

Raymond Carver

by Peter Cash



English Association Bookmarks
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Raymond Carver (1938-1988)

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Scope of Topic

"His *donnee* was marriage: in particular, a certain terrible kind of domesticity that he termed 'dis-ease'" (William L. Stull, 1990). The aim of this Bookmark is to examine Raymond Carver's view of marriage: in particular, the 'dis-ease' that he diagnoses in individual men and individual women who are married to each other. This Bookmark will look at seven stories in which Carver investigates the causes of the 'dis-ease' from which these lower-middle-class Americans, married for some years, usually with children, are suffering.

Collections To Read

Raymond Carver, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (Harvill 1995)
Raymond Carver, *Short Cuts* (Harvill 1995)
Raymond Carver, *Where I'm Calling From* (Harvill 1995)

Further Reading

Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919)
Edwin Arlington Robinson, *Selected Poems*
Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (1939)
Truman Capote, *Breakfast At Tiffany's* (1958)
Kirk Nessel, *The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study* (1995)

THEY'RE NOT YOUR HUSBAND

materialism, n. Opinion that nothing exists but matter & its movements & modifications; also, that consciousness & will are wholly due to material agency; tendency to lay stress on the material aspect of objects.

Concise Oxford Dictionary

In his fiction, Raymond Carver attempts to monitor the level of lower-middle-class consciousness in 1960s-1970s America. In his stories, he frequently interests himself in the domestic lives of blue-collar workers; in this story, he examines the marriage between Earl Ober (an unemployed 'salesman') and Doreen Ober (a waitress at 'a twenty-four-hour coffee shop at the edge of town'). In the process, he uncovers the 'dis-ease' which can affect marital relationships in which 'materialism' predominates.

They're Not Your Husband offers us a characteristic example of Carver's literary style. It is often said that Carver is 'a minimalist': that is, a writer who makes a virtue out of the economy of his language. He writes concise sentences: as 'a minimalist', he keeps both adjectives and metaphors to 'a minimum'. Instead, he delivers his narrative by means of literal statements from which readers are required to extrapolate the implied meanings. In the first paragraph, Carver's spare statements of fact tell us that Earl Ober is out of work ('between jobs as a salesman') and short of money ('something on the house'). He is preparing us to encounter the low level of Earl's moral consciousness, his crude sense of values. This we encounter as soon as 'two men in business suits', their white collars undone, enter the coffee shop and make uncalled-for remarks about Doreen's figure:

"Look at the ass on that."

Both the vulgar reference to her bottom ('ass') and the use of the impersonal pronoun ('that') deprive Doreen of her personal dignity. Earl's reaction to this disparaging observation sums up his unrefined character; it is not to spring gallantly to his wife's defence, but to take it to heart, not least because it implies a criticism of his own sexual taste: "But some jokers like their quim fat." Here, within his earshot, are two men imagining rear-entry intercourse with his wife and expressing disgust at the prospect; her 'husband', however, does not exploit the dramatic irony at their expense because he values their opinion. Because they are white-collar workers, he listens to their indelicate remarks; in doing so, he reveals his own lack of integrity, his own superficial values, his materialism. In this story, Carver is illustrating the extent to which material values can govern a personal relationship.

The situation worsens. For work, Doreen is wearing an off-the-peg company uniform which does not flatter her. When she leans over the edge of the freezer, her skirt rides up, literally exposing her to more ridicule when she carelessly gives the men an eyeful of 'thighs that were rumped and gray and a little hairy, and veins that spread in a berserk display'. This 'display' is not a pretty sight; for both men, ogling Doreen's bare thighs is a turn-off. For Earl, it was bad enough that his wife's bum was big enough to excite comment from other men; it is even worse that her cellulite and her varicose veins should now invite an even unkind reaction. 'When she began shaking the can of whipped cream, Earl got up' and left before the man could begin to grin next at the graphic thought of Doreen, in her pink girdle, giving a man hand-relief. In short, Doreen has become a laughing-stock.

Earl's concern, however, is not that Doreen is a figure of fun, but that he as her 'husband' will be perceived by his fellow men as a 'joker' for having chosen her. His first thought is not for her welfare, but for his personal prestige; it is not for her self-image, but for his own. Earl is a materialist: although he may not quite be of the 'opinion that nothing exists but matter', he has no highly developed conception of his wife's spiritual worth. In his appraisal of her, his tendency is certainly 'to lay stress on the material aspect' of the female person. Although he may not have wanted 'a trophy wife', he had liked to think of himself as being married to an 'object' that exuded a certain sex-appeal. As a result, he suddenly feels ashamed of her:

"Look at yourself in the mirror," he said.

On the following day, Earl's very next words to Doreen take the form of an imperative that reveals his sudden pre-occupation with her physical appearance. He is no longer at ease with her; this 'dis-ease' manifests itself in the 'terrible kind of domesticity' (Stull) that entitles a husband to comment in intimate detail on his wife's person and to interfere with her life-style. In the Obers' case, it entitles Earl to become obsessed with Doreen's weight. On three occasions, he tells her that she 'could lose a few pounds'; this is his euphemistic way of saying that she is too fat. Doreen's response -

"You never said anything before"

- dramatises the extent to which Earl has revised his perception of her; it reveals how quickly his view of his marriage has become conditioned by the coarse sniggers of the two businessmen. What is more, it is a 'terrible' response in that it expresses her compliance with his judgemental attitude towards her: "I'll do something." She feels that she owes it to her husband to look presentable. When Earl goes so far as to order her to 'quit eating', she remains completely tractable: "I'll try." It is evident that Doreen Ober belongs to a class of married women who feel obliged to sacrifice their independence to their husbands; put another way, she has no consciousness of herself except as a good and obedient wife, a chattel. It should be remembered that Carver's story is interrogating the social values of the 1960s: at that time, the attitude of husband to wife was still proprietorial.

Three subsequent episodes show how controlling a husband Earl is. First, he decides that he must measure Doreen's weight; being out of work, 'he drove to the discount store and bought a bathroom scale'. From Carver's economical description of the Obers' naked intimacy -

At home he had Doreen take off all her clothes and get on the scale. He frowned when he saw the veins. He ran his finger the length of one that sprouted up her thigh.

- we are able to infer that Doreen knows no better than to put up with Earl's patronising reaction to her: 'frowned when he saw the veins'. She consents meekly to this degree of exposure; she subjects herself to such intrusiveness ('he ran his finger up her thigh') as if it is not a gross invasion of her privacy. Second, Earl decides that he needs to monitor Doreen's food-intake. When he catches her 'eating scrambled egg and bacon', he hurls at her a monosyllabic, onomatopoeic epithet ("Slob") calculated to show up both her obesity and her lack of self-discipline. Despite this abuse, Doreen remains eager to please her husband: "I'm going to try again." Because Carver's story is set in the 1960s, we should not be surprised to find that Doreen is an unliberated female. When she reports that she has lost 'three-quarters of a pound', Earl's even more patronising response - "It's something" - is only to be expected.

Third, Earl decides to ensure that Doreen keeps strictly to her starvation-diet. When it begins to work, she sheds so much weight ('nine and a half pounds') that her clothes become 'loose on her'; her pallor and her weight-loss become noticeable. When she becomes a shadow of her former self, her work-mates express concern: "That I don't look like myself". Doreen is slimming at a cost to her sense of well-being; she is losing both her superfluous flab and her sense of identity. Earl, however, has turned into a body-fascist and does not care. It is at this point that he tells Doreen that he as her husband is her ultimate reference-point: "They're not your husband." At this juncture, Carver inserts a fifth page-break; it invites us to pause and consider the implications of the line of dialogue from which his story takes its title. Earl's argument is that, because Doreen lives with him, she is a reflection of him: in short, she is an extension of his male ego.

Indeed, the component parts of the eponymous clause "They're not your husband" identify for us the conflicting points of view in this social drama: whilst the pronoun 'they' represents the men outside the marriage, by whom husband and wife are being judged, the possessive adjective 'your' points to the relationship which they are judging. Not for the last time, Carver's title is taken from a direct speech which encapsulates the personal tension (the 'disease') in which his story is interested.

Carver's story moves towards a poetic climax; his narrative returns to the coffee shop in which it began. Earl (whose rules do not apply to himself) orders 'a cheeseburger'; from his choice of this fatty food, we are invited to infer that he himself is no fashion-icon. This hypocritical action prepares us for his nemesis. It becomes clear that he is revisiting the scene in order to re-test public opinion of his wife's appearance. First, he addresses himself to a waitress ("Who's your friend?") in the hope that she will endorse his remark upon Doreen's slim-line shape. When she doesn't, he turns his attention to 'an older man in a striped shirt'. Earl plans to inhabit the role of the businessman who passed an adverse comment on Doreen and solicit from this objective observer beside him a contradiction of that comment:

"What do you think of that ...? Don't you think that's something special?"

Once again, Doreen ('that') has ceased to be a person and become a pronoun; such language reduces her to the sum of her physical characteristics and serves only to annoy the customer. Earl is so desperate for some third-party approval of his wife's slimmer figure that he starts to hector him: "Well, does it look good or not? Tell me." He wants this objective observer to lech after Doreen's female form and in this crude way restore his pride in her; unfortunately, the man hears only the disrespectful accent on 'it' and rattles his newspaper in displeasure. Earl's lascivious imperative - "Look at the ass on her" - consciously echoes the tone of the

businessman, but does little to improve the present situation. Finally, he asks Doreen to fix him a chocolate sundae in an effort to replicate the scene that gave rise to the original leer:

Earl looked at the man and winked as Doreen's skirt traveled up her thighs.

Conspiratorial though Earl's wink may be, it fails to enlist the man in his seedy conspiracy. Because the man has a higher class of moral consciousness, he does not value a woman solely in proportion to her capacity to arouse desire; he does not see 'something special' in looking up her skirt. It is clear from her two indignant questions - "Who is this character?" and "Who is this joker, anyway?" - that the waitress shares the male customer's contempt for Earl's lecherous behaviour, his low-level values. Both epithets - 'character' and 'joker' - express the moral disgust of right-thinking people for a man who regards a woman in purely sexual terms; but 'joker', of course, is ironic, for it was the epithet by which the businessman first implied his scorn for Earl's taste. Then, Earl was a 'joker' because he liked a big bottom; now, he is nothing more than a dirty, old man. As he went about his bizarre re-enactment, Earl could not have expected to hear himself called this name again; the waitress' verdict ('this joker') serves him right for holding such values: i.e. it dispenses a poetic justice. By this ironic echo, Carver makes his final point: that a 'joker' is any man who admires a woman purely for the physical gratification which she can bring.

THE STUDENT'S WIFE

A touch is enough to let us know
we're not alone in the universe, even in sleep

Adrienne Rich, *Twenty-Four Love Poems* XII (1977)

In this story, the couple consists of Mike (the student) and Nan (his wife). Immediately, Carver's title signifies that his eponymous heroine Nan no longer possesses an identity of her own: after several years of marriage, she has become no more than an appendage of her husband. The very first sentence of the story –

He had been reading to her from Rilke, a poet he admired, when she
fell asleep with her head on his pillow

- is calculated to show that they no longer have things in common. Despite the 'sonorous' cadences of his voice, she could not sustain an interest in German poetry and 'fell asleep'. It is when Nan wakes up that Carver's narrative begins to illustrate in graphic detail how distant she feels from her husband, how much she longs for 'a touch' to let her know that she is 'not alone'.

Carver's narrative charts the course of Nan's sleepless night. Upon waking up, she asks for a sandwich; it is instructive that Mike, though he eventually complies with her request, a coded request for reassurance, 'groaned extravagantly'. While she is eating the sandwich, Nan, anxious to engage him in some sort of conversation, embarks upon the first of three monologues by which she contrives to keep him awake and paying attention to her. Her first monologue concerns a dream in which they go for a motor-boat ride on a lake; to this tedious tale, Mike's response ("That's some dream") is dutiful, but unenthusiastic. Her second monologue involves a nostalgic recollection: "Do you remember that time we stayed overnight on the Tilton River, Mike?" Although this camping-trip took place 'only a month or two after they'd married' and was in her view 'one of the best times they'd ever had', Mike ("I remember") struggles to recall it: 'He did not remember very well'. Try as she might to re-create with him the excitement of a shared experience, he sounds non-committal. When she wakes him again, Carver uses italics ("What is it, Nan? Tell me what it *is*") to convey the tone of his exasperation with her.

Nan's strategy ("I don't want to be awake by myself") is not only to keep disturbing Mike's sleep, but also to engage him in physical intimacy. Repeatedly, she complains of pains in her legs: "I wish you'd rub my legs. My legs hurt." He obliges, but does no more than she asks, further frustrating her. Ironically, he diagnoses the discomfort from which she is suffering: "Growing pains, huh?" To be exact, Nan is suffering the 'pain' that comes from 'growing' apart; hers are 'growing apart pains'. The literal pain is a metaphor for her emotional pain, her 'growing' awareness that her husband (by whom she has two children, Gary and Laurie) no longer cares for her. This exchange -

She said, "You're asleep, Mike. I wish you'd want to talk."
"All right," he said, not moving

- identifies precisely the 'dis-ease' in the marriage. Once more, a conflict between Mike's language ("All right") and his body-language ('not moving') expresses his reluctance to commit himself to the emotional partnership that his wife craves: whereas his words are co-operative, his deeds are not. Although he is not uncommunicative, Mike has become unresponsive to Nan's needs, unwilling – as the next passage reveals – to share in the only kind of companionship of which she is capable.

In her third monologue, Nan compiles a list of her favourite things. Each one of the seventeen sentences that begin "I like" implies for us both her scale of values and his. Good foods, good books and magazines, going to movies and drinking beer with friends afterward, going dancing, nice clothes, these are a few of her favourite things. None, however, signifies her situation more exactly than

"And I like sex. I like to be touched now and then when I'm not expecting it"

and

"And I'd like us to have a place of our own. I'd like to stop moving around every year, or every other year I'd like us both just to live a good honest life without having to worry about money and bills and things like that"

It is important to recognise that Nan's list is a list of both aspirations and deprivations. It would be a comfort to her if her husband would initiate sex with her 'now and then'; indeed, 'just a touch' would be a delight. Even more reasonable among the items in her catalogue are a place of their own and a freedom from money-worries; from this wish-list, it is clear that the couple has eked out an itinerant existence, struggling always to make ends meet, presumably because Mike, a perpetual student, has never held down a steady job. Kirk Nessel observes that typically Carver's characters are 'disillusioned by meaningless marriages' and left 'speechless in the wake of longings and fears they cannot begin to identify'. In this story, it is the disparity between Mike's intellectual preoccupations and his wife's material longings that causes their 'dis-ease'.

Furthermore, Nan can even begin to identify her fear; symbolically, 'she touched the wedding band on her ring finger with her thumb'. Whereas Mike ("I wish you'd leave me alone, Nan") wants to be alone with his thoughts, Nan does not therefore want to be 'alone' with hers. Poetically, Carver complements Mike's monosyllabic outburst with a monosyllabic description of his unco-operative behaviour: 'He turned over to his side of the bed again and let his arm rest off the edge'. Faced (or otherwise) by such indifference, Nan's only salvation lies in sleep. At this point, Carver punctuates his prose by means of line-endings as if he is writing free verse:

Please, God, let me go to sleep.
She tried to sleep.
"Mike," she whispered.
There was no answer.

To each sentence, he assigns a line of its own, thereby creating the rhythm of Nan's consciousness as she tries – and fails - to come to terms with her emotional isolation. His subsequent description of her insomnia –

She laid her hand under her left breast and felt the beat of her heart rising into her fingers. She turned onto her stomach and began to cry, her head off the pillow, her mouth against the sheet. She cried

- reveals that Nan has been reduced to feeling her own breast and checking her own heart-beat in order to affirm that she is still fully alive. Carver details the physical symptoms of her psychological 'dis-ease', ending with a self-contained statement ('She cried') of religious resonance. It is of course for her loss of identity - as Nan, an individual woman - that the student's wife is weeping:

Not in pictures she had seen nor in any book she had read had she learned a sunrise was so terrible as this.

At 'sunrise', Nan is sitting in the living room of her rented apartment and looking out of the window: both literally and metaphorically, it has *dawned on her* that her marriage is in serious trouble. Suddenly, Carver resorts to a convoluted syntax in order to dramatise this moment of epiphany: namely, that Nan is looking indefinitely at a 'terrible' kind of domesticity, a loveless marriage. Her final prayer – "God, will you help us, God?" – emphasises her desperation, echoing (as it does) her earlier plea to a higher authority in whom she does not actually believe.

SO MUCH WATER SO CLOSE TO HOME

Fornication – but that was in another country;
and, besides, the wench is dead

Marlowe: *The Jew of Malta* (1589)
Barabas, Act IV Scene 1

To conclude (as William Stull does) that, for the subject-matter of his stories, Raymond Carver has given himself 'marriage' is among the more uncontroversial conclusions that a critic can reach. For Carver repeatedly concerns himself not with newly-weds, but with couples in whose marriages fundamental problems are likely to have surfaced long ago. When a problem surfaces in the marriage between Stuart and Claire Kane, it does so literally in the naked form of Susan Miller. It transpires that Susan is quite unlike Donna (in *Vitamins*) and Jill (in *Jerry and Molly and Sam*) in that she is not an extra-marital liaison, not a mistress required to scratch the seven-year itch of an adulterous male, but a drowned body.

The first-person narrator of this story is Claire Kane. Her narrative begins *in media res*; that is, it starts in the middle of a quarrel between her husband Stuart and herself, a quarrel resulting from a recent incident about which we as readers have not yet been informed. To begin with, Claire informs us that 'Something has come between us, though he would like me to believe otherwise'. Something has had a traumatic effect upon the condition of their married life, though Stuart ("Tell me what I did wrong and I'll listen!") is not aware that it has done. What has suddenly opened up between them is a chasm between his moral sensibility and hers.

The issue in their marriage centres upon Stuart's reaction to the discovery only 'last Sunday' of a woman's body in the water of the Naches River - to which he and three friends (Gordon, Mel and Vern) had 'planned' their annual three-day fishing-trip. The opening dialogue – "She was dead, wasn't she?"/ "She was dead, dead, dead, do you hear?"/ "but she was dead, Claire, dead" – flashes back to Stuart's personal involvement in that sensational discovery. It

transpires that, upon discovering the body, the four men ('decent men, family men') had decided not to report it immediately, but to carry on with their fishing-trip regardless of it: 'they talked about what to do' and 'all decided to stay'. Foremost among their reasons for this pragmatic decision - "We'd walked for hours ... were five miles from the car" - is the Marlovian reflection that the girl "wasn't going anywhere": not only were they 'in another country', but 'the wench' was also 'dead'.

During the opening dialogue, Stuart's five repetitions of 'dead' and his two rhetorical questions emphasise that, in his mind, these circumstances genuinely extenuate his decision to delay. Given these circumstances, he is exasperated suddenly to find himself married to a judgemental wife: "I won't have you passing judgement on me. Not you." His reflex-action to Claire's reproach "But don't you see? She needed help" is instructive: 'he takes his cigarettes and goes out to the patio with a can of beer'. He doesn't 'see'; by this action, he aligns himself with those other blue-collar workers of Carver's fiction who live only for the material satisfactions of the present moment. Early in his marriage, Stuart was glad that they were 'going to live in the here and now'. In this precise context, it is significant to note that, after they discover the body, the four fishermen drink whiskey on no fewer than *ten* occasions: e.g. 'they drank a lot of whiskey', 'drank more whiskey', 'more whiskey', 'drank again', 'kept drinking whiskey'. By this very deliberate repetition, Carver succeeds in placing these essentially 'decent men' in their moral places.

It is safe to assume that Claire's alternative sense of priorities has been identified for her by Stuart's attempt to convince her that he was not unsympathetic to the dead girl. According to Claire's narrative, 'it might have been Stuart' who

took the girl by the fingers and pulled her, *still face down*, closer to the shore, into shallow water, and then took *a piece of nylon cord* and tied it around her wrist and then secured the cord to *tree roots*, all the while *the flashlights of the other men played over the girl's body.*"

Here, *my italics* are designed to illustrate the moments at which Stuart, in his attempt to look after the girl, ironically subjects her to additional indignities; from his point of view, 'nylon cord', 'tree roots' and prurient flashlights do not matter because the wench is dead. Being herself a woman, Claire feels an immediate sense of sisterhood with the young woman in the water; as Hamlet does, she enters imaginatively into the Yorick-like experience of the dead figure over whom the men's flashlights continuously 'played' and alongside whom the men's hands tastelessly 'rinsed off' their dirty dishes. Claire is more imaginatively aware and more morally sensitive than her husband (who on his fishing-trip had 'told coarse stories and spoke of vulgar or dishonest escapades out of the past'). As a result, she finds herself deeply affected by the 'coarse' inadequacy of his response to her fellow female: in a phrase, disturbed by his crass insensitivity.

In this story, Carver continues to interest himself in the 'dis-ease' caused by the difference between husband and wife in terms of imaginative awareness and moral sensitivity. It is very ominous for their marital relationship that, upon hearing Stuart's story on the morning after his return, Claire's first thought is of his hands which had touched the dead girl's fingers and that night been intimate with her: although they are 'the same hands', he - in both her romantic imagination and her moral estimation - is no longer the same person. When she regards his 'broad fingers', 'fingers that had moved over me and into me last night', she finds herself physically repulsed by him. From this moment, Claire will keep 'away from his hairy legs and his thick, sleeping fingers'; she will continue to find the idea of physical intimacy repugnant, for she no longer *approves* of him, of the material values that he holds. Subsequently, 'his fingers burn'.

This development has dramatic repercussions both for Claire's marriage and for her perception of men. Nelson's remark in *Vitamins* that "whatever you do, it ain't going to help none" anticipates her plight. Even though their relationship has undergone a river-change,

she can foresee that 'nothing will be any different' and that they 'will go on and on and on and on', if only for the sake of their son Dean. In despair, she asks herself why, when there was 'so much water so close to home', Stuart had to travel to the Naches River; if he had contented himself with the local creek, then this incident (which has permanently transformed her attitude to him) would never have occurred It is when Stuart tries to initiate sex that the cruelty of his chance-encounter with the female corpse impacts most painfully upon them. When he takes her free hand and 'puts it on the front of his pants', she pulls away and refuses even to share his bed; not for the last time, his response ("I could give a fuck less what you do") takes the form of verbal violence. When he begins to unbutton her blouse and slips one hand under her brassiere, Stuart finds himself rejected again and uses even uglier language: "I hope your cunt drops off before I touch it again." Such usages confirm her impression of his misogynistic nature and deepen her despair. It is when they are 'really undergoing a crisis' that Carver's characters become inarticulate: "their ailing and broken marriages are recapitulated in the individual failures of their tongues" (Kirk Nessel). Claire's incoherence ("I can't answer"/ "I can't explain I feel like, I feel like, I feel like") proves Nessel's point.

Before the corpse is identified, Claire is exercised by the process of forensic examination: "But for the last twenty-four hours men have been examining it, putting things into it" The accent on 'men' and the locution 'putting things into it' stress the extent to which she has felt compelled to redefine her attitude to the opposite sex; in her imagination, there can no longer be anything purely clinical about such an invasive, penetrative procedure. After the corpse is identified, it is Claire's empathy with Susan Miller that persuades her to undertake an arduous car-journey of 117 miles to attend her funeral. Carver illustrates Claire's redefined attitude by means of two encounters in which she appears defensive to the point of paranoia. The first is with 'Barry, a forty-year-old mechanic'. Although Barry ("What's in Summit, Mrs Kane?") is polite and chivalrous towards her, she is wary of him: "I can feel his eyes as I open my purse'. The second is with a thirty-year-old truck-driver: although he too may be simply concerned and solicitous, Claire's declarative statements express her certainty that he is mentally undressing her: 'He looks at my breasts and legs'. She has become so conscious of her potential sex-appeal that this self-consciousness ('the skirt has pulled up over my knees') limits her every movement. During the funeral itself, she finds herself preoccupied by Susan's Ophelian progress downstream: 'the nude body hitting rocks, caught at by branches, the body floating and turning, her hair streaming in the water until four men come along to stare at her'. Once again, her imaginative insight into Susan's consciousness involves an affinity with her 'nude body', a sisterly sharing of an acute embarrassment, a revulsion at being ogled by 'men', whether alive or dead.

Stuart (an engineer) and Claire (a receptionist) are typical of the semi-skilled workers who inhabit Carver's America. In this story, Carver concerns himself with the finer feelings of the female of this species, conveyed by the startling candour of her first-person/present-tense narration. In the process, he expresses a very dim view of men. In the end, Claire (who has no economic or social way out of her married life) is content simply to pity her crude, insensitive husband: "I think I know what you need, honey". First, she pities him for his incomprehension of her refined attitude to the murdered girl: 'I pity him for listening, detached'. Second, she pities him for his associated failure to relate to her except in material/physical terms: 'I feel a rush of pity for him'. In the end, Claire ("It doesn't matter, Stuart") resigns herself to 'a certain terrible kind of domesticity'; meanwhile, Stuart ("I love you") keeps believing that he has only to utter three trite little words in order to regain access to her body.

JERRY AND MOLLY AND SAM

Nelson yelled, "It ain't going to do no good.
Whatever you do, it ain't going to help none."

Vitamins

So far, he had kept away from any real harm, from those forces he knew existed and that could cripple or bring down a man if the luck went bad, if things suddenly turned.

A Small, Good Thing

Carverland (in this case, Sacramento in California) is populated by lower-middle-class Americans whose sense of moral awareness is not completely refined/has still to be sophisticated. Al, the protagonist of this story, is one such character. Al ('He had enough to contend with without having to worry about a stinking dog') is typical of Carver's male characters in that he finds himself living in domestic circumstances by which he is frustrated; he perceives the family dog Suzy as an object on which he can take out his frustrations, apparently without repercussions. What Al does not have the foresight to realise is that his act of getting rid of the dog will bring with it its own moral complications: in short, that, whatever he does, it ain't going to help none.

Like Carver's other lower-middle-class Americans, Al has existential worries: 'things to contend with'. He uses epithets for Suzy ('stinking dog', 'goddam dog') which suggest his exasperation with his daily lot; such usages reveal that the dog is not the only one at the end of its tether, for the accents of resentment upon these colloquial utterances express his irrational anger with the world itself. Al ('They were laying off at Aerojet') is feeling vulnerable. His circumstances –

And three months ago, just before all the layoffs began, he let Betty talk him [into] moving into this cushy two-hundred-a-month place"

- stem from a combination of 'those forces' that can 'bring down a man'. Faced by this sudden adversity, he has sought spiritual fulfilment in the material satisfaction of sex: 'He'd met Jill three months ago'. As a result, Al ('depressed and jittery') is in both economic and emotional turmoil: 'He was beginning to feel he was losing control over everything'. During a single-sentence paragraph, Carver -

Sandy! Betty and Alex and Mary! Jill! And Suzy the goddam dog!

- gives names to the forces that are bringing Al down: rather than commas, Carver uses three conjunctions ('and') in order to suggest the relentlessness of the domestic demands upon the husband; he uses four exclamation-marks to suggest that the man is at screaming-point. Fifty-five lines later, Carver -

He thought of Betty and Alex and Mary and Sandy and Suzy

- repeats this syntactical technique in order to personify the different forces acting upon Al. The names of Al's family become a kind of shorthand for the economic and social pressures that can cripple a man. Indeed, Carver dramatises a row between Al and Betty ("Go ahead, I don't care") in order to illustrate the 'things' with which Al has to 'contend'.

Al (who is thirty-one) is suffering a mid-life crisis and feels that he must 'do something'. 'Carver's characters cannot speak their pain' (Kirk Nessel); instead, he decides to get rid of 'that mongrel dog' in the mistaken belief that it will have a therapeutic effect upon his lot. Al takes an anthropomorphic attitude to Suzy ("She's crazy") in order to justify his false antagonism towards her. Another epithet ('the sonofabitch') is ironic at the expense of Al's illogical hostility in that Suzy, being herself a bitch, cannot be the 'son' of a bitch!

Al struggles 'to find the right place' to abandon the dog. When it finally occurs to him, there is a proleptic irony in his complacent assumption that this act of dog-dumping will restore 'order' to his life: 'Done! It would be done.' As we know, whatever he does is unlikely to help him in his existential quest 'to be free from worry and worse'; abandoning the dog represents a simplistic solution to his problems, no more effective than kicking the cat. It turns out that 'the right place' is the neighbourhood where he used to live, 'just across the line in Yolo County'. It turns out that the precise location is of emotional significance:

He thought of summers fishing and camping in the Cascades, autumns when he'd hunt pheasants behind Sam, the setter's flashing red coat a beacon through cornfields and alfalfa meadows where the boy that he was and the dog that he had would both run like mad.

From this rich description, it is evident that Al yearns for the pastoral idyll of his childhood, a period of his life when he ('the boy that he was') and his Irish setter Sam inhabited an Eden of 'cornfields and alfalfa meadows', a time when he was 'free from worry and worse'. It becomes clear that Suzy is not the only stray in this story. In his way, Al too is without a home: that is, a place in which he can feel 'comfortable enough' and welcome.

On his way back to Sacramento, Al stops at Dupee's Bar. It is typical of Carver's lower-middle-class males that Al should seek respite in the material satisfactions which such premises offer. He plans to 'shoot a few games of pool, have a couple of beers' and he makes the acquaintance of Molly ('a girl in a turtleneck sweater'). Already, Al ('jumpy and perspiring') has discovered that losing the dog has not had the therapeutic effect ('the good feeling') for which he was searching; it has not restored him to an Edenic state of contentment, brought immediate peace of mind. His dialogue with Molly is instructive:

He said, "Where are you heading for?"

She said, "No place I live here in West Sac. I'm not going anyplace"

It tells us that, unlike Sheila in *Vitamins*, she has come to terms with her life in Sacramento. She is not dreaming of 'someplace else', of 'going to Portland'. Molly ('not going anyplace') has no geographical nor spiritual ambition; on her horizon, there appears neither a literal nor a metaphorical Portland. She is an important character in that she has learned to live in the present and to be content with her domestic circumstances. In a matter-of-fact voice, she explains to Al that her suitcase contains 'a washing-machine motor':

"Jerry - that's the bar-tender - he's good at fixing things. Jerry said he'd fix it for nothing."

Jerry too is 'good at fixing things' in an entirely unmetaphorical sense; in his case, the pre-occupation is with a broken motor which requires only mechanical attention. Unlike Al, Jerry has only literal and material 'things to contend with' and is happier for it.

The brief episode with Jill, with whom Al is 'having an affair', is likewise instructive. As soon as he arrives at her apartment, Jill shows herself to be a compliant mistress: "I'll put on some lipstick. What would you like in the meantime? Coffee? Juice? A beer?" She is eager only to please him, to cater for his every need: in other words, she makes no demands upon him. When Al ("I'm falling") comes to her in his time of trouble, she comforts him. Friction arises between them when Jill, in her fastidious desire to squeeze every blackhead on his nose, becomes faintly demanding. Al's testy reaction - he extricates himself from her embrace, 'forcing her off, freeing his way' - tells us that he can no longer tolerate loss of control over his movements.

When he returns 'home', Al runs into the inevitable commotion ('confusion') that Suzy's disappearance has caused within his household. Instantly, he discovers that the loss of the dog is more of a complication than a solution. Carver's italics –

My God, heart lurching. What have I done?

- express Al's realisation that he has caused himself more domestic grief, not less. The rhythms of the direct speech measure the speed at which his daughter Mary and his son Alex register their concerns about the missing dog: "I want Suzy." By this time, Al is suffering from 'a terrible, terrible headache'; this literal headache becomes a metaphor for his increased/renewed turmoil.

Al begins to calculate 'how grave exactly was his mistake'. At first, it seems that the gravity of his error is to have exacerbated the situation in his household. Carver stages an outburst in which Betty ("I've had a hell of a day") compares her situation to an existential hell: in Jean-Paul Sartre's words, her hell (*'l'enfer'*) consists of the other people (*'les autres'*) with whom she is living her daily life. On second thoughts, Al realises that his precise anguish does not emanate from any intensification of marital strife; on the contrary, his existential hell ('Everything was going to hell') emanates from his inability to forgive himself for having disposed of the dog. This time, Carver's italics - 'immoral, that was the word' - illustrate that Al cannot live with himself. Al recognises that 'the gravest mistake of all' is to have betrayed his own sense of moral values: as he puts it, 'a man who would get rid of a little dog wasn't worth a damn'.

In response to Betty's reproaches, Al makes a statement - "I'll find the dog and then things will be all right" - that contradicts and reverses his original perception of his domestic situation. It is ironic that Suzy, originally perceived as the cause of the problem, is finally perceived as the solution to it. Of course, the moral of Carver's story is that she is neither; he is simply identifying in such men as Al an unfortunate tendency to find in a 'white shaggy dog' a scapegoat for his shortcomings: in this case, his failure to retain control over his life. It is consistent with this reading that Al, upon finding Suzy again, is presented as recognising that there is a dog of some sort in everybody's life; his rueful observation - 'The world is full of dogs' - implies an awareness that there is some difficulty or other *dogging* everyone's life. Al's ultimate reflection - 'Some dogs you just couldn't do anything with' - has a tone of acceptance; wearily, it accepts that some problems are 'just' insoluble.

THE DUCKS

Unusually, Carver, in this story, turns his attention to a happily married couple. Throughout the story, both husband and wife remain unnamed, identified only by their gender-pronouns; 'he' is a mill-worker and 'she' is a housewife, quite content with a stereotypical domesticity, washing 'sheets and blankets' and then preparing 'supper'. During supper, their topic of conversation is significant: 'They talked a little while they ate, mostly about the trip to Reno'. Reno (the gambling city in Nevada) signifies an escape from their 'days of work'; in Carver's fiction, it is to be closely associated with Portland (in Oregon) for which Sheila in *Vitamins* departs. Like Portland, Reno, apart from being itself a geographical location, represents an alternative way of life in any place where the grass is greener. In this story, the couple trusts that Reno will bring about not only a change of scenery, but also (perhaps even literally) a change of fortune.

After supper, the husband prepares to leave for his night-shift at the saw-mill. Because there are no children of this marriage, they are able to enjoy a tactile relationship in which casual intimacy ('He touched her hip, pinched her dress') plays a frequent part. They bid each other a fond, romantic farewell. As they do so, the atmospheric conditions which Carver describes -

'It was almost dark and it was raining hard' - are by no means incidental, for they form the backdrop against which he sets this psychological drama.

The meteorological conditions are unchanged when 'he' returns from work prematurely. It transpires that he and his fellow shift-workers have been sent home because 'the mill boss had a heart attack': that Jack Granger, 'about fifty years old', has collapsed and died. At first, the husband ("Just like that") affects an air of unconcern with this sudden death. It is at this point that Carver interrupts his account of the tragedy with this single line of description:

The rain rushed against the house and slashed across the windows.

His references to the noises of the rain recur like a refrain, punctuating the narrative. The rain is an emblem of the forces of dissolution; indeed, it is itself a force of dissolution, of erosion, a continuous reminder of the inexorable effect of time. As the rain falls, the husband and the wife are portrayed as reflecting upon Jack Granger's death ("a wife and two grown kids") and then subconsciously attempting to come to terms with it: not with the premature death itself, but with the abrupt reminder that their domestic harmony too is finite. Carver proceeds to present them as engaged in a series of occupational therapies, activities (such as eating, reading, smoking, love-making) that displace the frightening prospect in their minds.

After they 'eat something', Carver depicts them seated in their living room where they 'held hands and watched television', but remain preoccupied by the forces operating 'outside'. She proposes that they make love: "Maybe we'll have a little tonight." While he waits for her to 'take a bath' and join him in bed, he can do nothing about the impact upon his senses of the rain: in the living room, he stands 'watching the rain beat against the window'; in the bedroom, 'he could hear the rain washing down off the roof'. In the sound of the rain, he can in effect hear the passage of time towards his own death. It is against this sombre backdrop that he says to her:

"I think I want to get out of here. Go someplace else."

It is to this extent that they become the eponymous 'ducks' of the opening sentence, frightened off the lake by 'gusts of rain' and looking for 'quiet potholes in the timber'. Of course, the irony at their expense is that they cannot 'get out of here'; they cannot escape their mortal existence to which the rain provides a harsh sound-track, for there is no place else, quiet or otherwise, where they can go. There is nowhere in Nevada nor in 'Oregon' where they can retreat, no private Idaho where they can take shelter. Consequently, they take comfort in each other's arms:

He took the nipple and began working it in his mouth. He tried to think how much he loved her or if he loved her. He could hear her breathing but he could also hear the rain.

He has begun to 'think' self-consciously about what is he doing when he is pleasuring his wife's body: is he expressing his love for her *or* attempting to displace his anxiety, an anxiety that the sound of the rain serves to intensify? When he does not proceed to penetrate her, she assumes that he is simply not in the mood In actual fact, he has been seized by an existential anxiety (a 'dis-ease') which has incapacitated him. His confused reply "It's not that" indicates the extent to which he has been perturbed – spooked, one might say – by Jack Granger's death, accompanied everywhere by the atmospheric 'cascading' of the rain: 'He could hear it all over the house'. Throughout the story, the rain is unceasing, ubiquitous: "I hear something outside." Finally, Carver invites us to imagine what he hears 'outside' to unnerve him further If it is not the rain itself, then it is 'something' even more powerful that he detects, a mysterious force beyond his control, an even greater threat to tranquillity – for which the rain is a metaphor. In the end, he need no longer ask for whom the rain falls, for he knows that it falls for them.

TELL THE WOMEN WE'RE GOING

But there has been also the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable"

J. T. Adams
The Epic of America (1931)

The behavior of Carver's characters is linked to a sense of failure and a recognition of a gap between American possibilities and their own hard lot.

Paul Skenazy (1988)

Carverland (in this case, Yakima County in Washington) is populated by lower-middle-class Americans who implicitly 'dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller' and who cannot understand why it is not. In this story, Bill Jamison and Jerry Roberts are two such characters. They are typical of Carver's male characters in that they recognise 'a gap between American possibilities and their own hard lot', but cannot explain it. In their cases, the American Dream *is* little more than 'a dream of motor cars and high wages'. It is a dream of material satisfaction 'merely': once such a man has a wife, a car and some money in his pocket, he expects to be happy and he becomes perplexed when he finds that he is not. In this story, Bill and Jerry have risen 'to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable': 'banged the same girls', 'bought a car together'. They are frustrated to discover that their material pursuits do not bring spiritual fulfilment; eventually, they take out this frustration on 'the women'.

Carver's profile of these twenty-two-year-old couples places them both intellectually and imaginatively; theirs are the material pre-occupations of 1960s America ('listen to Elvis or to Bill Haley and the Comets/' 'drink beer and listen to records'. The language in which he describes their activities belongs to the idiom of that era; significantly, it includes the old-fashioned euphemisms for sexual activity ('banged/' 'date/' 'going steady/' 'one in the oven') which the couples themselves would use. With a proleptic irony, it suggests a world without romance in which 'the women' have been reduced to their genital and menial functions: 'The women were in the kitchen straightening up'. In effect, Jerry's comment on Bill's wife Linda ("She's great") is a phatic utterance; it betrays not only his limited powers of expression, but also his limited appreciation of female qualities. When the two men depart for Yakima County, Bill's valedictory statement - "I'll tell the women we're going" - deprives both Carol and Linda of any individual dignity; the epithet 'the women' stereotypes their wives and prepares us for the harsher epithets to come.

Carver's characters are never without psychological realism; in his description of Jerry's behaviour on that Sunday afternoon are omens of the tragedy about to unfold. Like all of Carver's male characters, Bill and Jerry have 'things to contend with' (*Jerry and Molly and Sam*): in Jerry's case, 'too many kids to drag around'. Neither Bill nor Jerry is given to abstract reflection or conceptualisation; consequently, they cannot make sense of the 'gap' between their 'nice' life-styles and their feelings of dissatisfaction/frustration. Both Bill and Jerry are petrol-heads; quite literally, their Dream is 'a dream of motor cars' - in Bill's case, 'the four-door Pontiac Catalina he was thinking of buying'. The description of Jerry -

Jerry was staring at the clothes line or at the '68 Chevy hardtop that stood in the garage. Bill was thinking how Jerry was getting to be deep, the way he stared all the time and hardly did any talking

- warns us that Jerry has failed to contend with things and is suffering from some form of psychosis: eg. 'deep' depression. Carver's language implies that Jerry's imaginative horizon

extends no further than 'the clothes line'; he has become taciturn ('hardly did any talking') because he cannot articulate the anguish that his domestic entrapment is causing him. When Bill, with whom he has 'always been best friends', tries to approach him, he discovers that Jerry's powers of self-expression have been reduced to a primal gesture:

Jerry finished his beer and then mashed the can.

Here, Jerry conforms to Kirk Nessel's view of Carver's lower-middle-class American males: often, they are "disillusioned by meaningless marriages [and] speechless in the wake of longings and fears they cannot begin to identify." Here, Jerry is virtually 'speechless'; he is in the grip of an inarticulacy which he cannot comprehend. He is so frustrated by his own bewilderment that he can respond to his friend's solicitous overture only with an act of petty aggression: 'then mashed the can'. "Carver's characters cannot speak their pain," adds Kirk Nessel (1995); instead, Jerry proceeds to express it by means of physical violence.

When they take the Naches River Highway, Jerry manages to utter a cliché - "Guy's got to get out" - which betrays his sense of claustrophobic confinement within his early marriage. Sadly, their visit to the Rec Center does nothing to relieve Jerry's frustration. Even after they have 'each had five cans of beer' and taken 'two hours to play three racks of rotation and two racks of snooker', he is no more articulate. When Bill asks Jerry what he thinks, Jerry does not seem capable of coherent thought. He can 'think' only to repeat his primal gesture:

Jerry drained his can, mashed it, then stood for a time turning the can in his hand.

He is without the capacity for rational dialogue; he remains lost for words and is able to express his unspecified anger only by means of a destructive action. He cannot speak his pain; instead, the crumpled beer-can becomes an emblem of his inner fury.

It is when they encounter 'the two girls' on their bicycles that Jerry becomes more animated. His exclamation -

"Look at that!" said Jerry, slowing. "I could use some of that"

- involves the repetition of the demonstrative pronoun 'that', a form of usage by which Earl Ober's attitude to his wife Doreen was characterised in *They're Not Your Husband*. In that story, the man's usage of this pronoun had an identical effect: to depersonalise the woman, reducing her to her sexual function, her 'quim'. In this story, Jerry likewise deprives Sharon ('dark-haired, tall and willowy') of her humanity; by this impersonal pronoun, he converts her from a sentient being into a commodity of which he 'could use some'. The verb 'use' compounds his original perception of the girls: because 'they both wore shorts and halters', provocative attire for 1960s America, he is unable to visualise them as fellow citizens and feels licensed to 'try it', another pronoun that dehumanises the girls. The first epithet which Jerry applies to them is consistent with this misogynistic attitude: "Bitches". It voices a resentment, presumably of the power which the scantily-clad girls exercise over his libido: in short, Jerry is blaming them for his own loss of self-control. As always, this Eve-like perception of a woman is effective in pointing out a man who has altogether lost control of his lot; even more dramatically than Al (in *Jerry and Molly and Sam*) Jerry is 'losing control over everything'.

Throughout the narrative, Bill's reaction to his domestic confinement remains stable and therefore becomes a measure of Jerry's mental decline. When Jerry draws his Chevrolet car 'alongside the girls', Bill ("They're not going to do anything") begins to chat them up without any audible optimism. Consequently, Barbara ('light-haired and smaller') and Sharon do not take his flirtatious banter too seriously; they are presented as a pair of giggling girls, taking a happy-go-lucky attitude to life, innocently enjoying a bike-ride; on no fewer than six occasions, they 'laughed'. Even though Sharon gives him no sign of encouragement, Jerry - in his deranged condition - reads one: "You see the look that cunt gave me?" For a second time, an epithet - this time, one more forceful than 'bitches', more obscene than 'quim' -

expresses a verbal violence towards a woman; it implies that Jerry, though not Bill, who wants to 'cut for home', is contemplating the penultimate act of misogyny: rape.

The two men in their car plan to ambush the girls on their bikes; they lie in wait where 'the highway forked at Picture Rock'. They pursue the girls up 'a high, sloping, black mound of rock, part of a low range of hills' The primeval geography of the setting endows the action with the air of Terrence Malick's film *Badlands* (1973) in which Martin Sheen plays the role of Kit, an amoral character based on Charles Starkweather who went on a killing-spree throughout Nebraska in 1958. Jerry ("Move it!") pursues the girls with a sense of urgency; he 'kept climbing' as if he were engaged in 'the pursuit of happiness' itself. For a third time, his use of language - "We'll cut the cockteasers off" - involves an epithet that reveals his disrespectful attitude to women. In Jerry's monocular vision, the girls - in their skimpy shorts and halter tops - appear not as fully realised human beings, but as Eve-like creatures put on earth simply to 'tease' and frustrate men: that is, to give them erections, but not orgasms. Carver emphasises the difference between Bill (who 'just wanted to fuck') and Jerry: although Bill may have regarded the girls as sex-objects, he was after no more than consensual sex, not even rape. Indeed, Carver writes of Bill that 'he never knew what Jerry wanted': that is, he was never able to identify the 'longings and fears' (Nesset) by which Jerry was motivated to commit the ultimate act of misogyny: murder.

Usually, Carver's fiction concerns itself with the business of everyday life; usually, it tells the stories of ordinary people in ordinary situations. *Tell The Women We're Going* is unusual in that it ends with a sensational event: 'Jerry used the same rock on both girls'. It does so in order to dramatise the extent to which some ordinary people can, like Charles Starkweather, feel that 'there wasn't any place for me with the kind of people I knowed'. The double-murder is a final, primal gesture; as such, it can be seen as the ultimate expression of Jerry's alienation from 'modern, industrial, urban, suburban life' (Nesset); it is the ultimate articulation of a disenchantment with American life.

HOW ABOUT THIS?

Carver's figures take American disappointment to its barest extreme, haunted as they are by unfulfillable, intangible longings, paralyzed, lost, pushed well beyond the verge of articulate dismay. Unlike Cheever's characters, Carver's cannot speak their pain. They translate it into obsessive behaviour, into desperate and abusive patterns, into drinking, smoking and eating, into adultery, into voyeurism and, on occasion, into violence –

Kirk Nesset (1995)

It is significant that, at the very beginning of this story, Harry and Emily are en route to 'someplace else', for no story deals more directly with the illusion of change that Portland (*Vitamins*) and Reno (*The Ducks*) represent in Carver's fiction. Their exact destination is never identified; we discover only that Harry and Emily are driving north from the city of San Francisco (in California) to 'her father's deserted place in the north-western part of Washington' and that they are doing so in an attempt to revitalise their relationship in some way. From the very first paragraph, we learn that this attempt has already failed: that Harry's enthusiasm for a 'move to the country' has been dampened by the geography that they have already encountered: 'dark stand of redwood', 'rolling pasture land', 'isolated farmhouses'. Even before they arrive, his 'optimism' has 'vanished' and his expectations of 'something different' have been disappointed.

It is instructive that, as they approach their destination, Harry asks Emily for directions: "Do I turn right or left here?" This request is designed to imply Harry's wider sense of disorientation. It is an emblem of his directionlessness, for it transpires that he is a drifter; 'thirty-two years old', he is 'a writer in a way, but he was also an actor and a musician'. The

'way' in which he is a writer is that he is permanently 'writing a first novel'; to this extent, Harry is not unlike Mike (in *The Student's Wife*) and seems likewise to have spent his life in itinerant experimentation: 'Los Angeles, Chicago and New York'. In Leonard Cohen's memorable phrase, he is 'just some Joseph looking for a manger'. Emily (his wife?) is affectionate and self-effacing, but appears at the same time to be perplexed by his peregrinations and in a state of considerable unease ('dis-ease'). To express this unease, Carver portrays her as a chain-smoker: 'She smoked steadily, one cigarette after another' and 'Emily sat next to him, edgy, he could see, smoking again'. More than Mike, Harry seems 'haunted by unfulfillable, intangible longings': because he is without a secure sense of personal identity, Harry does not know what will fulfil him. Nor therefore does Emily whose edginess (at not knowing how to be with him) promptly translates itself into addictive, 'obsessive behavior' ('one cigarette after another', 'smoking again') and thereby confirms Kirk Nessel's point. They are two Americans going 'someplace else' simply in the hope that a change of scene will occasion a change of heart, poignantly unaware that material improvements seldom result in their hoped-for fulfilments.

In Milan Kundera's phrase, Carver's own epigraph for *Where I'm Calling From*, Harry does not 'know what to want'. Emily is eager to encourage him, give him confidence: because theirs is a tactile relationship, 'she leaned forward slightly and touched her hand to his leg'. To his credit, Harry makes an effort, puts on a happy face. Upon their arrival at the derelict building, he 'tried to smile'; upon viewing the ramshackle premises, he made encouraging noises: "If you have a solid foundation, that's the main thing." He remains relentlessly cheerful, placing positive constructions upon facilities that are falling apart/ tumbling down: 'The top-hinge was loose'. Even when he discovers that the house is without basic amenities, he continues to put a Panglossian gloss upon the woodwork: "Let's ... let's not let any of it get us down, okay?" Close reading, however, reveals that Carver's prose has an instructive rhythm: whilst Harry's comments talk up the 'solid' properties of the property, his body-tics betray his scepticism: 'He tried to smile' (again) and 'He tried to cover his disappointment'. Close listening will detect that his terms of approbation ("Needs a little work, that's all") are actually euphemisms for the decrepit condition of a place about which he is deeply unconvinced; in such an empty shell, his enthusiastic reflex-reactions sound hollow. Emily herself ("I wish you'd just be quiet") can hear this hollowness, feel his 'disappointment'.

Briefly, Harry finds peace of mind in the little orchard that abuts the house: 'he thought it pleasant to feel that something permanent, really permanent, might belong to him'. Most appropriately, Harry [= Cohen's Joseph] then widens his search for 'a manger' [= a 'permanent' sense of belonging] to the barn. Nailed to the door, he finds a row of 'rusted' license plates for the state of Washington covering the period 1922-1949. Carver writes that 'he studied the dates as if he thought their sequence might disclose a code'; from this observation, he means us to gather that Harry, engaged in a search for the meaning of his life, is looking in his immediate environment for signs (plates, dates) from which he can decode that meaning. When he opens the barn-door, we realise that he has made no progress: 'The air inside smelled unused. But it was not an unpleasant smell'. In this juxtaposition of clauses, we can hear an irony at the expense of Harry's habitual determination to make the best of bad jobs; in that use of litotes ('not an unpleasant smell') is audible Harry's own failure to persuade himself that the stale air is fresh.

This juxtaposition looks forward to the manner in which Carver records Harry's decision to return to San Francisco. Because he does not 'know what to want', Harry remains in a dilemma, 'a spot': "What are we going to do, Emily?" He cannot decide whether to return to California or refurbish the run-down house in Washington. He is in a quandary: "We've got to decide." In both cases, Harry's use of the plural pronoun is ironic in that 'he' is the peripatetic one who must decide where to settle: as Emily reminds him, "You decide, Harry, if you haven't already. It's your decision." He hasn't decided already and characteristically wanders into the woods to think. It is here that Harry's anxiety manifests itself in 'obsessive behavior': 'He stopped to light a cigarette.... He stood there smoking.... He lighted another cigarette and leaned against a tree.... He smoked.... He smoked....' It is significant that

Harry's thoughts are punctuated by his inhalations of cigarette-smoke and that his eventual claim to self-knowledge -

He wasn't going to stay here, he knew that, but it didn't upset him to know that now. He was pleased he knew himself so well

- comes only after five such descriptions of his behaviour, for the juxtaposition is ironic at the expense of his professed self-understanding. The irony is proleptic: it is because he is still 'in a spot' [= 'afraid' to decide, *not* sure who he is] that he then lights 'another one'. To use Nessel's word, he remains 'paralyzed' by this fear.

Emily's reappearance is to be seen in the context of that earlier paragraph in which she reflected with nostalgia upon her juvenile ambition: "I wanted to be in a circus when I grew up I wanted to be Emily Horner, High-Wire Artist." Her impromptu cartwheels across the grass have the feel of an ambition realised; moreover, they express a happiness that Harry can only envy. Emily ("How about this?") is 'flushed' with exhilaration, an overdue sense of accomplishment in which she naturally wants to exult. Confronted by this acrobatic spectacle, Harry finds himself unable to communicate the decision that he had reached in the woods: "So?" It is because he has perceived her sense of *fulfilled longing* that Harry's indecision is final. As a consequence, Emily is obliged to reach her own conclusion:

"Harry, we have to love each other," she said. "We'll just have to love each other," she said.

Regardless of location, of economic or geographical circumstances, they 'have to love each other'. Only in this way will they be able to alleviate their existential fear, cure their 'dis-ease'.

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