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Signature Curt Rode

Date April 28, 1992

ILLINOIS ELEGY

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For My Parents

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ABSTRACT

All the writing in this collection has at least two things in common. Each piece aims at slowing down a given moment so that it may be examined in greater detail than normal experience or reflection would allow. The described events range from the purely imagined to the semi-autobiographical, but every piece reflects the speaker's attempt to come to terms with certain subsets of the world--namely the past and what he finds himself becoming as he moves towards the future.

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INTRODUCTION

For me, writing has always been a matter of what to write about. The greatest stress comes in the initial stages, in what some writers have called the "white page" syndrome. Even though I typically compose at the keyboard-- I might call my malady the "green screen" syndrome--the anxiety I suffer is the same for every genre, be it the critical essay, the letter home, the poem, play or story. This collection reflects, in part, the ways in which I dealt with the anxiety of the latter three.

Since this collection is comprised roughly of forty pages of poetry, the question I must answer is why I find it less stressful to write verse? I think this is due in part to the tools that prosody provides. Life does not present itself in neat packages, its resonant images are not always obvious, but the rhythm and length of a line and the way the poem's logic breaks into stanzas gives me sufficient tools to dig into memory, to brush away the sediment of time to get at, or to create, what is essential.

I recently read an excerpt from an essay by Philip Levine which claims that poetry gives dignity to a life that otherwise might not have any. Two interesting assumptions are imbedded in his claim, assumptions that can be made with

respect to the poems that follow: namely, that most poetry is in part autobiographical, and only through language can we begin to recognize dignity. The poems I write often begin in the autobiographical, but they never can be fully so. As historical accounts must be approached with an awareness of the historian's agenda, so too must my poetry be contextualized with respect to my need to justify my existence in these poems. Even the most self-effacing poet, by the sheer act of recording the effacement, attempts to lend a little more nobility to the life being described.

When we identify with a poem, we identify not simply with the commonality of the experience, but also with the ways in which the experience is being presented. We enjoy hearing our lives being discussed in rhythmically or aurally challenging ways. It is my position, then, that by justifying his/her own experience, the poet also justifies the experience of anyone who responds to it. This has been an aim of this collection.

As far as influences are concerned, there are many. Philip Levine and C.K. Williams come first to mind because they so consistently find dignity in the "stupid job" or the litter-strewn alley. I admire William Matthews for the ways he elicits laughter and turns expectations on their heads. Elizabeth Bishop is important to me because she energizes her poems through a strict adherence to form. Charles

Wright is amazing in the way he draws his insights from his images.

The first section of poetry focuses primarily on the dynamics of personal relationships, beginning with roughly autobiographical sketches of early childhood. The section then moves towards a more "third-person" voyeuristic discovery of sexuality as it manifests itself in the outside world, whether in others or in the natural world. The latter part of the section returns to the more directly personal, with accounts of the romantic troubles of later life.

The second section is concerned with an existential placement in the world. Here, the shifting landscape becomes an important motif, since the sense of location is never fixed. Whereas the first section might be seen as a search for an interpersonal and sexual identity, the second section might be viewed as a search for a spiritual one, in a world that is never constant, that perpetually provides both new dangers and insights at every turn.

The final section, of prose, continues the discussion of identity. What this section adds is a sense of humor that the earlier sections lack. The tools of prosody have not yet helped me tap into the comic side of my life. I hope this will come soon, for there is also dignity in laughter.

I. SPRING STORM

DUSK

snow just fallen,
 wet, me learning
to pack, no forts
 or snowballs, simply

feeling the squeak
 of mittenprints,
bootprints, falling-down-
 backwards-prints,

or just falling
 from my mother's view
into the snow, through
 a fog she tries

to wipe away, still thick
 from the kitchen's warmth,
dish water steaming
 on the yellow window.

THE POET AT FIVE

After Grandma's calico cat
dropped her litters, Dad didn't wait
for her to lick off the blood,
eat the placenta, lead her young
to her dugs. He'd slip each kitten
into a sandwich bag, spinning
it closed to shut off the air.
Grandma never said a thing.
My sister usually cried,
accusing my dad of murder--
some father, some man of God.

But at five, I considered
it part of what fathers did--
being the first one up each day,
preaching Sunday mornings,
naps with the dog, belt
unbuckled on the front room floor.
It made as much sense as our trips
to Grandma's, as our lining up
to wash before dinner or,
holding hands, the family's heads bowed,
my watching him lead us through grace.

GARDENING

Stooped, his sleeves rolled,
his large arms lost
among the unruly leaves, my father said
"Don't confuse the bean with the stalk"

which I was doing, so was he,
tossing as many whole plants
as ripe beans into old grocery bags.

He tried to replant what he could, hoping
the roots might again take hold.

But it was late July, the beans eclipsed
the other crops, already failing--
the carrots' green aerosal blooms barely

spraying past the topsoil.

For me, uprooting the tangle would've saved us
from another exorbitant harvest and him
time tilling the dead plants

from view, in the dried, manilla autumn.

But he insisted, as proud
of his simple folk wisdom
as of his first bumper crop--

more beans than the neighbors
would care to eat,
much more than he,
for his family, could possibly freeze.

ILLINOIS ELEGY

Surrounded by grain that wasn't meant
for dinner tables centered with bowls

of floating lilac, but for the troughs
of fattened cattle penned side by side,

my grandfather died, in Iowa, October's
haze hanging, fields yellowing in corn.

Both of us knew little else ran between us--
other family's farms, their yield channelled

down the Mississippi, and I-80, the route
his body took back past Moline and Joliet,

to Chicago--dust blooming in the fields,
wheat stalks buckling under a thresher's plod.

SPRING STORM

You rarely used the furnace,
having hid the thermostat,

the "blasted golden eye" that glared
as you fed the fire blazing

from one match through winter.
Tonight, rain combs the fields.

I can't protect your hardwood floors
and plaster from the window's leak

while wind flaps the boat's tarp back,
exposing the last cord of birch.

HE LEAVES HER THERE

after their game turns on him,

 tied to the maple,

damp bark sticking to, streaking

 her cotton print dress.

He kept pulling tighter

 the more she warned him

not to burn her with the rope,

 her hem sailing to her knees.

He laughed. As rain began

 knocking loose the amber

leaves which fell, clinging

 to her face, her pale skin

glowing white through the fabric's

 drenched flowers,

she looked older somehow,

 like the girls his brother

had snuck past his mother's bedroom,

 skipping each squeaking step,

hair shaking from their braids,

giggles muffled, then faint--

the boy's ear, half the night,

warm against the bedroom wall.

OVER A PUBLIC WORKS' 2-WAY RADIO:
GRAFFITI DETAIL

A girl, aged 9, brown hair,
 who wouldn't give
her name, had dropped her overalls
 to pee in a clump of dying pines

for a boy, aged eight, who fled
 behind a row of brick bungalows
when the police arrived.
 We heard the girl, sobbing behind

the squad car's bulletproof glass,
 perhaps too aware of the loose
straps returned to her shoulders,
 the seat's hot, black fabric,

aware of the absence of door latches
 that would be in the padded armrests
of her father's Caprice.
 She must have longed for latches,

if she wished to escape

and look for the boy in hideouts
they'd shared--dens, castles, lairs--
like the concrete culvert

we were sent to remove

crayoned "fucks" from,
but thought better of,
once we found him, curled

in a ball, trembling,

his seat soaked in rain water
drawn to meet the high,
branch-cluttered creek.

CUTTING BACK THE MUNICIPAL CREEKS

Her bra-strap through her t-shirt,
sweat-soaked and confining,
I wanted to snap it off her,

take her to the weeds,
leave our weed-eaters sputtering,
drowning out the sound of our

laughter to ourselves.
Instead, I raced her to the bank
to trickle the brown tepid

water down our backs, the water
flowing through shopping carts,
urine-stained mattresses,

still used as bridges,
as a prelude to home,
this time alone, to shower off

the dust and exhaust,
to pick at the twigs
knotted in my hair,

to find the fat welts--
a tally of blisters--
on my forearms and legs;

her own, I suspected,
she briskly scrubbed
with a soft-bristled brush

while I just patted
the welts dry, and itched,
that night, just the same.

MALLARDS FROM A BRIDGE

A brown-headed drake
dunks a hen by her neck
into the opaque stream

for the drakes awaiting
their turns, biting her wings
while their own

beat the rippled water.
She doesn't flinch,
but rocks on her breast

as each drake's back tenses--
then another clamour
that does not faze

a nearby drowsing mother
or her ducklings on that wake
whose necks bend to drink.

FROM A BRIDGE THAT SPANS THE AVON

I almost miss
the strung-out boy
the girl drags down
the river's dirt path.
As he plods on fours--
his back arched, his face
pressed in the grass--

the girl's concerned,
much more than he is,
with a pink balloon
the wind sweeps off.
Her shoulders slump
from urging him on,
from running to fetch

the wayward balloon--she,
the one bent on moving
along. She needs a piece
of string to loop
about his waist
so she can catch
her thinning breath--

let him anchor
the prize awhile
if, in fact, he won it
fair, or stole it for her,
before his falling ill,
before his crawl,
along the river, home.

SPRING JOURNAL: GEORGIA

Alone while the others
walked into the woods,
it's strange how we
went to our notebooks
instead of each other,
to describe, in our own way,
the river--how the recent
spring rains and the mountain waters
still clinging to winter
suspended the mist
above the rapid's spray--
how the mist, like our sadness,
pooled, shaped by the river's
bend, blurring the green
emerging in the trees.

YOUR NOTE

like concrete, poured in--
the road again

smooth for initials,
children's palms.

The broken main's
now patched--

the workers working,
not for themselves,

but for traffic
backing up.

THE LAST CUP FROM YOUR CABINET

Your last china cup cracks,
the white metallic glaze
floats in my coffee leaking
onto the tablecloth.

My tongue traces the cup's sides,
runs rough along the grain,
searching for coffee--
but tasting only the exposed

accumulated stains not yellow enough
to hide the network of cracks,
unlike the cracks we once could fill
with the dark, and strong, and scalding.

UPON CONSIDERING WHAT WE COULD HAVE HAD

So it turns out
some tired mechanic
has made other plans
for the flight every man,
at one point in his life,
runs towards

through one concourse
after another, only
to watch as the gangway
withdraws, with part
or all of his luggage.
And, later, he is bothered

with the muddling newscast,
with what the families
must think, huddled together,
eating vending room sandwiches,
drinking paper-cup coffee
to settle their stomachs,

and for their sake,
he takes on their grief,
tries to decide who'll call
the caterers, have them remove
the cake's lettered icing to try
to keep the white chiffon intact.

II. WATER'S LARGER CALM

STARLIGHT CANNOT BEND MY SHADOW

like the alabaster streetlight
scrawled with crooked pentacles
in black crayon,

or the undaring lamplight
that peeks warily from windows
of capsized bushels,

or march it into dissolution
with a military trodding
towards the fields,

nor draw it, nor collect it,
like a puddle of myself
at my feet.

WAKE

Because a blue-backed swallow
 serpentine ahead of his tractor,

a farmer pictures a wake
 of insects flitting from his path,

to his last pass
 and his freshly upturned earth.

PHOTOGRAPH OF SUYDAM ROAD

I only meant to preserve
the tapestry of the sky,
the edges frayed by farm houses,

leafless trees, broken stubble
of last season's corn.

But I captured much more--

a storybook red barn
greyed, collapsed
like an old field mule

slumped on one knee.
The farmer--too busy
or poor to clear away

the carcass of his fathers'
farm--raised a shed
of corrugated tin,

a concrete floor,
its white fiberglass
roof expanding, gently

popping from the sun's
heat, the sound
teasing of rain.

WINTER JOURNAL: ILLINOIS

Driving at night, past fields veiled
in the worst fog I've seen in years--
the road so flat we aren't for a moment

lifted to find our bearings--we wait
for Sommonauk to emerge, as if in a clearing.
Other carlights auger by, then wink red ahead.

Tonight, there's no flicker of a farmhouse
in the distance, nor the promising stagger
of streetlights, though barn silhouettes swell

and dissolve--a country drive with no country
in sight, just the centered yellow strip, and trust
in the diffused line of our headlamps' plumb.

AT SEA, EAST OF MONTROSE HARBOR

Sails bulging,
you fight to keep
the keel from breaking

the surface
as the wind shifts
North. We dip again,

Lake Michigan spilling
thinly over the edge.
Warning bells sound

louder until, one mile out,
I'm aware of calmer waters
deep below us, sucked

through Chicago's intakes,
unattended--rusted
ladders leading to pumps

behind peeling doors,
windows dark as slate.
You steer into the wind,

looking for a smoother ride.
I sit, fighting sickness,
my gaze fixed

on the city emerging--
buildings backlit
by the evening sun.

ENTERING THE EXPRESSWAY

2 a. m., the orange sky
returning Chicago's glow,
you point to skidmarks

stopping at the shoulder--

a wreck being cleared.

Pools of motor oil

cool, shimmer. A cop sweeps
glass through the headlights
of an ambulance, pieces

flitting like welding sparks.

You turn on the radio,
the news, no report,

just Sox scores and weather,
something about the weekend
looking clear.

SUNRISE: FORT WALTON BEACH, FLA.

We drove hard to get there--

eight hours down two-lanes

snaking through dot after dot

on the Alabama map--to see the night

sky blur peach, then pale.

But my film was black

and white, my one photograph

almost religious,

a given moment

stilled--faint

ripples cloud your feet,

ruffles of white

tide-swept sands,

your head bowed

to the water's larger calm.

CALLING

A boy lofting stones at a park pond's ice
hopes distance and gravity will help him

do more than scratch this winter's veneer.

It grows dark, his mother calls him to the car

outside the fence. In a flourish, he empties
his pockets, disappointed, still months

from Spring, when the pock marks will disappear,
his thrown stones sinking without a splash.

SWIMMING TEST

Just as my legs,
 too long and weak
for much else, sank
 into the green water,
the lifeguard turned
 to gaze across the lake
at the girl's camp
 or at fish striking

airborne bugs.

 Myself, I thanked him
and the fact I wasn't
 an inch shorter,
that the bottom's silt
 was solid enough
to support my steps
 between the docks,

handing me
the chance to skulk off
in a kayak, the paddle
blades flashing yellow
above the cattails--
fireflies among
burnt torches--darkening
the lake's far end.

APPROACHING THE VALVE

stripped, its water leaking
steadily, I find the point
where I can dig no deeper,

where every shovel-full
I bring to the surface equals
what the rising water

takes from the sides.
There'll be no padded time
today. I have to keep

the valve exposed, having
begun to dig too soon,
or worked too fast--

untrained as I am
to complete the job.
I should've known, having

watched the repair men before,
seen how fast they moved
with coffee steaming

in their beards, their truck
heated, rattling, hidden
in an alley, radio crackling.

FOUR STORIES ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

SEEING NOTHING BUT GULLS

Only the fluorescent light above his bed was lit; he liked it that way, as dark as a church. The room was humid with the smell of urine. Aunt Jeanne held his limp, moist hand, stroking the skin spotted with age, holding his large-knuckled fingers together. She cried to herself. Dad and Harold discussed the final arrangements in the corner, out of the range of the dying man's ears.

I slipped my hands between the drawn curtains. The ocean foamed about the broken coastline as a gull circled to pluck an unsuspecting fish from its passage. It would hover, suspended by the updrafts, not beating its wings, and then draw them close to dive. It made no effort, only minor manipulations. Uncle Ernie and I used to take long walks on the beach and watch for shark fins. All we ever saw was gulls, though. He once told me that gulls never do anything, nature moves their wings for them. All they do is make themselves available for nature's will.

A nurse came into the room to check his blood pressure, wipe his brow and moisten his lips dried by the oxygen. Her voice was low as she described to him what she was doing, answering her questions for him. "I bet you're still pretty warm, aren't you, Mr. Lynn? Doesn't the Vaseline feel good on your lips? Sure it does." She moved her fingers about his mouth as if she were finger-painting some of the red of

her nail polish back into his lips. When she was finished, his mouth and the surrounding area looked laminated.

Diana slipped in the door with her newborn daughter, asleep in her arms. "Look who's come to see you, Uncle." Diana knelt next to the bed and presented the infant before the dying man. "Don't she look like Momma, don't her nose look just like Momma? Ain't you glad to see Momma's beauty being carried on?" Diana held her daughter in one arm and took his hand with the other. She dragged the loose fingers with yellow nails across the child's pink cheek. "Ain't she soft and beautiful just like Momma? I don't got Momma in me like she does." The child awoke and began to scream. Diana bowed her head, returned the man's hand to his side, and slipped like a nun back out the door.

Aunt Jeanne looked at him through her tears and bloodshot eyes. "I bet he'd like a cigar, one of those Cuban ones he'd smoke on holidays." She pulled a hand-rolled cigar from her purse. "Look, Ernie, look what I got for you, it's one of your favorites." She waved the cigar beneath the tubes that came from his nose. "Don't that smell good? Nurse says that there's no smoking in the rooms, though." Jeanne looked about the room and then to me. "Look here, honey," her voice was low so he would not hear, "why don't you stand there next to the door and smoke this. You know, make this place smell a little more like

home." I told Jeanne that I didn't smoke. "C'mon honey. Do it for your uncle, make it smell like home in here."

"Couldn't you just bring in some of your cabbage rolls and place them around the room?" I reminded Aunt Jeanne of my asthma and how even secondary smoke aggravates it, but she just handed me a lighter. I sucked on the cigar for sometime before it stayed lit, getting little flecks of tobacco on my tongue. I was reminded of how Uncle Ernie made a meal out of each cigar, chewing off more than he smoked.

I stood in the doorway, emulating Ernie's technique. I rolled on my heels as I looked out into the hallway like he used to when he looked for his shark fins. In the hallway, I saw schools of elderly swim by the door in slow motion. They would swim in silence until a nurse or orderly would swoop down unsuspected and slip them back into little blackened rooms.

THE MAGICAL BAG FROM BUDAPEST

Simon waved his arms at Pete and me from across the street. He wore nothing but a dirty white t-shirt and a pair of blue shorts he could have used for a hula hoop. He showed us a large grocery bag in much the same way the pretty ladies from television show the contestants the fabulous prizes they have won. Pete didn't say anything as we lay down in the grass.

"Ask for anything, my good friends," Simon screamed from his lawn, "anything at all and I shall find it within my magical bag from Budapest." Pete did not hesitate to yell "breasts" back at him. He rustled for some time within the sack. "I searched the great world for such a bag and such a bag you will never see again. I travelled to the greatest extents of the seas, far below the equator, until I came to the magical island of Budapest where such bags are manufactured for those who are powerful enough to own one."

My mother never bothered to get me introduced to Simon when we moved into the area. I quickly learned the names of most of the children in the block but I never remember Mom even talking to the people across the street. I always wanted to meet them. They had an old school bus up on blocks in their back yard.

Simon continued to rummage and I think he was chanting. "Hey," Pete yelled again, cupping his hands to his chest, "where are my breasts?" Simon raised his hand to hush his auditorium. "I have searched the netherlands and have found that which you have asked for." Pete looked to me and then across the street somewhat surprised that his order was being filled. Simon once again dug deep and slowly pulled out a small doll's dress the same color as his shorts.

Pete was disappointed. "Breasts, breasts," he hollered, getting to his feet. Two girls from down the street stopped skipping rope, looked our way and ran inside. "Ya know. Titties, boobies, hooters, matzas? They're everywhere, you must have some somewhere." Simon searched his bag. He offered us a frying pan, a desk lamp and a shower cap, but nothing satisfied Pete's newfound appetite. "No, you shit head. I want breasts and big ones, big enough to sit on and watch t.v. from, big enough to hide stuff from your parents in, big enough to pay the national debt with!" Pete held his tight hands in front of his chest and danced about our maple tree, shaking his butt the whole time. Other children ran into their homes. I was about to turn and go myself when I heard a shriek that stopped me in my tracks. "Peeeter, you little fiend!" Pete's mother lumbered from their house, wiping her steel worker's hands on her apron. "You get over here right this minute!" I stood frozen and she did not acknowledge me as she stormed

by. Pete looked to run, but surrendered, dutifully placing his head in the half-nelson his mother offered him. She then dragged Pete home, his head strapped firmly to her chest.

IF IT WEREN'T FOR WOMEN TELLING US

They sat across from each other, sipping beer, which Janine didn't normally do. But it was all she had in the house.

"I'm sorry the place is such a mess," she said.

Chuck waved his hand in response while he was drinking. "Don't worry about it, I wouldn't have noticed. Guys wouldn't notice a lot of things if it weren't for women telling us that the room's a mess or that their hair looks like shit."

Janine laughed.

Chuck surprised himself with his wit and how relaxed he was feeling. He had only met Kari's roommate, Janine, twice before and they had never been alone together. The drive down from Chicago had gone by smoothly. He had had a flat tire and the jack had punched little holes into the rusty floor of his car, but even that didn't phase him. His neck had grown tense while he was packing, but the tension eased with each passing mile. The big green signs at the edge of the corn fields became brighter and brighter even as the sun set. He had felt calm and warm speeding down the highway, through a narrow canal of construction horses.

Janine excused herself to stack a loose pile of magazines, straighten the furniture and put away some damp dishes. She wanted the place to be presentable when Mark

got there. Not that he would have cared about the mess, or even Chuck, who was into his second beer, but she liked doing little things for him. Mark sold used computers during the day and took drafting classes at night. Janine saw him rarely.

"I really don't know what's keeping Kari," Janine said, folding a blue queen-sized bed sheet by herself. "She had so much to drink at the bachelorette party we threw last night, I had no idea she'd even be alive for happy hour. I could've have sworn she got your message." Janine shrugged before disappearing into her bedroom.

Chuck looked about the living room for something to do while he waited for Kari. He was afraid of touching the magazines and the big picture book with Gauguin prints that Janine had just arranged on the coffee table, so he wandered towards the T.V. It was turned to channel three. He noticed a tape in the V.C.R. He switched both on and sat on the floor. The screen crackled before four naked people, two men and two women, were shown writhing on a huge bed. Each person lay on one edge of the bed, circumscribing it in what Chuck thought was called a Daisy Chain. He sat quietly for a moment, with the volume turned down, before Janine screamed "Oh, My God", leapt over his shoulder and stood between him and the screen.

"It's no big deal," Chuck said, rocking back and forth, crossed-legged, trying to see around Janine's hips. "It's not like. . ."

"It's just a leftover from the party last night. Our girlfriend Suzie's getting married and. . ." Janine breathed heavily before taking another sip of beer. "I just don't want you to get the wrong idea." Janine squatted before the V.C.R., popped out the tape, clutched it to her chest and ran back into her bedroom.

Chuck wandered back to the couch with the yellow slip cover. He wanted to see more of the tape, but he had seen enough of it to make his mind reel uncomfortably. Only six months before, while Chuck was still studying sociology, he and Kari had formed one half of a Daisy Chain, with their clothes still on, in front of the university's super computer lab. Kari had tasted salty and smooth, lying there in the rock salt some custodian had used to melt the ice on the steps of the building. The custodian had wasted his time, Chuck thought, for when he and Kari were done, he noticed their imprint, like a snow angel or a chalk outline, on the frost that covered the cold marble steps.

Janine was still hidden away, cleaning her bedroom. The door was closed but Chuck could hear the tinny din of a portable tape player. The bass drum that kept a monotonous

four\four time sounded more like the yellow-skinned snare he had whacked when he dreamed of being a drummer. Chuck practiced his rolls and the rhumba style when he thought to or when his father mentioned it. But one day as he rode his bike to school, he decided he had neither the rhythm nor the authority to hold down a beat, so he quit. But without the image he associated with being a drummer, the image of the solitary madman who spoke only with the concise reports of his set, he found himself dreamless for the first time in his life. He resolved that if he were ever to dream again, he would not make the same mistake twice.

Chuck was sitting quietly, holding his beer can in his lap, looking out the window. When he looked up, he saw Janine packing a duffle bag full of towels and nightgowns and ripped t-shirts and underwear. From the bag she withdrew a blue teddy and threw it back into the bedroom, apparently for later use. Janine always disappeared into the bedroom when Mark was in town, or at least that's what Kari had said. Chuck knew that Janine would have to tell Mark, once he arrived and after they were alone, about the kiss that she and Chuck had given each other when she first answered the door. His eyes were closed and he lunged forward once the door was opened and took Janine into his arms. She must have enjoyed it, he thought: she used her tongue, too. She looked so sweet when he opened his eyes and saw his mistake, her eyes so big and brown and confused,

her mouth tightly shut. He believed Janine would have no choice but to tell Mark, she was an honest girl, as controlled by guilt as anyone else. Chuck saw Mark demanding to know what it was like, to know how he compared. Janine, of course, would play it down, unzip Mark's jeans and slip out of her powder blue teddy. But in her mind, she would relive the moment and send her tongue, searching, hoping, into Mark's mouth, the same way Chuck had done to her. Chuck laughed and sipped his beer smiling, knowing that his kiss, blended with Janine's virtue, her honesty and her guilt, would prevent the two lovers from ever tasting each other the same way again. Oh, sure, she tried to distance herself from the kiss by pushing up the sleeves of her sweatshirt and calling it an "unfortunate coincidence," but Chuck never gave much credence to the word "coincidence." People use it too often to disguise their truer intentions and more frightening feelings.

The doorbell rang and Mark popped his head in the door. Janine ran to him, swung her arms around his waist, but only allowed him a gentle kiss on the cheek. She led him by the hand into the living room. "Mark, this is Chuck, a friend of Kari's. Chuck, this is Mark, my boyfriend."

They shook hands briskly. "Kari says we've a lot in common," Chuck said. Mark smiled.

No one spoke and they all stared at each other. Chuck and Mark had smiles to wear, so they wore them. Janine was not smiling. Chuck liked the reverence Janine was paying to the tension that was seeping into the room.

Janine bounced on her heels. She felt it was time to speak. "Well, Chuck, you're welcome to wait," she said, "Kari's bound to be home anytime now. Help yourself to anything."

"I'll sit here and wait," Chuck said, pointing to the couch.

Janine hesitated, and then disappeared with Mark into her bedroom. Chuck sat back down on the couch and parted the curtains to look out the window into the wide, carless street. He sat, waited, decided that Mark was rather plain looking and then amused himself by seeing Janine's face on everyone who passed by.

TO BESTOW THESE GIFTS

The Characters:

FRANK TOLLE: A Methodist Minister. In his late sixties.

JOAN TOLLE: The Mother. In her early to mid-sixties.

JENK TOLLE: Their Youngest Son. In his late twenties.

Christmas very late morning/early afternoon. Mother (Joan) and Father (Frank) are sitting around breakfast room table, splitting a pot of coffee.

Frank: And he hasn't called?

Joan: No, I don't think so, Frank. Has he called? I haven't heard the phone ring.

Frank: Well, you'd think, just this once, as a gift, he'd be considerate enough to call. Just to let us know one way or another.

Joan: (distantly worried) Maybe he's just tied up in traffic. It snowed last night. Maybe he's had an accident.

Frank: The snow melted before it hit the ground. He's just being a bastard, so you can quit making excuses for him. I'll just have to forward his gift to him, like I do his mail. The kid's been out on his own for over a year now and still, all his credit card bills come here. Visa, Master Card, American Express. What's a kid making his kind of money doing with three credit cards? God knows if he's insured or not.

Joan: Or maybe he's overslept. I think he had to work third shift last night. I'll have to ask Jenk. You know how that job wears him out.

Frank: And this not-calling business really wears me out. You provide for somebody, lighten their burden. . .I got worn out too, when I was his age, but I always

was where I was supposed to be. It never crossed my mind to be anywhere else.

(Phone rings. Both, in unison, rise.)

I'll get it. I want to know firsthand.

(Frank lifts the receiver. "Jingle Bells" is heard coming over the phone's receiver. Frank slams the phone down. Joan jumps.)

It's your family. Tell them that they can sing all they want when you visit them, but not over the phone on holidays. I've told you this before. That's exactly why I got call-waiting. So I won't miss anything while you and your family are singing to each other long distance. What if Chaz called? Or what if somebody got sick or hurt or got themselves into trouble. We wouldn't know from all your singing. They'll say, "Hey, Reverend Tolle! My son committed suicide last night. My wife and I were in a bad way -- almost lost her too. Where the hell were you?" What am I supposed to tell them, that my wife and her extended family were singing "Jingle Bells" to each other across country? You're just too happy. I've had four funerals last month. That makes the eleventh this year. And. . .

(Phone rings again. Some poorly strummed electric guitar chords can be heard from another part of the house. Frank answers, pressing his hand against his free ear. As Frank talks, we hear one section of "Silent Night" being played from a record, stopped, attempted on an overly distorted electric guitar, and then replayed from record. This goes on for some time)

Yes. Wonderful. Great. This is more like it. In two hours. I couldn't expect any more.

Joan: (smugly) Oh, ye of little faith. What time is Chaz going to be here?

Frank: Don't little faith me. That was our darling daughter. She said that she and Joey will be here in two hours. They're just finishing up with his mother. So, thanks to her great consideration, we know that in exactly three hours and fifteen minutes, they'll get here, they'll spend their two hours and ten and then be off. We can plan our day accordingly. She plays by the rules.

(Jenk enters in barefeet, t-shirt, sweat pants. His hair is messy and uncombed. He heads straight for the refrigerator without saying a word.)

Frank: First time down today, Jenk? It's past two o'clock.

Joan: Merry Christmas, Jenk.

Jenk: (lumbering towards refrigerator, mumbling the tune of "Blue Christmas" to himself) Christmas.

Frank: You've talked to Chaz?

Jenk: I've been known to.

Frank: You know what I mean. Lately. Have you talked to him lately.

Jenk: Do we got anything besides eggnog. Any Coke cold?

Joan: There in the back. Isn't it kind of early for Coke?

Jenk: It's my fourth one today, or since ten last night. Couldn't sleep last night.

Joan: That's sweet. Just like when you were little. Even I have trouble sleeping on Christmas Eve, sometimes. I guess there a little of that in all of us.

Frank: (Annoyed) Well. Have you talked to him. You're the only one who does. He won't call us. Where the hell is he?

Jenk: Haven't the foggiest. Have you tried him?

Joan: He doesn't like it when we do. You know how he gets. But you could.

Jenk: But I have nothing to say to him.

Frank: Well, you talk such nonsense when you are together, I don't think he'll notice.

Joan: Call him and ask him what times he's coming. That seems innocent enough. Like you want to know.

Jenk: He'll see through that.

Frank: For goodness sake, he's your brother. Call him and wait for him to mention it. Even if he's suspicious, we'll have some answers.

Joan: Frank, that could take hours. You know how he gets.

Jenk: He doesn't "get" any way. He's like that. That's the way he is.

Frank: Listen, do us all a favor. You can do that much can't you. Can you pick up the phone? I know you can. Just call him, you owe us that, don't you, sleeping until two and not going to the Christmas Eve service last night. As a little favor to us, you can call your brother. I don't think it's so much to ask, since we let you stay home last night.

Jenk: I was too busy to go.

Frank: Busy? What's there to be busy with on Christmas Eve? You don't wrap your presents anymore. You just leave them in their K-Mart bags.

Jenk: What? The bags are green and red this time of year, like most wrapping paper you could buy. I'm being frugal.

Frank: "There's a time to every purpose. . ." and Christmas is hardly a time for frugality. Arbor Day, that's a frugal holiday.

Jenk: This from the man who asked for jumper-cables last Christmas.

Joan: Jenk, I think your father just would have liked to see you in the congregation last night.

Jenk: Why? Was there a gap somewhere? Or a quota to fill, for the conference. Didn't you have good numbers for the conference?

Frank: I don't know where you get this resentment for the church.

Jenk: I don't resent a thing.

Frank: Is it from Louise Bracher, the assistant pastor while you were still in high school. Is it because she walked in on you while you were in the bath house at that retreat at Starved Rock? That's hardly a reason to turn your ears from the Gospel.

Jenk: They don't speak to me like they speak to you. Certain things speak to you. Certain things don't. Chaz won't speak to you and I still do. The Gospels just don't speak to me.

Frank: I really don't know where this resentment comes from.

Joan: Anyone for three-way solitaire?

Frank: (annoyed) What?

Joan: Three-way solitaire. Wouldn't that be nice? We haven't done anything together like that for a long time.

Frank: Didn't you play yourself out last night?

Joan: I can never play too much Sol. Old Sol, that's what Mother used to call it. She played it most of her life, and I think she won more than she lost. She played late at night, while Daddy and the rest of us were asleep. Her cards got so worn, you couldn't tell one from the next, but Mother kept playing. She's the one that got me started. My whole family plays to a certain extent. Sometimes, when we lived in our house in Kennidale, we'd play six-way, all of us. We'd each get our own deck and we'd shuffle and deal out our own hands and play, you know, like we're playing by ourselves. But when we put our aces up, well, they were fair game. Everyone plays everyone else's aces. It was wild. Hands would fly in a frenzy and everyone would slap everyone else's aces. (Pause) I don't believe I said that.

Jenk: (pause) Tell you what. I'm going back to bed. Wake me if anything happens, or better yet, don't wake me and tell me about it later. It'll give us something to talk about when nobody shows up for New Year's. (Jenk leaves)

Frank: There's only one thing worse than a smart ass.

Joan: (beginning a game of solitaire) And what's that?

Frank: An adult child.

Joan: Things have changed, haven't they?

Frank: Not really. He's always been a smart ass.

Joan: You know what I mean. Remember when he couldn't sleep on Christmas Eve from anticipation, and not just from caffeine? I wouldn't so much as tuck him in when he'd be peering over the railing down at you trying to put together the train set or bike

that he'd asked for. And you'd get me to tuck him back in. But as soon as I kissed him and shut the door, he'd be peering over the railing at you, wrestling with the bike frame and those worthless instructions, the chain around your neck, and he'd start giggling and jumping up and down and you'd yell for me to chase him back into bed and kiss him good night. You got so flustered and cute and annoyed that night that you fell asleep before he did. (Pause) That's right. You did, because I remember, you were curled up at the base of the tree, on top of all the boxes and plastic bags and bolts. He pulled his blanket off his bed and laid it over you. He kissed you on the forehead, and said, "Good night, Santa." I don't think he mentioned Santa Claus ever again, after that.

Frank: Well, I played Santa a lot after that, even if no one mentioned or believed in it. Even if some of them might have forgotten.

(Both Frank and Joan look up suddenly towards the phone, but it's only bells from a Christmas record played off-stage. We hear Jenk haltingly play a few bars of "Blue Christmas" on his distorted guitar as the lights fade to black.)

VITA

Curt Rode was born in Peru, Illinois in September, 1966. After a series of moves around the Chicagoland area, he graduated with Distinction from the University of Illinois-Urbana, with a double concentration in English and Rhetoric in 1988. Despite a suggestion from a professor that he "never write fiction again," he dabbled in the University of Chicago's Clothesline School of Writing for two years before entering the Master of Arts program in creative writing at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville as a John C. Hodges Fellow and a Graduate Teaching Associate. He plans to finish what he started and pursue a career both as a practicing writer as well as a teacher, the gods willing.