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Belles Lettres, Spring 1953

Eastern Kentucky University, The Canterbury Club

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Belles Lettres

*Eastern Kentucky
State College*

SPRING 1953

Belles Lettres

An annual anthology of student writing sponsored and published by the
Canterbury Club of Eastern Kentucky State College
at Richmond, Kentucky.

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FOREWORD

In the hope of promoting literary efforts and encouraging worthwhile reading, we, the Editors of BELLES LETTRES, take pride in presenting this, the second issue of our nineteenth volume.

MAUD

MARTHA HERDT

"Break it! Break it!" she screamed, and then silence—the silence that closes in about you and comforts you. Yet, you're waiting, for what, you don't know.

The doctor was bending over her body. He shook his head, while he gently pulled the sheet up over her face. Aunt Maud was dead. Incredible, for you could still feel her presence, because of the gilt-framed mirror, which was her favorite possession.

"Jeanne dear, I think we'd better go down stairs to the library. Doctor Simons will take care of your aunt. Bill, check with him about arrangements for the funeral, and the death certificate. I'm certainly glad it's all over with. Here Jeanne, take my arm." Jim Melvin opened the bedroom door, and silently the room was emptied, except for the corpse, Dr. Simons and Bill. Numbly all filed along the carpeted hall and down the circular stairs to the hallway below. Light from the library knifed through the gloom of the hall. Each found a chair in the room, but no one spoke, for each was busy with his own thoughts.

Solicitously Jim whispered to Jeanne, "Dear, do you care for some water or want to lie down? I know it is a shock to you, but Maud must have been in agony to scream the way she did. She's at rest and so—."

"Jim, please stop consoling me. I'm perfectly able to care for myself. None of you need stay with me. The servants will be here, if I need anyone. Stell and George need to go home and rest. It has been a long day. Please leave me alone for awhile." Jeanne implored with her whole being, and even though no one felt that she should be alone, each one said his goodbye and left.

Jeanne walked to the large leather-top desk and unlocked the top drawer. From it she took a sheaf of papers. Quickly she glanced through them until she found the one she was looking for. She returned all the other papers to the drawer, and locked it just as Bill entered.

"Jeanne, where is everyone?" he inquired.

"I told them all to leave, Bill. I'd rather be alone, but I've been thinking. Would you mind staying with me this evening?" Jeanne asked as she walked to the wing-back chair near the bridge lamp.

"Sit in the chair across from me. I have a letter Maud left me to read. She told me about it several months ago. When she died, I was to read it alone, but I don't feel like being all alone. Since you were so close to her, I don't think she would mind you staying."

Bill Caldwell moved the other chair within the arc of the lamplight and settled back to listen. Jeanne broke the seal on the large envelope and drew from it a letter.

She read: "Dear Jeanne, I instructed you to open this immediately upon my death. I have a will which leaves everything to you, but this is written to make a request. Before anyone can go through my room, please do this one thing. *Break* my gilt-edge mirror. I command this of you! You have been my only joy, and I don't want you to be as unhappy as I've been. Tell no one of your deed, until you have completed it. Love, Maud."

Bill searched Jeanne's face for emotion, but found none. Oddly enough she could pass for Maud's double, that is, the young and vivacious Maud. How long had he known and loved Maud? It seemed only a few years since he had met her on a South-Pacific cruise, but it had been thirty years ago. Odd to think of that cruise now. Maybe the mention of the mirror reminded him of their meeting. She bought the mirror in a quaint shop in the Indies. It had always been her most highly prized possession.

"Bill, will you go up with me to break the mirror?" Jeanne interrupted his thoughts. She was opening the door, before he realized it.

"Wait, Jeanne. Tell me why would Maud want a thing she loved destroyed? The mirror has been sought by many and she refused large amounts of money for it. Now she wants it broken. Why not sell it?" Bill was talking

to the open door, for Jeanne hadn't stopped to listen. Leaping up from his chair, he strode out of the room and up the stairs, where he found Jeanne rattling the door knob of her aunt's bedroom door.

"Bill, open this! Maud wanted it destroyed, so I'll destroy it. Please!" she begged. He took a ring of keys from his pocket, but the bedroom key wasn't there.

"Jim gave me these, but the right key isn't here. The body has been taken to Morgan's Funeral Home, but the door was open when Dr. Simons and I left. I don't know who pushed it to. Let's go back down stairs to the library, and I'll find a screwdriver. If you must get in, I'll take the door off the hinges."

Firmly he led her through the darkened hall and stairway to the lighted library. There Jeanne paced before the french-doors, as Bill sat and watched.

"Jeanne, you're working yourself up unnecessarily. You must admit that Maud had some queer quirks. This was one of them. Please sit down and act rationally."

As Bill spoke, Jeanne glanced to a life-size portrait of Maud over the fireplace.

"Bill, she must have had a reason for wanting the mirror broken. I just figured out what she was wanting broken. She screamed, 'Break it' for hours, even after the doctor gave her a sedative. I wonder if there is anything in her will or other documents about the mirror?"

Jeanne was now looking down at the desk. She pulled out a drawer and flicked an unseen button. Slowly the picture slid up the wall to reveal a safe. Bill sprang from his chair and hurriedly moved to the fireplace.

Defly Jeanne whirled the combination, and the door swung open. The safe had stacks of papers, which seemed worthless to them.

"Place them on the desk and I'll read through them. If we can find nothing pertaining to the mirror, I'll ask you to open the door of the bedroom." Jeanne slowly looked over the papers, and because her progress was slow, Bill began to read searchingly.

Quietly time passed and the two read on. With fascination they read letters that Maud had received from dealers asking for her price on the mirror. Attached to each letter was a carbon copy of her answer, two words, "no price."

As the pile of letters shrank, the two readers began to read more rapidly, as each letter seemed so much like the one before. Near the bottom of the stack Bill found a packet of correspondence dated 1922. Untying the cord about them, he began to read. Saying nothing of his discovery, Bill began to read the letters written from the dealer in the islands. Slowly the years of hurt and anger were renewed within Bill. When he finished the last letter, he knew why Maud hadn't married him, as well as her reason for wanting to break the mirror. He tied the packet back together, and walked to the mantle where he stood before the fire.

"Jeanne, you can stop reading. I've found the answer in these old letters. I've read them all, but here is a summary of their content. When Maud bought the mirror, she left her address with the dealer. She felt that there would be others at home who would like a similar mirror. If the dealer procured any others, he was to let her know. As you know, the people of the islands are an ignorant, superstitious lot. Not long after her return he wrote her. In his letter he begged her to return the mirror. He told her it had a curse placed on it by a voodoo-priestess. Maud, being the person she was, was fascinated with the thought. She wrote and asked him what the curse was. He answered that it was placed on the owner of the mirror. The owner would be beautiful and vain and would worship herself. She would be unable to resist the mirror, and she would sit looking at it for hours."

Jeanne broke in on him by saying, "Really, Bill, Maud wouldn't believe that, and even so, we know how beautiful she was. She had always been that, before she went to the islands. Anyway, that wouldn't be such a bad curse."

Bill interjected, "Wait, I'm not finished. Along with it the curse also said that the mirror's owner would be lonely, never would marry, and would die a horrible death. You must admit that all of these things are true. Maud

was loved by many, but she wouldn't marry. Why? I'll tell you why. She was in love with her beauty. No one could equal it. If she could have found an equal, she would have been jealous."

Furiously Jeanne argued with Bill. "Who's being vain! Your pride and ego were crushed because she wouldn't marry you. Everyone knows you tried hard enough. If she knew of the curse, why didn't she break the mirror?"

Patiently Bill continued to explain, "The curse added that if the mirror was broken, its owner would die. Maud evidently believed that it must be as true as the other. She wrote to the dealer five years ago and asked him if he thought the curse still existed and if so, how to break it. His nephew wrote back that if any part of the curse was true, all of it would be. There was no way to break it, except death. We know that she suffered excruciating pain, and I believe that the screams begging 'Break it!' were for her death. She wrote the letter to you because she still owns the mirror. When the will is read it will be yours, so you must destroy it now before you are within its powers. Her life must have been very lonely, and, Jeanne, you are too young to follow in her footsteps. I'll go get a screwdriver."

Bill left Jeanne in the library with the letters. Without opening them she tossed them into the fire. The silly curse teased her imagination. Maud hadn't been lonely; she had her, Bill, and all of her other friends. They all loved her. She heard Bill climbing the stairs. His tread, muffled by the carpet, turned toward Maud's room.

Jeanne ran to stop him, but when she reached the door, it was standing open. In the room she found Bill standing before the mirror. Jeanne gasped. Bill's reflection was not the Bill beside her, but the Bill of thirty years ago. Quickly Jeanne grabbed a book-end and flung it at the mirror. Bill turned to her with a sick smile on his face and slumped to the floor.

Jeanne grabbed his arm as he fell, and from his hand slipped a piece of paper. It was a bill-of-sale. The mirror had actually been his, not Maud's.

MORNING DECISION

MARJORIE BURT

I awaken in the morning,
Bird song mingled with my dreams,
Like melting swirls of vapor
Interspersed with new sunbeams.
And a voice sings within me,
In what language none can say,
"Great things or small,
Soul's rise or fall,
Depend on you today."

If I rise with new-gained vigor,
Ready now to meet a foe,
And I hold faith as a banner,
For a sword God's truth I know;
Then it matters not how mighty
Are the ones I seek to slay;
Great things or small,
Soul's rise or fall,
Depend on me today.

If the troubles and the problems
Or the pain of yesterday
Blind me to the road before me,
That my feet know not the way,
Then I lose the new worlds proffered
By each rising sun's clear ray.
Great things or small,
Soul's rise or fall,
Depend on me today.

PHANTOMS

WANDA SMYTH

I walk under sunny skies
In a garden of magnolia and roses;
The robin announces the spring as He enters
And the flowers open to His touch.
Fear and uncertainty vanish
As he creates a sunny garden of happiness
With a smile and "I love you so."

But it is a make-believe garden
That feigns to look at reality.
A cloud now darkens the sky
The robin trembles and dies;
Magnolia and roses fade under the snow
His smile and "I love you so"
Are phantoms whispered by the wind
As it caresses the dead dreams
In a garden of long ago.

REMEMBRANCE

JANET BUSCHMANN

The naked poplar fronts the whining wind,
The persistent remembrance of days past
When brittle limbs were pregnant then with green.
Of days when breezes coaxed the timid buds
Into majestic submission of foliage.
Of days when Summer with its torrid hand
Yellowed the leaves into a shaft of gold.
Then soon the leaves, burnt brown and dry again,
Were crushed to dust beneath the feet of man.
And Winter with its heavy step stalked by
And struck the colored genius of the Spring.
But now the icy wind sounds weary tunes
And mocks no more the strong arboreal spire.
For upward stretch the branches toward the sky
As one who seeks for help to stop the pain.
And suddenly the wind gives up the fight,
Moves cautiously to rectify its sins.

EXCERPTS from the CORRESPONDENCE of the DEPARTMENT of DIPLOMATIC PROTOCOL, 1949

Edited by BRUCE BATES

March 19, 1949

Department of Diplomatic Protocol
1277 Pentagon Bldg.
Washington, D. C.
Dear Department:

Thank you very much for complying with my request by sending me Bulletin M-19960, "Diplomatic Language in Letters." The State Department has asked all us new emissaries to study this bulletin thoroughly before leaving on our assignments.

I am writing in order to congratulate whoever compiled this beautiful bulletin. Sir, you are a genius. Yours is the model bulletin: clear instructions and concise information, set in aesthetically pleasing type and printed on the highest grade of paper. And the cover! C'est magnifique! Have you yet sent a copy to the Library of Congress? Delay no longer! Posterity must not be denied this paragon of journalism.

However, in spite of its universal excellence, there is one little detail concerning the particular catalogue you sent me which, if I may, I would call to your attention. Now, I am sure the average person would hardly even notice this little blemish, but I am a perfectionist, and my instinct of propriety received a cruel jar when, on reading your splendid circular a second time, I noticed that every other page was completely blank. I have pages one and three, but page two is blank; I have pages 365 and 367, but page 366 is gone. In view of this trivial mechanical oversight, I respectfully request another copy, "re-moulded nearer to my heart's desire."

Ever your servant,
SMEDLEY HONEYWELL
U. S. Department of State
Washington, D. C.

April 24, 1949

Mr. Smedley Honeywell
U. S. Department of State
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Honeywell:

In Re: Bulletin M-19960

No doubt by the time you receive this letter you will have realized your error. It is generally felt in this department that the sort of impetuosity you exhibited is very unseemly in a man in your position (i.e., Ambassador to Turkistan), but the Department chooses to attribute it to youth and inexperience. We will not notify the State Department.

Although we feel we do not owe you an explanation, politeness demands that we explain nevertheless.

The bulletin you refer to (i.e., Bulletin M-19960) was issued in 1947. The fact that the presses were only printing the odd pages of the bulletin was not noticed until 288,631 copies had already been run off. It was obvious that all these booklets, perfect in all other respects, could not be merely thrown away. That would be wasteful.

The rest of the story is obvious. You should by now have received Bulletin M-19960-II. You will find that it is exactly the same as Bulletin M-19960, except that, instead of leaving every even page blank, we have left every odd page blank. The two bulletins are to be used in conjunction with each other.

Ever your servant,
Department of Diplomatic Protocol
1277 Pentagon Bldg.
Washington, D. C.

AUTUMN

HOWARD COOP

When summer goes and autumn comes
And hills begin to look as if
The God above had dipped into
Some multi-colored paint with His
Giant brush and carelessly slung it
And made of them a patchwork quilt.
It makes you think of by-gone days
When you were a child in school.

It makes a tingling in your spine.
It makes you long for days of youth
And friends you used to know. It makes
You want to sit beneath the shade
Of the oak tree that cooled your brow
On those hot summer days when you
Would run and play with kids at noon,
When you were a child in school.

It brings back thoughts of childhood friends
You used to know, but they have gone
And haunting memories now return.
It makes you want to take a stroll
And loaf beside the swimming hole
Where many happy hours were spent
On summer days, so hot and long,
When you were a child in school.

It brings back thoughts of by-gone days
That never shall return. Those days
You spent in school; the notes you slipped
To Mary, Sue, or Jane—the time
That you were caught; the happy hours
You spent with playmates in the yard
Or roaming in the woods at noon,
When you were a child in school.

You wonder where your friends have gone
That used to be around. There's John
And Jim—he always had a joke
To tell and make you laugh—and Joe,
Oh yes, and Jack; they were the gang
You used to know in by-gone days
When first you romped and played and laughed
When you were a child in school.

My eyes are dimmed as autumn comes.
My hair has turned a silver gray.
My friends are gone and I alone
Am left to watch the autumn come.
My friends are gone and things have changed
Since I was a child in school.

ON VISITING FAUST

GWEN JONES

A dreary fog lies heavy on the panes,
A mist descends upon the lonely room,
Vague shadows stretch their wiry fingers forth,
The atmosphere is one of dismal doom.

A sound!—A slow, monotonous, creaking noise;
I cannot see—but—but wait! Look there!
My eyes are focused on a splotch of black,
The creaking stops; the calm I cannot bear.

I quickly strike a match to light the fire.
It blazes high, is hot upon my cheek,
An icy chill winds slowly up my spine;
I whirl around, some refuge hope to seek.

The flickering fire sends forth bright shafts of light.
That chill returns more icy than before,
For when my glance at last alights, I find
Two steel grey eyes have pierced me to the core.

A pale old man with hair as white as snow,
A shaggy beard, a face with furrows deep,
His eyes reveal a haunted, tortured soul;
To look on him would almost make one weep.

We fast became great friends. We talked of life.
He taught me things I thought I'd never know,
And yet his words, so strange, more weird than real,
Were given up along with grief and woe.

He had no faith, no hope, no dream, no prayer,
His weary shoulders bent with untold pain.
I tried to cheer him up, I shared my youth.
He smiled, and soon, I saw him smile again.

We talked for hours, his hand upon my arm,
He seemed to gather strength as time went by.
The clock struck one when I stood up to leave.
He wanted me to stay—I wondered why.

I turned the knob, looked back to say farewell.
That icy chill caressed my spine once more,
For, as I set my foot upon the snow,
A stranger passed me coming in the door.

I SAW YESTERDAY

WANDA SMYTH

I saw yesterday through the wide blue eyes of a little grey-haired old lady who fixed her big ones on me and solemnly declared that it was a bad world, today.

“Why, when I was growing up—”

Yes, Grandma, I know. Yours was a world when girls were wicked who went to square dances, where the greatest form of entertainment was going to church, when girls wore long underwear and ten petticoats. Yours was a man's world when, truly, men were men and women stayed home and raised the family of twelve and did the pioneering while the menfolk were out convincing the world that it was a man's world.

Yours was a dark world of no electricity and the time when it took all day to go down to the settlement for coffee and sugar. Remember, too, how you had to wash by hand over a tub of soapy suds? Remember the hard work of those days when you cooked all the long summer day over a wood range to feed a half-dozen work hands?

Tell me about the old time meetin's and Sunday schools, and the fun of quilting bees. Tell me about your friendly neighbors and the satisfaction of sitting around the fire on a cold winter night while the snow piled up outside and you knitted stockings and the children played guessing games.

Tell me about your pa hiding sides of meat in the cracks of the chimney during the Civil War, and about the glory of Teddy Roosevelt. Tell me about the days when women could not vote and the only respectable job for her was school teaching.

Yes, Grandma, but did you ever glide in a car through the countryside on a spring afternoon with the wind hitting your face and the gypsy in your soul almost bursting it wide open? Have you ever thought it would be fun to have breakfast in Chicago, lunch in New York, and then go dancing in Paris? Or don't you think it would be exciting to be governor like that lady down in Texas, or maybe ambassador to Shangri-la or Utopia?

You love your visions of yesterday, Grandma, and I love my dreams of tomorrow. But I say to you, as perhaps my granddaughter will one day say to me, thank goodness, I was born today!

I REMEMBER

WILLIAM GREYNOLDS

I remember, I remember well,
The glorious days of my youth,
When earth and sky and all things
In between were mine.

I remember mornings in June, slow and golden
The crystal moist stillness of the early dawn,
When the dewdrops fought the new sun for glory,
And did a twinkling, scintillating death,
Diamonds burnt on the altar of day.

I remember the soft misty green of new leaves,
So delicate they floated on sunbeams,
And danced to birds' songs.

I remember climbing a hill in the soft
Shade of late afternoon,
To a cliff where I knew
The columbine was waiting,
Tossing her red and yellow head in the breeze,
Laughing and beckoning to me.

I remember days of dreamy beauty,
When time ebbed and was not,
The hot torpor of a summer afternoon,
In which I waited lost in immobility,
The dimension of forever.

I remember I found God one spring day.
His touch was soft and sweet
as he came down the valley,
playing with the trees.
I stood and waited.
He caressed the sweet william
that carpeted the hillside and
brought its elusive sweetness to me.
Then first I prayed a clumsy child's
prayer, and the wind touched me gently
And I knew that God was there.

FRUSTRATION

BETTY JIM ROSS

The smoke from my cigarette curled around and around—swirling eddies of angel hair. It was as love's path, strong at first, then growing dim and passing into the dark abyss of time. Yes, I found comfort in the opaque loneliness of my ceiling. It seemed to be chiding me, "Listen to your records there in the dark, talk to the leaping fire in your grate, for your beloved is far away and needs you no longer."

It was true that I had found the perfect love. Yet, where was my lover? Are you listening? It had been so long since I had seen you, and I wanted you so badly. Every evening I would sit here waiting for you. My life was meaningless. Do you remember this:

I miss you so—
I look for you in
Places only I have
Been before.

I hear a melody we heard—
And my half suppressed
Sigh is the only omen of
The inner tears I shed.

Once again my mind went flying across the mountain tops of thought, and settled on our day—spent by the sea, and in the mountains.

I was late and I began to run. I ran on—and as I looked up into the rocks where I knew you would be—my heart rose—and new strength was mine. I felt that you were watching me, and once when I fell in the sand, I blushed a little for fear you would think me awkward. As I neared the path I saw you standing behind the big boulder. You remember, the one where we used to sunbathe. And you were smiling and looking at me with those wonderfully deep and sensitive eyes. I started to wave but decided to pretend I didn't see you—suppose I wanted to act surprised. The wind was blowing fiercely in your hair, and you looked so desirable. As I reached the top of the path you called out, "Hello, my darling!" I didn't reply, just walked over and took you in my arms. I didn't kiss you at first—this moment was too sweet and poignant. Taking my hand, you led me up among the pines. Do you remember the mare and foal we saw on that beautiful little mesa—the one where our cabin was to have been—and how wisely they looked at us when we whistled? I wasn't amazed because they didn't start when you laughed. Your laughter was so happy, so pure—like a chapel bell echoing through a valley. There was so much love in it—and you always made me so proud, for people couldn't help being drawn to you when you laughed. You wore my love well. I was so happy that day—being up there with you. Up high, where the symphony of the singing winds was the music set to our love. The climbing began to tire you, and we lay down to rest in the grass of a sun-blessed lea. You cradled your head on my chest, and as I kissed your brow, your eyes slowly closed—and you were asleep. Once I held my breath so that my breathing might be in time with yours. You stirred once, and I kissed your nose, and you smiled. My arm began to ache, and I kissed you hard on the lips and slowly you began to awaken. . . .

I can't help smiling at how we whispered endearments when we were miles from anyone else. The clouds began to bank and grow dark, and we arose from our lethargy and raced each other down—down to reality.

And the smoke curled around and around. And my sob was heard only by the pregnant silence—waiting to burst, and be flung out, and to reach for you, and return you to your home—my arms.

It was madness to believe that you would come to me. Then I felt your hands on my shoulders. The huntingly beautiful musk of your body intoxicated me beyond measure and I was unable to reason clearly. We found each other's arms and I held you very close—so close I was afraid that I might hurt you. I traced your lips with my fingertips, and you kissed my hand so gently I hardly knew it. Silently I sought your mouth, and—you were gone.

CONCLUSIONS IN THE DUST

THOM MCELFRISH

I

Lament

A prouder flag—nobility
unborn, unflown—
Lies in the hollows of my heart.
Its pennant pattern, form, design
Lies in my bold desire.

The strength to hold it
firm, erect,
Lies not.

II

Three Voices

Away to the hills
The white-gold hills
That rise in the sun
From the green-gold valley.

Sing, "Hi to the hills,
And hi to the lonely oak
That surmounts that hill
And binds it up to the cloudy sky,"
For you are home.

A dirt-gold road
That winds that hill
And stops beneath that oak
And doesn't go on,
Because there isn't any place to go,
For you are home.

*And where, my friend, are you
At the end of that dirt-gold road?
Or does it matter to you
—For you are home—
That you aren't anywhere,
And there isn't anywhere to go?*

"At the end of a road
On the top of a hill
With a lonely oak to sing in the wind
The lonely wind."

"For I am home—
And it doesn't matter where it is
And you don't need a reason
For being there,
For being home."

"For home, like beauty, is its own excuse."

III

January 22, Thursday

I sit in my window and look
with little pleasure at the world before me.
And what I see is of little good
for anything to anyone.

The sky is a sort of bitter gray
and the wind blows
In fitful little gusts
about the corners of my soul.

The trees are naked, black
Against the somber sky.

There is nothing good or bright
in the world before me;
And there is no returning to what was right
and good and happy.

This day will end, I know,
for God is good;
And things unwanted end in time,
for God is also kind.