

A PRETTY HOW TOWN



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A PRETTY HOW TOWN

A Thesis
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Graduate and Research Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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To the Graduate and Research Council:

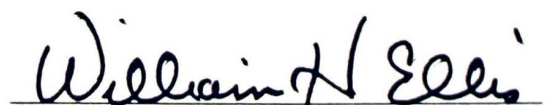
I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by R. Dale McCarver entitled "A Pretty How Town." I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content, and I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts, with a major in Theatre, Speech, Mass Communications.


Major Professor


Second Committee Member


Third Committee Member

Accepted for the Graduate and
Research Council:


Dean of the Graduate School

Acknowledgments

R. Dale McCarver is greatly indebted to many people for their help in building the road to A Pretty How Town. Laborers and scholars, actors and critics, students and teachers, directors and designers, friends and family--but most important, his longsuffering, darling Crystal--all contributed crucial elements of the play. The playwright hopes that each person realizes his or her immeasurable worth to the project and will derive the same personal satisfaction as he if the play achieves any future successes or recognitions.

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Chapter I

CHARACTERS

YANK PEPPER:	28, owner of Odyssey Map Shop, in Cumberland, Tennessee
MICKEY PEPPER:	25, Yank's brother, a bonafide neon artist
EVELYN PEPPER:	50, their mother
PEACHES BOULTON:	22, pregnant by Mickey
ROCKIN' ROBIN:	24, one of the Hollywood Honies, a mudwrestling team

(The actresses who play EVELYN and ROBIN briefly portray other characters as noted in the script.)

PLACE

Cumberland, Tennessee, just across the Donelson River from Culver

TIME

The summer Cumberland hosted its first annual Round Robin Invitational Mudwrestling Tournament and Convention

The author suggests playing *A Pretty How Town* without an intermission.

Every poem is autobiographical . . . some more so than others.

--Yank Pepper

ACT ONE

AT RISE:

A smattering of polite applause. Lights come up on YANK, an uncomfortable man in his late 20's. HE has tried to dress well, but HIS efforts only emphasize HIS awkwardness as a public speaker.

YANK

Thank you.

(awkwardly referring to index cards)

I have asked for this time to present the merits of Cumberland hosting an annual E. E. Cummings festival.

(MICKEY, 26, in work clothes
appears, completely at ease.)

MICKEY

All right. Yank's a little different. He sells maps.

YANK

As most of you know, I own and operate the Odyssey Map Shop.

MICKEY

My brother's a smart ass at times.

YANK

The map business does not thrive in a town where no one wants to leave.

MICKEY

And he's obsessed with E. E. Cummings.

YANK

Sadly, Cummings' reputation as the poet who does not use capital letters has obscured his significance as a modern visionary.

MICKEY

But the rumor that he is gay is a damned lie!

YANK

It's a remarkable opportunity for Cumberland to promote the most underrated poet of the 20th Century.

MICKEY

Besides, this town has a surplus of nuts--salted and unsalted.

YANK

The Hemmingway Festival in Key West attracts thousands of tourists every summer.

MICKEY

Bubba, most of Cumberland never heard of E. E. Cummings.

YANK

The first year we could limit ourselves to a weekend.

MICKEY

And E. E. Cummings never heard of Cumberland.

YANK

Dr. Clement Hassel from Vanderbilt has agreed to help with the events.

MICKEY

(disgustedly)

Vanderbilt?

(suspiciously)

Is this guy married?

YANK

We believe that by year five, the city will realize a small profit.

MICKEY

Why not a Conway Twitty Day?

YANK

Overdone in the South.

MICKEY

How about a Four-Wheel Drive Festival?

YANK

Culver has their Annual Mud Madness.

MICKEY

Here mud's a bigger draw than poetry.

(an idea!)

Mud! Mudwrestlers! Cumberland should host mudwrestling!

(Spontaneous, enthusiastic
applause. MICKEY turns to receive
the adulation of a crowd who
recognizes a timely idea.)

YANK

(a pathetic attempt to regain the
focus)

Cumberland High School has two auditoriums . . .

MICKEY

(taking charge)

I'll schedule a dozen teams through a Nashville booking agency. Kerry Reese, your cousin is a contact, right?

YANK

Dr. Hassel believes we may locate a rare 1937 documentary . . .

MICKEY

The arena at the fairgrounds begs to be converted to a mud pit. Zachary Wayne, check on availability.

YANK

Eventually, our festival may showcase some original manuscripts.

MICKEY

Delmer Ray, how fast can you print up a thousand posters?

(A man with a mission, MICKEY
exits.)

YANK

So thanks to Mickey, my E. E. Cummings Festival became mud-luscious and puddle-wonderful.

(EVELYN enters.)

EVELYN

Both my boys live with me.

(YANK exits.)

Cumberland, Tennessee, has more neon signs per capita than anywhere else in the world and my youngest did them all.

MICKEY

(HIS voice returns.)

Do the designs myself. Never once needed a pattern.

EVELYN

Gets his artistic leanings from my family. Daddy made corncob pipes.

MICKEY

One of my neons is in Conway Twitty's house.

(PEACHES, very pregnant, early
20's, appears.)

PEACHES

We got to see it . . . actually inside Conway Twitty's house.

MICKEY

Of course, Conway wasn't home at the time.

EVELYN

(bluntly disdainful)

Peaches Boulton moved in with Mickey last month.

PEACHES

Mickey's going to marry me.

MICKEY

I'm swamped: a backlog of signs and these mudwrestlers due in.

EVELYN

Don't let her pressure you.

MICKEY

Mama--

EVELYN

That's not your baby.

MICKEY

The baby is too mine!

EVELYN

How can you know for sure, Mickey?

PEACHES

This baby is Mickey Pepper's!

EVELYN

She wouldn't be the first girl to trap a handsome man with means--a bonafide artist of neon.

PEACHES

Mickey knows whose baby this is.

MICKEY

Mama, hush!

EVELYN

Timmy Short married a girl who claimed it was his baby. What a surprise . . . a little black baby.

PEACHES

We've been together almost a year.

EVELYN

The first time I saw you I was setting up the Nativity Scene in the front yard.

MICKEY

I took up with Peaches last fall at the Fair.

EVELYN

I had just chased Filancy Perkins' chihuahua, who had made off with Baby Jesus.

PEACHES

That's when *you* met me, but I've known Mickey for--

EVELYN

You've been hot gossip in this town for years.

MICKEY

Peaches is not some whore I--

PEACHES

I was a virgin until last fall. That's a lot more than I can say for your son.

EVELYN

So my son's the whore, is that it?

PEACHES

(slowly, deliberately)

I am going to beat the shit out of your mother.

(SHE heads for EVELYN, WHO
smiles undaunted.)

MICKEY

(intercepting PEACHES)

Nobody hits Mama.

EVELYN

You'll believe anything she tells you.

MICKEY

Calm down, Peaches.

EVELYN

But she won't convince me that I put out the Nativity scene for the September County Fair.

PEACHES

He's going to marry me!

EVELYN

Sure he is, Honey. Mickey, where do I stock up on Afro-Sheen for my grandbaby?

PEACHES

We're moving! I am not living with her another day--not one more hour!

MICKEY

Before I move anywhere, I got to know . . . Is it my baby?

PEACHES

(sobbing in frustration)

It's Conway Twitty's baby! We did it under your neon!

(EVELYN smiles contentedly as
THEY exit.)

(YANK in more comfortable clothes
reads a Cummings' collection.)

EVELYN

And my oldest is Yank. He runs a little store that sells maps.

YANK

\$3000 in mail order last year. I expect to show a modest profit in five years.

EVELYN

He worships some poet who can't spell.

YANK

(annoyed)

Why can't people get beyond his distinctive look?

EVELYN

His daddy didn't have any common sense either.

YANK

Daddy wrote poems. He knew they weren't very good.

EVELYN

Estlin left his suicide note on the refrigerator.

YANK

Daddy did not kill himself!

EVELYN

The people at the funeral home said it was a suicide note.

YANK

My father died in an accident.

EVELYN

Malcolm Dozier, historian at the Mt. Gethsemene Church of Christ, wanted a Xeroxed copy.

YANK

Keith Lundy, coroner and mortician for Cumberland County, ruled his death accidental.

EVELYN

He promised to edit the sexual references.

YANK

Officially recorded as an aviation casualty.

EVELYN

Did he know the first thing about piloting a hot air balloon?

YANK

Wizard of Oz was his favorite movie.

EVELYN

A man who had never been off the ground higher than a grapevine who steals a hot air balloon is suicidal.

YANK

He loved the part where the wizard sails off in the balloon.

EVELYN

Hadn't made it a half-mile before the wind whipped him into some TVA power lines.

YANK

Cumberland was without electricity for three days.

EVELYN

The explosion was better than fireworks. The newspaper said he was burned beyond recognition.

YANK

Mickey demanded a discount on the cremation.

EVELYN

Yank poured his ashes in the river.

YANK

Daddy thought he was about to live, not about to die.

EVELYN

Decide for yourself.

(SHE produces two sheets of paper
covered in a handwritten scrawl and
begins to read melodramatically:)

When a man looks at a town from about every angle he can stand, it's time to move on.

(HER comment:)

Malcolm Dozier called that a "metaphor for dying."

(back to the note)

I was born . . .

YANK

(taking the letter from HER)

on the Donelson River, 27 miles from the bridge to Culver.

EVELYN

Culver's my hometown, you know.

YANK

I was sixteen years old before I crossed the Donelson.

EVELYN

Culver's no different than Cumberland that I can see.

YANK

A man who owned a cabin on the other side of the river met a woman there on weekends.

EVELYN

The owner of Culver's only grocery, W. T. Kempson and his mistress, Mamie Stump.

YANK

She never knew how beautiful she was in my field glasses romping by the edge of the river.

EVELYN

Up close she had the deepest acne scars I've ever seen. And him married to Miss Culver City, 1939.

YANK

One Sunday morning I watched them make love on the bank of the river.

EVELYN

His wife's skin was so smooth Pond's Cold Cream offered her a contract.

YANK

If I find that woman, I'll tell her how she affected my life.

EVELYN

The last we heard of Mamie Stump she moved to Alabama with her bastard son.

YANK

She was the reason I started a ferry service across the Donelson--so that young boys could get to Culver, where the beautiful, naked girls played openly at the water's edge.

EVELYN

I'm a Culver girl and I've never been in the out-of-doors naked in my life.

YANK

If I find that woman, I'll thank her for a fantasy.

EVELYN

Kempson's cabin burned one hot autumn night.

YANK

The flames danced across the water . . . like fireworks underfoot.

EVELYN

We always said he got what he deserved when the Piggly Wiggly moved to town.

YANK

When I find that woman, I'll kiss her face.

EVELYN

Yank believes his daddy stole a hot-air balloon to search for a seventy-year-old whore with acne.

YANK

I'll swim naked with her at the water's edge.

EVELYN

See why I prefer suicide?

YANK

(turning sharply on EVELYN)

And then I'll choke the life right out of her!

EVELYN

(shocked temporarily to silence
before HER recovery)

Another metaphor for dying!

YANK

My father moved through dooms of love.

(YANK exits. A shower is heard
running off-stage. EVELYN listens
to PEACHES wailing some country
ditty, hopelessly but happily off-key.)

PEACHES

Mickey, do you think my pelvis is wide enough for natural delivery?

(EVELYN puts HER hand on a water
faucet. Decisively, SHE turns it on
full blast. Stung by the suddenly
scalding water, PEACHES yells,
"Oww!" The shower stops.)

PEACHES

(offstage)

There's something wrong with this shower!

(EVELYN delights in PEACHES's
suffering. The shower starts again.
Again EVELYN blasts the cold
water.)

PEACHES

(offstage)

Mickey, I get scalded every time I take a shower.

(EVELYN has never been so entertained. The shower starts again. MICKEY enters behind EVELYN, WHO is unaware of HIS presence. After a pause EVELYN repeats the water faucet trick.)

PEACHES

(offstage)

Oww! For the love of God, my hair is falling out.

MICKEY

What are you doing, Mama?

EVELYN

Washing dishes.

MICKEY

I don't see any dishes.

(PEACHES continues HER shower. MICKEY walks suspiciously to the faucet and turns the cold water full blast. PEACHES's shower stops as before.)

PEACHES

Mickey! People will think I'm on chemotherapy!

(MICKEY smiles. EVELYN smiles. MOTHER AND SON find PEACHES' suffering hysterical. SHE begins HER shower again. THEY wait for a few seconds before blasting the cold water.)

Damn! Shit!

(calling)

Mickey, this house is haunted. I swear to God!

(EVELYN and MICKEY collapse to the floor, breathless and red-faced in THEIR suppressed laughter. YANK enters. YANK eyes THEM suspiciously.)

YANK

What are you doing?

MICKEY

Washing dishes.

(THEY break up again.)

EVELYN

(recovering)

Yank, Mickey tells me you've decided to go with him and Peaches to the mudwrestling.

YANK

I need to see for myself a town backward enough to prefer mudwrestling to E. E. Cummings.

(HE and MICKEY move toward the bleachers, where PEACHES awaits them.)

EVELYN

Yank!

(HE turns back. SHE hesitates, unable to account for a sudden fear.)

Don't get dirty!

YANK

I won't Mama.

(An expectant crowd is heard.)

EVELYN

Watch out for him, Mickey!

(SHE exits.)

MICKEY

(as HE and YANK approach the bleachers)

Admit it, Bubba. I know what my people like.

YANK

Cumberland is a pretty how town.

(The crowd noise stops.)

MICKEY

Except for the neon. Little Las Vegas they call us.

YANK

And waterheaters.

MICKEY

After Tennessee built a bridge to Culver, Daddy lost the ferry.

YANK

He worked the line.

MICKEY

Poking insulation around the water drums.

(MICKEY and YANK kneel to the floor and begin scratching the back of an imaginary ESTLIN on the floor.)

YANK

It was pink and fuzzy like cotton candy.

MICKEY

Itched like hell.

YANK

You can't wash it off.

MICKEY

Little glass spikes dug in his skin. The more he washed, the deeper he drove them.

YANK

I've seen him take three baths in a single night.

MICKEY

When he was tired of scratching, he'd lay on his belly and make me and Yank scratch his back.

YANK

And he'd recite the poem he'd written that day.

(THEIR scratching becomes less intense.)

MICKEY

All from memory. He never wrote them down.

YANK

Then he'd grow easy and finally drift to sleep.

EVELYN

(appearing abruptly)

Go to bed, Estlin. People will think you've tapped out drunk.

YANK

So Mama would make him go to bed.

(EVELYN exits with ESTLIN.)

MICKEY

And soon we'd hear the scratching again. So painful this time they'd both be moaning . . .

YANK

And the next night Daddy's back would be scratched up bad.

(YANK and MICKEY take THEIR places on either side of PEACHES. Applause and cheers. ROBIN, a mudwrestler in HER early 20's, enters in a sequined robe.)

ROBIN

(into a microphone)

Hello, Cumberland, Tennessee!

MICKEY

Hello!

ROBIN

(undoing her robe to reveal her figure; shouts, whistles, encouragement arise off-stage)

The Hollywood Honies and I flew in to entertain you guys this week.

(SHE stops before MICKEY.)

PEACHES

This one's taken.

ROBIN

They're all taken, Sugar.

PEACHES

I am not Sugar.

(CROWD offstage reacts to PEACHES.)

ROBIN

No offense, Honey.

PEACHES

My name is Peaches.

(laughter and derision for PEACHES)

ROBIN

Peaches . . . you're married to one handsome man.

(CROWD and MICKEY react.)

PEACHES

We're not . . . He's about to be a father.

MICKEY

Peaches, damnit! Don't get jealous. She's a performer, an entertainer.

ROBIN

An artist.

MICKEY

Yeah, Mudwrestlers are artists . . . like me and neon.

PEACHES

Do you know how little weight I've gained in my breasts?

MICKEY

Do I care? Come on Peaches. Give me some room here.

PEACHES

Only a quarter pound. Doctor says it's stress.

MICKEY

(never taking HIS lustful eyes off

ROBIN)

How do you weigh your tits?

PEACHES

If my breasts don't gain, I won't be able to breast feed.

ROBIN

Now, fellas, don't be shy!

MICKEY

(shouting, applauding)

I ain't shy, Darling!

(annoyed, embarrassed)

I'll stop by the Hot Stop for some milk. Okay?

ROBIN

We're going to do whatever it takes . . . We have the equipment . . .

MICKEY

(whistling)

Oh, yes you do, Baby!

(PEACHES grabs MICKEY'S arm.)

Let me enjoy the show!

ROBIN

We have the experience!

PEACHES

I want the whole experience.

MICKEY

So do I! Peaches, the tickets are four bucks apiece here. Why didn't you stay home?

PEACHES

You said we were going to the carnival.

MICKEY

After the mudwrestlers.

PEACHES

You said I could ride the ferris wheel.

MICKEY

How much are the tickets?

PEACHES

Three coupons.

MICKEY

How much is a coupon?

YANK

Seventy-five cents.

MICKEY

Hell, no.

PEACHES

You promised me the ferris wheel!

MICKEY

Peaches, get those pregnant hormones in tow!

(SHE starts to protest.)

Right now! In tow!

PEACHES

(mumbling)

If we can spend eight dollars for mudwrestlers, we can spend four-fifty for the ferris wheel.

MICKEY

My ticket was free.

ROBIN

Let me introduce the Hollywood Honies

MICKEY

(excitedly to a passive YANK)
They look like the Hollywood *Hornies* to me.

ROBIN

Sassy Sandy, Luscious Lisa

MICKEY

Do you know the safety record of these mobile carnivals?

ROBIN

Pretty Patty, Cagey Kathy . . . and me, I'm Rockin' Robin!

MICKEY

(cheering wildly, over ROBIN'S
introductions)
Oh, my God. A garter belt. Damn, and this was my idea!

YANK

I'll take you on the ferris wheel, Peaches.

PEACHES

You will?

YANK

Mickey's afraid of heights.

MICKEY

Bubba's lying.

PEACHES

Dr. Toulmin said the ferris wheel wouldn't hurt the baby.

MICKEY

If Yank's paying, I say go. Of course what baby could survive dropping three hundred feet when the whole damn thing comes crashing down?

(PEACHES stares at MICKEY in
amazed horror.)

PEACHES

Yeah?

MICKEY

Steel and wire and glass twisted around your womb. You might live, but I don't give the baby a chance.

(SHE looks to YANK for some
comfort.)

YANK

I'll buy you a candy apple.

(PEACHES does not move.)

MICKEY Bubba, have you ever seen titties like these?

PEACHES

Mickey promised me some cotton candy.

(MICKEY and YANK scratch involuntarily.)

MICKEY

That's a lie.

YANK

It makes us itch.

PEACHES

Why did I come?

MICKEY

To let me see what a clawing wife looks like. It ain't pretty, Peaches. Not pretty at all.

ROBIN

Every man's fantasy: to go for a round with one of the girls.

(MICKEY goes into a frenzy volunteering.)

MICKEY

Me! Me! Pick me! Me! Me! ME, ME, ME, ME!

YANK

(looking at the waving, stomping
MICKEY for a second before telling
PEACHES:)

This pregnancy's been real hard on Mickey.

PEACHES

Mickey, you can't get in mud with your best breeches.

ROBIN

(coming toward MICKEY)

How about you, Sir?

MICKEY

Hot damn!

ROBIN

No, not you. The only man in the stands not on his feet.

MICKEY

(sorely disappointed)

Yank?

(a chorus of boos and catcalls from men)

ROBIN

(interviewing YANK with microphone)

What's your name?

YANK

(standing up)

Everybody calls me Yank.

ROBIN

Yank, what do you say? How about a round with Sassy Sandy? Or is Luscious Lisa more to your liking?

MICKEY

Pick the garter belt.

YANK

I didn't come dressed to mudwrestle.

(Boos from the audience.)

MICKEY

My brother wanted an E. E. Cummings Festival.

(laughs and jeers)

ROBIN

We have a special outfit for you backstage.

MICKEY

I wouldn't have ruined my breeches! Damn!

ROBIN

The girls might even help you change.

MICKEY

You lucky son of a bitch.

YANK

No. I think not.

(Calls of unbelief from MEN: "Fool!"
"Queer!" "Faggot!" "We should
have known!")

MICKEY

(yelling at the crowd)
My brother ain't queer.

(quietly to YANK)

Yank, this is your chance to prove to this town that you ain't queer. Do it! Do it for me!

ROBIN

No man has turned us down in twenty-two cities from here to Hollywood.

MICKEY

Yank, do it for Mama!

YANK

Mama told me not to get dirty.

ROBIN

Your brother seems eager to take your place.

YANK

Ask Peaches.

PEACHES

Only if you'll promise to hurt him very badly.

ROBIN

Which one do you want to wrestle . . . er . . . ?

MICKEY

Mickey. I'll take on the whole lot of you.

ROBIN

A feisty one! Lisa, take Mickey backstage to change.

(MICKEY runs off-stage; ROBIN follows.)

(YANK and PEACHES stand in a bright light, shining directly from overhead. EVELYN, as a foreign carnival worker WHO speaks broken English, stands to the side in the shadows. YANK is in a near-trance, aiming a dart. With a fluid, practiced motion, HE flings the dart; the thud of it sticking certainly where it was aimed.)

Red's a winner!

EVELYN

(EVELYN matches YANK's wager.)

Three in a row!

PEACHES

Let it ride.

YANK

Eighty dollars is the bet!

EVELYN

(EVELYN hands YANK a dart. HE concentrates for a second, then confidently flings it . From PEACHES's enthusiastic reaction, it is obvious the dart landed red.)

I wish Mickey could see this.

PEACHES

Again.

YANK

EVELYN

(matching YANK's wager)

A gambler here! Bets down! Bets down!

(As before, a winner. CROWD noises encourage YANK.)

Red.

YANK

PEACHES

We've won over three-hundred dollars!

EVELYN

Take it easy, Mr. Dart Man.

(The CROWD hushes expectantly. HE releases.)

PEACHES

Yes! Yes! Yes!

(SHE hugs YANK, WHO shows no emotion.)

EVELYN

(a decided reduction in enthusiasm)
Red another winner.

(matching YANK's wager)
Don't break me first night, American dart wizard. I here all week.

YANK

The dart.

EVELYN

Come back tomorrow night. You cool off.

YANK

The dart. Give me the dart.

(MICKEY, dirty, disheveled and
injured, hobbles in.)

MICKEY

Peaches, let's get home. They shot me in the crotch with a fire hose.

(EVELYN reluctantly hands YANK
the dart.)

PEACHES

Yank's about to win over \$600.

(ROBIN, still muddy, holding a towel
and robe, enters.)

MICKEY

What?

EVELYN

Okay. Last throw. Seven house limit. Someone else's turn. Bets down! Bets down!

MICKEY

Bubba, that's a lot of money.

(YANK hesitates, his confidence
drained. Finally, he throws the dart.)

EVELYN

(relieved)

Black!

(YANK stares at the board. EVELYN
sweeps up YANK's money.)

Let's go. Peaches.

MICKEY

(PEACHES throws ROBIN a glance of contempt as THEY exit. ROBIN stares at YANK, WHO does not notice HER.)

EVELYN

New game! Bets down! Bets down!

(YANK stays frozen for a moment longer before gradual fade on EVELYN.)

(YANK sits alone in a rusty lawn chair on the deck of the deserted river ferry. With confident fluidity, HE tosses a dart.)

YANK

Red!

(HE laughs. Suddenly aware of ROBIN, HE twirls with HIS arm cocked, poised to aim the dart as a weapon.)

ROBIN

Suddenly it's clear: slow with women, fast with darts.

YANK

Darts don't turn on you. Women are boomerangs.

ROBIN

Is this your boat?

YANK

Used to be my daddy's.

ROBIN

What happened?

YANK

A bridge. Waterheaters. Time.

ROBIN

Where's this river go?

YANK

All the way to the ocean, according to my map.

ROBIN

I don't believe in maps.

YANK

You don't care where you're headed?

ROBIN

Colored lines on a flat sheet of paper can't tell me where I'm going. How about you?

YANK

I sell maps.

ROBIN

What kind of maps?

YANK

Road maps. Atlases. Geological. Astronomical. Historical.

ROBIN

I'm looking for a treasure map.

YANK

Treasure maps are rare.

ROBIN

People buy maps?

YANK

I expect a small profit in five years.

ROBIN

I'm already making small profits.

(seductively)

Never needed a map.

YANK

You don't remember me?

ROBIN

The man who preferred a poetry festival to mudwrestling. Remember me?

YANK

The woman who smeared my brother's face in the mud.

ROBIN

He grabbed my tit backstage.

YANK

Occupational hazard?

ROBIN

(caressing HER breasts)

Biology is destiny.

YANK

Mickey likes proving things.

ROBIN

Don't you have something to prove?

YANK

Does wallowing in mud with an almost-naked girl from Hollywood prove something?

ROBIN

I can work you in tomorrow night's show.

YANK

Sorry.

ROBIN

Rejections aren't good for my reputation.

YANK

Mickey couldn't breathe when you were on top of him.

ROBIN

He had more important things on his mind than breathing.

YANK

Did you follow me here?

ROBIN

Besides, I'll let you on top.

YANK

No contest. Mickey can beat me. You beat Mickey.

ROBIN

I'll let you win. My first loss in 185 contests.

YANK

You bend in the middle just like a boomerang.

ROBIN

Everyone knows when a man beats a woman, it's because she lets him.

YANK

It doesn't seem wise.

ROBIN

Kisses are a better fate than wisdom.

YANK

(struck)
You know Cummings?

ROBIN

I went to school.

YANK

You did follow me.

ROBIN

I came to wash off in the river. The showers at the Cumberland Inn are pretty poor.

YANK

Cumberland's not much compared to Hollywood.

ROBIN

I've never been to Hollywood.

YANK

You lied?

ROBIN

Fantasy. On stage that's what we are. That's what we sell.

YANK

People buy fantasy?

ROBIN

Hollywood Honies don't have five years to turn a small profit. We have to make big money. Tonight.

YANK

Did you fly?

ROBIN

Eight of us made the trip from Russelville, Alabama, in a U-Haul Truck without an air conditioner.

YANK

You've never been higher than a grapevine?

ROBIN

I rode a hot air balloon once.

YANK

(incredulously)

You've been up in a hot air balloon?

ROBIN

What a gyp! Straight up and straight down cost ten dollars. We kept our rope tied to the ground.

YANK
What did you see?

ROBIN
The balloon man was all over me. That's what I saw.

YANK
Does every man you meet touch you?

ROBIN
You are gay, aren't you?

YANK
Most of the time I'm sad.

ROBIN
E. E. Cummings himself had rather run his hand under this bikini than write
Psalms and half of Proverbs.

YANK
Much of Cummings' work is sensuous.

ROBIN
Do you know what your brother would give to be here in the moonlight alone
with me? Sensuously speaking . . .

YANK
The trust of a girl about to bear his child.

ROBIN
His baby, his mama and all the gods in all the heavens.

YANK
You better wash before the mud dries.

ROBIN
Dirt turns most men on. Okay, I can take care of that.

(ROBIN removes HER bikini and
slithers into the water from the side
of the ferry.)

The water's plenty warm!

YANK
I kept very clean tonight.

ROBIN
I know some boys from Tennessee go skinny dipping.

YANK
Are you a whore?

ROBIN

(sticking HER head above the water,
laughing)

Thanks for noticing.

YANK

Your complexion seems very clear for a whore's.

ROBIN

Everyone goes to the highest bidder.

YANK

Mudwrestlers?

ROBIN

Me, you, your brother, Pears . . .

YANK

Peaches.

ROBIN

Everyone! Your mama.

YANK

My mother is not a whore.

ROBIN

Your daddy. E. E. Cummings.

YANK

No.

ROBIN

I know you, Yank. You want me, but you need to woo me.

YANK

How does a map salesman from Tennessee woo an Alabama whore?

ROBIN

Some men can't take me without a fight.

YANK

There's value in ritual.

ROBIN

No time. Saturday night we head home.

YANK

Perhaps the Cummings' festival will materialize and you can return as a presenter.

ROBIN

Look for me and the queer little balloonman sailing over the tree tops.

Avoid the power lines. YANK

What river am I staining, Yank? ROBIN

The Donelson. YANK

Never heard of it. ROBIN

My daddy's ashes are buried in it. YANK

ROBIN

(suddenly emerging from the water
into the robe that YANK dutifully
hands HER)

What are those lights across the Donelson?

Neon. My brother makes them. YANK

Another whole town of neon? ROBIN

Culver. YANK

Never heard of it. Who owns your daddy's boat now? ROBIN

First Cumberland Investor's Bank. YANK

Never heard of it. But you don't need a boat to get to your fantasy. I'm right here. ROBIN

Slow summer nights he'd sit out here, toss darts and yell his poems at the moon. YANK

And next week I'll never have heard of you. ROBIN

I'll remember you. YANK

Memories are inspired by regrets. ROBIN

You have none? YANK

ROBIN
No memories. No regrets. Some wintry afternoon you'll recall this summer night.
She was wet and willing

YANK
Was she real or just a fantasy?

ROBIN
Fantasy. Always. A ride on your daddy's boat would be nice ritual.

YANK
No one's started the ferry in years. I doubt there's a key.

ROBIN
Yell your poems at the moon, Yank. I'll listen.

YANK
Cummings wrote all my poems.

ROBIN
Whores write poems.

YANK
Let me hear one of yours.

ROBIN
I must warn you: even bad poetry is a great aphrodisiac.

YANK
Words are the only seduction.

ROBIN
I don't know you well enough to say my poem.

YANK
You know me well enough to strip in the river.

ROBIN
Anybody with four bucks can see me naked, but my poetry . . .

YANK
I'm not expecting E. E. Cummings.

ROBIN
You know poetry.

YANK
I'm not expecting Conway Twitty.

ROBIN
Okay, but don't look at me.

(HE turns away.)
All I have is the beginning . . .

YANK
Say the damn poem!

ROBIN
(simple, unaffected emotion)
I feel for those who threw the dice
And cast a loser's lot
I feel for those who sought the seas
But sail a landlocked heart
Yet most of all I feel for her
Who won and somehow forgot.

YANK
Is that you?

ROBIN
No memories. No regrets.

YANK
Did you forget?

ROBIN
I told you: I win every night.

YANK
No one who writes poems has to wallow naked in the mud.

ROBIN
Hollywood Honies turn \$200 a night.

YANK
She doesn't have to be a whore.

ROBIN
Where else can I make that kind of money?

YANK
Walk away from it.

ROBIN
I walked away from minimum wage at Burger King and grease up to my chin . . .

YANK
You're better than Burger King!

ROBIN
My choice was grease or mud. Grease or mud! Which would you choose?

YANK

Mama's church baptizes in the Donelson.

ROBIN

I wrote one stupid poem. That's all you know about me.

YANK

It'll wash away grease. It'll wash away mud.

ROBIN

And you're better than a broken boat on the Donelson River.

YANK

This is my daddy's boat!

ROBIN

This is the bank's boat.

YANK

I don't have a choice.

ROBIN

I'm choosing to mudwrestle tomorrow night. The show starts at 8.

(SHE begins to leave.)

YANK

Wait!

(SHE turns back.)

ROBIN

All you do is wait! You're too scared to do anything else.

YANK

Come home with me tonight.

ROBIN

Where do you live?

YANK

With my mother.

ROBIN

How many whores have you taken home to meet Mama?

YANK

And Mickey and Peaches.

ROBIN

We can do whatever you want to do right here in the grass.

YANK

I don't want sex.

I want it! ROBIN

I can help you. YANK

Sex would help me. ROBIN

Teach you. The power in a poem. YANK

The seduction of words? ROBIN

If that's the way you choose to phrase it . . . YANK

I've met men who claimed to be for baptism and against sex. They were liars. ROBIN

And you can teach me. YANK

To reach beyond your fear? ROBIN

Will you come? YANK

(SHE studies HIM a beat.)

ROBIN

(cooly)

I finally understand the allure of virgins.

(YANK smiles at ROBIN. Slow fade.)

(A shirtless MICKEY is on HIS stomach, groaning. A bottle of liniment sits beside HIM. PEACHES is standing over HIM, munching a candy apple.)

MICKEY

Oh, God. Oh. I sprung something--something I need.

PEACHES

Those girls train.

MICKEY

Will you trash that apple and give me some relief?

PEACHES

Did you think you could beat them?

MICKEY

Isn't mudwrestling supposed to be fake? Those bitches tried to kill me.

PEACHES

You made a fool out of me in front of the whole town.

MICKEY

Who was thinking of you? It was me up there with my legs twisted behind my head.

PEACHES

You looked pretty stupid, too.

MICKEY

Will you shut-up and rub my back?

PEACHES

(HER advanced pregnancy makes it difficult for HER to lower HERSELF to the floor.)

I can't get that low.

MICKEY

Sure you can. Come on.

(as SHE valiantly struggles to the floor)

Peaches, sometimes you're so self-centered.

(One hand still devoted to the apple, SHE pours liniment on MICKEY's back and begins to rub.)

PEACHES

Why were you so anxious to mudwrestle those girls?

MICKEY

Do you think I wanted to go through that?

PEACHES

(imitating HIS wild volunteering on the bleachers.)

Me, Me, Pick me! ME! ME! ME!

MICKEY

Men expect certain things of each other.

PEACHES

And where mudwrestlers are concerned?

MICKEY

Where a good-looking girl in a bikini is concerned, if she asks you to wrestle her in the mud, a real man obliges her.

PEACHES

And if he don't?

MICKEY

You know what this town thinks of Yank.

PEACHES

Yank is the only man in Cumberland with any sense.

MICKEY

There's your fool. His big chance to prove to this town that he's not queer.

PEACHES

Yank ain't queer. Do you think?

MICKEY

Any man not laid by 28 is highly suspect.

PEACHES

(teasing)

Yank may have had more sex than you.

MICKEY

Bullshit!

PEACHES

That mudwrestler asked him before you.

MICKEY

I noticed that.

PEACHES

There's a woman somewhere who'd love Yank.

MICKEY

(agreeing)

Yank's good looking as me. It's that poetry crap ruined his life.

PEACHES

E. E. Cummings wrote about women.

MICKEY

Who cares about Milly and Molly by the sea?

PEACHES

No. He showed me one about doing it:

(with dramatic gusto)

"May I feel" said he? "I'll squeal," said she.

MICKEY

Yank needs to do more than read about it.

PEACHES

If Yank don't care what Cumberland thinks, why do you?

MICKEY

Would you buy neon from a man who's blood kin to a faggot?

PEACHES

Have you lost business because of Yank?

MICKEY

I know this town.

PEACHES

Have you lost business because you won't marry your pregnant girlfriend?

MICKEY

Not tonight, Peaches. I'm suffering here.

PEACHES

If the town keeps score with your brother, don't they keep score with you?

MICKEY

Haven't I admitted it's my baby? Is Mama charging you rent? Who pays for the food?

PEACHES

I could get that from the Salvation Army.

MICKEY

You can't eat a wedding ring.

PEACHES

I don't need gold.

MICKEY

Daddy leaves us nothing. Mama's never had a job.

PEACHES

I want to be your wife. We could do it at the courthouse Saturday morning.

MICKEY

My fairy brother has yet to earn a dime.

PEACHES

I'll pay for the license. That's all we need.

MICKEY

I've got you, a baby on the way, and a back that may never be normal again.

When? PEACHES

One thing at a time? MICKEY

A date. Just give me a date. PEACHES

After the baby's born. MICKEY

Do you love me, Mickey? PEACHES

Lower. Lower. Yeah, right there. MICKEY

Do you love me, Mickey? PEACHES

Over. Right on the spine. Ahh. That's better. MICKEY

Did you ever love me, Mickey? PEACHES

Can I sue? The whole town witnessed what they did to me. MICKEY

Did that girl ask you to do anything with her backstage? PEACHES

What girl? MICKEY

What would a real man have done? PEACHES

It was all business backstage. You know California girls--they're probably all lesbians. MICKEY

She had a great body. PEACHES

They fight like a man, that's for sure. MICKEY

They all had great bodies. PEACHES

MICKEY

Men won't pay to watch hogs mudwrestle.

PEACHES

Am I a hog, Mickey?

MICKEY

It's okay to be a hog while you're pregnant.

PEACHES

I'll lose the weight after the baby's born.

MICKEY

Sure you will.

PEACHES

You haven't kissed me in two months.

MICKEY

That's a lie.

PEACHES

Two months. A real kiss.

MICKEY

The doctor said--

PEACHES

Dr. Toulmin said sex might be difficult, but he never said not to kiss me.

MICKEY

You've got a basketball growing out of your belly. My nuts have been run over by a firetruck.

PEACHES

You can kiss me!

MICKEY

I can't make it to the bed.

PEACHES

You won't kiss me.

MICKEY

I'll sleep right here.

(Visibly hurt, PEACHES rises and exits. When SHE exits, MICKEY sits up without difficulty and stares after HER. EVELYN enters with a blanket and pillow for MICKEY. Unseen, PEACHES re-enters with a blanket and pillow. SHE watches EVELYN cover MICKEY. HE kisses HIS MOTHER. EVELYN exits. PEACHES studies the resting MICKEY for an instant before exiting tearfully with the blanket and pillow.)

(The next morning EVELYN and PEACHES sit at the breakfast table.)

EVELYN

If I had known Mickey was the star, I'd went to see it.

PEACHES

At one point four girls spun him over their heads into the mud.

EVELYN

A natural leader—even in kindergarten.

PEACHES

He was so dizzy he was helpless.

EVELYN

A crowd pleaser.

PEACHES

They humiliated him. Again and again.

EVELYN

My Mickey always had a showman's flair.

PEACHES

They could have crippled him.

EVELYN

If he didn't love neon so, I'd encourage him to enter politics.

PEACHES

The crowd laughed at him!

EVELYN

How much of a political liability might you and a baby be?

(Stiffly, MICKEY enters.)

PEACHES

Evelyn thinks your performance last night boosted your political potential.

(MICKEY studies the PAIR for a clue.)

EVELYN

This town won't forget how you organized the mudwrestlers and the carnival.

MICKEY

Me neither. Peaches, get the syringe. My ear's got a ton of mud caked in it.

PEACHES

At the breakfast table?

MICKEY

I'll eat when I can hear.

PEACHES

(retrieving a large ear syringe)

Yank played darts last night.

EVELYN

His daddy's game.

PEACHES

He almost won six-hundred dollars.

EVELYN

(pouring MICKEY's coffee)

But then he went one bet too far and lost it all.

MICKEY

I warned him not to make that last bet, Mama.

EVELYN

Estlin Pepper will never be dead while Yank draws breath.

PEACHES

Do I put something in the water?

EVELYN

Just a tiny drop of Joy.

PEACHES

Won't that make soap bubbles in his ears?

MICKEY

Make sure it's warm.

EVELYN

(as PEACHES carefully administers
a drop of dishwashing liquid to the
water)

Not too much.

MICKEY

Not too cold.

PEACHES

(sucking water in to the syringe)

Ready?

MICKEY

(hesitant)

Mama's done this before.

PEACHES

(placing the syringe in MICKEY's
ear)

I can do it.

MICKEY

Be careful. It's not too cold, is it?

(MICKEY holds a bowl under HIS ear
to catch the drainage. SHE injects
the fluid into HIS ear. HE dives out
of his chair, writhing in pain.)

Ahh! OoHH! Mother of God!

EVELYN

What have you done to him?

PEACHES

Nothing.

MICKEY

She fried my ear drum. Oh! Oh!

PEACHES

You said not too cold.

EVELYN

I should have done it. Mickey, are you okay?

MICKEY

I'm deaf! My left ear is gone! Gone!

Sorry, Mickey. It felt lukewarm.

PEACHES

And my back! Oh, my back.

MICKEY

Don't you know that ears are more sensitive than fingers?

EVELYN

No.

PEACHES

What do you know?

EVELYN

You did that on purpose!

MICKEY

No, I didn't.

PEACHES

(YANK appears, taking note of
MICKEY, still wiggling on the floor.)

Peaches maimed your brother.

EVELYN

It was an accident!

PEACHES

This baby won't live a month.

EVELYN

(examining the dish washing
detergent)

YANK

Washing dishes is dangerous in this house.

Mickey, you'll be okay.

EVELYN

(pointedly, to EVELYN)

YANK

People get burned.

Get up, Baby.

EVELYN

Will you help me, Yank?

MICKEY

(YANK helps HIS BROTHER to a
chair.)

EVELYN

(to YANK)

I waited up for you as long as I could.

YANK

It was hard to leave . . . the river so cool and the sky so clear.

EVELYN

That old boat ain't ours no more. The bank's gonna have you arrested.

YANK

I had company.

MICKEY

(shaking HIS head)

Did he say company?

EVELYN

You never know who might be lurking down there . . . drug dealers.

YANK

My company came home with me.

MICKEY

(to PEACHES)

What about drugs?

PEACHES

Somebody spent the night with Yank.

MICKEY

Male or female?

PEACHES

He hasn't said.

MICKEY

Did he bring a homo drug dealer into this house?

EVELYN

I'm out of the Baptist Church.

YANK

A woman.

PEACHES

Who?

YANK

A friend of Mickey's.

(MICKEY motions HE can't hear.)

He says it's a friend of yours. PEACHES

Male or female? MICKEY

Robin. YANK

I don't know any Roberts. MICKEY

Robin who? PEACHES

Rockin' Robin is all I know. YANK

Is Kenneth Roberts back from Virginia? MICKEY

The mudwrestler? PEACHES

He was in seminary. We always suspected him. MICKEY

You didn't get mud on Aunt Jettie's sheets I hope. EVELYN

She is clean. YANK

What's going on? Tell me! MICKEY

Robin--the mudwrestler--stayed with Yank last night. PEACHES

It sounds like you're saying, "Robin the mudwrestler." MICKEY

Yes! PEACHES

Her! (ROBIN, clad in one of Yank's shirts and little else, emerges.)

(MICKEY stares opened-mouthed at ROBIN.)

ROBIN

(cheerfully)

Good morning, everybody!

(SHE kisses YANK on the cheek and sits in HIS lap. HE redirects HER to a chair. To PEACHES:)

Nice to see you again.

MICKEY

I must have mud in my eyes, too.

EVELYN

I did the best I could with both my boys.

ROBIN

(to EVELYN)

So you're Mrs. Pepper.

EVELYN

The best I could.

YANK

How about some breakfast, Mama?

ROBIN

What is that delicious smell?

EVELYN

Ham and eggs.

ROBIN

It's so hard to find decent food in Hollywood.

YANK

(smiling)

Mama, Robin and I would like ham and eggs.

EVELYN

Sometimes I think Estlin knew what was coming.

MICKEY

What are you trying to pull here?

YANK

Staying here was my idea.

MICKEY

Sure it was. Listen--

(Suddenly, HE stops HIMSELF.)

When I can hear, I want to talk to you.

ROBIN

Aunt Jettie's sheets were so much better than the Cumberland Inn's.

PEACHES

Mickey was so sore he slept on the floor.

ROBIN

(smiling at MICKEY)

Is that liniment I smell?

MICKEY

Shut-up, Peaches, whatever you're saying.

PEACHES

Washing the mud out of his ear only made it worse.

ROBIN

Hand me the syringe.

(PEACHES does.)

MICKEY

Stay away from me.

ROBIN

The trick is not to use water. Air will dry the mud and it'll crumble right out.

PEACHES

Let her try it, Mickey.

MICKEY

Let me test the water.

PEACHES

(loud, exaggerated)

No water!

MICKEY

Careful!

(SHE gingerly inserts the syringe and with the precision of a surgeon performs a maneuver in MICKEY's ear. At first HE is very suspicious, cautious, but slowly MICKEY relaxes, closing HIS eyes. Moans of pleasure emit from HIS lips. HER positioning of the syringe takes on a more provocative, suggestive air as HER whole body becomes involved.)

ROBIN

Men love this. It's very pleasurable.

PEACHES

Okay, that's enough.

ROBIN

Almost got it.

MICKEY

Ohhh. Yesss. Right there. Do it. Ahhhhhhh. God, what are you doing to me?????

(EVELYN re-enters with two plates.)

EVELYN

Put me on the next balloon. I'm ready to exit this world.

PEACHES

(pushing ROBIN away)

That'll do!

MICKEY

Don't stop! Not now! Please. Just a little more!

(PEACHES sits, resigned.)

ROBIN

(quickly finishing the procedure)

It plays on a reverse penetration fantasy.

MICKEY

(collapsing to the floor)

Will you please teach Peaches how to do this?

PEACHES

I understand reverse--

ROBIN

Penetration.

PEACHES

Whatever.

MICKEY

(sitting up, shaking HIS head)

It doesn't feel any-- Wait! I can hear.

EVELYN

(to YANK)

This time you've topped your brother.

I'll take care of this Mama.

MICKEY

A Hollywood mudwrestler with no last name.

EVELYN

She is more than a mudwrestler.

YANK

No one here doubts that.

EVELYN

Robin will be staying with me a few days.

YANK

Hell, no!

MICKEY

Lighten up! Maybe we'll schedule a rematch.

ROBIN

Don't you beat up Mickey again!

PEACHES

She didn't beat me up. Besides, there were five of them.

MICKEY

Mama, it's your house.

YANK

One-on-one, no contest.

MICKEY

She's your "company," Yank.

EVELYN

(to ROBIN)

You're all set.

YANK

Let's not tell Aunt Jettie.

EVELYN

Mama, she should be at the Cumberland Inn.

MICKEY

I didn't object when you moved Peaches in.

YANK

Peaches is different.

MICKEY

PEACHES

No I'm not. They're not married and neither are we.

MICKEY

You're on my side.

EVELYN

Your taste in women run along the same lines.

ROBIN

Yank and I aren't sleeping together.

PEACHES

Neither are we.

MICKEY

Shut-up, Peaches.

ROBIN

(meaningfully)

Not yet anyway.

YANK

I sleep on the couch.

MICKEY

(incredulously)

You brought a mudwrestler home and didn't sleep with her?

YANK

(pointedly)

I don't fall into bed with every woman that comes along.

ROBIN

Yank seduces with words.

EVELYN

Got that from his daddy.

ROBIN

Right, Yank?

YANK

I believe in maps.

ROBIN

But there comes a time to leave that map folded in the glove compartment and set off without a plan.

YANK

Cummings would be comfortable with that.

Don't you agree, Mrs. Pepper? ROBIN

Sounds like a metaphor for dying. EVELYN

Have any pepper for these eggs? ROBIN

Black pepper? EVELYN

The hotter, the better. ROBIN

Me, too. Hot, black pepper for my eggs! YANK

(EVELYN exits. PEACHES and MICKEY stare at EACH OTHER, dumbfounded. THEY exit.)

(A shower is running. MICKEY enters cautiously. The water stops. ROBIN enters in a robe, drying HER hair with a towel.)

Live on the road, you forget the comforts of home. ROBIN

This ain't home. MICKEY

Where's Yank? ROBIN

What's your game, Little Girl? MICKEY

My father called me "Little Girl." ROBIN

I ain't daddy. MICKEY

ROBIN

(combing tangles from HER hair)

Only when he was mad like you are now: "I'm on to you, Little Girl." "Watch yourself, Little Girl."

Yank has no money. MICKEY

ROBIN

Last year \$3000 in mail order. He's taking me to the map shop.

MICKEY

I pay the bills, so what's your angle?

ROBIN

Two-hundred dollars to seduce your brother.

(MICKEY moves closer, grabs HER arm.)

MICKEY

(conspiratorially)

On a river bank, not under my roof.

ROBIN

I never leave a job half-finished.

MICKEY

(letting HER go)

Keep the money. It was a stupid idea.

ROBIN

A man with maps might have buried treasure.

MICKEY

Another two-hundred dollars to leave right now.

ROBIN

How rare to meet a challenge like your dear, sweet Yank.

MICKEY

Because he's gay?

ROBIN

He turns me on.

MICKEY

Bullshit!

ROBIN

A seething volcano no woman could resist.

MICKEY

Did you try the Cummings stuff and the hot air balloon?

ROBIN

I told him I'd ridden in a hot air balloon.

MICKEY

I'd love to have seen his face.

ROBIN

And I fed him the Cummings' line you gave me.

MICKEY

I'll bet that plucked his string.

ROBIN

Nothing plucked his string.

MICKEY

You must have done something right.

ROBIN

An old Indian trick: turn back to camp and the prey tracks you.

MICKEY

Try that thing in his ear.

ROBIN

Why so interested in your bubba's sex life?

MICKEY

Cumberland needs someone else to inspire their gossip.

ROBIN

You hope I can turn him into you.

MICKEY

Daddy had crazy obsessions. Yank's just like him.

ROBIN

I've taken money for sex--a lot less than two hundred bucks, but what's the going rate to exterminate a poet?

MICKEY

Not one cent more!

ROBIN

I'll settle for your mama's breakfasts.

MICKEY

You have the week to do what you were paid to do.

ROBIN

"Kisses are a better fate than wisdom." What does it mean?

MICKEY

Who cares?

ROBIN

Yank.

MICKEY

Feeling is more important than thinking.

ROBIN

It should be easy to convert a man to his own religion.

MICKEY

You'll earn your money.

ROBIN

And you cram two towns full of neon.

MICKEY

One-hundred years from today my neon will still be catching eyes--eyes not even born.

ROBIN

You understand him just enough to hate him.

MICKEY

I love Yank!

ROBIN

Your daddy's craziest obsession was the truth.

MICKEY

I'm knee-deep in truth, thanks.

ROBIN

I sell the antidote.

MICKEY

(smiling deviously)

How much less than two-hundred dollars?

ROBIN

Fantasy, not sex!

MICKEY

(stalking HER)

Maybe a package deal . . .

ROBIN

One brother at a time, please!

MICKEY

Both Pepper brothers for three-hundred dollars and Mama's breakfasts.

ROBIN

One hot, one sweet . . .

MICKEY

What do I get for my money if you fail with Yank?

ROBIN

Get Peaches to pluck your string.

MICKEY
She's too tired to play. She'll thank you.

ROBIN
Yank is my charity case for the year.

MICKEY
Four-hundred dollars.

(He makes a move to pin HER,
which SHE easily sidesteps.)

ROBIN
Have you forgotten I'm a mudwrestler?

MICKEY
You promised a rematch.

ROBIN
I'm a one-brother woman.

(PEACHES enters, unnoticed by
ROBIN and MICKEY.)

MICKEY
You prefer poetry?

(grabbing HER breast underneath
HER robe)

""May I feel," said he!"

ROBIN
(squealing with laughter as SHE
submits)

Stop it!

(HE kisses HER roughly.)

Four fifty.

MICKEY
Four twenty-five.

(SHE pushes HIM away, then opens
HER robe.)

ROBIN
Four fifty.

MICKEY
Jesus! Five hundred!

(HE lunges for HER.)

PEACHES

Mickey, my water broke.

(ROBIN quickly breaks away and fastens HER robe. MICKEY takes an awkward beat to recover.)

MICKEY

A baby?

CURTAIN

END OF ACT I

OPTIONAL INTERMISSION

Chapter II

ACT IIAT RISE:

EVELYN, asleep, and HER sons are in a hospital waiting room. MICKEY paces impatiently.

MICKEY

A boy, Peaches. Don't let me down on this, Baby.

(HE wakes his MOTHER.)

EVELYN

I had that dream again.

MICKEY

The sign?

(SHE nods.)

Tell it, Mama!

EVELYN

I'm young. In Nashville visiting Uncle Herman. He promises after dark he'll show me the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

MICKEY

A big purple and green neon!

EVELYN

This was years before I met Estlin, but there he is—the way I first saw him sailing across the Donelson atop his ferry.

YANK

How does he look, Mama?

MICKEY

(impatient)

About the sign . . .

EVELYN

So confident in his starched shirt and red bow tie . . . a little checked cap cocked on that beautiful head . . .

MICKEY

The sign, Mama.

EVELYN

It was beautiful, but Estlin claims it's ugly and tries to tear it down.

MICKEY
Do you remember it this time, Mama?

EVELYN
No. In the dream I can read the sign, but awake it just won't come.

YANK
Daddy knew pretty words.

EVELYN
Much prettier than your Yankee poet. Why don't you spout your daddy's poems?

YANK
I can't remember them.

EVELYN
He never told them to me.

YANK
Why?

EVELYN
Said they weren't good enough. He meant I wasn't good enough.

YANK
No, Mama.

EVELYN
Did he ever write about a girl?

MICKEY
His poems never made much sense.

EVELYN
A skinny Culver girl who loved him . . . even after the bridge and the water heaters.

MICKEY
Hell, they were just words--

YANK
All his poems were about that girl. Remember, Mickey?

MICKEY
His poems were about--

YANK
Remember, Mickey?

(ROBIN, as a nurse in mask and gown, enters carrying a newborn BABY.)

Boulton baby? ROBIN

What is it? (cringing) MICKEY

Male. ROBIN

Thank you, Sweet Jesus! (falling to HIS knees in relief) MICKEY

(EVELYN gives BABY a quick look.)

So that was the big blob in Peaches' belly? EVELYN

Mr. Boulton? (to YANK, hopefully:) ROBIN

No, ma'am. He's a little Pepper sprout. MICKEY

Doctors can determine who the father is. EVELYN

He's mine. MICKEY

I've never seen a mouth like that in our family. EVELYN

One-hundred per-cent Pepper. MICKEY

You boys are moving more people in on me than I can stand. EVELYN

Your mama's right. It's time we got a place of our own. (to the baby) MICKEY

Your daddy left me, Mickey. EVELYN

Yes, ma'am. MICKEY

You won't get as far. EVELYN

(SHE exits.)

MICKEY
(struck for a beat)

(struck for a beat)

Mama, wait! (HE hands the BABY to YANK.)

(HE follows HIS MOTHER.)

YANK

(to the BABY)

Take us away in a balloon, sailing into a keen city nobody's ever visited.

(At YANK's map shop, ROBIN--dressed casually--passionately kisses YANK, WHO accepts passively.)

YANK

(ignoring HER kiss, producing a yellowed, fragile map)

Here is one of my favorite maps.

ROBIN

Did you enjoy that?

YANK

(gingerly unfolding the map)

I found it at an estate auction.

ROBIN

You put me back in grade school, where a kiss meant something.

YANK

Did that kiss mean something to you?

ROBIN

Men don't kiss the way boys do.

YANK

Experience is overrated in many endeavors.

ROBIN

I've had sex with men who never kissed me.

Does sex mean anything to you? YANK

Not in a long time . . . ROBIN

Why do you do it? YANK

What about maps plucks your string? ROBIN

Mickey says "plucks your string." YANK

A lot of people say it. ROBIN

Look at this one. YANK
(about the old map)

Cambridge, Massachusetts. ROBIN

Cummings' home town. Look at the year. YANK

1905. ROBIN

I run my fingers over the street names: I see Cummings as a child walking from Irving to Scott Street, noticing things everyone else has overlooked. YANK

What's there? ROBIN

Leaves twisting free in the breeze. Lovers in springtime. YANK

Let me try. ROBIN

(SHE runs HER fingers over the map.)

I see him . . . There he is, little E. E. himself on the corner of Kirkland and Farrar.

What does he see? YANK

ROBIN

This giant finger from ninety years in the future coming right at him.

(SHE "chases" HIM down the street
with HER finger.)

Look at him run! Stand still, E.E.!

YANK

(enjoying HER joke)

Don't crush him!

ROBIN

(acting aghast)

Now that nasty little poet is giving me the finger.

YANK

I've got maps from all over the world . . . from many different time periods.
Where would you like to go?

ROBIN

Oz.

YANK

The journey to Oz is slow and dangerous.

ROBIN

Give me quick and easy.

YANK

Hollywood?

ROBIN

Yeah, Hollywood!

YANK

(retrieving an atlas)

Here's California. There's Los Angeles.

ROBIN

A city of angels.

YANK

Now over here in west L.A. is Hollywood.

ROBIN

A city of honies.

YANK

Look at the inset.

ROBIN

(reading the streets)
Santa Monica Boulevard. Wilshire.

YANK

Touch the lines.

(SHE hesitates.)

Come on.

(SHE quickly jabs the map with HER
index finger, never taking HER eyes
off YANK.)

No. You must feel it. Give me your hand.

(HE guides HER fingers gently,
slowly over the lines of the maps.)

Concentrate. Don't just look--feel. Feel the pavement beneath your feet. Hear
the rush of Hollywood traffic. Smell Hollywood. Taste Hollywood.

(YANK's fingers caress the top of
ROBIN's hands, as HE tours HER
through Hollywood. HER smirk
slowly gives way to wonderment.)

We are there.

(SHE looks at HIM. Because HE
believes, SHE does.)

What do you see?

(SHE looks at the map.)

ROBIN

The Hollywood Bowl. Twentieth Century Fox Studios. Hey, I'm in Beverly Hills!

YANK

(enjoying HER adventure)

Where do you live?

ROBIN

(completely immersed in the
fantasy)

I live . . . in an apartment on . . . Beverly Glen Boulevard sounds like a nice road.

YANK

Is it?

ROBIN

(staring at the map as though it
revealed three-dimensional details)
Sure. Four lanes, but the traffic is never heavy. It's lined with palms. I always
keep the top down on the car.

YANK

How many rooms in your apartment?

ROBIN

Not an apartment . . . a condo! It's got stairs--a winding staircase. Four
bedrooms. Three baths--each one with a sunken tub and a jacuzzi!

YANK

Where do the other girls live?

ROBIN

(enthusiastically picking out places
for HER friends)
Patty lives on Hyperion Avenue. Lisa lives up in Pasadena. Kathy lives near
Dodger Stadium.

YANK

Where do you train?

ROBIN

At a gym . . . near Griffith Park.

(noticing a detail on the map about
Griffith Park)

They have a zoo!

YANK

(another Griffith Park detail)
And a planetarium. You can study the stars.

ROBIN

The Hollywood Honies are the stars!

(suddenly the spell is broken)

What is this?

YANK

Alabama Avenue.

ROBIN

What the hell does Hollywood need with an Alabama Avenue?

YANK

(a weak attempt to revive the
fantasy)

Here's Vermont Boulevard.

ROBIN

That's where I live: Alabama Avenue. In a rented two-room shack with a cracked toilet that overflows. And termites.

YANK

I'm sorry.

ROBIN

Pretty Patty lives next door. Her husband is dying a day at a time. Ever imagine the smell of dried blood and rotting skin on one of your little map trips, Yank?

YANK

No.

ROBIN

And Cagey Kathy wants to die, but God won't let her. She cuts her wrists. She ODs. Last year she shot herself in the temple. The bullet ricocheted inside her skull, but a month later she was back with the Honies . . . So if you don't have a treasure map, I'm not interested.

YANK

They're rare.

ROBIN

So are moments like this. Want another kiss?

YANK

No thank you.

ROBIN

What *do* you want, Yank?

YANK

To help you.

ROBIN

I'm a vapor, floating through town like fog on a cat's tongue.

YANK

I'm a tree, roots deep--no hope of moving.

ROBIN

A tree is living . . . it has leaves and bears fruit. You're a rock.

YANK

Daddy is ashes in the Donelson River. I'm the only one who remembers that . . .

ROBIN

We'll all be ashes. And no one will remember.

YANK

That's not true!

ROBIN

You'll remember that a girl kissed you, but you wouldn't kiss back because it wasn't time to escape.

YANK

A kiss without meaning--

ROBIN

What do you want it to mean?

YANK

More than fantasy.

ROBIN

There is nothing more.

YANK

You're wrong.

ROBIN

Rubbing your fingers over outdated maps. Searching for a poet who had the courage to do what you never will.

YANK

It can be real!

ROBIN

Burger King was real.

YANK

A kiss can be real--just like grade school.

ROBIN

The price is too high.

YANK

I have a treasure map.

ROBIN

You're lying.

(From a secret place, YANK produces an old leather satchel, tied with worn leather laces.)

YANK

It's not for sale.

Gold, money, jewels? What?? ROBIN

Daddy gave it to me the night before his accident. YANK

Open it! ROBIN

No. YANK

Where is it? ROBIN

I've never looked at the map. YANK

Not even Yank Pepper could hold a treasure map for years and not look at it. ROBIN

You've never looked at yours. YANK

I hold no treasure! ROBIN

You have a map. Use it. YANK

And you'll use yours? ROBIN

When it's time. YANK

You're overdue! Open it! ROBIN

Are you going to mudwrestle tonight? YANK

Are you going to kiss me? ROBIN

What would it mean if I did? YANK

I'm not expecting E. E. Cummings. ROBIN

Everything is concrete with you-- YANK

I'm not expecting Conway Twitty. ROBIN

Money, sex, even fantasy. YANK

Fog on a cat's tongue. ROBIN

You'll mudwrestle until your body betrays you and then you'll be back at Burger King. YANK

Like I said . . . grease or mud. You stay too damn clean, Yank. ROBIN

I'm waiting for gold. YANK

Your daddy waited too long. ROBIN

Don't go back tonight. YANK

Without me there's no show. ROBIN

Shows like that go on without people like us. YANK

I'm a whore, Yank. ROBIN

And damn proud of it! YANK

I have to be proud of something! ROBIN

Not mudwrestling! YANK

What are *you* proud of? ROBIN

(HE looks at HER.)
In all your pathetic existence, have you ever won?

(HE does not answer.)
So that's what you meant by "people like us." We're both losers.

Nobody loses all the time. YANK

ROBIN
Nobody mudwrestles some son-of-a-bitch in a couple of hours.

YANK
I'll wait up for you.

ROBIN
That son-of-a-bitch might get lucky.

YANK
I'll wait.

ROBIN
Very lucky.

YANK
I'll wait.

(ROBIN exits. YANK looks after HER before HIS attention is drawn to the treasure map. HE exits.)

(Dressed in a ratty robe, PEACHES-
-HER hair and face unkempt-
-nurses the baby. MICKEY enters.)

MICKEY
About a name . . .

PEACHES
You'll understand if we're more concerned with a last name than a first right now.

MICKEY
We could make this thing go down easier for Mama if we name him after daddy.

PEACHES
(looking at baby)

Estlin?

MICKEY
Estlin *Pepper*.

PEACHES
Pepper?

MICKEY
I don't figure marriage much of a bargain, but seeing as how the baby needs a family . . . Soon as you're able, I'll do the right thing.

PEACHES
What were you and Robin doing last night?

You got the wrong idea. MICKEY

No, Mickey, I got the right idea. PEACHES

I ain't perfect Peaches. I ain't going to be. If you want me, here I am, flaws and all. MICKEY

Do you love me, Mickey? PEACHES

Me and the boy have struck up quite a friendship. MICKEY

Do you love anything? PEACHES

Neon. MICKEY

Whatever you want. PEACHES

I want my boy. MICKEY

Will you ever love me? PEACHES

Sure I will. MICKEY

I love you, Mickey. Funny how easy the words come to me: I love you. PEACHES

Got you a ring. MICKEY

(HE places a ring box in HER lap.)

PEACHES

(never taking HER eyes off HIM)

I love you.

(SHE begins to cry.)

MICKEY

Saturday it is then.

PEACHES

(increasingly upset)
I really do love you . . . I love you . . .

MICKEY

Okay, I heard. I'll make the arrangements.

PEACHES

(louder)
I love you.

MICKEY

Honey . . .

PEACHES

Why in hell would I love you?

MICKEY

You'll bust your stitches.

PEACHES

(louder still)
I love you. God damn you. I love you!

MICKEY

(desperately)
I love you, too!

(Beat; SHE opens the ring box.)

PEACHES

(quietly)
Saturday.

MICKEY

Yeah . . . Saturday.

(MICKEY emits a long, grateful sigh.
A little dazed, HE exits. Still sniffing.
SHE tightly hugs the baby.)

(The fairgrounds. YANK stands stage
right at the dart game with EVELYN
as the foreign carnival worker.)

EVELYN

(waving the dart at YANK)
American dart wizard! You play tonight?

(YANK places a bet on the table.)
Oh, my! One-hundred dollars on red!

(announcing to the crowd)
Place your bets with American dart wizard! Bet, bet, bet!

(Applause and cheers. ROBIN enters
in HER sequined robe as before, but
HER verve is greatly diminished.)

ROBIN

Hello . . .

(The crowd answers enthusiastically.
YANK stares at HER.)

Hello . . . Cumber-- Cumberland, Tennessee.

YANK

(deep, serious)

Hello.

ROBIN

The Hollywood Honies and I . . .

(YANK throws the dart.)

EVELYN

Red!

ROBIN

We flew in to entertain you guys this week.

YANK

You rode in the back of a U-Haul truck.

EVELYN

(handing YANK a dart)
Two-hundred dollars is the bet on red.

ROBIN

All the way from Hollywood.

YANK

Alabama Avenue.

(YANK tosses another winner.)

ROBIN

Tonight one of you guys gets to have his fantasy fulfilled.

YANK

It rides.

EVELYN

Four hundred dollars is the bet on red!

YANK

A rented two-room shack with a cracked toilet that overflows. And termites.

(Effortlessly, HE flings another winner.)

EVELYN

Red. All right, American dart wizard. Someone else's turn to throw.

YANK

No. It's still my turn.

EVELYN

Come back later.

(YANK grabs HER forcefully by the arm.)

YANK

Not later. Now. Give me the dart.

(Frightened, SHE hands HIM the dart.)

Tonight I win.

ROBIN

One lucky man gets down and dirty with the Hollywood Honies in the mud pit.

YANK

Under your robe.

ROBIN

We have . . . what it takes.

(The CROWD cheers and encourages HER to show the figure beneath the robe, but SHE hesitates.)

YANK

Let these men ogle your body.

(HE flings the dart without taking aim.)

EVELYN

All bets off! \$1600 is all my money. You break me, American Dart Wizard.

(EVELYN disappears.)

YANK

I have the money. You'll do anything for money.

ROBIN

I have a poem . . . a poem I wrote myself.

(The CROWD begins to boo.)

I feel for those who take a chance . . .

(The CROWD chants in unison:

"Skin, skin, skin!")

Patience, please. I . . . I'm not feeling . . .

(YANK goes to HER.)

YANK

These men paid for fantasy.

ROBIN

Yank, help me. I feel . . . dirty.

(SHE collapses in HIS arms.)

YANK

Even at Burger King the customer has it his way.

(HE violently removes HER robe, forcing HER to face the chanting crowd by grabbing a fistful of hair. The CROWD cheers and applauds its approval.)

(PEACHES sits asleep. EVELYN enters. PEACHES stirs.)

EVELYN

You think that little bastard gives you the edge, but artists grow weary faster than anybody.

PEACHES

Did Mickey's daddy grow weary?

EVELYN

So weary he flew away one day.

PEACHES

Maybe I'll fly.

EVELYN

You have a son now so maybe you'll understand how I feel about mine.

(PEACHES looks at HER.)

Mickey is all I have. He is an artist. Do you understand artists?

(PEACHES is silent.)

I didn't think so. I didn't understand his daddy. You'll be just like me . . . You don't want that.

PEACHES

More than anything on earth, I want to be just like you.

(Stunned, EVELYN studies PEACHES for a moment, frantically searching for the slightest glimmer of insincerity. PEACHES fully meets HER gaze with a quiet strength that surprises, frightens the older WOMAN.)

(YANK sits alone on the river boat, forlornly examining HIS dart winnings. ROBIN stumbles on, muddy and exhausted.)

ROBIN

I lost.

YANK

I won.

ROBIN

What have you done to me?

YANK

I listened to your poem and I showed you a map.

ROBIN

You and Cummings can both go to hell.

YANK

How's the trip?

ROBIN

You've never met a whore before. Is that it?

YANK

Cumberland has whores aplenty. Culver, too.

ROBIN

So what are you going to do with me?

YANK
Remember you on wintry days at the map shop.

ROBIN
(SHE walks toward HIM.)
You can't beat your brother. You can't beat your mother. You can't beat this town. I was someone you could beat!

(SHE starts to push HIM, but HE avoids HER.)

YANK
Poetry beat you.

ROBIN
You're the saddest of us all, Yank. Hiding from the world in stupid rhymes. Hoarding maps, too afraid to follow one of them out of this godforsaken trap.

YANK
No one has me trapped.

ROBIN
You hold yourself hostage.

YANK
Daddy paid the ransom.

ROBIN
He was braver than you'll ever be.

YANK
Go back. Mudwrestle. Die a whore.

ROBIN
Mud. We all need a little mud.

(SHE wipes some off HER arm and holds it toward HIM. HE cringes away.)

YANK
Wash yourself in the river.

ROBIN
No, I like the mud. I didn't like the travelling. I didn't really like the show, and God knows I detested the men, but I loved the mud.

(SHE stalks HIM.)

YANK
Please stay away.

ROBIN
Afraid of a little dirt and water, Yank?

Of course not

YANK

Take my hand.

ROBIN

No.

YANK
(avoiding HER)

Touch me.

ROBIN

Please, no.

YANK
(grabbing a dart)

You want to clean me up?

ROBIN

Okay, but you get a little dirty in the process . . .
(desperately trying to touch HIM)

Stop it!

YANK
(cocking HIS arm, dart aimed at HER chest)

Think my dark, red blood will wash away the rich black mud? There's a poem for you.

ROBIN

Save me from mud for what? For what, you son of a bitch? For what?
(SHE takes a step toward HIM. HE moves HIS arm back a few more inches.)

Grease. You send me back to Burger King and I'm supposed to be grateful?
(SHE steps toward HIM. Obviously shaken, HE steps back.)

Kill me! For that I'll be grateful.
(another step as before)

(SHE streaks HIS cheek with mud.)

YANK

(throwing the dart far into the river;
in agony:)

Ahh

(HE touches HIS cheek.)

ROBIN

That's what you were so afraid of.

(THEY are unaware of MICKEY's sudden appearance on the river bank.)

Even a faggot gets used to it after a while.

(YANK tackles ROBIN, catching HER completely unaware. SHE falls. HE pounds HER savagely. Realizing that SHE is offering no resistance, HE stops. YANK cries. ROBIN sits up and ventures close to HIM.)

YANK

I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry.

(ROBIN cradles HIM.)

ROBIN

(crying too)

Sh . . . sh . . . it's okay, Yank. It's okay. Sh . . .

(THEIR arms slowly intertwine. Gradually, THEIR affection becomes a hug. ROBIN kisses HIS cheek, then HIS neck. HE holds HER at arm's length. THEY stare at EACH OTHER for a beat. Finally, HE pulls HER close to HIM, kissing HER lips in deep, groping animal hunger. SHE responds in kind. The passionate caresses on the length of HER muddy neck culminate in HIS ripping HER bikini top. HE grabs HER hair, gently forcing HER down to the floor of the ferry MICKEY's smile slowly fades to disgust, revulsion. HE turns away.)

(YANK sits on the porch with HIS Cummings' poems. HE reads very briefly, then tosses the book down, dissatisfied. HE studies the treasure map satchel, still unopened. Carrying the child, PEACHES enters slowly from the house.)

PEACHES

Want to see your nephew, Yank?

YANK

Sure I do.

(YANK takes the child.)

PEACHES

Mickey named him after your daddy.

YANK

(struck)

After daddy?

(looking at the CHILD anew)

Estlin?

PEACHES

(showing YANK the ring SHE wears)

We're getting married Saturday.

YANK

Why do you love him?

PEACHES

Everybody's a slave to something.

YANK

Or a hostage?

PEACHES

Maybe not you.

YANK

We're a slave to what sets us free. We lose to whatever helps us win. We fight those things that bring us peace.

PEACHES

Cummings?

YANK

Pepper.

Estlin? PEACHES

Yank. YANK

You love her, don't you? PEACHES

Was she real or just a fantasy? YANK

That's up to you, isn't it? PEACHES

YANK
(picking up the poetry book)
It's not what the poems promise.

PEACHES
Do you think Cummings knew that?

YANK
Daddy did.

PEACHES
I never knew your daddy.

YANK
Neither did I.

PEACHES
Is Estlin a good name for the baby?

YANK
Read him some poems. Let him write some of his own.

PEACHES
Mickey wants to teach him neon.

YANK
(with slight consternation)
Estlin Pepper, bonafide neon artist.

PEACHES
You don't think I should marry him.

YANK
Saturday's coming awfully fast . . . for both of us.

PEACHES
I'll get what I've wanted for a long time. You may lose what you've waited for all your life.

(Unnoticed, EVELYN enters. YANK returns the CHILD to PEACHES. HE kisses the BABY, then gently kisses PEACHES on the cheek.)

EVELYN

Yank Pepper, what have you done to that girl? Her face is all bruised and she's bawling about how dirty you make her feel, but she wants to be clean.

PEACHES

Yank?

YANK

(breaking away toward river)

I'm sorry. I don't know . . . I'm sorry . . .

PEACHES

Yank!

EVELYN

You can't have them both.

(PEACHES grabs the treasure map satchel and follows YANK.)

PEACHES

Yank, wait!

EVELYN

Where are you headed with that baby in this night air? Peaches?

(SHE follows PEACHES. Drinking from a liquor bottle, MICKEY is at the dart booth. EVELYN is there as before.)

MICKEY

Five dollars on black.

(EVELYN hands HIM a dart. HE considers HIS aim very carefully before releasing.)

EVELYN

Red's a winner!

(SHE scoops up HIS money. HE walks to the riverboat and boards. HE gulps the liquor.)

MICKEY

(yelling at the night)
Eyes not even born . . .

(toasting)
One-hundred years from now!

(YANK enters.)
You're not the only one who comes down here. Look at those lights.

(YANK looks across the river.)
See those lights over there. The green ones. The yellow, the red . . . Neons.

(MICKEY takes a drink.)
They reflect on the water.

YANK
Like fireworks underfoot.

MICKEY
I made them. Just like Daddy made you.

YANK
And Mama made you.

MICKEY
And on the seventh day she rested.

(Obviously drunk, MICKEY laughs uncontrollably.)
On the seventh day we all rested.

YANK
You're drunk.

MICKEY
Sit down, Bubba. Do you remember any of his poems?

YANK
Bits. Pieces.

MICKEY
Do you remember one about somebody's last speech?

YANK
"To the strongest." Alexander the Great's dying words.

MICKEY
Hell, yes. That's it! He'd sit out here with those darts and yell, "To the strongest!"

(trying to recall the poem)
Blah, blah, blah . . . a lighthouse and a library . . . Something in gold . . . Do you remember?

Why did you hate him? YANK

For what he did to you. MICKEY

Daddy loved me. YANK

(turning away)
I love you more. MICKEY

I know who's the strongest. YANK

Even if I beat you 'til your ears bleed. MICKEY

Yes. YANK

(finishing a big gulp)
The poet looked awfully human groaning atop the whore. MICKEY

You saw . . . YANK

You were a seething volcano, Bubba. MICKEY

Did she know? YANK

A girl like that knows most everything. MICKEY

Tell me, damn it! YANK

I had money invested. Never take a whore's word for anything. MICKEY

You paid Robin to seduce me? Why? Tell me why! YANK

Kisses are a better fate than wisdom. MICKEY

How much did you pay her? YANK

My treat. MICKEY

Get off Daddy's boat! YANK

I admire the way you beat the hell out of her . . . right before you screwed her.
(YANK punches MICKEY hard in the face. HE falls.)
It sure looked like fun.

(YANK kicks MICKEY. MICKEY collapses.)
Was she the best you ever had?

Shut-up! YANK

(laughing)
Oh, I forgot. She's all you've ever had. MICKEY

Shut-up! God damn you! Shut-up! YANK

I had her, too. MICKEY

I'll kill you if you don't shut-up! YANK

She did me for free. MICKEY

(YANK kicks MICKEY again.)
I didn't need lessons.

(YANK holds a dart to MICKEY's throat. ROBIN enters.)

Yank, don't! ROBIN

(YANK turns toward ROBIN.)

Did he pay you? YANK

(SHE looks at MICKEY.)

I don't-- ROBIN

Best \$200 I ever spent. MICKEY

It's not that simple anymore. ROBIN

So it was a fantasy . . . just like all the others. YANK

No! It wasn't. ROBIN

And you knew he was watching. YANK

What? ROBIN

Good theatre is expensive. MICKEY

I want to stay. ROBIN

YANK
(moves from the boat to the bank)

Thank you for the fantasy.

(YANK holds out HIS arms. SHE
walks toward HIM.)

ROBIN

I love you, Yank.
(When SHE reaches HIM, HE grabs
HER by the throat and begins to
choke HER. SHE struggles for
breath.)

MICKEY

(still lying on the deck of the boat)

Cut it out, Bubba.

(HE doesn't.)

Bubba.

(No response as HE continues to squeeze the very life from ROBIN. Finally, MICKEY goes to HIS brother.)

Hey, Bubba. Stop it.

(trying to pull YANK's hands from ROBIN's throat)

You'll kill the bitch.

(YANK does not release HIS grip, but flings an elbow in MICKEY's face, effectively knocking HIM away. ROBIN loses consciousness. MICKEY rises, finally frightened.)

Yank! Yank, please stop!

(PEACHES enters, carrying the BABY and the satchel.)

PEACHES

Yank, what are you doing?

(YANK releases ROBIN. HER limp body falls to the ground.)

YANK

Peaches?

MICKEY

What in the hell? The baby shouldn't be here.

PEACHES

Is she dead?

(MICKEY kneels to ROBIN.)

MICKEY

She's still breathing.

(sitting ROBIN up and gently shaking HER)

Robin. Robin, get up!

PEACHES

You forgot your satchel.

YANK

(to PEACHES)

Daddy's treasure map.

PEACHES

It's time to open it.

YANK

(looking at ROBIN)

Yes. Yes, it's time.

(HE opens the satchel. A key and a bundle of hand-scrawled sheets of paper are its contents.)

PEACHES

A key to what?

YANK

The boat.

PEACHES

Are you leaving?

ROBIN

(weakly from the ground)

No, Yank. Please don't go.

(YANK looks at the papers.)

PEACHES

What is it?

YANK

Poetry. His poetry!

ROBIN

(coughing)

I love you . . .

(YANK boards the boat. PEACHES looks at MICKEY.)

MICKEY

I said get home.

Yank, Yank wait! PEACHES

Take us with you! (YANK turns back.)

(HE hesitates, looking at MICKEY.)

They ain't going nowhere. MICKEY

Don't leave us here. PEACHES

Estlin Pepper always belonged on a ferry boat. YANK

(PEACHES boards the boat.)

Peaches, get back over here. MICKEY

Tell Mama we left for Oz. YANK

You ain't stealing a boat for a joyride with my wife and newborn baby. MICKEY

We won't be back. YANK

(YANK kicks the gangplank from the bank and unties the boat.)

You're a damn fool, Yank. Help me get her back to the house. You almost killed her. MICKEY

Don't touch me! ROBIN
(to MICKEY)

(ROBIN struggles to rise, but is still too weak. After a few coughs and sputters, the engine starts steady and strong. YANK is at the wheel.)

All right. Get your ass back over here. MICKEY
(HIS alarm increasing)

Goodbye Mickey. Goodbye Robin. YANK

(EVELYN enters.)

MICKEY

Now!

YANK

And goodbye, Mama. Goodbye to this pretty how town.

MICKEY

We're getting married Saturday, Peaches. Don't you want that?

PEACHES

Say goodbye to your daddy, Estlin.

MICKEY

I love you, Peaches. I mean it! Peaches, Yank, what's gotten in to ya'll?
Peaches? Peaches!

(YANK begins to pull the boat
away.)

ROBIN

Yank! Come back!

MICKEY

Yank, God damn it! Bring them back here!

(The boat is moving downstream;
MICKEY and ROBIN run alongside.)

ROBIN

(crying)

Oh, Yank!

MICKEY

Peaches!

ROBIN

(hysterically)

Yank!

EVELYN

(comforting MICKEY)

Let them go, Mickey. Let them go.

Bubba! Estlin!

MICKEY

Estlin! Estlin!

(ROBIN collapses in a tearful heap.)

(Finally MICKEY collapses also.)
My boy. That son of a bitch stole my boy.

EVELYN

Let them go, Mickey. Let them go.

MICKEY

Mama, that son of a bitch stole my boy.

EVELYN

(embracing HIM)

I know, Honey. I know.

MICKEY

My boy, Mama. My boy

EVELYN

(smiling over MICKEY's shoulder)

Quiet yourself now. Let's get back to the house.

(THEY start walking.)

Funny, I see the neon sign in my dream now. So clear, over a motel it said "no vacancy."

MICKEY

"No vacancy"?

EVELYN

"No vacancy" in purple and green.

(sadly)

Does this mean I won't dream of your daddy in church anymore?

(SHE exits. MICKEY picks up
YANK's book and thumbs through it.)

MICKEY

E. E. Cummings was never in Cumberland.

(ROBIN and MICKEY look at each
other.)

Poets just know, I guess. . . They just know.

SLOW FADE

END OF ACT II

Chapter III

The Road to A Pretty How Town

Accurately chronicling the genesis of a play is a difficult proposition because the author's creation is a mystical concoction of the observed and the imagined, the painful and the pleasurable, the truth and the lie. When his creation is staged, the playwright often finds himself unable (perhaps unwilling) to reveal the distinctions.

While not autobiographical in the strictest sense of the term, much of *A Pretty How Town* comes from the author's own sense of the division between intellect and emotion. It is not for the author to assess the validity of the themes of his work or to account for the origins of the personal philosophy so evident in *A Pretty How Town*. These tasks are appropriately relegated to literary scholars, psychologists and those versed in ethics, but the author's detailed journals (kept daily since March 14, 1975) allow him to report objectively the progress and research during the six years of sporadic work on the project. Still, to render an account of how the author meticulously ordered his eclectic experiences and explorations into a unified play is itself a challenge.

Having spent most of 1984 co-writing a children's musical with composer Kevin Talley, playwright R. Dale McCarver decided to forego musical collaboration to concentrate instead on a non-musical play. As with most of McCarver's plays, the catalyst was purely serendipitous. In December 1984 he was substitute teaching at Cheatham County Central High for eleventh-grade English instructor Patricia Sanders, who coincidentally left lesson plans to present and discuss several Emily Dickinson poems. Among the poems was

"The Bustle in a House":

The Bustle in a House
The Morning after Death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon Earth--

The Sweeping up the Heart
And putting Love away
We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity.

McCarver led a discussion that only piqued the interest of the decidedly apathetic students when they began to share that many of them had witnessed their parents go into a cleaning frenzy when the news had come that a family member had died. McCarver recalled a similar incident from his own childhood in which he and his mother had visited a great aunt who received word that her husband had been killed in a boating accident. The two women immediately launched a full-scale cleaning campaign, which struck the young McCarver as one of the most peculiar things he had ever witnessed. The students and he decided that assigning the body a menial physical task may be a way to lessen the emotional impact of such devastating news. The discussion was cut short by an unpredicted snow storm which closed schools early. McCarver went home, set up his typewriter on his mother's kitchen table, and wrote the first few lines of what would eventually become A Pretty How Town.

Using the working title, Sweeping Up the Heart, McCarver developed a tragicomic situation of relatives gathering at the home of a deceased loved one. On the first day of inspiration he created two brothers, Mickey and Yank Pepper. Mickey's name came from Mickey Dyce, the choir teacher at Cheatham County High School. Yank's name came from a neighbor, Yank Garrett, who had died a few years earlier after a lonely, alcoholic existence. "Yank" intrigued McCarver because it seemed the perfect appellation for a Southerner who felt alienated from his society. McCarver decided that in the first scene the brothers' mother would have just died and that they would meet at her house to make funeral arrangements. Yank had been living with his mother, while Mickey had moved out to marry Peaches, his eccentric wife. Mickey's wife's name, Peaches, resulted from McCarver's admiration for the name Bananas, the female lead's name in John Guare's House of Blue Leaves. Subsequently, he was surprised to find the name many times in print. The scene was set in April, but Yank had not removed the cedar Christmas tree from the living room. He had not even unplugged the still-burning fire hazard since the night in December when their mother had suffered a heart attack. By the end of the first day's writing, McCarver had created three of the five characters of A Pretty How Town.

The first scene of Sweeping Up the Heart reveals that Peaches has a greater interest in her unopened Christmas present than the more pressing

subject of her mother-in-law's funeral. Mickey, who is hard pressed for cash, tries to justify his claim on the family home. Yank is the only character who seems to have genuinely cared about the mother. At the comic conclusion to the scene, Peaches catches the cedar on fire and Mickey announces to a stunned Yank that his wife is pregnant. The only fragment that survived the original scene is a line about a chihuahua dragging Baby Jesus from a nativity scene.

For the first few months of 1985, McCarver created two female characters: Maria, a pathetically ordinary woman interested in Yank; and Rhonda, a teen-age neighbor whom Yank secretly adored. The younger girl (an artist with a fascination for poetry) slowly becomes attracted to the much older Yank, causing Mickey great consternation.

Early drafts of McCarver's work were shared with his mentor Brenda Boyte, Laura Mallernee (another English teacher at Cheatham County High School), and Talley. Boyte identified many problems with the script. She believed that Yank's passivity made him an unattractive protagonist. Although clearly not the author's intention, she empathized with Mickey. Mallernee, a determined feminist, noted that the female characters were drawn as helpless, unintelligent victims. Talley liked much of the play but expressed a greater interest in getting to work on another musical collaboration. Disappointed in the initial mixed reviews of the script, McCarver set aside Sweeping Up the Heart in lieu of their musical projects.

One significant 1986 event was the appearance of the Chicago Knockers mudwrestling team at the Cheatham County Fair. McCarver attended the event and afterward escorted one of the young mudwrestlers on a tour of the midway. He was struck by the performer's sad plight. After her mother had died, she had been forced to drop out of school and go on the road with the Knockers to support her father and young siblings. He took her name (Robin Hayden-Rockin' Robin) and Chicago address, though he never wrote her. Inspired by Hayden, he wrote his first non-dramatic fiction in several years, a short story about a teacher whose life is changed by a mudwrestler.

In the summer of 1988, McCarver and his girlfriend, Crystal Methvin, travelled to Indianapolis, Indiana, to research John Dillinger's background and

final resting place. One day during a lunch break, Methvin spotted a map shop on a street in Indianapolis. McCarver, who was unfamiliar with map shops as business concerns, was intrigued. Although they did not visit the shop, he took special note of the name of the shop: The Odyssey Map Shop.

During that same summer McCarver enrolled in a screenwriting course at Tennessee State University taught by Rick Reichman. When Reichman assigned his students to write the first act of a screen play, McCarver recalled Sweeping Up the Heart. By September 1988 McCarver had 45 pages of a screen play based on his stage play. Re-reading the script after ignoring it for almost two years, McCarver saw the merit of Mallernee's objections to the female characters. It was then that McCarver first considered incorporating Robin the mudwrestler into his story about the Pepper brothers. The screen play remained little more than an episodic version of the stage play. The screenwriting class criticized Yank's inactivity. Reichman had instructed the class to create "active" heroes. McCarver was determined to prove that an inactive character's slow metamorphosis to an active character could be equally dramatic.

Reichman thought Yank should be given a job. In the screen play, the Pepper brothers had an Uncle Jabez. In the planned climax, Yank was going to discover that his deceased mother had been involved in a long-standing affair with Uncle Jabez. McCarver decided to give Yank a part-time job, working for Uncle Jabez. What sort of job? McCarver was considering several possibilities as he lunched with his grandmother, Stella McCarver. He asked what jobs his grandfather (who had died in 1979) had held in his youth. His grandmother listed all the jobs that the writer knew his grandfather had held, then, almost as an afterthought, she mentioned that when she met him he had been a ferry operator. McCarver had never heard this story. Excited, he drove his grandmother to the deserted bank on the Cumberland River. The day was cool, cloudy, and windy. McCarver's grandmother had not been there in years. "Here there was a little dock," she explained. "The horses and buggies and the very rare automobile would move down a ramp that was built over there. Jim was so attractive in his checked cap. My daddy distrusted him because of the way he wore it, sort of crooked over to one side." Of course the ferry was long gone. The ramps and paths had been washed away by flood and time, but she painted

such a romantic picture of what had been that McCarver knew Jabez must be a ferry boat operator.

How had Yank felt on those slow Monday nights when he worked for his Uncle Jabez? McCarver spent several warm, fall nights sitting on picnic tables at Cheatham Dam trying to connect to this character's feelings. On clear nights the moon and stars were reflected brilliantly in the river. Before the first frost fireflies could be seen across the river, lighting an upland meadow. In a journal entry dated October 1, 1988, McCarver wrote that Yank was the saddest character he had created. "I am not Yank Pepper, but most people will think I am. The truth is that I fear Yank is a far better person than I will ever be."

By January 1989 McCarver had lost interest in the screen play. The class had disbanded after Reichman left TSU to teach at Georgetown. The sheer hopelessness of ever seeing the screen play produced prodded McCarver to return to what was his true love, the stage. McCarver expressed some concern to Methvin that the biggest problem in changing the play back to a stage play would be compressing the scenes to the single interior of the Pepper home. Methvin wondered if such a change would be necessary. They had recently seen some remarkable set changes at Actors' Theatre of Louisville accomplished inexpensively with a minimum of time loss. They had also marveled at the work of APSU scenic designer Gary Harris, whose work consistently challenges stage boundaries. McCarver decided to write the show with little concern for its staging. As a result, the final product has a decided cinematic feel, perhaps the most recognizable legacy from the screen play.

Boyte's reaction to the screen play may have been the single most important development in the birth of A Pretty How Town. She pointed out that the mother (who dies on the first page of the screen play) may be the most interesting character in the script. She again pointed out that Mickey is at least as sympathetic as Yank. As a result of Boyte's observations, McCarver decided to resurrect the dead mother. Her presence had been such an important part of the play that it was not difficult to envision her as an on-stage character. Doing so, however, shifted the dynamics of the play. Jabez was no longer necessary. The brooding presence that the mother had filled could then be the boys' father. The arrival of Robin and the mudwrestlers became the incendiary incident, not

the death of the mother. When the mother was allowed to speak for herself, she revealed a truth that McCarver had refused to admit. Mickey was her favorite son, not Yank. When Evelyn's (McCarver does not remember how or when the mother was named, but Evelyn is very similar to his own mother's name, Madolyn) choice is clear, the play began to come into focus. McCarver was very familiar with the rule in playwriting that states there can only be one main character. When Boyte pointed out that Mickey may have been the more interesting of the two brothers, McCarver briefly considered greatly diminishing Mickey's role in the play, but then he decided that he would allow the two brothers to wrestle for the dominant role in the show just as they had wrestled for the superior position in their dysfunctional family. Instead of diminishing Mickey's presence, McCarver strengthened Mickey's goals. He retained Peaches and even her pregnancy, but dissolved the marriage. In creating a connection between Robin and Mickey, McCarver stumbled upon the linchpin of A Pretty How Town. Narrowing the scope of the screen play version proved to be an effective method to tighten the play. Contrasted to the restraints of the stage, the screen invites (indeed it thrives upon) excess. Allowing himself the luxury of excess in the initial stages of creation, the writer may discover worthy avenues that he would have rejected as too extravagant within his own limited vision of what the stage will allow. A Pretty How Town taught McCarver that the stage is large enough (in every sense) to present any consequential idea.

McCarver realized almost immediately that Robin's presence would obviate the need for Rhonda. The playwright regretted losing the young character because of her near obsession with poetry, a wonderful contrast to the many anti-academic elements that Yank encountered in his family and town. Finally, he decided it would not be unrealistic to bequeath Rhonda's love of poetry to Yank himself. Poetry could be a concrete symbol of Yank's iconoclasm. McCarver searched Dickinson's poetry for appropriate lines and images to incorporate into Sweeping Up the Heart. Not coincidentally, it was at this time that McCarver grew dissatisfied with the title of the play. Many people commented that it was similar to Constellations From the Heart (written after McCarver had begun Sweeping Up the Heart). McCarver himself was concerned that it was similar to Beth Henley's Crimes of the Heart. Of course, the play's focus had shifted from the ramifications of grief; therefore, "The Bustle in a

House" no longer held significance. He very much wanted the title to refer to a poem; since Yank had an interest in Emily Dickinson, McCarver believed that eventually the right title would emerge from among the hundreds of her poems that he studied. Slowly, the writer became dissatisfied with Dickinson as Yank's poet of choice. At first he felt Dickinson's legendary reclusivity and reluctance to involve herself in Amhurst society would provide an undergirding for the structure of the play, but Yank's initial passivity was strong enough to require no support. For a time McCarver considered Dickinson's celebrated antithesis, Walt Whitman, but Whitman's themes were deemed too sweeping, too nationalistic for Yank Pepper's very personal struggle. Finally, one slow spring afternoon in the Cheatham County High school library McCarver was thumbing through some recent high school yearbooks. A Cheatham County tradition dictates that graduating seniors place a quotation under their senior portraits. McCarver was looking at the quotations his students from the past several years had chosen. He was struck by the great number who had chosen quotations from his favorite poet, E. E. Cummings. One quotation seemed particularly popular: "Kisses are a better fate than wisdom" from McCarver's favorite poem, "Since Feeling is First." Happily, McCarver skipped from the library that afternoon, excited that he had found one of the most elusive pieces to the puzzle. That same afternoon McCarver re-read Cummings' poem "Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town." The poem is about a person (Anyone) who is misunderstood and mistreated by a whole town of people content to languish away in their own humdrum existences. It is unclear whether he is aware, but Anyone does have an impact on one other (Noone). In many respects "Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town" is a poem version of McCarver's play. McCarver finally had his title, which eventually he shortened to A Pretty How Town. McCarver found in Cummings a rich source of imagery, ideally suited to the story of the Pepper brothers. Perhaps Cummings had been in McCarver's subconscious all along because many of the images already in the play could have been borrowed from Cummings. For example, the father's death in the hot air balloon was inspired by a much-publicized accident in Nevada involving several prominent Cheatham County residents, but Cummings often alludes to hot air balloons. Inspired by Cummings, McCarver added two allusions to hot air balloons: Robin refers to a "balloon man," an obvious reference to one of Cummings' most studied works,

"In Just." At one point Yank says, "Take me away sailing in a balloon to a keen city no one has ever visited." This line is a condensed version of a Cummings line from one of the many Cummings poems McCarver used. The author is aware of over a dozen lines or images that can claim their origin in Cummings. He would not be at all surprised to find many more.

Because he thought the ferry setting offered such interesting choices in the screen play, McCarver decided to keep it as one of the various settings in the stage play. Cleece's Ferry had been the topic of much debate in the Nashville City Council. News reports often showed video of the Judge Hickman, the ferry at the location. McCarver and Methvin decided to ride the ferry across the river one June morning. He had ridden the boat as a child, and the memory was still vivid. McCarver was so struck by the romance of the setting that he asked the two pilots if he could make several trips across the river. The pilots were eager to help, answering question after question from the playwright. They even allowed him to visit the controller's cabin and to steer the Judge Hickman. He explained to them that he was a writer researching a play. Neither could remember having seen a play. Neither knew Cummings. He asked them what they did during the lulls when traffic was light. "Darts," one of them said. They showed McCarver a faded dart board fastened to the side of the boat. The writer and his girlfriend spent several hours with their new friends taking mental notes of what a ferry pilot's life must be.

When McCarver developed Mickey as a full character, he rethought very carefully all the various elements of Mickey's life. From the very beginning Mickey's job had been a landscaper, suitable because it involved casting order from chaos, creating beauty, and encouraging growth—all in direct contrast to the persona he fostered among the town. Landscaping would have remained Mickey's profession had it not been for Methvin's meeting Kim Lee at Austin Peay. One night at dinner with McCarver she mentioned that she had recently met a woman whose husband made neon signs. McCarver had never considered the origin of neon signs, but suddenly the notion fascinated him. Was neon art? Did those who create it do so to cheat mortality in a similar fashion to writers, painters and sculptors? Given the mood of the play, Mickey's character and the off-centered "how" town that McCarver wanted to suggest,

neon signs were a far better choice for Mickey than landscaped lawns. Once again accompanied by Methvin, McCarver travelled to Russellville, Kentucky, to visit Brent Lee, a second-generation neon artist. The playwright found a staff of uneducated, stereotypical Southerners hard at work creating an array of neons. Mickey Pepper would have fit right in. Lee was proud of his work, showing many magazines devoted exclusively to neon and noting that one of his creations hangs in Barbara Mandrell's house. His wife (ironically very noticeably pregnant) seemed particularly impressed. Lee was extremely helpful, detailing how neon works and why it will last years longer than conventional lighting. As McCarver left, he noticed that the sign for Lee's Neon Shop was a sloppy, hand-lettered sign--black paint on a white piece of plywood.

In February 1990 McCarver read in The Nashville Tennessean of the University of the South's plans to host the first annual Southern Writers' Conference in July. Playwrights Tina Howe and Wendy Hammond were scheduled to hold the workshop for dramatists. McCarver was accepted to the workshop and apprised that Howe would be critiquing the first act of a full-length work by the attendees. This was the catalyst McCarver needed to force him to finalize plot elements and chronology to produce the first rough draft of a potentially producible script. By July 8, McCarver had shown the first act of A Pretty How Town to Methvin, David Alford, John Ignacio and Sam Whited, three gifted actors McCarver had met at Austin Peay. Their reactions were very encouraging. Ignacio commented on the script's humor. Alford and Whited discussed the challenges of playing the brothers. McCarver was surprised that Alford, a thoughtful, leading-man type, seemed more interested in Mickey, while Whited, generally regarded as a superb character actor, expressed interest in Yank. Was this an indication that Mickey was the true center of the play? Was Yank's iconoclasm such that an audience would withhold its empathy?

Tina Howe complimented McCarver's work. Yet, the most encouraging event from the summer conference did not occur until October. One night at eleven o'clock McCarver was surprised by a phone call from Wendy Hammond in New York, who said that A Pretty How Town had lingered in her mind since the conference and that she was calling to inquire whether he had finished the work. She seemed disappointed that he had not done so and reported that the

only thing that bothered her about the play was Evelyn's cruelty toward Peaches, especially in the shower scene.

McCarver felt the work was stageworthy. From his experience as a drama critic for The Nashville Scene, McCarver had met Paul Moss, a director whose primary interest lay in the development of original scripts. Moss had his own theatre, The New Play Theatre, at the Cohn Adult Learning Center in Nashville. On the strength of the first act of the play, Moss agreed to produce A Pretty How Town in March.

Because auditions for the show would not be until January, McCarver had three months to write a second act. McCarver had still not settled on resolutions for most of the conflicts he had established in the first act. He finally turned to the first act for the sense of closure needed in the second act. He realized that the play must conclude with some sense of triumph for Yank. A clear tie had been established between Estlin and Yank; therefore, Yank's escape should mirror his father's failed attempt. Stealing the boat was the obvious parallel to the hot air balloon heist. Yank's actions touch all the characters. Robin and Mickey pay heavily for their conspiracy. Peaches, emboldened by the birth of her child, finally begins to strike back at her tormentors. Perhaps McCarver's greatest problem with the second act lay in what fate should await Evelyn. Originally, Yank's discovery of his mother's affair with Uncle Jabez was the climax of the play. With Jabez eliminated, however, Evelyn, who plays a significant role in Act I, almost disappears in Act II. He created the neon sign dream that was interspersed with Cain and Abel imagery spoken by Yank as her fiery Baptist preacher and wrote separate scenes between her and Mickey and Peaches. Only days before the deadline did McCarver decide that it was admissible, even desirable, to allow one character (the mother, of course) to remain virtually unchanged from the outset of the play. McCarver was unsure of the second act from the beginning. He wrote it in less than three weeks and felt his haste was obvious in the product. Methvin pointed out a noticeable shift in tone from act one to act two. Some darkening was deliberate, however, and had been intended from the beginning. Moss was troubled by the concluding note of act one—the baby's arrival. He thought some might conclude the baby's

arrival and not Robin's forced Yank's actions. It was decided to stage the show as written, making any changes deemed necessary in rehearsal.

Auditions were held January 7 and 8, 1991. Dennis Tucker, George Northam, Meigie Mabry, Sandra Parke and Selena Helton were cast as Mickey Pepper, Yank Pepper, Evelyn Pepper, Rockin' Robin and Peaches Boulton, respectively. Only minor changes were made in the script during rehearsals. The cast had great difficulties adapting to McCarver's style of dialogue, in which lines are often unrelated to a preceding cue. As late as the final performance, several lines were dropped.

Staging the play proved a formidable challenge in the sixty-year-old, 1000 seat Cohn Adult Learning Center's theatre. McCarver consulted with Austin Peay professor Tom Pallen, who suggested a modified mansion and platea staging. The concept was used for the production.

A Pretty How Town premiered March 1, 1991. Two extremely important people attended the opening: respected Tennessean critic Clara Hieronymus and Dr. Joe Filippo, the major thesis adviser, from whom McCarver had deliberately kept details of the project so as to gauge his reaction without preconceived notions. The next morning Hieronymus's review was headlined "How Town Puzzles All." She was obviously confused by the abundance of Biblical imagery, inferring an unintended theme of redemption through poetry. She admitted rather candidly that she did not know the origin of the show's title, an admission that caused many to question the validity of her criticisms. The last line of the review said that the show was "more puzzling than convincing." Hieronymus followed her written review with an lengthy phone call to the playwright. She spoke of the work's great potential (praise the written review did not offer) and focused on what she considered a problem with Yank's obsession with Cummings. She suggested that Cummings be eliminated from the script entirely, allowing Yank's obsession to focus entirely on his father, the failed poet. Filippo read the script, making several suggestions for improvement. Most of his concerns centered on weaknesses of the second act. He felt the focus had been squarely Yank's in the first act but shifted somewhat to Mickey in the second act, a disconcerting change. He disagreed with Hieronymus's suggestion to eliminate Cummings but suggested that the slide of Cummings at

the beginning and end of the show would place unwarranted focus on the poet rather than on the characters.

McCarver agreed with Filippo's basic criticisms. He felt that even with the birth of the child, Peaches' change was not convincing. He completely rewrote her scene with Yank to better explain her motivation. Originally, Yank invited Peaches to accompany him on the ferry, but in the latest version she asks to go, a significant change. The production proved to him that Evelyn's second act scenes were largely responsible for the misplaced focus. He eliminated the confusing Biblical references and re-wrote Evelyn's scenes so as to affect Yank directly. As a result, Evelyn's relationship to Estlin is much clearer, making her a much more sympathetic character.

McCarver was notified on April 12 that the New Play Theatre version of A Pretty How Town had been selected as one of the four finalists in the American Theatre of Higher Education's annual student playwriting contest. The other three winners in the national contest were from Yale, Rutgers and Mississippi State. The prize for the four winners is a staged reading by the highly respected Seattle Repertory Company at ATHE's annual convention in Seattle, August 8-10, 1991. With the author in attendance, the revised script will be read before the gathering of theatre practitioners August 8.

McCarver believes that Cumberland may be the setting for some of his future plays. It is, after all, a thinly disguised Ashland City, McCarver's hometown. McCarver has over a hundred pages of discarded dialogue for A Pretty How Town, much of which could be fashioned into a sequel. He also envisions a prequel that would address Evelyn's relationship with Estlin. It is very conceivable, therefore, that the play may some day be the middle installment of a trilogy, as he continues to build the road to A Pretty How Town.

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