

SOMEONE WHO MADE THE ACQUAINTANCE OF KEN KESEY

the kid with the crooked teeth,
bespectacled hammerhead,

says, "yeah, i met kesey once
in oregon. he's sure not
the same ken kesey as the kool-aid
acid test. he's almost middle-class.
i sure was disappointed."

"look," i say, "everybody changes,
why not kesey? maybe he just didn't
feel like putting on a show for you."

the kid is pissed off now
because i have had the bad manners
to impugn his inalienable right
to backbite his literary betters,

so he tells me he's just read the latest saul bellow,
and i say i only read bellow from a sense of duty
and even then a good three years after the rest of america,
and he says bellow sure does have a way with words,

and i say i should hope that any writer would,
and he says yeah, but there's sure a difference of degree
between bellow and writers like himself or,
more conspicuously, me,

so the conversation has reached that stage
where it's a good idea to make one's adieu
even though it's the first night in two weeks
i've allowed myself to drink, and i was sorta planning on
savoring a couple more vodka-tonics before
returning to the wagon,
but kesey obviously figured this guy right
as someone not worth getting fucked-up with;
so, middle class, ready or not, here i come.

CATCH-23: AN ACADEMIC LIFE

I received one of those phony form letters the other day,
the kind run off on an expensive automatic typewriter to
make it look personal, inviting me to lend my financial
support to this creative writing center at a local state
college. Ironically, the board of directors contained
the names of certain people responsible for terminating

my employment at that school thirteen years ago.

I was twenty-three at the time and my third kid was on the way and I was all full of ideals. So when the department chairman summoned me to his office I just knew it was to extend to me his highest commendation, especially since I had heard through the grapevine that the report of the guy who had sat in on my class had been glowing. Instead, what the chairman said was, "Locklin, the policy and personnel committees have been meeting in joint sessions in an effort to define the future needs of our department and their conclusion has been that you are not a part of the aforesaid plans."

You might not think, if you know me now, that I would have been greatly affected by those words, but let me assure you that I just about croaked. Even apart from practical, financial considerations, my sense of personal and, yeah, professional rejection was such that it is only today, with so much water under the cooler, that I am able to write about these things.

Of course they pulled the typical academic bribe on me, and for not making waves they gave me the highest recommendations and I ended up at a better school, run by better people, at a higher salary, and at the beach rather than in the thick of the smog. They did me a great favor, though that was not their intention. At least I think they did, for another ramification was that I was moved from the company of black people to that of white, the students, that is, and who knows where I would have ended up if I had remained in a position to follow the dictates of my conscience -- maybe dead in a swamp in Mississippi. At the last party there, my black friends said to me, "You're gonna lose your soul down there," and I lifted my glass and quipped, "This is the only soul that I have anyway," and there was more truth than fiction to that.

So I was assaulted, in soul not body, not by rednecks but by liberally educated members of committees meeting in executive session. I still don't know what they had against me -- some colleagues suggested I didn't hang around the other faculty enough; some said I got caught in the swinging-door between an outgoing and incoming department chairman; one guy tried to twist a schedule request I'd submitted to imply that I'd refused to teach composition. Maybe they just didn't like my looks. I don't like them much myself.

But here's a postscript for you: at one point that spring I learned there was a new appeals procedure, and I mentioned this to the department chairman. He assured me he

would confer with the appeals committee. A week later he had their answer for me -- if I were being fired for cause, for, in other words, something I'd done wrong, I would have had full recourse to appeal, but since I hadn't been accused of a single peccadillo, I had nothing to defend myself against and no appeal was possible.

Joseph Heller could win himself a Pulitzer with that one.

THE CIVILIZING OF THE SHREW

"You didn't drink much on the trip," she says.

I say, "I drank a lot of beer."

"Never enough to make you feel bad in the morning."

I say, "I didn't feel so hot some mornings."

"Never so bad that you felt you had to have a drink."

"A couple of days I started at lunch," I say. "Anyway, how much would you estimate I was putting away most days?"

"Oh, a couple of six-packs," she says, getting it about right. "But that isn't so much over a number of hours, in such heat, when you're keeping active and have a lot of reasons to need a little something to relax you."

What a difference a mere ten years make! This girl has really come a hell of a way!

DUBIOUS DISTINCTION

i ran into one of our former english majors
and i asked him if he'd ever graduated.

he said he hadn't.

when i asked him why,
he said, "well, if you'd taught
just a couple more courses
i might've been able to.

A MODEST PROPOSAL

Since I only have an old black-and-white set anyhow,
and it's getting increasingly difficult