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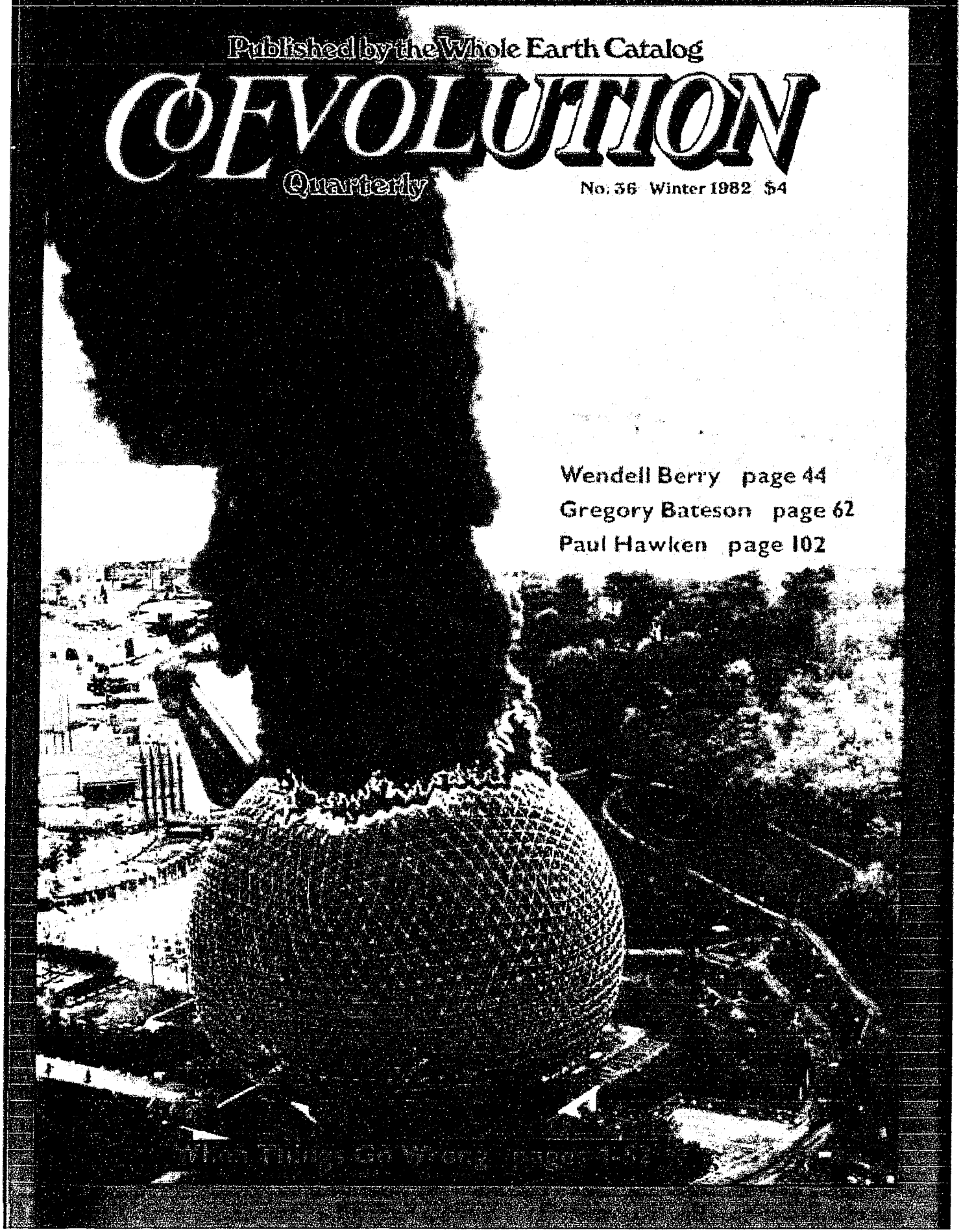

CoEVOLUTION Quarterly

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WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

WHOLE SYSTEMS

SOFT TECHNOLOGY

CRAFT

COMMUNICATIONS

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WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

FAILURE AND MISFORTUNE

The idea behind the next 49 pages has been to fashion a small mosaic of adversities. Sometimes lessons are made explicit by the authors; other times you'll have to work for them.

When we talk about failure or misfortune, we are basically describing human judgments, born of our natural tendency to make distinctions. The more we say that something is different from other things, the more we think of it in terms of failure and misfortune (or success and good luck, for that matter). Predictably, I guess, this tendency to subdivide and to be dissatisfied spawns its opposite: all of us strike a balance in our lives between notions of improvement and love of the indivisible.

In this section, we've presented a variety of difficulties that reveal some of the needs and possibilities for both change and acceptance. Some of the adversities are slight, easily converted to success. Others are deep and social, requiring hard work to turn them around. We hope they're all of interest.

—Conn Nugent, guest editor,
on behalf of my coeditor, David Gancher,
and the writers and readers who contributed care and effort to this little enterprise.
Thanks to them all.

WEN-TI TSEN

ON DEATH'S DOOR

by Star Poole

ONCE I FOUND a lump in my breast and thought I had cancer. While waiting for the results of a mammeograph I decided I might not have long to live. I have to take risks, I thought. I'll take the slipcovers off the chairs and stop saving the best china. I must see Paris. I'll even go to a singles bar, I resolved, checking the newspaper for listings. There's not much time left, and I won't be around to be embarrassed if my adventures are disastrous. And now I can quit my boring job and write a novel – **The Last Days.** It's almost worth dying just to get out of the rut!

I was feeling a little better. Never again would I type a grant proposal and reverify the spelling of words I'd known perfectly until being brainwashed with the errors of others. As for what they were paying me, it hadn't even been fair compensation for having to look at that decal of the Smiling Face merged into the woodwork above my station.

I reserved a first class seat on a flight to Paris and was about to phone the office with my resignation when the doctor's secretary called. It seemed there was no sign of malignancy . . . she was sure I'd be relieved.

Slowly I put down the phone. Sadly I went and dug out the slipcovers and replaced them on the chairs. I put the best dishes back in the china cabinet and tossed the singles bars listings into the garbage and thought what a letdown it was to feel safe again.

Dialing the airline, I was almost in tears. I remembered the Smiling Face as I cancelled my first class ticket.

Then I decided to travel coach. ■

Star Poole lives in Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, a few blocks from my office. She walked in one day and dropped off this small jewel.
—Conn Nugent

TOWARD A COMMON COVENANT

LANDSCAPES AND MIND

by Wes Jackson, drawings by Michael Moore

AS I UNDERSTAND it, Conn Nugent volunteered for the job of editing this section as a result of his criticism of the issue devoted to bioregionalism.* Though he emphasized that centralization has virtues which deserve a hearing, it seems to me that what really set him off is what he called the "cheery optimism" of many of those who extol the virtues of bioregionalism. As I made my way through his letter, I began to nod in agreement, for what he had to say brought to mind that well-known verse from Ecclesiastes:

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

I have always suspected that this scripture must have been canonized when religious thinkers saw a need for a counterbalance, lest we become too smug about our ideas for what it takes to "win" in this "world of tears." Maybe they wanted to remind us that winning is not what it is all about. Whatever the reason or reasons, those 49 words sit us down hard, which is what I think Conn Nugent wants this section to do. Even though the "cheery optimism" set him off, I doubt that he believes we need a debate over whether we should be optimistic or pessimistic about what's going on now and what lies in store for the future. There is no end to that one. And though I fall on the side of the decentralists, I don't believe that decentralism or bioregionalism is what we need to talk about as a people.

I believe Earth has a problem primarily because we have a problem with our very nature and no common covenant for governing or coping with it. The

*See "Bioregional Exchange," CQ Summer 1982, p. 47.

Failure and misfortune differ on the question of responsibility: failure denotes preventability and misfortune denotes fate. And, of course, they like to travel together: a negative event is often some combination of bad luck and our own damn bungling.

Distinguishing failure from misfortune, blameless error from sin, is an evolutionary cultural task, and it's one of the jobs that Wes Jackson has undertaken here. Ancient peoples thought that floods and droughts, for instance, were their fault; they had displeased the gods. Then we thought that floods and droughts weren't our fault, but that we couldn't do much about them. Then we thought that they weren't our fault, but that we could take some counter-measures. And now we're coming to learn that a lot of floods and droughts are our fault. In the next few pages, Wes takes this most difficult case – the moral dimension of human interactions with nature – and suggests both diagnoses and remedies. It's a real feat.

Wes lives on the Great Plains, in Salina, Kansas, where he and his wife Dana run The Land Institute. Among other useful things, The Land experiments with perennial, food-producing grasses, an approach promoted in Wes's book **New Roots for Agriculture** *(NWEC p. 76). He is a notable plant geneticist and a compelling ecological patriot. –Conn Nugent*

Rory Nugent is my brother and an accomplished sailor. After his first transatlantic passage at age 21, he knew that his life was with the sea. His specialty is singlehanded ocean racing, a calling fierce enough to dispel the image "of another expensively educated kid looking for contradictions." In 1976, when he was 23, he sailed a trimaran of his own construction to a creditable finish in the Observer Singlehanded Transatlantic Race (OSTAR), despite a dismasting that forced him to lay over in the Azores. Four years later, this time in a boat he built named Godiva (after the chocolate makers who ponied up cash), he set sail for England and another try at OSTAR. Godiva never made it, as his story explains.

It may bear noting that Rory is not rich, or even moderately well-off. In fact, he's poor. All money goes to the next boat he will build, toward the next prize. Many North American OSTAR competitors shipped their boats to England. Rory couldn't afford to, and so embarked on this incredible voyage. —*Conn Nugent*

MOTHERS IN DISTRESS

AN ANTHROPOLOGIST DESCRIBES THE WOMEN OF ULUAZAPA, EL SALVADOR

by Polly Harrison

WHO'S RIGHT about peasants? Do we agree with the Hobbeses that primitive life is "nasty, brutish, and short," a battleground for "every man against every man," and that peasant life is a muddle of fear-born suspicion, fatalism, passivity, and conservatism?

Or do we lean toward the Rousseaus, for whom savages were noble, pure, and healthy and for whom peasants were homogenous and egalitarian celebrants of land and hard work?

Or is there another perspective which draws from both, something which has to do with disappointment, struggle, and exploitation, and with the sense of a good life (if not Paradise) on its way to being lost?

As usual, it's best to ask the peasants themselves and, as Calvin Trillin would say, give the theory a skip. Beginning in 1976, with little theory in mind, I began a series of visits to Uluazapa, a small town in the eastern mountains of El Salvador, for the purpose of figuring out how such a community managed its health needs. I began to educate myself by first systematically reviewing all patient records, only to find myself counting and recounting the following sorts of data:

Out of a preliminary sample of women in fertile age (15 to 44), 67 percent had at some point in their clinic careers been prescribed tranquilizers, either meprobamate or diazepam or both. Of these, about half had been diagnosed under the syndrome labels of 'neurosis,' 'anxiety neurosis,' or 'preulcerous symptoms.' Most of the rest had reported psychological problems relating to threatened or repeated abortions or incipient menopause, or had displayed such indicators of possible psychophysiological disorder as insomnia, tension headache, or migraine, and a variety of physical symptoms and general malaise with no explicitly diagnosed organic cause.

To be sure, much of this might have been attributable to the gastroenteritic and diarrheal diseases, anemias, vitamin deficiencies, and pregnancies which trace so much of the Central American health profile. And the psychiatric syndrome terminology imposed by the recording public-health physician might have been facile, erroneous, culture-bound, or gender-bound, given the speed and necessary superficiality of the doctor-patient encounter and the class and sex differences between the two parties to that encounter.

Still, none of these possibilities explained why the village women who advised me on the content and language of my health survey questionnaire were urging me to add the category 'worried' to the survey questions about pregnancy and childbearing. Nor did they explain the frequent references made by my new friends to problems with their nerves. Nor did either possibility explain something I gradually uncovered over a year and a half – the existence of a well-elaborated vocabulary of symptoms which had different uses and which expressed different mental and physical conditions. Amidst the murk, which often seemed to thicken rather than dissipate, one fact stood forth clearly: many

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Polly Harrison is a medical anthropologist who has lived and worked in Central America and the Caribbean since 1964, consulting on development policies and projects, primarily in rural areas. She did her doctoral fieldwork in El Salvador, beginning in 1976. It was then that she first met the people of Uluazapa.

Polly's account speaks for itself on the social intractability of certain kinds of pain and abuse. But it may be worth suggesting what the women of Uluazapa can offer to most of the people who read these pages: a reminder of the small scale of our own disappointments and of the huge work of justice. We need to remember that there is such a thing as misery. It is almost always undeserved, and its lessons are rarely worth the price.

For the last two years, based first in Haiti and then in post-revolutionary Nicaragua, Polly was the Regional Social Science Advisor for AID. She is now back in Boston, thinking about it all. —*Conn Nugent*

had become a proxy for the futile search for a better life.

The ultimate tactic has to do with childbearing itself. More women are enrolling in prenatal care programs and more are trying for hospital childbirths. Part of this has to do with their desire for healthier babies, but an astonishing proportion has to do with a desire for surgical sterilization. The women of Uluazapa, like most rural women, reject temporary methods of contraception for a variety of reasons, part mythological, part medically astute, and less than 10 percent were using them when I was there. Yet close to two-thirds of one sample interviewed were considering or actively seeking sterilization through clinic enrollment. The national rate for sterilizations in 1977 was 52 percent of all family-planning acceptors. Women, many of them young, were quite matter-of-fact and deliberate about what they were doing and even had evolved the words and concepts appropriate to their actions. Pregnancy and childbirth were illnesses from which one healed oneself. Contraceptives were unacceptable Band-Aids. The cure was sterilization.

The health post thus becomes a central, perhaps the only, feasible strategy. It is the way to sterilization, the way to healthy babies, and, to return to those supposed neuroses, a place where women can speak, however indirectly and unsatisfactorily, of the distress that pervades their days and nights.

Back to earlier questions. Are the women of Uluazapa neurotic and anxious without due cause? Do they not recognize Rousseau's rural paradise? Did it, perhaps, exist once and has something terrible gone wrong? Is it, perhaps, that they are caught between both the discontent of civilization and its unjust absence? Is there really anything to romanticize about? ■

MALE FAILURE, FEMALE SUCCESS

FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH FRED HAPGOOD

CONN NUGENT: In your book, you point out that virtually all sexual species have many more offspring than are necessary for population equilibrium . . .

FRED HAPGOOD: Not "virtually all" species. All species.

NUGENT: . . . And that most of these offspring die before they get a chance to reproduce . . .

HAPGOOD: They get eaten, usually.

NUGENT: . . . And that even for that small minority that reaches breeding time, most lose out to a sexual competitor. Which is particularly true for males, of course. Well, why are there so many unsuccessful males? Why is the incidence of failure so high?

HAPGOOD: Let's see, what sort of answers work for questions like that? How about: "That's just the way it is"?

NUGENT: Fine. That's the one I use on my son all the time.

HAPGOOD: But, O.K., let's be more analytically rigorous. One could blame the males and say that there are just very few competent males. One could blame the females and just say that females make life difficult. Or one could chalk it up to evolution and say, as I did in the book, that the structure of gender only makes sense when you say that males do things that are so destructive to themselves that if females were to do them the loss to the gene lines would be terrific.

Now, if you can imagine a hermaphroditic species with a phase of activity that is very dangerous, or at least engenders terrible possibilities of failure, then you can imagine the evolution of something like males, in which all of the physiological reproduction of new individuals becomes the property of some fraction of all the current individuals (females), with the remaining fraction engaging in the dangerous activity (males).

For instance, scorpion flies have trouble with spiders. Hunting for things to eat, they're likely to get eaten themselves. So now imagine a species of hermaphroditic scorpion flies, where all the individuals reciprocally fertilize each other and all engage in the same behavior. And imagine a gendered species of scorpion flies. Under what circumstances would the gendered species, in which only half the individuals would construct individuals of the next generation, outcompete the hermaphrodites? If the females are kept safe, then the males can run the risk of the spider webs because one male can do the work of many. One female can't do the work of many. *That's the difference between male and female.* The reason why there are so few successful males, from an evolutionary point of view, is that they were born to fail. Their function is failure, at least compared to females, whose function is success.

NUGENT: Success relative to males.

HAPGOOD: Yes, relative to males, but also, and more importantly, relative to members of that hypothetical hermaphroditic species. ■

Fred is a science writer whose work appears in a variety of publications. His latest book, **Why Males Exist** *(1980, $2.95 postpaid from New American Library, 120 Woodbine Street, Bergenfield, NJ 07621), is a readable, illuminating consideration of gender and sexual behavior. He lives in Boston, in an old warehouse by South Station. That's where this conversation took place.*

—Conn Nugent

BORN TO FAIL

THOUGH A BIT OF SKILL COMBINED WITH THE PROPER ATTITUDE WILL PROBABLY GET YOU THROUGH

by J. Baldwin

FAILURE is a way of life for designers. We *know* our work is going to exhibit certain undesirable qualities until development is pretty much complete. That's what research and development ("R & D") is all about. That's why we have computer simulations, prototypes, and test pilots. And a junk pile behind the lab. (Or barn. There's nothing formal about any of this.) We learn to live with the possibility that our ideas may not work at all, and that even if they do work, the critics may not receive us kindly. The market might not be there, or a political perturbation might shoot us down. Any way you look at the situation, the potential for miserable failure is there. Statistically, about 90 percent of new designs do not achieve societal (market) acceptance. In the face of these dismal odds, how can designers continue to feel confident enough to work? And how is disaster to be avoided?

HENRY FORD MUSEUM GRAPHICS ARCHIVES

One of Henry Ford's people testing an early version of the Model T on a muddy road, circa 1915. Ford's willingness to work with failure gave the Model T high torque and light weight, which made traction possible on bumpy terrain.

Henry Ford is one of my heroes, mostly because he dared to ignore much of the conventional wisdom of his day. For instance, when he was designing the Model T, his engineers were not issued the expected order to make it as strong and tough as possible so that failure would be unthinkable. Instead, they were told to make it as light as they dared. Then, when it inevitably broke during road testing, they were to beef it up appropriately and test it again. When at last the test car didn't break, Henry knew he had the lightest and most economical car possible at that time. While his competition carted around hundreds and even thousands of useless pounds supposedly needed for strength, the Model T went on to become a deservedly great success, at a weight less than a modern VW. Today, design is primarily for the perceived market niche rather than for physical performance on the road. Consequently, when there is a rapid shift of customer desires, automakers are left trying to sell cars that are inherently not very good – a failure of a different sort.

CQ *readers who don't know J. Baldwin should turn in their* CoEvolution *T-shirts. His pungent articles and reviews have graced these pages from the beginning. As I write this, J. is working with the New Alchemists in Massachusetts; as you read this, he's back in California, pawing the ground.* *–Conn Nugent*

POETRY AND MARRIAGE

THE USE OF OLD FORMS

by Wendell Berry

THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE begins in the giving of words. We cannot join ourselves to one another without giving our word. And this must be an unconditional giving. The promise must be absolute, for in joining ourselves to one another we join ourselves to the unknown. We can join one another *only* by joining the unknown. We must not be misled by the procedures of experimental thought: in life, in the world, we are never given two known results to choose between, but only *one* result that we choose without knowing what it is.

Marriage rests upon the immutable *givens* that compose it: words, bodies, characters, histories, places. Some wishes cannot succeed; some victories cannot be won; some loneliness is incorrigible. But there is relief and freedom in knowing what is real; these givens come to us out of the perennial reality of the world, like the terrain we live on. One does not care for this ground to make it a different place, or to make it perfect, but to make it inhabitable and to make it better. To flee from its realities is only to arrive at them unprepared.

Because the condition of marriage is worldly and its meaning communal, no one party to it can be solely in charge. What you alone think it ought to be, it is not going to be. Where you alone think you want it to go, it is not going to go. It is going where the two of you – and marriage, time, life, history, and the world – will take it. You do not know the road; you have committed your life to a way.

In marriage as in poetry, the given word implies the acceptance of a form that is never entirely of one's own making. When understood seriously enough, a form is a way of accepting and of living within the limits of creaturely life. We live only one life, and die only one death. A marriage

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Wendell Berry reminds me of the great men of the old Roman Republic. He finds no contradictions among verse, prose, and the calling of a farmer-citizen. On the contrary. He speaks on behalf of ancient integrations of worship, work, art, and life on the land.

I first saw Wendell Berry at a conference in Western Massachusetts last year. The conference was a memorial to E.F. Schumacher, and it struck me that some of the speakers, and most of the audience, were engaged in a show of public self-congratulations (crucial insight this, seminal moment that) that might have offended Schumacher himself, a man who didn't duck difficulty and the possibility of error. Luckily, Wendell Berry rose and delivered a kind, evenvoiced reminder that revolution is dangerous and that love and social improvement emanate from humility and persistent hard work. He spoke then of the richness of inherited forms, of marriage in particular, and of the satisfying freedoms derived from assumed limitations. It was a wonderful, even a brave talk, and I'm pleased to see its themes treated in depth here.

When The Rolling Stones released ***Let It Bleed****, they wrote on the album sleeve: Play This Record Loud. And they were right. Let me ask a similar favor of you. Read This Article Slow.* —*Conn Nugent*

Wendell Berry's books include ***The Unsettling of America*** *(NWEC p. 46),* ***The Memory of Old Jack*** *(NWEC p. 75),* ***The Gift of Good Land*** *(CQ Spring 1982, p. 46), and* ***A Part****, a book of poetry (CQ Spring 1982, p. 124). "Poetry and Marriage" will be part of his new book of essays,* ***Standing by Words****, to be published in Fall, 1983 by North Point Press, 850 Talbot Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94706.* —*Art Kleiner*