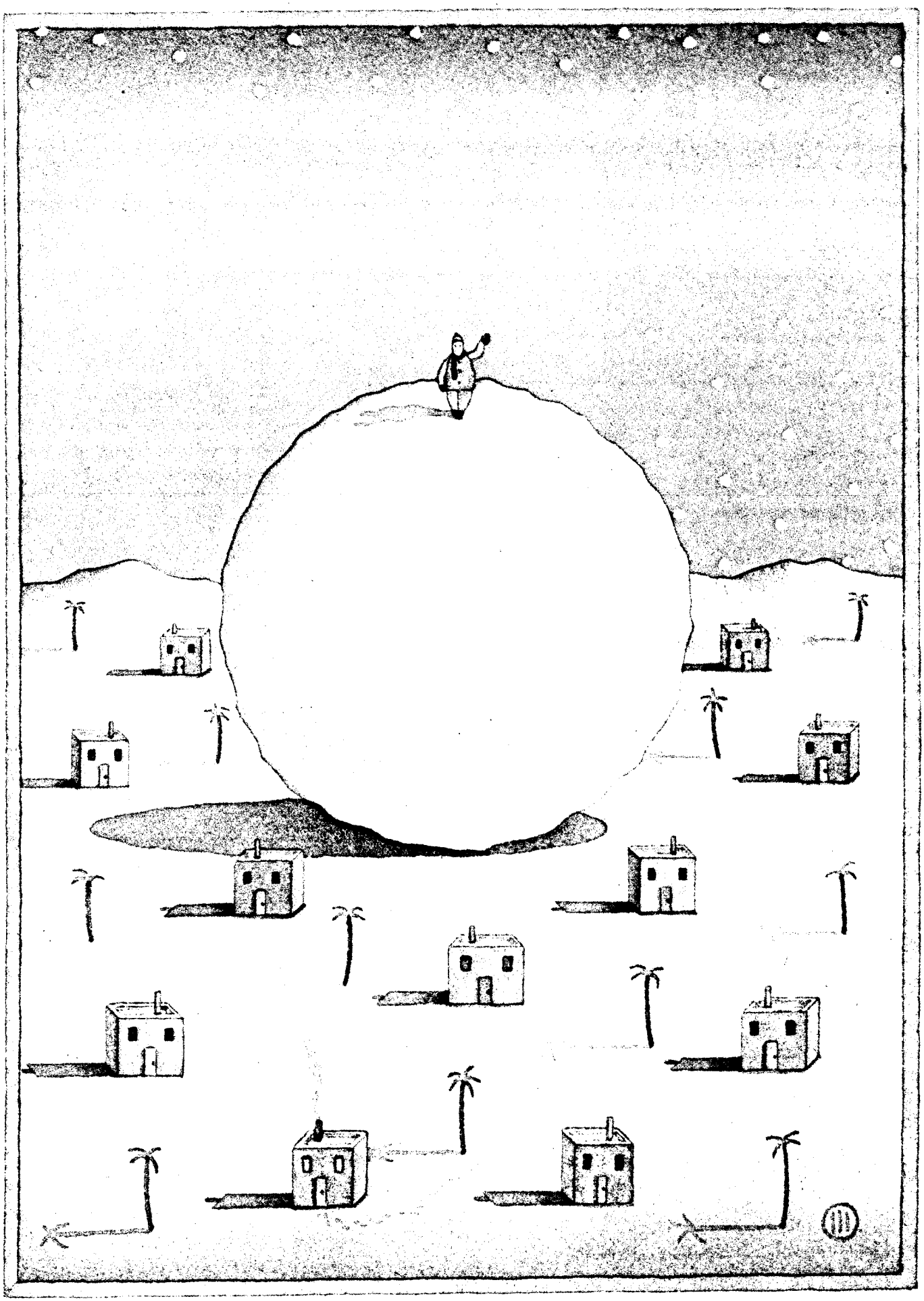

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN ALFRED DORN III

CALIFORNIA CHRISTMAS CAROLS

Nine writers writing . . . and a partridge in a palm tree.

THE BOY'S DESIRE

By Richard Rodriguez

THE FOG COMES TO MIND. It never rained on Christmas. It was never sharp blue and windy. When I remember Christmas in Sacramento, it is in gray: The valley fog would lift by late morning, the sun boiled haze for a few hours, then the tule fog would rise again when it was time to go into the house.

The haze through which memory must wander is thickened by that fog. The rooms of the house on 39th Street are still and dark in late afternoon, and I open the closet to search for old toys. One year there was a secondhand bike. I do not remember a color. Perhaps it had no color even then. Another year there were boxes of games that rattled their parts—dice and pegs and spinning dials. Or perhaps the rattle is of a jigsaw puzzle that compressed into an image. . . of what? of Paris? a litter of kittens? I cannot remember. Only one memory holds color and size and shape: brown hair, blue eyes, the sweet smell of styrene.

That Christmas I announced I wanted a bride doll. I must have been seven or eight—wise enough to know not to tell anyone at school, but young enough to whine out my petition from early November.

My father's reaction was unhampered by psychology. A shrug—"*¿Una muñeca?*"—a doll, why not? Because I knew it was my mother who would choose all the presents, it was she I badgered. I wanted a bride doll! "Is there something else you want?" she wondered. No! I'd make clear with my voice that nothing else would appease me. "We'll see," she'd say, and she never wrote it down on her list.

By early December, wrapped boxes started piling up in my parents' bedroom closet, above my father's important papers and the family album. When no one else was home, I'd drag a chair over and climb up to see. . . looking for the *one*. About a week before Christmas, it was there. I was so certain it was mine that I punched my thumb through the wrapping paper and the cellophane window on the box and felt inside—lace, two tiny, thin legs.

I got other presents that year, but it was the doll I kept by me. I remember my mother saying I'd have "to share her" with my younger sister—but Helen was four years old, oblivious. The doll was mine. My arms would hold her. She would sleep on my pillow.

And the sky did not fall. The order of the universe did not tremble. In fact, it was right for a change. My family accommodated itself to my request. My brother and sisters played round me with their own toys. I paraded my doll by the hands across the floor.

The other day, when I asked my brother and sisters about the doll, no one remembered. My mother remembers. "Yes," she smiled. "One year there was a doll."

The closet door closes. (The house on 39th Street has been razed for a hospital parking lot.) The fog rises. Distance tempts me to mock the boy and his desire. The fact remains: One Christmas in Sacramento I wanted a bride doll, and I got one.

Richard Rodriguez is the author of Hunger of Memory *(Godine).*

ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT

By Neil Morgan

SAN DIEGO SPREAD, dark and low, from the harbor entrance off North Island, where the beacons and buoys flash, on up the slopes and out to the mesas and canyons. Electric Christmas trees glittered in the dry air atop downtown buildings. It was dusk on Christmas Eve, twenty years ago, and I was a newspaper reporter looking for a Christmas Day story.

In Balboa Park, after an excursion to hear carols in the organ pavilion, a class of sightless children moved along the sidewalk. A light manila rope, snaking at waist level from hand to hand, was their touch with the

world. At both ends, they knew, were guardians with eyes that saw. I watched, wondering if the tiny blond in the bright blue dress had ever seen blue. Or if finding an orange at dawn in a Christmas stocking could be so vivid for her as it once was for me.

Downtown I took the stool next to a Navajo Indian in the uniform of a Marine Corps corporal. For him, unconvinced by the best efforts of reservation missions, Christmas was only a liberty.

"This town is dead," he said as I bought him a beer. "I wish I was in Gallup."

In a bar in the Gaslamp Quarter the regulars were amusing themselves by trying to sing carols. They stumbled on "O Come, All Ye Faithful." I sat at the tinny piano, remembering when I had played in my father's churches in small North Carolina towns, and picked out the melody. Then a peg-legged man in a leather jacket, who had a clipping to prove he had set a world's record for the mile on a motorcycle at a track in Springfield, Illinois, in 1939, dropped a quarter on the piano and asked for "White Christmas."

Later I hailed a police sergeant I knew and rode his beat. It was past midnight. In the glare and shouts of the back streets, Christmas Eve had brought whatever it had brought, and gone. From the police radio, the dispatchers' voices barked with increasing frequency.

"It's the lucky drunks who have a place to go," the sergeant said, "but they're not getting there very well."

We stopped at a hotel to back up a narcotics team. Up three flights of stairs we found two plainclothesmen who had just smashed into a bedroom. A naked light bulb hung from a ceiling cord. An empty syringe lay cracked on the floor. Tobacco smoke clouded the room, and odors of recent presence. One of the narcs swore softly and turned to leave.

"We got more calls, Joe," he said to his partner.

At his prowl car, I wished the sergeant a merry Christmas. He stared at me. I walked to the newspaper's city room to write my Christmas story. I wanted to get home.

Neil Morgan is the editor of the San Diego Tribune.

A PERFECT TURKEY

By Charles Perry

WAS IT CHRISTMAS or Thanksgiving? For that matter, was it 1966 or 1967? It's not just the loss of brain cells that makes me unsure, it's that all times sort of ran together back then in San Francisco.

On this particular Christmas, or maybe Thanksgiving, nobody in my little commune realized what day it was until my family called with holiday greetings. It was unsettling for us to think about. Surely, we agreed, holidays were rituals and hence "games," the enemies of authentic existence. On the other hand, some deep part of our minds, probably the medulla or "reptilian brain," told us that on this day we must eat turkey.

One of our number had a recipe she'd found in a newspaper for what was claimed to be the Perfect Turkey. It was incredibly complex, involving a flour-and-water crust around the bird to keep it from drying out in the oven, and a stuffing that contained, as I recall, wild rice and litchis. Well, anyway, that took the curse off the ritual angle—from the standpoint of the cosmic quest, the Perfect Turkey would certainly be okay.

It wasn't until around 2 P.M. that we got out of the house to go shopping. Of course, most of the markets were closed. Finally we found a Palestinian grocer in Ingleside who had some frozen turkeys. We took one home and thawed it out. I remember that, after some debate, we removed the red plastic gizmo that was supposed to pop out and tell us when the bird was done, because we didn't know how it would sit with the flour-and-water crust. We followed that baroque recipe to the letter, and around midnight the turkey was done.

Well, it was a New Age, right? Only the Perfect Turkey would do, right?

Only, because of the crust, the skin wasn't brown. And the stuffing didn't taste like stuffing, it tasted like the things we threw together when we were stoned. There was no gravy, no relish bowl of mixed olives, no cranberry sauce. I don't even like cranberry sauce, but my reptilian brain knew it was being cheated.

We stared at this monstrous, alien thing we had made and felt an irrational pang for our families and the traditional holiday dinner. It was a need so strong it could have driven us out of our chairs and off to the airport, but by then we knew that Christmas, or whatever it was, was over.

Charles Perry is a restaurant critic for this magazine.

THE MAGIC TABLE

By M.F.K. Fisher

CHRISTMAS IS FOR CHILDREN, and when I was a child it was for *me*. That meant, of course, the whole of myself: my younger sister, Anne, my parents, and now and then Grandmother. Together, we made me.

I don't know what psychologists would make of this theory, but I honestly believe that small new people, who are born from love and who can spend their first years wrapped in it, do not feel like single entities until they are four or so. For those first, timeless years, they are trusting parts of a whole. With things like birthdays and festivals coming along, and finally school vacations, they lose this innocence. They begin to wait for the next Christmas, and to remember the one past, and perhaps that is when they become world citizens.

If this be the case, I grew up on Christmas Day, 1912, when I was four, even though I did not know it then. We had moved to Whittier a few months before, and had borrowed money to buy a big wooden house on Painter Avenue, which my parents planned successfully to fill with more children as soon as possible. There were changes going on: Part of the big front porch was made into a sun-room, and there was a little apartment for Grandmother whenever she came, but that first Christmas we had not yet built a real fireplace. Mother wept, and would not let us hang stockings from the fake mantle above three gas logs in a skimpy grate, and "Next year, next year!" her husband promised.

I knew, as the older and temporarily more articulate child, that Mother would be singing in the St. Matthias choir the next morning (we were among about a hundred heathens in an enclave of some 4,000 Quakers) and that Anne and I would get into bed with Father until she came home, as we did every Sunday when she went to early service. But this was a very special day, because both parents had told me the Secret, the astonishing thing that was going to happen while we were there.

The sleeping porch was like a bird's nest, high on the back of the tall house. We lay on either side of Father, and felt his long arms around us in the cold dark. I remember feeling sharply awake, so that when the first notes of a trumpet sounded into the starry air, I cried out something like "YES," and little Anne awoke with a snap on the other side of Father's big chest, and he pulled us closer as we lay listening.

From the top of the square steeple of the Friend's Church, less than two blocks from our warm nest, a man blew bravely on his horn, sometimes trembling and flatting a little, the first notes of "Joy to the World!" First he played to the north. Then he blew to the east, where we lay breathless with the mysterious, triumphant beauty of the sound, and to the south, where in a few years we would move. Then he sounded his tiny blast westward, toward the great Pacific.

Father knew some of the words: "Joy to the world! The Lord is come. . . ." When the trumpet finally ended its announcement, he sang on softly, "And heaven and nature sing!" Then Mother came running in, all cool-cheeked and laughing, and then we were in our Sunday dresses at a special breakfast with candles on the table and probably muffins or sausages for a treat, and *finally* we went into the living room. (I knew there was more to this day, but what?)

At the far end of the room, in front of the three little gas logs making a fine light with blue and yellow flickers, stood a low table with two small Christmas trees on it, one at either end. The ornaments twinkled exactly the same for Anne's tree and mine: a tiny glass house with a red roof, a yellow bird with a spun-glass tail, bells and little strings of gold and silver beads.

A long time later, Mother told me there was no money for anything else, but the table, a secondhand thing with its legs cut off, was right for us to sit or kneel at for several years. The two beautiful trees were a present to the new house, she said, from Father, and the handsome pots came from the F. Sule One store on the Plaza, in Los Angeles, a present to the new house and to us all from the store's owner.

We gave the brave trees to friends who moved in when we moved on southward a few years later, and they too carried out plans to fill the house with children. But we took the magical low table with us. . . and today I still have it. After generations of children have eaten and cut papers and written verses on it, it is by my front door, and my head is still full of a vision of not one but two little pine trees before a glowing fire, and I am almost innocent again.

M.F.K. Fisher writes regularly for The New Yorker, *among other magazines, and her most recent book is* Sister Age *(Knopf).*

ON THE AIR

By Alan Rifkin

IN DECEMBER 1966, plenty of things were happening to people who did not live in the San Fernando Valley. Those needn't concern anyone.

What mattered about that winter to the Valley itself was hard to see then, but for me it is very nearly the turning point in a slow evolution that began with bridle trails and ended with the Galleria. Until then the Valley was hipper than it looked, instead of the other way around. Grown-ups knew something about what went on beyond the mountains on four sides and seemed to be having the last laugh on it—they had come from many places, where they had learned many lessons, so that their kids could be from nowhere and suffer nothing. All of which might explain the rather delicate philosophical makeup of a lot of eleven year olds who had rejected the Santa Claus idea the first time they heard it, who would not be caught dead singing a Christmas carol, and who were absolutely convinced of the sanctity of a local radio promotion known as KHJ's Christmas Wish.

This was when KHJ was called Boss Radio. My eleven-year-old friends, myself, everyone listened to it. We could count on it the same way other people depended on whatever East Coast commiserations got them through the holiday season. I can't remember the rules, whether you could phone in continually or whether you had to wait for the secret cue—something tells me it was "the sound of the KHJ sleigh bells," though I'm sure this is more faithful to the spirit than to the facts—but the premise was, phone in your Christmas Wish and Boss Radio will deliver.

It was not a time in my life when I was asking a lot of hard questions of commercial concerns. A few that perhaps should have come to mind are: Does Boss Radio *have* to honor my Christmas Wish? If not, has the public been (actionably) misled? And how is it that every lucky winner whose voice I hear played back on the air asks for things like $20 so his family can have its first Christmas turkey since before World War II? It was not sinking in—as I tried to get through, dialing from the fetal position, or the take-cover position—that KHJ might be exercising some discretion over whose Christmas Wishes were meaningful enough to honor on the air. Now I dialed fast, then suddenly slow. I was certain this was a test of skill.

Friends of mine were trying to get through, too. Some of them spread sketchy rumors about how KHJ's Christmas Wish was knocking out switchboards all the way to the Kremlin. (Invariably the Kremlin.) I believed all of it—it was a workable world view, even if it never really cleared the San Bernardino Mountains. Several days passed. More sympathetic stories. Those needy people sure could dial.

And then, at some point, something seemed to have gone wrong with the busy signal. There wasn't one. I heard a click. I heard a ring. "A merry Christmas," sang the recording, "from Boss Radio." This was my moment, our hour, eleven year olds the Valley over. I collected myself, waited for my signal to talk. Then, in my clearest speaking voice, I politely requested an Oldsmobile Toronado.

A few words about the Oldsmobile Toronado. It had front-wheel drive. It had racy lines, especially for something the size of a hearse. More important, it was exactly the kind of thing my mother would never think to buy for herself.

My request was never played back, never honored. (Did I get a consolation record album? I can't remember.) Mom was touched. And it did hit me, finally, that we were comparatively lucky to be where we were on Christmas Day, Toronado or no, which is as close to a loss of innocence as a Val wants to come. Or that is how it felt in 1966, gazing at the warm face of the San Bernardino Mountains, which simplified things so.

Alan Rifkin is a freelance journalist living in Los Angeles.

FIRST SNOW

By Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston

I FIRST SAW SNOW one Christmas when I lived in the high desert of Owens Valley. It was during World War II, and I was nine years old. When the crystal flakes floated down, like translucent coconut chips on the breeze, I ran outside, twirling and dancing and opening my mouth to catch the powdery ice. I was surprised by the sharp coldness of the air, and somehow disappointed that such beauty had its price to pay. . . icy feet and hands, and uncomfortable wetness when the snow melted upon contact with my clothes and face. Still, the utter loveliness of this new phenomenon was so overpowering that I soon forgot my discomfort.

This particular imprint on my memory is easily explained. Before the war, we had lived in Ocean Park. Memories of this era are warm ones of sunshine, hot days on the beach. A Christmas I remember, when I was about six years old, radiates with warm images of strolling along the promenade in a new orange flowered dress, pushing the doll carriage Santa had left under the big tree in our living room. My oldest brother, Bill, walked with me and helped me feed popcorn to the pigeons warbling around our feet. Then he rushed me off in his old blue roadster to visit his girlfriend, Molly, who played the violin while he sang—and I slept.

Several years later, my family and I were interned in Manzanar with 10,000 other Japanese Americans. One winter the snow fell, transforming the bleak emptiness into a stirring Hiroshige print. Other people began coming out of the barracks into this new world. Some carried brightly colored Japanese parasols and wore high wooden getas to raise their stockinged feet above the snow. It was odd not to hear the "kata-kata" clatter of the wooden clogs scraping across sand and gravel. The snow muffled sound and thickened the thin planed roofs of the barracks, softening the stark landscape in white on white. It was strangely soothing to me. I found myself moved to tears.

Like a story within a story, or a memory within a memory. . . I cannot think of one memorable Christmas, but of these two. They are yin and yang, each necessary to appreciate the other. I don't remember Christmas trees in Manzanar, but we gathered driftwood from the creeks that poured across the high desert from the nearby Sierra and improvised. A bare manzanita limb embellished with origami cranes and dried moss contrasts greatly with a lush, brilliantly lit fir tree.

Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston is the co-author of Farewell to Manzanar *(San Francisco Book Company) with her husband, James D. Houston, and the forthcoming* Don't Cry, It's Only Thunder *(Doubleday) with Paul G. Hensler.*

THE VISITOR

By Jon Carroll

LATER STUDIES have confirmed that mine was not at all an atypical Christmas, but in the fifties, in Pasadena, we did feel (my mother and I) that we were extremely unusual.

We did not enjoy feeling feeling unusual, but we had little choice. My mother was divorced. I had no siblings, all the members of our extended family (those who still spoke to us, given the divorce and all) lived east of the Mississippi, so come Christmas morning it was just the two of us, chewing on cornflakes and staring at the tree.

On this particular Christmas morning (I think it was 1953), the sun was bright and warm. My mother, who had been raised within shouting distance of the Canadian border, kept saying that it was not a real Christmas without snow, but I had never seen falling snow—indeed, would not see it for another fifteen years—and was unable to comprehend her anguish. Sure, Mom, I thought. Can we open the presents now?

The gift ritual did not take long. Some shirts for me, some bric-a-brac for her, and a tiny bottle of perfume. A courtesy aunt who lived in the Philippines sent me a set of scaled-down golf clubs; I used them as baseball bats until they proved utterly unsatisfactory. I gave my mother a scarf. It didn't match her clothing or her coloring, but she wore it for a long time afterward anyway.

And it was ten in the morning, and all of Christmas stretched before me. The other kids on the block, wrapped in the bosoms of their large and indisputably nuclear families, would not be out on the street for several hours. The carols on the radio were beginning their second cycle: ". . . and heaven and nature sing. . . ." I went outside to peer through the telescope my mother had given me.

I was waiting. I knew that an event was coming.

Next door to my small house, in an equally small house, lived the parents of Victor Mature's current wife. Victor Mature was a Star, an icon, a he-man in a world of wimps. His presence on my street would be something like a miracle.

Noon passed, and one, and two. The other kids emerged, great with toys. We warily circled the front lawn of the house next to mine. Just before three, the longest, blackest car we had ever seen turned down the street. Whispers moved through the throng.

The car stopped in front of the house next to mine. A small blond woman stepped out, bearing large presents with ornate red bows. She was followed by—yes!—Himself, in a camel's hair coat, his leonine head thrown back, his mouth showing teeth in a grimace imperfectly designed to resemble a smile.

He disappeared into the small house. We milled around, pretending to be children. Half an hour later, he reemerged. A state visit, a matter of protocol. The long black car purred away toward the Pasadena Freeway.

My friend Charlie, clutching the handlebars of a new bike, spoke out.

"He's shorter than I thought he was," Charlie said. We all agreed. Me especially.

Jon Carroll is a columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle.

PAYING FOR SANTA

By Wanda Coleman

MY CHRISTMAS PAST, spent in the South Central Los Angeles of the fifties, comes back in flashes of pain, anger, and rueful warmth. We'd tiptoe out of bed at 7 A.M. and start opening gifts. Mom and Pop would join us a couple of hours later, then she'd head for the kitchen. While Pop helped us put toys together, our home filled with smells of waffles, bacon, and hot cocoa. The four of us would

break to the table, allowed to eat in our cotton PJs for the holiday. We could eat anything we wanted that day, irrespective of spoiled appetites. It was our day of unfettered freedom. Mom and Pop even did the dishes.

For years Pop worked nights, sometimes Christmas night, as a janitor for RCA Victor. Around the holidays RCA discarded hundreds of unsold recordings, and he brought some home for gifts. I once received a set of red vinyl 45s by Wanda Landowska, the harpsichordist. She was the first famous Wanda I'd ever heard of. On Christmas, Mom allowed Pop to play the 78s she couldn't tolerate the other 364 days. The house reverberated with rhythm and blues—"T-99," "Friday Night Fish Fry," "Bad Bad Whisky," "Dust My Broom"—till even we kids protested. After a while we grew to love it as he did.

Throughout the day relatives stopped by. There was blue-black, softspoken Uncle Rich, and Aunt Lacy with her purple-tinged, silver-white hair. I'd never seen such hair. She wore it in a big upsweep atop her honey-colored head. It fascinated and repelled me. She always smelled of some exotic fragrance. To this day her image is instantly conjured up by department store perfume counters. Uncle Jimmy would bring orange net stockings full of candy and nuts. Between spates of lively chatter about their struggles as black bridge champions, Uncle Kenneth and Aunt Myrtle devoured all of anything Mom didn't hide.

Looking back, happiness abounded until I discovered Santa was a lie. From my poem "Growing Up Black":

> one christmas i found an invoice under their bed
> at 9 i discovered santa claus was sears & roebuck
> and demanded payment within 90 days

In the late sixties I followed the trend of young blacks and convinced my family to abandon Christmas—even Kwanja, its black nationalist counterpart. Racial and economic disparities made celebrations of any kind seem ludicrous. Still do. But within the decade I succumbed to pressures from my children.

The result is compromise. Last year I dared heavy rains to select a tree from one of the many lots on Central Avenue, as my parents had done before me. We rose early Christmas morning and spent the day at Grandma and Grandpa's with my two brothers and their families, climaxing in a long-distance call from our baby sister. We ended our celebration with a supper of roast lamb with all the trimmings. And I did the dishes.

Wanda Coleman is a Los Angeles native and poet. Her most recent book of poetry is Imagoes *(Black Sparrow Press).*

A ROOM AT THE MOTEL

By Leonard Michaels

WE LEFT BERKELEY December 14, racing down Route 5; flat, fast, boring road policed by aircraft that make the whole sky ominous with accusation. Jesse, eleven years old, twisted the radio dial, compulsively searching for rock music. Ethan, fourteen, in back with the luggage, was reading. Occasionally they would fight. I begged them to stop or, holding the wheel with one hand, smacked at them with the other. When the scenery changed in Arizona, so would their mood, I hoped. They had nothing to see now but the canal, a vein letting life leak out of Northern California into an agricultural empire and the proliferation of real estate from Los Angeles to Mexico.

At twilight we checked into a motel near Barstow. The boys chased each other into the room and began wrestling. Not to scream for peace, I stepped outside and smoked a cigarette, waiting until they wrestled themselves into a stupor. Early the next morning, I woke them and said, "Shower and pack. We're going to the Grand Canyon. It's ten miles deep, full of snakes and panthers." They cheered. Feeling I'd scored high, I left for the motel office. The sunlight was brassy, but the air was cool. Big trucks, running down the highway, pulled at me. Get out in the energy. Go.

Behind the motel desk there was a woman. She was about 50 and had a red loaf of hair, like body and blood mashed into her personal fashion statement for the season. While figuring my bill, she said, "Going home for the holidays?"

"No. I'm delivering my sons to their mother. She moved to Pittsburgh. We're divorced, so we're passing the boys back and forth. I'm doing it for the first time." She looked up while I babbled—surprised at myself, as if I owed her a confession comparable to what she offered in her hair. It bespoke a need for love beyond consummation on this planet. Lonely, laborious hours had gone into its construction. "I once drove my Labrador to another city," I said, "and handed it over to a nice family. Driving home, I began to blubber. Had to sit at the side of a road until I could control myself."

"You're talking about a dog?"

"Yes. Labrador retriever. Now I'm going to Pittsburgh."

"You're going a funny way to Pittsburgh."

"I want to avoid bad weather. I'm taking a southern route. We'll stop at the Grand Canyon, have some fun."

She became very still. My meaning seemed to sift down and settle inside her, like sediment in a wine bottle. Then her head dipped, the red loaf a second head, making a slow bludgeon of assent: "Yes, bad weather." She added, then, inspired by Christmas spirit, "But it's better than none at all."

"That's a fact," I mumbled, giving voice to the little moron, my heart.

"It is," she said. We smiled together.

I returned to the room and saw the boys hadn't showered. Their clothes were flung all over. They sprawled on the beds, gleaming with violence, having ceased to fight, apparently, when they heard the room key in the lock. Like my opponents in a rough game, they studied me, waiting for my move. But nothing in me wanted to move. There seemed no point in moving ever again. It was plain they didn't give a shit about the Grand Canyon.

That year, after Pittsburgh, I drove back to California alone, speeding through pine forests and chased by lashing squalls across flatland. The forests, flickering on either side of the road, were in Mississippi; the flatland was the Texas Panhandle. But all I really knew was that I was going from one end of Christmas to the other in my car, that singular drug of alienation, from sea to shining sea.

Leonard Michaels is a professor of English at UC Berkeley and the author of The Men's Club *(Farrar, Straus & Giroux).*