

“Even though written two years before I ever read Tennessee Williams, this teenage juvenalia reads like Tennessee in his youth writing stories of desperate, thwarted, misplaced love in the summer on the shores of Moon Lake. The third paragraph, I realize, is basically the opening paragraph of my novel, *Leather Blues*, which I wrote in 1968, and it is also very similar to the opening of my short story, ‘That Boy That Summer.’ Johnny Blake prefigures Denny Sargent in *Leather Blues* as well as Ryan O’Hara in *Some Dance to Remember*. Personal embarrassment of juvenalia aside, this is not a terribly bad example of a mid-century adolescent story built on high-school reading of Helen Hunt Jackson, Margaret Mitchell, and Thomas Wolfe, as well as on the early rock-and-roll songs of teen-age death by car crash.”
–Jack Fritscher, 30 December 2003

“One Summer Ago”
written by
Jack Fritscher
(freshman and seminarian, age 18,
at the Pontifical College Josephinum,
Autumn 1957)

Deep in July when the green corn has flooded the land and the far mists of dusk have softened the starkness of lone trees, erect and pointed above the flat fertile stretches of field, there creeps a pensive restlessness into the hearts of young men; for the land lies open and burgeoning after the tender conquest of spring.

Fulfilled April promise quivers on the meadow smells from south pastures, in the faint sounds of things growing in summer nights. A hint of haying and incipient golden harvest plays through the night fields and fingers upstairs curtains in farm houses darkened for early rising.

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Johnny Blake kicked the smothering sheet to the floor, breathed deeply, and clawed for elusive sleep. For a long while he stared at the shadowed ceiling, then hypnotically followed the lines down the repetitiously papered wall. He turned on his side not feeling the hardness of his arm. Forgotten was his pride in the aches and stiffness of early spring when he had come to the farm, pale and weakened by three semesters of college attacked too seriously

His collegiate social life had been nil; he had turned from book to board to book without missing a beat. He had joined no fraternity, avoided all practiced distractions, and blotted himself in ink and paper. His thoughts had been strictly defined: meanderings were quickly antoinetted.

He had few friends and they only academic; there had been one unavoidable date and that platonic to the aching point. She had mentioned Sartre and he countered with Camus; she, Cezanne, and he, Renoir. Exhausted, they had parted relieved. The experience merely confirmed the goose-necked scholar in his pale isolation.

Now tanned and hardened from sweating exertions under the hot corn sun of the Illinois flatlands, he found it easy to recall the telescopic, unreflecting existence he once had lived. There had been time for thoughts of Buber and Dante, but none for the thoughts of Johnny Blake. With individual goals of tests and papers no longer nervously immediate, but only the broad expansiveness of the summer stretching before and behind him, he could recall with some dignity the days when he was a brain detached from his body, a human being you had cut out his soul.

That was the way Doctor Karlson had put it when his body had revolted from the iron mastery of his brain. He was an excellent doctor and a better friend, this man Karlson, and he had diagnosed more than x-rays had indicated.

Now in this summer there was a return to life; he could defend a thesis and look at a sunrise, bury himself in abstractions and learn the secrets of preciously growing fields. The dominant weight of intellectuality no longer carried all the rest with it. Johnny Blake had met a girl.

He had seen her first at Timber Lake's May dance. She had stepped from the early dusk under the trees near the shore, her soft laugh like bells on summer air. The whole evening his eyes followed her white dress across the pavilion dance floor and his Aunt Emma, noticing his attentiveness, had finally made signally clear to Gordon Hughes, the girl's brother, that certain introductions were crying to be made.

Karen.

Thus the summer whirled itself in organdy and laughter and hair smelling sweet like fields under soft rain. The continual delight of unfolding personalities saw Johnny discovering the beautiful dignity of her and in her the answer to long locked secrets in himself. They were jogging along in dactyls; everything falling into rhyme.

Aunt Emma had warned perhaps they were falling too quickly; that, after all, she was only one girl and his first at that. But now Johnny was glad that the time had been so fruitfully full because it had been so poignantly short.

Gordon Hughes had promised to drive his sister the fifteen miles to Emma Blake's farm; but that was Sunday. On Friday, Gordon Hughes had a change of plans: someone special to him was weekending down from Chicago. He asked his brother Arney Hughes to drive their sister. Now this Saturday night, Arney was unconscious in the hospital and his sister was dead; glass from the windshield had splintered her palate and pierced her brain.

Johnny had not seen the accident, nor heard the noise. For moments in the early evening he had believed the news, but then with nothing tangible or sensible to reassure him he had rejected as untenable what he knew to be true. Now in the night that truth was washing slowly back into his consciousness as relentlessly and terribly as the moon-drawn tides that drag the shore inevitably into the restless sea.

When he had stood alone against the unity of the faceless world, outside the crush of people needing and being needed, she had reached out her hand into his and made him a part of that world of love where the twisted ironies of God were the deepest love of all. Now, where once there had been no life, the life she had made viable and vital lay crumbling in the summer darkness.

He wanted to rush somewhere, to let the wind beat his face; but he could not move. He was oppressed, crushed by the thought that he could no longer live. The mere suggestion of another breath was both blasphemy and sacrilege to him. In the world of sudden grief, he could not think.

He clawed at the night and pleaded for tears which would not come; for tears would be the final admission of his irretrievable loss, but perhaps tears would let him be done with grief. There had been scarce enough human feeling in his life before she had penetrated his darkness as the warm light of a taper kindles a cold candle lighting its being. Now, all the tapers in the world were snuffed and their white tender loveliness crumpled.

Lancinated with pain, he felt shards of memory fuse in the crucible of his mind and he

built remembrance from the sweet past. Time's endless flow made every paradise bye.

In his memory, she came once again to the lower meadow and sat barefooted in the grass watching him clear a thicket on the tangled bank. Under the hanging green willow whips the sun laced through the shade and his axe licked proudly through the air singing into the wood. He felled a tender spring shoot with one surprising sweep that tumbled him from his balance. They both laughed and Johnny thought with all his heart: this is where I belong, the better for having been elsewhere perhaps; but here is home.

They laughed. In the long twilight of late summer and in the peaceful copse by the river, he kissed her for the first time. Hand in hand they walked the winding path home, trailing the day slowly behind them.

Now part of him was dead, and the summer, sweet upon the land, drew him tearlessly to the window where he could smell the realities of damp earth and warm growing things. Starlight, no longer soft, spilled with the aggression of a rude stare silhouetting him against an expanse of dark and endless prairie.

Dams and barriers and canyons began crumbling inside him and in the roaring tumult he looked as far as any man can look when a world has ended.

“God. O God. Inscrutable God.” He sank beaten to the doorsill.

Finally with full realization torrential, he did not know what he would do; he did not know what he would think of today tomorrow, and he went running down the weeping end of the world. *Karen*. © 1957 and 2004 Jack Fritscher