

The Empty Center

BY R. CLIFTON SPARGO

The tattering rat-tat-tat-tatatata sounds started up shortly after dawn, for the twenty-first morning in a row. Montrose Morales, who'd never slept well and had for the last two months been fighting to keep his vice-presidency during a merger at his telecommunications agency, awoke and sighed plaintively for the benefit of his wife, who from inside soporific contentedness proposed that he ignore the bird since there was nothing he could do about it.

The plight of the red-cockaded woodpecker had once seemed to him, or to Sheri at least, a charming tale of local color. Almost every-one they met while shopping for their house in Boiling Spring Lakes had a woodpecker story, told with a distinctive sense of drama, that Montrose only later came to interpret as an attempted warning.

"One way or another that tree's coming down today," he said, neither quite believing himself nor expecting his wife to answer.

"Why can't you just ignore it?" she suggested, still half-asleep.

"Because I can't, that's all. Who cares why?"

"Did you dream about your father again?" she asked. Montrose's father had died over a year ago, and although the dreams about him had been slow in coming they'd burst forth over the last several months, sporadically, in energetic cycles, during sleepless nights in which he was possessed by the conviction that he would lose his job. In a dream from last week his father appeared to him wearing one of Montrose's shirts and Montrose was angry with him for borrowing it. Undeterred, his father reminded Montrose of a shirt his son had worn without permission and Montrose promptly remembered it—a navy blue-, cerulean-, and white-striped golf shirt he'd donned for a few hours last week, having found it among the keepsakes his mother had shipped to him. In the clarity of early morning he would feel the justness of his father's charge, but in the dream he'd tried to defend his own actions, claiming that his father had discarded the shirt. His

father replied simply, "That's not true," and Montrose awoke.

"Yes, I dreamed about him again," Montrose said to his wife. "But I don't want to talk about it. I want to talk about the woodpecker."

His wife rolled toward him, looking up with apparent consternation. "Possibly they're the same thing," Sheri said, alluding to his mother's newly developed belief in the transmigration of souls.

Shortly after Montrose's father died his mother had decided a bird that stayed too long in place in her backyard was her husband's soul come back to visit her. She put up a bird feeder to attract the soul, and on the day before the first anniversary of his death Montrose's father visited instead as a hawk, perching for close to forty minutes in a tree branch a few feet from his mother's kitchen window. She wanted to make sure that the hawk recognized her and so did not move from the perch until it flew off, magnificently, wings folded and then unfolded, the bird's entire being charged with remembrance.

She told the story to Montrose because he was a skeptic and because she expected him to reply (as he did) that if any of the Catholic faith in which she professed such confidence were reliable she must be spouting heresy. Nevertheless, two days later, while driving to work, Montrose spotted a hawk perched improbably on a roadside billboard and pulling his car onto the gravel shoulder got out to have a look, staring at the hawk as it returned his gaze with intent, marble eyes. Montrose was the first to relent, walking back to the car, abandoning the hawk. As he drove off he burst into tears.

There were two realms in which Montrose mourned his father, in his car and in his imperfect sleep. Occasionally he woke up crying for his father, as surprised by the suddenness of his grief as by its intensity. When awakened by dreams he would descend to the kitchen, make himself a sandwich, and sit before the television in his father's chair (which his mother had also shipped to him), performing all these actions in conscious imitation of his father's own restless, nocturnal habits.

"You shouldn't humor her," Montrose said to his wife about his mother. He'd been silent for so long, however, that Sheri had fallen back to sleep.

For much of the morning Montrose lay in bed next to his wife, plotting treachery against the bird in his backyard. Legally he could do nothing against it. Knowledge of his inability to do as he saw fit with

his own property had come roughly a year and three months earlier, a prelude to his father's final bout of heart failure. From the beginning his love of this property was focused not so much on the house itself as on the uncleared, wooded lot extending for acres behind it, within which, perhaps an acre in, was the home in which he wished someday to live. Sustained on that vision of home latent in his routine which lent an irreality to life's quotidian uneventfulness, Montrose thought of his not-yet-built house as a destination, as somewhere he was trying to arrive as though at a recovered origin. Other members of his mixed Italian-Mexican family talked of one day getting to Europe for a full month, but Montrose, Sheri, and their three children discussed a house that did not yet exist, ensconced in woods they already owned. Montrose and Sheri consulted an architect their second year in town, paying to have him draw up plans, and then with prophylactic caution put off the decision for two years. In their third year in Boiling Spring Lakes they'd had the land surveyed, marking off the area in the woods on which they wished to build. A contractor came out to look at the proposed location and foresaw a few obstacles but certainly nothing insurmountable, and then asked to see Montrose's lot-clearing permit.

"What's that?" Montrose asked.

Before they could put in for a building permit, the contractor explained, Montrose had to seek permission from the county to cut down the trees in his own backyard.

"But they're my trees," Montrose said. "I can take an axe and cut down any goddamned tree I want any time I want."

"Actually," the contractor replied, "you can't. Of course, nobody gives a shit if you play Paul Bunyan on a few trees now and then. But you want to deforest half an acre, you need permission."

"Well, it's a formality, I assume," Montrose said. "How long does it take to get a permit?"

The contractor began to shake his head, saying, not without sympathy, "You're a true blue come-here, ain't you?" Montrose understood the term. It referred especially to northerners who'd moved to North Carolina during the state's late 80s, early 90s economic boom, but it had lingered as a way of categorizing all who were foreign to the South. "The thing is the woodpeckers," the contractor said. "They got rights, too."

The number of red-cockaded woodpeckers worldwide had dwindled to somewhere around fifteen thousand, but the woods of Boiling

Spring Lakes (as any fifth-grader from the area could tell you) were full of the pine trees on which woodpeckers thrived. Boiling Spring Lakes was a woodpecker refuge, here the woodpeckers were ubiquitous. As you heard them hammering for insects in the recesses of the woods, it was hard to believe in their endangerment.

The lot-clearing permits, so the contractor said, depended on the low incidence of woodpecker trees in the area to be cleared. He roamed the patch of forest it had taken Montrose and Sheri almost three years to designate as the location of their future home, pointing to random pine trees, saying, “woodpecker tree,” or “that’s probably one, too,” or “most definitely a woodpecker tree,” concluding his casual survey by announcing, “You’ve got a helluva lot of woodpecker trees. It’s like woodpecker park back here. Do you hear them hammering at all hours?”

“I guess so,” Montrose said, as they turned to walk back through the woods. “Always seemed like everywhere else in town to me.”

“Nope,” the man said, “you got more than your fair share. You ask me, all those conservationists talking about how fortunate we are to be a haven for woodpeckers are crazy. More like a biblical plague, in my opinion. *God sent the woodpeckers to annoy the fuck out of Boiling Spring Lakes. Then all of the people took out axes to chop down the trees, and God said to the county, ‘Take away their axes.’*”

The two men reached the forest’s edge and came into the clearing that was Montrose’s back yard, traversing it to reach the northern exposure of his house. “Look, most likely I can help,” the contractor said. “You got to go downtown for a permit at City Hall. They give you any trouble, I know a guy who can be of assistance, who can say for a tidy sum there ain’t no woodpeckers to speak of in your yard. I should warn you that the folks from the Nature Conservancy in Wilmington want to take matters out of the landowners’ hands. They want to designate your trees and your neighbors’ trees as a conservatory for birds, and if they get their way the county’s going to make it virtually impossible for you to build that new house of yours, least not where you want it.”

“That’s absurd,” Montrose said and the contractor smiled.

“Nope, just gove’nment,” he said. Involuntarily Montrose recalled debates in his native Chicago about the extension of O’Hare airport, whether the city had the right to buy people out of their homes, at non-competitive prices, for the public good. “This country was founded on the right to own property,” the contractor said abstractly, like someone

prodding an old scar so as to be reminded of damage formerly done to him. "If we lose that—" he started to say but broke off his thought.

"That's a woodpecker tree right there," the man said as they passed an old pine on the border of forest running out beyond the northern face of the house. "I'd get an axe and cut that one down right now, or them noisy little fuckers will be at your door 'fore you know it."

What Montrose learned that day was that a woodpecker tree was one in which woodpeckers could penetrate deep enough to dig the nest-holes in which they laid their eggs. Some were recognizable from the ancient, V-shaped wounds on their trunks created formerly by harvesters who'd made turpentine from the tree's sap. Fungus filled the wounds, leaving a tree vulnerable, and the woodpeckers took advantage, digging at the wounds until a nest could be hollowed at the tree's core. In these nests the woodpeckers' eggs were kept relatively safe from the rat snakes who fed on them.

For the next several days Montrose surveyed his property looking for vulnerable trees and explaining to his wife over dinner why they had to chop down the tree nearest the house. Sheri's family was peppered with environmentalists of the modest, rather centrist sort, including two uncles who were great fishermen and who semi-annually worked themselves up to into petitioning efforts aimed at preserving a few acres of shoreline or near-inland territory along the Mississippi River. Just enough of their sentiment had rubbed off on Sheri to make her resistant to any action that might violate an animal's natural habitat. She was fearful of displacing the woodpeckers, she told Montrose, worried that it wasn't the environmentally responsible thing to do. "Your uncles chop wood," he argued. "Only of dead or dying trees," she said, even as she decided against allowing her husband to apply for the lot-clearing permit until she'd had more time to think about it. These spousal negotiations were interrupted by the events that eventually led to the death of his father—hospitalization at Illinois Masonic for breathlessness and chest pain; a brief return home to consider a transplant; and then the pulmonary embolism that put an end to all such life-extending considerations. While traveling back to Chicago by himself, every other week for over a three-month period, every weekend at the end, Montrose was too distracted to consider the trees on his lot. When his father had been dead a year, however, he informed his wife that he intended to proceed with the lot-clearing and she, in the hope it might divert her husband's sorrow, consented.

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Between the time of his initial application for the permit and the first rejection, the tree nearest Montrose's house was occupied by a woodpecker. Within days he discovered that the bird was accompanied by several others and they were excavating a nest in his tree. Sheri let the story out to his mother, who began to speculate, only half-seriously, that the soul of Montrose's father had migrated from a pigeon she'd recently fed in Humboldt Park into the North Carolina woodpecker that was now, a few short weeks later, dive-bombing Montrose and his children every time they stepped inside the perimeter of its territory. This went on for much of April. When in early May his mother relayed yet another story about her hawk, Montrose reminded her that only days before, based on Sheri's accounts of the woodpecker's uncanny knack for disturbing Montrose while he tried to nap, his mother had discovered traits of his father ("He has your father's sense of humor!") in the bird living in his backyard. Montrose found himself arguing, absurdly, that his father could not be both a Boiling Spring Lakes woodpecker and a Chicago-area hawk.

The second permit application was also unsuccessful. Having admitted to the presence of woodpeckers on his property, Montrose was asked "to demonstrate alternative habitat for the birds."

"They want you to pay somebody off," Sheri suggested.

"Don't be conspiratorial," he said. Nevertheless he called the contractor, who told him his wife was more or less right.

"You shouldn'ta said anything," the contractor said.

"Well, I couldn't lie."

"Just shouldn'ta said anything," the man said. "Your call, though. Now you need an expert to testify that there's plenty of other trees for the birds to hack into. I'll give a friend a call. You send him a check and your reapplication form, and he'll get you a permit."

While they were waiting on the third application, one of the woodpeckers dive-bombed Montrose's thirteen-year-old son, Kelvin, drawing blood from his scalp. His son came into the house bleeding onto the bridge of his nose and Montrose thought for sure he'd been in a fight.

"Who did this to you?" Montrose demanded.

"The woodpecker."

Montrose couldn't believe what he was hearing. He lost his patience, went to the garage for a rake. He had every intention of killing the woodpecker or woodpeckers and taking back the northern regions of his property. He was halfway across the lawn with rake in hand, his

son's old football helmet pulled halfway down his head, when Kelvin came running out the front door to stop him. "Dad," he said, "it was just defending its family." Montrose relented and took his son inside the house to tend to the bleeding scalp, which fortunately did not require stitches.

Over the course of the weekend the bird several times awoke Montrose from catch-up sleep and as he grew increasingly irritable he fantasized about the day when the lot-clearing permit would be granted, how he'd set the loggers on that tree nearest his house first of all.

His company's merger went through and, although the company brought in someone from the California office to oversee the department Montrose had headed for two years, he somehow retained his vice-presidency and most of his responsibilities. For how long, he wasn't sure. Two days later the contractor called, announcing that his friend had run into a few snags but would be back in touch by week's end.

"Timing's tough on this," the contractor said.

"Why?" Montrose asked.

"Are you from nowhere or what?" the contractor remarked. In his sharpness there was an allusion, so Montrose thought, to a recent conversation between them in which the contractor had asked what kind of a name Morales was and then a few minutes later remarked that Montrose didn't look, talk, or act like a Mexican, which was mostly true. Montrose spoke effectively no Spanish, having been sent by his father, a city employee with the sanitation department of Chicago, to top-notch Catholic schools (Immaculate Conception Elementary School, Marist High School, University of Notre Dame) at which Montrose took Latin instead of Spanish and ended up with neither. Montrose's mongrel family—the strain of Chicago Italian on his mother's side, his father's Mexican heritage mixed with a dose of Irish from his paternal grandmother—made his lack of Spanish inconspicuous. He was marked for assimilation, his looks generically Latinate, possibly also influenced by the black Irish. Only when Montrose left Chicago for the first time in his mid-thirties did people start to remark on his last name and expect him to speak Spanish.

"Listen," the contractor now said, as if he were explaining to a child, "we don't get this done in the next week or so, you could be out of luck. Where'd you disappear to all last year?" Montrose did not

feel like explaining the death of his father to a stranger and so let the comment pass.

The next day Montrose was driving out of town to catch Route 133 up to Wilmington and noticed the oversized logs stacked high along the road. Lifting his eyes to the top of the forest-line, he had the impression that there were holes in the horizon. Where there had been trees only weeks ago he could see multiple, newly cleared lots. His first thought was “How is this possible?”

His wife called him at work later in the afternoon. “Montrose,” she said, “our contractor called. He said the city’s issuing logging permits, and that’s the way for us to go. He started the paperwork.”

All week long Montrose drove out of town and back along Route 133 and each day Boiling Spring Lakes was less like what it had been only the day before. The rapid change was distinct from anything he’d ever seen, like the apocalypse of a California wildfire. In two weeks’ time the skyline of Boiling Spring Lakes was devastated.

Driving home from work later in the week, Montrose flipped on the radio and heard a woman’s voice: “The clusters of protected habitat are the only way we can assure the survival of these birds.”

“What about the property owners’ rights?” the disc jockey asked.

“It’s still their property. Nothing’s changed.”

“Except they can’t build on it.”

“They’ll be able to build,” she said. “They just have to work with mother nature, not against her.”

“What would you say to a property owner who’s been waiting twenty years—we had a woman on air yesterday in precisely this situation—to build a waterfront home?”

“I’d say to her, ‘Do the right thing. Build the home without tearing down trees.’”

“What if that’s not possible?” the disc jockey said and cut to a piece of prerecorded tape. It was the voice of the mayor, she was making a public statement of protest. “All of this lot-clearing is ruining the beauty of Boiling Spring Lakes,” she said. She begged the townspeople’s forbearance, asked them to reconsider their newly sprung lust for development. Nature wasn’t so easily replenished, she reminded them, her patience seeming forced, her conciliatoriness implausible.

As soon as he turned down his street Montrose saw the pick-up truck in his driveway.

His contractor was talking with Sheri in the front hallway and he turned to tell Montrose the good news. The logging permit had gone through. "Just in time," the contractor said. "There's talk coming from the mayor's office of a stay on all permits."

Two more trucks arrived as the contractor walked outside to bark instructions with Montrose trailing noncommittally behind him. The contractor walked around the house by the north end and Montrose considered mentioning the aggressive woodpeckers. When the birds failed to make an appearance, Montrose wondered if the number of oversized men clearly violating the woodpeckers' turf had inspired the temporary *détente*.

"I see they occupied that old pine," the contractor said. "I told you to get to it before they did. Don't worry, *hombre*, we'll take care of it."

The contractor was condescending and possibly racist. Montrose would have liked to fire him on the spot.

"Anything else you need from me?" Montrose asked.

"Not today," the contractor said, "we're just doing some surveying of the area to be cleared. These guys are all loggers. They'll pull their trucks up across the southern stretch of your lawn. Expect the grass to be ruined. But they'll have your lot cleared in a few days. The only thing you need to do, Mr. Morales, is go down to City Hall tomorrow morning and turn around the paperwork on the building permit."

The man's presumptuousness irritated Montrose beyond reason. The contractor acted as if he were doing Montrose a favor, as though Montrose, an executive at a major telecommunications firm, had nothing better to do with himself on a Friday morning than play errand-boy for his contractor. He would have liked to lay claim to a prior engagement, except that his own foresight had led him to keep the early part of his day clear in anticipation of just such a last-minute contingency. So the next morning he reached his secretary from his cell phone and let her know about his trip to obtain a permit for work he was having done on his property. While still speaking with his secretary he drove past a few cleared lots and was struck by an imprecise memory of forested vista, since replaced by the barren scene of grass, felled trees, and uprooted or still rooted stumps before him. His secretary asked how long he'd be, and Montrose said, "Not long," as he pulled into a diagonal spot in front of the Ace Hardware store. Exiting his car and walking around the corner, Montrose was confronted by a chaotically surging crowd of people on the steps of City Hall, the closest thing

he'd seen to a mob since one night almost a decade ago when he'd roamed the streets of Chicago after the Bulls' first title. Several policemen were parting the crowd and forming it into lines. Montrose could not believe he was expected to wait in one of these lines. He walked up to a policeman and explained he had business inside concerning already processed paperwork, and the policeman said, "Which makes you different from all these other people how?"

Montrose put himself at the end of a line that on first glance seemed a few persons shorter than the other two. A hot dog vendor set up curbside perhaps ten feet from where Montrose stood, and although it was far too early for such food Montrose was ravenous. He abandoned his place in line and went to inquire about the hot dogs, but the vendor told him they weren't ready. "Ten minutes maybe," the vendor said, "come back." Montrose returned to the line, to which several new persons had added themselves.

This scene, Montrose thought, was the doing of conservationists, contractors, the mayor, and hosts of local Carolinians who refused to be told what they could or could not do with their own property. Hundred of permits had been granted over the past couple of months and here perhaps was the last rush to liberty, the public's clamoring to do as it wished. The local newspaper (which Montrose almost never read) had reported only this morning that the mayor's office would be initiating, as early as tomorrow, a moratorium on permits for the tearing down of trees. All the people here assembled had come for logging permits. Montrose explained to an older fellow behind him in line that he'd already secured his permit and the guy nodded sympathetically. "That's foresight. Hey, you might try walking up front to see if they'll let you through," the man said.

"A cop told me to get in line," Montrose said.

"Too bad," the man said. "All this on account of a few fanatical birdwatchers."

Try as he might, Montrose couldn't feel any solidarity with the other people in line. His situation did not seem at all like theirs: he was only clearing a portion of his own lot, as he'd been waiting to do for years, as he would have done last year if not for his father's final turn for the worse. He could overhear conversations up the line, about birds and conservationists and the intrusiveness of government, all of which suggested that he was taking part in a political demonstration of some sort. The people in line were astir, seeming gleeful or defeated. This was a test of their frontier heritage. It was either clear

or be cleared, and they were determined to overcome the land and its arbitrary defenders.

After an hour of making minimal progress in line Montrose called his contractor to say he'd already lost a good part of the morning and could not be away from the office any longer. The contractor promised to have one of his people run over and obtain the paperwork, confident that he could backdoor the additional permits by way of some friends he had in City Hall. Montrose wondered why the contractor hadn't proposed this plan originally.

Now that things were on track, the contractor was again kindly, seeming reluctant to get off the phone with Montrose. "We're sure lucky we got our permit request in before the rush," he said, full of self-congratulation. Looking beyond the lot-clearing, which would take all of next week, he foresaw the ground-breaking on the house and spoke with enthusiasm of the moment when the skeletal structure should emerge. He bragged of homes he'd done in the area, selling Montrose all over again on his resume and his reserves of inside information. Montrose could not decide if it were all a con, and if so, what for.

On the weekend he was again discontented. He could not sleep on Friday night, even with an entirely empty day ahead of him, and Sheri asked from her sleep what was wrong. In part it was nothing more profound than childish excitement. He was beginning something entirely new for the first time in years; the home he and Sheri were breaking ground on was an adventure finally come to pass. He worried about his savings and his job, if his luck would hold, and he thought regretfully of his father, who would have understood the strange pride Montrose, child of Chicago's south side, took in building a home in the middle of North Carolina's woodpecker-infested woods.

The weekend passed slowly, unproductively. He had work to do for Monday but could not turn to it. He wasted time in front of baseball games played between southern schools—North Carolina State, Louisville, South Carolina, Duke, Auburn—from which a great many of his co-workers had graduated and in which they took partisan pride. With a neutrality indistinguishable from indifference he tried to remember which of his colleagues had graduated from which school and to pull for the teams of those he liked best, but within minutes, rallied by the hollow, metallic clink of a big hit, he found himself forsaking his improvised loyalty and rooting for offense from either team.

Late Saturday afternoon he made a phone call that, so far as he

could remember, he'd not planned in advance.

"What's involved in extracting birds from a stretch of woods or from a particular tree?" he was asking a woman on the other end of the line, surprised to have reached a live person on a late Saturday afternoon.

"Sir, we don't do that," she said. She was speaking to him from the office of the Nature Conservancy in Wilmington, from the city where he also worked. He was inclined to ask where their office was located.

"Look," he said, "the reality is these birds are about to be cleared and you're supposed to care about the birds."

"Well, that's why we're working round the clock to get people to purchase open-market properties and to get legislation passed so it will be much harder for people to displace these endangered birds. Is it your neighbors who are doing this, sir? Couldn't you speak to them?"

"It's my property," he said. "This has been in the works for a long time. I didn't understand what was involved in the lot clearing. I didn't realize there were, potentially, so many endangered birds in my backyard. They begin clearing the lot this week."

At this point Montrose became aware that he was no longer talking about all the hypothetical woodpecker trees in the far regions of his woods. He was thinking only of that one pine tree, no more than forty feet from his house, which was home to the aggressive woodpeckers whom his contractor had promised on Thursday to rid him of. He could not now say to his contractor, "Don't touch the home of the woodpeckers who nearly took out my son's eyes." There was an understanding between him and his contractor, almost covenantal in its implications: the birds were a nuisance, as inadmissible into the everyday reality of lived human experience as grace itself.

"Sir," the woman was saying, "if it's your property, don't allow this to happen."

Montrose was in the bedroom and he held the portable phone to his ear absent-mindedly, walking across the carpeted floor to the window on the house's northern face, from which he could glance at the tree in question. There was no sign of the woodpeckers. He hadn't seen or heard from them in days. There was a strong wind blowing in the trees, and the sky was laced with ominously charcoaled clouds, interspersed among ponds of blue. The woman said something else, and Montrose responded vaguely, "Well, if you can't intervene in these

matters, I'll have to see what I can do." Then, admitting that she was new to the Wilmington office and still finding her way, she told him to call back Monday morning to see if someone else at their office could provide better guidance. He asked where she was from and she said the Twin Cities in Minnesota. He told her he was from Chicago, and she said, affectionately, "I really hope you can figure something out, sir. You're obviously a conscientious man."

Montrose wasn't sure he was an especially conscientious man, at least not when it came to saving woodpeckers. For most of Sunday he managed to banish the woodpeckers from his thoughts and in the afternoon, by shutting himself up from the rest of his family, to complete a small percentage of the work he had to get through for Monday. The storms that had seemed inevitable all weekend began to arrive after dinner on Sunday night—still no rain, but the winds had whipped up tremendously. Montrose stepped into his back yard to see the trees bent and bowing in the wind. There were several horizontal flashes of lightning in the western sky, and from his porch he could see out over the trees to the north and west of him an especially dark cluster of clouds. Beneath them the sky, dense and poorly lit, gave evidence of a future downpour.

Later as he got into bed he felt a pang of regret for the birds in that nearby tree, tossed so fiercely by wind. He made up his mind to call the conservationists again first thing in the morning to see if anyone there might offer a plausible course of action. "Are you going to be able to sleep tonight?" Sheri asked and he looked at her without replying, superstitiously attending to his insomnia by refusing to allow thoughts of it to enter his head. Sheri intuited the reason for his silence and turned over in bed, leaving him to put off his unrest in whatever way he could. Montrose thought of the nearby tree, foreseeing its struggle in the wind and envisioning it bent low to the ground, and immediately he fell asleep.

He overslept the next morning, awakening to the sounds of the children noisily preparing for school in their bathroom down the hall. He went downstairs and saw the uncleared bowls and plates on the table. Sheri said, "I was going to wake you in a few minutes. I figured you could use the extra sleep. You want to grab a quick shower and dress while I make you some eggs? The contractor will be here shortly." The doorbell rang as Montrose was ascending the stairs, and still in his robe he went to the door to admit the contractor and his assistant into the front hallway. Through the open door Montrose caught

sight of the trucks already driving up onto the grass on the south side of his house.

“If you could sign these papers, Mr. Morales, I’ll send Steve here—”

“Hi Steve,” Montrose said.

“A pleasure, Mr. Morales.”

“—Steve’ll run downtown and get the paperwork pushed through. We’ll start right away. No sense in wasting the time you’re paying for, am I right, hombre?”

Montrose signed the papers, and Sheri came in, offered the two men coffee. Steve declined, racing out the door with the papers, but the contractor accepted.

“That’s something about your tree, huh?” he ventured, once he had his coffee in hand and he and Montrose were alone in the hallway. Perceiving Montrose’s incomprehension, the contractor continued, “It fell last night. Don’t tell me you didn’t notice?”

The contractor led Montrose out his own front door, and in bare feet and bathrobe on a cool spring morning Montrose walked to the north side of his house to stare at the tree over which he’d worried so much these past few weeks. It had fallen only a few feet from the corner of the house, just missing his bedroom window.

“I can’t believe you didn’t hear that,” the contractor said, promising to have the tree cleared out by the afternoon. “You must be one hell of a sleeper.”

Montrose wanted to ask about the woodpeckers but was afraid of seeming inexcusably innocent before a man who would be in his employ for the remainder of the year. Surely the eggs had been destroyed in the fall, or since eaten by an opportunistic snake, and Montrose was left to wonder only what had become of the parent birds, if they’d fallen to their deaths with the nest or flown off at the last second.

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About the Poets

DICK ALLEN's seventh collection of poetry, *Present Vanishing: Poems*, will appear from Sarabande in October 2008.

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