

Windows

By Phyllis Barber

This time, Herbert Jensen's family lives in a warehouse at the edge of Ely, Nevada. This time, his father takes work at Ely Meat and Company, part-time until the mines open again.

The Jensen's home was once an office when the roller mill had a clientele. Its partitioned walls protect eight-year old Herbert from the empty warehouse during the day, but they can't shield him from the high, black-eyed windows when the sun goes down. They grow in the dark; the cross-bars on the panes disappear.

Herbert curls into himself and his pillow so he won't see night creatures slip through the glass.

Outside the half walls and under the same roof, chickens in a pen scratch deeper into their straw nests. Inside, Herbert, his older brother Jack, and two younger sisters, lie crosswise on a double bed and huddle for warmth under a pieced quilt. The baby, wrapped in flannel, sleeps in an open dresser drawer. When Herbert tosses to escape the old man in his dreams, the one with grisly knobs on his face and three arms at each side, he feels a sharp elbow jabbing into his ribs.

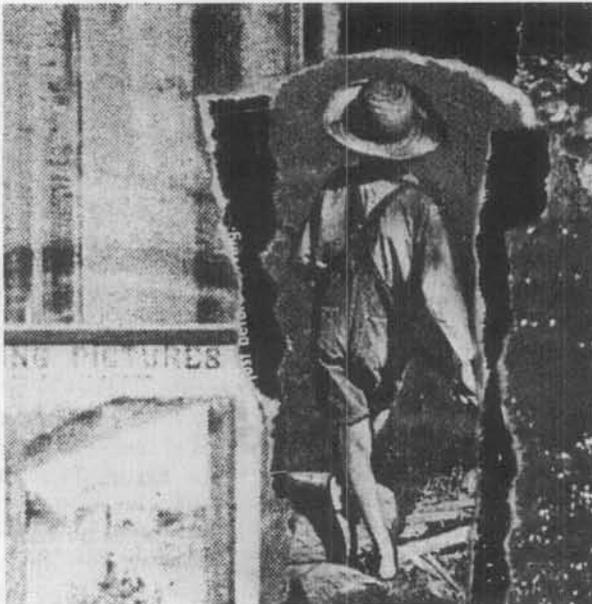
"Stop it," Jack yells thickly, half asleep. "And stop hogging the covers."

The quilt barely covers Herbert's thigh. He wants to kick Jack as hard as he can. He wants to curl his lip back over his teeth, snarl at his brother, and make him afraid, but Jack will pin him to the floor and make him say "Uncle" if he does.

In the other bed, his father whispers. "Esther? are you awake?"

In the hollow of the warehouse, under the high steel roof with the barest hint of light at the windows, the cock begins to crow.

Springs squeak as his father moves closer to his mother.



"Not this morning, Alf," his mother says as she gropes for the kerosene lamp, the matches, the light. She sits on the edge of the bed, brushing and braiding her long brown hair. She loops the belt on her bathrobe and pads across the floor to stuff the wood stove with fire.

"Time to get up, little Herbert," she says as she cracks eggs into a bowl. "Your father wants you to help him take the bull up to Old Ben's."

Herbert burrows into the mattress and pulls a corner of the blanket around his shoulder. He sinks inward

to his secret place, the pool where he talks with fish and breathes water. When he's not drifting or spinning through currents, he likes to sit on the shore and slide eight fingers between ten toes. He doesn't have to be wary. He doesn't have to double his fists to ward off boys with big shoulders and thick thighs. His pond is safe from slithering snakes and from his father's belt that cuts into his skin.

"Herbert, hurry. You need something to eat before you go." His mother hums for a minute, stirring the eggs with a fork, and then starts to sing. "And He shall feed His sheep."

Herbert sticks one foot out of the covers, remembering when she sang the "Messiah" with the Box Elder Tabernacle Choir in Brigham City, when she looked so pretty in her black dress and white collar, when she singled him out in the audience and smiled as she sang the last "Alleluia."

"Herbert," his father yells as he splashes water on his face, stretching up on his toes to see his reflection.

Herbert crawls out of bed and into his overalls. He sits on the floor to lace his boots. He watches his father angle for a clear space in the broken mirror.

"The ladies will still notice," his mother says.

His father fans her attentions away with his left

Honorable Mention in the D. K. Brown Fiction Contest

hand. "There's not enough starch in this shirt."

"I'm trying to make do, Alf."

His father fastens his last button, slips into suspenders and a straw hat.

"Your eggs are ready, Herbert," his mother says.

He wishes for more eggs, dozens of them. He wishes he could eat all day or stay in bed to read *The Tales of King Arthur*, his only book except for the Book of Mormon, both gifts from his mother.

"Herbert, your father is waiting. Grab another piece of bread to take with you. Come on now. Hurry."

"I'm coming, Mother." He follows her outside to the pen where she checks to see if, by some miracle, the bull has more fat than yesterday. He sees her shake a sorry head at the bull and at the chickens that have followed her out through the open door, pecking the hard earth for grain.

"Only a handful for now." She tosses the feed gently. "Share chicky chicks. Share until Alf gets back from Old Ben's."

Then she bends to her knees and laces her son in her arms. "Good-bye my boy with the deep-water eyes."

He clings to their good-bye, but doesn't say what he thinks. Maybe, someday, he can take his to his pond and grant her three wishes. One would be for a washing machine, he knew that for sure. Maybe for a real house with open-and-shut windows and trees. Maybe for a knight or for Jesus.

Four years earlier, Herbert's father had tried Idaho for luck. Sometimes, Herbert went with him to knock on doors in Pocatello, Blackfoot, and Malad. While they stood on the porch to wait for an answer, his father would always straighten his tie and check his briefcase for spots of mud. The housewives would ooh and aah and say "I want that one" as they browsed through his catalogue of new-fangled washing machines, but then most of them remembered their lean crops. "Please come back in six months, won't you please? And, young man," they'd say to Herbert, "where on earth did you get those big liquid eyes? And look at those eyelashes. What I wouldn't do for eyelashes like those. Oh my."

One day when he was supposed to knock on more doors with his father, Herbert woke to the sound of hammering. He noticed the briefcase full of catalogues half-shoved under his father's bed.

"What's Papa building?"

"A chicken coop," answered his mother who was sweeping the plank floor of the two-room house. "We're going to try chickens awhile."

The greenhorn-built coops didn't satisfy Finney who took to roosting at the edge of the hole in the outhouse. One day, Finney fell in.

His father, brother Jack, and Herbert puzzled over a way to save the lost chicken they couldn't afford to lose.

"Herbert!" his father said as his eyes lit up with a solution.

Anchored by his father, he dangled down into the hole from a rope around his waist. He eased past the scratchy tree roots that poked at his eyes and drew long white marks on his arms.

Herbert kept checking the window of sunlight above. Sometimes he saw Jack's head blocking the light and his shadowed eyes squinting into the darkness. At those moments, Herbert felt some satisfaction in being the only one who was the right size and weight for this job, and he dangled with a certain sense of pride. But the close earthen walls crowded his pride. He closed his eyes and held his breath. Mechanically, he rolled the woven hemp between his fingers and stroked the wisps that had escaped the braid. He thought about a fish at the end of a line, the one that he and his dad had caught in Big Creek. Pretty fish, blue/purple/silver, except for its eyes that didn't blink and its mouth where the hook had been.

"Find anything yet?" his father called.

Herbert wouldn't take the necessary breath for an answer. His father lowered the rope another six inches.

When Herbert heard Finney's fussing and clucking, he grabbed at the sound and gulped for air. "Chick sales," he yelled, saying the only words he could think of that might release him from the dank place where breathing made him see white. He had heard lots of the oldtimers excusing themselves to the privy, saying they had to go to a "chic sale," and they'd walk off fancy like a lady in a style show and slap their thighs.

Finney pecked his arm, its one free wing flapping wildly. "Bauk, bauk," Herbert clucked back at the chicken all the way to the top, gripping the rope and the wing of the frenzied captive. In the open air and on firm ground, Herbert stripped, threw himself and his overalls into the creek, and then streaked through the meadow's mustard grass, bare and bumpy as a plucked chicken. "Chick sales," he shouted as he ran. "Bauk, bauk."

The wary bull shifts weight as his father opens the makeshift pen. "Old Ben awaits your coming, El Toro," he says. "Ondalay." Herbert watches his father flip his suspenders with his thumbs and pull himself taller.

"Herbert, stay behind the gate. Stay out of his way."

Herbert waits with the prodding stick that is too long for his small arms. He closes his eyes, imagining at least a river's width between him and the animal. The bull's hair is whorled in peaks of brown and white; its eyes are rimmed in red. It moves slowly out of the pen, appraising them with a snort.

When a departing family had suggested a trade—their Hereford for his trailer, his father had seen financial possibilities but not the bull's confirmation, the short neck, the lineback. Unable

to breed the bull, he tried to fatten it on hopes. The time had come to sell.

"Let's go, son. Keep your distance, and poke him hard when he goes in the wrong direction."

Autumn tints the late November air as the three of them edge along the railroad track. Not one Nevada Northern box car rumbles past. No demand for copper. No buyers. Herbert and his father sidestep the random foliage, too spare to give its leaves away to any season. The bull tramples whatever stands in its path until they reach a dirt road

"Good day, Ma'am." His father tips his hat as a lady swishes by.

She smiles, turns her head away and passes.

"Herbert," his father says within her hearing, "I must teach you the rest of 'Thanatopsis.'"

Herbert is calculating how much money he will need to buy the washing machine that his mother keeps wishing for, the one on page 12 of his father's old catalogues. If only he could peddle newspapers with his brother Jack.

"Herbert," his father snaps his fingers, "you're wandering all over the road. Mind what you're doing."

Herbert feels a knuckle planted in the middle of his backbone. He jumps to the side, pokes the bull to satisfy his father.

"Ah, 'Thanatopsis.' William Cullen Bryant, you know."

"Daddy, why do I have to go? Why couldn't Jack go with you? He's the oldest."

"Mind your manners, son. Your brother Jack faced it like a man when he went for the first time."

His father tips his hat again. Another swishing skirt. "And how is Miss Lily today?"

"Just fine, sir, I mean, Alf."

"She's one of my customers," his father confides. "You know how my customers like me, don't you son?"

Herbert answers his father with another poke at the bull, remembering the day last July when he had seen that woman at Ely Meat and Company. He had been delivering a box of plucked chickens to the market where his father wrapped parts of animals in neat packages. The wagon squeaked all the way into town, one wheel crooked, as he pulled the poultry. He rubbed the cloth over the single penny in his mother's coin purse and rehearsed his upcoming business transaction. After the chickens were delivered, he'd go to Scanelli's for peppermint. He'd pull the purse out of his pocket, hoping Mr. Scanelli would notice how his mother trusted him with her purse, the

one that clicked when it opened and closed.

"Two peppermint sticks," he would say. Then he would hold the penny up between his thumb and first finger. "I earned this all by myself. I plucked twelve chickens for my mother." Then he'd see if he could make the candy last the whole day, sucking slower than ever before. He promised himself that he wouldn't bite into the red and white stripes.

Herbert guided his wagon to the back door that said "Ely Meat" in red paint and tugged on the rope handle. Sawdust powdered his shoes as he slid the box off the rim of his wagon to a place just inside the door. He pulled the door shut behind him, adjusted his eyes to the cool darkness, and made way through the hanging sides of beef. He'd tell his father that the chickens had arrived and then on his way to Scanelli's. But his father was busy.

"A breast or a thigh, Miss Lily?" his father was saying to the dark-eyed lady with long red fingernails. "You know, my dear, that the quality of mercy is not strained but droppeth as the gentle rain, don't you?"

"Why, I can only buy wings today, Mr. Jensen."

"Wings for the lady. And they shall fly as a winged angel unto the archangel himself."

"Oh, Mr. Jensen. Where'd you learn that fancy talking?"

"The Bible mostly. I'm a church man on some Sundays. But could you please remember to call

me Alf? I feel better when people call me Alf."

"Oh, we do want you to feel welcome. How is your family doing, sir?"

"Alf, please."

"Sorry . . . Alf."

"We are waiting until a company house is available. They are difficult to acquire these days, even with the slow-down in the mines. Not many places for people to go right now."

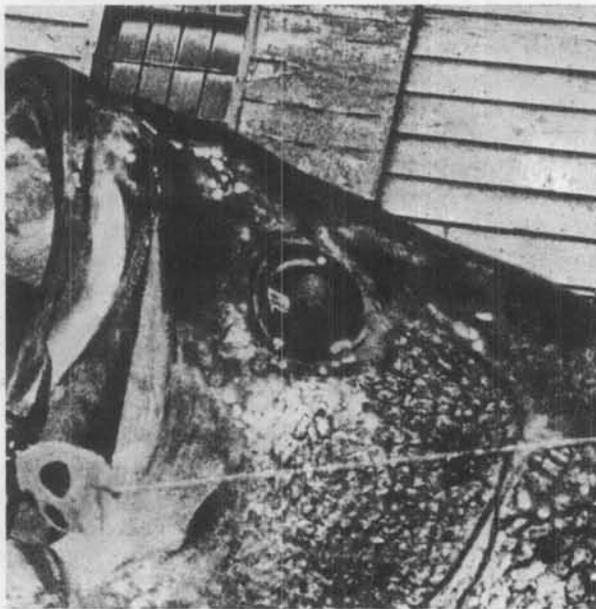
"Good luck to you, sir. Alf." She reached

out to pay for the white package of wings.

"Oh, thank you, my gentle one." He grabbed Miss Lily's hand, raised it to his lips and kissed two knuckles, each separately.

Herbert watched his father's eyes close reverently at the back of Miss Lily's hand, just as they closed when he drank from the sacrament cup at church. He decided to tell the owner instead of his father about the delivery.

"Thanks, son," Mr. Horlacher said as he



tweaked Herbert on the ear. "You're a good boy to be helping out like this."

Herbert groped back through the sides of beef and picked up the handle of his wagon. He pulled it to Scanelli's, the wheel squeaking in a higher

rangewithout the weight of the poultry. When he ordered the two peppermint sticks, he forgot to show off the purse or tell Mr. Scanelli about the money he had earned all by himself. As he walked back up the hill toward the warehouse, he bit into

the spiral and snapped off a piece of peppermint instead of making it last the whole day as he had planned. He didn't even notice.

The bull stumbles in a rut. Dust clouds the road, profuse after six months of straight sun.

"Damn it, Herbert. Watch where you're guiding that bull. Stop dreaming and wipe those seepy eyes."

"Yes, sir." Herbert tries to whistle, but chokes on the dust. His shoulders stoop. He wishes that he lived in a deep lake where his watery eyes wouldn't be noticed. All fish eyes are watery, he thinks, all the time. Days and nights. Nobody says anything.

"Son, do you want to be in the meat business like your dad?"

Herbert hitches his pants up off his hips and watches the early morning light reflect off the edges of his father's rimless eyeglasses. He thinks of Old Ben—his gapped teeth and his beard full of wood chips and straw. If some miner would dynamite that old man, then Herbert would wrap Ben's pieces inside of white packages and seal them with brown tape, just as his father did with beef at the market.

"You know, learning to make a pretty display in the showcase, green parsley and red meat trimmed just right? It's what I do every day to keep us alive. Butchering."

"You mean like Old Ben does?"

"No, no son. Old Ben runs the slaughterhouse."

"I don't like him." Herbert remembers his ugly laugh.

"He's just foreign, son. He was born in the old country."

"I don't like him anyway."

"Some folks think he's touched. But, anyway, there is a difference between what I do and what Ben does. Fine art, that's what butchering is. Someday I'll teach you, son."

Herbert looks at his father, at his barrel chest and proud walk. He pulls his own clothes back as he contemplates the possibility of money in his own hands.

"When can I sell papers downtown with Jack, Dad?"

"You stay home and help your mother with the babies and the chickens. Don't let me catch you on those streets again. You're not old enough."

In September Herbert had gone with Jack to sell papers on an evening when his father was late from work. Idle Greek miners argued in the street; Italians laughed as they disappeared into the tavern with the smoked-glass windows. In between sales, Jack was teaching Herbert to hawk distances. They balled up their saliva, tried to hit increasingly long-range targets.

"Paper, sir?" Jack said to a briskly paced passer-by.

As two pennies dropped into his brother's hand, Herbert heard music from the tavern. He started to move his feet, head back, mouth upturned, arms wide open. His body caught the rhythm, and he abandoned himself to full buck and wing, pounding the time into the wooden sidewalk. He poured himself onto the street, lost to the music.

Old Ben had suddenly reeled out of the tavern's double doors, laughing, and had slapped Herbert on the back. "You wait for Papa, little boy?"

Ben leaned in close, breathing whiskey steam on Herbert through his yellowed teeth. "You wait a long time—a long time." Then he stumbled down the muddy street, roaring a laugh that stopped all music in and out of Herbert.

"Herbert." He heard his name being shouted from behind the double doors. "Herbert, what in the hell are you doing out?"

"I wanted to help Jack, Dad."

"You're not to be on these streets at night—ever." His father's face was red, his eyeglasses further down his nose than usual as he leaned on the half door, swaying.

"Good night, Alf." Her creamy voice cut into my father's angry words. Her dark eyes peered out of the tavern over his shoulder, her ruby-red fingernail shifting his tie.

Herbert had gone to bed that night crying, a swath of red belt mark across his buttocks.

"I will buy a washing machine for Mother. You wait and see."



"Good luck, son. She'd like that, but she's used to promises."

The bull hesitates.

"Stay close with him, Herbert. He's getting wary. And hurry along now. Why do you drag your feet like that?"

Herbert doesn't answer.

"Now, son. Remember we were discussing 'Thanatopsis.' Here's a line for you to memorize: 'and what if thou withdraw/In silence from the living, and no friend/Take note of thy departure.'"

"And what if thou withdraw," says Herbert.

"In silence from the . . ."

"Living?"

"Good boy," says his father. "Good. You've a quick memory, but you must stop daydreaming. Your mother would like to box your ears, you're always off somewhere in that head of yours."

"And no friend?" says Herbert.

"Yes, 'no friend' is right. You're getting it. Ah, Bryant."

The high windows of the slaughterhouse reflect the red of the morning sun. Herbert stiffens and slows as he hears the animals and smells the air.

A stray chicken bobs along.

"A Rhode Island Red," says his father. "Well, I'll be . . . I haven't seen one of those since Malad. Looks like Finney." Every one of his father's chickens always had a name, even the ones he raised to sell. "Here chick, chick, Finney, Finney. Come to Alf." His father is crouching closer, his hands a spring trap.

Herbert flaps his arms like wings.

The chicken steps sideways, ruffling a few feathers.

"Here chicky, chick."

"Bauk, bauk, bauk, ba-rack-it," Herbert crows.

The bull forgotten for a moment, heads for the trees.

"The bull," yells his father.

Herbert is paralyzed between the chicken and the bull, unable to attend to either capture.

"Move, you baby," says his father. "Get over where that bull is and poke him hard."

His father runs, his straw hat bouncing. Herbert runs, holding the prodding stick like a ramrod, but his arms are tired. The stick slants groundward, rising and falling.

"I can't, Dad."

"Run. We can't lose this bull."

The long stick slams into a rise of ground.

Herbert's hands slide until the end of the stick pushes his stomach almost to his back.

"Daddy," he screams.

"Fool." His father runs after the bull, almost to the trees.

Herbert's pain sears red; he doubles over and tries to find a place inside of himself that doesn't hurt when he breathes.

Clutching his abdomen, Herbert runs unsteadily, dragging the stick behind him. His father wrenches the prod from the boy's hands and whirls it towards the trees. But the bull has stopped, mid-chase, lured by a patch of grass. It stops dead still. His father crouches, ready to fight, as the bull pulls a tall weed and crushes it between slow-moving jaws.

Herbert closes his eyes to find shelter from his father's wrath, to go to his pool under the willow tree. It won't be long, he thinks, and he can sell papers.

"A gift for you, Mother," he will say in his bow tie and shiny shoes, "here's a big box. I rolled it here on my wagon all the way from the train station. Jack helped me, a little."

"A big box for me?"

"See what it says on the side, Mother? It starts with a W."

"Herbert," his father shakes his shoulder. "Didn't you hear me?" He is still shouting. He slaps the prodding stick into Herbert's open hands, closes the boy's fingers around the wood, and the three traipse back into the road.

When they open the door, they see steam rising from barrels of livers, lungs, and unrecognizable parts. Ben has been at work early. He walks toward them holding a braided whip.

"In the chute," he says.

As the bull enters the passageway, Ben whips him along the narrowing wall until the animal noses into the wall. The concrete in front, the closing gate behind, compress the bull. Ben tears off his shirt, big shoulders shiny even in the blurred morning light.

"Watch, little boy." He laughs from his belly.

Herbert noses into his father's belt buckle, into trouser pleats.

"Herbert!" His father pushes him up toward the concrete platform.

Ben eyes the bull. "He's a bit on the puny side, Alf."

"What isn't these days?"

Ben grunts.

"I have to go to the bathroom, Dad." Herbert cups two hands over his crotch.

"Not now son. See this through."

"I have to go."



"It can wait."

"But. . ."

"Shut up, son. Now."

Ben lifts the sledge hammer.

Herbert looks out the door.

His father's bony knuckles dig into Herbert's backbone. "Stop crying, Herbert."

The hammer strikes. Ben jumps down and lifts the side gate. The bull rolls out of the restrainer, rests near a depression in the concrete floor. Ben grabs a tin cup from the ledge, unsheaths his knife, and slashes through spirals of brown hair from the top of the throat to the breastbone. The blood sheets into the trough and spatters Ben's apron.

Herbert puts one arm over his eyes. His father pushes it back down.

Ben holds the cup at the throat, slit open in a V. Blood on the tin handle, blood on Ben's wrists and in the cup until it overflows to coat Ben's rubber boots. He gestures his cup toward Herbert. "You like some little boy?" and takes a sip as he walks toward him.

"No, Daddy. Don't let him come near me." Herbert grabs his father's thigh.

"And this will soon be a man?" Ben laughs, still approaching.

Herbert's stomach rises, the morning's scrambled eggs returning. Clabber spills onto the slaughterhouse floor and speckles his father's brown shoes.

Herbert's father holds his son's head up while Ben gathers the hide into his hand, skinning it from the pinkish skull, leaving the eyes standing alone, three dimensional on a flat plane.

Herbert wants to sink to the ground and rest his ear on his father's shoe. He wants to escape, to splash in his pond and run through mustard grass. But the eyes hold him, those strange eyes that stare at him from the place where the skin has been scraped away by Ben's knife. They are filled with white and black, arranged as any normal eyes would be.

"Daddy," he whispers, still holding to his father's leg, "why does Ben leave the eyes like that?"

"I don't know, son." He pats the top of Herbert's head. "Maybe nobody wants to buy them."

"How long will they stare like that?"

"They'll shrivel up pretty soon, unless he lances them."

This time, without insistence from his father, Herbert watches Ben raise his cleaver and hack the bull's head away from the body. He watches him lift the head and carry it under his arm, almost as if it were a knight's helmet carried for a bow to the queen. As Ben hangs it on a metal hook, the eyes still stare at Herbert. He remembers something his mother has said many times—"The eyes are the windows of the soul." The eyes still seem to be alive, and he wants to look more closely. Maybe he can see the soul that his mother says is a part of all living things. He releases his hold on his father and walks to the head, to the row of hooks.

The skull hangs just above the top of Herbert's eyebrows. He lifts his chin, his head. Finally, his eyes connect with the two fixed orbs, the only remainder of the animal that Herbert remembers. He looks into the eyes that are losing sharp definition at the edge of the pupils. They are merging, black with white, into a sluggish mixture of themselves.

"His eyes are like mine, Papa," he says, not turning from the skull. The bull is like me—deep-water eyes. I can see in there.

His father half-smiles in approval; his son has stopped acting afraid in front of Ben. "Yes, Herbert, El Toro. Brave, fierce, courageous."

Herbert doesn't hear his father. "You have a friend," he is whispering to the eyes, as if the bull were all there to hear and respond. "I have long green grass by my pond. You don't have to go away."

Ben leans on the post near the hooks, drawing his knife out of the sheath attached to his belt.

"You want to see what eyes really are?" he asks as he pierces the edge of one of the shining half rounds with the tip of his knife. The jellied substance drips out to a pool on the hard floor, leaving empty, black-eyed windows behind.

PHYLLIS BARBER is a Salt Lake musician, homemaker, and prolific writer. Her work has appeared in *North American Review*, *the Cimarron Review*, and *Fiction International*.

ILLUSTRATED BY CAROL HEAD NORBY

