“The Circus in the Attic” The story chronicles the life of Bolton Lovehart (b. 1880), of Bardsville, Tennessee, son of a Confederate veteran who died when Bolton was a boy and of a monstrously overprotective and hypochondriacal mother. At sixteen, Bolton briefly escapes to a circus and later finds solace in a miniature circus he spends most of his life constructing in the attic. His mother’s supposed heart condition (she dies of it, but not until she’s eighty-seven) has kept him from attending college; well-instructed in high-school Greek, he runs Professor Darter’s prep school for a while and courts his daughter Sara, who abruptly leaves town for a better life after seducing him on her late father’s sofa. In the eyes of the community, Bolton is a promising young writer engaged in writing a history of the county, but this is just a cover for his devotion to the attic circus. In middle age he marries Mrs. Parton, a widow, and inherits a son, Jasper, who dies in World War II. Bolton donates his circus to be broken up and sold to raise money for the Red Cross (“The death of Jasper had brought the secret circus out into the world to live, to be enjoyed, to be used and broken in the end”). His wife dies in a car accident in the company of a Captain Cartwright; they had both been drinking. The story of Bolton Lovehart is preceded by the accounts of the ignominious but locally mythologized deaths of Cash Perkins and Seth Sykes, who supposedly defended the town against Union invaders in 1861.

“Blackberry Winter” The narrator, Seth, a young boy on a farm in middle Tennessee, goes outside barefoot during a cold spell in June even though his mother tells him not to. A tramp approaches the house wearing inappropriately urban clothes and carrying a newspaper-wrapped parcel. The mother gives him some work to do; the boy goes out to the creek to inspect the damage from the recent flood. There he finds his father, who lifts Seth up onto the saddle of his horse so he can see better. After that Seth goes to visit his black playmate, Little Jebb, but Jebb’s mother, Dellie, is ill and slaps her son for making too much noise playing with Seth near her bed. Seth goes to talk to Old Jebb, who suggests that it’s too late for blackberry winter and that the weather is so cold because the earth is tired
of feeding sinful men. Seth returns home, where his father is telling the tramp that he has no more work for him and can only pay him for half a day. Angered, the stranger spits near the father's boot; had he spit closer, there would have been trouble. As the tramp walks away, the boy follows him until he threatens to cut his throat if he doesn't stop. In an epilogue, the narrator says that his parents have since died, Little Jebb is in the penitentiary, Dellie has passed away, but Old Jebb is probably over a hundred and still living. Recalling the threat the stranger had made to him, the narrator says, "But I did follow him, all the years."

"When the Light Gets Green" A brief sketch about the narrator's grandfather on the family's tobacco farm in 1914. He used to tell the boy stories about his experiences in the Civil War. The title refers to the way the sky looks just before it is going to hail; it looked that way, and then hailed, just before the grandfather collapsed and had to be dragged into bed. He thought he was going to die and said so, and that nobody loved him, to the narrator, who replied, "'Grandpa, I love you'... knowing all of a sudden it was a lie, because I didn't feel anything." He didn't die until four years later, when the narrator no longer lived there—"and it didn't matter much."

"Christmas Gift" Ten-year-old Sill Alley shows up at a small town's general store one wintry day to ask where the doctor lives, because his half-sister's going to have a baby. As the son of Milt Alley, described in "Blackberry Winter" as "poor white trash," he is the object of some sarcastic remarks made by the men lounging in the store but is defended by the proprietor, who offers him some red-striped candy as he leaves. He finds the doctor's house, and in the buggy on the way back home Dr. Small rolls a cigarette and then passes the tobacco and paper to the boy, who reciprocates with half a stick of candy.

"Goodwood Comes Back" The narrator reminisces about Luke Goodwood, a local boy whose major league pitching career was cut short by his love of drink. The title is somewhat ironic, as it was originally a newspaper headline announcing his short-lived return to the majors; Goodwood had to come back to his hometown because the comeback cited in the headline never occurred. The narrator had played baseball with Goodwood when they were boys, but didn't like catching because of the danger of getting hit in the head with the bat; they used to go hunting together too. He had admired Goodwood's earthier approach to life. On his return, the former pitcher is the object of pity from the men lounging about the blacksmith shop, but accurately throws a rock at a distant telephone pole to show he still has control. He eventually meets a violent end in a domestic dispute.

"The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger" In Cobb County, Tennessee, Jeff York, about fifty, has broken the curse of his Appalachian ancestry and managed to put together, piece by piece, a decent farm of sixty
acres. He is especially proud of his patented gate, which can be opened without getting off one's horse. On market Saturdays in town, he treats his young wife and children to the hamburgers they delight in at Slick Hardin's Dew Drop Inn Diner. When Hardin jokes to Mrs. York that anyone who likes hamburgers as much as she ought to own her own hamburger stand, she takes him seriously. In fact, he does want to sell out, and within two weeks she has gotten her husband, we do not exactly know how, to sell the farm in order to buy the diner. He helps her get it set up, gives it a fresh coat of paint, and is later found dead—hanging from his patented gate.

"A Christian Education" Jim Nabb, a well-to-do farmer, has two sons. The older one, Silas, is retarded. His parents have given him "a Christian education," teaching him to turn the other cheek. The other boys give him lots of provocation, but it isn't until they are in a rowboat on a Sunday school picnic that Silas finally strikes back, with a pocketknife. In the ensuing struggle, Silas falls out of the boat and is drowned. The narrator, a good swimmer, might have been able to save him, but is unable to react. Later, the men row back out so he can try to find the body, but he can't. The younger son, Alec, grows up without being taught to turn the other cheek, and winds up in the penitentiary at age twenty-two for killing a man.

"The Love of Elsie Barton: A Chronicle" In Charlestown, Tennessee, Elsie Barton is now a withered old woman who lives alone in the house where she was born, eating her supper out of cans. She has a daughter, Helen, who was a beauty (and will reappear in "Testament of Flood") but moved away from town. When she was young, Elsie had been seduced on a drive in the country by Benjamin Beaumont, a tobacco buyer from Kentucky. She became pregnant, so they married at Christmas and went away to his father's farm, where she had the baby away from the prying eyes of her hometown. Beaumont later died in the company of liquor and fast women in a Nashville hotel.

"Testament of Flood" The title refers to Elsie Barton, who "was like those bits of straw or trash lodged innocently in the branches of creek-bottom sycamores as testament of long-subsided spring flood—a sort of high water mark of passion in the community." The story is told from the point of view of Steve Adams (possibly the son of the Thomas Adams who unsuccessfully courted Elsie in the previous story), who has a crush on his fellow high-school student Helen Beaumont. Helen, however, is being courted by Frank Barber, who is older and has a car.

"The Confession of Brother Grimes" This story is an elaborate joke. Brother Grimes is a preacher who spends a number of sermons trying to justify the ways of God to man after the tragic automobile accident in which his daughter died. Her husband, Archie Munn, was driving, drunk, and at fault—as he had been in many car wrecks before this one. Munn survived,
but Grimes's wife died soon afterward, even though she hadn't been in the accident. After preaching at her funeral, Grimes didn't come out of his house for weeks; when he finally did, his black hair had turned white. He sermonized that all had been for the best, since Archie had reformed. But subsequently Archie kills two more victims by running into a horse-drawn wagon and is sentenced to the penitentiary. In his next sermon, Brother Grimes says that it was all his own fault, divine punishment for the sin he must now finally confess, that of having dyed his hair black all these years.

"Her Own People" Mr. and Mrs. Allen's black maid, Viola, whom they have brought up to Tennessee from Alabama, quits just as they are getting ready for a party. To make matters worse, in order to get more money from Mrs. Allen, Viola claims that a black couple, Jake and his wife, Josie, are charging her more for her board than in fact they are. Mrs. Allen fires Viola and tells her to go back to "her own people" in Alabama, but she refuses to get up from her bed at Jake and Josie's.

"The Life and Work of Professor Roy Millen" Life had never been easy for Roy Millen; he had worked at many unpleasant jobs before getting a college professorship, and that only through marrying the department chairman's daughter, who has recently died after a long illness. When student Tom Howell comes to his office for a letter of recommendation for a scholarship for France, Millen at first says he will write him a good one, and after the boy leaves begins to dictate it to his secretary. But, jealous of the student's easy grace and good fortune, he breaks off the dictation and later writes a negative letter in his own hand.

"The Unvexed Isles" Professor George Dalrymple and his wife, Alice, are having a drink at their home with Phil Alburt, one of his students, just before the Christmas break. Phil, evidently from a wealthy family, is going to Bermuda, the "unvexed isles"; Alice would like to spend Christmas with her well-to-do Baltimore parents, but Dalrymple is too poor to afford the train fare and plans to spend the time getting up a note on Chaucer. George notices that Phil's cigarette bears lipstick stains—Alice's. Dalrymple, whose origins are humble—he comes from a Nebraska dirt farm—will never advance beyond this "sad, pretentious little college" in Illinois.

"Prime Leaf" This story begins with the visit of Mr. Wiedenmeyer, a tobacco buyer, to the farm of Joseph Hardin and his son Thomas; also present are Thomas’s wife, Edith, and son Tommy, as well as Tommy's black playmate, Alec. The Hardins have joined the tobacco association and tell Wiedenmeyer that he will have to buy from the association. Mr. Hardin brings down a chicken hawk after Tommy tries a shot and misses. That winter Joseph Hardin tells his son he's getting out of the association because he objects to what the night riders within it—particularly Bill Hopkins—are doing. He argues with his son, telling him that if he disagrees he ought to become a night rider himself. Thomas changes his
mind and decides to join his father in leaving the association and selling
their crop privately. Then their barn is burned. Thomas cuts across a field
to ambush the night riders and shoots Hopkins off his horse. Hardin tele­
phones the sheriff to say that his son is coming into town to turn himself
in. But on the way in someone shoots and kills him.

When Bolton Lovehart's father collapsed
from a fatal stroke on the brick walk in front of his house, Bolton's mother
saw him fall and ran to him uttering "wild cries of anguish that might have
been wild cries of triumph ... for no one knows the meaning of the cry of
passion he utters until the flesh of the passion is long since withered away
to show the austere, logical articulation of fact with fact in the skeleton of
Time" (28). This image of Time's skeletal articulation of fact with fact itself
has a long afterlife in Warren's oeuvre, reappearing some thirty-five years
later in "Youthful Picnic Long Ago: Sad Ballad on Box" (New and Selected
Poems: 1923-1985). The voice of a girl strumming a guitar by a Tennessee
campfire "confirmed the sweet sadness / Young hearts gave us no right to. /
No right to, yet. Though some day would, / As Time unveiled, / In its own
dancing parody of grace, / The bony essence of each joke on joke." In that
poem what Time would reveal was some genuine grief to incarnate the
sadness the girl named in her song but had not yet experienced: the name
exists before the thing it names. Within the sequence in which the poem
appears (Altitudes and Extensions), the contiguity of this poem with the
immediately preceding "Winter Wheat: Oklahoma" reveals even more.
There a grieving widower wonders "How flesh would peel off cheekbones
in earth out yonder" in her grave, while in "Youthful Picnic," the poet,
having first spoken of how Time unveils the "bony essence," then thinks of
the youthful singer who may well be dead by now, and wishes he could once
more see "Flame reveal the grave cheek-curve. ... " The echo in "Youthful
Picnic" between what flame can no longer reveal and what Time will inevi­
tably unveil is thus itself an echo of the cheekbones that peeling flesh could
show in the poem just before—could show, that is, if one could see into
what cannot decently be opened.

To read one poem through the one alongside it in the sequence, which
may be a larger poem, might also be to look where one shouldn't; but it is
a risk worth taking. In "History during Nocturnal Snowfall," the poem
immediately after "Youthful Picnic," the pulse and wrist that belonged to
the youthful strummer—"delicate / Was the melancholy that swelled each
heart, and timed / The pulse in wrist, and wrist, and wrist"—now belong
to the woman sleeping beside the poet with whose heartbeat he seeks to
match his own: "I reach a finger laid light / To a wrist that does not move
... / And wonder if I might devise the clever trick / Of making heartbeat
with heartbeat synchronize.” In both poems the poet attentively listens to a woman’s beating pulse, timing it, and thereby encouraging the reader to do the same, to “synchronize” the two poems lying side by side in the sequence of the text. That way we might learn something about Time and what it can eventually reveal.

One thing revealed by the passage of time between the original appearance of “History During Nocturnal Snowfall” in the Fall 1983 number of the *Sewanee Review* and its 1985 reappearance in *New and Selected Poems* is that the poem has undergone two changes that make it better able to synchronize with its neighbor in the sequence. Originally its first line had read, “Dark in the cubicle curtained from snow-darkness of night,” but later *curtained* becomes *boxed*, so that it echoes the subtitle of “Youthful Picnic Long Ago: Sad Ballad on Box”—the box being the instrument on which the fireside singer played her pulsing beat with fingers and wrist, “in their delicate dance / On the strings of the box.” The other revision changes “In the synchronized rhythm of heart, or lungs” to “the synchronized rhythm of heart, and heart,” with the result that the line is more closely aligned to the repetitive “pulse in wrist, and wrist, and wrist” that throb in the poem just before.

“Could one guess the other’s buried narrative?” the poet asks when he puts his finger to that wrist. In light of what lies buried in these poems, in a series of connected echoes leading back to what is in fact buried in “Winter Wheat,” one might well wonder if some buried narrative lies hidden in the sequence, too—especially in light of these poems’ tendency to name, perhaps surreptitiously, what it is they are collectively doing (synchronizing pulse-beats, for example). There is, as the narrator of “The Circus in the Attic” suggests, a certain logical articulation of fact with fact, of detail with detail (of a cheekbone in a grave with a grave cheek-curve), that comes to light only after the warmth of the original expression has died away. Such a suggestion is of a piece with Jack Burden’s insight that “the reality of an event . . . arises from other events which, likewise, in themselves are not real,” and with Warren’s own idea that “poetry does not inhere in any particular element but depends upon the set of relationships, the structure, which we call the poem.” It depends on what we call the poem—the individual poem in a sequence or the sequence itself.

All these observations are particularly relevant to the short-story collection *The Circus in the Attic*, which resembles Warren’s poetic sequences in that it is made up of texts that already have separate claims on the reader’s attention. And there are, as I hope to demonstrate here, enough connections of detail with detail among these stories to conclude that this collection may also make such a claim. Furthermore, just as the poems can speak, in evidently self-referential terms, of the synchronization they actually enact, so can a statement, like the one in the title story about how time
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eventually reveals the "logical articulation of fact with fact," speak beyond its immediate context (the wild cries of Bolton Lovehart's mother) to address what may happen when this story is placed alongside "Blackberry Winter" and the other twelve.

Indeed, the word *articulation* in itself speaks a great deal. Its double sense of "utterance" and "jointed connection" articulates (in both senses) the linkage between enunciation and connection, between passionate expression and dispassionate analysis of skeletal connections in the text. I could start by pointing to a connection, the same story in this instance, between this word and the toy circus to which its title alludes. Bolton Lovehart spends his life assembling the circus in secret. He is supposed to be writing a book of local history, a project that merely serves as a cover for his real passion. When the paints for his carved wooden animals arrive, for instance, he tells his mother they are for a multicolor county map; when people pass by the house late at night and see his attic light burning they marvel at his authorial industry. The circus is Bolton's escape from responsibility and the meshes of an overpossessive mother as well as a substitute for the actual circus he tried to run away to as a child.

Though assembling the toy circus is presented as what Bolton does when he is supposed to be writing a book, given more of the context of the story, it could be read as a kind of writing, in particular as writing a history of the county. It is when the narrator gives us a glimpse of that history that we see just how close Bolton's attic perspective comes to capturing the spirit of the place. On 16 December 1861, "Bardsville had its home guard, a few middle-aged men and a rag-tag-and-bobtail of young boys who could ride like circus performers and shoot anything that would hold powder and to whom the war was a gaudy picnic that their tyrannous mothers would not let them attend" (6; emphasis added). Bolton could have done worse than to have debunked local mythology and portrayed the mock heroics of the town's defenders as the circus stunts they were. Thanks to the narrator's manipulation of events, to the way he allows us to see the resemblance between the home guards and the circus Bolton ran away to join, Lovehart almost seems to be doing that, though it would never occur to us that he intended his toy circus to be read as a revisionist reading of history. His circus is something more like a cry of passion, a way of bolting—as his first name suggests—the attic door against a domineering mother ("nobody knew what went on up there, behind the always bolted door" [41]).

It is in the connection of Bolton's circus pastime with other facts of the story that the skeletal, structural logic of the narrative emerges. It was on the near-anniversary of the battle of Bardsville—"One day in middle December" (40)—that Bolton had passed by the local hardware store and seen the model circus that was to inspire his efforts. He would not have grasped the irony of this fact, but we can, and we can see, too, that in
playing with his model men and animals he is rehearsing, not only the circus antics of his father's generation that gave them the illusion of escape from their mothers, but also the ludic manipulation exercised by that same maternal tyranny. For Lovehart also bears a resemblance to his trapeze artists and ringmaster and cleverly constructed elephants with jointed—that is to say, articulated—legs ("He had managed, after two weeks of experiment and effort, to make legs that would bend" [41]). For his mother is said to have created and governed him, possessing him "with a thousand invisible threads controlling the slightest movement of his limbs and lips and spirit like a clever puppet" (16).

Like "History During Nocturnal Snowfall," these stories already come to us at some remove from their first appearance, some distance along on that passage of time that leads from one kind of articulation to another; all appeared earlier, separately, in print (listed in Grimshaw, 228–30). An author's note hints that in one sense the book is a new creation and not merely a reprinting, for the order of the stories no longer coincides with that of their first appearance: “The earliest story in this book was written in 1930, the latest in 1946, but the order here is not chronological” (i).² Given that Warren's poems (though from a later date than Circus) can acquire new meaning through the order in which they appear, and this is especially true with contiguous poems, an incident in "Blackberry Winter" takes on a certain tinge of irony when we discover that we have already seen its ghostly inversion in the immediately preceding story—if we read the stories in their sequence in the book. The boy Seth has wandered out to gaze at the flooded creek. Among the crowd of onlookers he sees his father on horseback.

the first thing that happened was, I remember, the warm feeling I always had when I saw him up on a horse. . . . I heard his voice calling, "Seth!" . . . I did not look up at my father until I was almost within touching distance of his heel. Then I looked up and tried to read his face, to see if he was angry about my being barefoot. Before I could decide anything from that impassive, high-boned face, he had leaned over and reached a hand to me. "Grab on," he commanded. (73–74)

Whatever misgivings the boy will have about the unseasonably cool weather or the tramp with the knife or the way Dellie slaps her son, his father will remain an undiminished source of confidence and love. He won't be angry, as Seth’s mother was, about the bare feet. “'You can see better up here,'” he will say when he swings the boy up to the saddle. But the reader who can recall a strangely similar event in “The Circus in the Attic” will not so easily share this faith in a father's affection, for he or she will have remembered what happened to another Seth when he approached a man on a
horse. Though a monument was erected to his memory, Seth Sykes did not exactly die a hero's death in the battle of Bardsville. He was simply objecting to the Union cavalry's expropriation of his corn.

Seth Sykes came on and the troopers watched him. He grabbed the lieutenant's near leg, the left leg, and shouted, "Hit is my cawn!"

The lieutenant leaned over and struck him about the head with his gauntleted fist. The horse shied and the lieutenant almost reeled from the saddle.

But the nearest trooper was on them now. He leaned from his saddle, seized Seth Sykes by the long, uncombed, matted hair, jerked his head back, and carefully put the muzzle of a pistol against the head, just above the ear, and pulled the trigger.

It is the small details that are troubling. The father "had leaned over and reached a hand"; the lieutenant "leaned over and struck . . . with his . . . fist." Seth Sykes had grabbed the lieutenant's leg; the younger Seth gauges how close he had come to his father by the fact that he was "almost within touching distance of his heel." And then, of course, there is the fact of the name: Although we are at the midpoint of the story, it is only when the boy hears his father's voice calling "Seth!" that we learn his name; in fact, the name never reappears in "Blackberry Winter"—almost as if the boy were fully Seth only at the moment he and his father repeat those gestures of the Seth Sykes's martyrdom.

Now as it happens, Seth's namesake in the other story, the unfortunate Sykes, appears only in the version printed in the book, for the shorter version of "Circus" in the September 1947 issue of Cosmopolitan omits about four thousand words (18 percent) of the text, including the entire Seth Sykes episode (pp. 4-12 in the book). It is less likely that the Sykes anecdote was added to the book version than restored there, for the magazine text repeats the story's later mention of the Sykes monument (Cosmopolitan, 83; Circus, 42) in a way that really makes no sense (since it assumes an acquaintance with Sykes that the reader could not have had) and cannot be accounted for except as a slip on the part of whoever—editor or author—shortened the story to make it conform to magazine length. Nevertheless, the presence of this episode in the book makes the experience of reading the first two stories in the collection a rather different one from that of reading them separately in their first published version. And so to the two ways the fullness of time brings new meaning to light—recurring details and the order of the stories—we can add a third: textual differences between their separate and later collective appearance.

Many of these differences are relatively minor. Elizabeth Beaumont,
in “The Love of Elsie Barton: A Chronicle,” becomes Helen Beaumont (her original name in the earliest, though unpublished, version of the story, the untitled novel Warren wrote in 1933–34), with the result that the continuity between this story and its immediate successor in the collection, “Testament of Flood,” where Helen Beaumont also appears, is assured. Sill Alley, the boy in “Christmas Gift” who goes to fetch the doctor for his pregnant half-sister and who is “one of Milt Alley’s kids” (98), was Sill Lancaster when the story appeared in 1937. Milt Alley owned the cow that drowned in the flooded creek in “Blackberry Winter,” and a boy who asks if it might be edible was “the kind of boy who might just as well as not have been the son of Milt Alley” (76); this change of name thus draws the two stories into closer orbit.

The telltale presence of the monument to Seth Sykes in the magazine version that otherwise omits all mention of his name suggests that he had been there all along, like Sara Darter’s seduction of Bolton Lovehart in the same story, which, once she performed it, “seemed like something which had always had its existence, waiting not for her doing but for her recognition. It was done, but it had always existed, even before her doing” (36–37). The intriguing thing about the aptness of these words is that they, together with the seduction scene itself, are also missing from the magazine version of the story. By contrast to the change of names in “Elsie Barton” and “Christmas Gift,” both the execution of Sykes and the seduction of Lovehart promise to be rather more meaningful revisions, for what happened to Sykes can change the way we read “Blackberry Winter,” and what Sara Darter did may somewhat alter our picture of Bolton (at least he had one sexual experience in his youth, though he still cuts the figure of a man easily manipulated by a woman, whether it be Sara or his mother). A greater significance, however, may lie in what connection that missing seduction scene may have with other stories in the volume. For if the Sykes episode is any indication, passages missing in the magazine versions but present in the book may serve to alert us to ways in which the book functions on its own as a unified work of art—how, to quote from still another missing yet now self-referential passage, it “slowly achieved its perfect form, like a crystal growing, according to its ineluctable pattern” (147). What such statements as this and the one cited earlier in this paragraph, themselves present only in the book, hint at is that the stories in their first appearance already contained within them the inner logic of these episodes and their accompanying imagery, and that their later “crystallization” in the book was nothing more than a drawing out, or recognition, of what was already there in that ineluctable pattern.

Sara’s seduction of Bolton Lovehart falls into this category, for when her submerged desire breaks the surface it takes the form of a striking image that will have resonance later in the book:
That last encounter with him had not been part of the plan. Or if it was a part, it was a part that had not showed itself above the surface of the stream, where the trivial debris and drift moiled and spun in the light, but wallowed in the dark central depth of the current, like an old log, black and waterlogged, sucked up from the mud, and borne in secret to the rock-tossed, rapid narrows where the waters boiled over with a last fury into the placid reaches below, and wherein that final, funneled rush the unwieldy inner burden heaved and lunged upward, black, blunt, big, and dripping. . . . (36)

Given Bolton's almost feminine passivity, it is perhaps appropriate that his only sexual partner (until he marries a widow at age fifty-nine) should evoke such usually masculine imagery, her desire expressing itself in the symbol of a big, blunt, dripping log. When it heaves and lunges upward out of chthonic darkness, it is almost as if Sara Darter, not Bolton Lovehart, were the one equipped with male apparatus.

It is curious that the first-person narrator of another story in the collection, “Goodwood Comes Back,” who is also in certain respects depicted as feminine and passive, should be frightened and feel endangered by an object resembling that phallic, blunt, and menacing log. That story opens with Luke Goodwood pitching and the narrator catching but afraid to stand very close to home plate “on account of the boys flinging the bat the way they did when they started off for first base” (109). His fear is not ungrounded; he does get hit in the head with the bat, and Goodwood, whose surname has the virtue of calling our attention once again to the strength of ligneous imagery, takes away his catcher's mitt and sends him to the outfield. Other details in that story reinforce the masculinity of Goodwood and the femininity of the narrator. The “Goodwood house was a man's house,” with hunting coats and flyrods and shotguns scattered even on the bed and the six men outnumbering the women, keeping them “going back and forth to the kitchen with sweat on their faces and their hair damp from the stove” (109). The narrator’s house was just the opposite: “At my house everything was different, for men there always seemed to be just visiting” (110).

Later, when he has grown up and come back to town to visit, the narrator stays at another woman's house, his sister's, and on one occasion again assumes a passive and receptive role. He sees Luke Goodwood coming up the street and stopping to chat with some workmen installing a culvert just in front of the house. Instead of coming out to greet his childhood friend, the narrator chooses to hide and listen: “there were still enough leaves on the vine on my sister's porch to hide me from the street, but I could hear every word they said” (114).
Now the roles that vines play in three other stories in *The Circus in the Attic* enlarge upon the femininity attached to them here: in one, they do precisely what they do in “Goodwood,” provide a feminine house with a protective screen; in the other two, they take up the woman’s side in the battle of the sexes, playing the part of entwining and endangering parasites to masculine wood. In “The Love of Elsie Barton,” passersby “would know that Miss Elsie was sitting on her porch behind the screen of moonvine. What she did behind the moonvine or in the house, they didn’t know or think about” (143). A passage present only in the book reinforces the feminine associations of these porch vines, showing us Elsie’s daughter Helen leaving a boy standing at the gate to go in and “join her mother behind the moonvine” (145). In a passage in “The Circus in the Attic” present only in the book, a “single scrofulous cedar, weathering to earth” above the house that was once Seth Sykes’s is depicted as “surrendering to the clawing hands of vine and briar” (4), and in a parallel scene on the next page the monument itself to Sykes is obscured by vines (“If you tear away the love vine ... you can read the words” [5]). One is reminded of the “thousand invisible threads” with which Bolton Lovehart’s mother controlled his slightest movement like a puppeteer (16). In “The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger,” Jeff York is proleptically described on the first page as having wrists that “hang out from the sleeves of the coat, the tendons showing along the bone like the dry twist of grapevine still corded on the stovelength of a hickory sapling” (120)—proleptically, because York, whose face resembles the wood of the weathering and vine-affected tree next to Sykes’s house to the extent that it looked like “a piece of hewed cedar which had been left in the weather” (120), was yoked to a wife whose emblematic coat had “a scrap of fur at the collar which looked like some tattered growth of fungus feeding on old wood” (124). The rope around York’s neck at the end of the story is, on a metaphorical level, the crystallization of an inner logic present from the beginning, whether we first see it in the parasitical, wood-devouring collar his wife wore or in the combination of twisted vine and sapling to be found in his own wrists.

Luke Goodwood made it to the major leagues as a pitcher, but love of liquor shortened his career, and when he returned to town he seemed a shadow of his former self. “I noticed Luke’s arms had got pretty stringy,” the narrator observes (113; emphasis added), echoing the description of Bolton Lovehart’s feeble appearance when he tried to apply for work with the circus: “You don’t look stout,” the old man said, eyeing the stringy, tallish boy with the perspicacity and contempt of a horse trader inspecting an inferior animal” (25; emphasis added). Despite his weakened state, Goodwood demonstrates that he still has control, if not strength, by scooping up a rock and throwing it square at a distant telephone pole (114). That pole, of the same general shape as the bat that used to strike the ball for
which this rock is a substitute, as well as the blunt log that stands for Sara Darter's sexual drive when she has her way with Bolton Lovehart, reappears a few stories later, in "The Confession of Brother Grimes." That story begins with a man driving his car into the rear of a parked truck that had "a pole sticking out behind," thereby killing his wife, the pole going through her "like the toothpick through a club sandwich" (170).

Thus, in the way that certain objects in these stories have of reemerging in other stories, the surfacing log that gave Sara Darter the power to attack Bolton Lovehart becomes the bat that frightens the narrator of "Goodwood Comes Back," which becomes a telephone pole later in the same story. The pole in "The Confession of Brother Grimes" does its deadly work in an automobile accident that, except for the pole, is a duplicate of the one near the end of "The Circus in the Attic" that killed Bolton Lovehart's wife. Her adulterous lover had been at the wheel, and "had driven at high speed into the back of a heavy truck parked on the shoulder of the highway" (60); in "The Confession of Brother Grimes," Archie Munn drove his "new Ford coupe through the back end of a parked truck that didn't have any lights on" (170).

It is thus in light of these logs and poles (including the one that functioned like a toothpick) that we might read the way Elsie Barton "stuck the needle neatly into the white cambric she had been sewing" (155) as she accepted Benjamin Beaumont's invitation to go for a ride in the country. For what is about to happen is another seduction scene, and though Beaumont believed himself to be the seducer, Miss Barton knows what she is doing. And when it is over, something in the way she so casually stops on the porch to pick up her sewing before disappearing into the house, "which under ordinary circumstances would have been so natural, seemed to be a monstrous attack upon himself" (158). It is no longer so clear to him who is in charge. Given what we have, by this point in the book, already read about how Sara Darter's lust could take the form of a lunging log, we might give the edge in this balance of power to Miss Barton, seeing in the thrust of her needle a sign of her exercise of the same power Sara displayed, and seeing in Beaumont's almost uncanny apprehension at her return to her sewing some confirmation of the significance of that gesture. If these stories were a dream, then Elsie's needle would form part of the chain of transforming symbols that include both Sara's log and the toothpick which the pole in the truck became. And if The Circus in the Attic is a dream, then it is possible to look for, in Freud's words, the repressed wish of which we have now seen the disguised fulfillment.

One plausible candidate can be found by returning to the title story. The death of Bolton's wife in that accident seems a kind of poetic justice in the context of his collection of stories where what Sara did to Bolton finally comes back in the form of a highway accident that is a stand-in for the one
in a later story in which a woman is decisively penetrated by a log. And a later addition to Elsie Barton's story tightens the resemblance between Elsie and Barton's seductress: "Her passivity, her silence which he could not force her to break, her acquiescence, her clenched hands thrusting him away after consummation, all in all, the undecipherable compound she presented to him left him always baffled and confused . . ." (159). For these clenched hands and this undecipherability echo a moment in "The Circus in the Attic" when Bolton Lovehart was unsuccessfully trying to woo Sara Darter (four pages before she counterattacked by surprising him on the couch): "Sara Darter wept often now, and Bolton tried to comfort her. But once when he put his arms around her and tried to kiss her, she struck him savagely on the chest, with clenched fists, and screamed at him with furious words which he could not interpret" (32). Four pages earlier, Bolton's mother had uttered similarly undecipherable words, the "wild cries of anguish that might have been wild cries of triumph"—the cries that the narrator tells us no one could know the meaning of until the flesh of passion had withered away to show the logical articulation of fact with fact in the skeleton of Time.

We have already seen how the mother's cries are emblematic of the way the story collection lends itself to a different kind of reading than do the stories by themselves. That they should be uttered by another character is emblematic as well, for certain other gestures persist from story to story, independently of the characters who perform them. Piecing together such repeated gestures (as well as repeated names, images, and even household objects) is part of the work of tracing the logical articulation of fact with fact. Allen Shepherd has observed of the title story that "Warren's structural-thematic technique is much like that in his novels: alternatives, opposites, and contraries are examined, arranged, and rearranged like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle" (11). The undecipherable cries that two characters independently speak in that story are a good example of this, but Shepherd's description is equally applicable to the whole collection.

One of the most striking of these reiterations grows out of the almost obsessive attention given to the mechanics of how many of the characters in these stories walk. The narrator's grandfather in "When the Light Gets Green" has such small hips and backside that when the boy notices them he says "I felt a tight feeling in my stomach like when you walk behind a woman and see the high heel of her shoe is worn and twisted and jerks her ankle every time she takes a step" (88). In "Her Own People" we actually see this twisted step in the gait of the black maid, Viola: "The Negro moved across the porch and into the house, her bowed legs setting the feet down on the boards with a sort of painful accuracy, so that the heels twisted over at each step" (185)—so that one is tempted to continue the associative leap begun by the narrating grandson that linked his grandfather's legs to a
woman's awkward heels, and to muse on what ironic connection there may be between that Confederate veteran and this descendant of the slaves he fought to keep. But the associative network is larger than that; the way Viola was “setting the feet down” with “painful accuracy” can remind us of how the boy Bolton Lovehart walked, who “set his neat little booted feet . . . with the motion of prinking precision and appealing weakness” (16), or even of Luke Goodwood, who “looked to be setting his big feet always carefully on the ground” (110).

To make sense of all this we should return to the scene in “Blackberry Winter” where young Seth approached his equestrian father and dared not look up at him until he “was almost within touching distance of his heel.” He was a little afraid of what his father’s response would be (having already read the oddly parallel scene in “The Circus in the Attic,” we might share that apprehension, for reasons of our own), and the reason for that fear had to do with his own feet: “Then I looked up and tried to read his face, to see if he was angry about my going barefoot.” When “Blackberry Winter” began, the boy narrator was consumed by the desire to go shoeless: “I was standing on the hearth, almost into the chimney, hunched over the fire, working my bare toes slowly on the warm stone. I relished the heat which made the skin of my bare legs warp and creep and tingle, even as I called to my mother, who was somewhere back in the dining room or kitchen, and said: ‘But it’s June, I don’t have to put them on!’” (63). It may be June, but it’s also blackberry winter, or so his mother says. Seth gives us, if not his mother, a very specific justification for going barefoot:

You do not understand that voice from back in the kitchen which says that you cannot go barefoot outdoors and run to see what has happened and rub your feet over the wet shivery grass and make the perfect mark of your foot in the smooth, creamy, red mud and then muse upon it as though you had suddenly come upon that single mark on the glistening auroral beach of the world. You have never seen a beach, but you have read the book and how the footprint was there. (64)

If Bolton Lovehart’s circus was a kind of writing, all the more so is Seth’s footprinted mark, which as soon as he makes it assumes writing’s characteristic quality of appearing to have been made by someone else. This moment of defamiliarization, in which a mark made, a letter mailed, or a word spoken takes on an identity of its own divorced from its maker, as if someone else had made or written or said it, as if it were now a text in its own right, is repeated in other stories in this collection. In “When the Light Gets Green” the boy narrator tells his grandfather he loves him, “feeling like it hadn’t been me said it, and knowing all of a sudden it was a lie, because I didn’t feel anything” (95). He realizes he only said it because his
grandfather had said he wanted to die because no one loved him. The boy seems to be realizing for the first time how it feels to make a fiction, a lie, to say certain words for the effect they have and not because he means them. His response to this realization is to go outside and do what Seth took pleasure in doing in the immediately preceding story—“rubbing my bare feet over the slick cold grass” (95)—thereby affirming the link that story had already made between this process of defamiliarization and bare feet.

One could take this a step further and explore the hypothesis that The Circus in the Attic seriously entertains a connection between walking and writing. One clue that points in this direction is what happens in “Goodwood Comes Back” when Goodwood is said “to be setting his big feet always carefully on the ground,” for in the same paragraph the narrator also talks about the way Goodwood wrote: “The only good grades he made were in penmanship.... He could make his writing look exactly like the writing at the top of the page, a Spencerian hand tilted forward, but not too much like a woman’s” (110). Writing too well, it appears, would run the risk of appearing feminine. It makes all too much sense: in the small-town culture of western Kentucky and Tennessee that is the setting for these stories, the kind of writing for which Goodwood’s Spencerian penmanship is a metaphor is commonly perceived to be a womanly activity. Goodwood, for all his virile qualities, had both a womanly walk and an almost womanly handwriting. The combination appeared in Bolton Lovehart, too, for Bardsville’s “most promising young writer” (an appellation earned for his desultory work on local history), when he was a boy, “set his neat little booted feet [down] with the motion of prinking precision and appealing weakness.”

Helen Beaumont, who—in narrator Steve Adams’s imagination—undergoes the same process of defamiliarization with an actual piece of writing that Seth experienced with the mark his foot made, is, obviously, a woman; less obvious, yet accessible to the reader who will track down a literary allusion, is the fact that the narrator of “Testament of Flood” sees her as a double of himself. Near the beginning of this short narrative, Steve Adams remembers something he never saw but “felt as if he had observed,” Helen mailing a letter:

So long as the letter remained between the fingers, it was intimate and part of herself. When the letter plunged into the black cavity and the lid clicked, the inscribed sentiments were abstracted, only connected with her being by a signature which he might recognize in precise backhand like the “Helen Beaumont” on her school papers. The letter with the signature “Helen” would no longer belong to her; it would belong to the world, to almost anybody.... (164)
The reference to a schoolroom signature recalls the association established in "Goodwood" between school penmanship and feminine writing; the abstracting of sentiments and the fact that the letter would no longer belong to its author recall the intentional forgetting by which Seth could pretend that his footprint had been made by someone else (in fact, by someone else in a book). At the close of the story the narrator undergoes a similar experience. Thinking of Helen Beaumont seated somewhere behind him in the classroom as he reads from a book about Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, he comes across the line "Cover her face: mine eyes dazzle: she died young. His lips, moving stiffly . . . formed the words. . . . Did he really speak the words out loud; he could never remember . . . [H]e discovered that he felt himself far away from her [from Helen], and much older . . ." (169). As Seth could look at the track in the mud and imagine it wasn't his and as Helen, in the narrator's postal fantasy, could write and mail a letter that was no longer hers, here that narrator, at the same time as he incorporates Webster's poetic line, can doubt whether he actually spoke the words or not. In the double context of the story and the play, the line yields two meanings. In the story it is preceded by the contextual note (from the book Steve Adams is reading) that these words are spoken "when the brother looks at the sister slain to avenge the family honor." Repeating the line with Helen in mind would then amount to a murderous wish on Steve's part—and getting even through writing does occur elsewhere in *The Circus in the Attic*, for the abstraction of sentiment the postal system affords makes it possible for the protagonist of "The Life and Work of Professor Roy Millen" to act out, with no apparent guilt, the hostile intent of a Bellerophontic letter. The plot there turns upon the professor's taking his revenge against a student's youth and good fortune by writing a damning letter of recommendation; mailing it would be the most casual of acts: "He would, he remembered, pass a postbox on his way home" (198).

The distance Steve Adams could now feel stretching between himself and Helen after he mouthed Webster's line—"in the resultant quietude he discovered that he felt himself far away from her, and much older"—seems to be achieved by making of her a text, sending her back in time to become the dead duchess. Like Webster's Ferdinand, who was angered because his sister had secretly married beneath her, Steve, frustrated in his desire for Helen because of her affair with Frank Barber, an older man, wishes to make her inaccessible by giving her a literary death. That he is already at this point able to reduce life to literature is suggested by the way his eyes reduce a three-dimensional scene to a plane surface, through a window that takes on the two-dimensional quality of a page: "Beyond the window a man followed a plow, seeming in the false perspective rather to ascend the pane than retreat across the field toward the green haze of woods" (168).

But the presence of that line from *The Duchess of Malfi* is susceptible
of another interpretation, too, one that has a different sort of resonance with the earlier scene at the post office: The reason why Ferdinand’s eyes dazzle and he wants his sister’s face covered is, at least in part, that she died young, as the next lines he speaks make clear:

She and I were twins:
   And should I die this instant, I had liv’d
   Her time to a minute.

(4.2.267–69)

Ferdinand is sufficiently superstitious to imagine his twin sister’s fate is linked to his. But in the context of “Testament of Flood” the possibility that Steve Adams might, by implication, be Helen’s twin throws a new light on the earlier scene that cast Helen in the role of writer—or, rather, a familiar light, since it has already become apparent how the distancing effect Steve experiences at the end of the story parallels the one he imagines Helen undergoing when the letter that had been “part of herself” is abstracted into a text “only connected with her being by a signature.” In acknowledging this twinship, if in fact that is what he is doing by quoting Ferdinand, the narrator affirms that Steve’s transformation of Helen Beaumont into a text is not just the work of a reader but a writer. And to be a writer is to be, if not a woman, at least woman’s twin.

When Seth makes his footprint in the mud of the auroral beach of the world in “Blackberry Winter,” he is in fact rehearsing what will happen in the book in which his story appears; for when we see this barefoot print again (and the mud has dried to dust) it will appear as the mark of another, indeed, of a black companion like the Friday Seth was thinking of: “Alec devoted his attention to making elaborate and perfect footprints in which the dust outlined the creases of the skin and stood up beautifully in the spaces between his toes” (216; emphasis added). We might remember that Seth too had been interested in perfection: “and make the perfect mark of your foot....” Alec is Tommy’s black playmate in “Prime Leaf,” a role analogous to that of Little Jebb in “Blackberry Winter,” and a measure of the subtle precision of the structural connections underlying the Circus stories is a coincidence of names like the one of the two Seths that links Alec to Jebb through another Alec who bears a resemblance of his own to Jebb. “A Christian Education” concludes with a note on the fate of Silas Nabb’s younger brother, who did not have to undergo Silas’s “Christian education” (with its injunction to turn the other cheek): “Alec turned out to be a terror.... When he was about twenty-two he got in a row and shot a man with a .38. The man died. Alec is over in Nashville in the pen now, and I guess he’ll be there a good long time” (142). “Blackberry Winter” closes with a remarkably similar epilogue: “As for Little Jebb, he grew up to be a
mean and sly Negro. He killed another Negro in a fight and got sent to the penitentiary, where he is yet, the last I heard tell” (86).

The hearth Seth had stood on in his bare feet before he went outside to make his footprint in the mud likewise reappears in “Testament of Flood,” as that story’s boy protagonist “crouched on the tile hearth and stared at the disintegrating embers. He heard his mother’s voice from the next room” (166). The hearth also reappears in “Prime Leaf,” where it is joined by some other significant details from “Blackberry Winter”: a father on horseback and a son who tries, as Seth had tried, to read his father’s thoughts by reading his impassive face. As Thomas Hardin, both a father (to the younger Tommy) and a son (to his father Joe Hardin), fixed his gaze on the family hearth, “his eyes stared into the depth of the embers like those of a man who sees something he desires but may not have. Then his wife laughed” (247). One thing he desires but cannot easily obtain—but which his father seems to possess—is his wife’s admiration and love.

“I know which one. It’s him.”

“You and Papa are mighty different” [she says to her husband].

I don’t know which one I like the best.”

“You and Papa are mighty different” [she says to her husband].

“I know which one. It’s him.”

“Maybe so, maybe you’re right.” And then she caught sight of her husband’s face. “Why, Thomas! . . . I do believe you’re jealous of your own father. You ought to be spanked like Tommy.”

He turned and stared directly at her with the same look in his eyes as when he had been staring into the center of the fire.

(247–48)

The immediately preceding story, “The Unvexed Isles,” might have alerted us to expect a scene of jealousy around a fireplace. There, Professor Dalrymple had reason to be suspicious, for he happened to notice that the cigarette his student guest had laid on the ashtray was stained with lipstick. The young man had “a kind of aimless vitality that seemed to make the fire burn up brighter and the bulbs behind their parchment shades glow with more assurance” (200; emphasis added). Now, in “Testament of Flood,” Steve Adams, whom we may presume to be the son of the Thomas Adams who unsuccessfully courted Elsie Barton in the immediately preceding “Love of Elsie Barton,”10 had been consumed with desire for Elsie’s daughter, Helen, thinking about her incessantly as they both sat in the schoolroom. As he did, stoking his desire for that which he could not have, he stared at the “swollen bulb of the stove” that glowed with heat. “At noon recess the older girls sat near the stove to eat their lunches. Heat flushed their cheeks and their voices harbored a subdued excitement” (165). In “The Love of Elsie Barton,” when Elsie threw over Thomas Adams for Benjamin Beaumont, she would sit with her girlfriends as they teased her
about him “with a secret, sweet thought in her head, like the piece of candy a child holds on its tongue and secretly sucks . . . and a little spot of color would glow in either of her cheeks” (153). Both of these girlish glows and groupings reaffirm what was already evident in the swollen bulb of the stove that glowed like their cheeks (from “red” to “tint of rose” as it cooled at the end of the schoolday [166])—the sexuality of their subdued excitement and his. Thus, the linkage of fire and glowing bulbs in the observation in “The Unvexed Isles” concerning the effects of the student’s “aimless vitality” is no accident. All of this comes to a head in a remarkable scene involving the professor, his wife, the student, and the fireplace:

Alice Dalrymple gave her gaze to the fire, where flames scrolled ornamentally upward to the black chimney throat. The brass dogs gleamed, the hearth was swept to a sharp border, the flames sprouted upwards like flowers from an accurate parterre. . . . Alice Dalrymple held her head at right angles to the young man’s chair; her profile was clean and delicate, with a careful dyspeptic beauty. The young man himself was looking into the fire. (203)

Alice’s posture allows us to see her in profile, and a closer look focuses on her throat: “When she laughs now she holds her head up so the skin won’t sag in her neck. Craning her neck like that, she looks like a cigarette advertisement” (205). Her throat invites a cigarette, or nourishes the thought of one, as the “black chimney throat” of the fireplace draws the flame. The right angles of her pose, the clean look of her profile, and the “accurate modulation” of her laugh (205) from that throat recall, respectively, the “sharp border” and clean-swept look of the hearth and its appearance of being an “accurate” bed for sprouting flames. If Alice is the hearth, the student with his aimless vitality supplies the flame—as does the elder Mr. Hardin in “Prime Leaf” when he “got down to his knees and began to blow Edith’s remnant of coals back to flame” (267). And it is with reason that the coals bear her name, for Edith is as closely connected to that hearth as Alice was to hers. When she sits at her fireplace, a sense of order prevails in the surrounding disorder, as if things were now in their right places; her robe falls to the hearth and almost makes her one with that hearth: “She . . . wore a blue flannel robe which dropped loosely from her shoulders to the stone of the hearth and crumpled there to give a strange impression of arrangement in the cold disorder of the room” (264).

The drama in “Prime Leaf” of the struggle between father and son is played out on the stage of that hearth. What is at issue is participation in or denunciation of the tobacco farmers’ association’s strategic shift from boycott to terror. The elder Mr. Hardin had resigned from the board of directors to protest this new direction and said he would leave the associa-
tion itself the first time it burned a barn. When he does decide to leave, and to write his letter of resignation from the association—a moment in the story exactly parallel to Senator Tolliver’s letter to the Tobacco Association in Night Rider—the first (and only, as it turns out) mark he makes with his pen on the letter has enormous resonance in the larger context of Warrendian narratives in which the relationship between a father and son is determined by what the father writes. Here, the text is a single line, and it obliterates the son: “Mr. Hardin got another sheet of paper from one of the pigeon-holes before him and laid it on the desk. Across the top of the sheet ran the business caption: Cedardale—J. C. Hardin & Son—Tobacco Growers and Stock Breeders. Carefully he drew a single line through the ‘& Son’ of the caption, but he did not begin to write again” (258).

The day the younger Mr. Hardin had stared at his wife the way he stared at the fire, with the eyes of a man who sees something he desires but may not have, and the day his wife accuses him of being jealous of his own father, the senior Hardin arrives with the evening paper and its news of the night riders’ burning three barns. The newspaper was in his pocket when the older man came in to sit by the fire opposite his son, “propped his stick against the stonework of the fireplace, and began filling his pipe.” After the first few puffs, he takes out the paper and hands it to his son. Tom Hardin stares at the paper as intently as he had gazed into the fire, and when he turns a page, “the paper crackled sharply in the silence, like a new-lit log at night.” Thomas holds fire in his hands, both for the simile that makes the paper sound like a crackling log and for the incendiary news it brings. Perhaps in another sense as well, if we pay attention to what happens in the background as he reads: “His father watched him; he still held the pipe fixed between his teeth while he watched, but no more puffs of smoke came from it” (251). Some kind of fire has passed from father to son, or so at least the son hopes, if, as one might suspect, his principal motivation is to possess the vital fire that would command his wife’s allegiance and desire, to steal it away from his father.

How appropriate it is, then, that when he finishes the article and begins to argue with his father about the association he should get up from the stool and step “to the center of the hearth.” The hearth is more than high ground; it is the prize for which the battle is fought. Simply to occupy it gives Thomas an immediate apparent advantage over his father: “The father, sitting in the chair with the newspaper on his lap, looked very small before him” (242). But Thomas’s moral disadvantage is very real: his father had been among the first to oppose the oppression of the tobacco buyers by joining the association, and had persuaded his son to come along. Now it appears that it is just as heroic to oppose the oppression of the association’s terrorist tactics, and the father has been the first to make a moral point of leaving. Standing on the hearth, the son accuses his father of en-
dangering the family farm by having made a mistake he can't correct: “You helped start this association. You got us in it and you got a lot of other people in it. You've started something and you can't stop it, so you're getting out. You made your mistake when you got off the board. Papa, you're on horseback now, you're on horseback, and it's a wild piece of horseflesh” (253). The image Thomas adopts here is curious, and perhaps premonitory, for after much discussion and his eventual turnabout decision to leave the association with this father and sell out their crop together, he will try, fatally, another heroic tack. Their own barn is burned that night and, too late to prevent that disaster or even for the act to be justified as self-defense, Thomas will go out with a gun and shoot a night rider off his horse. When he returns to the house to tell his father what he has done and the elder Hardin begins to telephone to find out who was hurt, Thomas's victorious pose on the hearth takes on a look of almost sexual triumph: “Thomas stood on the hearth, rigidly erect, and never shifted his eyes from his father's face. The face was inscrutable and tired” (272).

If we have the feeling that in aiming at the night rider Thomas was also aiming at his father, it may be not only because he had just accused him of being on horseback but also because at that moment he was reenacting a sequence of events we have seen enacted before in “The Circus in the Attic” and “Blackberry Winter.” The outcome was very different, but when Seth approached his father on horseback and came almost close enough to touch his heel, he had “tried to read his face,” that “impassive” paternal face. Likewise, Thomas never shifts his eyes from his father's “inscrutable” face. There was a persistent focus on the horseman's leg in both “The Circus in the Attic” and “Blackberry Winter”: it was when Seth Sykes grabbed the lieutenant's left leg that he made his fatal move (and Bolton's own father, Simon Lovehart, was flung from his horse in another Civil War battle by a wound in his left leg [17]); the other Seth thought about how close he was to touching his father's heel. That focus continues in “Prime Leaf,” for we are twice made to focus our gaze on the legs of the man Thomas shot. It was Mr. Hopkins, whose “thick, booted legs almost gave the look of deformity” (240)—an almost obsessive reiteration of the earlier sentence, “His thick legs were ridiculously short, and the boots which he wore almost gave the look of a deformity” (228).

Fathers are not alone in their inscrutability; mothers, too, are capable of difficultly decipherable utterance. Bolton Lovehart's mother made those passionate cries that could be misread as anguish at the death of her husband; only time could show that they were really cries of triumph. But her cries are now always as susceptible of interpretation as that, for when Bolton later tried to persuade her to see a specialist for her heart condition “she uttered again the wild, undecipherable, ambiguous, untranslatable cries which she had uttered by the fallen body of Simon Lovehart” (34).
are made more difficult to decipher by the narrator's claim that they are the same cries, for the situation is entirely different. How could now they be cries of either anguish or triumph? More likely than either is that they articulate nothing but the fact of their articulation, phatic sounds uttered in order to keep Bolton off balance, to convince him of her otherness and of his inability ever to interpret her. And if their second articulation is made more difficult to interpret by a changed context, what are we to make of the fact that they appear on yet another occasion divorced not only from that context but from that speaker as well? When Bolton tries to steal a kiss from Sara Darter, she too "screamed at him with furious words which he could not interpret." If what the narrator says is true about having to wait until the flesh of the passion has withered away to interpret such articulations, to wait until instead of hearing them we see with scrutinizing eyes the logical articulation of fact with fact, then perhaps not only the passion but also the speaker is unimportant. Perhaps what matters is less that Bolton's mother or that Sara Darter uttered those cries than that they were uttered at all, that Bolton finds himself in the position of being unable to interpret them—the same Bolton Lovehart who found himself unable to write the history of his county and constructed a soft pine circus instead.

Professor Dalrymple finds himself in a similar position of remoteness from the world in "The Unvexed Isles":

As he turned about and traversed the excessive distance across the blue carpet, he felt that all these objects accumulated around him—table, chair, blue carpet, rug, lamp—were unfamiliar to him, and not for the first time might, if he so chose, be construed in their unique and rich unities. After he had adjusted the tray, with special care, on the stand, he gave to its design a lingering and analytic regard. Lingering . . . as if his attention to the intricacies of the design might postpone the need to inspect those people whose voices, somewhat remotely, impinged upon him. (201)

If Bolton Lovehart found a distraction in objects of his own making, Dalrymple is distracted by everyday, preexisting objects that for others, and for himself before this moment, were mere background details of no importance. Suddenly they demand his attention, and in their unfamiliarity, their opacity, acquire a rich density of their own. We may be so accustomed to valuing engagement with the "real world," that we can too easily assume that when the choice of such a disengagement as Bolton or Dalrymple experiences appears before us in a work of fiction we are being exhorted to beware their evil example. Yet what Dalrymple does is precisely what Warren's story collection encourages us to do, and what we have been doing in these pages—to read these narratives less for their passion than for their
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connection of fact with fact, for the way in which they succeed in making such homely things as bulbs, stoves, hearths, shoes, legs, and limps uncannily unfamiliar. There is a certain remoteness attached to this critical activity that has more to do with Dalrymple's discovery of the esthetics of everyday objects and the intricacies of their design than it does with the kind of vicarious desire for intervention that we might nevertheless have wished that the professor had exercised. But he never intervenes in the drama or farce that he thinks is being played out between his wife and the student guest, and, serene to the end, lingers downstairs alone after she goes up to bed.

"Somewhere on the upper floor a light burned, splaying shadow and angular patches of illumination into the lower section like a gigantic, ghostly pack of cards" (209). This light from the upper reaches of the house illuminates more than Professor Dalrymple realizes, for it appears to one who has read the immediately preceding story in the collection, "The Life and Work of Professor Roy Millen"—likewise about a professor and a student of whom he had reason to be jealous—as the ghost of an image that the reader could have remembered from the first page of that story, the professor's recollection of "long tranquil evenings at the bridge table with the light glinting subduedly on the exciting and rich designs of the royal cards" (190). Dalrymple had been struck by the rich unities and intricate design of what he saw in the household furnishings; we have reason to be struck by the rich unity of these two passages, and to suspect an underlying intricacy of design. By design or not, the presence of this image in two so similar and contiguous stories should be cause for reflection. Yet it is not exactly the same image, for the playing cards at the beginning of the first of these two stories are real, their designs revealed by the glinting light, while their counterparts on the next to last page of the second story are imaginary, brought into existence only by the trick of the light from upstairs, gigantic ghost cards occupying the space that had earlier been inhabited by those everyday furnishings that had first attracted Dalrymple's gaze.

Perhaps the cards' significance is in that difference, a movement from the real to the imagined, a movement in the same direction of greater remoteness from the world that Dalrymple was pursuing when he was distracted by impinging voices from what he could construe of the design that surrounded him. Like Bolton's circus constructions, the second set of cards is no longer something merely perceived, like the furniture, but Dalrymple's own creation, a trick of the light that would not have worked without his participation. And, like the circus in the attic, they are playthings, flat surfaces as subject to playful manipulation as the tigers and trapeze artists of Bolton's upstairs menagerie. Representative as they are of the kind of double images Warren's Circus provides, where so much happens more than once, in different contexts, for different reasons, and with differ-
ent actors, the second pack of cards in particular seems especially indicative of the kind of reading this book (as opposed to its stories separately considered) invites—a reading imbued with the attic perspective that takes pleasure in contemplating the rich, separate existences of these images, their intricate design, and the underlying logic of their reappearances, that takes the risk of seeing them as a hand dealt a reader fully aware of the possibility that they may only be tricks of that upstairs light.