

*The Collected Works  
of Billy the Kid*

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MICHAEL ONDAATJE

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THE COLLECTED WORKS OF BILLY THE KID

*(Miss Sallie Chisum, later Mrs. Roberts, was living in Roswell in 1924, a sweet faced, kindly old lady of a thousand memories of frontier days.)*

ON HER HOUSE

*The house was full of people all the time  
the ranch was a little world in itself  
I couldn't have been lonesome if I had tried*

*Every man worth knowing in the Southwest,  
and many not worth knowing, were guests  
one time or another.*

*What they were made no difference in their welcome.  
Sometimes a man would ride up in a hurry  
eat a meal in a hurry and depart in a hurry*

*Billy the Kid would come in often  
and sometimes stayed for a week or two.  
I remember how frightened I was the first time he came.*



John & Sallie  
Chisum's house

Forty miles ahead of us, in almost a straight line, is the house. Angela D and I on horses moving towards it, me bringing her there. Even now, this far away, I can imagine them moving among the rooms. It is nine in the morning. They are leaning back in their chairs after their slow late Saturday breakfast. John with the heels of his brown boots on the edge of the table in the space he cleared of his plate and cup and cutlery, the cup in his hands in his lap. The table with four plates—two large two small. The remnants of bacon fat and eggs on the larger ones, the black crumbs of toast butter and marmalade (Californian) on the others. One cup in a saucer, one saucer that belonged to the cup that is in John Chisum's hands now. Across the table on the other side is Sallie, in probably her long brown and yellow dress, the ribbon down her front to the waist with pale blue buttons, a frill on either side of her neck along her shoulders. By now she would have moved the spare chair so she too could put her feet up, barefoot as always, her toes crinkling at the wind that comes from the verandah door. Her right arm would be leaning against the table and now and then she'll scrape the bottom of her cup against the saucer and drink some of the coffee, put it down and return the fingers of her right hand to bury them in the warm of her hair. They do not talk much, Sallie and John Chisum, but from here I can imagine the dialogue of noise—the scraping cup, the tilting chair, the cough, the suction as an arm lifts off a table breaking the lock that was formed by air and the wet of the surface.

On other days they would go their own ways. Chisum would be up earlier than dawn and gone before Sallie even woke and rolled over in bed, her face blind as a bird in the

dark. It was only later, when the sun eventually reached the bed and slid over her eyes, that she slowly leaned up to find her body, clothesless, had got cold and pulling the sheet from the strong tuck fold at the foot of the bed brings it to her, wraps it around her while she sits in bed, the fists of her feet against her thighs trying to discover which was colder—the flesh at her feet or the flesh at her thighs, hugging the sheet to her tight until it would be a skin. Pretending to lock her arms over it as if a tight dress, warming her breasts with her hands through the material.

Once last year seeing her wrapped I said, Sallie, know what a madman's skin is? And I showed her, filling the automatic indoor bath with warm water and lifting her and dropping her slow into the bath with the sheet around her and then heaving her out and saying that's what it is, that white thing round you. Try now to dig yourself out of it. Placed her in the bed and watched her try to escape it then.

On weekdays anyway, she'd sit like that on the bed, the sheet tight around her top and brought down to her belly, her legs having to keep themselves warm. Listening for noises around the house, the silence really, knowing John had gone, just leaving a list of things he wanted her to do. She would get up and after a breakfast that she would eat wandering around the house slowly, she would begin the work. Keeping the books, dusting his reading books, filling the lamps in the afternoon—they being emptied in the early morning by John to avoid fire danger when the sun took over the house and scorched it at noon, or dropping sideways in the early afternoon sent rays horizontal through the doors and windows. No I forgot, she had stopped that now. She left the paraffin in the lamps; instead had had John build shutters for every door and window, every hole

Shut  
out  
outside  
world

in the wall. So that at eleven in the morning all she did was close and lock them all until the house was silent and dark blue with sunless quiet. For four hours. Eleven till three. A time when, if inside, as I was often, your footsteps sounded like clangs over the floors, echoes shuddering across the rooms. And Sallie like a ghost across the room moving in white dresses, her hair knotted as always at the neck and continuing down until it splayed and withered like eternal smoke halfway between the shoulder blades and the base of a cobbler's spine.

Yes. In white long dresses in the dark house, the large bones somehow taking on the quietness of the house. Yes I remember. After burning my legs in the fire and I came to their house, it must have been my second visit and Sallie had begun using the shutters at eleven. And they brought the bed out of the extra bedroom and propped me up at one end of the vast living room of their bungalow. And I sat there for three days not moving an inch, like some dead tree witnessing the tides or the sun and the moon taking over from each other as the house in front of me changed colour—the night, the early morning yellow, the gradual move to dark blue at 11 o'clock, the new white 4 o'clock sun let in, later the gradual growing dark again.

For three days, my head delirious so much I thought I was going blind twice a day, recognising no one, certainly not the Chisums, for I had been brought out cold and dropped on their porch by someone who had gone on without waiting even for water for himself. And Sallie I suppose taking the tent sheet off my legs each morning once the shutters closed. No. Again. Sallie approaching from the far end of the room like some ghost I didn't know who it was. A tray of things in her right hand, a lamp in the other.

Me screaming stop stop STOP THERE you're going to *fall* on me! My picture now sliding so she with her tray and her lamp jerked up to the ceiling and floated down calm again and jerked to the ceiling and floated down calm again and continued forward crushing me against the wall only I didn't feel anything yet. And Sallie I suppose taking the sheet off my legs and putting on the fan so they became cold and I started to feel them again. Then starting to rub and pour calamine like ice only it felt like the tongue of a very large animal my god I remember each swab felt like the skin and flesh had been moved off completely leaving only raw bone riddled with loose nerves being blown about and banging against each other from just her slow breath.

In the long twenty-yard living-dining room I remember the closing of shutters, with each one the sudden blacking out of clarity in a section of the room, leaving fewer arcs of sun each time digging into the floor. Sallie starting from one end and disappearing down to the far end leaving black behind her as she walked into the remaining light, making it all a cold darkness. Then in other rooms not seen by me. Then appearing vast in the thick blue in her long white dress, her hands in the pockets strolling in the quiet, because of her tallness the hips moving first, me at the far end all in black.

Her shoes off, so silent, she moves a hand straying over the covers of John's books, till she comes and sits near me and puts her feet up shoeless and I reach to touch them and the base of them is hard like some semi-shelled animal but only at the base, the rest of her foot being soft, oiled almost so smooth, the thin blue veins wrapping themselves around the inside ankle bone and moving like paths into the toes, the brown tanned feet of Sallie Chisum resting on my chest,

my hands rubbing them, pushing my hands against them like a carpenter shaving wood to find new clear pulp smelling wood beneath. My own legs black with scars. And down the room, the parrot begins to talk to itself in the dark, thinking it is night.

Animals & humans...  
all welcome

She had lived in that house fourteen years, and every year she demanded of John that she be given a pet of some strange exotic breed. Not that she did not have enough animals. She had collected several wild and broken animals that, in a way, had become exotic by their breaking. Their roof would have collapsed from the number of birds who might have lived there if the desert hadn't killed three quarters of those that tried to cross it. Still every animal that came within a certain radius of that house was given a welcome, the tame, the half born, the wild, the wounded.

I remember the first night there. John took me to see the animals. About twenty yards away from the house, he had built vast cages, all in a row. They had a tough net roof over them for the day time when they were let out but tended to stay within the shade of their cages anyway. That night John took me along and we stepped off the porch, left the last pool of light, down the steps into the dark. We walked together smoking his long narrow cigars, with each suck the nose and his moustache lighting up. We came to the low brooding whirr of noise, night sleep of animals. They were stunning things in the dark. Just shapes that shifted. You could peer into a cage and see nothing till a rattle of claws hit the grid an inch from your face and their churning feathers seemed to hiss, and a yellow pearl of an eye cracked with veins glowed through the criss-crossed fence.

— Like  
Sallie

One of the cages had a huge owl. It was vast. All I could see were its eyes—at least 8" apart. The next morning however, it turned out to be two owls, both blind in one eye. In those dark cages the birds, there must have been twenty of them, made a steady hum all through the night—a noise you heard only if you were within five yards of them. Walking back to the house it was again sheer silence from where we had come, only now we knew they were moving and sensing the air and our departure. We knew they continued like that all night while we slept.

Halfway back to the house, the building we moved towards seemed to be stuffed with something yellow and wet. The night, the dark air, made it all mad. That fifteen yards away there were bright birds in cages and here John Chisum and I walked, strange bodies. Around us total blackness, nothing out there but a desert for seventy miles or more, and to the left, a few yards away, a house stuffed with wet light where within the frame of a window we saw a woman move carrying fire in a glass funnel and container towards the window, towards the edge of the dark where we stood.

\*

(To come) to where eyes will  
 move in head like a rat  
 mad since locked in a biscuit tin all day  
 stampeding mad as a mad rats legs  
 bang it went was hot  
 under my eye  
 was hot small bang did it  
 almost a pop  
 I didnt hear till I was red  
 had a rat fyt in my head  
 sad billys body glancing out  
 body going as sweating white horses go  
 reeling off me wet  
 scuffing down my arms  
 wet horse white  
 screaming wet sweat round the house  
 sad billys out  
 floating barracuda in the brain

① when in the "dark" can't make out reality — but when faced w/ reality we are aware of what's going on even when we can't see it  
 (Billy's myth: no one knows truth but are aware it exists)

Life/sellie  
 at  
 house  
 contains  
 in dark  
 even when  
 Billy isn't  
 there

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② Sellie & House  
 represented Sanctuary & Life & death  
 like the UK in darkness

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