

Fred Parker's Auction Sale

A hundred cars were hunched along
Fred Parker's road when I arrived.
Squatted fatly like rows of hungry bugs
glistening over June grass,
they were waiting in a heavy silence,
prepared to accept their loads and scatter,
dispersing what was left of old Fred's excuses
for having existed.

Early summer sunlight poured a
fuzzy warmth across the pavement,
clicks of urgent footsteps merging
where a muted hum arose: the
lookers moving in questing streams
among and through rows and heaps
of goods beside the long frame
house, with just a touch of homemade,
shaded by a pair of antique walnut
trees and shielded from the winding
road by cedars growing scraggly
from being too old and too close together.

The Angus bull across the roadway tore
sod and bellowed flatly with his
tongue beside his teeth, snorting and
lunging forward to his knees to drive
the redness of his unsheathed shaft in
desperate fury through rising
bursts of silt flung wildly from his
hooves one two three times,

Like the last futile gasps that ripped across
Old Fred's lungs while he labored
through the final weeks on a cherry
bedstead now standing in the sun, flat
up against the south outside wall
in the middle of Mrs. Parker's
newly trampled bed of purple iris.

The tall farmer in new bib overalls
and two days' growth of grizzled beard
bid for Fred's walnut mantel clock
against the oldish youngish city woman
with a too-sharp face and too-thin lips
standing beside her oldish youngish husband.

At forty dollars she was impatient,
at fifty disgusted, at sixty grim,
seventy angry, eighty furious
but silent. The farmer took away the prize,
cradling it in his great old arms and
walking stubbornly past the sea of eyes
and all the lifted eyebrows, saying
loudly enough to his silent wife who
stood with glistening, downcast gaze
beside the Ford, "*I come here
to get Fred's clock. And I got it.*"

He leveled it on the back seat of
the Ford and just before closing
and locking the door he touched
the pendulum into motion again,
set his jaw, raised his head, and
moved back into the chuckling crowd where
the auctioneer was calling over
strange personal embarrassing objects,

feather in his smallish gray felt hat
arrogantly crimson, Kentucky accent rising,
exhorting, cajoling, teasing over
a dog collar, a piece of embroidery,
kitchen utensils, black book.

A hush then, as jokes rose and fell,
words leaping now softly, inadvertently,
and briefly apologetic from his lips:
a family album, a woman's voice near me
saying in brief dismay she'd not
like her family's album joked over
in front of all those people
like that.

Gripping my sale-purchased, Fred-crafted
walnut stool I followed trampled grass
back into the bright hot sunshine,
stopped suddenly, thinking to hurl it
far out over the fence and down into
the ragged gully of the apple orchard;
almost forgot to gulp against the choking
acid of the sick that in the brightness
of the sunshine was strangely
no longer hidden deep inside me.

