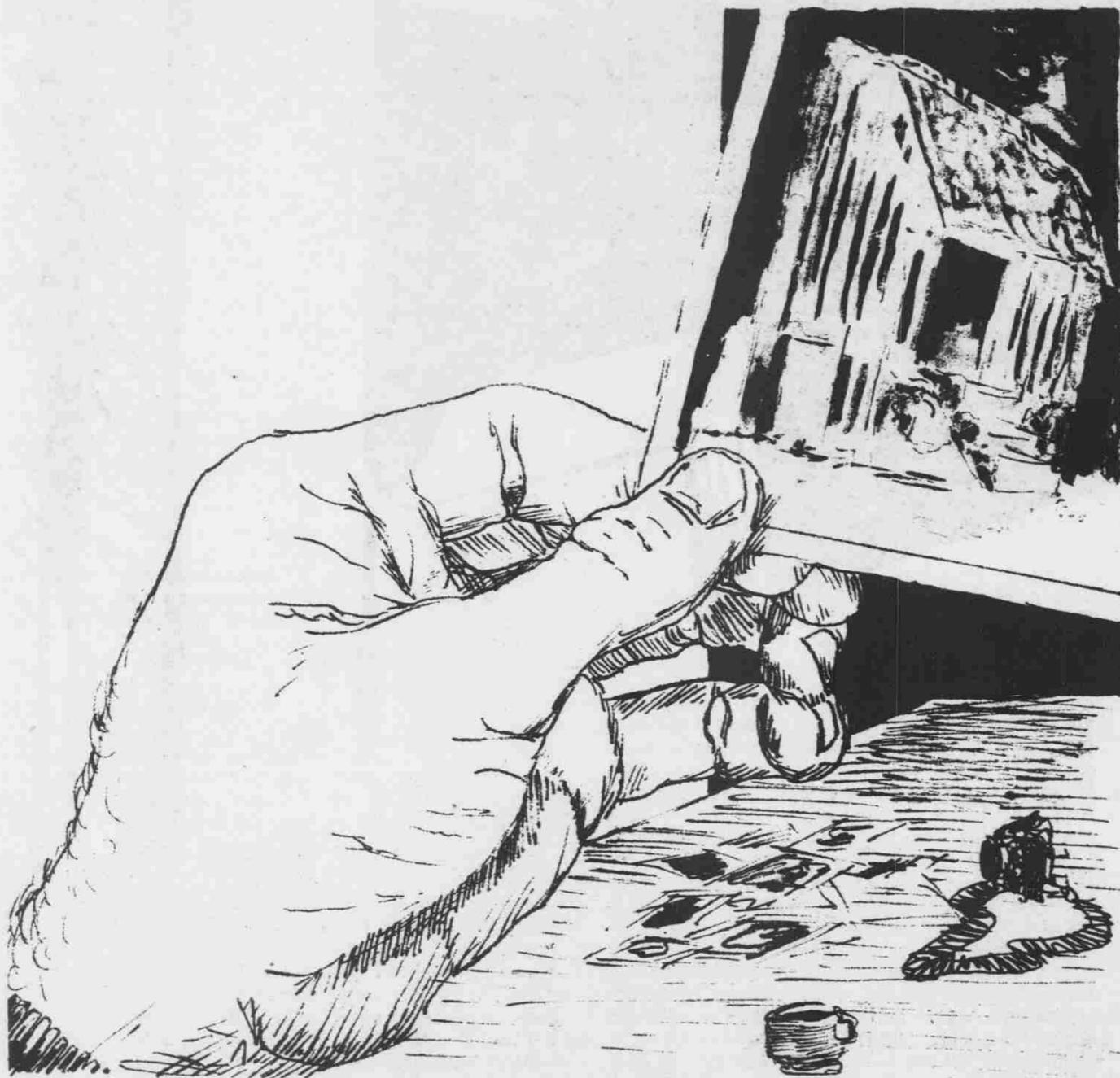


# TWO TALES THAT MENTION CHICKENHOUSES



By MICHAEL PARKER

## I

It was winter, and he had moved into a house with her in the mountains. She kept the house very warm, and the first week they were there, she helped him put plastic on the windows and doors that they were not using. They went down to the hardware store and bought a 50-foot roll of plastic, and covered all the windows and doors and even the outside of their bedroom. At one time, it had been a screened-in porch, and now, she told him, there were cracks where cold air streamed in. Together they tacked the plastic all the way around the back porch bedroom and when they had finished she went inside to start dinner, and he stayed

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outside to chop wood and to stare at the bedroom; insulated, wrapped, plastic gleaming in the late afternoon sun.

At first he liked it in the mountains. She had a teaching job at the college and he found some temporary work at a nearby state park cutting hiking trails through the woods. He usually worked by himself, and sometimes in the late fall he would be out on the trail all day without seeing anyone. He would take his lunch in his backpack and there was a favorite spot where he liked to eat and then lie awake for a time. He would lie awake and think about what kind of people he would meet on the trail, or what would happen if someone he knew came along the trail while he was resting. He ate and rested on a short cliff over a creek, and he could see both ways down the trail, if anyone were to come along.

Sometimes he didn't get home until late, and she would have already eaten and would be sitting at her desk grading papers or writing letters to her friends back in the city. He would eat and think

about telling her about his day while she talked about hers. She talked to him while she wrote letters describing the house that they lived in with the plastic over the windows and the piles of wood that he had stretched from tree to tree around the yard. It was not that she didn't ask him, but instead that his job never changed that much from day to day, unless he finished a trail, which he had done only once, since the trails were usually 10 to 15 miles long. He had long ago described the colors of the leaves to her, and besides, couldn't she see them herself, driving through the valley to her job?

Sometimes that fall, when he could not sleep, he would get up and lie on the rug next to the fireplace and listen to all the noises that went on outside. There were always plenty. He would hear owls, chicken trucks, and the wind slapping plastic against the windowpanes. The owls were off and on, like the chicken trucks. He knew they were chicken trucks because he had to drive past the chickenhouses to get to the park, and in the after-

noons when he got home early he would walk to the road to get the mail, and there would be chicken feathers lying in the ditch around the mailbox. When he heard the chicken trucks grind out on the highway, he would imagine the wind catching the feathers that did not fit into the small, barred chicken boxes and carrying them down along the sides of the roads. He would think of this while the plastic beat the panes. Usually she would wake up and miss him and find him beneath the quilt on the rug. She would wake him if he was asleep and pull him back in the bed. He would say things to her after getting up from the rug, things that he had not thought of. He had no idea where these things came from and after he said them, these things that he could not explain, he would remember something.

He would remember another time in another house, with another woman. It was in the kitchen and there was bacon frying. A Saturday morning that he planned to go to the hardware store, then come home and do some things around the house, and later read through the afternoon or nap with her, pull her away from her chair by the fire, pull her in with him.

But instead there was an argument that he did not care to get into, that he tried long and hard to avoid, even by going out of the kitchen. But the argument followed and so did the smell of the bacon until it was so strong throughout the house that he could not postpone it. He had to whirl around.

And he said, "OK. Everything you think is funny I don't, and vice versa. I mean it. Every single thing."

And she: "What? What are you talking about?"

And he: "It's OK. Really, it's all right. I'm sorry, I really am."

But that was that, and now this was this.

## II

He was working on a book about chickenhouses. It was to be called just that, *Chickenhouses*. It was to have many pages of diagrams and photographs, and upon completion, he hoped that his chickenhouse book would be standard fare on every glass and steel coffee table in America.

This chickenhouse thing required a lot of extensive research. He sometimes drove all day just looking for signs of chickenhouses. He had in his truck a map of all the major chicken producing areas of the country, but it was dated and unreliable. Besides, it was all so unpredictable. People changed what they were doing in a matter of days, it seemed to him. He had always thought of the rural means of livelihood as fairly constant, having grown up in the suburbs. But no more, he realized. His last book was much easier. It was called *Wells of America*, about wells. There were lots of old wells around, and he had not had to do so much driving.