

ANGLE OF REPOSE

BY WALLACE STEGNER

NOVELS

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A Shooting Star
Second Growth
The Big Rock Candy Mountain
Fire and Ice
On a Darkling Plain
The Potter's House
Remembering Laughter
Joe Hill
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SHORT STORIES

The City of the Living
The Women on the Wall

NON-FICTION

Beyond the Hundredth Meridian
One Nation (with the Editors of *Look*)
The Gathering of Zion
Mormon Country
Wolf Willow
The Sound of Mountain Water

ANGLE OF REPOSE

WALLACE STEGNER

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For my son, Page.

My thanks to J.M. and her sister for the loan of their ancestors. Though I have used many details of their lives and characters, I have not hesitated to warp both personalities and events to fictional needs. This is a novel which utilizes selected facts from their real lives. It is in no sense a family history.

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I

GRASS VALLEY

Now I believe they will leave me alone. Obviously Rodman came up hoping to find evidence of my incompetence—though how an incompetent could have got this place renovated, moved his library up, and got himself transported to it without arousing the suspicion of his watchful children, ought to be a hard one for Rodman to answer. I take some pride in the way I managed all that. And he went away this afternoon without a scrap of what he would call data.

So tonight I can sit here with the tape recorder whirring no more noisily than electrified time, and say into the microphone the place and date of a sort of beginning and a sort of return: Zodiac Cottage, Grass Valley, California, April 12, 1970.

Right there, I might say to Rodman, who doesn't believe in time, notice something: I started to establish the present and the present moved on. What I established is already buried under layers of tape. Before I can say *I am*, I was. Heraclitus and I, prophets of flux, know that the flux is composed of parts that imitate and repeat each other. Am or was, I am cumulative, too. I am everything I ever was, whatever you and Leah may think. I am much of what my parents and especially my grandparents were—inherited stature, coloring, brains, bones (that part unfortunate), plus transmitted prejudices, culture, scruples, likings, moralities, and moral errors that I defend as if they were personal and not familial.

Even places, especially this house whose air is thick with the past. My antecedents support me here as the old wistaria at the corner supports the house. Looking at its cables wrapped two or three times around the cottage, you would swear, and you could be right, that if they were cut the place would fall down.

Rodman, like most sociologists and most of his generation, was born without the sense of history. To him it is only an aborted social science. The world has changed, Pop, he tells me. The past isn't go-

ing to teach us anything about what we've got ahead of us. Maybe it did once, or seemed to. It doesn't any more.

Probably he thinks the blood vessels of my brain are as hardened as my cervical spine. They probably discuss me in bed. *Out of his mind, going up there by himself . . . How can we, unless . . . helpless . . . roll his wheelchair off the porch who'd rescue him? Set himself afire lighting a cigar, who'd put him out? . . . Damned old independent mule-headed . . . worse than a baby. Never consider the trouble he makes for the people who have to look after him . . . House I grew up in, he says. Papers, he says, thing I've always wanted to do . . . All of Grandmother's papers, books, reminiscences, pictures, those hundreds of letters that came back from Augusta Hudson's daughter after Augusta died . . . A lot of Grandfather's relics, some of Father's, some of my own . . . Hundred year chronicle of the family. All right, fine. Why not give that stuff to the Historical Society and get a fat tax deduction? He could still work on it. Why box it all up, and himself too, in that old crooked house in the middle of twelve acres of land we could all make a good thing out of if he'd consent to sell? Why go off and play cobwebs like a character in a Southern novel, out where nobody can keep an eye on him?*

They keep thinking of my good, in their terms. I don't blame them, I only resist them. Rodman will have to report to Leah that I have rigged the place to fit my needs and am getting along well. I have had Ed shut off the whole upstairs except for my bedroom and bath and this study. Downstairs we use only the kitchen and library and the veranda. Everything tidy and shipshape and orderly. No data.

So I may anticipate regular visits of inspection and solicitude while they wait for me to get a belly full of independence. They will look sharp for signs of senility and increasing pain—will they perhaps even hope for them? Meantime they will walk softly, speak quietly, rattle the oarbag gently, murmuring and moving closer until the arm can slide the rope over the stiff old neck and I can be led away to the old folks' pasture down in Menlo Park where the care is so good and there is so much to keep the inmates busy and happy. If I remain stubborn, the decision may eventually have to be made for me, perhaps by computer. Who could argue with a computer? Rodman will punch all his data