

The Water Tower

by Con Chapman

The water tower stood at the edge of town
and from its height few had looked down
except that every other year or so, a high school senior
would go and climb the thing, and paint something
vapid, jejune, as the spinster English teacher would say.
“Seniors 69” or something equally fatuous.
idle, disgraceful, gratuitous.

It was, in the climbers' minds, the principle of the thing:
to leave an imprint of their youth forever upon the face
of the town, in a place where all could see, and seeing,
remember the moment when all was pregnant with possibility,
so that when they returned, if they left, the fertility of that time
might be recalled; and if they stayed they would forever,
have a monument to the days when they were young, bold and
clever.



And so it was that on a night in June three boys climbed to the walkway where, with cans of paint in hand, they sought to leave their imprint upon a thing visible from miles away, their one chance at fame, or at least notoriety. They hurried to slather black and gold across its belly, and by so doing, to impress upon all who saw it from afar that they were as large in the world as they were in their minds.

Two had few accomplishments to their name, single line entries in the school yearbook, nothing much to speak of: audio-visual club, junior varsity football. The third was a lettered tie & coat rebel—

Speech & Debate, Journalism, Honor Roll. He was going somewhere

while the other two were not, but he felt he'd missed out on something

in his high school years. He felt he'd been too good for too long. He

was looking forward to breaking bonds, cutting loose a long way away.

The other two wanted to leave their mark, literally. All they cared about

was bragging rights; they had the balls to do it where others had not

and would simply leave a sign writ large that others might see and having seen would say "That there's Darrell and Gene's doing." The third had put more thought into his Vandalic act. He cared little for the esteem of greaser teens, or thick-necked jocks, or girls. He wanted to place his words up high to be seen by all the world.

And so he took his bucket and brush once he'd reached the top, and started to paint a poem: "As I look down on Sedville town, and watch the folks walk up and down . . ." "What are you doing?" Darrell asked after he'd finished his rudimentary scrawl—"We haven't got all night." "This won't take long," the third boy said. "Just a few rhymed couplets I've worked out in my head." He continued around the catwalk and wrote on.

“I see in their eyes a desperation, a cunning tergiversation.”
“What's taking so long?” the boy named Gene yelled out.
“The cops are going to see us if you don't watch out.”
The two boys heard nothing, and started to panic,
they'd had enough of their daring antic. They started to wind
their way down the stairs, leaving the other fellow there.
They hadn't gone far when they heard a rush of air and then

a sound like a humid door slamming shut, a muffled thud.
There are many ways to die, many causes for a fall from
a high tower; wind, a slip of a foot, a cable that snaps.
Looking back, the three accomplished what they set out
to do; no one ever passed the water tower again without

thinking of them, and that night lived in notoriety, for a young man died there—or merely went free.

