



4-1-1997

A Monument for Phyllis

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Recommended Citation

Hart, Edward L. (1997) "A Monument for Phyllis," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 37 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol37/iss2/5>

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A Monument for Phyllis

I didn't know her, really, since I was just a kid—
 Old enough to read though, and look up
 What *statutory* meant when I saw in the paper
 That her baby's father had been sent to jail.
 He was married and had kids, and Phyllis, maybe,
 Was thirteen—anyway old enough to have a baby.
 She died in childbirth, but the baby lived,
 Adopted by her married brother. I saw him
 Come and talk to my father alone in the front room:
 Everybody in town with a problem talked to my father.
 Our town was small, five hundred at most,
 At the mouth of a canyon through foothills to higher
 Peaks. But you couldn't see them from town—only
 The plain gray slope of sagebrush leading
 To a grove of aspen that sat like a saddle on the spine
 Of the swaybacked hill. And sage is gray, mostly.
 She lived up the hill, not far up, but enough
 Not to be close to other kids her age.
 I'm guessing now, but can't help thinking
 How it must have been, a girl turning into a woman,
 And yearning for night to come when, eyes shut,
 She could see the barn turn into a ballroom
 As one of the first radios in town played tunes
 From a dance band at Coconut Grove or someplace,
 Drifting softly from the house across the way.

Maybe by day she went climbing on the hill,
 Picking an Indian paintbrush here and a sego lily
 There, dwarfed in a gully by sagebrush taller
 Than she was. Or maybe it was the barn she went to,
 Across the street from her house, a big log barn,
 Like most in town, built by the first settlers,
 Not too long ago, before sawmills were built,
 And timber was handy: weathered gray now.
 Against it was a stable for cows and she wandered there,
 Not that cows and milking were so new, but because
 This man was different from father or brothers.
 She went over often while he milked and talked to him,
 Letting the calves come to be fed when he wanted them
 And laughing and skipping when he squirted milk at her.
 Or maybe it wasn't like that. Maybe she went alone,
 Just to explore. Outside, the sun shriveled
 Leaves on the poplar beside the ditch with no water
 In it. The barn was hot, but out of the sun.
 The inside smelled of dry lucerne, and was dark.
 Specks of dust danced crazy in the light spear
 From a knothole. When would night come? Thoughts
 Of bright music and catalogue dresses twirling. . . .
 A door opened. He came in, and she found
 Night hiding at noon in the dust of the old barn.

—Edward L. Hart