



When I was growing up in a small Ohio town, a favorite playsite was a junkyard that lay at the southern end of our neighborhood. It was not an “official” junkyard, the kind with a chainlink fence and a mean dog. Little more than a clearing beside a gravel road that ran next to Lye Creek, it was just a place where townfolk routinely dumped whatever the garbage collectors refused to haul away.

We neighborhood kids called it “the junkyard” anyway, though it didn’t occur to us that a junkyard might actually contain “junk.” We saw it as a trove of treasures that were not so much discarded as lost, thrown out in a crazy fit by people who now regretted it. Since these people could change their minds at any moment, it was important not to dally. Whenever we spotted a pickup truck heading toward Lye Creek, we grabbed our wagons and followed it.

A trip to the junkyard was an exercise in keeping our eyes peeled, in minding the main chance. We figured that on any given day, anything a kid might want could be waiting there. It seemed entirely likely, for instance, that we might find money—not nickels and dimes retrieved from discarded couches, but bags stashed by bank robbers: flour sacks with dollar signs rather than “Pillsbury” stamped on them. As we combed the piles of debris, we wondered whether we’d tell the police once we found the loot, a debate that always ended with one of us declaring “Finders keepers, losers weepers!” Emboldened by the moral clarity that comes from anything that rhymes, we searched even harder.

There were occasional moments of horror, like stirring up a swarm of rats or finding a dead cat, but these only gave our search the thrill of danger. Straight-arrow Midwestern kids, we knew that finding bags of money, like all worthy endeavors, demanded bravery and self-sacrifice. In fact, we vaguely equated foraging through the junkyard with doing good in the world. Lugging home a ten-pound sack of money and giving it to Mom would be the selfless act of a dutiful child—provided, of course, that she didn’t tell the police.

Our hopes of finding money eventually faded, and we teased each other for ever thinking it possible. But another obsession soon replaced it: someday we would surely find racing wheels—the kind found on Soap-box Derby cars. This fantasy emerged from the hours we spent planning and building motorless “go-carts.” Since the main challenge was finding suitable wheels, we got it in our heads that some fool would eventually throw out a shiny set of four racing wheels—and there we’d be, ready to pounce. As we combed through splintered plywood and soggy back-issues of *Life* magazine, we made up a story about a rich

## Children and Junkyards

# The Lure of Buried Treasure

by Jeff Hammond, Professor of English and Reeves Professor of the Humanities



Edward Ardizzone

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British kid who was somehow living in town and had become bored with the go-cart he was building. We had seen enough TV to know exactly what he’d say: “Jeeves, take these wheels to the junkyard.”

Although Jeeves never ditched those wheels near Lye Creek, we found plenty of other objects that would “come in handy,” either for fun or profit. We gathered rusty hubcaps with the idea of shining them up and selling them. Old tires might be sold to other kids as swings. Used plywood and two-by-fours were ideal for the clubhouse that we were always planning: hadn’t the junkyard already provided the window, with only two broken panes, that was now stashed in Robbie’s garage? Yellowed linoleum tiles were perfect for the clubhouse floor—or at least, two square yards of it.

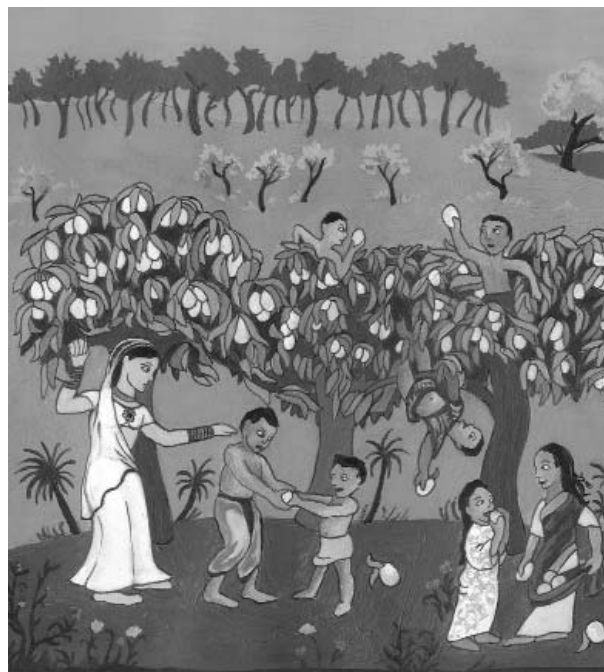
This was recycling with a vengeance, not least because our parents kept making

trash pickup, the variety of discarded objects astounds me: TV sets, computers, filing cabinets, wrought iron bedposts, music stands. Occasionally I mind the main chance, feeling mildly creepy as I open the rear hatch to load up some useful-looking wood or a seemingly repairable wicker chair. My finds usually wind up sitting at my own curb a week later, but some of them were keepers: an antique drafting table, a small bookcase, a garishly painted end table. Like hope, scavenging springs eternal: someday I may spot something really nice, maybe even a ten-pound sack of money.

I’m not sure what the ongoing satisfactions of scavenging signify, but a link between the child and the adult seems as clear as it is embarrassing. Is it possible that a passion for old things—literary history, archaeology, dead languages—could have started in a junkyard? What kind of professorial dignity does this suggest? And how do I explain the cheesy sentimentality with which I regard my finds, these “perfectly good” things in need of a home? Maybe a childhood obsession with salvage and reclamation creates a lasting sympathy for old things whose usefulness has been cut short by time and change.

If so, Lye Creek reminds me that nostalgia’s deeper lessons are not always pleasant. Could it be that a pack of junkyard-loving kids had vague premonitions of the Prufrock Zone of visions and revisions which we would someday inhabit as we entered middle age? After all, few things seem sadder than a set of shiny racing wheels lying next to a curb with nowhere to roll. Those wheels would not be fulfilling their purpose or their potential—and *that*, as any middle-aged denizen of junkyards can tell you, is one scary thought.

## About Danielle Hersey



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