

1995

Visiting Uncle Ernie

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Recommended Citation

Bolyard, Liz (1995) "Visiting Uncle Ernie," *Exile*: Vol. 42 : No. 1 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol42/iss1/14>

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Visiting Uncle Ernie

i

When Uncle Ernie and Aunt Pauline still lived
at the farm, we'd drive the forty
miles every weekend to see them.
Ernie'd turn on the TV to boxing
and posture his eight arthritic fingers
best as he could into fists, punching
with the boxers while Aunt Pauline fussed,
telling him to watch his heart.
He'd roll his eyes at us, but reach
over and click off the set.

ii

Aunt Pauline would take my mother out
to show her the garden or get the mail,
and mom would come back puffing.
I can't keep up with that woman.
Then Pauline would go to the kitchen
to make bread. Dirty Bread
Uncle Ernie'd call it — said she kneaded
it with her feet. When I was very young
my eyes would get big every time
he said that; then he'd wink at me.

iii

My dad would go pump water for her.
They didn't have indoor plumbing
until Uncle Ernie's third stroke,
and then reluctantly. Ernie was proud
of his outhouse. A two-seater, and carpeted
too. Clean, and it don't even smell
in the summer. He'd show us 'bout every
time we visited. Then he'd take
my dad to the fruit cellar to drink a beer,
thinking he was pulling one on Pauline.
She'd smile and keep kneading her bread
(with her hands, not her feet).

iv

Ernie would show dad his mining helmet
with the lamp on top Pretty fancy, huh?
and tell him about his first job in the mine
when he was ten years old, tell him about
the shaft collapsing, and him barely getting
out, Hell, I didn't all get out. Left
two fingers down there. They'd laugh
and Ernie would pound him on the back and tell
dad about digging graves, by hand, after the mines
shut down. He'd say he figured he'd been in more
graves than anybody else walking around.

v

Ernie and Pauline were married seventy-five
years, longer than lots of people live. When
Pauline was ninety, she died
in her sleep. Ernie started failing.
Six months later he was in the nursing
home. We'd visit him. He'd be lying
on the edge of that single bed. Dad would ask
him how he was sleeping, and Ernie would look
at that empty spot next to him,
Oh, I don't sleep so well no more.

Liz Bolyard '96