

ROGER LOFT

Beach Kids, 2004

Epoxy, fiberglass, pigments, 74.5 x 59 x 3 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

BILLY BAITES

Daddy Don't Go!

When the Nearly Departed Become the Dearly Departed

I was five years old when my parents dragged me out to God's Pastures Nursing Home on a summer Sunday in the early 1960s. God's Pastures was a far cry from the modern facilities of today and there were minimal, if any, laws governing the care and treatment of its inhabitants. It was hotter than blazes at the time and the walls and floors were dark, depressing colors illuminated by flickering fluorescent bulbs in filthy plastic covers filled with dead flies and mosquitos. The air was pungent with the odors of urine and Lysol.

We were there to visit my Great-Aunt Jossie, who had gone off the deep end in recent months, though I didn't understand that. As we walked into her room I held my mother's and father's hands in fear. Jossie was in bed staring vacantly out the window when my mother spoke up and said, "Hello, sweet Aunt Jossie. Do you know who this is?"

Jossie turned her bony skull in our direction and glared. Beneath an unruly mop of white hair, she had a wild look in her sunken, bloodshot eyes, and she was wearing something that looked like a dark-gray shroud. I noticed her shrunken, shriveled mouth and on the nightstand saw a glass jar with cloudy water containing her dentures. Without missing a beat, the ancient woman sat up in bed with a look of complete horror, pointed a bony index finger at me, and shrieked, "That boy is Satan! Satan who has come to snatch my soul away and take it to Hell! Look at him! He's the Devil and he's after me! Jesus help me! Take him away! Take him away!"

The sprout of wispy white hair atop her head shook back and forth violently, and spittle flew from her mouth as she spouted her accusations. I had not a clue about what was happening. I only knew I was terrified by this old woman and wanted to get away. Mama said, "Billy, she doesn't know any better, honey. Your daddy will take you out in the hall to wait while I finish my visit."

As the tears welled up in my eyes, Daddy took me by the hand and led me into the hallway without a word. He leaned down and looked me in the eye and said, "Son, that old woman can't help it. She has never been the same since her husband, Jake, ran off with that waitress. Let's just stand out in the hall and wait while your mama finishes up with her visit."

In the hallway I noticed another very sad old woman sitting in a wheelchair directly across from us. She stared