

“How do you do.”

It vexed him being pushed back to child talk.

“Well, to the matter of that wire,” said Gavin Robley. Stepping forth, he crouched to level gray eyes on the boy. His hand came heavy on Benjamin’s shoulder. Stale breath like Grampa Thornton’s. Gravely, he said, “Watermelons.”

Benjamin breathed and felt Robley swatting his arm, the old man chuckling pompously in his face. But no teasing could trouble him now.

Returning down the Robley drive toward the Chariton, Benjamin’s steps were jaunty. Little Alma skipped at his heels. Some whim had permitted her to like her guest. Her feet were quickly dirt-caked.

“Wheresa waddlemelons?”

“No place,” he said happily. “It was a message. Why, you like watermelons?” He was feeling generous toward her now.

“I like spitting the seeds.” She dropped her dolly in the drive.

He stopped to help her dust it off. He returned it to her and she took it with a stare. “Are you a daddy?”

He laughed at the scandalous notion. She joined in, though she didn’t seem to understand.

At the end of the drive she stood hugging the limp thing, watching him go.

Benjamin fairly loped over the Chariton and down the highway toward home, mind ahum with mysteries, distances, and the enigmatic beauty of electricity and its infinite reach. From the highway shoulders in both directions the low country coursed away in slopes and fields. His gaze roamed those expanses, and he felt his first vastness—wondering how men could keep at home while spaces opened all around.

Send! commanded the operators with a twitch of the hand—and flash!—it was done. Lightning could zoom through a wire. A soul could go anywhere.

He wanted to *be* the humming wire, outside time. To let nothing constrain him. He was not long for this place.

M. Allen Cunningham is the author of the novels *The Green Age of Asher Witherow*, set in a 19th-century coal-mining community in Northern California, and *Lost Son*, about the life and work of Rilke. Cunningham’s story collection, *Date of Disappearance*, was published in an illustrated limited-edition through Atelier26 Books, the micro-press he founded and edits in Portland, Oregon. His first nonfiction volume, *The Honorable Obscurity Handbook*, appeared this spring. He is the recipient of fellowships from the Oregon Arts Commission, Literary Arts, and Yaddo. “The Silent Generations” is an excerpt from his third novel, a book that would very much like a home. Visit www.mallencunningham.com.

JAN WURM

In the Park, 2009
oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in



courtesy: the artist