

The Curator Says...Ralph Womer reminds us that it is strange how an aroma will lock into one's memory and remain from childhood through the adult years. The author describes the rich aroma of fresh, new blue jeans in a department store. With time and many washings the aroma is lost, but the memory of it remains, clear, beyond verbal description, always "a surreptitious snort of nostalgia."

Back to School

Ralph Womer, Jr.

The smell of cool, air-conditioned air hits me as we walk through the doors of the downtown Sears store, still known to us then as Sears and Roebuck. The annual ritual of buying clothes for the beginning of school always starts with this visit. Two aisles away, I know we are near the department we are looking for. My nose catches the unmistakable aroma of new blue jeans. I am allowed two pair this year. One I will wear immediately and the other pair, purchased in a slightly larger size, will be worn later in the year. It isn't like these are the only ones I own. I have several pair that are a little too tight in the waist and a little too short in the leg. I even have a pair that has been cut off and used for shorts, but new ones, with their distinctive aroma, mean I am going back to school.

For me the first day of school is always an adventure. I look forward to it almost as much as I will eventually look forward to summer vacation. Making new friends and getting reacquainted with others I have known for years is high on my list, but finding out what new things we will learn is also a stimulus for this eleven-year-old. What will the teachers be like? Will I be able to grasp the concepts they will be teaching like multiplication tables and diagramming sentences? There is definitely angst mixed with the thrill of the first day of school, and all of this is attached to that scent of my new jeans. The scent won't last long, probably not past the first slide into home plate and the first washing, but it will be enough. In a few years I will be too old for jeans at school and I will be begging my parents for my first pair of pegged Skeets. I won't be playing baseball at recess, and I will save the blue jeans for hunting on the weekends, but for now they are my passport to the future.

Even today, in the fall, when I am shopping in a nearby department store, for Sears and Roebuck is gone now like so many icons of the past, I will walk through the western wear department, look both ways to be sure no one is around, and then inhale a surreptitious snort of nostalgia.

Ralph Womer Says... Ralph Womer, Jr., is a retired veterinarian who practiced small animal medicine and surgery in Alabama for forty years. He is the author of several professional journal articles, but has only recently turned his writing to poetry, essays, memoir and fiction. He has been published in *Boston*

Literary Magazine, Down in the Dirt, and numerous anthologies. Ralph lives in Auburn, Ala., with his wife Carol and their seventeen-year-old cat, Mr. Roberts.

