

F. Keith Wahle

The Invitations

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About the Author:

F. Keith Wahle was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1947 and grew up in Northern Kentucky. He studied poetry writing with David Schloss at the University of Cincinnati. Subsequently, Wahle attended the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop, where he studied with Donald Justice, Helen Chasin, Marvin Bell, Mark Strand, and Larry Levis, receiving an MFA in English in 1974.

He has published three books: *A Choice Of Killers*, *Farewell To Happy Town*, and *The Invitations*, in addition to several chapbooks. The print edition of *The Invitations* is illustrated with photographs by Brad Austin Smith, as is *Farewell To Happy Town*. *A Choice Of Killers* contains photographs by Amberlyn Nelson.

His work has been published in *Paris Review*, *The Partisan Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Panjandrum*, *Stooge*, *Three Rivers Poetry Journal*, *The Wormwood Review*, and *Yellow Silk* among others. Most recently his poetry, prose and stories have appeared in *Cincinnati Review*, *Lake Effect*, *Inscape* and *Forklift Ohio*. In May 2007 *Semantikon.com* published a collected review of Wahle's works which also featured a web exclusive video of the performance of his work *Secrets* with Colleen McCarty.

Since 1996, the Wahle has also become involved with performance art, creating poetry and dance collaborations with Judith Mikita, Rachel James, Susan Moser, and the late Cheryl Wallace, among many others. He has also written several short, experimental two-character plays performing them with various different Cincinnati actors, most recently with Jodie Linver, who is a member of Performance Gallery.

THE INVITATIONS

By F. Keith Wahle

If I invite you to cover my body
with mashed bananas, I don't really mean it.
I don't even like bananas. I really mean,
let's take a ride out to the cemetery,
and look at the black angel. Have you ever
seen the black angel? When I invite you
to snooze on my bathroom floor, I really mean,
let's stay up all night together. Let's talk
about art, and music, and women's liberation.

Let's stay up and talk. Let's take a walk
in the park. Let's go out for a pizza.
Let's make an omelet. There's a Preston Sturges
comedy on television Saturday night. In fact,
there are two—*The Lady Eve*, and *Unfaithfully
Yours*—but they're on different channels
at the same time. Can you believe it—
two different Preston Sturges movies on the
same night? Cable television is really amazing.

When I invite you to go shopping at the
vegetable market, I really mean I want to
give you expensive gifts. If I invite you
to lick spilled wine out of my bellybutton,
I really mean, let's go to the library,
and check out books of love poems. Or would
you rather curl up with an Agatha Christie?
You read your detective stories. I read
love poems, and South American novels.

You read instruction manuals, tax forms,
and mail order catalogues. I just re-read
"The Instruction Manual" by John Ashbery,
wishing I could go to Guadalajara,
Mexico, with you, getting sunburned,
and listening to people talk in Spanish.
When I invited you to go to Guadalajara,
I only meant we should read Ashbery's poem—
it's one of my favorites. Let's daydream.

Let's jump up and down on each other's mattresses.
For you, I would become a vegetarian,
I would learn to eat with chopsticks.
I think I could become a spiritualist,
or a Democrat. I could take up weight-lifting,
astral projection, or flying saucer research—
all the things I only half believe in.
When I invited you to go jogging, I really meant,
let's go out and eat with chopsticks.

I mean, I know a good Chinese restaurant
not far from your apartment. They have wonderful
lo mein, with no meat. And then I'll bring
some of my Boswell Sisters records over,
and we'll listen to them on your new stereo.
Even though they were originally recorded in mono,
they should sound great on your system.
I mean, let's go to the video store,
and rent some of our favorite old movies.

You like Clark Gable, and I'm nuts about
the Marx Brothers. I've thought about this.
I think *Horse Feathers*, and *Monkey Business*
are better than any picture Clark Gable
ever made, but *San Francisco*, and *China Seas*
are better than anything from the Marx Brothers'
MGM period, except maybe *A Day at the Races*,
which has the bonus of Ivie Anderson
singing "All God's Chillun Got Rhythm."

Let's listen to Duke Ellington records.
Let's go out in the woods at night, and take off
our clothes. Look at the stars. They're so
bright out here—not like in the city,
where you have to look at them through a mile
or two of hanging auto exhaust. If you loved me,
I think I might be able to accomplish great things.
Maybe I could find a way to end air pollution.
Maybe I could find a solution to world hunger.

Maybe I could write better poetry, or learn to move objects through psychokinesis. If you gave me a soul kiss, or a dry hump, or a tongue bath, I think I'd be able to kiss the top of a skyscraper, like Superman, or an angel. Would Superman get a hard-on, thinking of you? Would an angel? I mean a male angel. Would you rather go to bed with a male angel, or a female angel?

Would you ever go to bed with an angel? Would you go to bed with a ghost? Would you go to bed with me, if I were an angel? Would you go to bed with someone that you knew to be a werewolf? Can I come to visit you sometime? Can I bring a friend? That's a joke—I don't have any friends. Can I bring my guitar? Would you like to hear me sing "Keep on Truckin' , Mama," or "The Wreck of the Old 97?"

Would you rather hear "San Francisco Bay Blues?" That's by Jesse "Lone Cat" Fuller. Or how 'bout "Prohibition Is a Failure?" I want to come to your house the next time there's a full moon, to protect you from werewolves. And if there are no werewolves, maybe I can protect you from silence, from doubt, from longing and insecurity. Maybe I can protect you from urban angst, from *Sturm und Drang*, from the death of the soul.

I'd like to try to protect you from sexual frustration. Maybe you've never been worried about sexual frustration. Maybe you've never been troubled by anxiety attacks. Maybe you've never been bothered by ennui, or poltergeists. Maybe you've never had the heebie-jeebies. But I want to do something for you. I could pay your rent. I could cut your grass, or get you tickets for the ballet.

I could buy you a mink coat. I've had my eye on you for a long time. I used to wait for you to come out of the bank, and the grocery store. I used to watch you drinking herbal tea in your favorite vegetarian restaurant. I used to get in my helicopter, and hover outside your bedroom window. I had a clear view in. I saw you with all of your lovers, the men as well as the women.

I saw you coming out of the shower, as naked as the day you were born, but taller, and not as red. When you were in the hospital, recovering from your latest broken heart, I wanted to bring you flowers every day. I wanted to pay your bills. I wanted to drive the ambulance, when they broke into your locked apartment, and turned off the gas. But I didn't want to appear opportunistic.

I didn't want you to feel obligated. I disguised myself as a hospital orderly, bringing your breakfast tray into your room every morning. I noticed your nipples, erect under your hospital gown, as I delivered your poached eggs and grapefruit. I like to think of you sitting up in bed like that. I like to think of you in your bathing suit, when I saw you at the swimming pool last summer.

I remember the little strings of damp brown hair under your armpits, and along the leg holes of your swimsuit. Your legs, I noticed, were shaved smooth. I wanted, at that moment, to take the place of your razor, wearing a knife-sharp blade in my face, grazing along your perfect shins and calves, as you bend over in the shower stall, the hot spray squirting against your bare butt. The only thing I want is your happiness.

If I invite you to go for a ride
on the great water slide, I really mean
the art museum; let's go to the art museum.
Let's go and look at the Red Grooms sculpture
of D. W. Griffith, with Lillian Gish, and
Billy Bitzer. Did you ever see *Way Down East*?
It's not as good as *Broken Blossoms*, or
The Birth of a Nation, but it's still high
on my list. I also like *Orphans of the Storm*.

Yes, let's go to the art museum, not the model
train store, or the miniature golf course,
or the frozen yogurt stand. Not the baseball
game, though I know how you love baseball.
I say we should go to the art museum.
I think we can still get tickets for
the "Hollywood: Legend and Reality" show.
I want to see Buster Keaton's bicycle. I want
to see Charlie Chaplin's overalls and oil can.

Oh, I care about you the way Charlie cared
about Paulette Goddard in *Modern Times*.
I long for you as Emil Jannings longed for
Marlene Dietrich, as Lola, in *Der Blaue Engel*.
She had such big thighs then; it was still
early in her career. Later she would follow
Gary Cooper across the desert in *Morocco*,
and come out of a gorilla suit to sing
"Hot Voodoo," when she was *Blonde Venus*.

I want you the way John Wayne
wanted Elsa Martinelli in *Hatari!*,
but he didn't entirely realize it until
the end of the movie, and then chased after her
with baby elephants. Don't worry, I won't
chase after you with baby elephants.
But with or without baby elephants, I want you.
I could not want you any more if I were
John Wayne, and you were Elsa Martinelli.

There were some photos of her in *Playboy*,
swimming nude on the location of some movie.
Not *Hatari!*—it must have been some other movie.
I'm not sure, but I remember her bare flank,
arms raised, as she water skied naked.
It's a pretty old magazine—25 years old,
or more. I think I still have a copy
somewhere. I'll have to look in the attic
the next time I go over to my mother's house.

Anyway, she really had John Wayne rattled
in *Hatari!*—I mean Elsa Martinelli,
not my mother—the way Ingrid Bergman had
Bogart rattled in *Casablanca*. She had
left him in Paris, and he didn't know why.
He couldn't even stand to hear their favorite
song, "As Time Goes By." That's the way
you have me rattled, except we don't have a
favorite song. Oh, I want to see Sam's piano.

Yes, let's go to the art museum. Let's go
for a walk in the cemetery. I already said that,
but we can go again, if you want to.
When I invited you to join our volleyball team,
I really meant, I'd like to take you out dancing.
I meant, let's go for a drive. On our first date,
I kept hoping that you would touch me,
but you didn't. You just sat up straight,
watching the movie, with tears in your eyes.

The movie was *Only Angels Have Wings*, which
always puts tears in my eyes, too. I got some
Raisinets at the snack stand, and shared the box
with you. We were both crying, and eating
Raisinets, and not touching each other, except
when we passed the Raisinets box back and forth.
Next time, I'll take you to see *Footlight Parade*.
I know you won't cry in that; at least, I don't
think you will. Maybe a little, right at the end.

I like the part at the beginning of the “Shanghai Lil” number, when you see Cagney’s hand at the bottom of the steps, signaling to the orchestra leader from the floor. But you don’t know right away that it’s him. You just see that much, just his hand. What a wonderful moment! I love that moment. I love the whole movie, and I love you. I love your purple gloves, your Volkswagen, and your devotion to your cats.

I love everything about you. I love all your bad habits as much as I love your charities. I love everything you have ever owned, and every piece of clothing you have ever worn. That’s a lovely dress you have on today. I was just thinking, that’s exactly the kind of dress I would like to pull off in a motel room. I love the whole history of your life. I love what you majored in at college.

I love the day you were born. I love every city you ever lived in. I love your home, your car, and your piano. I have never loved another woman as I love you. I have loved other women, but never like this. I have never loved any food, any movie star, any philosophy, or diety, or political ideology as much as I love the hem of your underwear.

I have never loved any family member, any possession, or any past lover as much as I love the rim of your eyeglasses. It’s true that I love ice cream, and New Orleans, and Kenneth Koch’s poetry, and the five “Pastime Rags” of Artie Matthews—especially “Pastime Rag No. 4”—and the “Sweeping the Clouds Away” sequence from *Paramount on Parade*, but not as much as I love you.

I love you more than shrimp remoulade.
I love you more than I love Ethel Waters
out-singing Lena Horne at the end of
Cabin in the Sky. I expect to continue loving
you as long as I remain sentient. I want your
love more than good health, or lower taxes.
If your love were Nirvana, I would study
Buddhist meditation. If your love were
whiskey, I would never want to be sober again.

If your love were rain, I would throw
away my umbrella. If your love were snow,
I would not mind being killed in an avalanche.
If your love were the electric chair, I would
willingly face execution, that brief, hot kiss.
If your love were an ancient tomb, I would
want to be an archaeologist of the human heart.
If your love were Moby Dick, I would want to
be dragged one-legged down to the ocean floor.

I heard on the radio Monday
that the oldest hippopotamus in captivity
died in the San Diego Zoo. If my love
for you had been the oldest hippopotamus
in captivity, it would still be alive,
because my love for you is alive,
and may never die until the end of the
universe. Do you remember when
I invited you to go to San Diego with me?

If we had gone when I asked, we could have
gone to the San Diego Zoo, and seen the
oldest hippopotamus. Do you remember when
we got drunk at Sea World, in the middle of
the afternoon, and got splashed by the whales?
We didn't know what we were doing. Why did we
order those big tropical drinks at lunch?
Do you remember how wet we got at the killer
whale show? Why did we sit in the front row?

Why did we go to Sea World? Not the
San Diego Sea World—the one in Ohio.
When I invited you to go there, I really
meant, will you let me get lost in your eyes,
and in the sound of your voice? But you
took me literally, so we drove up to Cleveland,
and went to Sea World, and got drunk, and stayed
overnight in a motel, but you got a separate room,
and paid for it with your own credit card.

That night, I couldn't help masturbating,
as I listened to the shower water running,
and the toilet flushing over in your room.
The walls in those new motels are all so thin.
If only I could have fallen asleep in silence,
or with just the noise of the television,
or the noise of the trucks and cars going by
out on the highway! But the sound of the
water running in your room tormented me.

It made me wish that I could be your washrag,
touching every part of your nudity; or even
one of the tiny drops of water, allowed to
kiss you briefly, before being washed away
into the sewer. While we were driving home
the next afternoon, you told me about all
the boys that you slept with when you were
in college, and all the women you slept with
after you got out of college—more torment.

I wanted to know everything, but knowing was
driving me crazy. You said, "I have a lot
of anger toward men." Do you mean all men?
Are you including me? How can I prove my
love to you? Would you like me better if I
used a different after-shave? Would it help
if I bought a new car, got a better job,
stopped eating meat, stopped writing poetry?
Why do you keep accepting my invitations?

What would I do if you refused my invitations?
I remember the night we sat alone in the front
seat of my car. I pulled down the zipper of
my pants, and let you look at me. You clapped
your hands, and squealed with joy. But you
didn't want to touch me, and you didn't want me
to touch you. You didn't want me to kiss you,
not even a little kiss good-night. On our next
date, and our next, you still wouldn't kiss me.

You said that you cared about me, but not
in that way. You said that you wanted to give
our relationship more time to develop. You said
that you thought our friendship was much too
precious to complicate with sex. You said that
you loved somebody else. You said that you would
never love again. You had already been hurt
too many times. You said you were afraid of
germs. You also said you were afraid of bruises.

You said you loved me, and wanted to sleep with
me, but some other time. You said that you wished
we had been born in some other time and place.
You said you remembered me from a past life.
You said that your ex-husband would never
understand about us. You said that you wanted to
go to bed with me, but you were afraid your mother
would find out. You said you would see me in
hell before you would let me touch your knee.

I knew, then, that the only real way to see
you would be to hover outside your window
in my helicopter, the way I used to. When I
couldn't afford to buy any more helicopter
fuel, I propped a ladder against the wall
outside your bedroom. I stood on the ladder
for hours, until my instep arch kept the
pressure of the ladder round, just like in
Robert Frost's poem, "After Apple-Picking."

The rain poured down, and still I stood,
peering in at you. When you noticed me
watching, you began to masturbate more often,
pretending you didn't know I could see.
You left your bathroom door open. You walked
around the apartment in transparent negligees.
You did aerobics in the nude. You were really
making me nuts. I sent you nude photographs of
myself, to show you how lonely I was—how aroused.

I sent you my best book as a present;
the hand-set Stone Wall Press edition
of the *Drafts & Fragments of Cantos*
CX-CXVII, with Pound's signature.
I sent you a telegram to say I had made
you the beneficiary of all my insurance
policies. I saw it all through your
window: when the messenger arrived, you
invited him in, and gave him a blow job.

Why are you treating me like this? Is it to
punish me for the women in my past? The art
student with long, curly hair. The nurse with
big tits. The blind woman with tiny breasts,
and flawless pubic hair. The other nurse with
protruding teeth. The Jewish girl who had a
crush on some mystery writer, but went to bed
with me as a second choice, and would have married
me if I had been willing to switch religions.

I can't believe, now, how uninteresting all
those women were. So, my darling, forget them.
They mean nothing to me. Nothing and everything.
Everything, then; but now, nothing. Listen,
when I ask you to be my date for the antique
car rally, I really mean, we should burn
with passion. We should turn everything into
some kind of love. Let's forget the past.
Forget the future. Forget the antique car rally.

Fall into my arms. I would, like to spend.
the rest of my life in your glow, in the light
reflected from your teeth when you smile. Angel,
is that a halo you're wearing above your head?
It's so bright. I could lose myself forever in
your brightness. I could lose myself between your
alabaster thighs. I would like to lose my tongue
in the darkness of your mouth. I would gladly
lose my youth in the darkness of your mind.

I desire you more than anything. I want you
with or without your clothes on. I want you
the way Fernando Rey wanted Catherine Deneuve
in *Tristana*. I want you the way King Kong
wanted Fay Wray. I could keep you for good
in my heart. I would go blind for your love.
I love you more than old movies, more than
old records, more even than the Earl Hines
and Louis Armstrong recordings from 1928.

You tell me I want to live only in the past.
You want only to live in the future. Couldn't we
meet sometimes in the present? Or is there some
other place where the past and future intersect?
I'm starting to sound like a philosopher.
If I invite you to meet me in the present,
I mean, let's have lunch. We'll have lunch
in the present. It'll be fun. Think of tables,
chairs, and food, right here in the present.

I've been searching for you for years, dogging your
trail through the past, present, and future, hoping
to find you in an agreeable mood. Shall we dance?
Shall we go to the beach? I mean the swimming pool;
there's no beach around here. I know there's snow
on the ground right now, but we can go next summer,
when the sun is shining, and it's hot as hell.
That's in the future—your favorite time.
See, I'm willing to meet you anywhere.

When I invite you to help me install a new in-ground swimming pool, I really mean, let's get to know each other better. Let's save up to build a swimming pool in the backyard.. Let's go shopping together. Let's go shopping for soap. We can go to the Crabtree & Evelyn store. What kind of soap do you like best? Lilac? Primrose? Lavender? Strawberry? Lemon? Damask rose? Sandalwood? What about cucumber?

I want to find a special kind of soap, a soap that washes away inhibitions, a soap that washes away the barriers between people, the barriers between you and me. I want us to be washed clean with my special soap. I want to wash away differences of opinion, political disagreements, incompatible habits; wash away regrets, and fears, and memories of failed loves.

Let's take a shower together. I'm serious. I invite you to take a shower with me. I want us naked together, washing away everything that's keeping us apart. I want to see the past and future go swirling down the drain. And when we die, what then? Is it possible that we just go to sleep, and wake up in hell, or in heaven? Or do we feel ourselves falling through some gap in the universe?

Will I be able to see you again after we are dead? Will I meet you in heaven? Will we be together in another, better land, the land beyond the horizon, the land where no one grows old? Oh, what a beautiful city! There are twelve gates to the city. It makes me want to dance. I want to dance with you. I would like to dance with you through the streets of heaven, jumping from cloud to cloud, holding hands.

Could we dance together real close, cheek to angel cheek? I would like to feel your angel body pressed against mine, the swell of your angel breasts, beneath your angel gown—probably with no brassiere, if I understand anything about heaven—the chafe of your angel thighs against my thighs, the curve of your angel buttocks, as I let my hand grope slyly down on your hips. Maybe they'll be playing some real slow song.

Maybe Duke Ellington will be there, playing "Lush Life," or "Mood Indigo." Maybe he'll have all the guys from his old bands there—Johnny Hodges, and Jimmy Blanton, and Bubber Miley, and Barney Bigard, and Harry Carney, and Russell Procope, and Cootie Williams, and the rest. Maybe George Lewis will be there, playing "Burgundy Street Blues." Maybe Bunny Berigan will be singing "I Can't Get Started with You."

Do you think Bunny Berigan is in heaven? I sure hope he is. Do you think they let alcoholics into heaven? I don't see why they wouldn't. I hope they do, anyway. I'm not sure I would like a heaven without W. C. Fields, a heaven without Fats Waller, or Billie Holiday, a heaven without Raymond Chandler, or John Berryman. I'm not sure I'd like a heaven without Li Po.

Will I be able to kiss you in heaven? Will I finally get to sleep with you when we're in heaven? Who knows? So, let's not wait to find out. Let's not take any unnecessary chances. If we do it now, and it's great, maybe we can do it again up in heaven, and it will be even better. I'm not kidding. This is really important to me. I invite you, oh, my darling, I invite you.

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