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A JOURNAL OF WESTERN OKLAHOMA

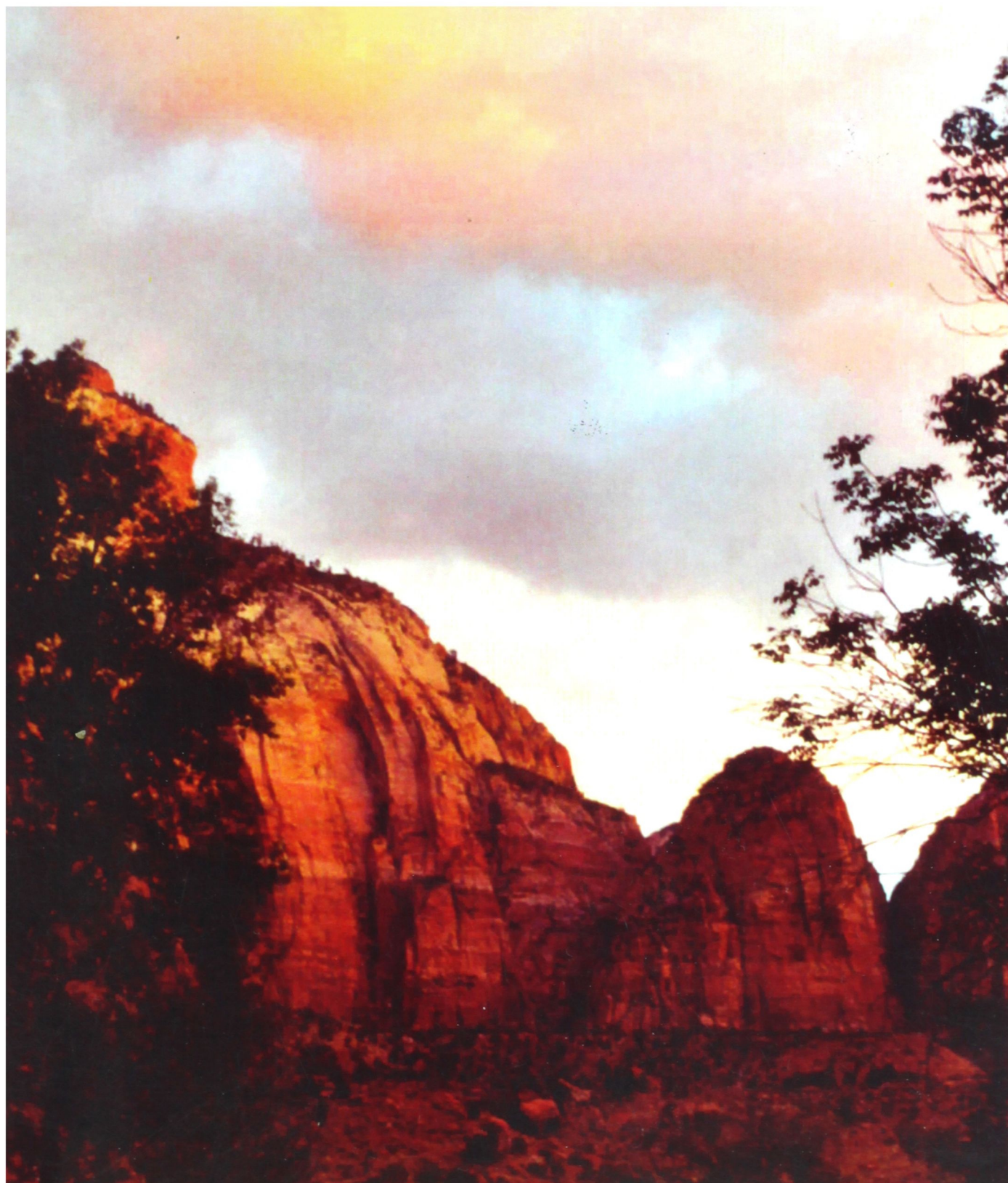
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2. Submitted artwork should be suitable for black and white reproduction. Work should be no larger than 8.5" x 14". However, photographs or slides of larger works may be submitted.
3. Include a brief biographical sketch for our contributors' notes.
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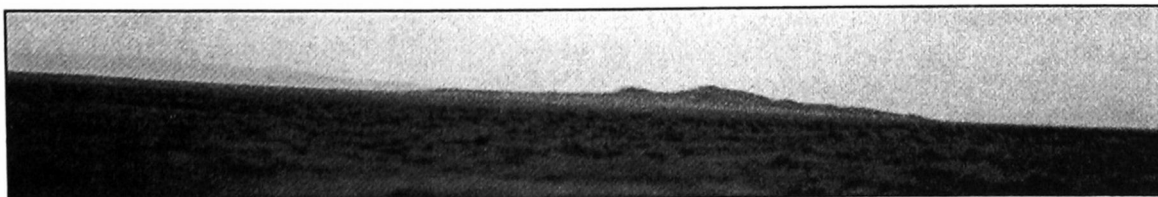


Photo by Kevin Collins



Making Connections

by Lucy Daniels

Noble Bennington was at his best on the telephone. Dialing ignited a titillating sense of power—stature, virility, impeccability—that momentarily dissipated his usual self-doubt. Noble also prided himself on being able to use the phone anywhere—at his office desk, in bed, in his car, in public booths, or in those hotel rooms with extensions beside the toilet, with additional challenges welcomed when necessary, which gave him considerable peace of mind and added a large degree of flexibility to his otherwise busy and sometimes hectic life. To colleagues, such constant availability by phone might seem an idiosyncratic and slightly irritating effort to ingratiate clients in his real estate brokerage business. But for Nobe, his nickname since second grade, keeping clients updated was secondary to a much more pressing personal need.

Five days a week, Noble had psychoanalysis over the telephone with Dr. Samuel Agroni of Chicago. Except for the use of the telephone, these 50-minute sessions were much like the 40-odd sessions Bennington had had with Agroni in person years earlier. At home or in his office, he even shut the door and leaned back in a reclining chair like the one at Dr. Agroni's. On the road, he would begin to look 30 minutes ahead of time for a secluded spot where he could count on not being disturbed. Sometimes the best he could find was a parking garage, a problem that had led him to purchase a high-powered antenna some years earlier. And even in the car, Noble carried a special wedge-shaped pillow so that he could relax and focus inwardly for the full 50 minutes, no matter where he called from.

Bennington had first consulted Agroni at 27, while he was working in a Chicago accounting firm after the end of his marriage. His uncle and grandfather had helped him get a job there because he'd decided he *had* to have experience on his own, away

from home. He'd hoped that getting away from Raleigh, where he'd grown up feeling an outcast and was later embarrassed by his marriage, would help him become more cosmopolitan personally and more assertive and self-reliant professionally. Although the marriage counselor they'd seen had made pretty clear that Charlotte's personality as an adult child of an alcoholic had caused their relationship to fail, other people did not know that. Also, divorce seemed degrading to the Bennington heritage, which Noble had always felt handicapped in living up to anyway. All of these had seemed good reasons to start over in a big city.

However, the shadows from Noble's past were not so easily escaped. He worked well in the firm where two of the partners were distant friends of his grandfather and uncle. Despite no great advances, he worked every day in a way that his supervisor observed without complaint. Yet friendships failed to develop beyond a few lunch and dinner dates, and his reluctance in regard to women grew more distressing as the months passed. While this reluctance seemed a natural consequence of the painful breakup with Charlotte, Noble could never see himself as flawless. So Charlotte's declaring herself an adult child of alcoholics had left him wondering what personal deficits had led him to marry such an injured person and then hurt her more by neglecting her needs. He never wanted to be in the same position again.

That such a beautiful woman as Charlotte could be so disturbed had been the rudest awakening of Noble's 25 years. He had tried everything he knew to restore his dark-haired, brown-eyed bride of two years to the fun-loving companion she'd been before the wedding. Charlotte had wept, "You say you try, but I'm left here evening after evening while you work! I didn't get married for this—to be a bird in a cage!"

"It won't be like this forever," he argued,



reaching to touch her hand. “I believe I can work it out to be home at least three nights a week. And later, when—”

“Three nights a week!” Her pretty face went red with rage. “Why not five, at least? You must not love me to treat me so badly.”

“I do,” Noble murmured. “Even the work I do is for us. Please, darling—”

“Don’t sweet talk me! I...”

At the marriage counselor’s, Noble had come to understand that choosing not to gratify someone’s every need did not make him insensitive. Still, even after the divorce, he’d not been able to stop blaming himself. So, besides feeling there was something wrong with him for not relating more easily, even in Chicago, Noble could not trust his own judgment about whom to get involved with. And, eventually, depression became so severe that he decided to see a therapist and somehow (years later, he never could remember how) ended up with Agroni.

Dr. Samuel Agroni was a man of medium height but spare frame. Already, in 1980, his hair had been nearly white, his goatee predominantly gray streaked with brown. His brown eyes seemed inordinately intense, peering at Bennington from either side of a hooked nose. But exoticness, not age, was Noble’s experience there. Agroni’s clothes—usually three-piece suits of richly woven fabric—seemed exquisite wrapping. He gave the impression of a shrunken, white-haired prophet against a tapestry-draped paneled wall, an almost magically wise man whose power radiated from the eyes burning in his solemn face. Yet Dr. Agroni was so formally respectful that he seemed almost invisible. He insisted on calling Noble “Mr. Bennington” and otherwise said almost nothing, conducting the initial session with a mixture of hand gestures and interrogative comments, such as “Oh?”, “How was that?”, and “What then?” which had the effect of making the patient talk more. At first Noble had not realized that Agroni was an analyst. He had felt relieved that he was

able to talk to someone at length about his distress and to receive a few wise comments. In response to Noble’s account of how his mother had died before he was six months old and how his father had been killed in an automobile accident the summer after Noble turned two, the doctor simply shook his head while remarking, “Phew!” And after Noble’s description of how he’d felt isolated and peculiar growing up as his benevolent, wise, but distant grandfather’s dependent, mainly cared for by black servants, Agroni remarked, “Of course. It sounds like you not only suffered repeated trauma but had to get by without the holding that every child needs.”

Though puzzled by such statements, and especially by their surprising mixture of formal respectfulness and kind intimacy, Noble felt oddly encouraged to keep talking. Out came things he’d pondered all his life but never expected to voice to anyone. Among these were minor memories, like how he’d worn short pants until he was 13 and how he’d always felt, despite Grandfather’s generosity and kindness, like a terrible disappointment—odd, illegitimate, and insufficient where a remarkable person was needed. To his surprise, after moving from sitting up and facing Agroni to lying on his couch and talking to the blank wall, Noble felt less alone than ever before.

Except for increased attention to his appearance, there were no visible effects of this treatment. Noble Bennington remained an awkward misfit at work and in his apartment. He still worried about his timidity with women, but rather than forcing himself into the arena scared and ridiculous, he took Agroni’s advice and tried to understand his own anxiety before getting into another relationship. Interest in exotic clothes began as part of his effort to feel like he really did belong in Chicago—an established resident rather than a transient. His first purchase was a maroon cashmere jacket with shoulder pads that enhanced the width of his chest. When his cotton shirts looked shabby, he substituted silk ones and, in the process, became



enamored of gold chains. So, little by little, as his wardrobe expanded, Noble came to feel and look like a prosperous businessman. He even wondered why, with all his money, he had never thought of doing this before.

Noble started listening to his own voice—at Dr. Agroni's, on the telephone, with colleagues, and with his supervisor. He could not change the drawling weakness his voice conveyed, but he did decide that holding back and saying less, so that the other person said more, was a useful step. Agroni did not seem to notice these changes, "because," Noble told himself, "he works with the inner me, the part that everybody else has neglected." And for Noble, the sense of being swaddled in the composure produced by Agroni's listening was the most valuable purchase of all. He carried that swaddledness around everywhere and came to rely on it, especially in difficult situations.

Several months into Noble's work with Agroni, Grandfather suffered a stroke and asked Noble to return to Raleigh. For Noble, as he complied, the request felt as much a relief as an interference. After all, Grandfather was the only continuous person in Noble's life. Furthermore, despite not having Agroni in Raleigh, Noble did have a greater capacity to look substantial. He soon joined the accounting firm of Smith, Jones, and Tucker and rented an apartment that felt spacious compared to the one in Chicago. He felt a little awkward and raw but no lonelier than in the Windy City.

Grandfather wanted to see Noble at least every other day for an hour or so, and their relationship was little changed from 20 years earlier. The real reasons for Grandfather's having summoned Noble home were his aging and fear of approaching death. The only impairments from his stroke were minor weakness in his left arm and occasional slurring of speech. Perhaps having his grandson near made the 85-year-old man feel younger. Certainly for Noble, their talks evoked the feeling of wearing short pants.

"I am proud to see you in such a fine accounting

firm," the old man said nearly every visit. "Your father would be proud to see his namesake so well established."

"I'm not a partner, you know, Grandfather. I'm just an associate," Nobee reminded him, smoothing the sleeve of his Brooks Brothers jacket.

"Of course," the old man continued. "But if you do your work and present yourself well, the Bennington name will honor you as you fulfill it.... That's what my father said to me, Noble, and I'm sure your father would say it to you if he were here. I believe I said it to him."

The way Grandfather's waxen head looked too big for his shriveled body reminded Nobee of a fetus. He could remember Grandfather tall and erect, flying about the country to serve on a multitude of boards of directors. He had the feeling now that to get anything substantial from Grandfather, he would need to get it quickly before the old man dried up completely. But, as always, the visits were much more for Grandfather than for Nobee. Though they seemed the least he could do for a man who had been the closest thing he'd had to a responsible parent, what most bothered Nobee about those conversations was their mechanical sameness.

After more than three decades of being together, the distance between him and Grandfather seemed as vast as ever. What Nobee wondered since his work with Dr. Agroni was whether that emptiness was his fault or Grandfather's.

The worst thing about being back in Raleigh turned out to be getting along without the analyst. Missing Agroni motivated Noble to take the steps the doctor had urged on him to find another therapist. He consulted all three of the people recommended. One was a brutish-sounding guy in his thirties whom Noble couldn't stand. The other two were a middle-aged matron named Anne Privett and a bald-headed professional type named Robert Guile. Noble tried Privett first, thinking it would be easier to get over Agroni if the replacement were a woman. But after seven sessions—two sitting



up and five lying down—he decided that Privett’s provincial attitude and mousy tone made him too angry. Although he knew he was lucky to have the money from Grandfather to be able to afford analysis, he hated to pay someone who didn’t have the wherewithal to really help him.

So, by 1982, when Grandfather had his heart attack and died, Bennington had begun seeing Dr. Guile. Guile seemed the reverse of Privett—someone who probably did have the substance but whose style was to withhold it. Grandfather’s death temporarily put Noble more in contact with Uncle George and his wife Ann. Helping with the guests at the wake, serving as a pallbearer, and trying to check out the details of the will made him feel more illegitimate as well as abandoned. Yet Guile remained silent and unresponsive, really so unhelpful, that Noble called Agroni.

The doctor’s first comment, “Mr. Bennington, do you have a lawyer?” made Noble feel touched for the first time in a year. After that, there were weeks of talking with Agroni periodically while still seeing Guile. But Guile’s silent style could not survive the contrast.

Several months after ending treatment, Noble persuaded Agroni to treat him over the phone.

When Noble looked back later, he saw that resuming analysis with Dr. Agroni marked the start of his life. Before then, although he had already secured a lawyer to look out for him with Grandfather’s estate, many other aspects of his existence were depressing and clumsily managed. Of course, women remained the worst aspect, because of how painfully his ineptness with them impacted Nobee’s self-image. Being a CPA was another downer; time with Smith, Jones, and Tucker convinced him that accounting was work he hated. And, perhaps because of his conflicts about women and work, Nobee was in continual anguish regarding himself, especially his physical self. Shaving became an activity that he dreaded daily because it confronted him with his reflection in the mirror. This discomfort was new, as he realized one day. For

most of his adult life, instead of seeing his face, he had focused only on its contour, skin, and bristles. Now, though, his weak amber eyes looking back from beneath almost invisible brows, his slightly effeminate pert nose, and the thin, pale lips made him shudder with humiliation.

Nobee continually mused about how to make his face appear more forceful. While his gold-rimmed glasses with their round lenses and arched nose bridge did help, he also tried a variety of conservative changes in hairstyle. His boring brown hair looked no less shabby in a neat conventional cut or crew cut. Shaving his head was something he could never bring himself to do, imagining that it would make his face invisible, like the empty eye of a needle. But he did try the other extreme—letting his hair grow long. And despite all the distress with different stages on the way—shaggy, earlobe Dutch boy, straight pageboy—by the time it was shoulder length and could be pulled back in a ponytail, he liked his hair enough to keep it that way. At the same time, he concluded there was no point bothering with beard or mustache because his square jaw and prominent chin were aspects of him that did look strong.

The discomfort gravitated to his clothes. He could take an hour to dress for work. If he put on a three-piece suit like Smith and Tucker wore, he felt like a six-year-old dressed for Sunday school. If he left off the vest, he felt like a slob. One snowy day, when he put on a lush sweater similar to those worn by some of the Chicago partners, he found himself expecting Tucker to terminate him at first sight.

“How do you feel about your money?” Agroni asked near the middle of one early session.

“I don’t know.” Nobee leaned back against the bed pillows and glanced at the bedroom furnishings of his rented apartment. Since he hadn’t yet realized he needed a shoulder prop to hold the telephone, his arm was tired. “Maybe I don’t have any feelings about it. I don’t think I live rich—except for talking to you. It makes me uncomfortable to relate to rich people, so I avoid them if I can. But I don’t



think about it much.”

“Maybe you need to. Maybe you’ll discover something if you do.”

By the end of their first year of working over the telephone, Grandfather’s estate was nearly settled and essentially uncontested, with Noble and Uncle George each getting half. Dr. Agroni seemed to persist with issues of self-worth: “How does it make you feel to refer to him as ‘Uncle George’ and to yourself as ‘Nobee’? How would it affect you to call yourself ‘Noble’ like your father and grandfather?” And later, after Nobee had spent weeks self-consciously struggling to use his full name: “How does it make you feel about yourself to work as an accountant when you hate the job?” Or “What is it about you or about women that makes them both so necessary and so discomforting?” Such questions made Nobee sit up straight and sometimes even doodle to relieve his agitation. “Given the fact that you are financially very fortunate in a life that has been brutally depriving emotionally, is there something you could do with your money that might benefit your life and sense of self?”

None of this talk helped Nobee feel any less awkward and isolated. Nevertheless, he persisted in puzzling over Agroni’s questions with the aim of trying to take effective action. Thinking about the money—reminding himself that Dr. Agroni said it was an asset, rather than wealth he did not deserve and should be ashamed to have—was Nobee’s first step in this direction. And later, when he could acknowledge that both Dr. Agroni and his luxurious status-claiming clothes were products of that wealth, it began to dawn on Noble that he was indeed fortunate and not necessarily guilty. He also became able to think in more detail about things he wanted. Two cashmere jackets and six silk shirts no longer seemed sufficient. Rather, Noble wanted his clothes to look both exciting and mysterious; he wanted a new way of wearing them that would make other people curious and desiring.

This idea came more into focus as he consid-

ered moving from his rented apartment to a luxury condominium. After that move, it dawned on him that speculative real estate might be a vocation in which he could use both his money and his accounting experience to personal advantage. In 1984, Noble put up a small part of the capital for a luxury office building. When he got back triple what he’d put in by 1986, he left Smith, Jones, and Tucker, earned his realtor’s license, and opened his own real estate office. Noble’s first project paired him with a contractor who wanted to build upscale office condos. That was when he began using the portable phone and wedge-shaped pillow for analysis on the road.

To Noble’s surprise, this increased degree of portability heated things up on all fronts. In analysis itself, the swaddled sensation, first noticed in Chicago, became greatly intensified. It felt miraculous that he could ring the analyst up at the appointed hour from any place on earth and always have his trusted baritone respond, “Hello. This is Dr. Agroni.” Noble felt even more comfortable with the doctor than earlier, but also more alone in the world with him, almost like they were sealed together inside the telephone lines. Stretched out in the backseat of his Buick with the heavy-duty antenna attached to the roof, he also felt with sensational acuity that he and Agroni might well be the only such pair or unit in the universe.

In addition to the convenience, Noble came to feel that in some ways analysis over the phone was better than analysis in person. Lying back with the receiver pressed against his chin, he could see Agroni—white hair, string tie, penetrating brown eyes in his deeply lined, infinitely thoughtful expression—as he talked. And that face-to-face illusion was something Noble had never experienced in any other treatment situation. It made him feel securely in contact as well as confronted, on occasion, in a way that was surprisingly sustaining. After Agroni’s repeated mention of how Noble had always longed for a good father, it was easy to imagine that this growing security had to do with



feeling that the doctor was a father figure. But there was much more to the problem. Besides not being patronizing as per Noble's concept of fathers, Dr. Agroni seemed to understand his patient's feelings in a way that made Noble feel known as never before.

As their work extended, Noble also discovered a new sense of his own continuity, related to how every day, week after week, he could pick up the phone wherever he was at the appointed hour and dial up Dr. Agroni. The only times when this sense of his own eternalness faltered were during the doctor's month-long summer vacations. Having to deal with being alone, while at the same time not knowing where Agroni was, made Noble anxious. Chicago was distant, but at least it was definite. *Nowhere*, or even *anywhere*, was painfully nebulous. Some years, Noble had to ring up Agroni's answer machine several times to listen to his voice. Talking about this distress before and after the doctor's vacations also resulted in Noble's developing a more secure sense of clarity about both himself and the analyst. Agroni never did speak about his own personal life, but Noble pieced together bits of information to conclude that the doctor was a widower. In 1989, Dr. Agroni acknowledged that he was 81 and that his ability to practice could be cut short at any moment by illness or death. He added, however, that according to his physician, he was very healthy for now. Contrary to Noble's initial dismay, this disclosure, in the context of Agroni's forthrightness, increased his sense of security.

Whether the power of their work fired up the rest of his life (as Noble believed), or whether the strength and ability he was accumulating in the world inspired the analytic sessions, the results were exhilarating. As the ventures of Bennington Real Estate branched out from investing to brokering to developing small and later large projects, Noble Bennington accumulated a clientele who came to depend on the long-winded, personalized voicemail messages with which he kept them updated:

"Hello, Mr. Davis," he'd drawl. "This is Noble Bennington calling to keep you posted on that piece of land we're trying to get under contract." Or "Hello, Henry, this is Noble Bennington. We got that contract signed by Ted Weathers. He made a few changes that I think aren't significant, but I want to bring it by for you to see. Please leave me a message about when would be a good time."

Sometimes in his voicemail, there were as many as ten different voices getting back to him and making him feel that even though this was just work, there *were* other people in his life besides Agroni. And these other people called him a mix of names: "Noble," "Mr. Bennington," or even "Noble Bennington." Sometimes, too, due to the busyness in his schedule or those of his clients, he held conferences over his car telephone. When he did so, Noble typically had two very different reactions. During the conference itself, he tended to feel in charge and well-connected to the other people. But afterward, intense loneliness welled up in him, triggering painful impatience with himself for not having made more progress in relating to women.

Slowly, this shameful sense of failure in intimate relationships gave way to more manageable determination to address the problem. Though he was still living in relative isolation personally, confidence about his appearance and developing career eventually provided new courage for the work. So, in 1990, Noble began dating again, starting, as Agroni had encouraged, by just asking female friends to have a drink after the symphony or to meet for lunch on a workday. "How do *you* feel?" the spare, persistent voice articulated. "That is the issue regardless of whom you're with or what you're doing. How *you* feel will determine how you behave. Only knowing that can you have the good sense to stop and ask yourself why you're feeling that way and how you want to manage that feeling. When you can do that, you have a choice. That's freedom."

"I might be lacking good sense," Nobee



drawled. "That's how I got my nickname, you know, back in grade school, because I couldn't make decisions. Grandfather wanted me to have everything; he didn't understand that I didn't know what I wanted."

"However, he did give you his name," the clear, somber voice declared. "And you and I both know that you decided you preferred working with me over the telephone to working in person with the therapists you could see in Raleigh. You decided that."

"Yeah. Because since I'd had it before, I knew what I wanted."

"So, how can you do the same thing with women?"

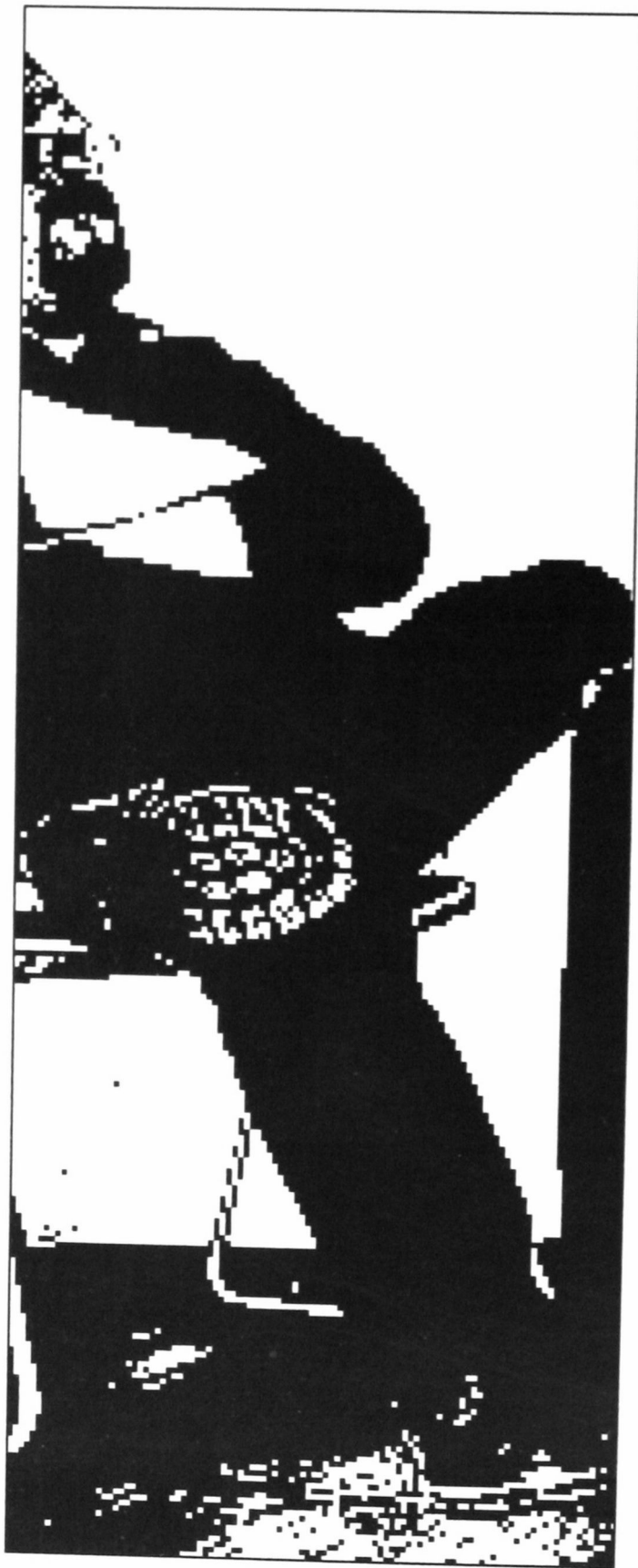
"I don't know if I can. All I could learn from Charlotte is what I don't want—and with these others, I think I keep learning what *they* don't want, whether on the second date or in the third month. One thing that stops me now, I believe, is fear of rejection." Nobee paused then to sit up; lying down felt draggy. "What *I* want doesn't seem to matter."

"There I have to disagree," the doctor interrupted. "What you want is all-important...or...let me be more direct. It seems to me that you are much more afraid of closeness than of rejection."

As impossible as the statement sounded, and as much as he hated to believe it, Noble knew that what the doctor said was true. For a few seconds, he felt like the phone had gone dead. Then he made himself ask, "But as lonely as I am, why would I... Why would anybody fear closeness?"

"If you don't get close, there's nothing to lose. Because you lost so much so early, part of you never wants to be in that situation again."

Nobee squinted to see the piercing brown eyes and taut face more clearly. Though this was not the first time Agroni had spoken about Noble's early losses, today those words had more impact. To regain calm, Nobee tried to go back to before the doctor's interruption. "Why do you say that what I want is all-important?"



Photos (detail) by Joel Kendall



"Think about what happens when you want something."

Nobee's mind went blank momentarily. "The only thing I can think of is that I try to get it."

"Exactly!"

Noble did not speak.

"By the way, there's another detail in this that might be useful. The indecisiveness you were speaking of earlier."

"What about it?"

"Indecisiveness is also a way to avoid loss. Choosing one thing always involves giving up something else."

Assimilating hours like that one was never easy. Driving away from the parking garage, Noble felt disoriented. He had to focus deliberately to remember which road to take back to Interstate 40. For several days, it felt like the earth was crumbling beneath his feet as he gradually adjusted to the idea that it was not stupidity or lack of sexuality that isolated him, but his own fear of loss if he got what he wanted. Once the cool peace of this new way of looking at things had become more familiar, he refocused on his problems with women. "Sometimes my own anxiety is so tremendous that I hardly care about the person I'm with. I just want

to live through the evening."

"Sure....Have you noticed when you're most apt to feel anxious?"

"Not at the start usually. I've got past that. Funny, but it might be just when I'm doing what we've talked about—trying to notice how I feel about this person, whether I want her or not."

"Being indecisive?"

"No."

"Trying not to be, perhaps....Do you give yourself time to see how you feel?"

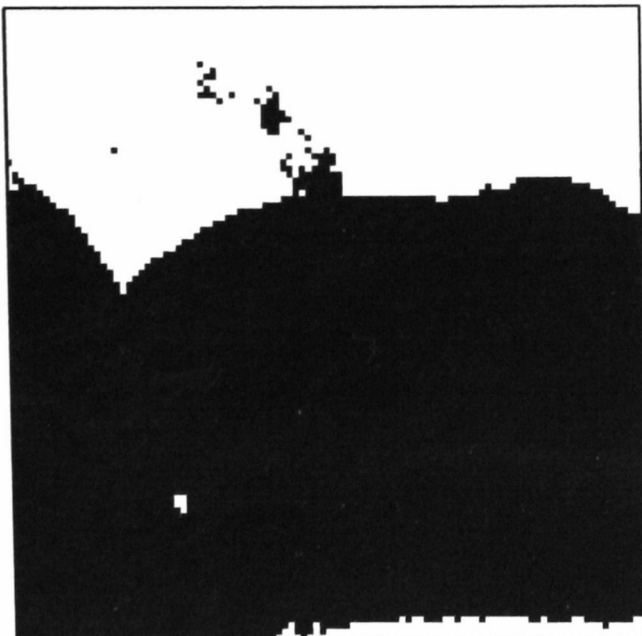
Silence.

"I mean to. But I remember that with Gail, you said I was acting 'desperate.' You compared my behavior to rushing to buy a tract of land without doing the due diligence."

"Yep. That's right. But here's another crucial question: Why would you do that? Or, perhaps, what makes you feel desperate?"

It was after that that Noble took on his largest speculative project ever—a major shopping center between Raleigh and Knightdale. At the same time, his descriptions of some of his encounters with women led Agroni to ask about his clothes.

"There's no problem there," Noble told him in late 1994. "Clothes were the first way I began to try



to claim myself....I don't know if you'll remember. I started while I was still in Chicago. There may have been something about wanting to look more like you."

Silence from the telephone.

"Usually, on a date, I try to look casually fine—like a comfortable guy who enjoys the best things in life."

"What do the women wear?"

"I don't know."

"Well, maybe you need to notice. Most women like to be complimented on how they look....Do you think you might be outshining them?"

Noble had never thought of that. He tried to focus on it by recalling the clothes of Angle, Esther, Holly, and even Charlotte. By then he had also begun to date, for the second time, a quiet woman named Jane, who had been an intern when he was at Smith, Jones, and Tucker. "Jane's clothes are a little like her," he mused to Agroni. "Stylish but stiff."

"How do you feel about that?"

"I think I like it. Jane makes me feel a little dumb and weak, because she's so professional. But her clothes make me feel substantial."

This work on the subject of women was cut short by the faltering, and then the collapse, of Noble's shopping center project. The loss of millions of dollars, wiped away overnight, was inconceivable at first, devastating next. Noble was left with only eleven million, which had the strange advantage of at least seeming countable. Women slipped from his mind altogether. The tangible money that was left, compared with the much vaster sum that had been lost, filled him with agitation and relentless guilt. The security of his remainder feeling circumscribed alternated with a catastrophic sense of everything he owned, including himself, going down the drain.

Again, what seemed to make the difference was Agroni.

Listening, listening, listening each hour before bringing their session to a close with statements that seemed constant, even though phrased differ-

ently, about a variety of issues: "Failure is always painful...and scary...especially for someone who has had such devastating losses in early life... There's at least one advantage to experiencing such a failure. It's yours and, therefore, something you may be able to learn and grow from."

Once more, the doctor turned out to be right. A few months later, Noble was able to use the patience and endurance developed through the real estate crisis to help as he resumed dating Jane and Donna and Laura, with the aim of becoming more clear about what he liked. But this time, Noble's efforts to learn through continuity without intensity led to problems not previously encountered. In less than two months, both Donna and another girlfriend named Edna discarded Noble with icy disdain—"because you're just too wishy-washy!"—while Noble had to reject Laura because of her temper. The gray that now streaked his brown hair in the mirror's reflection intensified his despair over these apparent episodes of Charlotte *déjà vu*. And the fact that Jane's good-natured detachment allowed them to keep seeing each other every week or two was little comfort. While working through these dilemmas, Noble came to feel that, besides being dependable and portable, analysis was more permanent than anything else in life.

By May 1996, despite having been in treatment nearly 16 years, Noble felt less apprehensive than usual when Dr. Agroni announced his vacation beginning early in July. There was a certain sense of this, too, being one of the repetitions—like the analytic sessions themselves—that made their work feel comfortingly enduring. That year, as usual, Noble planned to weather their break by working the first and last weeks and vacationing in between, second week at the beach, third in New York. He also considered the Olympics being in Atlanta as a real boon, as a further distraction from the loneliness and increased sense of sexual inadequacy that he expected to surface during the doctor's absence.

However, those weeks were not good ones for



Agroni to be away. In the heat of stressful negotiations that depended on rezoning, except for a couple of dinners with Jane, Noble saw no alternative but to put women on hold until the doctor's return. Still, with the discipline of pursuing his usual routine, he did not find it necessary to call Chicago and listen to the doctor's message. If tempted to do so when at home alone, he turned on the television instead. After TWA flight 800 exploded over Long Island and crashed into the Atlantic Ocean, there was that suspenseful investigation to watch as well. This distraction felt particularly lucky because Noble's stereo had finally worn out, and he hadn't had time to pick out a new one.

It was near the end of the second week, when Noble was about to pack for New York, that the odd message greeted him from his answer machine: "This is Dr. Mark Phillips in Chicago. I am a colleague of Dr. Agroni. Please give me a call at (312) 779-4353. I will be in my office and available to the phone all Friday morning. If you cannot call then, please leave some times when I can reach you."

It was early Friday when Noble heard the message. He had planned to go shopping to look at stereos as soon as the stores opened. He did not want to return the call; thinking about it made him afraid. Still, when all dressed to go out, he did stop and make himself do it.

"Hello, this is Dr. Phillips."

"This is Noble Bennington in Raleigh returning your call."

"Oh yes. Good morning, Mr. Bennington. Thank you for calling back. The circumstances under which I'm calling you are completely strange

to me but compelling...."

Noble felt light-headed and recognized the wisp of a fantasy focused around this doctor's calling to introduce him to a woman.

"I regret to tell you that Dr. Agroni was on the TWA flight eight hundred to Paris when it exploded on July seventeen."

Noble could not breathe. He stood paralyzed, in a vacuum, neither hearing nor seeing as he clung to the phone by its shoulder prop. No words came to mind.

"Mr. Bennington? Are you there?"

"Yes. This is a terrible shock. Thank you for calling." The receiver fell back into its cradle. Noble thought of calling to listen to Dr. Agroni's voice one more time. He felt too sick to do it.

Instead, he headed automatically for the car, only to stop abruptly in the kitchen and to turn back, to settle, head in hands, on the edge of his unmade bed. To think. To feel. To make a choice. None of which seemed possible because of the emptiness in his brain. After a few minutes, he realized there really was only one choice—to pull himself together and go on the best he could. He exchanged his linen pants and fashionable silk shirt for jeans and a striped T-shirt. Then he combed his hair, studied himself critically in the mirror, and sat down again beside the phone. Holding the receiver to his ear, he carefully punched in the next most familiar number.

"J-Jane," he stammered when she picked up. "I need to have coffee."



Echoes

by Ken Hada

Tucked away
within the oaks
daffodils outline
the remnant
of a homestead.

A gravel road
winds to a stop
at the gate, a
rock fence marks
their isolation.

The family, like
the house, is gone
but spring returns
in new grass by
the cracked foundation.

Dogwood buds
frame the yard
in colors where
children once voiced
a future.

Their absence echoes
in the wind,
speaks still,
defines them at play,
at work.

The barn resists—
brindled timbers dissolve
clinging
to each other
even as they falter.



*Photo (detail) by Joel
Kendall*



His Life

by Barbara Eknoian

When I see him pushing
the supermarket cart,
a blanket roll tied on his back,
I wonder if he'll sleep
along a river bank tonight,
next to a small fire, spread
his meager meal before him,
and start another endless journey
early in the morning
trudging along,
searching through dumpsters,
unaware of his matted hair,
unbrushed teeth, soiled torn clothes,
just barely getting by.

When I see him, I picture
a little boy at the breakfast table,
his mom serving hot cereal and juice.
She's not a fortune teller.
How could she know,
he'd take the wrong path,
be seduced by drinking and drugging,
lose his mind, not remember
who he was, or where he came from.
I see a mother kissing her child
on his forehead,
then handing him
his books to go to school.



Autumn March

by Eric Tallberg

Hank plodded up the small rise to the beat of the distant drummers practicing on The Green just off Main Street. With a certain amount of pride, he recalled, as he always did this time of year, that he'd been a drummer boy with Sherman back in that glorious autumn of '64. Long ago having come to terms with his vanished youth, Hank sighed and leaned on Bess Dickerson's mailbox to catch his breath and ease the ache in his knees and his feet. He wasn't sure how much longer he could manage this small hill on which sat his youngest son's house. Constance and he—Constance feeling poorly even then—had been forced to move in with Josh when Hank had been let go from the foundry back in '07. Josh, being a bachelor and fortunate in these days of Depression and hard times to be an engineer for the P & A Railroad, was rarely home now, leaving Hank to himself in the small house on most weekdays, an arrangement that Hank found most satisfactory, for he felt his son's near-charity demeaning to a man of almost sinful pride; thus, father and son had finally agreed not to discuss it further, which, of course, diminished what small conversation they had left.

With the house at the top of the rise now firmly set as his goal, Hank pushed off Bess's mailbox and, leaning slightly forward lest he simply tumble backward down the hill and have to start over again, trudged the last 50 yards to the end of Josh's front walk. Though fit enough at his age for this daily march, Hank realized more often than he cared to that he was nowhere near the man he'd been when he helped carry the remains of Custer and his boys to their final resting places after the squabble at the Little Bighorn River out in the Dakota Territories. He'd been an inspiring man at that time—tall, well-muscled, truly fit—able to ride, march, and fight all day and to please Constance all night. Now, he found himself panting when he reached the end of the short street that led into town.

He all but staggered up to the mailbox in front of Josh's house, wiggly from the years of his leaning against it, and he considered the final lurching march up the brick walkway, then the four steps to the front door. He carefully draped one arm over the smooth post of the box and waited for his strength to catch up with his determination.

"Hey, you old coot, why'n'cha ever smile?"

Hank glared across the street to see a young girl he knew only as Martha pushing a baby carriage down her father's yellowed and patchy front lawn.

"Yeah, you," Martha went on as she headed the carriage toward Hank, who scowled even deeper and hung on to the mailbox as a shipwrecked sailor grasps the last floating lifeboat. He knew that if Martha were allowed to note how weak, how infirm, how unmanly he really was in his dotage, she would harangue him unmercifully. He remembered a year or so ago when he'd snarled at her to keep away from the wiggly mailbox. She'd promptly flounced up to where he stood on his painfully flat feet and demanded, "Why don't you die, you horrible old man?"

He'd actually grimaced in shame and humiliation.

"Yeah, you horrible old man," Martha had continued. "Make stupid faces at me. That's just what you do to everyone on the whole street. You frown and growl and make yucky faces at everybody. It's no wonder nobody on the whole street likes you. Grumpy old man!" She'd stuck her tongue out at him then and run across the street to her father's house to slam the door on his feeble protestations that he'd once been young and manly and so happy....

Now, she pulled the carriage to a stop next to him as he panted and tried desperately to once more hear the beating of the distant drummers over the beating of his ancient and much-taxed heart.





Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

"You must be the oldest man in town," Martha said as she bumped his screaming knees with the carriage. "And you're as mean as you are old," she continued with a defiant tilt of her chin. "I don't think you've ever been happy, have you?"

Hank merely grunted as he turned and eyed the walkway to the stoop. He gauged that he ought to be able to make it all the way through the front door without stopping to sit on the top step to rest. He was determined to put this little pest behind him... at least for today.

After determining his route of march and his mission, he turned back to face Martha and her cursed baby carriage. He glanced down into the carriage then to see a small child, all blond ringlets and wide, round eyes and red cheeks. The child was a vision of pure loveliness, her yellow curls peeking from the tiny bonnet, the eyes of deep and wonderful blue peering inquisitively from below the fine, silver lashes. Hank was bewitched. This child was the picture of his Constance, the spitting image—in miniature—of his wife, his love of just over 40 years. He stared at the vision and sagged off the mailbox post.

He'd been making this march from the house to the huge cemetery across town every day—every single day, rain or shine, snow or mud, when the downtown streets were hot as Hades or slick with glaring ice—for more than 18 years

now. He would imagine the inscription on the headstone every night before he went to sleep—"MY LOVE" carved just under her name—and he would allow a single tear to fall on his pillow. He felt he owed her, owed their love, this daily march—felt he owed at least that. He looked at the image of his wife, this child that was her rebirth, and he smiled.

Watching his face release its ugly frown, his lips part to reveal still-strong teeth, his eyes widen with unexpected pleasure, his forehead un wrinkle with happiness, his lips smooth and flow into suddenly unmarked cheeks, Martha perceived what a fine-looking man Mr. Lewis's father really was—or had been when he was young. She looked at his glittering eyes and decided to be kind just this once.

"That's my baby sister," she said, leaning over the chrome handle of the carriage. She spoke softly to the child: "Give Mr. Lewis a big smile, Constance. He likes you, huh?"

She favored Hank with a small, shy wave and, being especially careful of his mistreated legs, turned the carriage toward downtown.

Hank, able to hear the drummers clearly again, marched stolidly up the front walk and took the steps easily. He opened the front door and stepped inside, the grin only now beginning to fade, the tears only now beginning to flow.



Birds Redux

by Gay Baines

Over Union Road, a herring gull
tilts himself. Above him in
the blue-white sky, a
jetliner turns and banks.
The gull thinks *I can do
that too, but I do it
differently*. He banks and

turns, his companion does
the same. Crows near the bush
off Schwartz Road float
on a summer day, eyeing the
smooth water of a swimming pool,
where a woman floats, arms out,
feet dangling. *We do that,*

they crackle to each other,
*but we do it up here,
in the open, not in that wet stuff.*
The cat, well-fed, stalks a champagne-
wire, attacks and tortures it to death,
or thinks he does. I hesitate in the
supermarket, buying haddock, heart

in my mouth, gazing at the lobsters
tanked behind the counter. Some day,
I think, I'll set you all free.
Back home, the cat, games over,
looks down at me from his perch
on the mantelpiece, saying, but
not in so many words, *You fool.*



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

Bizarre

by Dorothy Stroud

During the first class of the day,
I heard a student say,
“That bird dropped something...”

Back to the window,
I lectured to the drowsy class,
let the comment pass,
ignored the clumsy wing.

Later, under the recess sun,
strolling until my job was done,
I saw a mystery on the walk.

Dark, moist, a five-inch span,
Toe-touched dual parts,
a pair of lungs.

Bizarre find on a playground yard.
Explanations were hard
and quickly marred
by questions from the young.

I looked up wondering what I'd see
in the mindless blue.

Then I remembered what was said.
A bird dropped something as it sped
in flight overhead earlier in the day.

From the desert or nearby highway
a crow scavenged
then flew by our way,
dropped the morsel where children played
and turned my day bright red.



A Nest of Angry Wasps

by Lowell Jaeger

... in an old garage I don't recognize.
I suspect it's one of the dark
backrooms in my weary head. Forgotten
storage shed for old grievances. Thought
I'd walked away clean, but I've come
back. In this dream last night

I'm agape in the midst of dusty
clutter. High time I deal with this
overwhelming jumble
of useless artifacts. Can't puzzle out
why I've hung on to this stuff so long.
Can't figure where to begin...when

the electric hum of a hundred wasps
in the far corner of the back wall calls
out the first most necessary task:
rid yourself of these furies. Ah, exactly
as you told me I must to win the return
of your affections. You vacuumed, dusted,

mopped floors like a mad-woman
to shield yourself on weekends I'd brood
with such intensity I could charge the air
of every room, buzzing. No wonder you fled.
Now I've arrived at that irritated hive
of all my frustrations. I scrape away the nest

with a garden spade, smother it
in a burlap sack, smuggle it outside.
Run from a dozen yellow-jacket warriors
in hot pursuit. I'll get stung, I know.
I'll pay this price to bring you back



First Kiss, with Only Shakespeare to Protect Me

by Kathleen Zamboni McCormick

That man that hath a tongue I say is no man

Having Kirk kiss me was like being force-fed an oversized tablespoon of potato flakes cooked with too much water. His tongue was sodden and lumpy and hot. Saliva—his saliva—was dripping down my chin, and it smelled faintly of feet. “Oh, Ruthie,” he managed to say without taking his mouth off mine. “I think you are the most—” He cut himself off as he began to suck my bottom lip. *I had rather hear my dogs bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me.* One of his clammy hands was gripping my neck so hard that I couldn’t move my head. I was sure I would have fingerprint marks in the morning. His other hand flailed under my dress to find my underpants, and when I opened my mouth to scream at him, he only stuck his tongue into it farther.

But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?

I pushed my fingers into his cheeks and unstuck his mouth from mine. “Kirk,” I gasped before his lips took hold again, “the porch light is on. People will see.” Well, at least the moths would. They were swarming around the porch light the way every part of Kirk was swarming around me. As I pulled one of his hands out from under my dress, he slid the other one to my lower back and pushed his frisson against me.

I am driven on by the flesh

At least “frisson” is what Agnes called it, and from what she told me, she seemed to have seen a lot of them. The first time she said frisson, I was embarrassed because I’d never heard of one before, and I always did much better on vocabulary tests than she did. “‘Frisson’ is French, Ruthie.” She

lectured me like I was a child, even though I was supposed to be her best friend. “It means ‘arousal’ and is the only nice term for what other people call a prick, a dick, a pecker, or even a beaver cleaver. In fact,” —and she beamed with pride— “‘frisson’ is a term I invented when I was dating Robert, you know that exchange student from France who spent two weeks living with my family?” I’d never even known she dated Robert. He had such bad acne. *Mislike me not for my complexion.* Though his accent did sound great on the phone. “A ‘beaver cleaver’? What are you talking about, Agnes? Did you make that term up too?” I stupidly asked. Agnes laughed at me. “It’s a good thing I’m your friend, Ruthie, because people could really make fun of you. You might be the smartest girl in the class, but you don’t learn these kind of words on synonym lists or in those Shakespeare plays you’re always reading.”

O that she were an open-arse, and thou a popp’rin’ pear

I happened to love synonym lists and was forever trying to work new words—or novel lexicons—into daily conversations—or tête-à-têtes. My latest passion was Shakespearean quotations, especially from the plays about true love. And Shakespeare did have words for “it.”

But they were witty, like “fig” or “carrot,” and meant to be used on the stage, not in real life. “For your information,” said Agnes, continuing her condescending tone, “among the words you should acquaint yourself with if you want to know when a guy is talking about ‘it’ are: hose, dong, schlong, cock, pipe, trouser snake, and John Thomas.” She rattled these off with the speed of someone practicing for a test. At first I didn’t believe her. In our house, we had one term for “it,” and this term was used for both males and females. It was called



“the down there.” But it wasn’t something you were supposed to talk about anyway, so the name hardly mattered.

You kiss by th’ book

I did know that the correct word for a boy’s down there was “penis,” but when I asked Agnes quietly during lunch at school why we couldn’t just call it a penis, she said that I was pathetic. “‘Penis’ is like an emergency-room term, Ruth,” she sighed, clearly disappointed at my innocent stupidity. “Say ‘penis’ to a guy, and he’ll think you’re talking about a textbook rather than a little fun.” When I didn’t reply, Agnes poked me in the side and said, “What’s the matter, cat got your tongue?” Then she saw Paul coming and looked at me rather nastily as she quickly put on some lipgloss. “Guess at the rate you’re going, Ruth Marie, the cat’s about the only likely candidate,” she laughed and blew Paul a kiss. He nodded to us but kept on walking. Agnes shrugged and started telling me about blow jobs, but luckily the bell rang and Sex 101 was over. I didn’t talk to Agnes much after that until I got the invitation for her “Sweet Fourteenth on June 14th” birthday party, and I had learned nothing else about sex in the interim. But I did win a state prize for my literature essay on “Gender Differences Among Shakespeare’s Lovers.”

Groping for trouts in a peculiar river

The wet of Kirk’s saliva drippings began to seep up into my nose as he was stretching, open-mouthed, to get a finger inside my underpants. I was drowning, being mauled, asphyxiated, and occasionally gagged all at the same time. *Youth, you have done me much ungentleness.* Kirk had yet to demonstrate how any of this was fun. He moved one arm away from my back. At least I could half breathe. I hoped he was about to stop. But no. His hand grabbed my stomach as his fingers spread out, stretching and closing, trying to find

my breasts. He was also starting another kiss. I could see it beginning, almost in slow-motion. His mouth opened, then it rounded and began to move forward, like carp at feeding time. *Such carping is not commendable.* I thought that carp were disgusting when we’d watched them last Saturday on that nature program on television. Kirk the human carp. In that instant, I realized that I would hate giving blow jobs. Kirk’s tongue was bad enough, but there would be no way in hell that this carp was going to put his trouser snake in my mouth. *Fillet of a fenny snake, in the cauldron boil and bake.* I pulled away while Kirk’s lips were still extended and his eyes closed. With the combination of the June heat and Kirk’s excessive moisture, my new mini-dress felt damp. I was also sweating from the nausea. I couldn’t get rid of the image of a snake wriggling in my mouth trying to get down my throat.



Photo courtesy theatrehistory.com



The howling of Irish wolves against the moon

Everyone at Agnes's fourteenth birthday party had seen that Kirk was walking me home. He'd made such a point of saying good-bye to people, all while holding tightly to my hand as if I might run off, which, to be fair, was exactly what I was planning to do. "The boys are all walking girls home, Ruthie," said Agnes, smiling and giving me a wink. She called to some of the boys, and they came over to us. "Tell her," Agnes beamed, "who you are each going to be walking home tonight."

PAUL: I'm scheduled to walk Donna home at about ten.

LAWRENCE: And so am I for Anna.

JOE: And I for Marybeth.

MARK: And I for Lisa.

PHOEBE: And I for Ganymede.

ORLANDO: And I for Rosalind.

ROSALIND/RUTH: And I for no man.

"What did you do to these boys?" I asked Agnes, in shock. "Did you actually plan all of this in advance?" She shrugged, started to walk away, and then turned back singing, "It's my party and I'll plan if I want to." Typical, I thought. Agnes can only ever come up with a pop culture reference. I glared at Kirk. "I've been walking home from Agnes's house alone since I was three years old." His face remained blank. I wasn't sure he could do the math. "That's a decade, Kirk!" I shouted. I hadn't expected his soft-voiced response. "So, I guess it's time for a change, *dear Lady Disdain*." He raised his eyebrows just slightly and faintly wobbled his head from side to side. I think he was trying to look cool. Or suave. Kirk the jerk. And "*Lady Disdain*"? Had Kirk actually called me that? Agnes hugged us as we were leaving and cooed:

"Now don't fly too fast, you two little love birds." Funny how she never seemed to understand the concept of metaphor when we were studying

poetry in English class.

Sweet lovers love the spring

I knew that Agnes would certainly ask if Kirk had kissed me. She'd taken me aside during her party to tell me that she'd become a "connoisseur of kissing" over the past few months—a word she would never have learned or used in a sentence if it were in a vocabulary list. Sex or love seemed to do wonders for other people. *O, how ripe in show thy lips, those kissing cherries, tempting grow*. I had to admit that I was pretty jealous of Agnes's apparent good luck with boys. But I wasn't going to renew our friendship over the topic of Kirk's tongue. And anyway, she'd already know the answer. Why else would a boy want to walk a girl home from a party that was just three houses away from her own house? I would tell Agnes nothing because whatever Kirk was doing to me could never be construed as kissing.

Come, my queen, take hands with me

I'd been dreaming of the perfect kiss for most of my life, ever since I'd first heard of *Sleeping Beauty*, and I'd thought about it a lot more seriously since I'd started studying Shakespeare. A lord would arrive on a beautiful horse, recently returned from the wars. Metaphorically speaking, of course. He probably would just have won the state finals in debating. He could be only fairly good-looking, so long as he was intelligent. *Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind*. He didn't even have to have any form of transportation. We could take the bus until he got his driving license. He would have searched the world over, or at least through many high schools, to find me. He would see me from afar. *O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!* I would be busily working on my collection of Shakespearean quotations of great importance to my newest essay. *Hang there, my verse, in witness of my love*. But, somehow, he and



I would both know that I was waiting for him, and that he was looking for me. *It is my lady. O, it is my love.* He would take the pencil out of my hand and lean over my desk to kiss me. He would have minty-fresh breath. He would never perspire, or if he did, it would evaporate and be odorless. *A rose by any other word would smell as sweet.* I realized that, until tonight, I had taken these attributes of personal hygiene for granted. He would tenderly caress my hair, and then, his hand would brush across mine—*and palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss*—intimating that I should stop working and accompany him, a desire to which I would immediately acquiesce. *O then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do.* We would lean modestly into each other. [*He kisses her*]

I yield upon great persuasion

I would be redolent of thyme and roses because they began to grow wild all over the back yard after my mother and I planted them a few years ago. Their fragrance permeated all of our clothes when they dried on the clothesline. When I put my face in his hair, he would smell like woodbine. And we would walk and then he would say to me, *I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows, with sweet musk-roses and with eglantine.* And we would lie down under the clothesline in a bed of thyme. *Come, sit thee down upon this flow'ry bed, while I thy amiable cheeks do coy.* And he would lift

my dress. *O gentle Romeo, if though dost love, pronounce it faithfully.* He would be calm and unhurried and soft spoken. *Lady, by yonder blessed moon I vow.* And I would look up and behold the stars observing us—*I am as constant as the northern star*—as they had kept watch throughout time over great lovers like Romeo and Juliet, Hermia and Lysander, Rosalind and Orlando, Beatrice and Benedick, and Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. When I gazed into his eyes, I would see the stars glinting in them. “We should stop now,” he would say with great restraint. *It was the lark, the bird that sings at dawn, not the nightingale.* Even though I would feel that he wanted to go on.

The course of true love never did run smooth

I opened my eyes in disbelief. He knelt beside me—with *bated breath and whispering humbleness*—and tried to smooth out my dress. *How came these things to pass?* The dress was really quite wrinkled, and my back felt scraped, like I'd been lying on cement. *My only love sprung from my only hate.* Kirk, the disguised. *O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!*

Agnes would never find out.

Methought I was enamored of an ass.



How a Watermelon Saved My Life

by Suzanne Picard

Who gets married in August in Washington? Cicadas drone louder than conversations. Mosquitoes feast on any exposed skin. The air is so swampy that breathing gets tiresome.

I raised these arguments with Jessica, but she and Nancy were adamant. Thus it was that two days before the big event, a late August whim found me in the dappled shade of the new farmer's produce stand on East-West Highway. I chose a ten-pound watermelon, slightly ovoid, as grassy-green as the bridesmaids' dresses.

When I pulled in front of the future in-laws' house with my prize, I noted the Camry with Pennsylvania plates baking in their driveway and thought *Pittsburgh cousins*. Two days early, it couldn't belong to the former boyfriend, currently a U-Penn pediatrics resident. That had been another argument—why should Jessie's ex get an invite?—Nancy took my side on that one, but Jessie cradled her arms and rocked an invisible baby and pleaded: *he'll come back to Washington and we'll have an inside connection to a smart pediatrician*.

I was irritated but flexed my biceps and joked about how she wanted to show me off. *Who needs a doctor when you can have a rock-climbing instructor?* Nancy laughed, although Jess only blushed, and maybe I should have known then I was in trouble.

"Check it out." I walked into the kitchen holding the melon aloft for Nancy's admiration. "I thought we could spike it for the barbecue tonight." My mother-in-law-to-be was an ex-hippy with a gray braid down her back, and I didn't doubt her approval. "Where's Jess?" Still cradling the watermelon, I gave Nancy a peck on the cheek and headed out to the back deck overlooking the pool. Nancy put a restraining hand on my arm, which I took for a desire to grab the melon and start injecting it with Stolichnaya. Proud of the thing—it reminded me of drunken summer parties in my early

twenties—I needed Jessie's admiration first.

I pounded down the stairs to the pool. The wedding-planner book, several towels, nail polish bottles, sunscreen, and huge plastic cups with melting ice littered the lounge chairs. I felt a rush of desire for my bossy, small-boned, finger- and toenail-painted fiancée and jogged the garden path to the outdoor shower stall, enclosed on three sides and open on the fourth to Nancy's hibiscus and butterfly bushes. Imagining her wedding gown décolletage and garter-belt-encircled thigh, I pushed through the cicadas' din, failing to differentiate groaning from droning until too late, not until I came upon their profiles, a crescent moon of Jessie's, the same peachy color as the watermelon's sunspot, and the man's open mouth as he grabbed her hips and pumped from behind. I stared at his size and raw meat color in spite of the silent scream—*don't look, don't look*—pulsing through me. My body tensed as if I were the one about to climax. The watermelon hovered above my head, and I was already seeing brains and black seeds on the slick blue tiles. I don't remember backing away and lowering the melon, but as I returned to the house, I was clutching it to my abdomen, where it managed to hold in place my eviscerated guts.

Nancy gasped when she saw my face and followed me past the dining room table with its display of Belgian waffle makers, blenders, toasters, coffee grinders, panini makers, electric mixers: absurd, enraging items for someone who would never eat again. "I told her to send him away." Nancy sounded desperate. "He's not welcome. I'll go—"

"Too late." I transferred the melon to one arm so I could pick up the Stoli from the bar. Looking hopeful, Nancy took the bottle from me, unscrewed the top, then reached for the melon. But I shook my head and reclaimed the bottle, upending it into my mouth, needing it before my muscles began to



shake from the adrenaline hit. "I'll take...the Stoli... the rest—" I indicated the table "...you'll figure... what to do." When Nancy's face dissolved into tears, she looked so much like Jess that I had to sprint for the door.

I drove with that watermelon in my lap through Maryland and Pennsylvania. In Dayton, Ohio, I set it aside, cradling it in a bed of chalk bags and climbing ropes between the front seats. I locked it in the car and got out to see the bicycle shop where the Wright Brothers had dreamed up flying machines. Between Dayton and Springfield, Illinois, I drove with my left hand and touched the melon with my right. Once during that stretch, I dozed off for an instant—*life can change in an instant*—and had to swing the wheel hard to get back on the road. The melon rolled off its bed, banging against a carabiner and nicking its previously unblemished rind. When I returned to the car after paying hom-

age in Springfield, standing in the spot where the Great Emancipator said *I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return*, the car smelled sweet-and-sour, vinegary, as if the watermelon wanted to spike itself. I urged it to hang on until the Rockies. But even with the windows rolled down, somewhere along the Arkansas River, the stink and my misery made me gag.

I swerved to the berm near a pumpkin patch on an early September, circle-of-life whim. I walked into the field, hoisted the oozing melon over my head, and smashed it down next to a green-striped pumpkin. It burst like fireworks, splattering the vines, my T-shirt, shorts and bare legs. With bowed head, I waited until the first fly alighted on a piece of moldering rind and the last of its juice seeped into the ground.



Beer, Clams, and Baseball

by Christine Fontaine

I'm often asked about my father by those who don't know my family history. When an immediate reply is not put forth, the pause is usually followed by inquiring whether he's still alive. I often think of responding with a resounding "no," but truthfully, I simply don't know. I haven't lived with the man who is my father since I was 4, haven't seen him since I was 13, and I'm now in my 40th year. I can't say I remember having actually lived with him; I have only a vague memory of a house on Long Island, New York, where we resided for only ten months. And it was while we were in that house that he left my mother and me in order to cohabit with a woman in Brooklyn, where we had all originated. Any real memories I have start when we came back and rented a basement apartment in Bensonhurst. It was small and dark and had only one bedroom, which my mom selflessly gave to me. I didn't need all that space, but she took the tiny living room and slept on a pullout couch for nearly seven years.

I had no concept of why my father didn't live with us, and how do you begin to explain divorce to a five-year-old in 1972? But the kids at school and in my neighborhood lived with both parents, so I knew something was different. I was also an only child; my best friends were my Raggedy Ann, my books, and my imagination. Many who saw me as a little girl and who had known my father would say without hesitation that I looked just like him. I was blond, blue-eyed, and built lanky and lean, as he was. Looking in a mirror now, I don't doubt for a moment that I look far more like my mother.

After the divorce my father, a police officer, would sometimes see me on weekends. And "sometimes" is an overstatement. I vividly remember those Fridays when he was to pick me up for the weekend or even for the day. I raced home from school and waited on the stoop—which is how Brooklynites refer to the front steps of their

homes—with my packed bag. I watched every single car come down the block, feverishly hoping and praying that each was his, just to have each whisk past, with me unnoticed. I sat on that stoop for what turned out to be hours, my right leg nervously beating up and down like a drum, a habit formed for life. My father was never on time, and we're not talking about a few minutes or an hour. He was usually hours late, if he managed to show up. I still experience, after all these years, that feeling in the pit of my stomach—a mixture of anxiety and fear—just knowing that he wasn't coming for me. Most of the time he didn't show. And it was devastating every time. I probably should have come to expect it, but I never could get quite used to it. The phone would ring hours later, long after I had vacated those steps and that bag was unpacked and placed back into its closet, and I always knew, without ever having to be told. Even today, when I think deeply about it, I can still conjure up that sensation of complete disappointment. It's so real, and I know I will never truly lose it, because that insecurity planted so long ago became a permanent part of me. Even when I began dating, if the boy was five minutes late, I was convinced he would be a no-show. By then my lookout point became the window instead of the stoop, and I was stood up only once, by someone whose name now escapes me.

There are few memories of my father. I remember going, on those infrequent weekends when he did come for me, to the house in New Jersey where he lived with his second wife (the one he left us for), her kids, and the one they shared, my half brother. I remember feeling displaced, knowing I did not belong and that I was not wanted. A stranger in my father's home. After all, I was the old kid from the old marriage, and no one ever let me forget that. I remember riding in the backseat of his car, going back to Brooklyn those early Sunday nights.



As we drove I could make out a drive-in movie in the distance, its big screen enveloping the sky. We raced by too fast for me to see what was playing, but when it came into view, I knew I was halfway home, and my father would again leave me, with any future plans always uncertain. Sometimes it was weeks or even months until I saw him again.

I know why he left my mother, but I could never make sense of why he left me. What was it that made me so unlovable? I was only a child; there had not been enough time yet for me to screw up or do anything that could or should have caused his inattention. My mother told me years later that he said it hurt him too much to see me. Guilt over the divorce. I know now that was a cop-out and his code for *You're just not convenient to my new life*.

I don't remember ever having a real conversation with my father, nor do I know what kind of person he was other than the fragmented pieces I saw throughout those years. I look at myself as an adult and know that I am a composition of both my parents. I can be selfish, impatient, and I never really had the desire to be a parent in the way one should. And I know that that part is from him, because my beloved mother is none of those things. But I'm also reliable, considerate, and responsible, all traits given to me by her.

Children look back at their parents in different ways after they are gone: Some adoringly, some not-so-much, but often a mix of the two, with the good, you hope, always outweighing the not-so-good. For me, memories are fleeting. It's strange what the mind chooses to recall and how some events can be so vivid that you feel as if you can almost taste them, while others barely form a shape in your thoughts. I remember being ten, and my dad and I, along with my grandparents, went to dinner. While we waited for our table, I sat on my father's lap at the bar, sipped the foam off the top of his beer, and ate raw clams on the half shell for the first time. I felt like the most important girl in the world. You see, I had the illusion of having all of his attention

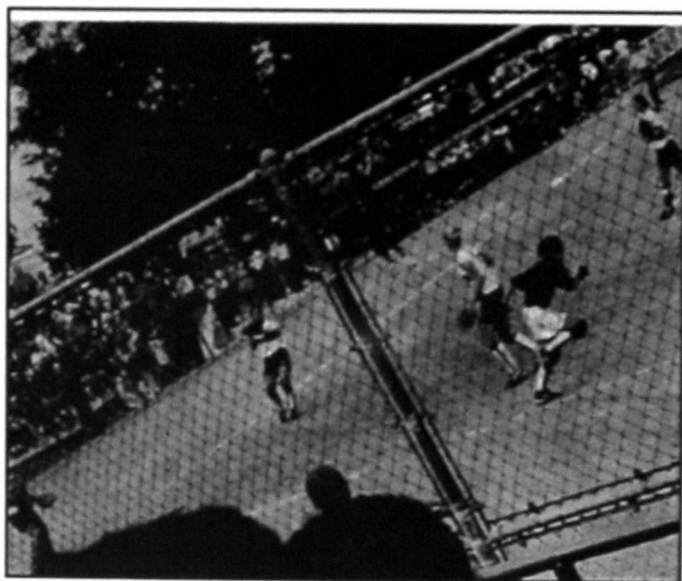


Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

that day—the only day I ever did. Today, 30 years later, there is still nothing like a cold one and a dozen little necks on a hot summer day. And I followed in his footsteps with my love for baseball. He took me to a few games during our short time together. I always wondered if he might have loved me more had I been a boy, so at least the possibility of becoming that all-star player would have been there to replace his own unrealized dreams. And that is the legacy he gave to me.

The last time I saw him was the spring of my 13th year. My father had moved to Florida by then and was in town for a few days. We made plans for dinner his last night, and I felt a sense of hope that we would somehow have a relationship despite the miles that separated us. He drove me to my softball game and watched from the sidelines. He did not stay for long, only a few innings. He had places to go and people to see, he always said. I watched him leave that day, his last act a smile and a wave good-bye. There was no kiss or hug, because I had already taken the field, and he couldn't wait for that third out. We never had that dinner, and I never saw him again. I guess he didn't like the way I played that day.



White Pine

by Georgia Ressmeyer

In the woods I spot the mature trunk
of a white pine stepping out of her
usual dress, which is stiff, gray, and
circles her waist like an unlaced corset.

I am startled to notice that her naked
torso does not seem to go with the
perfect posture her costume suggested
but twists like a discus-thrower's back

as if she has been gently wrung by giant
hands and dried that way, with bulges
and hollows everywhere, though these
have been smoothed by age and rain.

It seems a wonder she ever squeezed
into that gown. Now her natural shape
may scandalize some, but she has found
release in the truth of an unbound form.

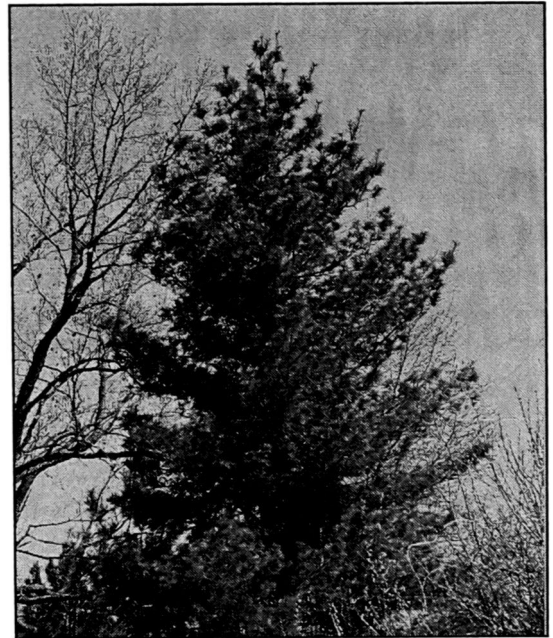


Photo by Bigyan Koirala



I Always Dream of You in April

by Jane Downs

The dreamed-dead are colorless. Desire
wakes them. Desire to remember a child's touch,
snowflakes spiking a night sky.

You rise to journey under black trees
to my childhood home, where we couldn't help
loving each other, and I couldn't have imagined
your death or mine.

You may inhabit me this one month
(don't worry, there's room for both of us).
We'll share chilled April nights, the dark
sparked with lilac. Dawn's new light.

I am still your child. In April,
I will dream your dreams.



“Smoke Signals from Another World”:

A Study of John Graves Morris’s *Learning to Love the Music*

by Helen Maxson

In the dedication of his chapbook *Learning to Love the Music*, poet John Graves Morris refers to Bruce Edward Taylor as “the better maker,” evoking both Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, which is dedicated to Ezra Pound as “*il miglior fabbro*,” and Dante’s *Purgatorio*, which uses the same phrase to honor Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel (26.117). Eliot’s dedication to Pound is commonly translated from the Italian as “the better craftsman,” given Pound’s editorial activity in urging Eliot to cut large chunks of his long poem. The difference between Taylor as “maker” and Pound as “craftsman” is instructive to readers of *Learning to Love the Music*, because its stress on creativity brings forth one of the main differences between the world and life Morris’s book depicts, on the one hand, and a waste land on the other.

Of course, reading a collection of poems as if it were a unified text, as if each poem contributed a part to a whole, is not always a valid practice. But in *Learning to Love the Music*, similar images from different poems—for example, albino June bugs (“Night Vision”), months-early white seeds drifting across a cold sky (“Middle of February”), and soaring white hawks (“Song”)—suggest a kinship that unifies the book. Other image systems, like reflections in water, circles, references to the seasons and children; recurrent themes like yearning, blossoming, and time: these elements of Morris’s book reinforce our sense of the poems as different areas of one region, like the sections of Eliot’s poem, or as chapters of a single story. While it is true that life in this book is consistently characterized by loneliness and the discouraging effects of time, its world differs from Eliot’s sterile waste land in the certainty that it will produce not only rain, but spring, flowers, young people, passionate feelings, and poems—products of an immanent fertility that exists, ironically, alongside

the book’s emptiness.

In his dedication, Morris is defining himself in terms of—and against—his poetic forebears, an endeavor the entire chapbook undertakes. Like Eliot’s waste land, the world of *Learning to Love the Music* is conjured by many voices, and Morris is clear that it is a collaborative creation. In fact, it is by exploring the impulse to connect with others that the book explores the theme of fertility. In a passage called “Notes” that precedes the book’s dedication, Morris cites the roles of his creative writing students in writing “lines, or versions of lines” of one poem, mentions allusions to lines by Dylan Thomas and William Butler Yeats in another poem, and credits another writer with the opening lines of a third. Passages from other writers are cited on a page just preceding Morris’s first poem and just under the titles of several of the book’s poems. Direct quotation of song lyrics by popular artist Paul Simon expands the world of the book, as do evocations of poems by Yeats and Thomas other than those mentioned in Morris’s “Notes,” and our recognition of dilemmas famously explored by major authors including James Joyce and Gerard Manley Hopkins. At certain moments, subtle music of Morris’s lines evokes that of earlier poets, and, well-schooled by the rest of the book, we trust our impulse, tentative though it is, to find meaning in those echoes.

In this rich fabric of voices, the poet of *Learning to Love the Music* acknowledges and celebrates the roots of his work in poems and songs of other artists, some of which he had learned to love before he wrote his own. An ease and a fluidity in the book’s allusions suggest that this learning was a natural, somewhat effortless, process. But the phrase “learning to love” suggests a concerted effort and reflects a theme of complex family dynamics that play against the speaker’s comfort in the



literary tradition that has shaped him, the theme of feelings about his father, his sister, his nieces and nephews, and his own childlessness. The title of the poem "On Having Outlived Dylan Thomas: A Meditation During A Family Reunion" connects literary tradition with family, and the book as a whole considers each form of membership in light of the other.

Fairly in-depth portraits of children are frequent in the book and dramatize the process of learning to love one's music, whether familial or literary, as the poems' speaker lives that process out. At times, the adult speaker of a poem is identified with a child or with children, the implication being that he has learning yet to do in order to connect fruitfully beyond himself. In the book's opening poem, "What Control There Is," the "inner child" of the adult speaker impedes his romantic connection with a woman. In the book's title poem, the adult speaker is, again, "a grown child" who, as the imagery of thawing ice and rushing water at the poem's end suggests, grows past a distant relationship with his difficult but loving father to consciousness of the strong, though barely expressed, love that informs it. The "music" the child learns to love in that poem involves the father's "full voice" that "jackhammers" his opinions on various topics, as well as the jazz that the father enjoys and that the son has learned, over time, to enjoy as well. In fact, the poem's opening lines suggest an equation between the father's jackhammering and the "long, quiet solo" of his jazz, a bifocal perspective that brings out the incongruity between the child's view and the adult son's, as if it is not until adulthood that the speaker has been able to hear the music of qualities that have brought a solitary dimension to his father's life. It is the same incongruity that, as we have seen, fragments the speaker of the book's first poem. In "So Close To All That Hunger," an adult teacher is taught by the five-year-old daughter of his student. In either dynamic—whether the teacher is half-child/half-adult, or is taught as an adult by a child—he is learning what he must

learn about connecting with relatives, lovers, and other artists. Furthermore, in all these episodes, the theme of fertility is at play.

Loneliness is also a recurrent theme of the book. The rich vision that unifies these poems explores qualities, like the vitality of children, that counter the sterility loneliness can imply, though without alleviating it. There is a repeated emphasis in these poems on a generating energy behind what is made in this world, a fertility that produces living things like children, poetry, flowers, and foliage. In the poem "Early March," the first blossoms of spring are killed by the return of frost, and the poem describes a parallel event in the writing of poetry. When "winter" returns unexpectedly in the writing process, "all" images of the natural world that might make a poem are

... resorted & pulled back by memory
inside the tidal corridor of the mind.
The language of incipient spring

& the grammar of winter's sudden return
retouch the feet to known earth,
our fragmented, renewing, momentary home...

The phrase "tidal corridor of the mind" suggests a locus of creative energy which, even at low tide or periods of low activity, is full of potential. In the chapbook's final poem, "Braille," the wind's scattering of berries and seeds in springtime produces new blossoms every year, blossoms that the poem likens to efforts of human breath to express in poetic language what we know and feel. Just as blossoms are replaced annually, poems are only momentary reflections of our changing experience. Neither blossoms nor poems bring pleasure once and for all, but both will always emerge:

All we know is forgotten
in breath, but pear trees
under streetlights last night
inspired & exfoliated
white secrets, smoke
signals from another world.



There is a sense here that the fertility of the natural world precedes as an eternal condition its temporary blossoms and its briefly telling poems as another world precedes and outlasts ephemeral smoke signals it sends. The poem refers to this condition, whether it lies in the natural world or in the mind, as an “evergreen intelligence,” that, like “the tidal corridor of the mind,” contains a creative potential preceding and transcending the fluctuations of tides and seasons. In the poem “Middle of February,” images of trees reversed in a puddle’s reflection “grow away from the sky, / yearning erasing itself, / smudging action back to thought. . . .” In this image, a locus of thought precedes what it produces, here specific actions; and some process of origination precedes tree limbs that—like a cat frightened by a car’s motor and fleeing in a rear-view mirror in an “inverse of panic”—grow backward toward their origin rather than outward toward the sky.

In the chapbook’s penultimate poem, “Near-ing Forty and Having Driven Alone for Hours the First Cold Night in Autumn,” sexual feelings bring to mind intimacy with a woman, and they always will, even when, as the speaker ages, that fertile connection becomes less likely: “The body, the body / never forgets to dream.” Described as “an urge against the current,” the speaker’s sexual impulses work against the approach of death. We think of Dylan Thomas’s emphatic advice to his father to “Rage, rage against the dying of the light”; Morris’s speaker seems to know, perhaps more calmly, of some inner, eternal vitality that will enable his resistance of time. Perhaps that knowledge is one advantage the speaker has acquired in the poem “On Having Outlived Dylan Thomas: A Meditation During a Family Reunion,” in which outliving one’s forebears involves finding and trusting the vitality of one’s own music amidst the voices of theirs:

I have lived to look quietly
and see, tussling with words
until I have learned
to speak with these voices
and, surrounded by blue light,
cast my shadow over the ground.

Like the ephemeral smoke signals of the poem “Braille,” a poet’s voice in this world is more shadow than substance, but as such it reflects a fertility in the order of things that one can learn to trust and use.

Still, learning to live fruitfully in this world can involve feelings that share the strength of the rage Thomas urges. As we have seen, the poem “Learning to Love the Music” ends with a vitality that may be akin to that of an evergreen intelligence or a tidal corridor, a love that has always been there but is only newly recognized. Perhaps, there is a kind of raging in that “snowmelt / raging down the mountain,” inspired by the father’s recent bout with cancer and the son’s awareness of his father’s mortality, that does not need encouragement to exist.

We see the same vitality in the poem “So Close To All That Hunger: Why I Don’t Often Smile When a Woman At Work Tells Me I Should.” At the poem’s beginning, a university English professor plays on the beach in California with nieces and nephews, stepping back from the “incoming swells of water,” the “chilly surf that kept rushing / over the sand toward my feet.” When he comes home to Oklahoma, he feels “more alone than I can remember.” He describes an indirect and uncomfortable sense of intimacy with a student whose father “I am old / enough to be,” who has included in a class assignment a few details about her own sexuality and an abusive relationship with a boyfriend. There is a faint suggestion of flirtation with her in brief joking comments that pass between them.



In the next section of the poem, the teacher remembers, not a moment of intimacy with a former lover, but a period in which he mourned a former lover acutely; in those thoughts, the poem moves from the avoidance of stepping back from the cold waves in California toward a greater willingness to claim one's own experience:

... Feeling
bad, feeling something, right now
seems like a good time I need again,
if only I would allow myself.

A few lines later, the speaker enters the waters of his own experience more fully:

Despite having my heels dug in,
I let myself be tugged under
the inward rolling water of sleep.

Still, he continues to hold back:
I float alone at great ease,
but feint a path along coral reefs,
declining to breathe the amnion
of sunstruck plankton & schooling fish . . .

...
I am enthralled in my usual solitude. . .

Knowing it would bring nourishment, he nonetheless refuses to take in the water. When he finally succumbs to his own feelings, it is in response to the somewhat annoying five-year old daughter of a student who has come in for help with her work.

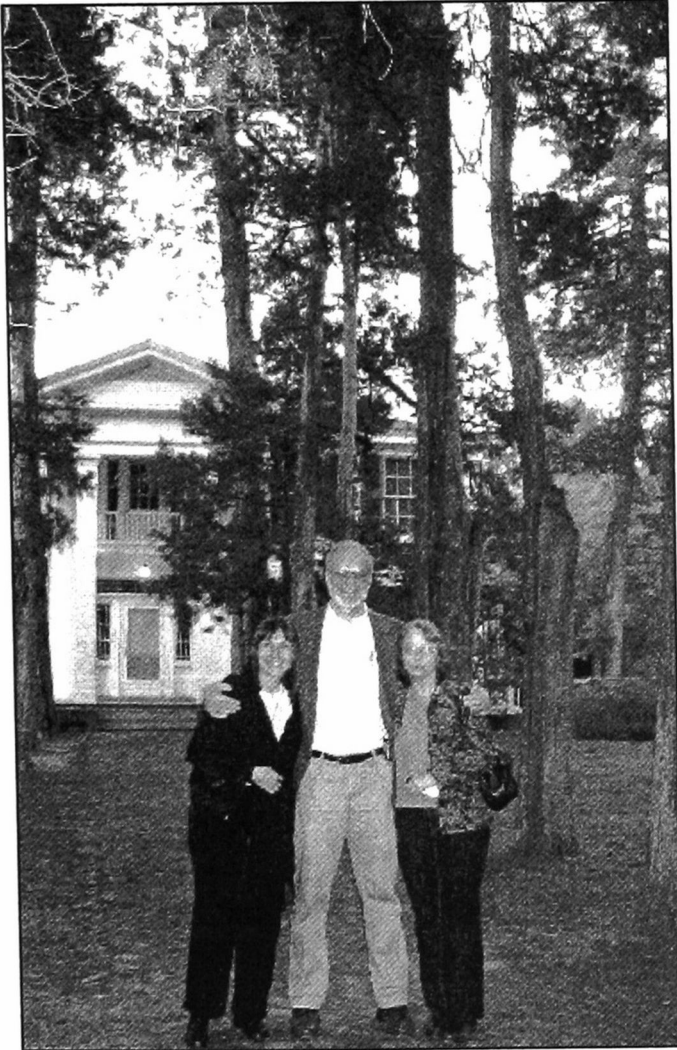
... For the third
time, she climbs into my lap
as I struggle to concentrate
on her mother's paper & fixes
her brown eyes on my face,
causing me to turn the narcotic
of my attention fully to them
& her teeth nibbling her mouth.
So close to all that hunger,

the tide relentlessly coming in
& rolling over the top of me,
I pull her closer with my arm
and almost without thinking
touch my lips to her fine hair,
famished & tasting with salt
the fear that I will never again
be able to live without such eyes—
undisguised, shining, insatiable—
the need not even a parent can fulfill,
and I am no one's father,
looking up from the bottom of the sea.

Certainly Eliot's *Prufrock*, who doubts the mermaids will sing to him, has helped to shape this powerful moment in Morris's poem, as have the child's undisguised feelings and the sadness the teacher feels at knowing he is neither father nor lover to the girl. The intimacy here, with its touch of sexuality, is as momentary as the joking moment with his other student. Still, it was the child's hunger for the attention of the teacher that freed him to experience his own hunger for intimacy and, therefore, to write the poem. Morris's phrase "tidal corridor of the mind," like the roaring snowmelt and the drowning sea, becomes a storehouse not only of ideas and words, but also of feelings and experiences, some painful. "Ever-green intelligence" involves facing loss and lack. In effect, the fertility that characterizes the world of this book reinforces as necessary music the very loneliness and emptiness it is defined against.

Accordingly, the role of children in the learning dramatized by these poems is ambiguous. We remember that the middle-aged lovers and the child of the first poem end up feeling distant from each other, each wrapped in an "autumnal stillness." We remember that the adult child who feels strong love for his father barely expresses it. We have seen that the professor who finds his own hunger in that of a child has no way to satisfy it. Toward the end of the book, images of childhood drop away. The arrangement of the poems in the book seems





The author (right) with her subject, John Graves Morris (center), and a colleague, Valerie Reimers (left). Photo courtesy of Jill Jones

to trace an overall process of seeing past childish perspectives, like an annoyance with a father that obscures one's love for him, and then moving beyond those lessons. After the book's title poem and the one following it, which can be seen as extending the speaker's new understanding of his father, the poems focus more on creative concerns of writing poetry and the experience of being middle-aged, without defining that experience against childhood. In this evolution, one form of vitality is lost to the book—the eyes of Morris's children shine, their behavior is impulsive and transgressive. The poem, "Nearing Forty and Having Driven Alone for Hours The First Cold Night in Autumn" describes a similar

loss: the impulses to bond with a woman and to parent children come with a backward glance:

Patches of cloud scud
in front of the full moon
in the rear-view mirror,
a sudden ocher areola:
my penis stirs in my trousers,
salmon-tipped, blind,
an urge against the current.

There is a mourning in these retrospective stirrings. Nevertheless, in the next poem, the last one of the book, they become a study of the speaker's present task, the writing of poetry, and a celebration of the "evergreen intelligence" that the poet must learn to discern in the world around him, to represent in his work, and to locate in his own poetic gift. And, as we have seen, even the body's mournful dreaming participates in the larger fertility at play in the world of these poems. Side by side, these last two poems suggest that even though one kind of fulfillment may drop away, always to be missed, another kind, already a part of the poet's life, will always lie in store. The approach of winter in the penultimate poem is succeeded in the final poem by the vitality of breathing and of a warm sun that, in its touch, teaches the poet a mode of perception that can be faithful to a living, changing reality:

the sun's yellow fingers
poring over the braille
of leaves a shade of green we, too,
must now touch to believe.

These images of springtime express the peacefulness of an aging, perhaps somewhat cynical, creative adult.

They are images that an accomplished poet might, in a parental gesture, share with his students of creative writing, offering them an inspiring voice with which to speak for a while and enabling them to outlive it in their own.



Mining for Happiness

by Earl Coleman

Mining for happiness
brought him further understanding of its evanescent properties.

He tried pursuing it
but it receded just as he
was reaching for his sack.

There weren't trams to take
him to its core or cart back
what he'd not yet found.

In his heavy-handed way he was
delicate, reduced his expletives,
banned explosives which might

shatter it, or sharpened instruments,
curses that might pierce, or even
frighten it away, fragile as it was.

When he was ninety-one he sat erect
in bed to contemplate the Herculean and
futile struggle all those years

and he was happy.



Thursday

by Jane Langley

How like a tourist in my hometown—the unfamiliarity
of afternoon traffic—its patterns like waves instead of a river.

How like a visitor in my own living room—the otherness
of the silence.

How like a client in my office—as if the sound
of shuffling papers would return me to my body,

the body that waits dinner for the absent husband:
How like that body to go to the front door at dusk,

lift its hand, turn on the porch light
like a beacon for the one who won't come home tonight.

How like Tuesday it still seems.



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall



The Blank Canvas

by Mark Dwortzan

All it took to end my old life was a simple, two-line announcement.

Line one pulled the trigger. "I have some news, Bruce," I said to my deskbound CEO as I stepped into his coveted corner office. And then I clutched my spill-proof Lilliputian Technologies coffee mug like an astronaut bracing for liftoff. It seemed unreal that in just 14 days, my to-do list would zero out for the first time in 20 years. The old game—of performing task after task for no purpose other than to cross it off the list—would soon be over. So would 60-hour weeks behind tinted glass in a gray cell of a nameless high-rise anchored to the concrete canyon of downtown L.A. My spirits soared!

But when Bruce said "Yes?" in his signature booming voice and leaned forward, his balding Mount Rushmore head closing in on me like an eagle circling carrion, those same spirits went into freefall. Stripped of a job title, superiors, assignments, coworkers, and a place to go every day, what would become of me? Deleted in one keystroke from the Lilliputian org chart, how would I navigate the outside world? Suddenly Bruce's motto—"Life is nasty, brutish, and short"—posted in red block letters on his bulletin board, loomed large. Feeling as naked as my clean-shaven face, I quivered in my Brooks Brothers suit.

And then held my fire. It wasn't too late to back out. For a split second, I considered handing the boss the latest progress report from our cross-functional strategic planning focus group. Then, as the digital clock on Bruce's flat screen monitor advanced to 11:54 a.m., his eyes met mine. Pummeled by the intensity of those dull green, command-and-control eyes, eyes that bore into mine like drill bits, I steeled myself for a blistering response.

Line two fired the shot. "I'm resigning, effective two weeks from today," I declared in a voice that could have doubled for Stephen Hawking's

speech synthesizer. Bruce stared at the month of August on his Sierra Club wall calendar for a few seconds, then trained his eyes on me. As I awaited his reaction, I could hear the omnipresent hum of PCs, laser printers, and keyboards in nearby cubicles, and the thump of my quickening heartbeat was rising above it all.

"You sure about this, Will?" Bruce said, narrowing his gaze to a squint.

"Positive." Now I began to feel light-headed. Everything had happened so fast.

"Maybe you should have a seat," Bruce offered, showing me the guest chair.

"Thanks, boss." Catching my breath, I collapsed on the stiff gray seat pad.

"Now I know the business has lost steam lately, especially in the nanotech sector," Bruce said with a half-smile that gleamed like his Stanford class ring. "But if you wait out the quarter, I'm confident things will hit stride."

"That's not why I'm leaving."

"Then why are you leaving?" he asked, scratching his square jaw.

"Because I can afford to."

"What are you saying, Will?"

I took a deep breath. "After my father's funeral last week, his lawyers informed me that I'm the sole living beneficiary in the will. Bottom line: I've just inherited a fortune."

"Really? I had no idea your old man had deep pockets. How much did you net?"

"Ballpark figure, taxes excluded, is 500 million."

Bruce gasped. "My God, Will, that's enough to ride on for a lifetime. For 50 lifetimes!"

"I suppose," I said, managing a weak smile.

"You 'suppose'?"

Why wasn't I jumping for joy? After all, in one fell swoop I had ended two decades of submission to a succession of interchangeable CEOs at the



same high-tech firm, three buttoned-down captains of industry who had controlled my time and sapped my life force, one assignment at a time. In truth, by resigning with no job to follow, I had just liberated myself from an entire lifetime as a subordinate.

It was my father, a miserly venture capitalist, who originally broke me in like an equestrian's saddle. While I lived under his red tile roof in a Palo Alto cul-de-sac, Father tied my measly allowance to my grade point average. And all through college, he refused to provide tuition unless I majored in business administration and maintained at least a B-plus average. When I dared ask him why the B-plus, he stated, "You won't make it in this life unless you're above average, Son."

Even after I had netted a Stanford MBA, stuffed myself into the latest prison uniform from Brooks Brothers' Signature Suit Collection, and scored the marketing director slot at Lilliputian, Father made weekly calls to monitor my progress. "How's work?" he would ask, never once inquiring about extra-cubicular activities, such as my rocky marriage to Lisa or weekend outings with the Stanford Alumni Club. Instead, he'd grill me on the status of my 401(k) and stock options. It seemed fitting that his legacy now boiled down to a hefty lump sum.

"Five hundred million, my foot!" said Bruce, smiling broadly. "I have to admit you had me lassoed for a moment, Bilbo. Don't tell me: Alison put you up to this, didn't she?"

"This is no joke, Boss."

He scowled. "Okay, buddy, the jig is up. It's already 1200 hours and I've got to get back to the grind."

Anxious for closure, I dashed to my cube, reached past the remains of a chocolate glazed donut and a pair of still pulsating headphones, and snagged a copy of the settlement from a file folder. Then I raced back to the corner office and deployed the deliverable on Bruce's Lilliputian desk blotter.

"Son of a gun," said the boss, combing through the 50-page document. When he came up for air,

his usually sparkling eyes appeared downcast. "So what will you do with your life now, Will?" he asked, handing me the settlement. "What's your game plan?"

"Well, that's the \$64,000 question." I'd have gladly paid that amount for the answer.

"You mean the \$500,000,000 question." Bruce sighed like a man who had missed his plane.

"Something wrong?"

"No, nothing."

"Come on, Bruce. What's up?" I had never gotten this personal with him before. A former Marine drill sergeant from North Dakota, the boss rarely opened up, even after downing a few beers at happy hour. But now that I'd resigned, he seemed more vulnerable, as if my announcement had melted his armor.

"Well, I'm really happy for you, Will," he said, leaning back in his black Aeron chair. "Pleased as punch. Even though I'm about to lose one of the best marketing directors in the business. I guess I'm just a bit..."

"A bit what, Bruce?"

"Well, envious. Right now my workload looks like a ten-car pileup on the Ventura Freeway. But on the drop of a dime—five billion dimes—you can just leave it all and follow your bliss."

"I wish I knew what my bliss was," I said, surprised Bruce had even heard of the concept, and saddened that a whopping 20 years had elapsed since the last time I had felt something approximating bliss. Back in 1988, when I joined Lilliputian, bought my first condo in Santa Monica, and married Lisa, I couldn't have been more charged up. But five years of 60-hour weeks later, I'd lost interest in work, and Lisa had divorced me on grounds of neglect. From then on, my existence boiled down to an ocean view condo and a mind-numbing job to pay down the mortgage. In the past 15 years, as my buzz cut went gray, I could feel my life force slipping away.

Now I was suddenly free to reinvent myself. But after two decades of letting my "superiors"



define my days down to the minute, how would I face that first Monday without a job? I had reason to fret: ever since the divorce, I had crumbled whenever a chunk of free time came my way. To get through most weekends, I'd sleep off Saturdays and work off Sundays. When I couldn't sleep or work, I'd envelop myself in the Sunday *LA Times*, comb the Santa Monica shoreline, or lose myself in a movie matinee. Or I'd surf the Web for an instant soulmate. Upon my return to the office on Mondays, I'd cling to colleagues like a stranded mountain climber greeting a search party.

Vacations proved even more daunting. I typically used up half of my annual two-week furlough running errands, leaving the other half for organized activities. Three years ago, after listening to the entire taped version of *Full Life Reboot* while commuting along the I-10, I tried on the arts for size. In 2005, I attempted to write a novel but couldn't get past the first three pages. In 2006, I picked up an acoustic guitar but sang so out-of-key that I couldn't stand to listen to myself. And last year, I attended a weeklong retreat at an artists' colony in Santa Barbara but found the blank canvas intimidating. Overwhelmed by choices of what paints and brushes to select and what subjects to render, I ended up painting by the numbers in a children's art manual.

How, then, would I face my first business Monday as a free man? As I stepped out of Bruce's office, the rest of my life loomed like that blank canvas.

As expected, a parade of colleagues filed by my cubicle that afternoon to wish me well. But many of their visits took a surprising turn.

I first noticed the phenomenon when Alison Williams, a marketing and practical joke specialist from the next cube, stopped by. "Seriously, Will, I'd love to ditch corporate life and launch a home-based organic granola business," declared the ten-year Lilliputian veteran with flowing, hip-length gray hair, "but I haven't had a moment to

think it out. Anyhow, most new businesses fold the first year."

Next, Roger Salazar, our potbellied, hirsute network guru, showed up. "My dream is to become a yoga instructor," he announced. "But for months I've felt too wiped out to take classes myself. I also worry how Carol would react to the pay cut." Tacked to the center of Roger's bulletin board, an 8" x 10" glossy of his stern-faced wife watched over his every move.

Even Bruce whisked me into his office to unload. As I stretched out in the guest chair, he admitted that he fancied directing community theater in a Sierra mountain town, a dream that would have to wait until he retired in ten years. At first, I strained to picture Bruce in that role. On second thought, as Lilliputian's CEO, he did function as a director of sorts, choreographing staff meetings and assigning roles to "actors" like me who faked enthusiasm for his every directive. Maybe Bruce could direct theater. Now I envied him for knowing exactly what he wanted to do when he retired.

Until my recent windfall, retirement seemed like a distant dream, and time belonged to the corporation. At Lilliputian, they permitted us three sick leave "events" per year, ten vacation days, and no comp time—all while expecting us to go full throttle, week after 60-hour week. Maybe that's why as many as eight of my 15 coworkers admitted that afternoon that they longed to evacuate their cubes to pursue their true passion. As I witnessed their revealing stories, I felt like a priest in a confessional. And I felt a bit guilty for leaving them all behind.

Poor Bruce, I thought that mid-August evening as I paced my concrete deck overlooking the Santa Monica coastline and watched the Pacific Ocean fade to black. Poor Alison and Roger. If only they had the time to stop wasting their lives and follow their bliss. Or the money. Or the energy. To think, there I was with all three of those precious commodities, yet no bliss in sight. No bliss! Only two weeks now stood between me and a void of blank



days, weeks, months, years.

On second thought, maybe I wouldn't last beyond a year or two on my own power. As I stared at the dark sea amid the relentless sound of incoming waves, Bruce's motto hit home. Even though I hadn't opened Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* since my freshman year, I could still recite the full quote by heart: "No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." With just two weeks to pinpoint my bliss, the pressure was on to start thinking outside the cube.

That Saturday, I did what millions of Americans do when they seek direction, and fast: I consulted a life coach. Luckily, the choice was obvious. At 9 a.m., I called Joyce Ravens, one of my direct-reports. Joyce developed marketing applications software on weekdays and coached on weekends. Out of the office the past week at a training session, she had already heard the news, every detail.

"Some guys have all the luck," she muttered.

"I do feel fortunate, Joyce," I reported as I sank into my Aeron home office chair and watched a distant seagull hug the shoreline. I then realized that my feet hadn't touched down on sand for months.

"Speaking of fortune-ate, Willie, how about sending some of those greenbacks my way? After all, what's a few million among friends?" I could picture Joyce flashing her trademark smirk, one that illuminated her wiry athletic frame like a pink neon sign. I'd miss that smirk once I entered the abyss. Not to mention those electric blue eyes.

"Actually, I'd like to send 100 bucks your way. Got time now for a coaching session?"

"So you've finally come around," she said, chuckling. "I wondered when you'd...uh...when you'd finally avail yourself of my services."

"These are desperate times," I admitted, losing sight of the seagull.

"So said the multimillionaire. Well, I was plan-

ning to hit the dry cleaner's right now, but I've always had a soft spot for blue bloods. What can I do you for, guy?"

Ecstatic to have Joyce on board, I got right to the point. "I'm dead set on finding my true life's work within two weeks, and I hope you can help."

"Okay, Will, then let's cut to the chase," Joyce said firmly. "If you really want to nail down your life's work, I've got a two-step process that's helped many of my clients."

"Sounds good, but do you think I can complete it within two weeks?"

"Try two hours. The trick is to trust your first thoughts. It's those uncensored, immediate responses that will put you on the fast track to your life's work. So, ready?"

"Shoot!" I said, now perched at the edge of my Aeron.

"Okay, here's step one: give me your all-time top peak work experience. I'm looking for a project in which you became totally immersed in the work, losing all sense of space and time."

As if speaking to a PowerPoint slide, I then described my proudest accomplishment from my first five years at Lilliputian, the years before I stopped caring: producing a viral radio ad that boosted Lilliputian's customer base by 15 percent.

"Excellent," said Joyce. "So what skill set powered this project?"

"Well, marketing, of course." The answer came as no surprise; after all, marketing was my core competency.

"Wonderful. Now we can proceed with step two: let's find where your deepest passion—in your case, marketing—meets the world's deepest needs."

"Can you give me an example?"

"Well, my true passion is the guitar, and I'm part of a local band. About once per quarter, we play for prisons, orphanages, and other confining places where people could use a lift."

"Really?"



"Actually, that's why I launched my coaching biz. Don't tell anyone, Will, but in five years, I hope to generate enough capital to bolt Lilliputian and rock full-time."

"Wow." It amazed me that yet another of my colleagues wanted out. Since her start date five years earlier, Joyce had always seemed so committed to the company. Then again, she had always struck me as a contained firecracker with too much life in her to waste in a gray cell.

"Enough about me. What I want to know is: what cause fires you up, Mr. Trump? What contribution would you love to leave behind to humanity besides that ample inheritance?"

I felt numb. After 44 years on the planet, I had no legacy to speak of. No children. No work of art, scientific discovery, or act of goodwill to resound across eons. Nothing value-added. My legacy at Lilliputian amounted to "boosted market penetration." Is that what I'd have etched on my tombstone? "I wish I knew, Joyce," I grumbled, slouching in my chair. "I guess I'm a man without a mission statement."

"Come on, Will, you must have at least one first thought. Who in the world would you most love to help out with those well-honed marketing skills?"

After a silence, I confessed, "Sorry, Joyce, I really have no idea. Do you?"

"Maybe you should hear Father John."

"Father John?"

"Father John of Saint Ignatius Church in Santa Monica. He gives this sermon on service that I promise will get you through step two. Every Sunday he does some version of it."

A lapsed Catholic, I had long resented the Church as yet another beacon of authority. But as I hurtled helplessly toward the void, I needed an absolute answer. And from what I remembered, the Church specialized in absolutes. So, for the first time in two decades, I attended mass that Sunday morning at Saint Ignatius. Seated alone on a back pew surrounded by stained-glass windows and art



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

carvings of the baby Jesus, I stared past the congregation at a buff, white-bearded priest who reminded me of a black Charlton Heston. Now emerging from behind the mahogany pulpit to take center stage, Father John raised his outstretched arms like Moses preparing to part the Red Sea. At that moment, I would have followed him anywhere.

"The great prophets of the Old Testament implored us to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, to clothe the naked, and to free the captive," he began, branding the words on my brain through the sheer force of his vocal cords. "This, my friends, is what infuses our lives with meaning! This, my friends, is the vision of the Lord in a nutshell! To every living soul He asks, 'What have YOU done lately—and what will YOU do now—to make it so?'"

When Father John paused to exhale, I cringed. What had I done lately to make it so? Nothing, unless I could count what I'd done for Will Bowers. Feed the hungry? I purchased organic produce and gourmet foods for top dollar at the local Whole



Foods Market and ordered takeout from ethnic restaurants dotting Santa Monica's Main Street. House the homeless? I lived in a luxury condo with ocean view, deck, Jacuzzi, sauna, pool, gym, and club room. Clothe the naked? Brooks Brothers Monday through Thursday; L.L. Bean for casual Fridays and weekends. Free the captive?

As it turned out, I *had* done something in recent years to free the captive, that is, if captive employees counted as true captives in the Lord's eyes. In violation of company policy, I often gave my five direct reports time off to compensate for overtime, even assumed their responsibilities during personal emergencies. I also organized an annual beach volleyball group retreat in Malibu and took the whole gang to lunch once a month on my personal credit card. Whenever I did these things, I felt ebullient. I was also anxious about how Bruce and Corporate might react, I'll admit, but definitely ebullient, as if I'd tasted a bite of forbidden fruit.

I also felt a bit like my late mother, Claire, who used to boost my allowance and take me to R-rated movies, Giants games, and the beach when Father went away on business. How I loved those beach outings. Running barefoot, shirtless, and watchless along the Pacifica shoreline south of San Francisco, I'd forget what college I would attend and what I'd do when I grew up. Mom, also barefoot and keeping pace, would call my attention to the soaring seagulls, the jagged cliffs, the salt air, the thump of my heartbeat. I really loved that woman, though she did make me nervous sometimes.

Now Father John began to work the center aisle. "What will you do now to make it so?" he repeated, thrusting a microphone at randomly-selected parishioners. Talk about first thoughts! As he approached the back pew, I prepared a quick response: I would use my marketing skills to free up captive employees in corporate America. But one pesky question remained: exactly what service would I provide? I had no idea. While Father John queried an elderly woman three pews away,

I bolted.

In a phone session the next weekend, Joyce and I explored how I could resolve Father John's big question. In one scenario, I would buy up several retreat centers and market each as a rejuvenation station for overworked desk jockeys. Offerings would include Shiatsu massage, career coaching, and real estate investment seminars. In another, I'd hire volleyball pros and market beach volleyball-day packages to corporations as a team-building tool.

The problem was, after a week at a rejuvenation station or eight hours at a beach volleyball-day site, customers would still have to return to the grind. Joyce convinced me that I wouldn't be satisfied unless I devised a far more liberating service. That week, as my final day at Lilliputian neared and my first unemployed business Monday loomed, I lay awake each night beneath a perpetually spinning ceiling fan, data mining my brain for the answer.

Agonizingly, the answer continued to elude me that Friday morning as I boxed up personal belongings, deleted computer files, and brain-dumped Lilliputian marketing plans on Bruce. Late that afternoon, during my going-away party at the Embassy Suites Hotel, I parallel-processed: while displaying my game face, I continued to drill down for a final answer.

Ten of us convened at a large round table at a barroom that routinely sucked in glazed-eyed employees from neighboring executive office complexes. The dimly-lit lounge featured a large oak bar, several round tables, and an upright piano. In short order, a waitress filled our mugs to the rim with Bud Light. As the reality of the moment struck, I wondered what I would come up with when my coworkers inquired about my future plans. My heart pounded like a bass drum as the white-suited pianist belted out a schmaltzy rendition of Frank Sinatra's "Come Fly with Me." Sandwiched between Bruce on my left and Joyce on my right, I felt weightless.



"Listen up," Bruce shouted. "I'd like you all to join me in a salute to our dear departing comrade. I'm sure we'll all miss Will for all he's done to add value to Lilliputian." After a round of applause, Bruce raised his mug and said, "Bilbo, this one's for you." He took a swig and added, "Now that you've joined the jet set, don't forget about the little people."

"Hear, hear," added Joyce, lifting her mug. "You absolutely must keep in touch, and, um, feel free to send cash any time! Shall we drink to that?"

As the toasts continued around the table, amid good-natured barbs from Joyce, Alison, Roger, and other cube-dwellers I would sorely miss, the answer, the final answer, became obvious.

Finally, I stood up. "You guys are outstanding," I began. "I feel so bathed in love right now that I may well retract my resignation!" Heads bobbed and applause rang out. "Only kidding," I said. "Actually, I have a better idea."

One year later, six of my clients joined me at the exact same table where I had been toasted for my retirement party. Standing nearby on a makeshift stage alongside the piano and sporting a ripped orange T-shirt and black jeans, a seventh riffed on her electric guitar. A keyboardist, drummer, and bass guitarist, all clad in black, joined the hyperkinetic woman in a spirited rendition of her latest hard rock creation. This was outrageous stuff for the Embassy Suites, more a bastion of smooth jazz than a staging ground for unplugged rockers, exactly as the lead guitarist would have it.

Joyce's smile seemed as charged as her instrument. Nearing the end of the concert, she grabbed a microphone, looked in my direction, and announced, "I'd now like to acknowledge one special person in the audience, Will Bowers. Would you please stand up, Willie?" As I rose, my table applauded with gusto.

"If not for Will, I wouldn't be here," Joyce continued. "I'm one of seven people at his table whose new careers he has sponsored and promoted this past year at DeCube.com. Seven people who once did time at Lilliputian Technologies but are now, thanks to this man's generous financial support, his expert marketing, and his true friendship, well on their way to realizing their wildest dreams. In that spirit, this one's for you, Bilbo." On that note, Bruce, Roger, Alison, and three other former coworkers at my table raised their mugs high.

As the band played on, I hoped that Joyce would soon score a more lucrative venue than an Embassy Suites Hotel. But I also realized she was exactly where she wanted to be: in front of a captive audience—or more precisely, an audience of captives. Scanning the room, I noticed a sea of familiar faces, many of them former colleagues, faces marked by unmistakably sad eyes, eyes that locked onto mine like high-gain antennas as I slowly rotated my head.

As expected, I left that night with dozens of business cards with boiled-down dreams scrawled on the back, including one from the woman who replaced me at Lilliputian. While driving home on the I-10, I wondered, "In which of these dreams, if any, could I invest with confidence? How many more could I take on without compromising my leisurely lifestyle?"

These questions weighed on me the next morning, but first things first. At 8:50 a.m. I "commuted" on foot to "the office," stripped down to my shorts at "the desk," and plunged into the daily "assignment." Running half-naked along the shoreline beneath the Pacific Palisades, I could smell the salt air, feel the thump of my heartbeat, and marvel at the graceful flight of seagulls overhead. I really loved my new career, though it did make me nervous sometimes.



People-Watching at Ruby Tuesday

by Bonnie Lyons

Who is this
behemoth biker with a greasy bandana
tied around his head, belly slopping
over jeans that barely cover his ass
sleeves ripped out to flaunt
beefy tattooed arms? What is he
doing with that tidy, high-heeled woman
and her Banana Republic daughter?
A one night stand in her wild days? Maybe
the woman's brother, an embarrassment
she will meet only in a soulless restaurant chain
where people just passing through fuel our bodies
for tomorrow's 600 miles? When he removes
his goggle shades, scared puppy eyes
return my gaze and my disgust boomerangs.



Sleepy Time in Bedlam: a Lullaby

by Kevin Collins

"Sleepy Time in Bedlam" is dedicated to James V. Forrestal, the first U.S. Secretary of Defense, who had a sad end in the asylum. His troubles began just after World War II when he confided to a friend his belief that Israeli agents were following him everywhere he went. The friend provided some temporary comfort, arguing that there was not yet any such thing as the state of Israel and that it was quite impossible for such agents to be following him. Not until long after Forrestal's death did former members of a proto-Israeli paramilitary organization admit that they had indeed been dogging his every step prior to 1948. The moral of the story: the mere fact that you're paranoid does not preclude the possibility that you're also being followed by spies from an imaginary nation.

It's the end of another long day,
Days have all been long since they put you away,
You're tied to your beddie,
So now you are ready,
For sleepy time in Bedlam.

Say goodnight to John Hinckley
And Rosemary Kennedy,
Watch Sylvia Plath
Get another sponge bath
When it's sleepy time in Bedlam.

Close your eyes and plug your ears
So you don't get scared by Britney Spears,
And don't make a sound
Or you'll wake Ezra Pound
When it's sleepy time in Bedlam

Scott and Zelda are in a fog,
And Frances Farmer's sawing logs,
And asleep down the hall
Is James V. Forrestal
'Cause it's sleepy time in Bedlam.

Listen to the thorazine
That you took tonight with Norma Jean,
Climb in the top bunk
Above ol' Edvard Munch
'Cause it's sleepy time in Bedlam

The moon is rising over you,
Buzz Aldrin knows that that is true.
And a light misting rain
Falls upon Kurt Cobain
When it's sleepy time in Bedlam.

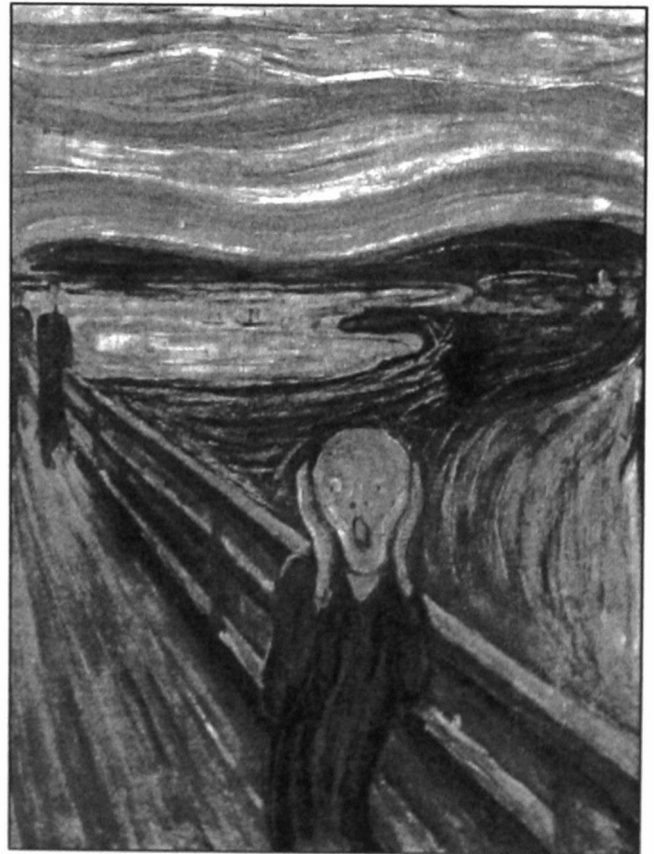


Photo courtesy edvard-munch.com



Genies

by Nicholas Meriwether

"It's the same old story. Nothin' new. In fact, it's not even a story—it's just nothing."

The man seated next to the speaker of this bar-room soliloquy nodded, attentive, concentrating: mid-forties, scruffy salt-and-pepper beard, kindly crinkle to the corners of the eyes. He knew his role; he was just wondering how to play the next few lines. He nodded slowly, half-smile telegraphing sympathy to the man standing next to him.

"Lotta somethings can hide in nothing."

That sparked a flicker of a smile. "I reckon."

The seated man sipped his beer again, let a few more minutes get filled by the mindless eighties pop drowning the silence that resurfaced in the brief, odd moments when the music paused. That silence was as strange as whale song, an eerie white noise made up of human longing and desperation and drunkenness normally cloaked by the alcohol-infused mists carrying off-color jokes and frenzied cajolery. Once, many years ago, the seated man had shared a joint with a friend in the parking lot, and when they walked back inside from the warm summer night into the neon gloom, it had all somehow seemed alive, all the smoke and shouts and laughter and music swirling and phosphorescing like the primordial sea right after it got that magic bolt of lightning that made it all come alive for the first time.

His pot-smoking days were long passed, but he remembered that image a little wistfully; he thought about it some nights when he walked the few blocks to the bar from his little house, wondering if he would ever open the door and see it in quite the same light, when the tin-clad cinder-blocks and cheap ceiling fans turned into some vast cosmic machine that soothed and mollified and transformed a crowd of sad-eyed drunken refugees into something as close to communal ecstasy as anything they would ever feel. A night when he would see a real-world Orgone Accumulator, and

a cheap little dive in small-town South Carolina would vindicate Wilhelm Reich and his crackpot theory at last.

"I'm not even sure that story stays the same. I think it gets changed by the telling. I think it's alive, and changes and adapts as it passes through us, and it feeds on us, too; that's why it hurts. Just a virus we haven't recognized."

His companion looked down and nodded, "Yeah, it's definitely a sickness," and snorted. "When my folks split up, the minister came and visited me and my little sister and told us that it was okay to feel rotten about it because divorce was a kind of death. I didn't understand then, but I do now. When you spend time with someone, even when it's bad, and you try to do the right thing and it doesn't work out—then yeah, that's death. Sure it is."

"I can see that."

Early in the evening to see condensation already running down the windows. There weren't many windows, and they were small and high up on the wall behind the bar. Once they had held air conditioners, before the bar had put in a central system. The seated man watched a dribble roll down the glass, carving a path through its fellows, veering left and right in little straight lines put together crookedly, mapping out stiff little football maneuvers. Who was the coach? What was the play that mapped out how this drop moved and responded to those unseen forces steering those lines?

"Maybe that's your story, then. You still had two parents, even when they were apart. Split something and you turn one thing into two. There are still two stories there. Three, really, since the relationship has its own story to tell.

"That's the thing about a bad relationship: it's a cage that prevents stories from being told, and there are three stories trapped inside. Some of the genies in bottles weren't very nice, but that was



always because they had been trapped."

He nodded. "Yeah. It was a cage, all right. Maybe that's why it took both our lies to break it. She's been seeing somebody I know for a while now. And I don't know why I care—that's the thing. It got so bad I couldn't even screw her. Couldn't even get it up. And she kept on saying how much she loved me, how she could never date anyone else, how she would kill herself if I left her. So when my dad got sick, I let her think I had moved in to take care of him; which I did, for a while, but not that long.

"So I lied. And so did she. I shouldn'ta been surprised, but I was. It's classic: she doesn't know how to tell me that she wants to break up, I don't know how to tell her, so we just linger on in this twilight, when the sun has definitely gone down but no one can admit that it's cold and dark and time to go on back inside."

The other man nodded. *And everyone inside is looking at the couple outside, frozen in shock and alienation, wondering how long they can go on before they realize that each is the only keeper of the other's secret. Everyone else knows. Anyone can see.*

Except for those immersed in it. Truck tires on gravel outside interjected, punctuated by the popping sound of a bottle collapsing. Someone leaving angry.

"The funny thing is, I didn't even like her, never really did." His smile wasn't forced this time. "She was shallow and selfish, and I knew that but couldn't admit it. I thought I needed the reassurance." The smile looked genuinely rueful now. "Who was selfish?" He took another sip, then swigged the rest of the bottle. "When the hunter gets captured by the game."

"Or maybe he just falls into one of his old traps," his companion replied. "Mighta forgot it, but it hadn't forgot him."

As he walked out into the warm night, crunching through the gravel of the parking lot, he ruminated on the conversation. Sometimes talk was the only balm that worked. The owner ought to pay him to hold office hours, he chuckled.

A bottle—the same one he had heard breaking, maybe—had left some good-sized pieces, enough to stab a tire, so he picked up the worst offenders and tossed them in the weeds in the lot next door. You could still see the outline of the bottle in its fragments, even after the big pieces were missing. It looked almost pretty in silhouette, the buzz of summer playing in the background, streetlights painting the glass yellow. Genies once lived here.

Maybe that's why we need to tell the old stories. We always forget what we do, even if the rest of the world remembers.



Mt. Auburn Cemetery

by Nancy Kassell

Enduring trees
and grounds are luxuriant this autumn
as they will be every season,
as if the dead deserve all the best
of this world after they leave it;
as if the living, charmed by nature's generosity
(the grandeur of a beech), should, reflecting,
grow more reconciled to mortality.

We are a deciduous race, destined
to shed out of time leaves,
to surrender obsolete selves.
Our hearts are pith, archives
of desire quick and quickening,
and you and I walk these shaded paths
holding hands, tendrils
of our late, regenerate love.



Photo courtesy mountauburn.org



The Books

for Rick Weinberger

by Hilda Weiss

Your books in small boxes.
Darkness. I carry you
across the lawn. I hold you
in my arms. Your dark
smallness. Your death. Your books.

In my arms I carry
your books in small boxes.
I hold what's left of you—
your books, death. In darkness
I cross the lawn.

Your books, they carry me
across the lawn, across
the darkness. In my arms
I hold the small boxes.
I hold what's left—the books.



Note to Myself

by George Young

There is a silence
quiet as a church on Monday

you may call many things, but not
sun on a white wall.

You—
with a feather stuck in your throat,
mucking about, making up stories about God,

chasing lights
like a dog after a flashlight on the ground—

must accept the true flame
is a black flame,
the *Via Negativa* of Aquinas, the absence of knowing,

a silence
that is not white stones in the moonlight.



Ophelia's Pantoum

by Kelly Parker

Someone stole my name and walked away laughing,
but I don't get angry with specific spirits.
Take back their yellow joy! Their warmth doesn't soothe.
Give me a season of cold fingers and no gloves.

I never get angry with specific spirits,
specific bodies of water, or cows lowing in the fields.
Not even the season of cold fingers, chilly dust bones.
I've been here before, I've seen these weeds.

The specifics of lowing: *One* cow. *One* field.
There is straw ablaze in the gloaming.
I've been here before, I've seen better weeds.
Fennel, rue, unhappy love. Did I mention the daisy?

Straw houses blaze in the gloaming.
The last good thought I had, smoke in a bottle.
Fennel, rue, unhappy love. Did I mention the daisy?
I'm content here. I like this blue, how it cools.

My last good thought, a cloud in the hand.
And now left to this: I lower myself in.
I'm content with this buoyancy. It's the way with blue.
O, how the wheel becomes it!

I've lowered myself in, every inch to my face.
In the end I will toss like the tree tops.
O, how the wheel becomes it!
I remember such dancing.

In the end I will toss and thrash about.
Take back the yellow joy. Its warmth doesn't soothe.
Bring back the dancing.
Someone stole my name and left me half laughing.



The Choice

by Michele Charles

Peering through the darkness three pairs of eyes strain to see in the dark of the cool, damp root cellar that has been dug deep down into the rich Texas farmland soil. Eight-year-old Molly's trembling hands grip those of Anne, her older sister by 16 months. Huddled in the corner, they try to make themselves as small as possible and hope not to be discovered. The two sisters shiver with chill but mostly from fear. They know not to utter a sound as they stifle their tears. Dressed in sack-cloth dresses, their hair done in bow-tied braids and faces smudged with dirt, they look small and vulnerable.

Thirteen-year-old Missouri, named for her father's beloved home state, grips the shotgun so firmly that her knuckles turn white beneath the brown of her slightly soiled skin. Standing with her back turned to her younger sisters, she doesn't even raise a hand to wipe away loose strands of wind-blown hair tickling her nose. A cold sweat begins to seep across her brow. Her body remains rigidly at attention as she rests a finger on the trigger.

Her face tenses as she listens to the sounds of chaos coming from above. Chickens squawk and scatter across the farmyard as war-painted Apaches race to scoop them up. A horse whinnies in fear. His hooves pound and scrape the ground as he

nervously and erratically trots around the corral searching for an escape. Shrill and angry screams from the throats of vengeful attackers pierce the night air. Furniture crashes and splinters atop a pile of burning objects from the pioneer family's sod home. Each piece crackles and hisses as the bonfire's orange and yellow flames dance higher, licking at the clear starlit sky.

Strange utterances of a language unknown to the girls come from voices nearing the crude, board-covered door of their hiding place. A dim glow from the bonfire of cabin furnishings breaks through the gaping cracks of the root cellar door, casting lines of eerie light across the faces of the frightened girls. Missouri raises the heavy shot gun and secures it against her shoulder. Like her father taught her, she rests her cheek against the smooth wooden gun stock as she sights down the barrel. Slowly turning to face her sisters she decides Molly will be the first because she is the youngest, Anne next, and then, finally, she will turn the gun on herself. Her chin quivers with fear and desperation as she silently prays not to hear creaking hinges of an opening door. For if she does, it will leave her with no choice.



Mortician

by Keisha Sandusky

They brought my angel in last night
You'd almost think she still had breath
Her beauty, overpowering,
Could not be quenched, even in death

My eyes drank in her smooth, pale skin,
Her full red lips, her flowing hair
A beauty rare, of just 18
And all for me, just waiting there

I stood beside her on the slab
And touched her cheek so tenderly
And wondered how I had such luck
This angel'd come to be with me

I traced my fingers down her chest
Then ran them thru her eb'ny hair
Then gently undressed her, then I
Lay beside my lady fair

I put my lips on hers, blood red
And opened sultry emerald eyes
And tasting, took her mouth with mine
Then mounted my illustrious prize

And then her hair, like ravens' wings,
I grasped and tangled in my hand
And took her breast into my mouth
Took her all, and it was grand



To touch, to feel, to make her mine
My every whim to quench this fire
I can't control this urgency
For death derives deranged desire

"She was an angel," the preacher says
Ah, that she was, and so much more
I listen to her mother cry
While standing by the stained-glass door

I listen to the preacher's dribble
"I remember..." he takes off
I tell her mother, "You are in my prayers"
And, "I'm so sorry for your loss"

And so they placed my angel low
Into the ground, into the blight
Without a sound, without a sight
And yet I'll not despair tonight

For now I must see to my guest
With long blonde hair and blue eyes bright
She's waiting for me on my slab
The prom queen killed herself tonight



Early November, 2007: A Tomb in Yoknapatawpha

by Valerie Reimers

Standing at Faulkner's grave
We pull out cell phones and digital cameras
Fifty-somethings, not-so-techno-savvy
As our twenty-something children,
But able to take a photo or two.

English, the teaching of writing and literature,
Our chosen career.
Visiting the tomb of one of our heroes thrills us,
This group of four colleagues,
With something like the reverence
Of standing on hallowed ground.
We digitally record our presence here
To honor the writer whose words
Float in our minds—
Descriptions, characters, concepts, images—
That wear well with time
Popping up in favorite quotations
In our classrooms, in our lives.

But someone had come to pay homage before us.
An empty bottle of Jack Daniels
Leans against a wreath of glossy
Burgundy-pink berries.
A purple plastic scepter, perhaps a remnant
Of the recently passed Halloween,
Rests propped on the stately unassuming headstone
Flanked by columns, not ostentatious,
But quietly elegant.

Our group, colleagues in preserving prose,
Had driven down from our conference
In Memphis, Tennessee,
Home of the Music King.

In Oxford, these graveside offerings attest
To someone's Mississippi sense of humor,
Keeping the Yoknapatawpha royalty
Grounded in simple pleasures.



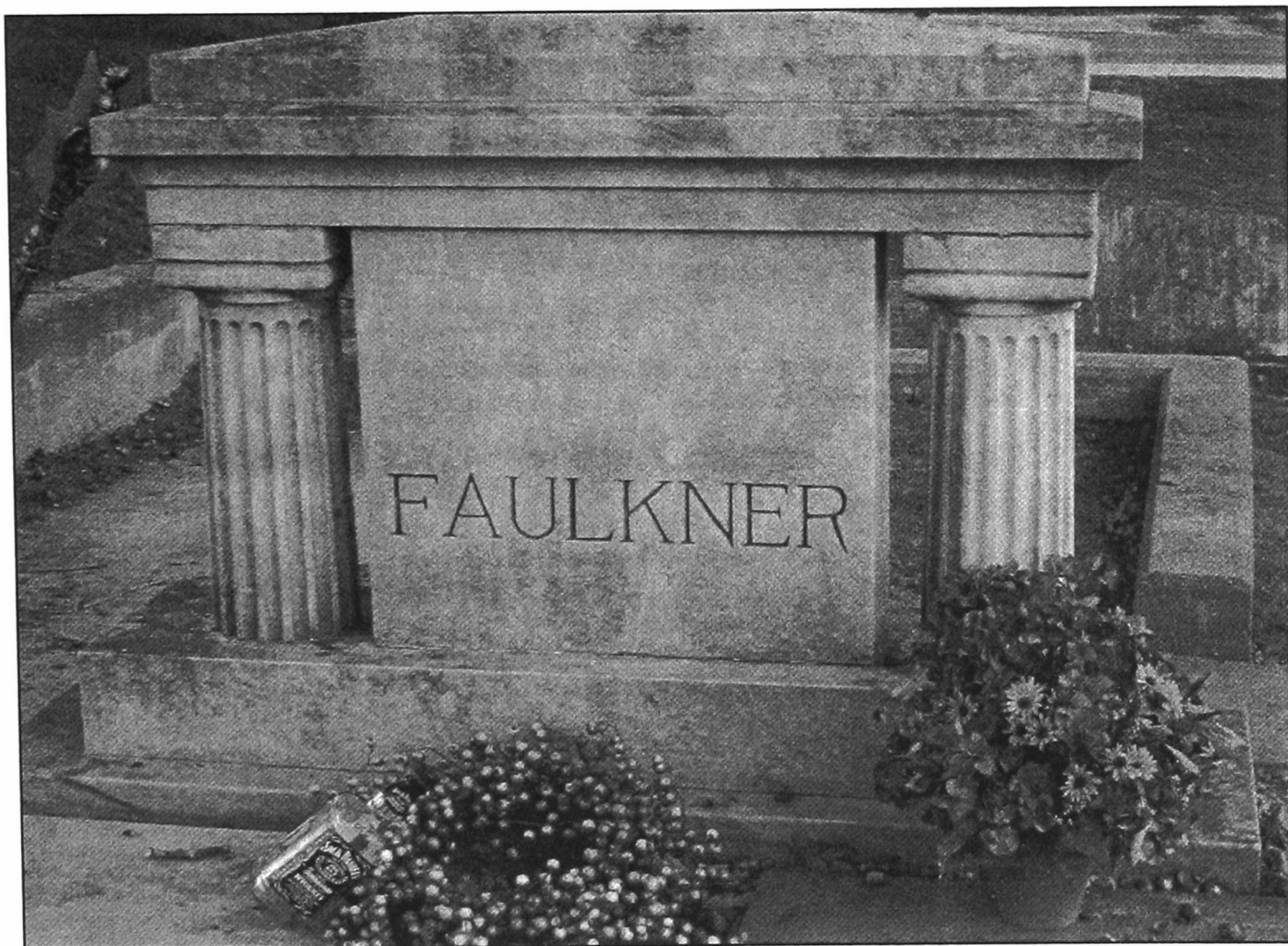


Photo by Jill Jones

Two Worlds

by Carol Hamilton

Now I see us circled
by strong fences, oblivious
to the good adults laughing

at their own jokes as we
nibbled the grasses, rollicked,
not thinking, not needing to think.

Those protective walls that circled
like Stonehenge or prairie wagons
have turned diaphanous, ghosts,

and soon we see the huge landscape,
sky, wonder that they were there,
wonder where they've gone.

We did not know (or did we?)
they watched while seeming
full of grown up things.

I did not know they were good.
I did not want the watching.
I did not say that now would come.

Open-ended coffee cans protect
the young peppers, tomatoes,
but they are stored for winter now

and the plants survived or did not.
Now days shorten, the garden attenuates,
and evening sings its knowing song.



Four Meetings: Scenes from Adult Dating, circa 1994

(with apologies to Henry James for borrowing his title)

by Daniel Schwarz

I.

"I'll bet you are great in bed;
Will you read to me?"
she blurted primly, coiffed and kempt,
our eyes meeting as she leaned forward,
on darkening late fall evening
in drab restaurant
lit by our flirtation,
her foot massaging mine
as my ears reddened in rash of puzzlement.

II.

"I want to do everything to please you.
With you it's wonderful,"
she gasped,
intermingled with me
in her Victorian parlor opened to
late December sun caressing
our mid-life nakedness.

III.

"Perhaps I should have
mentioned Robert, who has
returned to share our house and
whose illness requires my presence,"
she whispered grammatically,
looking away
as she lay beside me.

IV.

"I am a creature of duty and loyalty;
besides, I am in love with my house,"
she added formally, as she departed,
fastidiously closing my front door.



Sheriff Dennehy, Once the Posse Returns

by Robert Cooperman

One thing for Preacher
to've pranced around
with Mary LaFrance.
A man's got needs.

But for his widow to vanish
with the breed tracker
and ignore my marriage proposal,
that's going against your own,
and a mortal insult!

So I whipped the boys up
to such a lather
they'd have jerked
the first stranger
our posse came across.

But up rides Sprockett,
swearing he can read signs
good as that breed,
and who's going to tell him
he can't, a man who can murder
quicker than most can sneeze?

We spent a week riding hard,
sleeping on harder ground,
vittles running out,
liquor running dry
as drought-parched streams.

Finally, we turned back.
You ask me, what Sprockett
angled for all along.
Maybe he helped
send Preacher to Paradise,
but I ain't dumb enough
to say so.



John Sprockett, After the Posse Returns

by Robert Cooperman

I led Dennehy's drunk posse
in circles and onto false trails;
around ghostly campfires I told
of Utes drooling to sink arrows
and knives into white men's guts.

Between my terror tales
and the liquor getting drunk up,
they had less stomach to search
than General Lee to continue
the War he knew we'd lose
before he gathered an army.

Sheriff knows I'll kill him
quicker than I'd swat a fly
if he asks me how that snake
of a minister got found
at the Hell-end of a dry shaft.

Let the Widow and her Tracker
find a long happy life together,
far from where I might be forced
to keep their mouths shut forever.



Mary LaFrance Watches the Posse Return

by Robert Cooperman

A half-breed out-footed
mounted men, and him slowed
by the Preacher's Widow.
To trap him would've took
a woman using herself as bait:
but no one asked my opinion
about men sticking their necks
into nooses for love.

The posse would've enjoyed him
puppet-dancing from a rope,
then taking turns on her;
but tracking? Too much work.

Sheriff whipped them on—
braying like a wounded mule
to find the Widow missing—
but she'd rather have pulled slack
with a rattler than with him:
and the breed's a fine-looking man.

Now, the posse's pouring
into Sheriff's saloon,
bragging about almost catching,
"The mongrel and his white slut."
But Sprockett smashes his bottle,
and they fall silent, him hating
when any woman's spoken of
like tossed away apple cores;
still, he gives me the creeps
like a spider was grave-dancing
down my face.

I'll have to explain
my belly bump to Judge Sam;
him and me did go a round
or two on them nights
Tommy got stuck with his wife.
Judge Sam'll think himself
a hero to have planted me proper.



William Eagle Feather Hears of the Death of John Sprockett, 1876

by Robert Cooperman

We always feared he'd repent
of saving us: first,
from her husband,
then from the posse
that would've hung us,
since someone had to pay
for the crow-coat's death.

Now, we can breathe easy,
though I grieve the man,
his soul troubled as rivers
raging down from the peaks.
He was a thunder-god of death
filled with scorpion juice.

The wind-imp hisses
a woman stole his soul
when she returned
to her own people,
and he allowed himself
to be gunned down from ambush.
I can't think any woman
delighted in his scarred face.
But Hair Filled With Sun laughs,
"Scars disappear to eyes in love."

Maybe he'll meet that thief-woman
in the Land of Plentiful Game,
will forgive her for pouring
ashes onto his heart; and they —
like Hair Filled With Sun and me —
will dance in the mountains forever.



William Eagle Feather Changes His Name

by Robert Cooperman

When I gave you the name
Hair Filled With Sun,
you smiled, wore it
more gracefully
than Mrs. Lavinia Burden.

Now, it's time for me
to pick a new name:
Finds the Path,
a name that counts coup
over the white blood
that battles inside me
with the Ute.

Your eyes glitter mischief,
thinking this new name
a vanity
when I should be finding us
a good berry patch,
of if the smoke
you spy in the distance
is a white settlement
or some escaped Lakotas:
even more dangerous
for us to get close to.

But I do find the paths
we follow
in our mountain dodging
of desperate bands,
and of settlers and soldiers
howling vengeance
for Custer.

If half the rumors
whispered of him be true,
an unholy fool.



Hair Filled With Sun: the Colorado Rockies, Late 19th Century

by Robert Cooperman

When we escaped Gold Creek,
for a life of wilderness wandering,
I cried at first, for my bed,
a bath, clean fingernails,
but soon saw them as fripperies.

The first time I snared a rabbit,
I clapped hands with the joy
of a girl mastering ice skates.
When I learned to make fire
from twigs, dry leaves,
and my inspiring breath,
I watched, rapt as God—
forgive my blasphemy—
calling the sun into existence.

Soon, I could sniff out deer,
the rank brutality of bears,
could brazen wolves
from their kills.
We never attempted those thefts
on wolverines: more fierce
than any creature save Mr. Sprockett,
God rest the troubled angel
of his soul.

Soon, I could find
a trail or bushwhack one
through what a white man
would deem impassable brush.
The years have sped by
in our delight and hard work.

And soon, so very soon—
my aching bones
and rasping breaths inform me—
I must tread the trail that ends,
I pray, in mountains untouched
by toadstools of white settlements.

May we walk to that Good Land
Like trusting children, hand in hand.



Finds the Path Mourns

by Robert Cooperman

Hair Filled With Sun died today.
I hoisted her into a tree,
so she can fly off easy
to the Land of Plentiful Game.

Sometimes, when she thought
I wasn't looking, she'd sigh
for a bath or a new dress,
or her Boston childhood,
or even that gold hell-town
I took her from.

Still, she swore she wouldn't
trade our wandering for anything.
Then she'd hold me tight
and sing she loved me more
than her own breath
or the kids she couldn't have.

Hair Filled With Sun,
I named her. She said
I was a natural poet;
she took to snaring game
like she'd been a fox
before she was a woman,
could stitch our leggings
and tunics finer
than a Lakota squaw.

Just let me see her again:
in her preacher Pa's heaven,
or my poor Ute mother's
Land of Plentiful Game,
or in Hell, but together;
even if we're old
and wrinkled and useless,
except to each other.



A Tribute to Robert Cooperman

by James Silver

With the poem, "Finds the Path Mourns," *Westview's* presentation of *The Widow's Burden* comes to a close. We wish to express our gratitude to Robert Cooperman for allowing *Westview* to re-print his book serially. For the past few years, each issue of *Westview* has featured five of the sixty-seven poems from Cooperman's book, presented in their original order and usually placed conspicuously last to close an issue. We have decided to present the final seven poems in this last installment, rather than dividing them unevenly between two issues.

Many readers have expressed delight with Cooperman's work, calling it their favorite part of *Westview*, and the space that will be left behind, now that all of the poems have been re-printed, will be difficult to fill with material of equal merit.

The text presents a series of poems through which a story of the Wild West unfolds, complete with murder, treachery, love, and lust. Each poem appears as a dramatic monologue, spoken or thought by one of the various characters involved in the larger story that takes place in and around a Colorado gold mining town in 1871. Each poem reveals insights into the mind and heart of the given speaker and contributes also to a larger narrative that the character does not fully see or understand. This narrative design brings to mind Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, a novel that uses a series of monologues, or short narratives, to frame an all-encompassing narrative. A reader forms a view of the larger, unifying plot of the novel through inferences drawn from the dramatic, first-person speeches taken all together. Like a Faulkner novel, Cooperman's book requires a reader to work, but rewards a reader for working.

The story centers on the widow, Mrs. Burden, whose husband recruits John Sprockett, the notorious, badman killer, to murder her by tossing her down an abandoned mine shaft. Sprockett shows

his good side by throwing the preacher down the shaft instead. Eventually, William Eagle Feather arises as the hero of the story and as the lover of the widow, Lavinia Burden. This element, along with many others, takes the story in the direction of Romance. In the case of Lavinia and William, "true" love wins out over the lust and abuse of power that is associated with the villain, Sheriff Dennehy, who also wants to marry the preacher's widow. The story ends happily with the protagonists enjoying the fruits of their goodness, while the corrupted, poisoned spirit of Sheriff Dennehy becomes for him his own punishment.

One quality of *The Widow's Burden* that complements the other attractions of the story and the characters is the subtle humor, never absent entirely but not always immediately apparent. The last speech of Mary La France (page 62) injects a dose of much-needed comic relief to form a segue between representing the final defeat of Sheriff Dennehy and the triumphant escape of the true lovers.

But as shown by the closing monologues presented in this issue, the story does not end with smiles, and it does not support a happy-ever-after illusion. Lavinia Burden, re-named "Hair Filled with Sun," delivers the penultimate speech, which takes place some twenty-plus years after she and William had fled together. She reflects on many years of living in the wilderness with William, but her "aching bones and rasping breaths" tell her that she will soon be gone. The closing monologue comes from William Eagle Feather, re-named "Finds the Path," who mourns for his soulmate and yearns to be with her again, even if that would mean going to the white-man's hell. If that desire does not attest to the power and truthfulness of his love, then nothing can.



On the Roof

by Kate Wells

At the peak of the neighbor's roof
a fist-sized bird stands guard.
She waits. She watches.
She holds the whole earth
down with tiny feet.



Photo by Bigyan Koirala

Contributors

Gay Baines of East Aurora, NY is a member of the Roycroft Wordsmiths and a part owner of July Literary Press. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *South Carolina Review*, *Nimrod*, *California Quarterly*, *RE:AL*, *Controlled Burn*, *Rattapallax*, *Slipstream*, and *Quercus Review*.

Michele Charles is an author of how-to craft books and a mixed media art instructor who has traveled extensively throughout the United States, teaching and sharing art. Michele enjoys writing, and as a native of Oklahoma, she is proud of its history and has a special interest in stories of its pioneers.

Kevin Collins of Weatherford, OK has been asked by several prominent poetry journals to quit pestering them. His work in poetry, drama, fiction, creative nonfiction and literary criticism has appeared in *The Southern Literary Journal*, *The Simms Review*, *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, *Westview*, the anthology *Where I'm From*, and other venues.

Earl Coleman is the author of *A Stubborn Pine in a Stiff Wind*, a book of poetry. He has been nominated for Pushcarts XXIII and XXVII for short stories. He maintains a literary website, "Nearby Cafe."

Robert Cooperman's third collection, *The Widow's Burden*, is available from Western Reflections Publishing Co., P.O. Box 1647, Montrose, CO 81402-1647. His work has appeared in *The Centennial Review*, *Cimarron Review*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*. His first book, *In the Household of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, was published by the University Press of Florida.

Lucy Daniels of Raleigh, NC is the author of five books and is a Guggenheim fellow. She is a clinical psychologist, and both her practice and her writing focus on the relationship between psychoanalysis and creativity. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Confrontation*, *Emrys Journal*, and *North Carolina Literary Review*.

Jane Downs of Kensington, CA is the Royalty Administrator at the University of California Press, and she is very active in writing and reading groups. Her work received first prize in the 1997 Artists Embassy Poetry Contest and the 2003 Tide Pool Poetry Contest. Her work has appeared in several literary journals.

Mark B. Dwortzan of Newton, MA gave up a career designing NASA missions to focus on work as a freelance writer and environmentalist. His work has appeared in *The Boston Globe*, *Environmental News Network*, *Harvard Public Health Review*, and *Technology Review*.

Barbara Eknoian of La Mirada, CA participates in Donna Hilbert's workshop in Long Beach. Her first collection, *Jerkumstances*, was published by Pearl Editions in 2002 and received the Jane Buel Bradley Chapbook Award. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 1996 and 1997.

Christine Fontaine lives in Staten Island, NY and works in New York City as a litigation attorney, practicing in the area of insurance defense. While the bulk of her writing has been in legal documents, she is devoting a larger and larger percentage of her time to creative writing.

Ken Hada of Ada, OK is on the English and Languages faculty at East Central University. His work has appeared in *Oklahoma Today*, *Crosstimbers*, *Kansas City Voices*, *Red River Review*, *Flint Hills Review*, *RE:AL*, *Poesia*, *Westview*, and several other journals.

Carol Hamilton of Midwest City, OK is the author of *I'm Not From Neptune*, a children's book, and *Vanishing Point*, an Editor's Choice book from Main Street Rag Press. Her new chapbook, *Shots On*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press, and her poetry has appeared in several significant journals.

Lowell Jaeger of Bigfork, MT is the compiler-editor of two anthologies, *Poems Across the Big Sky* and *New Poets of the American West*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Iowa Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *The Coe Review*, *Poetry Flash*, *Georgetown Review*, *Big Muddy*, and *California Quarterly*.

Nancy Kassell from the Boston, MA area is a former college professor who has published critical work on classical literature and feminist studies. Her poetry has appeared in three anthologies as well as in *Salamander*, *Kalliope*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Southern Review*, and *Feminist Review*.

Jane Langley of Pacific Palisades, CA has worked as a journalist, an actor, an educator, a curator, and a designer. Her literary work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Cimarron Review*, *CQ*, *Comstock Review*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Hawaii Review*, *The Healing Muse*, and other journals.

Bonnie Lyons is on the faculty of the Department of English, Classics, and Philosophy at the University of Texas at San Antonio. She has published a full-length book of poetry, *In Other Words* (2004), as well as two chapbooks, *Hineni* (2003) and *Meanwhile* (2005). Her work has appeared in many literary journals, including *Westview*.



Helen Maxson is a professor of English in the Department of Language and Literature at Southwestern Oklahoma State University in Weatherford, OK, where she teaches courses in literature and composition. She is an active scholar specializing in the poetry of Wendell Berry.

Kathleen McCormick is a professor of literature and Pedagogy at SUNY in Purchase, NY. She is the author/editor of seven books and a winner of the MLA's Mina Shaughnessy Award. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Compass Rose*, *Fugue*, *Italian Americana*, *Lullwater Review*, and other journals.

Nicholas Meriwether has published short stories in *Watchword*, *Enterzone*, *Coffeehouse*, and other journals. Born and raised in South Carolina, he spent 20 years in the Northeast, in California, and in England before returning home five years ago. His theory is that fiction grows like kudzu in the South.

Kelly Parker is a graduate of the MFA program in poetry at the University of Virginia. After spending eight years in northern Illinois, she has returned to her native Oklahoma and lives with her husband, two children, and wayward dog. She is a freelance editor and an adjunct English instructor. Her work has appeared in *Papyrus* and *Midland Review*.

Suzanne Picard of Kensington, MD graduated from Harvard and studied writing at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference with Andrea Barrett, Claire Massud, and Thomas Mellon. Her work has appeared in *Enhanced Gravity*, a fiction anthology of Washington DC women writers (Paycock Press, 2006).

Valerie A. Reimers has been teaching composition and literature at SWOSU for the past fourteen years. She also supervises the university's Writing Center. Her poetry has previously been published in *Westview*, *Thema*, *Barefoot Grass Journal*, and *Cooweescoowee*. A short nonfiction piece appeared in *The Sun*.

Georgia Ressmeyer of Sheboygan, WI is the author of two novels and the recipient of two creative writing grants from the Wisconsin Arts Board. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The South Carolina Review*, *Wisconsin People & Ideas*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Old Red Kimono*, and other journals.

Keisha Sandusky of Weatherford, OK has been producing poetry for publication since second grade. Her poem, "God's Special Breed," was published in *A Muse to Follow*, a compilation of poetry published by the National Library of Poetry, and her "Mortician" received honorable mention at the 2008 *Westview* Writers' Festival.

Daniel Schwarz is the Stephen H. Weiss Presidential Fellow at Cornell University. He is the author of numerous scholarly articles and several books. His poetry has appeared in *Ithaca Times*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, and other journals.

Dorothy Stroud of Willcox, AZ is searching for people lost enough to read her poetry. Her work has appeared in scores of journals, including *Seattle Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Descant*, *Desert Voices*, *Armchair Aesthete*, *The Binnacle*, *Black Creek Review*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Buckle &*, *California Quarterly*, and *Ship of Fools*.

Eric Tallberg of Henniker, NH is a Vietnam veteran, and he recently retired after a forty-year career in the field of chemicals and coatings. His goal as a writer is to produce fiction that explores the often corrosive strata beneath the crust of the Joe Averages of the world.

Hilda Weiss of Santa Monica, CA is a technical and public relations writer. She is also a yoga student and the holder of a fourth-degree black belt in Shotokan Karate. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Ekphrasis*, *Nerve Cowboy*, *Pacific Coast Journal*, *Poem*, *Rattle*, *Salamander*, and *Tar Wolf Review*.

Kate Wells of Hangtown (Placerville, CA) teaches English at a charter high school and urges editors to recycle. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in such journals as *Poetry Motel*, *Common Ground Review*, *Rattlesnake Review*, and *Westview*.

George Young is a retired physician living in Boulder, CO. His work has appeared in a number of anthologies of the works of physician-poets. His collection, *Spinoza's Mouse* (Word Works, 1996), won the Washington Prize. Recent poems have appeared in *The Aurorean*, *Chaffin Journal*, *Poet Lore*, and *Willow Review*.

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