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A JOURNAL OF WESTERN OKLAHOMA

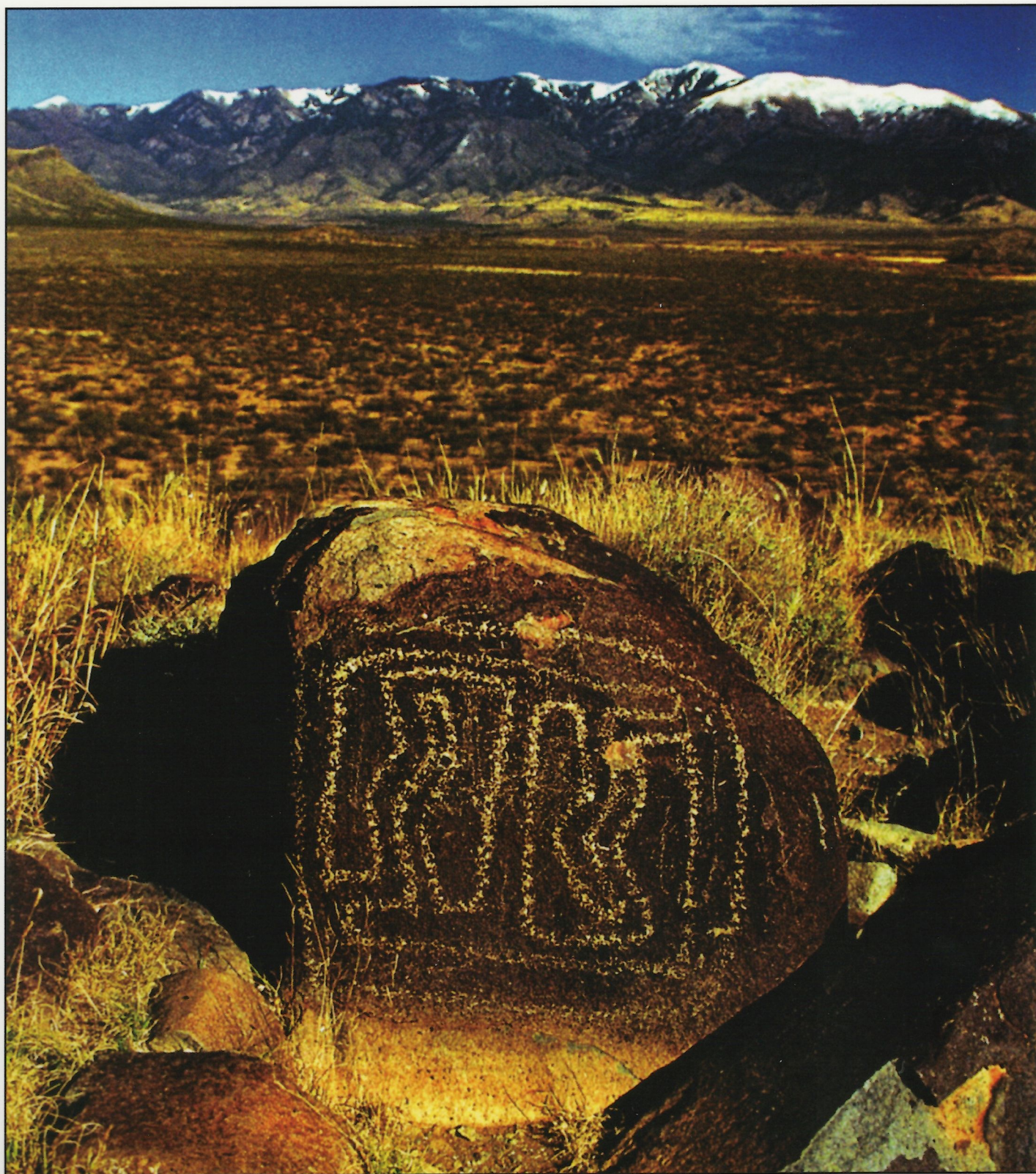
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W E S T V I E W

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Stylesheet

1. Submissions should be typed on 8.5" x 11" white paper; prose should be double spaced. Include a SASE.
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 work may be submitted. Submitted artwork with a SASE will be returned.
3. We accept and enjoy formal verse, free verse, and prose poems.
4. Include a brief biographical sketch for our contributors' notes.
5. We welcome submissions on a 3.5" disk formatted for IBM or Macintosh. Please include a hard copy of your submission.
6. Submissions and correspondence may be sent to:
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On the Porch Swing at Dawn

by Walt McDonald

A Steller's Jay plopped down on the deck,
cocking his haughty head, flag-blue,
dark topknot like a plume. We never fed him,
but he swooped down each dawn

to find some sudden wonder, a worm
or cockroach to pop. We slipped outside
with coffee in the gray-dawn cold,
grandchildren sleeping a thousand miles away

from hawks and big-horn sheep, the clumsy bears
hungry for berries, for carcasses wolves caught.
Light slashed Montana clouds like a scythe,
spruce needles silver-blue. Peaks flared

like glaciers from the fog, chalk cliffs
burning to granite while we rocked.
Crows cawed past the cabin,
flapping across a mile of meadow and gone.



Regional Faults

by Errol Miller

Living over there
away from the South is painful at first,
until the magic of knowing, in its red-clay wisdom,
brings the realization that we are what we were,
that we have only changed our armor,
gut and heart-strings attached
forever to native soil.

For we have moved horizontally
across a plain manufactured by Northern keepers,
wild oats waving in the plastic sunlight.
At the bottom, paleontological fish
fight for the earth's roar.

It is only temporary, the wanting.
Soon a Cajun fiddler in black boots will come
and play a mortal minstrel tune by hand,
his brassy flute worn
and twisted.

But in that desolate music,
in that serene homecoming, the white-oaks
shall weep and console us with
their slimy roots.

And we will be home again.



Third Planets

by Barry Ballard

If you imagined a planet, would you
imagine it blue and then green, heat it
and then freeze it—and then heat it again?
Would you imagine it a cool liquid
emptiness and then fill it with life, your spewed
out breath surfacing like volcanic fists
under the sea? Could you foresee the problems
of its gauging reach and self-conscious skid

through the outer atmosphere, its questions
trapped in orbiting spheres of geometric
shape (some of them igniting in the friction
of their own descent, while the others sleep
in an unguided drift of memory holding
to itself in the very womb of knowing)?



Thirst

by Kevin Revolinski

Patricia stared out at the horizon where the highway turned liquid and evaporated into the sky between two distant hills. As she plodded across the empty fields, the sun beat down on her dark skin and her limbs grew heavy. She stopped to rest. Juan, absorbed in watching the flopping motion of his untied shoelace, nearly walked into her from behind.

Pay attention.

He nodded. She held out her hand, her eyes still fixed on the horizon, and Juan handed her an old dented canister wrapped in threadbare canvas the color of dried mud. She tipped her head back to swallow the last mouthful of water so warm that it passed through her lips without seeming to touch them. She handed the canteen back to her silent companion who squinted up at her unsure of whether she offered a swig or simply expected him to take it back now that it served no purpose for her.

The canteen was Juan's most valued possession. It had been given to him by strangers some months before on a day that felt like Christmas. No, more than that. Christmas had never been like that day. Not for Juan. The children had gathered in uncertain anticipation outside the compound. The truck had rolled in, trailing a cloud of dust, and fair-skinned strangers had emerged speaking a mysterious language. English, he was told. From the United States, in the north. He remembered hearing of these people from the television. Rich, violent, they lived where everyone owned a car and carried a gun for protecting it.

The rusted hinges on the trailer door had made a hawk's screech as the door swung wide, and the light had glinted off of the bounty waiting there—tools of every imaginable kind. A soccer ball still in the box, board games, typewriters, books, a paddle game, a bat, a stuffed animal with one eye missing, a radio, even a bicycle with two tiny

wheels dangling off the hub of the back tire. More than Juan could count.

Juan discovered the canteen among the tumbling treasures and, from the beginning, his solemn stare never strayed from its target. He recognized it from old movies where people fought in terrible wars and crouched in dusty trenches and drank desperately from these things. He waited in anxiety as the first groups formed lines, taking turns at claiming their gifts. He held his breath, fervently praying to the Holy Mother that this one object be spared for him alone. They started with the youngest first, girls before boys. Juan took his turn with the six-year-old boys which meant he had to wait through two groups of five and under and then the six-year-old girls. But the canteen evaded the onslaught of desperate and grateful fingers.

Victorious, he clutched it in both hands, hanging back under the eaves outside again where the others kicked balls, squirted each other with guns the color of neon and filled with water, and where a group of girls made jewelry with tiny bits of plastic from some kind of kit. His probing fingers felt the rough fabric and then tested its worth by pressing harder along its surface, feeling every seam, every dent in the metal below.

One of the strangers approached and spoke to him in Juan's own language but the way only some of the very young children spoke. "*Es por agua.*" The man pointed and slowly reached for the canteen, all the while watching Juan's eyes carefully. Juan hesitated but relinquished it to smooth hands.

"*Mira,*" he commanded. Juan looked. Along the top of the canister the man grasped the lid, twisting it off to expose the dark hollow inside which the man made a point of showing to Juan. "*Ah-gwa,*" he said, louder this time. Perhaps he is hard of hearing, Juan thought. Or thinks I am.

"*Agua?*"

"*Sí, sí. Agua.*" He smiled widely, and enthusi-



astically summoned over one of his companions, a woman in brightly colored shorts and a white t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up and some words written across her chest. They spoke wildly in their strange tongue and then just stood looking at him and smiling. The man held out the canteen for Juan but with a hesitancy that suggested to Juan that there might be a condition for its return.

"Can-teen."

Juan hesitated, then grabbing his gift, took one step back.

"Gracias." He bowed slightly. The strangers looked at each other and laughed.

"Day-nah-dah."

Juan endured a slap on the back that stung a bit but then ran inside to put his new discovery to the test of water. Since that time, the canteen played an important part in the daily patrols....

Patricia sighed and without looking at Juan began to walk back toward the compound. Almost as a parting thought she called over her shoulder for Juan to follow. There would be no bandits today. It was almost time to eat. Juan followed over earth cracked and faded like the tired skin of an old man.

After breakfast and morning prayers, Patricia and Juan set out to continue their patrol for bandits and rebels. At the edge of the field, out behind the compound, Patricia lifted the wire and its rows of crooked teeth for Juan to crawl under. Goats stood staring at them in the sparse fields. Across nameless land and several barbed barriers they ventured into unscouted territory. The ground sloped a bit and they came to where rains of long ago had cut a meandering scar through rock and soil. The arroyo was deep but empty, a dried vein burning for the blood of the land to run through it again from the quiet mountains in the distance. They climbed down steep banks into a river of sand and scattered stones.

Juan searched through the worn rocks for ones that fit his palm snugly. Good weapons, he fig-

ured. He nodded sagely at several as he hefted their weight before concealing them in his pockets. Patricia warned him that too many might slow him down should the need arise for a quick retreat for reinforcements. The distorted outline of a hawk flowed silently over the cluttered path in front of Patricia as they followed the jagged arroyo, pausing to listen at each bend. As the sun rose, the shadows that protected one side of the gully slipped slowly into the sheer wall that towered over them. Juan followed patiently and squinted up at his sister with a certain admiration. He waited, clutching the canteen.

No one was sure whether Patricia really was his sister or not. No one except Juan. He just knew. They had arrived at the orphanage before Juan could remember. Patricia, who was believed to be only four at the time, simply appeared out of a cold night; a quiet ghost, she stepped out of shadows determinedly struggling to carry Juan under his armpits, face forward, like an offering. He wore only a soiled diaper that sagged with its weight. Juan's wailing brought the staff out into the parking lot where Patricia stood grimly in the cold wind that blew down from dusky skies to beat her tattered dress. No one knew anything of their origin; Patricia, though capable of speaking, did not. They were treated as siblings and Juan never questioned it. Only Patricia may have really known the truth, if it mattered.

"Agua." She held out her hand. Juan scampered up, unscrewed the top and watched Patricia's soft throat pulse as she drank deeply from the canteen. Juan took one swig for himself, tightened the cap, and returned the strap to his shoulder.

Patricia held up her hand. In the distance she heard the sound of loose gravel scattering beneath the roar of an approaching vehicle. The sound grew closer and closer before finally grinding to a halt somewhere just above the rim of the arroyo. Dust passed overhead, momentarily dimming the sky. They heard voices and they both stood motionless, only their eyes searching the sparse clumps of dried



grass along the edge above their heads. A car door. Then another. Footsteps in gravel and dirt. Words indiscernible and then the faint smell of cigarette smoke. Juan pulled at Patricia's arm and pointed directly above them. Patricia scowled and shook her head but pushed herself flat, back against the dirt wall. Juan followed her example.

They blended, motionless like chameleons, until even the swallows took no notice of the two silent figures and flitted in and out of the holes carved into the baked mud above their heads.

They could hear laughing. Closer. Another car door opening and then a slam. Footsteps. Steady and purposeful. A soft noise, barely audible in the breeze. A panting rhythm somewhere between a whimper and a whisper. Juan looked up, squinting in the bright blue sky. Dust tumbled over the lip of the arroyo and fell into Juan's face. He bit his lip and wiped at his eyes with grubby fingers.

Suddenly, the air split open with a loud shot. A sound like all the sounds in the world being summoned together in one tiny instant and let go with a burst; they could be heard retreating back into the world across the land, the hills, and even fading faintly off into the mountains. The swallows fled like bullets from their nests. Juan and Patricia jumped involuntarily. Patricia clutched Juan's arm until her knuckles turned white; her nails dug in like talons. Juan wet himself. The shot still pealed away along the shallow canyon walls and grew fainter in the distant hills.

Juan's ears rang but he could still hear the yelp that had almost blended with the gunshot. He covered his ears, trembling. Another shot and Patricia's nails dug deeper into his forearm as she pulled one of his hands down from his ears. Tears traced gleaming tan paths down his dusty cheeks and fell to the dry earth between his feet. He wanted to cry out but fear made his throat as empty and parched as the arroyo itself. His impulse was to run but his feet were firm, his knees uncertain. He gave no thought to the weapons in his pockets.

He looked to Patricia and she appeared blurred

and frightened, her eyes tightly shut. Then footsteps through the ringing. Several. Coming closer. Patricia and Juan cowered against the dirt.

Then someone counting, "*uno-dos-tres*." The sun blinked for an instant. All the terror of mid-night passed in that frightful second and from the sky the dead fell. The stones clattered like dry bones and out into the middle of the arroyo. A couple of meters to Juan's right, the glassy eyes of a dog stared back at him, the head twisted in an awkward and uncomfortable angle. From Juan's lips escaped a staccato cry, brief but audible. They sensed a pause above them. Then the ringing of metal being locked into place and the dog made an epileptic leap to the sound of thunder. Neither child could hear now; their ears had become numb and muted as though submerged in the earth behind them. They both cried as quietly as possible, praying for the nightmare to end.

They stood there shivering in the hot sun for a long time. Shadow crept toward them, a sheet of oil tumbling over the stones, reaching halfway to their side of the arroyo before either of them could move or even speak. Juan's pants were almost dry and began to stink.

Patricia cautiously looked about for a place to climb up the wall of the arroyo so she could search for the enemy. Juan could only stare at the gaping mouth of the dog, at the torn flesh that no longer oozed crimson, at the mangy patches that spoiled the rest of its lifeless hide, and at the solitary black fly that already drank from the glassy pool of a vacant eye. He shuddered until Patricia returned, jerking Juan's arm to break his horrified stare.

They are gone. She complained bitterly of not having binoculars as a proper patrol should have so that she could have searched the horizon for the identity of these bandits that would so mercilessly attack such an obviously pitiable animal.

She started back home, turning to Juan who was no longer trembling but had dropped delicately to one knee several paces from the limp figure.

"*Ven*," she commanded with just enough con-



viction that Juan obeyed and followed along.

He ran. The sky loomed behind him, a threatening, purple cloud billowing down into the arroyo. The walls on either side grew higher, stretching steeper until they seemed to be straight up to the very reaches of the lightning that split the black night, shattering the dark window of the sky. The stones seemed to roll toward him and he fell to one knee. Every time he stood to run he would only get a few more steps before his foot would sink into the scattered rocks that seemed to bubble and tremble like the surface of a boiling pot of water. His ankles would disappear between stones and hold fast until he fell. The winds rushed at him from all directions and the howling escalated at every stumbling step. It became so loud that he ran with his ears covered. Out of the wind came a howling so piercing he could hear it with his flesh. First, a tortured wail then a high-pitched continuous yelping. Both feet lodged as if in iron boots and he fell once more. His eyes came up to meet the imploring, glazed stare of the dog. Its tongue lolled out, its head at that unfortunate angle. It struggled to raise itself. Its breath came quickly, shallowly, and reeked of dark forgotten places, of caverns of fetid flesh and scattered bones. Then in a voice like the whisper of sand spilling on stone, the poor creature spoke to him. *"Please, some water."* And from his canteen Juan poured blood into the dog's parched mouth.

Juan awoke to a whimper that he slowly realized must have been his own. In the darkness around him, five pairs of frightened eyes peered back from the edges of their beds. He checked his bedpost where he could see the hanging outline of his canteen. He unscrewed the lid and drank from it.

"I am frightened."

"Why? Of what?"

"The dog."

"The dog is dead."

"It came to me."

"Last night?"

He nodded.

She paused, her scowl softening as she stared at a piece of egg she prodded with a fork. "Me too."

"What should we do? To make it go?"

"I don't know. Maybe if we catch the killers. Justice will send it away." She spoke uncertainly.

On this rare occasion Juan spoke to his sister in certain disagreement. "I don't think so. We are only two. They must be...dangerous."

She shrugged. "Our job is dangerous."

Juan was silent.

"We should go back."

"Why?" Juan, fearful, protested.

"We can wait for them."

"Do you think they will do it again?"

"Who knows?"

Juan shuddered.

"Are you frightened?" she asked, but not unkindly.

"Yes...But I will go."

"Then it is settled."

It was Monday and because they attended school during the day, they had to wait until the hours between dismissal and the evening meal. They shared a classroom, which also served as a cafeteria, with all forty-eight children regardless of age or comprehension level. Older students often helped the younger students and today Patricia's usual tutor, Felipe, watched as she struggled through her arithmetic. Felipe soon would leave the compound. After spending most of his sixteen years there he would begin a new life in the world outside. Secretly, Patricia would miss him.

"You seem disturbed."

She kept at her problems, stiffly avoiding his gaze.

"Something the matter?"

"It's a work matter."

He frowned. "A work matt...Ah," he smiled. "the patrol for rebels."



“And bandits...or murderers.”
 “Of course. And what have you to report?”
 “It’s secret.”
 “I see.... You’re not in trouble, are you?”
 “No. But....”
 “But what?”
 “It’s Juan.”
 “Juan is in trouble?”
 “No. Not exactly. He’s just having visitors.”
 “Visitors?”
 “Well, actually nightmares.”
 “Which is it? Visitors or nightmares?”
 “Nightmares...about visitors.”
 “Who are these visitors?”
 “Actually, it’s just one. A dead one.”
 “So a ghost? Someone you know...knew?”
 “Yes.”
 “And he’s scared?”
 “Very.”

Felipe seemed hesitant suddenly but continued to ask questions.

“Maybe he—is it a he?”—She nodded. “—is just coming to say goodbye. To say they—he—misses you.” She seemed to ponder this. “Do you remember the person’s name?”

“No...Yes. I mean, I think he does.”

Felipe nodded. “Well, I’m sure there’s nothing to be afraid of. Soon he will leave you and go back to where he came from.”

“I will tell Juan. Thank you.”

When they returned to the scene of the murder, the corpse already rested in shadow. Two vultures, their beaks painted in gore, looked up from their macabre feast and eyed the intruders warily. With a wail, Juan began hailing them with stones from the arroyo bed. Missing wildly, the stones skittered across the dog and past it. The birds retreated to the clouds without haste, to resume their patient circumspection of the fallen dog and its mourners. Juan gathered stones in a pile with nervous glances to the watchful eyes above.

“We must stay until dark. Then it will be all

right,” Patricia offered doubtfully.

For well over an hour Patricia watched the dirt road for the returning bandits while Juan remained near the body wishing the flies would disappear after vainly trying to drive them off with stones. The vultures had disappeared and Juan believed Patricia was correct—in the safety of the night at least.

As soon as they came back to Juan’s room, the other children told them that the director was waiting to see them. Upon entering his office, they found Felipe sitting on the old leather sofa along the wall. He smiled sheepishly at them. Patricia and Juan stood before the desk like soldiers confronted with the commanding officer.

“Children.”

“*Buenas noches, Padre Camilo.*”

“Felipe tells me you have been having strange dreams. From the past. Is that true?”

“*Sí, Padre.*”

“Do you remember?”

The children looked at each other hesitantly. Patricia spoke for both of them.

“*Sí...*”

“What do you remember?”

“Terrible things. Frightening. I remember death.”

The old man seemed troubled by this and looked at Felipe who nodded.

“I see. And do you know who this visitor is?”

She shrugged.

“Do you remember a name?”

She shook her head. Padre Camilo, who had been leaning forward over his desk with hands clasped before him, now leaned back with a creaking of his chair and spread his palms along the polished wood surface.

“Patricia. How old are you?”

“Eight years.”

“Do you remember when you came here?”

The silent room turned to her, Juan included. She nodded.



"And you Juan?"

He seemed bewildered. "I have always been here."

The man smiled gently then returned to Patricia.

"Is this visitor the same person who brought you to us? Family perhaps?"

Now the children looked at each other in perplexity.

"No." Her voice came softly now, a feather brushing a smooth surface. Juan shook his head in concurrence.

The man sighed and Patricia felt a passing guilt as though she had done something to displease him.

"You are certain of this?"

They nodded without hesitation.

"I see. Well."

He then settled into his chair a bit more and began telling them about dreams, to not be afraid, to remember they are safe there. The mood had altered somehow and now Padre Camilo sought his words from a spot in the middle of his desk rather than in the eyes of the two children. To all these things, Patricia and Juan listened and nodded.

He stood at the bottom of a dry well. A long tunnel reaching up above him to the sky. The sun lit the rim above and it glowed, a golden halo. Like hot breath the air moved in and out around him, the throat of a giant buried deep in the earth. His tongue throbbed in his dry mouth, his clothes hung heavily on him and stuck to his sweat like a second skin. In the shadows around him, set deep into the dark cracks and crevices of the stones, a whispering. An occasional laugh, the stench of cigarettes, his beating heart reverberating off hot stone, crescendoing until he thought his eardrums might split. Above, the pale blue eye that examined him at the end of this microscope of dust and stone; around him, the murmurings, the gasps of dismal distress, of breath pulling in short and shallow like a hiss, like snakes slipping through sand on their

papery bellies under a desert sky. And above again, the black shadows against the blue, circling patiently, waiting for him to sleep, flying lower, closer to him and though they were still far off he could see their eyes, crimson and flat, tearless. He felt his own breath now, rapid and coarse, his tongue draped over his teeth and lips, and the sound of his own whine now filled the hollow well. He looked down to his ribs and saw the bouquet of fouled roses that bloomed through his mange-infected skin, and water came where there should have been blood. His name, familiar that he knew it was his, but still somehow foreign, a whisper from a tightened fist spilling sand over paper. Juan. And he stared into the light above that alone gave reprieve to his darkness.

"Juan."

He reached feebly for the light finally closing his sweating fingers around his sister's wrist. Patricia turned off her penlight, eyeing the silent beds around them. Everyone at least pretended to sleep.

"You were crying again."

"I had dreams."

"Did it come to you?"

"No. I was alone. No, I was...someone else. I was hurt. Panting. Like a dog."

She nodded. "We have to rescue the dog."

"But I thought it was dead."

"Its spirit is not. Like the crosses where a person has died, we need to help its pain. It is frightened. We need to make a funeral."

Patricia remembered. She had seen one before. A shrine for the dead. The flowers, some real and withering in the harsh light and many others plastic, faded petals with tattered edges and stems. A white cross stood among them, a statuette of the Lady of Guadalupe with beckoning hands, protecting or offering protection, in a dress the color of a washed-out sky. She remembered the steel rails behind the sorrowful shrine. Rails laid out across mountains and deserts connecting even this small town to other worlds that lie beyond where the two



dark rails met at each horizon. Rails that lay still in the dust, taking no notice of the pounding of diesel and the pounding of unforgiving sun. But on a bitter winter night, stealing behind departed light, these quiet rails brought death to the town. Two teens in a battered pickup truck fell prey to the rails' deception. The boys raced to beat the cold steel with its breath of diesel, and the rails, victorious, claimed their brief lives for a prize. The Lady, the white cross, the tattered arrangements of pale colors, stood testament to their passing and the families kept the shrine watered with painful tears.

There in town stood a sign. A sign of remembrance, of sorrow, of comfort for the spirit that fears to be forgotten. It was this that they must do for the dog.

The dog had really started to smell. Flies probed it, leaping from wound to wound in frenetic buzzings. Patricia and Juan gathered the largest stones they could carry and stacked them near the matted and torn remains. It looked less like a dog after the buzzards had performed their ritual dissection.

"Do you think it had a family?"

"Everybody has a family."

"Not us."

Patricia thought for a minute. "We had to come from somewhere."

"But now we are alone. Like the dog."

"The dog is not alone. We are here, yes?"

"I suppose. So we are its family?"

"I guess so."

They arranged the stones carefully, first outlining the body and then covering it from the outside in, filling in the gaps with smaller stones and handfuls of dirt and sand. The stench was nauseating and they gagged involuntarily, trying to breathe through their mouths as much as possible. The rocks baked in the glaring sun and the air blurred

and shimmered above the pile as though the dog's spirit were evaporating like water into the wind. Patricia had fashioned a cross with two pieces of mesquite bound together with twine. She had trouble keeping the crosspiece in place and in the end it resembled an X. She wiped her dusty hands on her shirt and stood back to survey their work.

"I guess that will do."

"Now what?"

"Now we have to say something. A prayer or something."

Juan nodded and bowed his head.

Patricia murmured some things she heard the priest say sometimes. She ended with a sidelong glance at Juan. "Amen."

"Amen." A whisper.

"Well then, it is done. We should go now."

Patricia turned and began walking back through the arroyo in a resigned manner, like workers returning from the fields and the sun after a long day—tired, with heavy limbs, yet with a certain peace or serenity that comes with the illusory finality of completed work.

Juan followed along with downcast eyes but then stopped abruptly without even looking to Patricia. He slipped the canteen from his shoulder and held it before him with both hands. Then with firm steps, he returned to the humble grave. With reverence he opened the canteen and poured it carefully over the rocks. The water disappeared quickly into thirsty cracks, and the shiny dark patches on the rocks shrunk visibly in the sun until they were gone.

Without reluctance, Juan rested the emptied canteen below the awkward cross and stood back to see. He made a nod of satisfaction and ran back to where Patricia stood watching. Then, holding hands, they began their silent walk home.



Don Malo Prunes His Guayaba in Late Autumn

by Virgil Suárez

His shears in one hand and an espresso coffee cup
made from a cut gourd in the other, Mr. Malo
works his guayaba tree Bonsai in his patio, next

to the hen coop where the chickens lay their eggs,
the smell of moist chicken shit rising up to greet him.
This is Havana, he knows, but he's always had a passion

for Japanese aesthetics. He remembers his grandmother
telling stories of Samurai warriors, of Ninja sects, men
living and dying by secret codes of the sword, of Kabuki

dramas where masked men made strange noises and stuck
out their tongues. Though this is simply a guayaba tree,
he knows well, he intends to work it into art, snipping

the tip of an overgrown branch here, keeping the trunk
down with copper wire—at least until it achieves its form.
Moss blankets its tiny roots. A rooster crows, and Malo

bows to the rising sun. This is his favorite time of day,
when the sun light blanches the trees, catches its own
reflection in the pond water. Mr. Malo thinks about poets

on their way down river, to visit friends, to drink Sake,
to write eternal words in snow-banked villages. Why,
he asks, could not a man make a little of his imagination

blossom on the tiny branches of a guayaba tree? Sure.



Medicine Man

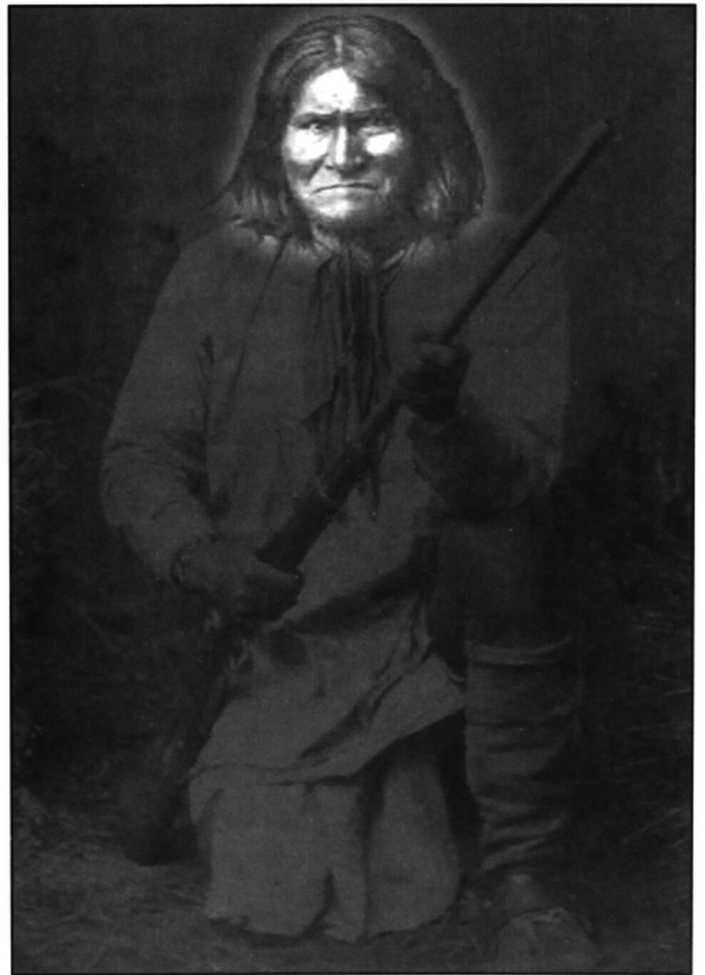
by Michael L. Johnson

Geronimo, old coyote, colorful
trickster far wilier than any white

words, you're not history's suffering joke
in Oklahoma but uncatchable

spirit forever back in Mexico,
hidden in the mazy mountains of time,

and the fierce face you left in photos still
stirs up guilt that scares hell out of us all.



*Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall
original A.F. Randall copyright 1886
from the Library of Congress Collection*

Song

by Kim Bridgford

The darkness brings a sadness to the shelf
And to the bed, and to the picture frames
That hold their memories in a close embrace
Without the names.

So much happens when you lose your sense
Of who lives in the house across the street,
The calendar a drift of patient snow
Mixed up with fate.

That thing's a sock? It leaks out of your mind
The way the news does, faces and events
That find themselves, like rocks and little sticks
Upon the currents.

Your children take their turns, with heads bent down
On days when you forget they are adults.
In talking of their own accomplishments,
They take your pulse.

But you wish they'd go: do the things they wish
And leave you with your secret thoughts, like a song
That runs its merry rhythms in your head:
Ding-dong, ding-dong.

You remember kisses, but don't know
What they're called, and when your husband weeps
You wonder who he is and why it's sad
To say, "For keeps."



Kidnaped

by Gerald L. Wheeler

A pair of traveling retired school teachers from Georgia picked me up when my VW van broke down during a photo shoot outside of Houston. Eyeing my equipment, the gray-haired, leather-faced driver, in a turtleneck the color of her sparkling blue eyes, said in a raspy voice, "Name's Iris. Give y'all ride if you take our pictures." Before I could answer, her tall sidekick jumped out. She wore a yellow ball cap over a pixie style dyed ruby-red hair and appeared well built. She extended a large hand that had more rings than a gypsy, cracked my knuckles squeezing mine. She winked a dark brown eye behind thick lens John Lennon style glasses and said, "I am Ruth." Then she grabbed my Nikon shoulder straps, confiscated my cameras and ordered, "Git in." She was dressed in a pink jersey embroidered with sunflowers, faded Wranglers and ropers. Her face had wrinkles like those of treasure hunters with metal detectors I'd seen sweeping Texas beaches and ruins. I grimaced, watching her deposit my expensive 35 mm, digital cameras and extra lenses on the muddy floorboard, as she nudged into the middle of the front seat of a vintage Gremlin loaded in back with suitcases, dirty clothes, maps, binoculars, plant and bird books. Thought I was in deep water when the car started sputtering and Ruth elbowed me in the ribs wrestling out of her top, revealing a "2002 Atlanta Triathlon" T-shirt, flexed her biceps, punched me in the ribs and proudly said, "I can bench press 200, run 10 K, bike 20 miles and swim 2000 meters in the same morning." Then she shifted her attention to my ponytail, gold loop earrings, dark bags under my eyes and grinned, "Son, you're kinda cute, but you look tired."

I believed her five minutes later, when her companion with keen birder's eyes shouted, "Redtail Hawk at 2 o'clock," slammed on the brakes, skid-



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

ded the car-off road into a barbed wire fence. Only Ruth's iron-man grip saved my head from crashing into the windshield. Before I could recover, I felt Ruth's strong arm again, yanking me outside while Iris retrieved the telephoto lens and my Nikon, me protesting, "I don't have a tripod."

Iris raced around the car, stood next to me, pressed her body against mine. She was short, her head below my chin. I smelled the aroma of peach perfume. She said, "That's OK, Hun, use my shoulder."

I zoomed, focused and clicked on a predator sunning her russet wings perched on a dead oak branch. Thinking of my next photo credit, Iris and Ruth escorted me like a prisoner to the car. Iris shifted in reverse, spinning tires, shifted into first gear, sped down a gravel road to an abandoned farm house occupied by Texas Longhorns. We quickly disembarked, took turns taking pictures of Ruth hugging a calf in the living room, me peering out a window making a face, my kidnapers posing arm-in-arm on a dilapidated porch, tip-toeing over planks and cow piles, straddling a golden hay roll, Iris driving a rusty tractor resting in peace in patch of mesquite and Ruth pushing over a tilting outhouse. Soon our presence attracted chickens, geese and other strays plus a burro until we were finally



chased away by wild hogs.

Wishing I had a cell phone to call 911, again shoved into the car, I covered my eyes as Iris punched the gas pedal, dodged animals and fowl, shaking my kidney stones loose, racing over a cattle crossing, Ruth pointing and screaming, "Gotta have that windmill thar, darlin.' It looks pretty as a Indian war bonnet flashing in the sun," which was unfortunately true. We crashed into a water trough filled with dirt and wildflowers next to an old barn. I was forced to reload, relieved when I expended the last roll of film and the digital camera's batteries expired. Hearing my stomach growling for food, Iris and Ruth hustled me to the Gremlin and headed down another unimproved road.

We swerved around a bend, almost sideswiping a 4 by 4 pulling a horse trailer. We sped over railroad tracks, our bodies levitating, heads bumping the ceiling, our butts wounded, landing on broken springs. Soon the horizon of trees changed to a silhouette of old buildings, a Wal-Mart billboard and inviting sign "Welcome to Bellpville." Iris leaned into me, turning right, two-wheeling around a corner, ignoring a stop sign, murdering a mailbox guarded by a prickly pear cactus. She hit the brakes too late, knocking over a row of Harley Davidson motorbikes that fell like dominoes into the handicapped zone, her singing, "Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, a restaurant!"

Inside, we were surrounded by camouflaged hunters, ranchers and trail riders in chaps and Stetsons, farmers in John Deere caps and bib overalls, and bikers wearing Nazi helmets and black leather vests decorated with patches of skull and crossbones and wings, all fighting for space in the chow line. All one could hear was country music, crackling bacon, the jingle of chains, spurs, whispers of feed prices, ball scores, taxes, war news, and hunting stories. Inhaling the aroma, not seeing a menu on the peeling Formica tables, I eyed the rattlesnake-tattooed-arm cook who looked like he was just released from a Huntsville prison. He pointed a shiv at a tray of plastic utensils and pa-

per towels. My companions ordered black coffee, three eggs over easy, grits, hickory-smoked bacon, and short stack of hotcakes, thanking me for a grand-slam country meal I never agreed to pay for.

I took a deep breath, hoping my VISA wasn't canceled, that my ponytail, pirate earrings, tie-dyed and peace symbol-T-shirt didn't offend anyone, witnessing raised eyebrows and snorts when I ordered decaffeinated coffee, baker's eggs, cranberry juice and a toasted bagel.

Squinting bloodshot eyes, licking the gap between his rotten teeth, the ex-con cook grunted, "This ain't I-HOP."

Opting for scrambled eggs, home-fries and wheat toast steaming on the table, about to dive in, I scanned the room for a wall phone to call a tow truck. I reflected on my adventurous morning. How I looked forward to escaping a pair of maniacal ex-school teachers that had taken me hostage on a roller coaster ride in a jalopy designed for mid-gets, caused me to tear my clothes climbing over barbed wire, almost broke my cameras and legs, chased by boars, nearly gored by steers, risked being shot for trespassing, and stomped by bikers from hell. I thought about being at home alone sipping red wine, listening to Mozart, reading poetry or the *New York Times*, smoking a joint or cigarillo, my trance interrupted by raucous loud voices, grunts, scooting chairs and shuffling heavy boots. "Shit!" I muttered, visualizing my crumpled body bleeding on the checkered-linoleum floor, a priest hunched over me, administering last rites.

Suddenly I felt Iris seize my hand, saw Ruth bow her head as if in prayer before an execution. The next sound I heard was Iris's soft raspy voice whisper the word, "Grace," as she lowered her head, closed her eyes and continued. "Thank You Heavenly Father for delivering thy bounty, our new friend Gerald and Wal-Mart that carries film."

I knew right then I'd been kidnaped and saved by two crazy Christian women.



Think Beauty

by Constance Studer

Alice is out just as the sun comes up, shooting frame after frame of Indian paintbrush, in every shade from yellow to orange to the deepest magenta. Through her camera lens, the walls of the garden form a soft cradle of red and brown and green. Purple fireweed. White, pink and multi-colored columbine. Lavender bluebells. And beyond the flowers, she photographs the mountains as they turn pink then violet. She aims her eye and becomes the golden eagle overhead, as it makes its lazy circles. Sitting down to reload film, Alice hears a car drive up the gravel drive. Caroline, Alice's best friend since childhood, is here to take her to the gym.

They drive down from the foothills, leave behind the perfume of apples, the tang of dying leaves, the country lane with its overarching trees that shade Alice's house all summer. Behind Caroline's curtain of blonde hair and large spectacles lurks a woman who changes personality behind the wheel. Riding with Caroline is a journey into the twilight zone of "what-ifs." Suddenly everyone in front of and behind the car becomes an ignoramus. She has her own unique theory about how to avoid traffic.

"If we leave now, it'll be rush hour and it'll take an hour to get there. But if we leave in a half hour, there'll be no traffic and it'll only take fifteen minutes to get there," Caroline says.

"Gee, we could actually pass ourselves," Alice says. They are on the freeway where grassy hills are terraced with condominiums. Orchards have been torn down to make room for identical homes. Meadows bloom with office buildings.

"Look at that fool trying to squeeze in on me. I see you! You're not going anywhere—" Her sentence dangles. Her neck is getting red with an anger so fierce that it makes Alice shudder at how fast it comes out of nowhere, her friend's face suddenly hard. For some, age simply softens, mellows, ripens. For some, age turns them to stone.

"Calm down. Let the fire truck go by," Alice says.

"Fire my foot! There's *really* a fire before breakfast, right? Go ahead you ignoramus."

Asshole would have been Alice's profanity of choice. "Caroline, you're right on that guy's bumper. Pull back a little."

"How old do you think I look?" Caroline asks. "You can tell me." Alice is used to Caroline's *non sequiturs*, but this is a drastic U-turn even for Caroline.

"How old do you feel?" Alice asks diplomatically, as she pushes a corkscrew of red hair streaked with grey behind her ear. Her hips and bust are voluptuous rather than merely ample.

"Oh, twenty-six on my good days and sixty-four on my bad days, but my subconscious eye refuses to log anything past thirty-five. I'm thinking about getting a facelift," Caroline says. She is built like her mother: hollow bird bones and no flesh to spare. Her mouth turns down at the edges into a scowl.

"Do you really want to capitulate to a system that victimizes women by convincing them that being young and beautiful is what really counts?" Alice asks. "Why do you want to risk death? It could be a side effect of this surgery, you know."

"I want to make a pre-emptive strike now before I'm too old to enjoy the results."

"Couldn't you get a diamond stud in your belly button instead?" Alice sighs, realizing full well that Caroline is the kind of woman who knows every psychic within a ten-mile radius and once hired a color analyst who warned her never to wear bright yellow or liquid green. No earth colors. No ooze of apricot. No crush of dark raspberry. *Nothing too strong or definite. You are a summer. Semi-precious. Amethyst. Aquamarine. Colors of the sky.*

"So I'm shallow. Shoot me," Caroline says.

Barker Gymnasium is filled with women

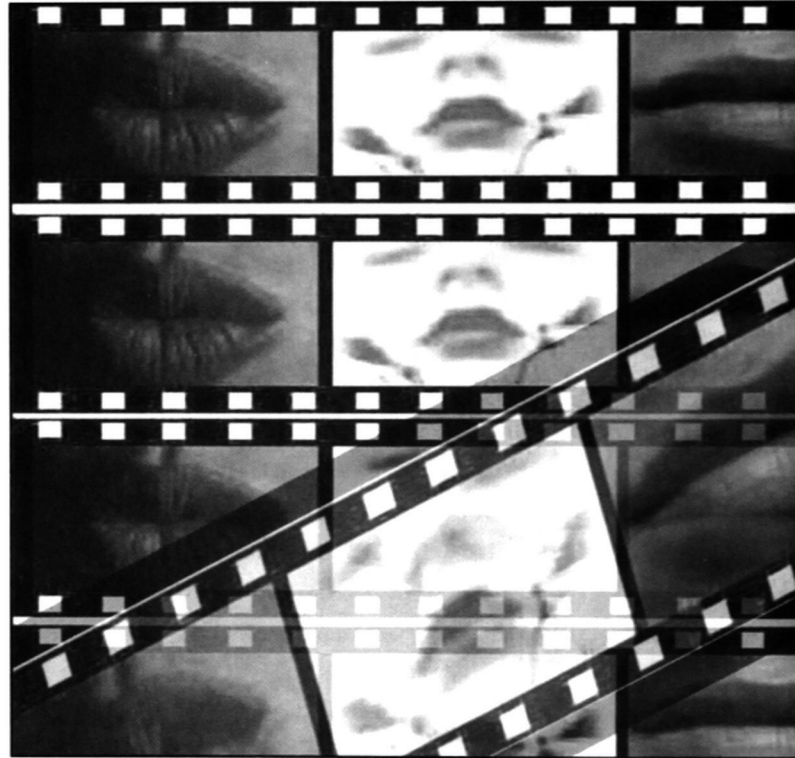


pedalling like hell on their one-way trip to nowhere. Caroline wears leotards and headband. She climbs on and hardly ever hits her stationary seat, manic, like a surfer catching waves, then crashing. She's up, she's down, sweating like crazy. Alice, in sweatpants and red T-shirt, joins the group, fascinated by how much energy it takes to pursue beautiful thighs. In this room there is a great unveiling of the female body. Legs and underarms free of hair. Svelte torsos. Firm breasts. Alice treats her body the same way she treats her ivy and schefflera, with benign neglect. Living with a chef who elevates cooking to art is hard on her waistline. Sam, the master of cordon bleu and teriyaki steak with mushrooms and garlic mashed potatoes whipped to perfection. Twenty minutes later, Alice feels faint. Already her calves are beyond quivering.

"Take a sip of water," Caroline tells her. Alice is way beyond water, but Alice stays the course.

"Will you go with me to see a cosmetic surgeon? Please?" Caroline asks. Alice sits there looking at her friend's profile, a younger Candice Bergen, and already knows that she'll accompany her friend because when they were thirteen and attended dancing school, the dancing teacher had pulled Alice to the center of the room after all the other girls had been chosen. "Would someone please dance with Alice McCullough?" the teacher had asked. Chatter subsided. Motion ceased. Caroline brought Flash over to dance with Alice, an act of friendship that she's never forgotten. Caroline has always been the friend coming in Alice's front door when everyone else was going out. The sister that Alice never had, the one to whom Alice could say, *Come now, I need you*, and Caroline came, no questions asked. The friend who could say to her, *Why are you acting this way? You are wrong. Let's talk*.

Beauty was an endless topic growing up. When they were six, Alice and Caroline raided their mothers' closets for lavender chiffon nightgowns and rhinestones and paraded down the stairs like queens at coronation ceremonies. At ten, the girls had



twirled and skipped and wore tutus to school. At thirteen they pored over *Glamour* and *Vanity Fair*.

"Don't you just love her hair?" Caroline had asked.

"But you *know* that model had a team of people working on her to make her look that good. Hours with a makeup artist. Soft-focus lighting," Alice had insisted, always the realist.

Alice waited and watched and exercised her chest while Caroline got her training bra, her period, feathered Farrah-Fawcett hair, ears pierced, eyelashes curled. Alice waited while Caroline pushed five-five, five-six. Alice watched boys sniff around her best friend while her face smoldered with acne. Iowa was on her chin and growing. While everyone else snuggled on hayrides, only Alice's head remained above the blankets.

When she was thirteen, a girl in gym class made fun of Alice's curly red hair. "Brillo pad, Brillo pad," she taunted and Alice knew she'd never be beautiful enough to be a model or a homecoming queen. *You don't look anything like Barbie. You don't fit in. You can't compete.* Within the security fence of



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

chitchat (*Do you like my hair better with bangs or without?*) and ads that preached that body hair was gross, the girls had shaved-bleached-dyed their way toward perfection. Weight. Breasts. Clothes. Alice and Caroline wore full skirts with petticoats that they soaked in sugar water and dried to make them stiff. Cinch belt. Tight skirt and sweater sets. They scrunched their feet into pointed-toe shoes. T-strap flats. Stiletto heels that poked holes in linoleum floors. They wore their hair in pageboys or pulled back in ponytails. Lipstick. Face powder. Blush. Mascara. Like tightrope walkers they walked the line between appearing drab or cheap.

On long summer afternoons they buttered each other in tanning oil and waited to see which boy would drop by. Stretched out on a blanket in the back yard, Caroline looked like a Charlie's Angel in a blue bikini. Lying beside her, Alice felt small, as if someday she might just disappear. The fact that her mother consoled her with, *You have inner beauty*, didn't help. She didn't want to be lit from within. Body image extended beyond weight, went deeper than tanned skin.

"Do you believe there is such a thing as true love?" Caroline had asked as they took turns reading *True Romance*. Caroline was the capable one and Alice the funny one, except when they jumped boundaries and Alice became rising-to-the-occasion capable and Caroline roll-on-the-floor funny.

Alice's first camera was a Nikon with many attachments, the camera her eye. Art was play, experimenting, fantasy. Some candor. Some catharsis. Some mistakes. Some serendipity. She started shooting sunsets and waterfalls until one day she gathered all her pretty pictures of mountains and apple bowls and zinnias together and burned them. *There's something wrong if only the beautiful must be shown. If everyone has to be nice all the time.* She awakened one day to the snarl of a chain saw rising above the sound of traffic, the percolator singing in the kitchen. She grabbed her camera and ran to photograph the old silver maple in the front yard. For weeks its shaggy bark had worn a large blue X that meant it was a Dead-Man-Walking. The city's crew had meted out a death sentence. A hazard tree. Alice aimed her camera up inside the hollow limbs, and shot the rot-brown innards where limbs had been lost.

The day that Alice lost this old friend was also the day that she learned that art wasn't about beauty, but about seeing, a standing-in-line, shy kind of bravery. The getting up to face each new morning. Having the courage to leap into the unknown. Communicating understanding and anger and love without messy words. Shooting pictures ten hours a day, six days a week, for twenty years. She stood in the darkroom watching the photographs develop out of nothing. *Why does this hollow tree move me? Is there truth here or merely beauty?*

Reluctantly Alice agrees to ride shotgun as Caroline tiptoes into the minefield of doctor appointments. "I'll go with you to see the cosmetic surgeon on one condition," Alice says.

"What's that?" Caroline asks.

"You let me photograph the whole process, from the doctor interviews, to the recovery room,

to the day the bandages come off. I'll take care of you too."

"That's blackmail," Caroline says.

"Not really. You know I'd take care of you anyway. But think of it as your contribution to my creative process."

"Okay, okay. You know you're the only one I trust to see me looking like a monster anyway." Two weeks later Caroline and Alice are in a neighborhood ripe with exhaust fumes, where a woman could get an oil change and a facelift all in the same block if she wanted.

The doctor's office is on the top floor of a dark glossy building just off Route 70. The waiting room has jungle wallpaper and large geode ashtrays next to fake plants. A table is littered with stacks of brochures advocating "easy breast augmentation." *Reader's Digest. Car and Driver. Cosmopolitan.* A woman across the room wears fishnet stockings and knee-high boots and looks like she's ignored her mother's warnings to stay out of the sun. Alice invents little movies in her mind: *That woman in black stiletto heels runs for the exit yelling Fire! Fire! then trips as flames overtake her.*

"Fill out this questionnaire," the receptionist says as she snaps her gum. "Are you married, Caroline?"

"Are you?" Alice asks before Caroline can answer. Caroline gives Alice the shush sign. "Go sit down," she hisses.

"What? Do they jack up the price if a person isn't married? How do you know this doctor isn't the kind who uses voodoo to remove double chins?"

"That's why I brought you along. The eternal skeptic."

A nurse beckons and Caroline follows her into the exam room, secretly hoping that the doctor will chuckle at her foolishness and say, "My dear, you are beautiful the way you are." Alice lopes along behind, camera in hand.

"You can wait here," the nurse tells Alice.

"No, she's coming in with me," Caroline says, pulling her friend into the examination room. Dr.

Sullivan looks like a young Willie Nelson: long pony tail, slight build, the same vintage string tie. He wears more jewelry than Alice owns altogether. He studies Caroline's face like an architect deciding where to insert a buttress. *Whir,* goes the light meter. The doctor turns and gives a toothy smile. *Flash,* goes the camera. Caroline wears a forced grimace.

"Here. Take a look," the doctor says, handing Caroline a mirror. He's marked where he'll pull and cut in order to show her what to expect. How had she missed this landslide? "Your face is too narrow. You have no cheekbones," Dr. Sullivan says. And to think that Caroline had gone forty-two years without noticing. "You look worn out because of this," he says as he jiggles the loose pouch under her chin. "Of course I can fix everything," he reassures her. "It wouldn't take a whole facelift. We could do facial contouring."

"What's that?"

"We liposuction fat from the stomach and inject it into your face. It would round out your face, erase those lines. Give you chic cheeks."

"What about the risks?" Caroline asks.

"People who do the best with cosmetic surgery are those who have the right attitude. Those who think beauty. Take a lot of vitamin C."

"What does this surgery cost?"

"Five thousand dollars. Can I sign you up?"

"I'm going to get another opinion," Caroline says, trying to leave with a smidgen of self-esteem.

"The longer you wait, the worse it gets," this facial architect says, this master of persuasion. Caroline runs, shaken, for the door. Alice gathers her camera bag and follows.

Caroline maneuvers the car out of the parking lot. "Here. I picked up this brochure for you," Alice says, handing over the paper. Clouds move in, a typical Colorado afternoon. "Dr. Sullivan holds seminars featuring a free drawing for a two-thousand-dollar gift certificate for cosmetic surgery. Guess who performs the surgery?"

"He had the nerve to charge me a hundred dol-



lars for telling me I'm ugly," Caroline sighs.

"*You're not ugly!*" Alice shouts. "Why do you do this to yourself? Will this surgery make you happier, or stop you from getting old, or keep you from dying? I don't understand why you want to get a facelift. Talk to me."

"The new producer at the TV station came up to me after a show a couple of weeks ago and said, 'We should have done a better job with your makeup,' the volume turned way up on her voice so that everyone in the studio heard. 'Unfortunately television emphasizes what's already there and your eyes were lost in shadows.' She doesn't care that

my newscast was all about my exposé of the cleanup at Rocky Flats. All she saw were these wrinkles stretching across my forehead." Caroline says as she pulls down the visor mirror, turns this way and that, pulling skin back with her fingers in an effort to regain a taut profile. "I've always had bags under my eyes, but now they've taken on whole new dimensions with dark plains and fleshy mountains and overlapping ridges that create shadows over my cheekbones. What can it hurt to get a little nip here, tuck there?"

"But those bags are a dowry from your grandmother," Alice protests. "I love those bags."



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

"Last week when Jake and I ate at The Brown Palace, I saw him eyeing the young waitress. I caught my reflection in a mirror at the end of the room and didn't recognize myself. Suddenly I can't read print closer than two feet away."

"Neither can I. But I chalk impaired vision up to God's way of taking sympathy on me. If I don't want to see how I look, all I have to do is take my glasses off," Alice says.

"Is there such a thing as a whole-body lift?" Caroline sighs.

Doctor Number Two is in Cherry Creek. Dr. Lowell is a nationally known cosmetic surgeon. Caroline arrives in sunglasses and black fedora, without makeup, as his nurse instructed, so that the doctor can get an unvarnished look. There is brown-velour furniture and oriental urns and a brass lamp that makes Caroline and Alice feel as if they've wandered into someone's living room. Bookshelves hold real books rather than rummage-sale treasures displayed for decorative purposes. *Bonfire of the Vanities. Of Woman Born.*

Even early on Saturday morning, the waiting room is mobbed. Wall-to-wall rhinoplasties. Two women lean in to discuss the peels and lipos they got last year and Alice wishes she could slide under the rug. From behind her *Newsweek*, she checks out the other women in their L.L.Bean turtlenecks and duck boots, and fantasizes about their sex lives: *Do they leave the duck boots on? Do their lovers know they're sleeping with a new, improved model?*

"There's little pain involved. You'll be back to work in a few days," the nurse says into the phone casually, as if the invisible patient on the other end were scheduling a facial or a haircut. A nurse, with the bone structure and lustrous hair that movie stars covet, comes towards them, manicured hand extended. She's wearing a Donna Karan suit, the most stylish uniform that Alice has ever seen. Alice wants to cut off all her hair. She wants to hide at the Gap forever.

While Caroline is ushered into a room to watch

a videotape, Alice leafs through copies of *Vogue* and the *Wall Street Journal* and sees articles about Dr. Lowell's work, complete with before-and-after pictures. *The photographer's lens has to be out of focus. His composition is off center.*

Caroline is prepared to hate Dr. Lowell, but he is warm and charming, more like a priest to whom she can confess her sins and secret longings. He is very tall, with white hair and an aquiline nose. He strides across the room, the epitome of bonhomie. *Joie de vivre.* Late fifties, maybe early sixties. He sits behind his mahogany desk as Caroline balances on the edge of a wooden chair. Alice hovers near a wall.

"How old are you, Caroline?"

"Forty-two."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"How long have you been thinking about getting a facelift?"

"On and off for a couple of years."

"What do you hope that a facelift will do for you?"

"I don't know quite how to answer that. Just to improve my confidence, I guess. I'm a TV newscaster for the local station. I want to take some action before they tell me I have to do something."

Dr. Lowell makes her stand as he explores her face with unforgiving eyes. It is worse than Caroline had feared. "First we have to take the bulb off the end of your nose," he says, leaving Caroline slack-jawed with shock. He's pointing at her Lowderback nose, a flat-topped, ski-jump affair. She has never considered her nose a defect to be corrected. *Who would I be without my grandmother's nose?* Alice finishes one roll of film and loads a new one.

Dr. Lowell seems more compassionate than the other doctor, or maybe it's only that Caroline's vanity is so badly damaged that nothing he says comes as a surprise. Yes, her face is narrow, and her skin sags. But he seems to understand her sentimental attachment to her nose. He doesn't mention "chic



cheeks."

Caroline is reluctant to let this stranger break her nose, scrape part of it out, and reposition it into a less obtrusive shape. He seems to possess more wisdom than he needs to

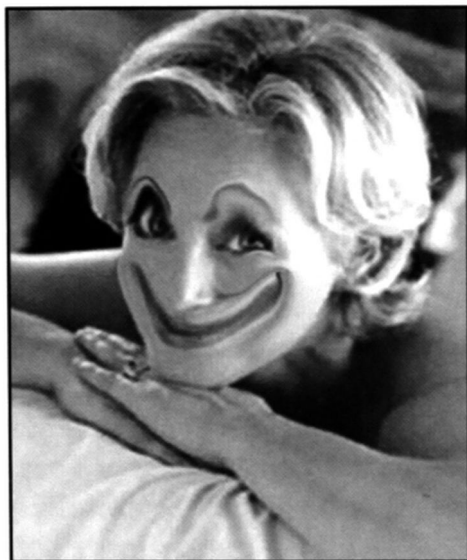


Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

verbalize. He addresses Caroline as a whole person instead of seeing only the sag in her jowl. For only 10,000 dollars, he can give her an improved version of her old face that her family and friends can still recognize.

The nurse leads Caroline and Alice to a sunroom with a spectacular view of a Japanese garden, where bonsai trees have been pruned into perfect domes. As they sit down at an oriental table, the nurse hands Caroline a paper upon which the doctor has written the procedures he recommends. There is a bewildering array of credentials and names of organizations to which Dr. Lowell belongs. "Be sure he's board certified," Alice had warned her. But certified by whom? And what's the difference between "Board Certified in Plastic Surgery" and "Board Certified Plastic Surgeon"? How much experience is enough?

"If you want a particular date, it would be best if you scheduled today. We'll need a deposit of one-thousand-three-hundred-fifty dollars now," the nurse says. "The balance must be received three weeks before the scheduled operation date." Good-sport smile pasted on her face, tense shoulders hunched up to her ears, Caroline decides to go for the stripped-down model and just have the bags removed from under her eyes. A little tuck in the forehead. Caroline hurries out of the office with

Alice loping behind.

"Just give me a paper bag to pull over my face," Caroline moans as she maneuvers the car out of the parking lot. The street is empty, the storefronts dark. Old sycamores line the boulevard, their limbs overhead making a dark tunnel with the street lights caught in the fog.

"So November tenth is the day. How much is this going to set you back?" Alice asks.

"The price of a small car. I could shop around for a lower fee, but do I really want to trust my face to a bargain-basement surgeon?"

"Good point. Radical change, the kind that would give you a leg up, has always been your favorite fantasy," Alice says. "And I suppose physical changes *should* be the easiest. But you know no one in polite society will ever say, 'Gee Caroline, you look great—you've had your eyes lifted, neck removed, lips jet-puffed. How becoming.'"

"But they certainly will notice that something's different."

"Why don't you just let me take you out for a drink and tell you, 'You look so beautiful today and I know it's your soul shining through?' I'll just keep saying it until you believe it. Have you told Jake you're planning to have surgery?"

"Not yet. Soon," Caroline says. "I wish I were more like you. You don't seem to care what people think."

"I learned a long time ago, back when my photographs were still being rejected and when I got passed over for grants, that if I didn't believe in my work, no one else would either. That's about the same time that I gave up wearing high heels and Wonderbras and lip liner. Now I wear cowboy boots and no one has ever complained."

"If I try to claim my own space, Jake says I'm aggressive. Pushy. But if *he* does it, he's being assertive."

"It's not aggressive to tell him what you need," Alice says.

The day of surgery, Alice and Caroline arrive at the hospital and wait in a room that could easily



be a bus station. They walk up the corridor, past windows that throw rays on framed portraits of board members, as if they were portraits of saints in a cathedral. There is the admitting desk, the "visitor's section" with its cheap hard-backed chairs, painted bright orange for Optimism. Even this early in the morning, the TV is beaming news that no one is listening to, the on-off knob suspended high out of reach. Across the room a man holds a woman's hand, while she softly cries.

"It's hell being awake at five-thirty a.m. You're lucky that we're joined at the hip," Alice grumbles. Caroline's name is called. "Break a leg, or whatever," Alice says.

"This is no play," Caroline says as she rises to leave.

"Could have fooled me," Alice says. "I'll be here when you wake up."

Then Caroline is gone, follows her escort to the locker room where she takes off her clothes and puts on paper surgery clothes. In a hushed tone, the nurse leads Caroline to the small examining room. The knot in her stomach becomes a stone.

"How are you?"

"Terribly nervous."

"We'll give you some Valium to relax you."

Then Caroline is rolling down narrow halls on a gurney, stripped of clothes and personality and identity, suspended in a state that is neither grace nor damnation. Flesh waiting on a table for the sculptor's chisel. Dr. Lowell squeezes her hand paternally. It's time now," the nurse says. The room bleaches to white, then nothing.

* *

The room is dark and Caroline hears someone say, "How are you feeling?" It is Alice's voice. A familiar hand squeezes Caroline's, but she can't see anything because there are wet compresses on her eyes. The head of the bed and her knees are elevated. She's waking up in a different room than she went to sleep. Everything in the vicinity of her head is tender and she knows better than to try to move. Swimming back into consciousness takes

longer than it should. She wants to drift out to sea again. Her face is the size of a pumpkin and growing.

"How long was I under?"

"Almost three hours."

"The bandages are too tight," Caroline whispers. It feels like a strap has been cinched under her chin and over the top of her head. Bandages encircle her head and neck, leaving only her face uncovered, except for the compresses on her eyes. Everyone has told her that there would be no pain associated with this surgery. They lied. But the pain is nothing compared to the rolling of her stomach.

"The bandages are loose," Alice says softly.

"No. No. They're too tight," Caroline pleads. Alice squeezes her hand and slowly it dawns on Caroline that it is not the bandages, but her face that is tight. *Good God, what have I done?* Alice leaves and Caroline dozes back to sleep. Every couple of hours she's awakened by a nurse changing the compresses. Around midnight, the pain sharpens. A severe headache develops.

"May I please have something for the pain?" she asks the nurse.

"Not time yet. Another forty-five minutes."

Time passes. Caroline asks again. This time the nurse relents. She must use the bathroom so the nurse removes the compresses and helps her swing her legs over the edge of the bed. Nausea rolls in. Only able to open her swollen eyes a crack, Caroline stands at the sink and tilts her head back so that she can see herself in the mirror.

"Don't look," the nurse says. "Please don't look." Her voice is soft, her concern evident. Caroline catches a quick look and realizes she's just landed in a Brueghel painting. She lowers her head and the nurse helps her back to bed.

* * *

Overnight the world has turned white; three inches of snow paint tree bark and brown soil into silhouettes of light and dark. The high mountain angels have been busy making powder, laying a tracery, a light mantilla over every surface.



Crouched within her oversized scarf, Caroline prepares to go home. There is a long list of instructions. *Don't wash your hair for a week. Keep head movements to a minimum. No heavy lifting. No leaning over.* Alice drives Caroline back to her home in the foothills, leads her to her own four-poster bed. A silvery mist slowly rises off the meadow. Far off there is a cry of wild geese. Alice puts new compresses on Caroline's eyes and goes to the kitchen to make lunch. Caroline's scalp is tender to the touch, not hers exactly, a foreign object. Other parts are numb. She feels the swelling and the heavy metal staples from the forehead incision that pulls together two folds of skin.

"Here's your lunch," Alice says as she sets the tray of tomato soup on the bedside table and starts to feed Caroline.

"This feels like when I was a little girl and was sick," Caroline says. "I lay in a quiet house and had my mother's attention all to myself. She'd make a fuss and puff up the pillows, bring juice and water because I loved the curved glass straw. She'd read me *Grimms' Fairy Tales*."

"In those stories a passive woman was good. A catatonic woman was even better," Alice says. "There was no reason to stun a prince with intelligence or kindness or business sense or wit. All that was required was the right shade of blush. The thickness of mascara. Back then beauty was simpler. A good daughter didn't get pierced or tattooed. A good daughter did what she was told. Eternally attractive but demure. We were told that if we kept our legs locked, everything would be all right."

"Mama would sit at the corner table and make her grocery list and I was in her marginal vision, her love indirect, like that glass straw," Caroline says.

"I can still see your mother decked out in her pumps and gloves and cameo brooches. Remember how we used to cruise main street in your parents' car? And listened to Elvis and bought bagfuls of hot doughnuts from Dunkin' Donuts? How I wanted Peter to ask me to the homecoming dance

the year we were juniors and how hurt I was when he asked you instead?"

"I watched while you threw your own private girl-revolution at the tyranny of thinness and pert noses," Caroline says. "Wasn't that about the same time that you became a serious photographer?"

"My sale of pictures of that old maple to *National Geographic* was the turning point. But don't forget all those dead-end jobs that fed my photography habit. My stint as a teacher's assistant reading *Henny-Penny* to twenty-eight four-year-olds. Selling Electrolux sweepers door-to-door. Reshelving books at the library."

"Those were hard years," Caroline says. "For me too. Selling ads for the TV station. Three years as a 'Weather Girl.'"

"Why did we grow up thinking that we had to shrink our souls down to petite size? Why not embrace earthy goddess figures? Ample bosoms? Wide, giver-of-life hips? Why did we believe that we were forbidden to show anger or disagree with anyone? Why did we buy into all that emphasis on being 'nice'?" Alice carries the empty dishes to the table by the window.

"Well, I've at least gotten over that. But I'm still hooked on keeping up appearances. What are you going to do with all those photos you took of me?" Caroline asks.

"They'll be included in my exhibit at the gallery. I'm calling the series 'Think Beauty.' Women building houses, fishing in mountain streams, nursing babies, performing surgery. A woman with one breast. A woman putting on her prosthetic leg. Women with wrinkles and glass eyes."

"And your best friend swathed in bandages," Caroline says, taking a sip through the straw.

"And still beautiful."

"Help me to the john." Alice guides Caroline to the bathroom, waits for her friend by the door. Caroline pats her hands dry and sneaks the first look at her new face. Purple-blue bruises cover her eye sockets. Black stitches are visible along the inside crease of her lids all the way to the corners



of her eyes. Gone are the familiar furrows between her eyebrows. Gone is the ability to move her forehead. Her mouth is pulled into a tight horizontal line. Her face is swollen, making her look like Alfred E. Neuman in *MAD* magazine. *Please, dear God, don't let me end up looking like a Kewpie doll.*

The bedroom window is open. Trees creak in a gust of wind. Cars accelerate up the hill. Far off a siren wails. Something rattles in the bushes.

"Over there," Alice says, pointing at a large shape half-hidden in a clump of snow-covered Pfitzers. "See it?" There is a quick glimpse of sleek hindquarters as a deer slips through the shrubs and disappears into the gloom.

"Jake is having an affair," Caroline says as she rolls back into bed, carefully bracing her body as if her head might break. "We made love for the last time and I didn't even know that we were saying good-bye. That's why I was so upset the other day. Sorry to take it out on you."

"Hey, it's that poor guy in the fire truck who I felt sorry for," Alice says.

"I never thought I'd reach middle age and not have a husband. I'm around people all day at the television station but it's not the same as having a mate. Maybe I'm just unlovable. Is it fair to hold a few mistakes against Jake? He *could* change," Caroline says.

"This is true. But he has to *want* to change first. You try too hard. Love is like the butterfly I tried to photograph last summer. The more I chased it, the farther away it flew. But when I sat down to rest, it landed on a branch right in front of me. So simple."

"I thought if Jake were happy, then I'd be happy. Pleasing him. Keeping him. How did you know that Sam loved you?"

"We were on a train many years ago coming back from Pueblo," Alice says. "I was sitting by the window, Sam beside me, Colorado prairie flying past. There was a nosy toddler hanging over the back of her seat, looking at us as I told Sam

that I wasn't ready to marry him and waited for him to explode or cry or plead his case. But he only sat there, as if he'd expected my decision all along, as if my breaking up with him was a foregone conclusion. 'I know I could never persuade you. It's your choice to stay or to leave,' was all he said. Two days later I was rushing back into his arms. A month later you were the maid of honor at our wedding. His simple phrase of acceptance, with its offer of freedom, chained me more completely to Sam than any wild declaration of love ever would have. He says he fell in love with my sense of humor."

"I could use a joke," Caroline says.

"Have you heard the one about the woman who confused her Valium with her birth control pills? She has fourteen kids, but she doesn't much care."

"Oh, oh, it hurts to laugh," Caroline says as she cradles her head in her hands. "But it hurts good. My turn. What is the difference between how a man impresses a woman and how a woman impresses a man?"

"I give."

"A man impresses a woman by wining, dining, calling, hugging, holding, complimenting, smiling, giving jewelry, writing love letters. A woman impresses a man by showing up naked with a pack of beer."

"Time for you to rest," Alice says as she renews Caroline's wet compresses, helps her brush her teeth, gives her the sedative that Dr. Lowell prescribed. In a few days the bandages will come off, but tonight there is no need to talk. Snowmelt and lengthening days take hold. This is the silent season of waiting for ice to break in the creek, for hummingbirds to return to the feeder, a time to heal. What a beautiful thing silence can be between friends.



Right Here in Clover City

by Carl Stanislaus

Pool here is not a place where one swims,
nor mutual transportation for commuting workers.

Here, it is a rack of colorful, numbered balls
on a cushioned rimmed table, with six leather pockets,
played with varnished cue sticks, chalk
and careful calculation.

Sitting on a glass display above the cigars,
a monkey figurine mimics "See no evil, hear no evil,
Do no evil." Signs admonishing patrons not to
swear, gamble or loiter are summarily ignored
by those doing their monkey business under the table,
hoping the management will turn a blind eye.

Young men, warned away from this "den of iniquity,"
have long since grown into wrinkled old men
who gather daily for dominoes, snooker or cards.

They commune in this smoky haze,
while concentrating spit toward brass spittoons,
or some greenhorn's shoes.

Nowadays girls in male attire wander in,
their feeble masquerade fooling no one.
Sometimes they try their hand at billiards;
more often they get change at the register
for the dispenser in the men's room
offering handkerchiefs, combs and condoms.



Lightly Packed

by Earl Coleman

When I walk from my house in still, fresh snow
out to my vineyard and my woods, I'm self-directed,
cane and all. I'm open to the world, the globe of it.
My tracks are clear as crystal and connect my dots,
two infirm feet, the cane for exclamation point.

Anyone can follow them, my steps; anyone at all.
Snow sees to it my tracks are open, leading me to
other lives, as well as theirs to mine. Follow them,
my footsteps. Expect to find my fire going and your
welcome in my house, my arms, or mid my vines.

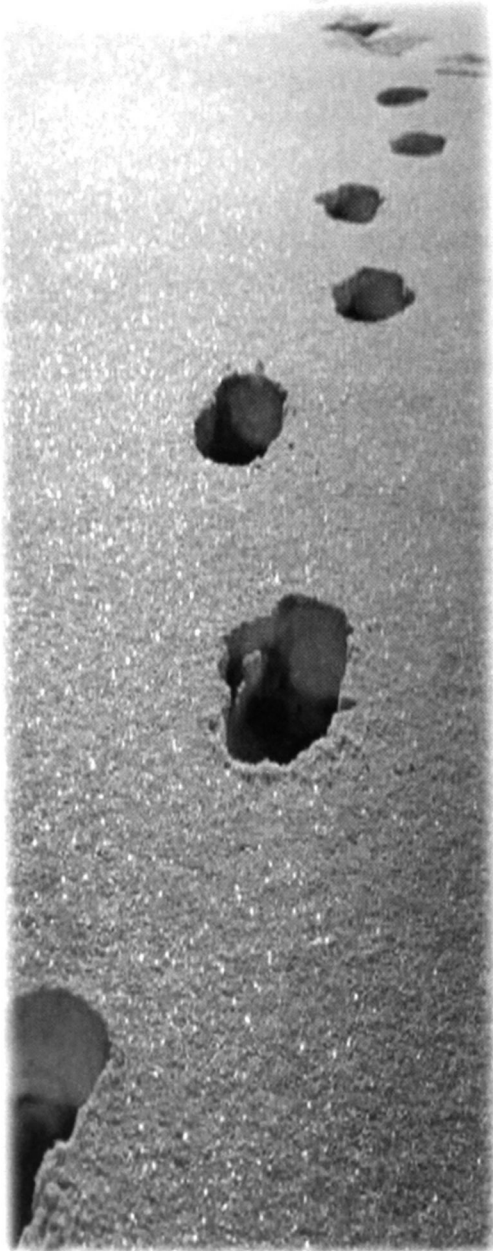


Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

All the Rage

by Barb Lundy

The Met fashion retrospective
features brass collar bands
piled high to stretch necks
power point bras
and a Mr. Pearl who
provides testimonial to
his rib crushing corsets
by winnowing his own waist
to a grotesque seventeen inches.

Skirts bustled and hooped force
contortionist drills
men sport padded calves
and gray black x-rays
chronicle the torture
of the three inch lotus slipper.
In every century
chic refinement renders
daily confinement.



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall



The Ice Cream Man

by Stephanie Kaplan Cohen

As soon as I heard the familiar jingle of the bell, I ran in, shouting, "The ice-cream man. The ice-cream man is coming. Quick, give me the money." I knew that he would never wait for me, that I would miss my chance, that I would watch the other kids licking their pops, eating their Dixies, and would be left out, stranded, ice-cream-less, on the shore of our street.

My mother never hurried despite my begging, despite my jiggling from foot to foot as she fetched her pocketbook, searched around for the little leather change-purse, slowly opened it, and asked, "Which ice-cream man?" I knew, because there was a difference in the tone of their bells, but I always said, "I don't know. I think it's Bungalow Bar." If it was Good Humor, she might decide she wanted ice-cream, and then she'd come out, and do something terrible like telling me to wipe my mouth or that I was dribbling. I could just die whenever she did something like that in front of the other kids.

Despite her refusing to hurry, I never missed the ice-cream man, and I never remained calm while waiting for the money. I always knew it was a hairbreadth race, and I was in deep danger of missing out.

We had two ice-cream men who came, jingling their bells, every day. Their bells were different, and we knew when they came to the corner just who each one was. They rode some sort of bicycle contraptions, which were essentially five-wheelers, the front wheel being attached to a four-wheel box, which held their wonderful treats.

One ice-cream man peddled Bungalow Bar Ice-cream, and the other, Good-Humor. The Bungalow-Bar man had to reach deep down into his box for our ice cream, since the box opening was on top. Smoke billowed forth whenever he opened the cover. "Dry Ice," some smart kid told me, and I knew less than before what kept the ice cream so cold. "It's ice, sort of," my big sister told me, "but

it doesn't melt. That's why they call it dry ice."

Bungalow Bar ice-cream cost five cents. Five cents for a Dixie cup, half-chocolate, half-vanilla, tasting cold, cold, cold. Too cold to taste other than cold until we were close to the bottom. The inside cover of the Dixie was covered with a thin piece of tissue paper which we carefully pulled away to reveal the picture of a movie star. Deanna Durbin, Judy Garland, Robert Taylor and Errol Flynn were favorites.

We collected these covers, and traded them among ourselves. Some of the boys on the block gave us their covers. Dixie-cup covers were a girl thing, just as bubble-gum cards, with their pictures of baseball stars, were a boy thing. The boy who lived right across the street from me, Jay Weiss, always gave me his Dixie covers, and I always gave him my bubble-gum cards.

The girls all liked Good Humor better, but at least every other time, we bought Bungalow-Bar for the sake of those covers.

The Good Humor man fought back. Inside some of his ice-cream cups was the legend, "Redeem for one free Ice-cream Sundae." A Sundae cost twenty-five cents, and contained a much larger amount of ice cream in its big cup, with a generous icing of chocolate or strawberry. The regular Dixie cost the same nickel, was only one flavor, either velvety chocolate, or vanilla, creamy ivory in color, with tiny flecks of black, which he explained were only produced by the pure ingredient, genuine vanilla. It didn't matter. Most of the kids who decided to get Good-Humors chose chocolate, which, if we were not careful, ran over our play clothes, ran over our fingers, ran down our bare legs. Somehow, the Good Humor Man's trailer, which he opened from the back, did not seem to freeze ice cream so cold, and so it melted much sooner than the Bungalow-Bar's Dixies.

When the mothers came out for ice cream, al-





Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

ways they waited for Good Humor. Good Humor was classier, more sophisticated, and somehow, motherly. The Good Humor Man's uniform was always sparkling clean, shiny white, just like his trailer. The Bungalow-Bar man's rumpled uniform had occasional smears of ice cream, and his trailer, with its big colored pictures, certainly did not have the pure appearance of the Good Humor Man's tidy blue script, proclaiming his name.

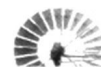
Several times a week, Helen and I pestered our mother for ice cream pops. Margaret was too little, and could never be allowed a pop. Only big kids could be trusted with them. They melted. They fell off their sticks. They got little kids even dirtier than the Dixies. And if we were talking about the Good Humor pops, they cost a dime. Who did we think our mother was? She informed us that she was no Rockefeller, no millionaire to hand out dimes for ice cream pops which we would undoubtedly waste, dropping them all over the street, bringing vermin,

and dirtying ourselves beyond what her washboard could repair.

"But all the other kids," one of us would whine. "All the other kids get pops. And there's even a chance to get one free." On some of those Good-Humor sticks were inscribed "Get one Good-Humor free."

One day my mother yelled about starving children who never ever had a lick of ice-cream, who never had enough food, whose mother probably fed them on less than five cents a day. "And furthermore," she told us, one hot day, "I'm thinking of cutting out the ice cream money. Mr. Jo at the beauty parlor charges three for a dollar. I'll get a hair wash, set and manicure with the money I save."

That shut me up for the rest of the summer. I was scared I was about to lose my chance to have the best collection of Dixie covers.



Mastery

by Shawn Pittard

Eggs sizzle
when they hit
the hot pan.

Hard shells,
brown and speckled,
require a certain

flick of the wrist
to crack. Olive oil,
brought slowly

to temperature,
under a cover
that seals in the heat

and cures both
white and yolk
patiently, while she reads

the morning paper. Coffee,
ground fresh and pressed
with water brought

almost to a boil, then
poured into porcelain cups
with little lids

that hold in the heat
between sips. Toast
pops when egg whites

firm, butter spread
while toast is too hot to touch,
melting uniformly



on the rough surface.
Grandmother's plates,
sized for the Depression,

white with yellow flowers
emblazoned on the rims,
just right for breakfast.

Coarse black pepper,
a pinch of salt—
she breaks the yolks

with her toast. Me,
I cut them into little squares
with knife and fork.

My wife can decipher
archaic laws. My father helped
put a man on the moon.

I, too, like being good at something.



Florida

by Stuart T. Gravatt

Her accent makes the needle
soft as she pushes it in to draw
the blood. I admire her dark
hand steady on the syringe. *Where were you
before?* I expect the nurse to name
some doc-in-a-box down the street.
New York, she says. *Before that,*
Africa . . . Burundi, and I suck
air through my teeth, watch the tube
filling. The war, her family? Half here,
half there, she says, unfolding
her story. A sister already here
brought her, her young son, to this Southern
backwater—*some family is better
than none*, I say, wondering
if it is true, and we both
laugh. She pulls the needle, presses
gauze on the wound, gives it to me
to hold. Her son in a Catholic
school, doing well. She is not
a nurse but a doctor, learned
her medicine in
French. She studies now to take
the Boards. *You did
good*, I say, as she tapes on
a Band-Aid, labels the tube. All day,
I say her name the way she did,
and wonder what it means
in Burundi.



In Nicaragua

by Joel Harris

While rummaging through my son's effects, I came across his old Mac computer. He had left it in our cellar before going off to Nicaragua. Curious, I plugged it in and discovered he had kept a journal of his apprenticeship as a teacher and his disappointing experience in a Long Island school system. When I shut down the computer, I was shocked by Stephen's voice emerging from the sound-actuating software, a message he had recorded several years ago. "I'll be back!" it announced, his mellow tones clearly recognizable even through the cheap speaker.

Stephen arrived in Nicaragua to teach history at The American School. It was a strange and beautiful year for him, probably the finest in his life, culminating with the desire to become a teacher and his sudden and tragic death.

I thank God that Mr. Quinn came to Nicaragua. This gave me the chance to see him every day, learn some of what he knew and some of what he felt. Mr. Quinn was full of life and charisma. Everyone who knew him will cherish the moments they spent with him.

My wife and I went to visit him in mid-September, the beginning of his second year, one month before he died. It was Nicaragua's Independence Day and school closed for a two-day holiday. Classes were going well, although the newly appointed principal had stirred up the teachers with a change of rules. Steve, in a typical first-over-the-hill charge, had clashed with the administration. Rather abruptly, he was informed his two-year contract would not be extended past next June.

"How can they do that?" he asked me on an expensive long-distance call. He had accomplished a lot that first year and it broke his heart. "I've done a terrific job. My students love me. Their parents love me. Should I go to their parents? They

run this school."

"Be patient, Steve," I advised. "There's plenty of time between September and June. Decisions can be reversed. Be professional. Hold your head up high."

"He doesn't know the first thing about education. He won't even let us use a lectern."

"As they say in the military, 'Keep your pecker up and your powder dry.'" He laughed.

"They're having trouble hanging on to teachers down here. It's not a hospitable country and the school doesn't make it any easier." He told me a story about one new teacher who went AWOL the next day after arriving in July. "No one knew what had happened to her. She just disappeared. Finally, the superintendent called her family at home to let them know she was missing and who do you think answered the phone? The missing teacher. She made up her mind not to stay in Nicaragua the day she arrived. She didn't unpack, slept here one night and took the next flight out."

On the other side of immigration the usual crush of eager friends and family waited to meet travelers from the States, mostly Nicaraguans returning home. We tourists were a distinct minority. I searched for Steve's face in the crowd, his auburn hair, perhaps a reddish two-day beard. He was over six feet tall with a broad frame and usually wore a shirt with bright colors—blue and yellow and orange. He stood out in any crowd. I didn't see him and was disappointed. We waited fifteen minutes outside the terminal.

"I got lost trying to find the airport," he joked as he ambled over from the parking lot, pigeon-toed in his worn-down-at-the-heel cowboy boots. "Haven't been a driver here for that long." How could you stay angry at him, bold in his shirt plumage and handsome, like a red-bearded Viking, yet shy. We embraced, he and I, as we always did on greeting and farewell, and I could tell he had lost



weight in Nicaragua, his finicky diet limited to what was safe to eat. He looked trimmer and quite fit.

Steve drove back into Managua hugging the middle of the road and traveling much too fast, for my comfort, in his old Toyota Tercel, a 1987 model he had bought at the end of the previous semester. We soon realized there was no logical road grid in Managua. It was a city without a center, a vast damaged slum of tin shacks, a few commercial buildings, open spaces with damaged overgrown foundations, a city destroyed by the earthquake of 1972 and never rebuilt. A few sturdy government buildings existed, several stories high, and off in the distance, we could see the pyramid shape of the Hotel InterContinental, our destination. But how to reach it?

There weren't any street signs and no street leading toward it in a way resembling a route. Steve had a terrible sense of direction. I thought of Steve's story of the new teacher who left the next day and began to realize how she must have felt. But we were here to see Steve and the school and the community he had come to love in one short year.

Cursed with bad luck, Nicaragua had been devastated by an earthquake, then robbed of its resources by a corrupt dictator, who embezzled funds devoted to rebuilding. Catastrophic civil war followed and periodic epidemics of dengue fever.

"I'm lucky they gave me an apartment outside of town. It's a higher elevation and there are fewer mosquitoes up here." Steve thought his cowboy boots saved him because they covered his exposed ankles.

In the fall of 1998, "Hurricane Mitch" hit Central America.

"It's been raining here for two weeks solid," Steve said on my weekly long-distance call. Widespread flooding caused mudslides, and thousands died, including the teenage son of the lower school principal, who had driven into a large puddle in the road only to have his car quickly flooded and swept away.

"Don't worry, Dad," Steve had said. "It's mostly

forty miles north. We're okay in Managua and we have plenty of food." His diet consisted primarily of macaroni and cheese. He had simple needs.

One day he chased the biggest spider he had ever seen out of his bathroom, possibly a tarantula. A month later he awoke with his neck swollen as big as a grapefruit and a gash as if Count Dracula had taken a deep bite.

"Probably a spider," said the school nurse. The swelling eventually went down and the wound healed but left him with a red scar, half an inch long.

"Keep a journal," I suggested. "You're leading an exciting life."

"I'm too busy," he replied. "I spend five hours every night just preparing for my classes." It took two to three weeks for mail to reach him from the States. He had a switchboard connection to the telephone where he lived, so he couldn't connect to the Internet at home. Long-distance telephone calls cost a fortune, almost two dollars per minute. My once-a-week call became his regular line of communication with home. After conversing for an hour he and I hated to hang up: such a wistful sound in his voice to prolong the conversation, such love in my heart for my son, who was managing to do such good work.

I wondered, sometimes, how Steve had arrived in this place. Was it destiny, some grand design or just bad luck?

Steve loved history and was bound to discover what dynamics drove society. It was a love he discovered after he graduated college, still shy two credits. He took his traditional walk through the graduation line but didn't receive his official diploma until a year and a half later.

"What do you want to do with your life?" I asked him. He worked part-time as a shipyard laborer.

"I don't know, Dad."

"It should be something you want to do, something you get enthused about."

"Maybe teaching?" he asked. "I would really



love to teach history.” He’d been working on a science fiction novel called *The History of Lath-rim*, carrying his notes and maps to whatever apartment he lived in.

Steve enrolled at Rhode Island College, a school that produced most of our state’s teachers. He had a purpose now.

Last year I signed up in Mr. Quinn’s history class, because I had to take US history, and I knew that he was the best qualified teacher for the class. I did not know him personally, then, but I certainly knew who he was, for he was not the kind of person who walks around unnoticed. I admired his uniqueness, for he seemed to know exactly who he was, and was not afraid to show it. He had a way of keeping it to himself, but I immediately realized he was a brilliant person. There were some topics I couldn’t wait to hear his opinions about.

His first year out of graduate school Steve signed onto the substitute teachers’ list with the City of Providence. It was daily student target practice and new teachers fair game. Within a month Steve substituted for a teacher who got hurt breaking up a fight between two boys in his English class, Central High School, the largest multi-ethnic, inner-city school. It wasn’t Steve’s subject but once called as substitute, he was allowed to keep the class as long as the teacher remained out of work.

I can remember Steve’s excitement, dreading the teacher might return and claim his classes back. He went rummaging through the archives of old textbooks stored in the cellars of Central High School and came up with a ninth-grade text to replace the fifth-grade text the injured teacher had been using. Steve flunked most of his students that first marking period and challenged them to do better.

But the system decreed that an English certified instructor replace him the following year. Back

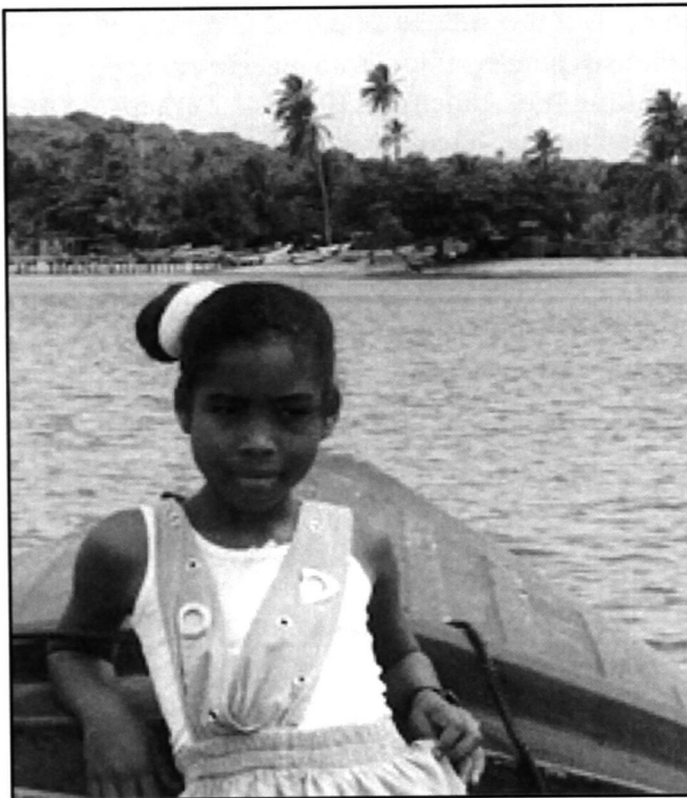


Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

into the substitute pool he plunged, hating every assignment to nursemaid unruly kids, a day at a time, never longer than a week—in all subjects from cooking to woodworking. Seldom history, the subject he adored. Two frustrating years and all during that time he perfected his resume and sent it out to other communities and other states, attending job fairs in distant cities, seeking interviews for a full-time teaching position in history.

He was hired, the last week of August, to teach middle school on Long Island, New York. Could he move to Long Island by week’s end, start class the following Monday? He accepted with trepidation, not completely confident he could control his class, teaching the difficult early teens. He’d always had trouble in the middle school. But that was substitute teaching. They’d have to face him every day. He could deal with it, if the school gave him support.

In just one month and a half, by mid-October the school took his classes away from him. Just after the first marking period. His journals tell the



story. But the subtext of sadness remained in his confused conversations with me. He thought he was handling the academic side okay. Perhaps he had graded them too hard. No doubt many would earn their A grade by semester end. Maybe the work was too hard for them. He challenged them to think as he might a senior high class. Were they ready to be drawn into controversy, since that's what most of the complaints were about—the pejorative word for “black” used in context when studying original documents from the Civil War, the film *Glory* shown in class about a courageous black infantry division that won Denzel Washington an Oscar. A book assignment that parents complained had the word “bastard” in it.

“God, I thought this was a liberal community!” he said.

School protocol made it necessary to be friends with your students, take them out for lunch, exchange e-mail, share their lives. One girl wrote him love letters which he tried to discourage. Someone asked if he were gay, because he walked “funny,” that odd pigeon-toed shuffle in his heel-worn cowboy boots. What next? One of his students vowed to get him fired. “I just don’t understand why this kid hates me.”

They gave him an administrative job, until January. He made friends there with the assistant superintendent of schools, who recommended him to a friend, who hired for The American Schools in foreign countries. Steve got his resume back in the mail. He didn’t want to substitute teach, although that would have been an option. In February he went for an interview for The American School in Nicaragua. They offered him a job later that day.

Mr. Quinn gave me exactly 77.8, which decreased my average a lot. Sometimes, I stayed up all night working on his homework, but all he gave me was a B or C. Who would like a teacher like this? Well, I do. He was, is, and will be one of my greatest teachers. He tried to teach us everything he knows. He was

not the kind of teacher who gives grades for nothing. After listening to his classes, I decided to be a teacher like him.

If there was a center to Managua, it might have been the InterContinental Hotel. As we circled around, catching a glimpse now and then of its pyramid shape, it vanished behind trees. We were lost and came to a vacant square. The huge ghost of a cathedral stood there, its roof caved in, windows shattered by the earthquake. A magnificent building, why had it not been rebuilt? Children came over to our car and offered sliced fruit for sale, candy, the daily newspaper. At each traffic light a competition occurred among children to wash your windshield. Several times, Steve had lowered his window to give a small tip. I let my sense of direction take over and guided Steve, by instinct, to the rear of the hotel where we circled just one more time up to the entrance.

The “Inter,” as Steve called it affectionately, was functional enough. Built in a flying buttress style out of concrete, it had survived the earthquake, one of few large buildings to do so. It had been the hangout for journalists covering the Civil War. Armed private guards strolled outside the entrance and in the lobby. Our room had a view in back towards the big statue on the hill, a monument and park honoring August Cesar Sandino, General of the Free Men, who had led the guerilla war in 1927 from his base in the mountains to the north. What from a distance looked enormous was a sort of sham figure made of flat steel plate, like a cardboard cutout hero. A tin-shack neighborhood began immediately at the confluence of hotel and park, with barbed-wire fence separating it from a military post guarding the monument. In the hotel shop Steve bought a T-shirt printed with the monogram “I survived Hurricane Mitch.” He joined us for an early dinner at the hotel, indulging in an Argentine beefsteak, then left to take his dog for a walk. He’d pick us up midmorning.

Our beds were flat and hard as a board, tile





Photo courtesy Nicaragua Tourism Authority

generic “Inter” bed in Managua, nothing you could do about it. The next morning, however, we changed our room to one with a view over the city—a busy, scrambling, populated city, hidden by trees, out of sight but not out of mind.

Steve looked good and he had quite recovered from the shock of his dismissal that wasn’t a dismissal. At the end of last year he’d had several children in each class pass their AP exam in American and European history. He knew with second-year experience and an established curriculum he’d do even better. His classes were stimulating and, while we couldn’t see him in action because of the holiday, he felt there was plenty of time for the school to reverse itself by June.

We got the guided tour, first to Steve’s old apartment up a hill, almost ten kilometers outside the city, green vegetation everywhere and traffic that Steve whistled confidently through like a Grand Prix race. I had white knuckles by the time we reached his first digs. He turned in towards the gate and a guard opened it. The stone walls were topped with circular barbed wire. Inside was a community of small buildings, perhaps eight apartments with corrugated rooftops. He navigated his car between them to his former residence, locked for

the holiday weekend. We wanted to see inside of one.

“Maybe Jonathan is still here. All my other friends have left for a place closer to school except Jon. He gave me most of my rides last year.” The Nica buses were crowded and not very dependable. They were mostly old yellow school buses from the U.S., owned by a cartel. To get to school on time for 7:00 a.m., Steve had to hitch a ride. Fortunately, several other teachers that first year lived in the same compound and he had been able to get a lift. By the end of June, only Jon was left with his pickup truck, with Steve riding in the rear like an itinerant farm worker, grateful for the lift.

In fact, Jon was still around for the weekend. Steve proudly introduced us to the young biology teacher. His shy Nica bride stayed in another room of the small apartment until Jon insisted she come out to meet us. They were doing their weekend chores with a college football game playing on TV. I thanked him for helping Steve last semester. “We stick together,” he said.

Steve’s current apartment was a couple of kilometers closer to town, rented from a retired American, also married to a Nicaraguan woman. I thought of the old calypso tune: “If you want to be

happy for the rest of your life, make an island woman your wife." Steve was ready for a helpmate, a woman who could balance that lopsided intelligence of his with a practical touch. Once Steve got planted in the American school system, I was sure she'd find him.

His apartment was spacious and the neatest Steve ever had, thanks to his once-a-week housekeeper, who used to wash his clothes in a barrel outside and hang them on a line. Proud of his space, Steve showed us around the two-and-a-half rooms, a bedroom-study with all his books, a large bathroom, and a living room-kitchen. Kinneson greeted us with howls and whining just like old times.

"Do you think he remembers us?" I asked.

"Of course. He's saying hello to you."

Once a small converted pottery factory, there were lots of overhead plugs to run each potter's wheel. Steve's TV and electronic equipment were connected by electric cords hanging from the ceiling. His recent purchases of native pottery, from various markets around Managua, were brightly colored, animistic forms that fit in perfectly. We waited while he took Kinneson for a walk and then we left his barbed-wire compound. "That's a Nica fence," Steve joked. Managua sprawled like a Los Angeles on the shores of a brown lake in which nothing lived. It must have once been a beautiful land before it became a city divided into zones of poverty.

"Squalor starts one hundred yards off the highway," observed Steve on the way to The American School.

"What would you call this?" I asked. Goats were chewing on household garbage piled by the roadside.

"Maybe just degradation. Everyone hopes the IMF will forgive all of Nicaraguan debt but no one is sure if the politicians would use the payments to rebuild infrastructure. There are twenty thousand people ahead of me just waiting for a direct telephone connection."

Everyone had abandoned The American School

for the long vacation weekend, some friends to the Pacific coast, others to the Corn Islands offshore in the Atlantic or to Costa Rica. We parked and he led us to his classroom, past rows of neat buildings on a large campus, relatively new since the earthquake. His room had a glass wall and an open feeling. School messages were tacked on bulletin boards, a gardener watered plants, shade trees dotted the grounds leading to a soccer field and basketball courts. One of his friends was playing basketball with his "novia," an attractive Nica woman. Steve introduced us but I don't remember his name. He taught history in the classroom next to Steve.

"He's a bit of a loner," Steve said. "We get along fine."

Huembe's Market had a totally unique Nicaraguan quality and if any place were the center of Managua, I think Huembe's could claim the distinction. "Here is where I get my hair cut... three dollars." When Steve first told me about Huembe's I imagined someone clipping his hair in a large open-air market, but, in fact, it was just one shop of hundreds selling all the staples and sundries of daily living in a vast multi-roofed bazaar, in a space taking up perhaps several football fields. His barber had a very nice salon, indeed.

"And here's where I bought my last cowboy boots, forty-five dollars. What a bargain! It's packed in here during the week," Steve said. "Clothing and furniture is cheap, but anything that plugs in is expensive." Sunday late afternoon and the crowds had thinned.

"They need to replace the Panama Canal," I said. "Reconnect through Lake Managua. That would jump-start the economy."

"There's always been talk of that and wouldn't you know Costa Rica claims they own the river connecting to the Atlantic that shares their common border. It really belongs to Nicaragua." Steve was partisan, now, in his politics.

We decided to give Steve's old car a rest and hired a taxi, the next day, to take us to Masaya Park to see the volcano, then on to the old Spanish city



of Granada, once the capital of Nicaragua. We chanced to see the same history teacher from school, getting out of his car to check into a small resident hotel. Stephen said he had another “novia” in Granada. “You should hang out with him,” I replied.

I feel compelled to describe the minutiae of our days because it was the last time we spent with Steve. The luxury of enjoying one’s children should never be taken lightly—each minute, in retrospect, so precious. Heading south, the country had a rural beauty that belied its violent and transient natural forces. All it lacked were leaders who had the best interest of its people at heart.

Up a winding road inside Masaya National Park we drove, past giant furrows of lava that had the appearance of a plowed field, overwhelming remains of the last eruption in the 1700s. Our hired car, a little taxi with its windows open for air-conditioning, chugged up the road cut through sections of lava, parking at the top along the perimeter of the crater. Only one other car there. The jagged crater edge peaked yet another two hundred feet or so higher. Stairs climbed along the edge of the crater with a large cross installed at the very summit.

In a file we trudged up the steep steps, mounting to where a young couple stood arm in arm gazing at the magnificent view over the rolling countryside of green fields and crater lakes, to another nearby still-active volcano. Although it hadn’t exploded in over 200 years, a steady cloud of steam billowed from the depths of the Masaya crater. Its cone seemed narrow across, perhaps 200 meters, a young volcano with lots of energy left.

Steve stepped outside the guardrail, testing fate, to get a better look inside the crater. A sign warned against just such foolhardy acts. That didn’t faze him. I watched several steps away, my heart thumping as he poised one foot forward as if teetering on the toe and heel of his clunky boots, one foot behind him for a brake. He leaned over in slow motion. Perhaps 300 feet below, shades of incandes-

cence glowed. I wanted to yell “get back on the trail” but not alarm him. Volcano sand and stone beneath his feet. What if he slipped?

“Why did you do that?” I asked when we reached the parking lot. “There was no jumping in to save you.”

“I know,” he replied. “Relax. You’re just being a dad.”

We stopped for lunch at one of several verandah cafes overlooking a deep and expansive crater lake, very still and blue with not a single boat on it. A three-piece string band strolled over to serenade us.

“What do I tip them?” I asked Steve.

“Dad, if you were kidnapped and held ransom for three months, you’d probably ask how much do I tip them when they exchanged you. The service was good.” My son had a macabre sense of humor. “Tip whatever you like.” Our driver, sensing my problem, said ten cordobas was customary.

I was a new student last year (and Mr. Quinn was the first teacher I met. From that first day, I loved his class and looked forward to it. I had never enjoyed history before last year, but Mr. Quinn knew it so well that he made it feel real. And his class wasn’t a history class where I just memorized facts. He taught how and why—the concepts and ideas behind the movements in history. We didn’t just learn in his class. We were educated to understand for ourselves. He challenged us to really think.

From Masaya we continued on to Granada, which had a seventeenth-century Spanish Colonial charm, centered around a large square planted with trees and tropical palms. Doors were open in a large cathedral, similar to the one in Managua, a service in progress. Out front, a horse-drawn hearse waited, covered with bouquets of flowers. The service had a lovely musical quality with tinkling bells counterpoint to the organ. A young priest gave Com-



munion.

Horse and wagon tours of Granada were available in the square, the horses skeletal, lean and worn like old leather. Granada belied the saying "Time stops for no man." In Granada it flowed like congealed lava. We might still have been in that ancient century of its origin. On the edge of town we fell behind another brightly covered hearse and a long line of mourners, until they took a turn and we gringos, always in a rush, sped back to Managua.

Once again we reached the outskirts of the city without a center—empty lots and overgrown foundations, like an archeological site excavated and plundered by scavenger bands. At traffic lights, eight-year-old entrepreneurs offered to clean our window. Their voices pleaded, they were not easily discouraged. The cab driver turned on his washer wiper and waved them off. Stephen muttered "damn" in frustration, wanting to tip them all. A man in a wheelchair sat in the middle of a wide street like a traffic cop. A child attended him. Probably a victim of the Civil War, he held a white cloth poster in his lap with some political message about Ortega. There were trees enough to hide the city from the hotel balcony, so that a visitor need never see any of this. Nearby a government building stood with Uzi-armed soldiers on guard.

"I have a feeling life here has been much worse," Steve replied, reading my mind.

"If I were to write about Managua," I observed, "I would describe it as how the world will end. It would be highly personal and probably highly inaccurate."

"If I wrote about it," replied Steve, "it would be impersonal and just as inaccurate."

The night before he died he talked until the early morning hours with a new teacher he fancied. She was very pretty and somewhat reserved and in his own shy way Steve had begun to court her. They discussed the great perplexing questions of existence that evening. When she went to bed, he started a file on his portable computer, which

he always carried with him, titled "Liz," part of his Nicaraguan journal. He summarized their conversation as a list of hypothetical questions with few answers.

"Is survival the highest instinct?" they wondered that evening, as they peered together into the abyss.

Back home, we had returned from a concert Sunday afternoon. The message light on our telephone blinking: two messages, one from George, who had gotten the call from the school in our absence. He was on Steve's emergency call list, one of his college roommates, as close to Steve as next of kin. The other, a woman's voice announcing who she was, Superintendent of The American-Nicaraguan School. "There is an emergency regarding your son Stephen. Please call as soon as you get home."

I knew immediately when she answered the phone and began her charge to tell me as quickly as possible, extinguishing all hope—no road accident here with blood and broken bones and Steve in the hospital. He had drowned in the Pacific Ocean, jumped off the rocks into the turbulent surf left over from a passing hurricane to save a dog. He was dead. The boat trip fifteen teachers were scheduled to take that weekend had been canceled. They stayed at a house nearby. Five teachers, including Steve, had gone for a walk Sunday morning. The family dog and owner went with them. I was confused at first. Was it Steve's dog he had tried to rescue? No, he had left Kinneson home in Managua for the weekend in the care of a friend. It was the dog belonging to the family where they were staying. It had been swept off the rocks by a wave. The owner must have cried out, and Steve ran down the hill forsaking all caution, looking for a safe place to get across the rocks and into the water. He had little time to consider his options. Either go, don't go. Jump in or let the animal be swept out to sea.

He left his shoes, his wallet, his car keys in a neat pile, struggled through a space in a breakwa-



ter of undertow and battering surf, and tried to swim toward the dog, yelling to get its attention. Stephen hated the beach. He had probably not gone for a swim during his entire time in Nicaragua. As a child he had been afraid to dive head-first into a swimming pool.

They never recovered the dog. Two teachers tried to save Steve but the waves kept them back and battered one against the rocks. A strong swimmer, he barely survived. A fisherman in a boat nearby heard the commotion. He fastened a hook and line to Stephen and dragged him ashore—fisher of Steve's body as I am the fisher of Steve's soul.

"Once I knew a boy who ate only mac and cheese," his friend Elizabeth said, sounding like the lyrical beginning of a children's story. Not a very healthy diet but it kept him satisfied. He thought he was going to live forever.

Mr. Quinn was a genius and nothing less. He has been the only teacher that inspired me to study harder and to do extremely well. For that, I am eternally grateful. Since I can no longer tell him that in person, I feel a great need to tell his family. In our school, it is very uncommon for a teacher to have that effect on their students. Mr. Quinn had that effect.

On Steve's computer I also found a book he wrote called *The History of Lathrim*, about a world with its own gods and people who were unique to his own imagination. One, a child of the gods, Saren, who:

... discovers new ways of doing things, that require more than just an understanding of the natural order of the world; they require an understanding of how to actively alter it to achieve a goal, ways that go well beyond the simple faith in the

world and the workings of it that Lithara, his mother, or indeed any of the gods, could provide.

...Life was becoming more than just survival, and Saren provided a release for their passions, enabling individuals to express themselves through their own acts of creation.

Even as he grows older, Saren remains a child his entire life. Saren encounters different tribes in his adventures and tries to bring them new ways of thinking. He brings literacy so that they might write down the story of their people in order to learn from it. He shows others how to predict the weather so that their voyages might be safer. Some tribes he teaches how to fish, others how to plant crops. To the hunters he teaches the pictorial language in the caves so they can preserve their family histories.

I wonder if Stephen intended a parallel in his life with Saren. There is too much irony and pre-science for me to even contemplate—Saren often frustrated by the indifference of many tribes to the knowledge he so wants to impart, often the butt of practical jokes. When he shows patience and good humor some tribes stay with him long enough to learn numbers, to keep score of games, and written language, so that the "best" jokes would be remembered forever. Saren, in Stephen's story, is also destined to die young.

Stephen came to a strange land, where he did help students who were eager to learn. It was gratifying to him. He touched too few lives during his brief teaching career and that is a shame.

"I'll be back." Steve's voice was fresh and innocent on the Apple computer where he wrote his story. Perhaps, he will.



Aftermath of the Ice Storm

by Catherine McCraw

The house is frigid,
all the warmth seeped out hours ago,
when the power went out.

The furniture looks the same,
but it's too cold to touch.
The bed doesn't invite me in,
the armchair isn't snug,
the countertop's as slick and icy
as a skating rink.

The air bites my skin,
as I wander from room to room,
bundled in a blanket.

Worse than the cold is the silence,
all voices stopped.
The CD player, radio, TV have laryngitis,
electronic larynxes frozen.
The refrigerator refuses to hum and
the heater won't hiss.
I have the only working voice
in the whole house,
but when I open my mouth
chill air rushes in, inhibiting speech.

Biblical images become profound.
God is light, the Good Book says,
and light means heat, and heat means life.

So, I'll make a spiritual pilgrimage
to the Holiday Inn down the highway,
perchance to find heat, to find light,
to find life, to find God.

I know exactly where He's hiding,
during all this miserable mess.
He's in the top drawer of the bedside table,
right where the Gideons left Him.



Photo by Roger Roussell

Cobh Village

by William Snyder, Jr.

From the cafe, a slice of Cork harbor
beyond the square—tugs, gulls, a ship plowing out.
I sip coffee, write postcards home. It has rained

all day—simple mist, then big, scattered drops,
then torrents soaking everything. During letups,
people duck in for tea and scones. I imagine

the Titanic hove-to off shore—tenders
churning wakes, black smoke ribboning
into rain, people waving, sending it away.

Apple tart, more coffee, then I walk
around the bay, squelching urges
to photo everything—yellow gorse

along a cemetery, a pilot boat bucking sea.
And there is something too, about the fog,
the rain swirling past the cathedral steeple,

muting Cobh's upper reaches—the what-can't-
be-seen, the what-is-possible—there is always
more to the heart. In a park, pansies ripple

in the now-mist, teens slouch on steps.
Two boys swing from a broken lanyard,
the tide edging out beneath their squeals.

**Pronounced "Cove." A village on the south coast of Ireland near Cork.
The Titanic stopped there before its transatlantic crossing.*



Turkey Run

by Lydia Webster

We're checking an old fire above Turkey Run, a steep canyon dense with
 pine and fir
where lightning struck the packed cliff wall below the crest.
We drive the broken road as far as we can, then hike in,
radios strapped to our chests, quarts of water slung like flasks.
Overhead, a cloud tinted pale aquamarine, two red-tailed hawks.
Touching the wet smolder for hot spots, where the fire
fingered out, we walk the perimeter pushing over charred logs,
then circle back to camp through a creek-fed valley, open and alive as
 a prairie,
and long before we see her, we smell the dead cow
lying down by the creek, three buzzards on her back.
All around, the lush grasses, the wildflowers—squirrel tail and
 snakeweed, macarantia, star thistle,
beepplant, yarrow, lupinus, crucifer. I remember the cow skull
in the bog up Corduroy Canyon: the white gleam of horn floating in
 shallow teal water, bidden by grass;
I remember the man who shot himself in the guest house, looking in the
 mirror.

You said, "Who drinks the wine should take the dregs,"
live life until it's all played out, no matter if death looks dear,
your own gift so clear—naked witness and acceptance—
you watched your aging mind hang like a fragmented star
in the body's dark decay, its oriental yearning to be
nothing, like the quiet cow, the fire played out,
even as you watched the dark wing of civilization cover the earth.
You said your children, and their children, "will find their way,"
and so your poems dust the world with the seed of what remains
eternal—words—shining where the earth breeds color, amid the
 crimson blooms—
their cool, mineral glow; their ash-white bones.



Better Late Than Never

by Brian C. Felder

You'll have to forgive me for this, Oahu,
but it wasn't my choice to give you so little of my time.
A cold beer at the airport bar enroute to Vietnam
was all that the Marine Corps allowed me that day.
For the record, it was June 6, 1967,
a Tuesday of some consequence for many,
all nameless until Maya Lin etched them into
the black granite of time.
But I digress.
I just wanted to tell you that I did get to see
Diamond Head and Waikiki Beach that day,
albeit as our plane lifted off.
It was, in fact, my last look at the country
I was about to defend for the next thirteen months.
It was a good memory to have, too,
being a vision of heaven to counterbalance
the hell that lay ahead.
How good of you to share your beauty like that, Oahu,
even if it has taken me until now to thank you for it.



Photo courtesy Oahu Tourism Board



Weight

by P. Culkin Ruddy

Nineteen seventy-nine. I have thin wrists, glasses and am obsessed with Hardy Boy mysteries and superhero comics. Mom works at JC Penney, the young men's department. She brings home stacks of discounted brands in odd sizes for me to try on. Green Toughskin jeans. Pinocchio shirts. Stiff fabrics and hideous colors that nobody else will wear. She watches proudly as I stand before the mirror and try them on. I look like a dork and I know it. I say thank you. I don't want to hurt her feelings. Tomorrow is the first day of school.

Four-foot-ten, 115 pounds, I am by far the smallest kid here. In gym class, we line up according to height. The coach tells me to bring up the rear. "The end of the line starts with you, Meyers," he says, and everyone laughs.

My mom and I travelled 300 miles to come to this place, a faded industrial town on a slow, muddy river. A railroad runs through it, then just disappears. This was once, insisted my mother, a thriving center of manufacturing. But it's mostly rusted-out cars and abandoned factories now.

After school, I walk home past a long stretch of bars. September afternoon, midweek, they're all full. Unemployed railroad men and laid-off metal workers, like horrible Christmas ornaments in their big old work pants. Drinking Old Style beer, playing darts, watching game shows and arguing over sports. Big, defeated men with no asses and double chins, blaming the Bears for another losing season.

I'm reading a Fantastic Four comic in bed when my mom comes into my room to say good night. It's my favorite—the one with The Thing. He's like a huge monster, made of rock. I freakin' love that guy. She sits down at the edge of the bed and asks if I've made any friends at school. Lots, I tell her. I'm the most popular kid in class. She gives me a look, brushes the hair from my eyes and kisses me good night. Then she clicks off the light and leaves

me alone, thinking of football games, victory, friends. Faraway dreams. Mostly though, I think about Jane Palmer, the straw-haired girl in algebra with the clean white Keds and slim legs. She has the neatest penmanship in class. I could get lost in her Os.

In my dream, a mighty wall of flame rushes through the school. Ignoring the danger, I valiantly search each room until I find Jane unconscious near the fish tank in the library. Gently, I pick her up, drape her limp body over my shoulder, and race outside as the entire building explodes, arching soot and flame high into the sky. My classmates, herded into orderly rows on the playground, watch in rapt attention as I step through the dust and the smoke with Jane in my arms. Gathering near, I set Jane safely down within the white, defined lines of the four square court and touch her forehead. She awakens, eyes fluttering as she comes to life, places her arms gratefully around my neck, and announces in a loud, yet dainty voice, that she loves me.

Fifth period is gym class. Besides me, there's one other kid here nobody will talk to. His name is Morris Jobek. Mo-jo for short, although he's six-foot-three. Two hundred fifty pounds. Enormous. Nobody talks to him because they're afraid. Nobody sits next to him because he smells bad. And he has greasy hair. He never changes clothes or showers after gym. If anyone asks why, he'll tell them he has a rare form of dandruff and the shampoo to treat it costs 70 dollars an ounce. But nobody ever asks. Behind his back, some of the guys joke he's retarded. He's not. He lives with his dad in a basement-level shit-box behind the train station. Everyone knows his dad. He drives around town in a rusty truck, hauling junk. For sport, he makes Egyptian pyramids out of beer cans. On weekends he shoots them down.



He also beats the shit out of Mojo. Once so bad, he fractured his arm in three places. The reason Mojo's hair's all greasy is because sometimes he sleeps in the woods.

Sometimes he sleeps at Spirit House, too. Spirit House is a homeless shelter. When that's full, or it's too cold for the woods, Mojo just goes home. "Better to take a beating than freeze your ass off," he says.

The second week, Rick Bennet, a rich kid with white teeth and expensive clothes, pushes me down in the locker room. He pounds me in the chest. He laughs and walks away. Mojo watches it all. Does nothing. But afterwards, when everyone else has gone, he says this to me: "You're gonna be small your whole life, Meyers, but you don't have to be weak. Why don't you pick up a god-damn weight?" The next day, I join the YMCA.

It costs sixty dollars a year, but you can pay by the month. For ten dollars down, I get a locker key and a plastic membership card with my name on it. The building's old and stinks like sweat, urine, chlorine, mold. Exposed pipes and water stains on faded tile. "The weight room's in the basement," they tell me. "Take the stairs."

I go down the steps and open a door to find the weight room. It looks like a bomb shelter. Gray cinder block walls and chipped concrete floors. Loud, heavy metal music echoes off the walls and weights. Lining the perimeter are rusting steel racks, battered barbells in ascending sizes cradled in their grasp. In one corner, I spot Mojo doing presses on an incline bench. Focused on his workout, he ignores me, completing rep after rep of the heavy steel weight without straining. He's like a machine, staring straight ahead at something I can't see. I wait for him to stop and see me. But he doesn't. When he finishes, he simply closes his eyes, catches his breath for a minute, then reaches for the weight all over again. I am invisible. I don't know what I'm doing here.

Clueless, I wander over to the rack and pick up a ten-pound dumbbell. I face the mirror, curl it for

as many reps as I can before failure. Not many. Maybe five. I rest, switch hands, then do it again. Over and over I go, until my arms are rubber, I can't lift anymore. When I look up, Mojo is gone.

The next morning, I wake up in bed and can hardly move. My arms are on fire—burning, lifeless meat, tethered to my sides. I'm convinced I've hurt myself. But somehow I get dressed. Get to school. At third period study hall, I request a library pass and find a book on weight lifting. I hide the cover with a napkin so nobody gives me shit. If they caught me with this book, I'd be killed for sure. Under the word PAIN in the index, I find a description of "lactic acid"—an acid brought about by the tearing down of the muscular tissue. The first step in building a new body. Immediately, I'm relieved. It means you're doing it right. The rebuilding has begun. The pain tells you this. I go back to the gym that afternoon and attack my chest.

For two solid weeks, I come to the gym every single day, following the instructions from the book and ignoring the pain. I see Mojo every day, but he looks straight through me. Doesn't say a word.

On the fifteenth day, I'm on the bench press, my last rep, nearing collapse. Mojo steps over, watches as I struggle. I try for one more rep, but can't make it. He doesn't help. Just watches, as my elbows give out, and the weight comes crashing down onto my chest, bounces off and clatters to the floor. I sit up, grasp my side. I wonder if I've broken a rib. Punctured a lung. Try to catch my breath.

Mojo just points to the floor: "Pick it up, do it again, and don't act like such a pussy, Meyers." I pick it up, do it again, and this time I don't act like such a pussy.

That night we leave together. Dead of February, five p.m., already dark. A biting wind sweeps through the YMCA parking lot. "Black as pitch and cold as a bitch," Mojo says. Walking behind the Dumpster, he pulls out a ratty joint. It takes several attempts, but he gets it lit. He takes a deep drag, then hands it to me. It's my first hit, and the

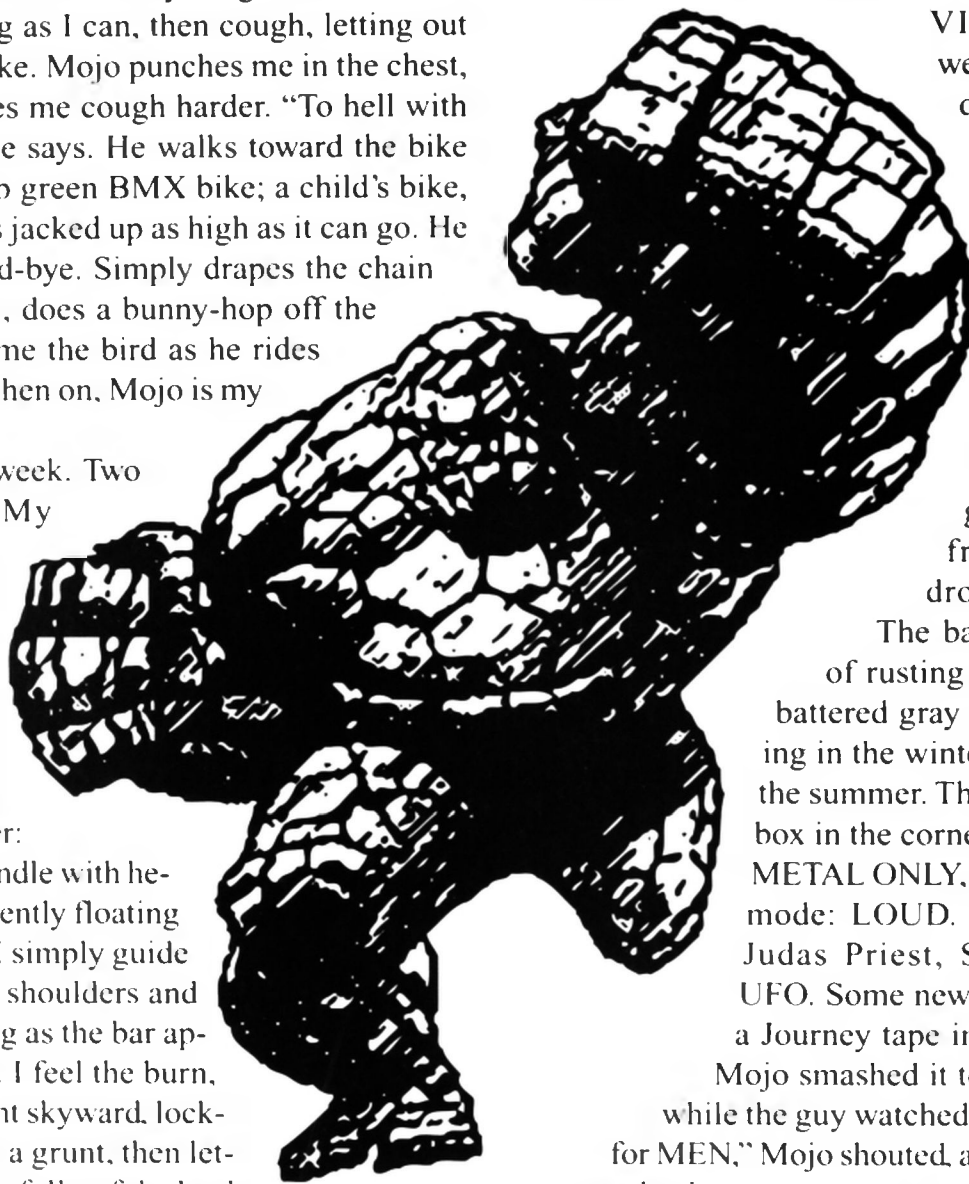


thick green smoke burns my lungs as it enters. I hold it in as long as I can, then cough, letting out most of the smoke. Mojo punches me in the chest, which just makes me cough harder. "To hell with you, Meyers," he says. He walks toward the bike rack. It's a cheap green BMX bike; a child's bike, really. The seat's jacked up as high as it can go. He doesn't say good-bye. Simply drapes the chain around his neck, does a bunny-hop off the curb, and flips me the bird as he rides away. But from then on, Mojo is my coach.

Six days a week. Two hours a day. My eyes burn, my arms ache, and I push that weight sky-high. Mojo says to imagine the bar's light as a feather: a broomstick handle with helium balloons, gently floating up and away as I simply guide it. I try this, my shoulders and biceps exploding as the bar approaches liftoff. I feel the burn, heave that weight skyward, locking elbows with a grunt, then letting the weight fall safely back onto the rack. I sit up, wipe the sweat off my forehead, catch my breath. I stand up and walk away. Mojo shakes his head, spits on the floor in disgust. He says I'm not trying. "You want to be a pussy all your life, Meyers?" I say I don't. He stands up, looks in the mirror, flexes. He has a ten-pound beer gut, but is obsessed with the fat in his arms. He wants his biceps to look ripped. He flexes again, and studies his triceps like a housewife inspects meat. "Then do it again," he says at last. I go back to the bench.

There are, in fact, two exercise rooms at the Y:

Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall



free weights and VIP. The free-weight room is our domain. It's like working out in a vault. Or a cell. It's loud and dark, with cinder block walls and a bare concrete floor with thick chips gouged out of it from years of dropping weights.

The barbells are made of rusting steel, housed in battered gray racks. It's freezing in the winter and boiling in the summer. The battered boom box in the corner is for **HEAVY METAL ONLY**, and has only one mode: **LOUD**. Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, Scorpions, and UFO. Some new guy tried to put a Journey tape in there once and Mojo smashed it to pieces for him while the guy watched. "This is a place for MEN," Mojo shouted, and the guy never came back.

But it's true. The men here are lifting fanatics, but they're not exactly health nuts. They lift weights for three hours, then go out into the parking lot afterwards to drink beer or smoke joints in jacked-up muscle cars of primer gray and black. During the day, they hang sheet rock, weld steel, pour concrete. At night they lift and drink.

The VIP room on the second floor is like another planet. An air-conditioned planet of chrome and mirror, with gleaming Nautilus machines. Like air-conditioned death. Right down to the easy-listening harmony piped in through the speakers.



"Music for people who don't like music," Mojo calls it.

Admission to the VIP room costs an extra 200 a year. Car salesmen, orthodontists and real estate agents riding exerbikes to the Captain & Tennille while an orange-tanned, big-titted "aerobics instructor" named Gwen reads *Cosmo* and checks membership cards at the door. Even if we *could* afford it, we'd never join, we tell ourselves. "Look at 'em all, Meyers," says Mojo, shaking his head in disgust as we watch through the glass. "Jesus Christ. Never forget that." We retreat back into our vault, and work out even harder.

Mojo says I'm getting stronger. I can feel it. Before, I could only do five reps with the 100-pound weight. Now I do ten without breaking a sweat. I point this out, and Mojo just frowns. Time to move up, he says. He slaps ten more pounds on each side of the bar, and tells me to lift it. I manage two before I collapse. "You're a pussy, Meyers!" And so it begins all over again.

For the next two years, I come to the gym, six days a week without missing a single session. Not one. We never speak in school, but on Saturday afternoons after our workout, we sometimes ride our bikes over to the news stand at Colonial Drugs, slipping copies of *Muscle and Fitness* magazine under our windbreakers. Pedalling back home on our BMX bikes, we side-kick garbage cans, and Knievel-jump curbs, beneath slate-grey skies of Midwestern winter. Back at Mojo's place, drinking mixtures of Hi-C and protein powder, we study the ads and stare at pictures of the muscle gods: Sergio Oliva, Franco Columba, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, "the Austrian Oak." Together, we envision strength, size, power.

"Jesus, Sergio Oliva's arms are bigger than his head," Mojo tells me. "Contemplate *that*."

I do.

An October afternoon, sophomore year, when Mojo's dad suddenly walks in. We are at the kitchen table, reading our magazines, visualizing strength. Reeking of beer, he takes one look and rips it out

of Mojo's hands. "Buncha faggots," Mojo's dad says. "Faggoty faggots!" He tosses the magazine in the trash and says he's taking us hunting.

"You ever been hunting, kid?" he asks me as he pushes me out the door.

"No." I tell him.

"Well, you're going now," he says.

He orders us into the back of his pickup truck and drives us out into the country. Out into the woods.

Amidst the trees, the fragrant autumn air, Mojo's dad still reeks of Schlitz. Beer gut hanging over his work pants, he carries a shotgun, half-cocked, over his right shoulder, as we stumble around in the brush, struggling to flush out a pheasant for him. The longer we walk, the hotter it gets. His dad pulls out a flask, makes us both drink. Mojo swallows his down with no problem. I take a sip and it burns my throat. He tells me to take another and I throw up into the dry leaves. I'm dizzy and can't walk straight. His dad scowls, calls me worthless and orders me to find my own way back to the truck. I manage, and by the time they return, I'm asleep in the cab. Mojo climbs in beside me. His lip's bruised and puffed up. "Smacked it on a branch," he says. Cranking the engine, his dad says nothing.

But he takes a different route home, winding through back roads, passing stubby cornfields, and we eventually come to an old, weather-beaten farmhouse and stop. Out front is a hand-painted sign on a wooden plank that reads, "Cider." Mojo's dad motions for us to follow him and we get out. We travel down a gravel path to the back, and come to a barn. Inside, a bare string of lightbulbs hangs draped across a rafter, illuminating an ancient press. It looks evil. All rusted gears and canvas straps. Like the kind of thing Mighty Mouse would get strapped into before escaping in cartoons. We watch, as dizzying rows of apples ride the slow conveyor up, pause at the top, then fall tumbling down into the press below, to be crushed and squeezed into pulp. Finally, through a contorted



mess of pipe and hose, at the end of a long rubber hose, a fat man in slick black waders and rubber boots funnels thick brown liquid into glass jugs. It looks foul, and I shake my head, but Mojo's dad insists. He holds out a Dixie cup and makes me drink. I close my eyes, expecting the worst and swallow. But to my surprise, it's delicious. Like sipping liquid autumn. Mojo's dad nods, laughing. He buys a jug, and on the way back, we take turns sipping from it. When we get home, Mojo whispers this is the best memory he ever had of his dad.

By the end of my senior year, I've grown to five-foot-ten, weigh a solid 185 and am benching 250 for five reps. My chest, neck and arms are massive and ripped. If I'm challenged to a fight, I'll still walk away, I tell myself. But that never happens, because nobody messes with me. I've become The Thing.

At the graduation ceremony, Mojo doesn't show. Afterwards, I walk out of the auditorium and see him back by the chain-link fence, across the football field. He's sitting on his BMX bike, drinking a beer. He doesn't recognize me, though. Because we're all dressed alike. Happy graduates in black caps and gowns. Mojo's wearing his cap and gown, too. I remember being surprised by that. I watch as he looks out among the emerging graduates, finishes his beer, and chucks the bottle. Then he throws that hat as high and hard as he can, and rides away—his gown flowing like a cape, the mag wheels of his BMX bike flickering shadows across the grass.

I left not long after that. Summer job out of town, then a state college with a fair reputation. Mojo stayed behind. The first semester, I maintain my workout schedule, manage to get all Bs. The

next semester, I meet a girl who doesn't care how much I bench. She's from Chicago and likes to read. We spend entire afternoons in my dorm room, drinking coffee, surrounded by books and planning our future. I begin to study harder; stop going to the gym. Years pass, we graduate and marry. I go into advertising, we start a family and move to a new suburb on the outskirts of Ames called Maple Creek. The houses are new, the trees are all saplings. When I was a boy, this was nothing but farmland.

I'm 42 now. I've got a larger house, my loving wife, three kids, and a Chevy Suburban. I don't lift weights anymore. Occasionally, I still see Mojo in town. He drives a tow truck. Lives in a trailer behind the gas station, just himself and a dog. He doesn't lift weights anymore, either, from the looks of him.

One day in February, it's 20 below zero. Late for a meeting, I pull up to the full service station and honk. The attendant shuffles out in a thick snowsuit, the hood pulled tight around his face. But even with that hood, I recognize the thick bulk of him. Without a word, he fills the tank, slips the little credit card receipt through the window, and I sign. He gives no sign of recognizing me, but when I hand it back, he shakes his head. I leave.

Later, back at the house, I go into the bedroom, remove my shirt and look at my chest in the mirror. It's starting to go now, but there's still a distinct thickness, a fullness to the muscle, testament to those days in the gym. My wife walks in. "What in the world are you doing?" she asks. "Nothing," I say. I put my shirt back on and walk down for dinner.



In the French Quarter

by Don Russ

for Brent and Angela

We were talking about the stench
of the underworld—piss and ancient drains,
spilled beer—when we passed a wall
spilling yellow roses.

We'd just stepped down to cross
the street and we came back. It was a rose
we couldn't name: little yellow clusters
clean against the sky.

That evening we had our drinks
in the courtyard, and white-winged moths
came out for the whiteness
of the moon.



For Those Visiting the Desert for the First Time

by Leo Luke Marcello

Walk carefully among the cacti.
They may look like a Disney set,
but they will lean into your flesh
if you let them.

Watch out for rubber bands.
They may snap out of shape
and sting you with their venom.

If you are scorpion-stung or cacti-attacked,
go at once to the Salvadorean kitchen staff.
They will cleanse your wound
and pack the bite with ice.

They understand. They can tell
stories of their torture
in another country, though they
do not speak of such things.

Before and after dinner, you can
hear their bright voices in the kitchen,
rising like flutes and cymbals
through the din of
pots and pans.

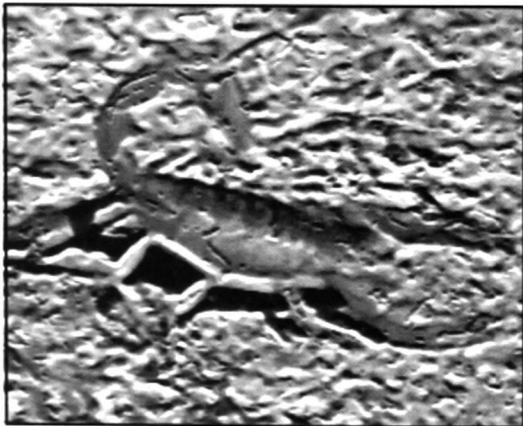


Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

The Decay of Central Texas Deduced from the Increase in Feral Cats

by Peter Hanke

Last night the drought moved on.
My rain gauge holds five inches.
Jays chase doves from the pole feeder.
The window feeder rocks with finches.

Oak saplings and black rose canes
Rest after the wind's rages.
I see through the eave drip sun
Glisten on the tomato cages.

My soaked yard is brown.
Austin's parks have lost their sheen.
Tree leaves are brittle. Only
Golf courses are fat green.

Now recovery begins.
We're used to it, people cope,
Drought cannot rule a city.
But pull out your telescope:

Lakes and aquifers shrunk, crops dead,
Wells dry, cattle sold for hay
For cattle: farms, ranches, dreams
Ruin to rust and clay

As starving barn cats stray.

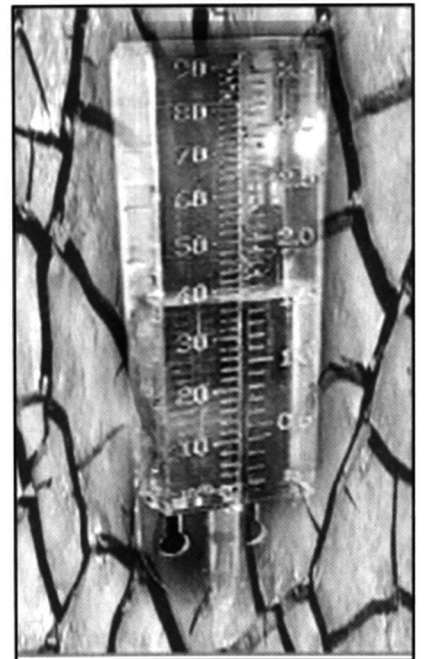


Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall



In Charge of Baby Brother

by Shoshauna Shy

When he sank
it almost seemed
like he had planned it,
big grin till the river
slipped above his cheeks.

I dove to scoop him—
slid small hands
through weeds, fists
meeting muck.

A hundred times we plunged,
yet not one fingertip tangled hair,
touched jeans, the mud bottom deeper
than we could reach.

On grass we heaved, howled, fought
over who got to race the dirt mile back,
who had to wait for what, in time,
would surface



Go

by Steven J. McDermott

Mike Carter, fueled by anger and self-disgust, pushed up the dusty trail connecting the seventeenth green to the eighteenth tee. The path crested in a thick stand of hemlock and cedar and fed onto the tight mown turf. Carter took a deep breath and expelled it as a heavy sigh. He stood his clubs and looked down the fairway, hands on hips. Garth Gibbons and Tommy Oh, his main competition for the Boeing company championship, were only forty yards down the fairway and still walking toward their balls. He could see the next group ahead just on the other side of the lake. Looked like a long wait. That's fine, he thought. He needed to get himself together. Needed to stop thinking about Susan's job interview down in San Francisco and get his mind back on the golf.

His concentration had been wavering all afternoon, moving back and forth from the golf to his conversation with Susan that morning. They'd argued—and not for the first time—about her out-of-town job interview. Argued the entire 45-minute drive to the airport. They'd stood, not speaking, at gate D7 waiting for the departure of her flight to San Francisco. Finally, as the first-class passengers began boarding, Carter tried to make amends.

—You'll do great, he said, you always do.

—Yep, she said.

—Have you ever not gotten a job you went after?

—Look, Mike, I just need to know you're up for this.

—I am, I am.

—Because there's no point in me going all out for this job if you're not willing to move.

On his drive back to their North Seattle home, Carter detoured through the Green Lake neighborhood where he grew up. He parked on the street in front of his childhood home, surprised to see it still painted the same light blue. His parents didn't live there anymore, hadn't lived there for many years, but the neighborhood still tugged at him. Within walking distance were the places he played when he was a kid: The Woodland Park Zoo, the ball fields at Lower Woodlands, the pitch and putt golf course, and Green Lake itself. Susan was from San Francisco; nothing held her in this area except him. He wondered if she would visit her childhood haunts on her trip, if she'd end up parked across from her childhood home. He knew it wasn't just the great job opportunity that drew her to San Francisco; with Alex finally off to Washington State University to study veterinary science, she felt free to think about going back home. Being in the neighborhood where he'd grown up made him under-



Photo courtesy Sugar Creek Golf Course, Hinton



stand her desire. But where would that put him? He'd have to leave his hometown so she could return to hers. How do two people work that out? What was a fair result if they both couldn't live in their hometown?

—Jesus Christ! I hate that climb, Tompkins said as he walked onto the tee. He laid his clubs down, his breathing ragged. He took off his hat and extending his arm out, wiped his forehead with his shirtsleeve. He put his hat back on and then pulled out the scorecard. You made five, right? he asked.

—Do you have to remind me? Carter said.

Tompkins laughed. I had six, he said. Shit! This is no time for us to choke.

—You might be choking, Carter said, but I'm not.

—Yeah, right.

Carter wasn't choking. His three-putt on sixteen was the result of trying to ram in the long birdie putt. He wouldn't make medalist by lagging safe. The six-foot comebacker he'd hit a bit too hard and it dipped in before spinning out of the hole. He hadn't choked on seventeen either. Hit that four-iron great, straight at the pin. It just got held up in the gust. Only landed a yard short and rolled back down the bank into the water. Maybe three was the club. Didn't want to end up in the rear bunker, not with the pin on the front edge. That bunker shot back toward the lake was nasty. And with the green baked hard the three-iron never would have held. Another couple of feet and he'd have been tapping in for birdie. Bad break, that's all.

Tompkins sat on the end of his bag while Carter stared down the fairway. Tommy Oh—a summer intern—was headed to Arizona State on a golf scholarship in the fall. Gibbons had once had a great game, not that he couldn't still play on occasion. One of Carter's great satisfactions in life had come five years ago when he broke the course record that Gibbons had held for fifteen years. Gibbons' fabled 63. A record nobody had come close to. And when Carter finally broke it, he was pretty sure that all the rumors insinuating that Gibbons

hadn't *really* shot that 63 in the wind and rain were true. Carter was glad that Gibbons was playing with Tommy Oh; the young kid would keep Gibbons honest. If he and Susan ended up moving to San Francisco this might be Carter's one and only shot to win the championship. All he wanted was the chance to win the thing fair and square.

Carter was a second-generation Boeing employee. His father had started out as a wing installer building the first 747. Working as an engineer on the big jets was the only job Carter had ever wanted. He knew if they left Seattle they'd never come back. So if they went to San Francisco, what would he do? He couldn't imagine. He also couldn't imagine staying in Seattle and letting Susan go to San Francisco by herself, and she'd made it clear she was prepared to do that.

Tommy Oh had found his ball in the rough bordering the trees and was experimenting with restricted backswings. Okay, Carter thought, let's see how the young hotshot handles this one. Gibbons was still searching the reeds for his ball. Carter was pleased that someone else was having problems. Despite playing the last two holes in three over par, he was still one under for the round and four under for the 36-hole qualifier. He'd had a two-shot lead over Tompkins after yesterday's first round. Tompkins faded fast—three over on the front nine. He's out of it now after triple-bogeying seventeen. Both Tommy Oh and Gibbons had been three shots back at the start of the round. He supposed somebody else could have got hot out there. Even so, four or five under would get him medalist honors and number one seed for match play. Carter wanted that number one seeding. Partly it was ego talk. For most of the last twenty years he'd had the lowest handicap. On paper he'd always been one of the best golfers in the company but he had never proved it in the championship. Not that he'd tried and failed; he'd just never played in the event. He didn't play in the golf leagues and he rarely played in any of the company-wide events. The first few years back in Seattle after getting his engi-



neering degree at Utah State he hadn't played because his job had kept him off the course in the summer. Later, though, it was deliberate avoidance. The handicap events were dominated by the sandbaggers; and Carter wouldn't play with them. And if he didn't play the handicap events, he couldn't play in the championship. This year was different; given the direction Susan's career was heading he'd decided to play while he still had the chance.

Up the fairway, Gibbons had found his ball. He was bent over contemplating his lie, then peered across the fairway at Tommy Oh, who was still experimenting with ways to extricate himself from the woods. Carter could see the wheels turning. Go ahead, use the hand mashie, you bastard. Gibbons glanced back at the tee and saw Carter watching him. Got you! Gibbons picked up the ball and went through the process of taking a legal drop. He laid down his driver and then faced the hole as he dropped the ball from his outstretched hand. When he was done, he looked back at the tee and flipped Carter the bird. He got the clasped forearm in return.

—I wouldn't piss him off too much, if I were you, Tompkins said. That UAL plane coming down the line is having interior fit-up problems.

Carter managed a Payloads engineering team that designed stow bins for all 767 aircraft models. Tompkins was the manufacturing engineer in charge of planning the lavatory and the galley installations. When those units changed, Carter's stowbin designs had to change too. Gibbons was the lead quality assurance inspector for stowbin final assembly, and he made the determination whether a part, assembly, or installation was tagged for rejection. Carter and Gibbons got along okay, although they locked horns every time certain installations came down the line. The mechanics had low tolerance for chronic design problems. When Gibbons' work load increased he made sure Carter's did too.

—Like that's a surprise, Carter said. I hate it when you shift that galley back into the 43 sec-

tion.

—That's the customer, not me. Besides, you could always redesign it.

—Don't even get me started on that one.

The green ahead was clear and Gibbons and Tommy Oh prepared to hit their shots. Carter took out his driver. Gibbons played a weak iron shot that appeared to come up short of the green. Carter tried to push negative thoughts out of the way. Five times before he'd stood on the eighteenth tee needing just a par to tie Gibbons' course record, birdies to break it. He'd hit into the bunker, the woods, the lake—he'd blown it every way imaginable. Choked. Choked big time. Even when he finally broke the record he'd choked on this hole. A par would have given him sixty-one and beaten the record by two. He'd gone from rough to rough and made bogey.

Just then Tommy Oh hit an amazing shot from the edge of the trees. Somehow he'd managed, with a restricted backswing, to hit a low sweeping hook. Carter watched the ball run up the hill onto the green, an awesome shot.

—You're up, Tompkins said.

Teeing his ball, Carter made another run at negative thoughts. He couldn't seem to get comfortably aligned. Felt like he was aimed too far right, out into the lake. So he fidgeted around, and then he felt like he was aiming too far left, into the trees. It took him about ten seconds over the ball to fidget himself into a pretzel, no longer knowing how to set up to hit the shot, let alone take the club back. He stepped away, went behind the ball and tried to visualize the shot. Come on, Michael, quit choking! Dig deep!

And then he had the picture in his mind. Not pretty, but a shot he knew he could hit. The image became stronger and he held it, the ball starting towards the trees and then hanging there, riding the tree line, before fading back over the bunkers and catching the left side of the fairway. Carter stepped up to the ball and aimed over the bunkers. He swung quickly while the image was still vivid, tightened up his left hand on the way down so the



clubface wouldn't square up. The ball screamed away. Carter held his follow through and watched as the ball got closer to the trees.

—Turn! Turn! He shouted and leaned hard to the right.

The ball started slowly fading away from the trees as it ran out of momentum. Landed in the rough and stayed there.

—At least it's dry, Tompkins said.

When the UAL plane hit final assembly Carter spent the whole day in the factory sketching out design changes and signing off the mechanics' workarounds. Gibbons was tagging everything that didn't fit perfectly. Carter was pissed. He suspected that Gibbons was trying to rile him on the eve of their semi-final match. The mechanics were flipping shit, too, taunting him with hands clenched to their throats, followed by gagging sounds. On the other hand, he knew that particular stowbin design was botched. Had been from the beginning, and it was particularly annoying because United had ordered 38 airplanes with that configuration. Every ninth plane down the line and Carter and Gibbons and the mechanics were redesigning it by rejection tag.

When the last of the tags were signed off, Carter headed back to his office determined to confront his boss about a redesign. He felt he no longer had anything to lose. Susan's interview in San Francisco had gone great. She was just waiting for the offer letter. That gave him a fall back.

Peavey was in his office answering his email when Carter walked in and sat down. Peavey swiveled around, saw Carter's demeanor, and said: Let me guess, UAL.

—This is ridiculous, Carter said. Everyone knows it's a bullshit design and they keep expecting me to fix it. And when I don't it makes me look like an idiot. Why won't you just let me fix the damn thing once and for all?

—You know what I like about you, Carter? You've got passion. That tells me I made the right



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

decision.

—What? By not approving the design change?

—The design will change all right. Just not on the scale you're thinking, Peavey said with a slight smirk. United wants to add a crew rest.

—Oh, Christ, that means a complete interior redesign.

—It gets better, Peavey said. Manufacturing will only sign-off on it if we use a design/build team.

—Great. Design by committee.

—It gets better, Peavey said. They want co-location.

— Meaning?

—We're going to move a design team out to the factory, make you all sit together.

Carter was stunned. A half-assed suggestion of his had come home to roost.

—The good news, Peavey said, is that engineering still has clout. We—you, Carter—are going to manage the team.

—When is this happening?

—A couple of weeks, Peavey said. It's not announced yet. I'm just giving you a heads up.

When Carter got home, Susan wasn't there yet, so he fixed himself a double scotch rocks and plopped down on the couch and put his feet up on the ottoman. Their routine since Alex had gone away to college was that whoever got home first would start something for dinner. He was more in the mood to de-combust than cook. He'd gone to



Peavey half expecting to quit or get fired. Instead he was getting his dream job. Just when he thought things would simplify, that his job would blow-up, leaving them free to move to San Francisco for Susan's career, he was being promoted. Now what? She could pursue her career—although not with the company she'd interviewed with—just as well in Seattle as in San Francisco. He had no such options. Boeing designed airplanes in two places: at the Renton and Everett factories on the outskirts of Seattle. Narrow bodies to the south, wide bodies to the north. That was it. Well, maybe she wouldn't get an offer and the problem would go away. She'd come home from the interview excited but cautious. She didn't want to get her hopes up until she had the offer in writing. One thing he knew, he wasn't telling her about his promotion. The last thing he wanted was Susan thinking he was putting up a roadblock to her career.

Carter and Gibbons had a four o'clock tee time and it was still in the upper 80's with no breeze when they were clear to hit off. Carter flipped a tee for honors and it went to Gibbons.

—Luck, Carter said and extended his hand for Gibbons to shake.

—I'm gonna humiliate you, Gibbons said as he walked over to tee his ball.

The first hole went downhill, dropping about thirty yards, with the green sitting in a depression at the bottom of the hill. Not a long hole, about 400 yards from the back tee, but the only flat lie in the fairway was a stretch 75 yards or so in front of the green. The rest of the fairway sloped either left or right and ran steeply to the rough on either side. Anything going hot would bounce off the slope into the trees. There were two plays: one safe, one risky. Hit a long iron to keep it in the fairway, playing the next shot with a 7-iron from the light rough on whichever side of the fairway the ball rolled. Or go bombs away with the driver and try to reach the flat spot in front of the green.

Gibbons stung a perfect one-iron down the left

center that faded back into the crown and then rolled slowly over to the left edge of the fairway. He walked over to Carter and said: Hu-mil-i-ate.

Carter pulled out his driver and made several full throttle practice swings. He teed his ball and glanced over at Gibbons, who was smiling as if he'd already won the hole. I'll show you humiliation, Carter thought. He settled into his stance and made a slow, wide backswing, keeping the clubhead out in front of his body as he turned. He parked the club on plane and in the slot at the top, shifted his left knee towards the target and snapped his hips around as hard and fast as he could. He felt the clubhead lagging behind and then the crack at impact and the club was extending and chasing after the ball and wrapping around behind him and slapping into his shoulder blades. The ball took off low, a line drive to straight away center. Shit! He crushed that one. The ball hit on the down slope, took a couple of big bounces, and rolled onto the flat where it stopped about sixty yards short of the green. Carter picked up his tee, looked at Gibbons and said: Hu-mil-i-ate that.

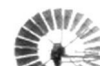
The match see-sawed, changing momentum on made or missed putts. Carter took an early one up lead, and then Gibbons moved to one up. They were back to all-square when they reached the par three eleventh and had to wait awhile for the group in front to finish. Gibbons paced, while Carter sat in the shade at the back of the tee. Mind free to wander, Carter started thinking about his promotion and wondered what Gibbons knew. So he went fishing. By the way, Carter said, I didn't appreciate all the rejection tags yesterday.

Garth laughed. You think that was all on your account?

—Hey. I've spent whole days in the factory signing off your tags, the majority of which required minimal changes. I kept your line moving. I didn't have to do that.

Garth stopped pacing and said: So when are you going to redesign the thing and fix the problem?

Carter realized that Gibbons didn't know about



the crew rest project, so he said: It's cheaper to stay with the existing design.

—That's bullshit and you know it. I've checked out the microfiche too, you know. I saw your initials. This design flaw has been around for years and we're sick of working around it.

—It's not my call.

—Yeah, right. When are you going to get some balls and buck your weasel of a boss?

They glared at each other, then Carter said: The green's clear. Just hit your goddamned shot.

They both hit lousy 6 irons. Gibbons' pull hooked left of the green. Carter's was hot and low, hit the green hard and jumped over the back into the deep rough. Gibbons hit a great chip to two feet and then tapped in for par while Carter figured out how to play his pitch. He had a decent lie and knew he could get the club on it clean. As he studied the green trying to read how fast the ball would run, he saw Gibbons standing there smirking. The bastard. He was going to hole it just to wipe that smirk off Gibbons' face. Carter settled over the shot, softened his hands and flipped the ball out just over the fringe, where it bounced and started rolling, a little fast at first, then it slowed, curled around toward the hole, hit the flag, and dropped in for a birdie.

—Bastard, Gibbons said.

The match was over at that point and they both knew it. Over the remaining holes Carter played flawlessly, with a controlled fury. When he rolled in a long birdie putt on 15, it ended the match 4 and 3.

Carter watched as Susan opened the Fed-Ex envelope. Her hands shook as she read the offer letter.

—So? he asked.

—Six figures, she said, plus options.

He whistled. That's nearly double what you're making now.

—Check out the title, she said, pointing to the letter so he could read it too. Vice President of Product Development.

He hugged her, wrapped her tight in his arms,

partly to share her joy and partly to hide his conflicted feelings.

— I want this job, she said.

In the championship match Carter played Tommy Oh. When they reached the seventeenth, the long par three over the water, Carter, thanks to a hot putter, and almost in spite of himself, was two-up. He didn't even need to take the hole for the win, a halve would be good enough. As they waited on the tee, Carter wondered what his son, Alex, would think if his parents moved from Seattle to San Francisco. How would he feel not having his childhood home—the only home he'd ever known, at least until he moved into the dorm room—to go back to? Would he still want to visit if visiting meant not going *home*? And what about the stuff in Alex's room? The posters, books, CDs, the closet full of clothes, all the belongings he hadn't taken with him to college. What to do with them? Box them tip and ship them to Pullman? Or would Carter and Susan, when house hunting, need to seek a place with a spare room, a room Alex might or might not ever use?

Tommy Oh played his shot safely to the back of the green, but left himself at least a sixty-foot putt down the slope. Not a threat. Carter teed his ball and took his stance. Just what had he been trying to prove by taking these guys on now? Prove to them that he could win? That he was the best? What did that mean anyway? He wagged, swung the club back. Winning wasn't going to change a damn thing. A slight pause at the top as he focused on the back of the ball. He dropped his right shoulder and pulled the club down hard into the ground, just laid the sod over it. The divot was so deep it stayed attached, curled over like a wood shaving. A reddish-brown clump of dirt stuck to the club face. Go, he said weakly, just before the ball plopped into the middle of the pond.



Country Cream

by Sheryl L. Nelms

I wish I could slip back
into that bedroom

with the lilac scented breeze
fluffing the starched and stretched
lace curtains

Big Ben ticking
and the "Girl Watching Robin" print

to my grandmother
with her white hair and quiet talk
who gave me credit for worthy thoughts
even then

to the turtle dove coos
drifting in from the walnut tree

to the embroidered pillow cases

and the love that swaddled me
from the world

when life was full
of afternoon naps
under the whir
of Philco fan
blades

back to the 50's
when the way
was easy

and the mulberries hung ripe
ready to fill the
evening



Y2K

by J. Morris

Home in bed at midnight and no,
my electric clock did not blink out
and yes, my megawatt reading bulb
burned on, illuminating the first
complete sentence of the current thousand years,
and all was Y2K-compliant.
The Western world pays for the best
and gets it.

Below, in the road, the usual cracks
and booms and hoots as revelers
tossed their expensive jollity into space.
Then, rolling into the room, came a thunder.
It grumbled like the other side of the planet,
powerful, unavoidable, and densely
populated. Came and went, and my light held steady,
and a whizbang swooped past the window,
burst into two. For the moments that
I rolled with it, I almost thought
The kooks were right... Ridiculous
to say I was frightened,
just briefly. I give the scare to you:
an appointment to take with us
onto the empty calendar,
as the triple-zero payoff rings the bell, our machine
loaded, not with cash,
but with a millennium of mounting, awful debt.



Epistemology

by Terri Brown-Davidson

Twilight. Gripping the curtains, Clarissa peered out the window at snow sliding down over the slick, ephemeral streets, over the garbage cans, over the homeless man who slept by the deli sheltered by a sodden box. She felt, now, nearly lightheaded from exhaustion, her knees buckling as she gazed. She'd never wanted to live in New York. Yet—like everything else in her life—this was a choice she'd never made; still, she'd ended up here just the same.

Down the hall, the faint tinkle of a mobile, brown bears in tutus wheeling grinning over the crib, the baby's hands fumbling up to touch them—or so she imagined; Clarissa sucked in her breath; she shone brittle as glass around the baby, couldn't wait for her to sleep, wanted nothing, ever, to wake her.

Eyeing the flat red line of the baby monitor beside her bed, hours later Clarissa crept toward her mattress side, the one nearest the alligator-paint-patterned windowsill, eased in beside Jamie's mounded form, laid her head on the pillow with a care that bespoke the terror of awaking Brie, curled up in her crib down the hall.

Clarissa ate, slept, rose to the rhythms of the baby. This was not as automatic a set of reflexes as people supposed, but could, she discovered, out of desperation be cultivated. It was mostly a matter of establishing patterns: offer Brie only wheat chex, not rice; strip the baby's bedding down and wash it once every three weeks, even if she suffered from nosebleeds during the night; change her clothes every other day. Clarissa did this not because she was, by temperament, cold, but because she wasn't certain how else she could survive.

That winter Brie turned twenty-one months old. The morning after the first snowfall, Clarissa woke to the rattling cry, half primal scream, half wail, that jarred her nearly trembling to consciousness. Peeling back the comforter, she slouched on the mattress while Jamie slept on, facedown in a messy

heap of blankets. The room shone brown-gray with darkness—in the dimming shadows ignited by sudden whitenesses of snow, a glint here and there that traveled across the top bar of the rocking chair, across the pile of clothing that was heaped always on the dirty red carpet or at the foot of the bed, across the picture of a too widely grinning Clarissa and her husband in his cap and gown on the day he'd earned his Ph.D. in biology. When, flushed from the success of the degree, Jamie'd coaxed Clarissa into having a baby, she'd agreed with the mindlessness with which she'd navigated through most of her adult life, because—then—the consequences of her agreeing with him had appeared miniscule.

Clarissa crossed the room, thrust her hand through the deep pile of clothes, grabbed a green, oversized notebook from beneath the mess, tucked it under her arm and exited the room to pull the baby out of her crib, diaper her with a Luvs Barney #4, feed her wheat chex and whole milk from her Sesame Street sippy cup. When she scooped her up, the baby leaned forward against her, groggy, her tiny hands feeling for the small of Clarissa's back. Clarissa felt her all over too, as was her wont, much as one might improve the radiance of a sapphire by rubbing it, polishing it: she adored her baby yet couldn't fathom why she also wanted her gone; it felt like the worst sort of betrayal, and Clarissa was an expert at that.

Brie ran all over the house while Clarissa worked, hunched up against the padded blue recliner, still wearing her voluminous white nightgown, the big green notebook propped open on her knees. The baby—or so she thought of her; really, she was a toddler now—never wore down, never became exhausted; it was Karmic retribution, Clarissa knew, for the sort of child she'd been herself, "too intense," as her own mother'd described her, having hauled back and kicked her mamma



once with the steel-banded toe of a roller skate when she was three, when she was taking skating lessons and her own mother'd refused her a pre-lesson hot dog.

While Clarissa worked diligently, marking up passages with messy boxes to proclaim their importance, circling term after term so avidly it seemed as if she must understand them though she didn't, the baby stood up on the dilapidated loveseat, attempted to pull a lamp cord from its socket, bumped up against Clarissa's computer, stood on a sagging grate that fed directly into the basement, peering all the while at Clarissa with her fixed hazel eyes to see if Clarissa noticed.

It was Saturday. And Jamie was not yet awake, this being his "Babyless Day."

Clarissa muttered while she concentrated. An old habit of hers, impossible to break. She was her own mental soundtrack, featuring the bitter, snap-pish conversations between her and Jamie recast from the previous day, lines from random poems she was attempting to write. She didn't know why she was attracted to this stuff. Epistemology, for God's sake. She was forty-four years old. She'd adopted a child long past the point where she'd been capable of conceiving one. Her attitude toward motherhood not ambivalent, but not exactly there. And that was the danger. What'd left her open to persuasion. Her mother nattering on at Christmas about the sort of woman who never wanted a child—and who could understand that? The disappointment hovering behind Jamie's perpetually foggy countenance, tentative but always in evidence, ready to be released as a huge roiling darkness if her secret should ever escape.

Because the truth of the matter was that she just didn't give a damn. And never understood why. Maybe it was a kind of balance the universe sought. A way of saying, 'You're endowed in *this* area; you can't be endowed in all of them.' If a woman were capable of becoming thrilled at the sight of a yellow leaf ripping away from a tree gone frost-gray with autumn, should she be allowed the luxury of

epiphanies attached to the truly important experiences, such as motherhood?

Jamie circled another term in her notebook. "Doxastic valuation." What the hell was that? The book never explained it. The baby toddled toward Clarissa's computer, announcing, with a holler and much fist-flailing, that she wanted to check Clarissa's e-mail. This was one of the banes of her existence, that the kid was every bit as anal-compulsive as Clarissa was herself. Yet—it was better now, wasn't it? The fatigue. The irrefutable fatigue, that slid down into one's bones, slept curled in the marrow.

Yes. It was better. After they'd adopted the baby, from a skinny Christian couple in Ohio who felt they already had too many kids to take care of, the blond and gaunt man and woman standing ramrod-straight, arms hooked around each other's waist, while Jamie and Clarissa made appropriate chortling noises at the blond Brie sleeping open-mouthed and bespittled in her basinette, Clarissa'd been so depressed that she'd wanted to live in bed for weeks. Yet, every morning, she still had to get up. There was this baby to care for. This "gift" she'd never asked for. Her life a never-ending cycle of waking up...and then waking.

At ten-thirty she was sunk as deeply into epistemology as a diver angling down toward ocean bottom, not afraid of the Bends, admiring the sweep of gigantic pink fish flashing past her fluttering vision, muttering phrases like "Deductive transmission of the inferential" while a distant roar sounded somewhere back in her brainpan, and once again it'd happened: she'd penetrated the barbed-wire syllables, eased down behind the fence, was sitting ensconced on an ashheap while a gorgeous, bloody red sunset enacted itself as grandly as Greek theater over her head and she shivered, submerged in and plucked out of her body, both whole and deliciously broken.

Jamie's barefoot creak on the stairs. She glanced up, the words receding from her retinas, startled and annoyed at his presence. His dishev-



eled whitish hair, cresting straight up from his skull; his milk-stained, navy-blue sweatsuit, loosely drawstrung at the waist—he was much, much older than Clarissa, and running to fat, perhaps, the padding of his stomach muffling her breath when she propped herself against it to doze while Jamie watched late-night TV. The years had run roughshod over them both, she reflected, left sneaker-prints on their faces.

“Any coffee?” Jamie asked.

Clarissa shrugged. “I’ll make some.”

He never the hell asks me about my work.

“How’s she doing this morning?”

The baby. She remembered the baby. Clarissa scanned, frantically, the living room, her gaze roving once, twice, four times before settling on the baby sitting primly on the loveseat, legs pushed straight out before her, nibbling somberly at the Saltine clutched in one grubby fist.

Inclining his head toward her. “Where’d she get the cracker?” As if he’d somehow intuited this latest failing.

“I gave it to her. She’s obsessed with them now. Like with the computer.”

“Because, you know, she’d been finding old ones, eating them out of her playpen.”

“I gave it to her.”

And thus with another small lie was their day officially launched.

They had a deal. They called it “Split Parenting.” They divided up weekends according to whose baby day it was—Clarissa was “on” Saturday, Jamie “on” Sunday, each of them thereby guaranteed a Babyless Day. Clarissa sometimes wondered if Brie’d grow up with a complex, knowing that one of her parents consciously elected not to be with her one day of the week. But—hell—maybe everything’d be different, anyway, once Brie was older. In other words... maybe she’d be more enjoyable to spend time with. Clarissa, parentless, had underestimated the sheer numbing drudgery of Baby Duty. It was like housework, only worse,

because you couldn’t choose when to do any of it—feeding the baby, giving her a bottle, wiping down her splattered highchair, wiping her butt, changing her diaper, picking her up when she cried...which was all the time, right?

Some Saturdays, as this one, Clarissa felt she’d barely survive. She woke up at 2:30 a.m. most days to work on her epistemology, yet the day seemed to be siphoned away with endless meaningless baby tasks. Plus, on Saturday, she had to change the diaper pail too, taking out the bag a task that involved snapping the plastic lid up carefully so as not to unsnap the coiled springs from the inside of the pail, damage it. Then, hauling the slick, white, greasy bag, packed with diapers, downstairs, the load so heavy she had to bump the bag along behind her as she descended, feeling as if she were dragging an elephant on a rope behind her, the hot stench of old feces nearly unbearable as it ascended in a cloud, perfumed the very air. As Clarissa descended, she always dreamed of the green notebook as something rare, precious, beautiful, though, when she returned to the actual words of the text, they snarled up toward her like stretches of barbed wire, too dangerous for her to penetrate.

On this Saturday, Jamie settling yawning onto the couch while Brie slid carefully off the loveseat, using the flats of both palms to maneuver herself off, toddle toward him with outstretched arms, Clarissa went into the kitchen to make coffee. Both she and Jamie had expensive tastes, preferred Starbucks French or Espresso Roast though—with Clarissa laid off from her job at the meatpacking plant, attending grad school in philosophy, a highly unlikely pursuit, right, for somebody who’d grown up in the rough-hewn world of tobacco chaws and blue denim and twenty uttered “F-words” for every “thank you”—money had shrunk to the size of a tightened fist and they really should be buying Best or Maryland Club or Folgers. Still...Clarissa couldn’t bear to relinquish this small, cracked jewel from a former, more self-centered life. She



dreamed of opulence, of what it'd feel like to take a scalding bath with a thick bar of Primal Elements Chocolate Raspberry soap stroking her nipples erect without a baby wailing somewhere in the background... and had never really accepted, as Jamie did with apparent ease, that This is The Way Things Are Now...So You'd Damned Well Better Accept It.

"Clarissa?" Jamie called, while Clarissa alternately scooped and inhaled the mounded, pure-black roast.

"Yeah?" she responded, holding back slightly as she counted, measured—sensing some tangible threat.

"I found another cracker in the playpen."

Clarissa paused. "Then why don't you take it out?" She sighed, but inaudibly. "I really don't think it's a good idea to leave crackers in the playpen like that. I mean...what if they get old? Or what if somebody nibbles on them? That problem, you know, with mice."

Clarissa switched the coffee pot on. Resealed and clothespinned the Starbucks bag, replaced it in the freezer. "O.K.," she called back. "Then why don't you throw it out?"

"I mean, I *really* don't think it's a good idea. We have to be vigilant, Clary. We have to be on guard against—" His voice nattered on.

Suddenly Clarissa shut his voice off. As neatly, cleanly, as pressing the coffee switch. How did she accomplish this? A screening device, mostly: *F---*. *F---*. *F---*. The mantra uttered three times deep inside her subconscious, the locus for the ritualistic practices of Jamie-Be-Gone.

And then, he was. And her mind sprang back, as if magnetized, against the thick hard cover of the notebook.

She carried it around with her all day. Why? Because she loved it. Though she didn't get it—and how could anybody love anything so fervently that they didn't understand? Her teacher, in class, resplendently skeletonlike in oversized yet expen-

sive gray suits that flapped around his wrists and knees. A hideous man, really, whom they—the students—were forced to face in their degrading elementary-school desks while his black-haired hands folded and refolded themselves and his words lofted and tumbled and soared, like balloons whose strings are suddenly severed, so she'd tilt her head back after "an infinite epistemic chain" or "the fourth chain is the only route to direct knowledge" and watch—as if she, the peon, could track them!—The resplendent green, yellow, purple balloons of his ideas rising and rising and then becoming a blot, obliterated from the wide blue screen of her consciousness.

Sometimes a student spoke—though Dr. Armstrong never encouraged it. The words fumbled, hesitant, hideously inexact so Clarissa cringed to hear them though she was never judgmental about the illogical propositions uttered, the failure to distinguish between *a priori* and *a posteriori* reasoning, because who was she?—Nobody, really.

A dolt just like the rest of them.

Maybe she was masochistic, loving it as she did. Hell—sometimes she thought she had to be. They were in Week Seven of the course, and Clarissa, who'd struggled like the puniest of Confederate soldiers, drawing strength from the conviction of the rightness of her actions and the blue-gray fabric of a uniform, who'd launched into battle stalwart and prepared, her musket cocked, her pages marked up so blackly she couldn't read the text beneath them anymore, had been wounded in Week Three, shot down in Week Five, and then couldn't even crawl anymore, stopped marking up the text, scarcely even read the material, simply allowed the teacher's words to float her while she sat there as slow and stupid as the rest... she wouldn't change to "Pass/No Pass" though she was positive, now, that she'd flunk; she couldn't bear to drop the course though she understood not a thing transpiring inside the thick yellow walls of the classroom anymore; and, finally, after all the other course con-



tent had been stripped away, there remained only the big green notebook and what it symbolized, a certain yearning, an attitude of mind...a hunger for Something More.

Winter. The trees, stark and bare, lifted their stick-thin limbs poignantly against the sky. Clarissa was walking to class. Brie, locked into the bearlike, protective embrace of Jamie's arms, watched her stride away from the house. There was a long, low, panoramic window in their sunroom, and the baby's head just cleared it, that strange little whiteness floating balloon-swollen as Clarissa jetted down the porch steps, out onto the street. Though Clarissa wasn't waving, the baby was, Clarissa knew; Jamie told her she did though she'd never once witnessed it. And the baby was saying "Bye-bye!" This, too, Clarissa'd never heard. It was like Brie and Jamie had a secret life without her, which was fine. Clarissa had a secret life too, one she didn't want others to penetrate.

She arrived on campus, the students—so young, incredibly young, with their good, fresh skin and their shining caps of hair—milling about as she hurried across the concrete quad to the Jonathon A. Roberts Philosophy Building. She rode the rickety elevator up to the tenth floor, where the seminars were held and where the professors and TA's had their offices. Clarissa adored everything about this building; the rank, rain-sodden smell of faded brick; the cramped tiny office where students dropped off notes for professors, so narrow two people couldn't stand abreast in it at a time because philosophy wasn't a popular discipline; the offices, most of them glorified masses of papers obliterating ancient computers and desktops, where she'd catch snatches of the conversations of the enlightened as she scurried past, her notebook under her arm, trying to appear as if she belonged.

Her prof, Dr. Armstrong, was in room 1009. She spotted him in there as she hastened past. He was talking to Tim Winston, the best student in class. Clarissa might not know much, but she'd

intuited the easy air of familiarity with which Dr. Armstrong'd leaned forward, his knees nearly brushing Tim's. And Tim's callow face, pudgy, his blond hair brushed back immaculately from his broad, pinkish forehead, as he'd waxed and waned beneath the bright gold sun of Dr. A's knowledge.

Suddenly Clarissa glanced around. The hallway was deserted. It was 2:00, a sleepy hour in the building. Nobody was here. Her seminar wasn't until three. Clarissa lied consistently to Jamie in order to get out of the house, claimed she had to run errands before class, said she had to be here at 2:00 when she didn't...she hadn't been to the library once.

Why?

Because she craved the solitude. The break away from the baby.

Had to have it at any cost.

Now, she wanted to hear what Dr. A was telling Tim, as any outsider hungers for knowledge about a group to which he aspires to gain admission.

Glancing around carefully, carefully, holding her breath, Clarissa backed up to the door. Leaned casually against the wall, as if she were simply waiting for Dr. Armstrong to dismiss Tim so she could talk to him. And—if she detected the sounds of rising, Dr. A's inner pant creases so sharp they rubbed against each other with an audible, fine-fabricked rustle—she could duck to the end of the hallway, round the corner, hide out in the bathroom until it was safe to reemerge.

All her radar fine-tuned to the particulars of the low, slow conversation, punctuated by occasional near-raucous laughter, that ensued.

"So...what would I have to do?"

"Well...you wouldn't take over any courses. But you'd be in the room, helping us and the students while we teach. Plus you'd grade papers, do a little scut work, draw up lesson plans—typical TA stuff."

"And you think I'd have a good chance."

"I *know* you'd have a great chance."

"And my tuition'd be picked up?"



"You'd be a teacher here, Tim. What do you think?"

Smiling, Clarissa backed away from the door, slunk down the hall, rounded the corner, ducked into the women's bathroom, demarcated with a festive little skirt detailed on the wooden door. The bathroom was miniscule: a single stall, the sink poised before it, a freestanding affair that was also tiny, but immaculate. And—above it—a mirror. Clarissa put her notebook on the mustard-colored couch, gripped the sink, leaned forward until her face tilted up against the glass. She didn't even resemble herself—her hair not tangled but sexily disarrayed, not mouse-brown but auburn, her cheeks topped with pink, her pale blue eyes, inclined toward rheuminess, gleaming with a radiance she'd never known she possessed. She was like philosophy herself today, Clarissa reflected: a light of truth; a fount of wisdom, knowledge; everything about her glinting, sunlike. She pinched her cheeks, as Scarlett O'Hara might have, to make them pinker, whispered to herself, plucked her notebook off the couch, hurried off.

In the seminar, seats seemed strategically chosen according to some prearranged plan Clarissa could never quite intuit. The students always eyed each other when they entered, mapping out an agenda, plotting a strategy. She'd figured some things out already. When they sat nearest the door, that meant they were underprepared for class, attempting to hide from the prof: a tactic which usually worked since Dr. Armstrong was loathe to call on anyone who might parrot his own ideas ineptly and thus make *him* look like a fool.

Other students, attempting to battle their way up into the upper echelon of the class, would choose seats nearer to Dr. A himself; those who felt the boldest might attempt to sit at his left and right hands, though sometimes that was such a daunting proposition that those seats remained unoccupied for the entire class period. Dr. A smirking

slightly, highly conscious of the empty chairs on either side of him as he pontificated about epistemic chains or seeking justification in the arena of social knowledge or whether the phrase "scientific proof" was misleading because it begged the question of whether science could actually prove anything.

During these sessions, Clarissa, depending on her mood, flipped through her big green notebook in a weird state of euphoria, jotting down notes in the margins as Dr. Armstrong talked, or noted with burgeoning alarm that he'd actually asked a question—a rare event that plummeted all of them, immediately, into panic—that he'd asked a question and seemed to be expecting a response, leaning back in his padded gray chair with folded arms, his shirt sleeves pushed up, sleek black fur agleam on his angular wrists.

This was the case today. He strode into the classroom at an even faster clip than usual, his spit-shined Italian loafers squeaking. Sat down, gazed out across seminar table at the gone-deliberately-blank faces of his worshippers, and said, "Our first test's Friday. Therefore, I need you to be more actively participatory today. That means—no hiding in the back of the room. No hiding behind books, notebooks, paper, what have you. Let's begin." He began flipping rapidly through notes then lifted his pencil, scribbled a reminder or an admonition to himself.

Clarissa's knees went boneless. She wanted to participate—of course she did, of course—but who dared? It's not as if Dr. Armstrong were a sadist though some students murmured that accusation, called him "bastard," "fascist," behind his back, though Clarissa honestly believed that he was a wonderful person. Still, he had a propensity to shred the arguments of any person bold enough to attempt to spar with him.

C'mon, Clarissa chided herself silently, *c'mon*, gazing down at a passage, attempting to focus. Something about a dog. All right. Something about a dog. "If some dogs are pets, then some pets are



dogs is a self-evident proposition, so obvious that it requires no further justificatory grounds, luminously self-evident....”

“Luminous”? Is that a metaphor? Why? Clarissa thought.

It was a kind of perpetual whine, a whimper that emanated from somewhere deep inside her skull, continued like the anxiety-producing drone of a rusty ceiling fan when she attempted to block it out.

All right, then—she loved the notebook, true, but maybe she wasn’t in control. Not ready, yet, to launch herself into the Arena of Higher Knowledge.

Maybe in ten minutes? Fifteen?

She had to be prepared to wait.

“What is the third major problem for coherentism?” Dr. Armstrong asked. Students glancing down at their notes. An involuntary blanching, a tightening of faces. Oh dear, Clarissa thought. I didn’t bone up on coherentism and foundationalism quite enough this week.

Suddenly, a flurry of activity. The seminar room door banged open; Dr. Armstrong stiffened in his seat, his hands clutching the table; Tim Winston had arrived.

Clarissa gazed at him sourly. He had to make an entrance: damn it, he had to make an entrance. Just when everybody else was getting an opportunity to participate, to speak, to enter the fray. All disheveled and breathless, his manifold philosophy texts sliding this way and that inside the plumpish crook of his arms, a string tie knotted carelessly at his throat, he loped, gallivanted, limbs flailing everywhere, toward the front of the room, sat down in the empty seat on Dr. Armstrong’s left hand without even pausing to consider the issue.

And Dr. Armstrong grinned. Studying him, approving him, out of the corner of his eye. Clarissa scanned the faces of the other students and registered a disapproval blatantly like her own. He was a minor god, Tim was. And therefore hated as much as the primary god—Dr. Armstrong—was admired.

Nobody’d yet spoken. Attempted to answer the question. Clarissa remained *highly cognizant* of that fact. She was flipping through the text, scanning for the section she was positive she’d highlighted regarding problems attached to coherentism. It was here somewhere. Had to be. She’d read it only last week. Page 230, was it? 250? Find it, find it, find, she muttered under her breath, a mantra of salvation, of ascendancy toward the godhead, her left hand gripping her pen cap so hard that her thumb managed to bend it back toward the point of snapping as her right hand continued to flip.

But it was too late. Too late, now. Because now Dr. Armstrong was swiveling toward Tim. Now Dr. Armstrong was saying, in the low, convivial tone he reserved exclusively for colleagues, “Tim. I was just asking them to address the third problem of coherentism—I’m not sure *you’d* want to join in this discussion, but—”

“Oh,” Tim said, tugging three blue ballpoint pens out of his notebook, arranging them in a tightly soldiered regiment atop his stack of textbooks, piled so high on the table before him that half his chest was obliterated. “Well, I suppose part of the issue that needs addressing is how coherentism can explain rationalism, experience, as sources of justification. But one thing they might, of course, posit is that many of our beliefs are non-inferentially and causally based on perception, and, since their sources, their origins are similar, there’s no earthly reason they can’t coexist.”

He grinned. Dr. Armstrong grinned. They sat ensconced there together in their bubble world of perfection, a world no one else was allowed to penetrate, pop.

And then. A question. How did it transpire? How was it allowed to enter her mind? Clarissa didn’t believe in the whole concept of the Divine. She was an irrefutably secular sort. And yet, there it was. The gleaming, gleaming—if she were only courageous enough to stretch forth her trembling fingertips, touch it, grasp it.

“In my reading,” Clarissa said suddenly, with



an almost violently assaultive level of volume, as if she were addressing a room full of deaf-mutes, “it occurred to me that there might be some type of secondary correlation between foundationalism/absolutism, coherentism/relativism...I wonder if you might address that.”

His eyes moved slowly across the table, as if he were unable to deduce the source of the sound. Clarissa slumped, knowing he’d find her, it was only a matter of seconds, recognizing that she’d be targeted.

But...still.

And he did. The roving gaze halted. Fastened upon her, would’ve pinned her against the wall with one fierce stick-pin through the torso if he were so inclined. She was hunched over her notebook, her arms folded atop it, her matted hair, no longer auburn, falling forward over her eyes.

“An interesting point,” Dr. Armstrong said finally, his gaze, released from her torso where it’d struggled, without success, to impale her, scaling the drab beige wall. “Wholly inaccurate, of course, but *interesting*. You’ll discover the answer to that question—which doesn’t need limning here—in Chapter Nine. Now, let us proceed.”

But Clarissa wasn’t listening anymore. A sun casting its golden glow across the Arctic expanse of her chest.

On Saturdays and Sundays, regardless of whose Baby Day it was, Clarissa and Jamie alternated housekeeping chores. She watched him, after he rose late from bed, pull out the dustpan with a sigh, stoop over small piles of matted hair and cracker crumbs, sweep them into the dustpan. She was sitting lotus-style on the couch, watching the baby run. Brie’d been up for an hour, watched her Saturday favorites—*Barney*, *Jay-Jay the Jet Plane*, *Seven Little Monsters*—but hadn’t ever fully awakened for her shows. Instead, she’d sprawled on her back in her playpen, her little red sweatshirt rumpling across her tummy, her fair hair sticky with OJ and the remnants of crackers that still lay scattered along the playpen’s bottom. Eyeing Jamie carefully

as he scooped and swept, aware that any casual comment could provoke an almost violently intense speech on the necessity for cleanliness or order in their house, Clarissa dreamed about her big green notebook, which was propped open, a few of its pages crumpled, against the couch. A compliment. Dr. Armstrong’d paid her a compliment. Called her comment “interesting.” What was that worth? Clarissa speculated. Well—ever since the seminar, a white-yellow, burgeoning sun had shot rays so warm through her chest that to remember was to shiver.

But next week, the test. She’d never be ready. Clarissa reflected. How could she be? Four-hundred pages of material. But if she performed well, if she performed superbly, even though her admission to the program was conditional, maybe she, too, could become a TA. Ironical that she—who’d never formulated tangible goals in her life, *for* her life—should suddenly feel them seeping out every pore. Was that so hard to understand, though? She wanted to be somebody. She wanted to be somebody—beyond a wife and mother.

“Shopping today?” Jamie asked. “Or should we wait for Sunday, you think?”

Clarissa shrugged. “Today’s fine.”

“Hy-Vee again?”

“Why not?”

Brie bumped up against Clarissa’s knees, took off squealing. She was a purely physical baby, always in motion. An empty-headed baby, if you thought about it a certain way—though of course that wasn’t the right way to think about it.

“Perpetual-motion machine,” Jamie said, scooping Brie up mid-flight, blowing hot air into her ear, Brie thrashing and giggling. “Ooh! Ohh! Gotta stop her.”

Claissa glanced down at her notebook; still in her nightie, and slipperless, she traced the edges of the hard, huge notebook with her toe.

When she’d married him, hell, when she’d met him, Jamie professed to be in pursuit of the “mean-



ing of life." That's what'd attracted her. And his undeniably romantic nature. They didn't live in New York, but California then. Every weekend they'd drive down to Monterey Bay, meander through the dilapidated wooden buildings of Cannery Row, walk along the beach holding hands at Pacific Grove. Then she'd felt she could gaze upon the ocean forever, the water bluer there than anywhere else in the world, white seagulls riding the waves, diving over large patches of foam that rolled up against the beach and dispersed, everything so shockingly white she felt blind.

"Clarissa?" Jamie asked.

She looked at him then.

"The baby," he said. Then, more pointedly, "The baby."

She glanced down at her, Brie still resting against Clarissa's knees, wielding a sunflower seed she'd pinched between forefinger and thumb, brandished in the vicinity of her mouth as if threatening to swallow it.

"Baby," Clarissa said. "Dangerous." And she reached out, pried the seed from Brie's fingers, wondering why Jamie could take the trouble to comment but not exert himself strenuously enough to remove the seed himself.

"Clar," Jamie said. "Don't you have a test? Next week, in your seminar?" Clarissa nodded, unable to speak.

"Why don't I take the baby today? Free you up for studying?"

She hesitated. "Well...O.K. Thanks. And...tomorrow, too?"

"Sure. Why not? Whatever it takes. I want to help you succeed."

She studied him, not, at first, comprehending, then wishing he were an analytic *a priori* proposition, luminously self-contained.

She spent all that weekend ensconced in her reading room in the basement. She loved to set measurable, definable goals now: one of the first was, I won't become anxious until I've studied the

material for at least four hours and *then* deduced that I don't understand anything well enough to pass. That was a short-term goal, though. The longer-term ones were: 1) Study intensively for *at least* thirty hours; 2) Thoroughly master all the terms contained in the reading material. But there were so many! Justification, knowledge, belief were the primary terms, should've been easy by now. But even these were never cohesively defined. Then, adding to the mix coherentism, foundationalism, memorialism, perception, testimony, reason, relativism, relativizationalism, made her feel, for seconds at a time, as if her brain had caught fire.

She studied atop a carpeted stage built into the reading room, which was actually an alcove in the basement that used to be rented out as a student apartment. Probably where she was sitting, the notebook propped open on her knees, a few private beer fests and more primitive sexual rites had been enacted.

Her bare feet quivered from a kind of incipient stickiness when they brushed against the carpet. But—for inspiration—a poster of Nietzsche glowered down at her from the front wall of the little stage, his eyes feveredly luminous—overlit, perhaps—with the first traces of his syphilitic insanity as he contemplated the Apollonian and the Dionysian, his handlebar mustache so much a part of the familiar landscape of his face that now he struck her as only slightly ridiculous.

The fourth hour came and went. And, though her passion for the material was more intense than any emotion she'd ever experienced in her life, she knew now that she could never compete with Tim.

Knew, irrefutably, that she'd never ever pass.

How could somebody love something so much—and yet not understand it at all?

The baby, she reflected, the *baby* was analogous: irritating, fast-moving, babbling nonsense syllables that made her want to scream, made her want to shake her and then hug her.

Clarissa gazed down, slapped her notebook



closed. There was still a chance, she decided. As long as she remained optimistic, there was always still a chance.

And plotted her preemptive strike.

Why was it that, whenever she entered this building, she always felt as if she were the wrong sex? Maybe it was a reverse sexism in her, Clarissa decided. Still, philosophy was often described as a “male profession,” a metaphoric den of scotch and raquetball and bull stories after dark, and she hadn’t witnessed anything that might disprove this theory yet. The moldering brick, a cross in hue between a washed-out red and a sickly brown, always made her feel tiny, decorative, ridiculously overdressed when she stepped inside, the scent of rainpounded brick assailing her like an odor from something that’d crawled into a corner and died. She was a bonbon of a person, she’d deduced, scarcely consequential, a mom who belonged at home in a sweatsuit and yet sometimes trotted herself out into the world. The question was—who really cared? She’d read Tony Robbins. She’d read Dr. Phil. She knew she was responsible for her life design, her destiny. Still, she knew she could never pass. Still, wishing she hadn’t worn her best black suit, red-silk blouse, ridiculously spiked high heels that—much like a man’s elevator shoes—fooled no one with regard to how truly petite she was, Clarissa entered the elevator, jabbed the button one-thumbed, was lofted up to the tenth floor, whispering to herself, all the while, a prayer even she didn’t understand.

It was his office hours. She’d made an appointment, asked Jamie to come home from his lunch break to look after the baby so she could keep it. Even on the phone she’d felt ludicrous. Her quivering voice. Her stammered request for an interview, the phrase “a matter of some importance.” She always turned pompous when she was nervous.

And baby, she was nervous *now*.

She heard her heels clack across the worn yellow linoleum as she approached. From a few yards

away, she saw that his door was ajar. No low, companionable murmuring this time, though. Good. She was afraid she might interrupt something—be honest, all right?... “somebody”—more important.

Then she thought, Stop being so damn defeatist, lady. You love the material. You have as much right to be here as anybody.

She spotted him before he spotted her. Glimpsed him sitting inside his office, his thickly furred fingers moving rapidly over computer keys. Maybe he was writing email? But no—when she stepped closer, her eyes near the crack in the door, she glimpsed the pages of a paper, or his text, spread out before him on the screen. The barbed-wire obtuseness of propositions enmeshed within propositions assaulted her eyes. If P entails Q, then P—wasn’t that always what he said in class? She didn’t know. She didn’t understand logic. If he could hear her thoughts now, of course, he’d laugh. Can’t *understand* logic! What an illogical statement! he might bark, dismissing her... but of course he’d be right.

His thickly furred fingers. The black fur neat-looking, combed. And all of a sudden, she was sitting before a tiny card table her mother’d covered with plastic. She was tiny, five years old, maybe, four, heaps of brilliant-covered Play Doh, bright green, purple, fuchsia, spread out before her in little lumps, and she was shaping trees out of those lumps, trees without limbs; it made no sense whatsoever to construct them this way, only, in some sense, that they felt “free-er,” more “liberated,” and when her mother pressed her, asked then demanded how “trees could have no branches,” of course she didn’t know what to say, but, inside her chest, that little sun, burning, burning, more intense than it ever burned now, and that was why she remembered.

And swallowed.

“Dr. Armstrong?” she queried, and lifted her fist, mimicking a knocking.

He stopped typing. Something terrible, she re-



flected, about halting those black-haired fingers, interrupting their motion. Her chest swelling open, a splitting along the breastbone. She was a wish-bone. A Thanksgiving turkey. "Hyperbolic," yes. That was what Jamie called her. Her reaction to things outsized. Absurd.

Dr. Armstrong's eyes cut around to where she was cowering in the doorway. Near black, really, those eyes, the irises swallowed by pupils that formed Black Holes in the center of his face, sucking her in—a gravitational pull. She felt herself whirl, implode. She should've let him keep typing. She shouldn't've adopted the baby. She was always, always, bowing to the will of others, and it was time to stop.

"Yes?" Dr. Armstrong asked. His tone even. Measured. Neither friendly nor unfriendly.

"Hi. I'm Clarissa Digges? In your undergrad seminar in epistemology? I made an appointment to come talk to you?"

Get rid of the question marks.

"Oh. Oh, yes," he murmured, dim with recognition. "You came to talk about your grade?"

"No. No, I—it's more important than that."

In class, he always wore expensively cut business suits, Italian silk suits with herringboned patterns that connoted "power," pinstripes so subtle that the imperceptible gray lines faded into the rich black background, and always oversized. She'd never be able to afford such a suit. She wondered what, in a year, he must make—he was a full professor and those guys raked in the cash, no doubt about it. One-hundred thou, she was guessing. She wondered what a TA might make. What Tim might make. Whatever it was, it was a start.

But today, as if he were proclaiming himself an "ordinary Joe," Dr. Armstrong was dressed in a red-flannel shirt, slightly frayed, that looked culled from the pages of an L.L. Bean catalogue, the sleeves thrust up over those knifeangled wrists, a forest of rich black hair, more hair visible curling up through the unbuttoned collar, faded blue jeans, beltless, and scuffed brown boots completing his

attempt at "slumming."

"Where're my manners?" Dr. Armstrong asked. "Come in, Clarissa, come in."

She sighed, exhaled. A good sign, she thought—he'd remembered her name. Then she remembered that she'd just introduced herself and blushed.

"Thank you," she said, and entered his domain.

There was a small padded chair, gray-fabricked, stained, half-obliterated with paper piles. Dr. Armstrong glanced at the chair as if he'd never seen it before, then, recovering himself, scooped stacks of paper off it, arranged them on a tiny metal desk crammed in against the far wall. Clarissa felt bad to put him to such trouble. Then, idiotic for feeling that way in the first place. Hell, he had prestige, position, was loaded. Why shouldn't he put himself out for her?

"Please, sit down," he murmured, when the chair was empty. She stared at it for a second then tucked up her suit skirt, arranged herself before him, locked her knees together beneath the skirt. Though he was at least two-and-a-half feet away, he was close, too close. She imagined she detected a greenly pungent waft of garlic off his breath.

And couldn't think of how to begin.

But he'd help her. Of course. That was part of his job.

"Now, you wanted to see me," he began, when it became apparent that she couldn't get started on her own. His huge blackish eyes flecked with whitish hints of fluorescent light.

Still she sat silent, her fingers twining themselves together in her lap until she realized she was rolling dirt balls off her skin—and stopped.

"On—a matter of some urgency," he prompted her, and cast down his eyes.

Of course. Of course. His fumbled words revived her. She let her hands drop down to her sides. Leaned forward with a semblance of aggression, willing him to look back up and see her, as he seemed to, did. "Yes," she said, her words resonantly belllike. "I've come because—I need a job."



I—need something to do. I'm home with my toddler now, and— And I heard what you said, the other day, in your office, to—to Tim. Tim Winston. And I'm thinking that I'd like to apply for a TAship, too. Because—because—” She couldn't remember why she'd thought she was qualified. And so she simply stopped.

Now, finally, she'd commanded his attention. But his glance was skimming the walls, her suited knees, the huge, framed posters of Kant and Hume hanging to the right of them both, the door. What had she said? He looked almost panicky. As if he wanted her to leave. And then,

“You heard that conversation I had? With—Tim Winston?”

What was the matter? Her brain paralyzed now. She couldn't even think. “Uh—yes. Is there a problem?”

“Well, that was a *private* conversation, of course, as I recall.”

“Oh. I—”

“In my office, right?”

“Well, yes. But—”

“Then how on Earth did you *hear* it?”

Now his eyes shone entirely black. A meteor'd swallowed the sun. Coal dust drifting, drifting, obliterating green fields, fields she'd longed to play in, romp in, dream in, lie down in. “No,” she said. “You misunderstand. I—”

And then it struck her. The dozens, hundreds, really, of tiny deceptions. How Jamie'd ask how Brie had spent her day, and Clarissa didn't have the guts to tell him that she'd parked her in front of the TV all morning long so she could study her green notebook. How Clarissa had silently “extended” Brie's naptime, pretending not to hear her if, upstairs, she cried. Of course. Of course. It was all logical. Irrefutable. If P entailed Q— Yet, some hope must remain; it was imperative that hope remain, especially since, Clarissa decided, she lived in a Platonic universe, a world of ideals that was so beautiful, so special, maybe nobody else'd ever have the power to glimpse it.

She could still save her ass.

“I didn't mean to listen,” she said, the words tumbling out. “I was happening to walk by the door, and I accidentally overheard.”

She could gauge, of course, by his face. And by his body. The stiffness thereof. A relaxing. How skillful a liar could she be? She waited, her heart rising beneath her tongue. His black eyes swam, receded, the round outline of his pupils returned.

Clarissa breathed.

“Well,” Dr. Armstrong said. “Of course, I understand. So—you're seeking a TAship, are you. But Clarissa,” he said, staring at her directly now, every bone in his angular body relaxed into a slump of emotional release, “aren't you in your first year of the program?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“So,” he continued gently, “how can you imagine that you might be qualified to teach a subject you barely even know yourself?”

She hesitated. “I—I just love it,” she said, looking at her hands. “That's all, I guess. I wanted to teach it...because I love it.”

“Love isn't enough,” Dr. Armstrong said, and she heard, in his voice, the timbre of a door swinging shut on its hinges. “Sometimes, Clarissa, responsibility must be taken. Details attended to, right? Attention must be paid.”

She looked at him quietly, then rose. His eyes already drawn back to the propositions crawling his computer screen, his hands fluttering up to the keyboard, curling loosely there, prepared to type the second her presence was erased.

She found her own way out.

When she arrived for the test, he fixed upon her the same blank gaze he reserved for all the students he never knew, had never met. Then, he passed out the test. Tim Winston came in late, grinning, leaned over to Dr. Armstrong, whispered something Clarissa couldn't catch though she was seated only halfway down the table. But it might as well have been the distance to the moon. The



exams were passed down the table; students fumbled with their blue books creased them open, exchanged, some of them, a single panicked glance, began to write. They had to write on three out of four essay questions in ninety minutes. There was one question on perception, one on the *a priori*, one on inference and testimony, another linking perception and memory. The fourth question was so extended that Clarissa couldn't understand it; it took up more than two paragraphs. When she first started the exam, she was convinced she understood nothing, should slap her blue book closed, walk out. Then she entered flow, rediscovered her passion, and—a terrible attitude, considering the field—didn't care whether she was answering correctly or incorrectly anymore. She wrote for the entire period, a weird kind of joy curling her hand in tight against the page, and, when she was finished, Dr. Armstrong took the exam from her without ever glancing up.

She called Jamie on her cell phone, told him not to bother to pick her up: she wanted to walk. When she emerged from the philosophy building, sauntered slowly downtown, it was early evening, and the sky shone with the lovely blue-black glow of something painterly, something iconic—a soft winter night studded with dozens of whirling white stars. Van Gogh-ish, right? She hadn't thought about him in weeks though she'd loved painting once, the very idea of it, had thought about becoming a painter herself before talking herself out of whatever modicum of talent she possessed. What a powerful thing it was, the mind. How reason could fuel it—or irrationality destroy it. Or, if not destroy it, at least render it not valuable, an organ among other bodily organs. Insignificant. She remembered her trees, those trees she'd insisted be born without branches, and how her mother'd refused to understand them. Remembered Jamie after he'd proposed to her—on the phone!—And they'd met out on the beach and walked gazing at the waves and she'd thought, staring out at that black nighttime roiling, waves thundering ever-

closer to her eardrums, I could die out there, die—a pinprick inside infinity.

And yet, she'd been happy.

She walked, tugging her wool coat closer, not bothering to fasten the buttons, not yet cold though people scurried past her on the sidewalk, heads bent against the chill. Not happy. None of them happy, including Clarissa, of course. But she felt clean, emptied out, ready for some newness she couldn't even fathom. She wandered down the sidewalk, let the fresh night air, pricked gently with cold, slide back into her lungs, breathing without effort now. Paused before the large panoramic window of a bar, some anonymous bar she'd heard about that specialized in fresh-drawn ale and repasts of wild game, the interior cozily reddish, a candle glowing in its stick on every table, Brie's image rising before her, like a Platonic emblem she dimly intuited beneath the surface of reality, to shine there briefly against the glass. It corresponded with the sense-datum theory, Clarissa thought, meaning that reality wasn't direct, that what we see isn't a thing at all but an image of the thing superimposed before our eyes.

And she looked at, examined, the sense-datum image of Brie.

Her too pale face, ratty, uncombed hair, her little red sweatshirt pocked with dried-on food. What would become of her, what would ever become of her, if Clarissa didn't begin to take responsibility for her, if *attention* weren't ever paid?

And then, her gaze moved through the image of Brie, penetrated it like a knife, and she saw, circling a table even larger than her seminar's, a table made out of some shining darkish wood, the men of the philosophy department gathered together, faculty and TA's alike, hoisting their beer mugs, sipping off lips of wildly outblown foam, speaking to each other like people who knew and understood each other, employing the rarefied language of intimacy.



Olive Phalen, Formerly of New York: Laundress

by Robert Cooperman

Da bartered me over and over,
men wild for a virgin —
or so he swore was my condition—
till I stole the cash he thought
himself clever as a Tammany boss
to hide under a floorboard.

When I landed on this gold mountain,
I got took under the broad black wings
of Preacher Burden's Sunday coat,
a good man—who cried my competence
with laundry and simple mending
to all and sundry —
though he's a damnation Baptist.

His wife too pure to dirty herself
cleaning his shirts;
I'd have married him,
if the job didn't mean
nastyng the sheets at night.
How else, you'll ask, can we bring
good Catholics into this world?
Ask the Blessed Virgin.

Preacher Burden let me bide
in his house: my own bedroom
and a tin tub filled once a week
with hot water; lye soap
scouring the dirt off me.
He read to me from the Bible
till sleep washed me clean.

Wouldn't surprise me if his wife
shoved him down that dirty pit.



Mary LaFrance Learns Why Reverend Burden Missed Their Appointment

by Robert Cooperman

Men've abandoned me
in every gold-cholera town
sweating its fever in these mountains,
but he's the first to fall
down an abandoned mine shaft.
Maybe he was escaping the baby
he'd stuffed inside me,
once it hit him his wife had him
in a grizzly death hug.

Or maybe he had help into the world
he was always preaching on
as if he'd seen Satan's caverns
and was reporting to the rest of us.

After my monthlies stopped,
he'd crow about the life inside me
like it was a mountain of gold.
I wanted us to run off together.
The funds he'd hid would set us up
till he could gather
a new congregation to toss nuggets
like we was sacred idols,
but he always said Gold Creek
was his home, his tabernacle.

Maybe he was finally fetching
that loot for our getaway,
and fell. I'd search it out,
but I'm heavy as that melon
I ate once, juice dripping
down my cheeks and fingers.
Lucky I never spent the presents
he was always laying at my feet.
I could sell some, and find a squaw
who knows how to get rid of
unwanted gifts from men who leave.



Lavinia Burden, the Night Her Husband Died

by Robert Cooperman

I couldn't sleep, our bed
a listing ship, with Thomas away
at an important appointment.
With Mary LaFrance, of course;
but he thought me a simpleton.

Suddenly I heard a rustling.
"Thomas?" I called down.
Silence, terrible as a mountain
before it collapses on miners
drunk with stooping for gold.

When finally I grasped
the courage to investigate,
moonlight cast a beam onto a pouch
sitting mole-fat on my best table.
A shadow pressed against the wall:
John Sprockett, the most dangerous man
in the Territory. I trembled
to behold the side of his face
a grizzly had scarred jagged
as barbed wire's vicious slashes.

The pouch was as heavy with gold
as the skull of a buffalo;
then Mr. Sprockett vanished,
a shade returning to Hell.
I knew Thomas was dead,
felt, Christ forgive me, relief:
the hypocrite believing
God approved of his adulteries.

"Freedom," the gold whispered,
the face of that tracker
I'd talked to once
and was dazzled by his beauty,
shimmered for an instant,
as if in lake water.
I closed my eyes,
feared I'd see Thomas
the rest of my days.



The Widow Burden, at the Funeral of Her Late Husband

by Robert Cooperman

His whole congregation stares
as if I'd murdered him:
my guilt for secretly longing
for William Eagle Feather.
"A half-breed," Christians sneer.

Once, rambling on the mountain,
I came upon him, preparing
to spit a recently killed rabbit.
"Best for a woman not to travel
alone up here," he warned,
then invited me to partake.

I found myself licking my fingers
to prolong each delicious morsel,
then reluctantly returned to town,
accompanied part-way by William,
who left me within sight
of our church steeple.

Still pure, at least in body,
I rushed to prepare Thomas' dinner.

Now, innocent mourners silently
demand the run-off of my grief.
I oblige, having to live in this town,
too much to expect that William
will even guess I need rescuing.



Photo by Fred Dickert Jr.



William Eagle Feather Attends the Funeral of the Reverend Burden

by Robert Cooperman

Not out of respect
for that demon crow-coat
that would cry, "Jesus!"
like he loaned Him
his best collar
and wanted it back,

but to catch a glimpse
of Preacher's widow:
her sun-colored hair
features honest
as mountain flowers,
her hands that never
pluck nervous as spiders,
but lie in her lap,
calm as the moon.

Even from the back row
the Widow's tall and trim
as a lone pine
against the wind and rain.
her eyes settle on me
for an instant, lips upturned
quick as the flick
of a hummingbird's wings.

No, just a fancy:
the time she sat by my fire,
plain she thought me
an ignorant savage
unable to say
two smart words
to an Eastern lady.

To be continued in future issues

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Terri Brown-Davidson holds the PhD, MFA, and MA in creative writing. Recently she was a 1998 *The Literary Review*/Web del Sol Featured Writer. She published an additional chapbook of her work in the spring 1998 *The Literary Review* "Emerging Writers" print issue. Her collection *Rag Men* won *The Ledge* 1994 Annual Chapbook Competition. Individual poems, short stories, and novel excerpts have appeared in or are forthcoming from more than four-hundred national and international journals, including *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *TriQuarterly* 86, *TriQuarterly* 90, *The Literary Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *Puerto del Sol*; twenty pages of her poetry are featured in *TriQuarterly's* first anthology of emerging writers, *TriQuarterly New Writers* (Northwestern University Press, 1996).

Earl Coleman, after a lengthy career in publishing, turned to writing full-time about ten years ago and has been widely published since then and nominated for Pushcarts XXIII and XXVII for short stories. On his website, updated bimonthly, he has poetry (some from his new book *A Stubborn Pine in a Stiff Wind*) and essays and stories. Website address: <http://www.nearbycafe.com/stubbornpine/stubbornpine.html>

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.

Brian C. Felder's work has appeared in *California Quarterly*, *Old Red Kimono*, *Clark Street Review*, *Pink Cadillac*, *Icon*, *Mobius*, *Milwaukee Review*, *Milwaukee Road Review*, *Ambrosia*, and elsewhere. From the Midwest originally, Felder now lives in Delaware.

Stuart Gravatt received a B.A. from Randolph-Macon Woman's College and subsequently earned a M.A. in English Literature at the University of Virginia. She has spent her career in public service and in banking and now runs her own business as a marketing consultant and facilitator in Richmond, Virginia. Her clients include businesses, non-profit organizations, and government agencies. Ms. Gravatt has been writing poetry for ten years and studying with local poets for five years. Her work has appeared in a cookbook published by local public television and also in *The Sun*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Apalachee Review*, *Aura*, *Baltimore Review*, *Confluence*, *Cumberland Poetry Review*, *The Distillery*, *Gulf Stream Magazine*, *Illuminations*, *Inkwell*, *Limestone*, *Lullwater*, *Lumina*, *spelunker flophouse*, *Painthrush*, *Pleasant Living*, *RE:AL*, *Sanskrit*, *Sulphur River Literary Review*, and *Wind* magazines. Her work has also appeared in the anthology, *Essential Love: Poems About Mothers and Fathers, Daughters and Sons*, edited by Ginny Lowe Connors and published by Poetworks/Grayson Books.

Peter Hanke is a lawyer raised and educated in the Northeast. He lives in Austin, Texas and has published poems in various magazines, including *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Italian Americana*, *LIGHT*, *The London Magazine*, *Poetry Northwest*, *South Carolina Review*, and *Troubadour*. He also has had two short stories published and four one-act comedies produced in a regional theater.

Joel Harris has published work in magazines including *TransAtlantic Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Palo Alto Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Chrysalis Reader*, *Compass Rose*, and *The Carleton Miscellany*. With his brother, he runs a commercial shipyard that repairs tugs, barges, tankers, and fishing boats.

Michael L. Johnson is a professor of English at the University of Kansas. He's published six books of poetry, including *Voilence and Grace: Poems about the American West* (Cottonwood Press, 1993) and *From Hell to Jackson Hole: A Poetic History of the American West* (Bridge House Books, 2001). His *New Westers: The West in Contemporary American Culture* (University Press of Kansas, 1996), a work of nonfiction prose, won a Spur Award.



Stephanie Kaplan Cohen's poetry has often appeared in *The New York Times*, and has appeared or is forthcoming in *Confluence*, *Poet's Page*, *96 Inc.*, *Ship of Fools*, *Aura/Literary Arts Review*, and *Iconoclast*. Her prose has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Smashing Icons Anthology*, *Artful Mind*, *Art Times*, *Contraband*, *Descant*, *Double-Entendre*, *Jewish Women's Literary Annual*, *The Long Beach Independent*, *The Scarsdale Inquirer*, *Sulphur River Literary Review*, *Belletrist Review*, *Fuel*, *Grasslands Review*, *Hardboiled*, *Minotaur*, *Orange Willow Review*, *Iconoclast*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Reader's Break*, *Real (RE Arts & Letters)*, and *Reed Magazine*. Her work has also appeared in an anthology, *Lessons in Love: Gifts From Our Grandmothers* (Crown, 2000) and *Split Verse: Poems to Heal the Heart* (Midmarch, 2000). She also writes a column, "Ask Stephanie," for the *Alzheimer's Association Quarterly* in Westchester and Putnam, New York.

Barb Lundy's recent credits include publications in *Slant*, *California Quarterly*, *Poem*, and *Hawaii Pacific Review*.

Leo Luke Marcello has a B.A. from Tulane University and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Louisiana State University, with additional study at the University of Dallas and Catholic University of America. He is the author of *The Secret Proximity of Everywhere*, *Blackrobe's Love Letters*, and *Silent Film*. He edited and published *Everything Comes to Light: A Festschrift for Joy Scantlebury*. His awards include two Shearman Fellowships and a Shearman Endowed Professorship. He has taught at Howard University, Catholic University of America, and Louisiana State University and in Wales. Currently, he teaches in the Department of Languages, at McNeese State University, in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Steven J. McDermott is the editor of *Storyglossia*. He received his M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Antioch University, Los Angeles. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Aethlon: The Journal of Sports Literature*, *Carve*, *Cenotaph*, *The Rockford Review*, and *Passages North*.

Catherine McCraw is a speech-language pathologist in the public schools. She has poems appearing in the recent issues of *Atlanta Review* and *Small Brushes*. The poem "Running Away" won first place in a poetry contest in *Byline*.

Walt McDonald served as an Air Force pilot, taught at the Air Force Academy and Texas Tech University, and served as Texas Poet Laureate for 2001. Some of his recent books are *All Occasions* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), *Blessings the Body Gave* and *The Flying Dutchman* (Ohio State, 1998, 1987), *Counting Survivors* (Pittsburgh, 1995), *Night Landings* (Harper & Row, 1989), and *After the Noise of Saigon* (Massachusetts, 1988). Four books received awards from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame. His poems have been in journals including *American Poetry Review*, *The American Scholar*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *First Things*, *JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association)*, *London Review of Books*, *New York Review of Books*, *Poetry*, *The Sewanee Review*, and *The Southern Review*. His latest books are *Climbing the Divide* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), and *Great Lonely Places of the Texas Plains* (Texas Tech UP, 2003). In the latter, his poems are paired with color photos by Texas State Photographer, Wyman Meinzer. In 2002, Texas Tech University Press published *The Walt: He Was Born For: An Introduction to the Writing of Walt McDonald*, a book of essays edited by poets Janice Whittington and Andrew Hudgins.

Errol Miller has published in *American Poetry Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Rhino*, *Nebraska Review*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Laurel Review*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Arkansas Review*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *Conn River Review*, and elsewhere. His newest collection is *Magnolia Hall* from Pavement Saw Press, which is also carried by Small Press Distribution. He also has two recent collections, *Forever Beyond Us* and *Downward Glide*, and several chapbooks. He was the co-winner of *Spillway Magazine's* 1998 Call and Response Poetry Contest, and was the feature artist in the 2000 *Poet's Market*. Several of his poems have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes.

J. Morris has published fiction and poetry in many literary magazines in the U.S. and Great Britain, including *The Southern Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Apalachee Quarterly*, *Pleiades*, *The Formalist*, and *Five Points*. His work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Morris was a first-prize winner in the 2002 Big City Lit contest. A chapbook, *Pregnant Blue*, is forthcoming from Flarestack Publishing.



Sheryl L. Nelms is from Marysville, Kansas. She graduated from South Dakota State University with a B.S. in Family Relations and Child Development. Her 4,500 poems, stories, and articles have appeared in *Reader's Digest*, *Modern Maturity*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Copper's*, *Grit*, *Country Woman*, *Poetry Now*, *Confrontation*, *Strings*, *This Delicious Day*, *The American Anthology*, and *Men Freeing Men*. Nine collections of her poetry have been published: *Their Combs Turn Red in the Spring*, *The Oketo Yahoos*, *Strawberries and Rhubarb*, *Rural America*, *Land of the Blue Paloverde*, *Friday Night Desperate*, *Aunt Emma Collected Teeth*, *Secrets of the Wind*, and a chapbook. Ms. Nelms taught writing and poetry classes at conferences, colleges, and schools in Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona, and South Dakota. She recently taught workshops at Amarillo College, The University of Texas at Dallas, and Tarrant County College. She was the editor of *Oakwood*, the SDSU literary magazine, and a contributing editor to *Byline* and *Streets*. She was the editor of *Crawford's Chronicles*, an insurance trade publication. Ms. Nelms has also been a staff writer for college newspapers, religious newspapers, and insurance news magazines. She is currently the Essay Editor of *The Pen Woman Magazine*, the national magazine of the National League of American Pen Women. She is a member of the Society of Southwestern Authors and Trinity Arts Writers Association. While making her living as an insurance adjuster, she is also a painter, a weaver, and an old dirt biker.

Shawn Pittard says he likes to think of himself as a full-time poet and essayist and a part-time planning and management consultant. He and his wife live in Sacramento, California, a city he sees as a perfect place for people who view the natural world as essential to a balanced life. From there he can access the trails and waters of the Pacific Coast, fish Delta rivers, and ski the Sierra Nevada backcountry.

Kevin Revolinski is a travel writer living in Panama. His articles have appeared in various travel publications. This is his first published work of fiction.

P. Culkin Ruddy has traveled extensively throughout the U.S., Europe, and Asia as a journalist, English instructor, and documentary filmmaker. Currently working as associate producer of the new A & E documentary series, *Married in America*, he lives in Los Angeles, California. His writing has appeared in *Details*, *Detour*, *Inkwell*, *Lynx Eye*, *Lumina*, *New Times*, and *Rosebud*.

Don Russ has published poems in *Poetry Northwest*, *Poet Lore*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Passages North*, *REAL*, *The Antigone Review*, *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, and *Southern Humanities Review* (where he won the Hoepfner award for best poem of the year), and in many other periodicals both here and abroad.

Shoshauna Shy has had work published in *Cimarron Review*, *The Comstock Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *New Millennium Writings*. A poem of hers was selected recently for inclusion in the program sponsored by The Library of Congress, "A Poem a Day for American High Schools," launched by Billy Collins.

William Snyder, Jr. has been published in *The Sun*, *The MacGuffin*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *Apalachee Quarterly*, and *Southern Humanities Review*, among others. He teaches writing and literature at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota.

Carl Stanislaus has many national and international writing credits, including *Scroll Original Artist*, *Yesterday's*, *Centennial*, *Mature Living*, *Rural Heritage*, *Spotlight*, *Write On!!*, *Breakthrough* (Canada), *Crosstimbers*, and *Westview*. He will soon have work in *Good Old Days*, *Feeling of the Heart*, *Hearland Journal*, *Sweet Pea*, *Simply Words*, *Scroll*, and *Storyteller*. He is an authority on collectable books, and is retired from the Oklahoma Tire and Supply Co. (OTASCO). He and his wife Margie live in Chickasha, Oklahoma.

Constance Studer graduated from Toledo Hospital School of Nursing and worked in Intensive Care-Coronary Care and then served as a hospital supervisor. She earned a B.A. in English Literature from Illinois College, Jacksonville, Illinois, and an M.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her poetry, short stories, essays, and translations have appeared in *Anthology: Intensive Care*, *Sing Heavenly Muse*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Balance: The Lifestyle Magazine for Women Physicians*, *The Eleventh Muse*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Paris/Atlantic International Magazine of Poetry*, *High Plains Literary Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Poetry East*, *Visions*, *Ascent*, and *Phoenix*. Studer's work has appeared in the following anthologies: *Hyperton*, *Black Sun New Moon*, *Prairie Smoke*, *Poetry from Colorado*, and *Practices of the Wind*. Her memoir,



Catching Lightning, is under consideration at the University of Georgia Press, and she has completed a manuscript of essays, *Body Language: Essays on Care-giving and Care-receiving*. Her book of narrative poems, *Prayer To A Purple God*, was published by Mellen Poetry Press.

Virgil Suarez was born in Havana, Cuba in 1962. Since 1974 he has lived in the United States. He is the author of four novels, *The Cutter*, *Latin Jazz*, *Havana Thursdays*, and *Going Under*, and a collection of stories, *Welcome to the Oasis*. His memoirs, *Spared Angola: Memories of a Cuban-American Childhood* and *Caf Nostalgia, Writings from the Hyphen*, chronicle his life of exile in both Cuba and the United States. He is also the author of five collections of poetry: *Garabato Poems*, *You Come Singing*, *In the Republic of Longing*, *Palm Crows* and *Banyan*. His essays, stories, poems, and translations continue to appear both nationally and internationally in journals and reviews, such as *TriQuarterly*, *Poetry London*, *Parnassus*, *Poetry Wales*, *Imago*, *Field*, *Cimarron*, *Indiana Review*, *Chelsea*, *Prairie*

Schooner, *The Toronto Review*, *Queen's Quarterly*, *The Fiddlehead*, *The Malahat Review*, *Salmagundi*, *New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Mississippi Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *The Southern Review*. He is a professor of creative writing at the Florida State University.

Lydia Webster's poems have appeared in *TriQuarterly*, *Quarterly West*, *Indiana Review*, and elsewhere.

Gerald R. Wheeler's photography, fiction, and poetry have appeared or will appear in *North American Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Descant*, *Louisiana Review*, *JAMA*, *Pivot*, *Sunstone*, *Lynx Eye*, *Kaleidoscope*, *The MacGuffin*, *RE:AL*, *Whole Terrain*, *Owen Wister Review*, *New Millennium Writings*, *Potomac Review*, *The Oregon Review*, *Aethlon*, and elsewhere. He is the author of *Tracers* and a poetry collection, *Tracks* (Timberline Press, 2002). His short story "The Map Reader" was nominated by Vincent Brothers Review for the 2002 Pushcart Prize.

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