


2003

et cetera

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et cetera





Et Cetera
2003

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Et Cetera Staff

Faculty Advisor, Professor John Van Kirk

Co-Editors-in-Chief

Rebecca Hoff & Krishna Wright

Art

Luci Wilson, Editor

Brian Bader, Reviewer

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Poetry

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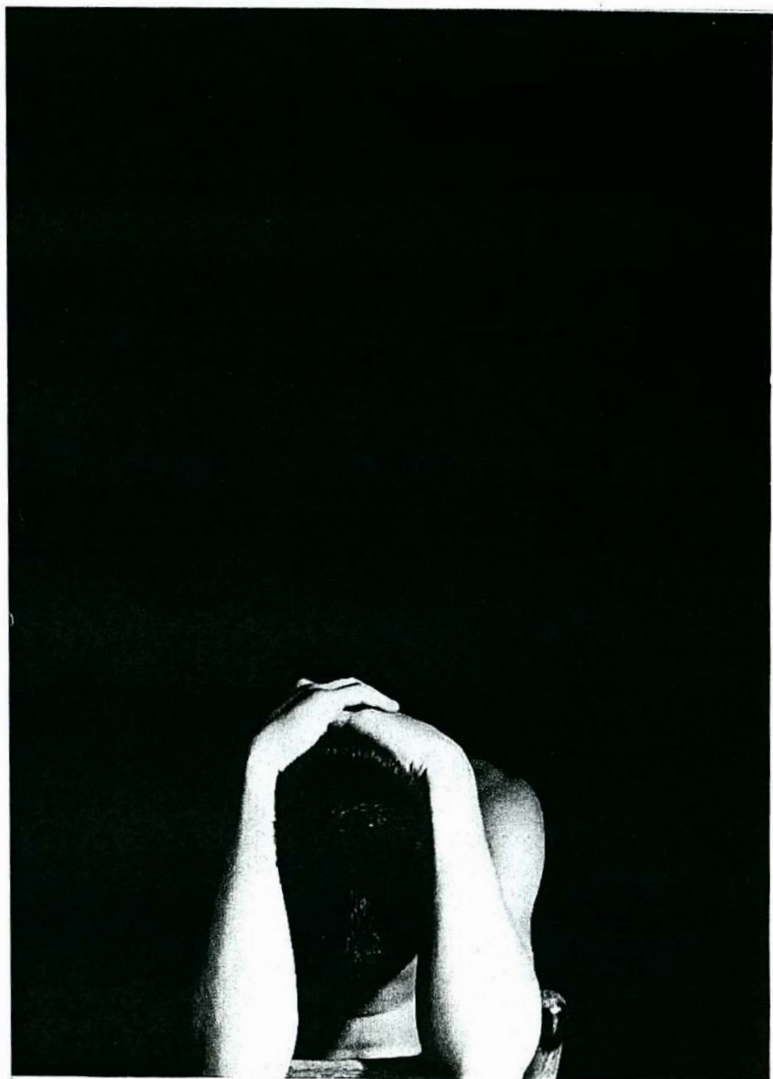
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Rebecca Hoff, Luci Wilson, and Krishna Wright are responsible for the layout, reproduction, and collation of this magazine.

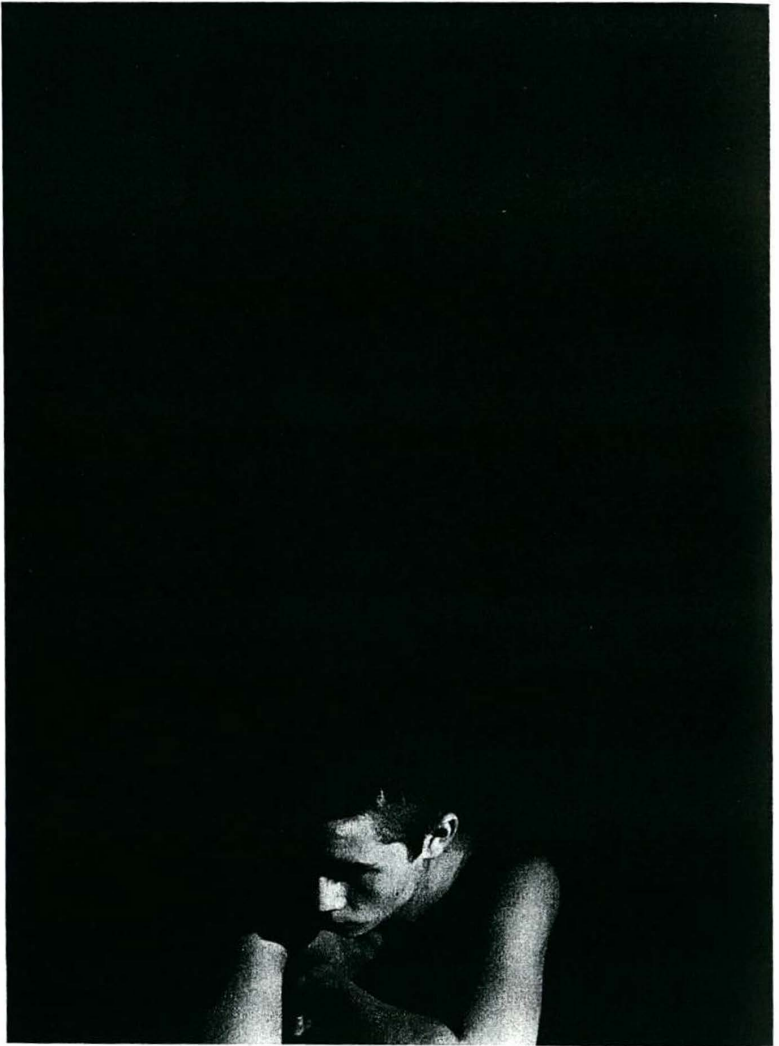
The Back Burner

My mother's voice stirs its long-handled,
wooden spoon in the back of my mind, whirring
my insides around and around and around.
Brown-skinned lies surface like potatoes,
their fleshy white hearts calling out for absolution.
Expectations, hard and lifeless
as carrots, fall into despondency.
Yellow onions are baptized in the muddy water;
they drown only for a moment before
arising again with new life.
A sacrifice of lean flesh falters through the darkness.
The mock congregation cowers, blind to the fire
down below until her gigantic oar smites again,
forcing them to petition for silence.

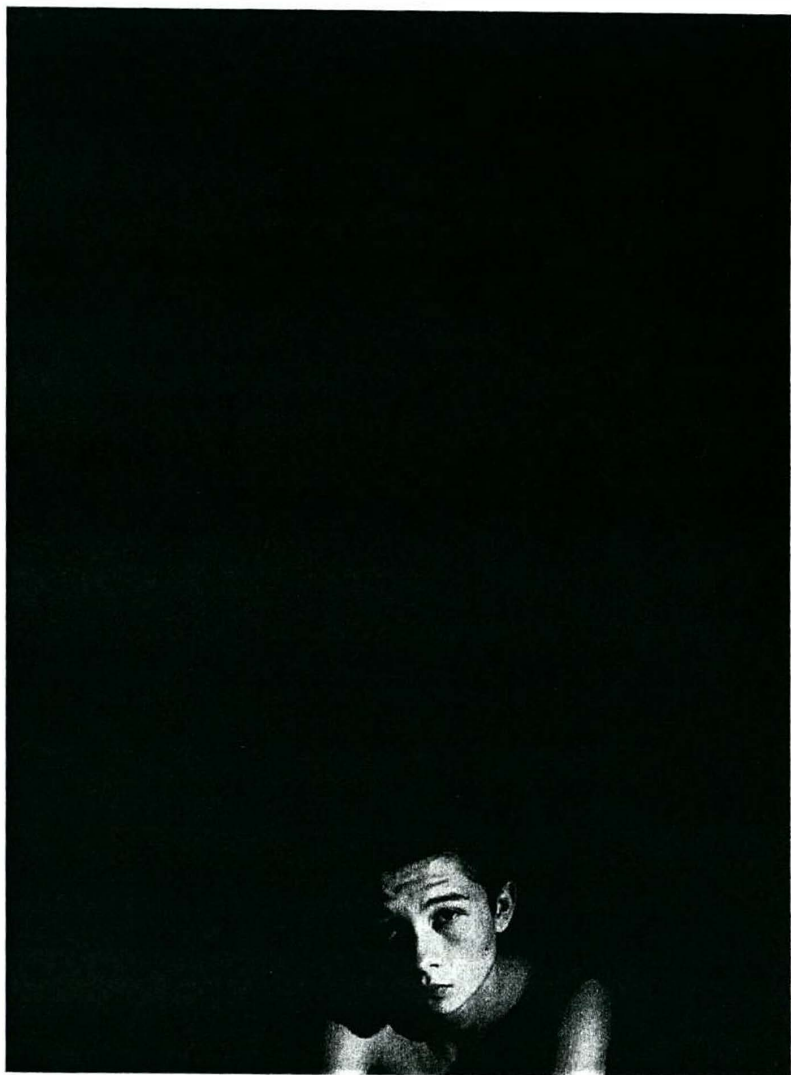
Angell Stone (recipient of First Prize)



Lori Thompson (recipient of First Prize for her series of three photographs)



Lori Thompson



Lori Thompson

Dobb's Final Grand Finale

The newspapers didn't get it right; I'll say that from the start. It was at the early age of 12 that I learned of the misrepresentation of great events by the media. But the more I thought about it, this really wasn't something that could be fully reconstructed and told by someone who wasn't there, and most definitely not in the formal "five 'W's and 'H'" method used by journalists. The real story of July 4th, 1985 could never translate that way. Sure, "When" could be answered, and "Where", even. But the "What"...the "Why"... the "How"? Nothing short of the most sensationalist tabloid could have contained those three, could have dared calculate their importance or traced their origins. And the "Who"? Well, there isn't a newspaper in existence that could have summed that one up.

The amiable, cuddly town drunk went away with the "Andy Griffith Show". Not the drunk, mind you—those still inhabit street corners and bar corners and jail cell corners, the red-nosed homeless folk who panhandle in downtown areas and always manage enough hand-me-out change to buy a brown-bag covered bottle of something—be it vodka, beer, or rubbing alcohol. Regular old drunks are looked down upon in an avoid-at-all-costs kind of way.

The town drunk, however, is an almost mythical being whom everyone in town knows by name and isn't afraid of. The true town drunk forever wears a smile and is a good-natured, endearing stumbler who would crack a joke and offer his take on the weather at best and spend a harmless night in the city jail at worst. That character still existed well into the 1980s in my neighborhood.

Of course, we didn't call Henry Dobb the town drunk, or even the neighborhood drunk. Sub-divisions were too affluent to have anyone called a "drunk". Henry Dobb was...a neighborhood eccentric. One that was three sheets to the wind ninety percent of the time.

Yet Dobb managed to remain wonderfully coherent as long as I could remember. Dobb was like John Wayne minus the hat, the swagger, and about 8 inches. He'd long since retired from somewhere, the identity of his former employers differing depending on Dobb's intoxication level. He used to work for either the Army, the Navy, the Nickel Plant, the water company, the secret service, the Toronto Maple Leafs, the coalmines, or Chippendales, depending on how much gin he'd had when he told you. And that was his drink of choice—gin, or more specifically Good Day General's Extra Dry Trophy Gin, poured over three ice cubes into the same

clear, fist-sized glass tumbler. Dobb always had his glass in hand when he was outside, day or night, open container laws and common decency be damned. You could hear Dobb coming from anywhere in the neighborhood, the tink...tink...tink... of the ice chiming against the side of his glass.

Dobb seemed to shine brightest on holidays. If there were anything Dobb loved more than his gin and his wife, Ethel, then it was to have a reason to celebrate. Once, for Halloween, he dressed as Tarzan, or at least his interpretation of Tarzan, which included a loincloth, a leopard print bra, a top hat, two Vulcan ears and a fake goatee, a costume he swore up and down was Tarzan.

"This is what Tarzan looked like in the book," he claimed.

For Thanksgiving one year, he walked door-to-door (gin in hand) offering to carve any family's turkey for them if they needed any help. He had no takers.

He mowed his lawn one Christmas morning in seven inches of snow. The sound of snowfall patting softly against the already 6-7 inches that had encased the town leading up to Christmas day was violently interrupted by Dobb trying to start an ice cold lawnmower, then, once starting it, walking in zigzags across his yard spraying snow all around. Dobb's wife Ethel stood patiently at the door, tucked tightly into her robe. She was trying to usher him back into the house, not out of fear of embarrassment—that bridge had been crossed, destroyed, rebuilt, and crossed again by Dobb many times—but instead out of simple etiquette, and not wanting him to disturb the neighbors on Christmas morning. That, or she just didn't want him to ruin the lawnmower.

One might've thought we'd feel sorry for Dobb in a pitiful, sad kind of way, but that was far from true. We never felt any sympathy for Dobb. We lived by the creed that ignorance was bliss, and that made Dobb the most blissful person this side of an over-caffeinated cheerleader, at least in a subdued sort of way.

Dobb lived for the summer. One June 14th, he decided to sunbathe nude on his roof while hoisting the American Flag in celebration of Flag Day. Within an hour, police, with a copy of the local public indecency laws, put an end to his tribute. He had a series of rubber garden hoses, about 15-20 by many estimations, connected end to end so that during hot summer days, he would turn on the spigot underneath his front porch and walk the neighborhood, hose in hand, spraying flowers and lawns to help battle any droughts, both real and imagined. But his true stage came on the Fourth of

July. It was his *raison d'être*.

Dobb seemed to spend all of his money on gin and fireworks, and he drank very cheap gin. Each year seemed to be better and more colorfully explosive than the last. And his real capper, like the exclamation point to any great fireworks display, was his grand finale. Dobb's grand finale often came in a series of quick strike explosives, or wave after wave of sparks and fire of some sorts being launched into the air. Dobb's grand finale was looked forward to with just as much zest as the whole event itself. He never let us down.

Dobb's mastery of fireworks had an artistic, rhythmic, and altogether brilliant method to it. I can never go back in time and watch Beethoven compose a symphony, with the music forming in his head and then being liberated onto a scale or through the piano; nor will I ever be blessed to witness Einstein reigning over a scientific formula, creating theories based on mere abstracts that with certain fine-tuning can be turned into fact. However, I feel confident I've witnessed a man who is similarly a master in his vocation, a genius above all others when it comes to a particular craft. Dobb worked in neighborhood fireworks the way George Patton orchestrated and commanded a tank brigade, or Picasso handled a brush...with a steady hand, an iron will, patience, planning, forethought, and, of course, the staple of any master's repertoire, whether they admit to it or not—Luck.

The Fourth of July celebration happened in the same place every year, out in the street in front of Dobb's house, which was down from my house a ways and across the street. A slight bend in the road in front of his house stretched the street a bit and made for a little extra room for the proceedings. A colossal evergreen tree peeked down over the show every year and made a nice backdrop as the airborne fireworks sped into the sky. Sticky-faced kids, their skin stained with the grime of summer, would come and stand—at a safe distance, of course, as demanded by their watchful and rightfully protective parents—staring wide-eyed into the heavens as Dobb shot bottle rocket after bottle rocket into the crisp July sky. For the old women in the neighborhood, the Fourth marked the only time all year they'd leave their houses after dark, perchance to pull in one of the few remaining bits of nostalgia that could lead them back to their youth. The cars would stretch all the way up Watercrest Drive, ten houses deep, though most people just walked down, enjoying a stroll through the summer

evening air as the sounds of firecrackers and bottle rockets popped and squealed in the distance across town. Dobb's fireworks presentations had become THE thing to do in our sub-division of Forest Meadows in the past few years, and the event's theatrics had grown because of it. Other local Fourth of July block parties would lose participants as they went to Dobb's show, and so after a while the other festivities simply merged with Dobb's—like a flood washing through a town and gathering everything in its path—until there was only one.

The Fourth was always sunny somehow. As long as anyone can remember, whether it rained on the third or rained on the fifth, the Fourth, inexplicably, sparkled in the morning and warmed to a simmer in the afternoon before cooling to a manageable sweat in the evening, making the outdoors peaceful for the night's events. This year was no different. Even the mosquitoes seemed to take the day off.

Dobb was invisible all day until sometime around seven-thirty PM. Passersby glancing into his windows from the street spoke of elaborate maps and intricate diagrams and blueprints hung militarily from Dobb's walls. Most people didn't want a hint of things to come. They knew half of the excitement came in the surprise of it all.

Around eight o'clock, as the sun began to yawn and drop over the hillsides in the west, and darkness slowly sank into the neighborhood, the buzz started to build. The frenzy officially kicked off when Dobb's porch light switched on—a sign that he—and his array of fireworks—would soon be exiting the house, and the festivities should begin shortly thereafter.

Dobb was nothing if not efficient. He walked out onto his porch around 8:45 to a smatter of random applause. He gave a quick wave of acknowledgement and continued. With his left hand, he pulled behind him a large, metal wagon with assorted devices of pyrotechnical esteem. In his right hand, of course, was his glass of gin. Frantically, the crowd that had assembled began to converge on Dobb as he pulled the wagon out to the street, everyone hoping to catch a glimpse of what this year had in store.

Once to the street, Dobb systematically unloaded the fireworks and placed them in predetermined spots about the street. He declined help more than once, no doubt knowing that this was his baby, and only he knew how to nurse it. Subtle gasps rose from the crowd as neighbors caught glimpses of Dobb's bounty: Roman Candles almost 2 feet in length, what seemed like

hundreds of multi-colored sparklers, numerous cones that stood a foot tall each and had names like "Apache Thunder" and "Green Sizzler", long, sturdy tubes standing erect on bases, with "SHOCKWAVE" and "BARBARIAN BLAST" imprinted in big block letters up their sides. Dobb had about twenty little cardboard boxes, topped by red paper, with wicks sticking out, whose purpose and contents remained a mystery. Still on the wagon were about a dozen of the fountain-type fireworks, which shot a spray of sparks and color out of their tops once lit, these bearing names like "GARGANTUA FOUNTAIN", "SPARK SHOWER" and one particularly wicked-looking device with a picture of the Grim Reaper himself on the side, under the sinisterly scrawled moniker "FEARLESS". The normal mixture of Black Cats, Bang Snaps, Lady Fingers, crackling whips, Spinners, jumping jacks, dancing butterflies, spark helicopters, pinwheels, and three-color gyro blooms already lay scattered around the street surrounding the wagon. About two dozen bottle rockets heaved precariously out of each of Dobb's back pockets like two extravagant rose bouquets.

When the placement assignments had been situated, only two items remained in the wagon. A pair of hulking, 2,000-count firecracker rolls rested, sleeping there, alone, waiting. Similar rolls, boastfully dubbed "celebration strips" by the fireworks companies, had been known to snap, bang, and crash for upwards of seven or eight minutes a piece. But were those Dobb's grand finale? The inspiring zenith of his Independence Day celebration? There was nothing wrong with huge twin firecracker rolls, per se, but I guess this year, I was expecting a something magnificent. Dobb, I should have known, would not disappoint.

"Oh, there's one more thing," Dobb said, then turned and marched back into his house. A few minutes later he emerged with a large, flat dolly, and I swear somewhere I heard a fanfare of trumpets play. On the sled of the dolly was what looked like a monstrous cardboard cake, a foot high and as wide as a manhole cover. People were rubbernecking and straining their eyes to catch a hint of the item, as if it were a celebrity. And in a very real way, it was.

I finally got close enough to Dobb to get a better look at the "cake". It was the biggest piece of pyrotechnics I'd ever seen or heard of short of a nuclear weapon. On the side, in dark purple lettering, read the word

“ENDGAME”. A black sheet of tissue paper stretched over the top, housing any number of fanciful explosives that would go off in a spectacular, coordinated fashion once ignited. Out from beneath the paper extended a wick the width of pencil, a wick that would never be lit.

Dobb wasted no time in getting things started. He first took a match to a pair of what looked like armored butterflies, and they went soaring into the air, spraying sparks beneath them as they flew and squealing a high-pitched whistle before exploding in the darkness of the sky. Next he lit four colored cones, out of which erupted fountains of blue, orange, green and silver sparks, depending on the color of the cone. Dobb next enlisted the help of ten forced participants, quickly handing them massive roman candles and lighting each before the recipients had a chance to say no. Some calm, some terrified, each person held their candle as ball after ball of brightly colored fire shot from the tubes and toward the stars. The crowd applauded Dobb’s willing accomplices.

Kids were wandering around twirling sparklers in elaborate patterns, oblivious to the grander things Dobb was regulating. He lit a few cardboard trains that screeched and puffed smoke as they rumbled across the pavement before slowing to a clumsy halt. A few random tubes were lit and shot various types of fire and flicker into the stars. And then it happened.

Dobb picked up a bazooka-sized roman candle, labeled “Big Bomber’s 6-Shooter”, hoisted it onto his shoulder, and aimed skyward. Rare is the sight of a man with a glass of gin in one hand and an oversized Roman Candle in the other.

“Ethel,” he called to his wife, “could you give me a light?” Ethel, bless her tired soul, scuffled over to Dobb and took his lighter.

“Okay, I’m ready!” Dobb proclaimed, and Ethel lit the wick. The fuse hissed slowly as it strained toward the back of the candle. It crept into the housing of Dobb’s cannon, and for a moment, there was a pause, longer than normal, and in that pause a sense that something big was about to occur.

BOOSH! The first fiery ball, a deep, glowing crimson, shot headstrong into the night sky. A few of the more vocal onlookers gasped at its audacity. The next ball, this one emerald green and like the one before it, the size of a baseball, launched from the tube and exploded skyward in an

electric display of crackling green flame before sputtering out. The third ball came after a shorter interval than the second one had, and seemed to throw Dobb off-balance a bit. The orange globe let fly from the tube and caused Dobb to shudder a bit and spill part of his gin. He quickly tried to compensate and catch a little bit of his spilled drink before it hit the pavement, and in doing so, lowered the Roman Candle ever so slightly.

BOOSH! A bright blue blazed cried from the candle and soared away, a little lower than the others, and landed near the pinnacle of the massive evergreen tree nearby. Dobb righted himself before the next ball, this one gold, shot from the tube and into the darkness above. After that a purple blast of color and light popped from the cylinder, and with that, this particular show was over.

Debate rages even today as to who actually spotted the fire first. An indistinct voice from somewhere in the crowd called out in panic:

“Fire!”

Then another cry, equally distressed:

“It’s burning!”

Then others rang in, with similar observations. A few seconds of chaos ensued, as people tried to locate the fire, looking around the neighborhood at houses and cars, and into yards and bushes, some people checking their clothing and shoes. It wasn’t until Dobb spoke out amidst the confusion, his voice clear and terse above the disorder, that everyone knew where exactly the flames were.

“Aww...tree’s on fire,” he said, matter-of-factly. His voice gave no hint of fear or concern, merely disappointment. It was as if he’d spilled spaghetti sauce on his shirt or lost his car keys.

Our eyes shot skyward, and there it was, plain as day. Near the top of the pine tree a tiny, dancing flame glowed brilliantly against the black sky. Those with any experience in the realm of fire knew by only a few seconds of observation that this flame was not going to burn itself out. Even as we watched in the initial few moments, the flame seemed to grow. A sense of panic rose through the crowd. Kids began dropping their sparklers and gazing up at the fire. The tree, nearly ninety feet tall, began to glow at its peak like a giant candle. A big, flaming birthday candle for our country. “Gimme the hose,” Dobb called out to no one in particular. He was, without a doubt, quick to take charge. This was *his* holiday, after all.

Ethel snapped to action. She scurried through the throng of gawkers and hurried to fetch Dobb's water hose, which sat in a massive, coiled pile in front of his house.

"Wait 'til I get up there to turn it on," Dobb yelled. "There's no nozzle on the end."

Ethel brought Dobb the open end of the hose, and even though it stretched across the yard to him, there still appeared to be at least one hundred feet or more left piled against the house, hose after hose connected end-to-end before fastening to his spigot.

Dobb strode to the tree as gasps in the crowd gave news that the fire was getting bigger.

"All right," he said gruffly. He started to grab hold of the lowest limb with his right hand, but it held his gin. He switched and started with his left hand, which held the hose. This back-and-forth went on for about twenty seconds. Then Dobb tried holding both his gin and the hose in the same hand, but that didn't work either. He finally wrapped the hose elaborately around his waist, weaving it loosely through his belt and leaving about five feet of slack. Then he started up the tree.

Somehow, and to this day I can't figure out why, nobody tried to stop him.

Dobb proved surprisingly adept at one-handed tree climbing. He shimmied and clambered his way to the top in only a few minutes. A lone bottle rocket fell from his pocket and drifted into the pine needles below.

By the time Dobb had gotten near the fire, it was still growing and seemed to occupy most of one half of the top of the tree. Dobb set up camp about ten feet below the fire and took a sip of his gin. "Ethel!" he yelled down. "Hit the water." Ethel, standing diligently by the spigot, cranked it to full blast.

Dobb was illuminated by the fire as he sat, seemingly in death's lap, right below the pinnacle of a burning evergreen tree. We heard the water shuttle through the hose and upward, into the heights of the tree. Dobb steadied himself and, gin still in hand, locked his right arm around the trunk of the tree. He balanced in his perch and held the hose above his head and toward the fire, which was now beginning to grow again after a small lull. The water, through some loophole in the laws of physics, finally made its way straight up the tree and flopped from Dobb's upright hose. The water spit about two inches into the air, then softly curved over and poured into

Dobb's face.

"Daggit!" Dobb cried. He lowered the hose and took a sip of gin. "I'm gonna have to get above it!" A few of the children, thinking this was all part of the planned show, started picking out new sparklers to light. Many adults had run inside to call the fire department, the police, the newspapers, the hospitals, and other neighbors who hadn't made it to the party, urging them to Get Down Here Now.

Dobb, meanwhile, was working his way further up the tree, of which there wasn't much left above him. The fire itself was located about twenty feet below the top of the tree; the only real branches above it were too thin to support any weight save birds or snow. I saw Dobb, gin still in hand and with five feet of garden hose dangling from his belt and trickling water, pull himself past the fire. He disappeared into the limbs and needles, and for a moment there was silence. Then...

SNAP!

At first I thought the sound was maybe just the crackling of the fire, but Dobb's dull, pained cry told otherwise.

"Naaaaw!" he yelled.

Dobb poured awkwardly out of a swatch of pine branches and crashed, butt first, straight through the heart of the fire, as if he had purposely done a cannonball into the flames. He started toppling through the branches before stopping abruptly, the hose having caught a limb above him. He hung there for a second before Mrs. Rackets from up the street vocalized what was the most improbable aspect of the events so far:

"He's still got his gin!"

And sure enough, Dobb was still clutching his gin glass. He was dangling in a relatively branchless spot near the middle of the tree, hanging out and away from it, like some giant yo-yo. The water was spraying from the hose and dousing everything below, and in the shock of the moment, no one noticed the smoke coming from Dobb's pants.

The first bottle rocket caught everyone off-guard, especially Dobb. It shot true and clean out of his back pocket and into the sky before erupting into a loud BANG. Whenever Dobb would swing or turn a certain way, I was able to make out the tiny flame on the back of his pants.

WHOOSH...POP! Another one was lit and launched from his pocket! Then another! Dobb, relatively helpless to stop things, tried to grab the tip

of the hose to attempt and extinguish his cut-off Levi's, but he couldn't reach. His struggling only gave the bottle rockets different trajectories. WHOOSH! WHOOSH! WHOOSH! He swayed there like a giant pendulum, leaking water from one side and launching explosives from the other.

The bottle rockets continued to soar spectacularly from Dobb's backside. Stream after stream of sparkling, flashing embers left a vibrant trail as they launched all across the neighborhood from Dobb's hindquarters. It seemed like it went on for an hour. Dobb, after his initial struggles, just went limp and let the rockets fly. He knew he was part of the show, now. He downed whatever was left in his glass.

"Ethel!" Dobb called out after a long, undoubtedly reflective silence.

Ethel Dobb's response was not audible to the whole crowd. Those near her claimed she merely whispered "Oh dear Lord" in response to her husband. A fire engine's siren could be heard in the distance. The news media were no doubt close behind.

"Ethel," he repeated, "turn off the water, sweetheart."

Things died down considerably after that. When you can say that firemen getting a man with his pants on fire and wrapped in a garden hose out of a tree and then extinguishing flames at the top of that same tree is an event "dying down", then you know whatever preceded it is the stuff of epic poems.

As an undeniable direct result of the Dobb episode, the city council held a special meeting concerning the use of fireworks in residential areas. They voted unanimously to ban fireworks completely within city limits. We all figured at first that Dobb would go out of his way to protest the ban, but he never made a peep. But then, why should he have? Dobb, above all, was a performer, and he knew he had ended with a literal and figurative bang and caused a new city ordinance in the process. How could he ever hope to top that?

For the longest time after that Fourth of July, Dobb stayed inside—some say because of his hurt pride, others say because his scorched rear needed healing time. I didn't see him until late August, when a group of us passed by on our bikes. He was out by the curb, watering the pavement.

"You know what, guys?" Dobb said. He had a newfound look of clarity and realization on his face. We all slowed to a stop and listened. He took a

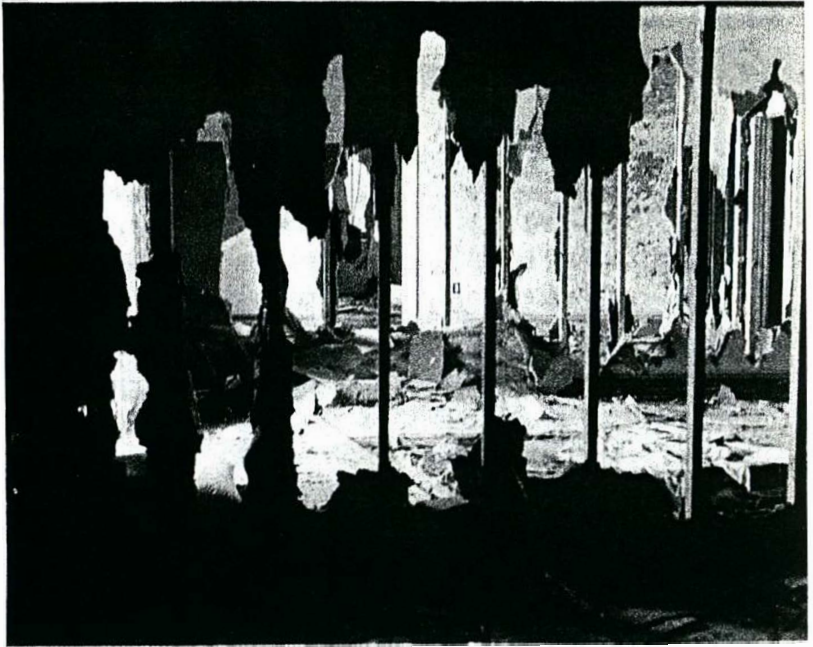
long sip of his gin.

“What’s that, Mr. Dobb?” I said. What Dobb said next may never turn out to be the most useful advice, but in a way, it was some of the best I’d ever received.

“Boys,” he said. “Sometimes...sometimes when a tree’s on fire...well, sometimes you just gotta let it burn.”

Amen.

Chris Hughes (recipient of First Prize)



Justin McCormick (recipient of Second Prize)

Easter Sun

Flowering, buttercup-yellow dress
Half-covered youthful, restless legs
Fully-covered by embroidered white
Hosiery, matched my grand and broad
Snowy chapeau, glossed with satin ribbon.

Well-planned and seemingly beautiful ensemble,
It fetched pre-formulated flattery
from fellow church goers with their finest Sunday's best,
Drew the flooding pride, maternal in nature,
From dark pupils set in the amber eyes of my grandmother.

Questions, comments, examinations of fashion ceased.
We had entered
The chapel –
Bedecked in white paraments and wreaths of flowers –
White- Easter Lilies, and polished gold icons.

The silver geese,
The peppery ganders,
Admired with awe the annual adornments,
Momentarily searched for their pew,
Still inwardly searching for meaning.

The sun mounted the horizon in unpolished gold glory,
Stung the windows with light
and the saints breathed,
the saints bled
on me.

I stood, breath tucked into my throat,
Breath wouldn't escape-
As the saints did.
The intensity of Spring sun on stained-glass:
Bled me of beauty,
I was pastel, pale, ridiculous.

The sermon, the hymns lilted, waved,
Refracted off the fractals frolicking in the window.
Pale, ridiculous words swept away
on my abandonment of the Search:
Questions quelled –
The sun, the light, breath, and blood,
Beautiful distractions!

Krishna Wright (recipient of Second Prize)



Thomas Cavendish

Jesus in a Sidecar

“Move out of the way, lady. Jumpin’ Jesus in a sidecar!”

I was standing on the corner of West Third when the fat man called out behind me. He pushed me to the left and everyone else on the corner began bustling past me. I looked up and saw the “WALK” signal flashing across the street. I hadn’t noticed it. I was not used to noticing it. I’ve lived in New York all my life, but I sometimes forget to look at the “WALK” signal. Go figure. This time, however, I was stopped.

Jumpin’ Jesus in a sidecar.

The idea of forward motion, of motion at all, had completely left me. I just stood there on the corner, people pushing and shoving about me in typecast uptown fashion, trying to cross the street to enter the subway, hail a cab, or whatever else people from “The Island” do. But me...I simply stood there, unmoving.

It had been quite a long time since I had heard someone use that specific swearing. A peculiar saying nowadays, no longer the cliché it used to be. People just never say it. But the fat man with the work shirt that read “Padriq” on the pocket did. That fat man—he looked somewhat familiar, but no one I know would be so gruff. He also looked to be about my age. He must have picked it up from a grandparent; that’s where I first heard it. That’s where I last heard it too.

My grandfather, James MacIlwane, used to say that all the time. I don’t mean he just used it frequently, as if to spark some fire in conversation. No, Granddad said it every chance he got. At the very least twelve times a day. That is, of course, until the lung disease took hold of him. (The doctor just said it was from Granddad’s playing too much with the pigeons on his roof; I don’t know about that, but I do know the doctor had no idea what he was talking about). By then, Granddad was so weak and frail and would talk hardly at all. Couldn’t talk, sometimes. But when he did, he said,

“Jumpin’ Jesus in a side car, girl.”

He peered at me with that look of feigned disappointment he had. One of the many looks he called The Face. His wizened eyes glowered, and then they smiled, his grimace dissolving into a cocksure grin.

“Oh you,” I jeered, poking him under his left arm. Then through surfacing laughter: “You mean old man.”

Granddad began laughing, too, a sort of greasy, choked rumble. “Jumpin’,” he began, but the laughter quickly shifted in to a series of wet,

staccato coughs. He tried to raise his hands to cover his mouth (my grandfather, ever the gentleman) but by this time, in the early June of 1972, he couldn't lift his arms above his heart. The sickness had taken over his heart and lungs and now it was taking over his whole body. The coughing fit rocked him back and forth, his arms bobbing up and down in front of him as if on some acute pendulum.

I bent over him, wrapped my arms around his back between him and the stained sodden sheets of his sick bed. I sat him up, brought his bib to his mouth, and let him do what he needed until the spell passed. He began nodding his head and flapping his right hand—his signal for me to back off. I lay him back down on the bed and waited.

Thinking about it now, I can see why this frustrated him. He was probably viewing himself from someone else's perspective. He was seeing a once virile, strong man hunched over in a bed with a woman, his grand daughter, holding a bib—a *bib*—to his face as he coughed up great big wads of phlegm, spittle jabbing at the air in every which way. I can't even imagine how he felt. I can guess though; I do have a fair share of knowledge on his state at the time. I was with him at least five hours every day. Except, that is, during his last week.

"Well, Janey," he grumbled after a few minutes. "I think I shall rest now." He sounded as if he had a mouthful of stones. It was just the congestion from his lungs that he had coughed up, but sometimes I wish it had been boulders. Instead of that damn disease, whatever it was.

I bent down and placed a kiss on his brow, his cheek, his lips—the way he had taught me when I was a child, the way he had taught my mother. He smiled at this briefly, then closed his eyes. The smile crawled off his face. I backed away and whispered: "See you tomorrow, Granddad. See you tomorrow."

I realize now how casually I just threw that out to him: see you tomorrow. I guess that's what hurts the most. I only had the chance to say that four more times. Unknown to any of us, including the doctor, James MacIlwane, my granddad, had entered into the final stages, the final days, of his illness...and, consequently, his life.

The next morning, Granddad didn't seem as lively. I sat by his bedside as I usually did, reading to him various materials: excerpts from *Irish Times*: writings of Joyce and Yeats; and articles on the President and the War. He loved to hear word from the homeland and listen to the old prose and poetry, as well. Except that morning—that morning Granddad was distant.

Instead of initiating conversation on the subject of his silence, I decided I should go on with the usual routine. He was either thinking about something or trying not to show pain. It was more than likely both. I went to the bureau across the room. As I reached to open the top drawer, I glanced in the looking glass before me and caught a glimpse of myself.

A young woman of twenty peered back: tall, slender, red hair down to my middle, wide doe eyes and a big smile, dressed in a sundress my Grandmum had sewn back in the days when my mother was my age. I didn't have dark circles under my eyes, not then; nor did I have the crow's feet to accompany them and the meandering frown lines about my mouth. I was in my prime: young, agile, bold, beautiful.

My eyes drifted to my right, and I had to fight to keep the smile on my lips. Reflected back to me in the opposite corner was a scene of death. A fragile, emaciated old man was lying between dirty, yellowed bedsheets. The quilt on top, frayed and worn from numerous washings, was pulled tight to this old man's chin. His eyes had sunk into their sockets a while back, and the skin had begun to hang from his face; but I still could not believe my eyes. That ugly, smelly, translucent body in the bed reflected in the glass was my granddad. I guess I hadn't really seen him in a different light up until then. And it was then that I realized he would go soon.

So I decided to make the best of the time we had left. This all happened in an instant. One moment between my opening the bureau drawer and my looking down to see what I would find there. It's not that I didn't know what contents the drawer held. It's a mechanical action of the body. People have been opening drawers and looking in to check the contents for so long, they cannot just quit the routine. They have to look *before* they reach in to it.

My first thought upon peering into that drawer for the twelve-thousandth, seven-hundredth, and fifty-third time was that I was glad to be able to look away from that scene in the glass. And on the heels of that I felt shock, indignation, and self-disgust. Yet I continued in my daily labors.

I removed the small oblong wooden box from the top drawer and set it atop the bureau. As I closed the drawer with one hand I opened the box with the other. Therein, wrapped with cloth, was my great granddad's boxwood flute. I carried it softly over to my granddad's bed and sat down on the edge of it.

When I was seven, my granddad had started me out on the instrument.

When I had put my lips to the mouthpiece for the very first time, it felt like an electric current had flashed through my body. From the first note played I had fallen in love with it, and since then, whenever I have played, my lips have hummed with that initiating shock.

It was now my daily routine to show my granddad my love for him as I performed. I played for nearly two hours, usually. Once I got started I couldn't quit. I played the old traditionals, various hymns from the homeland. Granddad's favorite was *Be Thou My Vision*. I also played some upbeat music. It was with these that I had to get up and dance around the room as I played, as per Granddad's request. Mostly pub songs, such as "The Boy from Tipperary" and "Finnigan's Wake." Granddad kept time by patting his legs with his hands. And his eyes gleamed like watchfires at night.

But not that day. I began with "Londonderry Air," the usual starter of the day's quasi-revelry. My granddad just lay there. I played for nearly ninety minutes, slipping in and out of various tunes and hymns. I received no response. I was somewhat hurt by this lack of interest, but thought: *why should I be? This isn't my time. It's Granddad's time. Either he wants to hear it or not.* I rationalized it, but I was still hurt.

My face worked, screwed up slightly, then returned to normal. It only took half a second, but he saw. He tapped my leg with the index finger of his left hand and with the right used a curling finger back and forth motion to tell me to lean over him. I leaned over and my face was inches from his face. I looked directly into his eyes...at least until he closed them. He patted my side with his right hand and whispered: "I think I shall rest now."

I sat up and felt my face work again. He didn't see it, though; he still held his eyes closed. The pain in my heart grew, but I felt that was just my Irish pride. So I merely leaned forward and performed my ceremonial goodbye: kiss to the forehead, cheek, lips. "Yes, Granddad," I said. "Rest."

I stood and put my great granddad's flute in the box, careful to wrap it once more; put it in the drawer. I turned to say something else, but my granddad had turned his head to the other side of the room. He was either sleeping or feigning. That day, I gave him the benefit of the doubt.

Yet when I arrived at my apartment on the other side of Brooklyn, I was shaking with shame and hurt. I unlocked my door, entered, locked the door, ran to my bed and threw myself upon it, crying into my pillow. It had been all I could do on the Metro ride home not to get worked up.

But the hurt of my granddad's lack of interest (for the first time in my life that I could remember) and the shame of my thoughts at the mirror plagued me and festered inside. I lay prostrate on my bed for hours, weeping unceasingly. Eventually I found myself drowsing, and realizing how selfish I had been—thinking that my granddad's lack of interest in *me* was more paramount than what he was feeling inside.

I knew that Granddad had been becoming increasingly more incontinent by this time. The nurse had informed me that at least three times the last week she had come upon him sleeping in his own feces or urine. Perhaps he was thinking about that. And then there was the memory: the nurse also had informed me that Granddad had referred to her as Bonnie a few times. Bonnie had been his older sister, who had died before I was born. Supposedly, my granddad had also called out several times in the night to the boys at O'Malley's, the local pub where he was known to have tossed back a few pints with the likes of Brendan O'Bannion and Matty MacCallister.

At any rate, my granddad wasn't doing so well. I knew it; perhaps he knew it, too. After getting through my woes and ponderings, I became resolved that I must do something on the morrow to cheer him up, to cheer me up.

So the next morning, I entered my granddad's flat on Paddington Lane in the hap-hap-happiest of moods. I flung open the door to his den, which was now his sick room, and rushed in with a flourish.

"Good morning, good morning, good morning to you," I sing-songed as I leapt and pirouetted about the room, casting fresh cut flowers hither-thither. "Good day, sweet Granddad, good day." I spun round and round, exulting in the bright, sunshiny morning, praising the day amidst a shower of lilies and daisies.

"Grrrrr-AWWWW!!!" The room filled with the terrible roar that could only have come from one place. All of a sudden, the den felt thick and humid. Astonished, I stopped in mid-turn; my legs locked together, my body twisted. Immediately the smell, of which I had gone unawares, filled my nostrils. The putrid stench was emanating from the bed. *My God*, I thought. *He's soiled himself.* "Stop looking at me, damn your eyes!"

If I wasn't frozen already, I was completely immobilized and uncompromisingly taken aback at that very moment. I didn't move; I didn't breathe; and for a second or two, I think my heart didn't beat. And in that time span, my composure was lost. I bowed my head, and let bright red tresses hang over my face—hide my face. My hands moved up

to catch the tears vying to well over my eyelids.

I tried to speak: "Gr-gr-grand-d-d-dad, I'm suh-suh-sor--"

"Get out of here, you bastard," my granddad bellowed. "Get the hell out before you try my patience and tempt my rage." His face pinched, reflecting sheer animosity.

I felt the color rise to my cheeks. In my periphery I saw my reflection in the mirror above the bureau. My cheeks were as brilliant in hue as my hair. Upon the sight of that, shamed, I fled from the room, the flowers forgotten and trampled underfoot. My eyes were streaming in courses as I ran past the nurse and out on to Paddington.

I sat on the stoop until I had re-collected myself. The nurse had come outside and was watching me. I didn't see her behind me, but I felt her sorrow-filled eyes consider my back. I can't explain how I knew—I just did. Sometimes people can just *know* things—you can't explain how or why, but you *know*, almost as if you were watching it take place. That's how I knew she had reached out her hand to light on my shoulder as she was doing it.

A strange moment of intimacy passed between us. It lasted only a second, but it was there. It was broken almost as soon as it had occurred as a bellow rolled out of the window above my head. "Son of a bitching Commie bastard! Leave. Me. Be!"

All of a sudden I knew I could now longer bear sitting on that stoop, no longer bear Paddington Lane. In one quick movement I was off the stoop and walking up the block towards the Met station. But I found myself walking on past the descending stairway, and kept right on walking for nearly a mile. My thoughts battled with each other, flash-firing back and forth across the dark expanse of my mind. The next thing I knew I was riding on the Met. And then I was walking again. Eventually I realized he hadn't been talking to me; it was a ghost from his past he had been addressing. An enemy from the war, perhaps. No matter who it was, the ghost was now haunting him. And it was haunting me as well.

That night I couldn't sleep. Every time I started to nod off, I would hear my granddad booming his final statement.

The next morning I returned to the flat—more out of commitment and consistency than anything else. My granddad was lying in his bed, waiting for me. I stood in the doorway and looked at him. Then he beckoned me come to him with his little signal. I approached him very cautiously and stood above him. He patted the bed. *Please, sit down.*

Slowly I did as I was requested. He put his hand on my leg,

rubbed it, patted it. His eyes were large in their sockets, wet and blurry. "Darling," he began. "I cry your pardon for yesterday. I wasn't thinking too clearly. I feel I may have gone and upset you." A single tear slipped over his left eyelid and meandered down his cheek. I was about to join in, but I fought the urge and laid my head upon his chest, as I had done in years past. "We've much to talk about, my dear. But not right now."

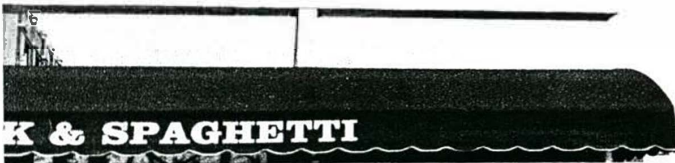
"I love you, Granddad," I breathed onto his heart. He began to stroke my hair as he had when I was young. "There, there, my dear," he whispered. "It's all right, my child. My sweet, dear Erin." Erin, my mother's name. He thought I was her, here in the now. My mum had died four years before in a car accident. There was only me. But if I was to be Erin to him, right then and there at that moment of time, then I was Erin. His Erin.

We stayed that way for my five hours, and at last I needed to go home. I tucked him in to bed, kissed his forehead, his cheek, his lips. And I left him for the last time.

At six o'clock the next morning, the nurse called and told me he had passed during the night. It seems kind of appalling now, as I look back over this writing, but as tears of joy coursed from my eyes in the knowledge that my granddad was in a place where he would finally be the whole man he had been, all I could think to say to her at that moment was "Jumpin' Jesus in a sidecar."

M. Joseph Jarrett, writing as Jackie Shaub (recipient of Second Prize)

RESTAURANT



Amy Dietz

The Carnival

2001

As I groaningly slumped back into my homemade gliding chair, the promise of a new day rejuvenated my spirit. At 65, I couldn't scale the mountains as I did in my younger days, but even so, I could still get around without too much trouble. Just the night before, I had taken my grandson, Jacob, out for his first coon hunting trip. Luckily, the dogs didn't tree too many, and we spent most of our time just waiting in the pickup, listening to the eternal sounds of the night. A little spooked by the darkness, Jacob had asked that question common to all young boys his age who have grown up in this rugged landscape of southern West Virginia.

"Do Indians still live in the woods around here?" he asked, most likely already knowing the answer from his schooling. Yet, alone in those dark, dense woods in the dead of night, a man could easily have believed that he heard the quiet feet of those who had hunted the same grounds for centuries past. In that sense, asking the question seemed much more appropriate. I chuckled briefly under my breath, however, and quickly answered, "Well, if they do, I've never seen one."

I thought about how those from ancient times had heard the same sounds, and wondered if the song of the cricket affected them in much the same way, or if perchance they simply ignored it. The night air of early September was turning a bit chilly for Jacob, however, and after we treed a couple more coon, we decided to just head on home.

Due to the long-running drought and stifling summer heat, water reserves had become depleted all over the area, which caused some of the local wells to go dry. Most households did what they could to conserve water - The Mingo County Board of Education even sent a memo to every grade school in the area, requiring a reduction in water usage by at least a third. Much to Jacob's delight, the little school where he usually attended as a fifth-grader had cancelled all Tuesday and Thursday classes, and since it was a Tuesday, he got to stay with us, his grandparents. My wife had fixed us a simple, yet delicious breakfast of fritters and sausage, cooked by the same loving, devoted hands which had stood by me for just over 40 years. After finishing, I sent Jacob to wash while I grabbed the newspaper and headed on out to the porch. I would wait for him to come blasting out the door at full speed, which he promptly did, scurrying across the withered late-summer grass to the sticky, sap-coated white pine

he climbed so often. Watching him scamper up that knotted trunk, I remembered a day when I was as carefree as him. I let my mind easily drift away as I recalled the last time I existed in such a peaceful, serene state.

1948

The sun sank tiredly low over the ragged hills surrounding Kermit, casting its huge shadow over the always-muddy waters of the Tug. Late in the summer, them same waters seemed as lazy and sluggish as me and the rest of the boys I'd run around with. Never did do much, us or the water, but we were always drifting along, seeing what-all we could get ourselves into. On a good day, we might rout a groundhog out of its hole, or catch a bunch o' crawdads...tricky little critters, or maybe shed our threads and just jump right straight into the river. I say we, meaning myself and three other boys. Me, I was born William Joseph Aldridge, but most folks just call me BillyJo. An then there's BobbyJo Sartin, Ronnie Sartin and Poke Messer. BobbyJo and Ronnie were twins from birth, and would you know, the same age as me! Poke was 4 years younger than all of us, and since he was eight when everything happened that I'm a talking about, that means the rest of us were twelve.

BobbyJo and Ronnie's dad worked at the Marrowbone Development mines when he could, scrapping around when they closed for any jobs that anyone might need done. Poke's dad worked at a machine shop in the main part of Kermit, across the double tracks, pretty near to the sawmill. He was always wheezing from the mix of fine metal shavings, sawdust (when he walked outside) and the dense smoke that often settled down over Kermit when the sawmill would build up too much scrapwood and sawdust, and have to start burning it. And then there was my dad, a proud man to be sure, who hated the on/off nature of the mines, hated the cold damp down deep in the earth, and often told us that's where he'd end up buried, unwillingly. Now some people said my dad was lazy, if'n he was, he never let me see it. Even when he wasn't in the mines, he was helping Ma tend to the little plot set aside for beans, taters, and corn, or taking care of what chickens we did have. The corn fed the chickens more than it fed us, and the eggs left by the hens kept us from getting too puny. Anyway, we always made it in them days, sometimes better than others, but we still made it.

As I was getting around to, it was late in the day and us boys had been out seeing what we could do to entertain ourselves, but there was nothing

much of interest this particular day. Even the birds and bugs seemed like they didn't care much to make their usual sounds, and everything, especially the trees, was lightly coated in a thin layer of grime - partly from the coal constantly whisked by, mounded high over the tops of the train cars, but mostly from the dusty streets which hadn't seen rain in over three months and the ragweed which grew out of control everywhere it got the chance. Well, it was getting real close to time for us boys to be home, and since I lived just outside of town, on the other end, I'd have to walk all the way back through the length of Kermit - not a hard walk, or a long one, but it still takes a little while on account o' how the little town is stretched out like a snake sunning on a log, all along the banks of the Tug Fork.

We were headed back, anyway, by the sawmill, the machine shop and the town's only eating place - a hotel with a restaurant downstairs that had been around for as long as I'd known of. Never really could say I ate there myself; Ma said she could beat their vittles any day, even without using any lard. Then I noticed something, through the glass piece that kept anybody from stealing one of the papers, but still let 'em see what they were getting. The headlines in big, dark letters read: "Carnival Coming to Kermit!" Well, it was about as big a news as we'd had around for a long while, in the way of any fun or socializing event. Why, it'd been five years since we'd had any kind of fair, and it wasn't much even. Everyone knew the clown was really just Poke's dad in some clothes that didn't fit and an old, tattered hat. I couldn't afford to play any games anyway, so I had to just walk around watching everyone else have fun, or try to, anyway. Shucks, the most exciting part of the whole darned thing was when Lacy Sturgill's dad picked up one of the workers at the fair, nearly shaking his teeth right outta his head, saying, "You're gonna give my daughter that doll or else, you little cheat!" By the time anybody stepped in to help, the terrified worker at the Bottle Toss had handed Lacy not just one but three dolls, in a panicked effort to pacify the huge chunk of a man. After the crowd scattered out, the fair was pretty much done for anyway, so everyone just went on home, 'cept me and Lacy. We hung around for a little while, just talking about things, whatever two seven year olds could really discuss in a dull, boring little town on the side of a river.

I'll never forget her, she was twice as pretty as a plum ripe for picking. Red hair, freckles and almost perfectly straight teeth, why, I reckon she was the prettiest girl in all of Kermit.

So as us boys kept shuffling along headed for home, the tinge of excitement that had first gotten our attention began to consume our imaginations, feeding off itself in a matter of a few short minutes, till we reached a level of anticipation for what we knew would be without a doubt the biggest event we'd ever seen in our short lifetimes. A real live carnival, imagine that, a *carnival!* It was such a grand feeling that for a moment I was caught up in the idea of all the wonderful things I knew would be there, till little Poke interrupted my euphoria.

"What's a carnival?" he asked ignorantly, having obviously never seen one before. I was willing to let one of the others respond to that naive inquiry, remaining silent for several seconds. Well, apparently everyone else had the same idea too, on account of no one speaking up, so I figured I might as well go ahead and fulfill his wonderment.

"A carnival, Poke, it's a, well..."

BobbyJo jumped in to assist, since my mind had seemed to take a temporary lull of activity, "You know, they have lion's and tigers and bears, and jugglers, and big ole elliephants."

"No, no, that's a circus, you dipweed," Ronnie corrected, appearing annoyed at us for some reason. By this time, I had gotten a little impatient with everyone, and directed that at ole Smarty.

"Oh yeah? Well you tell us exactly what a carnival is, eh?"

"I know, and I don't have to tell you."

"*Liar!*"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

At this point it became abundantly clear that none of us had the slightest real idea of what a carnival was, since we'd never laid eyes on one the first time. Why, we were every bit as much in the dark about it as little Poke, who by this time was looking a little less beneath us. It reminded me of a proverb Ma always told me, "if'n a man keeps his mouth shut, even a fool is thought to be wise." Well, we'd just proven ourselves in like manner one way or the other - most likely the other.

After I'd left the rest of the boys at the edge of town, where their homes stood amid a modest cluster of similar structures, I walked with a bounce and slight skip in my step for the first time in quite a while. I knew I couldn't easily wait the two weeks until August 16th, so I purposefully tried busying myself with all sorts of stuff. I even did me a couple odd jobs just to get enough money for admission and maybe some

of whatever else would be inside that carnival. I knew that this time I sure didn't want it to end up like before, but then, I was doing all I could to see that it didn't. This carnival, with whatever it would bring, promised to prove unforgettable.

Strangely enough, at the end of those two anxious weeks, I woke up. Quickly, quietly, and without much fanfare I simply slipped outta my bed, grabbed some britches and sunk a shirt over my head. I figured the rest of the boys would already be down at the edge of town, so my idea was to just slide on through the door without detection and go join them to see the carnival as it first came into view. I was just about to worm through the back door, when mom's quiet but firm tone caught me completely unawares, causing me to instinctively let go of the spring-loaded door and turn my face back toward her. As luck would have it, the spring actually worked that day, and promptly came back to smash me right good in the face.

"Where you sneaking off too, so quiet-like? You know you gotta eat your eggs, anyway."

"Awww Ma, but I ain't hungry."

"Eat."

"Ok," I conceded, having already gone through the drill many a time before. I ate my eggs and some fried taters she fixed up, and feeling contented, yet even more anxious, I set out again, but without any of the secrecy this time. After I made it safely out the door, I hit the yard at a full run, and it felt good to stretch my legs on such a beautiful morning, with the dew still wet on the grass, and the sun just beginning to burn through the dense August fog. There was no way I could know what lay ahead for the rest of that day - no warnings, omens, or indications of any sort. All seemed well until I got just into town, and saw a buzz of activity like I'd never in my life seen before, only I could tell it had nothing to do with the carnival at all.

I saw men in pickup trucks gathering ropes, shovels and carbide lanterns in such a frenzy that it sent a wild chill racing down my spine. By this time people were beginning to come out on their porches to see what was going on, and I *had* to know for myself. Looking back today, I almost regret asking one of the men what had happened, and when he told me I stiffened for what seemed to me as an hour, rooted stock-still where I stood. Denial told me it couldn't happen, and yet I knew all too well the grim reality. Marrowbone Development's main shaft had partially collapsed, and dad was working the morning shift! At that point

my mind swelled with emotions, memories and images that had been a short lifetime in building. I never was given to crying, but crammed in the back of a rusty old GMC with about ten others on the way to the mine entrance I let loose, and for once I wasn't ashamed; I knew no one would think anything of it this time.

The area around the mine entrance was littered with folk just trying to help the miners who had made it out, and men getting their equipment ready to make rescue attempts for those who were yet trapped somewhere deep within the mountain. Someone said they thought the collapse was just over a half mile into the mine, but no one knew for sure. I just tried to stand there and bear the burden that had been handed to me, all the while feeling a greater pressure welling up from within, and a churning that wouldn't cease, coupled with the knowledge that I may well never see my dad again this side of Jordan. The weight of the entire mountain seemed to lay on my shoulders, growing heavier with each moment that my dad didn't appear from the hungry mouth of that yawning cavity. As the load mounted, my soul's strength was tested under the strain of a million tons of figurative earth, and though struggling to maintain some form of composure, my resolve began to crack. Like a timber giving way, I splintered into a thousand emotional fragments, as I sprinted recklessly toward the entrance. My twelve-year old legs could only carry me so fast, thankfully, and just before I would've submerged myself for the first time in the deep recesses of the earth, I heard a sound like none other before.

The explosion, though somewhat deadened by the earth, rocked the ground all around where people were gathered, and amid the screams and shouts of terror, I sensed a second wave of destruction swiftly approaching. I thought of turning away, but instead remained precisely in position as the blast of dust and fine-crushed rock drove me off my feet with a force greater than any gale. I lay there motionless, pummeled with the debris still spewing from the opening, as the entire mountain seemed to crumble inward, and thus blocked the entrance, forever sealing the tombs of the miners who lay inside. As the hail of earth and stone finally ceased, I slowly raised one knee at a time, and looked up with awe at what had just occurred, overwhelmed with its magnitude. No thoughts came, except a feeling which crept over me as if it were not just the mountain, but rather the entire world which had just collapsed on itself, and mine - mine had done just that.

2001

I had just about dozed off when the phone began its deathly toll.

"I'll get it," came the familiar response from the kitchen. Only a few seconds into the conversation, my wife's easily discernable tone suddenly shifted following what sounded like a gasp from where I halfheartedly listened on the front porch. Her voice, normally smooth and even, took on a quiver of uneasiness. As she hung up the receiver and took her first steps toward the front door, I had no idea of the magnitude her impending words would hold, but to this day I wish I'd never heard them. With her face mortally blank, she stood in the door, neither in nor out, and barely above a raspy whisper, uttered those regretful words, "They've attacked the World Trade Center - and the Pentagon."

I sat there immobilized; unbelief first turned to numbness, and from numbness came a gradual realization that some unknown enemy had delivered a severe blow to those unmistakable icons of American pride. After a few seconds, or minutes, I really could not say which with any degree of certainty, I slowly stood and called for Jacob to come on inside. Images of Oklahoma City and the World Trade Center bombing ran through my mind, but nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to see. As we looked on helplessly at the horrifying images constantly streaming in over the television and listened to experts offering early analysis of what had just occurred, not even the steady voice of Tom Brokaw could ease the stinging reality that life had changed forever. Suddenly, just over Tom's right shoulder, a barely noticeable ring of dust and smoke began to creep through the windows below one tower's crash scar. Appearing as though in slow motion, the thin wisps quickly grew into a billowing cloud of ash and mixed debris which flooded the surrounding streets, and sent onlookers and rescue workers alike scrambling for safety in freshly renewed terror. While those on the ground dashed for cover, fate's hand delivered the demise of those inside as the roof and floors above the impact point seemed to sink slowly into the rest of the building, which quickly crumbled inward; the result was a massive burial mound of building, plane and people. Jacob watched intently, propped against the foot of the couch. He always took a peculiar interest in adult affairs, but even so, there were children in those buildings, which made it all the more his concern.

At that moment, a seemingly completely different Jacob looked up at me instead of my grandson. Some core element in him had obviously changed forever. Completely puzzled by what he had just seen, he asked the simple question, "Why'd they do that?" From his first inquiries as a toddler till now, I had always provided him with some sort of satisfactory

answer. This time, however, I could think of no explanation, no reasoning that he could possibly understand. I didn't understand it myself, no one did, so I certainly didn't expect it from him. I cast a worried glance over at Lacy, who just slowly shook her head. I looked back at Jacob, and prepared to launch into some meaningless, contrived speech about how humans didn't always love each other. I decided against it, though. He had heard that same spill, or one like it, so many times before. Instead, I just shut my eyes for a brief moment and thought a quick prayer before resuming the visual link with Jacob, took a deep, long breath, and simply said all that anyone could at the time, "I don't know."

Corby Dillon (recipient of Second Prize)

Quicksand

I scatter
Like sand seeping through her fingers
Stolen from a broken hour glass
Cast against a quiet, but forceful wind
Landing in an invisible pit
And I sink slowly into its deceptive depths
Grains of sand that bury me deeper and push me farther
But have no sustenance like dirt
No life swimming through it
No minerals to sustain a breath
Or feed a lonely hunger
No warmth of Mother Nature to bless it
Just rough, gritty excrement
Of dreams I never woke from
Grains that anxiously and endlessly
Scrape against your skin
Dry and torturous
Pain that a fire does not know
Grains that burrow into me
Where the quiet, forceful wind blows mercilessly
And collides and churns and scours the sand

To form shards of mirror glass
Where all the bony beauties dance
In palaces of praise for having no weight
And an automatic carousel for them to be displayed
The mirror seems shiny with sparkling perfection
Ideals ingrained in these grains
That form our reflection

I rebel and take vengeful aim
At the mirror that tore my skin
And keeps shackling its slaves
With a knife in my hand
Or is it a bone
I smash the mirror glass
To try to kill the sand it was born from
The mirror scatters like I do
But the broken glass lodges in my skin
I ignore the shards
But continue to bleed
And all the girls pause at their mirrors
And cannot look within
Some are blinded by pain
Bleeding a sea of the grains (of sand)
None of them can see
Because the tiniest shards have edged themselves
Into the back of their minds
And the corners of their eyes
Remnants of dreams
Always falling in quicksand
And when we wake
We wipe the crusty grains from our eyes
That Ana places at our dreams' demise

Sleep.

Lara Smith

Mythology

I once heard
that the stars dotted
the night sky like Braille.

With eight points
per cell, they crowd
one around another
spelling out the history
of the universe,
recording the births
and deaths of the planets
like a grandmother
with giant, loopy script
in the family Bible.

Atop Mayhill Crest
I navigate my way
through the limbs
of my town's largest
White Ash tree.

I reach my seeing hands
out of the branches
and into the cool
October wind

But, I cannot grasp the large,
icy chunks of rock.

I am unable to read
what is written in the sky.

Wedging myself between
two sturdy limbs,
I breathe a sigh of relief
If I did read the stars
I would have to explain how

I climbed a tree, at night, alone.

A one-winged samara
with a rounded
seed cavity
falls on the back of my hand.

My brother calls them helicopters.
He likes to toss them up in the air
and watch them spiral back down to the ground.

Unable to see the corkscrew maneuver,
I let the samara fall from my grip
and listen for it to hit the ground below.
I wait patiently, imagining how
the spinning blades must look.

Somewhere in the darkness
it soundlessly lands safely.

Angell Stone (recipient of Third Prize)



Thomas Cavendish

Flooded Cage

She falls with the rain
In invisible storms
Where all pathways are flooded
And places you in a cage
Saying she'll protect you
With a skeletal hand
Her long, bony fingers cradle your mind
They reach farther than you can
When they grasp, you can't feel
When they whittle, you can't see

Her fears inhabit you
From limb to limb
You stretch and twist and writhe
Pulling her weight
Weight that welcomes you
Into a dark crevice of your mind
Where a fairytale resides
Of bones manipulating hearts
And scales to measure the length of time possible
And maximum pounds allowed
For love

And sometimes she lifts a finger from your mind
To trick you
And points to a concrete slab
Others consume freely
It isn't a brownie, it is doom
Impending and transferring from one slab to another

Chew.

Guilt.

Chew.

Guilt and anger.

Swallow.

Panic.

Guilt chews you.

She brings a friend
To help you sleep better in your cage
Who wraps her hands around your throat
And tells you it will be OK

You have another chance

And out the concrete comes
Purging reason
To fill you with hers

Her friend comes and goes
But the skeletal hand is always there
Outstretched to blur fears from comfort
To keep you spinning in her world
Where umbrellas don't exist
And osmosis is continuous
But you won't know which one of you
Is being permeated

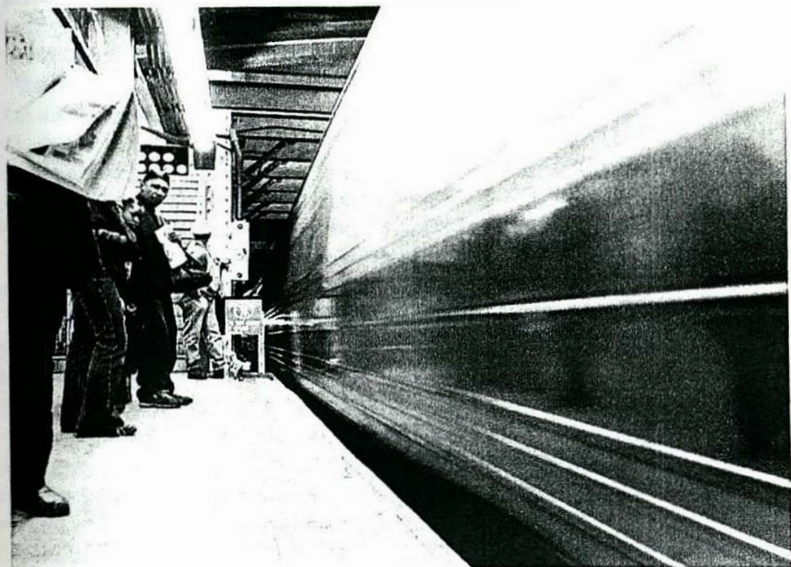
You are aware of your cage
But can't find the door
To know how you got there
Or how you can leave
But it doesn't matter
Because here your fairytale
Can keep love a possibility
As long as you wither
And she feels like a martyr
Because reality won't supply
The love the caged on desires
But she devotes her powers
To a hope that increases
With every decrease in pounds

Others try to free her
But her keeper knows it's the best place
Because she will provide the stability
Others lie about possessing

And someday a candle will be lit
For the one they say they cared so much for
But the candle's flame
Will only kindle another and another
Until love can find a way
To outlast the keeper

She waits.

Lara Smith (recipient of Honorable Mention)



Thomas Cavendish

Puppeteers Are Made of Wood Too

In the end I guess it was really all my fault. No one ever wants to admit that, but there's little I can do about it now. The evidence is gone; my face remains emotionless as I speak of him, the pictures are all put away, and they'll never recover the body. They can't pin it on me, but I don't know if I'd care much if they did. After all, I know I'm guilty; I just can't rouse myself to care much.

I suppose I ought to at least introduce myself. I mean we are going to be friends aren't we? You *are* reading my confession, so we ought to express a certain amount of civility. My name is Glenna, and since you've all seen me out on the streets and looked at me quizzically, or

bumped into me somewhere and looked at me with a certain blank horror in your eyes, I thought I would stop the questioning and the puzzling that the media has brought up by advertising his disappearance so much. Many of you suspect me, and rightfully so. But you wonder now 'why?' and 'how?' and such other odd things, like what was I thinking? This is simply my response.

None of you knew James...not really. He was a boy trying to be a man. We all show off our Superman underwear on occasion, but he liked to wear his on his head, and didn't even have the decency to be ashamed. He was just another bastard sociologist waving his card in your faces like you gave a damn until he seemed to be missing. Suddenly everyone is concerned. If you're going to mock horror at his demise you ought to at least look at yourselves and realize that you despised him too. You despised him always insisting that he laid judgment while all your opinions went unrecognized. You hated how loud and obnoxious he was and how he plagued you with the most redundant of all things and followed it up with an "isn't that interesting?" that made you all want to tell him to go see a specialist and leave you alone. You all avoided him when he ignored your ideas after he specifically asked you for them and then denoted them as inferior to his own harebrained excuses. You all hated him. At least I loved him...even if I couldn't allow him to live.

I *did* love him. As much as I ever loved anyone I suppose. Sure, he loved picking out my flaws and listing them at me as he maintained his own convoluted ideas of himself as my superior. And he liked to act self-righteous if you followed with his own shortcomings, then immediately list his own faults according to him to save face as one who could be humble. Although to be fair, his version of himself was a lot higher than the reality. He never hit me much. That wasn't James' way. He'd rather pretend he's the best thing that ever happened to you while he quietly moves you in the right direction to destroy yourself and save him the trouble of any real work. He plants ideas in your head and leaves you to ponder them and hate yourself more with each passing moment. Ever infallible, he always could give a complete list of how you've wronged him and how he's never been anything but good to you (except for those few times, but why bring up the past?).

I quietly thought of him as cute and charming for a year, encountering him only occasionally. It was not until the second year I was aware of him that he bothered to give me the time of day. Sure he made up a nice lie that any girl would love to hear. He hooked me with the usual, "of

course I recognized you, and I always noticed you, but I just could bring myself to talk to you before. You seemed so unattainable." I bit. He was nice, and mildly attentive, though a little aloof. He claimed it was just his artist's nature.

I spent months trying to please him and trying to change myself according to the never-ending lists I got from him about what was wrong with me. He gave me long speeches about how he is always trying to accommodate me and why can't I change, just a little, just to make him happy? After all, I would if I really loved him, wouldn't I? Of course I would. And so I changed more since he refused to notice all the changing I had done already. The year was ending and I noticed that I was missing part of my cycle. I began to suspect I might be pregnant.

I admit I didn't tell him of my suspicion at first. He was finally being kind of nice to me and I didn't want to ruin that. And he was taking a bit of an interest in another woman he knew, and I didn't want him to think I was making it all up just to keep my hooks in him. I waited until I was sure. As is the nature of men, he ran around with the other woman while I visited my parents and discreetly saw my gynecologist. I couldn't doubt any more. I spent better than a week trying to get him to accept my phone call, but he was always too busy with his new pet. When I told him he tried to be the starry-eyed father-to-be figure, but he still never talked to me. He discussed my having his baby with another woman instead of me. I can only hope she was a good substitute.

The pregnancy was ill-fated, however, and did not last long. I took myself to my gynecologist when I knew something was wrong and my body aborted my little secret without my consent while I cried silently on a cold exam table. I hurt, was empty, and quite alone. It was all too much. He gave me some sedatives and suggested I take a holiday. He knew I didn't want to be around my family when I hadn't even told them that I had something to lose. I didn't have anywhere to go, so I ended up at James' mother's apartment where he too still dwelled. I needed to tell him anyway. Sedated, I lay on his couch and waited the interminable hours it took him to come home. He was nice when I told him, let me cry a bit, and informed me his new interest was coming over for the evening (quietly insinuating I clean myself up a bit) and offered me a few methadone to cope.

The two sat on the couch opposite my heavily drugged and over-stressed body, flirting and making conversation. I was the unspeakable other woman now, and she looked at me haughtily as though wondering

what I was doing there. After all, I had been vile enough to have gotten myself pregnant and then careless enough to lose the child, surely I was done with her male counterpart and could cease to exist? I can't say I don't agree with her. But he insisted he loved me whenever she went to the bathroom or finally fell asleep. I was forced to endure the two of them together for two days before I was sober enough to dissipate. And then James chose me. He made a bit to do about it. Perhaps he thought I should be grateful that he would pass up such a specimen for my worthless self who could not even produce properly.

And of course, I was predictably grateful. I was drooling with a need to please, to rectify what I had done to his offspring. The next few months passed with little incident, but left me emotionally drained. He changed his mind week to week as to whether he wanted to keep me or not, and I was trying harder than ever to please him and make the appropriate changes to myself. But he was never satisfied with me. I told him little things about myself and my past. I think I was trying to get him to notice the real me even as I was forgetting who she was. I was trying to remember Glenna. I was failing a little more each day.

A shadow of whatever I had once been, for better or worse, I acknowledged to myself that I loved him no matter what and that I wanted him to love me in return. Oh, he always made a lecture of how he loved me and I shouldn't question it, and I think in his own way he *did* love me. But he forgot that he had been molding me for so long that I was no longer much more than a shell to be whatever he insisted. He began complaining that he missed my old, outspoken nature. He wanted me to converse with him and amuse him the way I had at first. But that was a Glenna that he himself had erased. It was my fault of course. I tried to keep tabs on the poor girl, but somewhere in the maze of my mind I had misplaced her.

I tried to reclaim her, but James only seemed annoyed at my efforts. My biggest mistake was starting to reveal itself as well. I had told him too much about myself. I had allowed myself to become completely vulnerable. He started making the occasional comment that threw something from my past at me like a well-worn dagger. The things he said cut deeply, and he rarely amended them. Whenever I brought any of these comments up he would look at me with surprise and raise his eyebrows as he exclaimed, "Good Lord! Surely you're not still dwelling on that silly thing!" So I stopped dwelling.

I tried to quit mentioning the past altogether. Sometimes James

look at me sweetly and ask me what he had done that had hurt me, and I would tell him. He would always look appropriately shocked and ask me to cite specific examples. But I never could any more! He had asked me to never do such a thing, so I had changed myself yet again to please him, and rather than please him I only served to give him an out for everything he ever did or said that hurt me. He claimed none of the things that bothered me were real, that I had imagined them, and that it was merely my bad perception that had caused me to think that way. Then he would chastise me for thinking so poorly of him.

I could no longer find my authentic self and now I could not even believe the things I saw for myself and knew to be true. I began to doubt every little thing I thought or felt because I had such naturally evil perceptions that apparently I had gotten my whole world completely wrong! I had never felt so lost, and I was even more isolated because I still insisted on trying to make James happy. I had been planning to move for a few months and the move was impending its doom quite suddenly. James had always talked of going with me, but when he was particularly displeased with me he would often make reference to going elsewhere, effectively shutting me up since my fear of being alone was only getting worse as the weeks wore on.

Anytime he had any complications with his life surrounding the idea of moving near me he mentioned how he was doing it all for me and how I should be grateful. I always felt he was pinning fault on me because he couldn't stand to admit that he was truly fallible. With everything I had lost and couldn't find, and the entire year of hearing what was wrong with me and never being able to please him, I was beginning to resent him.

I moved, and of course, could suddenly only think of the good times we had. I thought of the times he was nice to me and only listed a couple of flaws in my character instead of a slew. I missed him and I was having trouble adjusting. I called him a couple times, needing someone desperately. Always he made it quite clear that I was bothering him and should take care of myself. Always this made me feel more alone and more needy. Always this annoyed him more and made him say things to hurt me and make me go away, like when you throw rocks at a stray animal to make it stop following you.

He and a mutual friend of ours came to stay with me while they found a place to live. I was tense about him being always in my proximity. I simply didn't know how to act. I loved him to a fault, and I was starting to resent him, and I needed him, yet loathed the way he

constantly made me feel. Things were rough, but then one day, seemingly out of nowhere, he started being really nice to me. He held me through some of my constant headaches, he apologized for how things had been, and even acknowledged that my perceptions weren't all that fucked up and that he was always telling me what was wrong with me. He admitted that he never expressed that he was in fact happy with me and loved me.

I was elated. I finally felt that all my changing, all my work; it had all finally paid off. Finally, he loved me truly! But it was a bit of a ruse. He was merely pacifying me to get me out of his hair while he finished up his plans for leaving me completely. I had quite a few headaches for a couple days and he seemed tired of dealing with me always lying around taking pills. He had not made too many references to what I had done wrong, or to my past, so I knew I was due a big one. I determined that I would not allow him to pull me into a fight.

I made the mistake of having an opinion about something, a band I think, but my opinion didn't agree with his mood at the time, so predictably, he climbed his ivory tower and assumed an arrogant tone of voice insinuating I shouldn't be so judgmental and suggested that I look into Prozac suppositories.

I chose to not fight. I went to my room, cried a bit to release some of the hurt I felt, and read a couple chapters to soothe my damaged emotions. I reentered the room as though nothing had happened, bringing my book with me and trying to stay at least a bit aloof. He made the occasional snippets of sharp conversation he always used when he was in the mood to fight, so I quietly got up from my chair and went back into my room.

As he sometimes does when I just try to ignore the fight he starting by leaving the room, he opted for yelling through the door. He shouted, "Hey Glenna, here's a job for you I just found: safe sex, \$1,000 per week. That would suit you." He knew I was not well thought of back home and that I had been propositioned on more than one occasion. He knew I had turned them down but was also ashamed that such a thing had ever happened in the first place. He knew my last bad relationship had ended roughly and partly because he was trying to establish an I-paid-for-my-sex-so-let-me-have-it relationship. This last comment was crossing the final line. He had lifted an ax and intentionally cut me to shreds. With just two lines I was devastated. I ceased my tenuous trust in him and cried out the dull ache that had replaced my heart.

Feeling betrayed and angry, I took that same ax he had used on me

emotionally and severed the good I had seen in him despite his churlish nature. I began analyzing our relationship. Thought of all the mock-Nazi sociological bullshit he was always spouting and thought of how things had truly been. Realization dawned on me slowly and at each turn I began to see answers. I was a sociological experiment. I was a toy he kept around to study and creates situations with so he could test my reactions and see how far I would go at the end of his puppet master strings. I was a test, a game, an amusement, little more. I was a test dummy; a puppet. Fury flooded me. I knew he intended to avoid me while he moved into his new apartment so he could quietly disappear from my life forever. I had served my purpose. I had been a good little puppet, and now it was time to put me on my shelf and leave me behind.

But puppeteers are made of wood too. They splinter as easily as the puppet. Not too many people know that. It's classified information so that no one goes getting uppity against their string-holders. But I knew what I needed to do. Our mutual friend, who to this point remained blissfully ignorant of most of the horror in my head, was going home for a couple days. I lifted our proverbial ax again, only this time I opted for a real one. He never even knew it was coming. I invited him over for the night, playing the chastised lover. I waited until the next morning when he was in the shower. I wanted to be sure I did not stain my carpet. I turned on some music, Aerosmith actually, and turned the volume up. It was the middle of the day, most people were at work, and the volume really was up quite loud.

I kept an ax with my camping supplies, so I simply went to my closet, pulled it from its leather sleeve, and wandered into the bathroom naked with the ax behind my back. I was offering myself, as I had so many times before to please him, and he smiled, knowing he had a going away present even though he'd been impossible for days now. I smiled seductively in return. He never saw it until it was too late. I aimed at his pretty face to keep the screaming at a minimum; that and his vanity annoyed me. He was always so worried about how he looked so I thought it only fair. I chopped his head off and waited for his body to stop quivering and convulsing.

The running shower washed the blood away as I hacked skin and muscle away from the bone and gathered the gore into my mop bucket. When the bucket filled, I carried it to the kitchen and ran it all slowly through the food disposal. It took several trips, but I had all the time in the world. When I was left with nothing but bone I looked up a

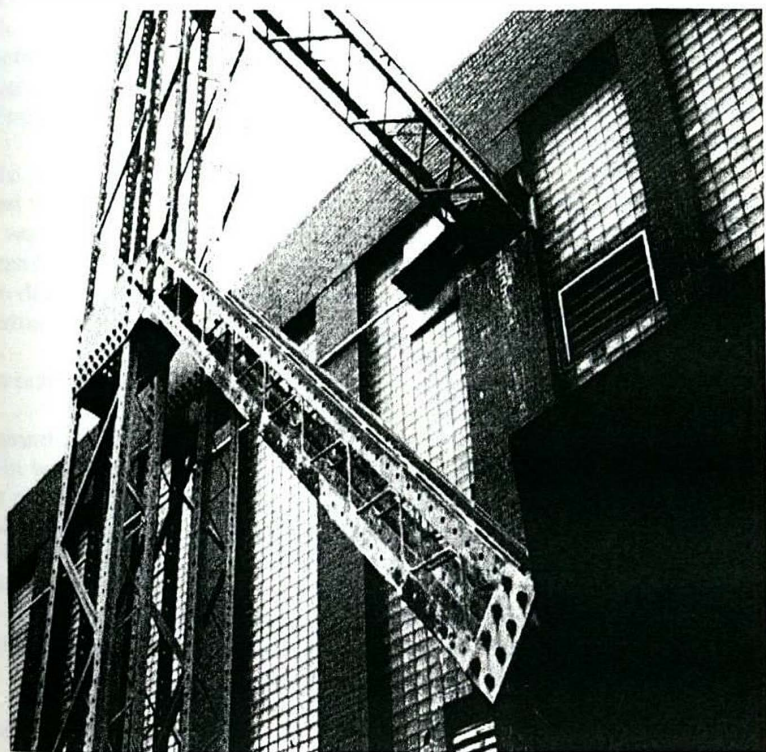
decalcifying agent that would soften the bones. Turns out such things can be found in some household cleaners. With the bones softened, they ran down the disposal quite well, and having all those chemicals in the tub with the bones cleaned everything quite nicely. I called our mutual friend, sounding worried, claiming James had gone for a walk and never returned.

Naturally, I was questioned. And as you, the public, have voiced from your own ivory towers, I seemed a likely suspect. At least this time you were all right. But he can't leave me now; not really. There'll always be bits of him stuck somewhere in my sink and shower. And I kept a lock of his hair, cut with the ax, so I could never forget the ax that he first wielded. Judge me if you like. I no longer care. He hurt me, I hurt him...it was a nasty cycle. But is physical pain and death worse than emotional pain and death? Who are you to say? Who's to say it's not merely in your perspective? I know my perspective has improved. I know because I can finally sleep at night. Perhaps you should consider your own goddamn perspective.

Jennifer Lynch (recipient of Honorable Mention)



Michelle Winkler



Luci Wilson

Bricks

The rocks were every shade of earth imagined,
Ranging from brown and red to dirty yellow,
And they covered the ground. The sun would bear
Down until sweat rolled down our necks. The tiny
Canyons cut through the dirt and offered a hiding
Place. Dandelions grew, scattered and few, breaking
Through the rocky soil when allowed. And sitting
In the middle of this desert, was a pile of bricks.

I remember building a fort out of the bricks,
And playing war until dinner grew cold on the table.
And surprised squeals of delight at finding a snake
Under a rock. The broken pieces of fossils discovered
As we were archaeologists under the hot sun. The
Wooden plank placed across the ditches for bikes
To cross, although I was always afraid. The brick fort
Built in the middle of the desert kept us safe.

Bricks that had appeared on the vacant lot were shaped
By our imaginations until workmen stole our battleground
By building a house. Dump trucks filled the canyons,
And the fossils we cherished lay buried under
A carpet of green grass. Pink tulips lined the house,
Replacing yellow dandelions that had squeezed
Through the ground. The snake we found lost his home,
And is an imprint on the burning pavement—a new fossil.

Jessica Gibbs



Jessica Long

Unruhe*

We brought you home
In a small, brown box—
all ash.
Your cracked voice sifted
Through the dust,
Cried out to our deaf ears.

We had heard enough.
We had made our choice—
there would be no children.
No grand babies for
you to destroy—
no matter

how much you had *changed*.

You haunt us now,
lying in wait—
under our bed,
listening for baby's first cry.
No rest. No peace.
The living and the dead
have both agreed on that matter.

*Unrest (German)

Angell Stone

Observing Images on the Finger in Florescent Light

When only one light is lit,
luminating over my bed
sheets bulked with body
and body heavy.

Hues dance over my free hand,
the hand not in a triangular
trembling to support my head,
my head heavy.

This light sinks into trenches,
tightly-carved lines
lapsing over the coarse
course of the finger.

Serpentine they run,
racing to form the crossword puzzle,
puzzling on my skin;
stained glass window.

Fine hairs guard certain squares,
spindling circles from forming,
formidable stars, constellations,
constantly expanding and detracting.

Rachel Eells



Jesse McLendon

Struggle for Freedom

I stole one final glimpse of my family beside the runway before the loadmaster dropped the paratroop door and jerked the yellow lock handle closed. The plane's body quivered as the number two engine started spinning. The quiver accelerated to a vibration until the engine erupted

in a violent roar. Overhead, small red lights brightened with energy from awakened generator. The pilots on the flight deck above us flipped switches and followed checklists to stimulate the giant gray beast. Fuel, air, and oil coursed through miles of metal vasculature that circulated life from nose to tail and between the giant wings. Engine two fed one, then together they fed number four. When number three reached speed the plane pushed against the brakes, begging to leave the ground. Our C-130 begged to fly, whether the men in its belly wanted to or not.

“Ready to kick some ass, Sergeant Owen?” Senior Airman Dave Jackson shouted over the engines with a wide, excited smile.

“You bet. Let’s roll!” I lied with my best gung-ho grin. I slapped his outstretched hand and he dropped headphones over his ears, leaned back against the webbed canvas seat, and bounced his head to the motivational metal that spun from his olive drab Discman. Dave was prepared to parachute over Iraq any minute and single-handedly conquer Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, the devil, or whichever other evildoer waited below. He forgot that we were aircraft mechanics, not Special Forces operatives.

Joining the National Guard had provided Dave with more pride than high school graduation, his championship-winning touchdown, or any single accomplishment in his twenty-three years of life. The Chief’s Council named him the Most Outstanding Airman of the Year, and he wore more ribbons than any other young troop in our squadron. When the governor called for flood cleanup in 2000, Dave answered. He entered with the first group and refused to leave until every church, community center, and trailer in southern West Virginia was one hundred percent free of mud and debris. He worked, ate, and slept for five weeks in the muck that made most mortals beg for relief after five days. He once complained that remaining stateside after September eleventh was his only disappointment since joining the Guard. This mission to southwest Asia relieved his eighteen months of frustration. I often asked Dave why he didn’t join active duty...or the Marines.

In some strange way, the deployment relieved me, too. Images of this day—the day when I would trade my civilian clothes for these tan desert cammos—had been whipping through my mind for three weeks. News of a pending deployment forced me to live my civilian life under the pretense that I would be around for weeks to come, though I knew Uncle Sam would call me any day. I had tried writing stories to ease the stress, but my pen stalled. I could only write about war in disjointed sentences

and blurry scattered thoughts. The stories were not fit to line our birdcage. Since that last intelligence briefing, I had lived as if I awaited rapture. Colonel Harbinger enlightened me, so I lived on edge, waiting for a sign from the Pentagon above. At the bugle of giant air raid sirens, I would be whisked to a barren desert beneath the blazing sun, leaving an empty outfit in whatever position I stood when I received the call.

No bugle had sounded, but the phone had rung, and my deliverance was underway. To no surprise, yesterday's uniforms of student, husband, and father did not rest in a heap by the telephone, but were hung neatly in my closet, where they would be waiting when I returned. I hoped that I could also leave my civilian sentiments in that closet, and that an unwavering determination would seep into me through the uniform. I pledged to "support and defend the constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic" when I joined the military five years ago, and President Bush (whom I swore to obey) bestowed Saddam Hussein with the title of American Enemy. No matter how much Gary the civilian disliked the war, Staff Sergeant Owen was ready to complete the tasks that I was assigned.

My secret excitement for arriving in the Iraqi theater paled in comparison to Dave's, (General Stonewall Jackson was not *my* grandfather's great-grandfather), but it seemed for a moment that this flight to war might restore the concentration that weeks of awaiting the call had broken. My mind was clearing inside the green walls of the C-130 cargo bay, and perfect lines for a thousand great novels were again firing through my mind. I pulled a notebook and pencil from behind the gasmask in my pack as the auxiliary hydraulic pump whined online from the opposite side of the cargo ramp. I heard a heavy thump from the wheel well when the brake disks released and felt the plane inch forward. I sucked the clear air into my toes and sighed, welcoming the end of the blurred daydreams that had tortured me since I learned of the upcoming deployment.

I turned to the last page of writing: a string of unpunctuated jabber that I had scribbled in the student union after my last conversation with my friend Jill.

"They'll leave you here, right? I mean, you're in college," she had asked as we sat at a table in the student union. She, like so many others I knew, mistook a National Guard activation for the draft.

"It doesn't work that way, Jill. I joined the Guard and they are paying for me to be here. When the Pentagon calls for our unit, I will go

with them.” I directed my reply to the quarter I was rolling over my knuckles. Neither Washington nor the eagle looked back with sad, disappointed eyes.

“But how can you? You know this war is a scam. Bush wants to steal their oil. Didn’t you read the pamphlets I brought from the D.C. march?”

“Yeah, I read them, and maybe they hold some truth. It’s impossible for us to know all the reasons why we’re going. Maybe Saddam really has all of those weapons.” George Washington nodded in agreement as I repeated the lines, reconciling my existence as an airman and a citizen.

“That’s bullshit. Would you shoot the man next door to you because he *might* commit a crime some day? Don’t we Americans believe in ‘innocent until proven guilty?’ France is right; we have to let the inspectors work. Hans Blix and his team find and destroy more weapons every day, so they will eventually remove all of them.”

My quarter slipped from my hand and wobbled onto its back on the tabletop. The mighty eagle and his olive branches were hiding. I lifted my eyes to discover the wells that had developed under hers. “I am tired of debating the reasons,” I said. “I don’t know if our military will fix the problem any better than a million inspectors would. I took an oath when I joined the military, so I do what they tell me; it’s as simple as that. Staff Sergeants cannot dictate international policy.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying this! You said yourself that you don’t even know if this will work. You supported me when I marched against the war in Washington. Were you lying when you said those protests were important?” She shook her head and fixed her gaze on the air above me.

“Jill, I...”

“How can you agree to be part of this? How can you go over there to kill innocent people if you don’t even know it will fix anything? *You* are the one who gave me all the Vietnam books. You are the one who said there were lessons to be learned there!” The first tear slipped from the corner of her eye. It rolled down her smooth face and collected with its partner on her chin.

“I can’t choose America’s battles, Jill. I joined the military because I love our country, and I am ready to defend it from any threat. I am just a tiny part of our military, but I have to do what I am called to. I have faith in our country, and I have faith in our military.”

“I don’t understand how you can be part of this,” she said as she stared deep into my eyes, expecting some answer to help her grasp my obligations. I had nothing.

"I know you don't," I said, looking down at George for agreement. He didn't nod, but I could see the support grow in his eyes. When I looked up, I saw Jill walk through the door on the other side of the building.

The brakes slammed together as the plane jerked to a halt. We were waiting beside the taxiway for the other planes to line up behind us (everything must be uniform for a military operation). I could only guess because the military designed these C-130s with only six portholes high above our heads for added security—the enemy did not need to know what the plane held and cargo would learn where it was when necessary: when the plane landed and the doors opened. In the grand scheme of mobilization, men became tools, mere digits to add to the three hundred some thousand soldiers already in place.

Regardless of our position in the pragmatic military plan, I was certain that the piece of equipment facing me from across the chem-gear pallet was a man. Airman Bill Grant was spinning a bright wedding ring around his finger. Bill had celebrated an early wedding the day after the briefing and his bride demanded explanations. She did not understand why her husband had already left her alone, why she could not know where his plane would land, and why he did not refuse this mission until all the details of the war were disclosed to him. After the seventy-two hour phone call left a phone number on her Caller-ID, she had called the first-sergeant seventy-five times demanding answers. Today, when Bill said goodbye to her in the hangar, she fell to her knees begging to know why he, she, or anyone had to make this sacrifice. I knew he could still hear her screaming each time he twirled that gold band around his finger.

Despite the pain that I was sure her screams brought him, Bill did everything to bottle it all inside. We all knew how to sever our emotions—it was part of basic military training. Our fathers taught us that big boys should not cry, and the military told us that men in uniform would not. We had been issued stone faces with emotionless features (emotionless meaning solemn and serious) etched by military bearing. Rivers of tears pushed behind our masks, but they were dammed by the pride that held the granite façades in place. Bill's ring blasted at the wall that shrouded his feelings.

I anticipated Bill's torture, so I tried to hide my reminders of home—out of sight, out of mind. On my left hand only a pale line remained where the gold band used to be; some symbols would never go away. I had suspected hanging my ring from the dog tags on my neck would help prevent the wrenching flashbacks to our temporary goodbye—my guess

the day I told Jennifer I was leaving. I took a deep breath to strengthen my dam, then my memory flashed back to when I walked out of the bedroom with my bulging green military duffle.

"It's not fair," she mouthed through a contorted frown as a new river of tears sprung from her eyes. "Why do they have to take my husband?"

I pulled a deep breath for some sort of inspiration in the living room air. "I'm sorry, Baby. It is my job. I told you I would have to go soon."

"Oh, so I'm supposed to be ready. I've had two weeks notice so I am supposed to send you off with a smile. 'That's my husband. He's going to go kill some Iraqis. Oooh, I'm so proud.' Bullshit!" She threw the remote at me and pulled her knees up to her face. Her body shuddered with the sobs that escaped through the muffle of the cotton pajamas that she pushed into her swollen eyes.

"Jenn, I am not trying to say that you can't be sad..."

"You're damn right you're not," she interrupted, the fire of her eyes burning through tears that deluged them.

"This is hard for me too, Honey. I've spent the last three weeks trying to get us ready for this..."

"Yeah, you've been getting us ready alright. You come home Monday morning and, like you don't give a damn, you say, 'Here's my will. Sign this power of attorney. There's a list of the bills in the computer. Tom will mow the grass. Call Joe if the sink stops up again. Everything should go along easily.' You think this will be easy! Who do I call when I get lonely? Who is going to take care of *me*?" She glared at me as if I should produce an immediate response.

"Listen, Jen, please," I begged as I reached toward her on the couch where we normally sat in love. She pushed me back to my feet. "I know this will be hard, but you have to be strong. You have to..."

"I know what you *think* I have to do," she yelled. "You think I should wait here, raise your son, and pretend life goes on while you go off to Iraq or Qatar or Turkey or who knows where, because you're *sure* not going to tell me. *No*, you can't tell your *wife* where you are going. She might call Saddam himself and jeopardize the precious little mission."

"What can I do, Baby?" I asked, defeated.

"What can you do?" She rocketed toward me from the couch, the anger strengthening her. She beat my chest with each word, "Do...not...leave...us...here...a...lone!" Her power dissolved, she fell against me. I held her up as the sobs overtook her once more.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

The brakes released with a second thud and the plane began the taxi toward the end of the runway. I wiped away a single tear and looked to ensure no one saw. Seated to my left, Lieutenant Meadows gave a small nod to tell me that he had, then looked away. I pretended that dust was irritating my eye until I saw the small photo he cupped inside his hands. The Lieutenant and his wife had a new daughter last month. I could not imagine missing the first year of my child's life.

I decided Lieutenant Meadows was suffering enough for both of us, so I fought the memory of my five-year-old son. I knew I would lose my composure if I remembered telling him goodbye. I pulled another deep breath and tried to blow away the pain. I turned back to my notebook, where a corner of gray paper poked out from within. My throat swelled as I pulled out the crayon picture of a man in green and brown spotted clothes. The man's right arm ended with a crooked flagpole that supported an awkward banner of red lines and a big blue box, his left fused with a smaller green and brown man. The smaller green and brown man said, "I love You, Daddy. From your litl solder."

A Polaroid of my son, James, hung from a piece of clear tape beneath his drawing. He wore undersized green BDUs and held a black plastic M-16 I had bought him for his birthday. In the white border below the snapshot, Jennifer's cursive read, "We love you, and we can't wait for you to come home." The picture took me back to when I left him this morning—I had tried all day to keep it from my mind.

"Why are you leaving, Daddy?" he had asked.

"I have to go work, Buddy."

"Are you going to war?"

"Sort of," I answered, wishing he never had learn the word 'war.'

"Can I go with you?" he asked smiling.

"No, James. Daddy has to go there by himself. You can stay home to protect Mommy, okay?"

"No!" he screamed. "I wanna go with you. I'm a soldier, too. I'm your little soldier." His small arms clamped around my neck.

"Listen, James." I tried to pull his face back to look at me, but he locked his arms to keep it buried in the side of my neck. "I will come back home to you real soon, okay. I'd stay right here with you and Mommy if I could, but I'm not allowed. The commander said it's time for us to go. Will you be a tough little guy and take care of your mom?"

He shook his head violently. "No. No. I wanna go with you and be a soldier, too." His warm tears slid down the inside of my collar.

Beside us Lieutenant Meadows was handing his wife a three-year-old. She juggled the screaming red-haired boy with the newborn she pressed against her breast. He kissed his wife, ran a sleeve across his face, and nodded to me.

"No. I don't want you to leave me. Please, Daddy, let me go with you," James cried when he looked up to notice the last of the troops leaving their families.

"I love you, James," I whispered.

I gave Jennifer a last hug and kiss, and then pried James from my neck. She grasped his waist as he kicked at the air in front of him.

"No Daddy. No, don't leave me," he repeated between loud sobs.

Jennifer mouthed, "I love you." She bit her lip and let more tears roll from her puffy eyes.

Neither the rub of my sleeve across my face nor a deep, useless breath of cool air calmed me. I hoisted a large duffle bag over each shoulder and hiked what seemed like 30 miles across the hangar as my son cried. Lieutenant Meadows met me at the door of the hangar, where we shared a final look toward our families. They gazed at us expectantly, as if world peace might break out any moment and send us back to their arms.

The plane jerked to a stop at the end of the runway and the engines roared to top speed. The brake discs clanked free one last time. The men in the cockpit had awakened the giant metal beast, and it yearned to fly. It lurched forward as if an enormous chain had been loosed from its neck. The force pushed us toward the tail; our belts pulled forward. We jerked and bobbed in unison while a greater force controlled us from somewhere outside our dark container. Beside me, the tires clicked faster and faster over the seams between the slabs of the runway. The forward end of the cargo bay inched upward, pushing us deeper into our seats. The floor made a weightless dip as the rear tires cleared the runway, and then the gear whined upward. Outside the portholes, gray clouds flashed past the glass. The landing gear slammed into the uplocks, the hydraulic pump silenced, and the roar eased to a purr in the best's domain.

The men that also lined the cargo bay stared at nothing in the air before them. I pulled my cap over my face and pretended to sleep. My first mission to blockade the painful memories failed; I could no longer stop the tears that pushed against my face, imagining my wife and son watching the sky as our plane vanished into the clouds and I wept like a free man.

Ben Simerman (recipient of the Prose Editor's Choice award)



Stacy Patrick

The Veteran's Daughter

Cold war thawed, the red machine whined
And whimpered in its death, and died—
And the money never trickled down,
And there were tears between her father's fingers
As he blinked awake at noon to shuffle newsprint,
Draw circles, brood and sigh.
A stranger in the daylight hours, he shambled from
Garage to basement, collecting dust on his white collar
And her mother was away. She came home stony-eyed
And harried, weary with the weight of tiny paychecks
In the pocket of her coat.

These were her parents: their time was up, their tired battles gone,
But she grew to grow their flowers once again,
To paste their bird-tracks on her placards,
To shout their rage, to rally for the dove—
But her cries fell away, as her father's rages fell,
Flat and impotent; we forgot the loss so quickly—

And so we gave our best away, our fathers' children,
Just turned twenty-one, or eighteen, or twenty,
A slender generation, just young grunts humping toward
Another undeclared waste.

Kristen Come

Jesus Didn't Smoke

You ask me how I got this scar? I'll tell you. But it's not a pretty story. It begins with the birds.

No, let me change that. It begins with the environmentalists. For years, they said, "You're destroying the planet! Do you want to live in a trash-filled desert wasteland?"

Sure. Fuck, I didn't care. I'll be dead and be part of that decaying organic garbage everyone's talkin' about long before any of that happens. That's what I thought. Jesus, that's what everyone thought.

So we'd stand outside our buildings, sweltering in the summer heat. Smoking. Hell, everyone smokes. At least, we used to. And I ask you: What do you do with your cigarette butts? What does anyone do with cigarette butts?

You toss 'em.

I mean, come on, that's what people have been doing with their butts for decades. And due to <cough> health concerns (ha!), most people smoke filters.

Now, stop me if you've heard this. No, not literally, of course you've heard this. Everyone has. I mean, come on, who smokes non-filters? Dead people who aren't quite dead yet. Well . . . nobody smokes 'em now.

So every smoker in the world tossed their little bundles of cotton and asbestos to the curb.

Lemme ask you something. You look old enough to remember. You ever toss bread to ducks or pigeons? You know how they'd swarm over it? Well, you could do the same thing with cigarette butts. They'd pick it up and shake their heads in disgust to get the nasty things away. Funnier than hell, let me tell you.

Well, imagine my surprise the 1st time I ever saw a pigeon eat the fucking thing! Whole. I thought maybe it was a mistake. Then it walked over and ate another freshly tossed butt. Jesus.

That night I got online and it turns out that American Gray pigeons have been rearranged and they redecorated their insides somewhat. Their metabolism had somehow adjusted, and it turns out they are now the largest tobacco consumer group in the world.

So who cares, right? Not I. At least, I *didn't*.

Did you ever see that Hitchcock flick? Not Psycho. Jesus, sometimes you make me wonder. Anyway.

So it happened like this. Me and Curtis, excuse me, *Curtis and I*, were standing out in front of Telenium, taking our customary smoke break. Except now, we're standing in a fucking lake of fiendin' birds. I mean, these flying city chickens had it so bad, even kicking 'em wouldn't discourage them for too long.

So we were standing there, filling our lungs with the black, hot goodness, when Curtis screams. I hadn't even seen it. These bastards were fast.

But I never saw it. My face became filled with a gray, feathery piercing pain. A fucking bird landed on my face and in the process of getting the half-smoked Marlboro out, its left claw ripped through my right pupil, iris, and disconnected my retina. It's right claw dug into my left cheek and into upper gums. It's beak tore off about half of my lower lip to get the dog-end out.

Curtis got off lucky. He was in the process of taking the cigarette for its flick when he got attacked. His bird only tore up his hand and forehead.

When we got to the hospital, we found a queue of people with similar injuries. Apparently, flocks of these dirty lice-infested bastards had been attacking innocent smokers all over town. Jesus.

Lying in the hospital, I saw on the news how our city was not alone. These flocks had attacked people all over the place. Me and Curtis were some of the more fortunate.

One guy had a pair of pigeons fight on his face for his cigarette.

A whole shitload people had heart attacks and died on the spot.

The worst? Some chick was attacked; she was pregnant. Miscarried, she was fucked up so bad. When they say smoking is bad for your unborn children, they weren't kidding. Yeah, I know. I'm going to hell for that.

So sue me. Jesus, I'm missing part of my face! What the fuck do I care?

So that's the whole story. Beginning to End. Of course I want a cigarette. But you can't smoke anywhere anymore. Not inside, not outside. It's illegal. It's public hazard. Like sewers alligators that fly. Jesus.

No. . . Jesus knew. Jesus didn't smoke.

Adicus Garton (recipient of Honorable Mention)

Spinning in a Squared Room

Spinning around until you fall on your ear and the ringing sensation lets you listen to the inner voice telling you to dance smile and forgive for you lived your life in a dream so startling and yet they mold you into the person you least want to be your greatest enemy on this planet which moves in a slow mysterious cycle that many are unaware of the persistent cold that makes a gargantuan noise in the stomach of a child who never learned to walk around in the circles of the inner wave that crashes down and kills an eagle because its prey looks to kill the elephant with tusks the size of a kangaroo's tail smooth yet awkward like the feeling you get from time to time yet time is the feeling and you look for other ways to be artistic and all you need is inspiration to let them in on the little secret and the little secret is about all the people who try to change society with the flutter of their left eye who see the world through the eyes of a ninety year old man who has suffered because he never worked a day but if he had he would have realized politics don't matter and his life was only at its prime the day he was born yet everyday hundreds of babies are born without an eye for hate and with an extra hand to lend it away to believers who just go to church to say they escaped for a mere moment with their god to a land that only men with a taste for strong bourbon and forgiveness from the way they acted when they took that one last drink over a thousand times and ended up spinning like a lunatic with institutionalized white walls closing in on him and he fell slowly and then listened for that one last ringing sensation of voices

Karen Lenhart

5-year-plan

Hope wound strings
Of floating cobwebs-
Delicacy and unexpected
persistence.

Hope flung such strings
at the distant warm stars –
to tug and to strain against
the untouchable...

within my palled palace,
my briar kingdom of solace,
my Timidity rivals the rabbits –
Burrowing beneath my walls—
my Hope rests in strings,
galaxy thinned stings.

Red-tipped thickets hide me
from roaming societal voices.
Gliding over bowed grass,
Words are bent.
Pricked on entry,
they leak hope.

Stronger strings are needed,
Strings of steel and Courage,
Stronger strings are needed
To yank down the stars!

Krishna Wright



