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Spring 1989

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1989

Grp. 3

ET CETERA

spring

1989



STATE OF TEXAS

County of ... State of Texas
I, the undersigned, Clerk of the County of ... State of Texas, do hereby certify that the within and foregoing is a true and correct copy of the original as the same appears in the records of the County of ... State of Texas.

Witness my hand and seal of office this ... day of ... 19...

Attest my hand and seal of office this ... day of ... 19...
Clerk of the County of ... State of Texas

Notary Public for the State of Texas
My commission expires this ... day of ... 19...

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Editorially Speaking...

As a quick glance at the magazine will indicate, contents run the gamut from serious to silly to science fiction, and a variety of shades in between. Variety being the spice of life, Et Cetera offers you a veritable smorgasbord. Enjoy!

Humbly speaking, I believe the contents of this magazine can stand tall alongside any university's collection of student writing.

Special thanks to Dick Spilman for being there with advice and experience when I needed it, and to anyone else who might have been omitted from these credits.

--Danny Cantrell, Co-Editor

Thanks to my ghost editors and friends Mary and Deb. Also to "Bud" who rode on submission roundup and fiction corral. To P. H.--limitless gratitude and admiration (nothing matters)!

Special appreciation and thankfulness to John Teel, Art Stringer and Bob Darling, and to others who committed time and faith (Lynne Thompson, Eric Kumlien).

And to Ulysses, who has been to places I only write about: Could words be any more or less zen guns?

--Stephanie Dower, Co-Editor

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The Treehouse

In my dream I'm climbing barefoot down a splintery and lopsided wooden ladder and a tiny sliver of rotted oak shoots into my left arch. I know it's my left arch because that's the foot that twitches beneath the sheet and wakes me up with a final jerk. The ladder doesn't lead anywhere except down and I descend for hours with dreamlike patience before reaching the splinter.

I've had this dream once or twice a week for the last three years and I'm getting damn tired of it. It started a few nights after my first husband found the neighbor-kid dead in his treehouse with an empty bottle of New York wine, a stack of Sports Illustrated and a couple of bloody razor blades lying burgundy beside his gray body. Tyler lurched to a space between the boards big enough to be called a window and threw up his lunch. The neighbor-kid was removed an hour later.

Judd walked around like his presence was important. He wore a serious scowl on his thirtyish face, illuminated in changing colors of yellow, red, blue and white from the lamps that hung above the small stage. He slid the skinny white fingers of his left hand along the neck of the guitar that was strapped across his shoulder and pressed flat against his thin abdomen. He turned his back to the audience and all eyes within reading distance glanced at the white letters on his black T-shirt: WHAT MATTERS? The letters turned different colors under the lamps.

"This guy certainly doesn't," Scott said above the screech of the guitar, and I leaned across the little round table and said, "What?" "This guy on stage doesn't matter to me," he said loudly, and I sat back smiling. I knew my second husband was too old to enjoy that kind of nightclub, but we had, both agreed it was an evening to do something different. I liked the idea of trying to carry on a serious conversation by shouting above the almost damaging din of electric guitars, synthesizers, and drum machines.

It was Scott's turn to lean toward me. "Is this what they call punk?" he asked and took

a small sip of his vodka tonic. "I'm not sure," I told him, and he looked at me as though I was supposed to know those things as a youngster of twenty-six. I sipped my beer and said loudly, "His name is Judd?"

"Whose?"

"The guy on stage. I saw his poster up by the bar."

"What?"

"His poster." I pointed and Scott glanced briefly toward the bar. He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

"I hope you brought aspirin," he yelled.

I smiled and nodded. "Judd acts like this music is really important. See how serious his face is. Kind of contradicts his T-shirt."

Judd turned toward the audience again and glared at us as though we were too stupid to comprehend his musical genius. He switched on the drum machine and adjusted the rhythm to a slow, monotonous DA-da DA-da DA-da. With his left hand he plucked randomly at the strings on the neck of the guitar and with his right he pressed over and over the same three keys on an electric keyboard. The sound was something like a train coming to a stop.

"Want to dance?" Scott asked and rolled his eyes toward the colorful ceiling. I laughed and remembered for the first time in a long time the look on my brother's face when I told him Tyler was asking me for a divorce because the neighbor-kid had killed himself in his treehouse. Aaron had rolled his eyes toward a thunderous, olive sky and said, "You've got to be kidding." By the time the first large, slow drops of rain had begun pelting the aluminum roof of Mom's carport, Aaron knew the whole story. My first husband was a broken man. A brittle man broken by a child's decision to die. He had said all the newspaper words--how tragic, how untimely, oh the grief-stricken parents, why why why--he had said them all but had felt something different, something stickier and unrelenting, something he couldn't get off or out of his skin. I told Aaron that Tyler had begun acting strangely. That he had become sullen and

would stop me in the middle of a sentence and say, I don't want to talk any more. He even started climbing onto the garage roof on clear nights to see if the planets had drifted closer together, the Earth caught in the middle like a little yellow onion in a ten-pound bag of Bermudas. I started calling Aaron. "He just needs time," Aaron told me, then would ask, "Do you think the neighbors have noticed yet?"

Two months after the boy's funeral, Tyler came down from the roof one night and walked into the kitchen where I was mixing a drink and talking to my brother on the phone. "We have to get a divorce," Tyler said, and I stopped talking and stopped stirring and on the other end of the line, Aaron said, "Danni? Sis, are you still there?"

On stage Judd scowled at the keyboard and lifted his hand from it long enough to position the attached microphone close to his face. He leaned toward it, pressed his open lips against it, and made moaning noises that grinded out of the speakers like a clogged garbage disposal. He turned some of the moans into words and I could understand only a few.

Come in here and kill me, Judd whined and sucked at the microphone with red and yellow lips.

Scott sipped his drink and looked around the bar with half-hearted interest. All the tables were small and round and pink-haired people huddled around them and banged beer cans to the rhythm of the drum machine. Some (the younger ones) laughed and picked at their sparkling hair and watched each other nervously to be sure they weren't doing anything weird or out of place. The older ones didn't smile and they didn't look at anyone but Judd.

"Having a good time?" I shouted at Scott.

"What?"

"Are you having a good time?"

"I'm not sure. Are you?"

"It's different."

"You can say that again."

"What?"

"Never mind."

Come in here and kill me
come in here come in come
come.

"If this guy wants to die so badly," Scott shouted, "why doesn't he just do it and put the rest of us out of our misery?"

I downed a large gulp of

beer and laughed. Nodding toward the other tables, I told him, "You seem to be the only one in misery."

"Come on, Danni, you can't tell me you like this stuff."

"No, but I can accept it."

"For what?"

"For what it is."

Come in here and blow me.

"What is it?"

"Ridiculous. Funny. A change."

"Not for the better."

"I thought we both wanted something different."

"So did I. Maybe I was wrong."

Scott emptied the glass of vodka and tonic water down his throat and leaned his head back against the fake-brick wall. I could see his cheeks quiver with the vibration, and he closed his eyes as if to shut out the generation that followed, albeit quickly and unfocused, his own. I couldn't help but wonder why we had really gone to that place.

Come in here come in here goddamn you.

I knew it wouldn't work. Our marriage, pale and nervous after only a year, was definitely in need of something different, but we weren't going to find it at the Not ME Cafe. I wondered if we'd gone there knowing the noise would put a safe wall between us. Scott opened his eyes and looked carefully at me like an art critic pondering a cryptic work. I had to smile at the thought of myself as a piece of art.

"Why are you smiling?" he asked above one of Judd's most sexual moans.

"Because I'm not a painting."

"You're not a what?"

"A painting."

"Who said you were?"

"Your eyes."

"I don't get it."

"What?"

"I said I don't get it."

"I know. Get what?"

"That my eyes say you're a painting."

Come in here and stick me
stick me man.

"You just have that look. This isn't working, is it?"

"What?"

"I said this isn't working."

"I know what you said. What isn't working?"

"Our night out for something different."

*My first husband
was a broken man.
A brittle man
broken by a
child's decision
to die.*

A dull-eyed waitress appeared at our table and held up two fingers. Scott nodded and she disappeared without uttering a word. I finished my beer and Judd finished his song, ending with a violent pluck at the guitar which snapped the string from the neck and stood it up shivering and silent in the stark white light. My eardrums ached from the sudden silence and I took the opportunity to lean close to Scott and say, "I'm going to the restroom." He glanced toward the bar and didn't say anything. I picked up my purse and wound through the tables as Judd sped up the drum machine and didn't seem to notice the unattached string.

I walked into the empty restroom and immediately had to decide whether the pressure on my bladder was great enough to make me tolerate the stench and filth. The first thing my eye caught was a sanitary napkin lying bloody-side-up across the rim of the grimy wash basin. Jesus Christ. Wet paper towels were scattered about the floor. The dispenser was empty and hung lopsided on the dirty, peeling wallpaper that appeared to be a beach scene with seashells and once-bright umbrellas placed at regular intervals against the dull-gray sand. Someone had used eye liner to turn a faded pink shell into a yawning vagina and a closed umbrella into an erect penis. Above the latter, orange lipstick spelled out DOWN ON IT and above that in blue ink HOW FAR.

I took it all in in a matter of seconds and hurried to the third and last toilet stall at the far end of the small room. There were no doors on any of the stalls and I couldn't bear the thought of any pink-haired beauty trotting by me as I huddled over the wet, shit-stained commode.

I had trouble urinating while holding my breath so I let it out and sucked it in through a tiny slit in my lips. The air sounded vulgar going through my teeth and I could barely hear it above Judd's muffled but throbbing noises. I wanted to be zipped safely back into my jeans before anyone came in but my bladder seemed to have decided to hang on to the beer for as long as it could. On the metal partition to my right, someone

had scratched PEACE IS SUICIDE and I felt my thighs start to ache with tension and weariness. I wondered if the neighbor-kid had found peace.

Tyler, committed to never finding it, had spent three days and nights on the livingroom couch after returning home from the tree-house. He would occasionally get up to use the bathroom or to stare out the back door toward the dead boy's yard where the tree stood dark and obscene like a self-ordained memorial to the end of childhood. "Stop staring at it," I would say to him, and he would say, "I can't."

He was twenty-two and acting old. I was twenty-three and growing sick of my husband's morbidity. The one thing—his solemnity—that had attracted me to him in the first place had become the thing that was pushing me away from him. I had thought it made him seem mature. He was a quiet kid with an after-school job in a funeral home and I was an even quieter kid sitting in a car out front while my father, mother, and brother were inside looking at my dead grandfather. I had refused to view his body and couldn't bear the sound of sobbing relatives, but I went half-way on paying my respects. I figured sitting outside the funeral home would be good enough with Grandpa and Daddy said it was okay with him.

Tyler had walked out the front door and stood on the steps leading down to the parking lot. I watched him from the back seat of the car and thought how odd to see such a young man in a three-piece suit. Leaning against a wall, he unbuttoned his vest, loosened his tie, and drew a pack of cigarettes from an inside jacket pocket. He looked like a little boy playing gangster in his dad's clothes. I leaned forward to get a better look and he noticed me as he raised a match to his lips where the cigarette dangled.

I sat back quickly and he looked away but we caught each other sneaking glances several times, and once I thought I saw him smile.

He took a long cigarette break and I pretended it was because I was there. When I went back the next day for Grandpa's second and final showing, Tyler returned to the steps for a smoke and after he tossed the butt aside,

Someone had used eye liner to turn a faded pink shell into a yawning vagina and a closed umbrella into an erect penis.

he approached the car, looked through my open window and said, "Hi there." We talked for half an hour, dated for two years and were married before either was graduated from college.

He dreamed of death—usually his own—nearly every night and would often sit up suddenly in bed before he was actually awake. I wanted him to see a doctor but he said he didn't mind the dreams and felt he was learning something from them. What that something was I never knew and he never explained. Then the neighbor-kid cut his wrist, ankles and throat, and Tyler cut himself from our marriage.

I heard Judd's second song come to an end and felt my bladder become more cooperative. The restroom door creaked open and slurred girls' voices rushed in, still loud from talking above the music. "Are you okay?" one asked, and the other answered, "Shit, I don't know, are you?" They made vulgar comments about the owner of the sanitary napkin and I realized there was no toilet paper in my stall. Just as well, I probably wouldn't have wanted to touch it if there were any, and all I could think about was getting the hell out of the filthy place.

One girl went into the first stall and I heard her cursing her stuck zipper. Looking straight ahead, I walked past her and she said, "Hey. Hey, girl." The other girl was brushing her hair in front of the cracked mirror fastened to the door, and I stood behind her not knowing which way to look. "Hey you, girl," the one in the stall said again, and I glanced around the floor and said, "What?"

"Aren't you the girl with that old guy out there?" she asked, and the other one laughed and watched me through the mirror.

"He's not that old," I told her and felt suddenly disgusted about talking to a stranger sitting on a commode.

"Oh, hey, no offense, you know, but is he your dad?"

"No. My husband."

Through the stall partition I heard her whistle. "Must be good, huh?"

"I'm satisfied," I said coldly and stepped around the other one toward the door. She

moved her hand quickly to hold it shut then turned around and pressed her back against the mirror. Facing me, she ran the brush through her short, choppy, white hair and smiled.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'd like to leave."

"Why?" she asked as though she really didn't know.

"Because I'm finished."

"Don't get mad."

"Don't block the door."

"Stay awhile and talk. Are you drunk?"

"No, and this isn't my idea of a place to chat."

"Oh it's not so bad, just a dirty rag and some godawful smells."

"Shit!" the one in the stall yelled. "Now the goddamn zipper won't go up!"

The one with the brush giggled and looked at me through glazed eyes and thick, blue mascara. "Are you a singer?" she asked.

"No. Look, will you move away from the door?"

"Are you a waitress?"

"No. Now let me out."

"A teacher?"

"No! Do I have to yell for help?"

"Who could hear you?" the one in the stall called out, and I knew she was right. I was trembling slightly with anger and fear and didn't know whether to start slugging or crying.

"What are you?" the one with the brush asked, and I tried glaring at her with violence in my eyes.

"What the hell difference does it make?"

"I just want to know."

Maybe bargaining would work. "If I tell you, will you let me out?"

"Only if you tell me the truth."

She giggled. Jesus. "I'm a writer," I told her, and the one in the stall walked out laughing. She stood beside me and tried to see her reflection in the mirror around her friend. Her pink and yellow hair was shoulder-length and tipped in green. She puckered and flattened her lips several times then ran her hand into her blouse to make adjustments. "What do you write?" she asked and tugged on a heavy breast.

"Different things. Stories, poems, now can I go?"

"I don't believe you," said the one with the brush.

He would occasionally get up to use the bathroom or to stare out the back door toward the dead boy's yard where the tree stood dark and obscene like a self-ordained memorial to the end of childhood.



"Well, I can't help that. You asked me and I told you, now get the hell away from the door."

"What kind of poems do you write? Are they songs?"

"If you hum along."

"Say one for us."

"What?"

"Say one. Tell us a poem you wrote."

"She means recite one," said the other who was now adjusting her shirt down into her jeans.

"You've got to be kidding," I said, and my hands shook and perspired.

"No, I'm not kidding," said the one against the mirror. "I want to hear a poem."

"I don't remember any. I just write them, I don't memorize them."

"Bullshit. If you write them, you know them."

"No, I don't, just lines here and there."

"Okay, let's hear a few lines."

My mind was void of poetry. I wanted Scott. I didn't understand why he'd left me in there so long without calling the police or at least the damn bouncer to break down the door. I couldn't grasp what was happening. I had got up from a little round table to relieve myself of two beers and now I was being held hostage in a stinking toilet by two teenagers with strange hair and unnatural demands. I couldn't possibly recall one line of anything I've ever written and figured the only way out was to make up something that would appease the girls. I remembered the scratches on the stall partition and decided it was okay to steal material in a crisis.

"Peace is suicide," I began, and both girls watched me carefully. "Suicide is peace. It's on the sidewalks and everywhere." I stopped. One of them said, "Go on."

"The treehouse is gone. The marriage is gone. I'm gone." I had their undivided attention. "Childhood is existential. He chose to leave it. Peace is awkward. It cries from embarrassment. It cries from pain. It cries."

The one with the brush said, "Wow," very softly and I grabbed the door handle. I didn't see much, just the thrust of one into the

other, a quick and colorful union, and the brightness of the hallway flooded with white stage light. I didn't hear much, just the scratch and hiss of musicless speakers and the murmur of indistinguishable voices. A few heads raised as the pale woman rushed by them but most didn't seem to notice. Scott rose from his chair as I wound my way toward him. His look asked, "What's wrong?" and I tugged on his arm and said, "Let's go."

Scott, wonderful Scott, didn't hesitate. He pressed his palm against my lower back and guided me with it through the tables, past the bar and out the front door. On the sidewalk he took my hand and pulled me gently and quickly toward the car. Not until we were inside with the motor running did he turn to me and say, "Danni, what the hell is going on?"

"I was captured in the john by two weirdos who made me recite a poem."

"What in Christ's name does that mean?"

"You heard me. Let's just go."

Scott put the car in gear and we pulled out into the empty street. He didn't ask any more questions so I volunteered the story. When I finished, he said, "Do you really think peace is suicide?"

I know I'll have the dream again tonight. I plan for it. Rehearse it. I see the wood of the ladder as if through a microscope. My eyes detect every groove, every particle, every atom. They can even see the smell of it. It smells like sawdust after a warm rain, the old oak storage bin that I think belonged to my dead grandpa's father and that we kept in the attic of my parents' house and that's probably still there. As you climbed the skinny, pull-down stairs to the attic, the bin sat on the right and became the first odor you smelled as your head broke into the air space above the floor. It was empty and I asked Daddy one day why we had an empty storage bin in the attic when it should be filled with something. He told me it was full of memories and, being a kid of nine or ten, I said, But memories don't take up space, and he said, Oh but they do. I think I laughed or something but Daddy's eyes were serious and I never

I had got up from a little round table to relieve myself of two beers and now I was being held hostage in a stinking toilet by two teenagers with strange hair and unnatural demands.

asked any more about the storage bin.

The ladder in my dream is dry and yet damp with the despair of being caught in a dream. Sometimes I feel the same despair and wake up sweating and irritable over the T-shirt sticking to my breasts and stomach. Over the last three years I've come to accept and often to overlook the dream, but I can't stand, much less overlook, the tiny stream of perspiration that collects

between my breasts and stands stagnant on a bony floor, dammed up by rising flesh and kept warm by a cotton ceiling. Many times I pull the shirt off and Scott wakes up to find me naked and wet and he says that's one of the reasons he loves me.

I want to call him Timmy. The boy in the treehouse. But I know that's not his name—that wasn't his name—but it feels like it should've been. Timmy is a child's name and the boy in the treehouse began and ended a child. The name haunts me. I don't know who his ghosts were.

Scott turns to me now and rests his head on my pillow. He says something about being sorry for the lousy night and I say something like it wasn't your fault.

"I can't believe you really stood in the bathroom and recited poetry about suicide," he says softly, almost amused.

"I didn't have much choice," I tell him, not at all amused.

"We shouldn't have gone to that place."

"We agreed on something different."

"Are we that desperate for something different?"

I don't answer that because I don't know how. Scott lays his arm across my stomach and I stare at the white ceiling, yellow-looking in the glow of the hallway light. The pattern is barely distinguishable, it looks almost like interwoven tree rings. But not really. It just looks that way because I want it to.

"What are you thinking about?" Scott asks and I tell him tree rings.

"Why tree rings?"

"See the pattern in the ceiling? Does it look like tree rings to you?"

"No. It looks like it needs new paint." He lifts his arm from my stomach. "You're

A dead twelve-year-old-boy ruined my first marriage. How dare the little bastard. Scott laughs too and then we both quiet down, ashamed of our humor.

thinking about that boy, aren't you?"

"What boy?"

"The kid who killed himself."

"I guess."

"It's no wonder you have that dream so much. You always think about him at night."

"He's easy to think about."

"He ruined your first marriage."

I have to laugh at that. A dead twelve-year-old-boy ruined my first marriage.

How dare the little bastard. Scott laughs too and then we both quiet down, ashamed of our humor.

"You know what I don't understand about it?" he says, rising to an elbow and looking down at me.

"What?"

"Why the boy's death bothered Tyler so much. I mean I know it was a tragedy and that anyone could be bothered by such a grizzly sight, but Tyler fell apart. He gave up his home and his wife and half his sanity, and he worked in a fucking funeral home for four years. He dealt with death every day, it was routine, it was a paycheck, he even liked dreaming about it. So what happened? What pushed him over the edge?"

"I don't think it was a push. I think it was a gentle leap. He was—he is—fascinated by strangeness, by dark things that normal people don't understand and he considered me and our marriage and our lives together normal, and it was too hard to be strange and dark in a normal life. So the boy's death was a good excuse to leap to the other side, to get over there where it's more fun and exciting to have people stare at you when you're not looking and whisper about you behind your back. He sat on the garage roof because he knew it bugged me. Because he knew I was downstairs mixing drinks and telling my brother how worried I was, how I couldn't get him to talk about it or go to a doctor, how I was even afraid of him at times. I wonder how many nights he sat up there and planned his entrance into the kitchen with divorce on his tongue. I must've been the perfect audience. He got everything from me—disbelief, shock, tears, anger, pleading—and finally resignation. That's the stage I was in when

he made his grand exit a few weeks later."

"When did you figure all that out?"

"Just now."

Scott rolls his eyes toward the ceiling and falls back onto his own pillow. "Why did you leave the hallway light on?" he asks.

"I thought you left it on."

He doesn't answer. I get up and walk out into the hallway where the walls and carpet and ceiling are well-lit and the tree rings gone. Maybe I won't have the dream again tonight. Maybe the ladder is folded or covered or even fallen and will wait for another night to be erected, to feel the weight or weightlessness of my body, the smooth flesh of my bare feet, stepping slowly down and down and always down, always slowly, always bare and unknowing, surprised every time by the prick of the splinter, the same damn splinter.

A Visit from Prometheus

He has carried me to this place
and I am well received.
The desert has receded
and I drink sweetwater from silent hands.
All that has passed is now arriving.

He stands in a corner passing out balloons
with twitching hands.
I hear the skins pop sometimes
and the small air merge soundlessly
with the large air.

Celebration is everywhere except
the balloonman's eyes.
Something before us pulls his sight
to a place we touch
without holding.

Nothing is still.
The pitch of the sun and
rhythms of color are bled into the air.
All is delight, and wonder,
and a song of the creatures.

As our celebration continues
he returns to his desert nightmare,
where all we leave out is inserted.
By nightfall the limp balloon skins
are swept neatly into piles
and left for the wind to scatter.

Rory Perry

Sweet Perfection

I frequently have chili sauce
On my upper lip
When the gorgeous guys find me

The sugar-barbies at their sides
Smile painfully
As I quickly clean my face

Their praline-cream curls
Are sprayed to immobility
They look and smell like cotton candy
Their flawless skin is
Soft, supple and honey-sweet

It hurts my teeth to look at them

These females glitter and twinkle
As they walk through rooms
Filled of men with sweet teeth

The boys and I
Are slap-on-the-back buddies
But romantically speaking, they treat me
Like a week-old spinach casserole

They squander their passion
On color-coated candy shells
Knowing all the while, some girls
Won't wash away in the rain

Dawn Johnson

Fermentation

Off rhyme I find
So assonant to say
The verse like wine
Pours forth unprayed.
These thoughts domestic
Slant chardonnay
Forms lines eclectic
With clots like corks
In bottled metric.

James A. McCoy

BLACKLIST

By W. David Hall

"Okay, listen up, folks," the writer said. "You all are familiar with the plot and have an outline of my story, so it shouldn't be too hard to keep up with me. The first chapter opens up on an airplane with a scene between the blonde stewardess working her way through med school and a passenger who will get killed immediately after the plane lands."

He walked up to the two characters he just described. He put an arm around each of them. "What I'm looking for is emotion. You two really don't know each other that well, but you both are aware something could develop. Don't rush things, just go with the emotion. I'm writing a novel and have millions of words to work with. Okay? Okay?" The writer sat down at the typewriter. He loaded a clean sheet of paper and cracked his knuckles. The characters took their positions on the plot, the stewardess behind a drink cart and the black character at an aisle seat.

"Let's sell this thing," the writer said.

Chapter One

He sat on Eastern Airlines flight 9, in first class, rubbing his hand over his stubby, salt-and-pepper beard while examining the menu. He couldn't decide on a down home cajun dinner or one of the more expensive Italian dishes.

A stewardess pushed the drink cart up the aisle and stopped at his seat. He ordered a margarita and watched her prepare the drink. Her blonde tresses swayed slightly with her every move. She handed him the result and, as their hands touched, he smiled.

"Nice. Nice," the writer said. "Play with the smile, baby."

There was a knock on the door.

"Damn. I hate writer's block," the writer said, rising from his seat. "I'll get the door. Stay where you are."

The author swung the door open. "This had better be important. I'm working on a..." A pistol was pointed in his face, stopping the rest of the sentence.

A man wearing a light brown trenchcoat entered the studio. He flashed a badge in the writer's face as he walked toward the plot and the two characters. He adjusted his tan porkpie hat and lit a cigarette.

"There is a good reason for all of this," he said. "We have been following one of these characters for quite some time now. You see," he said, taking a long drag on the cigarette, "the black character is under arrest."

The stewardess tried to push the cart out off the plot in order to avoid being seen, but another man in a light brown trenchcoat stopped her.

"What is the problem," the writer asked. "I was told that he's union. Just like the stewardess." He turned to the black character. "What's going on here?"

The black character stood and walked over to the officer. "I'm union, honest. I've got my card right here." He reached into his suit coat.

The policeman grabbed his wrist. "Don't give us any trouble, pal," he said. "We've checked your background. Union, character sketches, we got it all. But the union only protects you when you work within its limits. And our boys say you haven't been doing that lately." The man turned away to address the other policeman. "Book 'im, Dano."

Dano walked over to the black character. "Yo. You got the right to keep you trap shut.

Any bad mouthin' will be used in court against you. If you don't have the bills fo' a lawyer, the law will get you one. You hip?"

The black character stared at Officer Dano. He didn't understand a word that was being said. Dano stared back, then shook his head.

"Chief," Dano said. "This is our man, all right. Thinks he can't understand his own language."

The Chief sighed. "Play his game, for now. He'll get his later."

Dano reread the rights, this time in standard English. "Do you understand these rights?"

The black character nodded slowly as he was being handcuffed.

"Didn't you guys forget something," the writer interjected. "Like why you are arresting him."

The policeman turned back to the writer. "Listen. You are in enough trouble, so don't make it any worse. We only have a warrant for the arrest of the black character, but I can always find one for you." He reached into his trenchcoat and pulled out a wrinkled sheet of paper. "Now, if Mr. Bestseller here will keep quiet, I'll get to the charges." He cleared his throat. "Here are the charges: Violation of section 1.07.07 or a black character speaking without a dialect. Violation of the Convention Code for portraying a minority character in a first class airline seat without a permit or a white companion. Violation of the Benson Code for having been in a story under the name of "Bjorn." Need I go on?"

"I didn't even know about any Benson Code or anything else," the black character said.

"Ignorance of the law is no excuse, pal," the Chief said. "And we're keeping a record of what you say, so save yourself some trouble and shut up. We're going downtown."

Part II

The black character was pushed up the flight of huge, thick marble stairs and through the doorway of the police station. Paper wads littered Dano's desk. He brushed them aside when he sat down, revealing an old manual typewriter, a cup of black coffee, and a copy

of Ellery Queen magazine.

"Sit down," Dano commanded.

The black character sat in the wooden chair, balancing himself so that the thing wouldn't collapse.

Dano lit up another cigarette, then started typing the arrest. He stopped and peered at the black character.

"When are you all going to learn that you are just characters and we run the show," he said in a tone of voice barely audible over the sound of the typewriter. "Used to be, back when I was a beat cop in children's lit, a man could sit down and read decent, wholesome fiction and not worry about renegade characters trying to break conventions." He stopped typing and looked thoughtfully at the black character, still perched on the edge of the chair. "You can get help for this, you know."

The black character was silent. Dano pulled the finished report out of the typewriter and placed it in a thin folder. He turned the desk phone around so the dial faced the black character.

"You got one call," Dano said. "Better make it a good one."

The black character picked up the receiver and dialed the first number he could think of. Seventeen rings later, someone answered it.

"Preston, man," the black character said to his agent. "I'm at the police station. I got arrested because of that last story you set up."

"Sweetheart, relax," the agent said, in his best 'I still get my 10 per cent' voice. "look, I'll get the writer, then we'll be over. Don't worry." They hung up.

"You'll have to sit over there, until we can get the judge to rule on this case," he said. "Given your record, that shouldn't take too long."

The character walked to the bench and sat down. Smoke filled this part of the station. He looked for a window, but the only things on the drab grey walls surrounding him were wanted posters of renegade writers and their characters. A draft brought goose bumps to the character so he rubbed his hands together. Overwhelmed by the protests of authors and characters being dragged in, a pack of typewriters being furiously

"Here are the charges: Violation of section 1.07.07 or a black character speaking without a dialect."

pounded, and a telephone ringing, he didn't hear the footsteps coming toward him.

"There's got to be a better way to make a living," he said, sitting down on the bench.

The black character looked over at him and smiled. "When you find out what it is, you tell me. Wait. Haven't I seen you before?"

The man extended his hand. "You and every other soul who has watched television in the last week. I'm on the top ten situation comedy shows."

The black character looked puzzled. "So why are you here?"

"The scheduling got too political. My show was on top. Nobody could beat the ratings. Then some producer decided to take it all away. He decided to ask a few questions, stir up some shit, that sort of thing. Well, one day I'm on top, commercials, movie offers, the whole bit, and the next, I'm sitting in jail because somebody decided a show with a black couple who make over \$75,000 a year isn't real enough for television." He chuckled bitterly. "Even got me on the name. Said 'Cliff' wasn't suitable for a black character."

"Benson Code. Got me on it, too. Went by 'Bjorn' in a short story a while back."

"Bjorn? You portrayed a black man named Bjorn? Are you crazy? You should have checked that out before you signed on."

The black character was about to reply, but stopped when a hand grabbed his shoulder. He slowly turned around.

"Sweetheart, baby, we're here." It was his agent. "Just like I promised. Officer said your case comes up in about 10 minutes."

The black character exhaled loudly. "What am I going to do? I don't know anything about this stuff."

The writer cleared his throat. "I'm going to try to get you off on 'experimental fiction,' tell the judge we were just seeing what would happen if we dealt with a little bit of fantasy. We think it'll get you a suspended sentence."

Part III

The Chief stood before the judge, who peered at him over his reading glasses. "What's the problem here, Officer?"

"We found this man," the Chief said,

"I'm sitting in jail because somebody decided a show with a black couple who make over \$75,000 a year isn't real enough for television."

pointing to the black character, "in a short story flying first class without a permit or a white companion. Upon further investigation, we found that this character has a history of such offenses. Even went by 'Bjorn' in a previous story."

The judge paused, his face barely hiding his disbelief that a black character would do something like that. Finally, he spoke. "Well, I must allow defending counsel any remarks before I give sentence. Who will represent you, character?"

"I will, Your Honor," the writer said, while standing up. "And if it pleases the court, I would like to say that we, meaning the character and I, were engaging with a brush of fantasy, a 'what-if' scenario, if you will, that would allow such fiction, be it good or bad, to grow and mature within its own rights, just as its audiences must."

The judge raised his hand to stop the writer. "You're saying that this was . . ."

"An experiment, Your Honor, and nothing more. Just an experiment."

The crowd in the courtroom started to mumble. The judge banged his gavel on the bench. "I will have order in this court. . . ." He leaned back in his chair. "Proceed, Mr. Writer."

"Thank you, Your Honor," the writer said as his hands start to illustrate his every word. "I ask you, as a just and fair reader, a literary critic of the highest and finest regard, what damage can be done by such an experiment? And how are we, as mature readers and critics, critics and characters, supposed to embrace new ideas, yes, even our new selves if we cannot challenge the conventions imposed upon the massive whole by an elite and prejudging few? I mean, why are we here anyway?"

A lone voice called out from the crowd. "Beats having a real job."

The writer froze in thought. He turned to the black character and shrugged. "He's right." He then turned to the judge. "My client is as guilty as sin, your honor. Hang him."

The judge cleared his throat, then called the black character to the bench. "It is clear

to this court that this character has violated serious laws of our craft and should therefore be punished as an example to others of his kind. Normally, I would throw the book at you in a case like this, but I think, after hearing the wise words of your counsel, you would do well to take his advice. I hereby suspend the sentence. But be assured," the judge continued, "If I read such material again, I will not be so lenient. You do understand things, don't you, black character?"

The black character looked around the courtroom. His agent was talking with another writer, and the writer himself was busy scouting out new talent. He turned back toward the judge and nodded.

"Court is dismissed."

Epilogue

"Please have a seat, sir," the receptionist said. "The author will be with you in a moment."

He sat on the edge of a sofa, rubbing his salt-and-pepper beard while glancing through a magazine.

The speaker on the receptionist's desk crackled to life. "Send him in."

The man put the magazine down and walked into the office. He shook hands with the author and, at the author's request, took a seat. The author leaned against the desk, looking down on the character.

"As you know, I'm working on a novel and there's a small scene, a few sentences or so, that takes place in a crime-ridden ghetto. Your agent said you would be just the character for the part. What's your name, anyway?"

The man hesitated, then spoke. "My name be Leroy."

Haiku

Five, seven and five
syllable lines of black and
white mental photos

Karen McComis

Because I Couldn't Write Poetry

I never really understood how to write
poetry,
Until I took a class in creative carping
Given by the local comstock who came every
day
In a station wagon loaded with dead
kittens she
Had picked up on her way to class, Of
course I never
Went to class. I was too busy throwing
those damn cats
Under the passing cars that came roaring
down the street
Every half minute or so. So I never
really learned how
To write poetry, but I sure developed an
arm.

Eric Kumlien

Addicting Security

There was
a kind of joy
amid the awful,
awful
lone li ness
that filled my life
before love came,

an intriguing sense
of infinite amorous possibilities
waiting
behind the doorways
of inviting eyes
that must now remain
forever
unopened,
forever
untried.

Danny Cantrell

FIRST PLACE POETRY

A Close Finish

She says: I wish you were so dead you hadn't been born yet. In her head she says that. He says: Maybe we'll go to the Derby this year, let me put my hand under your skirt. He does that and she thinks about horses. Thinks about their hooves on his head. Thinks about removing them. Taking his broken head in her hands, caressing it back together, telling it I love you I love you I love you. She says: Will we really go to the races? and sinks farther into the couch. He says: Maybe. We'll see, oh yes, we'll see. His hand moves like a mop. She says: We won't go, I know we won't you say things like that at times like this, I know we won't. In her mind she says that. He says: That's my girl. She smiles because his voice has gone low and sexy like a priest's and he is Christ come down from the wood to douse his fingers in love, in her love, and everything she has ever felt is gone to him. She says: Be my stallion, because he has taught her to say things like that and he smiles because she's been so good. He whispers: That's my girl, we'll go to the races. She closes her eyes, hears hooves quick and splendid coming down the hall, hears herself: Oh Jesus, leaps into their path.

Pamela Steed Hill

Haiku

This is the biggest
waste of time imagina-
ble. Don't you think so?

Karen McComis

SECOND PLACE POETRY

Camping on Myrtle Beach, 1975

I remember the blank blue sky
and my mother's freckled hand
tugging my visions down,
while schoolgirls danced in
thin bikinis,
sexless to all but the young
boys sitting on their
sandy blankets.

And argument of morning glories
harbored the year of locusts
by our tent;
the chattering going all hours
of the night, like gossiping
nymphs, drunk on nectar,
time having meaning only to mortals.

Like tourists, we plowed
through gift shops and pier stores,
scrupulously fingering
the multicolored T-shirts
and flowered short sleeves,
as if they were fine China silks.

Father, in photographs now,
sits on the pier with his fishing rod
and funny hat, unknotting his line,
while silent breaking waves,
caught in the moment's flash,
hold pose, suspended
in that dimension
that exists only for the sake
of family albums.

Early morning, the beach, empty,
stretched out like a long bookshelf,
I searched for shark's teeth
and pretty shells,
needing only a nudge
to be washed away to England or France.
But my mother's hand,
wholly out of place
and startling,
always pulled me back.
Without interpretation,
it was a foreign voice
I heard in the shells.

Timothy M. Wellman

What God Has Brought Together

By Elgin Ward

Hobart Mayes lay belly-down on the rough belt of a moving conveyor and stared hard into the smothering darkness, trying to catch a glimpse of the light he knew should appear at any moment. The out-dated machinery groaned in its

straining effort to transport tons of coal and a shift of miners to the surface. His tired eyes turned the darkness into swirling purple clouds so thick they seemed to have a substance, like the heavy mists he had seen settle liquidly into the low areas of the hilly countryside. But this vapor was dirt-dry and so stifling that it sucked the air from his lungs and replaced it with invisible bits of itself. He shut his eyes but the clouds were there too, rushing toward him in breaking waves of ebony light.

He lowered his head to the crook of his arm, resting his neck muscles and surrendering his body to the random jerks and grinds of the conveyor. Deep down in the center of his brain a thought began to form, but he quickly opened his eyes to snuff it out. The carbide light from the lamp on his metal helmet made a small island of yellow flame in the pressing sea of blackness. He pushed up onto his elbows and looked straight ahead, seeing, or thinking he saw, the muffled lights of the other miners stretching out in a haphazard line along the tunnel. And then, just above these half-imagined lights he saw another, a tiny dot of brightness bouncing and shimmering eerily off in the distance.

Hobart breathed his relief and watched as the dot grew, first into a ball and then into a large, bright disc. He could now see the end of the conveyor sticking out through the

opening like an obscene tongue, and he pressed his body hard against the belt to miss the jagged roof of the mine entrance. Everything suddenly went from blackness to blinding light and the men rolled off the squeaking device one at a time and quickly, like parachutists leaving the belly of an airplane. Thirty-two feet past the opening the belt abruptly ended at the yawning mouth of the tipple.

Hobart's metal lunch pail hit the ground an instant before he did and clanged hollowly, its round lid popping loose and rolling toward the end of the conveyor. He chased it down and stood staring at the mounds of coal that had kept him company on his ride to the surface as they left the belt and tumbled the forty-odd feet to the sorting grate. He watched, quietly fascinated by the slow-motion fall of the black chunks until a sound behind him broke the spell.

The other miners were standing in a group back by the entrance, their eyes, unnaturally white against the black of their faces, fixed steadily on Hobart. He turned and stared back at them. The men began to shuffle their feet nervously and one broke away from the rest, walking slowly but deliberately toward Hobart. The man was as dark and dirt-smudged as the coal that sped by him on the noisy belt. He laughed an embarrassed half-laugh and faked a punch at the other's shoulder.

"You O.K. Hobe?" the man asked, his boot toe digging a small furrow in the coal-peppered dirt. He was a tall, gangling man with a hollow chest and the cough to match.

"Yeah, I'm all right. Why shouldn't I be?" Hobe's voice clearly expressed his anger. "And just what concern is that of your's anyway, Cabe? How come you're so all-fired concerned about my welfare all of the sudden? And why are you and those bastards over yonder staring at me?"

"Now wait a minute, Hobe," Cabe Phillips said, backing up a step and holding out his arms defensively. "Don't go getting all worked up. We're all friends here; you know that. It's just that with what happened down there today, well, we were just, you know, kind of wondering about you. Hell, Hobe, we just want to make sure you're all right, that's all." He squatted as he spoke and picked up the lid from the lunch pail, handing it to his friend with a nervous smile.

Hobe's face slowly smoothed and he accepted the lid with a nod of his head. He looked past Cabe and smiled at the others, waving a big callused hand in their direction. They waved back, seeming to relax as a whole and proceeded down the hill to the parking lot in gesturing bunches of two or three. He glanced at Cabe, his lips still spread in the same smile. The crank and roar of starting engines drifted up from the graveled lot below.

"I'm sorry, Cabe. I guess that thing down there did kind of get to me for a while. But I'm fine now. It's all just a bunch of shit, anyway. I'm not dumb enough to take something like that serious. Hell, you know me, I don't let anything bother me for long."

"That's my boy," Cabe said, putting his arm around Hobe's shoulder and squeezing hard. "Let's you and me head on down to my car. There's a bottle down there with our names written all over it."

The two men walked down the hill and climbed into the front seat of an old Ford sedan. Cabe pulled a paper sack from beneath the dash and masked its top back to reveal the neck of an amber bottle. He put the container to his lips and took a long, gurgling drink, then wiped his mouth with the back of

his hand and passed it to Hobe. He did the same. The sun was just touching the tree tops on a nearby hill and its slanting rays were turning a yellow-gold. The air was almost as warm as the whiskey.

"What say we finish this bottle up and go over to the Box for another one?" Cabe asked, turning in the seat to face Hobe and reaching for the liquor.

"I can't today," the miner answered, handing back the half-empty bottle. "I've got some things to do at home. Which reminds me, Cabe, have you still got your .32? I've got a weasel or something trying to get at my hens in the middle of the night and I'd sure like to give the varmint a little surprise party. I'd just be needing it for a couple of days." He nervously avoided his friend's eyes as he spoke.

"Hell yes. You know I do," Cabe coughed, his words beginning to slur a little. He reached back under the seat and gently removed a small, cloth-wrapped package. He unwrapped it carefully, revealing the gleaming, blue-steel shape of a pistol. He stared at it for a moment then replaced the cloth and handed it to Hobart. "Be careful. She's loaded for bear."

Hobe stuck the gun into the belt of his trousers. He could feel it press against the flesh of his stomach as he took another long drink from the bottle and opened the car door to leave. "Thanks, Cabe. I'll take good care of your gun. And thanks for your concern earlier. I got to be going."

"Aw, c'mon, Hobe. Just one more bottle. Hell, I'll even buy it."

"I can't, Cabe. Not today. I've got to go." He was backing away from the car as he spoke. "Maybe tomorrow. Thanks again." He turned and hurried on around the rim of the

parking lot to a set of railroad tracks that led away from the mine. He could hear his friend's coughing and slurred pleas in the air behind.

He hurried along the cindered rail bed, his boots hitting every other cross tie and his arms swinging in wide arcs. He kept this pace for a good ten minutes. When he came to a small metal trestle that carried the tracks across a narrow creek, he slowed down. He was

"Cabe, have you still got your .32? I've got a weasel or something trying to get at my hens in the middle of the night."

nearly home now and he wanted a few minutes to collect his thoughts. Half-way across the little bridge he stopped and leaned over the pipe railing. The water below lay in a wide, shallow pool and he saw his reflection floating lazily on the calm surface. He saw a tall man with deep-set eyes and dark, hollow cheeks. The reflection removed its cap and he saw a too-high forehead and a thick wad of dark blonde hair. He saw the shimmering green of reflected trees and he saw the rusted underbelly of the old trestle. And he saw his wife. He saw a shadowy form of her down among the rocks of the creek bottom, smiling up at him flirtingly and winking her eye. He saw his wife Pauline and straightened up quickly, continuing on across the bridge and around a hilly bend. He was just about home.

Hobart took the gun from his belt and stuck it down into the metal lunch pail. He could see the back of his house now and once again slowed his pace, searching the area for a sign of activity. But the old, two-story wooden boarding house was quiet, seemingly deserted. He walked carefully past the white-washed hen house and past a few of the dirt-caked fowl scratching the ground and clucking softly. He crept up to the small back porch and climbed the steps as quietly as he could, holding his breath and cocking his ear. He could smell potatoes and onions frying on the cookstove, even hear the sizzle of the grease. But no other sound. He leaned over the wobbly banister far enough to peek through the open curtains of the kitchen window. He saw the stove and the steaming skillet and he thought he could see someone. . .

"What on earth are you doing there, Hobe?" His wife's voice and the loud slap of the screened door almost sent him tumbling over the porch railing. His lunch pail did fall, slipping from his hand and hitting the ground noisily. This time the lid stayed in place.

"I was just checking the glass in this here window," he said nervously, struggling to regain his balance.

"It looked kind of cracked from back there by the well. I was just starting to wash up when I noticed it." His eyes kept darting to the ground as he spoke. He could not see where

the pail had landed.

"There hasn't been any glass in that frame since last spring, Hobart. Not since the boys knocked it out playing stick ball. You know that. You've been promising to fix it ever since."

"Hell, that's right," he said, walking unsteadily down the steps and retrieving his pail. "I guess I just forgot. The glare from the sun must've tricked my eyes. I'm going to go on and finish washing up." He walked quickly to the well and lowered the bucket through the rock-walled opening. It made an echoing smack as it met the water below. His wife followed, watching him with narrowed eyes.

"Have you been drinking, Hobe?" she asked, edging closer, trying to catch a whiff of alcohol. "You know I can't stand it when you drink. It scares me. You're two different men drinking and sober. And you promised you wouldn't stop at that gin joint after work any more. You know I'm scared of you when you drink. You know that."

"Hell no I ain't been drinking," he said, pulling off his soiled shirt and dumping a bucket of water over his head. The liquid ran down his face and chest in rapid streams, smearing the coal dust and soaking the top of his trousers. He picked up a piece of terry cloth that had dried to the rim of the well and began to rub himself dry. He carefully avoided her eyes. "I promised you, didn't I? When I make a promise I keep it."

"By the way," she said, relaxing, apparently satisfied her husband was telling the truth, "Cal Mooney's here. He came in this morning and went on over to the mine. Said he'd probably be here a couple of days or so."

The muscles in Hobe's back and neck tightened visibly and the towel slipped from his hand. But he said nothing. He turned and walked slowly toward the house, his shirt in his hand and the lunch pail tucked carefully beneath his elbow.

"Can't you treat him a little better than last time,

Hobe?" she asked, following him across the yard toward the back door. At the bottom of the steps she grabbed his arms and pulled him gently around to face her. "You know we hardly

"Was that about the time Cal Mooney got here? Or had he already been here a spell and the two of you were busy getting reacquainted about then?"



have any boarders now, just Daddy and a few salesmen. The money Cal pays helps out a lot. If it wasn't for him and his like stopping off and on, why, we'd probably have to give the place up. Old Man Preece wants his rent money each month whether we've had any boarders or not. And they're not such a bad lot, Hobe, once you get to know them. But you won't even try. You act as if they've got the plague or something."

Hobe had been studying his wife's face as she spoke, thinking how pretty she was and how delicately fragile she looked. And how out of place she seemed to be in these rugged hills. He was as hard as the countryside and as plain. But she, she was different, almost his opposite. He saw dark curls framing her oval face and how the points of her breasts pushed at the front of her cotton dress. Desire flared up in him hot and fast. He pulled away from her, angry at himself for being so weak, trying to dismiss the want of her from his body.

"Ain't it time for supper? Where are the children anyway?" He now realized why everything was so quiet; the children were usually there to greet him after work. He was edging his way up the steps as he spoke, ignoring her familiar request. He walked across the porch and into the large kitchen, grabbing a clean shirt from a basket by the door and pulling it over his shoulders. His wife followed him into the house, walking over to the big metal stove and stirring a steaming cast-iron skillet. The walls were papered in a flowery design and a row of home-made cabinets lined two of them. Across from the stove sat a huge wooden hutch, and its counter was half full of canned fruit and vegetables. In the center of the room was a long mahogany table, scratched and chipped, and eight high-backed chairs. The sink and long-handled pump were just beneath the rear window.

"They went to the store with Daddy to get some tobacco. He ran out. They should be back any minute. Go ahead and sit down to the table. I'll have everything done here before long."

The miner set his pail down on the countertop and stood there beside it, watch-

ing his wife's back as she stirred the pan, knowing she knew he was watching her. She kept her face to the stove and said nothing.

"What were you doing about eleven this morning, Pauline? Was that about the time Cal Mooney got here? Or had he already been here a spell and the two of you were busy getting reacquainted about then?" He saw her small hand pause over the pot, then continue its circular motion. She remained facing the stove as she spoke.

"What are you talking about, Hobart? I can't even remember what I was doing ten minutes ago, let alone some time this morning. You may work by the clock, but I hardly have the time to look at one."

"Was that when Mooney was here or not, Pauline? I'm bound to know. Were the two of you together then, yes or no?" His voice was rising in pitch and began to quiver slightly. He remembered the fire of Cabe's liquor and wished longingly for a swallow of it now.

The woman turned slowly toward him and lay down the large wooden spoon. She looked her husband straight in the eye, wiping her hands on her greasy apron.

"All right, Hobart, what's this all about? Do you want me to account for every minute of my day? Cal got here about ten this morning and I fixed him a sandwich before he left for the mine. He said he hadn't had any breakfast. I guess it was about eleven when he left. The rest of the day I've spent cooking, cleaning and watching after your children. Now tell me what this is all about so we can sit down to supper in peace."

"Damn right you're going to hear what this is all about," he said, his anger crowding the words together. "At the very same time you and that son-of-a-bitch Mooney were here playing house, my light dimmed on me down in the mine. Not just once, Pauline, but three times. The last time so damned dim that I thought it would surely go out. That's what this is all about." He had left the counter and was moving steadily toward her as he spoke. She backed as far against the stove as she could go.

"Good Lord, Hobart. Have you took complete leave of your senses? That's just a silly old superstition and you know it. How many times

"I'd go to bed with Satan himself to get free of here. I'll take the children with me if I can, but if I can't then I'll leave them behind."

have you come home telling me how someone's light dimmed on him and how you and the others teased him about it? Why are you taking such a stupid thing serious now when you never did before? Answer me that."

"Because when it happened to me, Pauline, nobody said a word. No laughing, no teasing, no nothing. That damned mine got as quiet as Lazarus' tomb. And they all started looking at me funny. Like they felt sorry for me or something." He was nearly shouting now and small flecks of spittle dotted his lips. "And when I asked myself why they acted that way, only one reason made any sense. This time the light was signaling the truth. And they knew it to be the truth. That's what this is all about, Pauline.

"Then a hundred little things that I paid no mind to before came popping back in to my head. Like how you're always primping in front of the mirror when there's a man in one of the rooms. How some of them bring you presents now and then, bottles of perfume and the like. And how some of them come and stay and never go near the damn mine. Especially that bastard Cal Mooney. Seems he's sniffing around here like a dog in heat every other day. Sales trips my ass. There ain't a mine in the whole damn state uses that much blasting powder. Especially this one."

Pauline had pressed her body so hard against the stove she could feel the steam from the boiling pots curl moistly up the back of her neck. The fear in her eyes grew as she caught a tell-tale whiff of alcohol. But she could retreat no farther and this knowledge seemed to work a change in her. Defiance began to crowd the fear from her eyes. She leaned away from the stove and directly toward her husband.

"You've had your say, Hobart, and now I'm going to have mine," she said in a strong and steady voice. Hobe seemed surprised and stepped back a pace, allowing her to move from the cookstove. Anger still twisted his features.

"For the last twelve years I've given you everything I have," she continued. "I've washed your clothes, kept your house and had your children. I've worked until I was ready

to drop trying to make a go of this place. And it's killing me, Hobe. Look at me. I'm twenty-eight years old and I'm starting to look forty. Twenty-eight years old with four children and already married twelve years. Before I know it I'll be thirty and then fifty; if these God-awful hills don't kill me first. And just what will I have for all my trouble and pain? Nothing. The same thing I have right now. Can you see what I'm saying, Hobart? I've got to get out of these hills. Now. And the only thing I have going for me is myself. I'm all in the world that belongs to me. And that scares the life out of me. I won't say if I've been doing what you're ac-

cusing me of or not. But I will tell you this: I'd go to bed with Satan himself to get free of here. I'll take the children with me if I can, but if I can't then I'll leave them behind. The only thing certain is that I'm going."

She had talked herself completely out of breath and now leaned back against the stove gasping.

Hobart rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, his eyes darting rapidly to the right and left. Suddenly, he turned on his

heels and walked, almost calmly, to the counter and pulled the pistol from the lunch pail. He felt its cold power run up his arm and was raising it toward his wife when it exploded in his hand. He saw splinters of wood fly from the floor just at her feet and saw her pitch sideways, grabbing at her leg as she fell. He dropped the gun and ran toward her, fear chasing the anger from his face.

"God, I'm sorry, Babe. Truly sorry. You know I wouldn't hurt you for nothing. Please forgive me. You've just got to forgive me." He was bending toward her as he spoke and he saw trickling patterns of blood on both of her legs.

"You get away from me, Hobart. You get away from me right now." She was scooting across the floor on her thigh, trying frantically to reach the back door. Her eyes were wide with panic.

He wanted to grab her and make her forgive him. And he was moving toward her when he heard voices coming from the front of the house. It was her father and the children.

"Damn, man. You'd best take it easy on that stuff. That isn't watered down, you know. That's the real thing."

He looked down at her for a long moment, then stepped across her and pushed his way through the screen door. It slapped loudly as he ran down the steps and around the side of the building.

He paused at the front corner of the house and peeked around it, making certain no one was there. The gravel road was empty. The voices were coming from the back now, shrill and excited. He took to the road, moving fast but not running. He did not take time to think about where he was going. He just walked. He stumbled a few times in the loose rock but did not go to the ground. His

mind was racing. What could he do? What should he do? He had almost killed his wife and the thought caused his insides to lurch. He needed a drink. Yeah, a drink. A drink would calm him down, let him get his mind straight. Then he could figure things out. He thought of the Box and just the thought seemed to soothe his stomach. Just a couple of blocks down the road he told himself. His legs moved faster and he ran his hands inside his pockets to get rid of them. He felt

something cold against his right hand and pulled out the pistol. How the hell did that get there, he wondered. He remembered dropping it to the floor after the shot. Or maybe he didn't. Maybe he picked it up again. He couldn't remember. And it didn't matter anyway. He stuffed it in his belt and pulled his shirt tail down over it. Up ahead he saw his destination sitting dingily along the edge of the road. It was a large clapboard building with large flakes of dirty white paint peeling from its sides. A weathered wooden sign stated, in dingy letters: 'Pandora's Box.' Hobart headed straight for the open door.

A mild mixture of stale beer and fresh urine met him as he entered. The interior was dimly lit but he could make out the five sets of tables and chairs and their silent occupants. Over in one corner stood an old Wurlitzer juke box, glowing but quiet, and standing unused against the back wall were the remnants of a long wooden shuffleboard, dusty and bowed in the middle. The floor was covered with brown sawdust and the L-shaped bar was made of unpainted plywood. The ceiling and

walls, once white or pale yellow, were now tinted a tobacco brown. The air was filled with long, curling streams of gray smoke.

Hobart walked to the bar and sat down on a wobbly three-legged stool. Across the counter, polishing a dirty glass with a ragged piece of towel, stood a freckled little man with thinning red hair and a pointed nose. He eyed the miner for a long minute then walked toward him, his thin lips curling into a half-smile.

"Well, hello there, Hobe. Ain't seen you in here for quite a while. Heard that pretty little wife of yours done gone and made you give up drinking. That so?" The little man punctuated each sentence with a moist sniff.

"Give me a whiskey, Purley. A double shot." Hobe's insides were still trembling and he wanted a drink in the worst way. While he waited for the liquor, Hobe turned on his stool and looked around the large, rectangular room. The tables were all occupied, with two or three men sitting at each one. He recognized most of them as local layabouts who

could not, or more likely, would not, hold jobs. They glanced his way without a gesture and Hobe returned their silent greeting. He turned back to the bar, drumming his fingers and watching Purley return with his drink. He had the bar to himself.

"If you're looking for your buddies from the mine, they've all drunk their fill and gone," the bartender sniffed, setting the liquor in front of the miner. Hobart picked up the glass and emptied it without a word. He ordered another.

"Damn, man. You'd best take it easy on that stuff. That isn't watered down, you know. That's the real thing." He poured another two inches into Hobe's glass then returned the bottle to a spot below the counter top. The miner said nothing as he turned the glass up and half-emptied it.

"How's work at the mine look?" the bartender asked casually, sniffing and running a damp finger along the end of his nose. "Think it'll hold up to the end of the year?"

"Purley, why don't you shut the hell up and let me drink my liquor in peace." Hobart drained his glass and pushed it toward the

"She just shook that pretty little ass of hers and the old fool was lucky he didn't end up giving her the property."

little man with a threatening glare.

"O.K. O.K., no need getting all worked up. I was just trying to be friendly, that's all." He refilled the glass and walked away mumbling to himself.

The whiskey was beginning to do its job and Hobart could feel his body relax as the liquid fire flowed through his arteries and veins. He needed to think. That was what he had come here for and he needed to sit there and get things straight in his mind. He took a small swallow from the glass and thought of Pauline. Pauline. The thought of her lying there on the kitchen floor came flooding into his mind. Lying there with blood all over her legs and that scared, almost crazy look in her eyes. His stom-

ach made a mild lurch and he drank again from the glass. Why had he done that terrible thing? Why had he pulled out the gun? And why had he aimed it at his own wife? Well, she had said that she was leaving him. That she wanted to leave the hills. Yes, but did she say why? Had she said what was really on her mind? Had she said why this happened to come up at the same time his light had dimmed in the mine? No, come to think of it, she hadn't said that. What she had really said was that the hills and their hard way of life were killing her. Wasn't that what she had really said? Sure it was. She had never really liked Kentucky, he knew that. She was always talking about Oklahoma and how she would love to go back for a visit. Her and her father both, always talking about Oklahoma.

He took another sip from the glass and thought of the first time he saw his wife. He was standing out in front of the company store, just a little way from where he sat right now, when that old truck rattled and wheezed into town. And there she had sat, high on the back atop a brown canvas heap, looking for all the world as if that were exactly where she belonged. Her father was a revivalist, a traveling tent preacher, and he was there to save the area sinners from damnation. Hobart still remembered how she looked down at him as they chugged by the store, like she were favoring him with the sight of her, honoring him with her glance. Her father had

married them that very spring.

And they were happy, even though Hobart's pay as a miner did not allow them much beyond the barest necessities; still, they were happy together. Then the children had come along and things had gotten a little tougher, but still they had been happy together. Or so he had thought. And then they had been offered the lease of the boarding house and things began looking up, everything looked as if. . .

". . . and everyone knows how she got old man Preece to rent them that place. She just shook that pretty little ass of hers and the old fool was lucky he didn't end up giving her the property."

Hobart had pulled these words out of the air around him and it took a few seconds for him to realize they were not part of his thoughts. He glanced down the bar at Purley but the little man was wiping the glass and seemingly paying Hobart no mind. He spun around on the stool and faced the men at the tables, but found them all drinking in silence and minding their own business. He watched each one for several seconds but could glean no hint as to who had spoken the words. He turned back to the bar and ordered another whiskey.

"Damn, Hobe, you best go easy. You're already starting to act as strange as hell." Purley got nothing but a hard look from the miner so he shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

Now where was he? Oh, yeah, the boarding house. That's when Pauline started to change, just after they moved into that place. Business was pretty good, and with his money from the mine it seemed as if they might finally be getting somewhere. But Pauline started getting moody, started to complain about everything from his drinking to his hunting. And sometimes, when he came in a little late from one or the other, she acted embarrassed. Like she was hiding something from him. She began to talk about Oklahoma, not just occasionally like usual, but all the time. And that's when he had noticed the new clothes she wore sometimes, thinking he didn't notice, and the perfume that he knew they couldn't afford. But he said nothing,

"I'm the coal-digging, whiskey-drinking, bright-eyed son of a mountain harlot and I'm too damn mean to die."

knowing that she worked hard around the place feeding and cleaning up after the salesmen who stopped there.

And that's the way things had stayed until Cal Mooney came along and began to make the place his second home. Hobart noticed another change in his wife just about then. She stopped talking about Oklahoma so much and . . .

". . . slept with every man-jack that's stayed there. Why do you think that slick-talking Cal Mooney keeps on hanging around for? It ain't for the scenery, I'll tell you that. And that man of hers, he acts like nothing's going on over there. He must be one of the dumbest men God ever blew breath into. Why he's just . . ."

Hobe knew exactly where the words came from this time. He spun his stool slowly around, drawing the pistol as he moved. He was calm now.

"Which one of you lying bastards just said that?"

The men at the tables all stopped what they were doing and looked at the gun. They saw the miner's finger tighten on the trigger and one of them stood up. He was tall, hollow-eyed and rail-thin.

"Ain't none of us said anything to you, Hobe. But I ain't calling you a liar neither." The man was shaking visibly and his watery eyes never left the gun. "We know you're upset, so if it's O.K. by you, we'll just all walk on out of here quiet like and leave you to your drinking."

Hobe was confused. The man seemed to be telling the truth, but if it wasn't one of them, then who in the hell was it? He watched them a moment more, then eased his finger from the trigger and waved the weapon toward the door. The men filed out quickly and silently, their eyes moving nervously from Hobart to the exit.

"Damn it to hell, Hobe, why'd you go and do a crazy thing like that for? I tried to warn you about drinking that stuff so damned fast. Now you've gone and run off all my paying customers." The man was red-faced, but he stepped back when Hobart turned to face him.

"Shut your goddamn lying mouth, Purley, before I ram the butt end of this pistol down your ugly throat." He drained his glass and

"Shut your goddamn lying mouth, Purley, before I ram the butt end of this pistol down your ugly throat."

stuffed the revolver back into his pants. He gave the bartender a blinking stare, threw some crumpled bills on the bar and staggered out the open door.

The sun was setting fire to the tops of the hills facing Hobart as he entered the road and began walking toward his home. The evening air felt cool on his burning face and he took some of it deep into his lungs. His mind was on Cal Mooney. He now knew the source of all his troubles.

That fast talkin' bastard

was the cause of his wife's changed feelings. He had poisoned her mind against Hobe, sweet-talked her into saying the things she had said earlier in the kitchen. Hobart stumbled in the road and went down to one knee. He blinked, got back up and continued his lurching walk. What he needed to do was to get home and have a long talk with her, tell her what had been going on and how he felt. How he loved her. And he needed to let Cal Mooney and everyone else know that he was not going to stand for any more interference between him and his wife. He staggered again but managed to stay erect this time. Lights were beginning to blink on in the small houses along the road and he tried to hurry his pace. He wanted to get home before dark.

He passed the company store and—funny, but he didn't remember passing it on his way to the Box—and saw the men he had chased from the bar peeking out through the crowded windows. Now was as good a time as any to show everyone that he was through putting up with their meddling interference. He pulled clumsily at the gun in his belt, finally jerking it free and pressing the cold metal against his burning forehead. He closed his eyes, just for a second. But no longer. They weren't ever going to catch him sleeping again.

"I'm the coal-digging, whiskey-drinking, bright-eyed son of a mountain harlot and I'm too damn mean to die," he shouted toward the store, firing the gun into the air. He laughed hoarsely as the men inside scurried about in a flurry of brooms, mops and other upended merchandise. That would show them once and for all to leave him and his alone.

He continued down the road, feeling good about himself now. That's all that was needed to make things right. He looked at the gun

in his hand, still smoking from the firing, and he suddenly remembered his wife's fear of firearms, how nervous she got when he just took out his shotgun to clean it. He shook the shells from the chamber and stuck the empty weapon into his back pocket. He was nearly home. He walked straight on into the blinding rays of the failing sun.

"That's far enough, Hobart. We know you're drunk and still carrying that gun. Go on somewhere and sleep it off. You go on now, and don't cause no trouble." Hobe recognized the oily voice of Cal Mooney. He was now just a few yards from his house, but the sun was shining directly into his eyes. He shaded his brow with his hand and could make out the forms of Mooney and Pauline standing together in the weedy yard of the boarding house.

"You can go straight to hell, Mooney. And get away from my wife." He kept walking toward them as he spoke.

"Stop right there, Hobart. I mean what I say."

"Please, Hobe, do like Cal says. Go on up to Cabe Phillips' and come back tomorrow. You almost killed me with that gun and I ain't having nothing else to do with you until you're sober." The woman's voice was edged with hysteria.

So that was it. It was the gun; she was afraid of the gun. Well, he would fix that quick enough. He reached back and pulled it from his pocket. He held it toward her, trying to show her it wasn't loaded. The sun suddenly dipped below the nearby hills. He could see them perfectly now. He saw Mooney push Pauline back toward the house and raise his arm straight out. Hobart felt the sting of a hornet deep in his chest and he felt his legs buckle under. He hit the ground hard and lay there unable to move. He saw an errant ray of sunlight burst from the hilltop and then, as if smothered by the approaching darkness, blink reluctantly out. He closed his eyes to try and sleep.

Back near the corner of the big house, back in the shadows created by the dying sun, stood four children. They looked from their father lying there on the ground to their mother huddled in the arms of the salesman, screaming. And then they turned and looked at each other.

On Passion's Passing

Passion wears thin
With time and stress
And tears
Like tissue;
Particles, elements of this and that,
Build and press together
Forming fabric,
Seeming whole,
Solid, durable, polyester.
Days, hours, moments
Lengthen,
Tighten;
Desire is old,
Worn out by smiles
That were too brief,
Touchings not quite enough,
Words never said.
One day a wind puff
Blows apart the threads;
Fibers disintegrate;
Only shreds remain
Of fantasy's fine weaving,
In solid air.

Helen G. Mollohan

We are dancing together, my dead uncles
and I,
while my grandpa waits his turn.
Moonlight from venetian blinds,
shines criss-cross through his hand.

My brother says it is the morphine
that brings these waltzes to me.
He laughs then stops and stares.
He doesn't hear the music,
light and sweet as the air,

and my grandfather
who smiles and does not pity me.
He knows my soul is rising
in little bits and pieces
upwards to his hands,
as we waltz across the old floorboards,
that never creak,
and over my sleeping body
dying on the bed.

Sharon Curry

In the Cool of the Day

Cornbread is in the warming closet;
Butter, soft, just churned, on the table.
The woman and child take the path along the branch to the milk-gap. Cows
have come from the back pasture.

In a bent straw hat the man on a low stool leans toward the cow's flank
and directs milk-streams into a galvanized bucket. He has plowed the field
all day: as his shirt dries, white salt patterns on his back. His sleeves
are rolled up; veins and sinews that stand out on brown arms scarcely
move.

The woman, in faded cotton, starched apron, sits on a flat rock that rises
above the grass;
the child, skinned knees hunched up, sits aside her.
In the sumac and sassafrass, katydids begin.
On a fencepost, a
whippoorwill.

Irene Orrick

Barren Winds Apostrophe to My Son

Yesterday the redbud and dogwood began to bloom, edging the pines on Cronacher Hill.
Most were sprouts twenty years ago when you played there. You brought me spring buds
and autumn bouquets, and I had to guess what you held behind your back. Even when you
were grown we kept the routine: "A hippopotamus with a bird on its back? A bird with
a hippopotamus on its back?"

You were a boy in the hill's solitude that shut the unquiet town beyond it.

Summer storms came roaring up the Ohio and across Cronacher's western ridge like a
thousand farm wagons. And by the path the storms came up, the sun went down, dropping
into red-gold fire without a flicker.

December mornings, that maverick buck rose up under the pines, shook off the snow,
snorted, and on his hickory-pole legs disdained stealth.

Will snow on the sulphur-yellow Dollar Store look like it did on the pines?

Last year we walked up Cronacher to watch September shimmer through the sassafrass,
alder, and aspen. We said sometime we would look down from there to see black asphalt
and a flat-roofed shopping center.

Today, across the April meadow, the 'dozers are roaring.

There are wars and famine and blood, and I mourn a hill. I am scorched, curled up like
a sow-bug. The cats growl and claw: aspens tremble; redbud, dogwood, sassafrass,
alder, and pine fall. Drills gnaw, brimstone explodes, the earth throbs.

Cronacher Hill lies at its own foot.

When October winds blow over it they cannot bear seeds of purple ironweed and pink
asters that shrink under raw granite and clay.

Irene Orrick



Suburban Treasure

My wife, Karen Anne, is digging holes all over the back yard. I don't know why. About two weeks after we bought the house, she found a map hidden in the closet that looked a little bit like the back yard. A map to *what*, she doesn't know. She says it's a treasure map. For the last month, she has done nothing but dig—there was no X on the map. She has become an expert digger; she knows just the right angle to push the shovel into the ground, so that a nice little wedge of dirt comes out; she knows how thick the topsoil is in different areas of the yard; she has even learned to mark off perfectly straight lines with string, so that she can dig in a certain pattern. She has come to hate darkness and rain. She has way too much free time.

I watch her through the kitchen window. Before this obsession, she was obsessed with me. We were married just five years ago. She was beautiful, then; she had long blonde hair and pale skin, very fragile looking. Now she looks more like a migrant farm worker. She is darkly tanned and seldom washes her hair. It would take too much time. I believe if she found the treasure, she would keep digging.

I walk out the back door and stand beside her. She doesn't seem to notice; she's looking into a hole.

She speaks. "Roger, what does that look like to you?"

I look into the freshly dug hole. I don't see anything but dirt. "Is it supposed to look like something?" I say.

"Yea. See there," she says and points the corner of her shovel to a place in the dirt. "The dirt changes color there."

She is right; the dirt does change color where she is pointing. I don't know what it means. Dirt has always been dirt to me. I've lived in the city all my life. "So?" I say.

"So? The dirt below this mark is a dif-

ferent color," she says. She looks at me as if I should be shocked at what she is saying.

The house is over a hundred years old. We bought it three months ago. It was converted into apartments at one time, and then converted back into a single house, probably because it's too far out of town for apartment dwellers. But we were willing to give up everything for a home in the suburbs. The map could have been here for over a hundred years, or some kid could have drawn it last year. It looks a little like a map of the United States. It was probably a school project or something. I don't know why the dirt changes color about ten inches down.

"I think I'll go to MacDonald's for a cheeseburger," I say.

"You don't get it, do you?" Karen Anne says. She is right. She takes the map out of her pants' pocket and unfolds it. "Look."

I look. I think it may be drawn in crayon.

"I think I'll get some fries, too," I say. "Can I bring you back something?"

"Look." She points to a place in the center of the map. "See, right here, it looks like the dirt changes color."

The place she is pointing to looks like Kansas to me. "You sure you don't want anything?" I say.

Karen Anne shakes her head and then kneels down and crumbles some dirt up in her hand. She sniffs it. Before I see her taste it, I walk away. I suppose the place she was pointing to could have been multicolored dirt. It's just too hard to tell. I certainly wouldn't live my life on the possibility. I'm hungry.

Karen Anne is still digging. I brought her a *Big Mac*, but it's cold, now. I guess, the first couple of weeks, I was worried. But then it just became normal to see her with a shovel

in her hand. I even bought her a little silver-plated shovel necklace. She really seemed to like it.

I was thinking in the car that the map could be of the backyard. Maybe what I thought was Lake Erie could have been the large tree by the fence. It's about 8:00; I've learned to tell time by the length of Karen Anne's shadow. She'll have to come in soon, her hair damp with sweat and dew, her knees and hands caked with dirt. Not exactly adorable. Our well-dressed friends don't come around anymore.

I walk into the living room and sit down and flick on the TV. On PBS there's a documentary about coal mining. Karen Anne needs a hardhat and she would fit right in. A man says there's no way to tell where the coal is until they take core samples. The ground above a vein of coal could be a cornfield or a suburban housing development or a backyard. It's impossible to tell what's under the surface until someone digs. I turn off the TV because the program seems to legitimize what Karen Anne is doing.

I hear the back door open and close and then Karen Anne walks into the living room eating the cold *Big Mac*. She is a mess, a coal miner's pinup girl.

"I found an old nail," she says proudly, with her mouth full. "See, that proves that there was something there before it became a yard."

I wonder how the nail proves anything. It was probably just buried there by a kid. "That's nice," I say.

"It's more than nice," she says. "And guess what? The nail was pointing toward the big tree."

"So?"

"The fold in the map points directly at the big tree, too," she says. She rubs some special sauce off her chin. "So, I'll need some bigger digging tools."

"Why?"

"To dig up the tree."

The tree sits like Lake Erie at the right side of our yard; it is huge and towering. The house is somewhere around North Carolina. If she digs up the tree, it will fall right on our house. I turn the TV back on. Coal miners

are walking into the earth like the Seven Dwarfs. They don't look happy. Karen Anne, on the other hand, looks elated. It's hard to believe she has a degree in Economics from Marshall University. It's hard to believe she was ever interested in anything other than digging. She sits down on the sofa and watches some of the show with me.

I say as a joke, "You need one of those machines." The machine is a large plow-like thing that scrapes the coal from the wall. Karen Anne just nods. She doesn't look up from the TV.

"I'm going to call someone tomorrow to come and trim the tree," she says. "That way, it won't fall on the house."

"Hon, I think you may be losing your mind," I say. She doesn't answer. I really wanted to say that I think she has lost her mind.

After a long pause, she says, "Maybe I'll just dig a shallow ditch around it, for now."

"Yea, that's probably best," I say. I remember our wedding. We had both just graduated from Marshall. That was five years ago. She adored me and I adored her. Just like a story book. I never dreamed she was secretly a ground mole. She used to take two baths a day. But I know, people change. Everyone changes. I wanted

to own my own advertising firm once. Now, I'm happy working for someone else. Maybe the idea of taking chances has become less romantic to me. I'm no longer an idealist. I don't look for pots of gold. But I do dream of Karen Anne the way she used to be. The mining show goes off.

"Well, I'm going to bed," Karen Anne says. I hope she showers first.

"What's it going to be like tomorrow," I say.

She says, "84 and partly cloudy, 20 percent chance of rain, increasing in the evening to 40 percent."

I don't know how she finds time to hear it, but she always knows the weather. She used to wear a *Walkman* when she was digging, but she said it was interfering with her concentration. Apparently, digging takes a lot of concentration. Maybe if she had gotten a job out of college, instead of becoming a house-

*What could I do?
It was either
call a tree
trimmer or a
psychiatrist. I
probably made
the wrong deci-
sion.*

wife, things would be different now. Who knows. Some people can be normal for most of their lives and then just crack. It happened to the preacher at my mother and father's church: one day, he was visiting the sick and shut-ins, the next, he was shopping for a hot tub and ceiling mirrors.

It's just 8:30. I pour myself a scotch and sit down and watch *Hunter*. I usually just fall asleep on the sofa. Karen Anne wakes me about 6:00 every morning and I go to work. So does she. If she would dig any place else but our backyard, I could probably rent her out to dig ditches for people. She has very healthy pectorals, now. If she found a treasure, I believe her life would end.

There is a man in our backyard, cutting limbs from Lake Erie. Karen Anne has a dirty face and she is wearing a yellow hardhat. She is trying to help; when a limb falls she throws it into a stack of other fallen limbs. Yesterday, she came to the conclusion that the whole key to the map was buried somewhere beneath the tree. What could I do? It was either call a tree trimmer or a psychiatrist. I probably made the wrong decision. The psychiatrist would blame her problem on me: I didn't give her enough breathing room; we should have taken more vacations; we should have had children. But I just wanted to be with her—the place didn't matter. She was all that mattered to me.

A big limb almost hits Karen Anne on the head. The man in the tree curses. Karen Anne sticks her middle finger up at him. The both laugh; but it is a nervous laugh, the kind of laugh a coal miner would laugh if a beam almost fell on him.

I am looking through the kitchen window and trying to cook. Today, I thought I'd have pork-and-beans, spinach, and chicken-and-dumplings—everything from cans. Karen Anne used to cook constantly; she loved it. Italian, Mexican, Oriental, she was a great experimenter. And it was all delicious.

The man in the tree comes down. He is an older man, maybe fifty, and he is wearing a yellow hardhat, too. He could be Karen Anne's father, some strange species of climbers and burrowers with yellow heads and dirty faces.

Even if she found a treasure and she stopped digging, things would never be the same as they were before we moved here.

They shake hands and Karen Anne hands the man a check. He probably thinks she's just another crazy suburban housewife. He walks around the corner of the house with his chainsaw and ropes, and leaves her standing in the yard alone.

The tree is nothing but a long, slender trunk, now, with a cluster of stubby limbs at the top. And Karen Anne gets her shovel and starts digging around the bottom. She showed me a mark on the map that looked like an X, and it was at the foot of the tree, or on the shore of Lake Erie. It was an X, I guess, but it looked freshly drawn. I don't remember it being there before.

I walk out the back door with a cup of coffee and stand next to her. I cough, just so she knows I'm here. She looks up at me. She still has on the hardhat; I guess the old man gave it to her.

"It'll be any time, now," she says. "I'm close."

"Close to what?" I say. Perhaps she doesn't know how close she is to a mental ward. But I could never do that to her. It's just a stray thought. Oddly, I feel needed. I'm the only one there is to look after.

"Close to what?" she says. "Close to the treasure."

"What if you find it?"

"What do you mean?" she says.

"There'd be no reason to dig, then."

"So?"

"Then what would you do?" I say.

She just digs faster and doesn't answer. She hits something, but it turns out to be a root. She goes all the way around the tree, occasionally hitting roots, but only roots. She does find a bottle cap.

"How do you think that got there?" she says. She says it as if she already knows.

"When I was a kid, I buried my dad's pocket knife in our backyard. Kids bury things," I say.

"Yea, like gold and silver," she says.

"No, like bottle caps."

"You just don't believe it, do you?" she says. "You don't believe that somewhere in this yard, there's a buried treasure."

"I believe you're going crazy," I say. Karen Anne just sighs.

She starts going around the tree again, this time digging deeper. I figure, after about ten times around the tree, it will lose its foundation and fall down. It's a good thing she's wearing a hardhat.

I step back a few feet and take in the whole scene: a once-beautiful, intelligent woman; a once-majestic tree; a yard that looks like a gopher picnic area. Everything seems to fit, though. It's been so long since I've seen Karen Anne in clean clothes or wearing makeup; I wouldn't recognize her. I remember eating at restaurants, going to movies, making love. It seems so long ago; it seems like it was with a different woman. And I miss her. But she is gone. Even if she found a treasure and she stopped digging, things would never be the same as they were before we moved here. We lived in a nice little apartment in Huntington. Our neighbors were nice. Everything was nice. Two years ago, I bought her a Volvo for her birthday and she was so pleased that we spent the entire weekend in bed. There's no getting that back, now.

"Roger, Roger! Come quick! Look!" she says. She is out of breath and bent over the ditch around the tree.

I walk toward her. I don't know if I want there to be a treasure. Then, the tree makes a strange noise and I see it start to fall. I manage to grab Karen Anne and jump out of the way, just before it hits the ground and covers up the part of the ditch she was staring into. Its roots rip big ditches in the ground, even deeper than Karen Anne has been digging.

We both sit on the ground for a moment, breathing heavy. The hardhat was crushed. It fell off her head when I grabbed her. I hold her in my arms. And she holds on to me with her head on my chest. She feels like the same woman I've always held, and I realize she has changed, but not so much that I don't recognize the way she feels, though she smells like dirt and not the *Opium* she used to wear. She is the only treasure I want.

She looks up. She is crying. "There was something there, Roger. I swear," she says.

I don't ask what was there: another bottle cap or another nail, probably. I nod my head and say, "I know Honey. I know there was something there."

She smiles and plays with her silver-plated shovel necklace. "That's twice that tree has tried to kill me today," she says. "It knows what it's hiding."

Ten Below - Honorable Mention

At ten
below the dampness
disappears. Dirty
stiff hand bills slide
and
tumble
off the sidewalk
to the gutter.

At ten
below the filth
freezes. City
streets hold dirt
and Gloria
lies on the subway
grate.

At ten
below exposed
flesh freezes.

At ten
below Gloria
curls with her rags and
is cleaner than ever.

Phillip T. Carson



It moves along slowly through my mind, this house,
like a great steamboat on a thick, black river.
The pecan tree is blooming now,
giving off its secret in generous bunches.
Six years my mother waited
and the seventh we were gone,
packed up and carried away while the house
stayed back and whispered voices
long since quiet in the empty rooms.

I had a dream that I went back there
and stood on the lawn by the sloping drive,
stained in circles of oil and gas
And the house pulled me in and breathed me, gave me back
my life, moved me through the darkened hall to the
bright pink bedroom where I sat in the corner
dressing dolls, the smell of bread everywhere,
and my brother's face at the window calling me.

Still I wake and find myself, months later, driving past,
and stop to look at all that used to be,
and is not,
this altered perception of my only truth.
The drive is painted white,
stark against the lawn, smaller, clogged with crab-grass
and yellow bits of daisies.
Only the pecan tree welcomes me,
and it is old.
A child sits cross-legged under it,
looks up at me not smiling, and suddenly
I am on the once-sweet grass, watching out for
strangers, ready to run for cover, in the
arms of this beacon, this memory, this house.

This house that doesn't know me now,
and seems to turn away,
and I want to run inside it,
to touch the walls that hold
all the secrets of my parent's pain,
to walk barefoot down the green hallway
where I ran screaming in my nightgown on Christmas morning.

I know that if I could I would find the tiny portholes
in the eaves of the garage,
where I looked out at all my world,
shrunken now in time,
and shouted to the neighbors
looking up confused.
This corner of the garage where I can almost smell
the dog hair and musty staleness of wet blankets,
the echoes of screen doors slamming and wet feet running
to the still blue water of the pool
that waits for me like a new baptism.

Sharon Curry

TEAROSE, PINKY-TOES, AND THOR

By Dawn Johnson

My name is Delany and Gordon T. Comstock is one of the most talented people I know. He turned up the volume on his stereo and returned to painting sky-blue Chinese tearoses on my toenails. He always told me he wasn't an artist but he was meticulous to a fault. Whatever he tried to do, he said, he tried to do his best. I read another paragraph of yet another article on PMS from my latest issue of Modern Mother-Woman Magazine and tried to ignore the tickling of his brush.

"Give me your other foot," he instructed. "And don't smudge the one I just finished." Gordon had worked his way across the toes of my left foot, pinky to big, with dreamy intensity. God forbid I should smudge anything you ever do, Baby, I thought as I yawned and continued on to page 134. Don't get me wrong; I love the guy. He's important to me but sometimes these impulses of his drop me in very uncomfortable positions. Like right now.

I raised my unpainted foot to his chest while shifting his masterpiece to an ugly forest-green footstool. The cold vinyl covering quickly became warm and moist beneath my heel. In a moment I could feel tickling near the pinky toe of my right foot. I lowered my magazine slightly and peered at him.

Gordon was frighteningly attractive. Although his hair was black, I often wondered if the T. in his name didn't stand for Thor. To me, he possessed an almost god-like physical and creative perfection. He had a tall, firm body; sinewy, like a swimmer. His eyes were cloud-grey and set in a strong, handsome face.

A hint of softness hid in the dimples that surfaced only when he smiled. Of course, he wasn't smiling at the moment. He never smiled while he worked. A lock of hair hung across

his right eye; a jeweler's magnifying lens poked from his left. I caught his tongue curving tightly from the corner of his wide, full-lipped mouth. A more difficult petal is in the making, I thought. His tanned features were stern with concentration and I tensed in an effort not to move. Gordon's head jerked up; so did my magazine.

"For God's sake!" he hissed. "Relax, Delany!"

Hiding behind my magazine of women, for women, by women, I could imagine him glaring at me through one, huge, black-rimmed grey eye. By the time I finished two other articles: "Men: the main cause of our madness" and "Death of a wife-beater," Gordon had completed the big toe on my right foot and his album had spun silently for 25 minutes.

"Done!" he sighed. I laid aside my reading and raised both feet to examine his handiwork. This morning, before Gordon's artistic surge, he and I had been sitting in the floor of his tiny apartment listening to records and trying to decide what to make for dinner. I was sitting with my back against the wall that was decorated with 961 wild cherry and dingle berry yogurt lids. Gordon faced me and would occasionally pick up the guitar resting in his lap to play along with a favorite tune. I held my knees against my chest and I caught him glancing at my feet a few times.

"What's for dinner?" I asked. "Keep it simple. I won't be here to help, you know."

"I know," he said, gently strumming the guitar. "You're having lunch with your girlfriends." He stared at my feet. I felt like I had baboon hair growing from my toes.

"Then we're going shopping for a while," I said as I reached down to scratch my oddly scrutinized footsies. Gordon raised his eyebrows as if just remembering our shopping trip.

"What's your favorite meal?" he asked, obviously preoccupied. I thought quickly.

"Meat loaf," I answered. Here was a man capable of preparing some of the most delicious meals known to the free world and my mouth watered for his meat loaf in tomato sauce. He suddenly put his guitar aside and hopped to his feet.

"I'll have to pick up some things from the market," he said. "But first I've got an idea you may be able to help me with." He disappeared into his bedroom. For some reason the eager glint in his eye upon his return did not fill me with the usual excitement. I looked from his delicious face to the paint

brushes he clasped tightly in his right hand and knew the only part of me he was interested in was my feet.

Now here I sit, wriggling my lovely, special new toes as The Amazing Thor Comstock stands admiringly at my side. I would wear my beaded sandals so the world could see my pretty little piggies. I lowered my feet to stand and walk my toes around the room but was frozen with sudden pain. Gordon saw the started look on my face and fell to his knees before me.

He looked up into my dirt-brown eyes like a puppy that's just piddled in the corner. That please-keep-loving-me-even-though-I'm-an-idiot look. He began to massage the stiffness from my legs gently, lovingly. I pushed the lock of hair away from his face so I could look into both his eyes. I wondered what, if anything, he saw when he looked into mine.

Hulio's Restaurant is a golden desert madhouse with stucco walls at lunchtime. The spinning ceiling fans sometimes give me the feeling they're just waiting for the chance to take my head off. I see my friends Kennedy and Melanie sitting in a booth across the room. I duck to avoid decapitation, surge through the crowd and drop next to Melanie. I never sit next to Kennedy if I can help it. She has a way of making you think you might violate her personal-buffer zone if you look at her too long. As usual she's wearing black from head to toe as if she's in mourning. She wears her black leather, sometimes lace, like body armor.

"You're late," she said as a wisp of smoke from her British cigarette curled and danced above her spiked black hair. Melanie looked up from her tostada long enough to give Kennedy a warning glance.

"I know and I'm sorry, but Gordon and I were in the middle of something."

"Ha! I bet you were," Kennedy laughed.

"What was it this time?" Melanie asked. She gobbled her lunch as though she had never eaten before. She was wearing a white and pink peasant blouse, light summer skirt and sandals. A large pink bow held her permed locks in a neat ponytail. She always looks so feminine, I thought.

Melanie was looking at me, waiting for an answer. I hesitated, then concluded it would be better if I simply told the truth. I lifted my right foot onto the table in a very unladylike manner.

"He was doing my nails," I announced. Melanie tried not to stare although her superiority cool had been shaken. Kennedy was never shaken and grinned calmly.

"Talented little pecker, isn't he," she said. She squashed the end of her cigarette into an ashtray, silently oblivious to the icy stare I was giving her. Already I felt a need to leave.

Lately, whenever the three of us had gotten together, Kennedy would find some way of turning the discussion towards Gordon. I noticed it was beginning to annoy Melanie as well.

"Are you really in love with him?" Kennedy was asking.

"What?" I asked surprised; then quickly—"Yes! I love him very much." Kennedy lowered her eyes and lit another cigarette. She puffed thoughtfully as she

watched Melanie swallow the last of her lunch.

"Well, gals, I'm outta here," she said scooting over, practically pushing me into the floor. I got out of her way.

"But I just got here," I said. I looked at Kennedy for an explanation but she wouldn't meet my eyes. "We're supposed to go shopping."

"I know, Hon, but you were late," Melanie said, raising her plucked eyebrows. "Besides, Chip called earlier and asked if we could do something together today."

I just stared at her, all pink and sweet like cotton candy. She stared back with wide, innocent eyes.

"Well, I haven't seen him forever!" she squealed.

"Who's Chip?" I asked Kennedy as I sat back down. Melanie reached over me and grabbed her huge pink purse. She stood over us for a few seconds arranging herself.

"Listen," she said, glancing at Kennedy. "You two go ahead without me. I heard Lazarus is having a sale on summer dresses." And in a cloud of sugary perfume, she was gone.

"Who's Chip?" I asked again, completely confused. Kennedy sat in silence, refusing to

I often wondered if the T. in his name didn't stand for Thor. To me, he possessed an almost god-like physical and creative perfection.



answer. I leaned forward and caught her eye. "Who is he? Some fraternity mutant?" I could feel Kennedy's desire to tell me something but she lowered her eyes again. "What is it?" I asked softly.

"What is your problem with Gordon?" Kennedy suddenly stared into me with her icy blue eyes.

"I believe he's going to hurt you," she finally said. "He might not mean to, but he will."

"What makes you say that?" It was something I had thought about while in the middle of a quiet time, when Gordon was out of town working. I wondered why someone like him would want to sit by my side on weekends. "Gordon loves me," I said finally.

"He may believe he does," Kennedy said, leaning forward. "But don't you think he's just too good to be true? I mean nobody's that great."

I remembered thinking, if anyone were too full of life, Gordon was that person. I believed he had so much to share. Sometimes I was not sure I could take it all in, me with my mud-dull hair, eyes and skin.

"I'll take whatever I can get," I lied. I wanted all of him. I did not want to share him with any other woman.

"You know damn well we're too selfish for that!" Kennedy hissed. "You won't settle!"

"Speak for yourself!" I shouted. A few heads turned. I quickly lowered my voice to continue. "You have no idea what it feels like to be held by someone you know loves you!" My voice began to rise with another lie. I wasn't sure he loved me. Kennedy sat back and lit another cigarette.

"I know what it's like to believe someone loves you," she said weakly. "I've been in love before, Delany." Her eyes looked haunted from where I sat. I stood and avoided her eyes. I wasn't sure which way to go.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I'm not hungry," I said nervously. I leaned closer to her. "And you and I both know we are not the summer dress type." There was a lump of quivering ice in my stomach as I headed for the door.

"Wait!" Kennedy said. I turned to face her. I watched her struggle to say something.

"What is it?" I demanded. Kennedy's face relaxed; she took a slow drag from her

"Talented little pecker, isn't he," she said. She squashed the end of her cigarette into an ash-tray, silently oblivious to the icy stare I was giving her.

cigarette. She turned her back to me and signaled the waitress for a pitcher of Bud Lite. I went to find Gordon.

I hadn't been gone very long and thought something might be left for me to help with dinner. I hurried into the apartment building, taking the steps two at a time. I could smell my glorious meal cooking before I unlocked the door. The

tiny kitchen was directly to my left. I grabbed a dishtowel from the sink and opened the oven. The warmth and aroma melted the icy knot in my tummy.

Just a few more minutes, I thought as I shut the oven. Gordon had left two bags unpacked on the counter. I smiled and began putting things away. At the bottom of the first bag I discovered two white candles. A candlelight meat loaf dinner?, I thought. Damn, he was good! Clutching the candles and with a love-drunk grin on my face, I went in search of Thor.

Just around the corner of the hallway I tripped over something and tumbled awkwardly to the floor just outside his bedroom door. Stunned, and with two cracked candles beneath my hand, I heard him.

I could hear his familiar breathless moaning, followed by unfamiliar gasping; delicate sounds. I rolled over and sat up. My gut tightened as the icy knot returned to my stomach. The coldness spread in to my chest and up into my head until my ears began to ring and my eyes stung closed. I let the candles lie and crept back down the hall.

I paused and stared at the huge, pink purse that had caused my fall. Next to it were tiny sandals half-buried by a pink and white peasant blouse, light skirt and lacy bra.

Her panties are probably at the foot of his bed, I thought as I reached the kitchen. The meat loaf was done and I took it from the oven and set it on the counter. I sliced a steaming piece to eat on the way back to Hulio's. He's put too many onions in it, I thought. My eyes are watering. I wrapped the remainder in foil to take home.

Looking in a bottom, corner cabinet, I found some paint remover. I left my key on the kitchen sink and locked the door as I left.

His middle name is probably Tom; just plain Tom, I thought.

The Child Bride

I was in my mother's garden when you first
saw me, picking dusty tomatoes
and hairy caterpillars from the sagging vines
barefoot and singing jumprope songs
I learned the year before in sixth grade.
When I came into my mother's house
with my apron full of tomatoes
you were in the kitchen smoking a cigarette
and cracking your arthritic knuckles.
My mother told me, Pauline slice up
those tomatoes and set another place
Uncle George has come to ask us something.
Through dinner you and my mother patted my head
and you twisted my braids around your crooked finger.
You told me you wanted me to come and live with you.
I didn't want to see your grey hair
Your grey face over your onion stained table.
My mother said yes I would make a pretty bride.
You drank a cup of coffee and I packed
my two dresses my school books
my jacks my jumprope my nightgown.
We left my mother's house
and you carried me piggy-back out the door
past the garden still decorated with tomatoes.
That night your house was cold
and your fingers were stiff
fumbling at my dress in the straw smelling dark.
I cried for a while. You made me a rag doll
from a greasy, brown dish towel
and rocked me to sleep on your lap.

Stephanie Dower

Disalle and Time and Punishment

By Karen Suhaka

He watched her carefully as he pulled the heavy red switch. It was a classic switch--the kind on big spectacular machines that did big spectacular things. He pulled slowly,

a little bit because the lever was still stiff from newness, but mostly because he wanted to see all of the show. He had never used this device; it was newly created, yet the idea had been germinating for what seemed like eons. At this, the moment of his project's fruition, his mind stretched back to try and remember when the concept had first entered his mind, when he had let the idea first sneak and snake into his thoughts, forcing him to dedicate his life almost entirely to its lengthy pursuit.

She, of course, had no idea what was happening. The project was one of the few aspects of their lives that they did not share; not because she wasn't interested, but rather because he was afraid. He stood there, hand poised on the switch, glaring at her. She had come down the stairway infuriatingly; he hated everything she did now. Her charming manner, disarming turn of phrase, her brilliant mind and quirky quixotic wit, even her stunning offhand beauty. She was coming to say goodbye; at least he thought she was going to leave him, so he would be surprised and hurt.

He saw the conniving woman at the foot of the stairs, her shadow flickering in the candle light against the wall behind her. His eccentric preference for candles usually gave the stone room a certain feeling of warmth; now they seemed to give off somber, unearthly light. The place was not quite well lit enough to see her clearly. Her evil little face, the beautiful face he loved, was floating in front of him, ready to start talking. To start

lying, he thought. Yes, to lie. To leave.

Time, that was the only way to really punish her. Nothing less than being left to think about him for all eternity would do. She deserved the worst he could do, and this was the worst anyone could do. All eternity, ever and forever, timeless. Hopeless. Unchanging. Punishment, that's what she needed. Harsh punishment for the pain she was causing him. She would regret it. Regret it completely for a very long time.

Time is just another dimension. Other research and development dealing with time typically tried to contrive some way to move faster or slower, backwards or forwards freely in time, as if time were analogous to the spatial dimensions. That's not what he was trying to do--he wanted to escape the dimension altogether. To move up or down or sideways, not merely forward or backwards within the dimension. He wanted to find a way to be free of it entirely. But first he wanted to push her out of it. He assumed she wouldn't understand timelessness, though she would obviously have quite a while to figure it out.

He had long been trying to think of a way to do it--thought experiments, vague discussions with colleagues, idle doodling in his spare time. To help him grasp the nature of time he created an analogy between time and a simple two-dimensional world. It would be as if this flat world were constantly moving along a third dimension, and some outside force just stuck a pin through one of the two-dimensional beings; as if a bug were riding



a piece of cardboard that was moving along a table, and someone just stuck a tack through it, pinning it down and removing it from the piece of cardboard. This being would suddenly be removed from the world it knew. The shock might kill it, bewilder it, or drive it insane.

Only he had no friends outside of time to help him yank things free—to do the pinning, so to speak. He was as enslaved by time, just as everyone else. The two-dimensional beings might be able to dimly imagine the direction of a third dimension, to imagine up and down, but they themselves couldn't move that way. But if they could get a clear enough grasp of what the next direction was, then maybe they could figure out some way to build a flat device that would fling one of them in the new direction.

Of course, whatever was moved in this way would disappear to the two-dimensional world. He hadn't considered the possibility of actually doing it until fairly recently, yet he had progressed fairly quickly through the early design stages. He now had managed to build something that could nudge things out of time, though only a little. Using her as his first live test had just occurred to him.

She would be like a river creature that had always had motion to order its life, that has always had things move by at a certain constant rate. She had always had time to order her thoughts; now she wouldn't. There would be no way to conduct a line of reasoning, to have a train of thought; nothing could be thought of before anything else. Thoughts themselves wouldn't necessarily occur after the synapses fired to trigger them. Her death wouldn't inevitably follow her birth. Only of the nebulous conscience that makes time subjective would function normally. She would be there forever, and she would be cognizant enough to know it. Thoughts of eternity made his skin crawl, so he assumed he was inflicting the worst punishment possible.

He was facing her now, and the switch was moving. She was standing right in front of the arm that would push her out of time. The arm, too, would disappear, but he could pull that back into time, leaving her with no way to rejoin the time stream. He watched her as she began to speak. But her mouth had barely opened, her cruel farewell not even spoken, when the arm first touched her. It had to be a quick, solid hit to make sure she was pushed clear. She felt it, looked around

to see where it was coming from, and was gone. There was a slight "shwoop-pop" as the air rushed to fill the space-time she had so recently occupied and quickly deserted. He fancied that there were slight eddies in reality around the spot. Then they were gone, she was gone, and he was laughing. Crying, and laughing.

Cactuses

They say after you're dead you're still in your apartment. In the books. In the plants. Cactuses dry and alive. Perched on the window sill, faithful sentries facing the sun breathing the light.

In the bare walls. Almost bare anyway, white and almost bare except for that square image of a square head, an old man done up in charcoal holding his eyes in place with white fingers. He used to moan when you came home drunk.

In the glasses. Long stems and snifters, shots and tumblers, frosted mugs cold as tombs, growing white make-up. Highballs laced with black hearts, souvenirs from the west coast. You raised one and said you'd live forever. California makes us say strange things.

They say when you're gone something's still there. Something imprinted with your frown, your music. You used to take so seriously the sound. You used to lie with your head between the speakers, some of your hair is still there on the carpet. Some crust of brie that fell from your fingers, hard. Yellowed.

They say when it's over it's really not. The cactuses parch and give birth. They swell, bristle out, carry your length to the sun.

Pamela Steed Hill

RAZZLE-DAZZLE

By Carol Van Meter

B.B. was dazzling.

I admired her not with jealousy, but with an almost slave-like devotion that a young girl just beginning to explore the power of her femininity has for a glamorous older woman. She was everything a woman would want to be. She was model tall but not model thin. With her curves she could have easily posed for the centerfold of Playboy. Her looks were not the petite blonde variety of beauty, but the strong-featured brunette image which emitted a sensuality that drove men wild, and B.B. knew it. She reveled in it.

She was haughty and her language was earthy. Her clothes were elegant, but not in the least demure by the standards of our conservative little town. But she got away with it all because she had the confidence to look convention in the face, laugh, and say, "No shit."

I'd just come home from my first year at the University of Kentucky when B.B., by the power of her attention, granted me adult status. As soon as I had deposited my bags and changed my clothes I drove to the country club. My only desire at the time was to get enough sun on my skin to cover my pasty winter white. Since the local schools weren't out yet the pool was deserted, except for a distant cluster of saggy matrons lounging in their skirted suits. And there was B.B., in the briefest bikini, right in the middle of the pool deck, straight across from the golfers' entrance to the pro shop. Already her skin had achieved a light golden brown.

While I stood there, trying to decide where to go, B.B. lifted her large sunglasses, which matched her green designer suit, and squinted at me. "Hi," she said. "You're Greg Anderson's daughter, aren't you?"

"Yes ma'am," I answered somewhat nervously. As well as I could remember, this was the first time she'd ever spoken to me.

"Oh Lord, cut the 'ma'am' crap, honey. I'm not that old and you're not that young." Her easy laughter took away my embarrassment. "Pull up a chair, Kate, isn't it?"

"Catherine," I answered as I dragged a plastic-webbed lounge chair next to hers. We settled into a comfortable conversation about mutual acquaintances while I smoothed on my Coppertone. B.B. was easy to talk to, listen to. She told the funniest, most irreverent, stories about the pillars of our little community. We laughed together, as if we'd been friends for years.

I leaned back and let the sun do its work while I let my eyes rest on the pale green mountains that by August would turn to a rich, dark, avocado. The golf course, wedged in between the steep slopes of the upper valley, was hardly large enough for eighteen holes. The tennis courts and pool were nice though. Suddenly, my focus narrowed to the other end of the deck. The women by the kiddie pool were glaring at me, us. It was unnerving. I hadn't experienced such hostility before. B.B. noticed my frown and the direction of my gaze.

"Don't let those old battle axes bother you, doll. You might as well accept reality. From now on you'll never do anything right in their eyes because they're jealous of your age and looks. They're so dried up they can't remember their youth, and they never had beauty." Her voice had risen with pent up anger.

"Careful," I said. "They'll hear you."

"So what. I refuse to live my life by their self-righteous standards. And you can bet your sweet ass they wouldn't attempt mine, even if they could. They're so venomous if you threw a damned rattle snake in their laps the thing wouldn't bite them for fear of getting poisoned." We both laughed, and B.B. relaxed back against her chair. We ignored the other women as they pointedly did us.

"Would you go get me a Maker's Mark and Seven-up? Archie's not feeling well today, and I hate to run him out here."

The health of our ancient black bartender had never entered my mind before. He'd always been a dignified fixture here, not really a person.

When I returned with her drink and my lunch, B.B. gave me my name for that summer. "Thanks, Kitten." After a long seemingly needed swallow, she eyes me critically. "You know, Kitten, we need to find you a two piece suit."

That was the beginning of my make-over.

According to B.B., the cosmetics fit to touch a face were by Lazlo, so we called Saks and ordered a complete supply for me. On rainy days, when she wasn't busy, I'd go to her house, and she would seat me at her vanity which was arrayed with enough cosmetics to compete favorably with any department store make-up counter. I was the model, and with her colors and brushes she was the artist.

The only top coat for nails was Faberge, and it could only be found in a little shop called 'The Power Puff,' so we made one of our many mad dashes to Huntington in B.B.'s new 1967 Cadillac convertible. Mad they were, too. B.B. drove the curvy roads as if she were in the French Grande Prix. The trip that took everyone else two hours, she drove in one hour and a half. Confident that we would never need them, we never wore seat belts. I often drove back because B.B. had one of what she called her "two martini" lunches. We made the trip at least twice a week, for any reason, no matter how trivial. We would go to buy B.B.'s lacy-topped hose that she wore with her garter belt. "The fellows think garter belts are as sexy as hell," she said. She wouldn't rest until I bought one. She would see her chiropractor, or her hair stylist, or whomever while I shopped for a couple of hours. We laughed and sang, and tried to find the hole that whistled when the convertible top was up. I climbed all over the back seat, stuffing paper and chewing gum in suspicious spots, but we never did stop the whistle.

"You know, Kitten," B.B. said one day after I'd lost all my money to her. She loved to play Black Jack. It

didn't take me long to learn to never take more than five dollars with me to her house. "That hair of yours has to go."

"But all the girls at the sorority wear their hair this way."

"Men may go out with 'page boys,' but they sure as hell don't take them to bed." Whenever B.B. got on the subject of men, she made me uncomfortable. "They really are like little boys who have a toy gun and can't wait to use it. Men are so egotistical they don't even know when they're being manipulated. One little pat or squeeze and they can be led anywhere. Just like leading a dog on a leash." She laughed loudly, and I smiled. The image was too graphic for me. "If they weren't so much fun, they'd be pathetic."

Because we were going to a wedding tonight, which promised to be the event of the summer, I relented and let her cut my hair. Then she did my make-up and I put on my new satin dress. The change in me couldn't have been more startling if I had suddenly aged eight years and become a high fashion model. I couldn't stop staring at my reflection in the mirror.

The doorbell rang. "That must be your date. I'll get it. Kitten, you give old Randy a chance to get settled, and then you make your entrance. You'll knock him dead. Old Randy sure will be randy tonight."

I could hear her laughing all the way down the hall. She didn't really like my high school boyfriend. "Don't be the fool I was, Kitten," she had told me. "Marry a man who has a good bank account, and not because he's a stud. Good lovers are always willing to share their beds, but they're seldom willing to share their check books."

She said so many wild things I never knew when to take her seriously. From my observation, Bill, her husband, wasn't as easy to handle as she implied. B.B. was constantly fixing "Billy Boy's favorite dessert," or his favorite casserole. He insisted that she be able to throw a lavish party for his clients at a moment's notice. Many times that summer B.B. called me and asked, "Kitten, why don't you come over tonight and help me entertain Bill's stuffy old customers." I guess what really bothered me about Bill was his habit of wearing a silk paisley

"I refuse to live my life by their self-righteous standards. And you can bet your sweet ass they wouldn't attempt mine, even if they could."



robe and ascot around the house when I knew he'd grown up on a dinky farm near Turkey Creek.

Randy was shocked that night, but not nearly as much as my mother. Her opinion of B.B. was very near that of the women by the kiddie pool that first day of my summer. Dad defended B.B. and that brought a sudden end to their evening.

I watched B.B. circulate that night at the club. Whenever she came to a group it was as if an electric charge had been released among the people. It was as though the dull people in our little town stood around waiting for her to make them laugh. With her easy manner and fabulous wit she did keep them entertained. It was her role. She joked. They laughed. She sparkled. The men flirted and the wives held tight. But nobody was bored. It was as if they each played the same characters week after week—B.B. the tease, Judge Murphy who always tried to grope the tease who always managed to get away, Dr. Brooks, the benevolent family physician who drank excessively with the tease, Belinda Markam, of the skirted bathing suit, who disapproved of everyone, especially the tease.

B.B. only spoke to me once that evening. "I can't spend much time with you, Kitten. Billy-Boy wants me to be nice to Harry Meyers, you know, the president of First National. Bill wants to sell him a new insurance policy." B.B. laughs rather ruefully. "Actually, I think I've sold more insurance for my husband over the years than he has. God, I've had too much to drink. My mouth is doing double time." She patted my hand. "I can trust you can't I? You know all our secrets are confidential."

"Of course, B.B." I was hurt that she would even suggest that they weren't.

"I know. Sorry." She took a deep breath. "Well, now to attack hairy Harry. I can't stand his soft wet hands."

Shocked at this revelation, I watched B.B. approach a group of people in the bar. Mr. Meyers was on the opposite side of the circle from B.B. Within a few minutes, he had managed to make his way to her side. B.B. hadn't moved an inch. When he touched her as he talked,

as if making a point, I watched her face. When he put his arm around her shoulders and hugged her in a friendly gesture, give her credit, her smile never slipped. How could Bill ask her to let that overbearing slob paw B.B.? When Harry led B.B. onto the dance floor and cuddled close, Bill didn't even cut in.

After that evening, my time with B.B. was curtailed some by my mother. We still made our trips to Huntington. B.B. had to shop for fall clothes. She bought—that is, charged—extremely expensive outfits. It dawned on me that she kept herself in constant debt. Then one day, while we were lying in the sun at the club, she said, "Damned! What a mess I'm in."

I didn't say anything because I wasn't sure she'd meant to speak out loud.

She continued. "I had to use the ring that had belonged to Bill's grandmother, you know, the diamond cluster I always wore. The only decent ring I ever had. Anyway, I had to use it for collateral for a loan to pay for the clothes I bought. Now Bill wants to know where it is. I told him a stone was loose and I took it to be repaired. Damned!"

"What will you do now?"

"I don't know. It's only two weeks until the Luau, and Bill will expect me to wear it then. He'll be furious if he finds out. I tried to get Harry to let me have it for that night, but he won't. That disgusting creep. He makes my skin crawl."

"I have some money saved up."

"No thanks, Kitten. You're sweet. It wouldn't be enough." She closed her eyes. I'd never seen her so depressed. "I could ask Mama. She'd give it to me if she could, but I know she doesn't have it."

B.B.'s tall, serene mother was one of the truly gracious women of our community. As she sat in church each week with B.B. beside her she looked as if divinity had touched her. B.B., with her

Halls Mentho-lyptus in her mouth to cover any traces of bourbon, tried diligently during that one hour each Sunday to emulate her mother.

"I'll work out something." B.B. said as she twisted nervously in her lounge chair. "Ten more payments. Maybe I can up the ante," she said enigmatically. "Kitten, would you

"Men are so egotistical they don't even know when they're being manipulated. One little pat or squeeze and they can be led anywhere."

be a dear and go get me a double. I need it."

The first thing I looked at when I came into the Luau was B.B.'s hand. I had to laugh. She'd entertwined a scarf dramatically through her fingers like some flapper in the twenties. I couldn't wait to see how she'd eat while holding a scarf and a fork. She managed, as always. She didn't eat. She stayed in the bar with those few regulars who never came out of the 19th Hole for any reason.

After the dancing started, I decided to finish a task B.B. said I'd put off too long. I had to tell Randy that our relationship would be changing. B.B. was right. This summer, I'd grown and he hadn't. I sent him to get us a drink and told him to meet me out on the lawn, so I'd have some time to frame my words to be gentle.

Although the night was warm, I felt cold. I walked through the jagged shadows cast by large trees in the moonlight. The blaring sound of the band softened with distance.

A flicker of movement caught my eye. There was someone in the shadow of a tree not twenty feet from me. My eyes quickly adjusted to the scene before me. First B.B.'s white dress came into focus, then the rest of her. Her back was pressed against the tree, her knit dress bunched around her waist, and her bare thighs clasped around a man's waist. Her scarf was on the ground. The man was Harry Meyers! His ruddy face was strained in a feral grimace as he pumped furiously back and forth. B.B. was making appropriate grunts.

I gasped and she looked up. I couldn't stand it. I wanted to scream, cry. B.B., how could you with that pig! I turned and fled.

I didn't stop running until I was back in Lexington the next day. Telling my parents that I had to get back a week early for a sorority rush meeting, I had packed and left by eleven. I spent all fall trying to forget I'd ever associated with Betty Bevins, who called herself B.B. In ridding myself of her influence over me, I became known as the sorority prude, but I didn't care. It was Christmas before I was able to face the town again.

I never did get around to breaking up with Randy. Now we were back at the club again for New Year's Eve. Nothing had changed. B.B.

was there, and so were the men. Whether planned or by accident, she followed me into the ladies room. I sat at the vanity and nervously straightened my hair.

"Well, Catherine, I see you've gone back to your old page boy."

I knew what she meant. Not only my hair, but my make-up and dress style was back to the way it had been before my summer with her. My voice was uncomfortably tight when I answered. "I couldn't help myself."

B.B. made a sound that was half laugh and half snort, patted my cheek and said, "I couldn't either, Kitten. I couldn't either."

I didn't see B.B. again for fifteen years. Instead of marrying my faithful Randy, I married my roommate's brother from Louisville. I was on my way to the club to meet my parents for dinner when I saw her. She was walking down Third Avenue. Third Avenue is to our little town what 42nd Street is to New York. B.B. was almost unrecognizable. Her hair was knotted and dirty. She wore an old

pair of stretch pants that were too tight and too short. There was a large hole in the right knee. She had on a tank top without a badly needed bra. She was carrying a heavy bag about the size and shape of those from the State Liquor Store.

I didn't stop. I couldn't.

When I reached the club the members were having their pre-dinner cocktails. I saw my mother and couldn't wait for a more private place to ask her about B.B. She told me Bill had divorced B.B. seven or eight

years ago, after he'd become head of the local insurance company. B.B. had taken her entire settlement and within two years had gambled and drank it all away.

My mother spoke indignantly and loudly. Several others came to join in the conversation. They were the same people who had been here that summer. The retired judge said, "B.B. came to me last week and asked me to buy a statue of a horse. She said she'd paid a hundred dollars for it. I gave her fifty to get rid of her. What would I want with an old," he pursed his lips in a silent 'w' before he said the word, "horse." There was a flicker of laughter at his little joke.

"B.B.'s a sad case. No doubt about it," the

His ruddy face was strained in a feral grimace as he pumped furiously back and forth. B.B. was making appropriate grunts.

doctor said. "I always told her that drink would get her in the end."

"Hell," Harry Meyers said, "she always was a disgusting whore. She even dragged me out behind a tree at one of the parties because she couldn't wait for it until the Luau was over. Now she's a disgusting old whore."

"You're the one who's disgusting," I said, trying to contain my anger. "You forced her that night at the Luau, and we both know it."

My father, who must have overheard my outburst, as did everyone else in the room, judging by the silence, came over and took me by the arm. "Come see my new golf cart, honey."

Although his words were casual, his grip suggested that I not refuse him. I listened to his chatter about his cart until we got outside. Then I jerked my arm away. "Why did you drag me out of there?" I didn't shout, but the underlying emotion was there.

My casually elegant father sauntered down the walk as if he were out for a pleasant stroll. "I didn't drag you out. I escorted you."

"Technical difference."

He merely shrugged his shoulders, conceding the point to me.

"How could they all be so cruel to her, especially Harry. It's not fair!"

"Situations change. You've been gone for a long time."

"What happened to her? When I left, B.B. was the belle of the ball."

Dad took a deep breath and stuffed his hands in his pants pockets. "It's hard to say, really. B.B. always walked a fine line between propriety and impropriety, between humor and vulgarity. I suppose the alcohol clouded her vision and she couldn't keep on the line."

"You mean when she got a divorce she lost all her status. The good people of this little town didn't want her for herself. She became a nothing, an object to be shunned!"

"You're being a little harsh, honey. When Bill divorced B.B., it hit her pretty hard. She was determined to prove to Bill and herself that she was still desirable. She had the fellows lined up at her door, so to speak, for quite a while." We reached the cart sheds

and Dad began turning the combination lock on his door. "After a couple of years she decided to go to Las Vegas and take the town by storm. B.B. always loved to gamble, especially Black Jack." The lock popped loose and he swung open the plywood door. "She lost everything—house, car, furniture, everything. She even had to sign over her alimony payments for five years. Those guys don't fool around. Anyway, she moved around for a couple of years. There were all sorts of rumors about her, usually involving some man."

He flipped on the light and I followed him inside the shed. I didn't comment on his new golf cart. They all look the same anyway. He didn't seem to expect me to. "B.B. showed up one day," he continued, "tapped out financially, physically, spiritually, and every

other way. Totally defeated. I'll never forget walking into the 19th Hole one night. The bar was crowded, and she was sitting all alone at a table in the center of the room. Everyone avoided her as if she had the plague. I sat with her for the rest of the evening." Dad laughed uncomfortably. "Your mother didn't speak to me for a month."

"Didn't anyone help her?" I asked.

"We tried. Some of us did. A number of the fellows contributed to her support."

He turned his head and looked straight at me, his eyes narrow and his face serious. "I know what you're thinking. It wasn't for sexual favors. We felt sorry for her."

I wanted to believe that last statement. I really did.

After a few minutes, I asked, "Daddy?"

"Hum?" He leaned over to unhook the battery charger attached to the golf cart.

"Did you ever sleep with B.B.?"

His back tensed, and he straightened. "No."

He walked out, and he closed the door, replaced the lock and gave the combination a flip. "Do you know that Frank, who owns coal mines, lumber companies and who knows what else, can't remember the combination to his lock. He wrote it on the wall like an addition problem, $34+16=55$. No one even noticed that the numbers didn't add up correctly. It worked fine until someone painted the sheds."

"She even dragged me out behind a tree at one of the parties because she couldn't wait for it until the Luau was over."

He smiled, but I didn't.
"Would you tell me if you had slept with her?"

"No." He started down the walk. "We'd better get back inside. I'm sure dinner's ready by now, Kitten."

Kitten! He used her pet name for me. I wanted, I needed to find an excuse for it. Everyone knew she called me Kitten. Maybe it was all very innocent. After all, he and B.B. had been good friends. I wasn't naive enough to believe that they couldn't have been intimate friends, but I chose not to think so. I had to.

I laughed and caught up with him. "You'd better not let Mother hear you call me Kitten." He smiled and put his arm around my shoulders.

Two months later, Dad called to tell me B.B. was in the hospital and wanted to see me. He said she was dying of cirrhosis of the liver.

When I got to the hospital, she was barely able to talk. Her face was puffed out of shape and her stomach was so bloated she looked nine months, or more, pregnant.

Her eyes fluttered open. "Kitten," she whispered, "I'm glad you came."

"B.B.," I said, trying to keep the horror out of my voice. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No."

"Could we bring in a specialist?"

She smiled. "No one knows more about cirrhosis than I do. My father had it. Mamma liked to tell people he died of consumption." A trace of a smile lifted her lips. "Consumption of Old Crow. That was the only thing Mamma ever colored the truth about."

"But if you knew everything would turn out this way. . .why?"

"Poor little straight-laced Kitten, you never did understand. I couldn't stand to live a dreary boring existence like everybody else. Life is to be enjoyed."

She started coughing violently and I called the nurse and she gave her an injection.

An hour later, she woke up. "Kitten?"

I took her hand. "I'm still here, B.B."

"I wanted to tell you." A pain seized her and she gasped. "That night, with Harry, I had to." She looked up at me with tired watery eyes. "Bill said if I didn't stop spending

"Mamma liked to tell people he died of consumption." A trace of a smile lifted her lips. "Consumption of Old Crow."

he'd leave me. I couldn't let him find out about the ring." She took several shallow breaths before continuing. "Until then all the flirting was just that, just flirting, mostly." She smiled. "Everyone falls from grace once in a while. But those few times, far less than people said, were just for fun, you know, not to get something. I only wanted my Billy-Boy. He was fabulous in bed. Billy found out, of course. Harry couldn't keep his big mouth

shut. Had to brag all over town. Billy and I fought about it. Then, one day, he left me, and nothing mattered any more."

What could I say?

"Kitten?" She clutched my hand.

"Yes, B.B."

Tears caught in the corners of her eyes. "We had a good time that summer. Didn't we?"

"We certainly did B.B."

After several minutes of silence she said, "It was a great party."

De Anima

Fog rolling on the dark Ohio
like soft tumbleweeds on a surfaced
abyssal plain
Smiling, caressing, watching the fish fly
just two sitting alone at 4am
Stroking my face softly
his touch sinks below the exterior
caressing de anima
The wind blows cold
but I am warm in the shadow
of his embrace

I barely know him
but the bond is gathering strength
each moment building upon the next
Slow down, my rational soul demands
Reach out, pull him closer, know him
my spirit cries

Two alone at 4am
Exhausted, but unwilling to let go

Lynne Smith Thompson

TWO BRICKS SHY OF THE LOAD

By Christopher E.
Divers

Nobody was crying. Of the six people who had actually taken the time to attend the funeral, only Uncle Mack appeared to be minimally saddened. I didn't know if it had something to do with the ceremony or Uncle Frank's self-composed eulogy, but no one seemed to give a flying crap that a close relative had died. It might have had something to do with Uncle Frank's request that the words "Yabba Dabba Doo" be screamed as his body was interred in the ground. He did love the Flintstones. I still found it hard to believe that no one really cared. Maybe Uncle Frank was the oddball of the family, but I didn't understand what made that a crime. Uncle Frank always was more than a little egocentric and personally, I found him to be a hell of a lot more interesting than any other member of the Mort family.

I had just returned from finishing my junior year of college and was greeted by the butler. My mother soon followed and exchanged niceties with me, and she was smiling and being very cheerful when she suddenly stated with an air of indifference, "Oh, by the way, your Uncle Frank died yesterday." This was

her brother, and I thought to myself, "Oh, by the way?" It seemed that no one in the family was too upset about it. It was true that none of my relatives were what one would consider open when conversations involving Uncle Frank were brought up, but I hadn't expected the complete and utter coldness with which they viewed his demise. They had always found their brother to be a disappointment and source of embarrassment and shame to the family, and the only satisfaction they ever seemed to gain from him was the fact that he had his last name changed to Hart, as that was the name he wrote under, and had at least spared the glorious name of Mort any damage in connection to him.

My grades were the subject of all conversations after my arrival, although I was informed of the date of Uncle Frank's funeral as well as the cause of death, heart attack, after I incessantly badgered for details at the dinner table. My grades again were outstanding, and my Uncle Terence, who had been invited to dinner, commented that I would soon be "yet another financial genius of the Mort family." I would soon become the latest addition of successful businessmen in the Mort family in his eyes.

If my Uncle Terence only knew my true feelings about the matter, he would likely go into a spitting hissy. Deep down I detested Uncle Terence and his pompous attitudes and beliefs, and I especially despised him when he referred to me as a Mort, considering the fact that my father's last name was Greenwell. It was true that my father was so much like them that it just didn't seem to matter though. He might as well have been a Mort, but I detested them, and lately I had found myself developing a deepening hatred for business school. I wanted to do something creative instead of sitting behind a desk with facts and figures and feeling like a convict. I wanted to paint, write books, write poetry, and experience life rather than miss it for the sake of money and the Mort family name. As Uncle Terence continued to ramble, my mind replayed a scene from the recent past, and his voice faded.

I saw Uncle Frank standing in front of one of his two-day masterpiece paintings. His eyes were baggy, and his rumpled and matted hair was in terrible need of a wash. My Uncle Terence and I had stopped by his modest abode because I had insisted that I visit him as much as possible as he became older. Uncle Frank was always full of life however old he was,



and that was the actual reason I loved to visit him. We entered the disorganized jumble of the living room and viewed many pieces of work that Uncle Frank had apparently become disenchanted with. Uncle Frank was a retired mailman and bachelor and had plenty of time to work on his creative endeavors, and he was ecstatic that we had come and hurried us into his den to see his latest masterpiece. I marvelled at the work and its complete originality and mystical quality. Uncle Terence viewed the masterpiece and was appalled.

The painting was of Bill Cosby. It was so bizarrely done that Cosby appeared quite realistically devilish and evil. Uncle Frank said, "Look. Isn't it great? It's Bill Cosby, the Antichrist." Uncle Terence simply shook his head, and failing to understand Uncle Frank's perspective of creativity and of what is beautiful, he started to lecture him on the subject matter of fine art and began a dissertation explaining why the painting was ludicrous and a failure. Uncle Terence believed that his truthful words fell on his older brother's deaf ears, but he obviously caused a definite change in Uncle Frank because he disclosed to me shortly afterwards in a whisper, "You know, he's right. Bill Cosby isn't the Antichrist—your Uncle Terence is."

As I sat at the dinner table listening to Uncle Terence, I could not have agreed more wholly, and I imagined that I stared at him with the same look my Uncle Frank had on that day, with the look of pity one feels for a babbling idiot.

I was worried about my mother. Even though she had never been extremely close to her brother, I thought she would be the most distressed over Uncle Frank's death. My father was away on business, as usual, and I felt that she would need me to console her, but she appeared to have metamorphosed into a true Mort. She acted oblivious to the death and would only talk of my upcoming entrance to the business world after my graduation the next spring. She talked of Uncle Frank during his life as an embarrassment and stain to the Mort family honor, but I never believed her to be so serious about her statements then.

The possibility sprang on my mind now that

The tombstone
epithet was a
Frank Hart
original. It
read, REST IN
PEACE? I WISH I
COULD WREST WITH
A PIECE.

I may have been blinded to the fact that my mother had always been yet another pompous Mort. She always was protective of me around Uncle Frank when I was younger, and perhaps those days were the catalyst of the curiosity that drew me to him as I grew older and my mother gradually lost control of my actions. I remembered the time when I was a high school junior that she despised for me to be anywhere near him because he had shaved his head smooth as a cueball and

claimed to be the modern-day reincarnation of an ancient Egyptian god. She wanted to have him committed, but Uncle Frank and I both assured her that it was only a prop that he was using for reactions of prejudice against visionary people that he wanted to use in a novel. She still despised him though and would talk only rarely about him and in shame.

I still hadn't expected the utter cold and indifference with which she acted now however, and I felt a vague sadness at the thought of my mother being heartless. As I sat at the dinner table, I felt like a pulsing, passionate human being who was sitting between two mechanical machines who existed only for two purposes—to be rich and arrogant and to uphold the prestigious Mort family name. Although my heart fell heavy at the moment, I aborted myself from my mother in order to release myself from her influencing grasp. Unaware of the inner conflict I had just resolved, they only exchanged minor curious glances as I excused myself from their presence.

The funeral itself was a joke in my eyes. A joke played on Uncle Frank's siblings by himself. He had planned his funeral ceremony and written his own eulogy ahead of his death, knowing that no one else would be able to do it honor. I was flattered at his request that I give the eulogy and graciously accepted the offer to do so. The Mort family was simply mortified at some of its scathing innuendos and insinuations, but I thoroughly enjoyed it, especially when I reached the place where Uncle Frank claimed that there were several moments during his life that he had wanted to give my Aunt Lucy a "sucking chest wound."

The funeral procession had consisted only of four cars—the hearse, a car carrying the preacher and hired pallbearers, a car carry-

ing Uncle Mack and Aunt Lucy, and a car carrying Uncle Terence, my mother, and myself. We were the only human beings who viewed the burial. After the ashes were thrown onto the casket by the preacher, I then performed the "Yabba Dabba Doo" ceremony with relish. I watched the reaction of the Morts as their faces turned red with embarrassment. They looked at me as if I must have temporarily lost my sanity, and I almost laughed. The tombstone epithet was a Frank Hart original. It read, REST IN PEACE? I WISH I COULD WREST WITH A PIECE.

The funeral was over, and the Morts turned quickly to go to their mansions to play with their facts and figures and business enterprises. My Uncle Terence came over to walk with me and placed his arm around my shoulder. I discovered soon that he did so not to comfort me but to talk about business and money. I found the act totally inappropriate and virtually ripped myself from his unclean grasp. I found myself in view of a group of self-seeking and uncaring individuals who had not just seen the burial of a brother, but had also seen the burial of a body of unwanted beliefs and insignificant ideas whose only purpose in life was to cause them shame.

I never felt more alive than the day I stood in the cemetery enjoying the perfect shock that appeared on the faces of the Morts as I disclosed to them my plans to quit the business school and pursue the fine arts. I had an overwhelming desire to paint, and I began to wonder what my head would feel like if I ran my hand over its smooth and complete baldness.

Haiku

Seventeen unit
Japanese lyric poem -
Who the heck's Buddha

Karen McComis

Cucumber Summer

This summer the rains never came.
The dwarfed corn
and shriveled orange tomatoes
refused to die until
the earth cracked cruelly
with African-desert aridity.

Only, one garden vegetable was
infant green in its vine,
so each morning we filled buckets
and brought life to cucumbers
too far from the garden hose.

Vines stretched green, speckled with
blossoms,
and our plants became famous, mutantly
overproductive
as if to offer consolation for the brown
corpses
that we carted from the garden to the
rubbish heap.

We learned to live a cucumber summer.
Friends who visit for coffee and talk
leave with full brown grocery bags.
Fresh slices crunch between our teeth
and we smile while telling
how we rescued five cucumber plants
from obvious death.

Now they yield more than we can consume.

Christy Jean Ruthers

Past Life Inexperience

When we were dreaming
A long time ago
Someone came up to me and
created a hand that took mine
made a heart that beat in tune
with mine
and told me about heaven

We told everyone along the way
but somewhere I dropped my wallet
and of course it contained
all my identification
so they wouldn't let me in
and I had to go back and do it
all over again

Eric Kumlien

The 1947 Chevy

Dad bought it blue in 1948, discounted;
years later we brush painted it black
on the summer grass behind the house.
It took us to Florida many times
in my childhood
the motor grinding to life
in the middle of the night.
We had packed the suitcases
with too much anticipation
to sleep, so we loaded
everything and everyone:
Mother and Father in front
Mark and I in the back
with the blankets and pillows
over the seat,
Dad's old wooden workbench
covering the hump of the transmission
to make a bed.
We drove all night and all day,
straight through to Ocala
where Grandma and Grandpa waited
and watched for the Chevy, still blue
then
and high and heavy, the front
like a dog's head
long snout with centered chrome emblem
pointing the way
south;
fenders like chipmunk cheeks
bulging over mammoth black tires
which spun around shiny chrome hubs.

In Florida
we crunched over sugar sand roads
when the blacktop ended,
gliding beneath groves
of pine, then grapefruit and orange,
smelling of Christmas
until Dad stopped and set the brake
in front of the little cottage
at the lake's edge
and we ate breakfast late:
eggs, sunnyside up
crisp brown bacon and thin-sliced
red and yellow tomatoes
which Grandpa had just pulled
off the vines out back.
And that night we kids slept in the loft
with the ladder you had to pull down
like a fire escape;
and the next day we begged to drive
to the salty green ocean

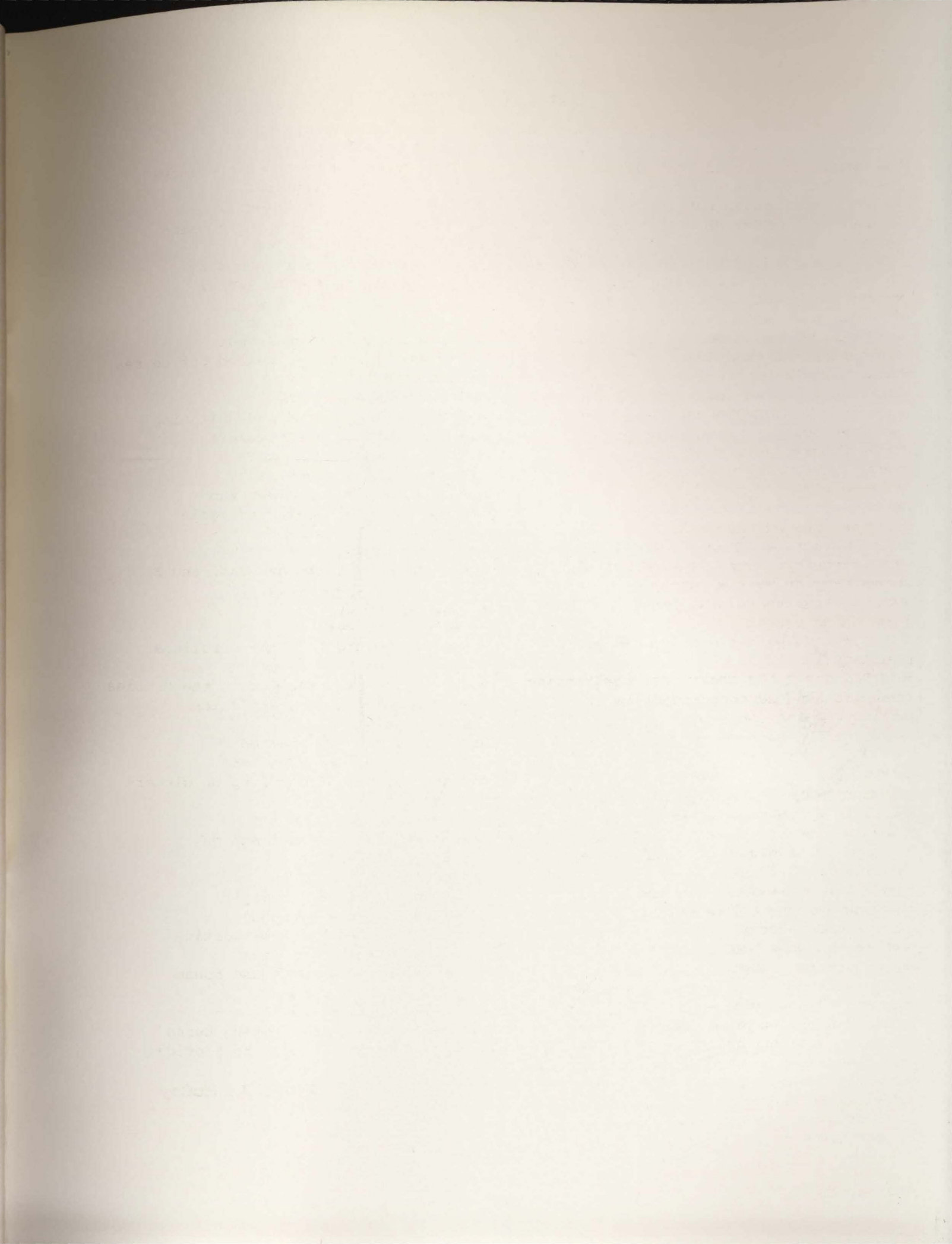
an hour away, to wash off the snow
and ice of West Virginia.
Before they made it illegal,
we drove the Chevy out on the sand
at Cocoa, and we changed
into our swim suits in the car.
I was embarrassed years later,
when I was eight or nine
that someone would see me
in my white cotton underwear.
Once, Mark almost got pulled out to sea
by the undertow
before Grandpa ran in,
thrashing and yelling and splashing
water as high as the breakers
until he caught my brother
like some shiny brown fish.
Mark thought it was great fun
Grandpa told us, again and again
at family gatherings.

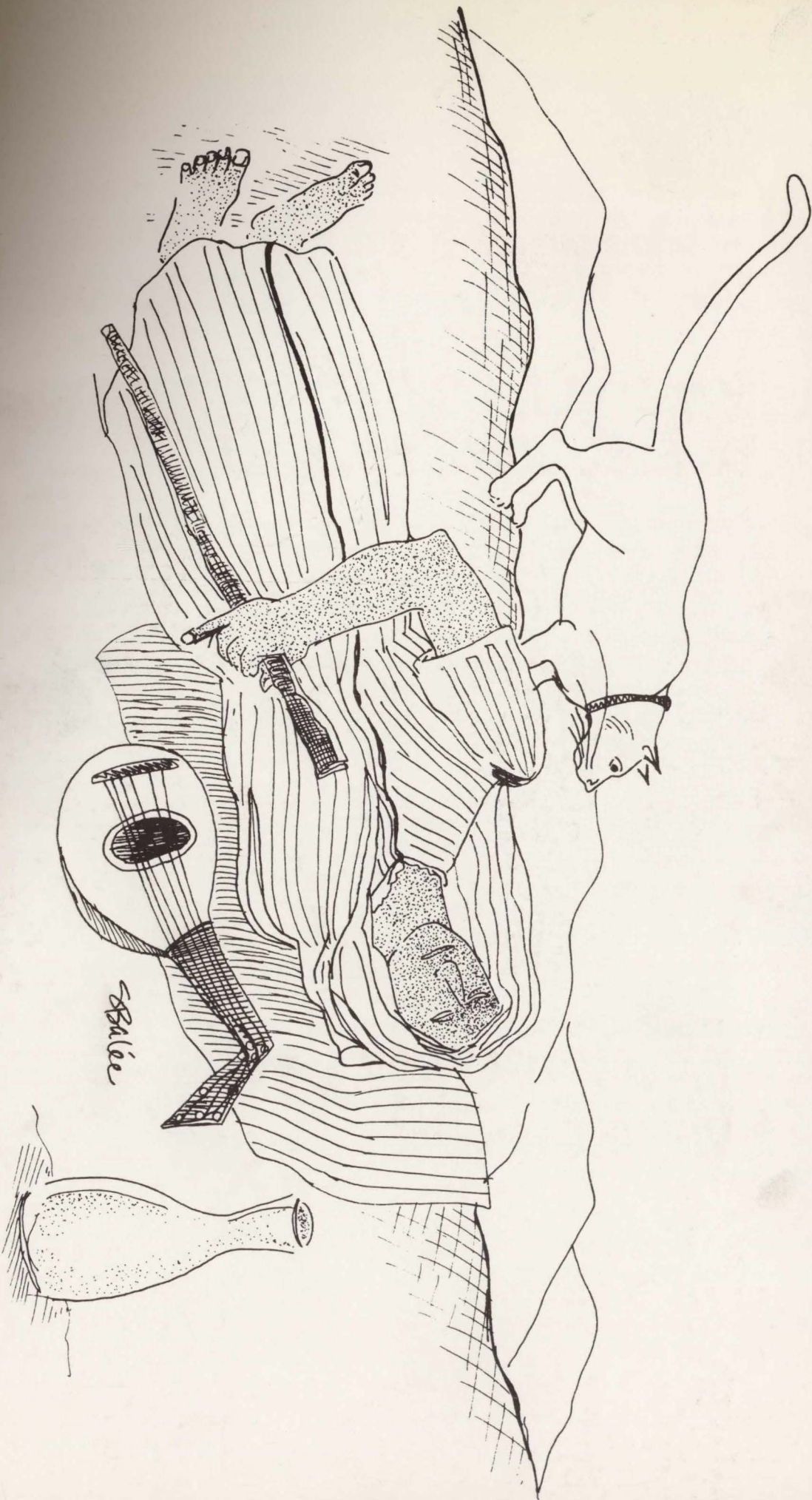
Then, one year Mark, and Dad, and I
drove back to West Virginia
alongside the train
with Mom's casket,
stopping overnight in the Carolinas.

And Dad drove the Chevy into the Sixties
over two hundred thousand miles
without a ring job
or an accident, he bragged
before he took the tires off
and set the old dinosaur up on cinder-
blocks
in the back yard
as a playhouse for Mark and me.
We were teenagers then
and could sit for hours
listening to Elvis Presley's
"Are You Lonesome Tonight"
on the radio Dad had kept working
with a homemade power pack
and an electric cord to the house.

We talked about girls
and pretended we were taking turns
driving straight through to Florida.

James A. McCoy





Balaie

PAPA

