



12-1991

## The Lantern Vol. 59, No. 1, December 1991

Megan Mendte  
*Ursinus College*

Tim Hannigan  
*Ursinus College*

Kathrin Phillips  
*Ursinus College*

Gretchen Lacey  
*Ursinus College*

Alan McCabe  
*Ursinus College*

*See next page for additional authors*

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### Recommended Citation

Mendte, Megan; Hannigan, Tim; Phillips, Kathrin; Lacey, Gretchen; McCabe, Alan; Blay, Jennifer; Kormancik, Mary; Starr, Vic; Lane, Bob; Day, David; Donecker, Gar; Colflesh, Jason; Heinzinger, Christopher; Moore, Diane; Woytek, A. Judd; and Kakacek, Christopher, "The Lantern Vol. 59, No. 1, December 1991" (1991). *The Lantern Literary Magazines*. 140.  
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**Authors**

Megan Mendte, Tim Hannigan, Kathrin Phillips, Gretchen Lacey, Alan McCabe, Jennifer Blay, Mary Kormancik, Vic Starr, Bob Lane, David Day, Gar Donecker, Jason Colflesh, Christopher Heinzinger, Diane Moore, A. Judd Woytek, and Christopher Kakacek

# THE LANTERN

Vol LIX, No 1

Winter 1991



# THE LANTERN

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

I'm extremely pleased with this issue, it is packed with fine pieces of fiction, poetry and artwork. The art contest winner is Blake Herr whose two drawings appear on the cover. The fiction contest winner is Megan Mendte whose story, And I Believed Them, appears on page three.

My staff and I are proud to provide you with this issue which is printed on all recycled materials. I want to thank all those who submitted; narrowing the works down from the original 125 submissions was a challenging task.

Happy Reading!

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**JUDGE'S NOTE**

"And I Believed Them." Literary critics disagree about not only what constitutes a good short story, but even about what a short story is. However, most do agree that a good one manages to convey a single moment in the characters' lives in such a way that it provides insight into their whole beings more generally. The final scene in "And I Believed Them," especially in terms of the relationships among the Landis family that it depicts, offers us just such a painful and intimate view. And while we might want to put it out of our minds because we identify so much more with Jennifer than with Jeffrey, we absolutely cannot let it go.

## And I Believed Them

By Megan Mendte

I watch from my bedroom window as Jeffrey slithers across the front lawn on his elbows and knees. He dodges from one trench to the next. His army fatigues are black on the belly from the new holes in the ground. He is watching his enemy. He pauses like a panther about to pounce. He attacks.

Little Molly Myers from next door looks up from her baby doll in terror. She screams as Jeffrey grabs the doll and runs down the street. Mrs. Myers comes running out of the house. Her hair is in a towel and she wears a bathrobe. "Jeffrey!" she screams with anger as he runs back past their house twirling the doll over his head. He flips her off, laughing with pure glee. He stops short at the invisible property line between our houses and begins to twist the doll's angelic head off. Mrs. Myers stares in awe at what has to be the most evil eight year old she has ever seen. His face is painted warish green and he has a twig taped to his baseball helmet. He hoots and hollers like an Indian as he laughs. He looks possessed, but Mrs. Myers hugs Molly to her as if she is facing the devil himself.

With determination Jeffrey tugs at the severed head until the body falls to the ground. "Please, Jeffrey, No!" Molly cries. Her eyes are wide with grief. This only increases the grin on Jeffrey's face. He holds up the doll's head in victory. "Stay off my property, or else. My Daddy owns this township and he'll thwow you out!" Spiking the head to the ground like a football player who's made a touchdown, he skips back towards our front door. I leave my room and hurry down the stairs to catch him as he arrives. "I saw," I say, trying to scare him, but I know better. He looks amused. "They have to learn," he says with as much maturity as he can muster. For a second he sounds like Daddy, then he is the demon again, "Get me a snack, or I'll bweak your neck," he says with a cackle. I hurry to the kitchen to make a peanut butter sandwich for Jeffrey.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jeffrey is in his room, playing with his snakes and plotting my murder. Mother is asleep. She was tired from her night shift at the hospital. She is an emergency room nurse. The call from Mrs. Myers had been too much for her to handle, as usual. She made me spank Jeffrey for scaring Molly. I got a few good slaps at his face before he tackled me. He kicked my ankles black and blue with his army boots. He swears he will kill me, and I believe him.

I am in my room too. I am trying to do my science project. Actually all I've done so far is look up the word "distill" and I can't even understand the definition. It says "distill: 1. to drop, to fall in

drops. 2. to undergo distillation. 3. to subject to distillation. and 4. to purify." Daddy has promised to help me distill water for two weeks now. The project is due tomorrow. I realize it will never be done by then. "God," I pray aloud, "please let me die a horrible death by tomorrow." This cheers me a little. I begin to rub my bruised ankles. I believe my left ankle is broken from Jeffrey's kicks.

Daddy's home. He's had a lousy day. He doesn't have time for some stupid science project. I guess being a township supervisor is hard. He has a beeper on his belt hoop. I've never heard it beep. He kicks off his Nikes so that I can see the hole in the toe of his knee sock. He puts on his thick reading glasses as Mother brings him his martini and his newspaper. He wears the same glasses that Mother and I wear. Jeffrey is too young for them yet.

"Daddy?" I ask. "Can you at least show me how to start my project?" He throws his paper to the floor and stands. I think he is going to help, but he begins to holler. Mother leaves the room. "Goddamn it. How can you be so Goddamn stupid? Can't you do anything? Fat tub o'lard. Get out of here. Now!"

I go back to my room in tears. Buster is barking out back. It has begun to rain. I pray for it to stop raining so Buster isn't soaking wet. I look out the side window and see Daddy's unfinished dog house project. The warped sides are beginning to cave in without a roof and the extra plywood is rotting on the ground. A rusted box of nails and our only hammer lies on top of the wood.

I check my bed for bugs or dead snakes. It has been awhile since Jeffrey has put one there, but I check anyway. His last snake-in-the-bed prank will keep me checking my sheets for the rest of my life. My ankle throbs against the covers. I dream I'm drowning in the pool and Daddy jumps in to save me. He holds me close and thanks God I'm alive. I hold on to him tight as he pulls me to the pool steps.

\*\*\*\*\*

This morning I try to play sick, but Mother makes me go to school. I go straight to the infirmary when I get there. Nurse Gibson looks at my ankle. I can't wait to show Mother the new cast wrapped around it. Nurse Gibson lets me sit on the examining table while I wait. When she calls my house to tell my mother that I can't go to class, my father answers.

"Oh, hello Mr. Landis. How are you? This is Nurse Gibson at Jennifer's school. Jennifer is doing it again. She says her ankle is broken this time. No not broken, but it's very badly bruised. Looks like kicks. She refuses to go to class. Should I force her, or..." Nurse Gibson looks angry, "No, that's okay. I understand. I'll hold."

The nurse stands with the phone in her hand for five minutes. She hangs up and calls back. "No answer," she says to herself. She hangs up the phone with a bang then smiles at me. "We'll try again

later, okay? Your father is on the other line."

I would love to stay and talk with Nurse Gibson all day and I tell her so. She says no, that I should go to class, that I'll be fine. She gives me a hug and I leave. Her hug lingers on my shoulders as I walk to my class.

Nurse Gibson finally gets a hold of Mother at one-thirty. My name is called over the intercom and it makes me jump. Everyone watches me limp to the door. I have butterflies in my stomach. Never before has my name been called over the intercom. It excites and terrifies me at the same time. Mother arrives just before school is over to pick me up, so we go down to third grade to get Jeffrey. I beg Mother to let him go on the bus, but she says, "Jennifer, please.." As we walk down the hall, I show her my cast. She stops walking and stares at me. "Please don't start this again, Jennifer. Everything's been so calm. There is no cast on your ankle. Stop limping!" Hurt by her anger, I limp ahead of her. The cast is heavy. I hear her begin to cry. This makes me smile.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jeffrey is out in the hall as we near his classroom. He has another boy in a headlock. He is laughing and cursing loudly. A teacher tries to pull him off. She recognizes mother as we stand frozen in the hallway. "Mrs. Landis, Oh thank God..."

Taking my hand, Mother turns around and hurries back down the hall with me in tow. The teacher calls her name several times. Little kids stare in wonder as the two of us pound past them towards the exit. We drive home in silence.

Mother decides to do my science project for me. She does it on the heart and how smoking can affect it. She uses a heart model and a bunch of pamphlets from the hospital to make it. I'm grateful, but I would have rather had Daddy teach me how to distill. Mother tells me that there is no cast on my ankle and to stop limping. She is trying to ignore it so she doesn't have to help me.

Jeffrey is outside now. His fight at school was never mentioned to him. He is throwing his official NFL football at the neighbor's cars as they pass our house going in or out of the neighborhood. He succeeds in hitting Mr. Newbauer's new white Mercedes. Mr. Newbauer stops his car and yells at Jeffrey. Jeffrey laughs and flips him off. I know he's going to get it tonight. Mr. Newbauer is on the Republican Committee and very important to Daddy.

\*\*\*\*\*

Daddy comes in from his after dinner jog. He is sweating and breathing hard. He sounds like Buster after he runs away. His face is a purplish-red with blotchy white patches. He looks like he is going to fall over right there. Mother brings him his martini and nags him, "Walt, why do you always overdo?"

"Shutup, you fat bitch. At least I try to keep in shape. I don't look



much different than I did in high school." He looks her up and down with disgust. The phone rings. I answer. It's Mr. Newbauer for Daddy.

Daddy rips the phone from my hand. His voice is much lighter and quieter when he talks to work people. "Hello. Oh, Hi Bill." Daddy is silent for about three minutes, then he says "No problem Bill. It'll be taken care of." Daddy hangs up the phone and hollers for Jeffrey. Jeffrey appears from nowhere. He has a can of oil in his hand. Daddy's full attention is on his son as he glares. I am jealous. Jeffrey puts his arm up to protect himself as Daddy swings. But instead of hitting Jeffrey, he slaps Mother across the face. Mother falls backwards into the wall. She is stunned. Daddy goes after her again and he screams, "Don't you ever watch these little monsters? Where were you today, sleeping? I can't be here twenty-four hours a day to discipline the little sons-of-bitches. Do you understand me, Louise?"

Mother nods. She is holding her mouth. She doesn't look at Daddy. She looks very far away. I wish I could be far away too. On closer inspection I think that her jaw is broken. I wonder if they will put a cast on her face. Daddy goes up to their bedroom and Mother follows. I guess she has to apologize more. Jeffrey looks pleased with himself and skips outside.

\*\*\*\*\*

I decide to go swimming. I haven't been in a bathing suit since last year, but Daddy had the pool opened last week and it's been calling me ever since. I dive into the cold water. I take long, hard strokes back and forth across the pool. It feels great. I stare at the water slide. It twists down into the water, inviting me to get on. Without Jeffrey's friends jumping in the pool and calling me fat, I feel as though I could. I climb the stairs. I can see into the Myers backyard. Little Molly is in the arms of her father in their pool. She is laying flat on her back in his arms. She is learning to float. She has a big grin on her face and so does her father. Suddenly she grabs for her father's neck, becoming scared. Her father picks her way up in the air out of the water, then pulls her to him for a hug. Molly is laughing again. A tear slides down my cheek and I wipe it away.

I go down the slide, but the fun is gone. I swim out into the deep end. I go under the water and hold my breath for as long as I can. Buster starts to whine. I pop back up then go under again. This time I flail my arms around and scream, bobbing in and out of the water. Buster barks at me to come out of the water. I scream and sputter and finally sit at the bottom of the pool for longer than I can stand. I can hear nothing. I surface, choking on some water I've swallowed. Buster's concerned howling fills the backyard, but no one else has noticed. I'm too tired to make it to the side, so I tread

water until I stop coughing. Buster seems relieved when I pull myself out.

\*\*\*\*\*

It's been a week since I tried to drown myself. I still have my cast. Mother says that I should go to a psychiatrist, but Daddy says that it's too late, I'm already crazy. I believe him.

Daddy has left his bottle of Absolut out in the garage after he has finished polishing his Corvette. I take it out back under my t-shirt. I limp towards the woods in my backyard. I listen for the calm sound of the creek. Its familiar trickle sends a chill down my back. I get to the edge of it and kneel. I can see every bug and worm in the dirt. I decide to put one in Daddy's shoe later. They burrow into the mud as I crouch closer. "Lucky bugs," I say aloud. Unscrewing the vodka, I shiver as the stench hits my nose. I take a gulp. My throat constricts against the stinging, but I swallow and take another bitter mouthful. And another. Then I wait, for what I'm not sure.

As I sit in the soft mud with the bugs crawling over my legs, I rub my ankle. The sky seems very blue through the trees and the water seems clearer than it ever has before. In the distance I hear Molly Myers laughing, and I don't hate her for it. Not now. I even smile myself.

I hear the leaves crackle behind me. I turn to face Jeffrey. He is grinning at me. He looks as if he is going to pounce. Instead, he turns and runs towards the house. I know that he is telling on me. The bottle of vodka lies limp in my hand. Gripping its neck tightly, I head back towards the house. A wave of excitement comes over me as I hear my father bellow my name.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Yes, Daddy?" I ask, limping into his bedroom. He sits on the edge of the bed. Mother stands against the wall. She looks scared. Daddy's eyes glare at his vodka bottle in my hand. I offer it to him. "I'm sorry Daddy," I say, hoping for a response. Daddy stands, grabs the bottle and smashes it against the wall. It hits near Mother's head.

"It's not Mom's fault," I scream, "It's mine!"

Startled by my loud voice, Daddy turns back to me. He seems to weigh the possibilities. He nods his head as if agreeing with me. "Alright," he says, with a Jeffrey grin. He slaps me across the face. I fall to the carpet with a thud. Mother screams, "Walt, no!" He picks me up by my shirt and throws me across the room. I hit the wall hard and taste blood. "Fat little thief," my father says as he comes at me again. I put my arms around his neck to keep him from hitting me in the face again. He pulls me off of him and shakes me. "Don't you ever touch my vodka again. Do you understand?" I nod, but he throws me against the wall again. My arm makes an odd

sound. Then there is only blackness.

\*\*\*\*\*

I wake up to blazing lights. I think that I am dead. My eyes refuse to adjust, then I see Daddy. He is standing over me, but he seems too small to be my Daddy. "My arm is broken," I tell him. He nods in agreement. He looks scared. This makes me scared. I look around me, noticing the rest of the room for the first time. Mother is against the wall. She has her head down. A police officer is talking to her. She is crying. Jeffrey sits on a black bench in the far corner. He is kicking aimlessly at a drinking water dispenser next to him. There is a man in white wrapping a wet, heavy gauze around my arm. He smiles at me. He has bright blue eyes. I like his smile. "Casts are fun," he is saying to me, " People will want to write all over it. You become a real important person when you have a cast. I remember when I got my first cast..." His voice is soothing and I begin to drift. Then I see Daddy again. Our eyes meet and I think that it is the first time he has really looked at me. "I'm sorry," he almost whispers. He pats my good hand and walks away with the policeman holding his elbow. Everyone in the room watches them leave. My arm begins to throb and the room spins. I feel like Dorothy in the hurricane. "Daddy, come back." I can still feel his hand patting mine.

But Mother stands beside me now. Her face is big, then small, then big again. She tells me that he has to go away for a while. She takes my hand in hers and the dizziness begins to subside. Then her hand is gone. I hear her scream, "Oh Jeffrey, No!" Then CRASH! Water splatters the emergency room floor as the water bottle on the dispenser shatters to the ground. Jeffrey stands next to the mess, smiling wide. The entire room is staring at him and he is delighted. Mother rushes over to him and begins to pick up broken glass. Other people in white coats appear with towels and mops. Even the smiling doctor with the bright blue eyes leaves my side to help save some of the equipment from the spreading water. I lie alone on the hard table with wet, heavy gauze hanging from my arm. I can still feel my mother's hand on mine, but I know that it is not there. I begin to drift off and as the lights swirl over my head I am in the hurricane again on my way to Oz.

## Silly Rabbit

By Tim Hannigan

The hare has eaten the forbidden food,  
warped my childhood, and killed my mood.  
What kind of Trix are these?!  
Frustrate the mind with animated ease.  
Now once again the tension mounts,  
the world has changed due to one ballot count.  
You've starved the rodent against my will,  
but NOW you feed him for the modern child's will.  
Once again you've caused my blood to boil,  
helping the youth of today to spoil.  
I won't buy it anymore!  
I want to burn down your factory  
and every stinkin' store  
that sells those pellets  
and encourages the rabbit to eat even more!  
That fucking rabbit can eat its own shit,  
'cause Trix were for kids.

## The Sky Seemed Endless

By Kathrin Phillips

"Cecilia you're breaking my heart, shaking my confidence daily..." Belting out the song and scrubbing my hair with *Sauve Aloe* shampoo, I try not to think about anything important. I drag myself from the shower and concentrate on brushing my teeth as I stagger down the stairs to my parents' room.

My mother, usually a cheerful and energetic woman, assumes somewhat of a different manner at six thirty on Saturday mornings. She growls softly at me as she rolls away from my tapping hand. "But Mom, we'll be late..." My mouth full of toothpaste, I whisper - so as not to wake my Father.

"Leave your mother alone." Oops.

My father will not be coming to today's horse show. He is, at this particular time in his life, completely uninterested in horses, shows, accidents, and his family.

"Mom, we need to go soon," I plead. Finally she nods her head in an attempt at agreement.

Leaving their bedroom I return to my own. I stare at my reflection in the mirror for what seems like hours. My face glares back at me; the similarities to my father are remarkable. I can thank him for my horrible bushy eyebrows and for the bump in my nose. When I was a little girl I wanted nothing more than to look like my Daddy, but when I was a little girl things were different. Crossing my eyes I screw my features into a horrible shape. Much better.

My mother is moving around in the kitchen. Sighing, I go downstairs to join her. I would like to escape the house without eating anything but my mother claims that "Breakfast is an integral part of your day." She prepares scrambled eggs, toast with jam and a big glass of frothy orange juice. My father and small brother are still asleep when we leave.

My stomach, properly bloated from my integral meal, is in my throat as we drive to the barn. My mother chatters away about the class selection, curious as to who else will be showing today.

Typical of early mornings, my mood is far from talkative and I grunt semi-intelligible answers at her. Finally she asks the question I've been dreading. "Are you afraid of jumping the wall?" Her eyes are on me, not the road.

"Yes."

She knows better than to press, instead, she merely gives me a worried look. My mother is very big on worried looks.

We travel in silence for a while. Today's show is a fine mix of jumping and flat classes so I have a lot to prepare for. My thoughts stray, first to my fear of the wall, and then to the absence of my

father.

"Jenny, I'm sorry this summer has been so rough on you."

My mother is trying to get me to talk about it. She thinks that if she talks to me, the nightmares, the fear that catches in my throat, will go away. Twisting my leather gloves on my lap I don't respond.

"Things have been difficult for all of us, but talking about it is a good way to alleviate the hurt," Mom continues slowly. She took a Psych class or two in college and likes to preach about the importance of communication.

"Can we talk about this some other time? I have too many other things on my mind right now." I know that my tone is cold, but I'm unprepared for the extent of the sadness on her face as she glances at me again.

"Jenny..."

I guess she thinks it's better not to finish because she just shakes her head and concentrates on the road.

Try as I may to plan my assault on the jump course I am instead filled with the pain of my father's betrayal. My father's affair is over. It was over before I even learned of its existence. Lying sleepless in my bed, the night before a big show, I could hear them talking on the porch. His confession, the name of the woman that betrayed us, I could hear it all. Alison, God how I hate that name. My mother's sobs still ring through me whenever I think about that night. I can remember the anger, the confusion, as I stumbled down the stairs and confronted them. My father - defensive and self righteous. My mother sobbing and still, even then, protecting him.

"Oh Jenny, dear, go back to bed. Everything will be okay." She tried to send me away but in my blind fury I only wanted to hurt him. "I hate you. I will always hate you!" I screamed, screamed in his face. And fled.

"Jenny?" Mom pokes my shoulder.

Somehow we're pulling into the long drive at the barn. I leap from the car. Riders everywhere are schooling their shining horses. Waving to another horsey mom, mine wanders away to discuss the day's coming events. I must get moving, I am short of time and Fire is waiting.

My father must wait. I have other fears to think of now. The accident is fresh in my mind even now as I buckle the old blue halter around Fire's head and lead him from his stall. I take him outside, walking briskly to his left. He follows at my heels like an overgrown puppy. He leans his head on my shoulder and pulls at my braid with his teeth.

"Fire! Stop that!" The big horse stops abruptly. Tossing his head and rolling his eyes, he opens his lips to show his teeth.

Soon he drops his head and nudges me, willing to walk again. He is excited already. I think that he can feel my apprehension and this

tells him that something particularly special is going to happen today. Fire behaves badly during his bath, shying away from the spray of the water. I forgive him. I always forgive him in the end. After his bath I ready him for our first class. His coat shines, his mane and tail are neatly braided.

Fire was a birthday present when I turned twelve, almost three years ago. My father, sick of listening to me beg for a horse of my own, conceded. He and Fire became quick friends. While I rode, my father would often watch and sometimes he even took video tapes during lessons and shows so that I could see exactly what I was doing wrong and correct it. Lately he is just too busy. Too busy for anything. I wouldn't want him there anyway. I brush one spot on Fire's shoulder over and over again.

My relationship with my father has deteriorated rapidly to an almost non-existent level. My brother Ryan, age five, is still daddy's little boy, but I am old enough to resent him and to hold his actions against him. The night of my outburst I vowed never to deal with him again and I have held my word well. I am silent during meals and spend most of my time either in my room or at the barn. He works late so I have been able to avoid him successfully.

My mother comes wandering down the barn aisle with a class schedule in one hand and a fresh bag of carrots in the other. "I thought Fire might be hungry," she explains as she offers him one on her outstretched hand. Part of my mother's role in life is to continuously feed the possibly hungry. Unfortunately Fire is always hungry. Huge mobile lips stretch towards her, enveloping the entire carrot. As he chews, orange carrot slime drips from his mouth onto the dirt. Grabbing a towel I wipe his chin to keep the carrot from staining his face. My mother, amused by my instant dismay, giggles.

As I wrap Fire's legs with clean white polo bandages, his head swings around, and he watches intently for a moment. Then, lowering his head he sends me sprawling with a well-planned push. My mother frowns as an impolite word escapes from my lips. Unfortunately I am too keyed up to bother brushing the dirt from my new tan britches and my mother must give up her seat on the tack box to help me. She shakes her head. All too soon it is time.

"Jenny, think about the horse, not your father," Mom says softly as we leave the barn.

I know why she says this. The morning after my father's revelation was the big county show. It was also the morning of the accident. Distraught over the previous night's events, and uneasy in the rain, I jerked Fire around the ring in our first two classes, upsetting him to the point of our disastrous fall in our third. Not a good day. My ribs are still healing and I'm wearing a brace on my strained right wrist. I promise Fire that I'll think of only him today.

It is becoming a beautiful day. The late summer weather has been terrible so far. The sky, a wonderful blue, seems endless. One fluffy white cloud hovers motionless above. The sand in the ring has absorbed the puddles the rain of the previous week had left, and Fire, expecting to sink, eyes the ground suspiciously as we approach the ring. His back, broad and reassuring beneath me, is more comfortable than any armchair. My legs are firmly ensconced in their familiar place along his barrel, and now there is only one thing on my mind, monopolizing my thoughts: the wall.

The course today is tricky. Gazing out at it I can see the big pine tree that so conveniently blocks my view of the wall. The wall is a five foot tall, two foot wide, wood contraption that strikes fear in the hearts of many riders. Mine is skipping beats as I let Fire trot and we glide around the warm-up ring. His stride is short, his head up, and I can feel the tightness in his body as we figure eight. He is as wound up and nervous as I, because he too remembers.

We have twenty minutes until the start of our class, and as we trot I attempt to reassure myself. After all, it is only a club show, in a familiar ring, and the competition should be almost non-existent. Today we will be ready, a team again. I firmly banish my father from my thoughts. The big red horse loosens up a bit as I ask him for another figure eight. His head drops to a comfortable position as he takes the bit. I ask him to canter, in a low voice and with a little pressure on his ribs. Easily slipping into the fluid gait he floats around the ring, skimming over the damp sand and tossing his head as his joints loosen up. I try to relax, moving with him and concentrating on our frame. Almost too soon it is time for our class. Reluctantly we join the others waiting by the gate.

As I watch the first rider enter the ring, my focus blurs and I am once again back to the day of our accident.

Eager to go, pulling on his bit, Fire refuses to heed my pressure on the reins, and he speeds up after the brush box. His ears are forward, almost touching. The rain blurs my vision, and I blink rapidly. I can feel the rise of mad concentration as we circle, heading for the third jump. It is a simple in and out and we clear it beautifully; his knees are tucked almost to his chin and he is nicely rounded. The wall looms ahead as we touch down. Fire lengthens his stride in anticipation. He can fit in only seven strides before the wall and so I half halt him, asking him to shorten his stride. He is intent on setting his own pace. His neck curves as he draws his chin close to his chest in an attempt to over power me. Sitting back, I exert more pressure on his mouth. Suddenly a rein breaks and he surges forward, lunging for the fence. As his knees bang into the wall, I lose my balance and we both go down in a tangle of legs, hooves and broken wood.



"Number fifteen. Number fifteen to the ring."

That's me. Shaking my head and trying to calm down I walk Fire to the gate. His head is up, and he prances. He can feel my fear, and he expects something big to happen.

Fire's canter is uneven and bumpy as we enter the ring. I settle him quickly, small circles usually do the trick, but he is still nervous and chewing on the bit. I press him forward, legs working without a second thought. We are off.

The first jump, straight ahead and he swerves a bit left, then right. Pressure from my legs straightens him, but he is off track and a hoof bumps the top rail. Miraculously it stays up and we move on.

The next jump is a strange oxer and he is more than ready. Four, five, six strides and up, my hands by his ears and his knees by his chin. Nice. We cruise around a tree towards the in and out. His ears are pricked, his stride strong and sure. Up down, up down, over. Fire falters as he catches sight of the wall. I can feel the tension throughout him as his stride breaks and he almost balks.

We have battled the wall several times in lessons since the accident but he never ceases to falter. My heart is in my throat, thoughts of broken bones coursing through my mind. This time we might not be so lucky and Fire wavers as if he knows my thoughts. My legs, working independently, urge him on. The strides are right, nine for some reason and they take forever. Everything seems to melt together, the sound of his hooves pounding, his breath blowing, my heart beating, all at once and together. Then, the sight of the wall as it stares us down.

Eight, nine strides, press on his barrel and pray as he rises, a surge of power and he leaps. I know it is not a pretty sight. I can feel the awkward set of his body and the stiffness of my own. His hooves thud roughly as we hit sand once again. We've done it! Back on earth and headed for a red and white vertical. We are accompanied by a small burst of applause, oh mom you shouldn't... The rest of the class breezes by.

We are awarded the red, second place, ribbon for our efforts, and Fire struts around, aware of the fuss being made over him. As the ribbon flutters from his bridle he eyes it warily, sidestepping.

Leaving the ring I pat Fire's neck, telling him over and over again that he is a wonderful horse, such a good boy. I search the crowd for my mother. It takes a few minutes before I understand that the man standing beside my mother is actually my father. He waves as he catches my open mouthed stare. The last time my father attended a horse show was the day of the accident, and he had been there merely in body. My family makes its way over to me and begins to talk at once. I don't hear them. I am too busy trying to figure out how to react to the sudden re-appearance of my father in my everyday life. He smiles at me and slaps Fire lightly on the neck.

"Good job Banana," he says, smiling again. My childhood nickname, reserved for my father's personal use and retired nearly two years ago, has surfaced again. Fortunately I am not required to answer. My next class has been announced and I must take Fire to the gate.

I am overwhelmed with the events of the day. I fear my head will burst as I dismount and walk my tired horse.

Waiting by Fire's stall, my family rises eagerly to greet me. While I give Fire a quick bath, my father takes my little brother Ryan to find the bathroom. Fire's bath is short and I groom him quickly, rubbing Absorbine on his tired legs. My mother watches quietly. Finally she speaks.

"Your father and I sat up late last night talking. He wants to try to work things out." Her voice is so full of hope, it breaks my heart.

"Do you think he means it?"

"Yes, I do. He sounds so sad, he really wants to make things better. Especially with you."

We stand in the barn aisle and talk about him. I've avoided him so well lately. And now he is here. Here, in my world and on my time. I cannot bear to see my mother hurt again.

"How nice." My sarcasm makes my mother wince.

"Jenny, your father loves you. Please talk to him. For me?"

I nod, focusing all of my attention on my tired horse. There is an awkward silence. "I'll meet you at the car," I tell my mother. She pulls a Milky Way from her purse and hands it to me as I pass her.

As I lead Fire back to his stall he rests his head sleepily on my shoulder and I share my Milky Way with him. He chews appreciatively, managing to slobber brown slime on my back. I lean over his stall door for several minutes, reveling in his safe silence. Fire, my best friend, never talks back or argues and so, is also my best confidant. He has stood by throughout the whole family drama and is now pushing at me inquiringly with his head. "Wish us luck Fire," I whisper as I stroke his forelock. Heart racing, I run to meet my father where he waits at the gate.



## Here Boy

By Gretchen Lacey

'forever', to a dog, is how long it takes to  
eat a rawhide bone. To suck it dry of all its  
flavor, to chew up the smooth edges, and  
to slobber and spit them out.

Then run off and not see  
the mess left behind.

So that's what you meant  
when you said 'forever'?

You mutt.

Go fetch yourself.

## Bill, The Person.

By Alan McCabe

I can remember my childhood perfectly -- I want you to remember that; it's an important part of my story. Every Crayola crayon, every salty tear, every spank on the ass. I have come to realize that this is unusual just from talking to people, all you people. 'Cause people will interrupt their own conversations and yell to the other side of the room things like "Now, Sis, were we living in Thistown or Thatville when I fractured my fibula?" and "Shit, was that Eddie Sumwunne or Johnny Oruther that was with me when I did that certain act of outrageous adolescent rebellion?" I know you know what I mean, because I'm talking about people in general, and you're a person.

But, see, that's not me. I mean, I'm a person and all, but I have this incredible memory. I can tell you, Mister, the date and time, who I was with, what the weather was like and what I'd had for breakfast for every event in my life, momentous or trivial.

Oh, you want examples? Proof? No, that's okay, you're a person; I understand.

When I lost my first baby tooth: 3/17/74. 4:03 pm. My dad. Raining heavily. Cheerios.

I can see that doesn't impress you. I could be bullshitting you, yes, I realize that. Well, in my heart, I know I'm not bullshitting you, and whether you want to believe me or no, that's ultimately up to you. I'm gonna tell you the rest of my story regardless.

This memory thing used to bug the hell out of me, scare me almost. *Why?* I used to ask myself, why do I remember my childhood so damn well? Every little detail of it is right there in front of me whenever I want it -- and sometimes when I don't want it -- as clear as a laser disc.

Entire conversations. Meals. I can remember -- yes, I see it right now -- me and my brother sitting at the kitchen table kicking each other's shins, eating lunch. My socks are itchy. There's a feeling in my bladder -- in about ten minutes I'll have to urinate. I'm eating alphabet soup. The first spoonful spells out JUBY. There's a piece of meat and a little carrot in that spoonful. The next spoonful spells out GOP. The next one -- well, I could go on.

This used to bug me so much 'cause most days I couldn't remember getting up in the morning. Or where I left my keys. Or people's names, people who I knew I'd only just met. Like that girl at the post office, you know, the one with all the nice sweaters and those fingernails. I knew I'd been introduced to her fifty-fucking-three times, but the name just would not stick! I hated that.

But that was just me, I guess. That was just Bill.

Oh yeah -- sorry. Hi. My name's Bill.

Caroline.

The girl at the post office -- her name is Caroline. See, I know that; I can remember that kind of thing now. The vivid childhood -- it's all still there, but I don't wonder about it anymore. It seems like such a small thing to wonder about. I got bigger things to wonder about now.

You see, I used to hang out at JAKE'S -- you know, just down the road a bit. I used to meet my friend Tom there every day at noon-o-one. That's what we used to say, "noon-o-one." But things got weird between Tom and me, and I haven't seen him in a while. I've known Tom since I can remember -- you know, he wasn't constantly *there*; he's not in all my memories -- I just don't remember not knowing him.

I have no idea what Tom's last name is, so don't even ask.

And if you did find out somewhere, and you wanted to call him up for whatever reason -- maybe you wanted to check up on my story or something 'cause that's what people like to do sometimes, I hear -- I bet you wouldn't be able to find him in the phonebook. I don't think the man has a phone. He never used to call me. Somehow, he always showed up at the right times. You know, just after I looked around and realized, "Shit, I'm totally out of anything interesting to *do*," ding dong! There he was at the door with some crazy something in his hands that he'd picked up at the garbage dump or a garage sale or something. And so we'd put it on my coffee table, and lean back, lean far far back in my easy chairs and look at it through eyelids that couldn't have been less open. I'd put my hands behind my head, with my fingers all interwoven -- I liked that -- and Tom would tug at his nipple with one hand and his lip with the other hand, and we'd kind of speculate, you know? You know: "I'll bet it belonged to a very thin man with a very large tattoo," Tom might say. He was so good at that game. 'Cause once he'd said this speculation, you couldn't picture anything else. I might say, "I think it's some kind of entertainment device," and I always felt so idiotic. But he always seemed pleased with my contributions, and pleasing Tom was the best feeling in the world for me. It was like pleasing a teacher or a parent. But here I was twenty some years old, and Tom's no older than I am.

So, yeah, there he was whenever I needed something to do.

And then there were all those things he knew. I mean things he couldn't have known -- but he knew them.

I mean things about *me*, you see. Things that happened to me when I thought nobody else was around --

You want specifics again, don't you, you person, you?

Okay.

This was the last time Tom and I were at JAKE'S -- you know,

noon-o-one, and all that -- it was about three or four weeks ago. We got to talking about women and sex, and Tom leans right up to my face, shows a lot of teeth, and says, "Well, you know, that little escapade of yours was nothing to be sneezed at. Some wild shit there."

And in my mind I'm thinking -- 'cause that's the place where such stuff is often done -- I'm thinking, there's only one thing he could be referring to. But then I think, no! No one knows about THAT! I told *no one* about *that!*"

And yet off he goes.

"C'mon Bill," he says. "You know, when you were in eleventh grade, and there was that girl down the road. Tanya. She lived in that huge house with the marble lions on both sides of the driveway, and the half-circle windows, and the perfect lawn that went on forever. It was summer, and her family was gone for five weeks. And you were hired by that family to take care of the lawn and gardens while they were gone. One day, mowing the lawn, you saw this vision of perfect beauty sitting under a tree, reading a book. You had *no* idea any of the family had stayed home. So you approached her.

"'Excuse me,' you said. 'Nut's your whame?' -- 'Cause you were already dumbstruck by her beauty. Not to mention consumed by lust.

"'Tanya,' she said in a voice that made your appendages tingle and your lips go numb. 'And I'm here in this big house all by myself with all the books and big fluffy toys a 16 year old girl could ask for. But I'm lonely. Would you like to play tennis?' You nodded stupidly. She gave you a brand new, very expensive tennis racket, and the two of you played tennis.

"She crushed you. 'Cause you didn't follow through on your forehand, damn it, and you tried to play a speed game. You know you can never win a speed game, 'cause you have no endurance and bad knees. Plus she was wearing that thin white dress and nothing else, and with the sun behind her when she stretched her arms to serve... you did not return *any* of her serves, did you?

"And then it was lunchtime. By then, you had regained some of your senses and you could talk. You had the most charming conversation; I mean, you really delighted her with your wit and jokes. Did me proud. And her light, honest laughter just sent you soaring, just made you the happiest man in the Milky Way. She offered to make you some lunch. 'I make a bitchin' PBJ,' she said, and she told you to wait in the dining room while she fixed it.

"You didn't notice it at the time, but it was a spectacular dining room. The ceiling was about forty feet high with the most magnificent, shimmering chandelier hanging down. A light breeze coming from an open window caused it to clink ever so slightly.

There were two huge mirrors on the dark wooden walls -- placed on opposite sides of the absurdly long dining room table.

"And so you waited. And you danced in that room. You checked your hair in the mirrors and your breath in your hand, and you winked at yourself, because you knew -- you knew you were one bad motherfucker. And then in she came.

"I seem to have made a terrible mess," she said, and the mirrors reflected an infinite amount of Tanyas, naked and perfect with peanut butter and jelly smeared strategically all over her body. As I said," she said," he said, "I make a bitchin' PBJ."

"And I think we can safely say, Bill, that that old dining room table had never held such a joyful feast like the one that ensued. And that those mirrors had never before infinitely reflected such a wild, wet spectacle.

"You had a lot of fun those five weeks, Bill, my good friend, you lucky sonofabitch."

I had never told Tom this story. So... what was I to make of this? Had he been spying on me that whole time? That seemed a reasonable explanation.

Then a sudden and nauseating thought came to me... during that five week period, I had never seen Tom. Could he and Tanya have been...

No.

But I just had to ask him how he could have known all this about me.

"Tom," I said, "how could you know all this about me?"

And as a reply, he just gave me this look. This look that I never could have imagined ever gracing his face. It was a look of total panic, a loss of control. And one thing Tom always had was control over his world.

"You haven't figured it out yet?" He whispered this, almost like a child, in a choked-up voice. And then he couldn't look at me straight. He looked at the cocktail napkins, and he looked at his sweaty palms fidgeting with the cocktail napkins, and he looked at the neon clock and the TV and the door, the wood panelling, and everything. And, I mean, come on, this was JAKE'S, noon-o-one everyday, he wasn't looking at these things out of curiosity, to take in new information -- he knew it already. He was just looking all around to avoid looking at me. And then he said in that same childish voice, "I gotta go."

"Gotta go" my buttocks. It was only noon-sixteen. We never left JAKE'S till noon-forty-seven 'cause I didn't have to be back to work till noon-fifty-five, and Tom? Well, Tom never had to be anywhere as far as I knew. He was a man without appointments or responsibilities. No. he wasn't leaving 'cause he had to be somewhere. He was scared or something, he was suddenly so



scared of me that he had to leave even though it was only noon-sixteen. He had to get away from me as fast as he could. And that scared me. "Haven't figured *what* out?" I asked. But he was long gone. And one thing I've learned about people is they can't answer your questions when they're not there. And on this day Tom was acting like a person.

So what was I to do? I ask you, what was I to do?

I finished my drink. I forget what I was drinking, but it was really good. So I asked Jake for another. And then I drank it, and then I blacked out.

I do that alot.

Next thing I remember is canoeing down a river. I don't remember going to the river or if the canoe was mine or if I was just renting it -- all I know is I was canoeing on some river somewhere and it was very pleasant and I had few worries.

The problem with Tom was in the back of my mind somewhere, and when it crept to the front of my mind, I came upon some rapids in the water and fell out of my canoe. The water was icy cold and frothy white. I flew through those rapids with no life-jacket on, but somehow I still held an oar. It got stuck in the mud in the river, and I suddenly found myself vaulting through the air. I landed on a woody island.

And there, God damn it, there was Tom.

He didn't look so frightened any more, but resigned to the fact that he had to face a fate he'd seen coming for a long time.

"Hi, Bill," he said.

"Hi, Tom," I said.

"It's noon-o-one," he said with that smile of his.

"So it is!" I said, looking at my watch.

He produced a drink from the inner pocket of his white jacket. He was wearing a white shirt, too, and white pants and a pink tie. And a panama hat. The drink was the same drink I had had at JAKE'S. Tom handed it to me, and I drank it, and it was cold.

He sat me down on a white rock, and he spoke.

"I made you up." he said. "I made you up. You're not real. This island isn't real, that drink you're drinking isn't real, that rock you're sitting on isn't real. Your world isn't real. You're my made-up friend. I think about you and make up little adventures for you because I find my own life very lonely and difficult. I'm sorry."

Well... I mean, what can you say to something like that?

At first I felt... concerned. I was concerned for my buddy Tom. Poor guy. Having delusions that he made the world and me and all. There's a word for people like that, isn't there?

And then I thought... yeah. Why not.

Why not?

I mean, what makes me so special? Isn't it a little egotistical of

me to believe that I live in the real universe? I mean, I know that if I'm just a figment of my best friend's imagination, then so are you and so's this bar, and so's this beer, and maybe you're not willing to accept that. Well, I understand; I felt the same way at first.

But, come on, the blackouts, the unusually vivid memory of my childhood, and Tom knowing so damn much. It kind of makes sense now, doesn't it?

"So right now, I'm not really here," Tom said to me as I sat there on that white rock. It was a comfortable rock, so I felt I had to thank him, seeing as he had made it up. But he kept talking.

"I'm sorry, Bill," he said. "I'm sorry I've made your life so... uneven. I spend too much time creating your perfect childhood. I'm always revising it. But I like your childhood. There are so many nice people there and lots of big fluffy toys."

I had to agree.

"Those blackouts must confuse you, but, you know, sometimes I think about other things. See... the problem is... My life sucks so I created you. I live in somebody else's world. And this somebody else is a very sick, sadistic person. He likes to play tricks on me. Likes to wake me up in the morning to what looks like a perfect day, and then send me to bed that night weeping from all the unexpected shit he heaped on me. And he never visits me, like I visit you. I've heard of people who claim that he's talked to them, but I think these people are sicker than me. Because... yes, I've been told by some important people that I'm not well. Life in my world is a lot different than the life I've created for us in *our* world, Tom. The days are a lot longer, and the games aren't as fun. I often completely forget where I am in the other world when I come in here to visit you. Like right now, for instance... you see, I didn't realize it, but I'm in a public place. There's a lot of people around, looking at me. Oh it's a grocery store, Bill. And everyone's looking at me. They don't look happy. Oh for goodness sake...

"Tee-hee.

"Bill I forgot to put on trousers this morning.

Tom got glassy-eyed on me and seemed to be observing what was happening to him in the other world.

"Don't worry, Bill," he told me. "The important people are here for me again. They're telling me I should have no more worries. And that's good. I can devote all my time to you now. No more blackouts, Bill. Life will be good,"

And, you know? I haven't blacked out in a while. The money situation's been good, even though they don't seem to care at work if I don't show up anymore. And Tanya! I hadn't seen the woman in years, and then I come home one night and find her in my bed. And, hey, isn't this some weather we're having? What month *is* this anyway?

## The Crash

By Jennifer Blay

Snow, molded into Sporto boot  
soles sizes 3, 5, and 6,  
stretched along the path  
from the houses  
to the top of the hill.  
The three of us squirmed,  
packed into an electric  
blue sled. On the count of  
three we screamed, adding shrill,  
happy cries to the freezy air.  
White below us;  
wet white targeting us from above,  
the sides, and in front.  
A villainous rock yanked  
the sled off the snow,  
spinning us toward  
a frightened tree.  
"Stop,"  
we shrieked, our brakeman  
pulled the black plastic  
handle off the sled;  
it became a 747  
as the sled climbed the tree.  
Butter knives of snow  
filled my sleeves. Our  
twangy laughter erupted.

## The Gifts of Edward Charles and Me

By Mary Kormancik

For Brigid's day  
I'll give you  
lavender  
crushed velvet  
and  
a moment in my heart.  
We'll smile at the moment  
and  
sing "Nil Sén Lá."

For Beltane  
you'll give me  
freckles connected dot to dot  
auburn  
and  
a moment of your white clay.  
We'll smile at the moment  
and  
sing "Nil Sén Lá."

For Litha  
I give  
you give  
and  
we have a moment.  
We smile at the moment  
and  
sing "Nil Sén Lá."

## Inspiration Incorporated

By Vic Starr

*The air was transparent.*

Of course it was, air usually is. How about:

*The air was laden with the broken dreams of...*

Stupid. It doesn't flow. Jeff backed away from his word processor in frustration. 2:00 a.m. and nothing. he ransacked his brain for ideas but came up short again. Outside the window he could see the entire campus sleeping. He could practically hear them snoring. he gazed over at his half empty coffee pot and stood up. The room was empty and the only sound was the gentle whirr of the computer. It had been whirring for four hours. Dr. Cassil was going to have a fit. The professor had no sympathy for missed deadlines. Being an accomplished novelist, Dr. Cassil demanded no less of his students than he demanded of himself. Jeff needed a story, any kind of story, but most importantly, he needed ten pages of story by noon the next day. And not one damn idea came to him. Everything in the world had already been written and there were no original ideas left.

A couple was walking by outside and Jeff paused to watch from the window. She was alternately crying and yelling at her companion for something. He wore a distant look and ignored her while striding two feet ahead of her. Finally she hit him and he turned with his hand raised. But he stopped himself and paused. Then he turned his back to her and strode off in the opposite direction, leaving her crying in the narrow cone of light cast by the street lamp. As she turned her head, Jeff recognized the girl from his creative writing course. Lisa's red framed glasses gave her away (Jeff had always considered them a turn on). Jeff had stared at her frames every Tuesday and Thursday from noon to 1:15 p.m. for the last seven weeks. She never stared back. In fact, she always made sure to be looking in the other direction. At least *she* appeared to have her assignment finished. Jeff took this opportunity for a risk-free, visual grope before turning back to the real world.

Jeff pulled the shade down and sat by his blank screen again. Nothing. Nothing but stupid distractions and interruptions. There was always the phone. But Jeff forced the idea out of his head. He didn't want that kind of help. Not this time. Surely he could come up with something of his own. but he couldn't. Maybe a week ago he could have done it himself but now he needed help. He picked up the phone and dialed.

"Yeah, Inspiration Incorporated. Gimme your account number."

Jeff read his 19 digit account number from memory. It was a number that he often wished that he could forget, but there are

some things you can't forget no matter how hard you try.

"One minute while I punch you up on the...Oh, Jeff! How the hell are ya? Damn, we haven't heard from you since last March. What do you need help with this time?"

"Creative. I need a story idea."

"No problem, loser. We'll have someone over in about two minutes."

"Is the fee still the same?"

"Jeff, my boy, listen up. We've been in business for longer than your little, unimaginative mind could comprehend and we have never, I repeat, never, ever, changed our rates! Got that, asshole?"

As Jeff waited for the service representative to show up, he hurried to put away some of his more valuable belongings. He was just locking them away when three rude knocks jolted his door. It really had been only two minutes. Insp. Inc. was nothing if not punctual.

He opened the door and the hooded representative from the company strode in. He was about three and a half feet tall and wore a black cloak. His face was obscured by the shadow cast from his long hood and a long cigar protruded from the unseen mouth. Giant clouds of smoke instantly filled the room.

"You Jeff?" it asked.

"Yes, I called about a problem with mr cr-"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Got anything to eat in this dump?" The little creature sat himself on the couch and began to blow thick clouds of smoke toward the ceiling.

"I might have some potato chips somewhere. Would that be all right?"

"For now anyway."

The service rep. popped open the chips and started shoving them into his mouth 4 or 5 at a time while indiscriminately dropping crumbs all over the floor. Jeff bent down to sweep some of them up and the creature farted.

"These damn things are going to kill me," it said as it crushed out the end of the cigar on the couch. "Well let's get down to business. You need a story right? Let's see now...Here it is: This psychopath kidnaps some babe with huge bazookas, straps her to a nuclear missile and launches her to the Russians. (Now you've got sexual symbolism and political undertones.) Then the Psychopath gets his head chopped off by a midget with one eye in the climactic lumber mill scene. What do you think?" He laughed heartily. "Great stuff ain't it?"

"I was thinking of something a little less violent."

"Bullshit! You weren't thinking of anything! That's why you called me."

He was right of course. Jeff had nothing at all, and the deadline

was approaching at warp speed. But he wasn't at all capable of writing anything as gory as this vile creature was suggesting. The imp was, himself, the essence of vileness. Jeff stared out the window again. In the distance a police car cruised around the far end of the campus. Jeff felt hot breath on his neck and whirled around. The thing had been standing right behind him and now he came face to hood with it. Despite being close enough to smell the thing's putrid breath, he still could not make out any features, and figured that there probably wasn't anything under that hood that he particularly wanted to see anyway.

"Write about the first time you got laid."

"What? Is that the best you can do?" Jeff took a step back, "I'm not trying to shock anyone, I just want to write a plain, interesting story in which no one gets killed, decapitated, or laid."

"Well you just eliminated about 85% of all great literature." It paused to think. "Oh, I see, you've never gotten any! That *is* pathetic! Jef-fy nev-er did the nas-ty!" he sang with raucous delight, "Oh, Jeff, my boy, you are a sorry case. How old are you 19? 20? A 20 year old virgin! I've heard about such things but never thought I'd meet one! Oh that is funny! You know that's the root of your problem Jeff. You have to *live* before you can write. Go out this Friday night and pick up some drunken chick with a short skirt and an attitude and..."

"Enough already!" Jeff shouted, "you can keep your vulgar advice about my private life. I need a story *now* not next week!"

"Hmmm. There's no way to get a punk like you laid before tomorrow anyway. That still leaves us one option."

"What's that?" Jeff asked, fearful of the answer.

"Write about the closest you ever got."

Jeff collapsed into a chair. He was actually paying for this. Some foul little gnome of a creature comes over and stinks up the place and tells him to write pornography about putting his hand up Cindy Bellamy's shirt in the front seat of his dad's Oldsmobile. The inspirational troll was enthusiastically digging his finger into his nose. Jeff hung his head and wondered if it was too late to drop the course. The troll flicked the exhumed treasure from its nose on to the opposing wall where it contacted with a resounding splat and hung there. Jeff looked up and saw that the demon had thrown the swivel chair out of its way and stood at the computer typing away. Maybe he could have his mom call the school and tell them he had had his head sawed off in a lumber mill accident. It was 3:00 a.m. and Jeff slipped off into sleep to the rhythm of the typing.

Jeff ran across campus in his pajamas, hopelessly late for class. His seven page story was tucked under his arm. He flung the door open and dashed into the classroom. Everyone simultaneously

looked up and stared at him.

"Well Jeffrey," said the professor, "since you are late this morning you can read your story to the class first."

Jeff froze. He looked at the story and wondered what he had written. His skin temperature rose to 300 degrees and every pore on his body opened up and drenched him with sweat. He struggled to open the paper and when he did he could not read a word of it. His eyes wouldn't focus on the paper. Dr. Cassil grew impatient.

"Problem Jeffrey? Well, I'm feeling generous today, I'll read it for you."

Dr. Cassil ran his fingers through his meager, academic-looking beard and read the first page. A smile crossed his face. Whatever it was, he apparently liked it. Then the smile sharpened into a grin.

"Is *this* it?" he said between bouts of laughter.

*"The transparent air was laden with the broken dreams of shattered lives. What does this mean? This doesn't flow Jeffrey. Dirk watched from the window as tears erupted from the girl's eyes. Lance strode off leaving her standing in the narrow cone of light cast by the street lamp. Her supple breasts strained against her pink sweater. The red rims on her glasses framed the reflected moonlight on her lenses.* Sounds like a cheap soap opera Jeff, I hate soap operas." The class twittered with amusement.

*"Dirk rushed up to her and he threw his arms around her. He had never tasted of the lips of love but she would show him.* Wait a minute. Jeffrey, I thought you stated back here that your character was 20 years old. But then you say that he's a virgin. Which is it? The way you have this written, Dirk is a 20-year-old virgin. This is supposed to be fiction writing Jeff, not fantasy! Alas, let's read on: *Yes Dirk, you're my true hero...*" At this point the laughter spread across the classroom like a brush fire.

"M-My t-true hero Jeffrey?" he said through fits of laughter. "Is he really her hero? some hero, a 20 year old virgin. Sounds more like a total loser to me. Is there a plot in here anywhere Jeff? Or is that it? Hey everyone! I found the plot! THAR SHE BLOWS! Yonder plot!"

The entire class was breathless with laughter. Lisa's face was redder than the frames on her glasses and she sank into her seat as her hand clenched around a sharp pencil. Jeff backed slowly out of the classroom. He was hoping for an act of spontaneous combustion.

"One last thing Jeffrey, next time please remember to wear your pajama bottoms to class!"

Jeff looked down in horror...

He awoke with a gasp. The sun was pouring in through the window and the inspirational troll was sleeping in the corner. He



was snoring and drool was running down the front of his cloak. The clock said 10:30.

"Hey, wake up! Wake up! What's up with my story?"

The thing woke up and stretched, belched twice and cracked its' knuckles before answering.

"Relax, Jeff." he pulled a manuscript out of his pocket and dropped it in front of him. "You are familiar with our form of payment?"

Jeff remembered his term paper last March. He still limped slightly, but he was improving to the point where one could hardly notice.

"Which foot?" Jeff asked.

"Let me check." The thing pulled out a small manual and flipped through a couple of pages. "Let's see, receipt of one creative idea, first name starts with J, you have brown eyes, and what letter of the alphabet does your mother's maiden name start with?"

"B."

"Then the fourth toe on the left foot should be adequate."

Jeff unlaced his shoe and removed his sock. He limped over to the table and placed his left foot upon the cold surface. He spread out his four toes and looked at the stump where the fifth one had formerly resided. Losing that one had completely screwed up his sense of balance. One more would probably not be so bad. The troll withdrew from his cloak a large cutting blade. He wiped it along the front of chest and raised it.

"Uh, wait a second. How is the story? I Mean, is it good?"

"Jeff, what did you get on that term paper last year?"

"An A+." Jeff conceded.

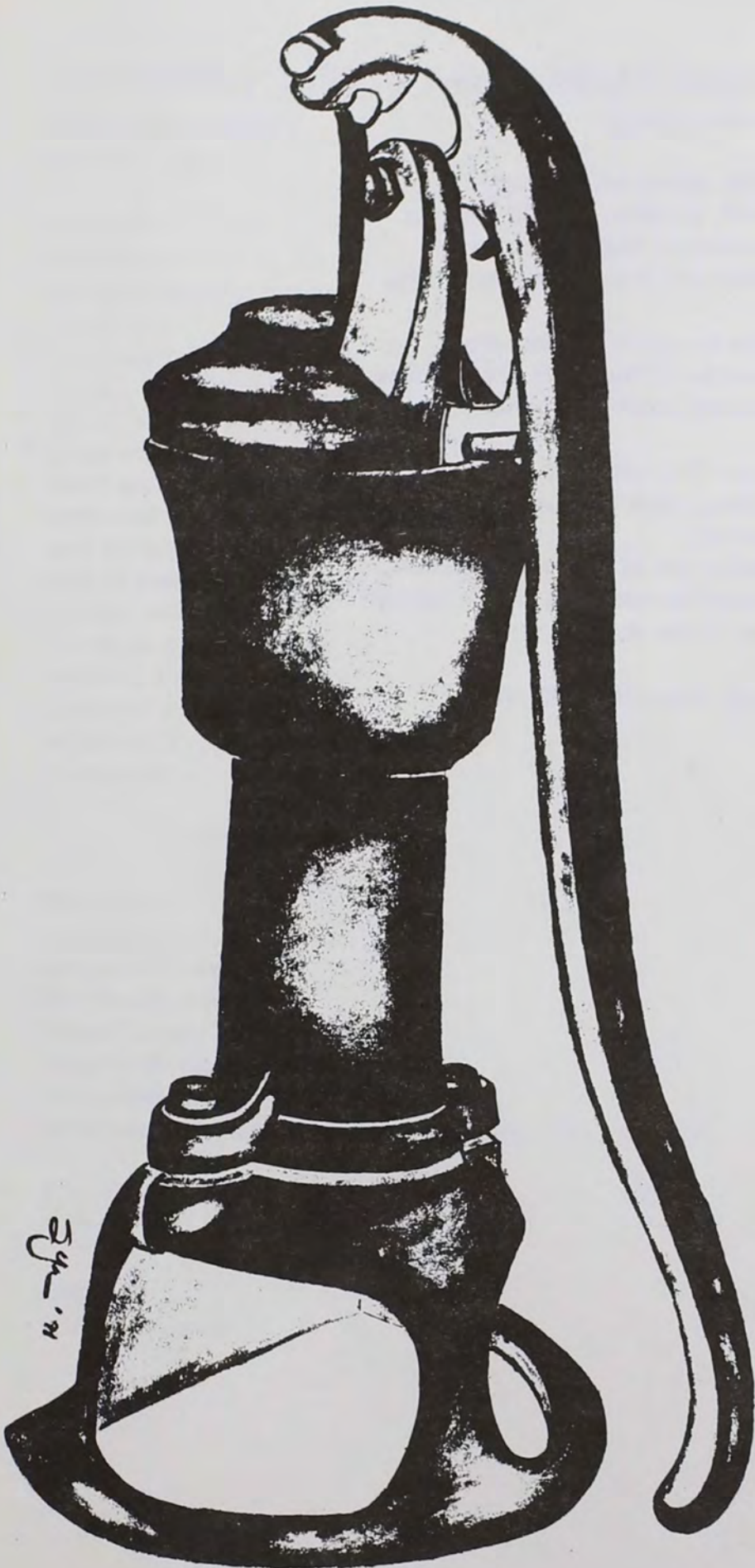
"Anything lower and you can call our refund department."

The blade fell. It severed the toe cleanly and precisely. Paid in full.

An hour and a half later Jeff limped into class. He had bandaged the stump on his foot and would visit the doctor later. He had read the story, and it *was* good. In fact, it was better than he had expected. Class started at noon, but Dr. Cassil often wandered in 10 minutes late, depending on how late he had been up the night before with his own writing.

The clock struck 12:15 and everyone was preparing to leave when Dr. Cassil hobbled in. He leaned his crutches against the wall and hopped over to the desk as he apologized for his tardiness.

"Sorry about the delay this morning. But even the best of us sometimes write ourselves into corners from which we have difficulty delivering ourselves. Now then, we had an assignment due today, did we not?"



## The Last Morning

By Kathrin Phillips

His voice stains my memory.  
His smell, penetrated, still radiates  
from sweaters that I fold neatly  
then plop into the green plastic bag.

"Thanks so much for donating."  
The woman at the thrift shop smiles.  
Her stained teeth mock me.

The room is empty.  
Everything hurts my eyes,  
my memory.  
Reminding me of many little details.  
Like when he missed a whole section of his face  
shaving in the dark.

He didn't want to wake me.

## Something's Fishy About This Relationship

By Bob Lane

A nibble on my line,  
I set the hook--  
Roughly--several times.  
I had her.  
She had me. Next?  
A long fight, a  
tug of war. My  
opponent blurred by  
salty waters.  
I invoked strength  
and patience, to  
rescue weather-beaten skill.  
I pulled and  
reeled in my line hoping to  
gaff me a prize. But,  
strength slackened,  
wavering patience baited  
frustration.

I cut the line.

She swims now,  
rather than  
suffer with me.  
Her mouth full of  
metal forever (may  
breed infection) as a  
remembrance.  
What would she have looked like above the surface?

A trophy?  
A feast?

Dead,  
stuffed or eaten.

## The Comforter

By Dave Day

They're trying to put my boss, Silas Baldwin, in a nursing home (they being Miss Mary Jackson, who is the county social services agent, and Mr. and Mrs. Arch, who live next to Silas and myself). Sure, he is seventy-five years old, and one may even consider him to be eccentric. However, eccentricity, when properly considered, is only an idiosyncrasy, and it is not grounds for a judgement of incompetency, let alone for an accusation of senility. Miss Jackson and the Arches are here to convince Judge Evert to commit Silas to a nursing home. I, Chris Baldwin (Silas is something like my second great uncle twice removed and thrice forgotten), am here to stop them.

Judge Evert, a portly, multi-jowled man with thick white eyebrows which look like two snow-white caterpillars contemplating courtship, sits behind a large oak desk, flanked on one side by the American flag, and by the flag of Virginia on the other. The Confederate Flag hangs on the wall behind his desk. The rest of us are arranged in front of the desk, and we are sitting in uncomfortable, low-backed, early colonial chairs with massive armrests which seem to engulf us as we sit in them.

"Your Honor," Miss Jackson says, "I can understand Chris' affection for Mr. Baldwin, but he really does not know the extent of Mr. Baldwin's condition."

"I've been living and working on Silas' farm for a year and a half," I say. "I think I'm in a position, to know his 'condition,' as you call it, much better than some Mother Theresa social worker from New Haven who's out to save the world from itself by exterminating from view anyone who doesn't conform to her textbook *Weltanschauung*."

Judge Evert looks at me as though he is going to preach to me about the need for politeness and decorum in his court, and then, drawing his eyebrows into a position of full copulation, says "*Weltanschauung*?"

"It's German," I say, "it means 'world-view.'" I had taken a few philosophy courses at the local college in my home town, after graduating a year early from high school. I had done well until I found North hall, which is the girls' dorm. Then I went North and my grades went south. My father had then made a suggestion, which my mother said was a request, but was in truth an order, to follow my grades south to Silas' farm in Hebron, Virginia, to find out what it was like to work for a living. Eventually I'll make it back to school, to major in philosophy.

"I'm just doing my job," says Miss Jackson in that tone of Ivy

League sophistication which has characterized all of my meetings with her prior to this hearing. She is young, about twenty-three I would guess. Her hair is short and dark and she wears a dark blue business-type skirt and jacket. I think she is kind of pretty in her own uptight way, although her cheek bones are a little too high and her lips are a little too full and her legs - well, she has great legs.

Judge Evert clears his throat, and his jowls move back and forth like the brushes at a carwash, and he says, "Let's just stick to the business at hand and try to make these unpleasant proceedings as pleasant as possible."

Mr. Arch, who reminds me so much of kindling, thin and easy to burn, and who until now had been silent, says, "You know the man has got to have something wrong with him. He sells two hundred acres to a developer for more money than most of us can expect to make in a lifetime, and yet he still keeps forty acres of hay and those damn cows, which I don't have to tell you judge, make the neighborhood smell like a damn fertilizer factory."

The judge, who also lives in the development which is built on what used to be most of Silas' farm, nods to Mr. Arch. I look at Mr. Arch and say, "That's why you want Silas put away, isn't it? You just don't like the smell. And for your information, Silas' wife's illness took about all the money he had made from selling the land." Silas's wife, Elizabeth, had died of cancer twelve years ago.

"That isn't the reason at all," says Mrs. Arch, a smallish woman with a skeletal face. "He isn't right anymore, that's all. I mean really now, he walks his cows."

"Walks his cows?" Judge Evert and his fornicating eyebrows look to Silas for an explanation.

Silas is sitting with his hat on his lap and his arms on the armrests. He looks relaxed, and stares straight ahead, not saying anything. I suppose he's just taking in all we are saying about him. How strange it must be listening to a group of people discussing his mental capacity, hell, his destiny, right in front of him as if he isn't even here. It must be like being at one's funeral and hearing what is being said about oneself. He doesn't appear as though he is going to reply to the judge's question so I say, "He has three cows, your Honor, and they're getting rather old and lazy. Silas walks them around to make sure they get some exercise."

"But he walks them with a leash," Mrs. Arch says, "like you would a dog."

"Look at his hands," I say, "he uses a leash because he can't get his hands inside the halter anymore." We all look at his gnarled and weathered hands, and I am surprised to see how white his knuckles are, like pieces of over-popped popcorn.

"Come on now," says Mr. Arch, jumping out of his chair and pointing a long, thin finger at Silas. "The old man is just plain old

crazy!"

"If you want to talk about crazy," I say turning to Mr. Arch, "let's talk about your mother. Woman does nothing but spin and knit."

"It's a comforter," says Mr. Arch.

"For all of Hebron?" I ask. His mother works at it every day until about ten o'clock at night, out on their porch in front of an old-fashioned spinning wheel. The thing is, she never cuts the yarn or begins anything new. The comforter is three feet wide, but it must be at least forty feet long. It lays in a pile all over the porch. She has been working on it for as long as I've been with Silas.

Miss Jackson looks flushed, turns to the judge and says, "I am not arguing that Mr. Baldwin is crazy. However, I do feel that Mr. Baldwin is not competent to live on his farm alone anymore. He would be better off in a nursing home with a caring staff to look after him."

"He doesn't need anyone to look after him," I say. I'm not going to let Silas be stored away in some 'nursing home,' which is just the polite term for human compost pile.

"You can't take care of him," says Mr. Arch. "You're not even old enough to take care of yourself."

"I didn't say I'd take care of him." After all, I'll be going off to college in less than a month. "I said he doesn't need anyone to look after him. He can take care of himself. You know he's O.K. You just don't like the honest smell of cow manure."

Mr. Arch turns to look at me and says, "If Mike was still here we could be sure Silas would be cared for. But he's not, and you're nothing like Mike was. That boy was a real hero."

Hearing Mike's name startles me, and I look over at Silas. I had only heard it mentioned once before. It was last spring and Silas and I had just brought Betsy, Liz, and Kate, his three Gurnsey dairy cows into the barn for the night. We had put them in their stalls and we both stood silent for a few moments. The scent of alfalfa hay had permeated the barn from the baling produced by over one hundred growing seasons. In one corner sat the old, oaken plow with its oxidized blades, which had been used by both Silas' father and grandfather. On the far wall, barely discernable in the shadows, the leather yoke and dry hemp ropes which had helped to break the virgin soil and clear the wooded acreage which had become Baldwin Meadows hung withering and limp. Silas had then pointed to a rotting wall beam and said, "Mikey never would have let that wood get like that."

"Mikey?" I asked.

"He's dead now," he said, "my son." He looked down at me through steady gray eyes and said, "I can't hardly even remember what he looked like - and yet I see him everyday." Hearing this I had been overcome with a strange attack of vertigo which had left my

head feeling light and my throat feeling tight. He then said, "Vietnam," and shaking his head, he had turned, walked out of the barn - and left me standing in the shade of his son. Looking at Silas now I notice that his eyes no longer have that steady, matter-of-fact look. The soft gray, which seems to bleed into his irises, is now surrounded by a collage of pinks and reds. He looks as though he may cry.

"We haven't heard anything from you yet, Silas," says Judge Evert, trying to gloss over the subject of Silas' deceased son. Silas looks straight at the judge but his gaze seems to me to be directed elsewhere. Silas says nothing.

"Mr. Baldwin?" says Miss Jackson. Silas shakes his head, opens his mouth and then closes it. Everyone is looking at Silas. Judge Evert sits at his desk with his hands folded on the desktop in front of him. Mr. Arch sinks his tall, bony frame lower in his seat, and rests his jutting chin in the long thin hand at the end of his right arm as he twists his body away from the rest of us in a contortion which would make a yoga master swoon.

"He doesn't talk much, your Honor," I say. "Most of the time he uses lists - of chores to be done that is, and gestures."

Mr. Arch lets out a cynical chuckle which is quelled by a twisting of his ear, courtesy of Mrs. Arch. Silas looks at the judge and nods. The judge looks at Mr. Arch and says, "It is a shame that only men of age know when to conserve their breath and measure their speech." Mr. Arch doesn't notice that the judge has directed these words at him, but Mrs. Arch looks down and away.

Miss Jackson looks at some notes she has made in her leather bound folio and says, "Very often the inability to communicate is a sign of the onset of age-related mental deterioration."

The judge sits back in his chair and brings his hands to rest on his broad abdomen and says, "I'm not at all convinced that this alleged inability to communicate is an inability at all. Perhaps it's an unwillingness to communicate, or just conservative communication, which I think is the more likely of the two. Do you think we ought to ship Catholic monks away to a home for taking a vow of silence?"

"That's why they're put in those monasteries," Mr. Arch says laughing.

"That's enough Mr. Arch," says the judge, "if there isn't anymore that you and your wife care to add, then you may go."

"He stares at the ground," says Mrs. Arch. She sounds as if she has just spun the wheel on 'Wheel of Fortune,' and just escaped going bankrupt. "The other day I was hanging out my laundry. That was Tuesday, I do my laundry on Tuesday. Anyway, I looked down into the meadow and saw Mr. Baldwin underneath that walnut tree



"Almond tree," I say, "I bought it last year at the flower show in Philadelphia."

"I'm sorry," says Mrs. Arch, "almond tree. And he was laying under it flat on his belly, and I thought something was wrong. So I ran down the hill into the meadow and I'm calling 'Mr. Baldwin, Mr. Baldwin' and he didn't answer me and I thought something terrible had happened but when I got there he was just laying there wide-eyed staring at the ground."

"And that's when I came down to the meadow and told you to go back to your laundry," I say.

"Why were you staring at the ground?" Judge Evert asks as he looks at Silas.

Silas looks at the judge and then down to the maple-wood floor. After a few moments he looks back up and says, "The grasshopper."

"Grasshopper?" asks the judge.

"There was a grasshopper," says Silas, "it was just crawling - must have hurt itself somehow - couldn't hop - poor thing just crawled along." Silas looks around and all faces are directed at him. "Felt so bad - he just crawled, couldn't hop."

Judge Evert looks at Silas and then to Mrs. Arch and in a voice almost syrupy with emotion - not a shaking emotion, just a smooth kind of sympathy, says, "That seems to explain why he was watching the ground." Mrs. Arch, who also seems close to tears nods her head as she looks at Silas.

I look at Silas and the pain I see in his eyes reaches out and wraps its fingers around my throat. How could anyone want to hurt a man who can feel and communicate so much compassion for a grasshopper? I turn to the judge and say, "If there is nothing else, we'd like to get going."

Judge Evert looks at Silas and asks, "Are you going to be all right?"

"He'll be fine," I say.

Judge Evert clears his throat and says, "Here is what I'm going to do." He looks at me and continues. Miss Jackson will come by once a month to check on how things are going. At this point I'm satisfied that Silas can take care of himself. However, I am appointing you as his guardian."

"Guardian?" I say.

"That's right," the Judge says. "You're responsible for him. Miss Jackson will report to me on how things are going."

I hadn't exactly had this in mind. "But I'm supposed to leave in a few weeks," I say, "to go to college."

"As long as Silas is competent," the judge says, "then you are free to be back at school. But if he is ever judged incompetent, then his care will be your responsibility." He looks at me for a few

moments and then asks, "Understand?"

I look away from the judge and over to Silas. Silas smiles at me and nods his head. It is the first time I remember him smiling since I've been working for him. He looks at me in a way that no one has ever done before. It is the smile a father gives his son.

I glance back to the judge and then again to Silas. He is still smiling. I know by looking at him that his heart will give out long before his mind ever will. I can go to school. Silas will die competent. I turn back to the judge. "Yes," I say, "it will be an honor."

As we are leaving the courtroom, Miss Jackson smiles at me. "Good luck," she says. "And here, take my card. If there are ever any problems, just call me."

"Don't worry," I say, "he'll be fine."

Silas and I are sitting under the blooming almond tree in the meadow. The meadow is flanked on the east and west by two hills which create a small valley which runs along the northern edge of Hebron. It is nearly supper time and the setting sun casts the shadow of the bluff over the valley from the west. It is quiet. Silas gets up and takes a few steps and then lays down on the green pasture, by the still water of the stream, which runs through the valley and is all that remains of the river which had cut its path through the hills. I look up at the Arch's porch and old lady Arch is sitting there, same as always, spinning her yarn and knitting that comforter, which lays in a large heap, devouring the porch and leading up to the spinning wheel like an umbilical cord. I see her leg pumping steadily and her hands working the needles. It's only about five o'clock, she'll be there for another five hours or so.

I realize now, that her large woven monstrosity is a comforter in more ways than one. It allows old lady Arch to feel useful. And I am Silas' comforter. I am someone for him to care for, and also someone to care about him. And even though I'll be away at college for eight months, he'll be fine, because he knows that we will always care about each other. I turn to Silas who is still laying by the stream. "We did it Silas. We beat them."

Silas smiles and says, "Yes, yes we did." A breeze is starting to blow over the western bluff which is unusually cool for July.

"I don't think they'll try that again," I say.

"No," he says, "I'm sure they won't." Silas pulls something out of his pocket and says, "Here, I want you to have this." I get up and walk over to him and he holds out a small black leather case, much like that which a Waterford pen would reside in. I take it from him and I open it up. Inside is a Congressional Medal of Honor.

"I got it at Normandy," he says. "Paratroopers, the one hundred

and first."

"I never knew you fought in World War Two." I look back at the medal and I take out a small card which is stuck to the inside lid of the case. The card says that the medal was awarded to Mike Baldwin, for selflessly giving his life in battle, the sacrifice of which saved the lives of twelve other platoon members.

"I want you to keep it," he says. I look at his gray eyes and once again they are steady and controlled.

"Thanks," I say, "but Silas - ." I look at the medal. It is covered with a dull tarnish.

"Let's get up to supper, Mikey," he says.

"I'm not - "

"Come on Mikey, even heroes like you have to eat." I watch him as he gets up and starts towards the house. "You'll need your strength to fix those barn beams tomorrow."

"Yeah," I say, as I watch Silas stride across the meadow. "I'll be right there." I turn to follow and I look up at the Arch's porch. Old lady Arch is no longer at her spinning wheel and I notice that the yarn has been cut and that Mr. and Mrs. Arch are rolling the comforter up like an old rug going out to the trash.

## The Castle Builders

By Gar Donecker

No need to overstate the meaning; I  
can make the point without symbolic, "raging"  
winds and waves. A sonnet is too fine  
to long withstand such flagrant signifying.  
It may work without a grown-up raising  
reasons, consequences, and I might  
go further, robbing them of tools or prying  
sticks, preserving only token light.

To some innocuous, white stretch of shore-  
line, two androgynous yet human youths  
retire intermittently. Their hands  
sculpt castles, miniature, blissful for-  
tresses. They toil on buildings, which in truth  
from dark to sunrise, vanish in the sands.

## Saturday Skeleton Crew

By Christopher Kakacak

Three figures watched the funeral from a distance, waiting for the gathered family to disperse.

"I bet she wants it, Alex," said Gordie. "Just look at how that chick's checking you out. Man, she wants it bad!"

"Give me a break, Gordie. Her grandmother just died," said Alex. The blonde in the black minidress glanced over her shoulder, and to his surprise, smiled at Alex from across the rows of headstones. Somewhat shocked, Alex smiled back and waved.

"Jesus!" said Gordie. "Did you see that? I bet you could slip it to her right now, on top of her granny's casket! She's good to go, man!"

"You are one sick puppy, Gord-o," growled Ron, who had been silent until now. "Ain't you got some holes to fill, asshole?" He spit on the ground, inches from the toe of Gordie's boot. Ron limped back toward the truck. "C'mon, Alex. We got work to do." Alex looked up at Gordie, whose eyes were concealed by mirrored sunglasses. Gordie grinned at Ron, but said nothing.

"Uh... right, Ron. Catch you later, Gordie." Alex shrugged, and followed Ron back to the truck. They drove away.

This was Alex's first summer working at Holy Trinity Cemetery. With college right around the corner, he needed a full-time job. The pay wasn't spectacular, but Alex refused to flip cheeseburgers in some fast-food restaurant, wearing a goofy uniform. It was a matter of pride. During the week, Alex mowed the cemetery grounds, trimmed around headstones, and did various odd-jobs. On Saturdays he helped Ron set up the funeral arrangements. Alex looked forward to working on Saturdays, since it broke up the monotony of mowing grass all week. Besides, working with Ron and Gordie always made for an unpredictable day.

"C'mon, you old bat," Ron grumbled. "Get lost so we can dump the poor stiff." Alex snickered beneath the newspaper that covered his face as he tried to doze in the truck. He supposed it was a callous remark, but this was an unusually busy Saturday. Nobody was getting any younger waiting for some old lady to stop chatting with a funeral director.

"Hey Ron?" said Alex.

"Ayuh." Ron was picking his nose.

"Why do you talk to Gordie like that? I know he's kind of strange, but he doesn't really bother anybody."

Ron lit up a Camel Regular. "After the war, I wanted to come back to a quiet place where I could just be by myself. I don't need some fuck-up like Gordie running around causing trouble, see?" He

looked at Alex. "Stay away from him. He's bad news." Ron took a long drag on his cigarette.

"C'mon, Ron. It's not like he's an ex-con or something. He's just a few fries short of a Happy Meal, is all."

Ron's eyes glazed over. "I know what I'm talking about, man. I knew a lot of crazies back in 'Nam. Some were just plain psycho, y'know? But some guys were wound too tight. You couldn't tell when they were going to crack. Guys you didn't want covering your ass with a loaded '16." Ron shuddered, and shook his head as if clearing it. "Looks like Grandma's bugging out. Let's go." He started the truck and drove over to the solitary funeral director.

"How's business, Mr. Halloran?" Ron asked as he climbed out of the truck's cab.

"Fine, Ron, just fine," replied the funeral director. "Don't get too many complaints in this business, eh?" They both laughed. Alex, shaking his head, folded the artificial turf that had been lining the open grave while Ron lowered the casket. Within minutes, the funeral arrangements had been dismantled.

"Thanks again, Ron," said Mr. Halloran. He got into his hearse and drove away.

"Cheap bastard," Ron muttered. Halloran was one of the few funeral directors who did not tip cemetery workers. Nodding in agreement, Alex climbed back into the truck. They drove to the next burial site.

"Aw shit! It's Gordie!" said Ron. In the middle of the road was a backhoe tractor bearing down on them like a juggernaut. Gordie was at the wheel, crowing like a rooster, a big grin on his face. Ron leaned on the horn and swerved off the road, narrowly avoiding a collision with a large headstone.

"Gordie! You crazy goddamn sonofabitch!" Ron hollered as he leaped from the cab. He stomped over to the backhoe, swearing at Gordie in a manner that made Alex wince. Gordie stood a full head taller than Ron, his bulging arms folded, still grinning through his red fu-manchu moustache. His sunglasses flashed in the sunlight.

"Just keeping you on your toes, Ronny-baby." Gordie cackled, and ran a meaty hand through his greasy, thinning long hair. He threw the tractor into gear, saluted to Alex, and drove away, singing "Foxy Lady" at the top of his lungs.

Still swearing, Ron got back into the truck. "You see what I mean? He's like a rabid dog, for Chrissakes! Turn your back, and the guy goes for your throat! Trust me, Alex, Gordie is a dangerous motherfucker." Ron's hands were shaking as he started up the truck.

"Ron, he was just trying to piss you off, get you excited. Looks to me like it worked." Alex smiled. Maybe Ron just needed a vacation.

The C.B. radio under the dashboard crackled to life. "Ron, I want you to drop Alex off at the shop. I got a job for him. Over." It was Spider, the cemetery grounds supervisor. He was a Native American, and earned his nickname from the black tattoo on his left hand. Although his real name was Dexter, nobody called him that. Nobody.

Back at the maintenance building, Spider told Ron and Alex that vandals had broken into the old section that night, toppling headstones and breaking statues. Spider's dark eyes bore into Alex's skull. "Ron, keep doing funerals. Alex, go with Gordie over to the old section to repair what you can."

Alex glanced at Ron, who gave him a strange look, and walked away. Alex shrugged. Ron really needs to lighten up, he thought. Gordie drove up to the building in a dump truck loaded with tools, and came to a squealing halt in front of Alex and Spider.

"Hey! If it isn't the gravedigging stud! Did you bang her, man?" Gordie proceeded to make obscene gestures with his huge, hamlike fist.

"I saw your little game of chicken with Ron," said Spider. "Pull another idiotic stunt like that and you'll be digging holes with a spade shovel. You understand, dipshit?" Spider stared at Gordie for what seemed like an eternity, then stalked off. When he was out of sight, Gordie wiped the stupid grin off his face.

"Assholes," he mumbled. "Think they can kick me around. I'll get even. They'll be sorry they ever fucked with me." Gordie clenched his fist, and his knuckles cracked like walnuts.

Alex laughed. "Sure, Gordie. But I wouldn't use the backhoe on them if I were you. Remember what Spider said."

Gordie did not smile. He just looked at Alex from behind his sunglasses. "Let's go before Tonto gets on my ass again."

It was awkwardly silent as Gordie drove to the secluded old section of the cemetery. Alex noticed a pair of binoculars sitting next to a porno magazine on the dashboard.

"What're the binoculars for, Gordie?" he asked.

Gordie smiled. "Sometimes I see kids in the old section playing hide-the-salami in the back seat. Sometimes they do it right in the grass. Can you believe that shit?" He glanced over at Alex with those large, silvery sunglasses.

"Uh, sure, Gordie. Heh-heh." Alex grinned sickly. He always wondered where Gordie went on his lunch breaks. Now he wished he hadn't found out.

"Yeah, I bet you can, Al. I bet you get all the hot chicks, don't you? Good-looking young bull like yourself."

Alex laughed uncomfortably. It always made him feel awkward when Gordie talked about him like that. He wasn't sure if Gordie was being complimentary or not.

Gordie continued. "Yeah, those babes just can't stay off your big cock, can they? Probably don't get much rest, do you Al?"

Alex smiled weakly. "No, Gordie, I guess not."

Gordie guffawed, and slapped Alex's thigh. "He guesses not! Man, what a stud! Say, you want to see something?" He accelerated, and shifted the truck into a higher gear without stepping on the clutch. "Here, try it," he said, and downshifted again.

Alex put his hand on the shift knob. When he pulled down, the tooth-rattling sound of stripping gears filled the cab. Gordie grabbed the stick over Alex's hand, and shifted back. Alex tried to pull away, but Gordie's grip was too strong. His giant, hairy hand felt sweaty and rough, like clammy sandpaper.

"No, you have to wait for the engine to cycle just right. See?" Gordie shifted back up again, with Alex's squirming hand still underneath his own. Finally, Gordie let go, and Alex jerked away. He didn't know what to think about Gordie's behavior, but it was beginning to scare him. Maybe Ron was right after all.

"We're here big guy. Let's go." Gordie got out of the truck and walked over to an open grave he had just dug the previous day. Alex walked over to him.

"Goddamn! Will you look at that!" Gordie exclaimed. The vandals had thrown a large statue of the Virgin Mary into the fresh grave. It lay broken in several fragments. "Assholes. Tell you what, Alex. Jump in there and pick up the pieces. I'll get a ladder and help you bring them up." He turned away and walked toward the truck before Alex could reply.

"Uh, okay, Gordie." Alex jumped into the hole, landing with a muffled thud. He had been in open graves before, but it always made him feel uneasy.

Gordie lowered a ladder and climbed down, his huge steel-toed boots clicking on the ladder rungs. Alex looked up at him. Gordie's sagging Levi's were revealing the crack of his ample, hairy buttocks. Embarrassed, Alex turned away and looked at the statue fragments.

Gordie, now standing on the floor of the grave, took off his mirrored sunglasses. His beady, bloodshot grey eyes were set deep in his broad, wrinkled face. "I caught you, Alex," he said. "You thought I wouldn't notice. You were looking at my ass, weren't you? I knew you were a little faggot all along."

"What're you talking about, Gordie?" A pit was growing in Alex's stomach. He slowly backed up against the earthy wall of the grave. Gordie's bulky frame loomed over him.

"Don't deny it. We're all alone here, Alex. I won't tell. And neither will you. You know why? Because you don't want anyone to know you're a little cocksucker, that's why." Gordie unbuckled his belt. "Get on your knees, Alex."



"This isn't funny, Gordie. Stop it." Alex's voice wavered. His bowels felt hot and watery.

"Quit crying, Alex. I know you've been laughing at me, just like Spider and that fucker Ron." Gordie unzipped his pants. "Who's laughing now? Huh?" He grinned widely, revealing a row of yellowed, rotten teeth. "Now get down, you little queer. I know you're going to like this as much as me." Gordie smiled gently, and began to walk towards Alex.

"Hey! Anybody here?" a voice yelled from above. Gordie fumbled with his pants and belt. Alex saw Ron's grizzled face peer over the edge of the grave. He let out a sigh of relief. "Hurry up, for Chrissakes!" Ron said. "The funeral director'll be here in fifteen minutes. Get that shit cleaned up!"

Gordie was already climbing out of the grave as Alex picked up the broken statue. Without a word, Gordie got into his dump truck and drove away. Alex's legs were still trembling as he climbed the ladder, his heart splashing in his chest. When he reached the top, Ron offered his right hand to help Alex up. Alex took his hand, and looked up into Ron's face. Ron looked somberly at Alex for just a second, then turned away.

Alex's cheeks were burning. It wasn't my fault, he thought. How was I supposed to know? Why didn't Ron tell me? He felt like crying, but forced back the tears.

"C'mon, kid. We got work to do." Ron pulled Alex out of the grave. Without a word, they walked together back to the truck.

## The Convent's Light

By Jennifer Blay

When sunflower rays  
drift from the water to  
the other side of the world,  
a white light starts its nightly  
vigil over Lake Oscleta.  
The fluorescent beam swims  
across black water, walks  
over stainless steel docks,  
dives, without a splash,  
into the lake, back floats  
to the lake's middle and  
disperses, sending bony  
fingers to tickle the beach.

## In My Veins

By Bob Lane

My father's gun fit into my hand like I was born with it. Its cold black steel weighed more than I thought. The gun had six chambers. I took one bullet from my father's sock drawer. As I sat on the edge of my bed I opened the barrel and loaded the single bullet with reverence. My right hand cradled the weapon as my left hand held my favorite photograph. It was a picture my mother had taken of Bill and I when he was 11 and I was 9. We were in our pajamas sitting on the top bunk of my old bunkbeds. I whispered to the picture, "I want to be wherever you are now." A noise from behind me froze my tears. I turned around to find the cross Bill made me in Bible school had fallen off the wall.

I slid the gun under my pillow and picked up the cross like it was an infant, and held it to my chest. Two whittled tree branches were fastened at the crux by blue and orange yarn that had a solitary cut nail pinned through it. When Bill gave it to me he said, "The concrete nail represents all the bad things in life that I want to take from you." I rocked on the edge of my bed, tears shattered as they hit the floor.

My mother entered my bedroom without knocking. It was just to drop off my laundry but when she saw me, she blurted out, "Do you want me to call Dr. Simmons?"

"No, I'm all right," I said, "I just miss him, that's all."

"He said we could call anytime if you felt sick again."

"I'm not sick, goddamnit, and I don't want to see anymore doctors. I've had it with all their bullshit that I have to go back to school and get on with my life! They don't understand."

She sat on the bed and put her arm around me, "They're only trying to help..."

"Nobody can help me, no one understands! I can't stop picturing him dragging that blade across his wrists, the blood everywhere, his bathroom painted with it. He must have cried so hard, I don't understand what hurt him so much." I darted out of the room and yelled to my mother that I was going to get some air.

I walked up the snow-covered street to the front steps of Bill's house, three doors from mine. I rang the front doorbell and, just as I had feared, his mother answered. "I'm sorry to bother you during dinnertime," I said, "but I was wondering if I could just sit in Bill's room for awhile?" Without saying a word she opened the storm door and moved aside.

The room was exactly as Bill had left it. I sat on his bed and looked around at everything. On his bookcase was the trophy I made him out of some scrap lumber from the garage and had used

a wood burning kit to inscribe it. It read, "Best Friends and 'Brothers' Forever," we were both the only child in our families but may as well have been brothers. Next to that stood the 8x10 framed picture of us after my first high school football game. It was taken only a year and six months ago. I looked like some monster in those pads towering a good eight inches over Bill, my arm resting on his shoulder. I had the biggest grin on my face, his was serious behind those wire-rimmed glasses. Even though Bill wasn't crazy about sports, he came to almost all of my home games that season.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was the last game of my freshman football career. The crisp November air found the stands filled with bundled up fans who cheered us on to beat Overbrook. All through the first half I surveyed the stands, in between plays, for my mother and Bill. The second half was rough. Where were they? Every play of the fourth quarter found me knocked on my ass. Jimmy, the quarterback was getting pissed, "Keep your mind on the goddamned line Steve, if 89 gets through one more time I'll have you benched," he screamed.

As we exited the field, my mother waved from the parking lot where she stood in front of our 1982 Caprice station wagon. Her eyes were red.

"What's the matter? Where were you? Where's Bill," I asked.

"Just get in the car," she said with absolutely no emotion. As we sat next to each other on the front seat she began to cry. "I have something to tell you." She took a deep breath. "Bill's mom found him locked in his bathroom this morning, he killed himself."

I was frozen. "What?"

"I'm sorry son, I know this is a shock, but he must've been sick or something."

"He seemed fine last night when we watched *The Outsiders*," I whispered to my window. I stared out at the lake by my school where Bill and I used to fish every day over the summer. It was covered with gold decaying leaves.

When we pulled in the driveway I ran through the backyards to the sliding glass door that connected the back porch to his room. I stood there pounding the door with my fist. Once, twice, a third time and then my fist penetrated that glass barrier like ice. Bill's mother flew into the room in hysterics. There was glass everywhere, she screamed at me, "Why did you have to give him that knife!"

\*\*\*\*\*

It was Friday afternoon and Bill drove me to the mall in his green 1972 Duster after he picked me up from school. He always picked me up because he went to public school and they got out 15 minutes earlier than my school. I was the only freshman that

didn't get picked up by his parents. I would tell everyone, "It pays to have a friend that's a sophomore and drives."

I had my very first real date that night so I needed to get some new clothes. Since football camp had started, I noticed this really cute cheerleader named Lisa. She always said "Hi" to me, and she was in my science class, God, I wished *she* was my lab partner. It was only after she made a banner with my name on it for the pep rally before our first home game that I decided I would ask her to go to the movies. That was two weeks ago, tomorrow would be our second home game and I was going to start on the varsity squad.

Bill was the best friend any guy could have. He volunteered to drive Lisa and I that night so I didn't have to put up with the agonizing embarrassment of my mom having to do it. I thought maybe he might be mad that we'd be missing our usual Friday night of Dungeons and Dragons, but he wasn't. He said she seemed pretty cool when he saw her at the game last weekend.

While walking back through the mall after I found this really cool "Op" tee-shirt, three guys from the football team snuck up behind me. "Hey it's our prize freshman beef - what are ya up to?" asked Jimmy, the Junior quarterback. He grabbed me in a headlock and tried to give me a noogie.

"Nothin' really, just got some new clothes," I said. Bill hung back behind me.

"Let me guess, are they for the big date tonight with Lisa?" asked Tom, the Sophomore tackle, who everyone on the team called Snap. He was dubbed that during his freshman year after he sent five players from other teams to the hospital with various broken bones.

"Maybe," I answered like a smartass so they wouldn't go on bustin' my stones.

"Look Beef," said Jimmy, "you better not be out too late tonight, I need you awake and alert tomorrow morning to make sure I don't get my ass kicked."

"Come with us down to Gold Medal." Tom said. "They got these kick-ass Nike cleats."

I hesitated, then blurted out, "Sure." The three of them started to walk as I turned to Bill. "You don't mind if I meet you back at home after dinner, do ya?"

Bill looked down at his car keys and answered, "I guess not."

"Thanks buddy," I shouted back as I began to run down the mall to catch up with Jimmy, Tom, and Pete.

When I caught up with them Jimmy asked, "Isn't that the dude that picks you up from school in that great Duster?"

"Why didn't you ask him to come with us?" Pete added.

"He had to get home for dinner," I answered as we walked into the sneaker section of the sporting goods store.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was Bill's birthday, and I couldn't wait to give him his present when I saw him at the bus stop. I got there a few minutes earlier in hopes of beating all my other blue uniformed schoolmates so as to give Bill his present in private. I was too late, Bill was standing there trying to ignore a certain female who was in the seventh grade with him and had a crush on him. I was only in sixth grade so I didn't understand all this girl stuff.

Bill and I sat next to each other on the bus. "I brought your birthday present but I want to wait to give it to you at recess, O.K.?" I asked.

"Sure."

"It's soo cool, I know you're gonna love it," I said. I thought I would burst right there on the bus.

The present was a real beauty. It was a genuine Swiss Army Knife straight from Switzerland. My grandfather had gone there on business and brought back these red handled knives for me and my cousins. He said we had to be very careful with them because they were very sharp and dangerous. The knife had 36 different things on it. There was a saw, screwdrivers, a pair of scissors, tweezers, a toothpick, and even a magnifying glass to burn leaves with. Besides all that there was also this really big steel blade that would be great for cutting bait or carving things into trees. My grandfather said it was made with the finest steel in all the world. Only the best for Bill. I saved that souvenir for the longest three weeks ever. I even had to make up this really big story to tell Bill how someone stole the souvenir my grandfather was going to bring back for me.

Recess seemed an eternity away. The knife was wrapped in newspaper in my schoolbag in the coat-room. I wished I hadn't left it there so I could have looked at the box then. Bill was in the next room. I stared at the wall pretending I could see through it, right to where Bill was sitting. Sister Elizabeth went on and on about times tables for an hour before the bell rang and the big moment was to arrive. I darted out onto the schoolyard with present in hand and dragged Bill under the steps on the side of the building where no one would find us.

"Are you ready?" I asked impatiently.

"Yup," he replied.

I handed him the box, and he unwrapped it. As he opened the box his eyes widened like baseballs and a huge "WOW," burst from his lips.

"This is awesome, I can't believe this. Holy shit where'd you get this?!"

"Remember that lost souvenir from Switzerland?" I asked.

"Are you sure you want to give me this? I'm gonna have to hide it. My mom would kill if she saw this."

"You're my very bestest friend, I'd do anything for you."

"This is the best present ever Steve, you're the best!" Bill shouted as he grinned from ear to ear. "I'm gonna make you something with this in Bible school this Sunday I swear! But first, I have a better idea, let's be blood brothers."

"Okay, but will it hurt?" I asked.

"Nah, it's just a little cut on the tip of your finger."

I was ready. I licked my finger like Bill did to his and then held it out, with my eyes closed real tight, for him to cut.

"It didn't hurt that bad," I confessed.

"See," he said.

Bill cut his own finger without a wince of pain and then squeezed the end of his finger. I did the same until a big ball of blood formed on my finger tip. I held my finger up to his and we pressed them together as if we were holding each other up. We stayed that way for a few seconds, and Bill said, "Now we're really brothers. Forever. We're in each other's veins."

## My Own Little Hell

By Jason Colflesh

Once I built a fire,  
Built it fierce and tall,  
And basked myself in its warmth.  
I had not thought the weather cold,  
Not before the fire.  
But soon the fire began to die,  
As fires are apt to do,  
And I could not stand the cold.  
So I threw your letters on the fire,  
And kept myself from the chill.  
But again, the fire began to die,  
As fires are apt to do.  
So I threw your photographs on the fire,  
And again kept myself warm.  
But once more the fire began to die,  
As fires are apt to do.  
I had nothing left to feed my fire,  
You were gone.  
As people are apt to do,  
When faced with the fire.  
I had nothing left, so, to keep warm,  
I stepped into the fire.  
How warm it is!  
Won't you join me?



## Idling

By Gretchen Lacey

"75 Years of Literary Service" read the sign above the door at Brownstone's bookstore. Brownstone's was a small but steady business that sat between the bakery and the deli on the east end of Main Street.

Phillip Brownstone, Jr. ran the shop from his father's office in the rear of the store. Originally the office, along with the stockroom, had housed the Brownstone family during the early years of the bookstore. Now there was barely room for the desk, the file cabinets and a small day-bed in the corner.

Most mornings, before opening, Phillip would walk next door to the bakery and bring back two coffees, one for himself and one for Anne Lawrence, his assistant.

Anne had worked at Brownstone's for twelve months. Phillip's father had interviewed her, and after a long speech about the importance of taking care of customers, Anne had agreed and was hired.

Since Anne had started, Phillip had been able to let go of the part-time clerk, and even work less hours himself. Anne came in early and often stayed late. She had the stockroom categorized and alphabetized, the accounting and the ordering up to date, and there was a cleanliness about the shop that had been lacking before.

But it was not her efficiency that interested Phillip; in fact, he was left quite cold by it. What he admired about Anne was something he saw, idling quietly below the surface, an alluring eager woman, impatiently desirous of something. What it was, he did not know.

Neither was he indifferent to her outward appearance. Anne was a dark-haired, dark-eyed woman of medium build, whose features were strong, but with subtle beauty. She was not glamorous, and dressed simply and conservatively, but there was an elegance in her voice that enhanced her attractiveness.

Phillip had begun to think about her the night after her first day on the job. By lunchtime, that day, she had completed all the work he had planned, so he ordered lunch from the deli and they sat in the office together; he at the desk, she on the daybed---the only other seat. He had thought he would use this time to get to know her, but when he saw how rigid and uncomfortable she looked poised on the edge of the daybed, he was not able to keep up the conversation.

But that night he had dreamt about her. He saw her sitting in the office, as she had at lunch, but now he was kneeling down in front of her. Her bare feet were warm, and his hands reached around, holding them at the arch. His fingertips glided up the back of her smooth legs and he grabbed, on each one, a handful of soft flesh.

His eyes closed and his breath was held inside. She did not move. He knelt there, hands on her calves, and without looking up he leaned forward and kissed her just above the knees where the hem of the skirt lay across her lap. He paused in the middle of the next kiss and his hands came up and lifted her skirt. She reacted, first with a mumbled sigh and arched back, then quickly straightened and moved to righten her skirt as she stood. Still kneeling, he reached for her as she turned and passed out the back door and disappeared into the night.

When he awoke, his fiancée was sitting at the foot of the bed. "You called out. It woke me up," she said curtly.

"What did I say?" He feigned no memory.

"You said, 'wait, wait!' and you weren't talking to me, I could tell that."

And she too left him that night, but only to sleep with the cat on the couch.

This first dream startled Phillip, and for a while he was cautious around Anne, as not to reveal the direction his thoughts had turned. But he found the more he avoided her, the more she invaded his thoughts, and so he began to pursue her company.

He looked forward to their morning coffees, and in small rare lots she opened up to him, but always with restraint. They shared confidences, mostly his, but once the store opened Anne busied herself with work to the point of annoying Phillip. She was especially kind to older gentlemen customers, it seemed to him, and when one of these men started waiting for Anne after work, Phillip was left feeling envious.

On one occasion, when he had gone home early and found a note from his fiancée citing 'lack of interest' as the reason for her departure, he drove back to the store, only to find Anne locking up, her companion waiting in the doorway. Phillip watched them from his car, still holding the note in his hand. He didn't know how he felt, and what's more, he could not say that the note had made him feel any particular way at all, except sorry that a chunk of time had slipped away and gone to waste.

Phillip watched Anne take the gentleman's arm and walk down Main Street. He drove home feeling lonely for her company and sorry for himself.

In some way though, Phillip hoped that this man would be good for Anne---maybe this was what she had been looking for. But she grew more solemn if anything, and eventually the gentleman stopped shopping at Brownstone's. Phillip never spoke of it. Not until Anne's first year anniversary at the book store.

Phillip, after convincing her that it was customary, opened a

bottle of wine and they shared a mid-morning toast. He handed her an envelope containing a note of thanks from his father and a crisp fifty dollar bill.

"My father used to keep a fifty dollar bill between the lining of his wallet," she remembered. "For emergencies." He smiled with her, hoping she would continue. "He died when I was twelve. I came home from school and my mother handed me some money and said that I had to go visit my cousin, that my aunt would be there in a few minutes to pick me up. In the car, my aunt said that my father had gone away and I guessed he was dead, but no one really told me. I didn't see my mother for a month, and when she came to get me, she had changed so much I thought I didn't know her."

Phillip had wanted to kiss her. To stop her in the middle of the story and kiss her and warm her. Her eyes had seemed so cold as she spoke, and he thought for the first time he had seen through the shadows that surrounded her. He wanted to hold her, now that he had finally seen her.

Instead, he poured some more wine.

The shop door opened, and they watched from the office as a man entered the store and looked around. He smiled and waved to Anne, and she put her glass on the desk and walked out to meet him. Phillip's eyes followed her, and he listened as the two talked and confirmed plans for dinner.

"And now that we have that settled," the man said to Anne, "could you help me find a book for my niece's birthday?" Phillip stood to get a better look at the man. He had seen him in the store before. His white shirt was neatly pressed, and his tie blended perfectly with his suit, but there was a plumpness about his waist that reminded Phillip of his own father's well-fed stomach.

Anne led the man to the back of the store where he chose three of the dozen or more books she suggested. Phillip emerged from the office and loitered around them until their conversation lulled and the man's attention politely wandered to the travel section.

"I want to speak to you, Anne. Please," and he motioned for her to rejoin him in the office, then closed the door behind them.

"Don't go with him," Phillip said.

"What?"

"Don't start up with him. He's just another older guy, just like the others. Probably married."

"What are you talking about?" she said.

"I'm talking about you Anne. I'm talking about you and I."

"You don't really know me, and there is no 'you and I'," she said.

"Besides, we're just going to dinner, and..."

Phillip cut her sentence short. "I don't know you because you won't let me, but I know this," and he grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her close and kissed her lips until she jerked away from

him. She stood with her back to the door, hands behind her on the knob, ready to flee, but unable to move. She stared at him until he backed away and went behind the desk.

"Go on then, go back to your customer," he said. But the words came out harsher than he had intended, and the look that came over her face just before she left, left him completely saddened.

The door between them stayed closed for the rest of the afternoon. At six, Anne's escort arrived and she left without speaking to Phillip. Phillip heard them leave and downed the last gulp of wine from the bottle, then stretched out on the day-bed. He spoke to her, as if she was there: "He's old enough to be your father, but that's what you like about it--makes you feel like a father and his little girl..." The words drowned out and he fell asleep.

At the restaurant, behind her sips of coffee, Anne watched her date. A couple passed by the table and their draft inflamed the candle, and in the heightened light the man across from her suddenly looked very old.

The bakery was astir with activity, as was usual late in the night. The back door was open and the kitchen lights flooded out into the alley along with wafts of sweet breads baking. The rear door to Brownstone's was also open, and the still cool air filled with the bakery smells slowly poured in over Phillip.

Anne appeared in the doorway. Phillip sat up and for a moment neither one spoke nor moved. He felt her eyes were reaching out to him and he moved to the side, making a place for her beside him on the daybed. She sat down and he knelt before her. Carefully and gently he removed each of her shoes, then again sat beside her and waited for her voice.

## You Know Who You Are

By Chris Heinzinger

Stained glass eyes,  
permeating blue, green, and a hint of silver.  
Long auburn hair,  
flowing around her sculptured  
face and shoulders.  
And her body looked like a mountain lion,  
as she danced  
in her black Danskin leotard.

She knew calculus,  
and Aerosmith. Twenty six years--  
she drove  
a Mercedes Benz but was fun like a '65 Vette;  
I've known her  
five years, and we have shared things, like pizzas  
and heartaches.

She writes to me at school,  
asking what girl  
I'm in love with. I tell her about the girl I'm  
seeing, but want  
to tell her she is the woman I love.  
I can't,  
even in drunken state when our bodies are  
pressed together in the front row of the Bon Jovi concert.

She runs her fingers through my hair and  
says I'll make  
some girl really happy. But why can't she be the one.  
My parents have  
always told me there is nothing in this world I can't have,  
as long as I work hard  
and set my mind to it. This summer my chin quivered  
when the Reverend  
said, "Speak now or forever hold your peace,"  
at her  
wedding.

## Pooh

By Diane Moore

Winnie the Pooh is my bestest friend. Tigger, Eeyore, Piglet, Kanga and Roo are all my friends too. But Pooh is my best friend in the whole world. They all live in the wall in my room. My Daddy's friend painted them there. We all get along real good. We never ever fight. Pooh and I share all our secrets. I know he would never tell anybody my secrets, not a soul. We trust each other. We play together a lot. We play tea party, Barbies, and dress up. I have lots of different costumes that my grandmom made me for Halloween. I like to wear the bride's dress the most, because it is the prettiest.

Pooh wanted to play tea party tonight, but I didn't feel like it. When I told him I didn't want to play he said "Oh, bother." That's what a Pooh bear says when he's disappointed. I've been getting in trouble a lot for not having my homework done. I wish I could just tell my teacher that I can't think right when my Mommy's screaming all the time, but then she would probably think that I was bad. My teacher, Mrs. Daisy, is real nice and I don't want her to think that I'm bad.

I think Mommy is mad because Daddy took me to the Brick Lounge today. I don't understand why this made her so grouchy. I like it when Daddy takes me to the Brick Lounge. I get to sit up in a big stool and drink all the soda I want. (Mommy doesn't let me drink soda at home.) They have a huge jukebox there and Daddy gives me lots of dimes to put in it. Today I played "Rhinestone Cowboy" two times and "Happy Birthday" three times. I know all the words to "Happy Birthday." There was this big man named Bubba, with a beard like Santa, who I played pool with. Since I can't hold the big stick I get to push the balls with my hand. I won and Bubba gave me a quarter. All my Daddy's friends are real nice. When we were leaving, the lady behind the counter said they were getting a video game next week. I hope Daddy will take me back to play. We had to leave when Bubba started fighting with some other man about the football game on T.V. I told Daddy in the car on the way home that I understood, because sometimes the big kids at recess fight when they play football. He just laughed. We stopped at the building with the piles and piles of soda on the way home. Daddy said he needed to get some more beer. I got to get a bag of roasted peanuts. I love peanuts.

When we got home, I ran in the house to tell Mommy how much fun I had, but she didn't want to hear. She told me to get to my room. Then she started screaming at Daddy. Maybe she found out Daddy let me drink soda. Mommy is very smart. I wish Mommy wasn't so angry all the time.

I'll watch my T.V. until the fight is over. Watching television is the best thing to do when my parents are yelling. I sit on the floor real close and turn the volume on real low so Mommy doesn't hear. She would be mad because I'm supposed to be doing my homework. There is a show on about the jungle. Lots of monkeys are swinging in the trees. Wow! That sure looks like a lot of fun. I wish I could be a monkey.

"Sara! Come here now!"

"Yes Mommy, coming." Uh-oh, better turn off the T.V. I run through the living room into the kitchen. Mommy's standing at the door shaking a jar of peanut butter. She doesn't look very happy.

"What's the matter Mommy? Why are you crying?"

"Why, why isn't the lid to the peanut butter jar on correctly?"

"I don't know, Mommy."

"You don't know. YOU DON'T KNOW! When did YOU use the peanut butter last?"

"I don't remember?"

"YOU DON'T REMEMBER? I'll ask you one more time. Did you use the peanut butter?"

"I guess so."

"You guess so. Did you put the lid back on correctly?"

"I thought I did."

"Well you thought wrong, Missy."

"I'm sorry Mommy."

"You better start paying attention. Get back to your room, and stay there."

When I walk back to my room, I pass Daddy sitting in his big black chair. He's drinking the beer we got him at the store. He gives me a big smile and a wink. I skip back to my room. Daddy always makes me feel better. I hope he doesn't drink too much beer tonight though. He may get sick and not be able to go to work again. Then Mommy would be real mad. I don't remember eating the peanut butter, but if I said I didn't eat it, then she would say I was lying. Maybe I did use the peanut butter and now I just can't remember. I do silly things like that all the time.

I turn the T.V. on, back in my room, but the jungle show is over. Oh, bother. There is some news show on. I don't understand half the things they are saying, but it is better than listening to Mommy and Daddy.

After a while, things get spooky quiet and I can hear Daddy fumbling around in the kitchen. He is acting real funny again. I can hear everything Daddy is doing because the sliding doors leading from my room to the kitchen are open a little teeny bit. I hear Daddy getting a glass out. I pray to God with all my heart, "Please don't let him drop it." But God lets him drop it anyway. As soon as I hear the glass crash against the floor, I jump up and run into the kitchen. I

ask Daddy if he is O.K., but he isn't paying attention. He is on the floor petting our puppy Radar. I kneel down to get the dustpan and brush out from under the sink, but it is too late, Mommy is standing in the door, her face is bright, bright red. I want to crawl under the sink with the dustpan and brush. But, I can't move. Mommy is quiet. Then, in a voice that doesn't sound like my Mommy's she says, "Sara, pack your clothes." I tip toe back to my room. When I am back in my room I hear Daddy start to cry. I want to go back out and give him a big hug and tell him everything is O.K. But, everything isn't O.K.

Mommy has left the house when she was mad before, but she has never taken me with her. I wonder how long we will be gone for. Mommy comes in and asks me if I am ready. I put my Holly Hobby coloring book, and my Supergirl UndeRoos in a bag. Mommy takes my backpack and helps me put on my hat and jacket. I hold my yellow blankie in one hand and Pooh holds my other. Together we follow Mommy past Daddy, still crying on the floor, and walk out into the beautiful snowy night.

Pooh and I get in the car and Mommy seat belts us in. Mommy starts the car and pulls out of the driveway. I wave bye-bye to Daddy and Radar and my pretty little house. I really want to ask her where we're going, but she doesn't look very good. I think it's best just to keep quiet. I wish I could roll the window down so I could reach out and touch the falling snow. The snow is falling real fast. When you look out the window it is real blurry. Too bad I didn't bring my snowsuit, maybe we're going somewhere where I could play in the snow with Pooh.

The car is hot and stuffy. It makes my mouth dry. I want to roll down the window, but I'd get in trouble for letting the cold air in. Pooh is getting heavy on my lap. I ask him to sit in the back seat and put his seat belt on. I also tell him not to disturb Mommy while she is driving, she is upset enough already.

Mommy is having a hard time driving. I don't think she can see where she is going. I ask Mommy if we are going to drive far in the snow. She says she isn't sure, we will have to pull in somewhere so she can make a phone call. We drive to the big Acme parking lot. All the lights are shining real bright. Mommy tells me to stay put while she goes and uses the pay phone.

It is past my bedtime. The heat is making me sleepy. I roll the window down a little tiny bit, so I can smell the fresh snow. The air coming in is giving me goose bumps. Pooh doesn't mind having the window down, because his fur always keeps him warm. Mommy is taking a long time. The snow looks so beautiful floating around in the Acme parking lot. I wish Pooh and I were home in bed.

I see Mommy walking back to the car. She looks really cold and her brown hair is all speckled with white from the snow. She opens



the car door, and sits down. She is shivering a whole lot.

"Roll the GOD DAMN WINDOW UP. IT'S FREEZING SARA! ARE YOU CRAZY?"

"No Mommy, I'm not crazy, I like the snow."

I don't know what I said wrong but Mommy's crying real hard. She is grabbing me and hugging me real tight. She starts to rock me back and forth saying my name over and over: "Sara, Sara, Sara," until she is screaming, "Sara! Sara! Sara!" I just stay real quiet and wait for the screams to stop. The screams stop, but the crying doesn't. I think Mommy scared Pooh, because he is curled up in a ball on the floor in the back. I'm not scared, though. I'm staying brave. I always stay brave.

Mommy finally lets go of me, she is finished her crying. I ask her when we are going to get going where we are supposed to be going. She speaks real quiet, and says we won't be able to go anywhere because the roads are icy and slippery. I ask her if we are going to have to sleep at the Acme. Then she asks me what I think we should do. I tell her that we should probably go home and put Daddy to bed.

"Then that's what we'll do Sara," she whispers, "then that's what we'll do."

On the way home Pooh and I forgot to ask Mommy who she was calling at the Acme. I just want to get home and tell Tigger, Piglet, Eeyore, Kanga, and Roo that Pooh and I are safe. I know they must be worried.

When we walk in the door Daddy is still on the kitchen floor, sleeping with Radar. Mommy wakes him up and tells him to come to bed. We help him walk and tuck him in. I give him a kiss on the cheek. His eyes are all red and puffy and he is mumbling about something. Mommy tells him to hush and rest and asks me to get him a glass of juice. I tip toe out to the kitchen and reach in the cabinet for a glass. Then I remember the glass that Daddy broke. There isn't a mess on the floor anymore. I look in the trash can and find all the broken pieces. What a good Daddy. He remembered to clean up. I pour the juice and bring it back to Mommy and Daddy's room, but Daddy has already fallen asleep. Mommy tells me that I should be asleep too. She says I still may have school tomorrow.

"Go to bed Sara. Sleep tight. I love you."

"I love you too, Mommy."

I go back to my room and take off my jacket and my clothes. Pooh and I laugh at Daddy snoring so loud. I put on my favorite Holly Hobby nightshirt and I turn off the light. When I close my door, I leave it open a tiny bit so the hallway light shines in. I take out my school books and pencil and place them in the light. Then I sit down beside them because I still have homework to do. I'm learning how to add and subtract.

## The Pond

By A. Judd Woytek

Ripples flowed across the solid blue oval,  
scattering the white ducks into the sky.

Frogs jumped from one green island  
to another or onto nearby brown rocks.

The dragonflies with their yellow  
eyes took refuge in the thick foliage.

The hair-like vines of the weeping willow  
were calmly swinging in the breeze.

I saw you against the blue sky sitting  
on the highest branch, reaching for the vines.

You fell down into the water with  
a smile on your pale, sweated face.

The pond enveloped you like blueberries  
drowning in Betty Crocker muffin mix,

and I never saw you again.

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