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WESTVIEW

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W E S T V I E W

Volume 29

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Spring/Summer 2009

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Stylesheet

1. Submissions should be typed on 8.5" x 11" white paper; prose should be double spaced. Include a self-addressed stamped envelope.
2. Submitted artwork should be suitable for black and white reproduction. Work should be no larger than 8.5" x 14". However, photographs or slides of larger works may be submitted.
3. Include a brief biographical sketch for our contributors' notes.
4. Submissions and correspondence may be sent to:
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Editor's note

This issue of *Westview* pays tribute to Howard Bahr, the featured Visiting Writer at the 17th Annual *Westview* Writers' Festival in Weatherford. Mr. Bahr is the author of three novels set during the Civil War era—*The Black Flower* (1997), *The Year of Jubilo* (2000) and *The Judas Field* (2006)—and, most recently, a novel of the railroad, *Pelican Road* (2008). The issue opens with a tribute to Mr. Bahr, an interview with him, and a sample from *Pelican Road*.

This issue is special also because of the contributions made to it by the students in Dr. Collins's course on magazine and book editing at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. For the first time in *Westview's* decades of publication, students made substantial decisions concerning sequencing, layout, selection of illustrations, as well as editing for style and content.

The students who made these substantial contributions are Sarah Carlock, Kaci Carpenter, Lisa Chain, James Crittendon, Misty Crosby, Robyn England, Heather Harmon, Wendy Hiebert, Jenny Mingus, Hung Nguyen, and Kayla Warner.



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Photo by Nathan Webb



Howard Bahr Recollections

by Jill Jones

When Howard Bahr came to the University of Mississippi, the 27-year-old freshman was assigned to a beginning composition class taught by a soft-voiced young teaching assistant who had just recently received her B.A. from Mississippi State College for Women. After attending a class or two, he visited the office of the Director of Freshman Composition, laid on his desk a copy of the September 1973 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* that contained Howard's article, "Outbound Odyssey," and asked if he might possibly be excused from freshman composition. Needless to say, Howard was allowed to bypass the elementary writing classes. That was one of the first stories I heard about my colleague in the English Graduate program at Ole Miss.

I soon learned that Howard spent four years in the Navy and worked on the railroad for five years, where his mentor and friend on the Illinois Central Railroad, Frank Smith, introduced him to the works of Mr. William Faulkner. Howard was in Oxford because he wanted to be in Faulkner country. (Oxford is Faulkner's Jefferson in his Yoknapatawpha County). He enrolled at the University of Mississippi, where Faulkner once served a short stint as a post office clerk. Soon Howard was named assistant curator of Faulkner's home, Rowan Oak, under the guidance of another mentor and friend, Dr. James Webb. When Dr. Webb passed away, Howard was named curator and for seventeen years dedicated himself to preserving Faulkner's home. Among my vivid memories of Oxford during the time I was there working on my Ph.D are visits to Rowan Oak; Howard showed me parts of the house not open to the public, and I felt very special. I remember his excitement when he found a page from a draft of *The Hamlet* tucked

in the crevices of an old desk in the library and his despair when he decided to wash the sheer curtains in Jill Faulkner's bedroom, only to have them dissolve in the sudsy water.

Sometimes a two-year period of your life can loom larger than a ten-year period. That's the way my years in Oxford, Mississippi, were, partly because of the stimulation of studies and teaching at the University, but mostly because of the people I knew there. Howard was part of a circle of friends dear to me: Joy, Dennis, Randy, John, Jeanne, Steve C., Dixie, Steve P., and Sara. Howard and Randy Cross were as good as any comedy team I've ever heard. They were both gifted with words and would play off one another's lines and keep us in stitches.

One of the fun things about knowing an author is recognizing some of the private messages or jokes in the books. Howard often uses names of his friends in his novels. In *Pelican Road*, Frank Smith, one of the main characters, has the name of Howard's railroad mentor. After reading *Pelican Road*, I told Howard I was in love with Frank Smith. He said he would tell him. I was delighted when one of the novel's main characters, Artemus Kane (who has many Bahr-like traits), sits chatting with a young boy caught up in the romance of trains. When asked his name, the boy replies "Sturgis Montieth the Third." Sturgis of the romantic name was one of our graduate-school friends at Ole Miss. In the Civil War novels, there are Lieutenant Cross, L. W. Thomas, Carl, Knox, and others of "the boys," as Howard called his particular friends. The names work perfectly well, but Howard's cronies must be delighted to find themselves embedded there.

Howard was a Civil War re-enactor in those





Photo by Erica Flannes

days, a phenomenon I didn't know existed until I met him. Reading through *The Black Flower*, *The Judas Field* and *The Year of Jubilo*, Howard's first three novels, all set during the Civil War, I know he gained much of his intimate, detailed knowledge of weapons, encampments, and military strategies from those re-enactment experiences. Although he usually went to battlefields as a common infantryman, he had the uniform of a Confederate officer with all the accoutrements. I remember a wedding of one of his re-enactor friends. The service was held in a little white country church which could have been present in the 1860s. Guests arrived in the back of a wagon, decorations were spare, dinner

was served on the grounds, and the simple wooden benches were filled with guests dressed in period costumes. I was in a borrowed antebellum dress with hoops and the works.

Because I knew Howard, I had experiences I would never have had otherwise, but Howard's main gift to me was a new, or at least improved, sensitivity. A man who would have been more comfortable in the 19th century than the modern world, he helped me to reassess many components of modern life, to recognize "foolishness" when I saw it, and to be more sensitive to Mr. Faulkner's "eternal verities" and "truths of the human heart."



An Interview with Howard Bahr

by Kevin Collins

Howard Bahr, the visiting writer for the 2009 Westview Writers' Festival, is a novelist renowned primarily for three novels set in what is still the most trying period of American history, the Civil War. We spoke with Mr. Bahr concerning the natures of fiction and of writers of fiction.

Westview: Of those life experiences seemingly unrelated to literature, which were most helpful in preparing you to be a novelist? Why?

Bahr: I was fortunate to be born in an old house in an old neighborhood in an old Southern town, to a family of musicians, freethinkers, storytellers, and artists, all of them a trifle peculiar, who taught me two important things: first, a person should be interested in everything; and, second, it is boring to be ordinary. These are good lessons for a writer. When my mother remarried—to Mr. Bahr, whose name I took—we lived in Dallas, Texas and East St. Louis, Illinois, which provided me with the exotic urban experience every novelist should suffer. In 1964, I joined the Navy, expecting to go to sea. I did go to sea, and I ended up in the Vietnam War. Though no one shot at me personally, I experienced some harrowing times and was witness to the great tragedy of that generation. After my discharge, I worked five years on the railroads in the twilight of that profession. Then I went to Ole Miss (1973) and was trained by a number of old-time professors—mostly men who had been to war and done things in the real world—who taught me writing, literature, and history in a context free from theories. These things made me a novelist, for good or ill.

Westview: Which are the most attractive aspects of a life of letters? Which are the least attractive?

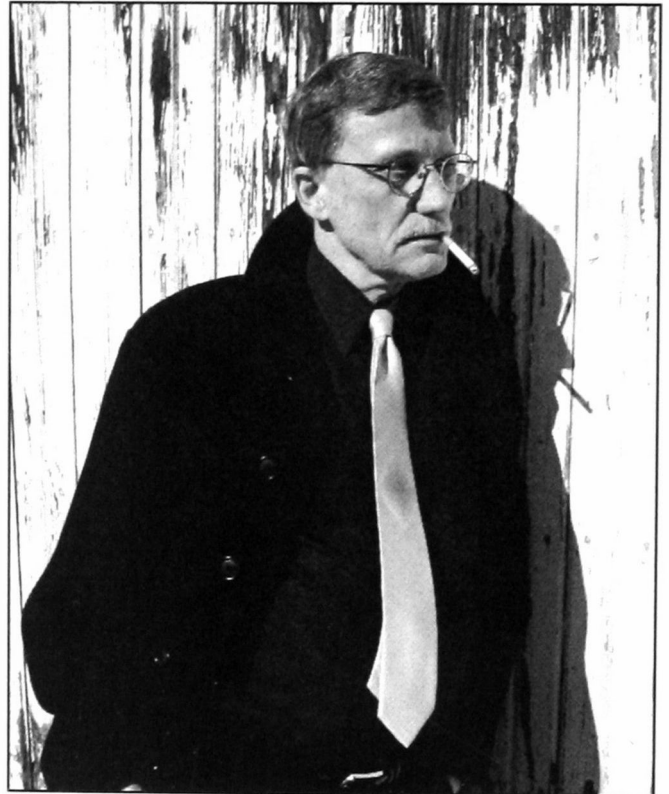


Photo by Erica Flannes

Bahr: As a writer, I am a fraud, of course. I became one only to solicit the attention of young, braless, loft-dwelling girls, which led to disappointment. For the most part, women who buy novels, underline passages, come to readings, etc. are good and sweet and kind. Some are pretty, but they all wear bras, live in the best part of town, and are married. They invite the writer to parties, which he attends purely on the chance that he might meet an artist girl there. News flash: artist girls are not invited to these affairs. They wear too much black, and they are apt to talk about death and angst. They make art that people do not understand. The Patronesses of the Arts do not like this. Especially, they want *their* writer to be cheerful. They do not want him to sulk in a corner. They do not want to be reminded of the lesson their writer has long

since learned: that art, like Vietnam, is lovely from the air—glamorous, exotic, mysterious—but down under the canopy, by the brown waters where the snakes live, it is a real bitch.

The best part of a life of letters is not the *Writing* but the *Having Written*. To see a novel accomplished and in print is a wonder to behold, something I never get used to. Then I go out and sign books and talk to nice people who ask interesting questions. For that little time, I can swell around and act like I know something. Eventually, however, I have to get back to the hard part, the solitary torture of writing, showing up every night, failing and failing, worrying and pacing, drinking too many beers, smoking too much, while the Night Watchman whispers in my ear what a silly fraud I am. During the process of composition, there are many times when I wish I had been born an accountant. However, that delusion is usually dispelled by the morning's light. Then, out of some unaccountable masochistic compulsion, I long to get back to the blank page. Something to remember: what a writer *has done* doesn't matter. The only book that's important is the next one.

Westview: Some of the most important themes in your novels, e.g., those concerning human decency and indecency, would be appropriate to a contemporary urban setting—or to a twenty-fifth-century setting three galaxies over—yet three of your novels have Civil War settings. What is it about that setting that strikes you as particularly conducive to illustrating the experience of being human?

Bahr: My first novel, *The Black Flower*, started out as a simple attempt to paint a realistic picture of the common soldier's life, based on my many voluntary hardships as a Civil War reenactor. I quickly discovered that I was not writing about the Civil War at all, but about people in a bad situation, trying to overcome it with honor and love and sacrifice. The Civil War setting served me well,

as I could show the realities of the soldiers' lives as well as those of civilians, and (unlike, say, a World War Two novel) romance between soldiers and maids could blossom on the same ground, the two of them brought together in the midst of great sorrow and tragedy. This was a combination I could not resist. Furthermore, I never lost sight of my original goal, and I labored to dispel the mythic aura of so many Civil War tales. Finally, I was able to work through all the themes peculiar to that era that had engaged me for years. With the final novel, *The Judas Field*, I had said all I could about the conflict while—I hope—making some comment about the universal human heart in times of trouble.

Westview: Since writers of historical fiction or fictional history can't be accurate in all historical details, they necessarily betray their own biases. What are some of your biases concerning the Civil War, and how do they show themselves in the novels?

Bahr: My greatest bias regarding the American Civil War has to do not with regionalism, but with the war itself: its waste, its stupidity, its brutality, and its eventual romanticization, some of which borders on the criminal. Death and War are the real enemies in my novels, and they are the enemies of Rebels and Yankees alike. I write about Southern men, for I feel most comfortable among them, but I have been careful to cast the other side not as villains, but as human beings caught up, like their Rebel counterparts, in circumstances awful beyond imagination. Having said that, I have no doubt that, had I been of age in 1861, I would have joined the Confederate army.

Westview: *Pelican Road* is strikingly similar and dissimilar to the Civil War trilogy. What did you gain and lose with the mid-twentieth-century setting for that novel?



Bahr: The blessing of *Pelican Road* is that it allowed me to escape the constant presence of Thanatos that accompanies the writing of a Civil War novel. To write the Civil War truly, an author has to go into some dark places where most folks are unwilling to venture; at least, that was my experience. I had a good time writing *Pelican Road*, for I was able to tell at last a story that I'd wanted to tell since I was a railroad man myself. Some readers have told me that the novel is "bleak," but I do not think it is. Surely there are many of the same themes that arise in the Civil War books—danger, alienation, loneliness—but, as in the other novels, these difficulties are redeemed by love, comradeship, courage, and sacrifice. One of the joys of *Pelican Road* was that I could have characters smoking cigarettes, listening to the radio, driving motorcars and motorcycles. This was new ground for me, and I had a big time. I also got to explore one of my favorite periods of American history, just before the Second World War, when the world was about to change forever, another way that *Pelican Road* is linked to the Civil War novels.

Westview: Apart from innate talent, what are the essential qualities of a professional imaginative writer? Which of these, if any, can be acquired in a creative writing workshop? Among those not available in the classroom, how might an aspiring writer go about acquiring them?

Bahr: The first goal of a professional imaginative writer should be to gain experience in the world. To paraphrase Mr. Faulkner, the writer must get down out of the ivory tower and see what goes on at street level. He must pay attention to what

goes on around him—the ways people talk, the ways they work out their relationships, the ways in which they fail and in which they triumph. Walker Percy talked about "the holiness of the ordinary"—this is where real stories come from. I believe that aspiring writers should put themselves at risk: join the Army, join the Navy, ride a motorcycle to California, work in a steel mill. Without worldly experience, academic accomplishments are pretty much irrelevant. Obviously, this kind of experience cannot be gained in a writing workshop, in an air-conditioned room where everyone is safe.

The second goal of writers should be to read everything they can: novels, histories, essays, comic books. They should watch movies. All the while, they should be studying how the other fellow does it: how he builds dramatic tension, how he develops relationships, how his characters talk, how they find redemption or fail to find it. By reading and watching, young writers can come to understand the complexities in every character; they can learn to love them all, even if they don't like them all, even the characters who fail. Writers should learn never—never—to make fun of their characters, but to offer them all a chance, even those who don't deserve a chance.

I think that workshops can be useful in that the student is availed of the comments of peers, which can be insightful and which trains them to accept criticism. More important are the comments of the teacher, hopefully a person with experience. In a workshop, students learn to handle the tools of the craft, and if they are lucky, they learn that writing is art, and therefore difficult. Beyond these things, students must fashion outside of the classroom résumés of experience that prepare them for



the serious work of writing.

Westview: What is it that distinguishes American fiction from the fictions of other nations? All things considered, do these differences amount to an advantage or a disadvantage for American writers? Why?

Bahr: If you want to see what distinguishes American writing from that of other nations—I mean, the old, settled European nations—all you have to do is read Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*. Nobody but an American—and one who consciously *acknowledged* himself as an American—could have written that work. It’s all in the materialism, the newness, the brashness, the recklessness, the phenomena of the wilderness and the frontier. We are still writing about that. Personally, I can see no disadvantage in the differences. American writers were set free from the old conventions; plus, they could steal what was best from French, Germans, English, and Russians while developing a tradition of their own. It is a commonplace that art moves from east to west across the Atlantic. That is a good thing, I think.

Westview: Some of the most enjoyable passages of your books—some dialogues and some descriptions—can be called poetic because of the ways that they force active readers to cooperate with you in the construction of meaning. To what extent are you aware of the burden you are placing on your readers in these passages?

Bahr: This is the best question of the lot, but I’m not sure how to answer. Speaking generally, and without specific examples to address, I would say that the situation you describe is one of the things that distinguish *literary* novels from those in a more “popular” vein. I do not mean to imply that one genre is superior to the other, only that the literary novel demands more from its readers. I think it is a mean trick for a writer to be purposely obscure; on the other hand, I admire writers who use language in unexpected and beautiful ways. I think that Thomas Wolfe, in *Look Homeward, Angel*, is a good example: “A leaf, a stone, an unfound door—O lost, and by the wind grieved ghost, come back again.” Readers might well ask, “What the hell does *that* mean?” Then they realize that the meaning lies in the words themselves, the beauty, the poignancy. Readers are touched by something sublime; they can *feel* it, and it doesn’t really matter if they can’t paraphrase it.

I am always pleased beyond measure when someone calls my writing “poetic.” I take it as a high compliment. However, I try hard not to obfuscate or call attention to myself as a stylist. I always have respect for readers’ intelligence, knowing they will come along with me and help me figure out what I mean. If, in dialogue or exposition, I place any burden on readers (and I’m not convinced that I do), it is done in a collaborative way, so that, through the words, they feel what I feel and see what I see. If it takes a little work on their part, so much the better.



Sweet Pearl River

an excerpt from *Pelican Road* (McAdam/Cage)

by Howard Bahr

Not long after he met Anna Rose, Artemus got bumped off the Silver Star and bid on a daylight freight job as conductor. One afternoon, southbound, they were stopped on the main line waiting for a northbound local to get out of the way. The local had pulled a drawbar and had to set the car out and had lost time, and Artemus's train was stuck. His drag was so long that the engine was at the south switch of the passing track, and the caboose was stopped in the middle of the Pearl River bridge. Max Triggs the flagman was flagging behind, Hubert Craft the swing brakeman was reading *Field & Stream* in the cupola, so Artemus filled his pipe and went out back to smoke. He was glad to have the chance, for he loved rivers, and he usually passed quickly over the Pearl, the iron bridge trusses flickering by and gone. Now he could study it for a while, take the evening air, sit on the porch as he might at home.

It had rained in the early afternoon, so the river lay under a fine mist. The water stretched away on either side, but Artemus sat down on the west-side steps, among a whine of mosquitoes, so he could watch the sun fall. In fact, it had already passed below the trees, painting the feathery tops of the cypress and pines with a delicate bronze light. Cypress and pine and oak were all draped in gray moss and hung with vines. In the shadows below, in the rank grass where white and yellow flowers bloomed, the fireflies were rising. Among the shadows, too, a single great sycamore leaned from the bank, whose silver leaves and white trunk seemed to hold still to the light of day. The leafy top of the sycamore dragged in the water, and Artemus thought he saw movement there. In a moment, a graceful pirogue poked its nose out, parting the mist, rounding the tree slowly. A boy sat in the stern, paddling lazily. He looked up at the bridge, and when he saw Artemus, he lifted the paddle from the water.

"Hidy," said the boy.

"Hidy, yourself," said Artemus.

"Say, can I come up there?" asked the boy.

Artemus beckoned, and the boy landed his boat and scrambled up the bank. The steps of the caboose were so high above the bridge timbers that Artemus had to pull the boy up by his hand. When he was aboard, the boy sat down next to Artemus, comfortable as if he were an old friend. He was about ten, a black-haired lad with a solemn face tanned the color of dark walnut. He smelled of fish and child-sweat, and Artemus remembered how his niece Fanny sometimes smelled that way at day's end in the summer. The boy wore a cotton shirt and jeans britches rolled to the knees. His legs and bare feet were spotted with chigger and mosquito bites, some bloody where he had scratched them. "Dern these muskeeters," he said. "It aint been a breath of air all evenin'."

Artemus laughed. "What's your name, sport?" he said.

"Sturgis Montieth the Third," said the boy. He pulled a corncob pipe from his pocket. "You got a Lucifer?" he asked.

"I do," said Artemus, and gave the boy a match, which he lit expertly with a flick of his thumbnail. He puffed great clouds of acrid smoke, then rested his elbows on his knees and squinted into the twilight. "That'll do for the 'skeeters," he said. "They can't abide Injun terbaccer." Then, after a moment, he looked at Artemus and asked, "What's *your* name?"

Artemus told his name, and the boy put out his hand, and they shook. "Pleased to meet you," said the boy, then pointed with his pipe stem as an old man might. "The river's pretty, ain't it?"

"Yes, it is," said Artemus. On the sand bar, a green heron—Artemus had not noticed him before—posed motionless, one foot raised. In the yellow sky, swallows darted and chirped to one



another. Artemus and the boy could smell the warm creosote from the bridge, and the old rank smell of the slow-moving water. They heard the secret voices in the long grass, the voices of night, and a bull frog tuning up, and his lesser cousins making a loud chorus: the leopard frogs, the spring peepers, the trilling of toads courting on the muddy banks. Here a kingfisher came darting down the tunnel of trees, there a flight of egrets crossed the sky. Silver minnows flicked and dodged in the shallows, and a snake traveling upstream scattered them. A big snake doctor came and perched on the pigtail whistle of the cab and watched them with his quick, bulbous eyes.

“Say, can I see your watch?” asked the boy.

Artemus was wearing overalls, and his watch chain was looped across the bib. He took out the gold Hamilton and showed it to the boy who said, “I wish I could have one like that.”

Artemus was suddenly aware of the piece, the weight of it, the delicacy of the numbers and the fine deep blue of the hands. The watch was ticking away, and time was passing, and right now Anna Rose was maybe going to Mass, passing through the doors of Immaculate Conception with her hat on and a little veil of netting over her face. Artemus could see her dip her hand in the holy water font, make the sign of the cross, walk down the nave alone with her head bowed.

“You will, one day,” said Artemus, and slipped the watch back in his pocket.

“Huh,” said the boy. “It’s always One day this, and One day that—I’d like to know what day you all are talkin’ about.”

Artemus laughed, for he knew the feeling well. He said, “Well, Sturgis Montieth the Third, what you doing out here on the Pearl River with night coming on?”

“Well, I was scoutin’, sir, mostly,” the boy said. “Too much fresh water to fish. We live on the county road about a mile upstream. My daddy is the game warden—I pretend a lot, to exercise my

imagination. This evenin’, I am a Royal Canadian Mounted Po-lice.”

“I expect that is a good trick in Louisiana in the summer,” said Artemus.

“Well, it’s summer in Canada, too,” said the boy. “I guess they got muskeeters, too, and they speak French like Daddy. I learned that in school.”

“All right,” said Artemus. “I see your point.”

“So why are you-all settin’ here on the bridge?” asked the boy.

Artemus explained that his train was delayed by another train, and sitting on the bridge was all they could do at the moment. He said, “I cannot begin to tell you how much I am disappointed by this state of affairs.”

The comment was lost on the boy. He said, “How you know to do it? How you know to stop?”

“We got a train order at Picayune,” said Artemus. “It said to stop at the south switch of the siding, so that’s what we did, and here we are,”

“Huh,” said the boy. He smoked for a moment, then said, “I hear you-all in the night, and I hear the engines whistle for the crossin’ down at Gant’s store. Such a lonesome sound in the dark.”

“Yes, it is,” said Artemus. “You don’t ever get used to it.”

Artemus Kane, at least, never got used to it. He loved to be out on the car tops on a warm day while his train rambled through a town: cap cocked over one eye, hands in his pockets, posing in the same careless, infuriating way that sailors have. He never missed a chance to lean from an engine cab or the cupola of a caboose and wave at the poor mortals down below—citizens in motorcars huddled like sheep at a crossing; children racing the train on their bicycles; pretty girls hanging laundry in their backyards—as if to say, *Why, this is nothing—I do this every day.* He believed he saw the envy in all their eyes—the longing for motion and speed, for freedom, for the privilege of walking always on



the edge of doom that could make even ordinary moments of life a sweet possession. And late on a moonless night, when the lamplit windows of houses winked across the fields, and the whistle of the striding locomotive drifted back from some nameless crossing, Artemus thought of himself and his comrades as the last tragic heroes, traveling forever into the darkness, forever apart, with nothing for their passage but a hint of coal smoke borne away by the wind, the glow of their marker lamps fading and gone, and this: a deep silence that embraced all the sorrow and mutability of a race that had owned Eden once.

He never got used to sixteen-hour days, pitch-black nights, clouds of mosquitoes, surly hoboos with knives and guns lurking in empty cars. He remembered slipping on ice-caked ladders and stirrups—Once trying to grab a hand hold but feeling the grab iron slip away, falling between the cars, catching himself at the last possible instant before the wheels had him—and how it was to look for car numbers in the dark, and switch in the blinding rain, and walk the tops at fifty miles an hour against a wind that slashed like a razor and blew your lantern out, or what it was like to work the head end, to be in the engine cab on a hundred-degree day with the firebox doors opened and a gasoline truck racing you to a crossing.

The world the railroad men inhabited was an alien masculine world with a language all its own—the runic timetables, the peculiar idioms, the complicated rules. Hecate was real, and Death was real, and the landscape was wrought of solid things, of iron, steel, gravel, piney woods, weathered freight offices and scale houses—a lonely, complex, unforgiving place.

One night. One day. One afternoon. That's how the men told their stories, every incident a particular moment in time, captured forever, immortal, always dressed in weather, in light or dark, full of voices and the quick, moving shapes of men. It was sleeting, raining, hot, cold, pitch-black dark—trains were always moving, wheels groaning, the

clock in the freight house ticked for no one, and something was about to happen—something *was* happening. Ghosts spoke, laughed, did mischief, got hurt, were stupid or clumsy or annoying—but in the telling they were not ghosts, for you could see their faces, see their arms move, see the pencils in their pockets, the grease on their pants, see the rain running off the bills of their caps, smell the whiskey on their breath. You could see a black yard engine coming down in the blinding rain, all the crew in sou'-westers so it looked like a shrimp boat, but never mind the rain, for the trains had to move just the same. Here a man grinned at you from the line of a story, and you knew he was real, no matter he died two decades ago from too much drink. You saw a man sitting amazed in the welter of his own blood—a man lying dead, cut to pieces, among the tall spring grass—men shambling up the yard in circles of lantern light—or running, taking a leak, choking on a chaw of Red Man, hanging off the side of a car—a man framed in the window of a locomotive cab or riding the footboard—bending to throw a switch, stepping off a moving engine or caboose, setting a hand brake, climbing a long ladder, walking the tops—each one real, all real in their grace, their sweat, their stinking in the heat, their noses running in the cold, their hemorrhoids and hangovers. Here a man flings his cap down and stomps on it in frustration. There a man throws a cup of water in another's face, and everybody tenses for a confrontation that never comes. A man curses, one fires a pistol in the air for no reason, another vomits bootleg liquor out the cab window, another cuts you with his meanness, then an hour later says something kind that saves you.

This is what he might have told the boy, but he didn't for there was no time, and no words to tell so a boy might understand. He wanted to tell Anna Rose, too, and maybe he would, for he hoped to have the time for that. Someday pretty soon, anyhow, if he didn't lose her.

“Sometimes I like to come up here to watch





Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

the trains go by," said the boy, and pointed with his pipe stem. "I stand right over yonder."

"Well, you must be careful," said Artemus. "These things will hurt you."

"Oh, I stand 'way back in the grass. I always give the fellers on the engine a highball." He waved his hand in the way that signified a highball, the universal signal to proceed. "They always like that," he said.

"All right, I will teach you something," said Artemus. "When you watch a freight train by, you always look for sticking brakes and hot journal boxes." He pointed out the journal boxes on the caboose, and the brake shoes against the wheels. He said, "One makes fire around the wheels, the other

makes smoke, maybe fire, too. You see something like that, here's what you do when the shack comes by." Artemus showed the boy the hand signals for sticking brakes and for a hot box. "Then the boys will know they have trouble," he said.

Sturgis Montieth practiced the movements. "Now, that's somethin' like," he said, pleased with himself.

"Only," said Artemus, "if you give those signals just for fun, the lord God will strike you dead with a lightning bolt. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You can't be fooling around out here," said Artemus.

"No, sir." The boy thought a moment. "What



if it's night?" he said.

"You can signal with your lantern, but never mind that, because you better not be up here at night. Now, pay attention." Artemus showed the boy the hand signals for coupling air hoses, cutting off, backing across, and the signs for numbers one through ten. The boy picked them up easily.

"That's good," said Artemus. "You learn quick."

"One day, I would like to be a railroad man my own self," said the boy.

"I thought you wanted to be a Royal Canadian Mounted Po-lice," said Artemus.

"Shoot," said the boy, "that was only pretend. Don't you think I'd a whole lot rather ride up here like you, with a fine watch, on a fast freight train?"

"You think so?" said Artemus. He wanted to tell the boy about Anna Rose, about the pain of craving her and how he wouldn't see her tonight or tomorrow night, maybe not for a long time, because that's how it was on the railroad, and you had to accept it or get out. However, this was only a boy, and he would not be moved by a sentiment of that kind. Artemus Kane would not have been moved when he was a boy, standing by the high iron, watching the trains go by and dreaming of travel and speed. In that distant time, Artemus believed in a future that owned no room for yearning, and speed was all that mattered.

Far ahead, the engine's whistle blew a series of long and short notes.

"What's that?" asked the boy.

"The engineer is calling in the flags," said Artemus. "It means the local is tucked away in the hole at last, praise God, and we are about to leave." He dug in the pocket of his overalls and produced a rubber ring, its diameter a little larger than a dollar coin. "This is an air hose gasket," he said, laying it in the boy's palm. "You keep it. When you hire out,

show it as a sign. You'll be that much ahead."

The boy looked at the gasket as if it were the Holy Grail. "Mankind!" he said. "Thanks, mister!" he said, and Artemus laughed.

From the rear, Max Triggs the flagman was trotting toward the caboose. The engine gave two quick notes on the whistle.

"That's the highball," said the boy.

"Time to go," said Artemus. He helped the boy make the long step down. "Stay off the bridge, now. Maybe I'll see you again sometime."

"I'll watch for you," said the boy.

In a little while, the Pearl River and Gant's store and the local in the siding were far behind them. Hubert Craft was still up in the cupola, reading, lifting his eyes now and then to watch for trouble along the train. Artemus and Triggs stood on the back of the caboose, holding fast to the handrail. They were making good time now, and the rails slid rapidly beneath them, the caboose wheels clicking on the joints. The air smelled of coal smoke and friction and rain. It was dangerous to linger this way on the narrow platform and the train racing along. It was against all the rules. Sometimes, though, and especially on a summer evening, you just had to do it, just for a little while.

Triggs asked, "Who was that little feller you were talking to?" He was a droll man whom Artemus had never seen disturbed or agitated. Hubert Craft was the same way, and sometimes their calmness drove Artemus crazy. Neither Hubert nor Max Triggs ever raised his voice, and Triggs didn't raise his voice now, so he was all but inaudible over the noise of their passage.

Artemus shouted in return. "Just a boy, though a smart one. He has ambitions to be a railroad man."

"Huh," said Triggs. "He ain't that smart, then."



Mathematics of Ties That Bind

by J. Alan Nelson

A square knot
a bowline, a sheetbend,
a kink
in the Name of All Force of Universe
and That which Transcends
the merciful, the most unreal real
a force of string that moves into fact
from the twisting theory of the wits
the blight of guess into observable detail
the bind of frangible string
a simple line that pulls into dimensional complexity
the immaculate tether of sturdy rope

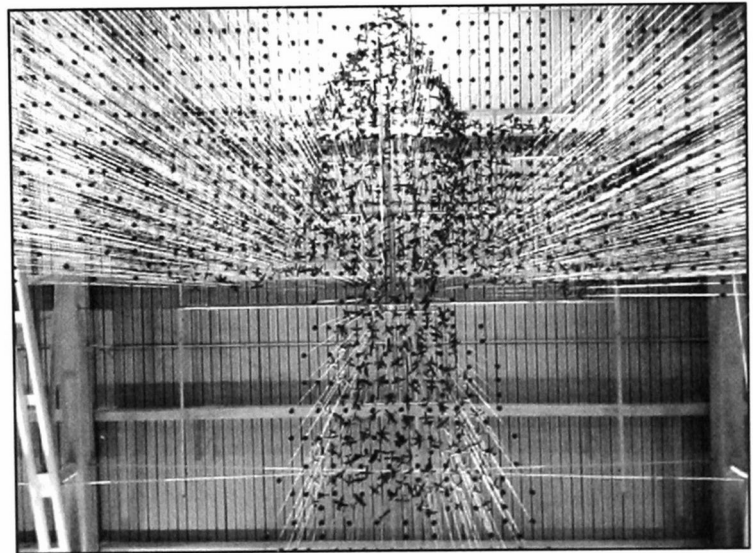


Photo (detail) by James Crittenden



Mildromeda: Pantoum

by Martha Modena Vertreace-Doody

"A naked singularity was suspected at the center of the Milky Way."

Harper's Magazine

Grey shelf mushrooms girdle leafless cottonwoods
like crinolines I layered under my high school skirts
fanning from skinny legs. Bound in its halo,
the harvest moon keeps pre-dawn half lit

like unstarched crinolines under high school skirts
covered in leaves I should have raked ages ago.
The harvest moon keeps pre-dawn half lit.
Blood sport. The same moon — gold over silver —

covers leaves I should have raked ages ago.
The same cloud bank writes the name of tomorrow's storm.
Blood sport. The same moon gilds the lakefront.
Stalled in revolving doors, images in downtown suits.

The same cloud bank writes the name of tomorrow's storm
on paper cups, bagels in plastic bags.
Stalled in revolving doors, images in downtown suits
now lost in your six-letter word for *mass of stars, gas, dust*.

Holding a paper cup, a bagel wrapped in plastic,
you guess *galaxy*, your point taken,
now lost in a six-letter word for *mass of stars, gas, dust*.
My crossword clue: *collision course of spirals*.

Not one galaxy taken. Not the point.
I write *Mildromeda*. The Milky Way and Andromeda.
My crossword clue: *collision course of spirals* —
the two become one.

Mildromeda: the Milky Way and Andromeda —
a blend of fireworks, exploding stars
as two become one face of the sky
when east wind scatters remnants of last night's snow,

blends fireworks, exploding stars
which sear my skinny legs. Bound by no halo,
east wind freezes last night's snow.
Grey shelf mushrooms girdle leafless cottonwoods.



Pawhuska, 1880

by Cheryl Loetscher

Call me by that other name,
the one worn like a cape
before you could read,
when I dressed you
in faith and deerskin leggings
fringed with elk teeth,
when 36 chiefs still knew the signs
for grace and peace.

Call me the name they carved
at the base of an Osage fencerow
the night you were born
in a country where bluestem grasses
and creeping groundcover
buffered the rivers, and the leaven
of solitude was still a proud legacy
in a town where hunger held the door.



Acrophobia

by Robert W. Cosgriff

Not for me places high and sheer
With their beautiful views of sure death.
I would not be a sea-cliff bird
Unconcerned to ledge precariously
High above uncompromising sea
For some fragile egg's sake;
Nor hawk (like Hopkins' windhover)
Drawn to escarpment's vertiginous edge
To channel air beneath wide-stretching wings,
There to hang hunting over the void.
I do not seek the nakedness of ascent
Or any summit's cold exposure —
Both being morally imperative
We are told at every step,
And climax worth the climbing's cost.
The dubious honor of high places
I'll leave to others — and the descent,
Whether misstep-swift or worse,
The slow death of coming back to earth.
Reason enough to wish my head
To be the highest thing around.
Horizon being what I see from where I stand;
And to prefer prairie over precipice,
Wetland over waterfall, riverbank
Over any spindly, dizzying bridge above.



A Total Eclipse

by Teresa Sutton

You are wrong to think it is the full moon that turns men
into werewolves and also wrong to think only men are turned.

In my yard in the shadow of our keep, I stood to watch the moon
in broad day upstage the sun, cover that golden disc

with its own circle of black night. Beside our pond, I spied two
wolves. Next I knew my husband was between me and them.

They pounced. I hollered. Teeth were all over. Blood oozed
in waxing crescents at each wolf bite. I looked to my husband.

Fur surged out of his face. His mouth swelled to a muzzle,
feet to paws. My insides were butter on a hot day right before

it gives up, pools in a plate. Muscles in my arms contorted. My palms
thickened to callous pads, fingers shrunk, sharpened to claws.

The two wolves writhed on the ground, snouts covered in our blood,
their fur fell off in clumps, bodies exploded with human limbs.

They stood, embraced each other, turned tenderly to us, explained
the curse. We stayed on the ground, watched them walk down

our manor road until they were out of sight. Then we looked up,
studied the slow play of the sun and moon until the moon let go.



The Whole Enchilada

by Marilyn Gilbert Komechak

A Texas thunderstorm greeted Daryl when he drove in from his patch in the New Mexico desert. Waiting for the first go-round, the young cowboy spent the night in his truck. The moon's scarred face stared down from the center of a storm ring. Morning found all the trucks and trailers parked in mud.

Daryl sloshed his way across the lot to the arena, stepping over trash and bottles to the cook shack. The smell of burnt coffee mingled in the air with the pungent odor of ozone, as he gulped down chorizo and scrambled eggs.

With plenty of time to kill, he walked over to inspect the horse through the heavy bars of the bucking chute—a big, rangy dun with a black stripe running from mane to tail. Ears flat against his head, the bronc pawed the ground like one of the bulls. The program touted the animal as rough stock's "top of the line." It stated further that the dun color had always been found in herds of wild horses. Daryl whistled. This horse meant money.

"Sumbuck's waitin' on yew. He's on fire 'n' gatherin' his wings." The gateman grinned wide at Daryl. The words scraped like splinters and made his heart thud. It was always like this before a ride. Daryl flexed his shoulders and rubbed his neck, hoping to loosen the kinks from the night in the truck and quiet his gnawing anxiety.

* * *

That evening, behind the chute, he made certain to tug his leather bootstraps tight. Once during a ride, he'd lost a boot and had to limp out of the arena on one sock foot. It made him feel like a little boy, a feeling he didn't care to experience again.

Daryl rummaged in a dusty, black athletic bag that bore his initials, D.C., in silver duct tape. He wound the glove strap tight around his wrist before pounding the palm with rosin. Though illegal, he grabbed a can of hair spray and squirted it onto the white powder in his palm before tossing the can

back in the bag. He was as ready as he was ever going to be.

During the last rodeo, he'd had some fair rides but nothing spectacular. Those events followed a long drought of no earnings. Right now he needed money, bad. Twisting around, he spied the two judges for the bareback bronc event standing outside of harm's way on the arena floor.

To impress them, and cash in, he'd have to make points. Rake hard with a fluid "lick" to his spurring. He mentally rehearsed starting each rake at the top of the horse's shoulders, then drawing his feet upward with every jump. He'd have to find the rhythm, because metal and concrete surrounded him, and there was only one soft place to fall, the muddy arena.

The announcer bawled his spiel into a mike mixed with static. The jaded audience was rowdy, impatient for action. But Daryl knew that even if he parked on the back of the bronc for eight seconds, there'd be little applause. A tough crowd, hard as the dun he'd drawn, ol' Sweetheart of the Rodeo, number A24 in the program.

A small brass band struck up "The Yellow Rose of Texas." The familiar tune competed with a cranky sound system and the voice of an old man hawking cotton candy. Meanwhile, Daryl watched as sparrow hawks struck with radarlike accuracy under the leaky canvas top of the arena, leaving only puffs of downy feathers to sift through the hot, humid air.

The puller climbed to sit atop the chute rails, then nodded in Daryl's direction. Daryl knew he could count on the old coot to yank the flank strap tight as the chute opened. The gateman smirked, looked at the puller, and stuck a thumb at Daryl. "He won't be the first cowboy to get schooled on ol' Sweetheart."

Daryl, now annoyed, snapped, "Well, I don't plan on doin' any whisperin' to him either."





Photo (detail) by Lisa Chain

The gateman haw-hawed a laugh.

Burly men strapped the rigging with its suitcase-like handle to the wide belly cinch with leather latigos. Daryl watched to be sure the rigging was secure. The bronc snorted, eyes wild and rolling. Lots of white. Daryl's sweat, like channels of liquid fear, trailed down his back between his shoulder blades.

The announcer tried to jolly up the crowd. "Let's give thanks to God, who sent us this refreshin' rain in this dry country. He gave us breath and life and the Ahmerkin way, rodeo. So, give a big welcome to Daryl Casey from Tucumcari, New Mexico. Word's out in the bronc circuit this cowboy's been runnin' with the big dogs—but will his luck hold?"

"Can he do it today on ol' Sweetheart—a bronc buster's worst nightmare? There's money to be had if he can. Is our cowboy ready?"

Daryl screwed his hat down and set his butt gentlelike on Sweetheart, like a hen squatting on a nest of eggs. He inched up to the rigging, grabbed

the handle, and put either foot out on a chute rail. A nod to the gateman. "Let 'er rip."

Like a wild bird poised in flight, the bronc was airborne. Time stood still as Daryl floated off from himself to watch the ride from above. He clung to the bronc, throwing his feet wide on the down spur. It felt to be a good ride, but he was at the mercy of Sweetheart's choreography. The dun twisted, spun, crowhopped, and sunfished, giving him the works. The whole enchilada. The crowd exploded.

* * *

The next morning the sun lasered through the windshield, making spots dance behind his eyes. Squinting them open, he struggled to pull himself upright. He hurt all over. The old injuries, the broke parts, warmed up slowest. The dun had cut him no slack, but he'd stayed eight. Wincing with effort, Daryl fished out his wallet and fingered the winnings. Enough to get him to Fort Worth for the next go-round and a steak for breakfast.



My Son

by Laura Johnson

My son has light brown eyes any artist would envy.
Six feet six inches of muscle, gold like honey.
Young girls stop and stare. He walks with his head down.

On the outside all is well, on the inside living hell

My greatest love fears hugs—they hurt. Human touch to
him brings pain. I have asked him how; he can't explain.
I miss his long warm hugs, but not enough to cause him pain.

On the outside all is well, on the inside living hell

Thoughts are enigmas inside tossed like word salad,
always aware those men in white coats are coming to take him away.
Since the illness took his mind, there are voices only he can hear
and people only he can see.

On the outside all is well, on the inside living hell

His days and nights have no end. Money has no meaning; he
doesn't know that it takes 100 dollar bills to make 100 dollars.
In the backyard he buried all my good jewelry—no more jewelry,
just a pirate sailing his own ship.

On the outside all is well, on the inside living hell

I am not afraid of my son. Sometimes he's like a soldier without
a battle, without a war. Anger overwhelms him; furniture, mirrors,
TVs, cars, all can become his jigsaw puzzle.

On the outside all is well, on the inside living hell.



Happy-Go-Lucky

by Diane Shipley DeCillis

You know that dream where you sit in your car and the seat automatically moves forward to the perfect position, then the car starts itself, takes you places you've never been while it talks to you about your worries with that calm yet commanding OnStar voice? You confide that people don't love you as much as you'd like them to, and if they did, you wouldn't, couldn't possibly love them back that much anyway. Which reminds you of a movie line: "Love itself is what's left over after being in love is burned away." Then the voice says, *Love can be a confusing state of mind.* And the car pulls up a map on the GPS screen, where the country, your country, is full of states, not Utah, or Michigan, but a New-York-state-of-mind which you've acquired, even though you're from Detroit. Because you identify with people who wear a lot of black and who enjoy the frenetic, somewhat impersonal subway, graffiti, melting-pot sensibility along with the ethnic foods that go with it. And you think maybe, just maybe, the car will stop at a good Provençal restaurant or someplace where they serve bone marrow, now that you're no longer embarrassed to say you like it. Especially since Anthony Bourdain posed naked holding a huge soup bone over his "meatballs," saying he loves the high cholesterol stuff. *But,* the voice cautions, *he also smokes and eats things that could change your nature.* Change your nature? What does that mean? Never mind, I don't want to go there right now, though I sense the need for turn-by-turn navigation when the melodic OnStar voice says, *Love isn't really all that complicated it's the fear of love that snookers us.* Reminds me of the time it took me days to untangle an impossible wad of necklaces, knotted chains of my own doing. That's when Happy-Go-Lucky pops up on the GPS screen, another state of mind, a destination or detour, but also a strange combination of words. Who strung that syntax together? *Sometimes we need to pack light. You've done it from time to time,* says the smooth, sultry OnStar voice. "Moi?" I say with doubtful curiosity. But then I think about how Happy-Go-Lucky reminds me of a fortune cookie I once got that said, "You are about to eat a fortune cookie," and how, yes, at that moment, it *was* all I needed to know.



Departing Moments

by Judith Pokras

I know exactly the day we met. It was Monday, May 5, 1970, the day following the murder by the National Guard of four Kent State students, part of a crowd protesting the Vietnam War and the invasion of Cambodia by Richard Nixon. A colleague invited me to attend a meeting of a small group of political activists. “Just some people getting together to plan ways of getting involved,” she said. The timing was right. I took her up on her offer.

The group of about ten was passionate in expressions of outrage over this most recent incident of violence in a violent age. These were people who were more in touch and knowledgeable than I about so much of what had been going on during the sixties that was now extending into the seventies. I was interested. There was an intensity in the air that I felt an affinity for.

Additionally, it was clear, at least to me, almost from the moment I arrived, that he was the most attractive man in the room. Tall, about six feet, with a casually trimmed beard and deceptively gentle eyes, he knew he was being watched, while he enjoyed his role as one of the hosts of the evening. Plans were being made to charter a bus for a trip to Washington and the major protest taking place the following week. Although I passed on that first trip, we began dating soon after, and that was when I fell into a bustling, somewhat chaotic, totally idealistic world—new, exciting, intellectually seductive.

He took an apartment in the East Village, the most radical of neighborhoods in those days. Ginsberg strolling down East Third, hanging out at Katz’s deli, chestnuts roasting in the fall, and green Army jackets for us as we walked the streets. He introduced me to jazz, his first love, and with friends, unable to afford the price of admission, we would sit on the steps of one of the most famous clubs, listening to Mingus, Sonny Rollins, and the recently deceased Coltrane. We spent pretty much all of our spare time together. We traveled by bus

to Newport, Rhode Island, then hitched rides to the jazz festival. He practiced his tenor sax in my small apartment, not so pleasing to the once-friendly neighbors. I learned to cook chili, cornbread, and ribs for our frequent guests. I enjoyed having a circle of friends—even if they were all his—coming together for food, drink, music, and stimulating conversation. It was all new for me. We read Hesse and Kerouac, and we earnestly examined the ideas of the Buddhists and the Tao.

Shortly after we began our relationship, he was fired from his mainstream advertising job for trying to radicalize the office. This made me the main breadwinner and gave him more spare time. I began to become sleep-deprived, which led to a general state of hysteria. He wanted me with him all the time, except when he didn’t. After about six months, as his rent became more difficult to maintain, he announced it was time for us to live together.

I was ambivalent. For one thing, there was no space in my tiny studio apartment, and for another, I was worried about my independence, which, on some level, I knew I had already lost. At the same time, I was still very much intrigued by my introduction to and involvement with this lifestyle that he was introducing me to. I wasn’t ready to let go, and so I continued to let him take the lead. I abdicated power over my life under the mistaken impression that I had ever really had it. My friends, not cool enough, faded into the background. I no longer had time for dinners and long telephone conversations with them. And then, too, ideas we had once shared were no longer quite so compatible. We were all in the process of defining the paths we would take as we attempted to move more definitively into the adulthood of our lives.

There was more to know about his world. We talked all the time. He wanted to change a lot about me. “You need to become sexier in your dress,” he



would say, oblivious to the magnitude of change he was asking me to make. "I know you have it in you." He thought it a compliment. Sexual freedom and experimentation would become an issue of contention later in the relationship, as the demands he later attempted to introduce were really out of the question for me; but in the beginning the focus was on clothing and appearance. He would take me shopping and insist that I buy low-cut, sheer blouses that made me uncomfortable and self-conscious. We had engrossing conversations, though, about life and its meaning, about goals and ideas we were exploring. We could spend an entire day talking, discussing the world, where we were in it. He informed me that service, as in my teaching, was the second highest calling, but art, as in his playing music, was clearly the first. He was the guru, and I was the student of his world view. He needed a lot of care and attention.

I remember the first time I heard Jane Fonda speak. "What do you mean you never listen to WBAI? BAI is the place," he mumbled, turning the stereo to the point on the dial, while I retained my focus in the kitchen. After dinner, relaxing on the sofa together, the clear, self-assured, deeply melodious voice of Hanoi Jane drifted into the quiet room. Back from her most recent trip to Vietnam, she was recounting her experience of broadcasting, from a helicopter loudspeaker, her message to the troops about the evils of a hopeless war and evil-doers, Nixon identified, who continued to instigate and occupy, bringing devastation and death to a country they did not understand.

I was in awe of her self-appointed role as anti-war spokesperson. Where did she get such a strong voice? From what place inside her had she found this kind of courage? By this time I was going with him to Washington demonstrations. Listening to the Vietnam vets earnestly protesting the war after having seen it firsthand, I was impressed and moved. Here was a passionate, idealistic, romantic world in which so many were living, yet it was a world I had somehow missed. I maintained my usual

stance of observer rather than fervent participant, but I was very much engaged by everything this relationship was teaching me.

The times themselves continued to be violent. There were riots at Attica, the Weathermen, an accidental bombing in Greenwich Village, and Patty Hearst, all following assassinations and one protest after another, in spite of earnest efforts to reach compatible understandings. Visits to his Long Island Italian parents involved heated and exhausting discussions illustrative of the generation gap. At some point in the mid-seventies — although I can't pinpoint the exact moment — the focus changed for us, as it did for many others, from one of protest and fighting back to an effort at finding an alternative lifestyle that would allow for some peace in a chaotic world. Maybe people just got tired; maybe they became resigned to the injustices.

He decided we would take a trip across the country and made plans for an "On the Road" cross-country trip with his best friend, who had just acquired a puppy named Monk. By this time I was teaching in a storefront literacy program in the ghetto, and it was fairly easy to get time off.

The work, intense and absorbing as it was, involved more volunteering than actual paid employment. All of us at the school contributed to helping support it, as well as ourselves, and supplemented surviving with outside work. For me, it was waitressing (I did not excel in this profession); others at the school painted apartments in their "spare time."

We set out in mid-May in an old Ford; the two of us, his best friend, and Monk. The plan was to follow Route 80 right through Middle America. It was the route taken by Jack Kerouac in his famous journey. I remember Kansas and the heat. We slept in the car or in sleeping bags on the ground when we could; we stayed, now and then, with people we met on the road; we stopped for short visits with old friends who had moved to various parts of the country. One of the most memorable for me was a stay in New Mexico, where we witnessed Native



American festivals and colors in nature so dramatic that one understood completely the enchantment of Georgia O'Keefe. It was during our few days in New Mexico, in the small desert cottage where our friend lived, that we watched the resignation of Richard Nixon on TV.

Often there was not enough money for real food, and we would buy a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter to share. If, after a few days of this, we decided we could afford a *real* breakfast of eggs and bacon, I found that the sudden introduction of nourishment made me dizzy. I had also developed a most excruciating toothache, the pain of which I still remember. There was, of course, no money for a dentist, so I suffered along with this the best I could. I continued trying to get used to not being taken care of, as well as not having enough autonomy to take care of myself. It was a difficult adjustment.

When we hit Los Angeles, after San Francisco, we were supposed to begin the journey home. It was the end of August, and we were expected back. But the two friends decided we needed to see the Northwest, and so we headed for Oregon and Wyoming. Although I didn't think I would make it through the extension of this journey, it turned out to be the best part for me. Wyoming is cold in early September; at least it was that year. We stopped in magnificent Grand Teton National Park and then headed for Yellowstone. It was midnight when we drove into the quiet of the park, looking for a place to camp. There, suddenly, frozen in our headlights, stood a huge elk with massive antlers, majestic—breathtaking! Yellowstone did not disappoint. It was stunning. Finally, we headed home, taking shifts to keep each other awake so we could make the best time possible. Families at home were getting angry. That was, after they stopped worrying.

The following year he was still unemployed. I worked and exhaustedly met all of the financial and household responsibilities, while he stood on the corner, contemplating his destiny. Clearly, New

York City was no longer working for us. The three of us, now four—our friend had a new lady in his life—rented a house on a small mountain about a hundred miles north of the city. We climbed the mountain almost every day, hiked in the woods, baked bread—not very well—and we females scrubbed floors. Back to waitressing, I would stand on the highway to flag down the large bus coming up from the city and get a ride to the diner where I worked or to the laundromat, in the desolate, depressed town nearest us. Everyone worked but him. His friend drove a school bus, and we two women worked at the diner. He never would discuss the fact that he was not working or, from my point of view, carrying his share. He was stoic in this, and it enraged me. Not only was I angry, but I could not find any satisfactory way to justify his behavior to myself. This life was too hard for me. I was in over my head, and I could see no way out.

At the end of our year on the mountain, we did not renew the lease. We returned to New York. With no place to live, we slept on the floor of a friend. We babysat for her, while she went to work the night shift. Then we went to work. This allowed us to save most of our earnings. We were heading for a new beginning as we attempted to reintegrate, just enough, into the mainstream of society to allow for more effective survival. I went back to teaching; he got a job selling sheet music and then managing a music store that, as its elderly owner planned his retirement, was on its last legs. Intensely determined to succeed, he would call on me late at night to help create window displays, something I knew nothing about. This again made it difficult for me to maintain my alertness during my own work the following day.

When we had saved enough to start our next home, we began our search. This apartment would be one we would choose together. It would go beyond our usual, less-than-favorable, less-than-stable circumstances. An apartment search in New York City has a deserved reputation as a nightmare experience. We decided to take the offensive in



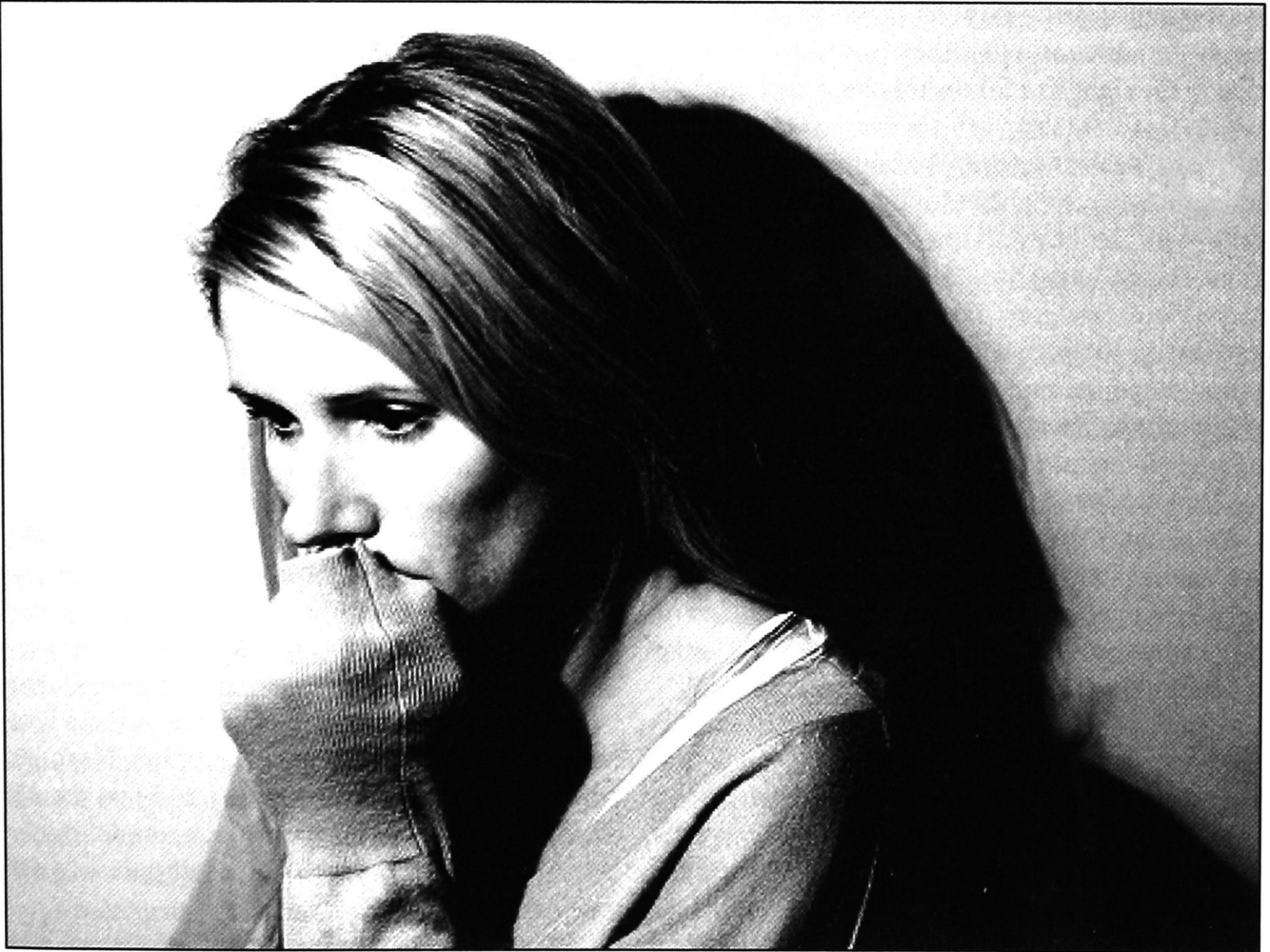


Photo (detail) by James Crittenden

hopes of alleviating some of the frustration. We were determined to find a “deal.”

We chose our street—crosstown Upper West Side, prime real estate with solidly built high rises erected before WWII, known by the natives as those prewar buildings. This was a neighborhood with a cultural ambiance acceptable to those of us who, in those days, considered ourselves alternative types. Apartments had beautiful moldings with thick, sturdy walls that guaranteed privacy. Many of them were still under rent-control or rent-stabilization laws that required below-market rents that might even be affordable. Such luxury was very difficult to find, and even if one got lucky, it took some doing, generally in the form of money under the table. The one with the power was the

super. He was the one who knew when the next vacancy would occur.

We would “work the street,” he said, and that is exactly what we did. We walked boldly into lobbies of exclusive buildings, day after day, to inquire about vacancies. Unfazed by a negative response from the doorman, we would ask to see the super. On the third day of our mission, we found *our* super. He showed us an apartment on the third floor that he explained was exactly like one on the twelfth that would become vacant in a few weeks. We would have to sign, sight unseen and after a tacitly-agreed-to understanding that *this favor* would be worth about \$200, and we excitedly signed. We were back and ready for a new and productive beginning, or so we thought.

Moving in with only the barest necessities, a friend found us an old fifties Formica table just exactly the right size for the tiny breakfast nook. A window in the kitchen, as well, denoted total luxury as far as I was concerned. We bought a cheap dining room table and chairs for the living room, and that—with our bed and dresser, a few lamps and some dishes—constituted our basic belongings. There were, however, the *precious* possessions—my library, his stereo and music collection. The night we moved in, he focused on setting up his music center, leaving me to take care of the rest of the unpacking. My books stayed in their boxes.

Now that we had the apartment, he no longer cared about the money for the super, which I felt was not only an obligation for a rare favor, but also insurance against future services we would most certainly need. Eventually, I paid the money to the super quietly out of my salary.

This was a practice I would become more adept at as we continued in our new lifestyle. There was clearly no money for shelving or bookcases, he said. We fought often about money. I think he became so frugal in part as a result of his upbringing but also in response to a lack of confidence that income would continue. He was right about this.

A few months into our new life, he lost his job. The music store folded. Here I was again in charge of the finances but not much else, outside of the housekeeping, shopping, and cooking, that is. Somehow I ended up, once more, scrubbing floors at 3:00 a.m.

It didn't take him too long this time to find a new position. He got a job selling advertising for one of the local neighborhood newspapers, the kind that were distributed free to apartment lobbies. Again, he approached it with an intensity that was exhausting for both of us. He seemed to think that I could advise him on how to succeed. "Woman behind the man," he said. But I didn't have a clue. I was busy with my own work, as well as my many household responsibilities, none of which he shared. His involvements always engulfed

him so completely that he was, in fact, unable to participate as an equal partner in our life together, even if he had cared to. In the meantime, my books remained in boxes, causing me daily upset. I had never been without my books. The living room remained empty.

After a while the idea began to enter my mind that the boxes weren't so bad—easier to move, I thought.

By our second year in the apartment, living room still empty, I was again exhausted. We had now been together close to 12 years. A strange sensation began to come over me: I was starting to feel as if I did not exist. The ground was no longer firm beneath my feet. I was lost somewhere in the middle of this relationship. We were both totally involved in living his life.

Where was mine? The sensation grew stronger. The more exhausted I became, the more I felt that I was living in some parallel universe. Where was reality? We pretty much stopped talking. No more hours of conferencing about his job. I just wasn't there anymore. My biological clock was definitely ticking, but this did not seem a likely place to attend to it.

One night, while cooking dinner, I had just finished putting the chicken in the oven when, out of the kitchen window, I saw a large, black dog lying on the ground in the lot across the street. From where I was on the twelfth floor, I couldn't tell much about its condition. After watching for a while and not seeing it move, I decided to head down.

Filling a large plastic container with ice cubes and cold water, I grabbed a sweater, turned the oven on low, and left the apartment. The lot had a fence around most of it, with a small opening near the far end. As I moved toward the dog, I could hear her whimpering softly. She was a Great Dane. Her stomach was severely distended, as if she had just given birth. I felt a wave of intense anger sweep over me. My face became flushed, and spots danced before my eyes. As I moved closer I began a soft



clicking sound and murmured softly; I called to her quietly.

“What a beautiful baby you are. Are you having a bad time of things? Would you like some cold water? Can I help?” I whispered.

The dog quieted for a moment; her ears perked up, listening to my soft voice. Lying still, she watched me somberly. Then, with a sigh, she raised her head and, pulling herself along the rough concrete, moved slowly a few feet toward the container of water.

I sat down, waiting while she took a long, noisy drink. Then, standing on wobbly legs, she began to move closer to me, somewhat calm, definitely less frightened as I extended my hand. I stayed still as she sniffed around and then sat down next to me, watching intently. The dog did not have a collar on, yet she did not look as if she had been in the street for very long. Although she was clearly weak, she was not dirty or smelly, and there was no mange. This seemed to be an animal only recently put out. We sat quietly for a while. There was no need for words. We both knew what we needed to know. We knew that we were friends.

Looking up, I saw him coming down the street. His head, as usual, bent over, concentrating. His long, lumbering strides moved his body forward as he mused. Attempting a quiet wave so as not to frighten the dog, I held my arm high and, rotating my hand from the wrist, was able to catch his attention. Seeing me, he turned and began to move in our direction. I could see resistance enter his face as his eyes took in the figure of the dog next to me.

“I’ve had a hard day, so don’t start with me.”

“What happened?” I asked, ignoring his instruction.

“The theater people canceled the account.”

“I’m sorry; I know you were worried about that.”

“Yeah, well, they weren’t happy at the office about it. That’s a big commission lost, you know.”

“We’ll manage,” I said. “We always do.”

“So what’s going on here?” He looked me squarely in the eye, gesturing toward the dog, who was watching us quietly.

“She’s been put out,” I said. “It looks like she just gave birth. See her stomach?”

“We can’t take her.” He said it sharply, defensively. “You know, she’s too big.”

“Well, I’m not leaving her here to starve,” I said.

“You’ll have to, because she’s not coming into the house. You don’t know where she’s been. I *really* don’t have time for this now.” His voice was rising.

“Well then, let me take her to a vet,” I pleaded. “Let them find her a home.” I was looking for a compromise I could live with.

“Right, a vet; do you think we have money for a vet? We’re hardly paying the rent.”

I was quiet, diplomatically not reminding him that it was my salary that was paying the rent.

“Take her to the ASPCA,” he said, making one last feeble effort to acknowledge my need.

“Absolutely not. You know they will only put her to sleep.”

“Well, you have to leave her here for now,” he said, ending the discussion. “Let’s go up. I’m hungry, and I have calls to make.”

“You go up. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Well, don’t take too long.” His voice was lower as he returned again to his own consuming strains.

Watching him walk slowly away, head down as before, I moved close to the dog and, stroking her head gently, tried to explain.

“I have to figure out what to do about you. Lady,” naming the dog without realizing it. “I’m going to get you some food, and tomorrow you and I are going to a really good vet. Will you be all right till then? What do you think? Can you hold on for one more night?”

Looking into Lady’s sad eyes, I wasn’t sure. “I think some nice warm dinner is going to help you feel much better. I’m going to get you some food



and fix a place for you to rest tonight. You stay now; I'll be back soon." Looking back at her as I left, I could see her watching me move away, sitting still, ears perked up straight, turning her head to my voice as it faded, with a questioning look.

Upstairs, I put his meal on the table and set the pot to boiling up a mixture of brown rice and barley in a little soup stock for some flavor. When it was done, I pulled an old blanket out of the closet. He watched me from the table, going about my business with grim determination. For once, a glare in his direction seemed enough for him to know that this time he had better let me be.

Downstairs again, I opened the large, plastic, covered bowl and set it down in front of Lady, who sniffed and poked once or twice at it with not much interest. The blanket was more welcome. When I laid it out in a double layer up against one corner of the lot fence, the dog moved quickly to the middle of it and settled in. With the dish of gruel close by and a ticking clock for comfort, it was becoming time to go. It was getting dark quickly now, but I needed a few more minutes with Lady before I could bring myself to leave.

"I will watch over you from the window tonight," I murmured, "and tomorrow we will get you to the vet." I cradled the dog's large head in both hands as she nuzzled into my palms. With tears welling, I pulled myself away, wondering at the same moment how I could allow myself to leave, against every fiber of instinct inside me, and yet I did.

I prepared for a night vigil, lighting a large,

thick candle and placing it in the window, hoping it might give off some warmth of spirit that would be felt way down in the dark, cold lot. I sat down in a chair nearby and tried to read, but couldn't.

The night wore on. Around 11, after he had fallen into his usual deep sleep, I changed into a warm cotton robe and, pulling the chair up next to the window, wrapped my woolen shawl around me and concentrated on Lady. *I bet her puppies are beautiful*, I thought. I was remembering all the sadness I had known in animals. I had always somehow identified with that sadness as an embodiment of the essence of life. An animal's pain was, to me, expressive of a depth of pain not often acknowledged by the human species.

When an animal is hurt, I was thinking, *it is clearly the most base or weakest part of a person that gives permission to neglect it. And a woman, my inner voice continued, would have to be lost in a sea of helplessness to permit such a crisis of conscience to occur and not rise up in fury against it.*

About 4:00 a.m. he awoke and, missing me from our bed, came groggily into the room.

"You really are being ridiculous about this," he said angrily. "You can't save all the animals of the world; haven't you figured that out yet? Now, come to bed. That dog is fine, for God's sake."

There were no longer any words left. I was mute.

"Alright," he said. "Tomorrow take the damn dog to a vet." He turned back disgustedly toward the bedroom. "Now, let's get some sleep. Jesus, I



wish you'd spend half this amount of time worrying about me."

I was focused on the candle, which created a line of demarcation between the darkness outside and the black emptiness within. There was no real place of safety or strength left inside me.

Somewhere in that dark and desolate night, I must have slept, because when the light of day finally arrived, I didn't notice. When I did open my eyes, it was after nine. He had left for work without disturbing me, and I was late. The lateness of the hour didn't matter. In fact, nothing mattered anymore.

I called the office to say I was sick and wouldn't be in. Then, pulling on jeans and a sweatshirt, I moved quickly down toward the lot. I could see Lady lying on the blanket. The dog didn't lift her head or acknowledge my approach. Sitting down next to the silent animal, I lifted her head into my lap and sat for a while. It was too late.

They sent a truck from the ASPCA and took her away. I didn't watch. I was packing a few suitcases with some clothes.

Then I left.

Although we talked a few times afterward, we both knew that this leaving, unlike earlier ones, was nonnegotiable.

* * * *

Looking back on those years now that they are distant memory, I wonder at times if what we had was love. I am certain there was love in it, but I think that, coming as we both did out of early

dysfunctional experiences, neither one of us knew how to love in genuine or healthy ways. I do know for sure that he had opened up the world for me, introduced me to understandings and a world view that I might never have known had it not been for my experiences with him. I am glad for that; my life is richer because of it. But he invaded my life in ways that were unacceptable, unforgivable. My family had appropriated the first 20 years of my life, and he took a significant portion of the second 20. But the fact is, I allowed it. It was my pattern, what I knew, and somehow on that deeper level of consciousness, where so many relationships are formed, we had to have both subliminally recognized the ways in which we reinforced and enabled each other. My story is about the ending of a relationship, but endings imply beginnings, and they, too, need to be acknowledged and remembered.

These days I ferociously guard my privacy, my autonomy. There are people in my life whom I love. I love members of my family and some of my friends with whom I only recently reconnected. I love some of my students. But no one is allowed in past a certain point. My phone is generally turned off. People think I screen my calls. That is not the case. I refuse to hear my calls until I decide that I have the time to acknowledge them. Today I set the boundaries of my life. I believe that the nobility and dignity with which that beautiful animal faced her death inspired in me the power, the courage, to face my life.



November Windfall

by Sheryl L. Nelms

the Jonathans wait

sprinkled through dry fescue
like so many jewels

nestled in velvet

they stay
where they landed
after a cold rain
washed them
down

squatting
full of the sweet
mush of ripeness

sucking in
yellow-jackets

who glut
to inebriation

then
fly



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall



Abyss

by J. Alan Nelson

His wife gripes he downloaded a ringtone
and she hasn't.

She gripes as his business partner prattles on the phone
about his mother-in-law, who does Pilates, looks great,
that he needs to get a look at her.

He reads about his wife's ex-boyfriend,
head of a 12-billion dollar energy company
a man who she implies she slept with thirty years ago,
then denies,

but her sister says, yes, she did.

He wishes that she married the energy executive,

so she'd be happy

buy all the ringtones she wants,

and he'd be a vague memory

of some guy that she knew thirty years ago,

that she'd have look up his name in a dusty annual

stored in her vast attic

to even remember his face.

Well, cry me a river, she says.

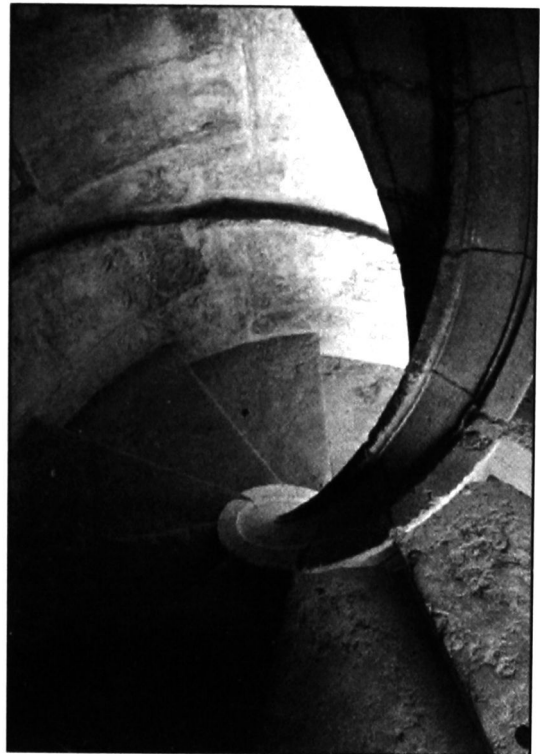


Photo (detail) by Jenny Mingus



On Dating

by Kaci Carpenter

I've noticed that the world around me is obsessed with the idea of "relationships." Everywhere I look, people either want to be in a relationship, are in a relationship, or they are crying to me about how much being in a relationship hurts. The idea of someone finding the "missing half" of his or her soul in another person's body has mystified countless people, intriguing them to the point that they feel the need to read or write about it in every single magazine ever published:

"Need a Date? How to Snag Your Man."

"10 Ways to Make Him Fall for You and Only You."

"Does Your Butt Look Good in Those Jeans? Who Cares? You Need a Date!"

I was one of those girls. I read every issue of *Seventeen* magazine and cut out every quiz with titles ranging from "Does He Really Like You?" to "Just Friends, or Just Soul Mates?" Unlike many of the girls I grew up with, boys didn't seem to flock to me in their search for love. Instead, I was their best friend, the girl who everyone hung out with but no one wanted to date. Unlike the stereotypes of the so-called "guys' girl" shown on television and in movies, I never had one of my closest guy friends realize that I was The One after being caught in a rain downpour. Instead, they'd just look at me and laugh because my mascara was running.

As a pre-teen, this distressed me. I wasn't particularly hideous. I could hold a decent conversation. I stayed away from the party lifestyle and went to church every Sunday like a good girl. According to my *Teen* magazine, I was any boy's ideal catch.

Flirting, I now know, is a fine-tuned art. Like most art, practice is necessary to achieve excellence, and my practice log was quite empty. I wasn't worried, however. After all, plenty of the "shy girls" I'd seen on television and movies had boyfriends who were intrigued by their shy nature.

Certainly if Rachel Leigh Cook could do it, then I would have no problem. So, I waited.

I couldn't believe the boys just weren't falling all over me. Just like I'd learned from Julia Stiles, I stayed in the corner and read books. When an attractive boy walked past, I would sneak a brief glance at him. If we happened to make eye contact, I'd fling my hair around my shoulders and go back to my book; however to my surprise, the boy in question did not immediately ask me out! It had worked in *She's All That*, just not for me. Apparently, a hunched-over blonde with a bad neck problem did not a girlfriend make. Or even a date make. Hell, even a second glance make.

After reaching the old-maid age of eleven and still having no boyfriend, I decided that it wasn't me, it was them. Stupid boys. I'd only started thinking they didn't have cooties a year earlier, so why not put off my dating debut for a little longer? Mary Anne Spier of *Baby-Sitters Club* fame was thirteen before she met Logan Bruno, so I had plenty of time to be a feminist, kick-ass girl who didn't have to flirt because she didn't want a boyfriend, thank you very much. That's when I met Taylor.

Taylor was the token New Kid. Brand-new to small-town school, he intrigued everyone for about ten minutes before the cheerleaders decided his geek-glasses vibe wasn't for them and went to watch the other boys play kickball instead. I was still in my kick-ass feminist phase, so I didn't care. This boy could have just as many cooties as the others. When my fifth grade social studies teacher assigned us to work together on a timeline for the class, I didn't care about this future dating prospect. To me, this assignment meant less time spent staring at the ceiling while my teacher tried to teach the cheerleaders the words to the Preamble for the tenth time.

Every other day after recess, Taylor and I would go to the empty classroom across the hall and work



on a twelve-foot timeline for the upcoming history chapter. We'd begin on opposite ends and work our way towards the middle, careful to write dates in pencil first, only then in pen to prevent mistakes that would cause an entire redo. That was Taylor's idea.

Occasionally, we'd talk. Nothing much at first, just two kids commiserating over how boring we found class, and weren't we glad to get out and do this instead? Then one day, when he was on 1774 and I on 1776, he teased me about almost falling asleep in class that morning. I shot back that I'd seen him do the same thing last Monday (except there had been no *almost* involved), and we both smiled at this little exchange before going back to work. Unbeknownst to me, this was the equivalent of fifth-grade flirting.

Outside of the security of the empty classroom, my friends teased me.

"You guys should *totally* go out," they gushed. I rolled my eyes. If I'd learned anything from my past encounters with boys, it was that they didn't like me like that. I clearly didn't have the *je ne sais quoi* of a Rachel Leigh Cook or a Julia Stiles, and I had accepted the fact and moved on. Besides, "I totally don't like him that way, you guys."

One Monday morning before school started, Taylor came up to me in the auditorium. I was sitting next to my friends in the auditorium, reading *Gone with the Wind* for the second time while waiting for the bell to ring and signal the beginning of the day. He looked nervous (as nervous as an eleven-year-old boy could look at 7:30 in the morning) and asked if we could talk. My friends, who had been talking loudly next to me, immediately stopped and stared. I shrugged and said sure, putting a bookmark in my novel.

"I mean, talk in the hall or something," Taylor said. Confused, I got up and followed him out to the hall, ignoring my friends' giggles and the smirks of Taylor's friends. And it was there, in the safe view of the hall monitor that Taylor Cooper asked me out.



Photo (detail) by Heather Harmon

My little heart beat fast. I really wasn't into Taylor that way, but...he was a guy. Asking *me* out. All girls had to start somewhere, I figured. So, a few seconds after he asked me, I blurted out, "Yeah!"

So, we were dating.

Fifth-grade romance has a few rules, I found out. First of all, the boy sits next to the girl until the bell rings for class, despite the fact that the girl wants him to leave so she can talk about him with her girlfriends. Secondly, the boy's friends wolf-whistle as the two of you walk by in the hall, even though you're not talking, not holding hands, and generally not doing anything that could garner a whistle of any kind. Third, when lunch time rolls around, the boy not only sits next to you at your girl-dominated lunch table, but he carries your books to the table while you get in the lunch line. The third rule led to the demise of Taylor and



me.

In the lunch line, I was every girl's new best friend. They all wanted to know how long Taylor and I had been talking (we'd always been talking), when we were going to go out (after recess, when everyone else was in history), and what we were going to do on our first date (talk about how much we liked doing the timeline). I was pretty happy, as eleven-year-old girls go. Then, it happened.

Across the cafeteria, another line of students were getting their food. In the line was Allyson, a larger girl who was one of Taylor's only girl friends. We'd always gotten along in the little time we'd spent together, so when we made eye contact, I smiled. To my surprise, not only did she not smile back at me, but mouthed back the word "bitch" before taking her tray to the table where Taylor usually sat.

I was dumbstruck. Me? Little Kaci, Queen of Inept Flirting, was now a *bitch*? What had happened to me? I carried my tray to the lunch table and sat down, thoughts swimming. What in me had warranted a change from Everyone's Best Friend Kaci to *Bitch* Kaci? My friend Rachel, who'd been in line behind me, told me Allyson was just jealous because she had a crush on Taylor. Great; now I was Vixen Skank Friendship-Wrecker Kaci. I didn't say much during lunch; Taylor gave me part of his brownie and I didn't even bother to pick off the nuts before eating it. I didn't know how to deal

with it all; my emotions were a wreck. So, I did the only thing I thought I could possibly do and still be true to who I was.

Immediately after lunch, recess followed. I walked over to the swings, my usual hangout, and Taylor followed obediently. Before the rest of my friends could catch up to us, I turned around to face him: my first boyfriend.

"Listen, Taylor...you're a great guy and all, but..."

Seventeen magazine and the movies were wrong. Boys are for vixens and bitches. And I—thank you very much—am neither of those. So now, nine years later, I remain single and still flirt like someone with a personality disorder, but I'm okay with that. I had my chance with Taylor the New Kid, and it was fun while it lasted.

I'm still every guy's best friend. I still read *Cosmo* and *Seventeen*, although I no longer cut out the quizzes and check to see if every guy is into me like that. This mysterious "dating" might work out some day, when I'm fully over my fifth-grade breakup. I remain optimistic that my next relationship might be a bit more fruitful and perhaps even a bit longer than my first and only six-hour courtship.

After all, there will be no recess to come between us now.



Attachments

by Marsha Koretzky

They stood on a cherry-wood mount under a naked lightbulb. Bossie and Bessie, the star attraction of Gus's Cider Mill Museum.

This was my first time. My mother was afraid of Gus and made me swear never to go to his crazy museum. But she was playing mah-jongg when Stewie Fleishman dared me to sneak over there with him at the exact same moment he'd been magically transformed from the bothersome boy next door into something completely different. Before, whenever I'd taken Stewie up on one of his dares—to eat carpenter ants or mud soup or dog food or to stick two peanuts and a raisin up my nose—it had been to show him up. But this time, I watched Stewie push up onto his toes and wipe his hands on his shorts, and Gus's seemed like the only place I'd ever want to be.

I'd prepared well for the trek, brushing my hair with baby powder because Judy Hunter swore that made it shinier, spraying my sister's ugly-smelling deodorant all over the bathroom, and slipping two tampons into my pocket because even though I didn't know exactly what they were for, I knew they were somehow important, grown-up lady things.

The museum was in a dark, ramshackle, low-ceilinged barn that squatted along the other side of a highway I wasn't allowed to cross. Inside, Gus's Cider Mill Museum smelled of old hay and fermented apples, but, more than anything else, of a lonely old man's dirty socks.

Stewie and I paid our dimes and got plastic cups of store-bought cider that we had to finish before

entering the museum. Gus spat through clacking teeth and warned us about no touching. And then there they were.

Bossie and Bessie were surrounded by a weird collection of old junk. Brown and beige photographs in cracked frames, the subjects sitting stiff and unsmiling in high-necked collars buttoned tight. A chipped replica of Michelangelo's *Pieta* on a low side table. The Virgin's nose was broken, and someone had painted Jesus's hair yellow. Weak light came from a lamp that flaked dust and paint, its shade resting askew over a plastic hula dancer. She was wearing a dirty crepe-paper grass skirt and a pink lei that just covered the twin brown balls of her breasts.

Bossie and Bessie stood on their four hind legs, their chests attached from just below the neck to the bottom of what must have been their one shared rib cage. The calves' forelegs were tangled together as though they were slow dancing. Bossie's head was arched back, and he stared at Bessie with glassy, brown eyes. But Bessie, at the moment of her death, or perhaps at the artistic whim of the taxidermist, had stretched her head sideways as though trying one last time to escape her too-loving brother. Her tongue was black and flopped out the side of her mouth. I could see the white around her irises.

"Wow...cool," skinny, frizzy-haired Stewie Fleishman whispered through wet lips.

"Yeah, wow," I sighed, feeling his palm, sticky and heavy, and gripping mine.



The Eclectic Rigors of My Spiritual Practice

by Susannah W. Simpson

Just as a redbird flashes
across my path, I long
for an epiphany.
One that erases my nagging
suspicion of chaos
as reigning supreme.
I'd like a favor from faith;
fiery baptism into an explanation—
a eureka! Even I can laugh at a joke
well told. I search for an arcane
code to follow—carved tablets
to honor—liturgy to memorize,
even argue with—or just one
believable, luminous being—like
the diamond solitaire of Venus
suspended off the tip of a crescent
moon—*something* to send a prayer to.
Transported by the swell
of a Puccini aria; uplifted
by the communion of kindness
between strangers
or stranger still—spouses,
I worship morning birds
in the larch and the didactic
loyalty of our dogs.
On an ordinary evening—
a book falls off the shelf,
bookmark in place—
I rush over to see
what sign is sent.



One Ordinary Cat

by Martha Holmes

You're right to think she was just an ordinary cat, no different than a trillion others who come and go through human lives. A calico, born in a barn, one of six. Just one more, really, not unlike the millions who die in the hands of caring humans because there are not enough caring humans or because there are simply too many cats. We named her Katy.

I never minded her sleeping around my neck, her fur moving with my breathing, sticking to my skin on hot summer nights. It never bothered me that she would lick my neck in imitation of being with her mother, who had not gotten the chance to wean her, thanks to me. Like all ordinary cats, she would put herself in my path, risking a stepped-on paw, if she wanted my attention. Through time I learned to understand her range of meows, from the feed-me, to the let-me-out, to the meow that meant hold me or the simple hi there. Through the years her habits changed, and in the last few she would crawl under the covers and sleep by my thigh, giving a poke with a sharp claw if I got to hogging her space.

Katy cat. She would come when I called her and purr whenever I picked her up. I went out one night, and when we returned she was under the bed with her four kittens, still wet. I have reels of videotape of them playing, entranced by a sock, devoted to a feather, lunging at one another with

all the ferocity of a butterfly. We kept one, a white female named Blanche. She's 19 now.

My call when arriving home is always "Katy! Blanche!" but Blanche is the only one now. She is mourning for the mother she can't find in any of the usual places. A deep moan rises through her after these searches, and she's beginning to sleep by my thigh.

So, despite the more important matters of the world and the decisions men make about the lives and deaths of others, this writing is a farewell to one ordinary cat. I held her while the vet put the killing liquid into her vein. I felt the life going from her body like a lover departing in the night.

Cats just care about the food you give them, some people say. They're just using you. Those people must be talking about the outdoor cats that nobody gets to know, the cats that flee if you wish to pick them up or scratch you if you try. Then there are the ones who follow you on long walks up to the top of the valley and all the way back, who seek your lap when you're trying to write, and even have walked across your keyboard, leaving you original writings you wouldn't have thought of yourself, like »»kkkkkkcccccyyyyyyyy3333q, by Katy.

If there isn't enough love in the world, it's not the fault of cats.



Africa

by Joanne Lowery

Its west coast is the profile of a skull
with a weak chin. Inside that continental head
is every human possibility plus desert
where even camels stumble
and jungles that still eat explorers alive.
Each birth is complicated by disease and war
as countries invent new names
and only birds fly in unison
with white wings and black bodies,

with black bodies and white wings.
Dark continent, why are your night rivers
lit by the red eyes of crocodiles?
What are our ancestors trying to tell us
as they swing screeching tree to tree?
Here where a floating log
can open its mouth and swallow
a man whole, it is easy to disappear.
There go the Arab, the Boer, the Congo slave.
Deep in the bush a boy in a ragged tee shirt
knows who wants him as he kneels at the river.
From cupped hands he sips the end of the rainy season.



Something Like Santeria

by Corey Mingura

Santeria is a mixture of Nigerian voodoo practices and Roman Catholicism. The Nigerian deities were replaced by Saints. Santeria means "The way of the saints." This religion is very prominent in the Caribbean and Spanish-speaking countries, such as Mexico.

On my altar,
The smoke of a white
Unscented Christ candle
Fills the air.

Two golden bells that hang
From the black cross on the wall
Rattle as cars drive by.

A deer's antlers rest on their side
Black and yellow, tinted gray,
Sit proud and alone,
For they do not need to adorn
The head of a master.

The imitation human skull from Mexico
Grins at me:
He has no choice without his lips.

And above all, St. Jude, the serene king of the menagerie,
Stands over this domain
With haloed head and walking cane.

In my apartment,
Every day is Dia de los Muertos.
In my living room,
In my place of sanctuary,
It's something like Santeria.



*Photo (detail)
by Jenny
Mingus*



Begun on September 10, 2007, about 10:30 p.m....

by Stan Hardegree

There is a certain awful meter to this thing, a beat set to an unseen and unheard metronome — of getting the first hint that something is wrong and then waiting and praying and waiting some more. Her Rosary beads are wrapped tight around her hands as she sits at her desk and prays in metered tones, Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee....

The second hand on the clock is a little louder and slower than you remember as the seconds tick by. No one knows anything yet so the phone isn't ringing. There's just that metronome tocking along toward the inevitable as the sun rises and climbs the summer sky toward noon. This is going to be a pretty day.

I go to my office upstairs to track the story on the Internet. The first shoe drops.

"There's a government vehicle in the driveway," comes the message from downstairs.

Braden, Michael's adopted brother, makes the announcement. He's been pacing the sidewalk out front while his girlfriend, Grace, rocks on the front porch.

I go downstairs and walk with his mother out to the driveway to greet them, a chaplain major and a sergeant major. The notification team.

"They're here to tell us that Mike has been hurt." I think to myself as we walk toward them.

I correct myself.

"You idiot, they don't send a notification team for that. They only call when they've been injured. And they don't send a notification team unless they are dead sure."

"Are you sitting down, Dad?"

"Huh?"

"I want you to sit down. Are you sitting down?"

"I am now...."

Most of my memory of those 15 days stops here. From this point forward, a good deal of my

life exists only from the perspective of a camera. For about 15 days, I live a third-person existence in my own life.

The only thing I remember saying to Mike's sister in Virginia is, "The notification team just left. You need to come home, sweetheart."

I don't remember her and her family arriving.

Most of the rest of the next two weeks exist to me only in personal accounts, pictures, newspaper accounts, and television interviews I did but can't remember doing.

I remember going to the airport to get Mike. Jay Collins leased a limousine for the family, and a motorcade of three or four cars went to West Georgia Regional Airport where a chartered Lear Jet with Mike aboard waited for us. There were a lot more people at the airport than I expected. I remember the crew opening the door of the plane and seeing the flag-draped casket inside. I remember the honor guard and pall bearers carrying Mike in front of and past us toward the hearse, and I remember seeing his dog tags hanging from the end handle of the casket.

"This is real," I vividly remember thinking.

We had his wake in Villa Rica at Jay Collins's Funeral Home; I was there, of course, but I don't remember much of it. Jay tells me that 2,500 people came through his funeral home during the two-day wake. There was a constant line outside the door, he tells me. Now and then a memory will push through the fog.

"I always liked chaplains when I was in the Army, but something tells me that I don't want to see you today," I say, greeting the major as he gets out of the Blazer.

"Are you Stan Hardegree?"

"I am." He introduced himself, but I don't remember his name. "Can we go inside? We need a quiet place to talk."

Then the certain awful meter starts again as we



begin the slow pace up our sidewalk, past Braden and Grace, toward the inevitable.

Once inside, his mother and I sit on the love-seat and we hold hands and we face the soldiers and we don't say anything and we don't breathe. The duty today falls to the sergeant major, with the chaplain standing alongside him at parade rest, silent and somber. The sergeant major, also at parade rest, pulls a piece of paper from his blue folder and after a pause begins to read.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hardegee, the Secretary of the Army sends his deepest regrets over the death..."

And he stops. That word stops him cold.

"...over the death..."

He gets to the inevitable. He has to...and the second shoe drops.

"...of your son Sergeant Michael Christopher..."

There is no mistake. They are dead sure.

"Goddamit," I say to no one in particular.

Now the awful meter is the sobbing of a mother who just found out that she has lost her only son in Baghdad. She lies on her side on the loveseat next to me as her tender heart breaks and she cries the most awful cry, the cry of a mother who just lost her son to war.

I stick my head out the front door where Braden is pacing the sidewalk on this pretty September day in Georgia.

"Mike's dead," I say, not able to manage much above a whisper. And that's all I say.

I go back in to thank the notification team and see them off on their rounds; dear God, I hope they don't have far to go today.

Now I don't know what to do. I am supposed to know what to do, but I don't. Dads and husbands are supposed to know how to fix things, but I don't know what to do.

The remainder of the day and night is the certain awful meter of people coming and going, one new group after the other about every five

minutes.

I station myself by the upstairs phone so that Cindy is relieved of the duty of informing friends and relatives — and of receiving calls. Calls come in every 15 seconds (they will come in every 15 seconds for 10 days). The news spreads fast.

The calls from good friends are rough.

"Stan? This is Andy. Is it true? Oh, shit, man! Oh, shit! I'm on my way. I love you two, man. I'm on my way, OK? Oh, shit. I love you, man!"

"Stan? Roger here. I just heard. Is it true? It will take me until tomorrow to get down there. I'm bringing Beth with me. She loved Mike. He was her first teenage crush. Oh, shit, Stan."

Some calls out are worse, one in particular.

"Dad?"

"Hey, boy..."

I remember seeing Keith Lipham, whom I met at a friend's place the Friday before Mike died on Monday. He hugged me and said, "Hello, my new old friend." Nice.

I remember that the 15 days between his death and burial were nice days as summer changed to fall.

I don't remember much about our time in Washington and Arlington Cemetery. That day is a blur. I am told that there were two congressmen and an ambassador at Mike's funeral and that I met them. Bill Clontz and Chris McClain, both old friends, were there, but I don't remember talking to them.

I remember sitting there at the grave looking at Mike's casket and thinking, "He will lie here forever. From this moment forward, he will never move from this spot in this ground." And I remember that the feeling of despair was overwhelming.

There is a picture of Cindy and me just after this moment, when General Galen Jackman presented us with the tri-fold flag at the end of the ceremony. I know what he was saying to us only because I have presented flags to widows and moms myself. Funeral detail.



The Guard of Sipán

by J. Todd Hawkins

In 1987 in Perú, an archaeologist found the unlooted tomb of a god-king known today as the Lord of Sipán. The tomb contained priceless treasures and large food stores, both of which the king would need on his journey to the afterlife. Also found were the remains of several men and women, a child, a dog, and two llamas, all apparently buried alive. One of the men had had his feet removed prior to being interred, presumably in keeping with the tradition of dismembering royal guards to prevent them from fleeing the king's side in the afterlife.

Night has passed, I think, though these squalid airs
still hold no heat. Darkness sounds like thunder
here every heartbeat, every hour we heirs
of glorified empire abide deep under

soft hills mined to sand, green hills grazed to dust.
We wait while their wars take our young red sons,
mock seas in fierceness, the cruelty in rust.
Boys sing secretly for he who outruns

the lord's men. A strong man, though, knows his arms
are not his own—knows others know his body best.
Still, my hours reek of bleak, blaring alarms—
like now: one woman's woken from rest:

in stillness she shudders as llamas bleat,
and knows I must kill her if she tries to eat.



Photo (detail) by Jenny Mingus



Hélène Boucher

by J. Todd Hawkins

On July 8, 1934, French aviatrix Hélène Boucher, by averaging a speed of 412 kilometers per hour, broke not only the women's world speed record for a 100-kilometer flight, previously held by Amelia Earhart, but the men's record as well. Unsatisfied, she broke the world speed record for a 1,000-kilometer flight two weeks later. Said to exude a quiet confidence, Boucher continued her pursuit of even faster speeds. Though she had always been superstitious of the number 30 and adamant about not flying on the 30th of any month, she was persuaded to fly a training flight on November 30, 1934. On that cloudy morning with poor visibility, she crashed from a height of 300 feet. Boucher was twenty-six years old and, at the time of her death, held many major speed records for all categories of flight.

As violet horizons visit lips of wine-dark earth,
I fly, rising medallion-eyed in wonder. The ground below
is nearly fogbound — it's far too hard to follow
the lines they chalked to guide me across land dim in dearth.
How quickly clarity's lost to speed: hills I'd hoped to give wide berth
approach through wispy veils bewailed by screaming winds. Bellow,
winds! Throw this plane about! I'm drunk on the pulse of breath, aglow
in blood flushing my face and tension anxious as childbirth.

Yet running atop the frost of dawn, haze suffocates the plain.
Fear seeps slowly in my paper-wasp wings, and the plane,
a timid mare, senses its rider's uncertainty, hears the Siren hole
in the soil howl loud. Alas, new flights must await a new rein
and ones less doubtful to hold it, who unfazed in frantic rushes reign
over skies that split wide open and mornings that eat shadows whole.



The Day Peeps Tried to Kill My Brother

by John Bradshaw

They seem harmless enough, those yellow chicks and pink bunnies, but they are dangerous. Yes, I am talking about Peeps, those Easter terrors sold as holiday treats. Sugar-dusted marshmallow murderers, more like. You don't believe me? I certainly understand. Peeps are marketed reverently to children all over the country, and seldom are there any reports of mayhem. The reason nobody reports mishaps with those fluffy little miscreants is, well, embarrassment. Who among us has the nerve to stand up to the inevitable ridicule that we usually reserve for UFO defenders? "What? You've had a nasty run-in with those cute little things?" Well, take heed! I have a tale to tell of the day Peeps tried to kill my brother.

It all happened millions of years ago—some time in the Triassic period, I believe. My brother and I were mere children. I was no older than eight and my brother was barely six. A week had passed since Easter, a time of jubilant gluttony for most American children. For some reason, my brother and I were left on our own. Our parents, I believe, were visiting family friends. They left me in charge. At age eight, I was clearly the responsible one, and my brother was, well, he was my brother. It was my job to make sure he didn't do anything crazy. Naturally, the moment my parents were out the door, he and I sneaked into the cupboard where Mom and Dad hid the candies. There we found,



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

among other things, left-over Peeps.

So, there we were, face to face with a pack of old Peeps. In those ancient times, Peeps came in only one form, the yellow chicks. Those Peeps



stared at us with their pitch-black beady eyes with characteristic defiance. Our plan was simple enough. We would bite off their heads; then we would gobble up what was left. My brother volunteered to launch the attack.

The problem was that Peeps can get quite stale. How old these Peeps were we had no idea. Peeps hide their age well. They could have been on the shelf for years before my parents bought them. And these Peeps were well beyond the limit of edibility. They were every bit as tough as roofing shingles. (Try to picture a house entirely shingled in Peeps. The Horror!) My brother, the daring one, tried to eat the first Peep. He bit down on the head and pulled... and pulled... and pulled.... Nothing happened.

With a mouthful of Peep head, my brother beckoned to me to help. I grabbed the body. He clamped down on the head with his teeth, and we pulled in opposite directions. I strained mightily, feeling my arm muscles tensed to their limit. My brother groaned, his neck muscles swollen. Drool trickled out the corner of his mouth as he growled like a dog. Grrrr, grrrr! And still nothing happened!

We took a moment to assess. I stood looking at my hands, wondering if I had it in me for another titanic tug. My brother stood with the Peep still in his teeth, not daring to let it loose, just in case it had escape plans. He looked confident that we could succeed and gestured for me to try again. So, I planted my feet and prepared for another assault on the marshmallow marauder. My brother planted his feet, growled, and thrust his chick-festooned

jaw in my direction. I gripped. I pulled. My brother chomped and leaned back. Then the neck tissues gave way! (The Peep's, not my brother's.) The Peep head ripped away. I fell back, crashing into the wall, rattling the ceramic butterfly wall hangings. One fell, and its pink wings shattered. I was in for it now.

At the same moment, my brother also flew back. Sadly, his feet were more firmly planted than mine. Off balance, he fell to the floor as his head banged onto the corner of the coffee table. He spat out the chick head and howled in pain. The chick head, covered in saliva, rolled across the floor under my left foot. I tried to get up but slipped on the Peep head, falling on top of my screaming brother. When I finally scrambled up, my brother was sitting and clutching the back of his head, blood pouring from a nasty gash. Meanwhile, the remaining Peeps sat on the coffee table, looking cold, vengeful, and satisfied. Blood was everywhere, and I was sure my brother was a goner. In sheerest panic, I called my parents. Within the hour we were sitting in the comforting whiteness of the emergency room. My brother did *not* die. He got fifty million stitches, and I got yelled at. As for the Peeps, well, when I finally got back home, I took care of them. I threw the package into the neighbor's yard. The neighbor owned a German shepherd.

So, next Easter, when you are thinking of buying treats for your children, do so. But select those treats carefully. Do not forget—Peeps are dangerous. They tried to kill my brother.



After the Last One

by J. Alan Nelson

bluebonnets live forever
they come again every year, damn the radiation,
we breathe the sun's fire with each breath
flames filling our lungs
dark filaments stinging our eyes' coronas,
walking on the planet's magnetic structures
and see the visual treat of a filmy spray of fire
through cities filled with shabby offices
filled with people, whose minds
hide loops of fiery plasma behind faces
expressive as shabby office furniture
stuck with the awkwardness
of the not unborn
the ineptness of those not dead
the latest advertisements their religious dogma
wedged in futile life's custody



Photo (detail) by James Crittenden

Contributors

Howard Bahr of Jackson, MS is a novelist best known for his *Pelican Road* and a series of three Civil War novels: *The Black Flower*, *The Year of Jubilo*, and *The Judas Field*. He is the Visiting Writer at the 2009 Westview Writers' Festival.

John Bradshaw of Norman, OK knows which side of his toast is buttered. To him, it's always darkest just before the dawn. He recently led a horse to water, but he was unsuccessful in his efforts to make it drink.

Kaci Carpenter was born and raised in Murray, Kentucky, which besides being the unofficial birthplace of radio, is also semi-famous for its occasional vampire cults. Kaci is currently a student at Southwestern Oklahoma State University, where she is majoring in English writing and was named Outstanding Creative Nonfiction Student for the 2007-08 school year.

Kevin Collins of Weatherford, OK talks to the trees, but they never listen to him. He has had comparable experiences with students. On these occasions, he prunes the students and sprinkles fertilizer on the ground where their roots can access it.

Robert W. Cosgriff is a retired Navy Commander now residing in Fairfax, VA after living in California, Italy, Guam, and the Philippines. In addition to writing, his interests include birding, running, and American history. His poems have appeared in various journals, such as *California Quarterly*, *Carquinez Poetry Review*, *Crucible*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, and *Studio One*. His collection, *Silent Tasting*, was published in 2005.

Diane Shipley DeCillis is from West Bloomfield, MI. She is the co-editor of *Mona Poetica*, an anthology of poetry on art. Her work has been published in *Nimrod International Journal*, *Phoebe*, and other journals. She won the Crucible Poetry Prize 2005 and the 2005 MacGuffin National Poet Hunt, and she was nominated for a 2009 Pushcart Prize.

Stan Hardegree is an English instructor at West Central Technical College and a graduate student at the University of West Georgia in Carrollton. He is the former owner of the *Villa Rica Voice*, a weekly newspaper published in rural west Georgia.

J. Todd Hawkins grew up in Forth Worth and graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with a degree in English and psychology. He also studied at the University of Oxford. He works for an educational publisher, developing and editing testing materials for social studies and language arts students. His poetry has appeared in *Antietam Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, and others.

Martha Holmes is an Ancram, NY writer. She has been a columnist for a Journal-Register Company newspaper for three years and has work published in *The MacGuffin* and other journals. She has received much praise for her work in the film industry.

Laura Johnson is a poet who resides in Geronimo, OK and writes on issues of family and mental health.

Jill Jones is the chair of the Department of Language and Literature at Southwestern Oklahoma State University and a scholar of British novelist Netta Syrett. Her 2000 article in *Popular Music and Society*—"The Delight of Words: The Elizabethan Sonneteers and American Country Lyricists"—is legendary at SWOSU. Her work has also appeared in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography* and other venues.

Marilyn Gilbert Komechak is the author of three books: *Getting Yourself Together*, *Morals and Manners for The Millennium*, and *Paisano Pete: Snake-Killer Bird*, for which she won the Oklahoma Writers Federation's Best Juvenile Book Prize for 2003. She works as a psychologist in Fort Worth, TX.

Marsha Koretzky has practiced law for the last 20 years in Orange County, NY, where she represents children in the Family Court. She is currently pursuing an MFA in creative writing through Vermont College and working on her first short story collection.

Cheryl Loetscher writes from Colorado. Her poems have appeared widely, and a number have won prizes and distinctions in literary contests across the United States. She was awarded the 2008 Douglas Freels Poetry Prize by the FCCJ Writers' Festival, and her first collection of poems, *Unclaimed Baggage*, published by Finishing Line Press in 2007, received the 2008 Jean Pedrick Chapbook Award from the New England Poetry Club.



Joanne Lowery lives and works in Kalamazoo, MI. Her poetry has appeared in many literary magazines, including *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Eclipse*, *Smartish Pace*, *Cimarron Review*, *Atlanta Review*, and *Poetry East*. Her most recent publication is *Jack: A Beanstalk Life* from Snark Publishing.

Corey Mingura of Hollis, OK will be graduating this year from Southwestern Oklahoma State University. His essay, "The 2000 Presidential Oppression" has been published on line, and his "Cash is Conqueror: The Critique of Capitalism in 'The Western Emigrants' and 'Sonnet: The Age of Gold'" is forthcoming in a special edition of *The Simms Review*.

Sheryl Nelms is a poet living in Clyde, TX who writes on the subject of nature.

J. Alan Nelson is a writer and lawyer from Waco, TX. His works have appeared in numerous literary journals, including *Wisconsin Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *Fulcrum*, *Red River Review*, *Adirondack Review*, *Red Cedar Review*, *Identity Theory*, *Kennesaw Review*, and *Driftwood Review*.

Judith Pokras is the director of a basic skills program and a part-time assistant professor for expository writing and critical thinking. She is currently writing reflective nonfiction essays that touch on personal and societal issues. She is the author of the college textbook, *Contexts in the College Curriculum*.

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work has appeared in *Carquinez Poetry Review*, *Descant*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Fox Cry Review*, *Nimrod*, *Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, and many other venues.

Theresa Sutton teaches high school English in Wappinger Falls, NY and works as an adjunct in the education department at Marist College. She serves on the executive board for the New York State English Council and for the Mid-Hudson English Language Arts Council. A mother of two, she lives in Poughkeepsie, NY, where, in addition to teaching and writing, she enjoys cooking and knitting.

Martha Modena Vertreace-Doody is a poet from Chicago, IL and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellow. She is a professor of English and Poet-in-Residence at Kennedy-King College. Her most recent book, *Glacier Fire*, won the Word Press Poetry Prize.

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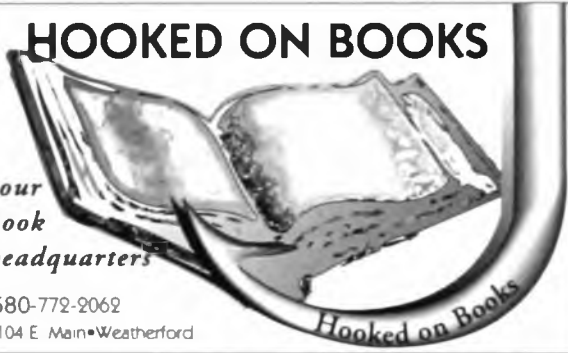
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