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Beth Kenny

Brook Wilson

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THE VEHICLE

Vol. 24, No. 2

Spring 1983

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A—B—C—D—E—F—G—H....

Beth Kenny

We sit on the porch swing
Her dirty little hand curled around a husky pencil.
My hand around her hand
We make shapes.
Lines and bumps
Turn into A's and B's,
A's and B's turn into apples and boys,
Apples become round red fruit
That she eats before supper
Spinning the stem out to see
The boy who will one day share her porch swing.

Contemporary Issues

Brook Wilson

O doesn't the world have problems?
The oil shortage took the horse out of
the barn and put Chrysler in it.
Inflation has ceased rising because when
you're on Everest where do you go next?
Unemployment has turned the workaholics
into alcoholics.
Budget cuts have worn the scissors out.
Bonzo is long gone but Reagan isn't.
Goebels is outselling Michelob.
Jerry Falwell can't heal herpes.
Eastern's swimming team just sank.
Your Pell Grant check bounced.
It's hard to be gay.
With Russia's satellite falling apart
you don't worry about flies in your soup.
But the issue that overtops these and
and sends you bending to your knees is—
the issue of the fat women on campus!

Black

John Stockman

Black is only black
but does not know that,
does not know facts.
You see, he is all instinct.

When black comes to town,
you say see her hair,
that is black.
And soot, of course, is black.

Always pleasant, black agrees
but says see that flower,
is it not black? And those pears,
they also are black. Shaking your head

you say no, black is absence of color.
He disagrees, saying
black is possession of all color.
Do you see the rainbow at night?

Beat

Graham Lewis

We called it The Pit because that is what it was. I wasn't a hole in the ground, or some kind of hellish prison, it was just Bob Moriarty's basement. Everyday, my friends and I would meet there. One of us could always get served, so beer was our usual libation. We would filter downstairs like ants, one by one, after, of course, the customary greetings to Mr. and Mrs. Moriarty. I'm sure they knew everything we did downstairs, but we always felt we were getting away with something.

Bob Moriarty was kind of a resident psychologist for most of us. It seemed that he was always the first person to talk to when life became twisted. He had a way of smiling, talking low, and calming down even the most frenzied depression. Bob reminded me of someone Kerouac would describe as a

"mad one." One "mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time." He loved life, to be sure, and even more so when he endangered it.

Certain nights, a group of us would get drunk, and argue until dawn about philosophy. We never classified what we defended or attacked as philosophy, but that is what it was. On one particular occasion, Bob and I were locked in an unusually vehement battle concerning belief in God. I had been reading Nietzsche, thus I took the atheist viewpoint. Bob, as usual, propounded the good of believing in any religion.

"C'mon, how can your belief in the existence of a superior being help you know yourself, when all it does is make you subservient to some old cliché-ridden dogma, designed to keep you bowing and scraping to old cliché-ridden men?"

"You don't understand! A man who has faith in something greater than himself will always strive to make himself greater, to come as close as possible to perfection."

"Maybe," I said, sure I had him beat, "but why can't a man do that confident in the knowledge that he himself can become that superior being, that he is that superior being, that he must continue to conquer himself, which is impossible as long as he calls himself a sinner and places control of his fate in the hands of religion."

"Yes, I see what you are saying to me, yet I don't believe one necessarily places his will in the hands of religion when he believes in a God. Listen, you may think this off the subject, but tell me, why are you my friend? Why do you come here? Is it because you enjoy my companionship, or is it because you can party here? Now, I don't want you to think I'm mad, I just want you to tell me if you believe in the bond of friendship, the love that makes life a breeze when you're with a true friend, or if you believe we just mutually use each other as friends are traditionally obligated to do?"

I sat there a minute, blinking, trying to figure out if he was serious, or trying to trick me. Bob could be a master at being seriously absurd, and I often fell for it. I stared at a painting directly across the room. It was one of many painted by Bob's father, a sober man with a biting humor. His works adorned The Pit like wallpaper, and few had ever interested me before. Now, gazing earnestly at this painting I had seen a thousand times, a strange satoric feeling buzzed throughout my body.

The painting was of two people in a sleigh. The terrain surrounding the sleigh was snow covered, and it was obviously very cold. The two people were dressed in huge, flowing fur parkas, their faces deliberately muddled. Their sex was impossible to discern, one could only see that they were happy, ecstatic, their fur-covered arms around each other's shoulders.

The satori was not a great explosion of revelation, or anything so grand as that. It was simply an all-encompassing feeling of contentment, and complete happiness to be where I was. I looked at Bob, and said: "I'm your friend man, I come here to see you." He smiled, passed me a beer, and with a triumphant look in his eyes, replied: "See, you believe in God."

I shook my head, acknowledging my defeat, as I rose to go tell Mr. Moriarty what a great artist he was.

Catholic Daze

Suzanne Horn

Twist knew he was special.
I could tell by the way he'd strut to school
eatin' his apple to the core
and hurtin' the seeds under the tires of cars
thought he was cool
but Badd Ass would burn him everytime
kick and giggle
it was disgusting—so we loved it.

Perverse little creatures
dancin' in the halls to music
tunes we had written when we were older.
Sigh would write me notes, and
tuck 'em in my shirt to piss me off.
So I'd slap him, and then read it
over and over at lunch.
Bay and I just giggled constantly.

Trucki and Russ smashed oranges on the teacher's chair
so they could hear her bitch.

"You'll burn in hell" she'd scream.

Can nuns talk like that?

We weren't scared of hell anyway.

Cigarettes in the bathroom stung the air
and swallowed in virgin lungs, slapping them around
'til they choked and coughed
always chewing mint gum.

Coke could french inhale
everyone watched the smoke invade
her powder white nose.

Sony was always spaced
growin' dope in her locker
she didn't even know she got busted
they hauled her away one day
just never realized....

The bells would start ringin'
and we'd all start runnin'
out
to raise hell
and then to fade away
like the stars do at dawn
'til tomorrow, we'd come back then
all a little older
but not much wiser at all.

Africa

Graham Lewis

Nights alone
Always leave me wanting
The hills;
Green patience and eternal silence.
My eyes seize the empty dark,
Beat it,
Gather it about me, bunch it up.
I pretend I am a hill.
Soon, I sleep, and like
Old men, I dream of lions.

The Friendly Skies

Rajendra Sinhan

It was once again the hurry-home time—the time most taxing for an alien in a foreign country. The buildings belched out men and women as if out of compulsion. New York's Fifth Avenue was, as were the other streets of the hour, an unending escalator of moving traffic. Tej sat near the window inside the cafe and watched people of every description cluttering the sidewalk in their continuous onslaught

He felt lonesome sitting by himself while all around him New York moved along to get home. Tej could not have moved even if he wanted to. All day he had window shopped, gazing goggle-eyed at the mannequins in the windows, the automatic toys and gadgets galore. He had no money to buy anything yet and he was in no hurry to possess any of the wealth that littered the shop. Instead, he felt extremely tired and alone. The excitement with which he had left India three days ago for New York had disappeared.

A group of smartly dressed young women went past his window. "...too many legs make all these legs sexy..." Whose lines were these? Too many legs, but not erotic. He was ignorant and unbearably scared. More exotic were the evenings in New Delhi, spent near Regal or Janpath watching the girls sway as only girls in the Eastern countries can.

The new world around him had expanded into a largeness which Tej found hard to take. Not one around among the multitude outside meant anything to him. The sounds that enveloped him were unfamiliarly harsh. He understood now why his elder brother had not left the small village in Bihar to which his family belonged. "What does a man need..." his brother had said in answer to Tej's plea to shift to New Delhi. "What does a man need to live out his life

happily except a small space he can belong to and a known face? I'll never belong in your New Delhi...."

Nonsense! Tej stiffened himself. A small place stinks and stagnates—it chokes you by degrees. Even New Delhi got too small; there weren't any jobs any more or decent houses within the reach of one's income. One had to, one must, enlarge one's world in order to fully unfold—the Khannas had done it and the Singhs.

It was getting dark outside. The shadows struggled with the glare of lights. He paid for his coffee and got out. "Don't loiter in New York after seven...stay indoors. There's too much crime these days...." An old friend had advised him through letters from far-off San Francisco. A closed-cropped young man ran swiftly past Tej. His heart dropped a beat. "It's not healthy to be so scared," Tej chastised himself. "I'm starting a new life in America the Beautiful. I'll get used to it, just as I got used to the hostile life in Delhi.

The air grew slightly chilly. He walked closer to the warmth of the walls that glowed with electric lights. He was ravenously hungry. For three days now he had eaten more sweet dishes and fruit than at any other time in his life. The few vegetables and cheese preparations he ordered had tasted strange. They failed to satisfy his hunger. His stomach growled for spicy food, for peas thick with large chunks of "paneer," for potatoes fried whole before they were curried, for a plate of rich rice 'palao!' The aroma of the food he hungered for assailed his memory and he felt weak in the knees. The thought of sandwiches and milk for dinner revolted him.

He stopped involuntarily outside the large show window of a shop which was now closed for business. Several Indian carpets rioted in color behind the bright glass. Here and there, a strategically placed brass-top accented the flavor of the hand-knotted Mirzapurs, Kashmirs and Agras.

"Aren't they beautiful?" someone said to him, making him jolt out of his reverie. He turned around. An aged white woman carrying a heavy grocery bag in the cradle of her left arm stood by the window. She too had stopped to look at the carpets.

"You know," she smiled, "I can't go past these windows without slowing down. Tell me, how long does it take to make one of those?" She pointed to a sharp velvet-blue Kashmir. "I'm told they are *actually* handmade...."

He mumbled a reply, for he himself did not know how long it took to make a kashmir carpet, big or small. In just a few days away from home, Tej had realized how little he knew about India, and how much he had taken for granted, or had never bothered to know the statistics of. Now as people asked him about the 'when' or 'where' or 'how' of something he mumbled in utter confusion.

The two moved away from the window. The lady walked **rather slowly** as if her legs hurt. Tej wondered if the woman was very old. She was **telling him** about how once, when she was in high school, she had wanted to **go to India**. The woman grew nostalgic and sentimental about her past. Her voice **sounded** glad to have an audience. She pointed out the names of buildings and places that could be of interest to a newcomer. Tej felt restless. He looked for an excuse to get away from her. The friend in San Francisco had written, "You will meet a very large number of lonely elders in this country. Avoid

cultivating their friendship even if you are lonesome, for you will end up hurting their feelings....”

They had now drifted away from the business section and Tej had a feeling he was lost. But somehow it did not bother him. Homesickness had made him reckless. “I’ll hail a taxi back to my hotel,” he assured himself.

“I live in that building.” The lady indicated one of the several red-brick apartments some hundred feet away from them. “Have you had your supper?”

“Not yet.” He tried to extricate himself. A tall, dark Indian appeared on the other side of the street. “Excuse me, Ma’am, there’s a friend I want to say hello to....” Waving a hurried goodbye, he crossed over to the other side.

Tej was very eager to catch up with the Indian. He had seen other Indian men and women on the streets during the day, but right now he wanted to talk to one about home over a cup of tea.

“Hello....” His voice was eager as his manner.

“Yes?” The man looked at him. The expression in the man’s eyes however, made Tej stammer suddenly. “Are you from India?” he asked, but felt very foolish in asking it.

“Yes,” the man answered again.

“I’m also from India.”

“So?” The man stared at Tej.

The lash of the insult flushed Tej’s face. The man relented. “Look, young man,” he said in a cryptic voice, “you’re probably new here, but you did not travel twelve thousand miles to know another Indian, nor did I. Goodnight.”

The street light changed. The elderly woman had entered her apartment building. The revolving door swallowed her. In the distance the neon sign flashed rhythmically: **Fly the Friendly Skies Of United.**

Bread

Ken Kempcke

White field of craters
Mushroom shaped frame
of golden wheat
Sponge soaking up
a half square
of unmelted sun
I Wonder
if it’s a prisoner’s dinner
or just a Roman Meal
A salad crouton
or the body of Christ.

Linda Fraembs



Snapshot

Maggie Kennedy

Marking the pages
of *Crime And Punishment*;
a black & white,
my mother in a bikini.

Dostoevski knew her
before me....

Waves curling gently
about her ankles
as she struck
a seductive pose....

Her arms are buried
elbow-deep now
in dishwater,
her wrinkles etched
by laughter.

Anne Smith

Tired brown,
well-weathered leaves
clutter gutters
and line streets.
Looking another way,
we see
neither their graceless fall
nor their silent landing
on brown, frozen earth.
In small spaces
they crush together
like old women
in the market place.

Frank, the grocery man,
now retired,
rakes together his share,
oblivious
to the colorful conversation
they create

when bunched together.
His wife remains indoors
chatting amiably with her cronies,
in a tiny kitchenette
about issues of
justice, education, and death.

Once finished
and lawn cleared of debris,
Frank plants himself
in front of the t.v.
The prattle
of the visitors
ceases
with Frank's return.
Their soiled
coffee cups
are deposited
in the sink.

The street sweeper
brushes leaves aside.
They catch in
swirling dustclouds.
City crowds
mash them
into powdered flakes.
There they'll remain
until the next rain.

Frank drinks beer
with dinner
and falls asleep
upon the couch.
His wife cries
in the bathroom,
wiping powder
from her withered face.
Her new dress
lies crumpled
in a heap.
The roast beef
must have been dry.

Termites gnaw
a bare-branched maple.
Aged and infirm
it endures in silence.

Activities On Ice

Kerri Mahat

Shiny blades slice
cool cucumber sections.
Snow sprays from fast skates.

Young watermelon rumps thump
in physical dissention.
On jello knees they rise again.

Apple-cheeked boys, hockey sticks held high,
slice the crisp air with swift intent.
Frozen laughter clouds surround them.

Each day they gather
a bountiful harvest of bruises and giggles.
At dusk they roll homeward, their games dissolved.

Beecham's Orchard And Vineyard

Becky Lawson

The dried-apple face of the old man
rested on the orange blossom white pillow.
I remembered his peach fuzz days
when, with apple-red cheeks,
he asked me to be his bride.
Funny old man,
with thoughts deeper than plum purple
and a wit drier than a sour grape,
you were ripened to perfection
like the perfect pear and then you were picked.
You were plucked like a red cherry
from our tree and I was left out on a branch,
without you.
Left all alone without you,
left to run Beecham's Orchard and Vineyard alone.

Kerri Mahat

peanut butter
be good on apples
be fine on eggs
be highly regarded
on raisins and things
but best of all
be good
on fingers

Sneak Previews

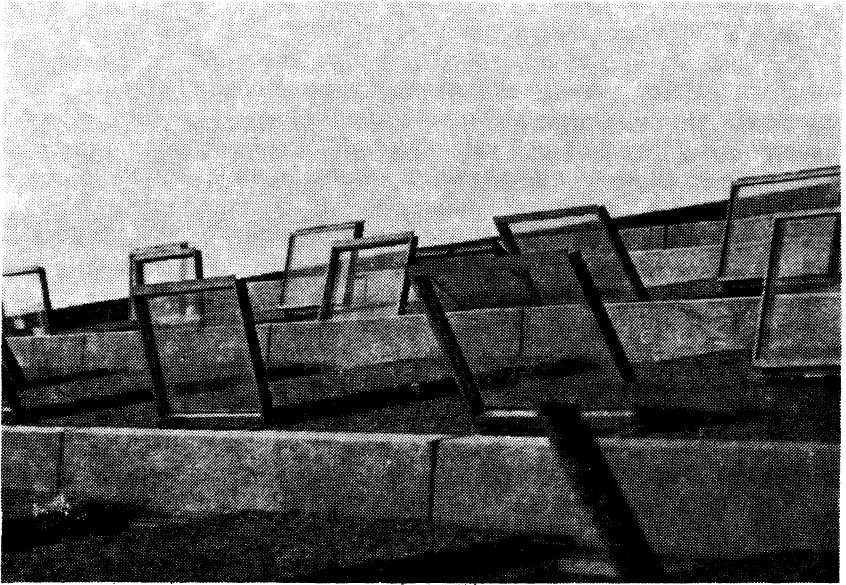
Maggie Kennedy

Passing the storm
in a Saturday matinee.
Milkduds bouncing off
a fat woman with bluish hair,
as we watch the stars
float across the ceiling,
holding buttered hands
and pretending,
as Godzilla eats
King Kong.

Zoo

Ken Kempcke

Carmel corn and peanut shells
stick to my gym shoes
as I walk.
All I see are knees,
babies in strollers,
and bushes beyond the fence.
When Mom lifts me up
and sets me on the cold railing
with her arms around me
I can see the polar bears like everyone else.



The Slave House

Craig Barnes

Catahoula Bayou stretched from west of Lake Charles to the Salrine River. Tiny islands dotted the swamp, and a large one, Boeuf Island, was the homesite of the Cajuns. I can remember how hot and sultry it was in the summer, and how rainy it was in the winter. In all the twelve years I lived in southwest Louisiana, I can remember it snowing three times, melting the same day. I never thought twice about having an alligator wander into the yard, or hearing a rattlesnake in the bush. Our house sat on the east side of Catahoula. It was a big white house, obviously a remnant of the plantation era. All around the house stood twisted oak trees, draped with Spanish moss. People used to comment on how spooky they made the place look, but I loved the trees because they were easy to climb and a great place to go when I wanted to be alone. A few hundred feet in back of the house was the swamp. A crooked boat dock led out to the deep water where I could fish for gar and bullheads.

Up on the main road a ways lived Don Ed. We were the only children our age around, and ever since I could remember we were best of friends. His parents were farmers, raising pigs and pecans, and lived in an old, rundown trailer. His mother was white and his father was black, and I never understood why Don Ed's skin was as white as mine. A year older than me, he was the scrawniest kid I ever saw. He went to school in Vinton, a couple miles away, and I went to a private school in Lake Charles, where Dad worked at the hospital. About the only thing Don Ed and I had in common was that

we were both only-children. For the most part, we saw each other only on the weekends and during the summer, which was probably for the best. Any time Don Ed and I were together you could be sure trouble was brewing.

The summer when I was eleven was probably the most memorable time Don Ed and I had together. School was over and we were faced with the yearly question. What will we do exciting this summer? We spent our previous summers fishing, playing army, and harassing old Lady Kesner. It was fun, but we felt we were more grown up now, so we should act it. Don Ed said we could build a boat and explore Catahoula Bayou and visit the villagers on Boeuf Island. When I told mom of our plans she strictly forbade me to do such a thing, and suggested we start a club. Being the only two kids our age around, I told her it wouldn't be much of a club.

I lied to Don Ed and told him our old smokehouse was a former slave quarters. I convinced him by showing him the chains "that were used to chain up runaway slaves." I usually had to beg him to go into the place, probably because of his father, but when I suggested we make it our clubhouse, he was thrilled with the idea.

We had to plead with mother before she agreed to let us use it. I think she liked the idea though, because she made us curtains and gave us some whitewash. We stuffed grain bags full of Spanish moss for beds and hung cypress knees on the walls for decorations. The place took shape after a week or so and we were proud of our accomplishment. Mom went in the place after we assured her the mice were gone. She commented that if we started a fire in the stove, we were dead.

Old lady Kesner lived about two miles from us. She was a woman in her sixties and lived like a hermit on the swamp. She made her living by fishing and transporting Cajuns to and from Boeuf Island. Ever since I could remember Don Ed and I were waging a war against her. Once we tried to sabotage her boat and were a little more successful in letting her rabbits loose, but mom and dad found out and I was grounded for two weeks. To us, old lady Kesner was a public menace and it was our duty to drive her from the swamp.

I guess that summer we began to feel sorry for her. Besides, we were tired of failing in our attempts to get rid of her. We decided to go over and call a truce, apologizing for all the mean things we had done. The walk to her place was one that Don Ed and I always dreaded. We were scared to death that we would be attacked by a cougar or meet up with some unfriendly Cajuns. When we made it to her shack we began to get cold feet. I got up my nerve and knocked on her door. "What in the name of the Lord Almighty do you damn kids want?" she yelled as she whipped around the shack's corner. We had never been so close to her before and we were terrified. We explained to her why we came and promised never to bother her again. She laughed, and to our surprise, turned out to be one of the nicest ladies we had ever met. She even gave us a ride in her boat, showing us her fishing place and an old abandoned Indian village. We both had already been out on Catahoula before, but never realized what lay in the hidden coves and inlets. She shared stories of her life on the swamp and we were fascinated by the legends and history connected with the swamp.

That summer dad was away for several weeks and I enjoyed the extra

freedom I had. Mom and dad were going out of their way to please me that summer, among other things buying me a new boat and taking me to New Orleans. I always felt guilty because Don Ed's family was so poor, but he never complained and was always content with what little he had. Some kids were cruel to him, calling him names and teasing him because of his parents. I was glad Mom and dad were open-minded about our friendship, something rare in a place where mulattos were persecuted, even by blacks.

The nights were cool and many times we slept in the clubhouse. Usually we stayed up all night inventing ghost stories. They usually involved some of the legends old Lady Kesner told us, and we improvised from there. Sometimes we ended up in my house because we thought we heard the "hatchet man," the villain in many of our tales. The clubhouse was the site of many of our first experiences. One day Don Ed took a jug of elderberry wine his father made and we decided to try it. Neither of us got too drunk, but we both ended up sicker than dogs, and we swore to each other that we would never drink. Dad caught us smoking cigarettes one day, and being a doctor, he gave us a long lecture on the dangers of tobacco. Don Ed called him a hypocrite, knowing Dad smoked like a chimney.

Like most summers, Don Ed and I began to tire of each other's company. School would start in a few weeks and I was looking forward to seeing my friends in Lake Charles. We decided to build desks for the clubhouse so we could do our homework there. I was surprised when Dad tried to talk us out of it. Any other time he would have been thrilled with anything that would stimulate my interest in schoolwork. I found out one day why he was against it.

Dad announced at dinnertime that we would be moving away. He took a job in a small hospital in Illinois, which was the reason he had been away so much. I was upset that we were moving but angry at Dad because he didn't ask for my feelings on the matter.

When I told Don Ed he didn't have much to say. I suppose he was thinking about how lonely it would be after I was gone. We agreed to make the most of the two weeks I had left. While mom and dad were busy packing and making arrangements, Don Ed and I were busy making plans for the future. I told him I would be back in eight or nine years and we could live off the swamp like old lady Kesner. We could live in her shack, sure she would be dead by then. Don Ed promised to look after the clubhouse and I promised to come down and visit every summer. We visited old lady Kesner and I said goodbye. She gave me a rabbit's foot and we laughed as we remembered the time we let her rabbits out the previous summer.

The last day Don Ed helped us finish packing. I was near tears the whole day, dreading the adjustments I would have to make in my new town. As we drove away from my home of eleven years I saw Don Ed, standing beneath the twisted oaks next to the clubhouse, waving to me. For a minute there I felt mad at Don Ed, jealous that he got to stay. It's been eight years now and I haven't seen Don Ed in all that time. I haven't forgotten him and the good times we had together. I still think about the plans we had and the promises we made. I like to believe he is still there, fishing and exploring, waiting for me to return.

The Nomad Preacher's Sermon

Stacey Flannigan

You choke
On the odor
Of my passing,
It stirs the dust
That is you;
I sprinkle you,
And yet,
Does not the baptism
Come from your own tears?

Owl Creek Revisited

Scott Gray

A Federal Scout leaned against a tree, grimly watching a hanging on an old railroad bridge. A northern Alabama wind whipped his hair about his hat, swirling autumn leaves around his legs. His shoulders hunched down in his grey overcoat; his upturned collar shielded his bearded face from the cool breeze. Haggard grey eyes peered out from the covering. His hands were jammed in his pockets; his arms adhered rigidly to his sides. On his shoulders were pinned the stolen bars of a Confederate captain.

Tied to a tree behind him, a chestnut bay mare bit impatiently at the bridle and tried to shake the rope from around its neck. Its normally shiny colors were dulled by road dust, which caked its flanks. On its back was a rifle, a blanket roll, and a leather saddle, worn dark from the sweat of the man and the animal. On the side of the saddle was elegant scrollwork, "JC," with two crossed sabres underneath the initials. A canteen hung from the saddle horn.

On the opposite side of the river, in vast contrast to the country's starkness, an infantry of soldiers stood at parade rest. Behind them was a small stockade. The Scout averted his gaze a moment, then shifted his eyes back to the bridge.

The Scout studied the man who was to be hanged. Judging from his appearance, he seemed very well-to-do. His clothing was that of a civilian. His white frock coat seemed well-fitting, and his mustache and beard looked

fashionable, at least from a distance. His hair, drawn straight back over his ears, also appeared well kept.

The Scout watched as the noose was placed about the victim's neck, and tightened by a sergeant, who stood behind him.

His hands and feet were bound to prevent any attempt to escape. The Scout saw him look down to the water momentarily, then redirect his gaze down the river. He then watched grimly as the two privates on either side of the convicted man stepped aside. He thought he saw the faint nod of the captain to the sergeant, then reaffirmed it when the sergeant, straddling a loose plank, slipped it from under the hanging man. The man fell through the bridge, using up the slackness of the rope, until it resisted with a resounding snap. Looking down, the Scout noticed a squirrel cracking nuts directly in front of him.

The hanging man's legs twitched three or four times, then stopped. The Scout pulled away from the tree, pulled his hands from his pockets, spit, wiped his mouth over his sleeve, then turned to his horse. He untied the mare from the tree, lifted himself into the saddle, and rode off, his body limp, his head drooping slightly.

He rode silently, hearing but not listening to the incessant clopping of the mare's hooves as they slapped the road. Dust clung to his uniform like flies on a dead carcass. The horse moved slowly, and the Scout made no attempt to hurry it. His hands were loose on the reins and his eyes glared absently into the horse's mane. As he rose, he thought back to the day two weeks ago when he had ridden into the territory.

The sun was just rising over the trees which scattered the countryside. Dew hung thick on the grass, as well as on his blanket. In a nearby tree, a yellowhammer chattered nervously. Other birds were just beginning their morning's litany, while squirrels clicked noisily at fallen acorns. Over by a rooting bush a wild dog gnawed furiously at a small white rabbit. Fur clung to his mouth as he pulled and tore at the animal's coat. The rabbit hung from the dog's mouth, pulsing, a convict of the gallows. No other animals paid attention to the dog, nor he to them.

James Colson woke up at the first sound of the birds. His first instinct was to place his hand directly on his Colt revolver under his pillow, in case anyone was near. After opening his eyes slowly, and seeing no one, he rose slowly and placed the gun in its holster.

After placing the gun in its proper place, Colson shook the dew off of himself, as well as his blanket, then rolled the blanket up and put it back on his saddle. He then readied a small fire for his breakfast. After searching a minute in his pockets, he pulled out a small sack of dried meal. Adding water to this, he placed the doughy substance on the end of a stick, then set it directly into the fire, cooking it until it was charred black. He ate it hot out of the fire, cursing at its ashy taste, yet thankful to have anything hot. I'm more fortunate than most soldiers, he thought. At least I've got this hardtack and a nice blanket. Most ain't got that.

Finishing breakfast, Colson threw dirt over the fire, then put everything back

in his saddle. He grabbed his canteen on the saddle horn, then cussed at himself for forgetting to fill it the day before. He put the canteen back, deciding to get water sometime that day. He left the remaining swallows in the canteen for when he really needed it. Untying the mare, he jumped on it and rode south.

He must have ridden most of the day without spotting any Southern troops. The sun was beginning its descent into the western horizon, casting a pumpkin-like glow over the tree tops. Having drunk the last of his water, Colson decided to stop at a house somewhere and ask for some. He saw one up ahead, and reined his horse into the long drive in front of a huge, brick-red mansion. As he rode down the drive, he noticed a sign reading

Farquhar Manor

Peyton Farquhar, Prop.

Farther back, behind the sign, he could see the outlines of small huts. He guessed these to be slaves' quarters, judging from the mournful work song which haunted the air from that direction. He tried to spit the disgust out of his mouth, but found he couldn't.

As he rode slowly down the drive, Colson saw an older couple sitting on a bench about fifty feet to his left. He noticed that the gentleman dressed in the latest fashion, with a wide Panama hat and smart-fitting frock coat. The woman wore pink taffeta with a high fitting collar. A big straw sunbonnet adorned her head of brilliant red hair.

Colson rode up to the couple, remembering to use his "po' cracker" accent that he had picked up since becoming a Scout. Tipping his hat to the woman, he asked, "Ma'am, I hope I ain't imposin' none by askin' for a canteen fulla watah. I'm powerful thirsty. I lost my regiment in a skirmish down south of heah, and I been lookin' for 'em all day."

"Why, I'd be delighted to. Peyton, entertain this young gentleman while I get his watah."

Colson watched as the woman walked swiftly toward the mansion, followed by two young black girls who had come out from behind the trees near the bench. He climbed down from the mare and tied the reins around the trunk of the nearest oak. As he was turning around to face the gentleman, the man asked, "How's the fighting up front? I hear ol' Grant's got our boys backed in a corner. Even heard that a Northern troop's taken some bridge close to here."

"That's right. The Yanks are a gettin' ready to make another advance. They been a fixin' up the railroads up near Owl Creek Bridge, and they even built a stockade on t'other side. That there Grant has issued an order sayin' that any person who ain't no soldier caught messin' with the railroad, the trains, or even the bridges or tunnels will be hanged on sight. I seen the order myself."

"How far is this Owl Creek Bridge?"

"Oh, I reckon 'bout thirty miles. No, mebbe it's nigh on forty. Depends on which way you ride."

"Are any military forces protecting it?"

"Ya mean Owl Creek?"

The man smiled. "Yes, Owl Creek."

Colson began wondering why the man wanted to know about the bridge. Instead of telling him about the regiment stationed there, he lied. "Well sir, near as I can tell, there's only a picket post 'bout a half mile out, and a guard at this end of the bridge."

Colson noticed the man pondering the information. He then asked Colson, "What if a man could travel around the picket post and maybe trick the sentinel at the end of the bridge. Could he destroy the bridge?"

Colson lied again. "Went by there just a short while ago. That there flood last winter brought a bunch of deadwood up against the pier at this end. I figger it'd burn like the blazes now."

"Has anyone been hung yet?"

"I don't rightly know. I guess not. Reckon nobody'd be crazy 'nuff to try it since they put that there warnin' up."

The man smiled at this, then turned to greet his wife, who was coming toward the men, followed by the same two girls, who were now weighted down by immense water buckets. The woman carried the small canteen. "I thought the horse looked thirsty," she said as she pointed to the girls laden with water.

Colson bowed. "I reckon he is at that. Thank ya kindly, Ma'am. I wish I could repay yo' kindness."

The woman replied, "Oh, don't even think of it. Our boys have to stay in fighting shape so they can whup those damn Yanks."

"Yes Ma'am. Thank you too, sir, for the converse we had. Don't get much chance to talk to townfolk very much. Always on the move, ya know."

"Yes," the man answered. "War does seem gallant, doesn't it?"

Colson bowed reverently to the couple, then untied and mounted his horse. As he turned around to go down the drive, he tipped his hat once more, then rode off. As he rode off, he thought about his conversation with the old man. He decided to report it to his commanding officer that night. To prevent the gentleman from becoming suspicious, he rode south on the road until night fell. Then, he rode back north under a full moon.

Colson shook himself from the fog that had covered his thoughts and looked down the road that he was riding on. As he did, he noticed the familiar brick-red mansion. Passing the entrance, he saw the sign bearing the name of the estates and the owner. A black wreath with black silk ribbons was draped over it. Looking past the sign, he saw a woman dressed all in black sitting on the bench in front of the mansion. She was weeping quietly, her hands holding her head. The horse's clopping caused her to raise up, and when she did, her eyes stared directly at Colson. When she saw his uniform, she went into a catatonic state of bawling. She didn't look back up.

Colson rode a little further past the mansion, then stopped his horse and climbed down. He walked over to the side of the road, bent down, and threw up. Slowly he climbed back in the saddle. He gently nudged the mare's flanks and headed down the road, toward the setting sun. His image grew smaller and smaller, until finally it disappeared.

Thought On Copper

Graham Lewis

Quickly down the slope
We race,
Strange animals on pieces of board,
Mummified in our colored wrappings.
Far below, I see you.
You glide as if gravity were only
 A theory...
Your skies cutting the snow like
A butcher, hair skewered
On the wind.

I realize how easy it would be
To lose control (only for a second)
 And die...
Limbs akimbo, snapped like matches.
Bright red blood on the white,
Man-made snow.

Outfielder

Ken Kempcke

On the warning track
lowering my glove
at the 374 mark,
I glare at the comet
as it screams over the ivy.
breaking a spectator's finger
in the fifth row.
Beer, tipped over in belligerent excitement
shows my cap and uniform
like salt in a wound.
The ball girl catches my eye
and we laugh
as though it were only a game.

Honeymoon

John Stockman

So far north, the compass spins.
It is here that stars come to die,
their skin left in the snow,
their bones scrub pine.
I could never come here alone.

Breath flowers before our eyes;
words fall away and hide.
Our sighs lift
and join with the howls of wolves—
the wind begins.

Our fingertips find
each other, mine dipping
into her and tongues,
sure at any latitude,
melt through curve and fur.

We have come here, yes.
Leaving is less sure.
The darkest night of the year
and our white bodies glow.
I will never be alone.

Candy Wrapper Dream Girl

Stacey Flannigan

Kitten with a cheetah's temper,
Walks through a steel guitar dream;
She likes to watch herself work,
But she won't ever smile,
Just disagrees with everything you say.
Like chocolate ice,
She's so nice.
Warm tequila and long-haired boy—
Take a ride in my fast car....
It hurts because it doesn't last too long,
In only fifteen minutes she'll be
Just another wrapper on the floor.

Linda Fraembs



October Dream

Marlene Weeks

Last night,
I stretched as tall
As I could
And pulled the moon
From the sky.
It made me shiver,
Lying in my palm,
Cold, pale, alien.

I put it in
A peanut butter jar
And set it
On my window sill.
I thought
It wouldn't be lonely
If it could see
The stars.

I watched it
In the still darkness
From my bed,
But it didn't seem
As bright
As it had before.

Tonight
I will put it back.
Besides,
There is a hole
In the sky
Where the moon
Used to be.

Indistinction

Stacey Flannigan

Gran's bubble-eyed in her new split-levels,
Bifocals, she corrects me.
I smile and wait while she checks me over—
All glorified magni-distortion;
Disgusted,
She lays aside optical wisdom,
Content and unfocused once more.

Taking Inventory

Sara Farris

The ritual is unchanging:
after a large family dinner
the farmer father and visiting student daughter
take off in the pick-up to count cows.

While he carefully checks ear-tags in a notebook
(though he knows them all by name),
they talk. She declines the Redman, offered in jest,
and they learn, once more, to be comfortable.

This is when she asks about
the grain market and Grandmother's surgery.
This is when he tells her
he is proud of her work.

Later, little will be said.
Back at the house he will
check the oil in her car and tell her
not to stay away so long.

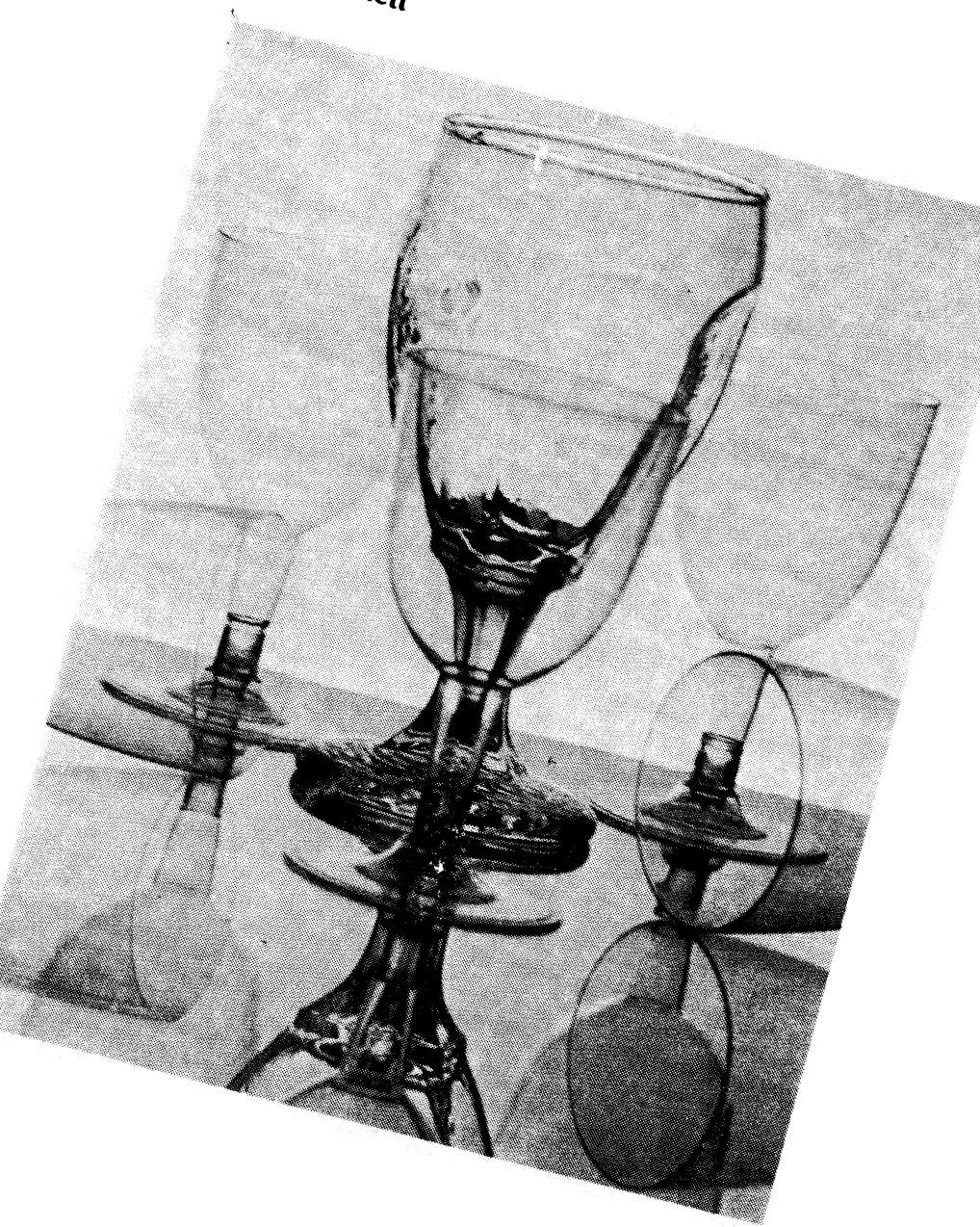
She can feel, against the belly of the car,
the familiar, rough gravel, the narrow blacktop,
and finally the peace of the highway.

Flying In From K-Mart, Nebraska

Michelle Mitchell

There is a sale
on Irregular Gloves
In the Bargain Basement,
Large, cellular women,
dig deep
for new shear-to-waist
control top
uplift
sandlefoot
No-Nonsense
panty hose
before they get
to the glove table,
leaning their polyester bodies
over, spilling out kleenex
from their underwire
Cross-Your-Heart
Dollar Days bras
They grab the matching glove
from *That Woman*, and
searching for their keys,
beneath the ketchup packets,
Sweet 'N Low, and
a roll from Ponderosa,
They hear "Attention Ladies,
Men's soap on a rope only 99 cents,"
dashing

Nick Haskett



Bone China

Michelle Mitchell

"I just came into town a couple of days ago. I noticed your place right off." A bearded man stood on the threshold to the shop, staring around the room at all the glass, porcelain, and fabric. "Yep, it strikes me as being quite an interesting place to browse." He took a mechanical bank and turned it over in his hands. Pearl winced at his semi-gruff treatment of the bank, but smiled a stiff smile. "Exactly the kind of thing I encourage," she said, trying to emphasize that she would rather have him just browse and not touch. He was probably a student from the college. They only look, never buy.

She came around the counter to get a better look at him. His face revealed more maturity as she came closer; however, he couldn't have been more than twenty-five. His brown eyes shined as he spoke, and they sharply contrasted his sandy lashes and brows. He moved his head from side to side, examining the workings of a spinning wheel. As he did so, his blonde hair fell perfectly into place, except for a few short strands which stood on end like a cowlick. His white shirt was a bright backdrop to the darkened objects around him. A moment later he bent easily to see a brass spittoon in his comfortable denim cut-offs.

"I'm Pearl Coffrin. I own this antique shop. Please feel free to ask any questions, if you like." He looked up. "Thank you, thank you very much." She admired his congeniality. If he was a student, he was the nicest she'd seen in years. As she returned to the cash register and pretended to rearrange some old campaign buttons, he made his way around the cluttered tables and shelves, paying particular attention to the paintings along the walls. "I like this one." He pointed to a seascape propped in a corner. She looked up. "Yes, a great many of my customers gravitate towards his work. He's a local talent. I sell some of his pieces when I have the space." He looked reflective for a moment and came around to the table nearest her, stepping up to the counter to introduce himself. "I'm Shawn Livingston."

As he held out his hand to shake hers, his sleeve caught the top of a hand-painted, bone china plate, which was sitting in a brass holder. The shattering sound it made as it hit the floor rang through the shop and both faces fell. Pearl bent slowly and saw that the pieces were scattered all over the wooden floor. "I'm so sorry!" Shawn said. "I feel terrible; please, let me..." He came around the counter and began to pick up the slivers. "Please forgive me. I have to be the clumsiest person. Is it terribly valuable? I'll certainly pay for it." The words spilled from his mouth. "Yes, Mr. Livingston, you certainly will," she said, the breath catching in her throat. She pointed to the sign above the door. It read: **If it gets broken, consider it sold.** "How much is it?" he asked, already reaching for his wallet. "About \$75.00, but I'll take \$65.00." "Did you say \$65.00?" "Yes, Mr. Livingston, is there something wrong?" "Well, yes," he said, keeping his hand in his pocket. "I don't have that kind of money. You see I just graduated from college. I'm running low." There was an awkward silence as she continued to clean up the mess, the blood-filled veins and brown patches stretched tight on her hands as she put the chips into a sack.

"Well, Mr. Livingston, I have to charge you." "I realize that," he replied. He thought for a moment. "Perhaps I could be of some service to you." Pearl's face reddened. "I don't need help at the shop, Mr. Livingston." He looked down. "That's not exactly what I had in mind. You see, I came to Middleton to do some painting during my vacation, and I'd be honored if you'd be my model. The painting would be my way of paying you back." "Oh my no, Mr. Livingston," she replied, eyes bright. "I wouldn't make a good subject." Shawn took her hand. "Please, Mrs. Coffrin. I can't think of any other way."

She looked at his hand on hers and then at his face. Pearl saw sincerity in his eyes and grew excited over the thought of having her portrait painted. "Where would you do it?" Shawn said, "I have my things set up at my place, and I can come walk you therefrom here. Pearl's shop was an addn to her home; there would be no problem there, and she knew from his expression that she had nothing to fear from him. "Well," she said hesitantly, "I'd like that just fine." He smiled, "Great! We'll start tomorrow evening at six." He whistled as he strolled out the door, the bells clanging behind him.

He walked her to his house at exactly six the next evening. When they arrived, Pearl's heart fluttered faster. "It's nice," she said, once they were inside. "Yeah, I like it. A good friend of mine is letting me stay here for a short vacation. It's a good place to get away to." His voice trailed off as he led her further into the house. She lifted her black skirt as she stepped between the boxes and the bags.

Strewn around the room were books, tennis rackets, stacks of *Runner's World*, and records by groups she'd never heard of: Rush, REO, and Queen. A small t.v. with foil on the antennae sat on a folding table in the kitchen. The table wasn't cleared from dinner. Styrofoam containers reading **Big Mac Big Mac Big Mac**, and **Large Fries** cluttered one place mat.

Pearl thought of her own dining room, the rust and red linoleum, the oak table set with bone china, and the china cabinet filled with pink depression glass. She thought of her shadow box on the wall, holding tins of Watkin's Pepper and Old Dutch Cleanser, ivory hatpins, skeleton keys, and button hooks. And she saw her piesafe brimming with carnival glass, and remembered her dinner conversations, the lonely spoon clapping against the soup bowl.

She was pulled from her daze when she heard Shawn say, "Sorry about the mess. I meant to pick things up, but, well, I'm kinda meeting myself coming and going for the time being." He grinned, hoping to break the ice. She searched for the right reply. "Oh, it's quite alright. I understand how it must be, being on vacation and all." She crossed her arms in front of her, feeling a chill. She felt old and dried up in comparison to him. She tried to shrug the feeling off.

The room he stopped in was smaller than the others they'd walked through. An easel stood in the center next to a card table covered with tubes, brushes, and palates smeared with paint. Newspaper covered the floor, and a tall stool was set about five feet from the table. A lamp with a flexible neck shined onto the stool. Shawn put a padded, white sheet on the seat. "Please sit down here." She hesitated, "I've never been painted, I mean, I've never had my portrait done before." "Mrs. Coffrin, I guarantee it won't hurt a bit."

As he mixed the paint, he looked at her as though for the first time. Her features were more striking than pretty. She was like a paper doll. Well-defined cheekbones jutted in a tight, white wrapper, which draped grey beneath frightened, seawater eyes. Small growing lines surrounded her eyes and lips, now moving nervously. In defiance of her age, a shock of black hair, parted down the middle, grew to her shoulders, straight and threaded silver, worn down for the first time in years. He made a few sketches on trace paper and tried to make her feel a little more at ease. At the end of forty-five minutes their conversation had developed into something which flowed easier. He invited her to join him for dinner the following evening, in order for them to become better acquainted.

Pearl brushed her hair that next evening until it shined. As her fingers fumbled with her shell combs, she thought of how nice it was to have someone there for her. She dressed casual, as he told her, in a navy skirt and a white blouse. Shawn knocked loudly at 6:00. "Ready?" She slipped her arm in his to indicate that she was.

Shawn pulled up to the parking block at McDonald's. "Here?" she asked, almost giggling. "Here." He came over to her side and opened the door. People were talking and laughing; some turned to look at them as they walked in. Pearl felt as though she were back at college, eating with her steady. When it was finally their turn to order, she stared at the neon menu. "I'll have an apple pie, a chicken sandwich, and coffee, please." "Ma'am, we don't have chicken sandwiches; we have Chicken McNuggets," the cashier droned without looking up. "Oh, dear, I'm sorry, well, I'll just have a hamburger then." "Want anything on it?" "No thank you," Pearl said, her cheeks flushed and one hand at her throat. Shawn held back a laugh as he ordered a Big Mac, fries, and a Coke.

He led her to a booth in the back near the Ronald McDonald carousel. "Oh my, look at that," Pearl said. Shawn thought she was talking about the play equipment, but when he followed her gaze, he saw a young couple in a passionate embrace nuzzling each other's necks below a picture of Mayor Mc-Cheese. "Could we please sit somewhere else?" "Sure," Shawn said with a grin. "Over here." He led her to a table beside a harmless family of four.

The meal went well, both enjoying and learning. "You've never been married?" "Once," she said. "He's gone now. It was a heart attack." She changed the subject quickly. "Have you a steady gir?" Shawn looked down at his french fries, a rush of red filling his cheeks. "Yes, there's someone special back home. We'll be married next February." For a moment he had a far away look. "That's wonderful, Shawn, congratulations!" Pearl squeezed his arm.

The dinners at fast-food places and ones at her house continued for two weeks, the duration of the sittings. Shawn had become a companion as well as a helping hand. He even helped her wallpaper. On the last sitting both Pearl and Shawn were quieted. Shawn would be leaving the following afternoon. "Shawn, I'm certainly anxious to see this!" "You should be," he said with a paint brush clenched in his grinning mouth. She returned a smile.

Later in the evening he presented her with a brilliant watercolor. She took one look at the painting and said, "It's...it's not me." "Yes, it is," he said, looking at her. "No it isn't. This woman is, well, she's young...she's beautiful. Look,

her hair isn't grey. Her skin, so clear and smooth. Shawn, this isn't me." She looked up at him, feeling betrayed. Shawn put one hand on her shoulder. "Pearl, I paint what I feel the person is. Look at the painting, really look. Don't you see?" Pearl examined the painting closer, noting his impressionistic style with its painterly lines and soft edges. The painting was good, no doubt, and, for a second, she felt as though she were looking at her college portrait. "How?" she asked in disbelief. "I'll miss you," he said. "Shawn, thank you. I'll miss you, too." She fell silent as he wrapped the painting carefully, so as not to smear the wet paint. The evening air was quiet and heavy, and the walk home was silent like the air.

He came into the house for a short time. "You don't like the painting?" "Yes, I like it very much, Shawn; I was just...surprised, that's all." "I've got something for you." "Shawn, really, you...well, I don't have anything for you." "Open it," he said as he threw her the small package he had tucked in his jeans. It fell to the floor and she sat down on one of the dining chairs to retrieve it. Her white hands shook when the ribbon pulled apart. "Shawn, you're really something," she said, holding up two Wendy's coupons. "I'd probably catch my death if I were a fast foodaholic like you, but I do intend to use these!" She rose and kissed him on the cheek. On his way to the door he turned. "Live a little," he said as he let himself out.

She stared at the door for awhile and then at the wrapped painting. She got up and held it in her hands, tearing back the paper. The tears spilled down her cheeks as she put the painting in the hall closet, facing it to the wall.

She Was A Doll

Nick Haskett

Her face was pink velvet,
my fingers, sandpaper,
cutting hearts of flesh,
which fell to the rosewood
floor.

Velour, brown hair,
follicles frozen by my touch,
melted during the night,
another wet dream.

Red licorice lips,
I gobbled off her face,
leaving perfect teeth,
but no reason to smile.

The Seventh Day

Geoffrey Andres

Windows open.
Nothing stirs outside.
Even curtains move
cotton quiet
in the breeze,
like latecomers in church.

Bells sing solemn tenor
in the distance,
a small dog barks,
just once.
The morning passes
on soft slippered feet,
even Sundays seem
almost afraid
they will end.

Blade Of Grass (On A Golf Course)

Ken Kempcke

All I see is me like others,
green surrounded
wind by tossed,
flattened by moving weights occasionally
but again enough flexible to straight stand.

Target of chemicals putrid
which drench me above
the knees, like a hot day
on sticky soda pop,
and make me grow itch.

Until up scoops metal cold
below me the dirt
and I wildly through hurled air
crowd on a landing,
up then plucked
and back into place
by heavy rubber stamped.

Ken Kempcke

The old English court
has a jury consisting of giggling school girls,
save for one, who has piercing eyes,
a conscience.
Declared guilty by the foreman, an old witch
of a school teacher, because I strangled a black man
when I was very, very young.
Strangled, because he did not share my opinion
about lead.
There are some who believe he didn't die,
but now lives as a lonely female
on the other side of the tracks,
sifting through garbage for dinner.
Not just to spite me, I think,
but because he is scared.

The hills around the maximum security prison
in North Carolina are crisp...gold and red in the fall.
The warden and I walk through them,
discussing Chautauquas.
I almost want to be here
just to experience everything in life.
Other inmates in Izod clothes pass their days in the lounge.
I have dinner with some, the rest are quiet and unstable.
I buy stableness from my cellmates,
but I own more than they think.

A St. Paulie Girl is smuggled onto my dinner table,
but the Doberman guard dog rips at my turtle neck,
and I abandon her.
Yesterday I lost my watch
digging trenches outside the gate.
Swept away by lawyers, now,
placed in double jeopardy for a single crime,
I have flashbacks of my hands around his neck.
Hands which remain clamped even after I leave,
tightly squeezing the wind pipe
until the body changes and she falls,

violently spilling red jewelry
onto the pavement.

Upon my return, I wish to write like Jack Abbott,
but being locked up all day allows me no time.
Inmates stab me with silverware and razors.
I stand by the side of my bleeding, mutilated body
in the prison chapel.
Mortally injured, perspiring, frantic,
I gaze up at me with the eyes of the very, very young
and ask, "Are they forgettable?"
Even in death, I think not.

Cigarette Smoke

Jean M. Davis

The carousel spirals
Away from me
Delicate horses
Rocking gently
Toward the
Overhead
Light

Pretty girls laugh
As they tip
Their heads
Riding side-
Saddle on
Painted
Animals

Up and down music
Plays on and on
The handsome barker
Sings along
"Come and ride"
On troubador
Ponies

Future Love

R. Lawson

I
never thought
I could love
a short,
fat,
wrinkled-up bald man,
but I love you.
Your toothless grin
makes me
giddy with happiness
and your garbled attempts
at speaking
are like the precious melodies
of the drab song sparrow.
Your skin,
wrinkled here,
and silky-smooth there,
invites my hand
to touch and caress you.
I love you,
my short,
fat,
wrinkled-up bald man—
my baby,
my son.



Dancing In The Street

Betsy Acklin

One cigarette can get me from the corner to the grade school, so I puff on it slow and throw the matches in the gutter. I can always get a light, and anyways, I like the look of that matchbook laying open on the smashed beer can in the street.

I think about James now. He's been waiting maybe twenty minutes for me, and right now he's probably shooting baskets with that Stickler kid. My feet move faster, 'cause I know I'm late, and James might be getting nervous, especially if Stickler went home already and didn't hang around to shoot with him. If I don't make it before five-thirty he'll be by himself and maybe be spooked. I suck a little harder on my smoke.

Leaving the sidewalk, I cut through two lawns, down a back alley, and hop a fence. I cross the street to the playground fence. My cigarette gets thrown in the weeds as I scout for James. Next thing I know, there he is under the basketball hoop, waving at me wild and spastic the way kids do when they see you. Stickler's not there, but James has got his basketball, and he gives me a big grin before he turns around and tries a lay up.

I try not to let anyone notice me watching him so much. I mean, sometimes when I come to get James, and I see him there, little and weird and happy, just doing his own favorite thing, I choke up. I know he's just a bratty kid without any sense, but looking at him, I think of me sometimes. He's pretty innocent. You know, like he thinks everyone can be whatever they want and just play basketball forever if they want to. Like I said, it gets me in the throat, but I control it.

I let out a whistle, and James speeds to the fence, his skinny legs pinwheeling on the blacktop.

"I made four free throws in practice today!"

"Out of how many?"

"Ten. Stickler only made three. He's not so good."

"Go for at least six out of ten."

"That's more than half."

"That's sixty percent. Work on it, and you'll be able to do it easy."

"Olympics, here I come."

Mom thinks I'm doing her a favor by picking James up after practice. Walking James home is probably the highpoint of my day, so I consider it a favor to myself. I spend my days working in a greasy gas station, waiting on people who would rather be somewhere else, doing something more important, just like I would. I do my job, but I don't think about it. I don't focus on faces or cars or my own thoughts. I get through the day. But my time with James is alive because he gets me back into the living world. He gets me talking, thinking, arguing, and focusing again.

James' legs, seven-year-old twigs, stretch to keep up with my longer, stronger Levi legs. I pull a smoke out of my pocket, seeing James watch me carefully. He notices I don't light it, but just put it in my lips and let it sort of dangle. The collar on my jean jacket looks good turned up, so I flip it into place and shake my long hair so it will fall over the collar, just right. James shakes his fly-away hair around a little bit, making it fuzzier. I feel a little like James Dean and a lot like a sixteen-year-old Clint Eastwood. I've got the cigarette so it will hang from my lower lip with no trouble, so I turn to James with my eyes half-closed and give him a good smirk. James squints his eyes and sticks out his chin, looking a lot like a little, nearsighted kid trying to act cool. I let him try.

I follow the steady drub, drub, drub of James dribbling down the sidewalk

ahead of me. He's trying fancy stuff; switching hands, faking out nearby trash cans, and dribbling through his legs.

"Slam dunk!" he yells and darts across the street to a trash can for the shot. He slams it, then hops into the street to do a victory dance. I tell him to get out of the street. He dances more. I yell for him to get his ass out of the road before it's hit by a bus, but he keeps on dancing.

"I'm the world's greatest! No one will hit me!"

Some horns honk, wheels squeal, and a siren wails. My hands sweat, and my face feels hot. I spit out my cigarette.

"Get your ass over here now!" James stops dancing in the empty street and walks slowly to the can to get his ball back. He stalks over to me, staring me down.

"There's not even any cars in the street."

"It's stupid to dance around like that, James, really stupid. You don't play around in the street."

"Don't you call me stupid! You aren't my *dad*, or anything."

I feel my chest tighten and do a slow burn as the word "dad" enters my system. Mini-flashbacks come and go through my head—there's me in trouble; Dad not knowing what to do with me, James is starting to look too much like Dad...he sounds too much like Dad, there's Mom alone after he left...she's pregnant and cries a lot, there's a few of Dad's shirts in the closet, he never comes back to get them. He came back last month for the first time in six years with a birthday present for James. A basketball. He calls him "Jamie." No one else does. James plays ball every day. I work...that's me, explaining to my counselor that I have to drop out—we need extra money, there I am, pumping gas, and Dad calls James "Jamie" and leaves fifteen minutes after he gets there....

My hands land hard on James' cheek, and I feel the sting and my anger fly out my fingers and onto his face. I slap him for looking so much like Dad, for reminding me of him, for bringing up the whole rotten mess in the first place. He doesn't cry, but he slowly places his ball at my feet and tears off up the street towards our apartment. I bend to pick up the ball, and my whole pack of cigarettes falls in the gutter. I kick them because they seem to be in the way, then I cuss myself for blaming all my hurt on James.

Mom's not home yet when I reach the stoop, because James is sitting by himself on the steps. I lean on the railing, the ball under my arm. The sun's setting in my eyes, and I whistle a little, trying to ease the tension I feel all around James and myself. It's an unnatural tightness that I would rather not feel. Softly, James says, "What would you do if I got hit by a car?"

"I'd be mad at you for playing in the street."

"But what if it was by accident, and I died, and you never saw me again?"

This is a question that I consider very carefully, because James is very serious. I never see Dad, but I never miss him; I don't let myself. But James...damn little serious kid. I hand him his ball and lay a hand on his shoulder. Mom leans out the window above us to announce that dinner will be on in an hour. So she was home after all. I sit down to talk with my brother, spending more than fifteen minutes with him, talking until we are pretty damn late for dinner.

Linda Fraembs



Cleo

Marlene Weeks

A soft shadow
Alights on my pillow.
Full moon eyes
Blink with childlike
Innocence.
She is fluid and silent,
Like the night.
Her

petite

paws

pad

Across my patchwork quilt.
She becomes a black velvet coil,
Warming my heart
As well as my feet.

Teddy Bear

Ken Kempcke

Polyurethane is coming out
from a ripped seam
where old stuffed Teddy's ear used to be.
Yellowing fur
hugged away in many places.
Cast indifferently
on the soiled and sweaty mattress,
in the empty, dingy room,
his marble pupils
long for simpler play, more stuffing
and a lot less fur.

Prelude

Becky Lawson

The wind ran its fingers
through the tangled mass
of tree branches
as the oak lifted its face
to the sky.

The tree shook its head,
letting its leaves
drift down to rest
on earthen shoulders
in an auburn mantle.

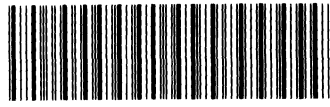
On the horizon
a deep pussywillow-gray cloud
was held closely to the ground
by the tenacious skeleton fingers
of the tiny forest.

The wind raced the galloping clouds
and threw a sea spray of leaves
into my face.

The trees tossed their heads,
glorying in the feeling of unleashed power
which hung heavily in the air
like a wet wool blanket on a sagging clothesline.

A cat's purr of thunder rumbled,
buried far away in the throat of the forest.
Suddenly, little bullets penetrated the air
with shrapnel intensity.

It had come,
the first storm of fall,
a prelude to the fury of winter,
a reminder of summer's devilry,
and a promise of spring's wild sweetness.



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THE

Editor

John Stockman

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