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The Vehicle, Fall 1985

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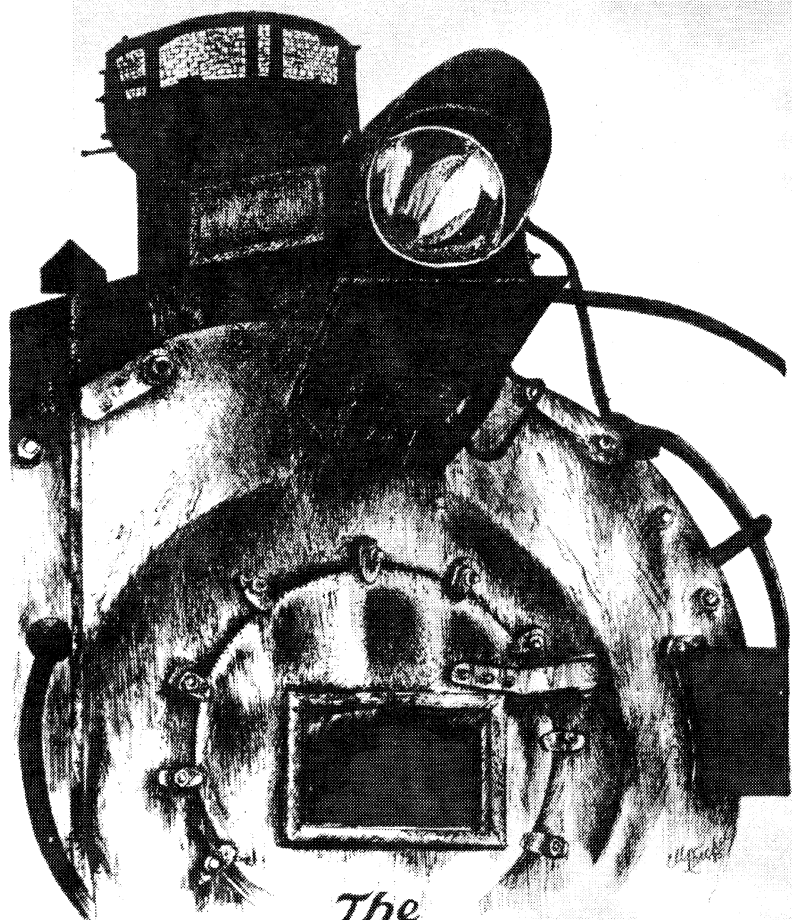
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The
VEHICLE
FALL '85

THE VEHICLE

Vol. 27, No. 1

Fall 1985

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Satchel Ass

I always wondered what Missouri was like. Now I know, and I've sworn to myself not ever to be curious again. I've been standing here the better part of a day, and the closest I've come to most Missourians is about six feet. They all just speed up like I'm going to jump in their car, or they look at me like I'm some poor lost soul living on the highway. I've got to admit it, I do look pretty bad. Traveling does awful things to your looks. I don't think I'd pick myself up by now.

I'm standing here sun-burned and smelling like I've got a locker room packed up in my dufflebag. I'm just glad I'm used to it. My cut-off work pants and my t-shirt have started to take on the same dingy-grey tint. The hang of my shorts, now knee length, has given me the idea for my new nickname, Satchel Ass. At least it's better than the names I've been through in the past few days; embarrassment keeps me from mentioning them.

I'm calling this next cigarette lunch. It's been so slow that I've only picked up one ride. Some generic looking guy in a Plymouth. He was like most of the people you meet your first day at a new school, at least the ones I met my first day of junior college. He was all smiles until he figured out I just wanted a ride, and figured out I didn't give two shits about what a hell of a wheeler dealer he was. By then he figured out I was probably stinking up his bright, new, white vinyl upholstery, hell of a guy, so he lets me off at this exit in the middle of nowhere, takes the exit and gets right back on the highway. Oh well, he probably wouldn't want some smelly joker like myself patting him on the back anyway.

This sun is just incredible, but it'll be down soon enough. I should've called that cigarette dinner, but I can fix that. I've got another one handy. It's pretty good, even though I hate having the same meal twice in one day. I had a huge breakfast this morning at this truckstop, so I just consider the rest of the day a fast, good for the soul.

I couldn't get a ride today if I wore a tube top and four-inch heels. I think I'll just call it a day. There's an overpass about two or three hundred yards down the road, and it looks like a fine little bachelor pad. I should have bought some food at the truck stop, but I bought a People magazine instead. It's a great mag; I love to read about Tom Selleck's career in drama or how tough it is for Pia Zadora to earn the respect of the film community. "I know Pia, they just don't understand." By the end of the article it becomes clear to me. The movie public just isn't smart enough, or maybe mature enough, to understand her films. I guess I've got no room to talk, though; I'm just some satchel ass on the highway and she's a STAR.

It's hard to see much from the top of a highway bridge, but it's the best place to be on a hot summer evening. The road that crosses overhead is hot, but the concrete at the top of the incline is flat and cool. My sleeping bag makes for a great couch, along with the magazine and half a canteen of whiskey. It looks like a nice evening at home. The best part is that after a while the mosquitoes won't have anything to do with you, if you smell bad

enough. The first couple of nights out I would just walk until I found a rest stop or a bathroom to sleep in. Man, I was all eaten up. By now my disguise is complete, and they just leave me alone.

Thinking about my scent always starts me to feeling a little edgy, though. I didn't really have to be so dirty. I started this trip with about two hundred and fifty dollars, but on my second day out these two guys pick me up and roll me for two hundred bucks. They take me over one hundred miles, and when we're out someplace where I've got nowhere to go, this guy pulls out this kitchen knife and asks if he can empty my wallet for me. "Sure," I say like I'm loving it, and they drop me off, laughing their asses off the whole time. I told this state cop, while he was shaking me down and checking my I.D., that they were kind enough to throw it out the window a little ways down the road. He just looked at me like the whole thing was my fault and told me to get my ass off the highway. I just sat in the shade for an hour or so and jumped right back on the road. I couldn't decide who I liked better, the cop or those two assholes. It doesn't matter anyway.

For about two hours after I got dropped off, I felt pretty good, but then the whole episode just started driving me crazy. I started wondering what those two fellas do for fun. Rolling old ladies and beating up drunks must be fun for a couple of swingers like that. The whole thing started eating at me, like an ulcer way down deep in my stomach. I mean, it's not like I'm living high on the hog, with everything I own packed in one dufflebag. Still, I was keeping my cool until this truck blows by. My hat flies off and the next thing I know my beautiful wide-brimmed straw work hat is covered with tire tracks. Destroyed. That's what did it. I was crazy for the better part of a day. I tried to relax and reason it all out. I sat in the shade for a while drinking a little water and eating this sandwich I'd bought that morning, but it was no use. I was pissed, and I was going to stay pissed until I could get it all straight in my head. I thought about the fifty or so dollars I had stuffed in my sock, but that didn't help much.

Well, there was no reason to be pissed and sit, so I decided to get a ride and maybe that would cool me off a little. I washed my face and dragged myself back up to my feet. I was a little better, but I just couldn't shake the feeling that I was the biggest moron on Earth. "Carry two hundred bucks in your wallet. Stupid, boy. Just plain stupid."

After a few more minutes of kicking myself in the butt, I got back on the road.

A couple picked me up in about ten minutes; what a break. I tossed my bag in the back seat and crumbled myself in behind it.

"Hello," I said, settling myself in.

"Hello. Where you off to?" he said. "Oh, my name's Dean Jansen, and this is my wife, Clara." Clara glanced back and nodded in my direction.

"I'm Travis Glass. And I'm headed towards Cairo, Illinois. Kind of way down at the tip of the state."

"Yeah, I've heard of the town, but I've never been through, though." Dean was throwing a little grin back, while he went on a little about his travels of Illinois. Clara remained silent, looking straight ahead. When Dean asked her if she had ever been through that part of the state, she just glanced over to him

and gave a little snort and looked back to the road.

Dean looked back again. "You been on the road long, Travis?"

"Just a few days, but it seems more like a couple of months." I paused. "It feels like I've been slummin' forever." That's when Clara went off. She turned her head around like a spinning globe.

"You look like you been slummin' all your life." Then she whipped around to look at Dean. "I don't know why you insist on pickin' up every piece of white-trash that's lazy enough to be some no good vagrant. It just don't make sense to me what good you think you're doin'. We're just good quiet people, and you think we got to carry somebody's load for 'em. As God looks down, I think I'm agin' faster every minute with that 'everybody's got somethin' good in 'em' trash you keep on spoutin' out. Every day you say that, and it just ain't true."

By that point my head was numb, and all I could think about was popping the handle of the door she was leaning on. There she'd go, right out the door, skidding and bouncing down the fiery hot highway. Her voice kept screeching on about the injustice she was subjected to day after day. It just drove me on. I could see that fat middle-aged hag smeared across fifty yards of highway, still bitching about what an ass I was. It felt good to see her dying in my head, but then I felt the car slow. Clara rolled her eyes back at me and said, "End of the ride. This is where we get off."

I patted Dean on the shoulder and thanked him for the ride and the engaging conversation and dragged myself from the car.

I looked at the mile marker and saw that we'd only travelled twenty some miles. I would have killed her five or six more times if the ride had been any longer.

The day was definitely off to a bad start, and by that time I was half convinced that the old bag was right about me being white-trash, running away from whatever she said I was running away from. I didn't know, and I was too pissed off to sit down and think it out. So I did what any running white-trash would do; I started walking and looking for a ride.

"Bitch." I said. "Fat, narrow-minded, high and mighty bitch." I just kept seeing her face, broad and pale, mouth open wide, going on about getting me out of her car. Man, I was pissed. I don't even know how to describe it. Damn, I was mad.

I went a long time just walking, steaming in the sun, thinking about riding in the car with them. The man quietly driving and his wife just going on and on, like I had wronged her somehow. I kept seeing myself throwing her out of that speeding car. Her skin would glide onto the pavement like butter on a hot skillet, and she would fall apart like a whole fryer, just a little overcooked. My teeth clinched tighter with the thought of her lying naked and spread out like a poorly prepared bucket of chicken. The only thing left was that putrid head, still screaming about the stupidity of hitchhiking and picking up hitchhikers. I could see my highwaymen return, kitchen knives in hand, to feast on the remains, only to be chased off by that putrid head. I gagged and laughed at the same time.

The squeak of brakes brought me back to the road. It was a beat-up old pickup about fifty yards down the road. When I reached the truck I saw it was

a woman in her sixties. Her long grey-brown hair was tied back in a pony tail, and she was wearing a faded work shirt with the sleeves rolled up to her shoulders.

"Why don't ya throw that stuff in the back so we can be off," she said. "What's your name there, boy?"

"Travis."

"Have a drink there, Travis. You look like you got a nice edge on there." My teeth were still clinched pretty tight; I guess she noticed.

"Thank ya, ma'am." She handed me a bottle in a brown bag. I could tell right away that a drink or two was going to help.

"I'm Margie, Travis. And if you don't mind me sayin' so, you look a little ate up. How long you been on this road?"

"I think about half my life, Margie. I'm about ready for a break. There ain't too much farther to go before I get home. That's Cairo, Illinois; you ever been there?"

"Well, I was there with my husband a number of years ago. He was workin' down around there for a while."

After that she kept quiet, and I lit a cigarette and started concentrating on the bottle she had put under my supervision.

Margie was a handsome woman with dark brown skin and rugged work hands. She'd look over from time to time to grab a drink or tell me a little something about living in Missouri (pronounced Missoura). She was the best ride I'd had the whole trip. I think because she didn't want my life story; she was just happy to have some company on a hot summer day.

That whiskey started in on me in no time, so after awhile I wasn't much for conversation. So we just flew along, relaxing, smiling at one another from time to time. It wasn't long before I was asleep, more like nearly dead.

Before I knew it we were pulling off of the highway. Margie gave me a little nudge and asked if I'd like to clean up a little and have a sandwich. It wasn't the hardest decision I ever made.

"That's Glen, my husband, up on the porch there. Why don't ya go up there and introduce yourself."

"All right."

"Glen, this is Travis. He's going to have a sandwich before he gets back to his trip." She did all the introducing that needed to be done.

"Hello, Travis," Glen said, sticking out his big rugged hand. "Pleasure to meet ya."

"Hello, Glen. The pleasure's all mine." Glen smiled big at me.

"Well, Travis, I wish I could stick around, but I promised I'd get some weldin' done at a buddy's place tonight. I really think this fella wants to lose a little more money to me. He thinks he's a hell of a gamble. Cards and baseball ya know."

I smiled and said goodbye.

Margie came back out with a couple of fried egg sandwiches and a big glass of iced tea. "Has Glen run off already? Nothin's better than watchin' baseball for that man."

After I ate, Margie brought out a big wet towel and a jar of lotion. "I hate to throw ya back on the road, Travis. Ya look like ya could use a night off the

road. Why don't ya sleep out here on the porch tonight, and I'll get Glen to give ya a ride out to the highway in the morning." Margie had a way of asking the easiest questions.

After I agreed, she went into the house so I could get to sleep.

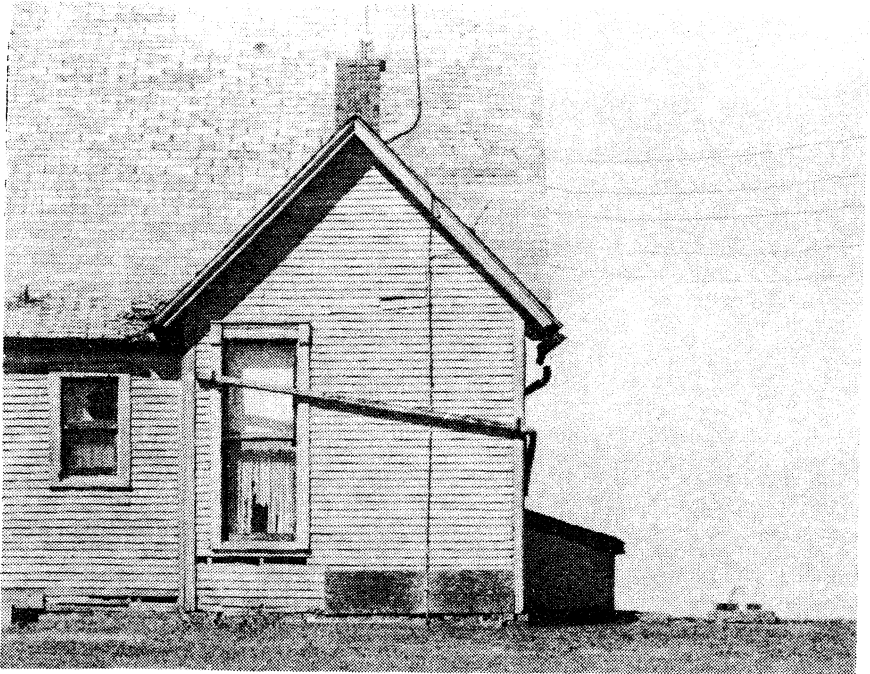
The tap on my shoulder was Glen's. "Ready to go there, Travis?"

"Sure," I said. I washed my face and wetted down my hair. Glen handed me half a bottle of what Margie had shared with me yesterday, and we made our way back to the highway. It was still dark, and we were both a little too dazed to talk.

As we approached the highway, I told Glen thanks for everything. He just smiled and nodded. He was out of sight by the time I'd walked down from the ramp.

That was a day ago, and I'm ready to get home now. It's only a day away. I thought about visiting an old junior college friend of mine in St. Louis, but I've decided against it. I need to get home and get the rest of this stink off of me. But until then, I'll just sit here and enjoy my magazine and have another cigarette.

Michael D. Smith



Doug Anderson

Counseling

He's putting his head in a blender
and turning it on high.
Brains, blood, black hairs, and skull.

He's going to put it in a baggie
and save it in the freezer.
He can pull it out and use it when need.

Shrink is going to thaw it in the microwave,
take out the mold that's growin'.
And then add some spices so it will be of good taste.

Shrink is going to help him with the jigsaw puzzle.
It's a picture of a mind.
Then Shrink is going to put the head back on the neck
so it can remember to pay on the way out.

Christy Dunphy

Grave Site

Thousands of homeless
Pass by one corrugated pine box,
Which holds
One blue lady
And a Nieman—Marcus bag.

Jay D. Fisk

Sight—Seeing Outside Phoenix

I. The King of the Mountain

A boy pulls lizards from a jar
and, one-by-one, tosses them
over the cliff, smiling
as they fall from his sight.

When the lizards are gone
he chucks the jar and
cocks his ear to listen
for the break. A hang glider

suddenly folds, spiralling
down like a winged goose.
The boy grins. No bird
ascends from the ash.

III. First Confession

Forgive me, Father, for I have
thinned my hope to a plea,
bounced prayer off night's dark wall,
its million blacked-out stars.

Forgive me. I know no God
but death, the singular smack
of flesh on stone. I am lost
on this hill, this mountain

engulfed by the night. Father,
the dead burn within me
as I drop, my knees
too stiff for the fall.

II. Contemplating the Sunset

My hand grips down
on the sand. Rock
is earth-flesh, callous.
Twenty-two years land

and tumble, bruised,
across this ledge. All rolls
as I roll over cacti,
underbrush, wildflowers.

Who hears the sky burst orange,
the wind whip this ledge
apart? I am deaf, blind,
amazed at my own stability.

Bob Zordani

Performance

The first trombonist's slide
skims on a milky mixture of
slide cream laced with sweat
and saliva wrung from his lips
by the mouthpiece
pressed
to his teeth.

Hearing applause,
he bows in the puddle
excreted from his horn
and makes his exit
with a dripping shoe.

Dan Von Holten

Nightmare

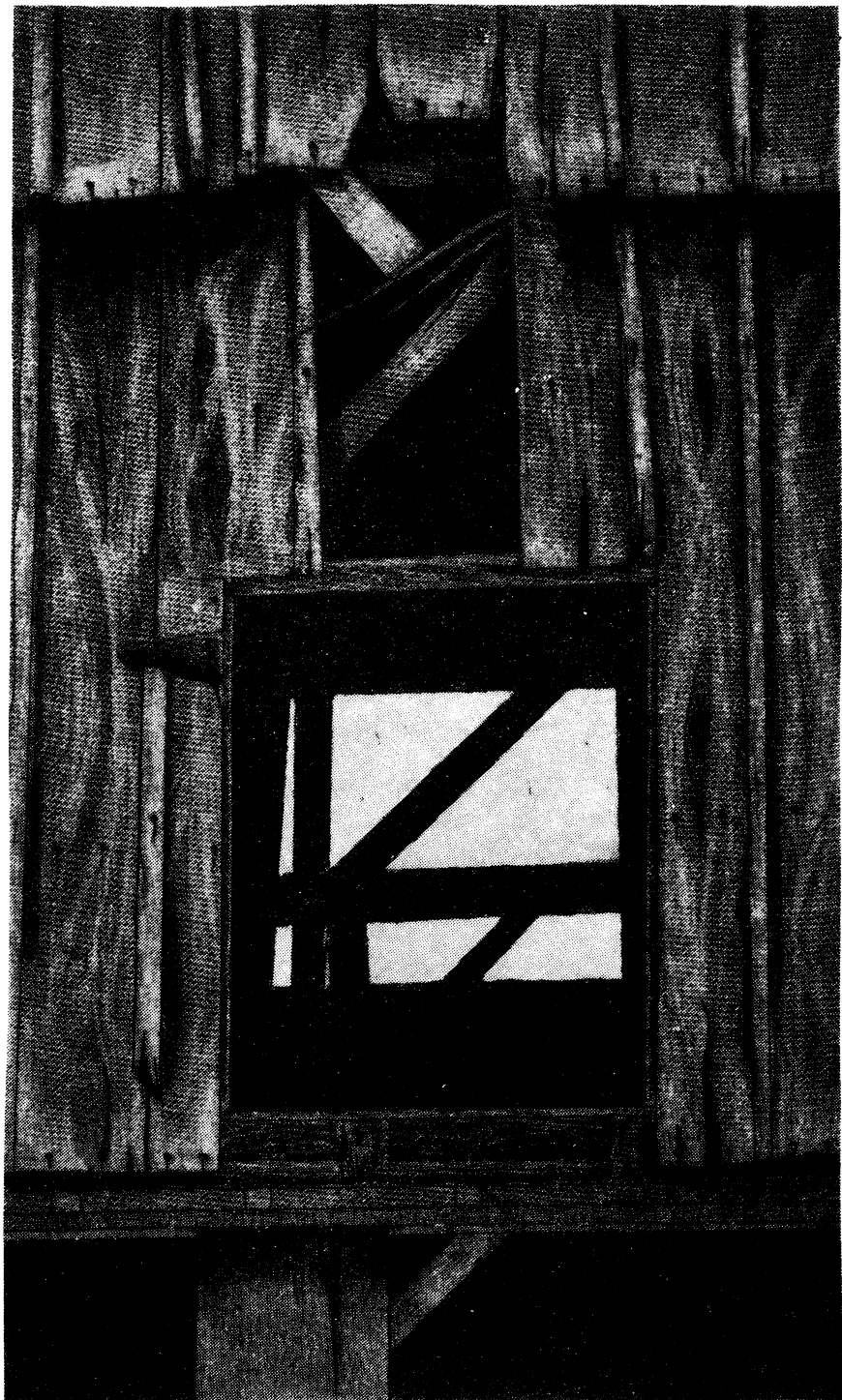
The air thickens,
drawing in the walls,
the ceiling closes down:
I'm trapped.

Nothingness drips, black
through my fingers.
Wet sand climbs
inching up my legs.

My hands bleed as
I struggle to be free.
My mouth opens
in silent scream.

Outside a wind
wakes a sleepy sun,
bathing my wounds
as I crumble to my pillow.

Kandy Bell



Lawrence McGown

Laboring

Sterile white and stainless steel.
Brightness chills her
Yet sweat runs
Between the tired, staring eyes
Fixed on the blank wall.
Wraiths pass,
Disembodied voices,
But she is alone.
A clock is whirring;
Or is it a heart?
Two hearts?
Sharp pain pierces as she frantically searches for the time
piece,
And her hands clench,
Reaching for someone, something.
A strange, cool hand guides hers to the cold, metal rail,
Then leaves.
The snake coils slowly through her body,
Then leaves.
And soft music penetrates muddled thoughts;
A child's music box...long ago...
"Momma loves her pretty little girl,
Such a pretty little girl."
The memory splinters,
Shattered by laughter in a faraway room,
In a faraway time.
Isolated, unable to share her private conflict,
Her mouth gapes silently,
Choking, welling
Without laughter.
No betrayal, no defeat.
Who is screaming?
Shut up! Shut up!
Hands are lifting her, moving her.
Another blank wall.
Her legs hang grotesquely above her belly
As a man probes her naked body gently, impersonally.
"Don't push yet. Don't push.
Just breathe. That's right."
"Let go, Honey. Let go.
Daddy's here. Daddy'll catch you.
Daddy loves his pretty little girl."
"Ready? Now push. Keep pushing.
That's right. You're doing fine."

Time is indistinguishable in her mind
As her body struggles to perform
This unpracticed trick, this new game.
The snake recoils
And dies.
She feels empty
And cold.
Oh God, is it done?
"What have you done!
How could you do this to your father and I?"
"You've just given birth to a healthy little girl, my dear.
Such a pretty little girl."

Janet Grace

Blood Donor

The nurse grins
and pinches my arm
as if it were
a ripe tomato.

My hand
pumps—
slow contractions
coax my blood
into a false vein.

I almost hear
each
drop

slap the

plastic

bag.

Dan Von Holten



Lawrence McGown

Examples

By broad s words
Men fall
They sin k now in g all
Children follow

Christopher Albin

THREE POEMS

By Patrick Peters

Letter from X

This is a love letter to you,
My darling Pudding Pop.
You, whom I have missed like oxygen,
and if I do not see you tonight
I'm afraid I'll crumble to chicken bones.
Yes, pass on like the wind,
the Old West,
Or Mae West for that matter.

Leaving Hair in X's Tub

Pudding Pop, I prayed for your call
like the second coming.
I have carpet burns on my knees.
Then I found an errant bobby-pin,
straight like bone, pink as flesh.

You might as well have left
a thousand words.

Green-Eyed X

Pudding Pop, I rattled by,
spotted his sleek car
like a piranha in your drive.
I know, I know, it's as innocent
as grapefruit.
So I called, and you told
a tiny, smoke-white lie,
just enough to cloud my vision.

Sometimes I Dream in Cotton Candy

The Fair creaked into town today
I'm ready
Bobbing ponytail
Cut-off shorts
lotsa pockets
stains of pink goo
(cotton candy?)
left from long ago
Smile at the weathered Ticket Man and
perk "haveaniceday"
he can't hear me
Calliope music's growin' in his head.
Clutching a sweaty lemonade
I swim my way
through the dust and clatter
gulping stale air and sunshine as I go.
Sam the Candyman

Elmo the Clown

Those Barbie doll tightrope walkers
Born in those beautiful
Orange 'n purple spangles.

God, so hot your eyes 'ud bake
If you look at the blacktop too long
I go to pay homage to Miss Lulu,
All 438 pounds of her.
Enshrined in sawdust
and pink lace.
Lulu's an institution.
Memorizing her face while no one's looking.
I dream of corndogs and nursery rhymes and
castles and how does she get the
food past that faded
red dot of a mouth. . . .

Kathy Gray

One Day While Boating...

For the boy overboard,
They dredge the lake with
fish hooks the size of a hand.

Old men with pock-marks
say, "Seen'em go and never come
up," and then cast for the prize.

A boat's wake washes up a log,
the mother's eyes tear
at the brown bank.

Then, the one cord goes taut;
like a sack of garbage,
the body is reeled in.

She cuddles the mass,
bringing white skin to her face,
warming away death.

An old man vomits overboard.

F. Link Rapier

Departure

Turtles couple yearly
then recede like weary
tides. They split the dark waves
to white foam while the sea
fills in behind them. Great
tortoise, hard-backed angel:
the pattern of your shell
escapes me as you slip
through the cool, black waters.

Bob Zordani

140 Print “That’s Life”

Of all the negative feelings I have experienced—bad grades, broken relationships, jealousy between friends and family, etc.—one tops them all, the unshakable grip of helplessness. When I was 12 years old I defined helplessness as: two 14-year-old high school freshmen who held me down and beat me black, blue, and red with a toy, metal shovel.

It had been a cold December day, and the Christmas spirit had been at a fever pitch in this excitement-packed Bicentennial year. This used to be my favorite time of the year, but that was before the two freshmen grabbed me on my way home from school. I fought back, but my pre-puberty 5’2”, 85-pound body offered little resistance. The taller of the two (a dopey-looking guy, who no doubt, by the distinct fragrance of his breath, had discovered marijuana) held my arms behind my back and let out a happy-go-lucky Arnold Horseshack laugh as his sadistic friend pounded me with a shovel.

The sadistic, shorter one did all the talking and hitting. I will always remember his wicked face; it was ghost white, with dark purple-reddish rings around his eyes, and jet-black hair outlined his face. He was not much taller than me, but he had something about him that sent fear shivering through me. Then in a cracked voice he said, “Hey, let’s take the wimp’s coat off.” Once again I screamed and kicked, but the taller one, who was at least 5’10”, had little difficulty following his friend’s orders. The coolness hit my bare arms—against my mother’s advice, I had worn short sleeves—and the shorter one said, “Hey, let him cool off good before we smack him up.” I wanted to ask him why, but that mean doped-up face glared heavily on me, and I just stood stilent as could be, trembling with fear. The cold, Chicago-winter air hit my bare arms, which would not have been bare if I had taken my mother’s advice.

“Hey wimp, are you good and cold yet?” the cracked voice of the sadistic shorter one said. With my arms all white and with red blotches starting to form, I looked down at my feet and very weakly said, “Yes, I’m cold enough.” In one smooth motion he whipped the toy, metal shovel around and snapped it off my frozen arms. I screamed in pain, but all I heard was the Arnold Horseshack laugh in my ear. He hit me several more times, yelling, “Look, the little mommy’s boy is crying.” He was not kidding; tears had been flooding my eyes. Finally, the hitting ended, and in the Christmas spirit they threw my coat in the nearby stream, which as my luck would have it, was only half frozen.

I picked myself up from the snow-covered ground of the beautiful park behind the beautiful school and walked through the beautiful woods that hid the beautiful park, all of which made it easy for my beating to go unnoticed. Yes, the beautiful park where the children played by day, and where the high school kids smoked dope or got drunk, or both, by night. It was all hidden by the trees before the houses where I had lived, in a highly acclaimed suburb where everybody wants to live.

I made it home quickly for obvious reasons and ran upstairs into the bathroom and turned the shower on cold. Because I was colder than the coolness of the water, the water had seemed hot. As I defrosted, the wounds on my arms began to bleed, but the bleeding stopped in 10 minutes. I hid the wounded arm from my parents and did not tell a soul about what had happened; I was deeply ashamed that I could not defend myself. From being exposed to the cold air I caught a terrible cold, the only thing I could not hide from my parents, and my mother kept saying, "I hope you have learned your lesson and will wear long-sleeved shirts with T-shirts in the winter." I learned my lesson, and wore long-sleeved shirts in the winter time while traveling home from school with at least four or five friends. The wounds healed, and the incident which had become my definition for helplessness soon faded—that is until the other day.

It was a warm summer evening between my sophomore and junior years in college. That night, I had to work, from 11:30 p.m. to 7:30 a.m., and I was trying to get some sleep before work when I heard the telephone ring. I picked up the phone an instant after my father did downstairs, and he said "hello" before I could. I stayed on the phone in case it was for me, but in an old dry cracked voice a man said, "John," and my father said, "Yes," in a plain tone. "John, this is Frank," the old cracked voice said. And my father, switching to his professional salesman voice, said, "Frank, I had a good week, I sold...." Then his boss cut him off and said, "John, what kind of crap are you trying to pull? You make one big sale at the beginning of the month and have been reporting it to me over several weeks. I got the check from the customer and would like it if you gave me the rest of the sales bill." My father, with a little less enthusiasm in his voice, said, "Frank, it was 600 handbooks for \$1000." That grinding old cracking voice that never let up went on. "John, is there anymore?" My father, picking his voice up a little, said, "Frank, there is a depression out there....," and the old bastard cut him off again. "Please, John, no more crap. You're wasting my time. Hope you have a better week next week this time. Bye, John." And my father lowered his voice and said, "Bye, Frank, take care."

I stared at the phone and waited for them both to hang up. A new definition for helplessness crept into my mind. As I slowly hung up the phone, a computer screen flashed in my mind:

NAME OF FILE: "LIFE"

100 PRINT DATA ON "HELPLESSNESS"

110 PRINT "HELPLESSNESS IS HAVING TWO BIG THUGS BEATING YOU UP."

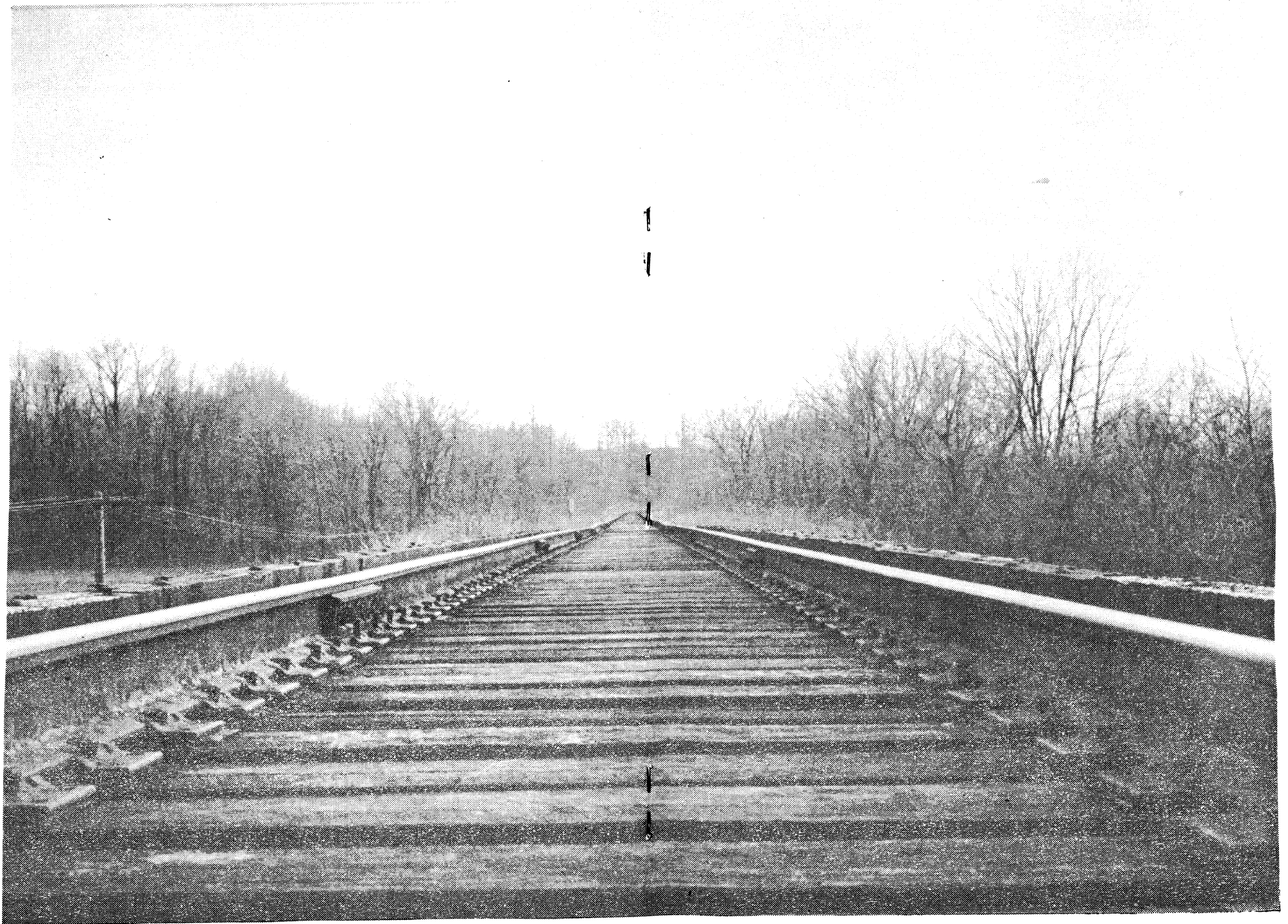
REPLACE

110 PRINT "HELPLESSNESS IS TRAPPING YOURSELF INTO A JOB YOU ARE UNHAPPY WITH."

120 PRINT "DEATH"

130 STOP

Peter Dowling



Light Conversation

Today, I removed long, fluorescent tubes filled with The Light. They spoke to me. They said (in English, I might add.), "Hello. We can talk to you because this is only a writing exercise, so don't freak out or tell the New York Post about this. We've been watching you for quite a while. You should use a little less Brylcreem—it's more honest. One of our brothers is sick. Please help him." I said (softly so the customers wouldn't freak out), "O.K., I understand. A lot of my brothers are sick, too." As I began to turn the long, delicate tube that usually watches me over near the cash register, the tube let loose with a horrific, shattering scream, and my blood warmly mixed with The Light escaping from the tube. I realized the art of death today as I applied direct pressure.

Dan Hintz

She Waits For The World To Shout Her Name

On a barstool
Smoking,
Eyes dreary
With too little sleep
A mixed drink
Caresses her fingers
As
She waits for the world to shout her name.

Jim Harris

Honey

SCREEEE went the zipper
slowly inching its way up a back
once known for its ability to
turn heads around and
turn men on

GREEEEEN yelled the favorite dress
from years ago
found again in the closet
indestructible polyester, an
oh—so—luscious shade of
lime

LOOOOK cried the sharpdarts
on either side
of those miraculously
cone—shaped breasts
purchased back in '72
at the Montgomery Ward Semi—Annual
Foundations Sale

POWWWW shrieked the clouds of Emeraude
—a Christmas gift from What's—His—Name
Blasting through the cool
of early evening

UMMMMM whispered her reflection
in the mirror
as Honey applied
just one more coat of
Revlon “Sizzling Tomato”

Kathy Gray

Photo Album

I. 1943

Overseas, in the nest of sandbags,
a boy slaps his buddy's back.
In the morning he wakes, bounces

sand from his boots, pinches
a New Guinea mosquito buzzing him
like a Messerschmidt.

Continents away, a girl
cranes her neck toward the billboard,
reads the parade of dead.

II. 1960

A man and a woman sit close on stone steps.
The war is over. They smile
in the shine of aluminum siding.

That night they bowled on the slick lanes,
sucked Pabst from the long neck bottles,
sped home, spilled a lamp

making love on the living room floor.

Patrick Peters



Lawrence McGown

Fallen From Grace To Saturday

Last night you were such an exquisite prig,
scanning the place for someone your caliber,
a man of your class who had that same look
of upward mobility, that Je Ne sais quoi
of the suburban riche.

You stood there by the bar, pristine,
sipping your gin—with—a—twist in one hand,
while the other was in the back pocket
of your blue second skin, pushing you out
of your extra large V-neck.

To your friend, you gabbed about which
Mel Gibson look-alike you would put your
money on to win, place, or show,
lips pouting the words like
a little girl eating strawberries.

Well, today's another day and you certainly
have come a long way, baby;
That Jheri Redding mane is matted
discretely against the side of your head,
arms crossed, clutching your nauseous stomach.

Your eyes are like a raccoon's, only swollen
and blue. A cigarette dangles unlit
from your lips; it falls to
the ground as you wipe your nose on your sleeve.
It's cold without that alcohol, huh?

Suddenly you stop, gagging on a dry heave.
You slip off your pastel stilettos and trot
toward the house, your feet slapping cold pavement.
I feel like reminding you how fantastically
awful you look, but realize you probably
don't feel a whole lot like Grace Kelly anymore, anyway.

F. Link Rapier

Post Mortem

My father came home with the news.
His words pierced the air.
My sisters hugged him.
My brothers hugged each other.

Shrouded, I found my way
to the living room.
The four o'clock sun

soothed the walls pink.
I sat in her spot on the couch
near the fragrance of her ashtray.

F. Link Rapier

Confession

Gasoline lingers
on my fingers
I lick parched lips
slowly
hear the flames
sirens
shouts from neighbors
A dog barks
It's very late, too late
muscles twitch within
me, life is good
the old church
crumbles, falls
ashes to ashes

John Kayser

Child's Play

They don't understand.
I try to tell the adventure
but old men don't climb trees.
And if they did, they wouldn't look
down.

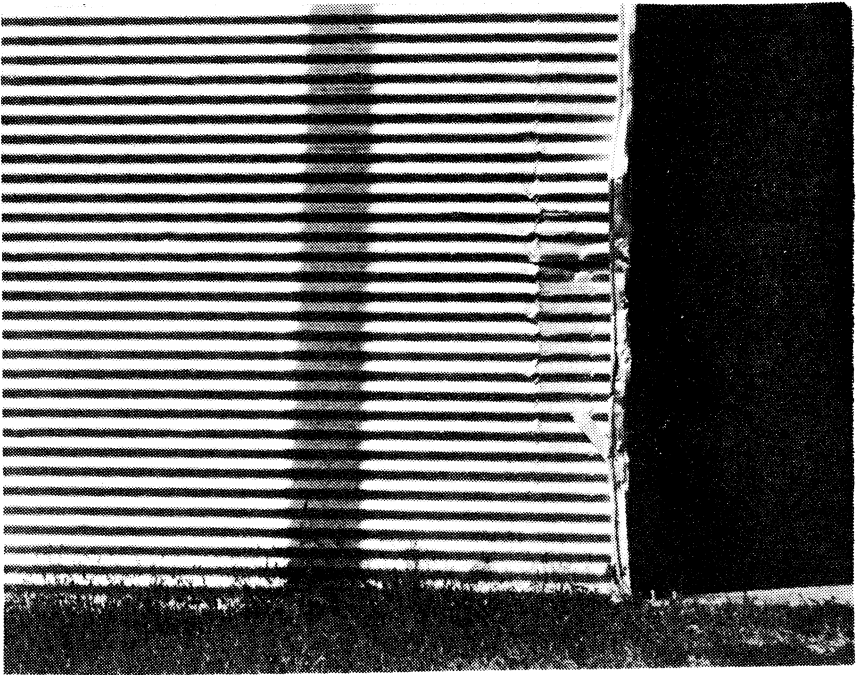
Christopher Albin

Seeking A Friend's Advice On Dieting

Drink lots of water
Says my size—three friend Marilyn.

Bitch.

Kathy Gray



Doug Anderson

She Came Back To Me

Hair all done up
And make-up on
And perfume wispy dry
Between her breasts
Her lips shiny silver
Like erotic sardines
She came back to me.

She said:

Forever was yesterday.

And her voice was
Soft and mute
And far away
Like a crying lamb
Disemboweled by
A tiger's paw
She came back to me.

Grief hanging in the air, smiling,

Knives slicing into
Hot flesh
Numb because

She came back to me.

Immobile
We were,
Words wreaking
With death
She came back to me.

Forever was yesterday

As the lambs
Exploded
And the tiger
Loped into the trees
That stretched on
Into the fiery hills

Where a sun set
Cracked
And leaking crimson shadows

She came back to me.

She did.

Jim Harris

Farm Boy

From his tenth-floor office
window
he peers out at the concrete structures
around him. For the first time,
he notices
that the snow has all melted, almost

time to plant the beans, he
muses, fingering the prized pin
in his vest pocket.
"Future Farmers of America," it says.

His thoughts wander to a place in his past. . .

the Farm
prime land, 200 acres in central Illinois
where golden sheets of wheat
shimmered and rolled
while corn tassels, slightly withered, waved at
the Boy
perched on his daddy's John Deere,
a cattail clenched
between his teeth

. . . then snap back to the present
his future.

He squashes the Marlboro and shoves it
into a sand-filled
ashtray. Sighing, he slams
his fist against the desk, his
boyhood dreams lost
or misplaced
among the paperwork.

Diana Winson

Dilemma

The dishes were dirty
and since the sink leaked
i couldn't do anything
about the situation.

All i wanted was a bowl
and all the cabinets
could offer was an
oval crystal candy dish.

Oh, well,
any port in a storm.

I really didn't want
to dirty it that
oval crystal candy dish
but like i said
the situation didn't offer
many alternatives.

It worked out well though
but there was something ambiguous
about using that
oval crystal candy dish
and then eating
my egg salad sandwich
off a paper plate.

Janet Wilhelm

In a Rock or Stone

Down below the mountain peaks, winding through caverns of thorn brush and twig, a lone figure trespassed on the lines in the palm of the hand of Mother Nature.

Nobody had assigned any task. There was no need to watch the sun, moon and stars, or to count the days.

Along the daily drudge, the figure collected rocks and stones to be polished later. A randomly constructed bag held all of them and weighted his neck.

Crumbling miserably but defiantly, one stone emerged from under the caking mud. The figure, appreciatively impressed, grasped the little treasure, keeping in mind the sparkling green polished result of its future well-planned form.

Unexpectedly and crudely, four limbs stretched their way into the suspended, cloudy air.

Frightened, then alarmed, a scaly, ancient-looking head peered into his vacant elevation.

"Never before have I seen somewhat like you," said the figure enthusiastically

Never have I seen you from this point of view," said the steadfast green turtle.

"Shall I make you lustrous as I diamonds and gems?
As colorful as spring moss?" asked the figure.

Closely have I watched many days and followed your entailings and quite clever in avoiding your superficial production," replied the turtle.

"I once served a relentless, tired, old man, nearly seventy-four-years-old. That's when I approached one hundred and four in that time. In the garden he kept me to eat the slugs for breakfast. Systematic was he of ingenious procrastination. I continued my job as I consumed many years and countless slugs," he continued.

"So what of it? Surely you accept my offering of improvement and eventual perfection with a bountiful need and a beautiful shell," defined the figure.

"No doubt I have tried to examine the situations with a unique interpretation, understandable to all the creatures, cycling vegetation and suffering mark strata layers," said the turtle.

"You now have, do you fail to see, what destiny can afford?

Through my sharpened knowledge of what must be known. I cannot bear disregard or tally silly refusal," pressed the figure.

"Then many times have they playfully attempted to disorient me. They spun me around like the potter's wheel and lay me down again," explained the turtle.

"That's the past, don't you see?" cried the figure.

"Engrained or imprisoned in my reptilian heritage, I must always, as a rock or a stone, and with natural skill, continue fully in my original direction, no matter what destination awaits," concluded the turtle.

As if the turtle were swimming through the air, the little boy placed him back on the mud—and they both walked away in opposite directions, but with congruent hearts.

Richard Donnelly

In November He Came To Me

A Sonnet written in memory of my father.

In November he came to me and said,
"I want you to go for a ride with me
In my new silver car in which I sped
From Death's black sentence to reality."
The winter brought us snow and suffering
That dragged us down to Despair's cold tomb;
We prayed for life to take him into spring
Before we were all swept down unto doom.
As summer took hold the pain grew worse
And we hoped that Death would claim him soon;
In July he was taken from the curse,
And with sad hearts, we buried him at noon.
Friends said to me because I was so torn,
"Our God will take a rose to help a thorn."

Jean Kover Chandler

Ending

It only took
an instant
after a lifetime
of living.
The ruby, rushing
blood
fell from her
wrinkles.
She lost none of the teeth
she didn't have.
No noise was reported
from the soundless
dark.
He took the golden cross
she wasn't buried with.
He took everything
but her
soul.
Sitting solemn
in a basement of cement.
Not feeling obligated
to kill
the cockroach
hurrying by.
Plumbing and pipes
my only conversation.
Snaps colliding
with dryer walls
warns me
someone might
come.

Christy Dunphy

The Honor Grad

"Please discard any shaving cream or other aerosol cans before boarding the plane." My first of many lessons was learned that day. Since I had just purchased a new can of shaving cream, I ignored the message. I found a seat about 20 rows back, towards the wings of the 707, and situated myself in preparation for the dismal journey that lay ahead of me. I forgot about the shaving cream. I forgot many things that day. I wish I could forget many other things that started with that long plane ride, but I know I never will.

How utterly ironic! Just a few short weeks ago I was a sulfuric acid denitration operator helping produce T.N.T. (trinitrotoluene) for the Government, never even considering where the end product might turn up; and now my very life might depend on it. There I sat, lost in the chatter of my 265 companions, wondering about my future, if I did, indeed, have a future. The noise of the men on the plane (you're no longer a boy when you leave the States) was deafening. The tones of the conversations were obviously artificial. All the guys were trying to be macho, to put off the inevitable, to delay facing the unknown, to hold their fears at arm's length. I wasn't macho, never knew how to be, but I did clown around a bit.

Once we were up in the air and the plane had leveled off, everyone seemed to relax a bit. At one point it was getting so quiet I decided to liven things up a little. I told a passing stewardess I had a toothache. When she went to get some aspirin for me, I slipped my dentures out, uppers and lowers. She noticed my pooched out lips and mashed up face about the same time as all the guys sitting around me. I must have looked pretty funny with my chin up under my nose, because the guys went bonkers. They acted as if it were the funniest thing they had ever seen. The stewardess, an extremely attractive brunette, stood her ground. When the belly-slapping subsided, she looked me straight in the eye, started to say something, smiled, shook her head very slowly, then just stood there looking into my mind. In the next instant she bent over and planted a soft, wet kiss on my forehead. As the sudden, unexpected hush turned to catcalls, she stood there sparkling her blue eyes at me.

She looked beautiful. I was so enthralled I didn't even notice the cheering and jeering for a minute or so. All I could do was sit there and stare at her; I was mesmerized. As I slipped my dentures back in place so she could see what I really looked like, I noticed her eyebrows suddenly arching, her forehead wrinkling slightly, and her smile starting to fade. Before I could say "shucks" she had turned and was almost down the aisle. She vanished through a small doorway and didn't come out for a long time.

We had a two-hour layover in Guam. The cafeteria, the room with all the pinball machines, the magazine shop, and the souvenir shop were all swarming with GIs. Everyone seemed to be taking advantage of this last bit of freedom. Some of us would never come back this way. The telephone booths were hidden behind a wall of wriggling bodies; young soldiers making a last attempt to hear a reassuring voice of a loved one on the other side of the world.

The plane ride from Guam to Viet Nam was quiet. Too quiet. Unnervingly

quiet. So quiet you could hear your thoughts. I wondered how Mom was taking this; she sure cried when I left. I wondered how all my lady friends were doing. I wondered what would happen if they found out that I had quite a few one-and-onlies. I wondered how much they would change in a year. I wondered how long a year could be. Twelve months, 52 weeks, 365 days, how many hours does that make? Will I even be going home? What if there's only part of me to send back home? Will my friends still know me? Will anyone still be waiting to say she loves me? As I looked around to see if anyone could tell I was getting goofy, I knew I was safe. I could see that the quiet had taken its toll on everyone. Those vacant eyes, the stillness, the sad expressions, the tear in the corner of an eye, the emptiness, the heart-aches, the hurt—all told me that I was normal. I was just one of the guys.

As we arrived at Bien Hoa Air Base in the middle of the night, everyone began to stir. I remember that night so well. It took forever to get out of that plane; everyone was moving in slow motion, biding his time. When I finally made it to the doorway, the heat and the humidity were there to greet me. I couldn't get a full breath of air; I thought my lungs had collapsed. As I stumbled my way down the steps, I spied my blue-eyed heart-throb standing at the base of the stairs, shaking hands with all of the soldiers and saying good-bye. With each step downward, I prepared for my handshake, and wondered what I would say to her. As the guy in front of me released her hand, I reached out smartly. I don't clearly remember what happened after that, but I remember how hard she squeezed me, how deeply she touched me. In that instant I knew I loved her. I knew I should get her name and address. She was trying to say something, but I couldn't make out the words. Her soft, gentle voice was jerked by sobs. As she released her grip, I pulled away and walked off into the night. I didn't even say good-bye. I kept walking. I was dying inside, but I wasn't going to let her see the tears in my eyes. At a distance of about 50 yards I sat my duffel bag down and turned around to look back. She was standing sideways, saying good-byes and glancing my way between handshakes. She looked like she was waiting for me to come back so she could tell me something. I turned around and walked on towards the airport. I never saw her again.

After being juggled from line to line, from waiting area to waiting area, we were divided, sub-divided, then divided again. My group was getting smaller by the hour, and I knew that soon I would find out where I was being shipped.

Long past daybreak we finally started boarding the troop trucks for our respective destinations. We still didn't know where we were going, but we were happy just to be going somewhere.

My group went to the 101st Airborne Division, The Screamin' Eagles, or, as we were often called by those of lower estate, The Pukin' Buzzards. At about 9:00 a.m. (U.S. time) we arrived at the P-Training area. We were ordered to stack our duffel bags as we got off the truck. Two lucky souls were selected to guard our belongings while the rest of us hopped to the mess hall. Breakfast wasn't much, barely edible, but most of us were so damn hungry it tasted good anyway. The lukewarm, licorice-colored water wasn't that bad, either. From what we'd already heard from the guys heading home, it wasn't the taste that mattered; it was the food that mattered. Any food.

We spent the next few days taking a crash course in survival. The training was routine for the few of us who had endured Fort Riley in August. We felt like seasoned veterans compared to the majority who were quickly finding out just how much the human body can tolerate. By mid-morning the temperature was usually over 100 degrees, and the humidity seldom fell below 90 percent. I was so well-conditioned that I was almost getting comfortable with my surroundings. That is, until the fat guy who I'd said was going to mess around and accidentally kill somebody, actually killed somebody.

Unfortunately, he was the victim. No, he didn't do it on purpose (although I've wondered about that for years); he just didn't lob the live frag grenade over the bunker. When it came rolling down beside him, he must have panicked and frozen. He really didn't have a chance to assess the gravity of the situation. He's still dead. No one made fun of any awkward fat guys after that. As for me, since I was next in line, I didn't have to throw the grenade. None of us who hadn't already thrown one had to complete that part of the training. I guess they assumed we had learned how to throw a live grenade. I know I had!

The crash course got tougher. We did all kinds of inane exercises, both mental and physical. One afternoon, before going to the rifle range, we had a lesson on explosives. When the instructor held up a container of raw T.N.T. flakes with the words "Kankakee Arsenal" on the side, I nearly crapped. I might have helped produce those flakes. Kankakee Arsenal, known more recently as Joliet Army Ammunition Plant, had been my home. Not only had I worked there as a civilian producing T.N.T., but I had also been stationed there until just a few weeks ago and had worked as the bar manager at the Officers' Club. Small world, huh?

I learned many things that week. I learned that 120 pounds didn't make me any less a man, even though I was the smallest guy in my training group of 160 men. I learned that everyone was just as apprehensive as I was; maybe more so. I also learned how to detect trip-wires, how to locate booby-traps, how to uncover live rounds of ammunition that were protruding from the ground, how to find and avoid punji-pits. Locating the punji-pits before the bamboo stakes were driven through your body was always a special thrill. Most of us had seen GREEN BERET with John Wayne; we knew what the bamboo stakes could do to a man. Sure, the ones we had in P-Training were scaled-down models, but a small hole in your body is, nonetheless, a hole. I got the picture. I also learned how to low-crawl on hot sand, but that wasn't part of the standard training. I was made an example of for leaving my rifle leaning against a bush when I went to discard my C-Ration cans in the designated O.D. receptacle. I learned how fast hot sand wears out fabric, especially on knees and elbows. I learned how fast hot sand stings raw burns. I learned that in just the first few yards with at least another 100 yards to go. I wasn't the only one who learned that day. The P-Training Officers and Non-Coms learned, too. They learned just how fast a skinny little guy could move on hot sand with his chin holding his rifle in the crook of his arms. They learned just how fast hot sand wears the flesh of the body. They learned just how flimsy our jungle fatigues were. They got the real lesson that day. They didn't expect me to take off like a bat outta hell; I was supposed to move like a snail

so I'd have plenty of time to mull over my costly error, to feel the embarrassment and humiliation of being singled out for punishment. But I was not embarrassed or humiliated; they were. I got the rest of the day off to change out of my blood-soaked fatigues, take a nice cool shower, and get some medical attention for my burns. No one was going to break my spirit. No one.

The last exercise in P-Training was night maneuvers. We were going to get a chance to do everything in the dark that we didn't get right with the lights on. Since I had volunteered to be Pointman for the day maneuvers, I decided I might as well volunteer for the night session, too. After all, I wouldn't have to listen to all the macho men piss and moan about being too big to be a good Pointman. What the heck, I'd get done first!

My training officer stated later that I'd done a yeoman's job, only he used Army slang. I guess I did do pretty well. I found every trip-wire, rolled away from every flare, kept one eye closed at all times so I wouldn't lose my night vision, located every punji-pit, and kept from crawling over any live ammunition rounds. I did so well I even found a trip-wire about four feet off the ground near the end of the course. Slowly I attached a piece of toilet tissue from my survival kit, twisted it together so it wouldn't fall off, and felt my way back to the Slackman. I gave him the word to pass back, as I had every time I had encountered an obstacle, to alert the troops. He was about to relay the message when our training officer came walking up to us bobbling his flashlight to tell us we were through; we had completed the course.

I told the good Major that I had found another trip-wire almost chest high, and had left my calling card as a marker. He told me they didn't have any more.....BOING! He hit the ground like a sack of turds, and as a matter of fact I could have sworn the aroma was present.

Some 30-45 minutes later, the area was cleared for us to advance. No one could say whether Charlie had paid an unexpected visit, or some practical joker decided that the Major needed a good bowel movement.

We had one more surprise. As we passed a water hole, a submerged charge was detonated. Water shot straight up into the air. Nearly everyone but the Pointman got drenched; I only got half-drenched. A couple of guys that were washed into the water hole from the cascading water had to be rescued. P-Training was over; most of us had survived.

The next morning we were leaving for our forward areas. I was headed north, way north, about as far north as you could go, within spittin' distance of the DMZ. We fell out after chow in our clean fatigues and spit-shined boots. I was late for the last big formation of my military career. I wedged my way into the middle of the platoon just in time to see some full-bird Colonel awarding some skinny GI some papers, something shiny and a hefty handshake. I heard something over the make-shift P.A. system about the excellent job he had done in combat training. I remember thinking that whatever the poor slob had done to deserve such an honor he must have earned it. When the Colonel read the Letter of Commendation to the assembly, I could have sworn he read my name. No, it must have just been the heat, and the anxiety of not knowing what was yet to come on my journey north.

As the Colonel left the stand, returning salutes, we broke up and headed in all different directions to catch our rides to the airport. When we got to the airport, I said good-bye to the guys that were headed the other way, tossed my duffel bag on my shoulder, and headed for the C-147 that was taking me to my new home. I was just about to board the plane when I saw someone running across the airstrip. The guy was yelling and waving his arms. He looked like the guy who was named Honor Grad. When he finally got close enough for me to hear him over the drone of the cargo plane, I realized he was calling my name. He ran up to me, handed me some papers and a lighter, congratulated me, and took off running back to the other side of the airstrip. I just barely made it inside the plane when the thrust threw me against the side of the seatless cavern. As I squatted down, holding on to a nylon strap that someone had handed me, I looked at my new treasures. Everything had my name on it; the Letter of Commendation, the Zippo lighter with a map of Viet Nam in colors, and the other papers.

So I was the Honor Grad. How about that? Who would have believed that out of all those big, husky men the scrawniest mutt of the litter could have been selected as best soldier in combat training? I guess there's hope for everyone. Looking back, I was very pleased with myself, somewhat humbled, and very honored to have been chosen. I really hadn't done anything out of the ordinary by my own standards. I guess they thought they had turned me into a real gung-ho GI Joe. Maybe they had. Who knows?

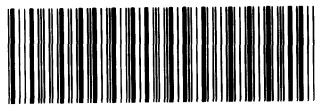
That day was the highlight of my excursion into the land of nightmares. From that point on things went from bad to worse. I learned a lot, and I aged a lot. I learned to appreciate the things that I had taken for granted back home. I also learned how to endure pain--physical, mental, and emotional--but I also found a bitterness that will haunt me the rest of my life. We were told not to make any close friends; I should have listened. It doesn't hurt as much to see a stranger die.

Fifteen years ago today, September 30, 1968, I was named Honor Grad. That was before I felt the bitterness, when optimism was alive. I did cherish the cigarette lighter with my name and rank above the colorful picture of a Viet Nam I never saw, but I got drunk one night and lost it. The can of shaving cream exploded in my Dopp Kit and ruined everything.

Eddie Simpson



Mike Frecker



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