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Archives

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THE VEHICLE



SPRING 98

The Vehicle

Spring 1998

Vol. 39, No. 2

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English Honors Society

Eastern Illinois University

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Milestone

The editors feel that this humble collection of paper and staples, sprinkled with letters, distributed with art and purpose, will serve as a vehicle for a joyride of the soul. We believe that this year's *Vehicle* represents the depth of literary and artistic talent on Eastern's campus.

It has been a pleasure to spend two semesters intimately connected with the creative community of this campus, though it was difficult for us to choose from among the high quality submissions we received. We would like to thank our submitters for generously sharing their ideas, their creativity, and their selves, and express our gratitude for the hours we shared perusing poetry and fiction.

We hope that our readers will be as moved by this collection as we have been, and will be inspired to grab a pen and open their spirits to creative expression. We believe the works contained in this semester's *Vehicle* serve as an outlet for the inexpressible in our daily experience.

"The role of the writer is not to say what we can all say, but what we are unable to say"

-Anais Nin

The Editors

Shannon Goodall

Julie G. Wedding

Denise Fitzner

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The Marriage

Carey's home is the studio,
where the cold of the world
cannot reach him, always warm,
always work to be done.

There he meets his lover every night.
Rebuilds her again and again
in towering forms of iron and copper,
cast in plaster, welded with care.

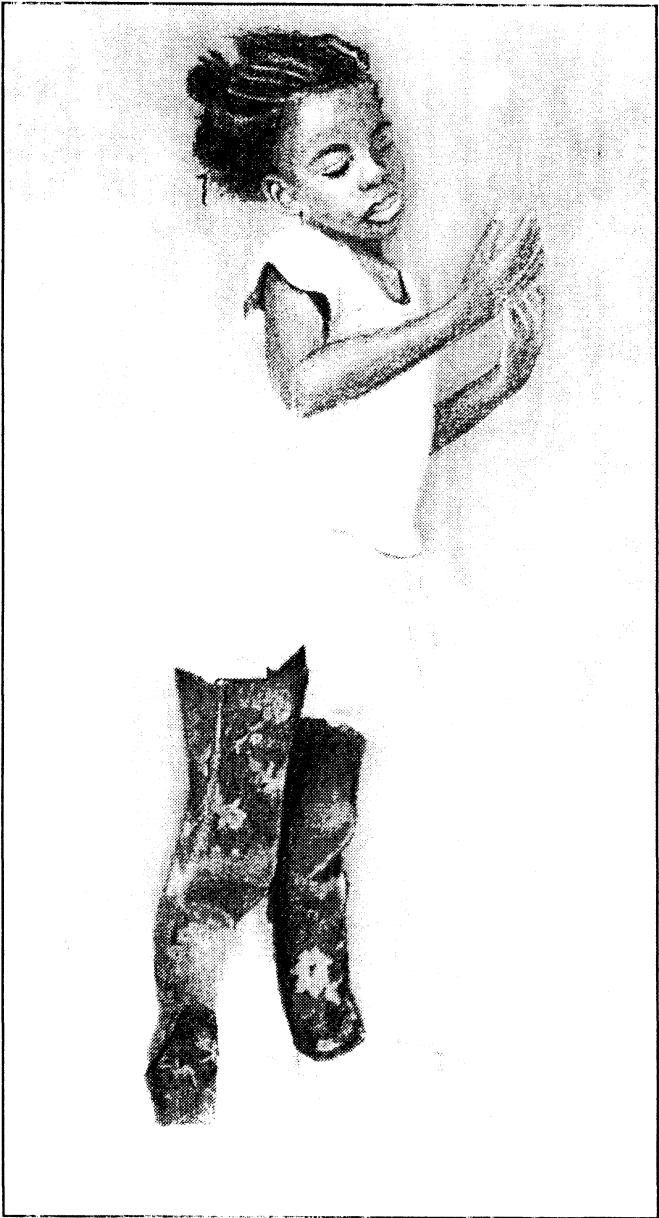
He knows her without sight,
by the grip of a hammer, the texture
of metal, the sulfur-burnt smell of her
while running his own hands
through his wiry blonde hair.

She is the only woman
he has ever laid
his small, strong hands on.

She licks him clean
like a mother cat, lavishes him
with praise and money,

but at other times leaves him cold,
as he stares into his own reflection,
his hard mind cast in steel.

– Stephanie Kavanaugh



Behind the Old Farmhouse Field _____

Saddlehorsing the old barbwire
fence in December left my fingers
gritty with stain smeared into curves,
stain that fit right into the woods:

The ten acre patch
across the fence
with its big trees
and that little muddy creek,
behind the peeling
gray farmhouse,
where the rusted-out tractor
used to scoop in the mud.

I always thought
it was pretty
with all the weeds and new trees
chomped clear by her cows;
idealistic, I guess.

But since they logged it, left tops of trees,
big leafy,crunchy jungle gyms,
the only cow left lies scattered
under a tree, dry and pocketed,
jawbones bleached into tomahawks.

– Jacob Tolbert

decomposing tears

lucid are the trailers of death
that weigh in the luster of denial
the sheer lunacy of those that remain
with their feeble obsession of angels and heaven
meant to stifle the pain of loss and grief

the stench of wet grass
and freshly turned mud
the vividness of flowers
and customary plants
decorating the new home
of my father's father
how I want to feel
what everyone wants me to
the sharp pain of loss
the wrenching emotions
to twist me into the mourning fools
that they are
instead I feel a surge of life
in the wake of death
as I watch
kitchen table discussions
about golf clubs, gun racks,
that old '55 Ford Fairlane
and where these relics of
another man's life will reside
my mind vomits in disgust
as greedy hands
with deceiving wet eyes
prosper from another's loss

transistor radio static
the feel of rough cotton
the smell of fabric softeners
these are the remnants
of memories I wish to hold
not the tradition of tears
that beckon to distort and blur
the line dividing life and death
and so with dry eyes
I stand alone in my memories
of a man I choose to let live
rather than decompose

– David Moutray

brook

I long to be the river,
that winding throughout your soul,
carries away the litter and debris
that was tossed, dropped, or dumped there
by careless people,
who didn't realize
that they were standing on Sacred Ground.

– Brooke Tidball

Sacred Circle

Stepping around the circle, with its chairs
gray and brown, guarding the sacred edge
purified just a little earlier with
spiraled snake smoke, licking its slow way home
to Mother Earth, brown and wet, and her grass
soon to be flat and muddy, dead and dirty
with dance, ancient, hung with leather laces
swinging in the wind that shakes with every hard
beat of the circle drum and the high chant
of the eagle singers, calling my name
touching my soul with their hard-soft beat
moving my head first, rocking my vision
swinging my arms, elbows, springing quick legs
still stealthy hunter, sacred circle

– Jacob Tolbert

without discretion

My second toe is not longer than my first.
Yu Ji says that is
a mark of true beauty.

He says that he draws not to
capture the soul,
but the eyes of his models burst madly
out from his work and
heavy my heart.

The joints of my toes
aren't doubled and don't hold shadow.
My stomach has no maternal pillow
curving away from my
breasts. My stomach is all
coiled springs.
A mattress.

I am not noble I am
listless and my hands are
queerly agile
charcoal can catch
the pain behind each fingerpad
smoothing without discretion.

– Mandy Watson

HAIRCUT

Your painted face hangs
in the display case
on the first floor
of the arts building.

She used heavy charcoal
and grey watercolor washes.

How appropriate,
for the dark waters of your mind.

You look me back
through the glass,
and something old and sad
creeps up my throat.
I salivate.

You used to have long hair
and were mine.
We camped at Starved Rock
and fucked in the woods,
kissed long and hard. . .

sat close by our fire
where I curled your thick hair
around my bony fingers.

(Our neighbors thought
we were married.)

I swallow,
bite my bottom lip,
and continue down
the empty hallway.

Your long, sad face
watches me go.

– Stephanie Kavanaugh

Slave for a day



Who Am I?

"dear," he said early one morning. "I need help deciding who I am today. I was Late yesterday and Courageous on Friday, but I'm confused as to who I am now." I looked at the clock above his head and cleared my throat, wishing I had stayed in bed.

"So what do you think?" He continued to pester me as he drank his coffee and I, my tea. My mind raced for an answer before I ran out of time. "You're Crazy," I thought, "a real Knucklehead. Why aren't you happy just being good in bed?"

He pondered his fate as he continued to eat his breakfast. I just laughed a little as I skipped outside. Who cares who he thinks he is as long as I'm Satisfied.

– Sara Cizmar

Their age
trapped them in
a maze.

the "scholars" call
Generation X.

where 70's free sex
and LSD
has evolved into
90's methamphetamines
and XTC.

Wet lips touch.
Tongues twist, tie
up in a kiss.
Ashes on the tray.
A joint feeling
blankets their libidos
which crashes in
waves of quivers
and leg shakes.
Above silk sheets,
on the bed's headboard,
a fragrance candle's
flame flickers two
dove breath beats.
Her ear resting
on his chest.
Fingers brush.
She begins to speak,
only to be
hushed by two
finger tips softly
pressing her lips.

She tangles and
twists the hair
around his naval.
Twirling it erect like
a shampoo devil horn.
Out of the corner
of tired eyes, with
dime size pupils,
shadows cover the room
dancing with
the yellow flame.
She slips into sleep.
As a pillow, he
nestles her head
in his chest,
caressing the soft flesh
around her armpit.
A pleasant scent
quickly itches
by his nose.
It was her coming
from his pillow
with slow sunset eyelids.
He tries to smile,
but slides into sleep.

– Jason Brown

Torn Paper

With my fingers lying smooth
on the chocolate-dark end-table
that supports Stratego games,
my hands move smooth and steady
to a white piece of paper
sharp and bright contrast on the dark
like a stained glass window
filled with icy sunshine
torn in a jagged cliff
line down the shortest edge
The paper meows at me this time
as I tenderly rip it
a tea kettle hiss, but a kettle
inbred, lisping its "S's"
with a slow slurred sh-sh-shsh

Although Ken sits across from me
in the new couch with its rough,
bizarre blue-red plaid upholstery
my ears fly, jetliners to Xenia
Grade School, Mr. Hosick's
sun-lit fourth grade class where I
tore paper, listened to kettles,
chewed the paper hard, wet, tough,
gooey across the room to bee-buzz
into a book, ear, or
construction worker light fixture

Even out the window
onto the grass, mud, gravel
playground where Kickball Diamond
mucked, older than neighbor Oak

too big to wrap your arms around
and above where girls turned cartwheels
and sang "Beat It," and down the hill
past the jungle gym where
you could play monkey family
into the puddle always beneath
the bar that was good to swing
under like the Dukes of Hazard
even though missing meant
filling your ankles and shoes
with mud too thick to slump off

Brought back by the ringing
bell to my seat in the hall
next to Ken and a dark end-table
to answer the calling phone

– Jake Tolbert

Fat Girls

In high school
Ridiculed by
Girls in short skirts and pom poms,
That extra forty in my ass
my hips, my thighs
Breasts like Tupperware bowls
Overflowing.
Now,
Ten years reuniting
These hausfraus and secretaries
Squished into stirrup pants from 1982
Cellulite bulging indiscreetly,
Catch me smile.

– Kim Hunter

Untitled

there is no sound
no movement
profound
the noise
the white washed
walls make
reminiscent of
poorly painted flats
in empty
theatre houses
abandoned wonder
an unfinished masterpiece
hung
in a low class waiting room
reeking of aristocratic
dreams.

– Maureen Raftery

Legos

Dad's heavy steps are heard from the stairs,
And Pauline and I bolt to our beds,
Legos still secured fast
In the dingy yellow shag carpeting
on our floor.

Dad once again threatens,
As I peep over my covers,
Playing possum.

Johnny Carson is coming on downstairs,
And still Confetti colored plastic pieces
And Chips Ahoy cookie crumbs
Litter our floor.

Dad reveals that tomorrow
The Salvation Army shall inherit our Legos,
As the light clicks off.

And Pauline and I are left to ponder,
"Why does and Army need Legos?"

– A. Fijakiewicz

Black Shoes in June

The black skirts and pants and shoes
Look ridiculous against the green grass
It's the middle of June
And we're all wearing black

The stupid birds won't quit singing
And even as I'm hating them
I'm wishing I was a bird
With bright yellow wings

So I could fly away from
This hole in the ground
That we're all huddled around
Like bums around a flaming
Garbage can in the winter

The Southern Baptist preacher
Keeps talking and praying
I wish I was the preacher
I would just say

Amen
And tell everyone
To go home

Some of the people
Wearing black are crying
The old men dab their eyes
With white handkerchiefs

I wish I
Was a crying
Old man

I wouldn't be
Numb
And I would have
Something better to do
Than stare down
At my
Black shoes

– Erin Maag

Untitled

She stares,
 swears
she can see
 her belly
swelling- -
 her head
in one hand
 her hair
falling over
 her fingers
her tears
 spilling into
her lap.

– Maureen Raftery



Ticklish

of naivete

My limbs drawn in tight;
in timid frailty.
My tepid skin
 constantly desiring a link
 to another.

Being able to pull, stretch
diagonal across a bed. For our
feet to intermingle
 and our legs to vine
 in warmth:
a mirrored image.

That pillow between one's neck
 and shoulder,
The space between the small web
 of their fingers,
The missing flesh of my heart -
waiting to be placed.

– Mandy Watson

The Geology of Waterfalls

I sit behind two veils of rain
Drops pour down from the cliffs above
falling on my face to dilute these tears.

Viewed from above
through so much water,
underneath these formations
of pressed sand, limestone,
clay and shale, we are
insignificant and young.

Time is stored in these rocks.
Time pressed the air out
from the inbetween spaces,
silencing stories and storing
memories of long ago in a
library few can read.

More time, more movement, more
pressure is needed:
 to carve canyons such as these
 to see the past for what it is
Until we are familiar with
the materials below the surface

Their luster, hardness, cleavage
along planes of weakness,
weakness in the internal structure.
The time and the water
slow and steady rolling on
uncover these gems of truth,
bring them into daylight

So like scientists we can
examine them, catalog our
losses, read those things
which were once
 organic
 living
 part of the present

But then folded their leaves,
Laid down upon their ancestors,
And passed into hard stone.
Seeds that lie below the surface
Waiting to be uncovered.

– Stephanie Kavanaugh

Gratitude

you slowly broke out the windows of my glass house
taking your time
considering each shatter from all angles
now I am walking barefoot over the broken glass
towards an ever expanding horizon

– Jeanette McClain

Answers

At my desk, papers lie scattered in disorganized order, stacks of crisp yellow paper on the satiny finish, awaiting some awakening. I blink at the pages, sliding my glasses into my hand and rubbing the deep, red indentations from the sides of my nose - trying to rub the vague incompleteness from my life. Nothing ever gets finished in this room. The moment one page is set aside, another quickly moves to fill the briefly empty space. Time is like an eighteen wheeler in an ice storm, afraid to hit the brakes for fear of toppling over. It never stands still. And the unfinished work keeps marching across the mahogany smoothness, never ceasing to let me simply catch my breath. My eyes catch the clock on the wall, a little memory from childhood slips out in a whisper - big hand on the twelve, little hand on the three, you are fast a'sleeping and the fairies dance with glee. I shake my head dislodging the tempting notion. No. Not me.

Five thirty, a.m. Too tired to climb out of the bed I fell into less than an hour ago, too tired to reach for the button to make the alarm cease. Just as the agonizing buzz is about to make me nauseous, about to make me cry, like magic beginning, the silence returns to my head. I feel a light hand brush across my cheek and a whisper kisses my ear, "I know, I know." In my half dreams I feel her smile, "Ten more minutes." And the light rain of the shower carries me back to the edge of sleep, where I begin to fall in the rapid rush of warm water. I imagine those rivulets running down her back, falling over the smoothness of her behind. I can almost feel the water meld into me, and we are sliding into the creases behind her knees, flooding down her calves to slip down the drain and wash away to the sea. Just as I've let myself lie backward, let the water claim me as its own and carry me outward, onward, the water stops and I am jerked back up through the tiny holes of the drain, to land back in my bed, opening my eyes with a snap. I stare at the ceiling. Open. Close. Open. And the grit burns through my eyes like flames. I blink so rapidly that the ceiling blurs until it and I begin to spin in opposite directions.

The nausea that was barely a thought before rushes in with such reality, and force, that I sit upright and grip the sides of the bed to stop the circles that the entire room has now begun to rotate in. At first, they are slow and lazy, but they grow in intensity and speed until I have to reach for the floor.

I fall to my knees on the cool, buffed wood, my forehead resting against the smoothness, fighting the acid rising in the back of my throat. I try to suck in huge gasps of air, the wet breaths smacking against the hardness of the floor, my face crushed against the coolness. I need the burning in my cheeks to go away, the boiling acid in my stomach to hold back, dissipate. I try to concentrate on the floor, on the air, on anything except for my body, bent double beside the bed. I attempt one more breath, raise my head, and the retching begins. And my hand grasps for my mouth, but the wastebasket is suddenly there, her right hand holding my head, fingers soft and firm in my hair, her left arm holding across my chest. The violent spasms jerk through my body but she whispers soothing nonsense, combs her fingers through my hair, pulls her arm closer, as if by pressing me against her she can single-handedly stop the wrath of nature with nothing more than her touch. And as those fingers stroke with such an even, repetitive motion, I think I agree. I concentrate on those fingers stroking in a smooth rhythm. Then her hands, perpetually cool, move to lie flat against my cheeks. In that moment, I want to be nowhere else in the world except here, clutched between the hands of this woman, leaning over a wastebasket on a hardwood floor, in my life. For one single moment, I really want to be in my life.

And in the next moment, I just want to be in my bed. As the thought crosses through my head, her hands are inching me upward, her voice, in low whispers, urges me to climb under the covers, to lie my head against the pillow, to let the waves of sleep roll across me. I close my eyes and listen to her voice - listen to how she speaks in poems, and let sleep claim me at last.

Eleven a.m. The minions of the flu have me within their grasp, clutching tightly to my insides, making me feel like every

piece of me is dying. But, those thousands of pages crinkle and beckon at me from across the house. Pages and pages of hours that I can't lose, and so I haul myself out of my bed, the muscles in my back and stomach contracting with the effort. My slow steps follow, one in front of the other, each lifting an occasion within itself. My hands grip the banister and cautiously I inch my way down the stairs. Halfway down, I stop, my knees bending precariously under my weight. I sit on the nearest step, letting my head rest on upturned knees. I'm so tired. And while I'd like to blame it on the newest strain of the Chinese flu, I know it is so much more than that. I just want to slow down for awhile - or come to a complete stop? The thought of ending it all has crossed my mind more than once, but I know that even the effort would take too much, and that I could never find the time to do it. I want to laugh at the thought, but it hurts my head too much with the kind of pain that makes it hurt to think. Maybe pain is the wrong word for it. It's like too many thoughts at one time making one more thought unbearable. And so I just sit here, my knees brushing my head, my breath warming my crotch. And I can't move. I'm stuck on the stairs between my bed and my desk, and I have no power to move from the step in between.

Four p.m. I've sat here for minutes? And still, I have no where to go.

Six. I think. When I feel her hand on my knee. The concern in her voice touches me somewhere deep, and I want desperately to pretend there's nothing wrong - that hours and hours of my life haven't passed me on this step. I'm ashamed that I could be so lazy - so worthless, so caught up inside of myself. But nothing inside of me can make me admit that something transpired here. So instead, I say I went for a drink of water, but stopped to rest, and must have fallen asleep. No big deal. And always the believer, she agrees, always agrees, and sends me back up to bed. Sometimes I think if she would stop agreeing I would feel more for her. That if she told me to knock off my shit that I would - could, and I would be. . . fixed? But she never

does. Never.

I don't even feel the bed when I hit it, but somewhere vaguely I know that I'm drifting off to sleep with the dreams of a woman in my head that isn't the one I have.

The work had only mounted as I slept, so with days to make up for, I dig in to the pages, reading and rereading until the beginnings of one page blur with the endings of the next. Roby vs. The State of Indiana. Just one of a series of cases that are supposed to boost me to the top. And for the first time I wonder - the top of where? The Empire State Building, as if I've ever been there? Or the Eiffel Tower? Or the world? Or perhaps I'm supposed to be on top of spaghetti, all covered with cheese, I lost my poor meatball. . .

I stop myself when I realize that I'm singing aloud. I want to laugh at the absurdity, laugh at myself. But a part of me is terrified. And I pray that she didn't hear from the other room, because for a second, a tiny, split second, I think I lost my mind.

She is on the couch, and doesn't see me standing there. Her hand has slid up to push the hem of her nightdress to her thighs, letting her fingers wander upward. There is something disturbing about the scene, yet still, my breath catches and my heart - so fast. I lean against the doorframe and watch as her fingers slide in and out, her back arching upward. Her eyes are screwed tightly closed, and she seems so lost in the actions, but her lips are tight, the edges turning downward. She isn't happy. I tip my head backward against the wood and try to remember the last time my fingers touched her there - the last time my lips touched hers for more than a moment or two. Days or weeks? Or months? The fact that the question even enters my mind makes me shudder with something akin to disgust, or is it despair? God, sometimes I want her so much but. . . I can't even explain what stops me - what the but is. I can even now feel the tightening in my groin, how I want to move her hands and replace them with my own, how I want to feel her mouth around my hardness. Those are the defining moments between us when I know where

I am - where I want to be. Then reality returns with such force that I recoil. And I am left to sort out what is left in the moments between, and how to make them all fit together.

I watch, as her breaths become faster, and shorter. The tense shudders will soon rush through her body, I know. But I turn my body away, not able to watch the fulfillment, not able to understand why.

10 a.m. It's a Saturday and I'm almost certain I haven't slept this late in my whole life, although there must have been days as a child when I slept till noon. I can feel the softness of the pillow as my arm wraps around it, the smell of her in it assaulting my nose. I bury my face deeper to catch every scent. The world hasn't slowed down, but my body has. Everything inside of me, slowing to the point where I'm afraid it will soon stop. I want to get up - do something, start my life again and make things simpler. I want to understand why I can't deal with things that should be so simple - things that everyone else takes as everyday fact. I want to be able to do what needs to be done, when it needs to be done, without feeling like nothing has been accomplished. I want to love her. But nothing inside of me works. And it's not like it doesn't work anymore, because it never worked to begin with. I want to be able to live, but I'm beginning to think that I've never had a life. And I don't even know where to begin.

I crawl out of tangled mess of covers that have caught around me in the night. I know she'll be downstairs, wondering what's wrong. She'll be waiting to fix this for me - make it all better. And somehow, I want her to try. The revelation is like the answer handed to me, as nothing has been handed to me before. I need someone else to fix what I don't have the power to do.

I don't shower, I don't dress. I stumble down the stairs looking for. . . redemption? I've lived inside of myself for so long that I want to put it outside - to live with it in boxes that I carry in my arms instead of in my head. And I know she'll be there, waiting to pick up the pieces she's waited for since the beginning - the pieces she always tries so hard to pick up, even when they

aren't there. But they're here now. Pieces of everything.

The need for her drives through me with almost insane intensity as I nearly run from room to room, looking for solutions that were always there. And I know it now. But no matter where I look, I can't seem to find her. I slow down and go meticulously from room to room as if by looking under every potted plant and treasured trinket I will find what I somehow missed. But she is nowhere. I stop to catch my breath but I find that with every gasp of air, a voiceless sob comes out. I sink to my knees on the floor, the tearless cries shaking my body with such an intense loss. Yet, I'm not even sure what the real loss is. Her, or me? Or an us that is so disjointed in my head that I can barely discern what it even is - was.

The front door slides open, and she is there. I want this to be my happy ending - that moment when her fairy dust and magic wand are enough. But I see the suitcase in her hand, I see the distant sadness on her face. And like a bad song lyric I sit there dumb, numb, waiting for her to put it down and rush to me, throwing her arms around me as if nothing has happened between us in the past months that could possibly make this moment inevitable. Waiting for her to put down her suitcase and rush to me. But she never does. Instead, her fingers curl around the doorknob tightly, as if by letting go she'll lose the will to close it. Her eyes, glassy and sad sweep low, to my own.

"I just don't have the answers anymore." The tears have started to fill her eyes, but she begins to pull the door shut with a slow finality on me - on us.

As the slab of door slides in slow motion closed, I reach out my hand to stop it. No, she may not have the answers. Neither do I. But I'm going to start looking in the right place. Somewhere she is an irreversible part of. And my hand reaches out to her not for answers anymore, but for help.

– Kim Hunter

Cornfield Meet

At 5:30 a.m. the pitter-pat slices were not welcome. He had just gotten off work around 12:00. Now his sacred day off was involuntarily sacrificed. The hot water heater made a lazy effort to improve this shower. The cold drops burned and the short bursts of scalding only heightened the contrast.

The soap slipped from Alex's hands. Ivory got caught under his nails as the bar wriggled out of his grasp. The lump performed a ballet on the gray-white porcelain, slowly progressing toward the drain. Bending over, Alex touched his skin to the clammy tile; the soap's dance had made the early-morning-cold tub slick and he dove head first. There was a clatter as he tumbled, his head hitting the cracked, pasty-white tub - the soap propelled from his reach. Several moldy bottles of too old shampoo thumped and slapped upon the contorted, damp body fallen into the tight space.

He lay there defeated before it began - cold, soggy, dead awake. His jostled head just now realized the dent it gave the bathtub. He looked up; the light was bright but not directly upon him - slightly out of direct sight. Its rays were filtered through the misty air and around the lime-covered shower doors. Contemplating sleep, Alex reluctantly placed his hands underneath his bulk and with an exhausted thrust put himself to his feet. It was not yet the time for sleep. He dressed uneventfully and shaved, nicking himself on the chin.

His head whirled and throbbed - not so much from his wounds but from the hour. Alex had only had three hours sleep - maybe four. He let his mind wander. It droned on about how like birth waking was. Thrown from comfort, you slowly develop into full ability and by the end of the day you've grown old and died upon the pillow - your soul welcomed into the underworld. It was an entertaining thought. Alex had to get to work.

He had sex with his wife last night. It was obligatory sex - always that way when he had come home from work. He had been old and rickety last night despite his bulk. He had been too tired to appreciate her fleshiness, her energy. The entire night he mentally complained of the discomfort of closeness to his wife.

He had wanted a pillow that didn't heave and caress and love and desire. He wanted his dead pillow last night - not his wife. He had to get to work.

His sweetness had risen to fix him breakfast - runny eggs, dry toast, and low-fat turkey bacon. She smiled affectionately as his battered form thumped into the kitchen, lowered itself into the chair and slept awake. She placed the meal on the table and sat across from him.

"Pass the salt, Hon . . . Alex the salt, please."

Grumbling, he shook the spiders weaving sleep from his head and overturned the salt. For some reason he'd been staring at the small modern cemetery directly outside the window and hadn't realized that the rest of the world was conducting business as usual. Damn salt.

Lily smiled, took up the salt shaker and continued her silent meal with her husband. Alex resumed his fixation with the cemetery and the workers busying themselves upon it. One particularly slouchy looking fellow was raking this one little patch over and over again. Jesus Christ, wasn't he done yet. Stupid Mexicans, they come here, take away good jobs from red-blooded Americans and then don't even do them right. Look at him stepping all over those graves. Suddenly Alex felt a sharp pain near his chest. Heartburn - damn turkey bacon. He'd rather drop dead of a heart attack than eat that crap. With the final gulp of his coffee burning his gut, Alex distantly kissed Lily and hauled himself to work.

As he drove, he inspected himself in the rear-view mirror. Fortyish-graying-thinning-sagging - stopped at a red light - typical. He had to get to work.

The entire way he fumed. He couldn't believe he had been called in on his day off, and Good Friday at that. Luckily, it was only a one day trip to Champaign. Alex calculated repeatedly the average speed necessary for him to return home by Noon on Saturday, 9:00 on Saturday, 6:00 on Saturday. . . Oh what did it matter. It's not as if he had anything to do. Still, they had a lot of nerve to call him in after he'd just gotten home. This assignment had better be something good, something important. It won't be

important though, he thought as he approached the dirty mint-green building where he worked. He was too old for interesting work. For him, it was just run the train down the track and back. He could have been an engineer, but drugs were more fun than work when he was younger, so he was a hostler. Hostlers were a dying breed they said, the last refuge for working class boys with no ambition. Pretty soon they'd be replaced or phased out as his generation keeled over. He'd never get to haul the top-secret government contracts, not that there were any, but he was sure if there were he wouldn't ever get to do it. Hell, the bastards probably wouldn't tell him about it. The railroad didn't give a rat's ass about him. I'm sure they care, he thought. Yeah, they hope I don't get killed on the clock so they won't have to pay the big bucks. Alex parked his pick-up. He had to get to work.

The shop was relatively quiet, being that it was Easter weekend and most things were run on a skeleton shift. Alex came in unnoticed and quickly changed into his drab gray coveralls. They smelled moldy and stale - probably a result of drying in his locker over the past couple of hours. Damn rain last night. He had been too drunk for that; he was surprised he hadn't drown in some mud puddle out in the yard last night. Enough bitching, he thought. Alex had to get to work.

He climbed the rickety steps up to the office rather unaware of the outside world. The entire shop could have come crashing down around his head and it wouldn't have mattered. Alex timidly pulled open the door. He really didn't want to talk to the boss this morning. Mr. Daniels was always in a wretched mood when he had to work holidays. Plus, Alex wasn't sure if he had forgotten that comment about a supposed unnatural relationship with his mother that Alex had made at the Christmas party last year. Alex was just drunk, Lily apologized. God he had been such an ass.

The office was cold and sterile - painted a dull white that did everything but suggest cleanliness. Daniels was pacing around the office, sweaty and mumbling. Alex's insides quivered. Damn it, I'm late. This is it, I'm fired. What's Lily going to think? Mr. Daniels scurried up to Alex frantically.

"Thank God you're here Alex," he bleated. "I'm sure you haven't heard yet; we just got work last night. Mr. Mortison passed away yesterday. You know, the principle stock holder. Well anyway, we need you to take the exhibition loco down to Champaign to be part of the funeral procession. His wife has requested that we provide the train to bring his body up to the family mausoleum in Chicago. I'm sorry to call you in like this, but all the engineers have been assigned to other jobs already. I hope you understand."

Alex couldn't believe his ears: they needed him. No they didn't, they just needed anybody. He was available. The bastards just wanted a monkey to throw the levers so that this rich son-of-a-bitch could ride into Hell in style. Why couldn't he just go in a hand-basket like everybody else? Inside, Alex laughed at his little joke. Still, life would be just so much easier if he was stone dead Like Mortison. Alex wished himself dead, but it didn't work. "I'm ready to go when you," he offered dutifully to Daniels.

"Don't get in too much of a hurry there Al." He hated to be called Al. "The paint shop boys are still putting the finishing touches on the ol' 5713. It'll be at least a couple of hours." Having finished, the boss darted away presumably to make a few panicked phone calls. Meanwhile Alex had a few hours to kill. There was absolutely no way to sleep in this roaring shop. He paced around for a while and eventually settled down with a girlie magazine he had found while snooping about the locker room. Terribly dull, he thought. At least he wasn't working.

Just about when Alex found himself relaxed and comfortable, the speakers snapped to life. Alex Hunt to track 7. Alex Hunt, please report to track 7, it crackled. Ponderously, Alex hoisted himself up from his chair and crept slowly towards his destination. For just a moment he had hoped they had forgotten him, about the goddamn train, about this assignment. He figured he would never be that lucky.

As he was approaching track 7, Billy Beamis rushed up from next to the engine. Billy wasn't too bright, he thought for no particular reason. Alex had just never really thought that highly of him.

"I just put the finishin' touches on 'er Al," Billy chimed. "Ain't she a beaut'. I got all the paintin' done 'cept for the loco numbers. They'd started on the left side yesterday but only got two of 'em done. I didn't have time this mornin' 'cause I was workin' on the hand rails, so I cover'd the first two up. It don't matter much though."

Alex ignored Billy and inspected the engine for himself. She really was beautiful, he admitted. Sleek, bullet-like, she was an old passenger locomotive from the early 50's. The railroad had picked her up when they bought out some dirty little short-line in Michigan. Mortison had decided to turn her into a flagship of sorts. Too bad the old bastard never got to see her finished. Rather fitting that this was her maiden voyage. Some guys get all the luck: an eternity of bliss in the hereafter and certifiably the coolest coffin ever. Alex panned his eyes across the engine one last time. Halfway down the side, they froze upon the two numbers Billy had been babbling about -13. Didn't Bill say they they had been painted over? Damn numbers are showing through. Alex reassured himself that he was not superstitious and that a couple of numbers meant nothing regarding his fate, but he couldn't shake the feeling of dread he had while staring at them. His grandfather, a wiry old railroad man himself, once advised, "You should never take out a locomotive marked thirteen because it is the goddamnedest bad luck any son-of-a-bitch ever came upon." Alex scoffed at himself for being so foolish and considered that his luck really couldn't get any worse. He didn't think about it any more; he had to get to work.

Alex vaulted up the freshly painted metal steps and swung his weary bulk into the cab. He found the driver's compartment incredibly tight and cramped. He thought back to lying in the bathtub this morning. It was definitely more comfortable twisting and writhing after the soap on his belly than sitting in this claustrophobic little box. Anyway, he began to back the locomotive out of the engine-house when he saw Billy waving and shouting in his peripheral vision. Easing up on the throttle, Alex poked his head out of the cab.

"Headlight just blew!" Billy screamed.

"Well then fix it ya son of a bitch. I wanna get outta here."

He grunted some submissive reply and within ten minutes the offending lamp was replaced. "Take it easy on 'er, it's 'er first time. Good luck, buddy."

By this time, Alex had tuned him out and was backing the engine out of the shop and down the track. The switchman was waiting to throw the lever when Alex had reached the edge of the yard. With a quick jerk, he was loose upon the open track. Alex half-acknowledged, half-ignored the warning light that screamed a luminous message at him - the headlight was out. Hell with it, he thought. They'll fix it in Champaign; he had to get to work.

He had to admit that being in control of such an expensive vintage machine was moderately exciting. Alex felt slightly better about himself. Perhaps they did trust him. Who was he kidding? Daniels said that the only reason he called him was that he was the only one available. Depressed and discouraged, Alex let the locomotive glide effortlessly over the tracks while he tended to more important matters, like his wounded ego.

The lone engine was barely out of Cook county when Alex noticed a threatening storm in the south. "Great," he muttered to himself, "looks like we're gonna be driving straight into some kind of tornado or something. Well, there's nothin' I can do about it." The solitary traveler pressed onward, heedless of the impending tempest.

The hours passed slowly, Alex couldn't completely divert his attention from the track because he knew he would have to change tracks several times along the line. Damn job. Rolling down the track, Alex reflected on his previous desire to die. As far as he could tell, he was sincere about it. He really didn't have that much to live for. His job was a little slice of hell - the better part of the day at the shop and then compensation at home because he had been gone. His wife was a genuine sweetheart but he didn't love her. Oh, he used to, but he was young then. The marriage just sputtered out after a while - probably a result of their son's death about ten years ago. To Alex, he wasn't really a son, more of a broken fetus. His wife had miscarried. For some reason they had never tried for another child. Lily had talked

about it, but he didn't want to see her cry when it died again. The thought of Lily's tears was probably the only thing that kept him from ending his own life. All he could do was wish for death and pray that Lily would forget him and move on. Damn Lily. She always made things so complicated. It began to rain.

Outside Kankakee, a switchman put Alex onto a sidetrack for about an hour while a gargantuan freight lumbered lugubriously past the sleek Number 13. The cab rattled around Alex as the freight inched by. Damn it, hurry up. Alex noticed the sky growing black around him; the rain had gotten slightly more boisterous.

By the time his cumbersome colleague had moved on and his locomotive had been switched back on course, the shower had become a deluge. Sheets of water poured off the cab. Inside, Alex noticed a puddle congregating in a corner as a result of drops sneaking their way between the seams. Why couldn't that bastard have died when this hulk was more than bubble-gummed together? He grabbed at the wiper switch - it came off in his hand. "Goddammit," he bellowed. "No wipers." He wished he hadn't gone to work.

Squinting, Alex's eyes tried to cut through the thunderstorm. Outside the cab, the sky had adopted a velvety blackness. Alex tried to ignore the lightning and its gunshots, focusing on the rail ahead. His attention was corrupted by a small, nonchalant light flashing on the control panel. Upon examination, Alex realized it complained of some very technical reason for the engine's desire to increase speed to idiotic proportions. He adjusted the throttle - the train moved forward faster and faster without hesitation. Alex, collecting the frenzied shards of himself, remembered the breaks; he heaved his weight upon them. The funeral train held its unwavering course.

Alex switched on the radio, which someone had apparently neglected to finish installing. He dashed it from the table and frantically searched for some way of connecting it. He was sure there was a way to do it, but he had no idea what it was. Alex dropped to the floor and sobbed. He had no control.

He was really not sure how long he cowered in the cab

weeping, but at once he snapped back into reality. This locomotive was to be sidetracked twice before reaching Champaign - once outside Kankakee and once in some little town. Where the hell was that little town? Damn this train. Alex had to get to work.

The foggy windows made it impossible for Alex to see out of the cab. Instinctively he punched open a storage locker that belched forth a rain-suit, a flare gun and some flares, a tool box, a fire extinguisher, and a manual of some sort. Alex jerked on the yellow rubber jacket and threw open the cab door. The rain bludgeoned him as he stepped onto the walkway. At this speed, it was all he could do to keep from being whipped off the train. Shielding his eyes, Alex peered out over the tracks; he thought he saw somebody, or somebody's shadow. The figure stood directly on the tracks. Was that the switchman? Didn't he see the train? Then Alex remembered the dark and the broken headlight that sent him into the cab to flip anything that resembled a light switch. Nothing happened. Thinking quickly, he snatched the flare gun off the floor. He had never used one of these. Why wasn't there any lightning now to expose the incoming locomotive? Alex's wet boots caught on the rubber pants still lying on the floor. He tumbled backwards and slipped partly out the door. During his descent, the gun discharged - the flare rattled around inside the cab. A burst of orange-red light blinded Alex and from what he could hear blew out one of windows.

Stunned, he blundered to his feet. Maybe the figure had seen that, he thought. Dazed and hurting, he grasped the hand rail and stood outside the cab. There were more figures near the track, about thirty feet away. Alex dove into the the driver's compartment and onto his stomach. He seized the toolbox, ripped it open, and spilled its contents into the puddle on the floor. Pieces rolled out the door and off the train. Alex blundered about for the flashlight, clicked it on, and sprang to his feet. He heard a ghastly wail. Stabbing his torch and heading out the door, he looked ahead for the man on the tracks - he was nowhere to be found. As the hearse rattled onward, Alex watched his sickly torch-light flow over a horrified ashen face standing near the tracks. It was a

quick glimpse, but this shade made an impression on Alex: he had seen a ghost.

The train sped onward while the eyes of horrified specters followed Alex's unnatural engine. A metallic, pulpy, dead smell hung underneath the doomed Number 13. His grandfather had been right. Never move a locomotive numbered 13, even a reluctant, sneaky, barely visible number 13. Damn luck. Alex had to get to work.

As far as he could estimate, Alex had about twenty minutes before he would collide with the Amtrak out of Champaign. The atmosphere was still black with storm, so there was little possibility of this unlighted bullet-gray train being seen. Collision would mean more death, his and others'. He winced when he thought of the switchman driven under the machinery of his locomotive. He did not want to kill. He did not want to die. He thought of Lily and how he would miss her arms at night. He had been so cold to her. Why didn't he realize he loved her? He was a bastard; he deserved the impending disaster. It was all fated - the number 13, the omens, the storm, everything.

Piss on luck. He was not about to have an epiphany and die without applying it. With a cry of frustration he gathered up four or five tools and stuffed them in his pockets. "I love you Lily," he called. "I love you life," he roared.

Alex charged down the walkway running along the engine; he heard the shrill horn of the passenger train before him. Alex tore open one of the engine cabinets on the side of the locomotive. At the same time, knives of electricity gashed the sky. This flash reflected off the components inside the cubicle with an intensity that shut Alex's eyes. He shuttered in sudden recognition of mortality and fumbled in his pockets for the hammer. Finding it, he beat the motor with unparalleled ferocity - he was going stop this train. He wanted to live. Steam poured forth burning his face; electrical cables stung him. He pulled away and moved to another compartment. He ripped and slashed at the guts of this doomed funeral procession. Looking over his shoulder, he could see the Amtrak approaching. By the time it saw him, it wouldn't be able to stop.

Nevertheless, Alex tried to stop the locomotive. He seethed with pain and joy and frustration and desire as he did his work, as he tried to kill this speeding beast. Alex had found his calling. As the trains were mangling each other, Alex beat away furiously. When friction and screaming steel severed his hammer-hand, he clawed and bit and pounded the engine with his very body. His last breath was spent in a passionate last thrash of fresh corpse against damned Number 13. He had finally gotten to work.

– Daniel G. Fitzgerald

Biographies

Jason Brown: a sophomore English major and Creative Writing minor from Pana, Illinois.

Sara Cizmar: a sophomore Psychology major. This poem is about the insecurity that college kids experience when choosing a career. In writing poetry, I take real life situations and try to make them more abstract.

Daniel G. Fitzgerald: a junior English major. He is also an active member of The Devil's Advocacy Council.

Kim Hunter: a senior (ha ha ha) English major who still can't figure out what the heck she's doing with her life. But she thinks, at least, in all the time she's been looking that she has found a truth: "I think we all have regrets and we're looking for the ultimate answers to make it all better but what it finally comes down to is that there just aren't any. Oh- and of course, sometimes we have to write our own happy endings."

Stephanie Kavanaugh: an EVB major and a chemistry minor who will be graduating in May. She began writing poetry in the sixth grade. Poems are her prayers.

Erin Maag: an undeclared sophomore.

Jeanette McClain: a sophomore English major from Crystal Lake, Illinois. I've never really thought of myself as a poet. I'd rather write short stories, but sometimes a few lines can say more than a few pages. "Gratitude" is the first poem I've ever had printed in anything. I wrote it for a friend who knows what a string of gold Mardi Gras beads

can do for a girl. Anyway, thanks to The Vehicle for reading my work and to anyone who has ever given me something to write about, whether they knew it or not.

David Moutray: a junior working on a major in English and a minor in Creative Writing.

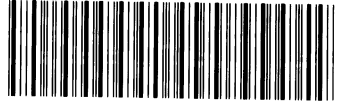
Maureen P. Raftery: I am one of those English majors that likes to act. Actually, I'm a double major in Theatre and English. (They don't like it if I write them down second) I'm funny, I'm in Hello Dali. Writing is my very private passion until now.

Brooke Tidball: a junior English major. The poem, "brook," is an expression of her feelings for Sajad Abid Husain, a human being whom she loves and admires a great deal.

Jacob Tolbert: an English major and a History and Creative Writing minor.

Mandy Watson: a junior English major and Art minor. "My advice in any creative endeavor, whether it be poetry, writing or art is not to remain stale in habit. I give thanks to God - Jehovah Jyra.

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