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Starla Stensaas

Elisabeth Crist

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Archives

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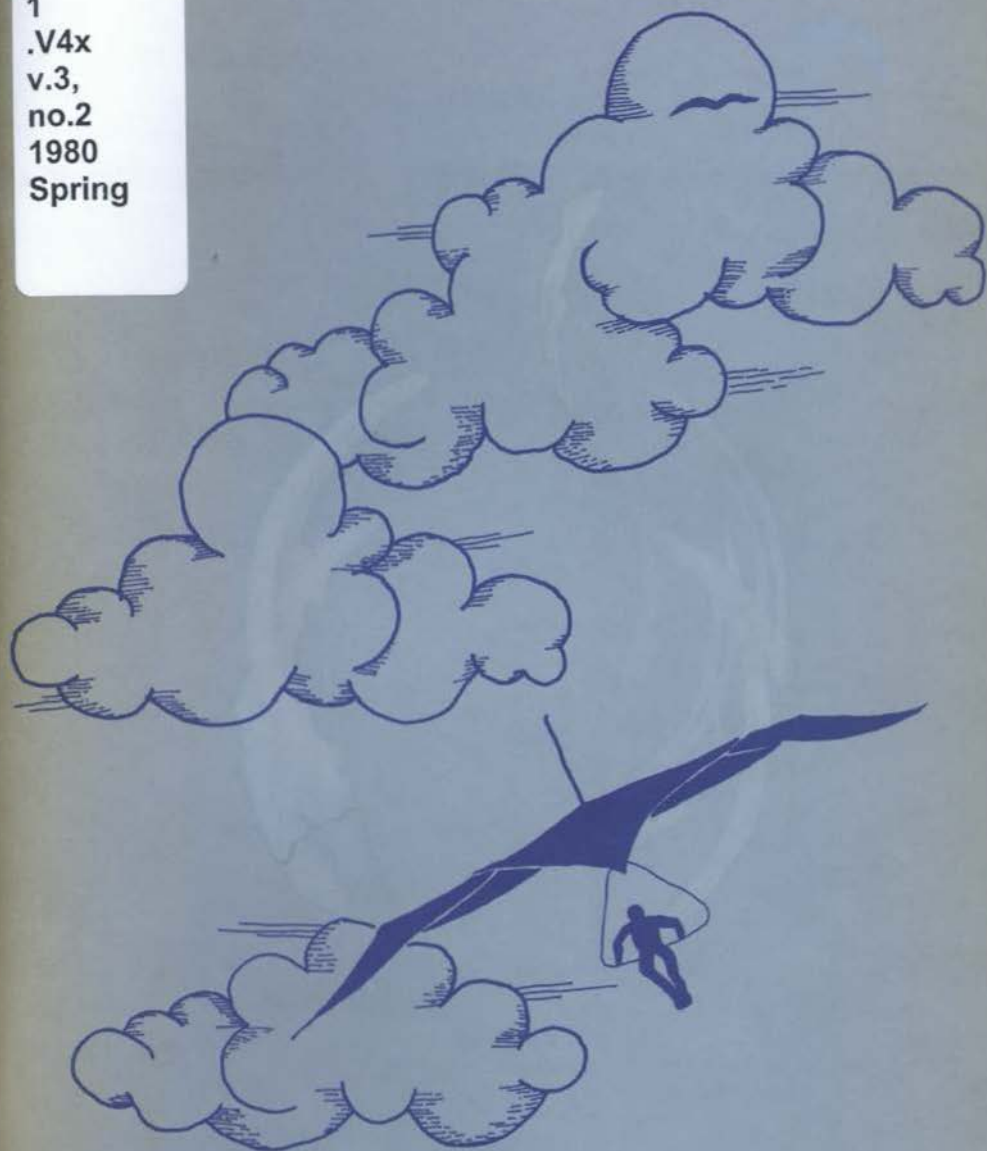
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Spring



VEHICLE
SPRING '80

VEHICLE

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--Cindy Hubbart

White Language

The poem leapt from the page
hung in mid-air
looking over the left shoulder.
I am here, lost in this line, sliding to its completion.
The period drops me,
slowly,
and I turn, leaning into an italic I,
Caressing the page like the black line etchings
of white sheets and pillows in morning light,
the narrow black frame that holds Picasso
from all the area around him,
the black tractor marks on the white snow where nothing
breaks the horizon, not even our breath,
nothing but the black earth torn and thrown from the field.
I am here, where the words are black on white
where everything is flat and white
where sounds leap upon themselves,
their tune, the wind through an icy flute.

--Starla Stensaas

The Grand Canyon at Sunset

The hum of tourists' conversations fades,
and I am alone.

Perched on the rugged cliff,

I watch

the muted red and orange sunlight
brushing across the painted rock faces
of the endless canyon.

The jagged sides are bathed
with steadily streaming
shadows.

A voice calls
behind me.

Reluctantly,
I turn to go down
through the dusk.

--Elisabeth Crist

Withering

A rose withers
in a forgotten vase;
Soft red petals,
Brown-edged, sag slightly.
Green sepals and leaves
Grow dry and curl;
Slender, succulent stem
Wrinkles and drains of youth,
And a once-sweet scent
Has almost faded
From all memory.

--Sheila Katty

In Defense of the Dandelion

Why do we think dandelions are ugly? Why does the sight of that innocent yellow flower drive a usually placid man into fits of violent anger, steaming like a tea kettle in its full glory and swearing like a sailor in his?

The word "dandelion" comes from the French name for the plant, *dent de lion*, or "lion's tooth." Unlike its mammal counterpart, however, the dandelion is not considered a "king" but rather as low life, foul foliage, a wicked weed! Each spring the newspapers advertise a miasma of devices all devoted to the proposition of wiping out that "vile vegetation," but how can the dandelion deserve such an appellation?

Like vermouth in a martini, those butter-colored blossoms add character to the monotonous stretch of spinach-green grass, euphemistically christened a lawn. Even when they go to seed they retain their beauty, their parachutes of white hairs carrying them on the breeze.

I've never thought of them as weed for I simply reasoned that they were pretty wild flowers. In kindergarten I collected bunches as bouquets for my teachers (it was cheaper than *FTD*), but they, unfortunately, had been brainwashed into regarding them as obnoxious growths that would infest the entire world if given half the chance, and eyed my gifts with disgust.

My mother, it seems, came from the same school of thought, for she is in constant combat with those "barbaric brutes" that devastate our backyard. Crab grass she can tolerate (although not without a great deal of self-control), and she has even learned to live with chickweed; but once the yellow head of a dandelion makes its way to the surface, Mom arms herself with a full arsenal of weapons to match virilities with the baleful vegetation. Shovel, shears, hoe, rake, and weed spray at hand, she confronts the dandelion, her eyes stern and unmoving; but somehow, the persistent plant withstands her attack—this time! Undoubtedly, she'll return with a new battle plan and better defense tactics.

Of course, my mother is not the only one bent on wiping the dandelion population off the face of the earth, but she's typical. Every summer, hundreds of bags of weed killer are sold to gardeners who will spend their weekends savagely attacking the defenseless dandelion. Why these people cannot leave the harmless things alone is beyond me. In fact, these plants, often termed "destructive," are quite beneficial, and it's high time we realize their full potential. We

can beat the rising cost of coffee with a tasty cup of dandelion leaf tea served with a heaping bowl of dandelion leaf salad. The plant also yields a milky juice which, in the form of extract, is employed for medicine. A bride can carry a dandelion bouquet (but only if she's a Leo), and arrangements of the versatile plants can make any number of creative decorations.

So let us leave the lowly dandelion to bloom in its full splendor and set our sights on a higher goal. Let's not persist in picking on that poor plant, for it's high time we band together in opposition of something far more worthy of elimination—let's lick athlete's foot!!

—Kathleen Alaks

Haiku

Stowaway upon
the wind. When will you be found,
dandelion seed?

—Scott Fishel

Double Solitaire

He flicks
And misses the ashtray everytime.
Pensive in his anticipation,
He is like a child, who has eyes and mouth open
Skyward and sanguine,
Waiting for the last sweet, syrupy sediments
Of his chocolate milk
To molasses down to his eager tongue.

I lay an adulterous king of spades
On an unsuspecting queen of hearts,
His naive mate tucked away
In the dregs of the deck.
Three times already our game has been forgotten for
A kiss
Which has forgotten in the
Absorption of each other's warm gin-flavored breath
Which has not been forgotten.

So it is
That we become playwrights
In our own right.
A finale forms between us
Unwritten,
Yet punctuated with eyes and expression.
He snaps off the snow-faced T.V.
And we stare at the screen
Glowing with nervous energy,
Then we lay all our cards on the table
And go upstairs to fold.

-Cathy George

Adolescence

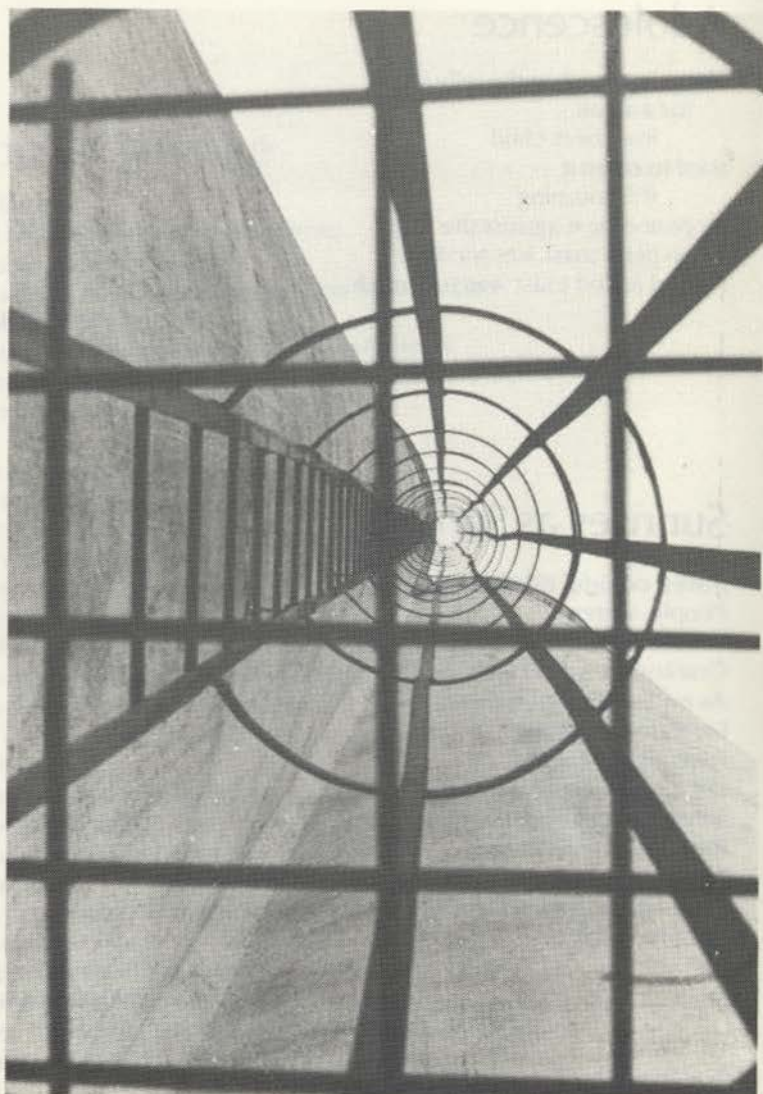
There is a crack in the jelly jar,
for a small
impatient child
tried to open it
this morning
by pounding it against the sink
when plain toast was too little
and jellied toast was too much.

--Nancy Douglas

Sunrises as Sunsets

Boxes, colorful dead plants
People, water,
Friends gathered because of one.
One took a walk, alone.
As my eyes entered the earth
I screamed, silently.
I was afraid, calmly.
Dig a hole next to it for
School proms never visited,
Breakfasts never eaten,
And children never conceived.
I saw all my friends' faces in one,
I'd rather look
down.

--Bob Schumacher



--Scott Fishel

War Is Not All Hell

One evening in the den
my father went to France,
reported home...
white-hot sands of the Cote d'Azur
magenta and saffron of the Vichy gardens
Marseilles fruit-bursting, sweet
teeth-gritting wounds at Normandy
and the seams-straight fineness
of Yvette's legs.

—Chris Goerlich

Young Soldier

The hole in his head
Breathed
Knuckles white
Clenched his rifle
Eyes wide
In frightened rage
Flickered shut
He whispered God's name
Asking for home

—Robert Swanson

"Without Really Looking For Them"

"Well, are we going to try to get a ride or not," Lisa bellows.

She is already walking down the road in the direction we were driving before the car broke down. As I start to follow her, I remember that the car isn't locked. I go back to it—that damn car—grab my purse and lock the doors. Just as I come around the car, Lisa turns and calls, "Well, are you going?"

"Yes, I'm coming, I'm coming. Okay?" I don't know what she's being so bossy about. It was her idea to take this road to her uncle's house anyway. I haven't seen a car since we turned onto it, and that was at least an hour ago.

I am not hurrying to catch up with her so she stops to wait for me.

"What took you so long?"

"I stopped to lock the car. Who knows, somebody might come along while we're gone, and I'm not thrilled by the idea of having my clothes stolen. I mean, they're not exactly high fashion, but I'm not finished with them yet." I continue walking.

"Okay, okay. Sorry I asked, but thanks for locking the car." She follows me.

"You're welcome, Lisa. Didn't mean to snap at you. It's just that everything seems to be breaking down around me." I wish I hadn't said that. I know she won't understand. She can't. She likes her life, dull as it is.

"What do you mean, Mel?"

"Oh, nothin'. Just the car and my dad's tractor and all. At least it's a nice day to be walking. Not raining like it has been for the last couple of weeks."

"Yeah, it is."

It is a beautiful day—cloudless—and the sky is as smooth as the insides of seashells. It is hot, but not unbearably so, and there is a slight breeze rustling the bright green leaves of the tall sycamores along the road.

I start to sweat and my long, dark hair is hot on the back of my neck. I catch it up into a ponytail and secure it with a rubber band taken from my purse. Lisa does the same with her blond hair. I can't believe how light her hair gets in the summer.

We continue to walk in silence. I don't feel like making small talk right now, and she knows it.

Suddenly, I hear a sound, a low humming sound—a car. It's a car coming down the road. Then, Lisa hears it, too.

"Mel, it's a car!"

"I know. I know!" I'm suddenly a little apprehensive. After all, two girls, alone, hitching rides from strangers? But what choice do we have?

The car moves toward us, coming quickly. It's a new-looking, red car, and it looks expensive. It is so shiny in the summer sun that it practically glows.

"Wave your arms, Lisa." We both begin to wave our arms frantically and must look ridiculous because the driver has surely spotted us already. How could he miss us? We are, in all likelihood, the only things moving within thirty miles of here.

As we continue to wave and watch the car come closer, I'm suddenly very conscious of what we're wearing—sleeveless cotton blouses and shorts. For some reason, I wonder if this will make any difference.

The car reaches us, slows, and stops a few yards ahead of us. "C'mon Lisa." We run to the car and look in the open window on the passenger side.

"Hi," we say in unison. The driver is a young man.

"Our car broke down and we need a lift to the nearest town to get someone to fix it. Do you think you could help us out?" I ask.

"Sure, girls. Hop in. I think I saw your car a little ways back. I'd fix it for you myself if I could, but I've never been able to do anything with cars except drive 'em."

I open the door and get into the bucket seat in front and Lisa climbs into the back. I close the door and the man shifts the car into "drive". We pull away from the shoulder.

We ride in silence for what seems like a long time, not knowing exactly what to say to one another. I try to look over at him without his knowing it. I can only see half his face, but as I remember from our first greeting, he is relatively handsome. The eye that I can see is focused intensely on the road, and his medium-length brown hair is blown back from his forehead by the air coming in the open window. He must be about twenty-three or so and looks like a pretty ordinary guy wearing faded blue jeans and a plaid, Western-cut shirt with the sleeves rolled up. The only really unusual things I notice about him are his hands. They are small and pale with smooth square nails and prominent joints and knuckles. There's something special about them. They are so different from any other man's hands that I've ever seen. Dad's hands are big and hard and brown from the farm work every day and so are my brother's. What a contrast theirs would make against his.

Suddenly he turns to me and says, "Oh, I'm sorry. I should've introduced myself first thing. I'm Tim Woods."

I jerk my face toward the open window trying to make it seem that I wasn't looking at him but only making it more obvious.

I turn back toward him, trying to compose myself. "I'm Melinda Barnes, and this is Lisa Phillips."

"Nice to meet you, Melinda, and you, too, Lisa."

She says, "Same here."

We are silent again. Lisa begins to hum with the radio. She always does that. She seems so bored and I don't see how she can be. It's a beautiful day for a drive and what an interesting man—there's something so very special about him. Maybe it's because she's isolated by being in the back seat, but if I know her, she could be sitting on his lap and still not notice any of the things that I already have.

He breaks the silence again, "The next town is Logan. It's about another twenty miles on. I'll take you to the gas station there, if that's all right. They do some repair work."

"Thanks, that'll be just fine." Only another twenty miles. That's about a half hour of conversation.

"How far is Logan from Harewood?" Lisa asks. That's one of the first intelligent things she's said all day.

"Oh, it's about ten miles on from Logan. Why?"

"We're going to visit my uncle."

"Oh."

Lisa returns to humming with the radio.

"Are you from Logan?" I ask. "You seem to know a lot about the area."

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I was born in Logan."

"You don't live there, now?"

"No, I'm going there to see my father. Always do when I'm going to be in Illinois for any length of time."

"Do you travel a lot?" I wonder what he thinks of my asking all these questions. I know I'm getting awfully nosey, but suddenly I want to know so much.

"Well, I travel enough when I'm touring. You see, I tour with a small orchestra, actually we're a jazz band. I play piano."

A pianist—I should have known. "Oh, I'll bet you've been all over the U.S then, huh?"

"I've been to every state at least once, though not very long in any one place. I live in Louisiana when I'm not touring, right near the Texas border. Have you ever been down there at all?"

I hesitate a little, "No...just to Missouri a couple of times. Nowhere else." Twenty years of life, and I've never been more than two hundred miles from my own front door. "You know, I've always

wondered about Texas. It's such a big state. There must be a lot of good things about it. Would you...well...tell me what's best about Texas?"

"Well, this is great because one day on the beach at Corpus Christi about four years ago I decided what I liked best about Texas and I always kinda hoped someone would ask me someday."

"What? What is it then?"

"It's the beach on a day like today and the ocean as warm as a bath. But the very best thing is finding seashells without really looking for them. It's almost like they're finding you. I guess it's like that at any beach, though, not just in Texas."

I don't answer. I can still hear Lisa's monotonous mixture of humming and singing coming from the back seat. She has been oblivious to our entire conversation. I try not to think about her.

Instead, I think about living in Louisiana and going to a beach in Texas and having a bath in the ocean, and as we pass the Logan City Limits sign, I find some seashells under a sky like today's.

-Sheila Katty

Journey

Once as I traveled,
The sun rose.
It shone brighter than ever before;
I rested,
Enjoying the warmth that caused me to smile.
The sun set.
Darkness covered the path I was to follow.

I will begin to travel,
Blinded.
But knowing the sun will rise again
Gives me hope,
Though I know the sun will not shine with
Quite the same warmth,
Rain does not always fall with
Quite the same force.

-Jean Wallace

I Barely Remember the Poet/Teacher Who Once Held Civilization's Destruction Within a Line of His Poem and Let it Live Anyway

They've muzzled our words,
disengaged our deep down anger
with classes titled
"Women in Contemporary Society,"
"Black Studies and the American Dream,"
and "Academia 101."
We won't take Student Services
or Old Main during this decade.

The day Allen died
A newspaper told me from a hard wooden bench.
A bout with cancer, the article read,
the steady draining anger
like water dripping constantly on granite rock.
The most gallant little man
his knee crumpled to his chest
yellow fingers grasping the chestnut
I pressed there.
His kiss was as distant as a snowflake
falling from eyelash to cheek.

He pulled our selves out in the classroom
where we laid it down in black and white
line by line.
"A story that produces a shock for the reader
does so because it shocks the writer," he said.

The sixties exploded in the streets
The seventies exploded within us
Our steady draining anger that drips
constantly on our rock hard selves
is now clothed in puffs of smoke
bought on any street corner.
blue, soothing smoke
heavy
heady.

-Starla Stensaas

To Search

Furnace, crashing and clicking
The sharp voices next door--
Soon muffled by thin walls.
A dirty ivory railing,
Shaking with every grasp.
Creaking stairs,
Leading up the shadowy, musty hallway.
The crowded closet,
Filled with bulky coats.
Pockets filled with torn tissues,
Blackened by tears.
A chipped table,
Holding soiled mittens of a child
Who plays on the street

To search the past...

Days of relaxation,
Long pastures, golden wheat and corn.
Clanking of an auger,
Screaming of a farmer
Over the loud combine.
Acres of soil, contoured and disked,
Containing the future.
Soiled work gloves resting, awaiting its owner.
Cockle-burrs clinging to coats,
Hanging on a plaster-cracked wall.
Pockets of seed corn, and
Tissues, stained with tears of soot and oil.

To search the present...
-Karen Buchanan

Killing Carp

Snow rolled down from mountain tops,
Lakes spilled over, sunken baths,
Warm water pooled north of the soccer pitch. . .
Ulf and I heard them splash their tails
Beneath the birch and tamarack,
Foolish scavengers, risk that sound,
They were wily wolves, so hard to catch,
We'd usually have to snag them from the bridge,
But now, we fetched our pitch forks.

I killed forty fish, wanting to stop,
Cringing as the trident tore,
Dark brown paper armour punctured sorely,
Hoisting up and out, heavy on the lever,
Yellowed ivory bellies, shining moons,
Snapping side to side so fast, breaking in agony,
Gasping in the stinging air, ragged holes,
Red blood oozing, sponges squeezing life,
Cold hard iron cutting deeper.

Ugly thick-lipped sucking creatures,
Silent underwater vacuum cleaners,
Sifting silt from dusty floors. . .
Basking near the surface, lazy submarines
Torpedoed by surprise,
Whiskered faces of the old ones,
Little tusks, trophy kills,
Lying, dying, slimy, soiled,
Sand sticking to their wounds.

A god with a fork, an empty feeling,
Sick from stony dumb eyes staring,
Slipping, slithering into sacks,
Dragging homeward, giving back life
In the orchard floor, scales shedding,
Bodies blending into dirt.
The sun hides its heart in the clouds
And spring rains pour,
Wash my hands, my iniquity. . .

—Jerry McAnulty

War of the Wills

I was drafted on a rainy Wednesday evening last fall while busily studying in my dormitory room. By telephone, Mrs. Smith issued my call to arms, urgently requesting that I babysit for her two pre-school aged children on Saturday night. I accepted and agreed to report for active duty at 19:00 hours in the dorm lobby, where Mr. Smith would meet me and transport me to the scene of battle.

I began combat preparations Saturday night at 18:00 hours, hastily donning my uniform, a sturdy pair of blue jeans and an old gray sweater. In my knapsack I included several pieces of light ammunition: a *TV Guide* with children's programs highlighted in vivid yellow; several Batman and Superman comic books; and my combat manuals, two textbooks on child psychology. Mr. Smith arrived on schedule and we hastily proceeded to the war zone. The Smith residence, a large white house, stood outside of town in a desolate, heavily wooded area. As we entered the house, I caught my first glimpse of the Enemy. Jimmy and Sally, ages four and two respectively, appeared to be formidable and clever adversaries, in spite of their size. While they retreated into the toyroom, Mr. and Mrs. Smith and I held a top-secret conference to discuss strategy. I received the following orders: the children cannot play hide and seek; they must brush their teeth before bedtime; and they must be in bed at 21:00 hours. My strategy, to tire out the children, pleased my commanding officers, who promised to return in five hours as they withdrew out the front door.

Daringly I ventured behind enemy lines into the toyroom, and stumbled into a fierce ambush of vicious projectiles. Assorted blocks, puzzle pieces, and dolls rained about my head, and I quickly ordered Jimmy and Sally to cease hostilities. I suggested that we all watch the *Muppet Show*, and for a blissful half-hour my diversionary tactics succeeded in keeping the pair out of trouble. To my dismay, once the credits rolled around the screen fighting broke out again as the children struggled for control of the television dial. Forcibly intervening, I appeased both children by allowing Jimmy to watch the special double-episode of the *Incredible Hulk* and by dragging out Sally's Fischer-Price Village, engaging her in play for almost an hour.

At precisely 21:00 hours I issued the children an ultimatum, declaring that it was bedtime. Immediately, a major conflict erupted with both sides exchanging fire.

"It's time to go to bed," I warned again.

"We don't want to go!!" the children whined.

"Your mother and father want you in bed on time," I threatened darkly.

"But we aren't tired!!!" Sally and Jimmy managed to explode, while stifling yawns and rubbing their eyes with their fists.

Hoping to undermine the children's morale, I unveiled my secret weapon, offering them some chocolate chip cookies and milk. For ten blissfully quiet minutes, we peacefully snacked in neutral territory around the kitchen table. Unfortunately, the cease-fire completely broke down once I renewed my attack, telling them, "You must go to bed NOW!"

Jimmy's and Sally's verbal resistance quickly escalated into violent tantrums. In desperation I hauled out my heavy artillery, threatening to report their misbehavior to their parents. Realizing that their cause was hopeless, the children sullenly surrendered and reluctantly trotted upstairs to the bedrooms.

As part of our peace treaty, I agreed to tell them bedtime stories. Jimmy bravely staged a last show of defiance by taking twenty minutes to brush his teeth, but Sally quietly climbed into bed, her will to fight broken. By 22:00 hours they slept soundly and I staggered downstairs, briefly pausing at the toyroom to survey the battleground. Dejected heaps of block rubble, battered toys, injured stuffed animals, and mangled doll's limbs met my weary eyes. With a heavy sigh I entered the living room and collapsed on the couch from combat fatigue.

The sudden arrival of my superiors roused me out of my fitful slumber, and in a stupor I reported the night's activities to them. Mr. Smith decorated me for bravery, complementing my resourcefulness during combat. Mrs. Smith pleadingly asked if I would be available to babysit the next Saturday night. Still dazed, I pledged my services, already bracing myself for the next week's offensive.

--Laurel Anzelmo

The Life of a Sexual Metaphor

On the bus this morning,
I sat next to a pregnant woman,
asked her what she wanted—
“Of course not a girl.
Think about it.
Women are born to be consumed—
Dish
Cupcake
Cream Puff
Peaches and Cream
Honey Bun
Or potted—
Shrinking violet
Wallflower
Ramblin’ Rose
Clinging vine...
Deflowered.
Or domesticated—
Filly
Chick
Bunny
Kitten
Have a boy.
A wolf
A buck
A stud.”

—Chris Goerlich

Hazy Days in Mid-July

The old tire,
Worn thin,
Hung by a frayed rope
From the walnut's bough,
Still in the balmy air.

Low-hanging clouds,
Pressing down upon a paint-chipped house.
The gravelled road's dust,
Parching and coating.

A screen door's seldom slamming,
The rusty hinges squeaking,
Breaking the solitary atmosphere,
Hollow with emptiness,
Like the dry, deserted well.

-Karen Buchanan

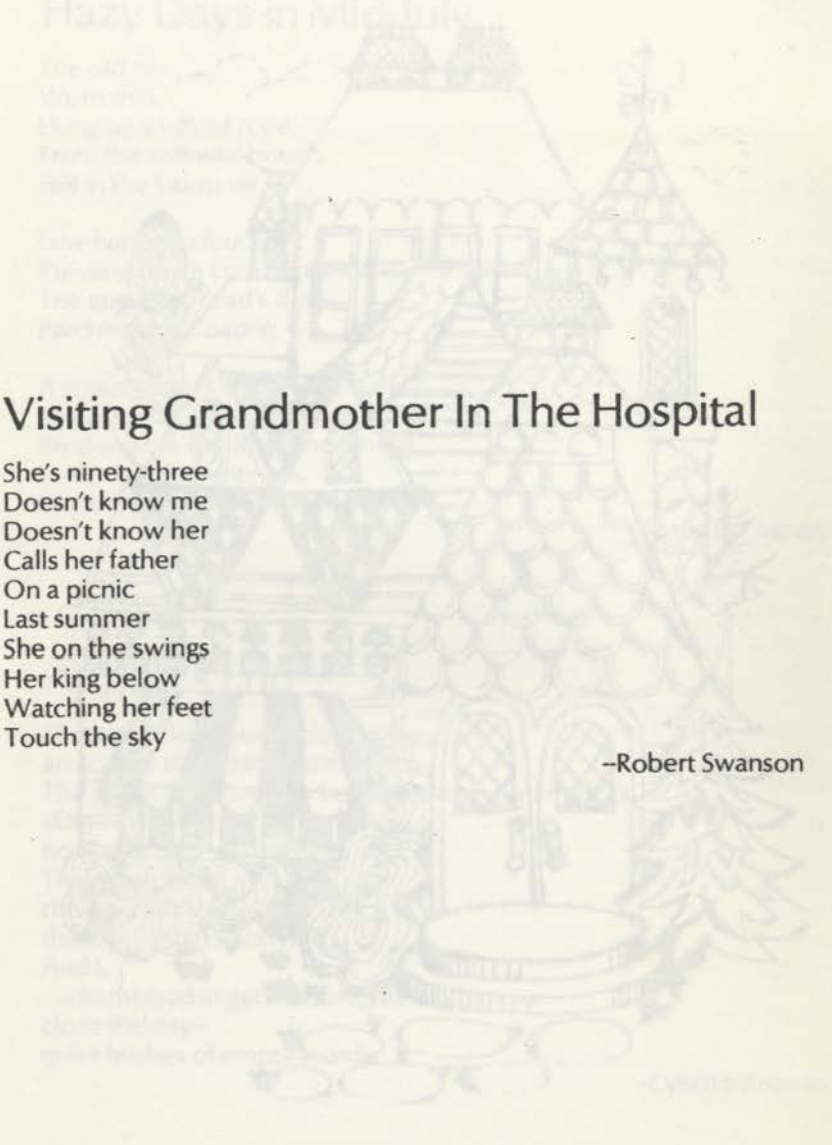
August's End

The sun slides down a closing door,
an orange slice quite bittersweet.
The geese flew over my house today in arrowed V's,
skimmed the sky,
honked a tune of summer's end.
The petals close,
the air cools softly,
the leaves still quickly,
And I,
immersed in gentle thoughts of you,
close the day-
quiet hushes of empty words.

-Cynthia Rozmin



-Karen Dankovich



Visiting Grandmother In The Hospital

She's ninety-three
Doesn't know me
Doesn't know her
Calls her father
On a picnic
Last summer
She on the swings
Her king below
Watching her feet
Touch the sky

-Robert Swanson

As I lay dreaming
My mind wandered
down a dark alley way.
I backed out quickly
before I could get lost in it.

Now I know, though,
that it is there.
I fear its existence,
but am drawn to probe it
Like a bad tooth.

--Nancy Van Cleave

The Albino

Hair-netted waitresses,
thick with lunches
dodge artfully as
plaids, checks
blur past
sandwiched tables
smothered in green,
blue plastic wraps.
Blondes, brunettes,
read thick scrolled
gold-tassled menus,
cool laughing lips
flash to cups.

He sits alone,
body hunched,
face voided,
a clean napkin.

--Denise Davinroy

Storm's Eve

Tall, damp, grass surrounds me.
A clump of clover forms my pillow.
Dead, split branches creak above me,
Swaying in the heavy gusts of night air.
Pale thin streaks of light outline
Grey, thunder filled clouds.
Low, reverberating sounds announce
The coming rain.

--Jeffrey Stouse



--Scott Fishel

Lovers: A Weaver in the States and A Peace Corps Volunteer in West Africa

Since you've gone,
I experiment with slightly different patterns
of behavior
and afternoon faces occasionally
stretch into morning faces.
It is flexibility
an exercise
a muscle contraction.

The first summer
I wove you in greens and browns
Threads full of tension across the loom.
The green is your shirt, your old war clothes,
carried on your deep brown shoulder.
I have found the color green everywhere
river green that clings to my bones
whistling tunes in a willow flute.
The brown is your language
the words that were whispered in your ear
from the Dark Continent
before your father's black skin
rested on your mother's smooth stomach.
The brown is your ghetto crawl
and the reflection of this place
in your eye.

Summer grew short
as inch by inch the weaving
took your shape
texture
colors.
the greens and browns
blending into dusk
I found the threads of your life
clinging to my clothes
twining and wrapping me
in every part of you.
When winter came
your colors were mine
day to day we lived as one.

Behavior is the way I still
make tea in gallons
and throw it down the sink
because you (significant other)
sit somewhere in a hut in Africa.
The silent secrets of your language
have called you to your birthing place
the land of perpetual summer.
You sit at the bantaba chatting with elders.
I stare in my habitual way at the snow threading green yarn across a
typewritten page
and brown yarn into my veins.

--Starla Stensaas

Gitchegumme Beach

Tourists on the beach
lined up on the musty towels
soaked in ointment and oil
pores crying from the heat.

Baste the backside
then flip
like pheasant on a spit,
limbs dangling in the hot coals.

--Scott Fishel

Dear Husband, What Do You Think?

I was thinking
while you were talking
So you started sulking
because I wasn't listening.
Now I'm apologizing
and YOU aren't listening
so I'm considering
different means of retaliation.
Maybe I should
send us to our room
like we do the kids
when they fight.
Yes, maybe I should
send us to our room
to "think about it awhile"
with the stipulation
that we cannot leave
until we've decided to make up.
Dear Husband, what do you think?

-Dear Wife,
why on Earth
would we want
to leave our room
just then?

-Katherine Adams

Cat's Eve Inn

Scrape the floor of nutshell paper,
shake the rug of leaves,
take the garbage in today for the cats are in the eves.

Lock the barrels,
close the kegs,
check both bolt and hinge;
hide the glasses,
slow the suds for Murphy's on a binge.

Nail the tables to the floor,
cork the opened wine,
tell the girls to watch their skirts,
for the cats -

they never lie.

-Cynthia Rozmin

Bass

Fingers walk the frets
like a spider, a vibrant surge and
a heartbeat sounding
with each step of tonal madness.

I see him and applaud,
he bites his lip, choking the wooden neck
for a sound that is out of reach.
The bass player smiles
as the light stalks away,
leaving his part in the background.

Content in the darkness
he sips a beer behind the curtain.

--Scott Fishel

Fall Morning in the Okanagan Valley

I feel the cold air as the screen door claps behind me,
It is early fall, the day will be warm for the sky is clear,
But it is not yet dawn. My leather work boots crunch gently on the
crisp lawn as I walk for the orchards.
The apple trees hunched over in the dim light, bending with the
burden of their fruit
Wait patiently to be stripped of the weight—have their props
removed...
Up in the jackpines, the cedar waxwings speak shrilly to the sun
Now creeping slowly over the eastern mountains,
Now peering through the even rows, flicking its rays,
Prodding gently between the green of leaves,
Describing rainbows through the spider webs.
A soft breath of wind and the trees are already dripping,
The sheen of the apples, beaming proudly from their foliage...
The valley is alive, lakes ripple in the breeze,
The mountains, dark brown and jagged, dark green and treed,
A puff of cloud suspended overhead,
Meadow larks trilling merrily...
And now, a rumbling noise like distant thunder,
Apples rolling into empty bins strewn on the orchard floor
Like little houses...
The pickers now at work, reaching on their ladders,
Snatching apples with piston-like rapidity,
Blurs of red from tree to sack...
A deep smell of wine—windfalls rotting on the ground,
Their scarred and blackened jackets
Blending with the soil...

—Jerry McAnulty

Music

*The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concórd of sweet
sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagem and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as
night,
And his affections dark as Erebus;
Let no such man be trusted.*
—Shakespeare

It was something that music does that made Eddie drop the straw lined metal bucket and reach for the knob of the transistor radio and her breast simultaneously. She slid to the dirt on her knees, crushing a manure-splattered egg, running one hand along the lines of her forehead while the other sought the buttons on her faded, paisley blouse. Mama—It was Mama who told her that the Bible was wrong, that first God created *music*, and then the night and the day, the seas and the fishes. And your daddy, she would whisper—don't trust him, there's no music in him—clutching a portable to her chest long after he had thumped the sides of her face for so many years that she heard nothing—while he pounded the table with bottle and fist, cursing the whore who withered between urine-stained sheets and the chickens that strangled between the pickets of the fence—nothing but a whining reverberation inside her head and—his damned, ugly, goliath of a daughter and the price of coal and the God who had given him such a goddamned, lousy life—the music. It does something—the music—that made Eddie know as she searched beneath the folds of her thick, padded bra and squeezed a nipple hard between forefinger and thumb that she had time, *some time*, for there was a warmth, a wetness inside of her that said she lived—but so little, so little time. For Mama had died at thirty-nine; and Eddie Mae Ramsey was thirty-eight today.

She wrapped the radio in her handkerchief and placed it delicately into the pocket of her apron, grabbed some eggs, set them on the cistern cap while she wiped her hands clean, and ran back in the

house to fix his breakfast. It was March and the wind still bit through the crack in the window and the only light in the kitchen was a bulb dangling, like the eye of a snail, from a greasy electrical wire, but it was Eddie Mae's birthday and she had a surprise. She could hear him in the bathroom splattering urine all over the stool, all over the floor, and she cracked an egg, tossed it in the skillet, deliberately breaking the yolk. Her father was a huge man with a belly that rolled over his belt and caused his pants to ride so low on his hips that half of his backside was exposed, and as he stumbled in, scraping his chair across the linoleum and growling "beer", Eddie thought of the plaster hula dancers that wobble on springs in the backs of cars. She separated a can from the plastic liner that held the pack together, held the liner, the *last* liner, greedily before tucking it away in her apron, and set the beer unopened in front of him. Pulling the metal tabs, like shoveling coal, was man's work. Once, only once, she had jerked the top off a can just to show him, for even if her two hundred pound woman's body did not inspire the men in the neighborhood, it was strong, just as strong as his was. And Papa had taken the tab, held it up to the light so that it sparkled between his fingertips and gouged it into Eddie's palm. She had stood there, watching her blood ooze down her wrist— and onto her daddy's eggs. *There was no music in him.* But not this time—for Eddie had a surprise. And she would do nothing to spoil it.

He tossed a last bite of yolk-sopped bread into his mouth and stood stretching his arms over his head, straining the sleeveless tee shirt that covered his middle. She watched him scratch his head with both hands, hitch up his pants, watched the muscles that still rippled in his arms. "Get them dishes," he growled, and Eddie jumped to her feet, scraped her breakfast into an empty milk carton, filled the sink with water, but he was still there, sneering, his half smile the perpetual one-sided sag of a mouth that has sucked cigars for years. "I know you got it hid somewhere," he said, gripping the back of the chair till his knuckles were white. "You always was like her, her and her goddamned radio." Eddie pulled her hand away from her pocket. He stepped toward her, reaching for her chin, tilting it back until she looked exactly into his eyes. "No more, Girl," he said, backing her against the sink so that she could feel it, cold and wet, against her waist. "No more." And Eddie watched him turn his back to her, his shoulders lowered, heard him as he trudged down the basement steps, heard the shovel scrape the concrete floor as he scooped chunks of black rock and carried them gleaming to the furnace. *There would be other times.* And as she climbed the stairs to her room,

caressing the radio with one hand, she knew that he was right, for she was like her mother, but stronger, much stronger. She clenched the plastic liner in her other hand.

Eddie's room was down a narrow hallway whose floor sagged away from the wall leaving gaps so large that she kept a slop jar in the closet for fear of falling through them as she groped her way to the bathroom in the middle of the night. The room was large, with a window that looked out on the coops and a basketball goal with a frayed net that trailed in the wind like a cobweb. The walls, faded now, were covered with footballs and knickered men in running poses—. *Eddie was a girl*. Something happened to Mama after Eddie was born—she dried up inside, Eddie guessed—and there were no more babies. So Eddie had to be strong, she *had* to—and she was, Mama didn't know how strong she was—she didn't hear his heavy step on uneven stairs as he climbed, rage-faced, to her room, she didn't hear Eddie's cries as she blocked Mama's door, absorbing his fists and the backs of his hands until he quieted and stood staring, staring at his coal-blackened fingernails. All those times, Eddie was there all those times. . . nearly—all. She frowned at the wall. She could kick a football farther than any of those knickered men—even though she was Eddie Mae Ramsey; even though she was thirty eight-years-old.

She sat down on the worn, chenille spread, tucked the transistor under her pillow, held the liner in her hand, and ran a finger around the plastic edge of each hole. There was her nightstand, and carefully hidden between it and the wall, paperbacks she'd picked up at a church rummage sale, romances of monks and maidens and knights; and her dresser, a bright enamel green for the last twenty years, housing only her underwear, blouses, a couple pairs of overalls, a picture of her mother taped to the bottom of the drawer above it. There was a wooden, gold-edged cross on one wall, an unframed mirror over the dresser on another, and a bar stretching from the corner to chimney supporting a winter coat, a couple of dresses, a quilt patched in poinsettias, on the third. And the fourth wall—. Eddie gripped the plastic liner. He had seen it, had accepted her explanation that it was just "something to do" with a wary glance back over his shoulder as he felt his way carefully down the hallway. Every morning, he came here, noting with a kind of dread satisfaction how large it had grown, and knowing with a hand to his forehead and a quick count of the plastic squares that were meticulously knotted together with bits of transparent fishing wire, how much he had guzzled the night before. To one side was a small row of the liners,

eight across in a double layer, and next to that a huge curtain of plastic, seventy-two inches by eighty-one—or it would be, as soon as she knotted the last liner. Her surprise, which hung on the wall like an immense saran shroud, would be complete. She lay back on the bed, felt for the transistor beneath her pillow, and switched it softly on.

When she woke she could hear him downstairs popping the tabs off can after can, filling the kitchen with that hollow, metal burp. She sat up carefully on the edge of the bed trying her best not to make it creak as she rose and reached for the small plastic strip. She felt her way through the hall to the stairs—that was the hard part—and so she shifted her weight from foot to foot a few pounds at a time and leaned heavily against the banister. She stepped to the floor, around the corner past a huge mahogany wardrobe, to the stairs—planks suspended between two narrowly-spaced walls. She paused, midway down, and fastened the plastic across the stairway nails which jutted out on either side—and there it was: the surprise. But Eddie's hands were shaking as she climbed back up the stairs. She had to pinch herself—just above the scar on the palm of her right hand—to make them stop.

He was still in the kitchen, his head resting on the table, encircled by his arms, when she walked in. He gripped his hand around a can of Pabst and squeezed it into an hourglass. And she was staring, staring past the pot belly, past the hair that curled from his back over the edge of the tee shirt, past the rings of flesh around his neck, to his eyes. She turned away—there was no music in him—and pulled herself from the doorway to let him pass. And she listened to him on the hall, turning past the wardrobe, on the basement stairs, each step faster and harder than the one before until suddenly there was only an elastic whine—and the scrape of metal on concrete as he fell, sending the shovel flying before him.

He was lying on it when she came down the stairs pulling the huge blanket of plastic rings behind her. The blade had neatly split the back of his skull and his blood oozed over the black rocks and the cinders and concrete floor. She enfolded him in plastic and dragged him back up the stairs, washed his face, pushed his hair way back from his eyes, adjusted his pants higher on his waist, folded his arms on his chest. She sat down on the flowered carpet, threaded a needle with invisible wire, and set to work sewing shut the edges of the shroud.

Two hours later she was finished. She stood to stretch her legs and fingers before she dragged him to the back door, out around the

house to the cistern. She strained to slide the cap away, glad she was a woman, a good, strong woman. She cradled him in her arms, let him slide into the water, then pulled the cap back on. The surprise was over.

She emptied the tea kettle four times to heat her bath, and now she sits in the parlour, blinds raised, the lights on, her transistor on the table beside her. She reaches for it, turns the music louder—now that papa is gone—then fingers the buttons on her dress while she rocks and waits and listens to the radio. There is something that music does to Eddie Mae Ramsey, and she smiles, leans into the rocker, turns a page in the romance she reads, knowing that there is time—now that Papa is gone. She reaches for the radio and twists it, again, just a little louder—and because of something that music does, she hears *only*—music.

—Mary McDaniel



—Scott Fishel

Anticipation

Night train whistles,
long and wolfish.
(If only I loved him
either more or less.)
Eating myself up
from hunger for him.
(I want to stop wanting.)
I have memorized his three good shirts,
learned to control my eyeliner's jerky dance.
(Sober daughter of a drunkard,
always obsessed, never indulged.)
Night train whistles,
telling the time in minutes, in miles.

--Nancy Douglas

Don't Let Your Bread Loaf

open a savings account
say the black letters
outside charleston national

where the girl behind the drive-up window
sends s.o.s. messages
no one understands

where nobody pays attention
to the receptionist
decomposing in the corner

where the sculptured shag
is never satisfied
except in the loan department

where the head teller
licks her thumb to the bone
keeping her good eye peeled

--John Stockman

The Field

At night
Hear the field,
The blades of grass
Shifting in the wind.
The cicadas, climbing down,
Their ash-skin ghosts
Clinging to trees.
The snake, restless
Over dryness.
Hear the ants
Dragging winged things
To their black-grained cellars.

-Elise Hempel

the g.a.

within a year
his eyes have evolved
from a liquid blue state
into silent patterns
of yellow/gold. . .

as my hand
begins to slip
between the heavily woven strands
gently brailling their contents,
the pattern instinctively changes form—
the weave tightens
around my scarred fingers
and i bleed,
again.

-Carla Vitez

Quality in Search of an Author

There I sat, behind a brand new, yet wobbling and warped desk. My light, emanating from a jerry-rigged 120-watt bulb, blinked in rhythm to the beat of some music from a homemade tape player. As my pencil disintegrated in my hand, I reached for a cigarette and took a long, harsh puff. "These things burn too damn fast," I thought, but my nerves were already calming and I continued. I looked to my left and the first thing that caught my eye was an ashtray. "Lifted" the day before from a McDonald's, it was already filled with dead butts, ash, and matches, and had warped from the heat it once contained. Next to the ashtray was a paper, blurred with time. It once had held a meaningful assignment. Holding the paper next to the blinking light, I could just barely make out a few lost words:

THEME 2—DUE TUESDAY...

... "QUALITY"

That last word intrigued me: *Quality*. "What is this strange word?" I thought. It seemed to have an hypnotic effect upon me, and before I knew what I was doing, I had pulled out an old ratty dictionary and began looking for the word. *Quack, quaff, quale*, all these words yet no "Quality." "Why does this word have such a . . . an unnatural feeling?" I thought. But, before I could answer myself, I had already pulled out a much older dictionary. The name was just legible enough to read: *Webster's New World Dictionary*. "Ancient!" my mind rejoiced, "Perfect!" Like lightning, my fingers screamed over the time worn pages, until:

qual.i.ty (kwɔl'atē) n., pl. ties (ME. qualite < OFr. < L. qualitas < qualis.) of what kind (see QUALIFY) 1. any of the features that make something what it is; characteristic element; attribute 2. basic nature; character; kind 3. the degree of excellence which a thing possesses 4. excellence; superiority

At first, I did not understand. How could such a thing exist? Then, as if the back side of God's hand hit the side of my face, I knew. Quality is. I began thinking new thoughts, and everything around me changed. As if I had walked into another dimension of reality, everything held a new discovery. My blinking light had a aura of beauty, the tape player had pleasingly quaint look to it, the ash tray looked...artistic, and the sawdust of my pencil took a shape un-describable. Revelation of revelations: "Of course! Quality is in the mind's eye of the beholder. Quality is!" I yelled.

A cool breeze of relief whispered through me. Sitting back, I lit another cigarette and tried to assimilate all my beliefs. Taking a second puff from the now already dying butt, I moaned:

"These things burn too damn fast."

-Robert Schinagl

February 9th

Quiet night,
The refrigerator hums and the tile
Is bare under my feet.

I sit, with elbows propped under my chin
on the creaky kitchen table.
Outside, the snow floats by the frosted
window pane,
Ignoring me

And my thoughts of you
At one a.m. on a Saturday,
With cake crumbs and the
Dirty dishes
Waiting to be done. . .

-Lisa Livingston



-Cindy Hubbart

By a Pond in Spring

The sun sparkles
The pond's surface,
A spider's web
In the morning light.

I toss a pebble
Into the pool.
Under the harmony of ripples,
A chaos of tadpoles.

Past the windbreak of pines,
A pickup without tires,
Abandoned shell of locust
Rusting in the heat.

-John Stockman

Night Sounds

I breathe the cold clean air.
The shadows are filled with
Faint music,
 voices,
 shrill laughter,
The clicking of spiked heels
The slamming of steel doors.

I close my eyes and
Wait--
 for
 the
 silence.

It never comes.

-Jeffery Stouse

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