



D. MORGAN

Absolute

Fall 1985

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African Herdsman & Son, Kenya, Africa

L.J. "Pete" James

Distinguished look of a young man
I remember the face

In his face I could see
my homeland

The land of cultures
the land of legends and bravery

The land of poetry and history
from the Aryan race
to the poetry of Omar Khayyam

How could I forget that face
my homeland?

—Shahnaz Fadaie
7 May 1985

Depths Of Imagination

The tide has turned
 & there is no flow,
 no embrace of the shore—
the sun bakes dry
 the sand
 that once was immense
 with life.

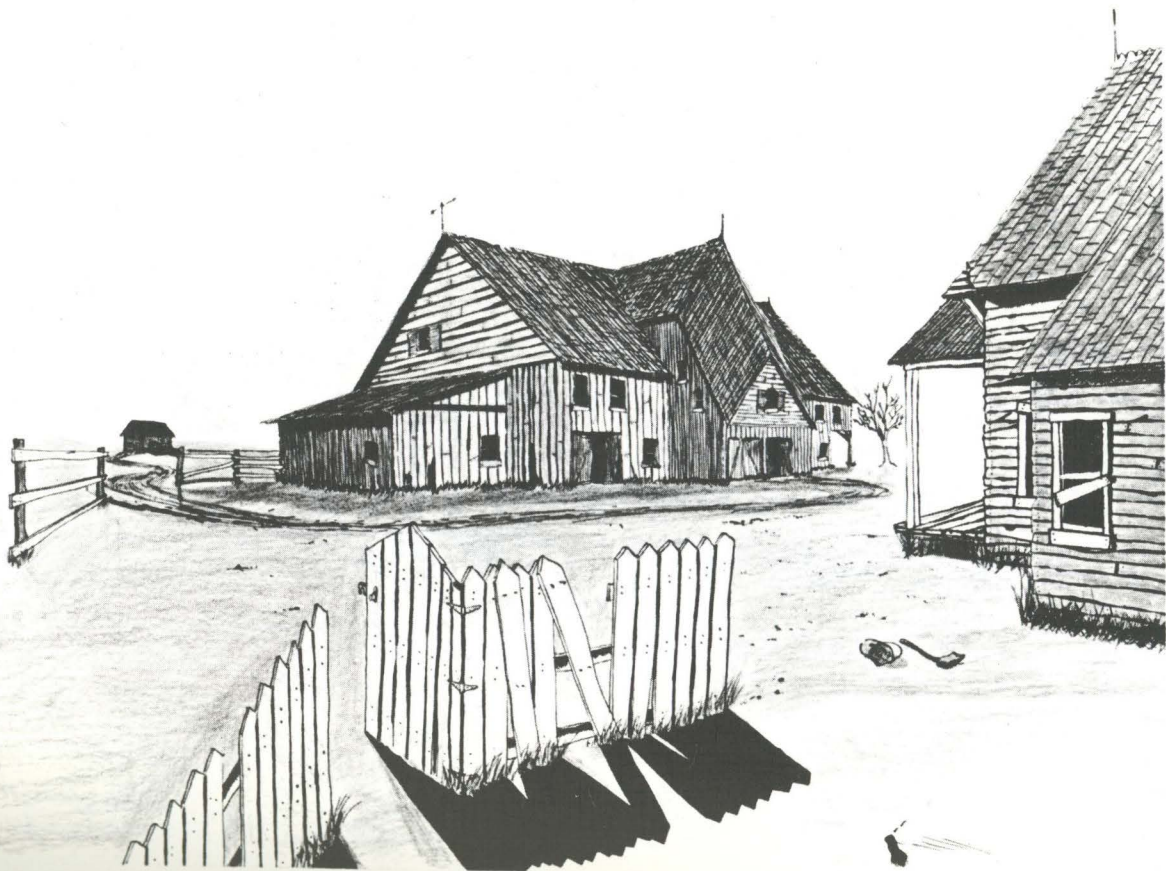
Once submerged,
 now exposed—
it is at the mercy
 of Nature.

The wind has blown a different song,
 a message of regret—
tears fill the soul
 as it is severed
 by the whims of humanity:

Belief carries a hefty price.

The sun will rise,
 no matter the events of Man—
there is a certain continuity—
 a balance
 between light and dark...

—Wanda Lea Brayton
23 July 1984



Watercolor

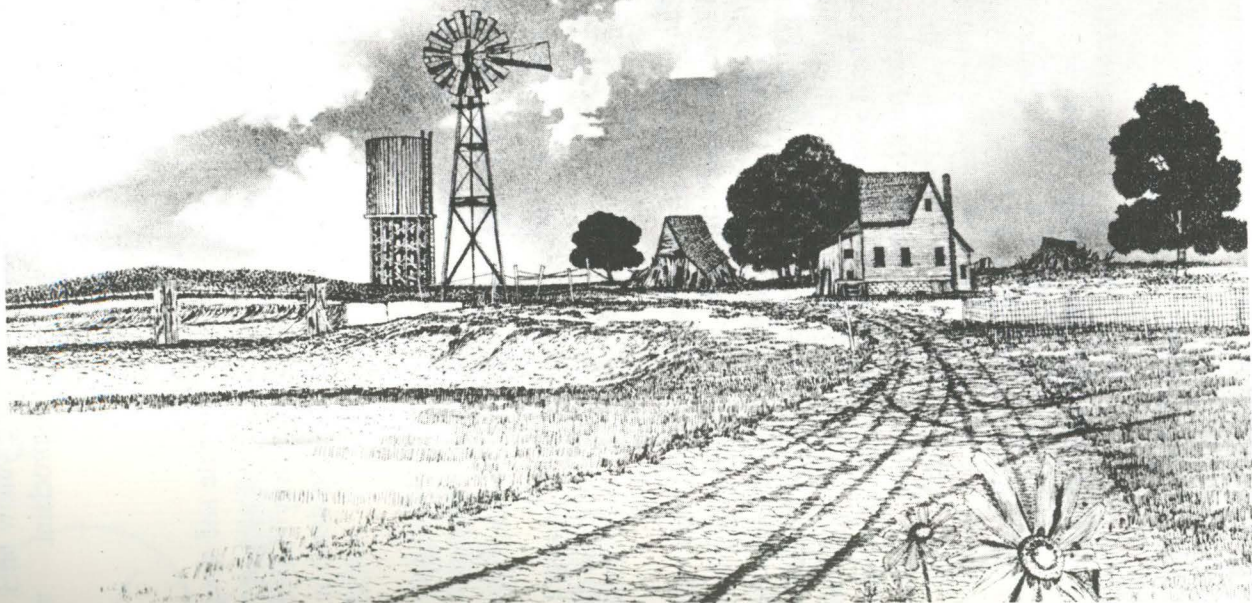
David Morgan

Cactus is indeed more
beautiful than a rose
that hides the tormenting
thorns under its velvet
clothes.

Look at it,
cactus has nothing to
hide.

Naked as it might seem,
it is simply beautiful
and not disguised.

—Fred Loochan



The Journey

The old entrance gate looms into sight. Its aging yellow brick posts haunt each side of the road like silent sentries ready to proclaim:

another body — another soul
in a few short weeks
we'll take another human toll.

The long, narrow entrance road leads through the gate and straight to the large three-story yellow brick building. Tall, sprawling pine trees and thick, rounded evergreens line the road on the left. Halfway between the gate and main building, on the right, is a small parking lot bordered by short metal posts and low hanging chains.

The sun-baked summer grass, now almost brown, stretches across the enormous grounds of the Valley Hope property. Valley Hope is a drug treatment center located in the southeastern outskirts of Cushing, Oklahoma.

A car inches down the entrance road, and Karen, almost unaware there are others in the car, sits deep in thought and stares unseeing out the side window.

She doesn't understand exactly what begins to happen to her when she first sees this gate and finally passes through. But it's disturbing and very unsettling. Perhaps it's the sight of the two brick posts bearing their signs of "greetings" for each arriving patient. Or maybe it's the realization of the moment as she sees the main building at the end of this long road and knows, without question, there's no turning back. Whatever the reasons, the bitter resentment and total despair Karen encountered at this same place last summer have returned.

Karen is approaching her second incarceration at Valley Hope with extreme skepticism. Or perhaps it's sheer panic! She has no desire to be here; only a fear of knowing she is. Surely, she reasons, she's not alone with these feelings. They must deeply affect each patient.

Karen looks a little older than her 43 years. Her dark hair is beginning to gray. And her hazel eyes stare out from behind her new glasses—bifocals already! She is tall but much thinner now. During the last three years, a steady diet of pills, rather than enough food, has resulted in quite a weight loss. So much so, that not many of the clothes packed in her suitcase would appear to be hers.

She stiffens in her seat, trying to understand what has happened during these past three years. Karen certainly doesn't believe a word of that old saying "Life begins at 40." At 40 she could feel hers beginning to end.

First, there was her mother's brain surgery, with every possible complication—and her mother's death seven weeks later. Then, doctors handing out their many prescriptions—tranquilizers, sleeping pills, antidepressants and pain killers. Mix together the strong sense of guilt she felt, after signing the brain surgery consent papers, with a new-found way of coping—drugs; and now, here she is!

"My God," she says silently. "I can't believe I'm back at this place—this despicable place. I don't want to be here, I'm sure I don't need to be here, so why in the hell am I here? Why did I decide to call Lawrence Carrier and re-commit myself? I must have been totally insane."

Karen has an intense hatred for this institution and shudders in a wave of contempt and disgust.

Her thoughts snap back to the people in the car as she hears one of her daughters ask a question. Ever since leaving home several hours earlier in the morning, no one has made any mention of where they are going or for what reason.

William, Karen's husband, has said nothing of their destination for the day. Just thinking of anything to say has apparently been difficult for him. And neither one of Karen's daughters has had much to add to the sparse conversation.

Fifteen-year-old Jodi has been extremely quiet during the drive; and thirteen-year-old Lee, normally the family clown and non-stop talker, can find little to say. And for Karen, talking to all of them has been even harder. She knew she must not let herself start crying no matter what was said. Luckily, she'd heard very little and remembered less.

The droning hum of the highway had become almost hypnotizing as their car traveled along, clipping off the miles between Norman and Cushing.

With the snap of a finger Karen is out of the trance that's kept her almost motionless during the two-hour drive. In its place now is the dreadful

remembering—remembering only one short year ago. Painful memories gradually come back. She had hoped they were forever suppressed. But have they ever come rushing back!

During a definite lull in the family's conversation, Karen nonchalantly reaches in her blouse pocket. Just before leaving home in Norman she had carefully counted out twelve Nembutal. She had dropped them in her pocket, knowing she didn't need anything to drink to pop the pills: with deft sleight-of-hand she would down the pills, and no one would ever know. At this, she had become an expert.

Karen is determined to take all the Nembutal before arriving at her destination. She desperately needs to be completely unaware she's making this return trip. That much pentobarbital should do the job, she figures.

As incredible as it sounds, Karen had started on her way to a treatment center for drug addiction, knowing she'd intentionally filled a pocket with barbiturates. And she planned to take every one of them before driving through the entrance gate of dear old Valley Hope.

She had no desire to be making a second venture to this "institution of miracles." "Ha, miracles indeed," she almost said aloud. Anyone believing in the reality of miracles had a brain more scrambled than hers, she decided.

As soon as Karen and her family arrived in Cushing, they began looking for a restaurant. William spotted a local hamburger joint, and they pulled off Main Street to go in and eat, to have a little more time together during lunch.

While waiting for her food, Karen reached in her pocket again. She carefully took out three of the yellow capsules and quickly swallowed them with a drink of water.

"This is really too easy," she said to herself, wondering why she had worried so much about her plan. So far, it was working out perfectly!

How many times she had already done this today, she wasn't sure. She didn't dare take the remaining pills out and count them, but it felt like few were left. That was good, she thought, but when was she going to be totally zonked? Now that they had arrived in Cushing, any time would be just fine—and the sooner the better. She was almost there!

The family ate amid strained silence though occasionally one of the members tried a bit of light conversation.

"We better hit the road again," said William, finally. "Remember what time we told them we'd be there."

Karen's legs could hardly get her outdoors as they walked out of the restaurant and went to their car to begin the final part of the trip.

Although they had all been here just the year before, Karen remembered nothing of how to get to the treatment center. Jodi and Lee weren't sure either. William decided to follow a few badly placed Valley Hope signs and only succeeded in getting completely lost. After wandering around several sections of Cushing, they finally got back on the right track by turning onto Jones Avenue, which leads straight to the Valley Hope gate.

There, directly in front of them, is the gate that begins to send Karen into panic. The instant the car drives through the entrance, her hand reaches in and finds the pills still in her pocket. Unnoticed, two more of the yellow capsules go down.

Karen is now very confused about what day of the week it is. Sunday? It must be. Everyone in her family who would normally be at work or in school during the week is in the car too. She suddenly remembers this is August and realizes her two daughters are out of school for the summer. But still, she thinks, today has to be a Sunday.

Karen can't be too worried about what day it is. Racing through her head now are thoughts of where she's arrived this very moment. Turning her head and gazing briefly out the front of the car, Karen looks straight ahead at the three-story building where she spent thirty miserable days last summer.

She's trying her best to block out the meaning of the journey she's just made and what she feels is sure to follow. She's trying very hard not to think of all the "exciting episodes" that might await her again.

"Oh, please, I don't want all that to happen," she says to herself, remembering the horrors of drug withdrawal.

Beloved

Not mergers nor pinnacle's shadow,
Not heights terrestrial nor hell's ravenous cravass—
None can engulf, endure nor measure
The depth of my loss, because you love me not.

—Winifred Louise Bowman
7 July 1985

rise from the ground floor to the third floor, bordering the front door and windowed alcove above it.

Another wave of panic grips Karen as William opens the door and they walk in. Instantly, the memories—the familiar sights—almost overwhelm her.

The nurses' station is in a new location this year, and they wander around a few minutes before finding it. Lindsey, a nurse Karen remembers from last summer, is on duty.

"Good afternoon, Karen. We've been expecting you," Lindsey says. "Sit down here, please," she adds, nodding toward a chair inside the nurses' station. "I need to check your blood pressure."

Karen sits and watches as Lindsey wraps the band securely around her arm. However, she fails to look over at the paper quickly enough to be able to read the numbers Lindsey wrote down.

"Your blood pressure is very low, Karen," she hears a distant voice say. Her head comes reeling back to the present as Karen remembers that's what she heard the nurse tell her last year. Ever since she stepped out of the car in the parking lot, Karen has been drifting back to events recalled from her first time at Valley Hope.

When Lindsey finishes checking Karen's blood pressure and pulse, she takes another sheet of paper out of the desk drawer and begins filling out an admittance form. Karen is positive the nurse has asked her at least a hundred questions, and she struggles to think of answers.

While watching Lindsey fill in the information, Karen sees just what she's been wondering about all day. There it is at the top of the admittance form—Sunday, August 3, 1980. At last Karen knows, it *is* Sunday; and now perhaps the days will fall into proper order.

"Do you have any drugs with you, Karen?" Lindsey asks.

The question startles Karen, and she quickly looks up, trying to remember what she brought with her.

"Everything, even over-the-counter drugs, will have to be turned in to me before I take you to your room," Lindsey adds.

"I just have what I was told to bring," says Karen, hoping she'd remembered to get rid of the barbiturates in her pocket. If she hadn't, she'll die if the staff has started the degrading practice of searching each arriving patient and all the luggage. But what could be more degrading than being here in the first place?

"Patients are not allowed to have any drugs in their room," Lindsey says. "So be sure I have everything you brought with you."

Already aware of the rule, Karen has brought only the drugs she was told to bring. She had called the treatment center two weeks ago to ask if she should bring her own pills. Yes, she was told. Bring her prescriptions for the nurses to give her, and she wouldn't have as much charged on her medication bill.

So Karen has arrived bearing bottles of Nembutal, Limbitrol, Elavil, and Cophene. She was also informed she could take the Cophene home when she's discharged. (It's a sinus prescription.) But she assumes being able to get any of the other drugs back would be a treatment center no-no.

Almost reluctantly Karen hands all of her pill bottles to Lindsey, knowing she will soon have had the last of these drugs she is ever to take. She already knows she'll be given a gradually reduced dosage during the first week or two she's here. Karen wonders if it will be harder to get off *three* drugs. Last summer she only had one drug to get off of—Valium. And that was bad enough!

Lindsey hands Karen a pen and shows her where to sign the admittance papers. Karen scribbles her name, then looks back at the page to see if she'd followed the line. With her signature on the paper, she is now officially checked into the Cushing Valley Hope Treatment Center and will be a patient here for thirty days.

Almost in disbelief Karen looks at the paper again; her name is really there. This hasn't been a terrible dream after all—and a sinking feeling begins to set in. It's a feeling of emptiness now, rather than the panic she's felt ever since she left home.

"Follow me, Karen," Lindsey says as she gets up from the desk and walks out into the hall. About ten feet straight ahead, Lindsey stops at the door of a room Karen has never seen before.

"This is the women's recovery room. It's new this year," Lindsey explains. "This is where you'll be for a few days."

An extensive remodeling of the main building began last summer shortly after Karen left. What a suprise to discover that the kitchen, where she had walked down the serving line for every meal, has been made into a two-bed women's recovery room and a three-bed men's recovery room. This is certainly a change from last year when Karen was put in one of the six small de-tox rooms the treatment center had then.

Lindsey opens the door of the women's recovery room. Karen has arrived!

A quiet figure now stands in front of the recovery room window. Karen is watching the family car go back down the long entrance road and out through the gate. She doesn't remember walking into this room or bringing any of her things in with her. She can't recall her husband and daughters staying with her for awhile. She doesn't even remember telling them goodbye or watching them go out the door when they left.

Unlike last summer, when Karen felt certain she'd never see her family again, now she knows they will be coming back. But, even so, she can hardly bear to watch as their car slowly disappears.

Karen not only feels lost and alone, she is alone. Terribly alone! Totally alone!

—Kay Hickman

Eve-of-crusade prayer
of Guy, châtelain of Coucy,
a twelfth-century French knight...

May God raise me to that honour,
that I may hold her,

in whom dwell all
my heart and thought,

naked in my arms, once,
before I cross to Outremer.*

—Translated by G.K. Williams
Paris, 1984

* *Outremer* : the land beyond the sea

Foreign policy

Brass and wreckage in
their rain forest. Employment
for our non-deferred.

—G.K. Williams
London, 1984

Reunion*

His fingertips linger
on B-24 skin. Across
forty years its thunder
echoes one last time.

—G.K. Williams

*783rd Bomb Squadron (H),
465th Bomb Group,
15th Air Force...
USAF MUSEUM
Dayton, Ohio 1985



Artie Hicks

Sanity

Writing the nameless, formless, innerness
into reality:

words are the flesh of ideas,
the backbone of dreams,
the materialization of an intuition.

Wrestling the shapeless, elusiveness
of: vaguely-thought, partly-felt, sort-of-sensed,
maybe-dreamed

but
maybe—imagined
from within to without,
to take its chances
under the hot sun/cold glare
of other eyes and minds.

—Cecelia Yoder
1 November 1985

On The Way Home

Ryan unlocked the car door and got in. In doing so, he marveled at the motion, as he had before. It didn't always work: doorframe might brush scalp. But, most times, the always complex and usually unobserved series of movements was carried out without a hitch. The snap of the head sideways, necessitated by his height, at the precise time. The right heel contacting the worn spot on the carpet. Beautiful! Sticking the key in the lock one moment, seated behind the wheel the next.

He'd noticed he was in luck: a strategically located gap a car-width wide would allow him to exit the lot via a much shorter path than had the gap not existed. Waiting in the vacancy (where was it then?), he beeped his horn lightly, a calculated amount, of a duration to attract the attention of the two co-workers passing in front of the car and yet avoid startling them. The fingers of his left hand uncurled, the hand remaining on the wheel, and he smiled in greeting and saw this reflected briefly in their faces. Driving out, the people flowed by. One woman caught his eye—the shape of her body, in particular her pelvic area and upper thighs, matching closely with what the eyes of the beholder saw as beautiful. Her jeans left only the shape of her escutcheon in question. Ryan was thankful for the delightful contradiction inherent in clothing.

He merged with traffic exiting the lot, his lights on (headlights, *not* parking lights) due to the premature failing of daylight caused by a large thunderhead to the west. The ground was wet, though not soaked, as though just the edge of the rain still visible beneath that cloud had passed over it, which was the case. This thought brushed Ryan's consciousness, enough to be remembered, not so firmly as to be silently spoken. He was sometimes annoyed to notice that he was thinking at a speed suitable for speech. He could almost sense the signals sent to his vocal apparatus, his tongue jerking minutely, vocal cords' tensions modulating. Now his attention was not on his thoughts, as such, and they did not falter.

For the last two weeks Ryan had gotten off work at 2 A.M. and had had no traffic to contend with, at all. Back on a regular schedule now, and approaching the gate (with attendant guard), he did not think this time of the farcical, wasteful security program at the plant; he merely noted the short line of cars making right turns (his usual maneuver at this point) and decided something not-usual was in order. He guided his car to the left, and though

he did not purposefully initiate the skid in the turn, he did nothing to stop it. It was easily controlled, and he enjoyed that sort of thing. Especially now, feeling a muted sort of exuberance.

The weather helped. It had rained, yes, but it wasn't raining. Clouds darkened the sky considerably, but it was growing lighter, and in the east, away from the evening sun, making everything look new, different. It was a warmish April day, and he'd worked nineteen of the previous twenty-four hours and he was off now, to drop some books at the library on the way home.

Ryan sped away from the gate, anticipating the pleasure of navigating the smooth, well-paved curves through the upper-class residential section between him and the library. Navigating in reverse. That is, he had never followed that route *from* work, only *to* work. And then the roads were covered with snow, which was why he went that way: to avoid the long, slow line of cars on the most direct but snow-packed route, he would take the longer, faster way through the residential area, enjoying every turn as he locked his rear wheels with the parking brake to slide the back-end of his car around. For fun.

Well, it wasn't as exciting now, without snow, but it was fine anyway. And he didn't floor it or drive *too* fast because he was aware of his own feelings concerning cars coming past his house at high speed, endangering his children and leaving lots of decibels behind. (Ryan was driving an eight-year-old Toyota that he knew, through frequent introspection on the subject and even more frequent "on-the-edge" driving, could be driven just as dangerously as some souped-up beast.)

Ryan and his car and books arrived at the library in just a few minutes. He thought about parking in the passenger pick-up/drop-off loop because it would be closest, but didn't. He thought then of how he was tempted to do that every time he went to the library and of how he refrained because it seemed wrong, somehow, even though one was three times farther away in the nearest "legal" spaces. (Only two times farther if one used the "Handicapped Only" spots, which, God willing, would never be legal spaces for him.) Today, for some reason, it didn't feel so wrong for a man to quick park, return some books, and quick leave, especially given the fact that there was little or no dropping-off/picking-up of passengers going on right then.

He rather enjoyed the thought and the freedom it gave him. Nor was this type of thinking new to him, for recently he had gone through a certain out-of-the-way traffic light on the red, on purpose, and more than once. It was analogous.

He parked in a good, close, legal spot anyway and didn't mind: that way he could stay a while, if he chose. He gathered up the books from the seat where he'd placed them in order to remind himself to go to the library. In their ostentatious position on the passenger bucket seat was a message, he might say, sent through time from his past: "To The-Ryan-I-Will-Be-This-Afternoon, hear this if you can: Take these books to the library. If you don't, you'll be P.O.'d. I Love You. Signed, The-Ryan-You-Were-This-Morning."

Walking, he heard one of the characteristic sounds that frogs make. It was coming from the tiny pond near at hand. Not "ribbet-ribbet," one of the other sounds. Rain and early darkness had stirred those unseen noise makers. The air had an earthy, wet odor to it—a positive smell Ryan found uplifting. There was a robin in the wet grass, eyeing him, breast thrust out. He remembered being told as a child that when a robin stopped and cocked its head, it was listening for worms. As an adult he figured that was probably baloney; the bird was really turning one eye to the sky to watch for danger, the other to the ground to watch for worms.

The public library he was approaching was part of the local high school, which made it more interesting than it would otherwise have been, for Ryan was fascinated by schools. For him, to walk on a school's grounds was to be transported back to his own school days. It was a powerful effect. Those days were not appropriately described as halcyon, he reflected, approaching the steps outside the relatively new and well-equipped school. On previous visits, he had compared it with his own high school. There was no comparison! He liked to put it in a nutshell by saying that his had gargoyles, which was true. He was jealous of this place's multiple playing fields, multitudinous tennis courts, marvelous library in whose rooms chamber music concerts were held... He had vague memories of *his* school's library: a cavernous, gloomy, uninviting place with dark shelves of musty old volumes to be checked out by hags. He couldn't remember ever reading a book from there, though he'd been as fond of reading then as he was now.

Though his present mood did not permit him to dwell on the matter, Ryan knew that his high school days were marred by two for the most part

ever-present feelings. One was dread brought on by his almost daily failure to do his homework, which led to frequent humiliation in front of his peers. (He was intelligent, but that often made matters worse.) The other feeling was sexual desire or, more to the point, the frustration it engendered, given the society he found himself in, or who he was, or whatever. But God! It hurt so much and so long that he knew now that it could have destroyed him... But there he was, stepping up that first step outside the school, the library. *How do we do it?* he mused. *How do we survive?*

As it happened, there was a girl at the top of the stairs, and she was hanging on the railing in that carefree unselfconscious way kids have. With two hands holding the railing behind her, she was arching her body over backwards in what Ryan found to be a rather titillating way. Not that she was beautiful, per se, though she was slender and had a good face, but that she radiated a youthful, unbroken passion, a clean-ness. *I had that once*, he thought. *I've less now, but it's still with me!*

As he passed, perhaps two feet away, she actually sang! "Some men get all the something something..."

Too rarely do we sing, too often do we silence our song lest someone hear, thought Ryan. He knew the transcendental value of song and was grateful to her for not remaining silent on his account, though he himself kept quiet: he did not feel he could communicate with her, under the circumstances. She might even become alarmed, fearing that he wanted what he did want, what he couldn't help but want, what to his way of thinking any man would and maybe even should want. *Perhaps we all hope to find God within us that way*, he guessed.

Then *Hmm! I'm rather "a-muse-ing" to myself!* he thought, trying a pun on for size as he opened the door to the library.

A tiny boy was swinging from the gate one had to push through to enter, and upon seeing Ryan he scampered away, saying "Ooops!" Ryan looked playful and said, "Lookout! Here comes someone!" He smiled and knew his smile was different at such times now that he had his own children. Three of them.

Returning his books at last, he told the librarian, who was no hag, that one, he thought, was overdue. Though he *knew* it was one day overdue, he

let the mis-statement stand. Her voice grew confidential as she said, "Not to worry."

He was over-warm with his jacket on, but didn't want to remove it to reveal his work uniform. He liked traveling incognito. So he went back out to the car, rather than peruse the new *Scientific American*, which had caught his eye. On the way, it began to rain, but he maintained the pace of one who was content to be, to observe. The girl of the steps trotted past him, going inside. The gate boy and sibling (apparently) ran to their car, at their mother's urging: "As fast as your little feet can carry you!" Ryan heard her laugh softly and knew she was tickled by the sight of those little feet going, those feet she helped make.

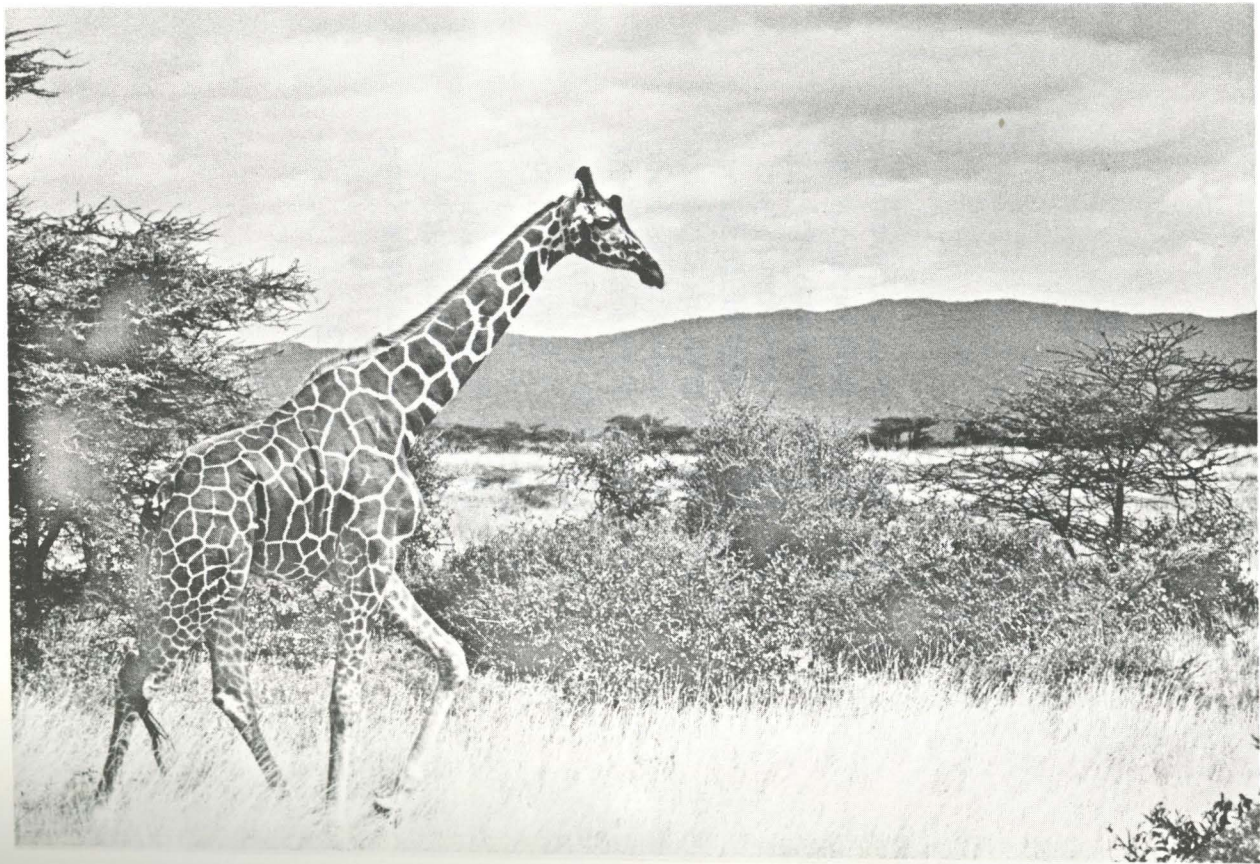
In his car, backing out of its space, Ryan wondered what he might do when he got home. His wife and kids were away for a week, visiting relatives of hers. He had to stay and work, for the money. He thought about masturbating, but doubted he would. *That's a tough way to use up an entire evening anyway*, he smiled. Smile aside, he reflected that even at thirty (or particularly at thirty) he was not above experiencing negative feelings as a consequence of that act. But then, he had some ambivalence toward sex of any kind.

There was a softball in the road as he drove past the field where practice was being held, rain or shine. No one seemed to know the ball was there. He thought of stopping. Then he envisioned the throw going wild and the derision some of the young people would probably direct his way, if only among themselves. By now he was well past the ball, and there was no way he was going back. But then he saw another way things could happen back there if he stopped and picked up the ball and called, "Hey! Somebody want this?" Some young person would turn and look down the slope at him a hundred feet away and hold up his gloved hand. Ryan would stand there, looking up at that person, and a great joy would burst through him: he would cry out, "Don't move!" And somehow this would be understood completely. His vision would turn inward and, as if having passed through a focal point, would ray outward, carrying that ball high with it and then—"Pock!" It would land in that motionless glove, and the two people would share a delight that both knew had nothing to do with the thrower's eye-hand coordination. Ryan liked this thought so much that he wondered if he could write about it.

When he got home, he was hungry for something. He thought a glass of chocolate milk might help, but one thing led to another and it turned out to be a milkshake. Not a “milkblend,” an honest-to-God shake.

As he fit the small cup into the large one, mouth-to-mouth, Ryan wondered if the arrangement would leak or if the shake would foam up so much he'd get spillage when he separated the cups. He worked over the sink, and as he shook the cups, he felt them draw together as the air inside chilled and its pressure went down. The negative pressure caused any leakage to be inward, and when it came time to separate, the large cup was full to the brim, with no extra. He smiled with satisfaction and said, “Ryan, you're a beautiful human being!”

—Alan Andrew Smith



Reticulated Giraffe, Africa

L.J. "Pete" James

Zoology

Mary Margaret Ferguson McBride
is a personal friend of mine.

She loves anything that's green
and swings that have long ropes.

She likes houses that have no steps.

Mary Margaret Ferguson McBride,
you see, has very short legs.

She also has a voracious appetite.

Yesterday she went into the kitchen
and ate her mother.

I said, "Mary Margaret, you act
as if you were a crocodile!"

She shook her head, as she picked her teeth,
and answered, "No, they eat their young."

—Vida Mathey

Cat walking the thin line of fence and air
as if to prove some masculinity
has now come to the end of wood and there
stands. His choices: to stand eternally
like the black guardian of a city,
half-blended shadow; to return from where
he first came, having reached the end of the
world; or to jump. Cat gives a yellow stare
to the sky, knowing to land on his feet.

—Jana Cossairt

A Length Of Rope

Maggie Brophy Davis shifted her weight as she opened the door of Jeb Martin's truck and began the Herculean task of squeezing her bulk through the opening that looked too small.

"I wanna thank ya for the ride in to town."

"Anytime, Miz Davis, anytime. Here... don't forget your rope. An' I'll be ovah in the mawnin' an fetch that cow up for you. Jes don't fret about it anymore, now."

"All right, Jeb. See ya in the mawnin' then." She waved the truck off as if dismissing a servant and began the long walk up the oval, graveled drive toward her home. She had been so much alone that she had, long ago, started talking to herself. "Maggie, chile, tell me when you first laid eyes on this place."

Tilting her head to the left, she answered, "Well, I was 'bout eight years old and my pappy was takin' a load of cotton to the gin in Ridgeville. I was riding high up on that mountain of white cargo when I happened to see this mansion... this lovely mansion with its three stories of cherry-red brick and those six white columns standing there so staunch, like guards, on the veranda. Well, I jes prayed me a wish, or maybe I wished me a prayer, but either way, I knew that when I grew up I'd live right here!"

"Come on, chile, tell me how it happened. You didn't buy the place, now, did ya?"

"No, ma'am, I married it!"

"Married it? No woman marries a house. She marries a man who then gets her a house."

Maggie ran her tongue over her lips before she smiled back at herself. "All I know is I could have married long before I did. But I waited."

"Waited for someone special, did ya?"

"Yes. I waited until Samuel Dosser Davis was a widower. He had a sickly wife, no children, and he was heir to this plantation. I was well past thirty, and all of Monroe County already had me pegged as an old maid. Imagine their surprise when they got their invitations to the wedding!"

Maggie stopped. The combined effort of walking in the warm sunshine and carrying on the two-part conversation had exhausted her. She stepped off the drive and sat down on the white, wrought-iron bench near the stand of magnolias.

"Let's see, where was I? Oh yes, the wedding. It was held at the Methodist church in Ridgeville. An' jes 'bout everyone came. They said they wanted to wish me happiness, but I knew why they really came."

"But I was young and strong then, no clingin' vine. The last thing Samuel needed was another one of those. Even if he was a lot older than I, neither he nor anyone else can ever say I didn't do my wifely duty towards him. Why, I had six strappin' boys! An' maybe you think they weren't a handful, always getting into fights with each other. Any stranger could have told they had an Irish mother. I was forever puttin' a bandage on a cracked head, a split knee, or else takin' them to Doctor Blake, who used to have that land next to ours. He set more bones in our family than anyone else's."

"Samuel never was one for socials, outside the church, that is. But by the time the boys were rompin' and racin' around the place, he didn't even seem to notice when I started invitin' people in for watermelon cuttin's, fish fries, and syllabub parties on New Year's Eve. Why, people who wouldn't have spoken to me if I had still been livin' with Pappy, all of a sudden couldn't be nice enough. Of course, it wasn't me they were interested in, chile, it was the house."

"But the house was mine, and to see it they had to be nice to me." She stood up slowly and began the trip toward the huge veranda, which offered the next spot of shade. "I went to the county seat with Samuel whenever he had to go there on business, and I got copies of everything about this house that I could. I know who built it in 1834, the measurements of every room, even the exact distance from the floor at the bottom to the ceiling above the circular staircase. I know how many original sections, acres, and inches there were, when they were sold, and who bought them. I know how much is left."

"One day a woman came and asked me if she could see the house. I showed her through it because she was writing a book about ante bellum homes. She was so impressed she couldn't close her mouth!"

“She said to me, ‘Miz Davis, you must be jes about the richest woman in this whole country!’ ”

“ ‘Rich in kids!’ I told her. She didn’t know Samuel had died dead broke or how hard the boys and I had worked in the fields during the depression. It was all we could do to scrape up the tax money, and even then I had to sell off some of the land. But we made it.”

“Then, when it was jes about time for the three oldest boys to go to college, the war broke out. Of course, they enlisted as quick as they could, no matter what I said. Doss was shot down over Holland. Sammy died in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. Brophy came back inside a wadded up body on a hospital bed and died within a few months. The three younger boys were workin’ their way through the college at Knoxville, and that sleazy ol’ house where they were roomin’ caught fire in the middle of the night. All three of them were gone in an instant.” A shiver rocked her frame of flesh.

Maggie reached inside her pocket and took out the crumpled letter. It was dated three weeks earlier, and she had read it so many times she had nearly memorized it. Still, she read it once more:

Mrs. Davis,

We regret to inform you that the Tennessee Historical Society has ruled against declaring your home an historic site; therefore, the crews to begin construction of the super highway will converge at the designated site on the morning of July 14.

It had all the official signatures. She refolded the letter and tore it to pieces, which she tossed in the air and watched flutter in flight like baffled butterflies. She gazed at the house.

“Oh, how beautiful the bricks are this time of day when the sun’s rays seem to be kissin’ them good night. An’ smell the deep sweetness of the grass and the clover. The roses are almost gone. God, isn’t it jes too lovely for mortal eyes? Thank you, God, for letting me have my wish-prayer. I’ve loved it. I know there was a lot of pain with it, but I have lived in my mansion.”

She began walking again. She no longer spoke aloud, yet inside her head thoughts and words buzzed at a furious pace. She stepped onto the veranda and advanced toward the great doors which opened in the center.

"Coffin doors," she told herself. "That's what they used to call them 'cause they'd open wide enough to git a coffin through. Even wide enough for mine." She smiled as she closed the doors from the inside.

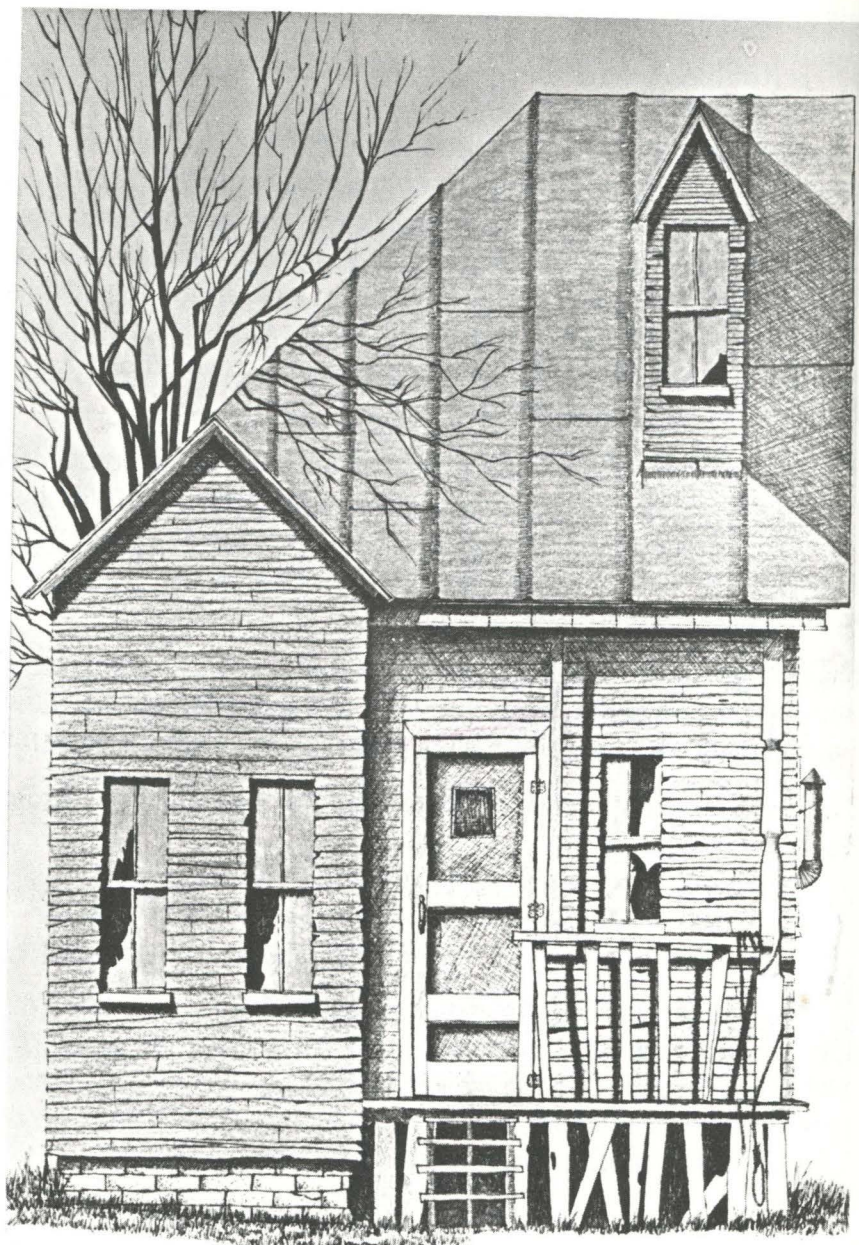
Maggie walked though the dining room, rubbing her fingers along the edge of the mahogany table, while the china cabinets seemed to groan from the weight of their treasures. On into the parlour she waddled and caressed the rosewood piano. Pieces of cut glass blinked at her like little children who had been awakened from a long sleep. Slowly she ascended the stairway, and when she reached the second floor she went to the sewing room and put the huge, coiled rope on the table where she had so often cut fabric. She uncoiled the rope, measuring it against the brass yardstick which had been bolted down. She picked up the heavy shears and sawed through the rope, cutting off a precise measurement.

As she climbed to the top floor she fashioned the knot, carefully counting the number of times the rope encircled itself. She tilted her head and smiled, "Well, now, I jes hope ol' Jeb won't be too upset when he finds out there ain't no twenty dollars here for him to bring a cow up out of the draw. They ain't even no cow."

She put the noose over her head and pulled it snugly against her throat. She secured the end to the rail of the stairs, at the strongest point. Slowly she put one huge leg over the railing, then the other. She took one step forward.

The rope, when stretched its entire length, kept her toes exactly six inches from the floor.

—Vida Mathey



Full Circle

I was born old
A child wrapped up
 in pretended responsibilities
Over and above my years

But sometimes the years fell away
On summer's evenings
Hot with concrete and the day's heat
 and the kids playing tag or catch

And the grown-ups
 my mother
 grandma
 my aunt, uncle

Would sit on the steps
With their coffee and cigarettes
 (me at their feet)
 and talk about when they were young

On a hot summer's evening
Those of us grown now
Watch our children play
 and join our parents

To sit and talk
And remember on the steps
Where once they sat alone

—Leigh Perry

excerpt: Visions

The eagle lifts
 his wings
 to Wind & Sun—
he pursues his destiny
 by instinct, no hesitation:
his nest high in the clouds.
I wonder:
 is it the view
 or the isolation
 he seeks?

—Wanda Lea Brayton
23 December 1984

I enjoy the blue waters
and
clear sky.

I praise the ants
and
their struggle for survival.

The morning dew on the grass
delights me,
the flight of a white dove
amazes me.

Shall we have hope for
peace and unity?

—Shahnaz Fadaie
23 June 1985



Artie Hicks

I'd Like To Put You In My Pocket

I'd like to put you in my pocket
And take you everywhere I go.
I'd like to put you in my pocket
And go away to Montego.

I'd like to hold you up and show
You to the world so they would know
That I love you like no other.
But this one thing is so:

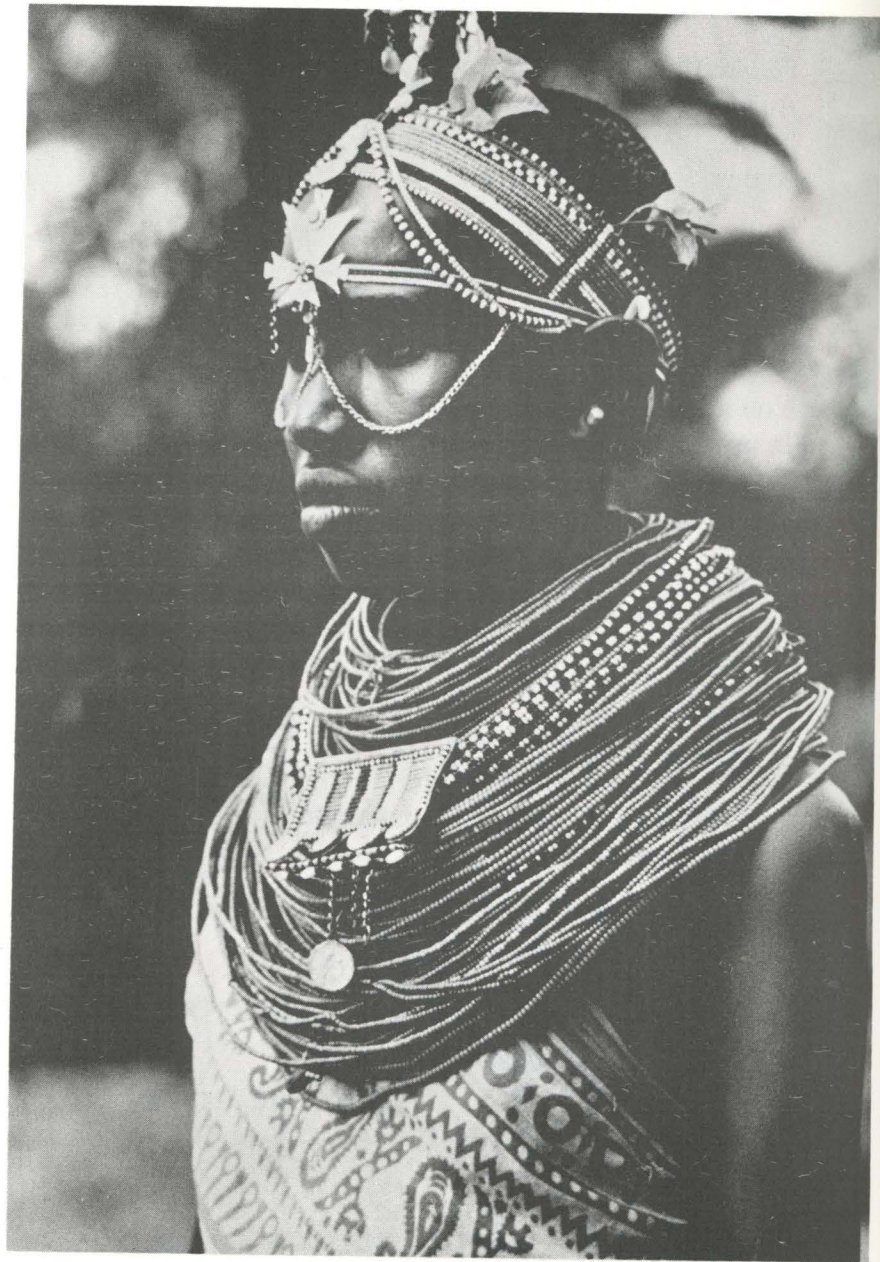
You're way too big and bulky;
In my pocket you won't go.
You probably would suffocate
On the way to Montego.

If I picked you up I'd
Drop you on your head, it's true.
I don't wear baggy pants
And I'm not a kangaroo.

This poem is really silly.
The words are kind of dumb.
I should blow them up with dynamite
And blast them to the sun!

We'd watch them go up through the clouds;
They'd look just like a rocket.
Then I'd slowly turn and walk away
With you protruding from my POCKET.

—Howard Jack



African Dancer

L.J. "Pete" James

Puzzled Optimism

I hear the music: my body thrills,
My eyes close, I feel the motion.
My breath catches, eyes glisten,
Heart finds synchrony with rhythm.

Painful joy! I *am*

Music I *am*

Motion I *am*

Bursting.

Muscles twitch and with double vision I rotate.
Each phrase powers me through outlandish movements.
Stroboscopic, staccato images flicker.
I feel the power within, glimpse radiance.
I lose it and forget, mostly, though
Puzzled optimism remains.

—Alan Andrew Smith

The Coverlet

It was finally finished! Sarah sighed with fatigue and satisfaction. She got up from the loom, which had been her mother's, and surveyed the blue and white coverlet woven in her favorite pattern, "Lover's Knot." She still derived great satisfaction from the creativity of weaving, even though industrialization had relieved women from the necessity of producing their own material.

This particular coverlet was special. It was to be a present for her husband, John, who was leaving tomorrow for a Confederate Army camp. He had hugged her, said, "This fight'll only take a few weeks at most. Besides, I'm goin' to look mighty handsome in that grey uniform." She had poured not only her practical skill, but much of herself into this project.

She smoothed wisps of her brown hair, which had rebelled against the discipline of its twisted knot, back into submission, stepped off the broad front porch, and stretched her aching muscles. The late August afternoon was stifling. She drank some cool water from the well and walked back to the shady sanctuary of the porch. She still had some work to do.

"Afternoon, Grandpa," said Sarah. On the porch, Grandpa Eagleton had settled himself in his rocking chair, by Grandma Rose's big spinning wheel, to smoke his pipe, stare off into the hills, and do the nothing he did so well.

"Afternoon, Sarah," he replied. "You 'bout finished?"

"Yes, I just have to tie the fringe, wash it, hang it to dry, and it'll be ready to go," she replied.

Grandma Rose ambled heavily through the door and said, "Come on, Pa. I need you to help me get a good fryer for tonight's supper."

While the two old people went out back to the barnyard, Sarah finished her work, this once grateful for extra help with the cooking chores. Grandpa Eagleton was agreeable enough, she mused, spending his time puttering when he wasn't smoking, but Grandma Rose was a force to be dealt with. She lacked the nurturing qualities many women her age had retained for their younger and more inexperienced counterparts; instead, she adopted a somewhat "tight-lipped" judgmental attitude about her daughter-in-law's management of her comfortable two-story farmhouse.

Grandma Rose also fancied herself to be something of a "seer." Not many of her so-called "visions" came to pass; still... there was the time at breakfast, in between mouthfuls of flapjacks, that she said she had dreamed of "red fireballs" rolling down the road, evidence that some poor soul was doomed. The very next day, Fred and Mary Dillon's youngest son had fallen into the hog pen and was eaten.

"Sometimes," Sarah muttered, "I feel like one of those lizards in the garden. The ones that keep changing color so they can get along where they live. When you marry your husband, you get his family to boot, and you have to keep changing colors to keep peace."

Grandma Rose and Grandpa came bickering around the corner of the house. Grandpa Eagleton was red-faced and puffing, with the dead chicken in one hand and an axe in the other. Rose's always neat grey hair had come undone and had fallen down below her shoulders, which gave her the appearance of an "old" girl. She cackled. "Lordy!" she said. "We lik'd to never got that chicken. Pa's eyes ain't what they used to be. He didn't chop the head clean off on the first try, so that chicken flopped all over the barnyard with half its head off and Grandpa right behind with the axe. I don't know who give out first, Grandpa or the chicken. I'll start it for supper."

"Thanks, Rose," said Sarah.

Supper would be special tonight. There would be stewed chicken with vegetables from the garden, biscuits, and their own orchard apples baked into a pie.

The sun was lowering itself into a valley behind the hills, and most of what heat was left could be seen broadcast across the sky in bright-to-pale shades of orange and purple.

This was the time of day that Sarah found the most melancholy. A melancholy that was now compounded with the unsure future of tomorrow.

"Paul," said Sarah, "go fetch your father and wash up for supper."

"Yes, Ma," said her five-year-old son, who took off in a flash, his towhead shining in the fading light.

At supper, Sarah regarded her husband while he ate, not having much appetite for food herself. John was a short, sturdy man; she thought him to

be one of life's real heroes. He assumed the heavy responsibilities of his life in a quiet, amiable manner, displaying the constant unassuming courage she had sensed was lacking in her other suitors in the days of their courting.

Through the still-warm evening, the eerie chorale of their barn cats came drifting into the open kitchen window.

"Somebody's going to die," whispered Grandma Rose. "Cats can smell death."

John laughed. "Oh, Ma, there's prob'ly a female in season out there. We'll have more kittens 'fore long."

The damp green earthy smell of the night air came wafting through the flowered cotton curtains of Sarah and John's upstairs bedroom. The depth of their feeling was too deep for conversation. They could only hold each other, finding mutual refuge.

As the pink-gold rising sun dictated the start of another hot day, Sarah gave John the new coverlet. She smiled and said, "I want you to think of me at night when you use this to keep warm. It gets cool towards morning."

"I sure will," he grinned, giving her a kiss.

After a breakfast of bacon and eggs, he shook hands with Paul, in a mock man-to-man manner, and hugged his parents. He gave Sarah a long searching look and then rode away on one of their mules, pausing at the crest of a hill for one last wave.

In the short space of a few weeks, the Tennessee hills transformed themselves into a mottled carpet of green, rust, and red. The loom and the spinning wheel were not moved indoors, and Sarah spent much of her spare time weaving. The mechanical process gave her peace and serenity in her personal loneliness.

The march of booted feet trudged dimly through to her conscious mind, and Sarah gazed through the window to see a horsedrawn wagon, escorted by four men, coming over a hill. She ran out to meet them, feeling apprehensive and somehow thankful that Paul, Grandma Rose, and Grandpa Eagleton were gathering the last of the fall vegetables in the garden in back of the house. The men halted and tipped their hats.

"Mrs. Donnell?" one of them asked. "We're awful' sorry, ma'am."

"Sorry for what?" snapped Sarah, already knowing in the inner chamber of her being the contents of the wagon. She knew that it would seem to be an eternity, after the burial of this patterned blue and white chrysalis, before the empty space John left would be filled again.

As Sarah and the escorted wagon slowly approached the house, Grandma Rose and Paul walked around the corner.

"Visitors!" cried Grandma. "Paul, boy, get Grandpa and fetch some cider. Company's comin'!"

—B.L. Harris

A Lion In The Desert

Through my eyes,
so am I a lion.
Under my feet,
so does the desert surround me,
and I am alone.

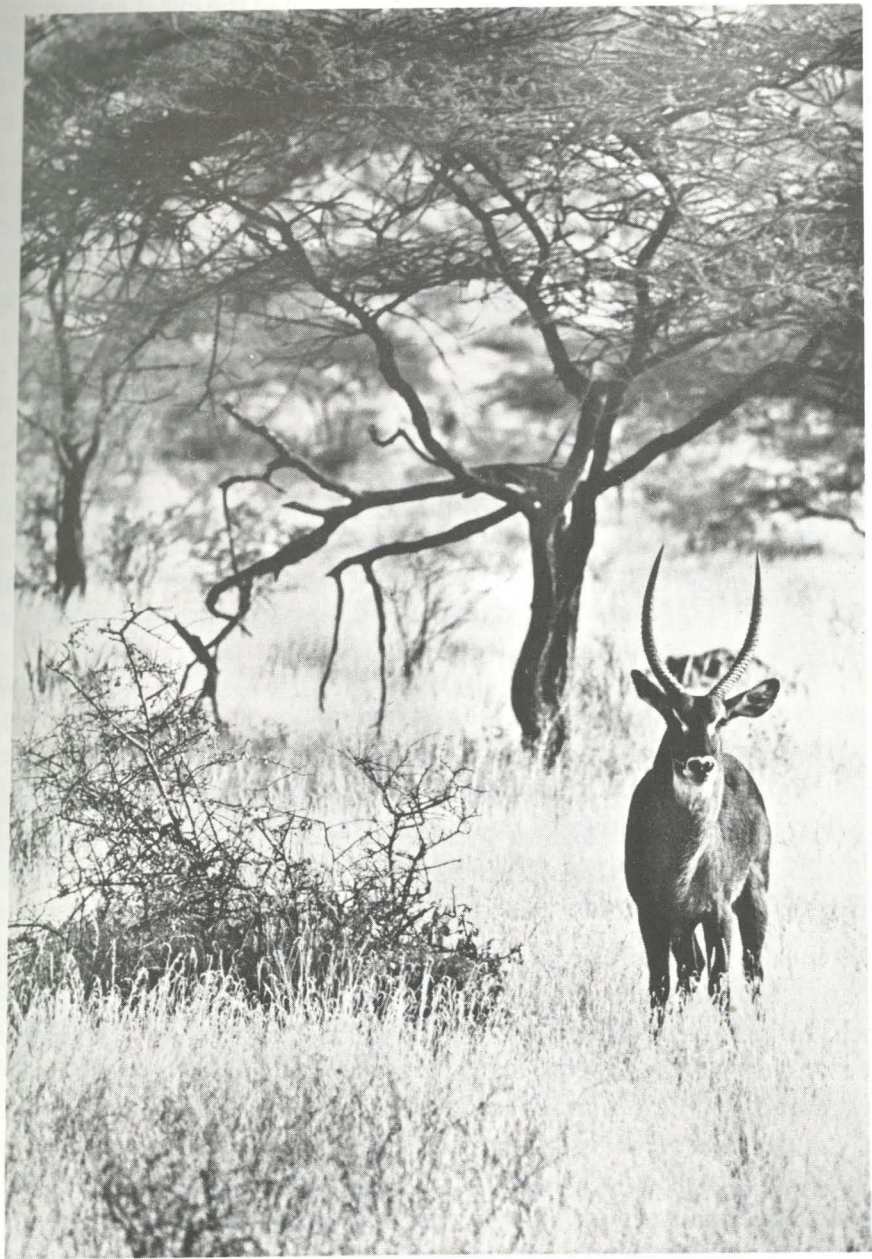
I stick out my chest,
and my shoulders reach the sky.
In my splendor, my majesty,
my utmost royal self,
I ask:

“Which grain of sand, glistening,
can recognize an exiled king?”

It's a cruel place that I live in,
for I long to be somewhere else
beyond the smooth horizon.
Someday I think I shall travel, yes,
travel to that place.

But there is no first dune
or middle dune
or last dune—only sand.
Such is my existence.

—Thomas Fahey



Kenya Bush Country

L.J. "Pete" James

My First Big Buck

Looking your first big buck Whitetail straight in the eye is an experience you will never forget. The excitement, terror, and compassion, all rolled into a large lump at the base of your throat, are feelings at once rare and universal to all hunters. Once you have known the exultation of this moment, you will never be quite the same. It will bring you back again and again in a never ending search to recapture the feeling. I have found that the best, the only successful, method to experience that feeling is to be there. To see for oneself what, exactly, it is. However, for centuries most hunters, be they male or female, have *tried to relate to others the feeling of their first hunt. Now I'm going to try my luck.*

My tale begins on a cold, snowy, windblown hillside in the South Central part of upstate New York. It is clear and crisp, at about 5:15 A.M. My whole family stands there puffing mist in the chill predawn air. The temperature is hovering around 24 degrees Fahrenheit. The shy, distrustful Whitetail deer, common to the Northeastern United States, can be seen silhouetted against the white snow. At least two hundred yards distant, they are moving back into the shadows of the woods after feeding all night.

It is Monday, the week of Thanksgiving. "First Day" we call it. The only sounds to be heard are the thumping of heavily-booted feet, trudging up the steep hill behind my parents' farm, and the onrushing passage of the cold November wind. Then we reach the top of the hill and the second stop of the day. Here, in hushed whispers, my father lays out the final plan to us all. This is to insure that no accidents or injuries will happen, and so that each is clear of the others' locations.

Now the solitude of the first morning's hunt. No sounds, only the wind in the bare trees and the puff of my misty breath. Into the woods where each crunching step, every snapping twig, and the slightest cough seem magnified a thousand times. Slipping as stealthily as possible amidst the thick trees, my eyes searching for the slightest movement in the brush, I locate my "Special Spot" on the side of the hill. I can see clearly under the lower limbs of the surrounding trees for at least one hundred feet in any direction. This "Special Spot" comes from many years of hunting this section of forest and many seasons of clearing out the underbrush, to give such unusual visibility. Visibility is very important. Because of the closeness of the trees, seeing a deer doesn't necessarily mean having a good shot at one.

After locating my spot, I get comfortable for the long wait I know is to come. I must wait until at least 6:00 A.M. for the sun to rise. That is the law. Then I must wait quietly for a male deer, a Whitetail buck, to come into my range of fire.

During this long period of silent waiting, a mass of jumbled thoughts runs through my mind. Which direction will he come from? Will he see me first? Will I see him too late? Will he be upwind or downwind from me? Will I get a good shot? Will I be accurate? And then after all the hours of preparation, the hours of patient waiting, the moment arrives. That is all it is. A moment, with a thousand little specs of time, slowly stretched out around me in a haze of hurried confusion.

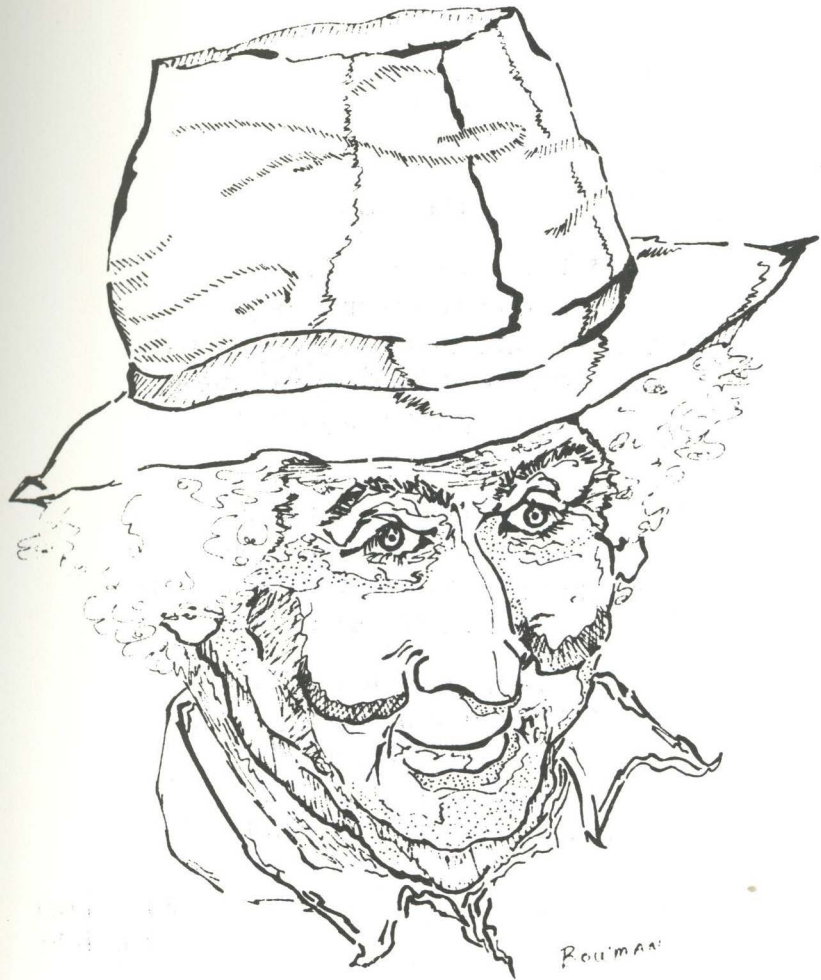
First a faint shuffle of snow, then the definite puffing of raw, exhausted breath. To the left of me, a fleeting movement. Slowly, so as not to spook him off, I rise and turn, bringing my trusty slug gun to bear. I can see him then, just a blur of brown, moving through the distant trees. Then he steps clearly into the open. A huge rack! Six, eight, maybe ten points. A beautiful set of antlers. I sight down my barrel, and then, as if he senses my presence, he turns and looks me straight in the eyes.

This is the point when fleeting seconds of decision turn into an eternity of momentous confusion. He's beautiful. Look at his magnificent stature. Does he know that I intend to kill him? Is this the inherited, predestined moment of victory, or the greedy insignificant taking of a life for sport? Can I actually put a slug in his heart and stop his life without feeling remorse and guilt? Then a calm feeling slips gently over me. Yes, he knows what I am about to do, yet he feels no hatred or anger. Just acceptance of the inevitability of death. This is not a matter of greed or selfishness. Nor is it a victory. It is a predestined moment. Not of victory, but of oneness, of fulfillment. The uniting of a boy and nature. The coming of manhood.

All these thoughts in the blink of an eye. In the length of time from the perfect sight picture to the slow squeezing of the trigger and the booming echo of a shot. Then it is over. The lump in my throat goes back down. My tears, of a real and new emotion, are swept away on the cold November wind. Now there is only a grand feeling of exultation. I have done it! I can

hear the happy shouts of my family, “Did you get him?” Next the pride, and work of field dressing, and dragging my first big *four point* Whitetail buck out of the woods.

—Nathan Converse



For You

I wrote you a poem last night.

That's how I went to sleep.

I dared the darkness to disturb my thoughts.

It worked so well that before I knew

Morning called my name.

I wanted to woo you,

Wanted to win you once again.

But, the sun stole my words.

Perhaps I pulled your pillow close to me

And it absorbed it all.

Some night, some time

When you're alone and awake,

Listen to your pillow.

Let it lull you to sleep.

Listen and let it recite your poem.

—Linda J. Myers

20 June 1985

Discord

We listen for violins
But hear pots and pans
Clanging on floor tiles
Breeding chipped ceramic
Black and white

Stubbornly you shake me
We have a deadline to meet
A dream to finish
A plot too weak for a climax
A deadline for dead lines

—Robin Pierce

Visions Of Delight (For J.K.)

Night Rider,
 lean as a waning Moon,
 spins his magic
 almost unknowingly—
he is magnificent & glorious,
but he does not quite
grasp the Truth with both hands
& look it in the face with recognition.

Fading sky & rising star—
he is in his element
of shadow-light:
he is aware of the subtlety
 (compared to the obvious)
& is able to remain himself
at any given moment—
he is as
 honest as a setting sun, a rising dawn.

Beauty stirs
 in dreams so wild,
imagination becomes inadequate—
I cannot voice the depth
 of your touch on my Soul:
I try to speak,
 to weave a web
 of Wonder,
only to entangle my words...

—Wanda Lea Brayton
1 October 1985



Sand Sculpture

Artie Hicks

Charisma

Love is built for speed
while sorrow crawls—
truth holds an element of danger.
Be a little proud;
keep faith near by—
don't attempt to jump the canyon
when there are easier ways
of crossing.
I am yours for the asking,
but I am silent—
it remains your choice.
Tomorrow is a distant dream;
I need you now—
you have a way of turning
moments into memories...

—Wanda Lea Brayton
10 December 1982

The car moves slowly down the entrance road, and William turns onto a graveled area near a newly constructed building. The parking area has been enlarged somewhat since last year. Only a few cars are parked here today, and William pulls in as close to the main building as he can get.

It's a sizzling August afternoon. The hottest summer on record, TV weathermen have repeatedly announced. A blast of suffocating heat hits Karen and her family as they step out of the car and walk over to the sidewalk.

Karen's horrified to discover all the pills she's taken have failed to dull anything. Walking a bit hesitantly now, she stares down at the sidewalk as terrifying flashbacks of experiences she had last year at Valley Hope return to mind.

As they walk toward the main building, Karen realizes she cannot go in with pills hidden in her clothes. She remembers a girl was sent home last year when drugs were found in her room. Karen quickly reaches in her pocket and takes out the three remaining pills. Her brain is still able to subtract, and she knows now that she's taken nine Nembutal in the three hours since she left home.

Slowing down, so she's walking behind the rest of her family, she holds her hand out past the edge of the sidewalk and drops the pills in the grass. Too late she remembers the cats that roam the grounds. The poor things are terribly thin and very eager for every bite of food they can find. If Karen should happen to see a dazed cat staggering across the yard, she'll know it was the unfortunate one who found barbiturates hiding in the grass.

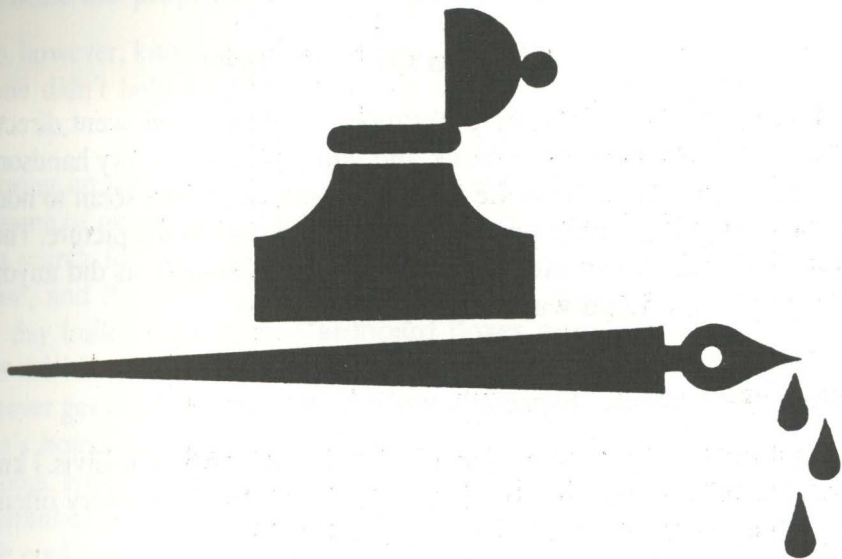
As Karen and her family approach the wide steps leading up to the front porch, they pass an entrance sign pointing toward the main building. Karen looks at the sign and laughs; she does know where to find the front door. She's not *that* bombed! Trudging along behind the rest of her family, she hopes no one noticed she's had some trouble climbing up the steps. She's getting a little wobbly.

At the top of the steps an enormous porch stretches out in front of them. Karen recalls spending many hot summer evenings sitting on this porch. It became the gathering place for most of the patients at the end of each long day. Ornate concrete benches and marbletop posts depict the elegance of the 1920's, when this mansion was built. Two stately, sculptured columns

I always saw you as a cedar
Never swaying in the wind
But yesterday in the plaza
You walked with a limp

Tragic to see you exposed
Your unruly branches trimmed
Leaves fallen to the ground
Were you ever stronger than I?

—Robin Pierce



EDITORS' NOTE:

We present the winners of our writing contest!

This fall, students attending high schools and mid high schools in the metro area participated in the second contest that ABSOLUTE has sponsored for young writers. The student editors of this arts magazine selected a winner in two categories: the short story and poetry. (Each first prize winner will receive ten copies of ABSOLUTE. Each writer whose work is published will receive a free copy of the magazine and our congratulations.) Winning compositions appear in the following section, and we have added several pieces from among many others deserving of honorable mention. (Due to space limitations we cannot publish as many works as we would like.) We are looking forward to another contest in the near future. So, teachers, keep ABSOLUTE in mind as an outlet for talented writers in your classes. Further, we invite you to contribute your own writing for possible publication. Thank you for your interest and cooperation!

The Son Of Easy Rider

He led a friend into his grandmother's house and went directly to a picture on the wall. It was a black and white photo of a very handsome man in a uniform. I was across the room, but he didn't even seem to notice me. He was caught up in a conversation about the man in the picture. The friend listened to my cousin intently and seemed impressed, as did anyone who talked to Loyd. Loyd was simple, yet so special.

"See? He looks just like Elvis," Loyd said, pointing to the very old picture of his father. "Especially when he was young."

The friend was nodding. My uncle really did look like Elvis. I knew that Loyd thought so, too, but he didn't talk about his father very often. That's why I was listening, pretending to draw a picture.

"What did you say happened to him?" asked the friend.

I almost broke my pencil in half. I hated for Loyd to actually say what happened. Over the years I had never heard him mention the accident. Maybe he did to others in the family, but never to or around me.

"He wrecked his bike." That was all I heard. He mumbled the rest with a blank look on his face.

The friend couldn't take his eyes off that picture.

Instead of drawing, I was doodling all over my paper. I was writing down words without thinking as the two of them left. Feeling sorry for Loyd, I stared at his father for a long time. I wondered why he had to die. I wondered if Doug remembered how much I liked to draw. Could he see me drawing sometimes from Heaven? Did he hear how proud of him Loyd was? I hoped so.

Across my paper I had scribbled: "Easy Rider... Easy Rider... You've taken your last ride, Easy Rider."

They were words to a song written by an uncle for Doug. Doug was Easy Rider. I can't explain how sad that song made me feel, and I can't begin to imagine what would go through Loyd's head when he heard it.

I've heard that people get over losses with time.

I do, however, know of two losses that were too great to recover from. And time didn't help Loyd to get over Doug, no matter how much he covered it up.

Growing up with Loyd was like having our own Peter Pan. He could turn a game of chase into a run for your life. He would group us like his army to search for "quality junk" that would magically turn into a real clubhouse, and if it fell down the next day we would all gladly spend another day building it again. Cardboard boxes turned into sleds for the grass on the hills. He trained us to be devious Monopoly players, and we would never get tired of losing to him. He took us to a small park near our grandma's house (we called it The Little Park) to play, where we could spend hours. He was the fastest runner, the strongest, and the tallest. Loyd wasn't afraid of heights. He would climb to the very top of trees and sway them. He could do anything he wanted, sometimes asking us to follow him to high places and then helping us *down* from high places. The Little Park was our place without grown-ups. No matter how much older Loyd got he never claimed to be a grown-up. He made it clear that we should be good, but that it was okay to be a kid. Any place that we followed Loyd was Never Never Land, a place without harsh realities. We were all sure that none of us would ever grow up, but Loyd knew about the real world.

The real world wasn't always where Loyd wanted to be.

I remember his little house that he shared with a friend. I was so happy that he asked me to see it.

"I used a whole paycheck to paint the cabinets, but didn't they come out smooth?" he said, unable to buy food that week because of the few improvements he had made in the house. Where did he get the plants? "Took them off of people's porches. They didn't pay much attention to them anyway."

In the real world, Loyd still lived in a clubhouse. He rode a skateboard because it was practical. He only wore clothes that were *his* style. He didn't expect a whole lot and didn't need much. He was the sweetest, wisest, and friendliest person that I've ever known, and I just wish I had told him that. I don't know if it would have helped, though.

Loyd found his way back to Never Never Land, but he couldn't take us with him. Always in the back of my mind I knew he wouldn't be with us long. He stayed long enough to see each of his followers grow and move apart. The game was over, and some of us are meant to be those mean adults—Loyd wasn't. He needed to fly. I'm sure he's in this boat right now, floating over the cities with Doug at his side. Doug has his arm around him, and he's telling Loyd that he's proud of him.

“Why are you always writing and drawing?” he asked me once.

“So that I won't forget,” I told him.

He smiled because I was trying to draw him.

—Lady De
Noble High School
(Teacher: Konni Gardner)

First Place: Poetry

Softly kiss my lips
depart without fear.
do not turn back
until your hunger
is finally complete,
for it twists me up
and wrinkles my clothes.

—Paula Vandell
Noble High School
(Teacher: Konni Gardner)

Honorable Mention: Poetry

Sweet Dreams Forever

I lie by your side and watch you dream.
Your soft hair falls boyishly across your feather-soft eyelashes.
You stir and shiver...

the breeze is cool...

Your arms tighten teddy-bear-like around my waist.
Another breeze...

Another shiver...

and you snuggle closer,
your head resting tenderly on my shoulder.
I look and wonder what you are dreaming.
Why you smile sweetly in sleep.
The perfect Citadel for a troubled heart, I never want to leave.
But I realize

Paradise is not forever

and pull you tighter still.

—Kim Cain
Noble High School
(Teacher: Konni Gardner)

Honorable Mention: Poetry

Love is a nightlight,
the surprise of a cool spot
deep beneath the blankets.

love is toothpaste and orange juice
too early in the morning—
but soon becomes a peanut butter cup
melting smoothly on your tongue.

love is silk
love is old crusty burlap
it is strawberry shakes,
burned milk,
a purring cat,
and a crying child.

love is a bedtime story
and a goodnight kiss.

—Carman Parsons
Noble High School
(Teacher: Konni Gardner)

Honorable Mention: Short Story

Murphy's Law Of Hunting (In Five Easy Lessons)

I've learned many interesting lessons from hunting, but the most important (and irritating) is that Murphy not only lives, but he also loves to help out hunters.

For instance, during my introductory year of deer hunting I learned Lesson Number One: Murphy likes to help hunters get into tree stands. I was finishing a breakfast of doughnuts as my grandfather began to talk me into climbing into a tree stand about halfway up a large cottonwood. The leaves were just starting to fall, forming a yellow curtain around the stand.

"It's way up there," said Grandfather, gesturing skyward with an arm still carrying the brawn from his younger boxing career. "I made it myself a couple of years back," he boasted.

After having both my arms shredded by a thick, living bunch of thorns which had taken residence on the trunk, my slow climb halted where I thought the stand was supposed to be. I spotted a rotten two-by-four nailed to a dead limb.

"Well, go ahead, sit on it!" yelled Grandfather, impatiently.

Just as I sat on the old plank, I heard Grandfather say, "That ought to be your lucky stand. I made it the year you were born."

I didn't have time to reply. The board cracked and sent me plummeting straight down to the forest floor below. Well, not quite straight down. I hit about three unfriendly limbs on the way and ran into killer vines who were waiting with open arms. I can't remember the phrase I used as I hit the briars, but I'm fairly sure you wouldn't use it in public.

"Hey, you're lucky those thorns broke your fall," said Gramps with a chuckle.

I staggered up to look for my gun, but I didn't have to look far. It was standing at attention, barrel-first in the ground. I spent the rest of the day in camp, plucking unwelcome thorns out of various parts of my anatomy.

The next morning, after a stale breakfast of day-old doughnuts, I learned Lesson Number Two, that Murphy enjoys a swim in cold water and also appreciates company while doing so. My grandfather and I decided to leave the trees to themselves and to hunt the riverbanks. We had been walking for miles when I saw a moss-covered rock jutting out over the river.

"I think that rock over there's calling me, Gramps," I said.

He mumbled something about how he used to walk five miles—every day—to school, and about the laziness of today's youth.

I propped my gun up on a nearby tree and sat against the rock. My grandfather, still telling me a story about his employment at the age of nine, reclined against a big sycamore. Suddenly, I felt my rock tip backwards toward the river. The rock splashed in and I quickly accompanied it.

You cannot, in any way, describe the feeling you get when you're bundled up in coveralls and a heavy hunting coat, with a skin temperature of about 105 degrees, as you suddenly plunge into thirty-degree water. I will say this, though: no matter how tired you were before your little dip, you are instantly refreshed and ready to start the day anew. But first you must find a way to climb out of the rapids and, when the banks are five feet of unavoidable slime, this quickly becomes a task. After long minutes of slipping and sliding on the muddy banks and then back into the river, I finally crawled onto dry land. And what is there to greet me? Why, it's my wonderful, loving, and understanding grandfather, lounging against his tree.

"Look what you did to my beautiful coat! When I loaned it to you, I thought you'd take better care of it than that! Lord, I've only had that coat 25 years."

The next day was the last of the season, but I stayed in camp with a case of the sniffles for company. Grandfather was still muttering about the history of his coat as he trudged into the woods.

As I started a fire, I learned Lesson Number Three: Murphy likes to experiment with different levels of lighter fluid. When I touched the match to the kindling, the flames leaped back up into my face—singeing my hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes, as well as turning my face a curious shade of crimson.

Less than an hour later, I learned Lesson Number Four: the spirit of Murphy also lives in fires and snatches hotdogs from anyone foolish or naive enough to loosely impale them onto a stick and place them over a flame. I then guessed that marshmallows might work better, but Murphy relishes them even more than hotdogs. He was able to appropriate several before I gave up and discovered that yesterday's leftover doughnuts didn't look so bad.

Eventually I decided to go hunting at least for a few minutes. As I reached for my rifle, I heard an echoing that could not have been caused by anything but my grandfather's .300 Weatherby Magnum. Gramps never came back empty-handed.

I grabbed my old Mauser and threw open the bolt. Just as I chambered the first round, I caught some movement to my left. I turned. Standing there was an eight-point buck looking straight at me. I slowly pulled the Mauser to my shoulder, aligned the sights on the base of his neck, and squeezed the trigger. The buck fell and never moved again.

An hour later my grandfather walked into camp, proudly hoisting the remains of a jackrabbit. When he saw my trophy, he hastily tossed the unfortunate hare into the brush.

We later paced off my shot and discovered that the deer was only 23 yards from camp.

Oh, I almost forgot. For those of you who have yet to learn Murphy's fifth lesson, it states as follows: Any person who survives Murphy's first four lessons and still wishes to hunt shall be rewarded.

—John Monroe
Blanchard High School
(Teacher: Rob Lamm)

Honorable Mention: Short Story

At Least He Wasn't An Axe-Murderer

A boy in his late teens sat on the hood of his car and stared at the lake. He had a can of Budweiser in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He was dressed in the typical high school party animal style. Dark green aviator sunglasses with gold wire rims, tattered fatigues, and a bright yellow shirt. The laces of his battered leather tennis shoes were untied and his shirt untucked, to give the overall impression of carelessness. The sun set, night fell on the city, and the boy still sat drinking. This was one of various ways of coping with the thought of school's starting in three days.

The last days of summer had always been a time of change, reflection, and last-minute debauchery, but this year seemed even more so. He faintly realized that this was because he was beginning his last year of high school; all of his older friends had left for college and a few well-liked but untrusted contemporaries had been "shipped off" to military school. Still, this realization did not make it seem any less strange. Every time he thought of school his stomach churned and he got a feeling somewhere between awareness of impending change and impending doom.

His eyes shifted from the lake to a cloud of dust rising from across a beer-can-strewn field. The speeding car came ever closer and he squinted to see the make. A battered brown Chevy Impala approached and parked next to him. The driver emerged from his car with a half-empty six pack of generic beer. The boy smiled, shook hands with the younger driver, and made a comment on his choice of beer.

The younger boy laughed. "It all has alcohol in it so I'm not too choosy. Besides that, I'm kind of broke," he added with gloom. "My parents are kind of tight with money now that they're paying for boarding school."

The older boy nodded in sympathy. "When do you leave?" he inquired and was mildly sorry when the driver answered that his plane left the next afternoon. He walked back to the trunk of his car and got the last three cold Budweisers from his cooler. He handed them to the younger boy.

"What's this for? I got plenty of beer."

“Take them. I’ve had enough beer in the last few days to do me for a long time. Celebrate leaving this place with some real beer.”

The younger boy thanked him and, before an awkward silence could settle upon them, the senior wished the younger boy luck and left. In the car he thought of the latest of his boyhood friends to leave and was sorry. “If nothing else, he was always a nice guy,” he thought. At least the kid hadn’t been a jerk on top of being screwed up like other people he had known. Looking back on these thoughts, he laughed a humorless laugh at the only compliments he could think of for the younger boy. It was like saying “At least he wasn’t an axe-murderer.”

—Ted Porch
Heritage Hall School
(Teacher: Lynne Roller)