

Absolute is published by the Arts and Humanities Division of Oklahoma City Community College during the spring of each year. All essays, poems, short stories, and artwork are the creations of college students and community members. To retain the creative intent of the writers and artists, only minimal editing of the works has been made. The items published herein represent our best choices from hundreds of original submissions.

Editorial Board:

Jason Murray, Student Editor

Marcy Beck, Student Editor

Naomi Christofferson, Senior Copy Editor

Dan Tysor, Publication Coordinator

Carolyn Farris, Design Coordinator

Clay Randolph, Faculty Editor

The Editorial Board thanks the following individuals for their support: Bertha Wise, Lisa Blankenship, Sue Hinton, Mark Whitney, Kay Edwards, and many students at Oklahoma City Community College.



All information supplied in this publication is accurate at the time of printing; however, changes may occur and will supersede information in this publication. This publication, printed by Pressworks, is issued by Oklahoma City Community College. A total of 150 copies were printed at a cost of \$757.50.

Oklahoma City Community College, in compliance with Title VI and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, and other Federal Laws and regulations, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, religion, handicap, or status as a veteran in any of its policies, practices or procedures. This includes but is not limited to admissions, employment, financial aid and educational services.

Oklahoma City Community College is accredited by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and holds a prestigious 10-year accreditation.

Oklahoma City Community College is also in compliance with Public Law 101-226, the Drug-Free Schools and Community Act Amendments of 1989 and the Drug-Free Workplace Act of 1988. In support of the spirit and intent of these laws, Oklahoma City Community College maintains an alcohol-, tobacco- and drug-free campus and prohibits the use of alcohol and/or illicit drugs by students and employees on college property or as part of any college activity and also prohibits the use of tobacco inside college buildings.

Poems

My Medori Sour

Keri Osburn

with a sharp wink
on my lips
and a swollen
sweetness
sliding down
to my belly
i feel my tongue
swell and sweat
as the words
stir in my mind
and the whir
of vodka
whispers a
soft lullaby.

Beadwoman

Lou Ann Wolf

She sees the future in her beads
and the past
as she weaves dreams
of bone and glass.

She gathers green, cerise and teal
to her hand
pieces history together
in a beaded band.

Dreams of light gathered from the fire
no need to ask
in a ritual as old as time
her fingers dance.

Pony beads and seeds traded by a man
form designs
from a dream brought by the double woman
spider lines.

The Thanksgiving Clean-up Symphony

Kristie Keener

The candles are blown out,
the napkins lie rumpled on the table.
The men grumble and grunt,
they waddle into the NFL shrine (a.k.a livingroom).
The women do not waste time,
no chitter-chatter to leave the food to dry on the china.
Only the sound of warm, soapy water rising...
plunge...
in goes the gravy boat—empty of its passengers.
swish, plunge...
the scrubbing begins.
The smell of “Joy” fills the air,
tiny bubbles escape the sink.
Harmonious squeaks come from the dryers—Grandma and Aunt Sue.
The hum of fridge pipes in,
rhythm develops.
First casually, but then with faster tempo...
plunge, swish, plunge, squeak...
“Yeeeeeeeeeha!”
“WoooOOoowe!”
Cries explode from the livingroom.
The women of the symphony look up,
and the tempo speeds up again.
Until the dishes are all done.
The napkins on to wash.
The women rock back and forth in their creaking chairs,
Food settles, exhaustion sets in...
no applause necessary.
Only three pairs of prune hands,
resting modestly at their sides.

Seventh Grade Sweetheart Dance

Marcy Beck

Sitting in a plastic chair
Alone in the shadows
Hiding from others
Plain.
Dressed in Sunday Best
Beanpole body
Scared brown eyes
Straight brown hair.
Other girls,
Of kaleidoscope colors
Dancing in perfected peacock poses
Sway in time to the music.
Grace
Not yet within the ordinary girl's reach
Making her
Uncomfortable.
Anxiously
She waits in the corner
Edge of the social circle.
Award girl,
Plainly pretty,
Whose time
To dance
Has yet to come.

Hot Saxophone

Ruby Reneá Edwards

I love that sax turn it up
blow real hard and move side to
side.

You blow softly to make a
sweet sound and you blow
hard to make a bold love sound.

You blow twice for the answer I
do and three times for I love
you.

A sound that tastes so sweet don't
you want to play the sax tonight
with me?

Christmas

Julie Shilling

I hate the way
this heater
smells like
burnt
gingerbread cookies
my favorite
things
glitter
like diamonds
in the snow
fort
wages a war
of ice
crystals
sparkling in
the sun
melts the
snow
angels
fly like
reindeer
have
shiny red noses.

Plateau

Shelly K. Unsicker

In the heart of the Wichita Mountains, I am
trekking across fields of tall grasses.

The day is warm in early spring
when eyes deceptively see nothing new
yet other senses feel the world
turning green.

Anxious to discover my own path, I shun
the trails already forged and turn into the trees.

The pungent smell of animal stops me
turns me slowly around
until I see the Longhorn standing
not four feet away.

I hold my breath not risking
the slightest movement.

Shades of creams and browns
cover protruding blades of shoulders and hips
camouflaging its massive body, curling horns
into the background of winter colors.

For a moment I think it looks at me
as it chomps its cud, but it turns its head
caring less.

Outside the trees, I begin the climb
through grass speckled with stone and cacti,
over boulders, searching for footholds, handholds
grasping the limbs of trees to pull
me upward.

Perfect exercise with blood pumping, muscles
moving, straining, rhythmic breathing.

Finally, I reach the top

a plateau of level earth
above the rocks and trees below.

On the far side a lake rests
below a steep ridge.
Blue water, surrounded by trees,
this mountain, and sky,
lies hidden and protected from man.
On a flat boulder I sit,
stretching my legs. I
feel the sun on my back
and am filled with its warmth.
Closing my eyes,
leaning back on my hands,
I fly with the breeze.
Air smells sweet and unmolested.
Buzzards fly so close I can hear
their wings slicing through the wind.

Back on the plateau
I feel the weathered texture and coolness
from the boulder where I sit.
Opening my eyes
breathing in the air and all I see
I am one with God's Earth.
I am Earth.
Earth is me.
I belong.

Chinese Proverb

Melissa Martin

Blue tiger
always searches for
Red tiger.
Fate inevitably
draws them together.
In the end
someone always pays.
So goes the legend
says the tattooist
as he pushes
his blue ink into
the skin of the
Yakuza.

Fantasies

Alicia Gibson

I could
have been
President.

Isn't that
the American dream?

But I am only a girl.

And women are never
presidents.

But they say

I can be Mommy.

They will

give me aprons,

they will

give me a

Kitchen to rule.

“What about the
Declaration of
Independence?”

They answer—

“We like our
coffee black.”

Illinois Central

Lonnie Haynes

Out in the middle of nowhere,
In the middle of a Kansas wheat field,
Along an Illinois Central railroad track,
Where, from horizon to horizon,
There is nothing
But wheat
And sky
And a lonely cloud
Now and then.

It is hot
And still,
Except when an occasional breeze
Gives you a break
From the stifling heat
And magnifies the smell of wheat,
Or a gust ripples the fields like waves,
Or the black diesel fumes,
The roar of the train,
And the clackity-clack of the rails
Let you know
That someone else
Is still alive.

Socialite

Denise Meyer

Unhinged woman

Paints her face

Walks through French salon doors

Colors her nails red

Decorate the frosted blonde

Cover the air with gossip

Sweet wreaths of vanity

Hang in a circle of dryers

Will that be cash or cash?

January Night

Desiree Lanier-Goad

The January night,
With a cold wind
Blowing from the north
Moonlight reflecting
Off the cars in the parking lot
While two, a man and woman,
Sit in their car.
In a flash of fury
His anger is like a savage beast
And his fist meets the dash before them.
The woman sits in fear.
Memories of her past haunt her.
Once that dash had been her
At the hand of a different man.
Will she be that dash again
Only now at the hand of another man?

Essays

Crossing the Lines

Chanon Wheeler Oakey

Thirty-two stories of steel and glass towered over the city of Moscow. The hotel pierced the skyline with its glittering gold metal and glowing red name—KOCMOC.

Our group struggled through the crowd gathered at the entrance to the lobby. Four uniformed men stood guarding the door. The guards silently surveyed the crowd, randomly selecting people to enter the hotel.

"This is ridiculous," I said to a woman in our group. "We have reservations, no need to stand around like this."

I pushed my way through to the guards.

"Hello," I said, smiling to the guard as I started to walk through the door.

The guard on my right placed his hand firmly on my shoulder.

"NaCNOpT."

Ignoring his comment, I pushed forward through the door. The guard's hand gripped my shoulder and shoved me outside.

"NaCNOpT," he repeated.

"I don't understand you. I'm a tourist. I am NOT a Russian."

The guard stared blankly at me, shaking his head. "NaCNOpT!" he demanded.

I took out my passport and held it up in front of the guard's face. "See, I'm an American, a tourist!" I shouted at him.

The guard slid his hand from my shoulder to my back and pushed me into the hotel. I looked behind me to see my group pulling out their passports for the guards. A few of them were allowed to enter after me.

"Next time, you go first," I said to Howard.

"You're the one who said, 'We have reservations.'"

I sneered at Howard and walked off to find a place to rest until all of the group passed through the guards.

The lobby filled with people mulling about, mostly tourists with cameras swinging from their necks and maps of Moscow sticking out of shirt pockets. I maneuvered through the flow of people to a cluster of chairs in the center of the lobby. I flung myself into an olive-green overstuffed chair, ignoring the oily black smudges on the cushion left behind by the many occupants before me, and began picking at some stuffing popping out of a broken seam.

I listened to the many conversations around me as I collected a sizable ball of stuffing from the arm of my chair. Chinese, French, German, and Russian languages clashed together, sounding like the gibberish of a twelve-month-old child. I surveyed the lobby, looking for my group, when a man at the front desk caught my eye.

"I want a bloody room, TODAY!" he demanded, pounding on the counter. "I have been sleeping in this lobby for three nights, and I refuse to do it again tonight."

"MNHyTOFKy," the clerk replied.

"Doesn't anyone here speak English?" he shouted as the clerk turned and scurried away.

"Good luck," I muttered aloud as I pushed myself out of the chair to join my group. A clerk had arrived to collect our passports. Each time she spoke to someone, they would look away and grimace or stare at her with their mouths gaping open.

"How rude! Don't these people have any manners?" I muttered to Howard as the clerk took his papers.

"NaCNOpT. BNea."

My eyes peeled back in disgust as I peered into a face surrounded by wirelike black hair struggling to escape a broken tortoise shell comb. Wartlike growths, several sprouting thick, black hairs, covered her face. The clerk took my documents and placed a flimsy, yellow card in my hand.

"BeRTb. HpOHyCK Ha DeqyPHaR."

"Where do we get our room key?" I asked, trying to avoid the lumpy face of the clerk.

"BeRTb. HpOHyCK Ha DeqyPHaR," she repeated, pointing to the elevator. After we managed to stuff most of our group into the lift, the elevator operator turned to us and smiled.

"KaKON CTaQ?"

We stared at him blankly, a few people in the group shrugged their shoulders.

“KaKON CTaQ?” he asked again.

“I don’t understand what you are saying,” I stammered. “The clerk gave us these cards and pointed to this elevator.”

The man tapped on the back of my card. I turned the card over to find the number 16 scribbled in small black marks.

“Is this our floor? Are we on the sixteenth floor?” I asked as the group flipped their cards over, looking for their numbers.

“Da, WeCTHaDqATb,” he replied and nodded his head.

The operator pressed a button, and the lift lurched upward toward the sixteenth floor.

“Thank you, thank you very much,” I replied as I stepped out of the elevator.

“What a nice man, so helpful,” said an elderly member of our group.

I turned to smile at the elevator operator. I caught a glimpse of him before the lift doors closed; he was snickering to himself. I sighed and stepped up to the desk of the floor clerk. She had flushed, red cheeks, and her face was framed by a faded floral scarf covering her head and tied in a knot beneath her chin. She was seated behind a scarred, brown desk with only a black rotary phone and a tattered paperback book decorating the desk top.

“BaWaHpOHCK, HOwaDyNCTa,” she said, holding out her hand.

“Does she want a tip?” asked Howard.

“BaWaHpOHCK, HOwaDyNCTa,” she repeated and pointed to my hotel card.

“Is this what you want?” I asked, holding out my card.

She smiled, took the card, and handed me a key with 1636 printed on the top of the key.

“Thank you.”

“HpNBETCTBNe.”

I turned to walk down the hallway, my feet barely crushing the industrial strength carpet covering the hallway, its olive green color offering the only contrast to the drab gray walls. I entered my room and collapsed on a hideous, orange bedspread. I rested a moment, staring at the yellow and orange striped curtains swaying above the air-conditioner vent. I spotted the television and jumped up to turn it on. I searched the stations for something to break the silence. The fourth channel was a rebroadcast of a CNN newscast.

“Finally, something in English!”

My stomach growled, reminding me I had missed lunch. I grabbed a Pop-Tart from my travel bag and swallowed three or four chunks while I looked for my bottled water. I went into the bathroom, looking for a drinking glass.

“Great, they give you an ice bucket but no glass. As if there is even an ice machine,” I muttered to myself as I washed my hands and face. Drying my hands on a rough little towel, I returned to the bedroom to hide my snacks among my clothes.

“Don’t forget the gum for the maid,” I reminded myself. I dropped a package of Juicy Fruit on the dresser, turned off the television, and headed for the door.

I nodded to the woman behind the desk, passing her on the way to the elevator. She picked up something from behind the desk and waved it at me. Moving closer, I recognized my hotel card.

“BaWaKHloe,” pointing to my room key.

“Here you are,” and I handed her my key in return for my hotel card. “Thank you.”

“HpNBeTCTBNe.”

Turning toward the elevator, I noticed my reflection in a mirror. My pale cheeks highlighted the dark circles under my eyes. I took out some lipstick to brighten up part of my complexion. As I rubbed my lips together, I noticed the woman behind the desk, watching me in the mirror. She was tracing her finger along her lips and smiling. I took my lipstick and placed it in her hand. Shaking her head back and forth, she pushed my hand toward me. I gently pressed her fingers around the tube and smiled.

“CHaCNSO.”

“You’re welcome.”

I stepped into the elevator and pointed to the lobby button. As the lift doors closed, I caught a glimpse of the woman behind the desk. She was slowly outlining her lips with her new tube of lipstick.

If I Had a Dream

Kristie Keener

During the first five minutes of first period, every day, all twenty-four students in my freshman history class would rise and salute the American flag. “I pledge allegiance...,” we began in a mumbling unison. Most of us were shifting our feet or rolling our eyes as a way of acting uninterested. By “...justice for all,” half the students had already sat down, and the remaining pledgers sounded as if they were saluting in rounds. I thought the pledge was pointless and wondered why we were forced to do it. But I never asked my teacher, who always stood straight-spined and proudly saluted.

Our history teacher Mr. Loughry said we were “acting ungrateful,” a statement that always got a chuckle from a safe back-row seat. He was a petite, bald man with a shiny scalp, blotchy skin, and gleaming white teeth. There was a rumor that he bleached his teeth to get them that white, but no one ever dared to ask him. His face turned war-paint red when he was angry, making his head look like a lollipop on his stick-skinny body. However, we rarely saw this side. Most of the class knew the subjects not to bring up. One of these subjects was pride in America or, more specifically, lack of it. Today, we busily took notes on the American Revolution and flipped through textbook pages full of American heroism.

Finally, the bell rang, and within twenty seconds, there was no trace of any classmember. I squeezed my way through the halls to my English class across the hall. Mrs. Mongelluzzo, a stout olive-skinned woman with cobalt blue eyes, was huddled over her podium.

“Good morning,” I chimed as I took my seat in the front row of my favorite class. She looked up at me and then looked back down without a response. This was a fairly unusual response; she was usually very businesslike towards her students. Shrugging, I sat down just as the tardy bell rang.

"I graded your contest entries last night. Most of the class did very well, and I had some very original responses to the theme—"If I Had a Dream," she said as she handed out the papers. Mine was on top, and she turned it upside down as she laid it on my desk.

You have to turn it over sometime, I gulped as I thought to myself. My hand crept over the paper, my shoulders began to tense, and I could hear my heart pounding as if it were in my head and not my chest. I flipped it over to reveal—a zero. I skimmed the paper for red marks but found none. There was only a note below the text, saying to see her after class. My eyes began to feel dry, and I purposely blinked as I climbed my way up the paragraphs to the title "If I Had One—A Dream—It Would Be To Abolish Writing Contests With Themes." I placed the paper in my folder and tried to recover from my shock. The lecture ebbed by as I awaited the bell. I must have looked at my watch twenty times. The bell rang and I approached Mrs. Mongelluzzo.

"Why did I get a zero?" I prompted her.

"You are one of the best writers in this class. I am ashamed that you wrote such a horrible thing," she said.

"Well, there are no red marks. What did I do wrong? I'll redo it," I gushed in confusion.

"You can resubmit an entry over a different topic tomorrow morning," she said sternly.

"But you didn't tell us we had to have a teacher-approved topic. I didn't break any of the school guidelines....I didn't promote violence," I calmly protested.

"YOU did NOT do the assignment!" she yelled. "I have told you your options. You don't HAVE to take the zero."

I turned and left the class, crying. In the bathroom, I splashed cold water on my face. My mind was racing as the mirror grew fuzzy in front of me. I wiped my eyes on the sleeve of my jean jacket and gathered my books in my arms. As I walked home, my shock turned to anger. I began to run the last half mile. The cool wind whipped my hair in my face. *How could she be so subjective? Since when am I graded on ideas and not quality of the way I express them?* I ran faster and faster. *Not even one red mark. The wind blew my open jacket behind me. Oh, how wonderful could America be? How just is it for a government-run school system to inhibit expression?* My muscles throbbed from lack of oxygen. *This is not a communist government. I can not be told how to believe.* I reached my house and flew through the front door, gasping as I lay down on the couch. I turned over on my stomach as the tears slipped down my cheeks. I dozed off from exhaustion.

The next morning, I went to the principal's office before first hour. I entered the neutral-colored office and sat in a cheap, uncomfortable chair. I told the principal what had happened. At the end of my passion-filled presentation, she leaned back in her large rolling chair, rested her hand on her computer keyboard to her left, and asked me how to spell my last name.

"Your file doesn't show you as a troublemaker. Why are you doing this?" She looked at me with confusion.

"Because I've lost my faith in a system which I have always wanted to work for. I wanted to become a teacher because my teachers shape the minds of the next generation. I can't become something that I know is allowed to inhibit the self-expression of the next generation. Without the essential need for expression, we would not have created the government which created this school," I said with the frustration of a three-year-old.

"Well, I suggest you redo your essay with a more positive subject matter," she flatly said in a tone of finality. She punched several keys to return her computer to the main menu and patiently waited for me to leave. As I began to gather my books, I realized how naive I had been.

I went to my first hour that day, but I didn't stand for the flag salute. That day, I didn't listen to the lecture on the American Revolution. However, I learned there are some battles that you lose but still win. I had lost my idealistic view of allowance of self-expression, a little chunk of my innocence. I won the courage to stand by my opinions. I didn't redo the essay.

Tom Coolbreeze

Dianna Ford

He is six years old and has a heart murmur. He proudly displays one broken tooth and a torn inner eyelid. His name is Tom Coolbreeze. He has become my cat. Tom is an orange domestic shorthair. He has very dark orange stripes along the top and sides of his face and legs. There is just a bit of white on his underbelly. His tail is very fluffy and looks like it is in a constant state of shedding. It is. When he is not asleep, which is a great deal of the time, he studies you with large yellow eyes.

My youngest son Chris found Tom hiding in the bushes in our yard. Although he was still a kitten, he was past the cute stage and looked more like a gangly adolescent. Chris felt sorry for the cat and started to feed him. Those of us with cooler heads called animal control. Animal control came but couldn't find the cat. This was because the cat had hidden in the drainage sewer in the street by the side of our house. Animal control said that if we would contain the cat, they would come by to pick him up. By then, it was too late. We all felt pity for this wild kitty that was trying hard to survive. We now had a cat. Chris named him Tom for the obvious and Coolbreeze for style. Later, it could be said that his name applied more to his roaming ways and his attitude toward people.

Since he was going to be an outdoor cat and we were responsible pet owners, Tom was to be neutered but not declawed. Since Tom didn't take to riding in the car, it was necessary to put him in a pillow case for transport to the vet. Being a skittish animal, this was a very traumatic experience for him. Even to this day, he runs away at the sight of pillowcases, trash bags, or any kind of bag. He did survive the ordeal with his great feline hunting skills intact.

Over the years, Tom brought home many trophies. Birds were his favorite prey. However, one night I heard a knocking noise on the patio door, and when I looked outside after turning on the light, there was Tom with a baby bunny in his mouth. He

put it down and looked at me proudly. The knocking noise was the bunny's head making contact with the glass door. Needless to say, the bunny didn't move. I was surprised how flat dead bunnies look.

Another evening Tom was in the house. Birds nested in the chimney, and they could be heard inside the house at times. This always caught Tom's attention. This evening, he seemed more agitated than usual. As a bird flew out of the chimney into the living room, I watched him jump from the couch to the fireplace, knocking down the fireplace screen. The bird flew everywhere in the house with Tom in hot pursuit. Tom jumped on top of the washer, and as the bird was trying to escape, he caught it in midair. I was amazed. This little orange kitty was like a tiger in the jungle.

Yes, Tom was an outdoor cat. He would spend time in the house, but it was on his terms. If the weather was rainy or cold, he wanted to come inside. He loved to hide under the bed and would stay there to sleep all day. He would come out late in the day, walking slowly, stretching and yawning. He was ready for attention. He wanted to have his head scratched or to be brushed. Then when he had had enough, he wanted outside. It was time to jump on fences, climb on the roof, or hunt.

I cared about what happened to Tom, but it was my dog, a Yorkie named Chelsea, that was my pet. When I was sitting, she was always in my lap. She would follow me from room to room. So last November, when my husband of twenty-six years wanted a divorce, it was understood that Chelsea would go with me. Tom was another matter. My husband did not want Tom, my eldest son's roommate hated cats, and my youngest son was now in the Army. This left the pound. Someone who wanted an orange cat. Or me. I didn't think that anyone would want a scruffy orange cat, and I felt that the pound was an automatic death sentence. I did have time to decide. The house was on the market for sale in January, and I had until it sold to make arrangements for Tom.

By the time the house sold in June, Tom had become a symbol of my crumbling family situation. After much thought and talking to my veterinarian, I decided to take Tom with me to an apartment. I was going to turn this great feline hunter into an indoor cat. He was to be declawed.

In July, on the weekend I moved, Tom was recovering from his surgery at the vet's office. I thought it best that he be spared the noise and confusion. When I picked up Tom from the vet's office on Tuesday, I was amazed. He was a calm, sweet kitty. I did get tranquilizers for Tom in case his calm didn't last. I thought this would change after a few days, and his outdoor personality would emerge. It didn't.

He adapted to a litter box immediately. I'm sure he would have found it and would have known what to do without my interference. However, I felt better after I put him in the litter box, gave him a "this-is-your-potty" speech, and helped him move his paws in the litter. Every morning, I fed him gourmet cat food to keep him content. During the day, he was happy to sleep in his favorite blue chair, under the bed, or in the closet. When I would get home after work, he was ready to have his head scratched and sit with me on the couch. At night, he was ready to sleep on my bed with Chelsea and me. I couldn't believe how smoothly Tom's adaption to indoor life was going. However, it wasn't to last.

Recently, Tom has become interested in the outdoors again. In the middle of the night, he runs through the apartment to leap at the miniblinds to get to the window sill. I get up to pull up the blinds so that he can look outside. He yowls by the door. I know he wants to go outside. This concerns me greatly. I have stood outside with him while he sniffs plants and tries to explore before I can scoop him up and take him inside again. I am reluctant to leave him outside for fear he will get lost. He has become more than my cat. He is part of what remains of my family.

The Timely Decoding of a Charcoal Black Spot

Russell Randolph

A charcoal black smear disrupts the concrete gray of the sidewalk. A preoccupied ambler neglects the chalk stain and walks over it. Another briefly glances at it before rushing off. Finally, a single pedestrian stops, stares, ponders, and perhaps chuckles at the cleverness hidden in the black spot. Nonetheless, all three make a choice, whether consciously or unconsciously, to decode this black smear. It is a decision of chance and knowledge that allows a decoder the opportunity to read and understand this spot.

It was a typical chilly winter day in 1988, when I first noticed this spot. In its initial stages, it was fresh and meaningful; however, through the wear of feet and the weather, it had become only a charcoal black blur. As a prospective student, I was visiting the University of North Texas. Being a high school senior, I was in awe of the university atmosphere; ironically, though, it was not my awe of the academics, girls, or parties that I later recollected about the University. Instead, it was that charcoal black smear. In my first glance at the spot, I did not notice the words, but as I focused on the concrete separations within the spot, words soon formed into the sentences “NIETZSCHE IS DEAD GOD KILLED HIM.” This was my first contact with this phrase, and I did not comprehend its meaning. Nevertheless, the chalked propaganda attracted and perplexed my mind. Upon returning home, I did not ask any questions about the statement even though it confused me. This was probably due to my being a high school senior and immaturely thinking that I knew everything. Nietzsche, whoever he (induced from the “HIM”) was, and his relation to God were illogical to me. I remember thinking that maybe it was just one of those absurd college statements, and soon it was seemingly

forgotten. Three years later, though, a variation of the spot appeared in my studies. Since then, “NIETZSCHE IS DEAD GOD KILLED HIM” has become one of the most humorous and satirical graffiti that I have ever read.

College campuses have an abundance of graffiti, both demeaning and beneficial, which serve as ways of expressing social, sexual, philosophical, political, and other ideas. Similar to the temporary chalk art graffiti at the University of Oklahoma, the University of North Texas’ chalks convey many of the population’s messages. With my trip to the University of North Texas as my first college experience, I was unaware of this type of propaganda and, thus, curious about all sidewalk chalks. It was this curiosity that drew me to walk across and decode “NIETZSCHE IS DEAD GOD KILLED HIM.” The striking aspect of this graffiti was its permanent installation into my memory. Literally, I decoded this quote when I first encountered it, but it was not until 1991, (three years later), in a Western Civilization class at Oklahoma Baptist University that the chalk made sense. My first reading of the graffiti obviously did not intrigue me enough to provoke research, but it did capture my attention and reserve itself for a later-in-life meaning. With my first study about Nietzsche, I, thus, decoded a puzzle I had begun three years before. Friedrich Nietzsche was a nineteenth century German philosopher who, in his literary work *The Anti-Christ*, had stated his famous proclamation that “God is dead.” Thus, this 1988 graffiti was a satire of Nietzsche’s belief. One hundred years later, this witty statement was comically reflecting the Christian concept that God punishes man, especially Nietzsche, for blasphemy.

The graffiti was, as described in the introduction, rather worn when I first saw it. The words “NIETZSCHE” and “GOD” were the most difficult to read because of their location, a corner where two sidewalks intersected and, thus, had been heavily traveled upon. This word “NIETZSCHE” was extremely blurry to me, probably because it had no historical significance in my mind. The graffiti was written in large, block, capital letters with the first three words above the last three words. Much time and effort had obviously been applied in encoding it because the letter tracings were still recognizable, only faded and smudged. As a result of the wear, the graffiti was not completely legible unless one briefly stopped and examined it. Being new in my surroundings, I was shy and did not spend too much time decoding it, but my interest in the college chalks allowed me at least to focus and read the letters as I slowly walked past.

Thousands of people must have passed this black charcoal spot, but the number of actual decoders was probably quite small. Like me, there were most likely many students, visitors, or even faculty who read the graffiti and did not understand its

satirical meaning. I, for one, did not comprehend it until I learned about Nietzsche and his philosophy. This example in my life defines decoding to me as not only a process but an understanding. A communicative text is not fully decoded until the reader or spectator applies knowledge and opinion. Yes, physically, I decoded the graffiti in 1988, but at that time, it was merely words. There was no meaning or culture to the text; only an encoder existed. For me, the communication triangle was not completed until 1991, when the text "NIETZSCHE IS DEAD GOD KILLED HIM" gained historical culture and, hence, meaning. It was at this juncture that I truly decoded this graffiti.

Now, as I look back upon "NIETZSCHE IS DEAD GOD KILLED HIM," I marvel at the power of communication and its relation to time. It took me three years to completely decode a simple form of communication, but the triangle finally did evolve. Graffiti is only one of the forms of communication that use the power of words and pictures to portray news, opinions, or feeling. Many graffiti are obscene and repulsive, but there are some that provide intellectual insight. I did not learn any profitable knowledge from this chalk at the University of North Texas, but it did allow me to explore my mind. Similar to the psychologists' ink blot test, this chalking illustrated to me how each decoder can have a different interpretation of the same object. In my instance, it was not only the object but the element of time that hindered my decoding of this charcoal black spot.

La Bistro

Christine Leshner

Every university has a local restaurant where students and faculty mix, both groups comfortable with the mixture. The University of Oklahoma is no different. Across the street from Jacobson Hall rests Campus Corner, a reminiscent reminder of 1930's architecture, at times overloaded with shops and restaurants and at other times sadly missing life. On the corner of Boyd and Buchanan sits La Baguette, the starting point to the maze of Campus Corner. In this one restaurant, the academics and intellectuals meet.

In *printemps*, *l'ete*, and *l'automne*, one can find women sitting in the covered patio, talking in knowledgeable voices about various topics from local gossip to politics. Once you step inside the heavy wood and glass doors, you feel as though you've left Oklahoma and stepped into a quaint little French bistro somewhere in the *Musee* district of Paris. On the far back wall is a mural of customers sitting at tables, conversing and enjoying the food. Warm, earth shades of brick encompass the walls except those facing the street, which are huge, floor-to-ceiling windows looking out at the university and onto the sidewalks. On the tiled floor rest small wooden tables and chairs.

Scattered about the restaurant are friends and lovers deep in conversation; students with books strewn across the tables, engaged in literature and philosophy; young athletic men, wearing baseball hats and frat tee shirts; waiflike women dressed in black, drinking coffee and water and perhaps eating a pastry. Everyone is caught up in a world not quite real, and into this world wander strangers: three women and a man, all in their seventies. The women sit down while he goes to order.

"This place is so loud, and not with the talking, but the dishes and glasses crashing up against one another. Hard floor, hard walls, hard tables, and hard chairs. There is nothing soft in here."

Up until that point, the young student sitting at the table in front of this group has not noticed the loudness of the place. She does notice the loudness of the complaining.

“Where are we going to eat tonight?”

‘They must be tourists,’ the college student thinks and tries to concentrate on her newspaper.

“We could go to Chile’s.”

“How do we get over there?”

“We just take the road that McDonald’s is on.”

“I bet this place is packed at lunchtime when school is in session.”

They must be blind. How many students are there in here now and walking around outside?

Now the man joins them.

“It looks just like the University of Maryland.” The women must be trying to be pleasant now.

She wonders if they will allow the man to talk. She doubts it.

The man does not answer. There is a lagging in the conversation; the classic rock is once more heard. The paper turns. Couples leave; more enter. Sacred silence is broken as the food is brought out.

“The tuna is good. How is your food?”

One can visualize the nodding of heads.

“It is such a nice place.”

“We have a Chile’s back home. The food there is good.”

The college student looks at her watch. Class starts in thirty minutes. ‘Maybe if I leave now, I can make it,’ she thinks. She rises, not knowing how much room she has before she crashes into their table. Grabbing her bookbag and turning slowly, she tries not to look in their faces.

In a gathering place where French is spoken and debates arise, the simplistic conversation drives one college student out and back to revered silence.

Sophistication

Amanda Gattenby

I have always been convinced of my sophistication. Doing well in school and particularly in English, I was told many times what a “talented young girl” I was; maybe sometimes I didn’t quite hear the last couple of words exactly.

When I was fourteen, I went through a phase in which I completely dedicated my life to a story I was writing. Denying my friends what I thought to be the pleasure of my company with dramatic lines like “the typewriter calls” and “I must suffer for my art,” I practically chained myself to my desk. I was very pleased with myself. Convinced that suffering would make me a better, more mature writer, I toiled away for hours on end. I felt a bit above (a bit being no less than a mile) my hoi poloi friends, deeper, more insightful. “They could never understand the pain of a true artist,” I crooned and decided to dress all in black to display my obviously excruciating suffering. Mostly, I used my mom’s clothes and borrowed my cousin’s too-big combat boots. I thought that, surely, since black was the color of sophistication, getting a blob of mascara and kind of scooting it below my eye was the proper makeup to complete this look. It was pretty uncomfortable, but the pain of paper cuts and my feet falling asleep often could not be denied.

Reeking of Eau de Teen Angst, I went to school this way, and not even the tauntings of my friends could bring me down off my high horse. I just hoisted my nose in the air and insisted they were too primitive to understand. I wasn’t truly depressed, of course; it was just my vain attempt to be shocking and mature.

One rainy night, while I was feverishly typing what I was sure was going to be a masterpiece, my typewriter abruptly ran out of ribbon. Cursing under my breath, I went to draft my mom to take me to Wal-Mart.

Once we were settled in her plushy car, she began to speak, choosing her words carefully.

“Mandy,” she started, “why is it that you feel you must dress completely in black, honey?”

“I’m an artist, Mom!” I said, spitting the words out and rolling my eyes. “And don’t call me ‘honey.’ It makes me feel juvenile.” I stared unhappily at the rain on the windshield.

“Well—,” my mom struggled, “it’s just that, honestly, baby, sometimes you look a little...ridiculous.” She let out her breath in one whoosh.

I wrote it off as her ignorance, but it still upset me. My mother had always taught me to respect my individuality, and her misunderstanding hurt. I didn’t say anything until we pulled into the parking lot. I tugged my skirt up and told her to stay out of the rain and I would be back shortly.

Halfway across the parking lot, my left combat boot had abandoned my foot. Squishing through the main aisle at the Super-Center, I was annoyed by all the looks I was getting from the many “Wal-Martians.”

“What?” I snarled angrily. “Leave me alone!” I began running toward the back of the store. I had no idea where I was going, and I couldn’t see because of the tears welling up.

Suddenly, I stopped short. I was in the Housewares Section, facing a full-length mirror. Finally, I could see what was getting me more looks than usual. My clothes, soaked, were sticking to my frail body, giving me a comical stature, not the flowy look I desired and pictured. The laces of my combat boots were wet and wrapped around my ankles, and my left boot was considerably darker from its recent swim. I had thick black lines running down my face: mascara on a warpath. My hair was plastered to my head, and a pond of black water was forming around my feet from my cheap temporary dye falling freely from my locks.

I was horrified and humiliated; I felt as if I had seen a true reflection of myself for the first time in a long while. I was nothing but a scrawny, pretentious, fourteen-year-old girl with her mother’s clothes on. I ran from that place.

That night, I cried in my mother’s arms. “I just wanted to be mature! I just wanted to make myself better!” I sobbed. We talked for a long time after that; we talked about being true to yourself, the pleasures of childhood, and the invaluable benefits of naiveté.

The next day I wore a pink sweater and jeans and wrote more than I ever had before.

Journey to the Walls

Bert Harper

Here I am, riding in a back seat of an '84 model conversion van—converted to make it safe for the transportation of prisoners from one penitentiary to another. The guard driving the van is talking on the two-way radio and doing twenty miles per hour over the speed limit. The other guard is wearing mirror shades at 5:00 a.m., and he has a real bad attitude problem. He also has a 12-gauge pump shotgun with one in the chamber. He turns back to face me with a grin on his face and says if I try to escape again, if someone else tries to help me escape, or he just does not enjoy the ride this morning, he is going to blow my head clean off my shoulders.

I am terribly uncomfortable because they have cinched my cuffs and shackles down like a vice. I have a chain around my waist. It is fastened to my cuffs with an iron black box and a tiny master lock. And they put a brace on my right leg that prevents me from bending it at the knee even the least significant amount.

I am on my way to Oklahoma's most secure maximum security prison (the walls) because I pled *nolo contendere*, no contest, guilty of first-degree murder, and I still have escape charges pending. We departed from the prison about ten minutes ago. We came to and went through the intersection where we should have turned right and gone south. I know where I am because I lived around here for eleven years.

I say to the driver, "You missed your turnoff!"

He replies, "No, I did not. We are taking the scenic route."

We are now somewhere on a deserted country road in the predawn hours, and there is a low thick fog. The only scenery is old, patch-riddled asphalt, dense fog, and the two goons who are accompanying me. The headlights are barely cutting the ominous fog well enough to illuminate the road. The driver is making no effort to dodge the potholes. Mirror Shades is going on and on about how miserable I am going to be, how much I deserve it, and how good that makes him feel.

I say, “Hey, chauffeur, will you turn on the radio and ask your partner to shut the hell up?”

I figure I am really in for it now, but to my surprise, the interior of the vehicle is filled with medium-loud country music: Hank Williams’ *You Wrote My Life*.

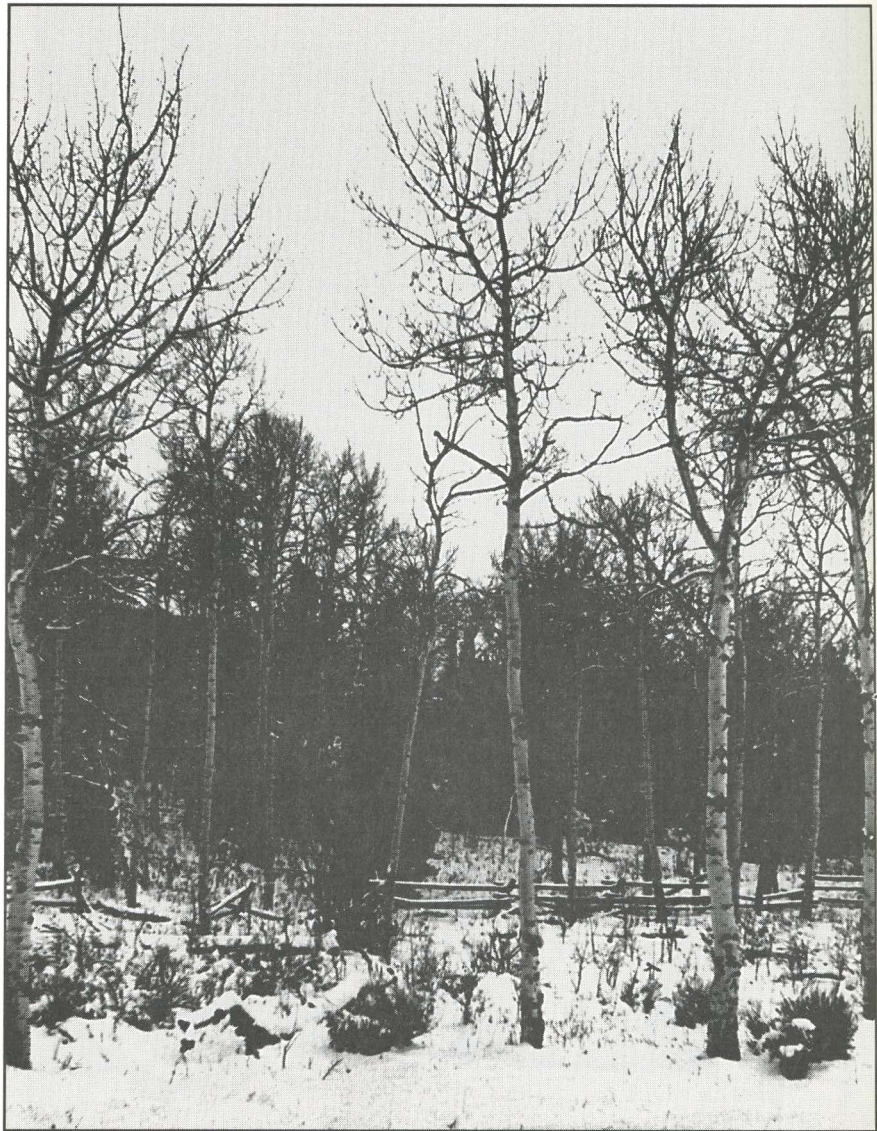
The driver turns the vehicle, and we are back on smooth highway. Mirror Shades transfers his grip from his shotgun to a thermos and pours himself a steaming hot cupful. He hollers back at me, “Sure smells good, doesn’t it?”

And to my relief, these are the last words that he speaks to me.

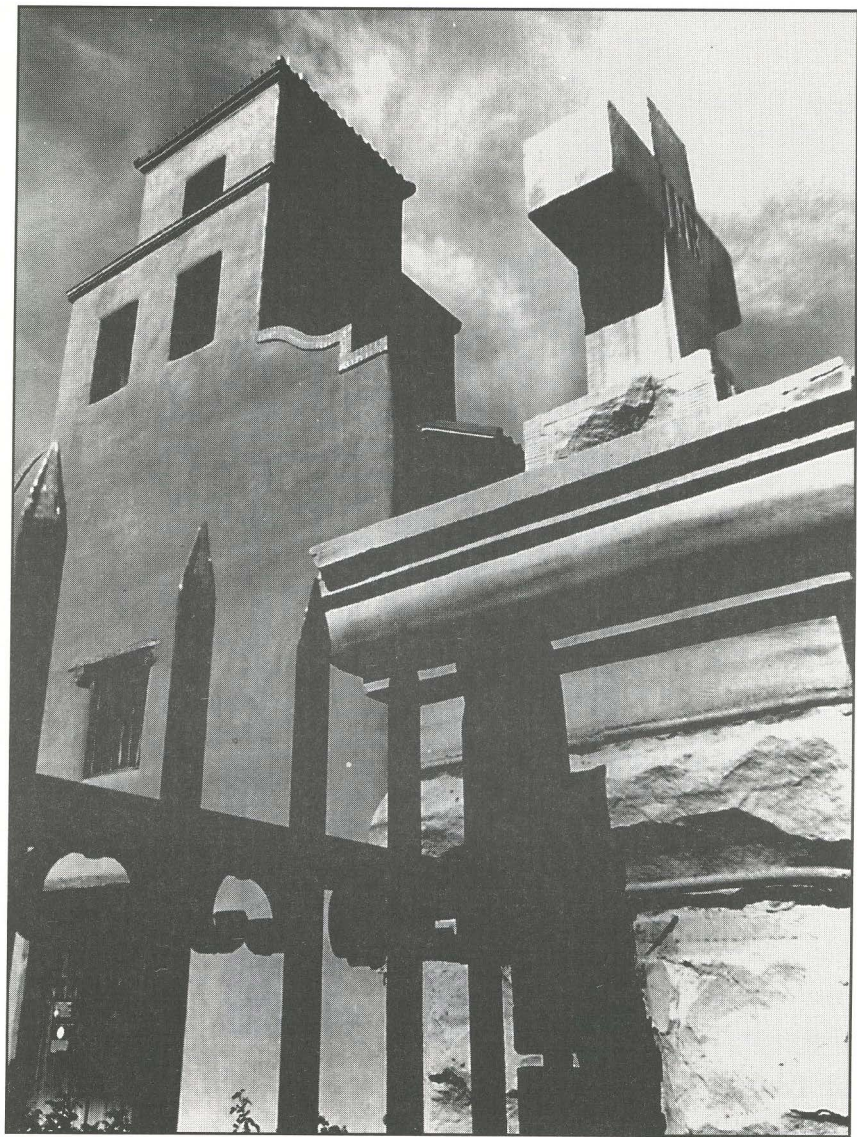
Art and Photography



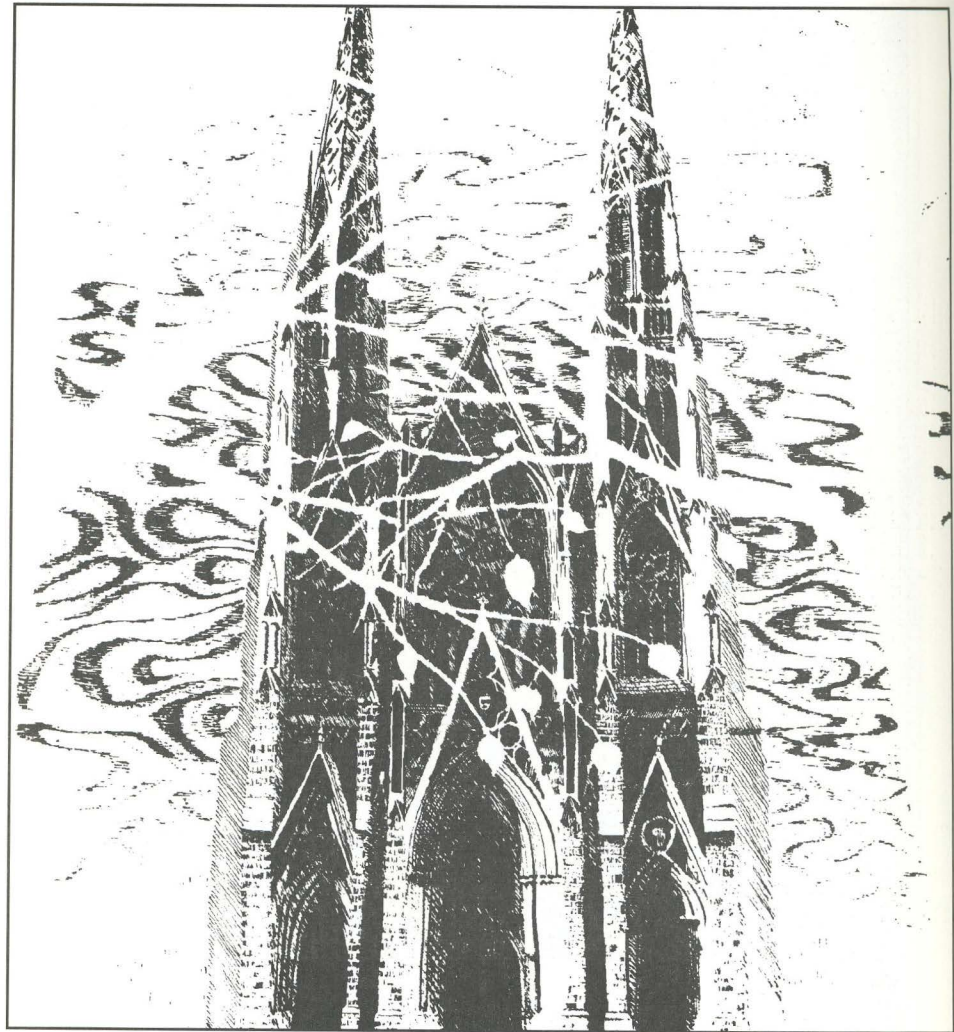
Children
Darrell Cardaff



Gros Ventre - Wyoming
John Seward



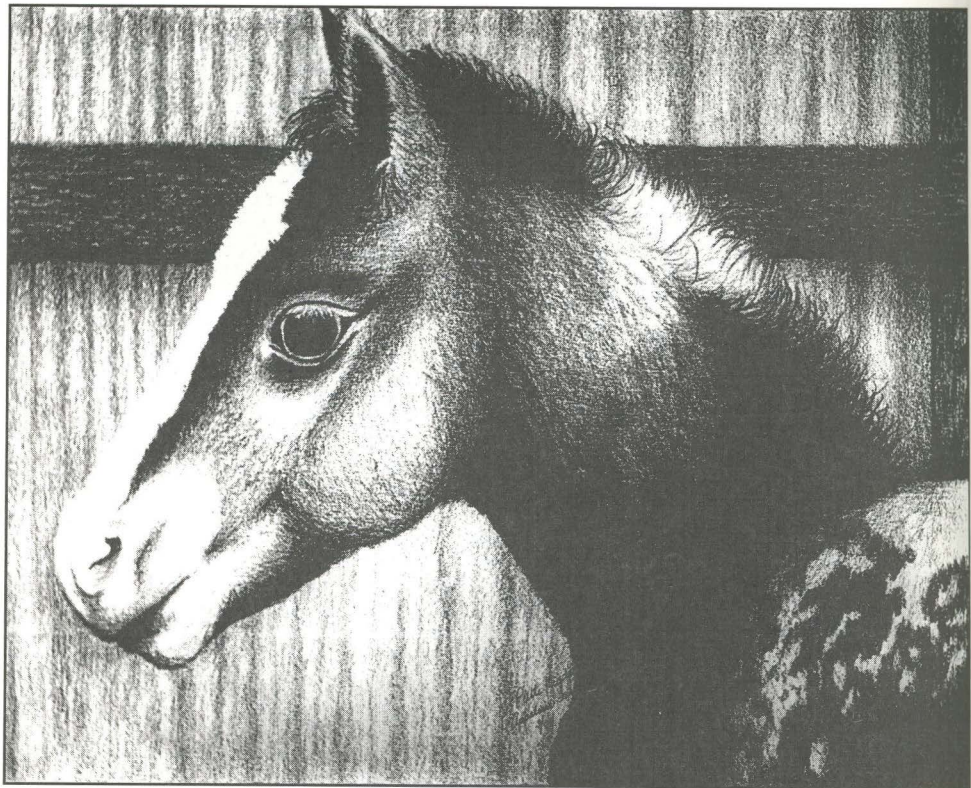
Church
Lou Ann Wolf



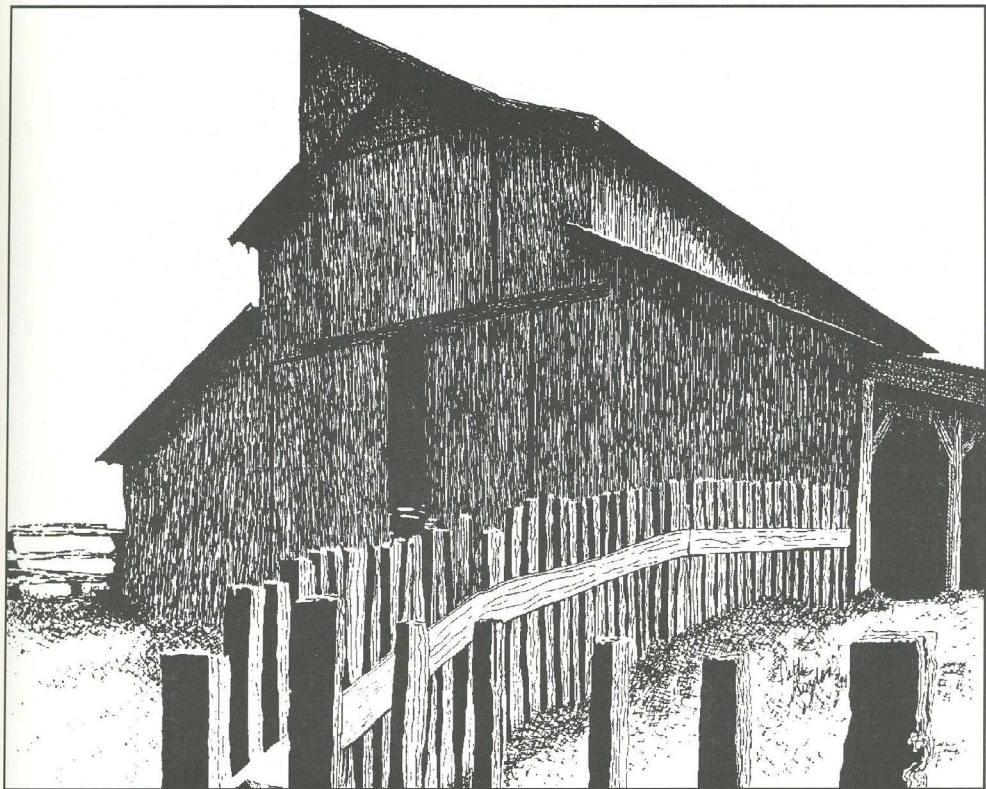
Linear Tone
Philip Williams



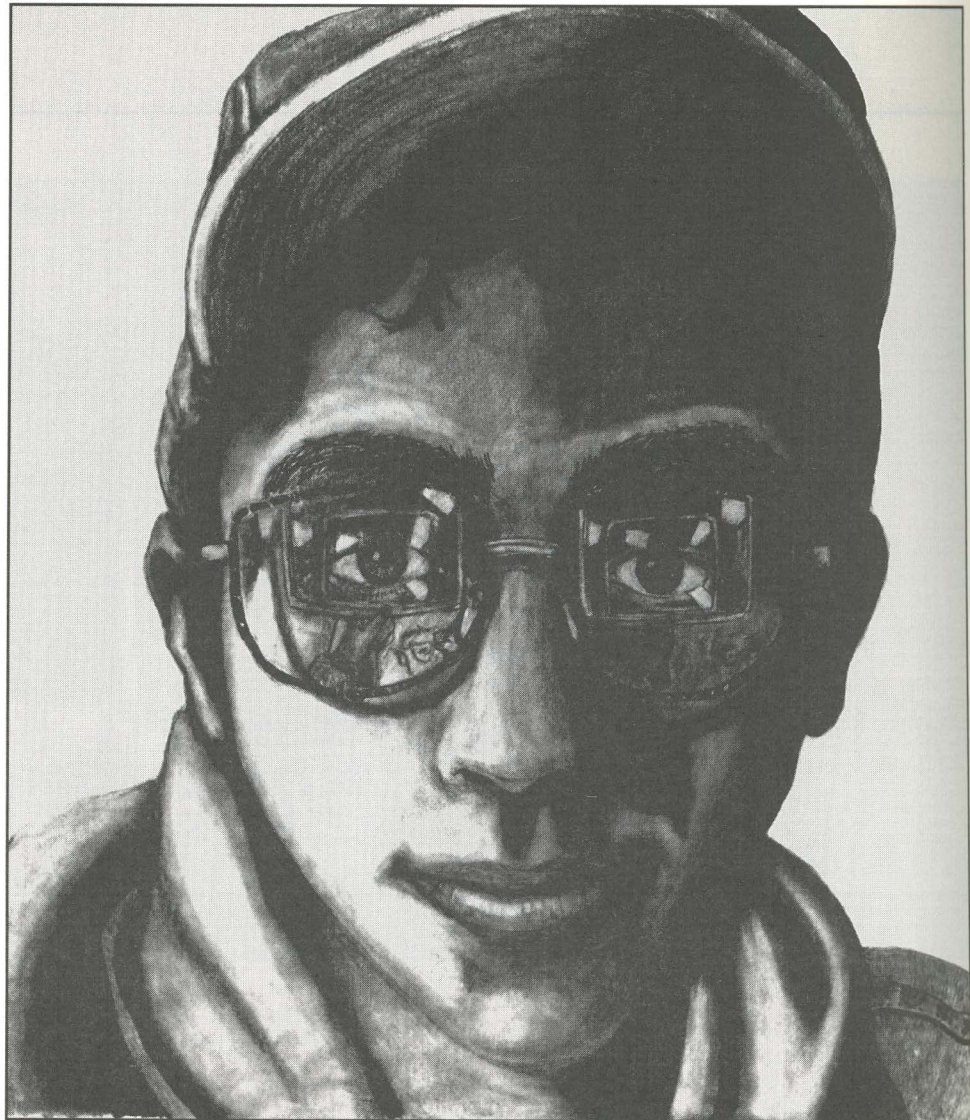
Bobcat
Sonya Patterson



Pony
Patti Higdon



Barn
Patti Higdon



“Me”
Jason Reince

Short Stories

Pizza Box Pillows

Tina Curtis

It's a funny world. I don't know...I guess I've been travelin' this circuit since I got kicked out of the house when I was thirteen. I guess that would make it about ten years now. Why'd I get kicked out? Wouldn't cut my hair. Nope...not even an inch. It was my thirteenth birthday and mom said cut your hair or get out, so I got out. I told her that an Indian should be as proud of his hair as he is his heritage. I'm related to Geronimo, you know, somewhere on my father's side.

My father... he left when I was about six. Mom never told me what happened; I came home from school one day and he was gone. Didn't bother me much. He was way too old. You know how people start to get unhappy, leading the kind of life they lead, and wrinkle up before they turn thirty? My father was like that. He was old before he had a chance to be young. I don't ever want that to happen to me. I want to be just like Geronimo—young, powerful, and strong. That's what an Indian should be like. I heard they never found Geronimo's remains. I bet he's floatin' out there in the sky, like that picture of the Indian on a horse next to a biker on a Harley Davidson. Have you seen that picture? I think it's pretty cool. I had a bike for awhile. It was a Triumph (they run better than Harleys) but it died on me somewhere in Arizona.

So I had to hitch from there. Scared? No, I wasn't scared to hitch. I've hitched just about everywhere in the country. One time I started in California, where I was visiting some friends, and went all the way to Florida. One of my friends in California said there was some Mafia guy that was about to get killed and he knew where the guy keeps some money. Well, it was a lot of money or I never would have agreed to go. Anyway, I found out after we got there that we were the ones who were supposed to do the killing. I wouldn't ever kill anybody unless I had to. I tell ya, though, I was about to kill my friend

when I figured out what was going on in the whole mess. Turns out, I didn't have to. Somebody else did it for me. That's when I got this bullet hole here in my leg. Well, the scar's kind of going away now. It was a long time ago.

After that, I was stuck in Florida with no money, no relatives, no friends, and a lot of enemies. So I took off fast. I needed some travelin' money so I joined up with the state fair circuit just as they were leaving Florida. I did odd jobs sometimes, but mostly just hustled people and got them to give me money. It's really easy. All you have to do is tell them some story about how your mom's in the hospital or your baby needs diapers or something. I usually just tell them the truth, except for the Mafia part. Hey, man, I'm broke. Could you help me? Most people are pretty quick to help with a ride or a buck, especially truckers. They're usually going pretty far, cross-country sometimes. I made it from Arizona (that time my bike broke down) and all the way back to California in two days. Most of the time, truckers aren't gay or anything, either. They're just nice guys who need some company. Plus, people think it's really cool if you do tricks for money. No, I don't mean prostitution "tricks." I mean like if you break a two-by-four across your chest or stick a pin through your hand or something. Yeah, I can break a two-by-four across my chest...see the scars? It doesn't hurt much. And if you know where to put it, you can stick a pin about anywhere in your body, and it won't hurt or bleed. Those are great tricks for bars.

What do you mean I wasn't old enough? I've been going into bars since I was fifteen. It's easy to get in when you travel with the state fair. My gig was in a freak show. I danced on broken glass. Cut my feet? Well, yeah, I did once or twice. But it was safety glass with rounded-off edges so it usually never cut me. It was a really easy show. I did the "twist." Our group broke up pretty quick, though. There was this girl there, the "Snake Lady," and she slept with about everybody in the group. Except Angelo, he's gay. He's also the boss, so I'm glad he never found out. I guess he's pretty cool. He swallows swords. That stuff is real, too. Angelo has a problem with his vocal cords 'cause he cut one or something, and now his voice is all raspy. God's honest truth! Anyway, our group broke up because everybody got in a fight over the "Snake Lady" even though nobody really liked her. The show was pretty much flopping like a dying fish at that point, anyway.

So I met these Rennies about to go on circuit to Colorado and joined up with them. I like the Rennie fairs better than the state fair circuit. The people are more like a family. They don't stab you in the back every chance they get for a few bucks or a beer or whatever. Living in the woods through a Rennie fair circuit isn't that bad, except for the

fire ants. They're vicious and painful. Other than that, I like the outdoor life. What's a Rennie fair? Where have you been, hiding under a rock? It's short for Renaissance fair. That's what I do now. I sell flutes that I make myself. All of us travel around to different states and sell our handmade wares, food, clothes, you name it. Most of the fairs have a medieval theme, like this one. Is this the first fair you've been to? I've been in about fifty. I can't believe there's anybody who has never been to a Renaissance fair. I must have been here for way too long.

I think Shakespeare said that all the world is a stage and the people are players. I have to say Shakespeare must have been a genius. He knew exactly how I feel. I guess people felt that way even in the thirteenth century or whenever it was Shakespeare was alive. We all just go on through the circuit, saying our lines, playing our parts. Good day, ladies, how would you like to sample our wares? Well, then, would you mind if I get a sample of yours? The girls love it; they love the acting, laugh at the play. Somehow they never want to stick around for the encore.

People are just like shadows, blending and separating in the darkness, hiding from the moonlight, and fading away in the sunlight. They're shadows just like my dreams, never coming true, never becoming reality, just fading away in the sunlight. The people you really want to stay always say they can't stay. The ones that really want you to go, you always have to tell them you can't go. That's the part that's really hard. Living under bridges and hitching rides from strangers isn't hard. Selling yourself out sometimes for a buck or two isn't hard. The hard part is stepping up to someone to say hello, knowing that pretty soon you'll have to say good-bye. The hard part is knowing that you'll never have a chance to be real, with the poodle, the two or three kids, the little house with a white picket fence. I'll never know what it's like to be like that.

I wonder what I would say if I could write home right now. Dear mom...living in the woods is great, but the fire ants are no fun. Dear mom...fire ant bites really hurt. Dear mom...fire ant bites hurt your arms and legs, but they really hurt somewhere else. Dear mom...pizza boxes make really good pillows, except when the fire ants figure out that there is leftover pizza inside them. It's a funny world, isn't it? Pull up a pizza box and stay awhile.

Skateboards

James Alan Davis

Jeff woke up at seven o'clock. He was young, fifteen years old, so there was no need to stretch. He pulled on his shorts, tee shirt, and skate shoes and walked into the kitchen. His mother and younger brothers glanced a good morning to him as he poured Cheerios into a bowl. His stepfather, wearing a suit and tightly gripping his briefcase, walked into the room. He said, "Jeff, I want you to have the yard mowed by the time I get home tonight." Jeff sank into his bowl of cereal, not daring to try to negotiate because it would only lead to a larger conversation, to an argument, and then to....

"JEFF, ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME? ANSWER ME!" The voice was louder than necessary and more forceful.

"Yes. OK."

"THAT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY AROUND HERE. WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO TELL YOU WHAT ELSE IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY? IT SEEMS THAT YOU NEED SOME MORE WORK TO DO TO FILL YOUR IDLE TIME. WE ARE GOING TO HAVE A LONG TALK WHEN I GET HOME FROM WORK."

"What about? Why do I have to be here tonight? It's Saturday."

"ABOUT A PACKAGE THAT CAME IN THE MAIL THE OTHER DAY. AND YOUR ATTITUDE ABOUT THIS FAMILY AS A UNIT."

Jeff felt small and weak; he looked at his wide-eyed mother and stepbrothers who stood like wax figures. The sound of hard-soled shoes hurriedly walking and the slamming of a door ended the silence.

"What package? What family unit? No wonder I never get any mail," Jeff thought. The phone rang and Jeff jumped to answer it.

"Jeff, are you ready to go? We're going to meet Aaron at the Taco ramp in thirty minutes."

“Yeah, I’ll be ready in five, Pepe.”

Pepe, Jeff’s closest friend, had introduced him to skateboarding, and now the two usually spent their spare time rolling down the street together.

Jeff got his skateboard and pads, told his mother he’d be home in two hours, and met Pepe at the curb.

“Aaron’s friend Mike will meet us at the Taco with a car. Then we’re going to Square Bowls and then to 161st to skate the ditch,” Pepe said with a grin that was hard to beat.

They talked as they skated the familiar road to the Taco. Cars always honked and the drivers often yelled. This always bothered them and made it easier to skate faster. They made the four-mile ride to the Taco in thirty minutes.

Aaron was already on the ramp when they got there. Tony, who owned the ramp, was just waking up, a little on the cranky side. He was older and went out late at night with his girlfriend—all reasons why he wanted to sleep in and not have a bunch of kids making noise at eight o’clock in the morning. Though Tony was always a good host, the sound of the CRAMPS came blasting from inside.

The Taco ramp was a fifteen-foot-tall by twenty-foot-wide giant that was as tall as Tony’s house. It was old, a collage of street signs, salvaged nails, and sheets of stolen plywood of different colors, some with advertisements painted on them. Nails and screws stuck out and scarred the wheels on the boards and sometimes would cut the riders if they were to take a slide. Aaron was a great skater, natural and fluid. As he rode, the ramp groaned—a loud roar of loose timbers and squeaky nails. Tony swaggered in his own enigma out to greet them, his long thick curly hair pulled back and stabbed with an Afro pick. His broad chest was tattooed and tan. He had an ego like a rubber ball.

It wasn’t long before the locals woke up; by ten o’clock, there were thirty people in the yard: girlfriends, kids, angry neighbors. The mood was growing hostile, so when Mike arrived, Jeff, Pepe, and Aaron were glad to leave.

Once inside Mike’s Honda Civic, Mike said, “We’re going to 161st to skate the ditch, but at twelve, I’ve got to go to GADZOOKS to see my girlfriend.” Mike thought he was really hot stuff because he had a girlfriend; the other three thought he was misguided.

“Man, Mike, you aren’t going pool-hopping with us?”

They happened to be on the side of town where people left their garage doors open on Saturdays and there was a swimming pool on every block.

"Do you think we will see any skinheads?" Mike asked the other three. "Preston and Danny got beat up at 161st last week." They had all heard about it and found it hard to believe. Although lots of people liked to start fights with them, they forgot all about it when they got to the ditch.

"Whoa, nobody's here," Pepe said.

"Whoa, huh huh," the other three mocked.

The boys rushed to Mike's trunk to get their boards and ran to the ditch.

The ditch was about a fourth of a mile long with forty-five degree walls that rose twelve feet high. Jeff waited where the others had just dropped in, thinking about the family unit. They all skated vigorously except for Mike who was only riding and looking at his watch. Aaron rode up to a vertical slab of cement and caught a 180 Venerial Aerial. Pepe tried to keep up but lost his board and tumbled down the side of the ditch, tearing a large rip in the seat of his pants and getting large abrasions on his left elbow and knee. He hopped around, cussing and wiping the burning sand off his limbs. Aaron skated up smoothly, handing him his board while Mike laughed and said, "There are pads in the trunk, but they wouldn't do your pants any good."

"Yeah, screw you, Mike." Pepe limped over to Jeff and said, "Hey, are you gonna skate or stand there and pose?"

"Yeah," Jeff replied absent-mindedly and dropped in. But when he reached the bottom, he hadn't pulled his weight back, and the board stopped while meeting the flat, sending him buckling forward and slapping him face down into the concrete. The pavement was hot and he picked himself up quickly. The other guys stood staring.

"Man, that looks like that hurt," Pepe said to Mike. "What's wrong with him today?" he asked the others.

"His parents are freaks."

Jeff stood there, not feeling the pain, brushing off the sand which was sticking in the raw flesh of his palms and wrists, ready to cry. He didn't notice the deep cut on his chin until he looked down and saw blood on his shirt. That almost amused him.

Aaron, always the last to fall but first on the first aid, came with a bottle of water and a Band-Aid.

"Thanks, Aaron."

"No problem, bro, though that might need a stitch or two."

They walked back up to Mike's car. Mike glanced at his watch and said, "We've got twenty minutes."

As they stood drinking water, a Chevy Impala Low-rider with six guys in it rolled up.

"Oh, shit," Pepe said and turned away, but Aaron walked up to the car.

"Danny! Wat's up? I heard you were in the hospital."

"Well, yeah, I was. Just a few stitches."

All of the guys in the car got out. Two had boards and went straight for the ditch. The others leaned up against the car, pensively listening to the music. Danny and Aaron walked off a ways, and money for cellophane was exchanged. Then Danny pulled out a fat joint, lit it, and passed it back to the guys at the car.

"We just came to get some payback. There's going to be thirty boys here in a few minutes, and we're going to kick some C.H.A. (confederate hammerskin's ass)."

Mike was obviously getting pissed. "Come on, guys. Let's go," he said.

At that, they left, with Pepe leading the way. Mike was raving about how much he hated gangsters.

"Man, Aaron, why do you hang out with those hoods? What the hell did you buy from them? Are you not satisfied so you have to take drugs? What's up?"

Aaron didn't say a word. They got to the Mall, looking like the scalawags they were. Mike said, "I'll meet you back at the car in forty-five minutes. If I don't find you inside."

At that, he changed directions with a spring in his step, raised his head, and made a beeline to GADZOOKS.

"That dork," Pepe said scornfully.

Aaron said, "Let's go to Skip's. There's a real pretty waitress working there. Mike introduced me to her last week, and I need a Coke."

Pepe grabbed Jeff's belt loop and motioned him to stop. He raised his arms, silently gesturing to their surroundings—all the shops inside the mall and the Saturday people. They were surrounded by balconies, and they could look up and see the ceiling 300 feet up. With a devilish gleam in his eye, he pointed to Aaron's baggy jeans that were held up only by luck.

Aaron was onstage when Pepe caught up with him. With only a tug at the belt loops, Aaron's pants were around his ankles. This was the only time that Aaron never looked graceful. Looking pale and weak, he wobbled for a second, his loose shirt hanging down over his boxers which were tight enough to slide down only a few inches. Then, red-faced and moving faster than he had ever moved in his life, he pulled up his

pants and quickly walked away. He didn't even dare look at the college girls sitting on a bench, trying to hold back their laughter. Though at least thirty people had witnessed this skit, thankfully the everpresent security had not.

Anyone who knew Aaron would know that this really hurt him. As funny as it was and as perfectly planned, he didn't even stop and wait for Pepe and Jeff. Pepe was laughing so hard he had tears in his eyes.

"Man, Jeff. You catch him at Skip's and tell him I'm sorry. I had to do it. I'm going to GADZOOKS to sour some love."

Jeff found Aaron in a booth in a corner at Skip's. He had his head down, looking at a menu. He looked surprised to see Jeff. He asked, "Why do people pick on me?"

"Because it's easy. Pepe told me to tell you that he was sorry, and I'm sorry I laughed but..."

Aaron interrupted. "That's OK. I would have laughed. Jeff, have you ever tripped?"

"You mean acid?"

"Yeah."

"No, man. That stuff. I don't know. Is that what you got from Danny?"

"Yeah. And some weed. But I've tripped before, and I hear this is really clean stuff. Would you trip with me today. Whatever we do, we're sticking together, all right? That is, if you want to. I know you're troubled today, and maybe we shouldn't trip because I think that acid is a mood amplifier."

"I've been upset, yes, but what could that little piece of paper do to us?"

Aaron handed Jeff a small piece of paper as he put one on his tongue. Jeff followed him. "Together," Aaron said.

A pretty waitress came up and said, "Hi, Aaron. Who's your friend?"

Jeff looked up and introduced himself. Her face turned matronly as she noticed the gash on Jeff's chin. "Jesus, that's no tie dye you're wearing. Have you been fighting or skating?"

"Skating. I only fight with myself. Can we get two large dinner salads and some water and two oranges and two bananas, if you've got any." At that, Jeff walked back to the bathroom to wash his face.

When he was gone, the waitress told Aaron about a party that he and Jeff had to go to that night. When Jeff came back, Pepe was sitting next to Aaron, making faces at some teeny-bopping mall chicks and rousing Aaron about the whiteness of his thighs.

The salads came—with fruit. Mike and his girlfriend came soon after, and when they kissed goodbye, there was Pepe, with an open mouthful of spinach, right over Mike's shoulder. This startled Mike's girl so much when she opened her eyes that she bit Mike's lip and stormed back to work.

"Damn it, Pepe." Mike was really pissed. "I'm not taking you anywhere. You find your own way home."

"I'm sorry, Mike. I see that mush stuff, and I want to flip out. I won't do it again."

"Sure!"

Jeff and Aaron just finished their salads and started in on the fruit.

"Man, Aaron, that waitress is beautiful. What's her name? How old is she?"

"She's nineteen and her name is Mary. She likes you. I can tell."

"Hey, Essie. I like the way you used the peanuts for texture." Pepe often imitated Cheech Marran.

"Pepe, isn't it about time for you to take your insulin?" asked Mike.

"Brothers, it's time to go skate," Aaron said.

The four started to leave, and Jeff gave one last glance back at the waitress. She stood where she was, watching them leave. He completely forgot about the guys.

'God, she's got beautiful eyes,' he thought. He walked over and said, "It was nice to meet you, Mary. Can I call you sometime? Or is there a boyfriend I would bother?"

She smiled and scribbled a name and number on a ticket and said, "I'll have you know that I don't give my phone number to just any rough that asks for it. Call me sometime, or there is the party tonight. Ask Aaron. Go on. Catch those stooges before they leave you."

"Right. I'll call you."

The possibility that he might have a date blew Jeff's mind. He caught up with his friends and completely forgot about the family unit. He looked closely at Aaron, who had enlarged pupils and an everpresent grin. Jeff was feeling the same rush, almost as though everything was larger than life, especially he and his friends.

As they left the mall, three YUPPIE college age guys told them to go home and bathe.

Pepe's response was "Rinky dinky twinkly winkly."

The guys turned and said, "What did you say? Are you looking for a fight?"

Jeff walked up to the first one and said, "Rinky dinky stinky twinkly."

"ARE YOU LOOKING FOR A FIGHT, YOU STUPID UPTOWN FAGGOTS?" he yelled.

The preps turned, shaking their heads, and walked away. Jeff felt surprised at himself. What an incredible adrenalin rush that was. His heart was pounding. As he turned to his friends, they looked as shocked as the YUPPIES. Their usual policy was such that they would smart-off while avoiding a fight, and if one was inevitable, they would run. They had become very quick to do that.

When Jeff caught up with his friends, Pepe said, "Man, you looked scary. You still look scary. They must have really set you off."

"Yeah. Oh, well. Let's go swimming."

Mike was angry, though. "It serves them well. Although they were right. You guys stink."

Everybody got back into the car, and they drove to a nearby neighborhood where Mike stopped the car and said, "Let's go skate the country club."

Since the other guys had never skated it, they were game to follow Mike until they found a pool.

"Just let's not get into a fight," Mike said, looking at Jeff, "because if you fight, we probably will, too."

"Da boy eats too much loco weed, man," Pepe said, and they were off.

Jeff was so happy with everything; the colors magnified as he flew through them. He loved the speed of riding this drug. It almost scared him. Where was the bad side of this freedom?

They finally reached the country club. Standing at the end of a dead-end street, they looked out over the immaculate landscaping. The sounds of many lawn mowers could be heard in the distance, a low rumble on the hot, stagnant air. They all looked at Mike.

"Well, where is it?"

"Follow me," he said as he walked onto the green.

They soon came to the greatest ditch they had ever seen.

Pepe said, "HOT DAMN! I do believe we're in heaven."

Mike and Pepe were in the ditch and skating before Jeff could finish comprehending that the world around them was rumbling. He looked over at Aaron, who was looking into the palm of his hand with a serene grin on his face.

Aaron turned to Jeff. "This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen." He thrust his palm forward to show Jeff a bumblebee the size of his thumb. The two were awed by the striking colors on the bee's body as it crawled up to the tips of Aaron's fingers and joined the rumbling of the world. They looked over to see Pepe and Mike standing in the ditch, looking pissed about the dubious antics of their friends.

Aaron and Jeff joined the others for a skate in the ditch. They rode for forty-five minutes or so until they were red-faced and sweating. Then Mike said, "There's a swimming pool over that hill."

The four looked at each other and started running for the pool, caring nothing about the shocked golfers who saw them. Jeff ran straight to the water fountain as the others dropped their boards at the water's edge, stripped to boxers in 4.5 seconds, and jumped into the water. By the time Jeff was ready to get in, Pepe was bouncing on the high dive, jumping and waving wildly. He left the board, flipping and turning, hitting the water with a pop that sounded as if it could split skin. Aaron was doing the backstroke and circling Mike, who appeared to be impersonating various waterfowl and sea monsters.

It took Jeff a while to get used to the water although he felt as if he were a part of it. He held his breath under water for what felt longer than he ever had. He felt like a fish. He saw his friend's legs and felt like a shark. He burst from the water with a loud roar only to see his friend staring dumbfounded at a posse of six irate golfers who were yelling about something or another.

"Well, don't just sit there! Get out of our pool! We've already called the police!"

"Bullshit," Pepe said.

They climbed out of the pool and were dressed as quickly as they had shed. Somewhat humiliated, they took a last look at the golfers approaching them with more nasty words.

As they turned to go in the direction they had come, Mike yelled, "Race you guys," and they raced to the car, pushing each other and pumping as fast as they could.

Hattie

Arlene Clary

The summer of 1935 was one of the hottest recorded in Oklahoma. Cycles of drought and violent dust storms swept across the state, bringing great discomfort and causing economic hardships. Life was a tremendous struggle. Survival became the main concern. It was the time of "The Great Depression" that touched everyone, rich and poor. During this time, Isaac Smith spent his last days, confined to bed.

Although Isaac had been diagnosed with cancer two years earlier, his strong belief that God would heal him prevented him from receiving medical treatment. The cancer, once treatable, had eaten away at his life to the point he no longer had the strength to live. His slow labored breathing was the only sound of life. When he spoke, his voice was but a whisper, understood only by his wife Hattie.

The day before his death, Isaac asked Hattie to let him die. Isaac told Hattie it was time for him to go home and that he could not die until she let go of him. Hattie had held on to Isaac, not wanting to believe he would die and leave her. He was her life. Without him, she was nothing. All Hattie could do was squeeze his hand and smile through her tears. She did not dare speak for fear she would break down. Hattie had to be strong, not only for Isaac but for her children.

That afternoon, while two-year-old Marie Elizabeth napped beside her ill father and four-month-old Rosie Pearl slept in her crib at the foot of his bed, Hattie retreated to her special place behind the barn. This place behind the barn had become a refuge for her. When things were bad, she could go there and cry and pray. She didn't have to be brave or hold back her feelings. Today, she went to her special place to give Isaac to God. This was the hardest thing she would ever do in all her life.

She told God, "I don't know how I can raise my seven children without my man. But if it is your will to take Isaac, then who am I to question you? God, you must show me the way for my heart is blinded with sadness and I don't know what to do. Give me strength."

Hattie pulled herself together and returned to the house. As she passed the bed, Isaac reached for her hand.

He said, "Oh, Hattie, I'm going home. I can see Heaven's gate. It is so beautiful. Tomorrow, I'll go home when you call the boys in from the field. Tomorrow, I'll go home to be with Jesus."

Hattie couldn't believe what Isaac was telling her. She didn't want to believe his time had come. The rest of the day was a blur. She did what chores had to be done, cared for her babies, and spent all the time she could by Isaac's side. Hattie sponged Isaac's feverish body and replaced the gauze that protected his open sore from the flies. She had done this a hundred times during the past three months. She never gave thought to herself, only to the comfort of Isaac and his care.

Sleep would not come that night. Her mind kept racing back and forth, thinking of the life she had shared with Isaac, of her children and the future she couldn't bear to face. Hattie's dread of the next day engulfed her to the point she felt as if her life were being sucked out along with Isaac's.

When morning came, Hattie lay very still, hoping to make the night last a little longer, praying for more time. But time passed. The babies awoke, and Isaac's final day began.

After breakfast, the boys went to work in the field as they had done each day since Isaac had taken to his bed. They were small and did not accomplish as much as Isaac, a veteran farmer, would have. But what they did in the field kept food on the table. Clarence, the oldest of the three, had the most responsibility. Hattie would give him instructions and tell him to be a good little man and keep an eye on his brothers. It was a great load for a young boy of eight to carry. Six-year-old Lewis was not much help when it came to carrying things but made up in his willingness to try. His left leg, badly twisted from polio, forced him to walk on his hands. He looked like a toy top, spinning when he moved and earning him the nickname Spoolie. Lewis didn't mind being called Spoolie. He was very fast on his hands and the strongest of the boys, winning all arm wrestling matches. Hattie had prayed for a way to take Lewis to Oklahoma City to have surgery so he could walk, but she had not found a way. Lonzo, the baby boy of the family, was Clarence's right-hand man and go-for. He helped carry hoes, shovels, rakes

and anything else big brother ordered him to do. Lonzo was the clown of the family, bringing laughter to a seemingly grim life. He was forever showing his strength, competing with his older brothers and showing off to his younger sister Marie Elizabeth.

As the boys headed to the field, Hattie's heart sank. She sat for hours, in a daze, by Isaac's bedside, not wanting to live yet not wanting to give in to the death that stalked her family. She put off calling the boys to dinner as long as she could. Finally, she told ten-year-old Myrtel to go call her brothers in from the field. Myrtel, Hattie's oldest daughter, had been a godsend to Hattie. Hattie had depended upon her to help with the other children. Myrtel became a second mother to her brothers and sisters, especially Rosie. Rosie was only a few weeks old when Isaac became so ill and spent his days in bed.

The other baby, Marie, was a handful at two but was a blessing to Isaac. Marie spent many hours playing around her daddy's bed, taking naps with him, helping him through the long hours of his last days.

As the boys came in from the field, Isaac's eyes began to sparkle with new life. He squeezed Hattie's hand and drew his last breath. On August 7, 1935, at the age of thirty-seven, Isaac's walk in life ended. He went home to be with his Lord, leaving his wife and their seven children to survive as best as they could.

The first thought Hattie had after Isaac's death was of her oldest son Ottis. Ottis had been sent to a mental hospital in Vinita after an injury from a fall left him with epilepsy. Convulsive attacks made it impossible for Ottis to live at home. Hattie worried about getting word of his father's death to Ottis. She wanted to be with him when he was told, but that was impossible.

The next few days were filled with plans and, finally, Isaac's funeral. After Isaac's death, Hattie began to prepare for the fast-approaching winter. Without money, it would be a great challenge to feed her children. However, Hattie's knowledge of living off the land gave her the ability she needed to survive. Hattie gathered everything. The dried-up garden was stripped of its last plant. Fruits and vegetables were dried on the roof and stored in the lean-to. Apprehension began to fade as the storeroom filled. This sense of security was crushed a few weeks after Isaac's death when a notice arrived from the bank. The bank was giving foreclosure notice. The team of horses and the wagon would be repossessed due to delinquent payments.

The sun was breaking over Grapevine Mountain as Hattie began her daily chores. Although leaves had begun to fall, they were silent under her footsteps. Everything had been covered during the night with a layer of dew. There was a crispness in the air. The dawning of a new day brought new worries for Hattie. Mr. Parker, the bank officer, was coming to take the team and wagon. Hattie was headed to the barn to get the team ready for their long trip into Tahlequah. Actually, Hattie wanted to say good-bye to Crip and Molly without the children around. Crip and Molly were part of the family, and it would be hard to see them go. Crip, named for the limp left by an injury he received when spooked by a car, was slow but dependable. He and Molly had plowed many fields, and he was the only transportation the family had. Back when Isaac put them up as collateral, the team was the only thing of value he and Hattie owned. The much-needed loan, used to buy seeds for last spring's planting, was to be paid back at harvest. Harvest had come and gone. It was now the first week of November, and the bank was taking the team and wagon in lieu of payment.

As Mr. Parker drove Crip and Molly out of the yard and down the road, Mr. Johnston came into sight. Mr. Johnston owned the land that Isaac worked. In return for his work, Isaac was given part of the crop and the use of a small house. The house was no more than a shack, one room with a small lean-to built on the back. The lean-to held provisions for the winter.

Hattie had worked hard to fill the storage room, knowing it would not be enough to last all winter. This was a concern for Hattie, but the problem would have to wait until she could solve a more pressing problem.

Mr. Johnston had come to tell Hattie she would have to move, for there would be a new sharecropper moving in the following week. Hattie was not angry; she was grateful that Mr. Johnston had allowed them to stay as long as he had. Mr. Johnston had lost a lot of money this year due to Isaac's death. Although the crops were planted, they were never harvested. Isaac fell ill just as the first blade of corn pushed its way through the soil. Through tears, Hattie thanked Mr. Johnston for his kindness and asked if he knew of a place she could move to. The answer was no. As he left, he wished Hattie well.

Hattie gathered her children around her and explained what had happened. The next morning, Hattie, Clarence, and Lonzo headed for the general store in Qualls. She obtained use of a wagon and a team of horses. She also had a lead on an empty house in Camp Gruber. She and the boys found the house, which had once been used by the men who worked on the WPA crew. The house was small but had a good roof, and there was enough wood cut to last most of the winter.

The next day, Hattie moved her children from the share-cropper's house two miles south of the Qualls General Store to the house left by the WPA crew, five miles northwest. The move took all day, giving Hattie no choice but to return the horses and wagon the following morning. At the store, as she was returning the team, Hattie overheard a conversation. The news of a sewing factory needing help drew her attention. Hattie asked about the work and made plans to start working at the factory. It was Friday, which gave Hattie plenty of time to prepare to go to work on Sunday.

The factory was located in Webber Falls, making it necessary for Hattie to stay all week and go home only on weekends. Hattie would leave home on Sunday afternoon in time to catch the last ferry across the Arkansas River, work all week, and return on the last ferry late Friday night.

The care of the children was left to Myrtle and Clarence. There were no other choices. Money was needed, and Hattie had to work.

With the money Hattie had saved and the money the Qualls community had raised at the last pie supper, Hattie was able to take Spoolie to the doctor in Oklahoma City. The weather was mild for the first week of December as Hattie and Spoolie boarded the bus. The adventure was frightening to Hattie, who had never been anywhere. She worried about the kids she was leaving at home. Spoolie was excited about getting to be the first to ride in a motorized vehicle.

The trip was long, but Hattie was prepared. She had brought along sandwiches made from that morning's biscuits and leftover fried potatoes. The two had just finished their picnic as the bus arrived at the Oklahoma City station. After asking directions, Hattie and Spoolie walked the ten blocks to the doctor's office, saving what little money they had for an emergency.

The day grew long, and the two weary travelers grew tired. The office began to empty. One by one, people were called, but no one called Spoolie. It was five o'clock when a woman dressed in white came out and told Hattie the office was closing and she would have to leave and come back tomorrow. Hattie began to cry; she didn't know what to do.

"I can't go until my boy sees the doctor. We've come a long way, and I can't come back."

"Did you not see the sign?" asked the nurse. "You were to sign in at the nurse's desk."

"I sorry but I can't read. I didn't know," Hattie answered heartbroken. She had wasted so much money.

The nurse could not turn Hattie and Spoolie away. She called the doctor and explained the situation. The doctor returned to the office and saw Spoolie. Arrangements were made to do surgery on Spoolie's leg. However, the surgery would not be done right away.

Hattie and Spoolie made their way back to the bus station in time to catch the last bus back to Tahlequah. Once on the bus, they shared the last fried potato sandwich.

It was nearly midnight when the Oklahoma City bus pulled into Tahlequah. Hattie had missed her ride back to Qualls. Mr. Lane had promised to wait until six o'clock before heading back to Qualls, and Hattie had missed him. Not knowing what to do, Hattie went down the street to the sheriff's office to ask for help. Hattie knew Sheriff Bishop well. Grover Bishop had helped her with Ottis on several occasions. He would be able to help her find a place to stay the night.

Sheriff Bishop knew Hattie didn't have money to spend on a place to stay, and he couldn't send her out into the night with a crippled child. Grover opened an empty cell and let Hattie and Spoolie spend the night in the jail.

The next morning, the two travelers returned home on the mailtruck that carried the mail to the Qualls General Store, which was also the local post office.

Hattie was glad to be home. She was missing a whole week's work. But she was happy to be able to spend time with her children and find out how they were making it without her. She learned that Marie Elizabeth had gained a new name. She was now called Screech. Myrtel said Marie would screech when she didn't get her way and was always screeching about something.

Rosie didn't feel well. She looked funny to Hattie. After asking questions, Hattie found the reason. The boys had been feeding Rosie persimmons, and Rosie, now nine months old, had eaten the seeds, too. Rosie became very ill. Her stomach swelled to the point Hattie thought she would explode. Hattie gave the baby castor oil, and, in a few hours, Rosie passed the seeds. Hattie was thankful she had returned in time to save her baby Rosie.

Time passed quickly, and Hattie had to return to work at the sewing factory. As she left, she gave instructions to the kids. Her fears grew inside her as she walked to Qualls. She worried that something would happen to her children while she was away. She stopped by Mrs. Lane's, the owner of the store in Qualls, and asked if she would send her daughter Clemy out to check on her children sometime during the week. Mrs. Lane said she would and for Hattie not to worry. Hattie wanted to feel better, but she didn't.

It was now the third week of December, and the weather was quite nippy. Clouds were rolling in, promising bad weather. Clarence, Spoolie and Lonzo were hunting rabbits for that night's dinner. Clarence was the only one allowed to use Isaac's old shotgun. He had to be very careful and save the shells because they only had six left. As the boys sneaked along the meadow, watching for a rabbit to jump from its hiding place and run, the talk came around to Christmas and how there would not be a Christmas that year because there was no money.

Clarence remembered hearing that the WPA crew was working the road north of them. He told the other boys that if they went over to where the crew was working, he was sure they could get some work. With the money, they could buy things for Christmas. The three headed down the road. It seemed to take forever with Spoolie, but soon they saw the workmen. Clarence asked for the foreman and was sent to the other side of the road where a man in a tan overcoat stood. Clarence told the man that he and his brothers were looking for work; Christmas was coming and they needed money. The foreman, Mr. Wilson, told Clarence roadwork was no place for young boys and they had better be getting home before the rain came. Disappointed but not giving up, Clarence directed his little brothers to come on down the road. Clarence said, "That's okay, boys. We can work right here. See what those men are doing? We'll do just like that. We'll get paid. You'll see."

The boys worked, taking rocks from the middle of the road and stacking them along the side. They worked until it started getting dark. Mr. Wilson kept watching the boys, wondering where their mother was and why she wasn't calling them home. Small boys should not be out like this. After a while, Mr. Wilson asked some of the men who the boys belonged to. He was told that the boys belonged to Widow Smith and that she had been working over in Webber Falls at the sewing factory. The children were left alone while she worked. She had no choice. Mr. Wilson walked up to where the boys were.

"You've done a good job, boys. It's time for you to be getting on home now. It's getting late and looks like rain." Clarence, Spoolie and Lonzo headed home.

Troubled by the young boys, Mr. Wilson asked the others if they could help with some groceries at the end of the each month for the widow and her children. With promises from the other crew members, Mr. Wilson went to the General Store and made arrangements to pay Hattie's grocery bill at the end of each month. Mr. Wilson also purchased provisions for a nice Christmas.

On December 24, 1935, Mr. Wilson delivered the wagonload of Christmas toys and food to Hattie and her children. He also told her about the arrangements at the General Store. He said, "Mrs. Smith, your babies need you here with them. We'll buy your groceries, and you stay home with your babies."

She couldn't believe her ears. God had made a way for her. She was so grateful to the stranger. As she promised to stay home, she told Mr. Wilson she would not spend much at the store, and she didn't. Hattie would buy only sugar, flour, and meal. She lived off the land, and by hunting squirrels and rabbits and by fishing in nearby ponds and rivers, Hattie could feed her children.

Hattie did not return to the sewing factory but stayed home with her children. She took in washings and did odd jobs around the community. It was not in her to just sit around. She became the best midwife in the community. Without being paid, she helped women have babies. The women of Qualls depended upon her and would send for her at all hours when their time came to give birth. Taking her children with her, she would go help those in need. Although times were rough, Hattie was able to raise her children alone.

Ten Dollars Well Spent

Jason Murray

People are always talking about unique individuals that they call characters. The story you are about to read is about a true character named Rollins. Rollins the dog. He was a very important dog, not because he was a police dog or because he saved a baby from a burning building but because he was my dog and, for almost five years, my best friend. Rollins was definitely a character.

The way we acquired Rollins was quite simple. We went looking for him. Actually, we weren't looking for him, but he's what we got. My father passed away when I was fifteen. After a string of burglaries in and around our small town, my mother decided that we needed a guard dog to watch us at night, especially since Pops had passed on. At the age of fifteen, I felt that I was man enough to be all the protection that was needed, but my mother and younger sister insisted that we needed a dog. After much pleading, I began to help them look for the right canine. A guy in Maysville had German Shepherd/wolf hybrids for sale, and my sister Kathy wanted one of those. Fortunately, I had read about those and explained to Mom that wolf crossed with anything could be highly unpredictable, and we did not want to get a guard dog that would eventually eat one of us. So, that idea was scrapped.

We scoured the papers and signs in the small grocery store, but nothing seemed to be right. Dobermans, Shepherds, Pit Bulls, Chows—all too aggressive. Labradors were about the right size but not guarding breeds. After searching long and hard, I finally found what I thought would be a really good dog. At first, I was hesitant to tell Mom about it because I still did not really want a dog, but I decided that it would probably be for the best, plus I liked the sound of this one, in particular. Half bull terrier, one-quarter golden retriever, and one-quarter German Shepherd. When I read that ad from the classifieds in the Elmore City paper, my mother was not overly thrilled, but my sister

was. She and I coerced Mom into going to look at the puppies. I explained to her that we should at least look and that these puppies were only ten dollars each—cheap for what we needed.

So, we drove the short trek into Elmore to look at the puppies. On the trip, I began to remember the passage in *Old Yeller* about how to pick out a puppy. It wouldn't matter. All that was left was a small, dirty-yellow, sickly looking pup. I had expected a strong healthy litter to be playing around. Instead, there was only one left, and he was the runt. I was extremely disappointed. The man selling them told my mom that he was going to put the puppy to sleep if no one would take him. I could tell that he thought my mom would be easy to sucker with a sympathy story. Unfortunately, he was right. Mother always had a soft spot for small helpless animals. She said that she thought that this was, indeed, the right puppy. I told her that this was definitely not the right dog for us. I explained to her that he was small, sickly, and just not what we needed. I told her that what we did need was a dog that would be big enough to stop someone and one that was healthy from the get-go.

She did not care, nor did she listen to me. She whipped out a ten and paid for the dog, and we got back into the truck and left. I knew that guy would be laughing all the way to the bar about how he had suckered us, and he would buy a round with that ten dollars, just so people would listen to him while he told the story. I was fifteen and was wise enough not to share my opinion with mom. I kept my mouth shut tight as anyone who did not want to get grounded would have done.

Once we got back home, my mom put the puppy in the fenced-in part of the yard, and we went into the house. My mom had made it clear in no uncertain terms that the new puppy was going to be an outside dog. About ten minutes after she made this statement, the puppy began to howl, and howl, and howl. After about five minutes of noise, my mother decided that she would go ahead and bring him in for a little while so he could get used to us. I explained to her that if we brought him in now, this kind of behavior would continue, and we would have a permanent house dog. Mother ignored me and brought Rollins inside, where he remained for the next four-and-a-half years.

As for how Rollins received his name, it is a fairly normal story. In our very small town, I was the only person who could have been classified as a punk rocker. I didn't really look different from anyone else, but I played a kind of music that no one else did: Punk Rock. My favorite band was Black Flag, and my favorite singer was Henry Rollins. I really liked how his voice sounded so full of fury. Black Flag came to Oklahoma City in 1982 or 1983, and my cousins who lived in Oklahoma City came

down to Antioch to get me and take me to the show. I was the youngest person in the audience, but I became a die-hard punker at that point. Henry Rollins was amazing at the show. Anyway, from then on, a Black Flag album could be found on my turntable at all times. When we got the puppy, I had just recently purchased their album *Family Man*. It was a spoken-word-and-instrumental album. My mother was an English teacher and thought that the spoken-word pieces on that record were very good. We began to think up names for the puppy. My sister came up with the general names such as Spike, Fido, and other dog names. I couldn't think of any name that fit until I thought about Rollins. Rollins. It was perfect. So I suggested it. My mom liked it, too. Then my sister suggested that we name him Fluffy as a joke. I said no way. Mom agreed with me and the puppy became Rollins.

Rollins grew, like his namesake, from a wisp of a thing into a force to be reckoned with. By the time Rollins was a year-and-a-half old, he weighed almost a hundred and twenty pounds. He was a good-looking dog, yellowish tan with semi-perked ears, and extremely soulful eyes. Despite his good looks in some ways, he looked quite funny in others. He looked like a file cabinet turned onto its side with legs. Even with his square build, his head looked far too large. Mom and I used to joke with visitors and tell them that he was part grizzly bear. You would be surprised how many people believed us. He was big. Often times too big. He would occasionally run through the house, knocking over end tables and such. Once while wagging his tail, he sent a lamp that my aunt had given mother crashing to the floor, where it broke into a million pieces. My mother flew into a fury, screaming and yelling at the poor dog. She was in the middle of giving him a good tongue-lashing when I came into the room. I told her to stop yelling at him and to remember that she was the one who had made him a house dog in the first place. She told me I was wrong, and from that moment on, Rollins was an outside dog. I told her fine but that I had my money on him being really noisy and being a major nuisance.

She took him by the collar and put him out in the yard. We did not hear anything from him until it started to get dark. First, Rollins began to bark, just outside the back door. Then he began to howl. This went on for about twenty minutes. Mother said that he was staying outside and that she would win this battle of wills. Not a full minute after she said that, Rollins changed his strategy. He grew quiet, and mother said that she had won. That is when we heard the thud. Then another. I looked out the kitchen window in time to see Rollins running at the door, and I knew what he was doing. The dog was hurling himself at the back door, attempting to break it down. The more he did it, the closer the door came to being knocked off its hinges. Once this started, mother decided

that it would be better to replace a few lamps and to set tables right side up every once in a while than to replace a door. So she opened the door. I expected him to be half-crazed and to run rampant throughout the house. Instead, he walked in as if he owned the place (in honesty, I thought that test of wills proved that he did) and walked directly over to his rug, lay down, and went to sleep. It was at that point I knew we had a weird dog.

Rollins was bought to be a guard dog, and he did sound quite ferocious, but in actuality, he was a big baby. The little kids from down the road used to come up to our house and ride Rollins as if he were a pony. He loved it. He was a real people kind of dog. Rollins never bothered anyone except two people—the Tharps. Kenny was my sister Kathy's age, and his brother Zac was my age. We grew up not liking these people because they were basically buttheads. They were rude and unfriendly for no real reason except that they felt as if they could be. I don't know if they ever bothered Rollins when we weren't around, but he did not like them one little bit. He would bark at them every time they drove by.

Rollins' first documented run-in with the Tharp family involved Zac and me. They lived about two miles to the south of us. One day, coming home from school, Zac tailgated me and honked his horn at me repeatedly. Not liking this guy, I waved hello to him with my middle finger. I pulled up into the driveway and parked my truck, and Mr. Tough Guy Tharp pulled in behind me. He began yelling at me, telling me he would kick my ass—all that stuff that sounds tough when you are seventeen years old. I waved hello to him again, in the same fashion, and told him to bring it on. So the two of us, being the young meatheads we were at the time, began stroking it out on the front yard. In our town, fighting was a normal thing, almost expected. Zac hit me with a solid left, and I returned it with a boot to the gut and a right uppercut. This stunned him, and momentarily the fight paused. That is when I heard Rollins barking. It was muffled, and I turned around to make sure he was inside. Taking my attention off Zac was a mistake. He caught me in a choke and was really choking the life out of me. It was at this point that I heard the glass break. Zac and I both looked up in time to see Rollins come flying off the roof. That lovable moronic dog had jumped through a second-story window. I was proud of that dog, but I was scared at the same time as I had never seen him anywhere near this mad before.

However scared I was, Zac was at least ten times that. He ran for his truck, but Rollins was faster, and Zac found himself knocked to the ground and a very large, very unhappy dog on top of him. I hollered out for Rollins to get off him, but Zac tried to get

up too soon. Rollins proceeded to bite Zac right on the biceps and simply hang on. I ran over to them and was finally able to get Rollins to let go of Zac's arm. Luckily for Zac, he had on his letterman's coat and a long-sleeved flannel shirt, so the bite was not too deep. Mother had heard all of the commotion and had run outside. I helped Zac up and had mother take him to the doctor while I chased Rollins all over the yard. He had cut his head open when he came through the glass. I finally was able to catch him when he stopped to urinate on Zac's truck. As I loaded him into my truck, I saw something on Rollins' face that I have not seen since and had never seen before that time. Laughter. I swear he was laughing. He thought the entire episode was funny.

Zac and Rollins both required stitches. Zac's arm healed up nicely, but Rollins ended up with a small patch of no hair between his eyes where the scar tissue was.

The story of what happened to Kenny, Zac's little brother, was different. Kenny brought it on himself, in a manner of speaking. My sister rode her bike to the gas station in town, and Rollins followed her the entire way. Kenny was with two of his FFA friends, practicing roping things. When Kathy rode by, he yelled at her. She ignored him and kept going. However, on the way back, he yelled at her again. This time, she went ahead and stopped. She got off her bike and told him to shut up. He told her to go to hell. My sister never was one to take anything in stride, so when she heard that, she became totally indignant. She started to tell him off, but then she did something that I consider to this day to be totally evil, yet genius. She told him that he and his FFA friends couldn't rope anything worth a crap. Kenny threw the lasso over my sister. She screamed. It was a fake scream, or so she said, but my dog couldn't tell the difference. He charged Kenny and the other two guys. They ran for the tree in the middle of the courtyard and made it safely.

Rollins ran around and around that tree, barking. They all cursed at him and kicked at him. That was a mistake. Rollins jumped and was able to catch the heel of Kenny's boot in his mouth. The boot came off and down with Rollins. Kenny then asked my sister to get it for him and told her that he was sorry. Before Kathy could get the boot, Rollins decided that it would make a nice chew toy, and it became one. Kenny began to curse again and to tell my sister off. Kathy offered up a great one liner. "Rollins likes how you Tharp boys taste." After that, she picked up her bike and rode home, with Rollins following behind.

This story became the talk of the coffee shop in Antioch for weeks. No one else liked the Tharps, either. Rollins carried the boot with him and chewed on it for many months before it was totally shredded. Justin apparently did make good boots. A couple

of years after that, I saw a movie called *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* in which the dog in the movie chewed up a shoe of someone he had chased. It reminded me so much of Rollins that I fell out of my seat in the theater because I was laughing so hard. He was a truly crazy dog.

One day, Rollins simply disappeared. He just ran off. We never knew where he went. We don't know if someone took him, if he just wandered off and died, or what. I personally like to believe that he went off and joined a pack of coyotes like Buck from *Call of the Wild* had done. I told my mom my theory, and she said that she was inclined to agree with me. Kathy and I moved away to attend college after that.

My mother tells me every time I make it back into town that the coyotes in that area are a lot bigger than before, and some have ears with a semi-perk to them. I tell her I hope she's joking because if she's not, no chicken in the county is safe. She always asks why, and I remind her about the door and window episodes.

"If he could do it, so could his kids."

Her response is always the same. "That is definitely not a reassuring thought."
I am inclined to agree with her.

POETRY • PROSE • ARTWORK