

Absolute

NINETEEN NINETY-SEVEN

Absolute is published by the Arts and Humanities Division of Oklahoma City Community College in 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 the editors' best choices from hundreds of original submissions.

Editorial Board:

Michelle' Langston, Student Editor

Assistant Student Editors:

Leslie Gulbransen

Guila Shell

John Easley

Naomi Christofferson, Senior Copy Editor

Dan Tysor, Publication Coordinator

Clay Randolph, Faculty Adviser

The Editorial Board thanks the following individuals for their support and help: Dr. Robert P. Todd, Dr. Paul Sechrist, Dr. Manuel Prestamo, Diane Broyles, Patricia Jimenez-Brooks, Teresa Hawkes, Bertha Wise, 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 Cocklin Printing, is issued by Oklahoma City Community College. A total of 150 copies were printed at a cost of \$1291.00.

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.

Fiction

'57 Mickey

by Mike Garey

“... died at 1:30 this morning in Dallas, Texas.”

The disembodied voice coming from the radio wormed its way through my sleep-soaked brain and gently pulled me into Sunday morning. In a state of fuzzy semi-consciousness, I reached over and snapped the intruder away, allowing silence to refill the room. The pre-dawn glow was giving way to the first bright slivers of sunlight as I sat on the edge of the bed, refusing to accept what I had just heard. I watched as little golden sun circles cast by the window blinds crept slowly across the top of the dresser like tiny yellow spotlights scattering the dust motes in their path. Flashing across a pile of silver coins, the spots of sunlight continued up the wooden shelves that framed the mirror, finally coming to rest on the clear plastic display stand. Moving to the dresser, I picked up the stand and gazed sadly at the only baseball card remaining from the thousands I had collected as a boy.

The front of the card from 1957 shows the player, clad in Yankee pinstripes, resting one foot on top of the dugout steps as he leans forward, propping himself up with his bat tucked under his right arm. His face, dominated by the famous Huckleberry grin, belongs in a Norman Rockwell painting. Tipped back at just the right angle, his hat reveals the cowlick of his blond crew cut. Superimposed across the bottom of the photograph in yellow and white letters are the words “Mickey Mantle, New York Yankees, Outfield.” For the first time in over thirty years, I carefully removed the card from its holder, as though touching it would change the fact of his death. Bringing it to my nose, I was disappointed to find that time had evaporated the sweet aroma of the bubble gum, leaving only a musty, cardboard smell. Sunlight glinted off the card as I felt its smooth surface and remembered how fortunate I was to have it.

By the end of August in 1957, Muskogee, like all the other towns in eastern Oklahoma, had patiently suffered through the nearly suffocating heat of summer and

eagerly awaited the cooler temperatures the coming fall would bring. I was nine years old and considered baseball to be my religion, Mickey Mantle, my God. The passion that drove me to the ball park every day in emulation of my heroes also compelled me to collect their images in the form of baseball cards. Although I amassed hundreds of these wax-encased icons every summer, status within my group was determined not by volume but by quality. Possessing a Willie Mays or Duke Snider, for instance, resulted in a considerable amount of admiration and envy from the other boys. Conversely, having nothing more significant than a card of Don Mossi, whose ears could sail a ship, allowed you the dubious honor of donating Mr. Mossi to the group for use as a BB gun target or flipper on a bike wheel. There was one card, however, that stood above all others: the 1957 Mickey Mantle. Known within my group as the “ ’57 Mickey,” it was the only card instantly recognized by the player’s first name. Let’s face it; bragging that you had a new “ ’57 Johnny” sounded like your family had finally gotten rid of the outhouse. Problem was, like the Holy Grail, none of us had ever possessed a Mickey Mantle ball card from 1957 or any other year because the company that made the ball cards based their sales on the Greedy Principle—we were, and they knew it. So, instead of issuing all the cards in the set at one time, they carefully doled them out in six separate series, which guaranteed consistent sales through the spring and summer. And you could bet your Captain Midnight decoder ring that Mickey Mantle’s card would always be in the last series, which unfortunately we never saw because the local store owners wouldn’t order any more cards until they had sold the ones already in stock. This meant we were lucky to get fourth and fifth series cards, much less the Mantle-laced sixth. Well, little did I know that, ball card economics be damned, things were about to change!

It all started with Andy Pickle. We had gathered at the ball park for our Sunday afternoon ballgame when we heard Andy yelling, “I seen one! I seen one yesterday!” as he came skidding to a halt, his bicycle spraying us with gravel from the parking lot. It seems Andy was in Fay’s Grocery (our main source of ball cards, by the way) when the terror of the neighborhood Jackie Peevyhouse came in and bought a pack of cards from the newly opened box Fay had placed on the counter. Although Andy knew from painful experience that Jackie was not one to be trifled with, curiosity overcame common sense as he crept up from behind, hoping to get a peek at the cards and avoid discovery. He was almost close enough when Jackie, catching him in the corner of his eye, suddenly whirled around and grabbed Andy by his shirt collar, nearly lifting him off the floor. Luckily, a withering stare from Fay stopped Jackie from doing any further damage as he let go of Andy and began picking up the ball cards he had dropped in the

process. That was when Andy swore he saw a Mickey Mantle. At first, I didn't believe Andy because, aside from being named after a vegetable, I figured he'd say anything that might save him the humiliation of always having to play right field. Of course, the fact that I knew I'd bought all the cards Fay had left on Friday did nothing to raise his credibility level. Just as I was getting ready to bring this fact to the group's attention, I thought, 'Wait a minute. What if ol' Andy isn't just jerkin' us around. What if there really is a brand new box of ball cards sitting in Fay's candy case, just full of Mickey Mantles. Worse yet, what if the brand new box of ball cards has only one Mickey Mantle left in it!' So I kept my mouth shut and tagged along as the rest of the group trotted out to the field, refusing to believe Andy's story, no matter how hard he pleaded. That evening, I stayed in my room and selfishly planned my strategy for getting the rest of the cards.

Monday morning saw me out of bed and on my bicycle in time to cover the four short blocks to Fay's Grocery and arrive before she opened at eight o'clock. Pedaling hard as I could, I rounded the final corner only to be greeted by the flashing red and blue lights of a fire engine in front of the store. As I neared the front drive, I envisioned my dreams of finally getting the Mickey Mantle card drifting away with the smoke coming through the front door where the firemen had broken out the glass. Fay, still in her housecoat, was standing on the concrete stoop, talking to two of the firemen. The curls of her dishwater blonde hair dangled limp and wet around her shoulders as she nodded and glanced up at the nearest fireman who was nearly a full head taller. As I braked to a stop, I noticed she had been crying. One of the firemen patted her on the shoulder as they left to finish rolling up the hoses. Finally noticing me, she motioned for me to come and sit by her on the stoop. I was still thinking about the ball card I would never have when she asked me what I was doing there so early. Before I could answer, I found myself looking at her face and thinking how amazing it was that this woman who had just lost the only thing she had left in her life could actually care about why I was there when all I could think about was the lousy ball cards. Instead, my guilty conscience allowing me one small lie, I told her my mother had needed some milk for breakfast. Getting up and walking sadly towards the broken, smoldering doorway, she managed a weak little smile and told me she doubted if the milk was still very cold. Watching her shuffle off, I realized how little I knew about her life.

I did overhear my mother telling ol' Miss Elzey next door about her. Her full name was Anna Fay Applegate, and she had lived in Muskogee all her life. Her late husband Nathan made a living in the early twenties by picking cotton and running bootleg whiskey down the Illinois River until falling victim to the depression in the thirties when

cotton turned cheap and whiskey turned legal. In 1939, they used what little money they had left as a down payment and purchased the grocery store located near the corner of Cherry Street and Callery Road. Originally called Applegate's Grocery, she changed the name to Fay's after Nathan and the rest of his crew were killed during a bombing raid on Berlin in World War II. With Nathan's passing, she discovered she rather liked her newfound independence and, having no desire to involve herself in another difficult relationship, kept herself busy running the store. Her only regret was not having children. I suppose this was the reason she seemed to have adopted many of the neighborhood children, myself included, treating us as her own, always keeping an eye out for our welfare.

Maneuvering around the slivers of broken glass, I picked my way into the store, trying to find Fay through the white, smoky haze. Judging from the scorch marks that radiated like charcoal-colored fans from the door frame, most of the actual fire damage seemed confined to the storage areas in the rear. I finally found her behind the main counter, busily sorting through a pile of soggy magazines. Without saying anything, I knelt down and started to help. Amid the acrid smells and dripping water from the fans and light fixtures above, we worked until well past noon. As we moved the last of the salvageable items outside to the front stoop under the drying sun, Fay put her hands to her waist and leaned back, allowing her smoke-stained face to absorb the afternoon warmth. I stood next to her, surveying what we had accomplished and realized for the first time how good it felt to help a friend.

"You'd best be gettin' on home, young man, before your mom tans both our hides." Fay reached down and wiped my face with the corner of her apron.

"You sure? I don't mind staying."

"Lands sakes, no! You've done too much as it is." She started shooing me off the stoop towards my bike.

"You gonna' be okay? I mean your store's gone and everything."

For the first time that day, she smiled as she tousled my hair. "You're somethin', you know that? I'm gonna' be just fine." She reached in her apron pocket and pulled out a five dollar bill. "Here, you take this. Lord knows you earned it," she said, holding it out.

"Five bucks!" Temptation almost had me, but not this time. "I'm sorry, Miz Applegate. I just can't! It wouldn't be right. Hey, I'm just glad that you're okay and that I could help an'...you know." I could feel myself starting to squirm.

"Well, if that don't beat the Dutch!" She put her hands on her hips. "A boy who won't take five dollars!" A little sparkle began to dance around her eyes. "You wait

right there!” her finger nailing me where I stood. “I’ll be right back!” she warned as she disappeared into the store.

Before I could build up enough courage to leave, she reappeared, carrying something in her hand which she quickly hid behind her back as she stopped in front of me.

“I know how you boys are always goin’ on about baseball this and baseball that, so here, you take this.” What was left of the baseball cards appeared like magic from behind her back. “No back talk, either!” Holy, jumpin’, snappin’ Jesus! I had forgotten all about the cards. “Now git before I put you back to work!” She smiled as she pointed down the street.

I barely remember thanking Fay as I grabbed the box of cards and started my short journey home. Of course, I found a Mickey Mantle card. Just one. I also discovered that truly important things like Fay Applegate’s friendship can’t be wrapped up in rubber bands and stored away in forgotten dusty shoe boxes. The truly important things, we carry in our hearts, and like pieces of fine silver, all you have to do is polish them occasionally and they will last forever.

The Wheel

by Thomas L. Newbrey

My cousin Bill was always a hell-raiser. Even when we were kids, he could talk me into doing things that I knew I shouldn't do. One time, we climbed to the roof of the Baptist Church and stuffed the chimney full of gunnysacks. On Sunday, when the parson went in and lit the stove, the whole church filled with smoke. Services were held that day with the distinct aroma of burnt offerings. That was before Pa died.

Pa took him in when Bill was just a kid—after his folks and my ma died of the fever. Bill was six months younger than me, and I guess I was about twelve when Pa died. We were living in Salinas, Kansas, at the time. Pa had worked all day at the freight office, loading and unloading wagons. Pa always developed a powerful thirst after a hard day's work, so he stopped in at the Red Hole Saloon for a cold beer. There were two young cowboys, just off the trail, standing at the bar, arguing. The older one pulled his gun and shot the younger one dead, but before he went down, the one that got shot managed to pull his gun and squeezed off a shot in the general direction of his killer. Pa caught the bullet right in the gut.

Bill and I would get up every morning and go sit with Pa in the little infirmary the doctor had set up in his office. Toward the end, Pa was delirious. Sometimes he would talk to my ma and Bill's folks even though they were all dead. Once, he opened his eyes and looked at me and asked for a drink of water. By the time I got back with it, though, he had already gone back to talking to Ma. Pa lingered on for almost a week before he slipped off on us. The whole time, he was in the most awful pain I've ever seen a man in.

One of the sheriff's deputies took Bill and me to an orphanage way out on the god-awful prairie. That place just never did sit right with Bill and me. The "reverend" that ran that place would wake us boys up every morning at four. We would get a ration of

oatmeal and then go out to work in the fields until noon. After noon, we would start school which consisted of reading the Bible, memorizing verses, and learning to do sums and figures. After four hours of school, we went back out to the fields to work until dark. By the time we got back, it was after dark, and we were too tired to eat our beans and cornbread. After supper, the reverend locked us boys in the cellar. There were about twenty of us boys, and some of them were the sickliest looking boys I ever did see.

The girls all stayed on the second floor where the reverend and his wife slept. Some evenings, I would lie awake after everyone else was asleep and listen to the wind blow across the prairie. On some evenings, when the wind wasn't howling, I could hear scuffling sounds coming from upstairs where the girls slept. I could hear furniture being knocked over, and I could hear the reverend talking real low. One morning on my way to the dining room, I stopped and looked upstairs, and there on the balcony, I saw a girl about my age with wheat-blond hair and pale blue eyes the color of the sky on a summer day. Our eyes met, and just for a fleeting moment, I had the feeling that she was going to jump off that balcony and land at my feet. Just at that moment, the reverend's wife came out of a door from behind the girl and grabbed her by the hair and yanked her back into the room.

That night, I stayed awake and listened for a long time to the sounds coming from up there. Somehow, that day when our eyes met, that girl took part of me with her, and somehow, that evening when the noises started, part of me was with her and the reverend up there on the second floor. I knew what was going on up there, and as much as I hated the noise, it was the silence that I dread the most. When the silence began, I could feel rage that started in my heart with a white-hot pin prick and radiated outward until it consumed every ounce of my being.

The next day while I was working in the fields, Bill called me over to look at a couple of scorpions he had found under a rock that he had turned over in the field. I took off my socks and scraped them scorpions into one of them. That evening, during supper, I excused myself to use the outhouse. I walked to the front door, opened it, and closed it loudly enough for the sound to be heard in the dining hall. I then crept up the stairs, walking close to the wall to keep the stairs from creaking and giving me away. I opened the door to the reverend's room, walked over to his chamber pot, removed the sock that held the two scorpions from my coat pocket, and pushed aside the cloth that covered the chamber pot. I held the sock upside down over the pot and shook it until those scorpions dropped into the pot. I looked inside and could see them crawling around on one of the reverend's turds. I hoped that he would enjoy his next midnight crap as much as I would.

I slipped silently back down the stairs, opened and closed the front door as if I were coming back from the outhouse, and returned to the dining hall.

That evening, after everyone else was asleep, I woke Bill and we walked over to the cellar window. Bill stooped down while I stood on his shoulders. He then straightened up and I could reach the window. I unlocked the catch, pushed the window open, and climbed out. Once outside, I dropped a blanket back inside for Bill to grab hold of. He grabbed it and I pulled him up and out of the cellar. We took off running into the night like a couple of jackrabbits getting chased by a skinny coyote.

For a long time, Bill and I just kind of drifted, doing whatever kind of work we could find. As soon as we were old enough, we found work on the cow trails. To start off, we made twenty dollars a month and all we could eat. After four years of chasing tails from El Paso to Abilene, we found ourselves out of work, with no prospects and no money. We really didn't have anything except the clothes on our backs and the cowponies between our legs.

We'd heard tell of Montana from some old trapper we'd met in a saloon in Abilene. As a matter of fact, after we'd bought that old skinner a few drinks, he wouldn't shut up about it. He went on and on about Montana like it was some kind of paradise or something. Bill and I finally left that old drunk propped up in a corner, talking to himself. We chewed it over for a good long while before we decided to head north for Montana.

When we crossed the Platte River in Nebraska, we passed through a town called Little Fork. We stopped and asked the sheriff about work. He was a fat little man, as big around as a potbellied stove, with mean, little black eyes that stared at us from under a Stetson stained yellow with sweat. He sat on the sidewalk in a wicker-back chair, leaning up against the saloon wall, sipping cold beer.

That sheriff smiled at us through his crooked black teeth and spat a wad of tobacco at my horse.

"Ain't nothin' for you boys 'round here. Best just keep right on movin'," he sneered at us.

We rode on through and kept our eyes open for something we could shoot for supper. The only thing we saw, though, was a bunch of quail that looked half-starved. They were so far off that we didn't have much of a chance at them, anyhow. The whole time we were riding, Bill kept looking back over his shoulder like he'd forgot his best hat.

That night we made camp at the bottom of a low sandhill next to a creek. Bill was chewing on the last of his jerky and putting on a mighty big show of it. I could tell that

something was eating at him, but I knew better than to bring it up.

"John, we ain't gonna' make it to Montana 'less we get a stake somehow," he finally exploded.

"I know," I answered. I'd been thinking of the same thing for quite some time and hadn't come up with a single thing.

"Maybe we'll find some work up north a little ways," I stated hopefully.

"Yeah," Bill sneered, "and maybe it'll rain steak and beans. Anyhow, even if we do find work, it'll be just enough to eat on. Ain't no way we'll make enough to start a ranch."

"You got any better ideas," I snapped back.

"Matter of fact, I do," Bill replied smugly.

That kind of took me by surprise. I couldn't see no way out of our fix. I could tell that Bill had something in mind, though, and he'd gotten the best of my curiosity. I took a sip of my coffee, savoring its flavor, because I knew it might be the last I would have for a while.

"What you got in mind?" I asked cautiously.

"We turn around, go back to Little Fork, and make us a withdrawal from that bank of theirs." Bill grinned like he'd broke the house in a game of roulette.

"Bill, my pa didn't raise me to be no thief. If we tried something like that, we'd be stretching some farmer's rope before sundown," I answered.

Bill just sat there, looking at me real seriously like I was a foreigner and he was trying to decide what country I was from. He reached over and snagged a burning limb from the fire and lit a cigarette. He dropped the limb back into the fire, leaned back against his saddle, and grinned at me like the cat that swallowed the canary.

"Ain't no law around here for miles 'cept for that fat old sheriff we saw sittin' back there by the saloon. We can take that money and start our ranch like we want. Soon as we get enough money saved, we can send it back 'nonymous-like so no one will know." Bill smiled serenely, obviously pleased with himself.

I looked Bill right in the eye for what seemed like a coon's age. I could tell he was serious.

"No," I said.

I rolled over and pulled my blanket up and looked off into the night at the stars on the horizon.

"Well, I guess we'll just starve to death out here on this prairie," Bill said disgustedly.

I could hear him settle down for sleep. I couldn't sleep. Long after Bill had fallen

asleep, I was lying awake thinking of Montana and how fine things would be once we got there. The more I thought about it, the more Bill's plan made sense. Funny how a man's mind can play tricks on him sometimes.

The next morning, Bill and I broke camp in silence, each of us not wanting to disturb the other's thoughts. We saddled our horses and tied our packs down good. I finished tightening the cinch on my saddle for the last time and swung up onto my dun. Bill stood on the ground, looking at his hands, fidgeting with his reins. He finally raised his head, and his dark brown eyes searched mine questioningly.

"Get up on that horse. We got us a withdrawal to make," I said.

Bill flashed me one of his best grins and swung up on his horse. We turned south, back towards Little Fork.

We edged around the outskirts of town real quiet-like and tied our horses to a scrub oak not far from the back of the bank. The bank was a single story building, square in shape, with a false front. It had only two windows in front facing the street, with heavy iron bars on them like prison windows.

Bill opened the door of the bank, and I stepped in. Bill followed. Through some act of providence, we were alone in the bank with the teller and the manager. They were apparently involved with discussing some ledger entries when Bill and I entered.

The manager looked up as we entered, smiled and said, "Good day, gentlemen. Just a moment, please."

I stepped up to the counter, pulled my Colt, and said, "We don't have just a moment. Hand over the money, and we'll be on our way."

The manager's eyes almost popped out of his head when he saw that Colt. I motioned toward the safe in the corner and told them to hurry with the money.

"Cal, give these gentlemen whatever they want," the manager told the teller.

I handed Cal my saddlebags, and he went over to the corner where the safe stood. He knelt down and started turning the dial on the front of the safe. He clicked the latch open and started stuffing the bag with money.

It seemed like Bill and I had been in there for hours by the time the teller handed us the money. We backed out of that bank real slow and careful, keeping an eye out for that sheriff the whole time. We headed for our horses at a dead run, lit into our saddles, and dug our spurs in like the devil was after us. We'd topped the rise behind Little Fork when I heard a sound like thunder in the distance. I looked back to make sure Bill was still with me. I could see that fat sheriff standing behind the bank, holding a Sharps buffalo gun surrounded by a cloud of white smoke. Bill was still behind me, and he waved for me to keep going.

We rode hell-bent-for-leather for five miles, crossing back and forth across the river several times, trying to confuse any posse that might follow us. I finally had to rein up to give my horse a chance to blow. Bill pulled up beside me, and I looked over at him. Bill's shirt was soaked with blood as were his horse and saddle.

"What happened, Bill?" I shouted.

"I'm hit," he moaned.

"How the hell'd you get shot?" I asked stupidly.

"They shot me back there," he said.

Then real low, almost under his breath, he said, "John, I think I'm gonna' die."

Then, as if to prove it, he moved his hands and showed me a gaping wound in his stomach.

I grabbed the reins of Bill's horse and headed for the highest piece of ground I could find. Once I got to where I could keep a watch out for a posse, I laid Bill out on the ground and made him as comfortable as I could. Bill was flat on his back, gasping for air like a fish out of water. He was gut-shot, and there wasn't a damn thing I or anyone else could do for him.

"Go on, John. Take the money and go," he gasped.

"I can't leave you here like this," I mumbled.

He looked at me for a long time, his eyes pleading with me.

"You know I ain't gonna' make it," he said matter-of-factly. "Take the money and go. If you stay here, they'll just catch you and hang you. Then we'll both be dead," Bill pleaded.

Bill coughed, and blood flew from his mouth and spotted my shirt. I could hear his breath foaming in his lungs, and I knew he was right.

I stood up and walked over to my horse. I cursed myself, first of all for ever going along with this fool plan, then I cursed Bill for ever having thought of it, and, finally, I cursed God and His world and everything that dwelled on it.

I walked back over to where Bill lay and knelt down beside him.

"Bill," I said. "I'm lost, Bill. I don't know what to do. What do you want me to do, Bill?"

"John," he said, "I'm gonna' look off to the west. I want you to pull that Colt of yours and send me to heaven."

Bill rolled over on his side until he was facing west.

I pulled my revolver and eased back the hammer. On the horizon, the sun was beginning to set. It was a huge orange ball, and the clouds in front of it were glowing scarlet and purple.

“John,” Bill whispered, “when the sun sets, it’s time for you to go. All right, John?”

“All right,” I whispered.

“I want you to go on to Montana and start over. All right?” Bill said.

“All right,” I whispered.

“It’ll be great there,” he said.

When the sun slipped below the horizon, my soul slipped into hell.

I’ve been riding ever since. I made it to Montana, and it sure was beautiful there. I rode west of Wyoming. Met an old Sioux warrior there who told me about the medicine wheel. I rode through the middle of Indian country to get there. It was a haunted place, a place where God lived. I stood in the middle of the wheel, with all its spokes radiating out away from me. I put one bullet in my Colt, closed my eyes, and spun the chamber. I put the gun to my head and pulled the trigger. Three times I did this. I guess I figured that I would give God his chance to have me. I sat there in the middle of the wheel for half the day, trying to find the meaning. I guess I still am. Finally, I got on my horse and headed north. I hear Alaska is nice.

Silent Night

by Mike Leon Stevenson

"It's getting worse, isn't it, Chet?"

"No! Not at all!"

"Yes, it is. It's Christmas, and you're scared to death."

"I get a little nervous around the holidays, but I'm fine. Really." Chester Worthington stood before his bathroom mirror, shaking a can of Gillette Foamy.

"What did they say at the V.A. hospital?"

"Nothing!" He nervously pressed the top of the aerosol can. A glob of shaving cream swelled to the size of a softball in the palm of his left hand. He cringed at the sound.

"You're up to what—three shaves a day now? And you always use too much cream. Look at you. You're shaking like a leaf. You afraid of shaving cream now? Hell, you're afraid of everything."

"I'm not afraid of it. I just hate the way it sounds coming out of the can."

"You hate the sound of anything coming out of anything. Toothpaste coming out of the tube or salt from the shaker. Things most people can't even hear."

"I can't help it. It sounds like . . . like, you know, like them. So I'm a little neurotic. Doc says a lot of people are compulsive about shaving and hear things in the night. Said it's a common phobia." He spread the cream onto his neck and cheeks. "Said lots of people dread Christmas, too. Not just me." He tucked in his lips, smeared cream over them, then popped his mouth open.

Thin lips peeked from underneath the lather like a cave in a snow bank. Like a hole in the ground. He could hear them crying in there. He still had a handful of Foamy.

Squint was right. He did dispense too much soap. But he would never give in. He'd just keep on piling the stuff higher onto his face until he used it all up.

"See. You used too much, didn't you?"

"No. I didn't." Chester applied the excess soap to his forehead and scalp until all but his eyes were covered.

"Great. Now you look like a mime."

"You're the mime. At least I have a voice." Chester liked the sound of the words. They gave him control. He spoke them again, slowly, watching Squint's lips move in a soft pantomime as he supplied the voice. But truthfully, he envied the silent world in which Squint resided. Never having to suffer screams in the night or lie awake hour after hour, listening to them trying to come out.

He opened the drawer and removed Nolan's old straight razor. He'd had it since the war. Squint hated it. A glint of light reflected off the stainless steel blade into his eyes, making him squint even more than usual.

"You see, it's the little ones, the whiskers, that scream loudest. It's because they're short but strong. Like Charlie. Short and loud. And they get louder as they grow. That's why we must nip them in the bud."

"Uh, Chet? Did you tell Dr. Ramsden about the screaming hairs and whiskers? Or how you can hear grass cry out as it pushes through the ground?"

"Can't let them give us away." He scraped the blade up and down his palm. "Nip those little suckers in the bud. Can't let 'em grow."

"Listen, Chet, you're in no condition to be using a straight razor."

"Is that so?" He slashed the blade at the mirror, but Squint never flinched.

"Did you ever tell the doctor about the acid they gave us in Nam?"

"Acid?"

"Yeah. Cap'm Johnson's elixir for bravery."

"It was vitamins. He gave us vitamins."

"Sure, it was. Vitamin A. Did you tell him how the Cap'm gave it to the whole platoon? And about the night we got trapped by incoming and had to lay dead-still while a regiment of Vietcong crawled over us? How we had to hold our breath to pass for dead while that Gook stuck a bayonet into Ricky Nolan no more than two feet away? How we would have been next if mortar fire hadn't saved our butts?"

"Did you tell him, Chet, how we were so scared we pissed our pants and thought they would smell it or how they might hear our hair screaming?"

"Did you tell him about Christmas, Chet?"

"No. I don't remember."

"About Christmas 1967?"

"No. Can't let them out."

"I know you remember, Chet. Don't play stupid."

"No I don't. Can't. Cap'm said nip them. Nip them."

"Remember how he made them dig the hole, dig their own grave, then crawl into it to be massacred?"

"They'd give us away."

"They were women and children, Chet."

"Can't let them out. They'll give away our location."

"Christmas 1967, Chet. I know you remember. Because I remember. I remember covering their bodies with dirt."

"No choice. They were the enemy."

"They were innocent women and children."

"No. The enemy. Cap'm said nip them. . . ."

"Cap'm was a liar. A liar and a murderer. It was Christmas, for God's sake. Cease-fire!"

"No. I don't remember that. Shut up. I have to shave you now."

Chester pulled Ricky Nolan's razor strop from the drawer and hung it on the towel rack. Ricky's father had used the razor back in W.W. II and his granddad in the first world war. The old straight razor had lasted through three generations. Now it belonged to Chester. He slowly began to hone the blade.

"I know you miss Ricky and the other guys. Maybe even feel a little guilty that he bought it that night and you lived on. But I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you just put his stuff away for a memento and shaved with a safety razor. They make them plastic now. Even disposable."

"You'd never catch Ricky shaving with no Commie plastic razor. Three wars this razor has seen."

"Well, maybe a nice, new electric one. You know. Made right here in the good old USA."

"I can't stand the noise they make."

Chester draped a towel across his left arm and thumbed off a smudge of soap, exposing skin. The razor flickered light as it shook in his hand.

"Keep still now, or I'll cut off our lips."

"Wonderful."

"Shhh," Chester said. "Go like this." He tightened his lip over his teeth. When Squint made the same face, Chester nervously touched the blade to the skin below his nose and drew down with several scrapes.

"You know, they have this depilatory cream . . ."

"Shhh. Go like this." He twisted his lips to the side. When Squint did the same,

he drew the blade down quickly from the left temple to his chin. A small trickle of blood oozed down his face.

"Ouch! Careful."

"You're making me nervous!" Chester said, wiping the pink foam onto the towel.

"Think you're nervous?"

"Keep quiet. Go like this." He lifted his chin, exposing his throat. Squint reluctantly followed suit. Just as Chester touched the blade to his throat, he swallowed. His Adam's apple slid up and down like a rat trapped beneath a blanket. Chester sliced off a thin strip of flesh. He wiped the bloody tissue onto the towel and said, "See. That's what you get."

Angry now at the sight of blood, Chester pushed his head hard to the left. "Hold still, I said!"

"Okay! Okay!" He drew the blade down quickly.

"Now the sideburns are uneven."

"It's okay. I never liked even sideburns, anyway!"

"NO! It's not okay!" The sideburns kept getting higher and higher with every angry stroke.

"Don't tell me I need a Commie razor!" The towel had become striped with blood and flesh.

"I'm sorry, Chet. I didn't mean to upset you."

"We never got any respect. They hated us!"

"For God's sake, Chet. Take it easy."

"They're screaming! Can't you hear them?"

Chester placed the cold steel to his hairline and began scrubbing in quick strokes.

"Don't tell me to take it easy!"

Squint held his tongue for fear of losing it.

"Shhhh. Hear that?" He held the razor up; blood dripped off his elbow.

"It's the little ones," he whispered. "Trying to get out of the hole."

Tiny fingers poked up through the tile floor. He sliced at the floor with the razor.

"Shhhhhh. Have to be quiet. Have to be dead now. Have to be dead."

"But it's Christmas, Chet. Cease-fire. Peace on earth, goodwill to men. Peace on earth. . . ."

The razor clinked into the lavatory, and Chester dropped to his knees. Squint stared back from the reflection in the commode until drops of blood disturbed the surface of the water. The white ceramic tiles were smooth again. No fingers poked through. The little ones were quiet.

The Letter

by Travis Byrd

16th December, 1903

U.S.S. Massachusetts

San Diego, California

My dearest Edith:

I am writing you from aboard ship. We are in harbor now in San Diego, as you can see by the prescript. The voyage has been a hectic one. We traveled from Japan via the North Pacific route. The Naval officers aboard the MASSACHUSETTS informed the ladies onboard that this is the fastest, most direct route back to the states, but it is also the most horrendous at this time of year. The ocean was in constant unrest and the winds blew at gale force constantly. Personally I was in a constant state of malaise. My stomach, I am aware ladies are not supposed to have these organs, was in a constant state of unrest. It seemed to relish the attempt to disembark permanently from its accustomed home. To make things worse, Molly Mcquire, my maid, was in a perpetual state of cheer. A state she believed was due to her preference for corned beef and cabbage for dinner at sea. I believe that self-same diet is one of the contributing factors to my perpetual malaise. After all, the aroma of cabbage is nauseating at the best of times.

Three days ago we were off San Clemente Island where the sailors spent two days painting our vessel for our entry into San Diego Harbor. The Island was really very welcome after the turbulent voyage across the north Pacific. While we were off the Island, the sea was as calm as a looking glass, and the breeze from the Island was calm and aromatic. I had lots of time to reminisce about the voyage of the last six months. I thought about our sojourn in Japan. Principally about our stay at the Imperial Court and the entertainment the court provided us. The *major domo d'hotel* put on an opera, in Japan it is called Noh, spelled N-O-H, NOT N-O. The way one might address an over ardent admirer. Anyway there is a character in this opera called Kamu, who happens to be a demon. This demon was wearing a white-faced masque, with black-diagonal lines across it. He had a mane of gray and black hair that arched back from his head in the most unbelievable and fantastic way. His eyes were bright yellow. They appeared like two lighted windows in a dark colored house on a very dark and moonless night. The

demon's clothes were red, black, and white. When the Samurai dispatched him, a bright bit of red crepe d'chinoise was used to emulate arterial blood. All-in-all a very memorable night of theater. By the way women are not allowed to sit with the men at the theater in Japan. I and the ladies with me were placed behind a screen with the other courtesans of the Emperor's household. The women wore the most fantastic gowns called Kimonos, garments that are totally embroidered in the most brazen shades of color. I will be bringing one of these garments home to you. We can use them as dressing gowns. I must close for the time being. As I am to be at the Hotel d'Coronado del Reye for a reception this evening for Teddy. I will attempt to finish this letter tomorrow morning.

Hotel Coronado del' Reye is one of the most exquisite places in the world. It sits on a large beach and looks out toward the Pacific. The Grand Ballroom is four stories tall and has windows that are two stories high. The terrace goes around it for a total 360 degrees. I nearly forgot to mention that the structure is round and has a peaked roof like a cone. Lt. Belcher, my escort for the evening, informed me that it was built without a single nail, but instead used wooden dowels. Whatever a wooden dowel is. Lt. Belcher is a really amusing fellow. He turns a bright shade of red and looks as though he will explode every time I call his floating home a boat. I am very much aware that sailors call their homes ships. After all was not Teddy a rather big stick in the Naval establishment? If the truth is to be known, I rather enjoy fiddling with Lt. Belcher's cranial development. Mentioning Teddy brought to mind just how insufferable he can be. He has recently arrived from South America, where he is having excavated a huge ditch. He insists that it is one of the greatest things he has ever done. I just have trouble seeing how a hole in the ground has much merit or will ever have great utility. Teddy insists that this excavation is in the sovereign state of Panama, when every geography book will inform you that the hole is in the northern provinces of Colombia. Teddy really believes women are such fools. There are times when Papa really tries my patience. You must feel the same; after all, he is your husband. Dear Edith I must close for now. I will write again after our voyage around the Cape of Good Hope. Teddy says that when his ditch is finished, the voyage will no longer be necessary. That remains to be seen.

Your affectionate daughter:

Alice Roosevelt.

Cinco Pesos

Toluca, México

1900

by Eduardo Santamaria

In a place very far, far away, there is a valley guarded by giants who are eternally crowned by white icecaps. One of them rises higher and dominates the horizon. It is a volcano, who stands arrogantly above all and whose top is always assailed by violent snowstorms, a fact that hides most of the time the infernal igneous stream to which it owes existence. Going down along the sides, the mountains transform into hills that mold into a sensuous and pleasant arrangement of curves.

It is really a beautiful place, where this story happened. Everywhere there are fresh water springs, and young deer usually drink there on starry moonlit nights. The forests are vibrant with life all the time.

In that place there still is, perhaps, on the edge of a road, a common house, with its own horse-tending stable, a chicken coop almost in ruins and a bread oven two hundred steps away. On the day the events we are about to discover happened, it was still dark, and the crack of dawn silently approached the house.

Among the cool morning shadows, the adobe construction was barely visible. It was not big nor small, and the few glass windows it had were covered on the inside by fabric or, better yet, pieces of fabric that the careless wind swayed back and forth as it filtered through some cracks.

A feeble light shone through one of those small windows, and from time to time, the shadow of a hand drew itself across the dusty glass. We will peek through it to see the actors of a scene that happened so long ago, in a country that exists no longer but in the minds of a few ancient people....

On a beautiful desk that surely had known better times and places, a man seated in a chair wrote in some huge books. Lighted by an oil burning lamp, the feather-pen in his hand created gracious shadows on the adobe walls. The lines of ink that traced into letters and numbers were steady and firm, of symmetrical precision.

The man was thin and scrawny and would be at that time closing on forty years. Veins and wrinkles converged on his wide forehead, a fact that was accentuated by the circumstance that his whitening hair had completely receded to the back neckline.

That premature baldness made him look even older than he really was. His nose was eagle-hooked and somewhat sharp, and his beardless face was showing some premature wrinkles. His thin lips uttered, from time to time, sounds that could be interpreted perhaps as cursing, such was the tone in which the words were spoken.

However, the words were numbers and sums, and the man muttered as he worked, without ever letting his hand lie fallow while he wrote, apparently tirelessly: "cuarenta y cinco...", he said, rocking his head sideways, "mas ventitres centavos," he kept going, "hacen un de cincuenta y ocho con siete centavos..."

For several hours the man continued working in the lamplight until a playful ray of brightness hit him directly on the face, as sunrise came by. With his raised-vein and somewhat shaky hand, he turned the wick of the lamp off, to save on fuel, and with a swift, hasty movement, he pulled the little curtain as to use the sunlight, and he kept on working.

After a while, he took a small ceramic jar from a table to his side and drank in intermittent intervals, as if he were trying to clear up his throat. "Raymundo!" he then called. "Raymundo, come here!" he repeated, with his thunder voice. Almost immediately, a little boy about seven years old entered running into the room.

"*Mande, papa,*" he said. The boy stopped a couple of paces short of the door threshold and waited for an answer.

His father did not speak for several minutes which seemed like hours to the boy. Little Raymundo limited himself to standing in a very attentive posture. With extreme care, the man put the pen on the ink pad and looked at his son with his customary severity. "I need you to do a favor for me," he said in Spanish, without taking his eyes off the boy. "Go to X, to collect the rents of the 'neighborhood.' They will give you five pesos." The man paused as if making sure he was being understood. "Do you understand?"

"Si, papa" was the boy's answer. Then he turned around and walked out of the room.

The boy of our story wore short light brown pants that reached his upper knees and a spotless white shirt. He was thin and jumpy, his hair was dark and his eyes were beautiful and black like obsidian rocks, and his smile wide like full ripe corn cobs.

Cinco Pesos! That was an enormous amount of money. Raymundito, the love nickname his parents used for their child, was overflowing with happiness while he ran along the beautiful valley countryside. Far away, on the horizon, the majestic Nevado de Toluca watched him with peaceful calm. Great quantities of flowers streamed along the roadside, and the little boy picked them all up, as he filled his eyes with them. Many years later, the boy as a man would carry the happiness and pride he felt on that summer morning inside his heart.

Cinco Pesos! It was the biggest amount of money that the boy had heard of or seen in his whole life! They were the combined rents of several months, paid by the occupants of that great subdivided adobe hacienda that his father administered. Don Antonio S., the boy's father, started to fight early in life since he discovered himself to be in an orphanage. A tireless worker, he paid his way through school and after great efforts elevated himself to the position of bookkeeper.

God knows if his son paused his steps that day to play with the stones on his path! God only knows if some other boys like himself shared the happiness of youth! Only the volcano, with his millenary wisdom, could tell where Little Raymond went in his delirious joy....

It was already late when the boy came back to his parents' *finca*. Both, without having crossed a word about it, were somewhat worried about his lateness, yet with a different attitude towards their son. The shadows of the outer-patio covering engulfed him as he crossed the portal. Though tired, he came almost running into the room his father used as an office.

"I'm back!" he announced triumphantly, the sun still in his eyes and his face apple-red. The man turned slowly towards him. "Did you collect the money?" he asked, with his characteristic dryness. The boy just nodded while he reached for his pockets, in eager search of the beautiful and argentine Mexican silver pesos.

"Here they are," he said, extending his plump little hand which was almost not large enough to close upon the huge coins. The man took them and started to count them slowly. "Uno, dos, tres, cuatro...." He paused. "You gave me only four pesos," he said, his forehead turning dark. Little Raymond searched with new fervor for the missing coin, in the depths of pockets that, at his age, should have contained marbles or toads. The accursed last peso was nowhere to be found.

"Did you spend it?" his father roared, with a menacing tone. The boyish face turned blue in fright, as much in fear of the adult as the veiled accusation.

"No, I did not take it, I swear." The boy's eyes turned glassy. "I did not take it!" he repeated, and while he searched his pockets in desperation, tears started to look through the windows of his eyes, a fact that was interpreted by the father as a signal and proof of guilt.

"Take this!" A tremendous slap was heard all over the house. "So you learn not to take what does not belong to you!" Don Antonio shouted, as he repeated the dosage. "I will teach you, . . ." and he took off his leather belt, made a loop with it, and immediately started to punish his son with it.

Several minutes later, Dona Maria, the boy's mother, came between the two of them. "You have hit him enough!" she said to her husband, with a voice that was begging and yet carried the strength of a lioness defending a cub. Only then did the man stop the punishment which had turned into a tremendous beating. While the mother wrapped her son with her hands and her heart, the furious father stomped out of the room, blind like a beast.

Dona Maria was a determined woman, with Indian blood in her veins and not particularly a beauty. She had married the father of the boy a little more to escape an extremely poor household than from pure love. With time, both got used to each other, and needless to say, they got along somewhat tolerably, not exactly exempt from caring for each other.

The troubled mother hurried to take care of the son who was barely able to stand up on his own, with both hands and a knee resting on a wobbly chair. She walked the boy softly out of the room, trying not to touch him where he hurt. Both sobbing, they entered the child's room, where he let his mother begin to take his shirt off, which was ripped to ribbons. She walked out momentarily to prepare a cure of hot salt water compresses. Then she came back to finish taking the shirt off, a task that was somewhat handicapped by the fact that in some places it was hard to distinguish between flesh and fabric.

The mother carefully put her son to bed face down, like one who puts a flower on a tombstone and, with tears in her eyes, applied the only medicine that is useful in these cases, which is many times more painful than the wounds themselves. The act was almost inhuman torture and drew involuntary tears out of the boy's contracted eyes. Both took it valiantly. What else could they do?

At last, the little one seemed to be somewhat alleviated of his pain, and he started sobbing slowly in an almost inaudible voice. The boy did not move and appeared to

begin a restful if feverish sleep. Dona Maria, knowing that it is not right to sleep all dressed up, started taking off the boy's pants. As she was folding the pants to put them away, both of them heard the very specific clinking that is so characteristic of silver pesos.

Raymundo did not pay attention to the sound and did not see his mother pick up the money and walk out of the room. She walked speechless into her husband's studio. He was still writing endless numbers on his books while he muttered terrible things, still enraged.

The boy's mother never did pick a fight, but her indigenous blood made her seek justice and truth above everything and everybody. Though she feared her husband's violence, she more than knew what she had to do.

Without saying a word of reproach, she put the coin on top of her husband's table with the firmness of one who demands justice. He hadn't at that moment even bothered to look at her. "Where did you get that, woman?" he asked, incredulously. "Out of the rim of your son's pants," she replied, speaking her last phrase of that day. Then she stood beside Don Antonio with her hands on her waist, her fists closed.

The man got up from his desk as if he were shot by a spring and entered the room where his son was lying, still sobbing and shuddering his body in convulsive spasms, with the Sierra Madre Mountains sculpted on his back in red and purple.

A thick rain of tears, more than the maternal cares, started healing the flesh wounds, although it could never heal the wounds of the soul of that almost unconscious boy. A thick fog of tears invades our hearts when we hear pronounced, also with tears in the eyes, the words from that terrible, disgraceful night that all the members of the S. family have heard from generation to generation:

"Forgive me, my son!"

Cinco Pesos

Toluca, México

1900

by Eduardo Santamaria

En un lugar muy, muy lejano, existe un valle vigilado por gigantes eternamente coronados de nieve. Domina entre ellos un volcán, que se alza arrogante por encima de todos y cuya cima suele ser assolada por violentas tormentas de nieve, que esconde la mayor parte del tiempo, el infernal torrente igneo a quien le debe su existencia. Bajando por las laderas, la montaña se transforma en colinas que se delinean con un sinuoso movimiento de curvas suaves y placenteras.

Es un lugar muy hermoso, aquel donde ocurrió la presente historia. Bajando por las pendientes, saltan por doquier los manantiales de agua fresca, que jóvenes cervatillos suelen beber a la luz de la luna. Los bosques que pueblan el valle, vibran todo el tiempo llenos de vida.

En ese lugar existe todavía, tal vez, a la vera del camino, una casa común y corriente, con su acostumbrado lugar para apasentar los caballos, el gallinero casi en ruinas, y un horno para hacer pan a doscientos pasos de distancia. El día que ocurrieron estos sucesos, estaba todavía oscuro, a pesar de que la alborada se acercaba silenciosamente.

Entre las sombras de la madrugada, apenas se distinguía la finca de adobe. No era ni grande ni pequeña, y las pocas ventanas que tenía estaban cubiertas de tela, o más bien retazos de tela, que movía de cuando en cuando el viento que se filtraba por las escasas rendijas.

Una débil lucecilla se filtraba por una ventanita, a la vez que de vez en cuando una sombra se dibujaba en el polvoriento vidrio. Nos asomaremos a la ventana, para ver a

los actores de esta escena que se desarrolló hace muchos años, en un país que ya no existe, más que en la memoria de unos cuantos viejos...

En un escritorio muy hermoso, pero que seguramente habrá conocido mejores días, un hombre sentado estaba escribiendo en enormes libros. A la luz de un quinqué, la pluma en su mano dibujaba graciosas sombras en los adobes de la pared. Los trazos de tinta que formaban letras y números en el papel eran parejos y firmes, de simétrica precisión.

El hombre aquel era delgado y enjuto, y tendría en aquel entonces cerca de cuarenta años. Las venas y las arrugas se confundían en su amplia frente, hecho que se acentuaba por la circunstancia de que su cabello ya blanco había por completo recedido hasta la nuca.

Aquella prematura calvicie le daba un aspecto aun más viejo de lo que realmente era. Tenía la nariz aguileña y un poco afilada, y su rostro lampiño se empezaba a arrugar ya, también prematuramente. Sus delgados labios proferían de vez en cuando algunos murmullos, que se podrían interpretar en maldiciones, tomando en cuenta el tono en que eran proferidos.

Sin embargo, eran números lo que aquel hombre murmuraba al trabajar, sin dejar de mover su mano mientras escribía, al parecer incansablemente. - cuarenta y cinco... - decía, moviendo la cabeza hacia los lados -... más veintitrés centavos-, proseguía, -... hacen un total de cincuenta y ocho con siete centavos...

Por espacio de varias horas, el hombre siguió trabajando con el quinqué encendido, hasta que un rayo de luz le iluminó su cara, pues había empezado a rayar el alba. Con una mano venosa y un poco temblorosa, se limitó a apagar la mecha, para ahorrar combustible, y de un tirón apartó la cortinuela con el fin de usar la luz externa, y siguió trabajando.

Al cabo de un rato, tomó un pequeño jarro de una mesilla que estaba a su lado, y bebió en sorbos intermitentes, como para aclararse la garganta. - ¡ Raymundo!- llamó. - ¡ RAYMUNDO, ven acá ! - repitió, con voz estentórea. Casi inmediatamente, un chiquillo como de siete años, entró corriendo en la habitación. - Mande, Papá - dijo. El niño se detuvo a unos pasos del umbral, y esperó respuesta.

Su padre no habló por espacio de varios minutos, que al chico le parecieron horas. El pequeño se limitó a permanecer de pie, en atenta postura. Con mucho cuidado, el hombre puso la pluma en el tintero, y miró a su hijo con la acostumbrada severidad. - Necesito que me hagas un mandado - dijo, sin dejar de mirarle. - Ve a X a cobrar las rentas de la vecindad. Te van a pagar 5 pesos -

El hombre hizo una pausa, como para asegurarse que estaba siendo comprendido.

- ¿Está claro? --

Si, Papá. Voy enseguida - El pequeño dió media vuelta, y salió de la pieza.

El chiquillo en cuestión vestía pantalones cortos de color café oscuro, a la altura de las rodillas y una camisa blanca perfectamente limpia. Era delgado y saltarín, y su cabello era oscuro y sus ojos negros como la obsidiana y su sonrisa amplia y hermosa como las mazorcas maduras de maíz.

¡Cinco pesos ! Eran una cantidad enorme. Raymundito, como le llamaban de cariño sus padres, iba rebosante de felicidad mientras corría por la hermosa campiña del valle. A lo lejos, el majestuoso Nevado de Toluca lo miraba con apacible calma. Las flores serpenteaban con el camino, y el pequeño las levantó todas, en su mirada. Muchos años después, el niño, ya hombre, guardaría en su corazón la alegría y el orgullo que sentía en aquella mañana de verano.

Cinco pesos, eran la cantidad más grande de dinero que el chico había visto en su vida. Eran las rentas conjuntas de varios meses, que pagaban los inquilinos de aquella grande y dividida hacienda de adobe, que su padre administraba. Don Antonio S., había empezado a luchar temprano en la vida, desde que se descubrió en un orfanatorio. Trabajador incansable, se costó los estudios valiéndose por sí mismo, y después de mucho esfuerzo llegó a ser Tenedor de Libros.

¡ Sabe Dios si se detuvo su hijo aquel día a jugar con las piedras del camino. ! ¡ Sabe Dios si otros chiquillos compartieron su felicidad de lozana juventud ! Sólo el volcán, en su impasible regazo, podría contar a donde el pequeñín Raymundito fue en su gozo delirante.

Era ya tarde cuando regresó a la finca de sus padres. Ambos, a pesar de que no cruzaron palabra al respecto, estaban ya un poco preocupados por la tardanza, si bien con diferente actitud hacia el hijo. Las sombras del cobertizo lo ampararon al cruzar el portal. Aunque andaba cansado, entró de nuevo casi corriendo al cuarto que su progenitor usaba como despacho.

- ¡ Ya volví ! - anunció triunfal, el sol aún en su mirada y su carita roja de manzana. El hombre se volvió hacia él despacio. - ¿Cobraste el dinero? - preguntó con su característica sequedad. El niño se limitó a asentir con la cabeza, mientras hurgaba en los bolsillos, en búsqueda afanosa de los hermosos y argentinos pesos mexicanos de plata.

- Aquí están - dijo, extendiendo su manita, que apenas alcanzaba a cerrarse sobre las enormes monedas. El hombre las tomó, a la vez que empezó a contarlas lentamente. Una, dos, tres. Cuatro. - Me diste sólo cuatro pesos -. La frente del padre se ensombreció.

Raymundito buscó con nuevo ardor la faltante moneda, en las profundidades de sus bolsillos, que a esa edad debieran haber contenido canicas o sapos. La condenada moneda no apareció.

- ¿Lo gastaste? - tronó el padre, con tono amenazador. La cara del niño se tornó en espanto, tanto de miedo al adulto como de angustia por la velada acusación. - No, no lo tomé, lo juro.- dijo el chiquillo, con los ojos vidriosos.

- ¡ Yo no lo agarré ! - repetía, mientras buscaba con más desesperación en sus bolsillos, lágrimas empezaban a asomarse en las ventanas de sus ojitos, señal que fué tomada por su padre como prueba de culpabilidad.

¡ Toma !- resonó una senda bofetada. - ¡ Para que no andes robando lo ajeno ! - Gritó Don Antonio, mientras repetía el castigo. - ¡ Yo te voy a enseñar !- Y se quitó el cinturón, formando un medio rizo , procedió de inmediato a castigar a su hijo con él.

Al cabo de varios minutos, doña María, se interpuso entre los dos. - ¡ Ya le pegaste bastante ! - le dijo a su marido, con voz de súplica y a la vez de leona con cachorro. Y sólo así se detuvo el hombre en lo que era ya una flagelación. Mientras la madre envolvía a su hijo con sus manos y su corazón, el padre enfurecido salió del cuarto ciego como una bestia.

Doña María era una mujer resuelta, de origen mestizo y de una belleza no muy extraordinaria. Se había casado con el padre del niño, un poco más por la necesidad de salir de su casa donde la pobreza era extrema, que por verdadero amor. Con el tiempo los dos se habían acostumbrado uno al otro y es preciso decir que se llevaban pasablemente, sin fricciones excesivas ni aun exentos de cariño.

La acongojada mamá se apresuró a atender al niño, que quedó recargado con las manos y una rodilla sobre una escuálida silla. Doña María se lo llevó hacia otro cuarto, tratando de no tocarle las heridas. Sollozantes los dos, entraron a la habitación del pequeño donde la madre empezó a quitarle la camisa al chico, que mas bien eran jirones.

Doña María salió momentáneamente a la cocina a preparar unos fomentos de agua caliente con sal. Al poco tiempo regresó a terminar de quitarle la camisa al niño, tarea que se dificultaba porque en algunos lugares no se distinguía entre tela y carne. Tendió a su hijo boca abajo, como quien pone una flor en una lápida, y con lágrimas en los ojos, le aplicó la única medicina que sirve para esos casos. La cura aquella suele ser a veces más dolorosa que las heridas mismas, pero los dos se aguantaron. ¿Qué otra cosa podían hacer?

Al fin, el pequeño pareció aliviarse un poco, y se quedó sollozando, en la misma postura como estaba acostado, que parecía a propósito para conciliar el sueño, aunque febril. Doña María, sabiendo que no es bueno dormir vestido, empezó a quitarle el

pantalón al pequeño. Al doblar la prenda para guardarla, los dos oyeron el tintineo metálico que tienen los pesos de plata...

El niño ni siquiera prestó atención cuando su madre recogió el dinero y salió del cuarto sin decir palabra. De la misma manera la señora entró al estudio de Don Antonio, que seguía escribiendo números interminables en sus libros, mientras murmuraba cosas ininteligibles, todavía fuera de sí.

La madre del niño no buscaba nunca las confrontaciones, más su herencia indígena la hacía buscar la justicia y la verdad por encima de todas las cosas. Aunque temía la violencia de su marido, sabía demasiado lo que tenía que hacer.

Doña María puso la moneda en la mesa con la firmeza del que pide justicia sin una palabra de reproche. - ¿ De donde sacaste eso, mujer ? - preguntó incrédulo, el padre.

- Del dobladillo del pantalón de tu hijo - contestó ella, articulando su última frase de la noche, y se quedó a su lado, con las manos en la cintura, a puños cerrados.

Don Antonio se levantó como impelido por un resorte, y entró con pasos reueltos a la habitación donde el niño sollozaba todavía, sacudiendo su cuerpo en breves espasmos, con la Sierra Madre grabada en la espalda, en rojo y morado.

Una espesa lluvia de lágrimas, más que los maternales cuidados, empezó a sanar las heridas del cuerpo, aunque no pudo sanar nunca las del alma, de aquel niño casi inconsciente. Una espesa niebla de lágrimas, invade también nuestros corazones , cuando escuchamos pronunciar, también con lágrimas en los ojos, las palabras que desde aquella desgraciada noche hemos oído todos los S. de generación en generación: - ¡ Perdóname, Hijo Mío!

The Tunnel King

by Michelle' Langston

Bernard could feel it coming. He always felt it before he heard it, felt the invisible waves of motion, the tingling tremors that made the small, gray pieces of gravel outside his bedroom dance like Mexican jumping beans. The vibrations of motion passed through the walls and up his bed. He closed his eyes and scratched the top of his thighs which tingled with an itchy, pins-and-needles sensation as the train's rumbling reverberation coursed through his body.

He rubbed the sleep from the corners of his nut brown eyes and struggled to focus in the darkness as the train's whistle cried out in the near distance. He quickly sat up and pulled the covers tightly about him as his four cats scrambled for the safety of his bed, temporarily forgetting their pursuit of rats. He smiled as the silver, blue, and red letters on the train blurred quickly before his eyes, the letters A-M-T-R-A-K barely recognizable.

Although there was no clock in his 20x25 orange-carpet-floored bedroom, Bernard knew it was roughly 4:00 a.m. The train was one of the few things that had always been dependable. For Bernard, recalling the exact date often proved difficult. He could tell you that for the past ten years, his days had started around 4:00 a.m., with the beckoning of an Amtrak cargo train whistle.

He slipped on his shoes, donned another pair of sweats and a heavy down-filled coat. The winters were difficult. The temperature in his wooden freight-box bedroom never rose above 30 degrees during the winter months. He spent his nights in hooded sweats, swaddled in the warmth of three down comforters. From the light of a red Eveready flashlight, he read crumpled magazines and paperback books that he found in trash dumpsters. He sipped from thermoses filled with instant soup, coffee, herbal tea or hot chocolate that he kept on a wicker nightstand. Although the bone-numbing cold had seemed an insurmountable problem when he first journeyed below, Bernard had learned to adapt and, like the train, he had eventually found comfort in its consistency.

As he walked to the area that he considered his kitchen, he planned for the day ahead. He hoped that he would be able to shovel enough snow and collect enough aluminum cans to purchase a T-bone steak and a bottle of good red wine.

Beneath Central Park, in the commuter train tunnels that now were used only by freight trains, Bernard had made a home. His kitchen was an open area outside his bedroom where plastic milk crates stored his cooking utensils, mismatched dishes, and food. Surrounded by the crates stood a small, red charcoal grill which he used for cooking food and boiling water.

He gathered a pot, bowl, metal spoon, bottle of water and two packages of apple-and-cinnamon instant oatmeal. He started a fire with newspaper and small tree branches he had collected in the park and placed the pot of water above the flames. He stood by the warmth of the fire only momentarily and wished that he did not have to make the one-block walk to the toilet that was used by all who lived below.

He grabbed his flashlight, walked quickly past the cracked cement walls, and carefully stepped over the usual piles of garbage and dead rats. He urinated and used a Folger's coffee can to scoop up dirt and gravel to cover his own waste.

He turned around and saw the shadowy outline of someone coming his way.

"That you, King?" the man whispered.

"Yeah, it's me. The train wake you up?"

"Hell, yes," he said, his voice thick with sleep, his eyes still bloodshot from too much cheap beer. "I hate that damn train."

Bernard laughed softly, then looked at the man sternly. "You got to remind the others about this mess. How many times do I got to say it? *Sanitation is everything down here*. You people got to cover your own mess." Bernard shined the flashlight on the piles of feces that lay uncovered on the ground.

Irritated, the sleepy man sighed and shook his head. "Now, King, you know that it isn't me, I . . ."

"Didn't say it was you. What I did say is for you to tell the others. You hear? We don't need disease spreadin' down here. You tell 'em again."

"All right. I'll tell them, again. But they won't hear a damn word I say. They listen to you because you're the King. Maybe you should tell them yourself."

"They can't depend on me forever. What happens when I go back to the world?"

"Come on. You're not serious about all that, are you? Where you gonna' go? What will you do?"

"I got my father. He's been beggin' me to come live with him. He's gettin' older, got no one to take care of him. Hell, I'm gettin' older. Gettin' harder to take this cold.

I think maybe arthritis is settin' in in my bones. They hurt me all the time, achy, like a bad tooth. Besides, you all will be fine, won't even miss me."

"This about Freddie and his girl? I mean, well, I know that messed you up. You shouldn't leave just because they were stupid enough to bring other folks down here."

"No, that's not it. Well, maybe it's part of it. I don't know. Just too much chaos. Feel like I was just dealt a life of chaos. Can't find any peace. The winter feels colder, I ache all the time, and man, I miss women. I haven't had a woman down here since, well . . . must have been three or four years."

"Listen, King, they've learned their lesson, the others, too. They learned what we already knew, but they had to learn it the hard way. They won't do it again."

"No, they won't because they're not comin' back. I went and seen 'em at the hospital. Freddie says he's not gonna' leave that girl's side. He said she gonna' be okay, gonna' pull through and all, but she still hasn't spoke a word. Not to the doctors, not to the police, not even to Freddie. He said they're gonna' move on, find someplace else. A shelter for a while, until it warms up, but he said he's too scared to come back here. Doesn't matter, anyhow. Been thinkin' 'bout going back long before that happened. It just helped make my mind up. Ten years down here has been enough for me. I'm gettin' tired of it all. Feel restless, like I might need a change."

"King, people get stabbed and raped up in the world, too. You won't be any safer up there."

"No? Sometimes I wonder. It doesn't feel that way to me. At least, I think I want to try to find out. Sometimes I believe my old man when he tells me I'm crazy, just plain crazy to be livin' here. He doesn't understand that I'm okay where I'm at. The only person it bothers is him."

"Well, King, maybe everything's not 'okay.' I mean somethin's up or we wouldn't even be talking about it."

"Who knows? I may go back up for a while. Maybe I won't. Maybe I can't make it up there. Maybe I'll come back. I can't say. Listen, I gotta' go. Got breakfast waitin' on me. You don't forget to tell everyone what I said. Okay?"

"Right. I'll tell them."

As Bernard turned and walked away, he heard him mutter, "But I still don't think it'll do any damn good."

He went back to his kitchen and found that the water was boiling. As he ate, he thought of the Christmas spent with his father three years before. The four days of central heating and awkward silences interspersed with his father's pleading had left him only with a bad head cold.

Two days after Christmas, Bernard had walked back to his underground home, knowing that the chasm of misunderstanding had grown. His father had never understood why he had consciously chosen a life of homelessness. Despite his most fervent efforts, Bernard had never found the right words for it to make sense to his father—or even to himself.

Bernard knew it was not rational. He knew the others who lived with him below would have concurred with his father that he must be crazy. For most of the others, the journey into the tunnels had been down roads littered with alcohol bottles, drugs, and mental instability. Bernard did not live for the bottle or the needle. His travels had led him through the halls of one of New York's finest film schools. His face had once been found on the perfume-scented pages of trendy fashion magazines.

As he finished his food, he struggled to recall the minute he decided to give it all up and found that he could not remember much about it at all. In his head, he heard the excuses he had given his father.

"Son, what are you running from?" his father had asked.

"I'm not running. I'm just distracted by society. No one even seems to realize that they are not doing anything more than 9 to 5."

"But that's what we all have to do, Bernard. That's just part of living."

"It just doesn't interest me anymore, only living for the dollar. People don't even know the difference anymore between what they 'want' and what they 'need.' I'm just trying to be real. Trying to be myself."

It had always ended the same way. Bernard trying to explain why, his father begging, and then promising to get him help if he would only come back.

As he scraped the last bit of oatmeal from the bowl, he wondered about what would happen to the others if he did leave. He thought about a "normal" life and worried if he would be able to re-adjust. He wondered if he should even try.

His breakfast finished, Bernard went to feed his cats. While there was always an abundance of rodents for his feline friends to feast on, he felt certain they preferred Purina Cat Chow. He wondered who would take care of them if he did leave.

Bernard used the remainder of the bottled water to brush his teeth. He put his wet toothbrush and toothpaste in a box by his bed.

He retied the string on the hood of his coat and put on his gloves and snowshoes. He was ready to begin his day. There were cans to collect and sell, snow to shovel, groceries to buy, and if it was not too cold or if he was not too tired, there were boxes to pack.

Star-Walker, an original screenplay

by Linda McDonald

FADE IN:

EXT. WICHITA MOUNTAINS. DAY.

Ominous dark blue clouds swell out of a peach-colored Oklahoma sky. Jutting up out of the endless plains, the Wichita Mountains rise in smoky purples and browns.

An orange sun disappears. A lone coyote's howl shivers into the night.

SUPER: "Based on a true story"

CHERYL ANN WILLIS, 19, her waitress apron still on over her jeans and blouse, leans against the jukebox and counts her tips. A KID mops the floor. BIG EARL, the manager, counts the evening's take with whispered numbers, his elbows planted on a prominent belly.

CHERYL

Well, I'm out of here. Mind if I
take a beer for the road?

EARL

It's illegal.

CHERYL

I know. I just felt like havin' a beer on
the top of Mount Scott tonight.

EARL

Oh? And what are you celebrating?

Cheryl takes off her apron and tries to answer casually.

CHERYL

I got my letter from the university. I've been accepted for next year.

EARL

No wonder you've been hummin' all night.
I'm proud of you, Cheryl.

Deciding she's not going to get the beer, Cheryl moves to the door and opens it. A gust of wind bites into the little cafe.

CHERYL

Yeah. Me, too, I guess. Well, good night.

EARL

Oh, what the hell. Wait a minute.

He goes to the beer box and gets a Budweiser. He pushes it into her hand.

EARL (cont.)

It's on me. And if you ever tell anybody, I'll call you a liar.

Cheryl gives him a kiss on the cheek.

CHERYL

Thanks, Uncle Earl. Love you.

EARL

Looks like that rain's about here.
Be careful.

EXT. PRAIRIE LADY CAFE. NIGHT.

A fork of LIGHTNING POPS against the sky, revealing Cheryl's green VW Bug as she steps out of the cafe. Its hood is caved in, and a light blue door replaces the original on the passenger side. Hugging her jacket, she hurries to the car.

EXT. WICHITA MOUNTAINS. NIGHT.

Lightning dances across the charcoal skies over the Wichitas.

A low RUMBLE OF THUNDER is punctuated by the SHRIEK OF AN OWL.

EXT. RURAL HIGHWAY, WICHITA MOUNTAINS. NIGHT.

The green VW wheels along the two-lane pavement, its headlights painting the roadside sagebrush in lush green tones.

INT. CHERYL'S CAR. NIGHT.

A late night COUNTRY MUSIC station blares Tammy Wynette.
Cheryl sings along.

Raindrops begin to pelt the windshield.

CHERYL

Shoot.

EXT. WHITEHORSE HOME, THE MOUNTAINS. NIGHT.

A single light glows from inside a frame house in need of paint. In back of the house is a barn made of corrugated metal and a corral.

INT. WHITEHORSE KITCHEN. NIGHT.

BILLY WHITEHORSE and his wife, DOROTHY, both Kiowa Indians in their seventies, watch the storm through their kitchen window.

Their modest home is Formica and Sears furniture. On walls and shelves, however, priceless artifacts stand beside ancient photographs of Kiowa ancestors in ceremonial dress or standing sternly in buckskin beside their "dress" rifles.

EXT. WHITEHORSE BACKYARD. NIGHT.

Lightning illuminates a weather vane in their backyard.

Perched on one of its metal rods is an OWL, seemingly oblivious to the rain dripping from his feathers. He lets out a LOUD HOOT.

INT. KITCHEN

Billy shakes his head in recognition.

BILLY

There it is again.

DOROTHY

Well, I'll be.

In spite of himself, Billy shivers a little. Dorothy notices his reaction and smiles.

DOROTHY

Oh . . . it's probably just Grandpa,
checking up on us.

EXT. BACKYARD.

The owl's eyes pierce through a sheet of gray rain. He SHRIEKS and flies off with difficulty, weighted by water on his wings.

EXT. TWO-LANE ROAD IN THE MOUNTAINS. NIGHT.

Cheryl's tiny car curves in and around red boulders on the mountainside, its windshield wipers beating time with the Everly Brothers. Cheryl knows every word of the song.

CHERYL (O.C.)

"All I need is the air that I breathe,
and to love you . . ."

Stones from an old cemetery fly by on one side of the road. The headlights focus through the rain on a battered old wooden sign:

"KIOWA INDIAN CEMETERY"

INT. WHITEHORSE HOUSE. NIGHT.

Billy puts on a storm slicker as Dorothy washes dishes at the sink. She leans to see out the window as she works.

BILLY

I'm going to go check on the horses.

DOROTHY

Be careful.

Billy picks up a flashlight and leaves.

EXT. WICHITA MOUNTAINS. NIGHT.

Under the strobe-like flashes from the sky, the mountains sink behind a heavy mist which rises out of its pockets. A gray, gnarled tree stands illuminated against the mountainside for a moment.

LIGHTNING STRIKES its thick trunk, **EXPLODING** flaming **BRANCHES** into the night. **STEAM RISES** from the **BURNING** trunk as **RAINDROPS HISS** at the fire.

INT. CHERYL'S CAR.

Cheryl jumps as the **THUNDERCRACKS** jolt the mountains. She turns down the **RADIO**, puts the **WINDSHIELD WIPERS ON HIGH**, and concentrates on the disappearing road ahead.

EXT. TWO-LANE ROAD.

A DEER's eyes flash out of the darkness. The deer freezes in the middle of the road, paralyzed by the oncoming headlights.

INT. CAR

Cheryl sees the deer and SLAMS the BRAKES, sending the VW into a spin.

EXT. TWO-LANE ROAD.

The VW SCREECHES through a dizzying circle which turns the car in a quick whirl, avoiding the deer but propelling the VW off the road onto the shoulder where it cuts S-curves over the slick, red clay. For a moment, the car GROANS to a stop, but its balance on the embankment is so precarious that it teeters on the steep slope for a long moment.

Then, with a sickening GRIND, the CAR SLIDES down the clay embankment, gaining speed as it hurtles down.

INT. CAR

Her face distorted with fear, Cheryl frantically pumps the brakes and pulls on the steering wheel.

EXT. ROADSIDE

The VW slides down the embankment like a toy and hurtles through space for an instant. It catches the side of a blackjack tree, which stops its forward motion.

RAIN SPITS against the still-SPINNING WHEELS of the VW, now on its side, with its headlights shining into the treetops.

The CAR RADIO PLAYS Willie Nelson's "ON THE ROAD AGAIN."

INT. WHITEHORSE KITCHEN. NIGHT.

Dorothy Whitehorse looks up from the sinkful of dishes. Her face is not afraid so much as curious about the strange impulses she feels. Out of breath, she leans against the counter and takes a moment to breathe deeply.

She looks out the window and sees in the distance two lights shining into the dark sky.

EXT. WHITEHORSE BARN.

Billy Whitehorse stands by his corral, staring at the faraway lights coming out of the woods. He hurries back toward the house.

BILLY

Dorothy. You see those lights?

INT. WHITEHORSE KITCHEN. NIGHT.

Billy enters quickly and grabs the keys to his pickup.

BILLY

I think somebody had a wreck. Down there by the creek. Dorothy? You okay?

DOROTHY

I'm fine. Go on. They may need help.

Billy leaves, glancing back with concern.

EXT. THE WRECK SITE. NIGHT.

The front half of the VW is grotesquely crushed. Cheryl, unconscious, is trapped in a contorted position, her neck paralyzed by the rim of the steering wheel which has been pushed back almost against the front seat.

She comes to, struggling for breath. The steering wheel has cut off the air supply to her throat and has wedged her neck so tightly against the seat that she cannot move.

She GASPS FOR BREATH, her one free hand fighting at the air for something to hold onto. Her other arm is trapped, and her legs are hidden somewhere in the floorboards which are now a metal sandwich.

Through the rear view mirror, Cheryl sees the flash of lights from the road high above her. The GURGLING SOUND of her BREATHING mixes with the NEWS PLAYING SOFTLY on the RADIO.

ANNOUNCER

President Bush announced today that an additional ten million dollars in aid will be made available to the earthquake victims in San Francisco. In other news, . . .

EXT. TWO-LANE ROAD. NIGHT.

The lone VW Bug lies smashed beside the tree.

BILLY (O.C.)

Oh, my god . . .

EXT. TWO-LANE ROAD.

He runs back to the cab and pulls out the mike to his CB radio.

BILLY

Come in. This is Winter Moon. Come in.
I got a Mayday.

INT. CHERYL'S CAR

Cheryl struggles, but she is about to give up. Each painful move she tries seems to make her predicament even worse.

SOUND: A WARRIOR CRY, FAINT BUT CLEAR.

EXT. BLACKJACK TREE.

Out of the darkness, a lone **FIGURE** appears in the headlights of the car. He is a Native American with a long, pecan-colored face, dressed in jeans and a cream-colored flannel shirt. His long brown hair reaches past his shoulders.

He moves calmly toward the car and looks down through the window at Cheryl whose panicked face pleads for help.

STRANGER

Here, don't struggle. You're going
to be all right.

He pulls open her mangled door and maneuvers his arms so he can reach her torso.

STRANGER

I'm going to move you.

EXT. TWO-LANE ROAD.

Billy looks down at the wreck, still talking on the CB.

BILLY

About a half a mile down from my house,
just past the old blackjack. Yeah.
Better hurry. I'm going to see if I can
get down there to check it out.

He turns on his car hazard lights and grabs his flashlight.

EXT. THE WRECK SITE. NIGHT

The Stranger, one hand on the steering wheel, the other against Cheryl's neck, manages to slide her head free in one smooth stroke. With a choking gasp, she finally gets a breath.

STRANGER

There. You just needed to breathe.
Try to relax now.

The somber, kind face of the stranger looks over her with concern. He strokes her cheek gently.

EXT. MUDDY EMBANKMENT. NIGHT.

Billy Whitehorse half runs, half slides down the slick embankment just above the wreck.

INT. WHITEHORSE HOUSE. NIGHT.

Dorothy Whitehorse, deeply disturbed, puts her tea towel down on the Formica counter and walks into the living room. She goes to the front door and opens it, looking out beyond the tiny porch into the darkness.

She turns to a coffee table and picks up an old, worn leather pouch, her grandfather's medicine bundle. She instinctively holds it to her chest and closes her eyes.

EXT. WRECK SITE. NIGHT.

Billy, at the bottom of the embankment, heads toward the lone VW. He sees the young woman driver lying on the ground beside the overturned mangled auto. He moves quickly to her, taking off his slicker as he goes. He spreads it over her as he bends down to check her out.

BILLY

Don't try to move. The police and an ambulance are on the way.

He lifts up the slicker to look at her body for injuries.

BILLY

You've got a lot of cuts, but I can't see anything that looks real bad. Can you tell me where you hurt?

Cheryl puts her hand to her throat and then to her chest. Her breathing is still labored, a little painful. Billy gently feels her rib cage.

BILLY

Probably broke some ribs all right. (looks up at the wreck) My god, it's a miracle you got thrown free before it hit the tree.

Cheryl points to the car.

CHERYL

The other man helped me.

Billy looks around and sees no one.

BILLY

Was somebody else with you?

Cheryl shakes her head "no" and points again. Billy stands up and surveys all around the clearing. There is no one there. Cheryl struggles to sit up.

CHERYL

In the white shirt.

BILLY

Hey, don't try to get up. Wait till the ambulance gets here.

CHERYL

He . . . he moved my neck so I could breathe.
He was right here.

BILLY

I heard you crash from my barn. I was here
in just a couple of minutes.

Cheryl looks up at the sky, confused.

CHERYL

But . . . he lifted me out.

Billy smiles. He recognizes her state of shock and is gentle.

BILLY

I think you may be a little confused. It's
all right.

The front seat of the VW Bug is smashed tight as an accordion. On the RADIO, ROY ORBISON CROONS.

RADIO

In dreams I walk with you . . .

Cheryl's puzzled eyes stare vacantly into the darkness.

INT. WHITEHORSE BEDROOM. NIGHT.

Dorothy Whitehorse lies in bed, fully clothed, clutching a picture to her. Her eyes are filled with tears which she cannot explain. She feels an inexplicable, overwhelming wonder. She rolls over on her side, and the face in the picture lies open on the bed.

In the cheap frame is an ancient warrior's picture. His hair is braided in fur strips, and he is posed formally with a breech-loading rifle at his side and a bow and arrow in his hands. He wears beaded medallions and a necklace of dried human ears.

As his features become more distinct, we recognize the long, proud face of the STRANGER.

EXT. WICHITA MOUNTAINS. NIGHT.

The black silhouette of the mountaintops nestles against a deep lavender sky. The rain has stopped and a few stars can be seen high above.

Somewhere on the mountainside, there is the FAINT HOOT of an OWL.

FADE OUT.

Essays

Lead Kindly Light . . .

by Guila Shell

There was no warning. We rounded the sharp curve and night suddenly closed down! It was as if a giant lid had been slammed over our world as I drove into blackness where snowflakes criss-crossing dizzily in the glowing cone of the headlights limited visibility to a few yards ahead. Frantically, I kicked up the brights, only to be met by a solid wall of white not three feet in front of the car. I switched back to low beams. I had to keep going; there was no place to get off the highway.

Too late I knew we had made the wrong decision. At the service station back down the mountain where we had stopped for gas, there had been a motel with a snack bar. We actually had considered calling it a day then and there, but at that time, sunset was almost an hour away, so we had chosen to go on to our planned stopover.

"It's only about eighteen miles; in less than a half-hour, we'll be there," I had said to Dad, pointing out the little red dot on the road map. In his typically taciturn manner, he had nodded agreement.

It was October 1953. I was on my way to the Seattle port of embarkation. There I would board a military transport ship for Yokohama, Japan, where my husband was stationed with post-World War II occupation forces. We owned a shiny, black, chrome-laden 1950 Ford, our first "bought new" car, and my husband had arranged to have it shipped to Japan, too. So I had no choice but to drive it to the P.O.E. Dad was going along as far as Seattle to help with the driving. I had pretended not to notice his longing backward glance at the motel as I drove out again onto the highway. So he had stretched his legs as far as possible and settled back with a resigned sigh.

We had traveled only about a mile from the station when great, fluffy flakes of snow began to drift from the sky.

"It's beautiful!" I exclaimed.

We were getting into the mountainous terrain of northwestern Wyoming, and as our route continued its upward climb, snowflakes fell thicker with each foot of altitude

we gained. It was when I turned on the wipers that I realized it was not just snow flurries; we could be driving into a real storm. Instinct told me to go back. However, on the two-lane highway with its narrow shoulders and blind curves, I knew that finding a safe place to turn around was not going to be easy.

As we topped a long upgrade, the sun, low on the horizon, momentarily broke through clouds to radiate fanned beams across the threatening sky, arousing false hopes for reprieve from the impending storm. Nervously, I surveyed the landscape. Through the veil of snow, I was barely able to make out the next ridge in the distance. To my left, across the descending lane, rose the rocky wall of the mountainside; on my right was a row of low posts connected by a steel cable. It was all that stood between us and an almost vertical incline to the valley below. I could look down on the tops of evergreen trees rapidly gathering snow.

Apprehensively I drove on, maintaining the best possible speed. The wind was picking up, and daylight faded swiftly as the snowfall increased. I switched on the headlights. Still hoping for a place to turn around, I glanced at the mileage indicator and found that we were at that moment passing the "point of no return." From where we had made the gas stop, nine of the eighteen miles lay behind us and nine more ahead to our destination. There was no longer any question of going back.

"Well, if it gets bad, at least we are more than halfway there," I said to Dad. He nodded.

"We should soon be over this ridge; there may even be a little daylight left on the other side," I commented optimistically.

Dad took out his pocket watch, glanced at it, then held it where I could see the face. He was just returning the watch to his pocket when we were overtaken by sudden darkness and heavy, blinding snowfall. Now, it was steadily building up on the roadway. The center line was entirely obscured.

On a particularly steep grade, I caught up to a laboring semitrailer truck, the only other vehicle we had seen traveling in our direction. I was glad to have its taillights to follow. The engulfing snow so effectively muffled the sound of the car's motor that I was having difficulty judging my speed. The sound of rushing wind, combined with swirling snow, created an eerie feeling of standing still while the invisible world swept by. I had to glance at the speedometer to be sure we were moving at all.

I tried desperately to keep up with the truck but fell farther and farther behind until, inevitably, the taillights flickered away and vanished. We were alone. There was nothing to keep us on the road except tire prints left by the truck. With dismay, I realized if the tracks went off over the edge, that was where we would go, too.

Was Dad as frightened as I was, I wondered. Although he sat silently motionless, I drew courage from his presence. I had always been able to depend on his strength and good judgment. But I understood his way of thinking and knew he would not offer help or advice unless I asked for it. It was his way of showing respect for my adult status. In the faint illumination from the dash lights, he appeared to be leaning forward with his palms pressed together between his knees, fingers pointing ahead.

“Can **you** see anything ahead, Dad?” I asked. He would know I was asking if he’d feel safer driving himself.

“No,” he answered and that was all. It was his way of saying “I could do no more than you are doing.”

Not the faintest landmark could be seen anymore; even the shoulders of the road were indefinable. There was only the wind-driven snow assailing the window beside me and threatening to blot out the tire marks which were my last tenuous lifeline in that desolate sea of whiteness. Slowly, slowly we crept on at no more than ten or fifteen miles an hour. Only intermittent tracks remained for a short distance and then they disappeared altogether. Ridges were building across the roadway where drifts were starting to form. How much longer before the car bogged down in ever-deepening snow? With no visible points of reference, I was becoming disoriented. I fought off waves of dizziness. How could I go on?

At the very edge of despair, I wanted nothing more than just to drop my arms, close my eyes and succumb to the terror which seemed about to overwhelm me at any moment. Instead, I leaned forward, peering past the almost futile sweep of the wipers, looking for something—**anything** to steer by.

Unbelievably, then, a light appeared ahead and off to the right! Had I been capable of reasoning at that moment, I would have been forced to consider that I could see nothing of what lay between us and the light. It hung like a single star in boundless mist.

Unaccountably, then, I turned the wheel toward it! My whole body was numb, all thought processes suspended as, in absolutely silent, dreamlike slow-motion, we traversed the unfathomable whiteness. Time became eternity, and we were detached from the earth, floating toward the tiny, glowing beacon.

Closer and clearer the light shone until at last, with the incredible feeling that we actually had dropped there from out of the sky, I found myself in a circle of light on a broad parking area. Here were heaven’s gates opened wide, and the surface was paved with solid gold! The light which had guided us to safety was on a pole between two gasoline pumps in front of a low, rustic log building. A sense of reality returned when I felt my foot shaking on the gas pedal as I maneuvered to park near a lone semi-trailer

truck standing at the edge of the lighted area. With ebbing strength, I braked to a halt. I dropped my head onto my arms folded on the steering wheel and simply sat there and shook.

Long moments later, I lifted my head to look across where Dad sat, patiently watching snow pile up on the windshield. My dad had a remarkable way of communicating without words. Now, his half-smile and the slow shaking of his head affirmed my own wonder and relief at our miraculous deliverance from the gripping nightmare. Finally, he spoke: "We might as well get a cup of coffee."

Inside, there was the reassuring, familiar smell of motor oil and anti-freeze and tires. A man somewhat past middle age, wearing a plaid shirt and grease-stained cap, welcomed us.

"Come on in," he said, "the restaurant's closed, cook's gone home, but we've got plenty of coffee."

He motioned to a door which led into a large room with a counter and stools along one side and booths lining two other walls.

At the far end of the room was a jukebox and, near the door, a glassstopped display case that held handcrafted souvenirs of tooled leather and silver inlaid with turquoise and other semi-precious stones. A mounted trout, deer antlers and some antique firearms hung on the walls between windows draped in red-and-white checked gingham curtains. The sturdiness of the exposed ceiling beams imparted a feeling of security from the storm. The truckdriver sat midway along the counter. He nodded to us, smiling, and went back to his coffee.

Two more trucks pulled into the parking area before we finished our first cup of coffee. The drivers came in, stomping snow from their feet and declaring they would go no farther until daylight. Shortly thereafter, a whole family trooped in from a station wagon with a loaded carrier on top. They had abandoned a two-wheel trailer a couple of miles back, the father said. There were five children ranging in age from an eight-year-old boy to a baby not yet a year old. The exhausted mother was frightened to the point of tears, and the baby was hungry and howling for attention. Speaking reassuringly to the distraught mother, the proprietor's wife found milk for the baby, and, together, they put it and the youngest boy to bed in the living quarters behind the kitchen.

Thinking no one else would be on the road that night, the proprietor, who was named Ed, began to total up his books when a sturdy old pickup truck rolled noisily to a stop near the building, and we were joined by a hard-bitten couple, well along in years, who were obviously local ranchers. Ed put down his pencil and went to greet them at

the door. The short, sprightly woman shook snowflakes from her salt-and-pepper hair and gave him an enthusiastic hug. He laughed and pointed her toward the kitchen where his wife was refilling the coffee urn; then, he turned to the old man.

"Charlie," he said, giving him a friendly slap on the back, "I'm surprised at you, being out in this weather! Did you get lost?"

"Nope," Charlie replied. "Woulda' been home long ago but ol' Betsy blew a tire and I had to change it." From his hearty guffaw, this was a great joke. Ed and Charlie sat in a booth to catch up on local gossip.

Our dinner that night was potato chips and stale packaged cupcakes. The wind abated somewhat, but snow continued to fall as we passed the evening, talking with the other stranded travelers and sipping hot coffee. The truckdrivers kept the children supplied with strawberry soda and coins for the jukebox. The next oldest child, a girl, had the typically toothless smile of a seven-year-old and wide blue eyes. She took a fancy to my red scarf and glove set and pranced around in them all evening, playing grown-up.

After the children went to sleep, I found myself yawning repeatedly. I sat crunched in the corner of a booth with my legs stretched along the bench and my coat spread over me. Dad, himself a former garage and service station owner, was engaged in quietly earnest conversation with Ed and the jovial rancher.

I slept restlessly, aroused several times by flashbacks to the evening's terrifying experience. It was barely daylight when I awoke to the sound of the baby's crying. I was cold and cramped, but there was the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and country sausage cooking in the kitchen.

By the time we finished breakfast, sunlight was blinding off of snow that lay, unmarred, almost two feet deep over everything. The place had turned out to be an overlook point at the summit of the ridge, and from where we sat near a window, we could see the valley, lightly blanketed in white, stretching for miles. It was, indeed, a breathtaking sight!

A tractor, equipped with a dozer blade and operated by a very young man, began clearing paths through the snow at the front of the building. The telephone rang and Ed picked it up. He spoke for a few seconds, laughing good-naturedly, then turned to announce to the assemblage, "Snowplow's on its way!"

The truckdrivers, donning coats and gloves, went outside to clear snow from their huge vehicles and warm up the engines. We performed the same chores on a smaller scale. Everyone was calling cheerfully to one another, and there was a great deal of

camaraderie among the strangers who had passed the night together. The children romped joyfully in the snow. They jumped up and down, waving and cheering as the roaring snowplow scraped by, throwing back great plumes of dislodged snow. The man in the cab waved, smiling broadly.

Soon the trucks pulled out onto the highway, one behind the other, the drivers giving a long blast on their air horns for the benefit of the delighted children. We were ready to follow. I may have hesitated with the car keys in my hand, but Dad already had the door open on the driver's side, and with the familiar half-smile, he said, "I'll take the first stint today." The young man on the tractor waved cheerily as Dad eased the car past him toward the highway.

Then my breath caught in my throat, and a vestige of last night's terror returned to sweep over me. I was gazing down into a gaping rift which had not been visible from the station. It split the highway off from the overlook all the way to where the mountainside rose a few hundred feet more to an imposing peak. We were crossing on a short access road which ran along a shelf that jutted perilously out over the crevasse. From the depths of the chasm, my eyes were drawn directly to the bright, cold blue of the sky; in my heart I knew that last night, at the height of the storm, we had **not** crossed that narrow ledge alone!

"Dear God! Thank you," I breathed aloud. Dad, too, looked for a moment to the heavens; then, as our eyes met in shocked amazement, he solemnly nodded a tacit "amen!"

When I was 17

by Nancie Prather

When I was seventeen, not even out of high school, I became involved with a boy I thought I loved. When we learned I was pregnant, however, he left me. I suddenly found myself alone and having to make a decision that could decide my future. I wanted to finish high school, and when my school counselor sat me down and told me all my options, it seemed an abortion was the only logical choice. One week later, I went to the doctor—pregnant—and left with my life and education still intact. It was an easy procedure, and I never thought about it again—until recently.

In June of this year, I found out I was pregnant again. The choice of an abortion was taken from me when I learned I was almost six months pregnant. Thinking about it, I counted back and was shocked when I realized who the father of the baby was. In December, I was raped by one of my friend's roommates while babysitting. Since I hadn't had sexual relations with anyone since then, or for quite some time before, it was painfully obvious how I had gotten pregnant.

The thought that I was pregnant due to this incident made me nauseous every time I thought about it. Keeping this child was an option, but not one I thought about long. Within two weeks, I had already chosen an adoption agency. I began the process of choosing the prospective parents.

The paperwork took less time than the pregnancy did. None of the papers could be finalized until after I gave birth, so it gave me quite a bit of time to consider the decision I had made. Over the next couple of months, I gave some serious thought to the issue of abortion versus adoption, and a couple of basic questions kept popping into my head.

What would I have done if I had found out I was pregnant earlier? At first, that one was easy. I would have gotten an abortion. But with time, the answer to that one slowly changed. By the time I delivered, I'm not sure what I would have done at all. I didn't know if I would have gotten an abortion by then. I'm not certain why I had that

change of heart. I think feeling the baby growing inside me and literally coming to life made me reconsider my feelings. Even though I wasn't keeping the baby, I realized that this life would make someone who couldn't give birth very happy. I had even begun to question my previous decision to have an abortion.

Which one, abortion or adoption, was more painful? The more painful of the two, both physically and mentally, was the adoption. The physical pain, however, was minor to the mental trauma. Mentally and emotionally, I was torn apart. As I lay in that hospital bed in labor, I kept thinking about why I was going through that. I hated everyone and everything then. I kept wondering what I had done to deserve the pain and suffering I was going through. I blamed myself for everything: the rape, the pain, even the Cuban missile crisis.

I went through labor with nobody there except the woman from the adoption agency. I felt unloved and alone. I had a few offers to come up and sit with me during delivery, but I couldn't stand the thought of any of my friends seeing me like that. After I delivered, the woman from the agency left. I lay there in bed for hours, alone and crying, feeling empty and wondering how I could do this. My only relief was in the painkillers they gave me because then I could sleep.

I couldn't bring myself to see the baby after I delivered. It would have been too painful, and if I had, I'm not sure I could have gone through with it. Despite my feelings from earlier, this was still the best choice. The nurses were kind enough, and they respected my wishes. They also made sure the paperwork for the hospital got done quickly and all at once so as not to upset me too much.

The next few days after I left the hospital were hard. I had three days to think before I went to court. I could not do it, however. Within hours of leaving the hospital, I was out and running around with my friends. I needed something to keep my mind off the ordeal I had gone through and the one I was about to face. I took it easy, though, because if I had not, I could have really hurt myself.

The Monday after I delivered, I went to court to legally terminate my parental rights. I sat in judge's chambers, answering questions and signing papers. I nearly broke into tears as the judge was questioning me. Was I sure I wanted to do this? Did I know that this was permanent? I was so relieved when it was over and I could leave. As I left the judge's chamber, I felt the tears start. When I got to my car, I sat there and cried for about ten minutes; then, I drove to the school and attended the first classes of this semester for me. I was already two weeks late and was glad to finally be able to go.

The main thing I ask myself now is what if I never have the right to choose again? This isn't an easy question to answer. I think a lot of women use abortion as a form of

birth control and abuse it to an unhealthy point. On the other hand, not everyone is able to handle the pain and emotional agony of carrying a child for nine months and then giving it away. There is no set answer for anybody. I still think that the right to choose should be mine even though, now, I have no idea what my choice would be.

Poems

Gem Poetica

by Guila Shell

One peerless, profound verse I'd wish to write,
like—say a diamond, a precious stone
deemed perfect held to unrelenting light.
No flaw would taint its purity of tone
or mar the metered cadence of its flow;
the syntax, sharply faceted, concise,
with polished points of simile would glow
and lucent imagery in sculpted ice.

Illumining the vortex, shards of flame,
kaleidoscopic revelations still
confined within the prism of its frame,
the myriad colors singing rhyme until
the slightest turning of a thought sets free
a gleam of brilliant light—epiphany.

The Widow-Maker

by Guila Shell

They stood, the three of them,
looking up at it, a limb, split off
by wind in last night's thunderstorm.
Big enough, almost, to be a tree itself,
it hung wedged in the branches of the
giant hickory they'd planned to fell.
"We'll need new rope," Carl said,
"nothing we have would hold it."
Hank squinted against the sun,
shaded his eyes with his cap. "Yup," he said.
"C'mon, Jerry, let's go to town."
He spat tobacco juice at a strutting blue wasp
and laughed. "We'll be right back."

Carl had his sawmill set up
at the edge of the timber just off
county road south of Mayfield.
One thing he always told his help,
"Don't ever try to get a hung limb down
by yourself." Said his grandpa had a name
for them — called them **widow-makers**.
"Guess I'll just pile brush 'til you get back,"
Carl said that day. Stood with the chainsaw
resting on a tree stump. Watched
the flatbed truck bounce across the meadow
crushing field daisies,
flushing out a cottontail.
He waved. "Don't forget cigarettes."

Later on, maybe he got impatient.
Maybe, before it happened,
he heard the mourning dove call

down where the Nodaway
ran shallow between sandbars
in warm haze
at midday.

The chainsaw whined
and the huge limb swung down!
The saw spun from his hand,
gouged deep into the dirt
where it fell, over in the alders.

The men came back
and found him pinned there, upright
between the limb and the tree trunk,
his head crushed and half his body.
"Jesus Christ!" Jerry whispered.
Hank said, "God damn!" and turned away,
seemed to be looking for the chainsaw.
Jerry went off to throw up
by the sawdust pile, then sat on a log
sobbing in dry, wrenching gasps
until at last the tears came.

At the big house down the road,
the woman went pale when Hank told her why he'd come,
but she held the screen door open,
pointed to a phone on the wall.
The sheriff said he'd be right out.
Should he send someone to tell Carl's wife?
"No! Don't want her to see him like this,
nor his mom either. Better get his brother.
Name's Ray. Works at Tyler's Texaco."
Sure, he'd bring him out.

The sheriff's car came in. Slow.
Hank put a hand on Ray's shoulder,
walked beside him to the tree.

“Well, little brother, you always did have to learn things the hard way.”

It was all Ray said.

Then he leaned his forehead on the rough bark and tears streamed over his cheeks.

After a while the coroner came and an ambulance from the funeral home.

Ray went to stand with the other men waiting there quiet,

looking at the ground,

the place so still, only insects

buzzed in the grass and a bumblebee

bent a daisy over, hung upside down.

Finally, the coroner

nodded to the sheriff and went away.

A mourning dove called—

far off—by the river.

The man from the funeral home

wrapped the body in a white sheet

for the trip to town.

Following, in the flatbed truck, Hank said,

“Don’t even look like Carl.”

Jerry sighed. “Why didn’t he just wait.”

Then they were silent.

Behind them, along the gravel road,

the dust cloud drifted back to the earth.

Wasn't Right

by Leslie Gulbransen

In her eyes the sky is blue
the grass
green
and the sun is yellow
as a child I painted sloppy
no Van Gogh
but still she should have liked
my purple grass
and indigo
sun and yellow sky
I made a world for her
but to her
it wasn't
right.

When I Close My Eyes

by Deidre Black

I want
to unzip your coat,
pull your sweater over my head,
duck my neck to fit
your T-shirt over my back,
dig softly in your chest,
right there
with four fingers, two of each hand
reach inside your skin, past your
muscle and tissue and blood, and
gently pry your tight bones apart.
Wide enough to slip in my forehead
clutch those bones
at the top of your back to pull myself in,
take off my shoes
put my feet down through your
hips to thighs to knees to calves to ankles,
until my toes are stacked just inside of yours,
one foot at a time.
Slip my arms into yours
like a jacket that actually fits,
straighten my back because yours is.
My head, which is the hardest part
to fit through your neck,
clamp my teeth over yours
open my eyes to see me
standing in front of you,
head tucked under your chin
arms under your armpits.
Begging for magic
to crawl into your bones
and be inside you
just for one second.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Women From Ecclesiasticus 44:1

By Way of James Agee

by Dulce D. Moore

She called us in to supper through the screen on summer evenings:
Tom and Papa up from the shadowy barn,
Sue and me from shelling our bushel of peas in the shade of the
Back porch;
Put the food on the table in the trapped heat of that day's
Canning,
And filled our glasses with buttermilk cooled in the well.

She opened the wood door on winter afternoons,
And called us in to warm ourselves at the kitchen stove,
Where, reluctant to start our chores after the long walk home from
School,
We stood ravished by the smells,
Sweet potatoes and cornbread baking,
Maybe an old hen that'd stopped laying,
While Papa sat in his chair by the window,
Lost in a batch of seed catalogs.

He made us a hard-scrabble living, poor hapless dreamer,
Beguiled by government bulletins into taking up a last-chance
Farm beyond the dry line.
But Mama made us a home in that wind-whipped little shack
Marooned on the edge of the plains.

She cooked and cleaned, pickled and preserved and put up
Wild plum jelly, singing hymns as she went.
Washed on a rubboard, hung the clothes on days so hot

They blew dry in minutes,
On days so cold they froze as her stiff fingers pinned them to
The icy wire,
And ironed with a pair of sad irons, aptly named.

She picked up the pieces after dust storms and hail storms,
Twisters and lightning strikes;
Waited patiently on God's promise of rain in season;
And kept a row of coffee cans bright with moss rose
On the front porch,
Where she aired her canary behind the honeysuckle vine
That hid him from the butcher birds.

She darned and mended and let down hems by lamplight,
Listening to our lessons;
Nursed us through illnesses, comforted our bruised hearts,
Demanded our best, matching it always with her own,
And sent us out into the world, one by one, torn each time
Between tears and pride.

When we went home to bury her,
Tom and Sue said they could feel her presence everywhere.
Well, she was as much a part of that house as the floorboards
And ceiling beams, seldom leaving it except to help a
Neighbor in need, or to attend church Sunday morning,
Even after Papa went on to his reward.

At the end, services over, last guest gone,
They left by the front.
But I walked out the back, where she used to call us in to
Supper through the screen on summer evenings,
And opened the wood door on winter afternoons, to call us in
From the cold.

The Fleshpicker

by Jamie Eneff

The fleshpicker
was long and dark
fingers
limbs and
eyes

A spider
full of laughter and lively black eyes
he harvested flesh from death's web
and delivered dreamers to their dreams.
Scraping bone with his long black nails
he cleaned them with great care
Then would prepare the mourning family's meal

The Fleshpicker

by Jamie Eneff

The fleshpicker
was long and dark
fingers
limbs and
eyes

A spider
full of laughter and lively black eyes
he harvested flesh from death's web
and delivered dreamers to their dreams.
Scraping bone with his long black nails
he cleaned them with great care
Then would prepare the mourning family's meal

Alongside the English Department

by John d'Andriole

Alongside the English Department,
tongues tingle on the tic of a thousand apostrophes
with the bearded mouths tugging on
lines cast from Ben Jonson.

Alongside the English Department
noses nibble on the heaven scent
whispers of musky decay in sheaves of
literature linen books of tissue hampered
by demotic French in a bad translation.

Argue argue argue argue the
realities of pretend
of Shelley the poetic dictatorship
(and Sylvia bitching about her daddy)
and Young Brown reality-crossed.
Steno pads paper clips tits on the secretary
memos drinks classes like bumps on the smooth
road of faculty meetings drinks
This concrescence of flesh to form me.

We craft wind of air.

Hint hint hint hint hidden
meaning in the letters of the gods
to mortal tenure professors
secrets passed
of the recipe of soul
decoded
from the white fire of spaces in the letters.
Meanings build as the dead don't dispute.

An English Department is a reality

Alongside the English Department

by John d'Andriole

Alongside the English Department,
tongues tingle on the tic of a thousand apostrophes
with the bearded mouths tugging on
lines cast from Ben Jonson.

Alongside the English Department
noses nibble on the heaven scent
whispers of musky decay in sheaves of
literature linen books of tissue hampered
by demotic French in a bad translation.

Argue argue argue argue the
realities of pretend
of Shelley the poetic dictatorship
(and Sylvia bitching about her daddy)
and Young Brown reality-crossed.
Steno pads paper clips tits on the secretary
memos drinks classes like bumps on the smooth
road of faculty meetings drinks
This concrescence of flesh to form me.

We craft wind of air.

Hint hint hint hint hidden
meaning in the letters of the gods
to mortal tenure professors
secrets passed
of the recipe of soul
decoded
from the white fire of spaces in the letters.
Meanings build as the dead don't dispute.

An English Department is a reality

as a seven letter word meaning
"whisper."

Students crank depression from the
doom mistress
creativity.

Faculty whisper in lots
Gnostic knowledge of Milton
as Eliot melts,
drooping himself into a hundred ABC's.
Poe lovers all sunken eyed lurching about
in black lipstick and too much eye shadow.
Raven lunatics.

There were
on the edges of order of chaotic
despotic synchronicity
desks in a graph
and students stacks of razor paper and sunlight white as correct-a-type bouncing
off the multi-blue carpet to glow as a plutonium beautiful menace. Students
disheveled on paper paved deadlines pens skating on lines of blue notebook menace
together pirouetting in word circles maneuvered by cloned arms
above . . . above the scene
of shirts and dresses and hair receding
pens dip like lovers to spill an
image from an alphabetic soup.

What does it mean?

My letterbox it fills with words to no beginning
Pen tickles light as sparrow feet
that flit to the ground but don't land.
This concrescence of words to form ideas.

frisbee

by Julie Ann Shilling

flashing blue
back and forth
in the late
summer sun
from hand
to hand
a small connection
between two people
spinning on
invisible lines
drawn in the air
by the wind

The Other Side of Silence

by Holly Easttom

On the other side of silence, you sit,
knees drawn to your hammering chest.
You think I don't see your smoke
hand wipe away tears.
Your liquid eyes pool, promise to travel.
Rage has an angry brush,
streaked purple under those eyes,
mourning islands in shallow water.

On the other side of silence, you shriek,
scream your silent voice sharper still.
I hear a whisper, minute tug on sleeve.
A vague unease when I've gone too far,
used my tongue as a whip on innocent flesh.
I see through to you,
shoulders shaking,
lips moving in a silent plea,
to not recreate you,
to chatter through, collect you,
suffocate the need.

On the other side of silence,
you shout to me, and
I listen.
I listen.

Cloudy Day

by **Todd Mihalcik**

Two bony frames draped
In skin.

Within each

The usual—

Muscles, organs, vessels, brain.

We stand beside one another
On a dry grassy hill, gazing
At the sunlit dome
Splattered with clouds,
White and amorphous,
Pushed along by
A chilly third month breeze.

She sees she says,
Cream puffs freshly-formed,
Sweet,
Poised atop a plate
Of rounded glass.

I see I say,
whales grouped and ghostly,
Tracking steadily across silent,
Strange seas to
A graveyard held fast,
Suspended beyond the sun.

Rorschachs on a cloudy day.

Stowaway

by Hadley Jerman

In a cramped and dirty ship
and hidden beneath her mother's skirts,
Katie Pojar, my great-great grandmother,
came to America

Smuggled under petticoats
because her family was too poor
to pay her fare

In this black and white photo,
taken a lifetime later,
white-haired Katie seems small enough still
to be a stowaway

Standing behind a wooden table,
she smiles down at her flowers,
lilies and vines and big pom-pom blooms
neatly arranged in jars
in someone's backyard

Katie Pojar, now in her eighties,
has grandchildren bountiful as the blooms
Still, I like to imagine her remembering
those days when white-capped waves
rocked her gently
in the folds
of her mother's petticoats.

Shake Me When He's Done

by Trent Dugas

Dirty water in the tub twists the drain.
Tender age I dry with a brown cloth.
There is a pound at the front door.
My dad answers: Mumbling.
He walks up the carpet stairs of the apartment.
Each step irritates my stomach. Sinking thoughts
with each sound of the carpet. I can feel and hear
his hands brushing the plaster walls.
Tolerance has no time.

The bathroom door slams open, the claims stop.
He looks at me, all I see in his face is walk on by
and you're going to get dropped.
Snap, Pop; Leather belt black onto bare wet skin.
Purple welts blister between shoulder blades. Cord
binding welter with smattering licks.

Crying, Pleading, Screaming.

Wait! On his fist I spot blood. The taste of it seeping
the back of my throat. The entrance of my nose, a bubble
of blood.

Crying, Pleading, Screaming.

Carpet burns with one ankle in the air. A long pull down the
stairs. His fingernails, packed of skin and plaster. Truth holding
my neck so my spine will not snap. Fumble sights, spinning garden
hose and concrete chipped toes.
I fall to one knee scraping flaps.

Crying, Pleading, Screaming.

A knock on the front door downstairs
at the apartment across the sidewalk.

A kid my age answers the door.

Dad stands behind me with belt in hand
my hair and head in the other.

I stand in my shorts, blood
smeared on my face,

crying, coughing

trying to catch

my breath.

In a whimpering voice,

I apologize.

Plains People

by R. D. Wulf

Plains people are
like sandstone, their forms
fallen and sloping,
the winds have cut dry rivers
into their faces,
their eyes are hawks
wheeling through the blue.
They wait for sunset
and stars sprinkled
above cold sleep.

Thou Art More Sweaty And Less Delightful

by D. L. Birchfield

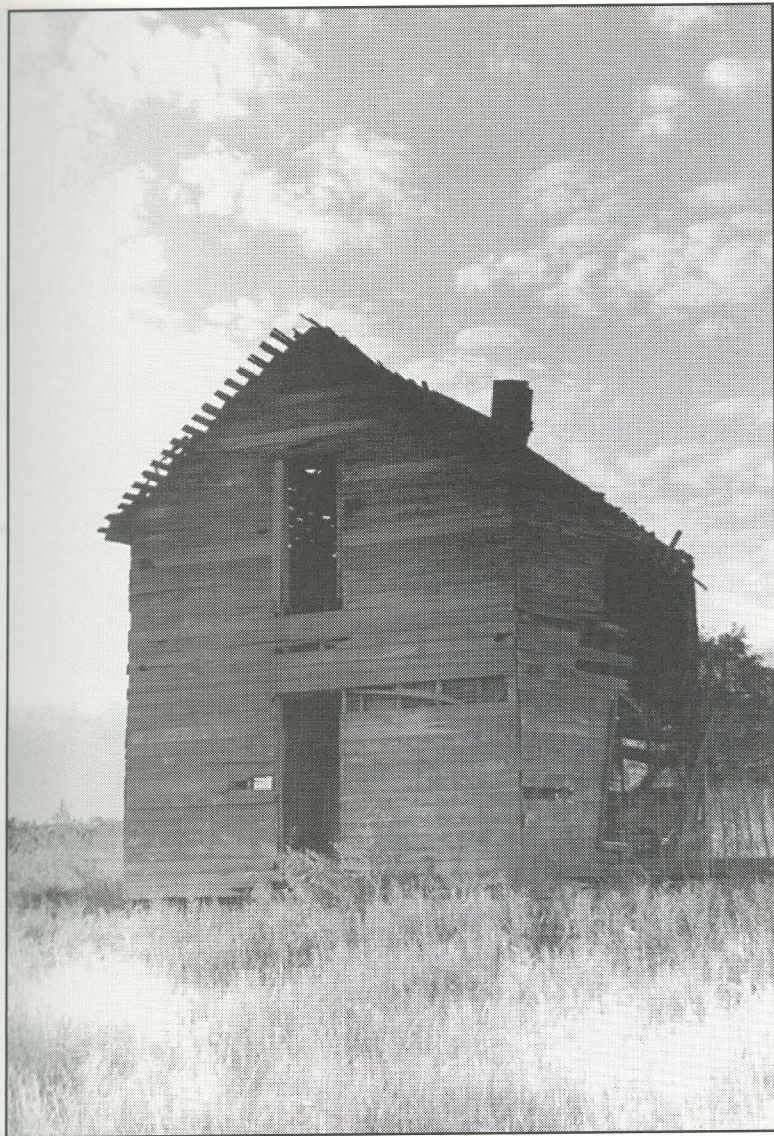
Used to be a creek behind our backyard
Used to flood now and then
Used to go floating on a tiretube

Used to get so hot in the summertime
Used to flood so high in the spring
Cut your foot on the glass in the mud
If you weren't careful

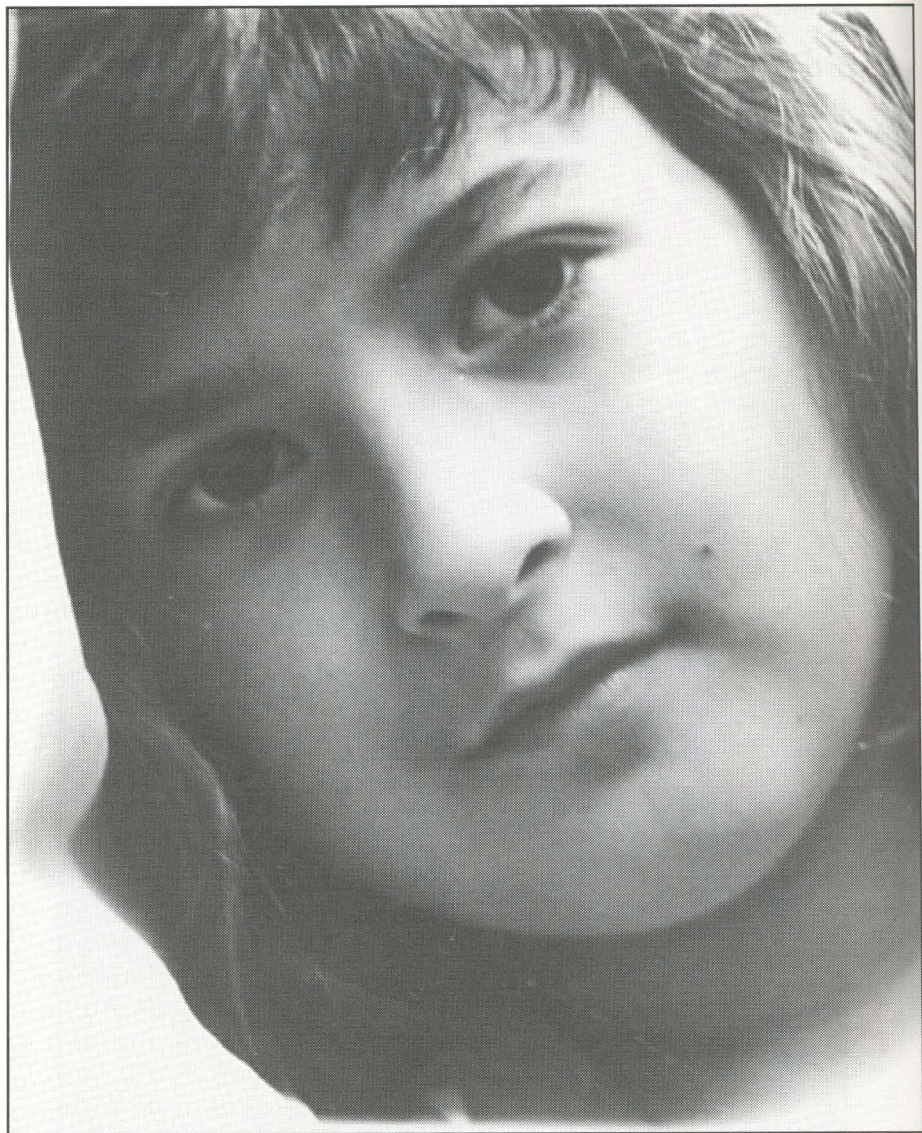
The smell of a slab of half-bad greasy bacon
Dangled out there on a piece of twine and
Hot Damn! Fried crawdad tails tonight!

Tarzan-screaming treetops and damsel-distressed castles
Mop-handled, knight-led, lightning assaults
And mud-caked, waterlogged, lost baseballs
And fistfights now and then
Along about when they got to be
A whole lot more fun to talk to
And just look at
And watch bend over

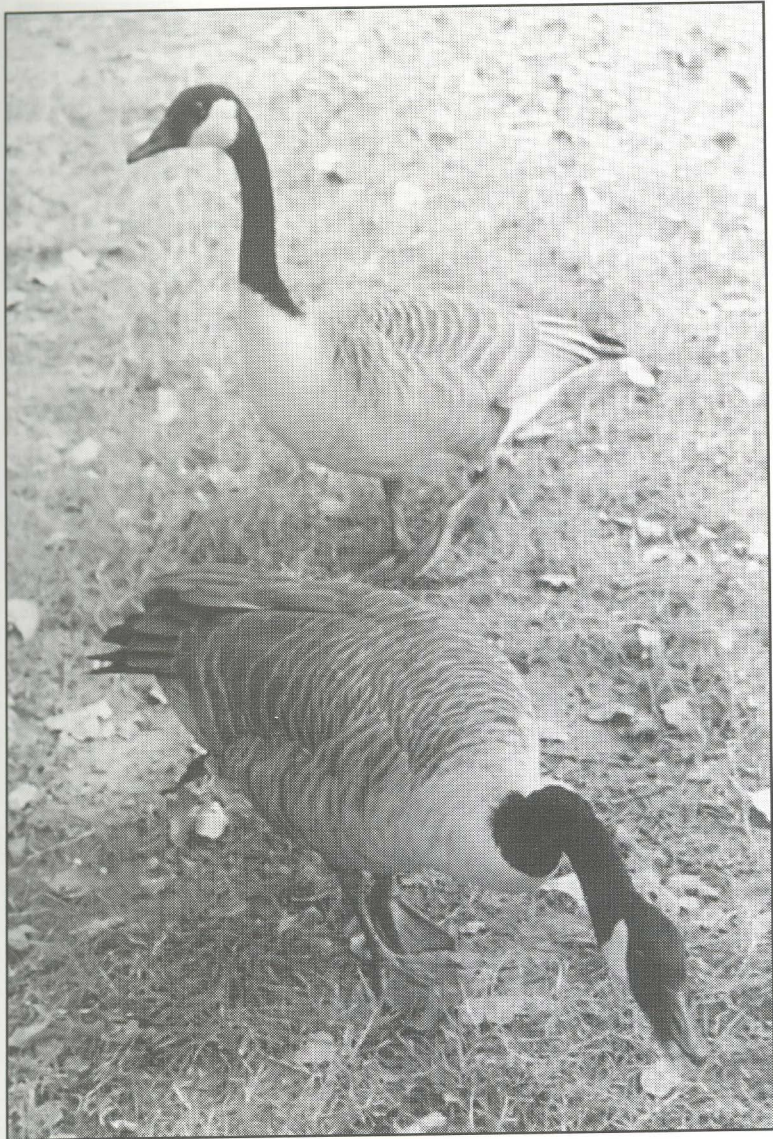
Until, oh, what one can look and taste and smell like
Beat crawdad tails and the glass in the mud all to hell



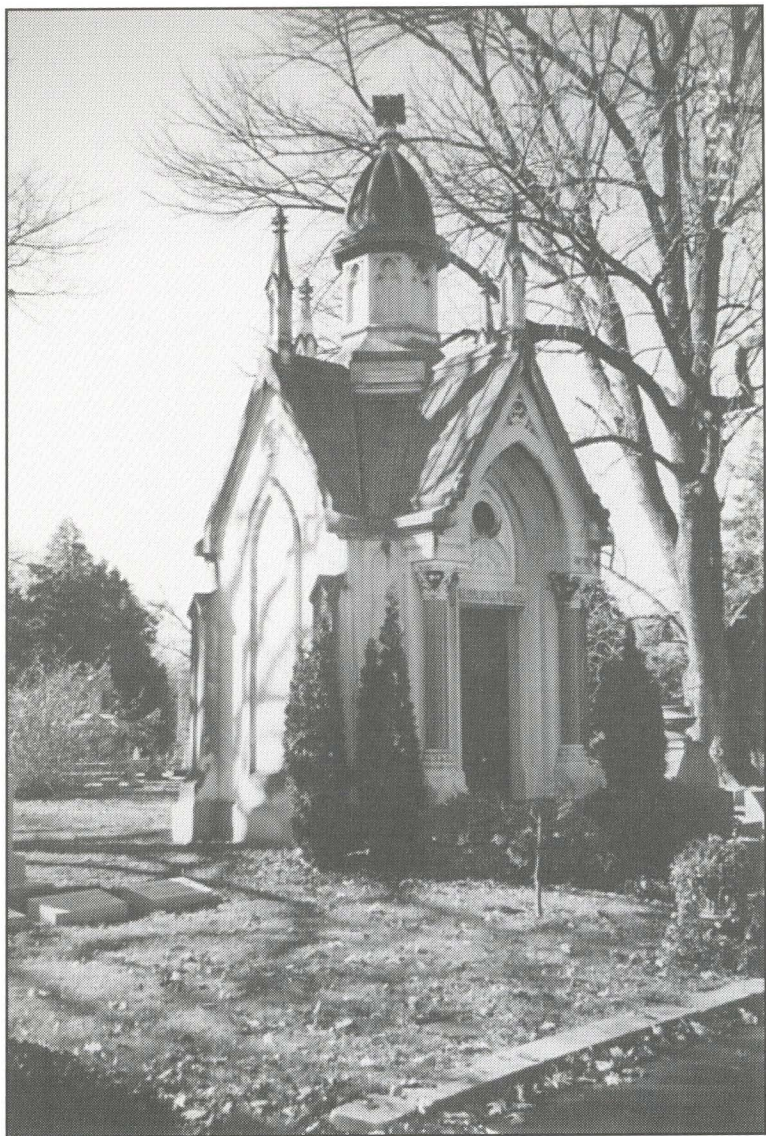
Abandoned Home
Justin Vorel



Pure Innocence
Negenn Sobhani



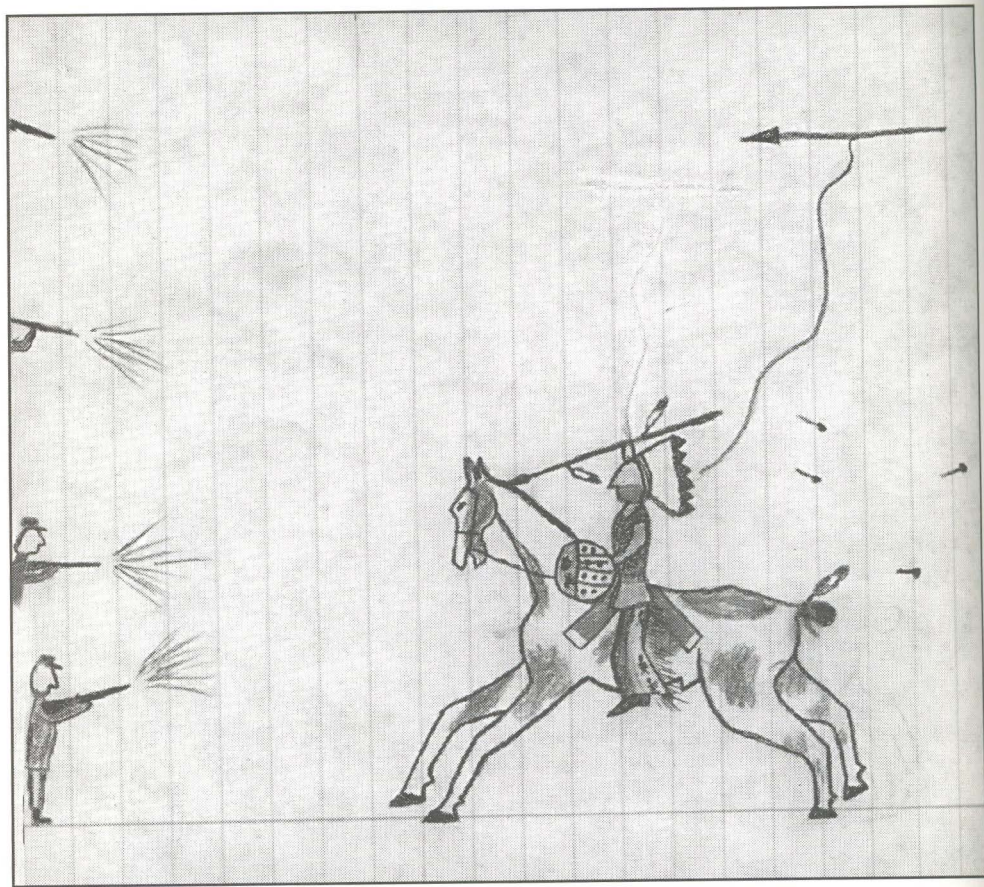
Geese
Justin Vorel



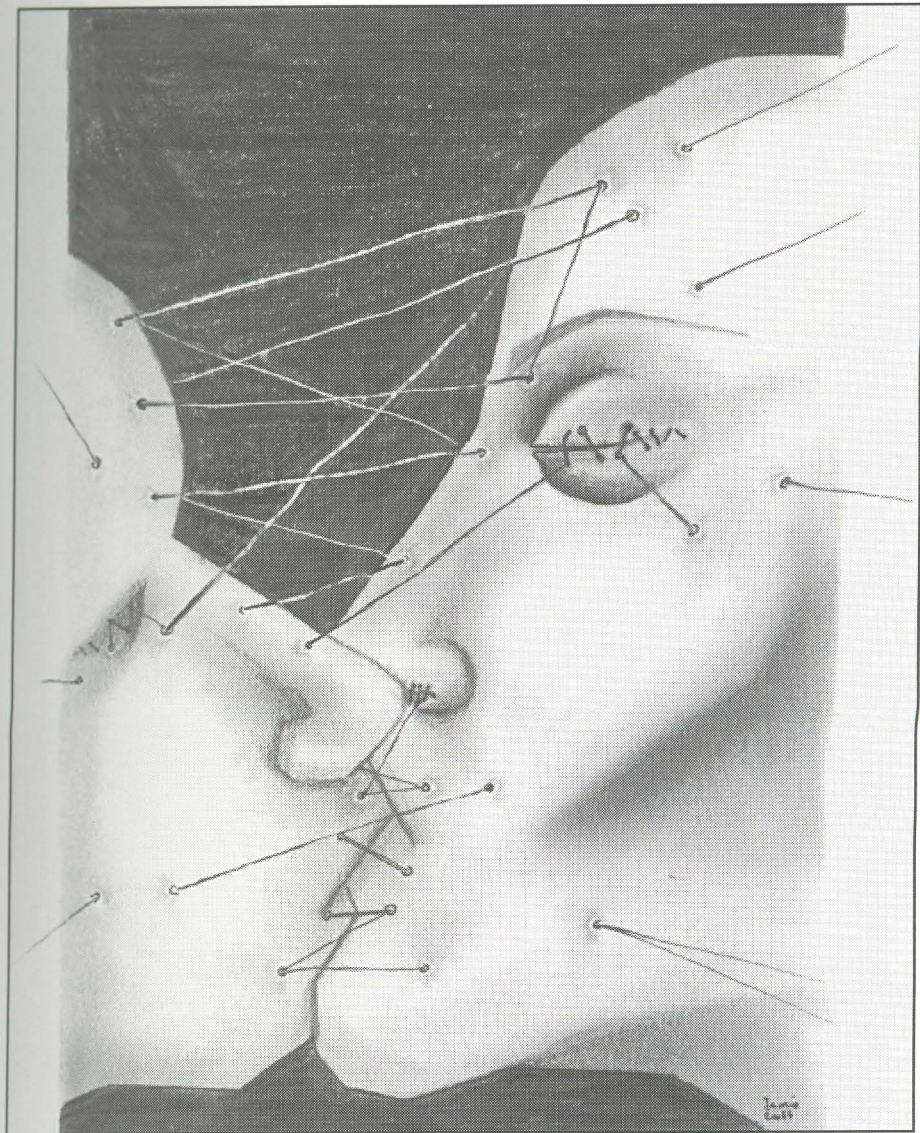
Chapel
Sheryl Christofferson



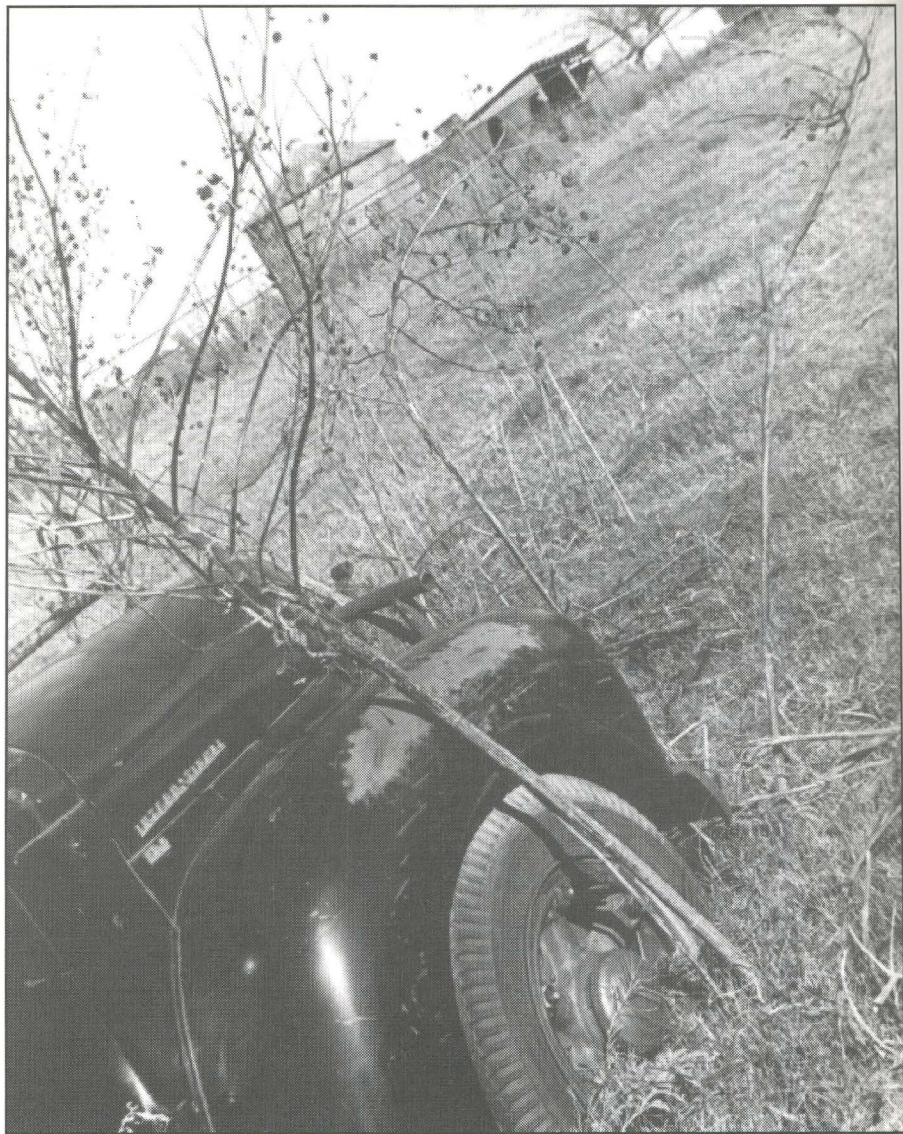
Girls
Rona Stout



Cheyenne Ledger Drawing, 1996
James Black



Love
Jamie Eneff



**Grounded
Trent Dugas**

POETRY • PROSE • ARTWORK