

# **Absolute**

**NINETEEN NINETY-EIGHT**

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**Fiction**

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# Let's Dance

by June Park

At first glance, Lillian assumed they were rats, perched on the old rectory chimney across the street. Curious, she lay aside her book and stepped to the open window. Suddenly, a thin, naked creature hoisted itself from the chimney to sit on the rim. Spindly legs dangling, its bat-like wings barely raised, two glowing eyes found Lillian.

Horrified, she dropped to the floor, and as she peered over the windowsill, the ungodly thing rose to its feet, howling. It then leaped to the rectory roof and cavorted about the tiles—a lewd, vulgar dance. Trembling with fear and disbelief, she reached up, pulled down the window and latched it. “Dear God in Heaven,” she whispered aloud, “I’m surely asleep and having a nightmare.”

The study door opened, and there stood Mrs. Dinty, the short, barrel-shaped housekeeper. Frozen in the soft yellow glow of a small lamp, she said, “Forgive me, ma’am. I had no idea you were at prayer. I’ll come back in a minute.”

Still shaking, Lillian got up and glanced at the roof. Whatever she had seen was gone. “Please don’t leave, Mrs. Dinty,” she muttered, wondering if her mind had played a trick. “I’m finished, truly I am, and I’d so enjoy your company.”

Desperate for light and color, she closed the heavy curtains and asked Mrs. Dinty to light another lamp. The Persian carpet and chintz furniture came alive.

“I’d like to stay and chat, ma’am,” said Mrs. Dinty, glancing at the clock on the mantel, “but it’s a fair walk home and the old man’s expecting his supper.”

Lillian clasped her hands together to keep them from shaking. “Of course. How thoughtless of me. It gets dark early this time of year, doesn’t it?”

“Aye, it does, so if there’s nothing else, I’ll—”

“Just one thing—it won’t take long.”

“Yes, ma’am?”



"I'm a curious individual," said Lillian, "so I was wondering—when you heard a visitor from London planned to stay here on Lambay Island for a couple of months, what did you think?"

"Think, ma'am?"

"Yes. Were you surprised?"

"Knowing a lady was going to rent the house surprised me. Hard to imagine a man coming to this godforsaken place in winter for three months to write a book of poetry. This part of Ireland is a rough, windswept place. Harsher than most."

"And what did you think after I arrived?"

"It was easy to see you was a fine Christian lady, ma'am."

"Thank you, Mrs. Dinty, and do forgive my curiosity, but now that we are better acquainted, has your opinion of me changed at all? Would you, for example, in describing me to your husband, call me levelheaded, not given to flights of fancy?"

Mrs. Dinty squared her shoulders. "I would, indeed, ma'am, but—"

"But what?"

"Well, you're a poet, Miss Plimpton, and the Irish are a mite partial to writers and poets. We forgive them for everything. Their eccentricities, their transgressions, the falsehoods they tell in the name of their art—even their occasional flights of madness."

"Madness?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. I'm not suggesting for one minute that—"

"Thank you, Mrs. Dinty—just one more thing."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Well, this is the nineteenth century, a time of miraculous discoveries and inventions, so do you suppose the average person still believes in ghosts and goblins—that sort of thing?"

The woman grinned. "There isn't an Irishman alive or dead, average or otherwise, who doesn't. Ireland's full of leprechauns, pookas, hobgoblins, and banshees. Most of 'em bad."

"But as Christians—"

"As Christians, I believe we must be alert to these fiends, ma'am, or fall prey to their powers. And they are powerful, to be sure. Why, it took Jesus Christ himself to cast out all those demons from that poor man in the Bible, but why do you ask?"

"No particular reason, though I may use related material in one of my poems." She cringed at the lie. "And what about devils?"

"Devils, ma'am?"

"Yes, creatures our size. Spirits that take human form and do human things—sing or dance, for example."

Mrs. Dinty looked startled. "Hearing that makes me think of demon dancers."

Lillian shuddered. "Demon dancers?"

"Wicked, devious perishers they are."

Lillian felt her heart miss a beat. "In what way?"

"It's said they lure innocent young women into unspeakable vices, hypnotize them into shocking acts. More that that I'll not say, ma'am. The things I've heard they do don't bear repeating—not to a lady like yourself."

"I find it hard to imagine a godly woman would fall prey to such a creature, though, don't you, Mrs. Dinty?"

"Have you not heard the saying 'Invite the devil to dinner and eat breakfast in Hell,' ma'am? Could happen to anyone is my thinking."

"Have you ever seen such a creature?"

Mrs. Dinty feverishly crossed herself two or three times. "Heavens no, ma'am, but rumor has a young woman by the name of Gillian Finney, sister of the priest who once lived in the rectory across the way, being acquainted with one."

"What happened to her?"

"This was years ago, before my time, you understand, and it's just a rumor, but I heard the girl wandered round town, claiming she'd been hypnotized by something or other. The priest was mightily embarrassed. Told everyone she was touched in the head, to ignore her rantings, and send her packing if she came to their door. A tragic state of affairs for a man of the cloth."

"And?"

"Some say she jumped, others say she was pushed, but it was the fall that killed her."

"The fall?"

"The priest rose early each morning to take a walk—that's when he found her, naked to the world, sprawled in the rose garden on the south side of the rectory, her skull crushed. They discovered her slippers and night clothes on the roof, though what she was doing up there in the middle of the night, only God himself knows. Some blamed a demon dancer. Others claimed she'd had a gin or two. I'm inclined to believe the latter." That said, Mrs. Dinty padded to the door. "If I don't go now, ma'am, the old man'll be sending out a search party."

"Of course, Mrs. Dinty—and, thank you."

“Goodnight, ma’am. The cat’s fed. I’ll turn out the lamps downstairs as I leave. See you come morning.”

Lillian reassured herself with one last peek through the curtains and retired to her bedroom, to the blissful comfort of crisp sheets, feather pillows, and a fluffy eiderdown. She often wrote her poetry at this time of night, but she felt troubled, too unsettled even to remove the pins from her hair. Her heart felt calm, but her brain seemed muddled. She needed rest.

Lillian awoke with a start. She felt hot and clammy, and her heart pounded in her chest. What was that dreadful sound? The wind, she decided—whining through the stand of elms in the garden. Or was it? She remembered the creature. Had she really seen the hellish thing, or was it, as Mrs. Dinty suggested, merely a poet’s imagination?

A different sound now—laughter. Not shrill, not high-pitched, but a deep, throaty roar. Lillian donned her robe, slid her feet into slippers, felt her way to the study, and parted the drapes. There he stood on the chimney, wings spread, hands on his hips, laughing at her. The world spun. Her knees shook. Her breath came in spurts. “God have mercy on my soul,” she muttered.

With a labored flap of its hide-like wings, the creature flew into the air and circled the chimney three times—then, poised and dignified as a ballerina, he landed exactly where he’d begun. Bathed in moonlight, the roof resembled a sheet of blue ice, as if one tap of a hammer could shatter it into a million pieces—and did her eyes deceive her, or had the beast undergone a transformation?

Yes, even from this distance, in the dim light, she could see he was definitely taller and sturdier than she remembered. He had a silver hue, his wings had white feathers, and his finely etched face was most appealing, not to mention the black hair curling about his broad shoulders. She then turned her attention to his superb chest and flat stomach—but it was the sight of his amazing manhood that forced her to grip the curtains with both hands and steady herself.

A bead of sweat tickled down between her breasts, and a wicked, delicious sensation flooded her loins. She pulled a chair to the window and sat in it, feet together, hands clasped in the ladylike manner her mother insisted on.

“Take deep, even breaths and remain calm, Lillian,” she told herself. “God is on your side. You have nothing to fear.”

Back arched, chin high, hair blowing in the wind, the man began to dance. He leaped and promenaded about the roof with such amazing skill and dexterity she could



have watched him all night, but he quickly stopped and pointed at himself, jabbed his chest and pointed at her while nodding earnestly—repeated the movements over and over again.

“God have mercy on my soul,” Lillian muttered. “He’s asking if he can come over here.”

For one brief moment, Mrs. Dinty’s words “Wicked,” “Shocking acts,” and “Unspeakable vices” flashed through her mind, but his manner of dancing now—hands clapping, feet tapping, fingers snapping like Spanish castanets—reduced the housekeeper’s words to a miserable pile of ashes.

He soared like a rocket, hovered above the rectory, dove head first to roof level, righted himself, and with his eyes hooded, his powerful legs dangling, his arms and wings outstretched, he rhythmically swung back and forth, back and forth like a pendulum.

Watching him, Lillian’s vision blurred, and to her surprise, she recalled her last Chelsea Ball twelve years ago and how the man she adored, the tall and debonair Reginald Farnsworth, mustache newly clipped, strode toward her as the orchestra played *The Blue Danube*. She’d smiled like a foolish girl and raised her hand in anticipation of taking his. How ludicrous she must have looked, to Reginald and everyone there, when he breezed past her to sweep the beautiful Pamela Humphries onto the dance floor. The embarrassing incident remained so fresh in Lillian’s mind she cringed anew.

The engaged couple invited themselves to tea three months later and begged her to be a bridesmaid—or was it Matron of Honor? She had declined, of course. She had a collection of bridesmaid gowns. Five, to be exact. Did they honestly think she’d make a fool of herself—and her disappointed parents—by wearing a sixth?

Since then, a numbness had settled on her—a fog, a haze, an anesthesia of heart and soul that never quite lifted until this very moment when, miles from home, here in a cozy study on the coast of Ireland, a miracle had occurred. Yes, that’s exactly what he was—a living breathing miracle. He nodded again, pointed again—and Lillian nodded back.

Wings tight against his body, he came at her like a bullet. When she fell back with a shriek, he shot up, out of sight. Seconds later, she heard a faint rustling noise on the landing. The cat, maybe—but the doorknob rotated slowly, the door eased open, and there he stood, hewn from a solid block of silver, an archangel’s smile on his lips. Michelangelo’s *David*.

Her mouth opened to greet him, but words wouldn't come, and as he passed, she detected the dizzying aroma of poppies. Yet, under that exotic scent lurked the faint, but not wholly unpleasant, trace of another. Smoke? Soot?

He threw open the French windows, leaped to the verandah's wrought iron railing and stepped back into space. Wings spread, he hovered there, beckoning with one finger.

Lillian followed, climbed on the railing and, with the wind beating against her face, balanced herself. Her robe fell away. He hovered closer, reached out, removed the pins from her tightly wound chignon, dropped them one by one, and as her chestnut hair fell loose and free about her shoulders, he unfastened the buttons on her flannel nightgown, slipped it over her head, and tossed it to the wind.

Her shoulder blades cracked open. Wings broke free, grew larger by the second, unfolded, unwrapped and unfurled themselves, towered above her. Hand in hand, they could now soar wherever the currents took them, to the highest mountain peak, to the stars, to the moon, to every uncharted planet in the universe—to Paradise.

Poised on the rail, arms raised, a reckless euphoria swept through Lillian like a warm tide. The air filled with music. Delicious woodwinds, sultry violins. Elgar's *Symphony for Strings in E Minor* was her favorite. Then, as if she were a famous actress, an audience of thousands sitting out there in the dark applauded. Lillian smiled for them, tilted her head, and curtsied.

Wings fully extended, hips swaying, muscles flexing and relaxing, magically suspended, her soon-to-be-lover took her hands in his.

"Come, my darling," he whispered, "let's dance," and Lillian, weeping tears of joy, stepped forward.

# *There Have Been Times*

by Debbe Moon

**T**hough it had taken most of the morning, the station wagon was finally loaded—almost. Forty more pounds and the entire trip to Fort Rucker, Alabama, would be felt on the rims of the wheels. Fort Rucker lay partly divided between Coffee and Dale Counties in the southeastern corner of Alabama. It had a special place in Darlene's heart. Somewhere on that military base wandered her husband. He was a military man in flight training school and had been transferred to Fort Rucker three months earlier. He left behind a wife and their four boys all under the age of ten. She missed their life and couldn't wait to resume, with her partner, the work of living in this world.

The separation was regretful but had been necessary since school would be in session for three more months, and neither parent had the heart to relocate the boys before summer. Now, school was out and it was moving day. Darlene was excited and apprehensive and, at times, ecstatic and fearful . . . and she wasn't sure which emotion to cling to. She was an hour away from the longest driving trip she had ever undertaken without the aid and support of another adult. She was not only the lone driver but responsible for the well-being of four children and one spastic German shepherd.

Darlene's mother expressed her support by stating unequivocally that her daughter was unable to make this trip alone. It was 1965, for crying out loud, and she was convinced that Darlene could not handle those MANY miles of highway between Madison, Wisconsin, and Fort Rucker, Alabama. Nor could she handle four boys between the ages of four and nine by herself. Her mother was from a much older school of thought than Darlene. Sometimes that small fact created a canyon between them. Darlene kissed her sweetly and assured her she would write.

One hour later, King, the family German shepherd, had been heavily medicated, the boys had been emptied of all body fluids, and the last bag of snacks was loaded in



the very back of the station wagon, just out of everyone's reach. The passengers took their places in the car, with the oldest child riding shotgun in the front seat. He had been the man of the house for three months and was not yet ready to relinquish his role. Darlene steered the car towards the highway. King's head rolled from side to side as the station wagon negotiated each turn in the road. His eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he napped. The noise from the three boys in the back seat dropped five decibels, and Darlene kept her eyes peeled on the highway signs so as not to miss that most important turn.

Once an hour, for the remainder of the trip, the boys took turns requesting the same information: "Mom, how much farther?" Darlene was anxious to involve the boys as well as inform them, so she spent the first day of the trip making the effort to give a reasonably accurate answer whenever the question was posed. By the second day, however, she was road-weary and threatened to sell each child to the first carnival barker they happened upon. The meaning was lost on them, however, and the nagging questions continued.

After 120 miles of driving, Darlene decided to make an all-around pit stop. She drove into the town of LaSalle, Illinois, and pulled into a Mobile gas station. She was traveling during the glory days when gas was only twenty cents a gallon and men in sparkling blue uniforms came out to greet people as they pulled their petroleum-swilling road hogs up to the gas pumps, yelling, "Fill 'er up, Mac, and check under the hood."

She instructed the boys to make use of the restroom and then retrieve a soda from the ice chest in the rear of the station wagon. The sun felt warm as she watched over the young man checking her oil and water. As the attendant orchestrated his mighty squeegee across the front windshield, Darlene cheerfully pointed out a bug smear he missed in the upper right corner and then proceeded to take care of her own needs.

Darlene walked from the restroom directly to the office area of the gas station. She gave a sideways glance toward the car as she pulled out her wallet, preparing to pay the gas bill. She noticed a pair of legs hanging out the back of the station wagon and, through the car windows, two small heads standing on the other side of the vehicle.

A man dressed in military blue was also in the office, and he started a conversation with the pretty woman who was apparently traveling some distance by herself with four small boys. Darlene was happy to talk with someone who was serving the same employer as her husband. The gentleman was on his way to San Diego and would be shipped off to Vietnam shortly after he arrived. The thought of U.S. involvement in

Vietnam frightened her because she knew the strong possibility that her husband would join this handsome man in blue. She felt a sudden urgency to be on her way so she could spend every available moment with her husband.

Five minutes later, Darlene was walking toward the car while trying to take a head count so she would not leave anyone behind. It looked to her that all the boys had crawled into the backseat, making it crowded and difficult to take an accurate count. She opened the door and took her place behind the wheel. She glanced up in the rearview mirror, preparing to restart the head count, and screamed as though she'd been goosed.

Perched in the back seat was an old man who obviously lived in the sun. His skin was roasted to a blackened brown. His long hair hung in two gray braids half-way down his back. His brown eyes were blank and stared straight ahead. He appeared to be in remarkable shape for someone who looked three-quarters of a century old. A finely sewn, brightly beaded band circled his forehead.

Darlene turned her head around in a way that would have made Linda Blair proud had she already filmed her infamous movie. She looked the gentleman over from head to toe as her lips, in a perfect "O," were speechless.

The boys were beside themselves with sheer wonderment and joy at their treasured discovery. They all talked at once. Darlene noticed road dust on the old man's moccasins. "Where . . . where . . . where?" Nothing else would come out.

From somewhere in the distance, Darlene heard phrases . . . pieces of the English language . . . a language she hoped to speak some day. "Mom, look at 'im! Isn't he cool?" cried one child.

"His name is Billy Yellow Mountain!" cried another.

"He's a real medicine man and we found him!" cried still another.

"He's coming with us!" exclaimed the four-year-old.

Darlene found her voice. "What?!?!"

"Worshipped mother of the male tribe. I was galloping to the great Shawnee National Forest and your respectful men offered me an easier way to my destination. I have pressing business. I accepted the gift."

"THE SHAWNEE FOREST?! My God, man, it must be 300 miles away. How in the world were you going to get there?" Darlene looked stunned.

"I have two fine legs attached to two solid feet."

Darlene's eyes fell to the old man's shirt pocket. The blue denim material seemed to have a life all its own. His shirt pocket was fluttering. It was as though his hand was moving underneath his shirt. The four-year-old stood balancing himself as he leaned against the back of Darlene's car seat. He cupped his small hands around her right ear



and whispered, "He has a hummingbird in his pocket."

Darlene gave her youngster a look only mothers can which clearly means stop that bad behavior.

The pocket moved again.

"Look, Mr. Mount . . . Mr. Yellow Mount . . . ." She looked to the boys for assistance.

Her seven-year-old stated matter-of-factly, "Just call 'im medicine man, Mom. That's what we call 'im."

Darlene tried again. "Mr. Medicine Man. Please try to understand. . . . I'm a woman . . . a . . . a mother . . . traveling alone with these boys . . . these four small boys . . . and we're on our way to Alabama to join their father . . . my husband . . . you see and . . . well, I didn't plan on having visitors."

Billy Yellow Mountain nodded in understanding but made no move towards the exit. The pocket moved again. Darlene was not sure what was in that pocket and she was very sure she didn't want to know.

"You see, Mister . . . I mean . . . Yellow Jacket . . . I'm not sure how my husband would feel with me hauling around a total stranger . . . on the road . . . with four small boys."

Darlene's oldest child leaned forward to speak in private with his mother. "Mom, it's already done . . . we already invited him. Don't be an Indian giver."

Darlene arched an eyebrow, not sure how to take her son's bold behavior. She heard a car honk and saw a bright red Mustang convertible with angry grillwork threatening in her rearview mirror. Seeing no other way, she pulled the car forward and steered it towards the highway that would take her to Alabama by way of the Shawnee National Forest.

The boys were ecstatic with their guest but so much in awe of his omnipotent presence that they barely spoke for fifty miles. Twice, when Darlene looked into her rearview mirror, she saw his pocket wiggle. It frightened and excited her to think that an actual hummingbird might be in his breast pocket.

At a point when she was ready to blow the whole notion off and do a sanity check for allowing a complete and odd stranger in the backseat of the sacred family car, the six-year-old spoke. "Medicine Man, do you know any stories?"

"Yes, young warrior. I will tell you the story of the Trickster and the great penis."

"No!"

All four boys jumped.

"Mom, we want to hear a story about the great penis!" cried the four-year-old.

Darlene steered the family car onto the shoulder of the highway. When she was safely parked, she put on her best "June Cleaver" smile and turned to face her backseat audience.

"Now, boys . . . we are not going to be involved in any fairy tales that involve the male anatomy, right, Mr. Medicine?"

"Caring mother, I would not dream of telling a tale that I would not tell my own small grandchildren."

"Well, now, that's better." Darlene put the gear shift in "D" and pulled out onto the highway. This trip was certainly turning out to be a challenge. She listened as the old man began his story.

"Five hundred thousand moons ago, the old coyote came upon an infinite lake. Far on the other side, he saw many young maidens washing their hair in the crystal clear water. He wished to get close to the maidens and teach them something about life, but he feared his presence would scare them away. He was known in many circles as the trickster, so he took out his very long penis and began . . ."

"WUP WUP WUP."

The boys looked at each other. Word came down from She Who Must Be Obeyed. There was no way they were going to hear the story of the great penis and they knew it. Not unless one of them was able to drive the car in a quick getaway while Carrie Nation's offspring was in the restroom at the next pit stop.

"I meant it, Mr. Medicine," came a stern voice from the front seat. "No stories with the P word."

The older boys looked at each other and rolled their eyes. Billy Yellow Mountain stared straight ahead. His shirt pocket fluttered. For the next twenty-five miles, no one spoke. Mystical movement occurred in the magic pocket from time to time, but little else shifted. King, the wonder dog, had been moved to the front seat to accommodate the medicine man. He slept soundly, lifeless thanks to his tranquilizer cocktail. His long tongue hung almost to the floor board. A thin stream of saliva meandered to the tip of his tongue where it puddled on the floor of the station wagon.

Darlene could only hope that, at the next pit stop, Mr. Medicine would leave or get lost or forget what the car looked like, and she and the children could make a quick getaway. But during the next pit stop at Effingham, Illinois, Darlene watched, disheartened, as the boys stuck to Mr. Medicine like glue.

Figuring King needed a break, Darlene dragged him out of the car and tried to stand him up on a patch of grass so he could do his business. He attempted to stand on unsteady feet, and when she spoke his name, his German shepherd ears raised to half-

level, and he actually groaned at her. His inaction showed that he did not have the same goals as Darlene, so she tried lifting his back leg, hoping to jog his memory, but he promptly lay down on his other three legs, obviously wanting to continue his nap. Knowing she was going to have to lift him back into the car, she rolled him on his back and scooped him up. Trying to balance him in her arms was like trying to balance a fifty-pound feed sack full of BB's. Using her thighs as reinforcement, she maneuvered him to the car and dumped him in the front seat. By then, her FIVE passengers and the moving pocket were all in their places.

Darlene got behind the wheel and headed the car south toward Shawnee National Forest. She turned on the radio to catch up on the news. Perhaps it would report that a deranged Indian with a magic pocket was on the loose. Then she would have a reason to park him by the roadside. She was a bit upset with herself for not being more alarmed at having a strange old man in the car. But, honestly, she was beginning to sense a peaceful, almost mystical quality about him.

She heard a commotion in the back seat and turned to see Mr. Medicine pull an acorn from her seven-year-old's ear. The boys were duly impressed with all their "ooo's" and "ahhh's." His hands were moving very quickly as he made three pebbles disappear. Darlene caught herself smiling.

She drove.

To the side of the road was a large sign stating that travelers were now entering Shawnee National Forest.

"Right here, please," came a voice from the back seat.

"Do you want to get out here?" asked Darlene, perplexed. There was nothing in sight but hundreds of trees: silver maples, cedars, elms, and black oaks.

"Right here, please," came the same request.

Darlene pulled the station wagon to the side of the road. Once the car was parked on the shoulder, she turned to ask him if he wouldn't like to be dropped at the nearest town. But Billy Yellow Mountain was already exiting the car. The boys called after him, "Good-bye, Medicine Man."

Darlene watched as the old man crossed a low area and disappeared into the woods. She sighed deeply and wondered where in the world he could be headed. How strange some people's lives seemed. The boys moved to the right side of the car and pressed their noses against the window glass.

"Wow, look at 'im go."

"He's in a hurry to do his rain dance," said the four-year-old, knowingly.



When the old man was no longer in sight, Darlene maneuvered the car back onto the highway. The boys settled in the back seat and became unusually quiet. Darlene could hear a low hum. She turned to determine where the noise was coming from. *Oh, my God*, she thought. *Is that car trouble. Are we going to have car trouble?* She strained, trying to capture the location of the humming noise.

Appearing suddenly in front of her eyes was a ruby-throated hummingbird. The sun's reflection on the bird made the red throat appear metallic. Darlene screamed. The boys hollered at her, "Don't scare it, Mom."

Darlene jerked the car over to the shoulder. The bird remained suspended right in front of her eyes. The only consolation she felt was that she was wearing her favorite pair of sunglasses. She felt sure that, without the protection, the bird would be sucking the juices from her bright blue eyes.

The bird's long, pointed beak came right at the lens of the glasses. It gently placed its beak against the lower right corner of the right lens.

"What the . . . !" Darlene jerked the door open and jumped out of the car. The bird followed, then shot off into the woods in the direction of the old man. The boys screamed from the backseat, "MOM, WHAT'D YOU DO THAT FOR?"

Darlene took off her glasses and looked at the lens. Situated in the lower right corner of the right lens was a bright red rose with a rhinestone chip in the center. Realization washed over her. The reason she bought the glasses in the first place was because of the painted red rose with the rhinestone in the middle. She smiled to herself. The boys were still screaming at her from the back seat. She calmly took her place behind the wheel and returned to the highway. The boys calmed down quickly. Order was restored. Darlene was at peace . . . ready to be reunited with the man who had blessed her with these four darlings.

Except for circling Birmingham, Alabama, five times, trying to negotiate the highway interchange, the rest of the trip was uneventful. Oh, yes, there was that incident with the three-inch cockroaches in the Nashville motel. But by the following afternoon, the station wagon's precious cargo was sitting at the entrance gate of Ft. Rucker.

Darlene and her sons didn't know they were making history . . . their history; they didn't know that they would end up in Oklahoma, waiting for their husband and father to return from Vietnam nor did they know that he was going to die serving his country. They knew only that, for the moment, they were home.

# Hay Days '81

by Tom Newbrey

I lost Jeff in a cornfield. Things had gone pretty well that night except for that. Mom and I had went up to visit my Aunt and Uncle for a week. The thing about going back to that crappy little town is, nothing ever changes.

Our visit happened to coincide with the Hay Days Festival, which was held every year in honor of the hay harvest. Jeff and I had Aunt Jen drive us into town and drop us off on Friday evening of the festival. We told her we'd find a way home.

"Got any money?" Jeff asked as soon as Aunt Jen's car had pulled off.

"What for?" I asked.

"I know a guy that'll buy us some beer."

I dug in my pocket and came up with seven dollars and some change. We set off for Jeff's friend's house.

Jeff's friend turned out to be some old drunk that used to play in the band with my uncle. He allowed that, for the price of a six pack, he might be able to do some purchasing for us.

After a quick trip to Seventh Street Liquor, Jeff and I were discreetly dropped in a back alley just off of Main Street. We pulled down the fire escape ladder of a four-story brick building and started climbing to the top, hauling a case of beer and half a pint of whiskey with us.

We were popping the top off a cold one as the sun was setting. The lights of the carnival on Main Street flickered a few times and then came on permanently, glowing dimly at first, then growing in intensity.

"What ever happened to Jamie and Alberto Roderiguez?" I asked.

"Jamie's in Kearney, doing time for burglary, and Alberto shacked up with some chick that worked for the meatpacking plant. They moved to Ohio, when they closed the plant. Last I heard, he was still there."

I ran down the list of a few others I had known when I still lived in Grady. Like I say, nothing ever changes there. If you're not well off, you go to work for a plant or feedlot and scrape by for the rest of your life. Booze is the cheapest and preferred form of entertainment for a lot of folks.

We sat on top of that building and drank. The view from where we sat was pretty good, and we could recognize familiar faces easily enough. We kept an eye out for cops, just in case. I recognized some distant relatives. That was a kick, seeing how old they looked. I didn't see anybody I wanted to go down and give a big sloppy kiss and hug to, though. Maybe that's why we moved away. I was only seven when we left.

The carnival was a machine of its own. When we first arrived, there were mostly families: screaming kids dragging parents, screaming parents dragging kids. As time passed, the carnival shifted gears. The crowd was younger now. A guy in a letter jacket won a stuffed bear for a girl who looked like she was head cheerleader. Another guy in a T-shirt, jeans, and a pair of snakeskin boots wandered into an alley across the street from us. His date followed him innocently. He threw an arm around her waist, pulled her close, and started kissing her. Soon he had her backed up to a wall and had one hand under her shirt, groping her unceremoniously. She escaped by ducking under one arm and ran out into the street, straightening her bra as she went. The carnival shifted gears again. The clock on the bank flashed 12:17. Men roamed up and down the street in groups of two's and three's. The guy from the alley staggered down the street, supported by his date. Groups of people gathered around the front doors of the two bars across the street from each other. They drank beer from bottles, and clouds of cigarette smoke rose from their midst and floated up past the streetlights and dissipated into the darkness.

I watched Chet Underwood stagger out of the Red Rooster, slump down on the windowsill in front, and light a cigarette. Chet hadn't changed much: same pointed cowboy boots, jeans, and a yoked western shirt. His Elvis "do" was gone, though, replaced by shiny scalp that threatened to recede down his back. Chet had dated my mom for a while after my parents divorced and Dad went to Hastings for "psychiatric help." Chet used to let me sit on his lap and steer his big old Buick down the gravel roads outside of town. He had an eight track in his car and listened to Merle Haggard over and over. I used to lay awake at nights and listen to him slap my mom around the front room.

"You 'bout ready to go?" I asked Jeff.

"Yea. Just let me finish off this beer."

"Hurry," I urged.

Jeff turned his can upside down over his mouth, then crushed it, and tossed it into a sack full of empties.



"I'm ready," he said.

The streets were deserted by now except for a few stragglers from the carnival and the occasional drunk that came wandering down the street. I picked the empty half-pint bottle up off the roof of the building and walked to the edge and hurled it across the street at Chet Underwood as hard as I could. The bottle disintegrated when it hit a parking meter that he was standing behind. I could see Chet getting bombarded by the pieces of glass and putting his arms up in a too-late defensive move.

"SON OF A BITCH," I screamed.

We scrambled for the fire escape and got down off the roof in no time flat. We picked our way down the alleys of Grady, and by the time we made it to River Bridge, I figured we would be all right.

We crossed the bridge and still had a good five miles to go to make it back to my aunt's house.

"I'm hungry," Jeff complained. "Let's stop and get something to eat," he pleaded.

"Sure, I'm thirsty, too," I agreed.

We stopped at a little convenience store that stood next to the highway. AL'S QUIK STOP the sign said. Jeff picked a frozen dinner out of the freezer case and unwrapped it.

"You're not gonna' put that in the microwave, are ya'?" I asked.

"Why not?"

"It's in an aluminum tray. You can't put metal in a microwave," I warned.

"Aw, bullshit. I do it all the time," Jeff said.

He popped the tray in the microwave and turned the dial as far as it would go. For a minute, it kind of looked like somebody welding in a shoe box. Jeff grabbed the dial and turned it off.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered.

I tugged at Jeff's shirt and headed for the door. The clerk was looking back in our direction, alerted, no doubt, by the sound of sparks arcing off the sides of the tray.

We started down the road at a trot and made it to the gravel road that led off into the country towards Aunt Jen's house in pretty short time. The darkness settled in around us as we distanced ourselves from the highway. The gravel crunched angrily under our feet, breaking up the regular rhythm of crickets scraping their complaint. Aunt Jen's yard light hung lonesomely over the top of a cornfield, shining like the star of Bethlehem.

"Let's cut through the cornfield. It's only about a mile that way," Jeff said.

"I don't know. It looks awful dark out in there."

"Aw, come on," Jeff pleaded. He jumped down into the irrigation ditch surrounding the cornfield and started clawing his way up the other side. I followed a little more cautiously, picking my footing on my way into the ditch.

We started threading our way through the shoulder-high corn. I could see Jeff's head over the top of drooping tassels. He seemed to be drifting away from the yard light that still levitated against the backdrop of the night sky. I had charted a course straight through the corn and was trying my best to keep the light dead ahead of me.

"Why'd ya' throw that bottle at Chet for?" Jeff asked.

I started to ignore him and then decided to tell him. I told him about Chet letting me sit on his lap and steer his car down the gravel roads of Hamilton County. Then I told him about laying awake at night and listening to Chet and my mom argue until they started fighting, and hearing Mom scream and then sob. And hearing Chet pace around the house like a caged lion, then hearing the screen door slam and wanting to go and throw my arms around Mom and knowing I couldn't because I was supposed to be sleeping.

Jeff didn't say much while I was talking. He was still pretty drunk, and I could tell he was having a hard time getting through that corn. He'd stagger once in a while, and a couple of times, I thought he was going to fall.

"I think I'm gonna' lay down and go to sleep," he finally said.

"We ain't got that much farther to go," I complained.

"You go ahead if you want. I'm gonna' lay down."

"What's your mom gonna' say?"

"Aw, she won't care. She's used to it."

I looked over to where Jeff had been. He wasn't there. I started walking towards the spot where I had last seen his head bobbing among the corn tassels. I stepped on his hand.

"Ow, shit!" he yelled.

"Come on, get up," I pleaded.

"Naw, you go ahead if you want. I'm gonna' lay down and go to sleep."

Jeff promptly rolled over and began snoring.

I got up and started towards the yard light. I did all right until I found the ditch on the other side of the field. I stepped through the last row of corn and into empty space. My ankle twisted when I hit the bottom of the ditch, and I found myself laying in six inches of muck, on my back, examining the Southern Cross and wondering if the piece of glass embedded in my hand was from a beer bottle or a pop bottle.



While I was laying there on my back, just for an instant, I could have sworn I heard somebody singing "Mama Tried." I pulled the glass out of my hand and scrambled up the bank of the ditch. Aunt Jen's house was right across the road. I went in and woke up my cousin Brett and told him about Jeff lying down in the cornfield and going to sleep.

"Oh no, not again," he groaned.

Brett woke up Aunt Jen. She came out in her robe, with tufts of hair sticking out in odd directions. She didn't seem mad, just resigned.

"One of these days, he's gonna' get run over by a combine or somethin'," she said.

Aunt Jen dressed and we piled in the car and drove around to the other side of the cornfield. Getting your bearings in a cornfield at two o'clock in the morning isn't easy. Trying to find someone lying down is almost impossible.

We split up and tried walking in widening circles. Brett finally found Jeff after stepping on his other hand.

I talked to Aunt Jen on the phone last night. Chet Underwood got drunk a few months back and drove his Buick off a bridge into the bottom of Ridge Rock Creek. He got out of the car all right. He passed out trying to make it to the bank of the creek and drowned in a foot of water. The police think that somebody might have been with him, but they can't prove anything.

Jeff went to Hastings a month ago. He's drying out. Doctors are doing CAT scans on him, trying to figure out why he gets migraine headaches. They think he must have suffered some sort of head injury at some time or another. Jeff says he must have gotten drunk and fallen down and can't remember it. I don't know.

# *The Box*

by Darlene J. Kidd

**T**wo days ago, the morning was just beginning, with its gray tones moving quickly to mauves and then to pinks. The sleepy Italian village stirred with the sounds of roosters crowing, doors slamming, and the ever-present dogs barking. Enjoying the half-awake, half-asleep period, Roberto reluctantly began the journey back to wide-awake.

Finishing his breakfast of hard bread, goat's cheese and strong black coffee, he set down his coffee cup. It started to move as if to jump back into his hand. Then he heard it. A deep rumble coming from everywhere and yet nowhere. Again it came, this time stronger, a definite shaking of the house. The hair stood up on the back of Roberto's neck. The sound of an earthquake! Villagers began to swarm out of their houses as the next tremor hit, along with a sound like deep rolling thunder. The earth moved in a rolling motion like a gentle ocean wave. After it was over, cries of the injured filled the air. Hurriedly, he called Maria, his wife, and Antonio, his son. Thankfully, they were unharmed but frightened. Villagers were very shaken by the earthquake, milling around aimlessly, some crying, others kneeling and calling out to God. Their faces mirrored the fear, fear that another, more devastating quake would come.

Roberto and Antonio spent all day looking in houses, first for remaining survivors or injured and then to determine the damage. By the next day, people arrived from the cities, eager to help the villagers look for the missing, repair the fallen telephone and electric lines, and check the water supply. Several of the bigger buildings had great chunks of plaster loose or fallen off, but the main beams escaped damage. The smaller houses were not so fortunate. A dozen or more had simply collapsed into large heaps of rubble.

Today, walking to the edge of the village to inspect the drainage ditch, Roberto tripped on a large stone hidden in the high grass, falling into a gash in the earth left by

the earthquake. Picking himself up, he followed its path as it grew wider and wider. Large clumps that looked like the earth had belched up some unwanted contents were everywhere in the deepening crevice. Between two of the larger clumps, something glittered. Roberto moved closer to see what had caused the brightness. Brushing aside the dirt, he found a four-inch by five-inch shape partially crusted with hard earth. Picking it up carefully, Roberto chipped at the brown crusty material.

"What is it, Papa?" said Antonio.

"A box," Roberto replied. As the crust fell off, more gold-like areas were revealed.

Prying up the lid of the box, Roberto gasped. Inside lay dozens of small stones. Red, green, blue, lavender, yellow, a few milky stones, and many clear stones. Roberto noticed at once that there was no dirt or grime inside the box, until now, perfectly sealed. Antonio peered over his father's shoulder at the gems and squealed with excitement.

"Oh, Papa. Can we keep them? Can we, Papa?" Though only ten years old, he recognized the stones as something of more value than the colored marbles that he played with each day.

Roberto's stomach twisted into a knot, and he held his breath. Thoughts tumbled through his head. He made a modest living in his small shop, making the bakery goods and breads he sold to the villagers. Savings in his bank account were small, certainly not enough to buy the desires of his heart, much less enough to provide schooling for Antonio. As fathers before him and others yet to come, he wanted more for his son than he had. The moments hung in suspense. After all, he thought, Maria deserves some new furniture and other things they'd been unable to afford. A new oven to make his bakery goods, one that wouldn't break down all the time like the one he had now, would be a godsend.

Releasing his breath, Roberto looked directly into Antonio's eyes. "Perhaps not, Antonio. You see, this box was lost a long time ago. It does not belong to us, so we must try to see if we can find an owner. If we make proper inquiries and no owner can be found, then perhaps we can keep the box." Looking across the field, he said, "Come, it is time for lunch. Your mother will be worried if we don't return soon."

The year had passed quickly since the earthquake. Today, the village celebrated its unbelievable good fortune! The city officials made many inquiries about possible ownership of the gems Roberto and Antonio had found. After much discussion and debate, the decision came down from the "proper authorities." The villagers would receive a share of the money! So many billions of lira that Roberto had difficulty

imagining so much money. Roberto wasn't quite sure who those persons, the "proper authorities," were, but their verdict meant that buildings in the village had already been rebuilt and other repair work completed. Roberto prepared bakery delicacies for today's celebration in his giant, shining new ovens. Maria had her new furniture, and Antonio's schooling was being paid for.

Roberto shut down the giant ovens for the night and closed the bakery. Walking along the road, he looked up at the stars, wondering at the thought of such a tragedy as the earthquake becoming such a blessing for them all. Silently, he thanked his God.



# *skindeep*

by Chris Daugherty

"so you see, then," he said in his most cultured, academic tone, "it stands to reason: ugliness is nothing more nor less than beauty upon closer inspection." he set his tea down sharply, settling in on her with an expectant gaze. when it became clear that some type of response was going to be necessary, she looked up at him slowly. "whatever are you going on about now?"

he laughed, the sort of laugh that reminded you of falling down on concrete and skinning your knees, and said, "don't you see? it's meaningless, valueless, the whole concept is a joke. beauty is ignoring all of the things you hate about something." now she put her tea down as well, crossing her hands as she said, "merely because you are exceedingly ugly does not mean everyone else is. beauty is in the eye of the beholder, after all, and everyone is beautiful to s—"

"only because they willfully overlook the disgusting! the most attractive beaux in the history of mankind still sweated and shat and stank. full of oozing squirming guts and foul noxious filth. but you see," and here he leaned forward, tapping the table with his fist, "the insidious horror of it all. the notion of beauty invites one to see the whole by pretending not to notice the details. it is only from a distance that anything appears beautiful at all.

"consider that star. very pretty, yes? twinkle-on, twinkle-off, just . . . yes, just sitting there, being a happy little star, it is? yes. from a distance." and his face became very grave. he leaned back and said, "the average star is burning itself to death at roughly four hundred million degrees. believe me, you have no idea how hot that is. pretty, is it? everything burns at four hundred million degrees.

"you've seen a spark, leaping between two wires, yes? imagine that spark if it were ten thousand times the size of earth. a ball of gas, igniting itself into a cataclysmic fireball off of itself, the heart of a star is a nuclear chain reaction. imagine every nuclear

missile ever built going off right now, in this room, and then imagine it again a nanosecond later, and again, and again, and again. . . .”

“very pretty, yes? twinkle twinkle.”

she sighed, weary, but her lips were set in a determined line across her face, and after a moment, she said, “there is . . . a certain beauty in watching an orderly system at work. cycles, orbits, rhythms. the natural way of things.”

“nature, then?” he said, his eyes shrieking, “nature, is it? fah! what could be more brutal, more carnal than nature itself? do you suppose that the wildebeest feels beautiful as a lion rips its guts out across the serengetti? the tapeworm in the lion’s intestines, the flies in its carcass? flies . . . maggots . . . hm. the species of decomposition, so absolutely vital to survival of the planet and yet . . . repulsive in every way”

“there is a species of wasp, did you know?” he took a sip from his tea, no longer hot. “this wasp that instinctively knows the correct dosage of venom to immobilize a certain species of caterpillar. quite remarkable, actually; it must calculate the age and body weight of its victim, to temporarily paralyze the caterpillar. if this is done properly, that is, if the poor fellow is still alive,” and here his voice dripped under the weight of its dark amusement, “the wasp then lays its eggs inside the caterpillar.”

“well.”

“after a time, the effects of the venom wear off, and the caterpillar wanders off, shaken but unhurt. the wasp itself perishes soon after.

“the caterpillar, though, is alive, perfectly alive, perfectly capable of feeling the insect larvae hatch inside of him, moving, legless-wingless-squirming . . .

“feeding . . .

“eating him up from the inside out. I imagine it to be a particularly unpleasant way to die, don’t you? a particularly . . . ugly way.”

“knowing you, you’d probably enjoy it,” she said bitterly, signaling that the debate was at an end.

“yes,” he said softly, thoughtfully. “perhaps I would.”

# *The Lost Sea, excerpt*

by Todd M. Mihalcik

FADE IN AND SUPERIMPOSE: "The Atlantic Ocean. 1850."

EXT. OCEAN. DUSK.

The sun sinks below the waterline, spreading reddish-orange sunbeams across the surface of a glassy sea. A merchant ship upon whose hull is painted *The Virginia* cruises towards the horizon.

EXT. VIRGINIA DECK. DUSK.

A near-empty deck. A trim, bearded Man of thirty-five, First Mate **JONATHAN FULLER**, crosses the deck, approaching a gloomy-faced **SAILOR** who swabs the deck.

**JONATHAN**

How goes it, Sailor?

**SAILOR**

Nearly done, sir.

Jonathan surveys the deck that, slicked in water, appears clean.

**JONATHAN**

I don't suppose we'll be having any more outbursts, now, will we?

**SAILOR**

No, sir.

**JONATHAN**

Good. Then finish up and get below before the soup gets cold.

Jonathan strolls across the deck and stops beside a mast. He looks up at a crow's nest in which stands a boyish-looking Sailor with wavy brown hair and prominent facial features, **WILL HOLLINGSHAUS**. Will, leaning against the mast, writes in a leather-bound notebook.

Jonathan whistles.

EXT. VIRGINIA CROW'S NEST. DUSK.

Will, startled, straightens up and looks down.

**JONATHAN**

How's it look up there?

**WILL**

Calm and clear all the way, sir!

EXT. VIRGINIA DECK. DUSK.

Jonathan glances out at the sun-glazed horizon. Satisfied, he reconsiders Will.

**JONATHAN**

Enjoying yourself, sailor?

EXT. VIRGINIA CROW'S NEST. DUSK.

Will smiles broadly.

**WILL**

It's beautiful up here. You should come up sometime!

EXT. VIRGINIA DECK. DUSK.

Jonathan shakes his head.



**JONATHAN**

I'm afraid my crow's nest days are over!

**WILL (O.S.)**

You don't know what you're missing, sir!

**JONATHAN**

Oh, but I do. All too well!

Jonathan waves to Will and turns on his heels.

**JONATHAN (CONT.)**

I'll be sending up a replacement shortly!

**WILL**

Aye, sir. No hurry here!

Jonathan, grinning to himself, leaves the deck.

EXT. *VIRGINIA* CROW'S NEST. DUSK.

Will, running his hand through his hair, settles back against the mast and continues writing in his notebook.

INT. *VIRGINIA* PASSAGEWAY. DUSK.

Jonathan passes down a dark passageway and approaches a door. He halts, knocking.

**MAN (O.S.)**

Yes?

**JONATHAN**

First Mate Fuller, sir.

**MAN (O.S.)**

Be pleased to enter.

INT. VIRGINIA CABIN. DUSK.

The door opens. Jonathan enters a sparsely furnished cabin. At a desk sits a slender, saggy-faced Man of fifty, **CAPTAIN GERALD GARRISON**. Captain Garrison, reading a book, turns around. Jonathan shuts the door.

**JONATHAN**

The crew is at supper and the deck is secured for the night. All's clear on the water and the watch will turn shortly.

**CAPTAIN GARRISON**

And our overzealous sailor?

**JONATHAN**

I don't expect that we'll be having any more problems with him, sir.

**CAPTAIN GARRISON**

We'd better not. Next time, I'll lock him up.

Captain Garrison sets down the book, rises, and yawns.

**CAPTAIN GARRISON (CONT.)**

So, what's old Sawyer got cooked up for us tonight?

**JONATHAN**

Beans and lamb, sir.

Captain Garrison grimaces.

**CAPTAIN GARRISON**

I hope to Christ this batch is better than that last one he made. That stuff had my stomach churning for days.

**JONATHAN**

Considering the tongue lashing you gave him, I'd say it's safe to say that this batch will be considerably improved, sir.

Captain Garrison huffs and walks to the door.

## **CAPTAIN GARRISON**

It damn well better be, or they'll be hell to pay.

Captain Garrison opens the door and exits. Jonathan, rolling his eyes, follows.

EXT. VIRGINIA CROW'S NEST. DUSK.

Will, engrossed in his notebook, remains reclined against the mast. A drumming sound, barely audible, echoes off in the distance. A distracted Will looks seaward.

He gasps, stiffening and dropping his notebook.

EXT. OCEAN. DUSK.

A bizarre, almost surreal sight.

A thin, vaporous fog layer materializes on the horizon, spreading wispy, serpentine tendrils out across the water and quickly expanding. Within moments, a thick, billowy, swirling fog bank blankets the horizon, blotting out the sun which, in turn, inflames the fog bank's interior with an eerie crimson glow.

From the fog bank emerge three ships that, sails swollen with wind, approach *The Virginia*.

The drumming, volume rising, increases in tempo.

EXT. VIRGINIA CROW'S NEST. DUSK.

A dumbfounded Will cups his hands over his mouth.

## **WILL**

Three ships off the port bow!

INT. VIRGINIA PASSAGEWAY. DUSK.

Captain Garrison and Jonathan proceed down a passageway and stop at a doorway from behind which issues a mixed melody of clanking silverware, clinking glasses, and hushed murmuring.

**MAN (O.S.)**

Captain! Captain!

The pair turn to confront a **CRATER-FACED SAILOR** who, wide-eyed and breathless, dashes up to them.

**CRATER-FACED SAILOR**

Captain Garrison! The watch has spotted three ships off the port bow!

**JONATHAN**

Ships? What ships?

**CRATER-FACED SAILOR**

One looks to be a clipper, the other a merchant vessel like ours, and the last one a whaler. They just appeared out of a fog bank.

**JONATHAN**

Fog bank! What in the hell . . .

**CAPTAIN GARRISON**

What have you been drinking, sailor?

The Crater-Faced Sailor runs back down the passageway. Captain Garrison, irritated, looks at a puzzled Jonathan.

**CAPTAIN GARRISON (CONT.)**

Goddammit.

*EXT. VIRGINIA DECK. DUSK.*

The drumming sound, dull and hollow, grows louder with each passing second. Captain Garrison and Jonathan follow the Crater-Faced Sailor onto the deck. They hustle across

the deck and over to a railing where several other awe-stricken Sailors stand, gazing out at the horizon. The Crater-Faced Sailor points seaward.

### **CRATER-FACED SAILOR**

There!

EXT. OCEAN. DUSK.

The three ships, now well beyond the congested, fiery fog bank and maintaining a tight v-shaped formation, converge on *The Virginia*.

EXT. VIRGINIA DECK. DUSK.

Captain Garrison, tight-faced, stares intently at both the boats and the fog bank.

### **CAPTAIN GARRISON**

My telescope, please.

Jonathan motions to a Skinny Sailor who runs off. Jonathan looks up at the crow's nest.

### **JONATHAN**

Yo! Hollingshaus! What do you see?

EXT. VIRGINIA CROW'S NEST. DUSK.

Will, squinting and leaning forward, wags his head back and forth.

### **WILL**

Three boats! A clipper, a merchant, and a whaler!

### **JONATHAN (O.S.)**

What's happening topside?

### **WILL**

I can't see. Too many shadows, sir!

EXT. VIRGINIA DECK. DUSK.

A wave of shouting, whistling, and clonking noises as Sailors stream out from below deck and position themselves along the railing.

The drumming grows still louder.

The Skinny Sailor returns with a telescope which he hands to Captain Garrison. Captain Garrison levels the telescope and adjusts the lens. His neck muscles tense. He swallows. Stunned, he lowers the telescope and regards Jonathan.

### CAPTAIN GARRISON

Mister Fuller, you'd better have a look at this.

Jonathan, uncertain, steps forward, handles and levels the telescope, and focuses the lens.

EXT. OCEAN. DUSK.

Three shadow-cloaked and fog-slicked ships, ploughing through the water, break formation. The telescope viewfinder moves to the far left and focuses on a merchant ship that bears the inscription *Le Paris* across its hull.

Next, the telescope viewfinder swings to the far right where a clipper ship named *The Yorktown* shoots away from the pack.

Finally, the telescope viewfinder settles on the lead boat, a whaler that, maintaining its lead position, charges headlong toward *The Virginia*. The whaler's bow bears the words *The Sea Wolf* across its hull while a grotesque, multicolored wood statue rendering of a winged gargoyle adorns its bow.

The drumming, incessant, reaches a feverish pitch while the boats surround *The Virginia*.

EXT. VIRGINIA DECK. DUSK.



Incredulous, Jonathan lowers the telescope and stares at Captain Garrison. They step away from the railing, turning their backs on the crew. Jonathan, leaning in close to Captain Garrison, bites his lip.

**JONATHAN**

Sir, those boats have all been reported missing within the last three years.

**CAPTAIN GARRISON**

Indeed. Something strange is afoot.

**CRATER-FACED SAILOR (O. S.)**

Captain!

Jonathan and Captain look back out at the water. Their faces sink.

**JONATHAN**

My god.

EXT. OCEAN. DUSK.

The three boats swing alongside *The Virginia*, exposing their respective decks. On each boat, dozens of silent, muscular, and dark-skinned Native Men, bodies garishly painted and braided hair beaded, stand lined up along the railings, wielding spears, rifles, swords, and machetes.

Drummers, bathed in sweat, pound wildly on bongo drums.

EXT. *SEA WOLF*. DUSK

On *The Sea Wolf*'s deck, a thick-limbed and masked man whose body is completely covered in brilliantly colored paints, the NATIVE LEADER, emerges from below

INT. PASSAGEWAY. DUSK.

The pair stand. The panic-stricken Sailors flee down the passageway while screams fill the air above deck. Captain Garrison motions down the passageway.

**CAPTAIN GARRISON**

The cannon. Man the cannon!

**JONATHAN**

It's too late for that, sir. We've got to abandon ship at once!

**CAPTAIN GARRISON**

Abandon ship? Are you mad?

**JONATHAN**

We're outnumbered, sir!

**CAPTAIN GARRISON**

I will never abandon my own ship! I have never . . .

The gunfire ceases. A surge of feet stomping above deck. The passageway ceiling groans. A Sailor, impaled on a spear, tumbles down the hatchway, slamming down on the floor. Jonathan backs down the passageway.

**JONATHAN**

They're boarding us, Captain!

He whips around and sprints down the hallway.

**CAPTAIN GARRISON**

Mister Fuller!

EXT. OCEAN. DUSK.

*The Virginia* is now motionless. The *Le Paris*, *The Yorktown*, and *The Sea Wolf* sit beside it while the Native Men leap and swing from ropes onto *The Virginia*. Howling

and screaming, the horde of Native Men pour across *The Virginia's* deck, attacking the defenseless Sailors who either cower or flee.

The Native Leader seizes a rope and swings over to *The Virginia*.

EXT. VIRGINIA CROW'S NEST. DUSK.

Will, removed from the fray, watches as the Native Leader lands on *The Virginia's* deck and begins slogging through the piles of mangled, bloody bodies.

EXT. VIRGINIA DECK. DUSK.

The Native Leader spots several injured Sailors, produces a pistol, and stalks towards them. Two of the Sailors, moaning, nurse body wounds while a third, bleeding from the head, lies sprawled out on the deck, clasping his skull.

The Native Leader shoots the third Sailor in the face. He motions to the other two Sailors.

EXT. VIRGINIA CROW'S NEST. DUSK.

A horror-stricken Will watches as the Native Men chain and carry off the two injured Sailors.

Bullets strike the deck beside the Native Leader's feet.

Will looks about. His eyes freeze.

EXT. VIRGINIA CABIN. DUSK.

Captain Garrison, rifle in hand, stands atop a cabin, firing at the Native Leader. Behind him, a knife-wielding Native Man scales the cabin wall.

EXT. VIRGINIA CROW'S NEST. DUSK.

Will seizes a rope. He wraps it around his hand, steps up onto the crow's nest railing, and jumps off.

EXT. VIRGINIA DECK. DUSK.

Will glides over the deck.

EXT. VIRGINIA CABIN. DUSK.

Will lands on the cabin beside Captain Garrison just as the Native Man gains his feet. Will charges the Native Man, slamming into his midsection, loosening the knife from his hand, and knocking him off the cabin. Breathless, Will snatches up the knife and grabs Captain Garrison's shoulder.

**WILL**

Captain!

Captain Garrison, still firing, turns his head. Before he can respond, a spear strikes him, burying itself in his stomach. Captain Garrison shudders, stumbles, and falls face down—dead.

**WILL (CONT.)**

No!

An arrow slams into Will's chest. Tottering, he spits up a mouthful of blood and collapses.

Will grips the arrow imbedded in his chest. Head reeling, he watches as the Native Men, producing chains, subdue the Sailors. The Native Leader, waving his sword in the air and beating his chest with his free hand, marches triumphantly around the deck.

Will, eyelids fluttering, yanks the arrow from his body and, sobbing, slowly closes his eyes.



Will seizes a rope. He wraps it around his hand, steps up onto the crow's nest railing, and jumps off.

EXT. VIRGINIA DECK. DUSK.

Will glides over the deck.

EXT. VIRGINIA CABIN. DUSK.

Will lands on the cabin beside Captain Garrison just as the Native Man gains his feet. Will charges the Native Man, slamming into his midsection, loosening the knife from his hand, and knocking him off the cabin. Breathless, Will snatches up the knife and grabs Captain Garrison's shoulder.

**WILL**

Captain!

Captain Garrison, still firing, turns his head. Before he can respond, a spear strikes him, burying itself in his stomach. Captain Garrison shudders, stumbles, and falls face down—dead.

**WILL (CONT.)**

No!

An arrow slams into Will's chest. Tottering, he spits up a mouthful of blood and collapses.

Will grips the arrow imbedded in his chest. Head reeling, he watches as the Native Men, producing chains, subdue the Sailors. The Native Leader, waving his sword in the air and beating his chest with his free hand, marches triumphantly around the deck.

Will, eyelids fluttering, yanks the arrow from his body and, sobbing, slowly closes his eyes.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. OCEAN. DUSK.

Silence, save the waves lapping up against wood as the three boats, again locked in a tight v-shaped formation and leading *The Virginia* toward the horizon, vanish into the fog bank.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN AND SUPERIMPOSE: "Nantucket. 1855."

# **Essays**

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# *The Perfect Game*

by Pam Zamora

Depending on who's talking and which seasons are followed by an asterisk, it's happened between eleven and fourteen times in the 125-year history of baseball. A perfect game was pitched last Thursday in Arlington, Texas, and I was there. Not "just" a shut-out and not "just" a no-hitter: an honest-to-goodness, 40,000-screaming-fans, how-many-thrills-can-you-stand!?!? PERFECT GAME. No hits, no runs, no errors, no walks. Twenty-seven up and twenty-seven down.

I had begun to take baseball for granted. My dad taught me how to wrap two fingers around a baseball when most little girls were learning how to wrap a diaper around a baby doll, and I don't guess I played ball with girls until gym classes were segregated in junior high. But over the years, baseball seemed to fall somewhere behind husband and children. I had even begun to think of it as just another season, along with football and basketball. For years, I'd been content to read during a game and just look up for the instant replay or if it went into extra innings, but this year, I'd begun to get back that old feeling, a realization that every movement on the field can be crucial and I wanted to watch every play of the game. Coincidentally, with this spiritual rebirth came "The Ballpark in Arlington," and a long-anticipated trip to check out the new facilities and watch a couple of Rangers' games.

We took the tour from the owner's penthouse into the bowels of the ballpark, walked through the tunnel the players take to the locker room (which we weren't allowed to enter because it was game day and players could be walking in and out — OF COURSE!! That's why I want in there !), sat in the dugout (where I couldn't resist sitting up on the back of the bench with my feet on the seat), and stood in the on-deck circle. I swear, I have stood in the on-deck circle where Jose Canseco warms up.

By the time the game started that night, I had decided that I could do this every day; I could spend every evening, watching the choreography on the field from my vantage point in the third tier. I was fascinated again by the dance as each action caused



an immediate, so well-rehearsed reaction on the part of every other participant in the production. Twilight at a ballpark is magic for me. I can look up at the darkening sky and almost not hear the crowd or the vendors ("Gitcher cold beer here!") I'm twelve years old again at the community softball game, leaning off the back of the top bleacher and laughing at my cousin hanging off the other end.

The evening seemed to fly (by American League standards), and when I returned to my seat after paying \$2.75 for a Decker Dog (worth every cent) and another \$3.00 for a bag of peanuts, my husband whispered, "Don't say anything, but he's got a no-hitter through the sixth." People actually do whisper about no-hitters because it's bad luck to start talking about it too soon for fear of jinxing the pitcher. The other players even begin to stay away from the pitcher in the dugout so nothing "bad" will rub off on him.)

I had known early on that there was something special about the night. Before the game, Jose was rubbing his bat with what MIGHT have been a rosin bag, but it sure looked like a magic chicken bone to me. There was the Sacrifice of the Red Shoes, a fire in the dugout which turned out to be Jose's old cleats. The other guys decided he had worn them long enough and the shoes were ragged and stinky, so they took them from his locker, doused them with alcohol, and set them on fire. Jose, who had been thrown out of the game the previous night for arguing a call, proceeded to hit consecutive home runs in his first two at-bats (with his new shoes and exorcised bat).

The top of the seventh, the tension was mounting and every play became crucial. It seemed like every ball was being hit to Juan Gonzalez in left field; Ivan Rodriguez was calling perfect pitch combinations from behind the plate; and three more hitters were retired. The crowd of 40,000 seemed to breathe in sync, 'this may not be just a no-hitter, this could be a Perfect Game.' You could hear the whispers now: husbands explaining to wives, fathers explaining to sons, and, yes, thank the Lord, at least one mother explaining to her daughter the significance of what might be happening on the field. The eighth inning was torture, but he got 'em out.

Not all 40,000 were on their feet for the first batter in the top of the ninth, at least not until that high fly ball that looked like it would drop in short center field and spoil everything. We all stood up then to see the end, and suddenly came this red-headed kid named Thurmond Clyde "Rusty" Greer who had determined before the inning that he was going to dive for anything that was remotely within his reach, and that's just what he did. Rusty made one of the most amazing diving catches in the history of baseball to save the day! There were still two more outs to go, but they were anti-climactic.

When it was over and a perfect game had been pitched, the roar from the crowd was deafening, and it seemed it would never end. We stood in that spot for a half hour, watching Kenny Rogers try to find words to describe his feelings, watching him interviewed on the “jumbotron” giant screen, even though there was no way we could hear what he was saying. No one wanted to leave.

I kept thinking of the young couple who had been sitting next to us. Before the eighth inning, I could hear the husband’s plea: “He only has six more outs to go; we’ll be out of here by 10 o’clock.” And then they left. I hope the marriage survives.

# Mirror

by Dawn Rogers

I awoke to the pilot's voice: "We will be landing in Manilla shortly. Please fasten your seat belts and return your chairs to their upright positions. Thank you for flying Air Philippines. I hope you have enjoyed your flight." I opened the shutter of the window and light filtered through the plane. Beneath the clouds, I could see three islands. Lush vegetation surrounded the mountains; various shades of green and blue ocean water surrounded the islands. The view shocked me. I did not realize that the Philippines had such raw tropical beauty. As I looked out the window, I wondered what was in store for me down there.

When we walked off the plane, my mother's face lit up. She was home. My mother had moved to the United States when she was twenty-two to go to college. When we got to customs, people's luggage and packages were being rummaged through. My mother spoke something in Tagalog to the customs attendant while slipping her a ten-dollar bill. I kept silent. I had lived in America my entire life. English was the only language I knew. We made it through customs without a suitcase being touched. As we walked through the airport, my mom hugged me and said, "I am glad that you decided to come."

The thought of going to the Philippines had crossed my mind several times within the last two years for some reason. I found out my mother was planning a trip to go back home six months ago. I told her that I wanted to go, and her eyes widened with shock. She hadn't ask me because she figured I wouldn't want to go. I had put a stop to family vacations when I was thirteen. Philippino food was a big No in my book, too.

When we walked out of the airport, there was a crowd of a hundred people or more waiting for their friends and families. People were not allowed inside the actual airport building unless they had a ticket. We were outside for less than five minutes before my mom's brother Romey came running up to her, yelling "Tita! Tita!" *Tita* is a word for respect and elders, kind of like the word *aunt*. Four other people followed him. I

recognized them from pictures. They were my aunts Tita Chit and Tita Tessing and two of my cousins. Hugs and “How do you do’s” were exchanged. It was a very warm welcome.

I met probably twenty-five relatives in the duration of two weeks. Communication was difficult since I didn’t speak the language. Most of the newspapers and billboards are in English. English is a second language here, but it is generally just written and read. It is not spoken among the people on a daily basis. My aunts, uncles and cousins speak English fairly well. I managed to pick up a few words here and there: *Masarap*—good food, *Maganda*—beautiful, *Salamat Po*—thank you, sir or ma’am. *Mestissa*, which I was often called by my relatives, meant a mix since I was half-Philippino and half-American.

We traveled to several islands and cities. There are 7,107 islands here in the Philippines. The number differs on whether the tide is high or low. It is half-modernized and half-native here. In some areas, people live in nipa huts made of bamboo and grass. They cook by the heat of a wood fire and wash all their clothes and dishes by hand. A water pump and buckets are used for the water supply in their homes. Some people that live by rivers take baths there and wash clothes there, too. The clothes are laid out on rocks to dry in the sun. Fresh fruit stands selling mangoes, coconuts, coconut milk and eleven different kinds of bananas are set up along the roadside. The next thing you know, there is a Mercedes Benz driving down the street. There are five-story malls that carry the latest fashion trends from Japan, Europe, and America. It seems rather ironic to me.

On my twenty-first birthday, my mother, two of my aunts, one cousin, and I all went to Boracay, a small island, a tourist spot that a lot of Europeans go to scuba dive. On our way to dinner, it started raining. As we scurried to the next restaurant to escape the rain, I heard someone say that it is good luck if it rains while you are traveling, which it often does on the islands. Later that evening, my aunt Tita Chit and I stayed up late, talking outside on the porch of the cottage we were staying in. I sat on the bamboo railing while she swung in a hammock made of thin strips of bamboo. She was the youngest girl in my mother’s family. Tita Chit often repeated that my mother used to be the prettiest when they were younger, but now she was the prettiest of the three sisters. She was a short lady with dark skin. A cheery disposition surrounded her. She was always primping and fixing her hair, making sure her makeup was just right. We stayed up until 1:00 in the morning. I am somewhat of a nightcrawler, so I was wideawake. She told me about Siquiojor Island and the voodoo that goes on there, where people make paper



dolls dance and put the souls of unbelievers into bottles. On Siquiojor, half-bodied vampires fly around at night and steal the souls of unborn babies of pregnant women. Tita Chit described the fireballs that reveal places of hidden treasures and the guardian that asks seekers a riddle which, if answered wrongly, results in the death of the seeker, who is burned to death by the fireball. She had seen little people dancing on the roof top of her very own house when she was a child.

Baguio, a city on top of a mountain, is the only place in the Philippines that actually gets jacket-weather chilly. I sat outside the Hotel Venus where we were staying, talking to my cousin P. J. who is my age. We talked a lot about the differences between America and the Philippines. He was surprised that I had my own car and that I did not live with my parents. He told me that, here in the Philippines, people will live with their parents even after they are married. He noticed the tattoo on my back and asked me if I was in a gang. Shocked at the question, I abruptly answered "No." In the Philippines, companies, even American companies, will ask people in the interview if they have a tattoo and make them take off their shirts to see if they are lying. If they do have a tattoo, they will not be hired. In the States, tattoos aren't a big deal; any Dick, Jane, and Harry can have one and have any job they want. It is against the law to do anything like that. He asked me if I was proud to be a Filipino. My heart sank as I flashed back to my childhood to the first time I encountered racism. I was in the fifth grade, and a new kid in my class pushed me down and called me a chink. Before that moment, I had considered myself white. After running into the chink word a few more times, I slowly began resenting my heritage. I was repulsed by my black hair, tan skin, and slanty eyes. I answered "Yes" even though for the past twenty years the answer had been "No." I was in the Philippine Islands where I had encountered the friendliest people I had ever met in my life. I was completely surrounded by the heritage I had despised for so long, and my own cousin was asking if I was proud of my heritage. For the first time, I had come face to face with my own worst enemy—myself. I realized that I was a racist against myself and my family's native land and people.

Outside, underneath the hot sun, I looked around, noticing all the people. The children, the elderly, the young adults. I paid special attention to the women who were my age. They were all thin, about my height, black hair, tan skin, and cat eyes. I looked closer. They were all really beautiful: no makeup—real, natural beauty. I looked down at my tan skin and my black hair that fell over my shoulder. Stunned by the resemblance, I realized that I looked a lot like them. 'If I think that they are pretty, with their native features, and I look like them, I guess that means that I am pretty, too.' I was home on the inside. Finally, after twenty-one years, I was at peace with myself and my heritage.

It was as if I had looked in a mirror and saw myself for the first time.

My mother and I sat on the plane. I glanced over at my mother. Her face was still beaming. I had never seen her as happy as I had this past month. I reached over and hugged her. “Thanks for showing me our home.” Tears filled her eyes as she smiled and said, “You’re welcome.”

“Please fasten your seat belts and return your chairs to their upright position. We will be landing shortly, and thank you for flying American Airlines.”

# *The Child*

by Darlene J. Kidd

For the second time that evening, we carried Benny down to the hospital morgue. His pale, limp, lifeless body rested peacefully in my arms. It was only a week since he first came to us.

My evening shift had begun in the normal way, getting a status report of the condition of every patient in my care from the head nurse Ann who was completing her day shift. We walked from room to room, greeting our little patients and their families. A little boy Benny, admitted during the predawn hours, was our last patient. No family was present.

He looked small for his age, not quite two. Enclosed in the oxygen tent, his features were blurred in their detail, like looking through an unfocused camera. I carefully unzipped the side of the tent to check his pulse, feeling the cool mist of the tent air in stark contrast to his skin—so warm, so dry. His thready pulse, labored breathing, and the bluish tinged coloring of his lips confirmed what I'd been told by the day nurse. This child was very ill. Thin wisps of irregular clumps of his fine hair had scattered droplets of condensation from the tent moisture. His head was several times larger than normal except for his little face. Benny's forehead was large as was the rest of his skull bones as if someone had partially inflated a balloon inside his head, causing a grotesque look. The size of his head told me immediately that his pneumonia wasn't the only thing that Benny was dealing with.

"He's such a cooperative little fellow," Ann said. "Even when we had to give him the penicillin injection, he didn't struggle, only whimpered a little. Too bad he has hydrocephalus on top of everything else."

"What do you mean, 'everything else'?"

"Well, his mom and dad are separated and in the process of getting a divorce," replied Ann.

The next day as we made our rounds, I met Benny's mother. At first, I mistook her for an older sister, this young, small, fragile girl. During our short visit, she told me Benny had been sick many times since birth. The doctors told her that there wasn't anything that really could be done for him. In time, the fluid in his head would collect to the point that pressure on the brain would finally prove fatal. In 1960, the operative techniques and shunts to treat this condition had not yet been developed. Benny had what was known in medical terminology as hydrocephalus or, by the layman as *waterhead*.

It was evening of Benny's third day in the hospital when I saw Benny's father. He looked so young I could easily have thought him to be an older brother of high school student age. His arm resting on the head of the bed, he stared intently at the little figure in the oxygen tent. Benny tried feebly to smile, his little mouth barely turned up at each corner. *So this is Benny's father*, I thought as I approached Benny's crib.

Other staff nurses had alerted me to the fact that both of Benny's parents were very bitter and angry with each other. Benny's mother wanted to put him in a nursing home. Although she didn't work outside the home at this time, she spoke of an inability to cope with Benny's physical care. He couldn't sit up, and his ever-enlarging head made it difficult for her to turn and move him. After the divorce, she would be looking for a job, and finding a sitter for Benny would be impossible, she thought.

Benny's father, according to the doctor, was equally adamant that Benny not go to the nursing home. Benny's father was employed as an assembly-line worker and could not assume Benny's care. He insisted that the mother should stay home and care for Benny. So, it seemed nobody wanted Benny for now.

Returning to duty from my days off, I found that Benny had taken a turn for the worse. The medications didn't seem to be working, and he was struggling harder for each breath. My stethoscope recorded the rapid pounding of his little heart. I could see the depression between each rib and at the collar bones as he tried so hard to fight for each breath. It had been several days, so I was told, since either parent had been to see Benny. They had both accidentally come at the same time one day with disastrous results. Hospital security had escorted them out of Benny's room and told them to leave because of the shouting and hostility between them. As I continued to listen to his lungs desperately gasping for more oxygen, I bowed my head and asked God to please take this child home, this beautiful, brave child that no one seemed to want.

As I checked my patients several hours later, I found Benny lifeless; his struggle to breathe had ceased some time after we had checked him last. Neither parent was at the bedside. After several phone calls, we located the parents. Both said they would not

be coming to the hospital. We carried Benny down to the morgue to await the mortician.

Later, the nurse supervisor called. “Go get Benny and bring him back to his crib. The parents are on their way here.”

And we did.



# *Poppa Was a Railroad Man*

by Jane Crossett

John awakened to the loud crack of thunder followed by lightning and rain hitting against the window in the small bedroom. He looked over at his wife who slept through the noise, and he arose quietly and began preparing for work. Dressed in overalls and shirt, he looked at his shoe soles which were getting thin, noting that he was sorely in need of another pair of work shoes, but since he had squandered his last paycheck playing poker, that would have to wait.

He was sure he was winning at poker last night with three of a kind but was beaten by a straight. Somewhat dejected, he had arrived home late, and Lillian guessed what had happened. She was furious with him and nagged him most of the night while he was trying his hardest to ignore her and get some sleep. He was thinking she was happy when he won and even helped him spend it, but she raved like a maniac when he lost. The irony of that always surprised him.

He opened the door, stepping out on the porch, and breathed in the fresh smell of the earth following the rain. It was raining only intermittently now. In the distance, the clouds were breaking, with a faint promise of the sun shining through. Maybe this would be a pleasant day, after all. He walked briskly down the gravel road toward the railroad yard, pondering what his work would involve that day.

John had worked for the railroad for several years now, beginning in 1890, after teaching school for a year. He had graduated from college, and his father was disappointed because he chose to work for the railroad rather than have a professional career. John was determined to do what he liked best, and he loved his job. The job required traveling several days a week and was a great adventure for a country boy. He was part-time conductor, and he also worked as a brakeman. Being conductor was rather dull in his estimation, but the work of the brakeman had an attraction for him because it required a certain amount of danger and agility, especially when he was

working atop the cars, jumping from one to the next or just riding on top. Just like gambling, he could win or lose, but playing the game was what he enjoyed the most. He always had a feeling of indestructibility although he was not consciously aware of it.

He walked into the railroad yard just as the cantankerous boss began shouting out orders. He resented his boss because he was a cranky old coot who liked to put down his crew. Although John did not try to flaunt his education, it seemed as though his boss felt he was just a banty rooster who liked to crow about his high falutin' education. John liked his work, so he tried ignoring any insults directed at him. Sometimes that was hard to do. John knew he deserved a certain amount of criticism as he did present a superior air, especially when he was given instructions by someone he considered less smart than himself.

At that point, the boss yelled out to everybody to board the train. They were heading for Cabot, Arkansas, a small town east of Little Rock. The engineer blew his whistle, and they were off, their seats swaying back and forth as they bumped along the tracks. As they entered the railyard, the engineer pulled over to a side track so they could switch some of the cars.

John climbed atop the train and began stepping from car to car. It was slippery, and he had to move carefully. He was almost through when the train lurched forward. John lost his balance, throwing him to the ground, and the wheels ran over his right arm, severing it at the shoulder. Someone yelled, "Stop the train. John has been hurt!" Lying there, John felt no immediate pain but realized with a sinking feeling something terrible had happened. Fear engulfed him as he looked up, blinking into the faces of the men who had hurriedly gathered around. The look of horror in their eyes confirmed what he was thinking, and at that moment, he was afraid of dying.. For an instant, they were immobilized by the sight of him lying there with his arm barely hanging by a tendon and a part of bone, with blood flowing copiously over his clothing. He was pallid and slowly falling into unconsciousness. His boss began compressing his shoulder to stop the blood flow.

Suddenly, John spoke. "Hitch the caboose to the engine and take me to Little Rock to the hospital." With that, he passed out. Four men carried him onto the caboose, with the boss continuing to try to stop the gush of blood. A record was set with their trip back to Little Rock that day.

He was rushed into surgery at the hospital where his arm was removed. Doctors marveled at the fact that he didn't die from loss of blood since the artery was severed.

His boss was given credit for helping save John's life, John thanked him for that. He wasn't such a bad guy after all. Later, they became good friends.

John slowly recovered from his injury. He went through a depression as most people do who have lost a part of their body. He worried about how he would support his family, if he could still play the fiddle at country dances which he so much enjoyed, and if he would be able to do as many things as he had before. He was only forty years old: too young to retire and didn't want to.

He did triumph over adversity, however. He was able to return to work as a conductor and later as station-master, working until he was sixty. Over those years, he had to learn to write with his left hand and could draw very well. He never played the fiddle again. He loved fishing on his time off and only needed someone to row his boat. He drove a car rather erratically, steering with his knees as he shifted gears and driving fast through mudholes as it was his theory to "go fast and you won't get stuck." Of course, there were not that many cars on the roads back then. He even could play cards and had a nifty way of dealing them: shuffling, cutting the cards, and dealing quite effectively. He led a full life despite his handicap and died of a heart attack at age seventy-two.

# *The Right Choice*

by Carrie Smith

When I was in third grade, my parents got divorced. I was glad finally to see an end to all the fighting. I thought my life would get better.

My older sister and I had become sort of the middlemen. We seemed to be used as a way for my parents to get back at each other. This turned my sister and me against each other. My father was busy with work and girlfriends. My sister was busy with boyfriends. We lived out in the country, so I didn't have anyone to play with. I felt betrayed and very alone.

One summer afternoon, my dad brought home two chestnut horses. I was to pick the one I wanted. One was a tall, lanky thoroughbred and the other a shorter, more stocky quarter horse. I rode Mac, the tall one, first. He was all right but just the same as any other I had ridden. Then I rode the other horse. He was a retired show horse, so he knew all about leg cues and side passing, all those things I'd never done before. I remember the butterflies in my stomach as I threw my leg over his back for the first time. I was so nervous. My dad was watching me. What if I pulled too hard on his mouth? What if I squeezed too tightly with my legs? All the questions in my head made it hard for me to concentrate. I didn't want to ride him. When I did finally ride him, it was for the shortest amount of time possible. I wanted Mac.

The next day, I rode Mac very comfortably. My dad told me to ride the other horse again. I didn't want to. I didn't want my dad to know how intimidated I was by this horse's knowledge. So I rode him again, only this time longer. My dad showed me how to get him to side pass. Squeeze with both legs equally and put pressure on his mouth. My horse was walking sideways! Wow! I'd only gone forward and backward before. My dad went back inside. I was now with only this horse. It gave me time to get to know him a little without the pressures from my dad. I rode him for a long time. He had such a smooth gait. He at first seemed reluctant to do anything for me, but that changed.



It was now the third day for the horse's trial period. I had to choose one to take with me to horse camp. Here I was, going to camp with a horse I didn't know. There, the campers would learn to do all the things showmen do. I had never done any of it. My dad was a cowboy, not a showman. I chose not to take Mac, but the other horse because he already knew how to do everything. It would be just me doing the learning.

I still hadn't named him. His papers said he was born in Cody, Wyoming. My dad suggested naming him Cody. I liked it, so that was that. Cody was my new horse.

There I was, a shy kid thrown into a camp full of rich, know-it-all kids. I was so uncomfortable being around people. I was afraid they would make fun of me like the kids back home. Or worse, make fun of my horse. Every break between lessons, I would stay with my horse. We spent almost a solid week together, both in a strange place. We became friends.

He seemed to know I was afraid of failing as a rider. It was the only important thing in my life. The other kids' horses would act up and just not pay attention to what was going on. But he and I were the stars. Professional showmen who were there to buy horses came to watch us work together. Three people offered to buy my new horse from me. Everyone was impressed with us both.

As the years passed, Cody and I made a special bond. He took the roles of father, mother, sister, brother, babysitter, and, most importantly, best friend. I spent every second of my free time with him. Now, I had someone there; I wasn't alone anymore. After school, I ran out to the barn. I'd ride for what seemed forever. Then, I'd groom him for even longer. He would just calmly stand there, occasionally turning to face me, rolling his eyes, and letting out a big sigh to let me know he was tired of all the primping and braiding. When I first got him, his coat was coarse and dull. I had buffed him to a shine. After I was through, you needed sunglasses to look at him. His mane and tail were long and beautiful. His star on his forehead was bright white. He was beautiful.

I remember trying to get the saddle on him. I was too short to reach his back. He seemed to be four hundred feet tall and me only a single foot. The saddle weighed more than I did. I would get things to stand on, trying to gain height. Nothing seemed to work. Cody would just stand there, curiously watching as I cried in frustration. Now that I think about it, I know he would have helped me if he could. I would eventually give up the whole saddle idea and ride bareback. That really helped my balance.

When I turned sixteen, my dad had gone through three different houses, losing them all. He had nowhere to keep our horses. We moved Cody and my dad's horse Tony from place to place. He was losing weight, and his coat had lost its shine. I hadn't been grooming him for those long hours anymore. I could see him only on the weekends once



or twice a month because I worked and had school; then, he was forty-five minutes away. I knew he was lonely.

When my dad bought Cody from his last owners, he had saved him from the killers. This is the fate of most horses, usually unbeknownst to the owners: their precious and loyal friends butchered in their last days. The owners had just left Cody in a pasture by himself for many years, doing nothing with him. He had burrs in his mane and tail and was dirty from muzzle to hoof. When they decided to get rid of him, they put an ad in the paper; he was under "pets." No one wanted him, so they called the killers to come get him. He was sixteen when I got him. Horses usually live twenty to twenty-five years. I guess they thought he was useless in his older age. My dad came just in time. I think when Cody wasn't seeing me anymore, he thought the same thing was happening again. I felt so bad. There was nothing I could do; my hands were tied.

My dad had a friend with two little kids. They were interested in Cody. I knew my dad wanted to sell him, but he left it up to me. I felt betrayed by my father. I had to choose to sell my best friend or keep him for my own selfishness. I thought he'd be happier with the attention he deserved once again. So, I chose to sell him.

I got one last ride. My dad took pictures of us together. It was so hard not to cry. My dad and Tony were in front of us. I watched as he and his horse fought constantly, Tony jumping at anything that moved. Cody and I watched, happy it wasn't us. He carefully took me through trees, not running my head into any branches, and I watched to make sure he didn't step on or in anything. We both looked out for one another, allowing us to look around and enjoy the sights. Tony was soaked with sweat from nerves, and my dad's face was red with anger.

Over Christmas, my dad got my sister a gun. She wanted to shoot it, so my dad took us to a field. He forgot to tell me it was where Cody was. I hadn't seen him in a little over a year.

I walked slowly up to him, fighting my tears. I could feel them collecting in my eyes. My face felt swollen. My heart was in my stomach and my mouth was dry. He saw me, throwing his head up. Ears perked, eyes wide, he started snorting. He was smelling me. He stretched his neck toward me, sniffing the air. I reached out my hand toward him, softly calling his name. He slowly walked toward me, nickering and muttering the whole time. I had never heard a horse make noises like that before. He was talking to me. As he came closer, I touched his muzzle. It was extra fuzzy from his winter coat. My hand seemed lost as the softness engulfed it. I was trembling from the overwhelming emotions. I was so happy to see him, so mad at my dad for so many things, and so sad that I would have to leave him again.

Then, he put his head over my shoulder and hugged me as I had always done to him. I think I must have hugged him three million times. He had missed me as much as I had missed him.

No one was around to see this. No one understood that a horse would really do this. I never thought it was possible.

He gently pressed his muzzle against my face as if to wipe the tears away. He was still talking to me. I told him I was sorry and that I did it for his own good. I desperately tried to explain why I had sold him. I felt like he already knew. He knew that I loved him too much to desert him. But he also seemed to ask me if I could take him with me when I left, as if those two times a month I could see him were enough for him. I felt like I had betrayed him. How could I betray the only one who had been there for me for so long?

I heard my sister and dad coming, so I quickly wiped my face. I said one last goodbye, the hardest and longest yet. As we walked up the hill, I could hear Cody calling me. He was running along the fence, As if he were going to jump it. I wanted to run back to him. My sister and dad hadn't seen any of this. It was Cody and I alone, as it always had been.

A year later, I heard that Cody had died. I felt dead myself. He had shaped so much of who I am today. He taught me so many lessons that I can't begin to list them. Most importantly, he taught me the saying, "If you love something, set it free, and if it comes back to you, then it loves your back." I had an animal who truly loved me back, unconditionally, as no human has yet.

And I had to walk away.

# *A Different View*

by Wynona Day

**M**y father was dead. In sorting through his belongings, I had sad decisions to make. Furniture and dishes had been purchased and could be sold, if need be. His paintings and writings were a part of the man himself, created from his own heart and hand. As a minister, my dad had always written a lot but, in retirement, had become more prolific. He wrote in a poetic style that I loved. It was flowing and easy to read. I picked up one of the manuscripts in its brightly colored folder.

Fifty years ago  
When I was seventeen  
I had never been  
Fifty miles from home.  
But over there  
Where the smoke was blue  
On Killingsworth Cove  
Was Jackson county  
And beyond that a vast world  
I fairly ached to see.  
I knew about the smoke  
Of the moonshiner's still  
From mountain men who  
Traded at our store.  
The world I knew about  
From reading many a book  
And stereopticon picture cards  
Viewed over and over by us kids  
Etched on my young mind  
Scenes from many lands and faces

Of people of every race and color.

Daddy at seventeen. I had never thought about it. Living in northern Alabama on a farm, he had dreamed of seeing the world. I could envision him, lying on the floor, looking at the stereopticon pictures because I had done much the same with the View-Master he had given me. This was a view of my father I had never seen before. It was different to think of him as a young man.

Well, now I can say

I have seen the snow-capped mountains

Crossed the hot deserts

Arizona and Sahara

Seen many great cities.

One day I drove into Milano and

Arriving in the center of a great square

I gazed in amazement at the

Great Cathedral.

I had seen it hundreds of times

On the View-Master

And wondered if I would ever see it real.

And now that I had

I felt a little sick for home.

Later, gazing at the Leaning Tower of Pisa

It seemed I had been there

Many times before

And, if I could wish on a star,

I would have changed my role

In the war for a place on the floor

Back home with the stereopticon.

This was a part of his life that I did know about. In his army jeep and his chaplain's uniform, I could imagine him seeing some of the things he had dreamed about as a young man. The war had been for him both a duty and a service to perform. His line about being sick for home when he was so far away really touched me. I had spent all the years he was gone being homesick for him.

The whole family had gathered around the fire that winter night early in 1942, as my father read the 91<sup>st</sup> Psalm.

He that dwelleth in the secret place  
of the Most High shall abide in the



shadow of the Almighty.

Then my dad prayed in that slow, wonderful Southern drawl, commending his family to God's care and keeping.

For me, that was the night the war began. Daddy was being sent overseas. At first, I had been so proud of how he looked in his uniform and was happy that he got to be a preacher even in the war. Having him go so far from home was entirely different.

His first letters came from North Africa. Strange, unknown places, Oran and Casablanca. "The children crowd around us, begging for chicle, chewing gum," he wrote. Even the letters looked different. V-Mail, Mother called it. It looked like a picture of a letter. Limited in space, he could write only one page. But the news we wanted to hear was there. He was fine. He loved and missed us.

For the rest of the news about the war, we depended on the radio. Mother and my sister always listened, but I usually left the room. I didn't want to hear anything bad about Oran and Casablanca.

The southern Alabama town of Foley where we lived was a quiet, farming community. I knew there were shipyards in nearby Mobile, and the planes from air force and navy bases in the area flew overhead. "Uncle Sam" recruiting posters were everywhere, and the ever-present rationing of almost every product kept the war very much on our minds. Even though I tried not to think about the conflict, I had little choice.

Our small apartment was cozy and just enough for my mother and sister and me. But it seemed strange and lonely to have only a picture of Daddy there. At church, even though the pastor was a longtime personal friend of my parents, I had always had my father as the preacher. Everything was different.

The music at church was comforting and uplifting. But even the music my sister loved to play on her record player reminded me of the war.

There'll be bluebirds over  
The White Cliffs of Dover  
Tomorrow, just you wait and see.  
There'll be love and laughter  
And peace ever after  
Tomorrow, when the world is free.

The influence of the war even reached to our summer trips to visit my grandparents. Because of the rationing of gasoline and tires, our trips were made by bus to northern Alabama and by train to Oklahoma. These journeys were very crowded affairs with many passengers as well as military personnel taking every available seat. Although exciting for me, these times were draining for my mother. She always seemed



glad when we arrived, greeted family, and she could share the load of responsibility for awhile.

As I sat there among my father's things, thinking back on those long-ago events, I realized my entire view of the war had been focused on one person. All I wanted was for him to be safe and to come home to us.

In time, his letters had begun coming from other cities, Florence and Rome in Italy. I remembered being able to find Italy on the map because it was shaped like a boot. This was what he had dreamed about as a seventeen-year-old boy. He had been able to visit some of the world he had "fairly ached to see."

I have sailed the mighty rolling sea  
Ridden a bicycle through  
Moslem Morocco and Algeria  
Walked thru great art galleries  
Seen great daVinci's Last Supper  
Faded now beyond repair  
Explored St. Peter's Cathedral  
Seen the Pope  
And Sistine Chapel.  
I went down into the catacombs of Rome  
And I saw the graves of some  
Of the first Christians who ever lived.

He wrote about visiting Palestine, the land where Jesus lived, going to Bethlehem where He was born. He stood outside Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified and climbed the mountain from where He ascended. He said,

Thus were my boyhood dreams fulfilled  
And all of it was satisfying and enriching.

I could only imagine what all of the marvelous experiences had meant to my father. It seemed strangely wonderful for me to realize that the very period that had been scary and lonely at times for me had been very fulfilling for him in myriad ways.. Although he had experienced danger and seen much destruction and death, his service in the army had afforded him the opportunity to do things he had wanted to do all his life.

Now that he was gone, I knew that I would miss him always, but I felt very glad to have been afforded a different view of this very important part of his life and mine.

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# Poems

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# *What Can the Spruce Tell the Fish About Life?*

by Teresa Hawkes

The Sufis say "if wisdom was information then dictionaries would be saints."  
*And yet dictionaries have their place.*

Beneath the cool branches splashes murky river water,  
black in the gloaming . . .  
Thirsty roots reach deep, growing out into swirling water  
beneath the rocky banks.  
Silver fish stops on his downstream journey  
to snatch an unwary water bug perched on a slender root,  
then meanders on his way.

Trees breathe air, fish breathe water.  
Trees root in one place and there they remain,  
fish constantly migrate.  
Two mediums,  
two methods,  
same result -  
Life.

Can the distance between two things  
be closed by desire  
the application of will,  
or the devising of strategies?  
No.

But in time two things may blend their essence,  
even though intercourse is unlikely  
when the distance between them is so great  
by simply living fully as they were engineered to live  
by a Universe in which all things  
have been wisely and lovingly placed.

The space between our hearts and our minds,  
man and woman,  
matter and energy,  
is just so placed  
that Life as we know it exists precisely because  
of the dance between these things  
which can't on the surface  
reasonably hope to communicate.



# *Dateline – Perrin, Texas*

by Robyn A. Lydick

I did not hold you  
Or wipe away the tears  
The crushing caused.  
I did not know

The texture of your  
Beautiful raven hair  
Crinkles still  
On my skin.

You gave me this voice.  
I use it now  
To remind the world  
I loved you.

Your love and faith  
Strengthened me.  
Made me who  
I am today.

I will visit your grave.  
I expect I will cry.  
Like a widow  
Hearing Kaddish.

I will read the fifty-five words  
The paper reserved for you.  
And I will know  
You were so very much more.

# *Self-Defeating Poems*

by **Heather Moody**

I hate self-defeating  
poems.

You know, the ones in which you realize  
that you aren't the best of everything,  
and that you aren't the sexiest woman alive,  
and men wouldn't die to get in your pants,  
and they wouldn't  
beg  
to get in your head and your  
heart.

I hate self-defeating  
poems.

You know, the ones  
in which you realize that you  
Are human  
And, therefore, imperfect,  
and that when your skin is pricked  
You Bleed  
and when your ego is pricked,  
you bleed all the more.

I would rather be left believing  
that somehow I am the epitome  
of

**SUPER-INDESTRUCTIBLE WOMAN**

And that I demand love  
With simply a sweeping gaze.

I would rather be left believing that I am more beautiful  
And more sexy and

More desirable than  
Any-other-woman-on-the-face-of-the-earth

I hate self-defeating poems  
You know . . .  
The ones in which you are forced to face  
Reality.

# *MICU Waiting in Laredo*

by Mary Punches

An awful kinship forms among  
The families of the half-machine folks.  
Different-tongued, our talk is common:  
"Better today/About the same."

Aye, we wait:

2 hours, 2 hours, 3 hours,

2 hours, 2 hours, 3 hours,

2 hours, 2 hours, STOP.

Then, plastic sofa dream snatches  
Amid snores, half-whimpers, and closed-in  
Odors of bodies ignored.  
Begin again.

We share stories and stares,  
Tears and touches,  
Directions, suggestions,  
Magazines, coins for machines,  
Coffee, cigarettes,  
Pillows, prayers, and  
Air.

An unsaid dread caresses us each much as  
Our spit-shined, over-deodorized scents.

We gather as the double-double doors  
Slam open and figures in masks rush inside.  
No! Backs each against the wall.  
No! Don't let it be my . . .  
Then hanging heads shamefully, not  
Theirs or theirs or theirs, either.

They move on as loved ones go  
To the floor (or out the back door.)

But more dazed strangers, future flop friends,  
Check in, and we, longest-tenured now, explain:

2 hours,

2 hours,

3 hours, . . .



# *cans of worms*

by **Todd M. Mihalcik**

the subject magnetized  
a point of view bit down  
his sharp-edged words chewed away  
alcohol  
cranking pumping fueling  
spun those two long shelved dusty cans  
in a vicious jagged circle.

onto the floor spilled her  
slime-coated dreams  
wriggling desires  
tangled feelings  
dirty thoughts.

onto the table crawled his  
limp hopes  
fat opinions  
muddy views  
blind beliefs.

my friend  
the human can opener  
grinned  
mouthing “catch some fish with that.”

i said nothing  
smiled rose  
looking for  
a pail.

# *Sunday*

by Julie Shilling

first shadows in days-  
they come at afternoon,  
grow powerful  
as the storm moves east.  
golden afternoon light  
glazing storm-blue clouds,  
rain-green trees.  
puddles of fallen sky  
among grassy shores.  
fire in the windows-  
a magic sun-trick.  
evening comes quietly-  
pink highlights on clouds,  
moon almost full,  
soft light spilling onto earth  
as Jupiter leads the stars  
from the blue.

# *Papa*

by Alex Fugazi

Folding the laundry,  
the air filled with the smell of softness.  
A smell my mother hates.  
My mind takes me back to his garage,  
playing with his tools.  
The air thick with hard, hot work and sawdust.  
A smell I love.  
“Be careful with those tools,  
‘cause I wouldn’t want you to cut your little hands,”  
he says through a toothless grin.  
He works the wood with the hands of an old giant.  
Veined hands, rough and callused.  
A thumbnail bruised by the slip of a hammer, black and blue.  
Gentle hands that used to rock me to sleep.  
Even before they buried his body  
someone tried to bury his existence.  
All I could find to call my own was an  
overlooked coat and a hat.  
Old even then, both torn and frayed,  
the brim of the hat sweat-stained.  
I kept them so I could breathe in the memories.  
Secretly they were stored, to be brought out  
only when recollection started to fade.  
Time weakened the threads that held my memories together.  
The vestiges eventually discovered and discarded.  
I don’t remember when they disappeared,  
sad shreds of cloth that whispered the fragrance  
of a young girl’s tears and the sweat from a carpenter’s brow.

# *Integument*

by Trent Dugas

Window open  
wind blowing through  
sheets hanging from the ceiling.  
Nobody understands the unsatisfied.

Frotcha sits and rocks  
back and forth with legs crossed  
both hands holding the temples of her head.  
Words sliced right through her soul and stapled it shut.

The light bulb  
is crawling with dust  
its fixture is broken in the corner  
The lurking humidity grooms her bridled lock of isolation.

She stands  
and waves her hands  
across the room spreading imaginary sprinkles  
of light into the air. The strings on her aqua harp unraveled.

Nothing looks pleasing  
in her oversized nightshirt  
and her misplaced stringy hair.  
Outside the door is a whole den of lions.

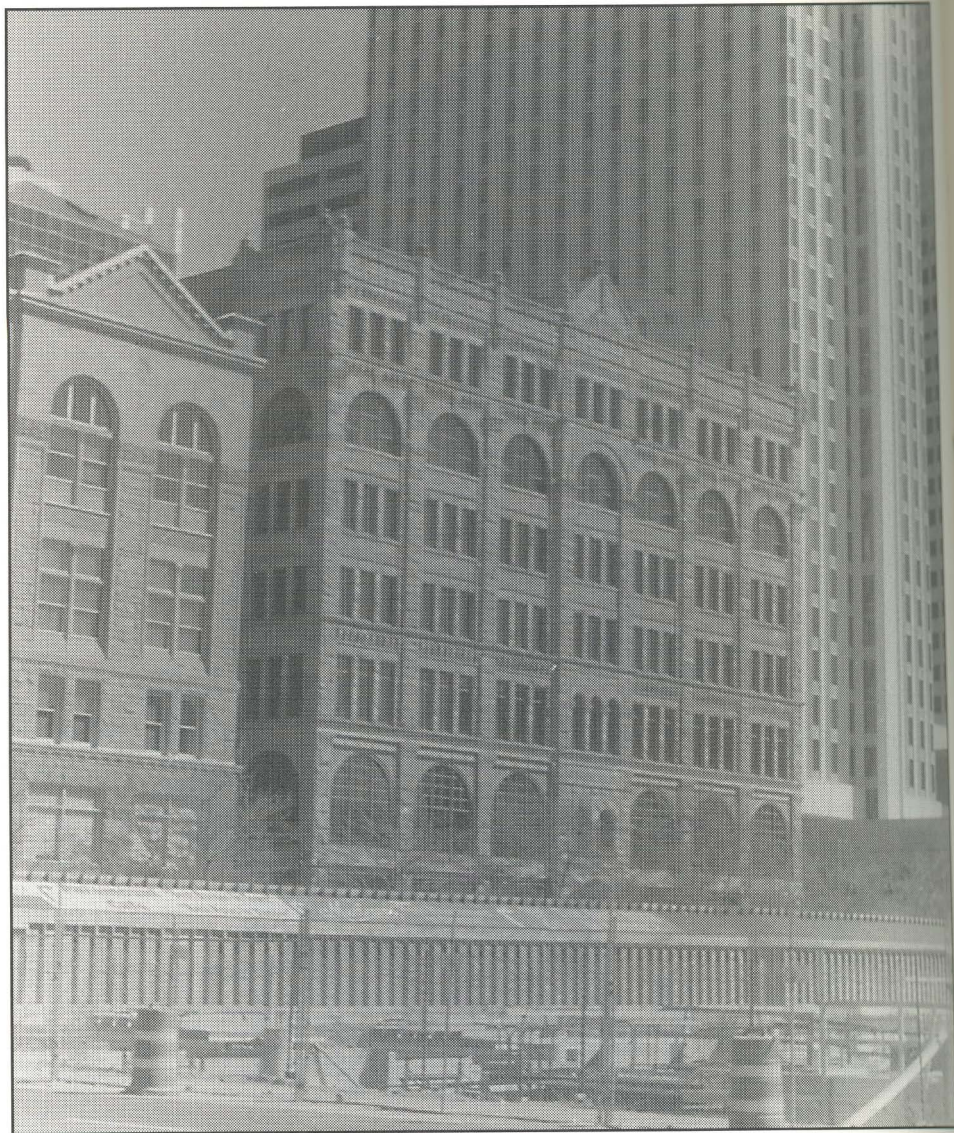


# **Art and Photography**



Little Boy  
Chrystal Chastain





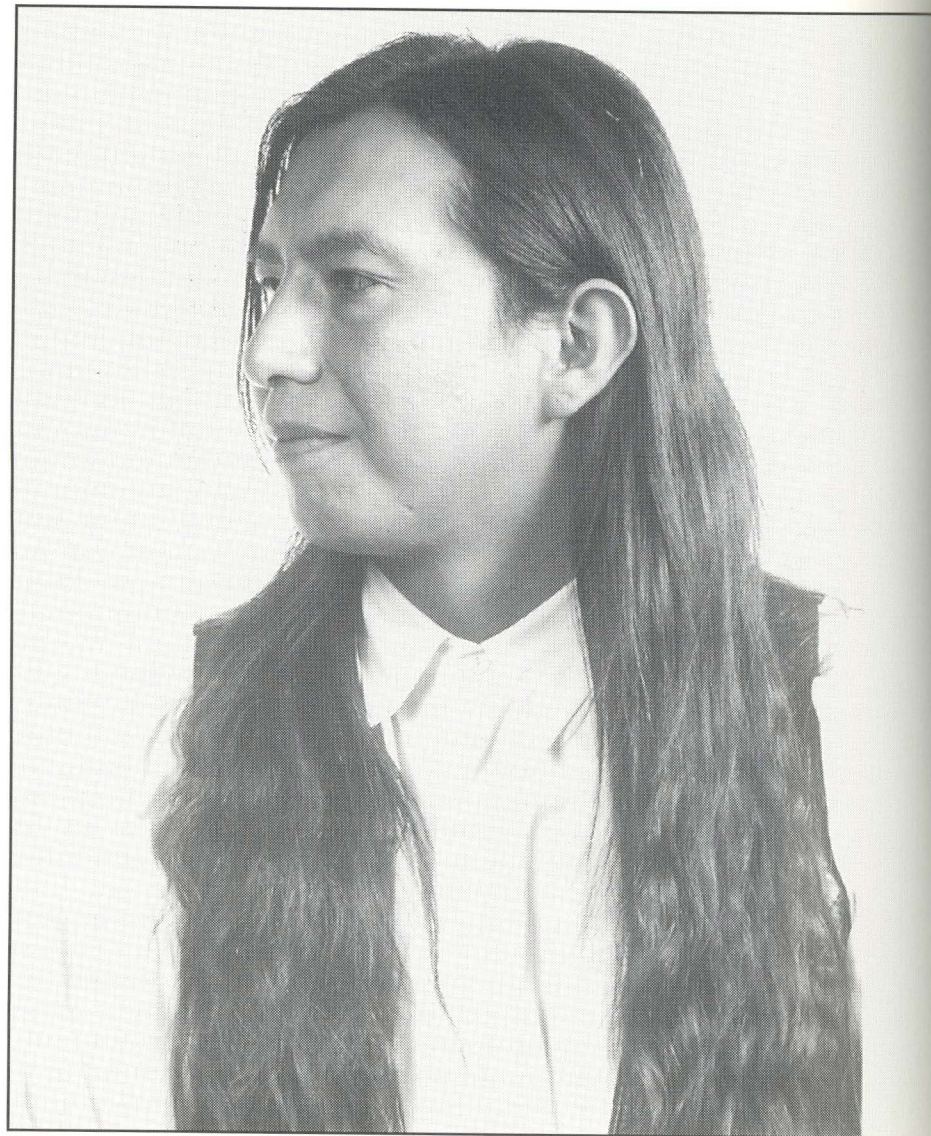
**Downtown**  
**Robyn A. Lydick**





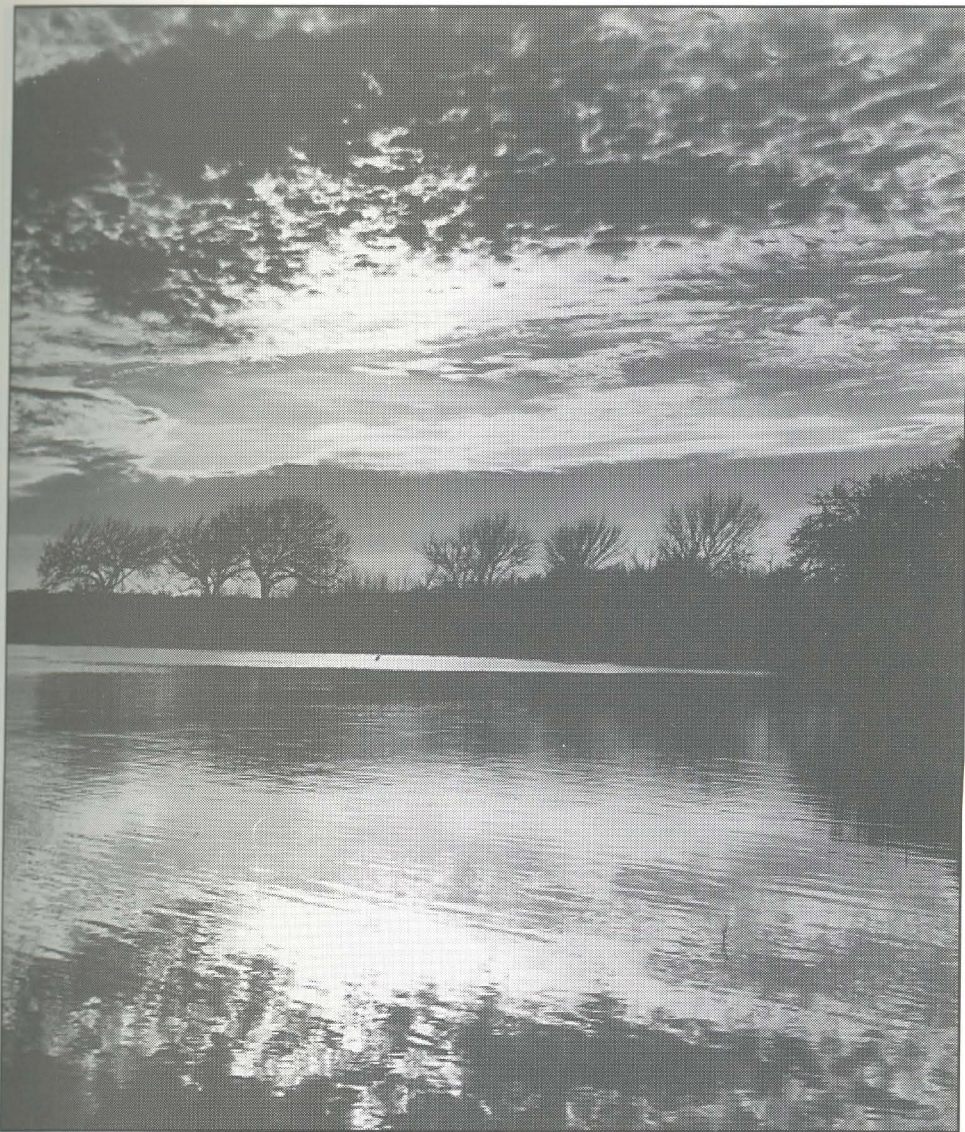
**Tree Frog**  
**Bob W. Bernhardt**





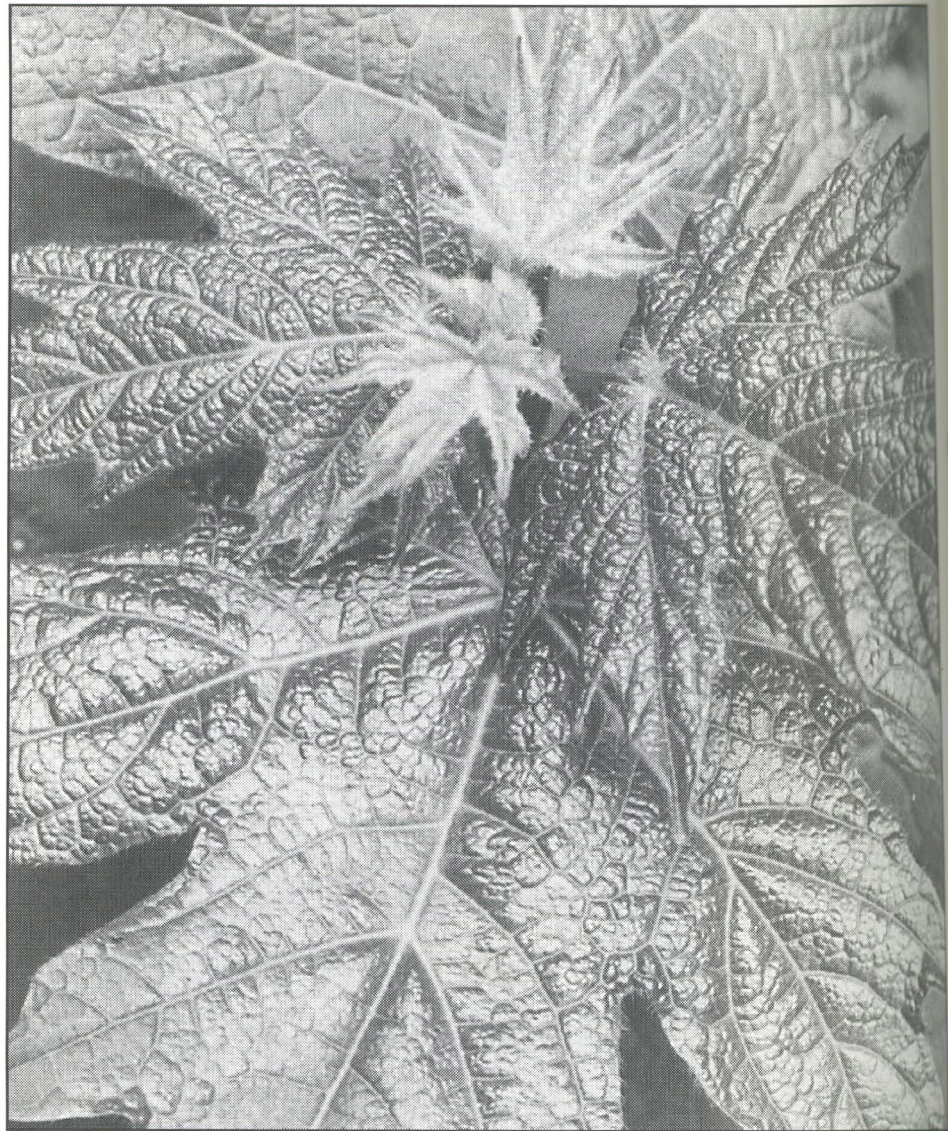
**Portrait**  
**Robyn A. Lydick**





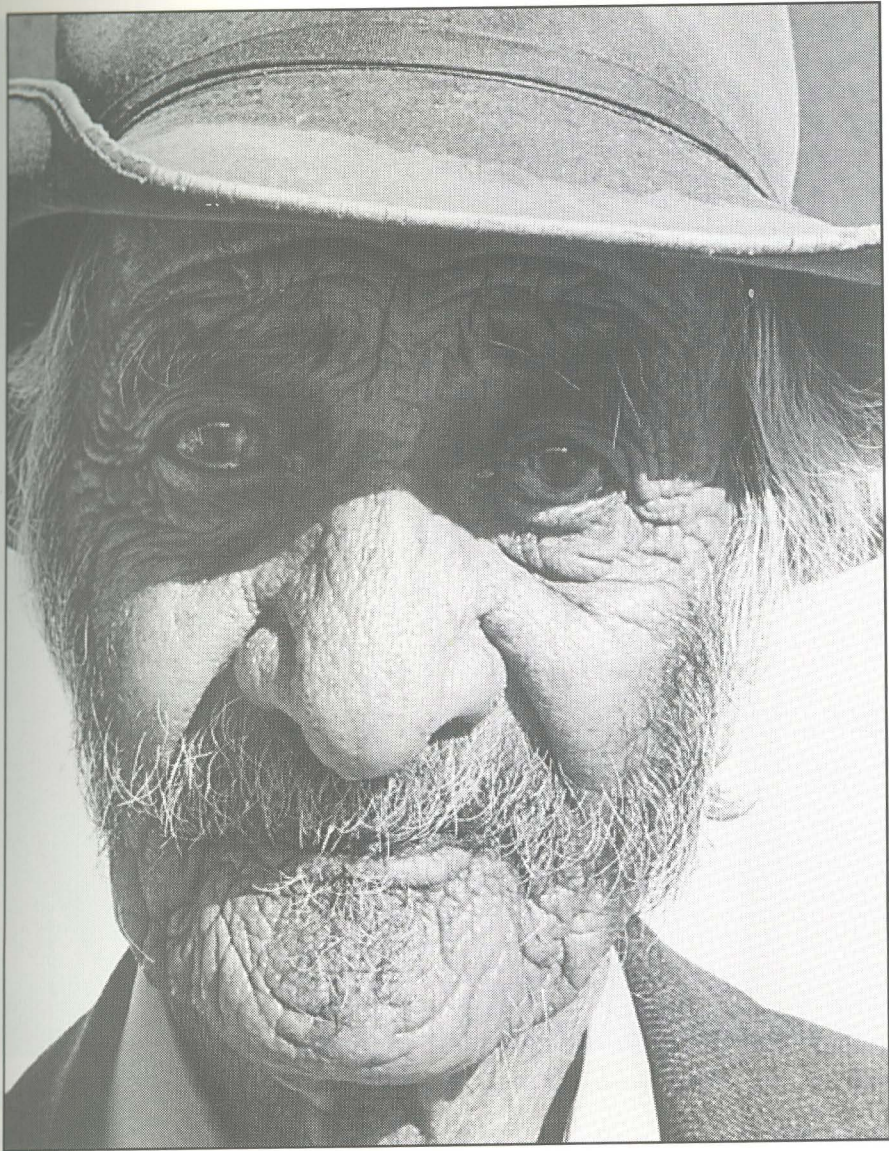
Landscape  
Jerrie "Jai" Gronemeier





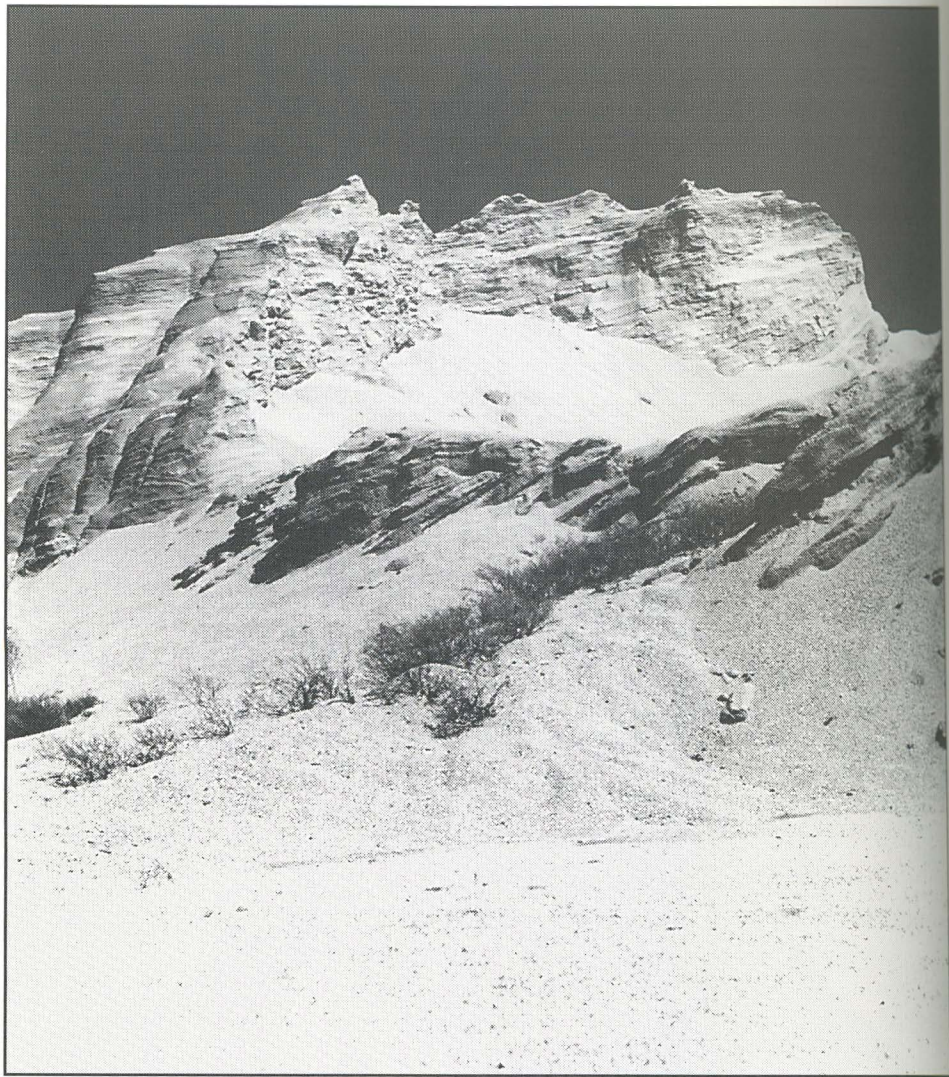
**Closeup**  
**Jerrie "Jai" Gronemeier**



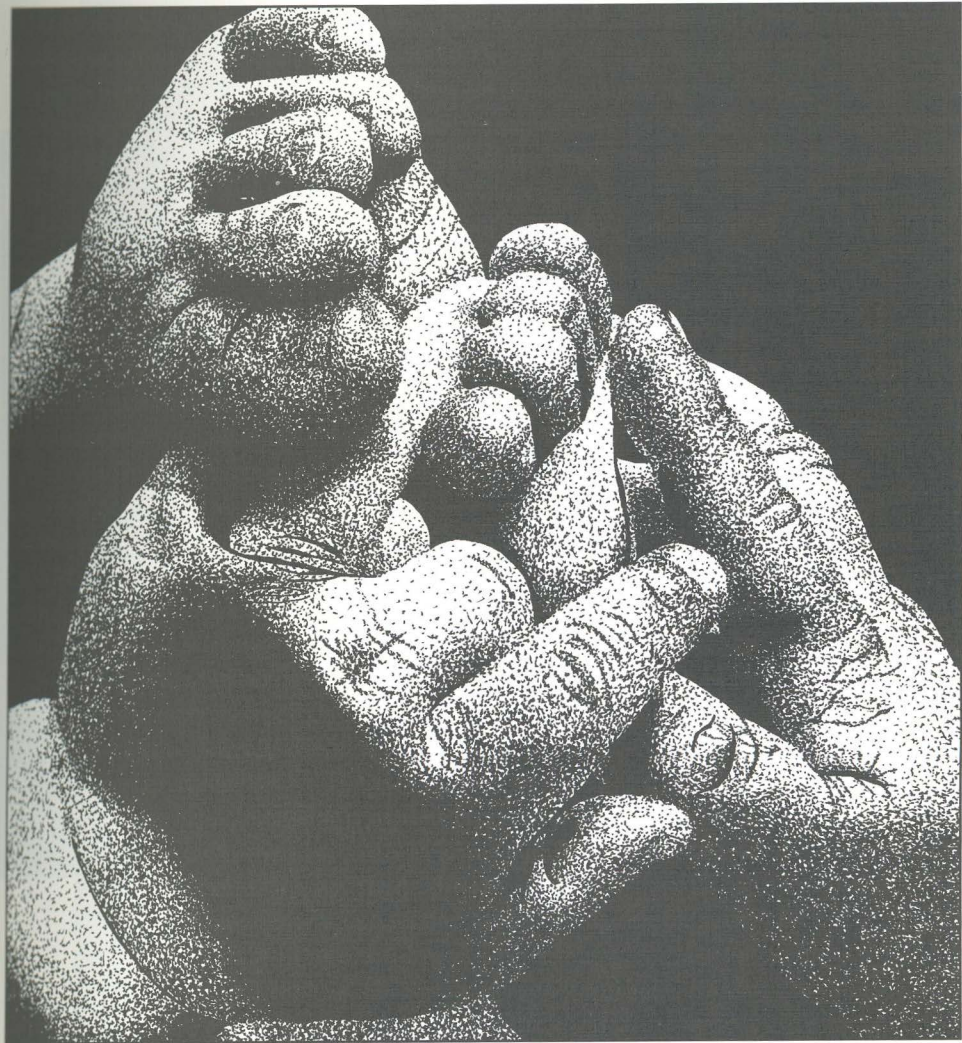


Los Vegas N.M.  
Ginger Mc Govern





**Mountains**  
**Jerrie “Jai” Gronemeier**

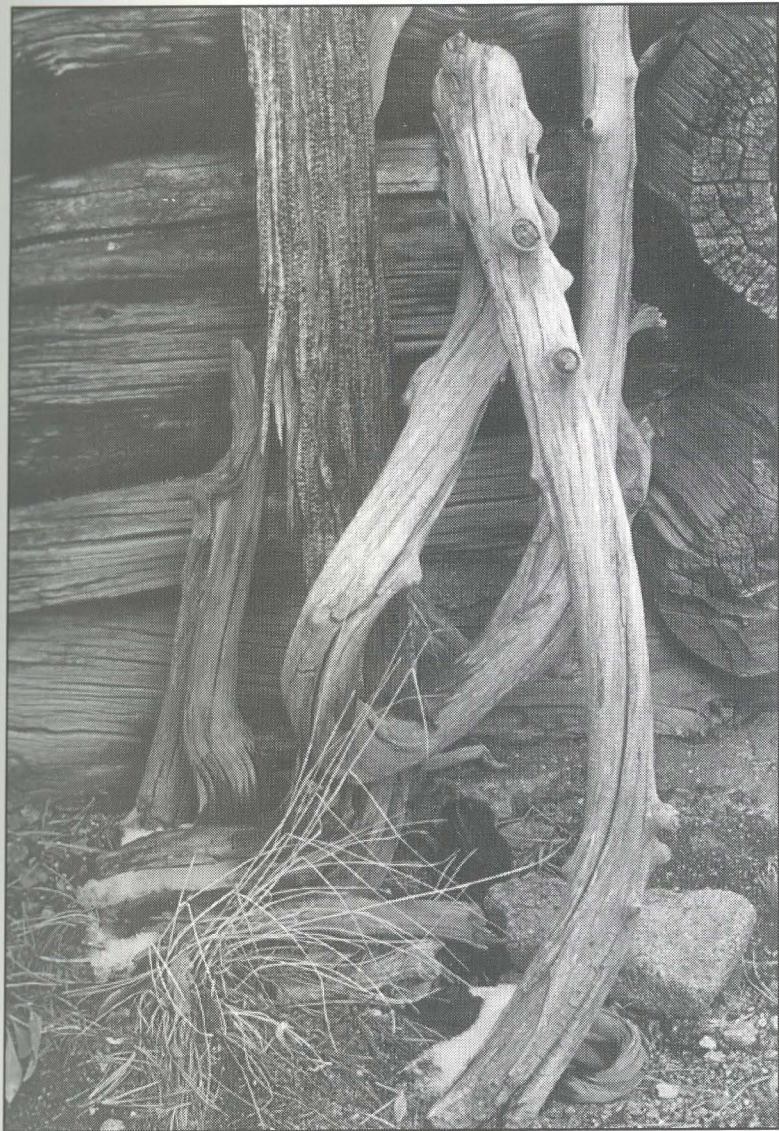


**Fingers and Toes**  
**Shannon R. Bridges**





**Silhouette**  
**Melissa Mayo**



Woodpile  
Jerrie “Jai” Gronemeier

POETRY • PROSE • ARTWORK