

Absolute

NINETEEN NINETY-NINE

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Fiction

Love Potion #8

Scott Wright

Nearly everyone has heard of Love Potion #9, but few know the story behind it. Few know the struggles gone through to get to the point of developing #9. Few know the stories of the first eight failures preceding Love Potion #9. Few know the tragedy brought on by Love Potion #8.

Arnold Tompkins was a scientist who had become independently wealthy following his invention of the Post-it Note. He was desired by women simply because he was rich, but he wanted a woman to love him with or without his money. This search was what drove him back into the lab. Arnold was determined to create a formula that could control women's feelings—specifically, the feeling of love.

He knew his way around the lab and was not in there long before he struck gold, or so he believed. His first creation, however, had a horrible odor that was much too strong. It would most likely push women away rather than draw them near, so he went back to work. His second creation was not as strong, but with it still lingered the aroma of burnt cheese. Attempts three through six were much too weak as he tried adding water to dilute the terrible smell. The seventh formula was nearly perfect, but he felt he could still improve on it, and that was just what he did—which is where the story gets interesting—with the creation of Love Potion #8.

Now that the formula was complete, Arnold needed to find a woman. Because he was desperate, his search took only one day, ending when he found Julia—five-foot, seven inches tall, with a tiny waist and the biggest, most beautiful blue eyes. He didn't understand why he hadn't noticed her before since she worked in the accounting department, which was on the third floor of his building. He began to speak to her almost every day until soon he was ready to ask her out on a date.

"I'm sorry, Arnold, but I already have plans on Friday. I'm going out with Richard from upstairs."

'So she has a date, no big deal. I'll get another chance pretty soon,' he began to think to himself. 'Maybe she won't have fun with Richard from upstairs. Wait a second. Richard from upstairs? Richard from upstairs!' His brain was screaming inside his head. Richard had been his best friend and partner. He was still working in the building, but not with Arnold anymore. Their friendship ended when Richard tried to take credit for the Post-it Note although he knew he had nothing to do with its development. Arnold didn't understand what Julia could possibly see in a guy like Richard who spent all his spare time in the lab at work, so he vowed not to give up. He didn't lose his last battle with Richard, and he wouldn't lose this one.

Following a few weeks full of frustration for Arnold, Julia agreed to have dinner with him. They enjoyed a delicious meal, and following dinner, they went for a walk by a beautiful pond. All the while, Arnold waited for the perfect moment to apply his love potion so Julia would be his forever. All he needed to do was sprinkle a few drops on her skin and wait for it to be absorbed.

The night became chilly and Julia had left her jacket at the office, so they headed back to pick it up. As they stepped off the elevator down the hall from Julia's office, they were greeted by Richard, who had just finished a long day working on the development of a computer program that would make the Post-it Note obsolete in the 21st century. Richard disliked Arnold as well, and upon seeing him with Julia, Richard became furious.

"You got the money, but you're not going to steal my girl, you lazy sucker!"

Those were fightin' words in the science industry, and Arnold knew he must defend himself. Richard shoved him backward into a wall, and he wanted to retaliate, but fighting was not something he had been successful at in the past. His last fight had come in the fifth grade when a bully pushed him into a wall, just as Richard had done now. As a fifth grader, he was so afraid that the bully was going to destroy him that he wet his pants in front of all his classmates. He just stood there as everyone walked past, with the warm liquid running down his leg. That was a feeling he had never forgotten. Now, as a grown man, he stood against a wall with thoughts of that day in the fifth grade filling his mind.

This time he did not remember losing control of his body functions, but he felt that same trickling feeling on his thigh, and his pants were warm and wet. He quickly reached for the bottle of potion he had been carrying in his back pocket and found that the bottle had been broken when he hit the wall and the potion was what was trickling down his leg. His body froze for a moment as his mind drifted. He began thinking about

the expensive cars he owned, his huge home, and all his money. At that point, he forgot about the other two people in the room and slowly walked downstairs to his car and drove home.

His potion was a success. He had fallen in love with himself. The next day, Arnold went shopping. He bought all the expensive clothes and furniture he wanted, he went on a Caribbean Cruise as well as vacations to Las Vegas and Hawaii, and he began to gamble and drink heavily. Within a year and a half, he had spent every penny of his Post-it Note fortune. His \$80 million home was taken away, along with all thirty-four cars and everything else he had bought for himself.

After a short time of living on the streets, Arnold died. Apparently the potion had some lasting effects on his memory, and he forgot to eat anything for a few months. Richard was given Arnold's lab along with his research data. He corrected the flaws in the potion and later became very wealthy with the creation of Love Potion #9. He did not need a potion, however, because he and Julia had fallen in love without it.

One bright morning many years later, looking back on the happenings that surrounded Love Potion #9, Richard said a few simple words that would change the lives of four men forever. These men had just recently formed a singing group, and after telling this story, he looked at them and said, "Wow, that would make a great song!"

Pilgrims, Indians, and the Girl Next Door

Patrick Riley

Sometimes, at Thanksgiving, I think of the Pilgrims and Indians getting together for a festive occasion. I picture them at a long wooden table, eating turkey and yams. I see all the little Pilgrims and Indian braves sitting around a card table, holding Tommy-Tippee cups. I think of the teenage Pilgrims playing catch football, and after the dinner, all the chiefs and warriors sitting around in the den with the Pilgrim elders, watching the Lions' game. That Thanksgiving night, I picture everyone eating disgusting cold turkey sandwiches. The next day, the first Friday after Thanksgiving, I picture one Pilgrim alone in his log cabin, watching the Oklahoma-Nebraska football game.

I'm sure the Indians and Pilgrims didn't do this, but my Indians and Pilgrims did. Every year, that was my family's tradition, and the most exciting part was the OU-Nebraska game. There is one year I particularly remember and will never forget. I was seventeen years old, and Oklahoma and Nebraska were getting at it.

My tradition for watching games was me alone, up in my bedroom, with my pillow stuffed in my mouth. If my pillow wasn't there, loud obscenities could be heard throughout my house.

The first half of the game flew by, and Nebraska was up 10-7. I was not worried because my Sooners always came back. The only thing I worried about was a power outage, and that day, the closest thing imaginable happened. My dad walked up the stairs and said, "Let's get ready to go to Grandma's."

"But what about the rest of the game?"

"We'll watch the end at Grandma's."

"But we'll miss a lot of it."

"It doesn't matter. We'll watch the rest at Grandma's."

My dad turned and left my room and the second half started. The third quarter began and flew by. OU was down 17-10, and my dad once again walked up the stairs.

"Let's go, boy."

"But the third quarter just ended."

"Let's go," he commanded.

"Can't I drive my own car?"

My dad then gave me a look—the look fathers give when they are disappointed with their sons. The look said to me, "This is Thanksgiving holiday, and my son would rather watch a stupid football game than spend quality time with his family."

I felt bad about the look, but I figure my dad got my this-is-the-last-quarter-of-an-OU-football-game look and forgot about it. SO my family left, and I was in the upstairs of my house, eating pillows. Oklahoma was still down 17-10, and there were five minutes left. I felt like I was becoming a man. When the doorbell rang.

There were two important things in my life when I was seventeen: sports and girls. They both took equal time in my life and both had flaws. The major flaw of a sport was my team sometimes lost. The major flaw of women, although many, was that there were not enough for seventeen-year-old guys.

I went downstairs and answered the door. Standing before me was the girl next door. She was the perfect girl next door, the one found in cheap movies and fairytales. She was new to the area, had a great body, great face, great charm, and a great crush on me. Sometimes she would come over to my house after school, and we would kiss.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi, Chucky," she mumbled, nearly falling over. I grabbed her tight pink sweater that was glued to her arm..

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She laughed out loud in an annoying voice. "My mom didn't hide the eggnog."

"Are you drunk?" I asked, praying for the right response.

"Yes," she giggled. My brain cheered. Standing before me was the drunk girl next door.

"My parents are at my grandma's," she said.

"So are mine."

"I figured I'd come warm you up."

"Okay." I was enlightened.

"I'd thought you'd be watching the football game," she spoke.

"Oh, crap. I forgot." I turned and ran upstairs. "Come on up," I yelled.

For a second, I had forgotten about the game. I jumped on my bed and grabbed my pillow. There were four minutes left, and OU had the football on their own two-yard line. They were still down 17-10. I could hear the stairs creak with each step the drunk fairytale girl from next door took. She made it to my room and said, "All that guys like is football."

"Yep. We sometimes like other things."

Methodically, OU was driving down the field. I was entranced by the game, but the girl next door wouldn't leave me alone. She kept rubbing my back, asking stupid questions like "Do you find me attractive?"

"When's the game over?"

"Have you bought the new *Twisted Sister* tape?"—all things I cared nothing about at that time. I wanted Keith Jackson, the play-by-play commentator, to yell, "Whoa, Nellie, won't you shut up!"

Then, with about two minutes left, OU scored a touchdown to tie it up. I jumped three feet, very high for a white guy.

"You're into the game," the girl said.

"This is awesome."

"What do I need to do for attention?"

"Wait for the game to be over."

"That's mean," she blurted.

"Two more minutes, that's all." The girl next door thought I meant two human minutes, not football minutes. There is a huge difference. For every human minute, there are five football minutes. Two football minutes went by, and OU was stuffing Nebraska.

Every two human minutes, she would say, "What do I need to do for attention?"

Each time, I answered with "Two more minutes."

OU got the ball back with fifty seconds and somehow was getting into field goal range. Finally, the clock ticked all the way to fifteen seconds, and a timeout was called.

"I know what I can do for attention," the girl said.

"What?"

To tell the PG-13 version of what she tried to do would be too descriptive, but I'll just say it's what bad uncles get sent to jail for. I quickly grabbed her hand and said, "No." It took a lot of guts to do, but I knew if things started with her, I wouldn't see the end of the game.

The game started back and OU got into field goal range. With three seconds left, they were about to attempt the game-winning field goal. Nebraska then called a timeout to ice the kicker.

I was nervous as hell. I was watching one of the greatest games ever. Then, the amazing happened. Straight from a script for a B movie, a shirt landed on my TV. It wasn't one of my shirts but a pink sweater. I then saw a pink bra hit the TV. I froze and I felt my hair tingle. I was sure it wasn't my bra because I did not own any. I was scared to turn around, but from behind me, I heard the girl-next-door's voice say in a sarcastic, innocent tone, "What do I have to do for some attention?"

Slowly I turned around, my pillow glued to my mouth, and saw the World Trade Centers perked before me. At that moment, it seemed time had stopped. I felt like it was going to be a very memorable day. The pillow slowly moved from my mouth, and I was about to greet my princess when I heard Keith Jackson's voice, "Whoa, Nellie, what a kick we have here!"

Quickly, my pillow jumped out of my mouth, and I turned to the game. I witnessed the snap, the hold, the kick, and then the ball curved through the uprights. I jumped five feet in the air, higher than any white man before me. The pillow fell out of my mouth. I ran out of my room, right past the topless, drunk, fairytale girl next door. I danced through the kitchen, hooting and hollering like a chimpanzee in front of Jane Goodall. I next reached for my tongue and pulled out fluff from the pillow. I couldn't believe what happened. OU was going to the Orange Bowl. I heard steps creak on the stairs. Downward came the girl next door, fully clothed.

She looked at me and said, "You asshole."

"W-w-w-wait," I said.

"You prick."

"But it's been two minutes," I hopelessly yelled.

She said nothing and quickly exited my house. The screen slammed behind her. I thought about what I had done and what I had seen. Minutes later, I left my house to go to my grandmother's. There I would eat cold turkey and tell them about the little Pilgrim that got to watch the game.

Dog Breath

Patrick Riley

I stood in my bathroom looking at two nearly new toothbrushes. One was red with high gloss; the other was blue and had an arch in it so it could reach the teeth in the back. I did not know which brush to use. The day before, I went all out and gave my dog a bath and haircut; for some reason, I brushed his teeth, also. The dog did not even have bad breath. I could not remember which brush I used to brush my dog's teeth and which one was mine. This was a problem, but not my biggest. Asleep in my living room on the couch was a fat, repulsive, acne-faced girl I fooled around with the night before.

The only reason we fooled around was because I was drunk. That was the one and only reason. I like to think I have pretty good taste; she was able to put a damper on that thought. As I looked at the two toothbrushes, I pictured the gross acts we indulged in. It made my stomach hurt and I threw up in my toilet.

I now really needed to brush my teeth. I had cottonmouth from the drinking, the germs from the fat girl, and the taste of fresh vomit in my mouth. I thought hard and tried to remember which brush was mine, but I could not recall. The thought crossed my mind of just grabbing a toothbrush and brushing away, but what if I grabbed the wrong one; would it be worth it? It would ruin the whole point of brushing my teeth.

I did what any practical person would do. I stuck out my right index finger and lined it with toothpaste. I then smiled big and rubbed my teeth, cleaning them the best I could. The cottonmouth quickly went away, as did the taste of the vomit, but the germs from the poster girl for Oxy stayed with me. I rubbed harder and harder, trying to wash them away, when I heard three tiny taps on my door.

"Hewoo," I mumbled.

"It's me." The fat girl barged in. She looked at me and smiled.

"You've got the right idea," she said.

I nodded my head. I looked at the girl through the mirror. I could not look at her eye-to-eye.

"Do you have beer breath?" she asked as her frizzy hair fell into her face, covering up some of her pimples.

"I did."

"Well, it's good you don't anymore." She looked at the two toothbrushes and then looked at me in the mirror.

"Would you mind?" she said, nodding towards the toothbrushes.

"Uh, no."

"Which one?" A vision ran through my mind of the red toothbrush falling to the floor of my bathroom. I remembered it sparkling in the light and then being crammed into my dog's mouth. I did not know if it was a real memory or a made-up one, but it was good enough.

"The red one. It's my extra toothbrush," I said with a grin.

"Okay." She looked at the toothpaste smeared on my finger and then at my blue toothbrush. "Whose toothbrush is that?"

"It's mine. I just dropped it on the floor. It's dirty. I saved the red one for you."

She looked at me and smiled. To me, her smile was ugly, like her body. I figured she thought that she had a beautiful smile. She then picked up the red toothbrush, painted it with toothpaste, and brushed. I watched her brush her teeth. I stopped rubbing my teeth and I washed off my finger. I spit out the toothpaste and rinsed out my mouth. Next to the sink, shadowed by a big bottle of liquid soap, was my mint dental floss. I nearly grabbed for it, but there was no reason to. I felt clean; my cottonmouth vanished, the taste of vomit no longer resided in my mouth, and the germs from the girl slowly began to fade away.

The Assassin

Zach Hughes

Life is never easy when you do what he does for a living.

He has been sitting for hours in the exact same spot. Never moving, only breathing. Thinking and breathing. The apartment room he is in is small and shabby. The walls are entirely bare and plaster hangs off in chunks. The only object around is the single bulb dangling loosely from the ceiling, and the only sounds coming from the building are those of domestic violence and sex. He stands on the cheap wood floor, peers at the building across the street from out the window, and waits.

Below, the busy four-lane highway of The City is filled with people of all colors, shapes, and sizes. People from each and every walk of life. People who have no idea what is about to occur right there, directly in the vicinity of their world, and wouldn't care if they did. It is nothing new for them. They simply continue on with life as scheduled, driving, working, buying, existing. Nothing more. He wants more. He has more. He has the power—the power to decide who lives, who dies, why, where, and how. For a moment, he begins to watch them scurry. He studies them like a biologist would an organism under a microscope, carefully, unemotionally. He sees taxi drivers throwing thick, ugly middle fingers high into the air as if cursing God Himself, bystanders shoving and plowing their selfish way through others doing the same, and wicked, nocturnal creatures calling on another family man to sell his soul to their siren song. He smiles. He loves the night and the filth it brings with it, but particularly the filth The City's night brings with it.

Filth has always played a pivotal role in his life.

He remembers sitting on the bed in his bedroom long ago. His room was small and so was the rest of the house. His family had been poor for as long as he could remember.

Then his father died and everything changed. His mother couldn't find a decent job, and even now he recalls the unpleasantly familiar feeling of seeing her walk into the house in the evening and throw herself upon the shabby brown couch in the living

room amongst her own helplessness and tears. He used to watch her from the shadows of the narrow hallway, never wanting her to know he saw her in this weakened state. She always tried to be the strong one, but it was a facade and evidently so. But she had her God and she had him.

His mother's God was not enough for him, however. He wanted more for them. He wanted more for her. So, he sat on his bed and thought. At first, he simply got a part-time job and went to work as assistant to the butcher at the slaughterhouse after school.

That slaughterhouse was what started it all for him. It was a building on the far outskirts of The City. He used to walk down the long gravel road leading to the stockyards every day after school. There were no neighborhoods around. There were no other businesses. There was not even any flourishing plant life, aside from the sporadic choking weeds and briars that tore out from the cracked and unforgiving ground.

Then, in the distance, the first signs of the existence of the place made themselves known. A yet small pillar of black smoke snaked and spiraled its way heavenward, but like a black arm from hell reaching up and out in a futile attempt to snuff out the bright light of good and day, never attained that particular destination. Then the stench would hit him from miles out still. Like a caustic fog, the stench of bloody death and burning flesh smothered any decent air into nothing and filled his nostrils with its impurity, an impurity he would come to welcome into his bosom with a loving embrace. Closer he came and deeper in the stench as his pace slowed as if trekking through the stench was equivalent to trudging through waist-deep mud and mire. Closer still and the low murmur of the cattle became audible as it was carried with the whistling and eerie breeze. It blew back his hair, and he closed his eyes in order to fully utilize his other senses. He learned to delight in the rankness and animal moaning as if it were dessert before dinner. Soon the beginnings of the stockyards were visible, and he made his way up the path beyond the gates of rotting wood and rusty barbed wire, past the herds of legged, living meat and their ignorantly accusing gazes. The stench would then be on the verge of unbearable if he had not learned to cherish its potency.

Then he pulled back, as he did every day, the large tin door of the slaughterhouse, groaning with its metallic creaking as it rolled away, revealing the sights within. The stench at ground zero took him longer to deal with, and he vomited onto the dirt here many times. Once the water in his eyes dried away, he was fully free to view the delights within the confines of the massive slaughterhouse. Corpses were hoisted upon great meat hooks all in a row, hooves tied together in the "Gein Configuration." These had

already been gutted and skinned and were ready for quartering. This was not his job for it took a surgeon's hands. This was George the butcher's job. The boy's job was getting the cattle to this point. His job was the actual slaughtering.

He remembers the first time Big George trained him for this. He was impressed with the speed, power, and callousness with which George brought that sledge down on the waiting skull of the beast. The animal moaned briefly in pain as its head collapsed and it sank to the ground under its own massive weight. Big George, on the other hand, was impressed that the boy didn't vomit more than once at the sight of the circle of thick black blood spreading wider and wider around the animal's shattered head. George showed him how to hoist the corpse, skin it, and bleed it, using what George liked to call the "ear-to-ear smile." The first time he witnessed this procedure performed, he could not believe how much blood the creature contained. It drained into a giant basin for minutes and minutes. The stream of blackness hypnotized him every time with the thickness of it and with the spitter-spatter sound it made in the tin basin. Flaying the dead creature of its skin and exposing the shining red muscle and viscera came as easy to George as peeling a banana, and the boy always found complete evisceration of the carcass perversely fascinating.

After a time, he became quite capable of doing all this himself. It did, of course, take many tries before he could sledge a beast dead in one swing. In the beginning, it would take him as many as eight strikes to hush the screams of the beast and bring it to its death. The beast would make terrible sounds upon the first one or two blows before it became unconscious, leaving the blunt sound of the hammer alone in the slaughterhouse. Each swing echoed in his mind, and, with each kill, the sound became more and more defined within his brain until the day it took only one swing. That day, the sound was clear and pure as a white-hot flame burning inside the cold emptiness of his soul. The power to kill planted itself in his mind and flourished into wicked life within the brain. He loved to kill.

Soon, killing cattle was not enough. They did not put up nearly as amusing a fight as they once seemed to. Also, the bills at home were still not getting paid. He needed more thrill and, with that thrill, more money.

That's when he met Mister Montgomery.

Mister Edward Montgomery was the man who owned the slaughterhouse and signed Big George's and the boy's weekly pay checks. He was also one of the biggest crime lords The City had seen to date, and the slaughterhouse was a location remote enough that the boy saw many business transactions being dealt with in the safety and solace the dirty, blood-splattered walls had to offer.

On one instance in particular, he recalls seeing Mr. Montgomery and three other black-clad gentlemen carry a bound fourth man out of the trunk of their equally black stretch limousine. He could tell that the eyes of the fourth man shone with terror evident even through the thick sheen of fresh blood that cloaked them. He was moaning frantically and desperately kicking for freedom against the big hands of the three henchmen who carried him. Then they threw him on the floor, kicked him a few times in the ribs and face with their boots to silence him, then left him to their boss. Mr. Montgomery got on his knees and leaned his face in very close to the other man's and began to talk. The boy in the shadows couldn't make out the words of either man, but to him, that wasn't what was important. What was important was what those men were going to do with their captive, and he found himself growing antsy with the excitement of witnessing human torture.

Then Mr. Montgomery pulled a shiny silver object out of his inside jacket pocket. After straining very hard through the dark, the boy could see it was some kind of switchblade. For a few odd seconds, nothing happened; a few seconds more and the other man began to scream. The scream rang in the boy's head for what seemed hours, and he will never forget how similar that scream was to those of dying cattle. *All are animals*, he thought. When the screaming morphed into little more than pitiful moans, Mr. Montgomery shifted slightly to the left, allowing the unknown witness to take a glance at the awful handiwork. For a brief moment, he noticed the tortured man gazing in his direction with his head resting on the dirty floor. The boy would have pivoted away until he realized the man was now equipped only with bloodied sockets where eyes once rested. The sight of the suffering blinded man burned itself like a brand into the boy's soul and, to this day, remains one of his most vivid memories.

The boy remained in a zombie state of awe until a big meaty arm wrapped itself around his waist and another came up against his mouth to block out any screams that might come over him. For a moment, he was scared until the arms whirled him around to meet the familiar face of Big George the butcher.

"This is nothing for you to see, my young friend," said the butcher. "Go on home, boy, and I will see you tomorrow."

"What have you got for us there, George?" inquired Mr. Montgomery upon hearing the whisperings of the butcher.

"Nothing, Mr. Montgomery. I was just telling my assistant to go home for the day," Big George answered nervously, trying to save the life of his young assistant.

"Bring him to me."

George sighed a little and whispered something to the boy about it all being okay and took him under his arm to meet Mr. Montgomery. The crime boss looked down into the eyes of the boy and instantly took an interest to his looking directly back into his own eyes with no fear in them and all the innocence in the world.

Soon, Mr. Montgomery began incorporating the young man's abilities and morbid fascinations into small deeds he needed done. Delivering packages and collecting money became an everyday part of his life, and the big boss paid well. Eventually, Montgomery had bigger assignments for him, bigger and deadlier.

He recalls the first time he took a man's life. He didn't know what the man had done, what crime he had committed against his employer, nor did he care. The day had just died out, murdered by night, and the beast came out of the dirty nightclub, stumbling and cursing. *Just cattle.* The boy thought. *All are cattle.* Now, with the animal isolated and intoxicated, he lunged out of the shadows and into the fleshy throat of the dumb beast. Almost instantly, the blood came hot over the killer's body, and the night's cool air caused it to steam upwards as an offering to heaven, and the stream of blood flowed down to hell. When the boy came back to his senses, the thing in front of him was a corpse in name only. A single puncture wound about the size of a silver dollar had been made in its neck, but it had been completely stripped of every inch of skin. The meat that was left lay shining and moist amongst ribbons of flesh and the trash that had been thrown around the side of the nightclub where dance music could still be heard thumping through the walls containing the ignorant herd.

He walked back into the shadows, wearing a thick coat of sticky red glue.
All are cattle.

He had done the deed many more times for Mr. Montgomery since then and for various other employers, which leads to now, tonight, in a dingy hotel room.

His rare smile disappears from his roughly handsome yet devilishly clever face as he regains his composure and concentrates once more on the task at hand. He looks up and away from the ugliness below and peers into the window of the building across the street. He knows the man will arrive soon to fulfill his lustful desires.

He sneezes.

"Damn sinuses," he whispers as he leans the silenced sniper rifle against the wall and wipes his mouth and nose. He is in excellent physical shape, but The City's air carries with it too much grime.

He looks up once more and realizes that the light is on in the room across the street.
"Dammit."

He sniffs his red nose hard to control the snot flow and grabs the rifle from off the wall. A quick inspection proves for the thousandth time that he has properly attached

the scope and silencer. As he has done a million times in the past, he masterfully points the rifle out the window and into the building. He stares at the lovingly familiar sight of a room circled in black and exposed only by the oval shape and cross hair. Naturally, he still prefers the more personal approach of the knife, but age has made him more professional, and the rifle will make his prey just as dead.

The man enters the room that is only slightly dirtier than his own sinful soul. He can see the man's bald head and smiling round face. His tie is undone and hanging with the knot just above his fat, bloated belly. His sleeves are rolled to the elbows, and on the arm not holding the bottle of liquor, a scantily clad young girl strides in beside him.

The killer is nervous. Though he has done it countless times, he always becomes nervous just before. He likes it, though, because it lets him know he is in control. He knows that the day he is no longer nervous is the day all will be over and he will make a mistake. There is no room for mistakes. He sighs and puts the gun down once more to wipe the beads of sweat from his forehead. He strokes his goatee and rubs his hands across his jeans. He says something underneath his breath and then swings the rifle back into position. Popping his neck, he allows the cross hair to move lazily, trying to find a satisfying resting place in the room across the street. The man kisses the woman. The cross hair places itself perfectly on the back of the man's fat head. The killer's finger slides gracefully into the trigger and begins to squeeze. The squeeze is slow and gentle on the cool, metal ring as if it were a bomb on the verge of exploding. The cross hair is still exactly on the man's head, right above the roll on his sweating neck, when that rare smile appears again, and the trigger finishes the journey inward. He feels the familiar recoil on his right shoulder and hears the sweet sound of a silenced bullet discharge from the muzzle.

Across the street, the back of the fat man's head cracks open, and sin-black blood seeps out. He slumps to the floor and out of sight as the prostitute shrieks and falls back on the bed, covered in brain and bone.

That is it. The fat politician died in his filth and sin. The killer's job here is done. He feels only little satisfaction, though, because he knows that he still has one more job to do—a job so big, so important, the likes of which he has never seen before. He quickly disassembles his rifle, puts it back into its briefcase-sized container with care, and leaves the building.

He is now on the street he only a moment before was watching. He makes his way through the crowd in suit and tie with briefcase in hand. He breathes in a deep lungfull of dirty air and exhales the fog into the night. He loves the night and the filth it brings with it. Then, the Professional, the Assassin, moves into the night.

Head Room

Brady Wright

As the prisoner transport truck crested yet another dune in the vast desert, the image of a silver building appeared like a mirage on the horizon. As we drew closer to the building, the immensity of this prison complex gave me a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. Yet, for its imposing stature, it seemed strange that the Detention Center had no guard towers or fences to keep in the prisoners. Apparently the desert alone was supposed to be enough to keep any prisoners from escaping alive, which wasn't an encouraging thought since I was about to be one of its prisoners. Still, I wondered, if I could just get through an outside door, I might be able to survive in the desert.

When we finally arrived at the Detention Center, I made the mistake of asking one of the other prisoners his name. My punishment: my tongue was branded with the Seal of the State. I remember the discipline officers informing me of my offense just before letting me taste the last thing I'd ever taste again—a red-hot branding iron. I heard the sizzle when the branding iron touched my mouth. I was told that if I ever spoke again, my punishment would be much worse. And it would have been worse had my tongue not already been numb from the chemical they had injected into my mouth to keep me from being able to move my tongue. The pain was strong, but the worst part was the sizzling sound. The worst part was knowing what was happening, hearing the sickening sizzle of my own flesh, and there being nothing I could do about it. Since then, after waiting in the food line and seeing inmates who had to suck all their food through a straw because they had no tongues, I learned what “worst” meant. No sort of socializing was tolerated at the Detention Center. We were all criminals and enemies of the People and could not be allowed to speak.

Because of lack of sleep and the passing of what I guessed were many years, I didn't even remember why I was a criminal. I had to guess—because I had no way, no light of day, no dark of night to count the endless time—that I had been here a lifetime.

I had no real idea how long it had really been, and in those supposed years, the world I had known had become a faded memory—a dream. The only world I knew consisted of continual pain and agony and was confined within the cold, stark walls of this Detention Center, and the only thing I remembered about why I had come here was that it had something to do with a thought crime. Thought. Thoughts were my crime, but thoughts were all that they had left me. Thoughts and all the time I needed to think them.

In the years following my arrival at the Detention Center, when it was quiet, I would sit and think of ways to escape. I would sit expressionless and just think. If I had an expression on my face, they might figure out that I was plotting an escape. Behind my facade of thoughtlessness, behind my stony visage, lay my mutinous pondering. They could not see in my eyes what I was planning. They could not hear my rebellious thoughts. My mind was the only place they could never invade and see my inner secrets. My face was my bulwark, and my mind was my asylum, my sanctuary, and my haven from this living Hell, and I would do anything to get out of this hell.

In all my planning, I had concluded that it would be easiest to escape during a dust storm and, preferably, shortly after eating because the outer force field doors that led directly to the open desert were only yards from the cafeteria and restroom area. If I had a key, it would be relatively easy to make a dash for a door and escape into the desert. But in all these plans of escape, there was one vital piece I lacked: a microchip-key. No matter what I did, I would need a microchip-key to pass through the outer doors. I had become resigned to the fact that before I could escape this living Hell, I would have to find one of these microchip-keys. I had often seen locked doors open automatically for guards who held one of the chip-keys in their hands or had one in their pockets. The chip-keys were blue and only about an inch wide, and they apparently emitted a signal that was automatically read by a door's scanner and allowed whoever held one simply to walk through a locked door without even removing the chip-key from his pocket. But getting my hands on one would be difficult because the guards always kept the chip-keys chained to their uniforms.

After I had been at the facility for quite some time, I thought I would go completely mad. Maybe I did, but it wasn't for the endless days spent in utter silence—the only activity being quietly waiting in lines for food I could, mercifully, not taste. It wasn't for the fact that our lives had no purpose. It wasn't for the fact that, since coming to the Detention Center, I had seen actual, genuine sunlight but once. If I did go mad, it was because of the many endless, sleepless nights—sleepless because of the Sound. The Sound was both high-pitched and low-pitched. It was all around me. It seemed to have multiple dimensions to it. It seemed almost to have a form. When I closed my eyes, I

could almost see it. It was enigmatic, yet had a shape I couldn't quite make out, and almost every night, as I lay in my one-man cell, the Sound would penetrate my skull. It was agonizing. It was torture, but I dared not scream for fear of punishment. Lying alone in the darkness, I would often have to bite my lip to keep from screaming. Many mornings—if you could call them that—I would emerge from my cell with teeth marks on my lower lip and stains from blood that I could smell but not taste that ran from my mouth and down my chin. On nights like those, it was hard to think, hard to sleep. Hard, but not impossible. Some nights, I was actually able to put the Sound in the back of my mind and drift into sleep, and when I did, I always dreamt of escape.

If I didn't go mad, it was because of the dreams of escape I had on the nights of the Sound; it was because of the dreamless nights when there was no sound; and it was because, despite the rules against socializing, I had a friend. Without my friend, I would not have been able to bear this maddening non-existence.

I had no idea what his name was. I had no idea what his voice sounded like, but that's not important. He was a large man and had black skin, but his eyes . . . I saw into his eyes, however briefly. Now, if I've learned anything from the time I've spent in relative solitude at the Detention Center, it's how to see deep into a pair of eyes and see the man. Since everyone went through the food line in order, he was always in front of me in line and always sat across from me at the table. Occasionally, we would exchange eye contact. My friend and I never dared to show an expression on our faces, but we could see into each other's eyes, and we knew each other, inside and out. When I looked into his eyes, I saw a fire raging deep within him that refused to be extinguished, and I knew he had thoughts of escape on his mind, too.

One night, after what was probably several months after meeting my friend, the Sound blared out in my cell, but I was able to fall asleep. That night, during my sleep, the form of the Sound finally came into focus. As I lay and dreamt in a feverish sleep, I saw a form floating in front of me. As it took shape, I noticed that it had five sides. As it came further into focus, I saw that it was blue, and it was then that I realized it was one of the microchip-keys. I could see the chip-key clearly now. As in a dream, I suddenly became aware that the chip-key I was looking at was embedded in the back of a man's neck, and, as in a dream, it made sense: If I decapitated the man, I would be able to hold the head in my hands while running through one of the outside doors, and I would be allowed to pass into the deep desert.

The next morning, I got in line for the first meal of the day. While waiting in line, I chanced a glance at one of the guards and noticed that he was wearing a scarf around his neck—a sign that there might be a dust storm. A thrill of excitement rushed down

my spine as it always did when I suspected that there was a dust storm because that meant if I could just get my hands on a chip-key, I might have a chance of escaping. Realizing this, I sneaked an extra portion of gray stuff onto my plate in hopes that I might find an opportunity to get outside and would need the extra energy. As I thought more about the possibility of escape, I recalled the dream I had had the night before about the chip-key. I casually wondered if there might be chip-keys embedded in the necks of the guards as I had envisioned the night before. As I thought about it more, I realized that it would make sense for the guards to have chip-keys in their bodies. That way, if they lost their keys or if there were a riot, they would still be able to get through the doors. I began to be hopeful and started taking closer looks at the back of the guards' necks as I stood in line. If I found any sign of a key in the neck of one of the guards, I'd be more than happy to take his head if given the opportunity. After all, I owed them.

After subtly looking over the guards in the room and not finding any signs of keys, I wondered why I had placed so much hope in a mere dream, but as I stood behind my friend in line and caught a glimpse of his back, chills coursed through my body, and my mind balked as I noticed a five-sided, pentagon-shaped protrusion along with a small scar on the back of my friend's neck. As I sat down and began to eat, I glanced at my friend's eyes. The fire that had been in his eyes the night before was gone. His eyes were weak and glazed over. I found it difficult to eat; I had too much to think about. I wondered why my friend's eyes were so different. I wondered what it all meant. I wondered if the chip was embedded too deeply for the door's sensors to detect it, and, if so, what I would use to dig the chip out of him.

After eating what I could of my breakfast, I proceeded to the dish-disposal line. As I began tossing my plates and cutlery into the cleaning bin, I caught myself just before I tossed my knife. A plan had formed in my mind that made me sick. I paused for a moment and finally, deciding to keep the knife, I hid it under my clothes.

As usual, after eating, we were herded to the restroom area. I was now as close to the outer doors as I was going to get. If I planned to escape, this would be the time. I followed my friend into a restroom stall. Before he even realized I had come in with him, I hit him in the back of the head, knocking him unconscious. For a moment, visions of decapitation flashed in my mind. I wanted to take the whole head. I was out of control. Finally, I calmed myself and decided to try to use the sharp knife to slice off only the piece of skin that covered the microchip-key. After all, I didn't want to take the chance that it was embedded too deeply. I would be better off removing it from his neck, and removing it meant I might also be sparing my friend's life.

The knife cut neatly through the layer of flesh covering the chip-key, revealing a shallowly embedded microchip. I quickly pried the chip from his neck and wiped the blood off of it and, just as I had dreamt, it was blue. As blood began to cover the floor, I opened the door to the stall and started for the restroom door. As I did, other prisoners noticed the blood covering the floor but were too afraid to make a sound.

When I burst into the foyer, I saw that a crowd of people waiting to enter the restroom had already formed. I bolted for one of the outer doors. A guard noticed me but couldn't fight his way through the crowd fast enough. I made it through the first door. I found that beyond the first door, there was a breezeway with a second door that led to the open desert. My heart leapt when, through the second door, I could see faint sunlight shining through a raging dust storm. As I neared the second door, its force field dissolved and allowed me to pass. Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw on the other side of the door.

As I crossed the threshold, I expected to feel the sting of wind-blown sand beating against my skin and hear the howl of hot desert winds. Instead, I found myself standing in what looked like a laboratory room. I stopped in my tracks, and my jaw dropped open as I saw two men standing right in front of me. One of them wore a uniform similar to a guard's uniform and the second wore a lab coat.

"Why didn't you kill the man with the chip? Why didn't you just take his head? You were supposed to take his head," said the man in the lab coat.

I suddenly realized that I had not used my voice in what seemed like years, and I wasn't sure I was still capable of speech since my tongue had been burned. Nonetheless, I attempted to answer.

"My . . . friend," I replied.

"Friend? What do you mean?"

"He . . . was . . . my friend."

Before he could respond, the man in the uniform said to the man in the lab coat, "Your experiment failed, doctor."

"Yes, but we got close this time."

Expressionless, the man in the uniform then pulled what looked like a pistol from his holster. He raised it to my face. There was a loud sound and then . . . darkness.

Dead Man

Larry B. Stem

We sat in darkness on the hilltop by the exit of the City Zoo. Below us was a stop sign that virtually everyone ran late at night.

The stop sign was on a fairly busy street, and there was an intermittent flow of traffic at all times. We sat like a black and white owl, waiting for a mouse.

The car was a late model Mustang, white. It slowed and then ran the stop sign. Bingo!

I dropped the patrol car into drive and rolled off the hill. As I came up on his rear, I hit my lights and flashers.

He didn't stop. . . .

My partner sat up, put on his seatbelt, and flicked away his cigarette. This could be action.

We rolled through forty, then fifty. He wasn't stopping or slowing. My partner blipped the siren and reached for the mike to call in a chase-in-progress.

He pulled over.

In '72, the Black Power Movement was going strong. One little gadget that they had come up with to kill cops was a sawed-off shotgun built into the car door. You opened the door a little and watched in the side mirror. When the pig got by your rear fender, you neatly blew him in half.

As I came up to the car, he opened the door . . . a little bit. I could see his eyes in the side mirror as he watched me walk up.

My hand dropped to the nickel-plated .357 Magnum on my hip. If I went, I was going to take him with me.

Suddenly, he threw open the door and turned towards me. His hand was under his coat!

As his shoulder came forward, I drew the big Magnum and took all the slack out of the trigger. I saw his head over the sights, and I watched the cylinder turn.

I saw his eyes widen.

He stopped. I stopped. Every noise stopped.

The wind went still.

Everything just . . . stopped.

He spoke very slowly, very carefully, very politely.

“Officer, I’m just reaching for my driver’s license.”

I spoke very calmly, very politely, a dead man in my sights.

“Real slow, brother.”

His hand came out with a billfold.

I lowered the gun.

I noticed that his hands were shaking so badly that he couldn’t get his license out.

I realized that my hands were shaking. I had a tough time getting the gun back in the holster.

It’s a scary experience, meeting a dead man like that.

After the Mustang had driven off very slowly, I asked my partner for a cigarette.

My first.

My partner spoke.

“Fool like that, just askin’ to get dead.”

I nodded, not trusting my voice as I drove us away.

I’d never met a dead man before. . . .

The Heron

Tom Newbrey

"You aren't really going to help him, are you?" Harold sat in the front of my little rowboat with a look of disbelief on his face.

"Well, I might as well try." I hated to see any animal hurt, and watching the heron struggle was breaking my heart.

We had been fishing the river all day and were only a couple of miles from camp when we spotted the bird. When we first saw him, he was sitting on a log that had been caught in a jam near a sharp bend in the river. I thought that when we got close enough, he would fly away. As we drew nearer, he did try to fly away. He rose about two feet in the air and then slammed into the water next to the log. I watched as he struggled to regain his perch on the tree. We paddled closer for a better look.

We had drifted downstream of the bird, and Harold lowered the trolling motor into the water and turned it on. It hummed loudly, fighting the current to get back to where the bird was. When we got within a few yards of the bird, I could see the problem. Someone had tied a bankline to the log. The heron had spotted the baitfish, landed on the log, and promptly swallowed the bait. Now he was someone's catch of the day.

"Aren't banklines illegal?" I asked.

"No, and it's probably not a good idea to be messing with someone's line, either."

Harold looked pretty uncomfortable and kept glancing around as if he expected to be surrounded by a crowd of irate fishermen at any minute. To tell the truth, now that I was close enough to see the heron's sharp claws and beak, I was having second thoughts about helping him.

Harold tied the front of the boat to one of the branches that jutted out from the fallen tree. I grabbed the branch with both hands and pulled the boat parallel to the tree. The heron eyed us suspiciously. He spread his wings in a warning gesture and hissed loudly.

I reached for him, pushed his wings down on his body, and lifted him into the boat. He struggled for a moment and dug his claws into the flesh of my hand, drawing little pearls of blood. Suddenly, he stiffened, closed his eyes, and went limp in my hands. I was afraid that he had had a heart attack or something and that, by trying to help him, I had actually killed him.

Fortunately, the hook was caught in his beak. I grabbed it and pushed it back through the hole it had made. The barb caught on the beak, and I struggled with it and finally managed to push it back through. The hook had gone through the bird's tongue, too, so I did the same thing with the tongue.

I set the bird gently back on the log and pulled its claws out of my arm. He lay there, looking twisted and broken. I thought for sure that he was dead. Harold let go the log, and the current began pulling us downstream. When we had drifted about ten feet away, the heron shuddered convulsively, then stood up and looked at us. He spread his wings, flapped them twice, dipping them into the air, testing it. He squatted and leapt into the air. His wings caught the current of air, and he flew higher. He rose to the level of the treetops, straightened his wings, banked sharply to the left, and disappeared around a bend in the river.

Essays

Confessions of a Telemarketer

David Lawson

Oh, the excitement of my first job! My brother had gotten me a job at the telemarketing company that he worked for. It was the summer that I turned sixteen. Finally, I was going to see some real money. The future was promising.

I started out with the excitement and energy that one would expect from a fresh new employee: reading my script word for word and never letting a customer hang up without hearing at least two rebuttals. After all, every call was a new prospect, a new adventure, and most importantly, the chance for bonus money.

As weeks went by, my enthusiasm quickly died. While I dialed digits of endless, long-distance numbers, I stared at an old round clock, watching its decrepit black arms slowly turn. Four-hour shifts seemed to last for days. The phone room had a way of manipulating time. I learned to hate everything about that room—the blue plastic chairs we sat in, the windowless white walls, the hideously bright orange and yellow carpet, and of course, the smell of rubbing alcohol that they used religiously to clean the phones. I do not recall a single day in which I escaped that prison without a headache and ringing in my ears. There was constant noise. The blaring of obnoxious pop music was drowned out by high-pitched bells that declared another sale. I can still hear the boss screaming those words I assume were meant to motivate. I'll never forget the frigid cold of that place. The whirling ceiling fans above our desks only magnified the chill that was supposed to prevent employees from becoming too comfortable.

One particular fateful phone call will always stand out in my memory. After two or three rings, a woman hundreds of miles away answered. I knew nothing about her. She was just another faceless voice, a name neatly printed on a notecard, just one more prospect. I flew lazily through the script, adding words and leaving out others at will. I knew this was terms for extermination, but the monotony of the script was driving me

insane. The words no longer had meaning. Despite my halfhearted effort, the woman decided not to make a purchase.

That was the last phone call I would make for P & P Telemarketing. Soon after I hung up, my boss entered and asked to see me in his office. I knew it wasn't to negotiate a raise or a new promotion. He asked me to have a seat in front of his huge glass-topped desk. He set out in front of me a copy of the script and a tape recorder, like an arrogant lawyer presenting evidence in court. While the tape of my conversation with the woman played, we both listened as my own voice testified against me. After what seemed like eternity, he finally stopped the tape. Not a single word was spoken. He knew it; I knew it. My days as a telemarketer had come to an end.

Passing Regrets

Sharon R. Kear

Prologue

George Arwood “Archie” Stidham was born into a financially poor family on September 29, 1947, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The second child of ten siblings, he was the oldest boy. He and his two-year-old sister were abandoned when he was six days old and were raised by their maternal grandmother for the next five years.

When they learned that their older sister was really their mother and their “mama” was really their grandmother, it was a devastating shock to young Archie’s mind, a fact he never really got over emotionally.

At the age of thirteen, after being shuffled back and forth between his grandmother in southeast Oklahoma and his mother in Oklahoma City, Archie, the victim of emotional and sexual abuse by his step-father, was ready to begin a life of crime.

His intense love for his grandmother eventually turned him back to wanting to reform and try to live his life to be a credit to his family and an asset to his community.

Unfortunately, that was not to be.

Passing Regrets

It was a fragile wind. Faint currents of air moved tentatively through the trees behind his grandmother’s house, barely stirring the thirsty willow leaves that drooped in midsummer exhaustion. In a narrow band of shade, the boy sat with his back against an old wooden add-on room that now served as his bedroom. The cold Coke in his small hand was temporary respite from the Oklahoma heat that smothered the afternoon. He sipped at the stubby green bottle, then rolled its moist wetness against a sunburned cheek. Getting sunburned at Gram’s house was a certainty. She didn’t allow him or his older sister to linger underfoot, convinced as she was that little boys and girls belonged outdoors discovering things about life.

Dead center on the old round dining table lay a nine-inch cherry pie, its top browned to perfection, still warm from the old wood stove oven. Red juices had bubbled through the slits in the crust, a promise of luscious rubies inside. Soft odors of fresh-baked pastries permeated the small kitchen.

He began assembling his sandwich, reaching to grab a home-baked potato chip from an open bowl.

"Wait for your sister."

"OK, let me just get it ready." He spread mustard on a thick slice of bread while she put together a similar sandwich for Sharon. Archie was proud to be trusted to prepare his own food.

"You looking forward to school next month?" Gram asked him.

"I guess so," he answered uncertainly. In truth, he was apprehensive about unknown goings-on in that one-room building his mother had shown him from the car as they drove past.

Gram sensed his uneasiness. "You'll have lots of fun making new friends and showing everyone how well you can read already," she offered encouragingly. His older sister thought his reading skills were very elementary but, nonetheless, a source of pride to grownups who often had him display the ability for guests, a situation he simultaneously feared and delighted in.

Archie hefted a huge glass of iced tea from beside his plate; both hands gripped the slippery cylinder. He sipped the sweet liquid, sucking out a small sliver of ice to roll around in his mouth.

"Maybe I won't go to school. Couldn't I just stay here with you?"

"No, Archie. It's time for you to stop being a little boy and start growing up a little. You'll like school." She reached over to ruffle his towhead with a gentle touch.

Unexpectedly, he felt moisture creep into the corners of his eyes, his love for her suddenly intense. But he fought back the tears; big boys don't cry. He leaned over from his chair and wrapped his small arms around her waist as she stood close by.

"I love you, Gram," he whispered.

"What's for supper?" his sister shouted as the screen door clattered against the back of the house.

Archie broke off the embrace with his grandmother, not wanting his big sister to discover him taking comfort, not knowing that this would be the last moment of loving comfort he would receive from his grandmother for many years to come. Unknown to him, the next several years would bring only abuse from his real mother and stepfather

and would lead to a life of crime and incarceration and eventually to a very violent death. The magic moment faded into that place where special memories conceal themselves.

* * *

Hot asphalt underfoot, a forever-blue sky overhead, Archie walked alone, circling the prison yard with a cigarette between his fingers. His body broadcast silent signals that warded off company and conversation. He glanced at his watch to discover that an hour had passed without notice. Only sixty minutes since the Chaplain had summoned him.

He had known it was bad news when the call came to report to the chapel. On a Saturday morning, there could be no good reason for such a summons. He immediately remembered the young girl he had killed during a drug deal gone wrong, the final act that landed him in McAlester State Prison in Oklahoma, with no hope of parole. The prison clergy had a corner on the market for dispensing unpleasant tidings. The young preacher had been sincere in his efforts to make the difficult announcement.

"Archie, I had a call from your mother earlier this morning. I'm sorry to have to tell you that your grandmother passed away yesterday. The funeral is being taken care of."

He didn't know how to reply. A mumbled "thank you" was the best Archie could manage as he turned to leave.

Hundreds of images and emotions crowded his thoughts. Foremost, he felt a need to be alone, an impossibility in a crowded prison cellblock. So he sought the best alternative, walking alone in the recreation yard, circling the perimeter, just as the confused thoughts circled continually through his mind.

At first, there was anger. He knew that some privileged inmates received emergency leaves for funerals, but he did not fall into that category. Few did. Silently, he cursed those who were not really responsible for his circumstances. The noise and activity around him drew none of his attention. Thoughts turned inward, a dead spot took root in his gut as he remembered special times with his grandmother.

* * *

The throng gathered once or twice each year for informal reunions, highlighted by a gigantic meal which Gram orchestrated with the aid of various daughters, granddaughters, and in-laws. Archie knew there would be at least two succulent cherry pies to conclude the eating festivities.

Late afternoon, it was time to go back to the city. In Gram's front yard, various relatives stood around in small groups, shaking hands and sharing embraces of departure, making promises that wouldn't be kept. Archie was seated in the car.

"You might be all grownup and everything, but you're still not too big for your Gram to kiss," she said as she leaned down to the open window.

"You be careful on the way home," she said, leaning down to kiss him tenderly on the cheek.

He eased the car slowly away, down the sandy driveway, glancing in the rearview mirror to see her watching him. He stuck an arm out the window and slowly waved, watching her reflected smile fade into the distance.

* * *

The cellblock slowly quieted around him. Ancient rattling plumbing roared and shook in the final sounds of night as bodies in nearby cells settled down for sleep. His cellmate grumbled in the darkness of their cubicle, incomprehensible mumblings in accompaniment to some unknown dream.

Archie lay in the darkness, arms folded behind his head on a lumpy pillow. Only vague outlines were visible in the unilluminated cubicle. He stared at shadows that crisscrossed the floor in a distorted replica of the barred cell front. A roaming officer strolled the walkway in front of the cell, flashlight clenched in hand, harsh circles of light rebounding unpredictably. Archie clenched his eyes shut as the guard passed, feigning sleep like a guilty child.

His grandmother's passing had left a sadness that walked hand-in-hand with guilty regrets. He had not spoken with Gram for a prison decade, not even written. There had been many times when he had wanted to ask her to visit, which she would have done had he only made the request. But he could not face her in this place, could not bring her to the ugliness of walls, bars, bricks, and rude young men in ill-fitting uniforms. Looking deeper inside himself, he saw that it was not entirely a need to protect her but also his pride that had prevented him from reaching out. As a compromise, he had always told himself he would visit her after his release.

Now, it was too late for that.

He tried speculating on what she would be saying to him right now, an imaginary conversation that suddenly jumped with clarity into his chaotic thoughts.

"Gram, I'm real sorry I couldn't come to the funeral."

"That's OK, Archie, I understand."

"I'm sorry we didn't get to see each other before . . ."

"Well, I'm here now. What did you want to tell me?"

"I'm sorry I let you down, coming to prison. Sorry that I hurt you. I know that you expected more of me."

"You didn't let me down, Archie. You let yourself down. But that's all history. It's almost time for you to start your life over again. It won't be easy. It's going to take some work."

"Knowing you won't be around for me to say 'I'm sorry' hurts."

"Oh, I'll be around. You just get out of here and make your life into something worthwhile. That's the best thing you can do for me."

"I'll miss you."

"Don't grieve for me, child. Remember me when I was happiest, surrounded by my children and grandchildren, doing things for the people I loved. Remember me with love, not pain."

"Cherry pie won't ever be the same."

"Nothing is ever the same," she said. "Wonderful things can't last forever. Otherwise, they become ordinary." Her voice started fading to a whisper in the darkness.

"Don't go yet!" he called to her.

"I'll always be here." Gram's final words left a delicate imprint on his memories.

"And I'll always love you, Grams. . . ."

Epilogue

George Arwood "Archie" Stidham died at 7:12 p.m., Tuesday, August 17, 1995. He was stabbed fifty-seven times while taking a shower at McAlester State Prison in Oklahoma.

He was forty-eight years old and had been in the penal system for thirty-five years. He had at that time been convicted of three murders, the first a young girl he allegedly killed with a shotgun over a drug deal gone wrong at Lake Thunderbird just south of Oklahoma City in 1971.

After breaking out of Cleveland County jail in Norman where he was being held pending trial of the Thunderbird murder, he kidnapped a student from the University of Oklahoma and fled to Texas to avoid capture, which resulted in a conviction for kidnapping.

That was the last time his grandmother saw him. At that time, his sister told him she would not see him any more as she did not want her two girls raised knowing him. She told him she loved him and always would but did not like him. His new lifestyle was not hers nor her family's.

He was twenty-four years old.

In June 1980, his sister came to visit him one last time at the prison to tell him "their" dad had passed away.

After his death, the prison doctors stated that Archie's last words were a rambling they could not make sense of. They did not know what he was talking about.

"Sharon, supper's ready. Come on, now, get out of that. You know to leave that alone. Hurry up! Mama made a cherry pie."

The Defeat of Pain

Travis Daniel Salsman

Walking up the ramp, shoulder to shoulder with some of America's finest athletes, was just one of the perks of playing football at the University of Oklahoma. This was back in the spring of 1991, when OU had the talent to compete, not for a national championship but for respect. It was the second season under Coach Gary Gibbs. Though I was upset that my lifelong dream of playing under legendary coach Barry Switzer had been altered, I was still, however, very thankful.

"Would today be the day?" I asked myself.

I had come a long way from being the little five-year-old who used to cry when the Sooners would lose which, at that time, wasn't very often. The dream literally consumed me. I had had dreams of running down the sidelines with the fans cheering, announcers yelling, and coaches celebrating. Again, could this be the day? Obviously, being a walk-on freshman inhibited my opportunities since there were three "big time" scholarship players ahead of me. I had come from a very small school southwest of Oklahoma City. These guys had been recruits from 5A and super 5A schools. I never asked myself what I was doing there because I knew. It was something that had been growing inside me for most of my life. Those guys didn't intimidate me. I knew that, when given the opportunity, I could impress the coaches. All my coaches in little league, junior high, and high school demanded that I hang onto the football. They used to tell me to concentrate on catching the ball and nothing else. They said that there was more to being a successful wide receiver than having the fastest 40-yard dash time. It was more important to be quick, run precise patterns, and get open. Once you got to the ball, you were to hang onto it, "no excuses." Having watched these "track stars" for three weeks, I noticed that they were faster but couldn't hang onto the ball.

Having stood on the west sideline of Owen Field for at least an hour, Larry Coker, our offensive coordinator, yelled, "Salsman." I threw on my helmet and sped to the huddle. I shook with excitement. I was among the second-teamers. Here was my long-awaited chance. I waited for the play-call and broke the huddle with a thundering clap.

I lined up on the weak side, for the play was going the other way. It was my job to block the free-safety who was also lined up on the weak side, toward the middle of the field, about twelve yards deep. I had to tell myself, “Hey, man, this is it.”

The ball was snapped, and I sprinted toward the free-safety. My life was flashing before my eyes. It was literally like a dream. I was here and the time was now. It seemed to be life or death. I met my foe with my arms extended. The initial contact was made, and he flew back about three yards. Having had too much forward momentum, I lost my balance and placed my left hand on the turf. Something snapped. I didn’t feel it, but I definitely heard it. Completing my mission, I threw myself between the free-safety and our tailback who, at the time, was as important as a captain in Vietnam. I took a bullet for him and didn’t even know his name

We all knelt on one knee around Coach Gibbs in the center of the field. The stadium lights were on, lighting up the entire world. Being within four feet of the coach, I looked up at him and waited for him to speak. I looked down at my thumb, which was quivering, but still there was no pain. In my heart, I knew something was wrong with it, but the elements—Owen Field, the coach standing there ready to speak words of prophesy, my heart still pounding in my chest, the dream that had finally come true—would not allow the presence of pain, not in a moment like this.

Grandma's Portrait

Mary C. Punches

Past eighty in all my memories, Grandma was a tiny woman who, every day, wore a bib apron, fashioned from floral-print flour sacks and trimmed in rickrack, over some nondescript housedress and thick, gartered stockings. The glasses she wore had a built-in hearing aid, which would often whistle like a teakettle if turned up too high or too low—I never knew which—prompting Grandma to jerk them off her face and fiddle with the earpiece. Not much taller than I, only ten years old, she had a special stool built by her son so that she could reach her own kitchen cabinets. Once, when she was climbing for an angel food cake pan, I told her I hoped I was short like her when I grew up. She replied, “I hope you aren’t, Honey; you’ll think different when it comes time for havin’ babies.” That statement did not mean much to me, so I dismissed the comment and went right on wanting to be just like my grandma.

Most grandmothers of my childhood had ever-filled cookie jars, and mine was no different. She made an iced oatmeal cookie that I loved to pull from her crockery cookie jar: a round old man with spectacles who I always guessed was Santa Claus without his beard and suit. Even better than the cookies, though, was her endless supply of horehound candy, sticks or drops, and her special sassafras tea, which she prescribed for my real or feigned coughs. Well, to tell the truth, everything tasted better at Grandma’s house, whether it was a little treat on a brief visit or supper served on my Saturday night sleepovers. Once, I remember, we just had sardines and crackers. I had never tasted sardines, and I thought it was exciting, almost sinful, to eat something like that for a meal. Even on Sunday morning when my brother told me that sardines were cooked with bones and guts still inside, I made a conscious decision to continue to eat sardines. After all, my grandma did, and not even guts could ruin our shared meal, destroy our like palates.

Grandma had what I guess some would call quirks, but I always just considered them her own unique customs. She stashed money in a Mason jar in her closet. I never

knew why, but then, I almost never questioned it. Likewise, I never questioned why she stood over her gas stove and singed off the hair on her arms, but I watched her do it many times, and she seemed proud of her smooth, hairless limbs. Believing that arm hair was somehow uncomely, I used my mother's razor to shave my arms free of fuzz, and mom promptly paddled me, despite my protests about Grandma's practice. Grandma also rinsed her hair only in rainwater. She had a small rain barrel out by the cellar, and together, on those precious times it rained in western Oklahoma, we poured the water into a big pan and then into a glass gallon jar. Regularly, one of my uncles would insist on her going to the beauty shop for a haircut and permanent, but I knew it was the rainwater's many virtues that kept her hair so soft and shiny.

We two had some customs all our own as well. My favorite, something I did in part to receive an anticipated response from Grandma, was whistling. I loved to whistle. It was a skill I had acquired with no small amount of practice, and having mastered it, I delighted in the tunes I could create. Each and every time I would whistle, Grandma would turn to me, shake her bumpy finger, and say, "A whislin' girl and a crowin' hen always come to some bad end." Although I could not decipher the rhyme's meaning then, I did understand that it was some sort of halfhearted chastisement. I knew with even more certainty that my whistling secretly tickled Grandma, that her upbraiding came more from a sense of propriety than from a heartfelt belief. Her twinkling eyes and half smile contradicted her words. They told me that we shared more than our physical resemblance and family blood—an unbreakable, secret bond.

My Saturday night sleepovers at Grandma's had a comforting routine. We would have supper at the counter, wash the dishes, and then, weather permitting, take a short walk around the block, sometimes two blocks. I ran ahead and around Grandma, throwing rocks, finding flowers, and snooping in her neighbors' yards, for Grandma walked very slowly, very deliberately. When we reached home, we watched Lawrence Welk, and as soon as the Champagne Lady sang the goodnight song, Grandma announced that it was bedtime. Even though it was much earlier than I went to bed at home and I was never sleepy yet, her announcement did not bother me. I knew there was plenty of activity left before we pulled the homemade quilts over us and turned out the lights.

First, Grandma had to remove her shoes and stockings. She never hurried this process. After taking off her shoes, she rolled down the garter on each leg, taking the stocking along, and packed each tight roll in a shoe. Then, off came the bunion pads,

Several years ago, my cousin had a replica of my grandparents' oval wedding portrait made for me. Knowing how I treasured the picture, my husband had it framed beautifully, and it hangs opposite our bed. Every now and then, I need to look into Grandma's eyes and see if I can still see my eyes staring back. I always do. So, then I pause and pay her my truest tribute: I whistle a little tune to a crowin' hen.

Woody

Larry B. Stem

About 1963, my parents bought a small cabin near the edge of a small lake some sixty-odd miles southwest of Oklahoma City. My dad's litany of "more sun, sand, grass burrs, and wind, with fewer trees than any place west of the Sahara" was a damned good description of it.

But, for nearly ten years, it was all I lived for.

One of the principal reasons was a man called Woody. He was about fifty to my twelve, and he was certifiably crazy in more ways than anyone I have ever met. He loved to rocket down the narrow, two-lane highway around the lake, doing about ninety (no exaggeration!) and blast helpless, mild-mannered tweety-birds off the power lines while he hung out the window with his twelve-gauge. Meanwhile, I drove from the right-hand seat, trying to watch the road, watch what he shot, and dodge ejected shell cases pouring out of the side of the gun.

He could do things with a charcoal grill that made any steak sold anywhere, now or then, a sorry second. I grew to love medium-rare sirloin steak. Until then, I had thought meat was to be cooked 'til charred on the edges, hard and tough, with the consistency but not the flavor of a shoe sole. Woody changed all that.

He charcoaled, and we ate, mountains of steak. He had a platter nearly two feet in length and a foot wide on which I ferried piles of steaks into the cabin. Woody's wife and my mother did their part with corn-on-the-cob, baked potatoes, mushrooms, huge salads, baked squash, yams, and baked beans (baked in a crockpot). He had a huge chef's hat, and he always wore a pair of baggy terrycloth shorts. Sort of "Chef-Boy-R-Dee" on his day off.

Woody was a little guy. Maybe five-nine. I was already six foot at twelve. We must have made a Mutt-and-Jeff-looking team as we made our twice-daily sweep of the fields adjoining the cabin area. Woody was noticeably bow-legged, with a roll to his walk, and

his hair was receded to a point over his ears. He carefully Vitalise'd the remaining strands to cover as much of his head as he could.

When we ran out of harmless critters—anything that “flew, flapped, had fins, flippers, or ran”—we would adjourn to the local dump where we would decimate legions of beer and whiskey bottles. From the sound of his automatic twelve-gauge and the pop of my little twenty-gauge, everyone always knew where we were.

Woody had a family and a cabin, too. His was always nicer than ours. And he never worked on it as opposed to my dad who spent every weekend working on something in our cabin.

This lake was home to millions of crows who used it and the peanut fields as a winter roost. You could hunt anywhere, just for the asking. For the first few years, we simply sat in lawn chairs in the front yard, swapping bull and blasting crows as they topped the cabin. After a few thousand casualties, the crow high command issued instructions to the troops to avoid the cabins, and I doubt that today, twenty years later, a single crow flies over those cabins.

So we'd drive to get in the flyways. I was allotted two boxes of shells (fifty) for my little popgun. Woody always lived large; he bought two cases of shells (five hundred), and he shot them like they would spoil tomorrow. He had a Browning Automatic shotgun, still one of the best and most expensive shotguns made. It had all the extras: gold trigger, ribbed barrel (he had two), and padded stock. It cost then two hundred eighty-five dollars. A lot of money in those days when we were buying a new Rambler for two grand.

Woody liked nice cars. Buicks. Monster motors, whitewalls, leather seats, and air conditioning. Ahh! What a luxury item! We had to suffer without since Rambler station wagons did not have the power to get up hills with an air conditioner.

Woody drove like a bat out of hell. Speed limits were followed only when a trooper was pulling out behind you. He once got a ticket for sixty-seven-in-a-fifty-five zone. As my dad put it, “Forty-seven-fifty for a hurry he wasn't in.” Woody put it as “Eighty-five talked down to sixty-seven. Loaded shotgun in the floor, drink in between his legs, and bottle in the seat. . . .” I often thought that my dad, Woody's best friend, wished that he had his carefree attitude. I think that Dad belittled Woody out of envy.

Woody liked nice boats. When we had a little tin tub that was basically a painted rowboat, Woody had a fiberglass monster. We had seats of wood; Woody had vinyl armchairs. When everyone had forty-horse motors, Woody had a seventy (later a hundred).

Woody liked to tell jokes. He had a five-hour supply, all ribald, racist, anti-religious, and politically incorrect, even for those times. He held no prejudices but found minorities, lesbians, preachers, and politicians hilariously funny and could convert you to his side with his laughter.

Woody really had a gift of gab. When he was grabbed by a game warden, he (and a twenty) talked the man out of an arrest. Cornered by the local crone for blasting a favored songbird, Woody soon had her laughing and inviting him to try her fresh pie. Caught trespassing by a farmer, he soon had the old gentleman telling him about his favorite baited fishing hole (we ran a trotline through there that night). He even charmed the old drunken she-male war-horse into letting him keep his testicles one night when she caught him peeing on her flowerbed. They were soon sharing her Ol' Hickory bourbon out of coffee cups, laughing like fools. First time that anyone had seen that shriveled old witch smile, much less laugh. Woody finally talked her into putting up the butcher knife she had come out with. And he kept his unmentionables, too.

Woody had class with humor. He was outrageous and had dignity. He knew good things, liked them, bought them, and enjoyed the heck out of them. He even loosened up my parents. No small thing in the sixties. He disliked only "snooty" people. Rich, powerful, religious, pompous, petty politicians, and bureaucrats—all ridiculed and laughed at.

They had laws about people like him. He was a lot of fun. He was a hell of a guy. He was my friend.

One Frame at a Time

Chuck Porter

In 1993, I thought things were going pretty good. I had an incredible relationship that was a little over a month old with Sherylynn Daniels, whom I would marry later that same year, and I had a great interview lined up with the biggest bank in Oklahoma—Liberty Bank.

I was welcomed into the real working world in a rather humbling way. I interviewed for a teller position at Liberty Bank in OKC, which, I felt, was beneath my intelligence since I was graduating in May from the University of Central Oklahoma with a Finance Degree. I was certain that I would be a shoo-in, but it did not work out to be so easy. A Human Resources employee who said, “I am sorry. You do not meet our minimum qualifications” turned me down.

After a very strained conversation between the manager and the Human Resources person, I eventually got the job as a teller. What I did not know then—but it is truly evident to me now—is that God wanted me to be employed at Liberty Bank. My official recorded hire date in the Liberty Bank records reads “April 19, 1993.”

Two years later, April 19, 1995, was a most beautiful spring day in Oklahoma. It wasn't too hot, not too cool; it was just right. As I did every weekday, I went to work on the fourteenth floor of the Liberty Bank Building, which is located right in the heart of Oklahoma City.

There was nothing special about this day except it was the exact two-year anniversary of my employment with Liberty Bank. My hard work and intelligence finally paid off in September 1994, when I was promoted to specialist in the lending department. This was better than being a teller, but I still knew I should be a lender but was not being given the chance. I hated the commute in the morning traffic from Edmond, and not liking my job did not make it any better. I was looking forward to 5:00

p.m. before I ever got to work. I had reached the point at which I felt as if I was being held down. I actually dreaded going to work, and I was always looking for a different job.

I got to my little cubicle about 7:50, and I was getting things in order for the day. You see, it was my job to get loans ready for approval or declination by the loan officers. At 8:00 sharp, my favorite co-worker, Curt Bates, showed up. I walked over and we shot the bull for about ten to twenty minutes, talking about everything from the Masters Golf tournament to OU spring football practice.

About 8:45, I hopped onto the elevator to take a couple of loans down to the ninth floor to the loan documentation area. I was chatting with some of the ladies in the department and logging in the loans for Mr. Mikeman, when BOOM! All thirty-five floors of the Liberty Bank Tower shook. We looked at each other with blank stares.

One of the ladies asked, "Was that a sonic boom?"

I replied, "No, those are illegal, and if it was, then someone is in big ass trouble."

We looked out the window and saw debris in the air. Some of the it looked like little pieces of wood, but there were also larger pieces that looked like rock or concrete. This muddy-colored cloud began creeping over the top of the tenth to twelfth floors of the Kerr-McGee Building. Scattered in this rapidly growing cloud was what seemed to be thousands of pieces of paper just gently floating and fluttering in the morning Oklahoma breeze.

My first thought was that the City had completed a controlled demolition of an old building. I said, "I'll be right back." I ran to the elevator to go get my camera out of my car, and I stopped and thought, *'Do I really want to go over there and get some pictures of some old building?'* When the elevator met me on the ninth floor, I hesitated and went up two floors, but when it stopped on the eleventh floor, I changed my mind and thought, *'Hey, I could get some cool pictures of this building for my portfolio.'* I got an elevator going down, ran to my car parked in the Spaghetti Warehouse parking lot on the east side of the Bank, snagged my camera, and dashed toward the cloud that was increasing in size every second.

As I made my way toward the now darkening smoke, the first thing I noticed was that I was not in very good shape because I was breathing hard after running only about two and a half blocks, but in my defense, I was in cowboy boots. As I darted across Broadway, through Kerr Park, and around the side of the Kerr-McGee Building, my innocence as a photographer vanished with the first sound of shattered glass crunching under my boots.

I froze. I looked all around and what I saw was not registering with my mind. I stood directly in front of this church that had been shaken so badly that every stained glass window looked broken. The entire street, as far as I could see, was covered in a sheet of broken glass and concrete, and this man, bleeding profusely from his forehead, walked right by me. The only reflex that seemed to be working in me was movement because I put my camera to my face and just started taking pictures. I wasn't looking for a particular thing or subject; I was just shooting. I made my way to the origin of the smoke, which was a parking lot full of cars on fire, and as I turned around, I know I must have turned pale. I stood on the corner of the street next to the YMCA, and what I saw across from me looked like a building that had just had the front shaved completely off from top to bottom. My direct conscious had stopped functioning and my subconscious had taken over control of my body. I do not remember getting from one place to the next. I must have taken a few shots of what was left of the Murrah Building and moved back south down the street on the east side of the building near the parking garage entrance.

I then stopped in my tracks when I noticed practically the only major movement occurring—a policeman running with something in his arms. He was running toward an ambulance where paramedics were working on an injured woman. As he made it closer to the ambulance, a fireman ran to meet him, directly in front of the ambulance. I turned and took one photograph at the exact instant the policeman handed what I now recognized as an infant to the fireman. The policeman ran back toward the building, leaving the fireman holding the infant, and I shot one more frame.

I walked in a daze around the south side of the building, not realizing the magnitude of my surroundings. All I could do was push the button on my camera of whatever came into the eyepiece. I do not remember screaming, but I do remember bleeding. Everywhere I looked, there were people bleeding. Some were standing, some were sitting, and some were lying. I made two full circles of the building that day in only forty-five minutes and shot only forty-eight frames of film.

In the hours and days that followed, one frame became what people across the nation and world, including the Honorable Frank Keating, Governor of Oklahoma, called the symbol of the tragedy. The frame of the firefighter gently cradling the infant traveled worldwide into the hearts and minds of people across the world. It brought out feelings of sadness and anger, some directed toward the perpetrator of this heinous act and some of the anger directed toward me. I was the target of abuse and was even accused at one point of going down there that day to find a picture like that one just to exploit it and “get rich.”

In the beginning, I was so naive as to the power that this image had. I would see it one place and then the next. I was constantly getting asked why I took the picture, as if I did it purposely, and what it meant to me. I had news stations from around the world interviewing me and talk shows wanting me on their shows. There were times I wished I had never taken the stupid picture. I am sure that some day I will understand all the questions. It does not completely make sense to me.

I have no regrets now about taking the picture and am no longer ashamed of the awards received or the trips I have been on. I am proud to be a Pulitzer Prize Winner and that the International Association of Firefighters recognized me. As I have always said, "I would not change any of the things that happened to me; I would just change the event that made all of them happen." I think everyone would.

I know taking that picture changed me. I have told people that the minute I turned that corner and began walking on all that glass, I matured ten years, and along with it, I received an education about life that a college can never teach. I know I have not been changed in the same ways that injured survivors and surviving family members have been, but anyone involved with that tragedy in any form will be changed forever. Not for three years, not for five years: they will be changed forever. Some will be changed more deeply than others, but they will never be the same again. I know I won't.

Poems

the circus clown

alone in an empty tent
pitched on the edge of town
face crumpled body bent
the aging circus clown

not needed in the main show
applause died with his act
lost his laughter long ago
just lost his job contract

no savings and no trust fund
no property to claim
no rich brother or good son
just faded three ring fame

costume packed in a suitcase
belongings in a bag
smile erased from his face
makeup smeared on a rag

no more riddles left to tell
head buried in his hands
sadness all he's got to sell
this clown now just a man

Todd M. Mihalcik.

Codger

The mid-summer sun
drops heat straight down,
marking dark territory where
heavily coated trees
rebuff the light's penetration.

And fat air
hangs stagnant
suspending mosquitoes
and banana gnats, mixing with sweat, mildew,
and thick Bermuda
cut short—
its musky sweetness rustling up
legions of mold spores
and roly-polies

It's the time of day old man Miller
pulls his baggy size 28 dungarees
over his 82-year-old bony body
and buttons a long-sleeved corduroy
shirt up to his scraggly chin,
tops his shaggy white head with a
rag-tag VFW cap
and heads out back to "do the lawn."

Slowly pulling a beat-up
Sears and Roebuck manual push mower
backwards
across the quarter acre tract behind his shack,
the old geezer lugs and lumbers
with the squeaky antique,
and whistles.

Later, in the cool of the day,
reclining on a chaise lounge
in the heavy shade, I sip iced tea.
From the two-story perch of my balcony,
I shake my head in wonder
at the old codger, and duly appreciate
his freshly mown mini-meadow
and the manicured fruits of his labors—
the efforts he can't see
from his shack.

Rica Mitchusson

Drowning

Words are feeble in the face of grief
that threatens to engulf the soul.

Nothing is there to say to stay
the rolling angry waves of hurt
that drown the heart.

I see you struggling against that tide,
fighting to survive.

How well I know, having gasped for air
that very same way.

Yet now I watch helplessly from the shore.

I see in your eyes a question for
just the right words to calm
the hurricane in your soul.

I have only the painful knowledge
that you are on your own.

There is
nothing I can say
nothing I can do.

I would help you if I could.

But, in this, as in all things,
we must swim for ourselves.

Amy S. Powell

Sand Plum Jelly

One bite of breakfast toast—
both sweet and tart—
brings me home to you.

We, with too few rituals,
prepare our yearly pasture
pilgrimage: picking sand plums.

Covered crown to sole—
hats, long sleeves and pants,
boots—we place pails, buckets,
wash basins in the beat-up truck,
take the terrier to sniff for snakes.

Thicket after thicket, battling
prickly, sticky heat,
eyes search and fingers pluck
plump red berries,
still more red berries.

How I hated that tiring trip!
Year upon year, after lugging
our loot, we toiled, sweated,
in steamy kitchen until
row after row,
jars of magenta jelly
covered countertops.

You make your jelly
alone now, fewer jars,
always a couple for my Christmas,
yet I am sure
I could call,

trek back in time,
and find a saved,
stray straw hat,
just my size.

Mary C. Punches

Mouth of a Black Alley

have you ever had to murder your darlings?
chop their pretty little heads off
as they sleep in their innocent beds,
safe in the knowledge of your love. . .
send them to the gas showers—
a private mass genocide.
sneak up on them in some black alley
jerk up their skirts
rip off their panties
and rape them, beat them back
like they beat you
until there are no more words
no more worlds exploding
inside your head.
come out any day now.
let these abuses pour forth like rain.
find your voice among the garbage cans
and dead ends.
go dumpster diving
to find the words they don't want you to say.
open your mouth wide,
but never swallow.

Julie Shilling

waterbugs

skimming along the surface without looking down,
skittering about, scuttling around,
walking on water they blindly go -

just waterbugs skirting
the depths

below.

Todd M. Mihalcik

Shadows

Late at night everything quiet

He waits for . . . me.

My children grown, gone,

I am alone.

He

Watches . . . me.

In my mind I go back 40 years,

My husband, the only one, lovers still.

Alone with black and grays

He

seductively . . .

gently . . .

powerfully . . .

touches . . . me.

I start remembering more,

His touch sending passionate icy shivers

over my body.

He

embraces . . .

willingly

me.

Suddenly my eyes open

crying,

laughing,

longing,

whirling.

Radiating determination.

The surgeon smiles.

Dejected, death slowly leaves again without . . .

me.

Sharon R. Kear

Good Dr.

Dr. C.

Chinese, a gynecologist

your legs apart

glove on hand

hurting, trying to be easy

I sorry you so small

gritting teeth tears in your eyes

poking prodding pushing hands full
of blood clots,

I see you problem

says Singh from between your legs

you

have

thyroid

problem

Slowly

you grin—

I thought thyroids were in your throat

head pops up from below

eyes sparkling . . .

grinning face

slow reply

long

fingers

good

Dr.

Sharon R. Kear

My Oklahoma Ancestors

Red Rose Rocks Rumble

Red Rose Rocks Rattle

Under the Redskin of a Fancy Dancer in Moccasins
Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee; Tsa-la-Gi

All came on the trail

with red eyes

to arrowhead-fed dinners

when Bisons bounded grass prairies.

And are buried on the Oklahoma at the Harbor of Pearls
with the Arizona, California, Utah and Tennessee—

Destroyers—

Blood at the Red Sun's hands.

Fighting the red, windborn clay

finally settled down

to cover bare, exposed, red ground

they harvested Black Gold, hidden.

They are red-headed Rebas

Stetson hats, spurs and chaps,

littered among skull and bone

of Red Angus, driven.

They conducted red Santa Fe Cars

past switching stations afar

where grandchildren would be born and

Owned the red pickup slinging milk cans

on a depression dairy route

from the old red barn.

They mourned Red-striped, Blue Marine pants
under rubble
caused by scarlet fuel mixed
where a Children's red swingset
sat upon the playground.

In the land
where Red Rivers Roll
Red Rivers Rise.

Dana Glencross

Hide-n-Seek!

Someone yelled,
“Let’s play hide-n-seek!”
then pointing a finger at me,
“You’re IT!”

So, I was It
And I started counting
While feet scurried away in time
Onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnineten
Sneaking a peek then
Fifteentwentytwenty-five
Thirty
Forty
Fifty!
Here I come, ready or Not!

Life is just practice for Hide-n-Seek
Fifty—Here I come, ready or Not!

Bertha Wise

RAIN

Rain is sent from God
Nourishing living creatures
Lifting our spirits.

Rita Akin Sandlin

THIMBLE DOCK

The winter soup smokes from a shimmering surface
Gravies and sauces crunching the city's south port
Curdled and thickened with flavors of lemony slap
Bouncing traces of pollution and foghorns, stench and settle,
Thimble dock and folding ropes, perfect for scrambling
Lobster paint with crates of spray, trout slices
and crab claws, crime from between the cement
cracks, racks of fish, gills flexing while eyes steady
Cubed ice and net bait for the thimble dock
All night long, just a little watch boy
caught and sat

Burlap sack, nylon twist ties and apple bags
White bark and olive oil underneath her fingernails
When we dropped her in, she splashed water up
into our faces. I left skin from my big toe on the cement
dock. Rasp graze and debris, a product of scrambling
All night long, just a little watch boy
caught and sat

Identity flung, blotted crude. Stretchable mask rebounding
resilient isolation. White elasticity with perspiration and water
beading off my rubber mask, wreck and shreds, sour insolent
All night long, just a little watch boy
caught and sat

Rust from a tongue never snags, I turn and look at the boy
crouching and watching, reaches of lacquer stretching toward
summary. Spurned and trifled, I stagger from the
boy's stagnancy. Mold and blight on the dock's fever

The wind wakes my hair through the open car window, leaving the
thimble dock in always; and when the bell has turned over
it is time to calm down.

her

She was there with me—on the rooftop
Over the city and the city lights
Holding her—
Away from everything and everyone—

Only her

Seeing her smile—hearing her laugh
Noticing eyes that glanced back at me
Running my fingers through her hair—feeling her kiss

On the rooftop—over the city

Only her

Jef Pham

JERRY SPRINGER: Trashy Drag Queens And The Men Who Love Them

Lonely foreign man

Frizzled money to spare hair

Enrique “superfly” Sombrero

Looking for a good time?

Oh yeah.

You like what you see?

Ooooh Yeeeeeah!

My silky leg rubs against him

Beautiful night covered in black lace

Letting the white peak through

A Virginia Slim fog

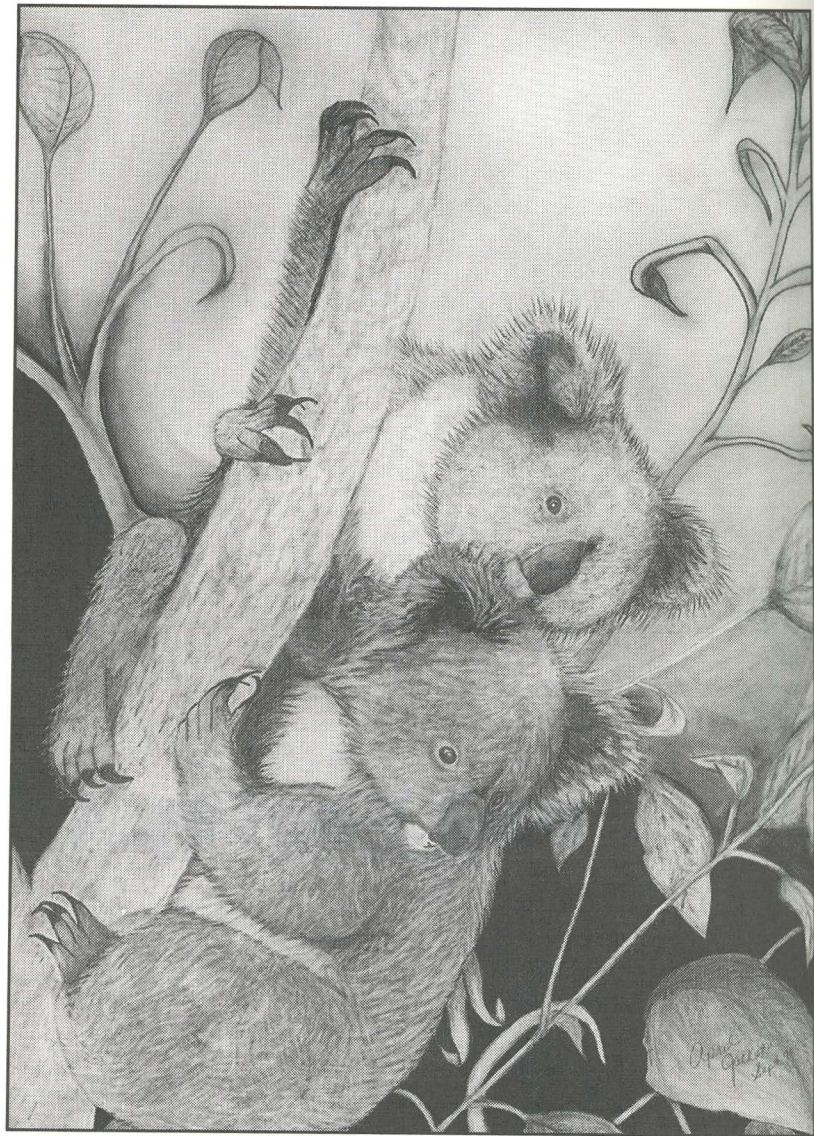
\$15

In two minutes he’ll find out

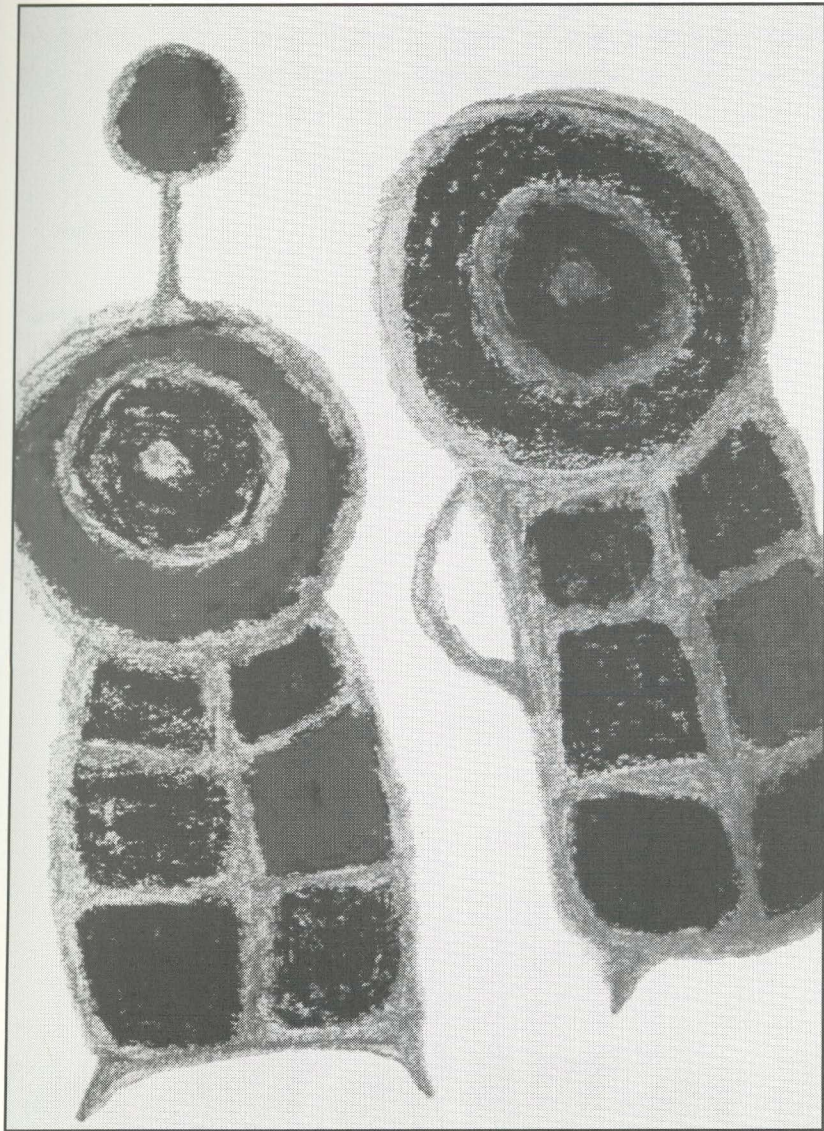
I’m a man

Paul Freeman

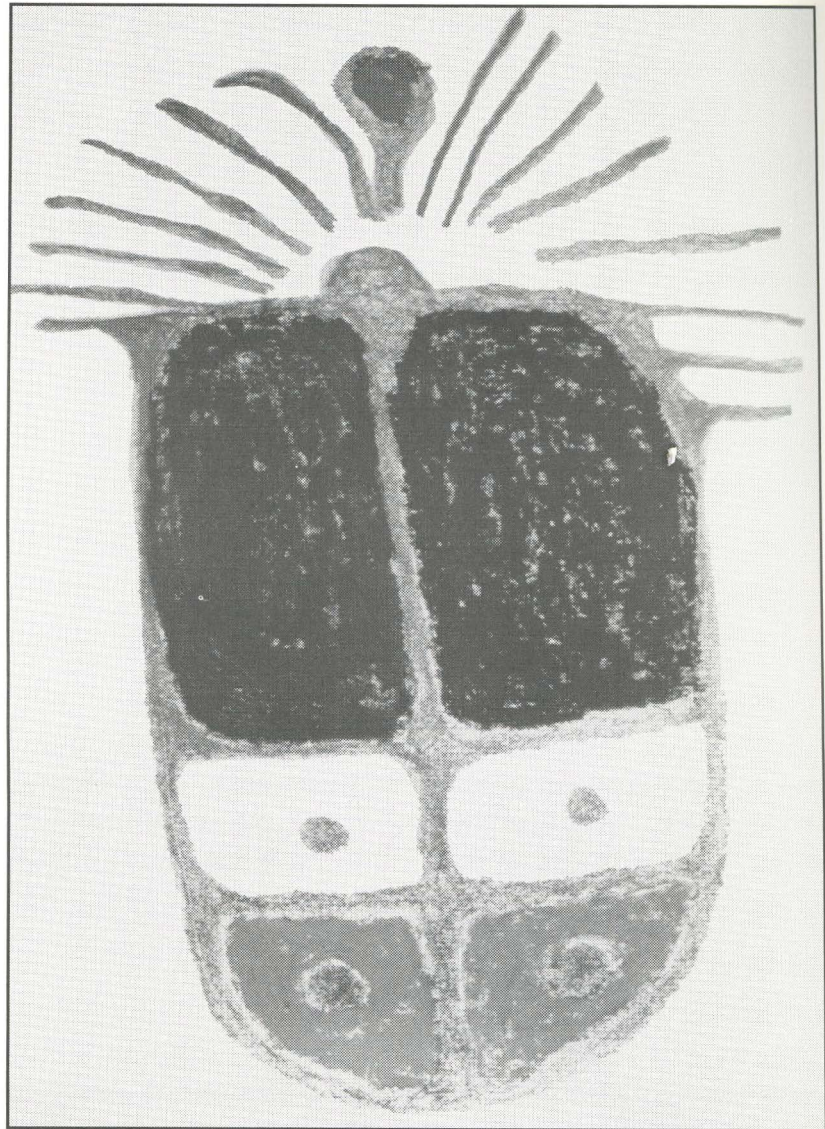
Art and Photography



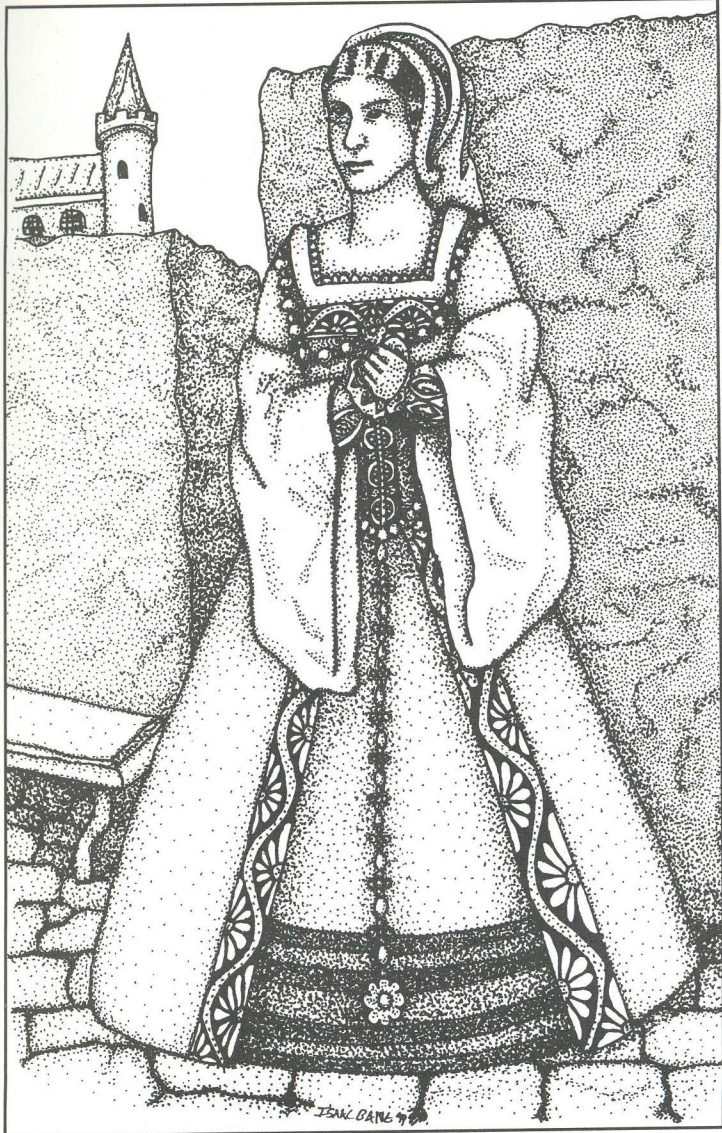
Two Koalas
April D. Jackson



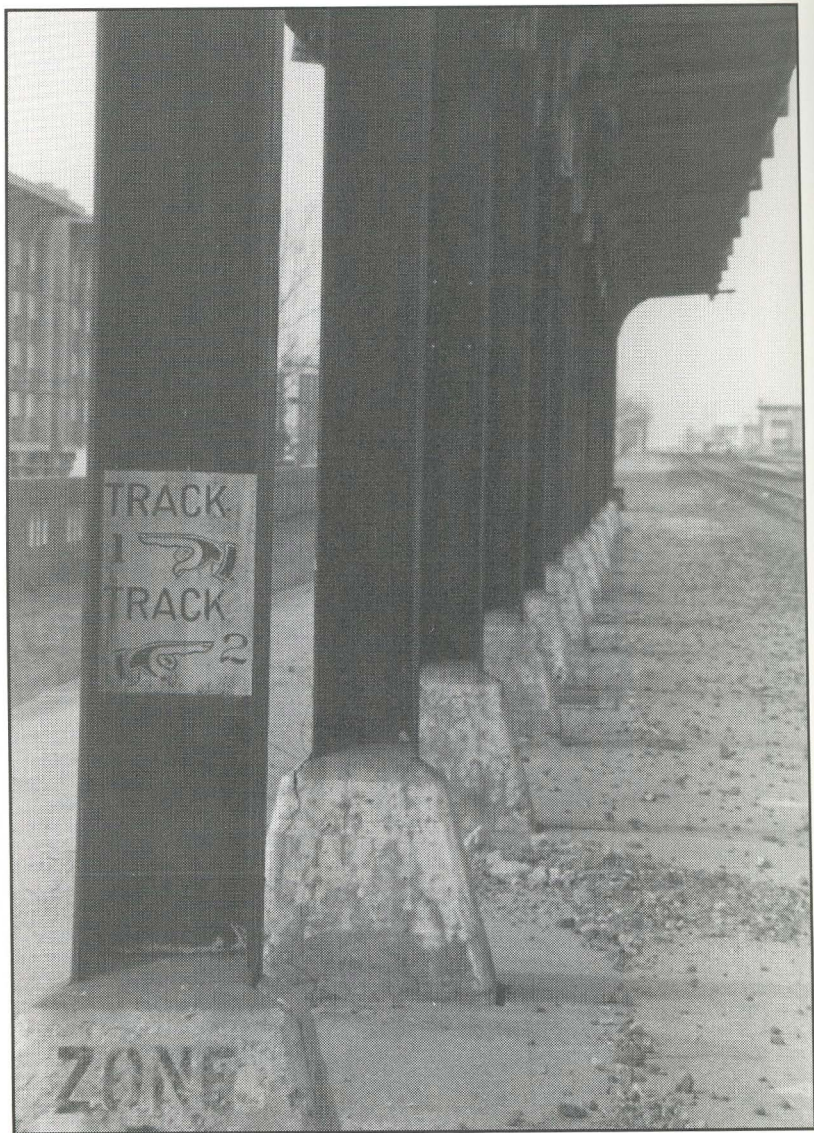
untitled
Victoria Carrasco



untitled
Victoria Carrasco



**Lady
Tim Sorrels**



No More Trains
Trent Dugas

POETRY • PROSE • ARTWORK