



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

## **Editorial Board**

Vicki Hamm, Editor

Cathy Hume, Editor

Vicki Newby, Editor

Clay Randolph, Faculty Adviser

Naomi Christofferson, Copy Editor

Ronna Austin, Publication Coordinator

The Editorial Board thanks the following individuals for their support and help: Dr. Robert P. Todd, Dr. Paul Sechrist, Susan VanSchuyver, and students at Oklahoma City Community College.



All information supplied in this publication is accurate at the time of printing; however, changes may occur and will supersede information in this publication. This publication, printed by DPS Printing is issued by Oklahoma City Community College. A total of 150 copies were printed at a cost of \$1,500.00.

Oklahoma City Community College complies with all applicable Federal and State laws and regulations and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, age, religion, disability or status as a veteran in any of its policies, practices or procedures. This includes, but is not limited to, admissions, employment, financial aid, and educational services. (2/01)

Short Stories

# *Studebaker Redoute*

by Larry D. Griffin

**A**s you may or may not know, there are no more Studebaker parts in Oklahoma. Hardly any parts anywhere. They quit making them, just like they quit making Studebakers. Except at my place. I bought out the whole Studebaker dealership in Joplin, Missouri, when it went out of business in 1965. I have thousands and thousands of Studebaker car parts, still in their little cardboard boxes, some red, some blue, and some green. Unfortunately, I don't own any Studebakers—any complete Studebakers. Any that will run, that is. On cement blocks out in the front yard, I do have a 1958 Champion without a transmission and a 1962 Lark that lacks only a serviceable rear end.

I work as a stocker at the Wal-Mart in town, and when I can't stand handling all those little boxes of disposable stuff, I go home, go out into the storage shed, and pick through my car parts. I am always amazed at how old the parts are and yet they still look new.

People who don't know Studebakers just wouldn't understand me. Girls I go out with have to be both rich and own their own cars. When I ask a girl out, I also always try to find out right away if she knows what a Studebaker is. And most don't. Which is probably why I have been married only three times. One girl who was rich and owned her own car (although a Chevy) tried to pretend she knew what a Studebaker was. Such girls are disgusting, and dishonesty I will not tolerate. Especially when some girl is trying to get next to me. I get so angry when I think about this out in the shed that I start throwing car parts around. Crash! Bang! Bong! they go as they hit the corrugated tin sides of the shed.

The girl who pretended to know about Studebakers asked me to marry her. She is also the one who told me about the Studebaker house going out of business up in Joplin. I know she meant well, but I began to get suspicious when I caught her sitting on my couch one time, studying an old Chilton parts catalogue. All she had was an intellectual



understanding of Studebakers. Not good enough. She also said that a relationship was like a Studebaker, all the parts working and fitting together just right. Yes, she said that. Fitting together and working just right. And then she went out and bought one of those coffee-table books all about Studebakers. I know because I saw it once, tucked under the front seat of her Chevy.

Sometimes, when she slept over, I would bring a few of the old, new parts in from the shed and spread them around on the bed. After making love, she would open the boxes and perhaps lay a solenoid on my navel. Her name was Brenda, a six-letter name that, unfortunately, contained only four of the same letters that the name *Studebaker* contained. However, her kisses were wet and warm like a radiator hose just pulled off a hot car. When she kissed me, it was like standing among the pit crew at the Indianapolis 500 on a hot race day, and the crowd screams and applauds because you have made a minor repair in record time. O, how I loved her.

There is all this pink paint peeling off my house. And when Brenda came to see me, sometimes, outside, she would run her soft hand over the paint and it would peel off in large flakes with the sweep of her hand. As the paint flakes fluttered to the ground, I would think of making love to her. Then I would think of painting the house. Already had the paint. Nine gallons from a Sears special four years ago. The reason the house wasn't painted was because I was going to do it myself and I just hadn't had time yet. She was nice and sweet and good. But I began to suspect that she was a pretender.

Once she brought her daddy to meet me. Her daddy was in cattle. He took one look at that old Crosley refrigerator I had on my front porch and he said, "Why do you have an icebox on your front porch?" He actually said "ice box." I didn't tell him that it was so the neighbors would know that I got a new refrigerator three years ago and this was a way of showing off to the neighbors. Instead, I answered, "I keep my better Studebaker parts in there." Which was also true, but not the main reason. He said that he couldn't help but notice the two Studebakers in the front yard. And I thought at first we were on our way to a great friendship. But then he said, "I always preferred Nashes."

So I changed the subject to cattle. He said, "Raising cattle's not hard. Just feed, water, vaccinate. Drive around in the pickup and watch them fatten up." A Dodge, probably, I thought. "All the ranchers just do pretty much the same thing." He considered himself a rancher rather than a farmer. That song about the farmer and the cowman being friends kept going over and over in my head.

He also said, "Studebaker made and sold wagons in the last century." What a put-down! He was kind of in the last century himself. But he had lots of money. And he

voted Republican. And he hated taxes. But he liked spending money on Brenda and Brenda's brother, who was his ugly son, he told me.

And his son was ugly. His name was Wayne. When he was a kid, he would tie frogs he caught to the blade of an electric fan and then turn on the fan. He delighted in telling how the centripetal force pulled the frog inside out. And ugh! That long slimy, celadon-colored frog tongue flapping against the side of the fan. Thwap! Thwap! Thwap! I had never met him, but Brenda showed me a picture of him, and she told me all about him. What a bastard! He was the kind of guy who would borrow his best friend's car and then just go out and wreck it on purpose. He was as ugly and mean as Brenda was cute and sweet. He would call handicapped people on the phone and let it ring and ring and ring until they finally picked it up. Then he'd just laugh into the receiver and hang up the phone.

And he grew marijuana. He smoked it, too. He would sell some of his dope to people, and then he'd call the police and anonymously tip them off that the person possessed marijuana. He had never met me, but Brenda had told him about me. Since Brenda was convinced that I loved her, then I was OK by him, she said.

Oklahoma is OK, too, and it once said as much on all the license plates. She told me this one evening when we were sitting on the front porch steps just before the lightning bugs came out. Off and on they blinked. Brenda got up and tried to catch some, but she was too slow. Or they were too fast. Otherwise, she was wonderful. We would be sitting out there together on the front step, and I would know that she thought I was wonderful, too. I was sort of like the lightning bugs. Off and on. Off and on.

Brenda could make you laugh when she chased those lightning bugs. When she came back and sat down beside me on the steps, she took my arm and she told me that Wayne owned a 1957 Studebaker Golden Hawk. I immediately loved her better. And Wayne, too. She sat there in the darkness and the word *Studebaker* just rolled sibilantly across her beautiful lips.

But this was all hearing. I couldn't see a thing. I couldn't see then that she'd made up the whole thing just to make me like her more. Just to make me like that despicable Wayne. But when I think of her that day, standing on the banks of the Illinois River near Tahlequah, my mind zooms down the Highway 10 of memory, and I still love her. Then I don't care that Wayne really, in fact, drove a late model Honda. I'd like to tell her now, "The Japanese car manufacturers helped destroy Studebaker."

I'm pretty despicable myself sometimes. I smoke. Cigarettes. Not pot. I don't listen very well. I talk too much. I talk too much about myself. Perhaps too much about

Brenda. But never, never enough about Studebakers.

Brenda and her brother once wanted to keep a cow at my place. It's in Salina, Oklahoma, not very good cattle grazing country. And I only have one large lot. What with my shed out there, there's not much room. And it's only half-fenced, but with a strong chain-link fence. But they got this idea to keep this special cow at my place. He was a bull. A high-powered bull. They had gotten him from their daddy. He was registered. A Hereford or an Angus. I can't tell the difference. They were going to put him at stud at my place. After they bred the bull out a few times, Brenda and Wayne were going to sell the bull, and with that money and the stud fees, go to Malibu, California. They wanted me to go with them, she said, and live on the beach. Like anybody from Oklahoma, they thought I would go to California at the drop of a hat. No Depression. No real reason. Just live on the beach, nap, fish, drink, and be happy all day.

Their daddy decided not to give them the bull because he probably knew that Wayne would just sell it. Brenda was going to use some of the money, she said, to buy herself her own Studebaker. I was going to go to automobile repair school part-time. I wanted to know how to get my two cars back in running order. I hadn't figured out how I was going to get the cars or all those parts clear out to California. But, and I hate to admit it, I enjoyed dreaming about leaving Oklahoma.

"I know this bull could make us rich," Wayne would say to Brenda. And she would tell me about it. Once, when I wasn't home, he came by while Brenda was there to check out the lot. Wayne said, "This would work fine." No doubt he drove over in his Honda. I don't know how he planned to haul the bull to my place. You can't pull a trailer with a Honda! Brenda said Wayne walked around all over the yard, and then he walked around and around the shed. It was locked, of course, so he couldn't get in.

"What's in here?" he asked Brenda.

"Car parts," she answered.

"Too bad," he said, "It would be the perfect place to keep feed and shelter the bull."

When Brenda told me about it, all I said was "No way, Jose!"

Oklahoma summers are like this: so humid that you walk around in an ocean of your own perspiration. They're that sticky. You can go out early in the morning anywhere along the Garber Sand Fault and gather roserocks — barite crystals — by the fistfuls, by the bucketfuls. Then you can bring them home before it gets too hot and line them up in front of the refrigerator on your front porch and make little lines of them along the side edges of your front steps. They are the same red color of that soil all around



Oklahoma City and Norman. I always put a few roserocks on the kitchen table to study and play with while I'm examining Studebaker parts over coffee in the morning.

I like the idea that roserocks are the Oklahoma State Rock. The state bird is the scissortail flycatcher. The state tree is the redbud. The state reptile is the mountain boomer lizard. And the state insect is the ladybug. Legislators years ago down in Oklahoma City passed a law against the state reptile eating the state insect. (Yes, they do pay those guys too much.) And at night the tree frogs, little moss-green critters the same color as the lichen that grows on the blackjacks, sing out in great chorus a beautiful and huge surge of communal throb. This is the background for everything at night. Even making love to Brenda. I know that our Oklahoma tree frogs sing the best. It's their nasal Okie twang that makes their song so distinctive. Their sound is strictly country and western, just like me, and it's no surprise to anyone how many country and western singers hail from Oklahoma.

Oklahoma is the greatest place. Some nights, I just sit out on the porch and try to remember what it was like for my great-great-grandfathers back in Scotland and Ireland.

The Western Auto Store in Pryor Creek is just a few minutes away. Sometimes, on Saturdays, I take Brenda over there early in the evening. The Wal-Mart where I work in Salina doesn't have a parts department. We stay looking at all the car parts that Jim (he's the parts manager) has time to show us. But because there are no Studebaker parts there to look at, I soon become bored and we leave.

After dark, on the way home, we stop at Bill's Super-T Drive-in and buy burgers and cokes and onion rings.

On Highway 20 back to Salina, I drive carefully so I can watch the moon when it's full. It always rises right out over the highway. I like to think that they built this road as the moon's highway, too.

The next morning, I always count my blessings while I count my roserocks and wonder just how many boxes of Studebaker gearshift knobs I really do have out there in the shed. It's the little things in life that count. The moon. Good car parts. Lots of both of them. Happiness is only a matter of getting your priorities straight. Not wanting too much of anything, just enough. Like car parts and girls and their brothers. I love the State of Oklahoma. When it gets too hot, too humid, though, we just load my camping gear into Brenda's Chevy and go to the Colorado Rockies until August is over.

Water moccasins? Water moccasins! We have water moccasins. I have encountered them when swimming in the lakes. The old-timers say they won't bite you in the water.

They say a snake cannot open his mouth underwater. Now, I can open my mouth underwater, so I don't see why a snake can't. I always swim the other way. Very fast.

And copperheads! Once when Brenda and I were out walking around the place, behind the shed, all curled up, was a mean old copperhead. I got a forked stick down on his head and reached down and grabbed him behind where he would've had ears, if he'd had ears. Brenda didn't like that one bit. I told her not to be afraid, that it was only just an old bull snake. I held the snake between my index finger and the thumb of my right hand and went into the shed where I found an empty Studebaker steering wheel box. And I put the snake inside. Then I taped it shut with duct tape. (Give me a roll of duct tape and a can of WD-40 and I can fix anything.) Now all I had to do was convince Brenda to let the thing go in Wayne's Honda.

The house I own is only about three miles from the edge of town. I like living on the edge, not really out in the country, not really in town. Like living in Oklahoma, you can run out to the mailbox in your undershorts if you like, or you can walk to work if you can't get your car started. If you have a car. You know what I mean. I can walk out to the shed any time of the night or the day, and everything will be just as I left it. Because I keep that shed locked and there's nobody around to mess with my car parts. I'm the only one who has the key. Sometimes, in the bright blue day, when the sky is the same color as the blue on the Oklahoma State Flag, I can walk out to the shed and smell the ozone of nearby thunderstorms and think how dry and safe all my Studebaker car parts are in the shed I built especially for them.

Possums. We have possums. At night, I see their eyes reflected from the headlights of Brenda's Chevy when she brings me home. Sometimes I have Brenda stop the car, and I look them straight in the eyes. They smile that dinosaur smile at me. And me? I just smile right back at them.

That last night I did that was the day that Brenda let that copperhead loose in Wayne's car. I thought it would be fun to know what happened, but as far as Brenda knew, nothing had happened yet. A few days later and still no news. I'd begun to think that Wayne had left his car door open and the snake had crawled out. About a week later, Brenda told me that she had gotten worried about the snake. Was afraid it would get hungry or thirsty. So, she'd put some bread and a small bowl of water on the back floorboard of Wayne's Honda.

Listen, Oklahoma is oil, too: there are oil wells everywhere. And I love oil wells because oil is made into gasoline, and gasoline fuels automobiles, and Studebakers are automobiles. There's an oil well across the road from my house. The pumpjack works

up and down and squeaks at each stroke. Don't know why an oil well would squeak. They ought to oil those oil wells.

For some folks, a snake is just like a Studebaker. They don't like them. Brenda, I knew, didn't like them, but she pretended concern for the one in Wayne's Honda. That's why she said she put the bread and water there. The same victuals you get in prison. And Brenda claimed she liked Studebakers, too, but she was just pretending there, also. About a month later, I thought about that poor snake, myself, doing hard time and eating prison food in Wayne's Honda. I decided to myself that McAlester would be a good name for Wayne's Honda.

"Happiness is a warm Studebaker," I whispered into Brenda's ear one night after making love with her. I guess my timing was wrong. She jumped out of bed, started throwing some of the car parts that I had on the highboy at me, got dressed, and stormed out of the bedroom. I hated to see her leave because I didn't know how I would get to work the next day.

But before she left, Brenda ran back in the bedroom and said, "You sonofabitch, I hate Studebakers. And I hate snakes. And I hate you."

Jesus, she was really angry. The only time I had seen her close to being this angry was when she wanted to go to a tractor pull and I wanted to go to the stock car races. I imagined a chain-link fence around the yard, zinging with the vibrations of her voice. I just wanted to go to sleep.

I guess I just thought that she was too old to get that angry. I thought fits like that were something you outgrew, but I'm learning. She was like that: always doing nice things for me, picking me up and taking me to work, then picking me up at work and bringing me home. And I guess I'm just not a good listener. I took her for granted, didn't really pay attention so that now I can hardly remember what she did sound like, sweet or angry. I thought it better then to just listen, and I did, and then she said, "And I didn't put that snake in Wayne's car, either." With that, she stomped out through the living room and slammed the front door behind her.

Outside, I heard the starter of her Chevy whir. I thought, *Maybe, now I can get some peace.*

Then I was starting to nod off to the gentle rhythm of the squeaking pumpjack and the ever-present background drone of the tree frogs when I opened my eyes wide.

"Then, what did she do with that snake?" I did say this out loud.

We go way back, these Studebakers and I.

Once I worked at the gas station in town. Not there, anymore. A real service station



where I pumped gas. Not one of those 7 – 11's. A man pulled up in one of those sea-foam green, mouse-nosed 1952 Studebakers. The color of the car reminded me of spring wheat in the field because there are lots of wheat fields in Oklahoma, too. The man asked me to check the oil. I can still see the sun shining off the hood ornament. I know now that it was a moment of perfect satisfaction for me.

You can buy cigarettes over at the Indian Smoke Shop. They're real cheap, and you don't have to pay any state taxes. They have a sign in there with the Oklahoma State Treasurer's address on it that says you can send him your taxes on the cigarettes you buy. I've been in there lots of time, and I've never seen anyone copy down that address.

With every puff of every Camel I take, I always feel a bit guilty, though. I just love this state and I hate to see anybody cheat it out of anything. Even me.

Just like hunting licenses. I never hunt, but if I did, I'd buy a license because if it weren't for the State of Oklahoma, there wouldn't be any turkeys or deer here. My grandfather told me they killed them all out in the territorial days. Back in the 1890s. I think it's kind of spiritual that the state has replenished all that once-disappeared game.

And Tulsa. The Paris of Oklahoma. True, not the Studebaker City, but once the Packard City. It's full of all kinds of religious nuts. Televangelism's a big thing today, but when I was a kid growing up, watching Channel 2, Channel 6, and Channel 8, I saw Billy James Hargis, Kathryn Kuhlman, and Oral Roberts doing all sorts of strange healing things. Sometimes at night, when I'm out in the shed working with my car parts, the sound of one cardboard parts-box rubbing against another as I pull it from the shelf sounds like . . . sounds like . . . sounds like God talking to me.

Fiddle with my car parts; think about working on the Studebakers; smoke cigarettes (careful to put it out if I'm in the shed so I won't burn up all my parts); watch lightning bugs in the evening; listen for turkeys; dust off and rearrange my roserock collection, both on the porch and on the kitchen table; get drunk sometimes and stumble outside and listen to the mistletoe growing in the blackjacks. Mistletoe is not a flower. It's a parasite. But mistletoe is the Oklahoma State Flower. Oh, yes, I love Oklahoma! Passionately. As much as I love Studebakers? Almost.

My daddy once took me to Kansas City to watch the A's play the New York Yankees in that great baseball season just after the homerun contest between Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris, and he took me in that same gunmetal gray Champion that's out on cement blocks there in the front yard, and I, because of that, I've loved baseball ever since. I had rooted for Mantle, not because of any love of his that I knew of for

Studebakers, but simply because he was from Oklahoma. Shoot, Mickey was born just north of here at Spavinaw.

So, here I am again out in the shed. I am going through and opening each of the several dozen steering wheel boxes. I take out of the box and hold each different colored steering wheel in my hands, imagining that I am driving some wonderful complementary-colored Studebaker down old Route 66. One box seems a bit light. I shake it and something slides around inside.

Brenda had gotten mad and gone away, and if she were here now, I'd probably ask her to marry me. She went to Colorado or California, and she probably has a new boyfriend who doesn't like Studebakers, either. She could come back here to me. I'd take her back. But it's too late.

I jump back when I open the box. It's the copperhead. But it's OK. It's dead.

I'm thinking of looking up Wayne. We will talk about the bull and all the money we might've made. We will smoke cigarettes from the Indian Smoke Shop. I might even look under the hood of McAlester, just to see what's there. Wayne is probably still ugly but I don't care. I don't even consider changing the lock on the shed.

I still love Brenda. I'd give all the Studebaker parts in Oklahoma to get her back.



# *Bold Honey*

by Jennifer Hoskins

Sarah cursed as the car next to her swerved into her lane. The sudden movement caused her to smudge the lipstick she was applying. She recovered quickly and glanced at her reflection in the rearview mirror.

“Perfect.” She always wore Bold Honey, and its shade was perfect for the mission she was on. She had decided that today was the day she was finally going to catch him. They had been married less than a year, and she was absolutely positive that Troy was cheating on her. There were many signs pointing in that direction, but the most obvious was his recent disinterest in her or anything she might have to offer.

She had decided to begin her search in the most obvious places. She rushed home so she would have a couple of hours before he arrived home. First, she would start in the dresser drawers. She went through his sock and underwear drawer and found nothing but some jars of pennies. Next, she went through the drawer where he kept his miscellaneous items. All she found there were some receipts and business cards. She looked through those but did not find anything suspicious.

Sarah decided to try a different approach. Each month, when the bills came in, she just wrote the checks and sent them off without a second glance. Today, she was armed with Troy’s cell phone bill, their home telephone bill, and her trusty cordless phone. It was equipped with priceless amenities such as caller-ID and a feature that blocked her number if she called anyone. She felt a little silly, but as she thought back to the most recent times that he claimed to be “too-tired” or “have a killer headache,” she forged on.

She quickly realized that the cell phone bill contained way too many numbers to try to decipher. She did notice that there were a lot of calls to their home and her work and cell phone. That made her feel good, but it was not enough to make her stop.

She had just begun on their home telephone bill when she noticed a strange number.

It was long distance and it was made late at night—way after she usually went to sleep. She felt a feeling of dread creep into her stomach as she dialed the number. She thought of things to say as the phone continued to ring. Her heart leapt out of her chest when she heard the line pick up, then settled back into place as she heard a man's recorded voice instruct her to leave a message. She hung up the phone as she plotted her next move.

Thirty minutes later, she heard the door open, signaling Troy's arrival.

"Honey, I'm home."

Sarah quickly stuffed the phone bills in with the other bills and stood up to greet him.

"I'm in the kitchen."

Troy walked in and kissed her on the cheek. They sat down to eat dinner and talked casually about their day. Sarah kept her anxiety concealed and waited until after the dishes were done to bring up anything. Troy was watching TV in the living room when she approached him.

"Sweetie, do you know anyone who lives in Wilmington?"

She asked him this very casually while carefully watching him for any signs of nervousness.

"No," he answered without batting an eye. "Why?"

"Oh, it's really nothing. I was paying bills, and I noticed a strange number on the long distance bill."

"Did you try calling the number to see who it is?"

"No, but I might try tomorrow."

"Okay." That was all he said, so she decided to drop it for awhile.

Things were fine for the next couple of days. The nagging suspicion stayed with her, but she was at a loss about where to go from there. On Thursday, she had a late meeting at work, so she left for a little while to run a few errands before it started. She was at the Clinique counter at Dillards when she decided to call Troy at work to remind him that she would not be home until later. One of Troy's co-workers answered and told her that he had left a little early. An internal alarm sounded and she dialed their home phone number.

The saleswoman's voiced interrupted her thoughts. "Can I help you, ma'am?"

Sarah handed the woman her credit card and said, "I just need one tube of Bold Honey lipstick." The woman glanced at her cell phone and frowned slightly, but Sarah ignored her and waited anxiously for her husband to pick up the phone. He never did. She grabbed her bag and headed for the door as she dialed his cell phone. Troy's recorded

the door for a moment. She heard nothing, so she knocked softly three times.

“Who is it?” she heard her husband’s groggy voice call out.

“Troy? It’s me.”

“Sarah?” She heard the sounds of rustling covers and padded footsteps. Troy opened the door a few seconds later. “What in the world?”

As her husband stood there in his boxer shorts, Sarah was suddenly at a loss for words. Her eyes adjusted quickly to the darkened room behind him and noticed nothing unusual. There were no half-empty champagne bottles, no candles, and no scantily dressed woman. The relief rushed through her body and she threw her arms around her husband.

“I just missed you so much, Troy.”

“I missed you too, Sarah. Now, let’s go to sleep.”

Troy led her into the room and closed the door.

A little while later, Sarah lay snuggled next to Troy, laughing to herself about how silly she had acted. Maybe someday she would tell him—but not for a long time. As she drifted off to sleep, Troy reached up with his hand to wipe the remnants of Estee’ Lauder’s Plum Passion from his cheek.

# *The Prize Rooster*

by Austin Davidson

When Barret first heard that his boss had a prize rooster he wanted to get rid of, hundreds of options and scenarios skated through his brain. What could be accomplished with a prize rooster? The answer was "a lot."

With a rooster, Barret would be original, he'd be funny, he'd be his own man.

"That beautiful prize rooster belongs to Barret!"

Everyone would envy him and he, in turn, would have a new friend.

The day he brought the rooster home from his boss's house, Barret already had prepared a coop in his backyard and had purchased four sacks of chicken feed. His folks were not enthused.

"What's the point, son? It's a rooster."

"It's just funny, Dad. It's a rooster."

Barret's dad couldn't stand the thing. But then Tuesday's yard work chores came around. Dad was on his riding lawnmower as usual: down one row and up the next. After a time, he noticed the rooster behind him, following the mower, an old surveyor making sure things were running smoothly. Dad smiled at the comedy. Where he would mow, the bird was sure to follow. Every Tuesday thereafter, yard work didn't seem right without that funny rooster trotting around. Outside, each morning, Dad, with a smoke in his mouth and a mug of coffee in his hand, would grin. The rooster would be crowing at sunup, seeming to say, "Mornin', Dad. How's that coffee?"

Mom couldn't stand the crowing in the morning. She never rose as early as Dad, and she would just as soon boil the bird as bid it good morning as Dad often did. But Wednesday's garden duties came around, and Mom noticed her tomato plants thriving more than they had all season. She noticed the rooster eating tomato worms from the vines. From then on, garden work didn't seem right without the rooster scoping for wriggling perpetrators.



Barret was all right with this at first. He was glad his family was warming up to the bird. As time passed, little things started to irk him. For instance, one day coming in from school, he noticed his Dad napping on the recliner, the rooster nestled smugly in his lap. Since the bird had started eating at the dinner table with them, Barret had noticed an increased amount of grain and gravel turning up in their daily meals. The big tip-off came one night when he opened the door to his room and found his belongings gone. The shell of his old bedroom was now scattered with hay and seed, and in the center sat his old friend. As Barret rested uncomfortably that night, cramped up in the old backyard chicken coop, the image of the prize rooster smiling at him burned in his mind.

He still had his girlfriend. His family may have jumped on the rooster bandwagon, but the girlfriend still gave him the love and attention he needed. On the phone one day, Barret was sealing the deal for a nice Italian dinner with her.

“Whattya say I pick you up at noon?”

“Barret, I don’t know. I have things to take care of.”

“What things?”

“I will call you later.”

As she said goodbye, Barret could have sworn he heard a rustling of feathers on the other end of the line.

Through the next few weeks, he began to lose her to all the laundry she apparently was doing. But then, Saturday’s run in the park proved her laundry stories false. Barret was jogging past when he saw it. She was sitting on a bench with the rooster. Lips locked, eyes closed, passionate embrace. This was not as surprising as it was disturbing. Barret didn’t run home; he moped, and as he did so, the girlfriend’s car passed him on the street. The rooster was driving. Of all the long days they’d spent together, Barret’s girlfriend had never let him drive her car.

That damn bird had been sent to destroy his life. Barret had to stop it. How would he go about it, though? The answer came in a Thursday social studies class. His teacher announced that she had a pet fox that needed a good home.

When Barret brought the fox home, he had all the proper accommodations ready for it. The next morning, instead of the annoying crowing of that bird, Barret awoke to the crying of Dad coming from the backyard. A pile of feathers and blood was all that was left of the prize rooster.

“Must have been the neighbor’s dog,” he sighed.

Over by the old chicken coop, the fox was lazing in the sunbeams. He seemed

strangely content.

Barret didn't go to the funeral, but when his folks came home, they questioned him about the pet fox he had recently acquired.

"What's the point, son? It's just a fox."

"Because it's cool, Dad. It's a fox. Something to fill the void since the rooster's gone."

The next day, during Friday's pool-cleaning obligations, Barret looked up from netting leaves to see his old girlfriend approaching.

"What brings you here? Wanting to talk about something?"

"Actually, I was wondering if I could see your pet fox."

This excited Barret. The fox would bring them back together. He only wished his parents were as excited about the new pet.

Dad, for sure, wasn't excited about it, not until Tuesday's yard work came around.

**Essays**

# *Survivors of the Urban War Zone*

by Nathan Tucker

Christmas dinner has always been a tradition in my family since my grandparents came over from the old country. At one point in time, it may have been considered a wonderful time to get together with fellow loved ones and share love and companionship — more than a meal.

Grandma and Grandpa are the only two nowadays who seem even to remember what this tradition means. Uncle Pete works as a doctor in Los Angeles and has what he calls a foolproof cure (known in layman's terms as "binge drinking") for the stresses of his job. He will always, without fail, start a fight with his brother because Uncle Mark is an out-of-the-closet homosexual as of two years ago.

Uncle Mark not only has to deal with the colorful accusations of Uncle Pete, but also has to take heat from Aunt Rose who, as a Protestant youth minister, sees his "perverse sexual nature" as an "abomination on the family name." Aunt Rose can dish out a lot of verbal punishment when she sees fit to do so and is always at odds with my mother who converted to Catholicism just before I was born.

These verbal battles will usually last until everyone falls asleep around three o'clock in the morning. How do I keep myself from being pulled into the fray of this litter of jackals I lovingly call my relatives? Quite simply by using methods I have adapted called Fantasy Observational Adaptation (FOA) and One Word Defense (OWD). Though they seem complex, these two phrases may just save your life—or at least a few hours of it—if used correctly.

Fantasy Observational Adaptation is not half as complicated as it may sound. It actually just means keeping in perspective at all times a sense of what is real and what is not. The world does not quit spinning just because Uncle Pete calls me a sissy. I like looking at it as if it were an underwater look at a feeding frenzy of sharks and I am the man in the steel cage with the camera. As long as I don't retort, I will remain safe inside the confines of the cage. However, replying to derogatory comments made by one of



my family members without thinking before I speak can be a disaster. I find the best way to keep my head in this situation is to daydream about something not related to my family, like Rush Limbaugh or the upcoming wrestling match. I will strive to think of anything that will prevent me from losing my patience and joining in the chaos of the holiday battle. Sometimes, FOA may not be enough to fend off the comments and questions from my ever-loving family.

Sometimes the human urge to fight back overcomes me and I will retort, quickly becoming drawn into the fray. Once this has been done, there is only the other way back in this bitter power struggle—the One Word Defense or OWD. This simply means that, no matter what is said to me, I reply with one-word answers such as *yes* or *no*. If a question is asked that requires more than yes or no, I will give as simplistic an answer as possible, making my reply as interesting and fun to listen to as an explanation of how to work out a logarithm in a four-step equation. OWD will either lead back to the previous step or, hopefully, it will cancel me out of the conversation completely. Fight-starting relatives are a lot like bullies in the respect that if you don't put up much of a fight for long enough, they will stop picking on you all the time. OWD is a person's way, in this scenario, of "not putting up a fight," no matter how bad the bully gets.

The two methods of dealing with family issues mentioned above are precautionary and perhaps, above all, procedure of prevention. They cannot help relatives escape persecution should they let their emotions run away with them if they have made themselves a family target by something they have done, such as coming out of the closet. But if these unfortunate individuals are just members of the family who want an escape from the torments of family gatherings between kinfolk who ignore each other every day of the year except during the holidays, then this might be the solution. I have personally watched OWD and FOA help out friends and some of my own family members who would otherwise dread Christmas and Thanksgiving. There are some things in life that people must endure to build character and wisdom, but a hellish family reunion shouldn't be one of them.

# *Out of the Nest and Into the Frying Pan*

by Cathy Hume

**T**he dusty road wound through the swampy backwoods of Jefferson Parish and ended abruptly at an old farmhouse that must have been built in Abe Lincoln's day. The dilapidated place looked like something plucked out of one of those old Ma and Pa Kettle movies—peeled paint, torn window screens, and on the front porch, two rickety, wooden rocking chairs and a 1940's wringer washer. Rusty car parts and used tires were scattered about the yard, and black speckled hound dogs lay in the tall grass, chained to trees, howling at the car that dared trespass into their area. Just a few yards to the right of the house stood a fenced-in chicken coop where cackling hens and chicks wandered about, pecking in the dirt. Overseeing the noisy brood below, a red rooster perched on the roof of the coop. When I turned and looked to the other side of the house, an even worse sight met my eyes: two possums had been killed and left hanging by their tails on the clothesline. Beneath them, in the dirt, a puddle of thick dark blood gathered blowflies.

I sat in the safety of my car with my soon-to-be husband, thinking this could not possibly be where my neat and orderly fiancé had been raised. A few seconds later, the screen door on the porch burst open, and a short, plump woman emerged. She wore a floral print apron over a paisley print housedress, and a red scarf half hid her long, graying hair. Turning back towards the inside of the house, she screamed, "They're here! They're here!" In that instant I knew that it was no mistake; I was deep in Cajun country and about to meet his "people."

I was eighteen years old the day we arrived at the end of that dusty road. I was a California girl who had grown up in a big city filled with shopping malls, multiplex drive-in theaters, fast-food restaurants, and neatly manicured lawns in front of typical suburban tract homes. Other than having gone to boot camp in San Antonio, Texas, I had never been east of the Sierras, let alone to Louisiana's Cajun country. I thought

myself to be savvy, street-smart, and unshakable. Les and I had met just six months earlier, shortly after I returned from basic training, and we quickly fell in love. He, too, was in the Air Force and was halfway through his third hitch. When Les received new orders transferring him to the airbase near Homestead, Florida, we decided that a cross-country romance was not what we wanted. We quickly filed paperwork, asking the base commander for permission to marry, and I also put in for a transfer to Homestead. Sixty days later, I kissed my parents goodbye and headed off on a thirty-day furlough to meet my fiancé's family.

During our road trip, Les told me bits and pieces about his family and childhood. The circumstance of his father's death when Les was only nine was sadly mentioned. Evidently, his father Carl had fallen from a tilling tractor and was shredded to pieces when the blades ran over him. His mother Melba, who never remarried, raised Les, his brother Earl, and sisters Jayleen and Trish on the farm by herself. After Les joined the Air Force, Earl took over running the family farm. Eventually, Earl married; however, he never left the farm or his mother. Instead, he moved his new bride in and immediately began adding little Bouvas to the family tree. Both Jayleen and Trish married young after becoming pregnant by local boys, and neither managed to finish high school. Trish lived close by on a sharecropping farm with her family, and Jayleen, twice-divorced and with four kids, lived in Bogalusa where she was a hairdresser.

Les bragged about his family ancestry and how they were Cajun. "Not simply Louisiana folks who called themselves Cajuns," he explained, "but real Cajuns." Later, I was to learn that Cajun people were descendants of a group of French colonists who were exiled during the eighteenth century and had settled in southern Louisiana. He said his people had farmed near the bayous and swamps for generations and still spoke a mix of French and English. His description of his family and their farm had given me the impression that they were unique and almost regal, like plantation owners from *Gone With the Wind* who lived in stately mansions. I pictured in my mind a grand house with a verandah that ran its length, towering white marble pillars with clinging green ivy spiraling upwards, and majestic old willow trees whose limbs were weighted with green Spanish moss. I pictured Tara.

Immediately after coming to the end of that winding road, I realized that I had not arrived at Tara at all, and his "people" were not gentle plantation owners who sat rocking on their front porches, sipping mint juleps. They were more like the Beverly Hillbillies minus the money, and Tara was a two-story shack with a wrap-around porch.

After yelling into the house that we had arrived, Les' mom came bounding down the



shaky porch steps at a full gallop—sixteen-ounce bottle of Pepsi in one hand, a cigarette in the other. As she ran, her huge breasts bounced up and down, slapping at her face, and by the time she reached the car, she stood huffing and puffing for a good breath. When Les and I stepped out of the car, his family instantly mobbed us. It was as if a conquering hero had come home with a new treasure, and I was the treasure.

Still stunned by culture shock, I was led through the screened door and into the house. “Take a load off,” Les’ mom said as she pointed me in the direction of a well-worn, overstuffed chair. Before I had a chance to even gather my thoughts, a Mason jar filled with iced tea was shoved into my hand, and Mother Melba, as they all called her, was telling me that supper would be on the table in a minute. Although I was given an occasional glance, the family, for the most part, sat huddled around Les, listening to him tell stories about California, his life in the Air Force, and once in a while, a tidbit about me. With each mention of my name, the family looked in my direction, some eyes squinting into narrow slits, others opening wide behind black-rimmed glasses. I soon began feeling like I was a newly discovered animal on exhibit.

Mother Melba called for everyone to come to the table for supper, and like a herd of pigs being called to slop, the family headed that way. Reaching for Les’ hand, I drew a deep breath and gave him a pleading look, silently begging for help as we began walking to the kitchen.

Before me, on the table, sat a meal like none I had seen before: a steaming pot of red beans and a large bowl of sticky white rice at one end of the table and a Dutch oven filled with shrimp gumbo at the other. In the middle was a huge mound of boiled crawfish piled high on top of several sheets of wet newspaper. Scattered around the table sat pint jars filled with either hot sauce or pickled peppers or green tomato relish, and freshly baked cornbread in a cast iron skillet sat ready to tumble off the edge. On the sideboard sat two pecan pies and a chocolate cake, ready to be devoured.

Unaccustomed to such strange food, I cautiously spooned small portions of beans, rice, and gumbo onto my plate and then reached for a large piece of cornbread. When asked if I would like some crawfish, I passed on trying any of the ugly red creatures altogether. My train of thought was anything that still had its head attached was not going to pass my lips. Les tried to show me that all you had to do was break off the head and fish out the white meat from the body. I was almost convinced to give them a try; however, when he added that the best part was sucking the juice from the critter’s head, I again decided crawfish eating was an event that I could take a pass on.

While we were eating, Melba announced that the next night we would be having one

of Les' favorite dinners. My hopes began growing as I thought that tomorrow evening I would be savoring a thick, juicy steak or maybe even some barbecued country ribs. Then Earl told Mother Melba that two possums would not be enough to feed Trish's and Jayleen's families and the rest of us, so he and Les needed to go possum and coon hunting after supper. In a flash, the memory of the dead beasts hanging on the line, with flies buzzing around them, came rushing back. Nausea overtook me, and the food I was chewing would not go down. As inconspicuously as I could, I raised my paper towel napkin to my mouth and spit out the half-chewed gumbo.

When asked if I wanted another helping of something, I used the excuse of being too tired to eat. Through the rest of the meal, I sat in silence and just listened to the conversations around me. Jayleen kept talking to her mom about ex-husband number two; Trish was being nosy and asking Les when and where he had met me, and Earl continuously yelled at his kids to "sit down and eat, or go to bed."

My trancelike state was broken when I heard chairs scraping the wooden floors as they were pulled away from the table. I noticed that everyone had finished eating. Melba had started clearing away dirty dishes and stacking them into a huge trough-like sink. My offer to help was refused. She said the dishes would be done later, after the water had been heated. It was then that I saw there were no faucets on the sink. Instantly, I added two and two together and panicked: no running water meant no hot showers, and worse yet, no running water meant no indoor toilet.

Later that evening, I got my first experience with an outdoor toilet. Before Les went out hunting, I had him walk me out back to the outhouse so I wouldn't have to get out of bed later to use it. There was no moon that night, and the only light we had was what crept through the crack in the kitchen curtains. It was pitch dark outside, and we navigated the yard like blind men without white canes, I holding Les' arm and he reaching for invisible objects in front of us. At last, arriving at our destination, a sense of dread overcame me and questions popped into my mind. *Would there be spiders? Would there be snakes? And would there be toilet paper?* As it turned out, the toilet paper question was irrelevant. Getting my fear under control, I entered the bathroom. However, just before I sat on the toilet lid, which was nailed to the wood seat, a chicken flew out from the hole under it. That was enough for me. Up came the britches, and I decided that any business I had to do could wait till we went to town the next day.

When I came out of the bathroom, Les saw the startled look on my face. He surmised that perhaps he had not prepared me enough for all of what had greeted me on my first visit to his old home. He was right. I was a young, naïve city girl, fresh from my

mother's nest. The people that I grew up around and was friends with were from my same social background. Although my family had a small vegetable garden during the summer months, it was more a hobby for my mother than food supplier for the family. I didn't know that in 1975 there were still people who lived mostly by what they grew in their gardens or killed with their guns. And every home not having indoor plumbing had never entered my mind.

Alone in bed later that evening—Les had gone possum hunting—I wondered if perhaps I was making a mistake. I remembered one of the last conversations I had with my mother before leaving. She kept telling me that I was “jumping from the nest and into the frying pan.” At the time, I thought she was just upset because I was moving so far from home. However, now that I have raised kids myself, I realize that a mother's intuition is usually not too far from the mark: mom's was right on. She had kept warning me that the eleven-year age gap between Les and me was too wide and that he was from a part of the country about which I had no knowledge and would find difficult. But back then, I was an independent, headstrong girl who listened to no one but herself and always had to learn things her own way.

Nevertheless, Mom was right. I was too young and unworldly for the adventure I had embarked upon, and four years later, I paid with a divorce for not heeding her advice. There were, however, two things I took away with me: Never believe what you don't see with your own eyes, and never use an outhouse in the dark.



# Colorizing Audie

by Jill May

*Winner: Oklahoma City Community College  
Department of English Essay Contest*

In the past, I've pictured Pearl Harbor in black and white. I imagined Pearl Harbor and Hawaii as they were in 1941. If I closed my eyes, I could describe the scene perfectly. I could see the capsized hull of the *U.S.S. Oklahoma*, the wrecked planes at Wheeler Field, and the smoke and flames pouring out of the *U.S.S. Arizona*. I pictured my Uncle Audie the same way: in black and white. I recently learned both impressions were wrong.

My recent vacation on Oahu served two purposes. The first purpose was relaxation. Uncle Audie was the second reason. Audie died when the *Arizona* exploded on December 7, 1941, and I planned to leave a lei at the *Arizona* Memorial in his memory. I thought I was prepared for Pearl Harbor's impact. Boy, was I wrong.

I arrived at the Visitor's Center before 7 a.m. Magnum would have called it another perfect day in paradise. The sun had just risen; only a few clouds were in the sky, and the sea was calm. Even the temperature was perfect: mid-70s with a light breeze. I had the morning planned. I didn't plan to spend a great deal of time at Pearl Harbor. I intended a quick stop at the *Arizona*, placing the flowers, and then getting back to the beach. My plans don't go awry very often, but when they do, they go with gusto.

The garden at the Visitor's Center banished my black and white image of Pearl Harbor. I saw green everywhere I looked. Grass, trees and plants abounded; flowers that would cost a small fortune in Oklahoma were all over the place. Since I arrived early, I thought I would kill time by wandering around the Visitor's Center, taking pictures. I was sitting on a bench, searching my bag for my camera, when an elderly man sat down next to me. He noticed the lei I had taken out and placed on the bench, and he asked about it. I explained I wanted to place the lei in memory of my uncle. You've heard the phrase "it's a small world"? Or maybe it was a case of serendipity. He had served on the *Arizona*, and he knew my uncle. He told me a funny story about

the time he, Audie, and a couple of shipmates went to Waikiki Beach.

After we talked for a few minutes, he told me about the memorial service taking place that morning for an *Arizona* survivor who had recently passed away and wanted to be buried with his shipmates. He invited me to the service. We joined the party for the memorial service and boarded a launch to the *Arizona*.

At first, I felt out of place. I was the youngest person in the group; the majority were elderly. The men wore American Legion hats with their suits. The women sported perfect beauty-shop hair. It dawned on me that my thinking was wrong. To me, this was a quick detour on the road to the Bonsai Pipeline. For them, this was very essential. These men weren't actors visiting a movie set or filming a scene for *Tora, Tora, Tora*. These men lived it.

The U.S.S. *Arizona* Memorial is a long, white edifice that spans the width of the battleship. You enter the Memorial through the Flag Room. This isn't the official name of the room, but it describes the area perfectly. The Flag Room is approximately ten feet long, and flags from the States line each wall. The middle section of the Memorial is open on the top and both sides, and you can look out and see the wreck of the battleship. The last section is what I call the Meditation Room. The main focus of the room is a white marble wall inscribed with the names of the sailors and marines who died on December 7, 1941. Two American flags stand at both corners. In front of the wall are two columns listing the names of the men who've passed away since then and are interred there.

We were met at the dock by an Honor Guard and escorted to the Meditation Room, where a Navy Chaplain waited to perform the service. The simple ceremony took only a few minutes. The Chaplain said a prayer, we sang a hymn asking God's protection for sailors, and a temporary marker of the late sailor's name on the wall was unveiled. The ceremony ended when the man's family placed leis on the marker.

The inscription of the names in the Memorial reminded me of the Vietnam Memorial. Unlike the Vietnam Memorial where you can go up to the wall and make a rubbing of a name or leave flowers, the wall on the *Arizona* Memorial is roped off and unapproachable. I found Audie's name about halfway down in the fourth row.

We returned to the Visitor's Center, and I waited to begin my official tour. The tour started with a fifteen-minute film detailing the attack on Pearl Harbor. I held a new image when I returned to the Memorial. A clip from a home movie caught the *Arizona* as she exploded and provided me with the new image. I felt things I never expected to feel as I stood at the railing, preparing to throw my lei into the water. Understandably,



I was sad, but I felt pride for Audie and anger at the waste of so many lives.

I was leaving when George, the elderly *Arizona* survivor, caught up with me again. He gave me an envelope and a quick hug. I put the envelope in my bag and forgot about it until that evening. The envelope held a photograph of a laughing young man sitting on Waikiki Beach. Audie changed from the solemn young man on my grandmother's wall to a real person. I finally saw Audie in color.

# *The Car*

by Vicki Hamm

**T**he faded yellow 1972 Mercury sat in the alley behind the YMCA for three days before the owner appeared and drove it away. It was a large car like many that you still see around town. Not many noticed the old car he had bought for \$250 parked snugly against the white concrete wall near the children's playground. The handwritten note on the dashboard read "Please do not tow. Needs batteries and cable. Will move by April 23."

Joggers passed the car on their noontime runs. That area of town allowed an old car to sit, unassumingly, for days without seeming out of place. Government workers had lunch at the Pizza Town (all you can eat for \$3.99) just two doors down from the alley. Men and women lifted weights, bicycled, swam, and played volleyball without realizing that the getaway car was parked just on the other side of the wall.

His hair cut short in the military style, the young man who owned the car had just gotten out of the United States Army. An Army buddy had driven down from Kansas on Easter Sunday to pick him up after he parked the car in the alley in Oklahoma City. Twenty-four hours later, he walked into McDonald's in Junction City, Kansas, 248 miles from Oklahoma City, for a hot apple pie. That afternoon, he picked up the yellow Ryder rental truck from Elliot's Body Shop. Using Robert Kling, a name he had used many other times, he had paid the deposit in advance days earlier to reserve the truck. He then drove the truck to Geary Lake outside of Kansas City where he and his buddy loaded the blue barrels full of fertilizer and racecar fuel. When the last barrel was sealed and the doors shut and locked, he parked the truck in the gravel parking lot of Dreamland Motel, registered under his own name, and went into Room Number 25 to rest before his journey. Big day coming up.

It was still dark the next morning as he pulled on his favorite white tee-shirt with the outline of the face of Abraham Lincoln on the front, and on the back, the outline of the

branches of a tree with red drops underneath and the words “The Tree of Liberty Must be Refreshed from Time to Time with the Blood of Patriots and Tyrants.” He pulled the loaded truck onto Interstate 35 heading south, beginning the five-hour drive. The radio was out of order, so he had plenty of time to think. He felt full of purpose, ready to make a statement. Little did he know the trip he was making would be one-way, and it would be the car that gave him away.

As he entered Oklahoma City, he took Interstate 235 to the Harrison Street exit, south on 4th Street past the Murrah Federal Building to Hudson, the one-way street going north. He circled the block, ending up on N W 5th Street going east, unaware that he was being filmed by the Regency Park Tower Apartment building security camera. He pulled into the indented delivery area in front of the building behind a Federal Express truck. After putting earplugs in his ears, he reached down and lit the fuse he had purposely run into the cab of the truck. As he got out of the truck, he looked up at the nine-story glass-front building filled with people working and kids playing. He then walked diagonally across the street, past a man in an Army uniform he identified as Major by the oak leaf, past what would become known as the Survivor Tree, and across the street to his car waiting in the alley. He turned the key and drove the big car with bad shocks down the alley onto N W 5th Street going east. He felt the blast of the 4800-pound bomb and saw thick black smoke in his rearview mirror. Mission accomplished.

Seventy-five miles and seventy-five minutes later, he became nervous as the Oklahoma Highway State trooper made a U-turn and fell in behind him. The red light came on as he slowly pulled the monster of a car to the side of the road. The officer approached the window and asked for his driver’s license and insurance verification. As the driver reached into the glove box to search for the insurance verification he knew was not there, the trooper saw the gun. Timothy McVeigh told the trooper, “I have a gun and it is loaded.”

The trooper put his gun next to the driver’s head and replied, “Mine is, too.”

The state trooper stopped the car, not because the driver was speeding or looked suspicious but because the car had no license plate—it was lying on the ground in the alley behind the YMCA where the children were silenced and where nobody jogged.

# Dragons

by Beth Colby

The alarm went off at 6:00 a.m. I fumbled for the switch for what seemed like an eternity before managing to turn it off. I rubbed my eyes and lay there, looking out the window. The phone rang at 6:07, and I knew it was Mom calling to make sure I was up. I was tempted to just not answer, but I had promised I would help her, and a promise is a promise. I sighed and answered the phone, feeling ashamed of myself for wanting to break that promise. As I hung up the phone, my spouse rolled over for a hug and a kiss. I wanted nothing more than to stay in bed, snuggling into his warm comfort. I could call Mom in a few minutes and tell her the car wouldn't start. My guilt over these thoughts nagged at me until finally I got up.

When I arrived at Mom's, I sat in the car for a few minutes. My dread of the task that lay before me caused my stomach to cramp and my body to break out into a cold sweat. With my head bowed, I walked up to the door. I paused for a moment. Maybe Mom hadn't seen me walk past the windows. Maybe I could make my getaway and tell her some outrageous lie later. As these thoughts flashed through my mind, the door opened. I mumbled "Hi" to Mom, blushing furiously. If she noticed my discomfort, she didn't comment on it. She just said "Hello" and told me to load the signs into the car. Still blushing, I followed her to the garage.

The signs were large cardboard boxes with big black letters proclaiming "Estate Sale 4025 E. Contessa" and big black arrows pointing the way. I loaded them into the car while Mom got her keys. As we drove around the neighborhood, placing the signs, Mom chattered on and on. She didn't have much to say, really; she was just making noise. I nodded and made comments in the appropriate places without really listening to her.

When we returned to the house, people had already gathered in the driveway. To me, they seemed like vultures gathering over a fresh carcass. Mom told them that we



weren't quite ready yet and hustled me inside to get the money belts and count how much we had to start with. Then she opened the garage door, and the nightmare began in earnest.

The people came in waves. Always, they had questions.

"Where did you get this?"

"I haven't seen one of these for years!"

"The sign said it was an estate sale. Is there more inside?"

As the day wore on, Mom's answers to these questions coalesced into what became her litany for the day: "It was our daughter's. She died. She was 39. She had diabetes."

How I hated those people! Every time they asked their questions, Mom's face got just a little paler, her voice just a little softer, and her eyes just a little sadder.

Between the waves of people, I wandered about, aimlessly touching this or that and trying to gain some sense of my stepsister in her belongings. I looked around in wonder that all that was left of her life was just a garage full of junk. I hated Kim, I loved her, and I missed her. Suddenly, I noticed an old woman. She was dressed in brown polyester pants, a brown and white checked shirt that was mis-buttoned (there's nothing more lonely looking than that one button at the bottom of someone's shirt), brown shoes, a cheap straw hat with "MEXICO" proudly displayed in neon pink letters, and a cheap straw bag with the same slogan in electric blue. She wore thick glasses that made her watery, faded-brown eyes seem somehow surreal. Her gray hair poked out from under the hat in unruly clumps, giving her a somewhat demented appearance.

She wandered around for a bit, scrutinizing the jewelry. At last, there were only the three of us in the garage. She looked at Mom and me, seeming to ponder whether to speak. She finally asked us how the lady who had died was related to us. At first, Mom was too surprised to repeat her litany. Instead, she asked the woman how she knew there had been a death.

The woman replied, "These stones are lifeless—that means that their owner has died." Mom stared at her blankly for a moment before once again repeating the words she had said so many times since this nightmare began.

The old woman stayed for a long time, talking to Mom about jewelry. With her gentle presence and her refusal to ask questions about Kim's death, she seemed able to comfort Mom when no one else could. I silently thanked this stranger for easing Mom's pain. When she started to leave, for some reason I called out to her.

"Bright Blessings, Grandmother!"

The woman stopped and turned to look at me. She smiled. She waved. She vanished.

Surely, she simply walked on while my attention wandered. Didn't she? Just then, I saw my stepfather pull up and park. I was more than ready to leave, and I think he didn't even manage to turn off the engine in the time it took me to hand the money belt to Mom and flee.

I don't have much to remember Kim by A cheap leather bracelet and a couple of clip-on bow ties from her waitress uniforms. Other than that, I have only my memories. How she would quietly come into my room when I was a kid to find some paper and a pencil for her midnight writings. How, when I was grown, I would gauge how drunk she was by how carefully she moved and spoke. The inevitable phone call from Mom and waiting for the autopsy results. But most of all, I remember the people descending like vultures to pick over the things she had left behind and how Mom's pain was eased by an odd old woman who seemed to arrive and leave in a puff of smoke.

# A Squiggly Story

by Tina Hale

“Your last major assignment can be an essay, a short story, or 200 lines of poetry,” my instructor announced. *200 lines of poetry*, I thought. *Is he kidding?* My longest attempt at a poem had consisted of only about 20 lines, just 180 lines short of his standards. “By now, you should be well on your way to completing it, or at least have a good start,” he explained.

As I sat staring at a blank screen, the instructor began to make his way around the room, discussing with each person what their plans would be for the final assignment.

I had taken this class only because a friend had managed to convince me I would enjoy it. “It will be a fun experience,” she said. I had only one class to take to finish my Associates’, and I was looking for another class to take, one that I thought might be useful in my future career as a teacher.

When we were filling out the enrollment papers, she had slung a course schedule book my way. “Check it out, it’s on page 45,” she insisted. The course description stated “Students will learn a variety of techniques in writing fiction.” The word “fiction” should have deterred me, considering I had never visited exotic places, had celebrity encounters, or been rescued from daring escapades, except all by the stroke of a pen and my imagination. Instead, I had always struggled with writing, and even my thoughts were not easily transcribed.

“He is a good instructor,” my friend declared. “However, he does have a rather dry sense of humor, but you will get used to it.”

*Was that something I would want to get used to?* I thought.

Still not convinced, I met with my advisor, and she, too, recommended the class.

“It will benefit you later on,” she stated, knowing of my plans to teach. So, for a grand total of \$156.64, I reluctantly enrolled in Creative Writing.

In he walked on the first night of class, the man who would be my guide for the next

sixteen weeks. He was a middle-size man, with a gentle smile and a short-cropped, salt-and-pepper beard. With a smooth, relaxing voice, he gave us a brief description of the course.

“You will be responsible for writing four major assignments in this class,” he stated. “Plus, you will also have numerous exercises to turn in throughout the semester, and as your syllabus states, your work will not be graded; instead, you will receive an A if you complete everything on time.”

*That’s a relief,* I thought.

He then added, “I have provided you with a copy of the syllabus and I do not have more. If you plan on losing the provided copy, you will need to go to my WebPage and print another copy.”

“Why would anyone plan on losing it?” I whispered to Lynn, my friend who had convinced me to take the class.

“You see. That is what I meant when I said he has a dry sense of humor. Don’t worry! You’ll get used to it,” she assured me.

After the instructor had informed us of what he expected, he quickly put us to work. We were asked to exchange a ten-minute true story with the person sitting next to us. Chad, a man in his early twenties, was my partner. I was the first to start, and I told him about a Christmas memory. It was your typical, boring Christmas story about a small child getting an unexpected bike for Christmas. After telling it, I felt rather guilty, considering we were told we would have to write each other’s story, putting it into our own words. I felt I had perhaps shortchanged Chad. However, after he shared his story, my guilt soon vanished. He told me a story of Cap’n Crunch and his love for it.

*Is he serious?* I thought. *What can I do with this story?*

He went on to tell how his current girlfriend (who was sitting beside him) would not allow him to eat it, which was putting a major strain on their relationship. After we were finished, I thanked him and went back to my seat.

Lynn, who seemed rather excited, asked, “What kind of story did you get? I got a great one to write about. It involves a tornado, survival, and even an encounter with a spiritual being.”

“That is just great, Lynn. I’m happy for you! I, on the other hand, will be writing about Cap’n Crunch.”

“Cap’n Crunch? How can you possibly write about Cap’n Crunch? The cereal Cap’n Crunch?”

“Yes, Lynn,” I said, rather annoyed, jealous of the dynamic plot I felt she had been



given.

The next week, we learned what the power of a squiggly was, or at least, that is what my friend and I called them. A squiggly looks like someone's attempt at making a circle, but they kept missing the connection and, instead, a spiral design resulted. As the teacher handed back our first assignment, he explained what this odd-looking symbol meant.

"If you have something that looks like this on your paper," he said as he drew it on the chalkboard, "it means there is something about your paper I really liked."

Upon hearing that, you could see the anxious look in everyone's eyes, just wondering if they would be making claim to their first squiggly. My friend received her paper first, and there it was in bold red, the much anticipated squiggly. She sat with a half-hidden grin, looking as if she was a third grader, having just received a gold star. I had dreaded the thought of getting my paper back, but before long, I, too, sat with the same stupid grin, just staring at the squiggly that was so elegantly etched across my paper.

*It's a beautiful design*, I thought, *just beautiful*. I was also happy that my friend and I had started out with an equal score: Lynn—1 squiggly; Tina —1 squiggly.

The weeks ahead were not as kind as the first week I had experienced. The squigglies were few and far between, at least for me, that is. However, I had dubbed my friend the Queen of Squigglies since most of her work was adorned with them. After each assignment was handed back, she would look at me and say, "So, how did you do?"

I would smile and, with my best poker face, say, "Oh, I did okay." Of course, only I knew that the score had quickly become unbalanced and I stood no chance of catching up.

As we were introduced to the writing of a short, short story, we also were introduced to the writing of thought and dialogue. I had never written either of these, and each assignment became a major struggle. About halfway into the course, I realized I was sitting amongst a class that was filled with aspiring writers, and I, somehow, seemed oddly misplaced—squeezed in between my friend who seemed to have a natural gift for writing and Chad, a mystery writer who wrote of creatures and spirits.

In the thirteenth week of class, we turned in our short story—major assignment three. The instructor gathered the papers from each student, and then he passed them back, giving each person someone else's paper. We were given an evaluation sheet and

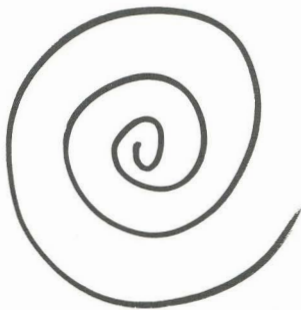
asked to read and critique the paper we were given. The questions we had to answer were in regard to how well the writer had managed to develop the plot, the characters, and the setting. The last question asked was “If you were a publisher, would you publish this paper?” If the answer was “no,” we had to discuss why we would choose not to. I, unfortunately, was the first person to have my paper critiqued. In a soft-spoken voice, the person kept whispering, “I’m sorry” as she spoke about my paper and slowly began to tear away the remaining remnants of pride that I had been holding on to.

“Sounds almost like a sad country song,” my instructor commented. At that point, I, as my friend had said I would, had gotten used to the instructor’s dry sense of humor, and I now rather enjoyed it. As each person took a turn at playing editor, we realized that each of us was far from being the writers that we had desired to be.

“Tina, what do you plan on doing for major assignment four?” my instructor asks. Startled, I look up as he takes a seat beside me. He has finally made his way to me, and I continue to stare at a blank computer screen.

“Honestly, Mr. Randolph, I have no idea,” I admit with embarrassment.

“That’s okay,” he says, as he quickly leaves my side, leaving me to ponder alone. I look over at Lynn and there she sits, fingers tapping the keys with determination. I am sure she is well on her way to gaining another squiggly, and with a score now standing at Tina—2 squiggles; Lynn—289 squiggles, I almost accept my defeat. However, my dream of capturing the elusive squiggly overcomes me, and, as the words “your last major assignment can be...” appear on the screen before me, I begin my final attempt.



# *The Boat*

by Elissa Crocker

I was raised in a small town in southern New Mexico where water was scarce and trees were prized. If you had enough weeds and kept them mowed, you were considered to have a yard. If you had enough weeds and didn't keep them mowed, you were considered to be white trash. Looking back, I guess we fell somewhere in between.

I can remember my father trying to plant grass, but it never took. Conceding defeat, he kept the weeds in the front yard mowed, more or less, but in the backyard, he had several truckloads of smooth, gray gravel hauled in. Nor was my mother overly domestic, but she did plant a cactus garden in a little vee-shaped flower bed next to the sidewalk leading up to our front door.

Did you know that ordinances mandating desert landscaping instead of lawns is common in desert cities today due to the scarcity of water? I guess one way of looking at things is that my parents were actually ahead of their time even if they were a little rough around the edges.

Directly out our backdoor on his lawn of gravel, my father positioned two sawhorses that became the resting-place for one of his most notable projects, that of restoring an old leaky johnboat that had definitely seen better days.

He found the boat in a junk pile behind a concession stand at a lake and paid the lucky owners five dollars for the privilege of hauling it off. True to the proverb that "one man's trash is another man's treasure," my father must've seen the potential others before him had seen, for bleeding through the boat's peeling and fading exterior were several different coats of paint, the most predominant being one step to the left of olive drab green. Perhaps it was the Caribbean Turquoise peeking beneath this that gave the old boat its come-hither appeal. At any rate, the prospect of getting that ancient vessel on the lake again had my father eagerly handing over his hard-earned five dollars,



A practical man, he saw no problem with the boat's external appearance; the multi-colored paint job and the pieces of inner tube glued together with the globby black tar no doubt gave it character in his eyes, for he was one of those Americans who had survived the Depression without knowing there had been one until he was grown.

I have no idea how long his repairs took, but I do remember the momentous occasion when we finally got the boat out on the lake. I wasn't surprised at all that it floated although, looking back, I probably should have been.

At that point in my young life, I still thought my father could do anything, could fix anything with the material at hand, usually baling wire and a pocketknife. He had proved this on numerous occasions with a number of dilapidated vehicles on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere—usually either in a blinding snowstorm or when the pavement emanated heat in undulating waves, the thermometer well over a hundred.

His most valuable tool, his pocketknife, was also his judge of a real man. If he saw a man fishing in his pocket who pulled out a handful of change and keys without a knife, that man automatically failed the test. All real men carried pocketknives.

In the end, his project was so successful that, in addition to actually floating, the boat served dual functions on our camping trips. Mounting two steel frames on the bed of his pickup, one behind the cab and the other at the tailgate, my father would hoist his multicolored water-craft onto these frames, bottom-side up, and lash it in place, using frayed brown rope that he found almost as handy as baling wire. Then we would be off on a marvelous jaunt to one of the various mudholes that passed for a lake in New Mexico.

Almost like a camper shell with natural ventilation, the boat, with its bow extending over the cab of his pickup, in all likelihood resembled a prop on the newest hit TV show, *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Oblivious to this, riding in the back with shade from the boat and wind in our hair, we embarked on grand adventures, grinning from ear to ear like puppy dogs, enjoying the ride and the wind and the day.

Although memories of countless such trips have since blended together, there is one that stands alone in my memory, the one my father referred to on many occasions, always shaking his head in wonder, pronouncing, "We all should have drowned that time."

It was also the time I heard him use a word I had never heard before.

Now, I have a confession to make. My family carries the cussing gene. Cussing, a nasty sin spawning untold misery and the first of the abominations in many Christian



circles, has come quite naturally to most of the members of my family. In fact, they believe their granddaddy put the H. in Jesus H. Christ, something I'm not especially proud of since, to my way of thinking, this is probably the one true profanity. The rest are merely adjectives, helping verbs, and other useful parts of speech. At any rate, we were well versed in all the customary swear words of the day, and then some—or so I thought.

The trip in question involved my father, me, and my brother Dan, two years my senior. If you looked at Dan today, you might be hard-pressed to discover his good traits, being that he works so hard to keep them hidden. But for the sake of blood, I will venture to say that macho-bravery can be counted among his better attributes. This can be traced back to his being the little brother to two big brothers with mighty big shoes to fill: the oldest considered one of the toughest guys in town, the other considered one of the smartest. As these were hard acts to follow, Dan worked hard showing the world just how bad-assed he really was, and if you met him on a dark street today, you would probably cross to the other side.

Nothing would please him more. With long stringy hair and bushy dark eyebrows drawing a line above hostile, haggard eyes; an equally long and stringy mustache holding his face, scarred and lined from years of bad living, in a perpetual scowl; and his body covered wall-to-wall with tattoos acquired in numerous stints in the pen, he would probably scare me if I wasn't on to him. But I still remember the fat-faced, squinty-eyed, roly-poly little boy who called me slobber-wobber, who was perpetually straining upward to the big brothers he held as icons, whom he could never reach.

Now, by this time, my father had put a used motor, which had also received the baling wire treatment, on his johnboat. In retrospect, probably because he had grown up with little adult supervision on a ranch where children were expected to work like men, there were many things he allowed us to do that I would never allow my children to do today. Things such as take a rickety little boat out to the middle of a lake when they were eight and ten years old with no life jackets, limited flotation, and poor judgment, to boot. My father was fishing on the opposite shore of the lake when an unexpected squall barreled in from the northwest. As the skies boiled clouds in angry shades of gray and the wind and the waves began to rock our little craft, I could see him anxiously motioning to us from the shoreline. As we rolled and pitched, my brother tried unsuccessfully to start the motor. At some point, he decided his next best option was to jump into the surging lake and heroically tow the boat to shore . . . if he could manage to hold onto the brown rope that my father found so many uses for, tread water in a raging storm, and avoid

drowning all at the same time.

By now, my father was frantic, bellowing instructions uselessly into the wind. I was wide-eyed and frightened, holding onto the sides of the little craft while Dan pumped his chubby arms and legs in a frenzy, making negligible progress.

It was a well-known fact that my father couldn't swim; he made do with a passable dog paddle. But his babies were adrift in a raging storm, and being descended from a long line of intelligent stupid people, fearlessness—even if in ignorance—is one of my family's strong points.

He shucked his clothes and began to dog-paddle furiously out to us.

The last time I had seen him do this was on a hunting trip the Thanksgiving before when he shot a wild turkey on the other side of a river too deep to wade. Off went his clothes and into the river he plunged, determined to retrieve his prize. Dog-paddling back across the river with the turkey's legs held between his teeth was a sight I would never forget.

Nor will I ever forget him, dog-paddling to us in that storm, hollering at the top of his lungs, "GET IN THE FRIGGING BOAT!"

Now, as I have mentioned, at that time I had heard it all . . . except frigging; this was new. And as such, I knew it had to be a really bad word—just how bad I had no idea. But when you think you've heard it all and a new one is sprung on you in the middle of a lake in a blinding tempest, moments before you drown, it has a tendency to make an impression.

When he finally reached us, he was still commanding, "GET IN THE FRIGGING BOAT!"

Had he been thinking more clearly, he would have realized that gravity had played a part in Dan's rescue attempt, and without something to push him back out of the water, there was no way my roly-poly brother was going to get in the frigging boat. Nor was my father going to be able to get in the frigging boat.

Somehow we all ended up drifting to shore, or perhaps they did manage to dog-paddle hard enough to tow the boat in. In any event, we still had a problem. We were camped on the opposite side of the lake, and the severe thunderstorm was now pelting us with stinging torrents of rain. Lightning was flashing; thunder was booming.

Out came my father's trusty pocketknife, and he repaired that secondhand motor, just as I had seen him work miracles on countless pieces of junk before it. It was something called a cotter pin that had sheared, and he fashioned another out of a piece of baling wire he, no doubt, had handy. We piled into the little johnboat, intent on getting back

to safety.

The storm had subsided somewhat but hadn't passed by in entirety. Not wanting to push his luck, my father nudged the unreliable engine along. A short distance from land, he "got cocky," he would later retell, gunning the little motor defiantly as we slid into shore. His make-do cotter pin sheared once more, only this time, to everyone's relief, we were in wading distance to solid ground. It felt good, too.

Over the years, I heard him relate the story many times. An animated storyteller, he would describe the ferocious squall as it roared across the water, shake his head at the foolishness of his youngest son's rescue attempt, gloss over his own, then explain with delight how he had repaired the motor. In his mind, this was always a relief, never a given. By far, his climax was cheating death not once, but a second time after his cotter pin had sheared again, a few feet from safety on the one hand and an early, watery grave on the other. Of course, he always omitted the frigging part. That was something I pondered for years—the meaning of this other F word.

Our survival had been nothing short of a miracle; he was sure of that. You see, he had more than one friend drown on a lake, and drowning, I came to realize, was a secret fear of his, a man I considered fearless.

Why he never bought life jackets, even secondhand ones, was one of the mysteries he left me to figure on, much the same way I figured on frigging, for a part of my life.



# *The Zen of Dishes*

by Keith Daniels

If I were blowing along like a leaf, like that leaf, like any leaf, I think I'd not follow the wind. I would dance for no one, just as they do in empty parking lots, with the calm, bitter wind my undercarriage. It's not random; they like to do it.

While holding a cigarette, my grandfather told me not to smoke.

There are many things that are interesting, but by far, the most is the difference between what they tell you and what actually happens. Boy-meets-girl-they-fall-in-love-get-married-baby-follows. I always thought that they should put out a revised version of the rules every year, like a dictionary or something. It could be called *Webster's Revised American Institutions* or maybe *Roberts' Rules of Disorder*. I don't remember anything in kindergarten about stepparents, adoption, half-siblings, or grandparents raising grandchildren. Maybe I missed a day.

No sense dwelling: back to reality

Away from the window, my eyes are pulled back down to the dishes. My hands had been washing them almost on automatic. Hey, daydreaming has benefits. A few small bowls, a plate, some cups. Scrub with soap, rinse, dry. I like the oily rainbow that swirls in dishwater among the little continents of bubbles that float along the surface. Dishes done, reach into the water to pull the drain, and make sure I didn't miss a fork. Gross. A small bit of noodle clings to the edge of the drain like some doomed sailor being drawn into the abyss. I flick him in.

I fall onto the couch, flopping my arm over to the coffee table. I grope for the remote almost blindly. *Click*. The History Channel comes on, my favorite. *Weapons at War* is the show on right now; actually, I think it's the only show they have on this channel. The clock on the TV tells me it's 2:20 p.m., almost time to go to work.

Damn.

I get up and walk back through the hall to the closet where I keep my work clothes.



I call it the *closet noir*. Well, I don't call it that outside my head. I'm full of funny names for things like that: names for places, names for people, or kinds of people. There's the customer at work I call Inspector Gadget because he talks like him. I can almost imagine him saying, "Go, go, Gadget cell-phone" someday. You have to be careful not to share your names out loud. In some ancient cultures, you had a true name that you never revealed to anyone because if a sorcerer found it out, he could control you.

It's true; only those who know your name can truly hurt you.

# *The Stude*

by John Perry

The old “Stude” pickup groaned as she made it up the hill out by the graveyard. We were sopping wet and dripping everywhere, but it didn’t matter. The cracked and ripped leatherette seat quickly absorbed the moisture, and what wasn’t absorbed trickled through holes in the floorboard and watered the grass that passed below us at about five miles per hour. We felt safe and secure in this old pickup and had every confidence in her even if we decided to use her for a cross-country trip.

We’d had a great day. Started early in the morning, parked in Church of Christ cemetery, slid down the hill across the road, pushed through a dense jumble of bankside trees and brush, and walked a short distance along Sand Creek to Dead Man Cave.

Dead Man Cave was an obscure, remote limestone cavern that ran back through the bank, under the road, and underneath the graveyard from which we had come. We had heard stories about this cave and had, at last, summoned up enough courage to see if you really could smell dead bodies in the cave air or see arm bones hanging from cracks in the roof of the cave or find an old coffin that had slipped from six feet under through a crack in the limestone and into the cave. We were ready for anything and hoped it would happen.

We had already faced the dead in the graveyard as they looked back at us through the stones that marked their plots. They silently spoke eternal stone words that were strangely reassuring.

“He died in peace.”

“Here lies a loving mother.”

“Our son will be loved in death as in life.”

“A cherished wife joins her loving husband.”

We were ready to face the dead in Dead Man’s Cave, come hell or high water. We got the latter and then the former in the blink of an eye.

As we walked through a narrow cave passageway, we stepped off a seemingly secure stone ledge and instantly dropped into about five feet of cold stream water that was running from some unknown aquifer to the creek. We were instantly chilled to the bone. Chilled to death. We were cold as hell.

"Let's get out of here," Jerry yelled.

"Nah," I said. "Let's go on. Maybe we can find some bones."

We waded for about ten minutes and finally found another ledge that we could use to pull ourselves from the water. The ledge led us to a small room-like area that had a floor of dried silt. After numerous tries, we got one of our Zippo lighters to fire up and were able to light one of the candles we had carried in with us. Despite our chattering teeth and shaking bodies, we felt warmed by the light, which revealed a small grotto with space enough to stand up and turn around and see what was going on in our newfound refuge.

It turned out to be quite interesting. Just above, pale crickets clung to the ceiling. Their long antennae tested the air now disturbed by the smoke of a burning candle, and they moved about randomly, confused by the light, the warmth of our bodies, and our hot breath that we puffed out at them. They had no eyes, which was our first major discovery about cave troglodytes. Of course, we had not the vocabulary at that time to understand such things. However, we did allow as how "them crickets" wouldn't have to worry about any dead people coming by because they couldn't see them.

After we had drained our shoes, wrung out our socks and shirts, we explored farther and found ourselves moving upward among piles of flat, plate-like slabs of limestone and sandstone. We passed a root sticking down from the cave roof and found a large crack in the ceiling that we could look up into. We could feel air moving, damp and musty like we remembered from our old cellar. A little farther on, the passage compressed to about four feet in height.

And then, we saw something that stopped us dead, stone cold in our tracks. We were standing on a giant slab of stone about five-feet in thickness and about fifty-foot long. It was obvious it had recently dropped from the ceiling. It was also obvious that additional portions of the ceiling could drop at any moment.

"What in hell's name are we doing here?" Jerry said quietly. "This whole place can come down on us, and we will be smashed flatter than that cricket shit we saw back down a ways. Let's get the hell out of here."

"I've seen enough," I agreed, and we moved slowly and cautiously back toward the entrance. We retraced our steps, nursing our nearly spent candle along the way.

We did not spend as much time looking on the way out as we had on the way in, but we did notice periodic piles of animal scat and wondered how many coons and possums got squashed when the cave roof fell in. Suppose there had been a person under that roof when it broke loose. I bet he thought “Hell” when he was laid to rest a second time.

Jerry was not impressed by my speculations.

Toward the end of our journey out of the cave, we had to face that cold canal of water a second time. We knew it was going to be cold, but it was even worse the second time through. The cold was searing, sharp and painful. Our bodies were baptized a second time: the sins we had committed by invading the cave of death and leaving alive were purged by the cold clear water.

As we reached the entrance, light was reflecting off the waters of Sand Creek and we noticed a green halo of mosses, lichens, liverworts, and ferns guarding the mouth of the cave. That sight produced a memory that I have never forgotten. I was born out of that cave on that day, after facing some of the scariest prospects that my young life had ever known. I left wiser, more cautious, and less certain about my immortality.

“Hurry,” Jerry yelled. “Let’s jump in Sand Creek and clean up.”

“I’ve got to get home. My ole man will be looking for me to get the cows in for milkin’.”

As we left the graveyard and pulled out onto the graveled road, Jerry’s old Studebaker truck purred along, transporting us safely. Down the road a ways was a long decline that allowed us to pick up considerable speed. At the bottom, a short, quick incline allowed us to shoot momentarily out into space.

We left the ground, we were in the air. We were in heaven on this day—just for an instant.



# *The Affection of Men*

by Sergio Vasquez

Parents generally keep the taboos of human sexuality distant from their children, wistfully hoping to spare any unnecessary confusion for both parties. Oftentimes, however, the confusion is thrust upon children through multiple media. Whether via satellite or passing drag queen, both promise volumes of toilsome questions on the blank mind-pages of a child.

"Why is that man wearing lipstick?" is a question I know I uttered, but the answer from my parents escapes me, being too vague, with the subject of cross-dressing eventually left alone. Destined to revel in explicit media details and self-discovery, I saw a vast collection of questions painfully materialize. I recall now a very specific event that redefined my later years as a freethinker and shattered the traditional mold of sexuality. I once kissed a boy.

Belonging to a strong Catholic family with strong Catholic values, I attended parochial school as was expected. There, the whole subject of sexuality escaped the starched minds of the Catholic nuns. As if to protect us from the truth, the good sisters would warp the stories of the Bible so they would not apply to children. Had the rapture occurred at that moment, all youth would be saved for we had not tasted sin. Mary Magdalene was saved from death by stones. When asked why a woman should deserve such a horrible death, the nuns would insultingly reply, "Because she was a bad woman."

We knew she was bad: no one hurls rocks at someone for being good. I often wondered about the sexuality of Jesus. The nuns stressed His humanity as equal to His divinity: God as well as man. If He was tempted by the Devil, the nuns surely were not talking about lollipops as the devices of sin (at least, I do not recall Jesus as a eunuch). No one dared question the sugarcoated fables even though we doubted their authenticity. After all, fourth graders really should not concern themselves with the minor

intricacies of the most-published book in the world. They should concern themselves with more easily tangible constructs, like recess.

Soon, schoolyard football provided me the ultimate forum to strut and swagger, allowing adolescent machismo full lucidity. Due to my strong arm and bullish tendencies, I always played quarterback. Mindful of their roles, my five teammates never argued that fact. Curiously, I never saw myself as an intimidator. A rowdy mélange of submissives, these boys were the only friends I had.

There was Fat Alfred, our designated ball-hiker, who had killed a young man by standing in front of the young man's motorcycle. As the motorcycle rammed Alfred, the young man rammed a tree, or so the story goes. All Alfred retained was a small indentation on his arm. I would bark an appropriate number of *hut-hut*'s, and Alfred would flop the ball in his usual sloppy manner. Scanning the field, I would see Xavier, a boy whose thin eyes and long head gave him a two-dimensional appearance. He was the fastest kid on the team but would catch a ball only if it left a bruise on his chest. I would also see Michael, the freakish kid with a soft voice whose breath reminded me of canned corn. He had newscaster's hair ever since his dad purchased him a vial of VO5. Michael was the average kid with no real talent except that he was always eager to play. There was Joey B., the boy with the thousand complexes. His feet were big, resembling sleds, and he walked with a slight hobble. His nose, strangely angled and bulbous, breathed as if it were possessed by a separate entity entirely. The terrible amount of nastiness directed in his general vicinity by the schoolchildren became etched in stone. Once, in an effort to rid himself of his shameful uneasiness, he fabricated a story about a small region in Europe called Alsace-Lorraine, claiming it as his country of origin. We called him the "King of Alsace-Lorraine," bowing irreverently toward the monarch.

Then there was Gabriel. He was the skinny kid with spiked hair who slurred his S's so as to pronounce my name "Shurgio." He gave Joey B. his complexes. He was also my best friend.

On this particular day, playing against the upperclassmen (sixth grade toughs who frequently cursed my friends), we became involved in a cacophonous skirmish. The game's outcome sorely important to both teams, two fights erupted unbeknownst to the stealthy eyes of our fanatical Catholic nuns. Fortune placed my team in her favor, giving us the ball three minutes before Sister Adele blew her shrill whistle. Some of the girls had given us their full attention, and I, devoid of any sissified funk that plagued some of my colleagues, obliged them with my greatest performance.

I am calling for the ball. Alfred hikes the ball in his usual sloppy manner. Collectively, the whole of the other team is counting “one Mississippi-two Mississippi . . .” I am looking for an open man. I see everyone. The boys are running for the promised land, and the girls are pleading with me to throw the ball. My teammates are jumping in the end zone, telling me that they are open (everyone wants some glory). I know they are open; I see everyone.

I see Joey B. and I see Gabriel. They both deserve it. I let the ball go in a fluid arc towards both of them (everyone cannot have glory). It is going to be caught.

Joey B. jumps for the ball, eager to rub it in the opponent’s face, eager to rub it in Gabriel’s face (he does both so infrequently). He jumps too soon and merely tips the ball. It zooms at an odd angle towards Gabriel. He jumps, too. He catches it. Miraculously. Undercut by a lanky opponent, Gabriel has his legs taken from under him. He swoops headfirst to the ground, the ball still in his hands. He lands headfirst with a solid thud that makes my eyes water.

Touchdown.

I am running towards him, more concerned for his safety than the ballgame. I am feeling true pain for another person for the first time. As I approach, he lies still, shocked by the trauma. As I get closer, he sits up. I stop.

With pain in his face but a smile in his eyes, he says, “We win.”

Then, I am startled by what happens next.

I lean forward and purposely place a kiss on his cheek. No one notices.

With disgust and a grimace, he asks, “Why did you do that?”

---

I never answered him.

That day, our friendship changed. We still hung out and played video games. We still played soccer over the summer. Everything stayed the same except I do not remember ever looking Gabriel in the eyes after that.

I grew up with that bothersome memory. An immediate answer to The Question may have provided closure. I endlessly pondered the “right” thing to say as the incessant retrospection played in my mind, my answer ultimately sounding juvenile and graceless. Had a line been crossed? I can recall disapproval in the action, but not in the sentiment. The emotional display usually reserved for World Series celebrations materialized in a schoolyard playing field, and I chastised myself for it. Perhaps a pat on the buttocks would have been more appropriate. The transpired emotions of children



toward their peers, expressed in action, regularly consisted of hugs and kisses by the girls and fists and foul language by the boys. Even though I felt comfortable in my heterosexuality by this time, the stigma of that moment affected me greatly.

Insecurity regularly tore at me, and I became a womanizer. I found myself unable to keep intimate secrets with my girlfriends. I perpetually blabbed all my affairs to all my friends, embellishing my conquests so as to solidify my manhood in their eyes and mine. Insecure sexually, I always found reasons to leave my girlfriends even if I truly cared for them. The pain and truth slowly seeped in.

I met other men who would share their bedroom secrets, and as we laughed, I would see myself in them—a pig of a man whose only destiny was to be lonely, unable to keep his mouth shut. As I listened, I became disgusted with those individuals and myself.

In hindsight, I believe if someone had explained to me that it is normal to have feelings for people of both sexes—and not for those only in the family—I may have been spared the anguish of these past few years. I have made it a point to show all the people I care for that, yes, I do appreciate them in my life. Too often I hear people regret they did not simply tell a lost friend that they cared for them. I always want to know what held them back in the first place.

Why is that man wearing lipstick? There are a multitude of answers, some of which are bizarre and ridiculous. Perhaps the reason will reveal itself in time. Why did I kiss my friend on the cheek? The answer is simple. I loved him.



Poems

# *A Failed Encounter With a Recluse*

## 寻隐者不遇

( 唐 ) 贾 岛

松下问童子，  
言师采药去，  
只在此山中，  
云深不知处。

Under a pine tree I asked your novice  
He said, Master went to gather herbs  
Just here in this mountain, but the cloud is deep,  
I don't know where he is.

—Translated by *Lucy Hu*

# *My Mother Washing Dishes*

She always stood before the kitchen sink  
looking out the window into grass  
and trees hung with bird feeders,  
grain feeders, suet wads, and  
hydrosugar bulbs red for hummingbirds,  
and at the end of summer when grass  
grew yellow and the green leaves of trees  
browned at the edges, she might have  
finished washing the dishes; she saves  
the black iron skillet for last,  
the remainder of its cornbread cut  
and stashed away in rejuvenated  
plastic bread sacks for later, or  
if forgotten until dry and hard  
and green with mold, crumbled by  
hand, cast on the ground beneath  
those trees for the birds in early winter.

Later at the table, she sits with black coffee  
that her doctor told her years ago to forego,  
and she opens her palms, scratches  
the fingers with fingernails lightly,  
arises and from the pink lotion  
bottle squeezes generous dabs of  
pink, and rubs it into her hands.  
The light that catches in the lead  
crystal suspended by monofilament  
from the window sill breaks its  
rainbow self into a dance  
about the room, and the year she  
graduated high school and married  
the man who built this house,

that summer of her beginning,  
Frederico Garcia Lorca was killed,  
and no number of birds, or green  
trees, or bright skies can account  
for the loss that since then, her life,  
her life could ever account for.

*—Larry D. Griffin*



# *The Seagull*

High above McKenzie's Mountain  
A lone seagull soars.  
Bearing the soul of a lost sailor,  
He protects Cape Breton's shores.

*—Barbara Fullbright-Owens*

# *A Day in the Life of...*

three  
cats  
Cody  
Dexter  
Daisy  
eat  
smelly  
litter box  
nap  
cat  
hair  
furniture  
claws  
pantry  
odors  
meow  
outside  
pet  
head  
purr  
sleep  
bed

—*Jennifer Hoskins*

# *Red Rockets in the Air*

I noticed children  
playing on the swings  
yesterday

The children  
pushed their feet  
against the ground

And their feet  
pushed against the clouds,  
back and forth,  
in the same manner  
like a timer on a clock

I looked up and clearly  
the children  
were smiling  
from ear to ear.

The children's hair  
was red and wild  
and waved like grass  
in the wind

I watched them while  
it seemed as if  
they would like  
to fly off the swings  
like rockets.

Nevertheless,  
the children

will come back to earth,  
their feet upon the ground.

And  
they are going home  
to their mothers.

—*Brandy Sparks*



# *Julie's Thai House*

3 women  
serving me acting silly  
rice molds  
and choke holds  
the 4th is their mother  
the cook  
who tries to get me to eat  
all I want to do is stare  
says I can have free soup.  
Now she's giving me an eggroll  
I give in. have to please  
the little mothers of the world  
of Julie's Thai House.

*—Dylan Oaks*

# *lunar gravity*

yes mother, she's gone  
she's really gone this time.  
they say she suffered from  
a fatal sense of security.  
yes, she really loved him—  
that man with his pale white  
face pulling her close.  
he was a rainmaker.  
she never learned to swim.  
but, oh how she loved him.  
the doctors say there was nothing  
more they could do, nothing  
anyone could do. and she  
told them—once you feel  
like that, there's no  
way back. even if the sky fell,  
she would still believe. it fell  
and shattered into a million blue  
pieces; the edges cut her hands  
when she tried to put them all back  
together again, and still she never  
doubted him—that man in the moon—  
he pulled her tides, made her swell  
and crest.  
and once you've felt  
like that, there's just no way  
back.

—*Julie Ann Shilling*

# *sylvia w/gills*

Was it Sylvia Plath who stuck  
her head in the oven? Or did she  
drown, her daddy's blackened hands  
holding her close underwater,  
and she—thrashing through the years,  
kicking out poems, birthing monsters  
and children: babies to make it new.  
Babies to hold a man whose hands  
were black sometimes—black  
as his heart—white sometimes  
like the clouds he would never let  
her reach, never let her rise  
in the morning like balloons,  
but he could make her dreams  
write about them. He was a god, a white  
god, so tall and grand. The black  
hands were only gloves  
and someday she could convince  
him to take them off, yes  
she would do anything,  
anything for that. Even learn  
to breathe underwater.

—*Julie Ann Shilling*

# *In That Winter I Dreamt of Dust*

In that winter I dreamt of dust  
Hard fought stomach I'd been kicked by a mule  
In the window I could see the trail  
The ancient sandy way by which we came last spring  
In a fever dream I saw my darling  
Standing there in the pretty dress I plowed all summer to buy  
The way she was before the bad blood claimed her  
She still has it under the old oak tree  
And how this dirt  
This God-cursed sod has become my skin  
It's under my nails. It's the walls. It's the floor.  
It's on my one pair of boots and my only jeans  
Red clay blood  
Running to cover my son, my wife  
In the flatlands and wheat there's no mountains to climb  
No boulders to roll away, no caves to hide  
If God has ever heard a whispered word or shout  
to grant me this thing before I go on  
Find a stone to cover my bones  
I don't want to rest in the mud

*—Keith Daniels*



# *Warrior*

METAL PLATE UPON MY HEAD  
BULLETPROOF VEST  
EMBEDDED UPON MY CHEST  
GAUNTLETS MADE OF STEEL  
WRAPPED 'ROUND MY WRIST  
CHAIN MAIL LIKE SKIN  
COVERS ME EVERYWHERE  
GAS MASKS COVER  
MY MOUTH AND NOSE  
YOU'D THINK I'M A WARRIOR  
NEEDING PROTECTION FROM  
MY ENEMIES  
BUT MY MANY ARMORS  
PROTECT ME  
FROM MYSELF.

—*Beth Lennon*

# *To Waterfowl #2*

My cousin says, “ The government allows  
The Indians to hunt them twice a year.  
They say the farmers need a break from geese  
Devouring fields of grain and all their grass.”

I heard a gaggle stopped and stays year round  
Adjacent to the golf course pond to graze  
On plants and day-old bread the children bring.  
They say the golfers have complained about  
The smell of goose dung on the greens they play.

“It serves them right,” I say, “you can’t convince  
A migratory goose that wetlands once  
A feeding station on the way is out  
Of bounds because the marsh is all filled in.  
The pond’s as good a home; the goose will stay.”

*—Richard Rouillard*

# *Paper Fowl*

Fold the page, fold again  
A triangle, and a tail unwanted  
Scissors forbidden, lick and tear  
Discard tail, continue again  
Fold the page  
Lift, separate, press down  
Flip, repeat,  
Fold, fold, flip  
Fold, fold, flip  
Fix the triangle, fold, fold  
Open the page, fold it up  
Flip, repeat,  
Reverse the page  
Fold up  
Flip, repeat  
Reverse the page  
Pull the neck, arch the head  
Pull the tail, open the wings  
Blow the breath of life  
The swan is finished  
Big fingers, small thumbs, these to blame  
The wings deformed, the neck angled  
But still it is a swan.

—*Matthew B. Williams*

# *September*

Weary of the effort  
of maintaining the intense color of life  
and endless sunny days,  
Summer slows to rest.

She naps —  
days grow shorter —  
imperceptibly at first...

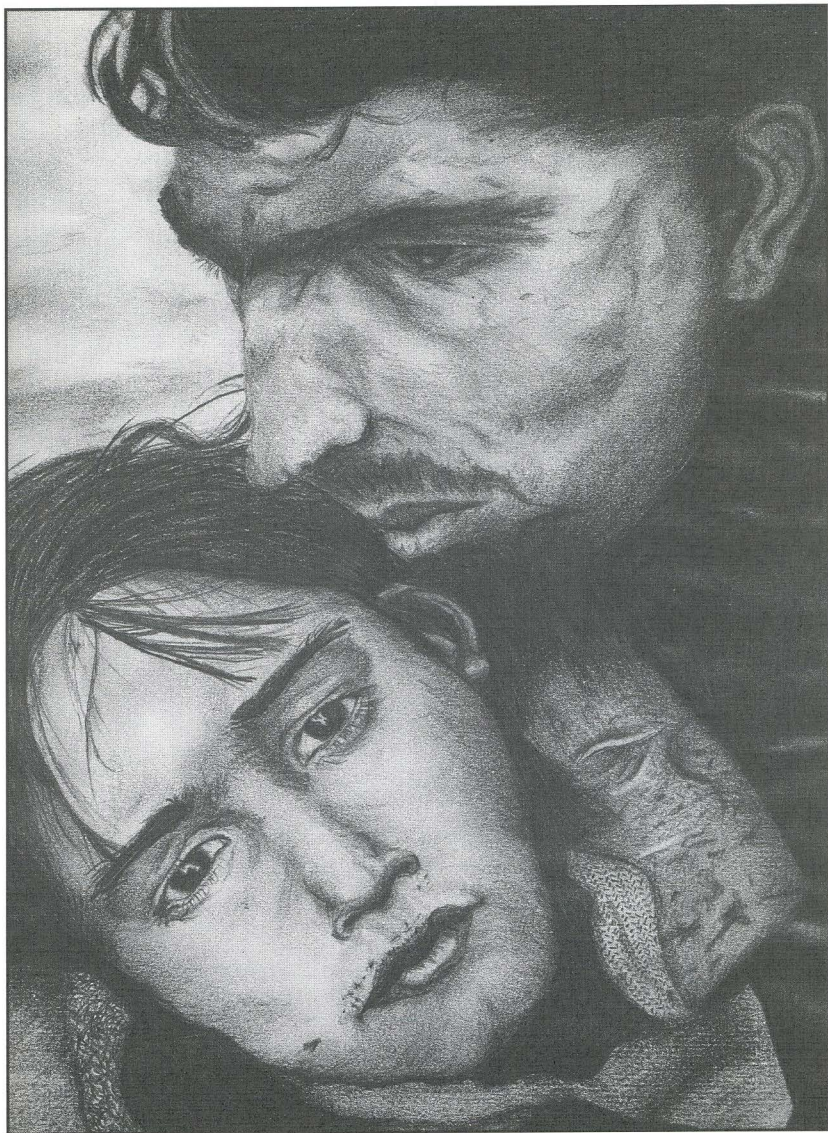
The cerulean sky fades in a gradient wash  
emerald grass turns the color of stone  
and the yellow sun, to pale lemon  
as the days fade.

Autumn awakens with a breeze —  
maples, sweetgum, and apples blush alizarin  
as She greets nature with a sigh and a kiss.

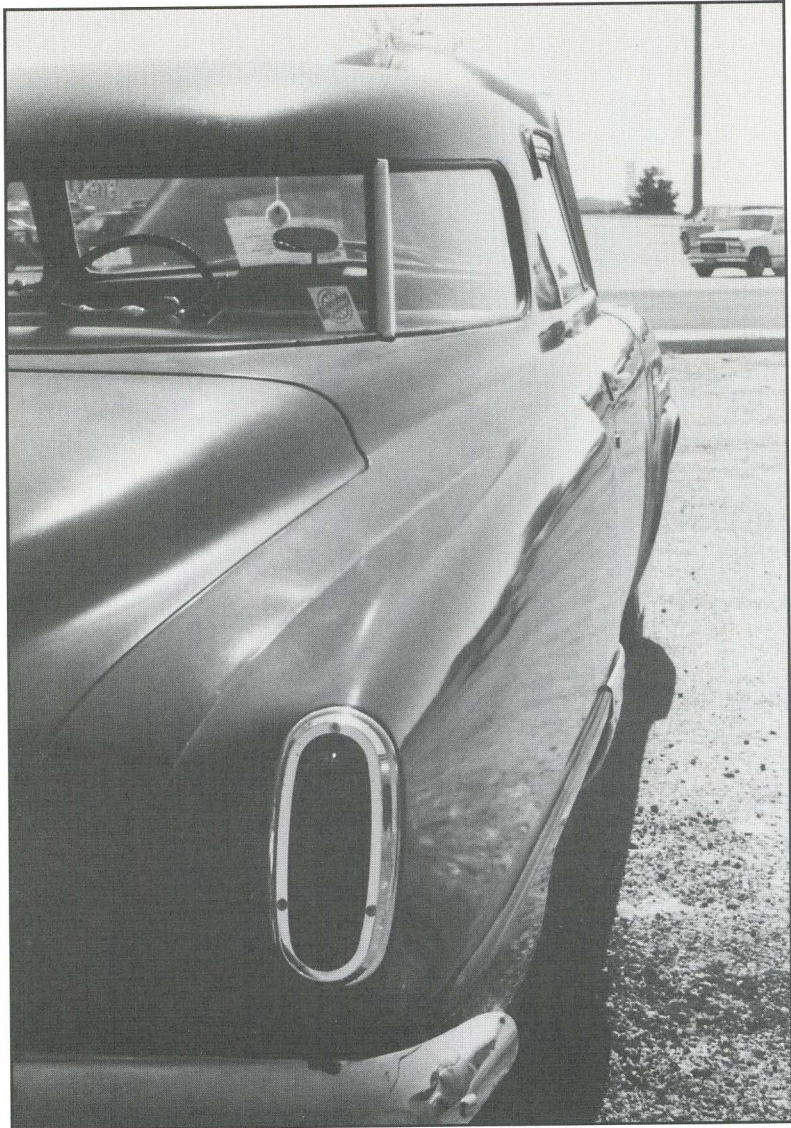
—*Vicki Newby*



# Art and Photography

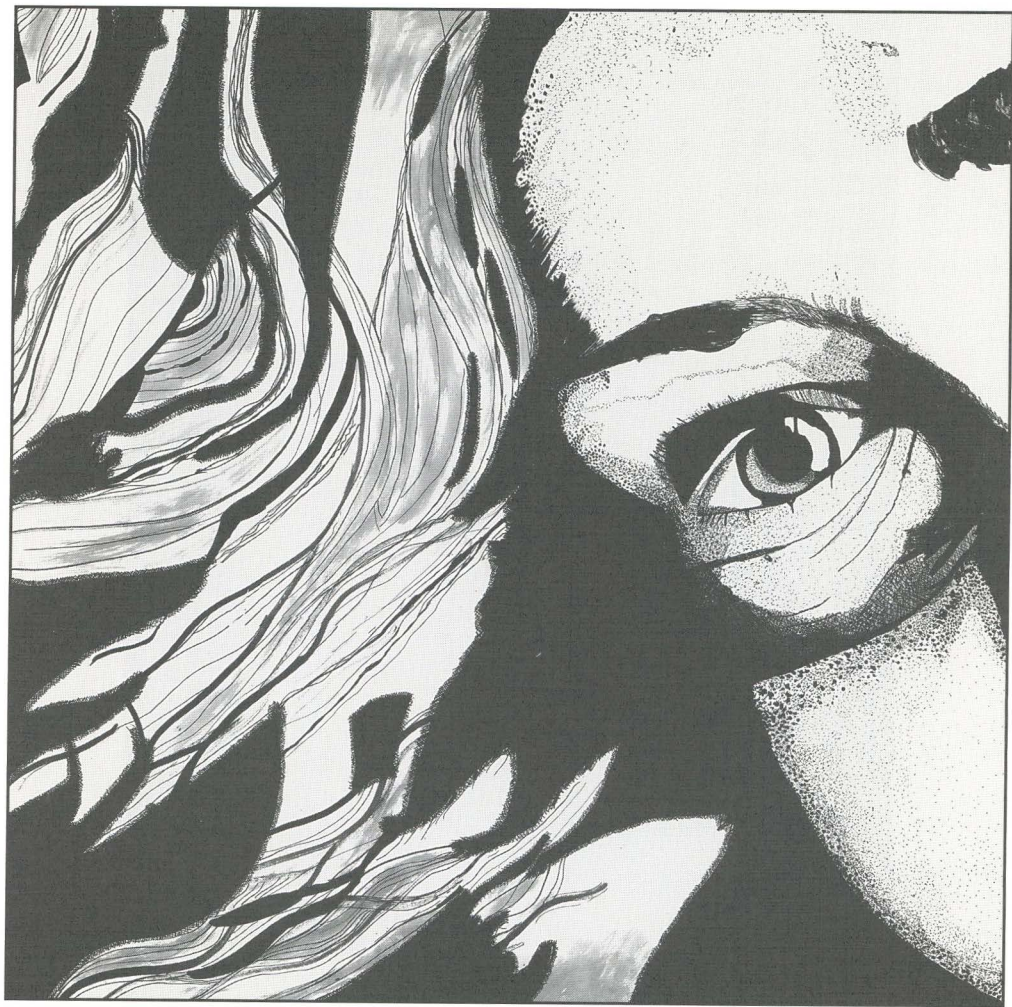


*Couple*  
*Ashley Winkle*



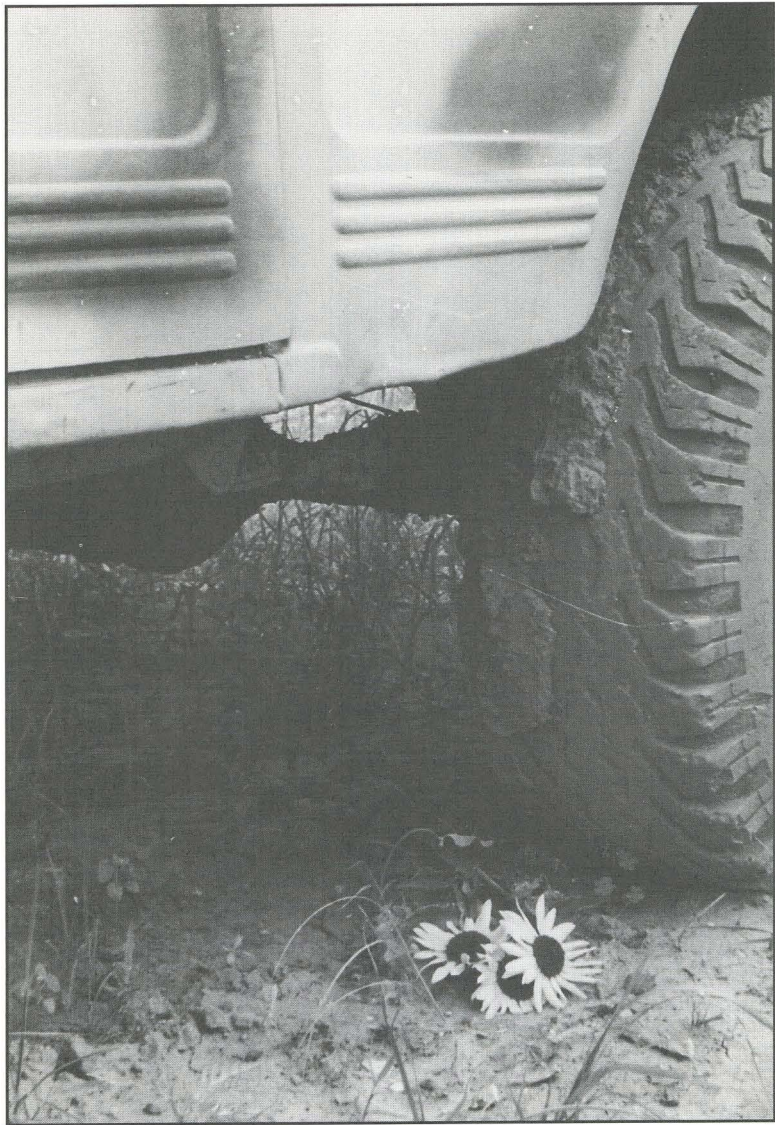
*1950 Studebaker*  
*Keith Leafdale*





*ECU*  
*Parissa Zegrati*



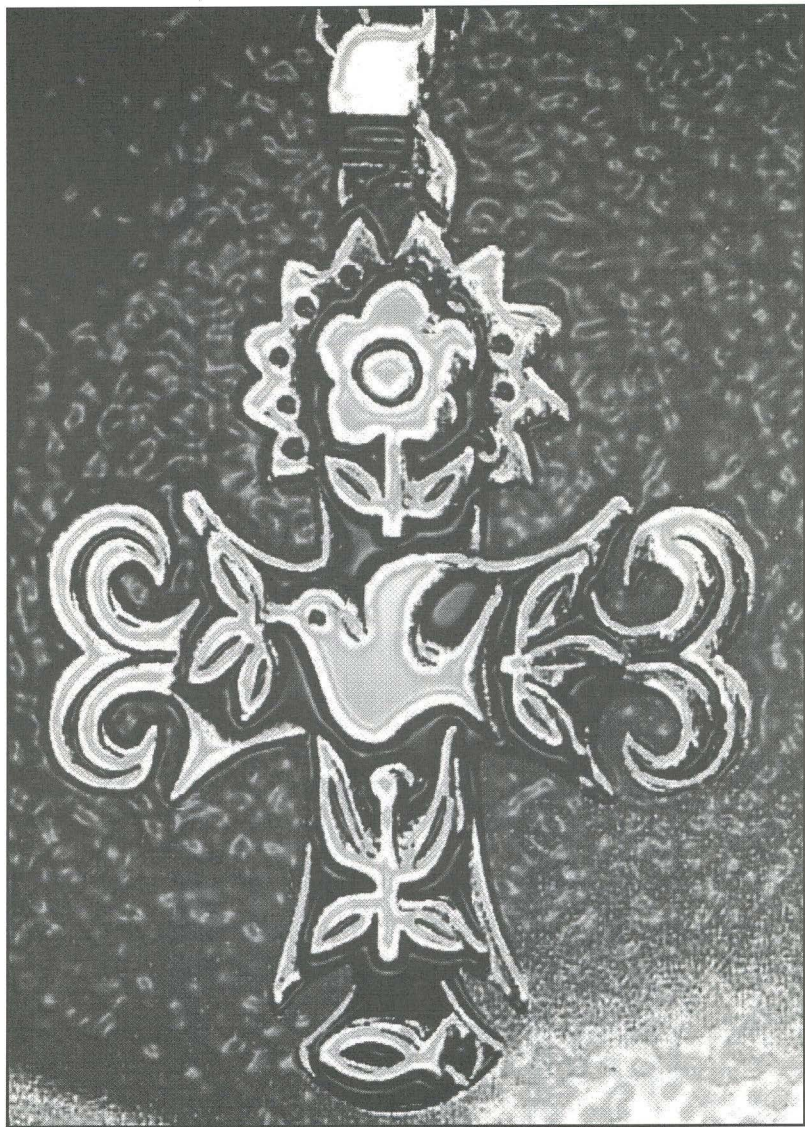


*Road to Extinction*  
*Else Carr*



*Israelis*  
*Vicki Hamm*





*He is Risen*  
*Melissa DePew*

POETRY • PROSE • ARTWORK