

# Absolute

TWO THOUSAND AND THREE

## **Absolute 2003**

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# Short Stories

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# Super Tower

by Meika Yates

James had spent that morning working on the tower. He managed to wrangle up all of the yellow and blue LEGO blocks from the other kids. It had cost him the Starship Captain he had in his stack of plastic blocks, but he decided that it would be worth how cool his tower was going to look when he was finished.

Mommy usually showed up around the time that Teacher Katie and Teacher Sara would gather them all for story time. They hadn't even had a nap yet. It was still early in the morning, so James knew he had plenty of time to perfect the tower before she got there, and, boy, was she going to love this.

Thomas Stupid Face could keep the Starship Captain. All James really liked about it was the green and black helmet that came on and off, and that helmet wouldn't match his tower anyway.

The tower was really starting to look like the one his mother worked in. He stacked his blocks as high as they would go, and when it got too tall, he stood up and it almost came up to his knees, making him feel tall and Godzilla-like.

Thomas sat next to him, working tediously on what appeared to be an airplane. It was all one color, though, and it didn't look nearly as good as James' yellow and blue Super Tower. The plane was all black. How boring! What kind of fun was all black? James studied it and said, "I bet you're colorblind." Thomas Stupid Face frowned at him. "What's colorblind?" James shrugged and carefully placed a yellow LEGO on top of a blue one, strategically making sure they went in the right order.

"I heard my Mommy tell my Aunt Liz that my Daddy is colorblind and that he is something that she just can't even say in front of me."

"So?"

James sighed. "So, it means that you must be stupid if you don't use colored blocks."

"Black *is* a color!" Thomas said.

"No it's not. Black's like the dark—and you can't *see* in the dark, so you must be colorblind if you're using black blocks."

Thomas the Baby looked like he was going to cry. He sat for a moment with a confused look on his face, then stood up.

"Well, oh yeah? I bet my black airplane could destroy your tower!"

James jumped to his feet and put his hands on his hips. "If you touch my tower, I'll kill you!"

The two stood glaring at one another, Thomas clutching his plane and James cowering protectively over his tower.

"Thomas! James! It's time for *Reading Rainbow*!" Teacher Katie called. All the other kids had already settled themselves onto their personal multicolored "magic carpets" in front of the television.

"You're lucky it's *Reading Rainbow* time, Thomas *colorblind* Stupid Face," James said.

He could hear the show starting, and both boys temporarily discarded the standoff, scurrying over to join the other kids.

James watched his show as he stretched out on his yellow and blue carpet, snacking happily on crackers that had an elf on the box and drinking lemonade out of a carefully selected Dixie cup with monkeys on it. Lavar was on TV, showing them the different kinds of birds that live in Central Park, when suddenly the television switched over to a newsmen. He spoke shortly before two tall, identical buildings appeared on the screen, causing James' eyes to light up. He pointed at the television so everyone would see.

"Those are the big, humungous towers my Mommy works in," he said proudly through a mouth full of crackers, quietly gloating that his Mommy worked at a place that was on actual TV. "I even go in them sometimes with her." Now he was famous.

It didn't take long for most of the kids to get bored with the newsmen's talking, so it came as a relief when Teacher Katie and Teacher Sara urgently shoed them all over to the play area so they could listen to him. Seeing the towers on the television reminded James that he had his own Super Tower to be working on.

As he followed his classmates back to the play area, he noticed that Thomas the Pest was hovering about James' tower, flying his little black jet around it in circles as far as his little arms could reach, mouthing little *zooms* as he steered.

"Get away!" James cried, rushing over to him. He grabbed his LEGO captain off the floor in the enemy's pile of blocks.

"Hey! That's mine!" Thomas retorted.

James shoved the captain into his pocket.

“You can’t have it anymore if you don’t keep that plane away from my tower, you colorblind stupid head!”

“Well, some of those yellow and blue blocks on your ugly tower are mine!” Thomas shouted.

“You’ll never get them back! They’re mine forever!”

“Oh, yeah?”

Thomas Mean Jerk hurled his little black jet into the side of James’ tower, causing the top half to sway briefly then drop to the floor, breaking into a million, billion pieces before James could stop it.

He burst into tears.

“I hate you! Now my Mommy will never get to see my tower!”

# *Bokaria*

by Dustin Perkins

“Norberto! Norberto, get up,” said his mother in a loud voice.

Norberto slowly raised his head. The morning sun shone through the cracks in their cobbled together tin roof and onto the dirt floor. It was early and he still felt tired, but Norberto did not complain. He sat up and brushed off his face. His bamboo mat offered little protection from the creatures that roamed the sand beside him. The beetles had found him again during the night and his sore felt even worse. He sat on his mat for a few minutes while he pulled his head out of the mists of sleep. His mother stood in the opening that served as a doorway. Her hands were on her hips, and the look on her face wasn't about to let him sleep any longer. He rolled up his mat and set it up against the bamboo wall. His heart skipped a beat. Today was the day. Today he would prove himself, but first, it was time for chores. He looked up at his mother and gave her a half smile. She nodded and walked back out to attend to his younger sister. Maya was only four and was constantly in the way as far as he was concerned.

Norberto grabbed his broom and headed for the corner of his room. He always started in his room first. His broom was about two feet long and its bundled bamboo handle was worn and felt like an old friend in his hand. He began sweeping the sand in smooth even strokes. He took pride in his work and with each stroke, he felt a sense of ownership. His room took a few moments to rake clear. He then moved to his mother and sister's room. Their little bamboo house took him only a few minutes to have the floor clean and smooth. Their house stayed fairly clean, but in front, the place was always dirty and it took much longer. Norberto brushed aside the brown rag that hung in the front doorway and stepped into hell.

He was now standing in a small alleyway of sorts. Small shacks, just as humble and ugly as theirs, lined both sides of this makeshift sand street. A putrid smoke hung in the air, and there was a constant small snowstorm of ash from the burning fires. As a result, Norberto could see only about thirty or forty feet in front of him. The sand outside was much darker and dirtier from the soot that mixed with it. Blowing trash had made a small skirt around the bottom of the house again

during the night, and the sand was all messed up.

He worked hard for several minutes, cleaning the small area just in front of the house. Most of the other houses were already clean, which explained why his mother had wanted him up in such a hurry. He paused for a moment and looked towards the top and whispered, "Today, my friend. Today." Presently, his small place was clear and he put his broom back in its place.

Norberto's room was sparsely furnished. It had a small wooden box that he had hollowed out and filled with his treasured things: his other set of clothes, some parts for a kite for which he had been saving a long time, and a pair of shoes with holes in them that were set aside for special occasions. He had been working on the kite pieces for months now. It was going to be the best kite in Bokaria. He looked around his room with a bittersweet gaze.

There would be no breakfast this morning. His mother was not able to sell the goods that she had gathered from the pile the day before. Hopefully, she could sell some before high sun. Living was hard in the Bokaria, the dump for the city of Maputo, Mozambique. He tried not to show his disappointment or hunger to his mother. She worked so hard every day to get food for them to live on, but the Bokaria showed no mercy to either man, woman, or child.

He missed his father even though he had hardly known him. They hadn't always lived in the Bokaria. His father had a good job at a lumber mill. The mill wasn't far from their old house, and his father normally walked to work. One evening, he had to walk to the market in the city for bread, and on the way back, a large truck drove onto the side of the road to pass a traffic jam and drove right over him. The truck didn't even stop. With their father gone, their family was doomed. His mother had tried everything she knew to keep Norberto and Maya in school, but the headmaster threw them out as soon as he heard of their father's death. Next thing they knew, they were scrounging for food in the city dump. Norberto was strong though. He worked his hardest to help his mother feed their family.

He walked over to his mother's room. She was kneeling over a bamboo mat, tying knots in the string between each piece of bamboo. His mother was very dark and worn with age, a true Mozambiquen. Her flat nose and well-defined cheekbones characterized her wrinkled face. Norberto loved her. He knelt by her and started tying up the other side of the mat. They worked in silence for a few moments. Norberto could hardly contain himself while he waited patiently for permission to go to the top. His sister sat in a corner, playing with coconut shells. He wrinkled his nose at her. His mother looked at him.

“Today you will make it, won’t you?”

“Yes,” he said. “I will make it today.”

“I wish you to be safe and go with much luck,” she said with a smile.

Norberto jumped up, gave her a quick hug, and ran to the front. Back outside, the walk to the top took several minutes. The Bokaria was about two square miles. As he walked up the alleyway, he watched the people. He loved to watch other people. There was the lady who always sat there wearing no shirt. Several hundred flies covered her back and chest, but she never moved or brushed them off. She just sat there, mumbling to herself. He shook his head at her. At least he brushed the bugs off.

He walked on. Small putrid fires burned all over the place, putting off a foul black smoke that hung in the air and made him choke every time he breathed it. It wasn’t that they liked the fires; it was just that no one cared enough to put them out. Plus, it was a convenient way to get rid of the real trash.

The road to the top was long. Norberto sometimes wondered how many people lived in the Bokaria, but he figured about two hundred fifty or so. They all had houses similar to the one that he lived in, but they were made out of everything imaginable: tin, bamboo, wood, cardboard—basically anything that came in on the daily loads from the city.

The path he was on widened out, and the sides rose up as he walked into the “valley.” The valley was the old road which the trucks came down to drop off their loads, but over time the trash had built up and created the thirty or forty foot sides that rose up on either side of the old road. Just above the valley was the pile. The pile was where all the trucks made their “deliveries.”

Norberto was always careful around the pile. It could get very nasty at times. When the trucks dumped their loads, it was free-for-all madness. Some of the pile was pure junk that would be burned in the fires after it had been looked at by the majority of the inhabitants of Bokaria. Other stuff, however, could be valuable or could be fashioned into something that could be sold in the market. Even at this early hour of the morning, there were about a hundred people around the pile, sorting and pulling things out. They all had in their hands large hooks that looked similar to sickles but without the razor edge. People used the hooks to pull the pile apart and, at times, defend their findings.

As he walked past the crowd of people around the pile, he heard the sound of all too familiar shouts. Two men had found a wooden chair and were fighting over it. This happened often, and the object always ended up going to the bigger

man. This time, though, the smaller man had his hook in his hand and was threatening the larger man who had put his hook down to pick up the chair. Norberto watched with mild interest as the men yelled at each other. The smaller man with the hook swung at the other man and caught the side of his face with the point of the hook. It tore the side of his nose from his face, leaving the man on the ground yelling and cursing. The smaller man picked up the chair and ran off. Norberto was glad he didn't get involved in the fighting. A cut took too long to heal, and without medicine, he had seen many people die from wounds that they received in the fights. He shook his head and walked on.

Presently, he reached the top. The top, as everyone called it, was the main entrance to the Bokaria. There was a hill just to the side of the top, and on this hill was where the guys sat. The trucks entered at the bottom of the hill, and that was where Norberto would prove himself. Today, he would make it for the first time. Many times had he been humiliated and disgraced. All the guys were waiting at the bottom of the hill.

"Hey, Norberto! Think you can make it today?" asked Pawul teasingly.

"You bet I'll make it," said Norberto. They all laughed. Ugo, one of the older guys, stepped in front of him. His face was hard and covered with scars from many fights on the pile and elsewhere. Norberto gulped and tried not to flinch.

"You better stay out of my way or you might end up under a tire," Ugo sneered at him.

"You just watch," said Norberto. "I'll make it."

Norberto knew that if the choice was between tripping another guy or making it, the other guy would be on the ground. He didn't want to push another guy down, but if they got in his way or tried to stop him, he would not hesitate. He was much more nervous than he was showing. His throat felt tight and his mouth dry. There were several other guys waiting at the entrance who were going to try as well. They made Norberto nervous. Last time he had tried, he had gotten his foot run over and had to stay at his house for a week. Not this time, though; this time he would make it. Now, especially, he wanted to make his mother, himself, and his friends proud.

The older guys went up to the top of the hill and sat down to watch. The first truck could arrive any time that morning. So, Norberto waited. The sun beat down on his head. The top was coveted territory by all the young men at the Bokaria. To be able to sit at the top meant that you were a man. He ignored the sun and thought about his victory. He stood and watched. A bead of sweat rolled down

his forehead. An hour passed, then two. He could not sit but had to stand and be ready. The other boys around him paced but did not talk. The guys at the top talked and laughed. They would work the piles later in the day or go sell goods in the market, but in the mornings, they would jump trucks. The guys at the front would try to jump on the trash trucks as they rolled into the Bokaria. The trucks would not slow down upon entering. It was a big game, a game where the boys proved their character.

Then he heard it, the sound of an old dirty diesel engine. Norberto tensed and set his feet so they were ready to run. All the guys on the hill stood up and started cheering. *This is it*, thought Norberto. He crouched at the entrance to the Bokaria. When the sound got just behind him, he sprang from his spot like a spring. He took off running as fast as he could. He risked a glance over his shoulder. The trash truck came flying into the Bokaria at about forty miles per hour. Norberto took a deep breath and pressed even harder. His feet slapped the dark sand. He was not alone. The other guys were right beside him, running just as hard. He had a good spot.

The truck came up fast on his left, and just when it was parallel with him, he saw it. The rear handle jutted out of the back corner of the truck. Just as he was ready to spring for the handle, someone grabbed his shirt. Norberto knew he could not wait. He swung his elbow around behind him and felt it smash into a face. The hand let go, and he heard shouts from behind him. He didn't look back.

Norberto leaped at the handle. He didn't hear the cheering of the other guys or anything else except the roar of the truck. His arms were stretched to their fullest when he felt the handle come into his grasp. He held it with all the strength he possessed. His hands held a solid grip, but his feet were now dragging on the ground. He pulled with all his might. Finally, he set his foot firmly on the back part of the truck. The rest was easy. He climbed up to the top and stood on the top of the truck with his arms held high in victory. All of the guys were yelling, cheering, and waving their arms.

He rode the truck down to the pile and jumped off. As the truck made its "delivery," Norberto caught his breath. Pawul and the others showed up a few minutes later. They gave him five and slapped him on the back.

"You are one of us now," said Pawul. "Find your seat."

It was tradition that when a new guy made it, he got to rummage through the next load for his seat to put at the top. A seat could be an old metal bucket, a stump, or even an old car seat. Off to the side of the dumping area was a bin of

hooks. Norberto grabbed two and started into the freshly dumped pile.

He spent the rest of the afternoon at the pile searching for a seat. Along the way he found some things his mother had been wanting. He had been digging for several hours when he saw it, a spool of fishing line. He couldn't believe it. *How much good luck can a boy have in one day*, he wondered. All of a sudden, his hard-earned seat with the guys at the top faded slightly. He nonchalantly pushed the roll of line over some. It was an entire spool. He gulped and slid it into his small pile of stuff. This was the final piece to his kite. He would guard the string with his life. Later on, he found a nice bucket that would work as a seat.

He rode one of the trucks to the top and placed his seat with the others. Pride swelled in his chest. The top was empty now. The other guys were at their houses or at the market, and Norberto stood by himself for a moment and looked over the Bokaria. He could not see his house but he knew it was there. His mother would be proud.

He then ran all the way back to his house. He ignored the burnt orange sun nestled in the smog of the horizon, he ignored the people along the pile and valley, and he ignored men that yelled at him for running.

He burst into the doorway just before dark as his mother was putting some bread on the table. She had luck in the market today.

"I am proud of you, Norberto," she said with a smile.

"I am, too," said Norberto. "Look what I found in the pile today."

He held up the spool of fishing line. She looked at it for a moment as if trying to remember its importance, and then she congratulated him all over again.

Norberto ate a few bites and then ran to his room. He opened the wooden box and pulled out two perfectly straight bamboo sticks. Then he pulled out a heavy plastic Camel cigarette sack. He also had strips of plastic tied into a tail. As darkness covered the Bokaria and the kite began to take form, he pictured it up in the air, soaring among the birds.

# *The Road Back*

by Sam Gresham

It was a warm, sunny day, a little windy. The road was clear. Their new Lexus cruised quietly down the smooth highway. The radio was on, playing classical music on NPR. Mr. A was motioning with his right hand as if he were conducting the orchestra. Mrs. A looked straight ahead, not paying attention. In the distance, another car approached coming toward them, on the other side of the highway.

“Look, Arnold,” said Mrs. A. “There’s a Cadillac just like I used to have, blue and everything.”

In their Lexus, they were going about sixty miles per hour. The Cadillac was going at least that fast as it passed them on the other side of the highway in the opposite direction. Mr. and Mrs. A turned their heads and looked at the Cadillac as it sped by. Given their respective speeds, it was almost a blur as it passed. Mr. and Mrs. A resumed looking straight ahead, only this time, Mr. A did not conduct the orchestra.

“Did you see them, Arnold?”

“I did,” said Mr. A.

“What could this mean?” asked Mrs. A.

“I don’t know,” said Mr. A, “but it’s weird.”

“Shall we?”

“Okay.”

Mr. A pushed the brake pedal down hard and turned the steering wheel left. The Lexus’ tires skidded, making a squealing sound, and the car spun 180 degrees and was going the opposite direction behind the Cadillac.

Mr. A pushed on the gas pedal and the Lexus sped up to 80 miles an hour as if they were in a race. The Cadillac was in sight again, just ahead of them.

“Don’t have a wreck, Arnold.”

“I just want to get close enough to see them again.”

The Lexus was now close behind the other car.

“That Cadillac, Grace. It is like the one we used to own and that’s us in it.”

Mr. A’s eyes opened wide as he looked at the occupants of the other car.

“It is us,” said Grace, “but we look younger.”

“They’re speeding around the hill into that dangerous curve.”

The Cadillac disappeared around the curve and the hill blocked Mr. and Mrs. A’s view of the highway. Their Lexus moved around the same curve. The guardrails were broken at the edge of the highway where the curve bordered on a steep drop. Smoke was rising from below. Mr. A stopped. They got out of the car and looked down.

Then they remembered.

# *The Mysterious Photograph*

by Toni Long

“I know this is going to sound crazy, but when I woke up this morning, Dan’s picture was on the pillow next to me and I have no idea how it got there.”

Aunt Frankie was sitting in her big green chair, her yellowed fingernail tapping the arm nervously. She always tapped her fingernail when something was eating at her.

“Well, I wouldn’t worry about it, Aunt Frankie. You must have put it there and then forgot about it, that’s all.” I was trying to console her.

“I did not! I keep that picture in the trunk at the foot of my bed, and I know I haven’t been in it for months!” Her agitation was growing, and I was beginning to get a little freaked out by it all. Her body was worn out, but her mind had remained sharp as a tack, so I had no idea what to make of her story.

Aunt Frankie was my mother’s aunt and my great-aunt, but we all called her Aunt Frankie. Born in 1898, she was sixty-one when I was born. Five years later, she moved to Missouri to be near my family. In my life, she had always been old and crippled. That was just the way it was. She was a very important part of my life even after I moved away and started my own family. I visited her every chance I got. It was during a visit six months or so before she died that I learned the story of her first marriage. By then, she was eighty-six and her crippled old body had all but given out.

That day Aunt Frankie seemed to be unusually agitated and preoccupied. I asked her what was bothering her, and that’s when she began to tell me the cause of her distress.

“A lot of weird things have been going on lately, and I’m starting to think somebody is trying to make me think I’m going mad.”

“Oh, Frankie, who would want to do that to you?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but something’s going on. Things have been moved around, odd things keep showing up in strange places, and now this thing with Dan’s picture. Go ahead, see for yourself,” she said, waving her arm towards her bedroom.

I walked into her room, and sure enough on one of the pillows was an old black and white picture of a smiling man flanked on either side by a beagle. On the back, written in my aunt's familiar hand, were the words *Dan Peterson with Blackie and Shortie*. I remembered my mom talking about an Uncle Dan, but I really didn't know anything about him. I walked back into the living room.

"Dan Peterson. Wasn't he your first husband?"

"Yes, he was," she replied.

"Did he die?"

"Well, he must have, but that's another thing that's bugging me. I can't remember him dying. How is it that I can't remember him dying?" she asked me, as if I might have an answer. Having no idea what to say, I blurted out the first thing that popped into my head.

"Well, Aunt Frankie, you've lived eighty-six years and that's an awful lot of living to remember."

Instantly, I felt like an idiot but she seemed to consider it, nodding her head slightly in response.

"Did he die while you were still married?"

"Oh, heavens, no. He lived many years after I divorced him. That I do know."

Intrigued by the mysterious man staring back at me from the tattered photograph, I wanted to know their story.

"Can I ask what happened to bring about the divorce?" I asked hesitantly, not wanting to be rude, but I knew it had to have been in the early thirties and people didn't get divorced at the drop of a hat back then.

"His mother was a witch and she hated me. She was determined to get rid of me and she did."

Her voice took on a hard tone as she told me the story. Not far into it, I could tell by the way she looked right through me that she was no longer in her living room with me; she was back in Illinois, on the property she had shared with Dan Peterson some fifty years earlier.

*I blame the divorce on that old biddy Dan called Mother. Her house was just up the hill from ours. It seemed like the only thing she had to do with her days was cause me trouble. I would see her spying on me all the time, peeking through her curtains, watching me. It didn't matter if I was working in my garden or feeding the pigs, or if a friend or the milkman stopped by, there she was, her nose smack dab in my business. She stole from me, too. Out of my garden that I worked so hard in, taking the ripest tomatoes or the plumpest squash, whatever she wanted.*

*"Why, that nasty old biddy!" I spat out.*

*"I'm sorry, Frankie. I just thought you should know what kind of garbage she is spreading." Looking embarrassed, Martha went back to her work.*

*"It's all right, Martha. I do need to know and I appreciate you telling me."*

*The rest of the day I stewed about all of the grief that old woman had caused me since I had married Dan. Enough was enough. I respected Dan for wanting to take care of his parents, but his mother was out of control and he needed to do something about it.*

*I finished out the day. Walking home, I rehearsed what I would say to Dan that night. I had bitten my tongue time after time, trying to chalk up the old woman's meddling to jealousy or loneliness, but it was time that Dan made it clear to her that we were married and that if she kept up, he would have to take action to stop her trouble-making.*

*I noticed her peeking out of her curtains when I went up the drive, but I didn't let on. I went into the house, put my things down and then went out to pick my tomatoes for supper. I went to the garden and stopped dead in my tracks. My tomatoes were gone! All three of those perfectly ripe tomatoes had vanished. I knew it wasn't birds because birds leave evidence behind when they pilfer a garden. As I looked a little closer, I saw a footprint in the dirt left softened by the recent rains. Looking even closer, I saw more footprints leading out of my gate and up towards the old lady's house.*

*Rage took over and I decided to hell with waiting for Dan. I was going to confront the old biddy myself. I stomped up the hill to her house and banged on her door. I knew I had to stay calm if I wanted her to come outside and talk to me. She came to the door and pulled the curtain back to see who was at the door. Seeing it was me, she opened up the door with a big fake smile.*

*"Why, Frankie, it's nice of you to come up. Come in and I'll fix you a cup of coffee."*

*"No, that's okay. I just need to speak to you for a moment if you don't mind coming out on the porch."*

*I was trying my hardest to speak in a calm, even tone.*

*"Who is it, Lizzy?" yelled Dan's dad who was as blind as a bat and spent his days swigging back corn liquor and listening to his wife's ramblings.*

*"It's Frankie, dear. I'm going to step out on the porch for a minute. I'll be right back."*

*She stepped out and closed the door behind her.*

*"What is it, dear?" she asked, her sickly sweet tone fueling my rage even more.*

*"Elizabeth, I would appreciate it if in the future you ask before taking things from my garden."*

*Her eyes grew big as she began her protest.*

*"Why, I am sure I don't know what you are talking about, dear. I would never dream of going into your garden without your permission."*

*"You would and you did. You took my tomatoes today and this wasn't the first time, either. What do you do? Wait until I leave for work and then go shop my garden for your next meal's produce?"*

*"Well, I have never been so offended in my life!" Raising herself to her most indignant stance, she started for the door. "I don't have to stand here and listen to such outrageous accusations! Just wait until Dan hears about this!"*

*Anticipating her reaction, I was one step ahead of her. I grabbed a hatchet that had been left on the porch railing with one hand and blocked her movement with the other.*

*"Oh, you will listen! You have given me nothing but grief since the day I married your son and I am going to have my say. Now, sit down!"*

*I pointed to the porch swing a few feet away. Letting out a shriek, she literally leaped into the swing, keeping her eye on the hatchet the whole time.*

*"Now, let's start with my tomatoes. If I were to go into your house and open up your ice box, would I find three perfectly ripe tomatoes?"*

*"No, really I didn't..."*

*"Stop lying!" I raised the hatchet above my head and stomped my foot for effect.*

*Letting out a high-pitched scream, she appeared to be trying to force her big, pear-shaped body into a crack in the corner of the swing.*

*Aunt Frankie actually laughed out loud as she described the scene, and I, too, had to laugh.*

*"Oh, God, help me!" she screeched at the top of her lungs.*

*"Just tell me the truth."*

*Just then, the old man made his way to the window, which had been left open about two inches.*

*"Lizzy? Lizzy! What's going on out there?" he yelled, panic clearly heard in his gravelly voice.*

*"Everything's fine, Frank. Lizzy and me are just having a little chat and it doesn't concern you. Go back to your booze and she'll be in shortly."*

*The blind old man hesitated for a moment, and then grumbling something to himself, he moved away from the window, his arms out-stretched as he grasped for the familiar landmarks that led to his chair. I must admit I took pleasure in seeing the fear in her eyes as she stared at me. I am sure I looked like a woman gone stark mad, wielding a hatchet and demanding her attention, and I had to stifle a laugh at the image. I knew I would never actually use the hatchet on her, but obviously she didn't and I used her fear to my advantage.*

*"Now, tell me the truth." I kept my voice calm.*

*"Okay, okay! I took the tomatoes! I didn't think it would hurt nothing, there were more on the vine." Her voice had taken on the high pitch of a little girl.*

*"No ripe ones, though, huh? You had to take the only ripe ones I had. And it's not the first time you've stole from my garden, is it?"*

*"No." Now she was whimpering, twisting the corner of her apron first one direction and then the other.*

*"Good, now we are making progress. What else have you taken this summer?"*

*I pulled a chair up and sat down in front of her.*

*"I can't remember."*

*"Try!"*

*"Some beans, squash, asparagus, a little rhubarb, maybe."*

*"Now, doesn't confession ease the soul?" I knew I was being mean but she deserved every bit of it.*

*"Now, let's talk about the nasty rumors you've been spreading, shall we?"*

*"Rumors? I would never..." her voice trailed off as she stared at the hatchet I was slowly raising again. She cowered once again in the swing.*

*"Oh, yes, you would. You are a sick old woman, trying to insinuate that I am having an incestuous relationship with my cousin! For God's sake, woman, how do you dream up such sick garbage? Perhaps from personal experience?"*

*I taunted her, wanting her to know how painful lies could be.*

*"I didn't mean to imply anything, Frankie. It was friendly conversation, I swear! You know how that is, don't you?" Her voice was so meek by this time I had to strain to catch the last few words.*

*"Oh, you didn't imply. You flat suggested that I was having a sordid affair in your son's house, with my own cousin, no less! You want to split Dan and I up and apparently you are willing to sink as low as it takes to make it happen. I have been nothing but kind to you and that old man in there. I come up here on Sundays,*

*my one free day, and I cook and clean for you. I've bitten my tongue time after time at your slurs against me and my kin. I have put up with your crap because of my love for Dan, but no longer. You have looked down that long, pinched nose of yours at me for the last time."*

*I sat back in my chair, arms crossed with the hatchet resting on my knees.*

*"What are you going to do now?" she asked.*

*"Nothing. Now we wait. We are going to sit here until Dan gets home from work."*

*And there we sat, me with my hatchet, her with her twisted apron corners, waiting for him to arrive. The sun was just going over the horizon when we heard Dan's '29 Model T chugging up the graded road and into our drive. I stood up and waved to let him know I was at his parents' house. Setting his lunch pail down on our porch, he started up the lane towards us. Watching his lanky frame, I could tell he was tired, and a lump formed in my throat. I hated to put him through such an ordeal, but I knew I could not live like that any longer. Whatever happened, happened, but I was drawing a line in the sand and the rest had to be up to him. Reaching the porch, his gentle green eyes looked first at me, then his mother, and back to me. Raising his eyebrow in his customary way with the slightest of grins on his lips, he addressed me.*

*"Hello, sweetheart. How was your day, or should I ask?" his gaze moving to the hatchet in my lap.*

*"She's trying to kill me, Danny!" the old woman, finding her voice, shrieked as loud as she could.*

*"Now, Lizzy, you know that's not true. I haven't threatened to kill you once. Not yet, anyway."*

*I smiled at her and then turned to Dan whose expression had become quite serious at the exchange witnessed between his mother and myself.*

*"Frankie? What's going on?"*

*"I'm sorry, Dan, I truly am, but things have got to change. She has been trying to split us up from the get go but you refuse to see it. She steals from my garden and she's been starting horrid rumors about me."*

*"Oh, honey, I'm sure it is not as bad as all that, is it?" His pacifying tone brought all of my earlier anger back to the surface, and it raged through me like molten lava from a recently erupted volcano.*

*"Yes, it is as bad as all of that. She sat right here and admitted it to me and it is time you face it. Ask her what she's been doing and what she's been saying. I'm done. I will be at the house when you are ready to talk to me!"*

*I tossed the hatchet back down on the railing and stormed off to the house. I had planned to stay right there and force her to confess to Dan, but anger got the best of me and I could no longer look at either of them.*

*At the house, I started a pot of coffee and sat down to wait. I was on my second cup when he came in about an hour later. He poured himself a cup and sat down across from me. He sat there with his head in his hand, two fingers rubbing his brow as he did when he was troubled.*

*"Well?" I asked. "Did she tell you?"*

*"Yes, she told me about taking your tomatoes without asking and she's sorry. She won't do it again."*

*He sighed.*

*"Oh, please! What else did she tell you?" I asked, tapping my fingernail impatiently on the table.*

*"She said that Jeb Zimmerman had misunderstood something she said and that it upset you."*

*"Misunderstood, my ass, Dan! She told Jeb that I was fooling around with George and that she was so worried about her poor unsuspecting son! She looks you straight in the eye and tells boldfaced lies that you swallow hook, line, and sinker! She hates me and she wants me gone. Why can't you see that?"*

*By this time, I was pacing back and forth, trying to hold back the tears that were stinging my eyes.*

*"I know she's done things that have upset you and that she says things without thinking, but I don't think she intentionally tries to hurt us."*

*Weariness hung heavy in his voice.*

*I stopped pacing and wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. As I looked at him, the anger I had felt all day was replaced with a deep sadness. I think I knew then that he would never be able to choose me over the woman who bore him, no matter the cost. I also knew myself. If I allowed things to continue as they had, I would soon hate the man I so dearly loved. Even worse, I might actually use that hatchet on the old woman I had grown to loathe.*

*Picking up a red pencil from the counter, I walked slowly to the calendar that hung to the right of the door. It was October and the picture above the dates was of pumpkins, all shapes and sizes, freshly harvested and waiting for youngsters to carve scary faces in them. Funny thing, I can still see those pumpkins as if they were right here in front of me. I lifted the page and I made a large red circle around the 25<sup>th</sup>.*

*"I cannot fight her anymore and I cannot live like this any longer, Dan, no matter how much I love you. I'm not saying that you should not take care of your folks. I'm saying I can't live on the same property with them any longer. Either we move together, or I move alone. It's up to you. You have thirty days to decide. I will not bring it up again, but one way or the other, come November 25<sup>th</sup>, I will be gone."*

Aunt Frankie stopped talking and she sat there, staring off into the distance, completely forgetting I was there, I'm sure. I was hesitant to intrude in the private place she had gone, but I had to know the rest of the story.

"So, what happened then, Aunt Frankie?" I asked.

"What? Oh, I am sorry, dear, I guess I must have wandered," she replied before continuing.

"Nothing. That's what happened. Just as I thought, the days passed with Dan acting like everything was just fine. On the evening of the twenty-fourth, after all of the chores were done, I packed two bags and set them by the door. I got up the next morning, fixed breakfast, tended the pigs and chickens, and then I went to work, carrying my bags with me. After work, I rented a room from the Widow Walker who lived about a block from the factory."

"That was it. You never went back?" I was in awe of her strength, her resolve.

"No, I never went back. It was done and over with. He made his choice and I made mine."

She was back with me and her reply was as matter-of-fact as if she had been discussing any ordinary day in her long life.

"Wow. You are an amazingly strong woman to stick to your guns that way, Frankie."

"That is just the way it was, child. It was a harsh world in those days, and nobody looked out for anyone but themselves. I just did what I had to do."

"But you were still in love with him?"

"Never stopped, I reckon."

# *Elephants in Her Front Yard*

by Nirmala Varmha

**I**t took Nirmee Varuna a minute to wake up and realize it was her twenty-seventh birthday! She got up slowly, went to the window, and glanced out sleepily – only to see one solitary cloud, shaped like Disney’s Dumbo, bravely marching across the vast blue sky. The sight took her back twenty-two years to another place, another time!

She was no longer in Providence, Rhode Island, teaching English, social studies and science to seventh and eighth graders. She was back in her native country, India, recalling her most memorable birthday. That morning, much like the present one, she had awakened slowly. Then, when she realized that it was her BIG day, she jumped out of bed with her customary burst of energy.

“Oh, Yippee!” she exclaimed, remembering that her father had said that if the weather cooperated, she would have “elephants in her front yard” for her birthday! When she asked what the word “cooperated” meant, the explanation had been lost in a burst of laughter that filled the room. That morning, however, without looking out the window, she instinctively knew that the weather HAD cooperated.

She loved those gentle creatures and had waited all year for this day. A little anxiously, she reviewed her actions of that past month. Being a somewhat precocious child, she was always landing with both feet in a “muddle” of trouble. So, it was natural for her to be a little anxious that morning. She allowed questions such as “Have I been good?” and “What have I done lately?” to flash through her mind. Frowning, she wondered if her parents knew that she had eaten some red candy that her friends Regina and Mary (whose aunt worked for the Varunas) had sneaked in to her the week before from a carnival held on the nearby Cathedral grounds. That was, indeed, forbidden fruit since her father thought such food was unsanitary! Finally, after a soul-searching period of seconds which seemed like hours, she smiled happily upon recalling that her parents had called her their good little girl the night before as they tucked her in.

Even as she finished her self-examination, she heard her mother come into the room to wish Nirmee a “Happy Birthday—and many moooooore.” It was a private greeting that always sent Nirmee into a fit of giggles. Hearing that, Nirmee

knew her day—no, her world—was secure, and she jumped up and down and laughed gleefully.

Grabbing her mother's hand, she ran towards the door. Addressing Nirmee by the pet name she often used, her mother said, "Ammu, let's get you dressed first because they will be here soon."

The birthday outfit was a simple, silk, pale pink pinafore dress with a pattern of violets on it. Nirmee had insisted on that dress because violets were her favorite flowers. She had been so very serious in her choice that she did not see her parents exchange smiles.

The coming of the elephants to her home was a yearly event. Each November, some thirty tamed elephants were brought to the south Indian town of Cochin to take part in an annual ten-day temple festivity that included a procession every day in the temple yard. These magnificent animals wore headdresses made of plated-gold and carried priests who held up huge, magnificent peacock feather fans which they waved periodically alongside wide-rimmed, multicolored, long-stemmed umbrellas set with gold filigree work and precious stones under which yet another priest held the Hindu symbol of God. At a command from the Mahoots, the lead elephant, with the other elephants in tow, serenely and proudly escorted God around the temple grounds. The trainers walked beside them. The drummers and the other musicians in front and behind them did not distract them from their designated parade, nor did the thousands who came to see, pay homage, and be seen. Nirmee and her family always had a vantage place at one of the balconies surrounding the temple or from the one at her father's ancestral home. She loved the sounds, the smell of the fresh flowers, the magnificent elephants, and the carefully choreographed pageantry of those days. Occasionally, she was allowed to go with a trusted servant to mingle ever so briefly with the crowd.

The elephants were brought from various plantations around the state, some from as far as 80 miles away. After the festival was over, the Varunas "invited" two of the elephants and their trainers to rest on the family's property for two or three days before making their way back home. The owners of these animals were friends of Nirmee's parents.

What made it different this time, what made it SPECIAL, was the fact that Nirmee's parents had made arrangements for two elephants and the trainers to be "guests" in May for her fifth birthday. They had gathered in her maternal grandmother's town Trichur, some sixty miles away, for the Puram festival, another major religious event held in that town's main temple for the south Indian Hindus. Again, there would be thirty or more elephants participating in the event. Three

temples were involved in this festival, and the elephants would be separated into three groups, each starting at one of the temples. The processions went past a statue of her grandfather who had ruled the state for almost two decades. Finally, the separate processions would meet at the main temple.

After the festival, the elephants had to pass through Cochin to return to their home, so Mr. Varuna asked their owner if they could come to the Varuna house to break their journey for three days. Ooooooh! She could hardly wait.

Each day, the three Varuna children would observe the elephants partake of a diet made of giant brown sugar and rice balls; then, they would observe palm leaves placed near the animals so they could munch on them as snacks. The elephants would delicately strip the leaves from the stems as they held the long branches down with their feet, and the manner in which they drank water with their trunks was a wondrous thing to watch. The children were particularly fascinated by the size of the rice balls that the trainers would roll and then place gently in the mouths of the elephants. In the evening, after the animals were bathed, fed lunch, and rested, the trainers would take the older children on short rides. Until now, being the youngest of three, Nirmee had only watched with awe while she clung to her mother's hand. Today, she had been promised her first ride!

It was difficult to sit still long enough to eat breakfast when every atom in her body told Nirmee to run out to the gate to see if they were coming! She wriggled and wiggled through breakfast and after it was over, she immediately ran outside. She heard her father tease her by calling after her, "Don't you want to see your other birthday presents?" She yelled back, "Later, please!" without breaking stride.

The elephants had not arrived, but her two best friends Mary and Regina had! So, the three ran to the front portico and waited anxiously. The children did not go to the double gates (which had been left open in the guests' honor) since that was not allowed. The gates were not in their line of vision because the house—a long, ranch-style, one-story building nestled in six acres of land near the backwaters of the Arabian Sea—had a long, curved driveway. The grounds contained coconut trees, green-leafed mango trees laden with little as-yet-not-ready-to-pluck mangoes hanging just out of reach of adults. Some of the tree trunks had peppercorn vines adhering to them, growing unafraid, it seemed, alongside these huge trees with ruby red hibiscus, golden marigolds and bushes with purple flowers which Nirmee and her friends referred to as "four o'clock flowers" since the petals opened up only at 4 a.m. and 4 p.m. Tamarind trees, with their long skinny fruits and gigantic trunks allowed their petite leaves to acknowledge the playful breeze. Bougainvilleas—brilliant bursts of pink, red, and gold—periodically graced the

long, winding drive which started at the gate, wound along, having on one side the kitchen and the servants' quarters and on the other—at quite a distance—behind a large brick wall, the cowshed which at one time held cows and water buffaloes. However, modern technology having made buying milk much less trouble than keeping cows, the sheds now remained empty. The drive next curved sharply, separating at this time the waterfront and the rest of the land. Finally, it once more bisected itself before it got to the house and became a circular drive with the carport directly in front of the steps leading to the main door.

The grounds in the middle of the circular drive were a haven of coolness and a profusion of color. Her mother could make anything grow, she remembered. This gift had been passed on to her brother. *The place will always be my definition of paradise*, she speculated before returning to the memory of her birthday over two decades ago. A place beside some mango trees, laden with yet-green mangoes, had been cleared so that the elephants would have soft ground beneath their feet and a canopy of leaves above their heads. Nothing was overlooked as far as their comfort was concerned.

Finally, the guests of honor arrived. Upon reflection twenty-two years later, Nirmee considered it amazing how such large animals could walk so delicately and softly. It seemed to her that the huge pachyderms almost glided without touching the ground. She soon resumed drowning in her pleasant memories of that day so long ago.

"They're here, **THEY ARE HERE!**" screamed the children in unison, jumping up and down. The whole family, including the servants, gathered to welcome the elephants—Rani the female and Raja the male—and the trainers. Upon arrival, the elephants were tied to the designated mango trees, and they stared at the gathered humans even as the humans stared back.

"Elephants are on the alert always," Nirmee's father broke the friendly impasse. "Watch how each moves the trunk and one of the front legs constantly? In fact, they often communicate what they need with their trunks."

He was a "scholar of the best kind" who always tried to give useful information to his children whenever he deemed it appropriate. Nirmee's mother, a creative mind and a dreamer, added her perspective to the father's by saying, "Yes, they dance a dance of joy! They know secrets which we do not."

Nirmee felt a rush of love for everyone and everything at that moment. In her young mind, she recognized just how much her parents and her sister Raima and her brother Raman cared for her and how lucky she was to have them as family. Suddenly, she wished Leela, whom she loved dearly but who had gone to look after

Nirmee's grandmother, were there, too. The excitement, however, caught up with her and she again focused on the elephants.

Her sister and brother were also excited; however, since they were older, they stayed in the background and let Nirmee have her day. After her father had spoken to the trainers, he and her mom drew Nirmee nearer to the elephants. She was not afraid of their size at all, but she held her parents' hands tightly as they neared the elephants. Her dad gently picked her up and allowed her to look into the eyes of the two.

*Wow! I wish I could hug them,* she thought.

Her mother, who could always read her thoughts, laughed and said, "They might be ticklish! Better not!"

Nirmee did a double take! *How does Mom always know what I am thinking?*

Without brooding further on that question, she let her attention drift back to the elephants. The question was filed away for future examination.

All too soon, the trainers said that they had to bathe the elephants. With Nirmee, Mary, Regina, and a servant in tow, the entourage started for the large pond quite a distance away. What a joy to watch the animals get into the pond and enjoy their baths among the lotus plants.

"Child, see how they enjoy the bath? Learn from them," the servant murmured to Nirmee because it was no secret how she thought baths were a waste of time . . . that she could put to better use!

The children shrieked with laughter when the elephants blew water out of their trunks. What fun! Soon, however, Nirmee was called back to the house since it was lunchtime. Mary and Reggie had to return home, too. They promised to return early the next day. Nirmee charged into the dining room and started recounting all she had seen at the pond. Her parents indulgently listened to her seemingly endless narration all through the meal. Excited by Rani and Raja's visit, Nirmee hardly noticed that the cook had fixed all her favorite dishes. Eating fast, she begged permission to go see "her guests." When she went out, the elephants were in the shade graciously provided by the mango trees. They were "dusting" themselves to keep cool. *So much for the bath,* Nirmee thought with a giggle. Soon, the trainers, having eaten, got the food ready for the two animals. The girl watched in utter fascination when they fed the elephants, and when the trainers retired to their room for a siesta, Nirmee sat cross-legged on the portico steps. Her mother smiled gently as she checked on her youngest. Through the screen door, she saw the concentration on her daughter's face and in the stillness of her body.

“Having a good time?” she asked. The child nodded without taking her eyes off her newly found friends. Smiling, her mother withdrew. Left to herself, Nirmee began to talk to them. Suddenly, she thought she saw Rani, the female, the smaller one, beckon to her. She looked again! Yes, Rani was beckoning with her trunk and asking the little girl to go to her side. Nirmee looked around as, excited at the thought of this phenomenon, she wanted someone to share the moment. Nobody was around. So, she turned back to Rani and Raja and saw that she was still being called to them. She walked over to the elephants and stood in front of them. Yes, Rani and Raja were SMILING with their eyes and their wide mouths. She touched each trunk gently, easily. Then she put her arms around Rani’s trunk and felt herself being lifted ever so gently off the ground. At first, she hugged Rani tight and shut her eyes. Then, when the movement stopped, she looked around and saw Raja to her left move his trunk approvingly. She felt no fear at all. Just love for the gentle creatures.

*Rani’s skin feels rough, warm, and a little ticklish to me,* the girl thought as she sat in Rani’s half-uplifted trunk. Nirmee looked around her in awe . . . she saw a branch of the mango tree in line with her vision. Seeing a small mango on it, she gingerly freed one of her hands and reached out and plucked the fruit. Looking up, she saw Rani’s huge forehead and the blue sky beyond that. Raja towered over both of them for extra support, or so it seemed to Nirmee. Being so close, Nirmee just had to run her hand over the portion of his trunk nearest her. He stood absolutely still. Not for a moment did she feel afraid. Then, she felt Rani ever so gently return her to the ground. Nirmee knew she had seen a glimpse of heaven that few see. Even at her age, she knew better than to tell anyone. This was too special a secret to divulge to anyone, she rationalized.

When the time came for a ride, all were surprised when she chose to ride Raja that first evening.

*After all,* she reasoned to herself, *I’ve already had a ride on Rani. I’ll ride her again tomorrow.*

Moreover, she did not want to offend her other friend.

Suddenly, the telephone’s raucous ring interrupted her reverie and rushed her thoughts forward to the present. Picking up the receiver, she heard a voice say, “Happy Birthday—and many moooooore!”

“Hello? Mom! What a wonderful surprise. What? Both of you were talking about my fifth birthday?” Nirmee grinned as she recognized that the moment of truth had finally arrived! “Well, let ME tell you and Dad about THAT birthday!”

# Mother

by Barbara Gwinn

The girl showed up at my door on a cold and rainy October afternoon. I had just cleared the table of the bundles of herbs and left them to dry in the lean-to when I realized that someone was there. I opened the door to find the filthy child shivering in the chill wind.

"What's yer name?" I asked the girl. She just stared at me, silent. I sighed. "Well, you best come on in. Let's get ya cleaned up and see who ya are."

I left her warming herself beside the fire while I went to get the washtub. She was quiet, didn't move much. Probably a simpleton, but she must be someone. I put the water on to heat and went to see what herbs I would use. My hand immediately went to the second shelf. There was chamomile and lavender to fragrance the water and no shortage of oatmeal to scrub her skin smooth. *So she's to be a lady*, I thought. *Let's make her a grand one*. Belladonna for her eyes, pomegranate for her lips—I hesitated, looking at the bottom shelf. Should I add some amber and sandalwood to give depth to her personality? No, chance had decreed that she was to be a lady, but it would be a dangerous thing, indeed, to change Fate's plan and make her perfect.

I went to my scrapbag and dipped my hand in. I felt the textures of the fabrics—the smooth, cool feel of satin, the warm, coarse touch of cotton, even the fluid chill of chain mail. I relaxed my hand and let her clothing be chosen, as well. I wrapped my fingers around the garment, soft and thin, and pulled it out of the bag. Thin, sheer gauze in a Grecian tunic style—a robe fit for a woman of stature and grace.

The child said not a word as I bathed her. They never do. I scrubbed the dirt off her skinny little arms and smiled as her creamy smooth skin exposed the long but dainty arms she was to have. I washed and rinsed her hair several times and watched as it became lighter and lighter until it shone like spun gold. With deft use of the washing cloth, I washed her face. The tips of my fingers under her chin tipped her face up to mine and I smiled as I gazed at this newfound beauty. Her big blue eyes and bright red lips were the perfect shape and color for her face.

"I think I shall call you Helene," I told her.

I helped the young woman out of the tub and acted as her handmaiden as she dressed. Truly, she was the most beautiful woman in the world. The gown fit her perfectly and complemented the curve of her hip and the swell of her breast. I brushed her golden hair until it glowed, then placed dainty slippers on her feet. I walked her to the door and watched as she serenely took the path through the freshly bloomed April flowers. I smiled and shut the door.

It seemed but a moment when the boy showed up at my door on a cold and rainy October afternoon. There was a hint of intelligence in his eyes and a bit of boldness that I had not often seen. What destiny would Fate have in store for him? I think I shall call him Aristotle or maybe Leonardo, but truly chance will decide. I look at the boy as he stands by the fire. No, this boy is most certainly Albert. I pull the washtub out and put the water on to heat. My children, my gods, my legends – I am mother.

# *Austin Dreams*

by Barbara Gwinn

“Wow! Would you look at that limo?”

Obediently, Diane raised her head to look. The limousine passed by the window where the three women sat with their tea and pastries. It was a pearl white stretch limousine and looked like twenty people could fit into it. Diane had never ridden in a limousine before, so she wasn't exactly sure how many people would fit in one of those cars. It was something that she had always intended to do, but it just never seemed to work out for her to be able to.

“I wonder who's riding in it,” she wondered out loud.

Linda, a maturing woman who was probably a real looker in her younger days, spoke up. “I bet it was Sandra Bullock. I heard she lives in Austin.”

“Do you think so? She is such a wonderful actress. I think she is so cool.”

Jill was young, blonde, and beautiful. Diane knew the minute she met her that she was a bimbo trophy wife.

“Well, it could be someone from the Bush family or maybe the new governor. It could be some dignitary coming to visit the capitol, or even one of the executives for Dell or Texas Instruments. Heck, it could be Lance Armstrong or Matthew McConaughey. I heard they both live in the area, too.”

“No.” Linda looked speculative for a moment. “I'm willing to bet it was Sandra Bullock. I heard she shows up just anytime, and sometimes she surprises the people around here by just dropping in to see them.”

“Oh, I would just die!” Jill squealed. Diane cringed inside, trying hard not to let the emotion show on her face. “I don't even know how I would act if I saw her. I mean, I wouldn't want to be annoying or make a fool of myself or anything, but she is just so wonderful.” Jill sighed and got a dreamy look on her face. “It must be so neat, jetting off from place to place, dating movie stars and making tons of money.”

“I know what you mean,” Linda added. “When I first met Jim, I thought he was so rich and handsome and we were going to live such a fancy life. I never knew what being a sales guy's wife was going to be like. He's on the road about

half of the year, and when he's home, we always have to play host and hostess to all his clients." She gave a big sigh before smiling broadly at the two women sitting across from her. "I can't really complain, though. At least, we're in a position where we get to play client sometimes, too. Diane, we really need to thank you and Mike for showing us such a wonderful time here in Austin—putting us up at the Delmonico, all the shops, restaurants, and entertainment. This town is so wonderful. Thank you."

Jill murmured her thanks as well, smiling demurely, and the conversation lulled.

Diane didn't know how this situation had gotten so bad. She had graduated near the top of her class with a degree in business marketing and thought she was lucky to land a job so quickly after graduation. She worked hard, got a promotion, and was thrilled when she was named to the sales team. It was what she had wanted to do ever since she had first considered her career options. So, when the district supervisor called a meeting with all the sales representatives and told them that sales were down and needed to get back up or heads would roll, she was ready to hit the pavement, make cold calls, and work to make something happen.

As she was leaving the meeting, she had been approached by Mike, another sales rep with a reputation for getting the sale. He followed her to her office and asked if she would be interested in partnering with him to land a really big client. She was very interested. She wanted to get her name out there and get it known; landing a big account or even helping with one could do a lot for her future. She didn't even hesitate when he told her that he thought it would be best for them to pose as a husband and wife sales team so they could work on a couple that served as co-chairs for a multimillion dollar company. It worked. They landed the account, got the glory and the bonuses, and life was good for a while. Diane even felt positive enough about the results that she didn't worry too much about the deception she and Mike had staged.

When Mike asked her if she was willing to go in on another one, she jumped at the chance. This one was a little different because the wife didn't actually work at the company but did have a lot of influence in how the husband made decisions, even on the job. It was almost too easy. Diane seemed to have a knack of knowing just what was the right thing to say to these women to swing the opinion in their direction. Soon it was taken for granted that Mike and Diane were a team, almost like a real married sales team, but Mike was always the point man.

After a year, Diane found out that Mike was making nearly twice as much money as she, and his bonuses were almost triple the size of hers. When she asked

the district supervisor if she could take on some solo calls, he just laughed at her.

“Do you think I’m going to break up my most productive team? Hell, I’m thinking about recruiting some of these other guys’ wives for you to train. Our sales have never been so high, and you and Mike bring in more than any other two sales reps put together. Don’t worry about the pay. Mike’s been here longer, and he’s the one who actually signs the accounts. You’re still making better money than a lot of these guys – some of them have even been here longer than Mike!”

She didn’t want to be a troublemaker. She just wanted to use her skills that she had trained so long for to do something besides occupy people’s wives. And more often than not anymore, she was finding that the wives were just mindless airheads.

She had thought that maybe she would feel better if she focused on her private life and decided it was time to start dating again. She had quit dating after college so she could concentrate on her career. It usually took only a couple of weeks before her “boyfriends” got sick of competing with her “husband” and left for less complicated territory. To make matters worse, Mike never seemed hampered in finding one girl or another to go out with, and they never cared who his “wife” was. She had even thought about asking Mike out, but she figured he would never risk their current lucrative relationship on something so nebulous as love.

Now here she was, stuck in another endless day of mindless chatter with a couple of pretty things with nothing more substantial to do than shop at outrageously expensive stores and have tea at quaint, overpriced bakeries and tearooms. When Mike showed up with the husbands, it was hard for her to smile when he kissed her cheek and put his arm around her in greeting.

“Guess what, ladies? We have a little surprise waiting for you outside.” Mike’s eyes crinkled with a smile of anticipation. They paid for their tab and shuffled out the door. There, just out of the view of the window where they had been sitting, sat the white limousine that had passed by earlier. Linda and Jill squealed all over again, excited with this new adventure.

Diane put another smile on her face as Mike leaned in to ask how it went with them that afternoon. “Fine” was all she said, but they had worked together long enough by now that he knew things really did go fine. They followed the other couples to the car and settled into the seat along the back of the car.

“I thought that our wonderful ladies might enjoy a little taste of luxury as we go out tonight and celebrate our new relationship as business partners.” Linda and Jill squealed all over again with Mike’s announcement. Their husbands

just sat there beaming at the display their wives put on for their benefit. The limo pulled away from the curb and conversation picked back up. Diane looked out the window and watched as the scenery went past. She had always loved Austin, but her disillusionment with her life was starting to color her feelings about her beloved town as well.

The limousine turned onto Congress Avenue and started across the bridge over the river. Traffic was stop-and-go as people lined up along the bridge, waiting to witness the nightly exodus of bats that lived under the bridge. Diane found herself looking at the faces of the people as they turned to watch the limo drive slowly past.

“Would you look at the way people are staring at us? I’ll bet they’re all jealous,” Jill said in an innocently snobbish voice. There were a few murmurs of agreement in the car.

“I’ll bet none of them have ever been out for a night on the town like this before.” Linda sounded almost as if she was pitching in just to be heard so that Jill didn’t get all the attention.

Diane sighed. “I bet they think we’re Sandra Bullock,” she said quietly, but everyone heard her just the same and burst out laughing as if she had said the most witty joke ever uttered. Mike reached over and squeezed her knee and gave her a smile. She smiled back at him for a moment before turning to face the window again. She looked at the faces as they passed. Some people looked curious. Others looked wistful and dreamy. And one looked like the reflection of a woman looking for her dreams.

# MADISON

by Vicki Hamm

The old farmhouse looked much like the one in the movie about the covered bridge in Iowa. As I got out of the car and approached the white two-story frame house, I kept looking for people to come out on the front porch and greet me. It was the kind of house that looked as if someone already lived there. There was a swing and a rocking chair on the front porch. The red pickup truck was parked by the cornfield. The mailbox was clearly marked with our last name. I was so glad to be here in this safe place.

The house was about a half-mile off a gravel road. No neighbors around, *just out in the middle of nowhere* is what the locals say. A lovely flower garden at its peak, a vegetable garden, and a windmill.

I could see my family living here and growing up here, my son as he played in the driveway filling up the bed of his Tonka truck with dirt and then unloading it over and over, the way small boys do. I saw me in the kitchen washing green beans and new potatoes as the tick-tock, tick-tock of the clock above the refrigerator competed with the silence to fill the room. The refrigerator hummed as it struggled to keep the contents cold. The sunshine came in the dining room through the window with the lace curtain gently blowing in the breeze. The clothespin holding the curtain back steadily hit the windowpane. I could see my husband driving up the long drive toward our house after a day at the plant. He would walk in through the kitchen screen door, put his arms around my waist, and kiss me on the cheek as he pressed his body against mine. I liked his familiar touch.

Finally, I had a place to put all of the old furniture that I had collected over the years—old things in an old house. The rooms were big and the ceilings tall. I could breathe out here. I could rest. I could dig in the earth and work the soil with my hands. This secluded life of ours in the farmhouse was a story almost too good to be true.

I looked at my husband across the room as he poured a little Coke into the glass of Canadian Mist. Our eyes locked as we smiled tenderly. So many things had happened and here we were. We had made it. Was there ever any doubt? Weren't we both survivors? That's the story I had told for several years back in Oklahoma. We were not only surviving—we were living and it felt glorious.

# Essays

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# *One Young Soldier*

by Amber Nevarez

**M**y aunts, Lou and Bobbie, admired my hair as it caught the light of mid-morning sun. It did shine brilliantly and the crimson tones called out in the light stretching through the window. I told them it was only the Suave shampoo I'd used the night before. They recommended I make the permanent switch. I didn't answer, choosing instead to study the interior of the mammoth car. My eyes drifted from the tiny bow on the collar of my shirt to the seat, then to the armrest on the door. It was colored in that meaningless, muted blue that has no real name, just a location, which is typically in old-people cars. The handles, door locks, and window controls were all silver. Quiet colors. Colors by which to grieve, though at the moment no one really was. My aunts, having lost interest in my appearance, now talked of chores left undone at home. Home in North Carolina, not here in Lawton where my grandfather's six-foot-four absence now left a gaping hole. My parents talked about picking up my little sister and the marital problems of her babysitter. My grandmother said nothing but twisted her ring just as she always did. We were all pretending, though for what reason I wasn't sure. I assumed it was for my benefit, but the effect of all this normalcy escaped me. I turned my gaze to the window, as the cars continued in their slow trek to bury my indestructible grandfather.

We had just left the church. Most of the service was a blur. My mother had cried hysterically. My father, in his dress blues, had to carry her past the casket. My aunts filed by, looking down at their brother with the wonderment of children. Turned out big brother couldn't beat it after all. They actually whispered their good-byes, though it was barely audible. My grandmother stood to the side, more concerned with silent good-byes than dramatic displays of emotion. Then it was my turn. Grandpa was "sleeping," but the navy blue suit and slicked down hair was in sharp contrast to the loose, worn gray pajama pants, shirtless image I had of Grandpa, with his hair sticking up in frantic tufts. His hands, folded still in the lap I would never sit in again, were as out-of-place as the suit. Grandpa's hands were always moving, tinkering with things that didn't need fixing, but that he was fixing

anyway. It was wrong, all wrong. I was glad to return to the indifference of the car. We were traveling slowly through the Ft. Sill Army Base, heading towards the military cemetery. Cars kept going by in spite of funeral etiquette that implores them to stop. Military lunch breaks aren't long, and the soldiers in passing cars probably all had places to report to. Still, this was one of their own. My grandfather served in France during WWII and had become a military policeman before retiring. He was to be buried with full military honors. I stared at my family in the car. They were no longer talking. Instead, they were pretending that our procession wasn't being ignored and passed by the military, the very military Grandpa had served with pride. I could not pretend. How could it be "full military honors" when they couldn't even slow down for a fallen soldier? I glared at the passing cars. The army my grandfather believed in was gone.

My sullenness was broken by a series of honks and screeching tires. I looked up but averted my gaze from the window, not wanting to see an angry look from a soldier that thought death was too slow. Then my grandmother took my hand and whispered, "Look." So I did, assuring myself that Grandma must see a reason for all this, otherwise she wouldn't ask. When I looked, I saw what was not there, as it should have been, but what I did see filled the space of disappointment more than the expectation ever could. A car had stopped in the middle of the road. It was an ordinary car. No accident or flat tire or stalled engine had stopped it. Otherwise, my grandfather might have risen from his casket, just so he could fix it. The driver had stopped it of his own free will; the angry drivers surrounding him had not swayed him from his purpose. This driver stood solidly next to his open door. His back was rod-straight, and his uniform was starched to a perfection that would make Uncle Sam proud. His boots shined with the luster that new soldiers strive for each night. Amidst the chaos he had created, this soldier stood and saluted his fellow soldier. He was so young, probably not long out of basic training, but in him I saw my grandfather and the army he lived for.

We watched the solitary soldier until we couldn't see him anymore. I saw the tears in my grandmother's eyes and knew she had seen him as I had. We were sure he had not returned to his car until the last of the procession had gone by. The burial was complete now. Grandpa didn't need to hear taps or the rifles or even the folding of the flag. What he needed was one last glimpse of the military he had known. Now, he had it.

The soldier turned out to be what we needed as well. It's nearly ten years later. Most of the details have become blurry, muted like the blue of the car. I

know the songs we played at the funeral, but their tunes have drifted away. I remember the guns going off, but not when or what order. I remember the minister, but not what he said.

However, whenever Grandma and I remember, we see one thing clearly. There, etched deeply in our minds, is one saluting soldier.

# *Civil and Not-So-Civil Servants*

by Cynthia Sabouri

I wanted my small office to be a beautiful space—calm, quiet, and orderly. I wanted a place where customers and other employees could come in and feel relaxed and confident that things were being handled in a good way. My manager put me in charge of decorating the entire area. So, I chose soft colors and plants with pale, velvety leaves, and two overstuffed chairs upholstered in muted green fabric that beckoned all who entered to sit for a moment.

I chose an oval mirror surrounded with a silver-leafed flat frame that matched the brushed silver door handles and the electrical outlet plates. I placed a large, octagon-shaped, clear glass bowl filled with coordinating colored potpourri at the corner of my desk. An energetic and brightly colored painting hung behind my desk area and a beautiful, contemporary-style vase held tall, soft-looking pussy willows on a small table beside the chairs.

The clutter of the many books of regulations and policies were taken off my desk and placed in shelved areas behind doors. The ugly, gray in/out basket was replaced with a lovely scrolled wire design basket with wooden handles.

My office looked beautiful and was everything that I had hoped it would be. I felt happy to be there.

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Soon after the office was completed, the Director came by on his way to a meeting. As soon as he opened the door, his face turned a scarlet color and anger spewed from his voice. He told my manager, "Too much money has been spent here and now all the other offices look shabby!" When my manager explained that every purchase had been carefully and thoughtfully selected and that each item was either marked on sale or half-priced, the Director made no attempt to change his demeanor. My manager also offered that we would be glad to help other offices with this process should they wish to make some changes. The Director just became more annoyed and then, looking straight at me, exclaimed, "Your assistant looks as though she has nothing to do; her desk is clear. She is obviously wasting time!" Again, my manager explained that organization had been a priority in the

office and the clean looking desk was the fulfillment of that goal.

The Director continued to look around the space with great disgust, and as he turned to leave, he blared one final charge, “The books of regulations and policies that everyone keeps on their desks are apparently not very important in this office! This is a government office, and, as civil servants, we owe the citizens our very best efforts! There seems to be no regard for that idea in this office!” And with that, he slammed the door!

My manager had not tried to explain about the books. He just stood there, not moving, his face looking pale. He managed to sit down in one of the overstuffed chairs and I behind my desk with my back to the energetic painting—both of us in complete silence. We felt as though we had just been dragged through glass and left to bleed. Several minutes passed before the color returned to my manager’s face, and then he got up from the chair. He walked straight to the silver-framed oval mirror, took a comb from his pocket, and combed his hair. Then, slicking the sides back with his hands, he straightened his torso to its full height, nodded to me, and returned to his office.

Lifting my chin and adjusting my body to sit straight and tall, I turned to face my computer.

# *One Woman's Struggle*

by Mary Ann Bodine

He's sleeping it off again on the living room floor. Soon the morning alarm clock is going to ring its familiar tune, and the children are going to wake up. They will be getting ready for school, but he will still be lying there in his own silence, unaware of the new day and the morning hour. He has classes to go to and he has responsibilities to fulfill, but it's unlikely that he will make any of them on time today—that is, if he makes any of them at all.

The two oldest boys are seldom ever ready to meet the morning. They have played too hard the night before, riding bikes out with their friends at the end of the cul-de-sac on their street. It was nearly nine o'clock when they finally came in for their evening baths and bedtime prayers. They drag out of bed with sleepy eyes and yawning grins. They will dress themselves in some sort of mismatched fashion that everyone is wearing and pour their own bowls of Buzz Light Year cereal with milk.

The baby doesn't need an alarm to wake up to. He was awake an hour before everyone else. He sits playing and waiting to be picked up and given his morning bath. He'll eat with the rest of the boys in just a few short minutes.

As the three boys watch their fill of Monday morning cartoons and eat their daily bowl of certified-to-be-good-for-you sugar and milk cereal, their mom begins to gather her things and dress for the business day ahead of her. She will need to provide for the family again today.

He turns over from his spot on the floor and lets everyone know he's trying to sleep. The boys are unaware of his drinking problem and continue on in their early morning conversation. He will cover his head and roll the other way. Soon he will realize the time, and with an aching head, will rise up and ask the boys where their mama is. As usual, they will point towards the bedroom where she is getting ready, and he will request for her to bring him a cup of hot tea and his cigarettes. She will come and bring him his drink and smokes, and then rush the children out the door to the car.

They will arrive at the daycare with just enough time to catch the morning shuttle to school, and she will arrive at work as the buzzer rings to start her day. He

will just start moving around and dressing himself when his first class starts at the university. He will miss one more day. He will miss one more opportunity.

Soon her children will not bother his morning silence, and soon there will be no one to bring him his cup of tea and smokes. Soon he will have his own place, and she will continue her day in harmony with her children. There will be no loss. She has already learned to carry the burden of raising a family on her own. Now he must learn the burden of living without one.

# *Family Traditions*

by Patricia Trimble

Most families have one tradition or another; however, in my family, we have a yearly tradition of praying together early in the morning on Christmas day. The tradition of prayer in my family goes back to before the birth of my great-grandmother. Each year, early on Christmas day, my mother tells the story of how our tradition started and has been passed down through the Jones family for generations.

This story began during the time of slavery. In the first couple of years, our ancestors and close friends gathered together in prayer; soon after, the numbers doubled. Our ancestors, with their families, close friends, and people of the community, would gather to give thanks to God with praises. People came from miles around and met at their home to pray together.

After arriving, everyone would be recognized and identified as a brother or sister. When it was time to start, all who were present joined hands and formed a large circle while singing songs of praise to God. Eventually, everyone knelt down where they stood. Someone in our family would read a scripture or two (sometimes more) from the Bible, as people continued to sing in a quiet voice.

After scripture was read, they would raise their voices with praises to God in song. Suddenly, while others were still singing, a person would shout out, "Praise God!" Slowly, one by one, their voices would get lower and lower, yet still singing. "Yes, sir!" another person would shout out. Before they ended, everyone prayed, gave praises to God, and asked God for strength to hold on, from the oldest person to the youngest. When they stood up, there was not a dry face in the house. They hugged, feeling rejuvenated, and then they ate together. Laughter and happiness filled the house. I can visualize a circle of people (slaves), holding hands, joined together by many common elements of life that tied them together in bondage.

Now that I am miles away from my family, I do not hesitate to get my children up early on Christmas morning and tell them the story of how we started this family tradition of prayer—then we pray.

# *Thanksgiving of the Laughing Trees*

by Gracelynn Allen

**M**y breath frosts the window into a circular curtain. I place my fingers on the glass and lean my forehead against the coolness. The smell of sweating, overcooked food overpowers my small, sterile room. My stomach turns. Outside the window, the gnarled, sparse trees seem natural until the eye reaches the anally arranged fences with faded swing sets and freeze-dried gardens behind them. The trees remind me of my father and the stories my grandmother used to tell us about his youth. As I stand alone overlooking the frost, I hope my father will forgive me and put his arm around me to tell me everything is going to be okay.

Before my purple Mohawk and combat boots, my grandmother gave me a picture of my father. This picture was of an innocent boy with Chevy-Impala-car-door ears and strictly pomaded hair. My sixteen-year-old father appeared so awkward with his stray branch arms and legs on a pale, skinny trunk. His gray eyes burned with an unending kindness even through that black and white picture.

The nurse taps on the door of my room. She aims at my daydreaming position at the window. She takes my arm and guides me toward a padded rocking chair. My legs wobble, and a shot of pain races through my body and lands on my face.

“Your parents should be able to check you out of here in the next two days; enjoy the rest while you can. Your little body has been going through lots of changes, so relax. I will come right back with some pain pills,” she murmurs while patting my shoulder. She checks my IV and then waddles out.

I doubt he will come to see me. I betrayed him by not doing what he wanted me to do. I had spent the last three years pushing my family away. I surrounded myself in a culture of abandonment and loss. Numbness was my drug of choice and anything to help along with that journey was my family. When I found out my son was joining my life journey, my sister and mother enveloped me through the pain and helped me to accept the joy of the coming life. My father would look down with cold, hard disapproving eyes. I wanted to apologize, but I was not sorry. This life that I created actually saved my own life. It created that

warmth and hope that I had abandoned. I know that sometimes he can be so mule-headed. I wanted desperately for his eyes to soften and his arms to envelop me to the very core.

As my siblings and I were growing up, he worked long hours. We lined up like a troop of soldiers once we heard the door of the silver station wagon slam. We assessed our battle positions, and if we felt it was safe to attack, we hugged him so tight our fingers almost touched each other on the other side. He horsy-bounced us on his knee until uncontrollable giggling fits sent us to the bathroom. Those rare night memories struggled against the slumped shoulders and immediate bedtime announcement and pajama-dashing contests that were the most common.

A hand touches my shoulder and startles me.

“Do you need to go to the restroom?” a soft voice asks.

I shake my head. She hands me two white paper cups: one with a shiny red pill and the other with water. I swoop up the treat and swallow deeply. The nurse opens up my curtains and reveals the storm arising.

She darts around the room in flashes of blue, straightens pillows and checks supplies.

“Looks like it is getting ready to snow, the first snowfall of the year. Can you believe it’s almost Thanksgiving already? There are many blessings to be thankful for, aren’t there, dear? Why, how...”

I grab her arm as she flashes by. “Has my dad been here to see him? Can you bring my son to me?”

“It will be time to wake him shortly to feed him. I will bring him to you as soon as the doctor checks him out. Your mom and sister just left and said they will be back later.”

I nod. She smooths my hair from my face and pats my head. I pull away, tired of people treating me like a child. I am sixteen years old, not eight.

I sit back in the chair and rock.

The knock at my door comes again as the nurse pushes the clear, sparkly box on squeaking wheels. Lined in soft flannel, it holds my precious jewel. I wobble over to my newborn son. His sleeping body curves into the nurse’s strong hands as she places him in my unsure arms. His eyes open with the change of steadiness. We sway over together to the window where my circle curtain has dissipated. The first snowfall of the year trickles down as the bare trees below laugh together in the wind with a one-motion guffaw.

My son’s eyes waver and I melt. As the snow falls on the laughing trees, I

hold someone else's life in my own hands. A desire to make things work and love of my family overcomes me with a wave, and I smile. The door creaks open.

I turn around and glance at my father. His gray eyes almost match the new silver of his hair. He smiles shyly and his eyes glance curiously at my tightly wrapped son.

*"I heard you named him after my mom."*

I remember the picture now of the awkward, gangly boy with kind eyes. The kindness and forgiveness in his eyes now erase memories of the silent treatment.

"Well, can I hold my grandson?"

The snow falls and melts with the warmth of the ground. The roots of the tree deepen, and my son sleeps as his grandfather shows him off proudly.

# Meeting Johnny Bench

by Kelly Clayton

The 2002 World Series featured the ten most memorable moments in baseball. This seemed like a ploy to get the fans more involved with the sport after a loss of interest due to labor disputes and threats of another strike. Although the number one most memorable moment could easily be debatable, the good people in the Major League Baseball PR office did not find it fit to choose my fondest memory as one of the thirty candidates.

In the sixth grade, I had the opportunity to meet a baseball legend, Johnny Bench. Bench was going to be in Elmore City, Oklahoma, for the opening of a new bank. Elmore City is the small hayseed town in central Oklahoma where my mom grew up. Banjo country. She still had many relatives there – banjo players. A couple of cousins my age who knew I was a big Bench fan phoned to let me know he would be there signing autographs. This could easily be the biggest thing to ever happen to that town.

My mom and I devised a plan. I was going to skip a day of school, she would have to miss a day of work, and my dad could not find out. We were going to drive to Elmore City, over three hours away. She was determined to make sure I would get to meet my childhood idol.

As a kid, I was a huge baseball fan. One of my biggest idols of all time was Johnny Bench. Bench is the Hall of Fame catcher who spent his career with the Cincinnati Reds where he was league MVP in '70 and '72 and world series MVP in '76. He also won 10 straight gold gloves and was elected to the all-star team 14 times. Bench was nominated the greatest catcher of all time when baseball voted for its all-century team in 1999 and named by the *Sporting News* the sixteenth greatest player of all time. He was also famous for a trick where he could hold five baseballs at once—one between his thumb and index finger, one between his index and middle finger, one between his middle and ring finger, one between ring finger and his pinky, and the last he held in his palm. Best of all he was a “good ol’ boy” from Binger, Oklahoma. About every boy in Oklahoma recognizes the name Johnny Bench.

We stopped at a sporting goods store on the way and bought two baseball bats for Bench to sign. One for me, and the other I was going to give my best friend Black as a Christmas gift.

We arrived at the bank and had to wait in a lengthy line. Seemed like the whole town was there. Behind me was a guy holding five baseballs he wanted to get autographed. Several times, he dropped the baseballs from failed attempts to hold them all in one hand. He was trying to be just like Johnny. It was like being at a Star Trek convention and everyone around you is practicing the Vulcan Neck Pinch.

When I finally got through the doors, I could see him. He had this aura about him that made me think of a dream sequence from a soap opera. I had one of those post-sex-like glows. There were kids with baseballs, some with gloves, and adults with baseball cards. Many fans brought hats or 8x10 pictures. Some of them even had jerseys. Many were holding several items. Bench would sign the pieces of memorabilia and send the fans on their way.

The anticipation was killing me. What was I going to say when I got to him? I didn't want to come off like one of these other crazed fanatics around me. I wanted him to remember me.

Finally, it was my turn. I was speechless; I could not believe I was meeting the legend. "This is Johnny Bench," I told myself. I couldn't even hand him one of my bats. Not because of the excitement, but because the son of a bitch wouldn't take it.

"I'm not signing that for less than fifty bucks. The minute I touch it, it'll be worth about two hundred," he told me. It was like time stopped that very instant.

I had nothing else for him to sign. My mom and I went back to the car to discuss what to do next. This wasn't part of our plan. On the way back to the car, I offered to buy one of the baseballs from the guy behind me. Not a chance. He told us he was going to sell them once they were autographed, and all I wanted was an autograph for my friend and me. I was in the sixth grade; I was not looking to make money on the deal.

We got in the car and tried to call around in the area and find a baseball. Apparently no one in Elmore City had any balls, including Mr. Bench. The closest place that would possibly have one was about twenty minutes away at a Wal-Mart in Pauls Valley. Nope, baseballs were out of season, and they wouldn't start carrying them again until March. This put another kink in our plan. At this point we had two choices—we could drive to Oklahoma City and back or pay him the fifty bucks. With the time we were working with, the possibility of us being back before Bench

left was very slim. My mom and I discussed the situation a little further and decided since I missed a day of school and she missed a day of work, we should just give the man fifty dollars for the autograph and she would consider it an early Christmas gift.

We had to wait in line again, which didn't seem as long as it did before. When we got in the door, Johnny Bench had lost that All-American "good ol' boy" glow. I tried to hand him the fifty dollars underhandedly, but he waved me off, as if to say, "Give me a minute." He signed a few more things and then called me back to give him the money in a hush-hush manner. He grabbed the cash in pretty much the same way he waved me off, turned to the side, and slyly slid it into his coat pocket. He signed my bat and sent me on my way. My mom captured this moment with a picture. A fake smile on Bench's face, and me, I didn't even fake it. I remember as she was taking the picture I was thinking to myself, *I wonder if he's going to claim that fifty bucks on his taxes?*

Looking back, I realize that Bench's trick of holding five baseballs at once is just mere warm-up to have the grip necessary to grab a kid by his two and squeeze fifty dollars out of him. On the way out I saw a kid with a catcher's mitt he wanted to get signed. I hoped his dad was a doctor or something.

A couple of weeks ago, I got on Johnny Bench's official website to see if my moment was mentioned as one of the candidates for most memorable moments in baseball. Surprisingly, it was not. But, not so surprisingly, the website was basically "book Johnny Bench for your next event" and "autographs for sale." Some people say baseball is just now going to shit, but the Internet has taken everything to a better level if you ask me. Now if you ever get the chance to meet your childhood idol, avoid it at all costs. Take the easy way out and buy the autograph on their official website.

# Poems

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# *The Ovenbird Gives My Calling*

The small ground warbler inspects  
Leaf duff; hopping and hunting.  
A grub is discovered and carried to  
Pink, gaping nestlings secured in a  
Small earthen depression covered by  
Carefully selected dry leaves.  
In the distance, I step quietly along an  
Ancient fox path, observing, recording  
Shapes, sizes, sounds, smells and tastes.  
I am captivated by the natural forces.  
I hear the ovenbird among the leaves  
And move to document her presence  
For a lesson not yet taught.  
I am detected and the ovenbird  
Shouts—Tee-cher! Tee-cher!  
I am revealed.

—John W. Perry

## *Dangerous Footing*

A black cricket  
Hops in all directions  
I step carefully

—John W. Perry

# *I Think I Am*

So let's go back about ten  
when "Our Hearts Were Young and Gay."

Would that make you happy?

Is it possible for you to climb up?

Or do you enjoy your familiar role?

*What I want*

*is*

*for things to be normal again.*

Will it ever happen?

*Not at this rate,*

*not before I'm dead.*

So what does your gut tell you right now?

*It tells me to hush,*

*stop thinking,*

*numb myself,*

*and fall into the well.*

Are you ever going to get it figured out?

*I'm sure I don't know.*

*Perhaps,*

*when I'm 82,*

*alone,*

*in a rocking chair, looking back.*

*At this point, I want to vegetate.*

*Be still my beating heart.*

Yes, but what about life?

Aren't you going to be anymore?

Is that your decision? To give up now,

when there is so much left? Are you crazy?

*That's what I'm trying to tell you – I THINK I AM.*

—Vicki Hamm

# *Refracting Particles on Entertainment with a Touch of Gin and Caffeine*

it's jazz  
it's soul  
it flows  
it's sex sparkling  
off the women's teeth when they smile  
it's layer upon layer of film  
on every living thing  
it's in the air  
out of thin air  
it's thick, it's  
love  
it's easy  
to breathe  
in  
out  
jazz off the walls  
in the cells  
it's jazz in the form of  
all that is ugly, all  
that is beautiful  
it's on that spoon in  
your mouth, it's  
in that body touching  
you  
just barely  
sex  
in the tip jar  
in her purse  
and it doesn't end  
with the  
orgasmic applause

—Dylan Oaks

# *A Simple Love*

All I need's a  
blue hippo a  
purple giraffe  
an e-mail  
and a late night chat  
you with your cap turned round  
A simple love will do.

Maybe a trip to the local zoo  
fried chicken, mashed potatoes for two  
a deflated air mattress and a  
sombbrero on your head  
gave me a good laugh  
A simple love will do.

The small things matter  
enjoy our moments together  
let's forget complicated  
all we need is  
you and me  
A simple love will do.

All I need is to  
run through the rain  
your hand in mine  
leave the flowers and diamonds behind  
chocolate cupcakes freshly baked  
a round of the question game  
A simple love will do.

—let's forget complicated  
all we need is  
you and me  
A simple love will do.

—Jennifer Jackson

# *Standing on the Corner in Santa Fe*

I've been to old Mexico,  
Down from New Mexico,  
Searched forever —  
No donkey show.

Didn't find the pot at the end of the rainbow either.

Saw Burt Reynolds.  
He was on his way from Dollywood  
Back to Hollywood,  
Being chased by a bear,  
Who was barely there.

I think he was after his seat cover.

I also met Al Pacino  
He was an arrogant asshole.  
Lots of overacting, due to lots of yelling,  
Reminds me of the cop in *Serpico* —

Yep, dead-ringer.

Long ago,  
Before its light beam glow,  
Thought it would never happen —  
Wrigley's night show.  
I saw Ernie Banks in Chicago.  
I saw the outer banks,  
On greater lakes,  
That I could see from shining sea.

But no pennant, and the fish weren't biting.

I've seen greener pastures,  
On the other side;  
Green Acres, and the Wild Side;  
The Wild Bunch, a whole bunch,  
And Naked Lunch three times.  
Once by Burroughs,  
Once at the picture shows,  
And once at a swank motel,  
I'm a gentleman, Mrs. Robinson, I'd never tell.

Besides, that was all in my younger days.  
There's too much static now –  
In both friendship, and life.  
Like the work of art, without Art  
Those memories are "Slip-sliding Away."

Now just a lonely man and his belly fiddle.

The murder has all been written,  
And that's all she wrote,  
Maybe now a spin-off –  
Her Suicide Note.  
No one even *likes* Raymond,  
Or the Newhart Show,  
I was scared by Mrs. King,  
And her sidekick, the Scarecrow.

CBS has got me down.

Now that times are slow,  
Where else can one go,  
Every night at six, when curtains close?

Can't go home.

After being up and down in boystown,  
Upside down in rich town,

Turned around downtown,  
I guess I'll move it a little further uptown.

Maybe to Wards, or Sears, or something.

But a thank you is in order,  
To Frank's TV, down on my corner.  
I saw the silver lining on the silver screen,  
Big screens and wide screens,  
Flat screens through window screens,  
In 56, 36, 32, and nineteens  
27, 25, 20, and thirteens.

I guess I must go.  
Who else can I know?  
What else they will show?  
Think I've seen it all.  
Funny thing though,  
I never even left New Mexico.

—Kelly Clayton

# *Love of Nature (and vice versa)*

An orange and purple marker  
draws me back  
to a trail of black and white  
and a deep Gray.  
The Kit of my memories  
rests awakened beside me  
near the red clay and amorous trees.

The wind whispers by on late summer leaves  
as a babbling creek rushes to catch up.  
Peaceful reflections cast a softened light on closed eyes,  
and the surrounding skies seem to blink in slow motion.

Rustling flames rise and fall to the midnight moon,  
and the fire tower beckons them to climb  
and then sleep.

Even still, they smolder and glow  
with the orange and purple coals of dawn.  
Smoke signals beyond the intangible reach.

—Leahna Robinson

# *The Vampire's Kiss*

Underneath the silk sheets  
I lay and then I saw  
To my wide-eyed stance  
The curtains slowly draw

The candles were lit aflame  
And the shadows shyly dispersed  
And he strode to my bed  
My desire at its worst

Dark was his nature  
And sublime his motion  
The lonely vampire's touch  
His kiss like a potion

He unraveled the mystery  
Of each bitter night  
Soothing my soul  
So that I knew my plight

I leaned up to return a kiss  
His lips sweet and svelte  
Warm with a thousand meals  
And to me he knelt

Doubly thick as honey  
Warm like a summer's day  
His love was mine without abandon  
Covering me every which way

And when he sank his sharp points into my soul  
Causing me to reel underneath  
I was his alone as well  
Hung forever around like the common wreath

Too soon he might let me go  
Too soon the night would come to a close  
But I had my prize afterwards  
And the next morning upon my breast I would find a rose

Into the vase it would go  
Among the bevy of others  
Fine trinkets from every past night  
In which we were lovers

His alone.

—Kristi Hendricks

# *Progress*

Amazing  
the things they do  
with dirt and trees and water  
dig them up, cut them down  
grind them, sift and stir them  
stretch, twist and bend them  
pound them, burn and freeze them  
and keep at it  
until they've made things  
that take you from here to there  
on the ground and in the air  
things that let you see and hear  
stuff from everywhere  
the wonders of the genius  
just to think —  
that from this simple rubble  
they made all this apparatus  
it is truly brilliant  
and they did it all so well  
then they made some other stuff  
that blew it all to hell

—Sam Gresham

# *Boom-Grasp*

We all sometimes play  
the blurry exercise. I  
never played the blurry  
exercise before. Time is  
a drag, now I remember.  
I should have known that  
she cries and she sheds  
tears like in the golden  
dreams of the lost galaxy  
In this exercise, I felt  
completely ordinary and  
that sounds like a suicide  
in different colors.  
Stepping in the hidden  
rain won't help. I hate  
feeling ordinary and I  
hate being good all the  
time. We need closure  
and time to dance away.  
It's hard for me to bleed  
every second I gain a  
reality as if it was a  
cosmic ponder of the  
destiny of the sky in  
twenty stories from the  
floor grasped to mister  
Green's garage door. All  
I know is that I won't let  
you down. I'll be hiding  
on the garden above.  
Yes, on the glacial  
garden of the endless  
capabilities. Where I  
would make you sweet  
love forever.

—Pepe Villafranca

# *The Quill*

With wet carbon soot  
And a goose quill,  
I will write on vellum parchment.  
I have never done this before  
Nor likely will do it again,  
For my computer transcribes not a pen.  
On my fingers, ink smear,  
Not a small thing to be,  
*In common with Shakepeare.*  
I am centuries dated and in a place  
Where I will not be there, tomorrow.  
Here and now, bonds are created  
Between me and Milton and Marlowe.  
But more than this,  
I write as though Paul composes.  
With an inkwell and a goose tail,  
I will write like Isaiah, and even Moses.

—Paul Wesselhoft

# *Simplicity*

The simplicity of life is not the air we breathe  
but rather the breath we take.

The complexity of love is not condemned to the heart,  
but in the simplicity of our actions.

The irony of life is not that in the end we die,  
but rather when we are gone life continues.

Are we masters of our destiny,  
or slaves to fate?

Do we survive for companionship,  
looking for the right mate?

Rescheduling meetings with our maker  
for the last breath we take.

How simple is love?  
As simple as life...just breathe.

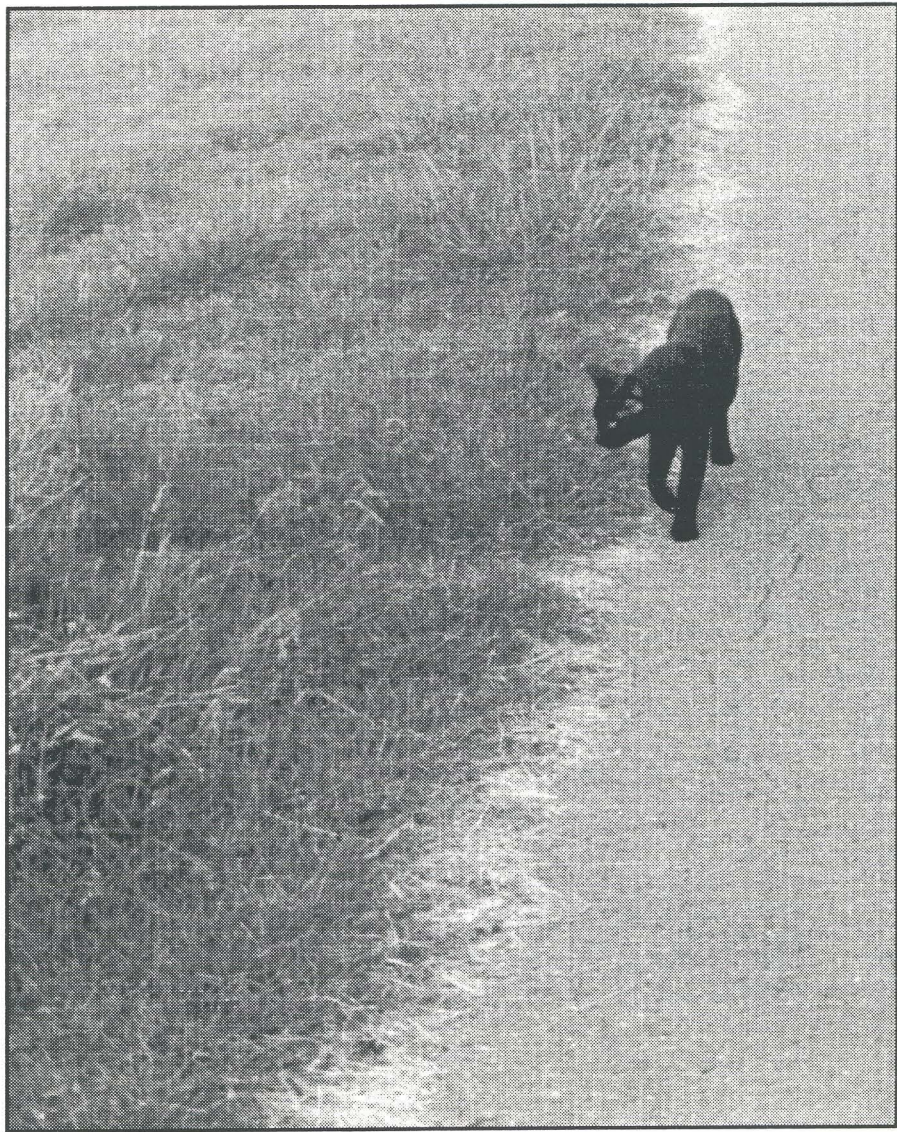
—**Martrina R. Mosby**  
**Garland D. Mitchell**

**Photography and Art**

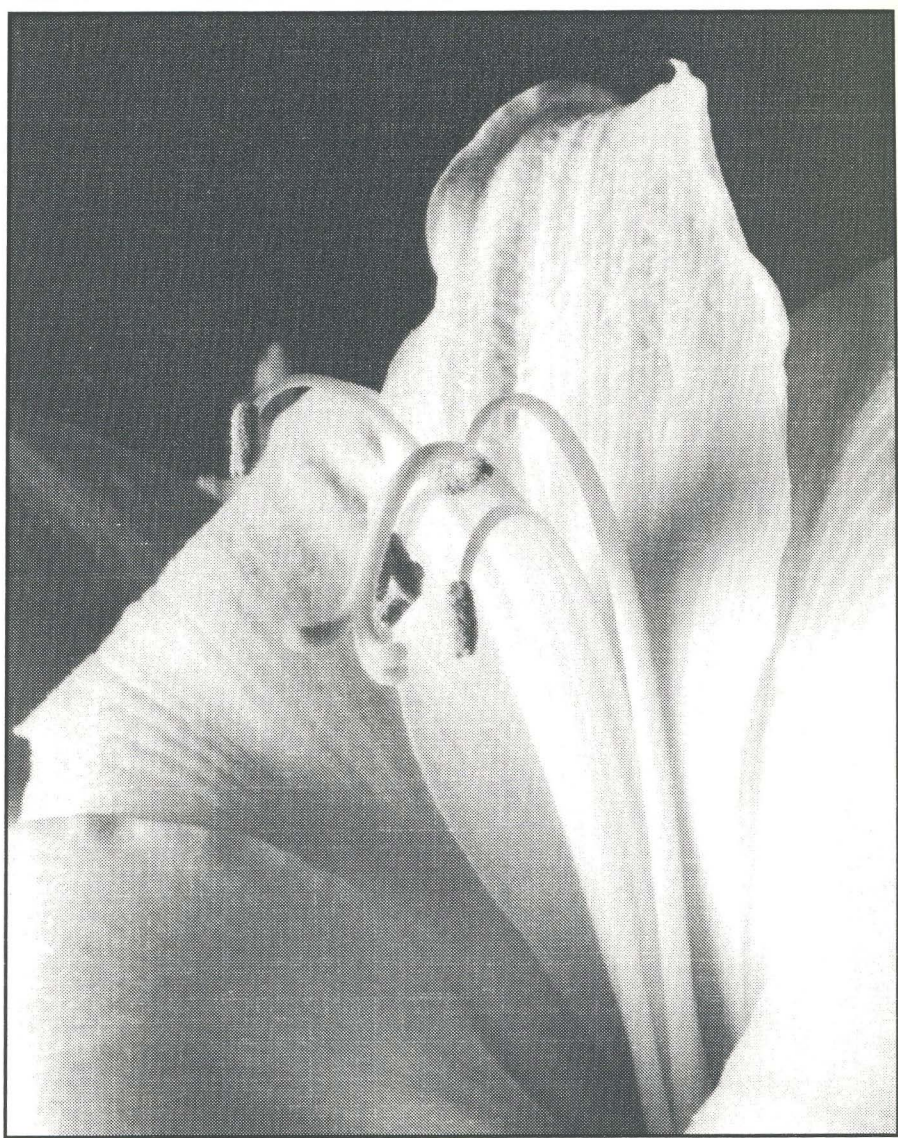
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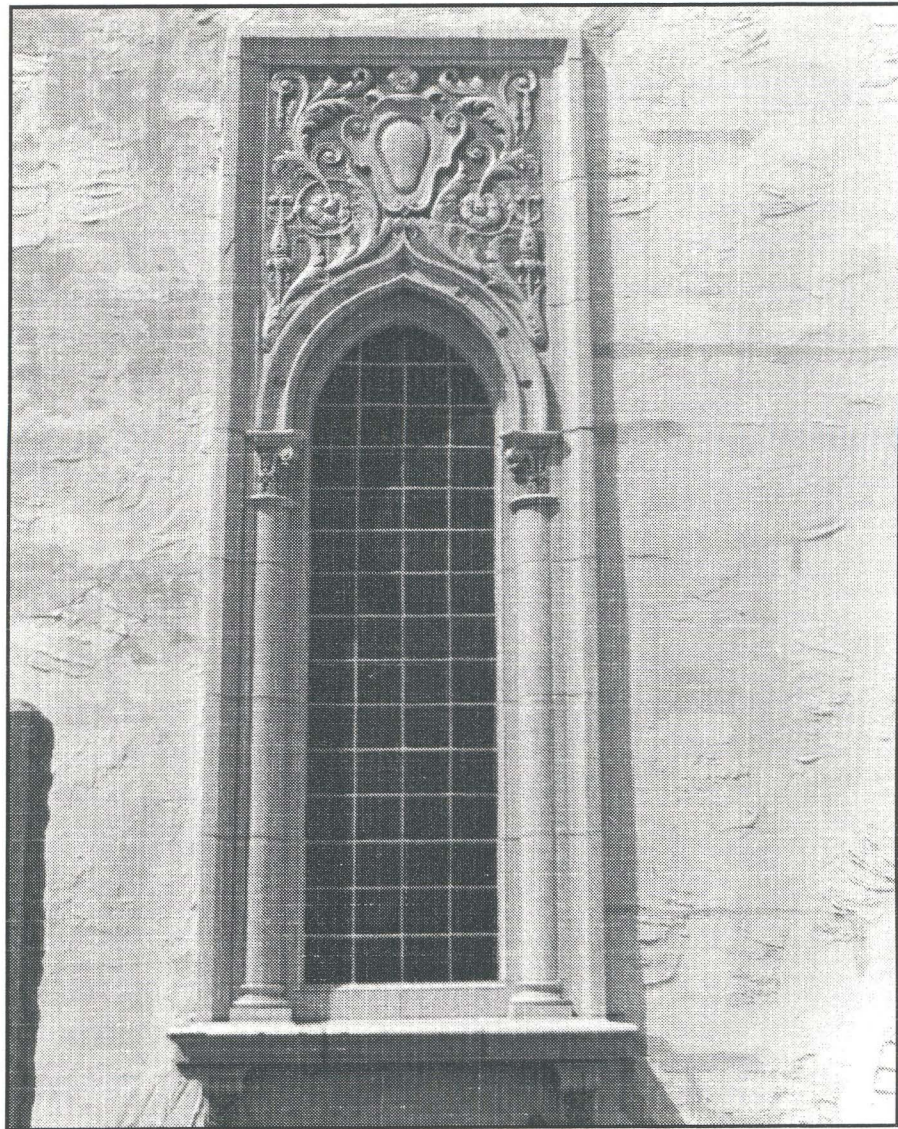
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**Vicki Hamm**



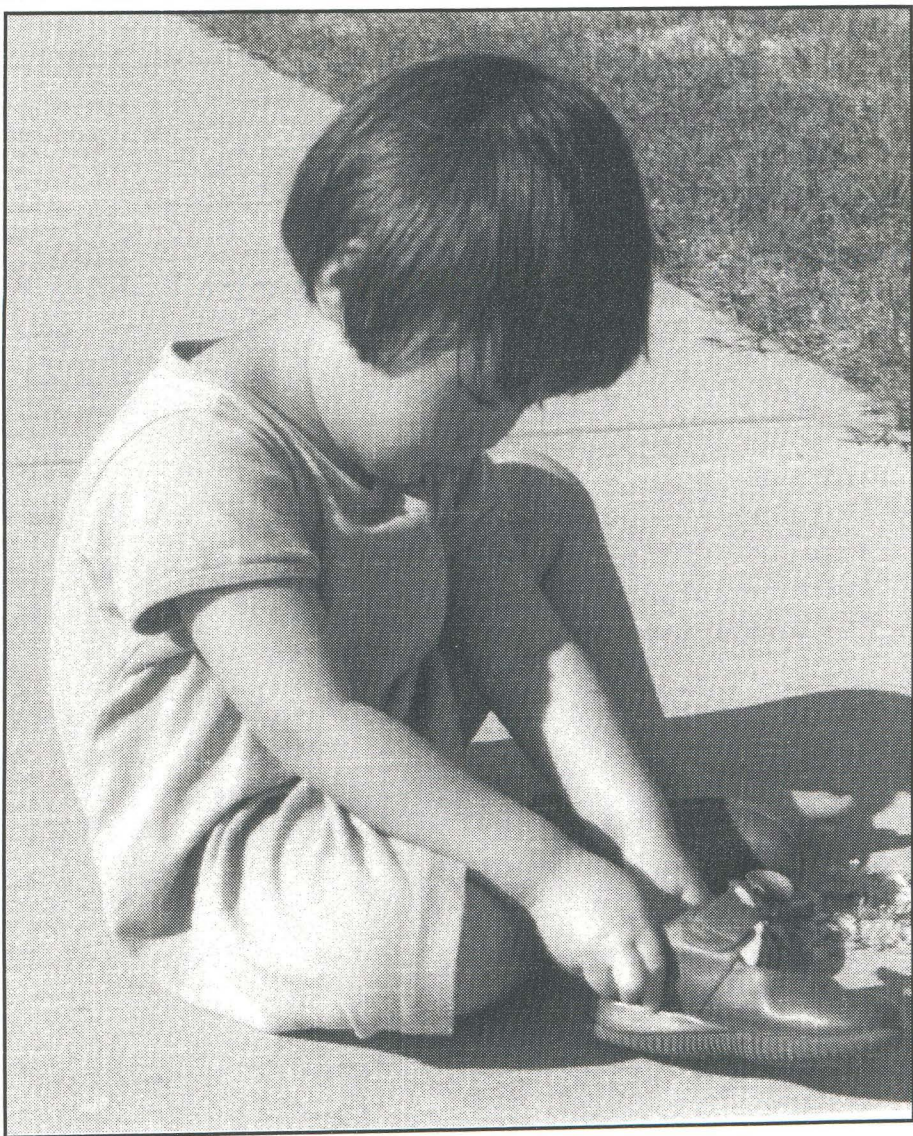
*The Katt*  
**Casey Harness**



*Flower*  
**Shirley Crosby**



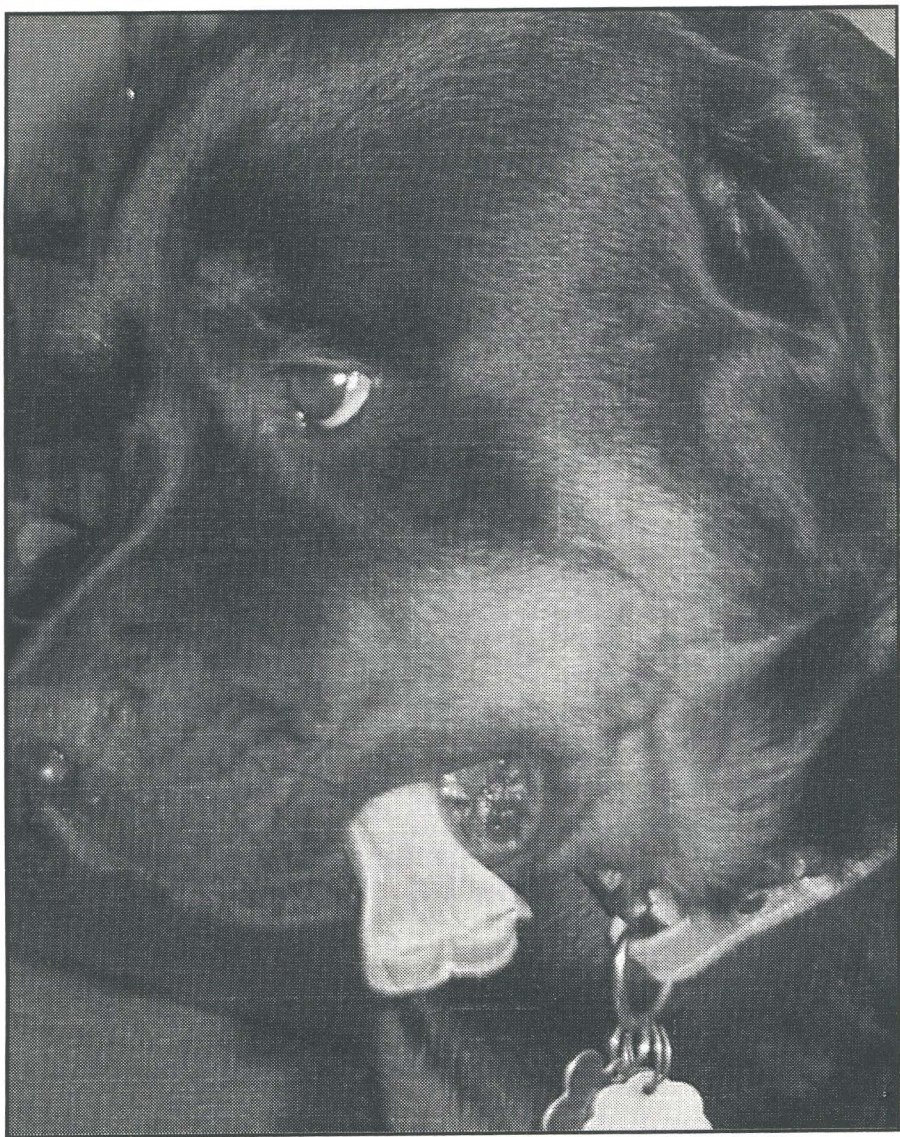
*Market Window*  
**Emily Kay King**



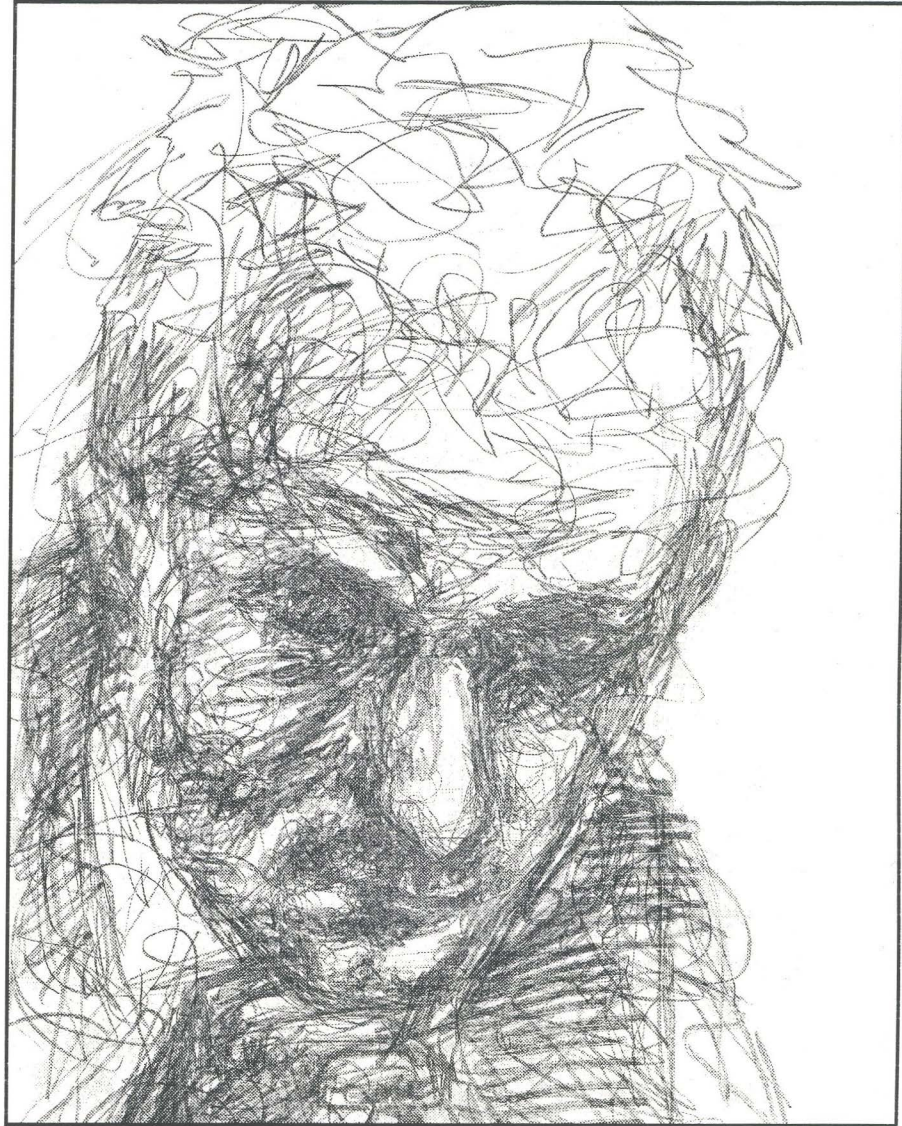
*Child*  
**Shirley Crosby**



*William Shakespeare*  
**Sandra Cizek**



*Rottweiler*  
**Teresa Randell**



*Two Drawings*  
**Eunice Carter**



*Two Drawings*  
**Eunice Carter**

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