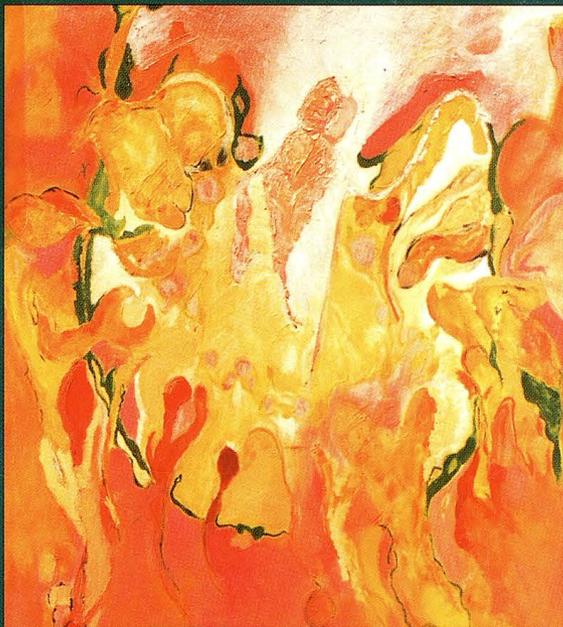


# Touchstone

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Spring 1998, Volume 30

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*Touchstone*, Spring 1998, Volume 30.

Poetry, prose, and art are welcome with suitable SASE. Manuscripts will be read in the spring and participants will be notified of their status before the journal is published. Contributor's payment is two copies.

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# *Touchstone*

*Kansas State University's  
Literary Journal*

**Spring 1998, Volume 30**

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## Editor's Note

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As you know, *Touchstone* is Kansas State University's only literary journal. What you may not know is the amount of exciting changes our journal has gone through in the past year. Once designed strictly as a creative outlet for undergraduate writers and artists, *Touchstone* has broadened its spectrum to include graduate student work as well. This change will not only increase the journal's competitiveness but will also make it more representative of all a university setting has to offer in writing and art.

In addition to including graduate work, the editors of *Touchstone* invite writers from other academic settings to submit pieces of art, prose, and poetry. A true writer and artist does not limit herself to her own surroundings. By reading and observing as much as she can she is learning how others create. In doing so, she becomes more confident and certain about her own work and how it fits into her genre. By extending the invitation for submission to other academic institutions, we hope not only to encourage our own students to read more widely but also to encourage other students to become part of our artistic community.

The grand finale is to announce the inclusion of Creative Nonfiction to our list of genres. Creative Nonfiction is a relatively new genre and has just recently been added to the curriculum here at K-State. In the past, we have received incredible pieces of poetry, fiction and art, and now look forward to widening our boundaries to nonfiction writers. If this year's participants are any foreshadowing of what lies ahead, we're sure we made a great decision.

Thank you for lending us your eyes, and we look forward to reading the pieces you are working on now.

Keep writing,



Kiersten Allen  
Editor in Chief, *Touchstone*

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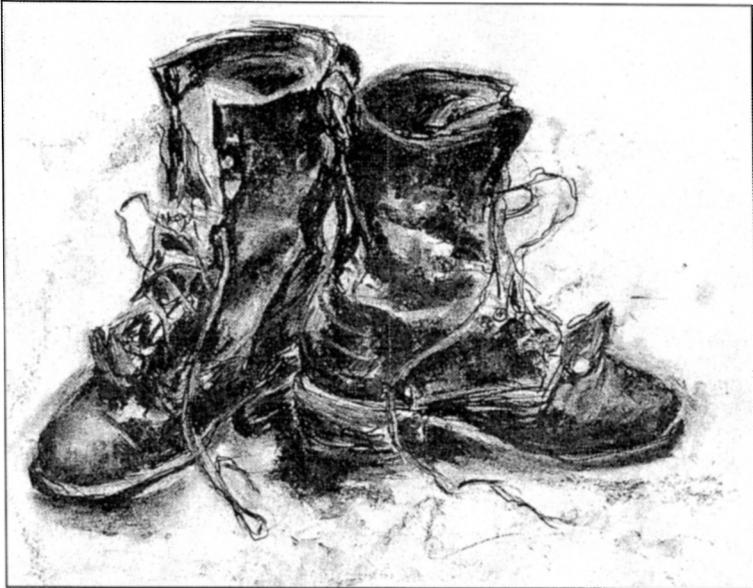
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*Shanna Dieball*

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**Stand Together**

Medium: charcoal on paper



*Ramona McCallum*

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## **Daily**

Life sifts itself  
through the screen door, in a gust  
that sets the broom to work.

Later guests arrive  
with travel stories; and mud  
on their shoes to remember  
them by.

So I vacuum across  
your two-year-old shrieks, past  
your puckered sobs, and let you  
gawk at what it sounds like  
to disappear:

*I can't listen right now.*

But tonight shoe-boxed photos  
will sort themselves as you sleep,  
childhood tucked safe between  
transparent pages.

Here, someday you'll see  
so many smiles.

*Christopher Piatt*

---

## **Cookie Cutter Nation**

My son plays with dolls. It started when he was six. His mother got out the JC Penney Christmas catalogue to make a list for Santa. Kenny sat on her lap and flipped through the pages until he found the toy he had seen advertised on television; a lavender My Little Pony apparatus that squirted water. Jeanette was silent for a moment, then smiled and dutifully wrote it down. That was it. Only a second's hesitation on her part. She never questioned it again.

Jeanette was killed in a car wreck two years ago. Kenny handled her death with surprising maturity. We mourned. We learned how to use the bread machine. We got a dog. I catalogued my Thelonius Monk LPs and Kenny sought solace in the Cabbage Patch Kids. Life without Jeanette was efficient and empty. I love my son, but he has been cursed with my laugh instead of his mother's. He takes after me physically, also. There is nothing in him to remind me of her.

This changed last summer when he developed Jeanette's affinity for the national pastime. Kenny's mother and I met at a benefit baseball game in Washington, D.C. Neither of us actually lived there.

The Wabash County Little League is cut from the same All-American fabric as Pop Tarts and John Wayne movies. Our coolers and tee shirts and sunflower seeds and "Heybatterbatter"s have earned us a seat in spectator Americana. As is often the case in these scenarios, our children cannot play baseball. This should come as a great relief to a number of parents, but as long as Kevin Crutcher plays for the Wabash All-Stars, no one is at peace.

Kevin is the son of Wayne Crutcher, town plumber and asshole-in-residence. Wayne and I are the token single parents in the All-Stars entourage, and our boys, #17 and #24, together embody an endorsement for a two parent family structure.

My Kenny had just turned eleven, tall for his age. He has never been athletic (and I've never forced it on him). So when he told me he wanted to join Little League, I was not sure what to say. I was ecstatic that he wanted to make

some sort of nod toward social mores, but at the same time mortified at the prospect of Kenny humiliating himself in front of all of Wabash county.

"You sure you want to do this?" I asked. "You know Aunt Chelsea in Oregon offered to take you for the summer."

"I'm sure. Baseball is the American pastime, Peter. It's up there with apple pie and rape."

Kenny is dark for an eleven-year-old. I am positive I did not know what rape meant when I was eleven. His vocabulary is immense. His mother used to read him Tom Wolfe books when he was a baby. Jeanette taught classes in 20th Century literature at Wabash County Community College, and she was willing to read anything that might put her baby boy to sleep. Kenny could read by the time he was three, and devoured any book he could lay his hands on.

In what I believed to be a moment of sound judgement, I took Kenny to buy a jock strap. Fortunately, he was literate enough that I did not have to explain to him what it was or why he needed it. He and I had never been to an athletic store together, and I selected Foot Locker because its location in the mall (between Musicland and The Gap) gave it a certain neutrality that put us both at ease.

Upon entering the store, we were immediately approached by a sturdy young man in a striped referee shirt.

"Hey, can I help you fellas find anything?"

Before Kenny could respond with something inappropriate, I dismissed the gesture with a simple, "We're just looking, thanks."

Kenny muttered something under his breath about Neanderthals working on commission as we made our way to the rack. Once there, we both stopped and stared, neither one of us knowing what to do. I was about to make an inquiry about the size of underwear when a gruff voice yelled, "Hey, guys, they don't see pantyhose in here."

We both looked up startled to see Wayne and Kevin Crutcher.

I wracked my brain to find a comment to match the pantyhose remark, so as not to look like a fool in front of Kenny.

"Congratulations, Mr. Crutcher," Kenny piped up. "I heard scientists just declared you the missing link."

There was a pause, and I prayed that Wayne would not understand.

"Waddaya mean? What the hell's this kid talkin' about?"

## 10 Piatt

My body flushed with relief, I changed the direction of the conversation. "What are you guys doing here?"

"We're buyin' a new set a' cleats for Little League." He laid his hand on Kevin's shoulder, and both of them sucked in their chests.

"Yeah, us too." I awkwardly laid my hand on Kenny's shoulder and he looked up at me with daggers in his eyes.

"Actually," Kenny said, "We're here to buy a strap."

I tightened my grip on his shoulder. "For his glasses. So they don't get knocked off during the game. Yep. Cleats and a glasses strap. That's...that's what we're here for."

Eighty dollars later it occurred to me that Kenny did not have a ball glove. Strike that. It occurred to me that Kenny had never used a ball glove. When he was baptised, his uncle Harlon gave him a mit as a gift. At the time, I thought it was inappropriate and silly to impose gender roles on a child at such an early age. I saw the value in it when I had to assemble Barbie's house on Kenny's eighth birthday (a party whose guests included two boys and eleven girls).

I could not find the glove in the attic, and I was taken aback to find instead several boxes of Jeanette's things I'd forgotten I had stashed up there after the funeral. I had not cried in over a year. Her huge assortment of how-to books reminded me that she would surely have a quiet, thoughtful solution for the dilemma at hand. A bit of dust lodged itself in my eye, and I felt a hot tear slide down my cheek. I did not want Kenny to see me cry, so I stayed in the attic. For four hours. It was midnight when I came downstairs, and I still had not found the glove.

I went to Kenny's old toy box in the den and sifted through Rainbow Brites, Care Bears, My Little Ponies, Barbies, Skippers, and all of the respective clothing, cars, cookware, and significant others before I found the shiny mitt at the very bottom of the bin. It was a high quality glove, but had not a single scuff on it. I am not an expert in this field, but even I know a baseball glove should appear rugged, should tell countless manly tales of pop flies and stolen bases and bottom-of-the-ninth-two-outs-bases-loaded-save-the-day-hometown-heroes.

I took the glove out to the tool shed and tried beating on it with a variety of tools. The marks left appeared artificial, and so I crept to the garage, quietly opened the door, and backed over the glove in my jeep five or six times. I let our

pet schnauzer Sinatra chew on it for awhile.

By 3:00 in the morning, I had run the glove through the dishwasher. Twice. I was carefully using a Q-Tip to apply bleach in some strategic places. I stopped when I thought I smelled an old perfume Jeanette used to wear. I turned around to see Kenny standing in the doorway.

“What are you doing up?”

“What are *you* doing up?”

We stared at each other.

“I, uh, found this old baseball glove of mine. Thought you might want to use it. In, you know, Little League.”

He stared at the bottle of Clorox on the counter. “Yeah. And if that doesn’t work, we can find that old one Unlce Harlon gave me.” He smiled.

“Yeah. Now get to bed.”

“Night.” He turned to walk upstairs.

“By the way, do you smell something?”

He froze. He did not turn to look at me. “Oh, I think I accidentally spilled some of Mom’s old perfume in the bathroom. When I was brushing my teeth.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Goodnight.”

My son occasionally dresses like a girl. I am not supposed to know this. I was cleaning his room once last year when I found one of his mother’s make-up kits under his bed. I also know that he has snatched a few women’s undergarments. I do not know where he gets them, but I have seen them in his underwear drawer.

Kenny does the laundry in our house. He cooks, too. Very well, I might add. I never asked him to take over the domestic chores after his mother died. He just assumed them on his own. In all the panic of making life work without Jeanette, I forgot someone had to do housework.

But once Kenny was sick and I was putting away laundry when I found a pair of pink panties in his top dresser drawer. I have kept this to myself. I have often thought about seeking a therapist. For myself, of course.

When he was seven, our doctor and a school psychologist tried to put Kenny on Ritalin. Too hyper. I secretly scheduled a session with the psychologist, Mrs. Lyman, when Jeanette was visiting her brother in Montreal. I expressed my concerns about the dolls, but Mrs. Lyman was

preoccupied with the possibility of Attention Deficit Disorder. By the time Jeanette got back to town, I had been forced to schedule an appointment with our family doctor to obtain a prescription. When she caught wind of it, Jeanette was furious.

We fought over it an epic battle.

“Would you rather he play with guns, Peter? Would that make you happy?”

Even when she was screaming she was beautiful.

“Are you scared the neighbors are going to find out? Is that what you’re afraid of, Peter?”

Her hair would fall down in her face a little and her eyes would smolder.

“Damnit, talk to me, Peter! I feel like I’m talking to a brick wall,” she used to say.

“Sorry. You’re gorgeous when you’re angry.”

“Don’t even try to think about it. This is an argument and we’re going to finish it.”

We only fought about this subject. We would have violent arguments filled with rage. We usually would up in the car, so as not to wake Kenny. After checking to make sure he was sound asleep, we would get in the car and drive all over town screaming at each other.”

After reconciling, we could spend the next eight days making love. Usually with all the torrid passion of the preceding argument.

Before Kenny was born, we made love constantly. By the time he was five, I could only count on it after a feud about our son’s behavior. I provoked fights often.

After Jeanette died, I had no desire to continue going to church. Kenny was far more enthusiastic about it than I. I never tried to pacify him with the notion that his mom was in heaven. I figured if I had trouble with my own faith, there was no way my kid, who was smarter at age nine than I will ever be, would accept it. But Kenny was adamant about our Sunday morning activities (he was the only kid in Sunday school who liked dressing up).

This particular summer I was amazed to see Wayne and Kevin Crutcher had started attending services at First Presbyterian. Neither of them looked thrilled to be there, but Wayne, whose wife left him when Kevin was born according to local rumors, was apparently seeing a woman in our congregation.

The first time they appeared for Sunday morning services, Kenny watched the threesome very closely for an hour. When Wayne awkwardly stepped up to the communion rail and took the wine chalice, Kenny giggled and assessed, "Oh. I get it. Free booze."

I tried to swallow my laughter and made more noise choking than if I had allowed myself to chuckle freely. Kenny began to laugh harder and I slapped his leg to scold him. We both looked at the floor in unison and laughed so heartily that our eyes welled up with tears. My face got hot as I felt people staring at us. Wayne and his lady friend walked past us on their way back to their pew. Wayne glared at me as I bit my lip and shook with laughter.

Other fathers of the Wabash All-Stars watched the team practice with an intensity one might think should be reserved only for actual games. State championships, perhaps. I could not bear to watch the first few practices. Kenny carpooled with the Bainbridge boy from next door. When he came home I would ask cautiously how practice went, he would issue me an obligatory "Fine," and jet up the stairs.

One night after Kenny had left for practice, I finished loading the dishwasher and took Sinatra for a walk. I found myself across the street from the city's baseball park where several teams of various sizes and age groups were working with coaches who wore looks of bitterness that only come from the belief that once could have made it in the major leagues.

I looked under several coaches who were crouched over young boys trying to show them how to hold a bat. I finally spotted Kenny under a young man who had recently graduated from Wabash High School and looked gentle enough. He had taken the neighbors' daughter to Prom last year and I sat with her father on the porch and smoked cigars as we awaited their return.

I stood behind a tree and watched nervously as the coach carefully positioned Kenny's arms and legs to swing the bat. The coach backed up slowly as Kenny stood frozen in his mold. Upon command, he broke free of the position and flailed the bat through the air, losing his grip and sending it flying across the field. A group of high school boys scattered quickly as the bat flew toward them and crashed into the ground.

I jumped out from behind the tree to help, only to remem-

## 14 Piatt

ber that I could be of no service whatsoever. Sinatra tugged at the end of his leash and yapped wildly. I stared at the young coach and cringed with anticipation. Kenny was staring at the ground, waiting to be sternly reprimanded. The coach smiled.

“Good arm.”

I hung around long enough to discover that my boy was not the only inept player on the field. In fact, by fate or by luck, I was relieved to find that Kenny had landed in a regular group of Bad News Bears. I liked this image because Kenny fit into it comfortably. He could be the brilliant oddball who played with dolls but was loveable anyway. Walter Matthau would be proud to have Kenny in his troupe of misfits.

I was about to join the other fathers on the fence clapping in encouragement when Wayne Crutcher emerged from his Crutcher Plumbing truck from which he had been watching the proceedings.

The coach was now working with Kevin Crutcher, the only boy on the field to demonstrate any skill whatsoever. Wayne watched closely as the coach pitched to his son. Father and son were wearing matching Washington Senator tee shirts. The other fathers stiffened as Wayne leaned on the fence and spat his chewing tobacco.

“Kevin!” He startled all of us by breaking the rigid silence. Kevin looked up and watched closely as Wayne pantomimed following through with the bat. Kevin nodded with a look of grim seriousness. He repositioned himself at the plate and looked back to the coach on the pitching mound. He tried with all his might to scowl at the coach, a face I was sure the Crutcher men practiced in the mirror together while shaving (Kevin had facial hair and acne at age eleven).

After a few pitches, the young coach hesitated, fidgeted a bit with his glove, and looked up at Wayne with pleading despair. Wayne did not budge from his spot, but grinned ferociously. After a pause, the coach announced that they had worked hard so it was time to call it a night. Thee boys ripped off their hats and ran rambunctiously to their respective minivans. Even Kenny. I realized Sinatra and I would have to sprint to make it home it time.

My son is obsessed with Bette Midler. After practice, he went to his room and blasted “The Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy

of Company B.” His mother had a beautiful voice. She used to sing forties jazz standards when he was in the crib. When Kenny was a baby, Jeanette and I used to joke about raising him to be a jazz musician the way other parents forced athletics or academics on their unwilling kids. We imagined sending him to bed without supper and yelling, “Won’t come back down stairs until you’re black and have the common courtesy to wear sunglasses in the house! Were you raised in an elevator?”

As luck would have it, Kenny took to jazz like a fish to water. He first heard the Divine Miss “M” on a radio station in the waiting room of my office. I share a small orthodontics practice with a dentist whose son plays football for Florida State and is the pride of Wabash. A few of his clippings can be seen hanging in our waiting room.

Bette was lamenting “Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most,” when I heard Kenny scream. I was in my living room chair reading the evening paper and trying to catch my breath from the run home. I ran upstairs to see Kenny in the bathroom at the end of the hall standing over the toilet in tears.

He was wearing a red dress and heavy make-up. One of his mother’s earrings hung from his left ear. From the end of the hallway, I could smell heavy perfume.

I stared at him. He knew I was there, but would not look at me. He was staring into the toilet bowl with a look of astonishment.

We stood there for the longest time. There were no words for the situation. And Kenny knew a lot of words.

“Mom’s earring fell down the toilet,” his strained voice jerked me out of my train of thought.

“What?”

He did not look at me. “The earrings Grandma gave her for Christmas. One of them fell down the toilet.”

There was a considerable pause. “It’s okay. We can get it out.”

I turned around and walked down the stairs, straight out the back door, and directly into the tool shed. Only then did I consider that I had no clue how to disassemble a toilet. Tools were still scattered about after my silly attempt to custom desing my son’s baseball mitt. I had not been back to the tool shed since because, truth be told, I am not much of a handy man. Most of my quality tools were Christmas or Father’s Day gifts from Jeanette’s parents. After we had

been married for ten years, I had accumulated so much junk that the garage was no longer adequate and I had to build the damn tool shed, which I did surprisingly well. Jeanette was so proud of me.

I threw a socket wrench at the wall in frustration. The fragrance of Jeanette's perfume was still in my nose. It made me long for one of our torrid arguments. I would have given my right arm to hear her tell me to go to hell at this moment. My hand ached for her to grip in and my ears felt completely empty without her warm voice telling me to get my act together and accept the fact that my son worshipped Bette fucking Midler. A bit of dust lodged itself in my eye, and I felt a hot tear slide down my cheek.

I thought I heard a car in the driveway. I ran out of the shed and around the front of the house to see Wayne Crutcher's plumbing truck pulling up to the curb. I stood on the lawn in astonishment as Wayne got out of his truck.

"So what's the emergency?"

I had no idea what he was talking about. A voice from behind surprised me.

"I called the plumber, Peter." I swung around to see Kenny standing on the front porch in his baseball uniform, the make-up washed from his face.

I turned to Wayne, relieved. "Come on in, Wayne. We're upstairs."

"Ya know, I charge time-and-a-half for house calls after ten o'clock," Wayne informed me as he pulled his toolbox from the back of his truck. I glanced at my watch. 10:07.

Wayne Crutcher is a menacing drunkard and a civic embarrassment to Wabash, but he is one hell of a plumber. Kenny sat curled up in the bathtub and I crouched on the bathroom tiles while Wayne tinkered on the pipes leading from the toilet. As he commented on the state of the situation, I would nod intently and feign extensive knowledge of the problem.

By the time he fished the earring from the toilet, I had forgotten just how awkward the circumstances were; a house with only two men living in it, and a dangly earring lodged in the toilet. Wayne stared at the earring, and then at me. I waited for the humiliating remark about cross-dressing or homosexuality or pretty boys or whatever crude comment Wayne Crutcher might come up with in this scenario, but he simply said, "You can make the check out to Crutcher's

Plumbing.”

Kenny still had a little rouge on his cheek.

Shortly after midnight, I crept down to the kitchen for some milk. Kenny was at the counter doing homework.

“You should be in bed,” I said flatly. It was the first I had spoken to him since Wayne left.

“Geography test tomorrow.”

“It’s a summer class and you didn’t have to take it. It doesn’t matter.” I was not in the mood for the cute witticisms he uses to manipulate me.

“Why are we pink?”

“Bed.” I paused. I absorbed his question. “Now.” He stared at me. I took the bait. “What are you talking about?”

He looked at the U.S. map in his book. “All the states are pastel colors on the maps. Why are we pink?”

Of course, I had no answer for this. I smiled. “Beats me.”

“I wonder who makes a decision so momentous as to which states are pink and which ones are blue. I can’t imagine the pressure.”

“You should sleep on it.” His eyes were red and puffy. He must have been crying all night. “Allergies bugging you?”

“Yeah. My eyes itch like hell.”

“Watch your language.” He stared at the map. “We can get some Benadryl in the morning.”

The first game of the All-Stars season was against the Barron City Mudhens. Both teams were terrible, which made it easy for their parents to enjoy the evening. I sat in the bleachers with Adam and Sally Bainbridge and Norman and Connie Schmid and Jason Peckinpaw’s parents and Randy and Sheila Stern and the parents of the Johnston boy and all the other parents who made a valiant effort to include Kenny and me in community activities and baked us casseroles after Jeanette was killed.

Wayne Crutcher was mysteriously absent. We rooted for Kevin every time he stepped up to bat, but I thought it must have been discouraging for him not to have his father there.

In the fourth inning (by the grace of God and the Wabash Recreation Commission, Little League games only last five innings), the Crutcher’s Plumbing truck could be seen pulling up to the park. Wayne stepped out and sauntered over to the field, stopping just behind the All-Stars’ dugout. We all shifted uncomfortably in our uncomfortable ball park seat

The score was two-nothing, All-Stars. Our only runs had been scored by Kevin Crutcher, who knocked one out of the park, and my Kenny, who had the good sense not to swing at anything pitched to him and was walked to a home run.

Kevin stepped up to bat and the bleachers fell silent. It occurred to me that I had never heard Wayne Crutcher's son speak. Remembering the spirit of the game, Jason Peckinpaw's mother stood up and hollered, "Come on, Kevin, score one for the home team!" Mister Peckinpaw grabbed her hand firmly and she immediately sat back down.

Kevin Crutcher hit two foul balls and then struck out. We were content with this. In fact, we are made stronger as a community but the fact that our eleven-year-old sons cannot play baseball. We rejoice in it. We have tee shirts designed to declare it to the world.

But Wayne Crutcher was not in the spirit of this game. He screamed from the sidelines, "You little faggot! What the hell did you swing at that for? Are you blind? Who raised you, you little fairy?"

We tried to pretend we could not hear him, and made an effort to drown him out with resounding cheers of "That's okay!" and "Nice try, Kev," but none of our enthusiasm seemed to matter to Kevin as he slumped back to the dugout and Wayne slumped back to the truck. The friendly coach gave Kevin a hearty slap on the shoulders and his team members patted him on the back, but he was too defeated to care. I was astounded at the compassion that these eleven-year-olds offered up to their teammate.

And in that instant, I was filled with rage. I wanted to rise from the bleachers and chase Wayne Crutcher down and have a shoot-out in the middle of Main Street. Or at least tell him to fuck off. I could feel Jeanette laughing at me, or maybe laughing with me. She laughed better than most people breathe.

"You must be proud of Kenny," Sheila Stern said to me. "This isn't his kind of thing, is it?"

I realized she was telling me this because Kenny was up to bat again. My mind had shifted from an act of vigilante justice on Wayne Crutcher. I settled back in my seat and held my breath as the scrawny Mudhen pitcher threw a curve ball.

My son counts his calories. I took him out for ice cream after the game and he ordered low-fat blueberry frozen

yogurt. I ordered a banana split and we found a booth in the back.

“So what did you think?” I asked as I plowed into my dessert.

“It was a cookie cutter evening,” he sighed.

“What?”

“It was bubble gum fare. A standard vanilla experience.”

I stared at him. “Could you please be an eleven-year-old for just five minutes?”

“Sorry.”

“Did you have a good time?”

“I guess.” He thought for a moment. “Wayne Crutcher is an asshole, isn’t he?”

“Watch your language.”

“Wayne Crutcher is a misogynist cretin, isn’t he?”

“Yes. Wayne Crutcher is an asshole.”

“Peter,” he put down his spoon. “Dad, I’m glad you’re not a cookie cutter father.”

I am not quite sure what this meant, but it may have been the finest compliment ever given to me by my son.

The Wabash All-Stars finished the season with a 2-7 record. We endured, that is, Kenny and I endured all nine games with old-fashioned moxie. At the end of the season, I bought him a new Bette Midler CD. The next day he bought me a new socket wrench with his allowance.

There was a back-to-school dance at the junior high in the fall. I was asked to chaperone. Kenny, who now asked to be called Ken, did not dance with a single girl all night. He later asked me if I was upset by that. I told him there was nothing to be embarrassed about. His mother and I were both terrible dancers.

*Alycia Armstrong*

**Self Portrait**

Medium: charcoal on paper



*Ramona McCallum*

---

## Lasting

The wind takes this stretch of hill along Carnahan Creek Road by its mangy scruff and gives it a good shake. What holds on the longest in terms of winter brush or stump seems to prove something about endurance to the following seasons. My eyes whip past bare branches and lumps of limestone during my weekly drive to Olsburg. Certain landmarks assume their places in the fields with the stoicism of church elders, or like icons defining what it means to last. Past Carnahan, I pull onto the main road and head into town.

Today in the window of Brick's Lounge and Steakhouse, taped just under the *Come on in, we're open* sign, a three inch square of paper whispers, to any patron observant or far-sighted enough to notice, that this business is for sale. As I knot my waitress apron, Jennifer Martin, who runs the restaurant along with her husband Wayne, reminds me that Wayne has threatened to close down for the better part of the decade they've owned the place. But this time, Jennifer warns, it could really happen, whether or not a buyer finds them.

With the advent of all the casinos in Kansas, many who used to spend their evenings at Brick's now make a pilgrimage to Harrah's or the Sac & Fox instead. Rather than celebrating the pool table back in Brick's dim cozy corner, or clearing away the long veneered tables up front for a make-shift dance floor, folks offer their salaries to foreign roulette wheels, while in the background all-you-can-eat buffets disguise themselves with small price tags.

"Business is too uncertain right now. We can't compete." Jennifer swallows, her voice an odd cocktail of resignation and glee. In some ways she's ready to give up this ghost of an establishment, with its worn rainbow carpet and the gouges impatient forks have taken from the booths' black vinyl cushions. Jennifer's ready to quit hoping the lilac-scented candles stay lit in the dark paneled restrooms, and she's more than ready to get Wayne out of the kitchen.

As a chef, Wayne has never neglected his mission to provide the Flint Hills with a taste of the past, and what he sees as a hope for the future: bison. Various pamphlets displayed throughout the restaurant explain that bison flesh is

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more pure, more nourishing than that of cattle or poultry. And raising bison is far more ecological, Wayne eagerly explains to out-of-towners inquiring about his own herd.

Occasionally the locals do stray from their chicken fried steaks to taste and see what this buffalo fuss is all about, but their general reluctance gets discouraging. Jennifer looks forward to a time when their lives will not revolve around the restaurant, yet she's thankful they've had the opportunity to work while simultaneously raising their son. Ramè Martin will turn three years old this April. Up until now the restaurant has been his home, certain customers were almost like family.

The door lets out an electronic ding, alerting Jennifer and me. Two of the remaining "regulars," Bud and Dale enter, right on schedule. As these two widowers make their loyal march to the bar like they do each Saturday evening, their cowboy boots scuff across the black slate floor. Bud and Dale occupy stools by the picture window, where Jennifer's potted cacti span the sill and add a hint of festivity to the clouded sunset outside. Their drink orders never sway. Dale meditates on a single can of 7-Up while Bud works through the first of several whisky concoctions Jennifer has named in his honor.

Standing at the bar, folding silverware for diners who may or may not be in attendance tonight, I glance up at the buffalo head mounted on the wall. Its crackled nose, larger than the palm of a man's hand, still looks moist by some taxidermic miracle. With a couple of Bud's specials, I imagine you could see a blast of steamy breath escape from the beast's permanently flared nostrils. Or perhaps you'd notice the suggestion of a hoof emerge from the wall, ready to smash down upon ashtrays, salt and pepper shakers, anything in its path. For now though, the head hands silently, glass eyes protecting the rows of hard liquor below, much like a crucifix guards the sanctity of its church when the congregation is elsewhere.

*Heather Hansen*

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## Whirl

I.

The whirl in the night: our rallying cry.  
 As dust ticks at the storm windows,  
 Dad fidgets with the old AM radio;  
 Mom says to stop running, stop giggling,  
 Stop bouncing.  
 Like housepets, my sister and I possess  
 A meteorological sense of smell,  
 And it moves us like sugar.  
 What could be better than to spin away,  
 To be carried, house, yard, sandbox and cat,  
 To fly, spinning, into the wet night,  
 Where no crickets wait, to twirl pinkly  
 Across the fence, toward a shiny new  
 Technicolor dream?

II.

He doesn't do it for attention.  
 Spying from behind cartoony walls,  
 I've watched my sister's son, alone,  
 Spinspinspinspin.  
 Arms out  
 Head back,  
 I know he feels  
 The centripetal rush,  
 The tickling tingle,  
 Electrical static filtering skinward  
 And what he must see,  
 The colors running, the unruly  
 Rings of Rainbow,  
 It's what a planet would see in its hurtle  
 If it could.

III.

Last time I felt this was in bed with a fever of 104, it made  
 me want  
 To be fevered forever, there is nothing like it in the world, you  
 know,  
 The throb of a drunken vertigo,

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(Are you going to be sick? No, I think I'll be all right)  
The bed is spinning, and we are spinning, and I feel the  
earth's axis through my back,  
And you straighten,  
And somewhere in a darkness,  
Double helices are raveling, unraveling,  
Voracious.

### IV.

My Jewish friend taught me this:  
*Nun, Gimel, Hey, Shin.*  
Four sides of a dreidel:  
*A Great Miracle Happened There.*  
She told me the story, but I forgot;  
It had something to do with survival,  
And there is meaning in the twirling.  
Watching, you know the balance:  
Somehow motion finds its center, spins, spins,  
Until, because it is a game of chance,  
The circle slows,  
Staggers, stops

*Nanette Stone*

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## Firewood

1.

You talk now of fall, your favorite  
time of year. Nothing green is left  
and all the stick-tights are gone from the woods.  
I ask how can we tell what to cut down, how  
do we know what is dead. I follow right behind  
you, trying to step exactly where you step,  
to be close enough to walk through branches  
together with you. You stop and I step beside you,  
an oak is down across our trail. you side-jump  
over it and keep on walking. I look at its roots,  
still gripping warm earth.

I step up on the tree,  
walk down its back and imagine the thousands  
of ants crawling just below my feet.

2.

We find  
a live cottonwood, the chainsaw's  
noise uncontrollable in the bitter air.  
I stand way back and stare at the small piece  
cut from its side, enough space missing  
to bring the tree--  
heavy, fertile, mortal--  
down. I carry the pieces  
with bare hands,  
look at the way history  
shows itself on the inside with  
barbed wire, drought, scars.

I imagine Bird Woman,  
how cold it must have been the winter  
she led men through unmapped territory--  
trees exploding like cannons before them.

3.

Below the window,  
I sit next to the stove

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with a map of the world  
behind my back. You stand beside me,  
watching blue jays chase the smaller birds away from the  
seed I have thrown  
onto the woodpile.

*S. Macdonald*

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## **Working on Words**

My three-year-old son has a speech problem. My spouse and I tried to quell our fears about his lack of coherence and articulation for months, by claiming he was just 'focusing' on other things. Like learning the alphabet, walking along balance beams, painting what will undoubtedly become heirloom masterpieces, playing catch, learning the basic plays of American soccer, creating vast and exquisite clay ornaments. Never mind, we thought, that only his papa and I can understand him when he sings along to the alphabet song, at least he is trying. Never mind that he rarely speaks when demonstrating his physical prowess with his friends, he's too busy to be bothered. Never mind that his clay teacher, his nana and nanapapa, his uncles and aunts, his neighbors and friends, his pediatrician can't understand him.

When I was pregnant with my son, I swore I wouldn't be like my mother was with me. Oh, she loved me, no doubt about it. She still does, even though I've given her many opportunities not to. But I never felt as if I quite measured up, that somehow I was a disappointment at every turn. So when carrying my unborn babe, I swore to myself, as I believe most new parents do, that I would "do things differently, not make the same mistakes my folks made with me, I would do better". When Keigan was born, we strove to instill in him a sense of self-worth, self-acceptance. We have attempted, as he has grown, to share with, and model, the idea that regardless of success or failure, if he just tries, we will be proud of him. And we are. Always.

While I never wanted nor expected Keigan to be "perfect" in the textbook definition, I always accepted him as such. In his father's eyes, and in mine, he was 'just right'. He was born happy and healthy, alert, and with all ten of his fingers and toes. He was perfect. Didn't have colic, or any major illness, slept soundly in the family bed with his papa and me, toilet trained himself first at 18 months--with a minor set back at 22--then again at 26 months, and his disposition is pure joy--rarely any temper tantrums, always willing to listen when we ask him to do something, a complete and total wonder child.

When Keigan's language difficulties became apparent and frustrating to *him*, his papa and I realized that while we had instilled in him a sense of worth and independence, we had also unwittingly created an expectation of flawlessness. Although he is just three and a half, he is perceptive. Often times dangerously so.

While we had demonstrated unwavering support for his attempts at language in all the ways we knew how, our child, our progeny, had perceived our concern (and that of others) regarding his slow speech development. So he shut down. He recoiled. He learned how to say "I don't know" and when asked anything would respond with his one and only articulate phrase. An easy out.

His father and I watched in horror, disbelief, and impotence as he slowly transformed from gregarious toddler to silent preschooler. We discussed possible options, and attempted to create various "safe" environments for language exploration, as discussed in the many child psychology and parenting books that we have stacked around our home.

Yet, we were stubborn. We were reluctant to accept that he may actually have a 'problem'. Realizing this limitation about myself, about my fallibility as a parent, was startling. While I had made my unborn child so many promises that I would do "better", that I would try to be the "perfect" mother, I realized I wasn't replicating my mother's mistakes, I was creating my own. In doing so I am setting the course for my relationship with my son, much as my mother set the course of our relationship.

Keigan has been in speech therapy for a month now, and seems to genuinely enjoy it. We no longer try to protect him from his flaws, but try to embrace them. He knows why he goes to the squatty red brick building that is always too hot, we've discussed it with him. He goes to "word on his words". And we go, his papa and me, to work on our expectations, our parental limitations, our selves. We sit together, often holding hands and beaming at each other as we watch, mesmerized, our little man conquer new sounds on the other side of the two-way mirror. He beams unknowingly back at us, with a renewed sense of self-confidence, identity, worth. He floods his 'word-friend' with "Why"s, and demonstrates his intellect with his growing vocabulary, reducing her to sweet-natured, professional laughter, and us to tears.

*Dana C. Fritzemeier*

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## **The Yellow Square**

*(The Yellow Square, Wolf Kahn, 1981)*

A lavender barn,  
soothing, though  
almost unreal.  
Hints of white  
embedded in my favorite hue,  
a reflection of its serene surroundings--  
clear sky, winding path, soft green grass.  
Inside, a light,  
curious, unnatural.

The intriguing glow pulls me in,  
dark, mysterious, familiar.  
I enter

with no consciousness of time or place,  
in my own world  
having left behind the noise,  
the people, the traffic, the stress,  
the deadlines, the impatience and misunderstanding,  
all the things that block out  
that yellow square, hidden in every soul  
shining strong with hope and grace,  
gently drawing others  
to a land which they have forgotten,  
a land where birds fly free  
and flowers grow  
unplanted.

*Craig McLean*

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## **Dogs 'n Deers**

“Hey, Willie Worm...catch!” Jody shouted, heaving a green horse apple at the boy standing in weeds almost as tall as he was, just a few yards away.

They weren't really horse apples at all, I'd learn much later--just the fruit of the Osage-orange tree. You can't eat them. I doubt if anything can, or does, or would want to, for that matter/. their skin makes them look like softball-sized brains, but because they were big and ugly--and lacking a better name in those days--we called them horse apples. For boys in elementary school, they were just the thing for throwing at each other. The milky sap that seeped out whenever they were brusined was an added bonus.

Hearing Jody calling him, Willy looked up and caught the horse apple aquare in the forehead. I flinched. Two or three years younger than us, Willy was thin and delicate--probably the biggest reason all the older guys liked picking on him. Worm wasn't his real last name; it just seemed to go well with Willy.

Willy grunted and fell over from the impace of the apple.

“Ha, ha...look at the Worm go down...you gotta be alert, Willy boy!” Jody laughed.

“What'd you go and do that for?” I asked, wondering if Willy was okay.

Jody looked at me like I was stupid. “He was following us again. I told him to quite huggin us all the time.”

We could hear bawling coming from the brush. I broke off a long weed and pitched it like a spear in no particular direction. Hundreds, thousands, of invisible locusts were chirping loudly--excitedly--like they were haivng an agitated discussion about Willy getting blasted.

Holding a hand over his forehead, Willy appeared again, a bit unsteady on his feet. Still crying, he looked at us one last time before stumbling off toward his house.

“That'll teach him,” Jody said, like he'd squished a mosquito.

A couple of inches shorter than me, Jody was the only kid my age for miles around. His upturned eyebrows made him appear almost sinister--I mean, even more than he was.

“I dunno, a horse apple...maybe that was too much, Jody

“Ah, shit, you gonna be a sissy, too? He’ll live.” Jody picked his nose. “Come on, I thought we were going swimming.”

I dug my toe in the dirt. “Yeah...right...”

We trudged across the field toward our favorite swimming hole, nearly two miles away. Of course, the pond was off-limits by order of all our parents, which only added to the appeal. It was a sweltering day, even for July--probably a hundred at least; the water was going to feel cool on our naked bodies. I glanced over my shoulder and bit at my lower lip. Willy was already out the appeal. It was a sweltering day, even for July--probably a hundred at least; the water was going to feel cool on our naked bodies. I glanced over my shoulder and bit at my lower lip. Willy was already out of sight.

“Last one in’s a rotten egg!” I shouted, pulling off my tee shirt, then dropping my shorts and underwear in the brush as quickly as I could.

Jody hadn’t been wearing a shirt and was already swinging his cutoffs and underwear over his head, lasso-like, as he charged toward the pond ahead of me. With a whoop, he let his clothes fly--missing the bush he’d been aiming for--and his feet began lifting big geysers as he stomped out into the water. The white flash of his rear end looked funny against the rest of his tanned body and I laughed to myself. Jody dove head first into the water and I cannon-balled in right behind him.

The pond itself was bigger than a baseball diamond. On one side there was a low cliff with a tree we’d hung a rope in for swinging on and jumping out into the water off of. For the most part, the pond was pretty clear of junk--just one old tree submerged at one end. The bottom was soft and mushy. All in all, it was a young boy’s paradise.

“Too bad we couldn’t get our raft out here,” Jody said, standing shoulder-deep in the water. Out behind his house, we had built a huge raft the summer before. We only managed to drag it a foot or two before finally giving up on it, figuring it couldn’t possibly have floated anyway.

“It was a swell raft,” I agreed, treading water.

Jody started dog paddling around me. “I saw Cathy Wexler yesterday.”

“Oh yeah? What was she up to?” I asked. Cathy was our age. Thin and wiry, with sandy blond hair, she could out wrestle a lot of boys her own size.

"Hers...you know." Standing again, Jody pointed down towards his lower body. He had a grin on his face.

I suddenly realized what he was talking about. "Oh, man, she didn't! Did she? Really?"

Jody kept smiling and nodded. "Yup. I had to show her mine, too, though."

I laughed out loud and splashed water at him. "No, you didn't." Jody laughed and splashed me back.

Today, some girls are getting pregnant by the time they're twelve. But in those days, we were all still a little naive and bashful, talking about girls and guys, and sex, and all that. It was mostly a mystery to us, although we vaguely knew the differences between boys and girls had something to do with making babies.

"I did so...I showed her my peter," Jody answered proudly. "Out behind her garage."

I wasn't at all sure I could do the same thing, but curiosity and a strange fascination began playing with my mind. I made a mental note to look Cathy up before summer was over.

"Hey, let's drown something!" Jody said with a sudden look of excitement. I remembered the box turtle he'd sailed out on a little board a couple of weeks ago. From the bank, we'd thrown rocks and sticks at it until the board flipped over, dropping the turtle into the water. I remembered hoping he'd float back to the surface and swim for it, but he never did.

"No animals," I said flatly.

"Okay...bugs or something. Wait here."

Jody climbed out of the water and I watched him stalk through the brush nearby. That's when I noticed something else moving behind some bushes not far from him. A blond head bobbed into view. It was Willy; he'd doubled back and followed us, watching us the whole time from back in the weeds. I started to call out to Jody, but hesitated. I thought about that day at Willy's house.

"Come in, young man." Willy's mom looked older than mine. I thought that seemed peculiar, him being younger than me and all. But she had a kindly face with thin, smiling lips--lips a lot like Willy's. "Willy tells me you're one of his friends."

"Well, sort of..." I answered awkwardly. He'd told her I was his friend? I wondered if he'd told her about how the rest of us bullied him, too. I felt really warm and my neck

started itching.

Most of the time, Jody and I tolerated Willy being around, but that's about all it ever amounted to--he was just *there*. He wasn't ever allowed to join us or anything like that; he could watch, and that was it. Other times, we wouldn't want him around at all, and we'd push him down or thump him on the shoulders until he'd cry and run home. After that, we wouldn't see him for a day or two. Eventually, Willy would show up again, though, from a distance at first--trying to gauge our mood to see if he thought it was safe to tag along. If he figured it was okay, he'd be right on our heels before you knew it, happy as ever--like the three of us were the best of buddies and all.

"Willy also tells me he broke a car that belonged to you." She glanced at Willy without anger. It was more like the gentle sorrow you'd expect from a grandmother. "I've told you, honey, you have to be careful with other people's things."

Willy looked up and said, "I didn't mean to. We were playing..."

I felt about as low as I figured was possible. "We" hadn't been playing at all. My house sat on a small hill and I'd been rolling a flimsy little toy car I had down our driveway. Willy was watching me anyway, so I finally let him retrieve the car and bring it back up to me. One time, he tried to push it back up the hill and pressed down too hard on it, breaking a wheel. I'd been mad all right, but all I could do was shove him and tell him he was going to have to pay me for it. Well, he didn't have any money, but he said he'd talk to his mom. And so, the visit to his house...

"Did you tell your friend you were sorry?" There's that *friend* again, I thought. Suddenly, all I really wanted was just to get out of there.

"Uh huh." Willy looked from his mom to me. "Didn't I? I'll be more careful next time, I promise."

I looked back at Willy thinking, *That's just it Worm, There's not going to be any next time...we weren't even playing this time, not together!* But what came out was, "Let's just forget about it Willy...it wasn't that great a car anyway."

Willy smiled and his mom beamed down at both of us, asking me if I was sure, and I said I was. Before it was all over, though, I had to stay for cookies and soda. I didn't do much talking, but Willy did. I'd never heard him say ten words before in my life, but he started recounting adventures we'd all been through together that summer; he, Jody, and I,

that is. As I remembered, Willy'd been a spectator at most, but I smiled and nodded as his mom listened too, showing real interest. I finally managed to pry myself away, with Willy and his mom waving to me as I left. I waved back absently. Things had not gone at all like I'd planned.

"Here's just the thing...a boat load of ants!" Jody called out, tiptoeing out of the thick weeds with a chunk of wood. His little peter bounced up and down as he dashed back to the pond.

"What now?" I asked, looking at the ants crawling over the wood. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Willy peering through the bushes at us. For a second, I thought our gazes may have met.

"We float it out like this," Jody pushed the wood into the water. "And then torpedo it! Any ants that hang on win, *if* the boat ever makes it back to land."

I dove down to get some rocks off the bottom, angry. Willy was assuming a lot, if he knew I'd seen him. But I decided not to say anything to Jody as long as Willy was gone before we got back out of the water. Or maybe I could "spot" him before we had a chance to climb out or get dressed again. Give him a little head start on us. My problem solved itself; Willy slipped away halfway through "torpedo the ants".

The summer continued to go on like most others. Jody and I played army, wrestled, went skinny-dipping in the pond, hunted for soda bottles to return for the deposit to buy candy at the 7-11 with. The usual kids-on-summer-vacation stuff. We were even building a tree house, at least whenever we came across any discarded lumber we could use. Some even came from our old raft. The tree house never did get totally finished, though. Today there's a whole block of new homes waiting to be moved into where our tree used to stand. Someone's going to have to look a long time to find another tree like that one to build a clubhouse in. It had a real...style...to it.

Two or three times a month, the Haight brothers would ride their bikes over from wherever it was they lived. It couldn't have been very close by. Jody and I never saw them except on summer vacations. They were in a different school district from ours altogether. There were four: Mike, Alex, Ted, and Big Jesse. Jesse was in junior high, but the

other three were still in elementary school, about Jody's and my age. Whenever the Haight boys came over we could play tackle football, softball, or anything else it took more than two to do.

They rode up one day while Jody and I were sitting on the curb watching a bunch of ants trying to carry off a freshly killed caterpillar we'd supplied. Willy was there too, a few feet away, watching quietly.

"Hey guys," Jody greeted the brothers.

They called back with "How ya doin'"s and the "Hey"s as their bikes skidded to a stop in front of us.

Big Jesse, always a little scary because he was bigger than the rest of us, snapped Jody on the head with his middle finger. "So, squirrel brain...you gettin' any?"

"Oww!" Jody winced, rubbing his head and squinting up at Jesse. "Any what?"

The Haight boys all laughed. I laughed too, even though I didn't know what Jesse was talking about.

"Don't hold out on us, you dog...everybody knows what a lady's man you are!" He snapped Jody on the head again. It sounded like an acorn bouncing off the pavement. The four brothers laughed raucously.

"Hey!" Jody bobbed his head and stumbled to his feet.

"How about some football?" I asked, standing up and trying to change the direction things seemed to be going in.

Big Jesse, chewing on a wad of Bazooka gum, looked at me. "Nah, we got a new one for you guys." He blew a bubble almost as big as his belly.

"Dogs 'n Deers," grinned Mike. One of his front teeth was broken off at a sharp angle, which added to his scaled-down prize fighter look.

I thought maybe "deers" didn't have an "s" on it, but there weren't any teachers around, so who cared?

"How does it go?" Jody asked, rubbing his head and easing out of Jesse's reach.

"Easy enough," Ted began in his slow drawl. "Half of us is dogs...and the other other half...is deers, see. And we set up boundaries, in some field...and, well...like, all the deers get a head start, you know--"

Impatiently, Alex cut in. "When a dog tags a deer, the deer has gotta freeze, unless he gets tagged free by another deer. Or until all the deers is tagged out...and then the dogs win."

"Then we change sides, Jesse added. "The dogs are

deers and the deers are dogs. It ain't much fun with four, but with you guys, we got three to a side."

"Can I play, too?" Willy asked, standing up.

Everyone turned and frowned at Willy. His fuzzy blond head was bowed slightly, but he had a hopeful look in his big eyes.

"Get outta here, Worm, before I smack you," Jody shot back.

Mike raised a fist. "Yeah, get lost creep."

I hoped Willy had enough sense to get lost. He did. Turning and walking slowly away, he didn't stop until he was at a safe

We decided the field across the street was as good as any distance. From there, he stayed and watched.

We decided the field across the street was as good as any to play our game in; it was mostly wide open, with only a few small clumps of trees which we figured would just make the chase more interesting. After choosing up sides, it was going to be Big Jesse, Mike and Alex against Jody, Ted, and me. I did paper-rock-scissors with Jesse and his rock beat my scissors. My side had to be the deers in the first round.

It turned out to be a decent game. Ted kept getting tagged, but I'd slip in and tag him free before any of the dogs could get close to me. I'd always been fast for my age. Jody was pretty slippery too, and the dogs weren't making a lot of headway against us deers. Willy was jumping up and down excitedly from one end of the field.

Well, Ted finally got tagged again and I was rushing to free him, only Big Jesse was ready this time. I heard him stomping through the brush and turned to see his forearm coming at my head. It was like a big door slamming, followed by this tremendous ringing in my ears. I was rolling in the dirt before I realized Jesse had "tagged" me but good. Three against one and Jody didn't last much longer. My head was still ringing when the round came to an end.

"Hey, you all right?" Jesse said, walking up to me, laughing.

"I'm okay," I lied, still brushing myself off. I wondered what kind of "tag" that had been anyway. Not only was my head pounding, but my elbow stung. I lifted it to see a thin trail of blood running through the dust on the underside of my forearm. I had a good-sized scrape on my elbow from plowing into the ground. I looked at Jesse and said, "I'll live."

Big Jesse laughed and punched me in the chest. "Yeah, I guess. You're a tough little fuck, right?"

I flinched from the blow. "Yeah...tough..."

Jesse started to give me another jab, but I skipped out of his reach. The Haight boys and Joey laughed. I just rubbed my chest and made a face.

"Now we change sides," Alex declared.

Us former deers had a little more trouble catching the new deers. I was finally gaining on Big Jesse, though, when he suddenly stopped and swung his elbow back, catching me on the side of my face this time. I went down hard again.

"Hah! Gotta watch out for us deers...maybe we're still dogs, you know! Ha, ha!"

Jody ran up to see if I was okay. I got to my knees and watched Big Jesse turning in little circles and running backwards. He was still laughing.

"Hey, you're bleeding again," Jody said.

I tasted blood and reached up to feel my lip. It was cut--there was blood on my finger.

"I oughta skip a rock off his head," I muttered.

"Yeah, if you'd like to *really* get your butt kicked!"

The deers went on to win that round. We kept tagging Mike and Alex, but Big Jesse kept freeing them again. And nobody'd go after Jesse like they really planned on tagging him anyway, snnounced we were giving up.

"You sorry bunch of wimps...can't even catch a few little ol' deers?" Jesse snorted, heading towards Jody.

"It wasn't my idea..." Jody said, backing up and pointing at me.

"Oh, so you're the little girl wants to give up, huh?"

"Jesse ran at me and I took off. I knew he was going to give me a knot on the head, or worse, so there was no way I was going to let him catch me. I zigged and zagged, and almost ran into Willy, still watching all this time. As I got closer, his eyes got bigger and bigger. For a second, I looked down into them and he looked back up into mine. I can't explain it exactly, but for a minute...it was like...well, he didn't look the same. I mean, it was still Willy, but he just seemed different to me somehow. Then I saw Big Jesse's face...and I blinked my eyes hard, suddenly remembering he was still hot on my heels. I pivoted to the right, finally losing him in a tangle of trees. Jesse turned away--cursing me--and swaggered back towards the others, who'd been watching from the center of the field. I waited until he was out of

range and spit after him. Glancing over at Willy again, I saw he was clapping his hands and laughing.

The next day, Jody and I were in his yard playing with a balsa wood glider he'd bought at the 7-11 when he and his dad had gone out for some milk the night before. Willy was there too, but he wasn't allowed to touch anything, just watch. Jody let go with one great throw and his plane made a breathtaking series of loops and rolls before finally nosing into the ground again. Willy, overcome with excitement, charged over to it.

"Wow, did you see that? Did you see that?" he squealed, dancing around the glider.

"Get away from there," Jody yelled, but it was too late. One of Willy's feet came down on a wing and the balsa wood snapped with a distinctive crunch, like when you bite into a potato chip.

"You idiot! You Goddamn little idiot!" Jody screamed, running over and picking up the damaged plane.

"Hey, he didn't mean it." I put my hand on Jody's shoulder.

Willy stood frozen, a shocked look on his face. "I'm sorry, it was...an accident..."

Jody twisted the broken wing back and forth. He looked at me and then over at Willy. "It's ruined, you little shit!"

"Look, Jody, it was an accident, okay?" I glanced at Willy.

"I'm sorry..." he repeated in a small voice.

"Sorry's not good enough!" Jody punched him full in the face. Willy's nose spurted blood as he fell backward, losing his balance. His head bounced on the cement driveway with a sickening thud and he lay still. A little rivulet of blood worked its way down his cheek.

"Damn," I blurted out, running over and dropping to my knees beside Willy. I kept looking from him to Jody, and back again.

Jody's plane slipped from his fingers and fell to the ground. Jody just stood there, motionless.

"Willy, are you all right? Willy!" I pleaded, shaking him.

Willy's head rolled loosely. Terrified, I looked back at Jody.

"God, oh God, he's dead...he's dead, Jody..." I held Willy's head in my lap and tears filled my eyes.

I ran off after the ambulance left with Willy in the back. Jody's mom was still standing near the driveway, wringing

her hands and talking to herself. Slumped to the ground Jody was holding his head between his legs. The driver had helped Willy's mom into the back of the ambulance--she'd wanted to ride with her son.

Belly-up and forgotten, the broken glider lay quietly in the grass.

I ran blindly, without stopping. Reaching the swimming hole, I threw myself down on the bank, sobbing. I don't know how long I'd been there when Jody finally showed up, breathing hard.

"Didn't you hear them?" Jody gasped, trying to catch his breath. "Weren't you listening? He's okay...just a bad bump on the head..."

Jody was trembling slightly. Sitting back up and ignoring him, I began wiping my eyes on the shoulders of my tee shirt.

The only other sound was the incessant chirping of locusts.

"Everything's okay, I'm tellin' ya," Jody said finally. "The Worm is gonna be all right--"

I jumped up and grabbed him. Getting my face close to Jody's, I could feel his breath on my lips. Then I started shaking him.

"You shit, you stupid shit!" I yelled.

"Look, it was an accident..." Jody, frightened, just babbled on, "...but, don't you understand...it's all okay..."

I hurled Jody as hard as I could out into the water. Tripping on a rock, I fell in behind him.

Staggering to my feet and spitting out water, I screamed, "No...no, it's *not* all right!" I wiped the dripping hair out of my eyes. "It's *not* okay! It's *not* OKAY!"

Sitting chest-deep in the water, Jody held an arm across his face and leaned away from me.

"And you...and everyone else," I slapped at the water with both hands, "can just go...to hell! Okay...huh? Huh?"

Jody's arm dropped with a soft splash. Little ripples slowly spread around him and his head dipped forward.

Water poured from my shorts and my shirt as I turned and climbed back up on the bank. Finally, in a choked voice, Jody called out to me. I'd already started walking away and didn't answer. Jody waited, and called out to me again, louder this time, but I was almost far enough away not to hear him.

*Jamie Sipes*

**The Letter**

Medium: charcoal on paper



*Ben Cartwright*

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## **The Persistence of Time**

And there is a destructive  
harpischord of days out there  
in the cracks and grass-  
filled furrows of sidewalks--  
it is a desolate time  
when you turn up your collar  
drowning in the present  
like burning your fingertips  
there is a time and no  
way out of this city  
this burg of iron  
baleful windows  
snows shoveling in  
new yorkr over grates  
steaming and the  
dreams are cold and still  
the sheets  
are cold and still  
because in America  
you will grow old and will  
work with the cracked  
skin of Arizona  
desert streamless  
flats of salt  
and mineral.  
so don't search here for  
a devotion for someone  
to take care  
you'd better start worshipping  
green  
or they'll catch you and put you  
out on these streets  
you're 20 and can feel them  
like needles  
can be pricked on the metro  
by the silence of economical minds  
and there are angels  
somewhere there are angels  
I can see them just

## 42 Cartwright

in the next car  
of the subway--when  
the doors open  
I try to reach them  
to brush my lips  
across their hems just once  
to escape this finite  
place for at least a day  
but they are swept  
away with the crowd and I  
push my way through  
floating as in  
a riptide moved out  
and up the stairs  
there's no heaven  
here, only gears  
and too many words to utter--  
too many so that at night  
you can't sleep  
like a child with the soft  
lambs of dreams and  
a liquid bottle of days  
around you floating  
but are forced into this  
human coil for a few more  
years until you can't work anymore.  
The streets are paved with old,  
worn out men and women  
Old Americans like John Brown  
pounding through with nails  
prophesying with a burst of love.

These cities aren't made for people.  
They're made for movement.  
Don't let go of your  
point here or they'll  
take it from you.  
You'll be left holding  
nothing but nails.

*Christopher M. Morgan*

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## **Emissary**

It was just this sort of day that had convinced so many retirees to flock to Florida. The bright yellow sun had chased all of the clouds far into the horizon by midday, leaving it the only feature in a vast expanse of blue sky. Its rays danced playfully across the small wavelets that gently lapped against the shore creating a dazzling display of light.

Every now and again a cool sea breeze would drift past, blowing away the sultry air that had been accumulating over the burning sand. The earthy smell of salt and fish pervaded my nostrils. Each time the tide washed in and receded, it left hundreds of small crabs scurrying for shelter under the sand. Further down the beach, a large group of finicky seagulls whistled unhappily at each other as they jockeyed for position, searching for any sea life unfortunate enough to be left by the receding tide. A brazen pelican swooped down from his low glide, plunging into the water near a group of delighted swimmers, spooned out a small fish, and swallowed it in a single authoritative gulp.

I had never been to the ocean before and I was eager to wade out into the cool, inviting waves. I started to walk towards the water and then stopped to watch my feet sink into the ground as the tide washed grains of sand over them. The cool water felt refreshing as it washed past my ankles and the sand tickled as it passed. After watching the tide slowly cover my feet with sand for a while I continued into the water. The waves lapped against my legs, gently at first, but began to sway my entire body as I went further. The water grew steadily colder as I waded in deeper and I had to stop intermittently to acclimate myself. The exposed half of my body still felt the fiery sun beating down against my skin while my legs were submerged in the chilly water, making me feel more comfortable than I had been, standing on the hot beach.

I could no longer make any progress walking. Each time I took a step, the current would push me backward and my toes would sift through the fluid sand on the sea floor. I started to swim, working my way up the crest of the waves and gliding down the other side as they moved past. I climbed the waves for a while until my chest began to heave slightly

from the exertion. I turned toward the shore only to find that I was further out than I had anticipated. I put my feet down to see if I could still reach the bottom this far from shore. To my surprise, my feet were granted with the wet, supple feel of sand.

The waves had changed from curling, breaking waves near the shore into smooth hills that rolled in a staggered procession, one advancing head on and the two after that flanking me on either side. The large gentle waves slowly lifted me off my feet as they approached and set me back down lightly as they passed. The seagulls' excited chirping seemed distanced, muted by the constant ripple of waves. My body was at a comfortable temperature, standing there in the chilled Atlantic water while the warm sun shone down. My mind drifted as the undulating waves rocked me into a peaceful trance.

Just over the peak of the next wave, something caught my eye. I squinted against the glare reflecting off of the water, trying to see what it was. The hairs on the back of my neck stood at attention. A wave advanced, obscuring my view as it rolled by. It slowly passed and on the side of the following wave a small gray patch of skin broke the surface. Beneath that, an enormous black shadow filled the water, occupying almost the entire wave.

My lungs jumped as I involuntarily gasped. The copper taste of fear filled my mouth. Streaks of electricity coursed through my nerves and my chest tightened up as if my heart were tugging at my rib cage. The image of the pelican swallowing his fish in one gulp permeated my thoughts. I wanted to scream but nothing came out.

Not waiting to catch another glimpse, I turned to shore, legs flailing in the ice water, my toes catching the bottom and sliding thought the aqueous mush. The waves beat me back and forth. The icy water slapped my face, forcing the salty water into my mouth and making me cough fitfully. My eyes felt swollen ten times their size from the burning brine. I swam desperately, feeling the impending presence just behind me. The sun's severe rays cascaded off the water, blinding me. I wasn't sure which direction to swim. The current sucked me under, pulling out to sea. I pounded the water frantically with my arms for what seemed like an eternity.

Finally, the scratchy feel of sand scraped my belly as I slid up onto shore. I stood, half-crawling, half-running, and collapsed when my feet hit dry sand. My lungs gasped for

oxygen. My arms and leg were on fire. My body shuddered with relief as a breeze blew across me. I steadied myself, distraught with my near demise.

My eyes affixed to the cursed water, I heard a chuckle. "They're big but they won't hurt ya son." I turned and saw a man in his fifties with a long fishing pole, wearing a floral print shirt and khaki shorts. I looked at him blankly, surprised at his absurd comment. Seeing my look of disbelief, he continued, "Oh yeah, they like to hang around the beaches...some of the most friendly beasts out there." He paused, "Manatees...That was a manatee that was out there with you. You know, a sea cow."

Relief gave way to disbelief. Blood rushed to my face and my cheeks felt hot. I was humiliated at my naive fear of something of which I only saw the smallest patch of skin. I began to feel a great disappointment. If I had looked past that patch of skin to see what it really was, I could have enjoyed that friendly visit from one of mother nature's most amiable creatures. Instead, I only caught a glance. To this day, when I tell people that I swam with a manatee, they ask "What did it look like?" I have to shrug and tell them that I was too scared to even realize what it was until it was gone.

*Dustin Parsons*

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## Law of Averages

I sat quietly in the back of my truck, legs extended with ankles crossed, boots depositing Kansas clay from under the worn soles. I always listen to whatever ball game I can find on the AM station after I get done checking cornfields for the day. That's the funny thing about AM; you can get stations from as far away as San Francisco or as near as St. Louis with the same regularity. I usually had a beer stowed away in my cooler, so I would stretch out with my shirt off, my head back against the top edge of the tailgate, and enjoy part of a ball game that I couldn't see. That's always the best way to "see" them.

I put myself there in the game, forming it like wet snow forms into a ball, packed hard together but eventually falling apart as it is thrown into reality. These evenings have molded my reality slowly. Listening to baseball games on the radio helped me reach out to them, to somehow tap into their talent. I remember the last high school game I played in the spring. The league championship game was probably the biggest thing to happen in Holyfield every year. Baseball was never the forgotten sport that it is in other places in Kansas. Here it made you, it put memories in other people's minds, it associated you with the blue sky, with the diving snap in the hole, with the hit that could have won the game. I only just realized this when moving here between my freshman and sophomore year. My hit never came that day though, and as I watched the junior college scouts walk away, I knew my applications were not being considered.

I was sitting on second base as out team packed it in and left. The sounds of cars starting, chanting the march away from Lark's park, left plumes of dust in their wake. I watched it rise slowly up, car after car, and dissipate as the wind slowly shuffled by.

"Justin."

"Yeah," I answered my coach softly without looking up.

"It's just a game," he said.

I was still staring at the red beyond the left field fence when he left, my glove lying in the dirt beside me. Harry Carey's voice brought me back to reality.

*Holy Cow, what a catch by Sammy Sosa!* I loved listening to the gruff voices pitched behind static coming from Chicago as they called a double-header. I could see the game being played in front of me, as if Kinsella had put his field of dreams in the corn fields I was parked next to at the top of this hill. I felt that if I built up this persona, the talent would come. I wanted the cheering crowds to chant my name, and as I approached the plate everyone would be sure to realize The Mighty Casey would not strike out again.

Neal was usually the only other hand at the farm that got off the tractor about the same time and didn't feel like going back into town. He usually came out with me to the hill on the north end of the Peterson land a mile off the highway. Neal rarely had much to say, and I liked that. Not because he didn't seem intelligent, far from it, but when he showed up he came to drink a beer, lean against the truck, and listen to the ball game. Just to relax, forget the day and try not to think about tomorrow. I'd usually talk about what I missed: my sweat stained baseball caps, apple bubble gum mixed Golden Blend, and the smell of my glove. He usually told me about how he loved working on his own, spending late nights in the corn fields during harvest, and just making things grow.

Neal pulled up the hill and parked his old Chevrolet next to mine on the access road to the field. He got out of the rusty cab and leaned against mine, cracking open a beer as he took his baseball cap off. The Cubs just gave up two runs and are now down 5-2 in the fifth inning, despite Sosa's catch. When Neal heard that, knowing I'm a big Cubs fan, he just lowered his head shaking it and laughed weakly. Then just as quickly, his eyes focused on me and the smile left his face.

"I heard you didn't get in," he said as he stared off into the corn in front of us. "Sorry."

I shrugged my shoulders. Every letter that came was an affirmation that maybe I would always have this job. *Perhaps you can walk-on, but we can't save any money for you this semester* rang through my head. I had grown sick of answering apologies, and finally realizing that I didn't have to, I made it clear I didn't want to talk about it.

Neal climbed onto the edge of the pickup bed and leaned against the back of the cab. Although as a general rule Neal kept to himself, I always felt like I could talk to him. He was there, in Holyfield, when my family moved there two years

ago and it took a long time before I could trust anybody, including him. But eventually I did. We really weren't hell raisers, as the average small town kids want you to believe they are. Mostly we just hung out on my back porch watching everyone drive by the main drag.

But if he was anything, it was reliable. He listened when I cried about my mother leaving my dad. Neal didn't want anything from me, and he seemed to have his whole life in his pocket. He held it concealed from the rest of the world. Yet I knew that he came over to stay away from his father. Neal's dad was a legend around the state. Every time I went to pick Neal up at his house I was greeted by Jefferson Michael Hoss, the greatest tailback ever to walk Ness County's hallowed dirt pigskin field. The trophy room doubled as the living room, and the TV tray that held up the constant noise of a television just barely held all the plastic gold that Jefferson (everyone called him J.M.) had been endowed with.

I knew that he rode Neal hard about why he couldn't see the hole between the tackle and the guard on Friday nights during football season. I knew that J.M. was disappointed in Neal. I knew that Neal hated football. Many people believed he had a future in it, but he wouldn't say a word about how he felt. Somehow I knew, and Neal realized that I knew. Sometimes I wonder if trust can grow in any other way.

He made himself comfortable, leaning back on the side of my truck with one leg stretched out in front of him, and began to speak.

"A few years ago, before you came to work here, we hired an old man named Jim to do the welding and odd jobs around the farm. He wandered in the Quonset one day looking for any work we could give him. I remember he had on this ratty collared flannel shirt with long sleeves buttoned down to his wrists, tucked into a pair of dark pants. This was July, and inside that shed, it must have been better than a hundred degrees, but while he stood there talking to Chet, the foreman at that time, he refused to roll up those sleeves. He seemed to be cooler than we were, because I was sweating my ass off."

I've never heard him say so much at one time. I raise my head to see his powerful figure just staring into the corn. His body was tailored for a running back. He had punishingly broad shoulders and a small, squat build that made his center of gravity impossible to duplicate. I have usually been

able to recognize what Neal wants to say by the way he looked and he never actually had to say it, but this was different. He wanted to tell me this. His eyes seemed to follow the cornfield's rows, moving away from us and coming toward us. He glanced at me and continued.

"Maybe Chet felt sorry for him, maybe he really did need help, but either way we hired him. He went to work without hardly setting down the small bag of gear he had with him. He walked right in and began to weld the arms of the under-cutter on like Chet told him. That's when I finally got a good look at him. He wasn't a big guy, but he was big enough to handle whatever Chet put in front of him. He was gettin' on though, probably 70 or so. Those years, however many there were, weren't very kind to him. He took his hat off and had a full head of hair with scars on his forehead. His cheeks too. His face was wrinkled heavily under his eyes. His cheeks were set kinda high, like he always had a grin on his face."

Neal took a drink while staring out at the corn. A dust devil cut through the rows like something, maybe a soul, was wandering quickly through the stalks trying to find its way out. The fields have a personality all their own, reacting to wind current, weather, and nature just as we react. There many similarities, I have noticed, between nature and man. It is easy to call a field by a name, as if it had a life all its own.

"About a week after we hired Jim, things were running smoothly. Implements actually fit on the tractors the first time that we tried hooking them on, and the Quonset was semi-organized. It was all him, man. He plugged away at that work as if was all he had, almost as if it was what he was judged upon in life. Ol' Peterson would feed Jim himself after work, talking to him for hours. To him, not with him. I always heard that Jim didn't say more than a dozen words to Peterson all summer. After supper, 'bout the time I would leave, Jim would head back to the Quonset, and Chet told me that the light would stay on 'til late in the evenin'.

"When we cut alfalfa late that summer, it was just me and him cuttin' on that old junker International Peterson has. I asked him what he used to do and he said, 'Jobs like this.' That's it man. That's all he'd say.

"I came upon Jim that night, whistlin' a tune I've never heard before. He was bent over what he had left in that bag, and I felt kinds bad sneakin' up on him like that, but I didn't wanna bug him." Neal took another quick shot of beer. "He

whistled pretty good, and he was looking' through pictures he had in his pack. I couldn't see what they were, but he would stop whistlin' when he moved to the next one. Never cried or anything like that, but I could tell he was rememberin' something' he didn't want to talk about.

"Two nights later that old man died in the Quonset in his sleep. It's like he knew he was goin', ya know? We figured we ought to call the sheriff, so we did, and he found out who he was, where he needed to be. Turns out he wasn't lyin' to me, all his life he worked service jobs here and there from Nebraska to Texas. Sheriff found out by gettin' hold of his W-4 stuff for all his jobs in the last ten years."

"Did you like the guy?" I said finally looking Neal squarely in the eyes.

"Yeah, I guess, as much as you can like someone you ain't really talked to. It wasn't so much that I liked him as that I appreciated what he did. Seemed that his only mission in life was to make things work, for himself and for us. You got to appreciate someone that works that hard not to get ahead, but just to do what he's good at. We didn't even pay him that summer. Chet was goin' to at the end of harvest, but Jim never went anywhere, never did anything 'cept work, sleep, and eat. That's what I think being above average is about, havin' passion for what you do."

I glanced at the corn field, now difficult to see as the sun was going down. The silence that ensued was unbreakable as we sat motionless listening to the leaves of the cornstalks brush each together. The waves of corn stirred with the wind, and I had trouble seeing the game on the radio in front of me. I tried to reposition myself to catch some more of the sunlight reflecting off of the cornstalk leaves as the sun set, but the red sky was already fading to a dull, enveloping orange. I got out of the back and turned the radio off as Steve Stone told me the score was 7-2. Cubs lose.

I looked at Neal, and he just stared off into the fading corn. "I'll see ya later, Neal," I said as I climbed back into my truck. Maybe, I thought, I ought to go to the batting cages tonight. I wanted to be in the minds of people who watched me like the blue sky, saw my diving catches, and awed at the hit that won games.

*Ben Cartwright*

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## Watching Nole on His Way Down

“Our father, who art in nada.” --Ernest Hemingway

This one's for the last dying spark--  
 the gold-coin at the bottom of Nole's glass  
 that keeps him emptying it.  
 He's out there tonight on the stand--  
 mellow on rum and coke, playing his bass  
 while Arnie Carruthers and the jazz band  
 wait for their saint to come back to them.  
 But Nole burned his sandals.  
 He splintered the wood of all the crosses left.  
 With the dull vibration on the strings  
 he plucks and plays.

I've seen his head lowered,  
 bobbing to touch seraphim--  
 his hands holding that wood  
 like a wrist.  
 I've felt the counter-rhythm  
 as he syncopates with the blind ideals  
 of the piano.

Nole is phrasing to survive.  
 He holds that bass like a bible,  
 between himself and the world.  
 The plucking sound of “nada” when he strums  
 crescendos and sings with his heart.  
 We tap with the tips and our palms.  
 The wood of the tables and chairs  
 careens out the beat  
 and we all move--marked to his time.

*Christina Herbic*

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## **Staying Together**

It was a cloudy, crisp October day. I kept quiet on our warm-up run. The sound of our nylon running pants was the only noise I heard. "This is it, this is the day," I thought to myself. Knowing this, thoughts raced through my mind. I knew that I needed a quick start and a strong first mile if I wanted to place within the top fifty runners.

Being a freshmen, I was nervous before every meet, especially this one. There were so many runners, even a few colleges were there. I was intimidated by the number of runners; there were schools there that I had never heard of before. Yet, I knew I was a strong runner and I knew that my task in this race was the same as the other races that I had run in. My close teammate, Juli, and I ran our warm-up in complete silence. That day, we sensed each other's nervousness. I regained some assurance when I glanced down at my new Asics. They were a beautiful shade of white, but had already become quickly speckled with mud. My dad had bought them for me the previous day. He had me completely convinced that these shoes were racing shoes, not just running shoes.

The damp air filled my nostrils as we approached the starting line. It smelled of a mixture of wet grass, sweat and Gatorade. It was the smell of cross-country. We approached the starting line and began our pre-race pickups and accelerations. Intimidating glances from the opposing teams were cast our way. Juli and I were the top freshman runners; our team counted on us placing well. We confided in each other all of the time. For some reason, that day I said to her, "Let's try to stick together." Juli and I usually started out away from one another, but we always ended the race fairly close to one another. Little did I know that our pact of "sticking together" would be so hard to keep.

We lined up with about two hundred other runners. For that brief moment, I felt like all of us were in the face together. I leaned on Juli as I took my warmups off and said to her, "Good luck." I glanced on the sides of me and surveyed the other runners, our uniforms segregating us immediately. With determined stares on our faces, Juli and I stepped up to the starting line. Our teammates patted us on the back

as they filed in behind us. I always felt guilty at that moment because the slower girls were pushed back before the race had even begun. We went through our pre-race rituals. Our coach pulled Juli and I aside and told us what our times should be at the mile marks. He also told us that we really needed to place in the top fifty if our team wanted to do well. A lot of this race was up to us; we had to run strong. With everyone's hands in the middle of the huddle, we finalized our race plan. By the time we reached the "Amen" of our last Hail Mary, we knew that it was time to race. Juli elbowed me as she always did before the races started. We settled in our starting positions and awaited to starter's command.

Juli and I crouched down and the gun sounded. We bolted out of the start and I felt the cool, wet mud splashing against my shins. We both were used to being out in front, but I was surprised by the small pack that enclosed us. This was our best start all season, and we were staying together. My legs felt strong as we rounded the half mile mark. The pace began to slow as we turned the corner onto the back loop of the course. I heard Juli pant, "Look at the ground!" I glanced down the course and there I saw the top runners laying in a puddle of mud. They had apparently slipped on the wet course and were struggle in to get back up. Juli and I, careful of our own footing, remained together. We regained our steady pace and started for the hill ahead of us.

I planted my Asics firmly with every step. We rounded a sharp turn when it happened. I planted my right foot down in the soft ground when suddenly, it got stuck in the mud. My new shoe was pulled right off of my foot. I hadn't even realized it until I felt the cool mud seeping through my sock. I started to panic.

"Juli!" I yelled. "My shoe!" She turned toward me with an open gaped mouth. I didn't know what to do. I had to go back and get it. I stopped right there and turned around, desperately looking for my shoe. It was nowhere to be found. Girls were sliding and falling all around me; I had trouble keeping my own balance. I saw Juli's curly ponytail in front of me and heard her yell back, "Keep going!"

I wasn't going to let her finish without me. I yanked my sock up and started running. From then on, it was anything but smooth, graceful running. My hip ached from the uneven footing and I couldn't feel my right foot at all. I feared that it was broken or was bleeding from all of the rocks I encountered on the course. "This would only happen to me," I

thought to myself. But I was determined to stay with Juli; I never let her leave my sight. This was my best start all season and I was set on having my best race. I used my arms more on the up hills and quickened my pace. My biggest fear was coming in last place. The crowd laughed as I passed by without my shoe. They didn't bother me; I was bound to finish the race somehow. I did finish and placed thirty-ninth, all without a shoe. Juli finished two places ahead of me. To this day, she's still embarrassed that I caught up with her. That was by far, my best race all season. Time-wise, I've had better races since then, but personally it will always be my best race. I gave that race everything that I had and more. I never broke my promise -- Juli and I stuck together.

My team and I went back later to find my shoe. With fifty-two pairs of eyes searching for it, still no shoe. I left the meet that day kind of mad I didn't find it. I was left with one lonely shoe. I accepted that it was gone somewhere in a pile of mud. My dad didn't accept it that easily. He went back three days later to find the other half of my eighty-four dollar shoes. He did find it in a dried clod of mud right where I had lost it. For once, I was glad my dad was such a tightwad and insisted on finding that shoe. It meant a lot to me. I had to run in three junior varsity races before my dad would buy them. To my dad, the shoes were eighty-four dollars he had spent; to me, they were everything that I had worked so hard for. Long practices, good mile times, aching muscles; those Asics were my reward.

I've never washed that pair of shoes. They hang on a hook in my closet still covered with mud.

*Nanette Stone*

**Once, I Saw the Moon**

Medium: lithograph



*Adrian Serene*

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## **Comforting a Madman**

The rain, in warm comforting blankets,  
rushes to quiet the pulse of midday Manhattan

Through my blurred window I see  
an exhausted old evergreen praying in thanks  
and swaying  
    dancing  
        in a ritual much older and wiser  
than the power lines trying frantically to cut in

*Brandi Hertig*

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## **Any Window**

They buried her on Christmas Eve, under sledding children and egg nog. At the funeral, Joe huddled in the back corner of the sanctuary, the small, time-worn box close to his side. His presence went unnoticed amid the stifled snuffles, comforting whispers, and the soft folding of tissues.

She first came into the store two days before her fifth birthday. Her brown hair dancing on the collar of her coat, Joe's stomach knotted. She clutched her mother's hand, a hand he knew all too well. He watched the two as they disappeared down the cake mix aisle. He ran his finger across his mustache and let his teeth gnaw at the inside of his cheek. When the mother and daughter emerged from the aisle, Joe dropped his eyes to his register, and began scrubbing away at a congealed spot that a package of bloody hamburger left behind.

"Jenny, give the man your decorations so he can ring them up."

The familiar lilt of the woman's voice made Joe jerk his head up. Maureen. He found himself looking into the face of the woman he had loved for so many years. Maureen. He found himself looking at the woman who left him two weeks after Jenny was born. Maureen.

He looked down at the girl, who was shyly holding her package of cake decorations up to him. Joe swallowed hard and smiled at the two.

"Well, what do we have here?" Joe asked her as he took the decorations to scan them. A sugar kitten sat in the middle of the letters spelling "Happy Birthday."

"My birthday is in two days and the kitty is for my cake," the girl smiled, tiny dimples forming on her cheeks.

"Two days? How old will you be?" He looked at her familiar little snub nose.

"I'm gonna be five, and I'm gonna have a party with balloons with kitties on them and lots of ice cream," her dark eyes grinning.

He gingerly put the decorations in a bag and handed it to the little girl.

"She's been terribly excited about her birthday this whole

month,” the woman said apologetically. “How much do I owe you?”

“\$1.50,” Joe said, watching Jenny as she tapped on the gum ball machine.

“Look, Joe.” The woman leaned in closer as she handed him a five. “Jenny and I had to come back here because I knew I’d still have a job.”

Joe pushed his fingernail into his thumb as she continued.

“Don’t even think about trying to see Jenny. I think you know what will happen. And don’t you ever tell her who you are, understand? You are just going to be that nice man at the store.”

He wasn’t sure what would happen if he did try to see Jenny, and he didn’t know why Maureen was bothering to threaten him in the first place. She should know he wasn’t going to try to do anything.

“One, two, three dollars and fifty cents is your change,” Joe said as he counted the woman’s change into her hand. “Thank you.”

“Thank you,” she answered. “C’mon, Jenny. Let’s go.” She wrapped her hand around the little girl’s as Jenny turned to wave at Joe.

“Happy birthday,” he called, watching her disappear from his sight.

The morning Maureen left him seemed like any other morning to Joe. Just as the sun began to slant through the pastel blinds of the living room, he remembered why he had spent another night sleeping in the recliner. When Maureen had come home from work late the night before, Joe had put Jenny down at around 7, then sat tensely on the edge of the recliner, waiting for Maureen.

At 8 Joe couldn’t stand the growing knots in his stomach any longer, and he called the clothing store where she worked. The answering machine let him know the store was open 8-5 Mondays through Saturdays, as well as that week’s sales. He slammed the phone down as Maureen’s headlights glossed across the front window. Joe fumbled for the remote control and pretended to be engrossed in a program about praying mantises when she walked in. A gust of wind caught the door and slammed it against the aluminum side of trailer. Jenny let out a howl, then began into a tiny crescendo of steady wailing.

“Goddamn it, Joe. Can’t I even count on you to put our

kid down when I'm not here?" Maureen threw her purse at him and stomped to the back bedroom.

Joe followed her to the back of the trailer and stood at the door as Maureen cradled the tiny infant.

"Honey, I'm sorry," he said. "She was doing fine until the wind caught the door and slam--"

"Oh? So you mean she was fine until I got home, is that it?" Maureen held Jenny protectively over her shoulder. "You think you're the world's greatest goddamn father because you can stick a pacifier in her mouth, then sit on your ass and watch television."

Joe sighed, leaning his head against the doorway.

"I'm sorry, Maureen. And, in fact I wasn't watching TV, I was just waiting for--" Joe stopped himself, knowing that arguing would just inflame the situation further. "Let me get you something to eat."

"Oh, please, Joe." Jenny stopped crying and Maureen placed her back in the bassinet. "I'm going to bed." She slammed the door shut.

Joe rubbed his eyes, pushing the afghan off as he stood up. Maureen crept quietly in the door.

"Where did you just come from?" Joe demanded.

"Oh, calm down, Prince Valiant. I was just loading things into the car." She rolled her eyes. "Jesus, I've been here all night, Joe."

"Loading what into the car?"

"Our stuff?"

"Whose stuff?"

"Me and Jenny's."

Joe peered out the front door and saw the back seat of their Honda Civic was jammed with two suitcases, the television and Jenny's bassinet.

He ran to the back room, shaking the trailer with each step. The room was empty.

"Where's Jenny?"

"That's not your concern no more, Joe, understand." Maureen grabbed Joe by the back of his head and forced her tongue into his mouth. She held him there for several seconds, then pushed him back and attempted to spit in his face, instead hitting the wall.

"Well, you just be sure to rub your face on that later, OK, Sugar?"

Joe stood in the doorway as he watched his life drive off in their car. He hadn't seen Maureen or Jenny since.

Maureen's father told Joe that she and Jenny moved to a town in southern Iowa, and he cautioned him against looking for them or doing anything legal with the situation. The thought of the legality of the situation never occurred to Joe.

Joe, you're a nice fella," Maureen's father said, shifting his copious weight in the leather recliner. "But I think Moe wanted a better life for Jenny and her, you know? A life that you working at a grocery store will never provide."

Joe wanted to argue, but his thoughts wouldn't let him. Instead, he ran his hand through his thinning brown hair and nodded. He said he would leave them be.

"This day is normally reserved for the anticipation of the birth of our savior," the pastor began. "And today, we are presenting to Him a wonderful gift for His birthday: his daughter, Jennifer Carlie Donnelly."

Joe began to chew on his inner cheek as he listened stonically. He put his hand in the box until his fingers came across the rough ridge of the Happy Birthday kitten. He traced the edges of each letter, feeling the sugar crumble off under the cellophane wrapper.

The two girls giggled their way up to the counter, clutching their bottles of Coke in their sweaty hands and whispering secrets to each other. Outside, the summer sun beat down on the town, drooping tree limbs and melting makeup from the women's faces. Joe took the bottles and pretended to scan them across the machine.

"Well, my goodness, ladies," Joe said to the girls. "It looks like you two picked the bottles of pop that just happen to be free today."

The taller one wrinkled her snub nose at him incredulously, a finger wrapping a strand of her stringy brown hair in a spiral.

"My momma said nothing is ever for free. And she said if anyone ever said that something was for free, then they were jus' big fat liars," she said.

Joe began to push his fingers through his hair, stopping midway, letting his hand come to rest on top of the sweating bottles.

"Hmmm...You suppose the people who make pop are big fat liars?" he asked her.

"Yes, I do," she said. Her friend's head nodded in agreement.

“Well, two out of two ladies can’t be wrong.” He scanned the bottled, each unpleasant beep leaving an unusual thing in his ears. “\$1.12.”

The taller girl dropped a damp wad of ones on the counter. Joe pulled them apart carefully and gave her the change. The girls grabbed their bottles and darted out the door. Joe watched them as they climbed on their bikes and pedaled away, disappearing into the heat rising from the pavement.

“We all know Jenny was good of heart,” the pastor intoned. “Something led her astray from the flock -- something beyond her or our control. But we must rest assured that Jenny has found forgiveness in the heart of Jesus.”

Joe rummages around in the box until his hand came to rest on the top of the bottle, the rough edge of the cap leaving tiny indentations on his skin. He smoothed the glass with his thumb, looking past the pastor at the casket.

The early morning sunlight had just begun to seep through the automatic doors when she came in. Her hair draped itself well down her back, having turned into a dull brown. Joe smiled, feeling his own hair with his fingertips.

She disappeared down the charcoal~batteries~lighter fluid aisle and didn’t reappear until the store was awash in sunshine. She held a package close to her on her spindly chest, her dark eyes darting desperately around the check-out lanes. Her eyes fell on Joe, who was watching her with interest. She sucked her bottom lip in and shuffled toward him.

“You the only checker open?” she asked, her eyes fixed on a clump of mud on the cold floor.

“Fraid so,” he smiled easily at her. The girl released her lip from her teeth and sighed. She laid the package on the counter with a dull thud, her eyes wandering around the empty aisles. Joe had to bite back a smile when he saw the word “Tampons” splashed joyously across the box.

“2.59,” he said, slipping the box discreetly into a paper sack.

Her lip went back between her teeth as she fervently counted her change over and over.

“Oh, God,” she muttered as she pulled her finger through the pile of coins in her palm. She tightened the grip on her lip. “Oh, God.”

"What's the matter?" Joe asked.

"I don't think I have enough money," she whispered, tears pooling in her dark eyes.

Joe reached out to wipe away the tear that began to skitter down her cheek, then quickly retracted his hand.

"Hey," he said. "Don't cry now. Just give me whatever you have and that will be enough, OK?"

She looked up at him with grateful eyes.

"I guess that would be alright," she said with a sniffle. She clicked eight warm quarters into his hand, carefully picked up the sack and began out of the store.

"Thank you," she called over her shoulder.

"Anytime," he said, carefully placing the coins in his drawer.

"Perhaps now would be a good time for her mother to come forward to say a few words here today. Maureen?" The pastor motioned toward the huddled figure in the first pew. She rose stiffly and made her way to stand beside the pastor.

"First, I want to thank you all for coming here today. I know Jenny appreciates it." Maureen looked up at the congregation, her eye catching Joe's. "There's something very strange about out living your child. Something very wrong.

"I know I'm not supposed to blame myself for what has happened, but it's hard not to. I guess maybe I didn't want to know anything was wrong with my baby. I should've realized she needed help." Maureen turned to the casket, falling to her knees.

"Oh baby, I'm so sorry. So sorry." Her sobbing echoed through the church and continued until the pastor put his arm around her and led her back to the pew. Joe felt a warm saltiness fill his mouth as he bit down harder on his cheek. He put his finger to his inner lip and pulled it back glistening with red.

The night was cold, with only a few drunks wandering the aisles of the store. The woman heaved the case of beer up on the counter and brushed her hair out of her eyes. She did her best to look older, but her smeared lipstick and squiggly eyeliner only pointed to her true age. Joe hesitated, then asked to see her ID.

"What do you mean ID?" Her dark eyes flashed with anger. "I've never had to show my ID before."

"You've never bought alcohol from me before," Joe said, keeping his hand on the top of the case. You better not have bought alcohol anywhere, he thought.

"I know you don't card people," she said. "I've seen people younger than me buying shit, and you've never carded them."

Joe dug his fingernail into his thumb. He knew what she was saying was true. He didn't really want to inconvenience anyone, so he never bothered to check anyone's age. He knew if they wanted to drink, it was certainly none of his business.

"I need to see proof of your age, please," Joe said. He didn't know why he was asking--he knew exactly how old she was.

"What's wrong with me?" she shouted, tears chasing one another down her cheeks. "What's wrong with *me*? Why can't I do this when everyone else can?" She slid down to the floor, her face buried in her knees.

Joe jumped out from behind the register and knelt in front of her.

"There is nothing wrong with you," he said, fumbling for the right things to say. "There's nothing wrong with you." He laid his hand on top of her head and placed his forehead against hers. He squeezed his eyes shut, holding his unshed tears.

She pushed his hand away and stood up.

"What the hell are you doing? You don't know me. You don't care." Her face flushed crimson. "You're just the fucking checker in this fucking store in this fucking town and if you did care you'd just let me buy this so I can get out of here."

Joe stepped back behind the register and scanned the cumbersome case. He wiped his hand across his eyes. "\$12.53."

She handed him a twenty. He gave her the change and let her lug the case away.

The congregation shuffled somberly to their cars and followed the ominous hearse to the cemetery. Joe trailed behind them, staying in his car when he arrived. He pushed his seat back and pulled the tattered box onto his lap. Coloring books. Soap. A bag of candy. A package of envelopes. Even a box of tampons. The box was too small to hold everything. The rest was scattered along the back

forming a mist on the windows.

Joe watched everyone slowly leave the cemetery and drive back down the road. When he started toward the grave, the only people left were the cemetery workers who were preparing to fill in the hole. Joe walked to the edge of the grave and looked down at the casket. He opened the box, now stiff from the biting cold, and spilled its contents into her grave. realizing what he had done, he laid on the ground and tried to retrieve the things from the hole.

“Hey! What the hell are you doing?” one of the workers yelled at him. “Are you a fucking retard or somethin’?”

Joe clawed at the sides of the hole. His body was almost entirely in the grave, the two workers grabbed him by the ankles, dragging him across the frozen grass. Joe stood up and brushed his suit off. He bent down and picked up the box.

“Are you fucking retarded or something?” the worker asked him again.

Folding the box along its creases, Joe turned around and headed home.

*Bill Kraai*

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**Lost**

Medium: gelatin/silver photographic print



*Jonathan A. Small*

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## Letter to Clark in St. Paul

Dear Clark, by mid-November summer has fallen down about my ears, in haphazard piles of faded curling color and things to do. Today, dutifully sacrificing one of the last good blue-days of autumn, I waded knee-deep into a crubling heap of accumulated annual detritus that has waited patiently since Halloween for my attention. I put it off as long as I could, left it growing in the knowledge that such things always depress me. The leaf dust collecting on my clothes and in my hair and ears turning me into a man of chaff waiting to be scattered. Why do I always put such things off until Sundays-- Sunday afternoons when the light fades quickest. Yesterday the news came of Caroline's failed marriage something else to add to the pile of things that don't last things to be quickly packed into giant orange plastic bags that never decompose and chucked to the curb. I shouldn't say I told you so, but it didn't take Laocoon to see the thing wouldn't last more than five years-- they didn't make it more than two. And I have always hated snakes. She's moved out of their house and contacted a lawyer. It's a good thing I'm not a betting man.

Remembering what Barnum said about suckers, I read in the paper where someone I had nearly forgotten was married the other day. I haven't seen her since seventh grade biology in her thick glasses.

Funny

how even unremembered acquaintances can make you feel old on days like today. Empty potato soup days where nothing fills you up.

She hadn't changed much except for the glasses. Too bad you weren't here to help with the leaves to help me clean up the shambles of another year. Write soon.

## About the Prize Winners

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**Ramona McCallum** won for both poetry and creative non-fiction: *Daily* and *Lasting* respectively. She recently returned to K-State in order to finish up her undergraduate degree in creative writing and literature. Ramona and her husband Brian are attempting to raise their sons, Noah and Max, in a balanced environment full of organically grown food and creativity. In Ramona's written work as of late, she tries to explore the inspirations, tribulations, and cultural implications composing the domestic sphere in which she currently finds herself.

**Christopher Piatt** won for his fiction piece, *Cookie Cutter Nation*. This story represents his first attempt at fiction. His biggest influences have been Jim Hensen, Miles Davis, Robert Olen Butler, Dar Williams, Wendy Allen, Terrance McNally, Rachel Hart, Bond Benton, and his parents (the best teachers he knows). His future plans are uncertain, but after extensive field research, waiting tables has been ruled out as a possible career choice. Christopher has been a finalist in New York's Young Playwright's Festival, a winner in Bakers Plays' High School Playwrighting Contest, and is currently working on a one-man play and a collection of short stories.

**Jodie Clawson** won for her art piece, *Together We Faced*. It is the cover art for this issue. She is a senior in Fine Arts with an emphasis in painting. Her work involves the suspension of personal situations in an attempt to reevaluate and record the impact that each have on her. Her use of color and form are used as a means to express the emotion of the event rather than to merely recreate the scene.

## *About the Editors*

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**Kiersten Allen** graduates May 15 with her Master of Arts degree in English from K-State and will relax for a little while with her family. Several of her poems have been published in anthologies, but she tinkers with plays and fiction as well. After attending the Rice University Publishing Program in the summer of '97, she is sure she wants to sweep into the editing and publishing industry. Editing *Touchstone* gave her experience, now if she can just find a job...

**Robert Johnson, Jr.** received his MA in English from K-State in December, 1997. His previous editorial experience includes a two year stint at Cal Poly Pomona's undergraduate magazine, *Opus*. A short fiction writer by trade, and poet by desire, he notes that his editorial skills have been honed to the point that, "I can now see just how bad my own poetry really is."

**Aaron Reynolds** regularly entertains notions of becoming a writer, but also has numerous other interests, including an unashamed love for cheesy power-pop music and regularly worshipping at the shrines of Hitchcock, Kubrick, and Scorsese. Aaron hopes to continue honing his writing abilities whether he is in school or not, but it's all just part of his master plan to write, direct, and produce the next *Boogie Nights*.

**Mary Heng**, an Omaha, Neb., journalist for 15 years, will receive her Master of Arts degree in English from K-State in May. Two of her nonfiction essays have received honorable mentions in national competitions, and a really short essay, sort of a "sudden nonfiction," has been accepted for an anthology on grandmothers. She will enter the University of Minnesota's MFA program in the fall, concentrating on creative nonfiction.

**Kevin Rabas** lives and writes in Manhattan, Kansas, where life moves faster than some might first think. He will graduate in May with his MA in English from K-State and is set to wed pre-art therapy student and sculptor Jennifer Marie Burrington this summer. He is the former production editor

of UMKC's literary-art magazine, *Number One*. His poem, "Indiscretion" was the winner of this year's Flint Hills Poetry Society contest and can be found in the *Sunflower Anthology*.

**Sheyene Foster** is a sophomore at K-State in English Creative Writing. After attending the Brockport Writer's Forum Summer Program in '97, she focuses on her fiction and nonfiction writing. Her experience at the forum has instilled in her a drive and commitment to writing *something* everyday. She is currently working on a project through the McNair program interviewing contemporary authors to be published at a later date.

# *Touchstone*

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*Poetry*  
*Fiction*  
*Creative Nonfiction*  
*Art*

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