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TOUCHSTONE

Kansas State University Student Literary Magazine

Fall/Winter 1983

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TOUCHSTONE, publishes stories, poems, and short plays. Manuscripts should be sent to The Editors, **TOUCHSTONE**, Dept. of English, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506.

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Editor's Note

The editors of Touchstone especially wish to acknowledge the support of those who have made this year's production of the magazine possible. A special thanks is owed to the students of Kansas State University, who through the auspices of their **Student Government Association**, have provided a grant that has helped to defray the cost of publication and made it possible for Touchstone to be distributed free among the various campus living groups. We, also, owe thanks, for additional grants, to the following organizations at K.S.U.: the **Student Association of Graduates in English**, the **English Department**, and the **College of Arts and Sciences**.

Touchstone continues to represent the best literary art produced by students at K.S.U., as well as those writers across the nation who have submitted their work to our magazine. Finally, we want to thank all the writers who have allowed us to consider their prose and poetry for publication in Touchstone.

EDUCATION

Judah Jacobowitz

Let the thunder cast its ruthless rocks of sound
into the deepest vales of restrained silences,
a decibel count to rival
the tearing away of Earth from her sisters;
let the rain wash away the transfigured traces
of all we have wrought on paper through all the ages
in our assault on the trail of heavens;
let God himself sneeze through the dimpled canyons
of all our crusty curiosities—
from none of these turmoils will we learn a howdydo.

But have one discerning glance
bridge the uncertain gap
from the ceaseless quest of your eyes
to the unsettled perplexities of mine,
then, oh then, do I humbly bow
before the art of expression,
and converse, if ever so seldom, with even tongue
uncleft as yet by moral decree,
nor coated with the film of fashion.

FOR IDA MIRIAM

Judah Jacobowitz

For one who cannot endure our own prolonged absences,
she is almost impossibly invisible now, fading,
fleeing this life she thinks she has finished with,
this hide-bound earth. Her escape velocity
increases slowly with wrinkling time,
as she sunders from me that muffled beat
which once echoed my own dim pulse
as I curled, unprepared, within her young confines.
"Yudeh," she beckons, a name
she alone calls me, now that my father is gone,
evoking softest cheeks, homey accents sprinkled
about the rooms like the pages of Yiddish papers,
Sabbath candles wasting their lives away, drop by drop,
Yahrzeit glasses of scalding tea, over which
our four heads fought and cried and kissed,
and full glasses of milk carried about after me
like giant, unlit tapers, through the three rooms

of the noisy, hot Bronx flat.

Ma, that old picture of you hanging on the wall,
a blue-eyed seamstress of elegant dresses,
a wondrous specialty you acquired and practiced
through demeaning times,
Ma, your picture recalls my own daughter
who favors you as though you passed whole
from your life directly to hers
through a timeless family gallery,
without my standing in-between.
Today, this plundering pain forces your withdrawal.
Like an old Indian, you wander away
through clouds and high grass, in a
greying dream which dulls life and heightens vision;
but you can never leave until my children let you go
from the hold of their grasping memories
through which you walk, a pebble,
a tiny other-world creature
that rocked all our cradles
with lullabies of a life that was
and will not yet be lost nor wasted for all our years.

A TRANSLATION FROM KI NO TSURAYUKI

Michael L. Johnson

Yes, the human heart
is something one cannot know.
Yet in my birthplace
the fragrance of flowers is
the same as it always was.

JUST THE BEGINNING

William Luwaas

The grocery appeared lit with klieg lights against the rain darkened sky. Inside large plate glass windows, there was prosperity and gaiety, so that the couple, as they sat quietly in their car, marveled that they alone should be wanting in this pageant of abundance. Those from chic suburbs to the south left cars idling while they marketed, evincing no awareness that the world had been put on short rations. The woman watched them come and go, wondering how God or Fate or Whatever It Was could play this cruel hoax on mankind: to give some so much and others so little.

She counted a handful of coins. "A dollar-eighty-six cents." Her husband shrugged. "Let's get a cup of coffee then," he said, reaching for the door handle. "We'll share a slice of pie. Kind of a last fling before destitution." She regarded him desideratively, for they shared the knowledge that fresh hope is often found in cafes.

"Hold on! There's Michael. He may know of something." He waved at his former employer, who ran over as if his pockets were full of change and slid into the back. Michael began crowing at once about a condominium complex certain to make him rich, leaning over the seat, long blond hair curtaining cheekbones that were a billiard ball striving for manhood while the mouth had forfeited to unrelenting adolescence and the eyes snapped like camera shutters.

The man interrupted. "Listen, we're busted. You wouldn't know of any work?"

The entrepreneur cocked his head. "Yeah, I'm broke too." The mercurial gray eyes watched rain plotting iridescent runnels down the windshield with a gaze both far off and fervidly self-indulgent. "Gotta come up with another hundred grand within thirty days or the whole thing is off." He stretched complacently.

"Damn you! I mean busted!" cried the man, grabbing his wife's hand and springing it open to reveal the moist little

huddle of coins.

Michael smiled forbearingly. "Hard times all over. Hang in there, kids." He slipped back into the rain, leaving the husband infuriated, for Michael was younger than he was.

The wife began to cry with hard dry sobs. "We're trapped," she murmured. He slipped an arm around her and stared after the shoppers, running as they hoisted umbrellas, the melancholy clicketyclack of windshield wipers. "Let's get that cup of coffee," he prodded tenderly.

"I quit," she said.

"Quit what? What are you talking about? There isn't any quitting."

"Yes. I give up. I'm beat."

She did look beat: eyes puffy with tears that soaked into the blotter of cheeks, where a few stray hairs were plastered.

"What do you intend to do?"

"There's nothing to do...but sit."

He looked back a minute at the street, alive with glistening snakes of water, without beginning or end, writhing in gutters and hissing fiercely at car tires. "Let's go, babe." She caught his hand at the ignition.

"Where?"

Since he had no decent answer for that one, he just sat. She ran her fingers across his cheek. "You're free to go, love, but I'm not moving. I'm through with going just to be going. Life's got me beat." He nodded, perhaps convinced that if they sat a while she would return to her senses.

They had been sitting in the car for hours, idling the motor to keep the heater on. As darkness fell, cheery wedges of light cut the slick sidewalk, and they watched dinner shoppers picking up chops and French bread, talking animatedly as they waited in line. An acquaintance waved and entered the store, was astonished to see them still there when she emerged. She bent over a window. "I mean, c'mon you guys, it can't be that bad."

"We've quit." He smiled recklessly at his wife.

"You've quit." The woman mimicked his enthusiasm. "Hey! You guys, nobody quits. Though sometimes it seems like a good idea. Want an apple?" She pulled two apples from her bag and chirped, "See y' later."

"We'll be here," he promised.

It wasn't long before clerks were going home. The proprietor, jangling a huge ring of keys, locked the front door, glancing over suspiciously at the two faces hovering in the twilight of the car like pale winter moons. The husband found a bedraggled blanket in the back and wrapped

it around them. "You must be hungry," whispered his wife, lines softened somewhat about her mouth, the entire face more relaxed now. "Yeah," he said, "but I don't mind." Leaning against one another, they quickly fell asleep. Sometime in the night, the deputy sheriff shined a spotlight into the car, but finding only an embracing couple passed quietly on.

Morning greeted them with the scouring of rain, a sky cheerless as the underbelly of waves when tides churn thick with mud. He stretched stiffly, humidity had burrowed into his joints, and, wiping clean a space of the fogged windshield, looked about--from a bank of cypresses miserable as wet cats to a woman in the breakfast bright window of a nearby house pouring coffee. He thought better of stepping out beside the car to piss; fished instead amongst the rubble in the back and came up with an earworn styrofoam cup, which he filled three times, tossing the steaming liquid out the window. His wife awoke. Not dour and irritable as he had expected but almost cheerful. They discussed coffee again. He rinsed the cup with rainwater and handed it to her to wash up.

Some time that morning, Mona stopped by the store. She stood over the car, squaring hands on gargantuan hips, red hair flaming, fussing over them like a huge hen. "Now you've got to be realistic," she insisted.

"We're perfectly realistic. We can't squeeze by like this any longer. You've said as much yourself."

She left at once and returned a bit later with a basket crammed full of homemade bread and jam, fried chicken, watermelon pickles, hard-boiled eggs, and chocolate cake. "Now is there anything else?" she demanded, face flushed, still standing hands-a-hip, but with the ghost of a smile. "It would be nice to have some coffee," he replied meekly. "Alright!" she snapped, returning in minutes with a piping hot thermosful.

By mid-afternoon, the grocery boy was saluting conspiratorially as he passed with bags, explaining to wary housewives how they had just been sitting there a full day now. Occasionally, the grinning red face of a clerk glanced out from amidst fading and forgotten holiday displays. School children stopped on the way home, peering into the car bug-eyed, while rain pelted yellow slickers and dripped from the floppy brims of sou'westers. Led by a freckled, gravelly-voiced little fellow in a cowboy hat, they chased round and round and romped over the back seat. Until tight-lipped neighborhood mothers came to rescue them from what they assumed were beach gypsies. However, upon seeing the inoffensive couple, quickly made excuses for their brats

and led them off by the ear. Returning later with pots of coffee, they spread out in back and gossiped voraciously; so that in no time the couple learned more of the personal politics of the community than they had in all the years they had been coming to town for groceries.

By dinner hour, those ladies from fashionable suburbs, whose lives were a sequence of perfunctory diets, approached the car, while hubbies--semi-retired from brokerage firms in the city--kept a squeamish eye out from the shelter of purring Mercedes Benzs. They chatted nonstop about batik classes, with effervescent confessions that serious art might be beyond me. Until he, unable to contain himself, inveighed that the sacrament of art was being dipped in the esthetic dung of a populace addicted to television. The good ladies pursed their lips and inquired if they were themselves artists.

"We were," he snapped, "until that too became impossible. We were potters and craftsmen and carpenters and clerks....In those days we could make a living."

"Of course," whispered the suburbanites.

"We didn't have children," added the wife. "It wouldn't have been fair. And then you could always have an abortion."

"I see."

At times, the ladies also crawled into the back, wrinkling noses a little at the litter. Then competing fragrances of bath oil and eau de Cologne hung on the heavy air like warring armies. "How chilly it is in here," they chattered. "Oh!" the wife laughed a little. "We don't mind that. We've been cold for years."

Invariably, the ladies returned, hubbies trailing with armloads of blankets; until soon there were cozy stacks of woolens on the back seat, skewed against one another like drunken brothers.

In the village at that time, another car dweller had parked his huge, gutted station wagon before the Deli, like an addict Noah riding out this pluvial overdose. Beatles music blared out open doors, a waterlogged welter of junk spilled over the sidewalk, a junkyard flea market--though none of it apparently for sale. While he himself glared at tourists from the car hood, bloodshot albatross eyes weighing reactions, water dripping from his beak. An apocalyptic figure. Wires, earphones, and the eviscerate shells of tape recorders strung about his neck, tools efflorescing from zippered pockets of a filthy Navy aviator's suit, black hair seemingly slicked back with motor oil, a stubble of beard, one lens of glasses taped over with adhesive. A novelist working in the idiom of castoff

America? A sculptor hung up on electronic erotica? A space cadet? Maybe just a lonely man attempting to strike up conversation?

When his great leviathan of a car pulled in alongside them, spilling music and petroleum odors, he made no attempt to communicate. Though it seemed certain that he assumed a kinship.

That was perhaps an hour before the grocer again locked up with a solemn jangling of keys, turned to stare at them, stood directly before the station wagon where the electrical man's head bobbed somnolescently to the music. He frowned and went home. Soon the wind began to howl, store lights no longer cut cheery wedges across wet sidewalks. Rain thrumming against the tin car roof in the compressed, soupy blackness made them feel caged up in a drum. Though they found human warmth in intermittent strains of rock that pierced the storm, in shadows moving across steamed windows of neighboring houses. Then a third car pulled in alongside the second and cut off its lights.

He was awakened by a knock on the window. It was pitch dark. His wife huddled against him, emitting fragrances of warm beds and vulnerability. Maybe he had dreamt it: senses bedeviled by the sledgehammering of waves against headlands, wind that howled like an imperious hound. With a start, he beheld a face staring in. At first he took it for one of the frizzly-bearded beach gypsies, then recognized the cripple, Andy. "Can I get in?" he was screaming. "CAN I GET IN YOUR CAR?"

"Sure, sure--get in!"

The little fellow clambered into the back, dragging a gnarled crutch, wrestled mightily to shut the door against the wind. Then lay back exhausted, smelling like a wet dog. He smiled wearily. "Thanks, brother. Guess we're all in this shit together. Got hold of my shelter, y' know, tore it to shreds. Now what'm I gonna do?" Andy asked in his husky voice, his dancing eyes collectors for what little light survived the desolation of darkness. Not waiting for an answer, he burrowed into the mound of blankets and within seconds was sleeping like a baby.

The husband sat awake, perplexed by fate's odd itineraries, knowing them to be the craft of no intelligence but arbitrary as a game of chance. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again--a mere moment later--morning had replaced the storm. The sun, though still a euphemistic wafer in an amnion of eastern clouds, managed to irradiate a soggy world. Andy was gone. A tow truck had hooked up to the third car in line--a superannuated Cadillac hearse that looked as if death had finally caught up to it, for a

monster tree limb lay embedded in its crushed corpus. The electrical man next door gestured for him to roll down the window. "See that!" he gloated. "That dude split the headlands cause it seemed too dangerous, and up here a tree fell on him!" He laughed with plosive horse-like snorts.

"Is he alright?" demanded the husband, but the electrical man was laughing too hard to answer him.

After a time, the tow truck returned and hooked up to the station wagon. The electrical man bellowed frantically, body stuck half out the window, arms flapping like impotent wings, as the truck hauled him away, his radio blaring the Helter Skelter yowls of the Beatles.

He turned to his wife and said, "I s'pose we're next."

But they were still waiting when oldtimer Finns and Portuguese stopped by to congratulate them on their seamanship, reminiscing about storms they had seen in days when the fishing fleet still trolled for salmon.

Overnight, they had become a hot item in the regional press. Conservative editors decried them for weak-kneed freeloaders, while liberals found in them a symbol of the frustration of the age. A contributing editor to a slick magazine in the City, researching an article on the outré spiritual movements sweeping the country, noted the mob of teenagers who gravitated to the car at the conclusion of each school day: boys in letterman's jackets whose expressions suggested they had something tucked under the lower lip and girls about to pop the seams of skintight jeans--eyeing one another in Holy Roller anticipation.

Soon painters had set up easels near the car and slim young men and women, eyes painted Martha Graham green, pranced about like word-wasted dancers, kicking legs high into the air. It was obvious as they milled about, sniffing under tails and snorting lines of cocaine through tightly rolled dollar bills, that Nathaniel West's Hollywood nightmares had quickened amongst them. Each cultivated a personal style: men dyed their hair silver and wore dark glasses, women filed their teeth and wore showy gold rings in the pierced septums of their noses. They gathered about the car and fervidly discussed the coming Renaissance. This infuriated the husband, who stuck his head out the window and denounced the coming era as the age of Proteus, when the self would melt like wax and awake each morning to a different form, unable to define itself.

They ignored him. The car had become their mooring, the prominent image in every poem, always there in the background of sketches. Suddenly painters could paint and potters throw pots for days on end without becoming restless. Lovers consummated relationships beneath the oil

pan with shrieks of passion. Old men no longer prophesied gloom and long married couples walked hand in hand. The building trades boomed, and workers with bulldog faces and bellies that hung over their belts came in convoys on Friday evenings from the industrial towns to the north to sit in the backs of polished pickups drinking beer. The country lesbians came too: delegations in sleeveless T-shirts that became sweat-soaked-transparent as they folkdanced with virago fervor, until the dark rosebuds of their breasts flowered out in exultation--and the proles shouted with glee.

College students descended on weekends, while university trustees hurriedly labeled it a seditious movement. A jeweler in the City came out with minatures of the car in silver and gold as the craze crackled like a brush fire through affluent suburbs. In the car, sociologists explained, had been found a compelling symbol; it hit everyone beneath the psychic belt, exciting them in mysterious ways, bringing them together in impossible alliances. Workers shared cans of beer with bosses, rabid feminists made coquettish passes at tight-lipped loggers. Oldtimers equated the mood to Christmases of their youth; former hippies said it was a high finer than acid.

There appeared over front pages of the land a newsphoto of a prominent politician standing atop the car like Mario Savio in the sixties, addressing a vast throng that stretched away over the headlands. In the background, slightly blurred, the electrical man--complete with transistors and earphones but not station wagon--held aloft a placard, a wriggly scrawl:

VOTE NO ON THE DEATH PENALTY FOR PARKING TICKETS

While two pale faces, withdrawn, almost unearthly in their pasty translucence, stared out beneath the politician's feet.

Inside their adytum, the air thickened with cabin fever, monotonous rhythm of unrequited days. Sea breezes swelled up mornings and deflated afternoons. At night, windows steamed; the many mushroom dishes left by well-wishers gave off a stench of rotting socks as they decomposed in back. They had stopped running the engine for heat: experts speculated they had run out of gas. Friends, including Mona, urged that they had made their point but now must give up this vigil and return to life. "Look at all the excitement. The sun is shining, the world is full of hope again." Some offered jobs. But the two sat impassively, staring straight ahead; seemingly, they had lost the ability to speak.

Neighborhood housewives still appeared with pots of coffee but shared them now only with one another, lounging

over the hood. Though occasionally there came a knock on the window and one of the beach gypsies, generally led by Andy the cripple, stood petulantly waiting to be dispensed a blanket or loaf of bread from the stock in back--thrusting out hands with mute importunance, which suggested they considered this not second-hand charity but a God-given right.

By now, few could remember a time when the car hadn't been there. A community landmark like the market it sat beside (from which the boy delivered a bag of groceries each morning). It was at this time--while newspaper columnists declaimed this preoccupation with the car as symptomatic of a run amok desire to throw away the good life that was America's promise to the world--that the many gurus and self-proclaimed Messiahs appeared with their followings. Sometimes hundreds surrounded the car, waving giant banners and chanting hypnotically: young people with round ecstatic eyes and suntanned businessmen, who found the new religious ideal since, like jogging, the devotee could do them before going to work.

Gurus who had begun with the bleat of lambs now roared like lions. Their dreamy, Shiva-eyed countenances had devolved to obsidian stares. They demanded the very souls of their disciples, who gave them gladly, as if relieved to be off the hook. Followers had begun to resemble their masters: haggard, jaundiced, filled with the furious impotence of gods who have fallen down to earth. It was commonly accepted that these gurus, now encamped in tent cities on the headlands, received counsel directly from the car.

Then, one morning, the car was gone.

The grocery boy stood foolishly with his bag of groceries. Housewives appeared with the day's first pot and stared dumbly at one another. Gurus and disciples crawled over the Tarmac on hands and knees, though couldn't be certain, even by tasting, whether an oil stain had been left by the car or by some other. Townsman and television crews jockeyed for position as if expecting something to happen. The people regarded one another suspiciously.

Some said they had driven away. "That's impossible!" cried the experts; "they were out of gas." Others, led by the electrical man, claimed the police had hauled them off in the night. Still others that the gurus had kidnapped the car and planned to use it to their own ends. While one of the latter insisted that couple and car had ascended to heaven in a ball of light. He purchased the market and, on that very spot, began construction of a church in the shape of a '68 Oldsmobile.

In the end, the belief prevailed that the car hadn't really been there at all. It was a fantasy, a short--but necessary--respite from the uninspired regime of the everyday, like Christmas and the Fourth of July. Most everyone came to accept this. For a time, they hung about irresolutely, then, one by one, went home.

Although Andy the cripple, whose green eyes danced and cheeks were always ruby red so that children mistook him for a leprechaun, tapped earnestly about on his bandy crutch, crying to any who would listen that there had indeed been a car; he had himself spent a night in it. "You can deny it, but you won't stop it," he shouted. "This is just the beginning, there will be other cars...many many other cars...."

They smiled indulgently and winked at one another, for everyone knew that Andy was a little mad.

"One begins at the word's source, following
its adaption to context, then one may
attempt its transfiguration."

Andre Gericault

LEAVE THE WORDS

J. L. Kubicek

Leave the words where you find them
in their abode
with their music.

Leave them in their native land
unclothed, unmasked
playing with friends.

When needed, carry each in hand
not
in your pocket

Where play, boredom and tricks
abound. . . where the beginning
of lies awaits.

Left to the bread of sun
to the water of winds
each will hoist its sail
for the uncluttered land.

AN APOLOGY

R. Hayden

My last
conversation
with him
ended

"have a nice
Thanksgiving."
It was spoken
perfunctorily

amongst the
groceries and
computers
and wire baskets.

With only two
bags to carry
I didn't need
him, that day.

I read he
perished in
a grinding crash,
I realized

dismissing us
perfunctorily is

Death's
modus operandi.

You are not alone - Mark.

rainy days (with no savings)

Ruthann Robson

that lighting bolt in a crisis
the courage
of your convictions
that single slash across a mediocre sky
to be a hero
to flash your ideals and bury your insti

to make the right choice in an instant

but most emergencies endure
beyond the zero hour
after the bomb
either exploded or didn't
there are years of living
with bugs in the kitchen
worming
their way past the loose rubber
into the freezer to die
in a puddle of vanilla fudge

there are winters of having
to get somewhere fast
while the car spews steam
or oil or both
and your children grow
even colder
waiting in their mittened resentment

there are summers of saying
goodbye to your friends leaving
for holidays in England or Paris
while your allies are rude
busy completing yet another application
for a government grant
there is no line for you

those little meteors of your visions
no longer illuminate the night
yet have not eroded like common rock
they still sit solid on the plastic
parson's table next to a painted buddha
an attribute of the trivial
is that it needs to be dusted

those sterling passions have been
blackened by that yellow tunnel
which breeds the tedium of dusk
your commitment swirls monotonous
and every dawn you wonder
what's the use
of this heavy steady downpour
that never yields a flood

FAMILY REUNION

Jeff Boyer

I wear the stick-on nametag
Through the humid holidome lobby,
Drifting here and there
While strangers squint
At a name of no familiar sound
At my face of no resemblance.
"Not A Blood Relative" my tag
Proclaims, and I'm introduced as
Friend of family to Nebraska farmer gents
And skinny grandchildren of someone
Called Bernice.
I catch on soon that no one
Knows anybody, and I've as much license
As anyone to circulate through
This thick uncertainty of barely remembered
Cousins and grand-nephews.
On the table where family portraits
Lie in disarray, I spot several
Ancestors of my girlfriend,
Obviously German in the early
Model-T sheet metal-ness of this
Gruesome century. They were poor then
And have come quite a ways as a family
To be welcomed on the motel arcade
In large block letters and to have
Open season on the bars and pools
Of this plains, farm town "convention center."
I feel as much a part of these
Stolid, sturdy men, slightly
Uncomfortable in checkered slacks
As they ever could of me.
Their wives and children

Dart quickly from poolside
To table, and a few others climb
Clumsily the garish Hawaiian
Pagoda serving as a bar.

We all wish we were somewhere else,
But the brother who is a minister
And a dottering great-uncle
Manhandle the itinerary,
Holding technology safely at bay
In the form of a PA mike
Half an arms length away.
"Can't hear," comes the cry
From wine-relaxed dessert eaters
During what is apparently a Bible verse
Guessing contest; but the speakers
Dumbly blink through fishbowl glasses
And plunge again into religious charades.

We laugh and drink and flirt
Innocently around gawking teens
And through arms filled with overdressed toddlers.
Those whose hands betray them
Farmers stare occasionally
To blue windows at the top
Of the dome, unthinkingly gauging
The sky for rain, for heat, for clouds.
It's hay season and this is wasted weather.

Later, in the motel club
We dance and familiarize
While a band from --where else--
Australia, hones its act for Vegas.
The smell of exhaust and squeal
Of fan and automatic steering belts
Will punctuate the departure
Sunday noon. Vague promises of
Another get-together five years hence
In Iowa echo through the lot.
We'll have forgotten each other's names
by then, my adopted family,
I know them well.

THE PURGING OF A GOBLER

Greg German

He'd been Old Tom, forever,
squat and fat,
a gloating, strutting ball
of self-conceit
that dared a larger world
of men and women
to cross a path
he'd paved with constant garbled gab
and flap, a collage of nothing
spewing from his throat
with feathers falling, tattered,
from a cushion growing old
spreading fluff about the yard,
a scourge that found us throwing slang
and rocks and cans
in his direction, to only have him turn
and chase us, bounding
across the yard
balloon style on a breeze,
intent upon attack.

Not to say, but one day
someone slapped him upside the head
grabbed his legs, drug him off,
hung him by the feet
from a tree to twist and twirl,
a dangling gunny sack of lard
finally silent with surprise.

Silence.

Again, someone
grabbed his long and greying beard,
yanked, stretched his neck
and played a tune of taps
across his throat,
a rusty bladed pocketknife, no less.
And in a final burst of glory
his blood soaked us all,
marble agates never blinking
as his mindless mind
hit the ground.

LISTENING TO GRANDPA, AGAIN

Greg German

As we walk
a path
once a road,
leaving tracks between
the puncture vines,
his gaze
runs along
a fallen fence, past
where Deacon Hayes or
John Coble is resting,
and cuts across
a field harvested forty-
seven times, before
passing through
regrown oaks
and crossing the creek,
to find a buckshot
wounded windmill
forever trading rhetoric
with the wind.

The Illusionist and the Hymn Book

Gary Johnson

Roanoke Baptist Church belonged to the old era of churches. It wasn't one of the new shiny ones with sleek roof lines and glass walls. Its core had been built about the turn of the century, and added onto numerous times after that. Each new section was slightly different in style. To a boy of eight, that only gave the church more atmosphere and character. The stairways and halls were scattered about randomly, so that one almost had to have a map to find his way from one end of the building to the next.

I always dreamed of the time when all the adults would be gone and my friends and I could play hide-and-seek or tag within the shadowed and musty hallways. There were sure to be many secrets hiding just from our reach that could be discovered instantly if we could only break file and run as we'd please. Especially on third floor; it was the most unusual of all. To find it you had to go through a special door that opened upon a series of steep stairs in a narrow passageway. The walls and stairs were made of a rough wood that no one had ever bothered to paint. After winding up three flights of stairs, you would reach the main room on the floor.

At the head of the room was a stained glass window which cast wierd configurations of light upon the floor. When my Sunday school teacher would get up to speak, sunlight pouring through the varied colored panels would play out kaleidoscopic epics on the room's wooden plank floor. This was the building's attic. Open beams came to a point in the center of the ceiling. Behind the four rows of pews was a long hallway with a myriad of doorways on each side. It was just like the old slapstick movies where Laurel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello would go in one door and out another while being pursued by some terrible foe. Behind each of the doors was a little cubicle for separate Bible study groups.

In every third room was a window. The windows poked out through the roof and looked out upon the asphalt shingles and gutterings of the entire neighborhood. It was my privilege, when in my third grade Bible study group, to have one of these rooms with a window. If the story about Jesus wasn't particularly interesting, I could look out upon a world of clouds, treetops, and birds acting different roles as they strutted on the telephone lines. Pigeons were the most interesting by far. They had real character and could rarely be miscast, although they were usually the overweight villains. Occasionally, one would land outside the window, but then the other guys would put up such a ruckus that the bird would take off again immediately.

The teachers always tried their best to keep us interested, and sometimes they even succeeded, although their topics all began to sound alike after a while. Noah's Ark and Jonah and the Whale were the most overused subjects. Teachers tended to shy away from talking about the Garden of Eden because we always insisted on knowing what Adam and Eve used for clothing. When the teachers couldn't come up with satisfactory answers, we would start giggling and making little jokes among ourselves. Other favorites were the stories of Jesus healing the sick. These always had me puzzled because I could never figure out just what it would be like to see Jesus heal someone. It seemed a little too flashy for the person's wounds to disappear in front of your eyes. I decided Jesus probably covered that part of the body with his hands or a blanket like a magician, and then, after he said some magic words, the wound would be gone.

But what interested me most was the tale of Jesus and the loaves of bread and fish. I could never quite imagine how that basket could keep being replenished without some bread and fish appearing out of mid-air. That just didn't quite seem in character with Jesus. So how did the basket have enough in it to feed all those hundreds of people? I never had any trouble imagining the creation. It seemed perfectly natural for God to be throwing fireballs around the firmament. The parting of the Red Sea, I had no problems with either. It was easy to imagine the water jumping back to form an escape for the fleeing Hebrews. For Jesus to walk on water seemed perfectly plausible, and Noah's Ark we all believed without batting an eye. But how did that other food appear in the basket? I had come up with several possible solutions, but they all had some flaw that made them not quite right. Maybe the new bread and fish would appear at the bottom of the basket; that way they wouldn't just be materializing out of nowhere. But wouldn't that make the other food bounce up a little bit? That seemed a little bit

cheap. Or how about if they put a cloth over the basket every now and then? That seemed too theatrical. Or maybe it just appeared when nobody was looking? But there were so many people there, it seemed that someone would always be looking into the basket. The mystery of those bread loaves and fish, I never solved, but I accepted it having happened as fact.

Each year when elementary school would let out for the summer, the church would open its doors for Bible School. It gave the mothers an opportunity to get their kids out of the house for a few hours each day. Mom would pack my sister and me off to church instead of waiting for us to tell her we were bored and didn't have anything to do. She didn't force us to go; it was out option. But she did use a box of popsicles as an added incentive. And thus instead of being in her hair when she tried to watch her favorite soap operas, we would be occupied and she wouldn't have to worry where we were. It was also free. A sort of babysitter where you didn't have to pay, except for having your children taught to be Christians.

Each morning my sister and I would leave the house at 8:45. We were ushered to the front door by Mom, given a sack lunch, and kissed goodbye. Rhonda was only a year younger than me, so most of the time we were in the same class. When I was eight, our class met on the third floor, just like my Sunday School class. Every day, Rhonda and I had to climb and weave our way through the several staircases before we could reach the classroom. At 9 o'clock sharp, the bell would ring and class began. First we sang hymns. We always opened and closed the classes by singing hymns. Mrs. Beatling, the class instructor, would strike the opening note on a small xylophone and we would begin to sing.

Every morning as we came up the stairs, Mrs. Beatling handed each of us a worn hymn book. There weren't many songs in it that we knew, but those we did know we knew practically by heart.

If there was anyone in the school that frightened us, it was Mrs. Beatling. She was overweight, but carried herself as if she knew what to do with every pound of her fat. She would stand rigid at the doorway with her nose slightly turned toward the ceiling. As we climbed the last step, she would push the hymn book into our hands and say, "Good to see you," while casting a perfunctory smile. I would lower my head, grab the hymn book, and quickly run to the third row pews. The fourth row, the back row, was where the tough guys sat. Sometimes when I felt especially rowdy, I would sit there, but usually I didn't feel like I fit in with them. The third row was far enough from the front that

I felt like I was trying to remain defiant while not going completely overboard like the guys behind me. Most of the girls sat in the first two rows; but the more flirtatious ones sat third row adjacent my best friend, Greg, and me. Greg was a little guy with blond hair and glasses. One of his favorite topics to talk about was magic. He had a book which described several tricks of sleight-of-hand. Almost every day he would have a new trick that he would describe to me.

About halfway through the summer when I was eight years old, Mrs. Beatling met me at the door, but without the customary hymn book. I waited for a second, looking at her questioningly, and as I started to speak, she motioned for me to take a seat. I was too afraid to accuse her of being wrong, so I quickly took off for the third row. As I passed the other pews, I looked down the rows to see if anyone else was missing a hymn book. I was quite relieved to find that none of the others had one either. When I sat down, Greg moved over close to me.

"She forgot the hymn book," he whispered in my ear as if he was revealing a great secret. I smiled and nodded back to him.

The thought that Mrs. Beatling might have made a mistake was simply marvelous. All the students were more quiet than normal. We watched her intently as she stood impassively beside the top of the stairs. We waited like vultures hoping that this might be a mistake on her part that would reveal she was as human as the rest of us.

As the 9 o'clock bell rang, she proudly walked to her podium in front of the stained glass window. She stood with a smile that seemed to say she knew something we didn't.

"Well, today we have something a little special for you," she said, as she motioned toward a large box sitting on the floor beside the podium. "I need a volunteer."

Even though I feared her, I found some satisfaction in trying to get on her good side. Anytime she wanted a volunteer, I raised my hand, and she usually picked me; so, once again I volunteered. This time it seemed especially interesting though; the box was sure to include some unique surprise -- like a birthday or Christmas present. Once again she picked me; I cautiously approached the front of the room.

"Go ahead and open the box," she said.

I pulled back the box flaps and discovered stacks of new, red hymn books. On the front cover of each was gold lettering that read "A Children's Hymn Book." Later in the day there were rumors that the lettering actually was gold and each book was worth hundreds of dollars. The red covers

were about the purest red that I had ever seen. Within the antiquated surroundings of the church, the red stood out like a beacon from God himself. The moment we saw the books we knew we were going to be able to sing better than we ever had before. Instead of the faded, worn blue hymn books, these would make singing something special, not just another part of the daily routine.

"Pass them out to everyone in the class," Mrs. Beatling said.

I picked up the top few books and began handing them out. My first reaction, though, was that there were not going to be enough books for everyone. I immediately thought of the story of the basket of fish and loaves of bread. There was no way we could come up short since God was surely on our side. Each time I picked up some of the books I tried to remember the position of the remaining books in case God did try and replenish them. I was just positive I was going to run out of hymnals. Returning to the box after finishing the second row, I noticed that the position of the books had changed. I stopped dead and looked at Mrs. Beatling.

"The books changed," I said.

"What?" Mrs. Beatling asked.

"They changed."

She walked over to the box and looked into it. As she raised her head she cast me a puzzled look.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"The box was almost empty and then a bunch more were there."

She smiled at me and then bent over to pick up a piece of cardboard.

"This was in there. It separated the books in the bottom half of the box from the top half. I took it out when you were handing out the books. Is that what you meant?"

"Oh."

Suddenly a thought dawned upon me -- maybe that was how they did the bread and fish. Maybe it just looked like the bottom of the basket and then somebody took the cardboard out.

"Maybe that's how Jesus did the basket thing," I said to Mrs. Beatling.

She looked at me questioningly and then said, "Hurry up and pass out the books, Jim, or I'll get someone else to do it."

I didn't really expect a grownup to understand the significance of my discovery, so I quickly started handing out the books again. After thinking about it for a while, I decided that he could have never done it with the cardboard because it still would have taken too big of a basket.

We sang that day like we never sang before. Each of the songs seemed completely new. During the remainder of the day, my thoughts kept returning to the hymn books. Recess wasn't nearly as important and neither was art class. And the Bible study became sheer murder to sit through. Usually I could only think about when was the bell going to ring, but now I actually looked forward to singing. At fifteen minutes till the final bell, everyone met once again in the main room for hymn singing. And once again Mrs. Beatling let me pass out the books. As she struck the opening note on her xylophone, she began singing like it was a completely new experience. When the bell rang I actually looked forward to coming to school the next day.

I took off for home feeling better than I could ever remember. My dad always told me to wait for my sister and hold her hand on the way home, but I would never be caught dead doing that, so I took off without her. The hymn books had seemed to give the Bible School a life it had never had before. I walked swinging my arms back and forth as if I owned the sidewalk. I noticed everything much clearer. The tall elms overhanging the sidewalk were greener than ever before and the squirrels seemed more friendly. The cars at the intersection no longer seemed to be tremendous mechanical monsters with their grills grinning at me as if I was a tasty morsel.

I was almost home, just passing the evergreen bushes in front of Mr. Moser's house, when I noticed to my horror that in my right hand, beside my Bible, was one of the red hymn books. I stopped walking immediately, staring at the hymn book as if I couldn't believe I was seeing it. What could I do with the book? Had anyone seen me go out the door with it? If I went back with it, maybe someone would see me and think I stole it. I couldn't go back with it. I had to get rid of it as quickly as possible. There was only one solution. After quickly looking around to see if anyone was watching, I threw the book into the bushes. The book dropped below one of the branches and was partially concealed. Only the corner of the book was sticking out, but that red was so brilliant in contrast to the bush that I thought I should knock the book farther in. As I looked around a second time though, I saw Rhonda walking down the block toward me. I decided the book was well hidden, so I ran for home.

The next morning when my mom called for me to get out of bed, I pulled the covers over my head and pretended I wasn't there.

"You had better get out of bed right now, or you're gonna be late," she said.

"I don't want to go today," I yelled from beneath the

covers.

"Why not?"

"I just don't want to."

"Well, you can't lie in bed all day. It's already eight fifteen. You had better hurry it up."

"I'm not gonna go!"

"Why not?"

"Because!"

"Come on, James. Get out of bed."

"I don't want to."

"Look, I'm going downstairs to fix your breakfast. If you're not down there in fifteen minutes, no popsicles for you for the rest of the summer."

She had hit me right where it hurt. It seemed like a dirty trick on her part. Then I started to think what might happen if I did go back and I couldn't think of anything bad. I made a pact with myself that if I went and nothing happened -- then good enough. But if something did happen, popsicles or not, there was no way I was going back.

I quickly dressed and went downstairs. As I entered the kitchen, I saw Rhonda sitting in her normal position at the breakfast table. She grinned at me like she thought something was funny.

"What are you smiling about?" I said gruffly.

"Nothing."

"Boy, did you ever get up on the wrong side of bed this morning," Mom said.

"You say that all the time. It's dumb. My bed's against the wall. I can only get up on one side of it."

I slid into my chair feeling like I was the toughest guy in the world, or would be for at least as long as Dad was gone, anyway. I ate my bowl of cereal as fast as I could, grabbed my Bible, and headed for the front door.

"Wait for your sister," Mom yelled after me.

I pretended I didn't hear as I ran out the front door. As I passed Mr. Moser's bushes, I tried to keep looking straight ahead since I didn't want to let on that I knew anything about the book, but I looked from the corners of my eyes. Much to my surprise, I didn't see the book. Maybe it was lying underneath the brush somewhere was my first thought. Then a worse idea occurred to me; maybe someone found the book. As I continued walking up the sidewalk, that idea kept growing more sinister. I decided that after school, I would take a closer look in the bushes. I would throw a football into the bushes and pretend that was what I was looking for. It seemed like the perfect plan to me. The only problem would be having to sit through another day of Bible School before I could act out my plan.

As I slowly ascended the stairs to the third floor of the church, all I could think of was Mrs. Beatling standing at the top of the stairs waiting for me. Then another thought ran across my mind that froze me in my tracks: Mrs. Beatling lived in the same direction from the church as I did. If she walked by those bushes she might have seen the hymn book. Just as I was about to turn around and run back down the stairs, a group of the other guys in the class came running up the stairs toward me.

"Get a move on, Jim, or you're gonna be late," yelled Marty, the leader of the group.

In the narrow staircase leading to the third floor, it would have been too much trouble to squeeze past the other guys, so I continued on up. Mrs. Beatling stood at the top of the stairs to greet us as usual. As we passed through the doorway, she passed out the new, red hymn books just as she had with the old, worn blue ones. She smiled at me as she normally did, so I presumed everything was all right. Once reaching the third row pew, I thought twice and then stepped into the fourth row.

"Hey! Gonna sit back here today, huh?" Marty said.

"Yeah, I guess so," I replied.

I wasn't feeling belligerent, but I did feel like I wanted to retreat from Mrs. Beatling. I made up my mind right then that if Mrs. Beatling needed a volunteer I wasn't going to raise my hand.

Marty was holding his hymn book with the cover bent way back so that the binding was creased permanently.

"Don't bend the cover back so far," I said.

"What does it matter? These aren't our books," he said as he bent the cover back further, grinning at me. I forced a smile on my face and acted like it amused me. The other boys acted like it was a great joke and started to imitate Marty's actions by bending the covers of their hymn books back as well.

"Go ahead and bend yours back. She's just an old bitch," Marty said.

Greg had turned around from his place in the row in front of me. "What are you sitting back there for?" he asked.

"He wants to. Turn around four-eyes," Marty growled at him. Greg spun around quickly. "Go ahead," Marty said as he took the book from my hands, "It doesn't make any difference what that old bitch thinks." He bent the cover back and put the book back into my hands, grinning at me again.

As the 9 o'clock bell rang, Mrs. Beatling slowly walked to the front of the room. Instead of telling us to open the hymn books as she normally did, she stepped in front of the

podium and looked out upon us with a smile that slowly dissolved into a sinister grin.

"Yesterday, when I collected the new hymnals, I found that one of them was missing. Does anyone know what happened to it?" she asked. She appeared to be as solid as my dad's '58 Cadillac as she stood with her hands clasped at her waist and her massive chest thrown forward. The class was perfectly silent. Not even Marty would say anything. Although she had never laid a hand on any of us, there were hundreds of stories of what she had done to boys in the past who had not obeyed.

"Does anyone know what happened to the book?" she said calmly. She slowly moved her eyes down each of the rows looking at each of our faces. I lowered my eyes once she reached the third row. Looking down, I found the hymn book which I still held in my hands with the cover bent back. I gingerly bent the cover to its normal position and ran my fingers over the crease that was left on the binding.

"Nobody knows? Not a single person in this class knows what happened to that book?...Well, someone is lying. Someone has to know what happened to that book. Maybe you all haven't learned what happens to liars when they die."

I swallowed hard.

"Nobody knows?...Well, I know a little bit about what happened to the book. I don't know for sure who is responsible, but..." She reached behind the podium and pulled out something that she kept behind her back. "I have something to show you," she said as she held forth a soiled red book. Its cover was wet and bulging. "I found this book while walking here today. I found it lying in a bush! How could any of you do this? Our brand new books!"

A warmth began to spread over my face and ears.

"Well, if no one knows, we had better continue on with class."

She stepped to a blackboard beside the stained glass window, and placed the book in the chalk tray. The red cover looked as if it were ready to fall off. Pieces of cobwebs and dirt clung to it. The red was faded and the gold lettering had lost its luster.

I don't think I sang a single song that day. All I could think of was the book sitting in the chalk tray. I wanted to run out of the classroom, but I knew I couldn't do that or Mrs. Beatling would know for sure that I was responsible. After finishing the last hymn, the class broke up into the separate Bible study groups.

I practically ran to my group's room. My embarrassment was still strong, but it was starting to turn to anger. Leaving the book on display in the chalk tray infuriated me.

I felt as if I were on display in front of the class. I stepped in front of the window and started to drum on the window sill. I stared out the window as the other guys entered the room.

"What are you doing?" Greg chuckled.

I looked down at my hands and found them to be rapidly hammering on the sill. As I stopped and turned around, the rest of the class began laughing. I paced across the room and into the hallway. As I looked down the hall, I saw my study group's teacher still in the main room. Mr. Womley was about twenty years old. He was thin enough that hardly any of his clothing fit properly. His shirts hung on his back like large sacks. As I strode back into the room, an idea struck me.

I shut the door and shoved a wooden chair underneath the door knob. I meant for it to be a temporary show of my defiance that might get a few laughs, but when I turned to look at the others, their eyes glistened menacingly. Even Greg was smiling. They all began to shout and laugh in approval. Soon everyone was jumping up and down, leaping off the chairs, and shouting at the top of their lungs. Marty patted me on the back.

"Hey, you're all right," he said.

At that moment we heard a large thump and saw the door shudder.

"Open up the door, guys," Mr. Womley said tiredly. He beat on the door several times. "I know you're in there, I can hear you laughing. Come on. Open up." We all began to laugh even harder than before. "All right. If you don't open the door I'm gonna go get Mrs. Beatling." With that, we laughed even harder.

"Quiet," Marty whispered. He listened at the door. We could hear the sounds of Mr. Womley as he walked back down the hall. "What do we do now?" Marty asked.

"Just take the chair out and pretend nothing happened," Greg said, "and when he comes back with Mrs. Beatling, he'll look stupid."

"He is stupid," Marty said as he walked to the window. He threw open the sash. "Let's go out the window."

Immediately, everyone except Greg and me started to jump up and down with approval. But then I saw a twist in the plan that would make it very interesting.

"And when we go out, we'll close the window behind us. Then they won't know where we went!" I said. The others started to climb out the window, led by Marty.

"Come on, Greg," I said as the others clambered onto the roof. With just Greg and me in the room, we heard the unmistakable sound of Mrs. Beatling's hard soled shoes

approaching on the hallway's wooden floor. If there was one person who was more afraid than anyone of her, it was Greg. I ran to the window and jumped onto the roof. "Come on!" I mouthed, being afraid Mrs. Beatling might hear my voice. The sound of her footsteps stopped outside the door.

"You boys had better open this door right this minute or you're going to be in big trouble. Each and everyone of you," she bellowed. The door shuddered. Greg's eyes grew to twice their usual size. He ran to the window and leaped onto the roof. I shoved the sash down so that the window looked closed. As I looked through the glass I saw the door shiver violently, with wood on the chair's back beginning to splinter. Greg and I took off for the rest of the guys who were dancing around the roof's peak. Just as I got out of sight of the window, I heard an awful crashing and wood snapping.

"Get on the other side of the roof!" I shouted as I ran up the roof. We scampered over the peak and flopped onto our bellies, looking back toward the window.

"What are we going to do now?" Greg asked. Everyone turned their heads, looking for somewhere to go. "What do you think they'll do now?"

"They won't know what happened to us," I replied. I firmly believed we had just performed a magic trick. We had disappeared. I knew that we had one thing left to do in order for the stunt to be complete. I looked around for some way to get off the roof, but it appeared as if we might have been stranded.

"Look around and see if you can find some way to get down off of here," I said. Everyone ran to the edges of the roof.

"How about this?" one of the guys shouted. He pointed at a three-inch vent pipe running up the outside wall and emerging above the roof line at the roof's peak. I grabbed the pipe and shook it back and forth a few times.

"Yeah, this will hold us," I said.

Marty was the first to descend. He grabbed the pipe and swung over the edge of the roof. He slid down the pipe a few feet until he came beside a window.

"Hey, this is our bathroom!" he shouted up at us.

"Can you get in it?" I asked.

He swung his legs over to the window sill. The sash was opened, so he easily got his feet inside the bathroom.

"Yeah, it's easy. Everyone can get in here," he said.

Within a matter of seconds everyone was standing in the restroom. Even Greg didn't take much coaxing to get down off the roof and onto stable ground again. We all felt safe in the men's restroom. It would be unthinkable for Mrs.

Beatling to follow us in. It was our own private haven.

"What about Mr. Womley?" Greg asked.

"Oh, he doesn't use the men's restroom," Marty said. "They have a special one for him in the basement. It says 'queers' on the door."

We all started to laugh, but when I realized the noise we were making, I tried to quiet everyone down. "Be quiet. Someone might hear us." Everyone quieted down. "We ought to see if we can get back down the hall to our room," I said. The restroom was located at the end of the hall of study rooms. To get back into our room, we would have to run three-fourths of the way down the hall.

"Marty, open up the door a little bit and see if anyone is in the hall," I said. Marty opened the door a crack and peeked down the hall.

"No. I can't see anybody. How are we going to get back into the room if the chair is in front of the door?" Marty said.

"I think they got in. Let me see," I said. Peering down the hall, I counted back three doors to our room. Light slanted across the hallway from the opened door. "Yeah. The door's opened."

"What if somebody sees us?" Greg asked.

"All the other doors are closed," I said.

"We should go down the hall one at a time like in the war movies. When one person gets there he motions to the others if the coast is clear," Marty said.

Marty was the first to go down the hall. He cautiously stepped down the hall, trying to avoid the areas of the floor that creaked. At each door he listened for a few seconds and then tiptoed past it. He reached the room without incident. Once there, he motioned to us that the coast was clear. One by one we tiptoed down the hall to our room. I began to wonder what had happened to Mrs. Beatling and Mr. Womley. They should have been around somewhere. As I tiptoed down the hall, I could hear the teachers softly instructing their classes. The floorboards gently creaked as I carefully stepped down the hall. When I reached the room, I saw the chair that had been propped underneath the door knob, leaning against the wall, with its back in splinters.

Once we all had reached the room we sat down and remained quiet for a few seconds, but as we looked at each other, smiles began to spread across our faces. We soon started laughing uncontrollably. After a few seconds we heard the sound of Mrs. Beatling's shoes upon the floor. She approached, breathing in great gasps of air. Her nostrils were flared out and her face was red, with sweat streaming down her neck. She was rubbing her left elbow.

"All right. You wise guys. You think you are pretty smart, huh?" she said as sweat dripped from her nose. "Just what did you think you were doing?" We sat quietly with our smiles quickly fading. "All right. Everybody. On your feet. We're going downstairs. Hurry it up," she bellowed. We all stood up and followed her in a single file. She led us downstairs to the library. She set up some chairs in the room and told us to sit.

"I'm going to be in my office. If I hear one peep from any of you, so much as one peep, you're going to wish you never saw me." She stalked to the doorway and then turned around. "Marty, I want to see you in my office right now." He got to his feet while smirking. He strutted to the doorway and followed her out of the room. Greg sat on the other side of the room, with tears flowing down his face.

I tried to hear what was being said in the office, but the words were too muffled for me to understand. The other boys sat with their faces toward the floor. I wasn't sure how to act. Part of me was proud of our accomplishment. We had disappeared from the room and then reappeared like magic, according to my way of thinking. It seemed like a stupendous stunt that could rank with Jesus and the loaves of bread and fish. And what was best of all was that no one had seen us. We had performed a perfect stunt. And we had defeated Mrs. Beatling. She had no way of knowing what had happened. I imagined her breaking the door down, her tremendous body crashing against the door and the chair's back slowly giving way and snapping. I knew that the awful crash I had heard must have been her falling to the floor after the door flew open. As I pictured that, I began to laugh. I tried to keep from laughing out loud, covering my mouth with my hand, but the more I tried the funnier it all seemed.

Marty walked back into the room, followed by Mrs. Beatling.

"Okay, Jim, since you think this is so funny, why don't you come on into my office next?" she said.

I got up and wiped my eyes. She led the way into her office and offered me a seat on the divan.

"So, why don't you tell me what is so funny?"

"Oh, nothing," I said sheepishly.

"Well, there must be some reason?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't you tell me just what happened upstairs."

I stared at the floor without responding.

"Who put that chair beside the door?" she asked.

I continued to stare at the floor.

"Look, I know you probably didn't have anything to do

with what happened. Just tell me who it was that did it and I'll let you go."

She didn't even suspect that it had been me. Always her volunteer. I started to feel comfortable with her. Instead of teacher and pupil, she seemed like anybody else. I didn't know how to tell her I had done it though.

"Why are you caring so much about who did it?" I asked.

"Don't you think I ought to?"

"It doesn't make any difference, does it?"

"Just tell me who it was," she said. She suddenly seemed to no longer be the fearful monster she used to be. She now seemed to be a sniveling old woman who was only concerned because we had performed a trick that she couldn't figure out. It sounded like she was asking to know how the stunt had been performed. None of the tricks Greg had told me about could compare to this one. I felt as if I had discovered the true basis for magic. The other guys then became pawns that had only played a part in my stupendous feat. I decided to take full responsibility. No one else was going to take the honor of making such a significant discovery.

"They didn't know anything," I said. "They didn't know anything that was going on."

"What?" she said, looking puzzled.

"I know what you want to know. You can't figure out how we did it. That's what you want to know, isn't it?"

She looked stunned, but then a smile began to creep across her face.

"It was you?...You did it?" she asked, seeming amazed.

"Those guys didn't know what was going on," I said.

"...What about that hymn book? I found it near where you live," she said.

I had completely forgotten about it. Until she mentioned it, everything seemed to be going just fine. I had been so completely caught up in the spirit of my new insight, that I had forgotten what had caused all this to. I immediately thought of the book with its cover soaked in water, sitting in the chalk tray. I hung my head in shame.

"Maybe I've been wrong about you all along," she said. Her face became solemn and she once again was the monster I feared. "It was you who did it, wasn't it?"

I stared at the floor, unable to speak.

"How could you do something like that? Was it you who put the chair beside the door too?"

My eyes started to water. I wanted to get out of the room as soon as possible. Everything in the room reeked of belonging to her.

"I think maybe we should call your mother," she said as

tears began to stream down my face. I wiped my tears away with my hand.

"You're only mad because you don't know," I said as I tried to hold down the sobs. "You can't figure it out. We did a miracle."

Mrs. Beatling shook her head as she leafed through our biography cards. My mom got there in about fifteen minutes. I sat in the library as they talked. After a few minutes, Mom called me to the door and we left the church. She didn't say anything until we were about halfway home.

"I don't think your dad's going to be very happy hearing about this," she said. "You're lucky I didn't beat your butt when I got there."

"I'm not going back there any more," I said.

"We'll see about that tomorrow," she said.

The next morning I stayed in bed. Mom threatened to take away my popsicles and I told her to go ahead and do it. She looked quite stunned when I told her I didn't care about popsicles anymore. She tried switching her strategy, and offered two popsicles a day if I would go. When that failed, she said she would take me to see a movie that evening, but all her efforts had no effect. My mind was made up.

ON THE ROAD

Erleen J. Christensen

Wake up in someone else's town
and watch the way the trees
arrange themselves against
the sky. At dawn,
check what color dirt
decides to be, what plants
have chosen to be weeds.

CIRCUS

Dee Walker

Scurrying across the high wire
gray squirrel steadies himself
with only his great bushy tail.

Then in come the clowns
Racoon
masked raiders of garbage cans
in the night.

Hanging from a fine thread
attached to an ankle
a sexy little spider spins
fearless of the drop below.

And in the Center Ring
a baby bird
is about to fly
without a net.

CROSSING FULTON BRIDGE

R. T. Wilson

A half-mile up Fulton Avenue
the offices of the Lysey brewery
are crumbling with infinitesimal
rumbles from the trainyard.
The mulberry trees we used to rob
with buckets are dead
and soot stains the doorways
where West Virginians live.

People will tell you
crossing Fulton Bridge at night
is taking life into your own hands;
perhaps because a cemetery
is on the other side. All around it
wrought iron works like ivy
on the mind and stones stake out
their own black bits of horizon.

And standing here I think of Catherine
who worked 20 years for my father.
Her son Danny, who I didn't like,
caught three bullets in his own front
yard on Labor Day, wondering
just how many ways there were
to get away from here.

Below in the groaning valley
flatcars crease the rails
in a frictioned ease of going --
and eight miles east the Cuyahoga
lugs long waters past the steel mill
and foams its dross into the lake.

SOUVENIR

R.T. Wilson

On the island of Hispaniola
stones drop like beads of sweat
from the mahogany trees

and grow large and hard as the chocolate
eyes of children.
They call this amber
and when the red tourist bus climbs
the long hill going up to the Hotel Cayeco
the calypso band plays
the women are full of hips and laughter.

What you want to remember is like this:

the green hill glistening after rain
how you climbed high above coconut trees
through the steam of grass and your wet shirt
and little girls with flowers for nickels
waited at the bottom.

Maybe it was the sun hovering
in all that blue
the way each step in spongy earth
held you for a moment
in a different moment,
but stopping to catch your breath
against the smooth trunk of a palm tree
you wondered of another life
and dreamt it full of silence
and green shadows folding down around,
hoping to be caught
in that constant bloom forever.

Far away
the ship waited
girls walked home
with fists of red bouquets
and you were thinking of the price
of innocence--
the white sand and soundless bay
how the insect crouched in a lacquered stone
and what you left became what remained.

WIDOW

Sue Saniel Elkind

Her spinster
and widowed friends
come for tea
bring advice

she craves all the old
annoying things
strong smoke smells
in the curtains and furniture
and the other pillow
on the too wide bed

she does things she never had
time for reading watching tv
going to shows
she wakes happy
is despondent by sundown

she floats through
the empty house free
to do all the things
she no longer cares to do

ARRIVAL AT FIRENZE
CHRISTMAS, 1981

Mary Martin

All day I couldn't stop,
archways kept pulling me
to another plaza, another sweep of stone
before a church embracing relics --
the gilded pillow
under St. John the Baptist's finger - -
indifferent to the cold I kept drifting,
looping under domes until I found
stairs that twisted sharply
to leave me arcing over the city.
Almost tumbling in my descent,
quick decisions pushed me
dazed through narrow streets
across bridges; I flourished
through palace grounds and skimmed
their precious floors, grew dizzy
looking up at the marble bodies - -surrounded
their smooth enunciation of limbs
with my small steps.
Finally tired,
lulled near a fountain
I was startled, and turning
regarded the enormous movement
of the pigeons in the plaza,
a flight so close to the hands.

House Rules

William E. Crane

I'm riding through Indianapolis, Indiana at two in the morning on my way home, looking at the houses along the expressway, wondering who these people are, who I am. Are they like me? I doubt it, not tonight anyway. Are they as cold indoors as their houses appear outside or as dead as the gray pallor of their streets I can see through my window? My wife's silent while I think; neither of us is sleepy. She's mad at me.

They can't be that cold. Surely their furnaces are working, burning heating oil or natural gas, children asleep in bed, unconsciously listening to the blower fan, secure as long as it runs and heats their bedrooms. Me? I've been listening to the car engine, secure as long as it runs without miss. What would I do if it konked out? There's hardly any traffic. Who would help me? Would my wife and I freeze inside my metallic silver Volkswagen? Or if I knocked on a door, would one of them let us in to share some of their heat, save our lives, late at night? Would I deserve being saved?

I'm trying to convince myself that my anxiety is a function of being sealed in my car, radio off, radial tires humming on the pavement, isolated, one clogged fuel injector away from disaster, one dirty tank of gas away from meeting these people face to face. It's not true. I'm rationalizing. I brought this feeling on myself, caused it earlier in the evening.

I sit on the sofa at Ken and Lisa Petty's waiting for them to bring the Monopoly board out of the closet. I wonder if there's somebody else in a car, driving by, seeing the lights on, wondering if we're like they are. I'm going to play Monopoly with my wife and our friends. It depresses me. I don't want to do it, but I will. Tonight, it's the only

game in town.

Kenneth pushes through the little ring box containing all the playing tokens with his index finger, searching for the racing car, I know. I watch him until he lifts it an inch above the box, still gripped between his thumb and finger, before he can drop it into the palm of his hand. My cousin always beat me to the racing car when I was a kid, and, ever since, I use the car. Ken is out of the same mold as my cousin, stealing the racing car from me. "When you were a kid," I ask Ken, "what marker did you always want to use?" He drops the token, now hot and molten, back into the ring box.

"The racing car."

"Yeah, me too. My cousin beat me to it every time when I first learned to play. I guess that's the reason I always wanted it. He stuck me with the steamship."

"You want the steamship?" Ken asks.

I laugh inside, tell him that it's fine, the steamship's fine, even though the body is too narrow, doesn't look right, doesn't feel right, like the racing car does moving around the board.

My wife Louise picks the Scotch terrier, says, "It's a dog's life anyhow and if anything could bring me some luck, a puppy dog will."

Lisa, Ken's wife, complains that there's no such thing as luck, not in this house. "Captain Ken always wins," she says. Lisa calls her husband "Captain Ken," or "The Captain" sometimes.

I tell her she's right. I tell her all we have to do is bring the Monopoly set out in this house and all bets are off. We play simply to get beat by Ken, we like it, and unless we shoot him, we don't stand a chance. I wink at Ken so he knows I'm kidding. I'm not kidding. I'm trying to make a point with Lisa but I know I can't do this, there's no point to be made nor argument to win, nobody to convince. Ken laughs at me, which is good, since Louise will kick me if I don't watch my step. I tell Louise to "check the dice, they may be loaded." She kicks me. Lisa laughs. I figure the lines are drawn.

Lisa chooses the steam iron.

"I didn't have you figured for the iron," I say, forcing a compliment. "I had you pegged more for the top hat, you know..." and I want to add, "out on the town all the time and all," but I don't.

"No," she says, "the steam iron is just exactly the right marker for me, isn't it, Ken?" Ken looks at her sternly. I don't think he's accustomed to Lisa talking back to him, even in jest. I must bring out the worst in people.

The cars going down the street can see the lights on in the Petty home, and if they're like me, they'll be wondering what we're doing, what we're like, and if we're like them. It's a primitive curiosity, this one, I think, left over from our ancestors, seeing a light and drifting toward it, knowing that there might be food, might be companionship. How many drivers, I ask myself, ask themselves, "What are they doing?" I ask that as well.

But Louise asks the really important questions. "What are the house rules tonight?" The question is necessary. Ken plays a variety of them; the favorite is to require a ten dollar fee to be paid each time a player passes Free Parking. Owed to the center of the board, along with all the fines from the Chance and Community Chest cards, a player collects the pot if he lands on Free Parking.

Actually, I like this rule. Ken believes he'll always have a chance to recoup a loss. He calculates anything he pays out should come back to him. I think he's asking too much. I'm going to win my share of the pots, after all. So will Louise.

Louise knows that Lisa angers me, disappoints me because of her amateurish strategies and manuevers. I realize it isn't accurate to characterize her play with these words, seeing how she does not operate on so high a plane, but Louise warns me to take everything as it comes. I agree with her; I can't let Lisa upset me. But she does. She bugs me. Her looks bug me. She has big doe eyes and she uses them to get what she wants. I don't care if Captain Ken wins because she lets him, helps him, and wants him to win. She is his stooge.

"Who wants to be banker?" Louise says. She asks all the right questions.

"The Captain's always the banker," Lisa says, shoving the game box over to him. He picks up the stack of orange-ish five-hundred dollar bills.

If I quit Monopoly for fifty years, I'd always remember how much money gets divided among the players. The human brain stores uncountable trash, a negative attribute of the organ. Ken counts out two 500's, two 100's, and two 50's.

Lisa says, "Isn't it amazing that Captain Ken can remember how much money to pass out? I could never do that."

Louise nods her approval. She really understands how to function in this situation. We're sharing a ritual, just being together with friends. It doesn't matter that Lisa can't play very well or that she worships Ken to the point of being maudlin. What matters is that we're drinking a little wine, sharing some time, ignoring a few of life's pressures. I can't do it. I imagine the cars passing

outside, taveling somewhere, out of the city maybe, feel their thoughts penetrate Ken and Lisa's brick home, asking us to explain ourselves, wanting to know if we're having a good time, if we love each other, if maybe they should be more like us. Louise nudges me.

"Roll for turns," she says.

I asked them if they'd like to play a shortened version of Monopoly where the title deeds are shuffled and dealt out like playing cards. Then the game operates like usual, the divided deeds the properties each contestant builds on or bargains with.

I think I see Lisa look to Ken, and I think I see him shake his head slightly. "No," she says. (Did he kick her under the table? Do they have a code?) "I wouldn't want to, it seems like cheating."

"It's not cheating," I say, wishing I hadn't; Louise kicks me. "Do you want to play where if you don't want a property, everybody else can bid for it?" She doesn't want to do this either, says she wouldn't know how to start a bid. I want to tell her, in the worst way, to bid somewhere below the actual list price for starters, try to teach her a little common sense, but I don't. I say, "O.K., no big deal."

My strategy is simple. The moderately price properties are my choice. I can try for more than one monopoly at a time and I can build houses fast. Usually, the big shot player tries for Boardwalk and Park Place, or the green monopoly, and dies trying to improve them. My plan eliminates the big spenders. I beat them to the punch. Other players have favorite monopolies, ones they like out of desire--not strategy. I'll buy from the purple to the yellow, whatever I can, as fast as I can. There can be no favorites, just monopolies. My really secret strategies are devious. I believe in the railroads, and Baltic and Mediterranean avenues. Baltic and Mediterranean, with hotels, keep me flush in everybody else's Go money. It's the best return, dollar for dollar, in the game. The railroads do the same, but they're spaced around the board. I have to be patient to see a profit.

I drink my Riunite; it has ice in it, not yet chilled when we arrived. I roll the dice, move, buy property, plan my strategy, watch what else has been bought, by whom, try to ruin Ken's and Louise's monopolies, try not to spoil any of Lisa's or she'd never succeed. She just throws the dice. She doesn't understand that the trick is to know where to land and to try for an exact roll. It isn't so much that this helps the number turn up on the dice (though there is something in this superstition). After all, odds are odds,

but, once landed, it's easier to know what to do. The move was expected and planned, in a sense. It hones strategy, makes the player think. It keeps my head in the game. Once I begin tossing the dice, I've given up, merely playing out the string.

Louise thinks I'm nuts. I pick up the bones, shake them close to my ear, like a movie gambler, ask for my numbers "the hard way." I get doubles, roll again. "Come on, baby needs a new pair of shoes." My wife rolls her eyes; "Pearls before swine," I think, smiling at her. She sticks her tongue out at me. I love her.

It's Lisa's turn. "Didn't Captain Ken do a nice job with our kitchen floor?" We all agree, yes, Ken did do a nice job. "He didn't think it would be easy, you know how he likes things just-so, but he managed it, and saved us lots of money." Lisa moves her steam iron and fails to buy a property she needs. Ken doesn't help her, and I think it strange that he wants to win so badly he'd beat his own wife's brains out.

"I'm such a klutz," Lisa says. "If I try to do something around the house, I just quit. It's really easier to have The Captain do it. He does a better job."

"That's because you don't pay attention," he says. Lisa nods in agreement.

"You are such a good cook," Louise says, always the right thing, "and you're a great mom to Michelle."

"I sure hope our daughter is more like Dad than like Mom. I'm so awkward, and Kenneth, well, he's like a mountain goat, agile, coordinated and all."

I laugh. "A goat? Dear me."

She looks at me. "Yeah, he hops from job to job, always does it right, never misses a trick."

"Sounds more like a rabbit to me," I say, unable to resist. Louise kicks me hard, in the shin. Lisa looks to her for help, but I wink at Ken. So far, so good, for me. They still think I'm teasing. Captain Ken doesn't joke around and makes me wonder where he's at in all of this. Is he trying to win right now as we wink? Is he lulling me into a conversational attitude so that he can beat my brains out? Is that what he's thinking? I better watch out. It could be violent.

The bathroom lights make me sad driving through Indianapolis at night. Flicking on and off, I sigh with relief, but when they stay on, I'm wondering who's sick with the flu, whose mother is up with her child trying to stop him from wretching, which grade schoolers are afraid of the dark and need a night light, need more than the furnace

steadily pouring out BTU's of warmth in a cold city, at two in the morning, with nobody caring about them except me. The speedboats in the backyards are dead under their canvas covers, dirty with granular snow, melted and refrozen a thousand times during the winter. They look like monstrous coffins.

The bathroom lights shine into the backyard from an angle; the moon and sky fill in with a dim glow illuminating these gothic scenes. Every block it's the same. Driving by at sixty miles an hour, everywhere it's the same.

Lisa declines to buy a property Ken needs, fails to interrupt a monopoly; I don't control myself, let a "Lisaaaa," slip, draw my shins back underneath my chair, not knowing if Louise tries to kick or not.

"What?"

"Ken needs that property. Buy yourself a bargaining chip."

"Bob," Louise warns.

Ken looks across the table at me. He says nothing. He should tell her that I'm right. She should buy St. Chuck's Place, even if only to sell back to him later. Ken says nothing. He is wrong in this.

Lisa's the kind of Scrabble player who will make a six-point word sitting a turn in front of Ken, setting up a triple-word-score for him the next play. And she'll be impressed when he does it, and Ken will take the points, every single time.

I'm getting angry. I think Lisa should stick up for herself. I think she should stop playing into Ken's hand. It drives me crazy and I want it to stop. I drink my Riunite and have no fear that I might get drunk. Not now. I'm not going to be able to control myself if this nonsense continues. But it will go on, I know it will go on. I can't change it. I've tried and there's no use worrying about it.

I need Ole Kentuck to capture the red monopoly. Louise rolls the dice, moves around Free Parking, and before she can think about paying her ten bucks to the pot, lands on Kentucky, buys it without remorse, shoots my monopoly down. I love her for it. My wife has moral strength, I think, and critical as I'm being, I'm glad she came through for me.

Ken owns no properties I need. Louise will not sell Kentucky because I have nothing she needs. I will have to trade with Lisa. I contemplate giving up, sitting at the table, sipping Riunite, monopoly-less, collecting measly rents, eventually being taken out of the game on a high-priced hotel. I've lost games on purpose before, but this would only confirm Lisa's irrational fixation. I owe it

to her to try to win. Some games of Monopoly are bad enough, but a game without a monopoly? I couldn't bear it.

I own two orange properties, New York and Tennessee avenues. She has the third, St. Jimmy's. She has Park Place. I have Boardwalk. I think she'll be flattered to have the game's most expensive monopoly (even though they're hard to develop at two-hundred bucks a house), so I say, "Lisa, let's talk turkey. I'll trade you Boardwalk for your orange one."

She looks at her spread, maybe not understanding why I would offer an expensive deed for a cheaper one. "No."

"I'll throw in a railroad, Reading even."

"No."

I wonder how to proceed. "Why?"

"Just no, for right now."

It's like talking with her Michelle. "No, just nooo!"

I pick up the dice and roll. I hit income tax. It should teach me for rolling carelessly.

Lisa rolls without thinking, lands, passes the dice to Captain Ken. He rolls a seven, "One, two, three, four, five, six, and seven," he counts, nailing marvelous Marvin Gardens and completing the yellow trio. "Bingo," he says.

"Wrong game," I mumble.

"Well, it's all over now. He's going to put houses on right away," Lisa says.

"Isn't that the object?" Ken asks. Lisa doesn't care.

"He always wins, and he's going to win again."

I motion to an imaginary person standing somewhere in the kitchen, "Director, Director, over here please." I wave him up, make him lean over so I can speak into his ear. "This woman is trying to throw this game. I'd like to file a protest."

"Well, he does too," she says.

In the worst way, I want to say, "He does not," and stick my tongue out at her. But I don't. My sarcasm would be misconstrued. I'm worried. I'm losing control and this is getting out of hand. She's setting a record for disturbing me. Ken really doesn't have an advantage yet, but I want to stuff my napkin down Lisa's throat. I drink my Riunite. I am not drunk.

Kenneth can't afford too many houses--not for the moment. It's Louise's turn. She has property in common with Kenneth and he will not trade now; Louise cannot win. She doesn't care and she's smart. Lord only knows how she does it. My brain is dying.

All the houses along the freeway in Indianapolis depress me even though I worry about the people inside. From

the picture windows, I can see the dull blue-green light of television screens, test patterns in some, lighting the rooms ghoulishly, bathing all the houses from the inside with insidious photons of light which get stuck in the walls, work their way through the fiberglass insulation and make the houses glow even grayer and colder than they should.

The dreams people dream must be of such colors and prime-time characters, doctors, lawyers, policemen, who aren't really qualified for these jobs, but people reading scripts, pretending to be all sorts of experts. The waves of ghastly light seep into the houses in Indianapolis, and my worries go out for these dreamers, dreaming at night when poisons, stuck in the walls, joists, and studs, leak out. They leak out and play by night, ruining all restful sleep, and only I can see it because I'm on the highway outside, late at night, no time to stop and save them, and only I can notice because Louise is driving without the radio. That's why I can notice.

It's my turn. "Lisa, I'll turn the deal around, I'll give you the two orange ones for Park Place and a railroad, two for two. And you'll have a three-property monopoly; I'll have a double."

"But Boardwalk and Park Place are better."

Now what do I say? I try, "No, they're not, they're harder to develop at two-hundred dollars a shot."

"You're trying to gyp me; Captain Ken, he's trying to gyp me."

This is all I need. "Lisa, I just want us to have a monopoly. Ken is ready to build on his; we're playing against him. You make a suggestion."

"O.K., I'll give you Park Place for two orange and a railroad."

"Oh Jesus," I say, "that's three to one. Come on, let's be reasonable, I don't have that many properties to begin with," and I don't, and I'm mad.

Lisa pokes through her title deeds, limning deep thought, artful planning. "All right, Park Place for the two oranges."

"Throw in the railroad," I try one more time; fair is fair.

"Oh, fine, go ahead. Here," she says and throws Park Place and the railroad at me, grabbing the avenues of New York and Tennessee. "You'd think this was life and death." She looks at Louise like I'm an idiot, like I'm the bad guy--the only person who ever thought about winning this particular game. I offered a deal, she said no, fine. I

sweetened it, offered two for one, and she said no, again, fine. Then I reversed the deal 180 degrees and still no way. She turns into Merrill Lynch and wants me to trade three for one. And I'm the bad guy. I give her back the railroad. "Thank you, Bob," she says, expecting my surrender. I am an apostate.

The table stays quiet for several rounds too many; I eat peanuts so that I can hear some sound. Nobody jokes, including me. I'm not happy that I'm taking the blame for her ridiculous play. I feel bad, the bully on the block. I let her get to me. Louise will scold me later. I'm embarrassed, wish it never happened. I don't feel so good, letting a Monopoly game get in the way of friendship, and I wonder if it is the wine, and if maybe I shouldn't drink ever again.

I can't build my two properties as fast as Ken does, and pretty soon he's collecting a pretty rent, both from Louise and Lisa. In my mind, Boardwalk and Park Place have always been overrated, and they stay vacant. I have a serious cash flow problem. I ease up, relax, reach down and rub my barked shin.

"Lisa, I want to make a deal," Captain Ken says.

"Go get him, Lisa," I say and wink at her, but she doesn't seem to understand.

"I'll give you, let's see, Oriental costs one-hundred dollars new. I'll give you two-hundred dollars."

I can't refrain from telling her that he's buying another monopoly and she shouldn't sell it cheap. She looks at me and nods.

"I'll sell it to you for three-hundred dollars."

"Lisa," I say.

"What?"

"Take a look at what it will cost you when you land there--with a hotel. Sell it for at least that, maybe double that."

"O.K., Ken, give me four-hundred dollars," and before I can accuse Kenneth of cheating her, he places the title deed neatly on his other two pale blue cards, and she collects his money.

I cannot help myself. I'm totally incapable of holding back, of letting this occasion go by. I knew it wasn't going to do any good, but, still, I try.

"I'm sorry I'm going to say this. Later I'll wish I hadn't but this is the last straw and I can't take it anymore. I'm sorry, Louise. I'm sorry I can't be like you." I turn to Lisa. "God damn it, Lisa, what in the hell are you doing? I swear to God you are incapable of separating yourself from Captain Ken for even one night." Lisa looks at

me, disgusting doe eyes never blinking. "You were a Wall Street trader when you made your deal with me, but the minute Ken asks you for a trade, you cave in. I'm sick of hearing that Captain Ken always wins, do you know how sick I am of that? Why don't you try to win once in a while, damn it, you win one. Lisa, you win a game! Don't feed everything to him. He can handle it, he's The Captain. He's the goat. Then again, would you even want to win? Are you a weirdo? Do you like to lose? That must be it. You like it. You like humiliation. You like to feel like Ken is God! I want to know how I'm supposed to have fun with you when you won't admit to any other possibility. Then you let him win. Why should I play with you? And if all of this sounds totally strange, you better see a psychiatrist because all of us can see it. I'm sorry; I lost my control, but I'm not sorry I said this because it is true. Oh, yes, I am sorry, it's not worth it. God damn it, let's play. I'm going to try to kick his butt, even with you two playing against me. I'll be the bad guy now. Come on, roll the damn dice, let's see how it works now."

Louise looks at me as if I'm a lunatic, dangerously frothing at the mouth, sent off the deep end by a full moon, in need of shots, or worse. She wants to chop off my head and send it to the lab for a positive rabies identification.

"Bob," Louise says, "you are a creep."

I can understand her feelings. I'm seeing red, but I can't disagree with her. I know I'm going to regret this. Yet, Ken hasn't said a word and I hate him for not defending Lisa from me. He's the creep. Of course, it is too late to win the game. I'm too far behind to prove a point and he's loaded now that she's sold him a monopoly for four-hundred dollars. The silence at the table is terrible. I can't believe that I've brought this on, but I have. It wasn't worth this; I guess I'm not so smart after all. I wonder what color this house is from the outside.

Louise drives me home, thinking I'm drunk. I don't know, maybe I am. I lean my head against the passenger door window, look out at all the houses on the way home. It's two a.m., it's cold, the houses are blue-steel, and the bathroom lights get me worrying, like usual. A young mother sacrifices her sleep for her sick baby, a teenager pukes his guts out, trying not to make any noise. Some of the lights wink out and I feel good. The ones that stay on might not mean anything at all; still I worry. I try to squeeze Louise's knee, but she's having none of it. If I told her what I saw in Indianapolis, Indiana, she'd probably want me

admitted to the hospital, psychiatric ward.

Louise gets us off the by-pass, heads the car for home. Switching on the radio, she breaks my concentration, the ghosts seep back into the woodwork, the television sets glow less ominously, and the whine of my fuel-injected engine fades behind the twenty-four hour news station. I listen for the reports which inevitably come; leading economic indicators are up or down, the Middle East is unstable, the college team has won or lost, the coach tells why, and the weather tomorrow will be more of the same, which leads into another wrap of the day's events, and on and on. A fire is in progress downtown.

Two weeks later, I learn that Lisa thinks I did what I did because I'm too competitive. She asked Louise if my childhood was competitive. Louise had enough sense to shrug, but Lisa figures this is the answer anyhow. "Just tell her I'm sorry," is what I tell Louise to say. "Just tell her I didn't know what I was doing." Louise says I almost made Lisa cry but she wouldn't cry in front of me. I am glad she didn't cry.

We don't play Monopoly anymore, predictably. We can handle certain card games but Kenneth quits now and then, when he's not winning. I don't say the slightest thing; but I think it. I think of Lisa watching Ken quit, recognizing no irony. She makes no statement to his not winning. I listen for Ken's admission of defeat. I listen in vain. Neither Ken nor Lisa seem to have any further understanding of themselves and it makes me sad. Apparently, she has gained no understanding of me either. But, I don't say anything. I only think it and worry about them when I drive by in my car and look into their windows.

**HE CAN GO HOME,
I GUESS WE PULLED
THE WRONG NIGGA THIS TIME**
would you like a cop of coffee and some candy
for the little girl

Aisha Eshe

You can't hide from the ghetto at night
At night I close my doors tight
turn off all the lights
snuffle the sheets and my baby girl
But the ghetto comes in at night
A knock that stirs your rest
Couldn't sleep wonder what's wrong
another knock
must be some mistake
nobody knocks on my door at night
Anyway Michael will answer
he sleeps out front
Another knock
Betta get us sister
Something must be wrong
'cause the ghetto comes in at night
even if you don't answer the door
Two punk cops
One Black one white
Dey always send one Black cop to the ghetto
but the honky always shakes his head
tellin' the nigger, come on let's go
Askin' me if I was Michael Roy's mother
Sayin' he broke into somebody's house
tried to rape a woman
Punk cops lyin' on my son
No sister you can't hide from the ghetto at night
'cause it creeps crawlin' through your door
but dis is one stron Black momma
and you ain't takin' my son nowhere
without me goin' too
Crystall get some clothes on
and find my shoes
'cause the ghetto comes in at night
sneakin' crawlin' through your door
but dis is one strong Black momma
and I'd mace dos punk cops
fo' I'd let them take my boy downtown alone

ain't no time fo' beatin' up niggason my boy
Crystall get my shoes
and bring the dog
'cause the ghetto creeps into the night
and you can't hide

BOTH FAIRE AND BROWNE, SPUNGIE EYES AND DRY CORKE

Duane Locke

If at sixty one's interest in the contours
of nudes has grown, increased in ardour
to an artistic intensity, and all
the burning gem-like flames of youth
that were smothered under asbestos
and other inflammables are quickly
uncovered by the wrinkles and puffs
of skin under the eyes,
then one's artistic intentions
should be realized with a camera.
The paint brush is too slow
for abundance and variety.

winter narrative

Andrea Moorhead

flooded with brilliant sun
i have the impression this morning
that everything once again
is in flower, that the world
outside my dusty sun flooded
windows is filled with petals
and scented lavender,
mercury stained from long
darkness but now beginning
shimmer again flat bright
green, across the snow
in a raining band, i am also
in light as in pine or snow
cone, flat bright ice crust
or tender magnolia into
brilliant air with scent
of april or early may.

light on my desk now
and the soft wavering of branch
and wind across the window
onto my wood hour after hour
ebbing and flowing as a light tide
as a time with no other marker

than sun, stick, and wind,
so plain, so stripped of
any other emblem and always beyond i can see pine
and wild cloud or pine
and a long still expanse
of sky, branching into the day
as the pure shadow of
coming night.

ACROSS THE ALLEY FROM A CONVENT

Elizabeth Rees

The roommate with intelligent hands
finally figured out how to fix the bamboo shade.
Now you are free
to rock on your heels, rock
your round breasts, the rosary beads.
You drop them, one by one,
shells of seeds, the intimate nipple.
Let us sing to the nuns across the alley:
many temples can be built from bamboo.

The trellis yawns and buds
but blocks permission. Your room
is a design of branches, flexed shadows flicker.
There is a wood etching
of a man and a woman.
She offers her hips to the ceiling,
surrounds the corners of his uneasy thigh.
From a prone position in your bed,
you could imagine them in love.
You could believe love.

Stack the holy papers on their shelf,
settle beneath the blanket for safe thought.
There is a little bit of God in this room:
dancing figurines stretch for sun,
you cannot fall off the floor.
I can still hear you telling me
about that time you sat at a party of strangers,
and suddenly realized you were alive.

INSOMNIA

Marianne Andrea

Trees bend into the room
to watch my brain dissolve,
and who can blame them when
Rilke reads "Sonnets to Orpheus,"
Plato argues with Blake
and Herman and I drum-out
Beethoven's "Fifth"
on the out-of-tune-upright.

We are ten on this planet
gulping white bread and cheese
between draughts of over-sweet wine.
Clutching our knees we rock
like Chassidic scholars
and sing indefensible songs.

In the light of three candles
it's the old, old story:
pressure of breast and buttock,
insatiable mouths,
needles and softness
with sweet punishment. . .

We live so many lives,
embrace so many seasons
that melt one into another;
we promise all things forever,-
and somewhere a violin bows Paganini. . .

Windows pale between me and the past.
Plato, Rilke and Blake are leaving
sealing me like a fish in a stream.
I edge into curves of your body
that breathes in another dimension,
and slowly begin some new poem
on
waters
of
sleep. . .

Contributors' Notes

Marianne Andrea is from New York City. Her poetry and translations have appeared in Poets On, Denver Quarterly, Nimrod, Christian Science Monitor, and numerous other journals.

Jeff Boyer is currently finishing Ph.D. course work in literature at Kansas State University. He has an M.A. in Creative Writing from K.S.U.

William E. Crane is the Production Manager and Senior Producer at Oklahoma State University's Educational Television Services. Recently he has filmed a television special, "Hog's Heart," an adaptation of a Gordon Weaver short story.

Erleen J. Christensen lives in Lawrence, Kansas.

Sue Saniel Elkind began writing poetry at the age of sixty-four in Pittsburgh, P.A. Her work has been published in Kansas Quarterly, Kalliope, Midway Review, and numerous other journals.

Aisha Eshe is the mother of four children and writes poetry and plays in New Jersey. Her play co-authored with Hassan K. Salim, Don't Lose Your Soul, was produced by the Black Gold Theatre Company and U.J.I.M.A. Productions.

Greg German is from Glen Elder in north central Kansas where he worked on a farm for ten years. He is currently majoring in English at Kansas State University.

Judah Jacobowitz is an engineer for Mobil Research in Princeton, N.J. He has poetry appearing in Windless Orchard, Voices International, and several other journals.

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Gary Johnson was co-winner of the Touchstone Undergraduate Fiction Award at Kansas State University. He has since joined the Touchstone staff as an assistant poetry editor.

Michael Johnson is a professor of English at Kansas University in Lawrence, Kan. He has published poetry and translations in numerous journals and has published three books, the most recent of which is Familiar Stranger.

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William Luvaas teaches and writes in New York City. This is his second story to appear in Touchstone.

Duane Locke is Poet in Residence and Professor of English at the University of Tampa, where he edits UT Review. His poetry has been published in over four hundred magazines including Nation, Ann Arbor Review, and Kansas Quarterly.

Mary Martin is a member of the Susan Warden Dancers in Manhattan, Kansas and a graduate student in Creative Writing at Kansas State University. Her poems have appeared in Poet and Critic, The Mississippi Review, and Intro Five.

Andrea Moorhead teaches Latin and French at the Deerfield Academy in Deerfield, Mass. She is also the editor of Osiris, an international journal which publishes works in English, French, and Spanish.

Elizabeth Rees is beginning the graduate creative writing program at Columbia University. She has recently had a poem accepted by the Partisan Review.

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R. T. Wilson has an M.A. in Creative Writing from Kansas State University and has currently begun his Ph.D. course work there. His poems have appeared in Kansas Quarterly, Mid-American Review, and The New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly.

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