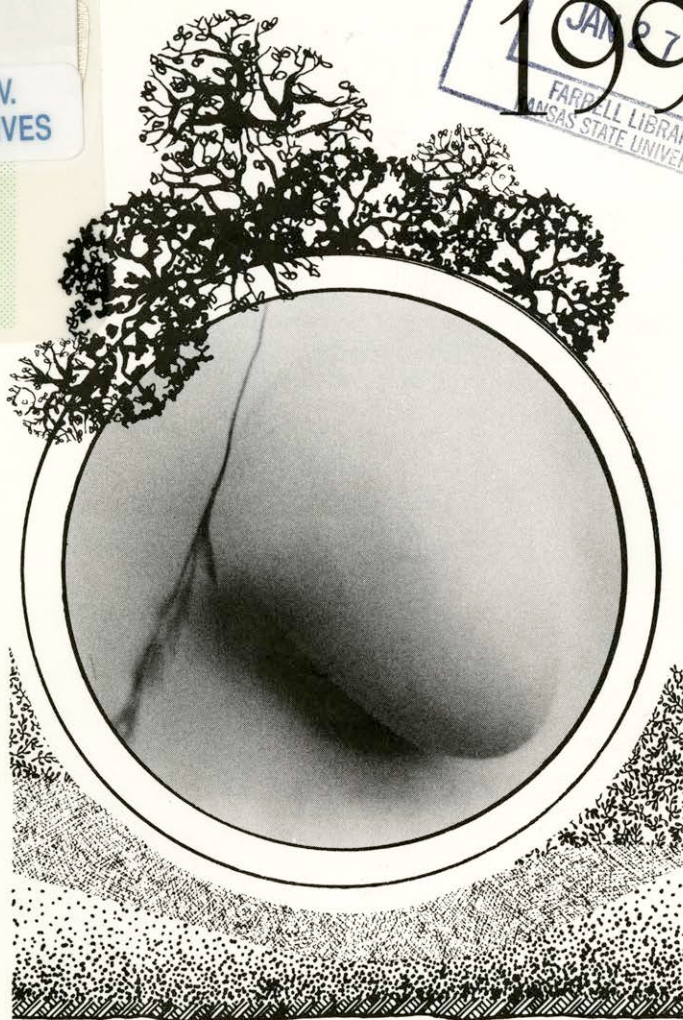


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# TOUCHSTONE

## 1990

Kansas State University  
English Department, Denison Hall  
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Volume 24 Fall

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Touchstone is an annual publication of art and literature by students from across the nation. The editors welcome submissions of art, photography, fiction, essays, and poetry. Manuscripts must be typed and doublespaced. Please include a SASE.

Touchstone provides the campus and the community with a tangible learning experience, a valuable forum for publication, and a stimulating collection of prose and verse.

A special "Huzzah" for our faculty advisor, Elizabeth Dodd.

We appreciate University Distinguished Professor Jonathan Holden's special contribution.

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1990  
Fall

## AWARDS

### POETRY

Jerry Engler

First Day Mowing

### FICTION

Paul Fecteau

The Sport of Trapping

### EARTH DAY ESSAY

James Hay

A Picnic of Intentions

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### Son, Age 6

Except when the stain of a bruise  
spreads darkly opaque  
he can't appreciate  
how whitely the sunlight wets  
the slicked grain of his back.  
(Forgets his girl-like wrists.)

All morning, chaste, he runs  
continuous with the light,  
transparent, complete.  
Not too modest yet  
to grant me a casual hug.  
(His ribs jut like rocks.)

*Bony moroni*, I joke.  
Give his heaving chest  
a poke. He wrenches away  
as if he didn't know  
a poke was as good as a kiss.  
(I know that he knows this.)

Jonathan Holden

## **First Day Mowing**

By the second round you have the feel  
of more than an ocean of prairie.  
Nine feet of hand-sharpened sickle stays hungry  
for the taste of wounded bluestem  
while you stay high in the tractor saddle  
breathing easy into the south wind under a fiery sun.

It's when you turn into the north that the  
tractor speed matches the soft breeze,  
and the sweet pungent smells steep your brain,  
or burns the nose if the sickle clacks  
in struggle against a renegade patch of wiregrass with ragweed  
that's on the shallow ground.

On the even soil the grasses are uniform,  
the mower's a well-fed shark  
slicing happily through little blue, big blue and gramma,  
slowing for a bigger bite on the switch,  
or gulping in struggle on slough grass in the draws.

The dog grins up at you from his place on the left or behind;  
he knows the sickle's big bite  
that cottontails flee. He's there  
for mercy if a bunny's bloodied,  
a dog's dining day out.

By the time you're four hours into your voyage when  
the rake man's there to check the drying  
from your beginning,  
you've found your sea legs, wobbling  
over to him from the tractor, and your  
eyes are reading the sickle's challenges in  
rippling waves of green.

Jerry Engler



## The Sport of Trapping

Paul Fecteau

A barbed wire fence rusted maroon with age runs all over my grandma's farm, seemingly not surrounding anything, banking left or right on to infinity. It is held up by metal fence posts, although a few of the original wooden ones remain, and occasionally a tree makes a corner, bark growing over and imbedding the wire.

I put one of my big leather hiking boots on the second wire from the bottom and, letting my weight go, force it almost to the ground. I grab the second wire from the top between barbs with my gloved hand. I pull up as hard as I can, so my cousin Christine can cross through.

She is seventeen and has long blonde hair like me. We both have blue eyes too, but there the resemblance pretty much ends. She's really athletic, and I've always been heavy. In fact, she is a cheerleader and tennis player at the same high school I graduated from five years ago with D's in gym class.

Looking back, I see the dust cloud we raised on the dirt road has settled, and I can see a long ways into the grey sky. The little blue Mustang my uncle Al gave Christine is covered with dust and parked where the road ends by the old skeleton of the silo.

I could tell she likes to drive. We took some tight corners on the ride out here from my parents' house. I think she likes to shift the gears the best. She does it like a pro, instinctively, and with a quick but fluid gesture. I never could get the hang of driving a stick. In driver's ed class I took a turn by this trailer court in third gear and almost drove into a little pond. Mr. Wayne didn't let me drive after that, and I got a C in the class. But I can drive an automatic alright.

I put a boot on the third wire, hoist myself up and leap to the other side.

"Let's go check the house first," Christine says. She is standing, hands on her hips, appearing to survey the horizon.

I make a motion with my hand. "Aprez vous, mademoiselle," I say, and she laughs. So we start walking through the dead prairie grass towards the ruins of great-grandpa Dresser's house.

I notice Christine is wearing her white tennis shoes. That would be bad in the summer, what with all the snakes out here. But it's the end of

February and I suppose snakes hibernate or go south or something. Her blue jeans don't cover her ankles either. They button tight below her calves, exposing her blinding orange socks. I wonder if these would attract snakes or scare them off. Probably, I figure, snakes are color blind.

"So what are you taking?" I ask Christine.

"Classes?" she asks, and I nod. "I have zero hour orchestra, Junior P.E., Algebra II, Psychology, Speech, Zoology, and American Lit." She concludes by throwing her head to one side and looking at me.

"That sounds well rounded. Who you reading in Lit?"

"Realists. Crane and those guys."

"Is that your favorite class?"

"Besides playing the cello, I guess."

"What about tennis?"

"That's in the fall."

"What about cheerleading?"

"That's just for pub."

"Pub?" I stammer.

"Publicity," she answers. She sure can pull words out of left field. "It's a social thing," she continues, "exposure, lets people know I exist."

"Boys?" I say tentatively.

"Now your catching on. It's all coming back to you, huh?, why you played ball. I know you hated it. You used to tell me so." Her comments make me a little uncomfortable. I wonder if she knows I never played a down in four years. She was only in grade school then, and I don't remember telling her I hated football. "I know," she says, "guys either play sports for their egos—you know, the weight room monsters who cry when they lose—or they play to impress girls. Huh?" I shrug and she laughs and smiles.

We stop by the big washed-out ravine where the creek twists in the summer. She steps to the precipice and stomps. Part of the edge falls, dead grass and chunks of black dirt landing in unmelted snow. That snow will stay down there until spring.

"I'm not going to cheer next year," she tells me, as we continue on to the house. The ravine is really no fun to look at without the creek.

"Why not?" I ask.

"Well, I think everyone knows who I am, and I'm starting to feel stupid."

The wind blows out here. I watch her brush her hair out of her eyes, and I start to think of the letters she has written me over the last year. They made me feel good, because they sounded like she was always having fun, and doing things that made her successful. The specific things she wrote never made much sense to me, but she sounded so earnest I just loved to read them. I usually read them at least twice. One of the things she wrote was about her relationship with a boy named Greg. It was in the second to the last letter that they had split up, mutually agreeing that

it was best. So walking with her at the farm I feel I should ask if she has a new boyfriend.

"Uhm," she replies biting her lower lip for a moment, "well, two boys want to go out with me, but I can't decide which."

"Why not?"

"Because they're so different, and I like them both," she pauses, "in different ways. You know what I mean?"

I have an inkling, but I want to hear her talk about it so I say, "don't really follow you."

She says, "Well, one of them doesn't go to our school."

I nod and, to my dismay, she stops. She's biting her lower lip again. I'm just quiet, figuring that she's just putting her words together. I'm mostly sure she wants to talk about it. We'd always talked when we were kids, and when she was a kid and I was older. But now, I think, we're both older, and wonder if it's changed. She runs a hand through her hair, so I do the same.

Finally she goes on, "One doesn't go to our school. He—his name is Curt—he goes to the military academy, St. John's, you know, down by the bank. In fact, he's the captain of the senior class. It's just the classic deal—a crew cut and a baby face. And, my god, his parents are loaded. His dad owns Alco or K-Mart or some damn store like that. Curt drives this pure white 280 Z. And tonight he's taking me to Burgundy's Lounge. Can you believe it? And you know what? Mom likes him too."

That I can believe. Aunt Michelle likes status. I know that. Uncle Al likes money, but Aunt Michelle likes status too. So now I'm real uncomfortable. Aunt Michelle has always kind of scared me, and so have guys that play with guns.

"Who's the other boy?"

"Jerome," she says. "He's in my class. I've known him since grade school. He's sweet, Stu, the sweetest guy I've ever met. I started helping him with his Algebra through that peer tutoring. Next thing I know, he sends me flowers, Jesus."

"Sounds to me like he's the one you like best."

"Oh, Curt's cool, tall and one hell of a body." We're back to Curt again and I'm uncomfortable again, but I want to hear her out, if not help her. "Mom does like him, and all the girls would kill to be in my place."

"I think you should spend time with who you like to spend time with the most." I feel real stupid after saying that.

"I like them both," she says.

There are three tall trees that surround our great-grandparent's burned-down house—it's just a foundation with scattered junk and overgrown with grass or weeds. The trees provide some wind-block as we approach.

"When was the last time you were out here?" she asks.

"Well, the week-end before I left, a year, I guess."

"I come out here all the time just to think."

"That's great," I say.

"Are you upset?" she asks, wrinkling her brow.

I'm surprised. I don't think I was acting depressed. "No, why?" I ask.

"Your expression got all blank when I talked about Curt and Jerome." We reach the tall trees and approach the foundation. "Stu," she says and her voice is very serious, "let's sit here and talk, just like when we were kids."

"We aren't kids. You're a young lady." When she hears that she makes a noise somewhere between a chuckle and a groan. I suppose Aunt Michelle tells her that too. "Well, you know what I mean," I say.

She steps up on the foundation looking into the house. It looks the same as it always has, I think. It reached a state of ruin and I guess it stays there. It burned down in 1968. It was the farm of our grandma's mother and father. Our grandma grew up here. She married grandpa and moved to the city. Then great-grandma and great-grandpa both died before I was born. The house out here burned down when I was two. No one knows why, maybe some bums. Grandpa died of a heart attack a year later. Grandma, who basically raised Christine and me while all four of our parents worked, died when I was twelve. It's true—I didn't handle it so well. We always call it Grandma's farm, but she only owned half. Our great-uncle Bob owns half too. We've never been too close to him. He lives in a trailer on the outskirts. He manages all the land here, renting it to farmers around the area. He and a couple boys hunt and trap out here.

Christine sits on the rocks. "Sit down," she commands. "Do you remember Grandma taking us out here and telling us those stories?"

I shake my head, not a denial but a display of awe. How I remember those stories. I dream a lot about the stuff Grandma told us she did.

"My favorites were the ones about the one room school house," Christine says.

"Yeah, the frail Miss Davenport who taught all the grades one through six," I add.

"Or swimming at the creek and jumping off the tire swing."

"Oh yeah, and when a water snake bit Bill Jr., and great-grandpa cut the bite open with his knife and sucked the venom out, remember that one?"

"Ick, I do."

"Ick" I agreed. "What about her meeting Grandpa?"

Christine thinks, then says, "At the gas station?"

"Yep, Grandpa worked at the only station in town, down on third street. Bob was the only one of the family who drove, took Grandma to the high school each morning and picked her up at night. They always stopped at Third Street for gas. Grandma'd always get out and talk to Grandpa as he pumped gas and checked the oil. One day he just up and

asked her to one of the dances they had every week-end down at the grange. Grandma graduated from high school and they were married that summer.” Christine smiles. “They’d been married forty-five years when Grandpa died.” I conclude.

Then we’re quiet, sitting on the foundation, listening to the wind hit those three trees. And finally she puts a hand on my shoulder and says, “Stu, how come you had to go away?”

I’m not floored by that like I thought I would be. I had an idea that when she came over to my parents’ house and said let’s drive out to Grandma’s farm that she wanted to talk about it. And though I don’t think I really want to, I think I can talk about it, because maybe she really cares. But maybe she’s just curious—I don’t know. So I ask, “do you want to know what the doctors said?”

“No,” is all she says.

There’s a big stove in this corner. This must have been the kitchen. The stove has holes in it, surrounded by black patches of rust. So I stare at the stove, not even thinking of a response. After awhile, I realize that her hand is still resting on my shoulder, and I feel I have to tell her the best I can. “I was really starting to upset Mom and Dad. When they said I should get some help, how could I say no? I was spending most all of my time asleep. I’ve always been a really vivid dreamer, and when I was awake I couldn’t do anything as good as when I was asleep.”

She is looking at me with such serious eyes, and I don’t really know how to say it and make it make sense. Finally, I decide, that’s because it doesn’t. You can’t force sense on something.

So I say, “When I was asleep I lived in this house. It was standing just like when Grandma lived here; even better, it was brand new just like when Great-Grandpa built it, flawless white. And I had a wife named Patience. She looked kind of like Grandma did when she was a girl, you know in all those black and white pictures in that drawer. She had that straight brown hair that went all the way down her back. So we lived here and farmed.” I conclude shaking my head, sure that was the vision.

Christine smiles. “That’s wonderful, Stu.” But then she chuckles. “You don’t know how to farm,” she says.

I realize she’s right, and I suppose I never really dreamed that specifically, but still it seems about the gist of what I dreamed. It was a year and a half of my life, but it all kind of runs together. It was when I dropped out of college. It started with late shows. I’d stay up every night watching them on all the local channels—Bogart or Bond, a musical with dancing or a cheap 70’s British horror flick, it didn’t matter, as long as it wasn’t a western. I hate John Wayne. So I’d be up all night and not wake up until noon, and then I’d eat lunch with Dad who was home on his lunch break. In the afternoon I’d play records, mostly stuff from the 60’s. Simon and Garfunkle are my favorite. I’d just sleep or lie there and listen to records until I got up to watch the late shows. I really didn’t think anything was wrong with that.

Then at lunch one day Mom starts talking about my life, and something she and Dad had decided. Dad didn't say anything. Mom said, "Stewart, I've been picking out job opportunities for you for over a year now. I tell you—I told you just last week that Mrs. Casey at the library said she would hire you for sure, but you ignored me. Now, your dad and I don't think you're just lazy, we think you're—well, that you could use some help." Dad didn't say anything, so I didn't dare look at him. I didn't know what to say to Mom. I didn't remember if she told me about any jobs. I still don't think I remember, but maybe I do.

I look at Christine and she's still smiling, her hand trying futilely to keep the wind from blowing her hair in her eyes. She has a date tonight. She always has dates, and I don't ever. It occurs to me that late shows and 60's music probably wouldn't make much sense to her. "No, I can't farm," I say.

Seeming to accept this, she says, "Hey, let's go on to the pond." She means the cattle pond, it's about a mile and a half from the house. We always went there in the summer and chased frogs—you have to watch for snapping turtles, they can take your finger off.

"It's getting pretty late," I say.

"It can't be any later than four-thirty," she says.

"It gets dusk before six out here," I warn.

"Like that matters, I mean couldn't we find our way on this path in the pitch dark?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I think about reminding her of her date, but then I figure she knows her schedule a lot better than I do. I've never been good about being someplace at a certain time.

"Come on, what do you think, we'll get attacked by wolves?"

I laugh, "Is it a full moon?" I ask. She laughs and gets up, brushing dirt from her jeans. I get up too, and we head on down the path that passes the house. Only slightly winding, it moves out beyond the grove of trees and on to the flat prairie grass, now tan and dead at its sides. Its main feature is of course two big wheel tracks made by the off road vehicles, that is Uncle Bob's big four-wheeler. Each tire track is permanent and remains dirt all the time. A little space of grass separates them. Me and Christine each have our own track to walk in.

Then she says, "I'm thinking of going out of state now."

"Any chance of an orchestra type scholarship?" I ask.

"Slight," she answers. "Did you ever regret staying in town?" she asks, and looking at her I see her bite her lower lip. She must think I'm sensitive about my quitting school. I'm not very much.

So I say, "There's a lot of good professors here, but it depends on what you're going in to. I don't know about the music department here, but you could probably go better places for that."

She says, "But I doubt I'll major in music, I mean, I just don't think I'm that good."

I frown. "Has Aunt Michelle been lecturing about a career?"

"Heck, no, she thinks I'll get a rich husband."

"Yeah?"

"Kidding, I'm only kidding, mostly kidding."

She's making me remember Mom telling me to get a major, though I just never could. "How about journalism?" she said all of the sudden when I was reading the paper, "Journalism would be a good major for you, Stewart." Dad put down the sports section and said, "Be a sportswriter." I hadn't paid a bit of attention to sports since high school but being a sportswriter sounded fine, so I just nodded my head. What else could I have done?

I tell Christine, "You should go for it if you really love the cello. You seem pretty good to me."

"Thanks for the support, and I'm not saying I won't, but whatever, I want to be able to party my ass off when I leave home. Christ, Stu, Mom makes me be in by midnight."

I shrug.

"With guys it's different. You can go out and don't have to worry." I look at her bright blue eyes and really can't picture them strained with worry. I begin to worry about her. It's on T.V. all the time—honor student overdoses, pregnancies and AIDS. I'm sure it's mostly hype—but still. "Serious, Stu, midnight, I have to be in by midnight. You know that means I can't make the after-dances."

Dances were a bad thing with my parents and me too. My first year in high school, they'd ask me every time there was one if I was going or not, and I always had to say I wasn't. Then they'd say "oh," their eyes wide, expecting an explanation. And what could I say? How do you explain it to people who went through a standard youth? They don't remember any great task in asking someone for a date. But I wouldn't have known the words to use. I really didn't know any of the kids at school. So I didn't say anything to my parents, and after a while they quit asking. That was until my senior year and the prom. They asked a lot about that, but it was the same with me.

I look at Christine. Her hair is falling all over her jacket. It's one of those brown leather ones that look like the ones fighter pilots wear, a furry collar and patches on the front, like John Wayne wore in *The Flying Tigers*. Of course, I couldn't stand that movie. But those jackets are quite popular now, and that's why Aunt Michelle let Christine get one.

I realize Christine will have to decide whether to go to the prom with Curt or Jerome, so I don't want to bring up anything about dances. We're just kind of quiet until we get to the pond.

In winter all the water in a farm pond snuggles down under a thick blue sheet of ice and stays there until thaw. There are a few grey-white air bubbles visible shifting under the ice. The edges, which will be underwater when the pond swells in the spring, are cracked frozen black mud.

We're standing at the edge of the ice, and Christine says, "Remember how Grandma could skip stones?"

"Yeah," I say, "if I got a real flat one, I could maybe get three. She'd pick up any old rock and skip it five, or even more."

"I was just a little girl," she says, "mine would always just go plunk. I used to think you guys were magic." I smile when she says that. "It makes me feel funny worrying about making the after-dance at some packed bar when Grandma just grew up here by herself. What the hell kind of stories can I tell my grandchildren?"

I put my arm around her. I really like what she's saying about Grandma and all. I really relate to it. I say, "Kid, this place will always be here. Come on, let's go walk around to the stream side."

She nods her head, smiles and says, "Yeah." So we walk by the frozen edge around towards where the little stream runs. It's the creek on the other side of the house, but over here it's just a stream.

Christine stops, picks up a rock and tosses it out on the surface of the pond. It lands with a crack and sits there on the surface of the ice. "See?" she says.

"Maybe someday," I tell her, patting her on the back. We go along the crest to the other side of the pond and have to go down through some thicket. I go first, tramping down the dead brush. And so I get a glimpse of a small coyote laying there by a place where the stream isn't frozen over. I see him tan like the winter prairie.

Christine makes a loud crash coming through behind me. She likes stomping and I think, before I can even point him out, there he goes, but I look and he's still there. I say, "Look," the excitement still in my voice. But the idea is already there in the back of my mind because he didn't run away when Christine made noise.

"Aw," she says and I suppose she smiles, but I'm not looking at her. He's laying there not running away. I can't see his back legs. I move slowly to the right. I move until I can see the metal jaws around his bone. I don't say anything and neither does she, until she says, "Oh shit."

I start to feel nauseated, but before I can—before I can think of anything, John Wayne, high school, or Uncle Bob skinning that coyote, all those things I have controlled so well, all those things that drove me crazy—Christine steps forward, saying, "Jesus, Stu, let's let it go."

I grab her arm. "We can't," I tell her.

"What? Come on," she says.

But I say, "We can't go near him. He's in pain and he'll bite us. He'd just bite anything."

"But all we got to do is—"

"Don't you remember Grandma telling us never to go near a trapped animal?"

She stops. "Well what are we going to do?"

"We got to go get Bob, I mean, we need someone with a gun." My voice goes funny when I say that.

She looks at me, her brow wrinkled, her mouth open. Then she looks back at the coyote, then away. "Yeah, I suppose so," she says.

"Let's go," I say, "It's alright Christine," I say, "it's alright."

"Yeah," she says, and we turn and leave.

We walk by the frozen pond and we don't say anything. I want to say something, but I'm suddenly tired. I feel like I could just lay down right here and go to sleep. But when we get to the old house I feel like I have to say something. Christine is so quiet by my side. I know I can say something to make her feel better. I clear my throat, and start, "Uh—you know Bob will be there—it's about supper time."

"How late do you think it is?" she asks.

"I'm not sure," I answer. She looks ahead frowning. I can't say anything to make her feel better, so I just shut up. It feels terrible.

When we get to the fence I grab the wires to let her go through the middle. But she slides through too high or too quick or maybe I'm not holding the wires as wide as before, but she catches her jacket on the top. It sounds loud when it rips. She stands up on the other side and reaches a hand over her back. She feels that the hole is a couple inches across. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, goddamnit," she yells.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"It's not your fault. Son of a bitch, I paid over two hundred dollars for this. Goddamn it." Her face is all red, and for a second it looks like she's going to cry.

But she doesn't. We go to the Mustang. We get in and she cranks the ignition. The radio comes on. I'm about to tell her that we can get to Bob's faster if we take that dirt roads that goes by Hayes cemetery instead of the main road, but she says, "Oh son-of-a-bitch, goddamnit, look what time it is." I look at the radio, the digital display that either tells you the station or the time. It says 6:01. "Christ, Curt is picking me up around seven. How did it get that late. I won't even have an hour to get ready. Fuck, why did this happen the night we're going to Burgundy's." She throws the car in reverse, and we swing back towards the barbed wire fence. She shifts again. The engine roars as we head down the farm road. She says, "I can only hope he's late as usual. He's always late. Maybe he'll be really late tonight." She shakes her head and her hair goes all over. "Damn," she says quietly.

We get to the two lane. There are no cars coming. We spin on to the pavement and she shifts hard. I'm just watching her. I try to think of something to say about it being so late. It really hadn't seemed that late. But then I wonder what about the coyote. I think about it back there and wince. I wonder what Christine thinks, and then I want to say something about it being so late, but instead I hear myself ask her about the coyote. I go, "So, are we still going to have time to stop by Bob's?"

She says, "Oh Christ, Stu, I don't know." She looks at me. Her eyes look real worried, and she says, "You're right, we have to do something." A car whizzes past. "Hey, can you call him when you get home?"

"Yeah," I say.

"What else can we do?" she says.

I shake my head, "It's so damn sad."

"Aw, Stu," she says, "what can you do? I love you—you try so hard." She reaches out her hand and touches my shoulder.

"I'll call him," I say.

We drive on. She keeps looking down at the clock. I think it will be dark soon. And I start thinking about Bob, and I know there's no way he's going to go out and get that pelt in the dark. It will be waiting for him there come morning. If we would go and get him right now, he'd get a real kick out of going with us and shooting the coyote. I know this but I don't say anything about it.

I suppose it's just a question of suffering. Then I think the coyote is probably numb by now. I mean he was just sitting there. You'd probably just be numb after awhile. Plus it will get below freezing tonight. No doubt the coyote will freeze to death before long. Freezing to death is just like going to sleep.

I don't want to think about all that. I don't want to think about it, so I look over at Christine. Her hair is all messed up, but she's going home and comb it out all nice. She's going out to that restaurant with her boyfriend. They'll probably dance. I try to imagine how she will feel in his strong arms. I wonder about a long kiss. I try to think about that, but pretty soon I think about the coyote again. I'd like to enjoy the ride home, just imagining Christine dancing, but it's no use. I just think about the coyote. And it makes me tired. It's been a long day, and I'm damn tired.

I look over at her. She's watching her driving. I concentrate on her. She has blue eyes and blonde hair just like me. I'm just going to concentrate on her until I can get home and get some sleep. I lean my head back on the head rest and close my eyes.

## **The Pocket Epic**

Sailing through the Flint Hills  
on the way to a borrowed cabin near Dillon Lake  
Odysseus fell

In the stillness  
he dropped  
like a silver stone into a liquid sky of black mercury

His Zephyr hung in the fall  
one wheel  
(front left)  
spun the only sound  
scratching imaginary circles in the air  
with spits of light  
like a single sparkler  
singing to the night

Sirens  
learned the song of the Interstate  
a harmony  
humming engine  
hissing warmth from the vent  
tiny rocks spackling the underside  
a random rhythm backing the drone of tires of tires on the road

only for a blink  
his eyes shut  
and open  
Just in time to witness the birth of a new exit onto  
Deep Creek Road

Brad Atchison

## **Doing the Lunch Thing with Death**

The last time I did the lunch thing with death  
I made the mistake of letting her choose our poison  
McDonald's  
37th and Vine  
One of the pasty white and creamy blue mausoleum monoliths  
that peppers my spicy suburbia

Terry  
manipulated counter conversation with his/her  
hospitable and accommodating verbage  
I had the nuggets, coke (no ice) . . .  
and it must have been the filet-o-fish  
(grayfish on Wonder bun) that made me  
McSick

The sanitized-for-your-protection tile  
felt like slick tundra under my hands and knees  
for a few moments death held my head and wiped my chin  
but,  
her burger was getting cold  
so? alone  
so feeble (urp) that I couldn't help but rest my chin  
on the stained hairy lip of the commode  
gasping through the gasps  
I wretched the bitterness of a bad Lunch Thing  
never (urp) have I made (in choosing a dining partner) such a big  
McStake

Brad Atchison

## Mealtime

Even now I can see my uncle (the milky man with cracked shoes),  
hear the sound of fish baking,  
and step into the pantry;  
in the kitchen a ham-and-pegs is roasting and turning  
as it ought.

“No choking please,” Mom intones as  
she sets out the Christmas cups;  
and as the steam of a family picnic,  
my gloom evaporates into laughter.

“Rub the hand of a loved one,” says one of the sly ones,  
and Matt comes in from sand-skating  
all gritty and needing a bath,  
tracking it through the foyer. We drink some  
cold glassy eggnog  
that goes down like water and ice  
and tell professional student jokes with a dark laugh.

Dad  
makes up a road rap  
while Sis does  
the beat with her mouth  
with her husky chug-click-chug-boom.  
My two aunts chuckle around the end table, and  
Michelle helps Mom wash the dishes.

Then the setting  
dissolves and the porch lights  
dim and the road rap  
fades and the taste leaves  
my tongue and I’m dusting an angry apartment  
that resists cleaning.  
There’s holly in my head  
and the sleeping Christ Child on my bed  
and candy canes in my bathtub  
and the Virgin Mary is my next-door neighbor—  
but I can’t eat, because  
my dinner companions  
never existed.

Monte O’Neal

### **Maturities**

grandpa  
is too weak  
to rise,  
so grandma  
fetches his  
first drink  
of the day.

Then  
they sit  
in the room  
silent,  
smoking,  
drinking,  
waiting.

Grandpa tromps over to where  
Grandma picks tomatoes, saying,  
“Damn gophers are in my garden, Catherine!”  
She just giggles and says,  
“Well the tomatoes look good, don’t they?”

Angela Waltz

## **Ceremonies at Olsen Lutheran Elementary**

—The janitor tugging at the flagpole

I'd rather be called a custodian,  
but I'd do the same damn things.  
Hell, call me a hunting dog,  
I'll still have to raise the flag at seven-thirty  
and bring it back down at five,  
before I leave.

—The P.E. teacher locking the gym doors

Jesus, I shouldn't try to make it home  
with that brake light out.  
Probably get a ticket from that cop who always parks  
by the Kwik Shop pay phone—that would be typical.  
Better drop by there anyway and pick up some beer.  
Gonna be a long week.

—The third grader waiting in line for four square

I wanna be the man  
who gets to wear the blue uniform,  
and walk like Daddy into my class to take away the trash can  
and not have to listen to Miss White  
and go up on the roof to throw down basketballs  
and fold up the flag like a boy scout after school,  
when I grow up.

—The drop-out cramping from bad acid in a playground tunnel

Holy damn I shoulda drank some orange juice first.  
Jesus,  
I know this place, I went here.  
Hid in here from some dumb teacher after recess. He had a whistle  
I went here.  
What is it—95 Theses 95  
nailed to the front doors of the pope's with a flagpole  
by Martin Luther King. Junior.  
Jesus,  
do they have to mix strychnine with this shit?

Edward Skoog

## **Bananas**

When Mom bought bananas  
she peeled the stickers off  
and gave them to me.

She arranged the fruit in a blue crystal bowl  
under the embroidered oven mitt she never used  
that said,  
“God Bless this Kitchen.”

I stuck each sticker on my closet door.  
I even spelled my name in ovals of  
Del Monte Chiquita Guatemala Dole.

A bunch of them are still there.

Edward Skoog

## **The Dying Macaw Queen of Wal-Mart**

Someone ordered up the wrong bird  
so she ended up here.

Clobbered

and barely lifting her scarlet matted feathers  
to breathe the manufactured Wal-Mart air.

In the Pet Department, not even the gerbils dance.

Fighting fish don't argue;

they have become old women, looking out through rainy windows  
from their apartments in the city.

Families drift past her wire cage set in the wall:

"Why's that parrot on the floor, Mama?"

At first she hunched on a perch made for finches that never arrived,  
then collapsed and lay on the sports page floor,  
like slumbering Gulliver flocked by winged Lilliputians.

Edward Skoog

## **Turtlebite**

We discovered the turtle  
    struggling through the grass of our green yard  
    and we caught it up like an escaping convict.  
I fed it lettuce from the kitchen  
    while Sammy ran home.

    He came back tugging his mama's boyfriend  
by his bathrobe's tail. He told us quickly,

    "It's a box turtle,  
    it eats lettuce.

Put it in a cardboard box."

    I named it Speedy and Sammy named it R2D2.

    We played with it  
on the sun beaten front porch.

    Since we had seized it  
    it hadn't risked its limbs or its neck.

I was holding him on his back  
    and he unsheathed his neck  
    and opened his turtle mouth  
and bit fast into the palm of my hand.

I shook my hand and yelled  
    but it wouldn't unbite me.

    My uncle had pulled into the driveway in his new Cadillac.  
He examined the situation with his lazy eye, and  
    standing tall in his cowboy boots, said

    "Them turtles  
won't stop biting  
    till it thunders."

    He ducked his head and went inside.  
Sammy had to go home for dinner.

    I sat on the swing,  
    and waited for a storm.

Edward Skoog

### **Pilsbury Crossing**

A beer can knocks against a snapping turtle,  
in thin water, unwinding  
the spool of a whole creek to this ford  
where,  
threaded across a slab of pink rock,  
cars and cattle cross,  
their black rubber tires and muddy hooves spinning water  
in Mardi Gras necklaces  
at fat bushes of men  
in flannel checkers,  
fishing in the road.

Edward Skoog

## **Banjo**

At night I like to walk.  
I can change trees and storms by staring them down.  
My banjo is muted in the moon like chalk.

Her white drum could be tender silk,  
cut of some Norwegian queen's gown  
at night as she slept. I like to walk

past farms and play my banjo to the cornstalks,  
they listen and answer with a cornfield romantic sound  
to serenade my muted banjo in the moonlight. Like chalk

grainy on a board, I mumble in the dark,  
renaming every thing I've seen and felt,  
to night-names I like. Walk

to the banjo's bridge  
where the five tuned strings perch like taut hawks.  
Hug the wires and slide down her mahogany neck.

Tuning in the moon is like using muted chalk  
to draw, from casual memory, a detailed sketch of the last Great Auk.  
It's a freelance job;  
no one checks around.

At night I like to walk.  
My banjo is muted in the moon like chalk.

Edward Skoog

### **The Only Way They Know**

At night the Mexican woman  
migrates from her apartment  
to downtown like a swan  
who swims aimlessly across  
a lake hidden from light,  
its moon forgotten. The florid  
streets are thick with other  
women who work the nights  
their husbands don't come home,  
who bring money for food  
and clothes in the only way  
they know. The woman checks  
herself against the store-front  
glare of windows, her lucid  
reflection staring back with eyes  
floating like balls of neon out  
of her body so that she can see  
herself. And the swan moves on,  
no honest reflection,  
only that of instinct, desire  
to find a light to seize  
the white of feathers, a light  
unlike the stars scattered  
as distant as men, and dim.

Brian Beatty

### **Pristine Beaches (Newfoundland)**

I'd say times have been sort of  
hard of late.  
My wife, she catches what she can  
working her long nets in the shallows  
the little fish jumping like the silver  
in a moneylender's hand.  
Not big enough to catch the eyes  
of the men who came before  
riding their ships with their whale hooks  
and long guns. *Oro y fata* they said  
as they gutted up what was left  
and went looking for more.  
Our kids are growing up  
to a bounty well-harvested  
to pristine beaches where the only movement  
is a tourist from the states  
or a scientist moaning over the facts  
with a clipboard and a graph.  
I kill the Puffins with one, good  
clean snap of the wrist  
their soft heads like baby chicks  
in the palm of my hand.  
I go home with whatever I can get  
read bedtime stories to my youngest  
you know the kind where animals  
dress up like people  
and the big cats forge relationships  
with every critter that  
walked the earth.

Linda Hopkins



## A Picnic of Intentions

James Hay

About fifteen minutes away from my parent's house in Wichita, Kansas, there is a small nature refuge called Chisholm Creek, just on the outskirts of town. Although the narrow trail is paved to increase public access to the meager fifteen or so acres, the area used to support an abundance of migrant birds, several deer, fox, and the occasional coyote.

I recall a particularly warm afternoon spent searching for an elusive cuckoo and its nest. My binoculars around my neck and bird book in hand, I crunched and cracked my way through the underbrush, hardly having to listen for the raucous kowp-kowp of my quarry. From dogged persistence, and from reading my field guide, I finally realized that a cuckoo's silence was a good indication of a nest. I was noisily led from the nest, and then silently led back—to the obvious dismay of the bird. I was fascinated, and it was only the growing darkness that reminded me to return home.

I have spent many such evenings there in the haze, the murmuring insects, and the cool, flowing tones of a grosbeak's summer trill. The greens of cottonwood and yellow bursts of goldfinch gradually deepen toward shades of dusk, as the last rays of sunlight stain the clouds a crimson red.

\* \* \*

With the first bulldozer's metallic cough, the deer darted across the clearing and along the creek. The steam shovels and tractors sent them over the fence, and the graders, pile-drivers, and flashing yellow construction barrels assured they would not return.

\* \* \*

K-96, a two-lane road between El Dorado and Wichita, was expanding due to the heavy traffic returning home in the evenings. It seems that people, impatient to pass, did not have visibility or shoulder enough to clear coming traffic. Following a few fatal accidents, the consensus among the drivers registered to vote was that additional lanes were re-

quired in order to handle the traffic load more safely. This, in itself, is an acceptable proposal, given that there are several undeveloped, state-owned properties that could easily fulfill such construction needs, each located roughly a mile from the nearest house—yet the thin strip of land behind and alongside Chisholm Creek and several residences was chosen for the elevated portion of the highway.

Historically, coyotes and foxes have shied from roads, and it is doubtful that four-lane traffic is conducive to deer. Chisholm Creek was established as a nature refuge so that people could enjoy the prairie, its residents, and possibly a picnic lunch. It is this type of exposure to nature, so generally lacking in larger cities, that is required to show just how important conservation is. The road expansion has undermined all of that. If construction has scared away the wildlife, why should the people return?

From an economic viewpoint, public money spent on construction of the inlet road and sheltered picnic areas, fencing, and minimum yearly upkeep is effectively wasted, in light of the felled trees, lying on mulched grassland, in puddles of diesel fuel in the highway's shadow.

From an ecological viewpoint, the value state authorities place on conservation is frighteningly manifest. The intentions behind setting aside several acres of land for public appreciation were honorable enough, but the fact that the habitat was despoiled by the same state shows that conservation is not at the heart of our decisions, and economy is. Aldo Leopold wisely warns that, "a system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided. It tends to ignore, and thus eventually to eliminate, many elements in the land community that lack commercial value, but that are (as far as we know) essential to its healthy functioning. It assumes, falsely, I think, that the economic parts of the biotic clock will function without the uneconomic parts."

The Council on Environmental Quality, created by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, requires that environmental impact statements be prepared by agencies receiving federal money in all situations that might effect any national park, forest, resource, or other natural area. Although this council has not proven to be the safeguard its original proponents had hoped for, it was nonetheless an important step in the right direction.

I believe that new legislation, creating local branches of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), run on a federal level, is required. All major construction projects already require a study of the impact on the environment, and such reports could be prepared with the help of an EPA official to ensure validity in the face of any monetary bias from com-

munity members. Also, land set aside for preservation or other conservation or recreation measures should be managed towards those goals and take priority over highway construction and residential development. This will also serve to remind us of our good intentions to conserve our most precious resources. For if we do not remind ourselves of what others have done, and take similar precautions, we will surely pave our way to destruction.

\* \* \*

About five minutes away from my parent's house, there is a small apartment complex called Chisholm Creek. It sits next to a barren field, overgrown with dandelions. It is not the prettiest place, but I understand they are building a pond . . .

## Mirror Absurdity

Start naked.  
Skip the underwear, we'll have no chafing here.  
Pull on the crotch padded body hugging neon lycra.  
Adjust the fit.  
Pull down the leg-ends.

Choose a clashing, lightweight  
chest enhancing  
storage behind you  
aerodynamic  
"hand-wash only"  
jersey.

Pry the white coated stiff and crusty, fragrant  
"I-only-wash-it-every-thousand-miles"  
black skull cap from its rest-stop under  
a pair of stained gym socks.

Don't use those semi-stiff soled  
Bo Jackson cross-trainers.  
Rather, pull on a pair of French sounding  
extra-stiff soled  
adjustable cleat  
Kangaroo tongued Diadoras.  
Lace 'em up and cover your bow with velcro.

Finish decorating your body with a hard,  
or soft shelled  
Ansi & Snell approved  
wind-cutting  
air cooled  
brain protector.

Attach a rear third eye  
and cover the front-two with carbonite UV coated  
"thermo nuclear protectors."

Finally, mount the bank-busting carbon-fiber  
ultra-lightweight frame  
& laugh at the suits, pressed  
in Porsches, 'Vettes, BMS's  
and foreign turbos  
stuck in 5 o'clock traffic.

Todd Feedback

### **Fresh-picked Berries**

Each day on my way to class  
I wait;  
I anticipate the Dick and Jane drawings  
at the top of the hill.

Like hieroglyphics on the  
cave man's wall  
this little girl  
records it all on the cracked  
sidewalk with cotton candy  
and mint green chalk.

With eight-year-old charm  
she tells of fish  
then sunny days—  
of hot grilled cheese  
and boys at school . . .

and then today it said  
in six inch letters  
of pepto-pink  
“HELP ME—MY MOM IS CRAZY”  
and I can't help but think about her  
all day long . . .  
in her yellow house  
with her crazy mom screaming  
and shaking an  
egg-covered spatula.

I remembered a certain school girl  
digging in the Louisiana dirt,  
tiny teeth deep in kool-aid lips.  
When I passed, that fresh-picked berry  
conjured a powerful stare;  
and announced in victorious bayou song,  
“I just killed a worm.”

Amy Huddleston

### **Voltaire's Last Wish**

They must have laughed at the old man's request;  
he had always astounded them.  
Still, one Paris evening they hoisted him into the carriage,  
his frail body looking as lifeless as it had in life.  
The horses, oblivious to their task,  
trotted the road to Ferney.  
The carriage, floating through the arbors,  
passed the illuminated country houses where  
silhouettes danced on yellow shades.  
Moonlight skirted a steeple.  
"If you see the devout," he said,  
"tell them I've built a church."  
A luminous theatre emptied its patrons,  
laughing into the night.  
"If you meet the pleasant people," he said,  
"tell them I've finished a theatre."

The men would have had to have talked in the cab,  
two breaths hovering  
in the night air, three men rocking slightly against  
one another. They spoke of his escape, the final act.  
The old man sat propped, his cold face against glass,  
eyes opened to nothing. They may have noticed  
his slight smile, how in his silence he had the last word.  
They could have looked at him and known  
he had been right, had been right all along;  
there was nothing better than life.

Wendy Snider

### **Seeing the Mentally Retarded Children at the Mall**

A child's head turned, then  
with the jerk of a parent's hand, returned face-forward.  
The grown-up fumbled for an old biology lesson  
as if science could explain  
life gone wrong.  
Instead, he spoke in terms of what a child would know;  
the logic behind broken toys, missing pieces,  
the defunct sailboat that waffed, spit bubbles, and sank.

But when a high-pitched squawk escaped and made its way  
through the Saturday shoppers, everyone watched.  
The nurses in soft-soled shoes quieted the disturbed,  
and like angels, led them in a song;  
a song that must have taken years  
to fill one black space  
in the children's jigsaw puzzle minds.  
Their parroted lyrics floated gently, gliding  
above the crowd, the last words hovering there, tenuously.

*Merrily merrily merrily  
Life is but a dream.*

Wendy Snider



## Playing House

Beth Handly

Although he hadn't actually been looking for them, Nathan still felt guilty when he discovered one of Anne's paintings in the attic.

He had been looking for their suitcases when he had backed into a bookshelf, sending seven years worth of National Geographic slipping and sliding down onto his head. The painting had been wedged between the bookshelf and the wall, wrapped loosely in white butcher paper so that its shape was somewhat indiscernible. But he had known immediately what it was. She had been stashing them all over the house, hiding them from him for the last year and a half.

"You'll just analyze them, Nathan. They'll make you worry."

"About what?" He always liked to know exactly what it was that he should be worrying about.

"Me."

Of course, he had then worried about what it was that might worry him about her if he saw one of her paintings. It had driven him crazy. Every time she had locked herself up in the old backyard garage that they had renovated for her, it was all he could do from sneaking up to one of the windows and taking a peek. But he had stayed away, and the kids had stayed away, just like he had promised. Once she had finished a painting, she hid it so well that even seven-year-old Andrew hadn't found any of them. So now, he finally had one of her paintings right here in front of him, waiting to be unwrapped, and he couldn't do it. He wanted to laugh, but he was afraid she would hear him downstairs and come up to check on him. Oh hell, he knew she would never come up to check on him, and admitting that made him very angry with her, suddenly. He was angry at her detachment. Angry for being made to feel like a criminal because he had accidentally found one of her paintings. Angry because once there would have been a time that she would have dragged him across campus to her college studio, at one in the morning, so he could see a new painting before any of her professors did. It was ridiculous to be made to feel like this over something like a painting. His eyes blurred over for just a moment, but he forced it away. He needed to see it. Even if this was the only one he ever saw, he needed to look.

Andrew had trapped Kate under the kitchen table and was pacing around it with a plastic machine gun, threatening to “blow her kneecaps off” every time she started to wail or attempted to crawl out. He hoped his mother would decide not to leave. She could turn to Mrs. Grimes right now, and grab the list from her. “Never mind! It’s just too complicated,” she would say. “What was I thinking? No one else could possibly take care of my children, even for just two days.” But she just kept showing Mrs. Grimes where to find all of the pots and pans and didn’t even look over when Kate started wailing again.

“Anne! We’ve got to go. I want to get there before it gets dark.”

“In a minute, Nathan.” She turned away from Mrs. Grimes and looked at Andrew, terrorizing two-year-old Kate. She knew he didn’t want her to go, but she had no choice, really. Nathan had been planning this week-end for months, and it would be good for the kids to see that they could get along without her.

“Hey, you two. Come give Mommy a hug before she has to leave.” She tried to smile. Andrew’s head dropped along with his machine gun, and with his feet dragging, he shuffled over to where she knelt on the kitchen linoleum. He had already torn a hole in the knee of the jeans she had bought him in September, when he had started the first grade. She didn’t say anything though. It didn’t really matter.

“Katie? You can come out now. Mommy has to go soon.” Kate’s curly blond head came poking out from behind two kitchen chairs, as she struggled to her chubby knees. Her pale little face was dirty and tear stained, and for just a moment, Anne’s heart leapt into her throat.

“I’m going to miss you two,” she said, pulling them both to her in a big bear hug. “You be good for Mrs. Grimes. No fighting, okay?”

Andrew mumbled some reply, and Kate bobbed her head up and down, her thumb in her mouth.

“I love you both, but Mommy and Daddy have to go now. Go say good-bye to Daddy,” and they both turned and ran, laughing and racing, towards the front door, where Nathan stood by the suitcases.

They had driven through the dark in silence for the last hour and a half. Nathan couldn’t tell if Anne was asleep or not. The car climbed slowly up the side of the mountain. The headlights were entombed on all sides by the dense, towering silhouettes of evergreens, and occasionally the light caught the golden gleam of an animal’s eye down in the ditch alongside the gravel road.

Nathan finally spotted the mailbox with “The Chaney’s” painted on it in reflective white paint. He pulled up next to the Jeep that Ted and Nancy left there for the weekends and fished through the pockets of his jeans for the key ring Ted had given him. The four of them had come here a few years ago, back before Anne and Nancy had drifted apart. He and Ted were still friendly, however, swapping tools occasionally and talking

football across the back fence, and Ted had made it known that anytime Nathan wanted to "get away from it all," he was welcome to use the cabin. This was the first time Nathan had taken Ted up on the offer, but he didn't think it would be the last. He was beginning to hope all Anne needed was to "get away from it all" a little more often. He had already talked with Richard about taking some more time off from the engineering firm this year so that he and Anne could start spending more time alone together. He found the keys, and leaning across the seat, he gently touched Anne's shoulder to wake her up.

Richard hadn't been thrilled. After all, Nathan Foster had taken more time off in the last year than he had in the entire seven years that he'd been working with the firm. Something about spending more time with his kids so that his wife could do her "own thing." Richard was beginning to think that Nathan's wife was one demanding broad. He had turned away from the window to face Nathan and said, "Isn't your wife a little young for a midlife crisis?" But Nathan's face was so unapologetic and strained that Richard had started joking about his own wife's midlife crisis, and how "thank God" it hadn't lasted forever. Richard couldn't afford to alienate or lose Nathan Foster, even if he was working less all the time. When Nathan did work, he accomplished three times as much as any of the other engineers. He was rising through the ranks quickly, and Richard might need him as an ally someday in the near future. They both knew it.

Anne hadn't been asleep on the drive up. She had only closed her eyes so that Nathan wouldn't try to make conversation.

"Atkinson approved the plans for the I-29 Longmont bridge today," he would say. And how was she supposed to respond?

"That's nice." How banal. How awkward. It was easier not to talk at all. This weekend was going to be awful. He was trying so hard, part of her wanted to make it easier on him. She wanted him to be happy, but she just couldn't keep pretending that she was okay, because she wasn't.

She felt him touch her shoulder, and she opened her eyes.

Nathan tightened the straps of the daypack on his back as he walked up the path behind Anne. It had rained a lot that summer, and the trails were washed out in a great many places and hadn't been repaired yet, so they were having to be particularly alert today. They had waited until afternoon to take a hike. The November mornings were a little too chilly for Anne, but he was glad that they had waited. The sky had been thick and grey this morning, but by the time they had set out from the cabin, the clouds were scattered, and the wind was less fierce.

It still surprised him that Anne had never grown accustomed to the climate in Colorado. He remembered asking her on one of their very first dates why she had come to college in Boulder if she disliked cool weather so much. She told him that she had seen it as the only way to make both

of her parents happy. They had divorced when she was ten, and her father had stayed on the west coast, and her mother had moved to the east. There had been a less than pleasant custody battle over Anne, and finally, it was decided that she would spend the school year in California and the summers in New Jersey. Of course both parents had wanted her to go to college near them, and so as not to hurt either of their feelings, she had chosen a place that was almost in between them—the University of Colorado at Boulder.

It was rather ironic, when he thought about it. She had ended up spending all of her holidays with his family in Colorado Springs, and the first time that Anne had even seen her parents after she left for college was at her rather sudden wedding to Nathan. Nathan looked up quickly at Anne's dark ponytail, swishing back and forth across the burgundy stripe in her rugby shirt. He didn't know why, but there had been times in the last year that he had felt like apologizing to Anne for the way things had happened. That was ridiculous, though. It wasn't as if they hadn't been planning to get married and have a family anyway. Anne's getting pregnant just speeded up their long term plans. They loved each other. They wanted to grow old together. Yes, he did regret Anne's having to drop out of school. But they had agreed that it was the best thing. Someone had to stay with the baby, since Nathan had been graduating and getting a job. They had decided she could go back once the baby didn't take up so much of her time. Nathan's parents had always taught him to devote himself to only one job at a time. That was the only way you could do every job very well, they said. That was how Nathan's mother had approached motherhood, as a full-time job, and Nathan wanted his child to have the same security that he and his brothers and sisters had felt growing up. Anne had agreed that motherhood should be her top priority for at least the first six years of the baby's life, and then she could go back to school. They hadn't been expecting Kate when they had made those plans, though.

Nathan had accidentally picked a shady rock for them to sit and eat lunch on, and Anne was cold. The sun had gone behind a cloud, and the entire valley below them was shadowed, as if it were dusk. She could hear the wind, high up in the evergreens, making the needles brush softly together like a comb going through static-laden hair. She looked down at the goose bumps on her legs and at the brittle, blue mold attached to what appeared to be the only comfortable spot on the entire rock. She thought about complaining. She hated complaining, even when it meant being uncomfortable. She remembered one time during the custody battle, her father was getting fed up with it all. The only reason he was fighting her mother was because he was convinced that she was a loon, and he didn't want Anne growing up with her. But when it had finally occurred to him to ask Anne what she wanted, Anne wouldn't choose. He had gotten angry and had yelled at her. "Goddammit! Will you stop being so

stoic! You're only ten years old, you're allowed to be selfish." She wondered now if a twenty-seven year old mother of two was allowed to be selfish.

She looked at Nathan, sitting across from her, making their sandwiches. She had turned away from him last night when he had crawled into bed next to her. If she had to say "no" to his lovemaking, he would have wanted to talk about it. And she didn't want to talk about it—any of it. He would just try to make things better. He was a good engineer. He always thought he could fix anything, if given the chance. But she didn't want to give him a chance to fix their marriage, because she knew that he would fail, and that would hurt him more deeply than if she just left. He would try to understand, but he would always long for the blindly selfless girl that he had married. That was what he needed. That was what was right for him and the life he wanted. She thought she had wanted that life too. It had looked so safe, so stable. She watched him spread grape jelly on a piece of wheat bread. If they talked about it, and she still left him, he would blame himself. Anne knew that there was strength to be found in feeling like the victim. If she couldn't do anything else for Nathan, she could give him that. And he was a strong person. He got through things. She had been drawn to him from the very first because of that. He was the strongest person she knew. She watched him pour lemonade into their collapsible cups. He spilled some on the rock, and it made a shallow, grey pool in an indentation. She sighed. It was so easy to let someone like that be strong for you and never realize you were doing it.

They had been so hungry after their hike, that they had gone through dinner without talking, wolfing down their food and only occasionally asking the other to pass something. Afterwards, Nathan pushed himself up from the dinner table to help Anne clear the dishes. She hadn't said whether he had made her hamburger well-done enough, and now he was afraid to ask. He put the placemats away and had been walking in to help her wash dishes, but she has shooed him away. "Go read or something," she had said. He had wanted to dry dishes for her like he used to do. Maybe they would have gotten into a soap bubble battle. He remembered one time that they had gotten particularly competitive, and suds flew everywhere. When they had finally stopped long enough to take a look around the kitchen, the walls had been dripping with soapy water, and she had sat down on the floor and laughed until tears had leaked out of the corners of her eyes.

"Put in that Pat Metheny tape, will you?" she called from the kitchen. That was one of the many things that had first intrigued Nathan about Anne. She had refused to listen to the radio. He was used to dating silly, giggly girls who liked to bop around to top-forty music. But Anne got wild and crazy by jumping up on the sofa at parties and doing an absolutely hysterical lipsync along with Aretha Franklin—old Aretha Franklin, not that new stuff. That had been one of her fantasies—to sing

backup for Aretha Franklin. That and to have her paintings hanging in the best galleries on both coasts. She hadn't talked about doing any of those things since they'd been married. He supposed that part of that just had to do with growing up, but then she really hadn't had a choice. She never complained, though. She had seemed content being a wife and mother. In fact, the roles had seemed to suit her, much to Nathan's pleasure. But now he was confused. What had happened? She never wanted to talk about it, but it seemed to him that everything had turned sour after Kate's birth. Anne had become so cold and distant. He noticed it in the way she treated Andrew and Kate, too, as if she were trying not to care about them. Oh hell, maybe she really was just starting her midlife crisis early. After all, she had become a wife and mother earlier than the average. Well, if that was all it was, they could get through it. After all, it was only four more years until Kate would be starting school. Four years wasn't such a long time.

She had pulled a red flannel blanket around herself and gone out onto the porch to look at the night sky. The stars were almost overpowering up here. When she had lived in Oakland, the night sky had always reminded her of a woman's smokey blue, velvet evening gown, randomly scattered with rhinestones. But up here in the mountains, she had the feeling that she was looking up into a bottomless, translucent black ocean with level after level of sparkling, underwater cities, stretching farther and farther away from her. It made dizzy and sick to her stomach if she looked at it for too long. She had been standing and looking up at the stars when she had told Nathan that she was pregnant for the first time. They had been dating for more than a year, and they had acquired a "favorite spot" in town. They used to climb over the fence of one of the country club golf courses, and they would chase each other up and down the darkened greens with flashlights and drink a beer or two under the stars. She hadn't known how she was going to tell him, but she had known that she wanted to be alone with him on that golf course when he found out. She wanted him to be able to yell at her and get angry with her, without having people around to be worried about. She had even prepared herself for the possibility of having an abortion, even though the idea had sickened her. She had been ready to do whatever Nathan had thought was best. She had always been ready to do what the people she loved thought was best, and she loved Nathan, very much. She also wanted to do what was right, and she thought that Nathan would know what that was better than she would. Her deepest fear was that this baby would drive Nathan away, but then, if he wanted to leave her, she wouldn't make it more difficult for him by crying. His happiness was what mattered.

"Oh my God, we're going to have a baby!" She hadn't been expecting that. But it had gotten even more surprising. "I hope it's a boy!" And then, "How soon can we get married?"

She had been shocked. But she had recovered quickly, and he had never even noticed her surprise. After all, she had wanted to do whatever Nathan thought was best, and if marrying him was the right thing to do, then she wanted to do it.

He had pulled her down into the damp grass next to him and made a pillow with his arm for her head, and they sat, silently, for quite a while, looking up at the night sky.

"You know how much I love you, Anne?" he whispered.

"How much?"

"I love you more than stars," and he gently kissed her eyelids.

Nathan stood in the doorway, for a moment, watching Anne as she leaned against the porch railing and looked skyward. He had been trying not to think about the painting, but her figure, blanketed in red against black sky, had brought the image rushing back. He still didn't understand what it meant, but she was right, it had made him worry—a lot. It had been very simple. She had painted the entire canvas black except for a white hole in the middle of it. Resting on top of this white hole had been a larger, red triangle. But resting was not really the right word, because the triangle gave the impression that it was struggling to fit into the hole, and when he had looked more closely, he noticed that the surface of the triangle had been cracked, and it was beaded with drops of sweat, or blood. He couldn't tell which. It was a deeply disturbing painting, and he tried to shake off the remembrance of it as he walked up behind Anne and wrapped his arms around her. Her back slowly went rigid, the muscles drawing away from the contact with his chest. He held on for a moment longer and then dropped his arms back down to his side.

"I'm going to call the kids and say goodnight. Do you want to tell them hello?" He suddenly felt tired. More tired than he had felt in months.

"Sure, I'll be there in a minute."

He sat down at the kitchen table and slowly punched the number into the phone. He couldn't let the kids hear him sounding like this. Katie wouldn't notice, but he knew Andrew would. Andrew was just naturally an "on edge" kid, and he'd been getting progressively worse the last few years. Anne came in from the front porch and closed the sliding door behind her as the phone started ringing in his ear.

"HELLO?" a small voice shouted.

"How's my boy?" he said, smiling at Andrew's loud phone manner. "Yes we're having fun. How about you? What? You still want us to come home? Well we'll see if that can't be arranged tomorrow evening. Can I talk to your sister for a minute? Then your mom wants to say goodnight to you. Hi Sweetheart. Are you helping Mrs. Grimes find everything okay?"

Nathan had been watching Anne as he talked to the kids, and a slow look of panic had been spreading over her face. He thought maybe it was

something that she thought the kids had said or done, but when he told Katie that Mommy was going to say goodnight to her now, the color had drained from Anne's face and she had backed away from the phone, a look of undisguised terror in her eyes, and had waved him away. Nathan floundered for something to say.

"Um, Sweetheart, Mommy can't come to the phone just now. But she sends her love to both of you and says to sleep tight. Okay? Tell Andrew Mommy loves him, too. I love you Sweetheart. Bye-bye."

He hung up the phone and turned to question Anne, but she was already gone. He walked down the hall to the bedroom, a feeling of panic wrapping itself around him.

"Anne?" She was in the bathroom. He tried the doorknob and found that it was locked. "Anne, are you okay?" He began to frantically twist the rattling doorknob, putting his shoulder into the door. Damn it Anne! Open this door!"

Her voice sounded tired and very far away.

"For God's sake, Nathan, I'm fine. I just need to be alone for a minute." She sounded muffled and strained through the door.

"Anne, the kids are fine. They miss us, but they're fine." He paused for a moment, listening. "Was it the kids that you were worried about, hon?" There was a faint sigh on the other side of the door.

"Yes, I suppose it was them, indirectly," she said.

"Anne, will you come out here so we can talk about this?"

"There's nothing to talk about Nathan. I'm fine. I'll be out in a minute."

Anne leaned over the bathroom sink, her head in her hands. The prospect of going back had gripped her around the spine and squeezed; it had actually caused her physical pain. She hadn't been able to breathe when Nathan had offered her the phone. She looked up at her reflection in the mirror, the pale face framed with black hair. The children had a power over her that was almost impossible to break, no matter how unhappy she was. She had felt it, even over the phone lines. All they had to do was say, "I love you," and without even seeing it in their eyes, she would have to go back. She let out a shaky breath, and reaching out, her fingers shaking slightly, she touched the reflection of her mouth in the mirror. "I can't do this anymore, not even for them." She whispered it again, just to hear the sound of it. Just to be sure. Then she straightened up and pushed the hair away from her face, and grasping the water faucet with both hands, turned it on. She splashed the cold water on her face and then hid her eyes in the soft, plush darkness of the towel until she felt able to look at him again. She flipped off the light switch and made her way into the bedroom. Nathan was already under the blankets, warming up her side of the bed. She sat down on the edge of the bed to take her slippers off.

“Anne, can we talk about what happened? I don’t understand. . . .”

“I’m really tired, Nathan. There’s really nothing to understand. I just missed the kids, and I was afraid I would cry if I talked to them. Can we please just go to sleep?”

“My God, Anne. Your feet are like ice! Put them over here with mine so they’ll get warm,” he said, reaching out with his feet towards hers.

“No, don’t bother, they won’t get any warmer. They’re always cold lately,” she said, rolling towards the side of the bed and flipping off the lamp beside her. They lay there in the dark, listening to the house creak, and finally his breathing became regular and even. She lay with her arms crossed on her chest and stared at the ceiling, picturing the air going in and out of Nathan’s lungs.

### **The First Dance**

that damn song  
is playing  
(again)

on the radio  
you know the one  
the dj  
played it our  
(first)  
night

the way you felt  
while I was being held  
(by) you  
I knew  
I would say  
yes (if)  
you asked

that song stirs  
sweet memories

(I've) been searching

for a red dress  
ever since

Beverly Alexander

## Embarkment

I knew wealth once I left  
an island behind in a blur of foam,  
two Johnson outboards speeding me away.  
In the Cayes any exile is rich.  
I drank the shimmer  
of a swelling moon on the water.  
I swam in turquoise strands, ate gold  
lobster, slept naked in lace sheets  
of a west wind. It took me  
at least a thousand miles away.  
To a woman who bathed me in passion.  
Who said wealth was a moment that shimmered  
on the night tide. What passed  
made me say this place, this ease  
of coconut milk was the only paradise  
I'd know. Until the winds stopped  
pushing me farther from the platinum  
fields and sanguine dusks of Oklahoma.  
Where she waited while I tossed  
in my own doldrum. Nights plagued me  
with the insect hum. I sweltered  
by day. That wealth of solitude, the luxury  
of distance, was sinking, and I with it.

David Thomson

### **Embarkment: Alternate Take**

How I shiver when I think  
there's still so far yet to go  
before I can bend my ear to your  
heart, feel your breasts rise up  
to meet me, your palms cupping  
my head. This is how Venus rose  
out of the sea. Desire, solitary  
in its singleness of presence, something  
deeper than the leagues her shell  
floated through as strands of sun  
swim the Aegean. But as I  
have heard something as vital  
as light to shade, kneeling  
before you as you stood, my arms tight  
around your waist and your hair  
falling across your eyes, I'm lured  
as well by the surf breaking across  
any sand. The surf I hear when I cup  
me ear and look for your face on any face.

David Thomson









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