

Touchstone

Poetry



Fiction



Artwork



Touchstone

Volume 29

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Touch stone

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Volume 29

Touch stone

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Volume 29

Contents

Poetry

Mama Balashova	Jennifer L. Johnson	4
Tu Fu Rides the Seattle Public Transit	Ben Cartwright	7
Flickering	T. Dowd	9
The Responsible Failure Who's Studying ..	Jacqueline T. Koehler	10
After Innocence	Misty Harris	21
The Saviors	Rachel Emig	23
What I Said to Kevin on the Drive Home.	Ben Cartwright	25
Timothy Joseph	Sammuel Erickson	40
Tuesday Mornings	Ben Cartwright	41
A Car Wreck on March 24	Hiram Lucke	42
Mornings Alone	T. Dowd	49
The Kitchen of the Warrior Women	Brandi L. Trujillo	61
Tradition	Jonathan A. Small	63
The Auditorium	Derek A. Tuttle	64

Fiction

The Song in Mrs. Alswell's Heart	Angelia Perry	12
The Outlaw and the Tough Woman	Ed Adams	28
The Phoenix	Nathan Jenkins	44
Sunset Grill	Carlos Hardon	51

Artwork

Soft Touch	Richard T. Burnett	6
Untitled.	Kari Rudick	22
The Plight	Darrol V. Walker	50
Cradle	Jonas Sturr	62

Bibliographical Notes

Contributors' Bibliographical Notes	66
About the Editors	Inside Back Cover

Jennifer L. Johnson

Mama Balashova

Mama Balashova's face is wind-whipped
red and coarse like steel wool.
Her breath wrinkles and cracks with cold.
She has just come in—outside,
winter washes indifference
like porous pumice
stone over people's skin.
Now she leans her stout body heavily
against a refrigerator that is too old,
recalcitrant,
like something you might discover
rusted and rotting in America's landfill:
a child's deathtrap in the dump.
It holds her,
but Mama is somehow heavier
than the weight of her body.

Her grey eyes are dull and rimmed
with watery red, blood beneath fragile skin.
Her blue-tinged lips are closed tight
like a fish.
She watches me, slumped on my stool,
her focus hazy and indistinct
through a misted veil of steaming chai.
I am exhausted from plane travel, train travel,
ceaseless cold.
My fingers are as close as I dare
to the grating shudders of the radiator,
chasing out the edges of chill
still settled in my bones,
a wakeful watch.
My friend sits with us—
she translates Mama's words
for me, Russian to English,
language of pure sounds, incomprehensible,
to one weighted with uncomfortable meanings:

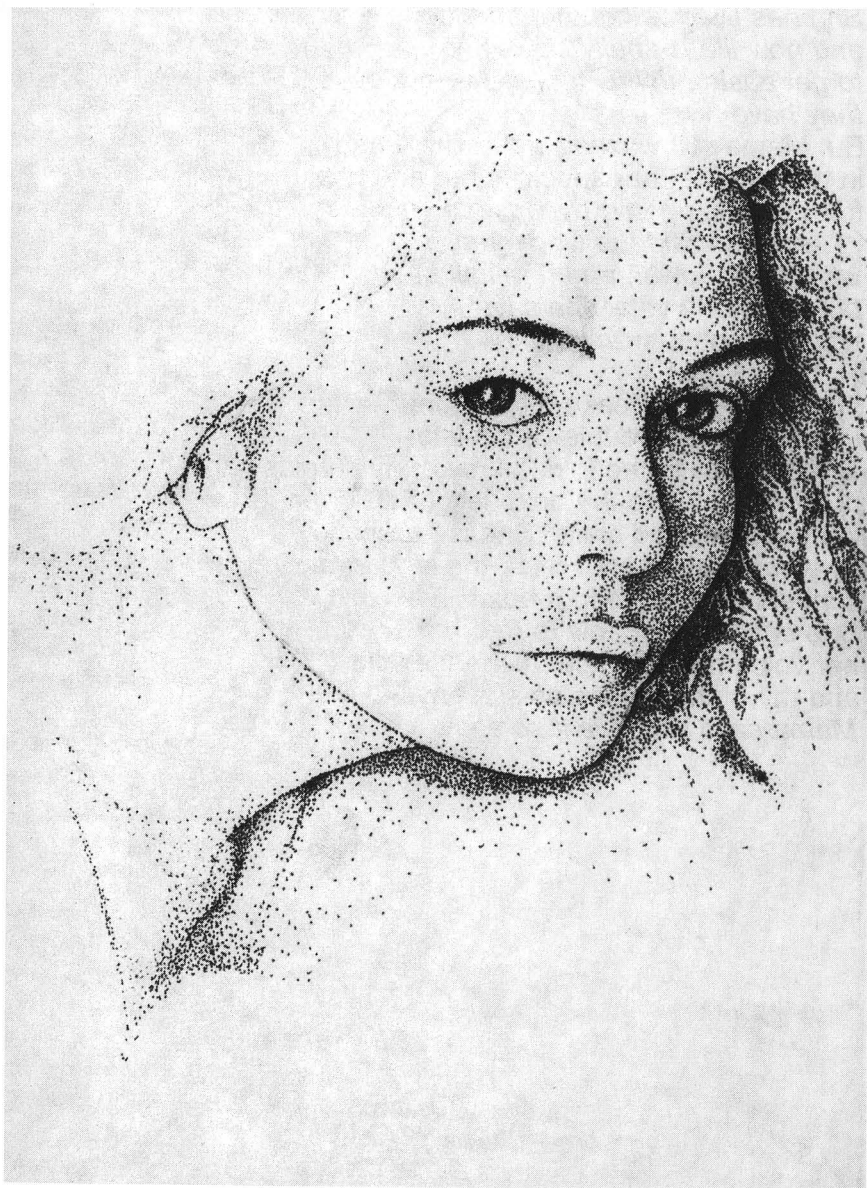
*She has lived without for so long,
and now life is finally beginning
to get easier, things they never had before,
they have now . . .*

But Mama still washes clothes by hand
in the bathtub, her knuckles red and raw
from scrubbing in grey, opaque water.
*. . . she is afraid the Communists
will regain power, and it will all be lost,
but she won't vote: she says
what she does won't matter . . .*

I have brought a cake mix with me,
Duncan Hines Double Chocolate,
tucked away in the folds of my army surplus bag—
now Mama holds the box, delight and wonder
in her thin-lipped smile. She is fascinated
by words she cannot read, the idea of having
convenience, cake in a box.
She speaks suddenly to me,
her voice high-pitched, rushed, excited,
and my friend laughs as she says to me,
Mama says we have it so easy.

Richard T. Burnett

Soft Touch



Ben Cartwright

Tu Fu Rides the Seattle Public Transit

“Poor old Tu fu, I thought then,
he must be agonizing over poetry again.”
—Li T'ai-po (701–762)

I saw your hands, brittle—
gripped around a bottle neck
peering through its lens towards the sky.
Squinting into a green thickness of clouds,
trying to locate the sun, you sneezed,
turning the bulbous shape upside down
shaking out the last, red, thin drops—
thinking it was the way they clotted
not the clouds
which prevented you from seeing
the ponderosa pines on the side of I-90.
Their wintry limbs were confusion—
how easy to mistake them
for the nestling boughs of home.

I was 10 years old across the street.
I saw you squatting and your bottle,
clinking in the gutter as you stood
transfixed with a woman
dressed severely in her suit.
I could imagine you painting
the dark, emaciated lines of her shoulders
on canvas with a horsehair brush.
I tried not to watch,
but couldn't help smiling
as you sang out discorded lines
of Marvin Gaye to her—
But the way you sat,
sad when she stepped onto the bus
made me want to forget you.
You, on your desolate pavement in the market.
You made me think that living

is at the same time art, and people,
being made of sap and tar, when broken
show their rings wound tightly.
They become old
and leave their autumns bleeding in frames.

In the way you sat
I saw deliberate stillness of trees—
the contoured elms and ricepaper skin
of birches. How funny
to see you in ragged clothes that day—
faded cloth and duct-tape on your shoes.

When life is unfolding
you never really find
anything in the shape of a heart.
The images always come
from things closer than buses.
They touch you across two lanes—
their breath sticks to you like wine.

T. Dowd

Flickering

I found your hand
in the middle of the dark
all moist
Your piss
soaked the bed
and I remembered
you wouldn't know
you said
I meant nothing
and you loved me
You slapped me twice
and lost consciousness
I was alone in the bed
again, wishing
my mind
could close its eyes.

I found your hand
when dream
was warm in my center
and I wanted to stay
sleepy
Cold came flickering
teasing with knowledge
You'd wake
a half smile of a boy
innocent, with forgotten
laced on your tongue
You'd think of dancing
before the last three drinks
smiling
my hand on the nape of your neck
You'd squirm to my side
to escape
the wet of guilt
wrap me in your coolness
I think,
how could you
but know.

Jacqueline T. Koehler

The Responsible Failure Who's Studying

I'm past taking life seriously
 Though I don't know
 the terminology
 For it now.
 Perhaps, intensely tensifying
 every moment
 Tensifying isn't a word.
 But do all the words matter anymore?
 All the words in bold type
 italic type
 underlined type
 no type . . .
 supposed to read their minds
 At every notch on
 —the old belt—
 my path seemed to become
 harder and more tense, no
 Commandingly difficult
 But even more so now
 (as usual with an exchange of bosses)

You corrected me on my words
 But I was saying what I meant
 A word can't live until you speak it
 hear it.
 I spoke it
 But you wouldn't hear it.
 You commanded me in my thoughts
 and feelings
 what they **should** be
 what they **were**
 I couldn't talk back
 I would be acting *undomesticatedly*.
 I **didn't** lay awake at night
 conjuring ways to harness attention!
 Attention of your wrath on me . . .
 your disappoint in me.

“Just fast forward your internal fight,”
I say aloud
as my mind slows to
grapple through details
 Years do go by
 so fast
So fast that memories don’t have time to stale.

Ah, lovely study break through memory chasm

Eyes tearing
from the 47th hour of information
being intensely forced in
Doubts of being able to carve the
“college notch”
—splash in the deafening silence

In abject horror and exhaustion
I answer the phone
after the familiarized double ring
“Hello sir?”

“I just wanted to let you know . . . “
And then I cried in
amazement, ecstasy, and feeling *loved*.

Angelia Perry

The Song in Mrs. Alswell's Heart

She said that it really didn't matter. Whatever they wanted. A week here, a week there, what was the difference? Besides, she had her heat pad, her night light, an extra pillow, Carmex, and a suitcase full of clothes, including her never-worn blue robe and slippers. She slept in an old T-shirt of her husband's at home, but this was special. The staff had taken her pills, though. While packing at home, she hid the plastic bottle in the pocket of her khaki slacks—thirty-two tiny pink pills—(it only took fourteen, she found the information in the medical handbook at the library, but she wanted to be on the safe side.)

The stout admissions nurse methodically emptied the contents of her suitcase and went through each article of clothing, explaining as she investigated the zippered compartment on the inside, "Sorry dear, we have to do this to everybody." When she began turning all of her pants pockets inside out, Mrs. Alswell sank deeply into the metal-framed mattress with a slightly panicked feeling. She tried to distract the nurse quickly by mentioning the many fine poetry books she had brought in the bag on the floor, but the nurse just smiled and murmured, "That's nice, but you'll probably be too busy to do much reading. Your stay here will be filled with activities and group—we're big on group here at Greenwood." When she got to the khakis, the bottle spilled out onto the floor, rolling under the unoccupied bed on the other side of the room. "What do we have here, Mrs. Alswell?" the nurse grunted as she bent down on all fours to retrieve the runaway bottle. She glanced at the prescription, tossed it in her pocket, and silently continued her search, but with a little more enthusiasm, almost eager. After she exposed all of Mrs. Alswell's things, the nurse turned quietly on her heels and walked to the front desk where she conferred in whispered tones with a couple of the other nurses. Mrs. Alswell watched anxiously from her door and quickly ducked back inside her room when they looked her way. Two of them came back into her room and took her fingernail clippers, nail file, razor, and heat pad (because of the cord they explained). When she protested, the older nurse said, "It's for your own good. If you do well here, you'll be off Watch in a couple of days."

No one mentioned it for the rest of the evening, not the admissions nurse who came back to her room to inform her of the 7:30 a.m. breakfast time at which she was expected to dress, or the two night-shift nurses who stuck their heads in the door at various times throughout the night. The next morning though, when she went to the front desk to explain that she didn't feel up to breakfast, she was mortified to find her name in black letters on the erasable board where they kept the patient room numbers by the building entrance, just to the left of the admissions desk. There were fifteen rooms and each patient was listed by first name and according to their room number. The section of the board that contained her name read, #3 *Judith* and in the parallel box to the side, it read **SUICIDE WATCH** in tall, red letters. Mrs. Alswell quickly scanned the other names and found only one other, #5 Tim, that had the extra red message. The other names had clean, white spaces between the columns.

She complained at once, demanding to see the doctor, knowing that he would understand that she wasn't suicidal at all—just careful. They shushed her off to the dining room, explaining that the doctor would make morning rounds later on, but first she had to go to breakfast. Everybody was required, it seemed, even if they weren't hungry and just sat in front of their plate, which is exactly what Mrs. Alswell did. She told them she wasn't hungry and looking at the other patients only confirmed her decision.

She scarcely had time to sit down, when one of them wandered in late and plopped down in the chair right next to her. "You're new. Ain't 'cha? I keep track of all the new ones and I know you're new. Ain't 'cha?" Mistaking Mrs. Alswell's silence for first-day jitters, he continued, saying, "Call me Joe. I got in a little fix with the law and all, reason I'm here, but I'm harmless."

Utterly revolted, both by the man's unkempt appearance and by the disgusting way he was shoveling scrambled eggs in his mouth, Mrs. Alswell pushed back her chair and excused herself, saying that she preferred to eat alone and in the future could he please remember that? "Ah, don't get your tit in a wringer an all. You're Judith. Ain't 'cha. I know 'cause I checked the board and Tim is the only other new name. And you sure ain't Tim." Mrs. Alswell turned to face the door, and he called after her, saying, "Don't go killin' yourself, now. 'K? We all got our problems and we got to help each other get along in this world. I'm #6 just down the hall if you want to talk at me."

Mrs. Alswell ran down the corridor, ignoring a couple of anxious faces, and turned left to her room. She slammed the door,

trembling with rage, and looked about with alarm. There was a fat, ugly stranger in her room, a teenage girl, and the admissions nurse from yesterday. "I know you requested a private room, Judith, but as we said yesterday, that could only happen if we didn't get any more admissions because we're full to the max, so Jasmine here is going to have to room with you. She's nice, knows the ropes—don't you, Jasmine?—and I think you'll get along just fine. We're almost finished up here and then I'll leave you two alone until ten o'clock group. O.K.?"

Mrs. Alswell nodded numbly, realizing the futility of arguing in front of the girl, but it was NOT O.K. Nothing was going right. This was supposed to be a relaxing experience where she could get some help dealing with the stress in her life. Not some place where they searched you like a criminal and you had to be around all kinds of nuts Joe, for example. He was nuts, that she knew. And now this girl. She wouldn't even be able to rest at night knowing she was breathing in the same room. The doctor was definitely going to hear about this.

She sat carefully on the edge of the bed afraid almost to get comfortable. She couldn't. Not with that gawking girl in her room. She moaned briefly when she remembered the pills. They were her safety net, just in case things got too desperate. And now they were gone, just like that. She hadn't been cautious enough. Why hadn't she thought to put them in a small envelope and stick them between the pages of one of her books? They hadn't even looked at the books. That would have been the prudent thing to do, she realized too late, but she consoled herself, knowing that she had done the best she could under the circumstances. It wasn't as if she had had a guidebook to prepare her for this particular experience.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the girl, Jasmine, who had watched her silently for a long time while chewing on a strand of thick, red hair and then said, "I've been here a bunch of times. How long you stayin'?"

Is this some kind of a resort for freaks, then? wondered Mrs. Alswell, but she replied, "My insurance will pay for a one-week stay per year at a mental health facility so that is what I agreed to commit to in my preliminary evaluation." *Not that it is any of your business, but of course you haven't the upbringing to know that, I suppose,* she added to herself. She thought of her own teenagers, Julia and Jonathan, and thanked God that she had at least managed to teach them some manners.

"I've got a medical card," the girl said, "so I can come here whenever. My shrink's really cool. I just have to tell him school's

really a bitch or something, I'm afraid I'm gonna hurt somebody, and he says, 'Do you need to go back to the hospital for a week or so?' Sweet deal, huh? Call me Jazz. I'm a bi-polar with obsessive-compulsive tendencies. What are you? I've got the DSM here if you don't know. We can figure it out. I've practically got mine memorized." With that, she pulled a bulky, black-and-white book from her suitcase. "I bought it," she announced, with no small degree of satisfaction.

Mrs. Alswell was not sure what the girl was talking about, but she said that she was a little tired, perhaps even a bit depressed, that she had a lot of responsibilities with work and the children, that was all. She noticed the name of the book was *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, and thought that she might scan it later to determine, if she could tell, whether or not the girl might be dangerous. She hoped that the girl would quiet herself, but the girl announced that it was time for group. "You don't want to be late. They hold the whole group until somebody comes to get you and then everybody stares at you when you come in. It's unreal. Let's go."

Mrs. Alswell shook her head. She couldn't stay here. She knew that now. This was a dreadful mistake and she realized with sinking conviction that she had not been mindful enough to thoroughly find out what the psychiatric ward was like before she had consented. The girl left, finally, muttering something as she went. Mrs. Alswell didn't care. This was all Dr. Nelson's fault. When she told him about the guns, how she unlocked her husband's gun cabinet at night when she couldn't sleep and touched the guns, he had excused himself to make a phone call, and then came back in vigorously arguing for her to stay at Greenwood for a week or so. She had agreed in the end because it seemed important to him. He had a fine reputation; she had checked to make sure before she started seeing him weekly about six months ago. She was disappointed in herself that she had let it slip about the guns. She knew better, but she hadn't been paying enough attention to what she said, though she was normally quite watchful. It pained her, though, that Dr. Nelson would think that she could do that. Mrs. Alswell shuddered in remembrance. *It would be so bloody, messy, God! Not my style at all. Couldn't he see that?*

As she recalled the guns, Mrs. Alswell thought about the way they had felt as she had run her hand up and down the long barrels. They were so smooth and hard. Cold. Once she had carefully lifted a gun out of the cabinet and ran the stiff, dark barrel along her cheek, tasting the very end, gingerly, though she knew

her husband always unloaded his guns before he put them away after hunting. The taste was not bitter at all, she was surprised to learn, just cold and unyielding beneath her tongue as she explored the various knobs along the barrel. She always felt better after she had touched them. Powerful, almost. Strong. Even thinking about them made her feel that way and she drew in a deep breath, clearing her head.

She heard a soft tap at the door and watched as the door pushed open. So this was the hospital doctor. He was foreign, but nice looking just the same; not Oriental, maybe Iranian she decided. He smiled and introduced himself and Dr. Link. He looked about forty-five or fifty; somewhere around Mrs. Alswell's age. That much relieved her. She was afraid he might be some young, fresh-out-of-med-school psychiatrist. "I understand that you're having some problems cooperating with the schedule here, Judith." She hated that. *If he was Dr. Link, shouldn't she be Mrs. Alswell, not Judith?* She didn't say anything, and realized that she couldn't. The exasperated look on his face told her that he wouldn't listen to reason.

He asked her to follow him to the examining room where he did a complete physical and explained that group was a necessary part of the process at Greenwood and that she was excused for the morning, but that she must attend every group and meal from then on. He told her that she would meet with him every day for about forty-five minutes to discuss whatever was on her mind and added that he would like to get some more information about her background. Mrs. Alswell remained silent, questioning whether she should talk. He seemed nice, but she wondered if he acted like that to all the patients. *Did he talk to Joe like that, and pretend to care? And Jasmine? And that bald old man that muttered beneath his breath at breakfast and cursed aloud when his bacon fell on the floor, but picked it up and ate it anyway?* No, she decided. She had to let him know somehow that she was not like all the others. She didn't pretend to be better than anybody else, but it was true that she wasn't nearly as odd as some of the other people there.

Didn't it get boring? Listening to problems day after day after day. Joe probably sends him right through the roof. It made Mrs. Alswell's heart jump to think that he might consider her like the other patients.

Dr. Link said, "You may sit and stare if you like, but we are still going to be here for forty-five minutes, so you may as well use this time to your advantage." Mrs. Alswell said nothing. Not then, not forty-five minutes later when he stood up and

announced their session was over, adding on his way out, "I've ordered a few medications to help you think clearly, Judith. You will be receiving an anti-depressant, a sedative to relieve your tension, and a sleeping aid at night to help you rest better. We're all hoping that your stay here will be beneficial but you must do your part too."

Mrs. Alswell rose stoically and walked to the door. She met Jasmine in the hall and returned her, "What's up, girl?" with a cool, blank stare. *Let all of them wonder. I am not easy, that's what they think. My personal problems are nobody else's business.*

For the next four days, Mrs. Alswell kept up her routine. She never ate, never spoke at group, and never talked to Dr. Link. He was getting very angry with her, that much she could tell. She found out a lot by listening at group, though she pretended not to. Joe was an alcoholic. The girl with the stringy blond hair, Tiffany, hated everybody. She was tiresome, thought Mrs. Alswell, and truly pathetic. Always complaining about her husband beating up on her when she was the one who had punched him when he came to visit. (Mrs. Alswell had seen it in the dining room during visiting hours). Tim, the new guy, had two broken legs. He didn't talk at group either, but Jasmine found out that he had jumped off the barn again. The first time he had only broken his collarbone. This time they didn't even let him have any clothes in his room. Everything was locked up and he wore a hospital gown. His eyes were so sad that Mrs. Alswell couldn't help but feel sorry for him. She didn't understand people like that.

The college girl was pretty, but she had an extremely bad disposition. She had even called Mrs. Alswell a "nasty bitch with a capital B" yesterday. She had apologized last night though, when she saw Mrs. Alswell walking to the end of the corridor to press her face against the cool, smooth glass of the locked door. It was her particular night comfort, her only one. "Hey, Judy, come here a minute," the girl had called from her room. Mrs. Alswell hesitated for a moment, then walked slowly into her room. Her legs felt wooden and she was dizzy again. It was the meds, she knew, and she rather liked the numb feeling they gave her. "I was kind of a rag yesterday," the girl said when Mrs. Alswell got closer. "Sorry." The girl talked to Mrs. Alswell for over an hour, telling her about her family. Her parents were both college professors.

She is intelligent, at least. From good stock. But nuts just the same. Right before she left, the girl had told her that she knew a secret place outside of Millsville where they had night meetings

and talked about the Second Coming and how Ross Perot tied in to it all. She asked Mrs. Alswell to go with her when they got out and made her promise not to tell any of the staff because "it was way over their heads."

Indeed, thought Mrs. Alswell as she shook her head and went back to her room, abruptly sidestepping Joe who emerged from his room with a sleep grin and said, "I might get out tomorrow, Jude. You stayin' on top of things?" Mrs. Alswell glared and continued on her way though she privately admitted a small relief, one nut less. At her room she noticed that Jasmine was asleep as usual. *No wonder the girl is so fat. All she does is write in her notebook and sleep.*

On Mrs. Alswell's fifth day at Greenwood, Dr. Link announced that he was changing her group. They were forming a small group of four, just women, and she was to take part. Mrs. Alswell nodded her agreement, thinking how nice it was to finally be singled out from the rest of the patients, and wondering who else was to make up the group. The college girl, of course, and maybe the old lady. She has a certain sense of elegance about her in the way she carries her frame, even if she does stay in her robe all day long. Mrs. Alswell's short burst of pleasure expired, though, when Dr. Link lowered his face to look directly into her eyes. "It's an incest survivor group, Judith. I've talked with Dr. Nelson." Judith felt an uncomfortable warmth spread throughout her face and she rose to use the restroom, where she splashed water on her cheeks, carefully averting her eyes from the mirror.

The next morning Mrs. Alswell had her first visitor. She was surprised because her co-workers, neighbors, and family thought she was on vacation. Only John knew where she was and she had asked him not to bother her as she needed rest. The visitor was an older man with thick glasses, a pastor, it turned out, from the Community Congregational Church. He explained that he had been led to share with her. Mrs. Alswell sat on the edge of her bed and listened to him for a while. She was not able to say why, but she began to feel peaceful and special in a comforting sort of way as she considered his words. She was on the verge of praying with him to receive Jesus as her Saviour when he said, "Today is truly a glorious day in Heaven. Tiffany just received Jesus too. The angels are surely rejoicing."

Mrs. Alswell spoke: "Get out." Then she excused herself and walked to the bathroom that she shared with Jasmine. She locked the door and stared at herself with reproach in the mirror. She soon tired of this and slid her back down the wall to sit and rest. After a long while, she stretched her slender body along the

cool, smooth, white tile. Jasmine knocked on the door, jarring Mrs. Alswell out of her rigid quietness. "I need to brush my teeth, Judith. How long you gonna take?"

"Get lost," Mrs. Alswell replied. She sat up again and noticed Jasmine's toiletry bag beneath the sink. Toothbrush, toothpaste, tweezers, nail file, polish of a perfectly morose shade of green, makeup (*How did she afford Clinique? Did she have a card for that too?*), and two pink disposable razors. She selected the razor that still had the plastic safety shield on it and zipped the rest up, tossing the bag in the corner while removing the shield. Good, it's new. Feeling for her pulse, she placed the blade against her wrist. She wanted to cry. She hadn't cried since she was small. She didn't even remember how to , it seemed, because she had tried, once from compassion when Julia was being stitched up in the emergency room from a bicycle accident, and another time for joy, last year when Uncle Pete died. The razor might help. If she could feel the pain, she might cry. That would help, she knew. She pressed hard, but it didn't even hurt. She ran the razor back and forth as hard as she could. Finally, her skin began to bunch up and get caught in the blade. She rinsed it out under the sink, looking again in the mirror.

I didn't realize it would be so hard. God, isn't anything easy? She determinedly sat back down and pressed hard back and forth, furiously making a soft, scraping sound. It was like a melody to a song, Mrs. Alswell realized, and she worked faster and harder to keep the rhythm, admiring the melody. There was progress, she noticed. The skin was red and weepy, like a bad carpet burn. She turned the razor over and pulled a couple of wedges of skin out. The moisturizing strip was in the way. That was the problem. She used the nail file to pry it off, cutting her finger in the process. Blood, finally, even if she couldn't get it in the right place. She watched as one drop dripped on the white tile, cleaned it up carefully with a tissue, then stuck her finger in her mouth.

Jasmine pounded the door so hard it shook. "Judith, hurry, you got to see this! Hurry! He did it! Come on! Come on!"

Mrs. Alswell pulled the robe sleeve down over her arm and stuck the razor in her pocket. The song was gone. *Tonight might be better. More peaceful. Less stress.* She opened the door and Jasmine pulled her by the sleeve shouting, "Hurry! He might be gone!"

Dr. Link came running behind them, shouting, "Get out of the way! Go back to your rooms!" but Jasmine kept tugging and pulling at her arm. They reached #5 at the same time. "Dammit!"

Dr. Link said, “Dammitdammitdammitdammitdammit!” Mrs. Alswell pushed in closer to get a good view, squeezing into Jasmine’s soft flesh.

He was hanging from the emergency sprinkler system. The casts looked almost comical dangling on his long legs. His neck was looped with what appeared to be his robe belt. The eyes were open, but he was dead. Of that Mrs. Alswell was sure.

Later that afternoon, Mrs. Alswell tapped lightly on Dr. Link’s office door. “Who is it?” Mrs. Alswell noted the weary tone and shrank back from the door. Dr. Link got up from his desk and opened the door. “What is it, Judith?” he said abruptly, then reconsidering added, “I’m sorry you had to see that this morning. It must have been very traumatic for you. You look as if you have something to say. May I help you?”

The tear gathered slowly. She could not keep it from coming out. Feeling its heaviness, she blinked, and it began tracing its way down the outside of her nose. *A peculiar sensation, so soft, warm.* She moaned slightly, catching it with her tongue just as it slid over her lip.

Misty Harris

After Innocence

driving through the blasted lands
dead hills the trees here
have had no shelter from the wind
and reach to heavens they no
longer believe in with cynically
mutated branches twisting down
to the hell that is so much closer
landscape forgotten beneath
dull lead sky seething
with sluggish clouds
dense black ribbon raping
its way over and under
around and through
soft curves and mounds
of amber frosted stony earth
my woman's mind too long encased
in flesh bearing breasts sheltering womb
reminds me that to be stranded
on such a desolate stretch would
be quite dangerous anything
could happen and maybe that is why
I'm driving to Nebraska
because I've never been there
before and because
anything might happen
although stuck in the mundane
reality of melancholy and early
winter I know
that nothing will

Kari Rudick

Untitled



Rachel Emig

The Saviors

When they came to our village in the
metal bird with the spinning beak
so loud it hurt my ears,
I watched them watch us.
I hid from their shiny tools and sharp edges,
I stayed inside our hut
third in the row
by the almost dried up well.
She saw me there in the dirt
at her ankles and pushed me into line
with all the others,
pulled at the cloth of my shirt where it hung
open at my shoulder,
like it would stay that way.
I watched them watch us.
We were a row of dirty browns,
bare feet and bones.
I watched back and saw the beads
pop out and roll down pink necks,
then dirt stuck in lines on their foreheads
when they found one of us
too bare,
too many bones.
Their clothes wilted like the plants
we tried to grow in the shade
behind our hut
third in the row,
and they drank so much
from those clear bubbling bottles
their stomachs must have
stuck out like mine.
They found me last in the row and
hunched down to stare in my eyes and ears.
They wiped my arm with a piece of wet, fluffy cloud
and stung me like a wasp, only longer.
All I did was look at the shoes.
The thickest, whitest shoes ever.

I didn't want to look at blue eyes so sad for me.
They moved in and out among us
in the sunlight, but met without us after dark.
We could hear murmuring
voices from the shadows
thrown on the walls of their cloth shelter, and
wished that they would share their light.
Instead they gave me a little green book with sheets
so thin my fingers stick to them and tear
them out on accident sometimes when
I pretend to know
what the black scratches mean.
They said it was about God before they climbed
back into the bird's belly and flew away.
I wonder if they flew to see God,
to get more shoes.

Ben Cartwright

What I Said to Kevin on the Drive Home

“Was the fish’s mouth big?”

“No, it was only about
the size of Dana’s hand.”
He clenched his fists
so I could see
what his sister’s balled fingers
would look like surrounded by scales.
Then Kevin and I
wrote our names in cursive
squiggling our fingers in fog.

On the window it was hard—
the car moved
and nothing inside held still.
But I braced my thumb
up against the frame
and when Kevin’s dad shifted
I’d place my syllables wet
and cold against the glass.

There were complexities—
things like uppercase
I’d learned since being five.
Other things too—
Neon light
sinks dripped and dragging
in puddles on Avenues
and clings to the canvas
and rubber wrapping your feet
on streets when you cross them.

Sometimes crossing is hard,
and the other sidewalk,
is the kindest place to go
away from women
who walk home by themselves.
They will be someone's
mother or daughter
and the space between us all
is like pressing magnets
against each other.
We won't turn them
so that they snap
flipping to touch sides.
We will play with spaces around the edges—
the impression of touch, sliding as we bump.
And this is how the city hurts you.

Later you will buy other girls flowers.
You won't have to cross
the street for months.
Her limbs will press around you tightly.
She will feel ocean.
You will hear the blood rush in.
But then kissing will feel
like "yellow ochre,"
squeezed from a tube—a color
almost thick enough to cover
what you can't cut out
with a putty knife, or paint over.
This will hurt also.
And you will talk with other voices
and somewhere years later
you'll pass on a street
and the field around her will move you
across a line of cars.
And it will be the same sidewalk.

And then there's that whole thing
about not having the right shoes—
and which fork to use,
and what happens when friends die.
Instead I showed Kevin the thumb trick.
He didn't believe me
but wanted to learn.
The window fogged up again.
His sister's doll
had the same name as my sister.
Our fingerprints
made squiggly lines on the glass—
they looked nice behind the lights
reflected in rainy Chicago.
Our names stayed there
when the fog came back
and after a few more minutes
of driving
you could look through them.

Ed Adams

The Outlaw and the Tough Woman

"Damn, it's hot," Arlo said to himself as he took another swallow of beer and fired up a joint.

As he drove down the dusty country road, he thought about all the hard work he had put in so he could have some time off. He had surprised everyone he knew by working at the same job for over a year. The job was about to run out and Arlo would be laid off in a couple of weeks. He had told his boss he wanted the vacation time he had coming, a whole week off with pay. Arlo didn't have much money because of an extremely bitchy ex-wife who demanded her child support whether Arlo had food or not. He didn't mind supporting his child. In fact, he loved her very much, but he hated his ex-wife, who gave the child support to her lazy boyfriend who in turn, spent it at the bars and liquor stores.

But, he had a whole week in front of him to do whatever he wanted. What he wanted most was to camp out on a river bank and fish, drink beer, smoke some good weed, and kick back. This was Arlo's plan for the next couple of days. He had worked hard for it, he deserved it, he needed it, and screw anyone who didn't like it.

A lot of planning had gone into this fishing trip. He was going to try his luck at a spot on the Smokey Hill River where he'd never seen. He had spent the entire morning loading his gear in the back of his truck. He had everything he needed plus at least a hundred pounds of extra stuff.

Arlo had been a boy scout as a kid and he believed in their motto, "Be prepared." He was also something of a pack rat and always brought a lot more stuff than he would actually use. But, he figured it was better to have it and not need it, than to need it and not have it. An example of this was the five razor sharp knives he carried (Arlo knew not even he needed five knives, but he carried them anyway).

Among other items in the back of the truck was a case of beer in a cooler along with twenty pounds of ice, and a small one-hit bong with a few grams of some good weed tucked inside a plastic bag. These two items were stored in a green backpack with a lot of other stuff on top.

Since he was taking country roads most of the way (Arlo always took country roads when he was carrying any dope, which was most of the time), he didn't feel the need to have the dope in his pocket as he usually did. If he got stopped by a cop, he wanted the chance to throw the dope out the window. One of his most important rules was never talk to a cop with dope in your pocket. He'd seen others try this with really bad results.

Arlo had several of these rules that he lived by and they had kept him out of trouble many times.

Arlo had been an outlaw most of his life and he was one of the few people he knew who'd never been busted for anything. The reason for this was that he was extremely cautious and very sneaky. He had gotten away with a tremendous number of things for which he should have been busted. He knew the law of averages was not on his side, but this late in life, he didn't know any other way to live.

Arlo was a loner. He didn't trust most people and he didn't really like that many either. He figured most people were a pain in the ass. He did, however, have a few close friends who he could trust completely and he cherished each one.

The late August sun was beating down at least 102 degrees, and the sweat was pouring off him. Arlo was hoping it would be cooler on the river. At least he could jump in the water and cool off if he wanted.

Arlo looked in his rear view mirror to make sure there wasn't a cop following him. Satisfied that he was unseen, he took another hit off the joint and held it in his lungs until the smoke threatened to send him into a fit of coughing.

His turn was coming up so he slowed the truck, checked his mirror again and turned right. This was a township road and he relaxed because he knew cops rarely traveled these back roads.

He reached over and turned the radio on. Static. He turned the knob. Bullshit. He turned it again, more bullshit. He turned the knob again and "I can't get no satisfaction, I can't get no good reaction," blared from the speakers. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel in time to the music.

He was out of sight of the main road now and he nailed the accelerator to the floor. The engine was still winding as he flew over the top of the next hill. At this speed, it was more like a jump. (Arlo figured, "Hell, take a chance. Columbus did.")

He landed with the front wheels first and when the back end hit, the bed of the truck started to come around to the front. Arlo steered into the slide and hollered, "Whoa! You son-of-a-bitch." He didn't hit the brake, but did let up on the gas a little. He took

another hit off the joint and swallowed some more beer. "Better slow it down, dumb ass," he said to himself.

After another mile or so, he topped another hill. Suddenly, something caught his eye at the bottom of the hill. There was someone sitting in the middle of the road as though they were on a beach trying for a tan. The person's knees were up and they were leaning back on the palms of their hands.

Some small trees temporarily blocked his view of the person and there was a small bend in the road where the trees were. Arlo slowed the truck. When he could see the person again, he realized it was a girl. He could tell this because she was totally naked. She was standing by the side of the road looking at Arlo. He slowed the truck to a crawl and turned off the radio.

The sight that he saw confused him for a moment or two. He couldn't quite understand what he was seeing. The girl he saw had the body of a woman, but the face was unrecognizable as human. She had large, nasty looking cuts all over her body, some as long as eight to ten inches, and she was covered with dirt and blood.

Her face was so swollen and red, black, blue and purple on the right side that it didn't seem to match the left side at all. Her hair had been chopped off close to her head and her right eye was swollen completely shut. She also had a large gash about three inches wide from ear to ear across her throat and her windpipe was hanging out. As Arlo was taking all this in, he continued to drive past the girl, until finally, he was looking at her in his mirror.

She walked into the middle of the road and stood with her legs apart and her fists clenched at her hips. She gave Arlo a look with the one eye that was open, saying, "You son of a bitch, if you don't stop, I'll kick your ass."

Then all at once, it hit Arlo what he was seeing. Arlo figured, any woman that tough, he ought to help out. Arlo absentmindedly laid the joint in the ashtray. He stopped the truck and backed up. He stopped, put the truck in park, and got out.

Arlo was so astounded by the girl's injuries, he didn't quite know what to say. He said the first thing that popped into his mind. "Are you alright?" he asked, which of course she was not. "Do you want to go to the hospital?" he added.

She moved close to the other side of the truck to hide her nakedness. "Can I have something to drink?" she asked in a low, raspy voice. She sounded unreasonably calm and detached as she spoke.

Arlo couldn't figure out how she could talk with her throat hanging open like it was.

Arlo said, "Sure, all you want." He reached into the back of the truck and grabbed the five gallon Gott can that he had just filled with cold water at home. He screwed off the lid, filled it and handed it to her. She drank deeply. Arlo figured her mouth must be very dry. She drank most of the water and Arlo noticed that the water was coming right back out of the wound in her neck as fast as she drank it.

"More," she whispered and handed the lid back to Arlo. He filled it again, and gave it back to her. She drank some more with the same result. Arlo decided this was no help to the girl at all. It didn't look as though any of it was going into her stomach.

He rummaged in his pack and pulled out an old t-shirt. He soaked it in the water and started wiping blood and dirt off her body. He wanted to get an idea of her injuries. It quickly became apparent someone had tortured her by making large cuts all over her body.

Arlo had gutted and skinned deer, fish, birds, and critters of all kinds but he had never seen anything cut up that bad. He wondered how much blood she had lost.

She looked at Arlo like he was some kind of pervert as he washed her down. He could tell from the expression on her face as well as the look in her left eye that she didn't like him looking at her or touching her. Arlo couldn't blame her for that but it was all he knew to do at the moment. It soon became apparent that her injuries were way beyond his skill and the scope of his primitive first aid kit. He finally took the Gott can and dowsed her with all the water that was left.

He said, "Come on, I'll take you to a hospital." She followed him around the truck and started to climb into the cab. Arlo told her, "Wait a minute." He reached into the bed of the truck and pulled out a blue nylon tarp. He shook it out and wrapped it around her.

"Thanks," she rasped.

She got into the cab. Arlo knew every movement had to be agony for her. She grimaced every time she moved. As she slid across the seat, she let out a small painful cry. Arlo remembered she had a large slash across her buttocks.

Arlo had so much junk and camping gear in the cab that the two of them barely fit. He shoved some of his gear onto the floor but she was still sitting right next to him.

Arlo reached over and turned the air conditioner up on high. He backed up to a field entrance and turned around and headed back in the direction from which he had just come.

She whispered, "Have you got anything to drink?"

He said, "I've got some cold beer."

"No, no beer," she said.

"Wait a minute. I've got some iced tea," he said. He reached across her and found his water jug. It still had some ice in it. He handed her the jug and said, "Drink all you want."

Again, she drank greedily and again the liquid drained out of her throat and ran down her chest, where it mixed with the blood that was still oozing from her neck.

Arlo was pushing the truck to the limit he thought was safe on the dirt road. "What happened to you?" he asked.

"Some guys kidnapped me last night off the street in Salina. I had a fight with my husband in a bar and walked out. Some guy that I'd danced with at the bar and another guy saw me leave after I had the fight. They followed me and forced me into their car."

"They grabbed you right off the street?" he asked. He couldn't believe somebody had the balls to actually do that.

"I kicked and screamed and hit them, but they hit me with something on the side of my head. She reached up and felt the right side of her head and then she started to turn the mirror to look at her face. Arlo put his hand on hers and said, "You don't want to do that." Arlo noticed a hurt look come into her eye.

Arlo asked, "Were they white guys or black guys or what?" He could hardly believe someone could do this to another human being. He thought, "Hell, not even animals would do something like this."

"They were white guys," she said.

"What kind of car did they have?" he asked as he turned his head for a moment to watch the road. When Arlo was this stoned, driving became somewhat automatic for him, he didn't have to watch every little thing.

"It was a little yellow foreign car. I don't know what kind," she said.

"Was it a two-door or four-door?" he asked, looking at the girl again.

She said, "Four-door."

Arlo still couldn't believe she was talking and didn't know if she should. He figured if she died, someone ought to know what had happened.

She said, "When I came to, they were slapping me. My clothes were gone and they started cutting my hair off with a knife. They raped me and took turns raping and sodomizing me and making me give them blow jobs for hours. All the time they were doing this, they were cutting on me with a knife." Her lower

lip began to quiver and she sniffed while trying to force back a single tear. She wiped it away.

It was then Arlo realized she must be in shock. He knew she had lost parts of herself she'd never get back.

"They said they'd done this to another girl last week. When they were done, they dragged my neck across a barbed wire fence and pushed me down into the ditch and left. Then a while later, they came back because they thought I might not be dead and they cut my throat with the knife. I passed out and they left again."

The truck was getting squirrely on the loose gravel, so Arlo tapped the brake a couple of times, and got control of the truck again.

"What did they look like?" Arlo asked.

"They were both in their late twenties or early thirties. One was taller than the other. They both had dark hair and one of them had a moustache. That's about all I saw," she said.

"How long have you been there?" he asked.

"Since last night," she said. Arlo tried to do the math in his head to figure out how long that was, but he knew he was too stoned and gave up on it.

It was just past noon when Arlo had found her. He had remembered to look at his watch. He knew someone would want to know that piece of information.

"Am I the first person to come along?" he asked.

She said, "No, several people drove down the road."

"And nobody stopped?" he asked incredulously.

"Nobody stopped," she said.

He thought she was going to break down after she said this. Tears rolled down her cheek now, but she sat silently and closed her eye. She tried to regain her composure. Arlo reached out and patted her hand and said, "You're going to be all right now. You're safe."

Arlo wasn't sure how to get to Salina from where he was but he knew how to get to Ellsworth, so he decided to go there.

He reached the main road and ignored the stop sign. He usually ignored stop signs, but he usually slowed down a little more than he did this time. He turned left and spun around the corner on two wheels and headed south. He pushed the accelerator to the floor again.

He was just north of the Kanapolis dam. He had a thought about taking her to the park ranger station at the other end of the dam. He raced down the road across the dam, ignoring the forty-five mile per hour speed limit.

About half way across, he met a Kansas Highway Patrol car and an Ellsworth County Sheriff's car. He flashed his lights and honked his horn and waved to the cops. He didn't think the middle of the dam was a good place to stop. He kept right on going.

He said, "What's your name?"

"Vickie," she said.

"Well Vickie, surely one of these cops will chase me. We'll stop at the other end and they'll get you some help. By the way, my name's Arlo," he said.

He'd been driving about seventy-five miles per hour across the dam, but when he came to the turn off for the ranger station, he slowed the truck and stopped. It was only then that he realized he was still holding his half empty beer. He opened the door and poured it out. He pitched the can into the ditch and drove ahead another thirty feet. The sheriff's car pulled in behind Arlo a minute later, with red lights flashing and sirens blaring.

Arlo jumped out of the truck and ran back to the car. He said, "I've got a girl in the truck that's hurt bad. She needs an ambulance right away."

The deputy got back in his car and called for an ambulance. He asked Arlo to go and sit in the truck.

Arlo returned to the truck and got in. He said, "They've called an ambulance and it will be here pretty quick. You're going to be all right."

About that time, some guy who had been riding with the deputy opened the passenger door and stuck his head in. He took one look at the girl and said, "Oh, Jesus! Oh, shit!" He ran to the back of the truck and threw up.

The deputy, a short round-faced man with blue eyes who looked like he'd had a few dozen too many donuts came up on the passenger side and looked at the girl. He started unloading all of Arlo's gear and throwing into the bed of the truck.

The deputy asked the girl what had happened. She repeated most of what she had already told Arlo.

He motioned for Arlo to follow him. He asked to see Arlo's license and registration. He questioned Arlo about finding the girl and wanted to know where he had found her. Arlo was a bit flustered by now and couldn't remember how to tell the deputy how to get to the place. He said, "I can take you back and show you the spot if you like."

The deputy went and talked to the highway patrolman who by now, was directing traffic around the intersection. The patrolman signaled to the guy who threw up to take over directing traf-

fic. He then retrieved a first aid kit from his car and went to try to help the girl.

The deputy came back to Arlo and said, "Let's go." Arlo felt strange about leaving Vickie but he didn't see that he had any choice.

Arlo got into the deputy's car and the deputy backed the car up and turned around and headed north back across the dam. He put his red light and siren on and pushed the car up to eighty miles per hour.

It gave Arlo a strange feeling to be in the cop car. He had always tried to avoid such things and had never ridden in one. The deputy questioned Arlo again about finding the girl and wanted to know all she had told him.

Arlo repeated what the girl had said, while he directed the deputy back to the spot where he found the girl. Arlo told the deputy to slow down, because the spot was just over the next hill.

The deputy said, "I want to see the exact spot where you picked her up. I want to stop the car before we get there."

Arlo said, "All right, pull into this field entrance. The spot is just a little past here."

The deputy pulled into the field entrance and parked. He said, "Now, I want you to show me the spot, but remember this is a crime scene. We don't want to contaminate the area, so be careful. Walk only on the grass and don't throw anything away."

"That's cool," Arlo said.

They got out and walked a short way up the edge of the road. Arlo showed the deputy the wet spot where he had doused the girl with water. The deputy said, "All right, I don't want you to go any further. Stay right here." The deputy turned and walked slowly along the side of the road.

Arlo did as he was told. He lit a smoke and looked around. He had not taken note of his surroundings before. The hills were dry and brown. There hadn't been any rain for weeks. The wind blew steadily from the south, making the tall ragweed and sunflowers sway in the ditch. The sky was the same aqua blue that it was every day. Not a cloud could be seen anywhere. Arlo wished for some shade. He thought about going and sitting under the small clump of trees, but thought he'd better do as the deputy said.

He wished he was somewhere else. He wished he had a cold beer. He wished he had a joint. Then it came to him. "Oh, fuck a rat," he swore. He remembered laying the joint in the ashtray of the truck. By now his truck would be crawling with cops. He thought to himself, "I'm fucked."

The thoughts that raced through his brain had a very sobering effect, making him instantly straight. When the need arose, he could force himself to be straight and no one could tell he wasn't, unless they looked under his sunglasses.

He had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He felt like a man on a ledge that was crumbling beneath his feet. No matter which way he turned he could not avoid the fall he knew was coming.

He tried to think of some possible defenses. He tried not to think about doing time in a county jail. He wondered how long it would be before they slapped the cuffs on him and drove him away. "What a drag," he said to himself.

Just then he heard more sirens. He thought, "Well, so much for my vacation. I should have known it wasn't going to last."

A couple of minutes later, three police cars topped the hill and slid to a stop by the deputy's car. It was beginning to look like a cop convention. One car was from Salina County, another was from the Kansas Highway Patrol, and the third was another deputy from Ellsworth County.

The highway patrolman walked towards Arlo. Arlo thought, "Here it comes." The cop stuck out his hand and introduced himself. Arlo shook the cop's hand and told him his name. The other cops had come up and stood around. They seemed content to let the patrolman do the talking.

He asked all sorts of questions, such as, what was Arlo doing on the road to begin with, where was he going, where was he last night, where was he that morning, did he own the truck, where did he work, what did he do on his job, and who was his boss?

This sort of questioning went on for quite a while. It was interspersed with questions about the girl and what she had told him. Arlo had the thought that he was the number one suspect. "That's all I need," he thought.

After a while, Arlo started asking some questions of his own. He wanted to know why there were cops from both Salina and Ellsworth counties. The officers told him that the place where they were standing was right on the line between the two counties, so both counties were conducting investigations.

The patrolman told Arlo to go with one of the deputies and answer some more questions. They went back to one of the cars and the questioning about the girl started all over again.

Sometime later, another car with state tags drove up and a man with a cowboy hat, white shirt, gray slacks, and shiny black boots got out. He walked past the car where Arlo sat talking to a

deputy. He stopped a few feet in front of the car and talked to the other deputy. He turned and looked in Arlo's direction. He did not look friendly. The man had a stony look on his face and didn't look as if he ever smiled.

Arlo asked the deputy who the guy was.

The deputy looked at the guy and said, "Oh, him? He's with the KBI."

Arlo thought, "Oh, wonderful. We got everybody here but the FBI now."

At one point a while later, a cop came back to the car and asked, "Who does the green backpack belong to?" Arlo saw no possible way to avoid the truth and he didn't figure it would do any good to lie anyway.

He said, "It's mine," as innocently as he could. He knew if they had asked about the backpack, they had found the bong and his little stash. The cop turned and walked away again.

Arlo wondered how long it would be before they hauled him off to jail. He also wondered which jail it would be. He was starting to get the munchies and he wondered if he'd make it to the jail in time for supper.

For the next couple of hours Arlo was asked to repeat his story to at least a half dozen other cops.

Finally, the highway patrolman came back and asked Arlo to write down all he knew about the girl and what she had told him, where he was going, what he was doing, etc., etc.

They gave him a pencil and a notebook and left him alone in the car to write. He tried to remember everything the girl had said and was careful to write down the time he had picked her up, as well as everything he had said to her.

While he was writing, he kept wondering if Vickie was alive and if she had told the cops that he didn't do it. He wondered what would happen if the girl died in his truck, and if they were looking through his truck, they might wonder why he had so many knives. He routinely carried two on him and knew there were at least three others in the truck. He was glad he had left his sawed-off shot gun at home instead of having it under the seat where he usually kept it.

When he was done writing, he signed at the bottom and dated it.

Pretty soon the patrolman came back and took the notebook and pencil. He read it over slowly, asking a few questions here and there. Finally he said, "O.K., if you'll go with this officer, he'll take you back to your truck."

Arlo thought, "Oh, sure."

Arlo got into the car that had brought him and the first deputy he'd met, got in and started the car. He backed up and turned around and drove back the way they had come. Arlo asked the deputy what happened to the girl.

The deputy said, "They took her in a helicopter ambulance to a hospital in Wichita. They think she's going to make it."

When they reached the spot where Arlo had left his truck, it was gone. Arlo thought it must have been impounded by now. The deputy said, "After they took the girl to Wichita in the helicopter ambulance, we moved your truck down to the ranger station."

"Ah, that's it. They want to catch me with the dope," Arlo thought. He just wanted all of this to be over.

The deputy pulled into the fenced area in front of the maintenance building by the ranger station. He drove over to Arlo's truck and stopped. He said, "Well, you're free to go. We may want to check back with you. You may have to testify at a trial. Thanks a lot."

Arlo got out of the car and the deputy drove away. Arlo looked around. He didn't see anyone. He looked in the back of his truck. Everything looked like it had been stirred in a cement mixer. "What a fucking mess," he said aloud.

Arlo rummaged in the back of his truck and eventually came up with the bong with the stash still inside. He looked around again and didn't see anyone. The bong and the stash went into the backpack. He got into the truck and started it up. The seat next to where he sat was still wet from where Vickie had sat, leaking tea out of her neck. He tried to put this mental picture out of his mind.

He pulled slowly out of the fenced area, expecting to be surrounded by cops at any moment. He drove back to the highway and turned left and started down the road. It was then that he looked down and saw the joint laying in the ashtray, where he had left it.

Arlo stared at it in disbelief. He turned right off the highway at the first opportunity and drove slowly until he was out of sight of the highway, then he nailed the accelerator as he looked in his rearview mirror again. Nobody was following him.

He reached down and fired up the joint again. The smoke felt good as it expanded in his lungs. Arlo drove a few more miles, stopped the truck and retrieved the bong and his stash and grabbed a six pack of beer out of the cooler. He got back in the truck and started off again. He popped open a beer and chugged most of it before coming up for air.

He drove slowly now, still looking in his rearview mirror. When he finished the joint, he ate the roach.

He couldn't believe his luck. His first rule was, "Thou shall not press thy luck." Arlo figured his luck had been pressed to the limit that afternoon. A while later, he arrived home. He'd decided he didn't feel much like camping after all.

He rolled a few more joints and sat on the back porch smoking, drinking beer and thinking about the events of the afternoon. He tried to understand why he had not been busted. He finally came to the conclusion that the police wanted him for a witness and that a happy witness was better than no witness, and they had simply chosen to ignore the dope. As it turned out, he was not called to testify at all.

A few months later, Arlo and his neighbor, Floyd, were watching the news and smoking some dope, just like any other afternoon. Floyd had just had a fight with his girlfriend and was going on about what a ball breaker she was. He said, "She thinks she's so fuckin' tough. There ain't no such thing as a tough woman."

Just then, the newscaster started telling a story about a trial in Salina. Two men had been convicted of kidnapping and murder and had been given natural life sentences. The camera cut away to a picture of a girl being interviewed. She had medium length, light brown hair and blue eyes. She was very pretty but had a sad countenance about her face. The interviewer asked how she felt about the sentencing. She said, "They got the maximum they could get for what they did." She raised her head to look at the interviewer and Arlo could plainly see the scar across her neck.

Arlo felt a certain sense of sad satisfaction and thought to himself, "Floyd, you don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

Sammuel Erickson

Timothy Joseph

I remember there was mist when Mom gave you to me
In the shotgun seat because Lucy was sick and we
Had to pull over so she could puke.
You were, I don't know how old.
You couldn't have been very old.
I touched you,
Not yet a little man
Just a little creature
Whose head needed a hand to stay up.

And I thought,
God, when I find a woman
that makes me feel like
this child does
I'm going to have to marry her.

Ben Cartwright

Tuesday Mornings

What am I seeing on these mornings
I lay down the sides of things
and peer over and under
and run my fingers over edges and textures
of glass and metal
I burn things and the smoke
floats undoing knots from
deep within the last good kiss I had
I can remember the lips that were
soft and pink and the way
I'd press was brought about that time
not of desperation but out of
something different
and it wasn't simply the variation
the mile marker on the way to the
end and god I guess
it's not even a road anymore
but here be dragons and there be ben
and this morning I got up and my body was still
there how strange and I think of all the things
I can do with my body I put on my
favorite shorts and sat down to drink coffee
and the way my mother will talk to me about coffee
and the way everyone will talk to me about coffee
it makes me realize how serene I look and how
that's one thing they can give me and I'll smile
there are many things I smile at
not more than one has been given
on Christmases I didn't like it was too much pressure
I'd never act as surprised or overjoyed as anyone
wanted and this triangulation of
all my thoughts I'm getting tired
of coaching and want to write
one thing that I can keep and not want
to erase and then change and erase and all the pink rubber hairs
left from the eraser across the pages in the past
are up and marching this morning I can feel
them on my way to tea
or other beverages and my days

Hiram Lucke

A Car Wreck on March 24

With a look back

I should have realized
the Celtic folk songs were an omen,
with their lilting melodies of dead lovers
and bloodshed and drink.
I should have taken your offer of sex,
leaving us together
and arriving later than we had planned.
I should have known
that a shopping spree in the stores
of used clothing,
records of the dead,
and small items from a curious shelf
of a broken marriage,
would be considered bad karma on the west coast.

But it was all over very quickly really—
nothing like the nurse
on my fourth day in the hospital
trying to start an IV and missing three times;
commenting on my painted toenails
that you talked me into months ago,
—the red still bright on the edges—
holding on as if it
were my hand latched on the bed rail
with each new attempt by the searching needle.

Nothing like the 12 weeks
I watched you lay in bed,
moving only from hospital
to nursing home
and back to hospital again,
hoping for the day that you could sit in a chair
and I could roll you outside
into the sun where you belong.

Nothing like that day you saw your face
for the first time, broken
—removed from the memory that you had held—
and though it was less swollen with the ache
than the day I ventured from my room,
if only to try and hold your hand
and talk through sobbing
as my father poked me in the side to make me stop
and you hoarsely whispered words
that I could barely recognize,
you still asked me never to look at you again.

Nothing like that time,
(so small in the actual universe, yet just as infinite to me)
when I realized what had happened
and I looked over at you and
thought you were dead.

Now it is all police reports,
as sterile and unpassionate as the reporter
the next day
talking about the other man's
humanitarian work,
the family he left behind,
or the TV channel two clicks away
which showed nothing but a clock
ticking to no music.

Trips to the psychologist are much easier than
the NG tube yanked out of my nose and
placed in the trashcan
in one swift stroke,
but talk is not what I need.

A rewind button would do the trick.

Sometimes Mr. Robinson
I see your ghost in my rear-view mirror

I say,
"I'm sorry, but it was your fault."

Nathan Jenkins

The Phoenix

phoenix also **phenix** n. **1.** A bird in Egyptian mythology that consumed itself by fire after 500 years, and rose renewed from its ashes. **2.** A person or thing of unsurpassed excellence or beauty; paragon.

"Maybe it'll happen today," Billy Ray smirked, and his head pulled back as he suppressed a laugh. "I used to think more positive like you," he said while watching an ant climb in and out of a crack in the sidewalk. The well-dressed man had just suggested that he could go home and patch things up.

"Well, good luck," the man said when he realized he couldn't convince him. "Here's ten dollars. Don't buy any beer with it. Get something to eat."

"God bless ya, man. I don't drink anyway." Billy Ray watched the man walk away, huddled and bent forward a little to fight the icy breeze. "Nice shoes," he thought. "Coulda used some of those back when I was playin'."

No one else was on Eight Street that night. Downtown Kansas City, Missouri slowed to a crawl on nights like this. A faint soprano sax hit a high note and cascaded down the scale. " 'Too cold for man or beast,' pop used to say . . . hah, wonder what that makes me," he mumbled. "You don't seem to mind, do ya?" he asked the ant. "Guess you got all that food stored up somewhere, don't ya?"

The only soul on the street, now sitting against the side wall of The Phoenix jazz club, was the homeless man known to the regulars as Billy Ray. A mural of huge, laughing faces looked out over his head. They were as far from his mind as the white sidewalk, the gray, sloping street, and the towering brick buildings that enclosed his present niche on the earth.

At forty-six years of age, Billy Ray Adams looked much older. Two years of living on the streets made a man lose any connection with youth he may have had. His gray-speckled black hair shot out in waves from underneath a faded gray-blue Yankees hat. his brown, bloodshot eyes were surrounded by coarse, almost black skin. A wide, flat nose sat among deep lines on his face. A thick, gray beard covered the rest. He had a gentle look

that invited strangers to come over and offer help, instead of having to go to them for some change—not that he would. Whoever talked to him talked to the top of his hat as he looked at the sidewalk and responded in short, mumbled phrases. If someone managed a glance in his eyes, his gaze would dart off to the surrounding buildings until returning once again to the sidewalk and their shoes.

These eyes looked down his worn, red coat, over the stains, the duct-taped holes, between his legs covered in old blue jeans, and at his once-white duffel bag. His eyes closed, and he lowered his head. The usual prayer ran through his head: “Lord, give me strength to keep goin’ or take me away from here. Protect my girls for me. Watch them as they go through life. Don’t let ‘em turn out like me.”

A gust of wind shot across the concrete and ripped through the old jacket, startling Billy Ray back to the consciousness of his surroundings. He unfolded his arms and looked at what used to be a left arm, now ending above the elbow and topped off with his coat in a knot. “Looks like a present,” he mused. “Like a Christmas sausage wrapped in red paper.” He remembered back to when it happened. That’s what his life was—remembering.

The night had been warm and the sky went on forever. He and his young wife, Lenora, were flying down The Paseo in their brick-red Oldsmobile Cutlass, Miles Davis blaring from the speakers, competing with open windows. They had a few drinks before leaving, and both felt a little drunk. “How’d I do tonight?” he asked indifferently. She looked at him and smiled while still leaning on her elbow.

“I think you know,” she said as she gave him a quick jab to the shoulder. “They haven’t seen anything like you before. They just shut up and listen like you’re the last thing they’ll ever hear.”

Billy Ray smiled and looked out the window. “You always say that.” He looked at her, the wind blowing through her hair, the small, perfect features on her face. “You look like a queen, my African queen. You’re like a field of flowers blowing in a summer breeze. Hah!” he laughed at his own corniness while she shook her head at him.

He had played very well, exceptionally well. Every time Billy Ray and his band played, an unusually large crowd of jazz lovers would pack themselves into the dark, smoky club. Gathering a decent following and gaining a reputation as being the finest trumpet player in Kansas City, the thirty-four year old man was on his way to realizing his goal of being a star.

"Billy!" she screamed as he swerved to miss the dog in the road by inches. The car screeched across the intersection out of control. The corner jumped at the car too fast for his slowed reflexes. The car hurdled onto the sidewalk and slammed into a telephone pole.

He had awakened two days later in a hospital bed. "Billy . . . Billy . . . Welcome back. You're lucky to be here," the nurse had said, trying to convince him with the tone of her voice.

"Lenora? Where is she? Where's my baby?" he asked in a drowsy voice. He found himself too weak to sit up or even open his eyes all the way.

"Relax, she's doing fine. Broke her leg and had a concussion . . . Billy? . . . She lost the baby. I'm sorry."

"Baby? What baby?" he said as he realized what she meant. He put his hands to his face, and that's when he discovered the missing limb.

"The doctor couldn't save it. You had lost too much blood," she said as his heart sank.

His heart never rose again. For ten years afterwards, they had tried to forge ahead with their lives, trying to push the past behind them. Sparse, odd jobs were all an uneducated one-armed man could get. Only for his family would he return to work every day, and he had lapsed into a shadow of his old self, aided by any kind of alcohol available. Emma, his daughter from before the accident, would avert her eyes from him and only on his lap if he insisted, but he knew she was never comfortable being around him. He would look at her with glazed eyes and want to tell her that he should be so much more than what's before her now, but she would never understand. Each question he asked was answered with silence or a shrug of the shoulders. Every day became a trial until one day, Lenora gave him the ultimatum. "I don't know who you are anymore!" she cried. "I need my husband back or get out of my house!" Billy Ray sat in the chair, shocked into silence.

A week later, he still had no reason for her to keep him around anymore. He had taken away her husband, her dreams, her second child . . . The next day he was gone. A note on the kitchen table told her what had happened.

Lenora,

I understand what you have been going through these years. I've tried, but I can't seem to work it out. I'm leaving for awhile. Maybe I can come back when I get control of my life. Give Emma my love every day.

Please forgive me.

I love you,
Billy Ray

Sitting on that sidewalk outside The Phoenix, he had the same feeling as that morning in the hospital. "I deserve this," he said to himself as the ant disappeared out of sight and into another crack. "You got infinite depression syndrome," another homeless man had once told him. "I seen yer case million times." "There's no cure for my disease," he thought now.

"Billy Ray!" The familiar voice brought his eyes to the corner of the building. Couples were shuffling and jogging across the street with arms interlocked, letting out startled cries and whoops as the fierce wind stabbed them in their backs. "Get in here! We're closed now." The manager of The Phoenix, a tall black man wearing the club's customary tie and vest, stood there with his arms wrapped tightly across his chest. He let Billy Ray clean up the club in exchange for some food every night after they close. Billy Ray rose stiffly and walked around to the front.

Inside, Billy Ray surveyed the setting. It was the same scene as every other night. The place meant for jazz was empty. Chairs were scattered around the little, round tables; the stage was bare. Musicians were putting away their instruments, chatting and laughing casually. "I could've been up there tonight," he thought. "They're probably too young to even remember me. This is some kind of cruel joke, being here every night like this."

Two hours later, the thawed Billy Ray prepared to step outside. "It's too cold, man," the manager said. "Stay at my place tonight. I'll give you the couch."

"God bless ya, man, but no thanks, Mike. I'm staying' at my friends' partment tonight," he lied. He was going to the alley, where others like him would gather around a fire for the night. He couldn't intrude on Mike and his wife. He had intruded on his own family for ten years.

Five blocks later as the alley come up on Billy Ray's left, he stopped. The thought of Mike's clean, warm apartment still lingered in his mind. "Maybe I could do it," he thought, trying to get his courage. "I have to at least try to go back. It's all or nothin' sometimes. I learned that years ago with my music." Spending one more night fighting the elements was more than he could handle. "Not tonight," he decided. "I can't go on like this." He looked up at the building and sniffed the cold air. Nobody was out at three in the morning. Walking across the street, he fished out

the ten dollar bill from the stranger and opened the door of the yellow station wagon taxi sitting against the curb.

After the silent ride, the cab pulled up in front of the familiar house. Billy Ray stepped out and nodded at the driver who waved and sped off. The scene reminded him of a movie: The long-lost soldier returning home after a long journey. The small, two-story, light green house sat on the same old corner. The white trim and porch looked gray in the light. "Fixed the steps," he thought. A blue light flickered in the upstairs left window. The butterflies in his stomach made him feel sick. "Emma," he said lovingly. At the time of the accident she was only one, and eleven when he had left home. "She would be thirteen now," he thought. "Just when all children need their dad more that they realize." He walked slowly up the steps, savoring every moment, and stood a foot away from the screen door. He thought back and remembered when they had bought the house. They were full of dreams and anticipation. "Maybe it'll happen today." That's what he said to Lenora before every gig. Billy Ray smiled as tears streamed down his face, creating even blacker lines on the dark skin. He reached into the duffel bag, past his two other shirts, and grasped the small metal object. He put the trumpet mouthpiece to his lips, looked up at the swimming yellow light above the door, and stood there motionless. After a few minutes, he bent down and laid the mouthpiece gently on the welcome mat. Billy Ray took a deep breath and let out a shuddering sigh. He stared at the once-shiny brass on the floor. "Sorry, Lenora. I can't do it," he whispered. "I'm not the man you married. I never meant to hurt you, or you, Emma . . . or the baby." With that, he turned, walked down the steps and headed up the street.

Early in the morning, on the ninth of January, 1993, as he sat on a bench in the quiet, frozen park, the air became warm and the wind became soft through his hair. He closed his tired eyes one last time and once again became the finest trumpet played Kansas City had ever seen.

T. Dowd

Mornings Alone

He lies
his stomach down
against the sheets
sticky with morning dreams,
his face
unseen,
the brown curls tangled.

I've been awake
two hours now,
the light
begins to cast shadows.

How will he wake,
his breath still
pungent of the party,
and my tongue sticks in my mouth.
Nothing to claim.

We've done this
a few times;
neither one asking any
questions,
a simple understanding.

I find
my ability to
distance us
failing.

Strange
I asked for this.
Touch
without feeling,
but still feeling.

Darrol V. Walker

The Plight



Carlos Hardon

Sunset Grill

1

Jules Hall almost committed suicide on his fifteenth birthday but was distracted by divine intervention.

He sat on the edge of the sidewalk and looked at the finely honed razor blade, fingering it cautiously. He ran it over his wrist, testing its strength. A thin white line marked itself over the bulging blue vein, pumping furiously as he ran the blade over his wrist again, this time drawing a trail of blood. He dropped the blade and quickly sucked the little amount of blood that escaped from his wrist and a nasty salty taste irritated his taste buds. He rubbed the tip of his tongue over his teeth and used his finger as a toothbrush, trying to rid the taste. He picked up the blade again and stared at it dreamily, hoping this time it would break more than the skin. The sun's fiery gleam reflected off the freshly sharpened and used blade, hypnotizing Jules' thoughts of long-time suffering and pain. An emotion of tranquility, a slowing of his heart and sleep deprivation, now became a yearning for eternal rest. He put the blade to his wrist, closed his eyelids halfway and let the sun filter through his eyelashes.

2

The bright sun woke Jules. He sat up in bed rubbing the sleep from his eyes, yawned, stretched, and tasted the sticky film in his mouth. He flipped the covers off his legs and sat on the edge of the bed wondering if he should go back to bed for another five minutes and have his mother come after him and try to drag him out of bed or get ready for school like he always did every day, but then the thought hit him. This was no ordinary day, but a special day. His birthday had come again and this time his age was eight. He put his feet into his doggy slippers, fled out the door, ran down the stairs, almost ran over Sparky, the cat, and stood breathless at the doorway. The jaunt from the bedroom to the kitchen mangled the left doggy slipper. The slipper lost its right eye and the left ear hung loosely on a stitch.

The smell of bacon and eggs hung in the air. His mother removed the bacon from the skillet and the frying eggs were next. She sat the plate of bacon in the middle of the table and

Jules saw a hand emerge from behind the newspaper, grab a slice of bacon and disappear behind the newspaper again.

"Morning Dad," Jules said cheerfully.

"Morning," said a muffled growl.

Jules looked at his beautiful mother, Esmerelda. She was the most beautiful woman in the world. Her black straight hair cascaded to her hips, and her skin was all one tone, brown. The contours of her petite face, small nose, thin lips and almond shaped eyes showed her happiness. Her smile and good humor made Jules' world turn.

But on the morning of March 2, his eighth birthday, Jules noticed something different. His mother wasn't happy. A furrow dug deep in her forehead and her cheeks seemed to be wet. Her nose flared as if in anger, her lips pressed tightly together, and her eyes were narrowed into slits. Her hair wasn't combed, different parts of her arm turned color, and purple indentations were wrapped around her neck. Esmerelda turned her head as if she was embarrassed.

"Go get ready for school, Jules," his mother said, almost inaudible to his hearing.

Jules never saw his father's face that morning, because it was behind the newspaper.

School was hard that morning and afternoon. He had a hard time concentrating on his homework while his mother's face was in his mind. She looked so sad and unkempt, and the thing that bothered him the most was, they walked to school. His mother always drove him to school. They never walked the streets of New York City. His mother wouldn't allow it.

After a while he forgot all about his mother, since she was the one that was always happy, and started thinking about his birthday. Balloons and presents danced in his head while he sat in deep thought thinking about what kind of birthday party he would have.

The day of school ended and a new excitement leaped into Jules' heart. He thought his mother was going to pick him up with the car. There she was, her hair in a bun, a turtleneck draped around her neck, which seemed odd to him this time of year. She was probably hiding the marks around her neck. She cracked a smile, but there was a sharp pain in her eyes as she stood at the bottom of the stairs, waiting.

Jules carefully picked his way down the stairs and met his mother's long arms; they carefully wrapped around him.

"Let's go get you a birthday present, shall we?" she said with a hint of a smile.

He hugged her tightly and nodded his agreement.

They went to his favorite toy store and he finally got what he wished for. The huge yellow Tonka Truck was almost as big as him, well, almost as big as him. The large squeaky wheels rolled loosely in the box, and the metal frame clanged with annoyance. He put it under the crook of his arm and slipped his hand in his mother's hand.

3

A slight breeze stirred him from his nap. He sat in a stupor and finally realized what he was about to do. On his hands and knees he searched frantically for the razor that had fallen from his hand, wondering if he'd ever find it. Sand sifted over half the razor but the sun reflected itself off the blade and the twinkling light caught Jules' eye. He rescued the shiny razor and held it in his hand, flipping it end for end, checking to see if the edge was dull, but the sharpness remained. He sighed a single breath of relief.

He put the blade to his wrist once again and without hesitation, the blade, like a hot knife slicing through butter, opened a deeper wound. Blood flowed like a calm river, peaceful and endless, from his deep incision. The blood dripped on the sandy soil, on his clean white shirt and blue jeans. Fire entered his body, but a chilly bite crawled up his spine and generated throughout his entire body. It felt like he was taking a bath with ice in it. The world spun in his eyes and he finally fell backwards, splayed his arms out and crossed his legs as though he were crucified. He closed his eyes, passed out on the hard sidewalk and let the warm blood pool by his side. The tainted razor rested in his palm.

Four minutes later, a shadow fell on Jules' body.

Jules' eye cracked open, and he saw a thin line of clouds in the blue heaven. The tinted sun lost its radiance, and the desert lost its heat. He closed his eye and the shadow crossed his face again. He opened both heavy eyes and saw the eagle. He pondered on the thoughts; should he get up or stay on the hard sidewalk? His mother could not make that decision. He sat up slowly and a bolt of pain shocked his body. His muscles ached, his hand throbbed, and his joints were stiff. He looked at his wrist closely and saw that he did not cut deep enough for the razor to reach the vein, but a trickle of warm blood still trailed from the closed wound. He had forgotten the razor, but when he clenched his left hand, he felt the blade bite. He opened his hand and saw the blood stained razor. It had lost its luster and glory. Jules' mesmerized state turned into hatred. He tossed it in the street and let the desert sands dull its existence. He carefully stood up,

put his left hand over his eyes and saw that the eagle still circled him. He stiffly took off his shirt and wrapped it around his wounded wrist. He bit down on his lip to ease the pain. He walked zombie like to the curb, and the eagle's shadow slowly waltzed with him. He was afraid at first, but his blue eyes stared hard and wondrously at the circling eagle, who flew flawlessly, up and down with its wings protecting him from the malicious world. A tingling sensation overwhelmed Jules' cold body, leaving his numbness behind. His conscience was clear and energy flowed through him. The eagle expanded its body across the darkening heaven, and Jules' fear turned into awe.

Jules was sure the eagle was inviting him to fly.

As he watched the eagle intensely, mesmerized by its fluidity, consumed by its power, he never noticed the sky. For what seemed like an eternity was only a minute.

The sun peeked out from behind the thin gray clouds, but the black clouds floated over the mountains of Capitan. Goose bumps spread all over Jules' body and his neck hairs stood on end as the chilly winds raced by him. Lightening struck the unprotected earth, the distant thunder resonated across the dry desert air, and the sun was beyond the reach of warmth.

An old, ugly decaying building stood erect. The malevolent winds hacked and pounded at the rotting wood, and the roof's shingles flapped inharmoniously. The tin's loose appendages dangled helplessly on a nail or two. The door banged repeatedly against the wooden frame as the dissonant, uncoiled hinges pierced Jules' ears. A sign swayed side to side and spelled in blood-red letters, **"Open."**

The red letters flashed behind his closed eyelids and the cold and numbness had quickly clawed back. He put the tip of his fingers to the sides of his head and massaged his temples. His leg shook and his arms hung loosely by his side. A flood of bad memories came back.

The desert sand sifted across the street, stinging Jules' young face. He covered his eyes, squinting through cracked fingers. He saw that the archaic building had a name—Sunset Grill.

Jules had nowhere to go. It was either home, which was on the other side of town, or the antiquated building, the Sunset Grill.

Without a thought, he put his right foot on the soft, sandy soil.

The heat and humidity struck Jules in the face as they walked, hand in hand, out of the air conditioned toy store, hand

in hand. His mother tightened her grip as they flowed in with the crowd on the busy New York City sidewalk.

The heat and humidity were unbearable. The air, saturated with water, felt like fly paper clinging to the skin and the skin would burn or bake under the intense heat.

A hard day's work showed on the pungent faces. Wrinkled foreheads, matted down hair, tight, thin lips and hands knotted into fists. Ties, jackets, and blouses were carried in one arm, while the other arm toted a purse, handbag, or briefcase.

His mother looked the same.

Jules had no reason to despise anyone or even care that people had a hard day at work. Sour, sad, unhappy faces never phased him. He saw it all at home from his father.

Jules didn't care about anything. Besides, it was his birthday. His mother had just bought him a Tonka Truck, and it was now under the crook of his arm. Not a crow bar, tire iron, or sledge hammer could ever pry or tear the truck away from him.

They stopped at the corner and waited to cross the street. People conglomerated and nudged their sweaty bodies against each other. No words of excuse me or pardon me.

The sign flashed its green color and everybody rushed onto the street like cattle being herded out a gate. People pushed and shoved and almost ran over Jules. Jules' mother squeezed his hand tighter and they seemed to float easily half-way across the street, but terror rapped Jules' heart when he saw the sign flash its contorted face.

Don't Walk.

Fear willfully seized Jules. His eyes protruded from their sockets. His legs and arms stiffened like two by fours. Tears welled. His body rose a degree, a profuse amount of sweat ran down his temple and his heart raced to a different rhythm.

Fear pried the Tonka Truck loose, dropped with a loud, tinny bang and rolled under the garbage truck's tire.

His frantic mother pulled at him, but his feet were plastered to the street's pavement.

His heart sank to his feet when the sign reared it's ugly head. The signs hideous words froze and the evil red stared at it's frightened victim.

The sun was peeking out from behind the clouds, as Jules' frozen body held it's place. Sweat had cooled his thermostat. Tears saturated his cheeks. His mother was a chisel that was going to break his fear.

The incessant roar of the engines pounded in his ears. The stench of gas and oil, like the smell of New York City, wafted to

his nose and made him retch. Inch by sordid inch, the cars crawled to it's prey.

His frightened mother continued to pull at him, and finally, fear was seeping out of Jules' pores.

Windows rolled down, and obscenities were yelled.

His mother also grew angry. Her face was crimson, and tears flowed from her brown eyes. Her small hands crushed Jules' tiny fingers. She pulled so hard on his arm that Jules bellowed out like an ambulance siren.

The cars worked their way up to Jules, where he could almost touch the hoods. The grill's teeth grinned their angry lunacy, and the engines reverberated a belch of gas and oil. Tires inched closer to the Tonka truck. The drivers behind the huge animals scowled at him and cursed him with foul language.

With one final pull, his mother broke fear's restraint and carried him to the other side. Esmerelda and Jules' tears flowed like rain. The fear was broken for the time being, but anger still remained for both of them.

His mother may have been angry at him, but she held her son so tight that he lost the rest of his breath.

The remnants of the Tonka truck were crushed beyond recognition. The only part left, one of the wheels from the truck, rolled down the street.

5

He snapped his foot back to the curve and wished he would have never thrown the razor away. He looked toward the sky, and like a celestial being, the eagle had disappeared. An ensemble of lightening , thunder and wind changed his mind about crossing the street.

He felt lightheaded and his feet were heavy to pickup, but with careful precision, Jules stepped onto Pasturas street.

Right foot, left foot. Right foot, left foot.

Sweat matted down his wind-blown hair, and thin streams ran down the side of his temples. He gritted his teeth as he fought pain and the winds. Sand planted itself on the wet surface of his face, leaving trails of dirty tears.

Step by thorough step, he was half-way. With stiffened legs, three quarters, sliced wrist, love and devotion, he was finally at the door of the Sunset Grill.

6

Jules' mother closed her hand tightly over his. His arm ached but his feelings hurt. His truck was crushed, his mother was

angry and it was his birthday. Nothing had gone right.

They walked down the sidewalk in long strides and finally rounded the corner to their house. He noticed his father was home early because his car was parked in the driveway.

He imagined a birthday bash. Balloons, games, presents, presents and more presents. Sweet cake, ice cold ice cream and printed napkins that said "Happy Birthday." A Tonka truck might be in a pile of presents he was going to get, he hoped.

She opened the door and both of them simultaneously heard the noises upstairs. A squeaky voice, repeating, "Oh God," emanated from the bedroom. She moved Jules to the couch and told him to stay put and not move an inch.

He listened to her instructions and again thought about the wonderful party his parents were about to give him.

She raced up the stairs, and Jules heard the door bang open. "What in the holy hell are you doing?" came screaming from his mother's lungs.

The noises from the bedroom stopped and feet pounded on the floor.

Jules looked up to see a blonde haired woman, semi-nude, run down the stairs. Her hair and breasts bounced every step she took. Her blue eyes glanced over at Jules. She gasped as if she were horrified and quickly covered her breasts.

His mother appeared from the bedroom and yelled at the blonde woman, "You nasty little whore!" as she pounded down the stairs and threw the bra at the woman who dropped it from her flight. The blonde picked up her bra and slammed the door behind her.

Esmerelda flew up the stairs and closed the bedroom door with a slam.

Jules never moved an inch and sat quietly and listened to the muffled yells that leaked through the door.

The door opened again, but this time it was his father. Keith floated down the stairs, buttoned his shirt and flung his noose ("tie") over his neck.

"When I come back home, you and that half-breed of yours better be gone!" he said, pointing at Jules with a crooked finger. He slammed the front door and Jules never saw his father again.

Jules' life turned into disarray. Two weeks had gone by since the divorce. Jules and his mother lived in a two room apartment and always had food on the table. Then after the divorce settlement, almost two years after, the money had gone to his father, since his mother made more money than he did. The present

days followed, but soon Esmerelda became depressed and lost her job after two years of the settlement. Drugs and alcohol had been the main factor. She spent most of her life savings and the money from work. Jules and his mother moved from a two room Hilton to a one room hole in the wall. Their financial aid came from all the men that tracked in and out, from the front door to the bedroom door. After three years of drug abuse and prostitution, she finally came clean. Jules was fourteen and very unhappy.

His mother decided to move back to her home, Pasture, New Mexico.

Jules and his mother arrived in Pasture, February 3, 1991. They bought a small house on the edge of town, and his mother got a job at a truck stop. There was enough food on the table, but they barely made ends meet when the bills flowed like a river.

Jules was not able to work because of his age and that made him upset. If he could've made money, his mother would have never died.

By the time the doctors found the cancer in her lungs, it was too late. There was a slim chance she could've made it, if she would've had chemotherapy, but she didn't have health insurance and money was obsolete.

On March 2, 1991, Jules Hall watched his mother die in bed. His mother laid motionless in bed, only her chest rose in and out. He held his mother's hand and prayed to God to rid his mother's pain. Her beautiful black hair had fallen out, but Jules wrapped a colorful bandana around her head everyday. Today the color was purple. Her hands never held his tightly again because they were frail and he could have easily hurt his mother. Her eyes had been shut for the last three days. He wondered if he'd ever see them again. The tone of her skin had changed to pale brown. He knew his mother would die today. Esmerelda suddenly sat up and turned her head toward her son and said her last words, "I'm sorry."

Her body dropped back on the bed and her breath of life subsided. Her eyes were still open and Jules closed them. He held her lifeless body. He laid her back down and told her, "I'll be with you soon."

He laid the sheets over her head and stormed out the bedroom.

He dug through the kitchen drawers and found a razor. Today was his fifteenth birthday.

He stood at the door of the Sunset Grill, and for one second, he hesitated to go in, but without much timely effort, he decided

being out in the rain didn't suit him.

He opened the door to the Sunset Grill and was in awe. He couldn't believe the sights, sounds and smells. On the outside, it looked like an archaic building not able, due to its frame, to hold its own weight, but the inside spoke for itself.

The smell was incredible. Grilled hamburgers, not like the kind anybody would get at Burger King, but at a barbecue picnic. Grilled hot dogs, like the ones his mother used to make, and the smell of frying potatoes filled the air. The smell wafted to his nose and he began to salivate like Pavlov's dog.

The sound of music sweetly came from an old jukebox. The record turned on its turntable and the needle finally dislocated itself from Hank Williams. An angel's voice resonated throughout the Grill. Patsy Cline sang, "I Fall to Pieces."

Jules leaned his head against the jukebox, closed his eyes and swayed back and forth, like the times when he would be in his mother's arms. He hummed quietly to himself.

The place looked like a dream for a fifteen year old. It wasn't a dream like the rest of the world, but a reality. Tables and chairs were spread throughout the room. A bar and stools covered one side.

He floated back to the jukebox and dug in his pockets for a quarter. He first found lint, but breathed a sigh of relief when a shiny quarter emerged from the other coins.

"You finally came to see the place," spoke a raspy voice from over the counter.

The voice cut through Jules train of thought and the quarter slipped out of his hands and onto the oak floor.

He turned around to see Eduardo standing on the other side of the bar, smiling at him with a toothless smile. His eyes were huge behind the glasses that were thick as the bottom of a coke glass. A thin piece of hair was the only thing left on the old man's head, and the slight smell of Ben-Gay ate at Jules' left nostril.

Eduardo hobbled to the other end of the bar with the assistance of a cane. He dug out a handkerchief, blew his nose, stuffed it happily in his back pocket, hovered over the grill and smiled at the frying meat, savoring the aroma.

"I just came in from the storm," Jules said back softly.

"Ah," Eduardo shouted back. "Can I get you anything?" Eduardo said again, kindly.

Jules shook his head "no" and was about to bend down and find his quarter when Eduardo spoke again.

"The evening's wearing thin, boy, and when the evening's come around, it's time to eat as well. Come on over here and sit on this stool here. I'll fix ya a grilled hamburger and you can tell

me what's on your mind," he said in one unhealthy, phlegmy breath.

Eduardo slapped the stool hard and motioned Jules with his crooked finger, to sit.

Jules hesitated, thinking about the shirt wrapped around his wrist. He looked down to see that blood had not seeped through. He smiled at Eduardo and sat on the hard oak stool.

Eduardo turned around and commenced grilling his hamburgers. The aroma was terrific.

Eduardo flipped the hamburgers over and turned to Jules.

"So, what do you want to talk about?" Eduardo asked.

"Well, you know my mother's dead." Jules said sadly, with his head down.

Eduardo looked over his glasses and nodded his head "yes".

Jules shrugged his shoulders.

Eduardo pointed his finger at Jules. "How about telling me why you're here?"

"Because you told me to come." He answered softly.

"But your mother has died and here you are, talking to me. Shouldn't you be by your mother's side until her spirit is at rest?" Eduardo asked angrily.

"Her spirit is at rest. I saw her today, flying in the sky freely. She left for the spirit world when she knew I didn't need her anymore." Jules answered proudly, thinking about the eagle who waltzed with him.

Eduardo handed Jules a hamburger and a vanilla coke.

Jules, the human vacuum cleaner, scarfed the hamburger in one bite and slurped the vanilla coke thirstily.

"Tell me something, Grandpa." said Jules. "Why does God have to punish people?"

Grandpa put down his sandwich and swallowed the rest of what he had in his mouth. "Son, " said Grandpa, looking over his horn rimmed glasses, "God doesn't punish people, people punish people."

Jules thought his grandpa knew everything and it seemed he had the right answer again. His life had gone to shit when he was born, and now he finally realized he was going to have to live in a people's world.

Jules said goodbye to Grandpa, told him he'd see him soon and left the Sunset Grill for the day.

He closed the door behind him and the sun was setting, and the winds whispered mirthless songs.

Jules crossed the street.

Brandi L. Trujillo

The Kitchen of the Warrior Women

We all sit
around the huge
wooden table, worn soft
by rough hands and hot plates—
the rapid lick
of Spanish tongues
crowds the room,
making my ears dizzy
and confused.
The air smells of sweet-sweat dampened
women and tastes exotic
like unearthly fruit.
Desert heat lies heavy
baking us to a deep brown
in the Earth's oven.
I sit on my stool between
two huge women who overflow their chairs
and hurriedly work to peel
chiles that only the fire dared to kiss,
hoping to finish
before the women smother
me in their fat hugs.
Voices call to one another over
the petrified slab at which we work.
There are no secrets here
because there are no whispers.
My grandmother cackles and
thuds the masa on the table
as she laughs at her sister's story
(I'm still too young to understand).
The rest of the women join in—
their faces like those before them—
streaked with the burning red of chile
like warpaint.

Jonas Sturr

Cradle



Jonathan A. Small

Tradition

Each year, in early October,
my grandfather would come from far away,
his Buick loaded with blue hubbard squash,
each one over ten pounds of prehistoric ugliness,
gnarled and knobby skin the precise color
of Welsh slate I saw years later—
Frightening vegetables from another age,
and somewhere else.

After unloading them
onto the picnic table behind the house,
he and my father began the laborious task of
hacking and peeling and slicing them,
putting their yellowish-orange, pumpkin-like flesh
into the waiting pans of cool water
that caught and held the gray autumn sky
over our heads.

They worked beneath the yellowing maples,
and they spoke of the old days,
matter-of-factly, without bitterness,
when my father was small,
and they lived above the dairy,
where he shared a room and a bed
with his younger brother
who died on his motorcycle
shortly before I was born.
How in winter they huddled together
to keep out the cold that slipped in through
cracks in the windows.

All of these things I learned by heart,
even though I had my own room,
and each chilly night I slept under
a round hill of blankets,
hating the taste of squash.

Derek A. Tuttle

The Auditorium

After the applause,
deafening silence
rules over the room.
The little boy's feet swing
backandforth-backandforth-backandforth.
The girl who has finished throws her
haughty smile at him.

The enormous black piano
waits alone on stage;
No one can yet hear
Beethoven's enthusiastic echoes.

Tension rises in the empty sound.
The little boy wiggles his thumbs
roundandroundandroundandround.

The mother smiles tenderly;
she sees her son's
new pants, new shirt, new shoes.
Her wide, blue eyes
reflect the carefully
combed hair.

The boy's thoughts drift;
battles to overcome memorization,
holding wrists up, up, up;
"Why couldn't I have just been a boy scout?"
The anxious mother smiles;
wishing . . . wanting . . .
"Oh, he'll be fine."

The shiny black shoes
click slowly on the white
oak stage. Click . . . click . . . click . . . click . . .
The rhythmic prelude
of the music to come.

The mother's clasped hands.
The boy's tight fists.
The gazing eyes.
The icy air of the auditorium.

At last, the boy sits.
All is in the moment;
the moment is his.
Beethoven is released—
he dances delicately
across the ebones and ivories.

Contributors' Bibliographical Notes

Ed Adams is a senior at Kansas State University in print journalism and English. He started college at the age of forty-five. He is married and has two children. Adams is a former carpenter. "I started writing things a long time ago, but this is the first work that I've submitted for publication. It's quite an honor for me to have my work considered for publication. I may be on to something here. I have to give credit to my former Comp. 1 teacher, Stephanie Goerl, a former K-State graduate. She taught me a tremendous amount."

Richard T. Burnett is a graphic design major at KSU. His artwork is inspired by his personal life, social changes and his mood. His favorite artists are mostly from the '60s. He likes minimalism, abstract and postmodern art. The artists Jasper John, Eva Haffa and Donald Judd have also inspired his work. He hopes to teach art classes someday.

Ben Cartwright has attended KSU for the past three semesters working towards a degree in English with a minor in French. He is currently managing a cafe in his home-state of Washington. Ben's work has been published in several anthologies, and he recently won first place in the Flint Hills Poetry Contest for 1997. Ben's writing has been influenced by the poems of Sam Hamill, Hayden Caruth, Stephen Dunn, and Richard Hugo, as well as by the music of Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground.

T. Dowd is a senior in the creative writing program at KSU. She plans to attend graduate school and work towards her doctorate in creative writing. She enjoys reading and says her life experiences influence her poetry. Another poem, "In Red," will be appearing in the upcoming *Sunflower Anthology*.

Rachel Emig is a K-State sophomore majoring in English with an emphasis in creative writing and minoring in French. She would like to go to graduate school after she finishes her degree at KSU. Rachel says she writes simply because she enjoys it. The poem that appears in this issue is a winner of the 1996 KSU *Touchstone* Poetry Award.

Sammuel Erickson is an English literature major at K-State, and he is currently working as a Resident Assistant in a dorm. He plans to graduate in 1998 and then attend graduate school. Sammuel's hometown is Olathe, Kansas.

Carlos Hardon is a sophomore at Kansas State University and wrote "Sunset Grill" as an assignment for Stacy Janicki's class. His favorite author is Stephen King, and his future plans include going to KU to major in film production.

Misty Harris is a freshman at K-State majoring in theater. Misty says writing is a "purging process" for her. She was recently married, and in the future, she hopes to continue working in theater and writing.

Nathan Jenkins is a Kansas City native and a sophomore at KSU. He is majoring in art and will probably focus on ceramics in the future. His hobbies include music, literature, and following Jesus. Ephesians 5:19

Jennifer L. Johnson is a senior at Kansas State University majoring in English and anthropology. She is postponing graduation to study for a year in Munich, Germany. Jennifer plans on studying anthropology there, as well as taking some German literature, history, and culture courses. She was inspired to write "Mama Balshova" after visiting a friend who was staying with a family in Russia. Two of Jennifer's poems were also featured in last year's *Touchstone*.

Jacqueline T. Koehler is a fine arts illustration major at KSU. She would like to work for Hallmark someday, designing greeting cards. She enjoys working on her art, riding motorcycles, and writing poetry. Jacqueline was encouraged to write by her friend Rob Phillip, who also writes poetry.

Hiram Lucke is a student of English at K-State, and he says he would like to continue going to school as long as he can. He enjoys reading poetry, especially Robert Creeley. The poem, "A Car Wreck on March 24," came to Hiram fairly easily and was based on personal experience.

Angelia Perry is a senior in English. Her favorite short story writer is Flannery O'Connor. She plans to begin graduate studies in English in the fall and is excited about becoming a GTA at Kansas State University.

Kari Rudick is majoring in social work at K-State. Art is one of her hobbies along with raising animals, like cattle and rabbits, to show. Her artwork that appears in this issue was inspired by conflicts of friendship. She will graduate in 1998 and plans on applying to graduate school in social work.

Jonathan A. Small will graduate from KSU in May 1997 with degrees in English and history. He plans to attend graduate school to study American Studies. Jonathan enjoys reading poetry, especially William Carlos Williams and W.H. Auden, as well as E.E. Cummings, whom he likes for his "sheer creativity." This is Jonathan's fourth appearance in *Touchstone*, and his poem "Tradition" will also be featured as the second place winner in the upcoming *Sunflower Anthology*.

Jonas Sturr is a senior at KSU majoring in art education. He says the primary inspiration for his artwork comes from the things in life that people tend to overlook. His photographs concentrate on the subtleties of life. His father, a professional photographer, has been his main influence. Some of his other influences are Olivia Parker and Gordon Parks. Jonas also enjoys hiking and studying astronomy. He plans to transfer to a university in Washington to work on a BFA in photography.

Brandi L. Trujillo, a junior at KSU, is a psychology major. She writes when she gets "creative bursts," and says that her poem, "The Kitchen of the Warrior Women," is a reflection on visiting Tucumcari, New Mexico, for the first time. Brandi's writing has also been featured in the publication *Sketches*. The poem that appears in this issue is a winner of the 1996 KSU *Touchstone* Poetry Award.

Derek A. Tuttle is a senior in secondary education at KSU, with an emphasis in English. He would like to teach at a small high school in Kansas and coach football. In Derek's poem, he recalls feelings he had as a small boy at piano recitals. He took piano lessons for ten or eleven years. Derek is originally from Grinnell, Kansas.

Darrol V. Walker is a senior at Kansas State University. He has a dual major in graphic design and visual communication. May 1997, his anticipated graduation date cannot come fast enough for him. He says "The Plight" was inspired by the need to fulfill a class requirement and to receive an "A." Walker designs logos in his spare time and says in the next couple of years, he will be making "mad loot designing computer generated graphics for a television station."

About the Editors

Bridgett A. Bell is working like a mad woman to complete a Master's degree in journalism and mass communications. After completing this degree, she plans to move to an island to complete work on her fiction novel, *Living and Loving Alex*.

Jennifer Bergen is single (# 867-5309). She enjoys hang gliding off the Flint Hills, collecting matchbooks from foreign embassies, and writing poetry. After she graduates with her MA degree in May, she plans on wasting away her remaining student loan by traveling, and then doing something to either help society or make good money (she has not yet decided which way to go). Either way, Jennifer will continue to live by the lines of Cyndi Lauper: "When the workin' day is done, girls just wanna have fun!"

Angela Franson received her Bachelor's degree in English Literature from KSU in May of 1994 and will finish up her Master's in May of this year. Her major area of interest has been medieval and Arthurian romance, but she has recently become engrossed in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century women's writing. After graduation, she hopes to pursue a career in editing or publishing.

Angela Havel has a Master's degree in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing from Kansas State University. She hopes to someday write the female version of *The Catcher in the Rye* but thinks her slacker attitude will probably preclude any future success in the world of publishing.

Laura Kalmer (Loveall) is working on her Master's degree in English with a Cultural Studies specialization at KSU. She holds a Bachelor's degree in English and a Bachelor's degree in psychology from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. She really enjoyed designing this year's Touchstone and feels the experience will be a nice addition to her past experiences with designing publications. Laura and her husband, Chris, are anxiously awaiting the arrival of their first baby who is due at the end of May.

Dawnielle Bianca Robinson will dance a jig on May 16, 1997, as she receives her Master's degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. She hopes that her two years of editing experience (teaching Expos I and *Touchstone* editorial board) will lead to a career in copy writing or editing. While currently mailing out resumes in vast quantities, she admits not having high expectations but has to have benefits which allow her regular teeth cleanings and new eyeglasses.

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