

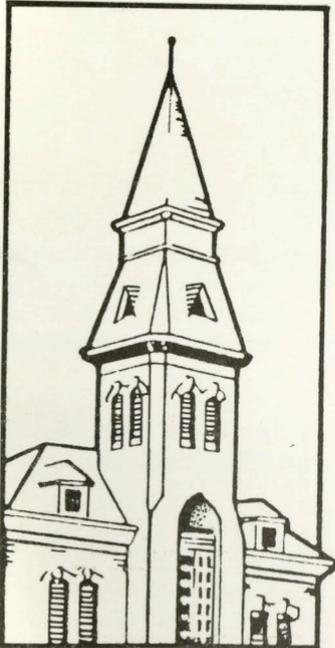
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TOUCHSTONE

Fall 1988

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TOUCHSTONE publishes poetry and fiction by undergraduate writers. Submissions should be sent to The Editors, *TOUCHSTONE*, Department of English, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506. Please include SASE.

Editor's Note

Touchstone customarily publishes fiction and poetry from writers across the country. This special issue of the magazine, however, is devoted to showcasing the quality work produced by writers from Kansas State University. All of the writers featured in this edition are current or former K-State students; many hold undergraduate or advanced degrees from the university.

The staff at *Touchstone* wishes to thank our faculty advisor, Steve Heller, and the English Department for the support and funding which made this issue of the magazine possible.

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Mary E. Martin

**Possibilities
for Alison**

I've heard that in the fields
of India, maybe Africa,
the women simply squat
to labor, their new babies dropping,
squealing onto the hot ground—
a break from their chores
of planting and picking.
And here we are so curious
about what fills us,
recording first movements,
describing our crazy dreams,
the budding convex of our bodies.
I watch you like spring,
curious if I could
mimic what most women can do,
succumbing to our great epic,
the rhythm larger
than pleasure, where we descend
and rise in the same moment,
gripping down
into the final deep
push, propelling the head out,
suspending until the first breath
rattles through tiny wet lips.

At six months you sit
encircled by your unborn;
I'm charmed
as if the air were swarmed
by little feet and hands
kicking for attention; I am drawn
to the possibilities, the importance,
the promise of children, but these words
settle like lost colonies
once I maneuver back
to my typewriter, to the sweep
of my body in dance, to my silent
jungle of romance where I carry
myself too far before returning.

Already your baby
is older than I can imagine.

Susan Jackson

Julie's Mother, Flying

In retrospect I name it the week of death. To myself I name it this. But at the time I named it no such thing.

The truth is that while tragedy was striking, I was on an island in the Caribbean, teaching myself to fly. I used to be able to do it as a girl and now I was determined to do it again. To do it even better than before. Every afternoon I lay in the same lounge chair by the pool and waited. The moment would come when I could feel my body levitate inch by miraculous inch above the chair's plastic red and blue slats. I hovered for a few seconds at time then lowered myself back down. That was as far as I got.

At night, in dreaming, I got further. I flew in great sweeping motions above the dark, sleeping island. It used to be that flying was a great effort for me. I always woke up exhausted. I had to pump the air, move my arms like a swimmer doing the butterfly stroke, propel my legs as on a bicycle. If I let up for one moment I began to fall inexorably to the ground. But on the island I taught myself a better way. I spread out my arms as though I could embrace the entire shore and all its people. I lifted into the air and soared over palm trees and ocean effortlessly. My body weighed nothing in the heavy tropical night skies. I have never been happier in all my life.

But in retrospect it is impossible that I should have been so happy. There had to have been something that warned me. A signal, a premonition, a voice in my head. Now I spend my nights looking back, for a sign. I have to find the moment during that week that was different from the other moments. I have to recall the exact second on that Thursday . . . but I can't even remember what I was doing on Thursday. I can't remember what I was doing at eleven forty-two on Thursday night when my twenty-year-old daughter drove too fast a thousand miles away from me and lost control of my Chevy on an icy road and crashed into a telephone pole. I don't remember it. I was asleep, probably. But I can't believe I was asleep. How could I have slept through her death, her dying. I don't understand this at all.

I ask myself. Didn't I wake up, a jolt, a fear like ice water in my veins? Didn't I feel the car sliding out of control? Didn't my bed move across the floor as in some cheap occult film, didn't I shout a warning, didn't I feel the impact of the steering wheel in my chest—the windshield against my forehead? Didn't I reach out in a nightmare to protect her? To protect us? But I didn't. I was flying, I was happy. Or I was asleep, not even dreaming. Unaware.

Now when I fall asleep I wake up shouting Watch out! Slow down! Or just—No! No. I wake up shouting for Julie.

I went to the island alone and I came home alone. In the airplane I looked down at the ocean and remembered how it had looked from thirty feet, or from three, instead of 30,000. I made plans for the week ahead and avoided talking to the old woman beside me, who desperately wanted conversation. At one point she even pulled out a pocket-size photo album from her purse and clucked and smiled

and chuckled at the pictures. I wasn't in the mood for her life. I steeled myself and focused entirely on writing a list of all the things I had to do before work the next day. One false move and she would start talking.

When we landed I was thinking about cabs and weather, not expecting anyone to meet me. So when I saw my ex-husband, standing slightly apart from the waiting room crowd, holding three roses in his left hand, not bothering to wipe the tears from his face—well. I stopped, for a moment, looked into the tunnel from which I had just emerged. I turned toward it instinctively as if I could go back through it and escape what was about to happen. What had already happened. But the onrush of sunburned tourists returning home pushed me forward, and I fell unwillingly into the arms of the man I once loved.

There is no flying now, of course. I don't even think about it anymore. I walk, watching my feet, one in front of the other. I move slowly through the rooms of my house. Sometimes I fall to the floor. I press my chest against it. I press my forehead. I stay there for hours, earth-bound.

Debra Monroe

Enough

I walk into the bar I work at, which is called Home. The idea is that when people want to know where you've been or where you're going you say Home. At first friends used to ask, "Are you safe?" Customers still say, "You? The bartender? You must be tougher than you look." I flip the TV channel and pour beer and set a stein down hard.

"Hey! You can't just walk in here and change channels," Marvin, who drinks warm Budweiser, says.

"I just did."

I don't smile.

I have tuned the Playboy Channel out and a station that shows country-and-western videos in. I hate the Playboy Channel, naked women spinning like pinwheels on the screen above me. George Strait is on the screen now, mournfully handsome, wearing a white hat, singing, "I lost my wife and a girlfriend, somewhere along the way."

"Give me a break," Marvin says.

"Where would you like it?"

"You need new material," he says.

I nod. I look at myself in the mirror above the cash register. I didn't fix my eyes today. My hair is a mess slung back in a ponytail.

Bill, my favorite customer, leans over and touches my hand. One of his spurs clanks on the bar rail. "Are you all right?" he asks.

"I don't have my face on," I tell him.

"I see that. Plainer than usual," he says, "but still mighty easy on the eyes."

I hear rumors that Bill wears his hat to bed. "You're simple to impress," I say.

"It's your no-good boyfriend," he says.

I shake my head.

"Acting up," he says.

"No."

Once, when my no-good boyfriend was acting up, I got drunk and told Bill. In his pick-up, parked by the river, I said, "Bill, kiss me, touch me." I wanted his hands on me all over. He took his hat off. "I'd love to but you seem gun-shy." He didn't look like Bill then, his bald head shiny as the moon, but like a beast from a fable, a friendly one to lead the lost child home.

The barroom door opens and Don Swan walks in.

"You were supposed to meet me here at five o'clock," Edna, his girlfriend, says to him. "It's eight o'clock now."

"And you stayed here and drank your dinner."

"I had to visit with Roxanne." Edna points at me. She's wiry, 48 years old, and she dyes her hair a wicked shade of copper. "Come here and give me a kiss,

sweetie-pie.” She kisses my lips. The best story she tells is about the time she rode in a car with Ferlin Husky while he wrote a song. She says, “Don’t nag me, Don.”

Dixie sits down on the other side of Edna and says in a whisper, “Have they been in here yet?”

“No, Dixie,” I say, “but quit chasing them.”

We’re discussing Dixie’s husband and the secretary at the feed mill where he works. They don’t hide their affair. Dixie joins them at their table and buys the secretary beers.

Edna says, “I’ve heard of bending over backwards, but Dixie you lay right down.”

“I just don’t want anyone to say I’ve been harsh,” Dixie says, sliding her large, soft body closer to the bar. Below her black, piled-up hair, her earrings shine. “All these years, Dwayne comes home late and I serve him his dinner on a TV tray in the living room and I never sass him.”

“You should start,” Edna says.

A marriage counselor once told me to stop throwing things at my ex-husband because it scared him. “He scares me when he doesn’t come home until dawn and lurches into the walls and knocks pictures down,” I said. “Besides, he smells bad when he drinks.”

“Perhaps,” the marriage counselor said. “But perhaps he drinks to escape you.”

For months I didn’t hold a nail-file at Darrell’s throat as he lay in bed or smash glass against the wall. He appreciated it, he said. He came home on time and stopped carrying a fifth in his glovebox. He said he thought how good his life had become and it was because I’d stood beside him. He said this in the grocery store parking lot, his head tipped back to enjoy the sun.

A week later I threw a power drill. It hit the door, not him. He was already gone.

“What you need,” Edna says to Dixie, “is a man who treats you good, but not so good you get bored.”

I knew a tender man once: he sold vacuum cleaners.

Edna says, “Don keeps me on my toes.”

Toes are not important to me. Other parts are.

I met Darrell at a club where I danced and he came in when I was on break and I told him I’d have to quit that job because my torso ached. “Your torso should be in the Louvre,” he said, “which is a museum.” My knees seriously buckled. He fell to his that night in my living room when I wore nothing but a white slip which is tight across the hips and see-through lace on top.

“Don’t you think I look like a bride,” I said.

He lit a joint.

I applied to vocational school in Ponca City.

Darrell said, “Well, Miss Thing, you don’t need me.”

I thought about it and said, “We should break up.”

Darrell said no. He walked into the living room and tripped over the cord to a lamp as he said this.

“That’s an antique,” I said.

“I only broke the shade.”

“The shade’s an antique too.” I showed him the decals on it that matched those on the base of the lamp. It had been my Aunt Cora’s.

He put the whole thing on the floor and squashed it some more. “Let’s get married instead,” he said.

“What are you doing here in your coveralls,” Edna says to Don. “Go home and change. You were supposed to meet me in your glad rags. We’re going dancing.”

“I’ll be back in a little bit,” Don says. And, “Roxanne, don’t let Edna keep drinking.”

“Roxanne, are you seeing anybody now?” Dixie asks.

“She is,” Edna says. “That no-good who thinks he’s too good to come in here.”

Max doesn’t come in the bar because he says it reminds him of bars in his hometown he had no choice but to frequent. “You should feel comfortable,” I say. “I never liked them then,” he answers. “Please come for awhile,” I said on my birthday, when the owners bought a keg. “You work there,” he said. “You have to go. I’ll never go.” His bar has orange fishnets on the ceiling.

Edna says, “Don drinks with me. If you can’t share your social life, what can you share?”

Max drinks with me in bed, a candle burning by us.

Lately, though, he snorts cocaine until his moustache turns white. Around dawn, his eyes look red and he sits at the kitchen table with his head in his hands. He says, “I care for you like a sister.” Or, “You’re an attractive woman, Roxanne, but not to me.” The next day he doesn’t remember. “Convenient,” I say. Once he bought flowers and also fresh shrimp which I don’t like as well as frozen, and he stared at his hands and cried. “Why?” I asked. He shook his head.

“Does he cheat?” Dixie asks.

“One lover doesn’t seem like enough,” Max says.

He shouldn’t say so out loud.

Last Wednesday I went to his bar and found him slumped in a corner, his arm around a woman in a backless pink dress.

“Well, Betty,” I said when I approached. She turned around. “How is Tom-Joe and the kid?”

“Oh,” she said, “Roxanne, it’s you.” She pulled the straps of her dress back up onto her shoulders.

“Rokshanne,” Max said, “my favorite.”

Driving home, Betty said, while Max snored in the back, his head propped against the baby seat, “He was drunk. He’s usually not drunk. Or lecherous for that matter.”

I didn’t answer.

Betty said, “I need something on the side.”

I didn’t answer again. I said. “Someone should tell him he looked stupid.”

“You looked stupid,” I said to Max in the morning.

“I can stand chewing, gambling, smoking, drinking,” Edna says, “but not cheating.”

“As for me,” Dixie says, “my priority is to have a man say Did you have a good day, honey?, and if I didn’t, run me a hot bath or rub my feet.”

I say, “I like a man who’s handy.”

“Roxanne,” Max said on the phone once, when we first knew each other. “Did you have a good day?”

“I had a miscarriage,” I said. “Your baby or Darrell’s, I have no idea.”

Max said, “Pardon me?”

“I had a miscarriage,” I said. “I was driving. Snow was falling. The car fish-tailed.”

“Can I bring you something?” he said. “Alka Seltzer. Sanitary napkins?”

He brought chicken soup, a loaf of bread, and some tea from the health food store with a label that read: Herbs Used Since Ancient Days to Harmonize a Woman’s Ways.

He said, “I know you’re depressed because you lost the baby.”

I smiled.

He fluffed a pillow on the couch. He said, “I would have paid for your abortion.”

“My what?”

“Come to bed,” he said, “even though you’re bleeding, even though you have a mattress between your legs as big as the one we’ll sleep on.”

He slid one hand inside my robe and snapped my sanitary belt. He said, “We should get a place together.”

Edna pulls a Kleenex out of her purse. “Oh, God,” she says.

“Edna,” I say. “What’s wrong?”

“I hate Christmas carols.” She leans over and lays her face on the bar.

I listen as I watch TV. I say, “Edna, that’s Dolly Parton singing I Will Always Love You. It’s February.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She sobs. She crushes the Kleenex in her hand.

The door opens. “I’m back,” Don Swan says. And, “What’s wrong with Edna?”

“Nothing I can explain,” I say.

Edna brightens. “Let’s go, Don. Let’s take my car.” She flops her hand around on the bar. “I can’t find my keys.”

Don sits down. “Check your purse.”

“They’re not there,” she says.

“Your pockets?” I suggest.

“Someone took them,” Edna says. “While I was in the bathroom, someone took them and is coming back here tonight to steal my car.”

“We’ll find them,” I say.

Edna turns to Don. “You picked them up before you went home. They’re in the pocket of your coveralls.”

“They are not.”

“If someone steals my car,” Edna says, “I can’t get to work. And if I can’t get to work I won’t be able to pay my bills. And if I can’t pay my bills, I won’t have a place to live. Oh, God.”

“So, Roxanne.” Dixie says. “Do you have plans for the future?”

Edna says, “You were drunk, Don, and you picked up my keys and took them home.”

“I was not drunk,” Don says. He slams his fist down.

“Hey!” Marvin yells from a booth. “Cool out.”

Bill looks up from the pool table. “Roxanne? Do you need help?”

I shake my head.

Edna says, “I’m going back if I have to walk.”

“It’s a mile and a half,” I say. “It’s twelve degrees outside.”

“Let her go,” Don says.

Edna swipes at him with her purse.

Dixie adjusts a strand of blue-black hair. “It’s true that if a man treats you good you can’t love him.”

The door slams.

She says, “If you have heaven all the time you can’t recognize it’s heaven.”

“Jesus.” Bill pushes back his hat and stares at me.

“Don’t start acting like them,” Max said about the bar patrons, when I took the job. “I mean, I think you’re vulnerable, being newly-divorced.”

“People fight to make up,” Dixie says.

Bill says, “Roxanne, are you all right?”

When Darrell packed his clothes and tools he said, “It’ll always be like this. We’ll always disagree.”

“Compromise is the key,” Max says when I want to leave, late in the day and I’m tired. “You’re crazy about me in the morning,” he says to make me stay. I am glad to find him then: big and salty-smelling, good to kiss. He never said he loved me though I pressed. The time he came close stands out in my mind. At sunset, on the porch, he held my face in his hands. “The surprise is that I care at all,” he said. He kissed me. He leaned over and blocked out the sun.

The door opens. “Dwayne,” Dixie says.

“Where’s the secretary?” I ask in a whisper.

“I don’t ask questions,” she says. “I don’t question good fortune.”

“I found Edna stomping across the bridge,” Dwayne says.

Don says, “To hell with her.”

Dixie says, “You can’t rush a good fight.”

"Why do you cry?" Max asked me today.

Today is Valentine's Day, the anniversary of my wedding, the first since Darrell left.

"You want me to do something I can't do," Max said.

"I love you," I said. Also, "I would love anyone I spend this much time with."

He looked away.

"Do you love me?" I asked.

"I suppose," he mumbled.

"Say it," I said. He looked away.

Edna opens the door. "I'm back."

"I don't need someone who needs other lovers," I said.

Max said, "Don't make yourself miserable."

I said, "You make me miserable."

"I don't fuck other people," Max said. "I want to but I don't. Isn't that the point?"

Dixie holds a bottle of perfume. "Dwayne bought me this for Valentine's Day."

"Sweet," I say.

"I bet you didn't know what day it was."

Two barstools away, Don stands with his arms around Edna. "I love you, Old Toothless," I hear her say.

"Bill, will you watch the bar?"

Bill clears his throat. "There's something I want to ask you, Roxanne, about that time we went for a drive."

"Oh," I say, "that was a nice evening."

He looks at his boots. "How about some coffee after work?"

I say, "Watch the bar for me while I fix my face and hair."

"Take your time in there," he says. "You're good-looking when you try."

In the bathroom I take my ponytail down and brush my hair. I turn my sweatshirt inside-out so the paint-splatters won't show. I dig in my purse for lipstick.

"Roxanne, telephone!"

I open the door.

Behind the bar, Bill and Marvin stand on chairs, hanging a spray-painted bedsheet that reads: Happy Valentine's Day Rox-Ann who turns us on with her special frown.

"You should smile," Marvin says, smiling.

Bill holds his hand out to me.

"The telephone did ring," Dixie says.

I pick it up.

"Roxanne?"

"Max, are you all right?"

“Leave your car at work and I’ll pick you up.”

“What for?” I say.

“Roxanne, hang up,” Edna says.

Bill looks at me and shakes his head. He buttons up his coat fast and leaves.

I watch the door swing.

“Roxanne?” Max says.

I look at the walls of my bar, dirty, my bar patrons lined up smiling like for a photo.

Max says, “I’ll come out, drink a beer with you, shoot some pool, and, afterwards, I’ll take you out for dinner.”

I look at the banner on the wall, the lop-sided heart around my misspelled name. “Roxanne, give it a try,” Max says.

It’s the wrong gesture. It arrives on time.

Mary E. Martin

Using the world's sadness . . .

can be useful,
a way to cry
when the news comes on,
those snippets of blood
and bodies, the clash
enough to shed
your problems—whether to read
or watch TV—and collapse
in your thick cushioned
brushed suede chair,
thinking of atrocities,
each tear sagging you
towards sleep until you shuffle
shoeless to burrow deeper
in bed, allowing sleep
to pamper your bruises sprung
from nowhere, but sleep brings
more, rows of arms
knife-straight shooting or accusing,
maybe bending at the elbow to hit
harder or jab quicker,
it's never clear.
Later in the dark
fingers twitch awake,
urgently reach for light,
the lamp almost tumbling.
As you yawn in the kitchen
the sudden steam from boiling water
a renaissance, a rush
that jets between your ears
just before the taste
of coffee. Now the revelry
of sipping and smiling, yielding
to the sun's ease in early morning,
while you muse over last night's tragedy,
now a hazy scene where UZI's
become graceful stutterings,
and the pink glow, the panorama
warming even the bloodiest ground
to nostalgia as you look down
at all the suffering, its cinematic
appeal so beautiful as
all life should be.

Jeff Boyer

The Geometry Lesson

There was only the vague notion, if you could even call it a notion, more like an image—or even a design. The design went like this: first there was a heavy line on top, very straight until the very end of it squiggled off in an awkward pattern. It seemed like it reminded him of something, the way a river would wiggle through bottom land maybe; but then what a river was and why he would remember such a thought as “bottom land” or “river” was in itself strange. But the sense of a heavy line remained—a heavy line that went very straight and then became a crooked line at the end. But only the end. The river and the land through which the river might or might not be running he couldn’t get right.

Then there was a shorter line which seemed to intersect the longer one. This shorter line was also straight, and it seemed to intersect. But he already knew that. There were two lines and they seemed to intersect somewhere, but that was all he could remember. There were lots of things he could make no sense of. There was a mishmash of pictures—he’d called them pictures to himself once—which had no shape that he could interpret. There was noise and blurred activity which also made little sense. The noise he couldn’t make sound familiar, and the jumble of activity was so confusing it hurt to think about it. There was also a burning. A terrible burning that sometimes seemed unbearable and sometimes felt almost reassuring. The burning seemed to concentrate around or be connected with the two lines. Most of all there were the two lines, and when all else became too confusing or too hard to remember, the burning and the lines were what he focused on, and somehow they reassured him.

Some time later, he began to have the awareness of different things. It wasn’t so much that he became aware of time, but that the *concept* of time suddenly was a part of his understanding. Specifically, he could remember geometry class when he was little. If he had once been little, that must mean that he was no longer little, that he was bigger now, that something must have happened to make him change and that that something was time. But really, he just remembered being littler and riding to a schoolhouse on a pony, tying up the pony to a fence of strands—which were like lines themselves—and listening to Miss Hodges explain geometry to him. There was no one else in the school, but he could remember her explaining lines and angles and how lines could intersect sometimes and how sometimes they would not intersect. He couldn’t remember too much else about the school. He could remember Miss Hodges and how she had come from a bigger town where geometry had been introduced to junior high students to prepare them for high school and how some people thought that it was too advanced for eighth graders. Where Lester lived—he could remember now that that was his name because Miss Hodges called him that—there was no junior high school, only the two schools and the high school down the road that served the whole county and part of the next one too. Miss Hodges would explain how lines could intersect into angles, but he forgot the names of the different kinds of angles and the different kinds of lines. Sometimes he could remember how lines

could *appear* to intersect, but really didn't because of the added dimension of space. That is, two lines could *look like* they ran together, but if you turned the sphere around, it became apparent that they really didn't come together at all. He wasn't sure why he remembered such things, but he knew sphere was the right word to use here. Two lines *within* the sphere could *look like* they crossed, but when you rotated the sphere it became apparent that they *didn't* cross. That was almost all he could bring back, except that he remembered that Miss Hodges was very tall and very pretty and not well-liked by all the parents. He could remember being the only student in the new geometry class, but there must have been more because some of the parents didn't like it that she, meaning Miss Hodges, had come to teach such a useless subject to their children. One other thing. Lester could remember that he had lived in a part of the state where the river ran through bottom land and was crooked. That reminded him of the two lines again, especially the bigger straight one that seemed to become crooked at the end. He couldn't remember anything about the state, its name or location, or any of the other students in the school.

However, the burning feeling was still there all the time and sometimes it hurt badly and was all he could think of, and sometimes he could take a kind of solace in the feeling. It didn't really feel good, but it didn't really hurt either. It was warm all right, but maybe not so hot and not so painful as before. There were still periods of noise and the blurred images all the time, but he was able to blot them out and concentrate only on the lines and the geometry lessons and something about lines intersecting; but he couldn't really remember too much else.

Once he was suddenly able to see something that wasn't blurred and wasn't like remembering. It was a body or something on a chair, slouched and maybe asleep. He could not recognize the body, but it occurred to Lester that he was looking at his wife. He could not remember any wife or what she should look like at all. He was disappointed that she was not Miss Hodges, but the sight of his wife sleeping on a chair all slouched down was not like his remembering Miss Hodges in the classroom. Then the image of his wife left him and he could no longer focus on it. For all he knew, he wasn't even married—but only a lanky eighth-grader taking geometry lessons. There was always the burning though, and even when it hurt, he found that he could concentrate on that sensation any time he wanted to. The blurred images weren't as confusing as before, but they still came and went and he still couldn't figure them out. Sometimes when he thought of the lines, he would feel afraid—or rather get a sudden feeling of panic. Sometimes he was pretty sure he had no wife, but sometimes he was pretty sure that he was, in fact, married to the woman he'd seen sleeping on the chair.

Later, he became sure that the sleeping woman was his wife because he heard the noises in a new way. He heard the woman say something to someone else that he, meaning Lester, had had a quiet night and was still sleeping. He could see the woman sitting up straighter in the chair and talking to someone else, but he could not see who the someone else was or even see the woman very clearly. She was blurred, but a little more visible than before. She was still in the chair, but she wasn't asleep and she was talking to someone he could not see. He tried to

move up in his bed—he was in a bed because he could see the bedsheets—and talk to the woman and the other person. The lines started to burn though, and he had to concentrate on the squiggly-crooked end of the longer line, the part of the line that became all twisted. He could no longer see the woman or hear anything, but could only think about the two burning lines, especially the hottest part of the biggest line.

One time all the blurred images were clear for a brief instant and he could see a hawk soaring on the wind. He was pretty sure that it was a hawk because it was too large for a crow and wasn't black. It was more brown-colored, and it was soaring on the lower end of a parabola in the wind. The picture seemed to come from a box, and there was some noise along with the image, but he soon lost the picture and could no longer see the bird. He remembered the word "parabola" from Miss Hodges' teaching, and he could remember seeing the big birds soaring over the river valley from the saddle of his pony. He could remember riding his pony on a road up above the river and watching the hawks soar in the updrafts coming off the cliffs above the river. They would be searching for food, but he used to pretend that they were putting on a show for him. He had another feeling of panic, or felt that the presence of fear was all around him, but he could remember nothing else. The burning came back, but only faintly and he realized it wasn't as hot as it had been for awhile. He wondered if time was like the sphere and intersecting lines. Maybe you could rotate time like a sphere so that lines that appeared to intersect would be revealed as non-intersecting after all. The burning was less intense, and somehow that must be related to time. That was all he could remember.

Once he heard a voice as clear as imaginable say something about "Patrolman Hughs being moved to another room." He was sure that he must be the person being referred to, but he could not remember anything about rooms or being a patrolman. He figured that he must be Patrolman Lester Hughs and that he must be moving rooms, but no other sounds were clear at the time and he didn't know why or how he had heard such a thing. He had no sense of being moved or not being moved afterward. The burning was almost never apparent to him, but he could still imagine the two lines. He was sure that the twisted end of the longer one was caused by the river moving through the bottoms, but the business about moving was very confusing. There were still too many blurred images and too much noise at times. But the burning was less severe, that he knew. He didn't know whether that was good or not. He tried to remember exactly what Miss Hodges looked like, but he had a harder time now trying to envision her. Sometimes he would see her with a hawk's head or in the dress of the woman whom he thought had been his wife. He could remember the feeling of panic, then he could remember the two lines. First was the long line, then the shorter one. Then he knew that the longer one was crooked at the end, but that was all he could bring back. He remembered his name though, Patrolman Lester Hughs. Even when the burning was almost indistinguishable he could envision his name. He could not remember being a patrolman or anything, but he remembered that the voice had referred to him that way.

The most important thing he learned happened one night. He was suddenly able to see the room again, or at least some room, maybe not the same as before because he might have been moved as the voice had said. But in another chair, he could see the same woman sleeping again. There was another box (or the same one?) where he'd seen the hawk soaring, but now he could see some pictures of two people being moved from one place to another. They had on handcuffs and there were other men there dressed in clothes that he recognized as being familiar. The voice on the box said that they were being moved because of expected trouble, and that a new date for their trial would have to be set. Then he heard his own name—Patrolman Lester Hughs—being mentioned and his condition mentioned—serious but still stable. He tried to call out to the sleeping woman, but he couldn't and the burning returned again more noticeable than in some time. Before he had to concentrate on the two lines again, he heard the voice mention moving Patrolman Hughs to another state. He couldn't hear anything else because of the burning, but he saw the faces of the people in handcuffs again and something about their expressions reminded him of the feeling of panic. He felt like he was in the presence of fear once again. The burning was getting worse, so he had to think only about it again. He could tell for the first time that the burning was coming from his chest area, and that there were two lines of hotness. The two lines didn't intersect though, but they did *seem* to intersect slightly. He knew from his previous experience with geometry that if you looked at lines from *different perspectives* that they would only *seem* to intersect. Then he had to concentrate on the burning.

Two things finally became pretty clear to Lester. First, he was sure the woman on the chair was his wife. He could see her face quite well, and he could tell it was the same woman by the way she was shaped. She was neither tall nor thin, but it was the same woman he'd seen earlier on the chair. Her face was very close to his and she was asking him how he felt. He could hear her very clearly, and she said, "Lester, can you hear me? Do you feel anything?"

"It burns," was all he could say, but she heard and he could tell she was excited because she began to sob and he could see tears in her eyes. Actually, they were tears from behind her glasses. He wanted to call her "Lily," but he thought maybe that had been Miss Hodges' name and not his wife's. He was sure that she was his wife though. Instead of being able to see her eyes, he could only see reflections of light and windows because he could see the Venetian blind slats in regular parallel patterns. The glassy look of his wife's face reminded him of the box from which he learned of his moving to another state. All of this was suddenly easier to comprehend. His room (or rooms) had TVs in them, and he had seen images from the screen and had not been able to make sense of the movements. He looked around briefly for a TV screen, but he was beginning to lose his focus again. More faces started to appear, but he couldn't recognize any of them.

"Les," a voice said, "it's Millie. Can you see me?"

"How's Ed?" he asked. "Ed Chambers? How's Ed?" He could hear voices respond, but they weren't clear. Instead, he could see the hawk-like bird in the distance soaring in the wind. The way it could fly without moving its wings fasci-

nated him, even though he could barely see it. He heard someone say repeatedly, “Oh my, oh my.” He couldn’t tell if it was his wife’s voice or not. A deeper voice, a man’s, said something about maybe thinking about “getting started on the paperwork.” That phrase also sounded familiar, but he couldn’t remember why. He wasn’t sure who Ed Chambers was, but he had the feeling that he was also a patrolman. Patrolman Chambers and Patrolman Hughs. It sounded right to him, but he was losing the ability to think very hard about it. He didn’t hear or see anything else then. He couldn’t even see the hawk or feel the two lines. There was still some warmth coming somewhere from inside him. He was still pretty sure of that.

He was trying to connect two more things together—two different things he had seen and heard. Connecting them was like trying to connect two lines in a geometry lesson, but something different too. On the TV screen another time he had seen the faces of the handcuffed people again. They were trying to hide their faces, but he could see them clearly. They were being moved again—he could see other patrolmen escorting them and helping them into the back of a police car. He could see this very clearly, but he could hear nothing about where they were going. Some words were on the screen, so he figured that for some reason the TV was soundless at the time. He looked to see if his wife was sleeping on the chair, but the area away from his bed was dark and he could only see the screen. The letters of the words were all a jumble to him; he couldn’t make any sense of them. The camera moved closer to the two handcuffed people once they were in the back of the car, and Les felt the same feeling of panic he’d experienced before. It was like being in the presence of fear without being really afraid.

The other thing was more what he’d heard than anything he’d seen. Another loud voice had been saying something about “his strength being slightly up.” Les assumed the voice had been referring to him. “We need to get in and remove the fragments while his strength is still up” was exactly what he’d heard. He thought he heard another voice say something about “moving him to Denver,” but he wasn’t so sure about that. Somehow though, the people’s faces in the back of the police car, the feeling of panic associated with them, and the moving to Denver seemed connected to him. Then there was Ed Chambers. Ed must be a part of this, but he wasn’t sure how. Les was trying to connect too many lines together and the effort was tiring him. He hardly thought about the two lines in his chest anymore, but if he tried he could still feel them. It was like seeing lightning streaks in the sky even after the lightning was over. He used to watch the lightning above the river when he was younger. Sometimes it would come so fast that all the negative patterns of the flashes would run together in his mind and crisscross jaggedly. He knew that they didn’t really cross, but they seemed to. He couldn’t remember what the color or pattern of his pony’s coat was, and that bothered him a little. He could remember the shade of Miss Hodges’ hair—kind of a darkish blonde underneath and lighter on top. She would wear it up in a braided bun on the back of her head, and he could see the darker coloring of the under hairs. He tried to remember what she looked like from the front, but could only envision her from behind, standing at the board. He couldn’t see her face very well at all, but he could remember the faces of the handcuffed couple. There was a dark-

complected man's face which looked slightly Indian, and the softer, more rounded face of a young woman too. She could almost be described as "fat-faced," but it was a healthy kind of fat and not a sloppy kind. He was afraid that his wife might turn out to be sloppy fat, but he could only remember the glasses and the reflection of the window blinds in them. He now had too many lines to try and connect, and he knew how hard and how deceptive that could be. He could barely feel the two lines in his chest, but he knew they were still there.

The feeling of panic was what bothered him most now. That feeling had to be part of the whole picture, but it was only a feeling and not something he could try and fit into the larger puzzle of things. He could not think about it too much and had to concentrate only on more pleasant things. The fact that Miss Hodges' knees showed beneath the hem of her skirt he found pleasant. He tried to remember what she looked like from the front, but could not. He also tried to remember the color of his pony, but he had just as much trouble with that as before. Denver was in Colorado though; he remembered that. He knew that it was a crooked line on the map from where he and Millie lived. He was glad to be going there if the voices he heard were right. He had tried to tell them that it burned sometimes, but he wasn't sure that they had heard. The burning wasn't really so bad anymore, but he had gotten so used to the feeling that he wanted to tell them. Perhaps they were doctors and should know about his. He wondered how they would be getting him to Denver. For a short time, he thought he'd fly there like a hawk—drifting and gliding on the updrafts of air; then he realized that that was only a fantasy. He felt better about being able to understand and remember more, but he was still having trouble connecting everything he'd heard and seen. He was concerned about Ed, but he couldn't remember why. Sometimes when he'd think about Ed, the feeling of panic would return. He wasn't afraid; but the feeling was definitely connected somehow with Ed and the two handcuffed people on the TV screen.

Finally, almost everything was beginning to fit together for Les. He was able to overhear and see his wife talking to another woman. He wasn't able to follow everything they said, but he was able to watch them one time during the day as they stood near his bed. Both women had been dressed in what Les called their "church clothing"; they'd been talking near the side of his bed.

"Oh I thank God a hundred times a day," he overheard Millie saying. "It's been bad, but not like for Charlotte."

"Oh my yes," the other woman said, "if Ed had only had Les's strength . . ." Her voice trailed off slightly. "And they were taking him off highway duty next summer," she continued. Then he heard the woman ask his wife about him. "Is he . . . ?"

"Oh better," Millie said. "We think they can operate soon—maybe next week."

"Does he respond?" the other woman asked.

Millie didn't answer right away. "Not like you'd notice," she said finally. The women were talking slowly, like they had time to waste and were in no particular hurry. "I think he sometimes knows more than the doctors think though. He

seems to hear things sometimes. He looks around, but he don't see much." The rhythms of Millie's speech sounded familiar to him.

"Well, he'll pull through," said the other woman. "God," she repeated, "poor Charlotte."

Les knew that Ed was dead. Charlotte must be the name of Ed's wife. He tried to remember if that was right, but couldn't. He felt like he could have called out to the two women if he had wanted to, but he held back. He could almost picture Ed now, but not quite. It bothered him that he couldn't envision his former partner. He didn't want to talk to the women at the time or interrupt their talk. They looked so peaceful and quiet together. He didn't recognize the other woman. Millie looked neat in her best overcoat, but he realized that she looked nothing like Miss Hodges. She was shorter and fatter. Not fat, but not skinny either. He let them talk on before he drifted off again.

That night, he saw a late news show on the TV that pretty well explained everything for him. He knew it was later the same day of the conversation between Millie and the other woman, but he didn't know why he knew. It was dark in the room but he could clearly see the screen. No one was on the chair where Millie used to sleep, but the TV was still on. A newsman was giving details of Ed's funeral. They showed his casket being carried by uniformed patrolmen with many other patrolmen present. Other people were present too, and Les tried to recognize some of the people there. He looked for Millie, but wasn't sure he saw anyone familiar. Even the picture of Ed they showed looked strange. It was the picture of a younger man. Maybe it was Ed when he first joined the patrol. Les wasn't sure. The newsman seemed extremely saddened by the whole event, and he talked in hushed but angry tones. He had that attitude that TV newspeople sometimes get of being irritated by the story they were delivering.

"Officer Chambers left behind a wife and two college-age children," the newsman said. A picture of the grieving family sitting under the canopy at the cemetery was shown. Mrs. Chambers and a younger woman had on black veils so you could not tell if they were crying. Les didn't really recognize any of the mourners though he felt he should have known some of them.

The TV then showed more pictures of the handcuffed couple getting in and out of more police cars. "With Officer Chambers' death, a total of seven fatalities can now be attributed to the robbery," reported the newsman. Then they showed something that made Les remember a great deal more. There was an aerial photograph of the handcuffed couple's van and the site of the shootout where Les and Ed had been hit. Looking at the pictures of the van, Les could remember approaching it from behind. He could remember looking into a window of panic-stricken faces—the faces of the dark-complected man and the chubby-faced woman. He could see and feel the fear almost as if it were seeping out of the vehicle like gas fumes. He could remember the two burning paths of the bullets that must have lodged in his chest. One line entered through his right rear shoulder blade and stopped somewhere near his heart. That was the longer line with the twisted end to it. The other was shorter and entered from beneath his armpit. They both headed toward his heart, but stopped. He could *remember* the burn-

ing, but he could no longer feel it. The funny thing about the couple was that Les had no real hatred or fear of them. If anything, he felt like he was the only one who might know how afraid and confused they had been. He could remember setting up the roadblock with Ed, but after walking up to the van and getting shot twice, nothing much came back to him. The newsman seemed not to have any such feelings for the arrested pair. He seemed to be irritated at them, or repulsed by having to include details of their impending trial. They had been moved twice already to avoid threatening actions by members of the community. Their whereabouts was being kept secret from the public “for obvious reasons” as the newsman stated. Les wondered if they knew in advance when or where they were being moved. Both faces looked extremely worried in the brief shots of them entering and leaving the backs of state cars. Les felt that the panic he saw in their eyes was a secret that only he and they shared. Nobody else still alive would know that feeling.

After the news was over, Les watched the closing-of-the-station segment of the screen. This was the one with the jet airplane and the poem about flying up next to God’s face. In the background of the screen were contrails of other planes. They intersected, or seemed to, at tight angles in the distance. Les could envision himself a hawk flying with the jet and keeping up with the maneuvers it performed. It seemed like Ed was there with him and the plane. Ed and Les were hawks and they flew as fast and as gracefully as the jet. Below, a river went into a twist and ran crooked through the bottom lands. Then the sky turned dim and he stopped remembering altogether.

Diane Barker

Grocery Ritual

The ordeal began
with wrestling chrome carts
apart. We started with the bread aisle
strolled past rising walls of red, blue,
and yellow cardboard boxes, collections
of specimen jars: pickles, pears,
and pig's feet, spears of okra,
embryonic ears of corn.
The Cheerios were friends,
cans of tuna I understood,
but fruits and vegetables
were an arcane science,
dominion of mothers.
Slowly we would approach.
Hanging from the cool
metal handle, I would steer
our cargo into saltine cracker towers.
Watch where you're going!
One wheel would always wobble
and stick, streak the floor black.
Dragging toes on pale linoleum,
Stop that. You'll ruin your shoes.
I rode the basket round and round,
never sure if I pushed
or was being pulled, at times
spiriting the cart around a corner
clustering it with others. I hoped
to see Mother put our eggs
in the wrong cart. Instead
I was too easily retrieved.
At last we'd round the detergent,
paper products gauntlet
into the onion, potato, grapefruit
islands. Here carts clogged,
women's voices undulated in recognition,
scandal, cooing admiration
of a punching bundle
wagging in the kiddie seat.
All along the islands I scouted
dark eyes peeping above silver
grids and mounded fruits.
Don't grab. Stop squirming.

Other mothers crabbed.
Mother began my initiation in earnest.
Perceptibly she squeezed
cantaloupes, weighed
bananas, examined every pepper,
cucumber for God's sakes.
Then, so ineluctably would she
rotate an apple before my dull eyes
and ask, *Does that look good?*
It looks OK, I would reply.
But she never hurried.
Slowly, so slowly she would pick
five more apples, the correct
bunch of celery, the juiciest
oranges, and with intense complacency
push me and the laden cart
to the black conveyor belt
at the check-out counter.

Kevin Snell

A Card From Clinton's

Clinton's gift shop is still half a block away, but its distinctive odor is already strong enough to annoy me. Most of the businesses here along Robbins Avenue have their doors open to let in the warm September air, but those merchants near Clinton's have shut theirs in a no doubt futile attempt to block the pungent waves that crawl out of the gift shop and permeate the surroundings. Why Clinton's smells so much stronger than other shops of its type is beyond me, though I'm familiar enough with the odor. It's a peculiar mixture of perfumed soaps, pot-pourri, scented candles, and other bits of merchandise that are supposed to make the home smell fresh and clean. Separately they might do this; together they're enough to crinkle the nose.

I linger for a moment outside the doorway, though I know it's useless to take a deep breath before plunging in. There's little difference between the heavy air within and that which I'm shallowly breathing out here, so I finally step over the threshold into *the* Clinton's, the most talked-about and expensive card and gift shop in the city, the place my secretary told me to go for the perfect birthday card. She told me Clinton's has the largest selection of cards under one roof in the entire state, in addition to a bewildering assortment of tasteful gifts.

The cash register is stationed just inside the door. It sits on a counter swamped with small, junky items—keychains, paperweights, and so on—that customers are supposed to see and buy at the last minute. The machine itself is big and brass and clangs madly when a button is pressed, the old-style tabs popping up from its guts to show the price of each item and the total sale.

Two women are behind the counter, one old and the other quite young. The younger one—a high school girl, most likely—is ringing up the purchases of a huge sweat-shiny woman wearing a flowered mu'u mu'u. The older woman watches as the girl pushes buttons, peering sharply through her half-glasses. The machine clangs and bongs its way through four or five operations until it's finished, then spits out the cash drawer to accept the money.

As I slide past the counter and take in the unfamiliar interior, I see the eyes of the old woman lock on me. She takes off her glasses and they fall to her narrow chest at the end of one of those funny black cords. She'll probably keep her eye on me. She looks like the type: old and soured on life, eager to take pleasure from trying to catch someone shoplifting. I'll try to ignore her, though. I simply duck around a corner and I'm hidden from view.

I pause before a shelf of wind-up musical animals and rub my itching eyes. It's the air in here that's doing it. I wonder if it bothers the employees, or do they just get used to it? I inhale deeply through my nose but cut it short to stifle a sneeze. I'll try to breathe through my mouth.

The toys on the shelf are irresistible. I wind up an elephant drummer and it bangs on two tin drums, its painted maniacal grin a good match for its mad drumming. The metallic racket fills the store until the toy's spring relaxes and the elephant slows and stops, arms frozen in mid-beat. I trade it for a chimpanzee

that claps symbols and twist the small crank in the chimp's back. After a few turns there is a distinct pop and the crank spins loosely in my hand—broken. I put it back.

Working my way deeper into the maze of porcelain, puzzles, and gag gifts, I'm once again in the sights of the old woman, and I feel a little uneasy. Store employees always judge customers, guessing how much we have to spend and whether we want to buy or just look. The two at the counter are probably deciding those things right now, the girl getting pointers from the veteran. I finger the twenty dollar bill in my pocket and leave them both behind again as I continue my search.

It's impossible not to find the cards, and the selection is formidable: eight aisles of racks that reach from my knees to my eyes, stretching down half the length of the store, and I wonder if I've made a mistake in coming here. I've never actually bought a card before, and there are so many here to choose from. But everyone says a card from Clinton's is something special. There aren't any helpful signs to direct me, so I go to the far left aisle and brace myself for an ordeal.

This looks like part of the holiday section. Halloween is still over a month away, but the shelves are packed with pumpkin-colored cards. There's even a few for people who were born on Halloween. A little farther down and taking up most of the aisle are the Thanksgiving cards, most of them a roasted brown color—like a turkey, I guess. People must like to get started early around here, or maybe it's like this all over. Anyway, the next aisle awaits, and I round the corner and see what I expect and dread:

Christmas cards. In September. By the thousands. Five-foot-high walls of cards on both sides of the aisle, holiday cheer in every imaginable color. I take in the tunnel-like sight and my eyes are dazzled by the fluorescent light reflecting off the shiny surfaces of the cards. The store melts into shimmering blobs of color and I have to blink away the tears that have formed in my eyes. Slowly I shuffle down the aisle with the vague feeling that something here is wrong.

Suddenly the high school girl is in front of me, for all I know materializing from the racks themselves.

"Can I help you find something, sir?" she asks.

Sir. Always *sir*. Always courteous. Her smile shows a glint of braces and her voice quavers slightly. She's still not entirely comfortable in what is probably her first job; shy about approaching strangers but falling back into the comfort of formality. Fifteen years between us and she treats me like her father. I wipe at my still-watery eyes and sniffle without meaning to. I must look like a dork.

"Yes, I think so," I finally tell her. "Where are the birthday cards?"

"For parents, children, assorted relatives, friends, or partners?" she asks. She rattles them off quickly. Maybe she's really been working here for awhile, or maybe they have to take a test or something. And what does "partners" mean, exactly, and does it apply to me? Do I have a partner? Or just a good friend?

I ask the girl if they have any cards for friendly partners, and she laughs on cue. "Follow me," she says. She bypasses who knows what on the third and fourth aisles, finally stopping a few steps down aisle five. She gives a wide sweep of her arm like a gameshow hostess. "Here you are, sir," she says. "Just call me if you

need any more help.”

Then she's gone, and I'm alone again. The buzzing light tubes in the ceiling cover the traffic noise from the street and the conversations of the store's few patrons. It's not quite ten in the morning, and though it's Saturday few shoppers are downtown yet.

At random I pull a partners card from the shelf on my left. The birthday greeting inside is written in thin, flowing script on a lavender background. If all the cards are this sweet and putrid my search is going to be even harder than I thought.

The only time I gave anyone a card was in grammar school, when for a class project we made Mother's Day cards from colored construction paper. Mine was blue and white, and with a crayon I scrawled "I Love You Mother" all over it. The teacher put it on the chalkboard and told us to write it. I had trouble with the scissors and paste and I know the thing looked awful, but my mother hung it on the refrigerator anyway. When my father saw it at dinnertime he laughed and said it was a stupid mess, so when my mother left the kitchen for a minute I ripped the card to pieces and cried.

"Why did you do that?" she asked me when she came back. She stood on her high heels and looked down at me on the kitchen floor where I was bawling amid the scraps of paper. I was eight or nine, and a crybaby. I remember wailing "I don't know!" over and over as my mother watched, and when I was finished crying I picked up the torn pieces of paper and threw them into the garbage pail.

So what I want this time is the perfect card, but I don't know what it should say. I've gotten lots of cards in my life, even though I've never sent them, and I always thought they were nice. None of them stand out in my mind, though, as really pleasing me. *Nice* is the right word, I think. It's *nice* to get cards that tell me I'm a *nice* guy, cards that wish me happy birthday or merry Christmas. But "nice" is such a nothing word, and I know people don't really mean all the things that are on the cards they send. I don't think I'm always such a nice guy, and everyone knows I hate birthdays. It would mean something if I knew the feelings were genuine, but there's no way to be sure. And if the feelings are genuine, why do people need cards to say them? Why not say them in person, or at least over the telephone?

The answer to that is obvious, and I need a card. There are so many. Some have flowers on the front while others have the old familiar cartoon characters. A few have overly cute animals on their covers, like the gorilla that says, "Darling, I go ape over you." Jesus.

A young married couple moves down the aisle toward me, coming from the front of the store. It's not always easy to tell they're married. The wedding rings they wear are thin bands of gold and the woman has no diamond engagement ring. They're holding hands and walk down the aisle with their hips touching. As I watch they press up close together and kiss, really kiss, with open mouths and clutching hands. I can't believe they're doing it in here where anyone can watch, but it's kind of refreshing. I bet they don't give each other silly cards all the time.

When they notice me staring they break apart and stare back. They probably think I'm some sort of weirdo. I just can't help watching these two people in love

and seeing how they act. It's embarrassing to be caught, though, and I smile weakly at them and bury my face in another card.

The parade of cards is endless. I sift through them for thirty minutes, until all of them look alike and my mind rebels. What kind of card should I buy? A comic card will not do at all, because what I want to convey is no laughing matter to me. And some cards are too sentimental to consider. I want to make her heart melt, not decompose. I guess I'm not sure what her reaction will be, and I wish I didn't have to be around when she reads whatever card I end up buying, in case she hates it or laughs at me. Of course, she'll probably be much more concerned with the gift I've bought her, a black lacquer music box that plays three different songs. We looked at it weeks ago, and I remember how much she loved it. This is the first time we'll have celebrated her birthday together, so now is my big chance.

My patience is nearly gone and I pay no attention to order, letting the cards fall haphazardly back into the rack when I'm finished with them. Now the store is beginning to fill with women and small children. I feel like running amok and strangling one whiny little girl with a running nose and Kool-Aid mustache. I should get out of here now. To hell with Clinton's and their goddamn ritzy cards. The heat rises in my chest and I feel my face flush as I shut my eyes to blot out the sight of thousands of glaring cards. It's useless. I'm beaten.

A card is still clutched tightly in my hand. The cover is a painting of water lillies, and has no words. The inside is blank as well. I'm not sure what kind of card it is, but it's in the partners rack. Blank? Maybe I could think of something to write, something she'd like, but I don't know if I can say what I really want. I need something, though. This is going to be the one. I hope it turns out all right.

The old woman with the string on her glasses is still behind the cash register, but the girl is gone. I lay the card and its white envelope on the cluttered counter and the woman picks it up, turning it over to see the price on the back. I watch as the cash register tabs pop up in response to the jabs of the woman's sharp fingers: two-fifty, plus tax. So what. It's a small price to pay if this turns out the way I want. I hand over the twenty and pocket my change without looking at it, wadding up the bills into my jeans. As soon as the small red and blue sack is placed in my hand I'm out the door and striding up the sidewalk.

A block away from the gift shop the air is pure, free of the Clinton's odor, and I slow my pace. Just ahead of me I recognize the couple from the aisle, the ones who kissed. They're walking slowly with their arms around each other's waist. They stop suddenly there on the sidewalk, and so do I, about fifteen feet behind them. The man strokes the woman's hair and whispers something in her ear, and she smiles and says, "I love you, too." Then they hug and kiss even more ardently than before.

When they notice me staring they break apart and stare back. They probably think I'm some sort of weirdo.

Michael A. Nichols

Patrik Jogenius

He told it to us in a crippling fit
of laughter and had we not known him well
enough and known for sure that he certainly
lacked desperate amounts of that grainy gray stuff
we believed our heads held the monopoly of
we would never have believed the confusing story
spluttered in half-Swedish half-English
half-Portuguese—Patrik had one too many
halves—of how on his eighteenth birthday in his
native Goteborg he drank his way through
“much cervejas” and how he passed out
without really noticing that nobody else
was quite as drunk nor that they wore devilish
smirks as they tugged at his jeans
T-shirt socks underwear and
spreading shaving cream all over his
pale Swedish body used cheap disposable
Bics to rid him
of each
and every
hair.

David Strom

Surf Music

4:30 a.m.

Dark.

Sitting on my bicycle in the driveway
waiting for Ray.

Only five minutes late,
we pedal to the beach.

Down the last hill
the wind of our speed
tries to tear the boards
from under our arms.

We play with the angles
racing empty streets to the beach.

A fisherman had caught a shark,
shore-casting in the night.

A baby five foot leopard lay
dead, twitching its last
on the sand.

Terrified, we put on our wetsuits
and pawed the sand
timidly, thinking about SHARKS.

I waited until dawn
colored the ocean with a
touch of grey.

I paddled out
with fastest strokes
trying to keep all
limbs out of the water, jabbing.

My third wave, electric glass
the deepest tube I ever
made.

I rushed my dancing soul
skipping back out across the water
starved for more
grey magic.

I heard Ray, hooting,
as he hit the water full steam.

We
didn't care about sharks.

Bruce Kellogg

Earthling Rituals: A Report

“If everyone would take their seat, we will get started.” The voice was mild, and the man who spoke was hardly an intimidating figure, old and small and sitting alone at the end of a large, oblong table, yet when he spoke every person in the room moved to a seat around the table. The man spoke again in soothing tones. “As chairman of the colonization committee I would like to thank you all for coming. You all know why we have gathered here. Young Sarn has just returned from his survey trip and we are all eager to hear his report, so without further introduction we will begin. Sarn.” The chairman nodded to the youngest person sitting at the table. He appeared nervous as he shuffled the notes in front of him, but once he rose and started to speak he became more confident.

“Thank you, sir, members of the committee. I am Sarn. I was sent to the third planet of the Sol system, called Earth by the inhabitants, to make a primary study of the rituals and customs of the society in order to examine the feasibility of peaceful cohabitation with the indigenous population.” As he spoke, a screen at the end of the room was flashing pictures of a small, blue-green planet.

“Of the seventeen planets that I have visited so far, Earth has the most hospitable atmosphere, and the gravity, although slightly lighter than our own, is well within the livable standard. The dominate race, called humans, are markedly similar to our own race, which would make colonization more practical.” The screen at the end of the room began to show pictures that did indeed resemble the persons seated around the conference table. There were slight differences, the humans had only four limbs and seemed to come in a variety of colors, but the differences were insignificant compared to the majority of other civilizations. The members of the committee were busy taking notes as Sarn continued. “The habits of these curious creatures are, however, another matter.

“After making a primary study of the family structure, economic base, educational system, and political hierarchy, I concluded that the most important rituals and customs revolve around an institution called *Sports*. I made this conclusion based on two criteria. First, that the participants in these rituals, called athletes or players, are paid extremely high wages; much more than the wages paid to teachers of children, or the officials of government.” As Sarn spoke the screen at the end of the room projected graphs that showed the difference in wages between athletes and other professions. Gasps of disbelief escaped the members of the committee as they scribbled notes on the lecture.

“The second criteria,” continued Sarn, “is the great crowds of people that gather to observe these rituals. Far more than gather to worship their God, which is done only once every seven days.” Sarn shuffled through some papers. Finding what he wanted, he continued. “The only other crowds of this magnitude that I encountered on the trip were those that gathered to observe what the natives call a Rock Concert. However, I will deal with that in a subsequent report on social deviancy.

“After I concluded that these rituals were the most important to the inhabit-

ants, I set out to observe some of them. Although I observed many of these rituals, I will report on only those that I was able to study in depth.

“The first sport that I was able to study was called *Baseball*. The participants were divided into two groups, called teams, and each team wore a different colored costume to avoid confusion. The ritual took place on a large, grass-covered field. Seven of the players from one of the teams stood at various points on the field while two others threw a spheroid, called a ball, back and forth. While this was going on, a player from the other team snuck up and struck the ball with a wooden club. He then started to run away as if in fear for his life. The striking of the ball seemed to infuriate the players in the field and they began to run around in a frenzy trying to recover the ball. Once they had recovered the ball they threw it at the player who had struck it. This explains why he was running. The player who had struck the ball ran to a small, white pad and stood on it, at which time the players standing in the field stopped trying to hit him with the ball. I assume that the pad is, according to the rules of the ritual, a place of sanctuary.

“The two players then continued to throw the ball to each other until another player from the other team tried to hit it. Before the player had a chance to hit the ball, his compatriot on the sanctuary pad walked off the pad, obviously taunting the man with the ball. The ball was thrown to an athlete close to the sanctuary pad who used it to club the runner on the head. The runner then left the field. Having exacted vengeance for the previous striking of the ball the original two players resumed throwing the ball. After two more players from the opposing team tried to reach sanctuary and failed, a small, fat man in black armor performed a brief dance and the players on the field ran into a burrow at the side of the field. The other team then took their places on the field. This cycle occurred nine times during the rituals.”

There was a moment of silence as the committee thought. “How unusual,” the chairman said, breaking the silence. “And this ritual is performed often?”

“Every day during some months,” Sarn replied. “And there are various levels of this sport, starting with the very young and progressing to mid-adulthood.”

“I see. And all the sports were like this one.”

“Oh, by no means. The customs in the ritual vary greatly.”

The chairman looked around the table, but no one had any further comments. “Please continue.”

Sarn picked up another folder and opened it. “The second sport ritual that I studied was called racquetball. The participants in this sport must have been criminals, for the ritual took place in a stone cell. The arena had high stone walls and a thick metal door. This was obviously to prevent the prisoners from escaping. The sport seemed to be a battle between two prisoner-athletes. The weapons consisted of a small hand extension, called a racquet, and, as in baseball, a spheroid called a ball. Hence the name racquetball. The object of the battle was for one of the combatants to try and hit his opponent with the ball by striking it against one of the walls in order to maim or kill him.

“The defender could then use his racquet to block the projectile. The skilled athletes were able to block a shot and in the same stroke return an offensive shot at the other player. It seemed to me that the racquet itself would have been a more

practical and efficient weapon than the ball. It would have been easier to maneuver and would have inflicted more damage on the opponent. The use of the racquet as a weapon was, no doubt, against the rules of the battle. In the contests that I observed the prisoners escaped from the cell before either had been seriously damaged."

"What a strange penal system," a voice murmured from the table.

"I suppose it would reduce the burden on the state to support felons, however barbaric it may seem to us," another offered.

"Shall we save our observations until Sarn has completed his report," the chairman interrupted.

"Certainly. Quite sorry. By all means."

"These were the only rituals that I was able to observe in depth during my short stay on Earth. I did however observe several other sport rituals on which I will make a brief comment.

"Football was a barbarous game in which each player wore armor. It is interesting to note that the ritual begins with the athletes bowing in prayer to a sacred oblong instrument on the ground before they commence beating one another. After viewing this ritual it became obvious that the players were asking the instrument to keep them safe from harm. The prayers were rarely answered.

"Hockey was a sport performed on frozen dihydrogen oxide. Each player had a hooked stick which he used to trip and hit his opponents. When this failed the athletes would build up as much speed as possible and plow into one another. Several times during the ritual two, and sometimes more, athletes would break off and begin a personal battle. Perhaps this was caused by some vendetta or infringement of rights.

"The planet abounded with individual combat sports: boxing, wrestling, karate, judo, and fencing were all basically battles between two players with the object of destruction."

Sarn set his notes down on top of a pile of papers and looked down the table. "Are there any questions?"

The room erupted with voices each trying to be heard over the others. Each member was shouting and trying to gain Sarn's attention. Sarn took a step back as he tried to listen to all the voices at once.

"Gentlemen," came the soothing voice from the end of the table, "we will not gain anything by battering poor Sarn with all of our questions." The room became quiet although the chairman had not raised his voice. Members composed themselves around the table and waited for the chairman to take the lead. "I think we all have the same question." The chairman brought his hands together and looked down the table. "My dear Sarn, what purpose do these rituals serve." The question elicited nods of approval from the committee as they turned to watch Sarn.

"Well, sir, after having observed sports of several varieties, I set out to research that very question. What possible motive could there be for such a destructive assortment of rituals.

"One source offered the motive of recreation. That these rituals were performed for the entertainment of the spectators and the pleasure of the

participants.”

“Recreation?” came a voice from the table.

“Absurd,” added another.

Sarn held up a hand to silence the committee. “I know it sounds ridiculous, but I wanted to explore all the possibilities. I negated this option after I compared Earth rituals with the entertainment activities of other worlds I’ve visited. For example the population of the second planet of the Caetia system found small, dwarf-like creatures and made them into decorative lamps. This seemed much more relaxing, enjoyable and rewarding than being carted off to the hospital following a boxing ritual. I must conclude that no intelligent society would use such barbaric rituals for sheer enjoyment.”

“Religious rites of some kind?” a committee member offered.

“I think not,” Sarn said. “The major religious literature advocates love, peace and good will, none of which are evident in any way in these rituals.” Sarn walked part way around the table. “I believe that the most understandable reason for these rituals is pure economics. They are a business. As I said before, these rituals attract huge crowds of spectators, all of whom are willing to pay money to see these sports.

“Not only are the athletes paid exorbitant salaries, but other businesses pay them huge amounts to advertise their products. The public media is full of athletes advertising everything from bodily apparel to high sucrose, carbon-dioxide containing liquids.

“This theory is strengthened by other phenomena on Earth. For example, weapons manufacturers spend large sums of money to see that the government continues to stockpile weapons in order that the weapons manufacturers increase profits. The society on Earth seems to thrive on two things, violence and money, and it is my theory that these rituals are simply an extension of the two.”

Sarn sat down. Each committee member started typing into a terminal in front of him. The chairman watched each member as they typed their recommendations into the computer, which then compiled them and fed the results to the chairman.

“It would seem,” said the chairman, after reading the computer’s analysis of the recommendations, “that we are all in agreement. This planet is still in the lower stages of development. Likely they would misunderstand any contact we would make with them. These rituals are beyond the comprehension of known civilized thought in the galaxy. We must assume, therefore, that they are the product of a barbaric race and without logical purpose. It is the recommendation of this council that the planet Earth be given twenty-five hundred solar years to develop to a point which will be conducive to colonization. This meeting stands adjourned.”

The members of the committee stood and started to exit. The chairman met Sarn halfway to the door. “A fine presentation. These rituals intrigue me. Were they all so violent?”

The chairman and Sarn walked toward the door. “Actually there was one sport that confused me, so I did not include it. The sport was called golf and consisted of an athlete trying to hit a small ball into a hole with a hooked stick.” The

chairman and Sarn were the last to reach the door. As they exited, Sarn switched off the light. "As I was saying, although this was a non-violent type of ritual, the athletes seemed to get more infuriated with that little ball than the athletes in any other sport. It was most unusual." Sarn's voice could be heard explaining the ritual as the door to the committee chamber swung closed.

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