

Touchstone

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Spring 2007
Kansas State University

Touchstone



"An Old House Speaks, No. 23"
by Marydorsey Wanless

Out the back door and around the corner of the handcut stone exterior of the house is the old red barn. It still holds bales of hay used to feed horses.

(The work of Marydorsey Wanless featured in this edition of Touchstone is from her collection "An Old House Speaks." These photographs were taken in an old stone house in rural Onaga, Kansas. The property was homesteaded in the 1880s by John Berges. It was inhabited by members of the family until 1944, when it was sold to the Hay family. Members of that family lived in the house until 1975. It was abandoned until 2001, when it was sold and restored.)

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*touch*stone:* 1) A hard, black stone, such as jasper or basalt, formerly used to test the quality of gold or silver by comparing the streak left on the stone by one of these metals with that of a standard alloy. 2) An excellent quality or example that is used to test the excellence or genuineness of others.

— The American Heritage Dictionary

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Touchstone invites submissions of poetry and prose (with SASE) from students enrolled in college or university writing programs. We accept poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction. Submission to *Touchstone* automatically enters one's work in the prize contest. KSU undergraduate winners are eligible for monetary prizes. Graduate students enrolled in KSU's Department of English are ineligible. Contributor's payment is two copies. Send submissions or inquiries to:

litmag@ksu.edu

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Introduction

Assembling a literary magazine is like hiking into the Flint Hills of Kansas. You have an idea of how far you want to go, and a map of the path you want to follow. You even pack plenty of snacks because you know you might need them. But inevitably the elements are what dictate whether you will be strolling casually among the grasses or dashing for cover in a sudden cloud burst. The elements of our magazine are, of course, the individuals, the writers and artists, who submit their work.

This year the weather has been quite fortuitous as we received many quality submissions for our editorial staffs to consider. Since 1998, Touchstone magazine has featured the creative work of KSU undergraduates alongside that of graduate students from across the United States and its neighboring countries. This year the magazine took another step towards a full online submission policy, through which we received work from as near as Salina, Kansas, to as far away as Glasgow, Scotland.

Through the submission process, a myriad of personalities and voices arrived in our inboxes, all with interesting stories to tell. The editors and their staffs had a daunting task determining which essays, short stories, or poems they felt were the best of the best. However difficult the job may have been, several works did stand out from the rest. One submission that comes to mind is the moving short story "Last Bed," written by the very talented undergraduate writer Miranda Asebedo. Quality in creative nonfiction work is also high, with graduate MFA student Alicia Oltuski's "Bacchus in the Kitchen" taking a long, reflective look at the shape of family. And not forgetting poetry, this year we present two poems by Jericho Hockett, a promising undergraduate from KSU, whose gentle style and sentiment pulls you into the world she creates through her lyrical lines. Also, this issue features an interview with Reg Saner, a man whose writing I greatly admire.

Saner began his career as a poet but now primarily finds his voice in the narrative lines of the essay.

But these are just a few of the many elements that shape our magazine this year. So take a break from walking about, sit back on the weathered stone, and pull something good out of your backpack, while you explore the many voices and perspectives comprising this 2007 edition of *Touchstone*. I hope you enjoy what you find.

TULORA ROECKERS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Acknowledgements

Special thanks go out to the 2007 *Touchstone* staff, Creative Writing Director Elizabeth Dodd, 2006 *Touchstone* Editor-in-chief Dennis Etzel, Jr. and Mary Seigel. Without your guidance and wise counsel, I would be lost amongst the understory.

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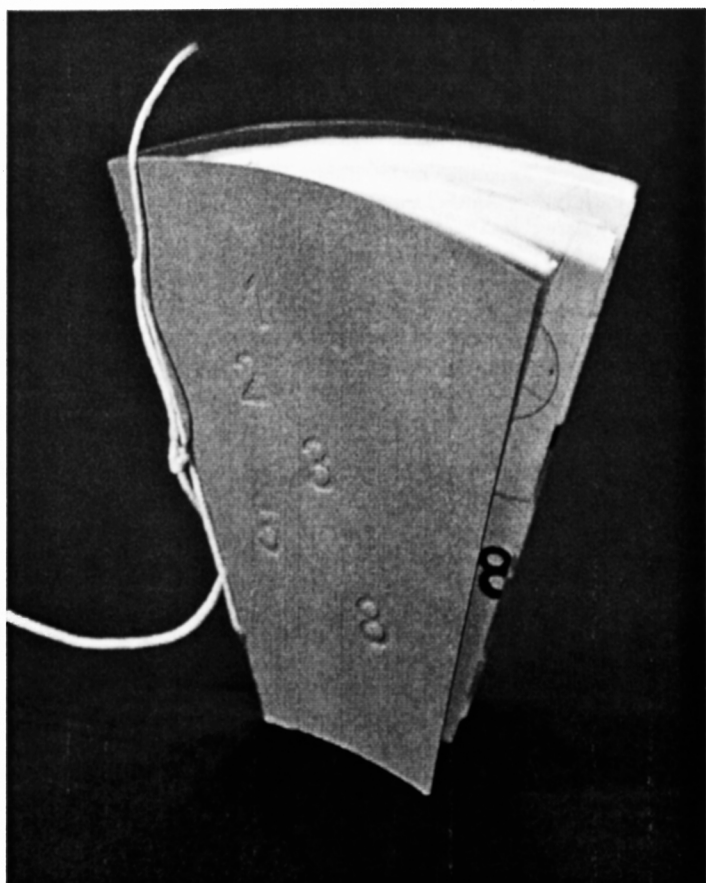
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"Fibonacci on the Prairie (closed position)"
by Mary Hammel

The Tracks Next to Ray & Ollie's

by Stephen Roger Powers

My wanderlust comes from my father,
who walked in his sleep to meet the trains.

Every night it was the same. My grandmother
heard the bells sewed to his pajamas,
wrung out her all-night-diner towel, and met him
behind the jukebox, where the stairs came down.

A week before her first stroke she told me
how my grandfather once rode the boxcars
after he ran away from the orphanage.
Maybe it was the legend of his own
father that pulled mine, blanket
over his shoulders like a Superman cape,
out of bed and outside to the tracks next door.

Early one dawn my grandmother was busy
dancing by herself to Nat King Cole, nobody
in the restaurant but her and the General,
who sat at the counter mumbling while
he re-arranged the war medals and ribbons
on his coat. She almost didn't catch my father in time.

She found him on the tracks.
He was scooping dirt in his sleep,
sifting it through his fingers, piling it
between the cracked ties in rows of little pyramids.

All that's left of their restaurant now
is one chipped saucer. My father tells me
it got that way after a penny, crushed
by a locomotive's wheel, flew through
the window. This story comes from a man who can't sleep
unless a train passes by in the night. This story
rides with me when I drive north to the lake,
the freight train of my heart opened and unloaded
tonight, rambling freely for once.

Coal, Inc.

by KB Ballentine

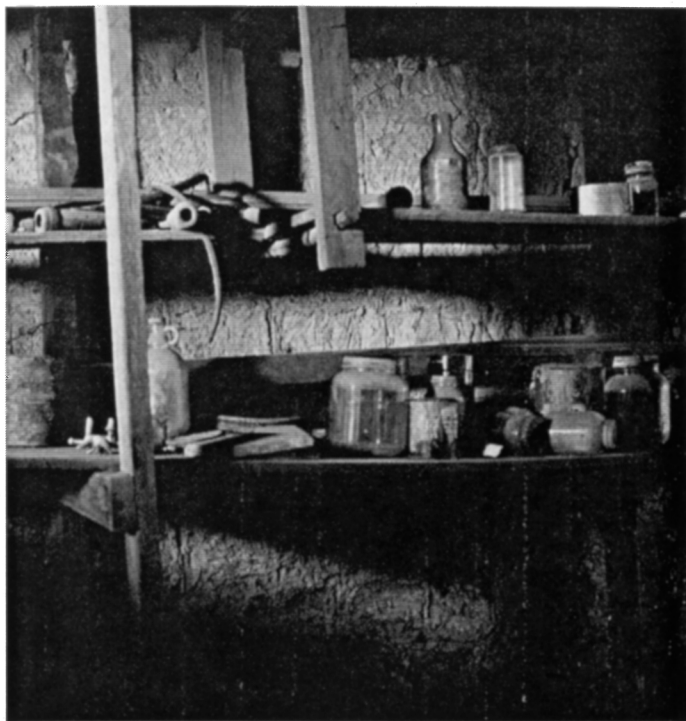
My father knew only darkness.
Six of seven days he'd swelter
in the belly of the earth,
enclosed by dirt and rock,
covered with coal dust that soaked
into the skin,
 the soul.

Coal that bled from the inside
 out and stained
the surrounding hills with rust.

At night, he rocked
the baby's cradle with blackened
hands, and after supper settled
in with sour mash.

Each morning I rose to the smell
of biscuits baking on a stove he'd stoked
and fired; Mama's stained apron fluttered
in her haste to get him out the door before
the whistle blew.

 Once, he told me
he imagined the mine's blackness
was shade cast by giant oaks
and every man's lamp was a persimmon
waiting to be picked. That's how he made it
'til the end of shift, when he'd wind his way
through the jagged maze of rocks
waiting to tear a man's hands,
 like thorns in a briar patch,
and stagger into the fading sun.



"An Old House Speaks, No. 19"
by Marydorsey Wanless

There were numerous jars left in the root cellar, most empty, but some holding treasures. There were peaches and applesauce, tomatoes and beans. There were oils, nails, and sparkplugs. There were packrat nests, spider webs, mud dabbler clusters, and of course, a dead snake.

Last Bed

by *Miranda Asebedo*

Over the perfectly polished ivory toilet, I hold open half-empty bottles of painkillers and antibiotics. I hold one orange cylinder up to the light. It makes the blue walls look brown and dark. I turn the bottle over and watch them dive, one by one, into the toilet bowl. The next bottle contains clear capsules filled with tiny colored beads like a dehydrated rainbow. Plip. Plop. Plop. It's sort of sad to see them go. I wonder, briefly, what it would be like to put a few in my pocket and take them all tonight.

I pause to listen as the gurney scrapes along the outdated wood paneling near the front door. I leave the rest of the empty bottles on the cold, immaculate sink. A few steps from the bathroom and I'm standing in the threshold of the master bedroom. From the open doorway, I can see her smoothing the sheets of our mother's last bed.

My sister Eva has shown up today. Her arrival was perfectly timed so that she could witness Mom's last few minutes on earth. She is standing over our mother's bed, looking at it as if she's not sure what it is. It's a hospital bed, I want to say, but I don't. I'd taken apart Mom's four-poster oak bed to make room. This bed is ugly and functional. The metal railings are cold, the sheets white and blank.

At last Eva turns and notices me. "I think I'll go outside for a smoke," she says, and brushes past me, her perfume following her in a slow, silky trail. I take one last look at Mom's bed. I can barely make out the imprint of her head on the pillow. A few brown strands of hair still cling to the white cotton pillowcase.

I step outside of Mom's little bungalow and see Eva sitting on the front porch, a cigarette hanging limply from her mouth. Her normally lacquered lips are bare, the only sign that she may be upset. Her face is devoid of expression, the only movement coming from the cigarette smoke that curls softly around her cheek like a caress.

"You know, smoking cigarettes will kill you," I say, watching the smoke slowly dissipate in the afternoon sun.

Eva glances up, "No kidding? I've never heard that before."

"You've got kids. Don't you want to live for them?" Mom told me when we found out that she was sick that she wanted Eva and me to be more like sisters.

A new Cadillac pulls up in the driveway behind Mom's old Taurus. The Cadillac is purple with chrome wheels and bumpers. I know as my father gets out that he is never going to get over the midlife crisis he began ten years ago. He slides out the driver's side, unfolding his long,

tan body and giving a little wave in our direction. His girlfriend, Brandi, gets out of the other side. Brandi is twenty-five, two years older than me. I asked her once if she knew she was the same age as my older sister. Brandi just smiled and asked where Eva graduated from. Maybe they went to the same alma mater. I am not sure what my father sees in her other than her breasts, which are like large golden cantaloupes.

Dad is not bad looking for a fifty-year-old man. He's handsome in a roguish sort of way and dyes his black hair to match his black goatee and never thinks about the silver chest hair that pokes out from his unbuttoned polo shirt.

From somewhere behind the house, Eva's kids come running when they hear the car. "Uncle Rex! Uncle Rex!" they scream. Apparently nothing reveals age like the title "Grandpa."

Denver and Havana throw themselves at Dad. I asked Eva once if she named her children after the location of their conception. Neither father has ever shown his face here, and each child took our last name, Ruiz. Denver is tall, at least for a third grader. He looks a little like "Uncle Rex," with coal black hair and chocolate eyes. But he could have easily gotten that from Eva. She is Dad's replica with a pageboy cut instead of what Dad refers to as "messy chic." Havana is in kindergarten, and she smiles shyly behind Denver, her looks a little less glamorous – mousy brown hair and missing front teeth.

"Say hello to Aunt Brandi," Brandi coos and reaches out for a hug. As she leans down, her breasts are barely contained in what she must have seen as a tragedy-appropriate little black halter top. Denver and Havana hang back. Denver gives a little "what's up" nod and a wave. Maybe I like these kids more than I think.

"Did they take your mom to Mortenson's Funeral Home, Cam?" Dad asks me, making his way to the porch and sitting down next to Eva on the little bench.

"Yeah." I know that I should invite them in for coffee or something, but I'd rather stay out here. Something about inviting Dad and his girlfriend into my Mom's house would feel like we were pissing on her yet-to-be dug grave.

Eva takes charge of the situation. "Why don't you guys take the kids and go to Roller Coaster World for the rest of the afternoon? That would give Cam and I a chance to sort things out, maybe get some things done."

Brandi curls her lip a little, but says nothing. "Sure," Dad says, still yearning after all these years to be the cool, hip Dad that goes along with anything.

Eva doesn't say thank you, she just herds the kids back in the house to slather them with sunscreen that she keeps in her "Mommy" bag. I stay out on the porch, noticing that the mums I brought Mom last

week are out here on the porch, dry and looking ready to die. I lean down and pinch off the dead blossoms.

"I'm really sorry about your loss," Brandi says out of the blue, as if she had just appeared now instead of ten minutes ago.

I look up from what I'm doing. "Yeah, I bet you are."

Dad seeks to counteract the currents of hate I'm trying to radiate towards Brandi with my brain. "Have you figured out where you're going to grad school yet?"

This question is meant to be supportive and interested, as if my dad has any idea what I'm doing with my life. "Dad, I haven't even gotten my undergrad. You see, I had this mother that got sick and I kind of had to quit school last semester before I graduated to take care of her." I cross my arms, wondering at my father's intelligence. "Don't you think I would have sent out an announcement or something if I'd graduated?"

Before Mom got sick, I'd had plans. I was going to get a degree, apply to grad school, finally get up the nerve to talk to the cute guy in my Philosophy of Religion class. But Mom's illness had sucked all of that away from me. Mom had sucked all of that away from me. I remembered that as I tended her, day in and day out. And the guilt ate away at my insides as I read to her from her favorite Danielle Steel novel when the meds made her eyes grow blurry and weak and she could no longer do it on her own.

Dad shrugs off my question.

Brandi thinks of something. I can tell because her eyes are scrunching up. "You should really go back to school. It's important to get a good education." Brandi knows, of course, because she took dance classes before she became an exotic dancer. Now that she is with my father she is retired, except for bachelor parties and the occasional bar mitzvah.

"Thanks for the advice."

Eva comes back outside, her two children in tow. I have to admit, Eva is a pretty good mom. Her kids are heavily coated with SPF 45 and each clutches a lightweight jacket in case it gets cooler. Early October boasted a few gloriously beautiful afternoons that died in slowly chilling evenings. "We're ready, Uncle Rex," Havana chirps. I see these children three times a year: Christmas, Thanksgiving and Easter. Each time they can do something new, like walk or talk or do long division, but each time they become a little more familiar, a little more endearing.

Havana reminds me of my mom. Mom had that mousy brown hair and fair complexion from some undetermined European descent, but it is her eyes that give her away. They are green and sharp and always assessing. They focus on Dad, and I can see that she knows who he is. Even at the tender age of five she is already beginning to question "Uncle Rex."

Eva waves to the purple Cadillac as it pulls out of the drive. I turn and go back inside the house. Mom bought this house with the money her parents left her after they passed away ten years ago. This was around the time Dad left Mom. I lived with her, but Eva chose to stay with Dad until she graduated from high school and moved away to Denver.

The house is small and quiet, smelling of potpourri and Pledge furniture polish. I walk over to the dining room table which is positioned in the nonexistent dining room between the kitchen and the living room. Mom's will lays out on the table.

Eva follows me in. She lets the screen door slam behind her, something Mom would hate. "You know she made me the executor of the will."

"Yeah. You're the oldest." I try not to chafe at this. I have not even read the damn thing. It seems too soon to be going through this all right now.

"Are you mad?" Eva sits down at the table, takes the will in her hands and opens it up. There is a lit cigarette burning slowly between her fingers.

"What the hell are you doing?" I ask, ripping the cigarette out from between her fingers and burning my own in the process. "Don't smoke in here." I make it to the kitchen sink in three quick steps and wash the cigarette down garbage disposal.

"Why not? It's my house." Eva holds out the will in my direction.

The cigarette is still smoking from down inside the drain pipe, so I run some more water in the sink. Eva's words register slowly. Her face is again expressionless. I want to hit it. "What do you mean, it's your house?" I know what she means, but I don't want to say it out loud.

"Mom left the house to me."

"What? Are you sure?" I had lived with Mom all through the divorce, through high school, and then through college. I had driven the thirty miles to campus when she said she couldn't bear the idea of living alone. And she left the house to my sister.

"I'm sure, Cam. I can read, you know. You don't have to go to college to learn how."

I take the will from her hands. It is true. Mom left Eva Ruiz the house and all its contents. She named me, Cambria Ruiz, the sole benefactor of her life insurance policy, totaling \$100,000.

"I don't know why you're upset," Eva says, fumbling through her purse for another cigarette. She holds her lighter in her hand loosely, and I take that, too, and put it in my jeans pocket. She seems not to notice. She keeps digging in her purse. "I'd much rather have the money than this rotting old house. I looked it up, you know. The value on this house in this crappy little town in the middle of nowhere is only

about \$40,000. There's no way I'll even get that. The whole place needs rewiring; it's settling, too. I had a contractor look at the place and he could spot places where the drywall was cracking in your bedroom because of the settling."

"You had a contractor here?" I think I can feel the air around us slowly constricting on my brain. I want to explode, hear the resounding echo somewhere in Taiwan.

"Yeah, last week I had a guy come up while you and Mom were at the hospital."

I remember the appointment. The doctor had said, "Just make her as comfortable as possible, Cambria. There's not much more you can do for her." The cancer had spread too far. It was eating her bones, her kidneys and stomach. It had raced hungrily through her body long before she made an appointment for her yearly checkup. We had driven home quietly, my mother doped up on pain pills and me fighting the tears that pricked the backs of my eyes like sharp needles. Eva had still not come home.

"Come on," Eva says, interrupting. "Let's go down to Mortenson's and see what needs to be done."

I nod, still wondering about the contractor. Still wondering about Eva. Eva drives us to Mortenson's Funeral Home in her Lexus. She is dating her boss. He is fifteen years her senior and is a top lawyer in a Kansas City firm. Eva does the filing there. Having two kids has done nothing to widen her ass or soften her good looks. She has had a continuous string of men since she moved to Colorado, which is when she got pregnant with Denver. Eva is nothing if not likable. She's witty and beautiful and can adapt herself to any situation. I have always admired her, if not for her good looks, for her resourcefulness. When she was pregnant with Denver, she got a gig modeling maternity clothes. When she dated her first lawyer while pregnant with Havana, she learned to do the filing for his law firm. She's been steadily employed ever since.

Mortenson's is a beautiful white stone building, as if it were some kind of heavenly satellite location. Roses and vines climb over the archway that leads to the heavy wooden front doors. On the steps, Michael Mortenson himself waits for us, as if his entire life has been leading up to this moment. He smiles when we get to the threshold, presses his cool hands around mine and then Eva's, murmuring soothing generic words of sympathy.

We follow him to his office, passing sober floral displays in muted fall colors around a large fireplace made of white stone. We sit at his desk, and Michael shows us swatches for the silk that will line Mom's casket.

All I can think about as Eva discusses with Michael the benefits and

disadvantages of plum versus ivory silk, is that the house will soon be my sister's. I clean the gutters of that house every spring and fall. I grew up there, from the age of twelve, mostly alone with my mother. It was our place. Eva had visited occasionally, mostly on Sundays during the summer. Even then, Eva had shown little interest in the house. Dad's place was bigger and located in a town with a mall.

Mom raised me in that house. It was small and cramped, but we were happy, I had thought. I know that Eva will sell the house. She won't want to move from Kansas City and her boyfriend, the lawyer. I will have to move out. I will have to watch the market as she sells it to a stranger who will most likely tear it down and build anew. Or even worse, I will be wrong and Eva will move in. She'll put up new drywall and paper and paint and tear out Mom's seventies shag carpet and till up her perennial garden. Everything of Mom's will be gone and it will be worse because Eva did it herself.

"What do you think?" Eva asks me, holding two swatches of silk.

"Plum. Mom liked plum." I look at Eva again and see that she is debating between two different pieces of ivory.

"Fine. Plum it is."

"The service will be Saturday, at two o'clock," Michael tells us. Saturday is in two days.

On the ride home Eva and I are quiet. I miss my mom. It doesn't seem to make sense to say it out loud, though. Everyone already knows. Six months of preparation for her death seemed to do little to dull the pain, but I feel like it somehow should have. Eva doesn't look at me the whole way home.

* * * *

When we get back to the house, Dad and Brandi and the kids are already there. Dad's Cadillac is parked in the driveway again, so we must park at the curb. The Cadillac needs to be near the front window so that he can look out and check on it from time to time.

"Cam, hon," Dad says as we come in, "I ordered pizza from Tony's downtown. Do you and the girls want to go pick it up? You can drive my new Caddy." He tosses me the keys like it's some great privilege to drive the purple beast.

"I'll go, too," Brandi announces, bouncing up from my father's lap. "I could use the fresh air."

I stare at her, hoping she'll change her mind. She doesn't. I grab a jean jacket from the closet and put it on. In the driveway, we slide into the purple Cadillac. It starts right up and I back out of the driveway, eyeing my old beige Corolla that's parked on the street with disdain as we pass by it.

The drive to Tony's is quiet. I carefully pull up to the curb at Tony's Pizza and Pub, listening with a satisfied smirk as I inch closer, closer, until the underside of the Cadillac's chrome bumper scrapes heavily against the cement. I back up just to hear the sound again as we pull away. Brandi's eyes widen at the sound. We get out of the car and walk around to the front. Dad's low-riding bumper is now bent in at the bottom, the chrome crinkled and scratched.

"Oh, my God, Rex is gonna die," Brandi laughs. "This is so freaking hilarious." She pulls a lip gloss out of her designer purse and applies it using her reflection in the crinkled bumper.

It is hilarious; I try to laugh, but the sound comes out forced and dry.

The pizza place is packed, and the guy at the counter says it will be a few minutes until our pizzas are done. We grab a couple stools at the bar up front next to a couple off-duty cops. I order a beer. Brandi looks hard at the bartender for a moment before ordering a Shirley Temple.

"Do you need to see my ID?" she asks.

The bartender smiles and shakes his head no.

I turn to Brandi in disgust. "A Shirley Temple isn't even alcoholic."

"I know," she says with a shrug. "But he thought it was cute. How do you think I landed your father?" She teases her hair at the roots and gives a little shake of her head right before the bartender gives us our drinks. Brandi gives him a pouty smile.

He grins in return. "Drinks on the house, ladies."

"See?" Brandi says. "A girl can live on what God gave her if she's smart."

Brandi doesn't look so dumb anymore.

* * * *

When we get back to the house, neither Brandi nor I say anything about Dad's Cadillac. Dinner is quiet. Denver and Havana are tired after their day at the amusement park and Dad seems to be, too. He doesn't say anything, but I can tell that he is not as young as he pretends to be. I take the plates into the kitchen and begin to rinse them off in the sink. They are murmuring in the living room, but I can't make out what they say. I smell smoke. I drop the dish I am holding in the sink with a loud crash. I run into the living room, see Dad and Eva sitting on the couch smoking cigarettes.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

A tinkling sound of gently colliding porcelain comes from the foyer, and my eyes immediately find Brandi going through Mom's china cabinet. Mom had collected teapots and teacups since she was a little girl. Some of those she had come from her grandmother's collection.

"What's going on?" I ask Brandi.

"I liked some of these. I thought maybe we could use them for the baby shower." Brandi places a hand on her flat belly.

My eyes widen. Dad comes in puts an arm around Brandi. "We weren't going to say anything, since your Mom passed away and all. We were going to wait a little while to make the announcement." He pats Brandi on the head and gives her a look of disapproval.

"Congratulations," Eva says without missing a beat. "You're welcome to whatever you'd like from Mom's things. I'll just have to auction them off in a few weeks anyway."

"You're going to sell everything?" I ask. "Mom loved those tea sets. You can't give them to Brandi. She hated Brandi. And Dad, for that matter." I turn to look at him, "What are you even still doing here?" I ask him.

Mom had hoped for years that Dad would get over his midlife crisis and come back to her. She'd kept out our family photos from when Eva and I were little and always set an extra place at the table when Dad would drop Eva off for the weekend in the summer. When Brandi had come into the picture three years ago, Mom had taken down her and Dad's wedding photos from the wall without a word to me and quietly put them in her bedroom closet.

Eva answers before anyone else. "It's my stuff, Cam. I'll do whatever I want with it." She licks her lips and I can see something I haven't seen before. She ashes her cigarette in the glass tumbler on the end table.

I want to hate her. I want to hate her for giving these things away in front of me just to watch the pain on my face. I know that I can take it all away from her. "I'll buy it. All of it. I'll give you the life insurance money."

Eva smiles. I can see that she has gotten what she wants. I look around the house, at these people that call themselves family. They are all strangers.

"Why don't we go back to the hotel?" Dad asks, herding everyone else toward the door. I watch him put his cigarette out in Mom's tumbler.

They leave the house. I hear a muffled curse as Dad notices his bumper. The Cadillac's headlights cut patterns of light against Mom's lace curtains in the living room as Dad backs out of the driveway.

Alone in the house, I go back to Mom's bedroom. The hospital bed is gone. Someone must have come while Eva and I were away. In the closet, I find the family photos. At some point in time, Mom has divided them into two piles—Cambria's pile and Eva's pile. In Eva's pile, she put the wedding photos of herself and Dad as well as photos of Eva and Dad at their house at Eva's birthday parties and high school graduation.

My pile of photos were all taken from this house. They are all of me by myself because Mom was the one taking the picture. There is one of just our heads where Mom is holding the camera with one arm as far away from her body as she can to get a picture of us together. I think I was sixteen in the photo. My hair is pinned up in ringlets. I think it may have been my junior prom.

* * * *

At midnight, I am still sitting alone in the house. I have not turned any lights on. There doesn't seem to be any point. I know the house without seeing it.

A car stops in front of the house. Its headlights cast shredded shadows through the curtains. I think it is a taxi. Someone stumbles up the porch steps and opens the front door. The living room light switches on and it is Eva. Her eyes are bloodshot beneath her perfectly straight black bangs. She walks up to me, her steps a little unsure on Mom's plush carpet. I know even before I smell her breath that she is completely wasted. When she speaks, it's like someone is throwing a martini in my face. "I decided not to sell you the house." She says this like it completely explains everything, her motives included.

I want to slap her, but it is too clear to me that she never meant to sell the house to me in the first place. I just nod, and she looks disappointed. She swallows a couple times. "I think I'm going to puke," she says.

I help her to the bathroom. I hold my sister's hair back from her face as she retches over Mom's perfectly polished toilet. The smell is almost overwhelming, but I focus instead on the floral wall paper above the sink. When Eva is done, I help her up and call a taxi for her while she wipes her mouth with her sleeve. I send the taxi back to her hotel, where hopefully Dad is waiting with her kids.

* * * *

When Saturday comes, I am still alone. I haven't left the house in two days. Eva has not called. My dad has not called. I think Brandi came by once and took a tea pot and matching cups.

When the clock strikes two, the funeral home has still not sent a white sedan to pick me up. I know that Eva has instructed them to come to her hotel instead of Mom's house. The phone rings and I don't answer it. I can hear Dad's voice on the answering machine somewhere far away.

I take a shower and make a sandwich. Afterwards, I walk down to the gas station and fill up the gas jug for the lawn mower. Mom's grass

has needed cut for a long time. I just haven't gotten around to it. The neighborhood is empty. They have all gone to my mother's funeral.

When I get back, the house is still empty and dark. I get out the lawn mower from the shed and push it up by the front porch.

I still have Eva's lighter in my jeans pocket.

I make a careful circle around the house, slowly pouring the gasoline out along its foundation, leaving a trail like expensive perfume. I change my mind about the mums on the porch and move them to the hood of my car that is parked on the street. I take Eva's lighter and ignite the gasoline. It glows merrily for a brief moment and then begins to race around the house, following the trail. I take a few steps back and watch the flames lick up the pillars on the front porch. The light from the fire reflects off of the dark windows, and I am alone.



"Generations"
by Mary Hammel

Originally composed for a lesson on digital montage, "Generations" became a personal essay on the interrelatedness of three generations. As a mother and a daughter, I find myself in this intermediate place in life, where my daughter represents the future while my mother symbolizes the past. So I placed each of us within our own doorways, using light and shadow to create depth and enhance the tension I sometimes feel in this midlife status, stuck in the in-between.

Bacchus in the Kitchen

by Alicia Oltuski

My parents are aspiring alcoholics. When I come home from college, my mother shows me a dishtowel they bought that says *Wine is the answer; I don't remember the question*, and it has become their motto.

It is something they undertake together, a concerted project in leisure, which my family has never been very good at. My father drinks a bottle of wine a night and my mother a half, though she has the coffee to negate it and still gets twice as drunk, as though she is naturally flimsy, just waiting to be set off in one direction or the other. The word *tipsy* was made for her.

Laughing and crying were never so close as in my mother. When he's smashed, my father does a perfect German accent in English (it is only she who has one, in sobriety), and he can make her laugh by aping her elocution, and usually she giggles, but sometimes she cries, and it is a while before he can incline her in the other direction.

My parents believe their heightened tolerance comes from their German nationality, their parenthetical Russian genes. The labels in our home are cheap but transnational. We don't know much about them, other than that, like my mother and father, they've come from somewhere else.

Because it is my mother's apartment, even drinking is something beautiful. She buys restaurant glasses in bulk, and my father pretends to be the sommelier, twisting his wrist at the right time, though later in the evening, things get spilled despite the fact. They stop the bottles with suction corks that have nude statuettes at their tops so that they are too tall to fit in the soda section of our fridge and must go with the important foods.

My parents are old friends when they're drunk. Sometimes, they even lie down together, then conceal the evidence, as though it was something foolish and impossible to do, and they don't want to deal with the permanent repercussions implied. And as always, the party begins only after I leave.

In some ways, they give themselves away as amateur alcoholics. My mother will order a glass of wine when everyone's already getting up to leave a restaurant, and it will complicate the bill. They are decorous in their efforts. My father dramatically tops her glass and his, and then their buzzes hit like inspiration. If it is anything other than wine, my mother still dilutes. Sprite and orange juice stand half used by the time they go bad, because they've always only been a quarter of a drink.

The problem is, they've started to imagine themselves growing old together, growing alone together, and this is what they see: no Germans and no coffeehouses. Two adults drinking wine is a more viable picture. My father, who is into photography, sees his life in slides and features, and decides what is acceptable to him by what would be acceptable in a gallery show. I'll tell you this much—a gallery show has a higher tolerance than real life does.

Meanwhile, though, they enlist others. My younger sisters have started to drink. They celebrate my parents' anniversary with one and a half cups each of champagne.

We have always been a part of our parents' marriage. It is something they don't want to be in alone. They invited us into their bed as small children, as if to say, "Don't leave us." This is the way we always sat in the movie theatre: my sister Felice, who liked to be independent, then my sister Romy, then my mother, then me, then my father. Sometimes, my father would ask me to pass a joke to my mother, some commentary on the movie, as though we were playing an epic game of telephone. They let us, invited us, to get between them. And even now, it feels as though they are each more married to me than to each other. How can I have Oedipal feelings when they practically give themselves over?

There are vast points of entry into their marriage. Sometimes, my father and I stand fixating on perils my mother cannot even begin to understand (mad cow disease, lime disease, herpes). Or we watch strange, inappropriate movies. "I hate that word," my father says. For him, inappropriate is when you use a spoon to cut chicken.

We must be drunk. We spend money on car services to school and then say we cannot afford to pay for a forty-dollar textbook, and we stay up late, as a family, talking about other people's children.

We must be drunk to go to a Jewish school, to walk into the rabbi's office and say, "We are Zionistic but have no intention of keeping the Sabbath and never will." To say that to the Orthodox rabbi. And then, years later, he must know when he comes to teach family purity, that my parents are impure, that I was born of impurity, that in the summers, we go back to Germany. They call their New York synagogue the German synagogue, but they mean Germans in the eighteenth century sense of the word. Before you-know-what and you-know-who.

There are no confidentialities in our family. We are not successfully airtight, as families are meant to be, keeping our secrets to ourselves, clustering and knowing them together, a joint conspiracy on the world. My father tells people that his parents were first cousins before they were spouses. He admits that he is thinking of getting some help to clean up my sister's rickety stutter, as though it were a leak in our bathroom.

And there are no confidentiality within—not parent from child, child from parent. I tell my father which boys I would like to kiss, and my mother tells me she believes she might be pregnant again, but hopes she isn't. It's been five years, the standard in our family. That she is an iota disappointed when the suspicion is put to rest is something—the only thing—she will not reveal.

We are like Noah, exposed on the roof the ship, only my parents resist the plea to get dressed. Quite literally. My father likes to lounge around in his briefs, and sometimes even worse.

When people get drunk and they get up and divulge everything—that is us. Please let us be drunk.

Their anniversary is a hoot. My father, who is a jeweler, makes a show of presenting my mother with a pair of earrings he knows are ugly (then why does he own them?), and she pretends to pretend to like them but says she can't wear bronze in her ears—they'll swell right up, and my father starts cracking up and kissing her simultaneously, and whips out a second box, a ring, and slides it onto her finger, and gets it on in almost one try. Everyone is so taken by the joke that they don't notice her asking me if I like it, holding it out farther in front of her eyes, as though it is a fine type and she's forgotten her reading glasses, which she never wears. My mother prefers sunglasses indoors, which makes her look like a movie star, and has an on-and-off pimple that looks like a beauty mark on the best spot right above the lip. I have always thought my parents could couple with anyone in the universe.

When he's put the decoy gift away, my father says, "Should you and Uri have the marriage that we do," and Uri smiles politely, and I say, Amen, because it is a Jewish holiday, and you can't be choosy with your blessings.

What will happen when we leave (it is a curiosity more than a concern)? They spaced us five years apart each, to prolong the presence of children in the home. This is where the German jokes come in. Five years a piece. They are really not as efficient as they seem to be. Sure, my father was a great believer in manuals, including the Bible. And my mother is tormented by the presence of a crumb on our spotted marble kitchen (it is as though she's set up an impossible obstacle course for herself that she goes through daily), but that, other than the red lists and the black lists and the long term and short term lists, that is as far as it goes.

Compared to Americans, Germans don't work. My father, for whom going to the office was a daily affront, allowed me to skip first period, which was prayer.

"God will understand," he says.

My mother finds prayer altogether an imposition, as though I don't attend a Jewish school. She is used to Zionism, as they told the rabbi. In Germany, they practiced army formations and then went out for coffee and cake, and that was Jewish youth Saturdays. God did not hover as much.

We skip prayer and work and my parents concoct doctors' notes for me, and I am left with many vague diseases of the body and the mind. I mumble the lines we rehearse at home, and I can tell the school office knows it's my parents.

Our family doesn't participate in the boycotts the Jewish school calls for—German cars, German stationary, American companies that have expressed hostility towards the young Jewish State. (Our car, our Jeep, was the first great offense America committed against my parents. My father missed his succession of economical German cars, the cheapest of which was healthy enough to graze the upper hundreds on the autobahn. Some people don't have enough to eat, or enough space. What my father lacked was movement. But my classmates' parents boycotted German cars most of all, as though VW themselves had transported the Jews.) Anything, just anything, could enter our home—Saddam Hussein's line of perfume—and we wouldn't care.

My mother is anti-anti. She prefers proposals to prohibitions ("Love thy neighbor," not "Do not steal"). In addition to Jewish day schools, America is an institution that thrives off of proscription. Children, all children in America, are still living in the prohibition era. It is at times like the ones when my father reminds her she could get arrested for allowing her children to have even a sip from her Chianti in New York, that I could tell she regrets the move.

"I like it when the children drink," she says at our table. America the prude. America the pious. My parents don't buy into hysteric embargos.

They are implicated. Venona has decrypted their German asses.

They are everyone's criminals. My mother wears fur to the animal hospital when we bring a hamster to be examined, then put to sleep, and the whole time (like the time she says it's okay to change by the open showers on the beach and we strip to our skin), we don't notice until the very end that everyone is staring.

We have not yet lost our sense of strategy. My parents keep a foldable game of chess in their bedroom, as though it were a covert, partly discreditable diversion. I sometimes come in late at night and see them, my father staring at the board as though performing mentalist activities. The suit jacket he is wearing looks to constrict his arm from movement. His clothing is stiff as canvas, because he buys it in a German store that declares its clothes stay fresh for eons. I always find it depressing that

his suits were built to last longer than his diamonds.

In their bedroom, he is explaining to my mother why she is going to lose the game. "That wasn't smart," he says, then proceeds to take over the region.

When I am older, I am let into this world of tactic. My father and I play chess, and I understand what it is to be told you are going to lose all that you've built.

"Checkmate." He says it kindly, but with the knowledge that I am bound to be checked; put in my place.

There is still hierarchy in our household, in the most outward of ways. "I am still the boss," my father says if my sister contests his safety rules.

"You are a target," he tells us. Hershey Park has arranged for Jew Day over Passover vacation (they bring in wheat free snack vendors for our kosher-for-Passover enjoyment), and he is disallowing us to go. One bomb and they've nailed five hundred at once. We avoid large fun Jewish activities.

I think our fear of a volatile world had to do with the fact that we believed the melodrama of our household transcribed onto the rest of the universe. We didn't model our habits after TV or pop culture, rather fashioned the world in the image of ourselves.

And things could be volatile. My parents were into role-play long before it ever came onto the pages of popular magazines, gentle little suggestions of candy strippers noted for reading and acting pleasure. In our home, my father went from educator to despot in a matter of minutes. My mother called him tyrant, dictator—her vocabulary towards him was one of oppression, and his towards her was one of microscopic parasitism. "You get into my sensitive spots and you tear."

The fights never lasted more than a day, but while their outbursts happened before us, their reconciliations were always private, again, the devices of peacekeeping forever inaccessible to us.

It is always like this; my sisters and I distract each other from the falling apart of our universe, and already in the kitchen, my father is entertaining my mother with a joke.

In a land of devoutness, my parents consider themselves great champions of the id. They don't believe in curbing our food intake. Standing before the glow of our refrigerator (it has a front compartment that opens out like a wet bar) you can find anything calorific. For us, the fast on Yom Kippur is not so much a product of the day's gravity, as the gravity is a product of fasting.

They like double nougat. They like Pedro Almodóvar. They like Madonna. In our living room hangs a modernist interpretation of Adam and Eve. Adam has a huge dick, and Eve's breasts dangle with nipples

like bull's eyes. The only small thing in the picture is the snake, which wilts between them, hardly a factor in the decision of what they are going to do. The apple is only a peripheral icon on the side of the print; they are up to juicier things.

Sometimes, their sense of enjoyment gets in the way of the law. When the neighbors below us complain of noise, my parents decide to hire an attorney rather than comply with the board's rule to cover a percentage of our grounds with carpet. "I want my floors," is my mother's reason.

We function with a subjectivism so strong our framework starts to melt like the leaky clocks of a Dali painting. And yet my parents' surrealism is constantly supported by reality, even my father, who deals with hard, real things as a profession. Their friends seem to work imaginary jobs. One man, the husband of my father's ex-girlfriend from Germany manages a company that makes metal vats to hold hot metals. When metals are being melted, they need to go somewhere. Then what about the metal vats? His job is an exercise in infinity. Another friend builds a series of German countryside hotels to look like fairy tale castles. In the summer, we visit his estates and there is no one living in them- they are too unreal.

"Beautiful," says my mother, the critic. "To live here." She often speaks in half sentences, as though they are topics for discussion, meant to prompt, rather than complete, thoughts.

It is not their lives through which they cipher beauty. Sometimes, they talk about the loveliness of other people's children. "Light hair and dark eyes is a nice combination," my mother says, as though she is choosing the elements of a design.

It is also not their lives they must feel better about directly, but my parents are very affected by the suffering of others, of their friends (all of them, for example are divorced. "How did we all end up like this?" my mother asks; you can see she empathizes intensely). And this is what brings alcohol to their lips. Wine helps with the vicarious pain of people they know. To ease the pain of their friend Yerje's alcoholism, they toast small inconsequential things. "There are no such things as things too small," my mother says when we shop at Duty-Free.

When I come home from college, I know my parents' friends are not doing well, because we are on a regular refill plan with the liquor store on York Avenue, and the wine is getting nicer.

But alcohol has not yet become the rubric by which they organize their lives. For my mother, it is the phrases of music on her piano scores, for my father it is organization itself. There he is in the kitchen, applying permanent marker items to his list for tomorrow on a legal pad, frustrated with the format the next day has taken on. His ways of saving

time are time consuming. And before he is finished, my mother comes in from the living room—our piano room—to announce that she is off limits for the night.

Kristen Bailey

by Tracy Tucker

Kristen Bailey has bad dreams now,
And she can't tell her husband,
And so she tells me —
"I never had a choice!"
But I remember:

How the picketers lined the walk,
Shouting "Murder!"
And showing pictures,
Lambs after slaughter;

And how she squeezed my fingers
Tight around her borrowed fifties
As she pulled me, feet first,
Through the pointing crowd;

And when the doctor said,
"No option, this late,"
And passed round triplicate forms,
Signed without reading,
Eyes just testing the keen-edged words
Dilation — Extraction —
Intrauterine Cranial Decompression;

And how,
After the Pitocin flowed,
After the silence was broken
By surgical steel and a vacuum
Cleaning up her little mess,
I remember crying,
And how she told me,
"Don't be such a baby."

For the past week my gut swaddled a dead embryo

by Cindy Childress

An ultrasound revealed this truth.

The doctor showed me the tiny form
on the picture,
and it seemed to be a tumor.

I didn't mind that it died,
just that it was still inside me.

For the first time
I felt its foreign presence
like an opportunity
discovered after expired,
or the realization
that one escaped danger
without knowing.

I was sent home
to miscarry naturally

so alone in my bedroom
I ate pistachio ice cream

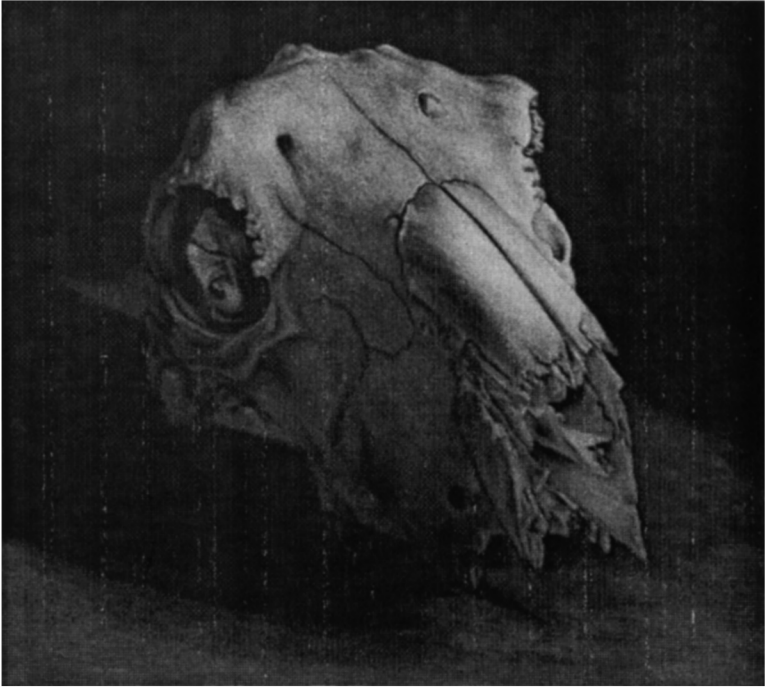
seven days straight
and waited

for absolutely nothing.

In the Graveyard at Night, and Alone

by Jericho Hockett

Enter not
as the dead enter
with somber processions of shiny new black cars
full of crying friends and relatives
loud and mechanical and at odds.
Instead, sneak in quietly at night
hand in hand with solitude.
Leave the streetlight's processed orange buzz
for the silent grey eye of the moon
and for the soft granite eyes reflecting her eye,
tombstone eyes
like sleepless lovers
side by side
eyes shining in the dark.
Walk the hills sloping like the dead
or the sleeping
slope in bed, hills like blanket-covered bodies,
nude underneath.
See how darkness greets with a lingering kiss
the mausoleum's mouth,
before they discretely steal away into
the tomb's private depths.
Keep to the paths well-marked by trees,
limbs still shaking
from passionate trysts with upper breezes.
Then you sneak out the way you came,
and promise solitude that you'll return.



"Skull"
by Stephanie Somers

"Skull" is a mezzotint, which is a printmaking method that does not use any chemicals.

The 90-Second Goodbye

by Robert Hayhurst

I was only 23—it was my birthday—and when they unloaded him off the chopper, I knew he was dying.

We were standing by when the helos thrummed in low over the trees. We crowded around the landing pads like ants clustered around something sweet that had been dropped in the soil.

We triaged those boys, bleeding and numb with pain, eyes rolled back in their heads, their brains shutting themselves off to reality. We ran back and forth, sectioned them off, him here, that one there, those two with me, that one with her, you take this one; he's not going to live. It was like a pronouncement, a declaration, a judgement.

He's not going to live.

I was a virgin in every sense. So they gave him to me. He was dying; I couldn't fail him. They gave him to me because I couldn't kill him. I was an unqualified virgin.

But no virgin is spared.

There had been futile attempts to wrap his injuries, but his whole body was a gaping wound, like a bloody maw. He had been dismantled. He was missing so much of himself. He bled onto the ground. They pumped him full of morphine and put him on a cot and he saturated the green canvas with his blood till it was black. On the underside of the canvas, the blood was congealing into the center, and it dripped onto the ground with a rapidity and a tick tick tick-ing sound that made my stomach hitch and I thought I might vomit.

I breathed rapidly and deeply and put my hand on his head.

All of us girls had made a promise to those boys. We wouldn't let them die alone. Whether it was their last moment of existence before the darkness or their farewell to this existence and the threshold to the next, we held them.

I ran my fingers through his hair. It was soaked with sweat. It was as if his body were turning inside out. Every part of himself — his blood, his sweat, his organs, his flesh — was being expunged, expelled, left on the ground to fertilize fields in a land that received too much rain.

His eyes snapped open suddenly, as if he were awakening from a nightmare.

"Where am I? Am I in country?"

"You're at the hospital."

"Am I home?"

"No, but you're with me."
He breathed laboriously. I could hear blood gurgling in his lungs.
"I think I'm dying."
I took his hand. "I know. I'm with you."
In the chaos, someone called out, "Marie!"
He grabbed me. "Don't leave me, Marie."
"I'm not Marie. I'm not leaving you."
His hand gripped mine, and I felt guilty that he was expending the last of his strength on me. "Marie, please stay with me."
"I'm staying."
He looked up into my eyes then, and he seemed to see me for the first time. "You're an angel," he said softly. "I'm dying."
I bent down close to him. "I know, sweetheart. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."
"I'm scared."
"It'll be all right."
His voice grew urgent, as if I hadn't believed him. He nodded quickly. "I'm really scared."
"Do you want me to get a priest?"
"Marie!" He grabbed my arm and pulled me down to him. "You've got to stay with me!"
"Okay," I whispered. "I'll stay."
"We might have known each other," he said, and his voice sounded like he was far away. "We might have been friends." He looked in my eyes again. "You're so beautiful. Please hold me."
I looked at him. His body was wrecked. I was afraid to touch him. I was afraid a brush of my hand would extinguish him.
"Please," he said. "I'm dying. Please hold me tight."
I bent over and took him in my arms and held him. I felt his warm blood soaking through my uniform, wetting my skin.
"I'm an artist, Marie," he whispered in my ear. "A painter." He whispered quickly now, funneling his words into my ear, as if he had so much to say and so little time. "And I play guitar. I'm not a soldier. I have this thing for French vanilla ice cream. I never even fell in love." He paused. "I'm someone you might have liked."
"I like you," I whispered.
His voice was soft as sand. "Kiss me," he said quietly.
"What's your name?"
"Jonathan," he said and smiled. "Kiss me and remember me. My name's Jonathan," he repeated, his eyes closing, the smile soft and smooth on his lips.
I bent forward. My lips were so dry. I pushed my tongue through their soft flesh, wetting them. I brushed his cheeks with my fingers, then

kissed his lips gently. "A woman loved you before you died," I whispered. I felt hot tears running down my cheeks.

And my lips. Touching his. Felt numb. Bloodless.

I felt his body soften in my arms. His hands loosened their grip on my sleeves. His head slowly turned to one side. As though he were casually looking at something. A slow, half-interested gesture. As though he were lying out in the sun, on some seashore, and something had caught his sleepy attention. A crab glittering sideways, perhaps. A child with a shovel and a yellow pail of sand.

A hollow ache, like a gentle pressure, filled my chest. I looked at his face. Handsome, gentle features beneath the grime of oil and coagulating blood. Gentle waves in his hair that I imagined were wild tangles in his boyhood. Lips slightly parted, like when he secretly kissed his mirror, I thought, pretending it was a girl. Or when he slept.

I was thankful that his eyes were closed. There is a dignity in sleep. A disconnection. Some kind of transcendence. So much better than the blank, unrecognizing stare of dead white eyes.

A hand touched my shoulder. A voice said, "Let him go. He's gone."

I stroked his wet hair. "No. I'm staying with him."

Strange, but soon I couldn't hear anything anymore.

In Death's Library

by Jonathan Frazzell

It is a quiet room.

What volumes line the dusty shelves
in Death's Library?

A favored book, poem, essay or story give glimpses of the soul,
and to know Death is our secret desire.

But we must wonder
does Death have a soul
or merely collect them?

Our eyes seek solace in the room, wandering faded bindings and yellowed pages
of bygone eras.

No works of Hemmingway, nor Shaw, Dickens, other authors of repute,
but names upon names those titles proclaim.

Opening one...
and then
another.

Blank pages greet our eyes.

All are volumes in Death's library
Yet offer nothing within their texts.

Perhaps it is our own souls that should cause us worry.



"An Old House Speaks, No. 13"
by Marydorsey Wanless

Scrolls of old wallpaper found on the upstairs porch. There were seven layers of wallpaper in the living room, depicting the tastes and styles of the times.

Detour Ahead

by Lance Turner

There's enough work going on in this town." This is the sentiment uttered by my Grandmother as she sits in the faded blue passenger seat of my 1991 Dodge Spirit, listening to "Life Is A Highway." The Labor Day weekend had brought beautiful weather reminiscent of both a spring day where the yellow blooms of the mums in the front garden of my parent's house, my house, are beginning to open and the approaching autumn that will soon see leaves swept up into the lawnmower. The air had filled the body with a childhood vigor that would not allow one to return to the confines of a home without longing for more exposure to the sunshine. Tuesday, however, brings about the stinging heat of summer as I pick up Grandma and drive to Mowery Clinic. Her leg is bothering her, it is swelling, and the heat radiating from the interior of the car causes discomfort to both of us until the air conditioner puts out a sufficient breeze. But the heat's presence still remains as it has caused the glue and duct tape on the plastic molding on the inside of the front driver's and passenger's doors to come unstuck and sag. As I drop Grandma off, I hope she does not pull it down as her hands grab onto the door frame in order to hoist herself out of the car.

She is right, though. There is far too much construction. In less than two miles we passed three signs claiming that there was utility work ahead, although no one was working or even present at three p.m. But utility work is one thing. Construction is another. Utility work comes and goes as it pleases, packing up soon after it is begun, but construction work is laborious and unending, fixed in a particular location for weeks, months, or even dreaded years into the future, which leaves an all too familiar presence on daily rituals.

Whether it is a light sprinkling of water streaking through the highway dust coating the hood, a downpour of drops so massive that the windshield wipers swaying back and forth successfully create a blurred vision of the gray road, snow, ice, the ping of hail, a strong wind advisory that overturns a semi-truck near Exit 260 on I-70, an artificial dawn created by a bolt of lightning, or even a twister touching down in a nearby town, I always manage to see a dull orange diamond with thick black letters stating ROAD WORK AHEAD as I commute through seven distinct construction sites in the 66.1 miles it takes to reach Kansas State University from Salina, Kansas. While individually these sites are not at all inconvenient, taken together they are a slalom of orange cones

and merging lanes where a grey minivan will tailgate for ten miles until I pass Abilene and the interstate opens up once again and everyone continues on, speeding more than they were, as they exceed 70 mph, the number on my speedometer.

I never understood why everyone works on everything at the same time. When one site opens up, two more join in. Is the asphalt ready to crumble and destroy my transmission as it sucks my vehicle down into the concreted earth? Will drivers pay better attention on a newly paved roadway? No. The fact of the matter is, some drivers don't pay attention, especially in construction zones. If they did, when the speed limit was 55 mph, I wouldn't have cars of all makes, shapes, and sizes snaking narrowly behind me as the sun descends into my line of sight and illuminates the day's progress on the return trip home.

When I'm back on I-70, heading toward Salina, sunglasses extinguish only a fragment of the glare and the quarter-sized yellow ball still diverts my eyes behind the dark glass and I discover something even more mystifying than tailgaters swelling in the rearview mirror. This discovery has been accumulating over some time now and I have become simply resolute as I transverse those unchanging construction sites that construction workers are not as they appear on television. With sites ranging from the few yards, to the block, the mile, and the definitive ten miles, is it too much to request that when the road bottlenecks and vans forcefully merge or when I'm waiting in gridlock for three consecutive stoplights to turn green that, for a brief instant, I can turn and glimpse a man in his mid to late twenties wearing a hardhat with a dust-covered white T-shirt pulled around his physique swinging a sledgehammer just before he takes a break and reaches up to wipe his forehead with the back of his hand. You know, nothing special, just something to quell the annoyance. Granted, passing by a construction site on the interstate going 60 mph does not give me enough time to gaze, but it is a nice thought being able to see something that might awaken a smile, a blush, a gasp, a laugh, a thought.

I love being able to walk down to Grandma's house barefoot and hopscotch. I've done it my whole life. When Mom was younger, she wanted to live close to her mother and now we are only four houses down from Grandma. I can talk to her. I can go down just to visit or to see if she has any chocolate ice-cream or to tell her about school. Anything's game, even problems, because since we live so close, our problems often overlap. There is a private sewer that runs underneath half of Des Moines Avenue, our street, until connecting to the city's line. Our sewer has been grandfathered in. It has been here since the houses were built in the early 1940s and the city cannot, or will not, do

anything about it when it malfunctions, unless it's in their own line half a block away. But then again, it's not so bad to have a private line. Everyone has one. The problem comes when there are other individuals feeding into it.

Eleven houses, including Grandma's and my parents', are linked to each other by the clay-tile pipes that connect into a main private line running beneath seven front yards before feeding into the city's line down the street. It's like the face of clock. The houses are not in a row. Only seven houses line Des Moines Avenue while the rest are behind them, facing Ohio Street. This might not sound like much of a problem, or maybe it does, but because everyone's line feeds into everyone else's it is more apt to clog, and when it does, it is never the city's problem. It's always ours, and if one person has a problem, we all do, even though most don't admit it because they believe that if they say they're fine, they don't have to assist in paying a plumber and his crew to dig up a front yard or two to replace a collapsed tile or flush out and remove a clog. And clogs and collapsed tiles are annoying because the water backs up into my parents' basement, and we find ourselves running up the wooden stairs carrying brown water in white plastic buckets to throw into the backyard until the pipe is drained.

The last straw, and hence the most costly mishap, occurred on Christmas Eve 2003. Superior Plumbing worked for three days to dig up three yards and replace the caved-in tile with plastic, and despite the fact that water was spilling out into our basement, Kathy, a neighbor, was sorry, but she just had to do laundry. After that, the whole block petitioned the city and within the last two weeks, Stevenson Construction has begun extending the city's line down the block, and when they're done, each house will be connected to it. Now, if a clog forms in the main line, it's the city's problem. We'll just have to take care of our own home.

About two people in 1,000 develop deep vein thrombosis, DVT, or a blood clot. The doctor is concerned because Grandma's leg is swelling. However, the chance of a blood clot being life threatening, especially if it develops below the knee, is practically non-existent. But if it's above the knee, it's more apt to dislodge from the vein and clog a major vessel in the heart, lungs, or brain. This would be an embolism, and it could cause a stroke or a heart attack.

The most accurate test for a blood clot is venography. That is where a dye is injected into the veins, making them easier to see, while highlighting blocked areas. But it has drawbacks, including an increased risk of blood clotting. Magnetic Resonance Imaging, MRI, and CAT scans, while less commonly used, can also diagnose a blood clot. But ultrasound is the most effective diagnostic method after venography.

This procedure forms images out of sound waves that are blasted into the body. This is what they performed on her. If it turns out to be a blood clot, it can't be eliminated with medication, but anticoagulants will stop it from growing bigger and prevent new ones from forming and the body will eventually eliminate it on its own. A side effect of such drugs is that cuts bleed more and take longer to heal.

Grandma already takes blood thinners. She's had a bypass. She's been in the hospital three times, more, for heart attacks, some caused by blood loss, but the doctors don't know where it goes. They draw blood today and cannot stop it. It drenches her shirtsleeve until it finally clots. If it is a blood clot, it can take several weeks for the body to break it up. Affected limbs have to be elevated, in constant motion, and treated with heat if there is pain. The doctor might prescribe compression stockings, which are tighter at the ankle than at the thigh, to help relieve the pain. But if it is a big, dangerous clot, the doctor might choose to administer a powerful clot-busting drug. However, it carries a high risk of bleeding, so it's only used in extreme cases.

Out of the three men currently working on our sewer, one is, um ... rotund and constantly wears the same color of blue. One sports a very trimmed beard as he drowns in an oversized gray shirt and puts a Pepsi bottle upside down in his back pocket. And one is undeniably cute behind his sunglasses in that rugged, unshaven, likes to work with his hands and wear a tank top to show off his sun-darkened upper body sort of way. But then again, I'm just weird. Who could find that appealing? And to top it all off, he speaks in a slight drawl. I mean... dear, God. But, once you talk to someone, the dynamic changes and there's a person in front of the body. It's addictive though, watching him work. After classes, on the enclosed, carpeted porch, time drifts quickly as I watch them break through the concrete, excavate the earth, and fit the plastic pipes into one another. The ground rumbles, the house shakes, and I hear the clinking of glass from inside as they compound dirt dumped back into the hole with a machine that breaks off a branch from the maple tree out front.

They're creating something before my eyes, making something new, better, making it work. That's what it is. They're building something that not everyone could. I couldn't. And they're proud about what they do, which is what you need to be. You have to take pride in what you accomplish or else why did you do it in the first place? But pride is a fickle thing to deal with. You want to find it when it's absent and you want to receive it when you crave it, but most times you don't. It's just not there.

It was the fourth or fifth day since they began working on the sewer and

thick boards were being placed over the open holes in front of Grandma's house.

"Are there any kids around here?" It was the bearded man. He was worried about children falling into the chasms covered by the boards and surrounded by orange cones.

"No," Grandma shook her head and inadvertently caught a glimpse of two children walking toward them down the street. She frowned, turned back to him, and smiled, nodding in their direction. "I've never see them before."

He followed her nod down the street and grinned brightly. "They're mine."

Dad is good with his hands. It doesn't matter if the project he undertakes will be hard or if he doesn't know how to get started, he'll find a way to do it. He turned the back porch into the back bedroom. He added the pantry and the second bathroom onto the house. Installing the siding was supposed to be difficult, but after a little research via the Internet and some in-depth talks at Lowes, he knew how it was supposed to work, and with Mom questioning every move, he got it done. The new windows were the same way, but Mom and I helped a lot with that, especially when he had to bring in a hand saw to widen the opening or when a wasp flew in. My sister's bookshelf, Mom's hardwood floors in the kitchen, the cabinets, the basement stairs, and the roof — twenty years ago, it was all his work, his creations, but after April's hail storm, he opted to hire the roof shingled. Most of the town did when faced with golf-ball-sized hail.

I was driving home that day, just past the construction on I-70, only a few miles away from the Ohio Street exit. The sky was covered in light gray clouds and sunlight poked through numerous openings. The rain came first, splashing the windshield with big puddles of spreading water that wouldn't wipe away. The wind hit next with swirling dust and the white semi-truck I was following disappeared as if it were an illusion. Nothing was around me except an immersing pale brown air whipping across the land. I pulled over and stopped the best I could, switching on the emergency lights, and waited, enveloped in a storm I had not seen coming as it tore through the outskirts of the city.

Is there such a thing as self-construction? Is it possible to build yourself? The words are found in many forms. Psychologists can deconstruct individuals to try and pinpoint what is wrong and still others find themselves in a place where they feel self-destruction is eminent. There is also self-esteem and self-respect, but not self-construction. Isn't that important? Deconstruction and self-destruction strip away, piece by piece, your being and try to annihilate a proposed fault, but what if that

wasn't it? What happens then? What if that was it? Are you now cured? Will something take its place? Are we to go forth in life always questioning ourselves, always finding something new that distracts and destroys us? Why do we find these things? Do we take an internal, spiritual journey into the psyche, or are our faults unearthed by others? I think the latter is more often true. We see through others what they see in us, and depending on how they react, we conclude if what they see is good or bad and siphon off those less compatible traits. That's why self-construction should exist because you're doing it for yourself no one else and you have to find what it is that makes you, you, or me, me, without changing who I am, just making me better, making me work. I imagine myself in a possessive crawl on my hands and knees through the dirt, mud caked onto my skin in patches. My hands dig through the earth, pulling up clumps. Sweat mats my hair as I'm up to my shoulders, hunched over, sifting through the grass and flowers, bulbs and stems, worms and roots until I find a fully formed cavern, completely untouched by its surroundings, needing to be filled in.

I find that the three men working on our sewer are much more considerate than the numerous city workers who come out to put in the water meter. They dig into a tiny strip of land near our house, piling a mound of dark soil high onto our neighbor's driveway. Of course, the city workers say they'll be done by five, but they aren't. At five they quit, pack up, and leave the driveway impassable. But the three guys move the dirt before they're done for the day. Before this sewer project was even begun, the guys told all of us that we'd be able to use our driveways most of time and they kept their word. There was no need for the dirt to be there. The three guys rely on each other to keep their word and to do their jobs. They each perform different tasks and, over the sounds of the machines' engines, they do so without much discussion, already knowing what to do and when. It's a silent movement of skill and precision, until a machine shoveling out soil snags the gas line buried underneath our front yard. The yellow flags that were pushed into the ground to mark the line were a few feet over, but the line unexpectedly turned and halted the day's progress and we now wait for the power company to check for leaks. The construction workers stand, lingering around the uncompleted hole, chatting. Small talk is a common occurrence between them, like when one leans against the open window to the orange Stevenson Construction truck and chats with the driver before climbing in to leave. They seem like they are friends or at least they get along.

I've never quite had the quintessential male buddy and a part of me finds that a little disappointing. In fact, Mom finds it's odd how easily I find female friends. In March of 2003, I flew to Washington, D.C. for a

week to attend Presidential Classroom and when I came back there were pictures of the Washington Monument, the Pentagon Mall, the Lincoln Memorial, and Eve, Emily, Caitlin, and Katie, and that was just a week. It doesn't hit me as weird that my social circle is so one-sided, but I know it's there. It's a kind of obstruction that I can't get around because I'm always wondering if I'm...presenting myself in a proper way. I've hit the cavern wall, but I haven't uncovered it all the way.

It's not a clot. Grandma calls the house, and I drive back to pick her up in front of the Clinic, on the corner of Elmore and Prescott. She waves her arm to show what they did to her and the blood on her shirtsleeve makes me a little dizzy. Taking a breath while she gets in, I avert my eyes and turn the car around to head home. I remember Mom telling me of the time when I was five or six years old. We were in the doctor's office, I don't know why. They drew blood. My hand was in hers as we walked out of the building and before she knew it, I passed out and slammed my head into the black railing. Clutching me to her, she ran her hand over my head and took me home. She knew I'd be all right.

Driving down our street, I already know that I cannot pull the car into Grandma's driveway because that's where the guys are working today. Instead, I park the car in our driveway and help Grandma unbuckle before we get out.

"Well, guess I'll see you tomorrow," she says.

Warm wind rustles the back of my hair and Grandma walks home, assessing the day's progress. I hear them scraping dirt off the street. A daily ritual before they leave cleaning off the large clumps of dirt and rocks, shoving them into a pile that will be whisked away before they call it quits and finish. They make it look easy.

Folie à Deux

by Brandi Homan

I miss it—our idioglossia
for the world to wonder at,

making foreigners out of natives.
Equal parts quote, neologism, night

like the one we bathed and conjured
a country from our bodies thrumming

with myocytes. O, how we ached
to become bigeminal, two heart

beats, solecistic territory.
You traced borders on my body,

majuscule script in sentences
down my legs. My words

apocopes, letters smudging off
in the water as I wrote, you

looking like a leopard,
ink bleeding out in spots.

Cursive slanted the wrong direction
like rainbows in oil, intimacy

spilling from the tub
in fat, round drops.

Storms

by Amanda Dillon

I felt the storm building for years.

Already I had felt it in the air as I stumbled sleepily through my usual morning routine. As I reached into the refrigerator for eggs, my stomach lurched slightly as Dan came up behind me, planting a sleepy kiss on my head.

"Good mornin' beautiful."

"Good morning, Dan. Did you sleep well?"

"Like a damn baby."

Twenty minutes later, after devouring the same breakfast of scrambled eggs, three strips of bacon and two slices of white toast he's eaten for the last two decades, my husband kissed me on the cheek, patted my ass, and was off to work on his father's farm. I've always found it interesting and somewhat disturbing that Dan has been happy living two miles from his childhood home. When we bought this old Victorian fifteen years ago, I hoped and prayed that we would do exactly what he said. I suppose it was just denial on my part, but when Dan said, "We are going to buy this place cheap, fix it up, and sell it for a profit ..." Well, I just really wanted to believe him.

We finished all of the remodeling thirteen years ago.

"... with highs in the 100s today. Be on the lookout for some major storm activity later today, with possibilities of tornadoes and large hail from this storm front."

"Great ..." I muttered to myself as I finished washing the breakfast dishes. About then the phone rang, and without even looking at the caller I.D., I knew it was our son.

"Good morning, James."

"Hey Mom. What's up?"

"The sky, as far as I know. I'm surprised to see that you are awake at eight in the morning. Are you sick?"

"Nah. Just had a quick question. Is there any way that you and Dad can, umm..."

"Put money in your account?"

"Yeah, exactly. I just need enough to cover rent until my paycheck comes...I promise."

"Yeah and pigs will fly out of my ass."

"Aw, come on Ma, I swear. I gotta go to work though, love you."

Click. Why he never waited for me to say I love you back, I will never know. Dan did the same thing all the time. Were they just that sure of my undying love and devotion to my family? James is a good kid, but

he never tried to do anything right. Here he was, a twenty-year-old college dropout who worked forty hours a week at a warehouse operating a forklift. He didn't want to come home and "mooch" off of us, but he had no qualms at all with calling me once a month to borrow money.

I picked up my coffee mug, walked through the kitchen into the family room, and paused for a moment to look at our family portrait on the wall. I pondered how Dan and I got to look so old as I slid open the door that leads to our deck. Sipping my coffee slowly, I looked out at the horizon at the storm the weatherman had mentioned on the radio.

I've always loved the country. Being a city girl myself, I still find it a breathtaking spectacle to be able to stand in your backyard and gaze for miles. The hot morning sun beat down upon the wind-blown landscape, causing waves of heat to rise from the aluminum silos in the distance, creating that curious feeling of seeing something that is not really there. I saw the acres of wheat fields that separate our house from my father-in-law's and bet against myself on which field they were going to cut today. All in, twenty bucks on the southwest quarter. I took a deep breath of hot air, the mixture of cow shit and rotten silage burning my nasal passage.

The pressure sure is building, the humidity rising. Something is in the air.

I loafed around for a few hours, not getting my usual urge to straighten the house. For some inexplicable reason, something was different today. By ten-thirty, I was in my garden wrestling with the hose and sprinkler, half-heartedly attempting to water my sweet corn. It was a futile attempt, one that didn't make sense in the first place. There was a storm brewing, after all, an F-something tornado could just roar through and ruin my chances for a blue ribbon at the state fair.

Gardening is usually my time to imagine my life away. I'll dream that I'm an A-list celebrity, constantly ducking paparazzi with my hunky guy-of-the-week. Sometimes I'll just pretend that I have some passion in my life. People with successful careers and exciting lives almost always pass over the need for passion. It's like their lives are so fast-paced that they have no time to stop and appreciate anything. I felt much the same, even though my life wasn't and will never be fast-paced.

I could only think about the night Dan and I met. My girlfriends and I went line dancing one night at a bar called "The Pistol Whip." It was the '80s and everyone thought they had a little bit of cowboy in them. Thanks, John Travolta. Dan was drunk and bought me a drink at the bar. He got my number. I don't like the story of how we met; it's not exciting. We just happened to meet, and he just happened to call, and we got married a year later when I was four months pregnant.

While I tramped back inside the cool house, I heard a car pull into the driveway and our beagle, Gizmo, started going crazy. It was my mother-in-law, June. Gizmo hates that bitch more than I do, and he's always good about making sure I know that the Wicked Witch has landed. As I stood in the family room I could see Gizmo circling June, hoping to get the chance to pounce.

"Hellooooo...Sherry? Are you home?"

"June." I had gone through our office, which has doors opening into the family room and foyer. By then she had almost made it to the kitchen, and popped into the foyer. I descended upon her commando style, "I don't know why you bother to ask if I'm here. Have I ever not been here?"

"Well, I just wanted to make sure. Didn't want to be rude, you know."

"Oh. I see. So why don't you just call before you come over? That seems like the polite thing to do."

"Oh, now Sherry. Are we in a bad mood today?"

"What's with this 'we' shit... do you have a mouse in your pocket?" Today was the wrong day for that woman to come annoy me. I could not find it in my heart to be kind or patient to Dan's mother. I didn't see a shred of goodness in her today. I kept thinking back to our wedding day when she had a "heart attack" that really turned out to be indigestion. Of course, we didn't go on our honeymoon because Dad had to sit with his mommy until he found out what was wrong with her. I saw James' tenth birthday party where that evil bitch baked a birthday cake and brought it, saying that the guests might want white cake too. It might have been that I had been putting up with her "You took my favorite son away" bullshit for too long, or it could have just been the weather. Either way, the Wicked Witch of the Midwest was not getting the better of me today.

"Sherry, I just don't understand why you are attacking me today! Did you and Dan have a fight?"

"No, we did not have a fight. Even if we did, I really don't see how it's any of your business."

"Dan is my son, and I only want what's best for him. I just don't understand, you haven't even vacuumed yet. Is this how you treat my baby?"

"Jesus, June. Are you kidding me? I don't think my carpet has anything to do with this. Dan is forty-five years old, and if he didn't think this marriage was good for him he would have divorced me years ago. And another thing... will you please get the hell out of my house?"

Sherry-1, Satan- 4,390.

June looked me in the eye, and I'm sure she saw pure crazy. It dawned on me she may not know how to conduct herself in the act of

being thrown out of a house, because she just stood there glaring. I thought I should help. I gently clamped onto the back of her arm and directed her to the door, where Gizmo was foaming at the mouth like a super-Cujo. I helped her descend the porch stairs, only making her stumble once or twice. And then I really went nuts.

I shoved June. Once. Twice. Those little intimidating shoves you see men give each other before they start to swing. She backed into her car, an Oldsmobile, causing her to jump a little in fright.

"Well June, it's been great seeing you, but I'm just very busy as you can see. I don't have time for you to nag and bitch and moan at me, so I'm hoping you can remember the way back to your house, where you WILL stay unless you decide to call first." She was just getting ready to shut her car door when I ninja-kicked it shut for her with a loud "HIIIII-YAHHH!"

Of course, just in the middle of my long-awaited victory dance, the phone started ringing. I wanted to ignore it and continue to shake my ass and do my jazz hands on the porch, but I had the feeling that it was Dan calling. Once, again my intuition was correct.

"Hello Dan."

"Hey, what's for lunch?"

"How the hell should I know? I've been in the garden all day."

Not true...I have just been celebrating the verbal thrashing I gave your mother.

"Well I suppose I could just get something at Mom and Dad's. What's wrong with you today? Bad mood?"

"FOR THE LAST DAMN TIME, I AM NOT IN A BAD MOOD."

"Okay, okay. I'll just get something at Mom's. Geez, what crawled up your ass?"

"Yeah, you just go on ahead and do that, run home to mommy, see if I care." This time, I got to cut him off, and heard a faint 'Bye' as I slammed down the receiver.

"Be careful out there, folks, this system is getting pretty nasty. I advise just staying where you are and riding it out..."

"Shut up!" I screamed at the radio while throwing the gardening gloves I still held to the floor. Even the weatherman was trying my patience.

It was then that I decided I needed a vacation. Alone. Without housework, cooking, and family obligation. A break from the schedule I follow every day, seven days a week. Through rain, shine, and snow. In many ways, I was more reliable than the mail, which I had decided not to get out of the mailbox.

Because the possibility of getting a vacation was very slim, I opted for a long, hot bubble bath. I stripped down to the buff right there in the kitchen, certain that my mother-in-law would not be coming back today. When I reached the master bath upstairs I was appalled at what I saw in

the mirror. The stretch marks on my stomach looked like squashed earthworms, a troublesome reminder that I had a child I was responsible for. My breasts sagged sadly, a remainder of what was once an impressive chest. Wrinkles lined my face, assuring me that I was well on my way to becoming a little old lady. Taking a deep breath, I convinced myself that I did not look half-bad for forty-four. I tried to look at the bright side. At least my ass was still okay and I wasn't half as fat as the other middle-aged housewives I knew.

While I was soaking in the tub, my mind started to wander. I knew that Dan would be furious when his mother told him of our exchange. I also knew that I would have to apologize, and it didn't matter how true my comments had been. Thinking of this led me to more thoughts on my life. When did I miss the train? How did I just become the boring woman with the boring life and the boring husband who loved his mommy more? I had always had such high hopes for my life. I was going to be someone great, but instead I stayed in my comfort zone and became something far below great. I went to college and had a degree. I had wanted to open a business, but Dan had never wanted me to work. I hadn't traveled to any of the places I'd wanted to go, hadn't done a fraction of the things I had planned. I had always told myself I would go to Italy. As I got older, I told myself I would settle on Canada or Mexico. A few years after that, I wished we could just leave Kansas once. I toyed with the idea of leaving Dan, but I realized then that I wasn't going anywhere, I wasn't going to do anything with my life. I had a son to look after. No, that wasn't it. I was afraid of what the world was like now. I had been in Harper County so long that I had no clue what the rest of civilization was up to.

"There have been tornado sightings all over the place, folks. Harper county is now in a tornado warning until nine o'clock this evening. Stay home. Don't drive if you don't need too. Take emergency precautions if you live in the tri-county area."

I stood on my deck once again, staring dumbly at the darkening sky. The storm was going to be a whopper, that much was true. I turned and went into the house, leaving the sliding door open. Without conscious knowledge, I found myself digging in the kitchen drawers for my emergency pack of cigarettes. I've been trying to quit for the past ten years, but some days, you just gotta have a smoke. Today was one of those days.

Back on the deck again, I took long, slow drags of the Marlboro, savoring the smoke completely. God, my lungs had missed this. Since I had already indulged in my occasional cigarette, I decided that a stiff drink was in order. I wondered why I had not become an alcoholic years ago as I sipped and then gulped the whiskey. It was two o'clock in the afternoon and I knew that Dan would stay in the fields in a last-ditch

effort to get as much wheat cut as possible. So, I had another drink. And another. And one more to make it an even number. By three, I was obliterated, staring glassy-eyed at the re-run of *Jeopardy* on TV and laughing at nothing in particular.

About then I could hear the hail pinging angrily off the tin roof of the shed. I hopped up as quickly as I could in my drunkenness to shut the sliding door. I saw my garden getting hammered and couldn't care less. Screw the state fair. I walked through the house and onto the front porch where I could see Gizmo digging in my red geraniums.

"Damn dog! Get your crazy ass inside before you ruin those flowers!" I let him inside in all his muddy glory. I was gazing into the foyer from my vantage point on the porch where Gizmo was running madly through the house, tracking up the white carpet.

"Well that's just great; I suppose I'll have to fix that before Dan comes home," I said to myself. I had forgotten what the hard wood floors underneath looked like and thought now was a good time for a little redecoration. I stalked out to the shed in my slippers and bathrobe and rummaged through Dan's tools until I found a hammer and an Exacto knife.

When I was back in the house I discovered Gizmo gnawing happily on one of Dan's cowboy boots and thought it made a rather splendid chew toy. I was in a manic state from the whiskey, and in no time, I had succeeded in ripping the carpet from the foyer. The rain and hail were still pelting the dry earth with the fury of God when I spotted a picture of June and her husband, Roy on the wall. They looked very stern and angry in the picture, so I decided to artistically alter them a bit. Pulling my purse off of the peg on the foyer wall, I grabbed the photo and sat down on my new hardwood floor. Seeing no sense in laboring over the frame, I slammed it onto the floor and extracted the picture. I grabbed my candy-apple red lipstick out of my purse and began to embellish. When I was done June had a red Cheshire-cat grin, a moustache, and a caption that read "I'm a vile bitch." I didn't touch Roy's image, seeing as he was not a large part of the problem. He was a quiet man, who had never said ten words to me in his life, and it just wouldn't be fair to take it out on him.

I stuck it back on the wall with the super glue I always carry in my purse.

I had just remembered I was soaking wet. I stumbled up the stairs and changed into sweats and a t-shirt. I found myself gazing at a picture of Dan and I in the hospital when I was in labor with James. You couldn't tell in the picture, but I was furious with him. He had dropped me off at the hospital five hours earlier and left me there while he installed his mother's new washing machine. Five hours. By myself. While in labor with OUR child.

I was preparing to artistically enhance that photo when I heard Gizmo going crazy downstairs. I looked out a window facing the driveway and saw an unfamiliar black sedan pulling in.

"What now? Did hell's angel send the SWAT team?"

I flew down the stairs into the foyer and saw a man in a business suit ringing the doorbell.

"Who the hell are you?" I said as I cracked the door open.

"Tom, Tom Green. The storm's really bad out there. I wondered if I could wait it out in your storm cellar. The radio guy said there was a tornado spotted three miles from here."

"Storm cellar? I'm going to the storm cellar. You can wait there if you want, but there's nothing down there but a surplus of spiders."

"Oh. Well could I come inside? Oh no, no. Don't slam the door ma'am. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm harmless, really."

"I don't know. What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a post master. Actually I'm just out here because I was going house to house for the Jehovah's Witnesses. You see, we are obligated to do this once a year and..."

"Okay that's enough. I have a religion, and I don't care to get another. You can come in if you do not mention Jehovah or anything else religious. And keep those damn pamphlets to yourself!"

I led him to the family room, where I noted that Gizmo had done a great job of ruining the carpet. The dog sat happily on Dan's easy chair chewing on the boot. The stranger remarked on the renovation and made a beeline for Gizmo, patting him politely on the head.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. He's been trained to kill. Likes the taste of blood more than a fat man likes cake."

"Really? Why would you do that?"

"Damn, you are gullible. Wanna drink?" I was pouring myself another glass of whiskey, even though I hardly needed it.

"I don't drink, but thank you. Do you think you need a drink?"

"If I didn't I wouldn't be getting one. Tom, are you married?"

"Ten years in October. Why?"

"Do you love your mommy more than your wife?"

"My mother's dead."

"No offense, but your wife is a lucky bitch."

I think I scared the man, even though he seemed to be the type that never got spooked. After five minutes of awkward silence, Tom the Jehovah's Witness bolted for the door in all of his black-suited magnificence.

I watched TV for a while. I let Gizmo destroy the boot further than I imagined he could. I decided to watch the news and see if we were close to being out of the worst of the storm.

"It's getting nastier by the second out here. Reports of golf-ball size hail in Harper county. Get inside and stay inside, with wind gusts up to eighty miles per hour, you don't want to be out on the road."

The meteorologist looked slightly like the Tostitos man, but I still wasn't taking any chances. I decided to take his advice and not venture out on the deck for the fourth time. Thunder was cracking and pounding, adding to the deafening noise of the hail. I amused myself with the idea that God must've been having a hell of a game of bowling going on up there with Michael the Archangel. I decided to leave the lights on and the front door open. After a quick glass of water to counter the effects of my sudden whiskey binge, I slowly walked upstairs and tucked myself in bed. I heard Dan's truck pull into the garage, and I felt the hairs tingle on the back of my neck as I anticipated the looming argument.

I thought of the last twenty years. All the bickering Dan and I had had over his mother's comments, all of the times I had threatened to leave him. It was then I realized that I loved Dan. I loved the way he looked like a little boy in the mornings. I loved how he still felt the need to ask if I wanted to make love. I loved his love for the land and the farm. I felt guilty for acting the way I did. I felt disgusted with myself for never really respecting his quiet personality.

I heard the pause in his steps and knew he was admiring my reconstruction downstairs. I heard him ascend the stairs, and knew the wrath of God was upon me. I quickly turned on my side, away from our bedroom door, and actually felt it crack open. For ten grueling minutes I listened to the shower running and Dan bumping around the room while he was changing for bed. I wondered what I could say in my defense. *I could plead temporary insanity. I didn't know I was abusing his mother with my harsh words, the whole time it happened I thought I had indeed been in the garden. I could claim that Tom poured the whisky down my throat in a ritualistic Jehovah ceremony.* Well, Dan was boring and quiet, but he wasn't stupid. I imagined his pained expression and heard his disappointed words running through my head over and over, like a broken record.

"How could you treat my mother that way? How could you? She just cares for me, that's all. You shouldn't treat her like that. What have you done to our beautiful home? We've worked so hard on it. What have you done?"

He turned on the TV in our room. I felt him crawl into bed, scratching himself and getting comfortable.

"Storm's really brewing out there." I've felt it building for years. High pressure systems. Cold fronts. Ninety percent humidity. Building for years.

Any moment now. Any moment. He's going to explode in anger. He doesn't care if I'm sleeping. This is his mommy. He loves her. He's a momma's boy. He's always loved her more than me. He wants me to be

just like her. Wants my personality gone, wants me gone, just wants his mommy in my body.

I felt him turn to me. He ran his hand through my hair. His face came very close to the back of my head, I heard him slowly inhale the fragrance of my shampoo. I felt his breath on the back of my neck where he slowly planted a kiss.

Then he whispered, "I love you, Sherry."

And with that simple act, no matter what was going on outside, my storm had passed.



“Hokanson Barn at Konza Prairie”

by Mary Hammel

During a photo hike at Konza Prairie, my husband and I came upon the Hokanson Homestead, where the original barn still stands. It was a bright, sunny day and when I looked up from the base of the barn I saw the window with the reflection of a tree. The texture of the limestone juxtaposed with the smoothness of the glass intrigued me. The combination of light quality and shadows was something that I was exploring at the time and it all came together in a unique perspective.

Lizards & Sliced Tomatoes

by Jay Rubin

One people shall be stronger than the other.
Genesis 25:23

In the small square of earth
back behind our father's garage,
my brother stalked lizards
blue-bellied, silver-quick, tailless and tailed.

That explains his anger
at my digging up his ground,
chopping the dirt with a shovel,
preparing the soil for sowing.

Soon, sunflowers grew, their ten-foot faces
bashful each dawn, turning toward the sun;
cucumbers, carrots, red leaf lettuce;
swollen zuchinnis, artichoke hearts.

On nights when my bounty
blessed our mother's table
cherry tomatoes sliced into salads
my brother would eat only meat.

After dessert, as the moon slowly passed
through its dim garden stars,
my brother locked his bedroom door.
Behind it, he practiced magic tricks,

failing over and over again
to make a silver dime disappear.



The Dawn Collector: A Conversation with Reg Saner

by Tulora Sharlee Roeckers

Some things are life affecting, even when we don't expect them. For example, while taking a course in Environmental Literature at KSU in my first year as a Master's student, I was given a reading assignment from Elizabeth Dodd that included Reg Saner's 2005 publication, *The Dawn Collector: On My Way to the Natural World* (The University of Chicago Press). This work, to me, was inspiring and definitive of its genre. As a fledgling writer, I can only wonder at the way Saner deftly interweaves immediate observation with the memory and living of the natural world. On a more personal level, I can honestly say that after reading this collection of essays I will never see the sun rise in the same light again.

Originally from the fields and flatlands of Illinois, Saner fell in love with the wilderness of the mountains while serving in the military and training in Alaska. However, anyone who has experienced life in the armed forces understands that all stays have distinct time limits. Soon Saner found himself deployed for combat in Korea. When his tour was up, he attended the University of Illinois and began studies in Renaissance culture, continuing as a Fulbright Scholar in Florence, Italy,

at the Università degli Studi from 1960-61. It wasn't until his return to the States in 1962 that he found himself in Colorado, back among mountains he so loved.

Now a naturalized Coloradan, Saner carries with him a history unlike many others. Besides that Fulbright Scholar business in Italy, in 1975 he was the first recipient of the Walt Whitman Award for his book *Climbing Into the Roots*. More achievements followed, as this somewhat truncated list suggests: in 1976 Saner was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship; in 1981, *So This Is the Map*, his second book of poetry, won the National Poetry Series Award; in 1983, he received the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts in Colorado; in 1992, he received the Creative Fellowship from the Colorado Council on Arts & Humanities; in 1994, he received the Colorado Center for the Books Award in Nonfiction and was nominated for the John Burroughs Medal in nature writing; and in 1997, Saner was co-winner of The Wallace Stegner Award. Along with publication of his poetry, Saner's repertoire also contains several nonfiction works, including the collections titled *The Four-Cornered Falcon: Essays on the Interior West and the Natural Scene* (1993) and *Reaching Keet Seel: Ruin's Echo & the Anasazi* (1998). Currently, Dr. Saner has served as Keynote speaker on many occasions including most recently for the 2005 debut of the literary magazine *Ecotone*.

Atypical of what one thinks of as a "conversation," my interview with Dr. Saner was conducted via the exchange of several email messages during the months of October and November of 2006. The world is expanding by bounds technologically, and, fortunately for us, Saner is not afraid of using such resources. Besides, it is much less stressful than a flight to Colorado would be on both the environment and on this poor graduate student's wallet.

* * * *

Tulora Roeckers: *First of all, thank you so much for agreeing to this interview for Touchstone. You are viewed by many as an author identified with a particular place and a particular landscape. How do you feel about this characterization?*

Reg Saner: Kenneth Rexroth once said, "Easterners hold unshakably that poetry set in the mountain West is merely so much bear shit on the trail." As if anywhere between Chicago and San Francisco were not a place. To the extent that the cosmos is regional, my writing is too. Some readers mistake the apparent subject of a poem or essay for its true subject, but Frost's "Mending Wall" isn't about masonry and dawn collecting isn't about acquisition.

TR: *I really enjoyed reading the introductory essay in The Dawn Collector. The last lines describing memory and your grandmother are haunting as well as very telling about how these childhood memories work. Have you come to a place where you can more fully bring not only your ideas about nature, but also your own biography to the reader?*

RS: Others have wanted me to be a bit more autobiographical. An editor at *Harper's* liked "My Grandmother's House" enough to ask if I had other similar pieces, but I hadn't. Its little-boy view of the world opens *The Dawn Collector*, which closes with his adult perspective in "The Cosmos and Me." The latter is equally autobiographical, but not in the same mode. The meditative passages of "Cosmos" are as personal as anything else I might write.

On the other hand, I do find the natural world incomparably more interesting than my seven-billionth of our species. In any case, it's good that my grandmother never lived to read of my graduation from a theocentric to a geo-centric world. It would have grieved her devoutly Irish heart.

TR: *In the book, you acknowledge how aspects of your growing up affected what was important to you as a writer—the focus or concerns of your later writing career. Wasn't your original focus on Renaissance culture?*

RS: We never truly know what we're doing, or why. "My Grandmother's House" originally carried an epilogue in which I explained that the trauma of my baby sister's death led me, quite unconsciously, to recover her. Elizabeth Anne was a radiantly beautiful baby who died at six months of meningitis. The epilogue explained why I fell in love at first sight with a radiantly beautiful replacement, my wife Anne. I first saw her at a Christmas party and radiance was definitely what struck me. My conscious mind had completely forgotten we had called our baby "little Anne." The wedding night was celebrated not only in my grandmother's house, become my mother's, but in the very room and the very spot in that room where my baby sister's casket had rested. Mother and our family were still up in northern Illinois where we'd been married, so the house was temporarily vacant. Not till about twenty years later during one of my mother's visits to Boulder did Anne and I make the connection. I was stunned. It explained a marriage choice which otherwise made no sense at all, because Anne and I are polar opposites.

So, unbeknownst to me, my adult dating life had been managed by a five- or six-year-old boy directing his adult self in the search for the lost sister. Maybe that's why I'm the only one-wife poet I know. Orpheus doesn't walk out on Eurydice.

As to my writing, sixteen consecutive years of Catholic education by nuns and priests gave me a Big Picture mentality. Perhaps that's the constant in my work.

TR: *From the author bio on your website, I find that you did your graduate work at University of Illinois and that you were a Fulbright Scholar in Florence, Italy. Charles Wright also spent a little time in Italy, and it greatly influenced his perception of the everyday, his world view, and his attitude toward what a poem should be "up to." What was your experience like abroad?*

RS: Charles Wright, William Matthews, John Ridland, and I once played basketball together using the hoop in my driveway. A Wright translation of Montale and one of mine were in a special issue *Field* did on that poet. Did Italy influence me? I jokingly tell people it ruined my life.

Kind of ruined it. My Fulbright year in Fiesole, a hill town just outside of Florence, so besotted me with Italophilia that all I could think of for years after was how to get back there. In the U.S., as Robert Hass said, "the inner life makes outlaws of us." And how! Not in Italy. Every restaurant or barber shop in Florence hangs original artwork on the walls. Most streets are named either for painters, sculptors, scientists, writers, musicians, architects, and statesmen. What's more, they needn't be Italians to rate a street. How many streets in the U.S. carry the name of a poet or painter? In Boulder, not one. I checked. How many buildings here carry plaques honoring artists? In Florence's central area, there are many such, often with lines from Dante related to the site. And of course the past is tangibly present on every hand, in *palazzi* and sculptures. Come to think, there's a *palazzo* near the train station with a plaque telling passers by, "This is where the great English poet Shelley wrote his immortal poem 'To a Skylark'." I've paraphrased it, but you get the idea. For this farm-town bumpkin, that was impressive.

Anne and I and baby Timothy got to Italy back when the dollar had biceps. A budget eatery I sometimes lunched at served up a plate of pasta for eight cents! When my thesis director came from Illinois to visit, we were living in a Fiesolan *casa* with a grand piano, good furniture, a garden and gardener, and two women helping Anne part time. All on my un-exorbitant Fulbright stipend. We spent August in a beach house on the Mediterranean. I read Tasso's great epic poem while lounging in a beach chair, and bought fresh fish directly from the fishermen who pulled in and spilled their catch on the sand. Daily, around about sundown, we'd put Timmy in his stroller, then in our swimsuits eat dinner at a table on a restaurant terrace overlooking the water. For snacks, we could phone and order a couple of ten-inch pizzas delivered by a guy on a bicycle for fifty cents each.

Smitten, we returned to Italy in '67 and '78, on fellowships, then in 1990 we were guests of the Rockefeller Foundation at Villa Serbelloni on Lake Como, above Bellagio. There's no cure for Italophilia, but that's okay. Who wants to be cured?

TR: *Similarly, do you find that your military experience had any effect upon your work in any way? I am a child of a military man myself, and the disparity between that world and civilian life is huge on many levels.*

RS: Combat in Korea became something I wanted to bury and forget. Leading a platoon of infantry at age 23 is stressful to the max. The Iraq war brought back stuff that really upsets me. The invisible wounds inflicted on soldiers *who don't even know they've been wounded* will screw up tens of thousands of U.S. lives. Because an anthology included me as "a soldier poet of the Korean war," I was asked to record some of my poetry for the BBC's annual Armistice Day program. I had to do repeated takes before I could get through even one poem without breaking down. I'd been careful not to read the Korean stuff in public. In a recording studio I thought I'd be okay, never dreaming. As the Italians say, I don't have easy tears, but something in those poems booby-trapped me. Leaving the studio, I was afraid to drive, so I just walked around stunned for a long time. U.S. society will reap what we've sown in Iraq.

I therefore *loathe* George WMD Bush, the genius who decided that just what the Middle East needed was more guns and bombs. He has presided over complete betrayal of our country's values. U.S. democracy is gone forever. Oligarchy rules, and it's only going to get worse.

TR: *Who or what are your poetic influences, favorite poets, writers, artwork, or other things that inform your work?*

RS: Writers and artists will name all kinds of influences but they'll never reveal the most important one. Of course, fiction writers are liars by trade, whereas we nonfiction types are more noble. Curiously, Dante Alighieri most influenced my early poetic style. His line is muscular, often densely compacted and phonically rich. You'd never guess that from the translations. I didn't myself till I began reading Dante passages aloud.

Since I also read French, I've enjoyed French poets, Jules Supervielle in particular, and Guillevic. They're "easy" but also have heart. Other than Dante, the only Italian poet who might be an influence has been Montale. Though my Italian's better than my French, I've never really taken to modern Italian poets except maybe Ungaretti and Umberto Saba. The French thinkers I've found most insightful have been H len Tuzet and some mavericks like Gaston Bachelard, Michel Serres, and Paul Val ry. What they share is a rare grasp of both art and science.

TR: *Bachelard is a thinker who I admire as well, but won't pretend to yet fully understand. Who do you read now? Are there any authors whom you find particularly intriguing?*

RS: Recently I reviewed Ellen Meloy's *Eating Stone*, which is superb. Shortly after its publication, she suddenly died of a heart attack, which left me for the first time in my literary life personally saddened and feeling, "what a loss." The main disadvantage of my kind of prose is that it takes so damned much research, there's not a lot of time left for reading others. Apropos of women, in a lit. mag. or anthology, I always read the women first, wanting their point of view. All else being equal, I'd rather chat with a woman than a man, though I've never been a womanizer nor have I ever pursued one. I was once comically and briefly kidnapped by a woman who later stalked me, which goes to show no case is hopeless.

TR: *What major projects are you working on now?*

RS: Two days ago, I mailed typescript copies of "My Kind of Creationism" to the publisher, the Center for American Places. They did my previous book. It's far shorter than the length of *The Dawn Collector*, and contrasts Bible-based Creationism with creative nonfiction. At the mention of Darwin, the Intelligent Design types and old-style Creationists roll on the floor in rage and chew the carpet. Me, I want to know what evolution says about who and what I am. Kansas school boards should order copies now. But I'm not profiling Kansans. A 2005 Harris poll of U.S. residents revealed that half the people questioned didn't know Earth goes around the sun and takes a year to do it, so you can imagine how much voters know of politics.

TR: *Although your observations and theories about man in the natural world appear to exist today as they did at the beginning of your career, for instance in *Climbing Into the Roots*, your recent essays are a subtler, much more reserved approach. Has your message changed through mode of presentation, that being the essay format, or has the man himself changed?*

RS: A writer's only subject is her/his sense of the world. Mine has widened enormously, simply because that's where we are, in a mystery. Nonfiction, which can be a mode of self-creation, has done more for my personal growth than a lit. Ph.D. ever did. Then, too, age alone moves you toward a more authentic way of being. I tell students, "Just getting into print shouldn't be your goal. Try to deserve it." Maybe the beginning of wisdom comes when you realize you don't need to be someone else. Who you are will do just fine, so relax. Pee Wee Russell, a jazz clarinetist with an eccentric style said, "The note I blow may be the wrong note for everyone else, but it's the right note for me." Once you realize what that note is, your writing improves.

Gradually, Darwin and geological time helped me see everyone, even difficult people, more humanely. We talking animals are mostly encoded and have so little time here. Whether I'm looking into brown eyes or blue, I see more feelingly the pathos of a fellow mortal. Till you understand that situation, you risk becoming the victim of your own ego.

TR: *One of my questions also speaks to craft in a way. A friend of mine, last year's Touchstone editor-in-chief Dennis Etzel Jr, was curious as to when you physically wrote your poems and essays. That is, would one find Reg Saner perched precariously on a granite outcrop somewhere up the side of a mountain, scribbling in a notebook, or do you carry these mental snapshots down the mountain with you?*

RS: I've tons of material in notebooks and card files. For years, I paused in hiking to jot images and phrases on 4x6 cards carried in a hip pocket. Using a micro-cassette recorder instead meant I no longer had to break my rhythm to save an insight. I've never planned a poem don't they plan themselves? but for prose, always do. In the long run, short cuts waste time and energy. "Technically Sweet," an essay on northern New Mexico, Oppenheimer, and the Bomb, alternated six themes in patterned repetition, which made careful planning imperative. Like any aid to memory, photos evoke useful associations. I often relied on them in writing about Anasazi sites, where physical setting was so crucial. Though I've used prose wordage directly from field notes, I have never written so much as even two lines of verse in the outdoors, maybe because imagination depends on absence of the stimulus rather than presence, which inhibits it. The place to read mountain poems is at the seashore.

TR: *How do you form a poem or essay initially?*

RS: Image is everything, and not just in politics and show biz. My poems and prose germinate from a seminal image. With "Technically Sweet," it was the impression of a primitive Indian's bare foot in sandy soil, with atop it, an atom bomb. "Breakfast with *Canis latrans*" began as a coyote in snow. "Pliny and the Mountain Mouse" began with a sunning marmot's lightly tousled fur in breeze well above timberline.

TR: *Is writing a primarily organic or synthetic process for you?*

RS: Both, of course, especially for long pieces. Some poems, it's true, just fly in the window. On the whole, though, Paul Valéry was right: the gods may give you one line, but the rest is up to you. The sine qua non of good writing is emotion. As Frost said, "no excitement in the writer, none in the reader." Of course, excitement's only one of many emotions. On intellect alone, you can be clever, impressive, but not

moving. Sidney Bechet, the great soprano sax player, said it best. "There cain't be no lyin. It's got to come from the heart." Poetry is nonfiction.

TR: *Now for fun: Do you have rituals or habits when you write? I must straighten things up first – although my children claim it's a combination of latent OCD and the onset of senility, rather than simply a writer preparing to write.*

RS: Your question exposes my embarrassing lack of rituals. Does clutter count? If so, I'm surrounded by ritual. Yet your fussing around before starting is probably every writer's ritual, because the blankness of the page can intimidate. Otherwise, my spur is words. Just taking some of that blankness away by shaping a line sets me going. The page becomes an ecotone where interesting things can happen.

TR: *In your writing "place" what do you keep on your desktop? Mementos? Reference books?*

RS: Now *that* makes me laugh out loud. Atop my desk is everything that isn't somewhere else. The wall facing me bears a world map, plus two large photos of Anne in swimsuit on our Colorado honeymoon. A planetarium schedule. A shot of mountains and cloud across Lake Como from our room in the Rockefeller villa. Photos of my backpacking pal Ron. Of me and my elderly Mom. Of three horses, and my brainy friend Les. Two of my brother Paul. One of a cluster of Pasque flowers. Head shot of Robert Oppenheimer smoking a pipe. One of son Tim in Florence beside a sculpture. Also a poster-size photo, in color, of the Virgo nebula and stars thick as pollen. Plus an ice ax and a coil of climbing rope that Tim gave me. Have I just done a self-portrait?

TR: *Indeed you have, Dr. Saner! On behalf of Touchstone I want to thank you so very much for granting this interview and sharing your insights on both writing and your world with us.*

Illusive Pastoral

by Aaron Deihl

—after Johnny Olson

Let not trifles ruffle your temper;
troubles like truffles are raised with the weather.
While fungus grows under the surface,
tartufois know should the soil hold purpose,
the knottiest poplar root points down to treasure

though the hidden is hard to conceive:
both blossoms and earthquakes begin underneath
the terrain. Either fate breaks in half
the grass from the ground. A sound like a laugh
shakes down the landscape lacking belief

and asks questions of measures of size:
What qualifies potency? Is it implied
with the eyes or by what lies beneath?
Growth and disaster, both trifles unseen,
are tempestuous things and by nature disguised.

The Phases of Running

by Heather Conkwright

On a drizzly October morning, I begrudgingly drag myself out of bed and prepare to go running. I am surly and grumpy as I lace up my sneakers; I am not a morning person. Worse, I absolutely hate running. I loathe it. Never in my life have I been good at running. I was always the kid behind the rest of the class in middle and high school, huffing and puffing and cussing until I crossed that finish line. And that was when I was in shape.

The reason I am going running is waiting by the front door, tail wagging frantically to let me know how impatient she is. My German Shepherd Belle is an eighty pound three-year-old. She has energy to burn. I had to learn that the hard way last August when we moved from a rental house with a gigantic backyard into a cute little mobile home with a somewhat-lacking lawn. If Belle does not get around forty-five to sixty minutes of walking in a day, she transforms from the sweet, obedient dog I am used to into an absolute hellion, intent on destroying our home in an attempt to release some energy.

I also learned that as a full-time student who works a part-time job at the public library, it is not always easy to walk the dog for an hour each day. In the summer it was much easier. It would not be completely dark when I got off work and we could stroll down the street to the trail by our house. Now, however, it is pitch black and cold when I get off work. Walking has become more difficult.

And so we run. Running twenty to thirty minutes or so will wear Belle out more quickly. The rather unfortunate side effect of that is that it wears me out tremendously also; the girl who was in shape and horrible at running is now a girl horrendously out of shape and worse at running than ever before.

In the past, I have tried to get myself used to exercising again. The Chester E. Peters Recreation Complex, with its variety of exercise machines and soft, green jogging track (that I enjoy walking on), is a very nice establishment to go and sweat myself silly. Unfortunately, whenever I go to the Rec, I feel as if I am the only one who is sweating badly. There are other people there working out very hard, but none I pass ever have a face as bright red as mine. This does not bother me until about two weeks have passed, and I feel like I have made no progress. I still cannot jog two laps around the track and I cannot go above level two on the elliptical machines. When the feeling of accomplishing nothing takes over, and I grow tired of seeing perfectly

toned and skinny bodies walking confidently around in little running shorts, I stop going to the gym for about six months, using excuses such as “I have a lot of homework,” and begin ordering a lot of pizza in some kind of messed up way to make myself feel better.

But Belle actually needs to exercise, and sometimes we are alone on the trail where no one can see me trying to run. I’m hoping on this Wednesday morning that no one else will be around due to the weather as Belle and I walk the few feet from our house to the Linear Trail. The trail is one that goes throughout the city of Manhattan, randomly weaving and snaking around different sections. Our entrance is on the west side of town, and to our right is the Seth Child movie theatre. From the trail, you can see the parking lot for the theatre. This, of course, means from the parking lot you can see the trail, and so we never turn right when we reach the entrance. I really do prefer not to have people see me weakly attempting to exercise.

We go left, and soon my feet crunch on the gravel, and I very slowly begin to jog. At the command, Belle heels by my side, even though it is completely obvious she wants to charge down the trail at full speed. Every so often she will slowly creep ahead, in an effort to force her master to go just a little bit faster.

We run, and I enjoy the first few moments of the run where I do not feel like dying. The trail is a nice place to jog; trees seclude you and block most signs of city life. The only thing reminding you that you are in the city limits are the occasional noises of a car from the nearby highway or the voices of workers from the Kansas Gas Company not too far from the trees. Since it is October, red and yellow leaves cover the trail, except for a single, solid line that bikes have created. It’s cool out, and I am so grateful; I finally do not have to put up with the little gnats that used to plague us on our walks. My face is also not the scary, beet red it gets in the summer.

We chug along to our destination: Down the trail, there is a bridge allowing us to go over a creek and just a little past it is a clearing where Belle can do her business. My goal is to someday run to that bridge without stopping. Admittedly, the bridge is not that far from the entrance to the trail. But I am not a runner, nor am I in shape, and I usually stop two or three times to catch my breath before we reach the bridge. Sometimes I seriously doubt that my actually jogging all the way to that bridge will ever happen. When I do think about it, when I do successfully run to that bridge without stopping, that is when I have become a “runner”—when I have perfect form and my breathing is smooth and controlled, and while I gracefully glide over the bridge.

Of course, that’s in my mind. In reality, I know I look nothing like that. My form is not anywhere near perfect; my legs like to flail about as if they are not attached to my hips. My breathing is ragged, and my face

is bright pink. One look at me and anyone can tell I am a beginner at this.

We run for about two or three minutes and then I stop Belle for our first break. I have a cramp in my side; one that is deep and piercing and causing me to wince. I think it is my body's way of screaming at me: "What the hell are you doing? Stop it! Stop it right now!" I get this cramp every time I work out; a smug and very fit co-worker informed me once that the only reason I get the cramp is because I am out of shape. I try to massage the cramp away and breathe normally, annoyed at my body's lovely reminder that I'm unfit.

Crunching leaves warn me that someone else is jogging down the trail, and I glance behind us and moan. Great. It is Skinny Sally.

Belle and I do not see the same people every time we take off down the trail due to my erratic schedule. But every so often we do see one girl, a girl whom I have dubbed Skinny Sally. She cannot be much older than me; I would say she is twenty-six, at the oldest. She obviously has nothing better to do with her time than jog down this trail and mock me; we see her at random times in the morning, afternoon and evenings. She has perfectly highlighted blonde hair (the kind that does not come out of the bottle) in a perfect little ponytail, and annoyingly cute running outfits. I used to have cute workout outfits too, before I moved out of my parents' house and started supporting myself. Now, however, bread, dog food and laundry detergent have become more important than \$100 running sneakers. My workout clothes now consist of high school t-shirts and the always stylish flannel pants.

Today, Skinny Sally is wearing black jogging pants with bright orange running down the sides, and a matching jacket. I roll my eyes as I look at my own jacket: the bright yellow of my boyfriend's Pittsburg State hoodie is nowhere close to matching my purple K-State shirt.

She runs by us, barely breathing heavy at all. Belle glares at her rather menacingly; she does not like it when other people are on the trail. I glare too. It is my opinion that if Skinny Sally is going to spend all of her time jogging instead of working, she should at least do it at the gym where all the other "fit" girls like her go and leave the trail for bikers and walkers. She makes me feel like a fool for even trying.

The cramp in my side has receded, and so we take off after Skinny Sally. Her hair swishes up and down as she runs; I wipe away the sweat dripping from mine. She has headphones in her ears; no doubt she has an iPod, or at least some kind of MP3 Player. I glance down. I have a panting dog to listen to.

I try to keep up with Skinny Sally. I do not want her to kick my ass running. Again. Every time we see her, she is in front of me one second and gone the next. Her ponytail disappears as she runs quickly away from us, despite my best attempts to stay somewhat in stride with her.

By the time she is gone, I am usually ready to take another break.

Today, though, I'm going to keep up with her. I don't know why. I want to run, I want to be fit, I want to lose the damned freshman 15 that after three years has not gone away. There is an anger overcoming me, taking over. You will keep up with this girl today, a voice inside my heads yells. The voice is tired of me ditching the Rec and annoyed at my struggling to keep up with Skinny Sally. The voice wants me to just suck it up and RUN like her. My body protests against the voice, but it is no use. The voice has taken over.

Belle and I begin hauling ass down the trail, trying to close the distance between us and Skinny Sally. Belle is excited at the change of pace. She charges ahead of me, happy to be able to run more quickly. I clench my jaw and double my speed, struggling to keep up.

Skinny Sally is confidently trekking on ahead, while I run at some kind of weird gallop behind her. I get mad at how hard I have to struggle. How in the hell can Skinny Sally run so effortlessly when it's so hard for me? I hate the fact that she can run easier than I can, with her fancy running shoes and her matching outfit. Why do I feel as if I have to catch up to her? Where the hell is this hatred coming from? And dammit, can't she slow down any?

My legs are powerfully driving me forward, despite the pain that is beginning to shoot up them. The sweat that was simply beading on my forehead is ten times that now. My forehead stings when the occasional raindrop plops down on it. My lungs are screaming at me and I am gulping in air, trying to relieve them. My heart is beating so fast I feel like if I don't give it a break it will give up on me. And yet I continue on. The distance between Skinny Sally and me is much smaller now, but I hardly even register that. I am running like a crazed woman; my fury has taken over. I cannot even pinpoint what my adult temper tantrum is directed at, but it is there, driving me closer and closer to the bobbing ponytail.

And then I trip. One moment I am pursuing Skinny Sally with vehemence, the next I skid and crash down, sprawled on the ground and stunned with confusion. My hands sting from the gravel that has been shoved into them to break my fall. Belle makes a gurgling noise when her lead runs out and she is yanked back a few feet. She realizes that I am lying on the ground and trots over, nudging my head with her nose.

I pick myself up off the ground and absent-mindedly pat Belle on the head. The wrath that had driven me is gone; I am exhausted. I squat down to Belle's level, wincing, then scratch her head and murmur a few words, apologizing for choking her when I fell. It is then that I notice where we are.

There, only a few feet in front of us, is the bridge. I stare at it for a few moments, then turn my head around and find the spot where Belle and I had stopped before Skinny Sally ran by. It seems very far away. I look down, and tie my shoe. And then, slowly, I stand up. It only takes a few strides to make it to the bridge. I stop, and Belle sits on my foot. Skinny Sally is nowhere to be seen. She probably had some song blasting on her iPod and never heard me fall.

The rain is coming down faster now; I ignore it and continue staring down the trail in awe. My hair becomes slicker as I glance down at Belle, who licks my hand. She seems to be happy from running so hard. I do not share that much enthusiasm. But I find a strange feeling coming over me. It is not pure happiness; I am tired, my breath is still a little ragged. And yet I'm wondering, Can I do more? Can I run all the way back to the entrance of the trail from here without stopping?

The tightness in my chest tells me probably not. But still I gaze down the beaten path and listen to the rain hit the leaves on the ground... and wonder.

At Galway Races

by Tara Prescott

Just as the couple arrived, the sky turned
marble, a turbid mix of brown and gray.
Following footsteps of the man she loved,
she tried to remember what Yeats had said,
something about the races, the jockeys
riding the moon, delighted companions.

The racecard read like a strange horoscope,
the print sticking to the palms of her hands.
Rain made tiny magnifying glasses
race down the pages, smearing every name.
Moons is sponsoring the best dressed award
So do you think we should give it a go?

He took his cue, smiled, gave a short clipped laugh.
She curled her coat into a wool cocoon.
At the tote, their pounds predicted success:
Audacious Dancer to win in the first,
Quite Chuffed to place in the fifth, and maybe
Absent Beauty to show. The lithe creatures

stood white eyed, muscles stuttering in place.
Grays were lucky. In the relentless rain,
everything looked gray. Nothing felt lucky.
Trying to make out a horse, a hurdle,
anything tangible, anything real,
she thought, *It isn't the poem at all.*

The Hardest-Earned Animal Crackers of my Life

by Greg Brown

Blood drives are very similar to NPR pledge drives, except they *literally* suck the life out of you. Sadly, though, the Putnam Hall collection site was equally lacking in humor, despite a bumper crop of humour. For three days, our lobby had been transformed into a miniature replica of the hospital experience. I was about to journey into this hell, try to give some blood, and hope that my story wouldn't end with a water buffalo being chopped up to the tune of "The End."¹

Just like a real hospital, the first thing I experienced was a waiting room. Putnam's was a sad semblance of the real thing, just a few chairs where you read a long list of the various conditions that bar you from giving blood. The annual K-State All-University Blood Drive had used our lobby as a location for several years running, so the layout had coalesced into the waiting area at the north corner, the interrogation booths along the southeast side, and the remainder of the room used for collection chairs. Some of the prohibited conditions listed were travel overseas during certain dates, a previous bout of malaria, and various sexually transmitted diseases. While the reasons for the latter two were clear, it wasn't until later in the laminated, metal-ring-bound, and thoroughly person-proof packet that I discovered why they were wary of travelers to the United Kingdom: Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.

CJD first presents itself as dementia, progressing to problems with speech, balance, movement, and memory, and eventually including personality changes, hallucinations, and everything else bad you can imagine when your brain matter is starting to resemble Swiss cheese. The cause wasn't truly pinned down until 1982, when Stanley B. Prusiner confirmed that the agent of infection was merely a special class of malformed protein which he called a "prion."

Bacteria multiply through reproduction to fill a host and viruses hijack a host's own cells to spread, but prions go about their business a different way. First of all, these prions are folded up in such a way to resist the body's mechanism for disassembling errant proteins. Secondly, the best evidence we have right now points to the prions spreading by latching onto healthy proteins and perverting them into copies, which then move on to pervert other copies and so on, making

¹ While I was ultimately unsuccessful (in a sense), I did manage to avoid one nurse who bore a remarkable resemblance to General Kurtz.

it rather similar to Vonnegut's ice-nine.² This disease can be spread through blood transfusions – thus sparking concern on the part of the Red Cross – but the traditional pathway in New Guinea has been ritualistic cannibalism: eating the brains of the deceased. So, in a way, it's also like inverse-zombies.³

Luckily, I've never been overseas (unless a jaunt down to Texas counts) and cleanly avoided any of the criteria. So, I upgraded to waiting room part deux outside of the interrogation booths. These were constructed in such a way to shield the rest of the room from the sight and sounds of the nurse and prospective donor. While it succeeded on the latter half, night had fallen and the lobby's windows transformed into eerily-effective mirrors, allowing those of us waiting on the couches to roughly view what was going on inside. This didn't help my growing sense of unease.⁴ Also creepy were the sections of newspapers lying around, as if someone had brought them to read and then not made it back to retrieve them. This may explain why every single doctor's office I've been in has had unbearable magazines – like *501 Ways to Fail at Trying to Make Something* – as if to assure visitors that these were not the artifacts of patients past.

Before I was able to dwell on the matter too deeply, a nurse summoned me to her booth. We smoothly ran through the questions on the packet, albeit with a slight pause as she figured out how to enter a VSD heart murmur⁵ into the computer system. Then it was on to the medical examination, as she tested to see if I was anemic (nope),

2 Curiously enough, when I went to verify the formatting of his name on the Wikipedia page, there was already a link back to the prion page as a similar mechanism. I submit this to you as evidence that the Internet has entirely too much time on its hands. As further evidence, I'd point out that the prion page had been linked from such diverse topics as "Planet Killer" (again making an analogy between prions and ice-nine), "Laughing Owl" (which mistakenly links to the page while instead referring to a type of small seabird), "The Hunger" (which links it to some horror movie starring David Bowie that attempted to serious-up the myth of vampires), and a page discussing how to write the page on abortion. I also submit this list to you as evidence that I have entirely too much time on my hands.

3 Wikipedia has yet to make this connection as of Monday, October 16, 2006, giving us all some hope for humanity.

4 Adding to the vibe, the reflections in the window seemed to have passed through the same process that they use for dramatic-re-enact-o-vision on TV, making the entire atmosphere that much more unsettling and surreal.

5 A pinhole-sized defect in my heart that allows a very slight amount of oxygen-rich blood to slip to the other ventricle, joining oxygen-poor blood on its trip to the lungs and back to that same ventricle. It's congenital, but wasn't detected until three, making it a non-problem except for a slight risk of infection during dental inspection a risk easily mitigated with some antibiotics an hour before.

chemically-bizarre (nope), or anemic (still nope). After a few more minor tests, I was on my way to a collection chair.

While I didn't collect any evidence as I was giving blood, the final tally of the blood drive noted 958 "presenting donors" but only 809 pints of blood collected. There's only one clear conclusion we can draw from this: 149 people failed miserably. As I sat down in the chair, I quickly ran through my chances again. My dad has always shrugged off blood donation like it's nothing, whereas my mom fainted every time she tried. The latter was my reason for avoiding donation until now, but as long as I split the difference I should come out OK, right?

When I initially entered the room back at the beginning of this tale, both my elbows started to ache, despite never having given blood before. It only increased as the nurse found my left arm's vein, cleaned the surrounding area, and plunged the needle in. I don't have a problem with needles, having received enough shots over the years to stop caring, but that was no needle. It may have been the circumstances, but in the moments before insertion, that thing looked like it wouldn't fit in a compact car slot. However, I somehow managed to ignore it (along with my memories a week or two beforehand of re-watching *Requiem for a Dream*).

Instead, I tried to concentrate on the illustrious career of bleeding. Yes, while blood donations have a relatively short-lived history, bloodletting (aka "phlebotomy"⁶) in general has built up a wonderful amount of infamy over the years. George Washington was killed by it, as was Robin Hood. Perhaps the most tragic case is that of Lady Ada Lovelace, a 19th century mathematician who wrote, among other things, the world's first computer program. Sadly, though, her life was cut short at the age of 36 when she was bled to death during treatment for uterine cancer. Perhaps this wasn't the best thing to distract my mind with.

Snapping back to reality, the nurse had thoughtfully given me a much better distraction: some heart-shaped squeeze-thingie that she said to put in my left hand and said to squeeze and release on a five-second, three-second rhythm. This alone was enough to tax my weary brain and I set to work squeezing and releasing, squeezing and releasing. After a minute or two of doing so, I realized my hands were starting to feel kind of strange, like I couldn't really feel them anymore. Additionally, my stomach started to ache. The nurses noticed my unease, and asked if I was still doing ok. I kept on answering yes, until

⁶ Today, phlebotomy refers to the drawing of blood for medical testing. Bloodletting still survives to treat abnormal build-ups of iron in bodily tissues, almost as if the humours were getting their revenge under the guise of our modern periodic table.

about five minutes in, when eye-witnesses say about half the color had drained from my face. The nurses seemed to think that my eyes were starting to glaze over too, and so snapped into action.

They quickly brought the back of the seat down so that it slanted slightly backwards, and brought the legs up so they pointed towards the ceiling. Two cold, wet washcloths were placed on my face and neck, and soon the nurses crowded around me.

“Wanna know how to make an old woman happy?”

“Whuh?”

“I said, wanna know how to make an old woman happy?” It was one of the older nurses standing above and to the left of me.

“I, uh, I don’t know.”

“You give her a Visa! You brought your Visa here, right? You got a Visa in your pocket?”

“Uh... no, I don’t.” By this point they’d surrounded me in a tableau, with faces popping in from the left, right, and top sides of my vision.

“Well, that’s a shame.”

Now another one chimed in. “Want to really know how to make an old lady happy?”

“I... uh...uh”

“You let her *flash* you!” At the word flash, the woman grabbed the bottom of her nurse’s shirt, and started lifting it upwards at a startling speed. It is at this point eyewitnesses agree that the rest of the color drained from my face. But before I could even cognitively process what was going on, it was over. The shirt had never even made it up halfway, and the entire room had enjoyed a laugh. It was my turn, on the other hand, to be that guy who awkwardly laughs way after everyone else.

After a few minutes of lying in the sloped-backwards position, the numbness in my hands subsided, only to be replaced by the incessant tingling of restored nervous contact. After a while, even that had faded along with the stomach ache, and a nurse assessed me as ready to go.

7 I lied, although technical distinctions may yet save my credibility, as it was a debit card, thus removing the unique reason for joy over more antiquated methods of payment (such as checks). Visa still handles the technical details of each transaction. I still lied, though, because my brain had long since chosen fleeing over fighting, and while my extremities remained stubbornly inactive, I still made what I felt to be a symbolic stand. That and my internal monologue at this point boiled down to OH GOD HUMAN CONTACT WHAT ESCAPE.

Speaking of fleeing, an alternative interpretation of “visa” while extremely unlikely would also save my credibility and bolster her case. Entering another country is a tad extreme, but it would still have fulfilled my desire to flee the scene.

He led me to the hospitality area, flanked by two of my friends who were volunteering at the time, and made sure I got some water and food. According to the sign advertising the drive, I had just saved three lives. It was a comforting thought, especially as I sat there trying to get my bearings, all the while breaking my animal crackers into pieces⁸ and waiting for the rhythmic throbbing in my head to End.

⁸ Why is it that people always seem to go for the heads first when eating food shaped like animals? In the case of the giraffe, it's a question of ease, but with graham cracker bears and other delicious delicacies the pattern still holds. Do I first eat the ears and head of that chocolate rabbit so I don't see it smiling back at me while I munch on its lower abdomen? Does the mere presence of that smile on a chocolate rabbit say something about us? Is anyone else seriously creeped out right now?

Ntato

(Kiswahili word for spirit protector)

by Virginia Silverman

Always good with his hands, my granddaddy owned Phelps Radio and Television Repair in our hometown of Greenville, North Carolina. Because of his talent with all things electrical, we were the first family in Greenville to own a television. Small yet powerful, the wooden box that sat dwarfed by the Queen Anne furniture in my grandparents' living room contained all the dreams and wishes I could conjure. I would sit for hours in front of the fuzzy gray screen, squinting to make out the faded figures moving about.

"Sky King" and "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom" were my two favorite shows. I was always ready for something adventurous, and the adventure stories brought to life each week sparked in me a desire to see the world, and conquer it if I could.

If pushed, I would have to admit that the wilds of Africa inspired me the most. For days after an episode of "Wild Kingdom," I would replay the crocodile wrestling matches and baboons playfully caring for their young. The jungles had a mysterious and magical hold on me. I began wearing my mother's zebra skin bathrobe around the house pretending to be an African princess. My fantasies were a reflection of my southern upbringing, a helpless damsel in distress. Frequently, I was held captive, waiting for the strong, handsome Bwana to rescue me. It was never an option for me to break free of my bonds and rescue myself.

From the time I was seven, I babysat my sister who was 18 months younger than I was. I do not recall feeling abandoned or neglected in those moments of isolation. Rather, I saw them as opportunities to be myself, fully and without judgment. My creative expression knew no boundaries, and my baby sister Kim was a willing partner.

Television was not our only occupation during our times without adult supervision. I loved music as much as adventure shows, and my favorite album was from my mother's small collection of 33 1/3 vinyls called "The Forbidden Jungle." As soon as the sound of my mother's wheels grinding against the dirt road that led to our house faded in the distance, I would pull "The Jungle" out of its place in the stack to catch a glimpse at the wonderful woman on the cover. Clad only in a thin veil of leopard skin accented by vines and leaves, the woman stretched languidly across the trunk of a tree. She seemed oblivious to the dangers that lurked within the thick bush that ached to engulf her. Her back

arched across the tree trunk, her head thrown back in what appeared to be submission to her environment. Her eyes closed as she strained to hear the faint, threatening drums that called to her innate animal instincts.

My imagination gave the woman on the album cover fear and excitement, loathing and lust, for the world that held her captive in my dream world. If I looked long enough at the picture, eventually I began to feel the drums myself. Inside my head and heart, the pounding would overcome me and soon enough, my pajamas were bottoms off, my shirt tied up under my baby's breasts, and I would need to dance. Carefully easing the treasure out of its cover, I would place the vinyl gingerly down on my mother's forbidden turntable, hold my breath and lower the needle into the first groove. The music would begin slowly, faintly, whispering the trance that would overcome me in time. Eventually, I would be lost in the writhing I imagined other jungle dwellers were experiencing, and I wished with every jerk and leap that I was there, with them.

The drums woke my "African spirit," that part of me that longed for something more than the confines of Greenville, North Carolina. My African Spirit was synonymous with total freedom from the dull, frightening world of my southern family. I came from a long line of suppressed freedom-seekers, all who ultimately gave up their dreams for simpler conformities like family, alcoholism, anger, and depression. While all consuming, any of these was easier and required less courage than holding on to a dream that suffered perpetual annihilation from fearful parents and damaged siblings.

"The Forbidden Jungle" drums beat a path for me to find my dream at the end of my frenetic dance. The harder I undulated, the stronger my connection to my African Spirit became. My blood pulsed with the fever of dreams and longing, and this drove me out of North Carolina eventually and to new life in California when I turned 18.

Traveling to Africa had always been at the top of my "Adventures to Take" list as an adult. Having successfully checked off Grenada, Ecuador, the Galapagos Islands, and most of the Caribbean, Africa was next. Therefore, in 1995, when I found myself with a 12-week hiatus between jobs, no significant relationships to prevent me from traveling for an extended period, and enough frequent flyer miles to travel first class, I arranged a 10-week safari to East Africa.

In Kenya for three and a half weeks already, I made my way across the border to Tanzania. Reluctant to leave the savannah I came to love, I was sad at the prospect of having to relinquish the hold I had on the Great Rift Valley. I discovered a deep spiritual connection with this

place halfway around the world. I came to understand the meaning of being “open and strong,” to see the tall, dry grass hide the hunting cheetah and yet feel no fear. Instead, I felt a sense of wonderment at being such a witness while at the same time accepting the fate of the gazelle much as I learned to accept my own destiny, whether facing the patriarchal platitudes of Corporate America, where I had spent the past 20 years, or wavering commit-less between relationships. It all held a greater meaning as I compared myself to these hunting animals. We had the same compulsive drives leading us to eat or be eaten, love or be loved.

During the initial days of my safari, I dreamed frequently of my childhood jungle ballets. The drums beat silently in my head, reminding me of my passion for freedom, something I had allowed myself to forget during the preceding 24 years of insatiable ambition. I found myself letting go of my uniquely American anxiety and preconceived notions of unachieved but entitled success. I struggled for outward approval and recognition all my life, and now Kenyans were modeling a new way of being. I found myself longing for their centered simplicity. The path was becoming clearer and set before me; struggling would not make it straighter or less troublesome.

I shared my time in Kenya with Abraham, a middle-aged man from the Kikuyu tribe, a nation of 6.5 million people who populate the central highlands of South Central Kenya. The Kikuyu are ambitious, hard-working people. Traditionally agriculturalists, the Kikuyu connect deeply to the fertile soil there. However, they have also adopted many aspects of modern culture. Today, the Kikuyu work as traders, businessmen, and shopkeepers in addition to working their soil for food.

Abraham shared his tribe’s inherent work ethic. As a private guide for adventure-seeking vacationers, Abraham would leave his village for months at a time, leading thrill-seeking, camera-wielding westerners on safari through the grasslands of his country. During the past month, he had introduced me to Colobus monkeys living at the base of Mount Kilimanjaro, pencil-thin ebony children living on the Masai Mara, and gigantic slate-colored elephants lumbering through Amboseli National Park.

As we drove, Abraham taught me Swahili. I must have been African in one of my former lives, as the language came easily to me. “Mbutu,” “Kilima,” “Nymbani,” “Asana Santi” and other Swahili colloquialisms floated easily from my brain and lips. In a matter of days, I could communicate with the Kenyans in their language, albeit elementary conversations. I loved the way their dark faces exploded in light when they realized I was trying to meet them linguistically in their

world. Their eyes embraced me as a welcome sister, and I fell easily into their hearts, and they into mine.

My guide and I traveled across the Masai Mara in a dusty four-wheel-drive truck. Everything – my bags, our food, my clothes, and my face – was covered in a light, hot, dusty film, a reminder of our trek across the great lands. Each night, when we returned to campsite, I relished in the washing that became a meditation for my heart and mind at the closing of each day.

I could tell that Abraham was ready to get back to his wives, ready to make more children and rest in the shade of the acacia trees near his home. He was done with the jambo-jiving American who could not stop asking questions or demanding one more minute before we turned back because there would surely be another lion pride just beyond that next rock formation. He was tired, hungry; and like the other Kenyans I had met there, he felt inarguably entitled to the rest and relaxation that seemed to be the conclusion to all work endeavors. People here appeared to work to enjoy life. In exhausting contrast, Americans seemed to work only to work more.

Aside from their commitment to finding food for today and minding sheep today and building a shambo by nightfall, so they have somewhere to sleep, the Kenyan people seemed to make no agreements with God or anyone else for more than that. They seemed happy to enjoy the gifts given to them now. When showers fell, they held their faces to the rain, drinking all they could. They did not run for shelter or worry that drought would come tomorrow.

In a contrast as vast as the African land itself, on the other side of the world, busy, civilized westerners ran into walls created by their desire to define their success and delay their future for as long as possible. We spend our time frantically trying to control our emotions and environments to affect an outcome planned before we are born. Unlike the Kenyans I met who lived in the moment *for the moment*, our futures were constructed by parents whose unfulfilled dreams had been shelved until we were of an age to bring them to life a generation later. We intensely educated Americans sacrifice feeling for financial futures, dreams for a full day planner, and hope for a brief dance with public notoriety. A mention in the Wall Street Journal means we have crossed into some sacred place known as “Destiny Fulfilled.” Each savannah surprise brought me more fully into the present, and farther away from my western way of living. I was grateful for each transforming opportunity.

I felt the difference between my life in America and the lives of the Kenyans I met there. Inherent in their land and very natures was the absence of boundaries. A barrier would insult the vast horizon, thereby

insulting God, who may never forgive the people their arrogant indiscretion. Their attitudes seem to be without walls; their ideas without restriction. They were a people free to roam their territory without need of passport or plan.

Not so for me as we entered the border town of Arusha. We spotted the customs office only a few feet from the line marking the end of Kenya and the beginning of Tanzania. No fences, no guards. Just a small shack with no door containing an officer who may or may not be there to stamp my papers and legally welcome me to Tanzania. Everything is a crapshoot in Africa. If your plans were aborted, no worries. "A Kuna Matata." I heard "If God wills" more than you can imagine offered as the rationalization for everything going right, or everything going wrong. There would always be another day for another attempt at the meeting. It did not matter. If things happened on schedule, fine. If not, fine. Abraham knew that he would go home eventually.

I was lucky that particular day, and the customs agent was there. A tall, thin, dark man with piercing black eyes, he took his job seriously, checked my papers, stamped my visa and smiled a huge, gleaming welcome to his wonderful country. The pride was infectious and enviable. I cannot remember ever feeling so connected or proud of my homeland, even though I enjoy my life in America. Africans seem to understand that they are not just inhabitants of their land; they are part of the land itself. When you experience Tanzanian land, you experience the people themselves. Nothing more. Nothing less.

My Tanzanian guide had not arrived yet, so we returned to the truck to wait. As soon as we had reseated ourselves, the local merchants descended upon us, hoping to entice me with their jewelry and baskets and artwork ... all things beautiful and made by the people of the land. By this time in my visit, however, my Kenyan shillings were gone and, with no Tanzanian automatic teller in sight, I could not entertain their offers. I did not want to unfairly tempt them knowing that I was not buying that day.

I knew enough Swahili by that point in the trip to be able to tell them in broken phrases, "Very beautiful, very beautiful. But not today. No shillings today. A Sana Santa. Thank you very much."

The vendors continued to swarm the truck and thrust their ware-covered arms through my window, hoping something would catch my eye. One old Tanzanian woman in particular insisted that I see her bracelets. She stuck her long Masai-thin arm through the crack in my window and across my face, demanding that I see her delicately beautiful trinkets. "Only one, Mama. Just a few shillings. Only one from me, Mama," she said in her lilting, broken English.

Again, I declined, becoming a little uncomfortable with the close quarters, the heat, dust, and the pressure created by the furious sales techniques of the eager Tanzanians. Still, the old woman would not relent. She took one of her bracelets and tossed it into the truck onto my lap. I returned it to her, open and strong, smiling and trying to communicate the best that I could that I did not have any money today, but maybe tomorrow.

She took the bracelet back from me, and tossed it back through the open window. More insistently, I turned to give it back to her. "No shillings," I offered with a smile hoping to soften the rejection.

The old woman blocked my returning hand. Her gnarled, leathery hand prevented mine from returning the bracelet. She locked her eyes with mine. In that moment, the sounds around us, previously loud and overpowering, softened so that hers was the only voice I heard. She gently pushed my hand back into the truck, and placed the copper bracelet into the palm of my hand. "No shillings, Mama. A gift from me. To remember me."

In that moment, it seemed as if the entire land was speaking to me through her ebony voice. Her words were underscored by my memory of the beating drums of those days alone in my living room. The old woman's generous gesture pulled me back into my African Spirit, my connection to my visceral self. Kenya, herself, gave me this gift to remember the woman, to remember the land, to remember my new open and strong hold on life. My African Spirit was my guide now, and the bracelet a tangible reminder of the gift Kenya had given me.

When I returned from my Africa, the land that I had come to love as my own, I knew that I would bring with me a new identity. I would not need to arm myself with my familiar emotional armor and psychological weaponry. I had re-discovered my African Spirit protector, only now I had learned its Swahili name, Ntato. In a lovely Kiswahili proverb that has been told for thousands of years, the Ntato was a python who was sent to protect women from evil spirits on earth plane and in the hereafter. The Ntato was present in the strength of the old merchant, and I determined to take that back home with me.

Many Africans believe when a person dies, he or she is not dead. Instead, the deceased lives on in a spirit world that transects our real world from time to time. The living can freely access the spirits through prayer, invocation, sacrifice, or dance, with the purpose of asking advice, or forgiveness, or to help soothe their rage or ask them to intercede with angry gods to bring rain to a dry, dusty land.

These ancestors remain alive simply because they are remembered. This persistent connection establishes continuity between generations. It is an important link from the past to the present and ultimately into the

future. Only when ancestors are remembered no more are they truly forgotten, and at that point, they truly die.

This was what the old Kenyan woman had tried to tell me, why she demanded so fervently that I remember her. Perhaps her request came as much for her need to ensure her afterlife as for my post-vacation benefit. As I drove away from her that day, I promised to remember my Ntato, my gentle bracelet seller, when I returned from Africa to American soil.

The safari had made me different in other ways too. Whereas before, I was anxious and amped to a compulsive pitch, as I returned I stood proud, calm, and steadfast. I arrived stronger than when I had left for my safari. I quickly discovered that as long as I kept the vision of the woman at the border clearly in my mind, I could hold onto the Ntato even as I held onto the bracelet she forced upon me. That is the secret of my African Spirit. Adversity makes it stronger. Calamity makes it more stalwart. Challenge makes it more powerful. The journey gives backbone to the python.

Today, my African Spirit is difficult to describe; it is intangible and fragile. I am aware only of a sense that the hole that had been inside me for so long is finally being filled. Warm and aware of my power, I seem to emanate light: yellow, warm, wide and enveloping. I see into the eyes of people; I invite their spirit into me for a moment. I feel myself healing little by little, feeling the wet murkiness of that hole inside the center of my chest dry up inch by inch like the rain-deprived edges of Lake Nakuru in Tanzania. The crust that appears as the blackness dissipates is a scab, temporarily in place to protect the warmth and connection that lies beneath.

I know that this kind of healing cannot occur quickly. The hole cannot be miraculously replaced with healthy tissue and feeling. A gradual process allows the new and sensitive circuits to gain confidence before they have to deal with the world's fears and pain. My energy is alive, buzzing on the surface of my skin. The hair on my arms seems to stand on end and imitates the sea anemone's fine cilia filtering out all the impurities. If the feeling had a sound, it would be electric. Not a constant hum, but more a sporadic "zzzttt" when it connects with something important.

The African Spirit energy prances and bobs as I make my way to the mountains of wisdom that are in the distance. The Africans call them "kilima," there across the plains of experience and challenge. They are attainable if I remain focused on my goal and connected to Ntato, my inner guide.

It has been 12 years since I journeyed to Africa. However, even after all this time, Ntato is still my powerful companion, constant and true as

protector and guide. It was a wild, uncontrollable part of me in the past, which now grows tame and stalwart after many years of work. My protective python is loyal to me; she never wavers in her commitment to my growth and fearless movement forward. Again, the mountains of wisdom are clearer and nearer as I have the courage to trust this inner strength. I can place my hands inside Ntato's mouth knowing that she will not harm me. My faith gives me courage to test myself by facing my fears, knowing that the same power which made the kestrels on the Serengeti sing or the feral cats warm themselves in the great Amboseli sun is there for me as well. It will bring me to the eternal wisdom I seek.

When I returned from Africa, I resolved to use my newfound African Spirit for the rest of my life. My life had new meaning now. I vowed to continue my safari, my journey for truth, at home. In homage to that vow, I admitted that I wanted to have a child of my own, and I set out on a course to find a suitable father. I married Dan, conceived and birthed a daughter, who seemed to emerge straight out of the Ntato power I had unleashed during that very poignant ten-week voyage to discovery of an integral part of who I really am.

Discovering I was pregnant on Christmas Eve one year after Dan and I married, it seemed impossible to name our daughter anything but Eve. But, Eve was my choice for another reason as well.

In the Bible, Eve is the first woman created. She has immense personal power and has the creative potential to lead the world into its destiny. In that story penned by the ancient patriarchy who ruled the day, the Ntato python was transformed from a spirit protector into the primary perpetrator of the demise of all civilization. However, I knew that my daughter would bring with her the Ntato of her feminine ancestors, and her strength would give the world another chance to right the wrong in that ancient story. The first Eve was ramrod into a position of colossal subservience, eternally blamed for having chosen wisdom and awareness over ignorant bliss. In contrast, Eve, with my guidance and Ntato's protection, has the power to rectify that for her children and their children, and ultimately all the women of the world.

Many years have passed since I trekked across Kenya and Tanzania. The visions of Ngorogoro Crater have faded and I must flip through my photo albums to recall the colors of electric pink flamingoes nesting along the shores of Lake Victoria. I have searched the Internet repeatedly for a copy of "The African Village" album, imagining my eight-year-old daughter and me dancing wildly in our living room. However, the album seems to have disappeared. Or, their owners covet them with the same selfish lust that propels my search. In either case, the album does not exist.

Until I find the lost album, I wear my Tanzanian bracelet to remind me of my African spirit, my Ntato. The tangible connection to what the energy that woke again during my safari helps keep it alive in me. But, at other times, my African spirit seems to hide as if covered by the tall, swaying grasses of the savannah. Moreover, although I may not be able to see it, I know that it is always there. Waiting, just as the cheetah waited patiently for the gazelle. Just as the old woman waited patiently to bestow her generous gift upon me. My African spirit, my Ntato, is there, waiting inside.

Silhouette

by Kreg Calhoon

The murky waters of the Ganga lapped against the worn steps, sweeping over the landing, slowly submerging stones and washing away footprints and debris. Faded boats bobbed lazily near the shore. Their sweat-stained owners attended to broken motors and empty fuel tanks. Heavy damp air rose from the river – the smells of faint soap and fish pooled and floated inward. The sun stretched as it fell behind the horizon, illuminating the roof tops and dropping the last of its heat onto the aching concrete. Chris and Nathan sat overlooking Assi ghat under the shade of a tall peepal tree. To the south the city fell away.

Nathan leaned against the warped wooden railing. His eyes fixed on the women below. They were up to their waists in the water washing clothes at the end of a hard day. Half-cleaned and fully-nude children splashed in the water. A small dog walked along the bank, the children leapt from the water and gave chase.

Chris paced the length of the stone landing. He raised a small glass of steaming brown tea to his lips and drank deeply – taking care to not alter his steps. His face hardened with surprise as the tea burned the tip of his tongue and dribbled out onto his goatee. He dumped the remaining tea onto the stone path below the landing, and then threw the glass into the river.

“Why do they bathe in that filthy water?” Chris said. “Don’t they know anything about disease?”

“I’m sure they know,” Nathan said. “There’s just not a better way to do things here.” He rubbed his sunburned neck, twisting his mouth at the unexpected pain. He wished he hadn’t cut his hair before the trip.

“It’s worse than the Hudson,” Chris said. “At least it smells worse.”

To the North, the nightly worship was beginning at Dashashwamedha ghat. The bells could be clearly heard where the men sat – the clear tones floating over the river and joining with the melody of the Muslim call to prayer. Chris turned away from the river; his eye twitched slightly – he sneezed. Nathan backed away from the railing and sat down at the edge of the landing on a small hobbled stool. He sat quietly with hands folded behind his head watching the commotion upriver.

There were men and women standing on the lowest steps; their arms rose toward the setting sun reaching over the river. Silhouetted against the orange sky – their faces were hidden. Nathan was amazed by their devotion.

Others were hunched over near the water releasing small candles in hand-made baskets. The baskets drifted easily toward the center of the river – the starry milieu became methodically less bright.

“Do you want to go out on the river tomorrow morning?” Nathan asked. He glanced back to the area where the women were washing; no figures were visible in the shadows.

“Not really,” Chris said. “We would have to get up early and pay too much for a boring boat ride. I’d rather sleep in then maybe read for awhile.”

“You think all this is boring?” Nathan asked. “We’re here to enjoy ourselves, man. Let’s explore the city and meet some people; really get to know the place.” He opened his pack and removed his water bottle. The water was warm and the outside of the bottle felt like the cracked concrete on which his bare feet rested.

“I feel like I know this place already,” Chris said. “Let’s find tickets for somewhere else, maybe Jaipur.” He wrung his hands on his shirt and nodded his head to the beat of an unheard song.

Nathan watched his brother from behind his aviator sunglasses. He wanted to tell him to just move on without him. He was not leaving Banaras anytime soon. “We can head out the day after tomorrow,” he said.

Below the landing several men had gathered near the chai stall. They sat peacefully by the water’s edge. Nathan had noticed on nearly every evening that the women seemed to disappear along with the sun. He imagined them going home to cook a meal for an ungrateful family. They would then ensure that there was water for the next day. Finally they would drift away to an uneasy sleep on the parched roof of their homes.

“Where do you want to go?” Chris asked.

“Let’s worry about that later,” Nathan said. He heard random conversations emerging from crowded tables near the water. Some men talked others listened, some smoked others sipped tea, and some simply sat entranced by the river.

“By the way, I am having fun,” Chris said. “I’ve been looking forward to this trip for months.” He plucked his harmonica from his pocket and played a few bars from some Bob Dylan song. The men below didn’t seem to notice the strange music as it floated through the air in opposition to the rhythm of the water.

“I’m having fun too,” Nathan said. “I really enjoy watching people and learning about them. I kind of wanted to play with those kids behind our hotel tomorrow.”

“The ones with the shaved heads?” Chris said. “They’re like a pack of miniature monks or something.” He laughed, maybe louder than was

necessary. He slipped the harmonica back into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. He flicked his lighter and lit up which attracted a cloud of mosquitoes to his face.

"Yeah," Nathan replied. He didn't laugh. "I saw them rolling an inner-tube down the street with a stick this morning. I don't think they have much for toys around here." He could still hear their laughter and see the brilliant smiles plastered on their brown faces. He had walked hurriedly by with his hands stuffed in his pockets, but had turned back in time to see one of the smaller boys in the group waving to him.

Chris drummed his hands on the splintery plank and turned to look at the temples downriver. "Why are all these old buildings still here?" he said. "They should really modernize."

"What do you mean?" Nathan asked.

"Well, it'd be cool to have a line of riverfront clubs," he said. "Tourists would spend all night by the water."

Nathan thought about spending all night at the waters edge. He wanted to learn to be drawn in and held tightly. He would listen to the river and allow his mind to empty. He would not open his eyes; he would not have to see.

Boys in Van Nuys

by Jay Rubin

– *Southern California, 1969*

We shot birds, squirrels, neighborhood cats;
Shimmied through open windows next door;
Rummaged through closets, dug through drawers.
We discovered we were *not* the only bandits
On the block: Others kept their own dark secrets –
The black-and-white pornographer,
His girls our age dressed up like whores,
Their lipstick smeared, their cigarette butts.

Out on the sidewalk one afternoon,
Mrs McDougal shot her husband dead –
Bullets in his thigh, his chest, his head.
From the porch of our house, our mother cried
That dinner was ready, to come inside....
And so we skipped home like men on the moon.



"West Stadium Series, No. 3"
by Mary Hammel

The West Stadium Series is a photo essay documenting the space underneath the west bleachers of Memorial Stadium occupied by the Art Department of Kansas State University. I hadn't visited this site in years, so when I rediscovered it I came back with my camera to photograph its spaciousness and emptiness. I stayed for over an hour taking pictures from different angles. At the time, I was examining places with unique qualities of light and shadow. This place seemed to have the right balance of both, as well as unusual architectural details that added to the uniqueness.



"West Stadium Series, No. 2"
by Mary Hammel

The Solitary

by Stephen Sloane

Leonard wore mist like a shroud. The rain, sore feet or possibly a combination of both, swayed him to view Central Park as a separate entity from the city fused to its borders. Lilly, his wife, took the park's vastness entirely in her stride. It didn't faze her at all, nothing ever did. He'd thought many times this had been the catalyst to their marital discord: her intransigence versus his compliance.

As usual, Lilly had decided where to go first on the trip: "Let's catch a cab to Columbus Circle, and then we'll walk up through the park."

"Fine," replied Leonard. "Let's go."

* * * *

Rain.

Leonard didn't mind the rain. He felt it made a city come alive: drenched buildings oozing infinite secrets through their walls. Reach your hand to them and touch; feel the damp: a gift from the city.

He'd indulged in Washington Square, the night before. Flying into La Guardia after ten, neither of them wanted to waste a fraction of the evening, so they walked down Fifth Avenue to the square, to check out the chess players. Naturally, they'd disappeared hours ago; now only a single figure sat slumped on a bench near the monument. Dark hair frazzled, he raised his eyebrows and gestured with his hand to the couple. Glancing, Leonard noticed a birthmark with coarse white hairs protruding, at the base of the man's thumb. He briefly nodded before dispelling him, as he turned to his wife.

"*Searching For Bobby Fischer*, Lil. Remember the movie? You liked it. Think they shot it here."

"Yeah, so? Let's go to that pub your architect friend told you about."

"Jekyll and Hyde's?"

"Didn't he say there were like two of them in the Village, and one up near Central Park?"

"Think so. Maybe we'll find one if we keep walking. NYU's round here somewhere, I think."

"You're the college guy. You tell me." Lilly walked on briskly. She turned her head to see Leonard pressing the palm of each hand against the monument, his forehead almost touching. "For God's sake! What're you doing now?"

"It feels cold; I like it. Kind of looks like the Arc-de-Triumph."

"Course it's cold. It's raining, and I'm wet! Lets get to this pub before someone mugs us or I freeze."

Leonard stepped back slightly and rubbed his hands together. "Hey Lil, *When Harry Met Sally*, right? You know, Meg Ryan drops off Billy Crystal at the beginning – right here, by the monument."

"Leonard, we're going. I'm not kidding."

* * * *

Ten-thirty in the morning rain, and Columbus Circle buzzed. Leonard had wanted to take the subway, but Lilly said she didn't want to get lost and end up in the Bronx.

"You can't end up in the Bronx on this line, Lil. Maybe Harlem, but not the Bronx."

He offered a smile, but she looked through Leonard as if he wasn't there, like she was focusing on something behind him.

Leonard had long felt he didn't have the fight to push any more. He'd studied the subway system before the trip, but there was no way Lilly would allow him to state his case, even on the most mundane things like city directions. She'd claimed the "directions" job a long time ago, and to Leonard, it wasn't worth trying to regain that ground.

Lilly got out of the taxi, her curly blonde hair now wet and hanging like rat's tails. The bottoms of her jeans were still damp from splashing through puddles in the Village, the night before. She was across the road and heading to the park before Leonard had paid. As he caught up to her, she murmured, "Big Apple. How about it?" almost under her breath. For the briefest moment, her blue eyes almost sparkled, lighting up her round, pretty face.

Leonard was taken aback. *How about it*, he thought, rolling those words around in his mind, trying to find a place where they'd fit in his wife's vocal repertoire. The phrase seemed alien coming out of her mouth; it didn't suit her.

That had been one of the reasons for choosing New York. Geoff, or the "architect friend," as Lilly usually referred to him, had suggested the city because, in his opinion, the place was one of the few locations in the world that really was larger than life. "If she isn't impressed with Manhattan, she'll never be impressed by anything," Geoff had said.

"She sure as heck isn't impressed with me anymore," Leonard replied. "Very much doubt if she ever was."

"Give it a shot. This could be the starting point, some kind of catalyst."

"Six years of marriage. I don't know which is worse – the silence, or her insipid attitude."

"She wasn't always like this, was she?" Geoff asked.

"You've known her since you came to her big piano recital, a few days before our wedding. She wore the same stone face playing Rachmaninoff, as she did when we gave our vows. Did you ever once see her get real excited about anything?"

"But you're okay together most of the time, just the two of you. You communicate?"

"We haven't had a real conversation for... perhaps not even this year. I hope this trip changes things at least a little – better had – it was our last fifteen hundred dollars."

"If it doesn't?"

"What would be the point of staying married to someone I can't relate to, and she can't relate to me? And why should I live in seclusion when I'm married? I could do that being single."

"Well, I hope the trip draws you both together. Once loneliness enters the confines of a marriage, the isolation has a way of evolving, manifesting itself in all kinds of ways. At least try to enjoy the city – and each other. And don't forget the Chrysler Building. If you look up at it from across the street, it reflects in that glass high-rise. Almost looks like there's two of them."

Trailing through the leaves, Leonard stayed a few steps behind his wife; he felt comfortable there. Nothing had been said between them during the walk. He didn't mind the silence as much as he used to, it was comforting like a blanket around him, something to shield him from any snide remarks Lilly might send his way. He noticed the mist rolling in. The rain was getting heavier, also. Not that it mattered; they'd both reached saturation point, but thanks to a Christmas present from Leonard's parents, LL Bean partially shielded them from the elemental barrage. He pulled the yellow coat around his frame, zipping it at the front, and brushed his receding hair back with his hands.

"So where are we heading exactly?" Lilly said suddenly.

Leonard felt a little surprised. Usually an open-ended question from Lilly meant she would answer it herself.

He decided to jump in. "I always wanted to walk around the lake where all the people jog. They shot *Marathon Man* there, with Hoffman."

"Hoffman," repeated Lilly. "You mean Philip Seymour?"

"No," quipped Leonard, "Abbie."

"Don't be a smart-ass Leonard! I was joking."

When they got to the lake, the mist was thickening. Leonard followed a jogger with his eyes, studying the tempo of her short, brisk steps. As she passed, he reached out with a smile, but she made no response. Any possible connection was lost: she mercilessly forced herself on, splashing through the puddles and fallen leaves. Swaying slightly, he kept watching, any hope for connection now faint within him. Pushing herself onwards, she became a distant speck. Leonard turned away, finally releasing her.

Looking heavenward, he realized that low clouds had fully cloaked the park; the city entirely gone, shrouded in mist. It seemed to get quieter, too. Listening for the hum of traffic from Fifth Avenue, he heard only rain blizzing the lake's surface; infinite ripples fighting for precedence. And for the slightest moment, Lilly had vanished, too: only raindrops driving through the fog; cold hands, numb cheeks, rushing wind through naked branches. Alone, detached. Complete.

"Len?"

He looked at Lilly.

"We're done here now, right? We need to move on."

"Okay."

In front of them, the clouds had lifted, and Leonard could see the city skyline again.

"That fancy hotel. The Plaza, right? That's right by the park, isn't it? Lets go there."

"I doubt they'll let us in, Lil, soaking wet and all."

"What're they going to say? 'You can't come inside, you'll drip?'"

* * * *

Walking up the steps of The Plaza, Leonard kept an eye on the bellman, who quickly glanced at them both while engaging two ladies.

They walked through the lobby and across to a restaurant. Around the corner to the left, a long hall gave way to expensive boutiques selling Rolex watches, and silk ties. At the end, a marble stairway leading to upper floors.

"Let's check and see if we can get upstairs," Lilly half whispered. She quickly bypassed the boutiques and rushed to the stairs, climbing two steps at a time.

"We'll get caught," Leonard cried after her.

"So, we get caught."

Begrudgingly, Leonard followed. At the top of the stairs was a large hallway. On one side, he saw doors he figured might lead to conference rooms, and at the very end, an ebony-colored grand piano. By the look on Lilly's face, she'd seen the piano, too. She took off down the hall to take a closer look. Leonard played "catch up" again.

"It's a Steinway!" Lilly said.

"You're not going to..."

"How many times do I get to play on a Steinway?"

"But what if people hear you?"

Lilly made no response. She quickly eased herself into position, and lifted the lid.

Leonard could tell by the look on Lilly's face that she was going to make it count.

Delicately, she touched a single note, sending a perfect "Middle C" into the air. Then she was off: The third movement of *Moonlight Sonata* was her most recent "party piece," and she'd perfected it with grace. The sound filled every crevice of the long hallway.

Leonard felt uncomfortable, looking nervously to the other end of the hall, watching for hotel staff to dash up the stairs with clenched fists. After a few minutes, he relaxed. The music lapped over him, and for a moment he saw the hint of a smile on Lilly's lips. Glancing up, she caught his eye and quickly turned away, her smile fading.

Any momentary peace that Leonard felt melted away.

He leaned against a large door behind him. Turning, he pondered, then decided to try it. It opened with a push of two fingers. Walking inside, Leonard saw before him a huge banquet room, empty except for a stack of chairs in the far corner of the room. Large windows to his right looked out over the fountain at the hotel's front, and on the far side by the chairs, more windows vaguely displaying the park through the fog.

He closed the door behind him. Lilly was on to Beethoven's *Appassionata Sonata*, but the sound was now slightly muffled. He walked to the center, and stopped. He couldn't remember ever being in a room so large, yet so empty. The slight sound of rain splashing on the windows mixed with Lilly's repertoire.

To the left of the chairs was another large door. He walked over and decided to try his luck. Again, it opened at a push. Leonard found himself in another room twice the size of the previous one, though poorly lit. Closing the door behind him he no longer heard Lilly's playing, only the sound of rain outside beating down onto the

street. The room was completely empty, except for an object sitting on the carpet, in the center. When he got closer, he saw that it was a silver tray with plaited bread. Leaning over, he reached his hand down and touched it. It looked perfect, but the bread was rock-hard.

He walked over to the window to take a look at the park, noticing for the first time gold sconces on the walls. He could make out a few figures down below, and the tops of the trees swallowed in swirling fog.

As he wiped condensation from the window to get a better view, he heard the sound of footsteps coming from behind the far wall. Turning, he noticed a door in the far corner of the room. The footsteps got louder as the door opened and a figure walked through. Thinking it to be a hotel employee, Leonard couldn't quite make out in the light whether it was a man or woman. The person closed the door, stood for a brief moment, and then walked slowly to the room's center.

Leonard thought he should say something. "I'm sorry," he offered. "I just wandered in. I'll be on my way."

The figure made no acknowledgment, but kept walking. Leonard saw now that it was a waiter. A sense of familiarity sparked within him as the man stopped by the silver tray, knelt down and picked it up. He held it in front of him at waist height, looked over to Leonard and proceeded to walk over. Both men faced each other, the tray of bread between them.

Leonard noticed a birthmark at the base of the man's right thumb, its white hairs inciting recognition of the figure from Washington Square, the night before. He was loftier than Leonard had initially thought, a good head over Leonard's average height. His face was gaunt, and the darkish hair, once disheveled, was now brushed neatly back. He had a small, thin mustache, which almost looked penciled on. Though he wasn't good with ages, Leonard figured he must be on the wrong side of sixty.

The man offered a blank expression, suggesting no recollection of their prior encounter. Leonard felt the silence between them seep into his skin. He searched hard for something to say, but nothing came. Finally, as he pushed to mumble more apologies, the man spoke.

"Everything in order, Sir?"

"Fine. Just fine." Leonard wasn't sure how to react. He looked down at the bread. "Strange place to leave it, you know, by itself in the middle of the room. Not even on a chair, or anything. Just on the floor."

The man continued looking straight at Leonard, his expression unchanged.

"Still," offered Leonard, "A nice silver tray. Someone will be missing it, no doubt."

The man said nothing.

"Of course, I imagine this doesn't happen often in a hotel like this, things being left out. I'm sure everything's accounted for."

"Ship-shape, Sir. We pride ourselves on having everything in its place."

"I'm sure that's the case. Exactly the case." Leonard felt his mouth getting dry. His top lip was sticking to his teeth. He pushed his tongue around his mouth, and tried to draw more saliva. For a moment he almost believed he could smell the bread, that fresh oven-baked smell, but he knew it couldn't be. He looked down, and thought he saw steam rising off the plait. "Of course, it must be interesting working in a hotel, speaking to all kinds of people," Leonard nervously offered.

"I haven't conversed with a soul in eons, Sir. I prefer it that way."

Leonard looked into the man's eyes, noticing they were glazed.

"You'll be staying with us long, Sir?"

"No. Like I said, we're... no, not long. Just in New York for a few days; first time in the city. Yourself, have you been here long?"

"I'm always here, Sir."

"Ah, a New Yorker, then. It's good to meet a real New Yorker." Leonard felt a drop of sweat roll down the middle of his back. He looked again in the man's eyes. He couldn't remember seeing him blink.

Leonard searched for more words. "Of course, we came for the time of year, the leaves changing on the trees in the park. Though it's a pity about the mist, hard to see anything."

"I never let nature's changes affect me, Sir. I am the city; the city is me."

Leonard shuddered. He glanced down at the bread again, now noticing green mold in the creases of the plait. He didn't remember seeing it before. There was now a putrid smell, more like rotting meat than anything moldy bread might conjure. The sound of rain seemed to have gotten louder, too, vibrating inside his head.

"You'll be dining alone tonight, Sir, I think."

"I... I guess. I don't know."

"I wouldn't venture out this evening. Not the weather for it."

"No."

“Should I reserve a place here for you for dinner, Sir? If I might be so bold, I know just the table. A quiet, solitary spot. Would suit you quite well, if I may say so.”

Leonard didn't answer. He felt almost dizzy. He glanced out of the window to see the trees, any movement that would remind him of the world outside. The windows were completely drenched with condensation; all he saw were the dim reflections of the sconces, on the wall. He looked down at the bread. The mold had now devoured most of the plait. He noticed three small maggots squirming in a hole they'd eaten into.

Looking at Leonard, the waiter's mouth slowly broke into a smile. His lips parted, revealing yellowish teeth. Slowly, the man pushed the tip of his tongue past his teeth, and out of his mouth. The tongue was yellowy-white and thin; the tip was red. Its end quivered, as if seeking a pathway.

The red tip moved slowly over the top row of teeth, while the man's eyes focused on Leonard. It then started moving down to his chin.

Leonard's eyes bulged.

The tongue stopped for a moment, as the man raised his eyebrows a little and opened his mouth wider. The tongue then moved along its way. It traveled down, slowly down by the knot in the man's necktie, past his breast pocket and silver tie clip, before reaching the bread where the tip quivered first over the green mold, and finally rested in the maggots' hole. The man's mouth was now fully open, the base of his tongue filling it, pressing against his teeth.

Leonard felt a raindrop slowly run down his neck. It broke his gaze on the tongue, and he glanced into the depths of the room. It seemed even darker now, but he could make out drops of rain falling through the darkness, onto the carpet. Water splashed onto Leonard's forehead, trickling down the bridge of his nose. He wiped both eyes, hoping the pestilence before him would disappear. The carpet seemed to thud with the force of rain, as if crying out against the deluge.

The tip of the man's tongue now slowly left the hole in the bread, the three maggots crawling up its shank. The tongue journeyed back into the mouth, moving past the necktie and chin, until the maggots and tip withdrew behind the lips and teeth. The man closed his mouth. The smile on the lips came back for an instant, then faded.

Leonard gasped, his mouth wide open.

The man moved his chin to one side. “Everything ship-shape and in order, Sir. So important to know one's place.”

Leonard closed his mouth. He tried to breathe, but the room offered little air.

He glanced around, the rain appearing to have stopped. The sconces on the walls now seemed lost in darkness. He consciously set about trying to shift each foot. As he turned to face the door he'd entered through, he noticed the bread now back to its former state, plaited, and nothing more than stale.

He moved towards the door.

"Dinner for one tonight then, Sir. I'll make the arrangements."

Leonard didn't answer. He walked over and reached for the door in front of him, opening it before moving briskly through into the other empty room. Half way across the floor he heard the door shut behind him. He glanced around quickly while still walking, but no one followed. Approaching the door in front of him, he swung it open, and walked into the corridor, taking a deep breath.

The Steinway was silent. Lilly was nowhere in sight. Leonard ran down the hall to the stairway, descending three steps at a time. Quickly glancing into the boutiques, he didn't see his wife.

As he passed through the hotel's front lobby, the bellman moved in front of him.

"Mr. Ross?"

Leonard hesitated, then stopped. "Yes."

"Excuse me Sir, I believe I have something from your wife. Mrs. Lillian Ross?"

"That's right."

"She asked me to give you this letter."

It was presented to Leonard in a white-gloved hand. The letter was more so a note, written on a pad. It was folded in two, and had no envelope.

"Oh, thank you. How did you know it was me?"

"The raincoat, Sir. She said you had on a yellow one. It's an LL Bean, isn't it? Have one myself, just like it."

"Yes. Yes it is. Well, I'd better be... Thank you for your help. Much appreciated."

"Not at all, Sir. Everything ship-shape and in order."

Leonard froze for a second, then proceeded through the front door, not looking back. He briskly walked around the corner onto Central Park South, and crossed the road to the park side. He opened the note, trying to shield it from the now precipitous drizzle. It had obviously been written in a hurry:

*Leonard,
I've gone back to the hotel. This trip isn't working out,
and I don't see any point carrying on. I'll wait till six*

– it's after four now. If you're not there then, I'll get a taxi, go back on the next flight and take my things from the apartment. You can pick up my key from Joan next door. It's up to you.

– LILLY.

PS. I tried harder than you think.

She hadn't signed her name, she'd merely written it in capitals.

Leonard looked at his watch. It was approaching quarter of five. If he wanted to, he knew he'd have enough time to make it to the hotel by taxi. He looked at the path in front of him, leading into the park. It was muddy, with leaves and broken twigs lining the edges.

As he crossed back over the road, the drizzle turned to heavy rain. Putting up his hood, he headed towards Eighth Avenue. It had been a long day, and he was hungry and thirsty. He remembered one of the Jekyll and Hyde's pubs was near by.

The wind picked up, releasing the last leaves from the tops of the trees. Leonard disappeared into the swirling mist.

That night he dined alone.

The Orchid Hunter's Wife

by Michelle Meyering

One fat grocer, with a face like a hothouse tomato,
pushed his belly against my back in the market as I worked
to stuff a sack with mushrooms and beans. He whispered,
"I heard your husband left you – " every word was wet enough, to wipe, " –
for a flower."

I imagined his grocer penis, under his folds, his long talcumed balls
shaped like walnuts.

That summer I paid a town boy – one with round shoulders – five dollars
to keep my yard: weed, mow, plant. I'd sit poolside each Saturday
and when I knew he was watching, I'd tuck my fingers into my yellow
bathing suit,
and play with myself in the sun. This was the picture
I would save for December.

In the fall, my love, I brought our divorce to the sun porch, folded it
into fours,
cut squares and circles from its sides with kitchen shears. This is how
hot weather children
are taught to make snow. I let each flake settle around me, cover the ground,
and thought of you
sloshing the Florida swamps, eyes wide.

Under Water

by Jericho Hockett

i.

The water under
the steady bridge
flowed like a treacherous ribbon,
winding around the bend at the old oak tree,
over roots
like tresses loosed.
And then I thought
a sobering thought
(at least it would have been had it not been
for the whiskey in my throat) –
I thought of your ribbon loosed
and your long auburn hair
splashed over the first autumn leaves
the day we lay on the river bank and kissed
at the beginning of the fall.

ii.

I dove in
at the deeper end
(much like I dove into you) –
bad form, eyes shut, but eager to feel
that rush,
to hear the tides pulsing in my ears.
And then I realized
there was a beat
of underwater ripples on my skin,
a dance on every place you'd touched,
and this realization made so much sense, because
I'm half water (and one third whiskey) on the inside,
and under water on the outside,
the way you were lovely on the inside,
and lovely
on the downside.

iii.

I surfaced fast
past the current of a blink-eyed fish
and pulled myself out at the shore,
where I dried off with a t-shirt
that you'd left behind,
and then I put on my traveling clothes.
I took
a steadying breath
(but not the empty bottle from the bridge),
and with river still running in my hair,
I left,
with the knowledge of what it was like to be
the drifting water
under.

Erin

by Billy Hughes

She sits, cross-legged, on the couch.
Wears yesterday's shirt - coffee stained,
sleeves stretched until they no longer cling
to wrists - and mouths back words toward a muted
screen. I'd paint her like Vermeer did the girl
inside of an open window - letter
in hand, thumbs pulling wide the inked page.
I'd mimic the way he caught the girl's hair,
as it spilled down the line of her neck
ends lost in the fringes of a white dress
collar. In place of the toppled fruit,
apples and pears fallen from a silver bowl
into the creases of a disheveled blanket,
I'd substitute the M&M's she's emptied
out on a T.V. tray. There'd be no curtain,
the *trompe l'oeil*, worn from those modest days
when drawn shut. I would leave the screen
like the letter indistinct. The detail
in both only available through the brush
strokes of the eyes, gaze lowered, and face
vulnerable, unaware of being watched.

Meeting at Dusk

by Judith DePriest

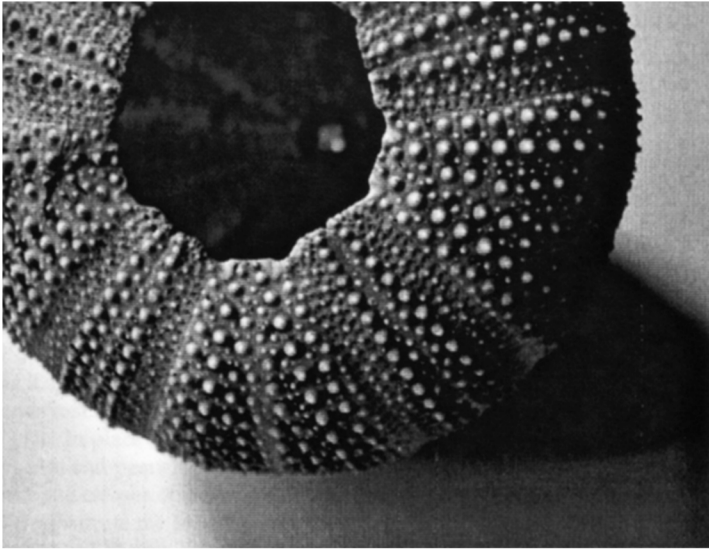
You stare off as the sun slips below
the ridge. Your cigarette releases
ribbons across the haze between us.

On the patio I drink chardonnay
in silence, like the ruby throated
hummingbird at the bougainvillea

racing the onset of evening. We are
attracted to this twilight ritual
like a bee drawn to the same blossom,

unable to understand why we return
to this patio, these exact chairs, this need
you and I in wait of the night.

Tomorrow we will be silent over coffee
and the light is not to blame.



"Shell Form"
by Mary Hammel

"Shell Form" was taken on a bleak November day with existing light in my living room. My mother gave me this beautiful shell and I have examined it with my camera many times. It is my favorite thing to photograph, a combination of opening form, texture, shape and shadow. I am intrigued with its tactile surface and the sense of depth conveyed through the yawning holes. I have turned it every which way and it never ceases to amaze me with its simplicity and complexity.

Framing

by Amy Knight

The first time it happened, Juma had the vague impression that Susan had spoken to him during the night, that she had tried to impart some date she wanted to remember or some craving she had, and that finding him inattentive, she had let him slip back away. She'd risen early, as always, and slipped out of bed, leaving him to sleep alone for another hour. As he sat up and allowed his eyes to focus, he tried to remember, but he could not.

He had stopped loving her – really loving her – sometime around the year their younger child entered high school. The love hadn't turned sour, or vanished overnight; it had just faded, a bit at a time, until there was nothing much left but a pleasant companionship, a routine, a system for the division of household chores. He wouldn't have believed it if you'd told him as a young man that love could fade gently away. It had to explode, he thought, or be tragically ripped from your hands. But here they were, peacefully coexisting.

He poured a cup of coffee from the carafe Susan had left on the nightstand. He could hear her banging around in the kitchen, fixing her bowl of raisin bran, spreading the newspaper on the table. By the time he made it down the stairs, droplets of water from the shower still falling from the longer hair at the back of his neck, she was on her way out.

"Morning, love," he called to her as she pulled on her coat from the closet. Susan managed the office of a lawyer in the city. The lawyer's name was Robert, but something about him made Juma think of reptiles, so he always referred to him in his private thoughts as the lizard. It was something in the shape of his face, long and pointed. Some quality of his skin, of his eyes. Juma had only met him a handful of times, so he didn't have much else to go on. He'd let it slip in front of Susan once and she'd railed at him for a good ten minutes.

"Good morning," she called back. She picked up her briefcase. She was having an affair with the lizard; Juma was fairly sure of it. He was also fairly sure that Susan still believed it was a secret, and that this illusion was important to her. He didn't see any point in bringing it up. Either she was or she wasn't.

"What was it you wanted to tell me last night?" he asked.

"Tell you? What do you mean?" She looked prim in her white blouse and knee-length skirt. Juma liked it. That was how the lizard saw her. No wonder, he thought.

"During the night," he said. "Weren't you trying to tell me something?"

"No. Why would you think that?" She said it too quickly. She was nervous, he realized. It made perfect sense when he looked at it from her place, but it hadn't occurred to him that she might have been confessing. That would be like Shylock, he thought, running down the street passing out coins to everyone he met.

"I thought I heard something," he said, "but I guess not. You look nice today." Best to back off. If she felt cornered, she might confess without being accused, and then where would they be? He must have imagined it. He'd heard a bird crying out from the woods behind their house, or a neighbor moaning in the throes of a very late passion.

"Why thank you," she said and reached for the doorknob. "Have a nice day, dear. Get some work done." And she was gone before he could say goodbye. He slouched over to the table, coffee cup in hand, and glanced down at the paper. She'd left it open to the style section. He never saw the point of having a style section. There was a reason it was called a newspaper.

He fixed himself his usual breakfast of two eggs and a slice of rye toast with butter and thought about what he would prepare for dinner. That had been his concession in the family arrangement constructed so many years ago. Susan had been promoted and was making enough, so he would be allowed to leave his part-time job and stay at home to paint all day, provided he would take time out to cook and sit down to eat with Susan and the children. His painting had really taken off once he'd been freed up to spend large chunks of time at it. He'd started to make a little money from the galleries. Locally, at least, people in the know recognized his name.

He didn't mind the cooking, but it did take up painting time, and since it was just the two of them now, he had half a mind to tell Susan that she could go ahead and eat with the guy, and he wouldn't have to bother. But then she'd feel obligated to talk about it, to move out, to get a divorce. A sanctioned affair was too modern for her. Besides, it was nice to have company while he ate, and to drift off in a bed that already had someone sleeping in it. She was like an old suit that you kept hanging in the closet, one that didn't fit anymore and was out of fashion, but you couldn't bear to give it away.

He thought he'd make chicken that night, roasted with a little rosemary, garlic, some potatoes. Susan loved rosemary, and he had some growing in a pot in the kitchen. He mentally composed the shopping list as he finished his breakfast. He would sit in his studio at the back of the house and paint all morning. Then he'd break for lunch and a trip to the store.

He was working on a large piece, six feet by four, mostly in reds and oranges. He painted in focused bursts of a few minutes, frantically applying and spreading paint in broad strokes and small jabs, and then sat on the floor in front of the canvas for twenty minutes or half an hour at a time, considering the piece and planning his next move. He found the paint particularly intense that morning, and the trip to the market would give his brain time to desaturate before he started working again. He could rest his left arm, which grew tired from holding the paintbrush. By lunch time, he'd entirely forgotten about Susan's late-night stirrings.

At the store, he collected everything he needed efficiently, starting in the produce section and winding his way to the bakery. He never needed to write the list down, and he never forgot anything. Their daughter, Elizabeth, used to call him up when she was at Princeton, begging for memory tips, but he didn't have anything to tell her. He had no technique, expended no effort.

"Rosemary!" Susan exclaimed when she came through the door at quarter past seven. "My favorite!"

"Work going well?" Juma asked as he carried the plates to the table. He pulled out her chair for her, and she sat. He wondered how far she was going to take things, how late she'd risk coming home, just how blind she thought he was.

"Busy," she said. She paused, as though considering whether to continue. She pushed a strand of straight gray hair behind one ear. "Robert takes on too much," she said softly, "and then it falls to me." Juma had never been inside the office, but he could imagine Susan sitting behind a big desk, her knees demurely crossed. There would be stacks of paper, all very tidy, a stapler, and a telephone with blinking lights. He imagined the lizard watching her from his office.

"Has it been worse lately?" he asked. He felt his right eyebrow rise.

"I suppose," she said. "He's not as sharp as he used to be." Juma didn't imagine that he'd been terribly sharp to begin with.

"Couldn't you put your foot down? Demand your usual lunch breaks, your time off, more standard hours?" He wasn't sure if she was covering, making up a story for why her work habits had changed, or if, in addition to sleeping with him, she was worried about his health. Probably a cover-up, he thought. The maintenance of lies could make a person say just about anything. If only he could free her from that obligation without driving her away.

"Oh, I don't know." She cut a piece of chicken and held it up in front of her face, inspecting it. "He relies on me." She put the chicken in her mouth and closed her eyes.

"How's the food?" he asked.

"It's delicious."

That night it happened again, but he realized that it was he who was awake, and she who was still, as he put it to himself, in the arms of Morpheus. He sat up a little. Yes, she was talking in her sleep. What was she saying? It was the noise that had waken him, and the part of his brain that took speech sounds and figured out what they meant had not yet come to attention.

"Love?" he asked, propping himself up on one elbow. She stopped talking. "You awake?" She began to snore. He remembered waking up the previous morning thinking that she'd been asking him something during the night; she must have been sleeping then as well. He wished he'd awakened a moment earlier and caught just a few of her words.

He turned onto his back and let his head sink down into the pillow, but he did not sleep. He wondered what Susan had been saying. Maybe she had been calling out for her slimy, reptilian lover. Maybe her subconscious was composing a confession to him, an apology. Or maybe she really was worried about her work, about all the responsibilities piling up on her desk, neglected in the hours lost to forbidden pleasures. Maybe she was becoming one of those people who let work take over their entire lives.

Juma had once been one of those people. He'd gone to work right out of college, putting in 60 and 80 hour weeks as an analyst for a stockbroker. He knew why he'd done it, and he saw now what a mistake it had been: his parents had been free-spirited types, and had spent a few years in the peace corps before settling down to raise him. That was where he'd gotten his name, from one of the African countries they'd visited. He could never remember which language it came from, only that the name meant he'd been born on a Friday when in fact it was early on a Tuesday morning.

The job he chose was the only thing they didn't want for him: working himself raw for someone else's ambition. But they'd kept quiet, and a few years in he'd realized how wrong it was. He quit his job that very day and called his parents to apologize. He moved to a smaller, cheaper apartment and took a part-time job in the hardware store two blocks from his old office. He sold all his suits on consignment and bought paints, easels, palettes, brushes, and canvasses, and spent all his free time painting. That was the Juma who'd fallen for Susan, a woman who'd seemed to have an extraordinary ability to make space in life for the good things.

He still hadn't fallen into true sleep when she began stirring just after six. He rarely saw her at this time of day, and she was beautiful, in

a flowered flannel nightgown, her hair falling crookedly onto her shoulders, no makeup. "Good morning," he mumbled. She jumped, unused to hearing his voice any time before eight.

"Morning, dear," she said. "You're up early."

"Yes," he said, "I suppose I am." He sat up as she swung her legs over the side of the bed. He reached out an arm to stroke her back. They still made love now and again, though the act had become mechanical, a release of tension rather than an expression of anything, and it had been a while since they'd done even that.

"Well," she said, "it's nice to see you at this end of the day."

"Mmmhmm." He pushed himself up so he could slide his arm around to the front. He rested it softly on her breast, and he could feel her nipple through the flannel of her nightgown.

"Juma, I've got to go to work," she said, turning around to face him. His hand slipped down to the bed beside her, and he felt his quick excitement begin to dwindle. She was probably saving it all for the lizard. She smoothed his hair off of his forehead and stood.

"What was it you were saying during the night?" he asked as she crossed the room.

"You asked me this yesterday." She ducked into the bathroom to start the shower heating up.

"You did it again," he called.

"I don't recall," she said. She reappeared in the doorway.

"Maybe you were talking in your sleep." He collapsed back onto the pillow.

"Maybe I was," she said. She looked down, blushing. It was as though he had accused her of conspicuous snoring, or of farting in her sleep.

"What did I say?" she called. She disappeared again behind the bathroom door. He could hear the soft *whomp* of the nightgown landing on the tile floor. He was tempted to tell her that she'd cried out for Robert, but that wouldn't get him anywhere. She might cry and apologize, or she might deny it, or she might pack up and go to live with him, and he didn't want her to do any of those things.

"I couldn't quite hear," he said. He began, finally, to feel the deep, pressing weight of sleep descending, and he drifted off as Susan stepped into the shower.

He slept past eleven, and when he awoke, he was in a peculiar haze. He'd been dreaming, he was sure of it, but he couldn't think of what it had been about. It was full of substance, full of form, but entirely without content. By the time he got up, showered, shaved, and dressed, his morning painting time was gone.

It was a week before it happened again. This time he awoke earlier in the sequence and paid attention. She wasn't speaking any real words. Not words in English, anyway, not words that Juma recognized. Still, it had the rhythm, the melody of normal speech. Her voice sounded as it did when she was awake, but Juma couldn't make out a single word. It was as though the animal side of her, the side with the passion and the guilt, had figured out her weakness, her need to sleep for six or eight hours each night, and had worked its way out. It had figured out when to hijack her mouth, her larynx, how to get at her voice. It was trying to tell him something.

The talking subsided after a while, and he turned over on his side. He could tell her that he knew about the affair, and that it was all right with him. Maybe she would rest better with his absolution. But things were all right the way they were, and he didn't want to knock the balance off. He lay without sleeping for the rest of the night. When he saw her stirring, climbing from bed, he forced his breath to be slow and regular, and kept it like that until she'd gone.

From that night forward he was unable to sleep straight through till morning. Some nights, Susan talked in her sleep, saying things he didn't understand, and other nights, he awoke in silence, expecting to hear her voice. He'd thought of asking her again, or of recording the sounds and playing them back to her, but she'd looked so embarrassed, so upset when he'd asked her before that he was hesitant to bring it up. He worried that she might finally give in and tell him about the lizard, and then he'd have to do something. He'd be required to get angry, to drive around looking for the guy, to throw Susan out with a single suitcase, but Juma really just wanted to retreat to his studio, to get back to the true work of his life.

His painting was declining. With all the worry, he'd sit for hours in front of a canvas, unable to touch a brush to it. He'd worry that he was finished, that he would not paint anymore, wouldn't even sell the remaining paintings he'd already completed. That was it for Juma Calla; he had burned out. He had made only the smallest of contributions; if he was remembered at all, it would be as an example of someone whose potential had never been realized. Most likely, he would be forgotten.

One day, when winter had settled heavily onto the city, he rose at eleven-thirty and went straight to his studio without pausing for a meal or a shower. He took a fresh canvas from the stack he'd stretched months ago and propped it on an empty easel. It had been a long time since he'd painted something that was intended to bear an actual physical resemblance to the thing it represented; he preferred abstract

work, because he didn't wish to force ideas upon the viewer. His work was a suggestion, he liked to think, not a command. But today, he couldn't help himself.

He began with the idea of a chair. A big chair, a recliner. It was going to be pale green. It would be in a room with tiers and tiers of bookshelves. There would be a small window at the back. The chair, he decided, would give off light into the room. People would walk by the painting and feel compelled to sink down, relax and take time for themselves, for their own desires uninhibited by the wants and needs of others. He started mixing the green for the chair. He would get the colors down first, the light, then refine the shapes as the scene came into focus. This idea was going to save him from artistic obscurity. After he died, it would be labeled as the beginning of a new phase in his career. Experts might hypothesize about what had instigated it.

He'd been painting for four and a half straight hours, without stopping to eat or think or survey the piece from a distance, when the phone rang.

"Yes?" he said, as he carried the handset back to his studio so he could continue to work on the painting.

"Juma?" It was Susan. "I may not be back until very late. Robert's been taken to the hospital, and I'd like to go check on him." A pause. "He lives by himself, you know." His first thought was that now she had gone too far, that he had to stop her for her own sake. Inventing mortal peril for a lover, even at his suggestion, would surely earn her Dante's very worst.

"Fine," he said, "I'm sorry to hear it. I'll leave something in the fridge for you."

"Thank you." She paused, as if waiting for him to probe the situation, but he did not. "It might have been a heart attack, but I think he'll be all right," she said. "They'll fix him up. It's just his heart, you know, it was never terribly strong, and he's got no one to help him, so I thought I should just make sure he's doing all right, and -"

"Fine, fine," Juma interrupted, eager to return to the painting. "Give him my regards," he added, realizing that he ought to affect at least a shred of concern.

"Thank you," she said, and hung up. He put the phone down and picked up his paintbrush. If he squinted at the canvas, it now looked like the scene as he imagined it might appear to someone in need of a pair of thick glasses. He had never created something so quickly in his entire life. He wondered if Picasso had ever painted a picture in one day, or Warhol, or Kandinsky, or even Basquiat. None of the famous paintings, of course, but perhaps some smaller work, some little-known gem. It had to be possible; it was happening right now.

It was nearly eleven when he realized that Susan had not returned. He shook his head to get rid of the fog, and then he remembered her story about the heart attack. What if she had been telling the truth? Perhaps she was not in his bed, but at his bedside, weeping, and he'd spurned her.

He studied his painting. The chair had taken on a quality of age, of years of devoted use, and it was beginning to exude the radiance he had imagined. He felt a warming in his fingers, in his chest. He wanted only to be near it, to feel the focus of all his attention on this canvas. His other paintings were nothing; he'd been on the wrong track for years.

He picked up the brush to continue, but he found that he'd lost his stride. He felt sick with the inability to change what he'd said. It had been, he thought, the painting's fault. He'd shaken Susan off so quickly because he was eager to return to it, and she deserved better. He left it sitting on the easel and settled in the kitchen to wait.

Soon after, Susan came through the door. She stood in the hall, her head turned away and down. Juma got up and went to her. "I'm sorry," he said. She didn't say anything. She stood where she was, with her coat still on, her briefcase still in one hand. He took the briefcase and set it on a kitchen chair. Still she stood, immobile. He drew her into a gentle hug. "I'm sorry," he said again.

"He's gone," she said. Her voice was thin like the wings of cicadas.

"You loved him," Juma said, "didn't you." She leaned against him, and her body started to jerk with sobs. "It's all right," he said, "it's all right." He felt a coward's guilt at his smallest crimes, the names he'd called the deceased in his head, the judgments he'd made about the man's appearance and intellect. He felt a tenderness towards Susan, a basic human empathy.

"Come here," he said to her. He set her upright on her feet and took her by the hand. "I want to show you something." He led her back to his studio. He didn't think about it. He took her over to the easel where he'd set the picture of the chair.

"Did you paint that?" she asked. She sniffed and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Just now," he said. "Today."

"Can I have it?" she asked. Juma hesitated. He knew he ought to say yes. She was in a great deal of pain. He looked at the picture.

"No," he said. Susan looked at him without comprehension.

"Why are you showing me this?" she asked.

"I just thought you might want to see," he said. He got a kind of retaliative pleasure from this. She had another man, but he had this masterpiece.

"I would've told you," she said after a minute, "but I wanted things to stay the same."

"So did I." He saw now that this was exactly what he wanted, the only thing he'd wanted for years. He'd been afraid to say so, even to himself. What a set-up, he thought. Even when you have it good, you can't relax. Especially then.

"And now he's gone." Susan began to sob. Her grief was still barreling along; it had not paused for Juma's moment of self-analysis. It was late, he realized. It was after ten, and she looked vulnerable, still in her wrinkled work clothes, her makeup smudged around her eyes, her shoulders hunched.

"I'll make you some hot milk," he said. "You need to sleep." He excused himself to the kitchen and poured a mug. He put it in the microwave and leaned back as it heated, pressing his fingertips against his closed eyes, making red and blue splotches appear on the insides of his eyelids.

When the microwave beeped, Susan appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. He handed her the mug, led her upstairs, and tucked her into bed. He sat beside her until she fell asleep, murmuring empty comforts, rubbing her back. At least for a few hours, she could be oblivious to the entire situation and the pain that came with it.

Juma, still wide awake, crept back down the stairs and into his studio. He wanted to spend a few more minutes with the painting, just looking at it, reminding himself that he had painted it, that it was real. He flipped the light switch in the studio and what he saw made him gag: the painting had a slash across it, a bright red gash running from one corner to the opposite diagonal. She must've done it while he heated the milk. The paintbrush was there on the floor, the tube of red paint open on the table. He turned away, willing it not to be so. It was inconceivable. He backed away from the room. His heart thumped in his chest.

As though in a dream, he climbed the stairs again and paused outside the bedroom. He could see Susan sleeping, and she looked oddly peaceful. He felt his anger swell, felt an impulse somewhere within him to strike her. She would deserve it. But he couldn't wake her now, while her grief was still fresh. His anger would keep until morning. He climbed into bed beside her and listened. She moaned and cried out in her sleep, but there were no words, nothing that anyone anywhere could understand.



**"In the Foyer at Graceland"
by Mary Hammel**

When I had opportunity to visit Graceland, the former home of Elvis Presley, I was thrilled. I expected some tackiness and was not disappointed. This is what I first saw when I walked into the front door. Mirrors all the way up the staircase. Chandeliers, textured wallpaper and blue velour curtains. The light fixture was huge, and I loved the way it reflected up the stairs and into the mottled mirror, creating an interesting shape and perspective.

The Daily

by Kevin Rabas

Three newspapers in our front yard, all in plastic sleeves.
They keep throwing them. We never pay.

And each falls like a curse from my newspaper days, reminders
of talks, interviews with ferret and mushroom farmers,

the man who lived 102 years on morels, the couple who took a cruise
with Richard Simmons, pictured here with him, slimmer,

and the day spent walking the blue middle school lockers at Junction City.
There was the blonde boy on his first day, who could not get his locker open,
spinning it five times, failing, followed by the long walk past the hall monitors
with cords hung from the ears, locks on all the in and out doors;

chains, padlocks, cameras swiveling at the ceilings, tacks spread at one door.
And the school lends books out, second grade level for seventh graders,
and I take the police report and I pray, watch for children's names

among the shot, East 400 block, and park at the elementary school
when the bell lets out, talk with the women in the cars,

and one of them turns, dials her cell, reports me for snooping,
asking too many questions, and I go home, reporting the low prices
on gas this Labor Day weekend, 10 cents lower than last year,

and tell my wife I've had it. If I come home again like this,
I won't be listening to the news on the radio
mornings any longer, my neck immobile, my legs run out,
my camera left on the darkroom counter. No more, I say.

I type one last story and lift a book from beneath my newsroom monitor,
one last story in time for the printers, in time for the ladies at lunch,
in time for the men who sit alone at sunrise with cups of diner coffee,
and know, know in one paragraph the mayor's done gone and shut down
the factory on us. There will be no turning back.

Explaining Poetry on a First Date

by *Brandi Homan*

Is like telling the Prom King why I'm in Chess Club
but still want the corsage, the one with the tiny basketball.

Why I can name every Tri-state poet, but don't know local DJs.
A Pilot pen makes me happier than any red satin

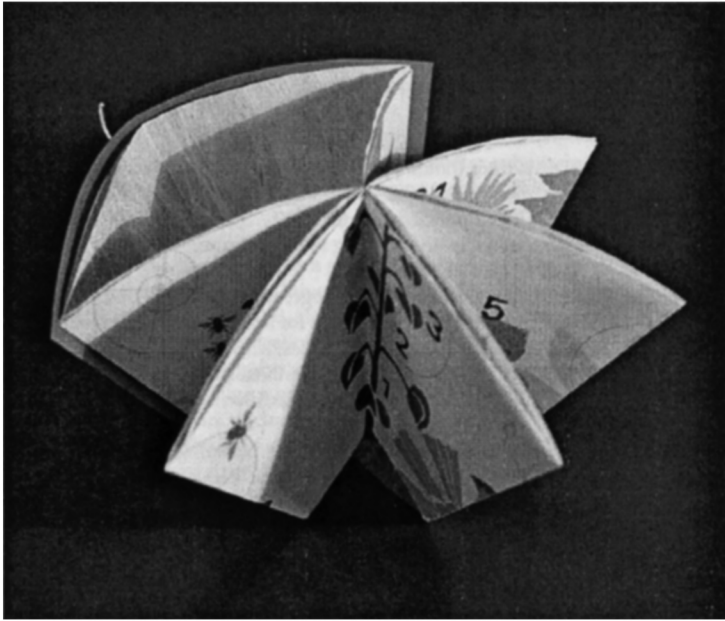
dress with polyester loofah sleeves. All my friends
carry Moleskines. One scrawls homophones on her hand,

another taped a pencil to his headboard. We collect epigraphs,
dog-ear books, read out loud in empty rooms. There's a library in my bed.

How do you explain constantly wanting to die or marry yourself?
That success isn't a matching loveseat or being in the Whitesnake video?

I don't want to get my picture taken and leave the dance early
because my head's full of streamers and cardboard stars.

The lights are always low. It's affliction not religion.
Not once have I thought I could be saved.



"Fibonacci on the Prairie (open position)"
by Mary Hammel

"Fibonacci on the Prairie" was created as part of a Book Arts course to celebrate the complexity and inter-relatedness of the Konza Prairie ecology. The Fibonacci sequence, a series of numbers where each number is the sum of the previous two, occurs throughout nature and converges to the Divine Proportion. This handmade book examines how the prairie ecosystem demonstrates this sequence, from male honeybee genealogy and leaf phyllotaxy to flower petal numbers and spiral seedhead arrays. The structure of the book reflects the sequential content through the vitality of a prairie flower.

Contributors' Notes

MIRANDA ASEBEDO is from Randolph, Kansas, and has published several short stories in *Kansas Voices*, an anthology of Kansas writers published by the Winfield Arts & Humanities Council, in Winfield, KS. She is a senior in English at KSU, with an emphasis in Creative Writing and Literature.

KB BALLENTINE teaches high school and college, while spending any spare time in several poetry groups, including hostess for a local Barnes and Noble Open Mic. Currently published in two anthologies, KB will begin her fourth semester as a Creative Writing student at Lesley University in Cambridge, MA, and has won a slam contest and second place in a local writers' guild contest.

GREG BROWN is a junior in philosophy at KSU, and pursuing a minor in Creative Writing. This essay is his first submission to a literary journal.

KREG CALHOON is a senior in Biology at KSU, and plans to pursue an MA in English at KSU. He is a two-time recipient of the Cancer Research Award from Johnson Center for Cancer Research. This is his first publication.

CINDY CHILDRESS is working on a creative dissertation of poetry at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and she served as Poet-in-Residence at the Pinellas County Girl's Correctional Facility 2002-3. Her poetry has been published in such places as *The Southwestern Review*, *Southern Hum*, *The Red Booth Review*, *X-Magazine*, *Temenos*, *Rock and Sling*, *The Canadian Women's Studies Journal*, *Altar Magazine*, and several anthologies including *In Our Own Words: A Generation Defining Itself*. Awards include the Marcella Seigel Memorial Award in 2005 and the third place Christina Sergeyevna Award in 2006.

HEATHER CONKWRIGHT just graduated from KSU on December 9th as an English Major in creative writing/literature. She was a fifth year senior upon submission. She has lived in Manhattan her whole life and will continue to do so for the next few years with her dog Belle.

JUDITH DePRIEST is a graduate MFA student at San Diego State University. Her most recent work has appeared in the UC Riverside Art and Literary Journal, *Mosaic*.

AARON DIEHR is graduating in March with an MA in English from DePaul University in Chicago. He received his BA in English Literature from Ohio State in Dec. 2004. Following graduation, he is going to travel through Europe for an unspecified period of time and then figure out where he's headed from there.

AMANDA DILLON is a junior in Creative Writing/Literature at KSU. She is from Hope, Kansas, and has wanted to pursue writing ever since she was published in an elementary school poetry collection in second grade. After she graduates, Amanda would like to pursue a career in writing and publishing.

JONATHAN FRAZZELL is a senior in English with a creative writing emphasis at KSU. Although he won second place for his poetry submission, he is also working on short stories as well as developing a novel. This will be his first publication.

MARY HAMMEL has worked as a graphic designer and director of Media Services for the Kansas State University College of Education since receiving her BFA from KSU in 1980. In 2003, she felt the urge to pursue her goal of achieving an MFA in Visual Communication in the KSU Art Department. She will reach that goal in May 2007, culminating an intense four years of discovering her creative motivations. Being a non-traditional student, she uses many of her life experiences in her work, including a set of handmade books about four women (herself included) who have survived cancer. A map lover, she has created works that incorporate map structures with images to communicate information about places that she has visited and formed emotional attachments to, including Chicago, the desert, and the Konza Prairie. Since receiving her first camera in grade school, she has been framing scenes through her viewfinder, trying to find the right quality of light and shadow or uniqueness in detail and color to create the best composition.

A sort of literary chimera, ROBERT HAYHURST is in the third year of his pursuit of an MFA in Screenwriting at UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. He is also an MFA candidate in Creative Writing at San Diego State University. He's written more than 250 articles and features for various magazines and newspapers. He recently published *Readings on Michael Crichton*, a critical book on the novels Crichton wrote and the films he directed.

JERICHO HOCKETT is a 21-year old sixth year senior in Psychology and Women's Studies (with a minor in Spanish) from Liberal, Ks, and expects to graduate in May. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society (2006-present), the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (2006-present), VOICES, the Women's Studies Club (2006-present), and the Psi Chi National Honor Society in Psychology (2004-present). This will be her first poetry publication, but she has been a leading author and a co-author of several publications in various academic psychology journals. The poems she has submitted were written in partial fulfillment for an introductory poetry class taken under Kansas Poet Laureate Dr. Jonathan Holden; a class that renewed the interest she's had in poetry since she was a child.

BRANDI HOMAN's chapbook, *Two Kinds of Arson*, is forthcoming from Dancing Girl Press in January 2007. Her work has appeared in *Salt Hill*, *North American Review*, *Fugue*, *CutBank*, *Natural Bridge*, and others. She is in the second year of the MFA in Poetry program at Columbia College Chicago.

BILLY HUGHES is currently working toward an MFA degree in Creative Writing, with an emphasis in poetry, at San Diego State University.

AMY KNIGHT is a first-year graduate student in creative writing at the University of Arizona. She is a graduate of Vassar College, where she studied English and cognitive science. Her work has appeared in *Combat* magazine, and she is at work on a novel.

MICHELLE MEYERING is currently a graduate student at American University in Washington, DC. Her poems have most recently appeared in the *The Redlands Review*.

ALICIA OLTUSKI is an MFA candidate at Columbia and writes a weekly NYC arts and culture page for the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin. Her previous publications include *Prairie Margins*, *The Penn Review*, and *Peregrine*. (alicia.oltuski@gmail.com)

STEPHEN ROGER POWERS is a PhD candidate in the creative writing program at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. To help cover the costs of graduate school he moonlights as a stand-up comedian in clubs and casinos around the Midwest. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Shenandoah*, *Main Street Rag*, *Margie*, *32 Poems*, and the University of Iowa Press anthology *Red, White, and Blues: Poets on the Promise of America*. He teaches at Marian College of Fond du Lac and spends his free time at Dollywood.

TARA PRESCOTT is currently a student in the 20th Century American Literature Ph.D. program at Claremont Graduate University.

KEVIN RABAS is a student in the Creative Writing program at Kansas University. He writes for *Jazz Ambassador Magazine* (JAM) and is co-editor of the *Flint Hills Review*. He served as art editor for *Touchstone* in 1998. His recent poetry and stories have appeared in *The Malahat Review*, *Event*, *Rockhurst Review*, and *Red Rock Review*.

JAY RUBIN graduates from New England College's MFA in Poetry Program in July, 2007. He lives with his wife and son in San Francisco, where he edits and publishes *Alehouse*, an all-poetry literary journal found online at www.alehousepress.com. New poems will soon appear in *Color Wheel* and *American Poetry Journal*.

VIRGINIA HARDEE SILVERMAN was born and raised in rural eastern North Carolina. The daughter of a sometime tobacco farmer, she spent her childhood playing on the wooded banks of the Tar River, running from gators and cottonmouth water moccasins. She has been a marketing executive with Fortune 500 companies for 24 years, and recently completed her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Non-Fiction at Antioch University-Los Angeles in December, 2006. She is a singer, cancer survivor, and mother of an eight-year-old daughter, Eve. Her essays have appeared in anthologies published by the University of Miami – Ohio and Virginia Commonwealth University, and in the April, 2007 issue of *Health Magazine*.

STEPHEN SLOANE Originally from England, he lives in Southern California, where he recently graduated from UC Riverside with BA's in both Creative Writing, and Film. Now in the UC Riverside MFA Creative Writing program, Steve has been published three times in *Mosaic*, twice in *Muse*, and received the Chancellors Performance Award for poetry, in his junior year. Apart from the honor of receiving the Second Place Award in *Touchstone's* annual Graduate contest, he looks forward to having two stories published in the spring quarterly edition of *Twisted Tongue*. Steve tries to write first with a visual eye, hoping to entice the reader to see each setting before feeling the emotion of each scene.

STEPHANIE SOMERS is a graduate student in Printmaking at KSU.

LANCE TURNER is currently a senior in English at Kansas State University, and considers himself to be a nonfiction and fiction writer. Much of his nonfiction writing, including "Detour Ahead," is inspired in some respect by his family. He has no previous publications.

TRACY TUCKER is a senior at KSU and is majoring in English.

MARYDORSEY WANLESS is currently a candidate for Masters of Fine Arts in Photography at Kansas State University. She teaches photography at Washburn University in Topeka. Her work concerns nostalgia and memories. She finds photography an expressive medium in which to convey essence of place.

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