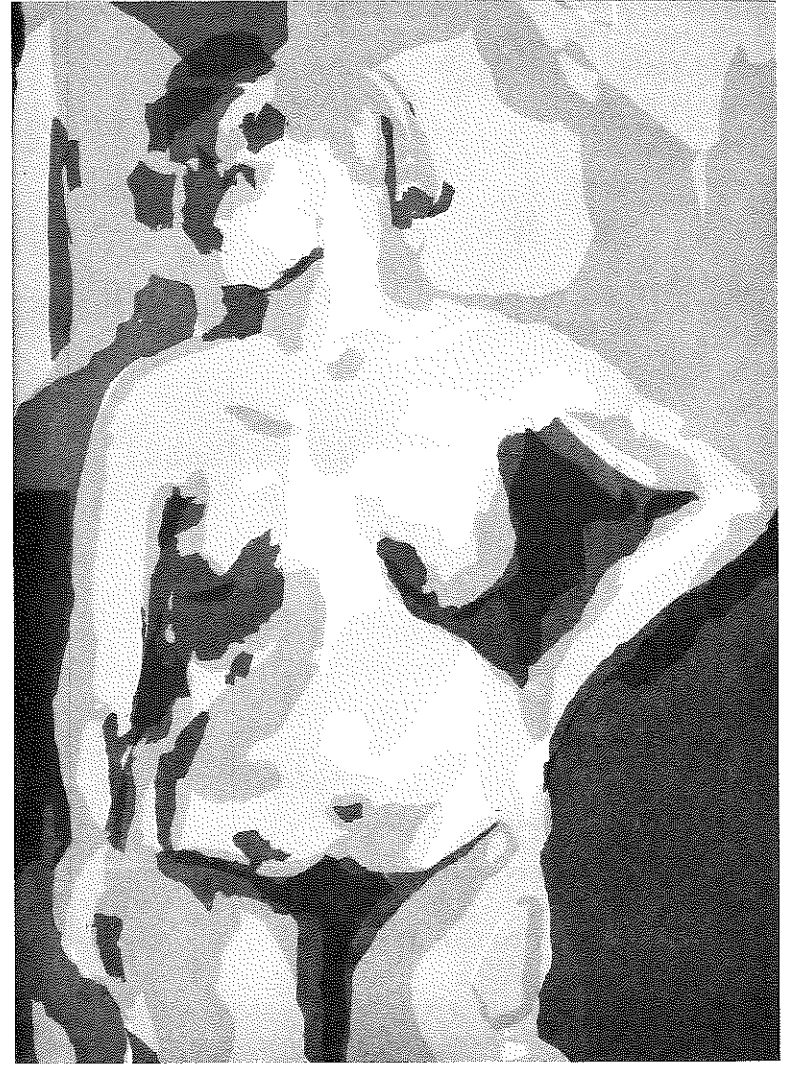




Zephyrus 2003

Zephyrus

2003



**A publication of the English Department
of Western Kentucky University**

Editors

Managing Editor: Sam Stinson

Travis Bowman	Thomas Johnson
Rebecca Butorac	Matthew James Jones
Laura Collins	Calvina Liebig
Jeff Crady	Antonia Oakes
B. J. Hatcher	Zachary Vaughn
Trish Lindsey Jagers	Angela Weisser

Art coordinator: Megan Klawitter

Cover and title page art: Megan Klawitter

Online version: Sam Stinson
<<http://www.wku.edu/zephyrus>>

Faculty advisor: David LeNoir

Printing: Print Media

Editor's note: Our selection process is based on complete anonymity. If an editor recognizes an author's work, he or she abstains from the decision-making process for that work.

Award Winners

Jim Wayne Miller Poetry Award
Jeff Crady

Geoffrey McCelvey Memorial Award
Molly Gibson

Browning Literary Club Poetry Award
Laura Phy

Ladies Literary Club Fiction Award
Aubrey Videtto

Wanda Gatlin Essay Award
Zacchaeus Compson

Zephyrus Art Award
Benjamin Ryan Moffett

Writing award recipients are chosen by the Creative Writing staff of WKU; the art award is chosen by *Zephyrus* staff.

Table of Contents

Dedication	6
Dianne Loftis	untitled 10
Laura Collins	"No Greater Love" 11
Jennifer Raggard	"Ducks (an ode to Holden)" 17
Maree Emberton	untitled 18
Zacchaeus Compson	"The Gestalt" 19
Jo Ellen Foushee	"Praying Mantis" 22
John William Keabler II	"Horny Toads and Sagebrush" 23
Christopher Butler	untitled 25
Erin L. Greenwell	"My Sister's Wedding" 26
Jeff Crady	"Soured Punch-line" 28
Laura Phy	"Foreshadowing" 29
Benjamin Ryan Moffett	"Winter kept us warm . . ." 30
Aubrey Videtto	"About Charlie" 31
Zachary B. Vaughn	"Proof that war is Hell" 43
Jeff Crady	"The upbeat poem for no good reason" 44
Alex Taylor	"Ceralvo Spurs" 45
Molly Gibson	"Against All Odds (Or, The Day I Knew I'd Marry You)" 58
Sol B	"Live" 60
Antonia Oakes	"Amber Looking-Glass" 61

Ben Nunery	untitled 67
Tara Austin	"Fountain Square Park" 68
Jeff Crady	"I used to write poetry" 69
Pat Jones	"Engage" 70
Molly Gibson	"Nocturnal Crow" 71
Jeff Meyer	"Self-Portrait" 72

Dedication

This year's volume is dedicated to

Wanda Gatlin

(1930-2002)

—the driving force behind the creation of *Zephyrus*,
remembered here by two former English Department colleagues.

Remembering Wanda

Walker Rutledge

When I came to Western Kentucky University in 1969, the year in which *Zephyrus* had its initial publication, Wanda Gatlin was one of the first people with whom I became friends. She invited Russell Moore, my office mate, and me to join her "group encounter" sessions, which were held in the Rock House, an old English department bastion located across the street from Cherry Hall and comfortably distanced from a department head who was not shy about calling me into his office and telling me to get my hair cut. I soon discovered not only that Wanda had started *Zephyrus* but that she and her students were funding it by carwashes and bake sales. Indeed, seven years would have to pass before the magazine would finally begin to receive some financial support from the University. The publication was a channel for creative writing, artwork, and photography, but it was also one of the few outlets on campus for anti-Vietnam War expressions. In those early years, Wanda had to battle censors who wanted to suppress "inappropriate" *Zephyrus* covers and controversial student essays. The truth is that Wanda was an Old School Liberal long before "Old School" became neologized and "Liberal" became virtually extinct.

A fearless champion of free speech, alternative lifestyles, and social justice, Wanda was also a generous friend who found the time and resources to become my four-year-old daughter's first pen pal, to bring me her sofa when she discovered that my children and I had almost no furniture, and to hire me one summer to wire her house when I was otherwise unemployed.

Summer unemployment was often the norm for us assistant professors during the mid-1970's, teaching slots being monopolized by those with higher academic rank. In an attempt to change this system, five of us (John Spurlock, John Reiss, Russell Moore, Wanda Gatlin, and I) joined together. What followed was a year of meetings

with the department head, dean, and various faculty members. Although at times it seemed as if our protests were going nowhere, by the next summer a rotation system had been established. Every full-time faculty member in the English department was enfranchised, deemed eligible to teach summer school on a scheduled, rotating basis. This change of policy was particularly welcomed because we all desperately needed the money.

An equally important development occurred when, with the addition of Katie Ward, S.A.P.S. was organized. S.A.P.S., an acronym for Save Assistant Professors' Salaries, developed from our frustration over the byzantine salary procedures at Western. Whenever a faculty or staff member inquired about his or her low salary, he or she was simply told that it was "in line" with what was appropriate for a particular rank, seniority status, educational background, etc. But all of us knew differently. In fact, as one administrator later confessed, so far as he could determine there was absolutely no correlation at Western between salary, degree, rank, seniority, or anything else. We started our agitation by writing letters to W.K.U. officials and to members of the Council on Higher Education, and by meeting with the university president and academic vice president. At first we were denounced by one faculty member who sniffed that we were not "team players" and that he was ashamed to know us. Others warned that we would likely be fired. In the midst of all this opposition, Wanda bolstered our spirits by inviting us to a strategy session at her house, attended by Jody Richards, who is now Kentucky's Speaker of the House.

From Wanda, who doubtlessly got her information from Jody, John and Sue Spurlock learned exactly where to find the state payrolls. Acting under the newly established public disclosure law, they went to Frankfort and collected all of the faculty salaries at Western. A day later, John, Sue, Diane Watson, and I published the results and the Six S.A.P.S. distributed them across campus. The response was explosive. Suddenly everyone knew what everyone else was earning; actual names were attached to salaries, not just meaningless figures in front of generic categories. Some people were embarrassed; some were in tears; some angrily marched into the offices of their respective department heads and deans; some even resigned on the spot. Finally, salary inequities were exposed and had to be addressed by the University. Every year since then, Western's budget documents, complete with the salary of every faculty member on campus, are placed in the Helm Library for all to see. If an administrator wants to claim that a University faculty member's salary is "in line," the official now has to provide proof. Inequities still exist, of course, but they are not

so easily hidden.

For participating in these and other crusades, Wanda paid a price. Despite the fact that she had studied with the legendary poet Randall Jarrell, had an M.F.A. in creative writing—which is considered a terminal degree—had an ardent following of students, and had started a publication that was twice recognized by the Kentucky Arts Council as the state's outstanding literary magazine, she never received the tangible University recognition she deserved. No significant raises, promotions, or load reductions came her way. Her response: graciously to fund a creative writing award at Western, an award which endures today, now funded by the English Department.

This was the Wanda that I knew as a colleague. Although Wanda was a private person, I also knew a bit about her past: she was born in Florida and loved the white sand beaches near Panama City, had earned a B.A. in biology, once worked as a lab technician in San Francisco, and had served with the Red Cross in Korea during the Korean War. These were the isolated facts. Epiphanies arise, however, when isolated facts become integrated into a three-dimensional whole. Such is the nature of my fondest Wanda memory. One evening at a Spurlock party, I asked Wanda to dance, not really knowing if Wanda were a dancer or not. What a surprise! Not only could she dance, but she was unquestionably the finest partner I had been with since I began ballroom dancing at age ten. I'd had clumsy partners, controlling partners, and halting partners. But Wanda was a liquid partner. Suddenly the picture was complete. I was in a U.S.O. club in Korea, gliding smoothly and quietly across the dance floor in the company of a young, idealistic Red Crosser, both of us dreaming of home.

Ironically, if Wanda the Crusader was chastised by Western, Wanda the Dancer was struck with rheumatoid arthritis and had to seek an early retirement. She faced it head-on, too. Her legacy: more open university policies regarding salaries, a first-rate literary magazine, and someone who gratefully remembers dancing the night away.

Wanda Remembered

Katie Ward

For years my office was located near Wanda's. From that vantage point I could hear Wanda as she counseled students and worked with the *Zephyrus* writers and staff. It was clear that she cared deeply about her students, especially those who were creative,

unconventional, or perhaps lost. She could spot undeveloped potential beneath an unlikely façade. For two years we shared a student worker, and Wanda was forever concerned about this particular student's not having a warm winter coat, being too thin, or living in a run-down, poorly heated apartment. Wanda was the same way with animals, constantly bringing home strays that she nursed back to health and usually kept as pets if she couldn't find them an appropriate home.

Wanda worked hard not only to found and support *Zephyrus* but also to invite rising, young writers to campus to conduct workshops and to read from their works. She secured the funding to bring such notables as Bobbie Ann Mason, Barbara Kingsolver, and Gloria Naylor. And she frequently hosted receptions for these writers in her own residence—a homemade dwelling, incidentally, which sported some of the most charmingly unconventional architecture in Bowling Green, as unconventional as Wanda herself.

Wanda was indeed a maverick. When she was able, she liked to travel and would be off to far-away places at a moment's notice. I cannot remember a conversation between Wanda and my husband that did not include reminiscences about their experiences overseas during the Korean War.

Wanda was a friend who was quick to offer help if one were down, ill, or out. She mentored her nieces, especially Kimberly, a young woman who completed Western's journalism program and later established herself as a free-lance technical writer. But Wanda did her work behind the scenes, shunning the spotlight. She did what she did because she believed in what she was doing. She was always her own person and never, so long as I knew her, conformed to any exterior code simply because it was expected.

During Wanda's last years of teaching, she was in constant pain. She could hardly open her office door, even when she used both hands. She could barely hold a cup of coffee, and walking was excruciating. Pain so sapped her strength that she had little energy left for anything other than her teaching. Yet, I never once heard Wanda complain. She tried to cover up her infirmities and reacted negatively if one tried to help her. She was always "fine."

I admired her courage and regret that after she took early retirement she became more isolated because often she didn't have the strength to socialize. She spent her last days at her home in Florida, just blocks from the Gulf of Mexico and close to her nieces and sister, who were with her when she died. Wanda was a good friend, and I miss her.



Untitled

Dianne Loftis

No Greater Love

Laura Collins

Mrs. Blanders reminded me of a nervous peacock. Her dot of a face was short and sharp and held two squinty blue-lined eyes. She had a tiny head, which following the slender curve of her neck gave way to two perpetually shrugged shoulders. Her tail end spread itself twice as wide as her upperparts, and if it had been adorned with a hundred of those blue-circled eyes, she could have watched me with bird-like anxiety at any angle from her perch in the front of the room. Needless to say, Mrs. Blanders was a control freak.

I still remember the look on Mrs. Blanders face when I bounded into her classroom during Open House Night, the week before school was to start. Fourth grade was the beginning of something new for me—and I began immediately telling my new teacher about myself and how excited I was about the coming year. In response, Mrs. Blanders gave only a knowing glance to a classmate's mother standing beside her.

"Oh no," she said in a tone that seemed almost apologetic to the woman. "I see what I'm in for this year."

Mrs. Blanders had thought she was being cute. As I left the room to find my own mother, an older girl on my bus route stopped me in the hallway and asked, "So who'd ya get this year?"

"Mrs. Blanders."

The girl had smiled a smile I would later come to describe as a "priss-pot" expression. "Oh, I had her. I just *loved* her!" My disassociation with the girl only worked to heighten my sense of dread.

It didn't take me long to realize that it wasn't blind dislike Mrs. Blanders had for me; I scared her. I was a perceived challenge to the norms of her strictly regimented classroom. I was the free radical who attached myself to all of the "good" little fourth grade cells, luring them away from their proper functions. Shortening my own work time by completing just enough of my assignment to ensure an A, I would then proceed to turn to the quiet, uncorrupted, completely composed student beside me, and begin explaining why pink is a better color than green, or how to properly perform a plie in Fifth Position, complete with a demonstration that would require my use of the small space between the second and third row of desks. By age 10, I had developed a knack for doing two things at once, but I'll get to that later.

It infuriated Mrs. Blanders that the only bad grade she could give me was in the area of conduct, and even there she could only catch me in action long enough to award a B. To some at William H.

Natcher Elementary, I will always be a B. I, however, have learned there is more fun at B. A is too pointy and straight; B is rounder. It allows for more movement.

Mrs. Blanders had an order for everything, and she loved to remind the class that "everything you do today will affect you in college," as if we thought of college while hanging upside down on the monkey bars, staring down at the discarded bloody band-aids and smiley-face stickers scattered in the saw-dust. Still, I began to believe her; she put the fear of failure in me as I began to catch shadowy glimpses of my college self, explaining to old men around a meeting table why I had received a B in conduct the second quarter of my fourth grade year. And then there were the "Projects." Throughout the year we each had to do at least five projects involving such themes as "St. Patrick's Day" and "Frontier Kentucky." Each project had to be presented on one of those three-foot cardboard foldouts, and be accompanied by a binder of information of at least 20 pages. Mrs. Blanders designed the projects to measure just how organized, how neat and precise, how color coordinated, how lax for time, essentially, our mother were.

In mid-October, Mrs. Blanders caught me playing Go Fish under my desk with Andrea Long during an "All Hallow's Eve" presentation and decided once and for all that if she could not make me conform to her regiment, she could at least sit me as far away from human contact as possible. She then had me seated next to Gilbert Hall.

Gilbert was the only black kid in the class. His desk was in the back corner, the farthest one away from Mrs. Blanders's, and was also within an arms distance from the window, where our "Let's See How Long it Takes a Banana to Decompose" project sat in sunlight on the sill, surrounded by fruit flies. Gilbert kept his homework organized in little crunched up balls of notebook paper inside his desk, and his projects were all mismatched products of his hand only that fell apart as soon as the wings of his cardboard display were opened. If I was a B in Mrs. Blander's eyes, Gilbert was a C, a letter with no direction at all except to curve off into oblivion, and occasionally he was a D, which brings to mind all sorts of negative words: degrading, degenerate, dirty, derogatory. Gilbert was even known to have an acquaintance with the letter F and all of its affiliates, a fact to which I soon would be eternally grateful. Though Gilbert never finished all his work, never brought his parents to Open House, and basically seemed even more incapable of functioning in her military-style classroom than I was, he always answered Mrs. Blanders with a polite, "Yes ma'am."

To my fellow students' disbelief, I, a doctor's daughter, lived in a small, three bedroom house directly across the street from Gilbert. More than once, Mrs. Blanders had put off on me the job of educating Gilbert, she herself inviting him over to my house for tutoring. She had found no way to reconcile Gilbert to the image of the Perfect Student she had constructed in her head and believed herself entirely unable to reach him. At least, I would like to believe that Gilbert's behavior, not his cultural differences, kept Mrs. Blanders at a distance. At any rate, I felt used.

Though living across the street from Gilbert had begun to put a damper on my playtime, it did allow me to know things about him that Mrs. Blanders, and the rest of the class, did not. I had seen his massive father stomping into the house, leaving the front door wide open so all could hear his bellowing voice giving a command. I knew that for Gilbert, "ma'am" and "sir" were a way of life.

It was around the time of my banishment that Mrs. Blanders, calling on the children of the class to help stabilize her ever-shaky sense of control, began incorporating The Vote. Should Gilbert have to stand outside the classroom for ten minutes for failing to turn in his Kentucky Project? The class said yes. Would it be a fair punishment for Devon to stay in during recess for pinching Madison Bright on the arm? Of course! Should Laura have to put that check by her name—that final, sixth check that would lower her conduct grade to a B and keep her from being a Principal's Scholar for the first time in her short but dazzling academic career? YES! Mrs. Blanders had given that smile that says, "I'm sorry, but not really," her hands in the air as if there was nothing she could do to change the verdict of the class. She could not keep me from the public shame of being the only girl who just couldn't get it together. I placed a check by my other checks on the board, and then turned to trek back to the far reaches of my desk in the corner next to Gilbert, my partner in exile.

But all was not despair. Despite my addiction to Micro-magic Fries (I never ate just one box, but two at a time) and King Size Kit-Kat bars, and despite my permed bangs and pocket-T for every day of the week, I managed to attract an admirer in the form of Drew Hillwood. He was one of those kids who could sit with his knees bent behind him, letting his butt rest on the floor between his upturned ankles. I call this the "Elastic Dopey Pose." Dopey was a great word for Drew. Drew occasionally made D's. I had told him that if he cleaned out his desk I would be his girlfriend. I would have been his girlfriend anyway, but his desk was directly in front of mine (he was still managing, unlike me, to hang on the outskirts of classroom civilization) and I was tired of looking at the crumpled up papers, the

sticky pencil shavings, and the pocket of melting glue seeping out of the corner and down the leg of the desk. He immediately set to work and in no time it was official. Drew and I were a couple.

Shortly before Christmas, my reputation for unfeminine behavior came to a head. I had received a shocking 15 Homework Alerts (I did not have time in my busy mirror-singing schedule to actually do work *at home!*), and I had forgotten to brush my teeth before school nine days out of the semester. My mother, who refused to buy me a pair of Guess? Jeans or let me shave my armpits, had given up curling my tremendous bangs every morning, stating over the brim of her current mystery novel that she “permed those things so she wouldn’t have to curl them!” I had spiraled into complete reject status and was even contemplating forming a new club called the SPS, or Students Perpetually in Sweatpants. Only Gilbert, and Lucas, the kid with the chronic bloody nose, were left to surpass. Surely, I thought, I could hold on to what little normalcy I still possessed, but no. On Friday, December the 3rd, events occurred that had the power to propel me into the outer galaxies of human existence, the place reserved for those who commit the most base, most disgusting, most absolutely heinous crime of all—the Sneeze-Fart.

Previously, my brother Paul and I had researched the subject, and came to the hypothesis that if a kid were to sneeze and fart at exactly the same time, he would instantaneously die of a lack of oxygen. This was a most alarming conclusion, because everyone knew the Sneeze-Fart could attack without warning. I lived in fear of its sudden strike, and approached each of my sneezes with the utmost attention to controlling my other bodily functions. Letting my guard down for even a second would mean my ultimate demise. It was during Silent Reading Time, however, that I let down the fort. The force of the blow from my nose was too strong for the sphincter stronghold I had established and my fortress crumbled from the sheer force of the fart.

Drew, who had been engulfed in *The Human Body*, a book that was being slipped around the room under various desks unbeknownst to Mrs. Blanders, shot around as if a balloon had popped in his ear.

“Gross!” he said, as his upper lip snarled and his eyebrows scrunched to meet in the middle of his forehead in a look of utter disgust. “Was that you?”

I sat in a stupor. “I...”

“It was her!” Patrick, who sat next to Drew, said with his hand covering the trail of laughter pouring out of his mouth.

“It wasn’t me! I...”

“The denier is the supplier,” Patrick said. (I must note that in

later years, he would come to be known as “Pockmark Patrick,” and would steal over \$500 worth of fake gold watches from behind the counter of JC Penney’s jewelry department.)

I tried to think fast, but the blow had jarred me so violently that I could only look in confusion at my accusers, the entire fourth row of the class. Had I really just done the unimaginable? I knew from that moment on I would not only have to deal with being a little chubby, naïve to the GAP, and a college-dropout in the making, I would also be known as the girl who could fart with the boys. The heavens above could not save me from such a fate.

“It was me,” a voice to my left said. Gilbert had stopped playing the drums with his pencils on a copy of *Huckleberry Finn* and was now staring at Drew and Patrick. “I did it on my arm. Watch.” He pressed his lips to his forearm and blew out violently.

One by one, the students began to turn away. Where they had expected twisted metal, they had discovered only a fender-bender. Only Drew was left darting his eyes skeptically between Gilbert and me. Gilbert blew on his arm again in affirmation, and Drew let it go.

Mrs. Blanders, however, would not be as merciful. At my deafening blow, she had jumped like a blackbird at the sound of a gunshot, and then cautiously fluttered back down to her wooden stool, looking in Gilbert’s direction. The idea that I, a girl, was responsible had never been an option. On spotting Gilbert’s arm instrumentals, she smiled smugly at her own excellent judgment.

“Gilbert!” she said. “Step outside, please!”

I watched him go, smiling back at me just before the door into the hallway slammed shut behind them. His teeth were white and straight and beautiful.

Our school district split after the sixth grade, and Gilbert and I went to the “poor” middle school, which turned out to be anything but poor, rich in experiences I might otherwise have never had. In high school, my family moved away from Gilbert and into Mrs. Blanders’s neighborhood, and every now and then I ran across her while out for a walk. Sometimes she waved, other times she pretended not to see me. It wasn’t until just a week ago that I actually spoke with Mrs. Blanders again. In fact, it was at a Meet the Authors banquet. I learned she was no longer in the classroom but now in charge of fourth grade curriculum, inventing new projects, no doubt. She asked me how I was doing, and as I watched her eyes nervously survey the room, I remembered what she had said about fourth grade affecting my college career.

“I’m trying to do some writing,” I said, making a mental note of a story idea, something funny that happened to me in the fourth

grade. I was smiling to myself as she walked away.

As for Gilbert—I don't know where he went after high school, but I will always remember the incredible service he did me. "There is no greater love than this—that you should lay down your life for your friends." In the eyes of a fourth grade girl, that is exactly what Gilbert did.

Ducks (an ode to Holden)

Jennifer Raggard

The third of December
was the first day I wore my new coat.
Green, wool,
cut to mid-thigh, big buttons.
I was walking with my head down,
refusing to meet the wind's eyes,
and I thought about what you said
about ducks.
Remember,
about where they go when the lagoon freezes over?
So I changed direction, went to the park to see.
You were there, sitting on the bench.
You had your red hunting hat on,
and you said you liked my argyle earmuffs.
I sat down next to you.
We didn't speak again
until I put my hand on the back of your neck
like Jane did.
Then a single tear plopped on your jeans
and you asked
if I wanted to go to a goddam show or something.



untitled

Maree Emberton

The Gestalt
Zacchaeus Compson

She arced skyward in one last effort to escape the ozone doom below, stretching upward, as to the sun, body writhing at the peak before the descent, hanging there in the halcyon equilibrium of forces, stalemated to the sky, creamy undersides exposed. Joe would have had her if it weren't for the surprise, the eruption from the water, the ascent upward against all logic, her lithe body rising full in our eyes, choking our stare. In an instant she was sinking back to earth, dipping her svelte sides back into the water. But there was chemistry in the water that day, and none escaped the water's electric seduction, our probes hanging out on either side of the boat, stainless-steel fingers groping low. She twisted, lurched deep, and lost control, drifting over on her smarmy sides. Her pale belly wavered almost a meter below, and Joe was thrusting the net deep now, compensating for the refracted light, netting her with a heave, twisting to capture her full, pulling her out from the water in a slow, straining move.

When the fifteen-minute run was up, I pushed the pole down hard on the kill switch, waited for it to choke and die, curse its last backfire and rest in the aftermath of stale smoke. That's when Joe went to work. Each wavering form he groped out of the live well with deft force, his hands firm about their girths. He would slide them up the measuring-board in an easy, single-handed caress, their stomachs rubbing on the smooth wood, their noses butting firm to the head-board, mouths forced shut. The little ones he let flap about a second in a desperate vim-flipping before he slid them in place. And then he called out their name and length and tossed them back into the water, the whole process so fast he earned the name "Joey: fish god." At first I thought him careless and ignorant, a country boy who just liked to shock fish, calling out random names on a hunch because he was too lazy to key them out. But Joe had an eye for fish, possessed the "gestalt," could just see a fish and know. Looking at the body shape of a Rosyface Shiner, he murmured why it wasn't the sister Mimic; brushing back the gills of the genre *Lepomis*, he whispered their species *cyanellus*; massaging the lips of suckers, gently rubbing the tongues of bass, tickling the fins of darters, he came to this knowing, would call their names in this Zen-Latin chanting: *Lepistosseus osseus*, *Etheostoma sterillum*, *Labidesthes sicculus*. I would question his judgement, rub off microscopic scales to get a count, tear fins

to get at the rays, bust up gills with fat slimy thumbs. But he was always right. I wondered what he had or had done to acquire the gestalt, to give him this vision of fish. Maybe it was his photographic memory; maybe he sat for hours at home reading about them; maybe he had just seen so many that they became more to him, more than fish, more than suckers and shad, carp and crappie, more than, even, specific species—he saw what it meant for them to grow old, become gravid with eggs, grow green with disease. He possessed the gestalt and so he knew their spirits; he knew their spirits and so possessed the sonar babble of their Delphian tongues.

He could see them from nearly two-hundred yards off, make out their shape, their smooth moves through the hazy day, their sides sleek and waving, skirts tight to their hips like scales. From the distance of a dozen leagues he not only aged and sexed them, but also uncovered their hair color, qualified their weight, and even estimated their bust size. And he was always right. Like he could smell their pheromones from a mile off and know the quality of her genes. It became a game for him to make me look at them, their lean legs meandering down the sidewalk, up their skirts. I would try to restrain, part out of respect, part out of fear of being seen looking. That is not to say I didn't look sometimes, but there was always this hidden voice in me that revered them with an inarticulate fear, that didn't want to face them up close. But Joe was all fight and no flight. So it was that on a few occasions I found myself looking into the eyes of one peeked madtom lurching forth with frilled fins and a purse with mace. Joe would just make gurgling, slurping sounds, like he was the fish, making some snap, but most just blushed and darted away.

He told me many times how they liked it, but I didn't believe him. Joe, however, always proved a man of his word--despite the occasional jerk of detest, most only tugged at his assessments with a demur smile, lashes down, a warm blush. Some would smile back directly. Still others sized him up! I tried to pass it off as the "bad girl" syndrome, or the "girls like jerks" phenomenon, but something more was nudging me, making me stroke the question mark of curiosity. What was it that William Joseph Oliver had that girls wanted? He wasn't particularly gorgeous, didn't have great clothes or a Mustang, didn't love poetry or picnics. He was gruff and unrefined: a man of barbells and gills, a man of teeth and scales, a man with the self-spoken commitment to "never deny his biology."

He taught me once about their proportions, how the swell of

the breast, the curve of the hips, must be just right, how a man will be attracted to a good-breeding woman, how pheromones draw in the perfect genetic match. But it wasn't the pheromones I lacked. It wasn't even the women. Joe had something more I couldn't understand—something I coveted and feared. The gestalt, I think. But the gestalt wasn't what made the women love him. The gestalt was how he loved them, worshiped them, and that faith seemed to make him strong. But how did he attain his faith? From where did one seek the gestalt of salvation? The baptism of the knowing?

She was in the boat now, in the live well, shifting. Joe's hands sunk deep in the water, snuck full around her girth, fingers pushing into her yielding stomach as she braced and bowed. She came alive in his hands—fins out, lips pouting, eyes black pearls. He laid her hard on the board and she became frightened, panicked in an arcing and twisting. His hands paused for a second, mid-air, assessing her position, then came full over her, pushing her firm against the wood. His hold was deliberate, a long bold minute, even after her strain began to soften. And that is when his hands came alive, began to shift and slide, counting each scale, opening the gills, fanning the fins out wide, forming his hand around her body, like he was forming her, reliving her creation. Or was it that she was forming his hands now, giving them the under-belly sense of touch, the quivering, newborn grasp, the first placental gasp for life?

Praying Mantis
Jo Ellen Foushee

Green little leaf.
Slow walker.
Chin of Satan.
Hands of Jesus,
Keep vigil over the feet
That want to crunch
Your crackly little body
Over the cement
That God made.

Horny Toads and Sagebrush
John William Keabler II

Absaroka; Bridger Tetons; Wind River; Popo agie; Thermopolis;
Arapaho; Shoshone; Wyoming (means *on the great plains*)—the place
and the people of my past.

I started off one morning, as I did many mornings, in search of horny toads—One purpose, no destination. Despite the name, horny toads are not toads (as members of the reptile family) nor are they horny (only mating once a year); however, they do freeze at the slightest hint of movement and make easy prey for a b-b gun packing eight year old in cowboy boots and shorts.

Rain falls, on average, twenty days out of the year. The land is dry and sun-cracked. Dirt-clods crunch under weight of boots. The air smells of sage. Characteristic yucca, prairie sage, and prickly pear cactus texture the extensive flatness. If a tumbleweed picked up enough wind-momentum it could blow across four states. Life is a paradox in Wyoming: depression runs as deep as the pre-Cambrian rock beneath the landscape, but the natives never leave.

My family's land butts against the convergence of two great plateaus separated by a gradual one hundred foot slope, tapering off to a crested butte, and then to another slope of comparable length. The lower plateau extends west for sixty miles until it slams into the Wind River Mountains, a minor range of the Rockies. The higher plateau extends east ending, it seems, somewhere in Iowa. Land as lonely as sky leaves ample time for an only child to quench the insatiable sauntering of the mind. But my business waits on the crested butte.

Horny toads, the color of sand, blend into their surroundings almost as well as bats in a cave. Wind-sculpted sandstone abstractions line the butte and provide perfect hiding places for those horny little devils. One's only hope of movement—slight ambulation of earth. It's best to find a comfortable spot, fix the eyes on the horizon, and sense the world peripherally.

I saw my first toad of the day as I sat on top of a sandstone monolith I named rattlesnake alley. Rattlesnake alley faces westward and I would often find a diamondback warming its scales there in the afternoon sun. Toad skirted across the face of a different rock ten feet away—an Arapaho scout scanning the pass. I jumped to my feet and raised the gun. He sensed my movement and froze. I could have descended, walked up to him, but I did not want to waste the opportunity. My father recently constructed a shooting range on our land and I wanted to show him how hard I had practiced. But this was a living

target, my first kill.

A grasshopper crackled in the sage. Sweat beads formed on my cheek. I pulled the trigger—missed. B-B ricocheted off rock, bounced back, stung my neck hard. I jumped down off my pedestal and squashed that toad (WHACK) with the butt of my gun. Whack. Porous sandstone absorbed his crimson blood like a sponge. I touched him with my fingers and wiped blood under my eyes, then I wept and wept—until the blood ran clean.



My Sister's Wedding

Erin L. Greenwell

at the church
saw same ceremony
but he saw

cream bride gown
full of regret
milk swollen breasts
pressed against
bead lace bodice
full skirt swelled in front

this he saw, not I

the ride there in summer heat
past farmland barren brown
he saw

ragged rib-cage horse
by rough hand hewn
plank fence against
bruise blue sky
mangled brown mane
limp upon its neck

this he saw, not I

car doors open
check for bow bedecked gift
climb in
roll windows down
close my eyes against
sun glazed dash

he did not see
the reason for
my blindness

Soured Punch-line

Jeff Crady

We have worn it out.
Like the joke your uncle always told
at every
fish-fry, bris, or confirmation dinner.
Cigar held tightly in his left hand.
The smoke caught in the bush of eyebrows . . .
forested mustache—
the same shriveled punch line
(his voice quivering under weight
of delivery)
about gorillas and flatulence.

We are the moment afterwards,
Where eyes roll, Aunt Gertrude hangs her
head . . . skin falls in folds, like melting
butter . . . your mother quickly asking
if I would like more bread.
Your uncle's arms raised,
mouth open, muttering . . . what? what?

Foreshadowing

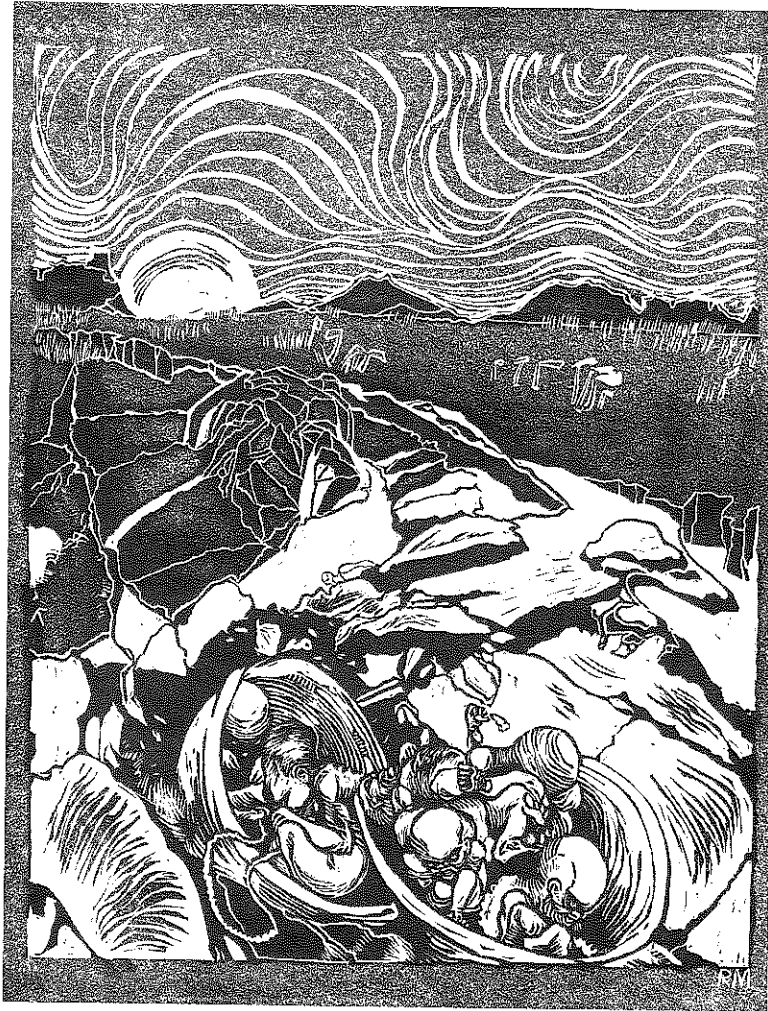
Laura Phy

The smell of hydraulic fluid,
the lathe spitting shrapnel,
tiny bits of razor-sharp silver
on a blackened concrete floor,
a shower of fire bouncing off steel,
men in large black masks,
red tool boxes the size of refrigerators,
and my father,
hidden somewhere in the maze
of towering metal creations,
the only clean thing in sight.

He sees me in the middle,
pink bows, long hair, and bare feet,
and stops.
"Hi, Daddy. It's lunchtime."
He nods, puts a finger in the air,
and turns back to the man next to him,
who just crawled out from underneath
the steel beast beside me.
The cutting sounds,
the piercing high-pitched squeal
of blades on metal,
keep me from hearing them.

They each nod
and his large strides head my way.
He gets close and squats down next to me,
whispers loudly the thing he always says.
Watch my eyes.
Watch my feet.
Be careful—
this place was not built
for little girls.

About Charlie
Aubrey Videtto



Winter kept us warm ...

Benjamin Ryan Moffett

Charlie's a big boy. When he was ten his parents bought him a super twin-sized bed, and by the time he was eleven he could eat two men's worth of fried fish nuggets and ice-cream sundaes from the seafood buffet at the Sizzler. That was just before his dad really moved up at GE. Now he can eat two men's worth of lobster bisque and duck liver pate. At twenty-two he's perfectly content to be living with his parents and working two part-time jobs. In a week he'll be twenty-three. He wants a motorcycle for his birthday. It occurred to Charlie earlier today that he hadn't been under a bed in a while. He'd hidden under beds all the time when he was younger—for games and sometimes to avoid mowing the lawn. But it's been awhile, and he wonders if he can still fit...

...I've forgotten what day it is again. If it's Wednesday then I have to be in the Kroger meat department in ten minutes. If it's Tuesday then I have to be at the restaurant in an hour. If by some stretch it's Saturday then Gary and Steve are waiting for me right now at the bar on Frankfort. I think that may be it. I bet I'm supposed to be at the bar. I'm never late. Why am I running late, just thinking of these things now? I think it may be that I'm under the bed, that the reason that I'm late is that I-am-under-the-bed. How the hell did I fit under the bed? I can't breathe very well here.

What's that noise? Who's that talking? Is that the machine?

"CharliEEEEEEEE! Answer the phone, Charlie. Charlie? Get out of bed, CharrrrrrliEE! You were supposed to be here an hour and a half ago. Char—what? He's not picking up..."

"Ha... haa... hey... guys."

Way to go, man! You're supposed to be at the bar... with beer. And there could be girls there. They could be sitting with girls right now. No, they're not sitting with girls. Hem. Ha-ha. I know what kind of girls they'd sit with. They'd—wait, I'm under the bed, and I can't get out and I'm breathing-real-hard-it-hurts-my-chest-on-the-springs.....

...Shit. What day is this? It's Thursday, I think, I'm thinking, it's Thursday. It's a good thing that I'm off work because I'm under the bed. And since it's Thursday, I don't have to meet the guys and those girls they're sitting with until Saturday, on Frankfort. I think the really sad thing about being stuck under the bed is that I didn't think that I could get under the bed and that if I did then I would

probably get stuck—under the bed. The sad thing is that when I thought that, I was right, and I was pretty sure even then, even before I got myself stuck under the bed, that I was right.

Now THAT is a spider. More importantly that's a spider that I can't kill because when I am stuck under the bed like this, if I move my hands away from the underside of the bed then I won't be able to breathe well and I will pass out. And also I wouldn't be able to wipe my hand off, I don't think. I...should really try now to get out from under the bed. I got my---head---to---my foot---if I can push on some-thing---on---with my arm---shoulder...I-can't-breathe... ..

...Yeah. Day day day day day Tuesday. It's Tuesday. I'm gonna be late for work. I really liked that job but they're gonna fire me now. Because it's Tuesday and I'm not slicing a pound of bologna...I'm not slapping that meat, slappin', slappy slappy slap pap pappa... ..

...I'm under the bed still. I think maybe I should consider really trying hard to think of some way to get out from under here because I don't know if it's really very good for my brain to pass out so much. GOD! I am SUCH an idiot. Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! That sounds funny iii-deeee---uuuuut.

I have to pee.

All right! Puuuuuuuuuush!

Ah yeeeah, I was stuck under the bed, but now that I managed to push the mattress and box springs up with my huge strong arms, and the mattress pushed up and over at least a foot, and then I crawled out and lay down away from the bed, now I am—not-under the bed. I'm already feeling a lot better. I didn't feel very well at first after I was under the bed for four hours and then pushed the mattress and box springs off. I felt dizzy. Now I think I'll get up and go meet the guys for Monday night football. Hmm, maybe I'll stay here for a min—... ..

“Hey, gimme the remote—no, the one on the table—no, that's to the stereo—yeah, that one.” Steve tosses Gary one of four remote controls. Gary hits a button in the upper left corner and the screen of the TV turns blue and then two cartoon racecars appear. In one of the cars, a driver twice the size of his automobile sits looking ferocious and something like a dinosaur crossed with a turtle. In the challenging vehicle, a mouse in a skirt turns its head toward the dinosaur/turtle and says in a deep demonic voice “I'll taste your heart, Holesore!” Steve giggles. It's half time.

“Who do you want to be?” Gary asks Steve, tossing him a

beer and a game controller all at once.

“Holesore,” Steve says through a gulp of M.G.D. Belch.

“Where's Charlie, should we call him?” Steve asks, eyes glued to Holesore as his thick fingers move deftly from one button to the next on his controller.

“Yeah, you call him,” Gary says. Gary throws his shoulders to the left and almost falls over as he furiously holds down the left turn button with his index finger. Dread, his mouse in a skirt, flips out of its car as it careens into the right-hand wall and explodes. Gary jerks. Within two seconds, Dread is unscathed, back in its car, racing.

Steve, almost inaudibly, has been chanting “come on come on come on come on come on come on come on come on,” since they started playing.

“All right, but you gotta pause it.”

“All right.” Gary pauses the game. The game's carnival-like music comes to an abrupt halt to reveal the noise of Gary gulping at his beer like someone might gasp for air; he'd forgotten he had one.

Steve, phone to ear and shoulder, cracks open another one as he walks back into the room. “He's not answering—you think he forgot?...Ah, I got the machine. CharliEEEEEEEEEE! Answer the phone, Charlie. Charlie? Get out of bed, CharrrrrrrrriEE! You were supposed to be here an hour and a half ago. Char---“

“Is he there?” Gary asks, interrupting.

“What? He's not picking up...” Steve hits the off button.

“We'll call him back in a couple of minutes,” Gary says and flips the TV to cable. The game is already back on. The Packers are losing.

“Yeah, Mitch? Hey, this is Max Greenwell from the Bloomington plant. Listen, we're hearing stories that Louisville's Appliance Park is gonna fold in less than a year. We're thinking about making plans now to relocate to Mexico two fiscal years from then—to kind of ride in on their coattails. Expand whatever they've got, you know.... Yeah, we know, but popular opinion isn't changing how much money we make or burn. No matter how many 'dependent communities' fold here, we'll still pull in enough from Mexico to make up for any negative sales from the move. People forget fast, it'll be fine.... What? Oh, right—Hugh Wagner wanted me to call and see if there's anything you can give us to prep our PR guys for the slam when this goes off. We've got guys here to deal with it, but they're home-towners and we figure they won't stick around to sweet-talk their friends for us; we'll need somebody new. We were hoping

you had some recommendations..."

Max Greenwell hangs up the phone twenty minutes later with a list of four names of possible new-hires. He leans far back into his leather chair and swivels it from side to side with the shiny black toe of his shoe against his big mahogany desk as he thinks about a brand new secretary—she'll have sweet golden brown skin and will mumble to him in Mexican while she's on her knees in his new office. He also wants big plate glass windows.

A noise shoots through the room and cuts into his daydreaming. It settles immediately behind his left eye to start another one of his headaches. They have been getting worse. He will find out a year after he moves to Mexico, which will actually be in five fiscal years, that he has a brain tumor. Before he can have it removed though, his secretary's boyfriend will shoot him in the back of the head at a company picnic for knocking her up. He will immediately shit his pants due to a simultaneous convulsion of his nervous and excretory systems. The shit will remind the orderly at the hospital that his wife wants him to pick up the ingredients for refried beans on the way home. She refuses to buy the canned, pre-made version in the American's store in the taco aisle—she says it tastes like caca.

Max jabs at the intercom button to make the noise stop. "What?!"

"Mr. Greenwell, your wife is on hold from the hospital. Would you like to speak with her?" His secretary asks through the white box on his desk. Every time that buzzer rings throughout the room he wishes she would just shout whatever it is through his fucking door. This makes him think of his father yelling through the house every night when he got home from work when Max was a boy.

"Max, goddamnit, where's your mother?! Max!! Where the fuck are you, you little shit?! I come home from working all fucking day in that fucking factory and ain't nobody got any FUCKING dinner on my table!! Somebody answer me GOD-DAMNIT!!!... There you are you piece of shit, now get your ass up and boil me some hotdogs."

Max caresses the Italian leather of his chair and smiles. His father died in a nursing home in South Bend ten years ago and no one was there but an orderly that Max had suspected liked to kiss the old men at night when visiting hours were over. Henry, Max thinks was the orderly's name, but who cares.

"Yeah, I'll take it Jeanie," he picks up the phone and pushes a button that puts him through to his very expensive wife. "Hello?"

"Max? It's me, Charlie's in the hospital, Max!"

"Calm down, Franny. Is he all right? What's happened?"

"Well, I'm not sure really. I got home from work and he was passed out on his bedroom floor."

"Is that little shit on drugs again, Franny? You better tell me if you know anything. Because if he is then that's it! No twenty-two year old son of mine is going to stay in my house for free and smoke dope all the time—he needs a real job. He needs to come and work for me instead of cutting bologna and smoking dope with those fool friends of his."

"Max, Charlie's known Gary and Steve since grade school," Fran says in her reasoning with Max voice, "And anyway, it's not drugs. It was—lack of—oxygen."

"What does that mean, Fran? Lack of oxygen?"

"He says he got stuck under his bed."

Max remains silent.

"Max?...Max?"

"I won't be home in time for dinner, Fran. Eat without me."

"Max? Aren't you coming to the hospital?"

"No." Max hangs up the phone and leans thoughtfully back in his chair. He has hated his father since he was five when Mr. Greenwell put Max's little hand through the living-room window for flicking the side of his mouth for too long. Max had been trying to learn to make that popping sound his cousins could make so well. Mr. Greenwell *had* told him to stop though.

And Max has tried to be a good father. Sure, he's fucked most of his secretaries and couldn't make it to many of Charlie's t-ball games. But that's because he's had to make money so that his family can have the nice things he hadn't had, that his lousy father never gave him. But his son is an idiot. He's raised a fucking moron. He decides to go to Rita's house after work tonight instead of his own. Rita doesn't have any kids, but she does have the best fucking tits this side of Texas. His father had always said that about his mom, "Your mother's the dumbest bitch I ever met, but she's got the best tits this side of Texas. HAAAAHA!!" Max feels bad immediately for thinking this of Rita. He decides to buy her something on the way over to make up for it.

Fran's mother Doris had warned her not to marry Max. "He's a liar, Franny," she had said, "He'll cheat on you and he'll be a bad father. He only cares about his money and his sex and he'll get tired of you. So he'll find some pretty young thing, like his secretary, to please him."

"To please him? Mom, come on. That sounds like some-

thing out of a movie. People aren't really like that. And Max is a good guy. You could at least try to give him a chance," Fran had said reasonably.

She and Max had laughed about it in his bed later that night.

"Don't worry," Max had said, "I'll make you the happiest woman alive."

Three years later Charlie was born. Fran's mother came to help her through the labor. She didn't say anything about Max not being there and Fran was grateful. When it was over they both held the new born baby boy and cried. Fran cried because she was happy and felt a new strange love well up inside of her for this new human, and also because she thought Max might spend more time at home when he fell in love with her baby too. Doris cried because this baby looked just like Fran when she was born, and also because she hoped Fran would need her help with the newborn so that she could spend more time with her only daughter.

Now Fran sits at the hospital and wonders why Max isn't coming. She's not stupid. She knows that he cheats on her. She knows that Charlie is not so bright as they had hoped he would be. She even knows already that Max is planning on moving the plant to Mexico. That he plans to take her away from her big beautiful house, one of the biggest in town, that they have lived in for ten years. To take her away from her son and her mother, who will probably die soon. To take her away from her friends and her committees. She already knows that she will file for divorce when he finally tells her this. She will get half of his money, his big beautiful house, Chuck—his dog—and at least two of his six cars. She will finally take ballroom dancing lessons. She will spend more time with her mother. And Charlie can live at home as long as he wants. The longer the better.

In the summer of 1983 Charlie, Steve and Gary spent two weeks at a nature camp in Dalton, Georgia, named Squirrel City. This was when they had become best friends. The Dalton squirrels were friendly and abundant. They streamed through the residential areas—a modern day plague. But instead of the hum of an oncoming locust swarm, you could hear the unending chatter and squeak of dozens of squirrels in one yard alone. It was best not to feed them—they came to expect it after a while.

Charlie and the guys took so much interest in this particular population of rodents for one simple reason—target practice. The camp schedule bulletin that circulated at the beginning of each week

noted the times and dates for the learning and practicing of the fine art of archery. The boys had never experienced the exhilarating feeling of allowing a deadly weapon to sail through the air at top speed with no assurance that someone or something wouldn't die upon its landing. The tight, neat suburb streets that they had grown up in in Bloomington didn't much allow for chucking a rock too far, much less aiming and projecting the sharp end of an arrow. Life would never seem so sweet again as in those moments of nine-year-old homicide in the quiet suburbs of Georgia.

"Wait-up!" Gary hissed. He was scooting forward on the ground about thirty feet behind Charlie and Steve. Gary had had something of a weight problem when he was younger and it was on occasions like these, and most other occasions, when he regretted it. He ran his big dirty forearm across his damp face and checked to be sure the bow and arrows were still securely on his back. Robin Hood—he had imagined the night before when they were making plans for the big hunt the next day. Robin Hood, the daring do-gooder of that time back when. He would assail the evil betrayers of justice with full force on the morrow! The guys reminded him that Robin Hood wore tights and a really queer hat. They, of course, planned to be Indians. Gary shut up about Robin Hood and waited until it wouldn't seem too obvious before he switched his alliance to the feather-wearing warriors. His neck burned with embarrassment until he was sure that they'd forgotten all about Robin Hood.

"Come on, Gary!" They said as loudly as they dared. They had stopped to wait at the base of a gigantic pine. Gary finally caught up with them, heaving like he'd run a mile.

They were safely off the main road now and back in the dense tree growth of some Georgian's huge back yard. Their eyes scanned the yard for the little brown creatures to dart into view. They decided to spread out and each took a corner of the property. They created something of a triangle with their vantage points and focused all attention on the enemy.

The squirrels were plentiful that hot August day. And the arrows began to fly. It really didn't occur to any of them until they were dragging fat Gary back to the camp with an arrow sticking out of his leg that they were all firing at each other. They didn't even know which boy had fired the rogue arrow that landed with a thump in Gary's right thigh.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Gary?"

"Shit!"

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Gary?!"

Gary didn't move while he was screaming because he was so fascinated by the sight of the arrow in his leg and also because the arrow had tacked him to the ground. It was just like so many thumb-tacks holding notes to his mom's kitchen bulletin board that said "Buy snacks for Gary!" or "Out of butter!"

They got him loose from the dirt but couldn't stomach pulling it through his leg. When their parents got there to pick them up after they'd been kicked out of camp for the whole thing, Max had looked at Charlie and said, "I don't know why we bother, Charlie. You'll never make it."

Charlie's worked in the Kroger meat department for about six months now and he really likes the job because all the meat guys are so funny. Once Rick told Charlie that he had a phone call and when Charlie put the receiver to his face he felt the cool wetness of a piece of sirloin on his ear and chin. They were always joking around in there. Charlie once ate a handful of raw meat on a dare and they had all been great friends ever since. He's up for a fifty-cent raise in two weeks, and today at work he and Rick are calculating how much they would make after so long with so many raises. They lose count but decide they'll be doing *pretty well* in a couple of years.

"What are you gonna do when you retire?" Charlie asks a thirty-eight-year-old Rick.

"Get a boat," Rick responds quickly as though he'd thought all this through many times before.

"What kind of boat?"

"A sail boat. And then I'm going to sail around the world and live all over the—world," Rick says wistfully.

"My dad has a boat," Charlie says.

"Really?" Rick says shortly to hide his immediate jealousy.

"Yeah, but he never lets me use it," Charlie says.

"When I have a boat I'll let my son use it. But only when I'm not using it," Rick says, feeling generous and happy. But now he remembers how his fourteen year-old-son Bobby took his Honda Civic one night and brought it home the next morning with a dent on the hood and the left side-view mirror missing. He frowns.

"What?" Charlie asks.

"Maybe I'll just let him come out with me and sail sometimes," Rick said.

"Yeah, my dad doesn't let me do that either," Charlie says.

Rick smiles. He feels generous again. "What are you gonna do, Charlie?" He asks.

"Oh, I don't know," Charlie says thoughtfully, fingering some tenderloin, "Maybe I'll work for my dad at GE."

"What would you do there?"

"I don't know," Charlie says, a little confused.

"Maybe you could be vice-president," Rick offers.

"Yeah, maybe," Charlie says without conviction.

Rick goes back to wrapping up plates of meat with cellophane. Charlie rests his forearms on the cool glass of the meat display and thinks. A few minutes later he looks up and says with a smile, "Hey, Rick?"

"Yeah?"

"I could be in charge of the assembly lines. Or I could be a Union rep. I could even work on the lines," Charlie says enthusiastically.

"If you're just gonna work on the lines, you may as well work here," Rick says calmly, but secretly he can barely control his excitement at the idea that Charlie could stay and work with him. He thinks that Charlie looks up to him just like his son doesn't. He decides he'll take Charlie out on his boat when he gets one. Maybe Charlie can even sail around the world with him.

"What?" Charlie asks, "work here?" He chuckles a little.

"I'm not gonna work at Kroger the rest of my life, man!" He doesn't notice the look on Rick's face as Rick slowly finishes wrapping the last of the plates of cut meat and then puts them all back in the back refrigerator. "Ah, I was just kiddin' anyway, Charlie," Rick says quietly, "Your dad'll make you vice-president for sure." They throw on their jackets and turn off the lights as they leave the meat department.

The floor waxer has already been through the aisle that they walk down every night to get to the front of the store. Charlie and Rick both watch the dull gleam on the floor from the over-head fluorescents as they walk. They can hear the waxer humming thickly in lane #13—the Coke aisle. They both feel sorry for the man with the waxer, as they do every night when they are leaving the store and he is still rumbling away, polishing away, mostly blind and pretty damn old. No telling how long he'd been there. They will be genuinely happy for him when, in about three months, the mostly blind floor waxer man will win \$100,000 in the lottery. The first thing he will do is quit his job.

"Charlie!" A couple of voices shout as he enters the pool-room at Patty O's bar. He makes his way back to his friends, weaving through the pool tables—each one occupied by at least one person he knows; they all smile at him. The knocking of balls goes on around

him as he adjusts his eyes to the smoky dim light of the room. Each table's suspended lights swirl with the smoke of cigars and cigarettes and the floor is shiny clean with the exception of the area beneath the hand chalk—it has a powdery coating that swims a little as Charlie walks by. He takes a seat at the booth next to their pool table. Shaking chalk cubes in his hand like dice he watches the pool game absently. Nine ball, corner pocket. Eleven, off the rail. Miss. Two ball, side pocket. Combination, four off the five, corner pocket. Scratch....

"Hey, what's on your mind, Charlie?" Steve asks, leaning against the pool table, stick in hand.

"Oh, nothing," Charlie says.

"Hard night playing with your—MEAT, Charlie?" Gary asks. He laughs loudly at his joke. Everyone else ignores him. He quiets and begins to study the pool table, seemingly plotting his next few moves.

"I just don't know what I'm gonna do with my life," Charlie says. "I don't think my dad is gonna make me vice-president."

His friends look at him somewhat bewildered. After high school they'd all decided to take a couple of years off before college. Charlie's parents had stormed around the house for a month yelling up to his bedroom that he was never going to make anything of himself now for sure! Steve actually deferred from IU where he was going to study sports team management. And Gary had just been relieved. He hadn't gotten in to any of the schools that he applied to, but he never got around to mentioning that to the guys. They figured that they could use a break. The break had turned into a five-year vacation and the thought of college had ridden off into the sunset like so many cowboys with a woman thrown over the front of their saddle. Gary and Steve have a cheap apartment near the university and go to college parties every weekend, and Charlie still lives with his parents because his mom won't let his dad charge him rent—which is what had happened to the other guys.

One day Gary's mom came home from work and he asked her if she was going to the grocery store anytime soon. She opened the fridge and pulled out a stick of butter and threw it at him. It hit him in the eye, and while he was holding a baggy of ice over it an hour later, she had come back to his bedroom. "Gary, your father and I think that you should move out. Or you can pay rent and buy your own food. And, Gary?" "What, Mom?" "I'm sorry about the butter, but I went to the store yesterday and you've already eaten all of my Mallomars and everything else. You need to go on a diet, Gary. You're fat. You know what I'm saying, honey? I just don't know

how you got so fat." She left the room shaking her head slowly back and forth. Gary sat and stared at his hands for a while. He had always wanted to be a baseball player when he grew up. He and Steve moved out the next month. That was two years ago. Their moms still bring them food at least once a week.

"Vice-president?" Steve asks from across the pool table.

"Yeah...well...you know, I thought since he's the president, I could be—vice-president," Charlie says timidly.

"Charlie, you can't be vice-president if you haven't gone to college," Steve says.

"But I'll go. I mean, I can go now," Charlie offers.

"You don't want to go to college, man, you can just work at Kroger and we can hang out here for the rest of our lives," Gary says, venturing back into the conversation.

"Gary—shut-up, will ya?" Steve says quickly. He senses the gravity of the topic for Charlie but he doesn't really know what to say. Charlie's kinda dumb, Steve thinks; he can't go to college now.

Charlie is sinking farther and farther down into the seat of the booth with a look of utter despair on his face. His flannel shirt is bunched up at his shoulders and neck, and his round stubbled face is pretty red. He almost looks like he's about to cry. Though he won't, of course. His huge frame is slumped forward and he keeps sighing deeply like some Hoosier Hamlet.

Suddenly though he sits up straight and smiles. "You know what I could do though? I could be a manager in the meat department, or in some other department. Rick's a manager and he never went to college, so they have to let me do it. And the managers there have way better schedules and get paid more. I could work there as a manager for a couple of years and then retire and get a boat like Rick," Charlie says all of this quickly and excitedly. His friends agree that this is a good plan.

"And we can hang out here for the rest of our lives," Charlie says contentedly. Gary smiles. So does Steve.

As Charlie rubs his chin in contemplation of this bright future, a pale blue beard appears on his face from his hands, now coated in pool chalk from his fidgeting.

That same night Max and Fran are lying in their king-sized bed staring at the ceiling. Max has just told Fran about the big move to Mexico. He hasn't asked her what she thinks of the idea, but he has told her not to go spouting off to any of her friends yet. It's not official.

Fran is trying to think of how she should tell Max that she

wants a divorce. Max is thinking about Coronas on the beach and Mexican women.

"Max, I'm not going to Mexico. I knew already that you were going to move and I decided that when you told me I was going to tell you that I don't want to go. I like my house and my friends and my life here, Max. And I'm not leaving....Max? Max, aren't you going to say anything? I want a divorce."

Snoring from Max's side of the bed.

"Max? Are you asleep?" Fran rolls over onto her side and looks at her husband sleeping. She'll just tell him in the morning. But what about Charlie? She remembers Max at Charlie's age. Max, with his charm and wit, and her mother had been right after all. But Charlie wants a motorcycle and got stuck under his bed yesterday. Fran smiles at this. He'll be fine.

Max continues to snore. Fran turns off the light. She closes her eyes and imagines telling all of her friends about the divorce. She'll serve quiche.

Proof that war is Hell

Zachary B. Vaughn

Bombs fall from the sky
like a hail storm—
as the gale winds blow down
clay built huts built
by clay-colored hands.

And a baby learns
not to cry,
because she can't.

And a baby learns
not to eat,
because she can't.

And a baby learns
how to sleep,
because she is already dead.

And the dust dances around her
naked flesh.

And the dust wraps his arms
around her like a father.

While 3,000 miles away,
WASPs sit in a boardroom
slapping shoulders in congratulations
because clay-colored niggers
were just tucked into bed.

The upbeat poem for no good reason

Jeff Crady

Skit-scat down the sidewalk
when the rain falls sideways
from the back-lit sky . . .
Sun awakens, rolls out
from the blanketed clouds.
And the girl's hair,
bounces and weaves . . .
glints gold ahead of us.
My broad shouldered brother
stands next to me, stands over me
with his corn silk hair,
hanging haphazard and wild
across his forehead.
Our feet fling, flip-flopped
and flimsy under us,
As we saunter down the
walk, whistling and
aimless, on our
way home.

Ceralvo Spurs

Alex Taylor

There is the track and him knowing it, knowing the hungry in fox-print, foot-leavings in the powdered, yellow dirt of the yard. He cuts the oak bough with his teeth, chews away a stem and tastes acorn, a bitter, squirrel-belly taste that makes him spit, finish the job with his knife. The oak shavings curl at his feet. He spits again, into the track, ruins it.

No blood this time, he thinks. No feathers.

The chickens roost above him in the oak, white blots among the dark boughs. He counts again, slow, fingers numbering fowl and, finding the one still gone, says coon. And wants it that way. Big, winter-fat sow coon, tree with a cousin's hound and look with lantern-fire, hide stretched against tackboard. But he knows the track and it talks at him, talks fox until he sees it there. The fine, brief footing, whisper-soft. He thinks of a den, carpeted with chickenbone, a litter of pups harmless with milk-teeth. He clutches his gut, feels the crater of it, counts another rib, close against the taut skin.

In the bad light, he shapes the snare, heat whipping his face, a thing that he waves away like a gnat-cloud. He lances the oak bough, triggers it with a rusted bed spring, covers all with leaves. From his pocket he takes the pork, skillet-thawed and cold with jellied grease, intended bait that he eats instead.

The fledgling dark comes on and he walks back to the trailer. Under him, the brown, summer-killed grass crackles, breaks off clean at the root. From the porch, he watches the fencyard, wire and post-vine, honeysuck and the hills beyond that know no dry. The drought does not touch them. Their backs are slick with green. A thousand times, he has seen clouds pass over the trailer, skies only miming rain until they reach the hills to down their pours.

In the yard, the dozen rooster barrels stand empty, mean nothing. He watches them turn out shadows like wash, the evening dark beginning to lengthen. He glances back at the oak, the roosting hens. In the grass, he wants to see a worm spot, a beaten place in the soil where something had stayed long ago, but there is only the dirty grass, skirt-swaying in the hot wind. Wiping the grit from his face he feels the small beard, fuzz-whiskers that want a shave. He thinks of a razor, water warm, bright with lather, goes inside.

The bantam makes noise, flicks dark, lead-pellet eyes through the wire of its hutch. It is a rooster, goes scratching at its newspaper bedding, stirs up a scent of seed-corn, guano. Granville sees a little molt beginning to take on the tail feathers, thinks of salve, of oint-

ments and almanac cures that will do more harm than good. He thumps the hutch and the bantam clucks. In his pocket, Granville feels the gaffs. They jingle, a nice sound.

The old man is in the bedroom and he finds him there, a vomit-crusted sheet tucked bib-like under his chin. The room is dark and reeks, a vague mist rising, vapors of whiskey spills and bottle shapes. Under the sheet, there is a body-sized lump and at first Granville thinks woman, wants it that way. Apron-clad and cooking, hair tied in back, dark locks of run-off from the seam of scalp between the part, smell of bathsaltz and underarm. Then he knows better, remembers the dog, three days dead.

"What you doin'?" the old man gurgles.

"Seeing if you're still alive," Granville says. He walks further into the room, kicks an empty fifth that spins in the lifeless dust of the floor. Under the sheet, the old man groans, hugs the rigor-stiff hound.

"I'm still here," he says. "Ain't going nowhere."

Granville smells the dog, remembers the old man wailing, staggering back from highway with the road-killed red-tick draped across his arms, the filth on his face streaked, turning to salt-mud.

"Get you a little drink," the old man tells him.

"I ain't thirsting."

"Go ahead. I got plenty."

And there is the sound of it, the drinking. The swallow, a drip into a white, shallow face, hard, door-knock noises echoing, the old, feral dark of the room pulling in like a lung, black waters mizering in dank, bile-driven dives. The bottles under the sheet tremolo together, glass on glass. The old man shakes, swallows.

"You take the banney up to Dervin yet?" he asks.

"No. Will 'fore long though."

"If he won't give you no more'n ten, shoot the sonuvabitch." The old man waves a hand at the gun-rack on the far wall, the hard metal of rifle and shotgun gleaming like railroad in the dark. "Use the four-ten. Ain't no since in making too big a mess."

Granville leans into the door-frame, scratches his back against the jamb, straightens a sleeping foot. He sniffs. Somewhere in the room a fly buzzes.

"Might wanna bury that dog after while," he says. "Starting to smell."

The old man groans, pushes against the hound and there is no give.

"Who? Ol' Drip? No. Drip ain't a bad dog. He won't stink less I tell him to."

Granville slides his boot back across the jamb and a pone of mud

drops onto the floor. "You musta told him good then," he says.

Again the groan, the bottle upturning, a slur of said likker. "Listen to that sass. Soon as I get off this drunk me and you are gonna have a little talk."

Granville scrapes his boot again, sees the mark it leaves. He has heard the old man's talk before, the gruff language of fists pummeling saw-wood, knuckles dusted with blood. He remembers his mother, backing away, falling into the bare yard, the skirt climbing up past the knee, plaid on worn skin, the old man standing back, awkward, away-turning back into the brief light of morning.

He goes with the boot again and knows the room, the chiffarobe shapes, the bed unmade, sheets roughed only because the old man had lain there unsleeping, a wakeful drunk. He sees the fist arc up again, sees his mother's jaw powdering into rock-salt.

"Get you a swaller," the old man tells him.

This time, Granville goes to the old chiffarobe that stands against the wall, takes a bottle down from the top. He cradles it under one arm for leverage, uncorks it, and gets the stench. Something, way down in the bottle, thumps against the glass and he thinks mouse, almost asks it before drinking. He swallows, coughs, hears the old man laugh.

"Take a little of that sass off you won't it?"

Granville grunts, feels the old slug of bottled corn, unsugared. He touches his face, feels the cheekbones beginning to leak through, the skin damp like cheesecloth.

"You coulda stopped me, boy. There wasn't that much fight in me. You coulda done it." The old man talks, snuggles with the dead hound. Granville takes another pull from the bottle and the thing at the bottom, mouse or finger or whatever, brushes his lips, leaves a taste. Bitter. Hot.

"Why didn't you stop me, boy? You weren't that little. You could've kept me from hitting her like that. Can't you even say why you didn't?"

Granville tries to spit, but the whiskey has dried him out. He sees them both again, as they were, years ago. Man and woman beneath the oak, chickens above, oil on canvas. He sees his mother offer up the pan of scorched eggs, breakfast brought ruined to the old man. He sees the fist go out, arc up like light. Forever, he listens to the grass catch her, soft forms falling on troubled ground.

"Can't you say it?"

"Didn't want to," Granville tells him and pushes out of the room, goes to load the truck.

The night is uneven as a stile, a go over dark that seems half-wintered, half-June. After sitting the rooster hutch in the floorboards of the pickup, Granville pulls off his old, scabbed work leathers and throws them into the yard. From under the seat he takes a box. The tissue paper billows and there is the oiled scent of the new boots. Dark, steel-toed shit-slinging clodhoppers two sizes too big. He slides them onto his sockless feet and his bony ankles knock around the brim like butter-churns. He looks again at the dozen empty rooster barrels, money made that way. Bartered, boot-buying money that the old man has been too drunk to miss. In his pocket, he feels the greased, waxy wad, bills bailed over like hay, lets his feet slip deep into the new leathers.

At the bottom of the drive he flicks the right blinker and the road glows jade in the moonlight. It goes a half mile further, he knows, turns up dead in the pleated grass and dirt of Dervin's yard. He thinks of old Dervin, meaty and overfed, his yard spread with the bones of the dozen roosters Granville had sold him, the pickings left for dog-strays and possum jaws. He thinks of old Dervin. Wallowing, mouth-greased, smelling always of dumplings, okra, tiny eyes spinning the slack-water face, a widower left to his own ends.

Granville turns the blinker back, makes a left, goes the eight miles to the Ceralvo barn. From the dark of the floorboards, he hears the bantam begin to cluck.

The parking lot outside the Ceralvo barn is brim-full. Pickups and shod-broken beaters are regimented in the wash-away gravel. A big crowd, Granville thinks.

He gets out, turns on his heels in the big river-rock that has been laid not a week before and is already beginning to loosen. He feels for the wad again, a slimming sum of fivers and ones, a single twenty. The barn hums and hives.

Its hickory frame is aslump, warped boards beginning, the tin roofing dog-eared, peeling. He sees the yellow scrape in the hill where the back-hoe had come to level off the ground, the cinder-block foundation of the barn settling into bright mud. And at once, the Ceralvo seems not as something built, but as something borne, a yield of all bad harvests, blight among the lacquered wood.

Granville struggles with the rooster hutch, nearly drops it. The bantam squawks and he calms it with a handful of fennel seed. His boots are scuffed already and he spits into his palm, polishes the black toe.

"Get your taps dirty?" It is Merlon. Granville hasn't heard him coming across the lot and now he stands leaning against the pickup's

tailgate, patting the rust of the truck like an old dog. The stubble of his burr haircut gleams like buckshot embedded into his bright scalp.

"Nice lil' fryer you got there," he says, pointing at the bantam. "Not sure we got a small enough pan to cook him in though."

"Won't need no pan," Granville tells him. "I aim to spar this bird."

Merlon's face goes into a sneer, high lips over horse-teeth. "Shit," he says, grinning out the word between his teeth. "He'll get ate alive and you know it."

"He'll do alright."

Merlon spits through a gap in his teeth, toes the chicken hutch. "Looks like he's been doing more egg-laying than hen-fucking to me. I bet he's a faggot rooster, ain't he?"

Granville shrugs, undoes his fly, and pisses a short dribble. He shakes and the last dregs of the piss go across his boots. "That Barney will take the purse tonight," he says, stooping down to clean them.

Laughter sputters from Merlon. He leans back on his boot-heels, kicks at the pickup's rear tire which is beginning to bald. Hiking one leg up, he balances himself on bumper, points at the bantam.

"That lil' fryer is gonna get tore up. Even a damn pusseyfart like you knows that." He talks sharp, stands looking down into the chicken hutch, and Granville gets the jitters, starts kicking gravel, thinking he sees the molt, the bad-feed, the troubleshooting. But Merlon doesn't say anymore, walks back to the barn, his thin shadow shouldered by the dark yolk of hill-rise. Granville watches him and feels the breeze beginning to coil, sounding from the river and roads below.

The Ceralvo barn is an organ of carbon. A straw-stuffed lung that breathes night, a liver and lights dish of cigarettes still smoldering, of dirt and dung and hay-rot. A heat-stove sits unlit in one corner; a draft fan turns slow, circles a lukewarm squeeze of air. The light is bad, dim. Fluorescent bulbs mostly. Christmas lights are nail-strung between tier and rafter, glow in the dusty haze that simmers and floats, a foot-called fog yellow that settles in a film on Granville's skin. Among the tiers, the Mexicans young enough to climb dangle their legs, watch with soot-cool eyes. In the straw below sit the elders, cross-legged and potbellied in the Levi's and T-shirts scrawled with English unreadable. The sound of their Spanish is quick and they smell of corn, hay. The whites have strayed, keep to themselves in isolated clutches of three or eight, eye the keg which has long since floated, the nozzle leeching its last, spermy dregs onto the floor in a slow, venereal drip.

In the barn's cleared center two leghorns are spurring. Their blood and feathers crawl together and the birds dance, squawk. There is the stale smell of greenbacks, bills greased and crumpled by hands too eager, bets placed on birds, laid down on benchwood. In the back, the dead pile festers, rooster carcasses leaking blood and bird-life from deep wounds.

Granville finds Leapfrog by the gas grille, the old man's belly sagging, a lip of white, stretch-marked torso dripping from over the waist of his trousers. He squints when Granville passes through his light, shifts in his lawn-chair, nods.

"Pilot light's blowed and everybody wants hamburger," he says, slapping the cold metal of the grille.

"Light her again," says Granville.

"Can't. That's more work than I'm willing to commit myself to at this juncture. Believe I'll just sit her for awhile, see if any opportunities present theirself."

"Opportunities for what?"

"Anything I guess. Gotta keep an open mind in this business." Leapfrog keeps nodding, takes a pipe from his pocket, knocks the bowl against his palm. He puts the stem to his mouth, looks up at Granville. "Been gettin' any pussey?" he asks, talking around the unlit pipe.

"Fraid not," Granville says.

The old man nods some more, takes a look at that bantam.

"What about that rooster? I guess he ain't worth a shit neither, huh?"

Granville sets the hutch at Leapfrog's feet, watches the old man lean forward for a better look. "He's got spark in him," Granville says, but Leapfrog leans back into the lawn-chair, suckling his pipe.

"How's your daddy?" he asks.

"Drunk."

"Ever bury that dog?"

"No and it's been dead three days now. You don't know about a stink like that."

Leapfrog grins, his face slipping into a wide berth of dark gum. "Oh, I might," he says and lifts a leg to fart, a quick, barking sound. Granville laughs a little, wipes a hand through the grit on his face.

"Getting looser all the time," Leapfrog says, still grinning.

"Bet when I was your age I could fart this barn over on its side. Now all I got's this damn mouse-bark."

Granville drops the hand from his face, leans forward, goes into a whisper. "Fox been getting my hens," he says. "Took three this last month."

"So that's where all your pussy's been going," Leapfrog takes the pipe from his mouth, fingers the slobber from his lip. "Got your snare made? Like I showed you?"

Granville nods, remembers with guilt his hunger, the eaten pork, the unpotent trap. "Just like you said."

Leapfrog knocks the pipe against his knee and a few singed tobacco sprigs fall across his hand. From the barn's center there comes a whiplash of shouting, curses and slap-hoots, a fight now finished. Granville sees a man's arm raise, then sling, watches a dead leghorn fall through the bad light of the barn and land among the dead-pile. Granville sees the money pass, communicable currency handed fist over frown.

"Got my slot marked?" he asks Leapfrog.

The old man leans up from his chair, spits a dark glob onto the floor.

"Got two spots clear," he says. "One's with a Mex and he's fighting a wormy looking domiknicker." He pauses, both hands shucking together, goes on talking around the pipe stem. "Other one's with Merlon." The old man takes a scrawl-ridden blackboard from under his seat, lays it like a dulcimer across his lap. He searches his breast pocket for a nub of chalk.

"Merlon still spurring that big red?" Granville asks.

Leapfrog nods, works the chalk. "I'll put you with the sand-nigger."

Granville slides his boot out and it scuffs the dry of the barn floor, leaves a yellow mark among the dust. "Don't," he says. "Slot me with Merlon."

The squint again, Leapfrog's old nod. Like the grazing of oil derricks in a pasture, down, then the other way, up, sucking air, gas. He cradles the pipe like it's something he wants to throw, points the chalk-nub at Granville.

"You'll get ate alive and that ain't all," he says. "How much money you bring tonight anyway?"

Granville's lips line out, taut as fencewire, talks through his set teeth. "Fifty," he says.

"That's a lie," says Leapfrog. "Only I ain't sure if it's more than fifty you brought or less. Don't guess it matters. You'll lose it all and then some if you spur with Merlon, but it don't help none me telling you that. You know it just like I'm sitting here. Know it, but can't help it. Or maybe you don't care. One or the other anyway." He works the chalk again, sculpting letter scratch, the sound knocking against the scuffed char of the blackboard. It scratches like rooster claw, the old man's powdered fingers smudging the slow writ. When he is finished,

he slides the board back under his chair and slaps a ghost's mane of chalk-dust from his hands.

"You're down for it," he says.

Granville grins, shows a little tooth, digs in pocket for the gaffs, shows them to the old man. They ring like spare change in his palm.

"Those Spanish?" Leapfrog asks, leaning to look.

"Yessir," says Granville, giving them a little jingle.

The old man's face cracks open like a drought-killed creek-bed. "Couldn't save you if I wanted to, could I?" he says and tucks the pipe back between his lips.

Granville slips the gaffs back into his pocket, gives a little more grin before going to stand beside the keg. Best place in the barn, he thinks, if somebody didn't want bothering.

Folks tended to stray from dry kegs worse than skunk-stink, avoiding them like bad luck. He has seen them do it a thousand times. Miners and workmen stiff with thirst turning quick when they see a floating keg, drunks fetching up ever gut left in them and keeping clear, wanting bad to lap the drip, suck away the foam until bone-dry but knowing where that'd get them and not doing it. Fights could happen that way, Granville thinks. Ass-kickings were always in order for anyone who took the last swallow.

His boots slush in the beer dregs. He scuffs the toe, throws up a little spray of Budweiser. The beer has turned to runoff, a foam-heavy flood snaking on the unlevel floor. The stream hits a nail-head, forks away across the boot-whittle grain, an alcoholic oxbow swirling in the straw and dust. Granville sits the bantam, cage and all, on the keg, searches his pocket for a little more feed. The bird eats right from his hand, a bad sign. No meanness in him, Granville thinks. Not an ounce.

He remembers the gamers his father raised: hard, flog-prone fowl with wild spark in their eyes, fierce, devil-bent birds that never crowed, only gave looks, slow and angry, at sunrise. Starving them was key. Towards the end of a week-long famine they'd get mean, start flogging anything. Cattle, dog, tree in the wind. Before a fight, the old man wouldn't even let them scratch for worms.

Granville twists his hand free from the hutch, drops the remaining feed onto the barn floor. The bantam clucks, hen-like behind his wire.

"Faggot rooster," Granville says and feels again the cave of his gut, the hunger incredibly there.

At the other end of the barn he sees Merlon. Laughing wild, his fingers pinch a cigarette, spume milky smokes and signal. His burr

cut gleams, drips. The sweat makes a little halo when it dries, the collar of his shirt powdered white with his body's own salts.

After Granville's mother died, Merlon came up to the trailer wanting a gamer, but Granville wouldn't sell. Even when Merlon pulled out a pair of snakeskin boots to go with the twenty he'd already offered, Granville wouldn't budge.

"Hell, they're your size. Try 'em on," Merlon had urged. But Granville was high-centered, sullen; no tractor-jerk or work-team could pull him off his berm and he had just shook his head.

Merlon had snorted, tucked the boots under one arm, looked over the place, the trailer and game roosters, like it was all something he could take anytime he wanted. His eyes had lit on the barren place, the grassless patch below the oak, and he had pointed, asked outright, "That where he kilt her?"

Two Mexicans are sparring their birds. They've each got Orfingtons, thin, wormy roosters. The two men grunt, throw-up handfuls of grit fine as hourglass filler, cuss in Spanish. Blasphemy and bad English, dark mats of dust-gray hair slipping into eyes. Granville watches the bird's tumble together. They are a whipping storm, a turning lash that makes him remember an oak thick with roosting hens. Wings sucking wind. In the pair of too big Jackson boots, his feet are damp, tired and he thinks always of a fist falling over and over until it is not simply one thing, but everything, the whole, the intact hunger entire.

One of the Orfingtons flops, tucks its head, dies in a gasping roll. The Mexicans glare, red faces polished like saddle-horns, dark tips of mustache reining in eager mouths. Granville sees Merlon cut a path through the crowd, come his way. He splats a hand on the floating keg, says right away his word, "Gravy."

Granville crosses his arms at the sound of the nickname, nods.

"Guess we're pegged to spur tonight, ain't we?" Merlon says.

Again the nodding. "Yeah."

Merlon drops his cigarette and it hisses on the beer-wet floor, burns away into nothing. "Can't quite get it figgered about that banney," he says. "Damn thing looks weak as bath water, but maybe that's just a bluff."

"Maybe." Granville leans back into the keg. The aluminum feels cool through his shirt.

He knows Merlon, has seen him driving among the streets of town, the big, V-8 Dodge fire-stoke red, roll-bar in back, lift-kit on the frame, a swirlstrom of grunt. He has seen the truck idling in all-nite parking lots, gas burning away like nothing, the fenders sprayed with mud, the tires big, boondock eaters with deep tread. Through the

smear windows of pool-hall and pit-pig barbecue shacks he has looked and seen Merlon there, face greased and damp, slavering. Always, Merlon brings at least three birds to the Ceralvo barn, bets a week's wages. Sometimes, he brings girls, once a woman. An honest-to-God woman whose name Leapfrog had told in a whisper. A real woman, all solemn and smoke-eyed, not pretty, but old enough to make Granville think.

"Purse is heavy tonight," Merlon says, pointing a wink at someone in the crowd. "Twelve hundred on top."

Granville scuffs his heel again. "That's chick feed," he says.

Merlon's laugh, high and crackling like burnt paper, breathes hot over Granville's face and he leans up from the keg, takes a half-chewed coffee straw from his pocket, begins working it like quid against his teeth.

"Now that's talk," he smiles. "That's the right kinda talk."

There is only a nod from Granville. He watches the crowd, sees Leapfrog bending to sweep the feathers from the center with an umpire's broom. Hands slap together in the crowd, dollars and curses mixing, the finger-smear mouths toothy and beginning to sparm froth. From barn center, Leapfrog waves a big, blood-sticky hand at them both.

"If that banney fights anything like your old man we're all in trouble" says Merlon and leaves to prime his bird. And Granville knows what it all means, that it has forever and always cycled back like water to its own place of origin: a barren patch yard beneath a chicken-thick tree.

Granville bends, opens the bantam's hutch. Gaffing the bird he pricks a finger, bleeds a sour taste into his mouth. The rooster clucks, gives a halfhearted crow.

"If you start getting into any trouble I'll call a handle. Ain't no sense in letting that buzzard of his pick your bird to the bone." Leapfrog talks at him, his brown face smoothing out, the toothless gums dark and wet from suckling pipe stem. Granville sees him take a vile of red powder from his shirt pocket, offer it.

"Cayenne," he says. "Might put a little more fight in that bird."

Granville nods, opens the vile. He wets a finger with spit, dips it into the pepper and slips it into the warm smoothness of the rooster's ass. The bird squawks terrible, tries to flog before Granville can get a handle, but the gaffs cut only air.

"If he gets weak," Leapfrog says, "slip him a little more."

Granville says nothing, barely nods, moves quiet to the barn's readied center. It is an old trick, the cayenne, and means nothing. Merlon will do the same, he thinks. Or worse, use kerosene, send his

bird bloodthirsting into a wild spit of spur and horn.

In the barn's center, Merlon is priming his bird. The red is a hoss, its long sprout of tail-feather showering metallic gold and jungle green. The gaffs Merlon put on are two-inch throat-cutters and they gleam from the chicken's leghorns, the bird quiet while Merlon strokes back its thick comb.

Granville takes the bantam, still riled from the dose of pepper, to the fight circle, squats with the bird cradled between his blue-jeaned thighs. From across the dirt, Merlon points a wink.

"Y'all boys know how it's done," says Leapfrog. He has come to barn center, his belly ripe, his stance bowlegged in the motley earth of feather. "I'll call handle after first blood and from then on let 'em spur less I call it again."

A few laughs break from the crowd and Granville sees the Mexicans watching from the tiers, plump faces of chicory, somber and close with straw stuck to wet fingers. Down in his gut, something turns over like a fist, its fingers tight over his innards and someone, deep in the crowd, caws to him.

"Hey Gravy," they say, "we don't spur hatchlings up here."

Laughter again. Dropping like ice onto galvanized metal.

The bantam squirms and he strokes it. Between his hands he feels the structured frame, the hollowed bone ready to fly. He sees Merlon start a grin, wink forever into the dimly strung Christmas lights, his face cut with slivered green, a pox of blue. Between his hands, Granville feels the bantam and it feels like a nothing, a boneless jelly zero that will slide and slip into dark when loosed.

Leapfrog waddles out of the circle, gives him a straight look. Then he nods to Merlon and they beak their birds, the red taking a wild peck at the bantam before both are released and become one, a sudden combustion of feather and flog-thrusts, instant smoke and fluid, alchemy of all angered instinct. The red is aggressive, does no needling, but jumps and comes down, trying to rip out the smaller bird's lungs in one thrust. The bantam is quick though and keeps a distance, clucks and caws, its head bobbing, the scarf of neck feather blown out like umbrella-bloom. The red is old though, big with experience and catches the bantam with a gaff, draws out from the feathers a spurt of blood that makes Leapfrog call a lethargic handle.

Granville is quick at his bird, lifts the lip of the wound. He opens the bird's beak, put his own mouth over, sucks blood up from a punctured lung, turns his head to spit. The taste is dark, like water taken from a gourd dipper. He sucks, spits again, slips a little more cayenne into the bantam before putting him back to the pit. And it is a quickening end, the red moving liquid, coming down with his gaffs

going deep into the wounded bantam, leaving nothing but a flounce, a twitch in the fine yellow dirt.

"Be fifty you owe," he hears Leapfrog say, feels something warm enter his hand. And only then is he aware that the old man has handed him his bird, limp and dead, a slow drip of blood slipping from its beak. He tucks it like a primer under one arm, shakes his head.

"Guess that means you ain't got it?"

Again, he shakes his head. In the far corner of the barn, he sees Merlon hutching his red, checking under the wings for scrapes. There are none, Granville thinks. No blood can be drawn from such kind and theirs is forever the kingdom and the glory.

"Merlon'll wanna collect," says Leapfrog. He rubs the sweat-bright knurl of his face, looks up and around the barn. "He don't care what he does neither. He'll beat the hell out of you right here and not think twice."

Granville tucks the bantam into his shirt. Blood makes a smallness of color there, a stain swelling on shirt fabric. He looks at Leapfrog. "Maybe you could slip me out back? He wouldn't see me leave."

The old man's face falls away from the barn and he looks at the boy, the lump of dead bird under his shirt making him seem big, greater. "He'll come after you. I was you, I'd find somewhere else to sleep tonight."

And he goes and the boy follows to the padlocked door at the barn's back, hears a jangle of keys, the night opening like a can of eels. He steps down into the mud of the lot, feels his boots sink into the loose-stool earth. He slips the boots from his feet and laces them together, stands with the mud budding up from between his bare toes.

"Give those to Merlon. Maybe that'll stay him," Granville says, handing the dirtied leathers to the old man.

Leapfrog grunts. "Doubt it," he says. "Remember what I said about being careful where you lay yourself tonight."

And he goes and the door shuts, leaves only the barn, noise cocooned by nailed wood.

All the way home, he drives with the dead rooster on the seat beside him. The blood taste is still thick, like molasses, in his mouth. His bare feet shiver in the floorboards, on gas, on brake, on clutch. At the foot of his drive, he idles, goes on up to old Dervin's. The trailer is dark, unlit. He pulls in, doughnuts in the yard, roosting the white aluminum with dark mud. Rolling down his window, he throws the dead bird, catches sight of an old redtick hound, barkless on the plywood porch.

"Caw!," he shouts. And drives on, going to some place he knows, a quiet dead end where all the night's losses could be slept away.

Against All Odds (Or, The Day I Knew I'd Marry You)

Molly Gibson

I awoke early, when the sunlight
reached my face, pouring from the window
like an amber pitcher
overturned
above the foot of our bed.

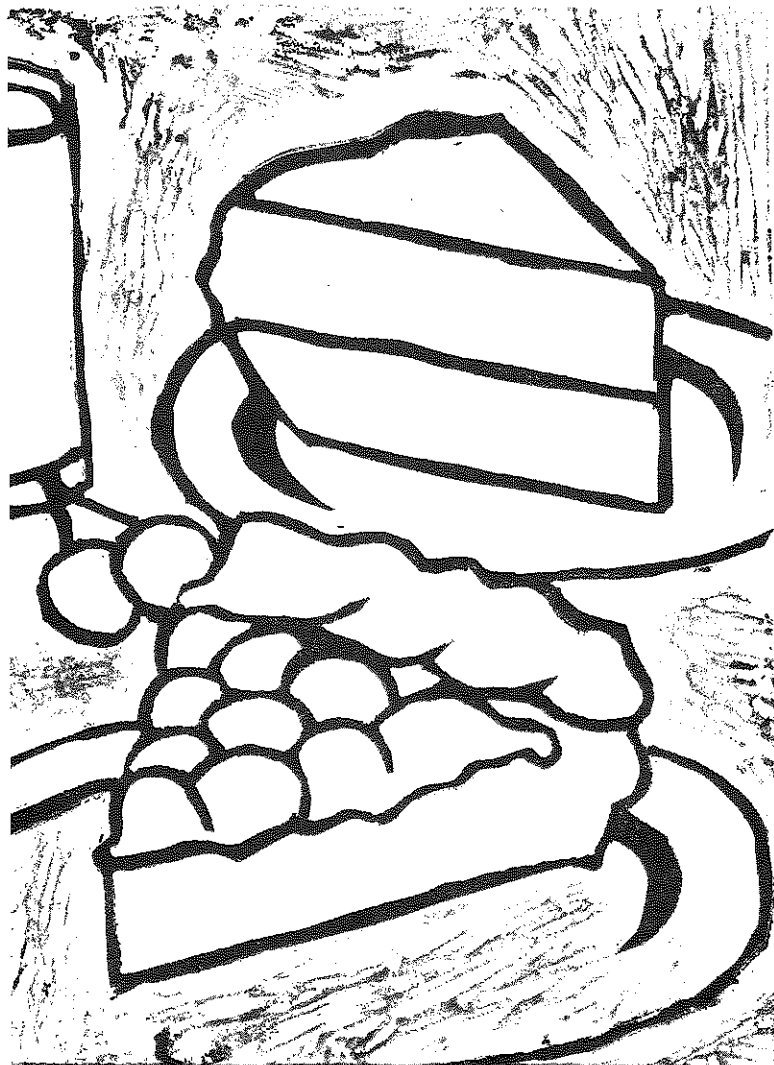
Easing back the sheet and stepping
softly, my naked feet just
missed landing on a headless yellow finch.
My cat had left a gift, a remnant
of devotions on the altar of my oriental
rug. Feathers dappled the floor, as if the sun
had seeped, like a stain into the bird
before sunrise.

When I yelled my cat just
gazed coolly, as cats do, perched
on haunches, tail twitching near his prey. You
awoke. I pointed, indignant at the desecration, then
stomped off to the bathroom.

When I returned the cat was out. You
knelt to pluck the last of feathers from the floor, gathered
their weightlessness into your wide
uncaloused hands. I slipped
back between the blankets,
grateful.

Minutes later the thick dark
scent of coffee reached me. When you
returned I pulled the cover back for you, guided
your fresh-scrubbed hands
between my thighs.

What more do any of us
want, but to find someone
to whisk away the mauled
and bleeding—to boot the clawed
indifferent beast outside?



man cannot live
on pies alone

Live

Sol B

Amber Looking-Glass

Antonia Oakes

Beryl pulled a pair of blue jean cut-offs over her damp bathing suit, and dumped her towel into the back of her pick-up truck. Bleached strands of her hair dried in the sunlight while heavier clumps brushed the back of her neck like dreadlocks. Her cheeks and forehead were bright pink, and already she could feel the familiar tingle on her shoulders.

Towering above her, the quarry wall reflected the white sunlight like a large gray mirror, broken with several crags and weeds. The dirt was chalky and dry; it collected onto everything so that her floorboard was dusted with gray grit and littered with tiny rocks. Yards away, Paul and others were still stepping out of the swimming hole, which looked like a big blue sleepy eye. Beryl watched them, shading her eyes with her hand.

Everyone called out good-byes in a cacophony that echoed against the quarry wall. Beryl waited for Paul to run and climb into her truck. She maneuvered around the bumpy gravel road with grace. She knew every bump and dip so well that she could brake and steer around while gazing at a plane in the sky, or even the stars or moon at night.

The quarry was best at nighttime. The stars seemed brighter there, and on a full moon night the water glowed so that everyone could see each other's faces. The blue moonlight would wash over the brooding mountain cliff, and somehow all the grit resembled glitter. The rocks became unpolished gems, shiny moonstones. Beryl liked to float in the water and stare up at the stars while moving her arms so that she swayed around on the surface. When she did this she felt like she was flying around in outer space. All she could hear would be the hum of the water in her ears, and she imagined that was what the universe sounded like, once you were out there in the vacuum.

Paul seemed to be uncomfortable, and Beryl was stirred from her daydreams after he flipped through the radio stations twice and gave up. He shifted around unsteadily in his seat. She could tell he was a little too drunk by the sleepy look in his eyes. Beryl sympathized with his awkwardness and pressed the first tape she could grab into the deck. Neil Young started singing "Heart of Gold" raspily over an acoustic guitar. She fished around for her cigarettes, and filled the truck with a cool, minty smoke until she could roll the window down.

She looked over at him, and his eyes were closing as if he were being rocked to sleep by the movements of the truck. Beryl had not been drinking. It was too hot, too early. While Paul stared at the

dashboard with half-closed eyes, Beryl watched the hills stand in the distance as everything closer swirled by. Every time she looked at the grass it looked greener than ever before. Cows grazed around or waded in ponds so still in the heat they resembled decoys.

Trees shaded over the country road that led to Paul's house and made a flashing contrast of shadows and light wash over the car. Beryl knew to turn after the white silo broke the skyline and somehow connected the brilliant green grass to the pale blue sky. The peeling paint of Paul's house came into view, and behind the house the sun was beginning to turn the sky pink.

Paul hesitated and looked over at Beryl with a sleepy smile. Beryl gathered him up in a friendly hug. His head relaxed against her shoulder and he felt heavy leaned against her.

"Beryl, do you remember that time over at Shea's farm, when we drank beer out on the blanket by the bonfire?"

Beryl smiled to herself, dreamily thinking about the fire spitting sparks against the sky, making her feel so warm and crisp in her flannel jacket, on an October night. "Yeah, I remember," she said, almost to her herself.

"I remember something almost happening, but it didn't," he said softly. She did remember. They had lain on the blanket as sparks swam among the stars and beer tainted their burps and giggles. He had rolled over and hugged her, giving her a kiss on the mouth. But she had smacked her lips and vocalized a friendly smooch, defying the romantic mood. Everything else was there but her heart. She had sat up, folded her legs against her chest and felt the toasty warmth of her boots with her hands. Paul had stayed rolled over on the blanket. He hadn't moved and his dark curly hair was drawn like a curtain over his face. She had looked back at him and nudged his shoulder, but he just lay there like a dead dog.

"Yes, I remember." Beryl pulled away and rubbed her hand through her tangled hair. An orange beam of light fell through the truck and actually made Paul's sleepy eyes twinkle with golden flecks.

"I try to love you, but I'm getting blown away," Neil Young sang. Beryl clicked off the player and smiled at Paul with only half of her mouth. Paul fingered the door latch, cocked his head first at her then swung it toward the door. Beryl thought then that this was one of those pivotal forks in the road, the point at which lives can either go in one direction or the other.

Paul's lawn was tall, and stalks of grain brushed against her shins and made them itch. Her toes collected the subtle wetness of the grass, as if combing a head of hair that never really dries. They

walked around to the back porch, where they had an unobstructed view of the sun as it pulled down the sky in a swirl of colors.

Beryl settled into a plastic chair and Paul landed on the porch swing and steadied it with his heavy legs. "Let me ask you this then. If you remember that night then why do you act like nothing happened?" Paul said, and looked at her face carefully. "You just think on that for a second," he said, and he stood up quickly to go inside.

Beryl raised her eyebrows to no one. It would have been easier if he had let her answer in the moment. Now, left to ponder about her answer, her mind went blank and instead chose to speculate on his reasons for asking.

He returned with two cold Steel Reserves, and held one out to her.

She accepted the beer with a nod and asked, "What was I supposed to do?"

"Well, surely that would've been obvious. You only give me all these hugs..."

"So?"

"...and tell me you love me. We spend so much time together. I wonder how you never expected me to kiss you."

Beryl laughed nervously and took a long drink from her beer.

"Hell," Paul said, "I wonder why you pulled away."

"It was unexpected. I didn't know how to react. It didn't feel right, and that's all I know."

Paul stared at his beer. He had not opened it. For the first time that evening, Beryl noticed the cicadas chanting in rattle-like crescendos.

"Look. Just because..." Beryl lost her words for a moment, as she watched Paul look up from his beer with sad eyes. She felt her arms turn hot, and her heart began pumping adrenaline like poison. "Just because I love you... it doesn't mean I want to kiss you, or anything."

"And why the hell not?" Paul asked quietly. The sun had slipped away and pink clouds were turning pale and silvery as the sky darkened. Beryl finished her beer, turning it up and closing her eyes to feel the bubbles burn down the back of her throat and cool her stomach. Paul still sat staring at his unopened beer, but as she raised herself up to let herself in the house she heard a click and fizz.

Inside, the house was warmer than it was out on the porch. Beryl wiped the layer of sweat from her sunburned forehead. She had come to get another beer, but she had also come to get away from his questions, from his sad eyes. She felt angry. She heard the back door open.

"So it's all about sex, is it?" Beryl said. "You just can't be happy with me until you get into my pants. Look at you pouting and moping around. It's pathetic."

Paul looked stunned, and he set his beer on the counter heavily. "No, that's not it," he said loudly. "That's not it at all." Beryl crossed her arms. "Well, okay so that's part of it, but that's not all." With that Beryl spun around and went to the refrigerator for another beer. "I want all of it. What do you think? You think just because I'm a man I only want your body?"

Beryl laughed and shook her head. "I don't want any of that."

"How do you know if you don't try?" Paul said.

Beryl held her beer with both hands as Paul walked closer. So this is it, she thought, what could be wrong? As he walked closer to her cautiously, she only wanted to burst out laughing. The bottle was cold and wet against her hot hands. That look in his eyes seemed so comical. She felt cruel and foolish for wanting to laugh at the sincerity pooling in his blue-green eyes. His lips were pale pink and full, but she didn't want to touch them. She reached out to stop him, to press her hand against his black cotton t-shirt, or maybe just to touch his chest. With a loud crash she realized she was standing in a puddle of fizz and broken glass, with Paul only an inch from her face. She closed her eyes. His lips tasted bland, but his tongue was bitter with beer.

She pushed him away slowly, and looked down at her feet. Glass had scattered like beads. "Don't move," she said, and grabbed a dishrag from the counter behind her. Crouching down, she wiped the shards away from Paul's feet. His toes curled up and down, and she saw blood seep from tiny cuts. "I'm sorry," he said. Looking down at her own feet, she felt the paper-thin cuts and picked a small glass thorn from her foot. Blood slowly flooded from the wound. Paul lifted her up out of the glass and she limped over to the couch. She heard his footsteps around the house until he returned with peroxide and towels. "I have no gauze, no bandages," he said. He sat on the opposite end of the couch and gently cleaned her feet.

"Do you think I'll need stitches?" Beryl watched his careful movements.

"I don't think so," he said. "I don't know. I'm drunk, Beryl. I'm sorry."

"Jesus," she breathed and reached for a towel and the peroxide to wipe Paul's feet with. She laughed, and then he laughed. "You're not that drunk," she said. "I'm the one who dropped a beer on our feet."

"Well, it was my fault," Paul said.

A quiet spell wrapped around them with its awkward tentacles. Beryl sighed and dropped her towel on the floor. Paul was still holding her foot in his towel firmly.

"Don't you see now, Paul?" He looked up at her and stared. "It's an omen. We both got hurt."

Disgust spread across his features. "What are you talking about? I kissed you, and you kissed me back. It was great!" he looked confused and embarrassed, and tried to hinder his own expressions.

"And we both got hurt. We broke apart like glass, and now we're both bleeding. And I'm bleeding more."

"You're crazy." He slid out from under her feet and placed them on the couch. Then he left the room and retreated to the porch, slamming the door behind him.

Beryl rubbed her palms on her closed eyes and over her forehead. She imagined herself with Paul: drinking strawberry wine on the faded gray porch, lounging with full bellies in a sun-flooded field, breaking flowers from stems for each other, hugging his soaked body at the swimming hole, walking through a forest while leaves fall around as if the trees were dripping sparks of fire. She saw herself resting on her elbows, listening to him try unsuccessfully to play her favorite songs on the guitar.

All these things had happened.

She tiptoed to the back door, and leaned in the doorway, hesitant. Paul was staring out at the purple bruise on the horizon caused by the city lights. The outline of his face glowed with a blue sliver of light.

"I don't care anyway, Beryl."

"I never meant to lead you on."

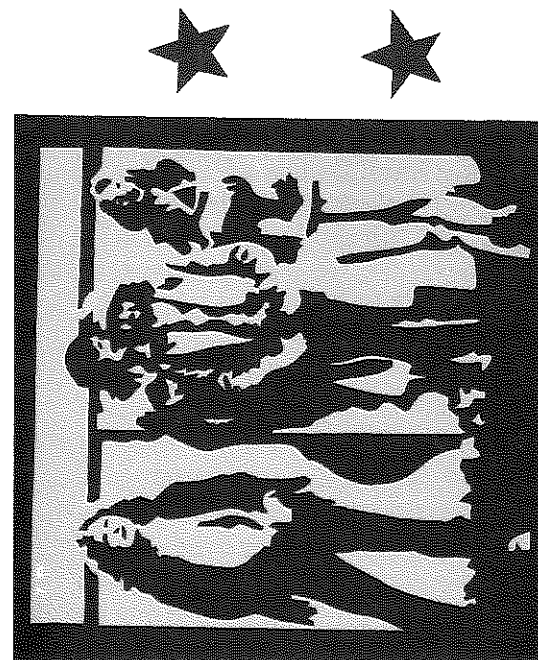
Paul let out a bitter scoff. Beryl sat down beside him on the swing. The crickets made high notes on their glockenspiels, and tree frogs played along with their xylophones. The swing creaked back and forth like a metronome. Beryl pulled her feet up and examined her wound; in the blue light, her foot looked unreal, like a ghost's foot.

She admired the way the amber ring on her finger found a way to sparkle in the washed-out light. Her grandmother had given it to her, and she remembered her grandma's words: "Beryl, when I was young I took off this ring, looked at the moon through it, and saw your grandpappy. I knew right then and there I'd marry him, because they say you'll see the face of your one true love if you look at the full moon through a piece of amber."

As Paul sat silently beside her, Beryl pulled the ring from her

finger and moved it around to see the flecks of light shining from the air bubbles. Perhaps there was some otherworldly wisdom to a drop of tree sap from billions of years ago, from when dinosaurs fought and fed beneath exotic pines. Now the sap had solidified to become a plastic drop of sunlight, or a tiny golden sage.

She lifted the ring to her eyes, and searched for the moon the way one does with a telescope. The fuzzy void turned to an orange static, and she felt as though she were looking right into the embers of a fire. She adjusted the amber but only saw a kaleidoscope of color, until she tried looking beyond the amber, dulling her eyes. A form morphed into shape quite suddenly, and left her with the feeling that her eye had somehow evolved. A profile emerged from the burning puddle, and she recognized her own tall brow, her turn-up nose, and her small chin. She pulled the ring away and saw the full moon, so calm and serene at its radiant post.



Ben Nunery

untitled

Fountain Square Park

Tara Austin

They piped the music in.
Four bronzed goddesses danced,
Melted under lamplight like a
Firefly swipe—
All around the slice of melted night,
Thick black pie.
Benches bowed
Under absent weight, where
Footsteps crept,
Caught in clay.

I used to write poetry

Jeff Crady

Just last year I wrote
of rotten apples . . .
how I slept sad and twisted
on my own tile floor.

This is what happens?
When the sadness is gone—
that space that once
seemed a cave, now
filling with the mineral forms
of contentment, stability . . .
of friends . . . Venus rising
each evening, its light
pokes through the
azure sky,
which ripples into rose,
deepens into merlot.

It has taken that long.
As slow as stalactites grow . . .
A few scarce centimeters
every year. Until there is
an arm that stretches
down, as if reaching
out for its brother's hand . . .
the finiteness of ground . . .
to stand, and not feel
legs give way.



ENGAGE

Engage

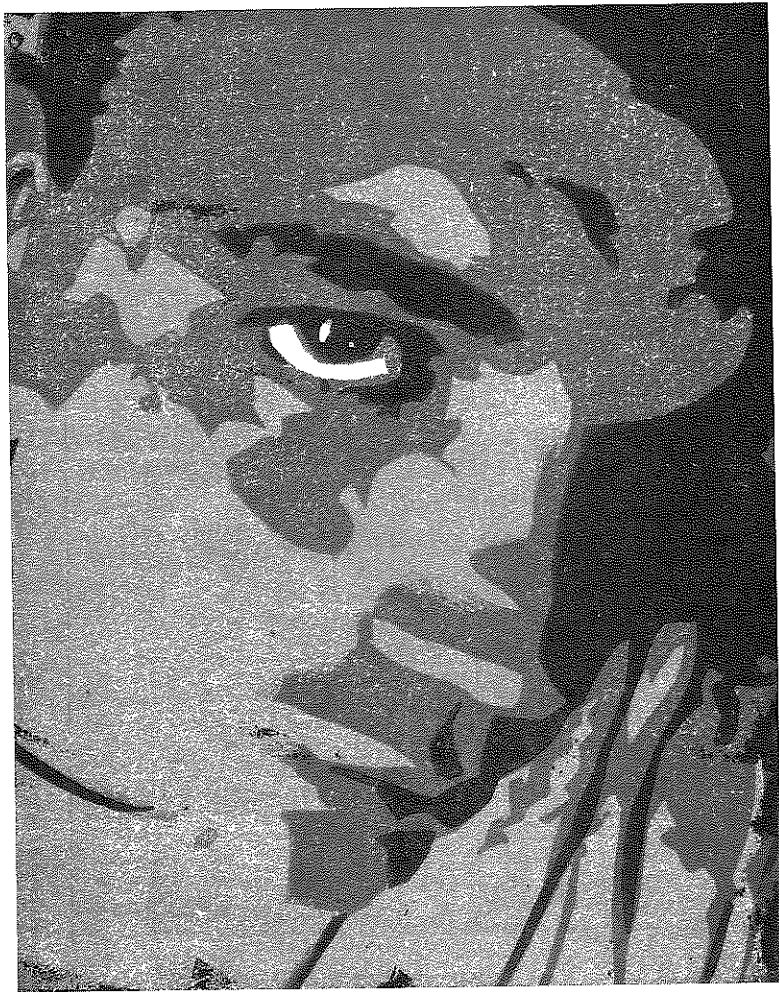
Pat Jones

Nocturnal Crow

Molly Gibson

Once we had a rooster who crowed
at the moon. Mama told me his inside
clock was wrong. At night I lay in my loft-bed
after her warmth and the yellow glow of kerosene light
left me. I'd hear her voice, and Daddy's—sounds
muffled and tight like a spring, over-wound.
I'd listen for the rooster then, imagining
a metal face, hands turning from a spring—
until the alarm of his call
sounded, or until image became sound
flapping heavily in my mind: "rooster rooster"—

I learned how a sound can cling to the roof
of my mouth like grit to something
brushed off,
salvaged from the kitchen floor. I found
how a word molts, becomes
plucked naked
of meaning, shivering in its crucial
timing, until nothing's left but
dry sounds, hard to swallow
as green persimmons.



Self-Portrait

Jeff Meyer