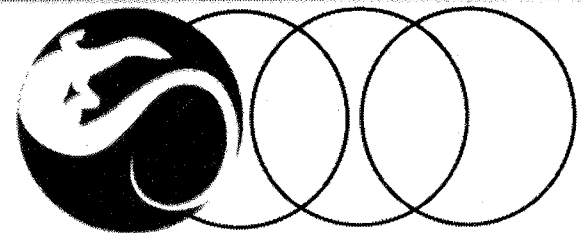




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Each writer is responsible for his or her own work.

"Among people who have learned something from
the 18th century (say, Voltaire) it is a truism,
hardly deserving discussion, that the defense of
the right of free expression is not restricted to
ideas one approves of, and that it is precisely in
the case of ideas found most offensive that this
right must be vigorously defended. Advocacy of
the right to express ideas that are generally
approved of is, quite obviously, a matter of no
significance."

--Noam Chomsky

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CROATOAN

fiction by >> Chris Scott

Dear Hank Vitter,

Five years ago you contacted me, stating that you were a reporter for the Peoria Journal Star and that you wanted a comment regarding the brutal murder of Jennifer Cole. You called, coincidentally, just as I was watching the tail end of the Peoria County Sheriff's press conference on television. You must have been watching the same press conference. I don't know if you remember calling me or not, but you wanted to know if I had any sort of comment. I said I didn't. I tried to be as polite as possible. That was five years ago. I'm 21 now.

We found her body in April, as you know, around three in the afternoon, her yellow dress dangling a few feet away from a tree branch, her hands tied behind her back and strapped to the tree she rested against, lifeless, the twine dug an inch into her bruised wrists, her legs spread open, her head hung down, long dark hair obscuring her face, she looked ashamed. I learned later she was nine years old. David and I had been hiking through his woods, casing the outer rim of the bluffs overlooking Glasford when I spotted her bright yellow dress about a hundred feet on the other side of the creek we'd been following. David, who I'm sure you tried contacting as well, was my best friend. I spotted her dress and then we dropped our packs and ran over to her. We sprinted the whole way back to David's house, stopping only twice to catch our breath and even then, not for long. I didn't know the land as well as David did. He led.

If I had given you that comment, Mr. Vitter, I would have said that I was just a kid. That even though I was scared out of my mind and sickened beyond belief-I vomited all through that sleepless night and well into the next morning-that even though I could see in front of me Jennifer Cole's limp posture, there was no way I would've been able to understand the significance of her lifeless body. I would have said to you, "I'm just a kid, I don't know what it is to find a dead girl in the woods," and you would have said, "But you did find the girl, you and your friend," and I wouldn't have argued, but I would not have conceded either. I would have said to you, "I'm just a kid, I don't know what it is to offer you a comment, to afford some local paper my version of events when words like 'contusion' and 'fracture' and 'rape' and 'murder' couldn't possibly mean a fucking thing to me." And it may not have interested you, Mr. Vitter, but I would have told you that I loved David very much.

I would have told you about the time when we were in the sixth grade and Aaron Andrews beat the shit out of me while we were on our way home from school. How he knocked my American History project-a detailed diorama of the settlement at Roanoke Island-out of my hands and stomped it to pieces and then hit me harder than I'd ever been hit before, calling us faggots before riding away on his new red bike. I would have recalled with perfect clarity how David cried later that night, apologizing for not sticking up for me, vowing to make it up to me somehow saying, "I just froze, you know? I just froze." And this prob-

FIRST PLACE STORY

ably wouldn't have mattered to you or your story, but I would have told you how David showed up at school the next day with a bruise under his right eye nearly identical to mine, and I never asked him about it, or had to.

I spotted her bright yellow dress hanging from a tree branch and we ran to her and because I was just a dumb kid and because I didn't know what it meant, I couldn't bring myself to touch her



Illustration by >> Frances Dusseault

to check for vital signs. I froze, turned away.

"Jesus," I said, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus."

"It's okay, man." I could hear him shuffling through leaves, circle her, pause, untie her. I could hear her body slowly fall over.

"Is she dead?"

"Yeah. She is."

"Who is she?"

"I think her name's Jennifer. She lives just down the road from me. I see her sometimes."

I turned and saw David brushing the girl's hair from her eyes, cool ingenuous empathy overwhelming his face. Love. You wouldn't have cared to hear this, and I'm sure it wouldn't have been the kind of quote you were looking for, but in that comment I would have abandoned all pretension

her blood on a hammer in his dad's tool shed, his fingerprints on the handle.

My comment: I trespassed. One day, after my first semester in college, I snuck back into the woods, and found the tree without much trouble, the topography having long since etched itself into my brain, and shivering in the frigid December sunlight, I drew a Swiss army knife and carved a word into the bark, and I know this must all seem beside the point to you now, but the comment you wanted from me is written there. I'm writing to remind you I received your phone call five years ago today. I haven't changed.

Sincerely,
Chris Scott

Editors' Box - The Case of the Winning Short Story

Encyclopedia Brown flashed a sign as he strutted through the Java Co storefront and spotted his friends seated in the back. The only sign of the neurological tempest raging behind his spectacles this Saturday resided in his mouth, which was pinched in slightly as he made his way past the red-eyed clerk sweeping briskly behind the counter. J. E. A. and F sat huddled around a sheet of paper, talking excitedly. Encyclopedia noiselessly lifted a wooden chair from an adjacent table and joined the group.

I was upset. "Two years! Four semesters! Two hundred dollars! And we've never had to worry about the winning story being stolen!" he cried. "We have to find it, but I have no idea

where to begin looking," he said, sullenly.

Encyclopedia Brown wasted no time in getting the facts. "Where were you keeping these stories?"

F answered quickly. "There were copies on the Internet and at the Monitor Tower. They are all gone."

"What day is it?" shot Brown.

"...Saturday," replied E, after a pause.

"I meant what time is it."

"It's noon." A answered quickly.

"I know where the winning short story is!" announced Encyclopedia Brown.

How did Encyclopedia Brown know the location of the winning story?

turn to page 18 to find out

Derrick

fiction by >> E. B. Roper

Derrick's only real complaint in life was that the 7-11 didn't keep the drink case cold enough. He had minor beefs here and there of course, but Luke had come to realize that the only consistent thing wrong in his roommate's perspective was the inability to find an ice cold Coca-Cola With Lime.

Today Derrick had settled for the cool-bordering-lukewarm beverage without the usual fuss. Now he was lying stretched out on his unmade bed wearing nothing but a pair of boxer shorts and enjoying his drink.

Luke stood at the window after forcing it open as far as it would go. A welcome breeze filtered in, shuffling the edges of papers that were pinned underneath the hula girl lamp on Derrick's desk.

Behind him Luke heard a low hiss and he turned to see Derrick settling the bottle of Coke against his flushed skin. The drink balanced precariously against Derrick's ribs and a fold of blankets.

"Damn that sucker might not actually be cold, but I'm hot enough to think it is," Derrick laughed, reaching for an orange that lay by his hip on the bed.

"It's hot," Luke agreed. He didn't want to move away from the window. He gazed out over the parking lot that was beneath them, knowing of nothing except the teasing breeze on his arm, his shirt sticking to his back, and the tearing sound of Derrick peeling his orange.

"Are there some good looking ladies out there in halter tops or something?" Derrick asked.

"No, but I think the lunch lady is on break," Luke deadpanned, turning around. Derrick didn't look up from his orange, his long fingers making fast work of peeling it. He laid the shreds of orange peel on his chest and stomach, shivering as the chilled pieces touched his skin.

Luke raised a brow, saying nothing, and moved to clean up his desk.

"I really wish you'd put some clothes on," he said, his back turned.

"Why? I'm actually starting to cool off," Derrick said. A tearing wet sound followed as he bit into a segment of orange.

"Everyone's hot. That doesn't mean that they're running around without clothes," Luke said irritably. "You could at least put on some shorts."

"You know what, I think you're just jealous," Derrick said slowly.

"Why would I be jealous?"

"You're jealous that I am a sultry bastard, and you, my friend," Derrick paused to suck at another piece of orange, "can't help but to walk around all day looking like you've got a pole shoved up your ass."

"Listen, friend," Luke said maliciously, "the Puritan blood flows just as freely through my veins as it does yours."

He turned around with a textbook in his hand, fixing Derrick with a hard gaze of contempt.

"But I do not fall victim to my genes," he stated around a slice of orange.

"Oh," Luke said, turning back to his desk, "is that why you are still single?"

"Touché, Luke, but I am happy."

"And I'm not?" Luke asked.

Derrick said nothing and when Luke glanced over his shoulder his roommate grinned at him, his smile comprised of an orange segment wedged between his lips.

Luke debated throwing his textbook at him, but blood on the pages would degrade the resale value. He tossed the book onto his chair instead.

"Look, all I'm saying," Derrick started after a moment, "is that you need to loosen up a little. The ladies, they like a man who's easy-going. Relaxed. Worldly."

Derrick said the last word leisurely. Luke could hear the grin in his voice.

"And I assume you take yourself to be the picture of sophistication?" Luke all but bared his teeth.

"Easy, easy," Derrick soothed. "All I'm saying is the ladies like a man who is a bit more experienced."

"Derrick, if you remember, we had this little chit chat about our sexual conquests shortly after we met and we both know that neither one of us is a virgin."

Derrick laughed and said, "Yes, if I remember correctly, you're quite the little slut."

Luke didn't dare turn around, not knowing how to take that statement.

"I was just kidding, you know," Derrick ventured.

"No you weren't."

Behind him Luke heard a sigh and then, "Okay yeah, I wasn't. But we're guys so it's okay. Don't worry, just relax."

Luke gripped the edge of the desk. It really was too hot for such bantering. Obviously it had only led to an ugly place and now Luke was wholly ticked off at his friend. He should have opened his book and pretended to read the moment that Derrick had stretched out on the bed.

But now it was too late to open his book. Derrick

had hit a nerve and the humidity had pumped Luke full of just the right combination of annoyance, irritation, and restlessness.

"I am relaxed," Luke said angrily, looking over his shoulder.

Derrick stared at him skeptically. He pointed his toes and shoved the rest of the orange into his mouth, and Luke had to admit that anyone else lying on a rumpled bed with bits of orange peel on their body would look completely ridiculous, but not Derrick. Derrick managed to make something so stupid look cool. Derrick could have been posing for a new fashion billboard.

"Luke, a drill sergeant is more relaxed than you."

"Screw you."

"No, I'm serious. You just need to open up. Try new things," Derrick proposed.

"I am not having a three-way with you," Luke said.

Derrick exploded with laughter, gasping, "Luke, you wouldn't even be able to bring yourself to kiss a man, let alone have sex with one."

"Yes I could," Luke said, wondering why he didn't just shut his mouth.

"Prove it."

Luke stepped close to Derrick's bed. Citrus and heat stung his eyes and made his head spin. A sudden rough hand landed on his chest and pushed him backwards. Luke looked up, startled.

"Kiss you?" Derrick said with disdain. "Ha."

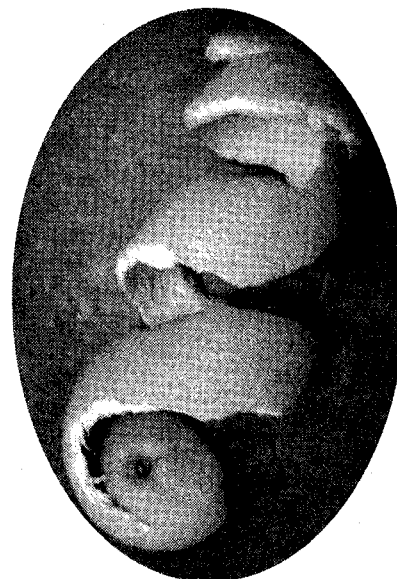


illustration by >> Frances Dusseault

a chicken with its head cut off."

His slow speech stops as he takes out a Marlboro Red and lights it with a match. I breathe in the smoke and sulfur and take a big drink of my beer. Sitting quietly while he takes a few drags on the cigarette, I wait for him to continue the story.

"So, I jump on my bike," he coughs out, "and chase after her. The small, decrepit houses whizzed by me on both sides of the road. The people in that town were poor, so the streets and sidewalks never got fixed. Not enough tax revenue, I guess. The sidewalks were all cracked and broken, jutting up at awkward angles in most places, and I used those uneven places as little ramps for my bike. It's funny the things you remember and the things you can't.

"I got to the park and rode across the creek on the little, half crumbling bridge to where my sister was, on the less steep bank of the creek. She was kneeling on the edge, hands in the water trying to catch minnows. I stopped for a minute, the sun was flashing off her golden curls, which framed her plump ten-year old face. I was caught up in a sort of brotherly love that usually doesn't come until later in life. Just for a moment, I understood family a little bit better than I have any other time in my life.

"Anyway, I got down on my haunches next to her, and pretended to be catching minnows with her. But I wasn't. I waited for a few seconds, and then splashed water up on her, and she splashed me back, and we did that until we were both soaked and had to ride the few blocks back to the small house to get dry clothes."

He finishes his drink, but not before a few tears fall from his face and water it down some. I just sit, giving him time, and sip on my beer.

"I started drinking the summer after that. High school, you know? I don't know that I have had a sober week since. So, that story is the last good, sober memory I've got, and I'd never shared it before. Thank you."

He sets down his fresh drink, stands and leaves.

I soon follow him, leaving some beer in my glass, and think about him the whole way home and all night. Will I end up like that? Telling anyone who will listen about chasing my dog through the neighborhood when I was sixteen? Or breaking my arm skateboarding at thirteen? The bar calls my name all day at work, not with its usual call from the booze, but a call from the old man, hoping to find an answer to my questions.

I'm sitting at the end of the bar when he walks in and takes a seat next to another young guy. After an hour or more sitting like that, waiting for something to happen, I guess, he turns and sees me looking at him, and he looks at me with his wet, red eyes and does not recognize me. He just looks down into his Jim Beam on the rocks, swirling it in his hand. Disappointed and confused, I turn to my drink.

I overhear the old man say to the new young guy, "Young man, I'll buy you another beer if you'll listen to a story," the old man says, voice worn and uneven, like a dying car engine.

I set my drink down, left the bar, and never set foot in one again.

THIRD PLACE STORY

Not Me

fiction by >> Trevor Alexander

It's 2:15 a.m. on a Tuesday, and there are only two people sitting at the bar, some people are shooting pool in the back room, but the old man next to me and I are the only two still buried in our drinks. The bar is dark, with wooden paneled walls, a mirror behind the bottles on the shelves, and quiet, other than a soft, sad country song and the occasional cracking of pool balls.

"Young man, I'll buy you another beer if you'll listen to a story," the old man says, voice worn and

uneven, like a dying car engine. Startled, I nod.

"A beer for my friend, and another Jim Beam on the rocks for me," he tells the silent, unobtrusive bartender.

"Thanks," I almost whisper, sipping the head off my cold beer. The old man stares into his drink, swirling the ice in the amber liquid, his sausage like fingers wrapped around the glass. His hair has gone where mine is going, and the sagging skin on his head is covered in age spots. He looks up into the mirror behind the bar.

"I want to tell you this story, because I've been thinking about it all night. And every night for the past thirty years or so. I lived in a nice suburb when I was a kid, you know the kind, rich and slick. But, my grand-

ma lived in a poor white trash town in Oklahoma and I loved visiting her in the summer."

He stops briefly to take a sip, but downs the whole glass instead. He points, asking for another. He takes a drink of his fresh whiskey, sipping this time.

"There was a squat, gnarled old mimosa tree in my grandma's backyard, and I had climbed up near the top, just sitting, thinking, I guess, I don't remember. Maybe watching the breeze blow through those thin green leaves. My sister flew by the house on her bike, heading for the park, and I jumped out of the tree to follow her. I was fourteen, those were good times, and I could do things like jump out of trees, then, believe it or not. Well, I ran across the yard and grabbed my bike out of the carport to chase after her. I ran like kids run, like

From the Pickler archives:

Chapter 1 of *The Hardy Boys Go to College: No. 1* (1998)

Detective Collective

fiction by >> Franklin W. Dixon

"Golly, this college seems too good to be true," the muscular Joe Hardy whispered to his older brother, Frank, pushing a lock of blonde hair from his forehead. "It seems like the Harvard of the Midwest."

"It was ranked number eight in the latest poll," whispered Frank Hardy, the more bookish and darker-haired Hardy Boy.

"I heard the Sodexo dorm food is delicious," Chet Morton, the Hardy's heavysset chum, whispered. He was flipping through the pages of *The Monitor*, the university's only source for thorough coverage of community issues, student affairs, politics, and culture. Chet laughed heartily, his huge belly jingling like Christmas. "I wonder who this Larry Iles character is?"

"I don't know," said Frank, turning his attention to the slim, pretty redhead leading the tour. "Maybe she could tell us."

"She's pretty," Joe said.

"You've been staring, Joe," Frank said. "We're here to check out the school, not the babes."

Frank, Joe, and Chet were in Kirksville for the university's annual V.I.P. day, along with several hundred other high school seniors and juniors. All three boys had gotten at least a 34 on their ACTs. Two of them knew jujitsu.



illustration by >> Frances Dusseault

"Here is Baldwin Hall," the tour guide said. "Named for Joseph Baldwin..."

Frank looked at Baldwin Hall instead of the attractive tour guide. Like most of the other buildings on campus, the walls were covered with thick patches of ivy. The realization dawned on Frank: It was just like an Ivy League school!

"What did you guys think of the President?" asked Joe. "He sure seemed excited about the school."

"He really seemed excited to meet you guys," said Chet. After the meeting, President Jack MacGruder had sought out the boys in the lobby.

"He said he was impressed with our detective skills," said Frank.

"I hope we won't have to use our detective skills this weekend," whispered Joe. "If all of

the girls here look like our tour guide, I won't be able to concentrate on sleuthing."

"You guys should read this," said Chet, pointing to *The Monitor*. "I can't believe this letter got published. This guy likes to capitalize everything."

"I'll read it later, Chet," said Frank. "Right now, I want to learn about the town."

Frank, Joe, and Chet listened to the tour guide. She was answering a question from a boy about the weekends.

"There's nothing to do," the tour guide said.

Joe looked at the beautiful quad. The trees were in bloom, and the squirrels were bigger than any squirrels he had ever seen before. I wonder if the squirrels are dangerous, he thought, chuckling to himself. Just then an acorn fell on his head. Joe looked up and saw a squirrel perched on the branch above him.

"Having a little trouble with the locals, Joe?" joked Frank.

"Funny," Joe grumbled.

"There's a Wal-Mart," the tour guide said.

The tour group stopped at the edge of the quad. The tour guide opened her mouth to speak, but her face turned white and no words came out.

"I wonder what's wrong?" Chet asked.

"The gum tree's gone!" the tour guide screamed. She collapsed to the ground in a faint.

"Looks like we might have a case after all," said Frank.

"Look at the ground!" Joe pointed at the sidewalk.

"It's gum!" Chet said.

"Let's follow the trail," said Frank.

The boys peeled away from the group and ran to follow the trail. Buildings whizzed past them in a blur. They constantly had to jump over orange, plastic nets. There seemed to be construction projects everywhere.

Joe was in the lead when he stepped on a circular patch of concrete.

"You stepped on the sacred potato!" screamed a student from a window. "You're gonna have bad luck!"

But Joe kept on running, following the gum trail around the corner of yet another ivy-covered building. Up ahead, a pickup truck with a Confederate flag decal in the window swerved into the road, causing other, more polite Midwestern drivers to honk their horns and

swerve. A tree protruded out of the bed of the truck, and the trunk of the tree was covered with gum!

Joe skidded to a stop and caught his breath. Frank and Chet rounded the corner behind him, Chet wheezing heavily.

"Did you find the tree?" asked Frank.

"I lost it," said Joe. "It swerved into the road on the back of a truck."

"It's gone?" Chet huffed.

"Look! There's a clue!" Frank bent down to pick up a scrap of paper. The message was typed but full of hand-written corrections. "It's addressed to us!"

"How does the tree thief know we're here?" Joe wondered.

"I don't know," said Frank. "But listen to this."

He read the note in his hand.

"Exclusive for the Hardy Detective Collective:

"In my, I have, possession, the 'sacred,' ecologically destructive practiced upon, gum-covered campus blemish. Often am I APPALLED AND DISGUSTED BY so-called 'students' disregard, blatantly, for oxygenated growth and life, towards producing greenery, of said alleged 'tree' in question. IT SHOULD BE LIKEWISE CONSERVATIVE THOUGHT A CRIME!!! Except, as one who has been published in obscure, EUROPEAN, SOCIALIST, ACADEMIC, 'dusty' tomes, unread by illiterate 'Good Ole Boys' on campus, content to slow-wallow in mud self-produced, spending crisp, well-earned, students' scholarships hours dollars on posterior, self-proclaimed, enhancing swivel, rich, plush chairs, the benefits of which enjoyed by same select few 'GOOD OLE BOYS' AS MENTIONED!!!!!! This matter I will settle, by myself and with the Boys, if they deem 'worthy' to deal with likes of me."

"What the fuck is he talking about?" asked Joe. "Does sentence four even have a subject?"

"There's more," said Frank. "If Hardy crime-solving detectives, being V.I.P.s, do, in haste, not keep 'probiscus' out of, stupidly, this 'unfettered' business, by morning, they, siding with 'Harvard of Midwest,' will be found by, ungrieved, unacquainted persons, as 'bullet-through-head' DEAD AS DIRT TREE ROOTS IN TEXAS-STYLE 'CHAIR' OF GOV. DUBYA'S MURDER!"

Think about Breathing

fiction by >> Holly Rudolph

Open eyes. In through nose, out through mouth. Breathe breathe breathe. Assess situation. Indoors. Blue walls. Hardwood floor.

The inside of my mouth is bleeding. I cough. It splatters across the floor in a beautiful way that makes me think of those ink splatters that shrinks show to their looney clients. Therapy is for people who can't make it with what God gave them. My father used to say that. *Concentrate. Breathe breathe breathe. Think about self. Think about getting out. Fast. Think about escape. Concentrate.*

As I pull myself to a sitting position, a roaring

fire comes to a blaze inside my skull. People are screaming, sirens and red walls and flames licking my inner thighs. I fall into the fire, giving my body over to the cool ease of unconsciousness again.

Stop. Wake up. Exist. Breathe in. Think, think about escape. Breathe out. Breathe breathe breathe. Do something. Think.

I can't tell whether it's been seconds or weeks. There is someone in the corner of the room, watching me. They are saying words, shouting them. I can't understand. My mind can't keep up. I don't even know if they are shouting at me or at someone else. I don't even know who they are. They are approaching me. My skin feels like a deflated pink balloon.

Get up get up get up get up get up get up get up.

I'm sitting again, trying my hardest to conquer the flames that caress my flesh. Fire people dance seductively before my eyes, pleading, begging me to dance with them. My hands want to hold them, hold their burning breasts and kiss their lips and make love to them and fall slowly into their sweet death.

Think about men and women. Think about real people. Think. Breathe. Think about the person yelling in the corner.

The person is now upon me, his horrible breath like sour milk and burning hair and death. He is lifting me. He is big, bigger than any person I've ever seen. He is holding me like a newborn child. He continues to yell. I try to tell him to stop, but blood comes out where the words should be.

Breathe. Assess situation. Indoors. Dark, with flashes of light. Heavy. Loud. He carries me down stairs. Through a door. There are other men, also yelling.

I am less aware now. The man and I have left the fire people behind, now we are in the cold night. I watch him work, yelling to all the other men. I pull heavy air into my lungs. I feel them collapse with each breath, my brain growing cloudier. I feel myself succumbing to what can only be my death. Death is here. He looks through my eyes and dances in my lungs with the sour smoke and licks my pink skin with his fiery tongue. Death is there, surrounded by fire people.

Keep breathing, keep breathing. Don't give up. Please.

Death is not a tall man in a black robe. He has a face, white as snow. His clothes are orange-red-blue-green-purple. He walks on two feet, vanishing into corners, hiding behind distractions. The man lifts me into a truck, red and blue lights dancing where the fire people used to be. The people in the truck are yelling, too. They yell at me, telling me to open my eyes, wake up. They tell me to think about breathing, in and out, in and out. They say "Stay with me!" Death sits among them, one white hand on my shoulder. He squeezes it firmly each time I inhale, reminding me of his presence. I look to him, making eye contact. I tell him I am not afraid of him. He knows I am lying. He plays with my burning skin, twisting it between his fat fingers. I cringe. *Stop. Think. Breathe. Think about death. Think about pain. Think about fire. Think about reality. Think about blood and smoke and agony.*

When I wake, death has gone. My wounds have healed. I am new.

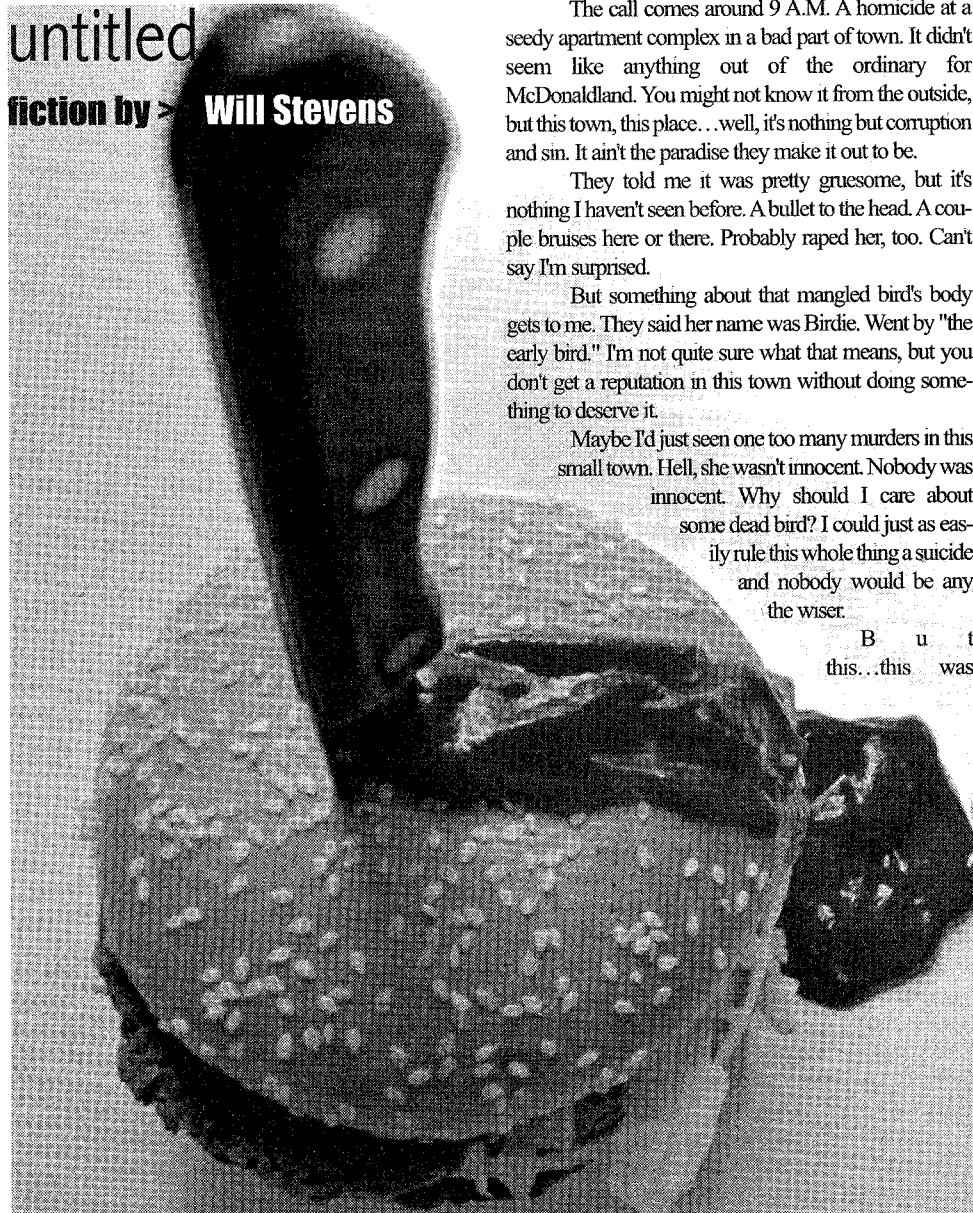


Illustration by >> Jon Lawinger

The name's Mac. Some of the guys on the force call me "Big Mac," but just Mac'll do.

The call comes around 9 A.M. A homicide at a seedy apartment complex in a bad part of town. It didn't seem like anything out of the ordinary for McDonaldland. You might not know it from the outside, but this town, this place... well, it's nothing but corruption and sin. It ain't the paradise they make it out to be.

They told me it was pretty gruesome, but it's nothing I haven't seen before. A bullet to the head. A couple bruises here or there. Probably raped her, too. Can't say I'm surprised.

But something about that mangled bird's body gets to me. They said her name was Birdie. Went by "the early bird." I'm not quite sure what that means, but you don't get a reputation in this town without doing something to deserve it.

Maybe I'd just seen one too many murders in this small town. Hell, she wasn't innocent. Nobody was innocent. Why should I care about some dead bird? I could just as easily rule this whole thing a suicide and nobody would be any the wiser.

B u t
t h i s . . . t h i s w a s

different. Knowing someone this twisted was out there made my stomach churn. All the marks of a serial killer were there. Something had to be done. If this guy strikes again, the blood's on my hands.

A footprint. Size 9 McSneakers. I knew that shoe all too well.

The Hamburglar doesn't look too happy to see me. Last I heard, he'd been off the streets for months. Trying to get his life back on track, you know. But a guy like him, there's no rehabilitating. He's a criminal, a menace to society. Born that way and probably die that way.

I don't mess around. You don't mess around with the Hamburglar. This guy's been committing crimes since he was in the womb. He knows what he's doing.

I ask him where he's been. He says he'd been home the whole time. I doubt he's even capable of telling the truth. I ask him again. Having a gun a few inches away from your face can usually bring back some memories.

He sticks with the lie. I stick him in the back of the car.

I make sure to toss him in a cell myself. I know I've got my man. Paperwork can wait.

I look up at a clock. A little past noon. The sun is beating down and the office air conditioner is on the fritz.

I feel like a day-old
burger under a
heat lamp.

The Mayor stops by, congratulates me.

McCheese ain't too popular, but that doesn't take away from the fact that he's the most powerful guy in McDonaldland. He seems nice enough, but I see right through that top hat.

Introduces me to his new assistant. Big purple guy. He's got an evil look on his face. Very grim.

I know I've seen him before. A few hours and a convicted felon database later, I know where.

The name was Grimace. Used to go by "Evil

Grimace" in the hood. Started out as a small-time thief stealing shakes. Just little stuff.

But that wasn't enough for ol' Grimace. Stealing shakes turned into stealing cars. Stealing cars turned into stealing lives.

You wouldn't think a guy like him could run too fast, but he managed to get away from me when it counted.

50 Cent's "In Da Club." I recognize the distinct ring of my cell phone going off in my pocket. "This is Mac."

"Mac, bad news. The DNA evidence on the Hamburglar didn't hold up."

"Don't worry. I think we've just made a break in the case."

Sometimes, part of the job is following your gut. Mine was telling me that a murder on the night of Grimace's reappearance wasn't exactly coincidental.

Unfortunately, one thing stands in my way. A cheeseburger with power I can barely dream about. With McCheese's protection, Grimace was as good as gold.

There ain't a lot to being a cop. You have to know how to use your head, you have to know how to use your gun, and every once in a while you have to be the hero.

City Hall. The office of one Mayor McCheese. The belly of the whale.

I barely get a word off before he shows me the gun he keeps under his desk. He knows I'm on to him. He may be dumb, but he sure ain't stupid.

"Step down, Mac. You've got a man behind bars. A convicted felon with no family, no friends, and a criminal record as long as the Nile. You know what I can do to you, Mac. You know how powerful I am. Just walk away and nobody has to get hurt."

I think of Birdie. Somebody had already been hurt. And somebody else was going to be hurt if I don't stop it.

He repeats himself. "Step down."

Like I said, sometimes you have to have honor. And so I do what any honorable cop in McDonaldland would do in my shoes.

I turn around and walk away. They send the Hamburglar to the chair for the rape and murder of Birdie. Hell, he wasn't innocent. Nobody was innocent.

Honor doesn't mean a whole lot when you're dead.

Holly Rudolph sits comfortably in her apartment, staring broken-heartedly at the cursor flashing in the extreme upper-left corner of her laptop computer screen. Nothing. Her mind cries out for inspiration, the due date crawling nearer by the second. Still nothing. Her roommate, Hillary, has gone out of town for the weekend, cashing in a gift certificate to the day spa in her hometown. Hillary is spending her weekend being rubbed and getting aromatherapy facials from a burly Swedish blonde man wearing nothing but a towel. Holly hasn't changed out of her pajamas since six o'clock on Friday evening, when she crawled in after the most stressful day of her life and watched horror movies alone until five in the morning, drinking cheap wine coolers and desperately wishing for the inspiration she still seeks. She starts to cry.

Four hours later, Holly is stretched out on the sofa, remote in hand, watching reruns of Boy Meets World. She has given up on her dream of actually ever writing anything intelligent, uttering an obscenity to herself and pulling her hairless kitten, Spunky, up toward her for a cuddle.

"Watcha wanna watch, Spunk?" she says, mid-yawn. Spunky does not answer. He cannot speak English. This fact does not stop Holly's feelings from being hurt by his silence. She rises, carrying Spunky into the kitchen with her.

"Spunk," Holly says, stroking his tiny hairless head, "I think it's time to get drunk." She giggles.

Spunky does not answer.

"I think this assignment is a lost hope. I give up." She pulls a cold glass bottle of vodka out of the refrigerator, unscrews the cap, and puts the bottle to her lips.

She throws her head back and swallows. Three hours later, she passes out face down on the beige carpet, all hope of finishing the story lost.

Hours pass.

"Wake up," someone whispers, warm breath caressing her ear.

"I'm not asleep," Holly says, hiding her face in her arms. "I'm just resting."

"Wake up!" The voice is firm now, firm and male.

Holly is jerked awake, realizing that no man carries a key to her apartment. She rises, looking around the room nervously.

"Hello?" she yells, barely able to stand. "Who are you?"

"Sit down, for Christ's sake. You're gonna make yourself sick!" the voice booms. It is deep, like a bottomless well. It echoes across the walls and vibrates inside her ears.

Holly is terrified. "Who are you?"

"Come on, it's me! It's Spunky!"

Almost instantly she is unconscious again, this time with fear.

"Get up, get up, get up! We don't have time for this!" Spunky yells, rousing

Holly once more. "We have work to do!"

Holly sits up, raising an eyebrow at her three-pound hairless kitten.

"You can talk, Spunky?" she says in disbelief.

"Yes," he says, chuckling. "I can."

I've never heard a cat chuckle before, Holly thinks to herself.

"Now listen," Spunky says, jumping to her lap.

"We need to talk. I think I can help you with something." He rubs his head affectionately against her hand. "I have some ideas for that story you've been stressing over."

"My story?!" Holly exclaims, suddenly alert.

"You can help me with my story?"

"Yes, I believe I can. You see, before I became an Egyptian Rex kitten, I had a job as a muse for this guy who wrote for the Times up in NYC," Spunky says, scratching his ear.

"A muse?" Holly asks. "You mean, like, his

inspiration?"

"Yes, I mean inspiration. I was very good, if I do say so myself."

Holly is stunned. "My mind is blown, Spunky. Why haven't you ever told me this before?"

Spunky considers this. "I guess my services were never really needed until now."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Holly says. She strokes his naked back.

"Anyway," Spunky says, rising and jumping to the computer desk, "Shall we get started? What exactly are you working on?"

Holly rises as well. "It's a one-thousand word short story for this contest," she says, sitting down before the glowing screen. That same cursor sat, blinking and taunting her. "The winner gets fifty bucks."

"Awesome," Spunky says, climbing down into her lap again. "Let's see what we can do..."

Hillary Hugelman turned the doorknob to open the door to the apartment she shared with her good friend, Holly. She was fully relaxed, having spent the weekend at a day spa being pampered by very nice people and smoking cigarettes in a

**continued on page 7
Under "Spunk"**

Spunky

fiction by >> Holly Rudolph

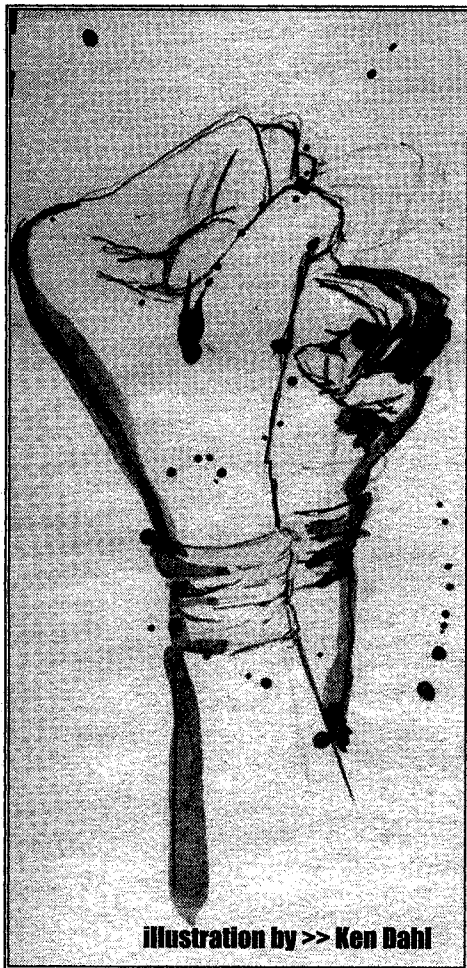


illustration by >> Ken Dahl

Chastity

fiction by >> Holly Rudolph

I wake as the sun rises on January 17th with dried mud lining my entire left side and tiny bits of gravel embedded in my left cheek. I am naked. It is roughly thirty-seven degrees outside. I pull myself up into a sitting position to survey the situation. Immediately my stomach fills with bitter awfulness and I lean to the side and vomit into the ditch. As bright orange liquid pours from my mouth, I think about the ditch and it occurs to me that I have never seen this particular ditch before. Looking up into the bright winter morning sun, I shield my eyes to clearly see the highway sign ten feet from my resting place. It says 63. 63? How the fuck did I get here? What the hell happened last night?

Slowly rising, trying my hardest not to agitate my already sensitive stomach, I realize that not only have I never seen this ditch before, and not only do I not know how I came to be sleeping naked in it, but I also have no idea who I am or where I came from. Looking down, I realize that I am female. Now we're getting somewhere. Fighting a fit of nausea, I sit again. I need to collect my thoughts.

I know for sure that it is January 17th. I don't know how I know that, but I know it. I know that I am female. I know that I am naked. I know that I am on 63 highway. I know that it is goddamn cold. I know that I have eaten or drank something that has severely upset my stomach. I know that whatever it was, it was bright orange.

A red car tears down the highway, pulling to a dangerous stop a few feet from my ankle, the tires sending little bits of gravel flying at my naked legs like tiny bullets. A beautiful woman, approximately twenty-seven years old, leans out

the driver's side window and whistles at me.

"How kind of you to meet me here, darling," she says, twirling one red curl around her index finger. "But don't you think it's a little cold for nudism?"

I laugh awkwardly. "What's your name?" I ask.

She chuckles. "You really are a strange girl, Chastity!" she says, holding a cigarette out to me and then lighting one for herself. "You know, I didn't believe you about this memory thing at first, but I'm really starting to." She raises an eyebrow at me. "Get in this car, poor thing! You're gonna freeze to death!"

I climb into her gorgeous car, lighting my cigarette.

She laughs. "It's been a long time since I've had a beautiful naked woman smoking a cigarette in my passenger's seat," she says.

We share an awkward silence.

She clears her throat. "Chastity, why don't we talk about the reason we are here," she suggests.

"Tell me your name," I say, flicking ashes into her sparkling ash tray. "Then we can talk about whatever you like."

"Honey, I'm Jazzy," she laughs. "You know me! We met a year or so ago in Georgia! You were dating that lawyer fellow and I was between husbands. Remember?"

To please her, I pretend to remember.

"Now tell me about this money. You sounded like a human tornado when you called me last night!" Jazzy says, finishing her cigarette.

I have no idea what to say. I shrug.

"Now, honey, I don't know what kind of shit you are up to, but I need that money and I need it now!" Her voice has gone from sugary-sweet to dangerous.

"Listen, lady, I have no idea what you are talking about!"

Next thing I know, Jazzy is pressing a cold handgun against my right temple, shouting something about blood and money. I may not know who I am or why I am stark naked in some woman's car in the middle of January, but I know that I don't want to die this way. Without thinking, I remove the gun from her hand. I turn the gun against her and tell her to strip. She does. I put on her hideous clothing and drive away in her flashy red car, leaving her freezing and naked in the ditch on highway 63.

On my way through Macon, Missouri, I pick up a bottle of red hair dye and a few inexpensive changes of clothes.

Funny how things just tend to work out for you. This morning I woke up a new woman: Jasmine Leigh, 05-17-1978, 5'5", 145 lbs. Funny.

Vaginally Secrete This, Bitch

fiction by >> Chris Barnes

Jared woke up in his mom's basement, like he did every day, and remembered the mornings when he used to wake up next to Hope. Their old apartment was nothing like his mom's basement where he now lived. The basement was a dingy green-walled room with grayish-white carpet and a computer that sat on a desk in the corner of the room. Times like these made him regret what he had done.

He remembered when he first met her. He worked in a comic shop, where most of the customers were fourteen year old boys or grown men who had never matured. Occasionally, the mystic species known as the female would pop in. Jared had his eye on a particular girl named Hope, who would come into the comic shop on a semi-regular basis. One day, she came in wearing a tight leather number that accentuated her size D breasts and her ghetto booty. Jared, in his nasal voice, mustered up the courage to ask her on a date, not thinking she would accept an invitation from a nerd with pasty white skin and a bulbous gut who still lived in his mom's basement. Surprisingly, she accepted, and many nights of awkward, passionate nerd sex followed. As the routine progressed, the two made the decision to move into an apartment together.

One day Jared sat down at the computer that he and Hope shared. He saw that she had left her email up, and being a curious fellow, opened an email she had sent a guy named Dirk. The email made references to "Jared's tiny penis" and how she "longed for a real man to do her right." Feelings of hurt, anger, and embarrassment swept over him. However, he wasn't sure what to do. He cared dearly for Hope, and the thought of losing her made him tear up. Still, knowing she was being pounded by someone else's hard cock tormented him.

The next few days were awkward. Jared tried not to let Hope know about his discovery. The time they spent together was quiet and tense. One night at dinner, Hope said, "Is everything okay?" Jared merely nodded, and Hope then asked him to pass the salt. Jared cried out, "Why don't you have that big-cocked hero of yours do it, you goddamned size queen?!" He jumped out his chair and ran out of the house crying. He flagged down the nearest taxi and went back to his mom's house, where he cried into a pillow until he passed out.

The next day, he went back to the apartment to give Hope money for the next month's rent and pack up his belongings. He brought everything back to his mother's house and told her that Hope had died in a terrible accident and he needed to live at home because he couldn't pay the rent by himself. So Jared went down to that all-too-familiar basement, set up

his computer, and resumed life. Everything that reminded him of Hope was gone, except his apartment key, which he had forgotten to give back.

Nothing felt right after that. Regardless of the fact that she had been cheating on him, he still missed her. He tried to drive those feelings out of himself by listening to the Dr. Dre song "Bitches Ain't Shit" at least ten times a day to remind him what a slut Hope was. The thought that she was still enjoying life sans Jared haunted him, so he set out to put an end to the pain. Killing her would be so cliché, he needed to do something more creative and less obvious. After searching the Internet, he figured out what that something was.

Apparently, there were pills out there that could stop a woman from vaginally secreting. If he could somehow get her to take the pills, her vagina would become desert dry, tear up any unlucky penis, and rub her raw in the process. Within a few mouse clicks and a few days, the pills were his. Now he had to figure out how to get Hope to take them. Then it hit him! The pills he ordered looked awfully similar to the birth control pills she took. All he had to do was switch the two. Remembering the leftover apartment key he had, and remembering that Hope worked an 8-5 shift everyday, he sprang into action. He took off towards her apartment, pills in hand. After unlocking the door, he headed down the hall toward the bathroom and eased the door open. He walked to the medicine cabinet and replaced the pills. With the deed done, he closed everything up and left it like he had found it.

Two weeks later, Jared was walking down the street to go to work when he saw Hope. After exchanging formalities, Hope mentioned that she had been having a "really shitty last couple of weeks," but failed to explain why. Jared laughed manically after she walked away, happy that he had gotten his revenge.

Later in the week, he was hanging out at the comic store when he was then shocked with unexpected news about Hope. Apparently, she had been dating some guy who was known for being a loose cannon. One night, when the two were getting intimate, he attempted to fuck her and was greeted with a vagina that made him feel like he was rubbing his member on sandpaper. Angry and feeling inadequate that he was not getting her in the mood, he rationed that she must be seeing some other guy who could give it to her better than he could. He punched her in the face, rendering her unconscious. Her naked body was then tossed out the window and onto a taxi, effectively killing her. When Jared heard this, the guilt almost overwhelmed him, but then he remembered what Dr. Dre had taught him: bitches like her were certainly not shit but hoes and tricks.

****Specil Editors' Distinction: Most Ego-Stroking Not-Really-Fictional Depiction of Sexual Conquest****

An Excerpt from the AIM Diaries

fiction by >> Jared Nichols

AIM is a tool that nearly every college student is familiar with. I have found my own personal way of exploiting it for your entertainment. The following story has been edited for length and to protect the innocent. All stories are real and not staged.

Jack: i try to be good and i know with you i will be, but i don't want to get carried away and fuck things up like i did last time

Jill: and since i dont know if i even want a relationship i dont want to say I do or lead you to hope I do or something...relationships dont happen like that for me.

Jill: i dont say 'ok...i'm ready!' and then poof, relationship

Jack: I love spending time with you, but im not doing anything till you know what you want , oooooor know you want something, idon't know

Jill: they just happen i guess.....so i dont usually try to make one...or look for one.....

Jack: im the exact same way

Jill: i could try and seduce you right now into coming back over.....i know I could try real hard., butttrttt

Jill: i should maybe just keep my mouth shut and

continued on page 7

AIM Diaries

continued from page 6

respect your decision, because it was a mature decision

Jill: but....you are soberer than me

Jack: i like you i just wanted to not stay because i want to make shure this is that you actually want to see me or if your just horny

Jill: so mature and sober are very similar

Jill: oh i'm always horny, so its not a questino of that :-)

Jack: your funny

Jill: but i know what you mean.....i don't want to hurt you

Jack: but do you understand me?

Jill: its like, i like you, i like talkign to you, hang- ing out, etc.....and the making out too, ya know....

Jack: im not expecting anything, i would like to chill or whatever you want...ok, where is the but

Jill: so its like it would be great if we could be just friends....except the fact i'm attracted to you fucks it up

Jill: its that i dont wanna hurt anyone in case i can't be what they want me to be....i guess.

Jack: just friends that chill and occassionally relieve the "stress"?

Jill: well, i've never had a "makeout buddy" beofre

Jack: god don't worry about that, just do what you want

Jill: i tend to think they dont last long b.c emo- tions get in the way

Jack: and i don't know what i want or should want

Jack: so u wanna give this thing a whole new try

Jill: who knows when they are 20/18 anyway! haha

Jill: ya know?

Jack: being close friends again and whatever

Jill: yes

Jack: just go with the flow

Jill: but i dont want to feel like ahhhhh!!!

Jill: no strings?

Jack: feel like what?

Jill: overwhelmed i guess

Jack: me too

Jill: stirngs=scar7

Jack: yeah for me too

Jill: i feel like i'm a guy. Isnt this what guys want all the time?

Jill: ahh well. too bad i'm a girl, i would've made a great boyfriend/makeout buddy, haha

Jack: well look im really scared by strings, but i was comfortable enoughwith you the last time that i went out of my comfort zone and made strings because i thought thats how i would keep you or what you liked or whatever

Jack: ahhh, ok. I have a solution.

Jill: i dont want anyone worrying toooo much about me, and doing what i want. when people are committed and in love, then they do things and sacrifice for each other. but starting out...its just a matter of feeling each other out, seeing if you even want to get to that point. you know?

Jack: yeah

Jack: go with the flow, do what you want, and be honest

Jill: ok

Jack: and most importantly, don't talk about long

term or relationships/ where it is going

Jill: thats a good point

Jill: good good then

Jack: deal then?

Jill: deal

Jill: hmmm....

Jack: what?

Jill: ohh...nothing

Jack: ok? what?/

Jill: :-P

Jack: ?

Jill: oh its just that i'm wearing these tiny shorts and tank top.....and i'm so cold! i should just hop into my nice warm bed.

Jack: to bed i will go to sleep on this crazy day while i still have some whits about me

Jack: shut up im tempted

Jack: what are u saying?

Jill: i'm saying that these shorts are soooooo little that my legs are freezing! and my tank top just isnt covering that much at ALL!

Jack: can i possibly take a rain check for tomm, at an earlier time also if possible?

Jack: god damn your hot and know how to get me thinking

Jill: hmm, i dont know if shorts and tank top will be otherwise occupied

Jill: plus.....

Jack: /?

Jill: i'm not wearing any underwear

Jack: lol ooo, got me there

Jack: no seriously im tired, can i take a rain check for tomm or Sunday?

Jack: or both if you so desire

Jill: i'll have to check with shorts and tank top....i'll get back to you....

Jack: ok

Jill: underwear might wnat in on it too....we'll see

Jack: maybe itll just be underwear or they will all reject the idea and itll just have to be you

Jill: oh, this silly tank top.....the straps keep falling down! i may as well just take it off.

Jack: seriously i want to but im tired and half a mile away

Jill: alright! goodnight!!

Jill: i guess i need to work on my seduction tac- tics

Jack: hey, don't give me attitude

Jack: its just because im not there if i was, trust me if i didn't leave then i would have been all over you

Jill: uh huh....coulda woulda shoulda....

Jack: anyway goodnight and i hope to hear from you later today

Jill: don't let the bed bugs bite.....too hard;-)

Jill: hard. that's a good word.

Jack: hope you take care of your hornyness in a appropriate manner

Jill: yeah, i bet you'll be dreaming about me tak- ing care of my horniness

Jack: let me guess just like your nipples right, cuz i know your "seduction techniques" aren't working.

Jack: goodnight

Jill: you jerk!

Jack: what?

Jill: pshh

Jack: ouch, jerk?

Jill: yeah!

Jack: now i get the cold shoulder?

Jill: whatever no more seducing

Jill: ever, cold fish

Jill: bye

Jack: ?????

Shades of Scarlet

fiction by >> T. H. Ferguson

The man slowly got to his feet and picked up his bag. It was heavy, full of his provisions and his ammunition. He put on his pack and helmet, and lift- ed his rifle to his shoulder as he walked toward the exit of the church. He had been praying near the altar, but hadn't much time, because of the shelling. The roofless church was dark, and wet, and leaving behind ancient wooden pews, heavy bronze doors, and the altar, he stepped out. He stumbled over crum- bling steps, but was used to such conditions.

The rain started to come down harder, and dripped off his helmet in small streams. It was a cold rain; winter would come early this year. He looked up and saw a screech owl roosting above the colon- nade of the city hall. Its call echoed through the broken columns and smashed windows-he recalled the barn owls of his youth. Rubble filled the doorways and the street; he could see the parapet of the building had fallen in from some rocket or shell blast. Exposed to the elements, the wooden beams were charred and shrouded with a veil of black. Small patches of weeds had sprung up in the cracks in the sidewalk, and he knew this place had been aban- doned for some time. The streets were deserted and none passed through them.

They brought back memories to his mind, powerful memories. He recalled before the war began. So many things had happened since then, it was hard to take it all in. For a while, he refused to let it get to him. Then he had no choice-the pain, the hurt, the rage enveloped him. The memories crashed back to mind, and suddenly he could see them as if they were real.

Empty cars had lined the highways leading from the city, some with the keys remaining in the ignition; their owners long had abandoned them in the exodus to the countryside, hoping to leave before the final onslaught of the rumbling and bestial armies. The rich had left first, then, seeing the rising fear, the middle class and the shopkeepers, and finally, left naked with none to attend to them, the lowly workers and the servants had begun to loot and to burn the city. The police, lacking their supervisors, took to the streets and battled back, yet after a time relegated themselves to mere token pieces, and finally, seeing the opportunity for gain, joined in the rioting.

The hard rain brought reality, and he was slammed in an instant to the harsh and cold present. Rusted hulks of what once were automobiles were left in the street as a child might leave his toys after finishing playing with them. Craters were every- where, disturbing the layers of asphalt, concrete, and cobblestones. The pavement was broken and cracked

fuzzy white bathrobe. However, as she pushed open the blue door and looked upon what had become of her home while she was away, her relaxation fled. There was her roommate, unconscious on the floor, surround- ed by paper and empty liquor bottles. Spunky, her hair- less kitten, snoozed on the sofa, basking in the sunlight pouring in through the window.

"Holly!" Hillary shouted, giving her a light kick. "Wake up, sunshine! Why don't you go lay down in your bed?"

Holly remained motionless, her only move- ment the rising of her chest as she slowly breathed in and out.

from the impact of the shells, and the rain ran sloshing and muddy freshets through the cracks a gaps.

He came to a car in the road, with its lo- hood and engine torn asunder. He peeked through opaque and broken windshield, and into vic- emerged a heap which had once held human for. The corpse was strapped in with the seatbelt, exce- for the left arm, which was on the ground near. Nothing surprising there-he did not flinch at t- burned skull that had fallen from the body and w- peacefully wedged between the dashboard and t- steering wheel, with face locked in an eternal too- grin.

A tarnished gold ring still encircled one fing- of the arm lying on the ground. He picked up t- arm, yet the hand fell off. He grabbed the hand, tea- ing off the finger, then tossed the arm into the c- The ring slipped off the rotting finger easily, and i- stuffed the precious symbol of love into his pocket. was a final resting place, but not necessarily sacre- Nothing was sacred, he reassured himself.

The shot was singular and cracked in the di- tance, matching the sound of the lightning from t- storm. The bullet pierced his arm, then emerged a- plunged into his chest. Its steel tip penetrated de- into the bone of his ribs, cracking two of them, sha- tering the years of work his body had done to bui- them. The bullet exploded into shards of metal as slammed against the bones, and one piece tore in his lung, collapsing it and tearing the tissue of his re- piration. Another fragment laid to rest near his hea- while yet another sliced his intestines, causing the- to pour out bile into his chest. Blood quickly stain- through his shirt, imbuing his jacket with shades- scarlet, and he sensed it as it bubbled in his throat.

The crimson bubbles popped and reformed. his nose and his mouth as he gasped for breat- Dropping to his knees, he crumpled to the groun- His pack dropped off, and his rifle clattered as it f- the paved earth. The blood dripped onto his hand- and he smeared it on his pants as he vainly tried- find comfort. His hands shot to his neck and h- scratched and ripped at his skin to breathe, but not- ing came. No air wafted into his lungs, no refres- ment.

He reached into his jacket, and found the pi- ture. It was his wife, lying naked upon a bed. Sh- had posed for him for that night, as something i- recall in hard times. He remembered that night an- the pleasures he felt, as his eyes slowly closed and th- picture fell to the ground. It drifted away into th- street, being carried by a dark red rivulet of water an- blood. The picture tossed and turned, and his wit- streamed away in the current toward the drain, ever- tually succumbing to the current. His hand stoppe- shaking; his pants soaked through with urine, while- last his lifeless body reposed peacefully and di- turbingly, but not surprisingly, quiescent in death.

"Alright, stay on the floor. Whatever," Hillar- muttered, heading into the kitchen to make herse- some lunch. On her way, she was distracted by some- thing on Holly's desk. It was two sheets of paper, short story, titled Spunky. Remembering that Holly ha- asked her to proofread her short story before she sub- mitted it, she sat next t-

Spunky on the sofa to read.

"See that, Spunky?" Hillary said, petting hi- hairless head. "Holly wrote her story about you! Isn- that cool?"

Spunky didn't answer. He couldn't spea- English. He just purred, affectionately rubbing his hea- against her palm.

the end of Spunk

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Still the Night

fiction by >> Brock Walker II

The gelid night air of Middle America always stirs with the musing of a permanent resident in the dole season. Never on some night but always on each night she speeds through city streets with chilling ferocity, over the frozen, dead plains like an eager phalanx of geese that has already quit its domain for warmer and more inviting locations, and the quite quiet, quaint suburbs are no strangers to her banshee songs and stinging touch.

But lo! She is far too experienced and bores easily. Oftentimes she is accompanied by another spirit to join in her merry-making. The other is not a frequent visitor but when she is inclined to appear, the mischief they create delights them so, that the masses run into their homes, covering themselves with droopy, dripping, puffy, harlequin habiliments. She comes down in a flourish and a brilliant dance, waltzing over everything that she spies from narrow creeks to vast and fanciful lakes; from the lonely, eldritch barns to the phallic towers of metal and glass that taper precariously and audaciously close to the high realm. Paved streets drenched by her kisses cause the obstreperous metal beasts to crash and carom off of one another in a symphony of squeals and honking like tortured, melancholy mallards.

On one day the conditions were made

ripe for them to regale themselves with mischief. In the season when all is dead and frozen in silence Wind becomes bitter and unyielding with nothing to allay her indefatigable vigor. Rain, metamorphosed into formidable hail, began her descent onto the land in torrents of showers that no malediction could have wrought. Wind was growing fierce, shattering the halcyon bleakness of night, raising houses, toppling towers, and emasculating the fool-hardy ravens - mere toys - that lacked the fear or common sense to flee her clutches. Within the cavalcade of clouds, one straggler traversing the star bespeckled empyrean revealed a weeping moon looming above, meticulously painting on, in the solemn, sooty blue of midnight, a sprawling, doomed, and vulnerable canvass.

All of a sudden, the world choked on a tacit gasp and shuddered, while the moon wept on in silence. A blanket of hailstones issued forth from the heavens and Wind jolted, whooshed, and rushed northward like a furious fist of cold and jagged stone. The wayward raven could no longer escape. Wind tossed it about in mid-air like a rag doll and smote its fatally jostled body onto the side of a brick schoolhouse. Hail then pelted the carcass of the bird, which would fly nevermore. Barren trees lining streets and yards and fields hollered and wailed in despair and anguish as Wind ripped and whipped through their branches that seemed to be reaching out, futilely begging to be spared from the impending onslaught. Alas, Hail is blind to mercy, and mammoth rocks of ice broke the many pleading arms asunder like twigs. Piece by piece, bark was cracked from

the trees and torn from them as Hail an Wind raped them bare of any remaining spirit and dignity.

As she gathered strength and malevolence, Wind lifted a black, stray cur, already bloody and broken, from the ground off its three legs and thrust it through a window of one of the houses lining the boulevard, yelping its final yelps. All the while, other windows were being shattered by vicious Hail or the majestic, unadulterated force of Wind, creating a symphony of doom; hail stones percussively chattering against impervious concrete streets, smashed and falling glass, the boom of roofs meeting the ground like tympani, the haunting and chilling aria of Wind...

At the end of a street a mansion, pearly and immaculate, sat proudly in defiance of Wind and Hail, roof intact. It had but few broken windows and laughable dents and bruises from the unrelenting tempest. It was surrounded by an obnoxious wall of white brick and protected by black gates. Between these gates and the mansion's entrance stood a towering oak. While others had been extirpated and felled, this tree, yet naked and exposed, stood firm, loth to suffer the wanton arboreal attacks. The oak brandished its unfathomably prodigious height and, with supercilious pose and girth, scoffed at Hail and Gale.

Fervently incensed, the two forces turned their energies toward the mighty oak and unleashed their wrath upon it. Wind gathered more speed, howling ferociously like a spurned, off-key siren and the sky spat an unceasing deluge of ice stones upon the black gates. With

their powers combined the gate flew from its hinges past the oak and into the front doors of the mansion. Hailstones tripled in size and ruthlessly battered the tree, testing the depths of its indomitable spirit. Its bark armour, at first so impenetrable, now cracked with each blow of Hail and the tree moaned with each strafing burst of Wind. Then, a calamitous clamour began from far down the street and, finally arriving at the now decimated gateway, a patrol car irrupted through, flopping and scraping the ground as it went. Wind hoisted the white, red, and blue beast into the air and javelined it towards the oak, which splintered when struck. At the same time that the metal monster was being readied to strike, a van, like a rogue elephant, burst through the opening. Enmeshed in the ire and arctic clutches of Wind, it was lobbed at the oak tree and hit its mark above the former wound. The once proud oak, stalwart and colossal, emitted a rumbling bellow of agony from the pangs of Wind and Hail's malice as it splintered again and tilted toward the mansion. Further it leaned until it was falling completely and it smashed in to the mansion, continuing downward until it touched the ground and the front of the building, like a lightning-struck redwood, had been cleaved in two.

The waves of hail decreased in frequency and size and became sleet. Sleet became snow. The wind abated into a whisper and then into nothing. The night became soundless and placid as snow floated downward to the earth until it was covered in argent tears under the sombre gaze of the resplendent, weeping moon.

It's Only Natural

fiction by >> Zhian Kamvar

The drops came slowly at first, being quickly devoured by the waiting land. Each ounce healed the cracks of my body. The rain fell faster, more than a sprinkle now, and I was in heaven. Soon the dirt turned into mud and my vast field was able to move and sway with life. Toads who had made homes in my flesh had come out to drink of what little rain ever came. It fell faster at an incredible rate. Holes were being formed in my surface because of the velocity of the water droplets, a gift from the clouds. Angered them many years ago, I did. I remember that day clearly, they left saying that they would never return to nourish me again. I still could smell the sun that they exposed to me when they left. Oh, how it burned my fragile and fertile skin and how I wish I had never said what I said. Alas, every so often, a group of clouds wander by and feel pity for me and my failed attempt at life. A barren wasteland most called me. No one ever wanted to communicate with me because I was so ugly. I gain a fresh start with the rain. I feel that the clouds had come to forgive me, but in a few days, I soon realize that this is not the case. My few plants, cacti, drink up all the available water until there is none left and then they sleep while I lie here, awake, burning with the sun and crying tears of dust for my poor pitiful self.

A flash of light appears and one of my cacti have fallen, being doused by the rain, ever increasing in speed and weight. Low drums emit from the

clouds as if to mourn the loss. It shakes me to my core and I weep. As I weep, I can feel my surface churning and bubbling. This was not the mud's ordinary action. I was commanding this, I was integrating all of my frustration, anger, love, and joy into this movement. I create a wave starting from a grove of cacti 20 yards from the southeast hill. It grows larger as it moves towards the northwest and almost touches the clouds that feed it. My wave of mud creates a shadow greater than the clouds or the night have ever made in existence. When the wave hit the ice formation in the sky, I drink up all of the water and freeze the formation in place. A gigantic wave, set in desert stone for eternity. The clouds try to destroy it by feeding me their precious lifeblood, water, but to no avail. I drink it all and give it to the desperate desert flowers and cacti who cherish and desire it the most.

The war flame that I had with the clouds had become fueled and was a raging fire, engulfing everything it touched. The clouds kept precipitating, and I kept drinking the water as it were. Suddenly, there was no more moisture. The air turned colder as the clouds gathered closer together. White specks began to fall gently from them as silence began to engulf the land. I couldn't move and I was being buried with soft, white ice crystals. The only part of me that was not covered was the under side of my wave. I forced all of my being to thrive in that darkness. The underside of the wave is a place that everything has feared, except for the fungus, which practically covered the wave. I gave them nutrients, so I was responsible for their upbringing. They were, however my demise. They ate more than the proper nutrients I provided, so the foundation of the wave grew weak, and it collapsed, leaving me in pieces upon my desert floor. I let myself sleep and that was when the world ended.

Passing On

fiction by >> Matthew Siemer

The summer of 1984 was unbearable in Yellowstone. Parched by the arid weather, the soil shriveled and cracked like chapped lips, painfully spanning through the landscape around the trees and geysers. The trees, once forming a proud expanse of thriving forest, now hung their heads in lethargy. Nothing seemed to move. No cheerful noises sprang out of the thrush beneath the dehydrated trees, and the birds seemed to have abandoned the place entirely. The geysers looked like long-dormant nipples, and the forest had the air of a ghost town, made slumped and sad by a whole season of blazing yellow suns and a constant drought that stretched over the forest like a dress.

Just when the withered trees looked as if they would collapse from exhaustion, the season changed. The days became gray and ominous, with towering clouds from the ocean pulled inland by a ripping jet stream. The trees shuddered as the first winds rode across their branches and the clouds hovered above like vultures amassing dark power.

The wind picked up strength, breaking upon the trees in waves so it sounded like, with every high tide, they were sighing, weakened by lack of moisture. The wind, realizing there was no resistance, taunted the trees. It

started ripping their leaves off by the handful and threw them on the ground. It smashed the smaller limbs as it passed and howled, reveling in its first easy prey of the season.

The forest tried its best to defend itself. The sturdier trees glared at the wind and the scavenger clouds, impotent but proud. The weaker ones closed their eyes and bent with the wind to lessen the blows. But all had a look of sadness in their eyes, a look of resignation, a realization of impending, inevitable defeat. They knew they weren't strong enough to withstand the onslaught of a cursed season and a cruel new carrion-call. The ever-stronger wind made the trees sound like they were drowning, gasping for breath and choking. Their grasping hands had now shorn the trees naked of leaves, leaving them exposed to the elements. The clouds had become a dark mass that spread over the forest like denim, swirling tightly and thundering curses down upon the land. They made promises of further harm, and grinned reckless blue lightning mercilessly. Smashing down among the helpless, the electric smiles sought out the stronger, more proud trees and brought them to their knees. Laughing now with the wind, the darkness opened its mouth and spit upon the trees with wet fury, lifting the dress that had kept the forest covered. The trees lost their resolve. Seeing the strong beaten on the ground, the weaker ones finally started to slump over and accept defeat. The forceful wind, shrieking in delight, ripped the trees one by one out of the ground. It invaded fur-

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Physics enrollment up 250% due to disenfranchised Greeks

"story" by >> Tom Ptallaby

Thanks to the amazing muckraking abilities of Truman's own, Index, much discussion has been made about the new Society of Physics Students T-Shirts. Sophomore, Steve Ng, said that he decided to de-pledge and join physics after reading the recent article about the SPS t-shirts. He said, "The one-sided nature of the article opened my eyes to the hypocrisy that exists in Truman Greeks."

KTRM DJ and Physics major Cody Jones tells of how his former jovial spirit has been crushed by the Index. "It's just gone too far... first they put a fictitious feud between KTRM and Dobson Radio on the front page of one section. This came as a huge surprise to everyone at the station, even causing utterances such as 'Well you're a Dobson Radio DJ, I guess we can't be friends.' When in reality no one cared. Now, the same thing has happened again... this shouldn't even be in a newspaper; we've sold twelve shirts, twelve shirts! ...what's next, are they going to write an article about how BSU and CCF are in a bitter feud or they'll cover some argument

between enraged roommates who cannot come to a decision on whose turn it is to clean the toilet...seriously, it has just got to stop. I cry daily, now."

One long time physics major also points out that a fraternity shirt directly copies the physics shirt of three years ago. She said, "Our shirt was dark colored and had 'Physics' written in white, and later a fraternity made a shirt of a similar dark color with 'BOOZE' written on it in white and in similar font." And when asked about the claim in the Index that, "He said the physics shirts from the year before matched the Greek women's recruitment shirts," she said, "WTF, mate... our shirts last year said 'Achtung High Voltage.' They didn't make a shirt involving German words and voltage, that's just ridiculous."

Claudio Torheit, a long time fraternity member said when asked about the issue, "Shiiiiiiiit [sic]... I don't know, bro. Physics is hard, want a beer?"

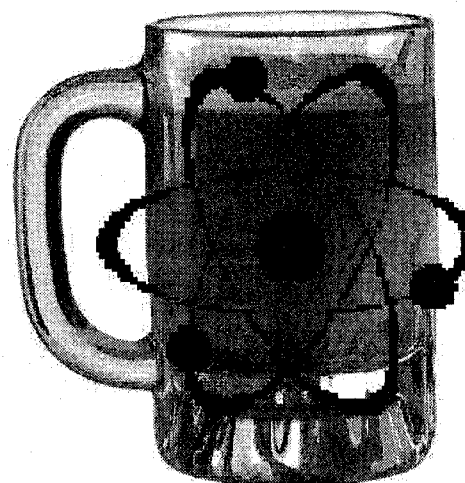
When asked why he switched to physics from his fraternity, junior Hank Josephson said, "I

prefer the organization of this society, and especially enjoy the leadership an advisor with a Ph.D. can provide. Also, I think it's good that the older SPS members only make the newbies drink on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday."

Marty McFlutter, a completely unrelated and unknowledgeable Kirksville resident was found in front of the Kirksville Post Office, he declined an interview. However, next to him was Northeast Missouri State University graduate Wilma Schueller, 66; equally unknowledgeable, she said, "This is the first time I've heard of this but it seems like anyone should be able to wear whatever shirt they want, as long as it doesn't promote the detriment of anyone's education." She also questioned when the next SPS kegger is.

We also tried to find some other campus opinion of the recent migration to physics.

Jennifer Kinderlieb, freshman sorority member said, "It's no surprise to me that so many guys are joining SPS, nerds make very good lovers, and they don't even make me flash them to get into their parties."



letter.



Patriotism vs. Nationalism distinction timely, incisive

Dear Editor:

I found Ian Florida's opinion on the flag controversy in last month's *Monitor* very intriguing and I completely agreed with his opinion. I had never known the difference between nationalism and patriotism, but now it makes perfect sense. Florida states that "Patriotism is love and devotion to one's country," and "Nationalism is only devotion to the interests or culture of one's nation." It's an ongoing issue that deals with true dedication to one's country as opposed to making a statement" about it. Jonathan Burns was obviously trying to make a statement with his feeble attempt to tarnish Truman's policy. Does he really believe that by hanging the American flag over his bed rather than his window he's letting out country down? The fire hazard policy that prohibits it is perfectly legitimate and not meant to "harass patriots" as he claimed. It's there for the safety of the students. To

be truly patriotic is to love your country and support it. It is NOT to selfishly defy authority for personal gain and attention. Our country as a whole has been so swept up in the "United We Stand" concept that we've forgotten its meaning entirely. It's not plastic on a car bumper or rocking out to "Soldier" by Destiny's Child (which is a good tune but hardly advocates the military). It's coming together as a nation and helping each other in times of need. The truth is that too much pop culture and propaganda has managed to seep its way into the media and skew Americans' perception of honest loyalty. There is no fast-food, reality television approach to loving your country (or at least there shouldn't be). Patriotism should be a natural emotion, not a way to fit in. The sooner people realize this the sooner they will become true patriots. I have two words for you Jonathan Burns: window cling.

Sincerely,

Julia Werner

Statesman Highlights Daily Express Article about Statesman

story by >> **admittedly humble Monitor co-editor, co-owner, co-publisher, co-distributor, essayist, humorist, fiction writer, movie reviewer, photographer, ad designer, promoter, landlord, Jon Lawinger**

The April 2005 edition of the Missouri Statesman included an article by Statesman staff writer Chris Matthews, detailing an article by Jessica Bennett in the Wednesday, March 30 edition of the Kirksville Daily Express which detailed the creation of the Statesman and the lead story of its first issue.

The Statesman's report on the Daily Express' report on the Statesman outlined the Daily Express's outline of the Statesman's history, purpose, and appearance. The Statesman also summarized the Daily Express' summary of Statesman founder Jonathon Burns' campaign against Residential Living's ban of hanging flags from dorm windows. Matthews' article quoted the Daily Express quoting Burns' article, reiterating that "the Kirksville Daily Express article reiterated Burns' feelings by stating, 'The article ends with Burns promising to reimburse flag costs for the first 10 people who are "documented by their residence hall

and -strong armed into taking down their flag.'"

It is the hope of whoever happens to agree with me that the self-proclaimed "admittedly humble" Statesman's front-page coverage of another paper's coverage of the Statesman (along with a celebrity politician endorsement) will call that self-description into question and evidence a greater emphasis on inflated self-importance than meaningful political debate or service to its ideologically-diverse readers. Or at least that it will appear just a little bit silly.

This contributor to the Monitor (who will not endeavor to speak on behalf of its entire staff) looks forward to a friendly, combative relationship with the Statesman, and does not wish to suggest that it is without valuable content, but rather that its recent front page suggests unsettlingly self-serving priorities inconsistent with its stated mission to "serve our readers, not ourselves."

Photography

send your photos to
monitortrm@hotmail.com



Junichi Saito



Phil Jarret



Jon Lawinger



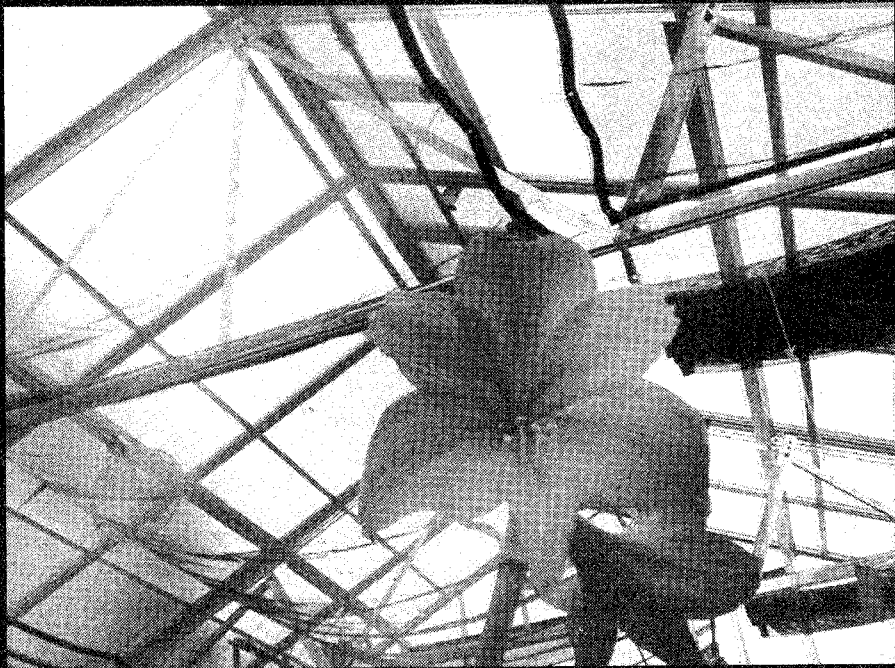
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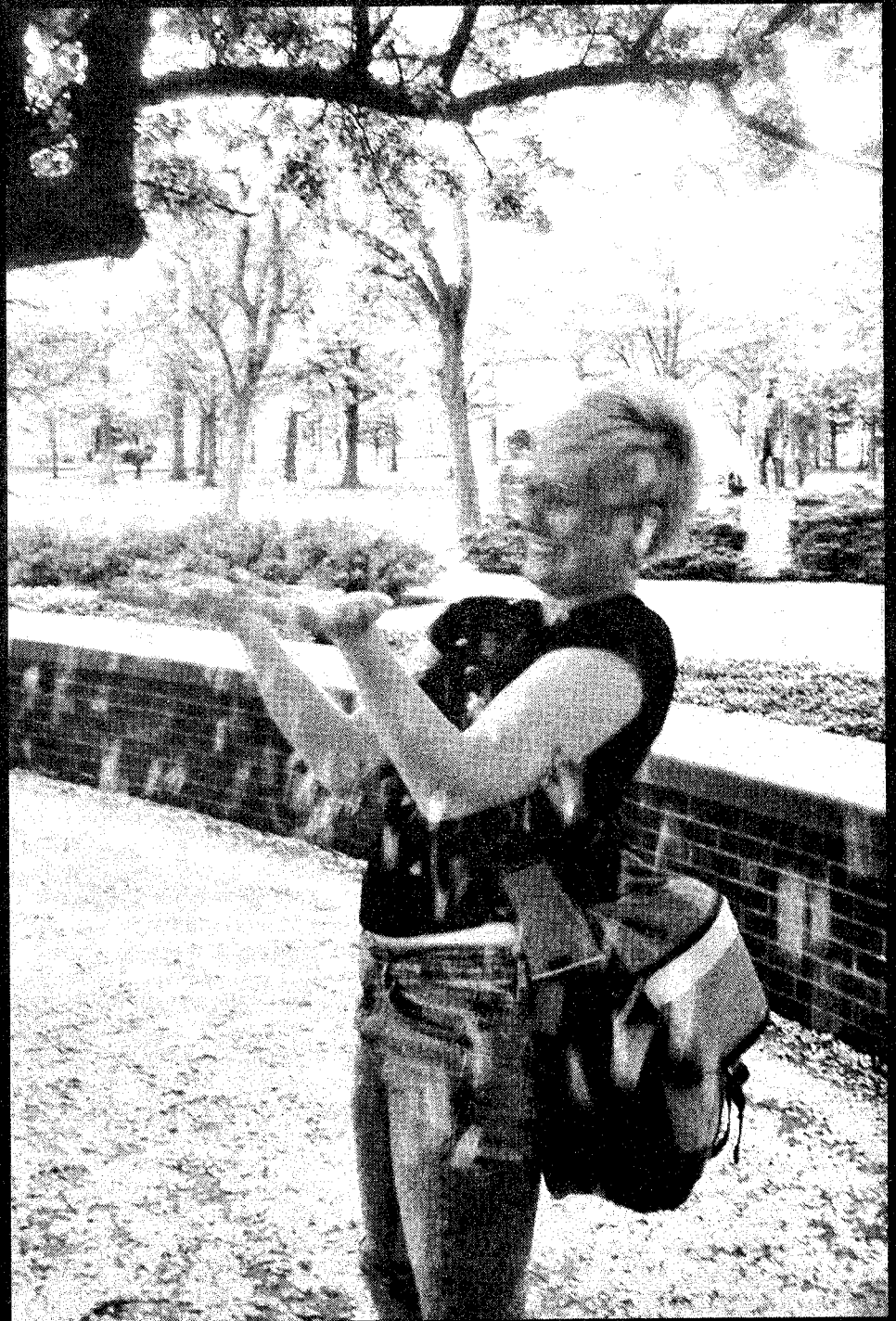
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Jon Lawinger

Social Security and Fossil Fuel are Highlights of President's Press Conference

story by >> Ian Florida

On April 29th the president held a press conference to discuss policy matters surrounding the high price of oil and his current commitment to reform social security. Several other issues were addressed as well, including: the war in Iraq and terrorism all over the world, the state of No Child Left Behind, Partisan fighting in the Senate and House over John Bolton and judicial nominees, talks with North Korea, and current relations with the United Nations. The discussion focused on the following, social security, and the energy crisis.

The first item on the Bush agenda was the high price of oil. Bush outlined several ways in which the United States could turn the tables on the high price of oil, foremost is encouraging those countries which produce oil, to produce more. He stated "we will continue to encourage oil-producing nations to maximize their production." However, those same oil producing nations have said that it is not a matter of production, but of the U.S.'s ability to refine the crude oil that is shipped to it. Two more ways in which the US can move toward energy independence were outlined in an answer to a question halfway through the conference: "We should have an active nuclear energy policy in America. We've got abundant resources of coal and we're spending money for clean coal technology." He also stated that we should "Develop promising new sources of energy." The President used this occasion to tout his energy bill which has passed in the house, but has not yet passed in the Senate.

Next on the agenda was the state of social security which the president described as being in "Serious financial trouble." President Bush outlined his goal for a new social security. He made it clear that under his plan "all Americans born before 1950 will receive the full benefits." He did not address any Americans born after 1950, those his plan would affect. During this press conference he reiterated the point that any new reform must include private accounts. He outlined these accounts as allowing people to invest their money in the stock market instead of solely relying on the government for a check. When questioned of how he felt that polls show a majority of Americans disapprove of the way he is handling social security, the president responded, "You know, if a president tries to govern based on polls, you're kind of like a dog chasing your tail. I don't think you can make good, sound decisions based upon polls. And I don't think the American people want a president who relies upon polls and focus groups to make decisions for the American people."

Justice Sunday: *Making a farce of religion AND justice*

opinion by >> Ian Florida

Since arriving in office President Bush has nominated 205 people for judicial positions. Of these 205 nominations, nearly 200 have been confirmed. In recent weeks Senate Republicans have become disgruntled with Democrats failure to acquiesce to their demands. The Republicans, not content with a 90% success rate in confirming the president's nominations, have decided to move against the democratic minority by removing their ability to fight the judicial appointments. The democrats are holding out against the most controversial of the president's candidates by filibustering against them. The filibuster is a tactic the Republicans are well acquainted with. Most notably is Sen. Strom Thurmond, a Republican from South Carolina, who filibustered for 24 hours and 18 minutes against the Civil Rights Act of 1957. More recently, however, the filibuster was used by the Republicans during the Clinton administration to block his judicial appointments.

The current rules require 60 votes for a nomination to move from deliberation to be voted on for appointment. There are seven such candidates which do not have the number of required votes to move to an up or down vote.

A few Republican leaders in the Senate are characterizing the Democratic block of these justices as an attack against people of faith. They believe that the democrats are fighting these nominees because of their Christian faith. In order to move that propaganda forward, the Family Research Council, a rightwing Christian organization, held an event televised from a "mega-church" in Louisville Kentucky. The event starred James Dobson, director of the family research council, and Jerry Falwell as well as Sen. Bill Frist. The event portrayed democrats as prejudiced against people of faith and striving towards a subjugation of religion in America. The slogan for the event was advertised on television and at the event: "Stop Filibustering People of Faith."

Senate democrats have countered that they are not blocking these justices because of their faith, but rather because of their extremist views. Sen. Biden has stated that they have written some "pretty radical stuff." He claims that they are being blocked because of their radical views on property rights. In a recent interview with CNN, Biden stated that "If you read what they've written and you read what others have written about those issues, you're talking about stopping the ability of county zoning facilities to be able to tell you that you can't build a factory in the middle of a neighborhood unless you compensate the factory."

Over 430 church leaders around the country have stood up in opposition to the FRC's intermingling of religious and political propaganda. They have sent letters and even held a demonstration in Louisville the day of the big event. Political and religious leaders around the country are upset by Frist's and Dobson's failure to draw a line between matters of state and soul.

Album Review:

Sabertooth Cadillac Soldier

review by >> Tim Linn

By all rights, this review should start like this: "Sabertooth, a three-piece out of Columbia, Missouri, make a racket on their debut, 'Cadillac Soldier', just released on Matador Records, that is comparable to that of the 'new' rock movement reinterpreted by aliens in the 31st century."

This review will not start like that though. Sabertooth was a band out of Columbia, Missouri, but their debut was not released on a major indie, but rather tiny old Catjams records, based in their hometown of Como. The band rose from the ashes of the Pows, a bunch of high school savants whose second album, Neon Winteer, provided a pretty damn solid blueprint for this.

'Cadillac Soldier' is 16 tracks of stuff that ranges from 31st century, monolithic garage rock, complete with bleeping synth noise interjections ("Be Haze") to nervous ticks of rhythm ("Hubba Hubba").

The entire band acts as a rhythm section, especially the vocals, save "Dino Crisis" and a few other instances, which works to give the album a nice "Fall that's not drugged up". The middle stretch of the album is especially energetic, with "Malaysian Skins", "Body People", and "Be Haze" locking in together, reminiscent of Neon Winteer.

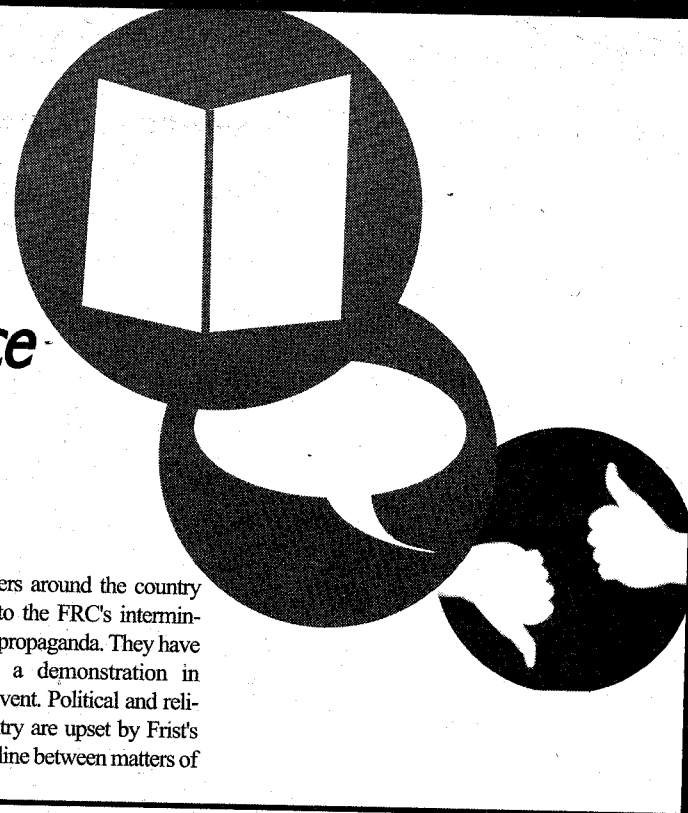
One of the most important aspects of the album is the sequencing, which brings

to mind the Pixies' Surfer Rosa, with short bursts of energy interrupted by longer songs. In this case, though, the sound of the shorter songs remains intact on the longer songs, giving the record a cohesive feel.

But to me, one of the most amazing aspects of Cadillac Soldier is the sound of it. For a record produced locally, every track sounds amazing, with the tighter production really working to its advantage. It was so good frontman Zack McLuckie submitted it as his portfolio for entrance to the Chicago Institute of Art. He was accepted, which prompted the breakup of what could have been and was, for a short time, this awe-inspiring local band.

Basically, Cadillac Soldier takes what the Pows had started to do, experiment with traditional rock, and breaks it down to where all that is left is a slobbering vegetable of a person, then build it back up to something different but equally impressive.

Cadillac Soldier is available through Catjams records, either by email (orders@catjams.com) or going into Maude Vintage, Apop Records, or Whizz Records in downtown Columbia. Not only will you be supporting local music, but you'll also have something to listen to at your next dance party (seriously, this is a kickin party record).



continued from page 8

ther and further into the lines of the fallen, discarding the destroyed after their fun was had.

Rain became hail, a multitude of fists beating upon the land as the whole sky seemed to move at once, coming down to touch the earth. Up and down it pulsed, throwing hail and lightning as it descended, and thundering as it rose upward. As the sky came down the wind rushed upward to join it, coming from all directions to a central point from which the largest stones were thrown and a funnel was being created in the clouds. Finally, with a loud roar, the clouds unzipped the vortex, releasing it from the heavens and allowing it to wind its way toward the desperate and dying forest. Small at first, the tornado grew larger as it erected itself, elongating to reach the ground. The sky itself also made a final descent with the vortex, yearning to bring a new destruction to the trees that were left. With a girth larger than any tree, the tornado impacted with the ground and started moving. Back and forth it twisted as the clouds heaved up and down, first slowly, gaining momentum as it found purchase on the surface. What trees were left were uprooted and discarded, the tornado chewing them and throwing them far away when finished. The ground itself seemed rocked to its foundations as it tried to react to the destructive force upon it. Up and down it quaked, in opposite time to the clouds, trying to compensate for the massive pressure. The tornado bellowed in rapture as it gyrated through the whole of the forest, leaving the land fully exposed.

The cracked land was now water-full around the geyser in the middle of the forest. Long chapped and dry, it sucked the water from the land as it saw the tornado moving with purpose toward it. Cries of pain could be heard all over the forest left destroyed by the brute force of the vortex, and as it barreled wickedly toward the geyser, the ground quaked in desperation. Nothing could combat the swirling, sucking cloud as it pushed its way forward, reveling in its own omnipotence, feeding off the land's incapacitation. It thrust toward the geyser quickly, first touching the land around it, then moving to stand on top of it, and the land let out its final, desperate yell. The geyser shuddered and responded, amassing all the force it could and erupting as the tornado came to rest on top of it. Water sprayed up like a volcano, ejaculating into the eye of the shifting mass and spraying out. The force of the explosion rocked the tornado, hitting its core, ripping through wind and cloud alike, and the tornado pulled away with a scream, the clouds of its sides evaporating in diaspora. As the tornado retreated the sky seemed to open in an expression of shock, and the wind lost its momentum as it stopped to watch. Sensing defeat, the wind ran upward to help the clouds retreat. Soon the darkness passed out of site, borne by the winds to new prey, leaving the land torn but fertile for rebirth when an inevitable humid spring could incubate the earth.

Most Personally Satisfying Experience

fiction by >> Samantha Fidler

"This is KTRQ 95.7 drive at five with Kelly and Stone. Sit back, and enjoy the ride as we get you home with the classic hits from the 80's 90's and today."

Classics? When did 80's music become classic? He shakes his head. Dr. Valden remembers dancing with his wife to this music in college. *It can't be classic music yet*, he thought. I'm not a dinosaur.

His eyes adjust to the weakening sunlight. He checks his watch knowing his wife is waiting for him. Surprised she hadn't called yet he checks his cell phone.

Dancing in a snowy fog, the memorizing hues of blues and grays intoxicate the senses and blind the unsuspecting driver. The windy path is no more visible than the trees he thought he saw on the side of the road. Clouds are now forming around him and the car feels motionless, as if suspended in a pool of water. The panic sets in. The feelings are remote to him as cleaning sup-

plies and diapers. He's the man of the house! He has everything under control all the time.

Though nothing seems right in his world, and he knows it, he feels it. The tiny pricks of pain in his heart tell his brain to run, but where to? Moving in this steel contraption is the only thing he can do until the fog lifts and the clouds disappear and he can see the road again. There, he can see the stark white lines and the panic starts to subside. The sunshine yellow dashes tell him he's all right. He knows he will make it home. He knows that after the bridge he will be just inches away from his driveway, where life makes sense and he is in control.

But he never saw the car stalled in the middle of the road, not until his grill slammed into the side door of the stranded car, ripping it off its hinges. The grinding of metal sent sparks into the air, like rescue flares signaling for help. The panic is back stronger than a raging bull and harder than the metal that flew by his face. His mind is blank as the car transforms into a top,

He'd shut his bedroom door, and play his guitar with his eyes closed. With his fingers dancing across the strings, he could almost feel her there. She'd be sitting across from him, their socked feet touching, and she'd be humming along.

"Yoo-hoo," a clear voice interrupted his imagination. A young woman was patiently waiting for him to take her order.

"Hi," she said, her voice warm and energetic.

"I am sorry about that. I guess my mind isn't here anymore today." Sam couldn't help notice how beautiful she was. She had short brunette hair that shined like it had been polished. Her green eyes were tiny emeralds that made him feel honored just to be looked at by her. His attention was drawn most to her mouth, though. Her full pouting lips were a very natural pink - he realized this gorgeous woman wasn't wearing any makeup. He would have given up anything right then to watch her lips move as she sung along while he played for her.

"I can understand that. I adore your jacket. Is it legit?" she asked, her eyes genuinely interested.

"Legit? Um, I didn't steal it if that's what you mean."

She laughed. Oh God, she had a beautiful laugh, Sam thought. "Oh you know, a real vintage find?" she asked.

"Oh yes. I got it at Ninth Street Vintage." "Even better!"

Sam was acutely aware his heart was beating rapidly within his chest. How long had it been since a woman had made him feel this way? Months? Years? He forgot all about the robot women that he'd pitied and instead longed to hear about the dreams he was sure filled her little heart.

"Well, what would you like?" he stammered to break the silence that he threatened to fill with words of adoration for this woman.

"Oh yeah, I forgot why I was here." She smiled a sort of half-smile and he noticed how wonderful her eyes were when she smiled. They

spinning around and around faster and faster.

Then the car stops. He closed his eyes and tried to ease his breathing. He opens them again and sees himself on the other side of the bridge. His heart moves down from his throat. He slowly struggles out of his seat and steps into the moonlight. He finds his cell phone in his jacket pocket and starts to call home. The phone rings once, and he hangs up. He didn't even think about checking the car or the bridge for the driver of the car he just hit. He searches for signs of movement, but his body was still disoriented. He knew he had to call 911.

He hears voices coming from the other side of the bridge. It's his wife running in bare feet in her night gown. Her hair shines in the moonlight, and her cheeks wet with tears. She throws her arms around him and then backs away firing questions left and right at him. He nods and smiles. He takes her back in his arm once again. For once in his life, he wants to be held and protected. He snuggles up to her, and cries like never before. His wife coos and whispers words of love into his ears. His whole body relaxes and they wait together for the ambulance to arrive.

crinkled up a little bit so that all he could see was the light they reflected. "I need to look at the menu again."

"No problem" -- he needed to look at her again. She was looking over his head at the selections, her face curved into concentration. He couldn't stop thinking about how much he wanted to hug her just so he could smell her hair.

Finally, she decided. "I'll take a cup of green tea."

"That's two dollars and twelve cents." She reached in her purse - it was a ridiculously bright pink bag - and took out three crumbled bills. When he reached to grab the money, his fingers brushed against her palm, just for a second.

He felt a spark transfer from her skin and race straight to his heart. He was breathless - he wanted to both shout with joy and hide at once. Anxiously, he looked up to see if she had felt it too. She had. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were soft. She looked at him with completely vulnerability that he hoped he'd never forget.

He thought then of the months he'd gone without even feeling a woman's touch, of the nights he'd spent crying his tired body to sleep, of the darkness that he was uncertain he'd ever be able to escape.

She smiled at him and spoke first, stammering, "What are you doing after this? Do you have any plans? Maybe we could get some coffee. Or, of course you don't want coffee, you work here. Maybe we could go walk on the beach, or."

Sam cut her off, "I have plans. Sorry." He shrugged. She looked crushed and for an instant, he thought about taking it back. Telling her what he wanted to do to her - brush her hair and kiss her nose. He wanted to tell her that he could see already that they were kindred spirits. That he wanted to play for her the rest of his life. But he couldn't. Not now. Probably not ever.

He was content to dream alone of her in the sanctity of his bedroom where she couldn't touch him.

Bean Dreams

fiction by >> Marie Tenny

Sam sighed slowly, his piercing blue eyes cloudy today. The constant stream of Ann-Taylor-wearing, fat-leather-purse-holding women had not stopped all day. The angry rattat-tat of their shiny heels had droned on for hours. He'd served so many of the mannequin women with steel hearts steaming double lattes that he wanted to yell.

He knew that the fur-clad mothers peered over their thin-rimmed glasses at him with dismay. They'd take one look at his clothes - a tattered red velvet jacket and tight blue jeans with patches on the knees - and dismiss him. Wincing, they'd hand him their clean fifty-dollar bills, as if he'd throw off his apron and run, their cash clenched in his fist. Sam knew they stared at the scars on his arms when he gave them their change with an aloof pity.

But, he pitied them. Some days, he'd pretend away their pathetic ugly lives with idealistic dreams of the girls they once were who wished for more from life than sateen sheets. Sam saved them all in his imagination some days - with a strum on his guitar to remind them of their pretty past.

But today, he was filled with a loathing for each of them. He despised these desperate women in his coffee shop, even more than those who shamelessly paraded down the pavement with Starbucks styrofoam in hand. These women were worse because they tried to buy passion, pretend they still had souls deeper than their Chanel perfumes.

He wondered if he was the only one left in the world unafraid to dream. He wanted to share a life with a woman who loved him and her dreams. He'd sing her to sleep and her smile would melt his heart. Maybe it made him pathetic, but after a day like today, he couldn't wait to go home to the solace of his music and dream of her.



Illustration by >> Ken Dahl

Galahad

fiction by >> Joseph Baumann

I was not with my father when he killed the dragon, but when he came in through the garage without bothering to knock the thick slabs of snow from his boots against the edge of the step leading to the door, sounding like a soldier marching to his death, I knew immediately that something was not right; he would not have forgotten the almost-forever ritual otherwise. He was still holding the ax he uses to chop wood, always in the back yard, looking like a Paul Bunyon who had lost Babe. The usually glistening blade was covered in a thick, green substance that smelled of burnt rubber and week old fish.

He took me from the kitchen where I was cooking dinner and led me through the garage, past her dust-ridden Buick of which we never speak and pretend is invisible. For some reason it remains entombed there, mummified by mildew and fading emotions. Stepping through the deep gouges he made in the snow quilt, I followed him to the spot where he'd first found its tracks. He measured the imprint with his hand. Stretched out, the old, chapped hand barely reached across the width of the dragon's sole. I noticed the age in his hand: the grayed hairs, the deep fur-

rows and wind-chapped wrinkles in his knuckles, the all-knowing blisters on his fingertips. They were the hands of an empty man, filled with water masquerading as blood.

The body was in a clearing. It was a slimy green, the color of the substance consuming his ax, which my father gripped tighter as we approached the opaque thing. The scales were misshapen hearts, like those of men who outlive their lovers, running down its eight food body, not counting the tail, bluntly spiked with larger scales which looked like ravenous incisors. Maybe they had ravished more than food.

It was almost medieval, and my father was, for now, Beowulf. Some might call him Hrothgar, but he was always my Beowulf, lordship and all.

My father handed me the ax. Without words I swung it and severed the dead thing's tail, staining the snow's peaceful white with the din of the dragon's insides. Perhaps we would make vengeful necklaces of its proud skin, dangle angry hearts from our necks.

When we returned home, I continued to prepare dinner. Wife and mother, called Ellie, would not dine with us tonight. No, she would remain buried under a thick slab of snow far away, where the dead pray curses upon dragons that might haunt their still-breathing lovers.

Chippy's Big Day

fiction by >> Tara Schneider

The eyes of Chippy Z were turned jellyward, but his mind was on the zamboni, his long-time partner in breadwinning. He snatched up a random jar and continued down the aisle with unfaltering allegiance. He wouldn't give up without fighting the good fight, no-sir-ee. He'd be the conductor of the Atlanta City Cultural Commission's train to hell if it was the last thing he did.

He strolled aristocratic through the back of the store, markedly not looking at any frozen foods or fish, until he felt a bump under the cart's front wheel and heard an involuntary womanyelp. He looked up and saw the eyes which had haunted the fog machine of his memory for so many years, now once again incarnate. He had steamrolled the toes of Loretta Florence Albentine.

"Well I never. Chippy Z. Lord as my witness, if I had a dime for every time you'd run me over in the Piggly Wiggly. . . I'd be one broke hooker. My, you've grown to a man! How you been, Sweet?" It sounded like banana pudding pie from her lustrous hot-pink lemonade lips. As she spoke, she had enticingly and unconsciously swiveled her hips and chest, so that one shoulder of her soft blouse had fallen down.

"I, uh, you know. . . just fine I'd say. You know. . . working hard and all. . . How come you're wearing that furry hood? I mean I like it, er."

"Well I'm glad you asked, Sugar." She glistened rosy like any southern woman ought to at this time of year, especially one in a furry hood. "I've joined up with the Inuits, see? The new Cultural Commission's shipped in real ones, from Alaska! They've put em up at the ice rink right up on Peach Street, with ice blocks and fishing holes and furry white animals and everything! Families can go to the rink and hunt with them on weekends; the rink will finally make some real money I think, and the Commission will too. Oh and the best part is, you can pay a monthly rent and live there, right with the Eskimos! Why, I moved in

this last Thursday."

As this narration had progressed, Chippy had grown increasingly agitated. His eyes had grown wider and wider, wilder and wilder. He had turned crimson and started quivering. Now he sputtered, "I, uh, forgot I have to um, be somewhere. I'll see you around," and shuffled out of the store without his groceries.

In the parking lot, he climbed into his zamboni and dropped his head onto the steering wheel. The world had punished him bitterly for every hope and dream he had ever harbored, for every right he had thought himself to possess. For almost two weeks now he had been dressed in sackcloth, wondering what would become of him. Now the question was: What would he become? It was time to take action.

[Ending I]

Chippy burst through the rink's zamboni doors riding on his magnificent ice-smoothing elephant throne.

"COWER AND TREMBLE BEFORE ME, KUDZU!!!!!" he roared, and slammed on the gas, advancing toward the tribe at a full 3 MPH. Yet, the transplanted natives cowered not. Nor did they tremble. Rather, they held their furry-hooded children by the hand and began to walk in a pack toward the zamboni. When they met the zamboni in the middle of the rink, they began pushing it backwards. One young man jumped up and tinkered with the controls until the zamboni ceased its futile forward-forging. Meanwhile Chippy was pulled down to the ice. He took the time between the zamboni and the ice to think of the pair of shoes he lost last month that now he'd never find, to wallow in compunction for not taking Mama Z's teachings to heart, and to try to recall some long-forgotten fantastic and life-changing moments.

This was it. He was done for.

However, as Chippy Z cowered and trembled on the hard ice, the elated Inuits began to load their numbers onto the zamboni. They dove headlong into joyous songs of celebration. Ten crammed themselves in the drivers cab, and six held onto the top. Singing merrily, fur-clad, grate-

ful, and triumphant, they all drove out of the rink and into the sunset.

[Ending II]

Chippy burst through the rink's zamboni doors. It was time for these squatters to pack their bags. Time to meet their baleful fate under the reign of the zamboni. Just then he heard Loretta shouting from the doorway across the rink. She dropped her grocery bags and started marching toward Chippy across the ice.

"Just what do you think you're doing, sir? This is our home you know. . . Chippy!? Is that you? Oh Chippy, no! Please," She reached the front of the zamboni and stood there like a seraph, tears in her blue-shadowed eyes, her hair curling and jumping like wildfire. "Come live here with us, hon, I've. . . Chippy, I've loved you all along. Will you put away that silly zamboni and stay with me forever?"

"I. . . y. . . well yes, Loretta! I will!"

Chippy woke to a rapping on the side of the zamboni. It was dark outside, and he was still in the supermarket parking lot. He rubbed his eyes, ran a hand through his hair, and looked over at a police officer, younger than himself, who seemed to be trying to grow a mustache and was standing firmly with his arms crossed, leaning slightly backward and to the left. As he spoke slowly and deeply, his face indicated that he was imagining old-fashion cowboy music in the background.

"Look son, the snow and ice are gonna come soon, and we need you to be stationed at one end of town to roll through and smooth everything down for us." The officer firmly patted the zamboni twice for emphasis.

"The snow and ice? What snow and ice?" Chippy blinked and squinted.

"You been sleeping here all day? The sun burnt out this afternoon. Anyway, I've set up the new Atlanta City Zamboni Foundation, with the funds I pulled from that damned Cultural Commission, to pay you well. Go now, boy. Godspeed."

About Dad

fiction by >> Jacquie Tosspon

My dad was a brave man. Born in the 1930's to a blue-collar family in the northeast of England, his was not a time of opportunity, so my dad went out and made his own. This was an uncommon thing to do, to say the least, for the collective mindset was to accept and to suffer stoically one's lot in life, whatever the circumstance. Definitely one of the heaviest burdens in England was to be born amongst the lower classes, for that is where you were destined to stay. People were born at home, lived their entire lives within a four or five block radius, and then died at home.

Ironically, the lifeblood of our home - County Durham - was also the slow, silent killer of its sons and fathers. Years on their knees in the coalmines in backbreaking repetition was their lot in life, "and thank God and King for the work," the men always added, loyal to a fault; for, before the mining boom was "The Great War" - WWII - and in comparison, life was good. But as my father grew up he watched the slow-death of the mines rob him of his father as coal dust blanketed lungs, packed eardrums, and darkened the sight, until my granddad Matt became a mere shadow of the robust man he once was. Because of this, my dad made a decision early on that he was going to make a better life for himself. This goal he successfully accomplished by leaving his home, his family, and all that he knew, and traveling halfway around the world to another land, a land of opportunity, which, for him, was New Zealand.

There are many tales about my dad, from the times before and the times after his leaving England. But, I didn't hear these stories until the last years of his life. That is because after his divorce from our mother we left New Zealand and completely lost touch with our dad. Over twenty years passed before I was to be in contact with him and another five years before we laid eyes on each other again. All this we owe to my sister Annie. She remained in correspondence with one of her childhood friends in New Zealand and it is through this friend that she made contact again

Continued on next page

This Weekend

fiction by >> E. B. Roper

My thirteen-year-old cousin pees angst. "You hurt the ones you love the most," she says as she steps into the house. The strap of her duffel bag slides off her shoulder and the bag falls heavily onto the hardwood floor.

Adam stares at her for a moment and says, "Maybe you should stop renting Garden State."

"Maybe you should stop nosing through people's accounts when you're working at the video store," she sneers. Her thick, dark lipstick highlights her crisp, white teeth. I remember the phase where she tried to die them yellow.

Adam shrugs; he's used to her. Her parents drop her off at my house when they are gone for the weekend, which is more often than not. Adam thinks they're swingers. I think they just can't handle the fumes from her black fingernail polish anymore.

"Don't mind her. She never really got over the

whole Kurt Cobain thing," I say to Adam.

"Ah yes. A tragedy reborn with every new generation."

"Whatever. Hey," I say to Adam, "did you bring the game over?"

Adam scoots around my cousin and slides across the floor to where his schoolbag sits next to his shoes by the door. He rummages around in the bag until he pulls the thin case out, shoving everything else back in unceremoniously. I try not to make eye contact with my cousin, focusing over her shoulder to Adam's activities. It proves difficult as her heavily eye-shadowed gaze bores down on me relentlessly.

"What is it?" I ask, finally cracking.

"You're supposed to make me dinner," she says and crosses her arms. Adam makes a wide arc around her, silently gliding across the floor.

"No way. You make your own clothes. You can make your own dinner," I snap.

"My mom said that since your parents are gone tonight that you have to make dinner," she says, her voice rising slightly.

"It's only four o'clock," Adam says, flipping

the game case from one hand to the other. "What are you, like eighty or something?"

"No," she says, brushing her hair over her shoulder, "but I know what is going to happen. You guys are going to go downstairs into the basement and play video games until you either pass out with the controllers still in your hands or stagger up bleary eyed and disgusting at who knows when and I'll not have had any dinner."

Adam grimaces, turning the game over in his hands. "She makes a good point," he mutters.

"So use the phone!" I growl. "Order a pizza or whatever you eat. Indian-Thai-Vegetarian-Low Sugar-Cantonese-Gluten Free whatever! Here," I say, digging through my wallet and shoving twenty bucks in her direction.

Her face screws up, ready to spew forth a nasty assault of verbal abuse, but finally she squints at me and grabs the money, shouting "Fine!" and stomping off.

I sigh and head through the hallway to the basement door. The house is silent. Wherever she has gone, she's not going to let us know about it.

"Harsh, dude," Adam says, following me

down into the basement.

"Whatever. You don't understand."

"She's only thirteen," he offers.

"Oh boy, I can't wait to see what she's like at thirty!" I huff in exasperation, throwing my hands up.

Adam bends down and puts the game into the machine. He pushes the power button and the box hums to life. "Just saying..." he mumbles.

I open my mouth, but have nothing to say, and instead settle for sighing and grabbing the first player controller. We play for a while, Adam winning most games, but refraining from his usual eye-sore of a victory dance. The curtains are pushed back from the tiny window and outside I can see the light darkening slowly. I have yet to hear a doorbell ring.

"Did you know my cousin plays the cello?" I ask Adam.

"No."

I swear softly as Adam kills my player for what must be the hundredth time.

He starts to say something, but I cut in abruptly. "I think I'm hungry," I say.

Adam smiles and says, "I'm glad."

About Dad

Continued from last page

with our father. She forwarded an address to me and I corresponded with my dad for several years until he moved to the States to live for good.

For the first two years, he lived with my family and me. Then he bought a camper and fixed it permanently behind the garage, just north of my house. We plugged him into the garage, procured a propane tank, helped him tote water from our house to the caravan, and he was set. So for the next five years, until he died, my dad was camped in my back yard. Needless to say, we got to know each other extremely well. It was then that I began to admire him for who he was and what he had done. I found out that, although my dad was not formally educated, he was extremely intelligent. He was an avid reader on many different subjects and, more importantly, he remembered what he read. But my dad's forte, without a doubt, was his storytelling abilities. The running joke was that our dad could talk Satan into converting, he was such a convincing speaker. It was a common event for our family to gather around a roaring fire at my dad's "camp" and talk. Mainly we listened, and my dad would talk.

He painted vivid mental pictures of his life in England as a boy during the Second World War. Everything was rationed then. My dad was nine or ten and after school he would work at neighbouring farms to earn an extra rabbit or chicken, or some extra vegetables - never money. He told of befriending young German soldiers who were just boys themselves, POW's forced to work on the farms of men who were off fighting, or worse, permanently gone. My dad worked in the potato fields, driving the tractor as the young soldiers followed behind, picking the potatoes from the ground and filling large burlap sacks. My dad said that these POW's ate better than the locals, their rations including such delicacies as chocolate and fruit. But the young Germans shared their bounty with my dad and the other children on the farm. During their breaks, they would all sit around and attempt to communicate, each teaching the other words in their respective languages. Common to all was a hatred of the war, and a certain uncer-

tainty as to its outcome. Also common to both was a sense of loss, and a longing for a world before war. Such exchanges, along with the unselfish act of sharing their fruit and chocolate, endeared them forever in my dad's heart, so much so that he found it hard to fault them individually, even though he lost many close relatives during the war.

Particularly painful was the loss of my dad's uncle, Ivan. He was my grandmother's younger brother and was very dear to the family. Uncle Ivan was only seventeen when he went to war but he went bravely. He was not gone two months when, one night as my dad and his mum were sitting by the fire, a knock was heard at the door. Not expecting anyone, my nana called out, asking who was there. They both heard, ever so faintly, Ivan's voice. "It's me Min, it's your Ivan." (My nana's name was Minnie.) Upon hearing this, they both rushed to the door, my nana swinging it open widely in great expectation, but no one was there. They stepped out into the snow to find nothing, not even footprints. It was the day after next that they received word that Uncle Ivan had been killed in action, late in the evening, the night before last.

Night Elves

fiction by >> Regan

It was dark now that the storm had finally set in. The rain was pouring down, instead of the light drizzle when he had set out. He new that it was only a matter of time before the lightning and thunder would come. Since he was standing under the old oak, to keep dry, he new he'd have to be careful. He watched in silence as the other figure rode toward the oak. Drayke Chrystian, he should have known. After measuring each other, Drayke spoke first.

"I am surprised that you showed up."

"You said it was urgent, so I came. Why did you call me here?"

Drayke didn't leave the saddle of his

horse as he spoke. Elves were beneath him.

"It's time for you to give up your life, you have nothing left Nortameier. Your life now belongs to me."

"So now it's my turn to die. I wondered when you were going to come for me."

Oh...elves were so pathetic. Always predictable. Like dirt they were. Very beneath him.

"Yes you. You knew this day was coming. Each day closer than the last."

The slightly graying elf smiled to himself. The wrinkles around his eyes coming closer together. Yes Nortameier knew he'd die tonight. He felt it in his dreams. That's why he put his plans into actions before he came. There were things beginning now that even Drayke Chrystian couldn't stop. Nortameier had stopped listening, but he caught the last of Drayke's revengeful speech.

"You are the last elf. Once your blood is spilled, and your heart stops beating, the elves will forever be finished. They no longer will be free to walk this land again. Magic will finally be erased from this world, no longer to claim innocent lives. I will have the control I seek and no one to challenge me. This world will be mine."

His father's work would be complete.

"You will never have complete control," swiped the elf. "There are others who believe in the truth of magic. They will fight. Innocent lives have not been taken by magic. They have been taken by you who seem to enjoy watching people suffer." Nortameier eyed the human. Never trust a Chrystian.

Elves were so annoying. Well, he would be done with them soon enough.

"You are putting up a pretty good argument for one who has lost everything. Your family has been slain. Your lands have been taken. What is left for you to fight for?"

Nortameier knew Drayke thought nothing of the values of the elves: honesty, loyalty, courage, honor, strength, and love. Least of all love.

"My life is worth something to me. I value what I have." The elf sneered at the

human.

"You have nothing." With that an arrow shot out of the dark, piercing the back of the elf. He fell towards the ground, not feeling the wet earth when he hit it...death had taken him before he had a chance to defend himself. The last elf had been slain. Chrystian gave a small smile, his father would be proud. He had avenged his father's death and slain the last elf. Oh what a glorious day it had been.

"Sir, what do you want done about the body?"

Drayke looked first at the slayer and then down at the bloodied body.

"Leave it, let it rot."

With that Chrystian turned and swiftly rode away.

The old oak had stood tall in the storm. It never wavered in spite of the destruction going on all around and under it. The dead elf's blood gave it a new strength that it had never felt before. The roots took all they could, not wasting a drop of blood. The old oak knew that one day it would pass on the traits of an elf, to one worthy of life.

A century had come and gone. Drayke Chrystian had been slain in battle. His great-grandson now ruled the lands, with as hard, if not harder, hand than that of his fathers before him. War had raged against Chrystian's followers and those still believing in what Nortameier had fought for. Small bands of rebels still collected together in secret. These rebels, more commonly known as the Night Elves, kept magic alive within themselves and their families. Elves had not been the only ones blessed with magic abilities. A select few in the race of man had been given the gift. These few taught their families, even those without the gift, in hopes of passing the knowledge to those who did. Stories and the Legend of the Last Elf, who sacrificed all he had to protect the world he loved, were common bedtime stories to all, not just the young, but the young at heart. For some, hope of a new life was lost. For the Night Elves, and their families, hope remained, laying dormant, waiting, silently waiting...

Dear Everybody, I'm Sorry - Anthony

fiction by >> Phil Jarrett

Dear God,

I know I've made a good deal of stupid mistakes in my life - some worse than others. And this one definitely takes the cake.... and well.... I've heard a few people say you are the great forgiver. Others say you will one day rain down fire on northeast Missouri if we start growing genetically mutated rice. That wasn't really relevant. I don't really care. I just thought I'd let you know what people were saying about you. Either way, I'll be seeing you soon.

-Anthony

P.S. Please take care of mom. One more thing... I mean, I know you are God and everything and not spiritual buffet for last wishes, but in all humility- can you make sure nobody hears about all this? I know a reputation doesn't really mean anything if you aren't around to appreciate it, but still I'm not quite sure how much I can stomach the idea of being remembered as the half-wit who..... well, you know the rest of the story. I mean, you're God. Okay, I think I've covered all my bases here.

Dear Mom,

I wish I had told you more often that I loved you. That is what I am supposed to say. Most last notes have something like that in them. I've found it to be a convenient loophole in the "I love you" system- if you just throw in an "I should've more often" in the end, it completely undermines a lifetime of neglect and leaves the neglected with only fond memories. I hope you didn't feel neglected. I'll be honest; the lunchroom table conversations everyday were pretty much a competition to see whose parents were the worst. I took part, but in all fairness you never won- despite the fact that I fabricated some stories that would've made millions had I published them. So if anyone tries to give you shit about causing all this because when I was younger you used to make me take off my shirt and cover me with dog food that you

would let Buckley eat off me while you videotaped and then showed the tapes to your numerous foreign love affairs - that was me trying hold my ground with Phil, Eric and Brett. Sorry to leave things in such a mess. I really am. I'm going to try to make up my bed before I go. Yeah, and I apologize for any emotional mess as well. I can't even imagine what that will be like and I feel really bad about it. I almost vomited today thinking about hurting you. In all fairness, it wasn't on purpose. I wasn't really that unhappy. This is one of life's weird turns, I suppose. Well, I was going to say I hope you don't miss me too much, but that is a lie. I hope you miss me a bit. If I am capable of missing, I will.

-Anthony

Dear Numark Laboratories,

This is Anthony Miles of Missouri. I recently purchased your product Certain Dri at a local retailer. I have to say it works great. Of all the anti-perspirants I've used, yours is definitely the best. That 12% Aluminum Chloride sure does shrink those pores. In gym last week, I ran half a mile in a grey sweatshirt and was pleased to find myself without those annoying sweat circles under my arms. Today we ran the full mile and I didn't sweat a drop. You didn't say anywhere on the bottle, container or instruction sheet that covering your entire body with it wasn't such a good idea. I guess you thought it would be common sense. I'll be the first to admit I'm an idiot. Sorry if my mom sues you. That isn't like her, so hopefully the worst of it will come in the form of a nasty letter. Well, I was just writing to wish you all good luck on this product and ask that you perhaps label it a bit clearer. I apologize if my death becomes any kind of inconvenience to you. In conclusion, Certain Dri really is really amazing. I'd go on about what a breakthrough this is for anti-perspirants, but I'm sure coming up with brilliant ideas like this is no sweat for you guys. Take it easy.

-Anthony Miles

Dr. Hendricks, Herpetologist

fiction by >> Marty Rice

I found my keys, and lost my job. My keys were under the bed, my job was at the zoo. My keys had been missing since Friday. On Friday, Chuck came over with some Oxycontin and hash. We watched the National Geographic channel as we smoked the hash and waited for the Oxy to kick in. The National Geographic channel was showing a program on coral snakes. I've become really interested in snakes since I got my job at the zoo. We have a coral snake at the zoo, but I don't handle it; they're really poisonous. I like to handle the boas a lot, except for the anaconda. One night while I was cleaning the smudges off the windows in the snake house, it almost got me. I went into the anaconda's terrarium to admire its coloring and pattern. While I was examining its midsection, it coiled around me with surprising quickness. Or maybe it wasn't that quick, I was pretty ripped on acid that night, and time kept slipping. Anyway, I was entranced by the triangular patterns on the snakeskin when I realized I was having trouble breathing. The triangular designs that had seemed so lovely moments before took on a menacing character, and transformed into jagged shards of stained glass. I could literally see the glass slicing into my belly. I watched as my entrails flopped out of my gut. I didn't want to see those shapes anymore, but I couldn't push them away. That anaconda is twenty-one feet long, and it has a girth of almost three feet. I think it's all muscle. Somehow, I summoned enough of my own

muscle to peel the snake off. With the terrarium safely locked I laid down on a bench to massage my stomach. Once I had convinced myself that my vital organs were still on my inside I emptied the trash. I only handle the smaller snakes now. Well, I did only handle the smaller snakes. I don't work at the zoo anymore. I can't believe I lost my job just for missing a couple days of work. I mean, I didn't have a way to get to work without my car, and my keys were M.I.A. When Frank, my boss, called to fire me, I kicked a book about North American snakes in anger and it slid under the bed. As I retrieved the book I found my keys too. I can't remember everything about Friday night, and I don't know how my keys ended up under the bed, but I do remember Chuck using all my eggs to make a giant omelet. A dozen eggs, a quarter of an onion, jalapenos, bacon, cheese, and sour cream all went into that behemoth. Chuck ate the whole damn thing too. He coiled one serpentine arm around the plate, and I watched while he put bite after bite into his mouth. The rhythm was hypnotic; one, two, three bites, a drink of strawberry soda, repeat. It seemed to last for hours, but I know how Chuck eats so that's impossible. After Chuck left, I shed my clothes like an old skin and took a shower. Relaxed from my shower and the drugs, I went to bed. I dreamed I was asleep in my bed. I found out Saturday afternoon that my keys were lost. I looked, but I couldn't find them. Without my keys, I couldn't go to the zoo, without the zoo, I had no contact with snakes. I realized I'm addicted to snakes. I really can't function without them anymore. I spent the next few days watching a lot of Discovery

The Sequence of Desire

A Satire by Daniel Poindexter.

Getting what you want isn't always rewarding.

Three men stepped from the gray fog that surrounded the hamlet of Leipwiro and made their way toward the still sleeping village. Their visages were grave, yet full of emotions, the foremost being purpose. The travelers were of noble bearing and walked quickly while their shrewd eyes absorbed their surroundings. The eldest of the three was called Aquila. Aquila was known far and wide as a powerful magician whose will was to be obeyed. He was ancient and carried an oaken staff in his gnarled hand. His face was wrinkled and his hair was white. Walking beside him was Ulcan, who was nearly as ancient as Aquila. Ulcan had long been revered as the greatest seer of the land. The knowledge he possessed had caused his face to be frozen in a perpetual scowl and had hunched his shoulders, as though he was carrying a great burden. Behind the two walked their acolyte, Colubra, a man of not more than twenty winters. Colubra was rugged in appearance and a sword was strapped to his back. In his right hand he carried Ulcan's staff. The three were known as the Magi of the White Mage.

As the group neared the village, Aquila broke the silence. "The White Mage is troubled by a presence in this village," he said. "Our undertaking is to make ourselves known to it. That is all.

The village consisted of about twenty wooden huts with thatched roofs. The three made their way to the village tavern, a two-story building with high roof. The Magi stepped through the low door. A greenish smoke curled up from the floor. "More Werra Smoke," muttered Colubra.

"We will be staying here for a time," Aquila said to the owner.

"The cost is twenty rupees a night," said the owner.

Aquila paid the man. "What is the smoke from?" he asked.

The innkeeper paled and said nothing. Ulcan tapped a mysterious symbol which he wore on his right forearm. The man paled even more. "There is no

Channel and National Geographic. I even walked to a nearby bookstore and bought the book on North American snakes that later found my keys. By Thursday these methods weren't giving me my fix, and my employment at the zoo had been terminated. The valiums only helped a little. I drove to Pet Emporium at the mall to see some snakes in person. They had a wide selection of reptiles, with snakes making up the biggest part. I handled a number of snakes before the manager came over. He had thick horn-rimmed glasses and short blond hair. He looked like an adult version of the kid from 'A Christmas Story'. He informed me that if I wanted to handle a snake I needed employee assistance. I proceeded to tell him that I was, "Dr. Hendricks, herpetologist", and I knew what I was doing. The term 'herpetologist' was one of many useful things I learned at the zoo. I liked the sound of that: 'Dr. Hendricks, herpetologist'. I thought maybe there was something there. The manager clearly didn't believe I was a zoologist of any kind, but since I handled the snakes so expertly he only stood by as I continued to do so. I surprised myself by buying a grey and brown corn snake. It cost forty-three dollars and sixty-seven cents, and it came with a plastic terrarium. As I was leaving I saw a now hiring sign. I applied, and the manager joked about a herpetologist being overqualified, but he hired me. That night Chuck came to my apartment empty-handed. That was rare. I gave him some of my valiums, told him about my new job, and showed him Salchicha, my snake. I let him hold Salchicha, and answered his lethargic questions. When I had satisfied his curiosity he said, "Thanks Dr. Hendricks," in a tone of half-mocking. I told him he was welcome.

smoke," the man said.

Colubra seized the man's tunic and brought his face close to his own. "Do not lie to the flame-wakers of the

White Mage!" he shouted.

"I do not know," the man whimpered.

Colubra reached for his sword but was stopped by Aquila's hand. "That is not necessary," Aquila warned.

Colubra wrenched his hand free from Aquila's grasp and shoved the man backwards. The man stumbled into a table which overturned, sending bottles and jars crashing to the floor. Colubra glared while the distraught man gazed about sadly at the broken goods.

Aquila spoke sharply. "Wait outside, Colubra!"

Colubra stalked angrily from the room.

Ulcan helped the innkeeper to his feet. "You must not be afraid of us," he said. "Now you must explain the smoke. The White Mage does not look kindly on those that conjure the Werra Smoke."

"I care not what the White Mage says, nor what any other man says," said the innkeeper.

"That is your choice. We are here to enforce the edict." Ulcan motioned to Aquila who began an incantation. Slowly the Werra Smoke disappeared from the room.

"You will not conjure any more Werra Smoke. It is bad for your business and bad for your health," cautioned Ulcan.

Aquila and Ulcan left the inn. No sooner had they shut the door behind them than Werra Smoke began to curl out from under the door.

Ulcan addressed Colubra. "Your impatience is unwise, Colubra," he said.

"It has been the same at every village we have gone to," Colubra replied bitterly.

"The only thing these people understand is the sword. You have done nothing to prevent the summoning of the Werra Smoke."

"That is not what the White Mage wishes, Colubra," answered Aquila. "You will obey us, for we are your masters."

"Does the White Mage wish for the Werra Smoke to go unchecked? For too long have I served the cause of your pathetic leadership. I will not go along with such foolishness any longer," said Colubra. He took Ulcan's staff and waved it over the two Magi. There was a clap of thunder and there in the Magi's place stood two stone tablets.

Colubra smiled. "Now to take care of that insolent innkeeper," he thought.

He drew his sword and kicked open the door of the inn. Inside the room the innkeeper looked up from his incantation. "Welcome, my friend," the man said.

Colubra lowered his sword. "Friend?" he questioned.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend. From your sword, I see that you have gone against your masters' commands," replied the man.

"You speak truth, old man," said Colubra. "I have overthrown the power of the White Mage's ambassadors. You are henceforth free to conjure as much Werra Smoke as you like."

No sooner had Colubra spoken these words than the smoke in the room increased three-fold. Immediately, Colubra and the innkeeper began to cough violently. They stumbled their way blindly to the doorway.

Once in the street the innkeeper breathed the free air. He turned around to find Colubra lifeless in the street next to two stone tablets. The innkeeper picked up the tablets. "Surely these tablets are a talisman against the danger of the smoke. It is unfortunate that this man did not carry them with him. I am lucky to have escaped with my life!" The man turned and took the tablets into his inn. The smoke vanished.

The innkeeper never felt the desire to conjure Werra Smoke again.

THE END

The Driver

I really hate John.
The stars are beautiful. It's a perfect night. All I can think about is my shitty day, and how much I hate that fucker John.

I hate myself too for letting him push me around. One of these days, I really ought to break his face. I'm too small to do it with my fists, but I'm sure a baseball bat could knock a tooth or seven loose.

Today was a bad day, but somehow, I still worked up the courage to talk to Sharon. But then John came up and destroyed everything.

He makes my life hell enough. Why couldn't he leave me alone this one time? The time I finally talk to the girl of my m y

He lies so still, arms draped over his chest, the satin pillow raising his head ever so slightly. It's like he's sleeping, but he's not. He's too still. Since he was a baby, he has been a hyperactive pinball bouncing off the walls and furniture. Even asleep, he tossed and turned until the covers almost strangled him.

Now he's still. And quiet. He's not supposed to be quiet.

I want to hear my son's voice again...
I remember the last thing he said to me. It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't poignant. It was just another afternoon. He said he was going out to buy his sister a birthday present and then hang out with friends. He would be home around midnight, and he loved me.

I told him to be careful and that I loved him too. I'm glad I did. I hope he knew I meant it.

I wish I had thrown my arms around him, covered his forehead with kisses, and made him play his favorite video game while I made his favorite cake. That

When somebody close to you dies, you should miss them, right? You should feel something. Anything. My brother died four days ago. I don't feel anything.

Everybody cried. Mom wished she had died instead. It's my birthday, and nobody smiles. Well, not really. My grandparents and mother force smiles that come off as grimaces. I start to blow out the candles. I should be sad John isn't here. I should make a wish like, "I wish John could see this." But I don't. All I can think about is how John ruined another birthday.

I tried to care about my brother. I really did. But how can you care about someone who makes you feel like shit?

I remember the moment I stopped loving my brother. I was five. It was my birthday. I had this giant stuffed bunny named Mr. Floblewobble. I don't know when I got him, but I loved him. That big dumb bunny went everywhere with me. I don't know why John did what he did. I guess he was jealous it was my birthday and I was getting attention. John was always attention starved; everything had to be about him. Whenever it was about me, he couldn't stand it. I remember I had just opened a present when John's mean little hands snatched Mr. Floblewobble and ripped the rabbit's head off.

Just ripped my bunny's head right off. For no reason.

He killed Mr. Floblewobble.
To a five-year-old girl, that was devastating. But

The Mother

He lies so still, arms draped over his chest, the satin pillow raising his head ever so slightly. It's like he's sleeping, but he's not. He's too still. Since he was a baby, he has been a hyperactive pinball bouncing off the walls and furniture. Even asleep, he tossed and turned until the covers almost strangled him.

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Just ripped my bunny's head right off. For no reason.

He killed Mr. Floblewobble.
To a five-year-old girl, that was devastating. But

The Sister

When somebody close to you dies, you should miss them, right? You should feel something. Anything. My brother died four days ago. I don't feel anything.

Everybody cried. Mom wished she had died instead. It's my birthday, and nobody smiles. Well, not really. My grandparents and mother force smiles that come off as grimaces. I start to blow out the candles. I should be sad John isn't here. I should make a wish like, "I wish John could see this." But I don't. All I can think about is how John ruined another birthday.

I tried to care about my brother. I really did. But how can you care about someone who makes you feel like shit?

I remember the moment I stopped loving my brother. I was five. It was my birthday. I had this giant stuffed bunny named Mr. Floblewobble. I don't know when I got him, but I loved him. That big dumb bunny went everywhere with me. I don't know why John did what he did. I guess he was jealous it was my birthday and I was getting attention. John was always attention starved; everything had to be about him. Whenever it was about me, he couldn't stand it. I remember I had just opened a present when John's mean little hands snatched Mr. Floblewobble and ripped the rabbit's head off.

Just ripped my bunny's head right off. For no reason.

He killed Mr. Floblewobble.
To a five-year-old girl, that was devastating. But

dreams.
I didn't even hear John come up behind me. And granted, he's done a lot crueller things to me. But for some reason, when I felt my pants around my ankles and heard Sharon's laughter at my Simpsons boxer shorts, it hurt more than any of the times he's rammed my face into the wall.

I wanted to kill him. I wanted to shove my fists straight through that smug, perfect grin of his. I wanted to feel his blood oozing down my arm, feel his brain and the small bits of bone turn to mush in my fingers. I wanted to hurt him, hurt him worse than he's ever hurt me. In ways he can't imagine.

But I didn't. Instead, I just pulled my pants back up, ran away, and tried not to cry.

I swig the beer. I'm such a pussy sometimes. I guess Sharon will never talk to me again. Oh well. I couldn't believe my ears when her friend told me she liked me. I never expected that, not in a million years. But I guess you can never know how other people see you. But of course, now it doesn't matter. Now Sharon sees me as a total loser. She'll look at me, and she'll see the helpless little pansy with his pants around his scrawny ankles.

I finish off the beer.

just how much I loved him. And he would still be alive.

Mothers never really sleep once their kids start driving. They'll lay down, rest on the border between consciousness and sleep, but they never cross into slumber until they know their child is tucked safely in his bed.

It was almost midnight. He still had plenty of time to meet his curfew. But I started to worry, like mothers do. Then the phone rang. I picked it up expecting to hear John make a weak excuse for being late. Instead, I heard what every mother dreads.

"Mrs. Smith," the officer said. "There's been an accident."

They called me down to identify the body. I never thought anything could be worse than my husband dying. I didn't think my heart could break again. I thought I had cried all my tears. I was wrong. You haven't really cried until you've wept into the arms of a stranger.

The officers told me what happened. There was another boy, a sixteen-year-old. He had been drinking, and he ran a stop sign. They talked about pressing charges.

"Good!" I cried. "I hope they lock him up and throw away the key!"

I think I would have forgiven him if he had shown me one shred of decency in the last fifteen years.

John hit me. He wrestled me when I didn't want to be wrestled. He made fun of me. He said I was ugly. He told me I dressed funny. He told his friends I was a lesbian. He said that I was fat. I'm sure a lot of brothers torment their sisters, but mine meant it. I stopped eating last summer because John said my thighs were like tanker trucks. John would have rather spit on me than look at me. And he only looked at me to find something to laugh about.

Sure, there's a hole in my life now that my brother is gone. But I can't say it's a bad hole. Why should I miss someone who treated me like the shit on his shoe?

I blow out my candles. I don't make a wish. Then we eat cake, and I open presents. I get a nice shirt and a book of Emily Dickens poems. And even though everybody is quiet because John's dead, nobody tries to ruin my birthday. This may be the most peaceful day of my life.

After I've turned all the packages into scraps of ribbon and paper, Mom grows quieter. She starts to say something a couple of times, and she swallows hard

It's a peaceful night. I blew off my friends so I could be alone. I'm not sure if I really want to be, but there's something nice about just me and the stars. Stars are really weird, you know? There's so many of them. It doesn't seem like you really need that many. If one of them went out, would anybody really notice? I wonder what makes each star important.

Sorry. I get philosophical when I'm depressed. And I share it when I'm drunk.

I roll off the hood of the car, and I stumble to the door. It's late. I probably better get home so Mom doesn't yell too much. I start the engine, and the stereo starts blasting. The singer growls, "People equal shit! People equal shit!" I agree.

I don't really know how fast I'm going. I'm not really thinking about the road, where I'm going, or how I'm driving. I keep flashing back to school, to John's smug laughter and how much I just want to fucking kill him.

I just want to kill him. I just want his blood spill out of his body. I just want him to die right the fuck now.

There's a flash of light. And honking. And then the sound of metal scraping as the car jerks, spins 360 degrees, and I'm thrown against the steering

I didn't mean that. What I really want is for them to kill him. It isn't fair. This irresponsible monster took my baby away. He can't know how much he hurt me. I want someone to suffer as much as I have. His parents should know what it's like to lose a child. He should know what it's like to suffer, to be in agony, to die just like John did. I wish I could put him in a car, flip it end over end, and let him see what it's like to die alone.

The last two days have been...emotional... I think of John, and I cry. I think of that kid, and I scream. I think of my daughter, and I'm thankful. I think, and I'm angry and sad and depressed and miserable all at the same time.

I dreaded the funeral visitation. I hated the idea of standing next to John's still body. John isn't supposed to be still. He's supposed to bounce around and say smartass things. I used to scold him, but his smart mouth would be a sweet sound now.

I can't believe all these people showed up. For the first time since the accident, I feel peace. Not much, but it is comforting to know I'm not alone. All these people miss John too. His friends. Our family. His teachers. They can't miss him like I do, but he meant something to them. I won-

before she finally gets it out. "There's one more present," she says softly. Then she disappears into another room.

She comes back carrying a box that covers her whole chest. She sets it gently on the table, and she wipes her hand across her eyes. "When..." She can't say the words. They get lost in tears. "They managed to pull this out of John's car after the wreck. It was undamaged, and it was for you."

I stand up, and I look at the top of the box. The paper is torn; he must have had it wrapped at the store. I wonder what horrible thing it could be. Could it be snakes that jump out when I pull the paper away? Maybe it's just a giant sign that says "You suck!" Or it could be a nice pie since I'm so fat. I don't know what to expect, and the family won't let me send it back.

I grab the paper, and I pull it away cautiously. No snakes jump out. I'm down to a plain brown box, and that doesn't give me any hints. I pull off the top, and I look inside.

Sitting there in the dark, waiting like an old friend, is a giant stuffed bunny rabbit. I shake a little as I pull him out. I look at him, and memories from a

wheel, bounced against the seat, and my head hits the roof.

I think I say, "Oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit..."

A thousand sirens, all out of tune, wail in my brain. Everything is fuzzy. Everything hurts. I lift my head off the dashboard, and I spit blood into my hand.

There's been a wreck. Oh, God, I hit someone. I fumble with my seat belt. "Let go of me, damn it!" It lets go, and I fall out of the car. I half crawl, half stagger my way across broken glass and blacktop to the other vehicle. It looks more like wadded paper than a car.

I go around to the driver. I can't see his face through the smashed window so I struggle with the door, finally force it open. I see his face. My heart stops.

"Holy shit. Are you okay, John?"

He looks at me from the corner of his eyes. Then he falls over. I catch him just before he hits the ground. I drag him out of the car. He's bigger than me, but somehow I hold him. He feels like a sack, like if I shake him, I'll hear his broken bones rattle. I hold him tight against me. His blood covers my arms, soaks through my clothes until my chest is wet and sticky. I whisper into his matted hair, "You're going to be all right."

He answers me with his last breath.

I feel the life slip out of him. He goes limp in my arms.

I pull him closer, and I press my face into his chest. And then I

mix his blood with my tears, crying like a little bitch, and I realize that this was not what I wanted at all.

Finally, he pulls away, and he comes to me. He looks me in the eye, and then he looks down. A tear drops to the floor.

"I'm so sorry," he whispers.

His words break the hole in my heart. I hug him, rub the back of his hair, and I hold him close. For a moment, I pretend he's John. "Shh," I whisper. "It's okay. We all miss him. It's not your fault."

I feel my dress grow damp beneath his face. Finally he pulls away, and he wipes his eyes with his hand. He pulls himself together long enough to say, "Thanks" and then he walks away trembling.

I watch him go. It means a lot to know my son touched someone so deeply. Even someone I don't know.

I turn to my daughter beside me. "Do you know who that boy was?"

"Yeah," she says distantly. "That was the boy who killed John."

A big dumb bunny
From a big dumb brother.
Happy Birthday!
Love,
John

For the first time in four days, I feel something.

Suddenly the hole doesn't feel so good.

f i c t i o n b y B r a d B r o w n

Spring Crocuses

fiction by >> Keith Bertelsen

It was one of those beautiful days when winter is just ending, and you're waiting for the warmth of spring to come. There's so much suspense in bodies, waiting for that first warm day, when classes meet outside instead of in, and beautiful birdsong flutters across the air.

It was one of those days that we happened to walk together to class. It wasn't uncommon; after all, we were supposedly in a relationship with each other. Though it wasn't something incredibly serious. We spent time together, talked together—though nothing more than that. Never held hands for a serious romantic reason, never kissed. Never spoke of our feelings.

As we were walking through the quad, he suddenly pranced ahead, spinning around in a dance across the sidewalk. He laughed warmly as the sun broke through the clouds, showering him in its brilliant light.

I laughed, and he turned to me. "What?" he asked, mockingly indignant, a smile on his face.

"Nothing," I said, laughing again. "Just seeing you like that makes me happy."

He skipped back to me. "But it's such a wonderful day! We haven't had a day like this in..." He trailed off, spinning in a circle, his arms open wide to the warming air.

"Six months?" I offered.

He stuck his tongue out at me, and then began skipping alongside as I walked. "This is too wonderful a day to not dance."

"But then you get in the buildings faster, and miss it all."

"But it's *spring*!"

He danced ahead again, and I laughed, unable to help myself. He ignored me this time, but instead made his way across the concrete lightly, like a falling leaf buffeted by the breeze.

As we approached the building our classes were in, he suddenly exclaimed, "Crocuses! They bloomed!" and pranced over to a small garden plot by the building.

"What?" I asked, ambling over.

"Crocuses!" he exclaimed again, leaning over to lightly touch one of them. "They're my favorite flower...especially the yellow ones." His fingers brushed against one of the blooming flowers and he inhaled the scent slowly, his eyes closed, basking in the experience.

I smiled, and could not help but tease him further. "Don't you mean 'croci'?"

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

"I guess not." I was a little uneasy, unsure of what else to say as he admired the flowers.

He turned to me, a cute laugh coming from his mouth. "You look like you've never seen a flower before."

"I guess I've never really stopped to admire them..."

"Then make these your first." He grabbed my hand, and pulled me forward a little. "Aren't they beautiful?"

"Yeah, I guess..." The flowers *did* look nice. But I thought they were "beautiful" more because he seemed to like them so much than from their actual beauty.

"Come on," he said, tugging me towards the building, laughing again. "Let's get to class."

I complied, a smile on my face at seeing him so overjoyed.

Editors' Pick

Kissing Martin Newcastle

fiction by >> E. B. Roper

Martin Newcastle lays his arm parallel to the side of the table. His fingers lightly play at the white tablecloth and he smiles at me.

"Are you having a good time?" Martin Newcastle asks.

When Martin Newcastle smiles his Clara Bow cupid mouth stretches back to reveal straight, even, white teeth. There is not one girl who doesn't envy Martin Newcastle's lips, who both fantasizes about having them and kissing them at the same time.

"How can I not be?"

Martin Newcastle resembles Prince Charming. Martin Newcastle is more than good-looking. Martin Newcastle works out. Martin Newcastle color coordinates his clothes. Martin Newcastle showers, shaves, and primps every morning. Martin Newcastle is suspected of wearing make-up.

The waiter approaches the table with the check, and Martin Newcastle signs the receipt, smiling at him. The waiter smiles back genuinely even though he has yet to see the tip.

Martin Newcastle should set off warning bells in a person's head. Danger, danger, danger

It was one of those warm spring days, when the last vestiges of winter had passed, but before the heat of summer could move in. A year older, a year wiser, but we had stayed together. We could tell that there was a chemistry between the two of us—a chemistry that did not change as the seasons did. In a way, our relationship had remained the same; we did things together, finished each others' sentences—though nothing more than that. Never gave a hug just to cheer the other up, never held the other. We knew each others' feelings, but this was the day I acted on them.

I knocked on the door, knowing he would be alone—that we would be alone. His voice came from within, telling me that I could come in.

Drawing in a breath to steel myself, I opened the door, and presented him with a bouquet of flowers.

"Crocuses!" he exclaimed happily, taking the yellow flowers away from me. "You're wonderful!"

Before I could say anything, he had grabbed me, and our lips came together in a kiss. We held it for a few seconds, then broke.

There was an awkward silence for a moment as we gazed into each others' eyes, before he finally spoke. "I should find a vase for these."

"Yeah..." I said, still stunned. It was the first time I had ever kissed a boy—or been kissed by one. Truth be told, it was kind of nice. Not just the kiss, though—to finally be able to express our feelings for each other *somehow*. To finally release the tension we had felt for so long.

He hummed to himself as he filled a glass with water, and placed the bouquet of flowers in it. He fussed a little with them, trying to make them look just right.

because Martin Newcastle knows what he is and doesn't mind using it to his full advantage. Martin Newcastle steals hearts when he inhales and he breaks them when he exhales.

Martin Newcastle's perfectly manicured hand slips down to rest on the small of my back after he helps me into my coat. It would be so easy to be sucked in by Martin Newcastle's good looks and Martin Newcastle's pleasant charm. One touch of those lips would guarantee me a notch in the wooden headboard above his bed alongside all those other poor sexual conquests that were nothing more than a chance for Martin Newcastle to get his freak on. Perhaps Martin Newcastle has planned for me to be the diagonal line across a group of tally marks. Girls in Martin Newcastle's world never say no. They only say yes...yes...yes!

Outside, Martin Newcastle has a quiet discussion with the valet that ends with laughter and hearty slaps on the back. The key ring twirls around the man's finger as he winks and puts a finger to his lips. Shh, he says to Martin Newcastle, I've got your back, friend.

Martin Newcastle's car is retrieved quicker than the other couples that stand huddled against the sharp winter wind. The valet opens the car door for me, but he is looking at Martin Newcastle. Martin Newcastle gives him a firm, two-handed handshake with a tip in the center.

In the car the radio is already on. The National Public Radio Saturday night jazz and big band show plays though the car's high tech speakers, the poorly recorded notes grainy and tinny despite the new technology. The car comes

I laughed at his fussiness. "Do you like them?" I didn't want to bring up the kiss just yet.

His face held his cute smile for a moment as he looked at me. "They're wonderful! Thank you so much!" I stepped forward slightly, growing closer to him. His hand came down, and found mine, and for a moment, we stood there admiring the flowers, our fingers intertwined.

"I know you like croci," I said, keeping a light-hearted tone in my voice.

He said nothing, but his grip tightened just slightly on my hand. And he turned to me, and we kissed again.

And this time, it was not awkward.

It was one of those days where it rained, and you were happy it rained, because it staved off the encroaching fire of summer. Another year, another twelve months, and we had remained together. The chemistry itself only grew with time, and we had settled into a rhythm—into a pattern as natural as the changing of the seasons.

Things had changed from what they had been, but some things never change; we still saw movies together, went shopping together—and much more than that. We shared small teasing kisses, and shared hours of passion. But it would be no more.

I went alone to the grave site, even though he had only been buried a week earlier. At the time, his parents and I were the last to linger after the interment.

And even visiting this time, there was a part of me that was still angry at the ones that had killed him. From the bottom of my heart, I wished that I had been able to take every blow and insult they landed on him. I had loved him, and so I wanted to protect him.

to a gentle stop at a red light and Martin Newcastle smiles at me, closed-lipped and content. His hand rests on my knee.

"Dinner was good," Martin Newcastle states.

"Naturally."

Everything is good in Martin Newcastle's world. The world is good to Martin Newcastle.

Light cologne filters throughout the car. Tomorrow I should think my hair will smell like Martin Newcastle and my friends will all know that I was out with Martin Newcastle. But they won't know that Martin Newcastle was actually out with me, because right now not even Martin Newcastle knows that he is out with me. Martin Newcastle doesn't remember a time when other people had their own agendas.

"Here we are," Martin Newcastle says as he pulls alongside the curb. A short distance away my apartment building winks at Martin Newcastle.

Martin Newcastle's slender fingers touch the bottom of my chin, turning my face toward his. I focus in on Martin Newcastle's face, looking for wrinkles, looking for blackheads, looking for spinach in his teeth - looking, looking, looking for that flaw, but finding nothing.

Martin Newcastle didn't have the spinach salad.

I did have the spinach salad and Martin Newcastle doesn't remember a time when other people had their own agendas.

I turn my head and Martin Newcastle's cherry Chapstick lips ghost over my ear.

"Thanks for dinner, Martin Newcastle."

I spent a long time saying nothing, merely holding my umbrella in one hand, looking down at the words chiseled into the gravestone. I knew his name did not matter—it never did. Yet, something deep in my heart leapt at its sound—or the shape of its letters. It was a love that seemed to come so naturally to me, yet it was the very love we shared that caused his death.

Tears fell from my cheeks, and my voice caught in my throat. I wanted, for all the world, to apologize, but I could not.

I bent down, and placed a small flower in front of the marble slab. I knew he would appreciate it, and he would have been happy that I gave it. But he would not be receiving any more flowers from anyone.

Except for the yellow crocuses from me.

Solution to the Editors' Box

(From page 2) Encyclopedia's sentence "I know where the winning short story is!" was spoken three days after A told him that it was "noon." By this time A, B, F, and I had tracked down and murdered the thief of their carefully selected winning short story. It was a good amount of effort to pick that story out of more than thirty submissions. The four first came to a consensus on six "editors' picks" and then selected three finalists from those ranks, eventually settling on CROATOAN as the winning story.

Frances L. G. Dwyer, et al.
Jim Jones
Andrew DeFede

Frozen Lightning

fiction by >> Eric Scott

My friend Holly had needed a ride down to Columbia to visit her boyfriend, and as she couldn't find anybody who actually had a reason to go there, I ended up volunteering to drive her. It was sunny on the way down, which paradoxically made me sleepy; I nearly passed out at the wheel at one point, which resulted in Holly driving the car the rest of the way. After we found her boyfriend, which took about an hour and a half, I said good-bye and got back on the road. It was getting to be about six, which meant the sun would be down before too long.

It seemed like the rain started just the moment I got out of Columbia. Just as soon as I was out of the city, the sky blackened and water started to fall in big drops that splattered against the windshield of my weather stained Oldsmobile. I mumbled to myself; storm clouds weren't what I wanted when I was trying to get home before sunset. Kirksville was still a good hour and a half away.

Every mile seemed to bring stronger rain. I cranked my windshield wipers up as far as they would go, but around Macon, they were barely doing any good; every time they swept away the water, new rain would hit and render the road invisible again. I probably should have pulled over to the side, but I was too concerned with getting back to

Kirksville. I was a good driver, after all. A little rain was nothing to worry about.

The traffic was light, thankfully, though it all seemed to come from the other side of the road-problematic, when I could just barely see the yellow road divider in front of me. I still felt tired, which seemed odd; I slept well the night before. Still, every few minutes I

would feel myself slipping just a little, which wasn't as scary as it should have been. I was almost too tired to be scared of crashing the car. As long as I could make it back to the dorm, I'd be okay. I could sleep there.

I was listening to a classic rock station on the way back, which played the usual assortment of songs; I could have sworn they played Hotel California three times in between Columbia and Macon. But somewhere in my dozing, I heard a song that I'd never expected to hear on the radio. It was Tom Verlaine's band Television, playing a long piece that was practically an instrumental. The guitar riffs glided ethereally through the car, long chains of melody that sifted through my sleepy ears. When it came to the chorus, I found myself singing along: "Life in the hive puckered up my

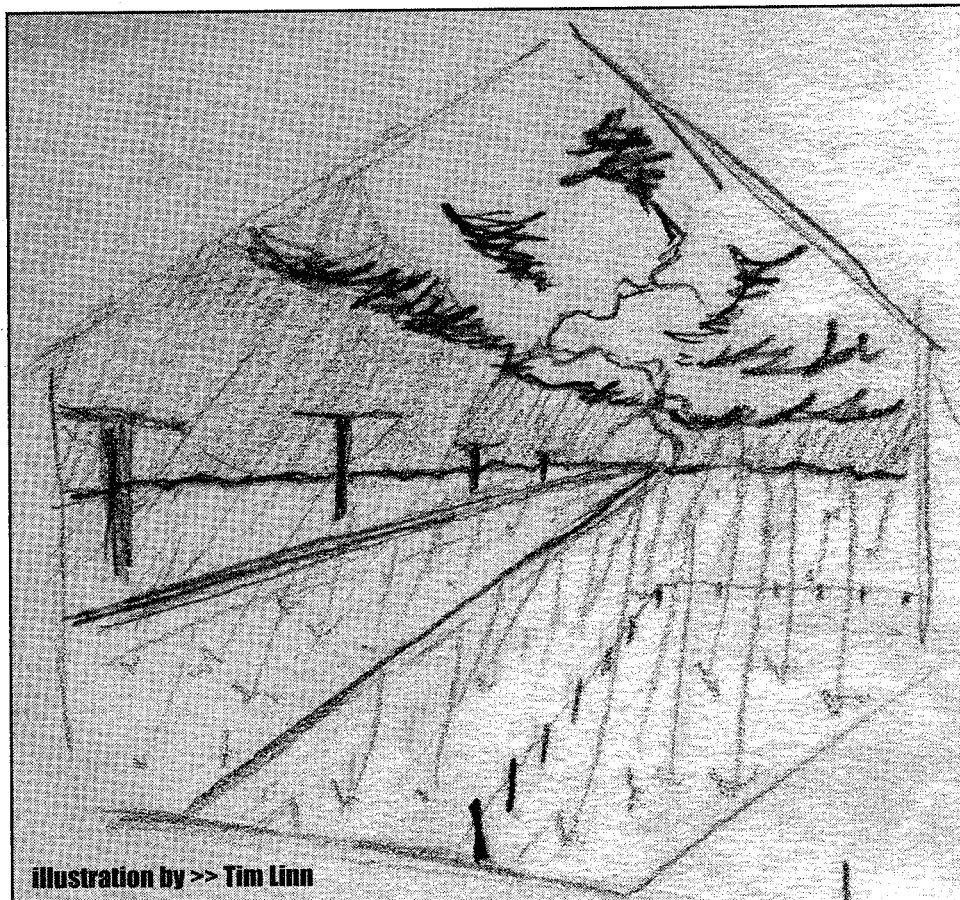


illustration by >> Tim Linn

night, the kiss of death, the embrace of life. I stood there neath the stars and the marquee moon, just waiting."

And then came the lightning.

I'd never seen lightning like that before. Almost all of my life, when I saw lightning, it was a brief shudder in the gray clouds off in the distance. Once or twice, I had seen actual lightning, fork lightning, crash somewhere in front of me. I always saw it in cars, oddly enough, and always from the passenger's seat.

But this was different. Lightning arced across the sky in magnificent webs over the Missouri trees. It was massive, dense and weighty, and burned away the black night with electric white. And even more oddly, it hung there in the sky for something like forever. I watched it, wondering when it was going to go away. It died, like it always did, just before another huge blast of light and sound ripped across the sky to linger there for two or three eternal seconds. It was like watching the fist of God slam down into the fields, over and over again, while the guitars wailed against the thunder. "He said 'look here, junior, don't you be so happy,'" sang Tom Verlaine over the din, "and for heaven's sake, don't you be so sad."

It was beautiful and dangerous, that light-

ning. I wondered if I was dreaming as I saw it. I watched it flash across the sky a dozen times or more, each time hanging on longer than the time before it. It took my breath away to see it.

I kept driving, wondering if this was what everybody saw that night. I wondered if Holly could see it from her boyfriend's apartment. I wondered if any of the other drivers saw what I saw, this magnificent dance of light and sound, or if they just passed by, thinking it just another rainstorm. I hoped not. Magic is too rare and dangerous a thing to be ignored so easily.

As I was leaving Columbia, feeling tired and a little morose, I had resented Holly a little bit for dragging me down there. I only went because I felt obligated. But the sheer wonder of the lightning pushed all that out of my mind. This was enough reason in and of itself.

I had forty minutes left until Kirksville. I didn't want to make it there. I just wanted to stay out on the highway, riding on the storm. I knew that the storm would pass, and the pounding rain and the lingering thunder would be gone by the morning, but I really wished there were some way to make it stay. I wanted to remain like that forever-a boy in a car on the highway, surrounded by an ocean of frozen lightning.

I'm falling so fast now that I forget to notice the white rubbing fingers of shock tickle my spine. Acknowledging its fate, the heart musters another beat, clogging forth in a hopeless attempt at keeping me alive. Sensations spill forward from my throbbing cartilage, circling my vertebrae and illuminating my nerves with a blinding euphoria. This is also known as cerebral infarct. If I wasn't shaking before, I am now.

Some say your life flashes before your eyes, like a changing television at two in the morning. But that just isn't true. No first word. No first step. No first fuck. Just you hurling in the infinite open sky toward the red earth.

An Uneventful Love Story Remembered as though it was a Series of Incredible Moments

fiction by >> Amanda Hackney

Our kisses made the fries cold.

The picnic on the floor of the empty dorm room was forced to wait for occupied mouths. An old memory rolled over in my mind, and continued turning as it became a Ferris wheel from 1967.

Enjoying the slow ride, we sat high above other minds forgetting their memories willingly. I refuse to forget talkative eyes. After the ride, he stood on the rear bus tire, smiling a silent good-bye to me. The distance we shared over the next decade would teach me how to hear his unseen smiles.

500.88 miles away from the spot of that memory, I shivered. The freezing air pushed apart the seams of my broken zipper and forced its way inside. Old moments were pressing their way into my mind again, the way a dog curls up against the cold body of its master. Just try to stay warm without memories.

His letters came with doodles, pictures, and incoherent sentences. Often the envelope was smudged where his hand had pressed it shut. His fingerprints in the smudges were the rings inside a tree, his skin was the bark.

Yes, he was rough like bark too, cowboy blood running through the city. The visits were arranged but always seemed spontaneous, as though we had run into each other outside of a coffee shop and the rain gave us an excuse to take shelter and chat. He brought me hot cocoa with cream, sipped to perfection by genital-sensitive lips.

"Hey" never speaks directly, it suggests. From him, it meant good morning, you're beautiful and I love you but without the words. People in Sri Lanka have no words to say I love you, it is simply understood. We understood.

We're still understanding, after 38 years, that time makes the story better. The stories that are truest to life are simply strands of memory waiting to be remembered. There is very little action or truth, hardly any great sex, and rarely violence. Most people simply live, and that's the way they remember it.

Down

fiction by >> Richard Boggs

I'm falling into a depth so cold, so black; an ocean of air and molecule debris. Suspended in a flow of oblivion, my mind begins to go. It breaks and bends on an emotional whim as curious as the wind. My meningeal layers shrink tight across my brain like an old hand winding a pocket-watch; the metal coils closing in. But if my mouth were to open, not a single noise would sound, for I am falling. Falling into the

sky.

Am I so shy as to think my feet were too heavy to lead me here? Not for a second, and not anymore. My mind whispers, "You're currently committing the act of suicide. Brace for impact." My hair dances in sticky clumps, holding hands with the wind. Writhing back and forth in what could be considered pain, but my hair feels nothing. My eyes are a sputtering eclipse - a biological zoetrope for my head. The film is right in front of me, but the reel is nearly finished. Legs could kick and fingers could clench, but it would only aggravate the spinning air tunneling me toward the ground. Jumping really was the hardest part.

Impact is imminent as the ground rushes up to punch my face.

My skull collapses in and crushes my gelatinous brain. My brain - it lurches between fractures like yolk spilling from a cracked egg, and onto the soil. Splitting the torso in two, my rib cage implodes forcing my spinal cord out my back. Lungs fill with liquid only to explode a mere moment later. Arms dissolve into fibrous tentacles. Stomach bursts like a pimple on a prepubescent scamp.

Where I can go from here is anywhere, anywhere but down.

My Back Pages....

Email Emily and Annie at
aHugeManatee@gmail.com



Hungry Hollow Pie

Mari Mari quite contrary
how does your garden grow?
With cryptosporidium
that's what!

-Kim Trist



Little Debby

Oooo mama
I wanna buff your buffer zone
crawl between your flaps of love
and moo with you.

-E. Colifield



Leaves

They hang from the trees
I eat them like Koalas
And they make me sick

-Leif Stocker



I understand...

I am smarter than you
but I forgive you
but I won't stop from correcting you
when clearly it is to the point of needed to be corrected
I will tolerate and encourage you until then
at the point where you say something
impossible, absurd, or not making any sense
and could never make any sense
because it doesn't
so, because people need to know when they're not making any sense
I will tell them
and make sure they know the absurdity of an idea
that is impossible
Because I'm smarter than them; so I know even when they don't
But it's OK that they don't know, because not everyone knows everything
like me

-God's Gift



Driving in Kville

Richscotting home last night
drunk as a skunk
I ran over one small child
a tricycle, a mailbox
a garbage can
and a fire hydrant

luckily though
the fuzz didn't catch me
and I only blew chunks

for half an hour
Richscotting
the porcelain bus.

-D.W. Iverson



Economic Development

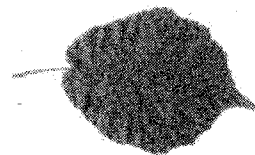
Half the hamlet is silent
now
so many empty homes
to fill with shiny happy faces
but let's build new ones
instead!

yeah, that's the ticket!
real estate is where it's at!
let's subdivide and zone it
all
for the people they will
come

to the Depot where the
Walls are Green
and lonely local lumbermen
and druggists beg for bread

while big city contractors
and national chains
bathe in the gold
of what we once had.

-Noah Scamnow



This tie

We saw this (tistle)
Grandma thought she would pick it
it cut-up her hand

-a

