

Absolute

Absolute 2002

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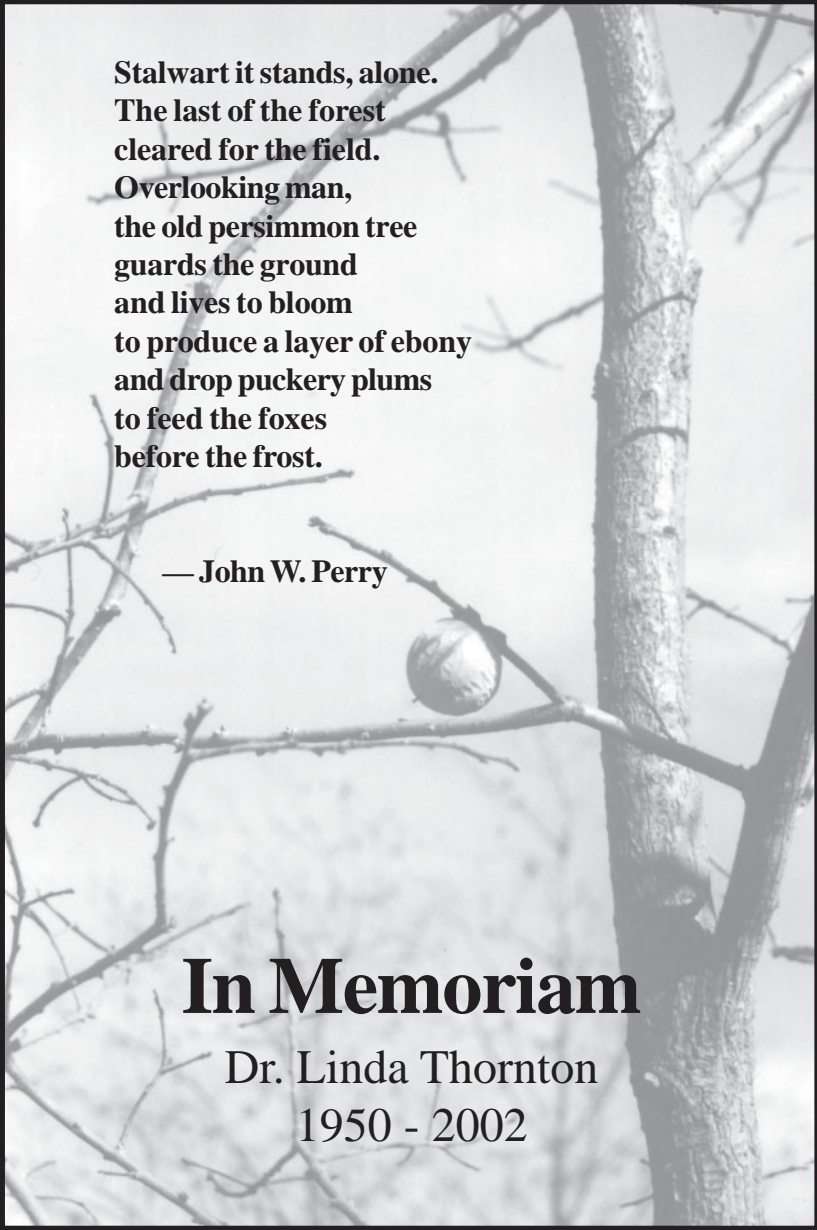
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Ancient Ebony

Photograph by John W. Perry



Stalwart it stands, alone.
The last of the forest
cleared for the field.
Overlooking man,
the old persimmon tree
guards the ground
and lives to bloom
to produce a layer of ebony
and drop puckery plums
to feed the foxes
before the frost.

— John W. Perry

In Memoriam

Dr. Linda Thornton
1950 - 2002

Contents

Short Stories 1

Jonathan Whittford's Last Day	<i>Julie Wright</i>
Bobby	<i>Jessica Welp</i>
Never Look a Gift Cat	<i>Robin A. Cox</i>
Move Away	<i>Mark Diaz</i>
The Scar	<i>Paul Wesselhoft</i>
Lois to the Rescue	<i>Cathy L. Hume</i>
Toots 2001	<i>Jerry Ramsey</i>
Old Things	<i>Vicki Hamm</i>
Hair	<i>Janelle Ramirez</i>
I'm Not Even Going to Try	<i>Zach Ward</i>
The Day Granny Goo Goo Got Her Gun	<i>Elissa Crocker</i>
Never Again	<i>Suzie Sells</i>

Essays 31

Life in Transit	<i>Amber Nevarez</i>
Hell on Wheels	<i>Mark Diaz</i>
Obsession Progression	<i>Barbara Gwinn</i>
The Day I Went Blind	<i>B.J. Megginson</i>
Uncle Gary	<i>Melissa Ronspiez</i>
Stan the Man	<i>Len Nones</i>

Poetry

51

This One, This One Right Here	<i>Mark Bates</i>
Requiem	<i>Paul Wesselhoft</i>
Cataract Moon	<i>Jon Inglett</i>
Noodling	<i>John Brett McCuan</i>
library girl	<i>Todd Mihalcik</i>
It is the Twain	<i>Pam Pinero</i>
<i>Locus Iste</i>	<i>Richard Rouillard</i>
<i>Locus Iste 2</i>	<i>Richard Rouillard</i>
Mountain View	<i>Brian Arthur Sexton</i>
Preception	<i>Julie Shilling</i>
Natural America	<i>André Love</i>
Guy on the Street	<i>Phillip J. Duvall</i>
Ciudad	<i>Judith Ghashghaie</i>

Photography and Art

69

Ja’Ron	<i>Linda Greenlee</i>
Give Us Clean Hands	<i>Candace Baldwin</i>
Village in Israel	<i>Vicki Hamm</i>
Homestead	<i>Kendall James</i>
Eternal Headache	<i>Kendall James</i>
Rica	<i>Emily Chitwood</i>
Lady in Black and White	<i>Jennie Nguyen</i>

Short Stories

Jonathan Whittford's Last Day

by Julie Wright

Bullets rained down upon the thousands of men fighting in the expansive field. Jonathan Whittford dived onto the ground, taking shelter behind the tree line of the woods. For a brief moment, both sides grew exhausted and the firing ceased. Carefully, he rolled onto his belly and steadied his gun upon a moss-covered log. Once the smoke began to clear, he couldn't believe his eyes.

Many times he had taken peaceful walks here. What had once been a flat, green meadow was now war torn and red. Fertile earth had been ripped open to form trenches for his men, and the field was covered with Union and Confederate soldiers whose blood now pooled beneath them.

Suddenly, Jonathan was brought out of his daze by the sound of marching in the distant forest. Realizing why the firing had stopped, he yelled to his fellow soldiers that the enemy was closing in from behind. Now alerted to the Confederates' tactic, Union soldiers began shouting orders to one another. Jonathan pulled himself into a crouch and prepared to run to the nearest trench. Counting down from three, he exploded from the trees and ran towards the trench. Shots began to ring out as he abruptly dropped and rolled into the trench, his weapon digging into his hand as he gripped it tightly. He lay upon his back between two of his comrades. Adjusting his gun, he began firing at the troops in the forest.

He began to feel strangely warm. Sticky red liquid stained his clothes. He looked to his left. The soldier who'd been fighting next to him now sat slumped over, dead. Confederates continued to close in from the tree line. Panic began to overtake Jonathan, turning in desperation. He reloaded as quickly as he could. Taking aim, he fired. Aim . . . fire . . . aim . . . fire until he felt he was in a dream. He closed his eyes briefly, reopening them. Once again, Confederates came at him from the forest. He reloaded and aimed, spraying bullets at the front line. The scene seemed to replay itself over and

over. He could've sworn in his weary state that he had killed a few of the frontline men. His last thoughts being Déjà vu, he continued to aim and shoot as his last breath left his lips.

Even today, upon a flat green meadow located within the forests of Gettysburg, the souls of the dead rise with the morning mist, and it's still Jonathan Whittford's last day.

Bobby

by Jessica Welp

By the time I had my hand on my M16, Samuelson already had his held straight out in front of him. A small boy stood frozen with terror at the end of the barrel. “Get the hell outta’ here, ya little gook!”

McFarlin put his hand on Samuelson’s M16 and lowered it.

“What’s your name?” McFarlin asked the boy, after stooping to eye level with him.

“Bobby!” The boy’s lips stretched tight into a smile. He held out a peppermint and an empty hand towards McFarlin. McFarlin dropped a coin into Bobby’s hand and took the candy. Bobby jumped up, patted McFarlin’s forearm, and trotted off.

After that day, we saw Bobby weekly while on patrol of the town. He always appeared just past the fruit stand run by a young Vietnamese man who always wore an American soldier’s helmet. And McFarlin always bought peppermints. Most of the time he didn’t even eat them.

“What the hell is that kid’s problem?” Samuelson once asked

McFarlin answered just by slowly shaking his head.

Bobby couldn’t have been more than six or seven. He was short, not reaching my belt, and quite skinny. He always had a big grin on his little round face. And I had to admit that he made me a little bit nervous in the middle of Hue in 1966. Everyone in the streets did. We were replacing a patrol that had been blown up by a young girl on a booby-trapped motorscooter. We had just taken over the Perfume River and moved into Hue. No one wanted us there.

But Bobby was so harmless, about my little brother’s size. He had no idea what was going on around him. He wasn’t scared; he was just making a friend.

This weekly meeting went on for most of the time we were in the country, almost eight months. Samuelson continued to be apprehensive every time Bobby approached, but he had slowed with his threats. We hit the scorching summer and we were all tired.

Sweating through our fatigues, we walked through Hue, surveying the streets, perhaps more closely than usual. We hadn't seen Bobby the last two times we had patrolled.

Then, a short round figure appeared in front of the fruit stand, approaching slowly. As it got closer, I could make out Bobby's round face, minus his usual smile. He was wearing an overcoat, buttoned, and looking very bloated. I stopped walking and looked over at Samuelson standing still, next to me. McFarlin took a few steps ahead.

I could see a look of confusion and perhaps fear on Bobby's face.

Bobby and McFarlin were almost close enough to reach out and shake hands. Very quickly and very gracefully, McFarlin raised his M16 from his side and shot Bobby. The bullet drilled a hole the size of a quarter into the center of Bobby's forehead. Blood instantly began to pour.

No one moved. None of the locals made any attempt to come near the boy's body. Samuelson and I watched as McFarlin slowly lowered his M16 and turned to face us, expressionless.

He passed between us and walked stiffly back towards our camp.

Never Look a Gift Cat in the Face

by Robin A. Cox

It was another Christmas and another gift from my husband's aunt and uncle. I carefully tore away the wrinkled wrapping paper. Hilda said it wasn't much, that they had had another bad year, but I knew she blew all her money at the bingo hall.

"It's the thought that counts," I politely said, biting my tongue.

The cardboard box was dented and said "Printed in USA" on all four sides. The picture shown was a blue porcelain cat. Under the photo were three squares, and beside each was written the color red, blue, or green. A black marker crossed the green square on my box. I looked inside. Sure enough, it was a green china cat.

"Oh, Hilda, you shouldn't have spent your money on me," I said, picking at the "Made in China" sticker with my fingernail.

"We can't bypass you at Christmas," Hilda said. "I thought it would be cute in your bathroom."

I wondered if I detected a note of sarcasm in her voice, but she explained further.

"I know the walls are blue, but green was the closest color they had left."

"Well, I'm sure I can find some place for it," I said through my teeth, thinking what a shame it would be if it were accidentally broken. Holding it up, I looked the lump of junk straight in its little green face. Its eyes were crossed. I set it on the end table very, very close to the edge.

Move Away

by Mark Diaz

*G*od, you are beautiful. As usual. On my way here, I was thinking about our first date. How you made me laugh. I felt so comfortable. We must have laughed for hours.

Who'd have thought that fifteen years later you'd still be laughing—or at least, pretending to laugh—at my corny old jokes?

Of course, I remember the dress. I BOUGHT it for you in Cabo San Lucas last year. Now THAT was a day to remember. The thing I most remember about that day was getting caught in that afternoon shower with you. I recall pulling you close and kissing your soft lips. The water was perfect. Deep, turquoise blue like your eyes.

I remember making a pact with you to move away to Cabo . . . To move away . . . Move away . . .

“Move away from the casket, son. Let the others see her, too.”

The Scar

by Paul Wesselhoft

Scars that marked a childhood memory have faded with the decades, and any internal disfigurements are now masked by a gimpy, gray-haired, beer-bellied man. An asphalt parking lot has replaced the house where a boy lived until he was old enough to join the army. He never saw the house again.

The house was on Territory Line, a red clay road that turned into a small dust cloud when an occasional car would pass through at forty miles per hour. His house was a four-room, government-subsidized, paint-bereft wooden structure like all the other four-room, government-subsidized, paint-bereft wooden structures that made up the boy's crowded tribal neighborhood. The interior of the house was dark, cluttered, scuffed and scarred and held secrets and declarations, most not worthy of memorializing.

It was the summer of 1956. The boy Timmy Redfeather and his stepfather Stone (that's what the boy was told to call him) were watching their sole source of entertainment and light in the house for most evenings—a black and white, sixteen-inch Sylvania TV. The program that night was not important except that it served again as a suitable reason for the two of them not to talk. The only thing they shared that evening, most evenings, was a ragged, beer-stained couch that could seat only two because of the springs that protruded from the middle seat.

The man was drinking his bottle of cold Coors as usual. Their supper that night had been yesterday's popcorn because the mother had to work the night shift at the meat packing plant. The boy noticed his stepfather rubbing dirt from between his toes and teased him about eating popcorn and toe jam. The man grunted; he was watching television.

The boy, skinny and short in stature, wore his long black hair in a ponytail, which gave him some pride in his heritage. His classmates referred to him as a half-breed.

Some days he wished he were white like his mother, and then, other days he imagined himself a full-blood warrior, horse-mounted, with a bow and arrow in hand.

The man possessed a broad hairless chest and cauliflower ears. His large nose was bulb-shaped, and his eyes were usually bloodshot. He was a large and impressively strong man, especially for middle age; he used to be a little-known professional wrestler, and it still showed except for his belly. He was called “Stone, the Bone Crusher,” and his scars and the arthritis in his joints testified to his former vocation. He was also known to be a brave man. The stepson had never seen him cry nor could he imagine it.

The eyes of the man and boy were diverted to a mouse creeping out from behind the TV. The man’s concentration was riveted on the mouse. He was, as usual, wearing only white boxer shorts. He immediately withdrew his flat feet from the cool linoleum floor and tucked them under his seat. His mouth fell open; his pock-scarred face strained; his body tensed.

The boy, too, was watching the mouse, but he was actually more delighted to observe his stepfather’s reaction to the mouse. The boy, not surprisingly, got the idea that he would pinch his stepfather’s leg as soon as the mouse came nearer their couch. He figured this trick would be funny. He had tried other things and they didn’t work; maybe this could. The boy wanted to endear himself to his stepfather, but these were not the conscious thoughts of a nine-year-old. He could barely keep a rare smile from forming on his face. He either forgot or chose to ignore the fact that his stepfather didn’t like “fooling around,” as he put it. He often treated his children impatiently, especially the ones he didn’t father.

The mouse moved in and out from behind the TV; then, it slowly ventured along the floor and wall toward the couch. The boy cautiously leaned over. At the precise moment that the man’s body recoiled the most, the boy pinched his leg.

The man instantly jumped a foot above the couch! He impulsively slammed his bottle of beer against the boy’s knee. The bottle shattered. The boy’s kneecap shattered, split open, and profusely bled.

On the way to Indian County Hospital, the boy and the stepfather sat in the dark cab of the ’41 Ford truck, saying nothing. After several miles, the boy broke the silence; he apologized for doing such a “stupid trick.”

I should have known better was the thought that pained him!

Lois to the Rescue

by Cathy L. Hume

“Please, lady, come out of the house and bring the dog,” the policeman begged through his bullhorn. “We can get this all cleared up. Just come out of the house.”

Hearing the commotion going on outside, I stepped out onto the porch just as Virginia, a neighbor from two houses down, came running over.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Lois has done it again. I saw her trying to shoo Rudy away from the dogcatcher a while ago. She was waving her arms and screaming for him to RUN, RUN! But instead of running away, Rudy ran to her. Next thing I saw was Lois and Rudy disappearing into her house, with the dogcatcher in hot pursuit. Can you believe that?”

“But why all the police?”

“I guess the dogcatcher got pissed and called them. I gotta’ get back to the kids. I just thought I should run over and tell ya’ since Rudy is your dog,” Virginia shouted as she dashed back to her house.

Standing on the front porch, I watched the ruckus going on at the house next door. I suddenly broke out into a gut-wrenching laugh that threatened to make me pee my pants. Never in all my life had I seen a more hilarious sight than the one I was witnessing. In front of Lois’ house were four police cars, three animal control trucks, and a sheriff’s car, all with their bright red, yellow, and blue lights twirling. I overheard one cop telling a dogcatcher that they would arrest Lois for “interfering with an officer in the performance of his duties.” I couldn’t believe that all those cops were there for just one crazy lady trying to save a dog. Lois had done some pretty stupid things during the years she had been our neighbor, but this really took the cake. I imagined she was learning real quickly that sometimes a dogcatcher’s sense of humor was on a short leash.

Lois was somewhere in her late fifties. And, with her jet-black bouffant hairdo,

cherry-red lipstick, and horn-rimmed glasses that always hung from a chain like a bauble on a necklace, she looked like someone who had just stepped out of a 1950s “B” movie. Although not small in size, Lois didn’t seem to know it; she dressed in scoop-neck sweaters three sizes too small, and her bosoms were always spilled half out of their confinement. I suspected she probably had seen one Jayne Mansfield movie too many.

Known around the neighborhood as “Loony Lois,” she was often the topic of discussion during back-fence gossiping because of her bizarre behavior. Three weeks earlier, the fire department had to be called when Lois locked herself in her bathroom and couldn’t get out. A neighbor, thinking he was hearing a cat yowling under Lois’ house, went to investigate. Instead of a cat, he found Lois. She was stuck midway out her bathroom window, hollering for help. Once the neighbor was able to control his laughter, he dialed 911 and explained the situation to the operator. Like the neighbor, she, too, let a giggle slip before telling the man that the fire department was on its way.

The next morning, my neighbors and I were trying to figure out why a woman who lived alone would lock her bathroom door in the first place. But that was Lois. She never failed to give the neighborhood something new to talk about. Like the time she mowed her yard, wearing only her underwear and bra, or the afternoon she chased two young men from the Jehovah’s Witness Church off her porch and down the street, flailing her fly swatter at them.

Rescuing Rudy was her newest attempt at supplying the neighborhood with juicy gossip. I sat on my front porch, watching the amusing scene. It was amazing how much effort the police were putting into arresting one middle-aged savior of dogs. The only things lacking in making it look like a scene from *Dirty Harry* were a circling helicopter and police sharpshooters.

“Lady, we’re not kidding here. You need to come out now,” I heard a policeman call through his bullhorn in a strained voice. “We need to end this.”

“Psst . . . Bonnie,” I heard my husband whispering to me through the screened door. “Come inside. I’ve gotta’ tell you something,” he added when he had my attention.

I hated to give up my seat to the three-ring circus going on, but I reluctantly went inside to see what Dennis wanted.

“I think we might have a problem,” he continued, whispering to me.

“Why are you whispering? What problem?”

“Well,” he said in a long drawn-out Okie drawl that I used to think was cute. “Lois is in our cellar.”

Not quite grasping the situation, I asked, “What are you talking about? What’s in the cellar?”

“Lois . . . is . . . in . . . the . . . cellar,” he haltingly repeated to me as if I were someone who didn’t understand English.

“Dammit, Dennis!” I said before taking control of myself. “Why is she in the cellar? Have you lost your last marble?” I added in my best disgusting tone.

“I know, I know. But what could I do? She was trying to keep the dogcatcher from taking Rudy.”

“So, have you forgotten we don’t even like Rudy? At least, I don’t,” I added. “He jumps the fence and won’t stay in the yard, he’s always digging up my flower beds, and I’m tired of finding craters dug out in the back,” I reminded him. “We wouldn’t even have that stupid dog if YOUR friend hadn’t dumped him on us. So, let the pound take him.”

“Well, it’s too late for that now. Lois is in the cellar and can’t go home until this mess is over,” he said.

Wanting him to get the message that I couldn’t believe he could be that stupid, I rolled my eyes in the way a woman does when she wants to let her man know “You’re an idiot.” Disgusted, I turned and walked into the kitchen to try to figure a way out of the trouble he had gotten us into.

I peered out the kitchen window at the commotion still going on next door. I kept picturing myself being handcuffed and paraded before my neighbors as I was led off to jail for harboring a fugitive. I imagined hearing Linda Cavanaugh, the local newscaster, breaking in for a News9 Special Bulletin.

“We want to report the arrest of two dangerous suspected felons,” she would say. “Bonnie Bouser and her husband Dennis have been arrested in connection with a woman who is a suspect in an attempt to thwart police officers in the apprehension of a vicious dog.”

The scenes kept running through my mind as I contemplated a way out of our predicament. The only answer I could come up with was that Lois would just have to stay in our cellar until the police left. Once they were gone and it was dark, she could creep back over to her own house.

Still peeved at Dennis for his foolishness, I walked back to the living room to tell him about my plan.

“She’ll simply have to stay here till the police give up and leave. Then, when it’s dark, she can sneak back over to her own house,” I said.

“What if they don’t leave? What if they break down her door?” Dennis asked in a panicked voice.

“They aren’t going to break down anyone’s door just because some crazy-ass woman hid a dog from a dogcatcher,” I tried to reason with him. “Where’s Rudy, anyway? He in the cellar, too?”

“No, he’s still over in Lois’ house. I didn’t have time to get him out,” he said boyishly. “I’ll have to get him after dark. What do we do with Lois till the police go?”

I was about to answer “Leave her in the cellar” when I was startled by my father-in-law’s voice coming from the front porch.

“She’s probably got a gun in there,” I heard him yelling to someone. “She’s crazy. You never know what that woman will do.”

Then he gave one of his laughs that always signaled to family members that he was making a joke. Only problem was the men out front weren’t family.

“Oh, God, Dennis! Your father is out there making things worse. The police don’t know he’s joking. Go get him in here before something happens.”

“Shit,” he said as he swung the screen door wide and marched out to get his father.

Since I knew that keeping Lois down in the storm cellar would not be a nice thing to do, no matter how much I wanted to, I reluctantly went to the back porch and called down for her to come up.

“Are they gone yet?” she asked.

“No, but you can’t stay down there, and they won’t be coming back in here most likely. Come up and I’ll get you some coffee and we’ll wait this out.”

A few seconds later, Lois climbed up the stair and walked into the kitchen. As usual, she was only half-dressed.

Doesn’t this woman ever wear a full set of clothes? I wondered. Evidently, saving Rudy was foremost on her mind when she rushed out of her house to the rescue.

“Lois, why didn’t you put on a robe or something before doing what you did?” I asked of the woman standing in my kitchen, with just a T-shirt and underwear on.

“Well . . . I was in the middle of getting ready for work and saw them through my window, trying to get your dog. I just ran out without thinking. You know, it would have cost ya’ \$45 to get him out of the pound,” she added as if she had done me a great favor.

“Lois, have you never heard me yelling at that damned dog because of all his digging? They could have kept him for all I care. He was just an inherited dog anyway, dumped on us a few months back by one of Dennis’ so-called friends. I was just getting

ready to tell Dennis to take the damned dog to the pound, anyway,” I tried to explain.

Lois looked at me like I had just pronounced the death penalty on Lassie. She scrunched her eyes and said, “But who’s going to want an old dog like him? They’ll end up puttin’ him down if he’s not adopted. No one wants to pay money for an old, ugly dog. Believe me . . . I know. No one ever loves old, ugly dogs,” she whimpered.

I stood there with Lois’ cup of coffee in my hand, and a guilty look splashed across my face. I realized that Lois wasn’t so different from most people. She just wanted someone to love her, care for her . . . be her friend. That’s why she had run after Rudy. He was the only one who never expected her to behave a certain way or laughed at her because she was odd. I realized they were friends.

“Lois, would you like to have Rudy?” I asked.

“What the hell would I do with a dog? Damned things always pee on the rugs,” she half-heartedly said. “Besides, I’m gonna’ end up in jail before this mess is over.”

“Well, if ya’ do, we’ll keep him till you’re out.”

Before Lois was able to answer my question, Dennis and Chuck, my father-in-law, came back into the house, both chuckling like kids who had gotten away with something big.

“They’re gone,” Dennis said. “One of the police supervisors came and cleared them all out. He said everything had gotten way out of hand. Even the dogcatchers gave up and went back on their doggy patrols,” he joked. “I’ll go over with Lois and bring Rudy back.”

“That’s okay, Dennis. Lois is going to keep Rudy. Aren’t ya’?” I asked the half-naked woman standing in my house.

“But, Bonnie,” Dennis said in a soft voice, “I kinda’ like Rudy. He’s not all that bad.”

“Dennis, that dog is costing us a fortune because of all his digging. Have you looked at our garden lately? He’s dug up all your tomatoes and squash plants, and my flowerbeds—they look like land mines have gone off in them. Now, you don’t think squirrels are doing that, do you?” I tried to reason with him.

Before I gave him the chance to give me one of his sarcastically cute answers, I added, “And if that’s not enough, look at the new trees you planted. He’s chewing the bark from around the bottoms.”

“I guess you’re right. She can have him if she wants him,” he said, with resignation in his voice.

I turned back to Lois and asked her again. “So . . . do you want Rudy or is it the

pound?”

Lois walked over to me, a smile curling the corners of her mouth.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “Are you sure you don’t want him?”

“There’s a lot of things in life I’m not sure about, Lois, but whether or not I want to keep Rudy is not one of them. He’s yours. Gladly, if you want him.”

“Yes,” she said, “I want him.”

Then she turned to go home.

“You know that’s not the end of our Rudy problems, don’t you?” Dennis asked. “He’s just going to end up jumping her fence and coming back over to dig up our yard again.”

“Yeah, I know. But at least I’ll know where to send the bill,” I teased.

“But only until she’s picked up by the cops and sent to prison,” Chuck joked at Dennis and me. “Then, he’s all yours again,” he said as he was leaving.

I couldn’t resist. I yelled back. “If that happens, Chuck, I know what you’ll be getting for that 65th birthday you have coming up.” Laughing loudly, I taunted, “And it won’t be no tie.”

TOOTS 2001

by Jerry Ramsey

“Special package for Mr. Bondy,” I heard the UPS man at the front door.

I was so excited; my new electronic wife had arrived. I had waited so long for this Turkish import to come I could hardly contain myself.

“Thank you so much. I love you.”

The UPS driver was happy for me but really did not appreciate it when I kissed him on the forehead. Some people just don’t know how to accept affection. I rushed to the kitchen where I could unwrap my appliance of the future.

When I opened the box, the contents took my breath away. The Toots 2001 had all the features I could have dreamed of: a double battery compartment for extra long days in the kitchen, attachments for serving dinner, and a cup-holder space everywhere. The remote also doubled as a TV/VCR/blender remote. I was also pleasantly surprised to find that she came with a mute button. Glancing over the invoice, I noticed that I had paid an extra two grand for that, but it was well worth it. I had ordered the Rebecca Stamos model; it came complete with swimwear.

This was the best thing to happen to me since the XF1! I couldn’t wait to try it out. It took me two hours to put together the Toots 2001 before I had it all built and ready to go.

I put in the fresh 12-volt batteries and pushed “Power.” Nothing happened. I pressed it again. Nothing!

Damn it! What was wrong? I almost pulled the rug off my head trying to figure it out. If I had wanted this much trouble, I would have gotten married to a real woman again.

I investigated and found that the auxiliary wires that connected the main brain and the body had malfunctioned. I drove down to the nearest Radio Shack, picked up a new pair, and hurried back home to try again to piece together my Toots 2001.

I don't know about you, but when I take something apart, I can never again put it back together the same. I worked for a week, trying to get that damned thing together again. I made the mistake of leaving the television on when I was putting together the memory part of the main computer. While I was working, I remember hearing "Good Times" and "Alice" coming on.

Now, everything works, but Toots will randomly scream "DY-NO-MITE!" and "KISS MY GRITS!" at the top of her volume. Sure, it's a glitch, but it sure as hell beats living with a real woman.

Old Things

by Vicki Hamm

The old Victorian style two-story home with the large yard was the big house I remembered it to be. The front porch that wrapped around the house still had the wooden rocking chairs that friends, family and strangers used to sit in, watching children make rings out of lightning bugs as evenings turned into night. I could hear the sound of the slow rocking, wood touching wood with a slight creeping noise, as the locusts hummed in the background.

Years of neglect had left the house in a state of dilapidation much like the body of the person in the casket down at the First Baptist Church. Funny how neglect affects things and people in much the same way. The white paint was peeling, window screens missing and weeds growing where flowers used to be. A few jonquils still peeked from the earth on this warm spring day. My mother had referred to the hardy flowers as survivors.

I opened the large, white, wooden door with beveled glass and entered the hallway with the wooden floor worn by years of people coming and going. The furniture had been covered with sheets as if to say the person who lived there had gone away for a vacation. The antiques, lace curtains, and white china plates with small pink rosebuds and light green leaves all waited for the owner's return. But my mother would not be coming back this time. She had died three days ago, and I was in town for her funeral.

I climbed the stairway and saw the bathroom at the end of the hall. My eyes immediately focused on the cast-iron, claw foot bathtub. The tub had provided a hot soak for many women over the years. It was deep. So deep you could cover your body with the calming water, just your neck and face exposed, and pretend the bruises were not there. I remember my mother as she lay in the tub, head resting on the inflated pillow, eyes closed, droplets of perspiration above her lip as the water soothed her body

and soul. She was beautiful.

I didn't know until later that our house was a safe haven for battered and abused women. I often wondered how my mother knew just what to say to the women who arrived with dampened spirits and injured bodies. And then I remembered the times I would find my mom sitting on the same bathroom floor, weeping as her face began to swell.

I would sit beside her, my small arm around her neck, gently patting her on the back, a young child reassuring the most important person in her life. Her tears would finally subside, and she would touch me softly, saying, "There, there. Don't you know it will be all right? Let's draw you a bath."

Hair

by Janelle Ramirez

She had beautiful mahogany hair. Her boyfriend loved to run his fingers through it. He would always tell her, “Your hair makes you a real woman.” Once, he even confessed that the only reason he first noticed her was because of her hair. That should have been her first clue. His favorite reason was when, after sex when they were sweaty, flushed, and sated, she would lay her head on his tanned stomach and he could run clumsy fingers through her hair. He claimed it relaxed him and his sleepy blue eyes would verify it. He said that she was the only woman in his life who made him feel loved, wanted, needed, simply perfect.

When he left, it hurt so much.

She had taken care of him when he was sick, purchased his clothes and toys, and given a part of herself, which had never been given before. But none of that mattered anymore. Now he was gone and she was alone. Night after night, sitting on a stool in front of her dresser mirror, she would go through her routine of brushing her hair. Stroke after stroke, one with the right hand, the next with the left, and so on until all her hair was smoothed by the Revlon brush. Finally, she tied it with a wintergreen ribbon before laying her head down on the blue flannel pillow and sobbing herself into a troubled sleep-alone. Sometimes she would find reddish-blond strands of hair in the brush, and on those nights, she couldn’t sleep at all.

She adopted a beautiful rag doll cat, but it wasn’t the same. There was nobody next to her to cuddle; the cat preferred to be left alone when snoozing. Whenever she went shopping, she’d look at the men’s section, thinking *This blue sweater will match his eyes perfectly*. Then she remembered that there was no one to wear it. The hardest part was going out to eat alone. She used to have conversations at the table, mundane conversations but they were still better than none. Of course, it was somewhat a relief not having to pretend she cared about whose house was now under watch or the ways

to use all parts of the plant when smoking marijuana. He always used to take her to eat Mexican food because it was cheap, good, and there was lots of it. Those were the only times that the conversation lulled. Usually, he would talk nonstop about his friends and whatever girls they had introduced him to and how lucky she was to have him in her life because so many others wanted him. Now, she just went through the motions: ate until she was satisfied, paid the bill, and left.

The company for which she was a secretary couldn't tell there was a problem. Most of the time her co-workers didn't even know she was alive. Her reading increased. Books were always faithful and had no nasty surprises. They would never leave her lonely. Bilbo Baggins always went home. Tom Sawyer always learned a lesson. Odysseus always reunited with his wife. Always, always, always—it was so repetitious. Eventually, even books began to get on her nerves. So did movies, music, and anything that involved people uniting with a member of the opposite sex, happily. Finally, her gorgeous, almost waist length hair began to get on her nerves. So, mustering up the leftovers of her courage, she went to the salon. Not to Total E-clips, her regular place because they would refuse to cut it that short. Instead, she went to a Fantastic Sam's where they wouldn't care as long as they were paid.

"How much do you want off, girlie?" asked the aging and overweight hairdresser. She seemed to want everyone to call her "Peaches" since the name was brightly painted on her mirror.

She reached up and ran her fingers nervously through her hair one last time.

"A foot and a half, please. What I'd really like is a bob, cut above my shoulders but still a little below my ears."

Swallowing thickly, she looked at the ends of her hair and nodded encouragingly to herself.

A raised eyebrow was the only response as she was led to wash her hair.

"Are you sure, sweetie?" temporized the hairdresser. "I can give you a spiral perm and turn these tresses into magic," Peaches said with a positive, almost hopeful lilt to her voice as though she really didn't want to be held responsible for trimming years of memory off her head.

"I'm sure." She let it out with a trembling sigh. "Please, just cut it, and I'll mourn later."

As her hair was washed, a careful observer could see a small tear trickling down her left cheek, or maybe it was just a drop of water. A stoic expression covered her face, and though her hands were twining in and out of each other, fiddling with a silver ring

on her right ring finger, she seemed to smile almost joyfully. A free, simple, peaceful smile began to spread on her face when, with one cut of the scissors, Peaches cut off more than a foot and a half. Those wet, limp, fading between black and mahogany locks fell to the floor, all life extinguished.

Leaving, she stepped into the real world again, and the fresh air smelled like lemonade and fresh rain. Taking a deep breath, she turned to walk back to her car, only to stop in stunned pain. Walking towards her was “him,” the same as always. His reddish-blond hair was still falling free and curly to the tips of his ears. His dark blue jeans looked as if they had been worn for the past week. The black T-shirt with the ironed-on silver Korn symbol sagged on his semi-broad shoulders. His confident swagger carried him to where she stood, and his half-lidded blue eyes traveled up and down her figure before dragging themselves back to the short brunette hanging onto his arm. Since he apparently hadn’t recognized her, no words passed between them. She stood there, body trembling with her need for his approval. But none was forthcoming. He appeared not even to know who she was. Incredulously, she stared back at him.

“Find your own man, honey,” sneered the brunette. Seizing his arm more firmly, she attempted to glower from her minuscule height.

The smell of lemons souring filled the brief space until her mischievous smile turned it to lemonade.

“Make sure to use protection, sweetie,” she whispered to the fuming brunette. “I’m still on a prescription for what he gave me.”

She stuck her nose in the air, laughed silently, and turned away from the furious yelling that filled the space now clearly smelling like Smoky Eternity. A bounce began to find its way into her step as she walked home, smiling with satisfaction, secure that she was more than hair.

I'm Not Even Going to Try

by Zach Ward

I thought that I could just walk in and everything would be all right. I couldn't possibly have been more wrong. Sure, I had some idea of what it would be like, but I had no idea it could get this bad.

I saw it the second I walked in. I stopped in my tracks and stared for a fraction of a second. It was so quiet you could hear the steady crackle of the intercom that no one ever bothers to shut off. Then, I backtracked out into the hall, turned to the right, and ran. I sped down the hall, not caring who or what I ran into and not noticing that there wasn't anyone to run into. I was alone here with it. I could hear it behind me, walking at its own leisurely pace. I turned another corner and ducked into my English class. I waited to hear it pass. It stopped at the door.

I knew that it would do no good to bar the door; it would break through eventually. I saw the door that led to the class next door. I jumped at it and promptly fell on my face. After I picked myself up and cursed at myself for being so clumsy at a time like this, I threw open the door and didn't even bother to close it behind me as I went through.

I was back where it all started. I would have taken the time to have a flashback scene to remember the day before, but it was still coming. I pushed the teacher's desk in front of the door as I left. Thank God for adrenaline. I then ducked into a conveniently placed alcove, breathing hard. I had to think. Up till this point, I'd just been running in circles, literally. I had to find some place that it couldn't follow me. Some place that held some protection from its kind. Did such a place even exist? And where the hell did this alcove come from? Those things don't just pop up when you need them; you have to pay people to install them, don't you?

I heard a screeching sound as the desk was effortlessly moved aside. The time for

thinking was over; it was now time to run. I went outside, hoping that the sunlight would give it pause. I then cursed at the cloud-filled skies as it pushed its way through the glass doors.

Once inside the other building, I headed for my locker. I thought that I must have something in there to scare off—or at least, distract—the accursed thing that followed me. When I got there, I couldn’t remember my combination. After a few seconds of trying random numbers and a few seconds of futile kicking, I was off again. The little imp that lives in there must have gotten scared and locked it from the inside. He has been such a pain lately. It didn’t really matter; I probably only had some books and an old sandwich or two in there, anyway.

Then I got a great idea. I knew the one place that it couldn’t follow me. The one place where I would be safe. I ran upstairs to my would-be sanctuary. I rushed into the bathroom and crouched in the last stall. The “magic words” on the door would keep it out. I smiled at myself as I sat there—until I heard it enter.

This was it; I couldn’t run any more. I simply sat there and awaited my fate.

Mrs. Dickinson knocked on the stall door as she said, “Zach, get out here! Your Urgency story is due.”

I thought, *Well, at least it can’t get worse.*

And then the toilet exploded beneath me.

The Day Granny Goo Goo Got Her Gun

by Elissa Crocker

The day Granny Goo Goo got her gun was a normal day in Hogsfoot Holler. Barney Baker didn't quit drinking, nor did Louella Baker quit screwing around on Barney. For that matter, neither did Preacher Tomson quit preaching or screwing Louella when Barney went out drinking.

But first things first. Before Granny Goo Goo got her gun, she got her name. When her first grandbaby was a toddler, he laughed like a silly goose. Granny teased, "You giggle just like a goose!"

Whereupon her grandson stomped his foot and said, "No, Granny. Ooh giggoo wike a goose!"

And in the ensuing argument over who really giggled like a goose, the little man hollered, "Granny giggoo goose! Granny googoo goose!"

And that's how Granny Goo Goo got her name.

Granny and Grampy worked hard to raise a family and even ended up with enough money when it was over to buy a few acres of their own in the holler. Granny often said, "Whoever said this is a free country ain't never balanced my checkbook. It might've been free to Dan'l Boone but a lot of water and a boatload of politicians have floated under the bridge since then."

Oh, she was patriotic to the core, but she had no illusions. Freedom in America was pricey.

While he was still able, Grampy put a chain link fence around their property with a locked gate and razor wire around the top. That was to keep others out and them in because as Granny said, "If I end up with Old-timers and walk around my property barebutt nekkid with pee runnin' down my legs, it ain't nobody's bizness but my own."

A proud woman, Granny didn't intend to end up on the highway leading to town

first, on the six o'clock news second, and at the Shady Acres Retirement Center last.

"Shady Acres, my ass," she said. "I ain't about to spend my Golden Years smellin' the pee runnin' down all those other old farts' legs who end up with Old-timers. The day they try to cart me out of here and into there is the day I'll get my gun."

In the end, that wasn't the day when Granny Goo Goo got her gun.

It goes without saying that Granny loved to shock people. At her grandson's big city wedding, she had to dip into her Mason jar to buy a new outfit for the hoity-toity shindig, so she didn't take kindly to the sanctimonious once-over she got from the preacher's wife. Her new hat had set her back a-ways.

Pumping the woman's hand enthusiastically, she said, "The preacher's wife, you say? What an honor. There's nuthin' quite like 'em. Why, gettin' the call to preacherin' is the only occupation I know where, after a few years of servin' the Lord, by and large, those who start out as men of God end up bein' gods of men."

Now, don't misunderstand. Granny was a Bible believin' woman who took her daily walk with the Lord seriously. She just didn't cotton to the airs a lot of Christians put on. When she met some of those "white-washed tombstones full of deadmen's bones" that Jesus talked about, she usually couldn't pass up the temptation to stir up a few white ashes.

Not surprisingly, Grampy was every bit as feisty and independent as Granny. When Jesus said to "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's," Grampy obeyed, but don't think for a minute he didn't figure Uncle Caesar had got more than a tad bit carried away with his share of the renderings and could use a new accountant.

You could say that Granny and Grampy were like two peas in a pod, and that's the way they intended to be forevermore.

So, about the same time Grampy built Granny's fence, he built an oversized pine coffin and stored it in the tool shed. In the end, that was the reason Granny got her gun.

Some folks in the holler said that old man Shnider was the cause of it all. The Shnidersons owned the county's only funeral parlor. Made a pretty penny on every funeral for miles around and they were partial to those pretty pennies. Old man Shnider said if Granny was allowed to get away with it, pretty soon everyone would be breaking the law, not to mention the diseases and plagues that would be turned loose on civilization because of all those decaying bodies that hadn't been properly embalmed. So, he figured it was his civic duty to put a stop to it before it got out of hand.

When old man Shnider and the sheriff and the man from the Health Department showed up at her gate, it was locked. But Granny was waiting for them.

She walked up to the gate and stuck the barrel right through the chain link fence,

leveled it in the general vicinity of the man from the Health Department's heart and said, "Unless yore ready for the real stuff to flow out that bleedin' heart of yours, I suggest you move your butt away from my property."

They spent the better part of the day trying to convince Granny that she needed to let them in and give Grampy a proper burial. But they all should have known once Granny's mind was made up, a couple of pompous do-gooders and a lawman weren't about to change it.

A few weeks back, Granny died. People always say that when one goes, the other follows pretty soon after.

I figure old man Shnider and the sheriff and the man from the Health Department are gonna' show up any day now.

I was always proud because I was the one who gave Granny Goo Goo her name. She gave me a pretty big responsibility when she gave me her gun.

Never Again

by Suzie Sells

He said it would never happen again. He said he was sorry. He said he really meant it this time.

She used to look in the mirror and make excuses for the bruises on her body. She tried to rationalize his anger. Jeff was under a lot of stress. Maybe she had pushed him too far. She knew how hard he worked; maybe she should have just left him alone.

He loves me, she thought. He's just having a hard time at work. He won't do it again. He promised.

Today, the woman in the mirror looked much older. There was a bruise on her cheek and dried blood on her lips. Karen felt the pain in her own ribs as the woman pulled back her gown, unveiling her beaten ribs. She wondered why the woman was so thin. Who was this battered skeleton looking back at her? She gazed deep into the swollen eyes of the stranger in the mirror, slowly recognizing the woman staring back at her.

"This can't be me," she gasped.

Karen rocked in the corner as she looked around the room. The moon shone through the dusty shade, tinting the room in yellowish-browns. Beside the window sat the nightstand with her grandmother's crystal lamp on top. It had been in the family for years, but no longer worked. Looking around the room, Karen realized it was the only thing of hers in the barren room.

No pictures or art hung on the walls. Jeff did not like art or color. He insisted upon white walls, white sheets, and no rugs on the wooden floors. Plain wooden rails held their mattress and springs up off the floor. Jeff thought a headboard was extravagant, so it was simply not allowed.

She smiled as she suddenly realized Jeff's Patsy Cline record was still playing. The music must have been playing for hours before she heard it. "I . . . to pie-ces, hmm,

hmm, hmm, each time I see you again . . .,” she hummed quietly to herself. She used to hate Patsy Cline and had a tendency to block it out. Jeff liked to listen to it while he drank. Hearing it now was like hearing it for the first time. Now she associated this song with relief, not pain.

In the moonlight, Karen watched the only color in the room spread over the white sheets and pillow and slowly creep down the side of the bed, dripping into a crimson puddle on the floor. She felt something cold in her hand. She looked down at the knife she held. As she sat, quaking in the corner as she had many times before, she knew that this was the last time.

Essays

Life in Transit

by Amber Nevarez

At our separate stops, we are still inside our own lives. We're on separate missions. Different people who, under no other circumstances, would ever meet. However, after stepping through those folding doors, it all falls behind me. My fellow passengers become my family; the worn-down seats, metal standing bars, and the stop tape are my home. Our dollar paid and our transfers in hand, we of the Metro-Bus System settle in with our common goal of getting "there." During this time, we are Life in Transit.

Bus 14 runs from 59th and Sunnyslane in Del City through Southeast Oklahoma City to the bus terminal at the corner of Kerr and Shartel. This is the first bus I ride on my daily commute. On my Walkman, Joan Osborne's "One of Us" dilutes the voices of the other riders. "What if God were one of us / just a slob like one of us / just a stranger on the bus . . ." I look around and see nothing celestial of any kind.

At the Hathaway Park stop, a young woman gets on the bus. She has three teardrops tattooed under her right eye. She is going to work for Burger King across town. She is a first time rider and fumbles with her transfer card as she inserts it into the machine. Two Burger King employees who ride regularly direct her on how to use her transfer and what route she should take next. In minutes, she has been adopted by the regular riders and has become a little sister of sorts.

An old man gets on at 23rd and Shields. He has with him his trademark blue lunchbox and cracked brown cane. His white hair sticks out in tufts from underneath his baby blue baseball cap. He adjusts his thick glasses and chats amiably with the black woman who rides regularly on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

"It's such a pain to get old," he says and laments about the woes of old age. I listen to his stories and save his seat for him. We all think of him as grandfather.

At 25th and Walker, the fortyish Indian man gets on. Perpetually jovial, he

launches into his usual speech: “Good day, sir. Going inbound?” He walks to the back, smiling, humming, and nodding to us as he passes. At a car lot on South Robinson, he steps off the bus and proceeds to huff paint. I know he knows we can see him since his bus ride to huffing is an immediate trip. On the bus, this man is my friend, almost like an uncle. I can hum the song he sings, and I return his smile every time I see him. When he steps off the bus, he is a man we don’t know. We look away, keeping the cheerful image with us. You don’t want to see family in shaming situations, so we smile and ride on.

At the last stop before the terminal, a woman inquires about her bus pass, which expired just that day. After being told she can’t ride, her arms sag and the heavy box of groceries she’s carrying almost falls. The man in the first seat tells her to get on. He’ll cover her fare. He counts out his change and another man takes the heavy box from her to a seat. A new member of the family has been taken in.

Already on the bus from 59th and Sunnyside, an elderly woman and her granddaughter ride to the terminal. “Gramma” is the girl’s primary caretaker. The girl talks to us and asks if we’ll “come visit her at the new, clean house.” We all agree we will, sharing isn’t-she-cute looks with Gramma. Watching her, all of us riding today can’t help smiling.

At the terminal, several familiar faces frequent the parking lot. There is the one-armed woman with many friends. There is the man who tries to sell me Sprint PCS phone service. He talks of the high cost of college and how Sprint can save money. As crude construction workers ride by and yell, he glares in their direction, taking the big brother stance. I smile at the absurd thought, yet I am comforted. There is also the red-haired boy. He is our traveling missionary, spreading his word mixed with the word of God. He insists computers are the “mark of the beast.” He also says that God’s name equals 156, which correlates with the letter Z, meaning Alpha and Omega—the beginning and the end. I don’t believe half of what he tells me, but he says to believe in Jesus, and that I can believe.

Bus 12, whose outbound route runs from the terminal through the Stockyards and to Oklahoma City Community College, is the second leg of my route. This bus passes by the Grace Rescue Mission. Every day, the homeless people frequent the outbound route. There is one I have seen who rode quietly twice. He carried a red bag and asked me for a nickel once. The second time I saw him, he was unrecognizable. The man had been beaten beyond recognition. He looked so sad, and inside, I cried for him. At the corner of Woodson Park, he got off. I haven’t seen him since. Yet his image remains

in my mind, and every time we pass the Mission, I look for him.

It's not all sadness on Bus 12. Loud and hyperactive middle-schoolers crowd onto the 4:00 p.m. run. The other passengers give them disapproving looks as their obnoxious antics become louder. Thankfully, most of them get off soon. A young Mexican woman rides to and from her children's daycare. She has a baby girl and a three-year-old son. She talks about the transition her life took after high school and her unstable lifestyle. She isn't married, and her distrust in men comes through. College students also frequent this run. There is the quiet Islamic man. Three black women ride on Mondays and talk about everything from their kids to job interviews. A red-haired man with glasses rides on the 10:00 a.m. run and leaves on the 2:00 p.m. run. Then there is me. I ride the 11:30 run and reach the college at 12:00. I sit quietly and listen to my headphones. It's John Lennon now, singing "Imagine" and "Nobody Told Me": "Nobody told me / there'd be days like these. / Strange days indeed." It is, indeed, another strange day on my Metro bus travels.

These people infiltrate my daily life. After those first few rides, I found myself a part of them. I come home, talking of them and realize how important they are to me. These people that I ride with are my new life. I take care in knowing that they are okay. I live a life at home, and I live a life in transit. Every day, I meet someone new, old friends. We travel, going separate ways, but unified in our daily ride together. We are rich and poor, working class and homeless. We are getting an education and going to work; we are getting beaten up in the night and huffing paint. We are young and old, tired and exuberant. We are white and black, Indian and Mexican. We are the true mirror of Oklahoma City.

Hell on Wheels

by Mark Diaz

I started my first band in 1967, in Upper Heyford, England. There was me, Tommy Morehouse, Jim Driver, and a guy named Greg who was in the band only because he owned a set of drums. He couldn't actually play the drums, but they looked pretty cool as our backdrop, so he was in.

Our first "gig" was the High School Talent Contest. We were granted contestant status due to the fact that Upper Heyford High School included grades eight through twelve. (Come on. There were only twenty people in the senior class!)

The easy part was signing up to perform; the other side of the coin was talking the guys into how we were going to perform.

"The Baby Beatles? You must be crazy!" Jim was never shy about speaking his mind.

"Listen to me, guys," I pleaded. "It'll be great! We'll dye some mopheads and use them as wigs, use white towels for diapers, and . . ."

"What?" Tommy screamed like a banshee. "No way am I wearing diapers! You can just forget it. Absolutely, positively, no way will I EVER get on stage wearing diapers!"

"Me, either," Jim chipped in. "No way."

"I'm out," added our non-drummer Greg.

The Baby Beatles finished third in the Talent Contest. I swore that when I grew up, I would have me a REAL band.

I never really grew up, but twenty-one years later, in a small dingy "box" house in the Old South Side of Toledo, Ohio, far removed from the sheltered existence of Upper Heyford Air Force Base, my first REAL band was about to be conceived.

None of the members of The Baby Beatles were to be found in my new band except

me, the not-so-skinny-anymore lead singer.

The band was an exotic cocktail, indeed. We were just another garage band without a garage. Actually, a garage would have been a step-up from Gary's house, an old wooden structure that perpetually reeked of stale pot smoke and cheap perfume.

But we thought we were Hell on Wheels.

We spent our entire first night of practice laying down simple chord progressions in a vain attempt to fashion something that resembled actual music. We failed miserably; we were being distracted by the most important of all matters facing a "new" band, "What are we going to call ourselves?" Lane was the first to broach the subject.

Lane was the best musician of us all, but he had a slight problem: he couldn't stay sober long enough to finish a practice session. He could make his cherry-apple red Les Paul cry like only a handful of guitarists I have ever heard: Allman, Clapton, Santana. He was that good.

He would start out all fresh and kicking ass, but as the night wore on, he transformed into a different animal—Drool Boy. You see, Lane had a penchant for cheap alcohol and prescription depressants, and he preferred to consume both in mass quantities.

Josh was our bass player, and he, too, was an accomplished musician. Josh actually was the only one of us that looked like a rock-and-roll band member. He had wild, frizzy super-long hair, black leather everything, those gloves like Madonna used to wear—the whole nine yards. Oh, yeah. He absolutely shredded on his Rickenbacker bass.

Dave, a lovable loser, was our "percussionist." He preferred percussionist to drummer because, as he was quick to point out, he also had cymbals in his kit. He was a great drummer (percussionist) who never had enough money for anything—smokes, gas, rent—you name it. But put him on that tattered swivel stool behind his Ludwigs and he owned the world. Dave had some serious skills.

We practiced in Gary's house two times a week for what seemed like forever. Gary was my age but looked ten years younger. He was cheating Father Time with a pumped-up body and a cute little dish of a girlfriend named Adrienne. He played a passable rhythm guitar, a yellow Fender Stratocaster signed by Joe Walsh. He never let anyone use his ax. Gary was the only responsible person in the band.

I was the lead singer/songwriter in what has turned out to be my last rock-and-roll band. I was also a regionally known French chef plying my trade in the area's only four-star restaurant. As I said before, an exotic cocktail indeed.

If my memory serves me correctly, I think it required two cases of Budweiser,

about a half-ounce of stinky Northern California (Marin County) sinsemilla, a quart of Canadian whiskey, and our collective burnt-out recollections of an old Jethro Tull song to arrive at our new identity.

We were Bad Intent. Not just a name, a way of life.

We went through all the normal problems of a garage band: Lane went in and out of rehab three or four times; Josh tried and failed to turn us into a speed metal band; Dave got booted out of two or three slums for nonpayment of rent; and I was the biggest idiot of us all. I got arrested, not once or twice, but three times, for DUI. Josh ended up being my best friend and chauffeur, and Bad Intent kept practicing twice a week in that little “box” house in the Old South Side of Toledo.

Then, one day, it happened.

We actually had someone hear us play at one of the many nonpaying parties we played, and they wanted to HIRE us to play in their bar! And not just any old bar. Not for our opening PAYING gig. Bad Intent discovered we were going to play the Good Tymes Pub, one of the coolest bars in the college town of Bowling Green, Ohio.

We had a lot of hard work ahead of us.

We practiced three times a week in preparation for our gig. Turner, our “manager,” had negotiated a kingly sum for us: half the take of the cover charge money and an open bar tab. We figured the open bar tab alone was worth close to five hundred bucks.

Saturday, September 6, 1993, finally arrived and we were ready.

We got to the bar early in the day to set up and look cool. After the obligatory sound checks, we went back to Gary’s to knock back a few beers. Turner called to tell us he would meet us there for our opening set.

We arrived at 8:30 to check it out and were more than a little confused. This was one of the hottest bars in BG and it was empty. I remember the look on each one of our faces and it wasn’t pretty. We all turned to Turner for some sort of explanation, but he still hadn’t shown up. Typical Turner. In five minds, the calculations of our take for the cover charge money all came up the same. Zero. Nada. Zilch.

We climbed up on stage at precisely nine o’clock and Josh ripped his leather pants. Dave got his finger caught under a mike stand and had to play with one hand for the rest of the night. Gary had forgotten our play-list, which we had meticulously prepared, so we didn’t have a clue what we were going to play at any given moment. Lane was so nervous about playing our first-ever paying gig that he had taken a handful of Valium and washed it down with a pint of some cheap brand of Schnapps. A long trail of drool had already soaked through his shirt. Turner finally emerged from the clutches of some

trashy-looking cocktail waitress to inform us that school was not in session, that the owners of the bar had had their license yanked for serving alcohol to minors, and that we were playing their farewell party before they went to County Jail. Oh, yeah, they decided not to charge a cover for the party. Not exactly what we thought we were getting into.

After numerous shots and beers, we climbed back onstage to find one of our light panels had blown a fuse. Lane dropped his microphone and it wasn't working. I raised my hand and we hit the first power chord of the song. Josh and I looked at each other and smiled.

We still thought we were Hell on Wheels.

Obsession Progression

by Barbara Gwinn

My husband thinks that I have a problem. I don't—not really. At least I don't think that I have a problem. To me, a problem is showing up drunk at your sister's wedding and throwing up on her dress. A problem is running over your mother-in-law's miniature poodle on your way out to pick up a pizza because you couldn't stand what she fixed for dinner. Your boss firing you from your job because you hit him in the eye with one of several staples you shot out of the stapler while twirling circles in his leather chair in his office on what was supposed to be the last day of his vacation is a problem. Streaking through town while naked and smeared with peanut butter . . . well, I wouldn't call that a problem, but I would call it a little twisted.

My point is that I don't have a problem. My husband just likes to call it a problem. This is so that other people will wonder just what exactly is wrong with me, and he can be the good guy for tolerantly putting up with me. It's nothing serious or life threatening, but it does cause some stress and strain in our marriage. I'm not antisocial. I don't engage in deviant behavior. I'm not really hurting anybody, and I'm not embarrassed.

I have what could be called a bit of an issue with books.

Yes, I said books.

I like books. I like books a lot. Books make me happy. I like to read books. I like to look at books. I like to put books on shelves. I like to take books off of shelves. I like to stack books on my desk. I like to plan which books I'm going to read. I like to look at catalogues of books. I like to read book reviews. I like to alphabetize books. I like to go book shopping. I like to touch the spines of books and imagine what's inside. I like to . . .

Excuse me, please, for just a moment. I see a book. I must go to it.

I think my issue with books really started when I was in high school. My family always had a certain reverence for books. My sisters and I were taught to treat them with respect. You didn't tear up a book, you didn't write in a book, you didn't let a book get wet. Spines were not to be creased, corners were never meant to be dog-eared, and pages under no condition were ever supposed to be torn out. In school, teachers knew us Anderson girls: our textbooks were always returned in the exact condition in which they were checked out to us, and the library never had to worry about how many books we checked out.

While in high school, I inherited the old metal bookcase that had been shared by all of us kids. I was the youngest, and it became mine by attrition as the others left home. My mother had actually gotten the bookcase when she was in college the first time. We stored our series of *Compton's Encyclopedia* on the bottom shelf. The next shelf up was for my homework and library books, then a shelf for my sister Lavone, and the next for my sister Karen. By the time the bookcase became completely mine during high school, it was fairly rickety and had a jagged corner that anyone coming into the room had to be careful of because it would rip their clothes. While my fourth generation bed, my dual cassette deck with built-in equalizer, all-inclusive stereo, and even my school-issued xylophone were tucked back into the corners of my room, my bookcase held a position of honor in the center of the main wall of my room.

One of the first things I did when I got the bookcase was to pull out the Mo-Ne issue of the 1962 *Compton's Encyclopedia* and look up the entry for mythology. I then taped together six hundred and forty-eight pieces of two-inch by two-inch paper and drew a mural in colored pencil of the mythological figures that I saw. It took me almost three weeks to finish, and when I had finished it, I taped it to the wall above my metal bookcase. On the top shelf I had a few candles, a mirror, some make up and a jewelry box. A friend had given the jewelry box to me. It was black lacquer with an inlaid gold unicorn dancing on the lid, and inside she had put little paper hearts and a gold heart necklace charm. I still have the jewelry box; I haven't seen the friend since high school.

On the next shelf, I had a small rectangular lavender-colored basket that I kept my jewelry in. My jewelry box was for memories—my basket was for jewelry. I also kept my colored pencils, my crayons, my ink pens, and other office supplies on that shelf. When I brought books home from school or the library, I left them on that shelf so I would always be able to find them when I wanted them.

The other shelves stayed empty for a while. It was kind of depressing. One day, I went to the Goodwill store, and after looking at the sweaters, blue jeans, and mismatched furniture donated from the last hundred years, I wandered over to the book

section. At first, I couldn't believe that anyone would want to get rid of so many books. There were hundreds of books lined up on homemade shelves made from 1x9 planks and cement blocks. I was captivated. I found a beat-up copy of Stephen King's *Eye of the Dragon* and a hardcover copy of V. C. Andrews' *My Sweet Audrina*. There were newer books worn from misuse and older ones that had yellowed with age.

I'm not sure what shocked me more—the abundance of books or the horrible condition that many of them were in. My sensibilities were bruised by the water stains, broken spines and pages just ripped out. BOOKS! My heart almost broke when I found an illustrated copy of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* from 1920 that had been split into three distinct pieces with pages missing from each of the pieces. But my heartbreak was quickly diminished by the elation I felt at finding an immaculate copy of a collection of Ralph Waldo Emerson essays.

I was hooked, and so began what my husband calls “my problem.” The shelves of my little metal bookshelf were soon filled, so I got a little raw-wood two-shelf bookcase that someone had made. In fact, I believe I got it at the same Goodwill store where my book addiction, uh, book issue began. It, too, was soon filled, and I started having to stack my books beside my bookshelves.

When I moved out of my parents' house, the little metal bookshelf, unfortunately, did not survive the move. A friend who was helping me move accidentally grabbed the jagged corner and cut himself, and in his pain he dropped it. It fell into so many pieces I couldn't even put it back together with duct tape. The first piece of furniture that I bought was a Room Additions imitation woodgrain six-shelf bookcase from Wal-Mart. A few other pieces of furniture followed; however, like a first love, none held such a place in my heart as that first bookcase.

I bought my first house when I was twenty-four. It was the third house I looked at, and since I didn't make a great deal of money at the time, the only houses I was even considering were older homes built in the 30's and 40's. I decided on the third house because it felt the most comfortable. It had a large laundry room, a screened-in backporch, and, most importantly, in the front room it had a built-in bookcase. The bookcase had eleven layers of paint on it (yes, I counted each one). I moved my books from my favorite authors into that bookcase. The bottom shelf had Anne McCaffrey and on the next were Mercedes Lackey and Piers Anthony. The third shelf held Stephen King, Anne Rice, Dean Koontz, and a few others where I liked the individual book, but not necessarily the author. On the very top shelf, I put the books that I considered to be classics. It was the shelf that held *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. *Anne of Avonlea* found its home there right next to *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *Ethan*

Fromme could look upon *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

There were times when I would come home from work and just stare at those wonderful books. There were so many interesting stories and people in them! I almost preferred spending my time with them after a hard day of dealing with customers rather than spend time with my family and friends.

I found a Community Thrift Store near where I lived that carried a wide selection of books, and I went there at least once a week to peruse their selection and see if there were any other books that I could add to my collection. Eventually, I knew the book section at the store better than the employees did, and I could tell quickly what was new and what had been there for a while. Not long after, I found another thrift store only a few miles farther away and started commuting between the two. The bookcase in my front room was quickly filled, and soon afterwards, my pride-and-joy bookcase was filled also. I started stacking books on top of books and eventually had to layer them two high and two deep.

My oldest sister Karen came to visit me and found my books quite amusing. Bored one day, she picked up one of my Anne McCaffrey *Pern* novels and read it. Then she read another. Before long, she had read every Anne McCaffrey novel I had. She started going back to the library, just like we used to do when we were kids. She would call and ask me if I had read anything by Robert Heinlein or Isaac Asimov. She would want to know if she could borrow my latest Tanith Lee novel or would offer to let me borrow her most recent Andre Norton acquisition.

The next time she came to visit, she took me to a used book store. I had never actually been to one. I had heard about them, of course, but I had never ventured into one. I just about cleared my bank account that day. I had to have her help to get all my new used books out to the car and, from there, into my house. I started storing my new books in my kitchen cabinets. There seemed to be plenty of room in them; after all, I was a single woman with only enough dishes, glasses, pots and pans to fill one cupboard. It didn't take long for me to fill the space in there, either.

The man who would become my husband seemed to understand that my books were a high priority in my life. After we were married, we bought a house that had two built-in bookcases in the living room, and he willingly relinquished possession of the two bookcases that he owned. Still, I had boxes of books left sitting in the closet. Eventually, we went back to Wal-Mart where he bought me two more bookshelves. I would have liked to have more; however, I have run out of room to put bookshelves up in my house. I have started stacking and layering my books again, but I have found many more used book stores and thrift stores to frequent, and my Waldenbook's

Preferred Reader card never feels neglected.

My husband walked into the bedroom I now use as an office. I saw him look around at all the stacks and stacks of books layered in every available space, and he shook his head. Once again I heard him say those words: “You have a problem.”

I’m about ready to agree with him. I need a bigger house.

The Day I Went Blind

by B. J. Megginson

The first time I met Martin was on a cold, dreary December day between Christmas and New Year's Day. I was a deacon at my church and was asked to take a leftover poinsettia flower from the sanctuary to an elderly blind man named Martin Petigrew who lived on Buchanan Street. It took me a little while to find his house, an old, rundown brick condo with cracked white shutters and a faded blue door. It looked like it might have been a nice place when Eisenhower was President, but now it looked like the kind of place you wouldn't be surprised if you found a meth lab inside. I knocked on the door, praying that I was at the right house and wouldn't be greeted by a man wearing a dirty tank top, holding a cigarette in his lips, a beer in one hand, and a shotgun in the other. Luckily, I was right and a frail voice told me to come in.

As I walked in, the first thing I noticed was a hideous lime-green and burnt-orange plaid, crushed velvet couch that looked as if it could have been a prop on *The Brady Bunch*. Hunched over on the left side of the couch, there was a little old man about five feet tall, with thin gray hair that went in every direction but down, dressed in brown slacks and a baby blue shirt. I introduced myself and gave Martin his flower. He set it down in his lap and started smelling it and running his fingers through the leaves.

"What color is it?" he asked.

"The flower is white and the rest of the plant has green leaves, and it's wrapped in green cellophane."

"I don't really like the white ones. They don't seem as fitting for the season. I'll just see it as red, like the Coca-Cola ad. That was my favorite color—Coca-Cola Red. I would see those ads all over the place when I was a boy. I heard they changed the Coca-Cola logo a few years back. That doesn't matter, though. It still tastes the same to me."

Martin's condo was very sparse. Aside from the seventies reject couch, he had a round wooden coffee table stacked high with colorless Braille magazines. Beside him was a pale yellow end table that someone had taken a saw to and rounded off all the corners. On top of his end table were four large leather-bound books, which turned out to be the complete works of William Shakespeare in Braille. Next to the books was a black clock radio with oversized buttons shaped like triangles, circles and squares that would, at the push of a button, tell the time in a lifeless mechanical monotone voice. It seemed odd to me the things he didn't have, like a television or lamps. He didn't even have any art on the walls, but I guess if you can't see, there's no use for any of those things.

I sat on the couch from 5:00 until almost 8:30 p.m., talking with Martin. He told me what it was like being able to see the beautiful world we live in, and then smelling, hearing, and touching that same world and still "seeing" its beauty after he lost his sight. One of the most amazing things he told me was about a speech he made during the civil rights movement, explaining the stupidity of judging people on their appearance. He said every person he met was the same; they were just people, not white people or black people, and there wasn't any difference between us. I was very impressed when I found out he had a degree from O. U. and had run the concession stand at the courthouse—by himself—for thirty years. I have trouble keeping up with school and running a cash register at Toys R' Us, and I have 20/20 vision. I couldn't imagine doing that with no sight.

I never thought I would lose my vision, but for about the last couple of hours of my visit, the sun had set and Martin's apartment was pitch black, and in his world, I was a blind man. I couldn't see the watch on my own wrist, but Martin could tell me what time it was. I wouldn't have been able to read the note I had in my coat pocket from my girlfriend, but he could have read me a sonnet by Shakespeare. To me, the apartment was still and dark, but to him, it was alive and vibrant with a table full of good books, a comfortable couch, and a new Coca-Cola Red poinsettia.

Uncle Gary

by Melissa Ronspiez

Sitting at my family reunion last year, I saw my Uncle Gary getting ready to light his cigarette. He has done this the same way as far back as I can remember. The thing is, my Uncle Gary has no fingers. He was burned in a house fire when he was sixteen years old and has no fingers, hair, nose or earlobes. Sitting back, I see him lean forward and run his right stub along the front left side of his shirt pocket and then use his left stub as a type of catcher's mitt. When the lighter lands in his palm, he grasps the body of the lighter between his stubs, flips the lid open with his chin, and inverts the lighter to strike the flint against his blue jeans. After raising the flame to his lips, he flips the lid shut and drops the lighter back into his shirt pocket. I have seen him do this countless times in my life. I am astounded by his independence even in such a small part of his everyday life. I am reminded of the most important lesson I have ever learned and how I came about learning it right there on that picnic bench.

My uncle was looking around for someone to talk to. So, I headed in his direction to speak with him a moment. We talked about different events in my life, mostly about all the trouble I managed to get myself into. I recalled when I was growing up on the farm, how every day, rain or shine, I woke up to my dad and him at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and bullshitting, wondering if the weather would hold through harvest. I would go sit in my dad's lap and ask, "Why do you have to go to work today, Daddy?" He and my Uncle Gary would answer in unison "That's what men do, sweetheart."

I looked down at Uncle Gary's stubs and saw they were chafed red and raw from working the harvest. He never missed a day's work even when his stubs were so raw that they bled. My mental image of him—sweat-soaked, at work with the special hay hooks attached to his stubs raising bale after bale of hay onto the back of my dad's pickup truck—still burns in my mind. After loading the truck, it was off to the barn to

unload the hay for storage until it was no longer green and could be sold.

At the end of the day when Uncle Gary went to remove the bloody straps of the prosthetic hooks, his stubs were so raw that they were bright red with little streams of blood dripping off them. Uncle Gary still went to work even with his skin so raw that it was laid open in places. He has told me countless times that a man should work and care for his family. In his case, having no family of his own meant having his brothers and their families and his parents as his family. He had these talks with me when I was being a “baby” or when I was just being hard on myself. He would tell me “there is nothing wrong with asking for help if it’s needed, but don’t make a living at it.”

Stan the Man

by Len Nones

My friend Stan Alvarez is a great man . . . a great man. He loves soccer, girls, and a good party. He has short dark hair, dark brown eyes, a slender build, and a great personality. He looks like a mini-Antonio Banderas. He always smiles. Even if he is having a really bad day, there he is—smiling. He isn't superficial or trendy and is always eager to put his two cents in. Stan is one of the most honest people that I have met in my life. He will tell you anything that he is thinking about or that you want to know even if it is something that you don't want to hear. He volunteered to help out at the Boys and Girls Club this summer because he said the kids needed someone to look up to. Stan comes from an upper-middle class family and has a great education. He is only one year older than I am, but he acts as if he is some great older brother.

Last week, my friend Stan Alvarez killed himself. I am really going to miss my friend. He had a lot going for him; I never would have thought Stan to take his own life.

I can see Stan lying in his coffin. He looks like a doll, one made of porcelain. It appears he might shatter if touched. Looking at him from a distance, he doesn't even resemble himself. The expression on his face is peaceful as if he were in some deep slumber. Perhaps this is a dream . . . I extend my hand and touch his index finger. Stan's creamy skin is cold and lifeless. His hair has been neatly trimmed and parted down the left side. His tuxedo is navy blue, a white shirt underneath the jacket. The small black noose strung around his neck is his tie. The watch that his grandfather had given him as a graduation present is on his wrist.

The coffin is a dark ebony color with white padding on the inside. It rests on a large altar-like structure. On either side of the coffin stand two marble tables. On each of these tables are two luminous bouquets of flowers. Standing next to this altar, with a

stern look on his face, is Stan's father. He is giving his own son's eulogy. I imagine it must be hard for someone to be reading at his or her child's funeral. The guests who join us here for this sad death party are all dressed in black, some with roses, others without. Not one smile is to be seen nor laugh to be heard. The only sounds are those of the father and the weeping and sobs of Stan's guests.

People go through their lives, thinking *Oh, things like this will never happen to me*. However, when they do happen, they hit fast and hard. It's always easy for someone to just vanish without a trace. For others, it is hard to deal with things like death, so they forget about the dead or leave them in the past.

As for me, I will never forget what I have seen here today nor will I ever forget my friend Stan.

Stan the Man.

Poems

This One, This One Right Here

This poem Is somewhat
Just for you—
Strange to say,
I guess, but this
Particular poem
Is different from
What you might expect.
Earlier this afternoon
My poem
Took a quick lap
Around the pool
And then toweled off,
Vigorously. It wandered
Back into the house and had
A bologna sandwich,
Listened to NPR,
And drank a grape soda.
I'm letting you know
So you'll understand
How special this poem
Really is: it's done things
Poems haven't done before:
In fact, this poem just
Ate an apple, right before my eyes.

— Mark Bates

Requiem

A horse-drawn carriage carries
A body outside of a city made great.

Nearly two score years hence
The same hearse
Will bring Ludwig's body to the grave
Accompanied by twenty thousand mourners.

But not so today,
This corpse will have a sole pallbearer.

Dark gray clouds
Roll in the sky.
Rain, thunder and lightning
Cry out in unison
As the wind whips
The wet robe of a priest.

A coffin is dampened by holy water.
Incense makes the sign of the cross
Over the surface of rough pine.
A sheet-wrapped body
Is lifted out of the coffin,
A coffin used again and again.
The remains are summarily disposed
In a common grave,
One body staked among many.

Lye is shoveled, then dirt.
"Into your hands, Father of Mercies,
we commend Wolfgang, our brother."
"May choirs of angels welcome you

and lead you to the bosom of Abraham;
and where Lazarus is poor no longer,
may you find eternal rest.”

“May angels singing
lead you into paradise!”

Musicians, post!

Take up the violin and bow.
Fingers, dance across the keys
of the clavichord and harpsichord.
Blow the clarinets and the oboe.
Play the piano.
Harpists, lightly stroke
your ten-stringed harps.
Flute players, play.
Singers, sing.
Dancers, dance.

To you, Creator of creators,
We commend the tortured soul
Of your servant.
Forgive his sins, his moral weakness.

And so, trumpets, blow!
Open the gates of paradise!

Beat, beat the tambourines.
Strike the timbrel
And the ten-stringed lute.
Crash forth, bronze cymbals.

May your soul, so genius, direct on.
Read the clef and bar.
Raise a song.
Violin and pipe, play on, play on.

Play the *Requiem*.

Play forever the sweet sound,
A symphony quilled for the orchestra of God.

—Paul Wesselhoft

Cataract Moon

The October wind
Spins its circles
Around Lake Hefner.
As one body curled
Into a blanket of grass,
We watch the horizon
Swirl our thoughts toward us,
Toward grey clouds
Spreading thick above the earth.
As some purple city light
Cascades its lost hue
Upon the twinkling waves,
We peer out to lose
Ourselves, see us defined
In each cold shiver and gaze.

Who knew, though, that soon
My thoughts would stray
Like clouds hiding a view?
Who knew exactly how
Our thoughts would raise
The brow of a cataract moon?

“When I am sixty-two,
This moon is how I want to look
Down at you,
With my cataract eye
Squinting through the fog of me,
Wanting to break through
And say those silent words, ‘I love you.’”

But tonight, the cataract moon
Only belongs to you,

And though I do not see through
Or say those silent words,
I hope the October wind
Will circle through us again
As we wait another night or day
For the clouds to thin out,
For my eyes to sift
Through the purple haze.

— Jon Inglett

Noodling and the Chase

Oh the chase that you give us each time;
all the while you lazily swim around and seem
not to mind. Not with a hook or pole do we
seek our mighty foe. Hand to fin, man to
fish. “Lord help me be quick”—that’s my wish.
Into the brush piles and holes in the banks
do we search and feel for our foe.
The price our bodies pay is worth the toll.
For a big old cat is where all the fun is at—
fishing without a pole. Noodling is not for
one and all. You have to be part crazy or
have a lot of gall. Into the tides we do
swim, for the chase is on—it’s us or him.
The smaller ones we do release ’cause we are
after a mighty beast. Caught a-hold of some
that we just could not hold. Maybe I’m
getting too old. For this kind of sport is
for the young at heart. But swim, swim old
mighty one—your day or ours will come.

— John Brett McCuan

library girl

having heard through word of mouth
unanimous glowing rave reviews
concerning the latest sheet changing thriller
looking for a quick easy lay
he obtained her call name and measurements
went to the local public housing project
located her street number in a dusty cul de sac
picked her off the porch
produced his credit card
checked her out overnight

over coffee he examined
her frayed faded outfit timeworn mishandled features
skimmed her table of contents
after a brief somewhat trite introduction
read in boldfaced signals
her first few thought-provoking impressions

hooked attention riveted
eyes glued to her figure

he took her home

where he removed her wrinkled jacket
admired her classic hardback
propped himself by candlelight up in bed
spreading her legs opening her up
settling in deeply absorbed
in her idiomatic streetwise voice.

licking his finger
slowly he thumbed through her garments
worked his way down the dress

her ironic expressions interpreting
noting her tight well-constructed structure
responding to her movement rhythms moods
delighting in deconstructing her body

willingly suspending his disbelief imagination transported
he followed her expertly crafted waistline through
unpredictable twists turns highs lows
tensions mounting
pace accelerating
witnessing unexpected reversals
of fortune shocking revelations ungodly acts

a shattering of explosive climax . . .

awestricken purged
profoundly affected by her final haunting words
he marked his territory
wrote his name in her checkbook cleared
a spot for her on his shelf
engagement date now long overdue
repeatedly warned heavily fined by the chapter
ignoring his parents' repeated calls
he curls up every night before bed
cracks her open
recites his favorite lines
speed reads the dirty parts
losing himself in her
and finding hidden meaning
within her stained torn rabbit eared sex
over and over
and over
again.

— Todd Mihalcik

The Twain on Which We Meet

It is the twain on which we meet
His is *compaq* and
Mine is HP
We take the super highway
With 56K, who wants to wait?
The warmth of his words
Makes my PC glow
Our thoughts come out much nicer
When typed into thin air
It's much easier to express yourself
When you're not locked in a stare
Thanks to *instant messenger* there's
No waiting on a reply
He can say I love you
and
I can type in <sigh>
It's true,
I want to hold the hand of my
Internet Romeo,
but
Until our fonts and graphics
Take us there
Oh, Juliet,
What a way to go!

—Pam Pinero

*Locus Iste**

“He fled back to the mountain alone.” Matt. 14:23

Sunlight filters onto painted places
Beeswax firelight fills in old and carves out
Shadows new in architected caverns.

Customs, celebrations and traditions
Intellectualized beyond distraction
Dominate and order sacred spaces.

Emotions,
Prolonged holy flashes in
Silence between echoes,
Consecrate
Togetherness as the transcendent
Purpose.
Uniqueness yields to unity.

—Richard Rouillard

**Locus iste* is Latin for “this place.”

Locus Iste #2

This is the place where penitents murmur
In line against the cooled darkened spaces.
A choir practices its concert songs.
I sit solemnly and listen to eclipsed
Whispers fuse with *Magnificats* of light
In sounds repeating on cathedral walls.

Words, compelling distractions, buffer
Then stifle burning responses.
Only in the intervals between echoes
Is the spirit freed to expand and soar
Into unassigned spaces.

— Richard Rouillard

Mountain View

The winding stream rushes down the mountain
Where it finds a sudden fall
It flows right over the edge without fright
A beautiful waterfall is created
The transparent blue water runs smoothly
Traveling over rock
Rock that was at one time rough and imperfect
But made perfectly smooth by the winding stream
That flows out of Mountain View

— Brian Arthur Sexton

Preception*

where are you supposed to look when you see
a man in a wheelchair, left leg missing
 (don't stare)
faded army fatigues tucked carefully
around the stump
 (don't look at it)
veins and tendons bulging
along his ferociously working arm
 (how many times did he pull the trigger)
long, frizzy grey hair streaming out behind,
crowned by a faded blue bandana
 (bet he was one of those hippie draft card burners)
his blue glare piercing and defiant
 (don't stare)
two sets of dog tags clinking around his neck
 (pretend you don't hear)
pushing himself quickly down the busy street
 (probably looking for a drug dealer)
an American flag emblazoned across the back of his wheelchair

–Julie Shilling

* *Variant spelling is poetic license.*

Natural America

A pale gray and pink
The scissortail flycatcher
Lands near a road's edge

The sky's a perfect
Brilliant brand new baby blue
Clouds are white as cotton

Too overcast falls
To feature famous red clay
Changing conditions

The horny toad runs
Shape, shift, adapt, camouflage
To the field of thorns

Red-orange rose rocks lay
Plains are covered with grained wheat
Racing and rising

Large lakes and rivers
Form into creeks, ponds, and streams
Like a trail of tears

Five civilized tribes
Native human beings
Have since settled here

It's Oklahoma
Natural America
What it's all about

—André Love

Guy on the Street

Please look at me through patient eyes.
Overlook that the soles of my shoes are worn.
So what if my shirt is torn.
Ok, maybe these cut-offs need a patch or two.
Socks not been washed in weeks, well off in weeks.
Yes, these teeth are yellow, but at least there are a few.
By the way, my hair is nappy.
Can't remember the last time it's seen a comb.
Oh, the smoke it bothers you!
It's merely to cover up the smell.
Not too many showers on these streets
These streets they know me well.
Now, before you judge me, look deep into your soul.
My shoes won't fit you.

– Phillip J. Duvall

Ciudad

Antiguo oficio
de abanico abierto
Movimiento
en el diámetro de la tarde
Gasa-garza de ríos pútridos
Lugar donde el concreto
encierra su osamenta
Larga herida de acero
Sueños precipitados de espejos
con suertes diferentes
Imágenes batallando con imágenes
quieren ser transparentes
Al revés la herencia de ecos
en una hilera
de parques
 catedrales
 rostros
 ratas
Es el canto del crimen delirante
Cizne desplumada
Sombra sin sombra

— Judith Ghashghaie

Photography and Art



Ja'Ron
Linda Greenlee



Give Us Clean Hands
Candace Baldwin



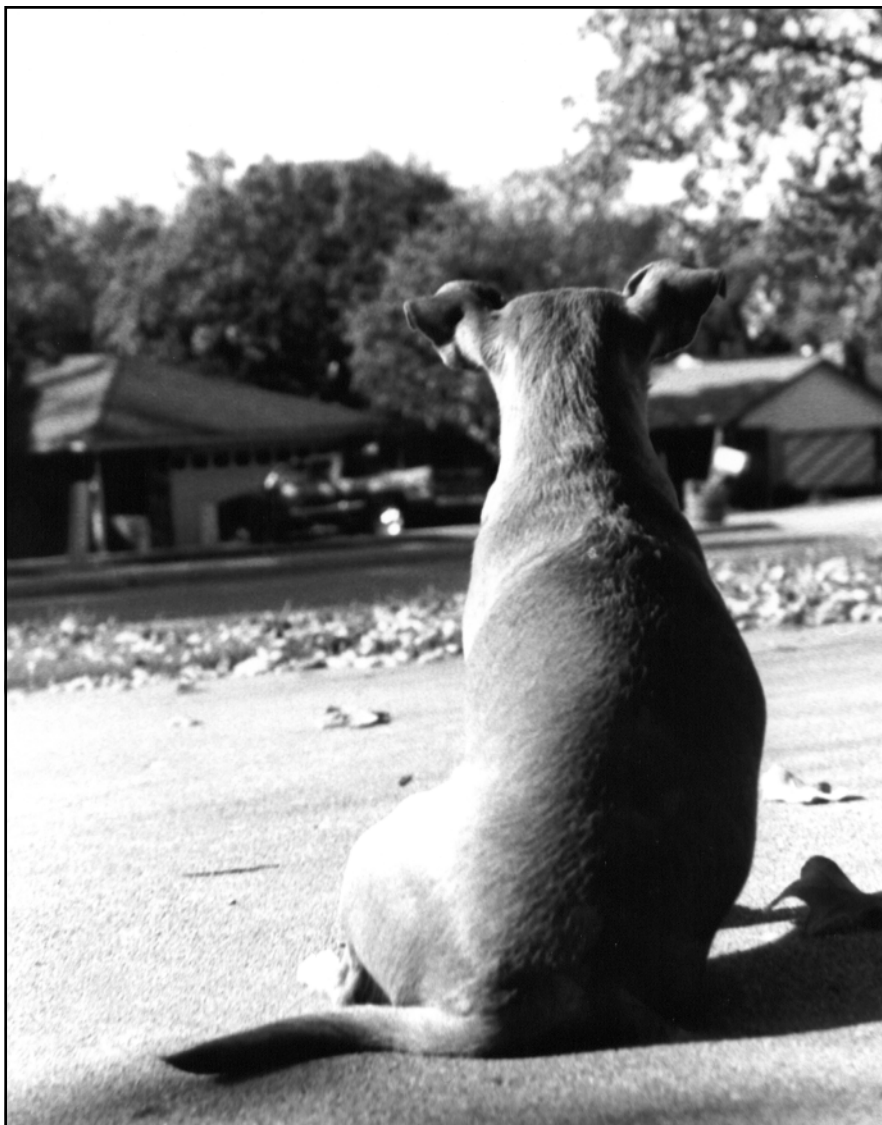
Village in Israel
Vicki Hamm



Homestead
Kendall James



Eternal Headache
Kendall James



RICA
Emily Chitwood



Lady in Black and White
Jennie Nguyen