

A large, stylized, black and grey 'G' logo, resembling a thick, curved line or a stylized letter, positioned to the left of the word 'Absolute'.

Absolute

TWO THOUSAND AND FOUR



Absolute 2004

Absolute is published by the Arts and Humanities Division of Oklahoma City Community College in the spring of each year. All essays, poems, short stories, and artwork are the creations of college students and community members. To retain the creative intent of the writers and artists, only minimal editing of the works has been made. The items published herein represent the editors' best choices from hundreds of original submissions.

Editorial Board

Rena Gibson, Student Editor
Lisa Harrison, Student Editor
Meika Yates, Student Editor
Carolyn Farris, Associate Editor
John Inglett, Associate Editor
Vicki Newby, Associate Editor
Mary Punches, Associate Editor
Mark Schneberger, Associate Editor
Naomi Christofferson, Copy Editor
April Jackson, Graphic Design Specialist
Clay Randolph, Faculty Editor/Adviser

The Editorial Board thanks the following individuals for their support and help: Dr. Robert P. Todd, Dr. Paul Sechrist, Susan VanSchuyver and many photography, art and writing students at Oklahoma City Community College.



All information supplied in this publication is accurate at the time of printing; however, changes may occur and will supersede information in this publication. This publication, printed by DPS Printing Services, is issued by Oklahoma City Community College. A total of 150 copies were printed at a cost of \$1941.00.

Oklahoma City Community College complies with all applicable Federal and State laws and regulations and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, age, religion, disability or status as a veteran in any of its policies, practices or procedures. This includes, but is not limited to, admissions, employment, financial aid, and educational services.

Oklahoma City Community College is accredited by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and holds a prestigious 10-year accreditation as of 2001.

Contents

SHORT STORIES1

<i>A Sea Story</i>	<i>Lisa Harrison</i>
<i>Crushed and Confused</i>	<i>James R. Forgue</i>
<i>Salmon</i>	<i>Morgan Felty</i>
<i>The Diet</i>	<i>Michael Robertson</i>
<i>You Never Know</i>	<i>Chris Bright</i>
<i>Kids</i>	<i>Amanda Vasquez</i>
<i>Passing the Test</i>	<i>John Mercer</i>

ESSAYS36

<i>It's Just a Little Hole</i>	<i>Constance Burris</i>
<i>Racing to Gdynia on the Kiev Express</i>	<i>John W. Perry</i>
<i>Postcards from Mexico</i>	<i>Emily Medley</i>

POEMS.....54

<i>Pained City</i>	<i>Torey Butler</i>
<i>Poetry and the Street</i>	<i>Rachel Peeler</i>
<i>Making the Grade</i>	<i>Bertha L. Wise</i>
<i>Storm (a Tanka)</i>	<i>Nicole Padilla</i>
<i>Disappearing Song</i>	<i>John W. Perry</i>
<i>Morning Walk</i>	<i>Barbara Gwinn</i>
<i>Half and Half</i>	<i>Meika Yates</i>
<i>Perfect</i>	<i>Rena Gibson</i>
<i>My Hands Are Shaking as I Write This, Now</i>	<i>Crystal Wellborn</i>
<i>city</i>	<i>Mark Dugger</i>
<i>The Flood</i>	<i>Mark A. Bates</i>

PHOTOGRAPHY/ART.....66

<i>Fairie</i>	<i>Lisa Bryant</i>
<i>Figure</i>	<i>Brent Goddard</i>
<i>Looking out the Window</i>	<i>Jorge Martinez</i>
<i>Alice's Vacation</i>	<i>Emily Fine</i>
<i>Martini</i>	<i>Marnel Havard</i>
<i>Girl Beside Herself</i>	<i>Joshua McRae</i>
<i>Flower</i>	<i>Nicole Padilla</i>
<i>Touk</i>	<i>Teresa Randall</i>
<i>Wagon Wheel</i>	<i>Sandra Cizek</i>
<i>Christ and Mary</i>	<i>Rachel K. Dove</i>
<i>All Hat</i>	<i>Phil Corbett</i>
<i>View from Below</i>	<i>Stephen Cumberworth</i>
<i>Building</i>	<i>Nichole Padilla</i>
<i>Berlin Wall #3</i>	<i>John W. Perry</i>

Short Stories

A Sea Story

by Lisa Harrison

Edward Francis was worried about Katherine. Since his wife had learned the news that she was unable to conceive a child, she had been nothing short of morose. He found her at their neighborhood park one afternoon, watching the children on the swings, silent tears rolling down her face. It was then he decided to take her on an extended vacation. He loved his wife very much and would do anything to ease her pain.

Edward rented a cottage at the shore for a very reasonable price, being it was off-season. He thought the peaceful solitude would be most beneficial. The cottage was small and tidy with a large rock fireplace and a breathtaking view of the sea. Edward's wife Katherine was charmed by the cottage and seemed to improve immediately.

"Nothing like the smell of the sea," Katherine commented, inhaling deeply. She and Edward were walking along the beach, holding hands and listening to the waves gently break against the rocks. Edward agreed and started to respond, but stopped suddenly and asked instead, "Did you hear something?" He cocked his head to one side and cupped a hand to his ear. Katherine listened for a moment and gasped.

"That sounds like a child!" she exclaimed and dashed off towards the sound a hundred or so yards from where they were standing. Edward chased after her, thinking himself that it sounded more like an injured seagull than a child. He saw his wife suddenly stop and put her hands to her mouth. As she bent over, Edward reached her in time to see her lift what looked to be a small bundle of rags.

"What is it?" he asked his wife, panting a bit from his run. He leaned forward and saw a baby wrapped in the rags, a baby with the brightest green eyes he had ever seen. The child had been crying but had fallen silent the moment Katherine had picked it up. Katherine was looking down at the baby with a look of sheer disbelief. She turned mutely to Edward with tears in her eyes. Edward was perplexed. He looked around the beach but could see no sign of anyone. They had been at their cottage for nearly two weeks and had been alone on the shore as far as they could tell.

He looked back at the baby in disbelief.

"Where in the world did this baby come from?" he asked her rhetorically. But Katherine answered him.

"From God, I expect," she answered. He looked at his wife sharply. "I prayed and prayed for a baby and now look." She held the infant up triumphantly. "Finally my prayers

have been answered!" She laughed and hugged the bundle to her breast. "Thank you!" she shouted to the sky. Edward felt a nervous dread. He had thought his wife had more or less come to terms with their childless state. He knew that God had not dropped a baby out of the heavens for his wife to find.

"Katherine," he spoke gently. "Dear heart, this is not a gift from God. This is an abandoned child. We must contact the authorities."

Katherine held the baby tight to her bosom and shook her head. She took a step away from Edward and set her face in a stubborn scowl.

"Am I a good wife to you, Edward?"

He sighed. "Yes, Katherine," he answered. And he loved her.

Mary Alice stood at the edge of the diving block and inhaled the sharp smell of the chlorinated water. The poolroom was completely empty, rare for a Sunday afternoon. She adjusted her goggles and took a deep breath. It seemed like a long time since she had last been in the pool. After coming in last at the previous swim meet, she had lost interest in swimming competitively. It wasn't what everyone on the swim team thought, what her coach thought, and it wasn't because she hadn't won in her division. She hadn't told anyone the reason why she'd quit the team, wasn't really sure herself. All she knew for a fact was the last time she had been underwater, she'd seemed to go deep inside herself, losing all sense of space and time, and hearing a voice . . . a voice that was not her own. It spoke words that frightened her, told her she didn't need to hold her breath, that she was able to breathe underwater like some sort of creature from the sea.

She shook off the memory and mentally slapped herself. *Get a grip, girl*, she scolded herself. She'd thought enough about it over the past few weeks and had chalked up the strange experience to stress or nerves. She wasn't quite sure enough of herself yet to rejoin the swim team, but she did want to prove to herself that there was no suicidal part of her that wanted to dive underwater and take deep breaths until she would no longer be able to breathe on land.

She took another deep breath, trying to calm the butterflies that had started furiously beating their wings against the walls of her stomach. She looked down at the smooth surface of the water, trying to see the bottom of the pool. She took a step back, readjusting the goggles on her face, moving the strap of her blue tank suit higher up on her shoulder. Anything to postpone the moment when she catapulted off the diving block and broke that mirror surface and discovered if that voice was only something temporary.

Mary Alice got into position, leaning slightly forward, arms straight out to break the surface cleanly. She pushed back with her feet and dived into the pool, the water like cool silk flowing over her skin. She swam a strong breaststroke quickly to the opposite end of the pool, touching the wall briefly before turning back to swim the other way. She

swam the length of the pool four times at her top speed and finally stopped, exhausted. She climbed out of the pool and lay down on the tiles to catch her breath. Nothing unusual had happened. There were no strange voices. But she still could not shake off the feeling that something . . . that *she* wasn't quite right.

* * *

Katherine sipped her coffee and studied her daughter silently. Mary Alice had eaten little of the omelet her mother had prepared for her and, instead, sat staring into nothingness. Edward had left the house before dawn that morning to drive up to Silverthorne for a game of golf with his old college roommate and would not be back until evening. Without Edward and his cheerful banter to distract her, Katherine decided to confront Mary Alice. She had been worried about her daughter's withdrawal for the past few weeks, starting when the girl had quit the swim team with no explanation offered to anyone. Katherine considered her relationship with Mary Alice to be a close one, but she was realistic when it came to adolescents. She remembered as a youth thinking her own mother was the last person she would turn to with a problem, that her peers' opinions seemed much more in touch with her life. Still, this mood of Mary Alice's was impossible to ignore much longer.

"Is anything troubling you, sweetie? You've not looked well at all lately," Katherine asked, reaching out to touch Mary Alice's hand. Mary Alice slowly turned her attention to her mother with a puzzled look on her face.

"Did you say something?" she asked, distracted.

Katherine placed her coffee cup on its saucer and folded her hands in her lap. She felt nervous for a moment, almost as if she was prying, but then decided that was ridiculous. Teenagers were notorious for blowing the smallest events into extravaganzas of hormonal drama. Surely, whatever was bothering her daughter was nothing too serious, nothing time and patience wouldn't solve.

"What's on your mind, dear? You've not been yourself these past few weeks." She reached out and brushed her daughter's light brown hair away from her beautiful green eyes, noting how prominent the hollow dark circles under her eyes seemed to be.

"Is there trouble at school? A young man, perhaps?"

Katherine smiled in a way she hoped implied openness and understanding.

Mary Alice stared back at her mother intently, calculating how much of her recently suspected madness she should reveal. Mary Alice loved her parents, of course, but often thought they seemed to be from another era. Perhaps mid-Victorian Great Britain. Especially her mother. She shook her head.

"Nothing I can't handle, Mom. Don't worry."

* * *

Later that night, Mary Alice lay in bed with her eyes closed and listened to the soft patter of the rain hitting the windows. The last time she had looked at the clock, it had been well after midnight and she was exhausted. She hadn't had a decent night's sleep in at least a week, starting awake from dreams she couldn't remember. She felt herself drifting, vaguely aware of the sound of cars on the highway in the distance, the rain lulling her to sleep.

In her dream, she was back at the swimming pool. She was alone and standing on the diving block, just like earlier that afternoon. But this time the water in the swimming pool was dark and choppy, churning with some unseen force. As she looked around, the pool room slowly melted into water itself, the diving block becoming a large flat rock in the middle of a turbulent sea. She was shivering and could taste salt when she nervously licked her lips.

"Where am I?" She thought she spoke aloud, but her voice was faint, and she was hearing only the sounds of the waves crashing into one another.

"Are you ready to listen?" a voice, the voice she had come to recognize, spoke.

She turned in a circle on the rock, only to see water in every direction that never seemed to end.

"Don't look. Listen."

She closed her eyes and focused on the voice. She was aware she was dreaming, but also aware that this was more than a dream.

"You don't know what you are. The parents you love who also love you are not your own. This is your home. You have been traveling for many years, but it will soon be time for your journey to end. When the time is right, when the moon is new, you will come home. Trust your instincts. They will never lead you astray."

Mary Alice opened her mouth to speak but found herself unable to, instead tasting only the salty spray of the sea.

* * *

Walking her bicycle into the garage the next evening, Mary Alice saw her father sitting in a lounge chair in the backyard, drinking a beer and watching the sun set. Her mother was inside cooking dinner, the smell of lasagna wafting through the air. The thought of her parents made her heart clench up suddenly, and she didn't really know why. All of a sudden, she missed them horribly, yet they were both right there. She remembered the dream from the night before, but didn't want to think about it. Lately, she had felt like she'd been running on autopilot, going through the motions of her life without giving them much thought.

She walked to her father and sat down on the lawn, next to him. He looked down at her and smiled.

"Hey, kid. Watch the sun set with me?"

Mary Alice nodded but said nothing. She wanted to talk to her father about the

dream and what it meant, but knew that was not possible. She hugged her knees to her chest and watched the darkness fall. She was only slightly aware that she was waiting for the moon to show itself.

* * *

Three days later, the moon was new. Mary Alice woke from a light sleep and got out of bed. She didn't really know what she was doing; she was trusting her instincts as the dream had told her. She threw on some clothes and quietly left the house. On the way to the garage to retrieve her bicycle, she turned back for a final look at the house. She didn't think she would be coming back and felt sorry for the mother and father who had loved her and raised her, but also felt a small thrill of exhilaration about what the night had in store for her.

She mounted her ten-speed and pedaled off down the driveway, heading north. She was heading for the sea ten or twelve miles away. The cool night air caressed her skin and tasted green.

Crushed and Confused

by James R. Forgue

At six years old, Ricky walked twelve blocks to school by himself every day. Well, his mother had walked with him the first few days; she held his hand and they walked. Ricky went to a very large school; there were eight first grade classes in one large building. That first day, his mom went into his classroom and talked to his new teacher a minute, then waved to him and left.

Ricky's teacher was young, very pretty, and eager to share her education with all of her new students. This was her first year, too, she boasted to them on that day of very important firsts. That was one day that really did fly by. They all had such fun learning and playing together. Ricky's mother was waiting for him outside his classroom door when school was over on his first day of school. He couldn't stop talking as they walked back home; Ricky had loved his first day of first grade.

His mom walked with him on his second day of first grade, too. They walked the same roads as the day before: south on their street, turned and walked west one block on the only paved street in the neighborhood, back south for three blocks. Then, they walked west along the school's football field, by the junior and senior high school, past the third and second grade buildings to his first grade building. This time his mom said good-bye outside, and he went to his classroom alone.

First grade was working out just fine. All the students were adjusting to one another, and they had the prettiest teacher in the whole school, really. Their teacher's picture was in the newspaper one morning; she brought it with her to share with the class. The picture was of her in her bathtub. The tub, bubbles, her smiling face, and part of one knee were all there was to the picture. A friend of hers worked on the newspaper and put it in as a joke. The caption said something like "local teacher to marry some important so-'n-so in the city soon" and then named Ricky's teacher and her future husband.

The first hour or so of that day was just like any other day: say the pledge of allegiance to the flag, a short little prayer, look at teacher's picture, and then move on to the first grade work schedule.

Soon after they started tracing the letters of the alphabet, all the excitement started. The superintendent of schools walked right into Ricky's class and not so quietly said to his teacher, "I want a word with you, young lady." That day Ricky's first grade class met the principal of the grade school and the superintendent of the whole school. A three-by-five nude

picture of Ricky's first grade teacher in the morning paper had been what some parents saw.

That was the last time Ricky saw his first grade teacher, ever. The superintendent of schools could not hold his voice down; the class heard him yelling at their teacher through those big closed doors. The principal ended the ugly scene when he came running down the hallway and asked them to continue their discussion in his office, but it was really over. Ricky's class heard their teacher's crying echo down that long first grade hallway as that pretty young teacher ran out of the school, crushed and confused.

The principal was their teacher for the rest of the day. He didn't explain anything to the first graders. The picture was not offensive to any of the students; they saw nothing bad in the picture. Some of the first graders' parents came and took their kids out of school that afternoon. Ricky had no idea what he was expected to do. He sat at his desk, on the verge of tears, for the rest of that day.

Walking home took him forever. He went on different streets and thought he was lost a couple times, but he did find his way home. His mother was sitting on the front porch, waiting for him when he walked into his yard. He sat on her lap and cried, not even knowing what all he was crying about. Ricky's mother had no clue what had happened at school or what could have upset him more than he had ever been upset in his whole life.

Finally, when he could talk, he told her all he knew, and that wasn't much. Ricky told his mom an old man in a suit came and yelled at his teacher, and he made her run away crying; then, the principal had to watch his class the rest of the school day.

The next morning, Ricky and his mother walked to school together again, all the way to the classroom again, where Ricky's mom talked with the old woman sitting in Ricky's teacher's chair. When she finished talking to the old woman, his mother came to Ricky and explained to him that he would have to be a big boy and learn to like a new teacher. The old woman was going to be his first grade teacher.

There were a lot of students absent for the next few days, and class was nowhere near as much fun with this grumpy old woman, who was always telling the first graders to be quiet. None of the laughing and fun times that they had had with their first, first grade teacher were allowed any more.

Sweet and Glum could have been the names of those two first grade teachers. The rest of the year, the first graders worked in class, turned in the required number of pages, and ached to have their real teacher back.

Salmon

by Morgan Felty

It had been a year since the clouds thinned enough for the sunlight to sneak its way to the Earth's surface that the boy found the book. He carefully wiped the spine of the book clean of dust; it was an encyclopedia, the "Sa-St" volume. He opened the book's thick cover and his eyes fell on the entry for "Salmon." There was a photograph depicting the stony features of a red and mossy-green salmon, a complete contrast to its smooth, moist, monotonous environment.

The boy looked up from the encyclopedia and once again became aware that the world was gray. Everything was covered with a thick layer of fine, gray dust: the dead trees, locked in poses borrowed from fallen soldiers; the flat, grassless land that was their battlefield; the mountain to the north that imprisoned the peninsula from the mainland.

"I am Salmon!" the boy yelled at nothing and to everything.

Salmon was twelve years old when the earth shook and the clouds covered the sky. He did not know what had happened but heard many theories from the people around him before they became sick.

"It's those damned Ruskies and their bombs!" Salmon once overheard his father and another man arguing.

"No! No! No! It was a comet, I say!" suggested Salmon's father although none really knew. The only thing people were sure of was that the sky had been black for a month and the foodstuffs were running low. That was when the Agents began to appear.

The people were more frightened at first by these black figures than of the extinguished surroundings. Their garments were fashioned from thick, black cloth and covered their entire bodies. Even their faces were covered with goggles too dark to see into. Once a day, they brought food and distributed it to the people, never saying a word. Although the people's fear decreased, they never trusted the Agents.

People knew even less about these mysterious men than the clouds that blocked the sun, but the theories were once again rampant. They were given many identities: Russians, men in black, government conspirators, and even extraterrestrials. The true identities of these men made no difference to Salmon.

Other than a meal, he wanted nothing to do with these black-clad menaces.

Salmon blamed these men for his current predicament. Even if they hadn't blown up the world, Salmon *knew* they had done something to the people. Soon after the Agents

appeared, people became sick. One by one, they became soulless gray masses that did nothing. They didn't talk to Salmon, anymore. They stopped moving, even to eat. They only sat, blank-faced and gray, and waited for death. And they certainly would be dead, now that a year had passed with them in this state, if the Agents hadn't been physically forcing food into them. Salmon hid from these men and stole just enough food to stay each day's growing hunger; he did not want to be noticed.

Salmon looked up and noted the sun's position in the sky. It was almost noon; the Agents would be at the camp soon to feed the others. Salmon hadn't eaten for two days; he was away from the camp, searching for the remains of his childhood home. This was where he found the encyclopedia, now his only possession. Salmon tucked the book under his arm and made his way back to the camp, constantly looking north. The Agents always came from the north mountain at the same time and down the same path, and because of their predictable movements, Salmon had no problem hiding from them.

Salmon approached the camp, a large open-air tent set up by the Agents. He chose a path that not only hid him from the Agents, but also hid the sick people from his sight. They had once been his family, friends, teachers, and neighbors. Now, he couldn't even look at them.

He once again scanned the northern slope. Though the mountain was two miles north of him, Salmon could spot small clouds of gray dust rising around a mobile black blob. It would be at least thirty minutes before the Agents would reach the camp, more than enough time for him to hide before they arrived.

He sat behind a large rock on the southern side of the camp, his usual hiding spot, and brushed the dust from his body. He opened the encyclopedia and began to flip the pages, paying no attention to the words that raced across his view. The trip to his old house had stirred him, and for a boy with nothing to do but think, he had a lot to think about. His memories haunted him, memories of holiday dinners, neighborhood football games, fights with Sis, fishing trips, and snow days. They burned inside him, drawing him deeper into himself than he'd ever been before. He felt like he could be stuck there forever.

And he would've been, too, if his eyes hadn't been fixed on the encyclopedia. Salmon snapped back into being and read the entry at the top of the page. "Saudi Arabia," it read, but that was not what had his attention. He saw a photograph depicting a farm: rows of small, green, leafy crops grew in a brown field surrounded by tall palm trees. Flashes from two years ago raced into his head. The world had color then. The trees were tall and green, grasses and flowers grew lazily on gently rolling hills, birds sang in the deep blue sky, and people were *happy*. Although Salmon had never heard of the country before, he *knew* the place in the picture. That was how the world was supposed to be. Colorful and happy, full of life, perfect. This photo sparked new life into Salmon; he would find this place. Even if it wasn't in Saudi Arabia, Salmon had to see trees again, and birds!

He did not know where Saudi Arabia was, but he did know that it was not on his peninsula. His most recent exploit to his destroyed home had assured him of that. He had traveled from the brown sea in the east to the same brown sea in the west; the south tip of his peninsula and the mountain in the north were visible from every point along the way.

The mountain! It must be over the mountain. I must go over the mountain.

Salmon knew he could reach the mountain before nightfall, and he guessed that it would take him another day to cross over it. For that, he knew he would need to steal more food than usual from the Agents and risk being discovered. But he had no choice; he was possessed.

Salmon devised a plan. As soon as the Agents arrived and began to feed the others, he would sneak over to their unguarded packs and steal a small amount of food from each, leaving them exactly as he found them. He'd done it many times before, although never on this scale. He was confident; soon he would have the food needed for his journey.

Salmon peeked around his rock, and his heart sank. The Agents had already arrived and started the feeding.

"Damn it!" he cursed himself.

Salmon knew he didn't have time to swipe from each Agent's pack; he had to take an entire pack and everything that was in it.

"I'll be caught. I know it. They'll notice. Damn it! Damn it!" he whispered aloud, but he could think of no alternatives.

The task proved easy enough; the Agents left their packs unguarded while they fed the people. Salmon slid stealthily from behind his rock and, using the naturally protective lay of the rocky land, easily snatched one of the packs. It was heavy, but he managed to carry it back to his hiding place behind the large rock.

He loosened the rope that secured the pack, then closed and examined its contents. It was all food, mostly vegetables and some cured meat. Salmon peeked around the rock again. The Agents were done with their task and had already gone. After his heart calmed, Salmon turned to the pack. There was more than enough food for him to make it over the mountain, and hunger ripped into his stomach.

He ate as much as he could and closed the pack, which now felt considerably lighter. Salmon watched as the Agents transformed from distinct figures into a black blob followed by a gray cloud. Then, he ripped the photos of the farm and the salmon from the encyclopedia, pushed them into his pack, and started north towards the mountain.

As Salmon had suspected, he reached the mountain before the night came. He found a small crevice weathered into the side of the gray mountain and did his best to clear away the dust. He crawled inside and opened his pack, retrieved the photo of the farm and a small piece of cured meat, and ate while staring at the photo.

The sun had already set, and the rising, grayish-blue moon had forced more thoughts into his head. He remembered the only day since his world was so drastically changed. He had been happy then. It was a year ago, a month after everyone became sick and the Agents came. Salmon was hiding from the Agents behind his rock when, without announcement, the sun appeared through the thick clouds. It was grayish-blue and alien, but it was the sun! Salmon hadn't seen it in several black months. It was his desire to see the sun that kept him going then; even if it was discolored and weak, it made the catastrophic world seem just bearable enough to live in. Salmon retied his pack, placed it behind his head, and slept with a smile.

When Salmon awoke, the sun was already high in the sky. Salmon panicked. It was almost noon, and the Agents would be crossing the mountain soon. He snatched his pack off the ground in furious desperation and crawled out of his makeshift shelter. He carefully scanned the horizon. In the east, the black blob was on the move. Salmon could slip past unnoticed if he moved now. He ran, his developing legs working harder than they ever had before, north to the mountaintop. He constantly stopped to scan the land behind him; each time, he was reassured that he was not being followed.

After several frantic minutes, Salmon began to tire. He took shelter behind a large rock outcrop and retrieved food from his pack. He ate the last of the cured meat; now, he had only vegetables left. Salmon frowned at this but soon decided that vegetables were better than nothing. After a lengthy rest, he peered down the mountainside. Although his pace left him nearly exhausted, he was already halfway up the mountain! At this rate, he would be at the top in less than an hour.

Salmon again located the black blob, still two miles behind him, moving toward the mountain. But he also noticed another black figure, much closer, heading directly toward him. Salmon leapt to his feet and, at a frenzied pace, returned to his struggle up the mountain. He found this stretch of the mountain much harder to navigate. His pace slowed considerably as the terrain changed from an easy slope to sheer rock walls that required him to climb and jump, as well as run. His energy was quickly draining. He was afraid to look back. Getting caught wasn't an option for Salmon, and he continued.

After climbing to the top of the tallest cliff on the mountain, Salmon was completely exhausted. He stopped and looked behind him. The Agent had gained on him considerably; he could see every detail of the Agent's empty, black attire and also noticed the Agent carried no pack.

Salmon turned north and looked towards the top of the mountain. He couldn't locate the mountaintop, only the thick, gray sky.

"Where's the top?" His voice echoed through the mountains. He collapsed, conceding his fate to the Agent, who was now upon him.

The Agent stopped only feet away from Salmon. He removed the mask that covered his head and the goggles that hid his eyes. Salmon looked up into the most beautiful face he had ever seen. Black hair flowed carelessly over the young man's unweathered face, and if the two shining blue eyes hadn't eased Salmon's fear, then the Agent's wide smile certainly did.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Salmon."

"That's a strange name; how'd ya' get it?"

Salmon opened the pack and handed the Agent the photograph of the fish. After Agent studied the picture, he handed it back to Salmon.

"I think I understand," the Agent said sincerely. "Oh! And to answer your question, you're already at the top!" Agent's voice soothed Salmon even more.

"Come." Agent took Salmon's hand and walked him a few steps north.

Salmon thought of how close he was and how, if his frenzy hadn't obstructed his judgment, he'd be taking these steps alone. He looked over the mountain for the first time and began to weep. The north mirrored the south: gray, flat, dead. There were no farms, no hills, no birds or trees, no flowers.

"What did you expect?" Agent asked in the same calming tone.

Salmon couldn't speak. He reached into the pack and handed Agent the photograph of the farm in Saudi Arabia.

"Oh, I see . . ."

Agent began to sob.

"That's what I want to see, too."

The Diet

by Michael Robertson

“Do you think I look fat?” I looked up from my sandwich. Karen was squinting at me, the reflected sun turning her pupils into little pinprick-sized suns. There was a cracker crumb precariously glued to the corner of her mouth with a small dab of Diet Coke.

“No,” I said.

Karen put her sandwich down on her paper towel. She pulled up her shirt and pooched her belly between her hands and looked doubtful.

“That’s totally just skin,” I said. “You just need to do some toning or something.”

She dropped her shirt and gave me a dirty look.

“Whatever,” she said. She suddenly wrapped up her sandwich and threw it in her basket, got up, and headed for the car. Her junky old red Fiero was parked next to the rest stop bathrooms.

I grabbed my stuff and jumped up. I took a couple of running steps up behind her, then sang, “Hey, fat Karen fatty, fat fat fatty, hey, Karen fat fatty fat . . .” in my most grating, annoying voice while I poked her in the back of the neck with my fingernail. By the time we got back to the car, she had loosened up a little bit and was trying to hit me in the head with a stick she had found lying on the grass. As we got to the blacktop, she threw the stick at me and sprinted for the car. I ran after her, getting to the car door just before she could lock me out. She punched me in the arm. I called her a bitch, and then she tore out of the lot, squealing her old, ragged, bald tires and spraying gravel.

As we raced past the eighteen-wheelers and back out onto the highway, I pulled up my shirt and started squishing my own stomach around. The rose vine tattoo around my belly button stretched and shrank between my hands.

“Jesus, if you think *you’re* fat, look at *this* nasty blob.”

Karen glanced over. “Gross,” she said, smiling a little.

I pulled my shirt down. “You suck.”

“No, *you* suck.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.” We rode for a moment. “So, do you want to go to Brownie’s with me?”

“Yeah, I guess,” she said. “Are they open on Saturday?”

When we got home, Karen went to work, and I dug out Dr. Brownie's phone number to set up appointments. I called about five times, but I kept getting a message saying that the line had been disconnected. I tried one more time just in case; then, I got out the phone book and looked up the listings for diet clinics. I had never heard of most of them, so I randomly picked one that was pretty close to our apartment. I called and made appointments for both of us on Saturday; then, I made a couple of French bread pizzas and sat down to watch *Star Trek*. After it was over, I got up and straightened the living room a little bit, then lay back down on the couch, and fell asleep.

* * *

The sound of Karen's keys in the front door lock woke me up a few hours later. Karen came in, carrying a big bag from Taco Town. She plopped down in the easy chair and started pulling out tacos and burritos.

"What's up?"

"Not much," I said. I fished the remote from under the couch cushion and started flipping through channels.

"I tried to call Brownie's office today, but his line was disconnected or something."

"Weird," Karen said and wiped a bit of guacamole off the front of her shirt with her finger. "Did you call back?"

"Uh, yeah, I called like *five times*."

"Huh. Slacker."

"Shut up."

Karen grinned, showing her blue Nehi teeth, and started eating a plate of nachos. I stopped flipping at an old episode of *Friends*. It was the one where Joey and Ross take a nap together. We were quiet until Karen cleared her throat, belched, and took a long slurpy drink from her giant cup of blue Nehi. She grunted excitedly while she ran her tongue around inside her mouth like she was excited about something.

"Hey, now that I think about it, Gretchen told me a couple of months ago that Dr. Brownie got busted! They shut down his clinic and took him to jail and everything."

"No way!" I said. "That sucks so bad."

"Yeah," Karen said, munching.

"I wonder what happened to his wife?"

"I heard she was strung out on pills or something, so they took her to jail, too."

"Wow." We watched TV in semi-silence, with the sound of Karen's loud, smacky chewing playing counterpoint to the canned laugh track.

"Oh, yeah, but anyway," I said, "I made an appointment at another place. Sharon or something. I wrote it down."

"Oh, cool," Karen said, working on another burrito.

"Hey," I said. "You want to go over to Shannon's here in a few, see if she's got

anything?”

Karen rolled her eyes at me. “Well, *yeah*, der,” she said, and fished a sliver of cheese off her right boob. She flicked it into my hair and opened her mouth, showing me the glob of ground burrito she was sloshing around in there.

“Like some see-food?” she mumbled, then started cackling madly.

“Ah, geez,” I said, picking the cheese out of my hair and shaking my head. “You are such a gross bitch.”

* * *

We got up on Saturday and made it to the clinic only fifteen minutes late. The outside of the building looked like crap, set in the middle of a run-down strip mall, so I thought it was going to be kind of a low-rent affair. But when we walked in, the waiting room was super nice, with big, fluffy couches to sit on, and a huge TV in the corner. As soon as we walked in, a painfully thin, super-model-type girl came out of the back, carrying a clipboard and serving attitude.

“Karen Albernoz?” she read from the clipboard.

Karen kicked my leg and gave me a goofy sidelong grin. I used my middle finger to scratch my eyebrow. Then, she disappeared into the back. I amused myself with a *Cosmo* sex test until Karen was done. Then, I followed the snooty nurse through the gilt oak door into the back of the office.

I walked past the girl into a narrow hallway where she measured and weighed me and wrote down the results. She looked really tired and bored. She led me down the hall, asking me questions as we walked. She checked off my answers with a red pen.

“Date of birth?”

“Ten thirty-one eighty-two.”

“Do you have ulcers?”

“No.”

“Do you drink excessively?”

“No,” I lied.

“Are you pregnant?”

“No,” and so on until we reached the end of the hall and the door to an examining room. She knocked twice briskly on the door before opening it and then immediately went in. She turned on the lights and motioned for me to sit on the exam table. It was one of those fake leather padded jobbies with the strip of paper running down the middle. I hate those. They make me nervous. They’re just so *noisy*.

Anyway, the girl went through the whole rigamarole with the blood pressure cuff and all that, asked me if I was allergic to penicillin, blah, blah, blah; then, she went for the doctor. I sat on the table and tried not to make too much noise with my butt. After about a minute, the door banged open and a mid-thirtyish man with early-twentyish facial hair came

in. He had on wire frame glasses and had big, poofy, curly dark hair. He seemed like he was in a big hurry.

“Brenda?” he said, checking his clipboard. He didn’t wait for me to answer. “I’m Dr. Sharon. Thanks for coming in.”

He walked over and offered me his hand, which I shook. It was big and hairy, with long fingers, like a giant monkey paw.

“Nice to meet you,” I said.

His eyes gave my boobs a once-over on their way down to the clipboard, then gave them a second, slightly more thorough examination on the way back up to my face.

“Okay,” he said, “we’re just going to need to go over a few things, and then you can be on your way.”

He started rambling through the same list of questions I had just answered for the anorexic chick. I answered them all the same, in the process counting about fifteen quick glances at my rack. Finally, he put down the clipboard, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a clear cellophane package with one small green pill inside.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s the treatment,” he said. He looked at me steadily through the glare on his glasses and held the package out to me.

“Just one pill?” I said, doubtful.

“Yes,” he said. “Our approach to weight loss is based on this one revolutionary pill. If you’re not completely satisfied with the amount of weight you’ve lost at the end of one month, you qualify for a one hundred percent refund, no questions asked.” He sounded slightly bored, like he’d been through this spiel a bazillion times.

“So, what happens at the end of a month? Do I have to come back?”

“You just come in for one quick follow-up at the end of a month, yes.”

His staring was starting to creep me out, so I just shrugged and opened the package and took out the pill. The doctor motioned to a water cooler in the corner. I wrestled my way off the table, filled one of the funnel-shaped paper cups from the dispenser, and took the pill.

“Okay, great,” the doctor said. “Just go ahead and see Jennifer on the way out, and she’ll give you the date for your follow-up. It was nice meeting you. I’d show you out, but it’s been really hectic this week . . .”

He drifted toward the door, smiling and nodding and glancing madly at my chest. I just smiled and said “thanks,” and he finally slipped out.

I got my card from the desk, and then Karen and me went across the street to get some ice cream cones.

“What do you think *that* was?” Karen said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe it’s some kind of time-release speed.”

“Yeah? I guess it could be, but it seems like it would have to be pretty strong to

last for a month.” She licked around her ice cream for a few seconds, then excavated a large walnut from the side of her tongue.

* * *

Neither of us noticed anything or felt any different for a week or so. In fact, I had kind of forgotten about the whole thing until I went to lunch with my mom one day. I had been eating like a pig the whole time, so I was surprised when she asked me if I had been dieting.

“Sort of,” I said. “Karen and I went to this weird diet clinic last week.”

“What was weird about it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. They just gave us one pill, but it hasn’t really done anything that I can tell.”

“Well, your face looks thinner, so it must be doing something,” she said, starting to look all concerned.

“Oh, yeah?” I started feeling my face to see how much thinner it was.

“Yes. I wonder what was in it? Did you even ask?” She was starting to get all nervous.

“Well, actually, I don’t remember if I did or not. I think maybe Karen did,” I said as neutrally as possible. She reached across the table and started feeling my forehead.

“*Mom . . .*”

“Your skin feels all right. Have you been eating?”

“Yeah, I’ve been eating everything in sight. I feel fine,” I said. “It’s no big deal. I go back in a couple of weeks for a checkup.”

“Okay, just watch out, okay? If you start to feel funny at all, don’t wait. Call and go back in early. All right?”

“All right. Can I have some wasabi?”

* * *

When I got home, I went to the full-length mirror in my closet. I looked like I had dropped a few pounds, but nothing drastic. I turned back and forth, pulling my shirt tight against my stomach, thinking how great it would be if I could lose another twenty pounds before my follow-up. I decided not to hold my breath, so I went into the kitchen and made myself a Frito pie with lots of chili and cheese.

When Karen got home that night, I noticed that her jeans were getting baggy.

* * *

By the last week, I was starting to get a little weirded out. After the lunch with my mother, I started losing weight faster and faster. I ate and ate, but no matter how many calories I took in, the fat kept melting off. I had lost all that I had wanted and a little more, which was no big deal, but Karen, who had been thinner than me to begin with, was starting to get that Calvin Klein/*Night-of-the-Living-Dead* look to her. She had dark circles under her eyes, and all she seemed to want to do at home was sleep.

On the day of our appointment, we were there early. We signed in at the desk, then nervously waited. Around the time I had finished the *Cosmo* sex test I had started last time, the snooty girl came out and took us both in the back at the same time. She weighed us again, asked us some more questions, took our blood pressure, then went for the doctor. I let Karen have the crackly table, and I sat on a small stool in the corner. Finally, the doctor rushed in, writing on his clipboard.

“Hello, ladies, how are we today?” He wrote as he talked, glancing at us only occasionally. “How did everything go?”

“Well, pretty good, I guess,” Karen said. “Except I think I may have lost a little *too* much, you know? If you don’t mind me asking, what was in that pill, exactly?”

“Well, Karen, the thing is, I can’t tell you,” the doctor said as he wrote. “I *can* tell you that it’s all natural, and perfectly safe. . .”

“Oh, so it’s a big secret,” Karen said, sounding pissed off.

Dr. Sharon looked up from his clipboard.

“I realize that the process can be a little . . . disconcerting the first time. I assure you, though, that the treatment is totally safe and there was absolutely no harm done. I just can’t divulge what’s in it for business reasons. It’s such a new procedure, we don’t want other clinics copying us so soon.”

“Well, okay,” I said, “but how do we get it to stop?”

“Well, that’s what we’re going to do today.”

He reached into his coat pocket and took out two more cellophane-wrapped pills, only these were brown instead of green.

“You two go ahead and take these, and I’ll be back in a few minutes to finish up. Okay?”

He gave us a reassuring smile that didn’t quite work, handed us the pills, nodded, and then left us sitting there.

Karen and I looked at each other. I gave her an almost imperceptible shrug. She countered with an extremely subtle head tilt. With that decided, we went to the cooler and took our pills, then sat back down to wait.

We sat without talking for a while, and I eventually started to feel sleepy. The buzzing of the fluorescent lights seemed to be telling me how great it would be to close my eyes and take a nap. I sat up to ask Karen if she felt sleepy, too, but she was curled up on the table, already snoring softly.

I sat back on the stool and leaned back into the corner, wishing I were at home in bed. I could barely keep my eyes open, but I hate to sleep sitting up. As I sat there thinking about my soft comforter and pillow, I leaned my head back and passed out.

* * *

When I woke up, the examination room was empty. I rubbed my eyes to get the blur out of them and stood up. I couldn't believe I fell asleep on that stool. My neck hurt, and I was feeling kind of irritated, the way I do sometimes when I've slept during the day. I looked around and wondered where the hell everyone had gone. I was going to be mighty pissed if Karen had taken off and left me.

I still wanted to sleep, and I looked longingly at the exam table. My bones felt like they were full of lead, but I managed to make my way over to the door and poke my head out into the hall. There weren't any people around that I could see, but I could hear some murmuring coming from the door across from me. I thought that I could hear Dr. Sharon.

I slipped out of the examining room and tiptoed across the hall. I don't know why I was trying to be so quiet. Maybe it was because it was already so quiet. I was feeling pretty loopy, too, so there's no telling. All I know is that I was starting to get scared, and I wanted to get Karen and get the hell out of there.

The door was open a crack. I reached out and nudged it with my fingertips, and it swung open noiselessly. I stood half-in and half-out of the room, peering into the half-light, trying to figure out what was going on.

There was only a lamp on in the corner, so it took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust. Even when I could start to see, I couldn't really tell what I was looking at. Karen was propped in a chair at the foot of another exam table, with her chin in some kind of headrest and her mouth propped open. She looked like she was dead to the world.

The girl was holding her head in place, looking bored. The doctor was standing to the side with a pair of forceps in one hand and a bedpan in the other. He was watching her face with careful patience. I was about to go in when Dr. Sharon moved toward Karen with the forceps. I looked to see what he was doing, and for an endless, nauseating second, I thought I was going to pass out again.

There was a worm coming out of Karen's nose.

It was flat and shiny, about as thick as a pencil. It dangled limply in the air while Dr. Sharon tried to get a grip on it with his forceps. He finally got the hold he wanted and started pulling it out, feeding the slack end into the bedpan. It was disgusting enough to look at, but suddenly I could smell it, a *smell* like garbage and rotten milk, and then I really did gray out. My legs went limp, and I fell into the room, landing on my hands and knees in front of the table. I looked up, and the doctor and the girl were looking blankly down at me, their faces absolutely devoid of expression.

Dr. Sharon said, "Get a hypo," and the girl turned toward one of the cabinets.

I managed to get turned around and sit with my knees pulled up to my chin. The doctor turned back to Karen and continued pulling the worm out of her nose. It seemed to go on and on, slipping slick and loose down into the bedpan with each pull from the forceps. He hummed to himself as he worked, as if all of this was terribly familiar and commonplace.

I put my hand over my stomach. It may have been my imagination, but I thought that I could feel something moving around down in there, at the bottom of my throat.

“Am I first, or second?” I croaked.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, without looking at me.

I felt a cold swab on my arm, and then a short sting. Suddenly, my head was full of bees, spreading lazily down into my neck and arms and then all over my body. I slumped over on the floor, my mind drained out, and I was gone.

You Never Know

by Chris Bright

You never know what you'll find at a garage sale. I pay the woman for my finds; her teenage sons help me load them into my pickup. There is the farmhouse table: a big monster, scratched and scuffed from years of use, with leaves to add when help is invited over. There are a dozen chairs matching in both style and condition. I also load a treasure of old harness and the draft equipment.

Then we load the chest. It is wood, about the size of a steamer trunk. The fittings are iron bands pitted with rust. The center band has a large padlock slightly larger than my palm, also badly rusted. The woman gives me the key "for what it's worth," she says. I ask one last time if she is certain she wants to sell the chest without knowing what is inside. "Yes," she tells me. Her grandparents were packrats, kept anything and everything regardless of how worthless it was. I nod, thinking about the treasures I purchased from her, and say nothing.

As I drive to the next garage sale on my list, I wonder what is inside the box. I shake my head in bewilderment at a woman who will sell a small fortune's worth of antique farm equipment for almost nothing. True, some of the leather straps will need replacing, but all the fittings that I saw were in perfect shape although a bit tarnished from neglect. Still, it was all in usable condition. An antique store wouldn't pay her as much as the table and chairs were worth, but she could have gotten several times what I paid her for them. And then the chest. How could she sell it without knowing what's inside? There could be family heirlooms, part of her history in there. Or the chest could contain coins, books, anything. Even accounting for the weight of the wood and iron, the chest felt too heavy. I can't believe that there is nothing in it.

I stop at the next sale, look over the stuff, mostly junk. It's stuff I'd throw away or use to furnish someone's dorm, apartment, or starter home. Stuff to use until you can afford something decent. I almost decide to leave when I find a stash of bottles. Mostly soda bottles mixed with canning jars, but there are also several antique bottles. The tag says this one wants a hundred for the lot. I smile. Great, haggling. If anything, the last one tried to haggle her own prices down.

I add up the soda bottles at a penny each, add fifty cents for each canning jar, and come up with about twenty dollars. Looking over the antique bottles, I decide I'd be willing

to go as high as seventy-five. I gently carry the box of glass over to the table where the woman has set up her cash box.

She smiles. "One hundred, please," she says.

I smile back. "Good afternoon. Beautiful day, isn't it."

"Bit warm, but a nice day all the same. Were you interested in those? Or did you have a question?" she asks.

"I like them, but I don't think they are quite worth what you are asking."

"Oh," she replies, a hint of mischief in her eyes. She knows that she has overpriced some of her stuff. "What do you think would be fair?"

I put on a "serious" face, pause for a few moments as if to think it over; *what's in ... no, can't think about the chest now, concentrate.*

"Maybe twenty, twenty-five dollars if that sounds reasonable," I reply, carefully inserting a dubious tone, and smile at her again.

She gasps, clasps a hand over a fifties dress that looks almost as old as she does.

"I'm on a fixed income, I can't afford less than ninety dollars," she shoots back.

I take in the blue hair; neither that color nor those waves come without dyeing and perming. I know she has money; she just enjoys haggling as much as I do.

"Perhaps it might be worth thirty dollars?" I ask, smiling.

Delighted, she smiles back and counters with seventy-five. After several minutes of haggling back and forth, pausing to allow other customers to pay or ask questions, we settle on forty-eight dollars. Yet, as I take the box of bottles—carefully—out to the pickup in order to minimize the rattle, I wonder, *What will I find in the chest?*

I continue to wonder as I drive to the other garage sales on my list. Some have wonderful stuff; some have junk. Sometimes the price they insist on is too high and I pass, but usually, either it is reasonable or I can negotiate them down and add another treasure to my load. But I am curious about the chest. I want to know, dammit!

Once home, I pull the pickup into the barn. I unload the pickup, taking the items to the various workshops I've made out of one or more stalls. When I'm finished, all that is left is the chest. I can't lift it out alone. I don't try. I've dealt with this problem before. I attach a chain to each handle. After checking that neither handles nor chains will give way, I toss the other end of the chains over the hayloft pulley. Originally used to pull bales up into the loft, I've lowered it for cases just like this. I check that the truck is parked as close to the woodworking area as possible. It is. I pull gently but firmly, watching the height of the chest until it is high enough to roll the table under it. Then I attach the chain to the holding hook mounted for just that purpose.

Next, I drive the pickup out from under the chest. I roll the table out and under the chest. Finally, I can go back and carefully lower the chest onto the table. It is heavy enough to make the table creak alarmingly, but no signs of buckling. I sigh in relief as I push the

table back into its place in the woodworking area and lock the wheels into place.

I examine the chest from front, back and sides, slowly and carefully inspecting all of the ironwork. Although badly corroded, the ironwork is strong and can be repaired with a little sanding and a liberal coat of stove black. All in all, I decide, the ironwork is not as bad as I'd thought out at the garage sale. But I was right; it is wrought iron, not cast. Three iron straps wrap around the trunk from front, underneath, up the back and across the lid to form the main closure. The hinges at the back and the lock and two clasps on the front appear to be the only weak points on the bands. The outer straps have clasps connecting front to lid; the central one is padlocked. All are rusted worse than the bands they hold together. There are also two horizontal straps going around the chest as well as iron reinforcing the bottom corners. These straps are riveted to the vertical straps and presumably through to the wood beneath. They overlap the center strap on the back of the chest. This thing wasn't meant to be opened without the key.

I try the key. As I'd expected, it doesn't work. I tug on the padlock. No, not rusted badly enough to give way. I manage to cut off the padlock with bolt cutters, but the clasps won't budge. I can't see a way to get the clasps open without damaging the chest. I refuse to do that if there is any way to avoid it.

I go around the table to the back of the chest. I check the hinges. Yes! I can get at the hinge pins. I use pliers from my lapidary shop to force the pins out. It is a long, hard fight, but I finally get two rusted hinge pins completely free and the third most of the way before it sticks. A thin chisel from the same kit as the pliers cuts the pin and the hinges are loose. At last, I am able to open the chest by lifting up the back. The clasps on the front actually act as hinges for the moment. Then the strain causes the lid to slip completely off. I control the fall, setting it upside down on the table next to the open chest.

The first thing I see is a fabric-wrapped package covered in something. I pull it out. Whatever it is, it was carefully wrapped in canvas before being coated in paraffin wax. Painstakingly, I peel away the fabric to find several books. Suddenly, I realize why the books were wrapped that way. Even if water got into the chest, the wax would prevent damage to the books and other items inside. Gingerly, I open one. It looks handwritten, filled with a careless handwriting that was, no doubt, meant for the owner alone. Puzzling out the lack of proper grammar or consistent spelling, I see that it is a book about herbs and their uses. It must be an herbal of some sort. The other books also appear to be journals of one sort or another, but I don't want to take time to puzzle them out. There is more in the chest.

I set the books aside and return to the chest. There are more carefully wrapped lumps in there. I pull out one at random and remove the wrapping. It is a granite mortar set with wooden pestle. I remove several more lumps that are the right shape to be cookware or bundles of tools. I unwrap a few pottery jars with fabric-covered corks. The jars contain

bags of powder or seeds; the lids are embroidered with letters and drawings of plants. I realize that they must be the common names along with images of the plant powder or seed contained within.

Finally, I come to a second wooden box about the size of the box my last pair of hiking boots came in. Aside from a string tied in an “x” around it, there is no closure on it. The hinges are in excellent condition. It also has the surname of one of my several times great-grandmothers, rendered in skilled wood inlay, on the outside. I remove the twine holding the box closed and see a piece of paper on top. I lift it out. Although the handwriting is carefully ornate, it resembles the casual script of the herbal. I still have to puzzle out the spelling, grammar, and flowing calligraphy of a few centuries ago to read

April 23, 1664

Twin Oak Ford, Sussex

Dear Descendant,

It is my dearest wish that this chest will safely find its way into your hands. If all goes well, it should remain in family lines. If not, it is blessed to return to family hands.

You may be wondering who I am. I am a hedge witch. I have lived peacefully with the village for most of my life. I have several beautiful children including three boys who have been adopted by village families. Yesterday, after my even meal, a neighbor braved the night wood to warn me that the witch hunters had come. One among the village has informed them that the village harbors a witch near its confines. This gentle soul presumed that I was the one they sought. In remembrance of the son he adopted from me as well as the many acts of kindness and healing I have done for the village and my predecessors had done before me, he was warning me about them. I will thank him and send him on his way with this chest.

So, I leave this chest with him in hopes that it will remain. These things I have left you will teach you. Use them well. Learn well, Daughter of Mine.

The final shock comes when I look inside the box, under the paper, and unfold the cloth covering the contents of the small box inside the chest. It is a jewelry box containing a tangle of chains, jewelry and coins.

I paid only five dollars for that chest. I told the woman repeatedly that she shouldn't sell it without opening it. Yet, she had almost insisted that I take it. I could almost believe that there was some sort of curse on the thing to get it back to a descendant. But am I? I go up to the loft, converted from hayloft to studio apartment, and check the genealogy files on my computer. Yes, as I thought I remembered; the name on the box matches the name of a dead-end, an old woman that I traced one branch of my family tree back to. She lived in the mid-1600's.

I go back to the chest. I haven't taken all of the implements out of their wax-coated wraps yet, and I thought there was a cauldron in there. Of course, it was probably my great, great, several times great grandmother's favorite cooking pot but, . . . well, it looked like a cauldron through the wrapping. And she did say that I'd learn from her stuff. And witches are known for using cauldrons.

Ah, I'm being silly. I sort through the wrapped lumps on the table. I find the piece I'm looking for. It is round with three bumps on one end and a depression where the top would open. At what is probably the top, there are two ridges curving up although no ridge where a bail would be expected to show through the canvas. I carefully peel away the canvas, using the forceps from my tool kit. If there is any rust or corrosion, I don't want to risk damaging it any further.

After an eternity that is only five minutes—ten at most—I see I didn't need to worry. As with everything else I've found inside the chest, it is in excellent condition. A visual inspection of it proves that it is, in fact, a cauldron, a round-bottomed pot set on three legs. One leg seems a little shorter than the rest, giving the pot a slightly drunken tilt that is quite cute. I can see that, like the farm table, this was used hard and was well loved. It is made of wrought iron instead of cast, but otherwise, it could have come from a Lodge mold. It has the black that comes from care; there are two handles on it where it could have been lifted out of the fire. Entranced, I reach out and touch it for the first time with my bare hands . . .

Everything grays out; all I can see is a world that looks just like TV static. Even time hiccups; it could be moments or eternities. Then everything is normal. Or as normal as everything can be when I am nowhere I should be! I look around. I am in a small clearing next to a stream. There is a game trail crossing the stream, going into what has got to be virgin forest. Those trees are huge. The diameters must be at least in the four- to five-foot range, and if not as much as six or even seven feet across. Like I said, huge. Looking up, often several stories, I see lower branches that are as thick as a normal tree trunk. The ground is covered with litter. Leaf litter, not human garbage. I look around, desperately scanning the ground. I can't see a single piece of junk: not one beer can or Snickers wrapper, nothing. I listen. Again, nothing. Oh, there are birdcalls, chittering squirrels, a babbling stream nearby—all normal forest sounds, but no cars in the distance, no planes flying overhead—nothing.

All right, I am officially freaked. I do smell something. Someone is cooking, nearby. I stand up. I pace. *I don't want to leave here; what if I do and can't get home because of it? But that does smell great and I am hungry.* Finally, I choose to risk doing something wrong instead of risking doing nothing wrong. I follow the scent. It smells close, across the stream. Looking at it, I realize I can jump it easy.

I get across safely and follow the smell up a game trail. Looking down, I see footprints, bare human footprints; perhaps this isn't a game trail after all. I follow the trail as much as my nose. Very soon, the trail opens out into a second clearing.

This one is different from the one by the stream. There is a small cottage, its earthen plastered walls clearly whitewashed in the early evening light. The windows are large with shutters that can be closed over their glassless openings if storms threaten. The door appears to be made of willow branches lashed together using some sort of vine. The roof is thatched with graying straw.

In the clearing, in the beautiful, bright summer evening, is an old woman. Her hair is light gray with wisps of darker hair that might have once been dark blonde. She looks up and smiles; it is a smile that is full of teeth in a wrinkled face. She gestures wordlessly at a nearby section of tree trunk as if inviting me to a seat at the finest table. I stay where I am for several long moments, taking in the setting. There is something very familiar, something I can't quite place. I've never seen the woman in my life. Her gown appears to be made of homespun wool, left the brown color of the sheep that once wore it. The cottage appears cozy, weather tight; one might even use quaint to describe it if one would be so trite to do so. But I've never seen one, either. I've heard of virgin forests, but I've never seen, let alone been in one before.

It hits me. I feel like I've been hit over the head with a brick, no, a brick wall. Maybe several brick walls. I walk into the clearing, take the offered seat, and question, "Grandmother?" as I realize that the sense of familiarity comes from the slightly drunken tilt of the cauldron she is cooking the stew in that has drawn me here.

She chuckles. It is a deep, hearty sound.

"Wondered if you'd think it out."

"Am I ... where am I?"

She thinks.

My anxiety grows; perhaps she sees this.

"Neither here nor . . . well, here." She holds up a hand to forestall my flood of incoherent questions. "I'm dead, you know. I couldn't teach any of my daughters of the flesh, so I decided to teach my descendants. Hard to do that if you are dead. So, I cast a spell. I'm a bit of a ghost, but I'm not a ghost. Perhaps a memory? No, that isn't right, either."

"An echo?" I interrupt.

"An echo," she muses. "Yes, I suppose I am a bit of an echo of who I once was, my purpose to teach you. And I am a bit of a spirit. Stayed behind to guide those I was prevented from guiding. So, do you know how you are related to me?" she asks.

Now it is my turn to pause, gather my thoughts. "About sixteen greats away from grandmother," I finally reply.

She looks shocked. "How much time has passed?"

I look at this echo of my ancestor, the same one whose chest I'd just opened, and

answer, "It's two thousand and one."

"I knew, but I didn't know. How could so much time pass? I thought decades, perhaps a generation or two, but centuries?"

I shrug. "The best laid plans oft go astray."

Absently, she ladles out a bowl of stew with some kind of dumpling floating in it and hands me the bowl and a spoon, then repeats for herself. We eat in silence for a few moments.

"I am not certain how much you know of the old ways," she announces after a few bites. "I live between the people and the land, communicating with both, preventing misunderstandings between the realm of man and the realm of spirit. I wish to pass on what I have learned from my mother and grandmothers as well as what I myself have learned," she informs me between bites, but the decision must be yours. I will teach you how to return to your home. If you wish to learn more, you must choose to return. It must be your decision, not forced upon you by accident of blood and of magick."

I have a lot to think about. I can't absorb it all. I am filled with questions.

"What makes the dumplings that yellow?" is the one that pops out.

"Cattail pollen," she answers, as if we discuss recipes all the time, as if it is the most natural question for me to ask.

Maybe it is. She invites me inside, shows me the bed, the wood frame with rope supporting a thick, down-filled mattress. Knit wool blankets are folded and neatly stacked away. I sit on the bed, questions pouring out. She calmly answers every question I ask. Does she know that I am getting a lesson in magick and magickal ethics now? Somehow, I think that she does.

Eventually, I run out of questions and she leaves to go to sleep.

Tomorrow, I will learn to go home. By tomorrow evening, I shall be home in my own body, not in this place that doesn't really exist. As I lie awake, processing everything she has said, I realize something as the sliver of moon gets high enough to shine into the eastern facing window: what she has said resonates with me. That is the only way I can think of it. Like sound waves creating resonance patterns in physics class, the ideas she had resonated with me.

I realize that the things she left in the chest are the things I'll need back home to put Grandmother's teachings into use. The journals are lesson books with most of the information I'll need. If I can't "translate" them from the mid-1600 English, I can ask her about it. She even has copies here if I need them. A peek at her garden shows herbs and vegetables galore. If a fraction of the seeds are still viable, I'll have the envy of any heirloom herb or veggie garden.

The cauldron, long associated with transformation, is the trigger for the spell to transport me here, to the place she calls the Summer Land. And I realize that I will come back. I will learn everything this echo, this ghost has to teach me.

Kids

by Amanda Vasquez

I'm driving down to the shopping center where the Piggly Wiggly is on the corner to get an iced coffee to cool myself off on a sunny summer day before getting a haircut. There's this girl and this boy sitting by the side of the road, up on the sidewalk, shaded from the sun by the overhang of the K&B. They're not yet fourteen. The boy is propped up on his skateboard, and the girl is sitting on the cracked concrete in her faded Levi's and a tank top. He's wearing cut-off khakis and a shirt from the last band he saw in the grass in the evening. She's looking at him, wide-eyed, mouth half-open, arm stopped in mid-lift of the Coke bottle to her sunburned lips. He's telling her a wild story about some crazy thing he did this weekend with his friends that she sort of knows, and I can tell from her smile that she's really excited to be with him. The boy is really cute and so is she in their pubescent innocence. They're both really excited to be together right now because it will probably be a first kiss for both of them. He finishes the story he's been spouting as she exclaims, "Damn, wow!" He nods his head in agreement while he's rolling nervously back and forth on the board. They look at each other a second, and then he says, "Hey, let's go get some ice cream."

Sitting in the chair, all leaned back while the girl washes my hair, I tell her about the kids I saw. She says that she has a couple of kids herself, and I tell her she doesn't look old enough. I agree, however, when she says you never can tell these days.

"Kids having kids," says a gray-haired grandmother of six from the same olive green-colored reclining chair next to me. "It's a shame!" Her disapproval goes disregarded by us all since she herself was sixteen when she had her first son sixty years ago. Now, she's too old to remember her own childhood. The only solace she gets since her son and six grandkids are long gone to God-knows-where is getting her hair permed and dyed purple every Wednesday.

The girl washing my hair offers little information about herself because she's just moved from the country to our neighborhood, and she's not used to the city yet. Soon enough, the owner of the shop will invite her over for Bloody Marys one night to get the scoop on her life, and then we will all know her.

While she's combing my hair out, I remember that I used to love when my mother did my hair because she brushed really softly and the bristle massaged my head. Sometimes she would spend a long time braiding my long thick hair and tucking it up to make doggy

ears on Christmas. Now, I'm looking in the mirror, and my hair is cut short and about to be shorter. My mother hadn't been as young as this girl when she had me and my sister, but she is strong and keeps up with us well, chasing us around for hours or taking us to the park to draw like she did when she was a kid.

I'm wondering how old I will be when I have kids, and I'm used to telling myself that I won't have any because I'm scared that I won't be mature enough or responsible enough. I tell the girl with the scissors that if I have a kid, I hope it's not like me. She tells me that no matter what you do, they always end up like you and you always end up like your mother because it's the only mother you know how to be since you've spent so much time with her. I guess so.

A few minutes pass and neither of us says anything because we are thinking that life is so much fun when kids are around. She says that she worries so much about her kids all the time because they have no daddy and rely on her for everything. She is afraid, too, that she won't bring home enough money for them to be as happy as she'd like. But, she says, her mother did the same raising three kids with no daddy and she thinks they all turned out okay.

I'm wondering why she's telling me all this, and I stare at her face in the mirror while she's focused on my hair and can't see me staring at her to see if there's any strain there. But there's no strain. Her eyes are bright and her complexion is rosy like the girl I saw earlier on the sidewalk. There's a small mustache of sweat on her upper lip that she wipes with the backside of her hand that holds the scissors. She's left-handed and works hard and likes what she does—making people look nice.

When she's done, I tell her not to blow dry my hair because it's too hot. She puts some mousse in it, instead. I'm going swimming with some other kids, and I know that the mousse will make bubbles when I jump into the pool. I decided to tell her, if she wants, she can bring her kids to the pool sometimes because nothing feels better than being immersed in cold water on humid summer days in New Orleans. She says that'd be great but that she'll have to buy her baby some orange floaties first because he can't swim yet.

The smile on her face tells me that she likes me, and I like her and I decide that we are going to be friends. I tell her not to worry about her kids being happy because they are probably the happiest kids in the world to have a mother like her since she's so nice.

When I'm leaving the shop, with my finger in my ear because it itches from pieces of cut hair, I feel good. If I decide to have kids some day, I want to be a mom like her. She's like my mom, but younger and blonde—not that I want to be blonde. When I think how hard it would be to raise two kids alone, I remember that there is no cloud hanging over her head, but she's happy and young.

Driving away, I pass my high school, and I think that in two years, I'll be done and

then college will come and then, maybe, I'll have kids one day. But for now, I'm content with being a kid myself and doing kid things like swimming and running and laughing and screaming. Eating ice cream and going to the zoo, going to Mississippi for the beach and playing cards on the porch when we get too sunburned to be out. Reading books under trees and drinking coffee until ten at night while talking about all the things that matter most in life, like Janis Joplin and the hot guy that works at the coffee shop and the road trip we've mapped out on the inside cover of *On the Road*. I decide then and there to be a kid forever.

Passing the Test

by John Mercer

I was like everyone else. I joined when we were attacked at Pearl Harbor. I was stupid enough to join to fight an unrelenting enemy. I joined to go to a humid place with the stench of decaying bodies that twisted your senses. I was one of those who would sit out this war, though. Starving in horrible conditions as a prisoner of war, taken by the Japanese. Sent to a camp where I was beaten, my body broken, but my self-respect still intact. The warden of the prison camp had been a proud man. Taking a liking to me for my height, he wanted me to show his superiority under him by bowing to him every day. When I refused to bow to my hated enemy, he tried to teach me to obey his command by breaking my left leg.

More than a year later, we POWs were rounded up for a journey. We would march until a great number of prisoners and my friends would fall and be trampled to their deaths. When a man fell, the guards would simply back the line of prisoners up just so they could march us over the poor man, who would be smashed to death by his own men, but I survived. Telling myself that I would kill the ones who did this to me, I still drew breath.

I lived to endure years of torture. I had every fever known to man back in those days. For three and a half long years, I waited. Disease was a way of understanding the fragility of the human body. For days at a time, I wouldn't be able to move. Improper use of medication and improper procedures led to more pain and infection. Twice, I had witnessed amputations. Twice, I had seen men die during the procedure.

Forced labor was a way of life. Working the fields of Burma gave me time to think about life and how I lived. Was this really worth it? Would I continue to push towards my beliefs and ideas when I was to endure this life of torment until my death? I thought long and hard about all of this. Raising structures, paving small roads that led to nowhere, stepping over the lifeless bodies of men I had once trained long and hard with. What was it all for?

They gave up trying to get information out of us within the first few weeks. We thought that they were starving us for intelligence then, but now we know that was just how they were. They smiled at our famine. They laughed at our skeletal forms. With food so scarce, we worked hard in the blistering heat. My skin felt of leather, and my hands were carved of wood. This was how I survived. I tried to turn a blind eye as the man in charge started his experiments. I was one of the few lucky ones. He liked having me around to beat. My bones felt hollow, brittle, as if they could shatter and be blown away in the wind like simple dirt.

At night, I prayed until I fell asleep. My eyes were now so dry with grief that tears could no longer come. I had helped bury friends that meant so much in keeping me sane. There started to be fewer and fewer prisoners.

I don't really remember what happened that morning that my blessing came. I had come down with some other tropical fever and was burning up. I remember the sounds of planes and the screams of joy as I was awakened by a man that had made it through with me. He helped me out of my bed and took me outside to show me the sight. The blue Corsairs soared overhead as I waved and, for the first time in three and a half years, smiled at the friendly sight. A pilot had dropped a chocolate bar on a small parachute he had made out of cloth from his plane, and it slowly drifted down into my hand. I remember eating it and feeling full for the first time in a long while. The trucks came in with friendly faces and insignias. Finally, my dreams of being rescued were becoming a reality. When a fellow American soldier came up to me to give me water, I remember kissing him on the cheek and thanking him for giving me back my freedom.

The Japanese guards had fled under the cover of darkness, leaving the rest of us for the invaders. They were all caught, and I actually remember the first thing I wanted more than anything was to get back to my family. I was nineteen when I had joined, and I was now pushing twenty-five, losing three and a half years of my life to be a prisoner of war. I had stood at six feet two inches and one hundred and eighty-five pounds when I graduated from basic. Now, leaving the camp, I weighed a total of one hundred and twelve.

I stared out the window of the plane, watching the quilted patterns of crops go by as I waited to touch down in my small town. When we landed, I was shocked to receive a hero's welcome. Growing up in a small town, everyone had come out to see my arrival. I came out and embraced my mom, hoping she would not make me relive my story so soon after it had ended. It has been a great many years since then that I can sit down and buy my own cup of coffee or pay for my own dry cleaning, but I guess back then people actually missed you.

It took me an even longer time to forgive my captors and forgive the people they were. It is still hard for me to believe myself when I say to God that I forgive the warden that was in charge of that place. That has been something that has kept me up at night, wondering if some actions of people can actually be forgiven.

When I came home, the rumors that I had been dead turned into legend. Turns out everyone thought I had been killed. The military still had no sign of my death and sent my check monthly to my parents. When I came back, I discovered that the Army had given me a promotion, and I was now a corporal. My military pay had been raised twenty-five dollars, as well. I found my accumulated total waiting for me when I came back. But I could not spend it; the memory of what I had had to endure for the last three and a half years lay in the back of my mind.

For about a year, I stayed at home in my chair, thinking about the past. Thinking of how I had been tested by God and passed, for not once showing weakness and giving up hope. But the faces of the guards still stood in my mind. How could I forgive those that I hated and loathed so much? How was I to cope with such an atrocity by man? Before my final days, when I realized that I was about to die, I thought of this once again. Digging the graves of men with whom I served. Putting down the remains of lost friends in a forgotten place. Lying idle in the hands of God, I realized that I could forgive. Through the broken legs and horrible conditions, I could, in fact, forgive. It was not my place to judge. If I truly was to pass the test that was set before me, then I would have to learn to forgive those who tortured me, both physically and mentally, during and after the war.

Essays

It's Just a Little Hole

by Constance Burris

The day was supposed to be a date day or what I called a movie-then-a-little-sex day. But before I could do anything, I had to do my four-year-old daughter's hair. Maya was born with a head full of fine, silky, black hair, but as she grew, the silky hair fell out and was replaced by what is often referred to as a "hair of wool," which is the biblical way of saying nappy hair. The fact that she had nappy hair wouldn't have been so bad, but it was long, unlike mine, and reached halfway down her back when it was wet, and the length made it that much harder to comb.

She was also light-skinned, unlike me. Growing up, I had always hated light-skinned girls growing up, as is the custom in the black society. The dark girls hated the light-skinned girls, and the light-skinned girls ignored and looked down on the dark-skinned girls. But I had to get over my color bias once I admitted to myself that Maya wasn't going to get any darker, no matter how much I set her out in the sun.

Her hair—I hated doing her hair. I had hoped for a boy, just so I wouldn't have to do anybody's hair. But, I had a girl. I'd had four years to learn how to do a girl's hair, and all I'd been able to do was ponytails. So I usually mixed it up; I gave her the choice between a lot of little bitty ponytails that take forever to do but last longer or larger ponytails like Pippi Longstocking. But I tried not to have them stick out that bad.

The tools that I used to do her hair consisted of a cup of water to help loosen up the nap, hair grease (really nothing but green Vaseline), a fine-toothed comb, and a brush. I usually took the water and the grease, mixed the two in my hands, and applied the mixture to her hair, which make her hair look really shiny, prissy, and girly. But not on that day. That day, were going to do two simple ponytails. So all I had to do was soak the brush in a cup of water and pull it through the war field that was Maya's hair:

"Oh, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts." She screamed and jumped up off the stool and out of my reach.

"Maya, I can't do anything if you won't stay still," I explained to her.

"But it huuuurrrrrrrttttts," she whined, trying to provoke some sympathy.

"Do you want to look pretty for school tomorrow?" That always worked because she was so prissy.

"Yes," she answered, with her bottom lip sticking out and tears glistening in her eyes.

“Then come sit down and stop being a crybaby.”

“Oohhh, I’m not a crybaby,” she pouted before she sat back down on the stool that sat in between my legs.

I then dipped the brush in water, applied a little grease to her hair, and the battle began again.

Eventually, I finished the war with Maya’s head, with no casualties other than a couple of handfuls of hair. Then it was time for the part Maya loved, the part that made the whole tortuous ordeal worth it for her—adding the barrettes.

“Maya, go pick out the barrettes you want in your hair,” I told her and she jumped up happily from the stool. That particular day she came back with two red barrettes in the shape of flowers. I put one on the base of each ponytail. Maya didn’t believe she was actually a girl until she had those barrettes safely positioned in her hair.

Finally, Maya’s hair was finished. I had to meet Brexton, my date, in forty-five minutes. So, I hurriedly got Maya dressed, dropped her off at my mother’s house, gave her the usual kiss and hug, and left.

I have five brothers and sisters, and between the six of us, we’ve produced nine children. Since my mom could never say *no* to anyone, she was constantly used as a 24-hour, free, drop-in daycare by all six of us. Since Maya was an only child, she loved it over there, and that day, my mom had my six-year-old niece Tyresha, and her three-year-old brother Mookie. My mom wasn’t a completely free babysitter; sometimes she would make me buy her cigarettes, bread, or toilet tissue—whatever little thing that she had run out of at the end of the month when she had spent all of her supplemental income that the federal government distributed to her for falling down and messing up her ankle in Wal-Mart.

Brexton arrived at the movie theater about five minutes after I did. Brexton and I had been going out for the past three years. He was thirty-two years old, with a beautiful caramel-toned complexion, and the body of a six-foot-three-inch tall football player. He was physically everything you would want in a black man, but he was incapable of showing any emotions and he didn’t like kids. Of the three years we had been dating, he’d been around Maya only a handful of times. I hadn’t minded since I wasn’t looking for a husband when I met him. I was in school, working on my engineering degree. It was hard enough managing a young child and the demanding engineering courses without worrying about “Where’s my man?” The relationship, as it was, consisted of me calling him whenever I was horny, him calling me when he was horny, and if we were lucky, we’d both be free. But I had graduated from school two months ago, and pretty soon, I’d have to break up with him. I wasn’t a child anymore, and it was time to move on, in spite of the good sex.

After the movie was over, Brexton went to the bathroom, so I sat on one of the benches outside the bathrooms. While I sat on the bench, I pulled out my phone, which I had turned off before the movie, to check my messages. I had fifteen messages.

Oooh, somebody loves me, I thought to myself. Then I pressed the list button to display the phone numbers of whoever called, and all fifteen messages were from my mother. The dream that my one true love had finally called and was on his way to rescue me from Brexton died.

I pressed the call button and the little modern miracle called my mom's number without me having to recall what it was since her phone number changed every other month.

"Hello," I heard my mother's voice say.

"What do you want me to get you from the store?" I asked intuitively.

"Connie, I'm trying to stay calm, but Maya needs to go to the emergency room."

"Why? What happened?" I asked so loud that the whole theater turned to look at me.

"Maya fell and her head is bleeding," she said right before she started crying.

"OK, Momma, stay calm. If you think Maya needs to go to the hospital, then call an ambulance."

"No, Toneeka said she was on her way."

"OK," I said, trying to breathe calmly. "I'm on my way."

I ran out of the movie theater then, not even stopping to wait for Brexton to come out of the bathroom. He didn't care about my child, and he didn't deserve an explanation. I was dumb to be still wasting my time with him.

Coincidentally, I reached my mom's house the same time as Toneeka.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"I don't know," I answered quickly and walked calmly into the house, mentally trying to prepare myself for what I was about to see.

The door was wide open, but no one was in the living room, so I crept into the back of the house. To the right was my mom's room. The first thing I saw was Maya's beautiful brand new pink coat (that she never let out of sight) covered completely in blood. My mind immediately flashed back to the opening scenes of *Saving Private Ryan* when heads were shot off and blood was splattered everywhere.

Oh, God, I thought as I tried to prepare myself for the worst—preparing myself to see my baby's head blown open.

I felt as if I was in a scary movie as I proceeded slowly into the room, expecting a big man with a white hockey mask to come at me with an ax—or even worse, standing over my baby's bloody body with an ax. (I really do watch too much TV.)

Finally, I entered the room to see Maya sitting on my mother's lap with a blood-soaked dishtowel pressed against her head. Her hair, which had been beautifully and

painstakingly fixed two hours ago, now resembled a humongous bush of wool. The long beautiful hair that everyone thought she was so blessed with was not a blessing that day.

“Moma, I’m OK,” Maya explained to me calmly as if the blood I saw on her coat wasn’t hers. “Moma, I’m OK. It’s just a little hole,” she kept repeating as I took her from my mom and listened to my mom explain to me what had happened.

Maya had been jumping off a chair onto the couch in my mother’s living room. She had been told to stop, but Maya had to jump one more time. She had fallen down and landed on her head. Maya cried, and my mom told her, “That’s what you get for not listening,” and made her lie on the floor with Tyresha and Mookie. Maya had used her coat as a pillow.

The next thing my mom knew, Tyresha was screaming, “Ooh, Granny, look. Maya got blood on her coat.”

Maya looked down, noticed the blood, and started to scream. My mom noticed the blood, so she started to scream. My eighteen-year-old brother heard the screams and came from his room to see what was going on.

“J. J.,” my mom said, still panicking, “what’s wrong with her? Where is the blood coming from?”

Fortunately, J. J. took Maya from my mom, carried her to the bathroom, undid her two ponytails, and unleashed the jungle of Maya’s hair. After a couple of minutes, he found the source of the bleeding. The pretty red barrette she’d picked out that morning had cut open her scalp.

J. J. was able to calm Maya by explaining to her that it was just a little hole.

“I’m OK,” Maya explained once more after my mom had finished describing to me what happened. “It’s just a little hole.”

Relieved that she hadn’t been bludgeoned to death by an ax murderer, I started crying as I held her in my arms. The realization that something could have happened to her was more than I could take. She was the most beautiful little girl I’d ever seen, the exact opposite of me, with her long hair, yellow skin, and prissy attitude, but I loved her more than anything in the world.

“Moma, stop crying,” Maya demanded, unable to understand what was wrong with me. “It’s just a little hole,” she explained again and again as she hugged me, comforted me, and patted me on the back, trying to calm me. She was using the technique that I had used on her so often to calm her and make her feel that she was loved and that everything was all right. She was only four years old and already the roles had been reversed. I was the child in need of comfort, and she was the adult, strong and all-knowing, confident that everything was going to be all right.

Finally, after some coercing from Maya that everything was fine—she just had

a little hole in her head—I decided that it was time to act like a parent again—strong, dependable, responsible, able to handle anything.

“OK, let’s go to the hospital,” I said with all the energy and courage I could muster.

We got to the hospital. It was a slow day, thank God, and they saw us immediately. I finally got the nerve to look at the gash on her head, and all the gory episodes of *ER* came back to me. The gash was a little larger than a quarter, and it was a red, fleshy pit. The doctor, unmoved by the sight, opened and closed the gash with his fingers as if he were moving a puppet’s mouth open and shut. All the while, Maya sat there, holding my hand, acting like the adult, and I was standing over her, looking at her little hole, grimacing and trying to choke down the bile that was begging to escape from my stomach.

“It’s just a little hole,” she explained to the doctor.

“Yeah,” the doctor agreed. “It is just a little hole.”

He then explained to me that she needed a staple to close the hole. He continued to explain that he could give her a shot around the hole, but it would probably hurt just as bad as the staple. So, I played the role of the responsible parent and agreed with the doctor not to do the shot for pain. Still, an insecure voice in the back of my head began speaking:

But what if you’re wrong? What if you cause her even more pain?

We’ll see, I said to the voice.

The young doctor left and returned in about five minutes with an odd-looking staple gun wrapped in sterile plastic.

“Are you ready?” he asked while I held Maya’s hand.

“Yeah,” Maya answered.

“1, 2, 3, *STRAWBERRIES*,” Maya and I said in unison as the doctor administered the staple.

In an instant, it was over. The doctor had put a staple in my baby’s head. She made no *ouch* noise, no cry of pain. She just flinched her eyes for a second. I looked over and the bloody pit was sealed with a silver staple.

“Is it gone?” Maya asked.

“Yes, Maya, the hole is gone.”

To this day, Maya has never asked for another barrette, she won’t wear her pink coat, and she explains to me carefully—if she has any type of bump, bruise, sore, scrape, or cut—that she’s OK, and it’s just bleeding a little. She thinks I’m the crybaby.

Racing to Gdynia on the Kiev Express

by John W. Perry

My wife and I sit restlessly on an uncomfortable wooden bench at the Lichtenberg train station, located in the east part of Berlin, Germany. We have been waiting for over an hour on the platform for a night train that will take us to Gdynia, Poland, where we will meet a colleague.

As we talk and watch a few passersby, we notice a train slowly pulling into the station. It is not one of the sleek and modern trains we have observed arriving and departing from the other stations in Berlin. It has a melange of mismatched cars with faded yellow, green, gray, and blue panels. Rust and heavy grime tell a story of hard rail service. The cars eventually creak to a stop. All is quiet. I notice that several of the cars are marked with bold black letters *KIEV*. No passengers get off.

I think, *My God! It's the Kiev Express heading for Siberia.*

My imagination takes flight: *This train could be carrying political prisoners destined for labor camps!*

Before I can speculate further, my wife pokes me and suggests, “You should get up and check it out.”

I resist and comment, “See that sign” as I point to the side of the car. “It says Kiev. This train is going to the Ukraine and who knows where else.”

She eyes me with some skepticism and looks at her watch. Then she firmly states, “But it is 10:35 p.m. and the Eurail schedule says this is when our train leaves.”

I continue to argue. “If we get on this train, we could wind up in Russia or the Ukraine without a visa.” To impress upon her the seriousness of my argument, I say, “Our kids might never hear from us again.”

I quickly add, “I think our train will be coming along after this one.”

Just then, a conductor steps out of a nearby car. He is dressed in an olive uniform with faded red stripes running down his sleeve and pants leg. I notice his hat has *WARS* sewed across the front. I point out the caption to my wife. We both stare and wonder what it means. The conductor stands quietly for a few moments, then looks down at his clipboard. His eyes sweep the length of the platform as if searching for passengers.

“I’m going to ask him about our train,” my wife states as she bravely walks toward the conductor.

She hands him our ticket. After studying it for several seconds, he points to the end of the train. Unable to communicate in his language—and not sure what he means—

she points to herself, then to me, and to the end car. The conductor nods his head in the affirmative. After looking at her watch again, she frantically motions for me to hurry. By the expression on her face, I know this is not a good time for further discussion. She starts walking quickly toward the end of the train and leaves all the suitcases with me.

I have no choice but to follow as best I can. I push a suitcase in front of me and pull one along in back. She has almost reached the end of the train by the time I look up. I practically have to run as I try to catch up with her. Suddenly, I hear the conductor blow one long shrill blast on his whistle. I learned the urgency of this signal from previous train trips in Europe. The train is ready to pull out and waits for no one. I lunge for the nearest open door just as it is beginning to close. I get in, but it clamps shut on my last suitcase. I have to use my foot to pry the door open, and with considerable effort, I eventually secure the luggage inside the car.

I stagger and weave as the train picks up speed leaving the station. I struggle to pull both sets of luggage down the narrow aisles of the train cars.

Where is my wife? I wonder.

My anxiety level increases as I consider the possibility that she misunderstood the conductor. Nervously, I say to myself, *What if I was right all along, and this train is heading for the Ukraine?*

I can envision the first sixty-three years of my peaceful and uncomplicated life coming to an abrupt end. My mind shifts to visions of some dark prison cell with a former KGB operative laughing at my pleas to call the American Embassy.

I am already beginning to form my excuses: *We got on the train by accident. We didn't know we were breaking one of your laws. We didn't have time to get a visa. I was just doing what my wife told me to do.*

As my various postulations are enveloping me, I look up and see my wife standing at the end of the corridor.

"Hurry up," she pleads.

"Are you sure this is our train?" I question her.

She gives me one of those looks as if to say, *Is your imagination running wild again?*

I plead for mercy. "I'm tired and I missed my nap this afternoon. Remember I have had four coronary artery bypass grafts."

Tired of hearing that excuse, she merely smiles and says, "You have been fixed. The doctor says there is nothing wrong with you."

She turns and heads down the aisle of this last car on the train.

"Let's find our compartment," she calls back. Then she adds, "What is wrong with you? You seem to be in another world."

If she only knew my thoughts, I quietly whisper to myself. *We will probably be arrested and doomed to a Kiev jail cell.*

We finally reach what we believe to be our correct place on the train, but the corridor of the car is very dark. It is difficult to read the compartment numbers because there are only two dim lights—one at each end of the car. Fortunately, my wife produces a small keychain flashlight she brought along for such emergencies. The flashlight emits a faint red glow that barely illuminates the handprinted cards tucked into slots on the compartment doors. We have to squint to read the numbers because some of the cards are bent and painted over with an oily, brown lacquer.

Finally, we find our place, slide open the door, and search for a light switch. The light switch is head high and has a rather inconvenient lever action. Just after we get the lights to come on, the car porter walks up behind us and asks for our tickets. After we hand them over, he takes his time studying our reservation card and Eurail passes. Then he asks for our passports. He looks at us and then the compartment. He uses broken English and some hand gestures to inform us that we don't need this compartment. Apparently, the ticket agent made a mistake and gave us a room with three cots. He directs us down the hallway to a smaller compartment with a bunk bed. I want to protest that there are no other people on this car and it should not matter.

I open my mouth to complain.

"Don't!" commands my wife in a stern tone.

The conductor eyes us suspiciously. I can think only of a line from Dr. Zhivago when the superintendent of a recently confiscated house exclaims to Zhivago's family, "Your attitude is being noticed. It is being noticed, you know."

The conductor turns to leave. We remind him that he is still in possession of our Eurail passes. He stops, turns back to face us, pats his coat pocket that contains our valuable trip documents, and says in his best English, "Morning."

This is the first time I notice any hint of doubt in my wife's expression. I think that she has finally realized that our situation is uncertain and that we are vulnerable to expectations that we never anticipated.

We throw our suitcases on the bunk-style beds and struggle to maneuver around one another. The pull down bunk beds take up half the space in the compartment. A tiny, fold down seat barely allows one of us to sit at a tiny built-in desk. The side window is slightly ajar. I try to close it, but it slides back to an open position.

I say to myself, *At least there will be no danger of carbon monoxide poisoning tonight.*

A sack on the table contains two croissants and a small tube of white-looking stuff. "I think I just found breakfast," I announce.

My mind wanders for a second. Then I say, "I saw a movie once where they served boiled wheat and potato peelings to prisoners in Siberia."

My wife peers at me and says with a certain degree of self-satisfaction, "It's lucky for us I bought some snacks back in Berlin."

Not to be outdone, I proclaim that I remembered to bring water and pull two containers from inside my backpack.

Noticing that we have no bathroom facilities in the cabin, my wife says, "You had better save some of that water. We may need some to take a sponge bath and brush our teeth in the morning."

My wife then decides she had better check out the bathroom situation down the hall. Before she heads out into the dark hallway, she announces that she is taking the bottom bunk.

Lucky me, I think as I proceed to prepare the top bunk for what I perceive as a rough night. Little do I know what awaits us.

In a very short time, she is back with a disgruntled look.

"Remember the IRW's (I'd-rather-wait) toilets I told you about on my trip to Egypt? Well, we have one down the hall." She then begins a detailed description of the bathroom. With a wrinkled-up nose, she explains that the commode is filled with mothball crystals and is very dirty. She offers some quick advice: "If nature calls, you had better get in and out fast."

She asks, "Did we remember to bring that travel roll of toilet paper? We may need it because there are only a few pieces of toilet paper strips hanging from a hook on the wall. Be careful of the sink spigot. It sprays water everywhere." To reinforce her warning, she shows me a wet spot on the front of her blouse.

Her final warning causes me great concern: "For heaven sakes, do NOT drink the water. There is a large red X sign marked through the picture of a drinking glass."

Alarmed, I think, *We may not make it to Gdynia. We will be poisoned before we arrive.*

My wife starts rummaging in her backpack. Finally, she pulls out a packet of moist towelettes. Shaking them high above her head, she says triumphantly, "This is what we will use for our bath and toilet paper."

For clarification, I ask, "Do we use the towelettes for bathing before or after we go to the bathroom?"

A flying pack of towelettes that barely misses my head serves as a response.

We eventually reach a point where we just submit to our situation and collapse, exhausted, on our bunks. I climb into my bunk and pull the covers over my head.

"Lights!" she quips as she reminds me that the switch for the lights is nearer to the top bunk. After I dim the lights, I doze off.

However, sometime later in the evening, I feel the train stop. It is very quiet except for my wife restlessly thumping her pillow. Suddenly, the compartment door slides open and the lights come on.

I roll over and look out from under my quilt and come face-to-face with an officer of the German border patrol. I blink repeatedly to ease the pain of the bright lights.

He looks at me sternly and says, "Guten abend. Haben sie pass?"

My college days pass quickly through my mind. I groan and think, *Why didn't I learn more German?* My best guess is that he wants our passports.

I can't help noticing he has an automatic rifle hanging from his shoulder, and the tip of the barrel is casually pointing down in the direction where my wife is lying. Fortunately, she isn't making a sound that might cause him to be nervous about our response to his demands.

Quickly, I pull out my passport. I hand it over along with our boarding pass. I watch as he inspects me carefully as he slides my passport through a recording device that is hanging at his side.

Then, I see a pale, delicate hand slowly appearing from the bottom bunk. It is my wife handing over her passport for the same inspection. The officer takes out his flashlight and bends over to match the picture in the passport with my wife's face.

Trying my best to remember my German, I ask, "Wo sind wir?"

"Das die Deutsch-Polnische Grenze," he answers as he goes out the door.

I lean over the bunk to check on my wife. She presses her hands to her face and goes through the motion of a silent scream.

"What did you say to the officer? What do you think Das Grenze means?"

"I think it means we are at the border," I inform her.

"Can I turn off the lights?" I ask.

She gives me a glaring look and a slashing sign across her throat. I don't ask again how she is holding up under this unexpected midnight awakening.

The train travels only a short distance before it stops again. We can hear people boarding the train and heavy footsteps coming down the hall.

What next? I wonder.

The heavy footsteps stop at our compartment door, and once again the door slides open, lights come on, and this time we see a different officer who is saying something to us in what we believe is Polish. We can only guess that we are to repeat the procedure we just experienced with the German officer. We obediently hand over our passports.

After the inspection is completed, the officer retreats, satisfied, we guess, that all our papers are in order.

By this time, sleep is the furthest thing from our minds. We look at each other nervously, then start to laugh.

"Shall I record this in my journal?" my wife asks, smiling.

"It definitely qualifies as an adventure," I reply. "But write it down in the morning. I think we should try to get some sleep."

Just as I dim the lights, I blurt out, “Displacement Behavior! I saw a short film in psychology one time about two primates under stress.”

My wife gives me an impatient response. “And the point of this midnight lecture is . . .?”

“Well, I remember they were throwing sticks at each other,” I reply.

“Good idea,” my wife sarcastically remarks. “I’m going to get me a big one.”

“Okay,” I respond. “I may have over-analyzed the situation. Let’s go to sleep.”

I settle down and soon drift off to a sound sleep. In the pre-dawn hours, and only half-awake, I realize the car is again at a dead stop. I sit straight up when I hear the sound of voices. *Not more Polish guards*, I hope. Then there is a loud banging. I listen carefully to what is going on. It feels like the cars are separating. Our car starts rolling backwards for a short while before it stops suddenly with a thud. I hear the train pulling away, but we are not moving. Alarmed, I lean toward the window, slide open the curtain, and peer out across a misty expanse of grassland.

I think to myself, *Oh, no! We are abandoned in the steppes of the Ukraine.*

I decide I need to check out our situation. I climb down from my top bunk, open the cabin door, and walk back to the end of our car. I look out the doors. The engine and the other cars are gone. The tracks extend to the limit of the vanishing point. I don’t know what is happening. I have no choice but to go back to our compartment and wait. As I enter, I see my wife sleeping. I can’t believe she is oblivious to what has been happening.

Since I am very restless, I decide to go to the bathroom. It reeks of odors just as my wife described. I try holding my breath and hope I don’t pass out before I finish.

As I walk back to our compartment, I stop to look out an open window. I hear sounds of crickets and katydids coming from the surrounding grasslands. I pretend I am safe and sound. There is no air circulating, and the car is very stuffy. When I reach our cabin, I take an antihistamine to ease some congestion that has been building in the night. It helps me drop into a deep sleep.

In a dreamlike state, I hear what sounds like a truck latching onto our car, and we start to move. I want to check it out, but feel paralyzed. All of a sudden, I feel guards dragging me toward a bizarre mechanical device that looks like a cross between a crane and a bulldozer except it has locomotive wheels. I struggle and escape and run away and hide in tall grass. The guards find me and begin to prod me with long sticks. I awake to realize it isn’t men poking me, but my wife.

“Are you having one of your weird dreams?” she asks. “You have been making noises and thrashing around ever since I got out of bed.”

She points to her watch. “You had better get in gear. We will be in Gdynia in less than an hour.”

I think, *What?*

I see that she is in the process of packing her suitcase, so I reluctantly get out of my warm bunk.

She remarks, “A conductor brought our Eurail passes back earlier. He also said they had disconnected our car at Poznan. The rest of the train went to Warsaw.”

“Oh, remember when we were concerned about WARS on the conductor’s hat?” she laughs. “That stands for a company that leases restaurant and sleeping cars out of Warsaw.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t hear a thing last night,” she adds.

After I swing down from my bunk, I stand up and convey, somewhat sheepishly, that in my dream, we were trapped in the Ukrainian grasslands outside Kiev.

Giving me a gentle punch on the arm, my wife exclaims, “What were you thinking? Your Kiev Express took a left turn at Poznan, and we have spent the night racing to Gdynia.”

Postcards from Mexico

by Emily Medley

For most middle class families who lived in white suburbia, nothing exciting or special ever happened. Every house on the block, with its neat, trim landscaping and freshly painted siding, was lined up in perfect unison to create the backdrop of a perfect life. Every day was pretty much the same as every other day. We performed the functions of everyday life with as much enthusiasm as getting a tooth pulled. By the age of thirteen, I had begun to resent every minute of this robotic state of existence, and with all of my cynicism and anger, I rebelled. For years, I continued down this path, getting worse every day in how I chose to act out until one day, a decision was made to send me to Mexico to live with my grandmother, a decision which ultimately changed my attitude towards life and helped shape me into the person I am today.

* * *

Sweat trickled down my forehead. Even though I had done this a million times, I still felt as though it were the first. I looked around and tried not to look suspicious as I swiped the first thing within reach off the shelf and into my shirt where I felt certain that it would not be discovered. I looked around again to make certain that I had done the deed unnoticed and then nonchalantly made my way down aisle seven.

Just then, an older man with a shiny, bald head and thick black glasses rounded the corner. He looked at me with a knowing look, or did he? I couldn't tell in my paranoid state. I put my head down so that he couldn't see the guilty look on my face. My heart beat faster and faster like the erratic beating of an African drum. I dared to look up, but I noticed that he had gone back to his shopping and had forgotten me before I even passed him. My heart slowed down a bit, and I laughed at myself for getting so worked up. Nevertheless, I hurriedly made my way past the produce and up to the sliding glass doors that marked my freedom. I held my breath and waited for what seemed like an eternity for the doors to open. When, finally, the warm summer breeze hit my face, I stood there for a moment and let the wind dry some of the sweat off my forehead. Suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder, and in a whirlwind of madness, I ended up in the back of a police car, with my parents angrily on the way.

Luckily, my parents managed to talk the store supervisor out of pressing charges. Unfortunately, I knew that they wouldn't be as kind to me as they were to him. As we walked to the car, I waited for the inevitable speech that was certain to ensue; it had become

a tradition. They had kidded themselves with the notion that their speeches taught me a lesson and that I would change my ways but I never did. Oddly enough, they remained silent, and although it was a nice change, I started to wonder what they had planned for me.

That evening, I lay in bed and listened to my parents fight over what was to be done with me. I comforted myself with the thought that I would just be grounded again. So, with that thought in mind, I fell into a deep slumber.

I awoke the next morning refreshed and ready to accept my prison term. My parents had begun to whisper in the kitchen, but when I entered the room, they fell silent. They sat there for several seconds, eyes cast upon the ground as if they had been caught doing something wrong, before I finally asked them what was going on. They kept their heads down and told me they had something to tell me after school. With that said, they quickly left the room. I felt certain at that moment that they had made some very important decisions about my life last night. For the first time in my life, I was worried about what they would do to me. I didn't want any more confrontations with them, so I quickly got ready for school and slipped out the door, unnoticed, into the rain.

It continued to rain after school had finally let out. Ditches had quickly filled to become rivers, and potholes lay in wait for an unsuspecting passerby to step into their lakes of cold, dirty water. I was fed up with the rain and didn't want to get wet for the millionth time that day, so I ran as fast as I could to the bus. I thought that if I could get up to cheetah speeds, I would beat every droplet of rain and miraculously stay dry. But halfway to my destination, I realized that I was already soaked and resigned myself to walking the rest of the way. There, with its powerful diesel engine running, stood Bus #17, waiting to take its students home.

Normally, I looked forward to going home so that I could hang out with my friends, but today, something ominous awaited me. Earlier that morning, my parents had wanted to tell me something. They had seemed extremely nervous, and now, as I headed home in the big yellow bus, I felt very uneasy. My trance was soon broken by the sound of the bus's whining brakes, and I realized that we were at my stop. I stepped off the bus and stood there in the pouring rain as it pulled away. I looked at my house and tried to decide whether or not to go in. Just then, my mother opened the door and motioned for me to come in. Knowing that I couldn't stand out there forever, I slowly made my way to the door and stepped inside.

As soon as I crossed the threshold, I noticed a difference. It wasn't in the way the place looked or smelled; it was the way the place felt. I took off my muddy shoes and set my bag down by the door as I had done for so many years. But today it felt unsettling. My mother led me to the kitchen as if I were walking the green mile, and there at the kitchen table sat my sister, brother, and father. Terrified as to what they were going to tell me, I sat down next to my siblings and hoped that they could telepathically give me some insight.

After what seemed like hours, my father finally spoke and broke the silence.

“You’ve caused a lot of trouble lately, Emily, and we don’t know what to do with you anymore. So, your mother and I have decided that it would be best if you lived with your grandmother in Mexico for a while.”

I couldn’t believe what I had heard: They were going to send me away! I would have to leave my friends and my school; everything familiar to me would vanish. I looked around and wondered if there was anywhere to escape to. I hoped against hope that they weren’t serious about it, but then I noticed my bags had been packed and neatly stacked in the corner of the living room. I shot up out of my chair and almost knocked it over. I stumbled out the front door into the rain and ran until my legs burned and my heart felt like exploding out of my chest. Exhausted, I dropped to the ground and cried until I couldn’t cry anymore.

The trip to Mexico was like a nightmare of airline clichés—everything from being seated next to the only screaming kid on the plane to being stuck behind the drink cart for twenty minutes in order to get to the bathroom. It was a flight from hell. I consoled myself with the thought that I would at least get some of those awesome peanuts. Then I found out that, due to budget cuts, the airline would serve pretzels instead. My anger was fueled even more when some little brat kicked the back of my chair for an entire hour. Fortunately, it was a relatively short flight, and by the time the plane landed, I actually looked forward to seeing my grandmother.

Upon arrival, I slowly made my way down the ramp into a large group of people who waited for their loved ones. There was a dizzying exhibition of emotions that surrounded the terminal from which we exited, and I wished that I could be just as excited as they were. I finally spotted my grandmother, who tried to see above the heads of what seemed like giants next to her, and I waved to get her attention.

We made our way through the crowd and gave each other a quick embrace before I headed to pick up the luggage while she waited in the car. I flew down the long flight of stairs to the baggage terminal and prayed that my bags hadn’t been lost. Thankfully, as I arrived at the baggage belt, I saw that my bags had made their way to the front. Like a professional football player trying to get to the end zone, I bulldozed my way through the swarm of people and grabbed my bags. Satisfied with my toughness, I left the airport to meet my grandmother in the car.

On our way home from the minuscule airport, we mostly made small talk about how I had done in school and what kind of things I liked to do in my spare time. I felt uncomfortable with the small talk only because I knew that it was just a matter of time before she asked why I was such a troublemaker. Not even a millisecond passed from the time I finished my thought to her question: “Why have you been causing so much

trouble, Emily?” I didn’t know what to say, so I turned my head to look out the window and remained silent. The rest of the car ride home followed that theme, broken only by the barking dog that waited as we pulled up to her tiny home. She showed me around the house and pointed out the bedroom that I was to stay in for the rest of the time I remained. I settled in and went to bed early upon her request.

Unbelievably, the next day began at five in the morning. I dragged myself out of bed to find a list of chores as well as breakfast that waited for me on the kitchen table. Angrily, I told her that I wasn’t about to do anything that she asked me to do when suddenly she turned from a nice old grandma to a drill instructor from hell. She got in my face and loudly informed me that I was to get out of my chair “this moment and do those chores or there was going to be hell to pay.” Frightened, I quickly obliged and made a mental note never to cross her again.

Weeks passed and I continued to do the chores around the house as well as outside. It was the first time in my life that I was made to do hard work. I swept, mopped, mowed the lawn, pulled weeds out of the garden, painted the shed, bought the groceries, and the list went on and on. At first, I hated my grandmother for this, but as I kept doing the work, I realized how good it felt to have some responsibility. I started to take pride in my work, and I stayed out of trouble because of it.

Since I had stayed out of trouble and had done everything asked of me, I was allowed to have some free time to explore my temporary home. In that time, I ran the banks of the Rio Grande and spent lazy days reading near its waters. I participated in the traditions and was welcomed by the Mexican people as one of their own. I learned to make their food, and I tasted every kind of pepper imaginable. My rebellious ways grew weaker as I continued to work and explore, and the months flew by like minutes.

It was a hot, sunny day when I set out to do my weekly shopping in the town market. I walked down the long dirt road and thought about all the wonderful fruits and vegetables that I would buy with my money. I stopped and talked with some of the neighbors along the way, and they were kind enough to give me snacks and cold lemonade to take with me. Twenty minutes later, I arrived in the heart of the town; it was the highlight of my week. There were so many wonderful foods being sold. Everything was fresh and homegrown. As I picked through the selection of cilantro, a girl not more than five years old came up to me with a cup and begged me for a quarter. At that moment, my eyes opened to the world around me. I looked around and saw beggars in the streets and homeless families. I saw shacks made out of little pieces of wood and metal. The children begged for money to buy food for their families just to survive another day. With tears in my eyes, I gave her all the money in my pocket and ran home to escape what I had seen.

For the rest of the day, I thought about the girl at the market. I realized how selfish I had been all this time. I had a home, a loving family, a roof over my head, and food to

eat. How could I have been so blind to the rest of the world? I had been a spoiled brat and a troublemaker. I had subjected my family to so much hurt for such a long time. I then made a promise to myself to respect my parents and thank them for giving me so much when the rest of the world had so little. I took out a postcard that I had purchased in town, and for the first time since I had been in Mexico, I wrote a note to my parents and told them how much I loved them.

Over the next six months, I continued to work for my grandmother, and in my spare time, I sent postcards to my family, apologizing for my actions. My anger and cynicism had faded to a memory, and one day, I received a letter that told me that I could come home at any time. After much thought and many hours of discussion with my grandmother, we decided that it was time for me to return home to my family.

I walked around the town that day and said my goodbyes to everyone. I spent the rest of the day with my grandmother and thanked her for everything she had done for me. I slowly packed my bags to leave and then tearfully carried the bags to the car. We drove to the airport, and after a long embrace, I got on the plane, waving all the way. The plane took off and I headed home to new life.

The decision to send me to Mexico was the best thing my parents ever did for me. It opened my eyes to a world of poverty and survival. I realized how important it was to obey my parents and be appreciative for everything they did. Today, I am grateful for all that has been given to me, and my experiences in Mexico have made me a better person. My parents' decision changed my life and made me the person I am today.

Poems

Pained City

Cremated origami cherry blossoms.
Oblong white faces sink. Black places spread.
Rice paper walls ignite when a mushroom cloud grows tall.
Kutos drumming, drum, beat faster with falling menace.
Falling frazzled. Our human's human drowning out by vengeful rage.
Sepal drooping. Bonsai dying.
The orphans eat from their empty Bento boxes, the children packed up their Bento boxes.
And ladies fold away ashed kimonos.
Shodo written cries folded up and left behind.
Her cremated city disastered with her residing hina dolls.
Flaking upward to every listener's ears, burning slowly and buried below.

— **Torey Butler**

Poetry and the Street

Poetry walks the street
Dressed in suit and tie
Shoes polished to perfection
Nose upturned

Poetry walks the street
Orthopedic shoes scraping the pavement
Blue hair ruffling in the breeze
Bifocals slipping down her nose

Poetry skates the street
Ecko hat turned backwards
Pulling his tongue ring across his teeth

Poetry walks the street
Hair tangled and knotted
Shoes missing in action
Mumbling misquoted bible verses

Poetry walks the street
Mad look in his eye
Twitching uncontrollably
Laughing at his own secret joke

Poetry pulls out a gun
Points it at the head of society
Pulls the trigger
Smiles in triumph

Poetry picks up his briefcase
Poetry waddles along, cane in hand
Poetry pulls his headphones back on
Poetry rips her skirt
Poetry stops laughing and moves on

Making the Grade

On that first day of class
your talk was full of excitement
reflected in your eyes
as you looked forward to learning
and making the grade—
Today I missed you—
again—from class—
and wondered where
you'd gone—
Then late in the day
you loomed in my office door—
wearing camouflage and
holding your fatigue cap
and apologizing
that you would have to withdraw—
“Nothing against you or the course
It's just that . . . that my unit's
been called up and
I'll be shipping out”—
Gone was that boyish grin—
Absent was your yearning—
And instead your eyes
Told the truth of your fear—
And all I could do was reassure you
With “Take care” and
“Let me know if you ever need any help—
after you come home.”
I hope you make the grade.

— Bertha L. Wise

Storm (a Tanka)

strong storm is brewing
thick air stands still and silent
clouds hover above
rain tiptoes in—a quick thief,
robbing the sun of its grace...

— *Nicole Padilla*

Disappearing Song

A sudden spring storm
Blows an egg from the nest
A song is lost

— *John W. Perry*

Morning Walk

Cold stars in dark sky
Uncertain birds trill slowly
My breath steams the air.

— *Barbara Gwinn*

Half and Half

One half freckles and long legs,
Big hands, big feet,
Big voice, big temper.

An American tongue,
Thick red hair (in the sun)
One half California.

One half caramel skin and tiny nose
Little mouth, little build
Little tone, little expression.

A Japanese stillness,
Almond brown eyes (slightly slanted)
One half Okinawa.

Growing up the same
But still different
Having blonde-haired, blue-eyed
Girl friends
And being rejected by boys
For those same blonde-haired
Blue-eyed girls

Gook
Chink
Get your racial slurs correct
Before you hand them out
And get back to me
When you've graduated from
Redneck school

Mind-blowing when you're only
A kid
To look in the mirror and see
A face that gets alienated
For the simple detail
Around my eyes

Growing up to be strong
Bruises can thicken the skin
Appreciating what I used to
Despise

— **Meika Yates**

Perfect

Perfect
I am not
Perfect
I must be
Perfect
I need be
Perfect
I strive for
Perfect
I must reach
Perfect, perfect, perfect
Might be the end of me.

— Rena Gibson

My Hands Are Shaking as I Write This, Now

The teacher talks fondly of
 his parents
 asks classmates of their opinions
 gets smiling feedback
 laughing response.
makes me wonder what I
would be feeling if
I had a Momma and a Daddy
 growing old
 blanketed by years
 soft wrinkles framing shining
 eyes and caring words.
 shaking hands would smooth my
 disappointed tears, tired of
 how hard life, love, lack
 of money is.
all I can remember, though
are screaming accusations
biting manipulations
fists of sleepless nights
tender skin—broken because
I braided my hair like
 the beautiful black girl
 I had a crush on.
never really knew what
Daddy was—only fear
 of waking up and

 he was there.
He loved his little girl.
Taught me how to hate men and say “Sir.”

I still have trouble sleeping

Pills help the nightmares,

guilty feeling, constant questioning of good
healthy decisions.

Am I doing the right thing?
the SANE thing?

Momma had her back turned.
knowing eyes, blaming heart

She chose him over you, you know

Lucky people absentmindedly chat about
how cute it is that their parents are
swerving into elderly habits.
My parents aren't
My parents are already dead.

— Crystal Wellborn

city

no more light lunging
dayspiraling down in ringlet rays

night moves through the city
swallowing it in rain

overcoming the edge of concrete
this rain spill will discontinue alley cat paw prints

dispense with antifreeze and resins
detour loose litter and brown bottles

factory stench will follow

given sufficient seconds
it will all go

black shoes and pink pumps are pushed through
as lovers dismiss with a kiss

a bridge overhang squeezes lonely tears
as a beggar below wraps his legs in a shiver of scraps

the plunge of rain at night
reveals the city's subconscious mind

years of lives etched in her skyline
truth defined in corner lamplight and shimmering puddles

extends to wet eyes and windows
where wind steals the silent drench from her dreams

– Mark Dugger

The Flood

He started a – conversational—
Poem— the kind that might wear corduroy
And dwell in empty rooms or coffee shops,
Talking, talking with words like water drops,
That could fill the rooms, and float them all away—
A conversation grown to a monsoon
That he could sway in. And he would play in
Them, the dripping words— he'd take anything—
Everything— subjects from potato chips
To the stout hearts of kings. The words would drip
From his pinched mouth, or from the carmine lips
Of whom he (loved?) But nip this, for all it's worth,
In the bud— love isn't borne on words— love
Is the rib cage, opened, and drowned in the flood.

— Mark A. Bates

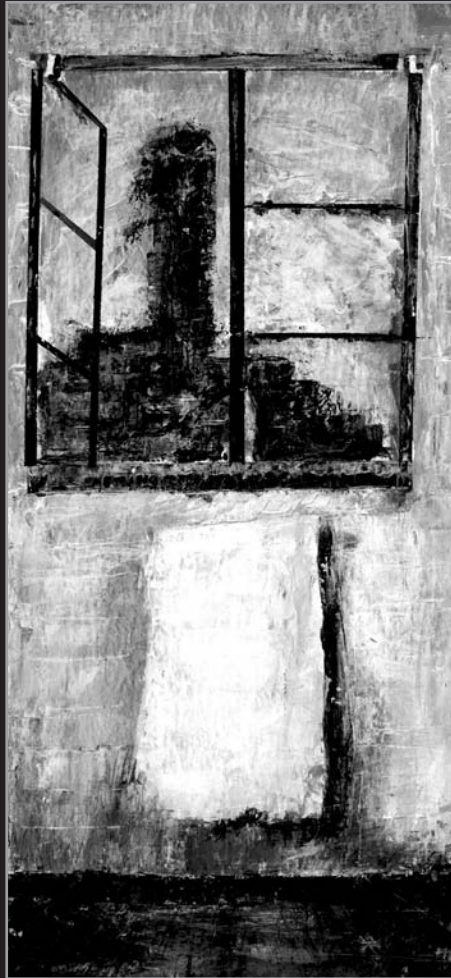
Art and Photography



Fairie
Lisa Bryant



Figure
Brent Goddard



Looking out the Window
Jorge Martinez



Alice's Vacation

Emily Fine



Martini
Marnel Havard



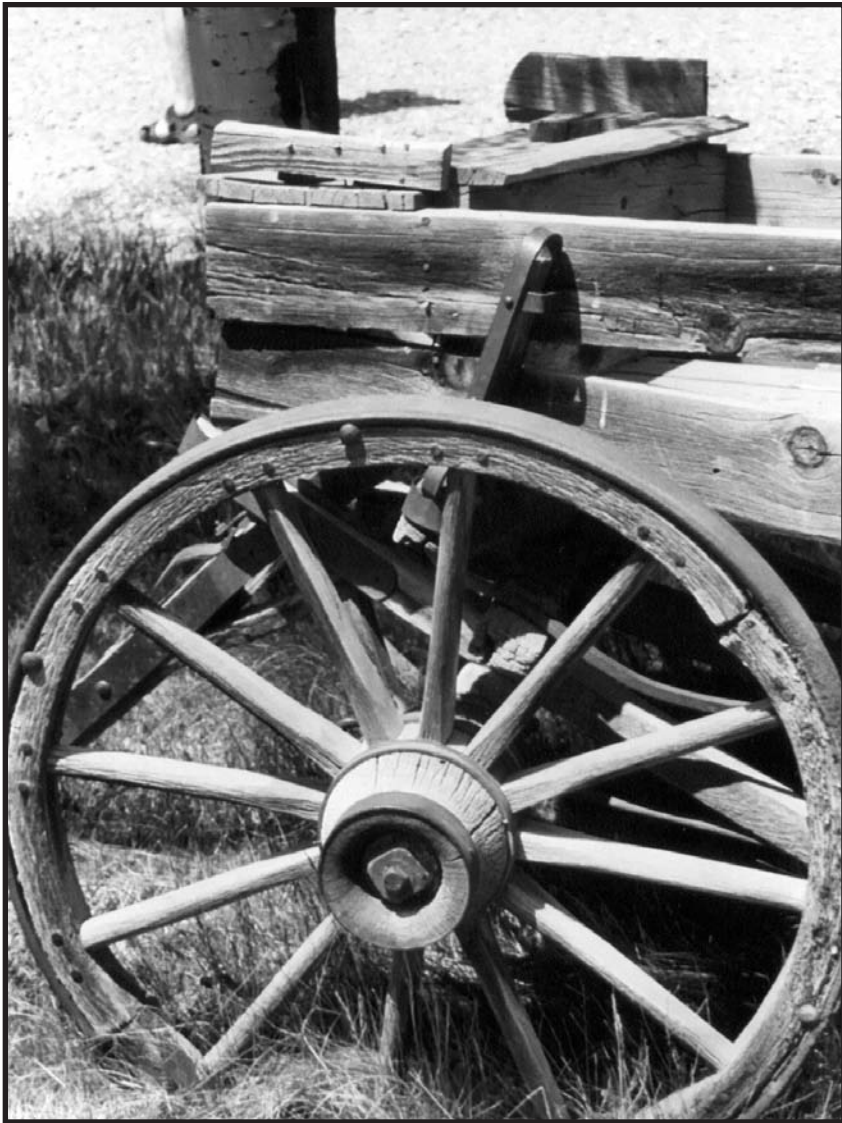
Girl Beside Herself
Joshua McRae



Flower
Nicole Padilla



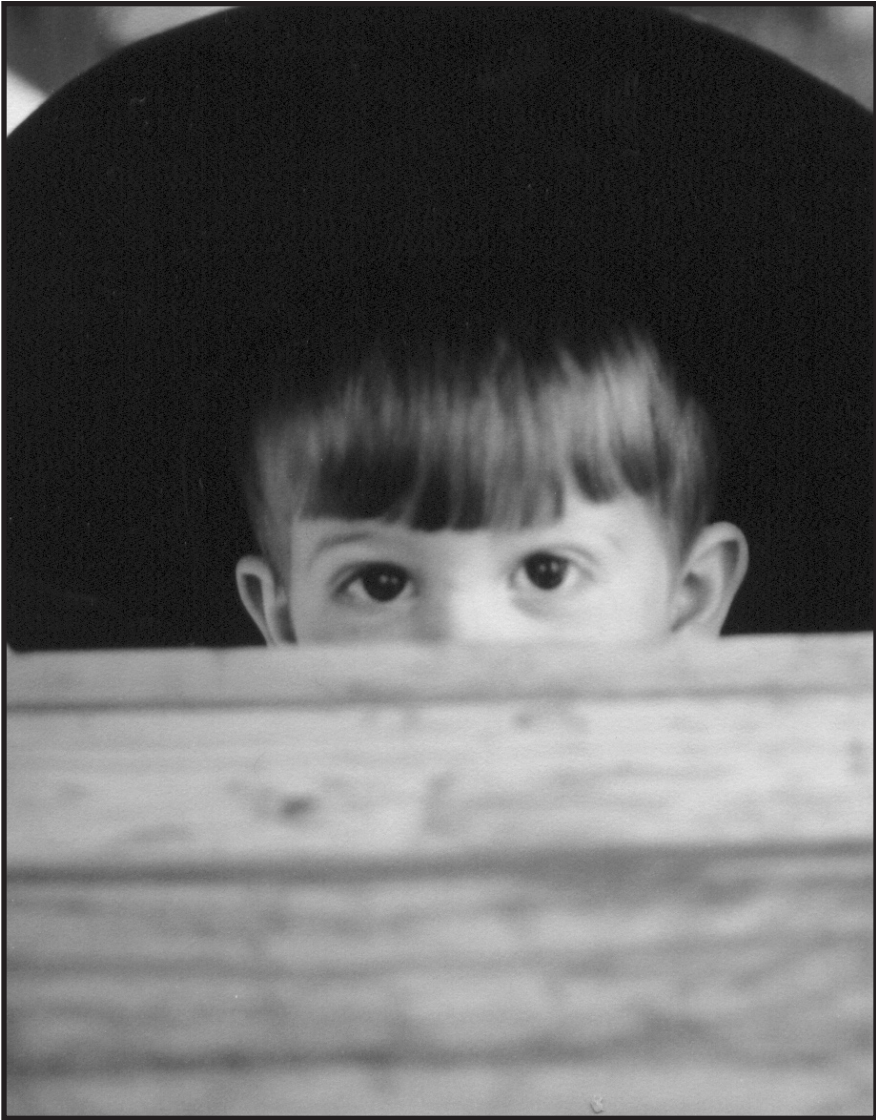
Touk
Teresa Randall



Wagon Wheel
Sandra Cizek



Christ and Mary
Rachel K. Dove



All Hat
Phil Corbett



View from Below
Stephen Cumberworth



Building
Nicole Padilla



Berlin Wall #3
John W. Perry