



Absolute 2005

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Short Stories

Raising Melvin

by Kathy Timberman

As the old woman's nimble, arthritic fingers worked the yarn's intricate pattern, she paused a moment, listening to the silence. Suddenly, the smell of burning cloth caused her to jump up from the doily-draped armchair and run toward the kitchen. A dishtowel blazed on the counter beside the open flame of the gas cookstove. She grabbed up the towel and quickly put it into the sink, killing the flame with a gush of water from the faucet. She turned around. Peering through the smoke, she saw him crouched by the refrigerator, awaiting his scolding. A look of fear and anticipation was on his face as she slowly crossed the room and, with a frustrated gesture, bent down to face him.

"Melvin! What am I going to do with you?" she said in a weary tone. Sadness crossed her face as she helped him up from his sheltered position. "You must never, ever play with the knobs on the stove," she warned. "You could've burned down the house with me and you both in it." She followed him as he retreated to his room to take his usual seat at the window where he sat, gazing out at the children as they played.

"It's plenty warm out today; can I play with the other kids?" he questioned.

"No, it's time for your nap," she replied softly, turning the quilt back on his bed. She returned to the armchair and resumed her crocheting, continuing to listen all the while for any telltale sounds from his room. When she heard the familiar squeak of the bedsprings as they gave way to the slight weight of his small body, she knew he was ready for his nap and would be sleeping soundly soon.

Her eyes were tired from counting the small stitches in her needlework, so she closed her eyes, resting her head against the softness of the old familiar chair. The only sound to be heard now was the ticking of the clock on the living room wall. In her solace, her mind began to wander back to a better time. She was young again, sitting on a bench watching a handsome young baseball player. He was slight in frame, but his quickness and agility at the sport made him all the hero anyone could ask for. He had caught her eye, and he knew it.

From the batter's box, he glanced over at her and gave her a wink. She replied with a shy, but encouraging smile. With this, he flashed a grin that could have lit up the field for a night game. As he took on a stance of defiance against the pitcher, he looked her way once more and mouthed the words, "This one's for you." When the pitch was delivered, a loud crack could be heard all the way across the park. The ball seemed to rise forever. As the

left fielder scurried toward the back fence, he realized trying to catch it was no use. The ball soared out of the ballpark. As her handsome young ball player ran slowly down the base line toward home plate, he blew her a kiss.

A soft whimpering sound brought her back to the present. As she made her way toward his room, she thought he must have been having another one of his dreams. She sat down on the bed, caressing him in her arms and rocking him gently.

"There, now. It's all right," she assured him soothingly. He opened his eyes, gazing up at her. Tears left a jagged trail in the creased lines of his face.

"If I'm good, can I play ball with the other kids tomorrow?" he asked.

"We'll see," she replied as she smoothed the thin wisp of white hair back on his forehead and gently gave him a kiss. With that, he wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his flannel shirt and flashed a grin that lit up the entire room, just like he had done fifty years ago when he blew her a kiss and gave her a home run.

Star Crossed

by James Miller

Charles liked the gentle hum of the big C-47 Dakota's engines; he thought they were soothing. Their distinct tone was easily recognizable even when you were far behind one being towed in a big wooden box with cheap canvas-covered aluminum wings designed by a piano-making company from Ohio. Unlike the training missions, however, Charles was unable to concentrate on the calming rhythm because his fellow soldiers insisted on singing songs the entire damn flight. They were in the middle of the chorus from "Over the River and Through the Woods" when the fireworks display began. The forty or so other planes in front of them had given the Germans defending the coastline more than ample time to get all their guns up and blazing.

"We will be nosediving in to give the Germans the impression they have shot us down." That is what the pilot had told Charles and the boys. It was one of the more stupid ideas he had heard lately and seemed all the more stupid, now that it looked like they probably would be shot down. They were in glider forty-seven in a fifty-glider group, and being that far in the back of the formation, they figured they would catch all kinds of hell. As it turned out, they figured correctly. The landing zone had been designated "Detroit" and was about six miles inland on the Cherbourg Peninsula. Their mission was to bring much-needed supplies to the 101st Airborne, who were securing the western end of Utah Beach. To Charles, the whole operation reeked of bad luck. For one thing, he was convinced the city of Detroit was a shithole. Secondly, his sister had run off with a Mormon, and that put the entire state of Utah in a generally unfavorable light in the eyes of the Darnell family. Besides, he was from Nebraska, so, of course, he had wanted to go to Omaha Beach.

The small arms fire and various other flak sounded like popcorn popping as it ripped holes through the glider. The clouds were low and the fog was thick; the ground could not be seen at all. The C-47 towing the glider had taken severe damage and was smoking like a chimney. The green light came on and the tow cable released. Nobody cared or even noticed that it was too early. Everyone just wanted to get the hell out of there. The explosion of the C-47 above them sent the diving glider into a tailspin. To the pilot's credit, he leveled the thing out enough that it didn't careen straight into the ground. Clipping the treetops, the glider flipped end-over-end and smashed into the hedgerows far away from the LZ. The last thing going through Charles's mind was a thought of Irene. He remembered how she looked their last night

together as they lay, staring up at the stars. Holding on to one another, neither was willing to let go, so they fell asleep under the starlit canopy.

Charles opened his eyes or, at least, tried to. One was swollen shut and the other was stinging from a mixture of sweat and blood. It was hard to find his breath and everything seemed upside down. The only thing that registered was the intense pain coursing up his leg and into his back. He had just been dreaming that he was doing cartwheels. No, it was the glider that had cartwheeled as it broke apart on landing. Corporal Charles L. Darnell of the 325th Glider Regiment, 82nd Airborne, was dangling upside down in his jumpseat, hanging from his badly broken leg that was twisted up in the safety harness. It was June 6, 1944, at two o'clock in the morning, pitch black and the dead of night in Normandy. He was alone and surrounded by Hitler's forces with only his dead companions to keep him company.

"Demarco, get me out of this thing!" Charles pleaded before he noticed that the man who had been seated next to him was gone, along with his seat and the entire left half of the glider.

Glide, my ass. We fell like a friggin' rock. T.T.I., he thought. *Towed Target Infantry; that's what the paratroopers called them. They're getting hazard pay and I ain't!*

His thought process was once again interrupted by the pain shooting down his leg and settling into his spine. Grunting, he managed to coax his bayonet knife free from its sheath near his shoulder. Passing in and out of consciousness, he honestly couldn't tell how long it took to cut himself down.

He awoke to the sound of metal clanking against metal. In the distance, the almost incessant report of gunfire could be heard from every direction. Exhausted from his earlier effort, he barely managed to crane his neck around to see what had made the clattering sound. Not more than four feet from him was one of those funny looking Nazi grenades the GIs had dubbed "potato mashers." Closing his eyes and gritting his teeth, he awaited the explosion and what he hoped would be the quick release of death.

The sounds of Germans jabbering away in their harsh sounding native language was the only indication he was still alive. Chancing a glance over at the grenade, he could see it still lay quietly where it had been thrown. Charles was thinking about the odds of the grenade being a dud when the soldier stepped up beside the broken glider. Lying very still and holding his breath, the young corporal tried very hard to blend in with all his dead companions. The Nazi Stormtrooper leveled his MP-40 submachine gun and sprayed the entire compartment, riddling the corpses with bullets, and quickly moved along. Miraculously, Charles was able to remain still despite being hit three times. Two of the bullets hit him in the same injured leg! The third slug punched a hole clean through his side just above the hip, but, strangely, the wound didn't bleed much or even hurt that badly, at least when compared to the wounded leg. "They are gonna cut this damn thing off, for

sure," Charles muttered to himself as he tried to stop the bleeding.

Although he didn't exactly feel lucky at the moment, it was fortunate for Charles that the glider's primary payload was medical supplies and ammunition. The floor of the aptly nicknamed "Flying Coffin" was slick with blood, but Charles did not seem to notice or care as he painstakingly dragged his broken body across it. By the time he located a medical kit, he was covered from head to toe in blood and gore and looked like something out of a horror movie. Prying open a box of morphine Syrettes, he jabbed about four of them into his leg and then patched himself up as best he could. He tried for what seemed like a long while to get to a standing position somehow, but finally gave up and crawled once again through the belly of the glider, doing his best to ignore its macabre contents.

Whether it was shock, loss of blood, or morphine overdose, Charles no longer felt any pain. Rolling out of the glider, he landed on his back in the muddy soil of a farmer's field. Staring up into the night sky, he noticed the stars were bright and beautiful here in France, just like on the farm back in Nebraska. As ridiculous as it seemed, Charles really just felt like going to sleep.

Maybe I overdid it on the morphine, he thought. Looking up at the sky, he knew it was a corny notion, but he wondered if Irene was looking up at the stars, too. As the sleepy feeling overtook him, his eyelids fluttered, and he struggled to keep them open, hoping against hope that Irene was, indeed, gazing at the stars.

The starlight dwindled and succumbed to the light of the rising sun. A misty fog hung stubbornly in the air, struggling against the break of day. A thick rubber-soled boot nudged Charles in the ribs. "Hey, buddy, wake up!" A second swarthy skinned GI ambled over the hedgerow and surveyed the scene. "Don't kick the guy," he protested. Ignoring his companion, the man gave Corporal Charles Darnell a kick on the blood-soaked bandage covering his leg. Charles did not stir. Reaching down, the soldier removed something Charles had crumpled tightly in his fist.

"What's he got there?" the swarthy skinned man asked. Unfolding the picture, the man glanced at it and then dropped it into the mud next to Charles's dead body. "Looks like some dame." Joining his companion, the swarthy skinned man picked up the picture of Irene and returned it to Charles's hand.

"Poor bastard. Looks like he survived the crash and then crawled out here to die alone. Oh, well, get his ammo and let's get moving. These Krauts ain't gonna kill themselves."

Moment to Moment

by Duane A. Beck

8:00

Jill was happy her mother had dropped her off at day school. Jill loved the time she was able to spend with all her friends. They played and the teacher taught them songs and numbers, but Jill had to work very hard to remember her letters. Still, as much fun as Jill had on weekends with her mom and dad, she always looked forward to going back to day school. She felt more grownup when she went with Mommy because she knew Mommy was close by at work.

8:15

Steve had just finished work for the evening and was now ready to go to bed. Working nights was really a drag, but the computer operator job paid okay. He pulled the shades and dove into bed. He had eight hours to sleep and then six hours to himself before he had to be back on the job. He turned on the TV. He hated sleeping in silence. Since working in the computer room, the noise of the machines had caused his ears to ring, and today they were ringing louder than usual. Steve closed his eyes and settled himself to sleep.

8:30

"Kick front . . . one . . . two . . . three . . . four, Kick back . . . one . . . two . . . three . . . four," the YMCA aerobics instructor called as Michelle followed in time.

As a thirty-something single mother, she loved her days off in the middle of the week to spend time for herself on herself. Since breaking up with her husband, Michelle felt the need to get back into dating shape. She was sure that there were other men out there better suited to her than Cameron had been. Sure, they were friends. They both loved their kids, but after ten years, they decided that they just weren't right for each other. She would find someone who would make her happy.

9:00

Carson loaded the Coke machine as fast as he could. He was behind today, and he needed to get downtown and bust out his route. He was already half an hour in the red. His boss was going to kill him if he was late again. He dropped a can on his foot and bit his tongue. *Move, you idiot*, he thought to himself.

9:01:57

9:01:58

9:01:59

9:02:00

Carson heard a dull rumble. He thought that someone must have dropped something heavy, but he seemed to have felt it, too. He closed up the machine and headed out to his truck, pushing the dolly as fast as he could. When he pushed through the door, he loaded the dolly and jogged to the driver door, hopping inside. He looked down at his route sheet, picked his next stop, and tossed the clipboard onto the passenger side. When he looked up, he saw billowing smoke. He hoped that the fire downtown wouldn't cause too much traffic.

Michelle fell backwards as she lost balance due to the ground shaking. Her head hit the step of the person behind her. She lost consciousness. When she awoke, she was in the hands of her aerobics instructor. He and the rest of the class were moving down the stairs. Michelle was still a bit groggy, but she couldn't understand why they were taking the stairs instead of the elevator.

"Shhhh . . . It will be okay, ma'am," the instructor said.

Michelle was still a bit confused, but when they reached the bottom of the stairs, the instructor and several of her classmates asked if she could stand. She said "Yes" and let them guide her out of the building into chaos.

Steve awoke feeling a heavy pressure. He sat up to see his TV lying face down on his legs. Looking around, Steve could see glass all over the bedroom floor. Then came the pain. He rolled the TV off his legs, almost blacking out as the blood rushed. His legs wouldn't move and pain was shooting through them. He stretched for the phone next to his bed and heard nothing when he put the receiver to his ear. He hammered the receiver against the night stand—still nothing. Panic welled. Steve was alone in his apartment and couldn't walk or call for help. Then there was loud banging at his front door.

"HEY!!!!!!!!!! I AM IN HERE!!!! I NEED HELP !!!! I CAN'T MOVE !!!!" Steve shouted at the top of his lungs.

"I WILL GET HELP !!!" the unknown person yelled in reply, and again Steve was alone, not knowing what was happening.

The day school was destroyed when the truck exploded. The building was in shambles. Jill would never play again.

Daddy's Sermon

by Michael Sneed

My father was tall and handsome with a head of sleek, black hair. Having been in the Navy and being an ardent runner, he was very fit. He was intelligent, but even more so, he was wise. He was a man of principle and character. He was stern, but compassionate. He used to say that you should find something good about everyone you meet. When he met my fiancé at the time, he said, "He's got nice boots." That is the type of person he was. He was genuine, and he never failed to help anyone in need.

We lived in Antlers, Oklahoma. It was summer 1970, and I had just turned twelve that spring. School had been out for about a month, and I was living the high life. I would wake up in the morning, and after eating whatever Momma had fixed for us, my younger brother Jim and I, along with our nephews Lane and Tracy, would have all day to play. We never ran out of things to do. We could play for hours with our Matchbox cars and Tinker Toys under the big tree. Or we could play by the railroad tracks and have rock fights with the kids down the hill. We would always pick whatever fruits and vegetables Momma told us to pick in between our adventures. Once a week, we could go on the school bus to Hugo where there was a city pool and a jukebox. To this day, I can never hear "Joy to the World" without thinking about swimming at the Hugo pool. In the evenings, though, at sundown, all the kids in the neighborhood would get together and play kick-the-can. That was a time of absolute freedom.

The only day of the week that wasn't mine was Sunday. We always went to church, no matter what. We were in church more often than the preacher. Momma and Daddy would make us go every Sunday, and Daddy was constantly helping with everything that needed help. Anytime the doors of the church were open, my daddy was the one holding them. Once when the people from the colored church down the road were without a preacher and they came to ask for someone to volunteer to preach for them, I knew Daddy would volunteer and we would be going with him.

Sure enough, the next Sunday we all loaded up in our 1955 Chevy station wagon and drove to the southeast part of town to the colored church. It was a one-room building that had been elevated about two feet off the ground. There were open windows all along the building. Inside, there were about eight pews on either side and a podium at the front. Most of the seats were full with the women and children while a number of the men stood along

the walls. Most of the men wore overalls or jeans with an assortment of plaid or striped shirts with buttons running down the front. The women wore a variety of one-piece, short-sleeved, floral-patterned dresses that stopped at the knee or mid-shin. Some wore hats but most of the heads were uncovered. The children were nicely dressed. Some of the boys wore bow ties, and most of the girls had bows or other forms of hair decoration. As Daddy went to the front to speak with someone, we began making our way to the front to sit down. I clung to Momma's side as we walked down the middle aisle.

There was one rather large colored lady with a plump face who sat on the inside of the left pew, about the middle row. She had large ripe lips and a wide nose that sat in the middle of her face and was being held up by the frown she wore. What caught my attention the most were her eyes. They sat far back in her head and had a glare that would scare God right off the throne. Sitting on her wiry hair was a beautiful wide-brimmed hat that contradicted her harsh demeanor. It was decorated with flowers and feathers, and there was even a fake (I hope) bird that had made stool in the small forest that grew on top. As we walked down the aisle, she stared at me throughout the whole journey. As I stared back, I felt a sharp pain on the back of my arm. I looked at Momma as she gave me a stern look. I turned and kept walking, though I could feel the woman's eyes burning my back the entire time.

We sat on the front row, and the service just kind of started without warning. A man stood and prayed, and then we went straight into some hymns. Afterward, we sat and some ladies walked around with baskets, collecting the offering, while three women and two men hummed a tune at the front. As the baskets went around, I noticed that nobody was putting anything in.

Looking up at Momma, I asked, "Why aren't they puttin' money in?"

"Shh!" she hushed me with a slap on the thigh.

Jim laughed. I hit him.

After the baskets were collected, everyone stood up and sang a very emotional rendition of "Steal Away." Then the same man who prayed earlier stood and prayed. Then Daddy stood and opened his Bible. He preached a relatively short sermon. I don't remember on what subject, but the people there seemed to agree with it with their "mmhm's" and "amen's" and "yep's."

When he was done speaking, he did something that I didn't understand.

"Thank you," he said.

Thank you? I thought. Why thank you? He was the one that had come to help them. He was the one who volunteered when no one else would. They should be thanking him. Didn't they understand? Wouldn't one of them get up and make the correction? "Oh, no, Mr. Campbell, thank you and your lovely wife and most beautiful daughter and somewhat

presentable son. You have truly blessed us with your presence. We are eternally in your debt." No, no one would stand. No one would make the correction.

I was truly baffled as Daddy retired to our bench, and we stood and sang again. After the service was over, a few people traded words with Daddy.

"Good preachin' ," one man said.

"Lookin' forward to next week, " said a woman.

But not one person said, "Thank you."

"What's wrong with those people?" I complained on the car ride home.

"Excuse me?" Daddy said.

"Why didn't they say 'Thank you'? And why did you?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You said 'Thank you' and you were the one helpin' them. And they had the nerve not to say anything to you. Those unthankful . . ."

Just then, Daddy shot me a look in the mirror that would have melted the sun.

"Elizabeth!" my mother gasped as she turned around, wide-eyed.

"Now hush! I don't want to hear another word," my father said.

I was dumbfounded. Didn't he understand what they had done to him? Of course not. That's why he said, "Thank you." He didn't understand that they were the ones to be grateful. He misunderstood what had happened, but I couldn't explain it to him.

We went for three more Sundays to the colored church. Every time, the plump black lady stared at me, and every time, the offering basket went around practically empty. And every time my daddy preached, he finished with a "Thank you." And every time, we left without a "Thank you." And every time, I left thoroughly confused as to why he hadn't caught on yet. Every time—until the fourth visit, and then I caught on.

On the fourth Sunday, we arrived as usual and entered the church. As before, no one greeted us except for the glower I received from the large colored woman. We sat down and then proceeded with the sitting and the standing that accompanied the singing and prayer rituals. The offering basket was passed around again, and it was still virtually empty except the one dollar and some odd cents that had been dropped in. Daddy then went on with his sermon. I don't even remotely remember what it was about. It wasn't a powerhouse message. It certainly was not worthy of the Billy Graham Crusade or anything like that, but once again, the people seemed to approve it with their "mmmm's" and "amen's" and "yep's." At the end of the sermon, Daddy once again said "Thank you" and sat down. Then the same man that always closed the service stood and walked up to the front.

"If'n yu would, Mr. Campbell, would yu come on back up to da front," he requested.

My daddy rose and joined the man at the front.

"We know it's not musch, but we wannuh give yu whad we collected in da offrin' o'er

da las coupla weeks. An' we hopes yu know how much we's grateful fo yu an' yu lovely family." As he said this, he handed the offering basket to my daddy.

"Well," my daddy began while looking at the basket, then looking up. "You have been more than gracious. I have enjoyed being able to speak to you. You have been so kind to my family and me, and it is we who have been truly blessed by you. Thank you so much for your wonderful gesture, but I cannot take your money. Please keep it. I am the one that should be grateful to you."

All over the room, there was a commotion. "Mmmm's" and "Bless him's" and "Thank you, Lord's." I was thoroughly confused, angry, and indignant all at once. What was he thinking? I couldn't make any sense out of it. Was he holding out for more? Why would he do that?

That's when my daddy did something I will never forget for as long as I live. What he did stopped my heart dead in its tracks and made me resent every fiber of my body. He reached into his pocket and pulled out fifty dollars and put it in the offering basket. My face turned red, and I sank down in the pew. I felt slimy. I felt like filth. I wanted to crawl into a hole and hide for all eternity. I felt God looking down on me with disappointment. I realized why Daddy didn't expect any thanks or compensation. They had barely anything to give, and still they gave everything they had.

The car ride home was very quiet. Jim was asleep on the other end of the bench; Momma, in front of Jim, was examining her grocery list, and Daddy, in front of me with his hands at ten and two like always on the wheel, stared intently at the road in front of him. I just stared out the window at the bright sky. I looked up in the mirror at my daddy and, breaking the silence, all I could think of to say was "Good sermon, Daddy."

He just smiled and said, "Thank you."

The Lizard Amulet

by Heather L. Erwin

In our household, the lizard was a sign, a symbol around which my uncle lived his life. He had a wooden lizard statue that sat on the center shelf of his bookcase in his study, surrounded by tiny figurines, geckos included. He would crouch down on the dirt floor of his study at the base of the bookcase and gaze up at the lizard with the eyes of a star-crossed lover. He would remove his khaki-colored safari hat and set it on the lowest shelf, keeping it out of the dirt.

"The lizards like the dirt floors," he would tell me. "Makes them feel more at home."

My uncle never explained to me why he revered the lizard. Around his neck, he wore a teardrop-shaped amulet made of wood with a lizard painted on it. He never took it off, not even to shower. Every time he knelt before the lizard statue, he complained about the dirt grinding into his knees. He wore khaki shorts that we had begged him not to wear, but like the lizard amulet, he would not take them off. Mother had to steal them as he slept to wash the grime from them.

He took me out into the desert with him one day. I had lived in the Outback my whole life and had never been this far from civilization. He laid his body flat against the scorching earth behind a flat boulder. He was perfectly in view. He waved his arms frantically, commanding me to hit the dirt. I crawled up beside him, behind his flat, non-concealing boulder and waited.

We waited for hours, and I'm still not sure what for. Uncle made chittering sounds from time to time, telling me he was calling the lizards to him. He then removed a pouch at his waist that I didn't know he was carrying and pulled a disposable camera from it. Said he wanted to get an "up-close-and-personal" of the lizard.

I was shocked into consciousness when my uncle screamed in glee. I opened my eyes, raising my hand to defend against the sunlight, and I saw movement in the pathetic greenery before us on the other side of the rock. It had to be the only bush for miles. Uncle raised his camera, once again chittering, this time in three different octaves of excitement. I had not said anything up to this point about his chittering. It occurred to me that he believed with all his might that his chittering was some sort of hidden lizard language. When the bush moved, however, I snapped at him to keep quiet. Lizards didn't have the body mass to move a bush that big that much.

My uncle disregarded me and chittered even louder. He even crawled up on top of the boulder and then lurched to the side, howling about the intensity of heat from the stone on his bare knees. His howling caused the movement in the bushes to stop, and I darted around the rock to his side, helping him to his feet. Once upright, I demanded that we go back home.

Checking that the bush wasn't moving, Uncle agreed. I glanced back behind us to see an enormous cat, hunched down beside the bush, watching us with curious eyes. I told my uncle to make his way calmly back to the jeep and get in quietly. He turned to see why and saw the cat.

"Why's that cat so big?" he asked me, covering his lizard amulet with one hand. I shook my head and didn't reply. I pointed at the jeep, and Uncle shook his head. The cat roared at us and started to scooch closer. Uncle yanked on his amulet. It came free in his hand, and I was shocked. I had never in all my fifteen years seen Uncle remove that amulet. The cat opened its maw, displaying its sharp teeth. Uncle growled back at the animal and grinned at me.

My knees banged against each other, I was shaking so hard. When my uncle took the amulet by the string and began twirling it in the air, I slapped his arm. This was no time to goof around. The lizard amulet began to whistle, and the cat lifted to its proper height and raced towards my uncle. He twirled the amulet faster and faster. An ear-splitting shriek filled the air and the cat blanched. It turned around and fled with none of the grace or stealth of its arrival. My uncle grinned at me again, tied the amulet around his neck, and headed towards the jeep.

When I joined him in the vehicle, long after the shock had worn off, I asked, "What happened?"

He said simply, "The Lizard never lets me down, my boy."

Pearl

by James R. Forgue

The shop on the corner is full of objects obviously of great value: a smallish white bowl with dragons of blue wrapped around it, in with collections of Chinese artifacts placed carefully in curio cabinets. Nothing collected from Oklahoma; most of the pieces have to be explained to the few would-be customers who venture into the shop. Collections are displayed in the glass cases set in the middle of the store, intentionally attracting the attention of all who enter.

Of course, the antique shop is quite a strange anomaly. The proprietor of the shop, also an antique, looks to be in his eighties. He wears those silk pajamas, peasant clothes of an era long gone and a place far away. He is bent, wrinkled, and his dull grayish mustache hangs down below his neck. Always perched behind his cash register until a potential customer enters his establishment, clanging that bell with the door, he slowly unfolds himself and carefully moves from his perch. He then follows the prospective buyers as they touch his valuable collections of memorabilia, explaining and illuminating each item in his choppy, broken English.

Seldom do the residents of this bedroom community buy from his shop, but more and more, he is becoming a curious attraction. The idle well-to-do of the community are curious and spend time exploring his shop.

Conversations at the country club drift to the shop and the old man.

"It is like stepping from this life, back in time, to a completely different place and time captured inside that antique shop," one blue-haired woman observes.

"What is the deal with the glass cases in the middle of the shop? Are those items for sale, too?" a very rotund man asks of the club.

One of the socialites shares her interpretation of a sales pitch the old man tried to use on her about an old porcelain bowl.

"Of course, he says it is very old and has been handed down for generations," she expresses with rolling eyes. "Then there is something about its belonging to a very rich man in a village of China, and its being worth an entire year's wages."

They all laugh as someone from the group asks, "Whose wages?"

The bell clangs as a young girl enters. She is dressed completely in black, with too much dark makeup, too many earrings, and carrying an old pearl-covered purse. That purse must have been her grandmother's or maybe lifted from a formal shop nearby. She is expressing

her feelings of disgust with capitalists and socialites with her darkness; she always dresses in black and carries that purse. The purse separates her from the rest of her dark friends so much so that they all call her Pearl.

The old man painstakingly climbs off his perch and meets her in front of a case, the one that holds his most valuable items. Despite her appearance, the young girl is quite shy and she listens intently to the old peasant. He rewards her with the history of the dragon bowl. An ancestor many years ago created a beautiful garden, then maintained it and improved it for one year; his only payment was the bowl. On his return to his village, he claimed great wealth because of the blue dragon bowl. After all, it had a value of one year's wages. She pieces together his narrative and appreciates the value he places on the old bowl.

The bent old peasant unlocks the case, reaches in, scoops the mystical blue dragon bowl in both of his fragile old hands; then, with his trembling hands, he removes it from the shrine and lets her hold the treasure. As she holds it, she feels the magic; the bowl is so much more than cold, hard porcelain. She can feel that mystical trick of the old village peasant ages ago, turning an item unwanted, given as payment unfairly, into a symbol of earned riches never to be, but always perceived by strangers and the greedy.

The two stand, sharing the magic, as would-be shoppers clang that bell coming and going, jealous of the attention lavishly given to the teenaged girl with no money. Absent-mindedly, the old man finally turns to the incoming customers and leaves the priceless bowl in the hands of the girl dressed in black. She drops the bowl into the purse as she has done with so many other items before. Locking the case, she quietly leaves the antique shop, never intending to return.

The old man closes his shop that night and, like every other night, walks the three blocks to the small house he rents. Entering the front room, he pauses briefly, just a few reverent moments before his family shrine. He lights incense, and as the aroma and smoke drift up and into the room, he touches items—small things kept as icons—that have always been important to his ancestors: the true blue dragon bowl, small books, and parchments written in a language he cannot read. He says prayers, thanking ancestors for their great wisdom; then, he goes to the kitchen to eat. He speculates about what the strange girl dressed in black might do with the bowl he let her steal from him.

Pearl has no reason for her theft; that is just what she does. She steals things. Pearl thinks to herself the old shopkeeper's story is kick-ass cool, a peasant making fools of the rich and greedy leaders of his village. The bowl is unceremoniously tossed into a corner of Pearl's apartment, not good for anything as far as she can tell.

Dreams of old Chinese peasants, dragons, and the shop haunt Pearl that night. Must be bad karma, she decides. It might be a trip to try to put the bowl back, just to clear her aura and the bad vibes.

That day, when she goes into the shop, she sees the old man is busy pushing his junk to some of the old blue-haired ladies. Pearl goes right to the case, knowing she can pick the lock and put the old bowl in before the old man sees her. As she starts working the lock, she sees another old bowl, just like hers, sitting in the case just as if it had been there for months. She starts to leave, but the old man is so close she bumps into him as she turns.

"The value of the bowl was the story, which I gave freely to you," the old man explains. "Keep the bowl. Put it in a place of honor. Perhaps it will bring you luck," he advises Pearl.

Crazy old fool, Pearl thinks to herself as she carefully places the bowl into her purse and takes it back to her apartment. Pearl positions the bowl with her most valuable belongings: her CDs, which are, of course, stolen; the pearl purse, also stolen, is tossed in that same direction nightly; collected together, they create a shrine to her life of petty theft. Pearl lies on her couch, listening to flute music she took from the Red Earth Festival one year. She would like to have a con as good and as cool as the crazy old man. As she schemes and plots, an idea comes to her. Maybe she stole that old purse from someone famous. She could print a name inside, spread a rumor, and then refuse to sell it until the price was right.

Fate, what tricks it will play. Pearl is hit by a semi, her schemes cut short by a Mack truck. She is just a dark spot on the pavement. The Highway Patrol search through the contents of her purse, looking for some form of ID; they find CDs, loose Gummy Bears, a Hot Wheels truck, a little girl's tiny hair clip, four neon-colored pens, an unmarked container of pills and, of course, dark lipstick and eyeliner, but no driver's license. They find the driver's license in her back pocket.

The police locate Pearl's family in Dallas; her real name is Linda Bluebaker. Linda's sisters and mother come to her little apartment to collect her things and bring them back to Dallas to be divided among them. None of them ever understood their strange older sister. CDs are gone through and shared; clothes—well, they throw them away; the blue dragon bowl is sold in a garage sale for fifteen cents. The pearl purse with the two M's printed inside is brought to the Antique Road Show when it passes through Dallas. The experts all agree Marilyn had carried it in a movie she made with Tony Curtis and is worth at least nine hundred dollars.

Pearl's mother has the old purse framed, and it now hangs in a place of honor between her velvet Elvis portrait and the stuffed bigmouth bass in the family room of their house just outside Dallas.

The kid who bought the bowl sends it to his blue-haired grandmother in Oklahoma for a Christmas present. He has overheard her talk about one she had seen once in a junk store near her house. The Blue Dragon bowl, the magic and mystery gone, now sits in a curio cabinet just three miles from the antique shop, the old peasant, and the myth.

Essays

The Piercings

by Enos Standridge

My first impression of her as she slipped through the ropes into the "Red" corner was that she was just too cute and shapely to be a boxer. She was about five feet two inches tall, weighed one hundred and five pounds, and "tough" would never have been used to describe her. The words "Cutie Pie" came to mind.

I turned my attention to the boxer in the "Blue" corner. She was taller, maybe five-six, one hundred and ten pounds, and if the old saying "opposites attract" is true, these two were going to be very close. She looked tough, athletic, capable.

I walked over to the Blue corner, tapped the boxer in the chest, examined her gloves and asked to see her mouthpiece. I checked her headgear and asked if she had any piercings. She shook her head, and I turned and walked over to the Red corner. Close up, I found that my first impression of Cutie Pie had been correct, but something else about her immediately jumped out at me. She was very "chesty." I tapped her there and heard the familiar little "pop" sound that the hard plastic chest protector makes when you're checking it. I checked her gloves and asked her if she had any piercings.

Cutie Pie nodded in the affirmative, gave me a sweet little smile around her mouthpiece, and, with her gloved hand, tapped her headgear. I turned to her cornerman and said, "You need to get the headgear off and take them out."

Her cornerman, a huge guy with hands like hams, unbuckled the girl's headgear and started fumbling with her earrings. He realized immediately that the task was impossible because his hands were just too big.

"I can't get 'em out. They're too little." He held his hands up in a gesture of defeat.

"Well, they've got to come out," I said.

He made another halfhearted attempt to take them out, gave up, and yelled for the girl's husband, who was sitting at ringside. The husband jumped up on the ring apron and proceeded to extract the earrings. The delay, the obvious frustration of the cornerman, and the unusual attractiveness of the boxer had quickly stoked the interest of the crowd of some five hundred people. They had all turned their attention to what was going on in the ring, hoping for something else to happen. We didn't disappoint them.

"Any more?" I asked the girl, anxious to get the bout started.

She stuck her tongue out at me, and the audience giggled, anticipating what was coming next.

"That's gonna have to come out, too," I said to the cornerman.

He had already started down the ring stairs and had missed the tongue gesture. He came back up the stairs, looking confused.

"What? What's got to come out?"

"The tongue thing," I snapped.

He leaned over the ring ropes, stared into the girl's mouth, and exclaimed, "Well, I ain't touchin' that!"

He turned and yelled for the husband again, and as hubby climbed back into the ring, the audience clapped their hands and laughed aloud. Hubby, struggling mightily, finally extracted the tongue ring, but the damage was done. The crowd laughed and jeered. We were good comedy.

"Any more?" I snapped at her.

I could tell she was growing extremely embarrassed, but I had to ask.

She shook her head "No."

By this time, the whole room had their eyes glued to the little boxer, waiting to see what would happen next.

"Are you sure? Any more in this area?" I asked, gesturing towards her upper body. When I pointed to the girl's chest, the crowd roared. My finger pointing had just made things worse.

Cutie Pie, embarrassed but afraid to continue the lie, stood on tiptoes and whispered in my ear.

The crowd roared and clapped their hands.

"You got two minutes to go to the dressing room and take them out," I said softly, trying not to upset her any further. "If you're not back in two minutes, the match is a forfeit." I walked to the Blue corner and explained the situation.

Cutie Pie was back in the ring in two minutes flat. I signaled the timekeeper and the bout got underway. Blue corner was, as I suspected, very athletic and fast on her feet. She had limited boxing skills, but didn't need much because Cutie Pie was putting up absolutely no resistance. Blue, with bad intentions, was striking her on and about the head with crisp, hard punches. Cutie Pie, stiff as a board, was stumbling backwards, taking more punches than I thought was healthy.

I yelled for them to stop, sent Blue to a neutral corner, and proceeded to give the little boxer an eight count. By the time I reached eight, she seemed recovered enough to go on.

Blue continued where she left off, connecting with several more hard shots to the body and head. There was no action coming back from Cutie Pie, so I stopped the bout and gave her another eight count. She had tears in her eyes and was a bit wobbly on her feet, so I told her that she had had enough and stopped the fight.

The confusion and delay over the piercings surely had taken something out of the lady in the Red corner, but even without the crowd's laughter and the husband's extractions, she was still probably destined to lose.

At the end of the night, Cutie Pie passed me on her way out of the building, and I heard her tell her husband, "I would have been fine, but that girl just kept hitting me."

River Rat

by Gary Bramlett

It's summer 1978; I am eighteen years old, wearing a cowboy hat and working on the Mississippi River. It's my first day as a deckhand on a river barge. A restless, teenage desire to travel landed me here among this array of veteran river rats. The feeling of being alone and far from home begins to settle in my gut, and I'm beginning to have second thoughts about this adventure. This is a summer when a boy will learn to stand on his own two feet and look the world in the eye.

The river barge is pushing three tankers full of carbon black to Chicago. Each tanker is three hundred feet long and fifty feet wide. The river barge is the same size as a tanker, but three stories high. The top story is the pilothouse, and the second story is living quarters for the captain and the cook. The bottom story houses the galley and living quarters for the first mate and deckhands.

We know the captain only as "Captain." He distances himself from the rest of us and lets the first mate supervise everybody. The first mate goes by the name of Red. He is a big man with broad shoulders and callused hands and sports a mean temper. He never speaks in a normal voice, but bellows with a stream of obscenities mixed in. Red is a true river rat. The cook's name is Beatrice. She is nice enough, but likes to put shrimp in everything we eat. That gets old after awhile. Red is always bothering her. It is evident she hates him and is afraid of him. Our senior deckhand is Paul who looks out for us. Matt, Scott and I make up the rest of the crew.

The first week comes and goes uneventfully, except for the time Red spots a dead, floating spoonbill catfish. He barks orders to get the johnboat over the side, and he is soon motoring over to net our dinner. Beatrice fries the catfish and serves it up on a big platter, along with all the fixings, including, of course, shrimp. Everyone is excited, and dinner turns into a celebration—all over a bloated, dead fish. I eat a bowl of cereal and go to my bunk.

The second week is a disaster. The captain hits a cross-current, and the lead tanker breaks loose. He sounds the alarm, and we start scrambling. There is only one out of four cables left securing the first tanker to the other two. We race to the front of the second tanker and grab ropes that are as thick as a man's arm. The goal is to re-attach the lead tanker to the one behind. The ropes, as thick as they are, stretch and break. The best we can do is secure

them to the cleats and run for cover. Broken ropes whip through the air all around us with deadly intentions. The first mate orders me to jump across to the runaway tanker and tie the corner down. Just as I jump, the last cable breaks. The tanker is loose on the Mississippi and I am its lone passenger.

I float farther and farther down the river. After awhile, the river barge looks like a tiny speck on the horizon. Finally, it disappears completely. Hours later, a horn blows, and I see my river barge coming to the rescue. Beside the barge is a tugboat, and together they manage to strap us back down. We are back on our way, and I cannot help thinking *What next?*

Eventually, we make our way through the river system to Chicago, where we have to go through a river lock. It is at this lock where all the trouble with Red starts. The captain informs us that we have a three-day wait to go through the lock and nobody is to leave the boat. I guess that doesn't mean Red because he leaves as soon as we dock.

Several hours later, Red—drunk and spoiling for a fight—comes back. Sweat runs down his face, and there is an unmistakable look of insanity engulfing him. He begins to chase me and the other three deckhands around the barge, waving a board and threatening to kill us. Luckily, Red is too drunk to catch us. We scream for the captain to help, but it's useless; the captain is as scared as we are. We try to launch the johnboat, but Red keeps coming up on us. There is no way off the boat, so we just keep running around it, staying out of Red's reach. The run-from-Red game lasts until daylight. The Coast Guard and FBI come aboard and arrest him. Paul is our new first mate.

After getting rid of Red and cleaning up the mess he made, it's finally our turn to go through the lock. We unload our cargo in Chicago, and now we are going to West Virginia to re-fill the tankers. Our captain got off in Chicago and was replaced by a man named Willie. He is not considered a captain, only a pilot. Willie is a jokester and prankster all rolled into one. He seems to take his job lightly, and it's a little frightening, knowing he is up there steering the barge.

On this particular night, a nasty storm brews overhead. The rain comes down in sheets, and the wind is fierce. Lightning illuminates the sky, and the crash of thunder is deafening. It is three A.M., and I am on duty when Willie pages me to the pilothouse. He informs me that the light on top of the pilothouse needs to be replaced. I retrieve a spare bulb from storage and begin my treacherous climb. The ladder is attached to the side of the pilothouse and stops about three feet short of the light fixture. I find that by holding onto the ladder with one hand and reaching over with the other, I can just reach the fixture. The rain pelts my face, and the wind does its best to sweep me off the ladder. I try not to think about the lightning striking all around me or the possibility of falling into the angry river below.

Somehow I manage my task of getting the old bulb out and the new one in. The light comes on, and then Willie blows the horn. The horn is right next to me, and the blast scares me so badly I nearly fall off the top of the pilothouse. My temper explodes as I scramble down the ladder. Willie, seeing the anger on my face, locks himself in the pilothouse and ignores my demands to be let in. Sometime later, my temper dissipates, and I am able to think straight. I have to get off this floating insane asylum. I start devising an escape plan.

We are on the Ohio River now. West Virginia is our destination, and that is where I intend to slip off the barge and start for home. We arrive at the pumps in the middle of the night, and dock. Willie tells us that we will start filling our tankers later in the morning. While everyone sleeps, I pack my suitcase, grab my cowboy hat, and step off the barge for the last time. I look back and wonder if I should tell someone I am leaving. Instead, I decide to hang my hat on a pump handle, thinking that when they see it, they will get the idea.

As I begin my long journey back to Oklahoma, that feeling of being alone and far from home is a little less frightening. The sudden realization that I crossed over the line into manhood dawns on me. My newly acquired confidence in myself feels good. I think I am ready to stand up and look the world in the eye.

Of Okies and Insults

by Elissa Crocker

I'm not a native Okie. In fact, I used to say there was no way I would ever live in that windy, God-forsaken place.

An old saying advises caution in stating one's desires lest we get them. I've learned the wisdom in choosing one's words carefully when stating a lack of preference, for God, indeed, has a sense of humor. I've been rooted and grounded in Oklahoma for over two decades and am proud to call it home.

However, with in-laws hailing from Kansas and Texas, I wouldn't describe living in Oklahoma as being the *crème* in an Oreo cookie. In truth, Oklahoma is a state that comes with baggage. Although not of the "carpetbagger" variety, the heavy load that many Okies carry is a metaphorical brand, burned into their collective psyches.

As the mother of two first-generation Okies, I've come to realize that, in addition to the garden variety of angst over popularity and pimples, teens in this state have another coming of age crisis to reconcile—the tacit but universal supposition that "dumb" and "Okie" are synonymous.

When my sixteen-year-old became aware that certain regions of the country relegated Okies to a position of inferiority, he asked me to elaborate on the *hows* and the *whys* of this designation. (Where is Dr. Phil when you need him? He's in the land where his forebears migrated when the going got tough in Oklahoma, leaving the dirty work to us hybrid-Okies, that's where. But that's getting ahead of the story.)

I think Martin Luther King was on to something when he held that character is the standard by which mankind should be measured. Having been looked down upon by a boatload of holier-than-thou types, I was grateful to do my part in attempting to remove the dunce cap from the next generation.

At the time my son asked my take on the situation, the subject was already on my mind. It was at the end of the football season, and Oklahoma's aspirations to add another national title to its trophy case were blowing in the wind. It's not like I'm a do-or-die Sooner fan, but, remember, I have in-laws in Texas and Kansas. I'll never deny that when the Sooners kick butt in their conference, it feels pretty good. We are, after all, their inferiors.

But last year, we didn't finish the job when it counted. And not only was Oklahoma bad-mouthed from coast to coast, it was even dragged through the red-dirt mud of its own citizens.

Why does the world love to hate Okies? In defense of Okies and in answer to insults, I offered the following explanation to my son.

It's a fact of human nature that some Homo sapiens base their superiority or another's inferiority on their concept of residential acceptability, be it the wrong side of the tracks, the wrong side of a river, the wrong side of a state line, or the wrong region in a country. Despite the fact that athletes, rock stars, and Hollywood heartthrobs shoot that theory out of the water, geographical arrogance has always been and will always be.

That Oklahoma has been designated as the region's doofus is a bit more complex. When I started writing, I took several classes from an English professor who assigned a textbook that he probably didn't need. Teaching from a lifelong immersion in literature, authors, and style, he attributed the genesis of Oklahoma's inferiority complex to a seed planted in the nation's psyche by John Steinbeck's classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Pardon me if my Okie's showing, but my opinion of classics is that the majority should be shelved in a special section in the library under "B" for Bo-ring. Notable exceptions aside, few novels touted as literary greats make anyone's list of preferred vacation reading. Which isn't to say they don't have merit. However, experience has taught me that reading classics is an educational pursuit in which the value of low expectations cannot be overstated.

Accepting my parental duty to evaluate the novel on my personal Okie-meter, I proceeded with low expectations. It proved to be a tough assignment that required an extraordinarily high ratio of skimming to reading. However, my impression of the Joad family didn't support the notion that Steinbeck intended to portray them as stupid.

Unsophisticated? Yes.

Poor? Yes.

Without Dignity? No

A cause for perpetual residential embarrassment? No.

So, this past Christmas, I gave my son a book of poems. In the book, I inserted a passage from Steinbeck's novel.

THE GRAPES OF WRATH

JOHN STEINBECK 1939

OF OKIES AND INSULTS

Ma was heavy, but not fat; thick with child bearing and work. She wore a loose Mother Hubbard of gray cloth in which there had once been colored flowers, but the color was washed out now, so that the small flowered pattern was only a lighter gray than the background. The dress came down to her ankles, and her strong, broad bare feet moved quickly and deftly over the floor. Her thin, steel gray hair was gathered in a sparse wispy knot at the back of her head. Strong, freckled arms were bare to the elbow, and her hands

were chubby and delicate, like those of a plump little girl. She looked out into the sunshine. Her full face was not soft; it was controlled, kindly. Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and a superhuman understanding. She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken. And since old Tom and the children could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledged hurt and fear, she had practiced denying them in herself. And since, when a joyful thing happened, they looked to see whether joy was on her, it was a habit to build up laughter out of inadequate materials. But better than joy was calm. Imperturbability could be depended upon. And from her great and humble position in the family, she had taken dignity and a clean calm beauty. From her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and cool and quiet; from her position as arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess. She seemed to know that if she swayed, the family shook. And if she ever deeply wavered or despaired the family would fall, the family will to function would be gone.

Left naked by the dustbowl winds, the Joads had been stripped of the material to clothe their outer shell, wearing instead the fabric of their character. Rich in their simple way, their strength no longer derived from mortar and brick, but rather from bone and sinew.

Finding no shame in that, I found, instead, a humble pride in these metaphorical ancestors. I tried to share this with my son, an adolescent struggling to reconcile his place within a world where value is assessed by the external.

He may be too young to draw strength from words describing a fictional character born in another man's mind. Perhaps only time can erase the lingering effects of cultural arrogance spawned by true stupidity.

Take pride, Oklahoma. On Black Sunday, the earth was loosed from its bounds, darkening the sky and choking its people. A symbolic lifting of that which was rootless, it laid instead the foundation of red dirt that true Okies could build upon.

Who Did the World Lose When John Eckhout Passed Away?

by **Dennis Eckhout**

When I started thinking about something to say at my dad's memorial service, the first thing that came to mind was that he was a man I didn't really know. He was a man who remained somewhat a stranger to me, even after being my father for fifty-one years.

Like many men of his generation, the men who fought World War II, he made his relationship with his family by working and providing for us rather than through intimacy. He wasn't exactly the type of person you shared your problems with or went to for guidance or advice.

Yet, during those first days after his death, I was surprised by all the things I had forgotten about Dad that kept popping into my mind. John Eckhout could be known by the things he did, and it turned out that I knew a lot more about him than I first realized. So, who did we lose when John Eckhout passed away?

Dad was a veteran. He went off to fight World War II when he was only seventeen years old. John Eckhout put his life on the line so that we could be free. He was part of the Normandy campaign and likely knew of the 9,000 casualties the allies suffered on D-Day. He must have been in many other battles as the Americans pushed their way toward Germany. I am sure he was shot at and shot at others. I am sure he suffered in the mud and saw what would be, to us, unimaginable horror and cruelty. But we knew little of it or of his courage.

He didn't talk much about his military experience when we were kids. If we bugged him enough, he would bring out his medals and the souvenirs that he kept in the basement. In later years, he talked more about it, showing me his medals on my visits home and telling me what they were for. Last year, he had them mounted and hung them in the living room for all who visited to see.

After 9/11, when we were attacked on our own soil, the collective conscience of my generation was shocked into the reality that the price of freedom is life. I told my dad on December 7, 2001, the 60th anniversary of the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, that I finally understood how much his service to this country meant to me and to the freedom of all of us. I was glad that I was able to thank him for it.

I knew Dad as a hard worker. For most of his life, he worked. He regaled us with stories

of helping his dad paint when he was a youngster and lying about his age to get a job as a merchant marine on the Great Lakes. He worked as a truck driver and took as much overtime as he could get. He painted houses on his days off.

When I was in second grade and went to school half days, he worked for Lee and Caty. He would come home around lunchtime and pick up me or my brother Ron to finish his deliveries with him. We would go down the road, eating Ball Park franks, raw right out of the pack. It was against the rules, but we did it, anyway, and it was fun.

He delivered furniture for Wards for many years, working Tuesdays through Saturdays. On those Mondays off, he sometimes chauffeured me and my friends around. One time, he took my friends Tom and Dennis and me to Cobo Hall for the auto show. He dropped us off, then drove the twenty miles back a couple of hours later to pick us up. Another time he took me and the twins from my ninth grade class to an orphanage to deliver Christmas gifts for their Girl Scout troop. Their dad couldn't do it; he worked Mondays.

Dad got me a job as a helper at Wards for two summers, which helped me pay for college. I found out just how hard that work really was and remember my arms feeling like rubber bands at the end of those days. But I learned from him and his partners how to move really heavy stuff without breaking our backs, something that has served me well over the years.

Dad knew how to get to just about any address in the Detroit metro area, and he didn't mind telling you. Today, a navigation system like that on a new Lincoln costs \$3000, but when I learned to drive and was going downtown or to the West Side, all I had to do was tell Dad where I wanted to go and he could get me there.

He took great pride in his house painting. There was no marketing for John Eckhout; he got all his work through referrals. I remember going with him to his cousin Ray Strebb's hardware store on Gratiot and McClellan streets to buy paint and supplies. We would go in the rear entrance, following the footprints painted in the parking lot that led to the back door. Dad took us with him to paint sometimes and always gave us the prep jobs—sanding and scraping off the old paint. But he paid us fairly, too, at the end of the day so we would have a little spending money.

Around the neighborhood, when someone needed some brawn, John was the go-to man. At 6'1", 220 pounds, and strong from all that heavy work, it was easy to understand why Mr. Mac always called him Big John. After the Jimmy Dean song came out, the name kinda stuck. Dad could always be relied on to help, to lend a ladder, a hand truck, or a push. He helped shovel out the neighborhood after the blizzard of '65, and made sure my brothers and I pitched in, too.

When I started grad school, he was there with his pickup truck, helping me move my

things from Whitmore Lake into his garage. He was there on the fifteen-degree day in East Lansing, helping me move into the dorm. When I moved to Washington, DC, he helped me load the U-Haul and tied everything securely for the trip. Even after he retired and his knees were giving out, he kept working around the neighborhood, doing odd jobs just to keep busy.

We were pretty well provided for, and not just food, shelter and clothing. On Saturday nights, we would have a late dinner so that we could eat steaks with him when he came home from work around nine o'clock. We all got new bikes for our first communion. We always had a TV in our room upstairs, a hand-me-down when the living room TV was replaced, but a TV, nonetheless. I was the first kid on the playground to have one of those newfangled transistor radios, and I remember when Dad upgraded it from a six to a twelve. He made a nice, finished basement for us, with a pool table, couch, TV, and stereo. I won't speculate how many of us got our first kiss in that basement.

Even though my brothers and I pitched in for the initial cost of buying a swimming pool, Dad was the one who kept up the maintenance and utility bills on it. He built a sturdy deck around the pool, and we had many hours of fun during the summers and at holiday barbecues with my aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Around the house, he was a do-it-yourselfer. It amazes me now to think of all the things he did really well. Our upstairs bedroom was finished with tongue-and-groove knotty pine and warmly varnished. He especially liked showing off the sixteen-footers that extended from the bottom of the steps downstairs to the top of the ceiling upstairs. He put new tile on just about all the floors at one time or another. He sided the house with aluminum, resingled the roof, and remodeled the bathroom.

He helped me with my houses. One day when Mom and Dad were visiting me in Falls Church, he painted the living and dining rooms of my house while I was at work. At Whitmore Lake, while I watched him do a rather distasteful task for me, I learned the John Eckhout technique for installing a new wax ring for the toilet.

John had his cooking specialties. His chicken noodle soup was a treat. He rolled and hand-sliced his homemade dough into noodles and spread them on the kitchen table or the pool table overnight to dry. He made turkey dressing by grinding up the organ meat with celery, apple, green pepper, and who knows what else. After he peppered the inside of the bird and filled it full of stuffing, he would get his special needle and thread and sew up that bird like a plastic surgeon on *Amazing Makeovers*. I guess the recipe passed away with him because I don't think he wrote any of it down, and I don't think he showed any of us how to do it.

Dad kept a vegetable garden behind the garage for many, many years. He raised tomato plants, and we always had fantastic tomatoes for several weeks at the end of the summer. In later years, he planted flowers around the house, making it one of the most colorful houses on Cole Street.

A hunter of sorts, Dad brought home some unusual pets, such as the turtles he would find along the road between deliveries. He brought home a rabbit, Thumper, which lived for years in a cage Dad built behind the garage. There were the duck chicks. Who knew that they would grow into quite mean and messy adults?

He liked to fish. Dad once took us out on Lake St. Clair with his friend Clarence in his rickety cabin cruiser. It started raining and there was quite a bit of chop on the water. I have no idea how we made it in that day. Dad also liked ice fishing. I remember going with him to someone's shanty and sitting there, freezing, all afternoon, waiting for a bite. I attribute these experiences to the reason that fishing never became one of my interests.

He was musical. Both Mom and Dad were musical in those days, but I think my singing ability definitely came from Dad. He liked to sing and had a good voice when he wasn't clowning around. It's too bad he never developed his ability. God only knows how he would have done his favorite songs "Cold, Cold Heart" and "Blueberry Hill" if karaoke had been around back then.

His automotive style was shown in his white '55 Mercury Sun Valley "glass top." It was striking when it passed by. I loved helping him wash it and scrubbing the wide white-walls until they gleamed. He made a bench to fill the leg room behind the front seat so when we went to the drive-in, we could lie down and watch the movie through the roof.

He brought home a white '57 Cadillac on a test drive one night, and a week later, a '59 Olds 98 that left us stranded on the way to piano lessons. He didn't keep either one of them, but the car he ended up buying, a '58 Chevy Impala, had great style. The surviving cars today are rare, sought after, and quite valuable.

The Detroit sports teams perennially disappointed him. Dad was never quite the same after New Orleans kicked the record-setting sixty-three-yard field goal against the Detroit Lions in 1970, to win the game. But once he had a son going to Michigan, he at least had a winning team to root for, one that didn't let him down quite so often.

He liked jokes and was funny. When my sister Cheryl was visiting me in Washington, we had our picture taken with a life-sized Ronald Reagan cutout figure in Lafayette Park. After I fooled Dad into thinking we had our picture taken with the President, he took the picture to work and convinced his co-workers that his kids had their picture taken with the President.

His whistle that was like one of those freight trains going down the tracks near Grosebeck—and almost as loud—would penetrate the whole block. When we heard it, we knew it was time to get home. When other kids heard it, they would come tell us, "Your dad's whistling for you. Better get home."

He was an independent man who didn't take any B.S. from anyone. He had his opinions, political and otherwise. He believed in the working man and was proud to be a Teamster and follower of Jimmy Hoffa. To say my dad and I had "spirited discussions" about the

Vietnam War, Nixon, crime, and other issues of the '60s and '70s would be putting it mildly. But I realized those discussions made me a better skeptic, a better challenger of the things I read and heard. It made me not so quick to jump on a bandwagon or become such an easy follower of some theory, idea, or solution. It made me a better thinker about what I believe in.

John Eckhout showed his affection for me, my brothers, and sister in the way he knew how. He taught me to ride a two-wheeled bike. He let me use his tools when I was younger and didn't mind if I spray-painted my model cars in his work area in the basement. He let me drive his cars even after I banged up a couple of them. Even though he never graduated from high school, he came to my graduations and was proud to say his kid went to college.

A month ago, when he was in the hospital with the bleeding ulcer, we thought we might lose him then. But he rebounded for a couple of days, and you could see his old self. He was giving a hard time to the attendant who was trying to change his bedclothes. He wanted to rip that oxygen mask off his face. He wanted to know what road was out in front. He struggled to get out of bed and talked about going back to work driving a truck. He wanted to eat hot dogs; I'm sure only Ball Park franks would do. You saw that old sense of humor, kidding around with those of us who were there. When Laura and I set him up on his pillows, you could still feel the power in his arms and torso. Big John was still with us, at least for a little while.

So, who did we lose when this man John Eckhout passed away? A man who went to war, worked, raised a family, and lived a life. We lost a man whose legacy is the five children and two grandchildren who will miss him greatly. We lost a man who did the best he could with the hand he was dealt. We lost Big John, a man I'm proud to say was my dad.

May he rest in peace.

So, I'm a Dork

by Michelle Pexa

My five-year-old daughter learned a new word last month when she stayed a couple of days with her cousin. She uses this new word on a regular basis, but uses it only to describe me. In her tiny, sweet voice, she has not passed up the opportunity to call her mommy a "dork!" *Dork?* I silently repeated to myself. Why has my little angel decided her mommy is a dork? I'm positive she does mean this new word in a benevolent way because of the exasperated tone of her voice and the way she rolls her big, hazel eyes when she says it. What does she think the word means? Since I was at first afraid to ask for fear of what her answer might be, I decided to do some research. I was on a mission. I just had to figure out why she thought I was a dork.

Personally, I believe she is wrong. I pride myself on being hip, slick, and cool. Even though I'm about ten years older than the moms of my little angel's kindergarten classmates, I still consider myself a cool mom. Why is she calling me a dork? I don't dress, act, or talk like a dork. I have my nails professionally done. I have an actual hairdresser who does my hair; I do wear glasses, but not with thick lenses and black frames. Well, actually, I do have black frames, but they're stylish. I have not worn a pocket protector to showcase my favorite pens. I put my favorite pens in a special place in my pull-along backpack. We live in a nice, middle-class neighborhood, and I drive a newer sport utility vehicle. All these things should prove I'm not a dork, right?

I began my research by looking up the definition on the Internet. According to Dictionary.com, the word has two meanings. The first definition is a "stupid, inept or foolish person." I immediately knew that wasn't I. How could a college student with a grade point average of 4.0 fit that description? The second definition was what Dictionary.com described as a "vulgar slang word" meaning penis. Is my daughter calling me a penis? Surely not. I don't expect her cousin to explain that word to her for at least a couple of years.

I began to panic. I was running out of resources! Would I ever figure out why I had become a dork in the eyes of my little angel? Fortunately, thanks to the Internet, I was able to take a Dork Quiz at www.csua.berkeley.edu/sarahfsk/dork.html. I was excited to take this quiz so I could prove, once and for all, that I was not dork material.

The quiz consisted of the following questions:

1. Are you slow at getting jokes?
2. When you do get them, do you laugh strangely?
3. Have you ever tripped over a smooth sidewalk?
4. Have you ever tripped over a smooth sidewalk while you were making eye contact with someone attractive?
5. What do your friends think of you?
6. Does your clothing match right now?
7. Do you go out on Friday and Saturday nights?
8. Who do you most closely identify with?
9. How do you react if someone refers to you as strange?
10. Do you have a web page?

I was honest and answered the questions to the best of my ability. All the time, I was smugly thinking of the response I would give my daughter the next time she called me a dork. After finishing the quiz, I clicked on the "Scoring" icon. I was extremely confident my score would show that I was, indeed, cool.

As I began to read the summary, I couldn't believe my eyes. I had to read it again. Then I retook the quiz twice. It didn't seem to matter. There it was in black and white. According to my answers on the quiz, I was a dork. How could that be? Don't dorks figure out they're dorks in their preadolescent years?

After reading my score summary over a period of several days, I finally began to understand. It said I was a winner and that I knew plenty of random "stuff!" It went on to guess, correctly, that I tell "I'm-a-big-dork" stories on a regular basis, and while I'm not a member of the *Alpha Beta Needa Data Club*, as suggested in the quiz, I do belong to the *Alpha Theta Alpha* Chapter of *Phi Theta Kappa* International Honor Society. The summary concluded with the statement ". . . take pride in your dorkiness. You rock." At that exact moment, I felt empowered again. I was a cool dork! That didn't seem so bad.

A few days ago, I built up the courage to ask my daughter what she thought the word "dork" meant. With a tone clearly full of exasperation, she said, "Mommy, everyone knows what a dork is. A dork is a mommy with curly, brown hair who always tells their little girls 'no' when their little girls ask for something."

Of course, I silently said to myself. *What else could it mean?* Just last night, my little angel once again called me a dork. This time, however, I just smiled and said, "Thank you!"

Crossroads in Life

by Thomas L. LaPlant

In the fall of 1982, I was a U.S. Army member of a forty-two man, anti-terrorist response team comprised of men from all branches of the U.S. Military. We were dispatched to the Sinai Desert region to provide terrorist evaluation support for Multi-national Force and Observers (MFO), a peacekeeping force. On one of those fall days, I encountered serious situations that caused me eventually to make life-changing choices. Sometimes by chance we encounter occurrences or experiences which have the effect of facing crossroads on a highway. The choice or action we take at those moments can determine the direction of our lives for many years or forever.

Several threats of a terrorist strike against the South Sinai Command Base were made during the past three weeks, and we had been following up on the intelligence reports since it was where tension was so high we could almost see its presence like fog in an early morning, and also where peace was barely being held together by the MFO unit. Because of the threats, we carefully executed several operations aimed at reducing the terrorist threat without causing an incident that would be detrimental to the peace process.

Two weeks after our arrival, we were asked to plan the security for an unnamed VIP to tour the neutral zone area that lay between Israel and Egypt. That morning, twenty-four members of my team made final preparations for our visitor. We coordinated for air support to follow the eight-vehicle convoy we had assembled. The air support would be six Cobra attack helicopters and two F-15 Tomcat fighter jets on standby on board an aircraft carrier one-hundred-fifty miles away in the Straits of Tehran, situated between Israel and Iran. Since I was the communication specialist and a sniper on the team, I made the final checks of the communication equipment and my M-19-A-7 Mountain sniper rifle. I would also be driving the vehicle that the VIP would travel in.

Our VIP arrived via a Blackhawk helicopter and a large air escort. To the shock of everyone on the team and at the control base, it was U.S. Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger, looking so majestic and full of confidence. We were quickly introduced and, without haste, loaded the vehicles with the open-top Jeep CJ-7 that I was driving third in the convoy. Casper Weinberger was in the front passenger seat, and a team member and one of his aides sat in the back seat.

The tour through the region took much longer than planned, as Mr. Weinberger insisted on stopping several times to visit with some of the local Bedouins that we passed, causing our air support to have to return for refueling. The Sinai is an endless sea of sand that the sunlight reflects off of like shiny pieces of metal. Spread out in this sea of sand are occasional miniature mountain ranges. As our air support faded into the distance, we drove on a section of roadway that went through the middle of a mountain range. The jagged rock rose up on both sides of the road like skyscrapers on a city street.

This would be a perfect place for an attack, I told myself. Unfortunately, I was right.

Suddenly, the sounds of the convoy engines were abruptly overshadowed by a terrifying thunderous sound. It was a gunshot from somewhere in the hills to my left. At that exact moment, my vehicle went through a large hole in the road that made it bounce several inches into the air. I felt an impact in the back of my seat and realized that the gunshot had hit it. Due to the bounce of the vehicle caused by the hole, the projectile hit a crossbeam in the seat and ricocheted to the floorboard. If not for the bounce, the shot would have caught me in the back of the head. I could have been dead or paralyzed, but I survived the first crossroads of life.

I immediately stopped my vehicle on the right side of the road, as did the rest of the convoy, and pushed Casper Weinberger out of the vehicle onto the ground, as did my teammate with the Secretary's aide. At that moment, another shot rang out like a loud buzzer when you give a wrong answer to a question on a TV game show. The projectile ripped through the seat that Casper Weinberger had been in, just missing my leg as we fell from the jeep.

Everyone took cover behind their vehicles as several other shots rang out. As I reached into the vehicle and retrieved my weapon, I encouraged the other team members not to return fire so that the shooter or shooters would continue to fire and I could get a spot or location on them. Meanwhile, my teammate was on the radio, advising the control base of the situation. The communication person at the control base stated that all available resources were being advised to respond to our aid. Then, from the radio, I heard the words that I will never forget: "Protect American Interest at all cost."

That was my order to act and act fast! I had managed to spot the shooter's location and determined that he seemed to be acting alone at the time. I readied my sniper rifle, and when he positioned himself from behind his cover to make another shot, I squeezed off a round at him. Through my scope, I saw him fly backwards, like someone being hit by a car, from his position as the 19.5mm round from my rifle hit him in the head. The gunshots ceased and an eerie quiet fell upon the mountainous desert.

The quiet was abruptly disturbed as response forces arrived by air and ground. While waiting for the area to be cleared, we stayed behind the jeep, lying on the ground for over an hour. Casper Weinberger told us about his family and their last vacation together. Just

before being loaded into a Blackhawk helicopter, to be ushered away from the region, he shook my hand and said to me, "Thanks, son, that was a hell of a job."

Later, I realized that he was not much different from me and that I had a new baby on the way and wanted to be there for my family vacation. Before the incident, I was positive that I wanted to make a career out of the military, but afterwards, I knew that being there for my kids as they grew up was a better road for me to travel. I think of the shooter and wonder what roads he might have sent his family down after choosing the road that led to a dead end for him.

As I write this essay, I get vivid images of my life since the incident. Like viewing a movie in fast forward, I see the long-term effects that it has had on the lives of my family and me. It is frightening to think of that movie being any different. All of us will travel through many crossroads in life, and we need to be sure that we make the right turns to reach our desired destination. I know I made the right one.

Above and Beyond

by Sherry L. Richardson

It is amazing what a parent will do for a child. Oftentimes the actions that we take are comical, no matter how frustrating the situation may seem at the time. As adults we look like complete idiots, going to such an extreme to please the whines coming from our beloved children.

I recently had the opportunity to pull off being the greatest mom in the world to my children. Yet, to everyone else, I most likely appeared to be the biggest joke of the century.

Around 8:30 one night, Kristin and Tyler, my two youngest children, begged me to let them get the parakeets out. We have two parakeets: one two-year-old baby blue male named Sky and one three-year-old green female named Petree. It is normal for the kids to play with them in the living room while I do my chores, homework, or whatever else I need to do. This night proved to be different. Sky, our baby blue male parakeet, decided that he did not want to be held. In an attempt to escape from the children, he flew under our gas stove.

The kids were all hollering, and I was at a loss as to what to do to retrieve this stupid bird. Mind you, this bird cost only \$14.99 at the local pet store. But according to my children, this bird had become a part of our family.

In a half-minded attempt to coax Sky out, I grabbed the broom and began to run the handle under the stove. The bird proved to be smarter than I am. Every time I swiped the broom handle under the Kenmore, Sky just jumped over and ran farther back. In the meantime, I was dragging out piles of sand from only God knows where.

After about thirty minutes of trying to outwit the bird, anger and frustration set in. To be honest, if it were not for my kids, the bird could fry under the oven. While I was rolling on the floor, which had become the indoor sandpit, trying to rescue our precious birdie, the kids were running back and forth between the living room and kitchen, crying hysterically.

With the best intentions, my children decided that they would help me retrieve our beloved pet. In an area barely big enough for an adult, there were then four children and me. Losing what little patience I had left while I attempted to work around the uncontrollable, sobbing, yet helpful little ones, I got the brilliant idea that putting birdseed down would solve our dilemma. As I poured birdseed on the floor, my eldest son Kevin grabbed the oversized cage, which contained Petree, and set it near the stove. In a child's world, once the female parakeet started chirping, her husband would naturally come running back.

So, at that point, not only was I plodding and rolling in the sandpit that had consumed my kitchen floor, I was attempting to work around eight helpful eager little hands, a Frigidaire side-by-side refrigerator, an extremely large birdcage while slipping on the birdseed, with Petree squawking away noisily in my ear.

While I attempted to clear a path and get the kids to bed, I got the great idea of turning off my gas and moving the Kenmore stove. So, there I was, yelling at the kids to go to bed and calling my ex-husband Brian to come turn off the gas. Of course, all I accomplished was to cause four already crying kids to scream even louder. Finally, I reached Brian and he immediately thought that someone must be dying since the kids were screaming hysterically.

While he was freaking out and demanding answers, I was attempting to keep the kids away from the open gas stove. I hurriedly explained my little problem and begged his expert assistance which, in fact, was like calling the plumber when you needed a mechanic. He hesitantly, grudgingly agreed to come over and try to help me rescue the poor creature that was turning my household into complete chaos.

While I waited for the "expert" to arrive, I noticed there were two small screws on the stove that I could take out to remove the bottom plate. Ah, yes, such wisdom. I quickly retrieved a tiny Phillips screwdriver that Kevin had found on his way home from school and, in desperation, began to remove the screws. Yes, it worked! I was then able to remove the bottom covering and see the remainder of my sandpit. The only problem to this little ordeal was that the bird was nowhere in sight.

So, there I was: no bird in sight, piles of dirt all over the kitchen floor, everyone in the room, birdseed all over, the kids howling even louder, Petree squealing as though I had just tried to kill her, my ex-husband reluctantly on his way over, and pieces of the Kenmore all over my kitchen floor. What was a girl to do?

I did the only thing I could do. I grabbed the broom and dustpan and began to clean. If nothing else, at least I would have all the dirt removed from under the stove. As I swept away and scooped up what appeared to be ten tons of dirt, I noticed movement inside the back part of my stove. Yes, indeed, it was our long lost pet! But I had no idea which method I should use to capture our loved one.

Truth of the matter, I had no choice but to reach up and grab the one blue feather I saw. Pluck. I got a feather, but no Sky. And the kids were screeching that I had hurt their brother. I yelled at them in frustration to go to bed. I noticed that I had become more determined to catch that damn bird just to silence those little monsters that were quickly directing me to the nearest crazy farm.

As I crawled on my hands and knees, frantically searching every inch under the stove, I noticed a glimpse of blue. Not just any blue, but baby blue. Could it be? Oh, yes, it was! Finally, I saw the creature that had been causing Holy Hell within our family, inviting me

to play superhero, knowing full well that I could not resist, motivating me to destroy my kitchen beyond recognition, and distressing me so much that I even had called Brian, the man I would love to kill. Yes, that tiny six-inch bird had come into my view and he WAS not getting away. I quickly reached up and grabbed what little parts of his squirmy, fragile body I could and yanked. Yes! I succeeded. Mom saved the day! I retrieved that now-despised parakeet and returned calmness to my yelling brats (who were cheering) before that jerk I once married was able to arrive at the door.

I spent an hour and a half fighting to outwit that two-legged creature, but in the end, I caught the bird, condemned the kitchen, and came out looking like the hero to my children. If asked whether or not I would do it all again today, I will gladly say, "Let the damn thing fry!"

Poems

November

Down in the village today
A hesitant Sun opens one eye,
Peeks through the clouds.
Down in the village
Snowflakes wander, apparently aimless,
Milling about
Like so many conventioners in the lobby
Waiting for the Big Meeting to begin.
Up in the hills
Snow is more direct.
One doesn't have to wonder what it thinks
You don't have to guess.
"Winter is here," it says,
Showing itself as proof.

– Vicki Newby

Caught

I remember
 that day.
The door swung open
 your mouth hung
 In shock.
"Ah, Ma'am, I'm sorry –"
Your eyes were wet
 With disgust
 And angry frustration.
They took the handcuffs off
 --after we were inside. –
 -- I think he wanted to scare me. –
 -- maybe the both of us. –
I sat.
 humiliated
 -- in silence –
 Exposed.

Numb and deaf,
you being told everything.

-- everything –

He left
 -- going to tell
 my friend's parents. –
that.

From then on,
 -- Never again –
 -- Never again –
The door shut behind him.
 I never stole again.

– Sonja Olson

Ride

(for Zora Neale Hurston)

Ms. Hurston looked at me and said,
 "lawd, there be trouble come down de road."
The ticket sat
 pressed tightly against the pages of her book
forgotten leaf of yesterday
 as she searched her purse for lipstick
laughed heartily . . .
 "I'se gwine to get me a fine man, I is!"
I laughed with her
 knowing that someday men would come to us . . .
painted up like hookers
 fine men would come to get us
we . . . forever sitting at the back of the bus . . .

– Brandi Paschal

Basketball Socks Restore Dignity

A musty, early 80's gym, broken windows built high above wooden bleachers
allow a small escape for the overpowering smell of dust and body odor.
Red, jaded paint draws a square around a tattered net.
The blow of a high-pitched whistle rushes eager players
into alignment on the out-of-bounds line.
Pigtails and french braids twisting and flipping,
anticipating their inclusion in the risky half-court game.
As small as a pea on an oversized plate, embarrassed and timid,
I took my place, which I felt unworthy of, in the line-up.
From the corner of each strained eye, knee socks trimmed in multi-colored stripes,
circled every white, black, and brown Indian leg . . . except mine.
The bareness nearly blinded every eye. Cackles and giggles deafened my ears.
Stares pierced my body, leaving unseen marks.
Tears welled up like boiling lava awaiting an explosion, causing deep burning
sensations to seize my face, covering it in flush pink.
With utter humiliation and lack of desire to even touch a ball,
I timidly approached the coach.
Squinty eyes peered down upon me, crushing my vulnerable heart,
though bravely I asked what I intended to ask.
Anxiously, I sat uncomfortably next to old, battered wooden doors.
I never thought creaking doors could sound harmonic,
but they became the most beautiful instrument.
Standing in the shadows of sunlight and fluorescent gym lights,
Grandpa's image beamed like heavenly hosts.
Grandpa, who refrained from compassion, poured out his mercy.
Sprinting across the unwaxed, gritty floor, every thought escaped me.
Holding wrong-colored socks, his gentleness outweighed disappointment.
We persuaded the "long blues" to mid-calf.
Roughly he muttered the softest words I needed to hear.
I am part of the team again.

– Jennifer Richardson

tanka

As you leave my arms, my dear
I feel January's sharp chill.
I close my eyes and wish to receive
two gifts from heaven's sky.
May winter's snow find you without a coat
and swallow you whole.

– Rebecca Seaton

the candle

this is how I remember us —
a striking match
sparking a dim room
as fire dances
in the candle's bloom

smoke rises
soothing the dusty air
as our bodies linger
like one shadow's glare

and this is how we are now —
a forgotten candle
sputtering in morning light
as darkness empties
its waning height

smoke then suffocates
the candle's plea
but there is little left
of you and me

except the debris of memory
cast with no flame
a struck match
that only stains

the counter — charcoal black

— Jon Inglett

Iowa Cornfield Funeral

Help me, dear reader,
do you know the one about the
Iowa farmer
pondering whether or not folks
should be buried in the Iowa ground,
the rich black Iowa soil,
the best in the nation,
or should crops be planted there instead?

Because I saw that one for real,
my cousin buried three feet from an
Iowa cornfield,
his tall strapping sons
holding back the tears in the June sun
in the green country cemetery near the corn,
comforting their bereaved mother,
young men whom I'd never met but came to love
almost instantly,
both much taller than the June corn,
but give it a month.

– David Charlson

One Evening in Budapest

One evening in Budapest
holding lit candles
we hooked fingers to form circles
and we did the shepherd's dance
and we were one

One evening in Budapest
a poem was spoken in Hungarian
with no English translation
but the poem was full of soul
and we were one

One evening in Budapest
a lady's fingers flew over piano keys
and played Liszt and Bartok
until she slowed to stillness
and we were one

One evening in Budapest
a Japanese soprano sang
a flawless aria from
Madame Butterfly almost crying
and we were one

One evening in Budapest
we watched a mime watching us
as he opened invisible doors
we laughed when he became a babushka
and we were one

One evening in Budapest
someone else played piano
an improvised flamenco that
made us want to dance
and we were one

One evening in Budapest
a techno theater dance troupe
stirred us with their sensuous bodies
moving to the strong music's beat
and we were one

One evening in Budapest
a band of flutes and drums
sitars and rain sticks and didgeridoos
created harmony from cacophony
and we were one

One evening in Budapest
we were many from other
parts of the world
we felt kinship—we felt peace
and we were one
because of
one evening
in Budapest.

– Bertha Wise

An Oklahoma Greeting

High noon and '89, with thundering hooves
And wild delight, those people came –
Fresh, bright hopes and dazzling rainbow dreams
To stir a kaleidoscopic array
Of youth-muscle, older sinew, and courageous tears –
Lean, taut, and sun-leathered
They toiled, carving out a magical saga –
A mix of legend and truth!

White-heat, that fiery passion for a chance –
This opportunity to "make it" –
To succeed, where once they'd failed
Perhaps, and with this surge of power,
A greater reverence and humility for
Blue-bright hope-filled skies and deep-clean air
Upon our flat-spaced sprawling prairies!

Distant summer perfumes of fragrant honeysuckle
Float on the close night air, along
With twinkle-star fireflies . . .
As heart-stirred pride swells memories –
My spirit-soul shines out
To signal the message and sing with
Full voice – I give to the world my
"Howdy" . . . and an Oklahoma smile!

– Leon Whitesell

Ode to a Small Feline

You would approve
I'm sure
Of what I attribute
To you

Worshipped in Egypt
In past centuries
Now parked on top
Of my computer

Japanese believed the calico
A good luck symbol
For me I now see you
Questionable critter

Splashed with many colors
Glowing eyes of golden beams
Does mystery lie behind those?
Small demi-dreamer

Sporting with me, you actually dare
Antiques bite the dust again
Food changed, again and again
Whatever her orneriness pleases

A thousand and one meows I hear
As you mirror my voice in time
We travel together, but just out of reach
My furry, elusive companion

Once in a while, a great while it's true,
You actually seem to be trying
To understand this human owner
Who feeds and houses and loves you

Most of the time, but an overseer
Moving from room to room
Behind me you watch and anticipate
Before dropping into sleep, contentment

– D. High

Amphibian

A tadpole, grey and obscure
With legs intact and tail attached,
Struggles to decide between
The waters of the spring
And the dry pools of summer

– John W. Perry

Afro-Centric

Afro-centric, Afro-centric
what would that be

A tall nice Afro standing tall as a tree
Pants hanging below the waistline
My brothers' generation being too damn fine

Riding in that nice Cadillac Escalade
24-inch rims spinning non-stop
Still staying with mother and father just a phase to get to the top

Teeth lit up by the karats of gold in the mouth
Got every one in the nation trying to demonstrate down south

Afro-centric, Afro-centric
What would that be

My generation that includes me
With my big hoop earrings that sway side to side
With my tall skinny pump heels that glide

My brown skin tone that shimmers
My nice neon green pants with a trimmer
My red wrist band that glimmers

Afro-centric, Afro-centric
What will that be

My culture in my generation
that would include me

– Rashida Hobbs

spin

there might be something
pretty
about a cut on the finger
when certain hands
take gentle care to
bandage the wound
something about that one
quiet
moment in seclusion.
the heaviness of
amaretto and cognac
 in symmetry
with the weightlessness of
girlish nerves
says,
(come sit next to me . . .)
spinning bottles and
strangers kissing acquaintances
your nervous lips
paint my already warm cheeks
a brighter shade than
the last eager tongue
attained . . .
soon anxiety wanes
as the air thins and
my blood thickens
but i'm cold
(can i have a blanket?
. . . and i'll leave you alone)
then your sleepy voice beckons
(share)
 and i do.

– Nicole Quigley

What is Heartbreak?

Heartbreak is a picture.
Pastels on the sidewalk.
Gently applied,
So it doesn't smear.
Tireless work.
The finished piece is soft –
Delicate, with an inner glow.
People admire the beauty and care,
Until night comes.
The first drops fall,
Puncturing the image.
The rain becomes angry,
Manipulating the forms
Into a distorted version
Of what it once was.
By morning the picture is gone.
Feet carelessly sloshing through a puddle.
The picture so quickly forgotten,
Except by the artist.

– Erin Lynn Stelter

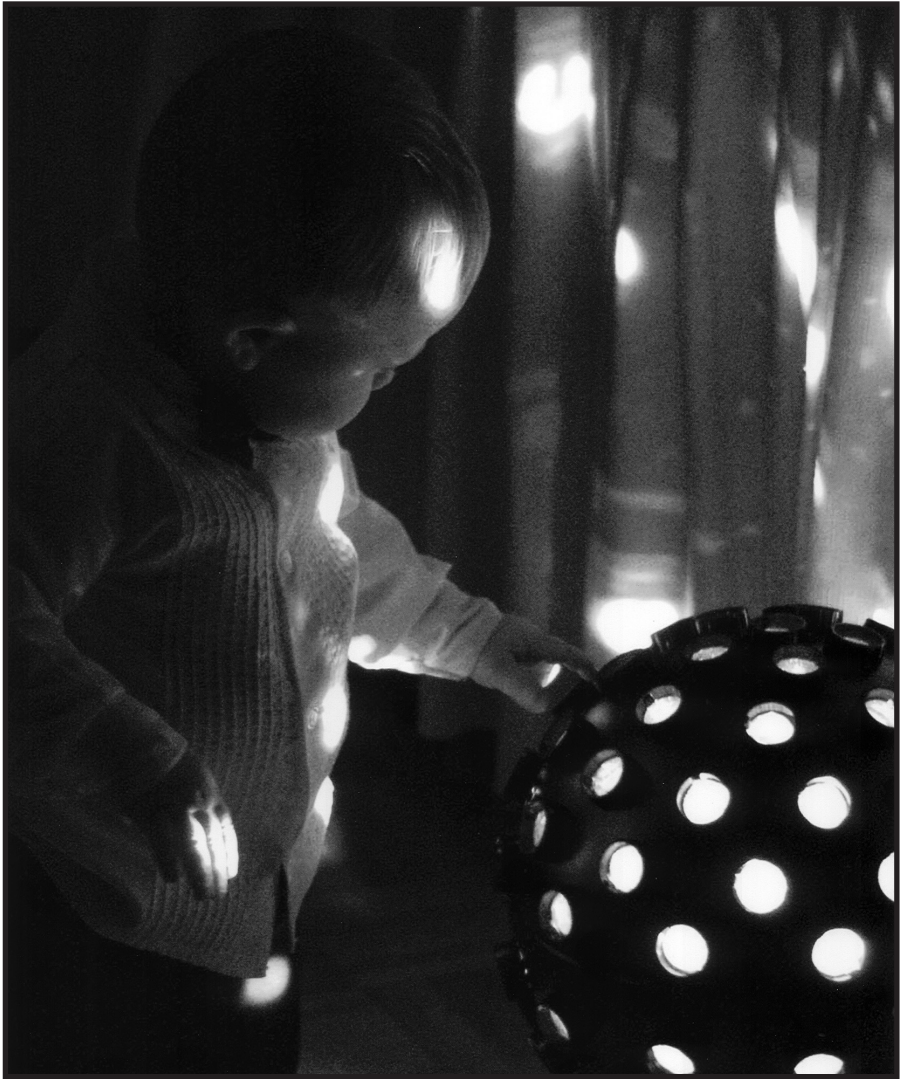
Photography and Art



Lilies in Spring
Nina J. Reaves



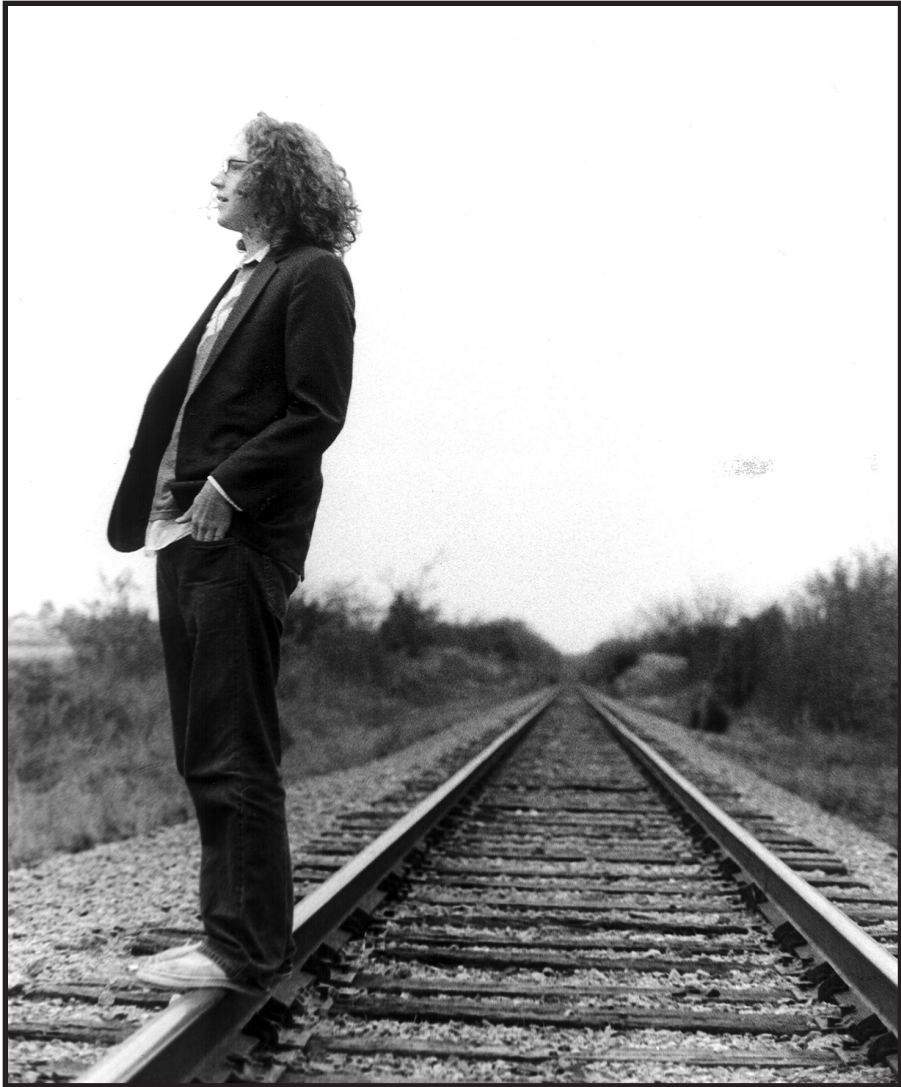
Building Blocks of Learning
April Jackson



Gavin
LaWanda LaVarnway



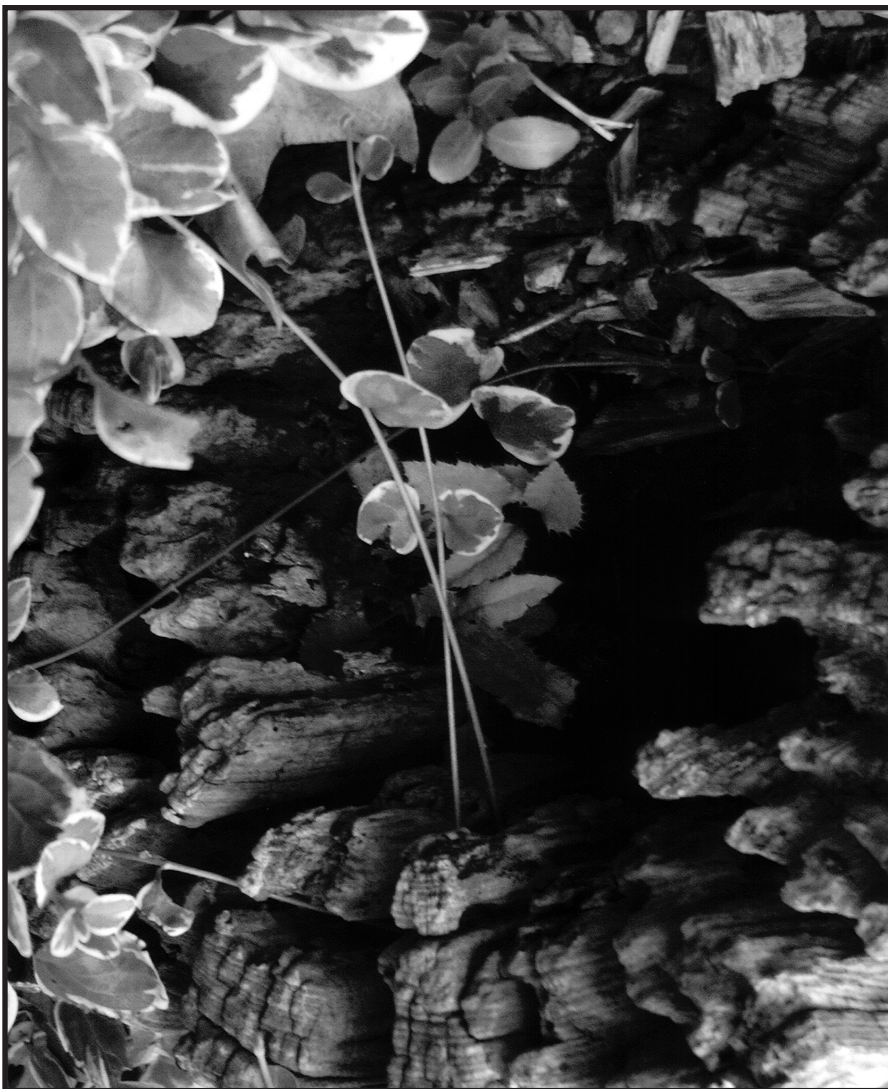
Musée d'Orsay
John W. Perry



Tracking the Fall
Shathar Tenpenny



Grecian Patio
John W. Perry



Rotten to the Core
LaWanda LaVarnway



Main Place
Samantha Olson

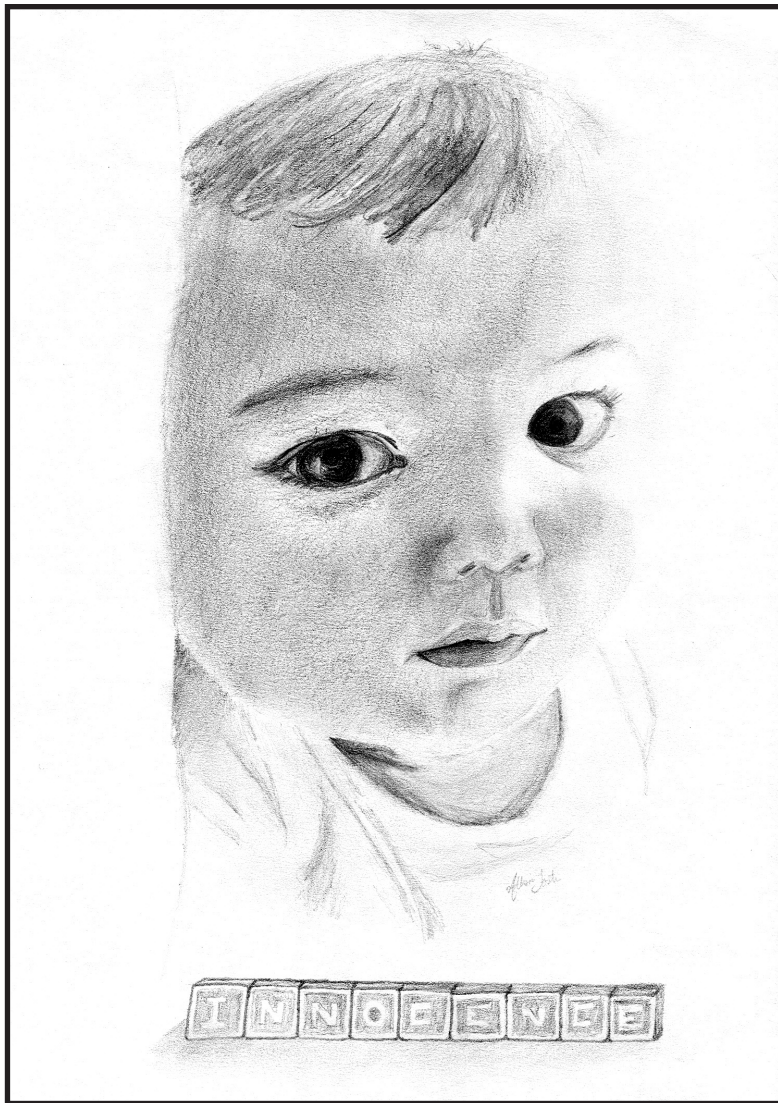


Jardin des Plantes

John W. Perry



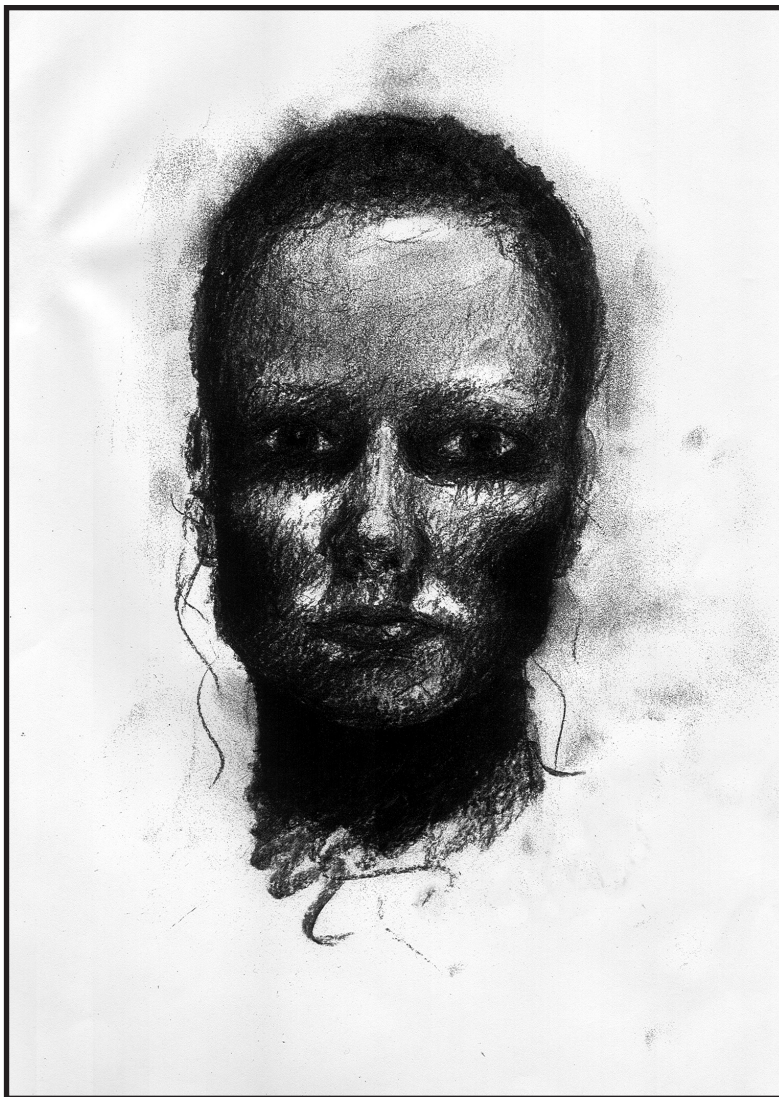
Let Him Lie
Teresa Randall



Innocence
Allison Foster



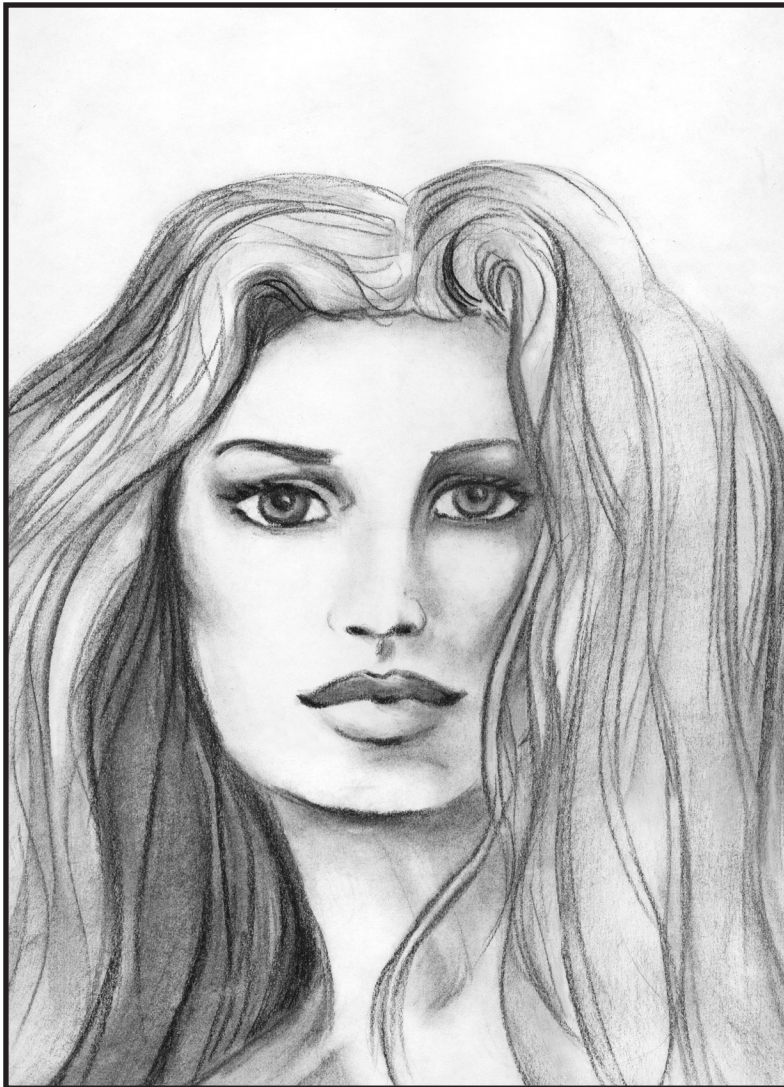
Flower
JanDe N. Eppers



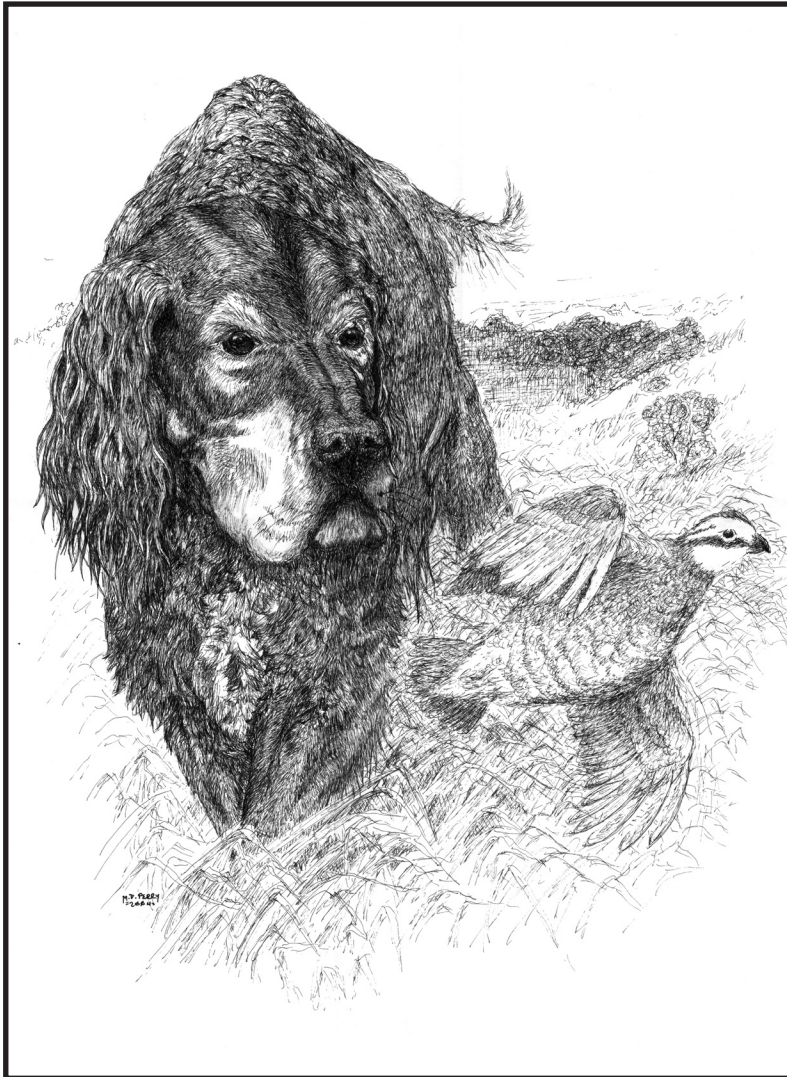
Portrait
Laura Kieran Brink



Line Drawing
Misty Perry



Beauty
Sunshine Garner



The Hunt
Misty Perry