



Absolute

Absolute 2006

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Fiction

Rat

by Tia Kishketon

The rat peered through the broken window of the condemned building. It was late in the night, and there was no one around. It crawled through a hole in the corner of the window and scurried inside to get out of the rain. The building was empty except for the cobwebs that covered broken boards and corners. Then something moved and the rat ran underneath a broken step. A little boy, probably no more than twelve years old, jumped up onto a pile of wood so the rat couldn't touch him. He was shivering and soaking wet. His clothes were torn, and he didn't have any shoes. He looked like he hadn't eaten in days. There was no one else around and no light. He was crying as he sat there with his arms wrapped around his bony legs. He seemed weak and malnourished. The rat stayed under that step all night and the boy sat still on his pile of wood.

Morning came, and when the light shone through that broken window, the rat moved but the boy did not.

My Father

by Ana Rodriguez

I walked through the parking lot behind my father, trying to stop my tears. He was a tall man whose working boots had seen better days. His eyes squinted as he walked, even on cloudy days. I had no idea if he truly loved me or had ever loved my mother. At times like this, I missed my mother most of all.

She had died giving birth to me, but had graced me with her best qualities before she left. My eyes were deep brown with a mystery yet to be solved. My nose wrinkled when I laughed or just before a good cry. My brown, curly hair grew what seemed like inches every night. It was the one thing that I was most grateful for. It was smooth and soft and bounced when I walked, but above all, it looked just like hers. It was my hair that bothered him most.

My arms were too short to brush my hair by myself, and my tender scalp aggravated him. Brushes were always missing and hair bows were too complicated. His growl of a face frightened me every morning before school. I walked on tiptoes to ask for his help and held my breath awaiting his response. I was never sure if he hated me for my own imperfections or because I seemed to be my mother's spitting image.

I stared through my window for hours at our neighbors, wondering what having a mother must feel like, to have someone to talk to and giggle with and to do my nails and brush my hair like a princess, or just to hug me long and soft.

"Get your hair out of your mouth," he shouted, startling me out of my daydream. I had absentmindedly taken a long chunk of hair and put it in my mouth.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly and quickly.

"Get your shoes on."

He sped down the side streets as if he were late for work, making me grateful for the seat belt. He never spoke to me, constantly making me unsure of his thoughts or feelings, or if he had any at all. He parked next to a long Lincoln that made our dirty pickup seem even more depressing. I followed in his shadow, unaware of our destination and too nervous to ask.

His shadow moved like an eclipse, exposing the bright neon letters of Sally's Hair Salon. My feet froze and my mouth fell open with disbelief. There was a blur between our sitting in the waiting area with a chair between us and heading back to see Sally herself.

"Oh, what a pretty girl," she said in a country twang. "You out on a special day with your daddy?"

Before I could answer, he said, “She just needs a haircut.”

“Okay, Pops,” she said with her hand on my shoulder. “Come on, Sugar. Let’s head to the back, and I’ll wash that pretty hair of yours.”

“No,” he said coldly. “Just cut it dry to right here.”

He took a long chunk of my hair from the side of my head, pulled it to my mouth to measure, and moved his finger two inches shorter.

I watched the long curls drift in slow motion to the dirty floor. My mother’s hair lay at my feet as I stood up and walked out the door behind the man I called my father.

I Do

by Maria Hernandez

I hold her hand and I can feel her blood pulse tiny fast-and-long rushes from her heart. I know she's long forgotten who I am, but it helps when I hold her hand. She smiles and says, "I do."

The words she said seventy years ago still make me quiver. I don't know, though, if it's from the nerves or her love. She forgot to put her dentures in, so she's smacking at me, getting me to laugh. Between her forgetfulness and my shaking, we're quite a volcanic pair.

But when I hold her hand, I stop shaking, and she remembers *I do*, the only two words she says.

And sometimes I keep letting go and grabbing again, just to hear her voice. There's a swing on the back patio of the nursing home we moved into. The swing is rusty and creaks, but on quiet nights, the nurses get a serenade of her sweet melodic *I do's* over and over again.

"Clementine, do you like it out here?"

"I do."

"Do you know me?"

"I do."

"Do you love me still?"

"I do."

"Couldn't we just sit out here all night, under the stars, watching them fall like we used to? Do you remember?"

"I do."

"I do."

"I do."

I hold and let go of her hand all night long. Perhaps it's more of a conversation on my part because I do my best to manipulate the questions for the one answer she gives, but I do love her.

Some days I don't feel strong enough to hold her hand, and it lies in her lap, unaware of her body, her mind in a wading pool of *I do's*. It's not all she used to say. I used to hold her hand at the end of a long day, and she'd talk for hours about the kids, the neighbors, and the pot roast she loved to cook. Sometimes I'd grab her hand, and we'd dance in the kitchen

after she'd done the dishes. The house was quiet with sleeping kids and the crickets outside, eavesdropping on our love. It even got to where I'd hold her hand in the middle of her two-cents-worth to quiet her down, using the sign language of squeezing her hand as our code.

Old age has an effect of wanting it all to be over and then wanting it all over again. When she says *I do* early in the morning, we have it all over again. In her mind, we're still in the beginning, waiting for the end. *I do* plays like the old Glen Miller record we used to dance to in the kitchen.

She was so tired. I was getting tired. We're both eighty-five years old and without me by her side, she won't eat or take her medicine. I hold her hand while she feeds herself chicken broth and toasted bread crumbs with her favorite ginger ale. In between bites, her *I do's* spit out of her like falling stars—quiet, mumbled, shooting moments of her devotion.

Her hand in mine is as it should be. I wouldn't have it any other way. She is my wife for better or worse. That's what you've got to do when *I do* is all you've got.

Pretty Sweet

by Leo Moseley

“**Y**ou aren’t as enthusiastic as you should be,” Shelly said. “That worries me.” Shelley is the manager at the pizza restaurant. It was my first day.

“Um. These customers do not seem very enthusiastic to be here either,” I said.

“Guests. They are guests. We don’t have customers. Go ahead; use some of the things I taught you with these next guests. Ask them what they are here to celebrate! Do it enthusiastically! Use exclamation marks! Not periods!” she said.

“Well, from the way these particular guests in the waiting area are dressed, I would say they are not celebrating anything.”

“Just do it!” she said. “Say, ‘What are you celebrating?’ ”

“Okay...”

I walked towards the group in the waiting area and cheesed a real big grin.

“What are you celebrating?” I said.

The woman in a conservative black dress spoke to me softly.

“Well...we aren’t so much celebrating as mourning. You see, my father passed away two days ago and today was his funeral.”

She had leaned in close. It was as if she thought she focused on only me, but still spoke at a normal volume. No one else could hear the response to the taboo question I had asked. Everybody around did hear; Shelley certainly had. I should have felt embarrassed, but I did not. I could tell that a family dressed in dark clothing was there for one reason—a funeral. I looked toward Shelley. She looked upset enough for the both of us.

High school does not really prepare us for “real life” at all. I was finding out about real life on my own. The only thing I had learned so far was that it was not needed, nor considered an asset, to have common sense to be a restaurant manager.

Shelley called that little situation with the mourners my first strike although the way I see it, it was her fault. The next came later that very same day.

“You must up-sell!” Shelley said.

I tried to ignore her. Here is how the company-suggested sales pitch goes:

HI. THANKS FOR JOINING US! HAVE YOU DINED HERE BEFORE?

Generic customer response:

WELL, YOU SHOULD TRY OUR LARGE PIZZA! IT IS MUCH BIGGER THAN

ANYONE ELSE'S! IT CAN EASILY FEED A FAMILY OF FIVE.

Either the customer accepts the deal or you say: "Gee, you guys look pretty hungry. Are you sure?"

The customer either accepts or rejects the second offer, but, in reality, that is not what people want.

Here is how I handled my first customers. There were two guys sitting in a booth.

"We just want a medium cheese pizza," the man on my left side said.

"Okay," I said. "I'll get that started."

Shelley stopped me before I got to the wait-station.

"I said up-sell! Why didn't you suggest the large pizza? And you are supposed to mention how it will feed a family of five."

"There are only two of them. They do not need to feed a family of three."

She scrunched up her face and curled back her lips. I was surprised how such a pretty young woman could look so ugly when she tried.

That lack of eagerness to please was strike two. Shelley did not wait for a third strike.

"Maybe you would do better as a cook...y'know, in the back," she said.

"Okay."

"You can meet Jimmy, our head cook!"

Her eyes brightened as if I were really in for a treat. I realized the only people I had met so far were Shelley and one waitress. Wait-staff were not allowed back in the kitchen.

Before I made it into the kitchen, I heard him.

"Goddammit! We are out of medium dough!"

He seemed to take his work very seriously, which is a good thing, I guess.

Once I got into the kitchen, I saw him. He was an old guy with a gut that stuck out and a long ponytail jammed into a hair net. He had a thin mustache, the kind you would expect on a kid who just reached puberty. The full effect of what this guy was hit me when he looked back at me, grinned, and said, "Hey, you're the new guy!"

He laughed as if it were the funniest thing he had heard all day.

"I'll let you two get acquainted!" Shelley said.

Jimmy's teeth, what few he had, were the worst I had ever seen. He had small, blackened stumps with gaps where teeth once were. I immediately wondered if they hurt constantly or how he could even stand to chew. He spoke in only one volume: very loud.

After he showed me how things were done, I talked to him a while. It took me most of the night to get used to hearing his yells, no matter how close he was to me. He was a nice guy. From the way he spoke, I could tell he was much smarter than he let on. Perhaps he had adjusted to the atmosphere of the store and had learned to cope with the dumb reality that was fine-family-dining, a lesson I was still having trouble learning.

After close, Jimmy told me we were going outside to take a smoke break before we cleaned the kitchen. This became an everyday ritual.

During our smokes I often wondered if this was the best I could expect—part-time cook at a pizza place in a college town?

Tonight, for the first time ever, Jimmy offered me one of his cigarettes that he rolls himself. For a moment, I considered taking it, but once I saw his grin, I decided that all of those unfiltered cigarettes may be why his teeth are in the shape they are and chose one of my filtered Lucky Strikes, instead. A few weeks had passed since I began working here, but his gesture made me feel accepted. I decided to let Jimmy in on my thoughts.

“How do you do it, Jim?” I asked.

“What? Roll a cigarette?”

“No. Be so happy all the time. We live in a college town where people half your age constantly go on to be doctors, lawyers, famous musicians, and generally successful people. Each one has something that makes them different, and all we do is feed them.”

“Well, hell, I am just as successful as them. I mean, think about it. Musicians have only twelve notes to work with. I mean, they can play them in octaves and everything, but they only have twelve notes. From the beginning of time and forever, musicians can’t leave that twelve-note scale before they repeat themselves. But somehow they can make every song original. Hell, there are more than twelve kinds of beer at the liquor store. The way I see it, I can live an original way every night.”

He laughed like it was the funniest thing he had heard all day.

“Hell, I don’t need to be famous to be happy,” Jimmy said. “Anyways, living in a college town is great. You ever seen *Dazed and Confused*?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“You remember what Wooderson says about how he gets older but the girls stay the same age?”

He laughs like it is the funniest thing he has heard all day.

I laugh because it is the funniest thing I have heard all day.

“It’s like I say,” Jimmy says as he rubs his cigarette out onto the curb. “Life isn’t always peaches and cream, but the parts that are can be pretty sweet.”

Slaughter

by Tracy Willingham

The man relieved the sheath of its contents and ran the sword through the woman's neck. The officer's bullet sailed through the air, then through his shoulder, but the man pressed on. The cowering boy's belly slid open almost willingly under his blade, spilling its contents on the pavement.

"Madman!" They cried real tears, but all the pleading fell on deaf ears. Eight more died as he strolled along the sidewalk. Another bullet found a home in his leg, changing his gait to a slower stumble. The man continued forward, taking a life with every other step.

A uniformed body launched itself at the man. With a step to the side, he raised the bloody weapon. It lodged itself into an open eye socket, and the man kicked the body to remove it.

"Somebody help us!" Each scream was quickly silenced. The death toll was climbing. A stray bullet, meant for the sword-wielding man, caught a child on the sidewalk. The man stood over the latest victim a moment, earning him a new bullet wound to the arm. He quickly stabbed the boy in the chest and walked on.

A bullet grazed the man's ear. He turned to the line of flashing lights and gleaming guns. Another sliced open the side of his neck, drawing a river of blood down his shirt. Three paces into his march on the lawmen, an officer found his mark. With a hole in his forehead, the man met the ground.

Pressing the power button and laying down the controller, an average, well-adjusted eleven-year-old walked downstairs to dinner.

Formative

by Micah Collinsworth

The first thing you really ought to know about me is the circus story. One winter, I must have been seven or eight at the time, I saw a poster that said the circus would be coming in the spring. I'd never been to the circus before, but in my child's mind, I could imagine it: a place of magic and wonder, where you laughed until your sides hurt. I got all excited and ran home to tell Dad and my sister.

My father said that if I saved my money all winter long, I would have enough to buy a ticket to the circus when it arrived.

Why the rich bastard didn't just buy a ticket for me, I'll never know.

Anyway, I started saving my pennies. I got an allowance once a month, but by the time I bought the latest Batman comic and tried out the new games at the arcade, there wasn't much left. I was eight; there wasn't a lot of flex room in my budget. Still, I saved religiously, determined to go to the circus.

Everything was going great until about December. I was walking past a toy store on my way home from school when I saw it. In the store window sat the Holy Grail, a complete set of Fleer baseball cards from that year.

I could do nothing but stare. Despite the fact that before that moment I never knew they printed baseball cards in full sets, I realized that my lifelong dream was to own a set. I had to have those cards.

Doing some mental calculations, I realized that Dad would have already done the Christmas shopping. He always got crappy gifts like socks or video games that sucked.

But I had the money. I could afford the cards... if I spent my circus money.

For the first time in my life, I was conflicted. I really needed that set of baseball cards, but I really wanted to go to the circus, too. I must have stared into the window of that store for an hour, trying to weigh the benefits of the cards against the circus.

I stewed over the decision for days. I was miserable. I knew that the store was marking things down for the holiday season and that if I waited too long, the price would go up and I'd never be able to afford those cards.

Still, I'd already put so much work into saving for the circus, denied myself so many quarters at the arcade, and so many candy bars...I tried to imagine how I'd feel if the circus was in town and I didn't get to go.

Finally, after several days of agony, I decided to ask my sister for advice.

She helpfully pointed out that I was stupid if I wanted little pieces of cardboard over a chance to see the circus. Something you did was always better than something you owned, she said. I felt really silly, not so much because I wanted to spend a lot of money on pieces of cardboard, but because my sister told me I was silly.

My sister realized that I would eventually cave-in to the pressure and decided to help me out. She told me that she'd keep my money safe in her room, hidden somewhere that I couldn't find. Each month, when Dad gave us our allowances, I would give her some of mine, and she'd add it to my savings. That way I could rest easy, knowing that I couldn't foolishly squander my money on something so meaningless as baseball cards. When spring got here, she'd give me the money and then I could go to the circus.

I was grateful for the opportunity to get rid of temptation. I was never too good with willpower, so I agreed. I gave her a shoebox with my life savings, upwards of seven dollars.

Every month, my father would give us each our allowances, and I'd dutifully subtract the price of a Batman comic and a few bucks for the arcade, then give the rest to her.

I began to wonder if I was going to have enough money saved up. Sure, Christmas was coming up, and that always meant cash from a bunch of relatives I didn't care about, but that wasn't for savings; that was spending money. What if the circus came to town and I couldn't afford a ticket?

So, after Christmas, when it snowed, I took a shovel from our garage and went around the neighborhood, offering to shovel my neighbors' sidewalks for a dollar. In our neighborhood, every home had something like a mile of sidewalk, so a dollar was a steal. All of our neighbors happily gave me a buck and told me to get to it.

I'm pretty certain I didn't actually do any shoveling. They'd give me a dollar and close the door, and I'd wait a couple of minutes and then go home and give the dollar to my sister. Sadly, this shrewd financial plan still doesn't work.

Finally, after what seemed like years, it was the day that the circus arrived in town. I was so excited; I hadn't slept at all the night before. Wired like a Chihuahua gnawing on a power cable, I bounced downstairs for breakfast.

But my heart stopped; horror of horrors, my sister wasn't home and wouldn't be back all day!

Once I was able to move again, I realized that I'd have to find my savings myself. I went to her room and began looking around for the shoebox that had my entire life in it.

She'd hidden it cleverly, but eventually I found it on the shelf in her closet. I couldn't reach it, so I had to ask our maid to get it down for me. Once I had the box in my clutches, I ran to my room to count the money. I could hardly wait! I must have saved thousands of dollars by now!

Tearing off the lid, I turned the box over and dumped everything out.

It took me a few minutes to figure out why there was only seventeen cents and a my-first-makeup-kit (complete with wrapper and receipt) in the box. Confusion turned to horror, and horror to anger.

Of course! My sister had played me like a fool. What a sweet deal: she got her whole allowance every month, plus some of mine, plus the shoveling money I had worked so hard for. I was so stupid.

I went crying to my father, and he told me I was pretty much screwed. If I was stupid enough to be conned, it was my own damn fault. He refused to buy me a ticket even when I begged.

My heart broken, I stormed from the house. I bawled until my stomach ached. For months, I had been anticipating the circus, and my sister had crushed my dreams.

At some point, I found myself walking toward where I'd seen the poster for the circus. I wanted to gaze longingly at the magic that I'd never see, the wonder that I'd never know.

The poster was there, tattered by a long winter's weather. A clown smiled brightly at me, happy that my life was ruined.

Stupid me, I stared at the poster for a long time before something dawned on me.

This was a poster for the circus last year. The circus wasn't coming to town at all. It had been here a long time ago, but wasn't coming back.

Moral of the story: invest in baseball cards.

Tobacco

by Phyllis Coleman

Lucy Marie's family lived for the tobacco and prayed the tobacco lived for them. It claimed their lives, dictated their vacations, and told them what to do from Memorial Day till Labor Day. Then there would be a short break before they lit the low smoldering fires in the barn for the curing. Lucy Marie loved that monster that ruled her family, from the first tiny shoot pressing through the rich fertile Kentucky soil to the last goodbye on the floor of the auction. The smell in the fields was sweet; the humid days intensified the aroma and then hung in the night air like the sheets on her momma's clothesline. She loved to chase lightning bugs at night and catch the smell of the ripening tobacco in the fields. Everyone teased Lucy; she had tobacco juice in her veins instead of blood. When she was younger, that frightened her. But now, she was almost twelve and knew better.

The nurturing chores always came first; the boys and Lucy would head off to the fields early before the sticky heat became unbearable. By July, the plants would be six feet tall and no air could get through the giant leaves. Lucy's brothers would scare her, telling her that they would leave her in the field, and she would never be seen again. After each plant had been examined for worms and suckers, they would take their peanut butter sandwiches into the woods and play till Ned got home from work.

None of the kids ever wore shoes except to go to the IGA and church. By the time they went back to school, their feet were rough and callused. Their skin would turn a deep rich brown, and they would be accused of having a background not becoming of the times in the South. Lucy had only a pair of flip-flops for summer and her black patent leathers from Easter. She always got new shoes for Easter.

Momma didn't often take the kids into town. It just cost too much if they whined around and convinced her to buy three boxes of cereal. Wasting money always got Ned all riled up. Lucy was happy they didn't see too much of Ned. He complained about everything they did. Every Friday morning was the same old speech if she was goin' to see Auntie, no eye shadow, no this, no that. She wondered if Ned would flip on to his head and spin like he was possessed by the devil himself if he knew Lucy Marie had been driving that big Buick that Auntie owned. But that was her and Auntie's secret, and Ned didn't need to know everything.

Now, Sundays were sacred; Lucy and the boys didn't go to the fields. Momma put a roast

in the oven, and they all went to Coles Campground Methodist Church. Grandmother Betty and Granddad Frank would go, too. Lord, Judy Mae would play that piano, and they would all sing “Amazing Grace.” Ned’s favorite was “I’ll Fly Away.” Lucy believed in Jesus, of course, but just didn’t understand why they all wanted to die and see Him so badly. She believed she would like to wait a bit longer, at least till the tobacco was sold. Just wouldn’t be right to go off and leave it.

After lunch, the great-aunts and uncles would get together at one house or another. Lucy always hoped they would meet up at Auntie’s or Aunt Cleo’s; they had the pretty furniture without covers and let her sit anywhere. Cleo had a big garden with plenty of squash and tomatoes. Both had refrigerated air, too; Lucy’s house did not. Besides the constant argument over whether President Nixon was doing things right or not, playing canasta and pinochle was the afternoon entertainment. Lucy was the only kid allowed to play cards with the uncles. She was probably the only one tough enough to listen to the ranting and enjoy the banter. She felt she was getting a good education; after all, they were talking about the President.

Granddad Frank was as bad a complainer as Ned, and Lucy just got sick of both. She wondered how anyone could get so miserable and want everyone else to be the same. They always found something wrong with everything and made sure Lucy and the boys knew. When Ned checked the tobacco each evening, he always found worms, and those kids were in trouble again. Lucy Marie knew she had checked all her plants and squished each worm. Why, she could never do anything to hurt tobacco. When too many worms got on a plant, it changed from the green she imagined was just like the color of the sea to an awful, sickly yellow. Ned and Granddad were just crazy if they thought she would leave even one worm.

When the time came for cuttin’ the tobacco, all the uncles would help. Momma would fix a big chest full of RC Colas and moon pies to take to the field. Cutting took everyone you knew to bring the crop to the barn. When they finished at one farm, everyone went to another farm till everyone had cut and hung their tobacco. It was the only time working on Sunday was allowed. Grandmother Betty said the Lord didn’t mind since we needed the money to give to the church. Lucy could see the reason in that.

By Sunday night, they would all sit around and talk about who had the prettiest tobacco. Lucy’s family always drew a good price, and sometimes a man came from the auction and bought their tobacco right out of the barn. Ned had a reputation for growing big, pretty tobacco. Lucy wondered if anyone ever noticed that the best tobacco crop in the county was grown by a bunch of kids?

Nonfiction

Hippies Crossing

by Holly Montgomery

I had never seen anyone get stabbed until I went to Colorado. “Holly! Do you want to go to Colorado with me?” is how it all started. Justin was planning a trip to see The Dead (as they’re now known since Jerry Garcia died). I agreed, of course, and found out that Marcus would also be joining us.

Long before the actual road trip started, my inner Girl Scout awakened, and I started obsessing about how I was going to pack. At that time, I was working at a call center, out-sourced customer service for spoiled credit card account holders. That’s where I met Justin and Marcus in training. We all hated the job and loved the same music; this strange combination would be the grease and glue of our friendship. After all, a partner in crime that jams out to Pink Floyd is a rare find among the sheep and cattle working around us.

We hit the road, off to destinations hours from home, ready for adventure. The trip-talk started with discussions of technical matters: seating arrangements, CD rotation, car chases, etc. Quickly the subject matter changed to reflect what we were watching pass by on the windshield in front of us, as it acted like an oversized television. The true matter of others can easily be revealed simply by spending twelve hours with them in a cramped car cab, telling everything they didn’t want you to know.

The sky was alive and storming. Kansas is boring like no other state, but the open and clean horizon gave a solid platform for the sky’s performance. The clouds were filled with electricity. “One of These Days,” a mostly instrumental song by Pink Floyd, played over the stereo speakers. The bass seemed to make the car travel at incredible speed as if the tempo could literally make the road fly by much faster. Every lightning strike seemed synchronized with the clashing drums. If ever a theory for God existed, I figure the *Pink Floyd* lightning show is my personal favorite.

Pulling up to the Hotel 6 on Wadsworth in Lakewood, Colorado, was a sleepy check-in experience. After twelve hours on the road, everything was dreamlike. The muted blue-and-gray tones from the overcast Colorado day made me yawn and need a bed like a man in the desert needs water. The Denver we’d just driven through was definitely more industrial than my childhood memories of the city. I wanted to stop and explore, but our hotel was waiting. The room was in Justin’s name only, so Marcus and I were to be stowaways. It’s amazing how little money you need to travel with a little help from your friends.

The mountains seemed as if they could swallow me whole if they wanted to do so. Every picture I took seemed to fail their majesty and mighty patience. “Breathtaking” was the only thing I could think, perhaps because of the thin air from the high altitude or because sometimes you forget that the earth has a skin. Every breath was clean and sharp, with only a faint smell of evergreens. I took it all in and felt alive.

Morrison, Colorado, is the home of Red Rocks Amphitheater, where the show was to be held. We drove up for a pre-show glimpse of the place. On the way there, we passed through the quaint town. The pre-show setup had started, but we could still roam around freely when we reached the top. There was a small museum-type building explaining how the natural amphitheater hosted several different bands over the years, many of which recorded live albums there. The stadium was empty, but I caught a couple of pictures with the guys as a before-and-after.

As they posed for the photos, I realized how they must look to the outside world; I saw the boys I had met only eight months ago. Justin looked like an over-privileged surfer and Marcus sported his skater-guy motif. My travel partners, both eager to leave Oklahoma, were friends I wouldn’t have had in high school.

As we were driving down the road, back to the hotel, we passed a “Pedestrian Crossing” sign with a hula hoop drawn around the waist of the black-on-yellow silhouette. We all started laughing hysterically and shouted, “HIPPIES CROSSING!”

After much cruising up and down the main street of Lakewood, Wadsworth, we returned to the show. A long line of cars had formed and so had the number of people walking by the cars, trying to get tickets. The people flowed in, and we finally parked in one of the three main parking lots. This is where the “drug swap meet” began.

As a child, I always imagined that the “black market” was an actual place. I imagined a booth with all the heroin and stolen TVs. I was disappointed to learn in my later years that this was not true. I actually wanted to go to the black market. This would be as close as I would ever get.

The people who travel with The Dead, or Dead Heads, were everywhere. You could tell quite easily who lived their nomadic lives around these shows from the people just showing up for the day. The uniform for a Dead Head varied, but usually involved some dreadlocks and muddy pants, along with a smile. These people were living another version of the American Dream that I hadn’t seen before. They took liberties literally, like free enterprise or freedom to gather peacefully, and didn’t care much what the modern world had to say about it. Freedom Fighters with a passive nature swarmed all around the parking lots, selling whatever they had to sell, hoping to get enough gas money for the next town.

Many of the shouting vendors were selling legitimate goods, like stickers and posters. The other products that some of these people were selling were generally spoken under their breath. “Jerry Garcia tee shirts! One size fits all!” was followed quickly by a hushed

“Nuggets,” which is slang for high quality marijuana. Justin gave us a quick tutorial on the particular brand of drug jargon being used out here because we didn’t recognize a lot of it. Justin knew from experience.

Marcus and I were floored. We knew that people at Dead shows were typically hippies, and with hippies went drug use, but we had no idea that all the parking lots would feel like a gigantic drug-selling party. We had to get back in Justin’s car as he looked for tickets, just so we could freak out on each other.

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” we shouted at one another, with eyes like saucers, giggling like children who had done something naughty. We couldn’t believe that anything like this existed in America. People walked by, offering us every form of pot or mushroom that we’d ever heard of. I thought you had to go to Amsterdam to see this kind of behavior. Drugs weren’t the only things unique to this counter-culture. I was amazed at the absolute, almost unconditional, cheery demeanor of the Dead Heads. Generosity flowed, and you could feel it all around you.

One of the many legitimate ways money was made was by preparing food and selling it to the crowd. The place was a virtual mecca of vegetarian burritos. You could see people everywhere, standing with a finger in the air, shouting, “I need organic peanut butter and Kentucky wildflower honey sandwiches.” The food was cheap and plentiful. Others were collecting the varying strains of ganja they could find; I was tasting every grilled cheese I could find between Jell-O shots.

You could see people everywhere, standing with a finger in the air, shouting, “I need a miracle!” These unfortunate souls didn’t have tickets to go in to the show, so this is how they let the other Dead Heads know they needed the kindness of someone to sacrifice a ticket. These events are always sold-out, and even if you travel around with the band, you might not get in. My heart sank when I looked at my ticket for I knew I wasn’t nearly the fan that some of these people were, and it reminded me that sometimes money isn’t the only currency in life.

The light sprinkles of rain gently fell around us as the show began. The rain couldn’t stop the spirit of the hippies as they danced with more heart than anything you can find on television. The earthy-crunchy folks, covered in mud, danced like the Earth’s rotation was reliant on their joyous motion. Justin and I danced in the row where we were seated, jamming out to the bluegrass and rock songs as they played, and I didn’t feel self-conscious at all about dancing in public—a rare thing for me.

The first day of the concert ended early for me. Between the tiring trip and the cold rain, I had to leave the show halfway through. I didn’t know at the time that I wouldn’t get tickets for the next two days, but instead would be soaking in all the life stirring in the parking lots or climbing around on the nearby mountains.

The third day of the shows, we still hadn’t seen everything the shows had to offer, but

we were trying. The three lots kept shifting around, with new stuff appearing all the time. A tie-dye-covered girl wandered by me with a pole, featuring dozens of handmade necklaces, strapped to her head. I stopped her to look at her wares and talked casually with the tan, down-to-earth girl about her glass beads and her hemp-weaving technique. Before we knew it, a small group of people had pooled behind me.

I turned around to see what all the commotion was. One of the hippies I'd seen wandering around for the past three days was standing defensively against another man, seemingly a local. The townie jabbed his finger into the hippie's chest and cursed at him. A fight was obviously brewing, but I couldn't make out what either man was saying. They grew red in the face, and you could see the anger enveloping them as they began to shake and spit between words. They looked ready to burst. I looked around in the crowd and saw that both guys had a posse behind them. All the hippies gathered around their colleague, especially a very angry-looking girl who, I assumed, was the hippie's girlfriend.

Before I could even react to the situation, I saw one of the local guys in the crowd break a beer bottle and forcibly ram the sharp edges into the hippie's stomach. I was paralyzed. The past three days had filled me with a feeling of love and peace, now broken like the shards of brown glass stuck in that man's abdomen. Even the townie he was arguing with was frozen with fear, not understanding that his friend had just stabbed the guy.

I decided the best thing I could do was leave the area. At least thirty other people were around to act as witnesses, but nobody was seeking medical attention for the bleeding guy on the ground. As soon as I could move, I ran to an ambulance and alerted the people there as to what happened.

"Some guy just got stabbed in Lot C!" I shouted, out of breath from running uphill in the thin air.

"Huh?" the stocky female paramedic responded with no facial expression at all.

"Two guys were in a fight, and some random third guy stabbed one of them with a broken beer bottle; you have to help him!"

The medic's face was apathetic, as if she were a fast-food clerk and I had just ordered a quarter-pounder with cheese. The so-called authorities responded with not only the same boredom, but you could almost smell the lack of concern for this person's life. This shocked me more than watching the violence itself. All my good feelings about life and humanity that had built recently at the concert were suddenly gone.

You could hear every Dead Head screaming, "Someone stabbed Kevin!" and people had mobilized at that point to get help. The "help," however, had not mobilized. I stood by and watched for more than twenty minutes as he lay on the ground, clutching his stomach with bloody hands.

Disturbed, I left the scene. Justin, Marcus, and I found a spot where we could watch the crowd and lights from the concert as we listened to the music bounce off the mountains. I

calmed down, knowing that everything was tended to, and kicked back to hear The Dead cover “Strawberry Fields Forever.”

Everything was back to where it should be. The three of us, listening to the music, wishing we had tickets to enter the show, enjoying our last night of escapism, knowing we had to go home eventually.

Le Séchage

by Elizabeth Childers

For two days, my heater and my wet laundry had made my tiny dorm room into a steamy sauna. Jeans covered my heater; socks plastered my chair; shirts hung from my shelves; and panties dangled from every knob and corner.

Two days ago had been another cold, gray, drippy Bordeaux afternoon. For over an hour, I had waited in the tiny, stifling laundry room to *faire le lavage* for the first time since arriving in France. Steam covered the windows. Trash was piled in one corner on top of an empty garbage bag. There were no chairs. Several students and I sat on the dusty floor, waiting for even one of the two working washers. The third washer was *en panne*. (I would eventually discover that this machine spent more time out of commission than actually cleaning clothes.) Our entire village was expected to keep their clothes clean with “three” washers and two dryers locked up promptly at 9:00 p.m. and never open on Sundays.

Finally, the washers were mine. I stuffed my clothes inside, waited some more, then transferred my clothes to the dryers. The next student in line—a dark-skinned African woman—immediately began stuffing her clothes into the washers. Every one of our loads looked the same: whites, delicates, jeans, and darks all mixed together. With only two washers, sorting clothes was a luxury not afforded to us.

I pulled one of the tokens I had purchased earlier in the day at the *Accueil* from my pocket and tried to slide it into the slot. The token wouldn’t fit. I turned it one way, then another, trying to force the grooves of the token into the shape of the slot. They didn’t match. The African woman noticed my frustration and pulled a smaller token with different ridges from her pocket. She told me this token, which I had never seen, was for *le séchage*. I wasn’t sure if I should believe her. If she were right, surely the lady at the *Accueil* would have sold me some that morning when I asked for laundry tokens.

Leaving my wet laundry in the dryer, I ran into the hall, down the stairs, and across the rainy courtyard to the *Accueil*. I asked the attendant if it were true.

“Are there different tokens for *le séchage*?” I asked in my broken French.

“*Qui*,” she replied.

I had been warned that I should buy tokens early in the day before the *Accueil* ran out. So I knew the chances were slim when I asked, “Can I buy two tokens for *le séchage*?”

“I don’t have any.”

“When will you have some?”

“Monday morning, maybe by lunchtime.”

It was Friday afternoon. Pictures of my wet laundry pasted themselves in my brain next to the words “Monday morning.” My heart beat faster to keep up with the angry words racing through my head. My neck and jaw were taut as I strained to keep my voice level.

“Why didn’t you tell me when I bought tokens from you this morning?”

“Because you only asked for tokens for *le lavage*,” she replied as if it were obvious that a brand new exchange student should have known that two kinds of tokens are required for doing laundry.

More angry words flooded my brain. I wanted to ask her if all French people wash their clothes without drying them. I wanted to tell her that, in America, when we talk about washing our clothes, we usually mean drying them as well so that we have something to wear. But I didn’t. I took a deep breath. I forced a *merci*. And I walked back through the drippy courtyard, up the stairs, and down the hall to my wet laundry, thinking of more smart comebacks and listening to all the useless *lavage* tokens jingling in my pocket. I pulled the wet clothes out of the dryer, stuffed them in my suitcase, and dragged them back across the dreary courtyard to my room. Then I began to drape and to hang and to dangle.

The next time I did laundry, I discovered why using one’s dorm as a clothes drying rack is a normal part of life at the *Université de Bordeaux*: the dryers left my clothes so wet the machines were actually like an extra spin cycle on the washer.

So, I learned to lessen the sauna effect by opening my screenless window and swatting the mosquitoes. I learned that doing laundry isn’t needed nearly as often as I once thought. And I learned that, for the moment, I could do without *le séchage*.

The Midnight to Eight Shift

by Rebecca Seaton

Empower them—mop the cracked linoleum floor in the disabled room. Whose green gum am I scraping off the patterned floor? What do they look like? Some children have lice; what do their moms look like? Sunburn, eczema, tired eyes, safety-pin-and-Bic-ink tattoos, bare feet, too much eyeliner, cigarette crinkles surrounding their mouths. They laugh but they know no joy. I wish I could see the men—the people who beat them, who lock them in closets, hit them with coffee mugs, staple guns, fists, car doors, beef jerky.

Yes, being pinned to the floor by a 200-pound man, in full view of three toddlers, violently whipped with rough-cut home-dried venison jerky until blood runs from the slices on your thighs—yes, this is domestic violence.

Listening to witty, well-read, hip men on public radio made me yearn, filled me with hunger for coffee, stacks of CDs and men with library-pale skin. But here I was, a saint, a hotel maid, a detective, a warden, a therapist, a cigarette dispenser planted in the domestic-violence shelter support-staff office.

The house surrounds me and they do, too, the women and their children. Their stories, similar to alien abduction experiences, the reality of their lives just as foreign to me as Martians and Vulcans.

Surrounded by the experimental human lab, test cases gone sour, but I'm the one in the coat and rubber gloves. I'm the one who sprays the mattresses with \$1 cans of disinfectant. They need me. How I got here is less frightening than how they got here. When the shift is over, I unlock the door and walk out. I can find that coffee shop full of young men in wrinkled T-shirts; I can stay out past ten p.m., drink dark beer and wear lipstick that I bought for myself. Nobody donates lipstick and tampons to women who haven't been assaulted. They can play in the storage boxes of donations, but they have to hide their cars, be in by ten, wipe out the microwave and live with other women who have schemed, fought and lied to stay alive. Women just like them, nothing like me.

There are bottles and bottles of hideous orangey-coral nail polish among the donations—it cannot count towards good karma to donate anything that turns your own stomach. Nobody discovers nirvana packing up dusty cans of cranberry jelly and solid pack pumpkin in August, dropping it off in a ragged Wal-Mart bag and calling it charity.

No more pork-and-beans. No more creamed corn. Donate tacos if you really want to gain

Allah's favor.

"He likes to break things with his forehead—stereos, windshields. He had me help him superglue his nose back on after he'd bashed out my Jeep windshield." She never stopped calling him. She hid his stolen cars behind the security gate. She mixed peanut butter and Karo syrup in a coffee mug and ate it with a spoon. She wore the coral polish on thick, clicking, fake fingernails. She thought we believed her, but I saw the meth in her eyes, her chapped lips, her twitching eyelids and overrun flip-flop shoes. I watched her cry and twitch and click those nails, and it was as real as theater, but I'm the one who gets paid to show up.

They have children, somewhere—not here with them but with relatives, in DHS custody in Mexico, handed over for adoption—with the abuser. Children connected only by the thin fragile threads of biology and 7-11 phone cards. Children who dream of alien abduction, who dream of disappearing into space.

Mother's New Chair

by John W. Perry

Spring catalogs were always exciting for my mother. They gave her a refreshing change of pace from the burdens of keeping a big farmhouse in order and meeting the daily demands of four young children. After her housework had been completed, Mother would fix herself some tea and sit down at the kitchen table with one of the new catalogs. She quickly scanned the familiar items, but slowly perused new merchandise and sale items. One day I noticed that she was looking intently at chairs in the furniture section. I could understand why since our house was bursting at the seams with young children, and there were few places for family members to sit.

My dad would not be concerned about such matters, except if it meant spending money, and then his response would be that the floor in front of the couch was adequate for the younger siblings. I can almost hear him say, "They can sit at our feet. They'll be close at hand. Besides, they won't know the difference."

Mother was also frugal, but when she decided to buy something for the house and her family, she could easily loosen the purse strings. As she examined each chair, she made an interesting discovery. A new modernistic chair based on a Danish design was on sale. It had a lime-green covering made of vinyl, something new on the market. Even better, the price fit her budget and could be purchased using her chicken and egg money.

After she decided to buy the chair, she carefully filled out the order form and inserted her money in the attached envelope. Coins were taped to a 3x5 card so they wouldn't rattle around and become a temptation for "sticky fingers." The envelope was personally handed to the mailman, and the date of delivery was then marked on her kitchen calendar.

While waiting for shipment, Mother experimented with different arrangements to accommodate the new chair. It was fun watching Mom fuss over changes in our home. We all shared in my mother's excitement for something new and different.

On the much-anticipated delivery day, the mailman drove down our long lane, a rare event. He stopped at the front door, which immediately prompted a family gathering. As he labored to remove a heavy cardboard box from his truck, six pairs of eyes watched his every move. As a surprise to me, my mother commanded that I go out and bring the package into the house. Ordinarily, I was not given such responsibility, but, on this day, I had the honor of being my mother's messenger.

When I got to the mailman, I stated in a very business-like tone, "Let me have my mother's package."

The mailman looked at me in a reserved, authoritarian way, as if to say, "Who are you, kid?"

"It's my mother's new chair," I declared. "Let me have it."

"Well," said the mailman. "I think I'll have to help you. It is a heavy package."

We carried the package up the front porch steps, through the front door, and set it down in our front hall. Everyone gathered around and stood quietly, some with awe, others with nervous fidgeting. Given the reception, the package could have passed as a treasure chest.

"Never saw such a small box for it to have a chair inside," the mailman declared as he broke the extended silence. "I'd like to see it."

Mother testily commented that she didn't have a knife handy. The mailman felt in his pocket and realized he also did not have a knife. "Well," he said. "I guess I'll be on my way."

Just at this crucial moment when something like a super asteroid could be poised between striking the earth or just glancing off the atmosphere, I blurted out, "I have a knife in my pocket." Sighs of relief shot through the group.

"I will open it, Mother," I said helpfully.

Mother hesitated for a moment, but said, "Okay, but be careful."

I pulled out the big old spay blade of my trusty Barlow knife and began to cut through the outer shell of cardboard box. I guess we all assumed that Sears and Roebuck would pack their merchandise with a high degree of care, at least, have it double-boxed with padding.

As I was cutting through the cardboard, the knife blade encountered an obstruction. It resisted at first, but gave way as if cutting through a tough piece of fabric. I thought about stopping, but I was under pressure to get the job done. I plunged ahead and opened up the top flaps of the package. A lime-green glow appeared as everyone gathered around the opening.

It turned out to be the backrest of the chair. But it was not wrapped or protected in the usual way. It just fit flush with the top of the box. As we all looked, a collective gasp swept through the group. The bright, lime-green vinyl of the backrest had been slashed down the middle, exposing fuzzy strips of brown padding. The exposed entrails of a butchered animal could not have been any more shocking.

"What did you do?" my mother cried out.

I stood looking in disbelief and then felt myself shrinking into oblivion as the glare of every eye radiated through me and penetrated every fiber of my body. I turned into an abject mass. I had no breath to speak, no energy to move, and no impulses left to explain my indescribable act.

The mailman was equally stunned, but offered a suggestion that sounded so reasonable that it allowed me quickly to inhale enough air to avoid dropping dead on the spot.

“You could just tape it,” the mailman suggested.

Before I could inhale again, my mother stated in a firm voice, “All of you had better leave.”

The look on my mother’s face and the peculiar curl of her pointing fingers suggested that a lioness was about to strike. In that instant that was akin to jumping off a railroad bridge as a roaring train approached, everyone scattered. As I stumbled out the door, the mailman had preceded me by several steps. Before I could turn to head for my secret hideout in our old barn, the mailman had started his truck. He tore down the lane in a cloud of dust and was out on the road before I reached the barn. In a state of shock, despondency, and despair, I hid out, entombed within a secret cavern of loose hay. I had to share my plight with agitated barn mice as they readjusted their tiny lives to accommodate my sudden intrusion. In the darkness and with the background sounds of tiny squeaks, the horrible accident played over and over in my mind until the kindness of sleep sent me into oblivion far away from the harsh reality of a childhood mistake.

I awoke when I heard my father call for the cows to come in for feed. When I stumbled out of my secret entrance to see where he was, I felt disheveled and nearly lifeless. I was covered with a mass of dried hay stems and blossoms. When I rounded a corner of the manger, I came face-to-face with my father who was standing, watching his cows. When he saw me, he was a bit startled, but after eyeing my appearance, he exclaimed, “What in the hell have you been doing? You look like a gunshot dog that crawled under the manger to hide.”

“Do you know what I’m talking about?” After seeing my puzzled face, he said, “I’m talking about a good hunting dog accidentally getting a dose of buckshot as it chased a rabbit. It did not understand a horrible mistake. All it could do was run and hide.”

“I talked with your mother when I got home, and she decided that what happened today was just a mistake.”

It was certainly not as bad as me accidentally shooting our Lady dog last year during rabbit season. I’ve kicked myself a thousand times over the accident, but even though little Lady will never be able to hunt again, we kept her. Some things happen, and there is nothing you can do about it. All you can do is try to make the best of it.

Later, as my father and I walked back to the house, I felt a little better but could not speak. When we got to the house, we entered through the back door, washed up, and walked through the kitchen.

Dad looked around, a bit puzzled, and then wondered aloud, “Hum, I wonder where your mother is?” Mother, with her hear-a-pin-drop hearing, spoke up, “I’m in here sewing.”

Out of curiosity, we walked into the sewing room. The first thing we saw was mother's new chair—unpacked, fully assembled and sitting by her side. The slash in the backrest was as visible as ever. It was too painful to look at, so I turned my attention to Mother. She was sewing some type of heavy green cloth about one foot wide and four feet long. It was double-layered and had carefully-prepared rounded edges, like upholstery. I was very impressed with her skill as she worked to complete the piece.

She then took the finished material and placed it over the back of the chair. When she folded the piece over the top and bottom, it covered the damaged part completely. As she pulled it tight, the fabric blended perfectly with the vinyl cover.

Just then, Mother said, "Come here and hold these two ends. Keep them tight while I sew."

With several deft strokes of her large needle, she connected the ends of the covering. It looked like it was part of the chair's design. I marveled at my mother's creative ability.

"Mom," I said. "You sure know how to do things. That looks great."

Mom turned, patted me on the back and replied, "Couldn't have done it without you. Now take the chair into the living room."

I placed the chair down next to Dad's easy chair and said, "It's all fixed." He gave me an indifferent look, as if to say, "You did not do anything except be a pain in the ass." But that was OK. His stares cut less sharply than his biting tongue. He motioned for me to sit. I plopped myself down and just let my mind wander. I could not believe the events of the day. Just hours before, I was certain my demise was forthcoming. Now, I had the self-appointed honor of being the first to sit on Mother's new chair. I felt resurrected.

When my mother came into the room, I got up and said, "Here, Mother, come and sit in your new chair."

She took a long look at the chair, sighed and then quietly said, "No, that chair is for you children." We eventually wore the chair to pieces. However, Mom's "patchwork" endured. Mothers are like that.

Scars

By Ana Rodriguez

Getting the chicken pox was momentous. I got them from the cutest boy in class. I sat extra close the day he came back to school. My imagination ran wild as I could almost feel the harmless virus crawling up my arm. I knew I would get to miss the dreaded science test and the mysterious lunch that I swore changed colors as it cooled. My heart jumped when I realized I would also miss the anticipated introduction to algebra, a missed lesson that would haunt my high school years.

By noon, I sat in the nurse's office, face flushed, but wearing a huge smile. My mother took off from work and held my hand tight as we drove home. The first two we noticed were on my shoulder. I didn't understand her look of worry. I knew everyone got chicken pox and I was just like everyone else. I was lucky and was ready to watch two entire weeks of *Silver Spoons* and *Different Strokes*. She handed me the remote before she made the best chicken soup I had ever tasted. She sat on the edge of my bed with a cold towel on my head until I fell asleep.

I was told not to scratch, so I didn't. I was told to get plenty of rest, so I did. I was told they would all disappear. But they didn't. I didn't understand why the two silly chicken pox on my shoulder just wouldn't go away. First, three weeks, then five. I was a normal seventh grader before. But this was not normal.

I held my mother's hand as we walked into the doctor's impeccable office. I sat nervously as the nurse whispered to my mother and smiled at me as she said, "I'm so sorry." in a voice too sweet to be real. The tick of the clock grew louder as my age dwindled in nervousness. Holding tight to my mother's hand, I concentrated on the carpet as we were led to the room. Within minutes, a white coat happily breezed in. He chatted with my mother, responding to her questions as he ran his clammy hand over my exposed shoulder.

He winked at me and said, "Sorry, Hon. They just aren't going to go away."

Confusion drifted over my face as his echoing words made me dizzy with disbelief

A single tear burned my cheek. The words "keloids," "shots," and "forever" flew by me in a whirl as he reached for his needle. I lay down on the crinkly exam table, pretending to be calm as I prepared for the worst. I wasn't close to prepared. The pain of the first shot in the sensitive pox scar was impossible for a twelve-year-old to endure. It pierced my skin like a knife and lasted longer than my scream.

I wiped my tears and sat up as I listened to him explain that every single cut and every single scratch I will ever receive throughout my life will form a scar. He explained that I had inherited the skin rarity from my father. He went on to explain how the “little” shots prevent the scars from growing bigger.

“She won’t heal normally,” he said.

I was no longer a normal seventh grader.

I couldn’t grasp the “forever” part of his speech. I couldn’t grasp that there would be more shots. I would have to come back for the injections every month of my life. I would have to suffer forever. Forever.

We left as he patted my head and said, “It didn’t hurt that bad, did it? I’ll see you next month.”

Shock overwhelmed me as I hugged my mother in the parking lot. She had no idea how to answer the *why*’s.

Month after month, year after year I returned. The shots increased. The two on my shoulder were joined by one on my leg, three on my hand and one on my knee. Once I passed out from the pain of twenty-seven injections.

I still sit in the same waiting room and wait my turn for the arrogant white coat to see me. I still lie on the crinkly exam table with a childhood of shots behind me and a lifetime of shots ahead. I had smiled when I first saw the pox, but I didn’t realize that eighteen years later, the tears would still be burning my cheeks.

Paris Sketchings

by P. L. George

Day 1:

Recovering from the wedding. Nine-hour flight to Paris, crammed cabin, frigid, watched the soccer movie with Will Farrell. OKAY. Landed groggy, jet-lagged, mess. Paris is full of metrosexuals, aristocratic. I'm the ideal American, rugged, individualist, crudeness as a definition in those eyes, touristy till they know I can actually write something. With my girl naked, chain-smoking cigarettes like we'll never get another. Bliss, the Tower lit like a NASA rocket burning, just outside our balcony.

Should have prepared for French. I go back to Spanish when struggling, saying "SI"... they don't understand. Two bistros on our street. The watchers, jacketed connoisseurs of people. Too high in dress, but not intellectually, I suspect.

Two a.m.—just like home, the city coming in silence. My girl naked. Me, in my boxers, scribbling, stacked spent butts in the ashtray. Taking it all in. Slowing my mind down. Sirens bang in the night, EEAW, EEAW, not like the sirens at home. I haven't slept in forever. Don't want to miss anything.

Ate toasted baguettes with *fromage* and tomatoes in bed. Watched the moon get jealous of the sparkling Tower. Am I here? It seems a dream, pulled out of my body, someone else living it. Me on my stomach, Andrea's hand on the back of my thigh; she's the sleeper in this relationship, me the insomniac.

I was reminded, or should I say why I always loved her. She understands me, will dump everything for me, and I her. Everyone, I think, has picked a headstone, wrote the epitaph. Another hypocrite who wrote *Bullet* died in suburbia by his own hand, a pistol, marriage. No, I'm a new defender of such things, they will see. The disgruntled lovers who found no one, the truth in all things the most important—love, friend, companion, crying shoulders... to love, cheers.

Louvre tomorrow, build a memory, still living...good night.

Day 2:

As I watch soccer at midnight, those melodramatic actors when fouled, as if life was ending. Yesterday walked to the *Tour de Eiffel*, monstrous, bounced up the street where it stood, kissing sky; brown and bronzed, videoed in ecstasy, strolled through, looked up with breathless eyes in grand wondered dizziness. Walked what seemed eternity through near accidents, lost...me and Andrea in electric Paris. Found the *Champs*, the *Arc de Triomphe*. All the stores closed. When they opened, couldn't afford anything. Nothing caught me, like Socrates through the Athens markets. I like the dust, dirt, clothes, not metrosexual feminine. Bought a burger, fries, and Coke Light (no ice) at Quick Burger. Smoked with my girl about life and love. Annoyed a little; but hell, I'm in Paris. Walked some more. Disappointed in the touristy *Champs*, want the old books and art and expatriates, the earth. Felt old. It's all the bread, fat. We underdressed in Paris, ragamuffins. Came home and crashed for four hours; thank God for taxis. Driver annoyed I was a five-Euro fare. Slept for four, first, sipped Heineken in the hotel bar. Across from us, four Irish or Germans who spoke English well. The older, I imagined, named Dieter, knocked over a stool; we laughed. My engine kicked, went to a café, night high, fevered. Me jacketed; watching people run about, ate bruschetta (the salt-cured ham I think a pizza). My girl, blonde hair in the dirty city wind, flopping like Paris Hilton, but smart and more intriguing.

Found heaven—Malone's bar close to the Splendid. Satellite radio sucks, only it seemed britney spears and hip-hop, got lit, Heineken tap, then strong white Russians, when it was pulsing, me in the Dionysis mood. Andrea LIT. Got courageous, bought Tequila shots, loosen the Frenchies up. We tapped frosted glasses to each other, to relations. I imagine politics in this bar, understanding through liquor, we'd either kill each other or make love, it's all how you take your alcohol, the eternal truth. Talked of writing with one who spoke English, about Jack Kerouac, he spoke *On the Road*, we tipped some more back. My girl, sexy, sophistication, hooker heels, stiletto dress, bliss swirl. Watched the mademoiselle dump her cleavage toward me in beauty, dirty blonde, nose pierced, I thought of rose. Andrea, sober, no children even drunk, no children, me, too, spread me sad, no chained kids, next year Barcelona, the bulls calling..., but I lust for New York.

Cool bartender, whipped hair, barely 22, bought shots on the house for us, we live tonight. My girl turns drunk, but with sober words, I understand you. She doesn't have to say. I turn up, higher cliffs of love, and it's not just the city's effect. Went home at twelve after boasting I'm a published writer, holy bum poet saint. Don't remember the walk, Andrea my police made drunken phone calls to Mom and her sister. To Paris, salute, drunk as the old bards would salute. Till tomorrow. Sweet Hemingway.

Day 3:

Hungover. The vodka is not my friend in the morning. Held Andrea's hair over the toilet, my standard position. Oh, how she used to hold her liquor.

Ate our breakfast for twelve Euros in the dining room of the Splendid. Booked a trip to Versailles. Hungover. Tired, beat, felt all of my forty years. The tour guide, smart, petite, French, blonde boy hair, waif, pissed at the traffic, Steven, a poet friend, would fall for that tongue alone. Versailles—took the tour, ornateness in its high definitions, beautiful, monstrous, went to the garden, I thought, all this for one man, the mad Louis, too much time on his dead mind, while all of Paris lived in the unwashed gutters. Marie Antoinette insane, head rightly rolling off a guillotine blade. Hoped for Claude Monet in Giverny beauty, hope, sleepy village, full now with the veins and arteries of tourist crap that leeches on once the great are silenced. Saw the Japanese garden, water lilies, wondrous, joyous, beyond the company of words. Thought a quiet heaven had come down and found rest. Claude, that big mystic, with paradise on his fingers, carved out Shangri La in an outpost hermitage...saw Singer Sergeant paintings in the village, at the *Musée de America*, the offerings of little ole America, toasting their French fathers...tired, beat, ragged, alive, with all my eyes taking in aesthetics in my humbled mind...must write, lay it there on the page, the destiny, like these star epitaphs that glisten still on the immortal mounts. Andrea slept on my shoulder on the ride back to Paris and I only thought of the love definitions, her the first word...I fall in love with her more every day in mad Paris...can my eyes contain much more? Tomorrow the Louvre...Friday, the nude wild of the Crazy Horse, building life and memories...Louvre good night.

Day 4:

Started out at the Louvre, passed Napoleon's Tomb, a man important then, now just a name. Louvre, Italian saint Goth paintings of mendicants staring to mute sky for forgiveness and release...a trillion of the same paintings...saw the "Mona Lisa," one's eyes must fall on those black pools before expiring...Cut it early after the French Impressionist section was closed...went Pompidou, a cool market place, thug-apparelled Frenchies, black and white Frenchies slippin' sideways, Mike Jones ballers, just funny, clichés. I got a piercing, across from a Guinness bar, appropriate for me, an eyebrow piercing, for Paris marks and memories. Bought Steve Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* on the street along the Seine. Ate some pizza with shaved lamb, nasty. It was baking in the glass case, probably since last week...walk the streets, taking wind out of the guts of Paris, alive. Walked to St. Germaine, more shops, couldn't get the *Review* anywhere, the French language a barrier. Walked

in circles and circles, past all the French demure stone-walkers. . .the women beautiful, uppity, hard for us gutter blokes, but imagined them as brown porcelain with thin, long noses, really cold and sedate...Ate *plateau de fromage*, overpriced 10e, chased it with a Coca Cola Light, still 33 calories, still no ice...the piercing tweaking and stings a little, he didn't use a piercing gun, just stabbed scissors into it. My girl nude in bed. After we make love, through our open window, the traffic turning to sleep...Put "Fall Out Boy" on the CD player, makes me feel American and young as I push the lines of 40. I found out today that a man can overdose on cultured things, to be so reserved and refined like the French with a sedative smile. I was born for the wild cliffs, jumping fun of bouncy crazy, we the uncouth, the bloody Americans. . .they could learn a thing or two from us...if I'm into art, I must be serious and old with a concrete brow, no smile...blah...blah...blah. Maybe it's the CD. Maybe it's identity, I feel myself in the crosshairs of myself, set free from the stench of haughty eyes, the morose, the bloody French, Ginsberg looked East, Kerouac within and out into America. We have the answers here...I'll carve out an obscene corner of brilliance, wielded by my own happy obscene hand...Greg's gonna have trouble here, when he honeymoon...Galileans, poets will fit, nicely...If Greg hates the people in vox, he'll go over suicidal thoughts here, often...the pretentious flourish. The real are pushed to the sea's fortresses...oh, well, you live and learn: hell, it's Paris...tomorrow, the Crazy Horse, French tits and unshaven armpits, should be brilliant...till we meet again...

Day 5:

The day slammed sunny hot; decide to go to Houseman, a kind of Sistine Chapel Mall at the end of the Champs...all high-tail bourgeoisie clothes, Dior, Chanel, Louis Vitton, just musing the whole time, that there is nothing in the French mind but vanity and what label they put on their olive backs...a little irritated at the quasi-Mall that went round and round. With mosaic heaven themes painted on the ceiling...every sale guy and girl dressed impeccably, as if they spent a thousand years in front of the mirror. Greg would hate this place. I bitched and moaned at Andrea over the Metro Tunnel to leave; nothing interesting to see, however, only the opera house, which we stole to build our minuscule capitol. Andrea so distracted by everything, her eyes corralled only in Oklahoma and Tijuana once...begged for taxis none, went to the other side immediately, caught one, on to St. Michele, more my speed, Andrea's indecision of where to eat, again, first sitting at a pizza place, then her eyes catching the sign across the way, authentic French cuisine, ah, the whims of a woman, me not caring, I'll throw anything down my throat, cold or hot. We got away from the pissed Italian waiter who brought our water, across the cobblestoned street...with the proprietor and what I perceived a family member or spouse running the whole joint, her older,

bleached/black hair, dyed strangely, gorged split, somewhat of a peasant dress you see in a Fellini movie, older maybe on the other side of fifty, but those tits, still young and vibrant, showcasing. Imagined her open and hairy unkempt with all her European earth between her thighs. But my girl, the doe-eyed special, innocent, in suffering vulnerable, I the hero to her in almost everything I am, encouraging, bleeding love out of every gesture and emotion and breath...for what would I do without such loveliness and caring upon my perpetual suffering that recreates itself every dawn...I'm in the moods of Rilke..., had fondue, with three cheeses, hadn't had it in a long time, forgot you dip it with stale bread, ...decided on gluttony, had the chocolate fondue which we dipped banana, kiwi, pear, pineapple, apple and something else which I couldn't make out...then a crepe thinly stuffed with sausage and cheese, which was good...sat next to German girls, rose-cheeked, in that hue, with soft natural rouge, that rushed back memories of my Dutch grandma. Then older men with strolling violins and accordion, French, but reminded me of Venice, like organ grinders but missing the monkey, washed it all down with the 2nd bottle Coca Cola Light, about to bust. Traveled the shops, bought French bracelet for two Euros from a Russian head shop. Andrea peeking in all the shops for what she could stuff in her suitcase, to turn our apartment into Paris...all the book stands on the cobbled street, jetting out...but the little green stands along the Seine, all self-contained, fastened to the cement walls that run along it, in all their simplicity, as it should be, with old books by Jules Verne and Hugo and Cervantes and Steinbeck and Cocteau, and Céline. Old beaten bindings as if they survived and thrived and made it through this bloody age, that couldn't come up with anything...got ballsy. Then not to put the *Reddirtreview* on their shelves, language the ugly barrier, the curse of the Babel Tower...I imagined I would bang literature in their ears, sipping absinthe, toasting Rimbaud and Monet and how brilliant they were...but I just sat there like some dumb American, though cultured in my small town, this at the time, a little above me...came back, watched the five channels, which were German, tell of the evacuation in Houston where we were flying in to...got ready in my only sports coat, are they called that now? My girl picking it out at Burlington, she loving me, knowing just what I will go for, just above the threads of the dress code. Paid the Paris tour guide, Arab, for the night, took us to *de Vez*, a lonely but nice café bar. Sat with my girl in the moon, eating delicately and in a slight struggle. If you peeked around the corner, the Eiffel was lit and vibrant, sparkling in the backdrop of the nine o'clock black Paris sky. The millennium was when they lit the strobes on the Tower and the Parisians liked it so much that they kept it...ate sea bass, which was excellent and salad, and burned custard, which was the best thing I'd had here...sipped cheap wine, like an old American rail rider, out of expensive crystal glasses, so white they glistened off her eyes. Made our way to the Crazy Horse, just one rung below the Red Dog strip club back home, French style...pervert show, pervert row, red velvet was bleeding off the pillowed

ceiling, and had two complimentary drinks, Andrea, Heinekens, me, Scotch like a Shriner at a convention. Asian tourists, businessmen, howled...my girl bangin' dressed to the nines, black short skirt, high heels, a little prostitutey, I thought, they thought. The show, dancing light, beautiful women, red paint, darkest mascara...couldn't smoke, paralyzed by the second Scotch, close towards catatonic. Smoked cigarettes out on the red carpet with the driver, drunk small Asians, leering, undressing my girl, barely looking away...imagined Iawo, the dancer, which was written on the back of her shirt, stealing peeks at me...but we all think that at a strip club, but she the only one that stood out with any type of sparkle, the others concentrating zombie-like on their routines, been-there-done-that looks...but an experience, this is the anthem, try anything. All the jet lag and lack of sleep caught up with me in the three glasses of wine...wanted bed or home...the first three days, crammed with the sights, the Louvre, the Champs, the Arc, the Tower, Versailles, Nirvanic, Giverney, and then all the sipping of espresso like some aloof Frenchie...the contemplative cafés, the simplicity of just life. Watching...I think I could get used to it, with a little more time and practice...can't get a read on the French women, so stoic, worshipped by men as soon as they hit puberty, it's all about the chase for the men in Paris, it's the way they dress, what they do for a living, everything like a GQ mag, ripped into reality here...colored shoes everywhere, even the men in red Adidas, and soccer jackets, and trimmed jeans, metro-glorious, don't want to be them...

DAY 6:

Andrea nude, comatose, the night, I slept six hours, feel good enough, the first gray day, the rain has softened the fever of the streets, the mood wet, subdued, tranquil, holy...I'll take it easy today, just watch, write and sip coffee...these days have been mad, the wedding, planning, Paris...running...in the sidewalk of the café, the shaded clouds float maybe two hundred feet above, the Orléans balconies dotted with small geraniums and Monet's soft blooms. Sit next to Italians, one raven-haired older steals a menu from my table to see if she still has it...she does. Her husband, older, beaten eyes, at how he will pay for all this to keep her happy...Rainy foggy cold reminders of London or Seattle, a sad Saturday, but not for me. Just going to feel art today, let Paris grab me like a valium—smooth, let it rest there for a while...as I sip my second *café ladoux*, I watch the intermittent walkers stroll and gaze up at all of it, and I wonder if I've lost something, my forty years always on my mind...but, hell, there's hope, Brad Pitt, Johnny Depp, Sean Connery, age a connoisseur of experience...our street is dull with British suburbanites. I imagine from across the pond on holiday, Paris out of the dreary clouds of marriage...I've made the vows to her, and more importantly, to myself, that we won't burn out like the rest...keep a sense of wonder, the

vibrancy. Experience keeps all things new and sunsplashed and routine and dormancy in white pickets, a three-headed leviathan. I have a girl that comprehends long-suffering, what I have to do, like some small Christ mission...to write...I take The *Reddirtreview* across the way to a French clerk, hopefully the owner on Rue 29, de Tourville, who sweeps out front, and with my jagged French, get it in there. This little-engine-that-could is now in sanfran new york, and now paris, the trifecta...And as I walk back in the thin razor breeze, I'll see if she's awake, and she will fall on my graying chest, and I will hear her breathe, exhale, and inhale, and everything will be good again. Good night, Paris.

Poems

Sexy Mic

This is a sexy mic...
To me, this mic
Is like a beautiful woman so I draw her in close,
Finding comfort as I pull her into my lips and...
Whisper.
And though she's lacking in hips, my Fingertips still quiver,
As I roll them down her thighs.
I am going to make love to this mic tonight!
Gonna ride her to the highest height of climactic proportion,
As she's screamin' n' moanin' with orgasmic distortion,
To this mic...
I AM A SEX GOD!!!
I pump rhyme after rhyme,
Every time after time,
Until each of us is lyin'
In our own gooey puddle of poetic exhaust.
Now, I wasn't always such a sultan of Lyrical Libido Sauce.
No, I, too, had to be taught,
And she was hot,
One hot mic indeed,
Barely givin' me time to look down and read,
She upped the speed,
And I found myself lost on my knees,
Beggin' her to stop.
Instantly, I felt my powerful prowess drop
To pitiful cowardice,
Embarrassed by my erectile dysfunction of rhetoric.
You see, it was my first time,
And the moment came and left before I could drop a rhyme,
And she was on the floor cryin', cuz I wasn't supplyin'
The love she so eagerly expected.
But she didn't feel rejected.
No.
She stayed hot,
After experiencing countless nights of unprotected "free speed,"
She'd seen it all.
So, I lifted her up,

And she nursed me into a lyrical lover of sensual slander.
I preached passion to that mic for a whole 15 minutes!!!
And yeah, it was great...
A lot of guys will brag about their first time,
So I'll jive about mine.
She was hot.
Havin' sent many a guy a walkin',
And she was LOUD!!!
But she let me do all the talkin'.

—by Weston Mize

Naked Me

Which uniform should I wear today?
Jeans, a T-shirt—my mom outfit...
Should I go out and play?

What hat will top my head?
Pinstriped suit, heels—the editor...
We must keep the public fed.

Which costume will I put on?
Fish nets, miniskirt—the hot wife...
OK, we all know that's a con.

A woman of many disguises...
First thing off the floor today—a student...
Up in the ranks, she rises.

How about my first act?
Pink bows and collared dresses—a daughter...
Part of the inborn, unbreakable pact.

What will it be? What will it be?
Nothing. Just my skin today.
I sit in the nude, frustrated—me...

—by Christiana Kostura

Spring Day

A sunny spring day in 1982.
Restless to enjoy the day.
Waiting for Mom to sift through the coupons before we go.
But the blonde dragon guards the screen door like a chaotic lawful knight.
“Rebel!” I say, and push my way
Through to the day, where my shining, 3-wheel, steel horse awaits.
The sun shining down on the trees all around
And sparkling on the red paint of my tricycle.
Just down the pavement steps, on the side of the driveway it sat. Beckoning me.
“Ha! I got away from you!”
ENERGIZE!!!
Ride away, with the ever ready vigor of my youth.
I dazzle the sun.
Round and round
In circles I go.
Round and round forever.
Round and round
Lightning fast I was! Watch me go round!
Riding a muscle machine.
But stop!
Get off with style.
Swing that leg over the back, pivot, and
CRASH!!!!!!!!!!!!
Flash!
My eyes blink.
There is only the edge of gray, and the deep red sliding down the side.
Blink.
Blink.
Flash!
Ear-shattering scream from the blonde dragon.
“Help, Mom! I can’t lift my head.”
No pain, no tears. Just breathing fast and dizzy and wonder.
“Mom?”
Flash!
Curled up, my head in my sister’s lap.
The sun shining off of her hair, we fly.
A rag pressed to my forehead, covering one eye

And my sister's tears.
 "Is she gonna die, mom?" in a quivering voice.
 With amazing false confidence of a terrified parent, she cried,
 "No, baby. She's not gonna die."
 On we flew, a flash of motion.
 And yells as a man purposefully blocks the way.
 HONK!!!
 Mom takes the cloth.
 Dazzling, dizzy, blinding, bright.
 It drips on its way to hang out the window for viewing.
 "I'm taking my daughter to the hospital, you..."
 Flash!
 White walls, white ceiling, bright lights in my eyes.
 We run, bouncing.
 Dizzy, faces blurring.
 The lady in the box window, with her scorn.
 Accusations thrown at my mother of abuse.
 I am taken from my mother's warm embrace
 To the ER alone.
 As I drift, I hear, "Is she gonna be OK, Mom?"
 Flash!
 Faces blurry, shifting, moving strangers.
 Urgency, tension, uniformity.
 Everyone busy, rushing.
 Making me dizzy.
 Faces on either side, but only eyes peering down.
 "This is gonna feel like a little bee sting, okay?"
 OUCH!!!!!!!!!!
 Right in my forehead!
 "You're gooonnnnnnaaaa beeeeeee oookkaaayyyyyyyyyy....."
 Flash!
 Dizzy. Dizzy.
 I gotta sit up. I gotta see.
 But no...
 How much time has passed?
 Not knowing the questioning of my sister.
 Not knowing my mother was kept from seeing me until the end.
 The time slips by.
 I gotta sit up. I gotta see.
 "What does it look like?" The first words I can remember.

“I want a mirror.”
ZAG! POKEY!
4 pairs of black whiskers sticking out of my forehead!
NO! Don’t touch it!
“My head hurts now...” As I slide back down...
Flash!
Jewel Osco
“Mom, I want a coloring book.”
Cradled in her arms, she wants to comfort me. To cuddle me.
You can’t cuddle a coloring book!
Flash!
The old, foldout couch in front of the window.
Looking down at our green shag carpet.
Clutching my brand new stuffed Papa Smurf.
My mother, crying, crawls up behind me.
“Try to stay awake, baby...”
but I was dizzy and sleepy.
Flash!
No longer the energetic, outgoing child.
Shift to the timid observer.
I look back.
Flash!
I am there again.
Going round and round.
Seeing through my 4 1/2-year-old eyes.
Carrying a scar that zags.

—by Erin Agans

Niño desconocido

Los ojos inocentes
Sin amor grita en la pared
Buscando suicidio.

Unknown Boy

The innocent eyes
Without love, scream on the wall
Seeking suicide.

—By Francisco Cervantes

An Example of How to Draw a Lifelike Self-Portrait

To draw my self-portrait
I would start with a picture of the woman
I would like to be and then...
Lighten the shade of the skin
Extend the waistline a little bit farther
Widen the thighs times two
Broaden the nose times three
Shorten height inches by four
Bring the chest contours in closer
Mess up the left eyebrow
Add blemishes on the skin
Erase the twinkle in the eyes
Reduce the height of the hair
Amplify the appearance of fat rolls
Protrude the lower stomach
Double the thickness of the arms
Thin out both of the lips
Lower the skin of the chin
Create indentations on the buttocks
Draw a scar on the right shoulder
Stripe a few stretch marks around the hips
Dot the skin with black marks
Fold it up into fourths
And stick it between a big, heavy book.

—by Leslie Bishop

Gray Days

Gray days
When clouds hang
Over the city
Shrouding it in
The mist of
Not quite rain.
London fog,
Fresno style.
It sets a
Chill in your bones
That never goes away.
Hot chocolate
Warms the soul
With help from
A roaring fire.

Dark days
When clouds burst
And lightning strikes,
Plunging the city
Into an echo of blackness.
Thunder rolls,
The sound of angels bowling.
No hot chocolate,
No roaring fire,
You sit on the terrace
And sip champagne,
Watching God's show of lights.

As you shiver
In the darkness
The fear is good.
And morning breaks
Across the valley.
The air is sweet
Your mind is clear
Gray days bring light hearts.

—by Linda Ammons

The Changes

Excuse...uh, pardon me;
I just haven't been myself lately.
Not for several years really.
It's the change.
No, it's the changes—
So numerous. so drastic, I no longer
Recognize myself at all.

I linger along Lethe's shores,
Stubbornly refusing to drink, fearing the last
Of me will disappear, merge with this deformed self.
Warned by those old wives, I was not ready, am not ready still,
To accept the cruel touches of Time.

Some days I want to grab everyone in sight, shouting
Until they believe, understand: I was once a fiery red-haired
Woman who boldly walked and worked and winked,
Who oozed poise, purpose, and passion.
I want them to see me, the real me.

Oh, if you had only known me when! But then,
I could never recreate that woman, for at the time,
I did not know her well or love her quite enough.

—by Mary C. Punches

Breaking Things

breaking things—

an arm by accident
toys in play
an alarm clock from curiosity
pencils from pressing down too hard

breaking things—

the first heart at fourteen
news that we'd marry and move far away
promises to stay in touch no matter what
plans in order to change direction

breaking things—

a plate while washing the dishes
the pattern of life to stop the hurt
the silence through persistence and providence
the eyes to see what lies ahead

breaking things—

accidentally?
on purpose?
unintentionally
for a reason

—by Bertha L. Wise

Wondering

I stare at the map
wondering if the distance is too great.

The spider webs of superhighways spun across the page link the nation
broken only by the occasional blue puddles splashed here and there or the
tiny blue fissures that slide across the page representing rushing rivers and smooth streams.

Massive metropolises are reduced to diminutive dots
the red numbers revealing the miles between and
tiny towns disappear completely while
mammoth mountains melt into wrinkles on the page.

Everything is reduced
Everything becomes smaller so that it will fit on the page
Everything except the distance between us

I stare at the map
wondering if the distance is too great.

—by Sherry E. Farber

His Turn

It was another Woody Guthrie tribute show,
and the young kids played their Wilco,
while others had songs “inspired by Woody,”
and some were strumming Dylan,
but then it was the “sound guy’s turn,”
and he got up and owned the stage and the place
like a knowing veteran of many a show
for his few minutes
by actually playing a Woody song.

He played the living hell out of “Deportee”
for Juan and Rosalita and all the others,
such sad lyrics and
pretty melody in the hands
of a man with a guitar and a voice
that rose and fell
and rose to the
occasion.

He squeezed every last beautiful tear out of
that beautiful Woody song,
and it was as good as it gets
in Oklahoma City or
New York City or
Mexico City or
wherever people
are trying
to figure it out.

As Mr. Beefheart
used to say,
“If you got ears,
you gotta listen.”

—by David Charlson

Bob's Cage

This man named Bob lived in a self-made cage.
He distrusted all the people of his time.
This was a source of rage which disappointment made.
This man Bob stayed safe in his self-made cage.

Then Bob found a key to his self-made cage.
It was in all the people of his time.
Bob used the key to open up the cage.
Gone then the rage disappointment made.

No longer does Bob try to build a cage.
He freely lives with people of his time.
Now he shuns former bondages of distrust
That thrust him into fits of rage.

—by Robert Smith

Photography



Chihuly
LaWanda LaVarnway

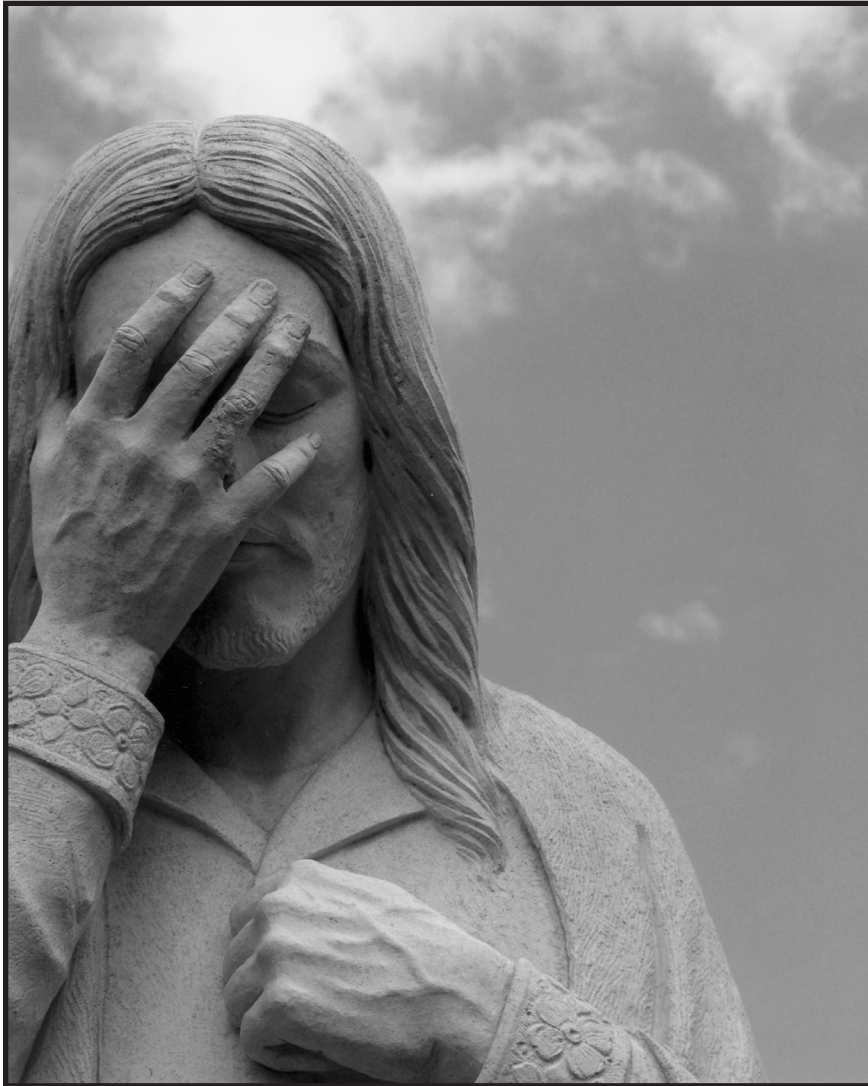


Adobe Enchantment
Sandra Peterson



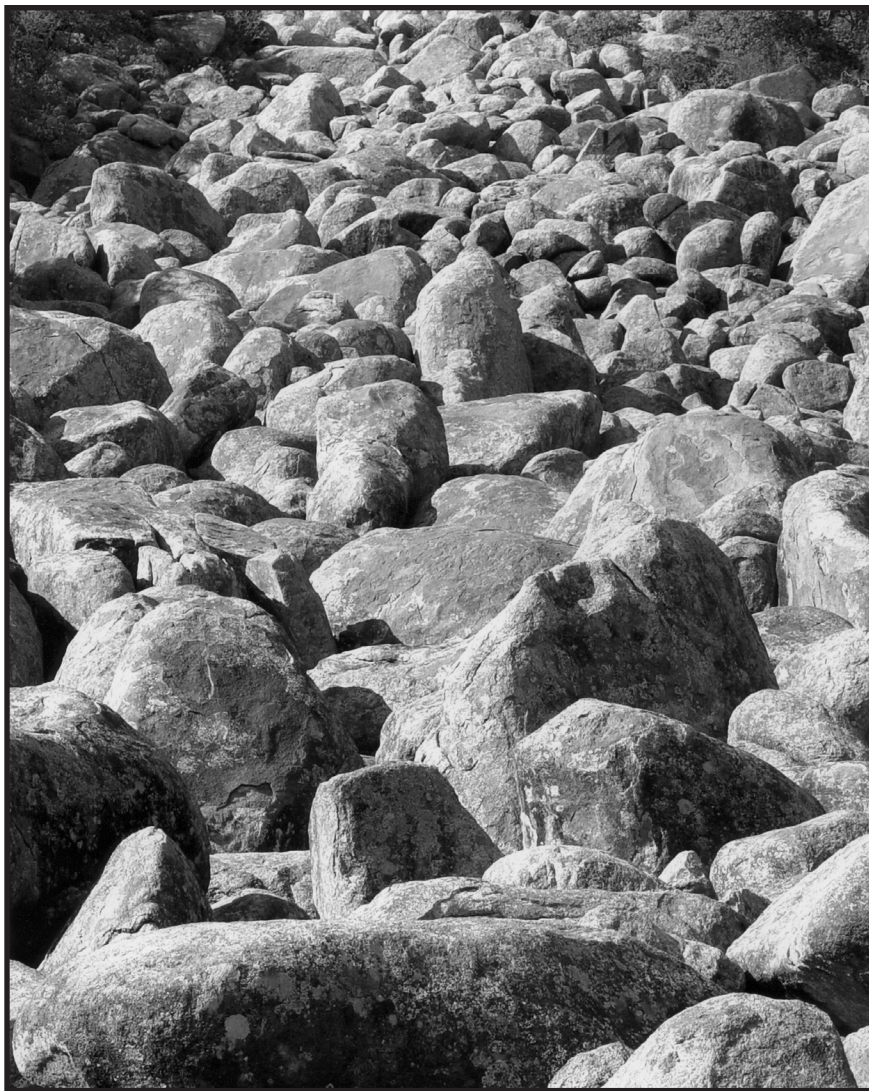
In the Wood

T. Skye Harris



Heart

Ana Rodriguez



Texture

Ana Rodriguez



A Lion's Soul

Isabella Rodriguez



Think
Isabella Rodriguez



Reflection
Ana Rodriguez



A View from Ellis Island, Darkly
John W. Perry



Musée d' Histoire Naturelle
John W. Perry