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*Absolute*

## **Absolute 2007**

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

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## **OKLAHOMA CITY COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

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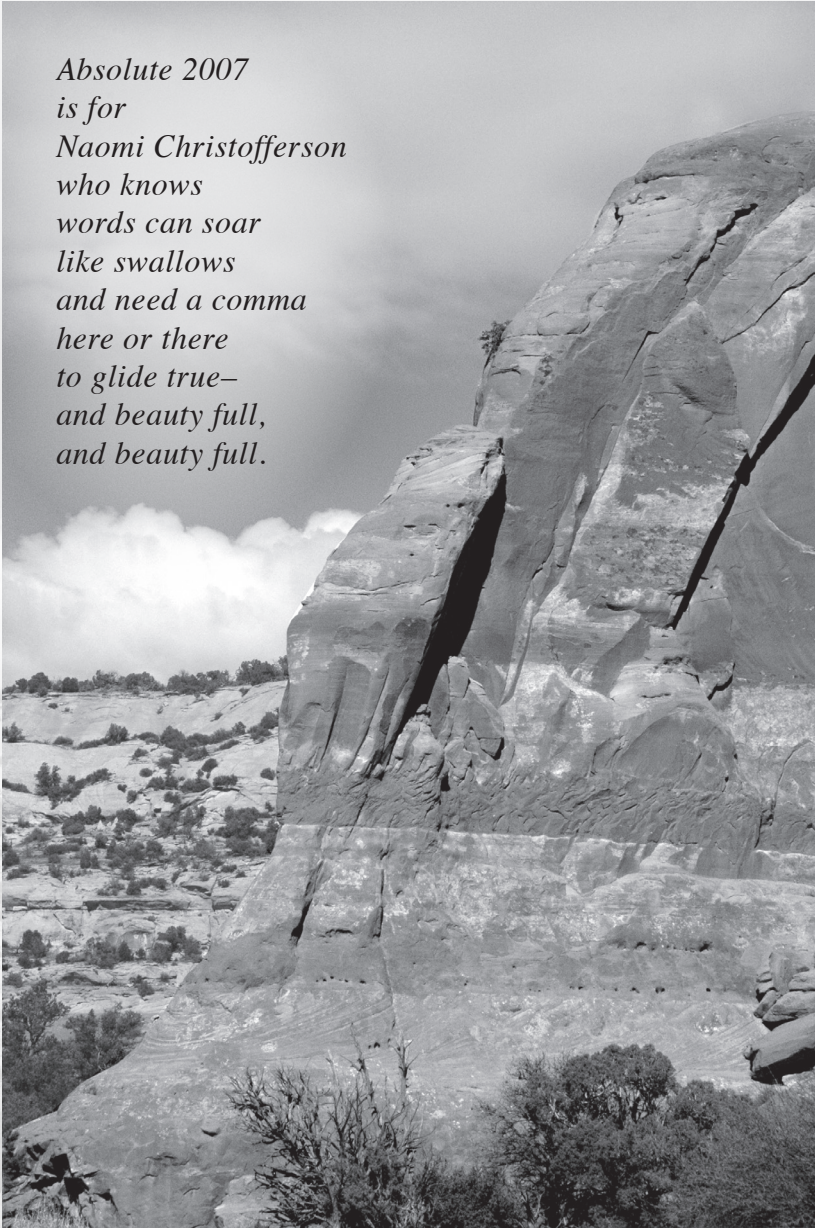
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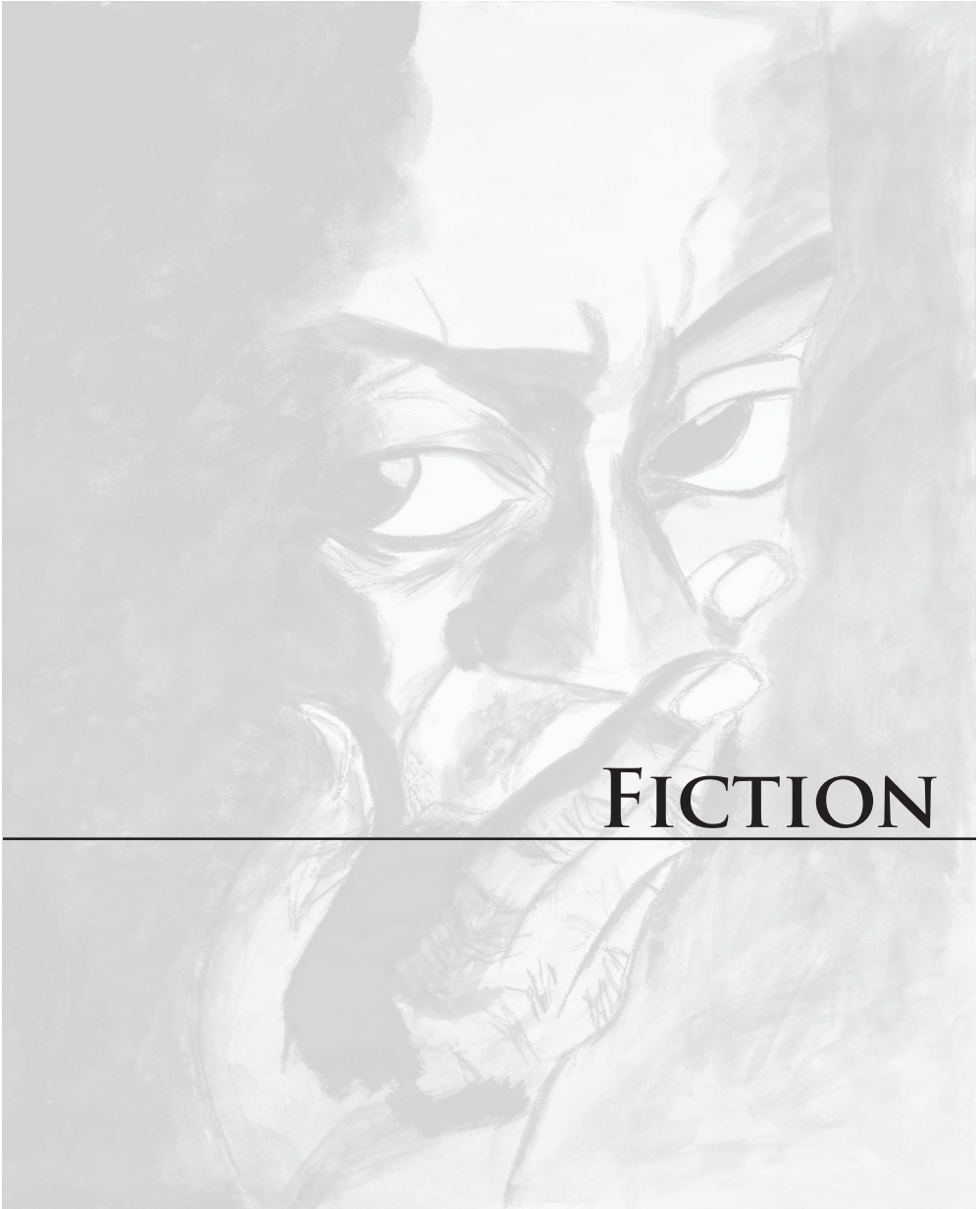
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*Absolute 2007  
is for  
Naomi Christofferson  
who knows  
words can soar  
like swallows  
and need a comma  
here or there  
to glide true—  
and beauty full,  
and beauty full.*







FICTION





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# *Cheap Lipstick*

by Micah Collinsworth

She wears cheap lipstick exactly the opposite of how she wears her tattoo: confident, vibrant. With every grand entrance into my life, she's carrying a cup from Starbucks, and the lipstick makes reverse time-lapse photography around the rim, showing always where she used to be and not quite where she's going. X marks the spot, and Pink No. 9 marks all the best places to sip coffee if you like a little makeup with your cream and sugar.

If you could mural her life in trash, the cups would show you the exact nature of each day. Tall for the good days, Grandé for the bad days, and Venti for days when she's lonely. Venti with extra mocha means she wants to get laid.

As she crosses the restaurant, an exacting tally forms in my mind. This is the third day in a row she's been holding a Venti cup. Three days in a row of loneliness; I know this because she's told me each day. Three days in a row I've been too much of a coward to make my move. Not for the first time, I look for my ally, the Extra Mocha sticker, but it's not there.

The best part is before she knows I'm watching her, when she's too preoccupied by all the cares of everything to be aware of me yet. She's at her prettiest when she's not being pretty, but I'm always happy to trade that for the moment when joy becomes electric as our eyes meet.

Every neuron in my body fires in synchronous cacophonous delight under a flicker of her rich blue gaze, but she's not close enough until I can smell her perfume. The perfume is everything the lipstick is not: expensive, smooth and infuriatingly unwilling to linger after she's gone.

Her eyes have moved from me to the menu; I feel like I'm looking at her from the other side of the small talk we didn't have today. She puts some more lipstick on the rim of her cup; I put another day on the tally. I could tell her how I feel, but instead I say what I always say:

"Welcome to Subway. May I take your order?"

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# *Chasing Storms*

**By Kristina Brooks**

Once I was truly happy. For one short-lived afternoon my capsulated world was perfect and harmonized, and I played as if there were no rules, no pain, and no memories to haunt me. I was twelve, and it was the last time I felt human, the absolute last time I felt whole.

I grew up in a small town in southwestern Oklahoma with my Grandma Carol and her fourth husband, Ted. Ultimately I would live with many people over the course of my teenage years, but that year was spent in Grandma Carol's bricked-up trailer. She was the kind of woman that most people meet only briefly and then walk away wondering what was wrong with the picture; the deep wrinkles, gray hair, and an obvious set of false teeth made her look like she was over seventy, but she was actually closer to fifty that year. Most of the confusion about her age probably stemmed from the fact that she'd gotten married at fourteen and had five children by four different men before she even graced the ripe old age of twenty-eight.

However promiscuous her early years may have been, in her later years she'd decided to make herself seem like an upstanding citizen. So, she had Ted buy her the finest trailer and had bricked it up on the outside, adding a carport and a wooden fence to make it seem even more like a "real" home. Then, she'd gone to the best bargain furniture store in town and bought a whole living room set with a sofa, loveseat, an ottoman, and even a recliner that we were never allowed to sit on, lest our dirty rears wear out the seat cushions. Every day I would clean that house on her command, scrubbing it spotless for visitors that usually weren't even allowed inside.

Grandma Carol was a living contradiction, a world of nicotine stains and bar fights wrapped in a bricked-up trailer and tied together by a top-of-the-line Cadillac. It was hard to know what it was she really wanted, hard to know when life would be good enough that I could have an approval from her that wasn't double-edged.

My day usually started at six-thirty in the morning, and I would spend those hours before school scrubbing the wood-paneled walls of the trailer, trying to remove the filmy tar coating that had become ingrained into every pore of my very existence with the false scent of lemon Pine-Sol. By the time I got home she would have already smoked enough to give the walls another finish. My life was tempered by her cigarettes. I once saw her smoke

four cigarettes at once. For a while, that made her like some type of superhero to me, able to conquer the evil side effects of smoking with nothing more than sheer determination. A few years later, when I actually did the math on the number of cigarettes she smoked per day, I understood that by most doctors' calculations Grandma Carol should have dropped dead over twenty years ago. Personally I've always believed that her secret was my scrubbing those walls clean every day so that she could start with a clean slate, somehow merging the walls and the lining of her lungs into a single entity.

The best part of my young life that summer was Ellen, with her short, frizzy hair, dimpled cheeks, and sprinkling of freckles that covered her face so precisely it was as if they'd been placed there by fairies. She looked like a dirty angel, untouched by the worries and pain that often clouded my world.

One afternoon we were outside in the playhouse that Ted had made from the scraps of wood left over from some house he'd been contracted to help build. It wasn't much, just a plywood shell built over the back half of the tornado shelter, but Ellen and I could always manage to turn those four plain walls into a castle or a grand ballroom, depending on the occasion.

Ellen came over a lot, and she didn't seem to mind that my grandma was a little dysfunctional. Sure, she commented on it like any twelve-year-old kid would, but it didn't stop her from being my friend. And that silence bought her a true friendship that no amount of ridicule in later years could break up.

This was before we thought of boys as anything more than friends. Before sneaking cigarettes and beer became our favorite pastimes. Before time and reality sucked the innocence out of our lives as if it were nothing more than a station on the television that could be changed with the click of a button. When I think back to my early childhood, I see everything as a two-dimensional picture that has faded over the years, and for the most part it's hard for me to accept that anything really even happened, that those defining moments were anything more than a dream I had a long time ago.

One thing I definitely remember about that day was that Grandma Carol had tucked herself into the storm cellar and was listening to Gary England's weather reports. She was smoking so much that a spiraling gray cloud could be seen wafting its way out the cellar vent as if she were a human chimney. It was the middle of tornado season, and we were in the pressure cooker that is southwestern Oklahoma, a place where the heat and rain can build up into a frenzied culmination of childhood fears and nails bitten down to the quick before the weather would suddenly snap, letting go of everything in one giant whoosh of storms that left the charged air smelling sharply of ozone. As I got older, I associated that smell with sex because of the release of tension that was usually so sharp you could hear the collective sigh that seemed to originate from the very center of the world when it was over. But that

was only a temporary cessation of nature's passion, and within a matter of days, sometimes only hours, she would be raring to go again. Storms were the one thing that actually terrified Grandma Carol. She would refuse to emerge from the storm shelter until the all clear had been given by her trusted weatherman Gary England, and the tornado watch had been lifted.

She had been down there six hours before we heard anything. Ellen and I had taken bets as to how long she could remain down there without needing to go the bathroom, and she'd held out longer than either of us had expected. She knew that May was the culmination of tornado season, a time of year when any bright sunny day can turn into a nightmare in thirty minutes. The heat and humidity can be as real as a fleece blanket pressing over every inch of your skin.

Just as we were beginning to believe she had turned herself into a shelter hermit for no reason, Grandma Carol's shrill voice rang through the thick air, warning that there was a tornado headed right for us. Ellen and I looked at each other, the excitement lighting up our faces like Christmas trees. We'd never actually seen a tornado.

"Marie! Ellen! You'd better get down here right now. I'm shutting the doors in thirty seconds." I can still hear her voice calling to us from that cement dungeon, but we never made it in. I took Ellen's hand in mine and ran to the front of the house, determined to see a real tornado, to look that god-driven fear in the face and say that I was not afraid.

Fear was the furthest thing from my mind, but it was then that I finally saw the face of fear itself; fear was a bucket of soapy water and a sponge on Monday morning, fear was a body that looked twenty years older than it was, fear was the repetition of the same thing every day until the end of my life. This was different from anything I had ever known before, and as such it had no place in the listing with fear. In fact, I felt liberated for the first time in my life. I don't think I've ever felt as free as I did when we rounded the gravel driveway and saw the thin spindle touch the ground. Now I know it couldn't have been more than an F1 tornado, but then it was a giant, the most beautiful and majestic thing I'd ever seen.

We felt safe even when we shouldn't have. The wind had sprung out of nowhere, as if there were a volcano of hot, pulsating air just beneath us. It circled around us, pulling at our hair and whipping it at our faces, punishing us by turning our hair into a cat-o-nine-tails.

Despite every warning we'd ever had to the contrary, we didn't hesitate for more than a second before we began running through the field, climbing the low-riding fence, and burrowing through the wheat towards that storm, sweaty palm touching sweaty palm the entire time, binding us to each other permanently. Even when Ellen died four years later, I could still feel her small, clammy palm pushing into mine at the funeral. The hollow roar of the wind once more filled my ears where the preacher's words should have been. The same seashell echo pulsed through my ears. The unsubstantial weight of the wind cocooned me just as it did both of us back then.

I've never been able to remember what happened when we crossed that threshold and stood in Mother Nature's embrace. Nothing I've tried has ever brought those lost minutes back, and now I'm not sure I want them. The local search-and-rescue crews found us a few hours after the tornado, huddled together and half-buried by uprooted plants and debris. They took pictures when they found us, the earth beneath our two curled and interconnected bodies the only area of ground not touched by the tornado. Our trailer had been partially mangled by the force of the wind, the once pristine furniture had been torn and scattered across the lawn like vomit, and my playhouse was nothing more than another memory, but our clothes hadn't even been torn, and not a single cut or bruise graced our bodies. Grandma Carol proclaimed it a miracle and pronounced me terminally stupid at the same time.

The next year I was traded back to my mother in Maine, and the year after that I went to my father's house with his new wife and three new kids in Arkansas, and the whole time I was gone I missed the embrace of the wind. It was as if there were a vacancy in my body I couldn't fill, no matter how many times and ways I tried. Eventually, I found my way back to Grandma Carol's.

When I went back to school I found that Ellen, my dirty angel, was halfway to being a harbinger of hell. Her face was pocked and partially eaten by her meth addiction, the careful dusting of fairy freckles transformed into symptoms of a horribly ravaging disease. The cuts and scrapes of her tormented soul had been sewn clearly across her flesh with interconnecting lines and marks that brazenly touted her insecurity. I think I understand now. I think she must have missed the wind, too.

Within six months of my return, I found myself one of the few people attending her funeral, and the wind was with me for the first time in four years, comforting me through her death the same way it comforts me now.

It's funny how in the movies the people standing on the ledge always draw such a crowd. It's not true. In fact, the only thing that seems to notice my presence is the wind. It's been cocooning me, cradling me, and, yes, even beckoning me for the last hour or so as I remain here, a living gargoyle on the urban skyline, watching the people below me move across the sidewalk in meaningless patterns—simple drones.

I stand up on the ledge and close my eyes, letting the wind work its way into my veins like a junkie begging for that last hit. There are still no cries from those below. No warning shouts or screams of horror to acknowledge my existence. There is nothing, just the wind rushing past my body, the roar in my ears, a small sweaty palm encased within my own, and the weightlessness of worries floating through thirty stories of air...

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# *Mutilated Currency or By Process of Systematic Abandon, All Colors Fade Black*

**By Carl Mitchell Kasiri**

The headlines read “Murderous Meteorite in Morocco,” and the TV evangelist uttered, “Armageddon, the end now from the fiery above.” Lists of scripture and horsemen references polluted the airwaves.

“It’s absurd,” Miles shouted from the couch. “These things have been said about everything. Not too long ago they prophesied about the new millennium; now a rock falls on a man and the prophecy was miscalculated? Six years off? Not us but God? And not global but Morocco?”

This was tradition, Miles on the couch ranting that week’s issue—or non-issue—while Robert Fleming, Ph.D.—or Doctor Bob to his patients—sat at his computer occasionally letting out an “uh-huh” like clearing his throat. Today, however, Doctor Bob mistimed his sounds of reassurance, placing them not at the end but in the middle of sentences. Miles didn’t notice.

“How stupid can they be? Get it through your head. We’re still here. The world will not end.” He stopped for a thought. “Not to mention that it’s a two-thousand-years-old religion. Think of all that’s changed in two thousand years. How can they possibly think it has any relevance?”

His rhythm was stunted by a perfectly placed “shit” that echoed in each ear. Miles’ head snapped like a mousetrap, to focus.

Doctor Bob decorated his office with a variety of motivational posters. The most terrifying was of an acrophobic kitten hanging from a clothesline with the words “hang in there” typed above. Through the framed poster’s reflection, Miles could see Bob’s computer. He saw minesweeper. *This is the last time.*

Miles had plans to see his girlfriend after the session, which came to a halt prematurely. She lived only a quarter mile away, on the residential side of the train tracks cursed for bringing distractions in times of release. But he was ahead of it this week, out of Bob’s

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office and across the tracks before the red lights flashed.

“Minesweeper-minesweeper-minesweeper”: a chant interrupted by children placing pennies on the track. The horn blared and the children laughed, waiting to examine their two-dimensional masterpieces. He missed those days, when he would do simple things, amazed by rational outcomes: flattened pennies, small explosions, and shattered glass. Those days before sensory adaptation. But he chose not to think of it. He left nostalgia on the couch.

*Minesweeper.*

His girlfriend lived on the second floor of her apartment complex, with the balcony overlooking the courtyard. He loved the view. He’d watch the younger girls sunbathe in the summer while the boys played soccer in the field or showed off in the swimming pool. Up the stairs and through the door, “Minesweeper,” he said to himself.

The door closed behind him, and he stopped.

Her normally tidy apartment was out of order. Magazines fallen from the table set chaos upon the floor. The blanket she kept on the back of the couch doubled on its cushions. Two empty wine glasses tarnished the table, and a rhythmic tapping vibrated the walls. Slowly, his head peeked into the bedroom and to her bed.

Another—mousetrap, and he no longer thought about minesweeper.

The headlines read “Murderous Meteorite in Morocco” and outside in the courtyard, Miles lit matches and thought about the children. He watched them burn and thought about the dimensions of the pennies. The boys played soccer, the girls sunbathed, and Miles thought about the evangelist. *Maybe it is the end.*

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# *The Truck*

**By Heather Brand**

“**T**urn that music up,” I told Vinnie, getting into the song playing on the radio. You couldn’t listen to Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven” without turning the volume up really loud. It was a requirement or something. Vinnie and I listened to a lot of Led Zeppelin that summer after graduation, when we’d ride around in his old Ford pick up truck with the windows rolled all the way down because the air didn’t work and my hair swirled around my face in the breeze. He’d bat my hair away, complaining that it tickled his face, but I didn’t care. His old truck was a pile of junk, but he refused to get rid of it. It was his first, and he coddled it along, spending countless hours repairing whatever part had broken down that week. Said it held a lot of memories for him, and I had to agree. I’d spent a lot of time in this old truck. Our first date and then our first breakup had been in this truck. We’d gotten drunk in this truck, talked about anything and everything, except what would happen after the summer was over. I didn’t want it to end, as much as I pretended we would keep in touch when he left in the fall. It was a hot summer, the kind that made you feel like the wind was blowing from a furnace. I always wore tank tops and cut-off shorts, never shoes.

That evening, I put my hands up in the air and was screaming along to Robert Plant when we hit a pothole in the long gravel road. Our heads almost hit the roof, and we both laughed like it was the funniest thing that had ever happened. Vinnie was funny like that, and he laughed at everything. It was one of the reasons I liked him so much. When you were busy laughing at everything, you didn’t have time to think about what you were going to do after the summer was over.

“Hey, did you know if you play this song backward, you can hear him talking about Satan?” I asked Vinnie, pulling my knees up underneath me and reaching out to turn the volume up even farther. The radio crackled with static. It was hard to get a good signal all the way out here in the country.

“Nah, you’re just teasing again, Lucy.” He laughed, moving the knob back down to a reasonable level. “Besides, we shouldn’t be turning the music up too loud, someone might hear.” He glanced nervously out the rearview mirror with a flick of his grey-green eyes. Vinnie, a big stocky football player, was not afraid of anything but my dad who cowed Vinnie, and for good reason. Ever since we’d started dating, Dad had made Vinnie’s life hell. It didn’t help that Dad was also Vinnie’s boss, so there was really no escaping from



him. They'd gotten along fairly well until Dad caught us together in the truck one night. Dad had yanked Vinnie by the hair, pulling him out of the truck and knocking him to the ground. He promptly put his foot across Vinnie's neck, his spur glinting in the moonlight. In no uncertain terms, he told Vinnie that if he ever caught him near me again, he'd drag that spur across his neck, and he'd make sure no one would find his body. I could understand Vinnie's fear, but I'd told him at least a dozen times already that my dad had driven up to the city earlier and wouldn't be back until tomorrow night.

"You afraid the cows are going to hear and stampede or something?" I teased him, poking his broad shoulder with my index finger and giggling.

"It's not funny, Lu," he said angrily, his thick neck turning red as it always did when he was angry, the color creeping up into the tips of his ears and staining them a delicate pink. His hands tightened on the wheel, his knuckles turning white with the strain. He always did hate to be teased, and I got a kick out of tormenting him, an odd satisfaction from seeing him squirm. I was always sorry later, of course, and I put on my best repentant expression, wide-eyed and pouty-lipped, and fingered the little fuzzy blonde hairs on the back of his neck.

"Aww, I'm sorry, Vin," I cooed, blowing cool air into his ear as I spoke. Vinnie's ears were sensitive, something I'd discovered during our late night drives around the countryside when we'd pull over in a secluded area, and Vinnie would spread a red checkered blanket in the back of his pickup truck, and we'd lie there staring up at the stars. Well, sometimes we looked at the stars.

"Cut that out," he commanded, batting away my hand in irritation. "Your dad probably went up to the city to have his spurs sharpened, and here you are, wanting to blare the music up so loud he can probably hear it all the way up there." He jerked the wheel sharply to the left to avoid a possum running across the road. As I hung onto his shoulder to keep from sliding out of my seat, I glanced backward to make sure the possum was all right. It had just reached the other side of the road, and I could see lights reflecting in its beady eyes.

As I turned around, I spied the flash of headlights just over the next hill. Dad and I were the only ones who ever used this road, the back road that led to our barn. Vinnie cursed under his breath, slamming his hands against the steering wheel. He abruptly put one of his big beefy hands on top of my head, shoving me roughly down to the floor of the pickup.

"Be quiet," he ordered gruffly, as I squeaked in protest at being handled so roughly. "Just shut up," he snarled, slowing down to pull alongside the truck driving the opposite direction. Vinnie cranked down the window, and I heard dad's voice, rough like sandpaper. I could picture the expression on his face.

"What're you doing here?"

"Just delivering those tools you wanted, sir," Vinnie said, jerking his thumb toward the back of the truck. Being respectful toward my dad was a big effort for Vinnie, but he didn't want to risk losing his job.

I was seething, huddled on the floor of the truck, squished between the glove compartment and the seat, a beer bottle digging into my knee. The floor was filthy with mud and dirt. I could feel something sticky on my calves. Soda pop, probably. I wasn't going to let Vinnie get away with pushing me around so easily. When I was sure he was occupied with talking to my dad, I sneaked my hand up and placed it on his thigh, tickling him gently. He jumped and made a growling sound deep in his throat and shot me a warning glance. I smiled innocently up at him as I heard my dad say sharply, "What's that you've got in there?"

"Oh, it's just my dog. She's being a real bitch." Vinnie lied, and I could see the smirk tugging at his lips. I pinched his leg hard, my face scrunched up into a frown. He jerked his leg hard, viciously bending my fingers back. I bit back a whimper and glared up at him, cradling my hand against my chest.

"Just set the tools inside the door. Then get your ass home," Dad told him brusquely. "And don't be late for work tomorrow, either," he said. I knew my dad was just looking for the chance to fire Vinnie who just nodded and answered, "Yes, sir."

As soon as Dad was out of sight, I climbed back up onto the seat, slapping Vinnie indignantly across the shoulder. "So you think I'm a bitch?" I folded my arms across my chest and slumped back down into my seat, sulking.

He laughed, a deep chest laugh, letting his head fall back against the glass. "Only sometimes, Lu," he said as he reached over to put an arm around me.

"Stop it, bastard," I glowered at him. I reached for the door handle. "Let me out, Vinnie, I've got to get back before Dad gets there," I said, slipping out of his grasp. He was such a jerk sometimes. If I ran across the fields, I could get to the backyard and pretend I'd been outside when Dad came looking for me.

"You know, sometimes you're more trouble than you're worth," he growled, stepping roughly on the brakes, almost making me slam into the windshield. I shot him a nasty glare and opened the door, ready to storm out and never speak to him again. I paused with one foot on the ground. What would I do without him and our drives? There was only a month of summer left, and he'd be gone to college, playing football for some big team. I didn't want to think about that. Where would I be when he was gone?

Impulsively, I turned to him, giving him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "See you tomorrow." I winked, hopped out of the truck, and struck out across the field.

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# *Dandelions*

By Robert Smith

#555777, a man in his mid-thirties, is sitting in a room with concrete walls and paint that has chipped off in places or has become discolored with time. This room is eight-by-ten; there is a steel door with one small window, a window with bars that look like steel two-by-fours. There is a steel table bolted to the wall with a steel seat bolted to the concrete floor. There are two steel platforms mounted one over the other—these are the bunk beds. Last there is the steel toilet and a sink.

As #555777 sits staring at the walls of this eight-by-ten cell, he doesn't have to think about what got him here as much as he has to think about how he should not go insane with anger.

Sitting on the bottom bunk and staring at the walls, he realizes that he can use a childhood game to keep his mind occupied. This game has no name, but all children play it at one time or another; basically the game is looking at the clouds and describing their shapes—animal, car, plane—whatever. In this young man's case, he is looking at the places where the paint has chipped off. At one point he sees a rabbit, the shape of a bird, and then he pictures a mountain stream with different types of forest animals. It has been hard for him to keep a cell partner because everyone thinks that he is losing his mind with the games. In reality, it is probably the invisible television and stereo system that he brags about that keeps others from being his cell partners.

The guards come to release him for breakfast. There are four times a day that he is allowed out of his cell. Three of these are breakfast, lunch, and supper, forty-five minutes each; the fourth is two hours free time if nobody creates a problem and has it taken away. All total, five hours of freedom from the confinement of the eight-by-ten room.

His room is one of ten cells on the floor, and a staircase runs through the center of the quad.

At meals he usually winds up eating on the floor along the wall in the day room which is on the bottom floor of the quad. During free time, he watches television, plays games, and visits other men. It is in the day room that he can make acquaintances...and enemies.

But most of all, it is imperative to take a daily shower; the shower is also on the bottom floor of the quad. The shower is covered with small white tiles with a blue stripe in small tiles around the walls about midway up. There are four shower heads and no curtains. #555777 always tries to find times when no one else is taking a shower to avoid any conflict.

Conflict comes in many different forms, such as sexual advances or drugs. Sometimes it is because someone has something another prisoner wants.

A few weeks after #555777 arrived in the quads, he was given an orderly position. This allowed him to have his cell door open all day long. He was able to get acquainted with several men on his rounds as he swept and mopped. To the left of the showers was a cell, a mysterious cell. The person inside would not speak when spoken to, nor would he show himself through the small window in his cell door. He never left his cell for meals or free time.

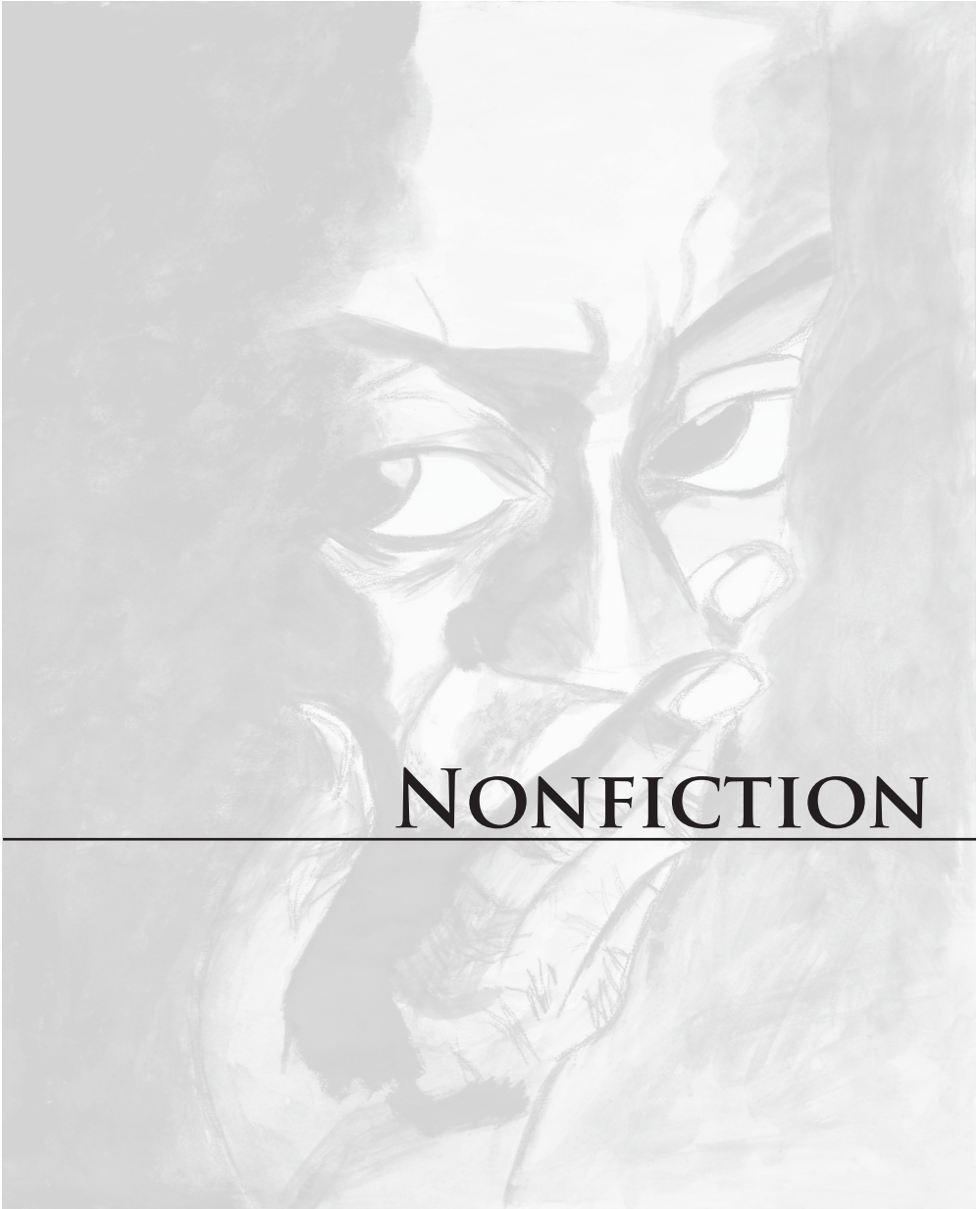
This Friday morning #555777 is eating breakfast in his usual place, sitting on the floor along the wall. He is halfway through his scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast when guards rush in and go straight for the mysterious cell. The guards carry a young man out of the cell limp as a tow-sack, but still alive. Blood drips from his wrists and neck. His eyes have very dark circles around them. The guards carry the suicide victim in front of everyone eating breakfast so they can see.

As soon as breakfast is over, orderly #555777 is given a bucket, a couple of sponges, and some cleaning solution and is told to clean the suicide's cell. Upon entering the cell, #555777 notices that the cell has the same design as his except for the blood that is on all four walls, the door, and windows. There is nothing that has been missed by the blood. During the cleaning of the room, #555777 cannot help thinking how short life is. He knows it is up to him to change the direction of his own life.

It has been a couple of weeks since the cleaning of the cell, but for orderly # 555777 it is still fresh on his mind. He has been thinking of ways to change his life around. He wants to change the negative thought processes he puts himself through. #555777 looks out the window just outside his cell door. He looks at the ground and notices how green the grass is. He sees something yellow—a dandelion, what most would consider a weed, a parasite. To him, however, it is a revelation—the most beautiful thing he has seen in a long time. Since the sighting of the first dandelion, # 555777 spots several dandelions. Sometimes one to three a day appear. To #555777, this is the start, and he hopes it is the beginning of some wonderful life-changing experiences.

Before, #555777 had seen dandelions as awful, terrible plants, but now he realizes even dandelions can be used for something—like a fresh salad.

Eventually, #555777 is sent to a prison yard, and while there he remembers the dandelions and decides to try a dandelion experiment in his own life. He decides to pick a positive trait and focus on it until it is grounded in him. As time goes by, #555777 notices more than one positive trait popping up at a time. He knows this means the growth of new and better things in his life. Today, #555777 lives on the outside and continues to make changes in his life for the better, one dandelion at a time.



# NONFICTION

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## *Playing It to the River*

by Sheryl Martin

Kym Bracken hates being predictable. So she took up poker four years ago—at fifty-one. Poker is about information, she says. A skilled player gets it from everything—the cards she’s dealt and the cards she’s not dealt, the other players—what they do and what they don’t do. The pot itself will tell her what her odds are. Is there enough in the pot to make it worth her while to keep playing the hand she has?

“Sometimes the most aggressive thing you can do is fold,” Kym reveals.

She proves it on a blustery Sunday afternoon at Riverwind Casino.

Riverwind, just south of Norman, is the new casino on the block, or, rather, on the Interstate. The mega-warehouse sized building, owned and operated by the Chickasaw Nation, offers Blackjack, Texas Hold-Em, video games and off-track betting as well as a fast-food court, restaurants and a concert facility. Inside, the lighting is bright and cheerful and gives everybody’s skin an unnaturally healthy pink glow; a colorful carpet of oversized paisley swirls and winds its way from the lobby through the gaming areas; the staff is neatly attired and friendly. There’s a faint whiff of cigarette smoke in the air, but the ventilation system keeps it at a minimum and in the poker area it’s not noticeable at all. Who can imagine a casino without smokers? Kym leans away from her table and says loudly, “The worst thing about this place is the noise.”

It doesn’t seem any noisier than the average county fair.

She talked about poker the day before, snug at home in a north Norman suburb, in a newish house filled with oldish furniture, stark white walls softened by paintings in deep, dusky shades of brown and red, wooden bookshelves filled with hardback volumes and treasured mementos, just enough light to make the place cozy—a far cry from the bright lights and hard-core cheerfulness of the casino. Not very “Vegas.”

“What about Vegas?” she asked eagerly when the subject came up. “Wanna go?” She smiled and made her eyes big. She was kidding, maybe.

For Kym, poker has been a lucky little detour on life’s highway, a side road that ended up taking her someplace wonderful she didn’t even know she wanted to go. She believes that’s what happens when you’re willing to say yes to life.

Saying yes to poker began when she came across a broadcast of the World Poker Tour four or five years ago, back when televised poker was something you only stumbled across

after midnight. She started watching partly, she said, because she'd always been an avid card player and partly because of a new twist the WPT had added—showing “hole cards,” the cards that players keep face down. Now viewers could try to strategize along with the players. But the jargon of the game was beyond her. “Flop, river, fish—I had no idea what they meant.”

Jumping into an adventure is one thing, but there's no need to jump in entirely unprepared.

“So,” she said, “I read a book.”

The book was Doyle Brunson's *Super/System: How I Made Over \$1,000,000 Playing Poker*. Brunson is a fifty year veteran of the poker world and a two-time winner of the World Series of Poker—a heady way to introduce yourself to the game.

But she read it and was hooked on poker's complexity.

“Oh, gosh, I thought, there's a whole strategy to this? I found out there's so much more to it than just placing a bet because you think your cards are good.”

Indeed. A wise woman once said, “Sometimes the most aggressive thing you can do is fold.”

At Riverwind, waitresses are in constant circulation, bringing food and free drinks and arranging them on portable tables within players' easy reach, and floor staff bringing chips for new players—whatever they can do to keep everybody happy and at the table, enjoying themselves and spending money.

Kym is one of two women at this table. She's dressed comfortably in a loose denim blouse over a white T-shirt, baggy jeans and flats. Shoulder-length ash blonde hair with bangs, a pale porcelain complexion and round wire-rimmed glasses give her the look of a canny little girl as she politely eyes the competition. The other woman, beside her, seems preoccupied with an order of barbecue and onion rings. Seven guys range around the table, one college age, one senior citizen, the rest probably Kym's age. The dealer is a lanky, fatherly fellow with dark hair graying at the temples and a pair of black-rimmed reading glasses on a chain around his neck. He could pass for a high school social studies teacher. And then he starts dealing.

Texas Hold-Em is fast. No need for keeping a poker face in this particular game—the first hand is over and the second has begun before a mere observer can even be sure who has won. Kym's progress is not always certain. But her slow and steady method becomes apparent after a few hands.

And luck doesn't have as much to do with it as you might think. Nothing puts Kym “on tilt” faster than hearing someone say, “I'd rather be lucky than good!” Luck may look good in the short term but in the long run, she asserted on Saturday, skill is what separates the fish from the real players.

Not that she hasn't “gone bust” herself.



“But,” she said with a self-mocking grin, “my level of going bust is way lower than a professional’s.”

During the first three years she played, she built her poker stash up to four figures. She went bust in just a few months.

“I got stupid,” she admitted. It forced her to step back and take a look at what she was doing. She learned a lesson and kept playing.

“I do not draw from household money,” she said adamantly. These days what she earns as an employment training counselor working for a private non-profit in Norman goes untouched. She bankrolls herself through projects like Web page design and by selling ad space on her blog, *Poker Perspectives*.

The blog, where Kym is known as “Maudie,” is another part of poker that has opened doors for her.

“*Poker Perspectives* fills a creative need for Maudie,” says “BG,” a fellow poker blogger. “I know that buys her a lot of credibility and love from the rest of us in the group.”

She’s traveled more, too.

She recalled a solo trip to visit a friend in California in pre-poker days.

“I remember being scared to death of life, scared to even walk into a restaurant and sit down by myself. I got to the Oklahoma border and almost turned around.”

But she kept going. It was a chance to say *yes* to life.

Since then, the shy little lady who couldn’t imagine crossing the state line has found herself jetting off to play poker in such places as Cincinnati, Chapel Hill, Philadelphia, Tunica and, of course, Las Vegas.

“Poker got me off my complacent little butt,” she said.

Kym counts among the bright spots of her poker exploits playing in the “Ladies Event” in the 2006 World Series of Poker.

“The Ladies event started out as a token event,” she said. “This year they got a wake-up call to take it seriously.”

The 2006 Ladies Event No-Limit Hold-Em game had just over 1,100 players this year, nearly twice as many as 2005. The prize pool this year was \$1,026,480 and the winner, Mary Jones Meyer, took home \$263,480 of that.

The game started at 11 a.m., and Kym lasted until about 3 p.m. She may not have taken home any winnings, but she didn’t leave empty handed.

“It had a feel of ‘this is a big deal,’” Kym said.

“And I learned a lot about my own level of play. It was exciting.”

But the poker itself is secondary to the people she’s met and the friends she’s made. That has been the best thing of all. Many of those people are young—in their early-to mid-twenties—and that’s fine with Kym. She regularly works with teenagers and young adults as

an employment training counselor, and she remembers what it's like to be that age.

"I give them a lot of respect," she says. That seems to go both ways, at work and at the poker table.

"No one cares that she's old enough to be one of our mothers," declared "BG."

"When she's in the group, she's one of the group."

"I knew prior to meeting her that she was an older woman," said Mattie, another poker blogger and player. Mattie recalled the first time he met "Maudie" in Vegas and what he called the "maelstrom of testosterone" she was about to enter.

"Who wouldn't be anxious?" he asked. "She showed up to the Excalibur poker room and sat down at a table full of people she'd never met. Moments later she was sitting at a table full of friends."

The most fun she's had—and she's had a lot of fun—was a trip to Cincinnati where she got to be a female fly on the wall in "the World of Guydom."

"Beer, alcohol, guys being guys," she recounted with a wistful smile. "I loved it."

"Of course," she added quickly, "these guys were smart, witty, colorful individuals."

The poker weekend in a hotel suite started at 5 p.m. on a Saturday and ended at 5 a.m. on Sunday.

"I knew I'd been accepted as one of the guys when I realized the bathroom door wasn't being shut," she said. Her brow furrowed. "I don't know whether I should have been insulted or honored." Then she smiled again. Clearly, she did know.

Kym didn't deny the ugly side of the game. She recalled walking out of a poker room in Tunica one night and seeing a man leaning against a wall, weeping.

"You knew he was weeping because he'd lost his last dollar," she said, with no hint of judgment for parties on either side of that sad equation. "You are there to take someone's money. A lot of people say there are no friends at the poker table."

While she may understand that point of view, she doesn't necessarily subscribe to it.

"They're being too negative about the dark side. It's not an addiction," she said.

At least not for her. She admitted that at first she wanted to play every day but credited that to the excitement of any new fun activity.

"Now," she said, "I play when I feel I'm going to play my A game."

Kym may not have her A game on at Riverwind this Sunday, but it's at least her A minus game. For nearly two hours she mostly folds. She wins a few hands and loses a few hands, but she stays in there while around her others lose everything or get tired of a table that isn't paying them off big and go elsewhere. As the fish come and go, the steady players begin to get to know each other's moves and the hands slow down just a little as they weigh odds and evaluate information. Kym stays for three more hours and goes home \$90 richer than she was when she came in.

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“Eighteen bucks an hour,” she remarks. “Not bad for a part-time job.”

In her living room that first Saturday, there were fish on her walls—salmon, worked in metal, painted green and gold, funny, quirky, delightful to look at. No, they were not a reminder of all the “fish” she’s taken to the river playing poker, but they were very special salmon, a memento from her parents’ house in Oregon. She loves those fish.

“But,” she said, “the one I really wanted was the only one heading the other direction.”

The one that got away. Naturally.

“When everybody’s headed that way—”

She swept one palm across the other, and her right arm arced off “that way.”

“My first inclination is to go,” she said as her left arm arced off the other way.

She hates being predictable.

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# *The Truth*

**By Mike “Sarge” Tate**

I will never forget the day I died. The sun was hot that day. I awoke lying in a pool of my own sweat. My APFU uniform clung to my chest, the grey cloth tinted by the moisture of my skin. It was looking like another typical day in Iraq.

I glanced around the POC (Platoon Operations Center). Everybody was already awake. Chris was spreading camouflage paint on his face, to conceal the fact that he hadn't shaved in a few days. Rhett was handing out our daily rations. Lacey, having lost the poker game the night before, was already hard at work cleaning our rifles.

Lt. Linker, already clad in full battle rattle, came strolling into the make-shift tent that was the POC.

“Tate!” he bellowed out. Not that I was in trouble. No, Lt. Linker just had a way of always bellowing. I guess being twenty-four, an Executive Officer with no experience, he felt the need to constantly remind us that he was the boss. He's a good guy when you get him drunk, but an asshole in uniform.

“Yes, sir?” I called out over my shoulder as I continued to arrange the gear in my rucksack.

“FRAGO on today's orders!” he said, still bellowing. “You're leading an LLVI today! Mission briefing at 1100 hours!”

“Uhh, sir? I can't lead an LLVI team.” I looked at him, confused. “I'm just a Spec-4, sir.”

“Field promotion. Congratulations, Sergeant Tate,” he smirked. “Now, guess which Sergeant is in charge of the new LLVI team.”

“Me sir?”

“You.”

He smiled and left. See, I didn't want to be in charge of an LLVI team. Intercepting low-level voice transmissions behind enemy lines was not my idea of fun. I was quite happy stowed away in the POC translating documents. I barely had time to wonder who had been killed the night before to make my promotion necessary when Rhett slapped me on the back, a shit-eating grin spread ear-to-ear, “Congrats, Sarge!”

“Drop and give me twenty,” I said nonchalantly. Rhett laughed. I glared at him, and he stopped laughing.

“Seriously?”

“Remember last week when you took the last grilled beef MRE after I already called dibs on it?”

“Dude, you can’t...”

“That’s SGT. Dude to you. Now, drop.”

He fell to the ground and started doing push-ups. Under his breath, I heard him mutter something about field promotions being temporary.

After the briefing, I hand-selected my team. We’d all been through LLVI training, so everybody knew what to do. I took Rhett, Chris, and Lacey—my friends. LLVI is normally a safe assignment, but I knew I could trust them in a pinch, and I knew they were good soldiers.

Just after noon, we covertly crossed into enemy territory. By 1300 hours, we had reached our location roughly 70 miles behind enemy lines. The sun was high in the sky, and the air was so hot it burned my lungs. God, I hated that country.

We embedded ourselves under the scorching sands and settled in for a long stay. We set up the radio and quickly found an enemy frequency that we were to monitor for pertinent information. We had been there for about two hours when we heard a truck rumbling towards us. We knew this was not one of our trucks, and in the harsh reality of war, if it isn’t ours, it’s theirs. With a hand signal, I gave the order to maintain radio silence.

There we were, sitting in a cramped hole in complete silence, the hot sun beating down on us, listening to the approaching truck. I prayed to whatever god would listen that it would pass us by. But no gods were listening that day.

The engine stopped. The tires threw a thick cloud of dust in the air. Near as I could tell, it had stopped less than 100 feet from our embedded position. Then we heard talking, loud boisterous talking. We all understood what they were saying despite the fact that they weren’t speaking English.

We listened as one of the voices barked out orders. They were there for the same reason we were. They were there to set up a temporary camp. Their mission? To find us. Not us specifically, but to find any American troops stupid enough to venture this far.

I couldn’t radio for help; they would have heard me. We couldn’t complete the mission; they would have heard the radio. I had only two choices: wait or act.

If I had given the order to wait, god knows what would have happened. With their proximity to our location, it was only a matter of time until they stumbled across our hiding place. Packed in as we were, a single grenade would have killed us all. No, I couldn’t give the order to wait.

But how could I give the order to act? I’d been in charge for only a matter of hours. What would we do? The hole we were in was not a foxhole. It was not a battle entrenchment. Ours was not a defensive fighting position, and the foxhole was not designed for battle. It was

designed for camouflage, and that's all. Clearly we had to get out of the hole before we were found and slaughtered, but how could I give that order?

We didn't know if the enemy was facing us or not. If they were, then the first person out of the hole would be gunned down before he could stand. But I had no choice. I had to give the order to leave the hole.

I looked at Lacey. Her blonde hair poked out from beneath her helmet. Her jaw was stern, showing bravery and patriotism, but her beautiful blue eyes were filled with terror. Her eyes said that she knew she was going to die today. Could I send Lacey out first? After all, as the only one who had attended the mission briefing, it was important that I survive. I had been told that I was the only one not expendable. Could I give the order to Lacey and make her go first?

She was twenty. She hadn't seen her husband in the six months that we'd been in country. She wrote to him every day. She was a sweet girl. She had invited me over for dinner on numerous occasions. I remembered the last time I saw her husband. We were in a pub in Germany, enjoying one last drink together before we shipped out. I had promised him that I would take care of his wife and see to it that she was safe. No, I couldn't send Lacey out. I quietly told her to stay put.

My eyes turned to Chris. The camouflage paint on his face may have hidden his stubble, but it didn't hide his emotions. His teeth clenched, showing that he knew the decision I was facing. Could I send Chris out first? Could I give the order to Chris and make him go first?

He was twenty-one and fiercely intelligent. I remember numerous times going to his barracks room to find him building a computer, or studying the works of Stephen Hawking "just for fun." Chris was a virgin. Not because he wasn't attractive, but because he didn't know how to talk to women. The man could do calculus in his head, but he couldn't understand why he got all flustered and goofy around a pretty girl. I remember he once thanked me for making him "feel cool." He was the best friend I had out there. No, I couldn't send Chris out. I quietly told him to stay put.

My attention turned to Rhett. This was the first time in my life that I had ever seen Rhett not smiling. His face was pale. The pimples that dotted his visage stood out like shining red beacons. Could I send Rhett out first? Could I give the order to Rhett and make him go out first?

He was only eighteen, still a child. He was a big practical joker. Whether it was slipping into a silly impression of the major or trying to convince Sgt. Gilbert that the deadly sand worms from *Dune* were real, Rhett was always up to something. He had the kind of joking innocence that only youth could bring. I remembered the road trip to Berlin the previous year and how he had made me laugh non-stop. No, I couldn't send Rhett out. I quietly told him to stay put.

I flipped off the safety on my rifle, and, with a silent goodbye to my daughter, I crawled to the surface myself. The Army may have said that I was the only one not expendable, but I disagreed. I was not willing to send my friends to their deaths.

The enemy was closer than I had thought. By my memory, it was only about 30 feet between me and the truck. The voices came from the other side of the vehicle, so I was shielded from view.

I was on my feet and still alive. Some people have said that I was lucky. I disagree. I wish to God that I had been shot down right there.

I stood there, dumbfounded. I couldn't believe I was still alive. Then it happened.

One of them came walking around the front of the truck. He stopped dead in his tracks as his eyes met mine. His brown skin was still tight over his bones. He couldn't have been more than sixteen or seventeen. His dark eyes widened in surprise. We stood, staring at each other for an eternity. I silently prayed that he would just surrender because I knew that if he called out a warning, I was going to be killed.

His mouth opened...I shot him in the chest. He went down. Hard. Dark gore splattered on the front of the dusty truck.

I don't really know for sure what happened next. There was shouting. I ran around the back of the truck. Four men, the eldest about my own age, were scrambling to pick up their weapons.

A three-shot burst flew from my rifle, but I don't remember pulling the trigger. One went to his knees clutching his stomach, his face pleading for mercy. He was still alive and writhing in pain when a second burst took off half of his face.

I heard the telltale rattle of an AK-47. I dropped to the ground and fired towards the sound. The rest is all a blur of blood and adrenaline.

As far as I can tell, the whole fight took about 15 seconds, but it seemed to last for days... weeks.

When it was over, five men lay at my feet, dead. Then I noticed the first one...the one that found me...the first man I ever killed...he was unarmed. In my haste and fear of being discovered, I hadn't noticed. I fell to my knees and vomited. Chris came up from behind me and put his hand on my shoulder. The rest of my squad had been too late out of the hole and missed the entire battle. I lay down in the sand, not caring about the blood and vomit. I lay there and have yet to get back up.

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## *Something for Nothing*

By Chris Allen

Although I would not consider Boogie a gleaner, he does at times have gleanings. I would, however, call him more of a “talker-out-of-stuff.” Boogie is by no means poor. He is most definitely a middle class, hard-working guy who just hates to pay anything for something, let alone full price. In order to get stuff (read “crap”) at a highly discounted price, one must frequent certain merchants, who may not be of the highest standing, flea marketeers to be exact. And the flea markets that Boogie likes to patronize are in the area of town where locking your doors is just an understood, along with not making eye contact with anyone. In these fine suburban markets, items such as pit bulls with counterfeit registrations, stuffed alligator heads, fake Oakleys, and tires with only slight tread separation can be had at prices well below their true market value. Unfortunately for these vendors, Boogie is an aficionado of the “talk-you-out-of-your-crap” game.

Two weeks ago, as spring began to make an appearance here in the city, Boogie called and asked if I would like to join him on a trip to Mary’s Market, one of the finer flea markets in town, distinguished from the others because only five Oklahoma City police officers need to be on location at any one time.

“Sure, why not, I haven’t had the crap scared out of me in a couple weeks. I need to feel alive,” I said before he hung up the phone.

Watching Boogie work the merchants is a great experience, and one should not miss the chance. It reminds me of that Crocodile Hunter guy from Australia on TV. It looks like the fellow has complete control over the situation, but in reality, the croc could simply snap its jaws shut and death-roll him into a watery grave. That’s what Boogie does every time he deals with the counterfeit-pit-bull-and-used-tire-salesmen. Yep, dogs and tires are undoubtedly Boogie’s favorites.

“You’ve got to have a good foundation stock for any dog breeding operation; people won’t buy crappy pit bulls,” he explained on the ride to the market. Boogie owns a puppy mill filled with unregistered pit bulls. He’s always looking for new stock. The man who sold him his last male told him that he would be at the sale today, and Boogie planned on talking him out of another dog.

We arrived at the bustling flea market and parked between two cop cars just to be safe. “Okay, don’t talk or look at this guy. I’ll do the talking, and we’ll be out of here in ten



minutes,” Boogie advised.

“Okay,” I answered, nervously looking over my shoulder, making a mental note of where all the cops were standing. As we approached the dog breeder, Boogie reminded me not to say a word.

“Hey, Bill, what’s going on? Got any new dogs?” Boogie inquired.

“Sure do, Ryan. I got these three brindle males yesterday,” he answered.

*Boogie’s name isn’t Ryan. Crap, I knew where this was going.*

“Man, those are a couple good lookin’ dogs. What do you think you’ll need for that big male there?”

“500.”

“Are they papered?”

“Can be for a hundred extra.”

“Man, all I got is 75,” Boogie replied.

“Got to have 500,” Bill said.

“350?”

“I thought you said you only had 75,” Bill answered unhappily.

“Well, I’d have to go to the bank and get the rest,” Boogie responded.

“Tell you what, Ryan, I’ll give you the dog, and when you get a litter of pups out of him, I get the first two picks, deal?”

“Sure, Bill, that sounds like a great idea.”

Bill thumbed through an old address book.

“Are you still at 1597 N. Marshall in Norman?”

“Yup,” Boogie replied.

*Boogie lives in Mustang.*

“I tried calling your cell phone, but it said the number was disconnected,” Bill said.

“Huh, it was working this morning. Are you sure you dialed the right number?”

“250-0333.”

*That’s not Boogie’s phone number.*

“Well, that’s right. Try calling me when you get home,” Boogie answered.

“How long before you think you’ll have your female bred?” Bill inquired.

“She should be in heat in the next two months or so. Well, it was nice doing business with you, Bill. Call me tonight and we’ll work out the details.”

“Okay, talk to you tonight, Ryan.”

I won’t bother you with the conversation I had with “Ryan” on the way home. Let’s just say I don’t plan to go gleaning with Boogie anymore.

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# Scrape

By Rebecca Seaton

Two thousand years ago the tomb of the first emperor of China included a football-field-sized bronze map of his conquered territories, with pure mercury continuously pumped through rivers and lakes built to scale. The first emperor of China died of mercury poisoning.

Two thousand years later, I was standing by the casket of a man who had died in an accident. I was delivering a spray of plastic baby-blue carnations on a green metal easel and a fifty-dollar papier-mâché bucket crammed with gladiolas, roses, and Peruvian lilies. The buckets, designed to park on the grave after everything is said and done, are top heavy and three-feet tall. They drizzle ice cold water with every step. The trick is to remove the arrangement from the van without snapping any flower stems, open the funeral home door without dropping the bucket, and carry it successfully to the right viewing room without any of the funeral home directors discovering the trail of wet carpet before you make your exit. This requires an almost martial arts sense of concentration, deep knee bending, and a black apron that doesn't clearly show the amount of water you're spilling with every step.

Two days earlier, while driving my daughter to school, the road was blocked by a cluster of emergency vehicles and a frantic local policeman waving traffic onto a detour passing by vineyard fields and miniature goats grazing in front yards. Later in the afternoon when all the fire trucks and sheriff's cars were removed, I drove over the accident site, my tires crossing a violent, deep scrape across both lanes of the old, dry asphalt. A large curved shape of grass had been ripped away, exposing bare red dirt on the roadside.

Two funeral home employees were in the office, but they were busy juggling family members. I had some time to look around before they whisked me out of the room. I parked the giant container on a varnished table and turned to view the body. He looked as normal as most dead bodies do, except his skin was a slight gray color and he was sporting a large square bandage on his unshaven chin. Whatever injury he had sustained could not be masked, even by the magic of the mortician's needle and make-up bag. A bandage on a dead man's beard seemed distracting.

Two visitors were signing the guest book behind me. The interior of the casket was baby blue, and parked proudly at the top corner near the head of the body was a bright, shiny model of the General Lee. (Insert loud YEEEEHAW! and a hokey narration by Waylon

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Jennings here.) Stuck on the baby blue satin of the casket interior, in the perfect place to be viewed for eternity by the dead man's closed eyes, was a sticker that read "GIT 'ER DONE." Below the text was a large cartoon truck drawn to appear to be speeding. I had to muffle a definite giggle as one of the funeral directors entered the room to sign my delivery tickets. I'm fairly certain he found this as funny as I did, but he makes his living with a straight face.

Two voices from the viewing room followed me as I walked down the marshmallow soft carpeting of the hallway. "He sure looks good."

"Oh, yes, they did a great job."

"Yeah, crushed by a semi and still an open casket. They do good work."

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# *Greyhound*

**By Phillip Grimes**

**T**wenty-two hours and forty-nine minutes of boredom in its purest state plague me—the Greyhound bus. I know that she will be there waiting. This feeling alone is what made me board the big metal box twenty-two hours and fifty-one minutes ago. I haven't slept at all on this cursed bus. Why do they have to make these seats so uncomfortable? The foothills of the Smoky Mountains pass on either side. I am almost there: almost to nowhere special and the most wonderful place in the world.

Small-town Tennessee is nothing special, but that is not where I am headed. She is my destination. I wonder if she will be there when I arrive. I wonder what she'll be wearing. I wonder how her touch will feel for the first time in months. Will it feel odd? Will it be all that I hope for? Will she run up to me and kiss me right there, in the bus terminal with people coming and going around us?

Twenty-three hours and twelve minutes of boredom have passed. The bus pulls in the parking lot, and the driver calls in the arrival. He doesn't know that he is pulling in to the most amazing bus stop on the continent. All the other passengers stay seated or reach for their carry-on bags. The whole world seems to be just outside the bus, and a handful of passengers stand between me and it. I grab my backpack and pull it on. The people are gone now. I walk past the people sitting and waiting to see their special ones or running away from bad memories. The driver helps me unload my luggage from the underbelly of his giant metal box on wheels. I sit in the terminal for a few of the longest minutes of my life. The woman sitting beside me is waiting for her taxi. We talk about her court hearing until a gold Toyota Camry turns from the off ramp and pulls up to the sidewalk.

She is sitting in the passenger seat. As soon as the car stops moving, she hops out and opens the trunk. Her brown vest is decorated with cartoon kitties. We stow the bags and crawl into the back seat. I put my arm around her and pull her close. Her hands feel small and warm in mine. I close my eyes and feel the car move forward on the pavement. It feels strange and incredible at the same time to be sitting here holding her. For the first moment in what seems like years I feel happy. When I open my eyes and look into hers, I've found my home. We sit, happy underneath the cold morning sky.

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## *Begin Again*

**By Amanda Bittle**

We've been stuck in the sand for three hours. Deep in the bowels of Utah, along a gloriously deserted stretch of U.S. Highway 50, Shelley and I had paid no mind to the signs warning "Soft Shoulder", and now we're waiting for a far-away hero to come and hoist us free. Shelley is scared, gripping the small black taser in her hands and urging me to keep a firm grip on the broken golf club she's given me to chase away Charlie Manson, who's sure to come walking out of the desert at any moment. I sit stewing in the driver's seat; I'm furious. We were supposed to make it from Denver to Reno today, and now we'll probably have to bed down somewhere so far from the ocean I don't even want to think about it.

"Hey, I see headlights!" Shelley bolts upright, clutching her ridiculous weapon.

The headlights loom closer and closer, finally revealing the outline of a tow truck.

"Thank God," murmurs Shelley as I get out to greet the driver.

For all the time we've spent waiting, the operation itself seems absurdly simple.

Within minutes, the grey BMW is out of the sand and headed once more for our briny promised land. For the first few minutes, neither of us says a word. Then Shelley turns to me.

"Where are we going to stop?"

I take a minute to answer. Something is boiling inside me, not quite anger but more reckless than a pure adrenaline rush.

"Come on, I'm tired. We need to sleep." Shelley is impatient.

Suddenly I've made up my mind.

"Well, pull over and switch me seats," I say. "I'm driving to Reno."

Shelley wastes no time drifting off into a cramped, uncomfortable sleep, and soon I alone am traveling this winding highway, passing mountains, mesas, lakes and endless square miles of sand in the pitch-black night. Through the sunroof I am watched over by a night sky filled with stars to rival those seen in Oklahoma, and, as I drift across the earth, alone with my thoughts, the tension in my neck and shoulders begins to loosen.

Something else begins to change in me, though I can't put my finger on it at first. The farther we travel from the scene of our misfortune, the less real it becomes, and I start to focus not on my anger but on the task ahead of me: to make it to Reno before the night is through. The funny thing is, once I quit noticing my frustration, I begin to notice other

things, things I've never bothered to note—the cool, smooth vinyl of the steering wheel beneath my fingers, the fresh, mellow smell of the unpolluted desert, the bright, clear infinity of the stars. I realize with some surprise that I can't remember the last time I fully appreciated a scene like this. As a general rule I multitask to a fault, scrambling to fill even the “wasted” time I spend waiting at traffic lights with some sort of productive activity.

I've heard of people who stop to listen to the wind blow or who drink their coffee every morning in the company of the birds and the rising sun; I've just always assumed I wasn't one of those “types.” I've never been able to meditate. But I realize that's just what I'm doing now. Free of needless worry, my mind focuses on the beauty around me, and by the time the creeping sunrise begins to show I feel I am about to burst with the most incredible feelings I cannot hope to describe, feelings I've not experienced since childhood.

“Is this happiness?” I think to myself. “Or is that totally crazy? I've been happy before.”

But I haven't felt like this. This is like being given a pair of legs after a lifetime of lameness, or like suddenly being given the gift of sweet and glorious sight.

I am torn between wanting to share this, all of this, the scenic masterpiece before me and my own blissful revelations, with Shelley, and wanting the solitude to go on forever.

As the sun inches over the mountains in the rearview, I keep driving in silence. Shelley has seen it before. I need this. I'm not sure what exactly is happening to me now, but I feel as though God has just whispered all the secrets of the universe into my eager ear. It's almost too much to bear.

The day opens on a beautiful stretch of white sand and salt marshes, somewhere in Nevada. I keep driving, on and on and on...why am I not tired? I've gotten second, third, and fourth winds, maybe more. My energy is endless, seemingly coming from nowhere and pushing me to go just a little bit further, take in just a little bit more. We're approaching Reno now. Should I stop?

Each turn is more beautiful than the next, and I cannot bring myself to exit the interstate. What began as a stubborn refusal to let some patch of sand keep us from seeing the ocean on time has now become something much bigger, a thirst to see everything wonderful and beautiful and an endless supply of energy to experience and marvel and explore. I feel connected now to all the mystics of the universe, people at whom I might have scoffed before, people who have a sense of something bigger. Is it faith? Is it harmony? I cannot describe exactly what it is I feel now. Perhaps enlightenment is the best word, I finally decide. I know a secret. The secret is peace, or the secret is beauty. The secret is perfect simplicity.

Already the time I spent before Now, before the mountains and the sunrise and the stars, seems as distant and far off as being stuck in the sand on Highway 50, clutching my fragmented golf club. How is it possible that I was so angry? It now seems absurd,

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remembering the things I have always allowed to haunt and harangue me: traffic, deadlines, arguments, even minor delays on perfect highways under the clearest stars. All their power now washed away by this understanding. I suppose it boils down to this: I am in control. I feel a bit ridiculous now, having just figured it out. Today, this morning, right now, belongs to me, in a way in which it never has before. It is incredible how quickly I have changed my philosophy, but I do not question it. I am only grateful.

Sometime around noon, we cross the border into California. It is fantastic. I feel like a pioneer, the first to see each snow-covered fir tree and ancient, far-away mountaintop. I am in awe, awe I have not felt since early childhood, back when I still marveled at sunrises and anthills. I've reclaimed something lost, something important but which I suspect many of us lose in the transition to adulthood.

I pull over finally at a snowy mountain gas station. Before I get out to stretch my legs, I reach over to wake Shelley.

"Wake up," I say. "We're in California..."

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## *In the Sun*

By G. Smith

Skipper had been out of the joint for two weeks, but to me he looked worse than that. He looked mad, not some romantic Kerouac-esque mad, but real mad, the kind of mad that warned you are in the wrong place at the wrong time, and you should have listened to your mother. All women are evil.

I sat next to him shirtless, breathing deep, trying to show no fear, trying to not look him in the eye. He had a peppered scraggly beard that hid the majority of a scar, a scar that spoke to me with its own voice, “See me, boy, testament that your problems aren’t shit compared to me,” and I saw a young Skipper, a young Dalton James Fenway, getting shanked standing in the chow line. It was a racist scar, in and of itself, that generated dreams and nightmares and vocabularies of a different life: where nobody cared anymore than anyone else. Skipper had my father’s eyes, cold blue and somewhere else, eyes that came from war and buying in to something that may or may not be real but whose end result was right there, in that wicked stare.

He sat at a homemade desk in front of me. My chair was a hard, cold metal folding chair. He opened the cabinet on his desk, and rows and rows of different colored little bottles of ink were so organized that at that moment, in spite of Skipper’s horrific persona, I knew that I was in the right place. Until, of course, he slid open a drawer and drew out a chrome mechanical contraption that widened my eyes and made me doubt everything I had ever done. But I needed this. The American Indians may have their sun dances, but for a seventeen-year-old boy looking for some kind of spiritual relief, this was the path of transcendence.

Skipper dipped the needle into a tiny cup of ink and turned toward me and smiled through broken teeth. He leaned towards me. I closed my eyes and felt his warm hand on my naked chest.

“Breathe deep and forget about it,” he said. And then I felt something so painful all of my dead ancestors since the beginning of time screamed inside me, and I felt the needle gouge deep and couldn’t close my eyes or grit my teeth hard enough. And there she was wearing her mauve-colored bra, whispering in my ear from across the flaming prairies, pulling me towards her, urging me to come back into her arms, back into the unyielding bed, back to where I am supposed to be.

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I was smoking at intermission, kneeling out front of the Civic Center, alone with small scattered huddles of smokers, my parents still inside, saving my seat, waiting for the Beatles tribute band to again take the stage.

"Hi," she said to me smiling. I looked behind me, but she was talking to me. I wore a tie-dyed Hendrix tee and faded jeans. She was short, blonde hair and freckles. She had the whitest smile I had ever seen.

"Hey," I replied with smoke not knowing what to say. I recognized her as the girl who was sitting next to the older lady that sat next to me. My nervousness was crippling, and I stayed kneeling and took another drag from my smoke.

She just looked at me as I looked away, stupid, not knowing what to say, wishing I had something cool to talk to her about, wishing I wasn't smoking a cigarette, wishing I wasn't with my parents, wishing for her to say something else, and wishing I had the right answer. But, no, I kneeled before her sucking on my cancer stick, like it was cool in all of my past lives but this one, silent and retarded, with a contorted smile similar to the smile babies smile as they poop.

"I hope the second half is as good as the first," she turned and smiled. She left me in my cloud of smoke.

I smoked another and thought of cool things to say, cool questions to ask.

Not hard to answer questions like, "Who's your favorite Beatle? What's your favorite Beatles song? But do you like the earlier or late Beatles? I like the early John Lennon but the later George Harrison. I like the second half of the *White Album* and *Revolver*. 'Fixing a Hole' is definitely the best song on *Sargent Pepper's*."

She would say how she loved "Rocky Racoon" and "I Will," and I will tell her that she should read Dostoyevsky's *Notes From Underground* and ask her what would she do if she wrote a book that inspired one of her readers to kill one of the greatest human beings on the planet? Would she ever publish a book again? Would she blame it on Yoko or Salinger? We both would pick Yoko.

I made my way inside through the masses. I found my parents and inched my way down the aisle making my way to the empty seat. The gorgeous freckled blonde was sitting where the lady had been. I figured it was her mother. I sat down between her and my father.

"You having a good time?" Pop asked me.

"Yeah, you?" I asked, and I looked the other way, to the seat next to me at the small white freckled arm resting on our shared armrest.

"If your mother's having a good time, then I'm having a good time," he said as the lights faded and a fake Paul McCartney appeared in a circle of light on the stage, and everyone rose and screamed, no one louder than my mother, as if there were four Christs before us.

I rose and jumped and "Roll Over Beethoven" came pounding over the audience and

blonde little Jennifer Deanne Hollingsworth grabbed my arm in the frenzy, and we all sang, and my life, the rest of my life, became one with the Beatles, forever to be measured and compared and celebrated and drunk to.

We spent most of our time together on the telephone. We lived a hundred miles and two social levels apart. Her mother didn't have to work. Her father was some big-shot orthopedic surgeon who owned a tailor shop and a construction company. His business, on the surface seemed to benefit people, but I really knew nothing except he dealt in the souls of families like mine. She didn't much want to talk about her father, and my father at the time preached on labor unions and Marxism for the blue collar, and how this state was bassackwards. This was the same time that I enrolled in a welding class at the Vo-tech, to be like my old man, and I seriously thought I could see steam coming out of his head.

Jen had a friend named Amy that just got her license. They came down one afternoon because our school scrimmaged in football. Amy dropped her off at my house, and we were to walk to the football field in an hour to meet her. We were home alone and I took her into my room, and life took on a whole other meaning. Time swirled into itself as we talked about our dreams and our fears, and I confessed to her with honest tears that she had me forever even if she was waiting, even if I wouldn't know what to do with it if she gave it to me. And we stayed in each other's arms until I heard someone in the living room. My sister was home from the scrimmage. It had been over for an hour.

Panic sat in and we both ran the five blocks to the football field where Amy sat, waiting with Jen's mom, who showed up to surprise her daughter.

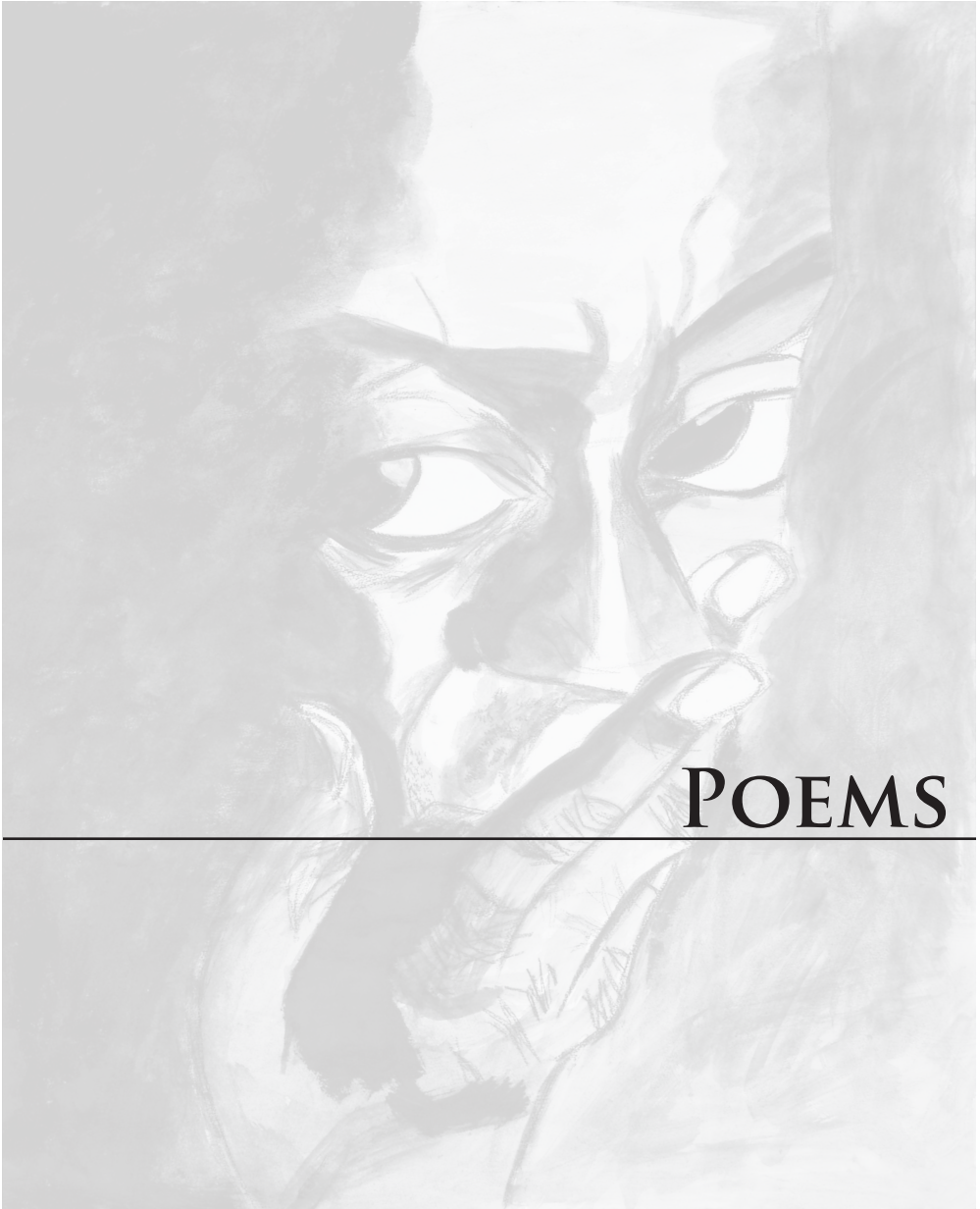
It was all downhill from there. The mark I had left on her daughter's neck probably didn't help.

Her mother's religion ran deep, and I, the smoking heathen, wasn't to be seen. But Jen hadn't given up on me. We talked on the phone. She would read to me new poems she had written, and I would receive those, days later, in envelopes that were covered in hearts and flowers. But as the fall settled in, there was no point. I had even picked up a Bible and started with Matthew, but by the time I had got to John she had met someone else.

I still called her. I checked in from time to time. Other girls came and went, unfortunate comparisons.



By the time Skipper had finished with the colors, I was numb and bleeding. I stood and walked to the mirror and looked at my chest. The reality of the doubts of those we learn to believe in is something that I need no physical reminder of, but still as I think of Christ and the Roman soldiers rolling the bones for his clothes, some things may fade in the sun, but the important things are immortal.



# POEMS



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## *Bali High*

As we leave the oasis of our hotel,  
the bright sun blasts a welder's torch  
across the tropical landscape.  
Our driver Adjah greets us warmly,  
the flower petals from his morning prayers  
still tucked above his ears.

Our car slips cautiously into the babbling stream  
of bright colored scooters and muffler-free cars.  
Hundreds of motorbikes weave an intricate braid,  
the white lines of the lanes only a suggestion.  
They drive at will, leaving all responsibility  
for safety to the drivers behind.  
Roaring scooters blur by inches from my window  
and our car seems a leaf in storm water  
carried forward by the motion around us.

Precious cargo balances precariously on two wheels—  
whole Indonesian families  
rough wooden crates too large to see over  
baskets of lumpy green fruit  
twenty gallon jugs of fresh water.  
Homemade metal hooks sprout dangerously to the side,  
carrying surfboards or bamboo poles  
for this week's Hindu ceremony.

Red Light!  
Vehicles crowd together  
racers at the starting line  
in expectant pause.  
The contrast of life  
in this foreign land surrounds us.  
A woman sits sidesaddle behind her husband,  
tucking her blue print sarong beneath her ankles  
in proper womanly modesty.  
A young girl in low-rise jeans and a bikini top  
straddles her bike,

slouching to show attitude.  
Next to us a toddler lies limply across  
the green gas tank of his father's scooter,  
his afternoon nap undisturbed.

Green Light!  
Vehicles stampede  
in pursuit of a prize  
unknown to us.  
The riders rush unheeding past  
the enchantment of the roadside—  
lush green vegetation  
elaborately carved doorways  
large stone temples built ages before  
exotic flowers of luminous colors  
home altars with today's offerings  
laid at Ganesha's feet.  
Beauty so commonplace it becomes  
the forgotten backdrop to the locals' mad dash.

Slowly into this turbulence  
comes a bicycle,  
serenely pedaled by  
someone's ancient grandfather,  
his wispy grey chin hair  
like the beard of a goat.  
A dead chicken, feet tied together,  
swings back and forth from the handlebars,  
tonight's dinner from the old market.  
The man floats in Zen composure,  
an eye in the storm around him.

I ponder this clash of old and new,  
the island's uniqueness fading  
at highway speed into the past.  
Bali's deep joy and spirituality,  
menaced by corporate uniformity,  
lingers still, an island beauty  
in silent prayer  
for diversity.

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## *Dinosaur Tracks*

I found a dinosaur footprint yesterday.  
My son was playing with trucks in the dirt,  
building a tower that would reach to the sky.  
The footprint had three long toes,  
each one slowly fading into the earth.

My son knelt inside the hollow impression.  
He paused for a moment, his trucks forgotten...  
frozen, staring, as if he were a hundred years old,  
gazing into his future,  
trying to catch a glimpse of an elusive truth  
which would evade him for a lifetime.

He placed his dimpled hand within the  
palm of the ancient print—  
a small hand made smaller by centuries.  
A harmonious consanguinity traversing ages,  
anchored together by kindred evanescence.

I stood there for many moments  
watching my son play in the vestiges of another life,  
pondering all the days and hours and moments  
spent pursuing something that is all  
passing away.

—Sarah Stiltner

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## *Dying in the Morning after Sex*

Today I woke up damn good.  
It was dark in the room.  
I had remembered to shut  
The blinds the night before—  
Which surprised me when I think  
Of all the cheap Italian wine  
I drank with  
My live-in girlfriend  
Was half dressed in my bed  
And I wanted one thing.  
I pulled her bra-straps off  
And kissed her  
Shoulder blades and back,  
Trying to wake her up,  
But she wouldn't move.  
For a second  
I was worried she had died and I was necking  
A corpse, but  
Eventually she started kissing me back.  
Her eyes  
Closed as we kissed each other  
And I kept my eyes open and fixed  
On hers  
As I pulled her underwear off lightly  
And pushed myself  
Hoping she might open  
More  
Than just her mouth  
And  
Look at me,  
But it never came.  
I lost my endurance and let go.  
I crumbled on top of her  
Let my shoulder ride up against  
Her chin and sweat ran off my face.  
We lay there like that for about two minutes  
Then I rolled off her and onto my back



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Felt my heart  
Drop  
Into the back  
Of my chest—  
And listened to the restlessness of branches  
Against my window  
And watched a small bird  
Mistake the clear pane  
For an open door  
And come to rest  
In a blue heap  
On the white ledge  
Of my windowsill.  
I didn't dare look  
At the mess I was lying with,  
The air was too still and crisp to disturb.  
And I thought about whether this was real;  
Over the past few months I wondered  
What do I want to do with my life now?  
And this morning I had it figured out.  
I wanted to die happy and die quickly.  
With my eyes shut, I kept my body still  
And thought deep  
In my head  
That if there were ever  
A perfect time  
For me to die,  
Now would be  
That moment.

—Brandon Isaak

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## *Intercourse, Pennsylvania*

In Intercourse, Pennsylvania,  
A peculiar strain of hedonism  
Is possible;  
To us, Friday intruders,  
What is  
Intentionally inconspicuous  
Is  
Clearly conspicuous.  
Simplicity doesn't seem  
So simple, after all;  
In aspects of willful intenseness—  
Cloaked in plainness—lie incongruities  
Of forms, contents, matter and notions.

Inside People's Place, the Quilt Museum's  
Diverse palettes, colors true, enhancing  
Amish quilts as noticeably varied  
As simplicity allows for quiet  
Pleasures taken silently through eyes well  
Trained to notice beauty, plainness, purity.

Quiet, simple, folk cashier at work, or  
Is it play? adorns her brunette bun with  
Gauzy whiteness; humble, homey, soft pink  
Dress embellishes the awe of her; what's  
Meant to be her modest poise expands to  
Classic, even elegant, to match her  
Renoir-painting, porcelain complexion.

Amish miss heads home, her buggy hugs the  
Right lane's edge; she drives the single, horse-led  
Streamlined cart, avoids the shoulder's dangers  
Skillfully; appreciated aptness  
For so young a solitary traveler.

Amish horseman comes to town atop his  
Peerless bay, an agitated steed, to

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Shop and show the world his subtle pride and  
Joy as though it were a Maserati  
Or Corvette. We see him twice; the once  
Before our survey of the cannery, the  
Other shortly after his successful  
Quest. The difference is that the hand that's  
Free of reins holds plastic shopping bag, a  
Sign he has his task completed and a  
Symbol: progress affects all of us with  
Equal concentration, even those whose  
Lives include intentional innocence.

In Intercourse, Pennsylvania,  
A private style of hedonism  
Is plain to see.  
Simplicity isn't really  
Simple, after all,  
And Paradise isn't many miles away.

—Richard Rouillard

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## *Riders*

We was pushin' up from Texas, had a thousand head bedded down  
Out there by that big clear creek 'bout a mile and half from town.  
I was ridin' in to grab some grub and maybe some good shut-eye  
When some strangeness started happenin' and still I wonder why.  
I came up out of the arroyo and what do you think I seen—  
A remuda, chuck wagon, four old waddies—they was dirty, hard, and lean.  
I glanced toward their saddles they was totin' Winchester '73's  
But I allowed that even with them old guns they'd be a match for me.  
So I rode on in and politely asked if I could sit a spell.  
One old puncher said, "Climb down, Son, if you've got a taste for hell."  
Then the cookey brought me a metal plate full of bacon, beans, and bread  
And ten years out I still recall every word them fellers said.  
We sat there by the fire and told each other lies.  
We cracked some jokes and drank some. "Joe," then I said, "the time does fly,  
But if I'm gonna catch that little stray, I better catch him soon  
'Cause it's gettin' on toward sundown, and there ain't even a quarter moon."  
So I swung up on my pony and headed up the hill.  
I glanced back over my shoulder and got an awful chill.  
I seen no wagon, no punchers, no woodsmoke hanging in the air.  
I thought that was rightly strange, 'cause I was just sittin' there.  
Just about then that little black brute broke from the mesquite patch  
And me and my little ropin' horse both knew he'd met his match.  
I pulled my old magee from off my saddle horn  
And my little ropin' pony 'membered why that he was born.  
We reeled that dogie in, boys, and headed down the draw,  
And I got a chance to study 'bout the things that I'd just saw.  
I got that stray back to the creek where the herd was bedded down.  
I got him gentled up and then I headed into town.  
I bought me a glass of whiskey and I raised that glass up high  
'Cause I knew that I'd just taken chuck with them riders in the sky.

—Ron Scrivner

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## *The Night Robert Johnson Laid My Uncle Haas Down*

Haas had a woman with a face once torn up by a hatchet  
Who went by the name of Hatchetface Sissy.  
When Haas's hound ran off, Sissy would catch it  
Until one day he ran off to Yazoo, Mississippi.

"I ain't goin', Haas, it's too far.  
These bones are weary and it's a long road to go."

Haas loaded his guitar and his old whiskey jar  
So as to kill two birds with one stone.  
He hit the road to hunt for his hound  
And found little, save sleepless nights on the road.  
Haas hopped from tired town to town,  
Yet found no hound to add to his load.

Haas wrote a drunken letter home to his gal:

"Dear Sis, I've rambled in juke-joints and bars...  
I've gained a few enemies and made a few pals  
From playing guitar and passing the old whiskey jar.  
Will return home with the hound. Love you forever,  
Your Haas. P.S.  
Be waiting out back with that dress,  
Unless this proves to be an impossible endeavor,  
A complete failure, a dying dog, a mess..."

Sissy sensed Haas was stepping out  
(Haas sealed the letter without a return address).  
Ever heard a hatchet-faced mama holler and shout  
After a weekend of whiskey before heading out west?  
Sissy took to the bottle and bathtub gin,  
While Haas howled the blues on his twelve-string.  
Sis took to hookin' and all seven sins.  
Sis took off her wedding ring.

Haas soon forgot about his sweet hatchetface  
When he met a bird called Razorface Ruth Thompson.

One night Haas was playing in Miss Ruth's Place  
When in walked no other than Robert Johnson.  
Robert made love to at least twenty women,  
While making love to his six-stringed guitar.  
He moaned of Blind Blake, called of Blind Lemon,  
Inhaling white lightning from an old Mason jar.

Robert made love to one woman too many.  
Haas made note of a certain hatchet-faced gal.  
Robert was making love to Hatchetface Sissy;  
Haas hit Robert in his lovemaking jowls.  
Robert faltered and fetched his piece,  
Warning Haas of impending doom.  
Haas went for Robert and Robert released  
At least one round into Haas and the room.  
Haas howled and hollered and fell to the floor.  
Sissy flocked to him and dropped on one knee.  
Haas struggled to crawl to the door,

Robert Johnson laid him out for the whole room to see,  
"Those evil-hearted women, no, they will not let me be."

—Lyndsie StremLOW

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## *Nights at Sea*

A harmonica plays in my left ear.  
An old clarinet sits at my right.  
Smooth blues remind me of...  
Wish I could play again.

A time of innocence,  
some form of clarity.  
No worries at all,  
when I played that old wind.

The ocean once called to me,  
with the wind off the waters.  
Sailed for days uncounted,  
blown by the wind I once followed.

Home calls now from afar,  
the wind now off the plains.  
I've forgotten where that is,  
and the ocean always stays.

Lost in dark waters,  
my lessons I've learned.  
Lost is my innocence,  
wisdom I've found.

The ocean speaks to you,  
on dark lonely nights.  
Stories of who sailed once before,  
while you search for your sight.

All from the harmonica belting the blues,  
bringing back times you once knew  
And an old clarinet, once filled with wind,  
That sent me around the world, and calls me once again.

---

*tia*

i slowly make my way up the old dirt road  
following the luring smell of coffee that flutters out  
from the barred windows of my *tia*'s house

she is the first to rise among my *familia*  
always up to cook in the small, turquoise  
shanty that is overcrowded

i enter the front door which is always  
open and see her toiling away in the decrepit kitchen  
that smells like a dank towel

she makes *frijoles*, *tortillas*, and *pan dulce*  
sweating from her brow and drenching from her armpits  
her body dropping and sagging like a *hamaca*

i enter, greet her, and sit at the table and listen to the  
animals in the backyard squawking and feel a jolt  
in my heart when I look over at her and notice her beaten, dark brown skin.

—Jairo Jose Rios



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## *If I could, I would.*

If I could, I would push my pen across this page  
 And compose a sonnet to Tomorrow's yesterdays.  
 And if I could, I would drive my pen so far into your vein,  
 You would feel the burn of my words in your blood.  
 If I could, I would throw my pen into this crowded room  
 And force the chaos of conversation to fall silent at its stroke.  
 If I could, I would break my pen  
 So it would weep tears of ink onto tissue paper pages of lament.  
 If I could, I would. But then what would I write with?

If the words could flow from my fingertips as they do from my pen,  
 I would trace a plethora of passion onto the parchment of your flesh.  
 If they could be planted,  
 They would take root in the concrete of your heart  
 and break down the pavement of neglect.  
 If my words could ever be formed to describe the rapture I find in your company,  
 They would tear their way out of my ribcage to expose my beating heart.  
 If I could ever fashion a word stronger than "love,"  
 God himself would stand at attention and applaud.  
 If I could, it would go something like... adulaffectionallegiamorousnessappreciattach-  
 mencherishindevotionalemotionalenchantmentfidelifriendshipidolatinfatuapassionalust...  
 (That may need some trimming...)  
 But if I could, I would.

— Weston Mize





# PHOTOGRAPHY

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## Black & White, a Photographic Essay : New York City



by Yousef Kazemi



*Clear Vision*



*Crossing*

*Glass*





*Steamy Streets*



*Times Square*



*Macy's*



*Girl in the City*



*The Open Window*



*Ground Zero*



*Liberty*



*Seductive Whorl*  
Carrie Cronk