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Absolute

Absolute 2009

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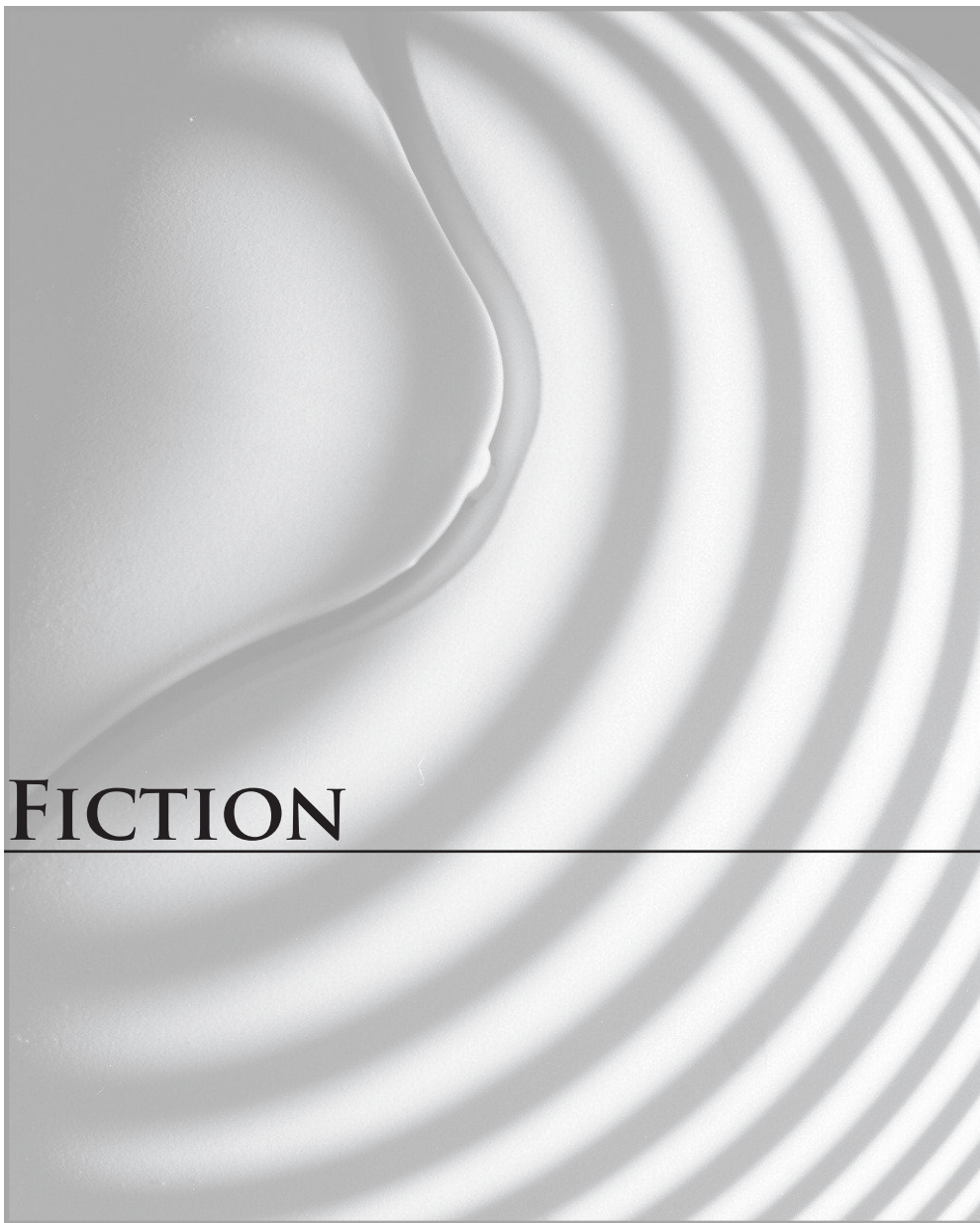
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*Absolute 2009 is dedicated to the
memory of Dr. Bruce B. Owen*



FICTION

The Sky is Blue

By Hannah Bollinger

Adam Herrington sat at his breakfast table eating his bowl of Fruity Pebbles and feeling dismal. He hated the design of the little blue flowers on his bowl and considered stopping somewhere and buying some new dishes after work. Looking around, he noticed the dust that had accumulated on all his shelves, countertops, even the table where he was eating. Despite it being 7:30 in the morning and very bright outside, his apartment was very dim. He had the blinds closed and only the light in his bathroom was on. There were very few personal touches to the apartment and the overall look was that of dust and loneliness. Adam looked down and was surprised to find that he had already eaten his bowl of cereal. The food has been tasteless. He bitterly thought, *Well, I guess if I don't taste food anyway, I should just start buying that healthy cardboard crap and at least get something good out of eating.*

As Adam carried his dirty dishes to the sink, his phone began to ring. Looking at the called ID, he saw it was just his mom. He let the machine pick up.

“Hi, baby! It’s me, Mom. Just thought I’d call and check up on you since you never call. I hope you are all right. I guess you are at work. Love ya’, sweetie.” Adam grimaced. He hated messages that made him feel guilty.

Adam went to his closet and picked out a plain black suit pretty much like all the suits in his closet. He put on a white button-up shirt with many stains. As long as he didn’t take off the jacket, they weren’t visible. The buttons pulled a little tight but he still considered himself to be in good shape. The

only real color in his whole outfit was the light blue tie he put on. It matched exactly the color of his eyes. Adam went to the bathroom and combed his dark brown hair. He was thankful his hair was still as thick as when he was in college. Then he brushed and meticulously flossed his teeth.

Grabbing his briefcase, he walked out of the apartment. A small folded note caught his eye. It was placed in the exact center of his doormat and seemed to be put there just for Adam. He snatched it up and stuffed it in his pocket. He didn't want any strange looks from the new lady who had just moved in next door. At the bus stop, Adam smashed the tiny black ants that infested the sidewalk there and then curiously unfolded the note. He read the simple message written in a childlike script: "The Sky is Blue."

What? What is that? Everyone knows the sky is blue. What kind of crap...

Adam thought the most pessimistic thoughts he could muster but he couldn't help look up. The sky was blue. The light he never let into his apartment now shocked his eyes and made tiny dots swarm before them. Adam was more pissed now because it took a couple of seconds for his vision to become normal. Then, the bus came and he rode to work.

The next morning Adam finished off his box of Fruity Pebbles and went through the same monotonous routine that he did every work day. After leaving the apartment, he headed down the stairs that led out of the building. On the fifth step was another note. At first Adam walked past it, but after three steps he turned and grabbed the note. He unfolded it. "I love you." Adam was shocked. This note was so different. Who was sending them? As far as he could remember the only person who had ever said these words to him was his mother. Adam thought about his mom's call. He had not called her back. Despite being overwhelmed with suspicion about the notes, he wondered if he should have called his mother back.

All day at work his suspicions and guilty feelings haunted him. No matter what he was doing, as soon as there was room for an outside thought, he was reminded of everything. He didn't know who had sent him the note, but he did

know his mom deserved more than she had gotten from him lately. Twice he picked up the phone but, after dialing her number, he would hang up. When it was almost time for his lunch hour, he decided to quit early and just call her.

Their conversation wasn't long, but his mother was pleased that he had called. Adam was sorry that he had neglected her, but he also felt anger that one little note had caused a change in his behavior. He didn't even know where the notes were coming from. Why should he even care? He remembered the new lady next door. None of this had happened before she moved in.

No one had ever paid any special attention to Adam. No teacher had ever gone out of her way to inspire him. No girl had ever fallen madly in love with him. Nothing for Adam, and he resented the world for it.

Cursing the notes, Adam shut his eyes as he climbed the stairs to his apartment. If there was another note, he didn't want to see it. In just a few more steps, he would have been safe inside, but he couldn't resist peeking. He sighed when he saw the note lying innocently on the step. He took it inside, grabbed a glass of lemonade, and sat in the recliner. At first he put the note aside and watched television. During every commercial he would pick up the note and turn it over in his hands. He imagined the secret admirer who must be sending the notes. His mind jumped to wild ideas about the message of the note. It was obvious that she had taken a great deal of interest in Adam. Unfolding the note, he was surprised. There was no note at all. Only a peace sign drawn in blue ink. Adam did not know what to think. The note was not romantic at all considering the last one.

All right, so she probably feels like she came on too strongly, and this is her way of keeping in contact without being too aggressive.

For the rest of the day, Adam stared at the picture and imagined his attractive neighbor leaving the notes for him. She must have wanted to represent her message with symbols to increase its significance. The hopeful message of peace and hopeful thoughts of a woman loving him encouraged Adam to clean his apartment that evening. He was up well into the night.

The next morning he felt better than he had in a long time. His mind was at peace. He looked forward to finding the next note and enjoyed the clean apartment. Walking out of the apartment, he was disappointed that there was no note on his welcome mat, but he wasn't distraught. He had not found yesterday's note until after work, so he decided it would be there when he got home. At work, his co-workers were surprised by his sudden friendliness. A few even thought that his behavior was so suspicious that they were afraid he might have planted a bomb in the building.

When he got home, he marched up the stairs and was bent over to pick up the note when he realized there was none. Feeling suddenly embarrassed and exposed, he rushed inside the apartment and slammed the door. He stayed inside all weekend. Occasionally, he looked out to see if there was another note, but he was disappointed.

Where can she be? Why has she stopped bringing me notes? Has she met someone?

On Monday, when Adam had to return to work, he was his old self. He didn't mingle and he left his cubicle only to buy a bottle of water. After work, Adam was nearly sweating when he turned into his hallway and looked for the note. He stopped in his tracks. There, on the welcome mat, was a little girl, nine or so. She was wearing pink denim shorts and a white shirt that was a little too big for her. Her brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail that had come undone. She casually pulled out a note from her pocket and placed it on the mat. She examined it but appeared to disapprove of its location because she picked it up and placed it in the middle of the "O" in WELCOME. Satisfied with it, she looked around and spotted Adam standing in the middle of the dim hallway.

"What are you doing, little girl?" Adam spoke through gritted teeth. He knew his intense anger was irrational, but he had thought he was something special and that some mature woman was interested in him. Now he felt ridiculous.

"I don't know. I was just...I was just writing notes." She was obviously frightened.

“Don’t leave them on my mat!” Adam was so angry. He stomped toward the child and realized he wanted to hit her, to pick her up and shake her. He wanted to hurt her.

“Nancy! Come here.”

The words startled Adam. He turned and saw the new neighbor. She rushed over, and put her face about an inch away from Adam’s.

“Just what are you doing to my daughter?”

Adam was speechless. He quickly turned and unlocked his door. On his way in, he stooped and grabbed the note. Inside, he read the last note: “My name is Nancy. What’s yours?”

The Apprentice

By Heather Clement

Just as I turned to see Christina flush the long-eared jack, I heard her yell out “Ho ho ho! Get him! Ho ho!” Kevin immediately released the jesses, held tight in his hand, letting his red-tailed hawk fly from his fist. Her wings beat hard as her body rose higher above the ground, pushing through the gusty wind.

The three of us stood in silence and waited for Marihoute to make her strike. She pushed ahead of the jack by two wing beats, winged over, somersaulted in midair, and then plummeted to the earth with talons open. As soon as I heard the cringing squeal, I saw Kevin rush in to assist his hawk with the struggling jack. Christina and I ran up to watch. Once Kevin dispatched the restless animal, I immediately stripped my coat and covered the jackrabbit, so he could remove his hawk without her fighting him to eat the dead animal.

“Gwen! Don’t do that! Kevin needs to reward her and let her eat first.”

“No, no, it’s alright. I will feed her when we get to the house,” Kevin said.

She exhaled sharply, “I’m just trying to teach her the right way of doing things. You’re setting a bad example. She will never be fit for falconry.”

I pushed back blonde strands of my hair that blew across my face, folded my arms, and said, “But I thought you were supposed...”

“Yeah, well you always think wrong.”

“Christina, cut her some slack. It’s not like she’s been doing this for years. I remember just a month ago when you forgot to...”

“Don’t even start. As an apprentice it’s important that she learns to do things right.”

Kevin smiled and slightly shook his head as he secured the leash to the hawk’s leather jesses. With the same pleasant smile, he looked up at me as he stood lifting the twenty-inch jack. His blue eyes meeting mine made me blush, and I quickly reached for the jackrabbit and helped him bag it up.

He leaned over to me and whispered, “It’s okay. Ignore your sister, you’re doing fine.”

I could feel my face turn red again. I smiled at him and then turned away to pick up my coat from the ground.

As we walked across the open field to return to Christina’s pickup, Kevin shouted, “Whoo! That was a great flight, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, Marihoute did really good.”

Christina kept silent as she reached up and pulled her dark brown ponytail tighter against her head.

“First jack of the season and we haven’t even made it to the meet yet,” Kevin added.

“Yeah.”

I hoped I had made a good impression and that Kevin had appreciated me helping in the field. After he placed Marihoute into her giant hood, we piled into Christina’s king cab to head on to James’. James always openly welcomed guests into his beautiful ranch house. His home was the best place in Oklahoma for the annual falconry meet. He owned eight hundred acres of land that provided more than enough hunting ground with plenty of game.

The long gravel road to James’ home twisted through the golden fields of Lovegrass that had sagebrush scattered through it. The air smelled cool but stuffy as the weighted breeze blew the fall scents of ragweed and rustled the leaves of the towering cottonwoods. The white two-story ranch house was

lit from inside with a soft glow, welcoming any visitors. To the right of the house was the silhouette of a few horses; behind them the pale sky glowed from the evening sun.

Across the yard was an array of perches. On each stood a magnificent bird of prey. Peregrines and Prairie Falcons stood on block perches. Their backs were dark grays and their cream-colored chests had black specks splattered across them. Redtails and Harris Hawks robustly stood on bow perches. All of the Redtails had bright crimson tails, while the Harris Hawks were dark brown with orange shoulders. Two of the Harris Hawks, apparently a hunting team, were placed so closely to each other that one was strangely standing on the other's back, sharply surveying its surroundings. Some wore leather hoods that covered their eyes; of those that did not, keen eyes stared in our direction. Further away from the house, a good distance from the rest of the hawks, evenly spaced across the yard, were three golden eagles. They scratched their perches as if they were bored. One of them stretched its neck out and opened its wings that were at least six feet wide.

Christina and Kevin immediately unloaded their hawks from the back of the pickup. Christina tethered her Peregrine, Cynder, on the lawn near the other hawks, and Kevin did the same with Marihoute. Once the hawks were secured to their perches and their bath pans were properly placed in front of them, we unloaded our luggage and took it into the house. James and his wife welcomed us. After dinner, the rest of the evening was spent visiting with all of the attending falconers.

The next morning I stepped out onto the dew-covered porch and sat alone watching all the eager raptors as they waited for the coming hunts. Switching my gaze from the eagles to Cynder and Marihoute, I noticed that Cynder's leash was loose from the perch. Without a second thought, I stood up and rushed to the perched bird. I reached down to grab the dangling leash, and as soon as I touched the rough leather the Peregrine clenched my arm tight with her talons. I instantly jerked my arm back. The determined falcon did not release her grasp but jumped forward with the movement of

my arm. I took my other hand and tried to pull her feet from my arm but she dug in deeper. As blood began to draw to the surface my heart began to pound—all I knew was I needed to get her off of me. I pushed against her chest and she fell back, losing her balance and releasing her grip on my arm. Immediately I felt relieved, but then the spirited bird lifted her wings and flew. After soaring in a circular motion over the ranch house, she perched herself in the tallest Cottonwood.

Barely noticing my throbbing arm, I frantically ran and grabbed Christina's leather glove out of the back of her pickup. When I tried to convince Cynder to come to the glove, she simply sat in the tree and looked down at me. Becoming impatient and agitated, I picked up a couple of small stones and threw them at the limb that she was perched on. I repeated this until she took flight. I whistled to signal her to come to the glove, but she did not listen to the command. Instead she flew down to the bath pan that was set before Marihoute. Cynder sat on the slim rubber edge and stooped over to drink the water. Marihoute took notice and started flapping her wings and attempted to fly away. After a few failed attempts, Marihoute landed back on her perch and began digging her talons into the rope wrapping. Suddenly, she flew toward Cynder with out-stretched feet and open talons that drove into the Peregrine's side at full force. Knocking her to the ground, Marihoute began to tear Cynder's flesh with her talons as she ripped feather and skin with her beak. Managing to pull away from Marihoute's grasp, Cynder lifted a few feet into the air and then dived toward Marihoute with feet balled into a solid fist. Feathers began flying, and the two raptors were lost within a blur of flapping wings.

I ran toward the screeching birds yelling, "Hey, Hey! Stop!"

Without knowing what else to do, I began screaming at them as loud as I could. I knew that I had made a terrible mistake. I began to cry.

All of the falconers rushed outside to see what was happening. I could see Christina on the first step of the porch. She could see everything that

had happened. Both birds lay on the ground. Cynder was completely still except for the slight heave of her breast. Marihoute lay only a few feet away, slightly flapping one wing while the other was pinned down under her immobile body. Christina immediately rushed to the injured birds. Kevin came rushing out of the house and, once he saw his hawk lying on the ground, ran to aid his bird.

Christina stood up and looked at me, “What happened? What did you do, Gwen?”

“It wasn’t my fault, I...”

“What do you mean it wasn’t your fault? You’re always trying to do things on...”

“But Cynder was already...”

“Just because you think you can handle something doesn’t mean you can. If you weren’t always trying to do something to impress Kevin because your silly little crush on him then maybe something like this...”

“Christina! Leave her alone. You don’t know that it’s her fault.”

“Look at her arm, it’s bleeding, she’s crying, the birds are dying. I’m her sister, and I can tell on her face that it’s her fault!”

Kevin looked down at the blood that ran down the length of my arm. He then raised his gaze toward my face and looked at me with a speechless expression. I felt my face turn completely red and my eyes filled with tears that began rushing out faster than my bleeding arm. Kevin’s face instantly changed to a concerned look as I clenched my injured arm against my chest and ran the opposite direction.

“Gwen,” he called after me.

There were not any qualified veterinarians for many miles around. James, the most experienced falconer, was the one to care for the injured birds. He did all he could to help Cynder, but it was just under an hour from the

incident when she died. However, Marihoute would survive. Her injuries were serious, one eye was gouged out and her feet were mangled. The deeply inflicted body wounds allowed a considerable loss of blood. In time she would heal, as long as Kevin could keep her strength up and her stress down. It was very doubtful that she would be able to hunt again.

I spent the rest of the day alone in a field and did not return to the house until it was dark. Even then I went straight to bed. I didn't have the courage to face Kevin or Christina. I knew Christina completely hated me now, and I was sure Kevin did too. That night I couldn't sleep at all; I stared at the ceiling with blurry eyes and cried constantly through the night.

The following morning James urged us to head home. "It's best that the three of you get back home. Kevin, your hawk needs the best care possible for her to recover. Gwen, after taking a look at your arm, it looks to me that there might be some infection forming. You need to get to a doctor as well."

Kevin and Christina said goodbye to all of the falconers before they left for their morning hunt. Soon after, we began packing the pickup. I slowly walked up to Christina and said, "Christina, I am sorry."

She stood for a moment and looked at me with an intense glare and replied, "You're sorry? Sorry? Is that all? Cynder was my first falcon. Buying her and of all her past vet bills have cost me over six thousand dollars. I had her for seven years. I don't want to hear sorry and I don't want to hear any excuses about what happened. In fact, Gwen, I don't want you to ever speak about Cynder again. You don't need to be around birds anymore."

I felt numb, and my bloodshot eyes pounded. Kevin walked out of the house with his bag over his shoulder. He started to say something to me, but as soon as he saw I was crying, he stopped. I climbed in the back seat of the pickup and waited. Kevin placed his bag in the pickup bed, and then got in the cab and sat in the front passenger seat. He turned to me.

"Gwen, I don't blame you, and it doesn't matter what happened. I don't need to know the whole story. I understand what happened wasn't intentional."

As I stared into his eyes, I started crying, “I’m sorry, Kevin. I didn’t mean...”

“It’s okay...” he placed his hand on mine. “Don’t worry. Everything will be alright.” He squeezed my hand and said, “I am here for you, Gwen, and I will always be here.”

Dark Run

By Hamilton G. Hargrave

I felt as though I were living in a world trapped in a waking coma, aware of and at the same time distanced from reality. I could see this condition when I looked into the tear-ridden eyes of a woman I had never known and heard her utter the cliché, “I am so sorry for your loss.” I knew of it when I read about my own personal tragedy in a corner article of a public newspaper. People were interested in every detail of the physical experience, but not the far more malevolent knowledge of what it truly feels like in a man’s heart to know something like that.

“We did everything within our power, but I am sorry to say that we lost her,” the doctor had said with his head towards the floor.

When Sarah had heard it she collapsed to the floor, not so much screaming as muttering gibberish. She had been a strong woman all of her life, and her strength had contributed to her breakdown. Instead of bearing the loss like a leaf of grass, she had taken it like the brick wall. There were no tears, just a lot of mumbling and hopeless stares as she sat on bright green tiles, immobilized, broken.

Do you think she hates you, Jack?

I gripped the steering wheel of my car and pressed the gas pedal down a little harder. The old engine responded with a slightly more intense vibration but little speed. Years of heavy use had taken their toll.

Sarah had not seen Maggie when the doctor had told us the news, but I had. There was no surprise in the way the doctor had walked towards the waiting

room. It had been a professional, sedated walk, with his head perpetually low and eyes making no contact with other people.

“She died instantly,” he had reported as he looked at a blue clipboard with no paper on it. “They said that she was hit by a tree branch...there was too much damage for her to have lived.”

As the doctor had reported that last piece of information, he did the strangest thing. He seemed to briefly ignore his position as professional doctor, and he had looked at me. His eyes were dark.

Ahead of me the roadway was covered in webs of small cracks and black tar. Traversing over the surface caused the tires to make thousands of small clicking noises with each subtle impact, vibrating the car, and making the older car body crackle with the sounds of steel rubbing against steel. That area of the roadway was given to deer crossings, skunks, and the occasional head-on collision at the top of steep hills. Those that were at all wise often kept their cars far over on their side of the roadway, weary of that teenaged idiot, or drunk, playing a game of four-door roulette at the top of a hill where you couldn't see what was coming. Naturally, the roadway was at its most dangerous at night, and the most dangerous night was one when there was a new moon.

I let my foot off of the gas pedal as the tires clicked with the impact of the car reaching the base of a very steep hill. The old car raised up and rolled up the hill, slowing down very quickly as it went until it was at a near stop by the time that it reached the very top.

That hill, which had neither a name or distinction, had been the scene of many of my nightmares of the last few weeks. As I reached the top of the hill, where for a brief space of only ten feet the hill became level, I hit the brakes. The car stopped instantly, heaving forward just slightly and then relaxing.

On the right side of the hill a small wooden cross, draped in red fabric, stood in Oklahoma mud surrounded by wild trees. It was a simple marker,

undistinguished aside for its almost archetype-like shape and thin red fabric. But it marked more than any gravestone could. It marked the place where death had actually occurred. It marked the place of a terrible crime as well.

Behind the car two headlights slowly appeared over the top edge of the hill. As the car rose up and leveled at the top of the hill, the headlights flickered slightly and then shined furiously into my rearview mirror. I watched as the square-shaped car came to a complete stop within inches behind my own.

How does it feel to be a murderer, Jack?

I looked over my shoulder at the car. It was painted white, and even in the darkness I could see the thick layer of red dirt that had accumulated on its every surface.

“What do you want?” I said out loud.

The car moved forward, hitting the back bumper of my car with a thud that shoved the car slightly forward. I pushed the brakes, flipped the car off with my right hand, and smiled.

Liar, you fucking liar. You never wanted Maggie. You were too young, remember?

I watched as a bright white light suddenly shone out from the rear of the white car. Its engine raced as it backed up a car length, screamed to a halt, and then rushed forward. The impact of this second attack caused me to jerk forward and back. My neck whipped and instantly felt tender.

“Goddamn it,” I said, “what is your problem?”

I unbuckled my seat belt and yanked the door handle open. As I stepped out onto the open pavement, the white car’s engine suddenly raced again as the car backed up and stopped. I stared at the car, searching its delicate plastic front for damage. I scanned along the edges of the weak bumper and over the bright headlights. There was not a single mark on the car’s body at all. But then there couldn’t have been. That car didn’t exist anymore. I had watched them tear it apart the day after Maggie had died in it.

I felt myself enter into something in between panic and fear. I turned and got back into my old Pontiac and fastened my seatbelt with mechanical motions. Even putting the car back into drive and stepping on the gas pedal had been done by a mindset removed from, though hardly above, any sort of planning. To describe the feeling in any greater way is an impossibility likening itself to explaining a true miracle. It cannot be and yet it is. There was little surprise that the feelings that came from such an event were just as paradoxical.

I stared into my rearview mirror as my car took the heavy decline down the side of the hill. For a brief second the headlights of the attacker disappeared over the hill's horizon and then came bursting back into view as it came over the threshold of the hill's top and rushed to within feet of my car's rear.

In my life I had known several miracles; all do. The first was in being born. The next, I tried to believe, had been Maggie.

The white car rushed forward and hit the back of my Pontiac, sending shivers of energy quivering into the shaking windows and through engine mounts that caused the old engine to shudder and briefly misfire. I gripped the steering wheel as I forced the unsteady gas pedal down, making the car roar and muster just before it switched gears and pushed smoothly forward.

The existence of another sort of miracle had occurred to me though. It was a belief that in a world filled with horrors such as ours, a loving God does not work alone. He has His enemies, and they have their kind of miracle. Disruptive and brutal, like the miracle that saw a tyrant saved from his own general's attempts to kill him, these infernal acts come at their most inopportune moments.

It was the same as when Maggie had come into the world. I was seventeen then, with no prospects whatsoever. I had been living with my parents for God's sake. How was I, with the wisdom of a complete idiot, and the money of a beggar, supposed to raise a little girl?

I gritted my teeth as I thought of the moment when I had first heard the news. Martha, like a teenaged fool will, had smiled at me with glee as she wrapped her hands around me and said, "Isn't this great!"

“Great” was the worst word ever invented. It was used like it was good in one sentence, and used to describe the power of a plague in the next. No, I did not think it was “great” that Martha was pregnant at seventeen. And the God’s honest truth was that I still wasn’t happy at twenty.

“At least you’ll be able to go back to school now,” my father had said, “you’re young enough that you should be able to just move on.”

The car shuddered and whined with the sudden impact of the white car. I struggled with the wheel as the tense balance of the long car came slightly undone, causing the car to nervously turn into the opposing lane. I took deep, panicked breaths, as I pulled the car back into the right lane and accelerated the old car more.

I smiled as I looked into my rearview mirror at the white Chevrolet Malibu. It was trying to kill me, and that was just fine. I had been looking for someone to let the hammer down anyway.

“Dad,” I had said, “I think that I killed her. I think I killed Maggie.”

My father, who had always been a very big man, had put his hands firmly down on my shoulders with his big hands and talked harshly into my face. “Listen, son, you’ve got to stop saying that sort of crazy stuff. We both know you didn’t kill her.”

“But, Dad.”

“But nothing. Move on, boy. We both know what happened, and we both know what didn’t.”

“I could’ve—”

“Kids die in car crashes all of the time.”

The Pontiac’s tires clicked as I came to the bottom of a steep hill. This one, which was slightly higher than the one before it, led to a very steep incline where a train track had crossed it nearly fifty years before. As I looked up at the top of the road, I could see two streams of light like searchlights in the night sky. Another car was on the oncoming side.

I looked into my rearview mirror to see the headlights of the white car turn a dark red. Thick red liquid had covered the front of the lenses. The wind caught it as the car moved forward, pushing it over the hood in long streams, and dotted the black windshield with flickering spots that oozed and spread. It was the same as I had remembered it.

The only difference was that the blood that now covered the phantom in fact covered me in an unseen way. It had worked down underneath, in between, and simply through me. It had permeated every part of me, festering and condemning me as it went until there was nothing left untouched. In its wake there was nothing left. There was neither a hope for the future, nor plans for one. My only wish had been to find some amount of justice in that world of mine. The white car was the natural answer.

Ahead of me I could see the white streaming lights of another car in the oncoming lane were closer now. I pressed the gas pedal down its last little bit and winced as I rushed towards those lights.

The car vibrated and shook as the road became suddenly rougher towards the very top of the hill. All around me, I could hear the air rushing around the old body of the car, pressing itself against dry-rotted insulation, key holes, and door edges where friction and time had left gaps.

At the very tip of the hill the incline evaporated. It was a tight edge of red dirt and a few fragments of pavement at that tiny spot, which was so perfect that it was nearly a right angle. If hit at a high enough speed, a car would simply fly over the top of the hill like it was some colossal ramp. But there was no illusion of being able to clear the oncoming car. I looked at my speedometer to see that its white needle was on eighty miles per hour, not the speed to make such a jump.

I gripped the steering wheel as the streaming lights of the opposing car suddenly leveled on top the hill. The Pontiac thundered with sound as the tires hit the few yards of dirt road leading to the top of the hill.

I stared at the streams of light coming off the car's headlights as they suddenly swerved into my lane. My hands tightened on the wheel as a gray sedan appeared directly in front of me. The tremendous impact that followed was so great that I was thrown into the steering wheel and racked by my thick seat belt. All thoughts of survival contracted in horror as I watched the sedan barrel towards me, missing me by a fraction of space so narrow it felt saintly in its infinitesimal goodness.

Then, the old Pontiac spun three maddening times before it came to a crashing halt against a tree. Broken glass hit me across the face as tree branches big and small punctured holes in steel and crushed their way into seats and engine parts.

A strange, deep silence filled the air in the moment after the car finally stopped. I breathed in the cold night air and tasted it like I had never tasted it before. Even the pain in my body from the wreck felt like some new, good experience. And for the very first time in a very long time, I felt at peace with what had happened.



NONFICTION

Playground

By Kristy Smith

It was a sunny day but the school and playground were deserted. The sky was a smoky orange and dropped ash because the Cuyamaca Mountains had been burning out of control for a week. I don't know where everyone was, but that's what made it okay. No one was around to tell on us.

We were in the first grade. I had on my favorite T-shirt. It had a picture of a boy sliding into home plate and the girl catcher was tagging him out. I liked the way my yellow skorts matched my shirt. My friend Wendy was wearing her standard pink shorts. Her white shirt had grass stains on the back. I was on my shiny bright green Shamrock bike. Wendy was on her forest green bike that had once been her mother's.

We were not allowed to go to the school to play even though it contained the best playground ever conceived by seven year olds. The new metal swinging monkey bars were like something out of the movies. They were so high we had to stand on the fourth rung to reach the first ring. We had to use the force of our entire bodies to obtain enough momentum to swing to the next loop. Oh, and we did. After hours of climbing and then lunging our bodies forward, we were naturals. We kept going across until we were exhausted. They were so different than the stationary monkey bars of our usual playground. The swinging motion of the rings made us feel like we were flying. They were as glorious as we dreamed.

Our normal playground consisted of five small swings, a merry-go-round, monkey bars that we could reach from the lowest rung on the ladder and a fence to keep us locked in. Although we loved to climb fences, we didn't bother with that play area. On this quite warm day it was all about the big

kids' playground. The yard was ours. We laughed and screamed as our voices bounced off of the concrete handball walls. Wendy's blonde hair clung to the sweat on her neck. My black braids were loose and my hair blew in every direction.

There were no teachers.

There were no cars.

There weren't any people at the ball field.

The rules were simple. They were easily understood. In our world they were universal. Today, they were ignored. We could leave our street. We could ride our bikes all the way to the field but not into the field. The school was even further and second on the do-not-enter list. Our school, Rio Seco, was just three minutes through the field. The fence line up Cambury Street meant the only other way to the school was up five long blocks, right one block and back down five blocks to the school. Cambury Street was such a steep hill it would mean Wendy and I walking our bikes most of the way up.

Since we were going to the school, we did not hesitate to go through the field. There were no dune buggies or motorcycles in the field. As we rounded the corner, the school looked massive. There was concrete with a red brick building and black iron fence. A little closer to the school and we could see the new monkey bars. They seemed to be creeping over the storage buildings. It was like getting close to Disneyland and being able to see the Matterhorn miles before you arrived.

It was unlike Disneyland because we didn't have to wait in line. There weren't any older kids to kick us off. If we fell, we didn't have to get at the back of the line. We got to go first or second every time. As first graders we never got to go first or second. We didn't have to share. We danced around, swung long enough to jump out, and spent the rest of the time soaring on the monkey bars.

It was getting late and we were getting hungry. The fastest way out of the playground was up two flights of stairs. The other way out was on the other

side of the school. We began walking our bikes up the two flights of stairs. As we reached the midway point up the stairs, we noticed a man walking toward us. We thought about going back down the stairs but thought the trip back down too treacherous with our bikes.

“Don’t make eye contact with the guy,” Wendy said. Her blue eyes gestured like Mrs. McCoy’s when she was trying to tell the class something serious.

“Ignore him,” I agreed

Like a terminator menu my brain went through tips from safety class. Don’t get into a car with a stranger. Don’t take candy from a stranger. If someone drives up to you, run in the opposite direction from which the car is moving. If someone is following you, go up to a house and pretend you live there.

Nothing.

I had no tips for: A guy is at the top of the stairs.

We got closer to the top of the stairs. Wendy’s flip flops were trying to leave her feet. I had a collection of sand in my tennis shoes. My mouth was dry. It looked like the man had something in his hand.

“It’s a knife,” I said.

“He can’t stab us both,” Wendy said. “When we get to the top, hop on your bike and we’ll each take a different side of the street.”

We discussed ramming the man with our bikes and screaming. Instead, we agreed that riding away as fast as possible was our best plan.

We got just a few steps from the top. Terror had built in our minds and on our faces. We’d never seen a knife as an actual weapon. The man, who looked dirty and wind-blown and fifty years old, was hardly thirty.

“What’s the matter?” he said. “Haven’t you ever seen a man’s dick before?”

He wasn’t holding a knife.

My brain froze.

He spoke clearly and directly to us. He had the same tone my dad used when he was asking for someone to please pass the salt. I didn't know what he wanted or why he thought we would want to talk to him, especially about things we may or may not have seen.

We hopped on our bikes and raced up the five blocks across a block and shot down Cambury like we were riding a shooting star. We didn't stop pedaling until we got to Wendy's house. Out of breath and concerned about a witness seeing us at the school, I asked Wendy, "Are you going to tell your mom?"

"No way," Wendy said. "She'll blister my butt for being at the school." It's true, Wendy's mom would too. She was single with platinum blonde hair. She dared to wear short shorts and tube tops. She owned Playgirls. Most importantly, she used the wooden paddles, from broken paddleball toys, to whip her kids. I'd seen her do it right in the front yard if necessary.

"Are you telling yours?" Wendy asked.

"No," I said.

I rode home. The streets were empty except for embers in the gutters. I never told and we never talked about it. And, I never went to the school to play—but I sometimes I did go through the field.

The Golden Rocket

By Keith A. Eaton

The sounds and sights of a passing train have always mesmerized me. The noise of the engine, the clackety-clack of a thousand wheels jittering over the steel rails, the wave of an engineer, the passengers peering back at me from their coach seats. All these remain locked in that part of my memory reserved for those times when pleasant thoughts bring comfort.

I was a child who could be entertained for hours by just sitting in the small train depot in Ada, Oklahoma, by just watching the great steel beasts as they came and went. There was the spectacle of an arriving train with the noise, steam, and water spewing from the many appliances that permitted the engine and cars to function in their sure but loosely coordinated way. The loading and offloading of people, mail, freight, and baggage by the porters in their navy blue, trimmed-in-scarlet uniforms was as spectacular to me as if I had been at Buckingham Palace for the Changing of the Guard. And when the warning whistle blew, I wanted to pull free from the restraining hand of my sitter, rush forward up and into one of the silver passenger cars and be pulled away into the unknown.

The restraining hands belonged to members of my family. My mom Ruby, my dad Ray, and my sisters, Gloria and Joy, spent hours attending to my insatiable curiosity for trains. And when they weren't sitting or standing patiently with me in the station, they read for the thousandth time the Little Golden Book story of *Tootles*, the little engine that grew up to be a Chicago flyer. I think they enjoyed that story as much as I. Secretly, we all want green flags and not red ones. We want to race down the tracks at top speed and

occasionally jump off the tracks and play in the fields of buttercups. And we not so secretly resent those “Billish” pedagogues whose job it is to restrain us, to train us for our responsible calling as grown-ups. You know, grown-ups—the people who always “Stay on the rails, no matter what!”

My dream was to take a long trip on the most beautiful of all trains, the Golden Rocket. It ran from Chicago to Los Angeles in only forty-eight hours, at speeds nearing seventy miles per hour. There were other trains that ran the same track and they too were beautiful and fast. But there was only one Golden Rocket.

I saw it only once, during a visit to Oklahoma City with my parents. Mom, Dad, and I had driven to the city to visit Uncle Charlie and Aunt Effie, two friends from the old days. We went to the Santa Fe station first, to pick up a box of freight for my dad’s office, and while we were there the Golden Rocket arrived. It really was painted gold. The engine, the cars, even the caboose; all of them were gold.

While my dad signed the weigh-bill for the freight, my mom and I walked out to the platform where the train had stopped. It whooshed steam and water condensed from the steam stood in little puddles near the tracks. The porters whisked passengers on and off the train, wheeled baggage around on bright green luggage wagons with huge red wheels, and shouted instructions to anyone who listened.

“All aboard! This train’s gonna leave on time!” The porter nearest me yelled at the top of his voice. The train’s engineer sounded the warning whistle, resulting in even more frantic efforts by the porters and passengers to complete their preparations. Then the train bucked, jumped, and started to move. Not all at once, but like a line of dominoes falling on each other in a chain reaction. Except in this case the engine pulled on car number one and car number one jerked number two along, car after car to the last, the caboose. And at the last second, just before the train was moving too fast to board, the conductor grabbed the chrome doorframe of the last golden

passenger car and hoisted himself onto its bottom stair step. And they all rode away. Down the track they went and out of sight, leaving me pulling instinctively on Mom's hand and arm.

My dad joined us on the platform outside the station. "Let's go," he said.

Years later my mom and I would take a train trip to California. Not on the Golden Rocket, but on an old, worn-out, milk-train. We would go to Los Angeles and spend an entire summer together visiting all of her California relatives. But that day we walked together slowly back to our old hand-painted, maroon 1947 Ford coupe. We climbed in and headed toward Uncle Charlie's house. I sat in the back seat with my eyes tightly closed and, while my mom and dad navigated the streets of Oklahoma City, I was headed west in style and comfort.

Hank Snow had been right all along when he sang, "That Golden Rocket's Gonna Roll My Blues Away."

Orphaned in Adulthood

By Francis DiClemente

My father died in August of 2007 after a six-month battle with cancer; yet even before his passing, before the cancer ravaged his gaunt, shriveled, and lifeless body, I felt I had been orphaned in my adulthood. And while my mother, stepfather, brother, and two sisters are all still alive, I believe I am psychologically abandoned on the basis of my unmarried status. In an emotional sense, I have been forsaken, left behind, separated from the rest of the normal human race, and exiled to the island of lonely misfit souls.

This lingering malaise developed in my advancing years simply because I failed to secure a bride. Meanwhile, nearly all of my colleagues, co-workers, peers, and friends from high school and college have managed to pair off, branching out and extending their families with the addition of wives, husbands, in-laws, and children. I, on the other hand, remain with only myself, a solo strand on a withering, fruitless tree. And as I edge closer to my 40th birthday, I must now accept and endure my perpetual bachelorhood.

I believe men are meant to have women and women to have men, and when this natural equation is unbalanced, an absence grows within that remains unfilled. However, I am not delving into the cause of my disconnection from the opposite sex, but rather the effect – the ramifications of my longstanding isolation. I have come to realize there exists in the English language no suitable synonym for the word loneliness; the same can be said for the word orphan. So I guess it's fitting that I identify myself as being orphaned by loneliness.

In his popular song, "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay," Otis Redding summed up the nature of loneliness with this line: "Just sittin' here resting my bones

and this loneliness won't leave me alone." Surely Redding understood, like other great artists – Vincent van Gogh and Thomas Wolfe to name a few – that loneliness is a nagging, persistent presence that never releases its grasp. It overtakes a person with such ferocity that only intercession by family, close friends, and occasional casual lovers can free the stricken victim and restore life.

But this only lasts for so long, because if nothing else, loneliness is a pattern that continually repeats itself. And more likely than not, individuals diagnosed with this condition are never healed; its progression results in the termination of the spirit and a personal fatality of the soul.

And this brings me back to my orphan status. For the spouse-deprived man or woman, his or her death is never mourned, because no children, husbands, wives, or in-laws are left behind. It is a silent death punctuated by a sense of loss that is final. There are no heirs squabbling over the summer cabin in the Adirondacks.

Hence, I face a grim future, and I feel a little like Ebenezer Scrooge looking at the headstone, overwhelmed with regret. Nonetheless, I have come to a conclusion on how to repair my life, escape this seemingly inevitable fate, and thus alter my orphan status.

As I see it, I have only two choices. One – find a good woman, get married, settle down here in central New York, and become like everyone else. The other – upon failing the first – is to flee my home and take up residence in one of the nation's major cities – New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle or San Francisco. Pick one, any one – it doesn't really matter where I land.

Because if I am to remain alone, I want to live in a city where no one knows my name, where I won't run into any old friends who are brimming with wedded bliss, where the couples walking by me on the street are only strangers, and where I can no longer be haunted by the familiar surroundings that failed to produce a happily married life. In effect, if I am unable to

link up with a woman in the next few years, then I want to whitewash my past – my family, my upbringing, my fractured adolescence, and my beloved upstate New York – and begin again somewhere new. Indeed this sounds cold and selfish, but in truth, I am in this world with only me. I am the orphan, a man alone, making decisions for a family of just one.

However, I also realize sometimes hope has a way of egging you on, provoking you and not allowing you to give up, even on yourself. So in reconsidering, I wonder: what does it matter when you get married – at age 23 or 59 – as long as you pick the right person to settle down with? So maybe there's a chance I am not an orphan, as originally suspected, but only a late bloomer. And perhaps this prospect might allow me to embrace the future as opposed to dreading it.

Making Mountains of Molehills

By Dianna Cavins

I sit at the summit point, 16,170 feet. As high as I am, I look in all directions and feel dwarfed by the surrounding snow-covered mountains of Chomolhari (24,000 feet above sea level), Tsering Kang (22,268 feet), and Jichu Drakye (22,924 feet). Prayer flags are blowing high in the sky. The belief here is that the winds blow the prayers directly to heaven. I am in awe and cannot help but reflect on the people and events in my life that bring me to this place of indescribable beauty and peace.

Located in the country of Bhutan, these mountains are in the Himalayan mountain range which includes Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world. Bhutan, bordered by Nepal, Tibet, China, and India, is a peaceful Buddhist culture. Its remoteness leaves it virtually untouched by the surrounding world. This is where our expedition team assembles: twelve hikers from various places in the U.S., our expedition guide, six Sherpas (native Bhutanese guides), six horsemen, and a remuda of horses.

To embrace the significance of this moment, I step back in my memory to the beginning of this endeavor. With limited finances, limited hiking experience, and limited hiking gear, only my desire and determination qualify me to be here. I live in Oklahoma, where the highest elevation point barely qualifies as a mountain and is not readily accessible. My boyfriend Andy, an experienced hiker, is invaluable to me for many reasons and was instrumental in my preparation and training. Having done many extreme hikes, including a 29-day expedition to the base camp of Mount Everest, he was aware of the training we would need. I was told the best way to train

for altitude, in the absence of altitude, was extensive cardio workouts. I spent more hours on the Stair Master machine than I care to remember. The challenges of this trek would be both physical and mental, and I was determined not to fail.

Other than a couple of intense hiking trips Andy and I took in California the summer before this expedition, my exposure to hiking and altitude was non-existent. I fell in love with the mountains. Maybe a part of it is being in love with someone who loves them. In any case, it happened.

For two people who do not live together and, for the most part, live alone, Andy and I have endured long, physically-challenging days on this trek. Sharing a two-man tent in extreme, cold, remote conditions, our other gear includes coats and sleeping bags that withstand 20-degree-below-zero temperatures. There are no showers. We each receive a small bowl of warm water for sponge bathing in our little tent—one in the morning and one in the evening. After long days of sweating and hiking through yak dung and mud, I assure you, it is not enough water.

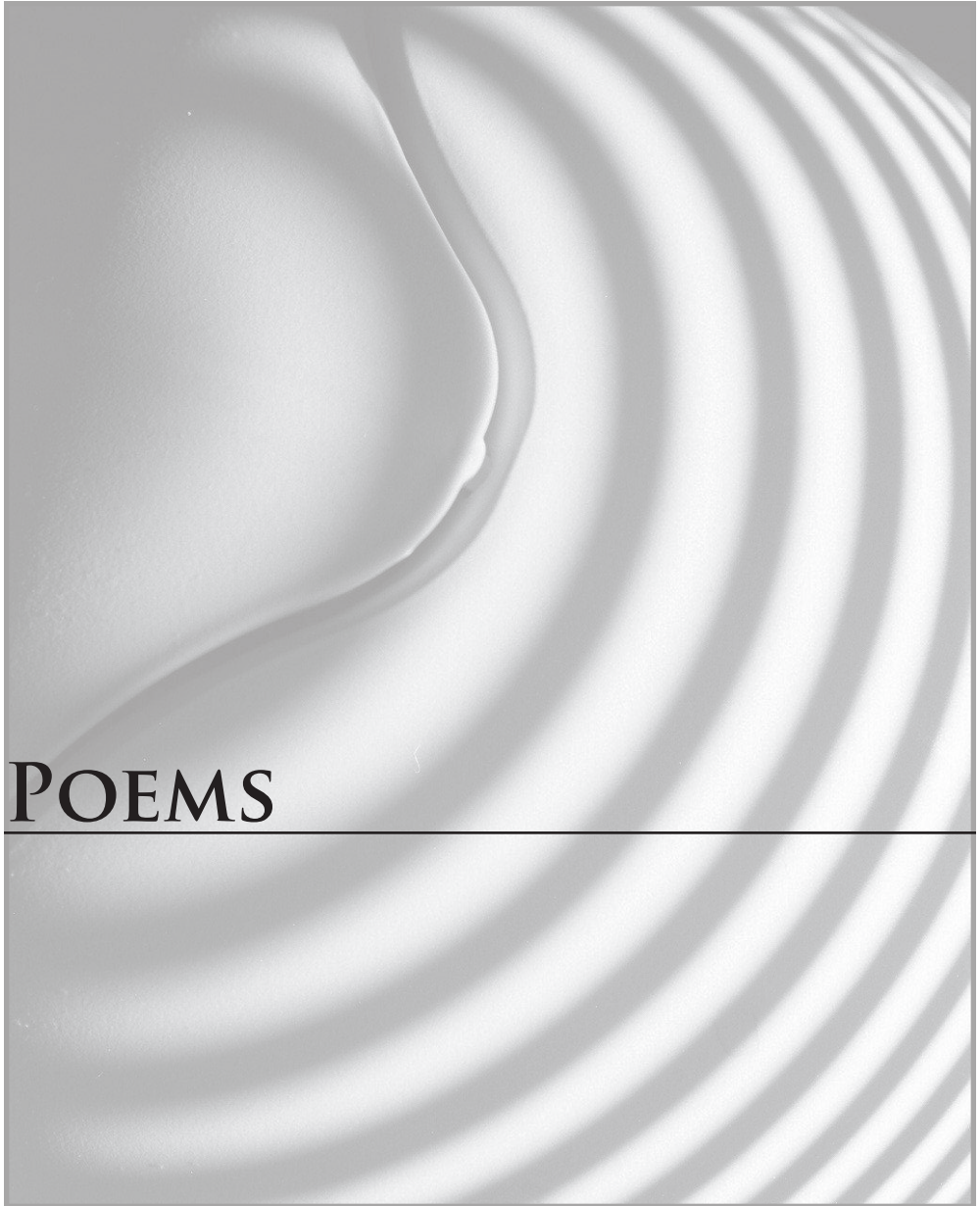
On this day we hike fourteen difficult miles and ten hours to reach this summit. The first half is through mud and unstable rocks; our lungs strain for enough air as we reach higher and higher elevations. The last 1,000 feet is a near vertical incline of snow and ice.

Exhaustion and exhilaration are prominent on all of our faces. Those who reach the summit embrace each other with tears in their eyes. Words of encouragement are called out to the hikers who are still climbing. After a while, when the last hiker has arrived, everyone falls silent, separate, lost in thought over the beauty of it all. Twelve of us started on this expedition, but only eleven of us finished. Suffering from the severe effects of altitude, one had to be air-lifted for medical care by Indian Army helicopters.

I look for Andy. At 6'5, he is not difficult to spot. He is sewing a prayer flag to an existing prayer strand. It is his own handmade version, made as a tribute to his dear friend who recently passed away. I am reminded of the

prayer flag he made and placed on Mount Everest for my daughter, who passed away a few years ago in a car accident. He is filled with emotion as am I. I watch his large, frozen hands weave the delicate needle in and out and my heart is so full for him.

What a patchwork of people we are on this summit. Unknown to each other a short time ago, we are now a family of sorts, comfortable with our peculiarities. Some are acknowledging hurts, or letting go of others. For one couple recently married, it is a new beginning. For others it is an indulgence of their adventurous spirits. Two in their maturing years consider this their last big “hurrah” before settling for less strenuous endeavors. Whatever the case is, perhaps the largeness of this summit experience is a metaphor for our smallness in the big scheme of things. We have already hiked 16,170 feet and 82 miles. When this trip is complete we will have hiked over 100 miles and 44,000 vertical feet. For now, I will sit on this summit and be in the present.



POEMS

Serena Rewritten

I watch you
standing on the diving board,
doing your own version of a cheerleading dance,
and I have to smile.

The pool house is full
of frolicking children
yet you seem almost unaware of anyone else,
lost in your own thoughts.

Your movements mimic
your teen-aged sisters.
You watch them so carefully,
you are a carbon copy.

It is strange,
yet very endearing
to see their teen-age ways superimposed
over your 7-year-old self.

You catch me watching you,
the tiniest smile
plays across your dainty, freckled face.
Ahhh, Serena, my Serena.

Your dive from the board
is a frog-legged, sprawling belly flop
Yet in the water you are
lovely, graceful, free.

I watch you swim,
gliding through the blue liquid,

seeing you as you are now,
a rainbow fish in the sea of sameness.

I remember the day I first saw you,
the social worker dropping you off,
your 20 pairs of dress-up shoes
the multi-paged list of do's and don'ts.

You were, by far,
the most pathetic child I had ever seen.
So broken and wounded
I wondered at my ability to heal you.

There you stood,
a skinny, scraggle-haired waif
who would only twirl and spin
in your solitary world of autism...

When did you let me in?
I cannot remember the exact day.
You looked into my eyes and said the words,
“I love you, Mommy,” and I cried.

Now you make your way to my side,
place your hand on my knee.
I can see the fine lines of your face,
the delicate profile, upturned nose.

You have been rewritten, Serena.
I see you as a little caterpillar,
wrapped so tightly in a dark cocoon,
now emerged as a beautiful butterfly.

Spread your wings, little one!

Finding Just the Right Pair of Shoes

In the restroom there —
near the last stall —
a pair of navy blue heels
slightly scuffed
sweat stained with wear and
a cheap pink bow that decorates
the top of the toe
to match the pink lining
but carries itself neatly
even though
no one is around to claim them—
the shoes —
I wonder who
left them behind
perhaps in a hurry to change
into jeans and boots
or maybe she was just swept off her feet
and out the door for the weekend —
or I imagine
someone entering the stall
stepping out of her shoes
so she can slink away
barefooted
making no sound
as she escapes toward
freedom from a past that
demands she wear navy blue heels
to match her navy blue suit
with a pink fabric flower
saying “yes, ma’am”
and “no, ma’am”
as she tries to please
but pleasing no one

except the cleaning woman
who picks up those navy blue shoes
and says “those are just what my girl needs
to go with her little navy suit
with the pink flower pinned to her chest!”
no one’s the wiser
and I don’t tell
as she carries the shoes away
in her cleaning cart.

—Bertha Wise

A Return to the Earth

I want to tear
civilization down
statue by statue,
formality by formality,
from time piece
to property
to everything
obligatory.

I want to peel
away layers of history.
I want to peel away pages
of fashion magazines
from girls' bodies
like unwrapping
gifts in the snow.
I want to expose
the parts they won't show,
the ivory bones
extended like tree limbs
that cast shadows
dark as the aberrant guilt
that buries man up to the hilt.

I want to unfold their hands
like closed flowers.
I want to destroy the power
of their bodies
erected like commercial buildings.

I crave a clear view of the night sky.
I want to return to the meadow

on either side of the highway.
I want to return to the moist soil.
I want to return to the clear water.
I want to return to the place of my rebirth.
I want to return to the earth.

—Lyndsie A. StremLOW

The Start of May

Happy sounds of the morning swallows,
A wrinkly man mowing the long green
 grass of May.
The sun rising and awakening the most
 beautiful
 patches of yellow and
 purple sprinkled everywhere.
Their small petals opening for the bees
 to gather their yellow pollen.
The old man stopped the mower, looked
 around, and detoured the signs of nature.
It was the start of May.
Another start of something new.

—Rebecca Randolph

On A Poet Who Tries To Find Her Voice Again...for t.d.

When I said “I want to be a poet”
my mother told me “You can’t make
money that way. I won’t pay for your
education.” My father “disliked” my poems he said
“it wasn’t real because they did not rhyme.” At 14, I was
too inexperienced to argue. I became a junior high
school English teacher. Age 34. Respectable.

Poor. I teach a unit on poetry.
My students create notebooks of poems they search
from magazines and journals. Poems
as relevant as rock n’ roll lyrics. I teach them
how to read aloud. Sending-out’s ritual.
Revision’s nemesis. Michael’s submission’s acceptance!
I cheerlead their Live After-School Performance
in the library. Readings from “Reflections of a Gift
of Watermelon Pickle.” Even surly, back-row
George, the coach’s son, stands up.

At home, I scribble. Notebooks strew my study.
My calico cat’s bulk, a writer’s block, fur-cloaked.

Poetry haunts me, heavy, my heart.

Buried beneath adolescent angst, parental
greeting card verse? I wanted to be an Emily
Dickinson once. My eyes trace her words. One fingertip
to paper, blind, I pray the touch of a poet’s ghost
might whisper to me, I’ll remember how it feels someday—
how to string words one after another, bright beads that click
on stout thread dangling.

—Rachael Z. Ikins

CAT DEBACLE (IN REVERSE)

In the end,
There is still Cat.

Scrawl with claw
Through coffee table dust
In Feline Esperanto:
BAZTRD BRDZ!

Squeegee
Down
The
Window,
Almost magical
In its sudden (!),
Squeaky-clean,
Impermeability
Evincing at a most
Inopportune moment
In linear time.

Blast off,
From point this,
To destination that.
Creating tabby-striped tracers
In frozen leaps and bounds
Suggestive of a dioramic
Acid trip.

Exhibit short-circuitry
Integral
To kitty synaptic memory
By assuming window

Has yet again
Been rendered permeable
By the omnipotent paw
of Felis Domestica:
Supreme God of All Life Forms,
Bottomless Repository of Cream,
Dealer in Delicacies Redolent of Tuna,
Licker of the Thousand Sacred Butts,
Subjugator of Hyoomahns.

C BRDZ!!!!!!

In the beginning,
There was Cat.

—Karen Chapman

Make Believe

Let's play pretend
And make believe
That you have in you
What I've found in me.
We'll both dress up
Like someone else.
You take my hat
I'll take your belt

Let's play tag
Like lovers do
Watch the lips
Become the zoo.
We'll stay outside
Play in the rain
With never want
To go home again.

Let's both go back
To a thing more young
Untouched by time
And fiery sun.
Undo the lines
That our smiles made
Exchange the years
For brighter days.

—Jonathan Loveless

The Mermaid

Come June she celebrated
the end of wearing
a Catholic school uniform.
At the quarry we all danced
in pools of water
that had cleaned gravel
until the mud was
as good as quicksand.
We closed our eyes
almost all the way
as if in silent prayer
while she got naked.
Raising her arms and pointing
her toes like a ballerina
she sunk slowly until her budding
breasts were covered.
When she cleared her throat
and snapped her fingers
we pulled her free.
The way the mud clung
to her feet and legs
she looked like a mermaid.
We carried her to the spring
fed pit like she was dead
and cautiously rinsed her.
Once a year she rejoiced
at shedding her Catholic
school jumper that was shiny
as an old man's suit —
no more than we did.

—Thomas Michael McDade

Hey Creep, Consider This!

My deaf student wrote about how he
just loved football,
hated losing
just like any other young man,
and instantly I was wondering
what team he played on,
if he were the only deaf student,
and of course I didn't know what
I was talking about,
so—through his interpreter—
he tells me
that he played on a team with other
deaf students from the deaf school,
so then I asked him
who they played,
and the answer was some local schools with hearing students
and some other deaf schools,
so I had to ask what the difference was
between playing those teams with hearing students
and playing other deaf schools,
and here's the answer:
in playing other deaf schools,
there was a whole lot more
trash talkin' goin' on.

—David Charlson

Real Jobs, Degrees, Grades, Homework

Final exam in six hours and fifteen minutes.

Compelled to write for the first time in a long while, regarding recent reflections.

It has taken two and a half years of college to show me what I lack:
Direction.

Grade school was a simple formula:
Do whatever it takes to go to college.

But now where is the goal?

The catchphrases of
“Get your degree,”
“Get a career,”
Ring hollow in my ears,
As I flounder along,
Semester after semester,
Class after class.
Grades reflect it.

“Discover yourself,”
“Find your life’s purpose,”
Ring equally hollow in my ears.

Where is the time for discovery,
With assignments and tests and grades by the week?
To say nothing of earning money in the midst of it.

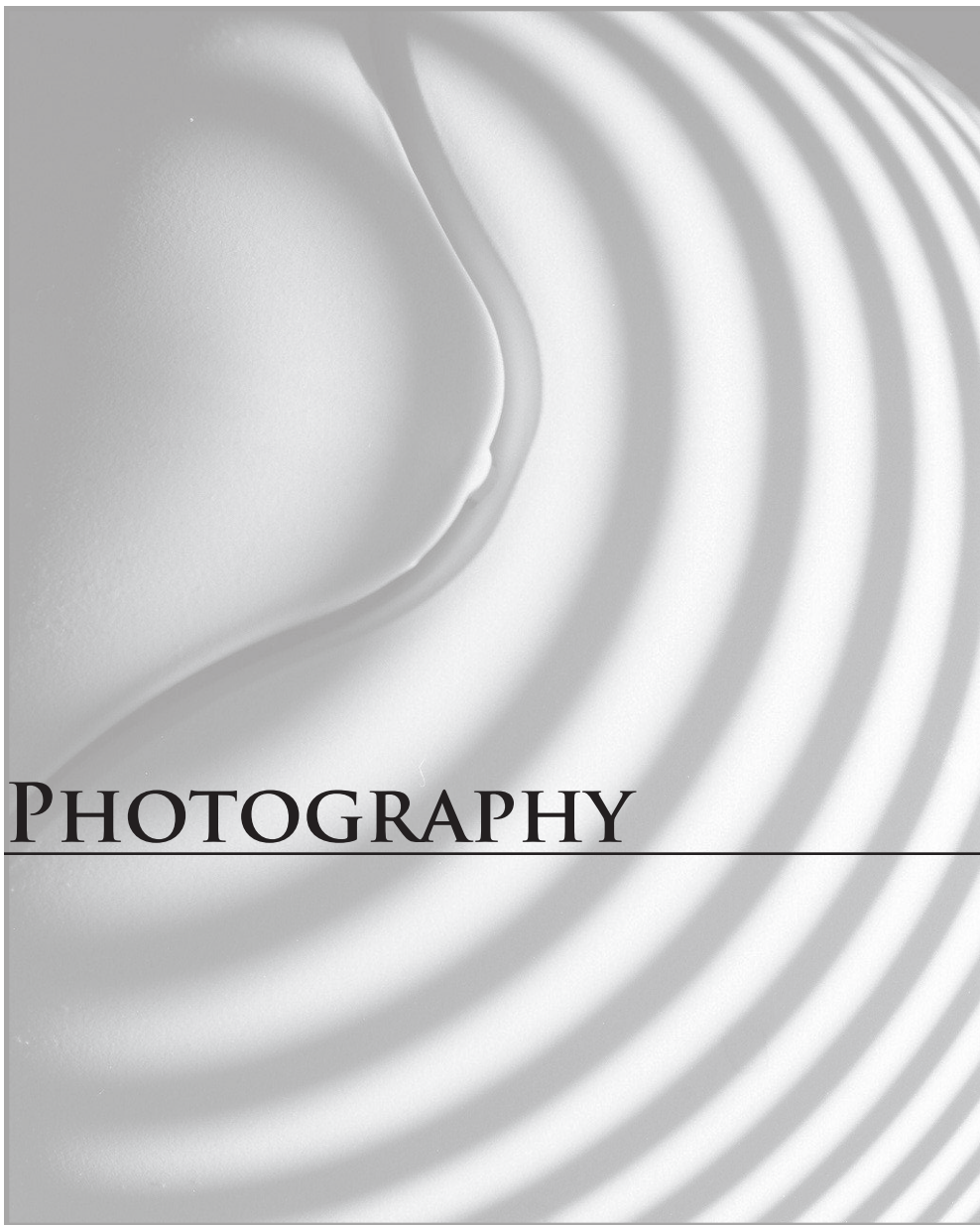
If I cannot see the other end of the pool,
I
Will
Drown.

Several new beginnings already.
Each of them full of promise...
None of them fulfilling of promises.
Disappointment from friends and family.
Boredom and confusion from myself.
Where can I do what I love?
Where can I improve my talents and myself?
Not here, surely.
Not in a world of grades and deadlines and wasted monies.

Only in creativity can I be free.
But when the walls of consumerism and the American dream
Rear up, where can creativity go
But to the chopping block,
Sentenced to die by
“Real jobs,”
“Degrees,”
“Grades,”
“Homework.”

Final exam in six hours and five minutes.
Floundering, fighting the frigid forces
Of
“Real jobs,”
“Degrees,”
“Grades,”
“Homework.”

—Brandon Rose



PHOTOGRAPHY



Window with Lace Curtains

Francis DiClemente



Tom's Shoes

R. Wulf