



10 *Absolute*

Poetry • Fiction • Nonfiction • Artwork • Photography

10
Absolute

Absolute 2010

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FICTION

Nuclear Pizza

By Ethan Anthony Burchett

Well it is that time of year again, the sky is blue, the grass is green, and people everywhere are getting ready to argue about football. I, however, will be consumed with a much more important task, ventilating the locker rooms in anticipation of the new season. The hallowed halls of the locker rooms are full of the most intriguing stories. The locker rooms were first built in the nineteen-fifties. Upon their completion, it is rumored that the designer and a box of unused condoms from lost and found were enclosed in the concrete of the south wall. Ever since, people have said that the south wall is haunted, and evidence to support this rumor is abounding. In the first game ever played, the quarterback leaned against the wall during halftime. As the players ran back out onto the field, Suzy Fielding, an extremely enthusiastic groupie to say the least, dove out of the grandstand, landing on top of the quarterback. He never played again, not because of his injuries, but because he could never conquer his fear of grandstands.

In the nineteen-sixties, it was the summer of love and the locker room became useful in many unexpected ways. However, the explicit details of this information are far too inappropriate to be discussed at this time. In the nineteen-seventies, the locker room was still subject to many inappropriate uses, and since slightly fewer illicit substances were used, these stories are fair game. Like the time when Harry Barber, the head coach, snuck five women into the locker room and was discovered the next morning tied to the ceiling with a Victoria's Secret catalogue stuffed in his mouth. He was rumored to comment that it was the best night of his life until he accidentally leaned up against the south wall. Shortly after this event, it was discovered

that the five women had been sent by a rival team to distract the head coach. A tradition ever since has been to lock the coach in a prison cell the night before the game.

In the nineteen-eighties, a different trend started—pranks. Once, a flaming slice of pizza was thrown into the locker room at halftime; this caused a subsequent evacuation of the locker room. The next big prank was to set the fire alarm off just as all of the players had begun their showers. All of the doors to the locker room, except for the ones leading out onto the field, were blocked off. Interestingly this is the only prank perpetrated almost entirely by women who were actually fans of the team. The only male participants were members of the glee club and a few male cheerleaders. Yes, the years in this locker room have been truly great. Every time I walk in, the fart-stained walls tell a million stories, and I realize that the ventilation system needs vast improvement.

The Democracy Machine

By Jeff Cleek

With the election just hours away, the Democracy Machine was broken and Brenda didn't have a clue how to fix it.

"Is it plugged in?" Arthur asked. He was Brenda's assistant.

"Of course not, dumbass," Brenda replied. The machine ran on lithium batteries with a twenty-year life guarantee. Besides, it was clearly on. The power switch was green, not red and the screen read: ERROR.

"What do we do?" Arthur asked.

"You could shut the hell up, for starters," Brenda said. Normally, she would take the opportunity to thoroughly rip Arthur like the spineless fool he was, but there wasn't enough time. An election was set to take place in two hours and without this machine, the United States would be without a president. As much as she hated to do it, Brenda called her supervisor, Miles.

"Hey, Brenda," he answered, "what'd your incompetent ass fuck up now?"

"Something well above your comprehension, but since the idiots in charge chose to promote you over me, I figured I'd give it a shot. The machine is broken."

"What machine?" Miles asked.

Brenda put her hand over the receiver and whispered to Arthur, "No matter what I say, you will never be the dumbest man in this building."

Arthur gave her a smile that put the statement into doubt immediately.

"The Democracy Machine, you moron. The one that decides our leader. The one that's supposed to tell us who the president is tonight," Brenda said.

“Is it plugged in?”

Brenda hung up the phone.

“Arthur, go away.”

“But I can help.”

“Yes, go away and that will help a lot. Better yet, leave the country.”

Arthur shrugged, frowned, and walked out. Brenda felt bad for the first time in a long while. Not terrible, but bad. She realized Arthur and she were the reason for the machine’s creation in the first place. Sometime around the turn of the millennium the level of discourse had gotten so bad that electing someone to govern became impossible. The country was divided into two groups of people: uncompromising, arrogant assholes like Brenda and flimsy wimps who stood for nothing like Arthur. A computer seemed like the perfect solution. If a quality leader could not be chosen by those unwilling to give an inch or those without an opinion, then people had to be eliminated from the process.

A team of engineers designed the largest processor in history. It was constantly fed the latest current events and given a criteria for leadership based on the greatest leaders in history. Every four years, several thousand applications were fed into the machine, and it determined the best person for the job. Brenda was actually just finishing up feeding in the applications when the machine quit.

She looked at her watch. She had less than an hour left. If she didn’t find a solution then voting would be the only option. She shivered at the thought. In the years since its creation, the Democracy Machine had given the world some of its best leaders ever. There was Roy Maclin, the first elected official by way of machine in history. The owner of a small roofing company, Roy balanced the budget within three years and made the White House leak free. Next was Jennifer Pulse, a daycare owner who revolutionized the country’s education system. Most recently, Jack “Two

Aces” Walters applied the same bluffing skills that had made him the best poker player in the world to diplomacy and brought the world into an unprecedented time of peace.

Brenda started to cry. All that prosperity would soon be undone. It wasn’t her fault, but she thought it was.

“Are you sure I can’t help?”

She turned around to see Arthur.

“No, you can’t. But you can stay,” she said. Given their relationship, she was shocked by his return, but she shouldn’t have been. Compassion in times of crisis is an inevitable, if unexplainable, human trait. Arthur couldn’t help, but he could keep someone from failing alone.

“Too bad we can’t just go through the applications ourselves. It’s not like anyone would know,” he said.

“Arthur, you sneaky shit, that’s it!” Brenda grabbed the stack of applications and handed Arthur half. “You find five and I’ll find five. We don’t have much time, so throw out the crazies and we’ll hash it out.”

“B-but I don’t know who should be president,” he replied.

“No one does, Arthur. No one.”

“But—”

“No, Arthur. You can’t sit on the sidelines for this one. Find a name you like, whatever. This country needs a president and we’re going to find one.”

So they searched. Arthur looked for “About Me’s” he thought were nice. Brenda found it difficult to find anyone who shared all her beliefs. But with five minutes to go they had ten candidates, one of which would soon be president.

“Now we argue?” Arthur asked. The way he said it let Brenda know he would cave in a heartbeat.

“No time,” Brenda said. She threw the applications in the air, closed her eyes, and grabbed one. “Looks like we got ourselves a commander-in-chief.”

That night, Linda Boswick, a gynecologist from Idaho became President of the United States. She wasn’t great. She wasn’t a disaster. She was the product of apathy, ignorance, conviction, and dumb luck. That’s all any democracy can ever ask for.

I Know You Never Loved Me

by Daniel Gordon

But I got close didn't I? I know I did. I had to. I was perfect. I did everything you wanted. And I did it with a smile. You were the only boy who ever showed me love, and for that I gave my life to your happiness. Maybe I shouldn't have told you that so soon, but just smiled and said, "I love you too."

I didn't expect you to give me a list of things you wanted done every day: 6 a.m. Cook breakfast, pancakes and eggs, sunny side up with a glass of milk. 6:30 a.m. Sex. 7 a.m. I dress you. 7:30 a.m. I clean house. 9 a.m. Pay any bills or get groceries. 11 a.m. Call you to check in and see you have special things you need done. 1 p.m. Take care of laundry 2 p.m. Work on the yard 3 p.m. I get to do whatever I want. 5 p.m. Sex 6 p.m. Dinner 7 p.m. You take a bath and I clean you. 8 p.m. We watch TV. 9 p.m. Sex. 10 p.m. We sleep. That was my life for years and I never complained once. You were happy and that kept me happy.

When did you get bored of me? Remember when John beat you out of the promotion and you told me if I really loved you that I would kill him for you? And I did. I dressed up like a whore and waited for him in his building. When he got in the elevator I followed him and asked him if he would fuck me on the roof. He smiled and led me to the top where I pushed him off the edge. The cops never knew I did it and called it a suicide. The next day you got the promotion and were happy again. I was happy again.

It didn't last long though. You started coming home later and later. Then some nights you just didn't. I never questioned you and you never gave

a reason. Until tonight, the third night you haven't been home. So I travel to your work to find you. Your office door is locked but I have a key. I open it and look in. I see half empty liquor bottles stacked on everything in your office. Then there's you passed out with another woman on your office sofa. I feel the crack break through me and then I feel nothing. So I stand here staring at you. Empty. I grab the bottles and a pack of matches off your desk. I pour the liquor all over your office. I start with the walls, then around you while you both are still asleep on the sofa. Finally the rest is put on the floor right in front of the door. I close the door, lock it, and then I light a the book of matches. I push the flaming pack under the door base. I never actually see the fire, just hear the sound as it spreads throughout the room. I run to my car. At home I lay in bed. An hour later I get a call saying that my husband was killed in a fire at his work.

I don't know whether to live or die. I move on.

Homos

By Jack LePlante

It's the sincere look in her eye, as she sits across from me in the soft Technicolor green grass of my backyard and asks me the question I'll unknowingly dread my entire life. The California sun shines brightly on her tanned and freckled face. Her mouth works overtime, like Miss Pac-Man. It seems to engulf the whole bottom half of her face as it opens and closes dramatically. "I need to ask you something, Jack." This sentence, like so many others before, begins with a hook and it is a sign of trouble. Six years old and already I can feel the flutter in my chest and panic in my stomach as I mentally retrace my steps to try and remember if I've stepped in something that could have been traced back to me. I tread lightly, "Uh huh?"

Her long slender legs uncurl themselves from beneath her. Her small yellow shorts leave little to the imagination as they stretch against her bare skin. She shifts on her knees to lean and look me dead in the eyes. There's always this stare of suspicion and curiosity when dealing with things of this nature. I know what she's going to ask, not the words exactly, but somehow I know what this conversation means in the back of my mind. I know there's more behind it, like a movie that you can guess the ending.

"You can't lie to me. I'll know if you're lying." Fear grips my chest, as I know my life is going to end. She is going to find out something I've done and condemn me for it. Excuses flood my brain: *I didn't mean to leave your bike in the street to get run over. Or I didn't mean to BBQ your Barbies without asking.* My thoughts begin to whirl, as I prepare myself for this confrontation.

I try to not look her in the eye, "Okay..." I manage to say. "Are you a faggot?" the words slip off her tongue and past her lips like the sound of bullets. I stare at her for a few seconds before I realize she's shot over my head and I don't understand what she is saying. "I don't know. Are you?"

Desiree is my next-door neighbor and my best friend. Well, my best friend, simply because she is my next door neighbor. She's older than me by a couple of years, and is willing to tell me things that my parents won't. She'll tell me the truth about grown-up stuff and quenches my thirst for knowledge. "The crust on bread causes cancer," she tells me one day. I believe her, and I refuse to eat any more crust. I've never doubted her; she's older, wiser, and won't sugarcoat things like grown-ups. She'll tell me things I need to know, like "In Egyptian times, men were slaves to women, and the only reason that changed was because girls felt sorry for boys, so they gave them a chance to be in charge for a while." When she speaks, things begin to make sense. The world and its complexities are no match for her wits.

Her body is long and slender for a ten year old. Everything about her seems bigger: her mouth and her long, dark, brown hair pulled back in a ponytail that reaches to the small of her back, her deep brown eyes full of intuitive wisdom that comes with age. She knows everything about everything compared to me, a fat six-year-old, with bulbous green eyes and a question prepared for every occasion. She is my opposite, in every way; I've grown to admire her for that and appreciate our differences. I ask the questions, she has the answers. I do the heavy lifting, she does the talking.

My mother hates her. At the end of every day, I go home and tell my mother the half-truths I've learned from Desiree and she frowns, corrects me on the things she can, or sends me to my room to wait for my father to come home to deal with the situation. "I don't want you going over there!" she says, "That little liar and her white trash mother are a bad influence on you, and I won't have it!" I agree for argument's sake and promise not to do it again. Then every day after school, Desiree comes over and knocks on my window. I sneak out and we play. This particular day, when she asks me if I am a faggot, isn't the first time I've been stumped by her adult language. She's always using big words, throwing me off, and trying to confuse my little brain. She's always proving her superiority.

"I can't be a faggot. I'm a girl," she tells me. "So..." I throw back.

“Do you even know what a faggot is?” she exclaims. I can only shake my head then stare at the ground and feel stupid for not knowing. “My mother says that they’re the men that God hates. They’re going to destroy the world pretty soon because of their sinning.” I am shocked. I wasn’t aware God hated anyone, and now it is up for question. Am I a faggot? “But who are they? How can you tell if you are one or not? Do they have other names?” Her wide eyes and serious face turn into a smile because she knows she’s gotten under my skin. “I just know a couple of names like gay, flamers, faggots, but those are just made-up words. Their real name is homo sapiens,” she whispers. I’ve never heard of them, but hope silently that I am safe from these sinners.

“There’s one way, only one, that can tell if you are or not,” she finishes, her voice dramatically low, enjoying the fear in my eyes. My mind is going haywire, afraid to find out if God hates me. Still very curious I want to know if I’m one of those homo sapiens going to destroy the world. “How can I tell?” I ask, growing more anxious. “We have to kiss.” Easy enough, I think to myself, as I lean in and kiss her on the cheek. “No, stupid! On the lips! That’s the only way to really know!” I haven’t kissed anyone on the lips for a while. Last time was my grandmother Juanita, my mom’s mom, and a God-fearing woman. I first learned how to kiss from my uncle Tony when I was younger. Trying it out on my grandmother was not a good idea. I remember the look on her face and the shriek she made: “Where did you learn that? Where? That is not for little boys!” She washed my mouth out with a white Dove soap bar. The taste of soap fills my mouth whenever I even hear the word “kiss,” and since then the idea frightens me to no end. But Desiree closes her eyes and sits there waiting for me to make my move. Now, or never.

This isn’t like the kisses I’ve had before. There’s more thought into this one. I have been practicing for most of my life. My great uncle’s foster grandson, Brady, was the first to teach me to play *the game*, as I’ve come to call it. At four years old, I had a certain way of just going with the flow. He took me into the backyard, flipped over a clean garbage can and we

snuck inside. Then there was my cousin James, who'd play the game with my uncle Tony, before we all played together. The game that nobody talked about was the first game I ever really became good at. It was a grown-up game I'd learned—one that everyone was playing, yet nobody talked about it. Nobody could be told because it's a secret. I usually don't think about it, unless someone wants to play. This will be the first time I play a part of the game with a girl. I think of how many people I've played the game with and add her to the list. I think I'm winning; I'm already in the double digits. I'm trying my best to think hard and connect the dots. There's a way this all fits in together; I just don't get it. The game, this kiss, this girl, me, God...It all means something.

I then lean in again and press my lips against hers. Her lips are chapped; the inside of her mouth tastes like Fritos and it's twice the size of mine. She is clumsy, but I show her what to do. I half expect her to say something at any point. I keep my eyes open, staring into her closed eyes, hoping for something, a spark on her face, or a sign of my fate. How in the world does this prove God hates me or not? We sit there for what seems like fifteen minutes, but is more like twenty seconds, until I actually pull away. She sits there, with her eyes closed, smiling. "Am I?" I ask, nervously anticipating her next words.

She sighs, "Nope, you're just a regular boy. I'm glad too. I couldn't be your friend if you were a homo samepien." I can understand why she feels that way; angering God is never a good idea. Having the satisfaction of knowing neither of us are homos, we go about our business, playing radio station, taping our conversations like news announcers. I never really think about it again, satisfied that God doesn't hate me and I'm not what she thought I was. For a while at least, I feel safer hearing her voice inside the back of my head: "Nope, you're just a regular boy." The same day I have my first thought-out kiss, I identify homos with hate. When confronted with the word, I'm quick to defend my faint lisp. I am a regular boy. Desiree tells me so.



NONFICTION

Fly with Wings

By Ningwen Chen

“Should I tell them today? Or tomorrow?” This question bounds up and down in my mind thousands of times every day. Reason always wins over emotion. *Let me keep it to myself one more day!* My parents still don’t know my secret.

My parents are ordinary people in China, just like anyone passing in the street. My father worked as a director of an office for forty years before he retired. My mother worked as a chef in a small restaurant for thirty-six years. They enjoy their retirement very much. They love my daughter Julia so much that they let her stay with them, take her to school, feed her all the good food they have, and buy all the new cute skirts she wants. My mother always tells me, “When you were a little girl, you were so sweet! Everyone wanted to play with you. I see it on Julia’s face. Now you have wings to fly and are no fun to play with anymore!”

Supper is always the time to listen to their funny stories about Julia: “Julia teaches me a very difficult English word today; I almost cannot close my jaw! She says *expensive* in English like we say *you are a thief* in Chinese.”

“Julia’s ballet teacher should quit making her do movements that hurt her legs. Do you want me to talk to her?”

“Julia shows me her drawing; she says that I am the one in the center hugging her. Am I so young?”

I get used to hearing this kind of conversation about Julia; I cannot concentrate on listening to them now because I have a secret. *What will they do if they cannot talk about Julia everyday?* I ask myself.

I know that the picture in my parents' minds is exactly this one: they are very very old, sitting on the comfortable sofa. I have grey hair also, and I cook the food in the kitchen for everyone. Julia and her future husband are holding their baby in front of my parents. They laugh with no teeth in their mouths.

I change this picture with the introduction of Mark Newman, my fiancé. My parents are shocked. "Ningwen, why didn't you tell us earlier? You always keep the secrets until the last minute!" "Ningwen, you know how many outstanding guys in China we have, right? Why do you want to choose a foreigner?" "Ningwen, we don't know how to talk to him. He cannot speak our language!" These are not the main reasons, the ones in their hearts are, "You don't want to see us everyday? You want to take Julia out of our life?"

Julia's and my visas are sleeping in my purse. I decide to wait to tell my secret until my parents finish their supper. My hands are sweating, cold, a little shaky. My parents put down their chopsticks. "Mama, good supper!" My father smiles to my mother. "I perhaps will add a little more soy sauce in the fish next time," my mother says. I clear my throat. They stare at me. I close my mouth very tightly, have two dry coughs, push myself to open another "door" and say, "Dad and Mom, Julia and I have got the visas. We will leave China at the end of this month to America!"

It is so quiet! If an ant walks on the table, I probably can hear its steps. My father does not say a word. He lowers his head, looking at the table unconsciously. My mother's tears are in her eyes. She tries not to say a word; one word would open the floodgate, and the dam would be destroyed. "Sorry, Dad and Mom! Mark and I want to live together. We will take care of Julia very well, I promise!"

My mother stands up suddenly; her back facing us, she pretends to comb her hair with her hand and her sleeve. She cries. I hear her low voice murmuring off and on, "When the bird has the strong wings, it is time to fly!"

The air is so heavy. Julia's little hugs and Julia's little kisses still cannot make it lighter. I run out of the house and begin driving my motorcycle. I don't know where I go or how long I stay outside. My mother's words are whirling in my mind, "When the bird has the strong wings, it is time to fly!"

Pals in the Golden West

By Keith A. Eaton

In the late nineteen-forties, Roy Rogers and Trigger were my Saturday movie matinee heroes. I watched their movies at the McSwain Theater in Ada, Oklahoma. One such movie was free, sponsored by the Ada Seven-Up bottling company. Free, if you had the ten Seven-Up bottle caps required for admission.

One of the discoveries we often make in mid-life is that the memories of your childhood friends assume added importance. In Fittstown, the small south-central Oklahoma oil field town where my pals and I lived as grade school kids, there were many common bonds that drew us together. We were poor; we were isolated; we were inquisitive; we were adventurous. Because we were poor, we learned to improvise. Because we were isolated, we were free. Because we were inquisitive, we were self-taught. Because we were adventurous, we were risk-takers.

Tony Lions was the only child of the town welder, Tab Lions, and every inch his father's son. The wavy blond hair, sky blue eyes, and winning grin that had established Tab's reputation years earlier were Tony's to exploit and he did so, very well. Whether escaping a licking at home, getting a second chocolate chip cookie from my mom just before dinnertime, or being excused from the Christmas Sunday School pageant, Tony was the preeminent childhood politician.

Bob Rollins was half-Indian, intelligent, and unconscious. He was the only kid I've ever known who routinely had sleep in his eyes at three o'clock in the afternoon. Bob had a big brother Elzy who rode around town on the largest motorcycle ever manufactured in this country. It was a real hog made

by the Indian Motorcycle Company. Elzy wore a black leather jacket and sported long hair and a three-day beard when he whizzed through Fittstown at midnight on route 99, headed home from what we imagined were clandestine adventures. Bob gave us immediate access to Elzy, the enforcer, so we never had any trouble with the older kids in the neighborhood.

John Houser was our intellectual. John was the only kid who had whole-grain bread sandwiches, celery, skim milk, and figs in his lunch sack every day. He brought an element of objectivity, logic, risk management, and accountability to our clan and balanced Tony's hell-bent-for-leather attitude. In short, John was the bean counter in our club.

Ennis McKinley was our good-ole-boy. He wore little round wire frame glasses and his hair was one large whorl covered by a cowlick. He was easygoing until ruffled, strong but gentle, with a non-judgmental ability to change a course of action, whether one person's or the group's. He was the closest thing we had to a social conscience. Ennis was the one who threatened to whip anyone who made fun of "Freckle-Face Frankie" when he got left back in first grade.

My contribution to the club was consistent with the role I have continued to play until the present, the enabler. I was unofficially in charge of maintaining the correct blending of the member personalities to assure the harmonious and successful operation of the club in its varied activities.

Every kids' gang, club, group, or clan has these basic personality types. But there was one rather unusual member of our gang who, on the surface, didn't fit.

For one thing Skeet Felton was fifty years older than everyone else in the club. He wasn't poor; in fact he was the principal merchant in our community. With his deeply lined face, wispy gray-white greasy hair, and ears so huge you suddenly believed Dumbo was a real elephant, Skeet could have easily been someone to ridicule. But he knew about kids and that won us over. He'd raised two boys, Bill and Donny, above his grocery store, in four small rooms he and his wife Blanche called home.

“Keith,” he’d say, “I guess you know the Willises are gone to Texas for the week.” Meaning, the best posted “No Fishing” farm pond in Pontotoc County was available for three or four days. Or, “Bob, I’m out of minnows and Donny’s in Ada all day.” Meaning, could we boys walk down the hill to Byrd’s Mill Creek, run the minnow traps, haul the catch back up the hill, and dump them in the concrete vats full of cold spring water for Skeet to sell to serious fishermen on their way to lake Texhoma?

“Keith, did you see where the Ada Theater is offering free tickets to see the new Roy Rogers movie next month?” my oldest sister Beth was reading from the *Ada Evening News*. “You only need twelve Seven-Up bottle caps to get in and you get a free Seven-Up for the show.”

Half an hour later the gang had a strategy in place. We’d all search high and low for Seven-Up caps and take them to our hideout, a cave under the big waterfall on Byrd’s Mill Creek just upstream from the pipe where the Felton’s laundry water drained into the creek. On the Friday before movie-day, we’d divide the caps into piles of ten and draw straws to see who would go. With a little luck there would be enough caps for all of us.

We started immediately, knowing that every kid in town would be collecting Seven-Up caps by tomorrow morning. We’d learned to strike when the iron was hot from the experience of cutting the offering coupon from the Captain Marvel comic book that promised a way to earn money or prizes selling greeting cards, flower seeds, or magazines.

Tony took the garbage can assignment. He didn’t mind at all since he routinely searched for cigarette butts there anyway.

Bob agreed to cover the trash dump and the welding shop where the local branch of the International Brotherhood of Spit-and-Whittlers met every morning and afternoon.

John would go door-to-door to every house where there weren’t any young kids and get commitments for any Seven-Up caps they had or might have that week.

Ennis went to a big square dance pavilion in Stonewall every Saturday night where his dad made extra money by calling the dances. There were plenty of caps at the dance from the favorite refreshment of the dancers, 7&7. Seagram's Seven and Seven-Up was very popular at square dances.

The annual picnic my parents' social club held every summer was the very next Saturday. It was always at the big state park in Sulphur. With all that fried catfish and chicken there would be a lot of pop around and some 7&7 as well. And there would be twenty other similar picnics in the same park.

After a lot of hunting, we were exactly twelve caps short on Friday morning, and we didn't want to leave anyone behind on Saturday. So we drifted down to Skeet's where we did our heavy thinking and problem solving.

"Boy, you guys look like you've been rode hard and put away wet," Skeet said. "Why, I figured you guys would be grinnin' like a possum eatin' soap in a hail storm, seein' as how tomorrow is the big movie day."

I explained we were still twelve caps short and no one wanted to go unless we all went. Skeet didn't say anything. He walked into his grocery store and into the back room where the smell from the Evergreen brand cow-feed, garden fertilizer, sacks of vegetable produce, crates of oranges, bananas, and grapes all mingled together. I had the distinct feeling Skeet was going to come through again, for the gang. Three minutes later he was back carrying a big Phillips head screwdriver. He walked over to his ice-filled pop box and unscrewed the metal combination bottle opener and lid catcher. Out came five day's worth of pop lids and among them we saw a lot of green and silver Seven-Up lids. We counted and discovered there were eleven lids, only one more to go. No problem, we'd just go back over the town one more time.

Then Skeet walked over to the pop box, reached in, and pulled out an ice cold Seven-Up. He popped off the lid, and said, "Nothing like a cold Seven-Up on a hot day."

So there we sat in the McSwain Theater, cool and comfortable on a hot July Saturday afternoon drinking a free Seven-Up. We saw two

Mighty-Mouse cartoons, a chapter of a Rocket Man serial and Roy Rogers riding Trigger across the silver screen in *Rider of the Purple Sage*. All of us were there, except the senior member of the club. He was sacking groceries back in Fittstown.

I never told the rest of the guys, but I'd known Skeet long enough to swear that he never drank anything but Chocolate Soldiers. He claimed carbonation gave him stomach gas.

Grandma de-Co-wetta

By Kylee Jones

I remember many things about her. I remember the red Plymouth Sundance she drove; it had a dent in one of the doors. I remember the terribly hideous brown carpet in her house. I remember how she always wore “slacks,” never “pants.” I remember the giant sycamore tree in her front yard and how she always warned us of sycamores making you itchy. I remember never listening to these warnings and finding out that, yes, sycamores do indeed make you itchy.

The old woman who babysat me and my sisters had an obsession with playing solitaire, which is probably what I remember most about her. She played solitaire while drinking iced tea at the kitchen table. There was a small television set in the room that I swear only received the news channel. It sat on top of a stereo system, on which she listened to southern gospel tunes. Her name was Coletta, but we referred to her as grandma even though she technically was not. She did an excellent job of being our non-grandma grandma, however.

As with all grandmas, for instance, the food is one of my strongest recollections. If we had breakfast at her house, it was always pancakes, no exceptions. Many times she made us spaghetti. It was the best spaghetti I can recall ever tasting, although my mother tells me she cheated by using the boxed kind and that I would more than likely not enjoy it if I were to sample it today. She occasionally bought us a cherry pie from Homeland. When it snowed, she would fill cups with snow and then pour Kool-Aid (always red) over it for a sort of slushy. Sometimes after picking us up from school, she would take us to grab a bite to eat at Dairy Queen. Once after one of these trips, my younger sister got in trouble for sabotaging my gravy with ketchup.

Trouble was not something you wanted to get into with her. Trouble with her meant a spanking, not to mention a bad report to momma. She had this thick black belt that she used. It was extremely old and parts of it were patched with duct tape. This was known as “The Belt.” A lot of times I think she only pulled it out to scare us; I honestly do not recall being spanked with it too many times although I do remember seeing it a lot.

Despite “The Belt,” I loved spending time with my grandma. I spent the night at her house on many occasions. Even though my sisters and I each had a room in her house, I usually shared her bed. She always held my hand as we drifted off to sleep and she always fell asleep first. As she snored, I remember staring at the feather quilt she kept on top of her chest of drawers and being completely infatuated with it.

I also remember that she would always talk about her “girdle,” which I thought was a funny word, even though I had no idea what a girdle was. I remember how she never had a big Christmas tree, just a small one that sat on a table in the living room. I remember that when we took our Friday morning walk around the corner to her hair appointment, she always let me walk on the curb. I remember getting excited when her daughter Brenda came to visit. I remember how we were not allowed to sit in her recliner if she chose to spend time in the living room.

There are quite a few things I do not remember, however. I do not remember her last name. I do not remember if she drank coffee or not. I do not recall the sound of her voice or whether or not she had grandchildren of her own. I cannot even remember the color of her eyes exactly. These things are miniscule compared to what she does not remember about me.

She does not remember anything about me. When I was around eight or nine, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. It had been a long time coming apparently. Once she went to pick us up from our Oklahoma City elementary school and somehow wound up miles away lost in Edmond with no recollection of why she decided to go there. I did not fully understand

what Alzheimer's was and that is probably why I cannot remember the last time I saw her before she really lost it.

The last time I saw her was in a nursing home. She seemed to have distant shadows of us in her memory, but no real idea of who we were. This broke my heart. I have not seen or heard anything of her in many years. I cannot even tell you if she is still living. Despite this, I feel very fortunate that I have the ability to remember her and the large part of my childhood that was spent at her house although she does not have the ability to recall ever having met me.

Along the Road to Crimea

By Scot George

I was making my way to Crimea with my good friend Andrew in this red Mustang convertible to investigate some potential business opportunities. The top was down and Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir" was blaring over the stereo. The countryside was green and fertile with wheat fields stretching out as far as the eye could see.

Around a corner we slowed, coming upon the police in wait for their next target and obligatory bribe. That's when I saw the young Ukrainian walking along the path next to the road. He was just a young boy, shaven head, shirtless, wearing tattered European jeans and sandals too large for his feet that had seen better days. He was with two companions. Smiles and camaradery emanated about them as they trudged down the dusty path. He was much like the rest in manner and actions, only he had no arms. Both looked to have been severed right above the elbow.

I thought how sad it is to have a full life ahead of you, only to have fallen victim to the horror of some unthinkable act. I wondered how his life would be shaped from then on. It was difficult enough there, let alone facing it without the use of arms and hands. I believed he could have a fruitful life if he was successful enough to avoid becoming an alcoholic, unlike so many others who would succumb to chronic binge drinking to cope with their hopelessness and despair.

Our eyes met for only a brief fleeting moment which seemed timeless. He almost instantly dropped his head, averting his eyes in what appeared to be shame of being the object of morbid curiosity and unwelcome gawking stares that must inevitably come his way from strangers. I felt neither pity nor abhorrence, only sadness.

We were spared the striped baton this time as the police only observed us with curiosity as we passed by in our out-of-the-ordinary machine. So it was back to the open road, the warm sun on our backs, the tunes again pouring out their rhythmic flow as we proceeded on to the possibilities of future prosperity. We were making good time. The night life of Sevastopol awaited our arrival.

Culture Shock

By Haley Smith

When you hear Paris, you might think of the Eiffel Tower, the Sacre Coeur, maybe Notre Dame or the Louvre, home to some of the world's most beautiful and popular art.

Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is one of the most beautiful and mysterious paintings of all time. Why is it then in a city of such tremendous beauty did I witness a display of such ugliness? I remember all of the good things and happy things about Paris, but I also remember a woman being brutally beaten in the middle of the sidewalk, a woman fallen victim to a man intent on causing her harm and no one stopping it or helping her. This was the memory of abuse that I took with me. This was the memory that changed my outlook on people and the world forever.

I was seven years old and it was my first of two trips to Paris. No, I'm not rich and I don't get to fly around the world on a whim. As a teacher, each summer, my dad would take a group of students on a trip. For the summer of 1992 it was Paris, and I got to tag along. I spent the first days in awe of everything I was seeing. It was a beautiful and thriving city full of people and history. It was a busy city set with the ambiance of the old world, complete with cobblestone streets packed with tourists and impressive cathedrals housing church bells that would ring on the hour. There within my reach were all of these places I'd heard about my whole life. There was the Eiffel Tower, The Sacre Coeur and the Louvre, where I got my first glimpse of *Mona Lisa* in person. She was breathtaking. She doesn't possess the kind of beauty that is extravagant in any way. She was dressed commonly; no jewelry could be seen and it's still a mystery who she is exactly. She did, however, have this smile, an intriguing and shy smile, that was completely

opposite from the dominating eyes that seem to follow you throughout the room. She seemed like a simple person in the painting, yet at the same time her picture is anything but simple. I remember she was protected by red velvet ropes letting you know exactly how close you could get. There were armed security men who never strayed from their positions, but their eyes never gave up on their ever-vigilant watch. They were watching you as you watched her. Just being in that room was one of the most exhilarating experiences in my life. Looking back at the whole trip makes me question how we can show such admiration and respect for this woman on canvas and not give that same respect and admiration for the living and breathing women we come in contact with every day.

On our last night there I met the woman who would be etched in my memory forever. We had been to the *Phantom of the Opera* that evening and returned to our hotel earlier than most nights. Immediately several of the students were struck with boredom. They convinced my dad that a trip to McDonalds would cure their need to move around. He agreed to chaperone them, and he let me go with them. Once out of the hotel we decided we would walk; it was a little less than a mile from where we were staying. I enjoyed the first part of our walk. We took in all the sights and sounds Paris at night had to offer. We were surrounded by buildings on either side of the street. Most looked about the same, having apartments on the top floors with restaurants and bars placed street level. The different establishments would keep their doors propped open and the huge storefront windows unadorned so that as you walked down the street the sounds met you outside and you felt as if you were inside enjoying the good times. Almost three blocks from our destination there was an alley between two of the buildings. It was from that alley the woman came running and screaming, right towards our group.

She was fairly young with long wavy dark hair. She had on a red dress that was long and fluid. I remember it moved with her legs as she ran, and, for some reason, she was carrying her shoes in her hands. There were tears streaming down her face and words coming out of her mouth that I

didn't understand. I could tell she was in some kind of trouble because she kept looking over her shoulder. I looked behind her and saw a man; he was an average man with short dark hair. He was dressed in khaki pants and a plain blue shirt. It was his eyes that stood out to me the most. The hatred and violence I saw in his eyes made me afraid. He was after the woman, and she was trying to get away.

The woman ran to the window of the first bar outside of the alley. She started banging on that large storefront window. I remember looking in as she did so. The people inside were sitting at a bar and tables that had been scattered throughout the room. The noise got their attention; they turned, looked at her, promptly ignored her, and turned back to their tables to continue on with their evening. As they turned around, the man caught up with her. He grabbed her by that long hair and started trying to drag her back towards the alley. She was trying her best to resist him. She definitely had it in her mind not to go quickly or quietly. As he pulled on her hair, she was clawing and scratching at his arms and face, trying to break his hold on her. When he saw she was going to be difficult to restrain, he started kicking at her legs and stomping his booted feet onto her bare ones. Then he took his free hand and slapped her face. Then with his hand wrapped in her hair he slammed her face into the glass window. It was like a sick choreographed routine that alternated between kicks and slaps and slamming, played to the rhythm of her sobs and cries. With the commotion they were causing, the people inside turned around once more to see what was happening. Yes, I thought, finally someone will see what is happening and help her. Only they didn't. They continued to ignore the entire scene. I was numb. How could someone watch something like this and not feel compelled to help?

I looked to my dad, searching his face for a sign that said he was going to help. I didn't find that sign. He looked at me and must have known what I was thinking because he said, "We can't help her. We are tourists and would do more harm than good." I could not believe this. My whole life I had been taught that you help people in trouble. Here was the man who had

taught me that, and he was doing nothing. I cannot tell you what my exact feelings were at that moment. I was experiencing too many to be able to tell them apart from each other. I knew what was happening was wrong, but I was the child, surrounded by adults doing nothing to defuse the situation. So we continued on our way, the woman's cries following us the whole way. This woman's situation made me rethink everything I'd known up to that point in my life.

We left for home the next morning. I sat on the plane, thinking about the night before. My seven-year-old mind was boggled by what I had witnessed. I know that Paris is not the only place such abuse occurs. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, 31% of women admit to being abused in some sort of way during their lives, and men abuse women in 96% of domestic violence cases. This, however, was the first time I had seen anything at that level of abuse. The whole scene lasted maybe sixty seconds, but it was an important sixty seconds. In that minute I learned that the world is not always a nice, sugar-coated place that parents want children to believe it is. I had always been told that you help people in trouble, you care for people. Men are not supposed to hit women, and women are not supposed to hit men. You are to be there for people no matter what the circumstance. In reality people don't always help people the way they should. Some people in the world abuse, while most of the abused accept it. For some reason my mind drifted back to the painting, *Mona Lisa*. I started thinking, maybe if we as a society regarded people with the same sense of appreciation as we do the painting of a woman on a canvas, we might make our world a better place to live.

Fired

By Justin Lewis

I had hurried home and found my best casual dress clothes: black button-up shirt, khakis, and dress shoes. I even gelled my hair for the occasion. A passerby may have assumed a funeral was near in my day. They might have been right.

I drove to Little Caesar's, parked, and sat in my car, heater blasting away the frigid January air. My heart thumped faster than I believed it should. In my rearview mirror I could see the curious head of Kristi poking from behind a wall in the back. I took a deep breath and all at once I dived in.

Yesterday

It started with a phone call.

The familiar pop song that had been my ring tone for some time aroused my slumber some time during the afternoon of January 7, 2009. I fumbled with the phone before finding the right key.

"Yea..." I said groggily, while shielding my eyes from the annoying rays of dusty light streaking through my blinds.

"Mr. Lewis, why in the hell am I being asked to cover manager shifts for your store again?" It was the voice of one Mrs. Allie Hawkins, friend and fellow associate manager for Little Caesar's. Nothing said *good news* like her croaky voice first thing after waking.

"Excuse me?" I questioned, mind sharpening, but still slow. Getting shifts covered had been a fun pastime with my store. Our little Midwest City store had run off only two managers, but a third had been recently added, so the need for more coverage was news to me. I had a blank to a question that should not have been asked of me.

Allie ranted off about our District Manager calling to the store earlier trying to get some shifts covered for my store, not saying why, just that there was a need. “Hold on, hold, hold on...what shifts?” I asked.

“Um, lemme see, it’s written here somewhere...Ah Wednesday, nine to six and Thursday nine to six?”

“No.”

“Why not?” Allie asked, not nearly as confused as I was, though for a different reason I was sure.

“Those,” I began trying to find the right words to process the true thoughts that were melding themselves in my mind. This didn’t make sense at all. I knew those shifts. Those were the scheduled shifts for the Associate Manager for the next two days. “...are mine.”

There was silence on the other end.

I sat up in my bed, alert. Allie and I chatted for the next few minutes about nonsense, her kids, unruly customers and such. My mind was running a million miles a second and was far, far away by now.

After assuring Allie that I would call her later with details, I ended the call and let myself fall back into my bed. Those were my shifts. Mine. Why would they need to be covered? I called my store to talk to my boss.

I talked to one of my employees who handed the phone off to Kristi, my boss of the past six months since I had been transferred to help turn around the store.

“Miiister Lewis,” came my boss’s typical greeting.

“Mizz Whalen,” I replied. “What’s up?”

My heart was gaining pace by now, nervousness and anxiety mixing into some dark creature within.

“Why are we looking for managers at other stores for my shifts?” To the point. I never did that. She paused.

“Who said that?” she asked.

“Allie.”

“Well, I uh don’t really know what to say to that. I think you need to talk to Ms. George about that one.” I wondered how someone so talkative could struggle with words.

“Kristi...”

“Hey, I got to get pies ready for the rush; I’d talk to Velma ‘bout it, though.”

“Right,” I said, my breath bordering on hyperventilating. We’ll call it super ventilating. This wasn’t right. In my mind, I knew what it felt like was coming. I quickly scanned over all wrongdoings at the store that might have occurred on my watch in the previous weeks.

Nothing.

I tossed the phone on top of my pillow. *Just breathe Justin, just breathe, nothing is wrong*, I kept telling myself.

I picked the phone up and pressed the third speed dial button. This time the person would be my district manager, Velma George, the person I trusted second-most in the entire company of thieves and liars. I got her voicemail.

I shut my eyes and sat back, hoping I could fall back asleep, that this problem would just go away. It gnawed at me the entire evening.

A Few Hours Ago

The next day started typically. I woke up, I showered, I made some lunch. Such was my life on a work day. Sleep had lowered the tension in my gut, but I could still feel it there, hiding in the darkness of my soul just out of sight. Fortunately, I had some errands to run that could distract me from the current atmosphere of dread.

Let it be known now and forever that I am an expert worrier. I take the small seed of doubt within and allow it to fester and grow in the damp dark recesses of the worst part of my mind. If this problem that I felt coming was a germ, I'd be in the hospital. The errands did little to satisfy the sickness that was now encasing my physical and emotional body. Light was turning to dark as the day moved on. The sun shone brightly.

Finally, unable to resist the feeling that what would come was inevitable and wanting to meet it on my own terms as a man, I called the non-returning-phone-call boss of mine, Velma. But this time she answered.

"Hey, Justin," said her more-tired-than-usual voice. "H-hey, Velma," I stuttered as my body began shaking.

"You all right, honey?" she asked, the tone of authentic concern in her reassuring voice.

"You tell me." She didn't say anything. I heard the sound of a door chime going off on the other end, followed by the staticky sound of wind piercing her phone. She wanted this conversation away from anyone else. "Do I need to even wear my uniform to work tonight?" I asked.

"What do you know?"

"I don't know anything. I have no clue what's going on and I don't like it. And I'm kind of scared to be honest. I'm sitting here in my car, in the stupid Petsmart parking lot because I don't know what's going on. So you tell me what do I know." That was the first and last time I would speak to Ms. George with such disrespect. The strange thing was that she didn't seem to mind.

"You don't know anything?" she asked.

"Nothing, no one will say a word. I sent out some texts last night. No one is budging. I think I know, but I don't understand."

The phone went silent for nearly a minute, though it could have been an hour or two. This was not the conversation that she and I enjoyed

normally. This was not the happy-go-lucky Ms. George who had garnered such respect and loyalty these past few years. This was not the person who managed to shape me into a pizza-making freak who had abandoned his friends and given up college when shit went down. This was a boss, a boss making decisions that she didn't feel comfortable with. It still had not fully come to realization, that dark future that I might have before me.

“Meet me at the store in 20 minutes, okay? We'll talk.”

“Whatever needs to be done. I'm finished waiting. I can't sit here and wait.” I wanted to meet the impending discussion head on, and on at least some of my own terms. No weakness.

Now

The first breath of the cold air felt like fire enveloping my warm lungs. Made me feel alive. I would need that.

As I walked closer to the store, I saw my reflection in the large windows. I saw a boy already defeated but wanting a fight, a boy who wasn't ready for what was about to happen, and a man who didn't know what to do for the first time in his life.

I followed my tired blue eyes in the window, as they studied the figure before me, curious as to how he had gotten himself here. I oddly chuckled to myself at the absurdity of everything in life and allowed my eyes to wander up towards the clear blue sky. The moon was out, dull and pale, not beautiful, but still it shone in a strange odd way, fighting against the normalcy of things. They say that a person who stares at the stars and moon is a lonely person indeed. At that moment I agreed

The hot air covered me as a blanket when I opened the door to the store. For the first time in a long while I smelled the pizza for what it once was: a sweet-smelling novelty. Over time the smell had dimmed to my senses, and I had no longer felt the funny wonder of working at this place, but today the pizza had prepared for me a glorious present of my senses.

One of the employees caught my eye and quickly looked away. Had I not been the one to get him hired in the first place? So he could feed his newborn? *Can't even look at me?* I shook my head in irritation.

The side door opened and I saw the small blonde head of Kristi pop out, "Hey, Justin, Velma's comin' out. Just a second." She never calls me Justin. It's always Mister Lewis and Miss Whalen, nothing official, but for kicks.

Velma came out; Kristi right behind her, solemn faces both. "Just get to it," I said.

"So you know why you're here then?" asked Velma.

"I don't actually know, but I'm pretty sure, and I don't know why."

"You didn't know this was coming?"

"Velma, three nights ago you told me I was like a brother to you and that the store was doing great. How would I know?" I was trying to look her in the eyes, but she wouldn't let me.

I saw Kristi in my peripheral, looking like she didn't quite know what to say. I really didn't mind. She was my boss, but she wasn't the one doing this. Wasn't her deed to do.

"It was corporate. Remember back in September when you and Pat were here and you guys gave a bad pizza to the owner? This is it." It was funny, I was thinking at the time, Velma was always so animated in her speech, long waving hand and arm motions. She was a great communicator, but her hands remained tightly in her pockets.

"You mean the time when I had two people working the shift that four should have been on and you told us to do everything different from normal that day?" I said sarcastically, perhaps a slight hint of ill will mingled in.

“I know. Well, my bosses have been on me about it the entire time, and when I walked into the office yesterday morning they asked me why you were still here. They said it was my job or yours, and I care about you, Justin, but I can’t afford to lose my job.” She was looking into my eyes for the first time. For the first time I believed something she said.

“Right,” was what I could muster.

“Sucks, dude, really sucks.” Those were Kristi’s wise words.

“Justin, I honestly believe you are going to excel in life. You’re smart, you’re good with people, you will do very well.” Velma glanced quickly at Kristi, a sad look upon her face. “ But it will not be at this company.”

She couldn’t even say it. One word. One simple word. Fired. She couldn’t give me that.

“Right.” I would not show weakness. I had seen people get fired before, and almost every time they threw a fit and cussed and howled and made a giant scene. Not me. I would burn this event into their memories not by antics but by my supposed strength of character in the face of adversity. I was always the calm one.

“I’m sorry, Justin, I really am. This isn’t easy for me. You must know that.”

“Yeah,” I said, trying to hold it together, my eyes glued to a spot on the wall just above Velma’s shoulder. *Just concentrate on the spot*, I told myself. “I guess that’s that then.”

“I guess so.”

They walked me outside, the cold air bringing me life as its breeze licked at my skin, willing me towards life. I was already dead inside.

“Wait,” I said as our slow march neared my car. “I forgot something.” Velma and Kristi looked at me confused. I smirked and walked back inside. I fumbled around the office drawers, trying to find where it hid. Finally I

found it, small and rectangular, gold in color. It was my validation. I returned to the two women waiting for me outside, both starting to shiver a bit. Not that I really cared.

“I earned this,” I told them sternly as I held up the small name plate that read *Justin Lewis* and under it *Associate Manager*.

Velma smiled for the first time. “Yea, you did, kid, you really did. Never doubt that.” With that said the parade was over. I hugged Velma one last time, and for the first time since working with her gave Kristi a hug. “I always wanted to do that, but since you’re my boss, you know.” She laughed and they both bade me farewell—a contrast to the gloom of when I had arrived.

I got into my car and turned on the engine, listening to the slow rumble pumping cold air towards my fired body. I backed up, went forward and turned onto the busy street and drove away as the tears that had been building for nearly a day finally had their way.

Dream Chasing in Colorado

By Terri Black

I had been putting in my resume at Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF) for five years when my phone finally rang. It was on a cold, breezy, snowy Sunday morning in December. I was lying in bed watching television with the electric blanket on and a cup of hot chocolate on the nightstand. I could feel the coolness of the outside temperature radiating over my bed, through my walls and window. I snuggled in deeper and listened intently. The lady on the other end of the phone identified herself as a human resources employee at BNSF. They wanted me to be in Denver, Colorado, on Tuesday morning for a hiring fair. I couldn't believe it! It had finally happened!

I drove to Denver the next day with high hopes of becoming a new employee. It was cold and dark when my friend and I started the drive. We drove up I-35 all the way into Kansas, across I-70 through dense fog, and by the time we got to Denver, it was a full blown blizzard! We got a room for the night and went to bed.

The next morning, I woke up and there was ten inches of snow on my car. As I walked across the parking lot, I couldn't help but look up into the sky, stick my tongue out, and catch snowflakes. The snow was cold against my warm skin and the moisture on my tongue was refreshing. I'll never forget the stark contrast of my black car against the white backdrop of the beautiful city of Denver.

I drove to the hotel where the hiring fair would take place. When I walked in the door, my hopes were dashed against a cold, brick wall. There were approximately one hundred and fifty people in the room for twenty-four

positions. And to make matters worse, there were only four women. I quickly cast that thought aside, knowing that it would doom me. I went through the class, had an interview at the BNSF human resources department, and was told to go home and wait for a call.

We left Denver the next morning, just in front of an immense snow storm. It chased us all the way across I-70 into Goodland, Kansas, where we stopped for the night. As we pulled into Kansas, a man shut the gate to the highway behind us. There was five inches of ice on the highway and it was too treacherous for travel. It had taken us ten hours to go one hundred seventy miles! My shoulders and forearms were cramping so badly I could hardly unfurl my fingers from the steering wheel. The headache that was throbbing at my temples began at the back of my neck and went forward, encompassing my entire head. It wasn't a matter of whether we needed to stop anymore. It had become a necessity! We found a hotel with a pool and a hot tub. We practically ran to our room, got changed into our swimsuits, and raced down the hall to the pool area. As I stepped down into the tub, I could feel all the stresses of the day slowly begin to subside, my muscles relax, and my headache start to go away. The next morning, we left for Oklahoma City and arrived in town late in the afternoon.

I waited for five weeks and finally got the call I'd been waiting for. The job had been offered to me provided I passed the intense training program. I had eight days to be in Denver. That week I quit four jobs, said goodbye to my family and friends, and got ready to go.

I left on Saturday, January 24, 1998, the day before Super Bowl XXXII— The Green Bay Packers vs. the Denver Broncos! I was extremely excited to be traveling to Denver at such an important time to the city. I was proud for them and their team. On the way, I drove through the panhandle of Texas. Have you ever been there? It smelled like a cross between cow dung and oil. Even with the windows rolled up, the aroma still seeped through. I got sleepy in Raton, New Mexico, and pulled over and slept in the foothills of the beautiful, majestic mountains. I pulled into Denver about five in the morning on Sunday, January 25, 1998. I got a room and went to bed.

Later that night, before the Super Bowl, I went to the club, had a few beers, and watched the game. The city was on fire: it felt absolutely electric. I returned to my room early fourth quarter because I didn't want to be out in a strange city alone in case they won. We won 31-24! People were driving up and down the highway honking their horns, whooping and hollering, and turning cars over downtown! I stood outside in the parking lot, taking it all in. It was great!

The next morning, I started a class that not too many completed. It was the class for railroad conductors, and was equivalent to getting an associates degree in a little over three months. The odds were extremely formidable, but I was positive and knew I'd do fine. The class entailed one month of classroom and nine weeks of being on call twenty- four hours a day seven days a week. We would be taking trains from Denver to three cities surrounding it: Sterling, Colorado; Cheyenne, Wyoming; and Pueblo, Colorado. The most dangerous to run was also the most exciting. It is considered dark territory because it isn't protected by dispatcher or lights. When a train travels in here, the train crew doesn't know who's coming against it. Federal Railroad Administration requires the crew to radio every station the train enters and passes. It lets train crews know where other trains are. Needless to say, many men have lost their lives in this territory due to not paying attention.

In Cheyenne, we stayed in a place called The Plains Hotel. It was built in 1911 and was frequented by cattle barons and oil tycoons. Back in those days, it was no doubt extravagant. The walls and floors were made of marble and no two rooms were alike. On the wall was a tiled portrait of a Plains Indian. When we traveled to Pueblo, we passed Pikes Peak in Colorado Springs and NORAD every day.

I got through the class just fine and graduated as a conductor in April, 1998. I learned a lot about myself in those eighteen weeks. It taught me to grow up and become more independent and more reliant upon myself. For the first time in my life, I was able to be all alone and feel comfortable with

it, for I knew no one in Colorado. It taught me that all a person needs to succeed is a positive attitude and the determination and desire to make it real. I learned that sometimes half the fun is just getting there.

I worked for the railroad for six years and decided that it was time for a change. I have always been a restless soul and have heard the phrase “There’s justification in a higher education.” I decided I wanted to find out. I have been going to school for two and a half years and my thirst for knowledge is unquenchable. Someday, I hope to finish, but I am enjoying the scenery along the way.

But, one thing is for sure, I will never forget the great people of Colorado, the friends I made there, and the beautiful state in which they reside. Most of all, I will never forget rolling down the rail at three o’clock in the morning, with the stars and moon shining upon the rail, the immense beautiful mountains towering over you on each side and the gentle, harmonic rocking of the locomotive as it rolls down the rail....

Chugga! Chugga! Chugga! Chugga! Choo! Choo!

Electric Ride

By Kelly Tanner

Her name is Mimi, and she's beautiful. She's a diva, a super-charged Mini Cooper. She has 168 horsepower, a 1.6 liter engine, and a manual six-speed transmission. She can go zero to sixty in 8.67 seconds, and she's taking us for a ride.

It's *that* day. It comes once a year—the day when the gray of winter finally surrenders to new life. Every tree is lime green or white or purple. The backdrop is glorious.

The temperature is eighty-three degrees. The air is thick and smells sweet with the promise of rain. In the west there are giant white thunderheads rising against a scary shade of green-black. The upper atmosphere is unstable and electric with passion from the coming storm, but down here the air is still. The sun is shining.

The convertible top is down. We have nowhere to go and nothing to do but drive.

Once again we've found ourselves on Mimi's favorite road. She brings us here often. It's only a few miles outside the city limits, but Urbania is a million miles away. The road is smooth and long and curvy. It belongs solely to her, and she consumes it with speed and agility. She sings in a throaty growl as the gears rise.

I like watching Paul drive—man and machine. He's daring and confident and sexy. He's in his element. Boston's "More than a Feeling" is piping through the Bose sound system. Paul cranks it up. He squeezes my knee and gives me a smile. After thirty years, he still melts my heart. I close my eyes and soak up the music, the sun, and the moment. I'm in heaven.

I take off my hat and sunglasses then let down my hair. It immediately starts whipping me in the face and is sure to end up a tangled mess, but I don't care. I lean my head back to tip my face toward heaven. My bones drink the gift of the sun.

The atmosphere thickens. The sultry air begins drawing trickles of sweat. As we cross a creek or go through a valley, an occasional pocket of cool air teases us with refreshment. Thunder rumbles in the distance and the trees start to dance.

The sky is eerie. Blackness is nearing. It's only a matter of time.

Fingers of electricity begin to illuminate the looming cauldron. Suddenly the air turns cool. One giant drop of rain splatters on the windshield. We look at each other. Neither of us is ready for the ride to end. We journey a few more minutes, ignoring the inevitable.

Splat! It hits my arm this time, then his head. *Splat. Splat. Splat.*

Paul downshifts and pulls Mimi to the side of the road to put the top up. Eric Clapton's "Wonderful Tonight" is playing. The melody is sweet and melancholy—a perfect match for the moment.

We drive home in personal silence—cozy in our vessel, sheltered from the raging storm. Paul backs Mimi into the garage. The roar of the engine is amplified times ten. He pauses for a moment then regretfully turns the key. He leaves the garage door open, and we stay cradled in our seats for another hour to enjoy the splendor of the heavenly pyrotechnics.

We have taken scores of drives, but none as magnificent as this. The electricity in the atmosphere, the springing of spring, and the fact we knew it would end before we were ready were all ingredients that contributed to the magic. We know the formula will never be the same, but each time we climb in and shut her doors we will look forward to another perfect drive.



POEMS

A Celtic Dream

Oh, my Friend!
You have such good taste.

In my next Life

I will be born to a family in Brittany,
Learn *Breton*,
How to play a pennywhistle with class,
How to beat the magic Celtic drum
And
Seduce the moon to release more metaphors.

Richard Rouillard

Two Writers

Two writers
become fighters
as two bodies
fusing bones.
More and more time alone
is required.

Two hearts burn to ashes
in their own fires.

Two rooms
like islands
become a caress
and a country apart,
heart revolting against heart,
hand longing to touch hand.

No, there is no understanding
between two birds
flying for the same branch.

Lyndsie StremLOW

Star-Crossed Lovers

I left a Butterball Ham
On the countertop for a week
When I was out
And this pair of flies
Were buzzing around the kitchen
Together like a pair of doves
They flew in formation
Landed next to each other
Suckled on the same rotten flesh
I thought they must be in love
But I up and slammed my hand down
On the countertop anyways
Stinging my palm
One of the flies went left
The other stayed right where it lay
And I didn't get how the one survived
But he came back around
And lit up next to the other fly
And stuck his spongey mouth
On its dead carcass
And I said out loud this time
That's not right!
And spun my other hand around
Flat down on the countertop
And ran that other fly's head
Deep into the body
Of the dead one

Brandon Isaak

Tarot Cards

“Pick a card,” she said with haste.

“The Moon: your instincts are wild and mysterious.”

(I’m a sucker for a pretty face)

“Nine of swords: you don’t listen, their words they waste,

Two of cups: you seek someone new and fun

Pick a card,” she said with haste.

“The Devil: You have dark desires (her hair is like black lace),

The Lovers: but inverted; you’ve lost something serious.”

(I’m a sucker for a pretty face)

“Ten of Wands: powerful dreams give chase,

Knight of Pentacles: you stubborn, deterred on something undone.

Pick a card,” she said with haste.

“Death: something bothersome has ended, that’s why you came to this place.

The Fool: you’ve taken risks and walked your own path, becoming notorious.”

(I’m a sucker for a pretty face)

“The Hanged Man: you followed your own beliefs and walked at your own pace.

Lastly, The Star: there’s hope for you yet, you can see it in space.

We’re done please leave,” she said with haste.

(I leave, wondering if I’ll ever see it again, that Tarot Cards girl’s pretty face).

Michael Enagonio

Freedom in the Context of Me

I am myself, young and happy. Not all the time. Some days are hard. Days weren't hard until this illness took my body. It tried to take my spirit and me with it, and there for a second maybe it did. I am back now. The zest for life, the need and will to live out of context and do what I feel right, what my self-proclaimed rulebook tells me. I cannot abide by guidelines or stereotypes for I am me. I feel this desire and this urge to experience life with the lack of any rules. Embrace my creator, live through Him, but live through me. I must run the quays of the Seine, Liffey, and Thames; navigate through the canals of Amsterdam with freedom in my head and love in my heart. Once I achieve the "rulebook" requirements of success, I am free to run to the other side of the world, wear bright colors, listen to loud music and dance in the bright shiny lights. I am me, free, loving and happy, and I cannot be tamed for that is not how life will be for me. I can never be tied down by a man, no matter how much I love him. I will find someone just as spunky, spontaneous, and willing to run free with me. My heart is on the line for nobody because life is meant to be lived and love is meant to be shared, not abided by.

Julia Gilbert

America's Widow

She waits...
...as the sun falls
while the air chills...
...and crickets chirp

She cries...
...as he tells her
and his voice cracks...
...while her heart breaks

She sleeps...
...and dreams of him
while he's prepped...
...as his widow mourns

She sits...
...while the guns blast
and bagpipes play...
...as the flag folds

She shivers...
...as goodbyes are said
while tears fall...
...and roses drop

She smiles...
...as time passes
while her heart heals...
...and the future awaits

Returning to the Moment of Separation

it took them almost forty minutes
to locate a purple bed
they drew my blood
which made a splashing sound
as it went into the vial
What did it matter
the bed's color in the emergency room?

only later, my feet hoisted in the air
did I realize that purple beds
had stirrups to rest your legs
so that when you rode the horse
around and around
the small white examination room
you wouldn't get tired from the rodeo

it struck me as odd,
to say I had lost the baby
as though I had simply misplaced it
somewhere between the parking lot
and the entrance to the mall
my husband, accustomed to my forgetfulness,
tried to help me jog my memory
Where were you when
you last remember having the baby?

I stared at my feet
floating above my body
and concentrated on my toes

the red nail polish chipping from daily neglect
all of my energy focused into remembering
When had I painted them last?

Kortni Torralba

Last March in Bernalillo County

we drove for hours to
stay in the casino at the foothills
of the Sandia Mountains
where he had spread his mother's ashes

we traveled here newly married
to make introductions and offerings
the tramway to the top terrifying me
he carried the cigarettes in his pocket
and took pictures of my face, tense from the height

at the top we spoke with a native woman
these mountains are sacred to our people
"posu gai hoo-oo" the pueblo woman said

nearby a park employee overhears our conversation and interjects
"where water slides down arroyo" the white woman said
we turned our faces away from her clean red hair
embarrassed she had felt the need to translate
and wandered by ourselves past the signs
warning of bears and tumbles over the edge

he took my hand and tossed the tobacco into the wind
his voice strong against the mountain
"this is my wife
I brought her here to meet you
she is beautiful and tender
you would have liked her"

When we turned to go back
she slipped into our coats
and rode down the mountain with us

nestled in the corner of our pockets
she returned home to Oklahoma

Kortni Torralba

Colors

Boeing 747 bound for Syracuse,
man reclines in a window seat,
hermetically sealed from
cotton clouds, cerulean streaks,
wife's body in the cargo hold below.

Dinner-time kitchen. Toddler plays.
Shiny pot bubbling pasta. Pink hand grasps
to pull. Water boils the child's leg.
Red scars she wears to nursery school.

Cold, closed cottage. Yellow
kitchen walls duller with autumn's
shadow. Toaster on the counter,
spider silk woven through slotted tines.
Plug dangles against wall like a black
broken-necked bird.

The past a series of pots that boil,
and unprotected fingers. Woodstove bellies
full of ashes of old lives, cold hearts,
love shaken between teeth until a neck breaks

Rachael Z. Ikins

Rainbow Lightning

Rain clouds in the west, the dawn sun rising in the usual place,
making a rainbow in front of the clouds.

Near a park, I'm sitting looking at the rainbow and see
a lightning bolt right behind it,
or wrapped around it,
or in front of it,
just part of it,
part of the show,
this rainbow and lightning.

What other two things could be put together
to new and magical effect? Are the possibilities
endless? Are there more things under the sun than are
dreamt of in just about anybody's philosophy?

Luther, my blind friend,
since you as a young American boy don't know the Disney Channel or
Nickelodeon and all that stuff,
you make me wonder where any mind can go
as you mix your midis and pursue Suzuki
and ponder Bach and Zappa.

Tell me your version of rainbows with lightning. Write out the score on that.

David Charlson

Sipple

(Dedicated to the memory of Oliver Sipple)

Is the taste of heroism
Like fragrant Oloroso sherry
Charged with raisin-infused sweetness
Greeting your tongue
Like a new lover
Before the chains form
And snake their way
Down your throat
Entangling themselves within
Your viscera where they remain
An onerous reminder
Of automatic duty carried out
As a testament to training
That left you walking and wounded?

Is the color of loneliness
The same shade as the blistered paint
Covering the four walls
That silently witnessed your surrender
To the festering sores of bitterness and despair
In whose depths lived the agonized hordes
Begging you to seek relief inside bottles
Where wicked imps flitted about
In faerie costumes of glittering illusion
Grinning widely with eyes narrowed
As they once again promised peace?

Is exposure of the powerless
Akin to hunting a kitten
Backed, trembling,
Into a corner of its cage
Giving contemporary predators
A sense of primitive victory
As they nail the bloody pelt to a post
Where it remains on display
Much to the voracious approval
Of those who relish any vicarious hunt
Only to return to their holes
With clean hands and barren hearts?

I've created a fantasy for you and me:
As old friends we walk
Laughing and trusting easily
Down the corridor of your past
Peeling back time as we stroll
All the while chatting
About nothing important
Until we arrive at September 22, 1975
Where, as an onlooker blessed
With power beyond this earth,
You rearrange, edit, and revise
Until satisfied with your alterations.
Then, never hesitating, you walk forward
Into a private future as I watch, gratified.

Too late.
You were found dead
On my twenty-eighth birthday.
And like most fantasies, mine
Could never be acted out

Remaining an unrealistic notion
Warming no one outside myself.

Oliver, you died at age forty-seven,
And here I am: Older,
As wise as a minute is long,
Thinking maybe fame is a dish
Best served to the mangy dog in the alley.
He'll eat anything, they say.

Karen Lea Chapman

Walmart Calls My Name

It's 3 a.m. and Walmart calls my name.

It whispers promises of sale prices, but more than that, it seduces me with the option of shopping without interference ...

No large families with children recklessly pushing carts filled with other children ...

No long lines of people who are all in a hurry, but saw fit to wait until the last minute to shop...

No grandparents allowing the grandkids to run amok in the toy department, playing with all the toys, and riding the bikes, while their noses drip unseen germs for the next unsuspecting child to touch and pass along.

No one sneezing in my face or shoving me out of the way.

The night stockers replace old items with fresh and new... The taller shelves are full, therefore easy to access for a person who is vertically challenged... Slow walkers do not have their heels and thighs bruised by the carts of those rushing to get the only can of soup left in the store...or is it?... oops...no.... there are 50 cases...sorry...my mistake....are you ok?

There is time to check labels for the unseen sodium and corn syrup content...

There is time to sort coupons and check off the shopping list as you go...

It is a quiet time for the world, the Walmart, and for my kind and me.

Yes, my people...the ones who eat dinner at four in order to save money at IHOP... The ones who are asleep when others are in clubs.... The ones who have worn a path in the carpet between the bed and the bathroom...the ones who gave life to a generation who will, without thought, run them over to get a good parking spot.

I hear the call, and my mind says....Go...shop...remove your body from the warmth of your cocoon-like surroundings...attire yourself in the sweats that symbolize your status in life...place the New Balance on your feet...grab your Visa...and go into the early morning...

To shop...with others of your kind...until morning when the young ones will begin to emerge from their homes, rubbing the sleep from their eyes, and invade the shopping places of the city...go while it is early and the world is safe.

Cynthia Praefke

World Lit Class in a Paris Metro

A crowded metro car in Paris
turns into a world lit class
as I see everyone around me
is reading something—
assigned or not—but intently
interacting with
characters and plots
that cut across time,
across cultures,
across languages,
even subjects—

one young Parisian is reading *Ulysses* by Joyce—
he's probably attending the Sorbonne—

another, a middle-aged woman, holds *The Tempest*—
Shakespeare having universal appeal—

Another (younger) woman focuses on a French novel—
a title and author totally unknown to me
but she's engrossed in some romantic interlude, I'm sure—

there is the guy sitting next to me
studying mathematics as I glance over to
see a lot of complicated formulas
with text to explain their mysteries
that might as well be in Greek—

a business man several seats away
peruses *Le Figaro* to get the latest news

or maybe he's working a puzzle or checking
the classifieds for a date—

as I watch all the readers
scanning pages and
glancing up to check the next stop,
I find that we are a collection
of characters
caught in the plot
of a speeding subway train
existing for a few moments
in our microcosm of the world—
French, Senegalese, Muslims,
English, Americans, Buddhists,
women, men, young, old—

we've met together
for world lit class
reading each other's
stories—
silently understanding
our shared humanity.

Bertha Wise



PHOTOGRAPHY & ART



Thrill Ride
Joseph Anthony Moore, II



Abandoned
Donna J. Ward



Hancock Building in Fog
Joie White



Leaf
Jansen Rouillard



Beginnings
Joseph Anthony Moore, II



Brookwood Village Pond
Brenda Breeding



Two Swallowtails
Donna J. Ward



Amazed
LaWanda LaVarnway



Miss Kitty
Cathy Bowman



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