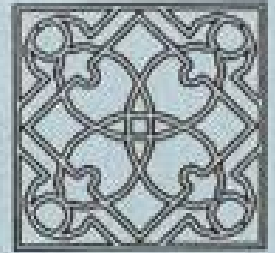


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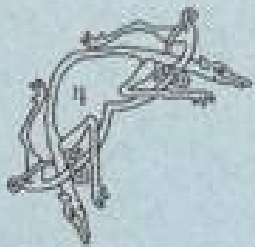
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RARE BIRD

by George Cohn III

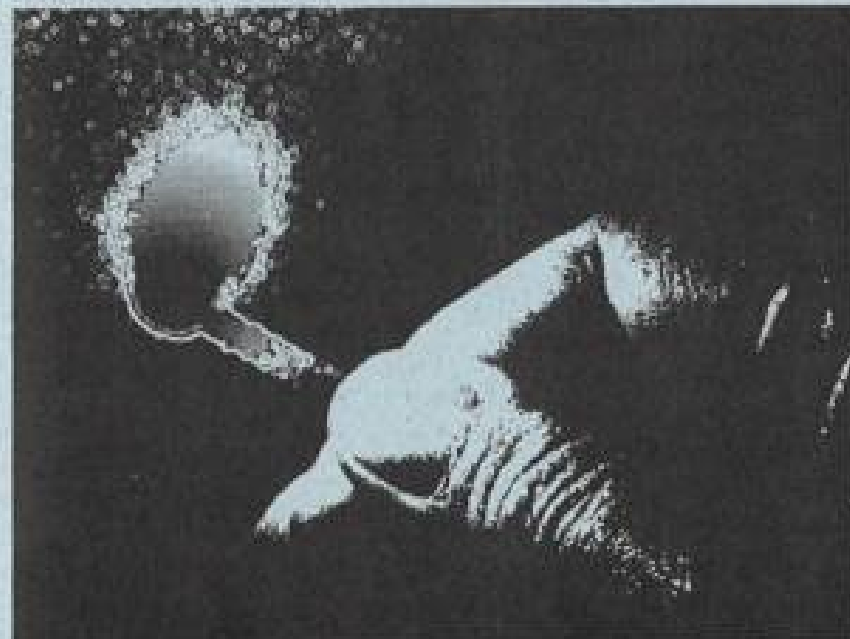
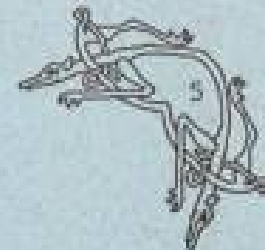
White capped mountains stand alone
with trees rising high above them.
Here, in this rugged, frostbitten land
of jagged peaks and carnivorous beasts,
many birds have come and gone,
but few have ever remained.

I pore over it all.
I remember being alone and cold,
yearning for warmth and affection,
friendship and passion; sensations
that only a lover could satisfy.

So I pursued my desire that grew
like the trees in the snow of the mountains;
and, like the birds, lovers came and went.
But none built a nest in my limbs.

Then you entered my life.
A rare bird,
you have built your world around me,
and a home in which our offspring
can nest and grow.

On top of my mountain
it no longer snows.



Inspiration

by Stephen Coppin



After School

by Sarah Rummet



A false spring day in late February made the winter-long inch of snow and ice on the ground melt and leave large puddles on the sidewalk. The children walked recklessly home from school, avoiding the muddy ground next to the concrete. Purposely sliding into the slush, sneakers became saturated with cold water. The restless pack proceeded this way up the street. Excitement ran through the group like an electric current, causing more than the usual after-school revelry and violence.

On that particular day, I walked home with Didi as I usually did. She lived in The Projects that bordered my middle-class neighborhood. Because of the close proximity to my house it seemed logical for us to become friends. We usually found interesting things to do together after school, like dig for worms under the bridge or hangout in the run-down playground near her building until I had to go home for dinner.

Didi was the type of child other kids mercilessly made fun of. She was small for her age and she had a perpetual Kool-Aid stain around her mouth. Her stringy blond hair hung in her eyes and gave her the appearance of a hippie without shampoo. Her blue fur coat from the Salvation Army smelled as if it had been used as a blanket in somebody's dog house before social services gave it to her. Her sisters Dana, Donna, Darla, and Dena had similar coats, most without buttons or zippers. On that day, however, everyone's coats were undone so the cool air would ventilate our sweaty bodies.

Armenta Ferguson, the meanest girl at school, walked behind us with two of her friends. My ankles stung from one of them stamping on my heels in an attempt to pull my shoes off my feet. Didi's thin socks had black smudges on them and one of her shoes was pulled away from her right heel. She dragged her foot along the



sidewalk, staring straight ahead.

"Nanny nanny boo boo. Stick your head in doo doo."

"Leave us alone." I said, my voice shaking. I was beginning to feel lightheaded and I wished my mother would drive up and take me home.

"You gonna make me?" Armenta retorted, yanking a lock of my brown hair so that my head jerked backwards. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a large pink spot above Didi's left ear where her white-blond hair had been. She kept looking into the distance, as if there was something really very interesting

about the street that we had walked up and down dozens of times. Didi never fought back. Coupled with her outward appearance, this passivity made her the perfect target for other people's aggression.

I heard a thud and Didi involuntarily lunged forward. A sudden sharp sensation at the base of my neck caused me to cry out in pain. A rock the size of a baseball fell to the ground. Another stone





hit Didi and she gasped for breath. One of the girls grabbed my skirt from its hem and pulled until the material ripped away from the waistband. Didi had caught her breath and cried, "Your dress! They tore your dress!" She always complimented the clothes my mother made for me. The plaid jumper with the big pockets I was wearing had been her favorite. Before I knew it, Didi was pounding Armenta's head with her fists. Armenta gripped Didi's thin shoulders and shook her like a rag doll. The other girls stood back to watch, shouting, "Knock her ugly teeth out, Menta!" and "Make her bleed!"

My body throbbed as my heart pounded and it felt like I was going to explode into a million pieces. I wanted to disappear. I stood by with my wet knee socks and torn skirt as if I was watching a movie. Armenta and Didi stumbled and flailed at each other. They had moved off of the sidewalk onto the muddy strip of ground next to the street. Cars swished past, splashing grey water onto the girls.

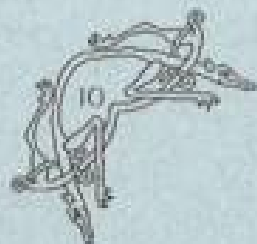
Didi managed to take a step backwards and gain her balance. As Armenta leaned forward to grab her, Didi reached up to the big girl's shoulders and shoved her as hard as she could. I heard the car's wheels squeal on the pavement before I saw Armenta's body come in contact with the automobile and fly ten feet away from where she had been. Her body lay motionless on the ground and her head was twisted around so that her chin rested near her right shoulder. Armenta's friends were screaming and Didi stood frozen to the ground. I inched closer to the body and saw her mouth was open and a puddle of blood had formed on the ground underneath it.

The man driving the car jumped out and grabbed Armenta's body, shaking her loose from hysterically for some sign of life. The man's action brought Didi from her trance and she turned and ran. She was headed towards The Projects, her arms swinging wildly in the air.



I never saw Didi again. She disappeared from school and I later overheard two teachers talking about what happened to her. Didi's mom packed up her five kids and their few personal belongings into their beat-up station wagon and headed for California. They had relatives in Recita, and the woman planned to stay with them for a while until she could "make a life" for herself and the kids.

Later in the week, my mother made me go to Armenta's funeral. Relatives and friends cried with abandon over the child's lifeless body in the casket. I didn't look at it. Afterwards, I went directly home and buried the plaid dress in the muddy earth in the backyard.



This Feeling

by George CDwin III

How can I tell you about this feeling
that I have inside of me?

I have been in love before,
and I know what it is;
what it's all about.
I have shared those intimate moments
of friendship and passion;
when two people share
what only lovers possess.
But I have also seen love die.

I remember sleepless nights —
dreaming of the woman I loved
and reaching out for her in the darkness,
only to find her place in our bed empty.
I watched sunrises with weary, aching eyes
as I realized she was really gone.
I faced the world alone.

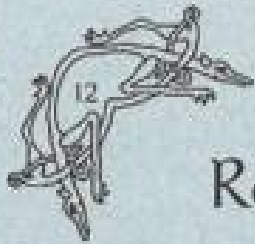
Only sorrow filled my heart then,
while tears filled my vision.
Yet I learned much from those
times of introspection—
wondering why she had left
and discovering just who I was.
My youthful, foolish tribulations
made me who I am today.
It is from my understanding
of these insights that I love.



But how can I tell you about this feeling
that I have inside of me?

I have only felt this glorious feeling
in the love of my God
and in the caring hands of my father—
until you came along.
You have changed everything,
giving me genuine friendship,
love and affection.
You are interested in who I am
and what I am.
You care about me.
You make everything I know
real and worthwhile.

In you I see all the love I've ever known,
and love I never knew.
You are love.
So, please,
love me now and forever,
as I love you.



Remote Control

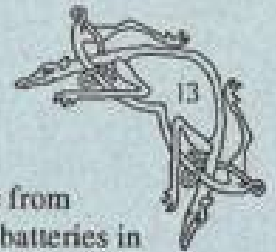
by Ethan Whitcomb

At midnight your bedroom looks grainy and gray like a snowy black and white picture. Lying alone in the static and shadows, you remember a friend who "blew his brains out with a shotgun."

Clicked off after Carson, your television cools on your dresser and you stare mesmerized into its murky after-glow. When you were young you loved to feel its velvet electric aura dissolve to dust on bald glass as the flickering images under your finger tips vanished with the twist of a switch.

You wish your own ghosts could be as easily banished.

When Julie entered the living room, she could tell that Joe had decided not to go to work again by the blaring television and junk food debris on the coffee table. Annoyed and frustrated, she shuffled through the shards of a cellophane chip bag, knocked

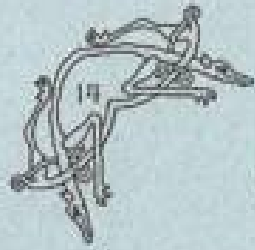


over a half-empty beer and rescued the remote from certain liquid destruction. It was just two AA batteries in a flimsy plastic box, but it felt good in her hand when she punched off the TV. Wishing she could eliminate the source of her agony with similar ease, she plunked down on the couch next to a fuzzy blue blanket that had been restlessly kicked into a ball against the armrest. The wrinkled cover's random contours reminded her of a miniature mountain range. She thought her husband would have once seen it that way, too, and might have even been inspired to paint it as an impressionistic landscape, but in reality, she knew he had not touched a brush in the last five months. A familiar wheezing bark broke her thought, and gave her hope as it drifted out of Joe's long-abandoned studio. It was the repressed smoker's cough of a working artist, characteristically muffled by the pockmarked No. 5 camel-hair brush clamped in his determined bicuspid grin.

In the studio, the barrel of a .38 rattled hollowly against Joe's front teeth as he readjusted his bite, puckering his lips around the cold steel that tasted like bitter oil and powder. A few drops of phlegm, summoned up by his hacking spell, rolled off his tongue and spilled into the muzzle. The gun possessed a balanced heaviness that felt good in his palm. As he slowly pulled the trigger, his unblinking crossed eyes watched the hammer engage and cock back like a cobra preparing to strike.

Julie heard the bang.

She screamed when she saw the graceful red splatters on the clean white canvas behind Joe. For an instant, she felt as though she was scolding a mischievous child, ashamed of his graffiti, submissively slumping in a swivel chair with his head down and feet self-consciously pigeon-toed. She knelt beside him, held him, rocked him, and petted his blood matted hair, then watched one of his pupils shrink to a dot, like a TV image that had been turned off.



Oh Brother!

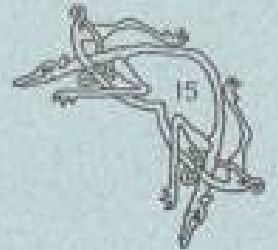
by Alicia Taylor

People change with time
I guess that's what happened to us.
But the older we get
the wiser we both become.

When he grows—I grow
Sometimes I think that gets lost.
But what we have shared
Are the times worth remembering.

I look up to the one
who used to put me down.
He's someone with a lot to offer
And some day more will come to me.

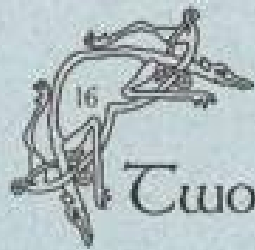
But for now what we have between us
Couldn't be traded for anything.
And, as he moves on I hope he knows
I am honored to be his "little sister."



Believe in Yourself

by Alicia Taylor

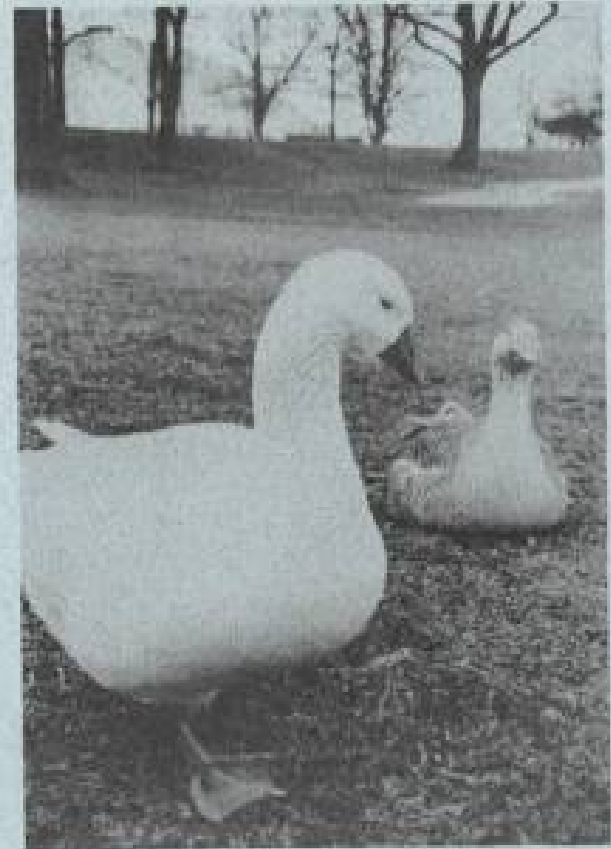
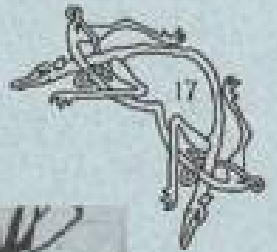
Dreaming is easy, fulfilling those dreams
is the difficult task.
You have to believe in yourself
and push yourself to the limit.
Hold on to what you believe in
and fight for what you think is right.
Let your conscience guide you
and stick to your first instinct.
Don't let anyone fool you,
for all you know you could be right.
Nothing is out of your league,
unless you make it too far to reach.
Prove to yourself you can make it
and the world will be at your feet.
Knock down all obstacles,
don't let anything stand in your way.
Search for goals and take them,
if you don't you may lose them.
Winning is the only answer,
giving up is mere defeat.

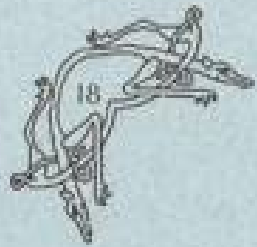


Two Different People

by Alicia Taylor

I never meant to hurt you,
please try to understand.
Just be my friend and take my hand.
Things were never meant to be,
between you and I.
We were two totally different people
passing by.
Our love was never there,
only in our parting.
You would show you cared.
Love doesn't always last forever,
because things can get rough out
there.
Maybe things will overcome themselves,
but for now we will lay them to rest.
Some day you and I will see,
that our parting was meant to be.





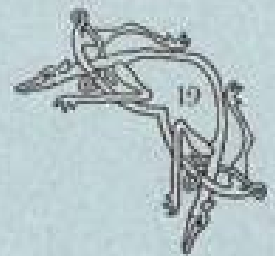
He and She

by Stephanie Oetiker

It is 11:15 p.m. A Wednesday night.
She is running a fever and he has come over
With a bottle of aspirin even though
Less than an hour ago they decided
That they are no longer friends.
She is under her confused blankets
And has cramps on top of the fever.
He curls up on the bed next to her
With his head on her stomach
And plays with her hands while they calmly discuss
Their reasons for hating each other.
He tells her that her chin is beautiful
Like a baby's and she tells him that
She likes his crooked teeth.
They look into each other's eyes
More than usual, and she feels like
Kissing him softly, even while he's telling her
That they have no common denominators
That he hates everything about her,
That he is too passionate and she, too reasonable.
He says that she should write an epic poem
About a medieval love affair and
He outlines the story, absent-mindedly
Touching her breasts now and then.
A princess and a peasant.

She agrees

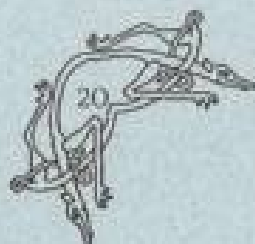
To give the story some thought,
Knowing all the while that she won't.
She's interested in love just now,
Her eyes are burning and tear up



Once in a while,
He steals one of her cigarettes and they
Angrily blow smoke in each other's faces.

Two hours later, while she writes this,
He calls to tell her good night.





Fond Stories

by Ethan Churchill

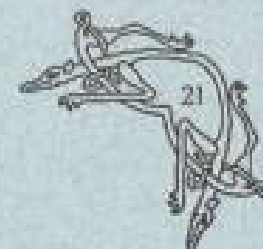
One immaculate Monday morning
A troop of young boys plotted
The fond stories of old men
While the crickets were still snoring.

With stomachs as full as our minds,
My band of summertime brotherhood
Launched its day's campaign on foot;
My nearly size-fives fell barely behind.

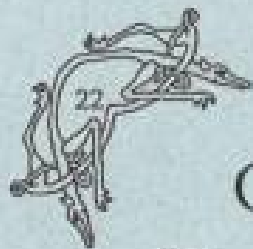
The delicious stench of cut grass,
And parched fragrance of dust,
Faded in our nostrils,
Baseball fields passed...

We forged forward into the forest;
An arena of leaves, high and low,
Greeted our entrance with cheers
While I requested more rest.

At our determined destination
The sequin reservoir hypnotized—
Flashbacks of sunrise swim lessons
played behind my eyes—no hesitation!



The metallic, nothing smell of wet,
Familiar friend to my senses,
Dripped from our noses and
Soaked naked flesh...memories inset.



One of the FIRST Times You Grew Up

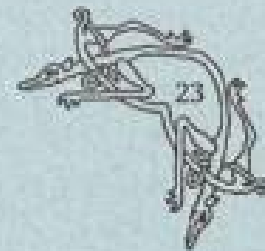
by CDinah Sobolik

It's early September—
The beginning of the end
Of Summer-and you know that, as of today,
Even more than on your fifth birthday a few months back,
You're a big kid now

Your mother
Is holding your hand
A little more tightly than she does
When you go shopping with her and you must stay close.
She does to leave you here

At this new place—
A big place with other big kids
And no mothers except those like yours
Giving new big kids last-minute briefings on the protocol
Of being in a new place-not home.

Your mother (Can you
Still call her "Mommy"?)
Is telling you not to be scared.
But why does she seem so nervous about leaving you here?
She promises to come back for you.

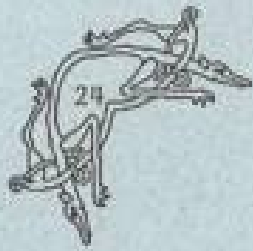


It's so exciting.
There's much to do
and see at this new place, that you
Didn't really think about missing her until she mentioned it.
You're thinking about

All these chairs.
They're stained and scarred and
Refinished, but they're all so identical-
To perfect scale of full-sized grown up chairs, and they're brand
new
To you and you wonder

Which one you get to sit in
And look at the massive blackboard,
Rubbed by now to gray, but freshly scrubbed
Like brand new-for you and the other big kids, and your mother
Won't be staying to see what they write on it.

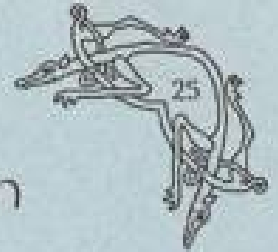
She's been through
This before with the other
Big kids in the family and you can't
Figure out why she's fussing and fidgeting and stammering
Like a child.



She's talking to
The smiling young teacher.
They're probably talking about you,
But you're looking at the construction paper ABCs that are
concealing
A badly pock-marked bulletin board.

As your mother
Straightens your collar
And reminds you to raise your hand
If you have to go, you're thinking about the cookies you've been
promised
When this is all over.

Don't worry, Mommy.
They have ABCs here, and a
Record player, and a nice young teacher,
And other big kids like me, and I promise I'll always come home
To have cookies with you.



MORNING SUN

by George C. Davis III

The morning sun peeps
through our window;
illuminates dust particles in the air.

Soft light plays upon her skin,
highlights her curves,
accents her beauty.

Sleepy lids open under my caress—
reveal eyes of a clear morning sky.
They focus. Then a smile.

Her face glazes
and thrills her passion . . .
excites my desire.

Gently we glide
into each other's arms,
and there we find all we need to know.

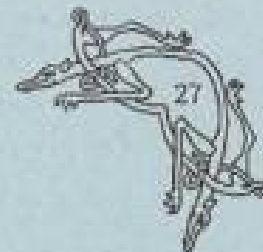


Dinner with a View

by Chan Whitehill

A gust off the bay tips
a cat boat starboard
toward the shore,
tousles your hair with
chilly fingers,
plucks the heat from your
steaming lobster dinner,
and mocks you,
wiping the damp warmth
across your nose.
Not easily haunted by a breeze
you continue dissecting your lunch
step-by-step, according to
directions on your
stained paper place mat.

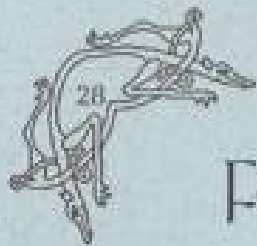
Across the deck, you see a man
rise from his chair
clawing at his plastic bib
with red chapped hands
and frantic eyes.
People hover around him
in ignorant anticipation,
like scavenging sea gulls
on abandoned tables.
Someone stabs the man's
clogged throat with a
steak knife and you hear a hollow
cartilaginous-pop
like cracking shellfish.



But it's too late—
the wind has stolen
his last humid breath,
and now begins to cool him.
"Nothing to see here,
go back to your plates."

It seems unfair that your soiled doily
mentioned only
how to eat a crustacean,
and not any useful information.

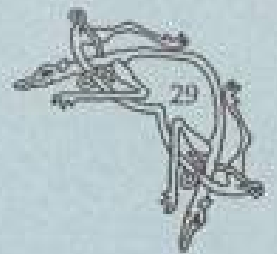




Form of Father

by Stephanie Oetler

You are everywhere and nowhere,
Elusive form of Father,
Growing fainter as I grow older,
In the beginning, I saw you in Daddy,
But could never get more than a slippery grip,
And in the perverted convolutions of puberty,
You turned up in places you shouldn't have been,
Choir directors, worthy science teachers,
And any old man who called me Stephie,
At seventeen I fell in love with you,
Form of Father,
I put my tongue in your mouth and told lies
To be with you and to smell you,
Today, I sit in the brown office of my college professor,
I listen to him speaking of what he claims to know,
And each time he looks at me, I am watching
For his eyes to invite me into the corduroy space
Between his lap and his chest,
To rock me gently and make me feel small enough
To find the pieces of you that's left.



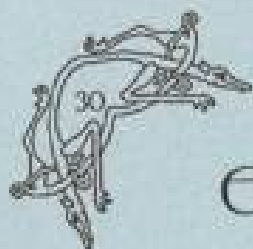
Only the Channels Change

by Clark Sobolch

There's this guy I know, not quite my age,
He's always doing things—mostly dumb things,
He always has to be doing something,
He watches TV too.

The young guy watches the new shows,
He told me once, "They get old fast."
The woman sticks with ones she knows,
She likes to "get to know" the cast.

If you've been watching, you've probably guessed
That nothing ever changes—either way it goes—
The constant repetition shows,
She loves a rerun,
He's afraid he'll be one.



Egg and Castle

by Jee-Dee Sung

Shell should be broken and
Castle shouldn't be collapsed.

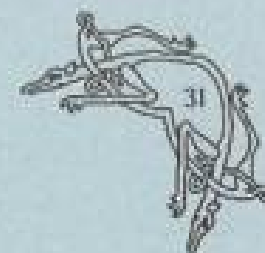
Stuffy it was when
There was another crust of shell
After I thought
I broke my shell completely.

Long long time
Writhed in the agony of pain
Until I made a small hole
In the hard and thick shell.

Met with many things
When I poked
My small head
Through my narrow shell.

A lot of encounters
With mysterious things I had
hope, friendship, truth, sympathy, and love.
Wide, narrow and beautiful the world was.

When the most preciousness
And philosophy of love
I met,
My sole castle

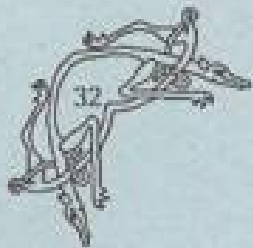


began to collapse and
I couldn't prevent it
Like the great power of Nature.

Again the invisible shell
Around me
I found—the thick and hard shell.

Nothing left
Except the realization
That I have to start
To break the shell again
Except the cognition
To begin to build
My strong castle
Not to collapse again.

Shell should be broken
Castle shouldn't be collapsed.



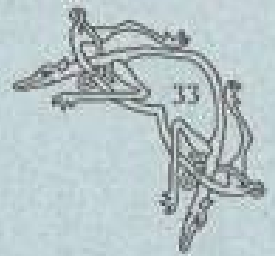
A Window

by K. Elisabeth Butler

There is serenity
in a silent room,
the sunlight drifting casually
through an open window,
soft spring breezes
blowing weightless,
white curtains in,
as if their arms embrace
an inner space
of insulated peace,

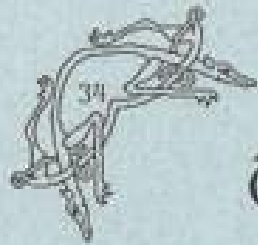
and lying in the room
is a silent dog,
who sought the light
and now ponders
the world of wall-less
plains and valleys,
through which he may run wildly without
the constraints
of this tiny room,
while the silence
draws him further away,

but across from the window
sits quietly a woman,
whose folded arms grasp
the withering pages
of years of dreams,
pondered in the silence
of a tiny room,



whose window admits
the light of
a thousand days,
like the yellowed pages
that she holds,
which embrace a thousand dreams:

Is there a door wider
than this window
through which so much light flows?
Are there distances to be run,
which are wider
than these walls can hold?
The swirling curtains whisper
no



Daily Bidness

by Craig Bennett

Sunrise over a blasted land,
painting crimson the scorched,
barren, lifeless non-terra-firma
beneath a blinding galactic firmament

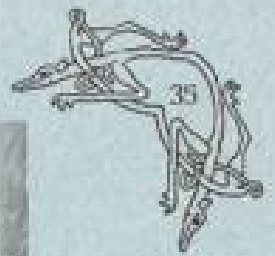
sunset follows immediately
fire falls to frost
snowflakes fall
each distinct
shaped like Britain's coastline

hexagon fall like
six snakes of carbon
consuming their predecessors

Insight flashes the Nine
to Five
and Three

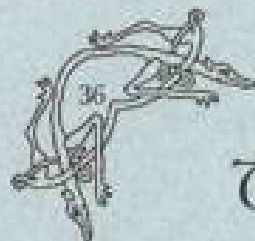
Archimedes dreams in
the pureness of water
displaced volumes flash
through the circuitry of his mine

he laughs running dripping
through foggy night streets



the people are deaf to his cries
blind to his vision
"there goes crazy Archimedes,"
they mumble,

and go back to the business of their days.



The One that Got Away

by Stephanie Ochetes

"Dad's home!" Car doors slam dissonantly and out of synch in the alley. Dad has been hunting all weekend with Uncle Bob. They're twins, but the similarity ends there. From the sound of it, Dad is unloading his things and stacking them in the alley behind the privacy fence. The truck is still running and there is laughter around cigarettes tucked in whiskered lips. Tony runs in a three-year-old sort of way to the back gate to see whether or not Dad has shot a turkey.

We girls wait in the kitchen, huddled in the steamy back doorway while potatoes boil on the stove. My hands are in my pockets. I'm eleven and I'm not particularly enjoying it.

Dad opens the back gate as Uncle Bob pulls away, honking. Dad looks as if he's trying to stretch himself out as he walks toward the house, rubbing his stomach with his cigarette hand. He looks tired out from the long ride. Mom knows that he rubs his stomach this way when he's drunk, but it will be a few years before she'll tell me this.

Mom goes back into the kitchen to fix a glass of ice tea while Dad and Tony carry duffel bags and picnic baskets into the basement. Dad carries the shotgun.

We all gather on the back porch, Dad assuming his seat at the picnic table with a fresh beer and a dirty ashtray in front of him. Mom and Dad laugh about the turkey that Uncle Bob missed—again—and Dad details the story of his own successful hunt. He got a twenty-four-pound gobbler with a beard as long as my forearm, so big that Dad has set a record in St. Genevieve County. He is happy when he tells us this, but not visibly any happier than



he has looked since he walked through the back gate an hour ago.

"One of Werner's dogs had puppies this weekend," Dad says.

"Which one? Was it Lady?" My sister and I are suddenly interested.

"I believe," says Dad. Amy and I will find out later that Werner names all of his female farmdogs Lady.

"She was having her puppies behind the barn near the springhouse." Amy and I nod while Mom sips her tea.

Dad's voice cracks. "And after she'd had a couple of them, one of the male dogs started snatching them away."

We are all quiet now. Dad is crying.

"The male took each puppy as it was born over to a group of dogs near by, where they proceeded to kill them. The puppies." Dad wipes his eyes. "The mother was too weak to protect the babies and by the time she was finished delivering them, they were all dead."

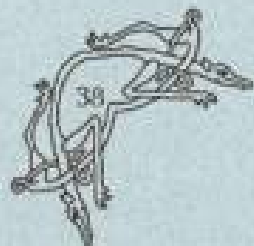
"Why didn't you stop them?" Amy and I want to know.

"You just can't interfere with things like that," Dad says, matter-of-factly enough to end the story.

After we've all had dinner and it's becoming dark and chilly outside, I help with the dishes and join Dad on the back porch where he usually spends his evenings listening to the ballgame and watching things get dark. I crawl onto his lap with an ease that I will never know again and ask him,

"Will you take me hunting again sometime?" remembering that the last time he took me with him I put my head in the way of his gun to get a good look at the only turkey we'd seen that morning.

"We'll see," Dad says, matter-of-factly enough to end the conversation.



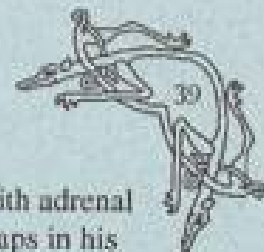
Communion

by Cehan Ulucchil

As you crumble the bread
with pinched fingers
above the glass gallon
universe, you see bubbles,
like silver meteors,
collide in a mercurial sky,
shiver to the side,
and blink out of sight.
Sequin-skinned fish
peck the quivering surface,
sink easily in an
invisible churn, then
turn to nibble dinner.
Their metallic bodies
flash and dangle like
hypnotic medallions.
You wonder if your life
is likewise sustained by a
bedazzled god thus entertained.

The small sailboat rides high on a wave's crest, like a hero on broad shoulders above a crowd. Jack grapples with the rudder as it slaps and shakes in an impassioned rip tide. A blast of spring wind inflates the rainbow sail, causing the craft to lean with its mast barely pointing above shore.

"God, this is it!" Jack thinks as he curls his toes around the slick starboard rim of the cockpit. Icy water rushes over his straining feet and numbs the pain in his arches. Pulling the sheet in with his left hand, he can feel his pulse throb and his flesh burn against the constricting line. The center board vibrates against the hull like a

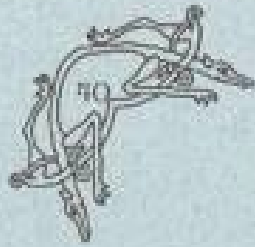


suspenseful drumroll, and his body prickles with adrenal anticipation. Suddenly, the varnished tiller snaps in his right hand and finale of waves crash the deck as the craft keels over. The ocean roars with applause and whitecaps stand in ovation.

Jack's watery plunge stings his sinuses and leaves them tingling as he sinks. He can see, through salt-itchy eyes, the wind puckered surface above him change from gold to red as a crimson pigment floats upward in delicate smoke-like curls. His heart pumps on the back of his head. Bubble clusters escape from his ballooning shorts and tickle his stomach; for a second he wonders if fish are ticklish, too. The gurgling constellation stirs the suspended blood cloud billowing from his skull, diluting it into feathery brush strokes. He wants to follow the air pocket, but cannot untangle himself from the boom's knotted rigging. His panicked thrashing only makes it worse; he inhales water and gags until his lungs turn to lead. Finally, he submits to his aquatic crucifixion. As he suffocates, he sees angelic silhouettes circle above him and he knows the sail cloth will be his burial shroud.

Like connoisseurs, the sharks lurking over Jack first delight in his blood's bouquet, then suck the drifting rose into their mouths and wash it past their gills, whetting their appetites for the flesh-ripping orgy that follows.

Strands of pearly bubbles trickle out of Jack's shark-bitten stomach and brush a feeding great white on the fin, making it giggle.



Open House

by Scott Drecoch

The boy and his mother got out of the car; they were home now.

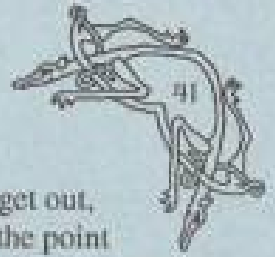
It was a winter night with no snow and a forgettable moon. The father and the brother and sister were still over at the uncle's house watching the Super Bowl. The boy had told his mother that he was not feeling well, and she in turn had decided to bring him home and put him to bed. The boy was eight years old, and his allergies were the problem.

The house was dark inside and only the front porch light was on. Nobody was home. The mother and son held hands and walked toward the house quickly. As they came closer to the small, lighted porch, it seemed to tilt back and forth in its appearance before them. Years later the boy would remember the view he had had of this approach, and he would suppose that it was like the view people have when walking out of a cave.

It was quite cold that night, windy. The boy could hear the wind coming down his street. He could hear it knocking over an occasional plastic trash can, and picking up the many dry leaves, piles at a time, and then taking them away in those miniature tornadoes that everyone has seen. At its strongest, the wind moved the small things that the young boy and others like him had left in their front yards for the evening. Foam-rubber soccer balls and dirty sweatshirts and plastic toy soldiers. These things moved quietly, if and when they were moved. The boy would not have been able to hear their movements.

But then the mother stopped walking; a complete, sudden stop. She might have lost her breath for a moment. The boy looked up at his mother, alarmed. She was staring at the front door. So he turned to look at the door and found that it was wide open.

Their hands tightened their grips on one another.



"Mom?" This was the only word he could get out, but, in the mother's ears, it was enough to get the point across. He turned his eyes from the new, open darkness of the doorway toward his mother's face.

"The wind did it, honey," she said. "I think your dad forgot to lock it." But she was looking at the door, not the boy.

There was a pause. The mother was standing very still, examining each window on the front of the house. All of them were closed, all of the screens were on.

The boy asked, "Should we go around back?" He was tired of standing still in the wind like that.

"Hold on," she said, "let me think." She was looking at the small kitchen window, the one closest to the front door. She was listening for the sound of the kitchen radio, which someone always left turned on whenever everyone was going to be leaving the house.

The boy said, "Dad left it on. I remember. Earlier tonight."

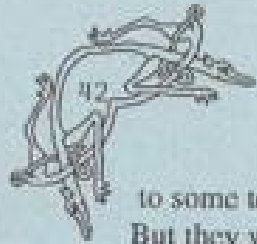
The mother wondered whether the loud wind was drowning out the volume of the radio. When she decided that it did not matter, either way, she finally spoke:

"Seth, I'm going to go inside and turn on some lights. I want you to run and get Mr. Porter. Tell him to come quickly, and have Mrs. Porter call the police.

The boy did not let go of her hand. He said, "No, Mom."

So they started walking again. When they were on the porch, the comforting sound of the radio came to them. Still, the dark house beyond the open door seemed cold and violated. It needed light.

They unhooked hands and slowly walked in. The mother flicked on the lamp that stood in the front hall and the boy softly shut the door behind them. They stood there for a moment and looked at each other, staying quiet. Both the mother and the boy felt quite worried, as if being inside the house had committed them



to some terrible duty they had never intended to face. But they were able to hide such feelings from their expressions and their actions, and this was done more out of fear than heroism.

Then a sudden sound from the kitchen. The flippant, unexpected sound of a thing falling and breaking. A bowl or a plate or



something else ceramic coming down on a floor of hard, cold tile. Then one of the family's cats came running out of the dark room, flying past them toward the further reaches of the house.

The boy grabbed his mother's hand. Everything was quiet, except for the mellowed voice on the near-by radio that was giving out tomorrow's weather. They started walking toward the kitchen. The boy felt his mother's long and soft and boney hand compact itself into a grip that hurt his own. Her other fist seemed equally clinched.

She was moving more quickly now. She opened her mouth to speak, and the boy knew that she was going to leap into the kitchen once she had finished talking. Now everything seemed louder to the boy. All of a sudden the radio was louder, the wind was

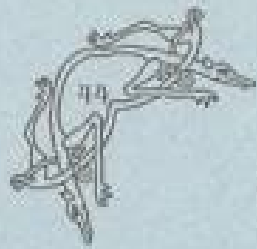


louder, his silent mother was louder. And then his mother spoke at the doorframe of the kitchen. And her voice was also louder. And she said to him:

"There's nothing to be afraid of. There's nobody in there. And even if there is, I have your father's rifle, just in case."

The boy was especially frightened by this point. She was lying, and yelling, and what she said had come out sounding thin and minor. At that moment, hers was a loud, frantic voice that somehow made what she said, and how she said it, weak and uncontrolled. The forceful tone and the strong phrasing were in vain. The lie was obvious, although years later the boy would remember that her voice had indeed been louder. But it had sounded so futile, on that night. As in a nightmare, when people find themselves shouting "It's only a dream" over and over again, but it simply will not end.

And the boy would remember how their eyes had simultaneously rolled up and widened, as each looked to the other with a smile that let out a deep breath, when they found only a broken mixing bowl on the floor of the cold kitchen. Blaming everything on the cat had been easy for them, given this. The boy would remember his mother's immediately sweeping up the scattered chunks of the bowl, her purse still hanging over her left shoulder. And the strong wind, at night. The way it sounds, from the inside of a house with closed doors and windows.



Candy Corn

by Jenny Oetting

My new black Nike high-tops were soaking wet from running through the puddles along the streets. The early afternoon thunderstorms had changed the faded grass and dry leaves on every lawn into gigantic swamp lands. The squashing sound of sneakers romping and pounding on soft wet mud pierced the brisk autumn air. In the glow of the yellow moonlight, I saw the outline of several small figures darting from house to house. I walked across the marshy ground to the corner of Seventh and Grand Street. From behind a light post, a kid, wearing black pants, combat boots, leather gloves and an army green ski mask, lunged at me.

"Give me everything you have." Everything was silent. Finally, the silence was broken by his bellowing laughter. "Luke, it's me—Thomas." As he spoke, he pulled off the ski mask.

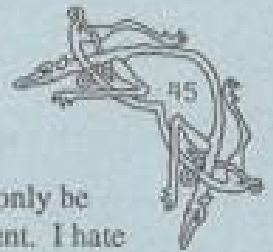
"God, Thomas, you scared the hell out of me."

Thomas and I had been friends for a long time. Three summers ago, we played on the same baseball team. Thomas was the best player on the team. He always said he was going to be just short stop Ozzie Smith. The other kids were jealous of Thomas and they never got to know him, but I thought he was great. He wasn't like anyone else I knew.

"Ready to trick or treat," he said pulling my arm. It had become a tradition to go trick or treating together on Halloween. Otherwise, we rarely ever saw each other. Thomas lived with his mother on the poor side of town and attended a different school. However, despite this we still managed to keep in touch.

We had walked up and down my street and all we had to show for our efforts were a couple of Dum Dum suckers, a few tootsie rolls, sweet tarts and several packs of candy corn.

"This sucks," I said. "I want candy bars, not these stupid red



and orange candy corns. Candy corns should only be given to criminals as a just means of punishment. I hate candy corns!"

Thomas nodded in agreement. I realize we were both being petty, but Halloween only came once a year, and it was important to get good candy. I told Thomas we were going to walk three blocks to Mr. Hill's house. He had been a friend of the family for years, and on Halloween he always gave whole candy bars to the kids he liked.

Mr. Hill's house wasn't hard to find. He lived in a three story stone house surrounded by a black iron fence. Thomas and I opened the gate and ran up the steps. When we rang the door bell, a robust man with a shaggy beard and droopy eyes greeted us. Once he discovered who I was, he invited us in the house.

"Well Luke, how have you been?"

I answered in a patient courtesy manner, but never the less thinking the entire time about the treat I expected. The three of us engaged in brief conversation, updating him on the latest in school and family activities. Finally, after what seemed like an endless conversation, Mr. Hill went to retrieve the candy. By this time, Thomas and I were both smoldering under our masks, so we peeled them off.

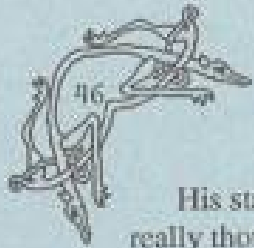
"I hope you boys sure enjoy these—"

When he came back in the room, he was so startled he couldn't finish his sentence. At first he stared in amazement, then his face became hard and stern. As he opened the door, he dropped a Snickers in my bag, something in Thomas' bag and mumbled, "I didn't realize your friend was—"

Before he could finish, I found myself out on the porch with the door slammed in my face.

"I don't understand what happened."

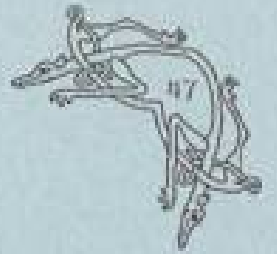
"He was saying, 'I didn't realize your friend was BLACK,'" Thomas said.



His statement took me by surprise. I guess I never really thought about what color Thomas was. I just thought of him as my friend.

"I guess Mr. Hill wasn't that great after all," I said, trying to ease the tension. "Although, he did give me a candy bar. Did he give you anything?"

Thomas looked down and said, "candy corn!"

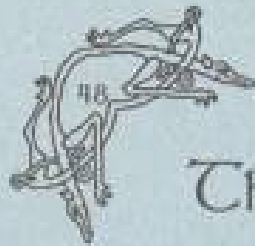


Swing

by Erhan Ulbrich

The yard blurred by as I kicked fast and high—
A rimshot of wind crashed in my ears with
Each "death defying" swoop of the tree swing,
My hair waved in the ride's rollercoasting
And I clung tight to the tire's bald scalp.
The oak's arthritic branch tossed the yo-yo
Around about in circular motions
Twisting the rope and making it chuckle.

But that was long ago and things have changed—
The tree is now a stump filled with weeds,
The tire is now a planter for a tree,
The pendulum measuring life is gone
And I await my return to the ground
After the rope's last laugh when I am cut down.



The Colt Solution

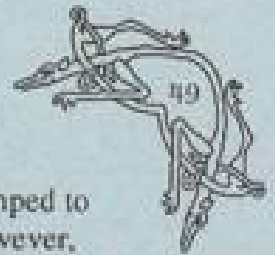
by George CDahn III

Wood smoke lingers in my nostrils. I hear some chitter chatter nearby and then one of my friends proposes a toast and we all clink beer glasses together. A group of guys sitting at the bar begin signing and the chitter chatter of the tavern grows louder. Then I open my eyes and a burst of sunlight forces them closed again. I cover my face with my hands and roll over onto my right side, where, when I uncover my eyes, I have full view of last night's dwindled camp fire. Only a few coals are burning but just enough to cause a faint, white stream of smoke to drift into the trees on the far side of the small clearing. There, a few blue jays toss their early morning cries back and forth as if they are in a tennis match.

Sitting up, I stretch and rub my eyes clear of sleep. Here and there clouds cross the vast New Mexico sky. The sun is warm against my face but the mountain air is still crisp and cool, and a low mist graces the clearing. I grasp a heavy stick and use it to stoke the fire for my tea and breakfast, a rabbit taken yesterday evening with my short barrel .20 gauge shotgun.

After breakfast I make some entries in my journal, just as I have done every day since the onset of my excursion alone into the mountains four days ago. Then I kick dirt over the fire and begin breaking camp, saddling the mare and loading the pack horse with the iron cookware, the various supplies, blanket and my guitar. When all is done, I strap my pistol (a replica black powder 1843 Navy Colt) on my hip and fasten the holster to my leg with the rawhide cord attached to the end.

I have only fired the pistol on one occasion during my adventure thus far. That was two days ago, when I came across a rattlesnake while riding along the bank of a stream. The mare reared up her two front legs high in the air and I thought for sure that I was

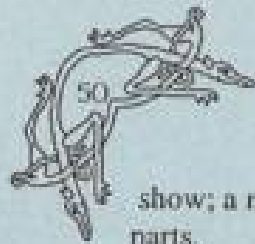


going to be flung to the ground and either stomped to death by the horse or bitten by the rattler. However, luckily enough, I was able to cling tightly to the mare with my legs while I plunged forward and grabbed a fist full of her mane with my left hand. The mare touched her feet to the ground and reared again. Still holding tight as best I could, I took my Colt in my right hand and fired two rounds at the snake. Both shots missed and the mare reared again. I fired a third round. This time the shot found its mark, taking the reptile just below the head.

The mare settled down and I dismounted. When my feet touched the ground my legs felt as if they were made of rubber. The pack horse had broken free and trotted off about 15 or 20 yards away, where he stood nervously. I stumbled down the bank of the stream and splashed my face with the cold mountain water. Then I sat on the bank and the thought occurred to me that what I had always seen in the John Wayne and Clint Eastwood movies had just happened to me in real life. It was an experience I didn't want to have again!

After checking the fire to be sure it is extinguished, I mount my horse and start my day's journey, although I have no particular route to follow in order to reach my final destination, to be done by the end of my three week vacation. Passing out of the clearing and through a thin line of trees, I ride into a valley, where the mist had dispersed and the sun is etching its way towards mid-morning. I ride on into the valley with the sun on my left.

Two days later I ride out of a gorge into an open field in the mountains. Zipping across the field is a jeep with four wild looking men in it. It doesn't take them long to spot me and they quickly alter their course and head towards me. Before they reach me I loosen the strap over my pistol. They race past me, yelling and screaming, and slam to a halt. The mare shuffles nervously beneath me, and the pack horse seems anxious as well. I also sense danger in these men, armed with a rifle or shotgun, but I don't let it



show; a move like that could get one killed in these parts.

"Who the hell are you?" asks the front passenger gruffly, after he spits out a wad of chew that catches the side of the jeep and drips into the knee high yellow grass. The two men riding in the back jump out and walk towards me while the driver stands up in his seat.

"What's it matter," I reply flatly.

"You're on our land is what matters," the driver says with fixed eyes. One of the men stops near my horse and the other shuffles over to the pack horse, where he starts examining the contents.

Pushing my hat slightly back on my head, then dropping my right hand and resting it my right hip, thus pulling my jacket back and exposing my pistol, I say sternly to the man examining the pack horse, "I'd appreciate it if you would step back from my horse."

The man stares back and says, "You gonna stop me?"

"If necessary," I remark.

"You got a lot o' guts, just bein' one man against four," the passenger in the jeep says.

"I have nothing to fear. I'm doing nothing wrong," I reply, maintaining steady eye contact with the burly man.



"You're on our land," the driver repeats, "and that's trouble."

"As far as I am Aware, and according to legal maps and the law, miles and miles of



this land is entirely free to public use. I wouldn't be on it other wise," I say, adding, "unless, of course, I've somehow made a mistake somewhere."

"Well you've made a mistake mister," the man nearest me says slowly. "Where you from?"

"St. Louis, Missouri," I reply.

"You shoulda stayed there, boy," the man near the pack horse, who stopped nosing around, scuffs, and adds, "cause we don't like strangers."

"That's right," the driver agrees. "You know what we do with strangers we don't like?"

"We kill 'em," the passenger says before I can even respond.

"Is that right?" I retort, and I briefly look each man in the eye. A chill runs up and down my spine and a silence ensues for what seems like an eternity. I know there's only one way out of this. I've never killed a man before, and I sure as hell didn't come out here to do so; all I wanted was a quiet, yet exciting, vacation; time away from work and a chance to live a dream as a cowboy. But I'm a journalist, not a killer! But these men don't care. They're just wild trash; they probably don't even own this land. As a matter of fact, I'm sure of it. I know I didn't get lost. They're probably poachers for Christ's sake!

I remember watching fireworks at the St. Louis river front during last year's four of July celebration. A few friends and I walking through the crowd and drinking beer. We laughed and had a good time teasing the women. Then the driver reaches down into the back of the jeep and lifts up a rifle. I immediately draw my pistol. The passenger pulls a sawed-off shotgun from the floorboard. God help me! I cock the hammer of the single action colt, take aim at the passenger, and fire; his body jolts backwards against the round lead ball. God! I've just killed a man, I say to myself.

From the corner of my eye I can see the man near the pack



horse reaching inside his coat. The man close to me starts towards me with no weapon but his hands. I bring my left hand down and cock the hammer again, this time setting my mark on the driver. I pull the trigger and he falls out of the jeep. Swinging the Colt around to my rear where the pack horse is and cocking the pistol at the same time, I also pull the mare to the right with my left hand and kick the man charging me square in the face with my right foot, sending him sprawling on the ground. The other man brandishes a pistol. We both take aim and fire first. His left shoulder jerks, throwing him off balance, and his gun fires, but the bullet finds only empty air. He points the weapon in my direction again and I fire once more. The hot, round lead ball forces him to the ground.

The last scoundrel is making his way to the jeep. I have only one shot left, since I let the hammer rest on an empty chamber for safety. He reaches for the passenger's shotgun.

"Don't do it," I yell, as I level the Colt on him. But he picks it up and swings it towards me. I have no choice. I pull the trigger. He falls back against the jeep and slides into a heap on the ground. Four men are dead.

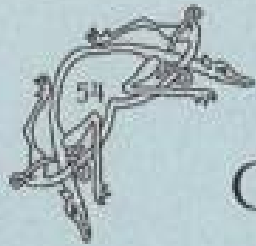
Not quite two weeks later, I ride into Crownpoint, thus marking the end of my journey; and what a journey it has been. I have decided to tell no one about my encounter with the four men in the jeep. Things will be better that way. I'll just board a plane home and leave New Mexico and my dream-turned-nightmare behind.



To You

by Joe-Dee Song

YOUR LOVE
IS LIKE DAZZLING SUNSHINE.
YOU GIVE ME
AN EPITOME OF SPLENDID LIFE.
EVEN WHEN I SOME DAYS
CONSIGN YOUR EXISTENCE
TO OBLIVION,
YOU WATCH ME
WITH LOVE.
YOU FORGAVE
MY PAROCHIALISM
AND TAUGHT ME
MONUMENTAL LOVE.
I CAN FEEL
YOUR DAZZLING LOVE
EVEN IN THE RIGOR
OF THE WINTER.
TAKE ME, LORD.
I GIVE MYSELF TO YOU.
YOUR TOUCH IS WHAT I LONGED FOR.
I LOVE YOU . . . FOREVER.



Childish Game

by Roger Williams

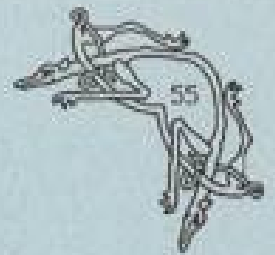
It's hot, very hot! It was always so damned hot those days out on the field-the battle field. Chuck and I held the point position on that march through the enemy's territory. We were reminiscing, with the aid of some rock-n-roll weed, about racing cars back in the rural parts of Indiana.

"Remember when Jake Pilcher tried to race the quarter against me?" He never had a chance. Can you believe he bet me a car wash and a wax? What an idiot! I wonder if he ever got water blisters on his....

BOOM... WHAT THE H... "AMBUSH," someone cried. "GET DOWN!" We retaliated—all of us—with return fire. WE used M-60's, M-16's and grenades. WE used grenades, because you could almost smell the pathetic enemy with his underdeveloped weapon. WE are superior, damn it!

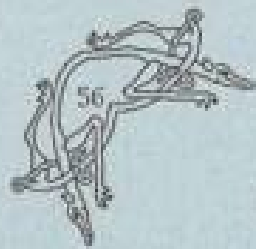
We fired what seemed to be an eternity, 'til it seemed to cease. Chuck, the careless bastard that he was, stood to see what the reasoning was. Chuck was out of ammo and was a virtual sitting duck. In a New York minute, he caught two in the chest and almost immediately fell, without a sound. Was he dead? The other's thought so. No time to see. We reloaded and fought again. Funny, this game was so much fun as a kid in the backyard; deadly now. We pushed'em back with our greater numbers. I advanced only to find a grenade at my feet. Panic stricken, I froze. Time stood still. Was I to die, too? What for? Why am I here? I heard a painful shriek, then my stilled best friend thrust his love and life forward, collapsing on the underdeveloped weapon, only to save me and two others with his own finality.

Eventually, we routed the enemy, but without my help. I was too busy disobeying orders to remain with my dismembered buddy, talking with him as I'm talking with you now. Without



worrying about that childish game in the backyard; worrying about the mature game of today in someone else's-WAR.





An Accident

by Stephanie Oetken

Hearing Mom pull up in front of the house after a quick run to the grocery store, I went to the front door and saw the flashing lights at the end of our street. They were quiet, slow-spinning lights that had the look of something more serious than a traffic ticket. At first I figured I was jumping to conclusions. This had been a summer full of death and I was almost beginning to expect that people would continue dying, every other week, in clusters of twos and threes, until there was no one left to look for in the obituaries.

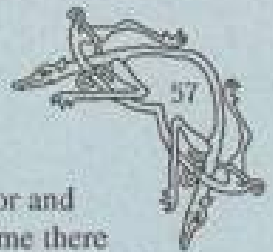
Mom was pulling a grocery bag of notebooks from the back seat of the car, the last of the supplies I needed in order to begin my last year of college. I was leaving the next morning, so Mom had gone shopping for me while I had a last evening out with my friends from work. After a little too much to drink, I had returned home earlier than I had planned.

I could hear the murmur of voices down the street and it sounded like quite a crowd. Mom was squinting against the glare of the streetlights, her purse on her shoulder. She turned when Mr. Foley called to her from his front porch next door.

"An accident," I heard him say, although I couldn't see him. I was still inside the house. "At least one of the kids is dead."

Mom approached our front steps, her head turned in the direction of the flashing lights. She asked Mr. Foley if he knew anything more.

As they talked, I thought of James, the Foleys' son, who had been killed in a car accident in June. The first time I saw the Foleys after the accident they had been standing on their porch, just like this. I remembered the way Mrs. Foley had hugged me so tightly, for a long time, saying through her tears, "You know your parents love you, don't you?" James had been exactly my age.



At the thought of all this, I left the front door and walked to the kitchen, expecting Mom to join me there after she left Mr. Foley. I sat in the bright yellow light of the kitchen, hoping to sober up a little by the time she came in. I felt numb all over and figured it must have been the vodka I had been drinking. I didn't normally drink hard liquor. As I jiggled my legs around, waiting for my nerves to wake up, I heard Mom open the front door, two rooms away.

"Jim," I could tell she was trying to wake my father who was snoring on the couch. "Jim!" The couch creaked. "Where's Tony?"

"Um... Down...down the street. There was some car wreck and he went down there with Mike Bizelli."

"Oh. Well, I guess I'll go and get him. He wanted to come with me to take Stephanie to school tomorrow and he needs a shower." The grocery bag crunched as I heard her set it down. "Oh, is Stephanie home already?"

"Yeah, I'm home." I barely creaked out, my head resting on the kitchen table.

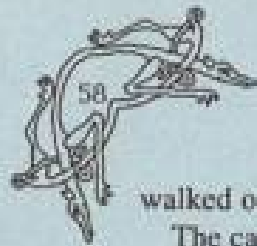
"Is this her purse? Or is it Amy's?"

"I haven't seen either of them." I heard Dad say through a yawn.

"I guess you wouldn't have...Stephanie must have left her purse here. She was just going over to Dave's...Well, I'm walking down to get Tony. Why don't you go to the bathroom and get in bed before he gets in there to take his shower?" The screen door opened and slammed shut. I got up from the table, deciding to follow Mom down to the scene of the accident. I passed Dad in the dining room, on his way to the bathroom.

"G'night," I said. He rubbed his face.

People I hadn't seen out of their houses for years were standing along the yellow police ribbons, whispering to each other and clacking their teeth. I saw Mom pause to chat with a neighbor. I



walked on to a clear spot to get a look.

The car was wrapped around a sycamore tree on the far side of the parkway. I thought the words "Mercedes-Bends"—the punchline of a morbid grade school joke—while trying to register in my mind the image before me. I could not figure out how this car had become so mangled. It was as if it had been melted down, attached to the tree, and then allowed to dry in this fascinating position. Even straining my eyes, it was impossible to tell the front of the car from the back, the hatchback from a side door. I didn't think that things could get this messed up, all on their own.

My little brother ran past me with a video camera on his shoulder.

"What in the hell are you doing?" I shouted, but he had already run too far to hear me. Besides, I couldn't think of a reason why he shouldn't be filming this. One that he would accept, at least. I guess it just didn't seem to be in good taste.

Mom was standing with a couple of people from the parish in the spot where I had seen her earlier. When I joined them, they were discussing how the accident had happened.

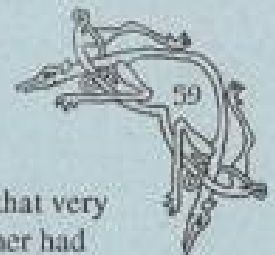
"The police figure they must have been doing eighty or ninety," said a man I recognized, but couldn't name. "After coming down that hill and around the bend, they must've grazed the curb and lost control."

"There's an empty beer box in the street next to the car," the man's wife said. The adults shook their heads. After a short silence, the man spoke again.

"I hear the church cleared thirty thousand on the parish picnic."

"You're kidding," Mom said, incredulous. "The crowd seemed a little thinner this year, to me. Probably because of the new restrictions on the beer garden." Mom and the man chuckled.

How could they laugh this way, I wondered. James Foley was killed on the night of that picnic, probably drunk on beer that,



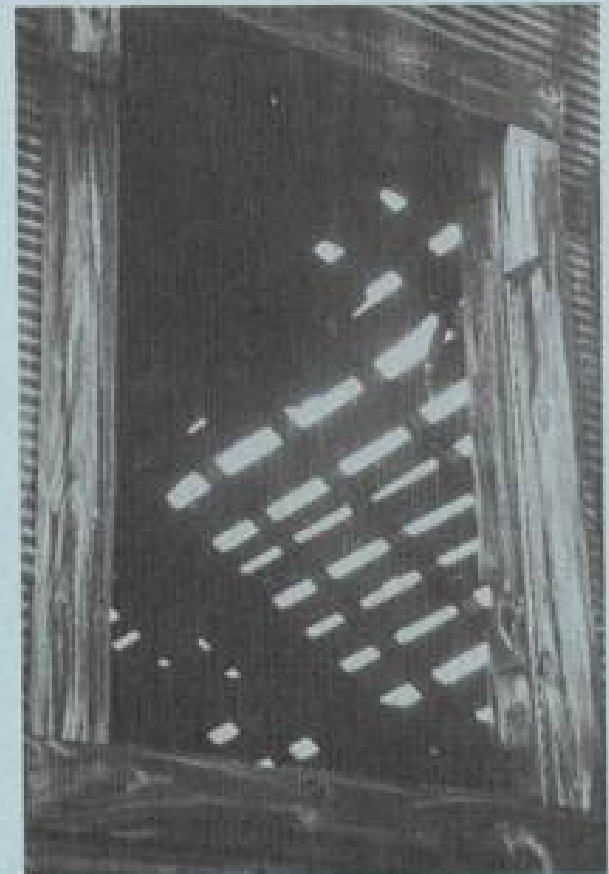
supposedly, wasn't being served to minors in that very beer garden. I remembered how James's mother had spent a lot of time at the booth that Mom and I were running. She just seemed to want company and once in a while would buy one of the pull-tab gambling tickets we were selling. A couple of times she had asked us if we had seen James lately. None of us knew that we would never see him again, not until Mrs. Foley identified his body at the hospital.

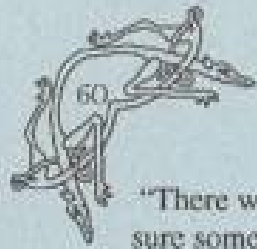
"...but Stephanie and I did have a lot of business in our booth, come to think of it," Mom was saying.

"We sold out of tickets in three hours," I added.

"I think the tickets were gone in three hours. Two big boxes of them." Mom flipped through her purse, looking for a cigarette. One of the three police cars pulled away from the wreckage. "We still don't know who was in the car?"

"Nope," said Mr. Schinsky—his name suddenly came to me.





"There were three people in the car, I hear, and I am sure somebody must be dead, from the look of things.."

"God, I hope it's no one we know," I said. This summer had been truly incredible. It all started when Judge Chancellor shot himself in the head at this home, just six blocks from our house. Then, the mothers of two women from home had passed away within the two weeks preceding James's accident. In mid-July, the Hummels—an elderly couple down the street—had died within three days of each other. One of pneumonia, the other of a broken heart. A close friend of our neighbor lost his battle to cancer in early August. He had been 46, the same age as my father.

"Did anyone end up buying the Hummel's house?" I asked, turning towards Mom.

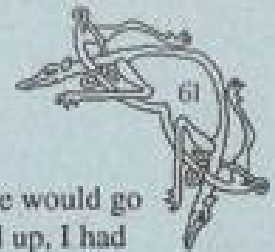
"How long ago did the ambulance leave?" Mom was talking to Mr. Schinsky.

"Uh...about thirty minutes ago."

After a reverent pause, I repeated my question. "Mom. Has the Hummels' house been sold? I'm just curious."

"Well, I guess I should be looking for my son. Last time I saw him he was making a movie of this. Maybe it will scare him enough from ending up this way."

"Mom. Do you hear me?" I was getting a little frustrated. She was glancing around the area for Tony and completely ignoring me. Then I remembered the argument we'd had as I was leaving earlier that evening. When I had innocently asked her if she wouldn't mind running to the store to pick me up the supplies I had forgotten to buy, she had blown up and started screaming about what a horrible day she'd had and how there was a weeks worth of dirty laundry piled up on the washing machine. I had interrupted her and apologized, saying that I would go to the store tomorrow morning, no problem. But then she had insisted, playing the martyr's mother, telling me that no, it was okay, I could just take



my dirty underwear to school with me, that she would go to the store. Not wanting to get her more riled up, I had left quietly and immediately, waiting outside until Dave picked me up.

Mom was now yelling for Tony, screaming that it was time for his shower. I turned to leave. "Well, never mind about the Hummels' house, Mom. I'll just run along and wash some underwear, or something."

I walked up the street towards our house, leaving the noise of the crowd behind me. The scene had begun to take on the atmosphere of an outdoor party and it was making me a little uncomfortable. Just another reason for people to hang out on the street on a summer night, I guessed.

Two of our neighbors were sitting on a front porch, discussing the accident.

"The cop told me that it was two young girls and a man. Two of them have been identified, but one of the girls had no identification on her. Her poor parents. Too messed up to even recognize, I guess."

"Were they from around here?" the other neighbor asked.

"The names of the two kids didn't sound familiar to me. Of course, I don't know about the other girl."

"I had had just about enough of death. No doubt it was someone I had gone to grade school with, or played with as a child.

I walked into the empty house. Even the dog ignored me. I was certainly ready to get out of here and head for the real world of school. Mom not speaking to me because of a stupid argument about underwear was the last straw. Enough of this pettiness.

I headed straight for my room. Ascending the stairs, I was amazed at how drunk I still felt. Jesus. I would have to remember not to drink Vodka in the future. I was beginning to wonder if I had suffered permanent nerve damage. I lay in bed for a while with the lights on, afraid that I would get sick in the dark. But, I



didn't feel sick, for some reason. I didn't feel much of anything.

I heard Mom and Tony bustling around downstairs and Toto barking happily. Tony was complaining about having to bathe.

"Be quiet! You'll wake your father up." Mom was carrying the grocery bag into the kitchen. The sounds of cabinet doors opening and closing were making it hard for me to hear what she was saying to Tony. Something about what time he had to get up in the morning. Six o'clock. I groaned.

The door bell rang. Tony and the dog ran loudly into the living room. "Mom! It's a policeman!"

I sat up in bed. A policeman. Where was Amy, anyway? The thought of my little sister in a car wreck like that did make me feel sick. I didn't want to move from the bed, but I knew that I had to.

I slowly stumbled down the steps, holding onto the walls that I couldn't feel.

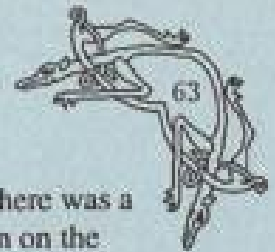
But maybe I was jumping to conclusions. I could hear no sounds indicating that anything horrible had happened. Just silence. An awful, heavy silence. My ears were ringing and I felt light-headed, almost weightless.

I turned the corner from the hallway to the dining room and saw my mother standing dumbfounded near the front door. Tony ran past me into my parents' bedroom and hit my father until he was awake. I couldn't say anything. Couldn't even if I had wanted to. I heard the jingle of my father's jeans as he pulled them on, zipping them as he walked out of the bedroom and towards Mom, who by this time was crying loud enough for me to hear.

"Are you sure?" she was moaning to the policeman. "How do you know?"

"One of the nurses on duty happened to be your sister-in-law, Ruth George...is that right?"

"That's my sister." Dad's voice was abnormally high.



"She happened to be on duty and...when there was a lot of confusion about the lack of identification on the body, a group of staff members gathered around and Ms. George recognized the blouse. Remembered giving it to her for Christmas."

"Dad put his arm around Mom while Toto sniffed around the feet of the policeman.

"Of course, you'll have to come to the hospital for some sort of verification. If you have anything with her fingerprints on it, or can get her dental records, that might be of some help to us."

Mom was nodding. "Yes...yes, fine...we'll be there just as soon as I can get a hold of my other daughter."

"Her other daughter? I unfroze myself from the hallway floor and started to move into the living room. It seemed as if I had to fight the air to take a step, like the air was water and I couldn't get any sound out.

"But, Mom, I'm here." My lips moved, but I couldn't get any sound out.

"Where is she?" Dad was asking.

"She was going to stay at my mother's tonight." Mom said as she shut the door behind the policeman.

"I'll call over there."

"Mom, I'm right here. You knew I was going to Dave's tonight. Why are you saying this stuff about Grandma's?" I still couldn't get any sound out. Dad walked past me with tears on his cheeks and picked up the phone in the kitchen. He dialed.

"Dad, what are you talking about?"

"An accident...Stephanie...she's been killed...Yes, the accident was just down the street...We have to go to the hospital...to identify...she didn't have her purse with her..."



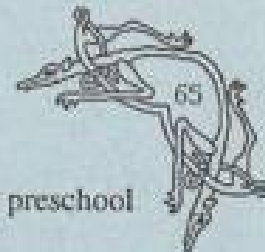
When Old Men Cry

by Alicia Taylor

If we don't hurry up and finish packing the car we won't get to Galveston until next spring break," shouted Anne, to her three best friends from college. Her friends were groaned as they picked up the large red cooler full of their favorite past time...cans of Miller Lite. Laura, who was going to be a junior at Baylor University next fall, opened the cooler and grabbed four ice cold beers and threw them to her buddies. They signaled thumbs up at one another, smiled and vaulted into Stacy's 1989 jeep wrangler.

The four girls, who met in the fifth grade, were on their way to Galveston, Texas, a popular vacation spot. To students who attended Baylor, only a few hours from the prevalent beach scene. With the radio pumping and the beer flowing, the girls began their escapade to the hot spot.

Laura, the youngest at twenty, was the most obnoxious one in the group. She never knew when to quit partying, she was always up to something. Laura had transferred from a junior college to Baylor two years ago, but knew the others from back home in Dallas. The four girls had grown up with each other. They had attended the Culvin School for Girls since the fifth grade. The "four musketeers" have remained best friends for the past fifteen years, through good times and rough times. Anne was twenty-one, as were the rest of the girls, she was a leader and reasonably responsible. She usually took charge of matters if Becky was not around to do it herself. Anne was going to marry her boyfriend, Steve after one year of graduate school. Stacy was the quiet one, but knew when to let her hair down when the time was right. She was engaged to be married to Grant after they graduated. Leaving Becky, the most responsible one of the four. One who always seemed to know the rights from wrongs in life. She would sometimes get caught up in her "motherly ways," but everyone knew



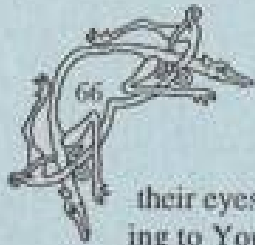
she meant well. She had hopes of becoming a preschool teacher.

The "four musketeers," as everyone knew them, were finally on their way for their last real vacation together, before the three graduated next year. Laura still had two years to go, one of which her buddies would not be with her. They were all elated as they pulled into the parking lot of the Ramada Inn, Galveston. They looked like they had just gotten out of a wind tunnel, as they filed and fell out of the car and went inside to see about their reservations. Laura, having a great time already, reeked of Miller Lite but eventually made it to the front desk. Where Stacy, Becky, and Anne were already getting their room. The clerk at the desk rang for a bellboy, but the girls insisted on carrying their own bags. Laura was not too sure, but managed to survive.

Piling in the jeep they headed to room 214 and then began unloading their car. After getting fairly settled they decided to shower and take a short rest. It was already 5:30, so they could not get any sun. Laura passed out and Stacy was tired from navigating the six hour drive, so she decided to nap also. Anne and Becky had no desire to have nap time. They went to the beach to check out the scene. The two of them each grabbed a beer and began to the beach. A walk would do them good and it would give them a chance to see what was going on that night. It was Thursday and they were scheduled to go home the following Thursday.



The sun slowly climbed to make an unforgettable daybreak. The four girls had slept fairly comfortable on the two double beds. Anne was already up and preparing breakfast, her night was not as rough as the other girls. She went to the sliding glass door and forced the curtains open, revealing the morning sunlight. Becky and Laura rolled over as to avoid the bright light. Stacy just looked at Anne and groaned, but managed to get to her feet. Stacy threw herself on the other bed and got Laura and Becky to open



their eyes. In the background Anne sang, "Good Morning to You."

While Stacy, Anne, and Becky ate a well-balanced breakfast of cereal and toast, Laura was on the balcony smoking a Marlboro Light and gazing at the beach. After the girls took showers, they put on their bikinis and darted for the cool breeze of the ocean air.

Laura was the only one lying on the beach, the others had gone straight into the gulf.

"Come on in! The water feels great!" yelled Becky.

Laura gave her a smirk and laid back down on her towel that she had taken from the hotel room. She laid there for awhile until she heard some guys laughing as they walked by.

"Steve, is that you? What are you doing down here?"

"Well, me and the guys decided at the last minute to come down here and catch a few rays, not to mention girls."

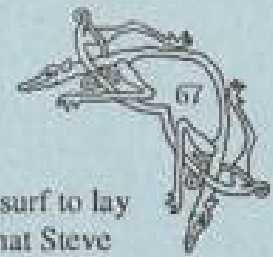
"Cute Steve, real cute."

"So who all's with you? Your regular group?" Laura asked.

"Yeah me, Grant, Mike, and John. We have to meet up with the other guys so why don't y'all give us a call in room 101 at the Ramada. That's where we are staying. Tell Anne hey for me."

"OK, we'll give y'all a call later on then. If you don't hear from us, call us in room 214. We're also staying at the Ramada, how convenient." Laura said.

Steve and his gang were in their third year at Baylor. The "four musketeers" knew them from school and had a tendency to party with them on the nights before their 8 o'clock classes. The boys were tolerably affluent on campus, with their classy cars and good looks. They were all "brothers" of the same fraternity, Kappa Sigma. Steve and Grant were known for their gentlemen intuition. Mike and John were the type to just go out, get laid, and stir up as much trouble as the law allowed. Often enough they would do just that.



Anne, Stacy, and Becky came in from the surf to lay out and catch some sun. They asked Laura what Steve and Grant had to say.

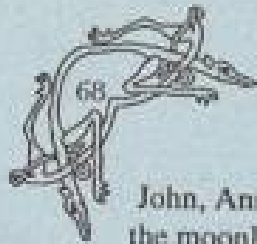
"Nothing much, we're supposed to give them a call later on tonight. Obviously they are looking for free beer." Laura said sarcastically.

The girls basked themselves under the pulsating sun and at about 3:30, they decided to call it a day.

Stacy was on the phone with Grant making plans for the night. The four girls ended up meeting the guys at a local bar and grill, Yaga's Place. It was a main attraction for all the vacationers, with live Reggae bands Thursday through Sunday night. It was a moderately sized place with two bars: one for everyday drinks and one for anyone who would dare to sit in a barber chair and have a waitress pour mixes of hard liquor down one's throat. There was plenty of room left for dining and dancing. Yaga's Place was also known for their seafood specials, which attracted the visitors as well as the locals.

The girls danced with their school friends as long as their sunburned bodies would allow. Stacy and Grant sat at the table for eight and drank frozen margaritas and chatted about school and the fun they were all having at the beach. Becky and John watched the other drunk college kids line up for one of the three barbers chairs. Laura and Mike danced until one of those chairs became vacant, then they both seized the opportunity and made a run for the barber chair. Anne and Steve were dancing to "The Rasta's" as they sang a familiar song, "Is This Love," originally performed by Bob Marley.

The Baylor crew danced, dined, and drank until they all decided to go for a walk on the beach. They got in their cars and met down in room 101 to grab a few beers, then ventured to the beach. All except Laura and Mike, they were busy taking turns throwing up in the bathroom. Stacy and Grant stayed in the guys room. Becky,



John, Anne, and Steve continued their journey towards the moonlit beach.

"Oh my God, look what time it is, we are missing some serious sun!" cried Becky.

As she turned, she saw John's face glaring up at her, instead of Anne's. Becky jumped out of bed and woke Anne and Steve up. They had lunch together, then decided to go and get the rest of the crew.

"Open the damn door, guys, we want to head for the beach," yelled Steve.

"Come on y'all, it's 2:15, we want to see the sun before it goes down," said John, as he beat the door a few more times.

Anne looked down at her feet and saw a note, it was addressed to them. It read:

Guys,

Boy are y'all sleepy heads. We're gone to the beach. We're sitting where we were yesterday, come join us if you feel you can make it that far.

See ya,

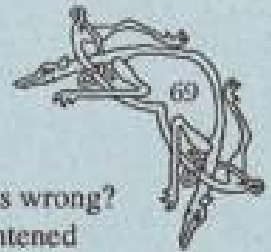
Laura, Mike, Stacy, and John

They looked at each other, laughed out loud, then joined the group already on the beach.



Sunday morning Becky, John, Anne, and Steve woke up to find themselves in the same room as the previous night. Saturday night was much wilder than before and they all had apparent hangovers. They finished the bottle of extra-strength Tylenol, dressed, and finally made their way down to room 101. As they got closer to the room they saw the window, facing the parking lot, was broken and the curtain was dancing in the wind.

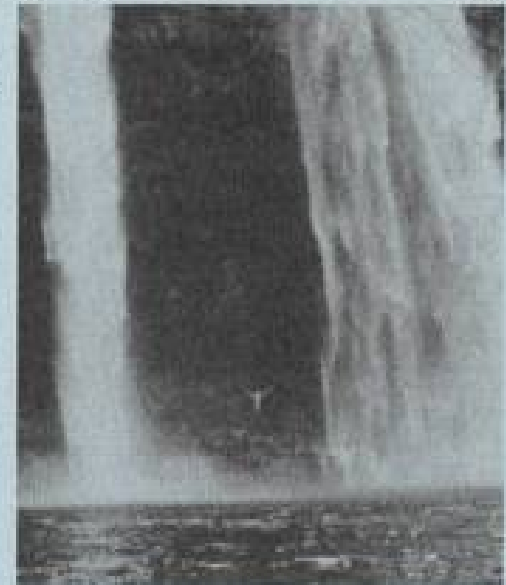
Steve returned to the girls, "Y'all stay out here, John and I are going to go look inside."



"What's wrong? Do you think something is wrong? Steve, tell us, is everything OK?" asked a frightened Anne.

"We're just going to check things out. Wait out here until I tell you otherwise." Steve begged.

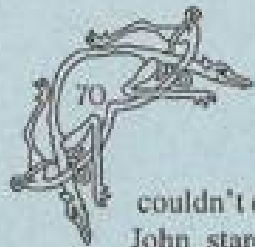
As John fumbled for the key he picked up yesterday afternoon, Steve turned to the girls and gave them a look of reassurance. The door was already slightly open, Steve gave it a nudge as a gust of wind took it out of his hand and opened it all the way. Their clothes were strewn about the room, the two mattresses were lying on the floor, empty beer cans and wine bottles littered the floor. The lamp that used to sit on the table between the two beds was across the



room in pieces. The room was a total disaster and the guys knew something was wrong. John looked around the corner to check the bathroom, the door was half way open and he could see the cracked mirror. He called Steve to come look. They slowly opened the door to find the once white telephone, now scattered with red fingerprints. John and Steve were frantic, but tried to look sane when they faced the girls outside.

"John, you and Anne go to the lobby and call the police," Steve said hesitantly.

Becky and Anne hugged as the tears began to fall down their tanned faces. Stacy and Laura were dead... so they thought, they



couldn't eliminate their worst nightmare. Steve and John stared at each other and tried to hold back their tears. They could not accept what they had just seen in room 101, the room that was to hold fond memories of their trip, would turn out only to leave permanent scars in their young minds.



Flashing red lights and loud roaring sirens turned into the once quiet parking lot of the Ramada Inn. Uniformed officers filed one by one out of their black police vehicles, there were three cars and five badges.

"Who found the room? When did you first know they were missing? What are their names? How long ago did you discover the room? Is anything missing from the room? Did anyone touch anything? Where are y'all from?" The questions kept coming.

The parking was beginning to look like a circus ground. Two officers started putting up the crime scene line. One officer was on his radio calling for backup homicide detectives, forensics, and a fingerprint technician. Becky, John, Anne, and Steve were all in the back of police cars crying and answering questions.

Becky wanted to go and contact Stacy and Laura's parents to tell them, at least, that the girls were missing. Steve wanted to do the same for Mike and Grant's parents. The thought of having to tell them over the phone was mortifying, they didn't even know if they were dead.

The officers collected evidence, took finger-prints, and tried to rule out the possibility of serious foul play. The media was everywhere trying to get the scoop in time for the six o'clock news. The kids were advised to go to their other room and sit tight until the detectives arrived.

Becky and John, and Anne and Steve did as they were told, with a police escort and protection from the media. The college group cried and comforted one another on the way to room 214. Steve regained his composure and tried to get through to his



parents.

"Yes, operator, I'm trying to get through to my family in Oklahoma City, but I get an out of order recording," Steve trying desperately to hold back his tears.

"One moment please."

Anne held out her hand for comfort and handed him a tissue.

"OK. Sir, there's a bad rain storm. Most of the lines are down in that area."

Steve hung up the phone knowing that he couldn't get through for at least another twenty-four hours.

There was a knock at the door. It was the detectives from the police department. They began throwing questions left and right. The kids questioned right back. There were no leads at this time. Everyone would just have to wait.



Anne and Becky took a much needed nap. Steve and John talked, planning their own private investigation, with or without cops, the curious spectators, had all gone home. The police officers and detectives returned to the station to file the reports of four missing college students from Oklahoma City and Dallas. It was a chance to go to room 101 and try to find anything the cops may have overlooked.

The guys eased around the corner and saw that it was clear to enter the crime scene. Steve took a last look over his shoulder to make sure no one was watching them. John unlocked the door and they both slipped under the yellow crime scene barricades. The room was somewhat dark. The only light passed through the cracks in the cheap two-by-fours where the broken window once was. Steve fumbled along the wall for the switch and clicked it on. John sifted through a pile of clothes now heaped in one corner of the bedroom. Steve went into the bathroom, returning with a small piece of stained, red plastic. Apparently, it was all that was left of the telephone. He thought to himself: "They must have



taken it downtown for evidence."

Steve's pale face was empty of emotion as he stared at the blood-stained floor. John looked at the beds where he once slept. The mattresses were now stripped and stacked neatly on the beds. He gently kneeled down to look under the beds, fumbling through the thick carpet. Something caught his eye. He outstretched his arm and grabbed what looked like a leather necklace.

"Hey Steve, come here, I think I found something."

Steve shook his head, "Yea, what is it?"

"It looks like some kind of tooth."

"That's a shark's tooth. The cops must have overlooked it, or maybe they thought it was one of ours."

"How did you know it was a shark's tooth?" John asked.

"My dad used to bring me down here to deep sea fish when I was a kid. He taught me a lot about fish, especially about sharks."

"Steve, I think this is the lead we've been looking for. Let's go get the girls."

"Wait. This could be dangerous, let them sleep. It's already 6:30, they'll probably sleep all night. You left the note for them didn't you?"

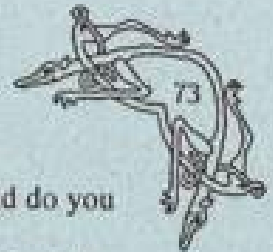
"Yea, I left the note. Got your keys? Good, let's go kick some ass!" John stated abruptly.



"Yep, just as I thought, this here's a Mako's sharks tooth. Hard to catch, they put up quite a fight. I think that's why people like to catch 'em, it gives them a great challenge to land one of these babies" said the old man with a deep southern accent.

The two boys turned and left the bait shop and headed straight for the pier. John was walking around asking questions. All the answers he got were consistent. Steve was pacing the docks looking at the boats to see if he could find a clue.

An old wrinkled man sitting in a lawn chair asked John, "Why



all the questions boy, is there something I could do you for?"

"Well, I was told that someone down here might be able to charter a boat for me and my friends. We want to go fishin' for Mako's."

"There's only one man who's landed a decent size Mako, it was ten feet six inches long. That's almost as big as they come. He even named his old boat after that shark: "Mako's Tooth" he calls it. Poor old man lost his kids in a boating accident, nine years ago. He wanted to have more kids but his wife just couldn't replace the three she lost. He even had a necklace made with one of the sharks teeth, says it reminds him of his fishin' days with his kids."

"Thanks sir, have a good one."

John ran down to the dock to find Steve.

"I think we've got something. Look around for a boat called, "Mako's Tooth." This is the break we've been waiting for."

The two boys stalked the docks to find the boat that might lead them to some answers.



"Becky, wake up! The guys are gone!"

"I'm awake! I'm awake! What's up?"

"Steve and John are gone. They left a note, all it says is that they have gone to find Stacy, Grant, Laura, and Mike."

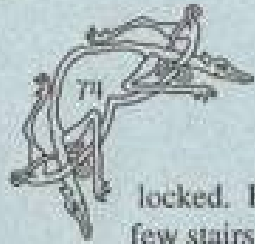
"Anne, we better call the police back. The guys could be in serious trouble."



"Hey John, there it is," Steve said, pointing to an antique catamaran with pieces of red paint chipped away to show the bare brown wood. "You better go call the cops."

John ran to the nearest pay phone and dialed 911.

The name "Mako's Tooth" was printed on the stern side of the boat. Steve proceeded towards the boat and knocked on the small cabin door. No one answered, so he checked to see if it was



locked. He gave it a good shove and tumbled down a few stairs onto the floor. The cabin was fairly large but it reeked of dead fish and musky pipe smoke. Steve choked back a gag—the kitchen was on his right; the stove was cluttered with dingy pots and pans. To the left was a couch and a small television set. An old phonograph could be heard playing “Madame Butterfly” in the background. Across from the couch was a dining table set for six. He started towards a cabinet that had old black and white pictures on it. Steve picked one up to get a closer look, there were two boys and a young girl in it, about his age.

“Those were my three children. They died in a boating accident when they were about your age,” said a raspy voice standing a few feet behind him.

Steve jumped and dropped the picture, it fell to the ground sprinkling the brown carpet with glass.

“You scared the shit out of me!” Steve said and turned around to see a man about fifty-five years old staring at him. The old man stood about six feet tall with strong arms bulging from his white undershirt. His hair was neatly combed to one side as if to cover his balding head, he had a pipe hanging out of the right side of his mouth and his clothes resembled that of a fisherman. Steve picked up what was left of the picture and placed it back on the cabinet; he drew himself up to face the old man.

“Boy how’d you get in here?” the old raglan asked.

“Where are my friends?”

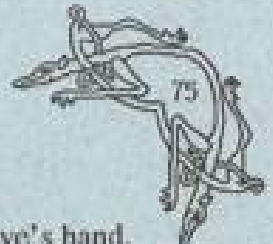
“Why son, I don’t know what you’re talkin’ ‘bout.” the old man drawled.

“Cut the crap old man, does this look familiar to you?” Steve held up the leather cord with the shark’s tooth on it.

“Where did you get that, son?” the old man said with a cough.

“I found it, it’s mine now!” Steve said with a hint of sarcasm.

“That tooth is my prized possession, give it back to me,” the



man pleaded.

The old crippled lunged for the tooth in Steve’s hand, but missed and fell to the floor. The old man grabbed a bamboo rod and hit Steve’s leg, knocking the boy to his knees. The foolish man stood up knocking Steve with the rod, but he managed to roll the old man off his back. The decrepit man spun around and Steve hit his head on the corner of the dining table. A small pool of blood was gathering at his neckline. As Steve turned to hit the man, he saw that he was already beaten. The lifeless wrinkled body was lying on the couch with his hands to his chest.

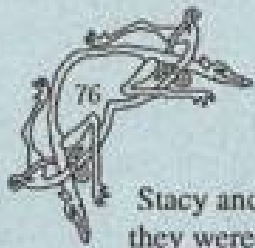
“Oh my God, Archie!” screamed a lady that had walked in a few seconds too late. The old lady dropped her bag of groceries and ran to her husband. She fell to her knees hanging her head over her dead husband’s chest.

Steve forced himself up and quickly began to open every door in sight. Nothing, no clues, not anything. Until he came across a closet door that had a pungent odor coming from inside it. He kicked that louvered door open with his left leg to find his four friends sitting tied up and gagged on the floor with dead fish smothering them.

They could hear the sirens in the background pouring on to the pier. Steve looked down at his friends and gave a husky smile. He took off their gags and then helped them untie their bound feet and wrists. They sat in the pool of the dead fish crying and embracing as if they had not seen one another in years. Four police officers entered the boat and apprehended the old lady. Two of them helped Stacy and Laura to their feet and escorted them off the boat. The boys helped each other up to retreat to the outside world, which seemed so vague and ominous now. A stretcher was carrying off the old man from what was once his home. Steve asked one of the officers how the old helpless man died.

“Heart attack,” he shrugged.

Officers began filing onto the floating vessel to collect evidence.



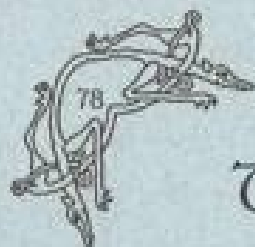
Stacy and Anne sat in the back of an ambulance until they were taken to the hospital for a routine checkup.

Laura ended up with nineteen stitches in her forearm from the struggle with the old man and his tooth at the hotel room. Grant and Mike talked to the policemen, then they too were taken to the county hospital. Steve was treated at the scene with a small cut above his right eye. John, Becky, Anne, and Steve followed the two screaming ambulances a few blocks to the hospital. All of the kids were treated and released.

The old man's widow would have ended up spending three years for in jail for kidnapping and aggravated assault. She died in her holding cell the day her trial was completed. Officers say, she cracked under the pressure, it eventually killed her. Her final resting place is alongside her husband in the Galveston Cemetery.

The Baylor crowd to this day remain best friends and are still called the "four musketeers" and the "regular guys." Every once in awhile they can be found down in Galveston walking the pier and throwing yellow roses in the Gulf where the "Mako's Tooth" once floated.





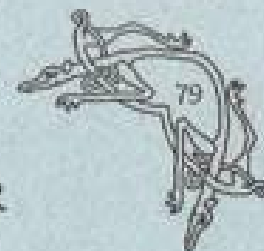
The Spectacle

by Dite J. Williams

Arriving this year on television sets across the nation was a spectacle of exorbitant proportions. There was anguish, there was controversy, there was torment, and in the end exparte elation. No, I'm not talking about the World Series. And no, it wasn't "L.A. Law" either. I'm talking about the Thomas hearings.

Before the eyes of millions of Americans, the U.S. Senate carousoled in a paltry subterfuge of partisan delight. At one end of the room stood the accused; at the other his accuser. Sifting through the lies, innuendoes, and subversion, was a panel composed in part by a known drunkard and womanizer, an admitted plagiarist, an individual under investigation for allegedly receiving bribes, and a whole host of other swindlers and shysters.

Grueling hours of heating allegations, days of ceaseless debate, and weeks of relentless mud-slinging culminated in a barrage of partisan posturing. "The truth," extolled one Representative as he maligned the credibility of Anita Hill, "is what we are trying to get at here." "What we have seen today," another sighed, "is the character assassination of a fine man." In the end it wasn't so much the credibility of Anita Hill, or the integrity of Clarence Thomas, that was left in question. When it was all said and done, and the dust finally settled, the brazen wounds which both Thomas and Hill sustained were nothing compared to the gaping bullet hole left in the foot of the U.S. Senate.



The Janitor

by Ethan Whitcomb

The weather changed,
just as he predicted it would,
and Winter removed its dingy
flannels to the closet,
exposing the decaying confetti
fallout of Nature's good-bye party.
Veinous leaves
in faded chlorophyll colors
blanketed the yard
like camouflaged carcasses strewn
across a battlefield,
and Spring began covering
Earth's stained and tattered mattress
with its sterile pastel linens—
neatly tucking in the corners.

Could he forecast his return
to the hospital that day?
I knew something had changed
when I did not see his fragile
varicose figure performing its routine
shining of the fan blades.
Did they remind him of propellers?
He spoke very little
of the war that had turned a
green youth red and finally brown,
of the war which had brought cold
Winter to him early.



Home Improvement

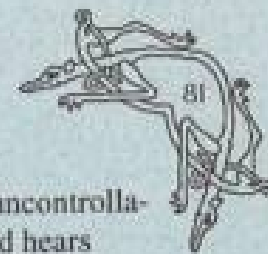
by Echan Whitehall

Douglas smells the rotten spice of a wet autumn as he trudges his way to the mailbox. The decaying leaves seem magnetically attracted to his feet as they collect on his shoes with each step. Annoyed by this, he violently kicks his right leg to the side, as if to defend himself from an aggressive schnauzer, but the leaves hold fast to his suede bucks. He makes his way to the street repeating this action with alternating legs — hopping on one, kicking with the other — like a dancing cossack. Frustrated and embarrassed, he curses the leaves, the trees, the yard, and his new house, which is something more than a “fixer upper.”

Douglas left his downtown studio apartment to live in the house he inherited from his Aunt Jo, who now lives in a nursing home and wears her nightgowns backwards under other people's robes. Her mind is gone, but she still keeps her cotton-candy hair dyed geriatric pink and fluffed sticky with spray. Her old house has been neglected since her husband's death fifteen years ago, but to Douglas the place offers sanctuary from monthly payments. In August he said he was “taking the lesser of two evils” when he told his landlord he was moving, but now, confronted by maintenance and renovation, he sees that he was wrong.

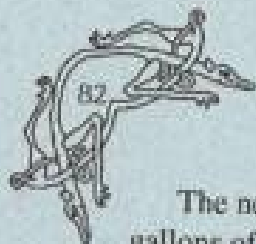
When he reaches the end of the side walk, Douglas finds the mailbox open, its door dangling on a single hinge as if the spectacle of his awkward approach had left it slack jawed. Rain water trickles out of the rusty mouth like drool, and a single damp envelope sits in the gaping box like a white tongue. Douglas yanks it out. It is an insurance bill for the policy he had taken out on the house.

Later in the evening, while eating a “Hungry Man” frozen dinner in his vinyl recliner, Douglas is lulled to sleep by the spinning clack of the Wheel of Fortune. He is still holding a fork-full

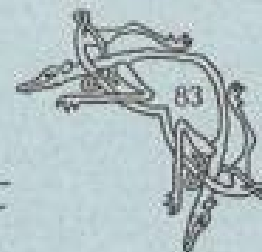
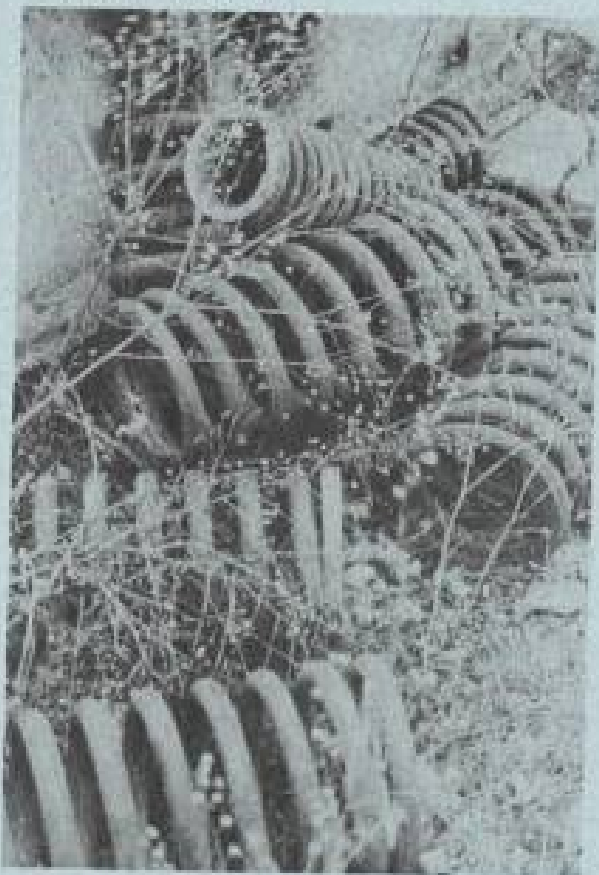


of apple cobbler which his eyes begin to roll uncontrollably under their lids. He starts hallucinating and hears someone on television say, “I'd like to buy a bowel, please.” In his fight to avoid the trance, his head begins bouncing as if it is mounted on a spring, making him look like the nodding Red Sox souvenir statue in his Buick. Pat Sajack's image is no longer coherent to Douglas, but, through fluttering eyelashes, he can faintly see the oak tree outside his picture window. Douglas dreamily watches its leaves fall like marauding paratroopers landing in curled crouches on his lawn. The attacking red and yellow leaves become flames and engulf his house. His mouth opens slightly, at first with disbelief, and then, to accommodate a snore. Douglas sees himself run out of the burning house and the scene shifts. He is now back at his apartment getting the mail, unlocking his box and maneuvering his hand in the cold, metal cubby. He becomes a boy again, fishing for a Cracker Jack surprise at the carnival. His effort produces a sticky hand and a single envelope similar in appearance to his insurance bill. He slides his finger under the sealed flap and rips it open to reveal a check for \$50,000, covering the loss of his home. Suddenly, Douglas loses balance of his suspended fork and jerks his hand in an unconscious reflex to save it. Jolted out of sleep, he notices he has dropped his dessert onto his lap and has dribbled on his chin.

Without looking up from his spill, he can tell by the cheering audience, babbling contestants, and bubbly theme music rattling his TV's broken speaker that the game show's closing credits are rolling. The clamor reminds him of the carnival fun house he frequented as a kid to escape reality — where loud, excited voices vied to be heard over random shrieks and a bouncy calliope tune. Looking back, he now realizes the bizarre house was nothing more than a trailer, rocking and bumping on hydraulics that whispered, “Shush,” in mechanical syncopation as if to quiet the racket above them.



The next day, Douglas goes to Texaco to buy five gallons of gasoline. He slips the pump's slender nozzle into the red can he uses for the mower, and hears its thin aluminum walls flex and buckle as they tighten under pressure. He smells the sweet metallic fumes of the regular unleaded, and seems them shimmer toward the sky like barbecue heat. The refracting vapors remind him of a warped fun house mirror. When the can is almost full he loosens his grip and times his release to the penny. The meter reads \$3.50, and he figures he will get a healthy return on this investment.

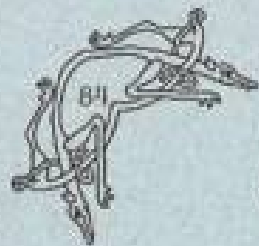


By Accident

by Edwin Whitcraft

You were the family photographer, but never a very good one. Remember when your thumb would get in the way of the lens and cover faces of forgotten friends or the monument of the moment? It would creep into our slide shows peeping over an edge like some unmentionable black appendage or Death's envious head secretary watching Life over the fence before ending it. That's the only way you really ever made it into our pictures: by accident. You must have known a posed smile would expose your resentment and plans to leave us in

shadowy tendrils, because you were a liar, but never a very good one.



Mud Angels

by Sarah Rummel

A creamy glaze in the old man's eyes is an indication of his age and impending death. He knows exactly when his time will come. He tells everyone without them asking that his dead wife, Lucy, approached him while he was sitting on the toilet one morning. She wore a white gown made of silk and cradled their deceased poodle, Beatrice, in her arms.

"Your time is up, Felix." This was all she said. The residents of the Pleasant Oak nursing home think he is crazy. In late afternoon, when the sun falls leaving long shadows on the orange carpeting in the rec room, Felix sits and waits. Voices trickle distantly around him and sometimes his wheelchair is bumped, but he does not notice.

Now he is in his home. The brick one-story is smaller than her remembers, and the furniture looks as it did when Lucy rearranged it 40 years ago. He has been out late with some friends from work and drank too many martinis. He has tripped over that coffee table in the middle of the floor and bumped it across the room where the glass top has shattered against the wall.

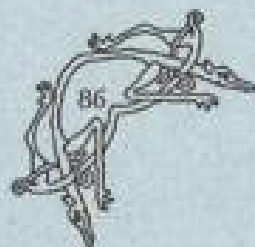
Lucy is here with Beatrice, sitting in the chair next to the coffee table, waiting. Her feet are bare and muddy and Flex wonders if she had to walk from her grave in the woods to the house. He quickly dismisses the thought because angels do not inhabit the ground. They also do not get dirty or sit in one's house. He flicks the light on to see if she will disappear. She remains motionless, appearing not to breathe.

The dog's hair is matted and smells as though it has been soaking up all of the late autumn rain from the last month. Sitting on the woman's lap, it, too, does not take a breath. Despite their disheveled appearance, Flex thinks they look strangely content. Slowly, Lucy begins to rise out of the chair as she gazes vacantly



into the distance. She turns and walks down the hall way with her feet barely touching the ground. Sliding the back door open, she steps out with Felix trailing behind. As they entered the woods behind the house, his ten acres turn into a forest.

Felix and his wife walk to the creek where an abundance of silver fish leap into the air. He finds a fishing pole next to a large rock and begins to catch his fish one after the other. He had always wanted an outdoor dog. Felix can not remember why he is at the creek but is happy he has the day off from work to spend with his wife. A feeling of relaxed contentment and pleasure makes Felix lie in the mud and roll around. They will bury Felix's body next to Lucy's on Saturday.



TRUE LOVE

by Sarah Rummel

The first thing Jack did when he got out of the Minnesota State Hospital was to take a taxi to the zoo. He knew he was expected at the Cedar View Half-Way House but he needed to roam, plus he liked the idea of seeing other beings in captivity besides himself. The frigid December air sliced through his throat and lungs, forcing him to shove his scarf up to his deepset eyes. He bought a package of beef jerkey at a greasy concession stand and tore the slices into tiny pieces, and tossed the shreds one by one to a pair of North American grizzly bears. A female voice pulled him away from his admiration of the animals' voracious appetites.

"Excuse me—you dropped your wallet back there," the voice said.

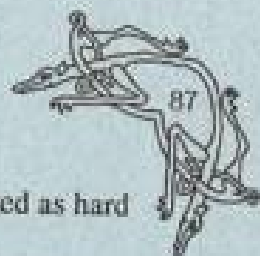
Jack glanced unseeingly at the figure standing to his right. The woman had on a red coat that hung to the middle of her calves. All Jack saw was a scarlet blur. Except for a handful of nurses and social workers, he had not spoken to a woman in almost ten years. He extended his right hand to the woman and she placed the wallet in his palm.

"Thanks," he managed to force from his throat as he turned quickly back to the bears.

"Don't you just love the way they roll around like that?" the woman asked.

"Uh yea—I mean, yes. Yes I do very much," he stammered.

What was it about that voice? It had a singing quality to it as if he had heard it before. Suddenly, the image of a blond dancer he had met a decade before passed in front of his eyes. Oh yes, Mauriel. Jack had tried to forget about Mauriel. He always enjoyed her company—until that one day. He reflected for a moment on the compulsion he had felt that day, how he grasped her deli-



cate, white neck between his hands and squeezed as hard as he could.

"May I have one of those pieces? I mean, for the bears?" the woman asked brightly.

"Uh, sure," Jack answered. The woman slid close to him and removed a salty slice from the bag. Jack continued to gaze straight ahead, through the bars, past the bears, into space. He thought of the hospital with its giant fences and pea-green hallways that reeked of urine. They told him he was well, that it was only temporary insanity which caused him to kill Mauriel Foster.

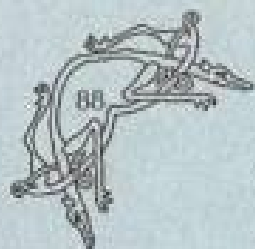
"We believe because of the abuse you suffered as a child from your mother, something about Mauriel triggered a memory. Like your mother, Mauriel had similar qualities—the same voice and hair, for example. That could be what did it," a psychologist had said, puffing thoughtfully on a pipe every now and then.

Jack remembered this conversation and smiled to himself. He was sane. They said so. They said his good behavior while he was incarcerated helped prove this.

"Yes, I know what I did was wrong," he told them.

"Yes, I feel remorse," he said when the psychiatric team evaluated him.

Now he was free. Jack turned to the woman and asked if she would like to go for a walk, and she agreed. A lonely man on a bench near the leopard cage watched the couple stroll by. He saw a man with a thick scarf around his face, captivated by a blond woman in a red coat. The man with the scarf walked a slight bit behind the woman, his eyes glued to the back of her head. He seemed mesmerized by her blond hair, blowing in the icy wind. The stranger wished he, too, was in love.



The Smell of Dark Streets

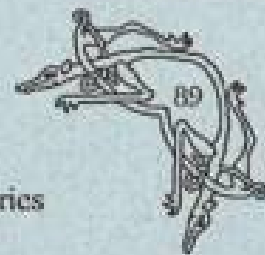
by K. Elizabeth Butler

The dark street quivers beneath every footstep
taken alone on a narrow
and twisting lane
passing tilted
and precarious
rowhouses,

And alongside the broken flagstone pavement
lingering wisps of green
branches shimmer and drop
tiny spheres of silver water into rising
mist;

Blanketing all but the looming dominance
of a mediaeval cathedral
whose gaping and
crumbling stones
despair of
passing,

While the still, silent weight of centuries
releases a thousand echoes heard
beyond icy sanctuary halls to ignite the Jubilate
and freeze the
moment



only to melt away like memories
of long evening walks in the
dark, veiled streets—
dim passages, trembling
to be
relived.

