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1994 Forces

Peggy Brown

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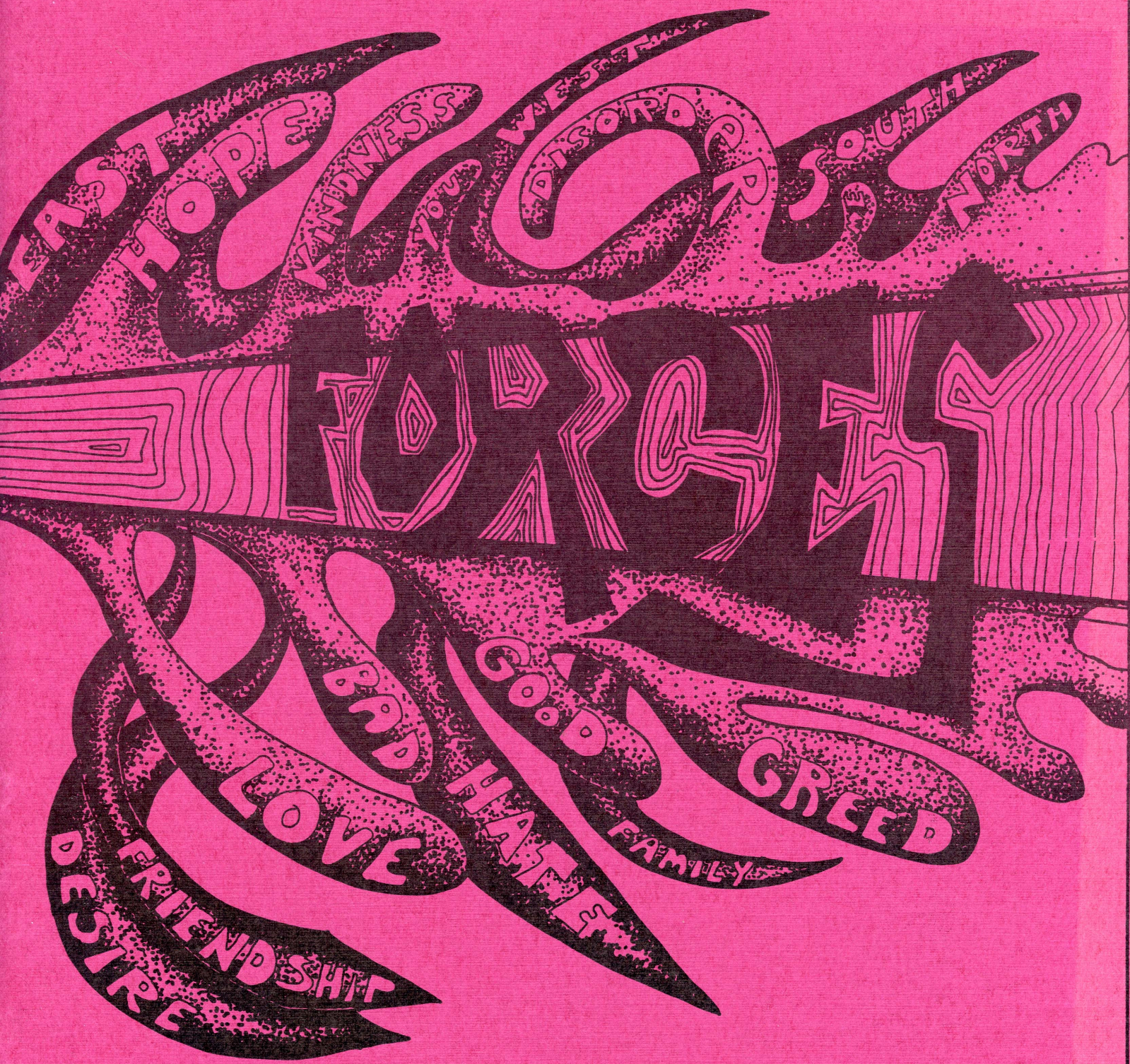
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FALL 1994

F O R C E S

ATTRACT AND REPEL



NATURE

Mankind plunders, yet enjoys.



FAMILIES

Torn asunder, somehow grow.



BROTHERS

Battle fiercely, strongly bonding.



EROS

Ever present, frees our soul.

FORCES

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This World

This world . . .
Spinning on its axis
Burning up our taxes
from fools
for fuels
Of deceit.

This world . . .
Rolling the atmosphere
Whispering in our ears
of pain
no gain
Losing ground.

This world . . .
Giving all it has to give
Feeding us so we might live
falling dead
in the red
Gone dim.

Melanie Beggs



James Dorrell

It was a perfect Indian summer evening. The heat of the past three months had left its unmerciful mark on all who had endured it, granting this sense of Indian summer a welcome relief. The air seemed easier to breathe with the sun's setting, leaving a calm before the onslaught of the fall winds and the frigid "blue northers" that would follow. It was the kind of evening well suited for yard work, something I always put off as long as humanly possible. School had started early, even though September was still on the horizon, so most of the children were in for the night. A quiet permeated Early Morn Drive as I surveyed my long-neglected gardens.

That was when I first noticed how overgrown everything had become in the side yard. As I poked and pulled on branches and limbs, I spotted the vines creeping up the holly tree, dwarfing the crepe myrtles and obliterating the junipers. The large, green leaves connected the thick vines to thinner vines that sent spiral fingers off in every direction as if searching for new and unconquered territories.

This will never do I said to myself. Whatever this is, it has got to go!

Actually I'd been quite lucky for someone not known for plant expertise. (No Green Thumb here!) I had the birds to thank for most of the things in this garden. The seeds they dropped as they flew by left me wonderful treasures: a cottonwood tree, blackberry patch, two rose bushes, and an assortment of crepe myrtles--but this new growth was completely overpowering. As I pulled on one vine after another, looking for some sign of origin, I began to unearth strange pod-like structures. They were attached to the vines at various locations. The more I pulled, the more pods appeared. The smallest was already the size of my fist, green, somewhat fuzzy, and hard to the touch. Pulling and tugging as I did sent the pods swaying as if moved by a strong wind. They leapt out from behind leaves on the ground and swayed from bushes and trees overhead. What on Earth could they be? Wait . . . a . . . minute. Maybe they're not from Earth . . . My mind raced backwards to the science fiction movie classic, INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS. YES!!! They sent pods from somewhere in outer-space. Those pods started out small, too! Inside each was the exact likeness of someone in that town. Oh, great! I was now raising perfect likenesses of all my neighbors! We'd all look the same as when we were humans, only our checkbooks

Dinosaur Eggs

Patricia D. Richards

would always be balanced, our houses clean, and our kitchens orderly--NO DUST!!!, NO TEEN-AGE BACK TALK!!! Oh, the thought of all this was unnerving. I would have to save Early Morn Drive from such a fate and destroy these invaders. I began to attack them with a vengeance, imagining myself wearing a shield emblazoned with a Green Thumb crest. I was so engrossed in my task and my imagination that I became oblivious to everything else. That's why the voice came as such a startling surprise.

"What are you doing?"

At first I believed it to be part of my story, but then it repeated, "What are you doing?"

The voice was clear and unassuming as anything. Turning around, I was surprised to see two little girls staring back at me. Of course I knew them, but somehow, here, saving us from the body snatchers, they looked different to me. The oldest was about five years old, barefooted and barechested, wearing only a

short, pleated skirt. She was forthright in her half-nakedness, displaying that absolutely confident air of one supposed to be dressed as she: with that sense of self that society steals too soon.

The little one at her side was wearing a short dress with a scooped neck. A floral pattern covered her dress, and she looked as if she belonged in my garden. Both appeared to have played that day. Little beads of perspiration stood like jewels around their hairlines and noses in the descending half-light of dusk. When the little one laughed, I swore I heard the sound of tiny bells.

A third time, the question was repeated, "What are you doing?"

Finding my voice, I told them of my discovery and desire to rid the yard of these menacing pod-like creatures.

Bending over, the older one studied the pods nearest her. Following her lead, the little one silently complied.

After a brief period they nodded in agreement to some unspoken pact. The older one, obviously the designated speaker, said they'd like to help.

Together we pulled and pulled on the vines, laughing and making a game out of taming my jungle. The little one would jump up and down and clap her hands whenever her sister and I managed to dislodge a particularly troublesome vine. Once, we even had the holly tree bent completely in half by our pulling. When the vine broke free, the tree snapped back to its rightful position, swaying slightly

rid of them--throw them away. We didn't even know what they were--what if they were dangerous???

Her serious countenance gave way to a broad smile.

"They're harmless," she said with authority. Silence stood between us. Then I said,

"Do you know what these are?"

"Of course," she said in her direct manner.

"Dinosaur Eggs," she said.

Melting completely, I looked anew at our vine and pod pile, nodding silently. Of course, dinosaur eggs. Why had-



before coming to a stop, as if we'd not been there at all.

When we finished, vines lay scattered on the ground over an area of about seven feet. The pile was as high as the littlest girl was tall. We ran around it singing our own made-up songs and chants. The older one turned suddenly and said,

"May I have some of the pods?"

She was serious and sincere. Bending down so our eyes were on the same level, I asked why she wanted them. She said it was a secret.

I told her I felt responsible for them and needed to get

n't I thought of it myself: were they any more or less believable than invading pods from outer space, for heaven's sake? What would I say to my little friends now?

I watched in amazement as the older one followed by the younger one studied the pods and selected only the biggest and firmest. Then pulling up her skirt in the front to make a basket and instructing her sister to do likewise, they loaded their treasures and turned to leave. At the sidewalk, as I thanked them for coming to my aid, the older said,

"You know, you could take our picture now, with the

dinosaur eggs, if you like."

Such an invitation must be heeded! They'd seen me on the street before with my big, wooden, 8x10 camera. As a matter of fact, I had tried to photograph them once or twice, but they never stayed still long enough for such a machine and were always blurry in the final print.

Solemnly, they sat on the sidewalk and arranged their treasures.

I raced inside to get my gear, realizing in horror that I only had one piece of film loaded. The light was almost gone outside. They'd have to be still for six or seven seconds--a truly impossible situation, but then again, you never know! This might be the time everything would fall into place. It might be the magic my grandmother always said was in the big black box that would give life to this image.

Racing back outside, I set up quickly, telling them they'd have to be absolutely statue-like for six seconds. I'd count out loud. "OK," they said. I made the picture. Then they ceremoniously packed up their precious cargo and padded silently in their bare feet down the street. I watched them as far as I could see them. At the corner, the older one turned to wave, spilling one of her eggs, but the younger one caught it in time. The older one called out,

"I'll come get you when they hatch, and you can make another picture." Then both waved and headed on their way.

My six year old, who had mysteriously slept through this adventure (she usually never misses a thing!) came outside to see what had been going on. She carefully examined the pods as well and concurred with the girls,

"Yep, dinosaur eggs, all right. Can I put some under my bed, too, Mom?"

It was so tempting. But then I remembered the body snatchers and chose not to take that chance... although her room would always be clean...

"No!" I said firmly. We pushed them into bags for the trash man who was to come in the morning. I never checked the trash before it was picked up. My daughter claims to have seen a hole at the bottom of the biggest bag, big enough for something round, about the size of my fist, to have escaped.

Is it possible that somewhere near here a tiny dinosaur is gasping its first breath of air, or the perfect likeness of a neighbor is busy tidying-up?

About the picture: When I developed the negative, I was delighted to see the eggs in sharp detail and not surprised that my little friends had moved their heads. Like I said before, they only appear as blurs in my other pictures, so I guess this is their role. But, for me, one glance at the picture is enough to recall the glory of a perfect Indian sum-

mer evening, insuring my grandmother's long-standing prophecy about magic and the big black box and other things to be so.

I've included the picture with this story, so everyone who reads this will know what dinosaur eggs really look like.

I never got the chance to take the second photograph of the hatched eggs. The girls decided the dinosaurs didn't hatch because we got to the eggs too late.

Now that you know what they look like, the girls advise the following:

1. Remove them from your garden when they are very, very small.
2. Place them in a basket covered by a baby blanket.
3. Put them under your bed.

You'll know when they hatch--then call me. I'll be happy to come and make the picture.

Until then, beware of body snatchers and watch out for pods. You never know. I've pretty much decided that, at least on Early Morn Drive, all things are possible.

*A child said "What is the grass?"
fetching it to me with full hands.*

Walt Whitman



Leslie James

The Swan Song

Paul McIntier

Sunlight was fading, and through the window Steve could see the streetlights glowing. Not many cars passed through the quiet, suburban neighborhood, and even fewer since the snowfall of the previous night. The winters were generally mild, but occasionally Old Man Winter made an appearance just long enough to screw up the traffic. Steve remembered passing several cars that had slid off the highway on his way home from work. He felt much better once inside the house, looking out the window and studying the long shadows of the trees lining the boulevard.

Turning away from the window, he clinked the ice cubes in his glass. It was his second Scotch and soda in the past hour, but it wouldn't be his last. At this rate, he would have to make another run to the supermarket for more limes.

It never fails, he thought. I always seem to have enough soda for the scotch, but never enough limes.

He drained the last of the drink and went to the kitchen to mix another one. The last few nights had been a bitch for him, and tonight he planned to get drunk. He had a difficult task in front of him tomorrow, and he knew he would not be able to sleep.

Glancing at the kitchen calendar, he noticed that six days had passed since he last saw Amanda. Now the house seemed like a schoolyard in the summer--too quiet. Even though not a large house, its emptiness made it feel like a mansion. Nor was it the first time he had spent a few nights alone here. In the six years they were together, she had left twice. This time, though, it was for good, and he knew it. But knowing it did not make it any easier to accept.

He plopped down into the recliner in front of the TV.

A movie-of-the-week was on, but he had missed too much of it to get in on the story. He doubted he would have been able to stay interested anyway, so he aimed the remote and clicked the TV off. He reached for the picture on the table beside him. It was a photograph of the two of them at the lake the previous summer with a group of friends on a weekend camping trip. Amanda's long hair was dripping wet, as were the cutoffs and the white t-shirt she wore. Steve was standing next to her, unable to contain his laughter. Rick Donner, Steve's best friend from college, had snapped the picture shortly after Steve had thrown Amanda into the lake. It certainly wasn't the best picture of her; it didn't show off the wavy brown hair or the deep blue eyes that had melted his knees--and his heart--the first time he saw her. It was, however, a photo that had captured the very heart and spirit of their relationship: a joyful celebration of life shared by two people without a care in the world.

He set the picture back on the table and took another sip from his glass. The ticking of the mantel clock was amplified now that the TV was off. Amanda hadn't cared much for television, so he had grown used to the hypnotic sound of the clock. The house was not always silent when she was around, though, as they both enjoyed listening to music rather than vegetating in front of the boob tube. They had an extensive music library to keep them entertained.

I guess it's now my music collection, he thought.

Amanda did, however, enjoy watching movies on the VCR. Steve could remember the first one they watched together when they first moved into the house. It was *9-1/2 Weeks*, and his friends told him it was the perfect one to watch with your lover.

They were right.

Steve and Amanda had spread a blanket out in front of the set and sat down with their bowls of popcorn and their Cokes. But less than thirty minutes later, they lost interest. It wasn't that the movie was uninteresting, they had just become more interested in each other.

"You know, this movie is starting to make me a little . . . uh . . ."

"Frisky?" he finished.

"Well, I was thinking of a different word, but that one comes close," she said, a playful grin crossing her face.

They undressed slowly, as if neither of them had experienced buttons and zippers before. She looked down into his face, her hair brushing his cheeks as the glow of the TV cast their shadows on the far wall.

"I want you to know," she whispered, leaning toward his ear, "I may not be as inventive as this movie, but I can promise you that each time we make love it will be more special than the time before." He remembered thinking afterward that he would enjoy discovering how she was

going to top that night's session.

The clock chimed 10:00 and his mind jumped to the present, sobering as it was. He noticed his glass was nearly empty again.

Why don't I just bring the damn booze in here.

He went to the kitchen and poured another drink. Returning to the living room, he set the bottles and the lime on the coffee table and dropped back into the recliner. He was having trouble concentrating on anything; his mind kept floating back to the way things used to be with Amanda around the house. He knew they would never be that way again. He assumed she would be better off, but he wasn't so sure about himself.

He thought back to the time his company had sent him to a job site almost 200 miles away. Because the work would keep him away for about ten days, the company put him up in a hotel.

Those ten days, however, seemed like weeks. On Thursday, after just four days away, he called her.

"Do you have a date tomorrow?" he asked.

"A what? What are you talking about, 'a date'?" She was not sure if he was serious.

"What do you think I mean? A date, you know?"

"Of course I don't, you know that," she answered, growing upset that he would suggest such a thing.

"Would you like one? With me, I mean?"

"Sure I--" she began, but stopped herself. "Well, wait, I don't know," she said, her tone changing. Steve could almost hear the mischievous grin creep across her face. "Ginny and I were going to go catch a movie, and then maybe . . ."

"Well, okay," he interrupted. "I noticed this topless bar down the street anyway, and . . ."

"Don't you dare!" she hissed. Steve started laughing, and she soon joined in.

"Okay," she said, "you've got a date. Now tell me how you plan to do this."

He told her about the little barbecue restaurant off the highway about halfway between them. He noticed it because it seemed to be the only thing in the area, and the parking lot had been full of cars when he drove past it. A couple of the guys he worked with had eaten there, and they all raved about the place, so he made plans to get off work a little early and meet her there for dinner the next evening.

"It looked as if three-quarters of the parking lot was full of pickups, so I'd imagine that jeans and a western shirt would be appropriate enough," he told her. "And wear those red cowboy boots you have. I'd bet my last paycheck there's sawdust on the floor and a country band in the back! And who knows, I might even feel like dancing!"

"This I gotta see," she said.

So they agreed to meet at seven, but when Steve pulled into the parking lot, he noticed Amanda's car already there. He thought he might have trouble finding her until he looked to the back wall and saw a gorgeous brunette leaning her head out of a booth, watching the door. She was even more beautiful than the day he left on this silly assignment. Slipping into the booth across from her, he leaned across the table and kissed her.

"I'm sorry," she told him, "but you'll have to leave. I'm expecting my boyfriend any minute." She started giggling, and that was when he noticed the three empty beer bottles next to the wall of the booth. She had never really been able to hold her booze, anyway, he thought.

"How long have you been here?"

"Well, I got too excited, and I couldn't just wait around the house, so I left a little early. I had to make sure I could find the place, and then I wasn't sure about the parking . . ."

"How long?" he asked again, grinning at her rambling.

"About two hours."

"How can you be so goofy after only three beers in two hours?" he asked, gesturing toward the bottles.

"Oh, she's already cleared the table once."

He decided it was best not to ask how many empties were removed, so he smiled and leaned across the table for another kiss. This one lasted a bit longer.

They ordered a generous plate of barbecue and finished off with a slice of their favorite dessert, Dutch apple pie. Strains of country music were drifting from the back room, and Steve's feet started tapping. He assumed it was a jukebox in a back room full of pool tables and pin-ball machines. He ordered another round of beers, but Amanda declined this one, so they headed for the room in the back.

Steve laughed when he turned the corner and looked down the length of the hall. "The Back Room" was handwritten in big, bright red letters on a hollow-core door. He knew it was a hollow core because there was a fist-sized hole in it. All of a sudden Steve was a little apprehensive about entering.

Aw, what the hell, he thought, and pushed the door open with his boot. As he suspected, the cement floor was littered with crushed cigarette butts and empty peanut shells, and one half of the room made up the game room, while the other half was set aside for dancing. Already several couples were out there, holding each other tight and moving to what his Daddy always called "buckle-polishin' music." Steve wasn't much for country dancing; all that spinning around made him feel silly and a bit dizzy. But tonight was different, and he really didn't care how he looked or what people thought of him. All he cared about

at that moment was Amanda.

A car roared down the street and its blaring radio brought Steve back to reality. His glass was completely empty, but he had no recollection of finishing it. Reaching for the bottle of Scotch, he noticed that it was nearly empty as well. Evidently he had poured a couple more, but he couldn't remember doing that, either. He went to the kitchen for another bottle of Scotch and the last bottle of soda.

Standing at the sink, Steve poured a fresh drink and decided he had better eat dinner. He had fixed a light snack just after he came home from work, but that was three hours and several Scotch and sodas ago. He called out for a pizza to have it delivered. There was nothing in the refrigerator worth fixing, and he certainly was in no condition to drive to the nearest fast food restaurant.

About twenty-five minutes later his pizza arrived, and he paid the driver, tipping him far more than he should. He had ordered a sausage and mushroom pizza, the kind he always ordered when the choice was left up to him. He grabbed a couple of paper towels off the roll and went back to the recliner, the pizza box resting on his lap.

"Rub-a-dub-dub, thanks for the grub. Yeeaaaaaayyy, God!"

This made him laugh so hard that he sloshed a good portion of his drink on the carpet and almost dumped the pizza on the floor.

"Where in the hell did you learn that?" he asked out loud to no one in particular.

He flipped through his mental photo album of the past thirty years until he came upon the image of him and his younger brother, Brent, at the dinner table when Steve was eight.

"Daddy, may I say grace over dinner?" Brent had asked. "I learned a new one in school."

Reluctantly his father agreed, and Brent recited the prayer he had heard in the school cafeteria that day. Steve would never forget the looks on his parents' faces. Mouths gaping, eyes as big as golf balls, they scolded him for his irreverence. From that moment on, they were always somewhat apprehensive whenever it

was Brent's turn to say grace.

Steve had eaten half of his pizza when the phone rang. He stared at it, debating whether or not he should answer it. After the fifth ring, he decided he should. He crossed the floor, on unsteady steps, to the end table, reluctant to speak with whomever was on the other end. It wasn't that he feared Amanda's voice coming through the line; he knew she wouldn't be calling anymore. Nor did he fear hearing his mother's voice, constantly reassuring him that everything would be all right, and would he like her to come over for a visit? His mother could still not get over the fact that her baby boy was thirty and perfectly capable of dealing with life's tragedies, however big or small.

No, he was not afraid of talking to any one specific person, just to people in general. He was not in a talkative mood. Fearing an emergency, though, he

picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" The word seemed to pour from his mouth.

"Steve? It's Rick. What's up?"

"Not much Rick, how's it going?" His tongue felt too thick for his mouth.

"Pretty good. Listen, a group of us guys were headed down to The Roundhouse and we thought you might like to come along."

The Roundhouse was a downtown sports

bar that had once been a small theater-in-the-round. When the theater closed, it was converted into a bar that had quickly become Steve's favorite place to unwind after work. But tonight he was already too unwound. He squeezed the bridge of his nose with a thumb and forefinger, his head throbbing. Normally he would welcome the chance to get out of the house for a "boy's night out," but tonight he was well ahead of them in the drinking department, and he really did not feel like being -- or having -- company.

"I don't think so, Rick, but thanks for asking. Can I take a raincheck?"

"Of course you can, anytime. But I gotta tell you, Steve, I'm worried about you. So are the rest of the guys. Nobody's seen you out of the house in three days."

"Yeah, well, it's my damned house, and if I want

"The Back Room" was
handwritten in big,
bright red letters on a
hollow-core door.

to stay in it, I will, all right?"

Regretting the words as he spoke them, he fumbled for an apology. "I'm sorry. It's been kinda hard for me to handle, but I've decided the only way I can go on is to admit to Amanda that I know it's over."

"What are you saying, that you're gonna talk to her?"

"Yeah," Steve replied after what seemed an eternity.

"Like I said, it'll make it a lot easier to accept the fact that I won't see her anymore."

There was a pause on the other end of the line, and Steve could tell Rick disagreed with the idea. He really didn't care about Rick's opinion anyway, or anyone else's for that matter. Tomorrow he would put the whole thing behind him.

"Okay, Steve, whatever you think's best. Give me a call this weekend, all right?"

Steve told him he would and then replaced the receiver in its cradle. The booze was starting to get to him and the pizza was beginning to rebel against his stomach. He walked back into the living room and stretched out on the sofa. The clock above the fireplace began chiming the midnight hour. Steve was out before it finished.

When he awoke the next morning, Steve felt as if someone had set off a stick of dynamite in his head. He noticed the half-empty bottle of Scotch on the table and realized he had made only a couple more drinks before he passed out. His head, as always, was pounding, and for the umpteenth time he vowed to stop abusing his body with alcohol. Sitting up, he tried to put his feet on the floor, but it seemed to move away from him. After two or three attempts, he managed to plant them. Looking about the room, he tried to remember the events of the night before. He could remember the pizza guy showing up, but that was about it. As he shook the cobwebs from his head, it felt as if several steel balls were ping-pong off the inside of his skull like a pinball machine. One thing he did remember, though, was that he needed to pay a visit to Amanda. He wasn't looking forward to it, but he knew it was necessary.

He walked to the bathroom and examined his face in the mirror. He knew he ought to shave the three-day growth of beard, but he reasoned it would be simpler to let it grow and just shave his teeth. His tongue felt like it was wrapped in fur. Hopping into a steaming hot shower, he attempted to scrub away the misery and self-pity, but could

not. Instead, he watched the grit and grime of the past three days slip down the drain.

Just like your life, if you don't straighten up, he thought.

He towed off and walked into the bedroom to get dressed. The telephone rang, but he let the answering machine get it. He wanted to hurry and put this day behind him so he could continue with his life.

He fought the urge to turn
and walk away, thinking it
would be better to leave well
enough alone . . .

"I always knew this would be difficult, but I didn't know it would be *this* difficult." He twisted the gold and black onyx ring around his finger nervously. It was something he often found himself doing whenever he was uptight or restless. Now, finally realizing that a six-year relationship had ceased to exist and would not resume again, Steve was nervous about opening up. He fought the urge to turn and walk

away, thinking it would be better to leave well enough alone, but he knew the pain in his heart would not go away unless he saw this through.

Looking up he saw the sun directly overhead, but it did nothing to warm the December air. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The air stung his lungs, and he could feel the cold concrete bench on the back of his legs. He waved to the groundskeeper who was out picking up trash on the lawn.

"I guess it took awhile to sink in, but I know I'll never have you back. The reality was there, but I didn't want to accept it. Now I know that I have to go, but I hope you don't mind if I reminisce a little before I go." He knew he would get no objection, so he continued.

"I can remember when we first met. It was as if everyone at the party suddenly faded into the background, and there was just you and me standing in the room. I thought of those TV shows where the picture suddenly goes out of focus as they take you on a flashback. But this wasn't a flashback; it was more of a *flashforward*, a look into the future. From that moment on, I knew the future would see the two of us together. I never once saw a day that we would be apart. If I remember right, it was some time before you felt the same thing, but eventually you came around."

He looked down at his hands and noticed they were shaking. Feeling the urge to shove them into the pockets of his coat, he realized there was no need to hide his nervousness. He glanced down at his feet just as the wind blew a

styrofoam cup against his shoe. He kicked it away.

"It was an incredible feeling, Amanda, it really was.

At twenty-four, I thought I had a few more years of playing the field before I would want to settle down, but all that went out the window in a matter of days. I had hoped you would be with me for the rest of my life, but I guess things have a way of changing whether we want them to or not. What, did God step away for a minute, and someone else dealt us this hand? I don't know. But whatever happened -- *why* it happened -- it makes my heart so heavy that I sometimes feel as if I'm going to buckle under the strain."

He stopped twisting the ring and stared at it. It was 14-carat gold with a rectangular top. The top was split into two triangles, one of which was the black onyx he had always wanted in a ring. The other half was brushed gold with a tiny diamond set in its center. Amanda had given it to him the day he turned thirty, almost six months ago.

"This is a "BILY" present," she had told him, "as well as a birthday present."

"Who's Billy? I don't understand." He wanted to scold her for spending the money, but he couldn't deny he wanted the ring. He felt a wave of selfishness come over him.

Besides, she's a big girl and can spend her money however she wants.

It was the same ring he had shown her almost a year ago. It was on his "Someday I'd Like To Have It" list, but he only told her he liked it a lot. He said nothing about wanting it, yet here it was on his finger.

"It's not a "who," it's a "what." A "BILY" present is a "Because I Love You" present." She kissed him on the tip on his nose. "Happy Birthday."

"I love you, too, Amanda." He picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. They made love as if it had been the first time for both of them, slowly, yet passionately.

He pushed the thought from his mind. The ring would now be a symbol of a time that was, a feeling he would more than likely never experience again.

"Remember the time we made love in my parent's bathtub when they were out of town?" He managed to smile in spite of the pain inside. It was the first time either one had used a bathtub for something other than bathing. It was quite awkward, and they both laughed afterward as they realized it was not unlike what their parents must have gone through in the back seats of their cars.

RAIN

The pregnant clouds
Anxious to deliver
Her labor pains explode
over the horizon
Until the water breaks
and the miracle is born.

Melanie Beggs

"Or how about the time you taught me the art of stir-frying chicken, and we stuffed ourselves until we were sick. You said you never wanted to see another wok again.

"I'm going to miss times like that, Amanda. I'm going to miss the times we'd turn on the stereo, turn off the lights, and dance in the middle of the living room. I'm going to miss how you'd politely put up with my singing no matter where we were. I had to hear from Rick that I sounded like a fork in a blender and that I ought to stick with shower singing. There is so much that I'm going to miss, sweetheart, and I don't know how I'll manage."

Brushing a tear off his cheek, he realized he still had so much to share with her, but now he would be unable to do so.

"It's been so hard without you, Amanda. Just one week ago, I was holding you in my arms, and now . . . this . . ." He let the thought go unspoken.

He had started crying now, the tears streaming down his face. Despite the hurt, he felt the sadness in his heart easing, just as he knew it would. He walked over and placed the flowers he brought with him next to the marker at the head of her grave.

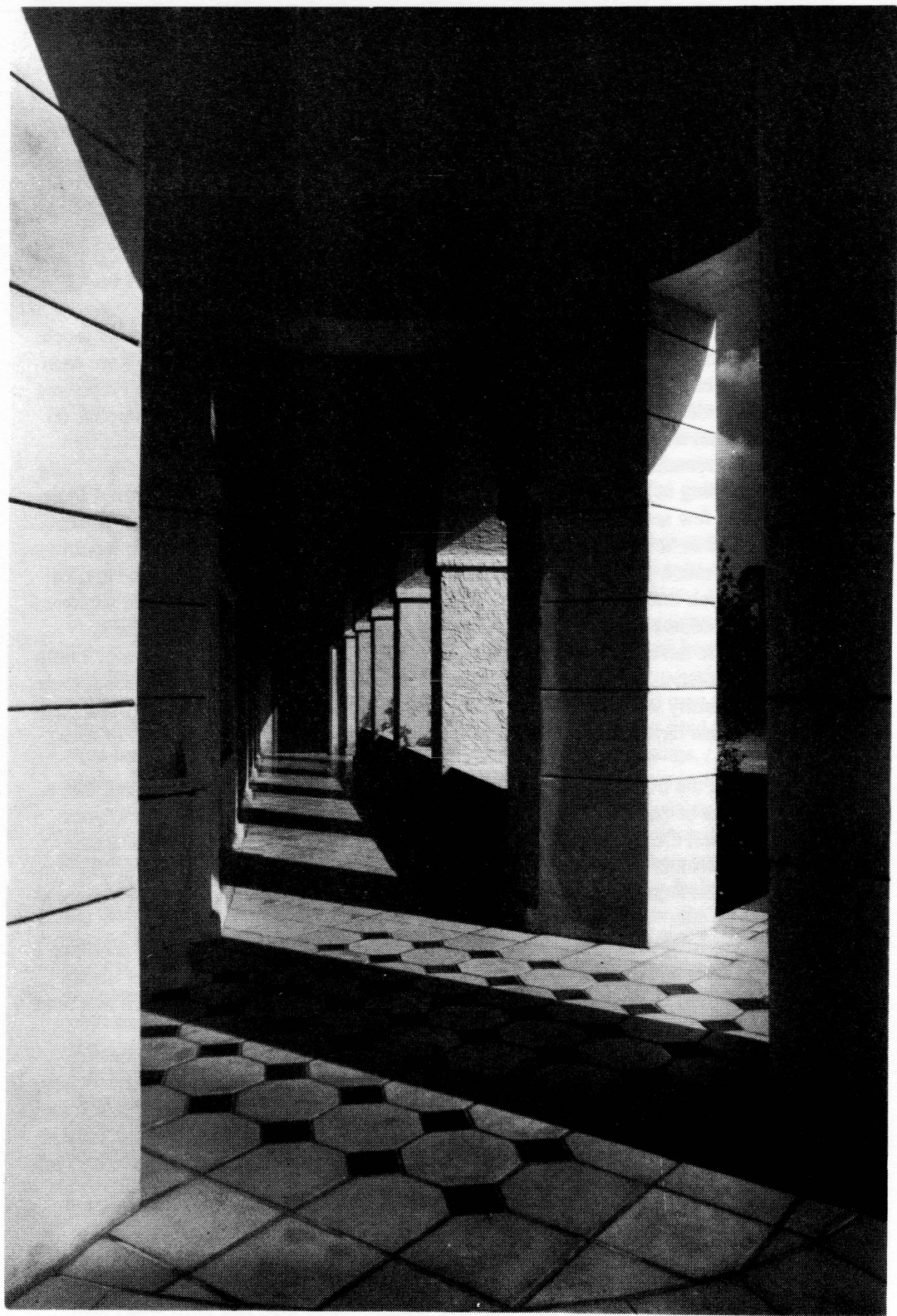
"I miss you, Amanda. I miss you, and I love you. I always will."

I wrote a good omelette . . .

and ate a hot poem . . .

after loving you.

Nikki Giovanni



Gary Ruppert

A Letter of Gratitude

Dear Ms. Akhmatova:

I have been blessed with a life in such contrast to your own that I can barely touch on the depth of your grief and the injustices done to you. As an American, I have seen the suffering of the Russian Revolution only through the eyes of historians and reporters and have wondered how people can stay in their country when their leaders impose on them a war that tears apart every shred of their being. I would like to think that, like you, I would remain at home to fight for my freedom. I cannot imagine making a daily ritual of standing in prison lines. I live in a world where it is unthinkable to even imagine waiting a few seconds to learn if your son or daughter is in prison, dead, or alive. You remained at home with your countrymen, suffering and grieving, when it would have been so much easier to escape; and because of this, you have allowed me to take an intimate look into your life and the lives of people born in a time and place where individual freedoms were few. Your eloquence and desire to record the atrocities occurring there have allowed me to gain a microscopic glimpse into the cold and lonely isolation, desolation, and desperation of those sentenced to wait and wonder about their friends and family who were lost to government imprisonment. What a heavy responsibility you must have felt knowing they depended on you to provide a journal of their experience.

I think of the troubles I endure in my everyday life and realize to my shame the sheer pettiness of each--the bickering, the time squandered. When compared to your losses and grief, these selfish annoyances mean nothing. I am lucky to live in a time when my individual imagination and emotions are valued. I have never had to fear being forbidden from working in my chosen field because it was not good for society as a whole.

I am free to speak out and to voice my opinion without looking over my shoulder or fearing that today might be the day they will find my diary and imprison or arrest me; or worse, my family will be punished for my expressions. You were born in a time and place where self expression was a crime that could cost you your life.

You have created for me a picture of brotherhood built on fear and strengthened through love, another world unimaginable in that your poetry is a crime against society. The strength you have shown is something I admire, and I hope I never have to test my own to such a severe degree. In a time when we are so individualized and look only at our own predicament, you spoke to me for yourself and your country and made me realize how lucky I am.

With deepest gratitude,

Renee Wallace

Dear David Diop

Dear David Diop,

Your poem "Africa" emphasizes the importance of knowing one's ancestral background. You encourage your readers to be proud of their heritage and cultural traditions. However, for many people who live in the twentieth century this may not be possible. Test-tube babies, adopted infants, and orphaned children may never learn of their ancestral backgrounds. Your poem provokes emotions of my own sadness to surface when I think about the thousands of children in the world who grow up not knowing their heritage.

A few days after reading your poem, I bought a Newsweek magazine. As I was scanning it, the article "Whose Eyes are These, Whose Nose?" caught my attention. The story was written by a woman conceived by donor insemination. Her purpose in writing the article was to describe her frustrations from not knowing all of her biological roots. This woman believes that half of her heritage has been erased and lost forever. She also had another reason for writing the article: to widen her search for her biological father whom she knows only as a brown-haired man who attended the University of Tennessee. Mr. Diop, I can sense the pride you hold in knowing your heritage when you say, "Africa of whom my grandmother sings, / On the banks of the distant river/ I have never known you/ But your blood flows in my veins" (4-6).

Unfortunately, most of the time children of donor inseminations are unable to find out who their other biological parent was because the records are closed or eliminated; therefore, the children do not know whose blood flows through their veins.

I know from experience the devastation adopted children may feel from not knowing their natural parents. As I reread your poem "Africa," I was reminded of the painful memories of trying to help my adopted stepson, Craig, search for his natural parents. He began asking questions about his natural parents at a very early age. Because Craig felt a sense of isolation from not knowing his heritage, he became obsessed with his quest to locate his natural parents. In your poem, you describe a son's strong desire to know his ancestral background when you say, "Impetuous son, this tree, young and strong,/ This tree in splendid isolation / Amidst white and faded flowers,/ That is Africa, your Africa" (20-4). However, Craig has been unable to locate his biological parents, because the courts have permanently sealed his adoption records. In desperation, he has contacted an organization to help him find his natural parents. I cannot describe the anguish he has felt while searching for his ancestral background so that he, too, can proudly claim his heritage.

Most often, adopted children grow up questioning who they are and where they came from. They are unable to experience the pride of knowing their ancestral backgrounds. Mr. Diop, you captured their disappointment at not knowing where they came from and their determination to locate their natural parents when you say, "This back that breaks / Under the weight of humiliation / This back trembling with red scars / Saying yes to the whip / under the midday sun." (15-8). Oftentimes the news of being adopted affects children's sense of identity and belonging.

Many children grow up in orphanages because of war. Much too often, I pick up a newspaper and read about children who become exiled from their own country and live in camps. Often, orphaned children are too young to know their name or their heritage. Living in poverty-stricken conditions, they struggle each day to survive. Many orphaned children do not feel the happiness and pride for their country that your poem describe when you say, "Africa, my Africa, / Africa of proud warriors / In ancestral savannas" (1-3). Children who live in orphanages usually do not know about their ancestral background, their cultural traditions, or their parents.

Mr. Diop, your poem sends a powerful message that conveys the imperative need for people to know their ancestral backgrounds and cultural traditions. Before I read your poem, I took for granted the importance of my heritage. You have taught me to value it, take pride in it, and to be grateful for knowing who I am and where I belong. Because of your poem, I appreciate my heritage much more.

I thank you,

Dianne Jones

*There are only two lasting bequests we can give our children.
One of these is roots; the other, wings.*

Hodding Carter

The Tale of Mother Goose

Mother Goose has slipped her noose
a'running round in circles.
That silly hen in a terrible spin
a'turning shades of purple.

Molly Boyce

She scrambled Humpty who fell on his Dumpty
a'scaring the King's men away.
Oh, what a fright, the moon's out of sight
a'fiddling with kittens at play.

Down feathers fly like snow from the sky
a'covering Mary's poor sheep,
Lost rams and ewes, like meadow's dew
a'hiding from Little Bo Peep.

That goose in a twirl, being such a bad girl
a'tumbling right past Jill.
Jack came down, hitting the ground,
a'bottom of that hill.

Webbed feet kick the air in a terrible dare
a'threatening Little Boy Blue.
Sheep nor cow's safe while she sets the pace
a'churning her personal zoo.

Her beak tills the soil under Contrary's toil
a'flinging those little maids.
Cockleshells scatter amidst the clatter
a'crying the price been paid.

Muffett's tuffet is tossed at the spider's loss
a'spilling the curds and whey.
Mother Goose, daffy bird, broke the poetic word
a'loosing her rythmic say.

The lesson we learn by her psychotic turn
a'changing our nursery fare,
is a mother gone mad jumbles tradition's fad
a'stirring emotions of care.

NITROUS OXIDE

You search for the bones of your past.

Damn you, Dr. Theo!

Why can't you see

you're the artist

not the patron?

Stop filling your life

with gold and silver,

you, the master of decay,

you, the master of deceit,

you, wasting away.

Stop building bridges

and doing canals.

You shouldn't be drilling and suturing,

picking and packing,

extracting and straightening,

but sculpting and molding.

But you went to school for six years,

studied periodontics and TMJ

while longing to be Miro and Rodin,

your hands caught in clay.

You think of Rome, the Pieta,

the sound of the Trevi. You smile,

then remember Schone Brunnen and Nurnberg.

So many gifts,

talents you push aside

to mold with the green,

to watch people flinch

at the sight of you;
they spit blood in your fountain,
your own Bernini
financed through the bank.
Aspiration doesn't always work.
Their bloody drool runs down
the tools God loaned you.

Ten years ago, for three days
I posed for your first, your only, work.
"Why, Theo?"

"I like to work with my hands."
I was young then,
old enough to know a lie,
smart enough to predict a failure.

Embedded within your anger
are teeth, hair, eyeglasses, ashes, ovens
the grandfather you never met.
I admired your work, my sleek body,
on your coffee table,
again begged you to tell me why.
you picked up my clay body,
hurled me against the wall,
to see me crumble
into a thousand pieces.
Pieces, broken, like the bones of your past.

Marti Miles-Rosenfield

Sheet Music

Jerry L. Harris

In the darkness, Lynnette stood naked and shivering. A speck of red on Michael's battery-powered smoke detector was all she could see. She had avoided "making love" as he put it, for the past six months, and during that time Michael had been very patient, very considerate.

She had met Michael through Emmett, her ex-husband, after Michael began playing in *Double Take*, Emmett's former country and western swing band. Michael knew how Emmett had left her and the band for a little bleach-blond slut of a singer who worked in an all-girl group called Hot Biscuits--and he knew what an egotistical S.O.B. Emmett was. Michael played a triple neck, pedal steel guitar and got along with the other band members, but he and Emmett hated each other.

Emmett played fiddle, and everybody knows fiddle players have got to have things their own way. "Jesus H. Christ! Michael can't improvise," Emmett had complained to her. "Who ever heard of a steel player that has to have sheet music in front of him before he can play? Leon never needed sheet music." Leon was Emmett's former steel player.

"Maybe Leon was so busy following your lead that he didn't have time to read sheet music," she had said. As the group's front man, its star, Emmett demanded that the band pay attention to him. He was always in the heat of the spotlight, always playing lead, always singing, always watching for audience reaction and always improvising.

Sometimes, during a show, Emmett's improvising meant changing the order of the playlist or repeating a chorus or verse; sometimes it meant setting up a wild backbeat, sawing on the fiddle, and jitterbugging across the stage.

He'd get cooking on "The Orange Blossom Special," and by the second chorus the whole crowd would be dancing right along with him, whether they wanted to or not. And it was hard to tell if their applause led to Emmett's improvisations, or if his squealing, squalling fiddling led to their applause. He had a devilish instinct for intensity and impulsiveness, and performing for a responsive audience seemed to excite Emmett more than anything. Sometimes Emmett would yell, "Key of G, follow me!" and begin playing a song nobody in the band had heard before. He'd play through a verse and chorus, the band trying to keep up, then he'd hog the microphone and begin to sing. He called this process "spontaneous combustion," and he swore he made up the lyrics as he went along. Lynnette remembered one song in particular. She could remember how Emmett shouted the first verse, almost taunting the audience:

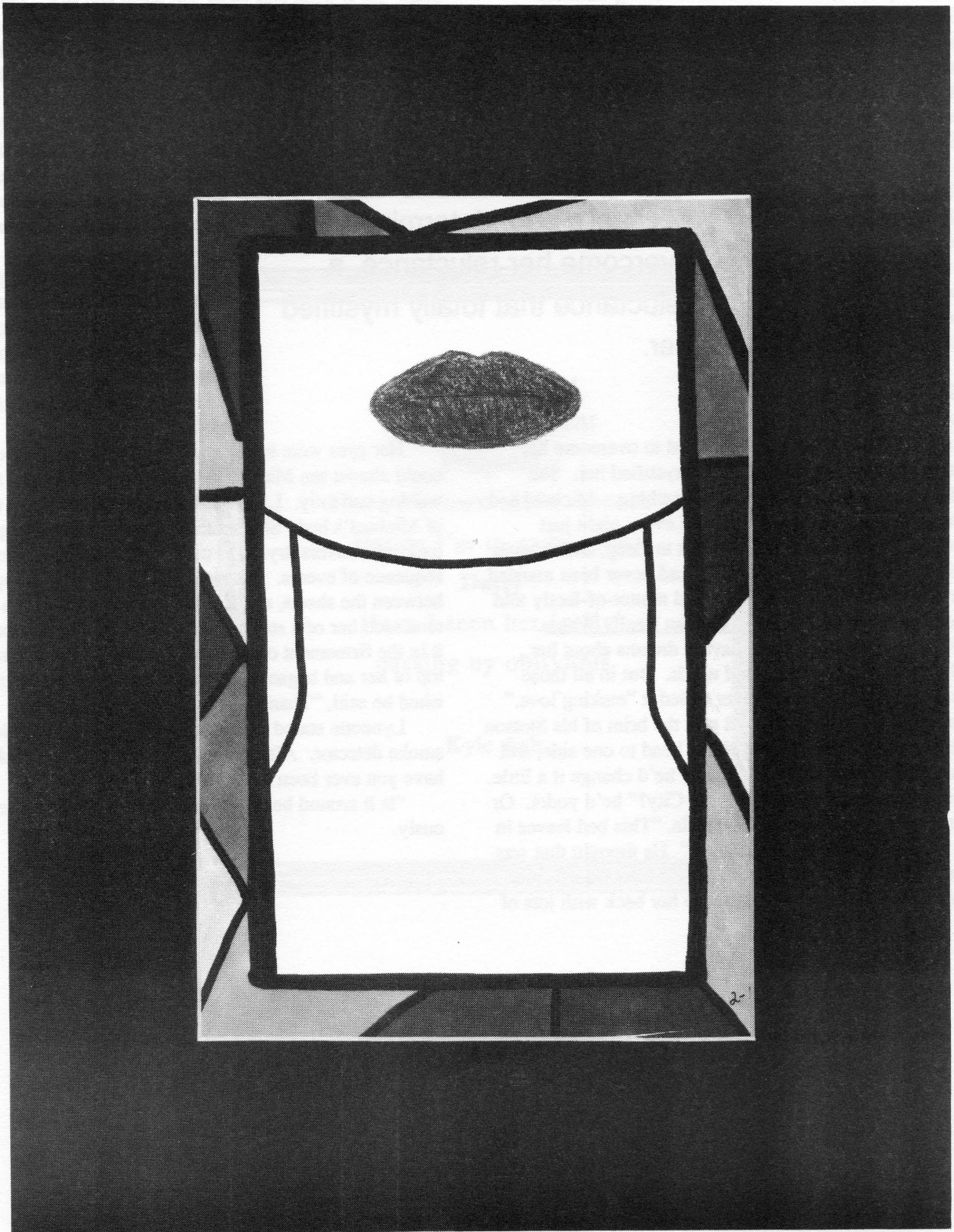
Have you ever been to New York City?
Honey, it's a long, long way to go.
I sure want to see New York City;
I want to go there before I get old.

Emmett's impulsiveness caused a great deal of anxiety for the band, though. They never knew for sure what he'd do next and had to watch for his quirky directions. Nothing could be taken for granted. A raised eyebrow, a wink, a nod, a leap in the air; these were signals meaning as much to the band as a conductor's baton-waving means to an orchestra. Everyone watched Emmett's performance, everyone except Michael: his eyes never left his sheet music.

In the darkness, Lynnette's emotions were jumbled and confused. Something about that tiny red light on Michael's smoke detector magnified her confusion. She couldn't understand it. She wanted to feel secure and happy; sleeping with Michael ought to be an enjoyable occasion. But their relationship so far had been tinged with an unshakable sadness. Sometimes Michael reminded her of the organist at church, the way he sat almost frozen behind his steel guitar, his hands methodically moving from one fretboard to another, feet efficiently working the pedals as he peered intently at his sheet music. His solos were heavy, almost hymnal. His favorite song was "Red Sails in the Sunset" and it always made her cry. She seemed drawn, however, to Michael's straightforward musicianship. He spent hours practicing.

"When I want to zig and zag, Michael wants to play it straight," Emmett had moaned. "What's he reading back there, The Christian-Science Monitor? The Baptist Standard?"

"What's wrong with playing it straight?" she had asked. "Maybe Michael knows more about how it's supposed to go than you do. Maybe he's playing it like it



Robin Thompson

ought to be played," she remembered telling Emmett.

She appreciated the way Michael took time to listen to her, and Michael seemed to enjoy the stories about her and Emmett's painful divorce and everything that went with it: about how she hoped and prayed Emmett would catch AIDS from Miss Hot Twat and die a slow, painful death, and then burn in the fiery furnaces of hell forever and ever, amen. However, the divorce was over a year old by now, and Michael was right: it was time for her to get over it, time to forget Emmett--time to make love.

She stood perfectly still, staring hard at the tiny red light above Michael's bed, determined to overcome her reluctance, a reluctance that totally mystified her. She could hear Michael's slow, steady breathing. Michael had told her that he stared at the red light every night just before he prayed, just before he went to sleep, and thought about her. He was twenty-five and had never been married, never had a steady girlfriend. He had matter-of-factly told her he'd been reading What A Woman Really Wants.

He said he felt guilty for having dreams about her.

She understood. People had needs. But in all those years of marriage, Emmett never called it "making love." When Emmett wanted her, he'd pull the brim of his Stetson to just above his eyebrows, cock his head to one side, and begin to sing "New York City," only he'd change it a little. "Have you ever been to New Hump City?" he'd yodel. Or he'd mumble, Humphrey Bogart style, "This bed leaves in three minutes, sweetheart. Be on it." He thought that was really funny. When she took a bath Emmett would come in, roll up his shirtsleeves, and scrub her back with lots of

soap. He'd wash and wash and wash and say, "You're so sweet I could drink your bath water." Then he'd be in the tub with her. Sometimes when she stood at the sink doing dishes, he'd sneak up behind her, put his hands under her

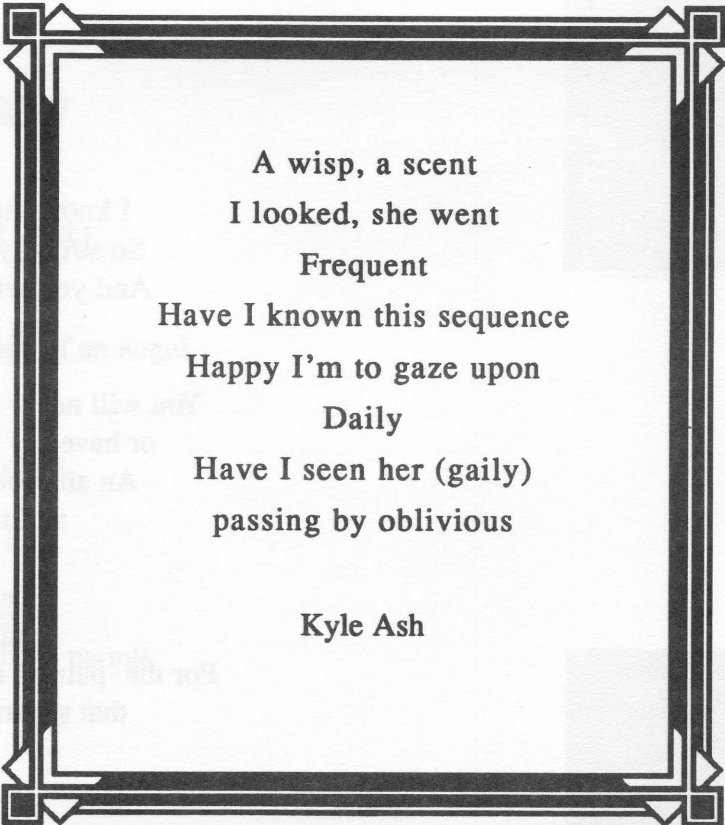
blouse and nibble her ears and say, "This is a stickup, lady. Give me all you got." When she turned around, he'd Texas two-step her across the kitchen and into the bedroom. Emmett was always doing stuff like that.

Michael was right, though. This was no time for guilt. Emmett wasn't coming back, not to her, not to the band, and all that cavorting with him over and done with. Now it was time to make love.

Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness. She could almost see Michael now. He was lying very still, waiting patiently. Lynnette forced herself to sit on the edge of Michael's bed. She waited a little while before getting under the covers, trying to concentrate on the correct sequence of events. She needed to do it right. Slipping between the sheets, she lost the tiny red light which reminded her of a star in another galaxy. As she looked for it in the firmament of Michael's dark bedroom, he rolled on top of her and began. He weighed a ton. And when he finished he said, "Thank you."

Lynnette stared at the wavering red light on Michael's smoke detector. After a while she whispered, "Michael, have you ever been to New Hump City?"

"Is it around here?" he asked, very patiently, very seriously.



A wisp, a scent
I looked, she went
Frequent
Have I known this sequence
Happy I'm to gaze upon
Daily
Have I seen her (gaily)
passing by oblivious

Kyle Ash

Rachel Chen



I know that I can make this wall
So strong you will never break it.
And you will never know the hurt
that hides behind this man.

You will never know my loving touch
or have my warm soul beside you.
An amorous shell is all that's left
as I internally burn to ashes

Leaving both of us to cry
alone at night in silence.
For the painful moments from my past
that separate me from your love.

Scott Tulk

Rachel Chen



Lunar Fantasy

Pieces of the moon
dropped from the sky last night.
First, I trembled--
then a tiny sliver
floated down like the wings of an angel,
touched my head.
My whole body lit up--
a firefly on a hot August night.
My feet started dancing
and jumping so high that I
leapt up to that moon,
grabbed a few more pieces,
throwing them down on those people
cold from darkness,
in need of the light.

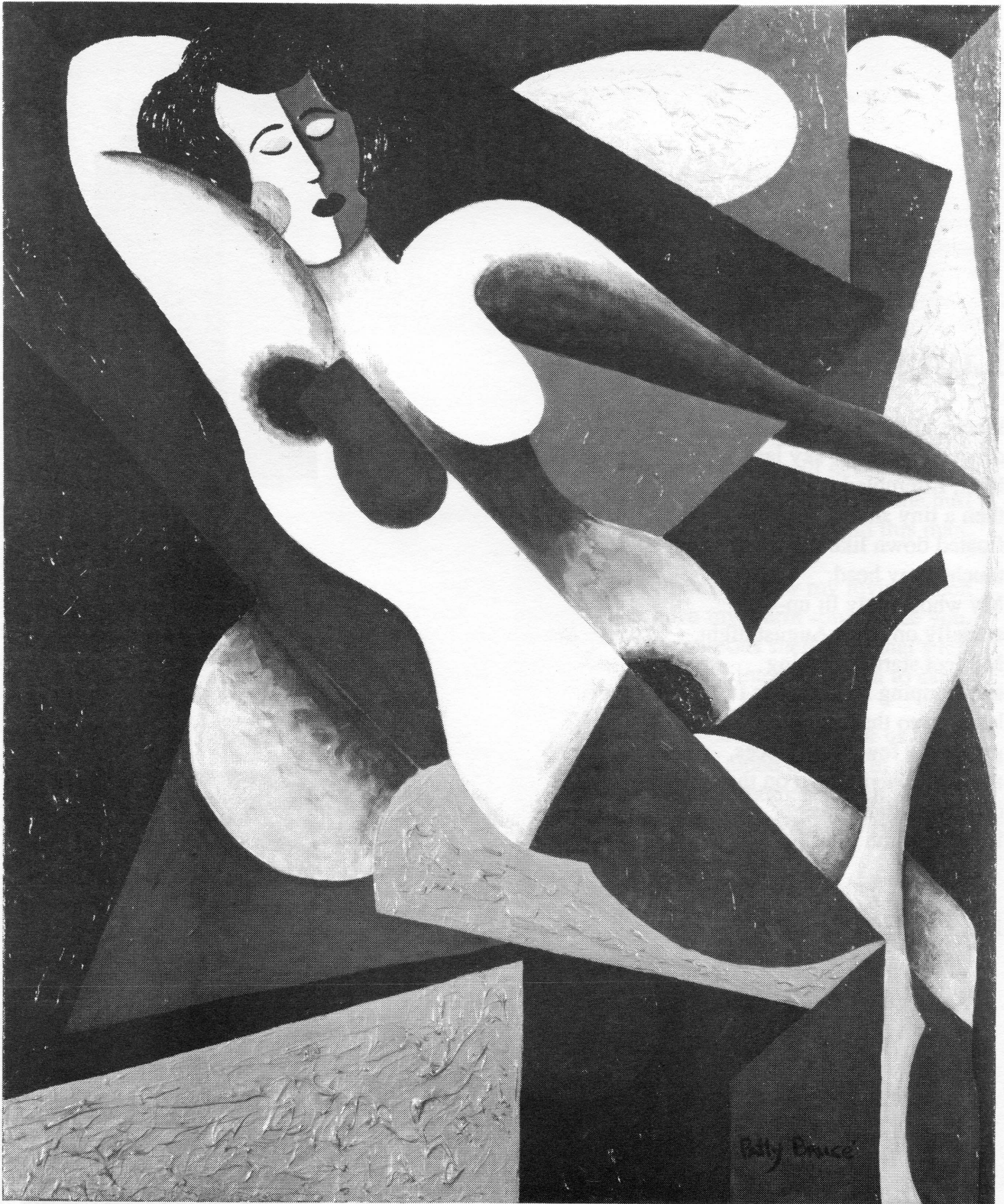
Marti Miles-Rosenfield



Rachel Chen



Rachel Chen



Patty Bruce

Between the Wars

I am chocked,
blocked,
stocked,
and shocked
full of sadness.

Riveting against the tumblers
at my wheels,
reverberating shadows at my eyes,
Trembling discordant views which
shatter harbored
remembrances of padlocked beauty
and unlocked pain, slicing, dicing,
splicing
gashes.

anon of the beauty of boys
in tight trousers, cigarette
or saxophone at their lips
suspended ardor in their notes,
smoke curling, schooling, "suicidally beautiful"
eyes and brows
launched anew with
the fervor of flies
trundling across eyes
of emaciated children,
old men, Daddy,
chained in hospital corridors,
scabs, lips,
belonging to
tight-trousered boys of 1944

Calling for blocked
Shocked
Locked
daughters, breasts chocked full
of sadness as they
spoon feed their sons.

Kathleen Clary

Solitary Confinement

Kevin Jernigan

"Thanks for dropping by, ol' buddy. I really wanna talk to somebuddy while I'm getting' ready, see what I'm sayin'? I gotta get ready and I want somebuddy to talk to."

"What's up Barker?" asked his best friend.

"Drake. Call me Drake. See what I'm sayin'? Us friends don't need to be formal between them. That's why they're friends. They can talk, see what I'm sayin'? They're just plain ol' friends. That's what I'm tellin' her tonight."

"Her?" asked his best friend. He reached across the table he was sitting at and picked up a deck of cards lying on top of a stack of pizza boxes.

"Yeah, her. Didn't I tell you yet? I'm gonna go out tonight, see what I'm sayin'? I've got a date, and she's sure a good looker. Works at that there Shepherd's men's clothes place. They got all kinds of guys' stuff. Everything and more, see what I'm sayin'? Catherine."

"Catherine?" asked his best friend while dealing out a hand of solitaire.

"Yeah, that's what it said on her name tag, just like Catherine the Great, see what I'm sayin'? And she sure is. That's how I remember things. Not that she's great, that's the easy part. I mean about her name. Like I said, just like Catherine the Great. You can move the red queen over. I like playin' that there solitary a lot too."

"Anyway, she was working at that there store when I went in and I was gonna buy a shirt. So she asked me could she help me, see what I'm sayin'? She just came on over like she'd done homed in on me. Girls do that to me in stores. I told her I was gonna buy a shirt and she asked me 'What kind of shirt?' and I said 'A regular kind of shirt,' so she just pointed at a wall full of shirts, and they were stacked. The shirts, I mean. I'm not crude like some guys are, see what I'm sayin'? Four goes on the five."

"Mm Hmm," said his best friend.

"So anyway, that's where I got this here shirt," said

Drake, laying a shirt on the ironing board. His best friend stopped his game long enough to stare at the shirt. It was bright pink with a green and gold paisley design.

His best friend shook his head and returned his attention to the cards.

"Nice, huh? She picked it for me. Said it would make me stand out in a crowd, and I figured 'Yeah, then girls could notice me better, see what I'm sayin'? If it were dark in a night club they could see me comin.' It's funny I didn't notice it at first. In the store, I mean. I just walked on over to the shirts she was pointin' at and looked up and down, there was so many, and she asked what kind of shirt I was lookin' to get, and I said 'Oh just a regular shirt like a guy wears to go out in.' That's where I let her know I was a single guy that likes to go out, see what I'm sayin'? Girls are like that. You mention goin' out, and they wanna go with you."

"So then she asked what size and what fit did I want, and I said, 'Big enough to fit me.' She smiled real big and put her hand over her mouth, and I could see she wanted to help me, but she was shy. Girls are like that, see what I'm sayin'? Helpin', I mean, not bein' shy. That's a hindrance. Bein' shy, I mean, 'cause girls like to help a guy. You can move that there row and turn over the card underneath it."

"Thanks," said his best friend, studying the cards in front of him. "Then what did whas-her-name do?"

"Catherine. Like Catherine the Great. Remember I told you how I remembered? Well, she asked me did I want a full fit or a taper fit? and I stopped her right there and told her I'd take a sport fit 'cause I like sports and I watch every sport I can. Football, baseball, fishin'. I told her once I watched a guy catch a whole big ol' string of fish. Took all day long, see what I'm sayin'? Thrill of the hunt. I finally had to leave when I ran outta beer. Girls like that. They like a sports guy, and I could tell Catherine wasn't no exception 'cause she stopped and looked me up and down and stared at me. She wanted to say somethin', I could tell, but I knew she was too shy so I said 'I'll try a striped shirt,' and she said 'Stripes would make you look wider,' and I said 'Is that bad?' She didn't say nothing, and I knew she knew I made a mistake, and she didn't wanna mention it cause I knew she cared about me, see what I'm sayin'? Girls don't mention when a guy she likes makes a mistake."

"Did you say you have beer?" asked his best friend, studying the cards.

"Hand me that there can of starch, would you? I'm gonna iron the wrinkles outta my new shirt, but I wanna keep the fold marks in it from when it got packaged so girls will see that it's new and that I ain't no cheap skate that wears an ol' shirt on a date, see what I'm sayin'? Looks to me like you ran outta options there buddy, but I'll

let you cheat."

"What?" said his best friend, scooping up the cards and shuffling them. "So how did you pick that shirt?" he asked.

Drake picked up the can of starch and returned to the ironing board.

"Like I told you, she picked it for me. After she didn't mention my mistake she got a measurin' tape and put it round my neck, and I smiled when her fingers touched my neck, and she smiled, and she said 'Seventeen-and-a-half', and I said I thought she was older than that. She put her hand over her mouth 'cause she was shy again, and she walked over to the shirts and reached up to the top shelf to get one, and I said 'Make sure it's one of them sports ones', and she got it and brought it over and said I could use one of the try-out rooms. She was still smilin' at me when I shut the door, and that's where I got my idea.

"What idea?" asked his best friend.

"My idea to compose her a note. There were pieces of cardboard and paper lyin' round the floor of the try-out room, and I picked up a piece of cardboard 'cause the paper tore when I tried to write on it, and I composed her a note. Here's a copy of it. I wrote a copy of it so I could remind her of it tonight, and so I could remember what I wanted to remind her of."

Drake took a folded piece of cardboard out of his back pocket and handed it to his best friend, who took it and began to read.

"Read it out loud so I can hear you," instructed Drake. His best friend was shaking his head. "Dear Catherine the Great," he read as instructed.

"I know this here note is being forward and all but I notic'd how you sidel'd rite up to me when I walk'd in your store and you were smilin at me. I'm sure I'll like any shirt you pick for me and then I could wear it out when we go on a date. Then when people ask where did I get such a good shirt I could say she pick'd it for me meanin you and that's sort of what your doin anyway and I'd like to take you on a date so I can get to know you and you can get to know me and then I can thank you for it. I'll write my name at the end of this here note so you can call me and I can ask you where do you wanna go. My name is Drake. That's like the duck so you can remember.

Sine'd,

Drake
555-3683

"Well, it certainly doesn't lack charm, does it?" said his best friend. "What about misspellings?"

"Are you kiddin'?" said Drake. "that there will cast a spell that can't miss, see what I'm sayin'? Probably already has. You should've seen the look on her face when I slipped it to her. I handed it to her and said, 'I found this here on the floor of the try out room' and asked her could she do somethin' about it, and I winked at her and her eyes got real big. I didn't want her to feel uncomfortable, being shy the way she is, so I mentioned about the shirt and said I was sorry but it didn't fit 'cause it wouldn't button all the way. I tried to show her and a button popped off when I tried to close it over my stomach. She put her hand over her mouth again, and I told her not to feel bad and I'd try another shirt and I'd let her pick it for me. She laughed and I knew she was feeling' better and she said 'OK.' She told me to go back in the try-out room and wait and she'd bring me another shirt, and I did. Go back in the try-out room, I mean. I let her help me, see what I'm sayin'? She sure kept me waitin' there awhile, but I knew it was on account of she was bein' shy. Hey, what time is it?"

His best friend interrupted his game long enough to glance at his watch. "Six-fifty-two," he said. "Why?"

"Well, she probably hasn't had time to call me yet on account of she's probably still gettin' off work."

"That store closes at six," said his best friend, shuffling the cards again.

"Well she's shy, like I told you. You should've seen when she brought my shirt to my room. I was in the try-out room, I mean, and she knocked real softly, and I opened the door and she had her hand over her mouth bein' shy again, and I could see over her shoulder that the other girls that worked there were watchin' and I knew it was 'cause they were jealous, see what I'm sayin'? Girls are like that. They get all jealous when they see another girl talkin' to a guy they like.

"Hey! The label just came off my new shirt!"

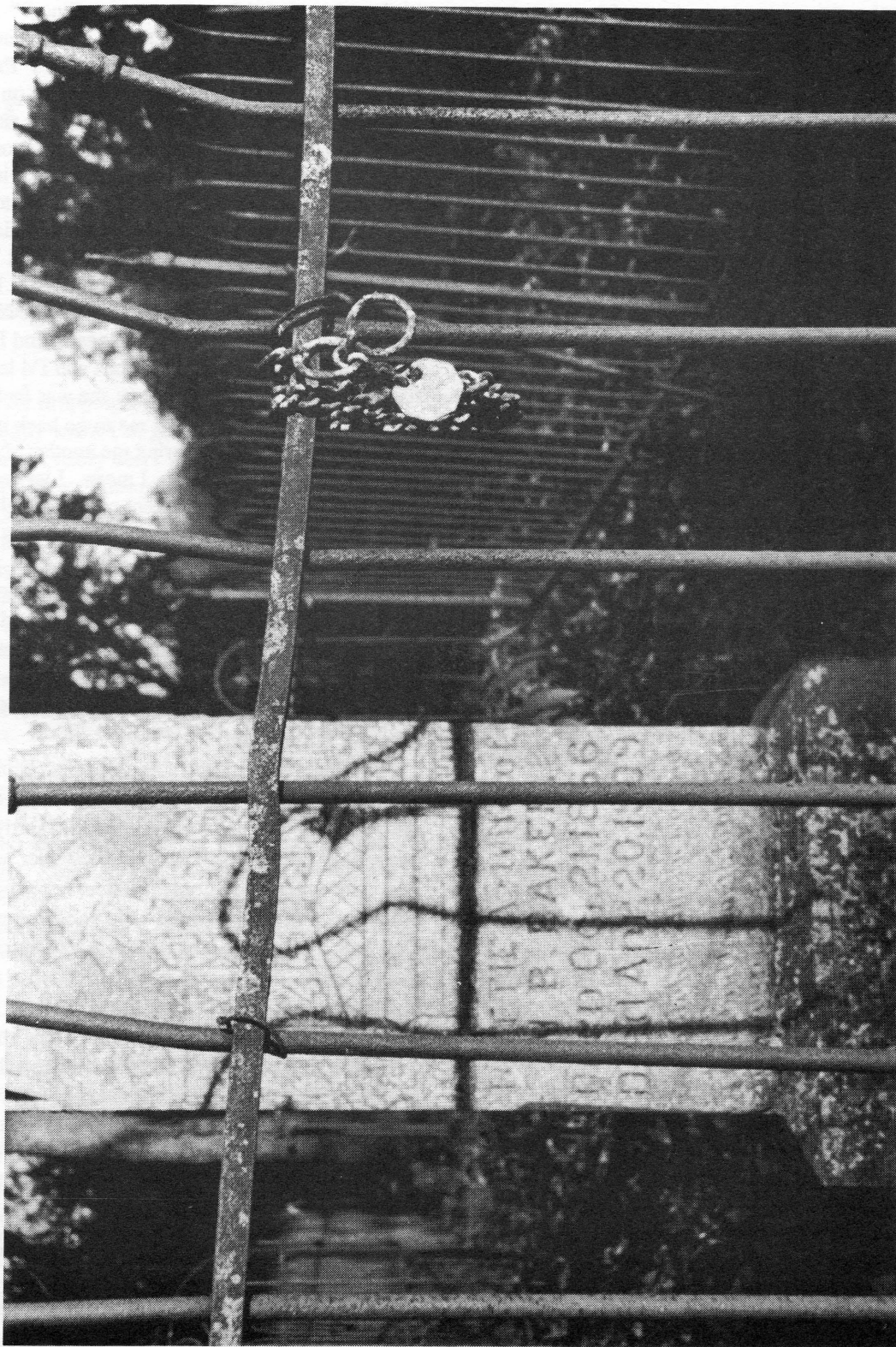
Drake held up the label for his best friend to see. His best friend stopped dealing the cards to look.

"Why do you suppose that happened?" he asked Drake.

"Well it's probably a sign of quality, see what I'm sayin'? She said it's from France or one of them other intentional places like that. I knew it was good 'cause it was expensive. It cost me twelve dollars and ninety-five cents, and that was without any tax."

"This label says Taiwan," said his best friend, examining it.

"Yeah, well the French people probably made it there,



Katherine J. Brands

see what I'm sayin'? They're rich, and they can make things anywhere. I know 'cause I paid for this here shirt, didn't I?"

"You sure did pay," said his best friend, returning to his dealing.

"Yeah, and when I tried it on there was plenty of room in the sleeves. I bet only those French people know how to make a shirt so a guy has enough room in it.

"I told Catherine I liked it real good and that she sure knows how to pick a shirt for a guy, and she said that's why she worked there. I knew she picked this real special for me and the label probably comes out so other people can't know where you got it, and so a girl can get her guy a shirt without her friends copyin' her, see what I'm sayin'? Girls do that. They see what their friends have and they want it, too. I wonder why she hasn't called yet?"

"Can't imagine," said his best friend.

"She's probably gettin' all ready for me. I'm all ready myself," said Drake. He walked over to the closet and took out a hanger.

"Why are you hanging that thing inside out?" asked his best friend, watching him.

"So it won't get dirty on the outside. I don't wanna take any chances, 'cause Catherine works with shirts and she'd notice, see what I'm sayin'? She's a real profession-

al."

"She must be to be able to see a smudge on that," said his best friend.

"Yeah, she is. She even put it in a plain box for me when I paid for it. She said it would protect it better than just an ol' bag would, and I agreed but I never would have thought of that myself. I figured she just didn't want any other girls seein' where I bought the shirt.

"She said 'Bye' and I said 'Bye' and then I told her 'Don't forget to take care of that there cardboard that I found in the try-out room,' and she said 'Oh I already have,' and then she put her hand over her mouth in her shy way.

"When I got home, I had to call you right away to tell you about it all. Thanks for comin' over, like I told you before."

"No problem. What are friends for?" said his best friend scooping up the cards and shuffling them again.

"Yeah, what for? I got somebuddy to talk to while I'm waitin' for my girl to call me. I just gotta give her time to get over her shyness, see what I'm sayin'? You might as well deal me in the next hand of solitary while I'm waitin'."

The Stone Said

The stone said to the dust:
"Dust is what you are now
And shall forever be."

Brian Delong

Relative Humidity

You absorb those
fluid around you,
allow yourself to fill
with their despair.
You
are their tissue.
You wipe clean their agony;
their lives blend
like gin and tonic
into your permeable body
as you sop
up their sorrow.
Bibulous and blind,
you blot their damp eyes
until they walk away dry,
without even a squeeze,
leaving you saturated--
their poison soaked into
your pores.
It will never evaporate.

Marti Miles-Rosenfield

I've been running this elevator up twenty one floors for six years and I tell ya I got no regrets. My mother calls me up twice a month to remind me how well my brothers are doin' in college, and I tell her the same thing when she tells me this, "Mother I'm very happy for them, as I'm sure you all are."

And then she goes on to tell me how I could still go if I found enough initiative in my soul to want to be somebody instead of working in the same apartment building all my life. And I tell her I'm not going to work in the same apartment building all my life, I'll move on to new ones. And I laugh. She doesn't laugh. She tells me I should talk to my father, but I know it will just be the same ol' crap in a lower and louder tone of voice. So, I smooch out some kisses and tell her I'll see her at Christmas, and I hang up, regardless of whether she is speaking or not.

But really, why should I leave? My brothers are at college bustin' their balls over school work so they can be a big somebody someday and make all kinds of big decisions for other big people, and I tell ya I want no part of it! I've had my share of making decisions, and I'm happy leading a simple life where I can avoid them. Every day I see the results of this little decision I made just a few years ago, right here on the job. And some might be thinkin', "Bill, my friend, you don't have any decisions to make! You open the door, you let people in, you close the door when they're all in, and you go where they tell you to go." And for the most part you would be oh so right. But there are peculiar people in this world that come in and just stand there like they didn't know where they were. Well, I gotta make a decision. Should I close the door and try to get them to tell me where they want to go, knowing they'll just stare at me with a wicked smile that shows you they're a little nutty from the start? or should I kick 'em out right there?

Granted, I shouldn't get so stressed over such a little thing, but it's enough for me. It just seems like when I get muddled up in people's lives, bad things happen.

I guess the one and only reason I feel this way is because of some poor sap that I still have to take up to floor eight during the week and up to floor twelve on the weekends. You figure it out. The guy's a louse. But don't go gettin' your dukes up to condemn the fellow. He's already done that himself.

And I could have turned things around the first time I saw him. I hadn't been here more than a year when they moved in. I had a few words with a resident of the building a few days before so the manager told me to take a week off without pay to cool me down and said if it ever happened again I was out the door. So I wasn't here the week they moved in. But I heard that nobody never saw him or his wife together. One of them was out

Fall 1994

A Little Decison

Sean Yoesting

getting groceries while the other was bringing in more furniture. And they tell me that neither of them could have been in the apartment together for more than three minutes. Ok, we got some pretty nosy maids, but they're cute, and they get the job done.

So anyway, I come back, and I don't see this couple that everyone is so nosy about for several days. They all tell me they must be up there throwin' lamps across the room at each other, but I don't want to hear about it because it's the same old Pa beatin' the shit outta Ma story, and I had enough of that when I was a kid. But nobody really knew nothin' anyway, so it doesn't matter.

So I'm standing there and the little light on floor fourteen requests my presence, and I cart the old heap up to floor fourteen, and I open it up. Well, here he comes, his face all twisted up in a grimace as if he's going to bust out crying at any second. And there she is, standing right in the doorway with tears streaming down her pretty little face. And she says to him, "Please, don't turn away from me like this, I love you so much." And so I look at him and he looks like he just can't handle these words. I don't know if it was my imagination or what but I thought I saw her move forward a little bit, and I closed the door.

Please, don't ask me why I did it.

I guess it was just impulse. I know that when I'm in a fight with the old lady all I want to do is to get the hell away. So, I guess I was sidin' with him and tryin' to get him outta there just as soon as I could. I guess that's what I was doin'.

He told me to take him to the lobby, and I didn't see him for several days. In the meantime, she moved out. She only took a few clothes, and she cried the whole way down. I thought she must have hated me, but the truth is she probably didn't give me a second thought. That's what I like to think.

But that was that for them two. He still lives here, and, like I say, he spends the week with one woman and the weekend with another, and I don't know how he pulls it off, unless

he just doesn't care. I seen the woman he's married to now, and she looks like a walking raisin and she bitches all the time. He's either drunk or hung over when I see him, and I have yet to see the poor sap smile.

Oh yeah, I seen her once, too. About six months ago. I was takin' my lunch break, and just as I stepped out onto the sidewalk, here she comes with a little girl that was just the cutest thing I ever did see. I don't know who the father was, could have been him, ain't none of my business.

She looked alright, but I could tell she hadn't had new

clothes in a while. The girl looked about the same. But all in all I'd say they were a lot better off than he was. She didn't recognize me; she just gave a sad little glance up the side of the building where they used to live for such a short time. She probably knew he still lived there. And I could see the loneliness spill out right in front of me. She still loved him and it tore me to pieces. I walked down the street and all I could think was, "I closed the door for him when I should have left it open for her."

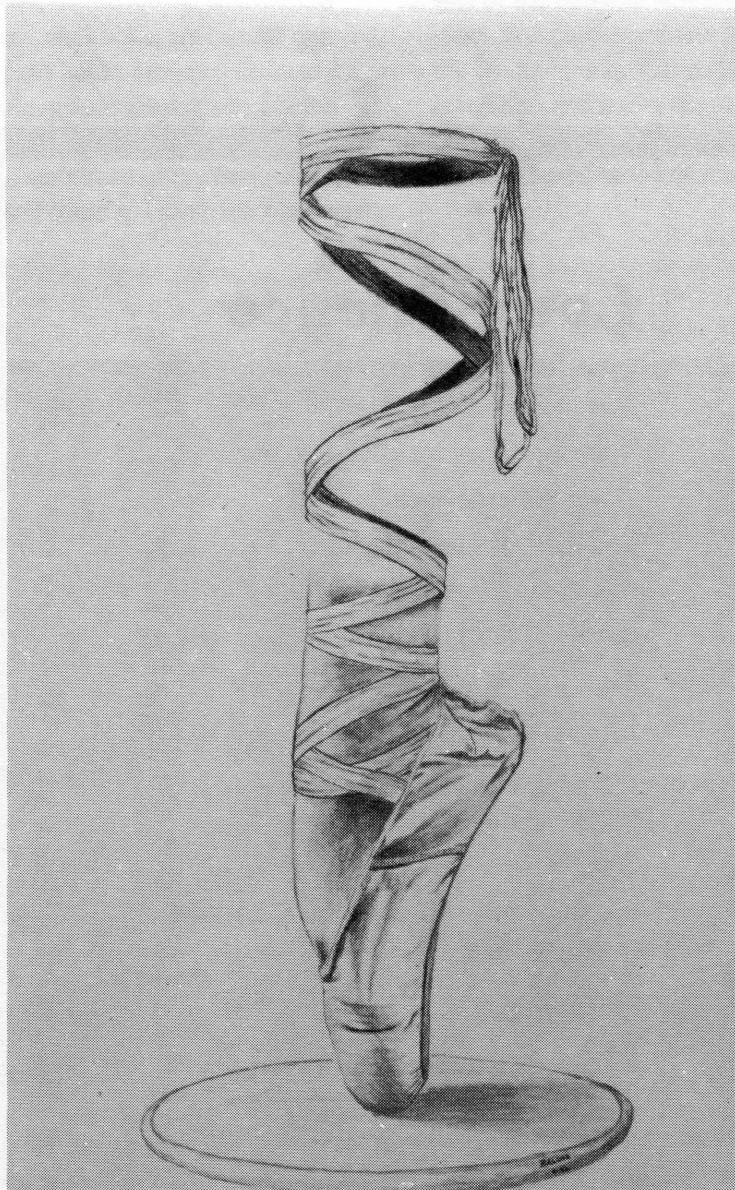


Michelle Jones

Loud Silence

What do you feel
in those quiet, awkward moments
when the tape ends
or the birds stop singing
or the wind stops blowing so hard
that my ears grow deaf
That imaginable silence
LOOMING like a masked assassin
over his gun
until he finally lets go
and it's all over
that moment of greed and
misunderstanding—
frustration—
pain,
of hopeless submission
until the song clicks over
and the music plays again.

Melanie Beggs



Steven Ballas

Statement of Honors

The following essays were awarded the Honors Scholarships by the Honors Task Force of Collin County Community College. The contest, conducted in the spring of 1994, was to present a one-page essay on a book that was meaningful to the author.

The editors hope you will enjoy the personal messages from the following award-winning essays!

Cooking, for author Laura Esquivel of Like Water for Chocolate, is the lens through which we, the readers, are allowed to peer into the De la Garza family. As she sharpens her focus on the family, we perceive their relationships, lifestyle, and the times in which they lived. She begins each chapter with a recipe that becomes the medium for developing each family member and the backdrop for their romances. In each family, there is function and dysfunction. The author deftly uses the preparation of recipes to mirror the family's joys and sorrows. A meal created in happiness was declared delicious. Crying into a soup had devastating results. In real life, our emotions have a great effect on the outcome of our accomplishments. This is reinforced by the plethora of positive thinking books and seminars in our society today. Just be happy!

My own family closely resembled the De la Garza family in structure. Like Tita, the main character, I was the youngest daughter of a family ruled by a strong mother. My oldest sister left home like Gertrudis, Tita's older sister, desperate and determined to find her own happiness. Tita was at the mercy of tradition of old Mexico, where the youngest daughter was not to marry but to remain at home to care for her mother. My role did not stem from tradition, but was silently communicated to me, sealing my position in the family hierarchy. For both Tita and me, an unreasonable assertion was made upon our lives without regard to self, feelings, or desires. No opposition was tolerated. Suffering was to be done in silence and grief left unexpressed. Loyalty was ingrained. We became victims of gravity, orbiting our mothers, helpless satellites within the confines of their unnatural laws.

All creative abilities were the reserved domain of our mothers. Like Tita, I was allowed creative expression through cooking. Chopping onions was an acceptable reason for crying. Our food revealed ourselves. Tita found her joy for living in the kitchen—a region uninhabited by her mother.

Tita states . . . "the right to determine the course of one's own life would take more effort than she had imagined." Anytime a river overflows, seeking a new course, it is considered a crisis! People galvanize to prevent the inevitable. Tita boiled over her banks "like water for chocolate." Frustration from constricted boundaries, like too-tight shoes continually pinching her soul, propelled her over the edge in search of her own riverbed. This conscious stepping outside unconscious boundaries is a scary

A Recipe for Life

Nancy Hedrich

act. The known has been left behind, and the now becomes uncomfortable, uneasy, and unsure: a crisis mixture of anxiety and hope.

Born into the river of life, the riverbed of our families cuts deep channels into our unconscious behavior. Channels of normal events of births, deaths, and weddings are repeated year upon year, forming the path of our lives. Tita and I were predestined to empty ourselves back upon our mothers in fulfillment of their needs and desires.

Like water for chocolate, the process of boiling is part of the preparation, the recipe for our rebirth. The efforts to resist family controls and restraints are enormous. Tita did not release herself until years after her mother had died, those controls stretching beyond the grave. Tita finally broke free of her restraints, super-imposed as a child, later self-imposed as a woman. She denounced her mother's ghost, and it promptly left, like an uninvited guest. After her liberation, she gave value to her feelings and married her first and truest love—a magical ending to an excellent novel.

This book has helped me to see that as children, we are innocent and helpless, needing our family's direction. However, as adults, we are to decide our pathways. I understand. More importantly, I can forgive. When I stopped giving permission to the unnatural controls over my life, I set myself free to follow my own course and give it value. Tita is fiction, but I am real.

My Own Secret Garden

Michelle Metz

Because I am a full-time student, single working mother of two youngsters, my spare time is scarce. Regretfully, I have no time to read for my own pleasure. The time I spend on extracurricular reading is limited to the obligatory bed-time story for my children's benefit. Until recently, I scheduled thirty minutes (and not a second more) to this task. Then we began a wonderful piece of children's literature, The Secret Garden. This book changed everything.

The Secret Garden is a tale of a neglected orphan, Mary Lennox, who is sent to live in her uncle's dreary mansion. Once there, her outlook on life is altered drastically. A little robin leads her to an abandoned garden that is in disrepair. She puts all her love and energies into restoring the garden and is greatly rewarded by its magic.

How did this children's story benefit me? Before I read Frances Hodgson Burnett's enchanting story to my children, I approached our reading time as an act of obligation. As I entered Burnett's world, my enthusiasm for this time of day grew. I found myself transported to my own childhood where I first read the story. I noticed that our standard thirty minutes passed much quicker than usual. After the second day on the book, I expanded our reading time from thirty minutes to an hour, which the children appreciated greatly. I believe they enjoyed my enthusiasm and cuddling more than the actual story itself. Their behavior improved. They listened intently and were less hostile about bed-time. I became increasingly patient and allowed my daughter to read certain passages. After each chapter we indulged in discussion about the plot and the pictures. The changes in our reading-time structure made a remarkable difference in our relationship.

I encountered several symbolic parallels between the main character's relationship with her garden and my relationship with my children. That parallel taught me a child's moral. That moral for a child was: Give something your love and attention and it will flourish. That moral and story demonstrated to me that I should turn my energies and affection to my own little garden, my children.

The Vietnam War has always been, to me, a distant incident: something terrible that took many of my friends' fathers, either physically or mentally. But luckily a football injury kept my father here. I was born in 1973 when Nixon was bringing the last American troops home, so my knowledge of Vietnam was colored by movies and history teachers talking about the Communists invading a small country and the United States helping them to preserve democracy. The closest the war got to my life was a visit to the new memorial in Washington, D.C., where my father saw the name of a high school friend, and I saw him cry for the first time. Then, on the eve of my 21st birthday, I saw a movie that prompted me to read a book that shattered all of my pre-conceived notions about not only the Vietnam War, but the Vietnamese themselves. The book, When Heaven and Earth Changed Places, by Le Ly Hayslip, is her account of what it was like to grow up in Vietnam.

Le Ly was born in 1947, the same year as my parents. While my parents grew up in a suburban, child-centered, baby-boomer society, Le Ly was working to re-build after the French occupation only to be caught in the middle as the Viet Cong and the Republican armies and later the American "advisors" struggled to control strategic hamlets. Before reading this book, I thought that all of the Vietnamese were conspiring to torture and kill our American soldiers in the name of Communism. Now I see that they were people trying to live as best they could in a terrible time, struggling to preserve their families and their beliefs in a civil war.

Young Le Ly was forced to spy for the Viet Cong, tor-

Changing Places

Erin Miller

tured by the Republican soldiers, and raped and exiled from her village. Her only way to survive was to go to Saigon and live as a beggar, unmarried and pregnant. Eventually, she was able to leave Vietnam and go to the United States. Throughout all of her hardships and with all of the injustices done to her, she has forgiven all of her persecutors. She believes that holding a grudge and seeking revenge only perpetrates the cycle of hatred.

Reading about this woman's heroic life and her generosity toward humanity has taught me to try and do the same in my life. It has taught me to use the hardships in my life to make me a stronger and better person. It has also taught me that there are two sides to every story, and how an event is perceived depends on the life and events of the person relaying the event. When I left that movie, which was told from the filmmakers' view, I felt embarrassed to be an American. After I read Le Ly Hayslip's own words, I felt glad to be a fellow human being sharing in the good and bad.

In Their Shoes

Sam Seidemann

Science fiction novels have the reputation of producing thought provoking ideas, especially in the area of social issues. A novel by renowned sci-fi writer Robert A. Heinlein entitled Farnham's Freehold is no exception. This controversial novel deals with a group of people who, through a quirk of fate, are catapulted two thousand years forward as a result of a powerful nuclear blast. As the group emerges from their shelter, they soon discover that the world has changed in more ways than one. Now, in this new era, Caucasians are the race that is subjugated while the descendants of Africa constitute the "privileged" race. Consequently, the overall tone of the book deals with an issue that is as old as history itself: racism.

Before reading this novel, I was the typical Caucasian, middle-class teenager (Circa 1974), who shared the prevalent attitude that the oppressed minorities had no right to complain and that their perceived lower social status was mostly a result of their own doing. However, this novel changed much of that type of thinking. I soon realized how I might feel if roles were reversed. The resulting conclusion caused much inner-consternation and soul-searching. The final analysis revealed that in order to understand a conflicting point of view, I should put myself "in their shoes" and try to look at a situation through the other person's eyes. This book helped me to transform my biased outlook to that of empathy and understanding.

I must admit that I still unconsciously harbor preconceived notions about other people, even though I try not to. Unfortunately, that seems to be a part of human nature. But with novels like Farnham's Freehold, coupled with efforts from all parts of society, perhaps that last inner bastion of bias will disappear. In addition, this enhanced outlook has had the added benefit of positively affecting my social interaction skills with people of the entire spectrum of humanity. These skills are essential in order to survive in contemporary society.

"By then I thought / I must find out / How men were truly men. What meant courage, where lay honor, why did heroes make their stands?" Stories in answer stirred imagination. It was me who carried the warning of approaching peril. It was me at the rudder while others peacefully slept. It was me who fought for the weak and innocent. In my thin armor I defended all in need with justice on their side.

In maturing, I left Aesop to sit bewildered before "Ozymandias." But before I collapsed below the Theban colossus, I stood with "Horatius at the Bridge." I was one of the "happy few" who heard "Henry's Speech at Agincourt." "The Little Steam Engine" I deserted for "Robert Bruce and the Spider." And I was spell-bound by Churchill's, "We Shall Fight in the Fields and in the Streets." The toy soldier of "Little Boy Blue" succumbed to "The Story of Cincinnatus" and the "Concord Hymn." The tales fed my mind and were as much of me as growing bone and muscle. All accompanied me into manhood.

The readings began again when I became a father. Then it was at this knee where the little children sat. As they grew, they also spent their rainy days in stories ever new. Now they are men and women. For two years I have had a grandson. He will be read to. His father called me recently and said, "I want a copy of the book, that anthology, for my birthday. I think it's The Book of Virtues by William Bennett. It's recently out; you showed me your copy-the one that has the fables and the stories in one volume." I responded, "You shall have it."

When I read the stories now, I need to take down just one book. How different from when I was a boy. I can have Bronte, Bulfinch, Defoe or Dickinson, and Faulkner's in there, too. I scan the chapters to determine my interest: Compassion, Courage, Responsibility, Honesty, Loyalty, Faith, and others. I can read Donne or Chuang-tzu, Jefferson or Wollstonecraft, Bacon or even Frost. I am no longer cowed by "Ozymandias." But as often as not, I'll choose the one about the gingham dog and a calico cat or a tale about a little tin soldier.

The Big Book of Virtues that Wasn't a Book 'Til Now

Randy Scarborough

*I heard them at my mother's knee,
I still have not forgot;
The virtues gently played therein,
The lessons that they taught.
Then I read them to myself
As often as I sought,
To while away a rainy day
In pleasures that they brought.
Then, when eight or maybe ten,
Or twelve, it might have been,
I picked them up and sat me down
And read them all again.*

Demeter Speaks

My womb is hard as unripe melons
I have bred weasels and wasps and caterpillars in droves
From this pregnant cavern of damp stalactites
I smell my children near me in the darkness
I glimpse their eyes sparking fires in the gloom
They twist and shove and brush their feelers against my legs
Seeking my milk of motherly madness
I taste of silk and nails and greenwood smoke
I am unripe
But ripe enough for eating
My insatiable Persephones
Eat away at my groaning table
Convulsed in laughter at the bitterness of my pomegranates and bursting wheat
I taste their hunger in the back of my throat, like river mud
Vini vidi vici
I am the hero who conquers
I am the victim who sleeps
I am a womb, throbbing in the darkness
Hades is crying in the light of day

Katherine Williams

Note: This poem was selected from the many works produced at the First Annual Honors Creative Writing Retreat, sponsored by Collin County Community College and held April 7-10, 1994, in Leander, Texas. Anyone interested in attending next year's retreat should contact Dr. Peggy Brown at (214)881-5808.



Maureen Botello

Fall 1994

*There was a hill once wanted
to become a mountain
and
forces underground helped it
lift itself
into broad view*

A. R. Ammons



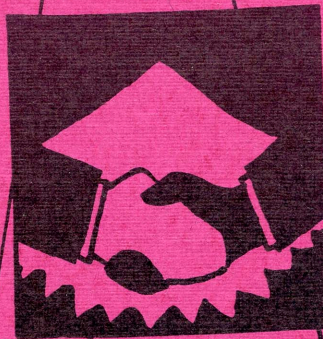
LOVE



LOVE



LOVE



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