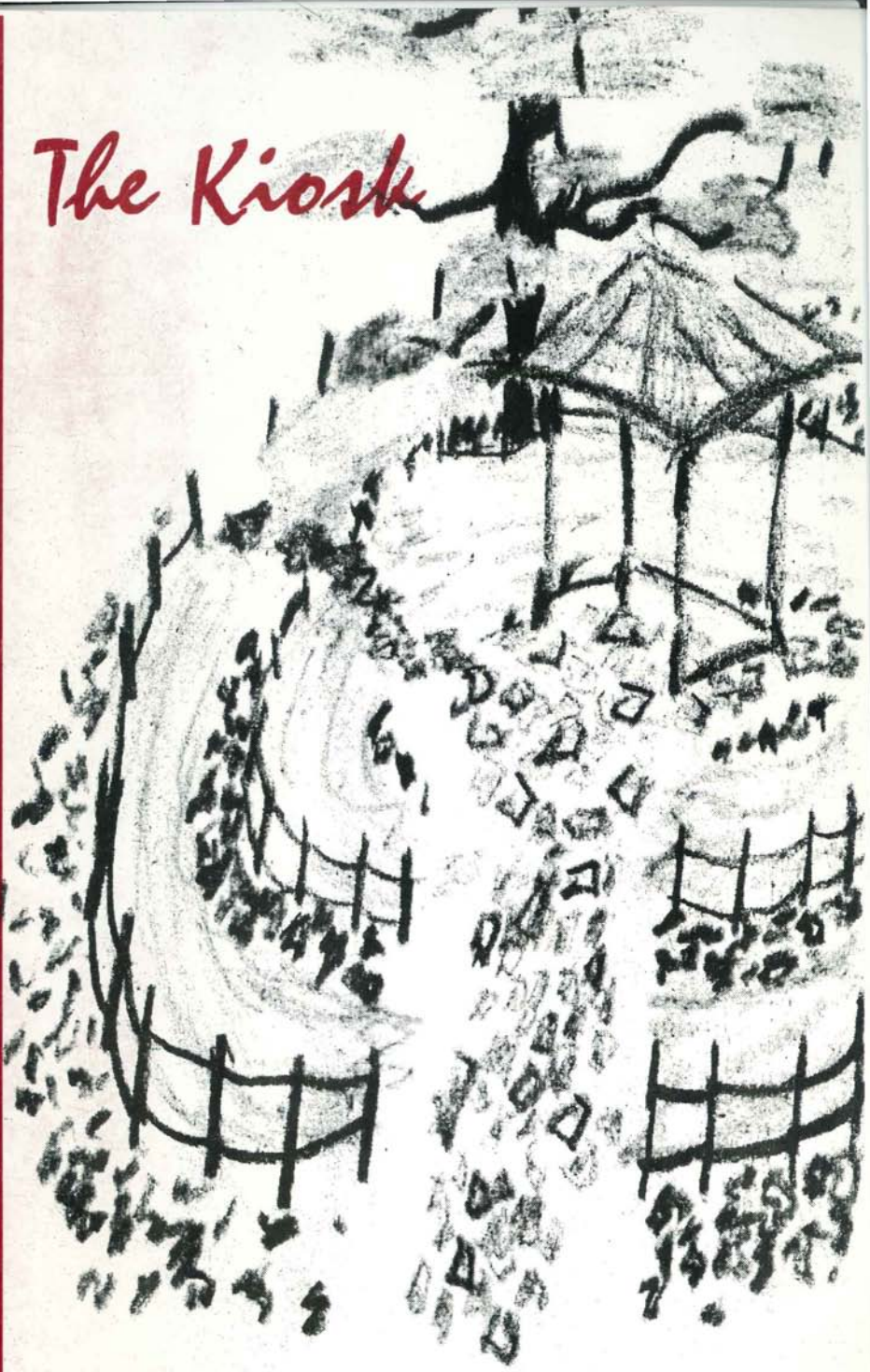
The Kiosk



Spring 2001

The Kiosk

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2001 Kiosk Staff

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Creative Writing Award Winners

First Place..... "Fish Tales"
by Tiffany Janssen

Second Place ..... "Devoted"
by Kylie Wainer

Third Place..... "Teenage Sex in Iowa"
by Jessica Wheeler

Honorable Mentions
"The Team" by Beth Donohue
"Hooking" by Kylie Wainer

About this Year's Judge

Terry Wright is a graduate of Morningside College and Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Central Arkansas. His books include *What the Black Box Said, Safe House, No More Nature,* and *Fun and No Fun*. His work has appeared in many magazines including *Sequoia, Rolling Stone, Puerto del Sol, Pig Iron, Slipstream, Urbanus,* and others. He has won the Arkansas Literary Society's Poetry Prize and Fiction Prize, and was a finalist for Arkansas Artist of the Year.

All entries are judged blindly by the editors, and no entry receives special consideration. Editors are eligible for the contest; however, they are not eligible for the prize money.

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Dave Rater

Beatles Anthropology

This here planet earth doesn't have a core
of molten ore like so many flat-headed
paper-smilin' sycophants propagate, one
tellin' another in a chain of fools, two-
steppin' on soulless shoes down Park Avenue.
No, this sphere's hollow and dark with a great big
disco ball, shooting sparkles off a leagues of
corrugated vinyl, classic forty-five,
but bigger than most, spinning rock and roll
music on God's radio, high-fidelity.
Put your ear to the ground, list'nin', list'nin',
Shake the very rocks in New Delhi, India,
where they dress funny, talk funny and don't
believe in good old fashioned rock and roll music
and their McDonalds serving tofu burgers
and they can program computers but their
camels don't dance or even smoke. And Buddha
and the scientists are scratching their heads and
wonderin' why we rotate at a six degree angle.
No east pole, west pole, don't make sense
but Eskimos with microwave glasses see
us shootin' signals 'verberatin' down the
Milky Way and somewhere storm troopers are
gettin' jiggy and boppin' in their space pants.

Beth Donohue

Sale

In the corner of a pasture
three miles west of Boyden, Iowa
the farmers stand in little groups—
clusters of color-
denim and flannel
with green John Deere caps.
They lean on pickups
or fence posts,
weathered and gray
in the flat light
of late October.

They talk among themselves
then browse,
brushing calloused fingers
stained with engine grease
over the dirt and rust on rows of farm equipment,
kicking tires
checking welds
estimating prices.
A solitary figure stands apart
arms crossed, eyes squinting
thinking of corn yields and cattle futures
and how much time another plow would save
if the bidding doesn't go too high.

The auctioneer's repetitive twang
drones continuously through the portable speakers
as piece by piece
a livelihood is sold away.
The buyers understand,
they're farmers as well.
They smile and nod
and pay what they can;
partners in dust.

Amanda Prince

Choke

she is young and excitable and she wants
everything
stars sky sea
she wants
it all between her legs
she wants to
swallow it whole
she wants to go
where he goes
and she wants the highway
the rush
the noise
cumming screaming floating
she wants
the boys
the girls
stars sky sea

(she doesn't need u she doesn't need u)

cuz she's got the stars she stared at
in the place where she used to be
safe
she's not the same

Choke

but this
this
is not about
his pain
her pain
this is full
of
unbearable
pleasure
the nerves
that sing thru her skin
that place where
he crawls in
she wants
jack kerouac in a cornfield
on a crisp, fall night lit by sharp stars
she wants
tight pants and smoky bars
she wants to fly
fuck cry feel
and land safe in her own bed
in her own head
(the place where she used to be safe)

where
his words don't stick pins under her fingernails
where
his touch doesn't leave her
rough and dry
where
his pain doesn't
cut her open

and she's only bleeding on the inside
(where she has insides)
where
it's more than an angle
a theory
a joke
where she swallows up
his intensity
and pretends not to

choke

Jessica Wheeler

Teenage Sex in Iowa

it's about the cornfields
at the height of summer
thrumming with vibrations
from junebugs that buzz
around their leaves and
it's about the sound
the hum of grasshoppers
standing out from the rustle
of cornstalks lit up
by lightning bugs and
it's about cool breezes
that fight against humidity
rushing through open windows
and tightening the skin stretched
across nipples and neck and
it's about getting kinky
in the backseat of a car
limbs twisted to accommodate
movement in a cramped space
pause to relieve knotted muscles and
it's about adrenaline
when headlights pop over the hill
or you think you hear an engine
or have an overactive imagination
but mostly i think
it's about the cornfields

Haiku

Watercolor art
reflections on silver streets.
New York in the rain.

Beth Donohue

The Wal-Mart Parking Lot

Jellied cigarettes
float in swirling rainbow pools
color in the gray

Beth Donohue

Appearing as two
concrete capturing the scene
chasing my shadow

Michelle Handsaker

Dave Rater

Restless

The door opened with a long creak, porch-light flinging his disproportionate shadow across the furniture. He kicked the door closed behind him, letting the living room return to its comfortable darkness, with only the memory of light sneaking in through the front door window and in around the curtains. Shrugging off his suspenders, he walked into the kitchen.

He'd told the guys from work, promised them actually, that he'd meet them at the bar, after a change of clothes, for a few drinks and who knows what else? He'd been pretty wired at the time. Didn't really have any intention of going, though, he realized as he rooted around in the fridge for a beer. The refrigerator light seemed to give everything a sterile, monotone complexion. Their moonlighting, boozing, and cheating on their wives didn't sit with him very well, he supposed. "Not the kind of action I need. Screw 'em." He'd gone with them on more than one occasion. He settled on a half carton of milk.

The door to the bedroom was open and he could see her dim form mingling with the shadows. She was lying on her side, the white sheets curving over her suggestively. He thought she must be beautiful and then how much he loved her. Sitting down on the bed, he leaned over her. The dark, quiet house at night always stole his energy, which had been ready to bust out after work. That's why his friends had made him promise. They knew he wasn't going to want to come back out. They weren't his friends, really.

As he sat there, the dim moonlight crept in through

the window and washed over her face. It looked so smooth and soft and white. Tracing a finger across her cheek, he thought she sighed almost inaudibly. Looking back up, he was shocked to see a pale face glaring in through the window at them.

It was just his reflection in the glass.

Laughing and heart going, he walked into the bathroom. The light came on with a flicker and a buzz, and he stopped short, looking at the mess in there: dirty laundry, make-up, water on the floor. Christ, she was a slob. He tossed some clothes out of the way, rooting around for his toothbrush. Something fell, hitting the floor with a tiny, startling crash.

"Aw, fuck," he sighed, and glanced around for something to clean it up with, or at least to throw over it. A shirt had caught on the showerhead. It was a pink thing that she wore more often than she cleaned; it was a couple of sizes too small and her curves had been molded into it with 'LOVE' spelled out in little red flowery letters on the chest.

"Love," he muttered, stepping back into the bedroom to find something; probably have to look in the kitchen. On the bed he heard her stirring, and he stopped in surprise to look at her. In the stark, yellow light from the bathroom, her face looked drawn and weathered. He stood there for a moment, dubious, then grabbed the milk where he'd left it on the nightstand and stalked back into the kitchen, tossing it into the trash. He'd look under the sink for some cleaning supplies.

Love, he thought. What the hell does that mean? She liked to throw that word around just like her dirty laundry, not caring where either landed. Usually on his stuff. Of course he always had to reciprocate. What else do

you say when someone lays the L-word on you? He always felt like a grinning idiot when she did that.

Slamming the cupboard doors closed, he looked around the kitchen for a rag or something. He saw his jacket on a hook by the basement door. I can't use that to clean it up, he thought with a laugh. He didn't bother to close the door on his way out.

Becca Loveall

Branded

It's between the hips and the lips
Of the perfect curves of the perfect girls
Who can only beg for more
It's all for the cigarettes and glory
That's all we came for
And we fly away on those spiky haired wings
Of rock 'n' roll stories of the years yet to come
(I've heard all these words before
Conversations outside my door
Tonight, I'm leaving you tonight
For want of having a little more)
The cold, hard floor
When push comes to shove
And he just hits too hard
She's left in the chair in her head
Where she sits
Her mind tied in knots
Her tongue tied in rings
But it's all for the cigarettes and glory
Between the hips and the lips
Of the perfect curves of perfect girls

Haiku

Ice Encore

Unexpected ice
covers flowers, buds, and trees
like spring under glass.

Angie Turner

Rain

Rain drips from rooftops
as leaves fan the sweating sun.
Who'll sleep well tonight?

Susan Rodine

Dew clings to the grass.
Child awakened by the sun,
let the race begin.

Michelle Handsaker

Amanda Prince

Touch

boy: nothing helps
i'm spinning
inside

girl: can I be your gravity?

boy: you are the moody girl
with the dark eyes
the amazing one the mystery girl
i could not possess
every inch of you
you are a deep indecipherable sea
of amazingness
your amazingness is so incredibly amazing
that i wanna jump in and swallow every inch of your
amazingness

what he obviously meant was

(save me)

what i meant was

(look at me)

well nobody else fucking would

girl: i can't save you
I have to find up on my own
you have a star on yr belly boy
you have a million starry things
you will never see

(he reaches out to touch her)

girl: (fiercely) this is mine mine i think this is mine
but if it weren't for the pills I'd be dead
if i was born ten years earlier i'd be dead

boy: do I drive you crazy?

girl: you don't drive me crazy
i don't give that kind of control away
anymore

(she sighs)

boy: i used to see myself driving along a cliff so fast i
couldn't see the edge

girl: sometimes i still wish for crazy
i wish to not care
i wish to drive off into the blank static
fluorescent colors of the fucked up imagination of my past
And be done with it…

boy: nothing makes any sense right now

girl: dive into memory
cuz i'm so sick mourning
lost colors lost looks in eyes lost souls
burning up all blue and tasting bitter we hold it like
a security blanket

boy: we are crazy searching clutching twenty years old
trying desperate secret and silly positions because
we're tired and numb

girl: it's like we still crave experience
everything they told us we'd never be

(girl stares into boy's eyes)

girl: well here we are
playing at rimbaud and baudelaire
neal cassady and allen ginsberg
you be henry miller and I'll be anais nin

boy: where's uma when you need her?
I love how soft your skin is

girl: (in her best uma voice) this is a finer place than the place i live

Kylie Wainer

What Kind of Love Are *We* On

Dedicated to the Demon of Screamin'

Ain't That a Bitch plagued with the Bacon Biscuit Blues,
a Hole in My Soul with a Bright Light
Fright I've got a Bitch's Brew cuz I Ain't Got You

Bolivian Ragamuffin, give me a Taste of India
you're Amazing, so F.I.N.E and Jaded Under My Skin
you're Jailbait, but Lord of the Thighs
and your Adam's Apple, Angel's Eye,
are giving me the Rocking Pneumonia and the Boogie
Woogie Flu

the Devil's Got a New Disguise and Deuces are Wild
Livin'
on the Edge when you Get a Grip and Get It
Up in your Gypsy Boots

you've had your Nine Lives, been on a Permanent
Vacation with that Three-Mile Smile.
Dream On 'till Lightning Strikes
Something's Gotta Give

it Ain't Enough, Think About It You
See Me Crying On the Other Side
When I Needed You, still Cryin'
let's Come Together in the Darkness
at Home Tonight on The Farm in
Hollywood

Love Me Like A Bird Dog
let's go Bone to Bone with a Lick
and a Promise on Uncle Salty

and your Magic Touch,
Wham Bam Rocket 88
Don't Stop Scream In Pain Eat the Rich Head
First

your Lizard Love needs an Attitude Adjustment Kiss
Your Past Good-Bye, drop your
Dime Store Lover and be my Downtown Charlie
so you can get Back in the Saddle and Love Me Two
Times

the Pink Flesh Jig is Up, Get the Lead Out
and pop my Black Cherry with your Big Ten Inch
Record
No Surprize. now we Can't Stop Messin'
as we Riff and Roll
I Don't Want To Miss a Thing No More No More

Melt
D
o
w
n

Walk This Way to find that Falling In Love Is Hard
on the Knees or is it Young Lust
Gotta Love It such Crazy Sweet Emotion
with All Your Love.

Susan Rodine

The Dime Store Is Now Selling Nickels

Backstabs on sale today,
twofer-one!
Now that's the way
to play the cards
throwing shards of ruptured words—
no charge for labor.

And last night, of course. . .
that was on her.

Run mightymouse!
runrunclick WAIT
Let me see
now don't blink.
Tell me, what do you think
of the porn pasted on your PC?

Your money's no good here
hide it well, keep it safe
close to your
heart.
We'll discuss the tab
the next time we meet.

Have a seat, Sweetheart,
let me buy you a drink.
On the house
of the man
who can dance while he fiddles.
The dime store is now selling nickels.

James Smith

Death in a Coffeeshop

"I don't think anybody gets it. Most of the people I deal with want things that seem to make sense. You spend pages creating real people, show them interacting with their environment, get the reader to feel real empathy for the characters, and then you kill them off in ways that usually have no meaningful connection to the character. When readers sit down to read, they want the chain smoker to die from lung cancer, not from falling in the alligator pit at the zoo."

Death sighed loudly and put down his cup of café latté. "But that's the way it is! People want believability and I show them things exactly the way they happen. I should know, I spend the better part of each day dealing with the people I write about."

On his off-hours he wrote prose, lots of it. And he painted. I'm the lucky guy stuck as his agent and critic.

"I'm not saying it's not believable, the readers live in this world and they know how it goes. Most people just don't seem to like it; perhaps it's a bit too believable. Personally, I love what you write. You're probably one of my favorite authors, but I'm not typical."

"Fine, fine. Well, what about my paintings then? Do you think I could get them displayed somewhere, maybe make a few bucks?"

"Listen, I know you've told me that there are forty-seven shades of black. The problem is that the human eye can only recognize a few of them. Black mostly looks like black to us. Maybe if you tried to get them sold as minimalist compositions."

Death's mandible dropped. "I am *not* a minimalist!"

"I know, I know! But I've shown some of your paintings around and everyone just looks at me funny and asks if you are."

I had been showing Death's paintings around for a couple months now, under the assumed name "Big D," and precious few of his paintings seemed to invoke any sort of response except questions about his suspected state as a minimalist.

"Philistines, all of them," Big D said. "I guess I should have expected as much, though. They'll never appreciate the work of a true artist like myself."

"Well, it's been said that the great ones are only recognized after they're dead."

My companion shot me a glance from his eye sockets, a small spark gleamed within them. I looked down and took a drink of my iced mocha. We both knew that because he was the Grim Reaper, Big D could never himself die.

"Basically what you're telling me," he said, "is that my work will never be appreciated."

"I appreciate it." It was true. Besides that, in any circumstance, Big D isn't someone you want pissed at you.

"You'd think that I'd be able to get at least one thing published or displayed. I have met all the great authors and artists; every last one of them."

"Talent doesn't just rub off, I guess. The majority of them had spent most of their lifetimes working before they become famous or struck it rich. I think a lot of them never lived to see their work succeed. You can't expect success overnight, you know."

Big D shot me another glance. I was being preachy; I

do that sometimes.

"Sorry."

He waved it off with a skeletal hand. "I suppose that it's not your fault. My genius is simply misunderstood, ahead of its time. We could let it sit for a while and then show some of it off in a couple decades; maybe say that I died or something to attract attention. Or, we could fake my death."

I shrugged. "Sounds like a plan. Say though, have you thought about expanding into other media? Maybe use some other colors, or try your luck with sculpture." On second thought I realized how horrible the idea was. Something told me that a dark red would be his color of choice. And figures twisted in the agony of death would be exactly the type of sculpture he would take a stab at. Big D couldn't help but be morbid, after all, he was conditioned by an eternity of reaping souls. It was probably a requirement in his formal job description, if he had one.

"No thanks," Death said, much to my relief. "I'll just stick to what I know for now, maybe take a break to recharge and come up with some new ideas. I don't know."

I shrugged helplessly.

"Well, I suppose it's time to go." He downed the remainder of his latté and then stood. "Same time Thursday?"

"Sure thing," I replied, wondering for the billionth time where the stuff he drank went. He wasn't saying and I was afraid to ask.

With our next meeting scheduled, the reaper of souls hefted his scythe and headed for the door.

******

Death in a Coffeeshop

How I came to be Death's friend and critic is confusing even to me. There was no dramatic, life-changing event. No fireworks or trauma. He just showed up one day at one of the coffee shops I frequented and asked if the seat across from me was taken. I have to admit, I was a bit startled by this. But I decided it would probably be good policy to just let the robed skeleton with the scythe do whatever made it happy. If it could be happy. I still don't know that.

So he sat down across from me and ordered a café latté. Surprisingly, the waitress was apparently unaffected by the fact that Death was here on her shift. Maybe she thought he was a Goth or something.

"You're Death, right?" I finally asked.

"Affirmative," he replied.

I decided that he would eventually explain what he wanted, harvest me, or simply finish his drink and leave. Even supposedly mythological figures could enjoy a cup of cappuccino every once in a while, I figured.

But eventually the wait got to me and I cracked.

"So," I started but couldn't really think of anything to say. What kind of conversation does one have with the reaper? Take anyone interesting lately? How many children died in Africa today? For some reason, questions about the departed seemed kind of off-limits, taboo, even rude. Finally, I settled on what I figured would be a somewhat safe question: "What do you do with your free time?"

He looked up at me, his lip-less jaws seeming to grin. "I was wondering how long I'd have to sit here before you asked."

That's how I was introduced to mountains of prose

and narrative poetry written by the being most deserving of the pen-name Grimm. The angel of death has a computer and Microsoft Word. That's what he uses to write his stories, anymore. He says it's a lot easier than writing everything longhand with a quill pen, or a typewriter. His keyboarding skills could still use a bit of work, but he doesn't have to worry about carpal tunnel syndrome. After all, he doesn't even have a carpal tunnel. His prose was grammatically perfect, honest, insightful, and utterly gruesome. His scenes and images were vivid and picturesque. It was unsettling.

Later, he revealed his painting skills, letting me get adjusted to the idea that Death thinks of himself as an artist, a creator. Fortunately for my stomach, most of his paintings were nighttime landscapes or supposedly elaborate paintings of shadows. To me, at first, and to everyone else who saw them, the paintings simply looked like black and dark gray canvases. Eventually, though, my eyes adjusted to the myriad shades of black and gray until I could clearly decipher the forms captured on his canvases. I considered seeing a therapist.

I tried to get some of his work published or sold, as he requested, but I continually met opposition. Magazine editors turned down his short stories because they felt they would upset readers. Book companies didn't see a market for a small collection of death scenes, let alone multiple books of such stories. Painters and art critics, of course, thought he was a minimalist, an assumption he despised.

******

On Thursday Big D didn't show for our appointment for the first time, leaving me to sit and chat with a dark-haired waitress in the otherwise empty coffeeshop.

"Where's you friend?" she asked.

"Search me, I haven't the slightest. This is the first time he's skipped out on me."

"So I noticed."

I raised an eyebrow and looked at her curiously. I thought she could have been the same waitress who had served us for some of our other meetings, but I didn't know for sure. I also didn't think that we stood out that much. That sounds kind of stupid, though: Death is sitting in a coffeeshop and no one's supposed to notice.

"You've been keeping tabs on us?" I asked, finally.

A slight grin crossed her lips and she glanced quickly at the table top. "Yeah, I guess so. You two always order the same drinks, sit at the same table, and talk about prose and paintings."

"So, you've been listening in, too?"

Her grin turned into a full smile. "I have been listening in a little, I guess."

I didn't think this could come to any possible good.

"So what's his pen-name? Big D?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, deciding there was nothing I could do to dissuade the somewhat nosy waitress so I may as well answer her questions.

"I haven't seen any of his stuff around. Where does he show it?"

"In all honesty, he doesn't do a whole lot of showing it. No one seems to like it much. It requires specific, acquired tastes."

"Does he write horror or gore or something like that?"

"You could say that, I guess."

"I think I'd like to read some of it, see some of his

paintings. I was a Goth in high school and this sounds kind of interesting."

I looked at her quizzically, trying to see if she was for real. She stared back at me, looking totally serious.

"Am I turning neon or something?" she asked.

"No, I'm just a little shocked. I guess if you really want to see his work, there's no harm to be caused." I decided there was a chance she'd like Big D's stuff, but I doubted it.

"My shift is over in two hours. Why don't we go and look at some of it when I'm done. My name's Larissa."

"I'm Cory," I said, still staring at her like she was growing antlers. "I'll be here."

"Good, it's a date." She stood and went back behind the counter just before three other customers came in the door.

******

"How long have you been his agent?" Larissa asked me, lightly running her fingers across the top of a stack of papers. The stack was at least half a foot tall off my coffee table, with several stacks like it in various places around the room. My meager, four-room apartment was full of Big D's literature, as well as a canvas or two. With no one to thin my collection, the papers kept piling up.

"I've been meeting with him for about two and a half months now, about once each week. He's a decent enough guy, doesn't seem to have a lot of friends, though."

"He sure writes enough. Is this one of his paintings?" she asked, indicating one of two portraits that hung on the walls of my sitting room.

"Yeah, it's my favorite," I replied.

"Likes black doesn't he?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Is he a minimalist?"

"No, it just seems that way at first. There's actually more there, you just have to let your eyes get adjusted to it. Like those 3-D pictures that you have to get your eyes out of focus for to see the image. It takes a while, but eventually you can sort things out." I was proud of my diligence. I had puzzled out the forms buried within the black. No one else had been able to do that but, strangely enough, I found myself wishing that someone else would eventually see the images, too. It would be nice to compare thoughts, argue meanings, and pick favorites with another person who could see the paintings for what they were.

"Interesting, I haven't heard of many people burying their images like that. Some painters seem just a little too anxious to make their symbols obvious. Maybe so other people will see them, feel smart for figuring it out, and maybe buy the painting."

I nodded, my recent experiences in the art world trying to sell the paintings seemed pretty much as she had explained it. Not all artists were like that, but there were more than a few.

"I can't see whatever it is he's hiding in there," she said, "but I'm sure it must be intriguing. I hope I'll figure it out someday." She moved back to the stack of stories and pulled one off the top. I remember it was about a gardener.

Sitting down in my sofa and getting comfortable, she pulled a small pair of reading glasses out of her purse. They were black-rimmed and made her look more like a scholar than a coffeeshop waitress. I clicked on the reading lamp by her seat and headed for my compact kitchen.

"You want something to drink?"

"What do you have?" She called, turning to face me.

"In truth, I've got some cottage cheese that used to be milk, eggnog from last Christmas, and coffee."

"Coffee." She didn't hesitate.

"What kind?"

She looked surprised. "What do you have?"

"Name it." My collection of instant coffee mixes was a matter of pride for me. Whenever I found a new flavor I hurriedly bought and tried it, adding its small, rectangular container to many more just like it in my cupboard. I even alphabetized them every month or so and checked that there was no unwanted fungi amongst the granules.

Larissa finally decided upon French Vanilla and, as I scooped the proper amount of grains out of the canister, I started to contemplate the glorification of laziness on my counter: the instant coffee maker. The instant coffee maker functioned much like a normal coffee maker but had three compartments on the inside instead of two; one to heat the water, one to store the instant coffee, and one that mixed the water and coffee like a blender and deliver them into the waiting pot. The machine came complete with appropriate sound effects and the wonderful smell of coffee being brewed.

"That smells great." She came into the kitchen behind me, carrying the gardener story. I couldn't blame her, no matter how great the author, the smell of coffee brewing grabs the attention in ways words simply can't. I'm sure it wasn't a conscious decision for her to follow me into the kitchen. Much more likely it was some primitive, instinctual reflex.

I couldn't help but grin at her.

"What on earth?" She nudged open the cupboard door, which was permanently ajar, and admired my coffee collection. "Where did you get all these?"

"Grocery stores, convenience stores, specialty shops, new age bookstores; pretty much you name it. I have a contact who's in good with a manufacturer and he tells me when to watch for something new. That hand-painted tin I got from a Romany family I met while touring Europe back in college. The one that's wrapped in fur I got from a South American trader I met a few years back. That's real llama fur."

She looked at me through her scholar glasses and laughed. "If you have all of these coffees, why do you come to the store at all? And why always get the same thing?"

"The environment. It's different drinking a cup in a shop than in your house. Each shop has its own feel, its own energy. I try to go with that energy to strengthen the experience. Everybody who comes interprets the energy a little differently. The shop you work at feels like iced mocha to me, café latté to Big D. The reason for so many variations of tastes in coffee is that so many people interpret the energies in different ways. I ruins the whole experience if a place sets you up for pecan and you get hazelnut. Businesses can fail because they don't have the flavors to match their energies."

She laughed again. "Where did you come up with that?"

"About two in the morning over at Gengo's All-Night Coffee on Avocado Street."

"You get around, don't you.?"

"Yeah, I've been in the coffee circuit since early high

school."

"Where do you get the money to support your fix?" She was grinning broadly.

"I majored in art education at college and ended up a talent scout and critic for the museum and gallery over on Edmond Street. They charge a pretty steep commission to the artists for what gets sold. It's dastardly, but it keeps the agents employed and none of the artists are complaining, not with the pretty hefty checks that get handed around over there when something does sell. I guess the thrill of being marketed for big cash every once in a while is enough to keep them from forming a union and striking."

"That's it?"

"Well, no actually. I have to admit that I've got an investment in the Coffee Quickie over on Berry Lane and I've got some stock in the franchise that supports the place you work. It all keeps me comfortable."

With that, I filled her cup with the flavor she had requested and handed it to her. She smiled and went back to the sitting room, sipping as she went.

******

"Where were you last week?" I asked the skeleton in the robes.

"Oh, it was horrible, a complete mess. A boat of about forty refugees tipped over out in the Atlantic. What's worse is that they couldn't all go the same way, I had to sort out the drowning victims from the shark attacks. And then it wasn't even time for some of them so I had to be real careful about which ones I took. There are some rules about this sort of thing, after all."

We stared at each other, both aware that the boundary had been crossed.

"Anyway," he said at last, "I've decided something."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I'm taking a break, going on sabbatical."

"What? How can you go on sabbatical? What happens then? Do people just not die or something?"

He shrugged. "I don't know; I would assume so. I haven't worked in a couple days, and that's the way it seems to work. Everything's kind of on hold."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing. What are you doing instead, then?"

"I'm doing like you said, trying my hand at some other media. Sculpture seems quite nice so far and I've grown a bit fond of ceramics."

"You've got to be kidding."

He wasn't.

******

As it turned out, Larissa had actually liked Big D's prose and started spending a substantial amount of time at my apartment. She would come over, I'd make her coffee, and then she'd read. When she was finished with a story we would joke around for awhile, lighten the mood. It was a little odd, though. I didn't go out much except for work, and I wasn't used to many visitors. She said that the stories made her cry and I made her laugh. I didn't know how to take that. It was nice to have someone friendly stopping by who enjoyed the same literature as I did.

She was smart, as much as her glasses made her seem, and when she read the stories she didn't need to look up the words that had stumped me. Against my better judgment, I started feeling attracted to Larissa and looking forward to her visits.

During my meetings with Death, she kept herself as

faceless and as silent as before. She didn't intrude on us, and I often caught myself forgetting she was even around, like I had before we met. When we were alone, however; her glasses caught my attention like nothing else, and I loved to watch her read. I knew the stories so well that I could gauge her place in any of them simply by paying attention to her facial expressions, a grin during a humorous section, a frown when trouble was brewing. Near the end she would always cry, and I would have a box of tissues waiting.

It went like that for the next couple weeks. Death was taking his time off, and I was falling for our waitress. Whenever Big D finished his latest creation he would bring it to me, and I would keep it on display in my apartment to be admired by Larissa.

To my surprise, Death's pottery resembled tribal relics more than it did the twisted and tortured souls I had imagined. His sculpture, however, met my expectations and I finally decided to drape a towel over it rather than face any more nightmares.

******

"Cory!" Larissa called for my attention from where I was making coffee in the kitchen.

"Yeah?" I peeked into my sitting room. She was standing in front of the painting we had admired the first evening she came to visit, Big D's latest prose tragedy in her hands. I walked into the room and stood beside her.

"I can see it! I can see it!"

I stood there, stunned.

"There's a rocky beach with crashing waves," she explained. "There's a large spire of rock shooting straight up from the water towards the sky like Devil's Tower at

sea. There's trees and all kinds of plants growing on top of it. It's all painted in shades of black like everything is late at night when there's no moon or stars. I can't believe it. Is this a real place?"

I didn't know, but I showed her some of the other paintings I had stored away. Buildings, trees, lakes, marshes; she saw them all and was shocked by the details. "It's like learning how to see in complete darkness," she said, gazing at the landscapes in awe.

That night she didn't leave my apartment.

******

"I take it that your sabbatical's over."

Big D nodded, seeming especially grim.

It was Thursday again and I was sitting again in the coffeeshop with Death. This time, though, there was no iced mocha in my hands and some skinny, red-haired boy was waiting tables.

"I guess I should have expected it," I said. "I've read enough to know how it happens: just like that."

"I never completely stopped working. It would have been hell coming back with it all piling up."

An image of stacked corpses, like in holocaust pictures, invaded my mind.

"Anyway," I said, "I don't know if I can keep up this partnership. It feels too weird, personal, now."

Death nodded his skull. "I expected this."

Larissa had not awakened after spending the night at my apartment. Death had taken her in her sleep, for reasons unknown to me. I didn't want to read what words he would write about her. I was furious and hurt, but I knew I shouldn't be angry with him. It was his duty, I knew. After reading all of his stories I knew that the scythe

was a heavy burden to bear. "I want out. You'll have find someone else to peddle your humanities."

"Actually, I have a proposition for you. Maybe you'll find it interesting."

I looked at him, puzzled and already standing in my halted attempt to leave.

"You are aware that I have become somewhat listless, perhaps unreliable, in my duties."

No kidding.

"When mortals die it's obvious that they cross over to a different place. You know that. Sometimes I can visit them. That's how I learned to write and to paint."

"Yeah, what's that got to do with me?" I was curious about what he had to say.

"In reality, Cory, you should have been dead a long time ago. I visited you a few days before I was supposed to subtract you. Do you remember when you could first see the images in my paintings?"

I nodded.

"That was the day you should have died. Instead, I broke the rules and recruited you as my representative. Larissa was to be taken the day before she stayed in your apartment. That's why she could see the images in my paintings. I altered circumstances twice for you as a token of my gratitude. Your time was up, but you continued on because I allowed it. The only reason either of you could see the images in my paintings was because you were already technically dead; you simply hadn't been separated from your bodies yet."

Shocked, I stood silent, trying desperately to put my feelings into words. Instead, I just gaped.

"If I hadn't done what I did, the two of you would

never have met. You both would have died alone."

Defeated, I stared at the scythe, resting against the wall where he always leaned it. "How was she supposed to go?"

"Hit by a bus," he said quickly. "She would have died in the hospital as a blood-soaked mess of twisted flesh and shattered bones. All of her relatives are out of town and, like you, she hasn't much in the way of friends, so she would have died alone with only hospital orderlies to sit by her. Instead, she passed on painlessly in her sleep without so much as a nightmare. And all the while you were there, holding her and keeping her company."

Death had given us to each other, and Death had taken us apart. I sat back down but didn't look up from the table.

"Now, my proposition may intrigue you. Perhaps even more now than before, now that you know how things could have gone. Recently, as you know, I have grown tired of carrying the scythe. So, I am offering the job to you."

I looked up at him and stared blankly.

"It has occurred before. You don't believe that a single soul can handle the burden of being the reaper for all of eternity do you? I myself am not even among the first hundred. We all grow weary and wish for our own passage. All we must do is find a suitable replacement. I think you are more than qualified. You take over the job, and I gain another chance at life; at least until the scythe tells you my time's up. Meanwhile, you are free to visit Larissa, or any other amongst the deceased, anytime you please. You could say that it's one of the perks."

"How do I know whom to take, when to do it, and

where they are?"

"The scythe imparts that knowledge upon its owner," he said casually. "It's actually more simple than it seems and you don't have to be present for every single death, just show up for the special ones and cut free the occasional soul to keep the ball rolling. Will you accept the responsibility?"

"How long do I have to do it?"

"*Totos annos*: for all the years. Or, actually, until you find an appropriate replacement. You'd be surprised at how easy it can sometimes be. After that you can live again for a while, sort of make up for lost time, even though you should have died months ago. It's part of the bargain. Eventually, you'll die and pass on to the next world. I'll be there and so will Larissa."

I felt like a toy played with and then cast away, but I nodded anyway. What did I have left to lose now that my romance was over and I understood the nature of Death's game? I had coffeeshop stocks and coffeeshop philosophies, that was all. It was all a small trade for what I now knew.

He held out the scythe to me and I grasped it, feeling the smooth, worn wood of the handle for a second before I felt a quick, searing pain as the flesh was torn from my bones and transplanted onto his. And then I felt absolutely nothing - the sensuality of nada.

"Ah, to be flesh again," Big D said, smiling with what used to be my lips.

"Someday, though," I said, my mandibles moving and shaping the words despite the lack of a tongue or even breath. "It will someday be time for me to take you."

He grinned, nodded and then sucked down the

remainder of his café latté. "You know, I've never been able to taste these, I wondered what it was like. I don't think it's for me. I supposed you'd be happiest if I kept your collection around for the memories, though, right?"

I shrugged my flesh-less shoulders and headed for the door. "Do as you will."

There was much work to be done before I was caught up with my duties. Besides that, I had to freshen up my writing skills. I had a story in mind that was simply dying to be told.

Jessica Wheeler

The Mechanics of Breathing

I wanna fuck you like I breathe.

It could be
like the expanding
and contracting
of the lungs
to draw air into
the body and feed
the blood.
Hell, you could breathe for me.

It would be
beautiful.
And in the morning
you would be gone,
leaving me
oxygen starved
and gasping.

God, wouldn't that be beautiful?

Courtney Neff

Nobody

Nobody knows I am a bold rose
and a dainty daisy all at once.
I am a paradox of ideas and beliefs
but nobody knows.
Nobody knows I am a little girl
hiding from a monster.
I am also a woman searching for security
but nobody knows.
Nobody knows that I tiptoe outside at night
to greet the moon.
I cover every bruise and scar,
but nobody knows.

Haiku

Ghosting

O'er, numbing waters
abducted by sly river
empty canoe floats.

Kylie Wainer

Horses in the field
whinny greetings as we near
with oats and halters.

Anonymous

Wolves

Gray shadows gliding
obscured by the rising night
silent in the snow.

Anonymous

Susan Rodine

Carnal

Clock strikes ten
and the light strikes
red
to force our hesitation
and release the flow
of daily thoughts
contemplations
observations
of people and relationships
and arguments.
He's concerned about his tires on the snow
I'm fighting paranoia
What are they assuming now?
Mistaking this,
no doubt,
as an attempt on my part
to rally his
romantic interest
Ridiculous?
I always hated
sexual politics.

What are you looking at me
like that for?
Oh, I was absorbed and didn't
realize
I had held the door.
Apologize?
Too late.
Guess I'll just follow
your Lead.

He'd better crotch his can
of Dr. Pepper
while the waiter
begs the desires of our companions and us
and runs to fetch the respective cures.
The table splits in broken
conversations
germinating from selected
comments
that fly over the cream and ketchup
and rest on fertile ears
that all day
haven't heard but
lecture
after lecture
and now crave the seeds
of beautiful nonsense.

The athletic duo
ponders the
flaws
of their teammates
and unknowingly take
the observers
as victims of unintentional
exclusivity.
Miss Carefree
is singing
and tossing her head with the rhythm
of the country music
that clouds the atmosphere.
and here we go. . .

Carnal

those two again,
those stubborn, vicious
two
fertilizing each other's
weeds.
He, justifying his use of the word
"non-moral"
she, questioning his grammatical
integrity

and, still,
Slowpoke hasn't decided his order.

But his patience
suffices him
and infects Miss Carefree,
who, still, is shaking
that damn packet of Half & Half
with the belief
and hope
of turning it into butter
before the frothy moon settles to the earth.
Miss Carefree passes the rest
to him
for his third cup of coffee.
"Good for the soul,"
he says
and then accepts the food from the waiter
which, apparently,
is good for other things.
She scoffs
and propels us into
discussion

about the mythical health hazards of salt,
"Yet another silent killer, you know,"
as I leave the table in search of
deliverance,
Mr. Athlete and he
immerse themselves in an
intellectual
conversation that most likely started with
sports
and will end
with politics.

My brief escape
into the ladies' room—
haven of indolence—
where everything is automatic,
except relief.
The hairdryer turns on as I walk past
to announce my intrusion
and I leave wondering
if the toilet is ever going to flush
or if that part of me
will be left to offend the next visitor.

At some point in my absence,
he must have lost his
speaking privileges,
now supplementing his argument
with hand gestures in
her direction
as the athletes
strategize
to swipe the mushrooms

from his omelet
and receive a calculated slap
from her, acting in his defense
for the
moment.

Seven-minute lulls
provoke her to try to bring
the observers to
speak
a witty comment
or two
before we abandon it for more
fruitful conversation
and slide back
into that verbal flow
that sustains most of the relationships
represented
by this bouquet of
personalities.

Suddenly, her space
is encroaching on his feet,
and tensions rise
as he begins to get high
on her
indignation.
The athletes choose
sides in the contest
just as he attacks her
passive aggression
and she
accuses him of being,

well,
a guy,
evidently the worst crime by nature.
The observers
reserve their comments for later
when they can be heard above the
roaring
of the two
those stubborn, vicious
two.
She, still defending her
Womanhood
When he retreats to
pay the check—
the last straw—
before we leave
with shards of her
dignity
embedded in our skin.

I'm caught
again
in the middle
and feel the need to
apologize?
But for which one
of
the two
I'm still not sure,
so I step aside
and let him get
the door.

Mary A. McMann

Feel Like Spinning

laughter to lose control
getting dizzy
we all tumble down
growing tired
of running the normal path
take a u-turn in my tracks
feel like spinning
no thought, just lose control
getting dizzy
falling to the ground
singing in the grass
let me catch my breath
still a child
but not as young as I'd like to be
take a left at the next stop
flying down the sidewalk
jumping from the sudden drop
falling down
with vertigo's touch
laughter ringing
in a childhood screaming
to be touched once more
feel like spinning
a moment to lose control
getting dizzy
we keep going down

Allison Baumann

Card Game

In those days,
I couldn't see above
that large oak table
where cards were played.
Grandma's gentle hands
lifted me up and
then placed me
at the center of the game.
There I'd sit
on that table
as the cards flew
past and around me.
Those cards, every time
from the same deck.
Then Uncle Ken,
in his drunken state,
would shout to all,
"I bet the baby!"
No one stopped playing,
they just continued the game.
In the end, when the winner
collected the prize money,
I was always left behind.
For by that time,
I was fast asleep dreaming
of the day when I
could play cards too.

Susan Rodine

Circus Car

They climbed in.
Four clowns
(minus the painted grins)
Bickering over the coveted
window seats
and trying to maintain a safe
distance from the abominations
called sister
flanking them in the backseat.
With every turn of the road, an annoyed
complaint would sound regarding the sibling
that had shifted
into the lap of another.
And they drove on…

Legs
grew…
Hips followed.
Shoulders, now overlapping, ignored
the dividing lines between ages and egos.
They had grown together
into a solid, immovable mass of laughs,
mass of laughs,
leaking giggles
with every sneeze
and muscle contraction.

The doors pop open
allowing the clowns
to fall strategically
from the car—

(grins in place)
thankful to have
their own bodies back,
content to have shared
their hearts.

Tiffany Janssen

Fish Tales

It was raining so hard I could barely see the road. The windshield wipers danced across the windshield. Outside, Vegas grew darker than I'd thought possible. The storm had knocked out most of the power lines that ran the whole damn place. You should've been there to see the confusion that followed. Faces turned upward, like God might be there for them now; He would light the way. Turns out it ain't God's country. Took 'em hours to get the place lit back up—long enough for me to get out of town.

The dark and the rain made my car feel like a cocoon. I couldn't see out, don't think there was anyone to see in. It was lonely. I stretched, yawned, blinked. The lonely was still there. It spread out across the road, silencing all but the rain and my thoughts. Memories of home began to surface. My thoughts kept drifting back to my grandpa. Right now he'd be alone in his room at the hospital. My grandma would have left over an hour ago. Ice ran down my spine, I tried to shake it off. Vegas still gave me the chills. I caught myself drifting off the road and headed onto the shoulder. I let the car coast a bit then stopped.

Outside, the rain still washed across the windows while inside I wiped at the fog; that ain't common out here, neither was this rain, come to think of it... A smile formed on my lips, and I opened my door. The dampness of the air was surprising; it was heavy like it had been when I was little. I grew up in the Midwest; in Iowa it ain't the heat, it's the humidity. Some days you couldn't take a deep breath for fear of drowning. This desert rain was warm and

enveloping, soon I was completely soaked. I held my arms out and faced God; you can turn on the lights in Vegas now, I thought. The water rolled off of my cheeks and into the creases of my mouth; it tasted cool and sweet. My outstretched arms acted as spouts, channeling water in the direction they were pointed. For a while I just played alongside the road, getting nostalgic for the last time I had stood in the rain.

I have always loved fishing. I love the quiet, love the challenge, and love the gear. From my first Mickey Mouse fishing pole, I was hooked. Starting at about age five, after a good rain, my neighborhood friends and I would collect night crawlers. Grandpa told us they came up out of the ground after a rain to avoid drowning. Turns out it's actually a result of some chemical that gets too strong in the soil. I like the drowning story better. After a long rain there could be thousands of night crawlers in the parking lot of our church. We would pack a bucket full of dirt and collect as many as the bucket would hold. We'd then ride our bikes to the creek at the bottom of our hill and fish for the rest of the afternoon.

"Miss are you OK?"

I hadn't even noticed that a car had pulled up in front of me. Hunched over, scanning the ground in this rain I must have looked troubled. I wondered if worms lived out there.

"Oh, um, yeah, fine," I said, straightening myself out. "Just needed fresh air."

"You sure?" The man had gotten out of his car, apparently oblivious to the rain, and started searching the ground with me. "If you tell me what it is you lost I could help you find it better."

I looked him over. He was about twenty-five years old, drove an old truck, wore only a T-shirt and jeans and had the palest blonde hair, which, along with the T-shirt and jeans, was now plastered to him by the rain. That pleasant sight, added to the look of concern on his face as he scanned the ground for something lost, and that feeling of loneliness that I couldn't seem to shake, may have explained what I was about to do. "Night crawlers," I said smiling.

"Going fishing?" He looked up.

"Well," I said and then paused, almost afraid of what I would say next, "I guess I had considered it." If at any moment the Twilight Zone theme song had started playing I wouldn't have been surprised. "Any place near here for it?"

"I believe so... bait shop, too, if I recall." At this he winked. "I believe it ain't far at all."

"Well then, sir, my name is Tiffany." I grabbed his hand to gave it a firm shake. "Could I interest you in some fishing this morning?"

Street runoff from many of the surrounding neighborhoods flowed into the creek at the bottom of the hill I grew up on. The sewer tunnels that this rain ran through were at least five feet wide and ran under places like supermarkets, and new housing developments. Grandpa took us on our first expedition through the tunnels one afternoon in search of buried treasure. My mother was convinced the old man had lost it. During storms the runoff would rush through the tunnels making it a challenge to navigate them, especially on bike, our favorite method.

"Yeah," he smiled as he stood up, "I would like to go fishing."

I smiled first at him and then at the memory of the tumbles I took trying to beat the rubber ducks we'd race on the creek. Come to think of it... I had already gotten one sandal off and frantically kicked at the other. This sudden burst of energy caught the attention of my companion who looked on with great interest. Within seconds I was hopping alongside the road, one foot stuck in my pant leg as I tried to wriggle out of my wet pants. "Ow!" I hit the gravel. I couldn't wipe the smirk off of my face as I lay on the wet ground and wriggled my right leg out of my pants.

"Lady, I said I'd go fishing with you," he announced. "A strip tease wasn't part of the deal." He laughed as he tried very deliberately to look stern and unamused while only managing to look like a half-drowned child after his first trip to the deep end, a little scared, a lot excited.

"Ha, Ha," I said. "There isn't enough light here." I thought for a second. "Wait!" Barefoot and half-naked, I walked into the headlights. "Yes sir!" There was my memory forever preserved in imperfect flesh. I stood sideways, flung my wet hair back out of my face and proudly presented my hip. "When I was younger, my friends and I would fish in the creek at the bottom of our hill. The sewers that fed the creek were all street runoff, and my grandpa showed us one day how we could go halfway across town in them. When it rained we'd ride our bikes through the sewers. Sometimes we'd race rubber ducks to the end of the line, although it wasn't quite a fair race. We'd take a tumble off our bikes and then lie there watching the duck disappear down the tunnel. The recollection just hit me and I hadn't noticed my scar for

years, guess I wondered if it had gone away."

At first I was met with an awkward silence. I suppose most people aren't used to total strangers who strip, invite them fishing and then divulge childhood memories. He just looked at me, eyes blinking from the rain, shook his head from side to side and smiled. "My name is Robert, Tiffany," he said, holding out his hand. "Why don't we see if we can get dried off a little and try to find that lake?"

I liked Robert better than most people already.

I nodded in agreement, grabbed my pants, and opened my trunk. In my haste to get out of Vegas I had thrown all of my belongings in the trunk and backseat of my car. After some digging I came up with three dirty towels. "Here," I tossed him a towel, "hop in your car and we'll drive up to the next town for a map."

"Wait, follow me, there's a truck stop not far, we'll head there." Robert climbed into his truck, and I watched him towel off.

It was my Grandpa who taught me how to fish. I was five years old and on the family camping trip. We got up early and sneaked out. He said we needed some real big worms. The man at the bait shop let me dig them out myself, and I found us two cartons full of them. I played with the worms the whole drive to Blackhawk Lake. I'll never forget my horror when Grandpa handed me the hook.

I almost forgot to put my pants back on after I was done toweling off. Had it not been for the chill of the defrost I flipped on for the windshield, I might very well

have gotten to the truck stop half-clothed. Robert waited for me to signal him that I was ready, and we pulled out from the shoulder. The truck stop wasn't far, maybe ten minutes, but it gave me enough time to wonder what in the hell I was doing. I was about to go fishing at three in the morning, in a storm, in the middle of a desert, with a stranger.

The woman behind the counter in the truck stop restaurant was everything you'd expect: fifties hairdo with too much spray, cigarette hanging from her bright red lips as she talked, stirrup pants with an oversized "Las Vegas" sweatshirt that had slot machines across the front. The gold coins in the machines matched her gold flats.

"Good evening ma'am," Robert said as he nodded in her direction and led me to a table. "Can we get some coffee here, please?" She grabbed two cups and a carafe and made her way to our table.

"I'm going to look for a map. Can you just get me some pancakes?" I said before sitting down.

"Sure."

I excused myself and headed towards the convenience section. I always marvel at the variety of stuff you can find at truck stop. What's most amazing is that they really do have exactly what you want. How did they know that someone would really need a deck of playing cards at four a.m. or that fishing lures are sometimes a necessity? I bought a map and headed back to the table.

When I was six or seven, my grandpa took me to a fishing tournament at Bacon Creek. On the way there we noticed our night crawlers had mostly died off, so we stopped at this gas station-cum-liquor store. Outside they

had the one thing I can honestly base my fishing obsession on: Vend-a-Bait. I saw the sign and was out of the car before it stopped. Night crawlers, grubs, crickets, corn, flies, they had all the bait you would need for a grand fishing expedition, all packed in little Styrofoam containers that were dispensed out of a converted soda machine. I spent my lunch money and bought one of each.

"What will we be fishing for anyway?" I said, sitting back down. "They have some pretty big lures back there."

"Hmm..." Robert shook off his daydream; he had been watching me walking around. "I'm not for certain. We'll have to ask."

The waitress brought our food, and we ate in silence for a few minutes. A group of hunters came in and sat up at the bar. They looked like good candidates to ask about the local fishing.

"What you wanna fish for?" the first one inquired.

"Well, we aren't sure," I said. "What're our choices?"

They told us about Lake Mohave, in the Lake Mead Desert USA National Park. It was about a half-hour's drive south from here. There is a great little bait shop, Billy's Bait 'n' Beer. If it ain't open, they got one of them vending machines. My eyes lit up. In the upper part of the lake we'd find lots of rainbow trout, and probably some catfish; in the low water, largemouth and striped bass.

The first real fish I ever caught, aside from some small perch and sunfish, was a largemouth bass. My dad, uncle, grandpa, and I were all fishing on the Missouri down past Macy, Nebraska late in the summer. I was six years

old and had just graduated from the Mickey Mouse pole to my first of many Berkley Bedels. This one had been my birthday present just a month earlier and had yet to bring in anything over a pound and a half. That day was perhaps the proudest in my early childhood.

I never took my eyes off of my bobber, so when I saw it sink and run, I jumped to my feet and yanked! I pulled with everything I had, and soon I saw the white of the fish's belly as it flipped around in the water. My grandpa grabbed the net and scooped it out of the water and into the boat. Before they even had the hook out they had the scale on it: five pounds, seven ounces, twenty-three inches long! I was truly Grandaddy's Girl that day.

"This time of year I'd go for the bass," said the biggest guy. I knew that's what I was going for. Maybe I could catch a prize for Grandpa just one more time.

We thanked them, paid for our breakfast, and started south. The storm had moved on and left a clear sky, just beginning to show daybreak. The air smelled fresh and damp still. I watched how quickly the sandy soil absorbed the puddles. I hadn't really noticed until we got on the road that we had left my car back at the truck stop and had taken Robert's truck. I had even grabbed my pole and tackle box. I guess it made sense; we didn't know if there would be good roads in the park. I just hadn't realized I was already this comfortable traveling with him.

Billy's wasn't hard to find, everywhere you looked there was a rude, hand-painted sign directing you to "Beer 'n' Bait," "Tackle 'n' Treats," or "Guppies 'n' Gear." I had to hand it to the guy, he sure tried hard. The unfinished wood of the makeshift shop was comforting; bait shops must look

like this in every corner of the globe. Billy was no disappointment either. Overalls, waders, and a nylon vest, he looked like he was born right there in the shop. We however, looked a bit out of place.

"You folks need directions?" Billy asked.

"No sir," I said. "Unless you can point us to the best possible cove in which to snag a prize largemouth."

Billy smiled and got up off his stool. "Well, your gonna need some grubs I bet. Good timin' for ya, the storm should've roused 'em all. Probably hungry from all that scared swimmin' they've been doin'. What'cha got for tackle?"

I went out to the truck and returned with my stuff. "I know I'll need some leads..." Billy set us up with chubs, grubs, lures, an extra pole for Robert, a net, a basket, and waders then wished us luck. On the way out the door, I dropped a buck into the Vend-a-Bait and got some night crawlers.

The dock at the trailer park in Arnold's Park where my grandparents spent summers was right on Upper Gar, a shallow lake great for turtle hunting and fishing. We spent many summer nights out there, exhausted from boating all day, but with enough vigor left in us to enjoy the late-night thrill of being stung by a large bullhead you've just pulled in. My grandpa was a good friend with Walt and Edna, an old retired couple who had lived there for over twenty years. Every morning at just past five, Walt would go off in his flat bottom, not to return until he'd snagged the limit. My grandpa often went with him and if I could get up, they let me go too. I caught my first carp one of those mornings. They aren't good eatin', but carp fight with every bone in their body, and they have a lot of them.

We headed southeast over some dirt roads until we got to the spot Billy had described. It was beautiful. The rock bridge he had described was there. The underbrush was still wet from the rain, and the moisture glared almost blindingly in the rising sun. "The sun shines directly on the spot you want this time of day," he'd said. "The fish come up to the warm water in the sun." And there it was. A break in the trees overhead left a small spot, maybe twenty feet long, in broad sunshine. I peeked into the lake and saw fins, ten, fifteen, maybe more.

I thought of my Grandpa back home, in his room at the hospital. My grandma wouldn't be there yet today. I wondered what he thought about as he lay in bed. Perhaps he had been playing back all of our fishing trips together. He was remembering my first pole, teaching me to bait a hook, my largemouth bass, Walt and his boat. I knew he remembered every detail. I bet he could tell you every measurement of my biggest fish. I sat still and watched the fins of the perch, bluegill; all had come to the light, just like Billy had said. And here I was, in the light, remembering my Grandpa and watching the fish.

Haiku

Hooking

Silky waters yield
as pink jig probes the surface,
seducing trophies.

Kylie Wainer

Diced tomatoes squirt
a new beginning onto
my postwhite t-shirt.

Anonymous

In sweat-drenched pockets
her hands search for yellow balls,
and the game begins.

Anonymous

Michelle Handsaker

Hailing Mary

Bright red polish and lipstick
the color of blood.
Dark—not candy-apple—red,
slippery gloss to touch, even dry.

Mom said only hookers wore it
and I was a 'good girl.'
She told me what 'good girls'
don't do

and I wanted to wear it even more.

Sixteen years of listening to
don't,
can't,
shouldn't walk down the aisle at Osco
longing for the forbidden
nail polish, longing for
a corner of my own.
Standing there, waiting for my
trick.
Hoping he would be my
savior.

Plaid skirt and penny loafers,
starched white shirt of a 'lady,'
or so mom would say.

That would be real sexy, wouldn't it?
"Hey mister, five bucks to
hail this Mary all night long."

Jeanette Wiederien

Finals Week

In the darkness I take
my position quivering
with goose bumps.
A sudden urge
to urinate,
or vomit,
and then I wait;
think only of the money,
so much needed,
so expensive,
for words
on a piece of paper.
Hopefully it won't take
long to make enough,
if I'm good at it.
But I still need
to pee
or puke.
So I wait.
I can see the crowd;
see the hungry men,
their beady eyes waiting
for a feast of my body.
And they wait

It's not too late to quit.
But the money.
Life-giving money,
so necessary.
I just need to take a piss.

"Don't think
about the men."
That's what she tells me.
They don't know you—
only want to see
your body.
There's no shame
in showing off your body;
gotta pay the loans somehow.
And so I wait
for the humiliation to pass.
Damn, I need to throw up.
I hear the beginning strain
and the lights come up.
I embark upon the dance
to pay off my future.

Kylie Wainer

Devoted

your born-again teeth,
plastic gums and enamel
Whose dentures are in the birdcage?

your mauve-colored chamber pot
laced with Wednesday night's entree
I'd better start scrubbing.

your bodily odors,
rank and thick
But only to the holiday visitors.

your starched linens,
stripped and replaced
Please don't vomit on the hospital creases.

your picked-over M&Ms,
bowl of peanuts for the unsuspecting guest
But Millie, these are nine months old.

your big white tub
a week's worth of filth swirled down its drain
Prune those fragile yellow nails, too.

your Sunday clothes
moth-ridden and tattered
Launder your housecoat, soiled for months

My skin
a salty solution coats the pale exterior
I'll be back tomorrow,

gladly.

Tiffany Janssen

Ode to Bernstein

Woman on her way home.
As she walks,
she's clickin' down her high-heeled shoes,
I think,
she's the kind.
Tug.
That skirt has a mind for mischief.

"Oh yeah baby, yeah,"
a holler moves out to slap that round ass.

Me with my hands in my pockets,
tight.
Her clickin' those shoes and shakin' that big, round ass.
And she's shakin'
and clickin'
and tugging at that skirt. Oh,
slides gently up her thigh.

That thigh.
Pale white flesh rolls in and out of view,
first under skirt, then under stocking.

Me with my hands in my pockets,
tight.
And she's shakin'
and clickin'
and I'm tugging
and pulling.

Beth Donohue

The Team

The cold white tile of the flooring was as impersonal as the receptionist that guarded the front desk, eyeing the nurses and orderlies as if daring them to say anything to her. She glared at me, then glanced back at the computer as if she were hoping I would go away. When she saw that I wasn't going to leave, she hurled a pen into an unsuspecting coffee mug and swung around in her chair, leveling her piercing eyes at mine.

"Whaddya want?" she snarled.

I swallowed hard. This was not going well. "I need to know what room my Grandpa's in, please."

"Name?"

"Um...mine or his?"

"His. It really doesn't matter who you are."

"Alvin Morris. He's in the cardiac unit, I think."

She hammered mercilessly at a battered gray keyboard for a moment.

"Room 489. Go down this hall to the elevator, up to the fourth floor, then follow the signs." She related the directions like a machine.

"Thanks," I stammered. She seemed not to notice, and instead turned her attention to the unfortunate couple who had just entered and were blissfully unaware of the dragon about to confront them. The receptionist was ridiculous; I wouldn't have been surprised if she could actually breathe fire.

I hate hospitals. There is nothing in the world that bothers me as much as opening the door and being blasted with the thick scent of the infirm. It turns my stomach. I

suppose its not just the smell either, it's the fact that I know people die in hospitals, and it makes me uncomfortable. I like to be in control, and all of these patients strapped to gurneys and attached to ventilators and feeding tubes are definitely not in control. My previous experience with hospitals had been limited to the occasional obligatory visit to a sick relative I hardly knew or to the latest member of the football team to fall prey to the dangers of the sport. I had always tried to distance myself from these places, but I couldn't avoid it this time.

It took me about five minutes to find the room, and my stomach did flip-flops the entire time. I stood for a moment outside 489, knowing that I would have to accept the fact that Grandpa was sick as soon as I stepped inside. I waited a few minutes, hoping that my mother or sister or someone might still be there, but they weren't. They had probably gone downstairs to grab a bite to eat. I considered going in search of them, but asking the dragon at the front desk where the cafeteria was could have been suicidal. I took a deep breath and stepped inside the room.

I hardly recognized my grandfather, swaddled in white sheets and surrounded by blinking machines. He was pale, and looked terribly weak. Mom had warned me that he looked worse off than he was, but I really didn't believe it. I swallowed hard, and tried not to think about the fact that he probably only had a month or so to live. He seemed to be asleep.

"Grandpa? Can you hear me?"

I watched for a moment, and just when I was about to give up and try again later, his eyes flickered open and he turned his head to focus on me.

"Hi Ryan... Good to see you."

I wasn't exactly sure what to say. How do you strike up a conversation with a sick old man who is probably

going to die from a bad heart? 'Hey, how ya doin'?' seemed a little trite.

"I just wanted to come and visit you and say to get well soon." It sounded dumb, but it was the best I could come up with. Grandpa didn't seem to notice my awkwardness and instead asked if I wanted something to drink (I didn't) and whether I wanted to sit down (I did.) I had a choice of an electric recliner over against the wall or a battered armchair next to the bed. I chose the armchair, and scooted it over a little so Grandpa could see me better.

"Your mom and sister were just here. They went to get something to eat. Glad you came." He paused for a moment. "How's school?"

"OK. Classes are going pretty well, but with spring coming, things are going to get hectic quickly."

"Don't I know it. Spring's a busy time for everybody." He shifted in bed and sat up against the pillow. "I remember when I was a boy, I wanted winter to stay forever, just so's I wouldn't have to go out and plow and plant and work in the fields every day until the next winter. Now, I'd love to do it again. Wish I could be out in the fresh air all day...hard work's good for a man, don't you forget that."

"No Grandpa, I won't."

We sat there in silence for a little while, and I struggled for something to say. I was saved for a moment by a frazzled-looking nurse who appeared silently, checked the myriad of blinking machines, wrote something down on a chart, and left.

"Her name's Denise. Comes in at half-past ev'ry hour. Don't say much, but she's nice I suppose."

I nodded in agreement. The awkward silence had

returned. Finally, I thought of something to say: "What're you gonna do with your horses, Grandpa?"

"The horses? Don't know yet. Don't look like I'll have any use for 'em anymore. I suppose I'll hafta sell 'em. Sure hate to do that, though. Wouldn't know what kind a home they'd get in this day and age."

Grandpa had always loved horses. I don't think he lived one year of his life without any. Personally, I didn't know much about them, only the fact that they were huge cream-colored beasts with blond manes and tails and gentle dispositions. There were four at the present time, and Grandpa used them every year to do the farm work. People had said the horses were completely impractical, and they were, but he was drawing an adequate pension and didn't have anything else to do, so nobody saw any harm in it. Every day, from just after the spring thaw to well into autumn, anybody driving past Grandpa's place could see a team of golden horses plowing a field or mowing hay, walking along slowly in the sunshine with an old man clinging to an antique piece of farm equipment and singing enthusiastically to the steady rhythm of the hoof beats. It became a sort of community attraction, with families out for an afternoon drive stopping to ask questions and let their kids touch the horses. With Grandpa sick, I doubted that would happen anymore.

I hadn't considered it before, but the thought of my grandfather having to sell his horses broke my heart. I made a quick decision.

"Don't sell 'em yet. Maybe I could take care of them for you, then you wouldn't have to worry about where they'd end up."

"That's real nice of you son, but you don't know

anything about horses. I couldn't ask that of you, not with school and all."

"But you could teach me, Grandpa. Tell me what they need to eat and stuff. School will be out in a month, and I won't start college 'till mid-September...They could have all summer out to pasture, and then we could decide what to do with 'em in the fall."

"No, I wouldn't want 'em turned out all summer like that. Those horses are used to workin' ten hours a day all summer. It's what they were bred to do, and its what they like, believe it or not. If you want to keep 'em, then you'd have to work 'em. It'd be too much to ask of you with all the other stuff you have goin' on. No, we'd better sell 'em. I'll ask your mom to put up a card in the feed store and an ad in the paper. I'm sure somebody needs good horses."

"Grandpa, don't sell them. Please. I want to keep them. I'll learn. There's all sorts of books in the library about horses, and Ellen at school has a horse, I could talk to her.... That way when you get better, they'd still be there for you."

Grandpa smiled and sighed. "Well, Ryan, I don't think I'll ever get out of this place alive, not with what the doc said and all, but if you wanna give it a whirl, I don't see what harm it'd do. Like I said, hard work's good for a man. And them horses are certainly a lot of work. Ask your mom when she gets back, and if she says its OK, we can start with what they eat and how to handle 'em."

Mom was back within fifteen minutes, and she actually seemed to like the idea. I don't think any of us really believed that Grandpa would ever set foot on his little farm again and work his horses, but it was nice to have the option openly discussed. It seemed a lot less

morbid than the doc's opinion at any rate. Grandpa took a nap for an hour or so, then after supper, we sat down and started talking about the horses.

My uncle Ted and I went to get them from Grandpa's neighbor on a Saturday morning. It was raining, and the day had a sleepy quality to it, but I was excited to get started with my new "job."

"Now Ryan, you know anything about these here horses?" my uncle asked as we leaned on the fence watching the group of four cream-colored animals grazing peacefully on the soggy grass.

"Kinda. Grandpa told me a bunch of stuff, that they're a breed of draft horse called "Belgians" and what to feed them and how they think; where to stand so's I don't get stepped on and such, plus, I got a book at the library."

"Well, that's a great place to start. D'ya know how to catch 'em?"

"Um, not really. I s'pose I just walk up and put the halters on their heads. It can't be that hard."

"Why don't you give it a try."

It didn't look all that difficult. The horses had moved about ten feet in the fifteen minutes we'd been watching them, and they looked too big to go anywhere very fast. Besides, Grandpa had said that they were all gentle. I grabbed one of the huge leather halters from the fencepost, clipped a lead rope to it, and started out across the field. In a few seconds, I turned around and took the rest of the halters and ropes. "Might as well get 'em all at once."

Uncle Ted smiled.

The grass was wet and sloppy, and my shoes and

jeans were soaked within a few steps. The horses turned their heads and watched me with gentle eyes from under their rain-soaked manes. They suddenly seemed much bigger than they had before. I swallowed hard as I got closer.

The Belgians stood solidly until I tried to untangle the ropes. As soon as they saw I was going to attempt to catch them, they merely wandered off. It didn't seem like a very big deal until they did it about ten times. I would get close enough to touch them, and then they would just start walking. Those horses could walk faster than I, and no matter where I went or which way I turned, I couldn't get close enough to put a halter on even one of them. I looked toward the fence in time to see Uncle Ted swallow a smile and pretend that he was concerned. "Not so easy, is it?"

"How on earth do you catch these things?"

He told me to stay put, and disappeared into the barn for a minute. He was back shortly, carrying a metal bucket over one arm. He rattled it once, and I thought the world had exploded. As soon as those horses heard the oats rattle in the bucket, they lunged into a thundering gallop over to the fence, mud flying in all directions from those plate-sized feet. I had no idea such huge creatures could move so fast. I dropped all the halters and ropes and stood there, staring, as Ted gave each horse a handful of oats.

"Get over here Ryan, and put the halters on!!" he bellowed.

I gathered up the tangle of leather and rope and stumbled over to the fence. I must have looked pretty stupid fumbling with the buckles and trying to figure out how the halters went on the horses' faces, because Ted took

one from me, shook it out, and within seconds had it on one of them.

"There. Now you try one."

I unsnarled a rope and stared at it dubiously. It took me a few minutes, but I finally got a halter on. The horse hardly seemed to notice. As I stood proudly surveying my handiwork, Ted got tired of waiting and haltered the other two. He swung the gate open and started leading his two toward the horse trailer.

"Just take one rope in each hand and walk between 'em. They'll walk along right next to you."

That's what I was afraid of. I was sandwiched between two tons of Belgian with eight huge hooves that could squash my feet like tomatoes. I stepped gingerly forward, and sure enough, so did the horses. I held my arms straight out to the sides as far as I could reach to keep the horses as far away from me as possible, but it was still a nerve-wracking trip across the barnyard and onto the driveway.

Ted already had the trailer doors open when I got there, and he grinned at me. "Don't worry, son. They won't hurt ya. Nicest creatures in the world, these horses. Gentle as kittens."

Yeah. Two-thousand-pound kittens. Great. I was beginning to wonder about the sanity of my decision until I remembered Grandpa—sick in the hospital and wondering how I was doing with his team of horses. I swallowed hard and handed the ropes to Ted. Within minutes, he had all four horses standing in the trailer side by side, and he tied each one securely to a ring in the wall before closing the tailgate.

"There. All set. The harnesses, hay, and feed are all

over at your Grandpa's place, so we'll just take these here horses over there, and you can get to know 'em better on your own time."

The old pickup lurched out of the muddy driveway and down the gravel road as the rain pattered onto the cracked windshield. We didn't say much as we drove, and all I could think about was what I would say to Grandpa if I did something wrong with his horses.

The next few weeks were uneventful. Things were busy at school, so I didn't have a lot of time to spend with the horses. Besides, I was taking my free time to visit Grandpa in the hospital and glean every bit of "horsey information" that I could. Health wise, he was doing pretty well. I think having someone interested in what he had to say had a lot to do with it. I had already filled a notebook with hints and teachings, and was starting to feel that I had a pretty good handle on horsemanship.

Grandpa's place was right next to ours, so at least it was convenient to do chores. I was growing more comfortable handling the horses, and tried to spend a few minutes a day with each one outside of feeding time. They really were nice animals, placid and willing to please, and each had his or her own personality. Dolly was the boss, while Doc was next in line. Beau and Jim were lowest in the pecking order, but didn't seem to mind. I liked to stand in the barn early in the morning while they were eating and listen to them chew their feed while I breathed the sweet scent of hay, leather, and horses. I was starting to understand why Grandpa preferred them over a smelly diesel tractor for farm work.

Grandpa had planted his corn just before he was

hospitalized for his heart problems, so there hadn't been much to do, but by now the weeds were starting to take a foothold on the little plants, and it was time to cultivate. I studied my notes on how to harness and work the horses until I was sure I could do it in my sleep, and I set about giving it a try early one spring morning when we had the day off from school. I fed the horses and cleaned their stalls, then I wiped the cobwebs off the harness and hunted through the machinery shed until I found the cultivator. It was a small and savage-looking piece of equipment consisting of several thick curved tines and two handles. Grandpa had said that the traces on the harnesses were attached to the hooks on the ends of the doubletrees, and that the cultivator was tipped sideways and drug along the ground until it was where I needed to use it, then you set it upright and the weight of the machine and the curved blades pulled it into the soil and clawed through the weeds. I would have to stand between the handles to guide it as well as keep it upright. It didn't look terribly complicated, and I had seen Grandpa harness his team before, so I knew what the doubletrees were, which helped a lot.

Grandpa said that cultivating was a lot of work for the horses and that he usually worked all four at once but, it would be easier for me to use two at a time until I got used to driving them; one team in the morning and another in the afternoon. I didn't argue. By the time the sun was up, I had Beau and Jim standing in the barn aisle and gleaming from the quick grooming I had given them. "One piece of dirt will rub a sore under the harness in an hour's time," Grandpa had said. "It's the quickest way I know to make a horse refuse to work for you." I took it to heart and carefully cleaned the horses and harness until they shone in the soft light.

It took me a while to decipher how to get the harnesses on, but I managed with the help of the diagram Grandpa had drawn for me. The Belgians stood peacefully, dozing with one hind foot cocked underneath them, completely relaxed. I was careful to adjust each strap and buckle and make sure that no hair or skin was being pulled or pinched. When everything looked correct, I led the team out across the barnyard to the cultivator and hitched everything up. I threaded the reins through the terrets on the harness, stood behind the machinery, and clucked to the team. They started forward with a hard lurch, and the cultivator jerked loose from my hands and skidded behind them across the gravel driveway and onto the lawn. It took me a moment to collect my wits and the reins, but I had everything stopped and reorganized in a minute or so. This time, I was ready for the jolt, and we plodded up the driveway and along the gravel road for a few minutes, then turned into the driveway of Grandpa's cornfield.

I decided to drag the cultivator around a little bit in the end rows of the field just to get the hang of it before I actually started in on the crop. I was glad I did. Whenever I set the machinery upright and clucked, the horses started forward and the cultivator bounced along the top of the ground for a few feet, and then fell over. When I did get it to work, the horses wandered to either side, and I had to let go of the handles to turn them, which also caused the cultivator to fall. After an hour of trying, I was hot, frustrated, and had succeeded only in digging out a few weeds and scraping up the top layer of soil with the cultivator tines. The horses were getting anxious as well, and stamped and fidgeted with impatience whenever we stopped.

I was about ready to give up when my mother appeared, carrying a bottle of water for me and a bucket for the horses. We all took a quick rest. She smiled and said that it looked like I needed a little help. "You need to practice driving just the horses first, without the machinery," she said.

I wondered why I hadn't thought of that. I unhitched the team and spent a couple of hours driving in straight lines, circles, serpentines and sharp turns. It didn't take long to get the feel of the reins and to learn how much pressure was needed to go straight or to turn. After another short break, we set the cultivator back up. I held it firmly while Mom walked beside the horses and kept them moving in a straight line. We set off between the first rows of corn, and I was pleased to see that I only wiped out a few of the stalks and almost all of the weeds. I was grinning broadly when we turned and headed back down the next row. At the end of the field, Mom stepped back and I started off to do a round on my own.

"You'll be fine now," she said. "Come on home over lunch. I'll make you some sandwiches." I thanked her and kept working. I was exhilarated with my success.

My enthusiasm didn't last long, however. By the end of my fourth or fifth pass up the field, I was exhausted. My arms ached and my back was complaining loudly for a rest. I gritted my teeth and kept going, but by lunchtime every muscle in my body hurt. I unhitched the cultivator and pulled myself onto Jim's back to ride home. I considered going back to the barn and getting the other team for the afternoon work, but decided against it because, after all, Beau and Jim had really only been working for a couple of hours. I tied them to a post in the front yard and

brought them some water and hay before going in for my own lunch.

I wasn't thrilled when the hour was over and I had to get back to work. I considered quitting for the day, but Mom said that it was supposed to rain later in the week, so I had better keep going to make sure I was done before the weather changed. I gave the team more water, then rode back out to the field, hitched up, and started off again.

The afternoon was almost intolerable. I switched to the other team mid-afternoon so the horses wouldn't be overworked, and by dusk I was so tired and sore I could hardly walk. My arms, back, and legs ached, and my hands throbbed with blisters and scratches. It was all I could do to unharness the horses and make sure they were cooled out, fed and watered. I staggered home and collapsed in the front yard. I was only there a few minutes when my sister yelled out the door to hurry up and take a shower because dinner was ready.

It took me almost a week to get the cultivating finished; it was the hardest work I had ever done. I worked every morning for three hours before school and rushed home in the afternoons to work until dark. I now knew why Grandpa had always been so thin and wiry. Just when I thought I was finished for a little while, I noticed that weeds were encroaching upon the first part of the field again, so I needed to start over. It was raining when I woke up one morning, though, so I caught up on my homework instead. After school, I went to the hospital to see Grandpa.

I waited until someone else distracted the receptionist, then I slipped past her and up to Grandpa's room. He was sitting in bed reading a magazine. He

looked good, but I could hear his labored breathing. "Hi Ryan! How're you? Haven't seen you for a while... Figured you'd be in today, with it rainin' an' all."

"Yup. Jus' wanted to let you know that the field's cultivated and as soon's it quits rainin' I'm gonna do it again."

"Sounds good. Them horses workin' well for you?"

"Uh huh. We're getting along real well. They're nice animals Grandpa."

He sighed and smiled. "Don't I know it. Glad to see they're gettin' work and care."

I nodded and reached into my bag and pulled out the gift I had brought for him. It was a picture Mom had taken of all four horses and me standing together next to the barn. She'd had it enlarged and framed. Grandpa got quiet when he looked at it, and I pretended not to notice when his eyes filled with tears. I busied myself pounding a nail in the wall to hang the picture on. I was pretty sure the receptionist would have skinned me alive if she knew I put a hole in the wall, but I really didn't care. When I was finished, Grandpa handed me the frame, and I hung it up next to the bed so he could look at it whenever he wanted.

Grandpa died at the end of July. Everyone was surprised that he held on that long. We buried him in the little cemetery a few miles from home next to Grandma, and I think he'll like it there under the whispering cottonwoods. A few days before he died, we bundled him up, put him in a wheelchair, and brought him home according to his wishes. He spent his last days in the company of family and friends. We even opened his bedroom window, wheeled him up next to it, and brought

his horses out so he could see and touch them. They nickered softly when they recognized him, and blew warm breaths of air onto his gnarled hands. He smoothed their manes and stroked their faces, feeding each the little bits of carrots and apples that my sister had cut up. When he'd said good-bye to each of them, I took the horses back to the barn and cried onto Dolly's warm neck, breathing in the sweet scent of horse and sun and grass. After the funeral, I harnessed all four horses to the hayrake and went down to the pasture I had mowed the day before. In the late afternoon sunlight we worked, plodding up and down the field turning the cut grass over to dry more fully, walking along in a monotonous rhythm listening to the clacking rake and the hoof beats and the hum of the insects. Every now and then I would find myself singing a nonsense tune to the horses, and they would flick their ears back and forth, listening. I was making a pass up by the road when a blue car drove slowly by, then stopped and backed up. A young man and little boy got out, and the man smiled at me.

"Would it be all right for my son to pet your horses?"

I smiled and nodded. We talked for a few minutes, and then they left to get home for supper. I clucked to the team and we were off again, walking toward the setting sun, turning over the sweet grass before the dew fell.

Bloom

A cherry blossom
Is easily destroyed
Like the sapling
Falling to tree
But as the blossom
Becomes the fruit
Life
Is not so easily taken