





the **KIOSK**

Spring 1994

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Second Annual Abigail Van Buren Prize for Creative Writing

- 1st place **One Way of Looking at a Blackbird**
 by Trish Regnerus
- 2nd place **New Year's Eve**
 by Tim McMurrin
- 3rd place **Grief**
 by D'artagnon Flewelling
- Honorable Mention **On the Corners of Mulberry**
 by Trish Regnerus

About this Year's Judge

Robert J. Conley, a member of the Cherokee Nation, is a novelist and poet. Among his more than twenty published novels are *Mountain Windsong*, *Nickajack*, and *Ned Christie's War*. He has twice won the Spur Award from the Western Writers of America, and is currently writing a series of novels tracing the history of the Cherokee people. Now residing in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, he was a member of the Morningside College faculty from 1979 to 1988 as Director of Indian Studies and then in the department of English.

Spring 1994 Kiosk Staff

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Christopher Shook

Crush

“**H**ave you ever seen somebody get killed? I mean for real, not this TV baloney death. Have ya seen a guy get hit by a semi, or maybe stabbed or something? How about maybe getting shot? My dad seen a guy get it in the belly with an axe once. It was really amazing. I mean, imagine a guy taking an axe in the gut! Dad always said that the blood just flew out everywhere and the guy got really pale and his intestines fell out. It’s kinda weird but I wish I could’ve seen it.

“I lied about the axe thing, I’m sorry. I do know what it’s like to see somebody get shot though, I seen that before. A couple times I didn’t really have to but I did it anyhow, you know, for kicks. Let me see if I can describe it so that you understand. Okay, put a balloon that ain’t blown up yet inside some guy’s chest. Got that? Okay. Now imagine a gigantic breath that fills up that balloon and makes it real big, real fast. Then have it explode.

“I don’t deserve to be in this place. Take Jerry over there, for instance. He chopped up his mother-in-law and fed her to his dog Shelly. And James in 316, he castrated his dad because the pigs told him to. He’s a little fuzzy, if you know what I mean. But me, all I did was go out with Lorraine and I come back alone, that’s all. I don’t know where the hell she went, I’d had too much to drink you see.

“No, I don’t know why all Lorraine’s blood and hair was in the back of my pickup, I think I was framed. Yeah, I know she had my skin underneath her nails and my stuff was found in her and all, but that’s what happens when you do what we did. I passed out after and that’s when she got herself killed. I’m tired of talking to you, leave me be.”

My brother Leonard had been committed to the Hofstra Hospital after the jury found him not guilty by reason of insanity in the mutilation killing of Lorraine Thompson. He

was eight years younger than I was, of a medium build, with dark brown hair and bright blue eyes. He never caught on to learning to read well or even simple addition. He didn't know I was his brother; I had moved to Georgia with Dad when Leonard was five. Mom had passed away four months ago and I was the only one left to take care of my 18 year old brother, if he was ever released.

"Who the hell are you? Every Thursday after I eat lunch you come barging in here and ask me questions. My mother used to ask me questions all the time; you know what happened to her, don't ya? She's dead. The food lady said that the devil come and took her for having a son in league with Satan. I don't have much church but I know that what that lady said was bad. I'm not bad, I think she should have her mouth rinsed out or something. Why are you here mister? Do you know me?

"Hey, mister. Brian. That's your name right? All right, this is what I heard. Marty, over by the chessboard, is here 'cause he likes puppies; I mean he really likes puppies. They found tons of milk crates filled with puppies in his house; some were dead though. So his sister comes over 'cause he hasn't answered the phone for a couple of days and lets herself in his place. Marty had all the dead puppies laying down like they were sleepin' or something, but he had strings on their little paws and stuff so he could move them. There he was, sitting in his chair with all these strings tied to him so that the puppies weren't dead no more. And these people think I'm nutty. Some of us make doggy noises at him when the ladies aren't here. He cries.

"Yeah I had a brother, no sisters though. Everybody says that's a good thing. My brother was older than me; Momma said he was with Daddy in a car crash. She said that Daddy stole him, my brother, and told lies about her. I don't know what she meant but when cars would pull up to the house she made me put all my clothes on like at school. We never wore clothes at home, even in the winter. Mom called it naturalisticism or something like that.

"I didn't have any friends really, just me and Mom in a little one-bedroom house. We shared everything. I tried to

bring the other kids over but she got real mad and yelled at me and made the other boys leave. That was nothing compared to what she did when I brought Lorraine over the first time. Hoo boy! What a mess. She called Lorraine a slut and a whore—everything in the book. I had just got my license and had asked Lorraine if she wanted a ride in my truck. She said sure and I went home to tell Mom I would be late, we didn't have a phone. All hell broke loose. The next week Lorraine was gone."

I had read what I could of Leonard's case and found that he had not said anything of the strange relationship between him and our mother in court or in the hearings. I remember dad packing for a camping trip that he and I were going on, just the two of us. We never came back, he never said why and I didn't think that it was my place to ask. He used to get drunk and grab me by the ears and tell me that my mom's love was more than a man could handle and shake me and laugh until he cried. He wasn't in a wreck. He hung himself from a tree in the old children's cemetery when I was nineteen.

"Brian, Mom told me you're my brother. Are you my brother? Momma said you broke her heart when you left with dad: she had so much love to share with you. She still can Brian, even if she is dead. She talks to me every night before I fall asleep. She told me that you were dead to protect me from you; you were bad. She said you shot birds and squirrels and bunnies. She said you and Dad weren't cut out to live in the love in our home. She said you were a bastard. Bastard. You kept yourself from Momma, stole from her. Just like Lorraine.

"Mom told me why she did that to Lorraine, it was for my own good. Lorraine was loving me when Momma found us. We were in the back of my truck when I saw Momma. She had the snake hoe from the garden and she swung it almost all the way through Lorraine's head. It was the biggest mess I ever saw in my life, watching her head damn near explode. I passed out and when I woke up Momma told me she was going to tell the police what a horrible sinner I was. They

came and got me and now I'm here. I robbed myself of her love and now she's dead. She's glad you came here to talk to me. She's gonna talk to you, tonight."

I didn't really know what to do. I was waiting to see my dead mother. Leonard had spoken with such surety. I bought a bottle of Jack Daniels after leaving the hospital and had worked my way through half of it when I realized how cold it was in my room. The thermostat was at a cool 53

**Her small
glasses were
scratched
and stained
with dirt ...**

degrees. I heard a soft sound coming from the bathroom and watched as my mother came out and stood in front of me. Her small glasses were scratched and stained with dirt, and behind them her eyes squirmed with the activity of being interred for four months. A cricket fought its way out of her right eye socket

and dropped onto the carpet, where she promptly stomped it. Her mouth opened to speak, spilling maggots into her tattered blouse.

"You abandoned me Brian, you and your father. Leonard was a good boy. You have to take care of him now, give him the love that I can't anymore."

She ran a hand through her blackened hair, coming away with a nest of hair and skin infested with lice and pulsing with beetles. I reached for the whiskey and she leapt across the room, bringing her face within inches of mine.

"Your brother is a saint, of my own blood and goodness. Get him out of that hospital, or burn with me in this hell."

She spat a mouthful of worms and maggots into my face and they swarmed into my nose and mouth, gagging me. I shoved her away and she fell through the floor and was gone. I stumbled into the kitchen, vomiting into the sink. I rinsed my mouth with water and saw that the clock showed only five minutes had passed. I didn't sleep.

"You look a little under the weather today Brian. Momma

leaves one hell of an impression, don't she? I feel pretty good today and I go in front of my two year hearing in a week. Mrs. Thompson said that I've shown a lot of improvement over the last few months. They think that with Momma dead I can become a functional member of society again; what a crock. I need Momma; it's too scary to be alone. Momma told me what to do if she ever went away. But now I can come and stay with you Brian. You can give me everything that Daddy didn't. Momma will be right here with us, and she can give you the same direction and guidance she has given me. Our family can be complete. Momma's love is forever."

I've seen my momma every night this week. She holds me tight and tells me how much she loves me; I'm her favorite boy. She is everything Leonard said she was. Everything is better with Momma. I don't wear my clothes anymore at home. She told me what to do with Leonard if he gets out. He has to understand that he isn't as important to Momma anymore; he got himself dirty with that slut Lorraine. Momma just talks to Leonard, but she holds me. She loves me. I have to go see Leonard now, he's at the hospital. Momma's gonna come with me, to help.♠

Krista Calvano

Intensity

two pinpoint of laser
blazing over the softness
pause
ruby lips wrinkle
daggers shine in shades of green
ah, the pure—the living
tilt of the cranium
eyes raised in mixed passions,
daggers shining in reds of shade
oh, My Lord, The wait—
the Moment
a sharp intake of breath
the air rips
fangs are buried

my incisors twist with pain
as my arms convulse, embrace.

Kathy Saad

Stuffed Up

It's 7:30

I watch the stuffed animals dance across the room
wishing only that I had a camera to get this fun stuff on film.

I chase the rabbit with a razor,
the lion with my handy, dandy salad shooter,
I corner the cow, only to have Barney distract me,
and the cow escapes.

The single socks run from the closet into the laundry bag
to go to the dryer
to meet up with their mates.

8:00

The empty Zima bottles spin themselves from the shelf
singing

Six bottles of Zima, seven bottles of Zima ...

I think of the headache
and the constant peeing I will do through the night
and make the eighth bottle spin down

8:30

He was supposed to call at five.

I decapitate the dinosaur,
and I feel much better.

9:00

Zima number nine comes to visit
and I then set my sights for the purple dinosaur.

Barney must die.

But first,

I must visit the John.

Tim McMurrin

New Year's Eve

Why must we always
argue
when we drink
too much?
I gaze through the
smoke
into your
Champagne eyes,
I know that
you know that
I hate it when you smoke.
So I
snatch that cigarette
from between your lips
and crush it
in my hand
(because I can be as dramatic
and macho as anyone).
But
you didn't swoon
you didn't even seem impressed.
Sometimes
I still look at the
scar on my palm
and think of you.

morning haiku

as the dawn of time
peeked over the horizon
i longed for nightfall

D'artagnan Flewelling

Grief

Reed left his dying mother and drove to the nearest convenience store to buy a pack of cigarettes. The clerk at the counter was a pimply-faced teenager with greasy hair, filthy fingernails, and a permanent scowl. He rang up the charge with agonizing slowness and finally opened the cash register. Reed paid the two-fifty and hurried back to his car, tearing open the pack of Marlboros along the way.

The day was hot, even in the late afternoon, and sweat made his thin dress shirt stick to his chest and armpits. It ran in rivulets down the sides of his face, irritating the stubble that had bloomed that day. Reed scratched absentmindedly, stuck a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, and lit it. Smoke billowed out in a gray cloud and he had to roll the window down before he started his car. As he pulled out of the parking lot, his thoughts turned inevitably back to the breathing corpse he'd left in the hospital.

She'd fallen asleep just before he left, doped heavily on morphine and feeling the tide of pain wash back to the sea of agony. Reed had said, "See you tomorrow," as her eyelids fluttered shut and added, "I love you," as a hasty afterthought. As he had left the depressingly stark room, the only sound was her shallow breaths and the beeps of several monitors alongside her bed.

Driving along the freeway, he couldn't suppress the mental images of his mother lying near death in that lonely room. The doctors had said she'd be lucky to survive until the weekend. Four days, he thought grimly. Four days of life, confined to a bed that gave her sores and a room that offered no comfort. Four days to ponder her life and what she could have done differently, never mind the pain that swept her mind away and had placed a monkey on her back until she was drooling at the thought of the young nurse's footsteps coming to deliver another dosage of morphine that would send the tide back to the sea. And here he was, driving the

twenty miles back to his home where he could eat a nice meal and enjoy the company of his wife and children, all the while trying to forget the sight of his mother lying in bed with drool creeping out the side of her mouth and the dull, lifeless look in her eyes.

He was afraid of death, he could admit that. The thought of a hospital, with its peculiar stench and the aged zombies roaming the halls and lurking behind every door, sent a chill down the nape of his neck. Rarely-seen doctors and ever-present nurses would make their rounds in a businesslike manner and then the doctors would disappear and the nurses stood around drinking coffee, babbling on and on about their families, boyfriends, and the perverted old Mr. Hopkins in Room 217, who had a heart condition and a habit of trying to look down the front of their uniforms. When consulted about a patient's condition, nurses would claim not to know and say, "wait for the doctors, will ya?" So he'd wait for an hour or two until the doctor, looking like he just woke up, would tell him in two minutes what he'd waited for for two hours. No, he despised hospitals and all the people who made a living there. Hospitals reeked of death, and he wanted no part in them.

Reed almost didn't stop at the light two blocks from his house. The brakes squealed as he snapped from his reverie and stomped his foot down on the pedal. Drivers in the opposite lane stared at him disapprovingly and shook their heads. "Screw you," he muttered and reached for another cigarette, his fourth since leaving the hospital. Carol would smell it on him and silently reprimand him, giving him the look that said, "you quit six months ago." With that would come the silent knowledge that his mother chain-smoked for fifty years, the major factor in the cancer that had ravaged her body. The irony was deafening.

He pulled the Buick into the driveway and parked. He was late for dinner, and Carol would be understanding but pissy. The fact that he smelled like an ashtray wouldn't help matters.

She met him at the door wearing jeans, a sweatshirt, and an exhausted look on her face. Reed gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, mindful of how he smelled and wishing he'd

thought to buy breathmints. She didn't seem to notice and gave him a hug which brought the world reeling back into focus. Suddenly, he felt as exhausted as she looked, the day's strain finally taking its toll. They stood for a minute in the doorway, holding each other like survivors of some tragedy. Finally she pulled away and tugged on her sweatshirt.

"Want some coffee?"

"Love some." Reed entered the house, nostrils flaring at the tremendous smells of the kitchen. When Carol was depressed, she cooked.

He sat down at the kitchen table and took the cup she gave him, noticing the hand-painted logo WORLD'S GREATEST DAD on its side. "Where're the kids?"

She sighed and sat down next to him. "Bobby's at a friend's house for the night, and I think Mark's upstairs." She paused, sipped from her own cup, and asked the inevitable. "So, how is she?"

"In pain," he said, wishing he hadn't said it so bluntly, so finally. Carol had gone with him to the hospital every time for the first three weeks. Eventually she had to move on and keep the house running. After all, Reed thought bitterly, it wasn't her mother. No, it was entirely up to him to keep his mother company and offer support. He wished, not for the first time, that he hadn't been an only child.

She held his hand, the one that wasn't clutching the coffee cup in despair, and Reed felt his eyes well up with tears. "I'm sorry," she said.

Reed held back from crying outright and coughed. "I'm going to take a bath," he managed to say, standing up. Carol looked at him, eyes expecting him to break down, but her heart knowing that he wouldn't. John Reed wasn't the type to get emotional in public. In fifteen years of marriage, she had never seen him cry, and would almost testify to the fact that he *didn't* cry. His father, what she had known of him, was the type to discourage that sort of behavior from a man.

Carol, with a few tears of her own in her eyes, grabbed the aerosol freshener and sprayed the room. She never missed anything.

The phone rang early in the morning, waking Reed from a

dream where he'd been carrying flowers across a field, terrified that he'd drop them. The dream was confusing, and when he heard the shrill ring of the telephone from beyond the wall of sleep, he snapped awake feeling totally out of place.

He picked up the phone on the fifth ring. "Hello."

"Mr. Reed?"

"Yeah." His mouth felt like it was full of ashes.

Carol awoke beside him on the bed, her long brown hair falling in her face. She wiped the sleep out of her eyes and watched him open the bedside dresser drawer and pull out a pack of cigarettes. She started to complain, but then noticed his pale face and trembling hands as they worked to light a cigarette. "What's wrong, John?" But she knew as soon as she asked.

Reed hung up the phone and turned to her, slowly dragging on the cigarette.

"She's gone."

The funeral was held three days later. Reed had little to do in preparation since his father had bought plots and picked out caskets five years ago, just before he had succumbed to heart disease. His mother's casket was a dark mahogany, lined in white. Flowers were spread neatly upon it, a discreet ornament she would have appreciated. Helen Reed hadn't been one for gaudiness.

There were few people attending. Besides Reed and his family, there were only a smattering of cousins and Reed's aunt Linda, his mother's younger sister. The minister was a young man with prematurely gray hair and a deep voice that quavered during the eulogy. Reed had never met the man before, but assumed he had known his mother, who'd gone to church regularly since her husband's death.

Standing there as the minister spoke the ancient verses of funerals past, Reed felt a strange vertigo come over him. It was like a dream.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust ..."

Aunt Judy sniffled and wiped away the tears that ran through her heavy makeup. Carol was crying openly.

"... we commend Helen Reed's body to the earth."

Reed felt a tightness in his chest and tears welled up in his eyes. He coughed and held them back. Years of memories flooded his mind. A kaleidoscope of emotion swept through him and carried him away until he felt like he was observing himself from above, detached from the proceedings.

The funeral was over and the casket was lowered into the earth. The mourners slowly walked away and consoled each other, heading towards their vehicles. Reed pulled out a cigarette and lit it, wiping at his eyes with a quick motion. Carol tugged on his arm and led him away from his mother's final resting place. In minutes, the grave was deserted and alone.

An attic full of dust, a scrapbook full of memories.

Reed sat in an old torn chair and flipped through the pages, lost in the past. His mother's possessions had mostly been given to Goodwill. The rest, like the photo album, was boxed up and put in the attic. Within the album's pages, Reed rediscovered a time he thought he had lost long ago.

A wrinkled black and white photo: his mother and father on their wedding day, looking young and happy.

A shot of his mother in 1962, barefoot and pregnant.

A birth announcement for one John Charles Reed.

A color shot of his mother and himself, sitting on her lap in the kitchen.

His graduation photo, taken a few months before Uncle Ray's automobile accident.

A more recent photo of his mother and father in '85, kissing each other over a birthday cake.

The last photograph in the book: his mother, aged considerably, standing before a dark sunset. Reed had taken that one shortly after his father's death. He remembered how he thought that she looked so *old* at that moment, as if she had nothing left to live for.

The life of a housewife, he thought. There were other albums, full of memories and dreams. An entire life reduced to the confinement of three cardboard boxes. He could picture his mother looking through her scrapbooks, sitting at the dining room table while his father watched TV in the next room. He'd often wondered what dreams and plans she'd had before she got married. Did she fulfill any of them?

Was she happy? She never complained if she hadn't been. Reed often had the suspicion that she had suffered quietly, confined to a life she had minimal control over but was unwilling to denounce for the sake of her family.

In the dead silence of the attic, pouring through memories of someone else's life, Reed shook and cried, letting out the grief that he'd refused for so long. He cried for the plight of humanity, condemned to watch their loved ones pass away. Tears fell for the woman who'd taught him how to read and write and who'd comforted his childhood fears in the night. She'd always been "Mother" to him, never a person with real feelings and hopes. He couldn't stop the rush of bad memories, no matter how petty they seemed now. The times he'd gotten in shouting matches with her; the way he felt coming home at three in the morning on a Saturday night after losing his virginity, certain she knew and was ashamed, but feeling even worse when he found her asleep on the couch. The way she looked at her husband's funeral.

Reed let the emotion pour out, long held back by his shame of crying. The stress drained away with the tears. He'd never known crying to be beneficial, always lumping it with women and young children. He'd never seen his own father cry, and took that as the way men were supposed to be: emotionless.

Now he understood differently. His father had probably shed tears in private, as he was in the dim light of the attic. Reed wiped his eyes with his sleeve and placed the photo album back into its box, then stopped himself and pulled a faded picture from its pages: his mother sitting in a wicker chair on a porch, face composed and dignified.

Reed tucked the picture into his jean pocket, silently said goodbye, and walked downstairs to join his family.♠

For my mother

Jan D. Hodge

Checkmate

When Julia told me Harry'd thrown her out, I offered her a place to stay. I'd always liked Julia, but didn't see much of her because of Harry.

Watching her at breakfast, I thought of the last time I'd seen him. We'd played chess. I don't know why; I hadn't played in years. I threw a knight away early, but then somehow (he must've gotten careless) trapped his queen. Cursing, he tipped his king.

Julia asked why I was chuckling, so I told her. "Damn!" (softly into her coffee); "he told me he'd won. That bastard never could stand losing."

China

Mother's will had been perfectly clear: Jane got the cups of the best china, and she the saucers. She told herself it was because Jane had broken a cup years ago, leaving seven. But she knew it was because Jane was older and had always been mother's favorite.

Then why hadn't mother simply left the entire set to Jane? No; this was better. At least now the cups aren't any good either.

Maybe she'd been wrong about Mother and Jane. Maybe. And maybe she could ask Jane to trade four cups for four saucers. No. Jane would never do that.

Acceptance Speech

He had always suspected that a writer's work couldn't be judged adequately during his own lifetime, that literary prizes and the brief glory they bring were awarded to those

who merely reflected the popular sensibilities of the moment. Naturally he liked the fame and relative fortune, but winning the Pulitzer confirmed his uneasy, unshakable suspicion that his work was somehow incompetent.

He had said as much in his acceptance speech, expressing it with more elegance, of course, though it had still taken him less than a minute. The speech (the only thing he is remembered for) has become a classic.

Lorna Chepkwony

Armanda

Armanda was a well-meaning lass:
Read anthropology at college,
Danced whisky to the rocks,
Smoked Dunhill to the hills,
And drove men off their heads
By her beauty, the beauty of the peahen.

Armanda was a well-meaning lass:
Hated the kitchen and its bureaucracy,
Abhorred the cards and the bridge,
Disliked the chess and the radio,
Screamed at the telly,
And frowned at the Scrabble.

Armanda was a well-meaning lass
Until she turned the apple-cart
Marrying the semi-paralytic Ray;
That was 'true love', so she said,
And insisted that the crutches
Were part of Ray that sent her on heat
And tickled her most!

Armanda was a well-meaning lass
Until they flew to distant lands
To sow the seeds of *happiness*;
In her well meaning, thank God,
There is hell expanding each day.
She led him to the bank laying the millions
Into Armanda who missed nothing
And misses nobody.

In her well meaning, thank heavens,
There is hell, heating each day.

She led him to the orthopedics
Recommending a plastic thigh.
Henceforth, Ray too could dance the tango
And converse at cocktail parties
All without the 'tickling' crutches.

There is no perfection in this world:
The surgery a disaster,
Ray regressed to the wheelchair
And Armanda continued to sympathize.
The well-meaning eyes went shy
And the sight of love
Became the sight of pity.
Safe with account,
Safe with the pills,
Suddenly she qualified as judge
To judge the quick and the slow.
Life between two people
Is but plastic association
When one must always give
And another ever receive,
If I must dress you up
And push your wheelchair,
You too must dress me up
And drive me to the beach
A meaningful marriage.

One evening as the wind blew
A piece of paper came floating
In the wind and as it rested on Ray's lap
He read what he has always expected one day,
 "Goodbye love, goodbye Ray,
 I thought I could change it
 But I have failed
 And I've flown home."
And Ray never thought
Of his millions in her name.

Denise Gard

Superficial Coloring

I wielded the knife
Calmly, sparingly,
Slicing the skin
Digging out the eyes
That sought to sprout,
Peeling away the dirty brown.
He watched as I performed
My task, marveling at my
Accuracy and speed.
On the counter another
Knife was placed,
Longer than the first.
He said, "Use this one,
Remove all the dirt."
I reached for the glinting blade
And peeled the impurities
From the potato,
Cutting my skin—its skin
Mixing red, brown, and white
Into one.

Incantation

"Drip fat, Drip fat"
Was what she said,
Touching the tube attached
To her pale white arm.
She and I, sisters in
Thought, believed
Cosmopolitan and Redbook,
Their quick diet tips
Were easy for us.

One after one we tried
And molded our bodies after
The skeleton thin models,
Trusting their sagacious advice
In the area of health.
“Drip fat, Drip fat”
Was the song we used to
Chant, echoing the faint, empty
Beat of an Ethiopian drum.
Pangs of hunger
Contorting ecstasies bringing
Acidic rains,
“Drip fat, Drip fat,”
Were the words she mumbled,
Wrenching the tube from her arm.
“Drip fat, Drip fat”
The headline epitaph
On her magazine tombstone.

Mary Massey

Homecoming

Sandra pushed the yellowing lace curtains away from the living room window. Now dingy and fragile, they hung from the front door and every window in the house. She could remember when they were white, like winter snow, and starched so stiff the delicate lace felt brittle.

Sandra hated funerals, but fall funerals were the worst. It looked as if the whole world were dying. Her Aunt Donna's funeral, this summer, had been devastating for her, but at least she had been surrounded by life. Flowers were blooming. The trees displayed their beauty and birds were singing, as if to welcome the dead and the grieving.

Her Aunt Donna had stayed in good health until Sandra finished college. After graduating, Sandra took care of her until the day she died, devoted to the woman who had taken her in, no questions asked. Her aunt sent Christmas cards to Sandra's parents every year. Sandra obediently signed them. It was her only contact with her parents for years. Her aunt's one request before she died was for Sandra to go back to see her parents. That love alone, for her aunt, was the only reason she was here: at her father's funeral.

Her father's funeral today had no warmth. The cold wind seeped into one's soul. As the mourners watched, it whipped through the flowers and blew them off the coffin. The bare branches of the trees scraped against each other and the dry, brown grass crunched underfoot. The trees outside the window looked like an extension of the funeral.

The well-wishers had opened their arms to her and spoke in quiet politeness. After twenty years, she remembered few of them. They fondly remembered her as a little girl. But after her father's funeral, she felt the prying eyes and heard the loud whispers floating around the living room.

"... hear she never did visit her father ..."

"... not during his illness? ..."

"... not in two years of wasting away ..."

"... could have come once, at least ..."

"... such a devoted family man ..."

"... and after she left like that ..."

"... he never was the same ..."

"... children can be so ungrateful ..."

Her mother sat across the room, embracing the outpouring of sympathy. Sandra wouldn't turn around and defend herself. Her attention focused on the front steps. She could see them as she looked to the left. The cement was cracking. The bricks that rose from the foundation once created two solid walls on both sides of the steps, but now they were starting to crumble. The front porch they led to was suffering from dry rot and had creaked and groaned as she made her way to the front door.

Looking at those steps, Sandra felt a jumble of emotions stir in her. Her memories were leading her to a place she wasn't sure she wanted to go. These three simple steps had been a haven, a place where the sun shone, a safe place, her place. They led to a house she was frightened of, and they offered escape when she had finally fled. And they had welcomed home a man she loved and despised.

Looking at those steps, Sandra remembered the innocent ritual she had started when she was a toddler. She would sit impatiently, eagerly awaiting her father's arrival. He would wave to her when he turned the corner. His stride would lengthen and reaching the steps, he'd toss her in the air and say, "How's my little princess?" Sandra would shake with laughter. His strong, safe arms would then carry her into the house. Her mother would be by the door, spying on their ritual, laughter shining in her eyes. With Sandra still in his arms, he would hug his wife. Then together, they would walk into the kitchen. Her mother's voice would weave with the songs on the radio as she served her family supper.

Sandra remembered the last time she sat on the steps, waiting for her father's return years ago. She was thirteen then. She remembered hearing her mother through the open front door, fixing supper. There was no music in the kitchen anymore and no singing. Her mother had stopped singing years before. The radio was silent. Sandra could feel the fall chill in the air, but she didn't want to go into the house for a

sweater. Her mother's silence made the house a cold place to enter.

She sat bathing in the sunshine, toes touching the sidewalk, elbows on the step behind her, head thrown back offering her face to the sun. But the warmth of the sun could not hold off the chill of the breeze. She sat up, tucking her knees under her chin and she hugged her legs for comfort. She felt confused and alone. She hadn't wanted things to change. She wasn't even sure how or when they had changed. But things changed. Not all at once, but the way most things do— little by little. And as they changed, the innocent ritual of waiting for her father became more and more important to Sandra. The innocence and laughter was gone, but she needed desperately to cling to the childhood memory.

She wasn't eager to see her father, but she would take the affection from his homecoming over the cold rejection she felt sitting in the house with her mother. Her mother didn't come to the door and watch anymore. She became angry when she would see her husband and daughter together. She cringed when father and daughter touched, and her eyes filled with disgust. Her mother saw what was happening and she watched her daughter with contempt, saving her loving eyes for her husband. Sandra saw eyes that adored, but also showed a desperation.

Sandra had to make her mother understand that she hated it. That as a little girl she wasn't sure if it was wrong. Her father loved her and she trusted him. He was her protector, her teacher. He would do everything he could, out of love, for his daughter. Every father would.

"... so proud of my Sandra..."

Her mother's voice rose above the voices in the living room, and invaded her thoughts. The mourners had perceived her as unapproachable and were prying into her life through her mother.

"... No ... Not married. . . Not dating ..."

"... She's an accountant ..."

"... Yes ... Good job ... She's so good with numbers ..."

Good with numbers but inept with people. Numbers don't reach out and touch you. Sandra needed that security. She could always shove a piece of paper with numbers between

her and people.

Sandra once again tuned the voices out, never moving from the window. She remembered as the years between childhood and adolescence passed, it became awkward to bring up a subject she was starting to feel very confused about. How could she question what her father was doing? Her mother would know if it was wrong and would have said something. Her mother loved her. But slowly, over time, she felt her mother's attitude toward her change. The love, the mother love, was shadowed with anger. And Sandra understood. It was her own fault. She had done this. She desperately tried to be good. But she couldn't. She failed. So she kept quiet and it went on. It was something she and her mother silently agreed not to talk about.

But now at thirteen the questions wouldn't go away. The answers she was piecing together were disturbing. The giggles and whispers she overheard in the girl's bathroom at school had been the first to raise her suspicions. Her classmates were coy and embarrassed and curious, but their knowledge was so limited. Sandra's shock turned to embarrassment. She realized they hadn't been shown anything by their fathers! The secrets she shared with her father weren't special, as he had whispered they were. It was a lie. All of it was a lie.

Maybe she would listen, Sandra thought, if I would just try. Her mother would probably be as shocked as her to hear this was wrong. She was surprised to realize she had never tried talking to her mother before. But it was hard for her to question her parents. She, like her classmates, thought parents knew right from wrong. Parents knew everything.

If her mother would just listen, she would see that Sandra didn't want to share in these secrets. She wanted the simple love of being thrown up in the air with strong arms to catch her and laughing eyes to look at her from an open front door. If her mother knew this, she would make it stop. She would put Sandra's world back where it should be.

Sandra stood up, not wanting to wait anymore for a make-believe father to come home to his princess. Though the day was chilly, the cement steps had absorbed the sunshine and were hot. Her bare feet welcomed the coolness of the front

porch. The screen door banged as it shut and Sandra's mother looked up expecting to see her husband. Her look of love changed to disdain as Sandra walked into the kitchen. Her mother turned back toward the sink, busying her hands with work.

"Dad's not home yet," Sandra mumbled as she sat down at the small kitchen table.

"I can see that, Sandra."

Sandra looked at her mother's back, wishing she would turn around. This would be so much easier if her mother would look at her.

"Mom, I need to talk to you."

"I'm busy, Sandra."

"Mom, please. It's about Dad." Sandra's feet wound around the chair legs and she picked up a napkin and started twisting it with her fingers.

"What about Dad?"

Sandra felt as if her voice was stuck in her throat. The words were rushing through her head so fast she felt as if she were grabbing at fireflies.

"Sandra, what do you want?" her mother said impatiently.

Her mother's tone touched off a spark of anger. The words she had been rehearsing in silence came pouring out like a stream exploding from its banks.

"I want Daddy to stop touching me. I know he's not suppose to. I don't want him tucking me in at night. I don't want to do the things he wants me to do. I want to go back to being his little girl. I want you to love me like you used to. I want to feel safe and protected and happy. I want you to make everything all right."

As Sandra stood up, the chair skidded backwards and thundered against the wall.

"I want you to make it stop!" she shouted.

Silence. Awful, suffocating, time-stopping silence. It frightened Sandra more than the commotion she had just made. Her mother was gripping the edge of the sink, busy-work forgotten. Her back was straight as she stared out the window above the sink. She turned slowly, crossing her arms in front of her. Her arms seemed to meld with the breasts above them, forming a shield.

"So, you've gotten tired of the little game you started and you expect me to get you out of it?"

"Mom ... Don't blame me ... Please ... Help me," Sandra pleaded softly. She was shocked at her mother's look of contempt. Sandra wished she were still looking at her mother's back.

"Help you! I've watched in disgust as you've taken away what was mine. My daughter! Ha."

"Yes, your daughter!" Sandra had to get through to her. "Your kid. I want you to protect me and love me. I'm not stu-

Her mother's words were so cold and quiet they were deafening

pid, I figured it out, Mom. It's not right. I thought it was, but it's not. Mom, make it stop, please!"

Sandra's mother walked slowly toward her. She was so close Sandra could have put her head on her mother's shoulder and she yearned to do so.

"You've taken it too far for too long, Sandra." Her eyes were dead. Devoid of any mother love. "If I do anything now, your father will leave. Or maybe even be taken away! Just because of you! Then you'll grow up and leave. And then what? I'll be here alone."

"Mom, what do you mean?" Sandra felt like she was suffocating. "You won't stop Daddy?"

Her mother's words were so cold and quiet they were deafening. "I've known it was wrong all along. But I have no choice. You see, Sandra, you'll always be my daughter. You will come visit and send Christmas cards. You'll always be mine. But if your dad leaves because of this, he'll never come back. You'll still be his daughter, but I won't be his wife. You see, I lose everything. You'll grow up and leave and I'll still be here ... in this house. Alone!" Sandra saw a single tear slowly making its way down her harsh face. Her mother angrily brushed it away. She turned, walked back to the sink, and resumed her busy-work. Sandra stared at her mother's back.

"Eventually," her mother said, "I have to let you go any-

way.”

“But, Mom.” Sandra felt hopeless. “Can’t you see? You’ve let me go too soon!”

Sobbing, Sandra turned and ran down the hallway and out the front door. She ran bare footed across the porch and down the steps. For the first time since she was a little girl, she would not be waiting for her father to turn the corner.

The memory was so vivid and the emotions still so strong that Sandra sucked in her breath and let the curtain fall. The steps were old and cracked and unwelcoming now. She hadn’t been back to this house in twenty years.

For a moment she had forgotten where she was. And by the sound of the others in the living room, they had forgotten her presence also. No one was whispering anymore. She still didn’t turn to face them as the talk grew louder.

“... mother is a strong woman ...”

“... they had such a wonderful marriage ...”

“... must be hard for her ...”

“... no husband ...”

“... alone, now ...”

“... she has all of us ...”

“... think her daughter will stay? ...”

“... hasn’t been back in years ...”

“... it must have been hard to have a child turn away like that ...”

“... daughter did come ...”

“... to the funeral ...”

“... I guess that says something ...”

Yes, it said something, Sandra thought. But it was the wrong message reaching everyone. She was here to make sure the bastard was really dead. She had to see the coffin and the dirt and the grave.

She felt like lashing out. She wanted to stand in the front of the room, hold her glass high and offer a toast like a dramatic scene from a movie. To my father, a wonderful man, so full of love he wasn’t satisfied with screwing his wife but screwed his daughter, too. And he screwed all of you because he let you believe he was one of the good guys. Boy, that would start another round of whispers. But it wouldn’t do any good. They’d think her an ungrateful daughter who sur-

vived her father's funeral on too much wine. A cynical smile crossed her face, and she almost laughed. Wasn't it considered bad taste to denounce someone at their own funeral? Sandra found no choice but to keep quiet.

She continued to stare through the yellow lace curtains. The afternoon had finally passed and the room was now empty. Sandra and her mother were alone in the house. Her mother had retreated to the kitchen and the light in the living room was fading as dusk approached. She should leave. What was she waiting for? There was nothing here. The truth had been buried this afternoon.

She heard her mother enter the room with a tray filled with funeral leftovers and coffee. As her mother set the tray on the coffee table, the cups rattled harshly. Sandra stiffened at the sound. Out of the corner of her eye she could see her mother turned towards her.

"See," her mother's smile was cold. "I knew that you would come back."

Sandra stiffened, but continued to look at the darkening window.

"You didn't come to Aunt Donna's funeral," Sandra said.

"Your father needed me. Besides, there was no point for me to be there. She was your father's sister, not mine," her mother replied. "Come, pour yourself some coffee, Sandra."

"No thanks," Sandra answered. "I was just leaving."

"If you wanted to leave, you would have done so long ago. You stayed because you needed to stay. To be here with me."

Sandra turned to look at her mother. She was stunned.

"I haven't needed you since I was thirteen. You weren't there for me then. Why should I need you now?"

"Because I know the truth." Her mother sat down on the couch. "Isn't that what you came looking for? The truth. To come to a funeral where everyone knew what you knew. To watch everyone spit on his grave. Well, everyone who came today loved your father. I guess you were disappointed?" her mother sighed. "Now, you need me to tell you it's okay. That your father was a terrible person and you were right all along. You used to love him, Sandra."

"How can you defend him? He was a joke. His friends didn't really know him."

"Friends don't really want to know you, Sandra. They just want from you what they need. Besides, they wouldn't have believed you if you had told them. People don't like to think they've been fooled."

"But he ... he ... was a monster. He took away my childhood. He used me!"

"How many of us can say we haven't used people? He used you. You tried to use me to save yourself. If we end up only hurting one person in this world, we are doing pretty damn good!"

"But you helped him. You lied for him. Was he that important to you?" Sandra could feel the tears coming.

"Yes. He was."

"And I wasn't important?"

"I knew your Aunt would love you enough."

"So you threw me away?"

"Which are you more hurt over, Sandra, what your father did to you or the fact that I wouldn't stop it?"

The question hit Sandra like a slap in the face. The hatred and the hurt were so intertwined it was impossible to separate them. She felt guilty and unsure of herself. How dare her mother turn the situation around. Sandra wanted to give back the pain she felt. She wanted to watch it sink down into her mother's soul.

"You've accomplished nothing, Mother. You're all alone now. And that was exactly what you feared. It terrified you!"

Sandra waited for her mother's shoulders to sag with the realization. She wanted to see her mother's eyes reflect the pain she had tried to inflict. Her mother looked at her calmly, eyes as cold as glass.

"No, Sandra. You've got it wrong. I got what I wanted. I had 35 years with your father."

"But he was never all yours again. He never forgot me, did he, Mother? That must have eaten at you."

Sandra saw a flicker of pain reflected in her mother's eyes. Instead of the elation she had expected, she felt pity.

"But he never tried to make you come home. He stayed with me, Sandra. Me!" Her eyes were challenging again. "And I knew he would stay because I knew the truth. And now my daughter has come home."

Her feelings turned to anger once again. She knew now that the situation was hopeless. The years of pain and frustration were too much and she knew she had to escape.

"God, you're twisted." She picked up her coat from the chair beside her. "I'm leaving. Don't expect me back."

"Fine. Suit yourself. But remember, Sandra, no matter where you go, you will always be my daughter. I'm the only one left who knows the truth. That's something you'll never change."

Sandra turned at the front door and glared at her mother. Her mother was smiling.

"We share the same secrets, you and I. Don't forget, Sandra," her mother's voice was calm, "leave your father's name off the Christmas card this year." ♠

Dave Neitzke

*Saturday Morning,
January 29, 2:30 A.M.*

I'm not awake I'm not asleep
I'm somewhere in the early morning
typing words and draining thoughts
trying to make sense of the fragile mysteries
that seem to follow me from day to day
and she's one of them

She's beautiful though she tries to tell me otherwise
with wide eyes peeking through a meadow
of tangled brown hair
we talk laugh debate
digest the moments of silence
that occur every so often
God, she laughs and smiles
and I think of some old movie
with a black and white goddess in close-up
framed in incandescent glamour
provided by the imperfect immortality of film
We touch hands for a moment
then in stupid uncertainty I let go
ruining the moment with the bad habit of thinking
She rests her head on my shoulder
letting me know it's okay
I just look and smile
framed in uncertainty for the evening

I just sit here at the keyboard
asking myself questions
I don't want to know the answers to
I think about her
I think about her a lot

but I don't know how to tell her this
I don't know how to tell her anything
I don't know my next move
I've forgotten my lines and my blocking's atrocious
But she never seems to care
she's just as nervous as I am
we sit together on the floor of her room
strewn with old clothes and the remnants of her life
desperately holding hands
hoping that we've passed the auditions

The sun's coming up now
and I'm almost finished typing
running out of questions and patience
the phone rings, an electric cock crowing the new morn
it's her
I say hello and she answers back
like an old familiar song
I look at the screen so full and bulging with words
and push delete
and turn back to her with her mysteries and questions
a puzzle with a voice like an angel
a trick of the lights that's caught my fancy
I still don't know any answers
but the questions don't seem as hard as they used to be
with tomorrow already shining down on us both
and giving us something to talk about.

Old Time Radio

Pep and energy
fun and adventure
for red-blooded young Americans
of all ages

all crackles and blur
just an echo
from long ago

a ghost speaking and
living and fighting
those dirty "Ratzis"
for America and
vitamin fortified
Ovaltine

and a ghost listening
but not hearing
a ghost much younger
than the one in the radio
but still invisible
scribbling in a notebook
at ten o'clock at night
with Captain Midnight
and fuzzy white noise
keeping watch

Jeff Thelander

The Magician of Ivory and Black

Tucked away in a dark, smoky corner
of the club, he pounds away
every evening and long into the morning.
The faceless player, whose velvet voice
softens the room, soothing the drunkenness
of the broken-hearted, coating their numbness
with rich, thick chords of remembrance.
Like the night in New Orleans, in that cozy
little cabaret, when I saw her
sleek silhouette sketched against
the glossy frame of the baby grand,
eyes piercing through a hazy cloud of
intrigue.
I asked her to dance—
Slow. Cheek to cheek, barely moving,
swaying gently, body rhythm.
Alone on an empty floor, in a world of
slow, sweet jazz.
If only I could have held her as tightly
as I did that night.
Maybe she would have stayed,
to dance again.
Tonight, I'm just another patron
in a crowded room of wasted time.
Listening to the magician of ivory and black
bring back
New Orleans.

Trish Regnerus

One Way of Looking at a Blackbird (after Wallace Stevens)

“It was evening all afternoon
It was snowing
And it was going to snow”
Two blackbirds stood
In the cedar’s fallen limbs,
Picking at some poor dead thing.
How strange it is that they stand,
Side by side, picking, digging,
Fighting for flesh,
Meeting at the beak where
At times they are in love.
They caw at one another while I stare,
As if I had no place in their
World of clacking beaks and
Blinking, red-rimmed eyes,
Of awkward flight and tree-top nestle,
Perching where they join again to
Clack and caw and
Pity me as I go my way,
Brown, dull and alone.
Shiny black birds. By nature—
Do you love?
Or do you fly free each day until once
More you join for your
Vicious company?

It saddens me.

How wrong to be jealous of
You—a pair

Who content yourselves
Searching and fighting
For death.

On the Corners of Mulberry
or
(how business-black ties
drape on loosely-boxed corners)

I think that I would like to live
On the corner of Mulberry Street

Where white homes house families
Dressed stiffly in white

Where taffeta curtains float
Up and drift down

Where each perfect morning the
Sweet-smelling mothers

Box-corner the sheets of their
Proper white beds

And scatter gardenias in light

Milk glass vases on the

Sills of the windows and the

Foot of the stairs

Where wives patiently wait to
Greet squeaky-clean children

And take off His tie the
Last thing before
Bed.

"Jeopardy!": The Home Version

She thinks of future "Jeopardy!" categories when she isn't thinking of other things.

Flavors of Ice Cream
Asian Animals
Colors of Condoms
Famous Nuns
Rhymes with Leprosy
What Makes a Relationship
Ways Sean Has Hurt Me

She won't send her suggestions to Alex Trebek. He probably wouldn't use them. She wouldn't expect him to use them. She doesn't have all the answers, but she plays the game anyway.

"I'll take 'What Makes a Relationship' for \$200, Alex."

Sean said he loved her. Not often, but sometimes he would say it, usually after she said it first. Come to think of it, she always said it first. No, there was that one time when they were sitting on the dock at his parent's cabin in Minnesota when he said it first. They had been dating for nearly two months.

"Rachel," he said, as he slipped his hand inside her flannel shirt and rested it on her breast, "I love you." That was it. Then he kissed her. She wanted to tell him she loved him, too, but their tongues were now tangled, so she decided it could wait. His hand was cold. It began to warm as he moved it from one breast to the other.

Maybe it was the way he had said he loved her, almost instinctively, like one asks for more milk or to have the potatoes passed. But she believed him anyway. What else was she supposed to do? She didn't know about love. She was only 18. She'd never been in love. She knew love was supposed to make you feel warm inside, and that night in Minnesota, she felt warm inside.

"I'll take 'Ways Sean Has Hurt Me' for \$300, Alex."

Sean left a message on Rachel's answering machine. He called at 2 o'clock in the afternoon on Friday because he knew she'd be at work.

"Rachel, it's Sean. Listen, I, uh, got some of your, uh, stuff here.

"It's in a box by the, uh, door.

"Some sweaters, your, uh, John Denver albums, that plant thing, and, uh, those candles, so, if you know ... Um, if you could come by sometime Saturday, I'll be gone. I thought that'd be better, don't you think? If not, well, just come by on Saturday. And, uh, say, could you leave my key on the table?"

"Well.

"I think I have some stuff at your place, too. Maybe you could bring that over Saturday, too. No biggy. Whatever.

"Okay, so, uh, thanks."

Seconds later the VCR clicks and whirs into action. "Jeopardy!" is on.

The consolation prizes aren't very good on Friday. Some Wonder Works stain remover, soup, a 10-piece knife set, and the "Jeopardy!" home game.

I wouldn't like the consolation prizes, Rachel thinks. Except for the home version of "Jeopardy!" maybe.

Betty, the librarian from Phoenix, and Richard, the flight attendant who raises boxers on a ranch in Nebraska, come in second and third. They had fun and will take home the consolation prizes. Becket, the account executive, is the champion with \$13,560. He can't stop smiling.

Rachel packs up Sean's things neatly: a pair of boxer shorts, two detective novels, deodorant, the wok, a tennis racket, and Scruples. She puts the box by the door with an empty glass pitcher he stole from Pizza Hut and a package of strawberry Kool Aid next to it. Strawberry is Sean's favorite.

Saturday she takes the box and the pitcher and the Kool Aid to Sean's apartment.

She hears Alex Trebek's voice. "Now entering the studio apartment ..."

"She stares at you curiously in the elevator and you stare back, and you both think you've met somewhere before."

"Who is Sean's Neighbor?" Alex."

"Oh I'm sorry, that'll cost you \$300. The correct answer is, 'Who is Steph, the girl Sean was sleeping with while you two were still dating?' You're still in control of the board, though."

"'Sean's Apartment' for \$200, please."

"Stetson After Shave, Jack Daniel's, and Greek food."

"What is— the smell in Sean's apartment?"

"Correct for \$200."

Rachel sets the box on Sean's bed. The sheets and blankets lie tangled in a lump near the center. One pillow rests on the chair across the room. Rachel wonders if one person slept in the bed last night, perhaps two. She ponders over the wrinkles and folds, but still can't tell.

"Sean's Apartment" for \$300 is a Daily Double. Rachel bets everything.

"This is where you and Sean first made love."

"What is Sean's balcony?"

Rachel has doubled her score.

The studio applauds her knowledge.

Rachel makes the strawberry Kool Aid and takes a sip, then pours the rest of the pitcher carefully over the box of Sean's things, staining the bed sheets at the same time. She hums the "Jeopardy!" theme song.

"'Poetry' for \$100."

"You are the cherry pie of my eye.

I would drink snake blood for you.

I love you a bunch, more than Captain Crunch.

Happy Birthday, R. C."

Rachel almost misses the box Sean has left for her. She doesn't want any of it. She actually wants all of it, but she has her pride. She has her limits, too. He has her black jacket. She grabs it, despite her pride. Despite her limits. It's leather. She doesn't want the other things, but she doesn't want him to have them either. The smells are getting to her. She tosses Sean's key on the bed and leaves.

Time for Double Jeopardy.

"'Pity' for \$600, please."

"Moping, crying, shuffling aimlessly, not answering the phone, eating constantly, wallowing."

"What is— Things I will do for the next three days?"

"No, sorry. Can't accept that answer. Things you will do

for the next three weeks?"

Sappy commercials and movies make her cry. She mopes. She shuffles aimlessly; the phone rings but nobody answers; she eats all day. She calls in sick for work. Lovesick. Her boss worries. When she does go to work, she is sure everyone knows—sure everyone is whispering behind her back, pitying her. Is it that obvious? she wonders. She feels foggy, distant, distracted.

"It always turns out to be some loser, jerk."

Thinks, who cares? Without Sean nothing matters anyway.

Thinks, that's bullshit. Get on with your life.

Thinks, why bother? It's not worth living anyway.

Feels like one of the contestants who ends up with a negative

total at the end of Double Jeopardy and won't make it to Final Jeopardy. What happens to those poor, pathetic losers? Do you have to pay the show?

"Blind Dates' for \$800."

They meet on a blind date, fixed up by her best friend Chris. She remembers telling Chris, "I hate blind dates. They suck. It always turns out to be some loser, jerk. Why did I let you talk me into this?"

She hears her mother's voice. Tenth grade. She has just been dumped by Jimmy Stearns for a junior with breasts and a driver's license.

"It's okay, dear. He wasn't right for you..." No, you're wrong. You were all wrong then, Mom, and maybe you're wrong now."

"It Reminds You of Sean."

"What is—everything?"

"Right for \$1000."

Cartoons they watched together. Pink Floyd songs. Men she sees on the street: his eyes, but not as blue; his walk, but faster; his butt, only tighter and cuter. Rain. Crest. Pink Floyd. Gyros.

She goes out occasionally, but feels uncomfortable. Men look at her differently now. They aren't interested like they used to be. She knows they're thinking she has been

dumped, poor, pathetic loser.

Everyone knows.

"Things I wish on Sean' for \$200, Alex."

"A fatal disease."

"What is— AIDS?"

"That's right. Pick again."

"Things I Wish on Sean' for \$400."

"It's over. I don't love you anymore. In fact, I never did!"

"What is— stinging rejects I wish Sean's current girlfriend would give him right now?"

"Right!"

"For \$600, please."

"Yes, I really do love you, too ..."

"What is— the biggest lie Sean ever told me?"

"Right."

Rachel becomes angry. "Hey, I'll ask the questions here," she asserts. "I want to ask the questions."

Alex stares at her. "You have been asking the questions," he explains slowly. "That's the point of the game. I give the answers, you ask the questions."

"Oh."

But the game seems to be over.

The animated blue television screen that displays the categories during the show is black. Only the giant Jeopardy! letters still blink insanely. Alex is gone. The other contestants are gone. The studio audience is gone. Rachel is alone. The "Jeopardy!" theme song rings in her ears.

"Hey, where'd everybody go?"

Her voice echoes. "Hey, anybody. Did I win or lose? Is anybody here? Did I win or lose?"

Rachel closes her eyes, waiting for a barrage of consolations prizes to rain down upon her: soup mixes, stain removers, knives, "Jeopardy!" home games.

Nothing.

She squints at the neon lights as they flash on and off, on and off around her.

She thinks she has lost. Now she'll have to join the other pathetic losers. She won't be asked to return tomorrow.

But she doesn't know for sure, maybe not.

She wants some new categories.♠

Randy Clyde Uhl

Returning to Oblivion

I am not afraid of living in oblivion,
Existing in nada,
 zero,
 zilch.

What I wouldn't give
to be the girl
who sat two seats behind you
in the third grade

or to be the name of the second boy
who kissed you.
I want to be black on black.
Put me out of your mind.
Let me yellow, fade and peel 'at the edges.
Some say we have an eternity
for privacy.
I want more.

Randy Haworth

Patience in Fire-Kindling

Lord God, thank You for giving me patience,
the patience to know how to tease fire from simple tinder.
*the patience to lie still, while she hesitantly strokes my
stomach and hips.*

The fragile spark shoots from the steel and flint, and
buries itself in the tinder.

Patience retrains me, as I pause those tense seconds,
waiting for the spark

to stretch and lick the inside of the tinder pile.

*I must remain patient in my eagerness, and not startle
the concentration*

so evident in her sweetly serious eyes.

I take in a hasty breath, ready to blow the air and fulfill
the flame.

But to blow too early would snuff the infant blaze.

Only after the fire has a stronger life of its own
may I add my whispered air to its tiny hunger.

*Over days, weeks, and months her hands will flutter
with more insistent assurance.*

After added tinder and more gentle breath, the fire
quivers happily—a coaxing, quickening heat.

*Her once-hesitant breath becomes a pleased sigh
from feeling the warmth she draws
from the flesh beneath her fingers.*

Sonnet 19.5

The Purpose of Poetry

Devouring Rhyme, blunt thou the lady's quips
and make her mirth devour her own ill mood.
Pluck the protest from between her lips
and churn her thoughts with love's new fiery blood.
Make full or empty bedspreads as decreed,
and sing the way thou wish, O' blessed Rhyme,
to every lady who stands against the deed.
O' I implore you for a thing so prime!
Please, fail not with your words to make her waver
and with a verse, help her a timid conscience ease.
With luck and your lines, we'll languidly enslave her,
and burn her with our hot and urgent breeze.

So do your best, sweet Rhyme, and sing your song,
Else she be chaste, and my passion's force, full wronged.

T. Andrew Casey

Mile Marker 104

“What’s that?”
“What’s what?” I asked.

“On the horizon, it looks like a bonfire.” That was Jimmy.

We had been traveling for two hours on this stretch of road and we were completely lost. Four men in a car bumping through the darkness.

Now, you might say that it’s next to impossible to get lost on a country road in Iowa. Drive a mile—crossroads. Drive a mile—crossroads. You come upon a town every few ten miles.

Well I’m not going to lie to you. We had been drinking—but that’s as far as I am going with that part of the story. The point is we weren’t drunk. We weren’t just, “seeing things.”

“I’m not kidding, that’s a fire up there and you better slow the hell down!” Dan said from the back seat.

I turned on the dome light and looked back at him. His face had gone that pasty white that happens to you after a really good scare. Or after a night looking down the bottom of a dozen too many long-necks. Like I said, we had had a few. But the look he gave me was more of fear than of nausea.

Dan pointed at the road, wanting me to turn around and get back to the business of driving. Next to him was Carlos. He had the road map out and had been studying it by flashlight for the past half hour.

“Let us have light or no. *Tengo dolor de cabeza* from map reading,” Carlos said with a noticeable edge in his voice.

I turned back to the road which was illuminated by my headlights. The road began to head toward a crest and above that I could see the glow that had caused such a stir in Jim and Dan.

My left hand gripped the wheel. My right extended over the top of the wheel with a Marlboro dripping from my fin-

gertips. I brought the cigarette to my lips, burned it down to the filter, and flicked it out of my partially opened window.

"This is going to be a pisser," I whispered while continuing to keep the smoke in my lungs. I turned the dome light off and could hear Carlos curse in Spanish under his breath. I chuckled.

"What's going to be a pisser?" Jimmy asked. He was sitting beside me with a tired expression on his face. Jim and I were pretty good friends before this here incident took place. I made Jim nervous and he admitted that. At six foot four and 240 pounds, not many people scared ol' Jimbo.

I exhaled the smoke. "Looks like an accident. Probably a bad one. That's the only kind you get out here at his time of night."

"Then maybe you ought to think about SLOWING THE HELL DOWN!" Dan screamed from the back seat—his voice trembling.

"Do you want to drive?" I started getting out of the front seat and heading toward Dan with my fists clenched.

"Hey! What? Stop it both of you," Jimmy said, reaching across the dash to steer the car away from the approaching ditch. "Keep it between the lines!"

"You're out of your friggin' mind," Dan said. His face had gone from white to bright red.

"*Que número?* What mile marker did we just pass?" said Carlos, who was still studying the map with racked attention.

"What?" I said and started laughing as I took back control of the car from Jimmy.

"Mile marker? We just passed a mile marker," he said.

"How the hell should I know? I was busy giving my baby in the back seat some personal attention."

"Screw you," Dan said, settling down. "Maniac."

"I saw it," Jimmy said as he slid back into his bucket seat. "Mile marker 104."

"One-Oh-four?" Carlos asked while he rubbed his eyes.

I was watching him in the rear-view mirror. I had to hand it to him. In our country only two years and he could read a map better than I could read the newspaper.

"All of us are no where to be found. This map is very bad,"

he said.

We crested the hill and immediately came upon the accident scene. I down-shifted and all four of us lurched forward.

The accident occurred in my lane. A car had been driving along, crested the hill and found a good sized truck waiting for it in the same lane going the opposite direction.

"Oh-my-God ..." I heard Dan squeak from the back seat.

I stopped the Mustang and popped the stick into neutral. The engine chugged along. We just stared—not saying another word for what seemed like hours.

What we thought was fire was actually a combination of police lights, emergency lights and sparks from a huge saw that was cutting into the car. It looked like about four bodies were inside (and outside, now) the car. They were all dead.

The truck didn't look too bad. Interspersed between the moving bodies of police, fire, and ambulance personnel was the owner of the truck. He had a bandage on his head and was telling his story to anyone who would listen.

"I was just minding my own business when this car just appeared out of nowhere," the trucker explained to a cop. "The car must have been doing ninety miles per hour."

There would be no one coming out of the car any time soon to dispute the trucker's story. It was amazing that the car didn't just blow up so that we didn't have to view this carnage. But there it was— Interstate Anatomy 101.

"I'm out of here."

"Yeah," they all seemed to say in unison.

I drove the car past the scene. None of us wanted to look. We had all seen enough. But we looked anyway— studied it in a horrified fascination.

It's like when you have that piece of skin which hangs down from the roof of your mouth after you burn it on a slice of pizza or hot soup. You want to leave it alone. It hurts to run your tongue over it. But your tongue returns again and again.

Our eyes were doing the same thing. They returned again and again to the scene.

No one, not one of the workers, noticed my car as I slipped by the scene, which was a good thing because, like I said before, we had a few. But I could hear snippets of their conversation as my car slipped by.

"How fast do you think they ..."

"Was the trucker drinking? I thought I smelled ..."

"I'm going to guess the average age of the boys in that car was about 28 or so ..."

After clearing the scene, I brought the old red Mustang back to seventy and rolled my window down to get a breath of fresh air. No one in the back seemed to mind. Jim was looking straight ahead, Dan was staring out his side window, and Carlos was back at the map.

"What do we got, amigo?" I asked Carlos.

"This map is crazy. Keep an eye out for the next mile marker."

"Gotcha," I said. This seemed normal enough. Let's get back on the road and find out where the hell we are.

"Did you see the driver?" That was Dan. I don't think he was taking things well.

"Let's just get home," Jimmy said. Boy did I appreciate him. He got me out of so many fights by just being reasonable. He was so damned reasonable!

"That steering wheel was driven completely through his chest," Dan said.

"Leave it alone. It wasn't our fault, for Christ's sake," Jimmy said.

"Let him talk," I said as I looked at Dan in my rearview mirror. There were tears streaming down his face. I lit a cigarette and held it in my right hand. "If you want to talk, talk."

"I don't want to dwell on it but— I ain't never seen dead people before. Not like that."

"We just passed one— a mile marker— *Que número?*" Carlos begged.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see it," said Jimmy with his thoughts obviously about a mile back.

"I think it said 101," I said.

"*El mapa es inútil!*"

We were still completely lost.

"Did you see the guy on the passenger side?" Dan asked.

I was starting to get a bit irritated. "How could I miss it, Danny-boy? He was sprayed all over the front of the truck."

"But did you look at him?!"

"What the hell do you mean?" Jimmy said as he spun around to face Dan— so much for being reasonable.

"Nothing," Dan almost whispered.

"You're Goddamned right, 'Nothing.'"

"Come on, girls. Let's just get home. How are we doing, Carlos?" I glanced back in the rearview mirror to find Carlos looking out his window. His mood had changed from angry map-keeper to mourner in a matter of seconds.

"*No quiero ...*" he whispered, almost to himself. "Leave me alone. That map is bad— is wrong— and we are lost."

"We'll stop in the next town and just wake somebody up. Someone knows where the hell we are," I said with such humor and gusto that I almost convinced myself. "If nothing else we'll pull off at a park and try again in the morning. So what? We miss a day of work, big deal."

"Right," Jimmy said. "Hand me that map and flashlight, Carlos. I'll get us the hell out of this backwater."

"Here, take it."

"One-oh-two," Dan said.

"Good. The last one said 101, this one is 102. This should be easy to find," Jimmy said and set to shining the flashlight on the rumpled map of Iowa.

"What kind of car was it?" Dan asked.

The question hung in the air like smoke in a crowded bar.

That really was the clincher. The bodies were a mess— you couldn't see their faces and their clothes were masses of blood and color. But there was no mistaking what kind of car it was.

"It was a red Mustang!" I screamed, breaking the silence. "Big freakin deal. Do you have any idea how many red Mustangs are in this world? *Do you?*"

"I just think it's one hell of a coincidence, that's all," Dan yelled back (I was impressed). "You don't have to freak out. You're thinking it, too. We're all thinking it."

He was right.

"Stop your praying," I yelled at Carlos, who (from God knows where) had taken out his holy beads and was whispering in Spanish. "I'll steer this car into the next tree if you don't stop your praying!"

He opened his eyes and looked at my eyes reflected in the mirror. "*Para!* Stop. Just stop the car."

"Yeah, let's get out of the car," Dan said as he started to fumble at his seatbelt.

"No one is getting out of this car," I yelled and punched the accelerator, bringing the speedometer over eighty. "Do you know how stupid this sounds? Am I right Jim?"

Jim looked up from the map with a worried look on his face. "These mile markers are screwed up. We passed that accident back there at 104. We've passed 102. We're coming up to 103. Which means we haven't come up to 104 yet."

He put the map down and looked out his window. I took a deep drag off my Marlboro and flicked the ashes out the window.

"You have to admit, this is kind of screwy," Jimmy said.

He was a reasonable S.O.B.

Mile marker 103 whizzed by. I was doing eighty-five.

"I'll admit this," I said. "We passed an accident three miles back that involved a red Ford Mustang and an International truck. Four people were in that Mustang and they were smeared inside and out of that car. This accident happened after a mile marker that you thought said 104. That much I'll admit.

"Now, Jimbo, I want you to admit something. Can you absolutely say without a doubt that that broken down little mile marker sign that I could barely read if I was sober, said 104? Or, maybe—just go with me for a minute—did it say 100?"

The car went deathly silent, except for the sound of the roaring engine and the wind that whipped into the car through my open window.

"No, Blake," Jimmy admitted. "Now that you mention it. That sign could have easily said 100."

Back to reasonable.

"Well I'm not willing to take that *chance*," Dan said. "Pull the Goddamned car over and let me out. That's my choice and that's what I'll admit."

He then flew out of the back seat and struck me below my ear with a wrench that I must have had stashed back there. Jim grabbed him and threw him into the back seat. Heat filled the right side of my head and I felt a quick flow of blood seeping out of my ear. The car weaved and I attempted to get

it back under control.

Mile marker 104 flew by with no one noticing.

"I'll show you, you son of a bitch," I said as I punched the accelerator.

"And when we get passed this mi—"

Carlos quickly brought his rosary across my throat.

"*Lo siento*," he whispered through his gritted teeth. "Pull over! *Por favor!*"

Those beads were strong. They weren't the cheap plastic ones you see in Catholic gift shops. These were made of metal— maybe silver— and the beads felt cold against my throat.

Jim was still struggling with Dan. I could see that as my vision jerked from one side of the car to the other. The road was heading toward a crest of a hill. The no-passing zone sign whizzed by on the left.

The cigarette that I had lit moments before dangled between the fingers of my right hand. My brain was exploding, and my vision was becoming bubbly. I realized with a certain degree of certainty that I was about to black-out.

I turned the smoke around in my hand and jabbed the cherry end into one of Carlos' hands.

"*Aaaiii!*" and the grip was off my neck. My lungs were filled with air. I grabbed Carlos' left hand and turned around in my seat to hit him.

In the confusion, I guess I must have forgotten that I was the one driving the car.

The car flew off the road. In the instant between the time the car took flight and hit the ditch, we were blinded by two sets of headlights heading our way. One set of headlights was higher than the other— a truck. And if it wasn't for the fact that we were flying off the road, we would have been kissing the bumper of that truck at this exact instant. Our car landed in the ditch and rolled twice before coming to rest on its wheels.

The trucker lost control of his rig and it flew into the ditch on the opposite side of the road.

A car, the car that the trucker was passing before it came upon us, had pulled over. He was running back from where the truck was and noticed us for the first time.

"Are you guys okay?" he asked through heaving breaths.

He had obviously been shaken up.

"Yeah," I yelled back. I was the first to get out of the wreck that moments before was my pride and joy. The others slowly piled out.

"How's the trucker?" I yelled back.

"Dead."

All four of us stared at each other for an instant—reliving all that we had just been through. We then turned away from each other and went about the business of "moving on."

I grabbed the pack of smokes out of my shirt pocket. I opened it and noticed I only had one cigarette left. I lit it and took a deep drag off it. The cherry lit my face. I stared back at where the trucker's vehicle was smoldering.

"Better you than me, buddy," I exhaled.

Petooka Falls, Iowa (AP) – One man was killed and four injured in a two-vehicle, near head-on collision at the mile marker 104 on county road 452 east of Petooka Falls on Sunday morning, Falls County highway patrol said.

Nathaniel Robinson, 42, of rural Dickson, was killed after losing control of his truck while passing a vehicle in a no-passing zone. He nearly missed a head-on collision with a Ford Mustang driven by Blake Johanson, 28, of Robins Point. The Mustang entered the ditch to avoid hitting the truck.

Johanson and the other three passengers, James Kelly, 29, Daniel Olsen, 25, and Carlos Chavarria, 33, all of Robins Point, were injured in the accident.

The four men were taken to Trinity Regional Hospital in Fort Dodge where all but Olsen were treated and released. Olsen's condition was not available, a spokeswoman for the hospital said.

Highway patrol officials said an investigation is still underway to determine if alcohol or drugs were involved in the accident. No other accidents were reported in this area during the holiday weekend. ♠

Dave Diamond

The New Poetry II

Poetry is too cute
all this love stuff
crap about nature
silly similes

Let's have something
small, mean, brutish

Like people.

Dayna Mansfield

*Buzz-Sawing
the Apron Strings*

The roar of the buzz-saw equals
The thunk-thunk of my heart as I
Pray to the porcelain god
After my freedom flight.
It's a happy sickness,
The linoleum under my
Knees belongs to me and
I smile, weakly.

Something of my own.

A place she'll never step in,
She'll never darken.
This is my chance to
Spread my own cream cheese,
Bite into my own steak sandwich,
And face another wave of freedom

On my own.









