



THE KIOSK

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CONTEST WINNERS

FIRST PLACE Don McCormick for his short story, "Rollers."

SECOND PLACE Ivy Nielsen for her poem, "Requiem Birds."

THIRD PLACE Anita Gottsch for her short story, "The Life Insurance Salesman."

HONORABLE MENTION:

Diane Patton for her poem, "Success Story."

Anita Gottsch for her poem, "Sharing."

Rebecca Hartsell for her poem, "Home."

Diane Patton for her poem, "Prince Charming."

ABOUT THIS YEAR'S JUDGE

Ann Struthers, is a graduate of Morningside College, and received her M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Iowa. She writes poetry criticism for The Des Moines Register, New Letters Review of Books, and MacGill's Literary Annual. Her essays have been published in the Cedar Rapids Gazette and the Christian Science Monitor. Her short stories have appeared in Kalliope, The Spirit That Moves Us, Wapsipinicon Almanac, and other publications. Dr. Struther's poems have been published recently in Poetry, The American Scholar, The Hudson Review, Southern Humanities Review, and numerous others. Her poems also appear in the current issues of The Iowa Review, Iowa Woman, and Zone 3. Her current volume of poetry, published by Pterodactyl Press in 1989, is entitled, Stone Boat.

Dr. Struthers judged the eligible pieces sent to her without name, class, or any other information about the author on them. The Kiosk staff sincerely thanks her for her cooperation.

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Special thanks to:

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Frank Breneisen.

Rollers

I get my rubberized apron out of my locker and tie it around my waist as tight as it'll go. Makes my top half look like a body builder's. Next I put on this bandana gypsy style that has paisleys on it that used to be yellow, but the carbon black's been washed into it so many times it's now the color of old newspaper. I strap on these big green goggles and the oily black crap that's on them slides across my face and I smile. Then I put on my used-to-be-white dust mask and that covers my nose and chin. Some guys go through two, three masks a day. Not me. Get one Monday, toss it Friday. Got to wear two pair of gloves cause the rubber's so damn hot when it comes off the mill. I push the crotches of my fingers together and jam my gloves down tight.

Clock says eight til one. The other millers should be coming back from lunch in about three minutes, so I got to get back to work. I do this so when they walk in and see me working already, they know I ain't no slacker. They know I'm best.

Stupid ass press room workers throw pallets wherever they want back here, so I got to kick some out of my way. There's a new maze I got to go through every day. Hate mazes.

The turbine on the mill screams hard like a jet plane for five seconds. Then I pull the lever down once more and that puts the machine into milling speed.

There's a radio sitting on the fan that's always on, but when the machine starts up it kinda gets drowned out. Still, I can hear bits and pieces of the songs and fill the rest in myself if I know them already.

I look across the top of my machine and see the other millers come back from lunch. Like me, they're all around twenty-five, twenty-six. They're walking real slow in single file and dragging their dogs. Chain gang.

Taber's last in line, about ten foot behind the rest. He stands out from the Supe and the other two workers cause he's so damn clean. Glows like a big white maggot.

Taber cups his hands around his mouth and yells, "Go Millboy, go! Gotta break them production rates, don't ya, Iggy." My name's Shawn but he says I *look* like an Iggy, whatever the hell that is.

"Take a deep dish bite, Taber!" I yell back over the noise of my machine but he's already walked into the locker room. He'll spend about ten minutes in there putting on his gear and talking with the Supe. Slacker.

I hate Taber. I really do. Thinks he's a god damn genius when it comes to cutting on guys. Well, me anyways. And the other millers just eat it up; think he's a real comedian. Live entertainment while you work.

Taber hates me cause I break the production rates and make him look bad. Then the boss gets on his ass and tells him that he's got to at least come close to my pounds per hour. But he can't and he knows it.

Still, that don't give him no right to go trying to get me fired. See, sometimes he goes over to a box of chemicals I got measured out ready for milling and throws in a little more of one chemical than what the recipe calls for. He's been doing this for two months now and I can't tell what batches he's got fixed.

I know the chemicals and raw rubber I already got back here ain't been fucked with cause I measured them out before lunch and Taber always leaves early. He can't stand me working ahead like that.

The machine's rolling nice and smooth so I'm ready to throw the base rubber up on top of the rollers. They look like two big shiny rolling pins set two inches apart, spinning into each other at about fifty RPMs. I see my reflection in the rollers, them going round and round but I stay put. I heft the ninety-five pound block of base rubber up and it bounces around a bit, like it don't want to get smashed. Finally the rollers pull it through real slow and it makes a screeching sound as it gets crushed.

Takes about fifteen seconds to go through so I go over to my thirty-five pound box of chems and mix them up a bit with my hands. Doing this used to give me a headache cause the dust comes right through my mask. But now it smells good, like spices.

I close the rollers together an inch and pick the flattened rubber out of the catch pan then pop it back through. Next I quick reach under the rollers and grab the material to feed it up topside again. It joins with the end that ain't quite through and that makes it into a fifteen foot wide rubber band with a furrow rolling around on top. The stuff forms tight around the roller closest to me and I cut it with my mill-knife halfway across two or three times to help it get all soft and mixed.

The more the rubber passes through these rollers, the more flexible it gets. Easy to play with and easy to cut. It's mine.

The knife feels good in my hand. I hold it right in the crotch of my thumb and first finger and it looks real professional.

I pour the chems on top of the furrow and the machine crushes them into the hot rubber. This makes the band roll around all swirled with white and yellow streaks. Kind of pretty really. What I got to do is to get all these chems mixed in and get the rubber back to its original black color.

Sometimes I like to think I'm turning out more back here than just raw rubber; as if all these high tech chemicals like antiozant and captax make me a big scientist trying how to make gold. That's what I do.

I'm cutting my rubber in just the right places and it gets mixed up so fast I forget I even put the chems in.

I'm milling so damn hard and fast my knife slips out of my hand and gets caught up in the furrow. I quick hit the brake bar above my head to try and stop the mill before my knife gets sucked in. The machine squeals loud and a big bang goes off inside it like usual. I see my knife roll around stuck in the band. It's all flat like it got steam rolled. I start picking my knife out of the rubber.

Taber hears the bang and flies out of the locker room laughing like he just heard an Indy 500 Champ grind his gears.

Everything's quiet except the mill and it's hissing like a snake. Taber yells, "Hey! Put some salt on it next time ya go feeding that thing, would ya." The other guys swarm around him like flies to shit, all laughing like hell. Even Roy Dean, the Supe, shakes his head and his shoulders bounce a little.

I can't screw around with Taber now cause I got to get the machine rolling again before the material scorches.

I finish picking the broken pieces of my knife's yellow plastic handle out of the rubber and then start the mill up again. It sounds a little bogged down and the rollers come around real slow.

Once I throw it back up to normal speed I run up to the locker room to get another knife so I can finish this batch.

Taber's leaning on the trash barrel like the slacker he is. "That knife blade must've been too thick for ya, eh Iggy? Figured you'd make it cut better by flattening it out some, right?"

"Keep pulling the bull's balls, Taber!" I throw away what's left of my knife and it makes a hollow sound as it hits the side of the trash barrel.

Taber picks it out of there and holds it in both hands like it's a hurt soldier or something. He looks up at the ceiling and says, "Chalk up another pair of Angel Wings, Lord. This one's coming home!"

"Yeah, well, I lost my knife cause I use it once in a while. You think that mill's going to do all your work for you, don't you? You got to use your knife and cut that shit, Taber. Damn near every batch of yours is a reject."

Taber turns to the Supe and says, "Look who's talking about rejects! Roy Dean, do you know how many . . ."

"Only the batches you haven't fucked up for me. I know what you're up to."

Taber's about five foot ten and weighs a fat one eighty. "I ain't up to nothing. And if I was, what are you going to do? Pull your knife on me?" He knows that when I get pissed I get up in guys' faces with my knife like I'm going to cut them. "It's gone." He rattles the trash barrel and laughs like a donkey.

I grab another knife out of my locker and point it at him. "It wasn't the only knife left in this place."

"Rate Breaker!" he hollers after me and follows me out the door. I'm walking fast and Taber ain't giving up. "Watch out now, rubber! Da Ig-man's coming to cut ya!"

And I do.

It's about twenty minutes 'til quitting time and I feel like I'm just part of the machine. With my earplugs in I can't tell the difference between the noise of the mill and the blood going through my head. Like it's my own oil getting pumped up to where I need it most.

I look over the rollers and see Ernest emptying one of the trash barrels. He's black, about 60 years old. A lifer. He used to work in the mill room until he got his hand caught between the rollers in the big mill. Tore it clean off and now he works as the plant janitor. Still, he does pretty good for a guy who lost his right hand. I'd uv sued.

Watching him empty trash is like watching a three legged dog go up steps. First he tilts the barrel forward and slides his boot underneath. Next he kicks the thing straight up and it lands on his knee while he's still holding on to the rim with his one hand. His other arm's just hanging loose at his side, minding its own business. Then, in just one lift of his leg, he gets the barrel to land on the edge of the dumpster. He's holding it by the bottom now. It's balanced and he's just standing there like he can choose whether or not to empty what's in it. Control. He never lets go, even when he lets it fall into the dumpster. Just keeps hanging on with that one good hand. Then he puts the barrel down just as graceful as he tossed it up. Slides it across the edge of the dumpster and grabs the rim as he lets the thing land real soft on his boot, like he's trying not to stir up any dust.

Through the heat coming off the rubber he's a little wavy.

All I see is a head and one hand poking out of his blue one-piece uniform. Black and blue.

He stops working and looks my way. I can't tell if he's looking at me or at the machine or at us both. Maybe he's thinking about the time he got sucked up by this thing. I don't know.

I hardly notice that I'm sweeping out the dust pan and throwing chems back on the furrow. Just keep looking at Ernest and doing my job.

I wonder what the hell he's all about. Here's a guy who had two good hands when he started and they say he could cut rubber slicker than snot on a door knob. Then he goes and gets chewed up by the thing and don't do shit about it. He's got one on me there.

From where Ernest is you can't see my face cause it's covered up by my mask and my eyes are behind these big green goggles. So he ain't got no business staring over here at me like he is and that kinda gives me the heebie-jeebies.

I pour some more chems on the furrow and the bucket I've been using slips out of my hand and starts bouncing around on top of the rollers. I just reach up there and grab the thing before it gets sucked in. This happens so often that I know now just when and where to grab it. Don't even think about it. Just a talent I guess.

Ernest slides the barrel back over to where it was and then starts walking my way. He's got a look like he's gonna tell me something when he gets here.

Ernest looks like he shaves every day but I don't know if I'd call him clean. Truth is, I don't really know if he is or not, cause his skin is the same

color as what makes the rest of us dirty. His uniform has a patch that says 'Ernie.' No one ever calls him Ernie, though, except maybe himself.

He stands in front of the fan and I get a whiff of Tru Grit hand soap mixed with the stuff he uses to clean our showers.

"What the hell you doin', Shawn, pullin' shit off of the rollers while they still going like that?" His eyes are sunk in bad; like he pushed them back there himself.

"I got a talent."

"Talent, my right hand." He gives me a big toothy grin and holds up his stump. It's tip is palm white and bumpy like they decided to cut some joints out and leave others. You can tell where the doctors folded the skin over and sewed it shut.

"I'm telling ya, I know how to do this shit. I'm the best guy back here, you know that. I know this machine."

"Just you be careful not to end up like old Ernie. This hand of mine ain't no fashion statement." He taps me once on the chest with his stump and that makes my insides go hollow.

I try to laugh but it comes out real uneasy. I'm looking for something to say. "An . . . and end up just a janitor? No way."

He can't see that I'm trying to smile underneath my mask. Just looks at me with this blank black face, black like the rubber rolling through on the mill. He turns to go.

He spits some tobacco juice on the floor he's just swept. The spit beads up when it hits cause the floor's soaked up the talcum powder we use in the cooling tank when we do extrusions.

Ernest starts back toward his blue janitor's cart. It's got handles sticking up every which way and spray bottles hanging off the sides. They bounce and slide around as he pushes it past some pallets and out of the millroom.

I feel kinda funny about what just happened; how everything got uncomfortable and all my words came out wrong.

It's getting near quitting time and there's the same noise coming at me in all directions; my machine's rolling round and round, the blood's thumping in my ears, and my breath sounds like its coming through a busted pressure valve as it hits the inside of my dust mask. Catch it right and I sound like a one man band.

By the end of a day working on the mill I get these little pieces of rubber sticking all over me, mostly on the arms. Come's from sticky flakes

of material that fall down when I reach under the rollers.

The batch I'm working on takes a while to mill up and there ain't much to do to rush it along. So I pick at my boots with my mill knife and flick off little pieces of rubber that have come off the mill and get stuck to the tops of my feet. This is the one job where you get better tread on the tops of your boots than you got on the soles.

It's about two minutes til quitting time and Taber comes over to where I am. He's dressed about the same as me but his gloves are white and he ain't wearing a dust mask. Stays so far away from work he don't need one. "Get outa here, munchkin. I'm working swing shift tonight to try to catch up on what you didn't get done today."

Aretha Franklin's singing *Respect* on the fill-in-the-blanks radio. . . -pect . . . just a little bit . . . -pect . . .

"Shit," I say long and slow. "The only thing I didn't get done doing today was teaching you a thing or two."

"Pop-quiz tomorrow, Ig?"

. . . -P-E-C-T- . . . find . . . what it means to me. . .

I tell him I know why he's working overtime. It's cause he didn't get a raise last month like most of us did. "Slacker."

"Listen. I work how I want to and I sure as hell don't go around breaking rates and kissing ass like some guys I know."

. . . take care TCB . . . pect . . .

"You're just jealous is all, cause you can't work as fast as I do."

"That's it, Ig. I'm so jealous of you, I even shit green when I get home." He pops me on the head with his calipers and I get up in his face with my knife.

. . . sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to . . .

Then he drops to his knees like a smart ass and grabs my legs saying, "Spare me, Sir Iggy! Spare me! I didn't mean to tape up your locker with packing tape today."

I'm looking for a come back but I'm so mad all I can say is something like 'you piece of shit.' My breath is hot inside my dust mask.

"I'm sorry Iggy. The guys made me do it. It wasn't my fault. Please spare me!" He starts a fakey bawling noise at my feet. The radio fades out and there's nothing but dead air.

Taber's bawling turns into a donkey laugh as soon as I take off for the locker room. Hate him.

All the guys start howling when I come in and see my locker. I start

hacking away at the tape with my knife. I curse him under my breath and my knife blade breaks.

As I walk up the sidewalk to my front door I hear the TV channels getting flipped around. It ain't her changing stations during the commercials that I hate, it's how she does it. Sticks out her arm and points that remote control right at the TV, like she's got a leash on a dog she's trying to train.

I look at the grass on my way to the door and thank god it don't need cutting, seeing as how its all brown. The dirty white paint on my house is peeling and the porch step needs new grouting under the tiles. One tile used to make a hollow clunk every time you stepped on it and was kinda wobbly until I took it off and set it up against the house. Still sitting there looking like it ain't planning on fixing itself.

The screen door sticks so I got to give it a jerk when I come in. Sounds like a yard stick busting.

"God damn! You ever gonna fix that thing, Shawn, or am I gonna spend the rest of my life jumping sky high every time you come through the door?" My wife talks without looking at me and stops flipping channels. The TV is showing some war show in black and white.

"Damn, Sarah. I told you I ain't got no plane to shave the sides of the door with. What you watching?"

She tells me it's *The Red Badge of Courage* and to shut up.

I'm tired so I stretch out on the couch with my feet hanging over the arm and watch. It's night time in the movie and there's this soldier standing alone by a river. He hears something and it's the enemy talking to him from the other bank. This guy's voice is real down home and kind.

"Move back in 'ter the shadows, Yank. Unless'n you want one of them little red badges. I couldn't miss ya standin' in the moonlight." So Yank moves out of sight without firing on the guy.

The enemy was right. Pretty stupid for that guy sticking himself out when he don't need to be.

I'm beat so I don't listen to much more . . .

Next thing I know, Sarah's shaking me to wake up. I ask what's for dinner.

"Pork chops." She turns off the TV and goes into the kitchen. She makes pretty good food. Works as a waitress at a truck stop just outside of town and rakes in a heap of money. But I keep telling her she ought to be a cook or something out there. Don't listen though. It's the tips I guess.

Waitressing ain't damn near as hard as milling rubber and she don't work as long hours as I do. But don't she make as god damn much as I do?

She comes into the living room and looks at me lying on the couch.

"Smells good," I say, "but I only tip twenty percent. Unless of course you're serving desert later." I pop her on the butt and she laughs.

"Shit. Come eat."

I sit down and start serving myself some mashed potatoes. She's messing around behind me getting some beers out of the fridge. I hear one crack open above my head. Then she says kinda huffy, "What the hell is that crap all over your arms?"

She's got a tongue. Saves it up all day 'cause she's busy being nice as pie to truckdrivers then gives it to me after work.

She knows what's on my arms. "Rubber Bunnies," I say.

She slams the beer down on the table and a little splashes out on to my hand. "Well neither you or your god damn Rubber Bunnies are eating at my table. And the back of your neck's still all black. You're taking a shower before you eat one bite."

"The hell I am. I'm hungry, woman, and I'm eating!"

And I do.

All through dinner she don't say one word to me. All I hear is the knives scrape across the plates like fingernails going down a chalkboard.

After dinner I go into the living room and turn on the TV. Sarah's doing the dishes. We still ain't talking and she don't plan to until her feathers get smoothed down a bit. And guess who's got to do it.

I go wash my arms, but not too good, and change into this white button down shirt.

I go back into the living room and sit down with my feet up on the coffee table. Sarah comes cannon balling into the room and whacks my feet hard with a wooden spoon. "You *ain't* putting your feet up on that table and you *ain't* wearing that shirt! I gave you that for your birthday and you go putting it on before taking a shower. Show some respect!"

"What the hell you know about respect? All this dirt your getting on my case about comes from working hard, Sarah. I'm the best miller in that whole damn factory and I think I deserve a little more than getting bitched for wearing the wrong shirt."

"All you are is talk, Iggy. That's what they call you down there, ain't it? Loud mouth Iggy knows he's best but that don't make him a wart on a coon's ass."

I'd like to belt her one but she's a woman. So I just sit there steaming. I wonder what Ernest does when he gets into fights with his old lady. Hell, he don't get riled about nothing. Even when he lost his hand. He could be sitting in the god damn Bahamas right now. I asked him about that once when we was in the break room.

"That ain't gonna get my hand back," he said. "'Sides, if I'd a done that, I just might as well uv lost both hands."

"Why?"

"A man's got to work and folks don't work in the Bahamas, Shawn."

"But you could've put up a fight, at least. There ain't nobody that's gotta go out of this world not standing up for himself."

"I'm still standing pretty good." He pushed the tip of his cigarette down in the ashtray just once to put it out. It still smoked a bit, which kinda bugged me.

"So now you're just happy to go along knowing that you lost."

"Life ain't no fight you can win. You got to be able to take a hit or two and say no skin off your teeth."

"Or put up a fight."

"Ain't much difference when you only got one hand. And don't we all got but only one hand in a way?"

He looked at me like he knew I didn't get what he's saying. I still don't.

"It's like you and Taber. He's good at playing the dozens and you do your damndest to give it back. 'Cept there's something that ain't letting you get by with it. And that's something you got to live with."

Just then Taber came in and that reminded me I been talking too long and had to get to work before he thought I was a slacker, which I wasn't, and still ain't, even stretched out on the couch.

"I'm going." Sarah says and whips the spoon into the kitchen where it hits one of the chairs.

She gets her car keys and the screen door makes that cracking sound when she kicks it on her way out. I know she's only going to her mom's house for a while to cool down. Well, good for her.

I go back to watching TV. Course I ain't really paying attention cause I'm so pissed at Sarah.

Shit. Married life.

A commercial comes on with this guy carrying a lunch box and that reminds me I forgot mine down at the plant. Ain't got nothing better to

do so I decide to go back and get it.

The parking lot is quiet now and all I hear is the hissing of the presses inside the plant. Even outside, the air smells like rubber that's been laid by some hot shot with a suped up Nova.

I walk in through the press room door and see all the Smashers popping rubber parts out of their machines. They all got to wear tube socks with the toes cut out of them on their arms, so when they reach between the hot plates of their presses they don't get burned. Bitch of a job, really. Always ready for something to happen to you or the guy next to you. Ready to see him jump away from his press holding his arm and cussing like hell. Sometimes in the break room the Smashers take off their socks and show each other their burns they got that night. If you're lame-headed enough to work that job, you might as well be proud of it.

These guys don't really know me cause I've always been working day shift. Still I make sure to walk around looking like I know what I'm doing. These are *my* stomping grounds, not these part-timers'.

Between each room there's plastic dividers hanging down from the door frames that are so dirty, carbon black rubs off on whatever touches them. I'll have hell to pay if I get this shirt dirty, so I part the dividers and walk through them real careful, like they're covered with razor blades.

Takes two minutes to walk from the press room to where I'm going. The closer I get, the more I can hear the mill. Rolling. Rolling.

I walk through the dividers between the warehouse and the mill room and there's Taber back on the big mill. He's the only one here. I forgot he was working swing tonight. He don't see me cause he's slacking off and not paying attention to much of anything. Still, I try to get in and out of there as fast as I can, in case he does decide to stop picking his nose and look around.

I get to the locker room and see that my padlock's been greased up so I can't turn it without wiping it off first. Fucking mo ron.

I'm cleaning my lock up with a paper towel and then I hear the mill bog down, like somebody threw in a block of cured rubber. Then there's the loud bang inside the machine and the alarm goes off.

The alarm never sounds unless there's an emergency so I fly out of the locker room. Then I see Taber with one of his arms sucked up to the elbow between the rollers and his other arm is grabbing it, trying to pull free. I'm running toward the mill and the maze of pallets don't seem like a maze no more.

Taber's got his mouth's open but there ain't nothing coming out.

First thing I do is grab his mill knife out of the catch pan and reach underneath the rollers to cut the rubber clean across. That way when I back the rollers up, I ain't going to be pulling rubber back through the mill. Little trick to make the rollers turn easier.

There's a lever behind the machine I got to stick between the gears inside the mill to turn the rollers backwards by hand. I lift up the flap to the gearbox and gray talcum flies everywhere. Looking at Taber's face through the dust makes him look like a ghost.

The mill is bogged down so much, I gotta brace the lever up against my chest as I push the gears backwards. The alarm's going off right above my head but when Taber starts to scream it gets drowned out pretty quick. Sounds like he did today when he was pretending to bawl at my feet, only worse.

Takes about 15 seconds to get the rollers back far enough for Taber to get himself free. He don't really pull himself out, though. Just kinda slides off the front roller like a dead man and then hits the floor. He ain't moving at all.

By this time all the Smashers are back here and one's yelling to call 911. Another's going into the locker room for the first aid kit. The mill ripped off Taber's glove so you can see what's left of his hand. He's mashed up pretty good all the way to the elbow and blood's oozing out everywhere. It beads up once it hits the floor.

The press room Supe is asking me what happened and I tell her all I know. I'm still breathing heavy from turning them gears.

Someone's wrapping gauze around Taber's hand. Everyone else is just standing around looking at him and talking like it's the movies, like he's some shipwrecked sailor that got washed up on shore. Don't even know I'm there, which I ain't really. Dazed.

"God, look at him. Crushed him like a toothpick."

"Glad I don't work on this thing."

"Poor bastard."

He is a bastard, though. Now I'm beginning to think I probably should've let him suffer a while before I got him out. What I should've done was gone up to him and told him to his face what he gets for slacking.

While everyone's standing around looking down on Taber, I slip out of the mill room. I know I should stay til the ambulance comes, but I'm so pissed I can't stand to watch everybody cry their eyes out over some son-

of-a-bitch that ain't in as much pain as I could've made him feel. Then they'd really have somebody to feel sorry for.

In the car I start thinking about everything I should've said to Taber while he was sitting there with his arm between the rollers and his mouth open wide like a dying cow.

"Well, well. Lose something in the mill, Taber? What is it you're looking for? If you're looking for respect, it ain't in there. All starts right here." Then I'd point to my head. "But you wouldn't know about that now would you? All you ever do is treat Shawn like he's wasn't nothing but a insect buzzing around your head. Buzzing like a bee. But that bee is trying to tell you something. It's saying that all you are is a slacker, a slacker with a attitude. So you don't deserve to be treated right. Now see, I ain't no slacker and you and I might just get along if you just once said to me that you think I'm good. Not even the best, which I am, but 'good' would be just fine."

By now he'd be wriggling all around to get free so he could at least beat the hell out of me. But he couldn't of course. "Now stop your squirming, Taber. Hey. That's it. Let's give you a name like the one I got. How about 'Squirmy?' Fine. So just hold on, Squirmy. I'll get you out. Might take a while, cause, you know, my hands are all greasy for some damn reason. See what I mean about treating people right?"

But the thing is, I didn't say all this. I was being a good guy. That's what I was doing. Doing him a favor. Being his hero.

That word echoes around in my head for a while. The press room Supe knows what I did and word's going to spread pretty quick. Tomorrow it's all going to happen. People going to start to take notice of the Igster.

It's 9:30 by the time I get home. In the dark, the grass looks like it might be green.

Sarah's watching TV when I walk in. The screen door makes that cracking sound like usual but when I see her just sitting there in the Lay Z Boy, she don't look like it scared her at all this time. I say hi and she looks up from the tube.

"What's that on your chest?" I look down and see that she's talking about a black smudge I must've got from leaning up against the lever when I turned the gears backward. It's a perfect round spot right over my heart.

I may be a hero, but I still got to deal with her. I stall trying find

something to cool her pipes with. I finally say, "That's my black badge of courage."

"It's something somebody's got to wash out."

"Is that any way to talk to a hero?" I smile. "You're looking at the hottest topic in the plant tomorrow. I damn near saved Taber's life tonight and all the press operators seen me do it. He got sucked up by the big mill and I pulled him out."

I can't see her cause I'm in the kitchen now, but I imagine her eyes getting big.

She says, "Yeah? What the hell were you down there for anyways."

"Forgot my lunchbox. Should've seen it, Sarah. I was at my locker and bang! The brake dropped and then the alarm went off. Next thing I know I am running back to save Taber. Taber. Can you believe it? Course I was doing just what I thought was right. Me and him was the only people in the mill room but I wasn't gonna let him just sit there. No sir. So I backed up the mill by hand and he was free inside of fifteen seconds. Saved him."

"Well ain't that a coinky-dinky." She laughs once in a short breath. "All you are is talk, Shawn. You just happened to be back there at the right time. Anyone could've done what you did."

"Yeah but I *chose* to do it. And after what he's done to . . ."

"You'd of got canned if you didn't. Go put your shirt in the hamper."

That's pretty much the end of our talking cause she don't really want to listen. But I know the truth. I know I'm a hero and folks going to have to answer to that tomorrow; going to have to start treating me right.

I walk into the locker room latter than usual today; five 'til eight. The Supe don't look up from filling out production sheets when I come in. I got to say hi to get his attention. He grunts back.

There's a long silence while I'm putting on my gear. My bandanna's still work shit dirty and my tight apron strings push my guts up into my chest. I check myself in the towel dispenser and I'm wavy again. My ears touch the sides and I smile.

I bust up the quiet by saying to the Supe, "Boss-man tell you about what happened with Taber last night?"

"Went to see him in the hospital after his operation. Amputated. He's still there of course."

The other two millers, Bill and Jack, are suiting up and ask the Supe when visiting hours are.

"All you guys can clock out at four to get up there and see him if you

like."

I say, "Was he conscious enough to tell you what happened? In his own words, I mean? How I saved him?"

"No. But last night's Press Room Supe told me how lucky it was that you was back here when Taber got stuck."

Ernest walks in with a stack of paper towels and a couple rolls of toilet paper.

"Luck? Wasn't luck that made them rollers back up, Roy Dean. And it ain't luck that I got to think more about breathing than I do about working that mill."

Jack says, "The sun's already up, Ig. You can stop your crowing now."

Bill sounds like a pig cause he never opens his mouth when he laughs.

"I got reason to. Wasn't easy doing what I did, especially with Taber being the asshole you know he is. I could've just let him sit there and bleed. But I didn't."

Bill starts singing in a high voice, "Here I come to save the day. Mighty Ig is on his way."

"Like to see you do it."

"Like you had a choice."

Jack says, "We get the picture, Dudley Dooright. Now get back to the mill and . . ." His eyes get real big and he grabs his chest as he falls to the floor.

Bill drops down and kneels by him like they had it all rehearsed and says, "Quick, somebody call a doctor. No wait. Iggy knows CPR, I bet. Help him, man. You *got* to help him! He's gonna die! He's . . ."

I fly out of the locker room and hear everybody busting up laughing. Even Bill's going "whoo-hoo!" like a train whistle.

I'm walking fast back to my mill, kicking through the maze of pallets and almost bust a toe on one.

I don't even slow down when I grab a seventy-five pound block of base rubber that's sitting on a shelf. I drop it in the big mill's catch pan as I head over to the switch box. I pull the start-up lever down so hard that it jams and I can't throw the thing into milling speed. Got to pull the brake and start over.

Just when I get things going smooth, mill running, rubber on, radio going, I realize I forgot my knife in the locker room. Course I don't want

to go up there but, shit, there ain't no way around it.

I'm walking fast looking straight at the floor and end up bumping into Ernest by the shelves of pre-cut rubber and chem boxes. He stops me and holds me back with his stump. Looks me dead on. The whites of his old eyes look dirty, covered with black veins.

"You asked for it." His voice is strong and almost angry.

"For what?"

"You're making them two take Taber's place of giving you shit, when all you got to do is shut up."

"But damn, Ernest! I'm good."

"But being good is laying low about it. If you don't, then what folks think you deserve ain't what you want."

Ernest drops his stump and turns to go. I just stand there and listen to the mill rolling, rolling while I watch him head off toward his blue janitor's cart.

I feel the bridge of my nose getting tingly and so I punch a block of base rubber that's sitting on a shelf next to me. It don't make me feel any better cause my hand just bounces off.

I head up to the locker room.

The second I step in the door, everybody starts laughing again. Jack tries to say something but he's howling so hard he can't get nothing out. I grab my knife off a chair and take off out the door and back toward my mill as quick as I can.

Even standing next to the mill now I still hear them laughing. It's inside of me, in my head and I can't shut it out. The fill-in-the-blanks radio's playing I don't know what for once, the machine's rolling, rolling, and I see Ernest, wavy through the heat coming off the rubber, dumping a trash barrel somebody forgot to empty on night shift.

The air smells like fresh skid marks and the blood in my ears ain't thumping like usual. The material's still soft and so every once in a while I punch it like an Everlast Bag as it rolls toward me. Of course as soon as I make a dent in the rubber it just fills itself in, or gets smoothed out when it passes through the rollers.

ANITA GOTTSCH

The Life Insurance Agent

"No!" He shot up from the pillow that only moments before cradled his head. His eyes were opened wide. Beads of sweat coalesced on his brow. For a few moments the dark room was again silent. He even forgot to breathe.

The realization that it was only a nightmare finally struck him. His shoulders slumped and he remembered to breathe again. He took the edge of the gray, threadbare sheet and mopped his face. He ran his fingers through his wet, black hair as he fell back into his pillow.

"Just a dream. It was just a damn dream." He rolled over and counted the ticks of the antique clock until they lulled him back into the unknown.

It was not a fitful sleep, though he had the luxury of a private pod. The dingy walls and peeling paint of his small room belied the prestige it owned. The honor of a private was afforded to only the rich and powerful, neither of which was he. But he had other redeeming qualities; redeeming enough to earn him a private pod.

Technically, he was still a life insurance agent, although now he worked independently. It was his responsibility to get rid of them. Most people were too squeamish to do the job themselves. That's where he came in. He wasn't (or so he thought).

Before this job, before the discovery and explosion, he worked for a large national firm. He was an average agent. He was there to put in his time and then retire. Maybe he'd get lucky and earn the right to a quadpod or if he got really lucky, a tripod. He never expected to have a private in his later years, let alone now. He did his job well, no more and no less. He had a certain charm and that, matched with his quiet good looks, enabled him to fare a little better than most other agents. He was liked and disliked. He was an average life insurance agent.

The only thing he did above average was aim. His marksmanship was in the top five percent in the country. He enjoyed hunting and competing in the various tournaments held throughout the national territory. He was even vain enough to display one of his most prized awards in his small pod.

After the discovery and explosion nothing was the same. His whole life became unnecessary. No one needed life insurance any more and like many others he had no job, no income and was forced out of his decapod onto the crowded streets. Fights erupted over possession of the smallest spaces and the most meager food. The safe and secure life he had taken for granted was now part of the past.

The phone rang, and again, he awoke with a violent start. He grabbed for the receiver several times before he managed to pick it up.

"This better be good," he said.

"Don't use that tone of voice with me, and it is," one of the rich said. "There are two of them running around in the Atlantis Tower. If anyone else sees them, we're going to be up to our ears in shit. I don't want to lose their contract. You got five minutes to get over there and ten to get rid of them."

"Yeah, right." He hung up on the rich man.

He rubbed the nightmares out of his eyes. 0320. What a time to get a guy out of bed. Well, at least he was working.

His large bare feet hit the cold floor with a hollow slap as he reached for his Unitar shirt. A bit worn, but by far his favorite. His good luck shirt. He never went on a job without it. He also never let one get away. This shirt was undefeated. As he slipped on his black pants, his mind timed out the job. Twenty-eight minutes to the Tower and back, thirty minutes to do the job; he'd be home in an hour. Two of them the man said. At 500 credits a head, this would be a profitable hour. Besides, he could sleep when he got back.

He walked across the room and took his plasma rifle out of its platinum and glass case above the door. He threw a handful of pellets into his bag of gear, kicked the scuffed door open and was gone.

He stepped into the night and the cold air chilled his escaping breath. His footsteps crunched the frozen turf as he walked to his Luna IV. He got in and programmed his route.

As he left the garage, he looked out through the speeder's smokey window into the darkness. The quiet of the city at this hour still surprised him. Most of the high rises had been converted to multipods. Yet even so, there were many people on the streets. He knew; he used to be one. They were nowhere to be seen, sequestered in their hiding places, trying to escape the cold and each other. He knew they were there though; he could feel their eyes.

This sensation made him feel necessary. His kind may be looked down upon by others, but he was needed. He thought of the old saying, "It's a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it." This position paid well and he had his benefits. . .

Atlantis Towers suddenly loomed ahead. Funny how time is eaten away by thoughts before it's even been tasted. The ivory building looked quiet. No lights and no life; well, no worthwhile life. He stopped his speeder in a "NO IDLING ZONE" and went inside. He walked with the swagger of one who is good at what he does and knows it. His rifle rested on one muscular shoulder; his bag slung over the other.

The shadow cast by the faint security lights protected him as he walked through the atrium. His soft footfalls were barely distinguishable to the ear. His large frame moved with a feline's grace. His eyes left no corner unobserved. Everything appeared as it should be.

As he took the elevator to the penthouse, he rummaged through his bag until he found his security card. The elevator slowed to a smooth stop and a sensuous female voice announced, "Penthouse, no unauthorized personnel allowed. Please have your security card ready." Little did he know the owner of the lusty voice was a gray-haired, one hundred fifteen year old dockworker.

He jabbed his card into the slot, punched in his security number and the doors swooshed open. The penthouse was one large room divided by a glass partition. It reeked of power and wealth. The sparse design and simple, though expensive furnishings, allowed for easy checking. He made quick work of it. On the way back to the elevator, he eyed the wet bar.

What the hell, they'll never miss it. He grabbed a clear glass bottle of deep azure fluid. He unsealed it and gulped down a shot. As he wiped his face with his lucky sleeve, he checked the label. Artesian Spirits, and not a bad year. He carefully tucked his prize into the bag. He'd never make enough in a year to be able to afford something like this.

Working his way back down the building, he methodically searched the other floors. These were mostly offices, storage areas, and meeting rooms. As he approached one of the ebony office doors, he passed his hand over the sensor. The door slid up silently. The compact office had one wall of shelves filled with rows and rows of microchips. In front of the shelves sat a polycarb desk covered with papers neatly stacked and sorted, ready for tomorrow's business. "Boo!" he said and the voice-

activated lighting brightened the room. The Atmospheric Intensity Regulator (AIR) came on and a warm breath caressed the back of his neck. He pivoted around only to find the desk's papers parachuting leisurely to the floor. He stared at the newly papered carpet for a moment and left the room. He returned to the first floor.

Nutrition Fabrication, Guest Acceptance and Lounge, and the Factual Center along with the atrium were located on this level. The monotonous beige and chrome of the Nutrition Fabrication area was deserted, as it should have been. The Guest Acceptance and Lounge were dimly lit. The floor light sensors gave the comfortable and plush room an eerie, sinister attitude. The Factual Center, opposite, had memos, bulletins, pamphlets, and papers all symmetrically arranged within its confines.

The atrium's large clear dome housed several of the few plants in the city. Two tall slender trees provided the backdrop for a lush, though small bit of Eden. The water from the imitation brook ran from the base of the trees through the patches of ferns, flowers, stones and grass, only to be pumped back to begin the trip again.

A shadow passed over his face. He quickly dropped to one knee and his rifle jumped into position, pointing toward the movement. In the silence, he heard his breathing echo in his ears. His eyes were all that moved as he surveyed the atrium. No other motion. He waited a few more moments, then started to rise. Again a shadow flitted across his vision, but higher this time. And again he dropped down, his eyes focusing toward the arch of the dome.

Then he saw it. A branch of one of the trees swaying in the breeze caused by the AIR system. He exhaled long and low. Eden was secure. He rose and returned to the elevator. The garage was the only place left to check. He pushed the button for the lower level.

The elevator door slid open and he gently touched the stall button and waited. The flash of the red argon sign announced his arrival to 'VEHICULAR HOUSING'. He listened while his eyes became accustomed to the red light and dancing shadows. He took one step into the garage and let the elevator go about its business. He saw no movement. The hypnotic pulsing of the sign kept time with the only sound to be heard, his heartbeat. He became one with the night.

His feet took him soundlessly into the structure as his eyes scanned the area. A slight rustle to his left brought him up short. His trained ear

pinpointed the location of the sound. It was to his extreme left, almost behind him, about five meters away behind the '38 Ravital. The man was wrong, there were three. He could smell each of them. That makes the job 1500 credits. Good. He turned around and leveled his rifle in their direction and paused. They weren't patient creatures. He was. It usually didn't take long before their fear took over. He adjusted his position so that he could see their shadows. The argon light flashed. They were gone.

"Shit!" he whispered. These three must be older. They knew the strategy of the hunt. Most trackings were simple. Find them, corner them, shoot them. No real skill involved. But these three would be different. It appeared as though he would have an opportunity to put his skills to use tonight.

He rose slowly and extended his senses throughout the garage. No sound. No smell. Nothing. He crouched low and melted into one of the supporting columns. There weren't many speeders here this time of night. The contrast of the red light and the black shadows distorted reality and made tracking difficult. He watched the seemingly empty garage for the slightest sound or movement.

A muffled cry echoed woefully through the silent structure. The frosty breath of life rose from behind a silver speeder. There they were. He brought his rifle to bear as he set his bag of gear down. Several pellets fell out and danced on the concrete floor. Instantly his prey was off and running toward the elevator. The tallest was carrying a small one and the other had a slight limp. They ducked behind the few speeders and the columnar supports as they made their way toward their escape. His first shot blew the window out of a newer model green speeder. His second took a sizeable chunk out of one column and perhaps grazed the limping one. He couldn't be sure.

"Damn, they're gonna make it." He raced around the damaged column and saw them dive behind the Ravital. He took aim and destroyed the elevator control panel in a blaze of white plasma and fire.

The figures behind the Ravital stopped. Their means of escape inoperable.

He advanced on the speeder. They couldn't run off unseen this time. He rounded the front of the vehicle and watched their feet disappear underneath. He jumped over the bonnet and placed himself between them and the rest of the garage. The tallest stood, reached to pick up the little one, turned and slammed into him. The two children fell to the floor

knocking the third down as she emerged from under the vehicle. The smallest began crying, a mournful sound that reverberated throughout the garage.

The tallest, a male, gently picked her up and held her close. He moved over to the other female and pulled her behind him in a vain attempt to protect her from the inevitable. The agent noticed the absence of part of her left foot. Yes, they had made it this far, but not without a price. Her damaged arm hung limply at her side. He had hit her.

The boy raised his large brown eyes as he drew himself to his full height. The agent saw the ragged shirt the boy wore. A Unitar. Faded, grimy, and full of holes, but a Unitar nonetheless. A Unitar like mine. Has this been this boy's lucky shirt? He touched the boy's sleeve.

He was this boy once, with the same athletic build as a result of his years of wrestling; with the same determined stance that convinced his father medicine would not be his profession; with the same dark brown eyes that told Lasa he did not love her. The small one's sobs ceased. His thoughts returned to the garage. He dropped his hand and examined the children.

The earth could only support so much life. Since the discovery of instant regeneration and the subsequent population explosion, the earth was supporting all the life it could. Sterilization was no longer a viable option. Birth control was mandatory yet, it wasn't always successful. Most women were compliant about taking their Abortacaine when they discovered they were pregnant. But there were always those who didn't . . . or wouldn't. With the right connections, they could find a fugitive midwife who had managed to elude the authorities and continued to practice and care for the young ones. For the past twenty years, life insurance agents earned their living by eliminating the young humans who managed to survive, so that the adults had the room and the resources to live.

He had a grudging admiration for these three; they had survived this long. In his younger days, he would have been hunting down their parents to sell them insurance. They would all be sitting in the living room of a small, comfortable home. The children would have been spit and polished and ready for bed. They'd line up for their goodnight kisses and then up to their rooms so Mommy and Daddy could talk to the nice gentleman. Times change. He stalks his prey a little differently now. He was still assuring the well-being of someone's life . . . some adult's.

The two older children stared back at him, defiant and silent, as if he

were the menace to society. He recognized that look. He wore it once, when he was one of the eyes in the night. He would never wear that look again. They had given good chase. They would not suffer. With respect, he fired his rifle.

"NO!" He shot up from the pillow that only moments before cradled his head. His eyes were opened wide. Beads of sweat coalesced on his brow. For a few moments the dark room was again silent. He even forgot to breathe.

The realization that it was only a nightmare finally struck him. His shoulders slumped and he remembered to breathe. "Just a dream. It was just a damn dream."

The phone rang and before its echo died he shouted, "Hello!" into the handpiece.

"There are two of them," the rich man said.

CHET MANDAIR

The Perfect Mirage

A young man in a white shirt and dark brown trousers emerges from a large complex bearing the name "Bombay Steel Mills." He pauses a little at the gateway, throws a nervous glance at the passers-by and with a contented gesture taps his bulging breast pocket.

He crosses the road, and seeing an overcrowded tram (a two car train which runs on the main road) coming in a snail-like fashion, he rushes to it. He first advances towards the second class compartment, his usual mode of travel—he hesitates—and with a shy look on his face boards the first class. He ploughs through the crowd much to the frustration of the squashed passengers. He sees a seat being emptied and drives for it. He tussles with another man and finally wins the seat, causing his competitor to look at him angrily. He does not mind it, settles down and stares outside. The rhythmic motion of the tram takes the man a few years back.

... His native village was Kalighat, in the state of West Bengal. His father had suddenly died leaving him in charge of a household with a mother and a sister. His mother took up work as a housemaid. Slowly and painfully the days passed. The boy finished school and came to the capital of the state of Maharashtra, Bombay to seek a job. It was easier said than done, as the man found out in the next few days. During that time he had often wondered if God had kept aside only blood and tears for the poor.

His mind was in constant turmoil and many a time he had a desperate urge to commit suicide. Then, suddenly, he got a job in a factory as a labourer. Despite the meagre income he was happy to think he had at last grown up to be a man. He would now be able to give something to his mother. And now, today he had received his first salary. . . .

...His thoughts are disturbed by the conductor who asks for the fare. He pays it and casually tosses the ticket into his pocket. The sun has set. The evening sky is covered with a tint of red. The tram travels slowly through the brightly lit and crowded streets. The shop windows are colourfully decorated. The man reflects upon the tingling impulse when he had received his salary packet. He had stuffed it into his pocket and felt proud. He suddenly remembers he had to buy some presents for the

family for Diwali (a Hindu festival known as the “festival of lights”). His sister had asked for a necklace. He had already selected a silver necklace in a local shop close to his residence. How happy she would be to see the wonderful gift! The man suddenly has a carefree mind. He looks outside in the streets and everything seems new to him. He feels the tide of new life stealing warmly through his arteries. Never has he known such a thrill of sensuous joy as came with that freshet of life. He has a sweet feeling of peace and gentleness and a mitigating sense of comfort steals over him.

He is so deeply absorbed in his thoughts that he does not realize when his destination arrives. He, however, gets down and walks toward his house. Casually his fingers try to touch the comforting bulge in his pocket. His fingers make contact with the torn fragments of cloth. He stops and gapes at the neat blade-slash across his breast pocket.

JASON M. SCHEAR

Sometimes You Have to Hold Your Own Hand

Alex watched the two lights at the top of the bus turn from yellow to red. He was reminded of eyebrows when he saw the lights flashing above the front windows of the yellow beast, which carried him and the other children to Treeton Elementary School.

The bus stopped perfectly in front of him so that when the driver opened the doors Alex had to just step up.

"Hi Alex," Tim, the driver said, as Alex climbed the last step of the bus.

"Hi," Alex delicately responded, not wanting the other kids to think he was talking to the "Nerd" as Tim was known.

Alex walked slowly to the empty seat above the tire. No one ever took this spot because there was no leg room. Alex was small so he didn't mind being over the hump.

Alex sat and looked at the window which was covered with a thin sheet of ice. He wasn't going to mess it up until his friend, Greg, got on the bus. The two had since the first day after holidays played tic-tac-toe on the window. Alex had lost only twice in the three weeks of their competition.

Alex was intelligent, a handicap when you are at an age when you should be good at "Nerf" football, not spelling.

Alex's head jerked forward from being hit with an open hand. He turned around and saw Billy Hanson smiling.

"Gonna cry," Billy taunted.

"No," Alex replied.

"Then maybe I should do it again."

"Don't," Alex defiantly stated.

"What are you going to do, tell?"

"Maybe I will."

Billy's hand flailed out and hit Alex on the shoulder. Alex responded by spitting a tremendous green wad, which landed on Billy's cheek. Billy's eyes filled with tears.

"I hate you," Billy sobbed.

"I can live with that," Alex smiled.

Billy then sat down and wiped his face with the sleeve of his jacket.

Alex knew that he didn't have to worry about being bothered for the rest of the trip. The kids would be teasing Billy for crying and not worry about the kid who made him cry.

The bus stopped. Alex peeked above the seat to see his friend Greg get on the bus. Greg had black hair and blue eyes. The girls liked him. This made Alex wonder if the reason he didn't have a girlfriend was because he had red hair and glasses.

Greg plopped down beside Alex.

"Hey Red," Greg exclaimed, using his nickname for Alex.

"Hey Greg," Alex replied.

Greg looked back and saw Billy crying.

"What happened to him?" he questioned.

"I spit on him."

Wow, you spit on a fourth grader. Now all the fourth graders will try to beat the third graders up."

"Big deal. They will forget about it tomorrow anyway," Alex responded.

"Yeah, but if they don't I'm the third grader that always has to help you," Greg exclaimed.

"Sorry," Alex genuinely said.

"That's ok, I can beat most of them up anyway."

Alex smiled and realized that was true.

Alex made the tic-tac-toe lines and the game began. Alex let Greg win. It was compensation for the troubles he would be receiving for Alex's desecration of Billy's face.

The bus stopped and the kids got out. Alex and Greg went to class. After lunch the two walked outside to the jungle gym. They were intercepted by six fourth graders, one of which was Billy Hanson.

"You are going to pay," Billy sneered.

"What are you going to do?" Alex asked.

"We are going to throw you in the hole."

Alex began to get nervous. The hole was in the woods behind the school. In actuality it wasn't a hole, it was a pond with muddy ridges. For punishment kids were thrown in the ridges. The mud itself wasn't what Alex was nervous about. The smell that accompanied the mud reeked like sewage. Spending a day smelling like crap was not one of Alex's desires,

so he ran. Greg helped by tripping the kid who first ran after Alex. Greg knew he wouldn't get thrown in, but he also realized he couldn't come between six fourth graders and their lust for cruelty. Greg hoped Alex would make it until the bell rang to go inside. That was about ten minutes. Greg doubted in Alex's fate.

Alex ran around the school to where the tires were lying flat on the ground. Alex looked back and realized Greg had given him enough time to hide. He approached a group of girls talking on the biggest tire. Their feet were on the inside of the tire. Alex ran and jumped into the middle of the tire, and their conversation. He was positioned in a manner that a quarterback might take in a huddle. He then disappeared from visible sight. He had placed himself in the part of the tire where the innertube would have been. His body curved in a semi-circle.

"What are you doing?" Betsy Miller began.

"Shh," Alex whispered. "I'm hiding. Pretend I'm not here, please."

"OK," Betsy said. "But you are going to do my math homework."

"Dames," Alex thought to himself.

Not ten seconds after Alex dropped from existence the gang of six approached the girls.

"Have you seen Alex Mills?" Billy demanded.

"Yeah, he ran by and went around the far side of the school," Betsy lied.

Billy took off running in the false direction with the five others close behind.

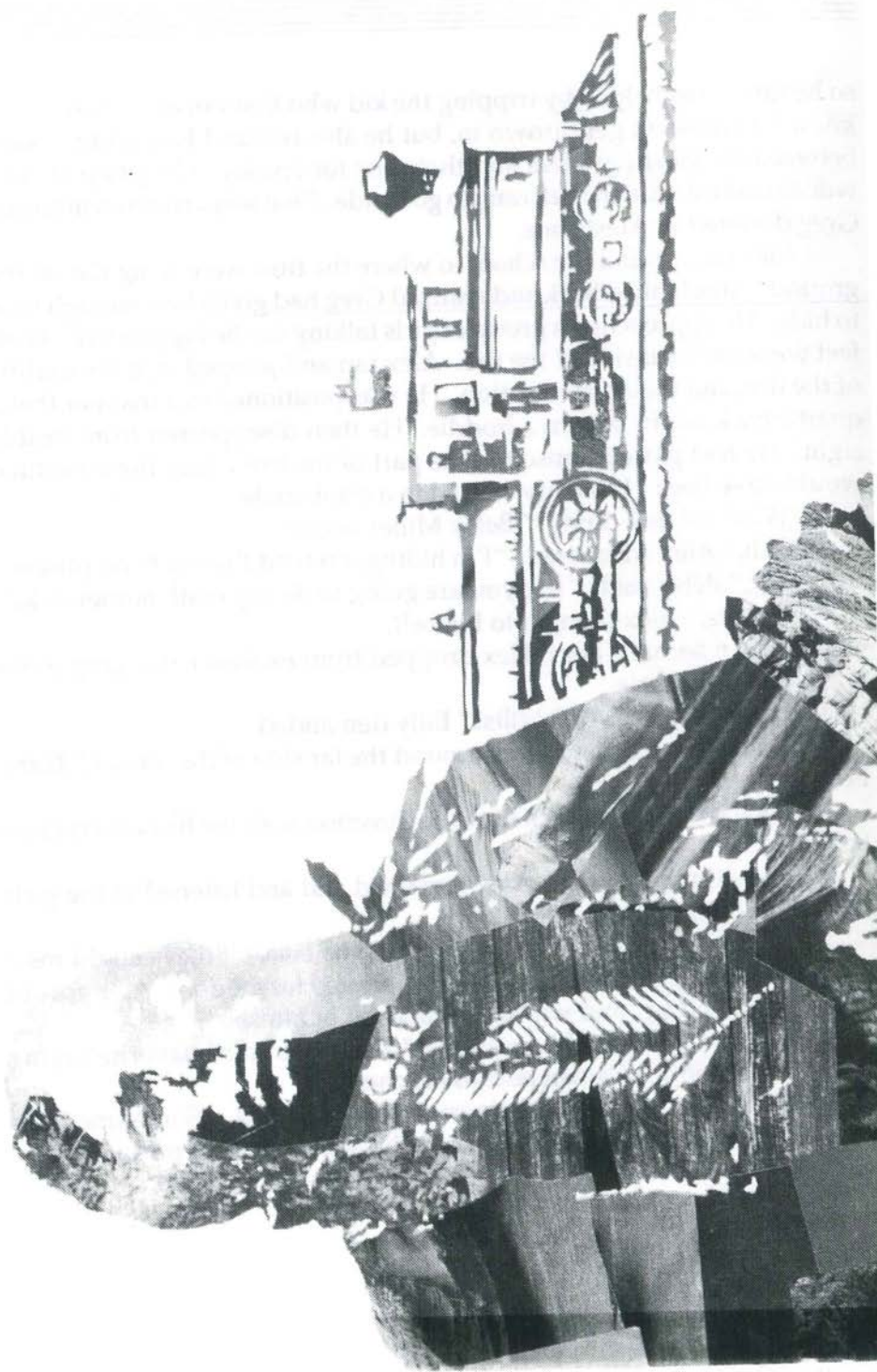
The next nine minutes Alex remained still and listened to the girls talk about dolls and dresses.

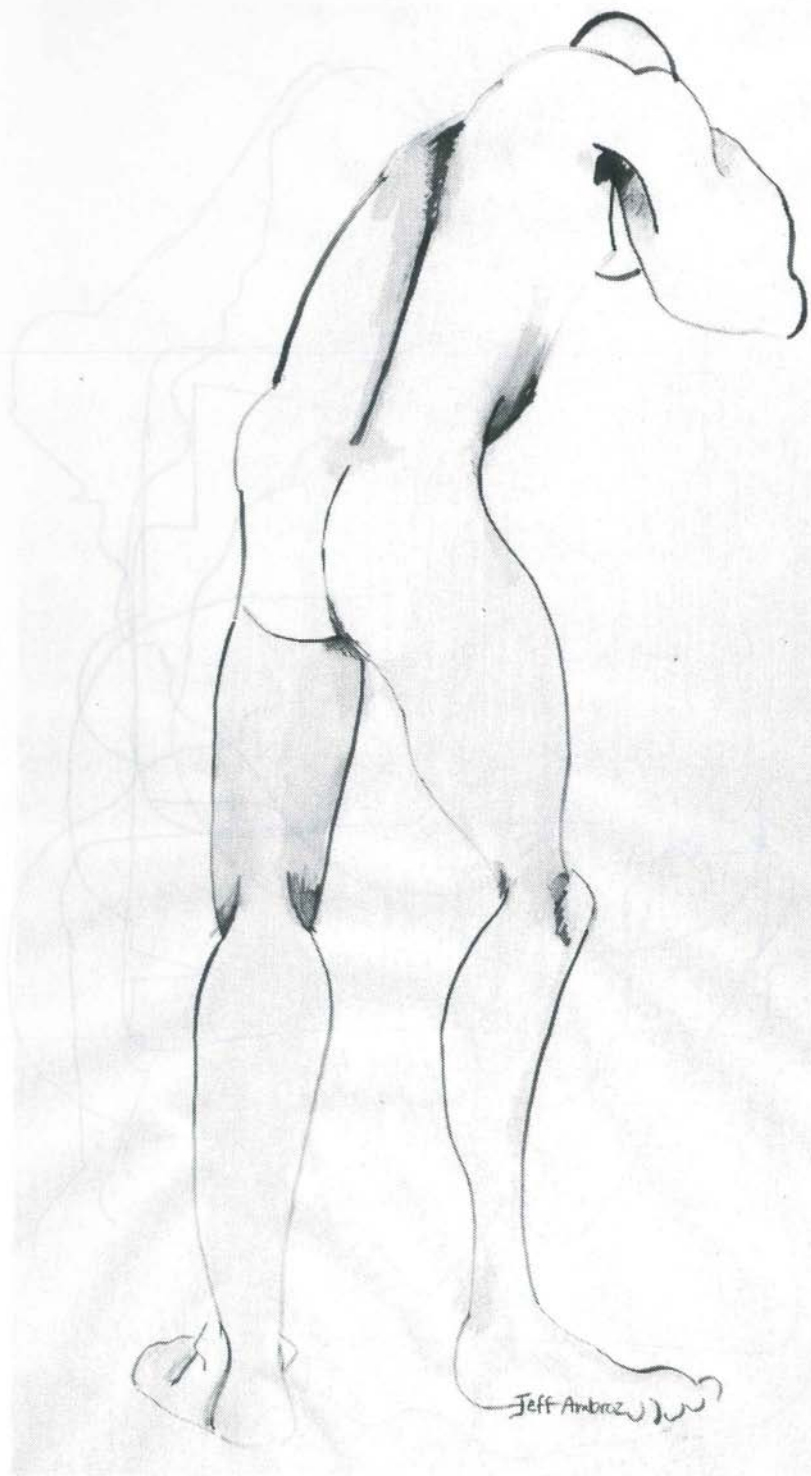
"Geez," he thought, "Maybe it would be better if they caught me."

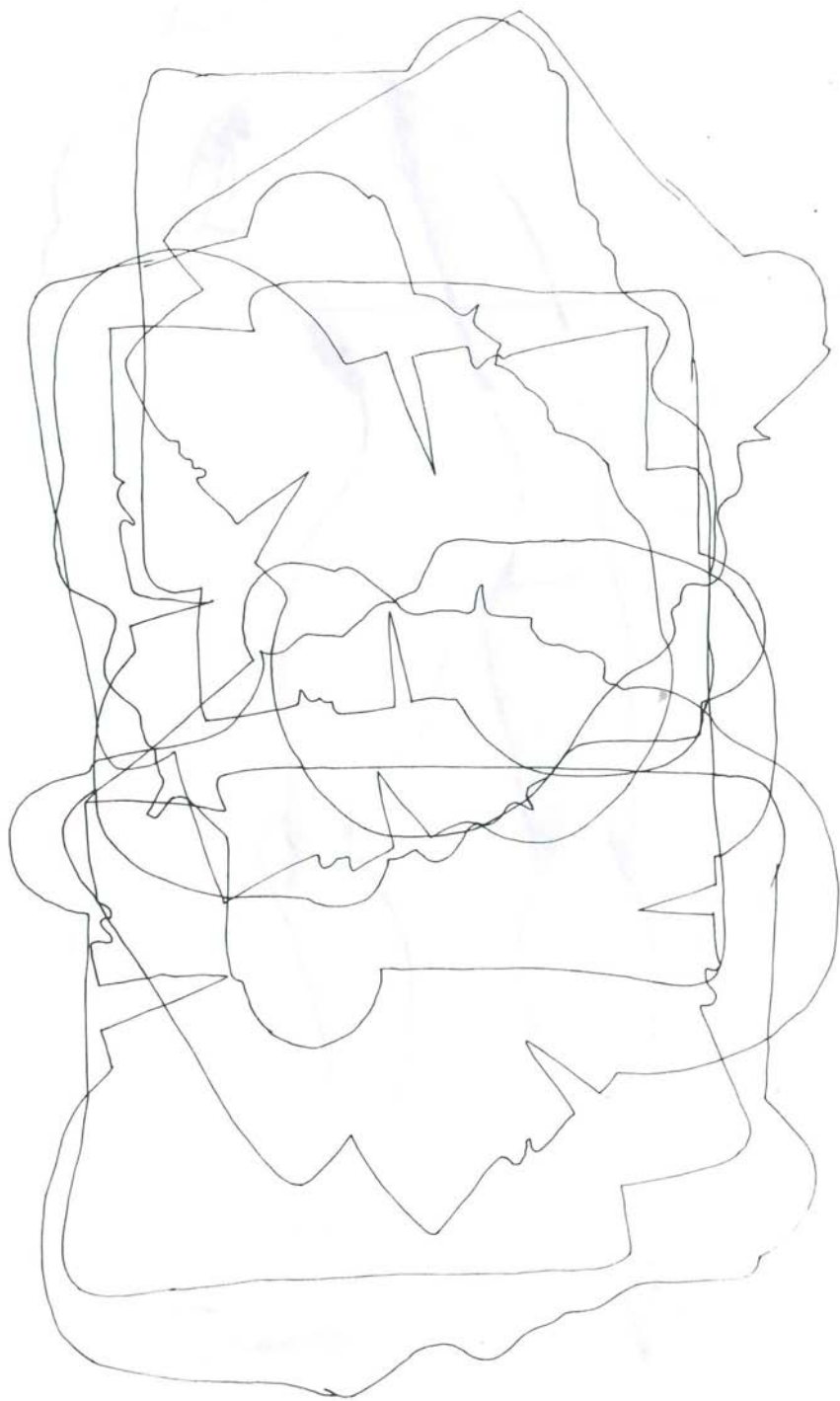
When the bell finally rang the girls sprinted for the door. Alex got out of the tire, stood up, and wiped the sand off of himself.

"They are weak, and I am strong," Alex uttered his favorite saying accompanied with a Tarzan beat to his chest.

Alex walked towards the doorway of the school. "Sometimes you have to hold your own hand," he thought with a sense of pride.

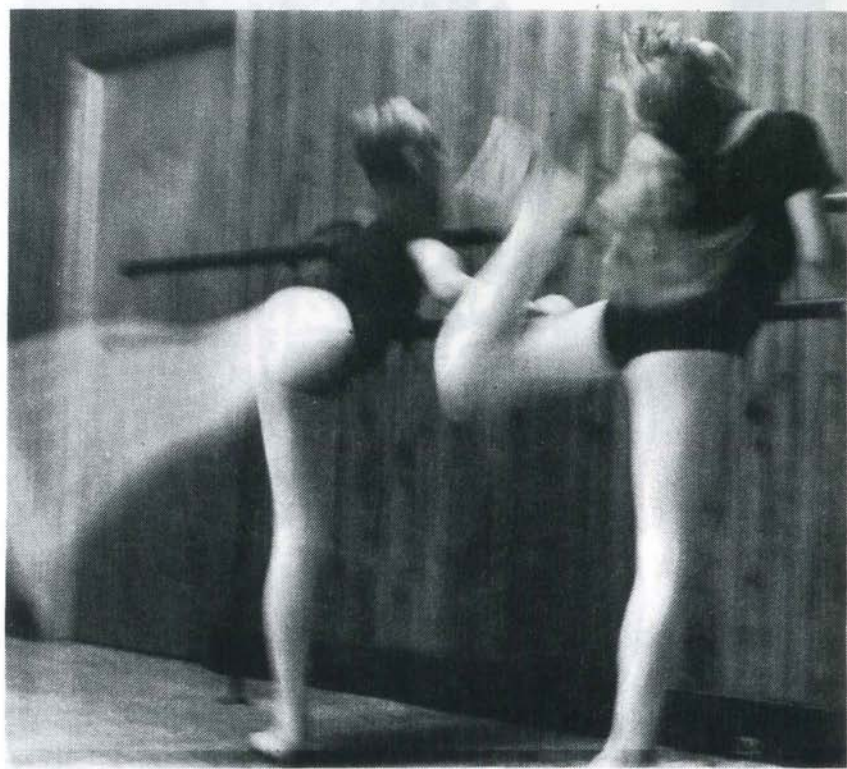






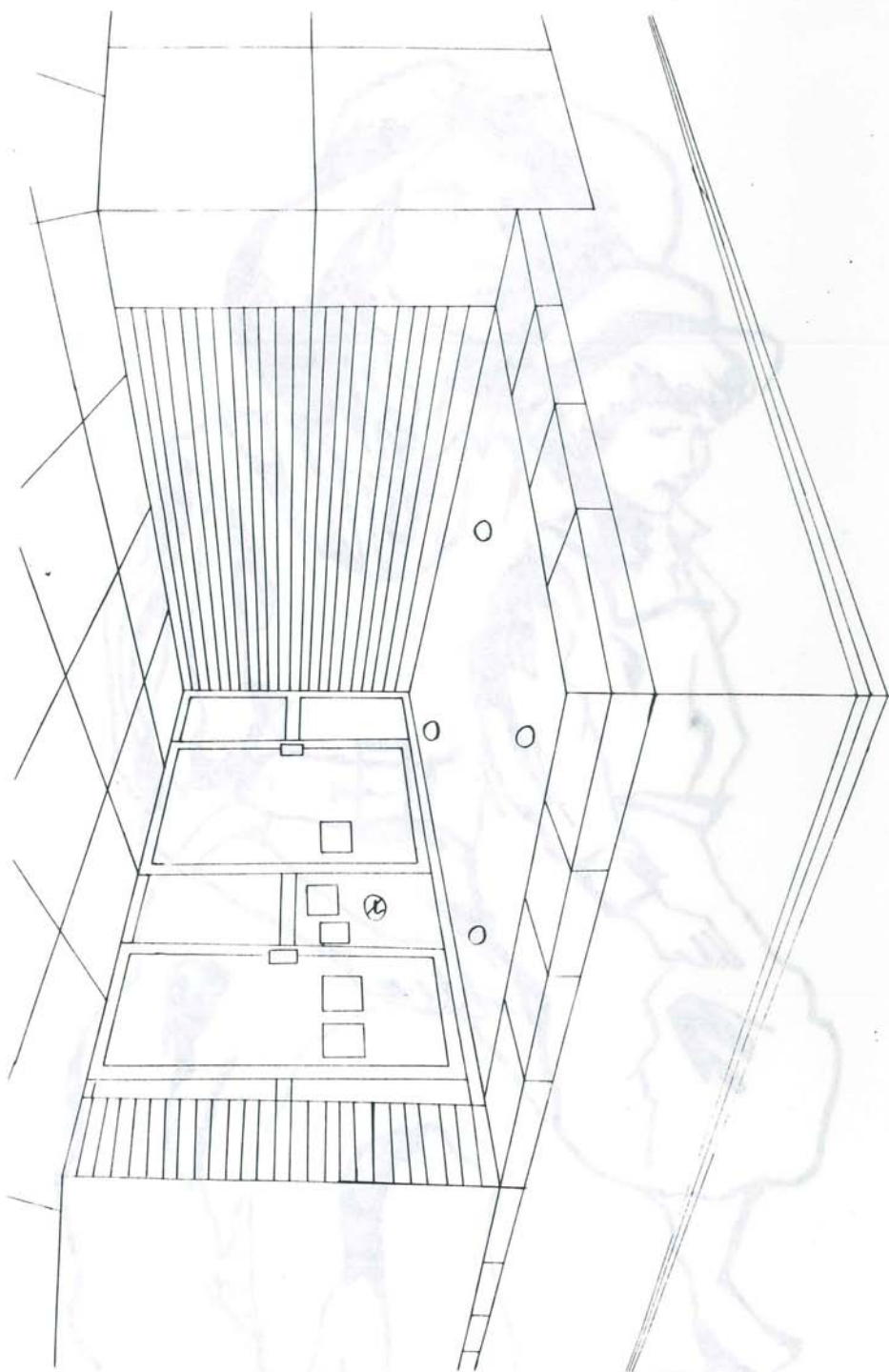




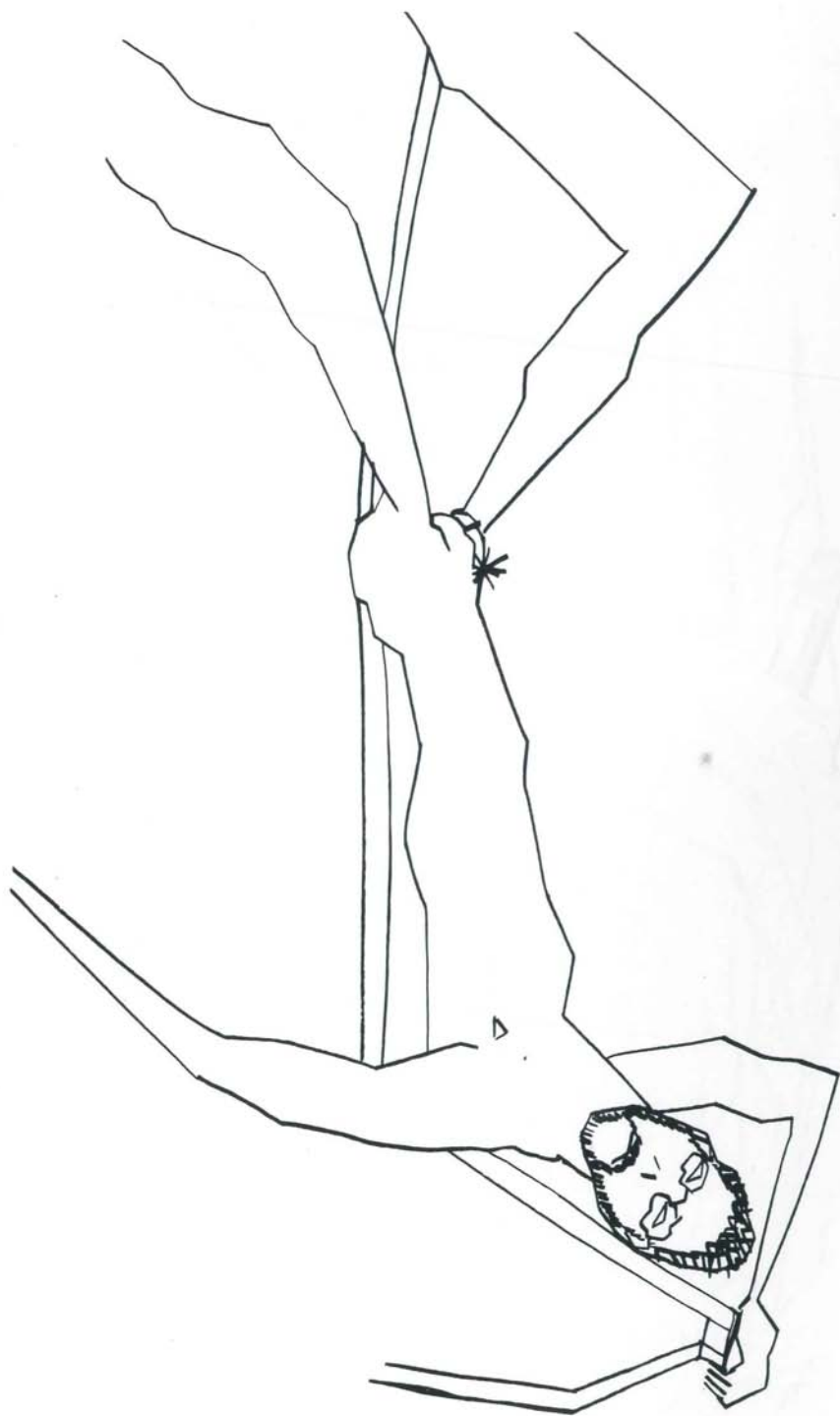


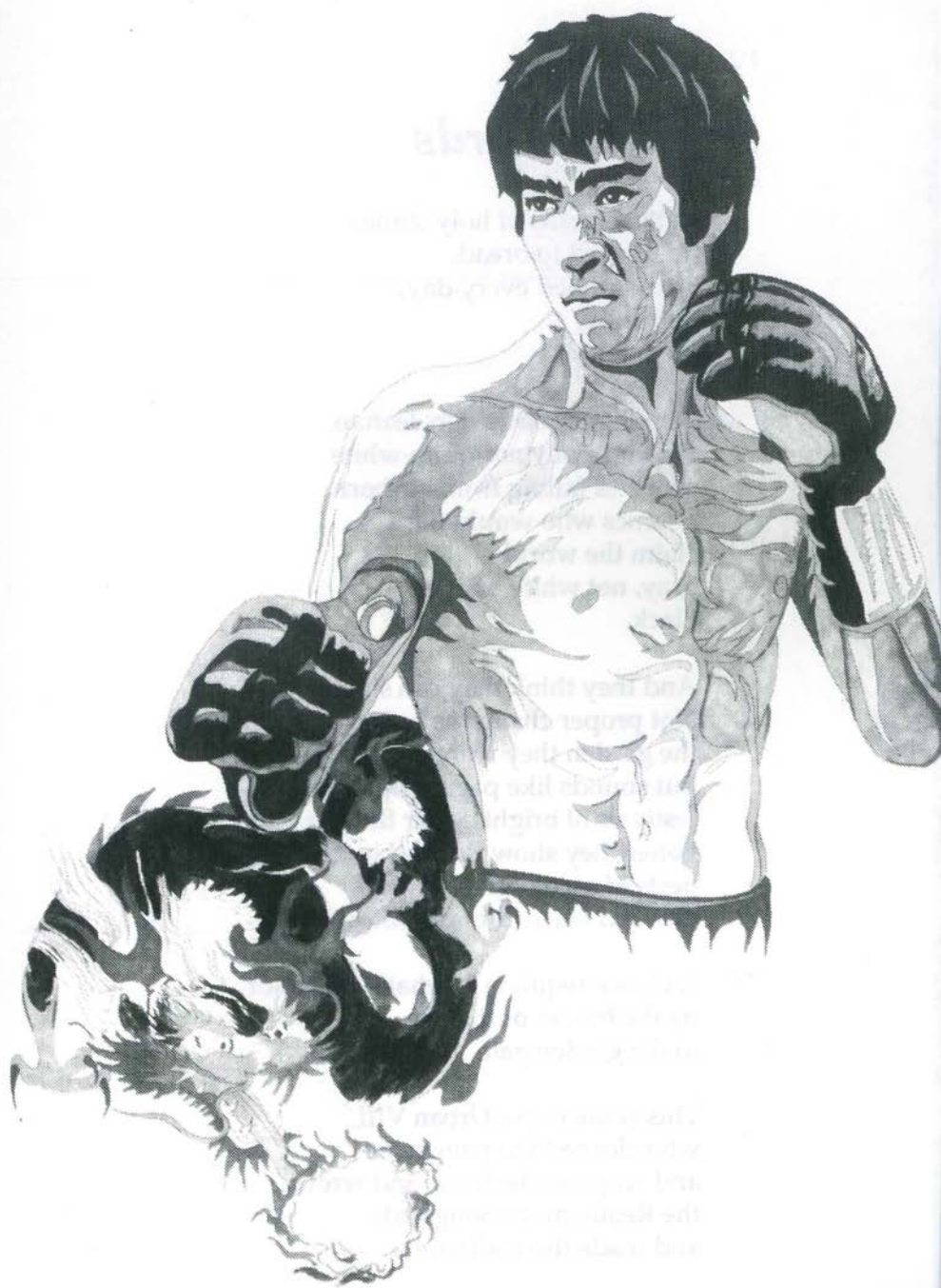












DIANE PATTON

First Love

He smiles at his reflection
in the candy apple shine.
It's good to have her out again.
Like Christmas every spring.

A light touch on her wheel,
and he slips her into gear.
Their lives begin by heading in
reverse. Back twenty years.

They've had their share of touch-ups,
but they're looking good today.
Her paint job covers faded red,
his hair dye covers gray.

He doesn't seem to notice
that the car was built for two.
He couldn't bare to share her.
She's the last trace of his youth.

As they drive into the sunset,
there's no doubt about their status.
At mid-life, he lives half the year.
The Corvette is called a classic.

INA MULFORD

The Cage of Co-Dependency

Don't talk, for I won't listen
to more of your lies. Don't talk,
keep your distance, for I want to hear
truth from you tonight. The white ring
around your finger glows in the light,
the forgotten gold band lingers still,
in your pocket. Don't talk husband listen
to me now. I know if you think long
and hard, you will know
that the drink you drown your troubles in
is the trouble you're in now.
I said don't talk, but listen
to these words that I speak.
I am fooled when you talk for I think
you care, but when your talk is over you
tilt that bottle up in the air, and you always do
toss back more than your share. Now you're restless,
you pace the room, your insides are churning like
waves in a storm; rough, ragged breath.
Your eyes are searching husband,
for somewhere to put the blame, for the pain you feel inside.
Trapped by your fears, you'll look for a closer,
easier mark and you'll see me
fair game.
You'll choose a name for me, but not my own,
your eyes will glow so fiercely
as your raised fist smashes down...down...down...
Time will pass, bruises do fade, we'll talk about this
when your head is clear, but until then you can talk talk talk,
but I won't hear.

DIANE PATTON

Prince Charming

I've seen that shine in her eyes before.
Nothing but a man makes a woman
look like that.
With coffee cups between us,
I can tell from her face
that this is going to be
the longest talk yet.
I've heard it before
and she'll say it again,
this man of her dreams,
every promise he made.
It's amazing to watch
as she gestures and laughs.
She's exquisitely happy
with a knife in her heart.
As her friend, I'm required
to listen and nod
and just let her talk
until the knife must be turned.
Now she's dreaming of "someday."
It's gone far enough.
When she stops for a breath
I mention his wife.
It's a pretty short fall
from heaven to hell.
The shine leaves her eyes
and slides down her cheeks.

KEITH JONES

Birth of Man

Hard rock rhythms beat
through the F.M. stereo
each note as harsh as
a bumble bee sting.

A punch of the gas
jerks the Chevette as if
it has been slapped
on the butt.

Bugs bloom upon the
windshield
like flowers
in the green of spring.

It might as well be
the dead of winter.

My thoughts turn
to icicles.
Daggers of nature's
revenge.

The stink of Old Grandad whiskey
and cigars breeds
a nauseating reality.

Full tank of gas
and a one-way highway
to carry me from a full
belly of responsibility.

A wail from the radio
rocks me into a world
of midnight bawling
and diarrhea-stained diapers.

The gift of life given
to one only
beginning to live.

A successfully executed
U-turn marks the
death of the boy
and the birth of man.

W. RAIN

Impotence

My mate looks at me
with sympathetic, impatient eyes
offering empty words of comfort and
ignorant advice.

Angrily, I begin pacing the floor.
I've always prided myself
on my ability to 'perform.'
This has never happened to me before.
Well...once before
Kinda.
But NEVER this bad.

I've heard of it happening
All the time.
To OTHER PEOPLE
not me.
People who 'perform' better than I
tell me to "relax"
"It'll pass. It's all in your mind."
But what if it isn't?
What if...
I can't anymore? Ever again?

Desperately, I try the usual remedies.
A long walk. A movie. Watching T.V.
Even putting it away for a while
doesn't help.

I feel like an addict
cut off,
from the ability to achieve a high,
Who'd kill for a quick fix.

I return to my love
And try it again.
The moment is brief.
Definitely NOT my best.

Writer's Block is truly
A fate worse
than no sex.

DIANE PATTON

Success Story

He's had ten-year plans
since he was thirteen
when baseball was traded
for three paper routes.
He worked all through college
and on into law school.
He married, had children,
(it's all in the plan).
Now the files on his desk
have buried the picture
of Sue and the kids
in Hawaii last year.
That trip cost a fortune
and was better forgotten.
The beach is no place
to conduct a career.
She'd found it amusing,
but the sand in his briefcase
was all that he needed
to swear off more trips.
He tolerates golf
since it's client-related,
but he'd rather be here
in the big corner office
working out problems
in other people's lives.
It helps him forget

he's at the top of the ladder.
There's no plan to follow
when the goals are all met.
Now the best house in town
and a six-figure income,
are still not enough
since he knows in his heart
that seven day workweeks
have made him a winner.
He'll work till he dies,
for he's never quite grasped
the difference between
laid-back and laid out.

RENEE SAUNSOCI

Mother Earth's Challenge

To the men of the world
I challenge you
to consider your lives
and the worthlessness of your existence
If you continue pursuing your cowardly aims
of dominance and destruction
—all life will come to an end.

However, I will not let that happen. . .

BRANDDIE MEYER

Verse

Silence is a verse that I've never heard
Wishing that I've seen the invisible man
Smelling the odorless plastic flowers
Enjoying the flavor of water
Lands of timeless time
Dreams of sleepless sleep

THELMA THOMAS

Warrior Son:

Tatanka Cistina,
The Little Buffalo

The people, prayers, love, support,
respect, and honor came from the
four directions.

The proud paint pony pranced.
His warrior horse led the way.

Fearless of death.
A brave Dakota Santee Sioux
Son began his journey.

To be with his relatives in
the spirit world.

(In memory of Tony Thomas)

REBECCA HARTSELL

Home

The corn husks rattle
in the driving November wind.
I huddle my coat closer.
My breath frosts in the frigid air
and my footsteps crunch on
the crusted snow.
There's nothing here
but the sound of the wind
and the thin strain of Dad
putting the tractor away.
I look at my house and see
the only light.
The warm glow on the snow
from the kitchen window.
The warmth flickers as a shadow
crosses the panes.
The six o'clock whistle blows
and the dark deepens with the cold.

IVY NIELSEN

Iowa Haiku

Between crop and ditch,
Full field and wasted water,
Coons' eyes shine mischief.

REBECCA HARTSELL

Haiku

The dawn softly breaks
I stand frozen in its rays
Shadows linger, still.

G. J. FRAHM

The Folsom Place Revisited

North of a farmhouse I once knew
a clump of Persian lilacs grew;

southward, a honey locust tree
shaded a pile of sand and me;

northeast, a roost for Leghorn hens;
southeast, the Poland Chinas' pens;

close by the shed where pigs got born
a red slat crib for golden corn;

dawnward, the barn where Daisy's calf
lickled my nose and made me laugh.

I still see where the windmill rose,
where clotheslines wore their Monday clothes,

where violets grew, where one small toad
lived in the ditch beside the road.

The road still passes—graveled now.
All else was buried by someone's plow.

Who had such need for beans, I wonder,
to burn and turn my childhood under?

ANITA GOTTSCH

Sharing

I caught a code
Da udder day
Or rather,
It was gived to me.
Suzy gived it to Pam.
Pam musta got tired of it
'cause she gived it to me.

My noze feels like a
Jumbo pink marshmaller
My eyes can barely see around it.
I got my very own box of Puffs
My 'personal box' Mom said,
But it's almost gone.
I hope I run outa code
Before I run outa Puffs.

I tried to give my code
To my friend, Judy
Mom says, "Better to give
Dan to receive."
Judy only took half.
Her mom always says not to
Make a pig of yourself.
Maybe I'll give da
Udder half back to Pam.

BARTON FLEWELLING

Frost-bite

The numbing sound of silence
falls over our cuddly-warm bodies,
as we crunch out of our home
into the church-still winter night.
The cutting quiet rings in our heads
and hugs us as the snow,
slipping so lazily down,
hangs like a bleached shroud.
We kids, eyes bright as firelight,
halt on the glazed steps.
Maybe to listen for a stray dog yelp
to scamper over the hills
to our brittle ears.

Mom and Dad sit locked inside.
Their icy eyes frozen on the TV.
I wonder if they would stop
and eavesdrop with us, instead of slipping off...
off the glazed edge of concrete earth,
sacrificing their voices to the cold
swallowed by the shrouded silence.

MICHELE BEERMANN

Telling a Dream

I'm in a big warehouse
with my boss
from two summers ago.
We're making a movie.
I work the camera,
and he's the director.
Lots of kids running around
in baseball uniforms.
He tells me to go get supplies,
so I start downtown
and my mom's with me.
We take a short cut
through a long alley,
and midway we run into
a huuuge pile of shoeboxes
(about a hundred thousand).
We decide to climb
with me in the lead.
But I'm wearing rollerskates
and keep rolling down.
Two guys from
the phone company
are sitting in a van
laughing at us.
I jump from the mound
and fall hundreds of feet
and land in the outfield
of a baseball game in space.

RICK RECTOR

Mountain Corral

High strung stud in a mountain corral
nickers at the running red mare.
Young cowboy in a battered straw hat
lifts the rawhide latch with a smile.

DON MCCORMICK

Opening Night

The only thing new
In this old scene
Is the quick squeeze
When you imagine steps
Across the stage.
Then as your cue is called,
Sure as night,
You know the thing
That is jumping up
Into your open throat
Is not your gut
But your heart.

GREG BERGE

Logical Analogy

WAR spelled backwards is RAW,
RAW is what chapped lips feel like,
Lips are Mick Jagger,
Mick Jagger sings for the Rolling Stones,
Stones Roll like little balls,
A little ball is a golf ball,
Golf sounds like GULF,
A well known GULF is The Persian Gulf,
As you can see, War and The
Persian gulf are directly related.

STEPHEN COYNE

Old Jazz

After all these years
she still goes to his gigs—
gray-haired groupie
to that old trumpet.

By ten, her chin
is in her hand, and
when he leans back
to finger out the last
second of a breath, it's
just a little sigh.

There's no jazz left
in those old licks.
Endless "Summertime"
and "Georgia" on the mind
have darkened the gray
gravity of their faces.

But when he puts
his lips to her ear,
that old triple tongue
tickles out a smile.
It's not yet eleven
when they leave.
The saxophone grumbles,
and brushes sweep
the broken set.

They pass the plate glass
with its painted sign—
“evil zzaj” it reads
to those of us inside
where living is easy—and
they walk into the night,
every tottering step
daring and improvised.

JAN D. HODGE

Old Folks in Winter

You see them after storms in all small towns,
Defying wicked winds and four-foot drifts
To pace their measured, solemn ups and downs
And mete out greetings as if they were gifts.
Their children and their children's children stay
Inside and warm before well-tended fires
And while the winds whip, while away their day
With games, or huddled by their VCR's.

What brings these stern survivors out of doors?
Not memories of blizzards lived through long
Years since, nor any wish to mind the young
What hardship is. No; each grim step declares:
I'm not yet ready to be shut away.
Don't even think it. Leave me my today.

CHARLES MCKENNY

Ladies in Waiting

At the dance they filled the chairs
against the wall they'd draped
in aqua and silver crepe
while the others baked in the sun.

Their broken-nailed fingers ladled
punch they'd mixed into
crystal cups clasped
by manicured talons.

They glittered crowns
someone else always wore
not knowing they were perennial herbs
that would last the winter
while showier annuals
withered in the first light frost.

CHARLES MC KIM

Ladies in Waiting

At the door of the room
I stood for a moment
in silence, waiting
while the ladies looked at me.

That ladies should be so
kind to me, I was
certainly not
in the least prepared.

They were so kind
to me, I was
not at all
prepared for that.
I was not at all
prepared for that.
I was not at all
prepared for that.

