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The
Kiosk

Spring
2004

published by the English Department of
Morningside College

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About This Year's Judge

Jim Brummels was born and raised in northern Nebraska and educated at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and Syracuse University. His books of poems include *614 Pearl*, *Sunday's Child*, and *Cheyenne Line*. His novel, *Deus Ex Machina*, was published by Bantam in 1989, and a short story, *Clay Hills*, was published as a book by Nosila Press in 1996. His poems and stories have appeared in the periodicals *Rolling Stone*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Iowa Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *South Dakota Review*, *Pebble*, and many others, as well as a number of anthologies. He has been the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship, the Elkhorn Poetry Prize from *The Elkhorn Review*, and the Mildred Bennet Award from the Nebraska Center for the Book.

A member of the English Department of Wayne State College since 1977, Brummels has directed the Plains Writers Series and edited *Nebraska Territory*. He and his partner Jim Reese operate Logan House, an independent publisher of contemporary poetry and short fiction.

Brummels lives with his family in western Wayne County, Nebraska, where they run a horseback cattle operation.

All entries are judged blindly by the editors, and no entry receives special consideration. Staff members are eligible for contest placement, but are not eligible for prize money.

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Lukewarm

CLIFF THOMPSON

“I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth,” Revelations, chapter three: verses fifteen and sixteen.”

Nick heard the speakers echo his voice from the back of the church. His tone was nasal and tinny—it carried a sincerity that he did not feel. The church was crowded on Saturday night, parishioners cheating the Sabbath so they could sleep in and watch football. The ancient priest’s voice ground on, speaking the gospel of the Lord, his gravelly voice holding the vowel sounds so long that Nick was afraid he’d keel over in mid-sentence.

There was no choir, no deacons, no army of altar boys, not in this small town Catholic church—just the priest. Nick was the lone helper tonight, doubling as altar boy and reader since none of the scheduled folks showed up on Saturdays during the winter. Nick’s mother was always happy

to volunteer his services to the Lord when the priest called her for help. She didn’t believe in night masses, though, because she was always up for the eight o’clock on Sundays. Nick figured he’d be too drunk tonight to even sit in a pew tomorrow morning. Tracy and Davie would be waiting for him after mass, ready for a night of whiskey and trouble. Nick knew he shouldn’t be raising so much hell. He knew he was smarter and a higher class of people than Tracy and Davie. His mom told him all the time. There was just nothing else to do in a small town.

Nick walked out into the faint flurries of snow after mass, looking left and right for Tracy’s pickup. His black Chevrolet was parked impatiently at the curb. Nick waved and ducked his numbed face from the glaring headlights.

“Get in here Nicholas,” Tracy said, offering a bottle of whiskey as Nick opened the door. “You’re in the devil’s hands now.”

“Bout damn time, too, I was losin’ my religion

in there,” he said as they squealed away from the church. “Davie gonna make it out?”

“His woman has tightened the leash on him tonight. Might just be you and me and Jimmy Beam.”

“We don’t want a man who’s whipped anyway, that puss.”

They turned onto the main street of the town. Nick saw that both bars were doing a good business tonight. Half the population was downtown shaking off the chill. There would be plenty of drunks driving in the snow tonight. He passed Tracy the bottle, wishing he was twenty-one so he could drink in a nice warm bar.

The truck pulled into his driveway, and Nick got out popping in a piece of gum. He ran toward the house, rehearsing his lines in his head for his mother. The wind slammed the door behind him. He went downstairs to get his duffel bag and gun case out of his room.

“Nick come in here, please.” His mother’s voice stopped him a few feet short

of the door. "Your plans still the same for tonight?"

"Yeah Mom. I'm going to stay at Tracy's place and we're going to hunt his north fields in the morning. Fresh snow oughta have a few roosters sitting tight in the tall grass."

"Well, you be careful with that boy, and say your prayers tonight. Bye, sweetie."

"I will Mom, good-night."

Tracy and Nick cruised through town, drinking and discussing their plans. Davie's new pickup pulled up beside them on Main Street. They slowly cruised side by side.

"Hey fellas, I told my lady she better get some sleep for church," Davie said. "Pull over and let me in."

"Surprised to see you Dave," Tracy said once Davie had climbed into the back seat. "Wouldn't the wife give you any action?"

"Naw, that girl is too in touch with the Lord," Davie said. "She's got her legs crossed so tight a guy couldn't get dollar bill between 'em, forget my pecker."

"That's what you get for datin' a Catholic girl, boy," Nick said. "That Bible has

got them locked up tight until you put a ring on their finger."

"Damned depressing thing," Davie said. "I don't want to think about it. Gimme a drink and let's get out of town."

Tracy took the highway south out of town and turned onto a dirt road. Nick remembered all the times they had traced the hard dirt roads between the fields throughout high school. He rolled down his window and took aim at a stop sign. The boom of the shotgun was thunderous in the cab of the truck, and the bee-bees peppered the sign, *pinging* metallically off into the night.

For some reason it made him smile to break the law, knowing his image in town as such a good, straight kid. Just last week he had been singing with the school choir at the old folk's home. They all loved to shake his hand. But they disgusted him, drooling onto their bibs, half of them not even hearing the music. He took aim at another stop sign, and smiled again as the red paint flaked into the falling snow.

The gravel plunked the floorboards, spit up from Tracy's tires moving too fast

along the country road. The snow intensified, making it hard for them to see even the road signs.

"Boys, we can't even see our targets anymore," Nick said, "I don't know if it's due to the snow or the liquor, but we need someplace indoors to drink."

"Ain't there an old church around here somewhere?" Davie said. "I always wondered what was in that place."

"Yeah," Tracy said, "it's right up around this turn, we'll pull in there and check it out."

"I've had about enough church for one lifetime," Nick said, "but in this case I think I can make an exception if there's no praying, no preacher, and no God."

The tiny church was a bare shadow on the white swirling snow as they pulled off the road. Nick wondered if the worshippers there had doubted God like he did. Probably not, he decided—there was even less to distract a person from church back then.

Tracy kicked open the doors to the abandoned church. Nick's spotlight lit the church's interior. The sharp winter air swirled the dust on the church floor.

Pigeons flapped up the darkened roof. The three walked up the center aisle, stomping the snow from their boots. The old floorboards creaked with every step. Davie turned on a lantern he'd retrieved from Tracy's toolbox.

"Woooooeeee boys," Tracy said, "call the apostles, I brought more wine for the last supper. If God was more than a load of bullshit would he let me do this?" Tracy fired a one-handed blast with his twelve gauge, smashing the aged crucifix on the back wall. He took a long drink out of the Jim Beam bottle.

"Gawdamnit Tracy, you know I gotta confess this shit next Saturday night," Nick said. "You want me goin' to hell?"

"Nicky boy, either we're all goin' or none of us are. You gotta forget about that cat-lick mumbo jumbo and open your eyes."

"I'm not sure you're gonna remember it anyway, Nicky, but you're probably right. We don't need to shoot this place up. Just need a warm spot to sit and drink," Davie said, taking a pull out of the bottle.

"Sure beats the hell out of booze cruisin' and shootin' signs," Tracy said.

"Ain't gonna stop me from sending a few pigeons to meet their maker, though." The shots were deafening in the tiny church. Davie and Nick joined in, their blasts drowning out the whistling wind of the snowstorm. After the last pigeon was pronounced dead, they sat quiet in a pew and passed the whiskey bottle. Nick wondered why he didn't feel the cold.

"Well, if pigeons have souls, we're hell-bound for sure fellas, but at least they won't be crappin' in this old church anymore, which oughta count something with St. Peter," Davie said looking around at the dead birds.

"There you go again Davie, warpin' Nicky's mind with that religious shit. This place ain't nothing but a shelter from the storm," Tracy said, his tone defiant. "Sides that, we don't mean two shits in the scheme of things. Three farm kids from Nebraska ain't got a part in God's alleged plan."

"Jesus H. Keerist Trace, that's a damned depressing thing to say," Nick said, shivering. His hand twitched against the shotgun on his lap. He took another drink of Beam and absently watched the snow trickling

through the newly broken holes in the ceiling.

"You fellas ever really think that religious stuff through?" Davie said. His thin face was tight under his stocking cap. "Maybe it's all bull, ya know?" He uncrossed his long legs and pushed shells into his shotgun. Nick wondered how long Davie had thought about that one.

"Damnit, I've been to church every Sunday fer eighteen years and it ain't hurt me none," Nick said. "There isn't anything else to believe in out here but booze and farmin'."

"Well, I'd put my belief in booze if I were you and ignore the farmin' and God," Tracy said. "Crop prices are down and it's a whole helluva lot easier to read the label on a bottle of whiskey than the Bible."

Nick smiled and wondered what his mom would do if she heard some of the things Tracy said. Have a conniption of some sort he figured. It definitely wouldn't be good.

The snow piled up outside the church, and they sat, each staring into space, not feeling the cold, the only movement the swift tipping of the bottle. ♦

Green people are only that way because they're not bluE

JESSI PLUEGER

a glare on green glasses
celery green
a gnome on green carpet
smiling gnome
green hair on blue girl
blue mood
a glare in green eyes
tearful blue girl

I See Eyes

RICK RECTOR

I see glittering eyes in the dark(ness)
Dripping wolfish jaws
Sharp teeth waiting
(Not so patient now)
To pull me down
Gut me, gnaw my bones
Savor the marrow
Life has deadlines
I've met another.

What Next?

ZACHARY WARD

I was seventeen, and I had no place to go, no idea of my next move. I was homeless, I suppose. I sat in my car a few miles from home, wondering. What just happened? What am I supposed to do next? How did I get here? After an hour or so, the floodgate controlling my memories began to open up. My mind quickly plunged in.

It was the middle of the night, and my parents had been fighting again. My father swung a kitchen chair at the wall. The chair shattered into a dozen pieces. My mother left, and the next thing I remember, my dad was taking us across town to my grandmother's to stay. He was trying to explain that he was leaving and didn't know when he'd be back. I tried my best to understand what he was telling me, but I couldn't quite get it. My younger brother and sister, Aaron and Theresa, ages three and one respectively, were in the backseat of the car crying. I was four years old.

It didn't seem like very long before my father was

"replaced." I wasn't ready for the change, and, in my mind, no one could ever take his place anyway—especially not Wayne. I had no intention of accepting him from the very beginning. I found out later that he had no intention of accepting me either. Wayne, my soon-to-be stepfather, made several comments to my mother and grandmother that he didn't ever want to take care of my brother, sister, or me. My grandmother eventually revealed that he especially did not like me. His dislike for me was very evident from then on. I was only five.

I hated Wayne, and I knew he hated me; it was the nature of our relationship. He gave my younger brother and sister hugs before bed, but I only received a scowl. I didn't want a hug anyway. He jumped at the chance to "discipline" any one of us, but especially me, probably because I learned not to cry, but to continue antagonizing him. When I knew he was angry, I would lure him into beating me repeatedly to prove that he couldn't hurt me and to make sure my

younger siblings didn't get hurt. He, on the other hand, grew more anxious each time to prove he could break me. In this respect we had the perfect relationship; we were meant for each other.

By the time I was twelve, Wayne had been thrown out of the house several times, usually in handcuffs. Sometimes my mom saw the light and kicked him out after he beat one of us. However, it was only a matter of days before he would return, with neither of them acknowledging any sort of problem. Things always went back to "normal." I became further enraged. My hatred for him grew each day, and soon it would be larger than my ability to contain it. I called my father often. He was two thousand miles away in California and of little help, but he did offer me the idea that "Wayne would get his." I had no clue what that meant coming from my peace-loving father, who usually managed to contain his temper since divorcing my mother.

Once, when Wayne was exiled from the house,

I was watching my younger brother and sister along with Wayne's two kids. Wayne barged into the house unannounced as if he owned the place. I had two strict instructions: (1) Wayne wasn't allowed in the house. If he came, call the police, and then call Mom. (2) He could not take the two younger children, Robin and Alex, anywhere. If he did, the same consequences as rule number one. Apparently, Wayne wanted to "take the kids out for pizza." I tried to remain calm and tell him that wasn't happening. "The kids are supposed to stay home until my mom gets back," I said. He wasn't hearing it. He began to get their coats, so I stepped between him and the kids. Before I knew what happened, I was pinned up against the wall with some sort of metal wall hanging imbedded in my back. The pain was excruciating. I couldn't move. Finally, Theresa leapt on him and pulled his hair until he let go of me. When he stepped away, I swung my fist with everything I had, hitting him square in the jaw, knocking his head into the refrigerator. Wayne decided to leave and call the police who arrested him for his efforts. I looked

at the dent in the refrigerator every time I walked by. I was thirteen.

It wasn't long before Wayne came back into the house, once again as if nothing was ever wrong, and things continued in their usual way. Since I had finally gotten in my first punch, my appetite for destroying him grew more fierce each day, but he outweighed me by nearly one hundred pounds, and I wasn't that brave. Yet.

Aaron and I got home around ten o'clock one night after our basketball game to find my mother and Wayne fighting again. I could hear things growing more intense. I went upstairs to investigate. The fight was on the verge of getting physical, so I calmly asked Wayne to leave. He ignored me, so I threatened to call the cops, thinking it would remind him of the past and make him stop. It didn't. He shoved my mom to the floor on his way to get at me. I retreated to the basement to get Aaron who wasted no time following me back upstairs. We were soldiers being called up. We had known this war was coming. *Wayne would get his.*

Wayne was told to leave several times, but it seemed he wanted this fight as badly

as anyone. He tried to use the phone, probably to make his routine call to the police, but my mom unplugged it, so he threw it at her. The phone missed her and shattered on the side of the kitchen cupboard. The always-silent Aaron calmly told Wayne that he'd be paying for a new phone. That was it.

Wayne headed toward Aaron, but I swung at him from behind before he got there. I hit him right where I wanted to: in the ear. I knew it would hurt. He stumbled, caught himself in time to grab Aaron around the neck, and squeeze as hard as he could. I began punching Wayne hard, and often, in the back of the head until he slowly released his grip. When he stepped away, he hunched over giving Aaron the perfect opportunity to redeem himself. He grabbed the back of Wayne's head and kned him in the face, shattering his glasses and nose. Wayne fell to the floor. We picked him up and dragged him outside, where I spit on him. I was sixteen.

As a result of this particular brawl, Wayne was kicked out again, this time by a court order. However, one day on my way to a friend's house after school, I saw

him and my mother talking outside their cars in a parking lot. I could barely contain my anger. My mother's promise that a divorce was already underway came up empty yet again. A few months later, I got home from school to find Wayne in the house.

He acted as if nothing had happened. I was amazed. I couldn't take it. I couldn't deal with him parking his car in *my* garage or sitting in his recliner as if nothing ever happened. I couldn't watch my mom kiss him and laugh at his stupid jokes. I didn't

want my "normal" life back. I was afraid if I had to fight him again I wouldn't know when to stop swinging. So I left. I had no idea what I was going to do, or where I was going next. I just got in the car and drove. I was seventeen. ♦

The Quilt

MARCIE PONDER

Pulled across Iowa like the thread of a needle.
An autumnal quilt of God's creation
and man's design spread out before me.
Variegated green and gold fields decorated
by ditches of yellow calico print and
dotted with knots of velvety green trees.
Blocks of corduroy soybeans and woven corn
stitched together by endless runs of fencerows
and power lines. Asphalt borders of gray and black
tacked on with yellow and white threads.
The Skunk and the Raccoon flowed like
appliqued ribbons, while wisps of cotton batting
escaped to the heavens.
A skeletal tree stands isolated in a barren field.
Disease has robbed the tree of its lush foliage
as it has also sapped you of your skill, strength,
and substance. Needles now pierce your
body instead of the cloth you once worked.
Your hands — a quilter's hands — rest
on a sterile bed unable to mend my tears.
You lovingly pieced together lives and lessons.
Stitched them with smiles and tears.
Colored them with memories and bound them by love.
Soon you'll lie beneath that awesome quilt
crafted by His hand as I lie beneath one stitched
by yours, ever thankful for all that has been sown.

Meta Mom

RICH WRIGHT

DAY 1:

I'm sitting at my writing desk. All around me are the tools of my trade: my notebook computer and strap, an inkjet printer, three reams of paper, a coffee mug filled with pens, pencils and highlighters, a loose-leaf notebook with fourteen dividers (one for each day I will chronicle). On the corner of my writing desk is a picture of my Mother, my Father and my sister, to. It was taken on mom's and dad's third anniversary, and mom, though it doesn't show yet, was pregnant with me. I'm writing my memoir. Memoirs were very popular a few years ago, *Angela's Ashes* et al, and I'm timing the release of mine to be ready for the next wave. ["Wave" or "waive"? Better look that up later.] I'm alone in my house. I look over to my bookshelves and see the volumes of instruction from my writing teachers: John Gardner, Anne Lamott, EM Forster, Umberto Eco, Northrop Frye. Some of them, I believe, have even written published fiction. I get a new book on how to

write each month from a book club. They're layed out so good that I can pretty much get all I need to learn by scanning the table of contents. On the top shelf of my bookshelf is mom's three books. Two are novels and one is short stories. They are held up on one side by a statue of Aristotle and on the other by a bust of Poe's raven. Somewhere is a book on grammar what Sis gave me for Christmas. I began it but I felt it strangling my creativity and sat it aside. I gave Sis a couple of my stories to read when she was here last summer, but she's never let me know yet what she thinks of them.

It's ten o'clock in the morning. I'm waiting for something interesting to happen for my memoir. I get up and flip my calendar to June. The girl for this month is laid out on a sandy beach and is waring a thong bottom and a silky bra top that shows off her nips. I think this picture will be pretty useful. And just as it's getting really useful there's someone at the door. Now I'm feeling extremely irritable

that someone's knocking. Well, whomever it is, that someone is in for a bit of my irritable unpleasantness.

I adjust the strap and walk carefully to the door and open it a crack. "Yes?"

"Alan?" says a woman with a tentative, questioning voice. "May I come in, Alan?"

"You may, but then again you may not," I say, wishing this day over so I can say said (the present tense makes me tense).

Then POOF!

DAY 2:

Wow! It's some kind of magic. I get my wish. Today is tomorrow. I can write in the passed. Plus I feel released ["relieved"? "relaxed"?], I'm mellow, so I can edit out yesterday's irritableness and edit in today's patience and carelessness.

Turned out, that woman at my door wasn't a woman at all; she was my Mother. "Alan," she said, "I've been knocking at your door for fifteen years."

"That can't be," I said, "cause I've only lived in this

house fifteen months."

"Sixteen months," she said. "That's a record. I've knocked at all your front doors. For fifteen years."

"You seen dad?" I said.

"Am I your Father's keeper?"

"I bet they think that's funny up there," I said.

"Not really," she said. "They won't answer the door, either."

"That's cause you've been knock, knock, knocking on the wrong door."

"Who sang that?" she said. "Was it Clapton?"

"No, mom," I said. "I'm pretty sure it was Simon and Schuster."

"Garfunkel," mom said.

"Right," I said. "What did I say?"

"You said Schuster, but now I'm thinking that Bob Dylan sang it first."

By then mom was inside, and she kept moving around me so she could peek at my screen. "You should be capitalizing mom, but in the case of Father, not," she said.

"Which case? Upper or lower? I get those mixed up."

"And that 'Father's keeper' stuff. I never said *that*. You made that up."

"That's my writerly

rite," I said.

"That's 'rite'," she said.

"Yes, it's my rite, and I intend to express it."

"No, it's not 'rite,' it's 'rite'."

"Oh, sure," I said. [Note: fix 'rite' and 'mom' and 'Father'.]

"You're getting carried away with the italics," mom said. "A little italics goes a long way. You don't need quote marks 'and' italics."

Well, I ignored that suggestion. Italics is cool. It's my writerly pejorative to use italics as I see fit. Irregardless of what my Mother might say.

"Ugh!" mom groaned. [Note: edit out 'groaned' and put in an apt facial description.]

"Quit reading my stuff," I said. I turned to keep her on the other side of my notebook computer, which was hooked to the strap and hung around my neck like a popcorn vendor's case of wears.

"It's 'wares'," she said, then added: "I'm just surprised you're writing."

"Why not? You think you're the only one in the family what can write?"

"'Who' can write," she said.

"I can write. Sis writes, to."

"She writes 'too'," mom said.

"Yes, we both do," I said.

"How is Sis?" she said.

"You should've been here last summer," I said. "Sis was up for a whole week."

"I was here," mom said. "I told you, I've been knocking for fifteen years."

"I never heard you," I said, "You know, you don't half to knock, the bell *does* work."

"'Have' to knock," she said.

"No, you don't half to. There's a bell, and it works."

She twisted her wedding band. I noticed that her fingers and hands weren't all arthritic and gnarled anymore.

"What happened to your hands?" I asked. [Oops, change to 'said'.]

"Well, I dipped them into the River Jordan," she said. She paused and her face turned three shades of red [Note: fix cliché]. Then she leaned close and whispered: "I went skinny dipping with Saint Pete."

"Mom!" I gasped, jumping back and almost falling over the coffee table.

"Well, why not? If your Father can get married

again . . . two times . . . I can go for a dip with a saint."

"Wow," I said, suddenly aware, "you look like you're twenty-five."

"I feel like it, too. Must be that Peter that did it. A miracle worker."

"That was Patty Duke," I said.

"No," she corrected me. "Patty was Helen Keller."

"Hey!" I said. "Let's go over and surprise dad."

"Think I should?" she said.

"Why not?"

"I've been dying to see the third Mrs Jones: Mrs Jones, Mrs Jones, Mrs Jones."

"We've got a thing going on," I sang.

Mom winced. She really *did* look young. Beautiful, to.

"Too!"

I'd been staring at that anniversary picture for so many years I'd forgotten what she looked like the last years before she past away.

"Passed!"

"So you've been 'dying' to see dad?" I said.

She gave me a look. She couldn't see the screen, but somehow mom saw everything.

"I'm going to clean this up," I said. "I'm just letting it all flow, now. Believe me,

when I'm done it'll be a work of art."

"No, it's not that, Alan," she said. She straightened her skirt, which was pleated and looked like something out of the fifties. "I'd be nervous seeing your father and his new bride."

"She's hardly new," I said. "She was pretty well used when he got her. I can't believe you never popped in to take a look?"

"I don't 'pop'," she said, "Besides, I've been—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," I said. "You've been knocking at my door for fifteen years. But you didn't say why."

"Because you keep calling out to me," she said.

"Huh? When did I call out to you?"

"I've heard you calling for me every day since I left. I kept knocking, but you wouldn't let me in."

Well, I couldn't remember any of that. Then I saw a tear on mom's perfect cheek.

"Let's go," she said.

"Yeah," I said, anxious to change the subject. I unstrung the PC from around my neck and gave it to mom. "I'll drive, you type."

"I never tried one of these."

"It's like an electric

typewriter," Alan said, "only you don't have to press the carriage return. It word-wraps."

"This is cool!" I said.

Alan started the car. He looked old. It's strange to see your baby with crows feet. He turned to back out of the garage and peeked over at the screen.

"For Chrissake, Mom," he whined, "don't go changing the point of view."

The house on South Martha Street was as I remembered it, although I could tell that without me there to remind him, Elwood had let repairs slide too long. The porch steps needed to be scraped and repainted, and the eave on the south side hung too low. Then there was the lawn, showing signs of grubs, and the silver maple in the side yard in need of a trim. Elwood did keep the hedge shaped nice, and it looked like he'd put in new windows on the upper story, which was a good thing—he was getting too old to be up on the ladder changing screens.

Alan parked the car in the driveway, and we went up to the door. He forgot to take the computer back, which was fine with me.

That boy never would make the effort to learn the basics. I was determined that when we got back to his place I would sit him down and make him learn, kidding myself, of course, since I'd never been able to get him to study when he was growing up, and now he would be grooved to continue in his same manner.

We went up the front steps and Alan rang the bell. Then he pushed the door open. "Maybe you should wait out here so I can go in and kind of prepare Dad to see you," he said.

I agreed and went over and sat on the porch swing. That swing brought back a rush of memories. I used to sit on that swing on summer mornings, with my spiral notebooks, outlining story plots and working up character sketches. There was a cardinal that whistled to me from the high power line across the street. I'd work out there until Jake, the milkman, drove up in his truck and delivered our two quarts. Then I'd go in and start breakfast.

Elwood was a personal loan officer at the bank. He didn't have to be in until nine, but it was still a struggle getting him up

and going each day. In the summer I let the kids sleep, so once Elwood rushed off to work I'd sit down at my Remington typewriter and pound out my thousand words. Then I'd be busy with the kids and the housework until it was time to start dinner. Elwood usually got home at six. He'd come into the kitchen, take me in his arms and kiss me like he was going off to war. It always made me feel flushed. Then he'd pour himself a whiskey and head to his easy chair to read the paper while I finished dinner.

Alan came back out onto the porch, and Elwood was right behind him. He looked almost as I remembered. The distinguished shock of white at his temples had spread, and I could tell by the slight bulge at his lips that he was wearing dentures, but he was still as straight and handsome as ever. Poor Alan. Why couldn't he have inherited his father's good looks in addition to his lazy restlessness. I never saw two men in such a hurry to accomplish nothing.

"Where'd she go?" Alan said, walking first to the far edge of the porch and looking into the side yard, then coming over next to

the swing. "She was here. I swear it."

Elwood shook his head in disgust and went back inside. Alan followed him, and I jumped up and ran in behind them before Alan could shut the door.

"Do you need more cash? Is that it?" Elwood said. His razor-thin white mustache twitched as it always did when he was annoyed. "Is that what this is all about?"

Poor Alan hesitated for a moment, then flopped down onto the couch. Elwood disappeared through the dining room. I heard the steps creak as he went upstairs. I wondered if *she* was up there. I had to see. When Alan reached for the remote and clicked on the TV, I set the computer down on the coffee table.

DAY 3:

When I woke up from my nap on dad's couch I saw my PC laying on the coffee table. But no mom. My battery was dead. I closed the lid and took it home. Now I sit here at my writing desk. I'm alone. I look at the picture of mom and dad and Sis, to. I wish it was still then and I was still warm and tucked

away inside mommy's belly. I connect the printer to my PC and click the print icon. Eight or nine pages spit out into the tray. I punch holes in the sheets of paper. I separate day one and day two and put them into the notebook under their respective tabs. I put the strap around my neck and go over to look out the window at the rain pelting down onto the deck. "Bang"! My printer smashes onto the floor. Busted to bits. I unhook the printer cable and reach down to pick up the printer. There, underneath, is the picture. The glass is all shattered. I put the picture back onto the desk. The printer I take out to the garage and dump into the trashcan. I consider taking the PC with me to K-Mart to buy a new picture frame and printer. Nah. Who wants to read about K-Mart? I look over at the calendar and Miss June calls to me. I'm shutting the lid.

DAY 6:

I still can't believe the crap my own Mother wrote about me. Not having my Dad's good looks. Poor Alan. Crap. Nothing but crap. Crap! Crap! Crap! What did you mean? Where did you go?

DAY 11:

I'm in bed. Sis is out in the kitchen fixing me lunch. She's been here two and a half days. She said my Step Mother called her and told her to get right up and take care of her little brother who'd gotten drunk and popped a handful of his Prozac capsules and got hauled to jail by the cops cause he was running naked around the high school track. First of all it was in the middle of the night, so what's the big flipping deal. Didn't the Greek Olympiads compete in the buff?

"Alan," Sis says. She has my soup and a sweaty glass of milk on a tray. "Put that down so you can eat."

"I can eat and write."

"You'll spill soup on the keyboard and ruin the computer. I'll bet you never made a backup of your work."

"I'm not hungry."

"Suit yourself." She sat the tray down on the bed beside me and left.

I can tell she's anxious to get the hell out of here and back home. She was all warm and Motherly when she first came up. But then I told her about my memoir. She said: "Well, keep *me* out of it." Well, *I* certainly intend

to. *I* never asked *her* to come here in the *first* place.

I did show her what mom had written. I asked her if she believed it was [should this be "*were*"?] true. "What is truth?" she asked [said, frowning . . . looking away . . . her eyes heavenward . . . said]. "Truth is truth," I said. "It's the opposite of untruth." "So you want me to say mother lied? Not that I'm going to humor your delusion." "What delusion?" That's when she started looking like she couldn't keep her eyes unglued from the tick-tock-ticking of the hall clock and get the hell away. So go, I thought. Whom the hell said come in the first, second or third place ["*win*", "*place*" or "*show*"], I thought. Get out of my humble abode. Adiós. Au revoir. Ood-gay eye-bay.

"Sis! . . . Sis!"

She opens the door. Her cell phone is pressed against her ear. "Yes?" she says, tipping the phone slightly away as if "*I*" was were am to be the receptor of her utterly totalitarly absolutely attention.

"What day is this?"

"It's June 11th. It's 12:45 PM. It's time for you to get the hell out of bed."

"That's what I thought, to," I said.

"It's 'too' and it's 'say' and if you don't close the lid to that damn computer and eat your soup I'm going to call your doctor and tell him to put you in the nuthouse. I don't have anymore time for this bullshit."

She leaves. I sit here thinking what to relate next and next and next. I sit and I type and I don't have nothing. My head stopped pounding yesterday. My mouth is still dry as dirt on a really hot day . . . bear dirt . . . picture bear dirt on a really, really hot, hot day [Note: don't really want all the commas but the damn computer can't figure out I really want to put the same word in a row two times]. Now the door flies open and bangs into the dresser and knocks over my statue of a Native American that I made in the first grade that mom liked and now it roles onto the hardwood floor and smashes into a million little brown jagged ugly fragments of his former self. She throws that damn grammar book at me and is wrestling to take my comsaf;ldfjas;lg;akjlsd. fsfdgjlsda

DAY 14:

This is it. The final installment of my memoir. My masterpiece.

My tour de force. It's a lucky thing I found my computer. Three days I've been searching. Sis always was good at hiding my stuff from me when she got pissed. So I'm finally sitting back at my writing desk with my computer. I tried using a tablet. It didn't work for me. I work as a pianist at a posh nightclub here in Sioux City, Iowa, so I type much faster than most and much faster than I can write—ninety words per minute. I was going to write that I live in Buffalo cause I want *The New Yorker* to serialize my memoir and they might not care about some Iowa story though mine has nothing to do with where I live at all and I could as well live in Manhattan as Morningside.

Miss June hasn't been doing it for me since I got well and Sis left, or was it the other way around that Sis left and I got well. I remember being sick a lot when I was growing up and mom would come in with the tray of chicken noodle soup and milk and crackers with butter. She would stick a thermometer under my tongue and place her cool hand on my cheek and tell me I didn't feel to warm. Then she'd say it was a good thing we caught this

in time, and she'd take away the tray when I'd tasted my soup and drained away a third of the milk, and she'd sit on the edge of the bed and deal the cards and we'd play Rummy while we both ate the buttered crackers. Sometimes she'd call the doctor in (this was back when doctors made house calls, something that seems quaint and old fashioned and countrified, but Dr Clark really did come knocking on the door and would sit down beside my bed and reach into his little black bag for the stethoscope to listen to my rasping chest, while mother stood behind him in her apron with a worried look on her face).

I must have done a word count once for each word in my memoir. My vacation is almost over and I'm no where near the hundred thousand words that it takes to make a decent-sized book that will sit up straight on the shelf next to mom's. My editor will have to switch to a larger font and double space. That might even add an air of creativity to my work that could put me in line for some literary award that I can show off to Sis (ha!). I picture my book with a green binding and a picture of dad's house on the dust jacket, with the picture

from my desk as an insert in the corner. I hope to get one of my writing teachers, maybe John Gardner (I know he's the best cause just about every writing book I've got lists him somewhere in the index), to write the introduction and I imagine an excerpt from the introduction could be on the inside front leaf of the jacket and on the back leaf would be the picture of me when I graduated from Harvard [or Yale or Princeton, maybe Stanford, less pretentious or old money] Oxford and a list of my major accomplishments. I can't decide whether or not I'll quit my job. There'll be the book tour from coast to coast and Oprah will have me on her show and review my memoir. And the women. Wow! Imagine the women who'll be after my sweat ass.

I was married once for a minute. Josey. Josey was a big girl with thick auburn hair and a green tattoo heart with the name "Larry" on her rear. We met at Harvard Oxford and moved in together and were together for ten years. I asked her to marry me a hundred times but she kept saying no. Then one day she said: "What the fuck. Why not?" and we drove to Elk Point, South Dakota and stood up in the courthouse and said our

vows. Then we drove on up to Sioux Falls to the Holidome for our honeymoon. Mini-golf and Ping-Pong and a romantic dinner at TGI Friday's. After dinner we went to the falls and walked down by the rapids and made out like teenagers on a bench until some old farmer nudged my shoulder and asked hadn't we oughtn't to get a room and I assured him we ought and we had. Then we went to a bar on Minnesota Avenue and drank martinis, cause it sounded like a classy think to drink on a wedding night, so that what happened or how we got there next I don't remember but we ended up at a tattoo place and I had "Josey" tattooed onto my ass and Josey had "Alan" tattooed in red over the top of her green "Larry." Then we woke up at the Holidome around two-thirty in the afternoon and showered together and I told Josey that the green and red tattoo on her butt looked like a damn Christmas reef. Well, that was the end of the shower cause she shoved me out and I hit my head on the sink and when I came too Josey was gone and she drove off in my car and I never heard from her again until I got the annulment papers two months later. I found out much later than that that her and mom kept

up writing letters to each other for years. I saw her way in the back at the funeral, but she hurried off before I could catch up to her.

Now how many words? Thirty-nine hundred and change. Close enough. So in summary and conclusion of my life to date and to wit, and naturally their will be a sequel if the demands of the women and of Oprah so warrants it, I had an interesting vacation, with a visit from my Mom and my Sis, and it was two weeks that neither of us, you or me, either one are likely to forget as long as we have my memoir to remember it by.

The End.

I gaze up at Miss October. I had quickly flipped from Miss July clear through Miss September, but that Miss October, her with the round pumpkins and long cornstalks behind her and she leaning toward me in her ample and low-cut bib overalls. Then I hear someone knocking but I ignore it cause Miss October's calling and I'm about to click save one last time.

"Bang"!

Damn! I can't afford another printer. ♦

Sober Cowboy

CLIFF THOMPSON

Sober cowboy
rides the trail.
Strawberry roan
swishes tail.

Herding cattle,
swirling dust,
along with ire
rises thirst.

Be two weeks 'til
they hit town.
Sober cowboy
puts spurs down.

At the End

RICK RECTOR

My life didn't come packaged with small print.
I can't return the unused portion for a refund.
or for store credit.
I don't want to return it.
I want to use it up
so I have to borrow more
at the end

Resurrection

MICHELLE JOLOUD

The night before his flight back to Russia, Igor was sitting in the kitchen when my father arrived home with a twelve-pack of beer. I was so wrapped up in the excitement of the past nine days that I hadn't given the situation of Igor being a guest in our home much thought. In fact, it wasn't until I overheard them conversing that I began to understand the magnitude of the situation.

I had brought home the enemy.

"Ivans. Did you know that's really what you are, now that you're sitting here on American soil? That's what you've always been to the good guys. Just a bunch of Vodka drinkin' Russkies that didn't know any better. We made it easy and just called you all 'Ivans.'"

I felt my heart drop as I reached the top step, hearing my father begin to chit chat with Igor in the kitchen. I sat two beers on the counter; my mind raced. Igor touched my hand gently before I let go of the Miller Lite and smiled. "Oh, my girl, thank you very much."

"You're welcome." I

felt my face grow warm as I quickly tried to think of a comment to defuse an explosive situation.

Igor offered me a can, "Would you like one, Meesha?" He never called me Michelle. After he explained that Russians always use diminutives and not birth names when addressing their "close people," my heart skipped a beat with each exotic endearment he created from my name. It gave me a message; I was thought of as his "close people."

"That's okay, there's more down in the fridge." I started to get really nervous when he started to stand up, ready to wait on me.

"No, really, I'm fine. Thanks." Igor sat back down, and I noticed my father looking out the window, trying to seem uninterested; his face was tense. My stomach twisted; I knew what he was thinking: Igor is weak for caring about me.

"So what'd you call the Americans, Igor?" I asked, trying to hide the fact that my blood pressure was rising as I strode on through to the living room. To stay and interfere

with my father's happy hour would not be acceptable. No females allowed. Reading a magazine in the nearest room would serve as my stakeout.

"The same as you call yourselves. Americans." He turned his head a bit, smiling with a curious expression as I glanced back over my shoulder at him.

My father cracked open his beer and forced a chuckle. "Yeah, makes sense. Let's see, besides Ivans we have the Gooks, the Krauts, the Whops, the Camel Jockeys, and those are just a few I can think of right off the top of my head."

"Well, sir, the Americans are very creative with their names, I think."

"That's right. Americans are good at everything we do, except for convincing the government that women don't have any business in, well, let me just say for now, combat situations. So what do the Rooskies think about women in the military?"

I could feel my stomach knot up when I heard *Russkie* change to *Rooskie*. The beer was starting to talk.

"Well, sir, forgive me if I am presuming too much,

but I think we may share a lot of the same feelings about the military, and perhaps females as well. I am in total agreement with you, sir. The military is a place for the man's mentality—do or die, in order to protect, which of course does not compare to the unique and essential intelligence of a woman. I am certain, sir, that you probably agree that the female should be held in a much higher position, a set above, in order to be admired, honored, and revered. Females have the intellect and instincts to enable humanity to survive—and men, well, sir, let's be honest, we have the capacity and instinct to gather, hunt, and to kill if we believe the situation calls for it."

I stopped breathing. Igor turned on his stool slightly and glanced into the living room with a quick smile. All that came to my mind as I waited for my father's response was: "Fire in the hole! Everyone run for cover." My father paused for only a moment, then walked over and sat next to him, shoulder to shoulder.

"So you guys don't grill over in the land of Vodka and snow . . . wasn't that what you were saying earlier, right?" His voice was almost pleasant.

I was dumbfounded. I stared at their backs; the magazine I was holding fell to the floor and startled me.

"No, sir, Russkies have no concept of the grilling. Maybe you would be so kind as to teach me, sir. I am always very grateful when I have the opportunity to learn something new. Even more when I can learn from a master."

"Well, let's grab a couple more Millers and the steaks."

"Millers, sir?"

"Beers. And then I'll take you out on the deck and show you how the professionals season and grill a perfect steak that I *gar run tee* will melt in your Rooskie mouth."

"Thank you, sir. I'll run down and grab a beer for you."

"For us. Grab four."

"Sir, I am afraid that if I have another beer I will not be able to eat your masterpiece."

"Too tough for ya? Do we need to break out the 'ol Voodka? Maybe a little easier on your stomach?"

"Thank you very much, sir, but to be quite honest, I am not too much of a drinker. I'll be right back with your beer, though, sir."

I headed downstairs to intercept Igor at the refrigerator.

He smiled when he saw me.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"For what?" He turned and hugged me. "Meeshenka, everything is just fine. Your dad is very friendly and kind to me, and he is having fun. Everything is fine. There is nothing to be sorry for. I am a guest in your parents' home, and he and your mom are so gracious to allow me to come and stay with you. We are going to have fun with the grill and then we'll eat. Come on, relax . . . he's happy and I appreciate that he accepts me into his company. Come on now, smile; everything is just fine. Would you like me to get you something to drink?"

"Yeah, like a bottle of wine." I tried to smile. Standing behind him, I wrapped my arms around his waist as he bent over to look in the refrigerator for a beer.

"Meeshenka, do you really want some wine? I will get you a glass."

"No thanks. What I want is for you to stop being my father's entertainment. What I want is for us to be alone. What I want is an education, job, and enough money so I can have my own home and not live with my parents. What I want is—"

"Meesha. Calm down,

my girl. Everything is fine. *Ti takiya krasaveesta.* My girl . . . everything is wonderful." Hearing his native language made goose bumps appear. Even without any understanding of their meaning, *his words* captivated me.

"I know you don't have any desire to cook, and you don't have to pretend like you want to learn how to grill. It will take my father fifteen minutes to explain why his cheap-o-plastic-dollar-ninety-nine grill lighter is the best in the world and then another hour for him to explain how to turn it on—like it is some top-secret mission. I don't want you to play his game."

"What game? Meshenka, what are you talking about? Your dad is being very friendly and sharing conversation with me. He's proud of his grilling and maybe his admirable plastic lighter, as well. Let's be thankful, please, my girl. Where is the harm?"

"Well, don't feel like you have to keep drinking. It's not bad etiquette in America to refuse a drink. You won't offend him and, if you do, he won't remember it in a few hours, anyway. The most he will do is call you a pansy-ass."

"Pan . . . what?"

"Never mind. I don't even want to be having this conversation with you right now. Our time is so limited and this shooting the shit grilling lesson is crap!" I felt my face flush again—how tacky. "Sorry. I just feel our time ticking away. It makes me nervous. We leave for the airport at six in the morning—eleven short hours away—five thousand mi—" I had to stop myself. The distance was more than I could comprehend or say. "And you don't have to drink." I turned toward the stairs.

"Meesh, in Russia it is very bad manners. I learned from my dad to take the first glass you are offered and then pretend like you are sipping it every once in a while. Let your host fill it a bit every so often, and you can get away with one drink all night long. It just became a little bit more difficult tonight maneuvering my way through beer. We don't drink straight from the can."

"Well, don't drink at all. You can say no. You're in America now, remember?" I clung to his belt loop as he started back up the stairs. "I'll be in my room; next bathroom break sneak away, 'k? You know how to be stealthy . . . right? KGB guy and all . . .

right?" He leaned back so my face touched his shoulder. Without seeing his face, I could hear his smile as he whispered.

"Operation—*get the girl, right?*"

"Did you lose your way to the fridge Rooskie? What happened to the beer?" My father appeared at the top of the stairs with his case of prized grilling utensils tucked under one arm. Igor quickly pulled away, leaving me with a burning sensation in my finger as he raced up the steps two at a time.

"No, sir, just a little detour admiring the awards and plaques hanging on the wall in the hallway. All of the shiny metals diverted my attention, sir. I feel myself so proud to be in the company of such a distinguished officer."

I watched as Igor handed my father the beer and they disappeared around the corner. I stood for a while at the bottom of the steps, listening to the genuine enthusiasm in Igor's voice as he commented on the impressive "hardware" as they headed out the door. They were on a mission. I walked to my room, trying to sort through my emotions.

The Cold War was far from over. ♦

Dining Room #3

ALEXIS SCOTT

They herd us in and we wait
sometimes half an hour, for supper
while antidotes for age
are delivered in tiny paper cups.

So, we stare at the pill-cart,
rolling down the hall
remembering hay-barns and beets
chickens in the yard.
What, in the name of God,
are all those pills for?

And speaking of God –
that goofy, God-damn nurse
tells me to take my pills with
peas and mashed potatoes.
But they're not any good,
canned peas never are.

Ah, but none of this matters.
My youth is lost and I
am hemmed in, at this table,
by the machinery of old age.
My tractor and tillage was traded
for the spectacle of aluminum walkers,
injection-molded Jell-O, and oxygen tanks
for breathing this high, thin air.

Here, nearing oblivion, our skin
bruises purple from the slightest jar
and tonight our teeth
will sit in cups,
chattering.

But, here, in this room
we never say a word
and like a morgue
it is unbearably silent.

Not lacking Not going Not growing

JESSI PLUEGER

What would it be to escape through
 a heartbeat through the trees at
 night in the park—I want
your branches around me
 tonight—squeeze the breath out
 of me—wrap *that* tight. Looking around
 at the dark but the street lights and
 the idea of people of excitement of
 being and doing and not having to know
 but knowing it will end at four
 a.m. so hoping and joking and laughing
 all the while while never looking up
 without a smile and dreaming and
 thinking how wonderful—to not be
 an adult but not be a child

between your mind

JESSI PLUEGER

rubberband banana brain
 is what I have
 that's what you claim
 fill me up w/a fruit loop cup
 and I'll let you sing that fable
 when I let you sing I get ugly things
 the scenes you create aren't stable
 don't speak your mind and I'll keep mine
 just the same
 rubberband banana brain

The Last Surprise

RANDY UHL

Mia knew she had to take it slowly. This wasn't something one jumped into without passing it through the old canoodle first. She had been burned before and it wasn't a feeling she wanted to relive. Stopping the hot water three inches from the lip of the tub, she watched the steam rise. She did this knowing full well she didn't have time to daydream. Jimmy would be by in less than an hour expecting an answer, and she was uncertain of what she would say. Despite constant reminders to herself, she couldn't help letting her mind fill.

There were so many questions and fears splashing around in her head that the queasiness couldn't help but ripple out to the surface. She wanted a sign, something to guide her and calm the waters. Then, as she tested the heat of the tub with her fingertips, her mind waded back to eighth grade science. For a moment, Mia pondered displacement and Ira Fleishman.

Ira was Mia's lab partner when she was twelve. She

remembered he was Jewish. She remembered he had to sniff everything, and she remembered he had the nasty habit of always putting his hand out, palm up, on her chair just as she was about to sit. Her mind floated back to nasty Ira and junior high experiments.

The assignment was to fill a glass beaker with water and one by one drop in metal orbs. This, of course, couldn't happen until after Ira had sniffed them all, thoroughly, which creeped her out. Being felt up one too many times, Mia needed to be vindicated. Jumping as if her pants were on fire, she pointed and shouted, "Ira Fleishman is sniffing his balls! Ira is a ball sniffer!" The class laughed. No, roared, Mia thought, and then he cried so hard he peed himself. After that, Ira was known in the halls as the Ball Sniffer. Even years later, when she was a senior signing Ira's yearbook, she noticed that at least on three occasions he had been addressed as "The Great B.S."

Finishing the experiment by herself, she watched as the

liquid washed over the side of the glass cylinder. This memory got Mia thinking. Was displacement only relative to water? Could it happen to other things, softer elements like the mind or the heart? And if it did, if two people were to come together, what would spill over when there was no room left? Would one have to sacrifice part of oneself to coexist with the other? Would the weaker of the two be forced to give something up? For Mia these were only more questions. This could not be a sign, Mia thought. Nothing that could be traced back to Ira Fleishman could be a sign.

The ring of the phone jolted Mia out of her head and back into the room. The sound was sharp in the near empty house, and it was just like Mia to climb the stairs, fill the tub, and undress without bringing the portable. She thought for an instant of dashing out the door, sans robe and slippers, to catch whomever was on the other end, but decided against it. The steam from the water warmed the room, as well as

her skin, and to be slapped with the cool air from the hall was an awakening she hoped she could discover in a more subtle way.

Mia guessed it was her mother calling to convince Mia not to marry Jimmy. That was a call the machine could listen to and even at that, Mia doubted if a box of wires and screws had the patience to endure her mother's ramblings. She half expected to find the answering machine dangling over the counter in a tragic suicide, swaying by its cord.

Joyce, Mia's mother, made it very clear why Jimmy wasn't the right man for her daughter. Joyce didn't hate Jimmy, but had distaste for him, the way she had distaste for pickled herring or key lime pie. She thought his personality too bold and that he overpowered others. Mia, on the other hand, liked that about him. At parties and mixers she could dive under his bravado and remain out of sight.

"Sweetie," Joyce had said over brunch, "what you have isn't marriage material. Keep your options open." And before Mia could interrupt her, stop her from saying any other dreadful things, she continued. What

fell from her mouth sent Mia reeling back to her thirteenth birthday. That was the year Mia wanted a three-speed Schwinn with glow-in-the-dark pedals. She instead received the "birds and bees" talk and a hardcover copy of *Are You There God, It's Me Margaret*.

Joyce went on, "This doesn't mean you have to throw the baby out with the bath water. You can still see him, have that 'sex thing' with him. Just don't commit. Mark time until someone better comes along," she paused then added, "if they do." Without skipping a beat Joyce finished, "Would you like a mimosa?"

Mia excused herself twice during that meal, once to vomit and once to call Jimmy. Both efforts were fruitless. Not only did she have the dry heaves, but her cell phone had no reception.

After brunch, Mia lied and said she had errands to run. She could not face a lengthy cab ride with her mother. She helped her mother into the yellow taxi. Joyce turned to Mia and said, "Honey, you have to kiss a lot of frogs." Without finishing, she gave the driver her address and he drove away. Mia was left standing

there, speechless and no one to tell it to.

As quickly as the phone started, it stopped. Mia entertained the thought of giving a moment of silence for her departed answering machine, but remembered her fleeting time. With one hand on the chair, she lifted her left leg, craned it over the tub's side and positioned it above the water. Using first her heel, where the skin on her foot was the thickest, she dipped it into the still steaming wetness. Gritting her teeth she kept it there and centimeter by centimeter, breath by breath, lowered it until it touched the porcelain bottom. Frozen, Mia stood as the heat stung her tender skin. She was afraid to move, afraid to create waves. For a second she really thought she would jump out, abandon tub, but the pain subsided and her skin numbed. Next came the other foot. This time Mia steadied herself with the other hand on the towel rack and proceeded with all the same motions until she was standing in the biting water.

What does my mother know? Mia thought, as she stood, skin reddening. How great was she at marriage? Mia's parents had separated

twelve years prior. "Not divorced," she would explain to Jimmy after his first meeting with Joyce, "but separated, because just like marriage they couldn't commit to a divorce."

Mia realized it was her turn to commit. She must either sit down or step out. Lowering herself, she felt her face cringe as she converged with the molten water. She didn't just flinch, but actually cringed. Her face collapsed in on itself. This made her think of the old woman dolls whose faces were made from dried up crabapples, the kind that were peddled at traveling craft shows. She bet if she had a mirror, that would be exactly how she looked. Somehow making that face made the temperature more bearable.

Once she was seated in the tub, thighs and knees on fire, she found herself experiencing two very different temperatures. Her lower half burned beneath the surface while her upper half now felt cold and jealous. It was disturbing to be between two opposite extremes. So, with a swinging, cupped hand, she scooped the water toward her to create a small tidal wave of steaming water. It

crashed against her breasts, neck, and chin. She inhaled so quickly and severely that she swallowed a bit of it too. Maybe that wasn't the best idea, Mia thought, but at least now she was all one temperature.

Taking a deep breath Mia began to slide down the back of the tub. She had to be careful. Once her upper back got the slightest bit wet she could slip under the surface like soap from a baby's hand. Using her arms she lowered herself slowly. The water rose and she prayed the three inches she left would be enough. Plugging her nose with one hand, she leaned back until she felt her head resting flush against the white bottom. She did not move. The sounds of the world twisted under the water.

In the shallow depths, Mia continued to think. She recalled the heated arguments her parents had when she was younger, how they would drown each other with insults. She did not want that. Mia had set up a pretty nice life for herself. Her career was taking off and the house was paid for. If she was to let someone slip into her space, she might have to give something up.

There has to be something good, she thought, some reason to take the plunge. Jimmy's loud, she admitted, and he is clumsy as hell. There is no way he would have sat through brunch with my mother without reaching across the table with his spoon and digging her eyes out. Under the water Mia smiled at the thought. She wondered if being eyeless would make Joyce change her mind, not about the marriage, nothing could do that, but about that "sex thing." I'm guessing after that Joyce-a-roo might just have yanked that "sex thing" idea of hers off the table. Not expecting it, Mia laughed hard, making her come up for air. After the giggles subsided she decided to give the water another chance. Plugging her nose again, she went under.

Eyes closed, hearing only her amplified heartbeats, she waited. Her long hair, like seaweed, danced across her neck and shoulders. It tickles, she thought. She once contemplated cutting it—it was forever in the way. The feel of it on her shoulders drew her back to the first time she and Jimmy bathed together. It was just a shade over a year ago.

It was their six-month anniversary when Jimmy showed up unexpectedly to clean out her gutters. That was his gift to her. Any other girl would have kicked his ass to the curb, she thought, but Mia saw more romance in gutter cleaning than paying someone fifty bucks to cut and de-thorn a dozen roses.

Joyce, on the other hand, did not see the romance in it at all. Stopping by the next afternoon, she casually asked Mia if Jimmy remembered their anniversary, and if he did, did he bother to get her anything? Mia had felt the need to be vindicated. She ran out back to the garbage, where they had thrown the gutter waste, and picked up the biggest bag. She went back in and dropped it in the middle of the table. Spilling open, wet leaves and a small bird's nest bounded out into Joyce's lap. "Here it is Mom!" she shouted. "Do you like it?" Mia remembered laughing so hard that she almost pulled an Ira Fleishman right there in her pants. Joyce didn't ask for a second cup of coffee, but left early.

Jimmy was filthy after finishing the gutters. His hands were black with dirt,

leaves and stray bird feathers stuck in his hair. When she laughed at him he tackled her, wiping his palms up and down her neck and face. Before he could sit on her chairs or couch, she told him he had to shower. He came up with the idea that they bathe together. Reluctantly, Mia accepted. That was the first time they saw each other naked with the lights on. But there was something more, she thought. More substantial.

Suddenly, bolting up and breaking the surface, Mia wiped the water from her eyes and what she could from her ears. She had heard a noise. She knew she had. Silently, she waited, then heard it again. The ring of the doorbell, much like the phone earlier, cut the quiet. Disappointed and not really knowing why, Mia chose to ignore this as well. The only one she was expecting was Jimmy, and he had his key. If he didn't, he knew where she kept the spare. It wasn't under the flowerpot on the step where most people hid it, but rested above the framework of the door. Yes, that was clever of her. Joyce would be proud.

After what she assumed was the second ring, she did

not notice a third. Whoever it was went away. Time was short and she knew she had to stay focused. Wetting the washcloth that hung from the rack, Mia smoothed it over her skin. With small circles she washed herself. Suddenly it seemed familiar. There was more, she thought. How could she forget that? Her mind jetted back to the afternoon they bathed together.

Mia was reluctant at his proposition and remembered setting ground rules. She was thirty-six at the time but her self esteem felt much older. No thirty-six-year-old woman in her right mind gets naked in the afternoon, not in front of a man she wants to keep. She agreed anyway.

The first rule was that it had to be a bubble bath. The more bubbles the better. Bravado was good to hide behind, but in this case, bubbles were a girl's best friend. The second rule was that she got to get in the tub first. That would give her a chance to position herself properly, tuck things away that needed tucking. Mia also wet her hair down. The water made it seem longer and she positioned it, divided, to lay flat over her

shoulders and cover each breast. The "twins" were the first to go, she thought, referring to her breasts. Her ass stayed nice. You could bounce a quarter off that, but her boobs checked out around twenty-seven. Her laughter surprised her. There was a time they would look you straight in the eye. Now they complimented your shoes. She giggled even more at the thoughts in her head.

When she had readied herself, she asked Jimmy to climb in. Once inside the tub she tried to make small talk, anything to keep his attention on her eyes. Then it happened. "The more," she now whispered aloud. Jimmy put his forefinger up to her lips and ever so softly mouthed, "Shhh." Struck dumb, Mia stopped in mid-

sentence. Jimmy leaned forward. With both hands he brushed the hair back that was covering her breasts and tucked it away between her shoulder blades and the tub. She could not move. Her eyes grew wet and the spillover warmed her cheeks. Jimmy simply looked down at her breasts, then smiled. To her surprise, he kissed her hard on the mouth like he meant it. I know he meant it, she thought. Then he leaned back so hard the bath water splashed over the side. This is it, Mia thought, wading back into reality, I am thirty-seven years old. My tits sag. I'm not getting any younger and Jimmy is my last surprise. Mia inhaled severely for a second time, but for a different reason altogether. The waters calmed.

She hummed as she soaked now and didn't mind the splashing. What sloshed over the side became part of the towel she had earlier spread and would eventually join water again. When separated from oneself, Mia thought, we find our way back.

Standing, the cool air loved Mia's body dry. She pulled the plug and stepped out onto the damp towel. The robe, hanging on the wall, went untouched. Reaching for the door she looked back. Had I really been that dirty? The ring in the tub was the sign she no longer needed. Washed clean of confusion, Mia drew a lopsided heart in the steam on the mirror and walked downstairs naked. ♦

The Usual Haunts

RANDY UHL

In the dream
I notice first the air
iron-wet
and that I am barefoot always.
Past the markers is the gate
so I make my way
through what remains of my adolescent wars.
Careful as I am,
still I tangle in the flora and fauna
of my past.
But I am
almost there.

Then grows the music
demolition vines . . .
climbing up my thighs
encircling the small of my back.
The moon—
He's telling me to race
but
there are sirens in the graveyard
dressed as boys.
I know them by name
and I remember their honey
but move I can not.
My feet are planted in their song.
I am rooted in my fears
and the gate stands
forgotten.

In the morning
I wake with legs stiff
humming a tune I can't place.

A Christmas Call

MARCIE PONDER

Whirlwinds of snow swirled in the yard like the trails of cream in Paul's coffee. Over the rim of his cup he watched the fat flakes dance outside the kitchen window. He hoped the snow wouldn't cancel Christmas Eve service that night. It was the one church service he looked forward to each year. Reverend Thompson seemed to have only three kinds of sermons to pitch at the congregation each week—do more, save more, and give more. Paul caught the message every week, but he was tired of being told he had dropped the ball. The Christmas story though, that one was kind of hard to screw up. He liked leaving church with a sense of renewal and hope instead of the guilt he usually felt. The ringing phone interrupted his thoughts. He picked it up.

"Ho, ho, ho!" a voice said. "Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas to you, too," Paul said.

"Looks like we'll have a white one after all."

"Yeah. The weatherman said to expect 8 to 12 inches

by midnight." Paul had never been good with names, even worse with faces. Maybe if he let her talk he could come up with the name that went with the voice on the other end of the line.

"Glen's down at the barn trying to get the horse in and shore up that south door," the voice continued. "I wish he'd take it easy. He says he's feeling better, but the doc doesn't want him to over do it. His incision is still pretty red but most of the scab has worn off. He should be back up here soon. There's no toilet down at the barn, you know, and he's taking so many darn pills. One makes him nauseous and one binds him up. They've got him coming and going," she laughed.

Paul chuckled along with her. "That's too bad." Glen? Glen who? he thought. He had an uncle Glen, but he was 86 and lived out at Sunny Estates. Uncle Glen had no business being outside on a day like this.

"Bonnie and the kids should be here by lunchtime. I hope she don't bring that dog of theirs with them this

time. Last time the darn thing peed all over my new couch. I can't say anything to her, though. She's an emotional wreck since she left Doug. I wish she had listened to me ten years ago. I didn't like the looks of him then, and I sure didn't like the looks of him after he laid his hands on my girl. Glen don't know all the details, of course. I didn't want him to get all worked up on account of his heart, you know."

Paul gave a commiserating mumble. He wished his wife were here so he could pass off the receiver and the unknown caller to her. She was always better with names than he was. He was getting ready to admit his confusion when the voice cut short his confession.

"But we're going to have a merry Christmas, darn it. We've got a lot to be thankful for this year. Santa may not be able to bring much, but we've got each other. I picked up some toys for the grandkids over at Wal-Mart because I know Bonnie can't afford much, and Glen cleaned up Bonnie's old sled so they'll be able to

have some fun in the snow tomorrow. I picked up a turkey, too, so that's enough. Toys, turkey, and we're all together. Yes, sir, that's enough. Well, I'd better be going. I want to get a pot of chili on for lunch. It's been nice talking to you. You tell your wife Glen missed her pecan pie this year. But the doctors have warned him off the sweets, you know. Tell June I missed her pecan pie, too. And tell her I said hello.

Have a merry Christmas."

"You too." Paul smiled as he hung up. He didn't know Glen, and he didn't know Bonnie, and he sure didn't know Bonnie's mother. In thirty years of marriage, he couldn't recall his wife ever making homemade pie before. But he really did hope they would all have a good Christmas. He wished he knew their number. He could call them back—offer to bring over a pecan pie. It

was Christmas after all. One slice wouldn't hurt Glen. After pie he would invite them all over to the church for Christmas Eve service. He turned as the kitchen door opened. Stomping snow onto the rug, Clair, his wife, came in, her arms loaded with the groceries for Christmas dinner. He wondered if she had the makings for a pecan pie. ♦

A Ride in Asking Why

JESSI PLUEGER

Frightened
 in the corner
 Dark and
 wanting over
 over the wanting
 zipped up in
 up in
 the lack of reality
 and Jack - who doesn't know you
 believes you have no speciality
 thank you sir,
 may I have another?
 ... lover?
 love her?
 you should n't
 why why not
 feels like sucking all the lot
 monkey with the business that makes your
 monkey money
 so you feel lucky
 w/lack of sucki ness
 seeing the lava-filled clouds look pissed
 looking into his ear canal
 resisting & regretting the urge to yell
 so well

Poem for Monett

RICK RECTOR

Exhausted thoughts shimmering
 In lines of ink or pencil
 The generations have begun to fall away.
 I look at the Roman carnival I call my life,
 Own the Roman carnival I call my life.
 Pearls of light slam holes in the darkness.
 What was it you said?
 My smile looks sad and tired?

Nurturing Nature

MARCIE PONDER

Their naked limbs and tawny heads reach for the sunlight streaming through the window. It's odd how strangely beautiful they are standing along the ledge as if stemming the urge to jump. Some still glow with a verdant light, but the sun's brilliant rays fail to permeate the death and decay of the others. I attempt to cultivate a relationship with the worst-off. Lily, ivy, and fig, however, have all given up. They remain contained amid their companions, potted and parched. I call it my window garden. My family calls it death row.

"Mom, why do you like to torture poor, defenseless plants?" My son leaned over my shoulder.

"I'm not torturing them. I'm nurturing them, encouraging them to grow."

"Yeah, but I think if you treated us the same way you'd be arrested and sent to jail."

"Well, that wouldn't be all bad," I said, pinching a bit of soil from the potted fern and rubbing the dry earth between my thumb and fingers. "At least then

I'd have a better chance for privacy, I wouldn't have to cook dinner, and I'd have all the time I wanted to read." I turned and put my arms around his shoulders.

He hunched his back, but didn't step away. "We'd visit you every other Sunday."

"Gee, thanks!" I said and rubbed his head. "I love you."

"Uh huh," he said as he left the room.

I won't acknowledge my lack of horticultural skill to my family. They've never understood my desire to fill our home with flowers and greenery. I'm not sure they can appreciate how the body of the cactus gently cradles its delicate bloom. They laughed when I repotted a 3-inch seedling in a 10-inch pot. I told them, "I want it to know that I expect it to live up to its full potential." They laughed more.

I remember when my husband and I first suspected I was pregnant with our firstborn. It was early spring and I was late. Unusually warm winds

whispered for us to be outside. Having no one to answer to but ourselves, we grabbed our camping gear and headed out.

We set up tent, took a ten-mile hike, and toasted marshmallows. By the campfire, we discussed the possibility of a baby, faced a few fears, and promised to remember "us." I worried, "What if I'm as good a mother as I am a gardener?"

He put his arms around me and said, "What if you're not?"

"Yeah, but what if I never catch on to that 'nurture' thing," I said, into his shoulder.

He chuckled, "Yeah, but what if you do?"

"You're not helping, you know." I punched him lightly.

"I'll help you then, and I'll love you now and for always," he said. He really could be romantic when he wanted to be.

"If I am pregnant, I hope you planted that seed well and deep." He laughed and said he'd take care to check on it often.

That night we lay

beneath a blanket of stars by a stand of budding cottonwood trees and made love. I know our son wasn't conceived that night. But I like to think he was.

A week later it was confirmed. My husband sent me a Mother's Day card and flowers. It was March.

My daughter and I walk to the library occasionally. I looked once for books about gardening. They were under the call number 635, right next to the section on animal husbandry. I checked out a few texts—*1,000 Beautiful House Plants and How to Grow Them*; *The Color Dictionary of Flowers and Plants*; *The Green Guide to Herb Gardening*. My daughter carried her books and I carried mine, and we walked home together talking about everyday things.

I never got around to reading any of the books. I skimmed the table of contents of one. It seemed pretty basic, light and water, feed and prune. I hoped that maybe by just having possession of the books, even for a short time, the knowledge contained within would seep through the pages and I could absorb it through osmosis. I don't

think it works that way.

I took my houseplants outside one day near the beginning of summer. Fresh air and sunshine would be good for them, I thought. I stacked them neatly on the plant stand I had picked up at the garden store. I placed it just outside the kitchen window where both God and I could watch over them. African violets and English ivies, and those whose origin I was never quite sure of. I wanted them to know the directions their lives could take, see all of the possibilities in the trees and hedges outside.

Rain started late the next morning. I watched the storm clouds build outside our kitchen window, and I switched on the radio. The warning sirens went off a short time later. "The National Weather Service has issued a tornado warning . . ." came the announcer's voice.

"Mom," my daughter said, "should we go to the basement?" Her eyes focused on mine.

My son hurried around the corner of kitchen door, both hands on top of his head tangled in his hair. "What's going on?"

"I don't think there's anything to worry about, guys." I smiled at them both. "Let's go play cards." I grabbed a deck of cards, a flashlight, and a spare radio and led the way to the basement.

We set up camp between the laundry room and the furnace. None of us could remember how to play any card games, but we dealt the cards anyway. "What about Bart and Boo?" my son said, looking up at the stairs for the dog and cat.

"They'll be okay," I said while reaching for the radio. I knocked over the flashlight in the process. It blinked once and then went dark. The batteries in the radio were shot, too.

"But Mom, they're up there all alone," my daughter worried.

"Okay, okay. You two stay here; I'll be right back." I went back upstairs, calling for the animals. The dog was in the kitchen, his tail wagging anxiously. The cat was in the living room, his whiskers spread wide in mid-yawn.

Streetlights had come on outside while rain and hail pelted the windows. Streams of water blocked my view of the plants outside. Oh, well,

I thought.

The package of batteries I had bought a few weeks before was empty, but the electricity hadn't gone out, yet. I grabbed the kitchen stereo, picked up the cat, whistled for the dog, and started for the basement once again.

The dog's claws clicked down the stairs in front of me. I knocked the cat in the head with the stereo when he twisted in my arms. With a hearty push of his back legs, he launched himself back up the stairs. I swore under my breath while rubbing the scratches on my chest. Good riddance.

When I returned to our basement shelter, the kids had remembered how to play *War* and were busy slapping cards onto the floor between them. My son looked at me over the edge of his glasses, "Sorry, Mom. Only two can play *War*."

"That's okay," I said. I turned on the radio and tuned the weather reports on low volume. I sat beside the stereo and leaned back against the dryer. The dog rested his head on my knee.

Thirty minutes later we heard the all clear. The rain was gentler, and the sky had turned a funny shade

of green. We went outside. While the kids splashed in puddles and did a funky kind of rain dance, I inspected my plants. It seemed as if nature itself had acted as executioner for my death row inmates. Pots were askew and stems were completely stripped. One pot contained only a thin muddy soup. It *was* almost lunchtime. Time enough for a grubby sort of food fight before we ate. I picked up the pot, slipped it behind my back, and walked towards the kids.

"**B**lood, fire, some kind of disaster. Natural or manmade," I said giving last minute instructions to the kids. "In your case kid-made. These are the only reasons why you should call. We'll have Dad's cell phone." My husband and I were having one of our infrequent date nights and we trusted the kids enough to be on their own for a few hours. I slipped on my jacket and headed toward the door. "We'll be home about ten o'clock. Lock the door behind me. Love you."

My husband was waiting in the car. He didn't get out and open the door for me, but I didn't expect him to, either. I was

lowering myself into the car when I saw a yellow, long-stemmed rose on the seat. "Aww..." I couldn't stop my descent and sat right on top of it. "Ahh..." I pulled the flattened flower from under my fanny. "Thank you," I leaned over the gearshift and gave him a kiss.

It had been a while since we'd had a night out. In fact, the movie we'd seen on our last night out was already on video. We could afford to go out more often. Nights like these just required too much effort—kind of like housework, grocery shopping, and sex. Well, maybe not so much sex.

But it was our anniversary. We'd been together for twenty years, married for seventeen. That's more than half my life. He likes to joke that if he'd been convicted of manslaughter, instead of getting married, he would have been paroled by now. I tell him he's not that lucky.

There wasn't much conversation on the drive to the restaurant. I twirled the yellow rose under my nose while my husband drove. We listened to NPR.

Silence continued to grow at the restaurant. We struggled to find something

to talk about other than our jobs and kids. We ended up listing the household appliances our marriage had outlasted—two refrigerators, two microwaves, three washing machines, three dryers, innumerable toasters, countless irons, et cetera, et cetera. It was more difficult to recall those things we hadn't replaced—an alarm clock, a crock-pot, some camping gear.

We considered it a success. Not just the evening but also our whole relationship. We decided to take inventory in another twenty years. Divorcing and dating were just too complicated nowadays, anyway.

I took the rose home and put it in water. A few days later it fully blossomed then wilted over the edge of the vase. I refused to take the blame.

Hyacinths and amaryllis, maidenheads and philodendrons—one could write volumes about their fragile foliage and vibrant variegations. Metaphors and similes abound. A fertile mind could go on in dramatic prose about how the lifeless leaves of the spider plant look like the dreadlocks of

a steel drum player or how the tear-shaped leaves of a string-of-hearts rain gently down over the edge of an azure jar. Maybe later.

"Mom, can Morgan come over after we eat?" my daughter asked at the lunch table.

"Not right now," I said, "maybe later."

"Maybe later," my son said, "is mom speak for 'no, never, nada, not a chance in h—'"

"Watch it!" I said, striking the classic stern-mom pose and pointing at him. He grinned.

"And 'we'll see' means 'ask again later, but probably not,'" my daughter echoed her brother's expression. The conversation began to sound like a script from one of those family sitcoms.

"I'll think about it' means she hopes we'll forget about it, and she won't think about it until we ask again," my son said. He smiled around the half-chewed bite of hotdog in his mouth.

"I guess' means she doesn't really want to do something," my daughter said, scooting her chair closer to her father. "But she'll do it anyway and be grumpy about it the whole time."

My gasp should've

signaled my husband to remain quiet. But he didn't.

"I'll have to talk it over with your father' means she has to tell me what the right answer is before I can talk."

"It does not!" I said, rising from the table and planting my hands on my hips. "There are just some things that we need to discuss as a mature, adult couple."

"Just like we discussed having kids," he smiled. "You said you'd make sure they were taken care of and cleaned up after and walked every day."

"That's what I said about getting a dog!"

"Oh, yeah. I forgot."

My son spit milk across the table and my daughter choked on a potato chip.

I shook my head at them and couldn't stop the smile that broke across my face. I turned away from the giggling trio and threw over my shoulder as I left the room, "I've got a headache. I'm going to lie down." The laughter grew.

I've never tried to learn the Latin, more formal, names of the plants in my collection. Besides not being able to pronounce them, it would suggest a kind of

familiarity that I wouldn't be comfortable with.

The spider plant sat on the counter looking more brown than green. I plucked at one of the brown leaves and it loosened easily from its grip on the soil. I tossed the leaf into the garbage along with a handful of others. I reached for the scissors and trimmed the brown tips from some leaves, picked lightly around those that still had color, and held onto the hope that life could overpower death. There was more green than brown when I finished pruning. I rotated the pot. The poor plant did look pitiful, but I wouldn't admit that to anyone. It was still alive.

"Mom, how do you spell deciduous?" my son asked.

"D-E-C-I-D-U-O-U-S," I answered.

"Mom, what's seven times eight?" my daughter asked.

"Fifty-six."

The kids sat at the table doing their homework. I'm a wife, a mother, an employee, and a student. It seemed everything I did was some kind of home work. At the moment, I had to think about

starting dinner. While my kids' pencils scratched and their heads hunched over their schoolbooks, I started checking the cupboards.

"How do you find the area of a rectangle?"

"Length times width," I said from behind the refrigerator door.

"Mom, what's lint?"

"It's those little bits of fiber and fluff that stick to my pants with the dog fur that I try to brush off when we're walking out the door," I said raising my voice over the flow of water in the sink.

"How do you spell anti disestablishmentarianism?"

"A-N-T-I . . . what . . . why in the world would you need to know how to spell that?"

"I don't," my son said.

"I just wanted to see if you could spell it."

"Eri . . . I mean, Matthew!"

"What's the matter, did you forget my name, again?"

"No, you're Matthew William Ponder," I said, waving a can of green beans at him, then at his sister, "and that's your sister, Erin Meredith Ponder. At least I didn't call you by the dog's

name this time." He nodded his thanks.

"Mom, I got something in my hair," my daughter said.

"What is it?" I dropped the can opener back into the drawer.

"I dunno. I think it's gum."

"How on earth did you get gum in your hair," I said walking to the table.

"I got tired of chewing it so I put it on the end of my pencil. I guess I forgot about it and stuck it behind my ear."

I picked lightly at the hair-encrusted gum, gently removing strands that weren't fully embedded in the sticky wad. Scissors would have to be used to remove the bulk of it, but I wasn't going to tell her that. She'd just witnessed my pruning skills. I'd have to reassure her that the shortened locks could be covered up. I couldn't help the little bud of laughter escaping my lips.

"What's so funny?" she turned to look at me.

"Be happy you're not a plant." And the laughter blossomed. ♦

Poetry Is Not For Loudmouths:

A COLLECTION OF HAIKUS AND OTHER SHORT POEMS

Finger tipped with fudge,
Licked clean by caressing tongue—
Caloric foreplay

—Marcie Ponder

Overripe tomato
Hijacked from the garden floor
Splats on sister's butt

—Marcie Ponder

Lithium puts out
Always giving electrons
A chemical whore

—Katie Harder

Pizza getting cold
Cheese congealing on the crust
Stinking up the room

—Katie Harder

Evolution is
Survival of the fittest
I am a goner

—Katie Harder

I see the fly floating by—telling
me I shouldn't cry . . . all
the while—bugging the hell out
of me. But that's okay. I'm
not sure I wanted the
hell in me in the first place.

—Jessi Plueger

I love to catch your dirty looks
to lick the soul of your shoe
to expect only what you do.
what I do.
what do I do?

—Jessi Plueger

girls are calmer people
because they sit down to pee

—Jessi Plueger

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RICH WRIGHT is from Sioux City and graduated from Briar Cliff with a degree in Business Administration. He writes and takes writing courses from Morningside in his spare time. This is Rich's first publication in *The Kiosk*.

Editor's Foreword

CATHIE STANGL

About a week into last year's *Kiosk* I thought to myself, "What have I gotten into?" I had this panicked epiphany: "I don't know what I'm doing." It was the blunt truth, and I was sure it would result in disaster. I had the same epiphany two weeks into this year's *Kiosk*. Once again I thought this would be devastating. There were points this year when I thought there wouldn't be a *Kiosk* at all. I was certain I would be responsible for the demise of Morningside's 66-year-old literary magazine. But of course *The Kiosk* is here.

Most of the time I am not quite sure why I wanted to edit again, or why I sometimes feel a little depressed that this is my last *Kiosk*. If something keeps you up at night, often frustrates you beyond measure, and complicates your life more than you think you can handle, why in the world would you do it again, let alone *ask* to? This phenomenon is not unique to me. It is a phenomenon of writers. It is also a phenomenon of

parents. Somehow they forget the pain of childbirth, the sleepless nights, all the spit-ups, and dirty diapers, and they have another baby. It must be some sort of defense mechanism. If writers couldn't forget all the struggling, frustration, cursing, and drinking they went through to write their last short story, there's no way they would ever try it again. Maybe we all suffer from selective amnesia. Or maybe we're all just a little bit crazy. Either way, we're sitting here with new stories in a new *Kiosk*.

I am pleased to say that like last year's *Kiosk*, this one is a little bit different. Last year we had some physical changes along with the addition of the creative nonfiction genre. This year, our changes are not as noticeable to the eye, but they are still, at least in my opinion, exciting changes.

Rich Wright's story, *Meta Mom*, is a work of metafiction—fiction about fiction—a sub-genre that has been growing in recent years. I am always excited to see pieces that try something

different or are inherently unique. This piece has managed to fill both of those criteria, and I could not have been more pleased when I heard from the judge that it had placed first in our contest.

Marcie Ponder's piece, *A Christmas Call*, is a short short story. This sub-genre's name is quite deceptive. Writing a short short story is not as simple as chopping off two-thirds of a short story. It is difficult enough to cram characters, conflict, suspense, and resolution into a short story, never mind trying to do all this in less than two pages. But this piece has, like Rich's piece, managed to fill its own lofty goals.

We have also printed a page of Haikus and short poems by various authors. The title of the section, *Poetry is Not for Loudmouths*, is a single line Jessi Plueger submitted and I fell in love with it instantly. I think that all too often the shorter poems are forgotten about because they are small and complicate layout issues. But, to me, Jessi's phrase says that even two or three lines

can be powerful, funny, or moving—even the little guys are important and deserve a voice.

Jessi's line also reminds me of all the unheard voices in *The Kiosk*. As always, this magazine sits here because of many people who do work unseen by the reader. I must first and foremost thank all the contributing writers, and my editors, who were all much more patient than I had ever hoped for. A special thank you to Rick, who didn't complain in the beginning when we started off reading potential submissions for six hours straight, didn't complain when we ended with a copyediting marathon, and didn't complain about anything in between. All he ever asked for was more coffee. Also a thank you to Marcie Ponder, who is, without a doubt, the mom of the English department—she can write, she can edit,

and she can fix the zipper on my coat on a day when everything is going wrong and breaking. Thank you to Dr. Steve Coyne, who asked "What's the difference?" when I brought him two different layout designs. He's always been good about bringing me back to reality. A huge thank you to Dr. Bill Deeds for making it possible for us to buy a much needed layout program. He has saved many different people, including me, hours upon hours of work and frustration. And of course a very appreciative thank you to Sheila Partridge, who does more for this magazine than direct art. She speaks truth about life and art with natural grace—even though she doesn't know it—and talks me out of having a nervous breakdown about once a week.

Also thanks to our judge, Jim Brummels. I always hope the judge's job is tough—it's

the one thing I wish to be difficult about *The Kiosk*—so I was practically ecstatic when he was done judging and wrote in an email, "This was tougher than I thought it'd be. (It's no complaint to find a bunch of good stuff.) I'm still going back and forth." There is no greater compliment a collection of pieces could receive.

My hope, now that this new *Kiosk* is going out into the world, is that our readers will have the same problem as the judge. I hope, that like me, no one can pick a favorite piece, but instead see the effort and care that was put into each. I hope that I have put in enough effort and care to allow these pieces to show off—to let them be magical and insightful, serious and funny, and everything in between. And my last hope is quite simple: I hope our readers enjoy the 2004 issue of *The Kiosk*. ♦

