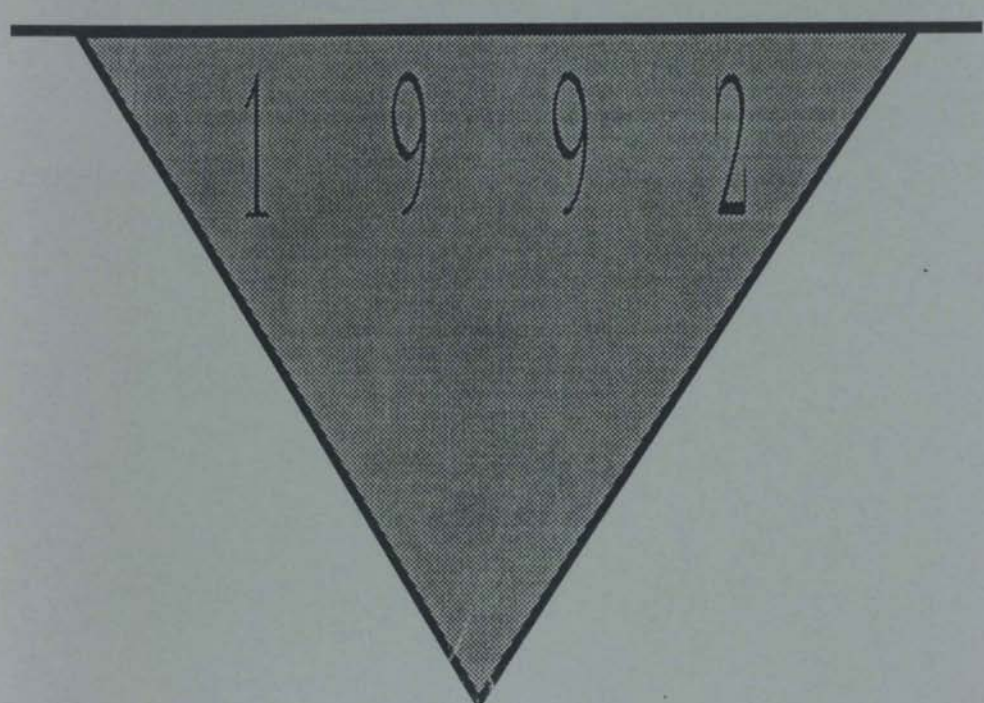
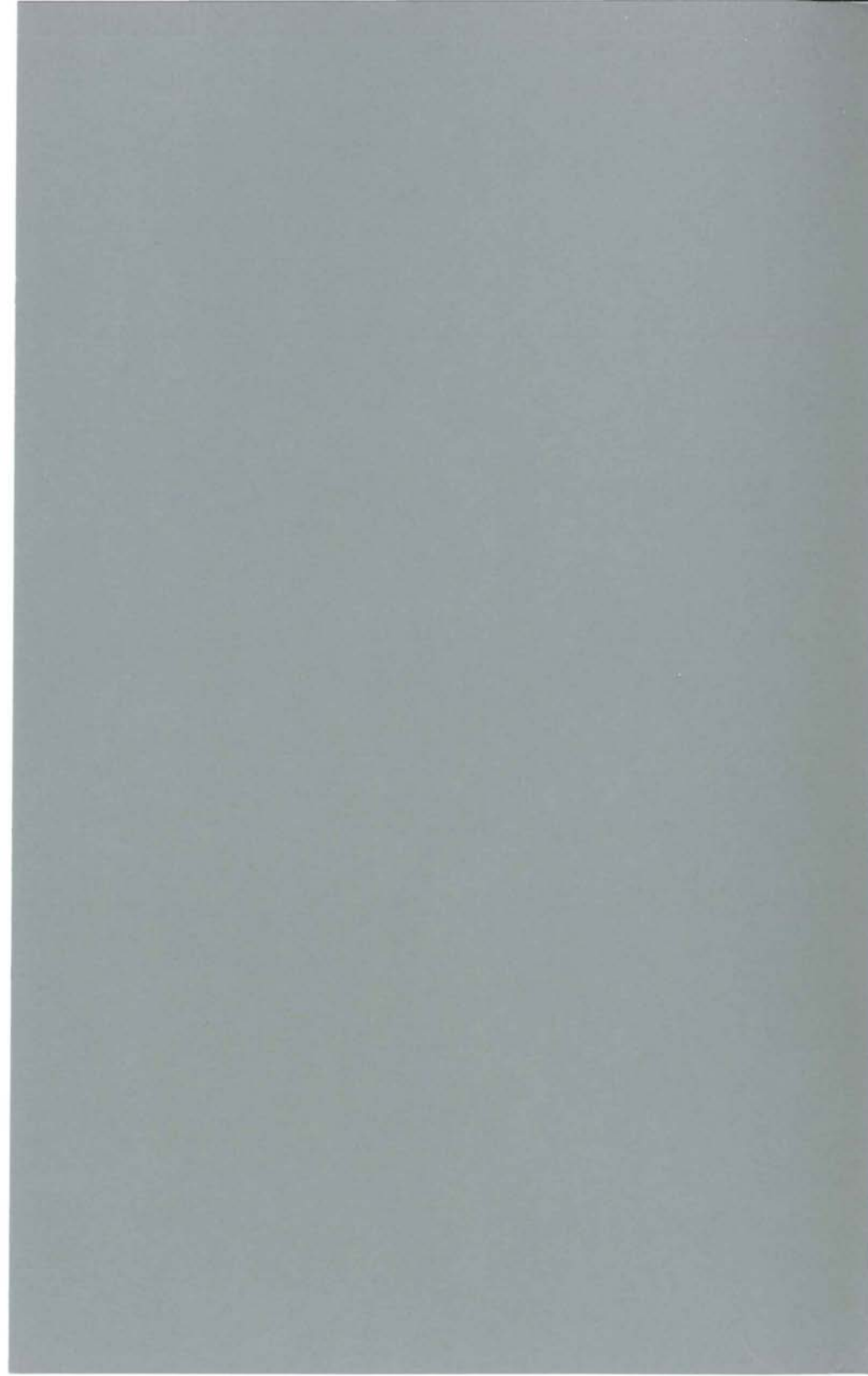


KIOSK





THE KIOSK

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CONTEST WINNERS

FIRST PLACE

Jean McGinnis for "Boxes"

SECOND PLACE

Juline Thornton for "Looking For A Story In All The Wrong Places."

THIRD PLACE

Merrill Swartz for "Rebirth"

HONORABLE MENTION:

Xin Ye for "The Self"

Jane Eckerman for "The Trial of Purgatorus"

ABOUT THIS YEAR'S JUDGE

William Kloefkorn, was named Nebraska State Poet by the state legislature in 1982. He has published over a dozen books of poetry including, *Alvin Turner as Farmer*, *loony*, *Uncertain the Final Run to Winter*, *Let the Dance Begin*, and most recently, *Dragging Sand Creek for Minnows*. His poems have appeared in many periodicals including *Prairie Schooner*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Georgia Review*, *Ironwood*, and *Carolina Quarterly*.

Kloefkorn was instrumental in initiating the Nebraska Poets-in-the-Schools program, and he served for several years as Master Poet. He is currently Professor of English at Nebraska Wesleyan University.

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JEAN MCGINNIS

Boxes

The clock on the wall goes tick-tock and I climb into my box. My daddy's coming home soon.

I pick up my crayon and add a friend to my cardboard. The blue animal is a bird with furry ears. Trees with purple leaves give places for my bird to land.

The clock on the wall goes tick-tock. I'm playing in my jungle. My friends are warm and furry. The monkeys run to meet me and put their arms around my neck.

The animals all clap as I climb on my rocket ship and fly over the clouds. The stars whiz by my window.

The clock on the wall keeps going tick-tock, tick-tock. The front door opens and slams behind him. In my box I bow my head and see the mountains as I fly above them. My friends—the lions, snakes, and bears—are all too tiny now to see. I hear him walk across the kitchen.

I don't hear the clock on the wall anymore. Ahead is Saturn, Mars, and the one my teacher said was Uranus. Where should I land today?

My daddy comes and picks me from my corner box. The planets fade and my rocket ship is out of gas.

"Billy!" he screams and I try to remember what I did bad today. "Why wasn't the door locked? I've told you a million times to lock it when I'm gone. Why don't you ever listen to me?"

I smell his breath as he pulls me close. "I'm sorry, Daddy!"

"Damn kid," he says and throws me down. The lions and bears have gone away. I'm glad they can't hear me scream. My face hits the coffee table hard. The sharp edge cuts my lip and makes it bleed.

Tomorrow when my friends ask I know what I'll say. I'll tell them I crashed on the moon. It doesn't matter, though, because they never ask. Teachers always ask.

"Go get me a beer."

I turn to the kitchen. I'm going to have to be careful I tell myself. Tomorrow is November 12. There's a big red X on daddy's calendar. He got real mean this time last year. Of course I didn't know how to read the calendar then. The year before that...

I grab the beer and concentrate on popping it open with one hand.

Careful not to spill, I walk back and hand it to him.

A sticky taste in my mouth reminds me of my lip. I go to the bathroom and rinse my face with water to wash away the blood. It won't stop bleeding. Then I remember what mommy used to do.

I take a washcloth and hold it on my lip until it stops bleeding.

I walk back to the living room. There's an empty can beside him and another in his hand.

As he drinks, I shuffle my stocking feet around the living room. When I think I've gathered enough electricity, I touch my cat as he sits on the windowsill. I laugh as he jumps and runs away. Poor Charlie. I'll have to apologize later and give him an extra bowl of milk.

"Come here, Billy."

He's done with his beer. I think my stomach is full of tar as I walk to him. He's sitting in his favorite green chair with the threads hanging from the arms.

He starts to touch me in that way I hate. I try to hear the clock ticking on the wall, but his sounds fill my ears instead. I try to see the tops of mountains, but I can only see the dark because my eyes are shut.

Leaving me on the carpet he gets up and goes to the bathroom. I lie there and cry—like a girl.

I remember the night before she died. I remember when she was still alive he used to come in the middle of the night and wake me up.

I get myself off the floor and put on my clothes and try to forget. I still see her though. She walked into my room and saw us.

I wish I could forget. I hear the faucet in the bathroom and know he's washing his hands. He always washes his hands. He did that night too—after the screams and the bad things I heard him say.

The clock on the wall goes tick-tock and I climb into my box. I lay down on green leaves that fell from trees in my jungle.

I hear him pass by my box. I peek out at him from a crack. He's looking out the window—the curtains are open now.

The chair across the room is empty. It was her chair. It's where she used to sit and wait for him till he'd get home. Sometimes it was real late. I know because their screaming always woke me up. If he got home real late he would leave me alone.

I can see his brown hair and the ring on his finger. I think I see tears on his face. It must be the shadows.

I lie back on my leaves. Sometimes I wish my lion would eat him up.

I told mommy that once and it made her cry. She told me to love Daddy.

I hear the ticking and it's my elephant's heartbeat as I ride him through my jungle kingdom. I remember her long red hair. It was so nice to put my face into when she hugged me goodnight. Her voice was sweet. "Puff the Magic Dragon" was my favorite song and she sang it to me every night. Sometimes, when daddy was home I could see him stand at the door and listen too.

A bear cub comes to join me on my bed of leaves. I put my arms around him and tell him not to be afraid of the dark. Then I sing to him. "Puff the magic dragon, lived by the sea..."

When I'm done with the song I feel sad. I can't sing it as good as her. When I look up there's my daddy looking into my box. I should have been quiet. He must really be mad. I've never seen him look like this before.

"Goodnight, Billy."

"Goodnight, Daddy."

He mumbles something. I think he said, "I'm sorry."

I fall asleep beneath the stars. A bird calls in the night. "Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" it sings and I sleep on.

I wake up in the morning when the light shines in my face. In the bathroom I look in the mirror and rub the sand from my eyes. I'm going to school today. The cut isn't very bad and the bump is small.

I smile and comb my hair straight down. I wonder if there's show and tell today.

I go to my bedroom to dress. The coldness of the room makes me hurry. Daddy doesn't heat this room because I don't like to sleep here. The walls are too white and the pictures on the walls are scary. There's old pictures of old people who can see me through their wrinkled eyes. Daddy says they're his grandparents. I don't care who they are—I hate 'em.

There's a picture of me and my daddy too. He's helping me fly my big blue kite. I remember how fun it was and how I cried when it got stuck in a tree. He took me out for ice cream then—a banana split with extra hot fudge.

There's a picture of my mommy in her favorite white dress. My throat gets tight like I can't breathe so I turn and run out of the room. That day was terrible. I knew it was my fault she died. When he told me it was my fault—I already knew. I got her mad at him and then she died.

The excuse is on the kitchen table. "Please excuse Billy for yesterday's

absence," it read. "He had a sore throat. Sincerely Michael Martin."

I close the front door quietly behind me. He wasn't awake yet. He took the day off last year—he must be doing it again.

"Hey Billy!" I hear a yell from behind me as I walk down the sidewalk. A girl with bright red cheeks is bouncing up behind me.

"Hi, Jackie."

"You sick yesterday?"

"Yeah," I remember the note, "Sore throat."

"Too bad. Well guess what you missed," and she tells me about the snake Rudy Barber brought for show and tell.

"Would've liked to seen that," I say. "How long was it?"

When we reach the playground at school, there's six graders on the jungle gym throwing snowballs at the little kids. One hits a kid in the face. "That'll teach you—you little turd."

"Let's go get those guys!" Jackie says. Her eyes shine. She's mean for a girl.

"Can't. Have to go turn in my pass."

"Okay. See ya," and then she runs across the playground and I walk to the office.

The day goes slow. No one brought anything for show and tell. Mrs. Steinhaus talks about geography. I watch the clock. The second hand goes around again. It gets slower every time and then it's hard to see. I hear my friends calling to me. They're waiting at the end of the jungle. They tell me to follow them into the jungle farther than I've ever been. I go and see lots of new things.

"Billy?"

The trees above me open to let the sun shine on me and warm my face.

"Billy?" A hand is shaking me. I look around. The other kids are all gone.

"I was just wondering if you were going to go to recess or sit and dream all day."

"Sorry, Mrs. Steinhaus." I get out of my desk.

"Sit down a minute, Billy."

She sits in a desk beside me. She looks silly in such a small desk. "Why weren't you in school yesterday?"

My mind races. What did the note say? "I had a sore throat," I smile.

"You had a sore throat last week, too. Don't you think that's odd? Billy, how did you get that cut on your lip?"

"I fell down," the answer falls out of my mouth. She asks more questions, questions about things. I try to give the right answers, but I get confused. The excuses won't stay straight in my head.

After a while she stands up and tells me to wait here. When she's gone I hear the humming of the fish tank in the back of the room. Our class has two goldfish—Nannette and Wilma.

I hear footsteps in the hall—the click of my teacher's and the boom of someone else's. My eyes stare at the doorway and my heart keeps pounding.

Dr. Wharton walks in behind her. He's the man we talk to when there's something wrong with our heads. I hope none of the other kids walk in while I'm talking with him.

They sit beside me. He looks even sillier than her. His fat belly hangs over the desk. "Billy," he says with a wrinkle running through the top of his round face, "we're worried about you."

I look at the tile on the floor. The squares stretch out across the room. He asks me questions. They make my stomach feel full. I wonder how he found out these things. I answer no to everything. I can't let them know how awful I am. They would tell all the other kids. They would all hate me.

Dr. Wharton sighs as I tell him no once more. "We know what's going on, Billy. It's obvious the way your face is always bruised. We've got to stop this. We're going to make everything okay, Billy. Then you won't have to lie anymore." He tells me what they're going to do. They're going to call the police and not let me go home.

I look out the window. He's going to kill me. He's going to know it's all my fault. I ask to use the bathroom.

"Of course, Billy," Mrs Steinhaus says.

I force myself to walk slow out of the room. When I'm far enough down the hall, I take off. I've got to warn my daddy.

I run the whole way home. I find the key in its hiding place and open the door.

He's still in his bedroom. I take a deep breath and knock. "Daddy?" I can't hear anything.

I open the door. "Daddy?" I flick on the light switch. He still has the same suit on. "Daddy, I have to talk to you." He's lying on his stomach

with his head tuned the other way. His shoes are still on. Again I call "Daddy?"

I shake his shoulders. He's stiff. I look at his face. It's all blue. I scream. I grab his hand. It's as blue as his face and cold. "Daddy! Daddy! Wake up!" I scream and know he's not asleep.

I drop to my knees and hold his blue hand. I touch his hair and look at him. I sing a song, but my voice is not as pretty as hers.

His gold ring is lying on the nightstand. Beside it is a brown plastic container. The inside is empty. Just like when I found her.

"I'm sorry Daddy," I whisper as I sit on the edge of the bed. I lean to kiss his cheek. He's so cold. It feels like my heart is being squeezed. "I'm so sorry." I can't see him very well because my eyes are filled with tears.

Two years ago I called the police. I was in kindergarten and my teacher had taught me those three numbers. Today I know they're already coming. They won't get him now, though. They won't get him now.

I climb into my box and look and look but can't find my friends anywhere. My jungle isn't there—only silly pictures on cardboard.

I lay down. My bed of leaves is gone. I only feel the hard floor and the cold cardboard. I listen for the clock tick and wish my mommy would come and sing me to sleep. ■

JULINE THORNTON

Looking For A Story In All The Wrong Places

I live in an ovarian offensive. A uterine universe. Four flakey females under one roof. I am the mother of two 13-year-old daughters born nine and one-half months apart (my ex was a beast), who are seething and simmering in hormonal soup. The fourth member of our matriarchy is Fifi, our foul-breathed poodle, but I guess she doesn't really count since we had her fixed last month.

I sit at the kitchen table in our crowded little apartment (that the landlord likes to call a townhouse so he can get more rent) and survey the disaster around me. In the corner, the garbage is spilling right over the top of the bag, and somebody has kicked over Fifi's chow bowl. There are piles of dirty dishes in the sink. Empty pop cans, overflowing ashtrays, and unopened bills litter the counters. The remainder of some take-out spaghetti I picked up on the way home from work is smeared all over the table where I am trying to work.

I am too busy to clean it up. I need a story and I only have three weeks to come up with one. I am a blank. Write, rewrite, revise, rip-up. Help! I wipe the spaghetti sauce off the corner of my paper and start over.

In the next room, I hear my daughters, Melody and Harmony (my ex was a musician), fighting over the remote control. I holler in at them to turn down that damn TV, and knock off the fighting, and they come running in screaming at each other and at me.

"She took the remote, and I had it first."

"Yeah, but you put it down."

"Just for a minute cuz I was gettin a drink."

"Hey, ya snooze ya lose."

"Can it!" I jump in. "You two are old enough to handle this yourselves. Now get lost; I'm trying to write."

I am exhausted. I am always exhausted. I work two jobs and take one night class each semester at the University where I have been trying for eleven years to finish my degree. You would think I could get some help out of my girls. They know how beat I am, how much I have to do, how important this class is to me, but do they help?

My friend Dani Sue comes over. "Get a look at this dump," she says. "Girl, you need to get out of here. Let's go have a couple drinks and try to find some men."

"Can't do it," I tell her. "I need to write. I need an idea, I need some peace. How about taking the girls off my hands for a couple days?"

This doesn't go over too well. "What you really need, Sandy, is a night off. That story can wait, honey. There's a whole city full of men out there just waiting to buy us drinks. Now that the World Series is over they got nothing else to think about."

I look at Dani Sue. She looks fabulous as usual (she doesn't have any kids). She's wearing that fluorescent green skin-tight mini dress that nobody her age should be able to wear, and it looks super on her. I hate her. I look down at my grubby blue jeans and baggy sweatshirt with the spaghetti sauce on the front, and I hate me. I catch my reflection in the toaster and cringe at the bags under my eyes, and the lines in my forehead, and the way my hair is sticking out from the ponytail I put in ten hours ago.

"Mom," Melody yells in from the other room, "Fifi just hacked up a hairball."

"Well, clean it up," I tell her.

"I'm not touching it," she says. "You clean it up."

"Let's go," I tell Dani Sue.

We walk into this little country western bar, and I start to think this might not be such a bad idea after all. I might just stumble on a story in a place like this. Dani Sue likes to go to country bars because she says she has a thing for cowboys (and whips and spurs).

We find a table in a crowded corner right next to the band where the music is so loud we can't hear anything, and we settle in. The smoke is so thick it stings my eyes, and black tears run down my face. I can hardly see the big old cowboy walk toward us, hitching his pants up over his sagging belly.

"I saw you two ladies walk in," he tells us, "and I says to myself, I says what the hell (excuse my French, ladies) what the hell, I'm gonna go talk to them. So, either of you ladies married, engaged, or otherwise attached?"

"Yes," we both lie.

"Well, do ya fool around?" Then he throws his head back and laughs like a hyena.

"Get lost," Dani Sue tells him.

And I say wait a minute wouldn't he like to stay and have a drink with us.

Dani Sue kicks me under the table and says to him, "I said get lost."

After he leaves, muttering something under his breath about us passing up the best thing we could get all night, I say to Dani Sue, "What did you send him away for? You said you wanted free drinks."

"He's a loser," she tells me. "he says excuse my French."

"Yeah, but he's got character. He has a strong voice. I could use him in my story."

"I'm sick to death of you and that story. It's all you think about. Relax, enjoy yourself. Work on your story tomorrow," she tells me.

"I'm sorry," I say, "I can't seem to get anywhere. The girls won't leave me alone, they won't let me write, they won't lift a finger..."

"Just smack their ass. Tell them to go to their dad's."

"Forget it," I say. "I'm just a little obsessed."

"You're not obsessed," she really starts letting me have it now, "you're possessed. That story's like a demon got its hands around your soul threatening to take control of your life. What you need is an exorcism so you can start having a good time."

I tell her to mind her own business, and when I want her advice I'll ask for it, and maybe if she had some goals in life besides getting drunk and getting laid, she'd understand.

Lucky for me, Dani Sue is not very sensitive so she just shrugs her shoulders and goes off to find someone to dance. I pick up my purse and leave. There are no stories here.

I walk in the back door of my house. "Smells like a dead cat in here. Did you take the garbage out?" I ask my daughter.

"I told you I'd do it, and I will," she says.

"Do it now! Today!" I tell her.

"Loosen the bone, Wilma," she says.

"Just what the hell is that supposed to mean?" I ask.

"It means take a chill pill. Lighten up. You're going nuts, mom. It's only garbage."

"I need to write, and you know I can't work in this mess," I tell her, and by now I am really losing my cool. I stomp up the stairs, climbing over piles of clothes on the way to my room. I grab some paper and sit down on my bed to write. Nothing. I switch on the TV and begin to watch some goofy documentary about religious ceremonies.

The voice on the TV tells me about a ceremony of the Dakota Sioux, "crying for a vision." The Indian goes into the mountains for four days and four nights. During this time, an animal visits the Indian and gives him a vision, a direction for his life. This animal becomes the Indian's friend for life and gives the Indian wisdom.

Perfect, I think. I can do this. I can cry for a vision and receive my story. Maybe it will come from a wise old owl. It will be a profound story, it will enlighten people, it will give direction. Maybe it will come from a fox and be a crafty, cunning story. Or maybe it will come from a leopard and be a dark, mysterious, Edgar Allen Poe kind of story. It doesn't matter what kind of animal brings it, it will be the best story ever. I'll be famous; I'll be rich; I'll be able to hire a maid.

The voice on the tv brings me back to reality. It tells me that the Indian doesn't get any food or water for the entire four days, and I say, "Forget it. Christianity is just so much easier."

I say a quick prayer, "Oh please God, give me the perfect story," and I fall asleep.

The next evening, after a grueling day at work, I come home determined to find a story. I walk right by my kids who are submerged in some after-school TV special. I step over the bags of chips and empty Hoho wrappers and think to myself that one of these days, I'm going to start watching what they eat.

I begin to write about my friend Dani Sue, cross it out, write about my boss (the jerk), tear it up, and end up staring at a spider crawling across the ceiling. I hear noise from the kitchen and it gets louder until I can't concentrate. I yell, "knock it off, girls." The fighting continues and I walk into the kitchen. "I said knock it off. I'm trying to write."

They pay no attention to me.

"Oh yeah," Melody says to Harmony, "Your butt's so big I've been thinking about building a house on it."

Harmony reaches out and grabs a handful of Melody's hair, and they are down on the floor trying to kill each other.

I grab the closest thing to me, a dirty frying pan, and shake it above my head. "There will be no violence in this house!" I tell them.

They laugh at me, which really ticks me off, and I say, "What, you got nothing better to do than fight? I'll give you something to do. Clean this place up. That damn meatball's been under the table for two days. It's so disgusting the dog won't even eat it."

After I feed the girls a late nourishing supper of Big Macs and fries (which I justify by giving them milk instead of soda), I send them to bed and sit down to write. I think to myself, what do the great writers do when they need a story? I think of Hemingway and Dostoevsky and it dawns on me: they drink. So I go to the fridge, and the only thing I have is some beer left by Dani Sue a month ago. I hate beer, but figure I'll try anything.

I pop open a can, plug my nose, and take a long drink. I wait for my vision. Nothing. I drink some more and pretty soon it doesn't taste so bad. Two beers later, I feel pretty good. I start wishing I had a man around right about now and decide I better take my mind off of that, so I write:

She ran her fingers through his dark curly hair. He let his hand fall from her shoulder and brush across her breast as he unbuttoned her blouse.

Stop! I better drink some more. I down a couple more cans, and I am drunk. Rip-roaring, snot-flying, drunk-as-a-skunk drunk. I am not a fun drunk, I want revenge. I am mad at Mr. Peck, the dumb-butt teacher who gave me this assignment.

"You wanna see some writing skill?" I say. "How 'bout I dazzle you with some alliteration."

Professor Peckerhead positively pisses me off with his plea for polished, impeccable, prose.

There. Perfect.

Suddenly I don't feel so good. I am getting really warm, and the room is beginning to spin. I strip down to my underwear and lie on the cool linoleum of the bathroom floor. I must fall asleep because the next thing I know, I wake up and it's daylight, and the dog is lying with her head on my chest breathing right into my face, which is just enough to send me over the edge. After I sacrifice last night's supper, I call in sick, and stumble to my bed.

I sleep till about two in the afternoon and get up with only an hour till my kids get home from school. I have wasted another day and have just a little over two weeks left before my story is due. I start writing something less-than-wonderful for the sake of writing. My kids come bounding in from school.

"Mom, take us to K-fart," Melody says.

"Not right now," I answer, "I'm busy—you'll have to wait."

"We need to get a protractor for Mr. Popenheimer's class," says Harmony.

"I said not now. I'll take you later."

"We have to go now. Poopie Popenheimer said we need to get it tonight."

"If Mr. Popenheimer wants you to get that protractor tonight, he can take you himself. I'm not going to have time. Better call your grandma," I tell them.

"It's not Grandma's job," says Melody. "You're supposed to take us. You never do anything for us."

I send her to her room, and tell her to pick the junk up off the stairs on the way up, and then I say, "And did you even make your bed today?"

"Did you make yours?" she asks.

"That's not important," I say, "You better watch your mouth, young lady. Who's the mom here anyway?"

"That's what we've been trying to figure out," says Melody.

"Just what the hell is that supposed to mean?" I ask.

"It means that all you care about are your damn problems and that damn story. All we ever hear is 'Shut up girls, I have to get this story done.' 'Clean up this place girls, I have too much to do,'" Melody mimics me.

"You don't even care about us," Harmony says (now they are both attacking me). "You're with us for two hours a night, and then you're not really with us. You're working on that damn story."

"Look, you rotten little shits," I say, "you better knock off that swearing. Who told you that you could talk that way in this house?"

"Dad's right," Melody says, "you're no mother!"

"Oh yeah?" I'm really pissed. "Well, if you think your Dad's so great, maybe you should go live with him."

I need to get out of there and fast. I need to breathe. I slam the back door on the way to my car. I pop in a tape and console myself with a little Simon and Garfunkel. "Many's the time I've been mistaken and many times confused. I've often felt forsaken and certainly misused."

I sing the blues all the way over to a little coffee shop about two miles away. I'm feeling kind of sick, and I realize I haven't eaten all day, so I go in and order a burger. I look up and see Mr. Goldsmith, my first writing teacher, sitting at the counter. It's been years since I had Mr. Goldsmith for a teacher. I see him from time to time in this little town, and he always makes me feel peaceful. He calms me down. So I go over to talk to him.

Mr. Goldsmith looks like a character out of one of his short stories. He has a head full of white hair and a long white beard which blends right in with his chalky skin. The only signs of color are in his crystal blue eyes (that always see more than you want them to), and a little yellow caffeine

stain on his huge, white mustache. He is forever chewing on a pipe that he never lights, yet the cherry tobacco scent follows him from room to room.

I explain to him how much I want to write. I explain that I am taking a class right now and I am dead-ended. I explain that I can't get an idea. "My kids will not leave me alone," I tell him. "They won't back off and give me some space. They won't take on any responsibility. All they do is make extra work for me. If I could just get rid of the kids for a while. Just long enough to come up with a story."

He nods and begins to talk to me in his slow, methodical way. "Once when I was very young," he says, "I attended a reading by a very famous author. We made eye contact during the entire reading. I could tell we were really connecting."

"Yeah, yeah," I think, "Come on, Come on, give me a story. Give me an idea."

"After the reading, I went up to meet her," he continued. "I told her how much I wanted to write. I had only been married about six months at the time, and my wife was making it very difficult for me. I explained to this woman how my wife was always bothering me to take her places and spend time with her. I couldn't get through to my wife that I needed to be left alone. I was looking for sympathy from another writer, and do you know what she said to me?"

"What" I say, and by now I am bored to death, and wishing he would hurry up, and wishing I had never started this conversation with this old man who was obviously becoming senile.

"She told me, family first, writing second, everything else after that. You see, Sandra, if you don't put things into perspective, there will be no stories. You will have another day and another idea, but you won't always have your children. Some day they will grow up and be gone, and if you don't start to live now, you won't even be left with your memories."

He hasn't told me anything I don't already know— just things I don't want to think about. I still don't have a story, but I have received my vision. It doesn't come from a wise owl, a crafty fox, or a mysterious leopard. It comes from a woolly old sheep dog.

As I drive home from the coffee shop, I think about my children, and my situation. I begin to write a story to end my story:

She ascended the stairs to her children's room and thought about how she had neglected them. It would not happen again. She would give up her writing and become the

perfect mother. She stepped over piles of clothes to the bed her daughters shared. She stroked their faces and climbed on the bed to lie down between them. She heard a sleepy voice say, "Get out of here mom. What are you doing?" "I'm fulfilling my vision," she said. "You're so weird," the little voice said. She smiled, "I love you too."

Yuck! Too sweet — give me a cavity kind of crap. Too unbelievable. Too happy ever after. It won't work.

She ascended the stairs to her children's room. She climbed over piles of clothes to get to their bed and stroked their little faces. She had neglected them and knew she would continue to neglect them. She needed to make a decision, and either way, her children would resent her. She had received her vision, and even though it was not the one the old man had intended, she knew what she must do. She walked to her room and picked up the phone. She dialed her ex-husband. "Joe, I need you to take the kids..."

Too mean. Too selfish. I hate her. She isn't redeemed in the end. She can't give up the kids just because she wants to write.

I arrive home and ascend the stairs to my children's room. I climb over the piles of clothes to get to their bed, and touch their faces. I know I have neglected them and promise myself I will try to do better. I go to my room and find that Fifi has eaten the meatball after all and puked all over the only decent bedspread in the house.

When I go to the kitchen to get a rag, I find a note on the table: Mom, there isn't anything for breakfast. Go to the store.

I realize the resolution for my story is that there is no real resolution. What is, is. My children will continue to need me, Fifi will continue to be a pain in the butt until she goes to that great chow factory in the sky. Life will always be chaotic. But I must learn to slow down and enjoy it—to somehow take time for my children, and take time for myself. I have learned what the sheep dog man knows: there are no stories if you're not really living. ■

MERRILL SWARTZ

Rebirth

At first there was nothing. No sensation. No feeling. The only awareness Bren had was that of time passing. Time once again became a concept with meaning to him. Then the pain started. It burst on him like a wave crashing into a fragile sand castle. The shock of awareness was too much for him. His screams were finally silenced only when his consciousness blinked out. The automatic restraints which had kept him from hurting himself caught him as his body went limp.

Bren was not sure how long he had been out when he came to again. This time was not as violent. The computer had analyzed his reaction the first time, and had formulated the right mixture of stimulants to bring him back to life gently. The restraints relaxed as the computer monitored his heart rate and determined that it was in a safe range. At length Bren gathered the strength of will to open his eyes. He was greeted by a blinding brilliance. Slowly, a combination of Bren's eyes adjusting to their vastly different conditions and the computer adjusting the lighting level downward brought Bren's vision into focus on the ceiling above him.

Bren sat up. He noticed that his muscles seemed to work adequately, but there seemed to be a noticeable delay between his brain giving commands and the muscles obeying them. They were, in a sense, having to relearn connections down to the basic neuron. He gazed down at his naked body. Its contours were familiar to him. He recognized the heart-shaped birthmark to the left of his belly button. These few familiar details did little to dispel the realization that he recognized nothing else, including the bed he had been lying in.

Bren's eyes took in the room around him. He had no recollection of it, or anything in it. He was lying in a large rectangular grey room. The room was much longer than it was wide, so much so that he couldn't clearly see the ends of it. All around him were rows of metal cylinders which were each about eight feet long. Complicated tubes and wiring was sticking out of them at all sorts of angles. The rest of the room was clearly built with functionality in mind as the walls were bare. Bren had always thought that sterile utilitarian techno-environments like these lacked a soul. It was only when Bren said aloud, "Where in all the hells am I?" that he noticed

the absolute silence that had reigned supreme.

That silence was broken again when a woman's voice answered him, "I assume you are referring to where you are. Don't worry, loss of memory is a common aftereffect of deepsleep, but it's only temporary. You should regain your full capacity soon."

Bren's eyes whirled around. He could not locate the voice's source. He swung his legs out of bed and began walking around on the plush carpeted floor, his legs taking awkward short steps. "Who are you? Where am I? Are you a computer? If you are, I demand you tell me what is going on."

"You must relax. Your heart rate is going up again." The voice had a syrupy smooth quality to it. "There, that's better. It's almost back to normal. Back to your questions: Yes, of course I'm a computer. If you would like a name, I've been called Ronni Jean with an "i". Here's the visual component I've been using most recently."

On the wall directly in front of Bren a screen materialized. A familiar face appeared which mouthed the words he heard. Bren searched through his jumbled memories until he found a name for the face. It was a stylized portrait of the 20th Century U.S. President, Ronald Reagan. The fact that he could remember an obscure fact like that, but couldn't figure out what was happening to him did not reassure him.

"Ronni Jean" continued, "Of course, you can call me whatever you decide to; I'm not picky. I should probably let you know what is going on. You are on board the *Challenger*. We are approximately 2.3 light years from Earth on the way to New Gaea. This is the eighteenth year of the journey. You are to be the pilot of the ship for the rest of your life. Do you remember any of this?"

The curtains that had been drawn around Bren's memories were beginning to be pulled back. The enormity of what Ronni had just said was working its way into his consciousness. He sat down hard in the bed that had kept him cryogenically frozen for the last 18 years. Any energy he had possessed was seemingly drained from him as his mind struggled to take it all in. He began to remember the mission he had been sent on and its importance.

His voice faltered as he said, "If I'm remembering right, I wasn't supposed to be activated for at least another 15 years at the earliest. Tina should still be piloting the ship. Where is she?"

Ronald Reagan's expressionless face said, "Come with me, there is

something you have to see."

An opening in the wall parted soundlessly. Bren went through it, noticing that his co-ordination and balance were quickly improving. He was somewhat self-conscious of being naked until a small servo-droid entered and handed him a robe. He entered a room that he recognized as the control center for the ship. It was tiny in comparison with the bulk of the massive craft. In one corner of the room, two servo-droids were repairing some control panel. Bren began to feel the comfort of being once again in the room where he had trained intensely so recently, yet so long ago.

Then he noticed the chair facing away from him. Crossing over to it, he was stopped in his tracks when he saw Tina in the chair. Her unkempt hair and rumpled jumpsuit seemed out of place with the serene smile on her face. That was strange, he thought. She always prided herself on her grooming. At first he thought she was only sleeping. Then he realized the truth when he saw the empty hypodermic needle on the table in front of Tina.

Ronni Jean's voice confirmed the sick feeling in Bren's stomach, "You had to be activated early because Tina, our first pilot, committed suicide earlier today. You must take over for her now, and endeavor to keep this from being your fate."

* * * * *

Earth had been going through one of the most idyllic times in her history. It seemed like all of the problems inherent to being human could and were being solved through science. The threat of mass human destruction appeared to be a moot one after the beginning of the twenty-first century and the virtual disarming of the world. The futility of war was made evident to the world when a terrorist group from the Mid-East detonated a small nuclear bomb in downtown San Francisco. The United States' massive retaliation resulted in over six million deaths.

The horror of what had been done caused an incredible uprising of pacifists worldwide. The U.S. Government was overthrown and nations all around the world vowed that such a senseless loss of life would never happen again. And for the first time in history, they had kept that promise.

Instead of making weapons of war, the resources and scientists of the world were directed towards bettering humanity. Hunger became a thing of the past, as bio-engineering made great leaps in producing super-hybrids of grains that out-produced anything ever seen. Similarly,

environmental problems and disease were no match against the spiralling expertise of science. This progress was accompanied by automatic birth control implants at birth to keep the population down as it threatened to explode. Life on Earth had never been so good. Not to mention life on the blossoming colonies on other planets in the solar system. Then on December 27th, 2367, the utopia of Earth exploded as all myths do.

From the time he was a boy Bren McCaulins had wanted to be in the Space Corps. His hero was his father, the shuttle pilot. He could do nothing wrong in Bren's eyes. Bren's dream was to be just like him. That dream seemed to die along with his father when the life support systems on his ship inexplicably failed on a routine shuttle run to the Mars colonies. The loss affected Bren deeply. He developed a deep distrust for machines. And yet, ironically, he seemed destined to be involved with technology. He knew that he had a great aptitude for it. And somewhere within him the desire for space still lurked.

So it was that he entered the Space Academy on his eighteenth birthday. He took to the subject as if he was born to it, which he was. He graduated third in his class from the Academy. He rose quickly in the Corps, showing quiet brilliance and technical expertise. He acquired his first shuttle command at age 30, which was considered quite young. His reputation as a top-notch space pilot became widespread. He was on the way back to home on the Earth-Mars route when he heard the news that would change his life.

Scientists had detected on their deep-space scanners an object heading towards Earth. It turned out to be a comet, twice the size of any ever seen. It would strike Earth in three years, giving it a glancing blow. However, life would be devastated on the planet. Forecasts estimated that the earth would be thrown out of orbit. The atmosphere would probably be sucked off the planet into space. Life would effectively be over in nine years, and Earth could do nothing about it!

What followed was the most concentrated effort ever seen on Earth. Scientists had discovered a star about 12 light-years away that had a planet that looked as if it could support life. Scientists converged worldwide to design and build a ship that could take people to it, so the human race had a chance to survive. The ship was the most advanced ever designed. Named the *Challenger*, it could only transport 2500 people. Only those at the absolute pinnacle of their fields were chosen to go on the ship.

Competition was intense and violence was common among those trying to be chosen. Earth's governments declared martial law and ruled with an iron fist in the last days of the planet. Work had to be completed on the ship without interference from those with reason to want to stop it. The severe time restraints the scientists working on the project were under left them little margin for error. As it was, certain limitations in the ship were unavoidable.

Bren applied and was chosen to be one of the pilots of the great ship. He went through intense training for several months. As the day of takeoff from *Challenger's* orbit around the moon approached, the feeling of dread increased. Insulated as they were, reports from Earth still reached them. Chaos was reigning. Civilization was falling apart at the seams as the end of the world approached.

After sending one last message to his mom, Bren entered the deepsleep chamber. Being a pilot, he was one of the last to be cryogenically frozen for his long trip to New Gaea. A sense of greatness, of doing something beyond oneself, was mixed with the sadness of never being able to see Earth again, as the gas mask was fitted on his face. A single tear escaped Bren, then all was blackness.

* * * * *

Ten years had passed since Bren had taken over from Tina. He had taken to talking to himself.

"You know, Marilyn," which is what he had taken to calling the computer these days. It was after a twentieth-century movie star. "I know why Tina killed herself."

Bren sat sprawled out on a couch in the control room. Music from a 21st Century techno-rap group was blaring unintelligibly from the speakers. It sounded the same as all the other music he had been listening to.

Marilyn drawled out in the Texas accent Bren had programmed in, "We've had this conversation before, honey."

"That's just it. We're incapable of having new conversations. Tina killed herself out of boredom. There is nothing to do out here."

"Why don't you play a holo?" Marilyn's green and orange afro blew in a nonexistent breeze on the monitor.

"I don't want to play a holo. I've watched more of them than I can count. How many have I watched?"

"In ten years you have watched 34,539 different holos." Even though

the computer was programmed to mimic human inflections of voice precisely, it always sounded tinnily metallic to Bren's ears.

"Sounds about right. And I've read countless books. What I wouldn't give to touch another human being. But no, it's impossible to take anybody out of deepsleep. They told me when I signed up, 'The ship only has enough resources to sustain one pilot throughout the 190 year voyage. Any other passenger taken out of deepsleep could jeopardize the mission. You will be in charge from when you are activated to when you die.'" He said this in a bad imitation of a now long-dead scientist that probably never existed anyway. He found it quite hilarious and laughed out loud.

"I talked to one of the designers of this ship right before I went into deepsleep," Bren continued. "She said that if they could have had just six more months they could have made the ship with enough resources to keep at least two if not twenty more people awake throughout the journey."

Bren kept talking to the ever-patient Marilyn. "It wouldn't be so bad if I had some important duties to perform. If I was guiding my way through asteroids belts, I could live with this. What do I do instead? Not a damn thing. There's nothing out here but space and more space. You could fly this thing without any help from me."

"That's not true. I need you to make any judgements that require a human touch."

"Quit quoting from your programming. You know that's just a load of crap. What's going to happen, are we gonna get attacked by a vicious band of aliens? Yeah that's pretty likely."

Bren was pacing now. He knew why he was awake. The people who had engineered this ship really had no idea what was out there. For all they knew, there could be little green men ready to meet the ship. Bren was there to handle exactly what the ship couldn't: the unexpected. It didn't matter if it was almost a sure thing that nothing unusual would happen. The mission had to be successful.

"I am going to go out of my mind. But no, I suppose that's unlikely too. I went through lengthy psychological tests to determine if I was stable enough to do the job. And I passed them all with flying colors. Only I don't feel so stable now."

Bren stopped talking. His thoughts, if he let them, always came back to Earth. Only he didn't mourn for the whole planet, which he knew by now was just a lifeless husk. He mourned for his mom, who was the

person he had always been closest to. He mourned for the little church he had gone to as a child. He mourned for the last girl he had loved. He mourned for robins landing on the sidewalk in front of him. He mourned for the Statue of Liberty. He mourned for himself.

"Stop this!" Bren told himself. "You can't let yourself bog down in self-pity. Remember the mission. Remember what happened to Tina. Remember those, or you'll forget yourself."

He put a song on the ship's speakers by a late 20th Century group that was classified as something called disco. This would be easy to sleep to, he thought. He drifted off into what was always a fitful sleep. He dreamt of planets dying while he watched in horror. All the while he heard laughter coming from a bodiless green and orange afro.

* * * * *

More time passed. It could have been months or years. Bren stopped keeping track. Time was meaningless. The universe was him and the ship. His once trim body soon went to hell as he lost the will to use the ship's exercise machines. He began to lose touch with reality, or what there was of it on the ship. Everything was fake on the ship, from the food to the company of the computer. He began to lose his mind, and he knew it, and he was unable and unwilling to do anything about it.

"I command you to take someone out of deepsleep."

"You know my programming will not allow that."

Bren was shouting, as if the computer's sensors were not picking him up accurately. "I am the human here and you will obey me, dammit. I order you to activate someone."

Bastard, as Bren had been calling the computer, was implacable, "The ship can not support more than one activated human and still be able to complete its mission."

"You know that is bullshit. You are just trying to drive me nuts. Well you won't. I'm the brightest and best that Earth had to offer. No bucket of bolts will out-smart me. I'll find a way to get what I need." Bren began beating his fists against a console.

"Why won't you listen to me? You killed my dad, and I'm not going to let you kill me. Somehow, somehow I'm going to beat you!" Bren's fists were becoming bloody.

"Don't you see?" He was pleading now. "I just need to touch somebody else's hand. I need to hear another living thing's voice. Please

I beg you. Please." A tear ran down his face. He lay down on the floor sobbing.

Bastard interrupted him, "My scanners have picked up an asteroid-sized rock in our direct path. If action isn't taken, the *Challenger* will collide with it in less than fifteen minutes. I will initiate evasive maneuvers."

Bren, who had curled up on the floor in the fetal position, leaped to life at those words. He jumped over to his control panel and put in some commands. "No, you won't. I've finally got what I needed."

"Bren, what are you doing? You have taken over manual control of navigation. I can't steer us clear."

"That's right. If you don't activate someone else, I am going to run us straight into that asteroid."

"Bren, that is suicide. And think of all the other people you will be killing." There was no change in the computer's tone.

He was screaming now, "Their blood will be on your hands, if you had any. Activate just one other person and I will give you back control immediately."

"I can't allow that. The mission is more important than any one person. I can't sacrifice it."

"Nothing is more important than one person." Bren did not see the servo-droid silently approaching him from behind. He screamed as the hypodermic needle entered the back of his calf. Numbness quickly spread from his leg upwards throughout his body. As he slumped to the ground he whispered, "I'm sorry Dad. I failed you."

The ship's computer took back navigational control and plotted in a course to avoid the asteroid. It then began to take the next pilot out of deepsleep. The mission was still on line. Everything was right in its world. ■

CAREY POTTER WELLS

The Final Page

She stared down into her coffee cup, watching the single hair float with the ripples as she swirled the cup between her pale, white hands. The light reflected purples and blues, and tiny particles dodged the floating hair creating a kaleidoscope effect. They all slid to the bottom side of the mug as she raised it to her numb lips.

"How bad can it be?" she asked as the clock flipped to 10:30 AM. "It's bad, it gets worse, then better but never good. When will it ever be good again?"

She could remember when she was younger, getting stoned, laughing until she peed. Back then she had the best...the best friends, the best boyfriend, car, everything. But most important to her now were her memories.

As she splashed the kaleidoscope into the sink she mumbled..."best boyfriend-bullshit."

Why were her memories of him good? Probably because he was her first love. Part of her still loved him in some weird way, and always would. But that didn't change the facts. He was always out doing somebody else. Never took her anywhere but to beer parties and his basement. His family treated her like shit, especially his sister. He treated her like shit, always yelling at her. And still, she was there for him. When he was too messed up to confront his dad, or on those rare occasions when he was defeated, he could cry on her shoulder, and he did. He cried on her's. No one else's. That was what mattered. He could screw anybody, but he only confided in her.

She noticed her fingernails looked strange as she poured herself a shot of gin for a bracer and headed for the bathroom. They were kinda lavender colored. She looked into the mirror and the same color bags hung from her eyes against her dead-white skin.

"Just wonderful. You haven't seen these people for ages and you look like a sick bitch". After all, she had a reputation to uphold. This was the first reunion in years.

When she drove into town, a chill came over her. She re-adjusted the car thermostat. Why couldn't she re-adjust her life as easily? "First, a quick cruise down the all-to-familiar memory lane." Most of the houses looked the same. The kids on the corner were different though. She didn't

recognize any of them. "Oh come on. You gotta know their older brothers and sisters." She looked again. They looked back with disgust...like she was invading their privacy or something.

As her heart pounded harder and harder she began to feel like a stranger in a strange and empty place. But still, she had those great memories. She had arrived. As her car pulled up next to the building she noticed that the parking lot was pretty full. Rubbing her cold, clammy hands together, she wondered who would be in there. Hopefully a friendly face, or two. She noticed as she grabbed her treasured scrap book that she was shaking. "Jesus Christ. Take a deep breath and chill out. It will be okay. These people are, or at least were, your friends."

She had kept that prized scrap book for almost 20 years. Occasionally she would take it out and look at it, laugh, and cry, and then put it away again. These past few days though, she had looked at it many times...just to refresh her memory. She didn't want to say anything to anybody about it. Very few even knew it existed. She had saved it for their future and reminiscing with their children. It had evolved to become her private way of visualizing those wonderful days. Now, as she reached for the handle and pulled hard on the heavy door, she would be sharing her memories with others.

Coming in from the bright sunlight, the entryway seemed, dark as night. It took some time for her eyes to focus. She strained to see someone she knew. Someone from the pages of that scrapbook. She was shaking harder now. "Straighten up", she thought. "Take a deep breath and calm down. You'll be all right". Her signature resembled that of an old woman's. She couldn't grasp the long, golden pen which rested on the registration table. As she swallowed hard and walked in to the main room, she realized that this wasn't simply nervousness, it was fear. Cold. Lonely. Bigger than life fear. Her stomach churned and she felt like she was going to throw up.

In the main room several people stood around in groups. They were talking. Some were even laughing. "How could they be laughing? What was so funny about any of this?" She glanced up and down, hoping to find the strength to look forward. And then, from the very back of the room she looked up and toward the front. She heard no one. She saw no one. But they were all there. They were watching her to see her reactions. Just like when she would show up late to a party, and they would watch her to see if she laughed or cried when she discovered that he (her wonderful boyfriend) was in the corner making out with someone else, or simply in

the corner passed out; dead drunk. As she tried to focus through the tears, she saw him there. He looked familiar, but different. This time he was not dead drunk. He was still, and pale, and simply dead.

That was enough. She had seen what she had driven all of those miles to see. She had heard it over the phone time and time again in the past three days and now that she had seen it for herself, the visitation was to be the final page in her precious scrapbook. A closer view was not needed. She didn't want to see him like that. She had confirmed for herself that this was not simply another lie or a bad joke. Not another "He wants to get back together," or "He wants out." It was the cold, painful truth. Still shaking, she parted her tears with a turn and ran for the door. Again, it was the all too familiar. She had walked in on something that she thought she was prepared for, that she could handle. Just as always, she was not.

The others at the rear of the chapel came back into view as she glanced at them out of the corner of her eye. She could see their faces as the sunlight pierced through the vivid colors of the window. They were looking at her. They were not laughing....not out loud anyway. She was hot, her face was red. She needed air before she took her turn at unconsciousness. In humiliation she made a quick and silent exit through the double doors with her memories still in hand.

Out front she struggled to gather her faculties. "Why'd you do that?" she thought. The practice and preparation had not worked and she felt embarrassed. There had been a promise to herself that she would not make a scene. As she breathed deeply she realized that there was not going to be another loud confrontation as there had been before. He would not be running out behind her to yell at her. They would not be apologizing either; no kiss and make up. This was a party that she was leaving alone. A party that he was not leaving at all. The consolation of a hug from one of the characters in her scrapbook made the realization rip through her like the shredding of cloth. Not a smooth calculated slice that healed neatly. This left a jagged and ugly wound that she knew would never heal completely.

On the lawn they stood together, she and two friends from the pages. Again they had come to her rescue as they had many years before. She had fond memories of friends who should comfort her when he was cruel. Reassuring her that she was better off. She remembered their younger faces around a beer-splattered table at one of the local bars.

"You know you can do better than him. You deserve better," the one would coach. Then other would chime in.

"Do you want to be stuck in this town "packin' it" with the other meat packer's wives. Livin' in a trailer. Come on, give yourself some credit."

Then they'd buy another round. She would only shake her head in agreement as the tears rolled down her cheeks and into her glass.

Today they were together again, but never had they been together at this place before. They had frequented many in earlier days, but this was new and strange to everyone as they all seemed to force smiles through the tears. She found that squeezes on the shoulders were a feeble effort to relieve the tension of that final day of July.

As her face began to cool and her shaking slowed she was acknowledged by his sister who had never graced the fond memories of her pages. They were civil to each other. Today, calmer words were spoken. She recalled the conversations she had had with him many years ago. "Just don't say anything. Just get along, for me," he would plead. Now she realized that their differences were not so different. They both wanted the best for him; their definitions were not the same. The two had spoken before, working as temporary allies in his behalf, but their concern was their only similarity; aside from loving him.

"Come back in and look at him. He really doesn't look that bad. It will be easier to accept if you look at him."

She knew that the suggestion was actually being offered in her best interest, but she couldn't. She just couldn't do it. "No. I'm fine, thanks".

"Well, tomorrow then. You will do it tomorrow at the service."

As she choked down a breath she handed her fond memories and recollections to the sister. "Please give this to your mom," she strained. She had no use for it now. Her youth was gone; her days of inexperienced carefree happiness...and now he was gone too. This would be the final liaison between the allies as well. Their common interest was no more.

As she left the church and walked toward her car, she felt a relief that this whole awful ordeal was over. Once again, her feelings were hurt. At the service there had been another girl, like always. She was being recognized as the "special friend". Those words sounded trivial. She was the widow. She knew it. All their friends knew it. Every hug and kiss confirmed it. It was her unspoken honor. Silently, she slipped the final keepsake from her coat pocket. It read "In Remembrance". She could never forget. ■

SUE CASE

Weeping Willow

All day long
We run under
Her tangled
Hair,
Tugging strands here
And there.
We forget about why
It is we love
Playing
With imagined
Villains
Even as one
Of us falls
In spasms of
Convincing death.
Later we lie
About, hanging
With legs
Monkey-tailed around
Outstretched arms.
When we leave
At night
She weeps
And wind scatters
Tears in piles
On dew damp
Ground.
The next day
Before play
We collect her
Tears and pretend
They are
Magic.

JANE M. ECKERMEN

The Trial of Purgatorus

"Why black?" she asked, "you've got more color than one."

"Oh come," he said, "black paths are best than none"

"Such silliness" she smiled, "why're you so stray?"

"Oh please," he said, "stray has no worth to me."

"Do stray!" she yelled, "Stray far, deep, long and wide!"

"No fool," he said, "would think such pagan pride."

"Some pride," she said, "can be not bad but good."

"My pride" he said, "no one has understood."

"No worry." She drew close, her words stretched long,

"I understood the beauty of your song."

Said he, (but to himself) "How she be wrong.

There is no hope to grasp, all love is gone."

Then looked she in his eyes and reasoned new.

"Your end will never end, ends never do."

"You sing your song!" he said, "Yes, let it shine!

Its happy tune is truly yours, not mine."

"Alas!" she sighed, "his soul's mistook for dead.

Who stole the shining crown from off your head?"

"No crown," he moaned, "would sit upon this block."

"You fool!" she cried, "your humanness you mock!"

She sadly turned her eyes away from he

who swiftly fled to his eternity.

G. J. FRAHM

The New Old Bear

For Michael L. Wiley

These things I told you one cool autumn night:
no mere red measles' fever set to flight

that boy who lived in me till I was ten
and pushed him toward the race of silent men.

I mentioned how, when he began to mend,
he missed his Bear, his childhood's surest friend
whose shabby ears at least would hear and keep
secrets he sobbed before he fell asleep.

"Where is my Bear?" he asked. But no one knew.
They shoved the question off, as grown-ups do:

"Why would you want that dirty thing?" they said.
"It's old and full of germs. Now get to bed."

And lying in the dark alone, he learned:
because he'd gotten sick his friend was burned
along with truth and courtesy and such,
and boys and bears had never mattered much.

That night he lit a low slow fire of rage
and threw his boyhood in and came of age.

When, Bear forgotten forty years and more,
I shared what I had never told before,

I said it with a wise indulgent smile,
thinking he had not mattered all that while,

and only spoke intending to reveal
that childhood hurts—eventually—heal.

Then Christmas came, after a month or two,
bringing with it a new old Bear, from you.

Oh, how could you have known, whom I call child,
your gift would nearly drive an old man wild

or guessed that I, who had not wept for years,
could shed so many and such bitter tears?

RANDY CLYDE UHL

Cameos

Emile's lowboy is piled high with letters Three penny
stamps Valentines Yellow Laced with cedar and pressed
violets Alice drifts through the house lighting
sconces Fearing abrupt weather changes Basement drafts
Pulls tight her shawl Miss Aurora K. Grandeur sips
camomile and sorts vintage photos Views stereoscopic
film icons Scorns similarities All others diffuse
Margaret alone sits at her secretary Considering her
bible She marks each Peccavi Cries because she cannot
believe Billies suit Tweed Ascot starched Hair cropped
and slicked to the side Ashamed of her widows peak Collects
pipes Pocket watches Keys Rebecca nibbles pecans in the
bath Choosing hair combs Listening to wireless Verdi
Sarah convenes beneath the Spanish moss Gathers thyme up
in her crinoline Readjusts her cameo Cooperation

CLYDE D. SWITZER

The Party

It's hard to remember
looking out into the faces
waiting to see what I
might do about the noise
that once those faces
were familiar faces—the
faces of friends
who knew me, who trusted me.
It's hard to remember
the respect of a long time
tenant
who taught me of
tissue walls and silent
nights:
the quiet desperation of
lonely people who cared
about their neighbors;
Cared about this place.
Twenty people side by side
in rooms like closets,
in homes long forgotten
from which we each came
so long ago....
Now lost to the strangers
outside my door
Waiting for complaints
against the empty years
of silence.

STELLA ROWELL

"Abandoned"

I'M A LADY ABANDONED -
BAG LADY ABANDONED, I MUMBLED AND MUMBLED.
I'M ABANDONED - JUST TRAVELING, AND
TRAILING BEHIND ME
ARE OTHER ABANDONED
LOST BAG PEOPLE.
TRANSPARENT - DIGNIFIED FACES
DON'T NOTICE ME OR US.
IN DAY LIGHT I SIT UNDER
STOP & GO SIGN -
SIGN IS TURNED AROUND &
PRINTED BY DEAF MUTE FINGERS
"BAG LADY & FRIENDS NEED HELP"!!

THOUGHTS-IN SECURITY VAULTS
OF SELF SURVIVEALISTS,

THINK:
I'M A MENTAL-CRAZY - FUNNY & STEAL HONEY-MONEY-

OTHERS -
WRITE CHECK-FOR US
DROP IN CORNER CHURCH-BOX.
AT EASE - TAKE CRUISE - IN-SOUTH-SEAS.

TAKE IT BACK!!
I WANT SELF ESTEEME - HAPPY-ICECREAME,
NOT DISGUST OR SYMPATHY FOR-US
NOT FOOLING-US -
WE SEE TRANSLUCENT
DON'T CARE—STARE.

I MUMBLED, SHOUTED, AND SCREAMED!!
NO, NO, NO!!

I LOST MY LOVER-SPOUSE, HOUSE, JOB, FINE LOOKS
& CHECK BOOKS -

I PRAY BEFORE I SLEEP UNDER
"COME TO ME" TREE.
THAT TOMMORROW,

I CATCH "FLYING PAY CHECKS"

TO SIGN -

ERASE
"BAG LADY"

FOR
"FINE BRAND NEW"
LADY -

JACK D. PACK

Journey

Go softly, Dear-
The wrench of leaving must not tear away
The fragile thing that ever made us one—
Allow us still the measured time to seek
For those pale shadows which we bonded close
When you and I began this troubled trip,
Unknowing, then, not caring that the time
Might come when each of us would ache to find
A peace somewhere—a small, illusive thing.
And you must know I love you still, my Dear,
Though I must gaze at you as through a mist,
Never quite recalling how it was
Before the sadness crept before my eyes;
The paths we seek may lead to purer air,
And then, perhaps, I'll look and find you there.

RAOUL HURD

Sacred Places

There were once upon a time sacred places
Sunburnt mesas, the tops of trees and windswept mountain peaks
Reveling in the nearness of their creator
In the call of birds soaring in prismatic blue...
Sacred places sensually feasting on
Coral and lavender in sunsets and sunrises immemorial.
Till uncontrollable they ejaculated
Clouds into the heavens, overwhelmed by the unbearable ecstasy.

Today contaminants rise to the stratosphere,
Fierce jets scream their defiance to the skies.
Choppers daily and nightly clap their propellers
And beam their searchlights fiercely to the ground.
Cosmic trash litters what is left of the ozone.
All the while radio waves crackle into satellite boxes.
But where has God gone?

XIN YE

The Self

Beneath the twinkling stars
under the bloody sunset
I sit there
listening to the sound of my heart
lost in emptiness

The wind never speaks to me
but I always
hear my voice in it
The river never looks at me
but I always
see my eyes in it
The sun never wakes me up
but I always
come around with the transparent
light of the dawn
I sit there
listening to the breath of nature
lost in nothingness

God meets Budda
Confucius meets Muhammad
they whisper
laughing secretly
it's Heaven on earth
Hell in Heaven...
I sit there
listening to the music of the universe
lost in blissfulness

So, when Siddhartha comes up to me
with tears in his dried eyes
I say: "Kid, now you've reached the right man
who knows the right thing."

We sit there
staring at each other
lost in lostness. . .

"You will die, Om"
With sword in my hand
Siddhartha fell asleep
a forever sleep
an eternal sleep

Here comes the moon
I sit there
lost in myself . . .

JACK D. PACK

The "Old Road"

Often as I skim the paths
Of looping highways, ribbon smooth,
I see with just a blink of eye
The "old road" furtively pass by
In broken patches of neglect.

It struggles for a fleeting space
To keep the newer, rushing pace,
The stops abruptly, leaderless,
Seeking vainly to recall
The skill of continuity.

It wanders on in fractured track,
Bewildered by the jarring loss
Of dim remembered form and shape;
It halts completely now and then
Before it parallels again.

Fading legends line my way—
I've caught a glimpse of yesterday.

SUE CASE

Distraction

Sitting in a chair I begin,
Intent on reading.
Quickly I find
My mind disobeying.
Eyes no longer see
Words. Instead, razor slashes
Angle across stark pages.
Images creep
Between lines.
They play with my thoughts.
Distracting and persistent—irresistible.
My already hazy brain
Begins to fade.
Sleep teases my senses,
Taking them without
Permission or realization.
Eyes look but see things
Written only in my mind.
My head begins to bobble,
Meeting my chest.
Suddenly, consciousness,
That ebbed, breaks
Bringing reality.
There is no recollection
Of reckless thoughts.
Sitting in the chair, I begin

Again.

CHARLOTTE WALKER BAKER

The Thorn Tree

Grandfather took us with him when he went
To salt the stock, down where a thorn tree grew
Beside the creek. "Now, there's a way that you
Can climb up through," he said, and then he lent
A hand to boost us to the limbs that bent
Each way to form the steps. Rough bark, a few
Sharp thorns to plague us — then we brushed the dew
And petals from our faces as we sent
Our glad shouts ringing till our breath was spent
And wonder stopped our throats — no wild "halloo!"
Could match the magic of that sky-ringed view.
Our hearts shook with strange joy and strange content.

Grandfather smiled and said, "There comes a time
When every child should have a tree to climb."

The Other Thorn Tree

Grandfather lay abed before he went,
Too weak and ill to note the grief that grew
In all our hearts. "Is there no way that you
Can help him now?" we asked. The doctor lent
Us his kind smile and shook his head, then bent
Above the quiet form. Rough gasps, a few
Sharp cries broke from us, and we felt the dew
Of teardrops on our faces as we sent
Our thoughts back ranging till our grief was spent
And wonder stopped our throats. What faint "halloo!"
Brought back that magic of a sky-ringed view —
And in our hearts strange joy and strange content?

Grandfather murmuring said, "There comes this time —
When every man...will find...his tree to climb."

RANDY CLYDE UHL

Speak Easy

It was odd how calmly we walked.
Nine months between us
and barely a word.
We spoke with silence
and listened to nothing
and I remember his coat flapping against my thigh.

I try not to remember,
but it's that same feeling (you know the one)
that pulls you from your deepest sleep
and all you can do is sit
and wait for the sun's reassurance.

We sat over pie and tea
and talked of nothing
that was everything.
Leaving, he tipped the teacup as if our fortune lay in the leaves.

The wind swept through his hair,
which was longer now,
and I wondered what his children would look like.

Drifting through the park,
we each bought a yellowed balloon.

As I lost sight of him, I let go of the string.

MAUREEN HALEY

Unknown

I came, not to
write of anything.

But everything
came after me.

And I
couldn't
run fast enough.

And I
wouldn't
just walk away.

And I'll not forget
that I
should've
cried over nothing.

G. J. FRAHM

Memento Mori:

The Day of Equinox,

September 22, 1989

The ash, so green last week, is showing gold;
the steepled spruce's tip is brown with cones;
against a north wind sharp with sudden cold
nine buzzards come to pick dead summer's bones.
So pass we on to autumn soon this year:
tonight, they say, will bring a killing frost.
Slow Indian Summer days, though (never fear),
will intervene before long light is lost.
But then, in low-light white snows, what redeems?
Jay wings' blue fire? Flash of cardinal red?
Ah, winter may not prove the end it seems
before this year (How many more?) be dead.
Still, buzzard black will persevere in these—
small jaunty caps of busy chickadees.

JAN D. HODGE

1492

1492

a ragtag of men a sea a
 fear ridden sea coffins backturning
 delicate trio of here on a far reaching and no may this daring
 go westward and trust to God oh name be my
 adventure prove fortunate my of
 inscribed in the heavens with those of
 sovereign King and his Queen by the will
 God monarchs of Catholic Spain we have for long days now
 had no sight of land and the men grow disgruntled still we
 press onward for gold and to bring pagan souls to our Christ
 in Whose hands is our fate the wind is strong and the compass
 always tells truth the men are afraid of a wind that will never
 blow east that will hold them from home in spite of their plaints
 I hold fast for the Indies and tell them the petrels and ringtails
 we see sleep ashore stargrass and falling stars promise that we are
 by land it heartens them not and I cannot trust Pinzon who yearning
 for glory is racing forever ahead but the sea makes up without wind
 an omen from God and the men dare not rise up against me the passing
 of frigate birds assures me that land must be near
 may they guide us and soon to the shores we seek the
 crew is most anxious for landfall
 and reach it I shall with the
 help of
 our
 Lord

STEPHEN COYNE

Riverside

Largely, I am made of water,
but I am not like water.
I am more like this place
at the river where
the slitted sycamore leans
over power lines and currents.
I am water with a snag
bobbing like an idiot,
whose nod affirms
what he does not understand.
I am a reed that breaks
the flow into music.
Crows nest in this place,
and nests crumble.
I toss the inevitable in air.
Give me change, but leave me here.



