



The Kiosk

1995

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**We would like to thank Dr. Esther Mackintosh
for her generous support of this year's *Kiosk*.**

After being graduated from Morningside in 1969, Esther Mackintosh earned M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Kansas State University. She has since worked as executive editor of *Horticulture* magazine in Boston, a script writer for King Faisal Hospital in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and senior editor of *Science 80* magazine. In 1986 Dr. Mackintosh accepted a position with the Federation of State Humanities Councils in Washington, D.C., where she currently serves as vice-president. She also does free-lance writing and editing, and is actively involved in the PLAN adult literacy program in Washington, D.C.

About this Year's Judge

Formerly a professor at Campbell University, **Henry Dickerson** now teaches at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, NC. Although his specialty is John Steinbeck, he considers himself a generalist and teaches courses in various periods in American literature as well as in science fiction, literary criticism, and creative writing. As a poet himself, he favors satirical poetry written in traditional formats.

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***Dr. Esther Mackintosh Prize for
Creative Writing***

- 1st place **Warm Summer Nights**
 by Randy Clyde Uhl
- 2nd place **Full**
 by Krista Calvano
- 3rd place **Screening Reality**
 by Steve Gregg

Spring 1995 Kiosk Staff

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Washing Windows

Her first memory of him is black hair
and talking with those big hands
and the beer, always the beer.

In her front room, Marcie rubs
the glass invisible. Her small hand
seeks out his last sneeze, the dark

specks of fly. Her muscle wipes
away his last oily print,
her breath polishes his breath clean.

She can still hear him pacing
at this window, running dirty hands
over the dark wood, tracing

the curves of the corner scrolls,
and turning to lurch into her pale eyes.
Under her hand cotton cloths

scrub at these translucent spots. She
frowns: his dark hair still gleaming,
pressing out from the mahogany to her.

Debra Kehrberg

A Week Ago Yesterday

She said:

Don't come near me,
snowing me with those words,
treating me like a rag doll
to play with.

She said:

I'll nail my door so tight
Death can't get in if you come
Around again.

I whispered:

Remember how water
Dissolves the dry desert's rancor,
Always.

She whispered:

Like a great yellow dog, the sun
Laps up the water in the creeks,
Always.

I think:

There's always a picnic
with a full moon on the river,
somewhere.

Sabine Lawless

Warm Summer Nights

She remembers pouring coffee for two
and reorganizing the Sunday paper
before reading it.

She more than remembers.

It haunts her —
and she likes it.

But memories will not kick the sheets off
on warm summer nights.

How can I make her believe
that she will have this again —
and more?

There will come a time soon
when she will share coffee in bed
and the Sunday paper will be kicked on the floor.

Randy Clyde Uhl

Ballerina

Unscuffed red rubber boots
Become dainty toe shoes.
The girl in the sunshine-yellow slicker
Dances among the worms.

Kristin Johnson

Renewal

It was a day clear as crystal,
cold, January cold.
I remember wearing
many layers to keep me from it.
My booted feet crunched
the crisp, silent whiteness —
waves of white blown in by the wind
flooding the cornfield.
Could I walk on water?
No, I wanted to immerse myself in it,
to lose myself, to find myself
in this cold sea that stretched to heaven.
I dove in.
Swimming, I made a snow angel
and soared through the white,
flying far, searching, reaching
through all the layers
until I found my soul,
and I laughed

Nicole Bollig

Full

His mouth, so pretty
It's a pleasure to watch him
Speak my name. I blush.

Krista Calvano

Braiding

If only this braiding
would weave comfort

through the kitchen
like the hot smell

over their coffee.
Marcie's fingers steam

deeply in his dark hair.
Her hands cup the shape

of his skull,
measure the depth

of his neck.
Each morning a truce

as she dresses his hair.
Mark slumps, eyes closed;

she turns down the pigtail.
It hangs stubbornly

at the nape, like her lips
clinging to his cheek,

his alcohol breath
wheezing.

Debra Kehrberg

Wisdom

I found you slumped over in the stairwell.
You said you had lost your keys.
We can't afford to change the locks again.
Exasperated, I smile as you scramble up
to help carry the groceries.
Your hair is smoothed back above the right temple
where you thoughtfully rubbed it all night.
Setting your bag on the counter, your turn to me.
"The earth has many eyes," you say,
trying not to let the words slur.
I lower my gaze to meet yours
and leave the groceries to fend for themselves.
Pausing, you light a cigarette.
I wait.
"Many eyes . . ." Yours avoid mine.
"The land sees and follows all things."
Something about the tree guardians of cattle and strawberries.
I wonder how long you agonized over each image.
I return when your voice falters.
"And separate eyes . . . for children."
Your face turns toward the yellowed photo on my desk —
A younger you and a boy in fatigues.
I head for the kitchen to save the spumoni.

Abra Armstrong

Leaving Innocence

Night came quickly
as we sat in the park.
Just you
me

our angels in the background.

You watched my lips
as we played words
like bad tennis.
Then you told me
you were an alien
and everything changed.
I said
there was a metaphor in there somewhere.
You said
even together we were alone.

You took a long drag on your smoke
and I cracked another beer.
I remember the hole
in your jeans
like the moon.
I stuck my finger through
to know I was alive.

It was cold for September.
You let me put my hands
under your shirt
to keep them warm.
I held you there close as breath.
I couldn't think
of anything else to say
so I said I love you
and together we sat
trying to figure out what comes next.

It's funny what you take with you
when you leave innocence.

Randy Clyde Uhl

Flatland

(Sioux City, Iowa)

I never thought I'd end up here,
like this,
in a flat town with flat bugs skirting
across my sink.
They're big and brown, and remind me
I don't belong.

I need a rustling wind,
mountains of trees, and
just plain mountains rising
purple and pink;
the sun breathing fire, setting;
flaming orange captured in a stream's gurgle.
I prefer these extremes
to this mundane flatness
to this same old same.

Days, bugs, beasts, man
blend with strawberries for flavor
and the flavor's repetitive,
stinging my tongue.
A seed stuck in my cheek.
Me stuck in this place
thumb stuck out,
but no one's driving anywhere.
They circle, blending one beginning
with one end,
ending without realizing
Everything's 3-dimensional.

Denise Gard

Observation Made in a Darkroom

Your hands are streaked with the scent of creation:
Stop bath,
Fixer,
Developer.
I admire you,
How you can bring still-born
Images
To life.

Kristin Johnson

A Lesson

(for Carolyn Steinhaus)

“It was a small small lake, no larger than
this mere apartment where I ground my being.
Deep in a wild seldom disturbed by man
it lived, and I lived more intensely seeing
its life, coming upon it as I had
after a three-day hike. My first night there
I felt my soul converse with cricket, loon,
and frog. Next day I washed my hair,
then sat for hours beside the lake, heart glad,
watching until the bubbles danced in moon-
light. Silently, I listened to the silence.
No frogs, no crickets talked. Slowly the black
wound grew from the subtle violence
I had done. The loons never came back.”

Jan D. Hodge

Walking in the Country

The corn rows bake in an Iowa oven,
basted with July's heavy humidity,
blended with milkweed, and thorns
of wild roses. Gravel roads pull
apart the fields and roll out over
the rich land; a steam of grey dust
blown up by a car thickens the air.

Purple phlox thrive — teetering along
the edge of the road, full of pollen
and sweat bees. A mulberry tree
in the fence line marinates the ground
with sweet, purple berries. Walking
alone, my arms, my legs are kneading
the air, breathing in the song of the

meadowlark that clings to a power line,
then glides over the tassels. The sky
stirs rich with sunlight and swallows —
deeply forked tails sifting through eddies
of glowing air. I long to let go — blaze
through the clouds filled with custard,
rub my hands through the dust until it

melts off my fingers, land in a silken
maple tree and settle down between the
branches. I want to dance in circles,
twirl around and around, but a car may
crest the hill so I climb down to the
mulberry and eat berries sticky with
honey, juice clinging to my lips.

Debra Kehrberg

Doubting Thomas

For the longest time
you were my religion —
my trilogy —
I nailed your hands myself
and hung on every word.
I practiced you like Sunday.

But faith is costly
and few understand
the value of disbelief.
With each unanswered prayer
your cross bent a little more
until your feet reached the ground
and you walked like the others.
Doubt was my only road out of Calvary.

Now your memories are either penance
or salvation.

Randy Clyde Uhl

Her Grand Lesson

I can't remember much about her,
Just the smell of fresh cinnamon rolls when she was a young grandmother.

I can see us sitting in her living room watching the Carol Burnett Show together.
She drank water with a splash of Seagrams 7, mixing it with a finger in an old jelly-jar.

So many Saturday nights I spent with her there,
While she taught me that a woman could be a friend, a hero, and a Grandma all at once.

I can't remember that last time I saw her.
I think I must have told her a joke and, of course, she laughed.

Keith Jones

Mulberry Days

A yellow jacket hums for hours,
as we stand and pick in the ditch
thick with heart-shaped
leaves of mulberry trees.

Our days are colored
with these sweet mulberries;
our fingers, warm and purple,
taking each tender fruit
gently — trying not to crush
any fragile membrane.

Some liquid leaks out
juicing down our fingers,
dripping from our wrists.

I watch as the lavender honey
blushes your lips and
slides down your throat.

Your white canvas shoes
fresh-ground with berries
tinge an earthy shade of lilac.

And the days pass with early
morning walks through the
purple-black roadside.

We start out empty, searching
with our pale buckets,
and return filled, pleased to
relinquish our jewels.

I count as our amethyst
treasures grow, berry by berry.

Nights we sit near our gazebo,
whispers mingling:
me cross-legged in a sun dress,
you still in purple shoes.

Your eyes meet mine,
spooning me those sweet berries
beneath perfect stars
staining us butter rich and
juice-thickened.

Debra Kehrberg

Pastel Candle

Stacey Jones

Twenty-three years old and twenty-three pastel candles clash with a luscious layer of chocolate frosting. I listen and blush before a chorus of "Happy Birthday." I bend close to the confection and can nearly taste the thick sweetness when I pull in a wish-fulfilling breath. Just as I am about to exhale, I see my grandmother. A heaviness suddenly collapses around my heart, like a star collapses into itself to create a gravity-intense black hole. I have to come up for air again. This time, as I inhale, I know I can't waste my wish on standard desires. Of all the other wishes, made with other pastel colored candles, on other birthdays, I want the wish I make now to come true more than any other.

Six years old and six pastel candles and what did I wish for? I wished that Benny Patrick would quit picking on me. Benny was the bully in my kindergarten class. He always found a way to hurt me or humiliate me during recess with pinches and pulls or his cruel teasing. That day at school, he had pinched my arm so hard that the bruise had immediately formed and swollen. He had teased me for wearing my new, blue, birthday dress and when I yelled at him to stop being such a meany, he took the opportunity to give me more punishment. As I got off the bus, Grandma was watching from the corner. My mother had left me when I was only a baby and I had no father to speak of, so I became Grandma's responsibility. She watched over me very carefully and I hardly ever got a scratch that missed notice. I didn't want to tell her that Benny had been picking on me again, and I tried to pull the sleeves of my dress down a little more, but Grandma noticed the ugly, purple mark on my pale skin immediately.

"That looks like it hurts, honey. What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Oh my. That's an awful lot of nothing."

"I fell at recess."

I hoped maybe that would stop the questions. We began to walk back to the house and Grandma watched me out of the corner of her eye. I tried to pretend I didn't notice her watching me.

"Honey, tell me the truth, please."

Reluctantly, I answered her request. "A boy at school pinched me."

"Oh sweetie, who pinched you? Why?" I tucked my chin in, ashamed of how bad Benny made me feel. I knew as soon as I told her, Grandma would call his mother.

"Because I was wearing a dress. He said I looked stupid." We stopped walking.

"Who said you looked stupid?" I didn't answer. She knew anyway. She squeezed my hand and put her arms around me. The soft, wrinkled skin of her

upper arms brushed gently over me and felt cool against my shoulders.

"You don't look stupid," she whispered, " You look pretty."

Whether I looked pretty or not wasn't the point. The point was, he had hurt me, not only this time, but many times, pinching and punching, name-calling and teasing. I hated him as much as any six year old could hate someone. I was glad Grandma did not call Benny's mother. It might only bring more punishment from him. When the chocolate cake arrived at our table that night, I didn't wish for Barbie dolls or games, I wished that Benny Patrick would go away.

I forced out air and saliva as hard as I could. Every candle went out.

The next Monday, Benny wasn't at school. The teacher said he had gotten sick and that we should all make a card for him, telling him that we hoped he would get better soon. My card had just two pictures on it. One of Benny, lying sick in bed, and one of a little girl in a blue dress with a circle on her arm, colored in purple. I didn't want Benny to think I had really forgotten how mean he was to me. Benny was sick for a really long time. When he finally came back, the doctors said he couldn't roughhouse during recess and the teacher kept a close eye on him. Benny never dared pick on me with the teacher watching so closely.

My wish had actually come true. Benny Patrick could not pick on me anymore. From then on, I believed in the power of birthday wishes.

Fifteen years old and fifteen candles seemed to float on top the chocolate cake my grandmother baked for me. This year, more than anything, I wanted a car. I wanted to get my school permit and drive back and forth to school for basketball practice and FHA meetings. I wished for the car, despite Grandma's assurance that she would not buy me one.

"Why should I buy you a car?" was her standard question.

"Because," I tried to explain, "All of my friends will be getting theirs. Please Grandma, then you would have more time to run your errands instead of running me around all of the time. I could take on more responsibility for myself then."

"I assure you, you do not need a car to help you take on more responsibility for yourself. I don't mind driving you to school. You are so busy lately, it's the only chance I get to keep you in one place long enough to get a decent conversation out of you."

"But . . ."

"And since when have you really had to do everything your friends did. One other thing, you don't need a car of your own so that you can drive a mile to school. I pick you up because I like to but, if worst came to worst, you could probably walk home."

That usually ended the conversation. However, as I blew out my candles, I still had the image of my dream car on my mind. Nothing fancy, just a simple, little car that would get me where I needed to go. I wanted nothing expensive. I knew my wish had no chance of coming true if I limited it like that.

Grandma picked me up from basketball practice one day soon after that with a more than secretive grin.

"Let's hurry home," she said. "I have a certain something for you."

Just by her tone, I knew it was my car. I could hardly believe how lucky I was. As we neared our home, I couldn't make out the shape of a car in the driveway. Maybe it's in the garage, I thought. When we pulled into the drive, I felt the horrible, black-hole sensation. On the sidewalk, with big, pastel bows tied to their handlebars were two bicycles, one red and one blue. Obviously, both had just had new paint jobs, because both of the two wheelers looked like something off of a fifties T.V. show.

"Surprise!"

Surprise nearly kept me from speaking at all. I wanted to whirl around and scream at my grandmother for doing something so silly, but she was already wheeling the blue one over to me.

"I found them at a garage sale a couple of weeks ago. I wanted to have them ready for your birthday, but the job of fixing them up was a little more than the repairman had expected. I hope you don't mind if I take the red one." She winked at me. It was all I could do to keep from crying, but it would have been impossible to ignore the excitement Grandma felt. She was obviously quite pleased with herself.

"And," she pointed out, "this will be lots more fun than a car for now."

A bike is not better than a car, I thought to myself, but I smiled politely and hugged Grandma. I hadn't had a bike in years and I was absolutely too embarrassed to ride that bike to school. After a week, my grandmother pressed me about going for a ride together.

"How about a ride? We could ride down to the park and back."

I looked up from my homework and shook my head.

"No, not right now. Maybe later."

"Oh, but it's so nice out now," she begged, "It will be a short ride, OK?"

Submission would be better than an argument, I decided. In a few minutes, we were pedaling down the street. It seemed so much quieter this evening and I could hear someone mowing a lawn. The clean scent of cut grass drifted past as we pedaled farther. Before we reached the park, a water sprinkler came on and sprinkled a thin mist of water over Grandma and I. It did feel good to take a little break and ride for awhile. Even though we hadn't gone far, I began to feel the stiffness in my legs from pushing and pedaling. It was an odd sensation and one I had not felt for a long time. On the way back home, the water sprinkler was still going and we passed on the opposite side of the street so as not to get wet. I looked back to notice the family's cat carefully avoiding very edge of the sprinkler's reach.

When we returned home, Grandma thanked me for taking the time for a ride. After she left, I thought about the smell of the grass, and the sound of the mower, even the coolness of the mist from the sprinkler. I began to realize that

the ride on the bike had given me an opportunity to experience things I might not have been able to if I were just driving the car. However, the sensible part of my mind told me that I still could have enjoyed watching the cat avoid getting wet from the inside of a car. But, I argued with myself, would you have understood the plight of that cat if you had not gotten wet yourself? You also avoided the cold water when you rode by on the opposite side of the street.

I sensed a certain freedom with my new bike. I didn't ride every day, but when I did, Grandma would meet me on her bike, and we would travel home together. For an older woman, she kept up pretty well. Our trip home took us longer and we sometimes had to stop and rest along the way, but it was a better journey. I silently thanked the fulfiller of wishes for doing such a good job granting this one. I had a different kind of freedom than I had expected.

Eighteen years old and eighteen pastel candles were lighted in the kitchen before a group of my friends brought out the now boring standard chocolate cake. Grandma stood back from the group, pleased with herself for keeping the surprise party a secret from me. After our conversation the week before, I doubted that this birthday could have been a very happy event.

"Can I come in?" my Grandmother had asked that day. I mumbled a reply and the door pushed open.

"Why are you sitting here moping? Shouldn't you be over at Arthur's saying goodbye?" I looked at her blandly and pretended to be reading my *Seventeen* magazine. Arthur was my serious boyfriend. We had dated for two years and we planned to spend the rest of our lives together. We had decided that, before we got married, Arthur should follow his dream of attending military school. Arthur was leaving for his entrance interview the next day.

"I'll go over later," I said, "then Arthur and I will have a chance to be alone."

Grandma seated herself awkwardly on the foot of my bed. I knew what she wanted to say, but I was hoping she wouldn't bring up the subject that day.

"What are you and Arthur going to do while he's gone?" I rolled my eyes and turned over on my side. I did not want to discuss why Arthur and I had decided we weren't going to see other people. We had our minds made up that we were perfect for each other. Grandma felt otherwise.

"Do you really think it's wise to not even admit to yourselves that you will meet other people? How will you feel if he does meet someone else?"

"I know you're trying to help, but we're old enough to be able to decide what is best for ourselves. I won't meet anyone else like Arthur. He's kind and sensitive. He's perfect. He loves me and I trust him. He won't find anyone else."

"No matter how wonderful you think he is," Grandma said, "there is no reason why you shouldn't be prepared for something to happen. Boys are like that."

"Arthur is not a boy, Grandma. Try and understand."

I could see that what I had said had struck a certain nerve. She got up from

the bed and began to walk out of the room. She paused in the doorway.

"I do understand. I've seen it happen too many times, believe me. Talk seriously with Arthur. Not about how perfect for each other those surveys in your magazine say you are, but about what could really happen."

What could really happen? As far as I was concerned, nothing could go wrong. Arthur and I had our whole lives planned out and nothing my grandmother could say was going to change that. Just to ensure it, for luck's sake, I would wish for a happy life with Arthur when I blew out the candles on my birthday cake.

My wishes always come true, one way or another, I thought to myself as I looked at the glowing candles. Please let Arthur and I have a wonderful life together. I blew out all of the candles. Grandma and Arthur and all of my friends clapped and began talking again. Arthur kissed my cheek and wandered off to talk with some of the other guys.

Once Arthur started military school, I began to hear many stories of his "wandering off." He was always quick to point out that they were "just with the guys." I believed him until one night on the phone, he sounded particularly sad.

"What is it Arthur? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just tired. School is pretty tough lately."

"It has been tough for a long time. Are you sure there isn't something else?"

There was a long period of silence and I got the sickening feeling one gets when they know something is up.

"No, no. . . I'm fine. . . I guess I just feel a little bit guilty." He had slipped in the last part like I might not notice it.

"Guilty? Guilty about what?"

I pressed him for more and more details until I had the whole ugly picture. An overnight trip into the city had given him and his friends a chance to visit some of the bars. He said it was so easy to get in, even though they all were under age. They drank and had a good time and met a group of girls. They all paired off. I hope it was worth it because from the way Arthur explained it, it was the last trip any of them would be taking for a long time. Rules for the cadets included no drinking and no fraternizing. Arthur and his new "friend" got caught doing a whole lot of fraternizing and I do mean fraternizing.

I was furious and hurt. We had it out on the phone that day. Sure we struggled on for awhile longer. I tried to forgive him, but I couldn't feel the same sort of blind love as before.

To top it all off, all I could think of was that Grandma was always thinking: I told you so. She never said it, but I knew she was thinking it. I remember my last birthday wish and all the other wishes that halfway came true and couldn't deny that there really wasn't any reason to wish for things when only coincidence and luck made them seem to come true. I swore I would never hold out hope that birthday wishes made with pastel candles on top of chocolate cakes ever came true for girls who were old enough to know better.

Twenty-three years old and twenty-three pastel candles would be lit on my cake tomorrow. I traveled home with my new husband for a little reunion. I was so happy to be home. Grandma greeted me at the door. I threw my arms around her, and I heard her suck in a deep breath. I wondered if old age was finally taking its toll on her. I missed all of my relatives and I was eager for the celebration tomorrow, when all of my family, my aunts and uncles, a few close friends, and Grandma, would gather to celebrate.

"The doctors took some X-rays and noticed a lump on her liver," was all I got out of the conversation with some of my aunts. They had taken me aside shortly after Grandma had gone to bed. The word 'cancer' was never actually spoken, but we all knew it had to be true. My great-grandfather, Grandma's father, had died of cancer when I was just barely old enough to remember.

"Cry now, so you can be strong for her tomorrow."

I didn't want to cry. It couldn't be true. Just knowing it was cancer made all of my hope disappear. It was always so hopeless for cancer patients. I felt useless. I lay in bed that night, worrying about what tomorrow would be like. After the biopsy, the doctors told her she would feel like someone had kicked her hard in the side. I doubted whether Grandma could be her chipper self tomorrow.

I lay in bed that night, wishing there was some word of comfort I could give her, some miracle bit of advice that would give her and myself hope. I prayed it would all be a mistake. I wanted to be there for my grandmother, but all of my courage seemed to have faded away. My birthday celebration was supposed to be full of happiness and good blessings for the future but all I could think about was losing the most precious woman in my life. To pray and to wish were the only things I could do.

In the seconds before I let go of the massive breath of air that would hopefully extinguish every pastel candle on my twenty-third birthday cake, all of the memories of my other birthday wishes managed to blur together in the flickering light. Slowly and carefully, I let loose the current, watching the flames shift and resist until finally, I had nothing left to give.

"Oops, you missed one," someone teased. The black hole-heaviness returned to my chest as I saw one last candle still burning strongly.

The American Dream

So there is a cup in front of me.
The pack of cigarettes means less.
My hands are shaking, but my mind doesn't worry about trivialities.
Do you see this?
It is a scar I was dealt when I was in their arms and prematurely hugged by
their ideas of never-ending bliss, such baggage
to show that I could handle them and grab-bag love that
none of the professors talk about
the hope that shatters and then scrapes your face
but retrace
the steps you used to get there.
offer your body here and there and leave the sandbox to a new game.
Lord, what foolish ideas these mortals pretend to deny. go and
learn higherly and come back, of less than you left the village, to
dream of your days of delight.
Sinister trick to leave you, but you knew it wasn't that easy.
Leave your toy dumptruck in the
backyard but my friend has one why can't I?
Grown up on video screens and we all want an extra life to conquer
the next level and push some buttons, to go,
(too bad there isn't a drive through)
but humans can't see
that we all run around the building but never enter, we have nothing to go on
just rules we attach to universal truths
trying to end up in my-car-won't-slow-down places that
we see in movies behind the screen.
what of that kind of dream?

Tell the story of your falter-on-heels journey to center stage when
you saw America at night
you gave me the same run-of-the-mill, try-but-you'll-be-back thing.
Listen to the music and
smell the roses.
Beatnik, like them that left to the road
bye to your six-figure making, Saturday mowing, PTA nagging,
gourmet cheese eating, college bill paying snob mentor.

But the id doesn't talk like that with
bodily pleasure
and no measure
of the future
just it will be and don't tell me that

I'm wrong I'm real
and that is not hard
to find

a chewtoy that is laying around and run with it til it is taken back to
its rightful owner
but you never recover your own and that is the real shame

I hate

two bit speech of myth books-on-the-shelf-staring-back-at-space
and I am blind and shuffle the deck of universals because
that is all of us
ambiguity means less for who cares
in the (my-new-chew-toy-hurts-my-throat) morning after.
I have a headache from this.

Mark Fullerton

The Bird Cage

I am a cage of bones.
Death builds
Its nest in me.

When nothing happens
I hear its wings rustling.

When I laugh
And stop suddenly,
I hear it echoing
Like a little bell.

Death is a bird held prisoner
In my cage of bones.

After eating my heart,
It will not leave.
It must have my soul as well.

Sabine Lawless

War

A child sits
Fixing the chaos,
His humid forehead
Wrapped in a dirty bandage.

A ray of black light
Shapes mangled windows.
Shadows are born old.

The empty glass he holds
Is cracked and shaking.
Shadows are born weak.

Darkness and blood.
The withered walls
Hear the sick cry out:

"I'd like to get you
In a trap that closed
Tighter every day,
I'd like to watch you
Gnaw the bars."

No Hawk, no Harpy
Disputes its place, poised at the sun
At the heart of life.

Crash! Marble bursts,
Is stains and dust.
Shadows are born old.

Drink? A thousand ghosts
Rush to hang their lips within his glass.
Shadows are born weak.

The broken mouth
Of his shattered head
Groans perpetually:

"I'd like to get you
In a trap that closed
Tighter every day,
I'd like to watch you
Gnaw the bars."

His tears turn shadows
Into substances
Strangely real.

Playtime is over.

Sabine Lawless

Burning Love

and so I wait . . .

. . . not for the flames,
they've already started.
He's taken care of that.
It's the resurrection
I'm holding my breath for.
Although it has yet
to fail me,
there are no guarantees
as I stand on the ashes
from before
and before
and before.

I'm not sure
I have another Phoenix left in me.

Randy Clyde Uhl

Sunday Morning, 10:47 AM

Kneeling before your millionth sacred altar,
my shoes don't fit and my suit's too tight.
I'm listening to your Liturgy wondering
if Montana will start this afternoon.
Did Eve buy those donuts I like to eat after
Mass? The ones with cream in the middle?

Your prophet is getting closer, helping
some fat lady with big breasts drink from the chalice.
I think she's had enough, Father. Won't
be able to drive home like that.
What time is it? The pregame show starts
at 11:30.

Now he's watering the kid next to me
who will be putting down a few tonight
from the longneck bottles before groping
his girlfriend and arguing about chastity.
Reminds me of me
and Eve on our third or fourth date.
She was worried about Commandments, too.

OK, here you are.
I drink the blood. I chew the flesh
and swallow, tasting how
awful goodness is.

D'Artagnon Flewelling

October in Hinton

A train passes each night
through this Iowa farm town.
The co-op locks tight and
the hum of the huge dryers

pushes the town to sleep.
Each morning fat wagons
rumble past the main street bar
standing solitary like .

a cocklebur in a town of corn.
Dusty tires on wagons and trucks
wait around the corner,
millions of yellow kernels

weighing them down. The flavors
of fresh ground feed
and coffee crackle the alleyways
and mingle in open windows.

The sound of grain shifts down
from the wagons, crosses the grates,
and tumbles into the bins,
then spreads out

to coat the rooftops.
Each kernel glimmers and disappears,
drenched by the morning dust.
Farmers full of ripe air

and fields and soil
clamor out of town,
drift out of view
like chaff savoring the harvest.

Debra Kehrberg

Trucker's Ritual

When I heard him coughing
I knew he would awake
and I'd turn off the TV
and run upstairs to leave him
alone.

I'd seen this scene before.

Stumble to the bathroom
then sit at the table
drink his coffee
smoke his Kools
talk to Mom and
cough some more.

Get dressed and slap a pen
into his shirt-pocket.
Pour the change into his pants-pocket
to join the snotrag already within.

Out the door
into the pickup I'd packed
with his things.
Gun the motor
back out the driveway
up the road
out of sight.

The taillights have disappeared a million times
from my view in the upstairs window.

D'Artagnon Flewelling

How did you do it, Sylvia?

You stuffed sheets under bedroom doors
not to keep out the frigid air of February
on Fitzroy Road but to keep out death.
You borrowed stamps from old Trevor Thomas,
your disgruntled neighbor, and for once
he smiles — does not take your coins.
(Did you plan to mail letters in the morning
from the hospital bed?)
Did you calmly place the mugs of milk,
the plates of bread on nightstands?
Did Nick cling to your neck for a good night kiss?
Did Frieda pick the bedtime story?
Were you teasing as you pulled up blankets?
Was it hard to turn around,
to walk out, to leave them alone,
to watch your feet step down into Yeats's kitchen,
to place the pillow for your head,
to lay your face in the gas from the oven?
Did you think the new nanny would find you breathing?
Were you sure you could manage it
— another walking miracle?
When you awoke to find your death, were you relieved,
or were you shocked in your own intense way?

Debra Kehrberg

Screening Reality

A Tale of the Future

Steve Gregg

The stadium loomed ever closer.

Riles thought the weather was feisty. The wind constantly tormented his cap, lifting it from his head, wrestling it to the ground. He had to constantly pick up the defenseless hat from the waterlogged earth. Yep. A defenseless hat, he thought. And a brand new one at that.

The wind was not the only thing that troubled Riles today. Being superstitious and believing in omens, Riles had often sought predictions from the sky. You see, today was his favorite football team's important playoff game. Should they win, they would be heading to the playoffs for the first time ever. And he wanted to be there to see history in the making. So it made perfect sense to him to consult with the heavens to see what climate outfit they would don today. If it was sunny, the game would be won. The sun and a few clouds meant his team would endure a little adversity in their triumph. If the sun was constantly fighting the clouds for attention, his team may well be in for a fight. Riles did not dare think of the other condition.

When he looked out his window his worst dream had been realized.

Overcast.

He carried his deep concern with him all day, telling his two friends, Josh and Rayleen, about what he felt.

"Don't worry, Riles," said Josh, watching his friend adjust his cap. "Our team will do well. We're favored to win, you know."

Riles was not consoled.

"I don't know," he replied. "Remember the Stallions' blowout game to Dallas? It snowed that day."

Rayleen rolled her eyes.

"The weather does not predetermine the outcome of a game. Relax, Riles. We'll win."

If Rayleen had not been so knowledgeable about the game, Riles would have still persisted in his argument. But she knew the game, and aside from all of that, he had a crush on her.

"I hope you're right," he said, smiling towards her.

She returned his smile, which caused Riles to quickly look away.

Having reached the procession gathered at the entrances of the stadium, the trio was reduced to a standstill, which only increased Riles's discomfort.

The aroma of food had caused hunger pangs in the three friends' stomachs. The tailgaters and their scents of many grilled foods hung heavy around the stadium, temporarily distracting the fans' concern for the game. The three had eaten some of the varied food earlier, but found they were far too excited to eat

much. Now they regretted it.

Rayleen knew they were getting ever closer to the inner confines of the stadium when she heard the computerized feminine voice informing incoming fans not to bring confetti, balloons, or other such objects that would float in the air or land on the field. Rayleen shook her head.

"The football league really messed up with that rule," she said. "I mean, don't you guys think rules like that keep the fans from feeling the full taste of victory? It's like we have to be civilized when we cheer. I wish they would negate that rule."

Josh shrugged.

"Well, the rule has been around for a few seasons, and attendance hasn't slipped. In fact, due to the increased excitement of the game, attendance has actually grown."

The other two remained quiet, looking ahead of the line. They had nearly reached the entrance.

Thirty minutes later Riles barely averted disaster.

Josh and Rayleen were embarrassed for their friend. The moment the security guard discovered Riles's Swiss army knife, the guard had been melodramatic, yelling and waving his arms, making a scene.

"I swear that's all it is!" protested Riles. "It's my lucky charm. I simply forgot to leave it at home!"

The guard, whose name was Knute, scowled disapproval. He inhaled deeply, wanting to vent intimidation on this cocky little kid. The man hated Riles the moment he saw him. Punk high school kids having expensive football tickets. They didn't know how lucky they were. Why, when he was a kid . . .

"You realize what I have to do, don't you? Because of this knife you have violated all laws set forth by this franchise, as well as city and state mandates. By law, I'm forced to have you exiled from the premises."

Riles caught the faint smirk. Tears overwhelmed his orbs.

"Officer, please! It's just my lucky charm. I don't go anywhere without it. I--"

"Looks like it is anything but lucky, kid. Sorry, but--"

"Hey!" yelled a bystander. "Let the kid go! It's kids like him that allow jobs like yours to even exist!"

"Yeah!" cried another. "If you're that intimidated by that frail piece of metal, maybe you don't have the mettle it takes to perform your duty!"

Knute, taken aback by the unexpected surge of hostilities, tried to regain composure.

"Bu-but this kid is, uh, in violation of --"

"Oh violation, smiolation! Let the kid go. You're holding the rest of us up!"

The rest of the crowd voiced their disgruntlement, forcing Knute to capitulate.

late. The officer looked at Riles, clearing his throat.

"With everyone's safety in mind, I am confiscating this item. You may regain possession of the knife when you depart, following the end of the game."

Knute held out his chest, pocketing the knife. He was pleased with himself for regaining control of the situation and the respect of the crowd. He motioned for Riles to proceed, and he did so quickly, joining his two friends.

Knute turned back to the crowd again, smiling. An elderly lady stopped by the guard.

"You should be ashamed of yourself, you hoodlum!"

She moved on.

Others followed her example, walking past and belittling the guard.

Knute simply stood dumbfounded, his mouth agape. He had never felt so small in his life. Angrily, the guard looked behind him, catching a glimpse of Riles walking down the corridor. His eyes burned, his mind vowing revenge.

The game was going into the second quarter when disaster struck the Stallions. Up by a mere field goal, their quarterback threw a key interception which resulted in a touchdown for the opposing team. Riles nearly threw up.

"Settle down!" cried Rayleen, observing her friend. "There's plenty of time. After halftime there's still thirty minutes of football left. We can still win." She rubbed his back, moving her hand in a slow circular fashion.

Riles's nausea suddenly vanished. Excitement again grew within his person. He decided to gamble. He slowly shook his head.

"Oh, I really don't know, Rayleen! I'm just so . . . so . . . worried." Burying his face in his hands, he feigned sniffing.

Rayleen was touched. She put her arm around him.

"I know how much a win would mean to you," she whispered, kissing his cheek.

Riles's eyes widened. Again, he called on his roleplaying alter ego.

"But what if my team loses? I, oh, I don't think I could handle it."

He looked away. Rayleen grabbed his chin, forcing Riles to look into her face.

"I'll be here to comfort you."

She smiled, licking her lips, causing Riles to involuntarily twitch. Rayleen again regarded the game.

Man, I hope the Stallions lose, he thought. I hope they lose and lose badly.

The Stallions were losing at halftime by eleven points. Everyone on the side of the Stallions was dismayed. Everyone, that is, except Riles. Suddenly, he became the opposing team's number one fan.

During the break, Riles left the other two. He went about the task of finding the restroom, ignoring the feminine computerized voice informing everyone in the stadium to stay out of the Buffer Zone that surrounded the field. To walk in

the Buffer Zone was illegal, and trespassers could very well be shot on sight. Everyone had heard this many times before, which was why many people, like Riles, ignored the inanimate woman. He walked into the bathroom, impatiently scanning the crowded area. He sighed displeasure and picked out the smallest line he saw.

Twenty minutes later Riles zipped up his pants angrily. He had heard the cheers from the crowd, which obviously meant the Stallions were doing something right. He gritted his teeth and headed for the exit. If the Stallions were starting to win, that was bad. He saw his chances with Rayleen dwindling before his very eyes. Actually, what really was in front of Riles was the same guard he had confronted at the gate. Obsessed with Rayleen, he hadn't noticed Knute walking into the bathroom. Knute, having just turned the bend, saw Riles coming but was not quick enough to avoid the collision. Both went sprawling to the floor.

Knute stood up, enraged. He pointed at Riles.

"Haven't you had enough excitement for one day, boy?"

Riles stood up.

"Uh, yes, yes sir," he replied, readjusting his cap.

Knute regarded him for a moment. He then took a step forward, lowering his voice to a whisper.

"You, boy, will have a new understanding of what misfortune is when the game ends. Remember, pretty boy, I still have your pitiful lucky charm."

Knute smiled, walking past Riles, giving him a push with his shoulder.

Riles regarded him with contempt, swallowing hard. He turned away from the hated man, walking out of the room. He had nearly reached the entrance when something on the floor caught his eye. Looking down, he saw his lucky Swiss army knife. Smiling, he picked it up, rubbing it between his fingers.

"Oh yeah! Whew, now I don't have to stop by that officer again." He pocketed the prized possession.

"You know," he said aloud, "I think that guard wanted to kill me."

Josh and Rayleen seemed worried when Riles finally arrived.

"Jeez, what in all that's holy took you so long?" asked Josh.

Riles smiled, revealing his knife. The other two displayed shock and surprise.

"How did you get that?" asked Rayleen. "You can't have that in here. The guard--"

"Bumped into me in the bathroom," Riles said, inaccurately finishing her sentence. "When I bumped into him the jolt must have freed the knife. Pretty simple."

The other two smiled, shaking their heads.

"You always manage to avoid trouble," Josh said, looking at the field. Riles smiled.

"I heard the weirdest thing when I was getting a drink," Rayleen said after awhile. "There were these two guys talking about the game. They said they thought it was weird how football seemed so much more exciting than it used to be. They weren't complaining, but they said the Game seemed like it was unreal somehow. You know. Like the games had been rehearsed or something. It seemed too perfect."

She waited for a reply but received none. Realizing she was being ignored, Rayleen angrily rolled her eyes, again watching the game.

The stadium had been silenced into shock. With only two minutes left to go it became apparent the Stallions would not be going to the playoffs this year. Seeing their team losing by three touchdowns and a field goal, many people began emptying the stadium. The trio of friends sat, two regarding the game with dismay, the other inwardly smiling. Riles knew he was in store for a memorable evening.

He had noticed Rayleen eyeing him with concern each time the Stallions gave up a touchdown. He knew his performances had succeeded, as even now she continued to pat his thigh, rubbing slowly. He had thanked his lucky knife throughout the game.

Josh, quiet for most of the game (authentically wounded by his team's performance), suddenly came to life.

"Hey guys! I've got a great idea. Let's see if we can grab one of the players' towels! You know, as a souvenir!"

Rayleen and Riles eyed him as if he were insane.

"Uh, hello, McFly!" crooned Riles. "That means we would have to get onto the field. Which means going through the Buffer Zone! You know, that one last place where no man has gone before."

Rayleen was quick to agree.

"He's right, Josh. We would never get past the Zone. The fans would see us."

Josh shook his head.

"No. We wouldn't go in broad daylight! We would hide underneath the bleachers and wait until everyone cleared the stadium. At the rate everyone is leaving that'll be soon enough."

Rayleen looked at Riles. He didn't like the gleam in her eyes. He knew what that meant and he was chagrined. Rayleen, girl or not, had an insatiable hunger for adventure and he knew that Josh's plan now appealed to her. Great. Now that wonderful evening would be put off just a little bit longer. He shrugged.

"Okay Josh. What do we do?"

Riles pushed as much of the debris away as he could.

He did concede that Josh's plan had worked without the notice of fans. Josh had offered a plan of lying under separate rows of bleachers. This would still allow them to hear each other, and not arouse any unwanted attention. Sure the

plan worked, but it was a messy one. Soda, having been spilled hours ago, now lay in a syrupy state by his face. Riles cringed, trying hard to ignore the fact that his jersey was being soiled.

It was about an hour later when the trio emerged from their places of hiding. The stadium, now only partly lit, was quiet. The field of artificial turf lay emptied before them, towels and other articles of clothes lying everywhere.

Josh moved forward quietly.

"Okay, guys," he whispered. "Let's hurry up and grab some towels. This is creepier than I imagined." He moved quickly down the steps.

Rayleen and Riles followed just as quickly on his heels.

"What happens if we get caught?" asked a nervous Rayleen.

Riles shook his head. "Don't think of getting caught. But if we do, we'll just say we were doing kinky stuff in the bathrooms or something." He laughed.

Josh and Rayleen did not.

Everyone's blood pressure immediately increased the moment they confronted the Buffer Zone. They looked at one another nervously, daring the other to walk first. Josh, ignoring the beads of sweat forming on his forehead, took an unsteady step forward.

When the expected alarms and firing squad did not materialize, they all approached the field, their confidence heightened. They were now within reach of their souvenirs. Only a four foot wall stood in their way.

Josh smiled.

"Well," he asked, "who's going first?"

"Ladies first," offered Riles.

Rayleen smiled, backing up to get a running start at hurdling the wall.

"Okay then. Here I go."

The two guys watched Rayleen pick up her speed. Utilizing her gymnastics skill, Rayleen placed her hands on the wall, flipping over. She hadn't completed her flip when she suddenly vanished.

The boys looked at each other in complete shock. Looking back on the field, they found it remained as it had before Rayleen's flip.

Empty.

"Wh-where's Rayleen?"

Josh couldn't answer his friend's question. Moments of uncertainty passed. Then an idea crossed through the boys' minds almost simultaneously.

What if she got hurt? Man, they would be instantly caught, probably forever banned from the stadium. Worse, they would have to go home and face upset parents. Shock had suddenly given way to panic.

"Riles! Let's get out of here!"

Just as the boys were preparing to depart, Rayleen's head reappeared.

"Where do you guys think you're going?"

Riles had to cover his mouth, stifling a naked scream. Josh was horrified by the appearance of Rayleen's severed head. The boys were further paralyzed with

fear when Rayleen's head smiled.

"What's wrong with you guys?" she asked. "You two look as if you've seen a ghost!"

The blood had left Riles's face. He blinked, not believing what he saw.

Rayleen's head, appearing to be suspended in mid-air by absolutely nothing, continued talking.

"You guys should see what is in here! You'll never believe it!"

Her arms appeared, motioning the boys to follow. Josh and Riles did not move.

"Oh you idiots!" she cried. "I'm okay! Now hurry. Get in here!"

The boys looked at each other. Together they moved forward, hesitating when they got to the wall, unsure of what might occur. Both let out a startled scream when two hands appeared out of thin air, pulling them both inside.

When Riles opened his eyes, he saw Rayleen standing in front of him.

He regarded her cautiously, wanting to know how her head had been reattached to the rest of her body.

"Boy, are you dumb!" she exclaimed. "Look around you, Riles! Tell me what you see."

Riles looked beyond her. He saw the bleachers, lit only by half of the stadium's lights. He saw the debris left by fans. He then looked at the field. The sight that greeted his eyes caused consternation.

Yes, the field was still there. However, there was something different about it. Again, shockwaves coursed through his being.

The field of natural grass was torn up in many places.

Josh noticed the field too. It did not look at all like the one they saw from the bleachers.

"What's going on around here?"

Rayleen shook her head.

"I don't know, but I think we've discovered something very big. Something no one is supposed to know anything about."

Riles took his turn at shaking his head.

"I don't understand this. What are you talking about? I'm confused."

Josh exhaled slowly.

"That's a real field, Riles. A real, true-to-life football field that hasn't been touched by a football team in over ten years."

Kevin Moss had never gotten so far.

After sneaking his fiancée, Valerie, into the surveillance room, one thing had led to another.

Valerie had wanted to watch the game from the best seat in the house.

Kevin, being head surveillance, had the key to the Room, which would allow him to watch the game from whatever camera angle he preferred. When the Stallions

started losing in the third quarter, the couple started kissing, slowly moving on to more intimate means of increasing their passion. Now, as Josh, Rayleen, and Riles had made their move on the field, the only person in the entire stadium who could have stopped them was presently half undressed, trying hard to keep his fiancée quiet.

"Oh, Kevin! This is so . . . romantic!" Valerie breathed, pressing her lips hard against his. "I love you."

Kevin smiled as she let her blouse fall to the floor.

"And I love you," he said, failing to look at her face.

Suddenly, the lights came on. Valerie immediately shrieked, quickly reaching for her blouse.

Kevin stood up, pulling on his pants as he did so.

"What is going on in here?"

Kevin paled. That deep, penetrating voice was unmistakable. There was only one man who harbored such a cold, intimidating voice.

The team owner, Regis Murphy.

He looked at the two with distaste. He shook his head, preparing to leave, when the cameras caught his attention.

Regis froze. Seeing the cameras on, displaying various areas of the stadium, had caused his heart to skip a beat. There was a problem here. He cleared his throat.

"Why are those cameras still on?"

Kevin stood, not understanding.

"Why are those cameras on?! The game ended over an hour ago! After the Scan, those cameras automatically shut off. Why are they still on?"

Kevin was scared. He was not even aware the game was over.

Regis felt looming disaster. An hour had passed and the Interior Scan had not been performed. If there were any people walking about the stadium, without supervision . . .

He hurriedly walked over to the console. Punching in a series of numbers, Regis activated the Scan.

Above him, the main screen came to life, displaying a computer-generated image of the stadium. The Scan went to each angle of the building, searching for unwanted visitors. During the long moments of silence, Kevin prayed fervently, hoping beyond hope nobody had stuck around. When the Scan reached the football field, a series of beeps sounded, announcing intruders. Hearing the beeps, Kevin relinquished all hope, resigned to his fate.

"You have failed me," whispered Regis coldly. He reached inside of his suit.

"Please!" begged Kevin, "let Valerie go! She didn't do anything!"

Valerie panicked, not understanding what was going on. When she saw the silencer emerge from the depths of Regis's suit, she quickly understood, and screamed.

Kevin made a heroic dive, attempting to throw Regis off balance. He

succeeded only in receiving the first bullet, which entered his jaw, crushing teeth, and lodged somewhere in his throat. Blood flooded his mouth, causing him to gurgle. He tried turning to Valerie to apologize, but there was too much blood. He did manage to look at Valerie, which he instantly regretted. He saw her mouth ajar, obviously screaming. He couldn't hear her and didn't want to. Her face, locked in morbid terror, was his last glimpse of her.

Valerie continued to scream, witnessing the death of her fiance. They were long, piercing screams, which were suddenly ended with uncompromising finality.

Rayleen hugged herself, trying to rid sudden chills.

The three teenagers were attempting to figure out what was going on. The truth, as Rayleen recalled, was always the best policy. However, she was beginning to feel this case may have proved the only exception. Should the truth in this case be revealed, she thought, it may cost them their lives.

"So what we've been seeing is a . . . a . . . image?" asked Riles.

Josh nodded.

"I'll wager that's why we couldn't bring anything that would land on the field. Those objects would have easily penetrated the screen, which would have been witnessed by thousands of fans. The Buffer Zone, I'll bet, didn't exist to protect the players. It was meant to keep people from finding out the truth."

Rayleen sighed.

"So the football league has fooled all of us. No real football teams, no playoffs, no Super Bowl, nothing. Everything we grew up watching didn't even exist."

Rayleen's statement had a profound effect on the boys. They instantly recalled the many moments of sadness and heartache when watching their team lose the close ones, the many times each rejoiced at having beaten a defending Super Bowl champ, the anxiety attacks which occurred during dramatic endings. While Riles felt a certain embarrassment at having been fooled, Josh was angry.

"I feel . . . manipulated. I mean, think of how we anguished over our team, win or lose. The football league controlled our emotions for how many years now? Ten?"

"Ever since the rules barring flying objects were put into effect, I'm sure." Rayleen offered. "Remember how we thought we were the lucky generation, you know, having virtual reality and everything? Man, after this I wonder how many things in our lives are real."

Josh agreed.

"If the football league is doing this, everyone else is. That would explain why every sports arena in America has a dome."

For the first time, the gravity of the situation dawned on Riles.

"If a big business like the football league is doing this, there's no way the government doesn't know about it. In fact, if they do know about it, I wonder how much of what we see in the news is false."

"Boy, this is so scary," added Rayleen. "I suddenly feel so . . . insecure about everything." She looked at the boys. "What's real and what isn't?"

Joshed sighed heavily, his anger rising.

"I don't know, Rayleen, but one thing is for sure. We're going to let the world know what we just discovered. That means getting out of here now, unnoticed."

Nervously, the trio clambered back over the wall. They were well on their way out of the Buffer Zone when alarms suddenly ripped through the stadium.

Knute, upset at having lost Riles's pocket knife and a chance at nailing the punk kid, was frightened.

Why, on God's green earth, were the alarms going off?

Other security guards were hurriedly filling up the room. They all were asking questions, afraid, not knowing what to do. Knute told them to shut up.

"Alright," he boomed, attempting to seize control. "It's quite obvious we have a situation here. Had this been a drill I would have been notified by the big cheese. I wasn't, so--"

Knute was interrupted by the sudden formation of a holographic image. When the image formed to its full height and the static cleared, the guards recognized the holo as being Regis Murphy. He looked most unhappy.

"We have a breach in security! Three delinquents have compromised the reality screen. They are still within the confines of the arena, and I want them to stay there."

Knute had a question.

"What happens if they are not there when we arrive?"

Regis's eyes formed into cold slits. There was little contemplation.

"You kill them. I don't think I have to tell you what happens to us in the unfortunate event that they escape."

The image of Regis disappeared.

Knute turned to the rest of the assemblage. He felt uncomfortable at the idea of taking the lives of people dumb enough to snoop around in the stadium. But if not killing them meant his job, well, that was something else entirely.

"Alright boys! You heard the chief. Let's get those intruders!"

The guards left the room running. Knute followed, unsure of what was about to happen.

The three friends had reached the corridors.

Rayleen, having stopped screaming, was trying to control her heart. She felt stark terror, a feeling unknown before. Having been a fan of action movies, she had always envisioned moments such as this one. Running, avoiding certain death, and escaping. Now that her dream had been realized, she wanted none of it. Unlike in the movies, the only thing she was certain about was the fact that they were running. The latter part of her dream, she realized, was about to be

unveiled.

They were breathing hard when they reached the corridors. Josh had motioned the other two to stay back while he looked beyond the corner.

Empty.

"Okay, let's go."

The moment they stepped out of the arena, Riles felt cold. He couldn't explain it, but the feeling told him of impending doom.

The trio continued running fast towards the nearest exit, when the alarms stopped. They could suddenly hear their own footsteps, which were being amplified by the long hollow corridor.

Impossibly, their hearts beat faster.

Their optimism greatly increased as they neared a long, slow turning corner which, each knew, led to the way out.

Home free, thought Rayleen. Just like in the movies.

Knute's headset came to life.

Having stopped the beeping, he turned the dial over. Knute recognized Regis's voice.

"They've escaped the arena! They're now coming towards you."

Knute was surprised.

"They are coming towards us?!"

"Of course, you belligerent!" screamed Regis. "You're the nearest exit. When you confront them, contain them. There is another group of guards coming in from the other side of the building. I'll join you soon."

The headset went silent.

Knute told the guards to ready their guns.

The trio had reached the corner. So had Knute and his guards.

Rayleen screamed when she saw the guards, their weapons trained on her and the boys. Her mind told her this didn't happen in the movies.

"Do not move!" yelled a roly-poly guard. "Any move you make will be seen as an act of aggression, whereupon we will shoot."

Riles instantly recognized the guard. Yep, the same one who had taken his knife.

An idea hit him. He reached into his pants, searching for the lucky charm. His movement caught the attention of Knute. The guard began yelling when he recognized the boy.

"You again?! Well, looks like you didn't escape me! I thought I lost you, once I discovered I had misplaced that knife."

At that moment, Riles withdrew the pocket knife, hurtling it towards the guards.

"It's a bomb!" one of the guards yelled.

Everyone, except the trio, made a mad dash for cover. Knute scrambled

around, bumping into his men. The knife slid, bouncing off people's feet, halting a little beyond the group of harried men. The men slowly uncovered their heads, having felt no explosion. When they saw the supposed bomb was no more than an old Swiss army knife, their embarrassment soon turned into rage.

"Hurry up!" yelled Knute, wiping the sweat from his brow. "They're gone!"

If the situation hadn't been so damned scary, Riles would have been laughing hysterically. Boy, did those idiots fall for that one! The look on their faces, yelling and bumping into each other like that! Hilarious.

He followed Josh and Rayleen back into the arena.

"Maybe the guards don't know about the field being fake!" yelled Josh. "We'll hide in the hologram!"

They raced down the aisle, crossing the Buffer Zone, diving into the image.

The guards led by Knute entered from one side. The guards summoned by Regis rushed in on the other. They crowded at the bottom of the aisle, stopping short of the Zone.

"Where are they, Knute?" yelled the opposite guard. "I don't see them."

Knute was confounded. Inside the hologram, the three friends didn't breath, their lives hanging in the balance. Rayleen buried her face in Riles's shoulder, her arms tightly wrapped around him.

Regis Murphy finally entered the fray. He panted his exhaustion, making his way to the bottom, joining the guards.

"What the hell are you staring at? Fire!"

"Into the hologram?" asked Knute, confused.

"Yes, you infidel! They're in the hologram!"

Angrily, Regis yanked the weapon from Knute. Aiming straight ahead, he fired.

Rayleen screamed as she was pushed to the floor. Riles and Josh joined her, covering their heads. They winced at the noise, which had gone from a single shot to a sudden deafening roar of exchanged fire.

When Regis fired, a guard on the other side cried out in pain, collapsing to the floor dead. Obsessed with killing the kids, Regis did not realize what he had done. He simply continued firing his weapon, the bullets passing through the hologram, over the heads of the kids, into the bodies of the unsuspecting guards.

The men, stunned into stupidity, simply fired back. Theirs was a reflexive action, simply defending themselves.

The guards on Regis's side screamed, bullets ripping into their bodies. They sought refuge, firing back.

All of this, having occurred in the span of mere seconds, wreaked havoc in the arena. Regis Murphy was one of the few standing when bullets ripped into his jaw and torso. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Knute, his cowardice sending him into hiding, crouched on the floor, praying harder than he ever had in Sunday school. People were crying out in anguish,

falling dead all around him. This must have been in the fine print when he signed his contract, he thought.

Moments later the firing subsided. The smell of gunfire hung heavy in the air. The stadium was eerily quiet.

Knute raised his head, looking slowly around. There were a few guards on the other side still standing. They bore faces of shock and horror. Knute looked around and saw all of his men dead, including Regis Murphy.

"Hey! Look at that!" yelled one of the men.

Everyone focused on the center of the arena. The image was gone, revealing the old field and three frightened friends. They still had not looked up.

Knute knew what had to be done. With his boss dead, along with many of his men, there was but one way to get out of this mess once society found out. Tell the truth.

He walked onto the field, his men looking on. He reached the middle of the field and stopped.

Riles was the first to look up. When he saw his nemesis, Riles was rendered speechless. The guard brought his hand out of his pants pocket, revealing the pocket knife. He let it fall to the ground.

"Here's your knife, kid."

Riles regarded the knife, and then the guard. Knute reached out his hand, helping Riles up. His friends got up too. Knute looked nervously at the teenagers.

"I think it's about time we went out into the world and gave it a dose of reality."

A haze had settled in the arena, a result of the firefight. Josh turned and regarded the field, deep in reflection. Years ago, that old musty field had been the scene of real and true heroes. Today, he thought, the field had been the scene of a new brand of heroes. No, not football players, but simple citizens, who were about to add a new chapter of truth and reality in the book of humanity. He turned, following Riles and Rayleen. They were hand in hand, heads together. Josh wasn't sure, but he could have sworn Riles was rubbing his lucky Swiss army knife.

