

# CORNFIELD REVIEW

2005-2006





# **CORNFIELD REVIEW**

**OR,**

**AN ENLIGHTENED COLLECTION OF  
WORK IN THE AREA OF  
THE LIBERAL ARTS AND HUMANITIES AS  
ENVISIONED, ENABLED, EXPRESSED,  
CREATED, AND COMPILED BY  
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The Ohio State University at Marion

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# KATHERINE McCONNELL

## Nabel and Her Cat

THE SAME THING happened the last time Nabel tried to poison her cat. She felt her collar grow thicker. Wool rose in her throat. Before she knew it, she just couldn't breathe. Dr. Singer had told her, written it down a couple times like a prescription but, all the same, Nabel couldn't remember the precise steps. She shuffled around her silent apartment stumbling over the limp brown body stretched in front of her television set. Her chair swiveled and buckled with her falling weight, flipping Yum-Yum's saucer and the last of its lethal milk across the carpet. Nabel began to panic, searched her mind faster for the doctor's steps. *deep breaths first, breathe Annabel, even if you can't breathe. Listen to the air going in and out and in and then follow it to the next sound and then to the next and when there's nothing left to hear just open your eyes—slowly—and look right through the wall, don't stop for anything until your eyes just fall back in place. Focus on the thing they stop on and then move onto the next thing and then the next until you're looking at your feet and up your legs into your belly and your hands resting on it. Look at your hands. Just look at your hands. There. Breathe. Easy.*

There. It wasn't exactly right, but she managed. Dr. Singer said if she kept getting better she'd be fine, good enough to go off the pills even. She hated them — like swallowing gummy cigarette butts right out of the ashtray.

Nabel quit smoking six years ago, right after Cleary's stroke. Aneurism, really. Right out of the clear blue and right in the middle of dinner. Chomping his pot roast, smearing gravy on the table beneath his ring finger and then on the cabinet door, stretching for his heart pills. He shook the stove in a queer sort of way, his knees tapping awkward beats, left right — right left and his face turned yellow under the hood lamp, then heated to a panicky orange before his arms reached for the hanging brass pan, then the stovetop, then the table as he lurched closer to Nabel. Finally Cleary was just grabbing for the carpet. By the time Nabel was standing over him, a limp baby carrot stabbed on the end of her Corningware fork halfway to her wondering mouth, Cleary was an awful shade of gray, and when Nabel pushed her old fingers into the soft spot behind his ear, Clarence Fosnaugh Brown wasn't breathing anymore.

Nabel was breathing fine again. The fingers on her left hand twitched and unclenched. Always came back to her a few seconds before the right, on account of her arthritis, she figured. She slumped in her La-Z-Boy, panting, her chin bent into her chest. Nabel forgot herself. Reaching her hands over the orange velvet arms, Nabel hoisted herself up, forearms quivering, until she was sitting sideways but upright in her chair. She pressed her sweaty forehead into the upholstery and enjoyed a few deep breaths before the thought slipped through her ear like the narrow iron of a nail file: *What if the cat's not dead yet?*

Her body tensed. She strained her ears. Nothing but the electronic hum of her muted television. Her eyes darted to the end of the table. The lamp, thanks heaven,

had stayed put during the panic. Nabel held out the same hope for her glasses. She saw the light reflected in their lenses, right on the *Tribune* daily crossword where she'd left them. She swiped at them and they skittered into her lap. Nabel fumbled the glasses onto her face, her jumpy fingers pressing the frames to her brow. She focused, her vision centered on the living room rug four feet in front of her.

Yum-Yum, posed with the tall dignity of a tomb-cat, turned his gaze straight on her. The Siamese held Nabel's eyes, their black shallows not half as deep as his blue marbled orbs, until he could smell the sweat rising in her palms again. Yum-Yum let his lids fall together and released the old woman with one prolonged, impatient blink.

The cat arched, neck craned until its dense body was bent nearly double, and licked the fur down along her telephone stand, pawing gingerly over the tangled cord before slipping into the black of Nabel's bedroom.

Nabel's locked knuckles pressed the glasses to her temples and she didn't blink until she heard his meaty pounce coil the springs of her single bed.

She didn't grab her ten-pound handbag or tie on her plastic rain cap, or stop to slip on her shoes. She just hefted herself out of the recliner and scooted down the short hallway out the door of her apartment. She hunched down the senior center hallway to the elevator. The doors closed, packing her inside with the smell of boiled ham, wet medical gauze, and pickled beets. Nabel wondered how much of the evening had gone by trying to take care of Yum-Yum. Had she set the VCR to tape her program? She thought she remembered programming it this afternoon, right after recording "Captain Blood" with Errol Flynn on channel 34, but she couldn't be sure. She reached for the emergency stop button, then jerked her hand back to her hip as if it had been slapped.

Nabel stepped off the elevator and out into the lobby's biting Lysol air. The linoleum breezeway always smelled sterile. She eyed the black rotary phone at the receptionist's window. Her son's telephone number ran across her mind, but barely paused as she hobbled past it, through the heavy swinging doors and out into the parking lot. She slowed her pace to a stop, her socks sticking to the April pavement like a cat's tongue as the rest of the evening's rain soaked through to her soles. She turned and looked back up at her apartment. *Tonite's special two-hour-long episode of "Murder, She Wrote,"* she thought one last time before she'd turned on heels and elbows and mall-walked down the senior center walkway.

IT WASN'T EVEN nine at night, but Nabel was alone on the corner of Walnut and Main, the town silent except for the distant peel of tires over wet asphalt. She brushed beads of rain from the bus stop bench and eased down. The majestic marble façade of the senior center rose up behind her, dwarfing her scant frame. Cleary had taken her there once when they were young, to celebrate their tenth anniversary. Back then it was the best hotel in town, with a cinema built right into the ground floor. She remembered how he gazed at her over their blueberry pancakes and scrambled eggs on the last day of their weekend stay, and whispered that he wished they could live there for good. They'd laughed about giving little Billy his own bedroom several floors down.

Bill had stepped right in to help Nabel sort things out after Cleary's funeral. Bill made his money in real estate. He moved in on homeowners whose mortgages were one step from foreclosure, bought them up for dimes on the dollar, hired undocumented Mexican teenagers to fix-up the property for four bucks an hour, then sold them at a two-hundred percent profit.

His parents' home was the most valuable property he'd ever gotten his hands on, and when he saw his chance to take it to market, he did.

After the service, Bill had ushered his mother up the stairs from the United Methodist basement, away from the smell of funeral casseroles and home-baked wake cookies. He hurried the petite old woman past the last few wrinkle-mouthed mourners and up to his silver Jetta. Bill hopped into the driver's seat and pushed the passenger door open for his mother. Nabel ducked and eased herself down into the leather seat. The back seat was full of Cleary's flowers, Nabel's new houseplants. The odor of condolence daisies and day-lilies made her head hurt. Her cheeks flushed.

"I found a buyer," Bill said, shifting into second and sipping away from the church. "Nice young couple, Mom. Great price. Plenty of money to move you into the new senior high-rise like Dad wanted. You're gonna like it Mom. I got you a nice unit with a balcony and cable and everything. There's a Buehler's right across the street. You just walk on over, pick up your groceries, and walk back home. You don't need to be driving Dad's big Olds. He always said it was too big for you anyway. Plenty of people calling about that, too."

"How will I get to Eastern Star if I don't have the car? And what about Muffy? She lives all the way out on Country Club Drive. We play bridge every Tuesday."

"Just call a cab, Mom. It's only ten bucks to anywhere in this town. Why can't Muffy come over to your place for card club?"

"She's got Pitterpat."

"She's got what?"

"Pitterpat, her poodle."

"So?"

"Well she can't just leave the poor thing."

"Muffy can't leave her dog alone in her house for a couple of hours to visit you?"

You girls are starting to worry me. Maybe I shouldn't give you your surprise."

"What are you talking about, Billy?"

"Jesus, Mom, I know this isn't easy, but wouldya try and pay attention? I'm talking about your new best friend, a roomie, some company for your new place. C'mon upstairs and I'll show you."

Bill pulled up in front of the old hotel, punched his hazards and left his Volkswagen to idle beside the unfed meter.

"This is it, Mom, your new home. Come check it out." He opened Nabel's door and pulled her up from the seat by her wrists.

Bill held his mother's arm, a broom handle wrapped in black knit dress sleeves and her good cloth raincoat. He led her through the double doors of the breezeway, which were terribly heavy considering the average upper-body strength of the majority of the building's tenants. Nabel followed her son into the elevator. The doors opened onto the fourth floor.

The interior of the building had lost all traces of the glamour Nabel recalled from her last visit. Instead of long strides across a tapestry of royal blue fleur-de-lis weaved in rich red pile, Nabel shuffled her shoes over smooth berber Stainguard, several feet spreading between them as she followed her son down the fluorescent beige hallway. It smelled like leftovers from a week's worth of geriatric dinners. Boiled chicken. Egg noodles. Baked cod. Bill stopped in front of 416, took out a set of keys and opened Nabel's new front door.

Nabel stood back from the door and watched her son walk straight in like he owned the place. He was shaved and efficient with his manicured sideburns and four-button blue suit. Nabel waited in the hallway. Her fingers picked at each other as if she were furiously knitting.

"Jesus, Mom, what are you doing out there? The movers'll be here in the morning and we have to decide where you want

everything."

Bill's voice sounded too nasal when he was impatient, almost like he had been raised in Minnesota rather than central Ohio. It irritated Nabel, but she followed his muffled echo and stood looking into the bare, narrow unit from the doorway. The round tips of her Easy Spirits toed the thin gold threshold. She could hear Bill shuffling around somewhere deeper in the apartment and her chest jumped when he strode from behind a corner into the living room. He was still talking, though Nabel hadn't picked up a word of it. The plastic case he was carrying bucked from end to end until he set it down on the standard-issue tan carpeting.

"Come on in here Mom and shut the door. Jesus. Just come on over and see what I bought for you."

Nabel listened to her son. The door was light and closed easily. It didn't sound sturdy and oaken like the old double doors at the house. She guessed she'd have to get used to that hollow sound and the unsatisfying weight of the doorknob in her palm. She shuffled into the room and stopped when she was standing over the case.

"What's in there?"

A delicate mew echoed inside the box's own bare walls.

"It's your very own cat, Mom. Siamese, purebred. So — what are you gonna call it?"

YUM-YUM WAS demanding to begin with. He allowed the old woman to touch his coat, but only when the air was dry and itchy, or before he settled into a nap. He had her trained within a month to deliver water, milk, and Fancy Feast at exactly eight in the morning, two in the afternoon, and eight o'clock at night. She'd resisted three servings at first, instead piling too much food into the dish to avoid the extra feeding. Yum-Yum wouldn't touch the mush once it had turned crisp and black at the



edges. He'd asked her politely at first — a series of protest meows — but she'd ignored him and let him sit staring at the dish of stale slop until his pride rose up his tight sandpaper throat. He only had to shred the old woman's sheer window dressings once — she wasn't dumb at all, just rude — before she'd obliged him with fresh afternoon servings.

Sometimes the old woman liked to leave in the evening, not often, just three or four times every new moon. Still, Yum-Yum was irritated with her distraction. In the evening, the cat was inclined to finish his dinner, bathe and let the woman brush him from ears to tail until he was dreaming. This routine pleased him, and her absence showed the utmost inconsideration, if not intentional neglect on her part. Yum-Yum's thoughts ticked as quick and regular as a clock without those long, calming brush strokes. If there was no old woman, there were no brush strokes and his mind wound tight and tighter behind the calm of his sleek face. The cat could not bear any suggestion of his dependence.

The last time she'd upset him so, he sat poised, boiling behind his metered blinking until the constant repetitive recognition of her insolence filled every atom of his compact body and he sprang from his stony pose into animated rage. His transformation from sculpture to flipping, hissing energy was so sudden as to be imperceptible. Yum-Yum left no newspaper unshredded, no collectible teacup unshattered, no cushion untainted by his cloying ammonia spray. The old woman had wept when she's returned that night. It was the last night she'd ever spent away from him.

THE MOVE HAD been a complete upheaval of Nabel's routine. Bill stayed home long enough to see his father in the ground and his mother taken care of. Her furniture arrived the day after Cleary's burial, and

Bill had sold their house within two weeks. After all the details had been settled, Bill headed back to his condo up north, leaving Nabel by herself. Alone except for the cat.

Nabel spent her widowed mornings fussing over coffee and medication. During the day she worked from her easy chair, scheduling her television programming as if she kept the trains running on time. She trekked over to Kroger's twice a week for VHS tapes. They came in packs of three, and she filled them all — hundreds — all catalogued and registered with the titles of familiar films from her childbearing years, gossipy biographies of resurrected silver-screen icons, and her favorite syndicated British mystery series. She talked to Muffy on the telephone three or four times a week, but she didn't get out to see her at all anymore, not since it upset the cat so much when she left him.

Muffy never visited Nabel, either. She had come to the apartment once. It was the day Nabel's new tape got stuck in the VCR and she had to jimmy it out in time to record a showing of "The Secret Cottage" on AMC. She was so focused on her task that she had forgotten Yum-Yum's afternoon feeding.

Yum-Yum waited next to his dish. He watched Nabel's rigid arthritic hands poke and shake the machine with no sign of progress. Once the cat's patience had wasted completely away, his posture melted into measured strides from his dish to her kneeling lap. Yum-Yum sat between Nabel and the entertainment system. As soon as she returned his stare, the cat pounced for her. He landed tightly on her right arm, her bad arm, and hugged her wrist between his paws. His claws sank into her palm, holding it steady for his head to hammer her hand like a cobra. Her rice-paper skin punctured with every rapid strike. The cat's needle-teeth became daggers as their pressure punctured every arthritic nerve. Even the shallowest of wounds ripped into her

brittle joints. Nabel whimpered and jerked her arm, shaking it as much as she could given the cat's weight. Yum-Yum held tighter with every attempt to buck him. The beast's fangs sank deep into the thickest flesh between Nabel's thumb and forefinger, stabbed almost completely through until the points touched and then stabbed again in the raw wound. Nabel screamed. The cat sprang from her outstretched arm, ending her high-pitched yelp. Yum-Yum scurried into the bedroom, whiskers tracing thin lines of Nabel's blood along the white wall as he whisked around the corner.

Nabel's arm was gloved in thin ruby gruel. She was panting, panicking. Her mouth let out "ohhhh, oh, ooooh" in low, forced breaths. She found the phone and dialed Muffy with her good hand.

Nabel had seventeen stitches put into her hand and wrist. Muff walked her up to the apartment after the hospital. When the elevator stopped, Nabel held the doors closed.

"Will you stay here with me Muffy?"

"Oh no, no I couldn't Nabel. I don't want to stay out too long. I've got to feed the doggy. Pitterpat gets so nervous when I don't come home. Wees all over the place if she can't go outside when she needs to."

"Don't leave me here alone with the cat. Please, Muffy."

The elevator opened. Nabel stepped out into the hallway. Muffy stayed hunched in the bright little box.

"Oh Nabel, I'm sorry but I just couldn't. You don't know how Pitterpat gets. I should have had her dinner ready an hour ago." Muffy's hands began to knit together. Her words were shaky and rushed.

"Nabel, I've just got to get home." The elevator doors slid together and Nabel was alone in the long hall full of closed doors. Each knocker was hung with some wreath or handicraft to distinguish one resident from the next. Nabel's door was still blank after six years. She twisted her key and let

the door fall shut behind her.

She hurried through the living room and bedroom to lock herself in the bathroom. She hadn't seen any sign of Yum-Yum. She peeled the bandages from her wounds. The gauze stuck to the dried blood and snagged on the loose strings of the sutures. The doctor, a tidy young Indian woman, had cleaned her wounds, but Nabel didn't trust peroxide and Neosporin. She opened the mirrored medicine cabinet above the sink and took out a thick glass bottle of iodine. Bits of its yellowed label flaked off where her fingers held the tiny jar. Nabel gripped the lid between her teeth and twisted. Orange rinds of dried antiseptic stuck to her lips. The tincture tasted cold and bitter on the tip of her tongue. She leaned over the sink and gulped water from her cupped palm. *Poison*. The word splashed over her brain cool and bitter like water from the rusted tap.

Yum-Yum scratched at the other side of the bathroom door for his dinner.

Nabel raised her head from the basin. "Poison," she whispered to her reflection.

NABEL HAD NEVER tried to kill anything before the night she mixed tincture of iodine into Yum-Yum's Fancy Feast. The brown mush didn't even change color as she mashed the reset of the bottle's contents into the plate. She tapped the fork on the porcelain, and set the dish down just as Yum-Yum prowled into the kitchen. The cat lowered his nose to the bowl, his neck as slim and graceful as a giraffe's. The nose twitched; the lips parted to take in the full scent of the food. Some sour note rolled over his palate and triggered several olfactory alarms. Yum-Yum rose to his full height, the slippery smell of iodine still breathing through his parted lips. The tongue pushed past the tiny fangs. The cat panted at her as Nabel looked down into his glare. She

shrank under his accusation, lowered her eyes with the submission of a convicted felon. Yum-Yum left the dish untouched.

The cat began to sharpen its claws on the arm of Nabel's recliner. It hopped up onto her television set and began to lick its paws, nibbling and pulling with its teeth on each extended claw. The cat owned the old woman, and they both knew it.

NABEL HAD BEEN sure that she would succeed this time. She'd crushed up four of Dr. Singer's Xanex and let the powder dissolve in Yum-Yum's evening milk. Half of a pill made her fall asleep after one of her panic attacks. That was enough to sedate her through her tedious afternoons with the cat lording over her, watching her, following her, always ready in case she should forget her place in the world. She was the old woman, weak and wrinkled, and he was timelessly beautiful with an elegance that she, even in her richest years, had never achieved. The time in the world for her willfulness had passed. Every one of the cat's gestures reinforced this truth. Each time Yum-Yum stretched his lithe body along the center of her *TV Guide* when she was in the middle of her programming, or scattered her hand of solitaire across the carpet when he tired of watching her occupy herself, she slumped back in her easy chair, resigned to the inevitable, patiently waiting as he executed his own desires. Clearly, the only life that mattered in their apartment was that which was lived with strength, grace, and dignity.

Nabel had only possessed these qualities in the very shiniest moments of her life: her first time riding her father's mare, sitting so erect in the saddle, the disciplined feel of her laced boots; her first dance at the bandstand down at Lake Park in the new pink cotton dress her mother had sewn with Alan Christy's peony pinned on the firm bodice; her first time accepting a soldier's

proposal before the boy had been shipped over to Okinawa; the second time a ration-sized diamond was slipped onto her hand, this one after the bomb; her posture as she stood facing Cleary at the altar of his father's church in her silk beaded wedding dress, the most expensive gown she had ever owned; the burial of her first son; the hard, dry birth of her second; the funerals of her own mother, of her father, of each of her three older sisters and her younger brother, and finally of her dear Cleary. The closest Nabel's life had come to silver-screen perfection was this half-hour compilation of her best scenes connected by hours and days and years of bland costumes and dropped lines. She had dreamed most of her life, and she sat dreaming on the bus stop bench outside the old town hotel.

Nabel surveyed the deserted town square. No one. she had nothing now, nothing but her stranger son, her movies and her cat. Yum-Yum was the only thing of any reality or beauty in her life. She should have appreciated that the whole time instead of taking him for granted. She had done worse than that — she had tried to murder him, to kill everything he had that was long beyond her reach. how foolish for such a worn old woman to expect the devotion of a creature of ageless artistry. She had denied what she was, had taken pride in an image that had expired long ago, if it had ever really been to begin with. She'd seen it time and again: every heroine in her video collection answering for such cosmic delusions.

Nabel walked back to the apartment.

NOTHING HAD CHANGED inside the apartment since she'd left it. None of her collectibles had been destroyed, none of her plants uprooted and ground into the carpet. And Yum-Yum couldn't possibly have let her second attempt on his life pass without retribution. Maybe he had fallen asleep from

the medication. Maybe he was waiting for her in the bedroom. Maybe the dose had been large enough. *Maybe . . .*

"Yum-Yum? Yummm-Yummm," Nabel rubbed her fingers and called to him.

She looked in the bedroom. There he sat staring at her, waiting for her. His brush lay on the bed next to him. It was that time. Nabel set to make it all up, to humble herself, to repent, to resign. She picked up the brush and sat down on the bed next to Yum-Yum. He crawled into her lap and began to knead her thighs. It was inevitable that she should end this way, and by his grace she had another creature with whom to share every last moment. It was mercy; it was charity, maybe even love that kept her in his company. And he was again graceful enough to pardon her for her pride. She stroked his entire body.

When his claws first dug into her skin she thought it was just the pleasure of his grooming. But the nails didn't retract. They dug deeper into her leg than seemed possible. Nabel thought they would continue all the way down to the bone, and the pain was sharp and bright. She reared her head up to draw a deep breath while she still could. The air flowed in and she held it until she was sure the room would keep its focus. She focused on the dim corner of the apartment where she kept her videos. The cherry bookshelves stood empty. The floor of the alcove was buried in cardboard boxes and gutted plastic cartridges. Ten million minutes of film lay lifeless, ripped and ribboned on the cheap carpet.

Anger flashed through Nabel's brain for the first time in many years.

She hated the cat. She hated her son. She hated all those dead and dying friends and lovers. She wanted the illusion. She wanted the movie of her life, even if it was at best, made-for-TV rather than celluloid. She gritted her teeth against the shout that rose like bile to the back of her throat and raised the wide silver-plated hairbrush

up over her head. She brought it down on the back of Yum-Yum's biting skull. Twice. Three, four, five, six strokes. Her lap was wet. Fur clumped under her nails. Her arthritis flared and burned in her body and she collapsed from the release, the relief, the peace her violence brought, and buried her smiling, crying face deep in the cat's sliced and breathless body. It was closer than she'd been in many years to truth and beauty.







# JOHN SHUMATE

## The Zombie Guru

MY CIVIC WAS running on fumes when I stopped in front of the Holiday Inn. There I was, exhausted and relieved, prepared to enter the tenth annual Monster Wizard Tourney. The three-hundred mile trip to Chicago had cost me my job, my wife, and a couple-hundred bucks. I put the stick in park and rolled up the windows, my mind running through a host of images: the screaming match with Gloria, the slammed door, the zip over to the bank, the emptied savings account, the *fuck you* call to my boss. Gloria, my wife of five years, she haunted me through the entire trip, standing in my head, sitting in the passenger seat, her legs propped on the dash, her eyes and cheeks red and puffy — she wore that tight camouflage tee shirt I loved so much. I kept going back to that moment, three-hundred miles ago — she had dinner on the table, the works — mashed potatoes, Salisbury steak. The fight had begun the same as most of our fights. She had discovered, for the fourth time in three months, that I had spent half of my paycheck on Monster Wizard cards. But it was a necessity, I had in-

sisted — just adding a few last-minute power cards to my three Tourney decks. But that was another thing. The Tourney. She couldn't get it, me wasting all my time and effort on a trading card game. She had refused to go with me, then the Wendy's management team had refused to give me the week off. To Hell with all of them, I thought, reaching into the back seat and grabbing my deck box. I had played and trained for fifteen years. Fifteen years, all invested in that moment, the Monster Wizard Tourney. First place was ten-thousand dollars.

I sat the box on my lap. I brought nothing else. No clothes. No extra cards. No trade bait. I was a professional, making my competitive debut. Monster Wizards was a serious sport, and I had come to clean house. I caressed my deck box and everything but the task had vanished. Gloria was the last to leave my head, taking her time as usual, and I knew she would return before the day was out. Her camouflage tee shirt floated, bodiless for a second, impressions of her C cups springing from the chest, then diminishing, leaving only the brown and green patterns, preparing me for combat.

I arrived at the Holiday Inn with five hours to spare — enough time to take in the competition, enough time to size up the vending booths, to sip a Long Island iced tea or two in the lounge. I left the Civic and headed toward the sliding doors, a huge golden banner hanging over my head: *Holiday Inn Welcomes Fantasy Masters Inc. and the Tenth Annual Monster Wizard Tournament and Convention!* I was stoked. And so were the Gamers flanking me, most of them at least ten years my junior, wearing shirts blazoned with screeching dragons and half-naked valkyries, their hands loaded with luggage and card folders, backpacks brimming with all their spare commons and uncommons and rares. These were the adolescent novices who would fall under my experienced and honed wrath, who would hunker home

to their mommies to soothe their brutal defeats. By the time the glass door whooshed and closed behind us, our problems in the world had become neglected scraps, floating in the gutters surrounding the hotel. We were Gamers, and I was proud of our designation, our trade, our art. Geeks, they called us, those who couldn't understand, like Gloria. Weirdoes. Dweebs. Smelly freaks. But we knew better. We were good people.

The entrance opened into a gargantuan, circular plaza, the sky-lighted ceiling hundreds of feet over our heads, bathing the place in summer beams. In the heart of the plaza a small yet sufficient swimming pool was sectioned off with white ropes and striped life preservers, complete with a small booth selling Corona, for those who were too drunk, lazy or too laden with children to make it to the bar. I saw the cordoned entrance to the Convention, but I thought a drink was in order, so I turned into the small, neon and fake flower lounge across the way. I had all of our savings in my pocket — over a thousand bucks, enough to stay there for days, drinks included.

The bar was empty when I entered, sitting my deck box next to an ash tray and asking for a Long Island. The bartender was a pretty twenty-something redhead. She took one glance at my white, Fantasy Masters Inc. tee shirt and dismissed me, sliding my glass over with an empty stare. The Long Island was smooth, just what I needed to clear away the cobwebs. I had never been much of a drinker. In fact, that Long Island was my first in years, but on the eve of the most important display of talent in my life, a little hair of the dog was mandatory.

Halfway through the drink I was playing with a straw and humming along to the Annie Lennox Muzak when a troupe of Gamers giggled into the lounge. Five boys in all, they made their presence known by slamming onto their stools and shifting their deck boxes, talking loudly about the Tour-

ney, looking forward to busting out their Eight Eyed Demon Hounds by the second turn, to stomping their opponents with well-timed Mutant Beetle attacks. I couldn't help myself. Those boys were in need of a reality check.

"Mutant Beetles are way overrated, you know. Just look at how many have to be in play to do any damage. It takes ten rounds to get those things going."

The boy sitting closest whirled around on his stool and smirked. He was thin and blonde and full of energy, his blue eyes creeping out of their sockets, stained red around the rims, sizing me up. "You here for the Tourney, man? How old are you, anyway? Like thirty?" He elbowed the kid sitting next to him, who turned and licked his pierced lips, rested his head on the kid's shoulder. It was clear they were lovers.

"Thirty-one."

He smiled and lifted his white Russian. "Well good luck, Gramps. There ain't been a champ yet over the age of twenty." His boyfriend echoed the gesture, nodding and smiling, just one professional to another.

"Guess that counts you out too, then," I told the kid.

He winked. I finished my drink and left.

I DECIDED TO GRAB a room. I wanted all to be in order before I stepped into the Convention, but I was also teasing myself, flirting with the Candyland past the Convention Hall doors like a child taking his time walking to the tree on Christmas morning. The elevator overlooked the gigantic lobby, and as I slid up the hotel wall I watched the splashing and diving in the pool, slowly receding beneath my feet. An overweight father sat in a plastic lawn chair, a bottle of Heineken cradled in his crotch as he watched his two sons create havoc, throwing their goggles at each other, pushing each other into the water, screaming, cursing.

The room was a one bed job on the third floor, seventy bucks a night, complete with prints of bad Bob Ross paintings, a small desk, and enough pay-per-view porn to keep all the idle perverts happy. I sat on the large fluffy bed with my deck box, briefly clicking through the options: *Debbie Does Dallas*, *Two Girls and a Donkey*, *Butt Bashers Five*. I thought that this was my doom, at my age, abandoning my home, my wife, this was my doom: Clicking through detached and emotionless sex scenarios, a thick pane of glass separating me from the action. But then the deck box resting under my hand reminded me that I was not alone. I had only known Gloria for six years, but the bond I had with my cards held steady since I was a teenager. I could always count on the foil wrappers to be in every store, every hobby shop, neverending, always releasing and reformatting and illustrating, Fantasy Masters Inc. was a lover I could count on. Sure my collection wouldn't suck my dick or give me quickies, but I was never much for that kind of stuff anyway — I preferred the aphrodisiac of fresh ink on card stock, of knowing that my opponent didn't have shit in his hand, of winning at the last minute with a well-timed combo. I smiled, comparing the situation with a soap opera love affair, lurid and secret — I had vanished from reality, my true love in my arms, checking in to a distant hotel with gleaming chandeliers to drink expensive wine and wrap myself around my infidelity.

I turned the TV to local news and explored the bathroom, shaking my head, trying to lose the image of Gloria's tee shirt. But as I pissed in the sparkling white porcelain hole I had the misfortune to look down at the cabinet handles below the sink, and Gloria reappeared as if on cue, naked in the shower, pointing at the handles, her fingernails painted blood red. I shook and zipped, shaking my head and chanting *no*, but in spite of the terror I felt, I bent over and opened the cabinet. There were the

predictable stacks of heavenly white towels, arranged in order of size, and a few individually wrapped bars of coconut scented soap. But I knew what it meant to be looking in that cabinet, to have Gloria washing her hair and humming next to me, and I saw what she wanted me to see, the thing I had been avoiding for hours on the way to Chicago, the thing I had been avoiding when I had screamed at Gloria, the real thing which had pushed me into the Civic, to the bank, onto the open road: a thin strip of indented plastic sat between the stacks of towels, a little circle in the center displaying a blue plus sign.

I sat on the toilet lid and pushed my face into my hands, but the tears wouldn't come. I could feel the bustle of Gamers and Gaming swarming three floors under my room, and it comforted me. She didn't think I knew — I had found the evidence in the sink cabinet a day earlier, and that dinner, our private Last Supper — the Salisbury steak, the mashed potatoes, we could barely afford any of that, and it was always a special occasion, to not eat out of a box. That dinner had been part of Gloria's process, part of the act of revelation — she had prepared a delicious supper for us, and had I not slammed the door and sped to Chicago, she would have dropped the bomb. Sitting there on the toilet, my hands rubbing my temples, I pinched my eyes together and shoved the whole damned thing out into the gutters, where it belonged, on this of all days, with the rest of the shit, swirling, forever swirling, hundreds of feet beneath the cement. I wondered if I should find a job after the first night's round of competition. I could live in my car. I never had to go back at all. I could make friends there, fellow Gamers. I could swim in my cards for the rest of my life, being a kid with all the other kids, living to play and playing to live.

There was a knock at the door.

It was the boy from the bar, his hand hanging from the backpack strap around his

shoulder, a Monster Wizard ball cap now resting backwards on his head.

"Hey kid," I said. "Used to have a cap just like that."

"Oh yeah?" He leaned against the door frame. "Wear it backwards too?"

"What do you want kid?"

"Saw you coming in here a few minutes ago. I'm staying in the room next to you. Thought I'd come over and like say 'no hard feelings' you know. Sorry for being such a smart ass earlier. I mean it. I respect you, playing as long as you have. Look, if you wanna come over later, I got some primo smoke, man."

"Smoke?"

"Sure. After the first couple rounds. If you wanna come over. To smoke, or whatever, you're welcome." He backed up and motioned down the hall.

I stepped out a bit, taking in his half-opened door — number twelve, and the black and red patterns twisting under our feet, the dim fluorescent lighting barely illuminating the small corridor, giving the hall the look and sensation of a deep and imposing tunnel. "Thanks but no thanks, kid. Need to stay focused. Besides, haven't been into that stuff for years. Think I'll take a pass."

He shrugged and slid his feet to his door, which opened as he approached, revealing a pair of brown eyes, pierced above and below — the friend who had been sitting next to him in the lounge. I closed my door. Think I'll take a pass. Those last five words, they resonated, echoed in my empty room, through the bathroom, into the sink cabinet.

I opened my deck box, deciding to stack my decks one last time. I grabbed my weakest deck first because it needed the most care — I called the deck "Wicked Foliage." Its main theme was forest creatures and leaf-generated attack capabilities. I separated the cards into five stacks, based on category: Creature cards, Spell cards,

Combo cards, Modification cards, Trap cards. The beautiful illustrations flowed through my fingers. There was the elegant and large-breasted Dryad, the withering Tree Folk, the earthy Soil Zombie, their glossy faces rubbing my hands, slipping past and over one another, softer and finer than any woman's skin. During these quiet moments with my decks, pride and hope would surge through me, heightened by hasty glimpses of flavor text:

*In the thick wood of Karpassian Forest, I am the lord of fallen leaves and fertile earth, for I spring from the depths of the Underground Plains, where water runs clean and unmolested by the hands of man.*

*I feed on the carrion left by wars of greed and lust. I am one of the millions known as Soil Zombie, and in my wretched, armor-laden Hell, I anticipate the death of day, the birth of night, when I may roam freely through Karpassian Forest, feeding on the flesh of Mutant Owls and Beetles, or the occasional lost wanderer.*

I could taste the flavor text — it licked my tongue, my teeth, my gums, transporting me to that sweet realm of adolescence, making me nostalgic, as it always did, for the days of marching band lessons and girls with budding chests. But looking at “Wicked Foliage” also brought sadness, despair. There was something lingering over my dissected deck, intangible and cold. Gloria lowered the pressure in the shower and shouted into the room — she wanted to know if this was the sum total of my life, my identity, those thin slices of cardboard spread across the bed in tiny piles. She told me that I was being foolish, putting all my emotion and life within two-inch borders, investing in a one-sided relationship, a mass-produced love affair. Then softer, to herself, she mumbled that something must change. Something must be done about the deck box, about my collection. I would not leave, she insisted, as the same person. She would clean my sickness out and send me racing home. I laughed at her. She laughed

back, so I closed the bathroom door and finished my work. On the way to the Convention I stopped in the lounge for one last Long Island, and by the time I paid the kid guarding entrance to the Tourney I was limber, in my prime, ready for the worst assault, ready to conquer.

THE TOURNEY ROOM was as large and open as the main lobby, filled with evenly spaced square card tables, sanctioned judges proudly displaying their passes on strings around their necks, walking up and down the aisles, observing each duel, hands wrapped behind their backs. A humble silence permeated the entire room, most voices never rising above controlled whispers, the sound of shifting pieces of cardboard defining every move, every decision, every attack and defense. I looked for the signs of Gloria or her tee shirt, but my suspicions were confirmed — there, in what she must have considered the ultimate layer of evil, the dragon's den, the troll's cave, I was safe from her spectre eyes. She would stay in the shower, pestering me with every passing hour, every passing victory, until she broke me. But I would never give her that pleasure, I thought. She could follow me all the way to Chicago, tucked inside my brain, refusing to leave, but she wouldn't affect my resolve. I was a professional. I was a professional.

My first opponent was an eighteen year old with thick glasses, his face little more than one gigantic zit. His greasy hair fell into his eyes, and I quickly learned that he liked to swat his hair away when he had just drawn a particularly crucial card. For that first night I had selected my most powerful deck — I called it “Red Nightmare,” on account of all the Blood Ghosts and Vampire Ferrets which composed the main thrust of the deck. I slaughtered the kid. By the third round I had summoned my King Blood Phantom and I had devastated

his horde of Sponge Worms. I attacked with my Phantom, then played the Ultimate Damage Infliction Modification Card — a nasty little combo days gone by. The card involved was worth two-hundred dollars. My opponent bowed his head upon defeat, rose from the table and left silently to report his loss to the Grand Judge. I was elated. One of two duels won, which meant I qualified for tomorrow's competition, regardless of the outcome of the next duel.

It seemed that fate had something special planned for me and my unwanted neighbor — the kid ambled up to my table, slapping his deck down and smiling, twisting his cap in the proper direction. "I wear it this way when there's serious business at hand," he said, taking his seat across the table and waving to somebody across the room. "I can't believe it. Here we are. Guess we were destined to have it out, eh? I must have thrown one Hell of a gauntlet down in that lounge, huh?"

"Blind stupid luck," I said, annoyed with his coyness. "You know as well as I do, they pick the order by drawing names out of a hat." But I could tell then, hours before my sacrifice — the kid would pester me, follow me, haunt me until something came out of our misshapen relationship. It was in his fingers, tapping anxiously on the card table. It was in his arched, expectant eyebrows and his blue, searching eyes. There was nothing about that kid that did not annoy me, yet there I was, forced to face him for the third time in five hours.

"Yeah," he laughed, "out of a Monster Wizard hat, like mine!"

"Just cut the deck, would you? Let's get this thing over with."

"Got somewhere to go afterwards, do you? Like a little party down the hall?"

"I told you I wasn't coming. Just cut the deck already."

"Alrighty, Gramps — here goes nothing."

I shouldn't have been surprised

when the kid laid out the first Mutant Beetle on round two. I was standing well enough by that time with two Carrion Ghouls, but my Blood Phantom wasn't in my hand on the draw, so I would have to put up a sturdy defense until my power combo showed up. Things went downhill from there. the kid had the luck of the draw — by round three he had four Mutant Beetles because he had managed to play a restricted card (meaning only one allowed per deck, like my King Blood Phantom), the one card that could allow half a chance for a Beetle deck to work, a little card named Bug Factory, which allowed the owner to multiply his insect deployment by two. I was swarmed, only drawing enough peon Ghouls and Zombies to keep up with his Beetles for the first four rounds. After that I drew shit. His Beetle gamble had worked, the bastard. I lost on round six — the quickest beating I had experienced in at least four years. My one-thousand dollar pro deck had succumbed to a cheesy little common deck filled with ten cent Beetles. I was in a rage, but I tried my best not to reveal this to the kid. Both of our faces were red, mine from temper, his from embarrassment or sympathy, I couldn't tell which.

"So much for the uselessness of Mutant Beetles, eh?" He smiled, reaching over and poking my arm. "No hard feelings though, right? I mean, what a great deck, man. I could never afford the power you have in those cards. I'm impressed man, really." He reached over and tapped my deck box, the brief physical encounter with my treasures accompanied by eyes loaded with passion, desire. He had designs on my cards, I could feel it. He wanted my cards. I imagined him later that night, creeping into my room and stealing my box, zipping home with his boyfriend and tipping a few white Russians to celebrate the heist.

Before my jealousy turned into screaming or strangling I stood up without another word. I had managed one win, but



two would have secured my position. I heard the kid shouting behind me, something about seeing him at the party. I didn't turn around. As I reached the Grand Judge's booth to report my loss, it felt as though the kid's beetles were crawling all over my skin, down my shirt, into my boxers. What I needed, I thought, was some high-quality insecticide, to shove down the kid's disrespectful throat. I hadn't been a sore loser in years, but the old feeling crept over me as I left the Tourney room. I wanted to punch something. Someone.

I had to walk through the vending section to get out of the place — it was a blur of backpacks and thick guts under cheesy tee shirts. Young men and boys bumping into me from every direction, some absently cursing my lack of attention, others checking the contents of their bags after running into me or anybody else, paranoid that their precious finds were being pilaged a few feet away from the point of purchase. A tall man passed, holding his toddler by one hand and cradling a two foot statue of Gandalf in the other. As I reached the exit I noticed that many fathers were doing the same thing, keeping their eyes not on their children but on the highly expensive treasures in their sacks. The whole room was filled with the bastards, some sitting on the floor in corners, counting the ratio between money left and quantity of loot. Most of these passive convention-goers were not there to play but to arm themselves — they would scuttle away after the first night or the second, their wallets so light they could barely afford a couple value meals on the way home. It always ended like that, I had seen it time and time again, when food and gas were secondary necessities, survival taking a back seat to this or that ultra rare card, this or that missing combo, this or that autographed illustration of a photograph. Before I left I stepped up to the closest booth. An old man with a missing nostril stood behind the table, sur-

rounded by posters and packages of Monster Wizard action figures. The real treasures were under his wrinkled hands, under the glass case, spread out and protected by thick plastic sleeves. He grinned and played with his yellow goatee as I scanned the selection. He asked me what my pleasure was, and I pointed to the three-hundred dollar card in the center of the case. My pleasure, I told him, was the privilege of owning that card: Zombie Guru, the third copy for my collection. See, in Monster Wizards one copy is never enough. Four was ideal and five was great. Two more to go, I mused, feeling much better after my purchase, feeling much more at ease with leaving the Convention for the day.

AFTER TWO HASTY Long Islands from the lounge, I spent an hour restacking my decks and admiring my new purchase. The alcohol warmed my body, allowed me to forget the bitch in the bathroom, scrubbing her unmentionables with a lace squeegee. I fell asleep early, around ten or so, not bothering to crawl under the blankets or take off my clothes. My clothes. I would have to find a Wal-Mart in the morning to buy a new wardrobe, a few tee shirts and a couple pairs of shorts. Then maybe I could stop at the liquor store, get a few supplies, make my own Long Islands for the rest of the Tourney, and for less than five bucks a glass.

I dreamed of walking in and out of some Supercenter clothing department, picking the threads which would hold my new identity, leaving the store and making my Civic more comfortable until I could find an apartment and a new job. Installing a sink in the back seat. An oven in the trunk. A television in the dash. Things would be good, living out of my car, and better still if I won the Tourney. I floated to the podium to accept my first-place check, and I flew to the bank, taking enough time to stop in front for a press photo op, shaking hands

with the Grand Judge, who also passed me the key to the city. Gloria's camouflage tee shirt was the bank teller, counting my prize slowly, in one-dollar bills.

Screams threw me out of my dream. I ran to the door and cupped my ear. I recognized the kid's voice, higher in pitch, and the less familiar voice of another kid, probably his friend. They were having a lover's spat — I could only catch a few obvious obscenities. A door slammed. I cracked my door open slightly, peeked into the ill-lit tunnel. My eyes made contact with the pierced kid as he passed my door in a huff, wearing a tank top and jeans, his car keys hanging from his hand. This looked like more than a slight disagreement — this looked like me, running out on Gloria, slamming the door, going to the bank, speeding to Chicago. Final. Irreversible. Their relationship was over. I could see it in the kid's eyes, in the tears sparkling on his lip piercing. I felt at the time that the kid had received his just desserts — this was God slapping his hand for using those stupid Beetles. I chuckled, sat on the edge of the bed, considered *Two Girls and a Donkey*.

I was close to ordering the porn when the first thump landed on my door. The sound shook the Bob Ross paintings over my head, rattled the bed, the water in Gloria's tub. Then another thump. And another. Slow. Methodical. I sat on the edge of the bed, arms wrapped around my waist, shivering from the cold emanating from the crack under the door. I thought I could see stage fog sliding into the room from that crack, and the idle flickering of alien flashlights. The kid moaned from the other side:

"Gramps? Are you awake, Gramps? Come on, man. I need someone to talk to. Pleeese. We can party. Wanna party? I knooooow you're awake in there, Gramps."

I backed up and covered myself with blankets, peeked over the top. I didn't want to get involved. I wanted to tell the kid this,

but I wanted more to keep my presence secret. He was only a jilted lover, wanting comfort and reassurance from an adult, but his pounding and moaning seemed more like the ramblings of the creature on the card sitting on my small desk — he was the Zombie Guru, wanting to eat my flesh, to steal my cards, to play with my blood. I think he was still out there, jiggling the handle and whispering when I lost track of sound and time. I fell back asleep.

THE DONKEY SAT in the corner of my dream room, staring at me and the kid, sitting cross-legged on a waterbed the size of a football field. A huge grinding machine covered half the bed between us, clanking with determination.

"This will be the shit, man. I promise," the kid said, stuffing a handful of Mutant Beetle cards into a spout on the machine, which processed and shredded the cards into bits of confetti, spat out on the other end of the machine, onto a flower-embroidered plate. The kid took the plate, sat it on his lap and sprinkled the confetti into a blunt. "The Beetles are best for toking." He lit the blunt and passed. We sat in silence, smoking and bobbing our heads to the beat of the grinding machine's gyrations. I felt the smoke enter not only my lungs but my stomach and my brain and my arms and legs, numbing everything, making it all feel better. "Yeah," I said, "put that in your pipe and smoke it, Gloria."

"Who is Gloria?" the kid asked.

"Just some bitch," I exhaled, inhaled, coughed out a chunk of illustration. The donkey raised his head and smiled a huge, cartoon smile. "And who are you?" I asked the donkey, but the kid answered:

"I'm you."

SWEAT COVERED MY body when I woke up at four in the morning, trembling

from the ambient horror of the dream. I stumbled into the bathroom and threw cold water over my pale face. Gloria was in the tub, lying in a pool of steaming bubbles, a towel draped over her forehead. She lifted a foot and pointed her big toe — not at the sink cabinet but at the wall, past the wall, into the next room, the kid's room. She was right, there was something pulling me in that direction. I didn't care about the little bastard or his romantic problems, but still the urge persisted, to go down the hall, to face the tunnel, to open the door and see what was inside. I grabbed a fresh towel from the cabinet and wiped my face. As I left the bathroom Gloria splashed me — she told me to be sure to grab my wallet, and especially my deck box. I decided that if I was foolish enough to follow her lead to a virtual stranger's hotel room at four in the morning, then I might as well bring the shit with me too. I wiped my hands across my tee shirt, making sure my hands were dry, picked up my deck box. I felt that the box was more significant to me at that moment than at any time in the preceding fifteen years. A halo of self-determination surrounded the box, an aura of omen, premonition. I tucked it under my arm, confirmed that my wallet was in my pocket then left the room.

A few bulbs must have blown while I was asleep, because there was no hallway left when I stepped out. just darkness, the only beacon being the light emanating from the kid's door — it was hanging half open, orange light bouncing and skipping across the hall, the light of a television fireplace, crackling and popping from inside the room. I took my time heading to the door. In my hazy, half asleep malaise, I expected the Devil himself to pop out at any second, or perhaps one of his minions. Perhaps it would be the King Blood Phantom, come from the depths of some ancient hole to end it all.

I stood in the front of the door, thinking about turning tail, jumping back

into bed and sleeping my weird urges away, but the door squeaked open with its own ghost momentum, and the light swallowed me. Before I could adjust my eyes, I heard the kid's voice, small, skipping to my ear like a fleck of dust:

"Hey, there he is! Gramps! Come on in, man!"

I was too dazed to notice how it happened, but the door closed behind me — I was in a world of smoke and jumping TV reflections. The smoke cleared away. The room was exactly like mine, only one large Picasso print stood in stead of the Bob Ross landscapes. The kid was sitting in the middle of the bed and I just stood there, looking back and forth from the contorted bodies in the print to the kid, slumped, legs folded, a glass pipe resting against his crotch. I felt his bulging eyes going over me, his blue pupils now lost in a maze of twisted and blated veins. My mind and body seemed to go on auto pilot and some hidden puppeteer asked the random question, I felt the words slip out of my mouth. "What has happened here?"

The kid's eyes weren't on me at all — he couldn't keep them straight. His left eye rolled into the back of his head and his other eye moved frantically as he said "the fucker left me." The words slurred into each other. He must have been nodding for hours before I had entered, but weed wasn't enough to trash a person so thoroughly.

"Why?" the puppeteer asked.

The kid shook his head and pointed to the small desk across the room. My eyes followed, rested on a small baggie, torn open and covered with tiny white rocks. "He was sick of it. Tried to hide it from him. Told me I was killin myself. That's why, you know, I wanted you to join us, Gramps. I coulda told him the shit was yours."

"Is that coke?"

"Crack."

Even the puppeteer was lost for words. The kid was a fucking crack head.

And the pipe between his legs, it wasn't a bong at all. It was a light bulb, the insides ripped out and the bottom torn away — it was a crack pipe.

The kid smiled and slumped over further, a string of drool sliding down his chin and onto the flowery sheets. He smiled, looked directly beside me, as if he thought I was a few feet to the left. "Hey, is those yer decks? Man, I bet those are killah. Did ya wanna play or something?"

This time the puppeteer spoke without hesitation: "This is for you." I threw the box on the bed, feeling an invisible tension, an elastic pull between the box and my hand as it flew through the air. The box bounced off of the sheet and landed beside the kid's pipe. As soon as it landed I felt the puppeteer loosen the strings. I was terrified. The box was already calling my name, furious of my neglect, my blatant disregard. I could feel the impression of the missing box around my palm, like an amputee's ghost appendage. I knew at that moment why Gloria had shoved me in the situation — this kid needed the company more. This kid needed a new lover, and so did I. He might go downstairs in the morning and hock my decks for crack, but I doubted it. Even half-serious Tourney players couldn't deal with the guilt of giving up such gems. "Use these in the Tourney. You'll probably win. And use the prize money to check into rehab, or to find your friend." The words had their own momentum, their own power and authority. For the first time in my life I was being a parent, and it felt good. I knew my words were hollow. I saw that I was feeding an addict more addiction, rewarding him for being a slobbering fool, but I didn't care, and that felt good too. I didn't care about the one thing I had spent half my life caring about. My deck box belonged in that room, right next to the crack, and there it would stay.

"What!" The kid screamed, as if personally scarred by my action. "You can't

do that! Don't do it, Gramps! There must be a thousand dollars wortha cards in here! You want these, right? Right!"

"I have to leave now."

"At four inna morning? Come on man, you can't do this!"

The kid crawled to the edge of the bed, pushing his pipe out of the way, fighting with passion to keep his eyes focused on me, but they won the battle, focusing instead on the relinquished deck box, reflecting his real desire — to tear in to the box and review the spoils. He looked like a blathering creature on the face of a Monster Wizard card, inching his way toward his prey. He was not aware of his actions — the puppeteer had possessed him, and he was playing out the motions, personifying my lost deck box, begging me to reconsider, while at the same time wanting me to leave.

I turned and ran out the door, followed by the kid's moans and objections: "Gramps! Gramps! Graaamps!"

THE ELEVATOR COULDN'T get me to the lobby fast enough. I leaned against the rails, tapping the glass and watching the pool beneath crawl towards me. The elevator chimed its first floor arrival and I sprinted out, my mind still in the dark tunnel three floors above, only one objective in mind, until I reached the pool.

It was deserted. The Lobby was vacant, lit by small ballasts buried in the floor, uplighting the whole place in a sick yellow glow. The pool stretched out in front of me, lit as well from the bottom, small ripples playing across the surface. I turned around and looked at the third floor balcony — Gloria stood there, looking down on me, wrapped in a pink towel, her wet hair dangling over the ledge. She nodded and mouthed the words: "You're almost there."

I dove into the pool.

I stayed under all the way across, fighting the weight of my soaked clothes.

Somewhere between the shallow and the deep line it became a mission, feeling my age as I kicked, as I pushed with my arms, trying to keep tabs on the amount of air left in my lungs. I was a pro by the end of the swim, my muscles numb from the exertion, it felt so effortless, so smooth and easy, to fly through the chlorine and kid piss, to cut through the water like a steel-bodied Olympian. I felt powerful, in control, lost in the liquid surrounding my body, becoming one with that simple element, feeling it enter my nostrils and ears and mouth — the water, the water, the water.

I emerged, spraying the water everywhere and squirting it out of my mouth in a stream, lifting myself out of the pool in one swift motion, standing triumphant next to the Corona booth. I didn't pause to take a breath. I was still swimming, my course clearly defined, past the sliding doors and into the budding sunlight. I would go home and make a glorious entrance through the door. I would slap the remaining money onto the kitchen table, next to the Salisbury steak which would certainly still be waiting for me, the bills fresh, clean and sterilized by my long swim home. My journey would be flanked by signs of optimism: *Never too little! Never too late!* My hometown would give me a grand homecoming, complete with a parade of old men driving little buggies, clowns with smiley-faced balloons, the Mayor riding in a sparkling convertible, ready to give me the key to the city. I would have the key to the city. Wendy's Management would be pleased with my early return — they would sweep that nasty *fuck you* message under the Dave Thomas rug in front of the registers. The kid three floors over my head would visit me years later, to tell me that he flushed the crack down the toilet, that he had won the Tourney, that he had take my advice, got cleaned up, made something of himself.

She sliding doors spat me into the parking lot and I shoved my hands in my

pockets, whistling that Annie Lennox tune with a passion. My left hand rested on a soggy piece of cardboard — it was the card I had purchased, the Zombie Guru. I studied the card for a second as I walked to my Civic. The illustration was one of the best in the series — a crumbling horror with long teeth and blazing red eyes, a tattered black robe covering his decomposing body. Even through the mush the card had not lost its gloss, its soft sheen playing with my fingers. I stopped halfway to the Civic, turned round and looked at the golden banner, instinctively squeezing the water out of the damaged Ultra Rare in my hand. maybe I should keep it, I thought, as a memento of my passage into the realm of responsibility, where all the bills are paid on time, where wife and husband spend a couple hours in a bar every weekend, laughing and complimenting each other on their beautiful children. I looked at the hours displayed on the sliding doors — the lounge would be open soon. Maybe I should stay, have a Long Island first. One for the road.

I read the flavor text at the bottom of the card:

*I am that which cannot be seen or heard with the naked eye. I change form with the flick of a finger, and I follow you around every belabored corner, past every crack in the road, over every rickety bridge you try to cross. I crawl into your lover's bed when you are away defending your little slice of land, and I slide my cold fingers around her waist, giving her the last embrace she will ever know. I am the Zombie Guru, and nothing can stand in my way.*





# JOHN SHUMATE

## The Day Laura Died

HERE SHE IS, drinking coffee in the kitchen on a Saturday morning. She is wearing a pink bathrobe and blue bunny slippers. A cool spring breeze blows through a window, shuffling her long brunette hair over her face, obscuring her view of Rick, her husband, who is cramming eggs and toast into his mouth. A rush of pain flows through her bruised cheek and she massages the spot, brushing the hair away from her eyes and watching Rick drip egg yolk and bread crumbs over his janitor uniform. There will be an orchestra concert at Marion Harding High tomorrow, and Rick has been called in to clean for eight hours, in preparation for the event. Today is Laura's thirtieth birthday, but Rick is too preoccupied with the dread of scrubbing urinals to acknowledge the fact. Today is Laura's thirtieth birthday, but she is confined to the house for the day while Rick scrubs urinals, confined to baby-sitting Junior and Carl, their elementary school children playing outside, jumping on a trampoline, enjoying the first day of Spring Break. Today is Laura's thirtieth birthday but she doesn't plan to take a shower or get dressed or visit relatives or

do much more than drink Maxwell House out of her "Life's a Beach" coffee mug. Today is Laura's thirtieth birthday, but there doesn't seem to be any indication that the world cares — the front page of the *Marion Star* says there are terrorists killing innocent civilians, that the unemployment rate is skyrocketing, that the police are looking for a wheelchair thief, that authorities found the body of a seven-year-old girl floating in the Delaware Dam, that, in short, the world is going to Hell in a hand-basket while Rick scrubs urinals. She gulps the last ground-ridden bit of coffee in her mug and lights a Newport.

"More coffee, Rick?" She hears herself ask.

Rick stops his shoveling long enough to check the level of coffee in his Dale Earnhardt mug. "No. Have to go soon. What does the paper say?"

She scans the front page again, remembering the details of the paper's contents. "Two-hundred more teachers are being laid-off in the Central Ohio area. There was a Pro-Choice riot in Columbus. They still haven't caught that serial flasher. It's going to rain all next week. They found a dead girl in Delaware Dam, that Jill Preston who went missing last September. Do you remember?" No answer. She looks at the picture of the dead girl, almost a mug shot, little Jill Preston, age seven, missing since September, buried under moss and fish feces. She had been staring at the picture for hours, long before Rick and the kids woke up, thinking about what it must be like, to lose a daughter. Missing since September — she remembers the reports, the fizzling search parties, the crying parents losing hope, accepting their daughter's fate, accepting her for dead a month after the searching ended. Missing since September, but it seemed so much longer to Laura.

Rick nods, as if carefully weighing the bout of information. He drops his fork onto the empty flower-patterned plate,

scratches his goatee and adjusts his gold wedding band, sliding the ring up and down his ring finger, allowing his finger to breathe. Rick's extendable key ring jingles from his waist as he stands and scrapes crumbs from his shirt. He studies a spot of dry yolk near his pen-pocket. He scrapes the yellow goo for a second, then concedes with a sigh. Laura wonders how many hours she has spent in the past ten years, just washing that single shirt, and she resents Rick's carelessness. She resents a good deal of Rick, or rather the cool, stubborn, uncommunicative Rick to whom she is now married.

Today is Laura's thirtieth birthday. Last night she spent half an hour looking at her flab and her stretch marks in their upstairs bathroom while Rick masturbated to lesbian porn in the bedroom — "warming up" he calls it. As she gripped her scarred paunch she heard Kitty Supremo begging and moaning: "Turn me into a slut. Turn me into a slut." She thought of their boys, Junior and Carl, and she wondered how much porn they had listened to over the years, in their bedroom on the other side of the stairway, jumping under their Harry Potter sheets and pretending to sleep when Rick peeked into their door. "Maybe we should quiet down some," Rick was prone to musing while slapping Laura on the thigh. Laura knew that her husband considered their sex life "hot" and "nasty," but Laura thought those adjectives were bred from the Lion's Den paraphernalia which had crept into their closet. She wondered if Rick actually believed he was in love with her, as opposed to Kitty Supremo and Ginger Love and Angela Flesh.

Rick slides in his chair and hovers over Laura for a second, kisses her forehead. "I really wish you'd trim this shit," he mumbles, yanking a long piece of hair out of his mouth. She follows Rick through the laundry room and to the backdoor, thinking about Kitty Supremo's shoulder-length hair, Kitty Supremo's inflated and pouting

lips, Kitty Supremo's hairless vagina.

"Have a good one, honey. I'll be back for lunch," Rick says, opening the backyard gate, vanishing behind the knot-hole infested fence surrounding the yard, into his grey Monte Carlo and gone, gone, gone to scrub urinals. Junior and Carl are sitting on the edge of the huge black trampoline, four feet above the ground, staring in silence at their father's exit, absolutely motionless, only resuming their actions when their father's car is out of ear shot. They share their mother's hair color and they are wearing matching Pokemon t-shirts. Carl is cocking his Supersoaker 5000 and Junior throws a Nerf ball into some bushes across the yard.

Laura looks at the dreadful condition of the backyard, again rubbing the bruise on her cheek — Rick has yet to improve the yard for spring. He hasn't done much in the way of home improvement since the beginning of autumn, inside or out. A discarded lightning rod juts out of a pile of trash in the far corner, a few yards away from the trampoline, its business end poking the air. She grinds her teeth — she had hoped Rick would get rid of the rod over the winter, but still it rests in that soggy pile, endangering her kids with its rusty presence. Blue tarps with ancient puddles cover the lawn chairs and a heap of tools and wooden ladders are congregating in the shin-high grass along the back of the house. The house. It was once yellow, but most of the paint has cracked off, showing the dark green wood underneath. Even if they could afford the paint she doubts if Rick would ever get around to painting the house, and as a result she has been ostracized by the neighborhood over the course of a few years. She has noticed that the decline in baby shower and barbecue invitations is directly proportioned to the passing of yellow paint: a corner of the house shed paint and the Brewers ignored Laura's friendly waves; a chunk of the front porch lost its luster and

the Mandells stopped offering to baby-sit; a few feet of paint disappeared from the second story windows and the Harmons stopped visiting for coffee and gossip.

"Junior," Laura commands, "go around front and get yesterday's mail. Sit it on the kitchen table."

Junior nods and whispers into his brother's ear: "Race you."

Laura looks at her children for two seconds and closes the screen door, her mouth watering from the idle thought of coffee, more coffee. She stumbles into the kitchen and opens a cabinet, searching for a fresh pack of CoffeeMate filters, but she notices something else in the back of the cabinet.

"Slow down in here!" She shouts as Junior and Carl whirl through the kitchen, slamming a wad of mail onto the table.

"Can't Mom, I'm *it*!" Junior shouts as they circle through the laundry room and slam out the backdoor. Laura rubs her temples, staring at the mail sprawling across the table. The Columbia Gas bill has found a home on Rick's dirty plate. Flicking on the light above the sink, she resumes her inspection of the cabinet. There is something else in the back of the cabinet: a half-full bottle of Jose Cuervo.

As she places the bottle on the counter her mind races back to the binge-birthdays of yesteryear, when such an occasion was of little concern, nothing more than an excuse to take the day off work and get plastered with friends. It was all such a blur, running around with gin and tonic and joints in hand, the world seeping with possibility, boys holding their tongues and fists in quiet preparation for their first piece of ass, weaving in and out of booty-dancing crowds, worrying only about spilling drinks or burning cigarette holes in skirts and jeans.

She looks out of the kitchen window: Carl and Junior have continued their trampoline games, flopping about in the midst of all the white spring noise, their

giggles and infantile curses mixed with the chatter of cardinals, squirrels, barking dogs. She studies the lightning rod past her jumping children, gauging the distance, too big and rusty to move on her own, without any help. Impossible, she thinks, the boys could never jump high or hard enough to fly so far. As long as they don't touch it, don't grab it, don't try to use it as a light saber, it will be fine. Turning her back on the hazard, she returns to the table, hand sliding down the neck of the liquor bottle.

She does the math, a simple proportion problem: Rick gets drunk three and four times a week, returning home from Whitey's tavern hours after his shift, while on the other side of the equation, she has been sober for two years, including the day of her father's funeral, which the whole of her extended family took as an easy justification for throwing a kegger. One bored and depressed housewife. Two distracted kids on the dawn of Spring Break. One bottle of tequila. "Jose, you win," she smiles, slamming a *South Park* shot glass onto the kitchen table.

The first and second shots are malignant. The fourth and fifth shots are benign. She is grateful to discover that the pain in her cheek leaves after shot number five. Shot number six is waiting on the sidelines when she reaches out for the heap of mail: Verizon phone bill, MasterCard application, Value Pack, Fashion Bug Spring Fling Advert, Papa John's Pizza Coupons and at the bottom, a red envelope addressed to Laura, with no return address. The alcohol swimming in her blood triggers a hyper-emotional skip of the heart — could it be, she wonders, somebody remembered my birthday? She tears the envelope and smiles, licking the liquor coating her lips — it's a Hallmark card with a Van Gogh sunflower painting on the cover. She opens the card: "Happy Birthday!" and beneath that somebody has scribbled the words "We here at Dr. Schmeltzer's Chiropractic Center wish

you the happiest of birthdays! (740) 555-6281."

She downs shot number six and throws the card onto Rick's empty plate. Carrying the mess to the trash can, she enjoys the drunken challenge of dumping the contents of the plate into the trash. A slice of crust falls to the floor, which she ignores. She throws the plate into the sink, grabs the Jose and the shot glass and stumbles into the living room, tripping over the Super Nintendo on the way to her couch — wires and games are scattered over the carpet, in front of the faux-wood entertainment center. She looks down at the mess of antiquated electronics, and Super Mario World looks up at her. She puts the cartridge into the Super Nintendo and flips the power button, having never played a video game in her life. But today is the day for new experiences, more Jose.

The neon green and red of Mario World blinks from the television, and she loses herself in the glow of it, the room spinning now, mixed with the family photos surrounding her from every corner, she takes stock, bobbing her head in time with the bleeps of the video game — she sees a silver frame float by, a snapshot of ten years ago, when she and Rick had first met, tucked within the frame's borders, they are smiling, arms draped around each other, their hair perfectly arranged, Rick's eyes in mid-wink, two glasses of Chardonnay in the foreground. And faster, faster, another photo appears, the whole family in the woods, the kids angry because they've been asked to stand still. Rick is the only person smiling, holding a large bass in one hand and a bottle of Heineken in the other, keys dangling from his leather belt. Laura is behind them all, looking slightly to the left, zoning out, as she remembers, to the steady flow of mobile homes lumbering across the nearby interstate.

She blinks and reads the screen: "New Game, One Player Select, Two Player

Select.” She moves the cursor to “One Player” and presses the start button.

Half an hour and three shots of Jose later and Laura is Mario, on an epic quest to save the beloved Princess Peach, with the help of the turtle-eating dinosaur Yoshi. She is, as many gamers would submit, in the zone. Jose sits beside her, twirling his mustache and grinning, offering suggestions which only seem to complicate matters:

“Try to jump over that large gap, maybe there’s something cool on the other side. Go into that giant ghost’s mouth, there might be a way to beat him from the inside out. What do you mean you thought you heard Carl crying? You have a kingdom to save!” But in spite of Jose’s annoying advice Laura enjoys the absent flipping of buttons, her brain going into autopilot, relishing the ease and idle frustrations of playing children’s games. She crosses the Donut Plains and treks through the Boss Castle which blocks her path to the caverns beyond. She dies in the Castle three times, unable to pass the zombie skeleton turtle guarding the door to the Boss. For the fourth time she collides with the turtle and Mario stops in his tracks, shrugs his shoulders, falls off of the screen. Her face turns red and she clenches her teeth. “Fuckin turtle.” A menu appears — she has expended all of her available lives.

“Continue?” the menu asks.

A twinge of guilt registers in the back of her brain as she thinks of her unsupervised sons, battling in the backyard. She throws the controller at the television screen and stands up, feeling a rush of nausea. A thrust of vomit hits her esophagus but she skillfully swallows it down and wins the battle. She fears puking — she remembers the embarrassment of being told by numerous family members and friends that she sounds not unlike a wounded sheep when she pukes, and even in the privacy of her own home she fights that image from ever returning.

She sways for a moment, standing in front of the TV, finger moving toward the channel button, pushing, turning to a random news at noon station. There she is again — a picture of the little dead girl pulled from Delaware Dam, a family picture left over from the tear-filled search through forests and parks. The girl is smiling, her missing teeth clearly defined in the dark of her mouth. She is sitting on top of a wooden and steel jungle gym, legs wrapped around a cedar pillar, hands busy plucking a dandelion. “Jill Preston,” Laura says, reading the name at the bottom of the photo, drunken tears filling her eyes, feeling the loss of that happy youth, wondering why, why, why. An autopsy will be performed tomorrow. They will find no clues. This girl, Laura thinks, will be swallowed by time, buried and forgotten, her phantom killer long gone, speeding to Vegas in a stolen Ford pickup, and nobody will notice. Nobody will care. She tries to imagine the kind of filthy creature who would kidnap a little girl, molest her, leave her for dead. What kind of monster, she wonders, would do that to an innocent girl?

The phone rings. It’s Rick, breathing heavy and sniffing as he always does, his nostrils suffering from the bleach and urinal cakes. “Laura? Have you started lunch yet?”

“No.”

“Good, I was hoping I’d catch you. There’s too much to do here. I’m staying during lunch. Think I’ll eat from the vending machines.”

“I know what you really want to clean — your hands,” Jose says.

“What the fuck do you mean? Are you drunk?”

“Your finger. It’s itching, isn’t it?”

“I have no idea what you mean, Laura. You better go feed the boys.”

He hangs up. Laura stares at the hard lump of plastic in her hand. “They’ll do the autopsy tomorrow,” she says. The

pain returns to her cheek — she consults Jose.

JUNIOR AND CARL are throwing worms at each other when Laura steps into the backyard. Her body sways with the breeze and she feels that at any second she might double over, spraying vomit all over the dandelions.

"Hi Mom!" Carl runs to his mother, carrying a handful of fresh worms. Slime and dirt cover his face. "Want one?"

"Put those nasty things down," Laura hisses, trying not to look at the squirming life in her son's hands. She had thought about making spaghetti for dinner, but now she isn't sure.

Carl shrugs and throws his collection into the weeds. He presses his belly against Laura. "Mom, you smell funny."

Laura raises her mouth to the sky. "I haven't showered yet."

"Mom! Mom!" Junior calls from the trampoline. He jumps high into the air, waving his hands. "Come jump with us!"

Laura smiles for the first time in weeks: Jose is telling her to follow Junior's order. She tightens her fuzzy pink bathrobe belt and bunny-slippers her way through the tall grass, Carl skipping close behind. "Okay, but just for a second," she looks up at Junior, standing on the trampoline, fists against his hips like a scolding adult. She raises her hand, pink sleeve falling to her elbow, revealing her pale freckled arm. "But I need some help here."

Junior takes Laura's hand, grunts and shifts all of his weight in the opposite direction. Carl does his part by pushing his palms against Laura's adequate rump. "Mom, you're heavy. Is there gonna be enough room for me?"

Laura flops onto the trampoline. Standing over Junior, her face is crimson with embarrassment and awkwardness, her granny panties peeking through the loose

folds of her robe. The unstable, artificial ground beneath Laura's feet sinks to accommodate her weight and her bunny slippers descend a foot into the trampoline. She swallows another rush of vomit, stabilizes her rolling eyes. "Carl, you stay off, I don't want too many people on here."

Carl crams his hands in his muddy Levi pockets. "Okay, but it's my turn next, Junior!"

"Whatever, bat-brains." Junior is on his feet now, bending his knees and springing into the air. "Like this Mom. Jump like this," he instructs, as if Laura is in need of explicit directions.

"I am Mario," she mumbles. Her knees pop as she crouches for liftoff. She closes her eyes, fearing that if she sees the motion she will puke. She jumps.

A small skip, then with force, hair mixing with the fence and the sky and the peeling paint, the kids, Junior giggling somewhere to the left, the laughter enters her throat, infects the whole backyard as she rises, rises, rises, higher and higher, into the air, gravity lifting and releasing her swishing bathrobe, bunny slippers shifting under her heels and leaving her feet, flying across the lawn and landing in junk heaps. She opens her eyes, breath lost and sweat dripping, rising again she sees over the fence — the Brewers are out, heaving their propane grill into the sun, arranging paper plates and ketchup bottles and bleeding sirloin for a barbecue lunch, Mister Brewer in plaid boxer shorts and "Kiss the Cook" apron. She feels vomit creeping, but jumping all the same she sees across the yard, and over the other fence little Jimmy Mandell tinkers with his trove of action figures. Her bare feet slide across the rolling surface. Her knees bend and buckle. She stops.

Carl is there instantly, hands around the borders of the tramp, hopping up and down, up and down, "Okay Mom get off, my turn! My turn to jump!"

Laura slides off, feeling the crawl-

ing earth under her feet, the juices in her brain convinced she hasn't stopped jumping. "Carl, stay off. I'm not done," she says, resting her hand on his shoulder, bending over and bleating like a wounded sheep.

"Oh, gross," Junior says, hitting the ground and standing next to his brother, hands scratching his greasy scalp. "Mom's puking."

The vomit flies out, finally liberated, yellow and tar-like, stinking like a filthy wino. Though she can't see anything but the flowing bits of eggs and toast, she can sense the stillness around her and over the fences, neighbors pausing in their idle activities, snickering under their breath, laughing at her, at Laura, the sheep. She wipes her mouth on the sleeve of her robe and shoves her children to the side, stomping toward a pile of ladders and debris against the wall of the house. The boys are silent, studying Laura's trek, Laura's grunt and heave as she grips the rungs of a wooden ladder, pulling it until it rises out of the junk like a termite-ridden phoenix — it slumps onto the side of the house, slices of roof tile and gutter slime falling under the ladder's strain. Jose stands on the other side of the ladder, tapping his boot and winking, pointing his index finger toward the roof. There is no hesitation, no moment of doubt or consideration — she wants only to jump higher, to see the world shrink beneath her feet, to see all of her enemies and problems disappear, lost somewhere in the space between her soles and the trampoline. They won't have a reason to laugh, she thinks, when the sheep is soaring hundreds of feet above them, ready to sprout wings and hit the clouds. They will marvel at her powers, the youth in her flapping arms, her robe flopping in the wind like the cape of a superhero. She felt so high, in her brain and in her actions, down there on the tramp. She wants the adrenaline to go faster, the freedom to last longer. She has scaled half the ladder when Junior calls from below: "What

are you doing, Mommy? Can we climb too?" The Jose haze undulating around her head throws the voice off target, and though she doesn't hear the words, Jose is kind enough to answer the question: "Stay there. Stay off my tramp. It's my turn, you little shit." She continues her climb, the wind growing in strength with every step, but she is determined — a mountain climber with a mission, the summit goading her, teasing her, calling her name, over and over again: "Laura. Laura. Laura."

She swings her leg over the edge and mounts the roof, her feet burning over the tar and rough shingles. Wiggling her head, she fights to focus, the entire neighborhood now visible from her perch, she takes it all in — the rows of emerald lawns and yard gnomes, the dogs running out of their tiny box houses, barking at the sheep, the strange apparition in pink standing on the roof. But I can go higher still, she thinks, and Jose agrees. She huffs the air and looks in every direction, down and left and right, observing her audience, standing and whispering all around her, she hears Carl sob, and his brother joins him. All of the Brewers are in their yard now, even the extended family, cousins and the like, dressed in the latest leisure fashions from The Limited and Old Navy, faces contorted, trying to determine if they should be scared or laughing. Mister Brewer hovers over his grill, a large steel spatula clenched in his fist, frozen in the act of flipping a burger, his mouth hanging open, inhaling the toxic smoke floating around his face. "Should I call the cops?" His wife touches his elbow, her other hand loaded with a plate of celery sticks and deviled eggs, "No, honey. don't get involved." Carl and Junior are looking up at their mother, faces red now, littered with tears and wrinkles of concern, holding each other's hands, begging Laura to come down, begging Laura to fix their spaghetti, to clean their pants, to do anything but stand there in a pink robe, toes dangling over the ledge, body waving

dangerously. Jimmy Mandell is sitting on top of a red picnic table, legs and fingers crossed, his GI Joes and Transformers standing in long, organized rows in front of his feet. Rick and Kitty Supremo are sitting on the hood of the Monte Carlo, necking each other and sharing a forty ounce of malt liquor. Laura's gaze centers and rests on the pile across the lawn, and Jill Preston stands there, leaning against the lightning rod. Her naked body is blue and green, chunks of lake scum sliding through her black hair. She giggles and plays with the rod, shaking it, watching flecks of rust fall away, revealing pristine, glowing sliver, flashing across Laura's face. Laura nods and Jill echoes the motion, smiling and poking her tongue through the gaps between her teeth. "I'm sorry," Laura whispers, "It isn't my intention, to join you. I can't leave the boys. They would end up next to you, at the bottom of Delaware Dam." The dead child pats the lightning rod with tenderness, as though it is the shoulder of her best friend, and she moves away, backing up slowly, one tip-toed step at a time. Everybody disappears as Laura concentrates on the trampoline, and all that remains is the sound of ruffled gravel, the slam of a large car door, a familiar, raspy voice, filled with desperation and concern, "Laura! What are you doing? Laura, come down!" But it is too late because Laura is soaring, flying, casting a shadow over her audience, she can see them down there, so many ants, trifling, insignificant. Jill Preston bows and extends her right arm, as if to say "all is clear. All is clear."

All is clear.







# AYERS RATLIFF

## The Frognappers

A TAN, THREE-BEDROOM ranch house on Bursley Road, trimmed with a partial white brick front with an attached barn garage is what the frognappers call home. The frognappers are a six year old boy named Bryan and an eleven-year-old girl named Mandi. Mandi and Bryan's two older siblings are gone a lot, being out with their friends. Their dad is at work a majority of the time at the family business. Their mom is home with them almost all the time, but is always busy with home chores or working in the basement, as she is in charge of all the bookwork for their business and her office is in the basement.

The frognappers are forced to amuse themselves a lot. This is easy for them to do, as they live about a quarter of a mile from their favorite place in the world, the frog pond. The frog pond is a small body of water, just to the side of Clark Road, which perpendicularly intersects with Bursley about five hundred feet from Mandi and Bryan's house.

On this August afternoon, just after eating chipped ham sandwiches, with mus-

tard in the shape of a smiley face on the bread, chips and pop, the froggnappers get up from the table and head out to the garage. The garage door opens, as it does many summer afternoons, and out comes Mandi and Bryan on their red Huffy bikes, pedaling down the stone driveway, each carrying a white, five gallon bucket. As they look down to see inside their empty buckets their eyes grow big. They can already see the frogs, jumping around in the bottom and they cannot wait to go and nap some frogs from the pond. As they pedal their bikes out of the driveway and onto Bursley Road their thoughts of filling their buckets with frogs are only briefly interrupted with a thought of watching for cars. Their heads are always packed with dreams of filling these buckets, even though they usually come back with the same amount of frogs as they leave with: zero. But sometimes they luck out and catch a frog or two.

Pedaling is so much easier on the paved country road and takes much less effort than pedaling in the deep, stony driveway.

"Race ya!"

Mandi speeds away with Bryan pedaling as fast as he can behind her. Mandi always starts their races and she always starts them to her advantage, so she can never be beaten. If Bryan starts a race, Mandi says "I'm not racing," or "That's not fair," and the race is over, then when she catches up to her brother, she'll say "Now!" so she will have her momentum going and be able to get a good head start, being sure to win. Bryan, being younger, will sometimes cry or complain or tell mom on Mandi that she is cheating, but most of the time he just tries as hard as he can to win the race.

By the time they get to the frog pond both of them are panting like dogs on this hot summer day. They lay down their bikes in the tall grasses that surround the small pond and then lay down on the cement slab that sits between the road and

the small body of water. Upon arrival the frogs do their usual "ribbit, ribbit, ribbit, ribbit, ribbit," as they jump from the sides into the water. The frogs do this every time Mandi and Bryan come to the pond, but by the time they catch their breath, some of the frogs are back on the sides again.

After catching their breath, they sit up and hang their feet down the two-foot drop from the concrete slab to the pond. The pond is well-shaded by a weeping willow tree and is nestled between the road, which seldom gets any traffic, and a gigantic cornfield. This body of water is almost exactly circular, as if someone had made its boundaries with a giant compass. The pond is about a foot and a half deep and is about the size of the circular contraption of a pony ride, seen at almost every county fair.

Gazing into the pond, Mandi's eyes get so big that her sockets can hardly hold her eyeballs when she sees it.

"Look at that!" she whispers.

"What?"

"That!" pointing her finger across the pond.

When he sees it too, his eyes become as large as hers, but neither of their eyes are as large as the frog that their eyes are fixated on. They have to have it!

"Wow, it's the biggest frog I've ever seen!"

"Let's get it!"

"How are we going to get over there?" Bryan sees no way to get this frog, as it is on the other side of the pond, and the only way they have of catching frogs is right off the cement slab or directly beside it. All the other ground surrounding the pond is too swampy to get through.

"I have an idea," Mandi explains to Bryan that if he sails across in his bucket, he can catch the frog.

"No way!"

"Yes, it'll work."

"What if I tip over?"

"Hurry up!"

"I can't."

"Come on. Get in. Stop being a baby!"

"Mandi, please."

"Really, are you going to be a big baby?"

"I can't."

"I'm leaving."

"Don't go."

"Well . . .," Mandi thinks for a moment before she begins speaking again. "What about this?" Bryan attentively listens to her new idea.

Bryan thinks Mandi's new idea of how he can protect himself is brilliant. So he races off, heads back to the house, while Mandi stays and keeps an eye on the frog.

Bryan runs into the house and searches and searches through the closet in his bedroom for his snowsuit. Surely his snowsuit would protect him if something happened, so he puts it on and runs back outside into the ninety degree sun, to scamper back to the frog pond and nap that frog.

Pedaling as hard as he can, he reaches the pond.

"Is it still there?"

"Ya, hurry."

Bryan leaps off of his bike and kneels down on the concrete slab, lowering his bucket into the pond.

"I don't know about this, Mandi."

"Do it."

When the bottom of the bucket connects with the pond's surface, the water looks as nervous as Bryan, as the movement of its ripples mimic the shaking of Bryan's hands.

"You are going to help me, right?"

"Come on."

Mandi helps to steady Bryan as he slowly lowers his right leg towards the bucket. Bryan's eyes become glossier and redder the closer his foot reluctantly becomes with the bucket's hollow opening. Finally, the bottom of his shoe meets the bottom of the bucket. The plastic container

starts to shake and rock, moving slightly away from the cement slab.

"Oh, Mandi!"

Having one foot in the unstable bucket and the other on the cement slab, Bryan cannot keep his balance. Over it goes, with him going with it. His legs spread like a gymnast completing a routine. The splits, the scream, the splash, the yell! Enough tears begin flowing from Bryan's eyes that the pond may have been made two feet deeper.

"Get up!"

"This is gross!"

The ooze and mud that lay on the bottom of the pond, under the unclear water feels like quicksand to Bryan, as he thinks he is being sucked in.

"Help me!"

"Get up!"

He had never been this close to the water before and had never noticed its foul odor. Bryan gags and tries to hold his breath to keep from puking.

"Get up!"

He puts his hands on the bottom of the pond to help lift himself to his feet and quickly retracts his arm when he feels the mushy surface. Trying to raise himself without his hands, he stumbles and falls back in again.

"Get up!"

"I can't!"

"Stop being stupid, get up!"

He finally finds the strength to raise himself out of the water. Exiting the pond a darker color than he was upon entering it, he is soaked, dirt is caked all over his body.

"You look like the Mud Monster!"

"Shut up!"

"You did the splits," Mandi cannot contain her laughter.

"Shut up Mandi!"

"I can't help it."

"I'm telling Mom!"

Both of them ride back to the house carrying empty buckets and Bryan, wearing

a soaked snowsuit, still bawling and yelling like a banshee, with his screams becoming louder and louder the closer to home they become.

"Be quiet. Mom will hear you."

"Good! Shut up."

When they reach the driveway their mom meets them outside.

"What happened?"

Bryan spills his story as fast as he was spilled out of the bucket.

"So you tried to float across in that bucket?" Mom asks smiling.

"It's not funny!"

"I know it's not. Let's get this off of you and get you into the tub."

Bryan's mom goes in, lays down a path of towels from the front door to the bathroom and runs bathwater for him to soak in. He follows her inside.

"Let's get all those yucky clothes off."

Bryan sheds his layers of clothes and puts all of them into a big lump on the linoleum bathroom floor. He leaves the sopping pile of shoes, socks, pair of shorts, underwear, t-shirt and snowsuit, then moves over and steps into the tub. The water acts like a knife to a potato, peeling the dirt from his skin and revealing a clean, white flesh.

From all the washed-off dirt, the bathwater turns a shade of muddy brown. The muddy brown water reminds Bryan of the pond water. Disgusted, thinking about laying in the dirty pond water, he stands up and begins to get out of the tub to go ask his mom to run a clean tub of water. He looks down at the ground he is about to step on, then notices a little frog jumping out of the hood of his snowsuit. Excitingly, he goes over and catches the little frog.

"You must have jumped into my hood when I was in the water."

He puts the little frog into the dirty tub of water, then gets in too, to finish his bath with his new friend. Being so excited about the frog, he forgets about the muddy

brown water.

"I think I'll wear my suit when I go back tomorrow!"

Bryan finishes his bath, gets dressed and goes outside to play with his new green friend. When Mandi notices that Bryan is playing, and not playing with her, she goes over to see what he is doing.

"Where did you get that frog?"

"I think my snowsuit has special powers."

"Let me see it."

"No. I'm not playing with you."

"Duh, let me see it."

"No. He's nicer than you and I'm playing with him and not with you."

"Fine. I'm going to go do something funner."

"And you're not allowed to wear my snowsuit either!"







# KAREN KELLEY

## The Lug Nut

IT BURNED A COLD hole in his hand as he stared at it. Well, I love you too Dad, Scott thought as he turned the worn piece of metal over in his fingers. Flipping it in the air and deftly catching it, he wondered how far he could throw it. At eighteen he was sturdily built from long summers of bailing hay for local farmers. By the time school started in the fall he was tough as nails and ready for football. He loved the sport for two reasons. First of all it was a physical outlet for his youthful energy. “Where else can you knock a guy down and get away with it?” he would laugh. The other reason was that it was “his” game, not his father’s. When his dad wasn’t working he would be over at Twin Oaks playing a round of golf. The small course was close enough to the house that if his dad had too much to drink he could usually make it home safely — well at least as far as the driveway. Scott, or one of his brothers, would watch for the car’s headlights as he pulled in at night. If he hadn’t made it into the house in a reasonable period of time, someone would go out and bring him in. This became neces-

sary after a few times of finding him at the bottom of the steep slope behind the house where he had tried to take an unsteady pee. Armed with flashlights, the boys followed the sounds of his moans and retrieved him. No easy job for teenagers. "Dad wasn't a little guy," Scott would recall, "and hauling his butt up that slope wasn't fun."

Yet for all the anger that he carried in this father-son relationship, Scott had an easy smile. If you would look at the team photos he stood out. Number 50 was always grinning while the other players wore their newly discovered manhood on soft faces with fierce looking stares. "Tough guise," as one author I read put it. Uniquely, this seventeen year old didn't need to posture for the camera. "Who can intimidate me?" he'd say. "My dad was 6'8" and 220 pounds. If he didn't scare me — nobody could."

Today though, there was no smile as his Irish brows knit together over piercingly blue eyes. The muscles in his tanned arm rippled as he angrily pitched the rusted lug nut into the meandering creek below. Standing on the deck of the family's house that overlooked Mill Creek, he held back tears of anger. "Damn. Damn!" he choked under his breath as he whirled around and struck the rough sawn siding with his fist. The pain of his bleeding knuckles felt good as it replaced the pain in his chest. What did I expect? he thought. A new car? Hell, even a pat on the back or a handshake saying he was proud of me wouldn't kill him. All his life he struggled for respect from this imposing figure who was his father. Now today, on his graduation from high school, all he had gotten from his dad was this worn out piece of metal — a lug nut. When he left home . . . he never went back.

TWENTY-ONE YEARS later the pain was still alive as Scott shared with me the story of his life growing up with a distant

and alcoholic father. The years had been tumultuous for him as well. After his graduation his parents had divorced and his father moved to Arizona. In the meantime Scott had married his high school sweetheart. Those happy days were short lived and quickly decayed to a living hell.

Later his ex admitted, "I was miserable and wanted to make you miserable too." Complaining that he didn't bring enough money home, she then found fault when he took a second job. "You are never home. I'm raising the kids all by myself." Facing up to his father hadn't prepared him to face up to her. It was a whole new ballgame and one that he couldn't win. It was during this time of turmoil Scott found out his father was dying.

"Dad didn't tell any of us kids personally, instead we each just got a photocopied letter with a check mark beside our names. It said that he had cancer and only had a few months to live. He just was letting us know but didn't want any special treatment or anyone to come visit him. He had a good life and he was satisfied. He signed it: Love, Dad."

Studying my expression, he paused. My eyes were wide open and I was slowly shaking my head.

"What did you do?"

Wiping his broad hand across his face (as he always does when he's stressed) he said, "I went out to see him. I needed resolution. I couldn't let it end this way even though it didn't seem to matter to him. So I packed a bag and flew out." The floorboards under his feet creaked as he shifted his weight off his bad knee. "I was nervous as I walked up to his door. Heck, we hadn't seen or talked to each other in over 7-8 years, I didn't expect a warm welcome and so I wasn't surprised when Dad's first words to me were 'What the hell are you doing here?'"

"Ouch! That must have hurt."

I was surprised when he laughed. "Actually I smiled. It was like the old days.

So I took a deep breath and said I was there to see him and wasn't he going to invite me in?"

Scott went on to relate how over the next few days the wrinkles in their relationship relaxed like an old shirt under the Arizona sun. They visited some of his father's favorite places outside of Tucson in the high desert. Standing on an overlook one afternoon his father pointed to a valley and said, "That's where I want my ashes scattered." Scott smiled appreciatively. The area was beautiful and it was something they quietly enjoyed together. Sensing this long awaited bond his father said softly, "You know. I don't know why I treated you harder than the others." Then with a pause and what sounded like a sigh, he turned around and headed to the car never to speak of it again. That admission was a great relief to Scott. At least his father recognized his part in their dysfunctional relationship and though it was as close to an apology as he was going to get, when he left his heart was lighter because of it.

This brief moment of peace and resolution ended when Scott returned home. Walking in his front door he waited for the kids to rush up to him as they always did when he'd been gone. Instead the house was quiet and empty. A note was laying on the kitchen table from his wife saying she needed "time to think." She and their three small children were gone. Devastated, he worked hard toward a reconciliation that was never really intended to occur. Though in the coming months she would send him letters saying that she knew it was "God's will" they get back together, that time never materialized. The "time" she really needed was the time it took to empty their savings and checking accounts so she could pay an attorney. Now dealing with a looming divorce, he got more bad news. His dad had died.

Retreating into the darkest part of a man's cave, he put in even longer hours at

work than he had before. In a sense, since the separation, he had been supporting two households, hers with the kids and his own. But "work was a friend," he recalls. The long hours kept his mind off his problems and, anyway, going home to an empty house had no appeal. His kids weren't there and they had been the only ones that were glad to see him. After the divorce he moved into an old, abandoned farm house. But until he could afford to fix it up and get heat in it, the children couldn't spend time with him there. The only bright spot was the help his former father-in-law provided in getting that accomplished. "He was closer to me than my own father," Scott would later say. "We had a special bond."

But the 120 hours a week left him blindly tired and exacerbated the knife-like pain that carved the word "failure" into his soul. Failure as a son. Failure as a husband. Failure as a dad. One night he put a revolver to his head and pulled the trigger. The hollow click of metal on metal echoed through the empty house. There was no explosion, no peace, no comforting darkness — just one more failure. Sitting at the scarred, second-hand kitchen table he wept uncontrollably. With his father's death he felt lost. It was over. No more opportunities to apologize or even find more reasons to leave the barriers up.

Then it happened.

"I was shaking and weak when I felt a hand on my shoulder. Startled, I quickly sat up and turned around. No one was there, but I swear to God I felt a hand! At first I was scared and then a sense of peace swept over me and I began to calm down. Somehow I knew it would be all right." His next sigh dripped like blood from an open wound. Shaking his head he quietly said, "I would like to believe it was Dad letting me know that he cared after all. I really needed to know that someone did. Or maybe it was God's way of telling me that he was my Father and had been there all along. I don't

know — but it saved me. I put the gun away and never ever thought about suicide again.”

When you love someone, really love them, their pain is yours. It was almost more than I could bear. Yet as I tried to sort through all the traumatic things that had happened to him I was looking in particular for a clue as to why this relationship with his father had been so difficult. Marriages have their own ethos and pathos but the bond between a parent and a child should make its way full circle to love before one of them passes away.

I thought about how Scott, when telling stories from the past, seemed to almost enjoy the competition in outsmarting his father. Their relationship was dysfunctional, complex and typical all at the same time. Whether he knew it or not the “chip” he had on his shoulder as a teenager was actually a “chip off the old block.” Perhaps that was why his father was so hard on him. He saw reflected in his son a lot of his own youthful attitudes.

As he spoke about his “lousy graduation gift” my mind drifted back to something he had told me that had happened when he was about sixteen. His dad had been trying to take a tire off the family car and one lug nut was rusted on and he couldn’t get it off. Scott saw him struggling and could see that his father was frustrated. “I told him that I could get it off and Dad said that he doubted it but I could try. Two hours later I walked into the kitchen and slapped the lug nut down on the table in front of him.” His dad said nothing, but Scott didn’t care. Persistence and a healthy young male ego had won out. It was another victory against the man that didn’t respect him.

As I was thinking about this he broke off telling the story. “Hello, McFly?” he teased. “Did you hear anything I just said?”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” My face flushed hot with embarrassment. “It’s just that what you

said made me think about the time you were able to get the tire off the car when your dad couldn’t.”

His eyes lit up and he grinned.

“I didn’t surprise him very often. But that day I did.”

I knew I was onto something here. Taking a deep breath I pressed forward.

“Well, I think when you graduated with your class you surprised him again.”

Puzzled, he stared at me and I continued.

“You once told me that you had a hard time in school and even though your parents didn’t know you had dyslexia, they still arranged special tutoring for you didn’t they?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Even some of your teachers made fun of you. They would say, ‘One more time for Scott.’”

The smile left his face and his eyes took on a steely glint.

“It was embarrassing. I quit trying.”

As that painful memory stabbed at him, I quickly pressed forward. Almost breathlessly I burst out, “I just realized why your dad gave you the lug nut! He was trying to say that he was very proud of you for graduating with your class.”

“Heck of a way to show it.”

“Babe, there are a lot of men, especially back at that time, who had a hard time expressing their feelings. From what you’ve told me I can tell that your dad was that kind of guy. It may have even been a reason why he drank so much. So he gave you the lug nut. He had kept it for a year as a symbol of your persistence and strength of character.”

“Two years,” Scott corrected, but there was a stunned expression on his face. “I threw it in the creek.” Staring off into the distance he tried to remember where it landed over twenty years ago.

“My attitude. My stinkin’ bad attitude. I should have been smart enough to

recognize it.”

It was a pivotal moment when one of the whys of life became clear. For my husband the struggles growing up were part and parcel of the struggles of his own father. There were other issues no doubt but ever so briefly a big hand from the past, in the form of a memory, came to rest on his shoulder once again. This time it healed the open wound in his heart, too. Most of the years of his young manhood had been spent trying to win the approval of someone who didn't know how to express it. It was hidden under his father's own painful issues. Often these things cause some to build a wall around their heart. While it does keep some of the pain out — it also holds their love in. Like a stagnant pond with no inflow or outflow their emotional health has difficulty supporting *real* life for both the person and those around them.

This wall was passed on from father to son like a genetic trait and at the first sign of hurt or pain it quickly built on the foundation that was started decades before. When I first met Scott a friendship began to bloom. But ever cautious he kept his wall of protection in place. Now, six years later, as a happily married man, that winning smile has returned. His old friends notice it too. Jokingly he tells them, “I was building a wall and turned around only to find her handing me the bricks!” With that, I quickly retort, “Wall? What wall? I saw a door.” Then we laugh and hug.

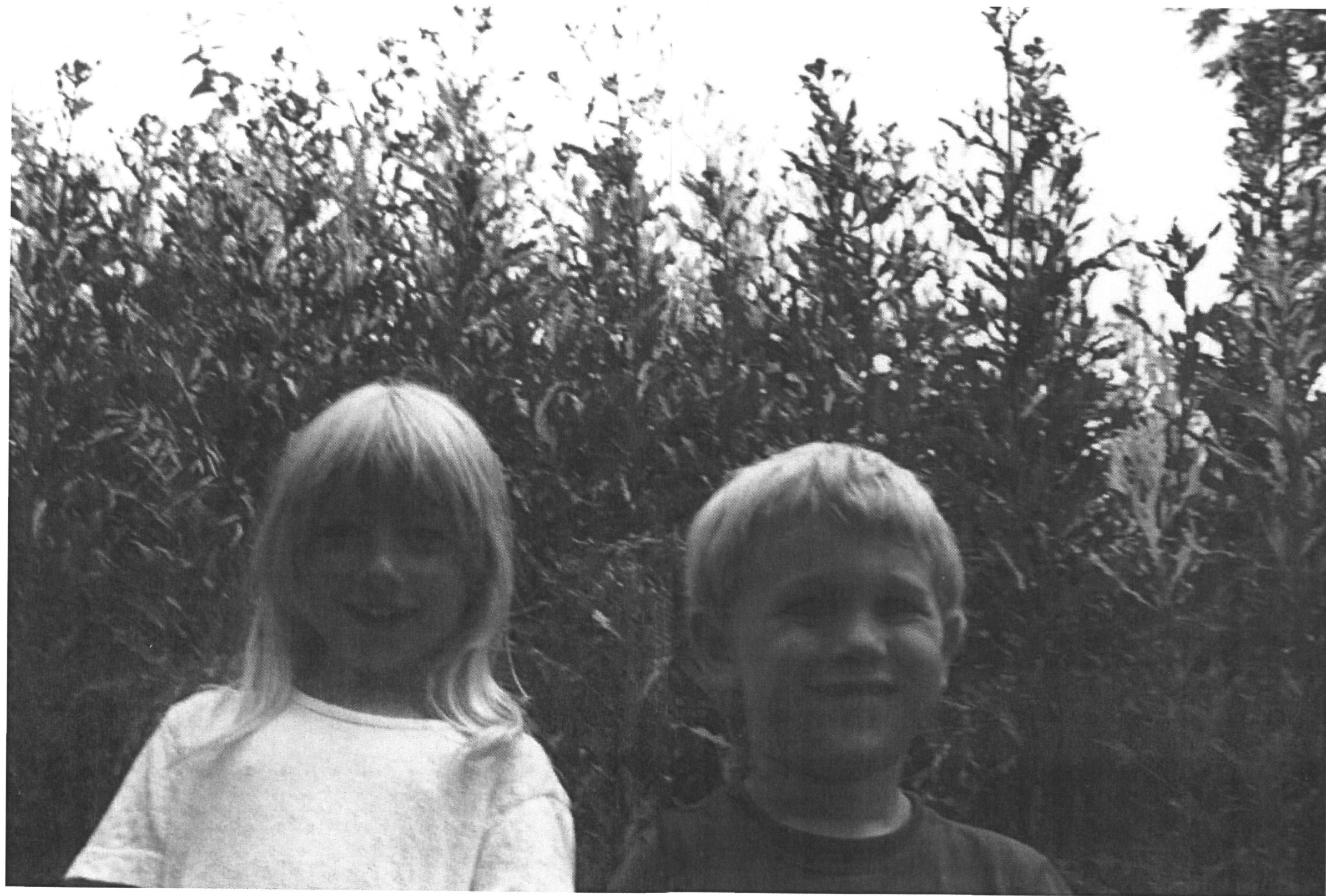
Remembering the lug nut, he doesn't hesitate to tell his own teenage son that he loves him. “I love you too Dad,” is the quick response. Neither of these men need an icon to represent their affection for one another and so a worn piece of metal lies quietly on the bottom of Mill Creek rusting away to oblivion.



**MANDY LEWIS**

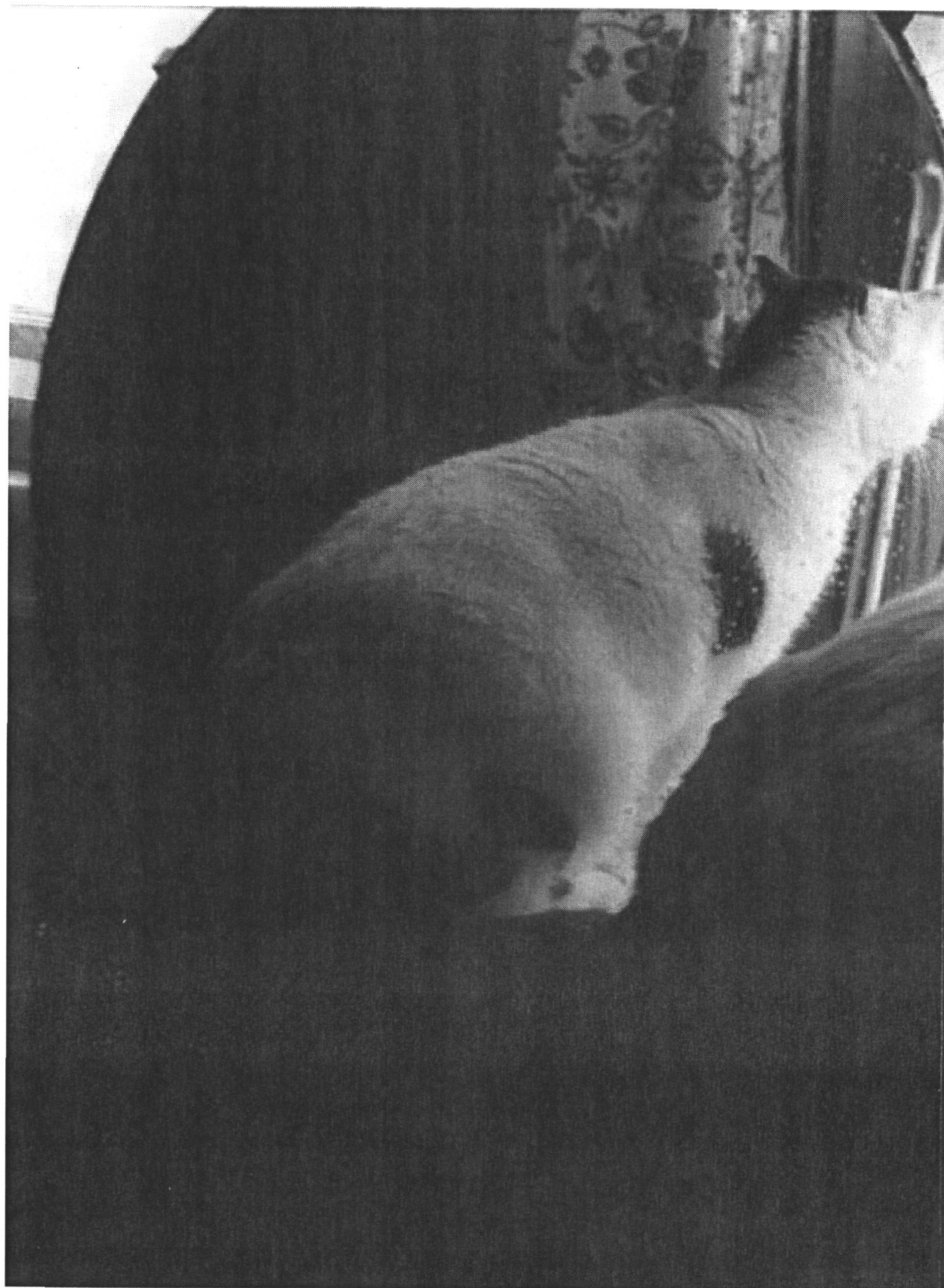


**PHOTOGRAPHS**



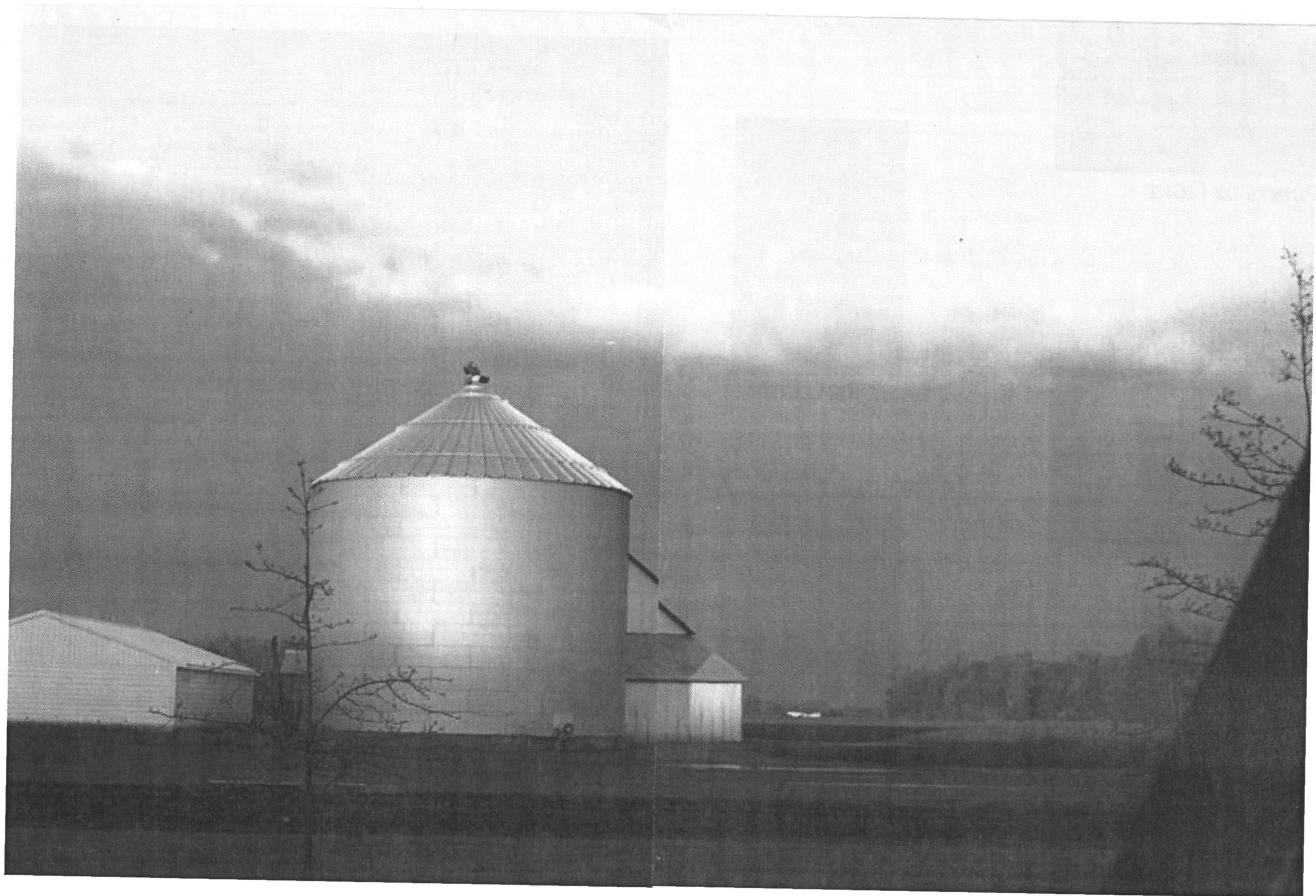








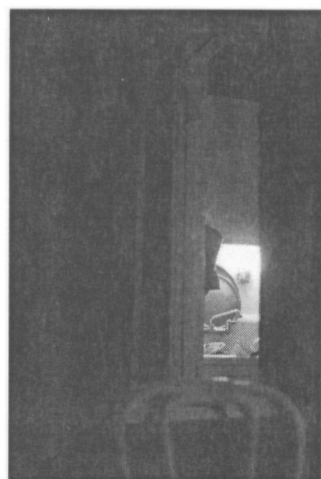




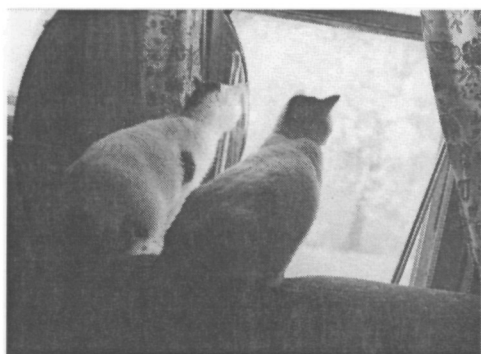




**POINTS OF LIGHT**



**HOME REFLECTIONS**



**SIDEKICK**



**NIGHT LIGHTS**



**FARM VIEW**

# TY MEDOWN

for colorful girls who have considered  
suicide when Rainbow's had enuf

Ohio Winter Grey™ how it splinters  
certainties of hue, tainting, in painting  
by raining, snow's white lies that hide the corpse  
of lawn, pawned to Charon, loving the truth.

Like splitting sputum from some spectral realm,  
Rainbow lactates prismatic miasma  
from withered brittle bitter tit, battered  
with worries or recovering colors:

*Can I afford to save the grass from hock?  
Whoring summer through — the price I'll pay for spring,  
urging binging, impinging on purging,*

*closer each cycle to believing bleach  
drinking is the solvent I've been seeking  
in dying, peace, translucence for my mind.*

Painstakingly written by Ty Medown

<With apologies to Ntozake Shange, of course. And  
if, through the miracle of typographical error by  
editorial discretion, battered should become but-  
tered for a divinely comic effect, I wouldn't com-  
plain.>

Exorbitantly as ever, til the end,  
Ty Medown



# STEPH HORNER

## Three Poems

### Andromeche

Come Hector lay your head on my warm breast  
Let your cold tears fall down and in between  
Please, come inside and put your soul in rest  
Husband, kiss me deep and become one being

I am in your thoughts and you are in my dreams  
Hector I can hear the world chant your name  
You are not mine, Priam's son, comely king  
Here to many, Zeus's bright flame  
Build your pyre, ashes is what I claim  
Put off war and bend your kiss to your babe  
Slavery's teeth are blunt in death's campaign  
Give, please, implements/instruments away

Sheathe your blade. Keep it warm by your thigh's heat  
Tears shed for Ares is a worse defeat



**Sister, I Close My Eyes**

Sister,

I lay down and you lay down too

Sister,

In my head you are a complaint

That gets up out of my thoughts and walks around my room at night

Making the floorboard protest

Leaving me to jerk

Startled up

Making my nerves overly alert so I can't sleep

So I can't sleep until I forget to be afraid

Sister, be still so I can rest

Sister,

You betray for the love of men

Sister,

You love me and men

Or not

On amputated petals

Greened by threads weaved between white polk-a-dots

With golden virgin locks falling down your shoulders

Getting caught in breezes yellowed by sunned butterflies

Sister, how so much I wish I could take your place

Sister,

You may have thought so

Sister,

You are not Esau and I've only dealt with demons

Sister,

I never caught you in the field,

Hungry,

And lulled you away from your birthright

Sister,

I never asked for a blind father

To lay his hands on me

Instead of you

To receive blessings which put amnesty in you

To drive me away

Sister,

Maybe you never loved me

Sister,

Maybe you just don't like me

## *CORNFIELD REVIEW*

Sister,

I look for you in all places  
Around my cracked memory  
In Bibles where our Epitaphs and Family trees  
Branch into withered flowers

Stuck between ancient proverbs

Recorded by souls known to us

But never met,

Sister, I looked for you

Once,

In a broken photo album

And found you

In a picture when you were young

Before there ever was a me

And your hair was fresh and bright then

Timeless, blowing in a spring wind

That you stood alone in.

Sister,

I sat alone

With your image in my hand

And I cried because I love you so damn much

Sister,

I kissed a person who can't kiss me back.

Sister,

You said that the scariest eyes you ever seen belonged to your father  
So I closed my eyes

And hated my colors for you

Jody.

## The Supplication of Samyaza: The Father of the Nephelim

*“There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown . . .” Genesis 6:4 (KJV)*

Scribe of the mighty and terrible Lord,  
I beg, give ear and record these sayings:  
In the day I stood at the throne of Him  
Who perceives all and takes not action, but  
Deals punishment after the transgression,  
I took to arms with the holy seven  
Against the lustfully impudent thanes  
Of that failed, rogue usurper, Lucifer.  
I, beside Michael, who now bares witness  
Against my comrades and I as well as  
My own family,  
Bound and cast out those  
Traitorous to our creator's high throne.

Remind him, oh Scribe, that I too was there  
When he modeled man after his own kind.  
I listen as the the first born of a new  
Race named all the first born of the new world.

How often I wished the man hadn't been  
Lonely and needed the aid of a mate.  
How often I wished I hadn't looked at  
Her, and wondered why I couldn't look away.  
She was liken to no other creature  
Upon the surface, below or above.

Yet, I was not the only one looking.  
It was not I, but shameful Gadrel who  
Went to find her in the garden and told  
Her in a forked whisper, "You shall surely  
Not die." What would she know of truths and lies?  
It was not I, but wicked Azazyel  
Who put a blunt instrument into a jealous  
Brother's hand and asked "Are you your brother's  
Keeper?" What would he know of pain and loss?  
It was not I, but damnable Yekun  
Who excited our ears with the woman's  
blaz'on, and said to us, "Look how fair the  
Daughters of men are. Come, let us make wives  
Of them and make children such as men do."  
And Kesabel who incited evil  
Counsel to us to corrupt our bodies  
Such that we could take on man's appearance.

Oh, had I not looked upon the beauty  
Of this one creation I would remain  
In the peace of silence.

But I did look.

Holy Lord, forgive me!

Ask him, oh Scribe

Please forgive me for wanting her for mine  
Own. For exchanging her for my service  
To him.

I could not have her, so I looked  
Among her daughters for she who is like  
Her mother. I became flesh for this one  
And married her. I slumbered not, whilst in  
His service. But in her, I did find rest.  
In my sleep I uttered the secrets of

My master, and her kin heard and began  
To develop these words in sorceries.  
how could I have known the wickedness of  
Men? How corrupt their hearts and minds can be!

Tell him, oh Scribe, that I wanted her in  
Want of him. For she among no other  
Can bring forth the life of his own image  
Either by the dust of the earth or the  
blood of the body, in them is all things.

Tell him, Scribe, though I be the head of those  
zoo, no fallen, within Hell's keep,  
This darkened place devoid of taste or smell,  
This tormented valley of barren trees  
Grassless dales, emptied streams, filled with only  
Our endless lamentations and each other,  
My petitions are not for us alone.  
I beg for the souls of my little ones.  
I knew not that all offspring of women  
Are like her first born. Mine are innocent.  
I beg, have mercy on them despite their  
Delinquent human nature and sadden  
Depravity.

Our kind need not drink blood.  
But humans are insatiable with thirst.  
Forgive them for the faults of their mother.

Scribe, if you should find audience with him,  
Inform him, Sir, my sword rests on the earth  
And I want to come back to His great house  
To serve Him as I once did when I was  
In the home of his favor, and silent.





# MEGAN SIMMERMON

## Seventh Dance

Deep blue Planetos     *wanderer*  
Spinning out to see \_\_\_its shadow  
                Banished  
      Upon a lustrous face.  
Savoring the talent of feigned  
                Abandonment,  
Planetos dances never blinking  
      Ever smiling Maliciously.  
The *Light of Day* breaks     away  
      Shaking Planetos awake  
To see its shadow     pulled adrift  
                Lost  
      To the Shadows' Abyss.





# ANTHONY IACOBUCCI

## Can You Taste This Ink?

Can you taste this ink, paper? Is it bitter, like salt drip,  
or strange-sweet, like little threads of black licorice?

Where is your heart? Up there in the corner,  
hiding in the shad of the page-break,  
or did it roll off your back?

If flies make holes, or my pen stabs through you,  
does it sting that thin, chalk dust skin?

Or is the pain drawn out by the words I write,  
or the ones I neglect to write, leaving you incomplete,  
clamping the jaw down  
before the out with the yawn?

I think you're a mirror,  
but there must be a fog between us,  
or else I've started to dissolve  
into brittle black lines.

I could just walk away from this desk,  
let dust and years lay heavy on your back  
and turn you to yellow-brown onion skin.

Time would lick its paws and stretch,  
but we wouldn't sleep.  
We need this movement of a pen between us.

And know that everything you feel  
is just a reflection of me.

So let's go, let's grow,  
bitter and sweet, wounds and all,  
far as this pen and I can take us.



# TIM WEST

## We Are Rubber Frogs

The world is full of towering mean girls  
and disconnected cool kids  
frozen in the tall grass waiting to hold  
Bic lighters to our delicate under-  
bellies, pale and smooth,  
or stomp down on our thin skins.  
It makes you scream  
the way people try to reach out  
and touch with fire and boot soles —  
embraces that leave us burnt,  
bruised and haunted forever,  
lacing our plasmic poetry  
with scar tissue and the withered  
rubber of chewed feet  
as we try to hop past their thick legs  
and into the pockets of our protectors,  
where we can safely watch  
the world that loves us so much  
that it never eases our pain.



# AMANDA SCHRADER

## Four Poems

### The Black Years

*Out of the black years come the words, the herald of death.*  
-J.R.R. Tolkien

The feminine curse of emotions crawls  
like a parasite around him.  
He tries to forget the jackhammer  
rape of his mind,

writes a recipe for hate.  
Hate tastes it.  
Hate will replace loneliness and longing,  
a smoldering black snowball in his cold white life.

His final throws are thrown at you.

These pages weep for them.

**Bidden**

Ash  
curve-like sculptures,

hold hands over  
the path, over

our heads.

Is it lonely  
to fall

to the ground  
one

by one?

Dead leaves  
cluster.

We wander forbidden  
into the three-

leaved, peel  
bark away

like an orange  
to see smooth

wood  
underneath.

Bidden.

**“The Victory of the Echo Over the Voice” \***

Moonlight shows patches  
of her pelt,  
turns her eyes metallic,  
orbs of hematite  
like smoky embers in the blackness.

Starlight wraps around her like liquid crow’s feathers,  
she yearns for daybreak.  
Tomorrow she will rise with the dawn  
and burn off the mist,  
kiss the flame red shadows of the leaves.

She dines with the sun,  
rides into battle bird-back.  
She sings with the song of the wind,  
full of amber excitement.  
Her name is ‘more than meets the eye’.

*\*Shinzon, Star Trek: Nemesis*



**Small Pieces of the Whole**

Drops congeal;  
a leaf becomes an insect canoe.  
He speaks his oak age  
like rain

drips from drain spouts, opens  
like the butter yellow blooms,  
lectures ceaselessly as the wind  
that blows the flower buds.

Wet jeans stick to my legs,  
blisters slide along the roof of my mouth.  
He talks on. . . about  
whorled milk-wort, aromatic aster,  
the brown smoothness of a fallen buckeye. . .

Transforms  
into Rattlesnake Master,  
this Jack-in-the-Pulpit of Biology,  
whose whip-like tongue of bamboo  
breaks the soft stickiness of spider-web bridges.

## *CORNFIELD REVIEW*

I wish I was in a blue hot air balloon  
over an aquavelva sunset  
on an island in the middle of a marsh.

Seagulls swoop to catch bread pieces,  
I see through a dwarf iris,

hike in the plush thickness of grass,  
stand under a toad mushroom,

the rain  
like the sting from a strong shower. . .

and he goes on, like a big cat on catnip,  
about the square-stemmed monkey flower,  
and how the cougar's nipple is but a small piece of the whole.



# BETHANY BATES

## Four Poems

### Is This Night Rational?

Somber the candelabra  
Languish the torch lit diamonds in your tiara  
in which miracles sway low.

I'd ignore cayenne summers to liberate your petals,  
O silver hyssop!  
Ringlet light mirrors your silky fingers  
on my horizontal existence.

Veto the dove song, for the sea music doth thou ring!  
Your hair bathes and the river  
sings saliva thirst.

Is                      this

Night

rational?

## Acquired Taste

Whisked away, the meringue  
peaks drift coconut flurries, fondue

and lime rind décor.  
Thawed innovations of overnight mari-

nations, tenderizing rosemary  
and Mediterranean vinaigrette absorption.

I used to be a Russian raspberry  
substitute, but now

I'm Mexican salsa simmering  
on medium high.

I'm no lightweight delight  
or microwaveable side dish.

I'm a chili pepper symphony,  
a secret recipe —

no room to season to taste.  
I'm an uncovered, uncondensed,

main course phenomenon.  
Don't try to reduce heat to low

or leave me in the pan to cool.  
I'm a delicious delicacy.

My ungreased garnets  
are not meant for leftovers.

**Winter's Flower**

In my dreams, time no longer affects me.

I bathe under the eye of dawn  
and drink of its chilled sweat like wine.

I dance in fields of Great Solomon's Seal  
petals blowing in the wind like bellydancer's hips.

Singing the Middle East Manzura, the black throated  
call of the bunting hulls me to sleep.

I awake.

Alone

Sunlight reflects my frosted body like a stained glass window,  
but no one sees my beauty.

I'm like the moon in a sunlit sky,  
the remnants of a sweet summer's lily,

a boat on frozen water.

## **Bellydancing in My Living Room**

Dolphin, dolphin, dolphin, camel.  
In out, in,  
out, out in, the muscles pull.

Snake  
    slides,  
    slide  
        snakes  
    to the  
left,  
        right,  
            forward.

Snake slithers through the garden  
till the beat is done.

    Circle,  
        circle,  
circle.

Her curls, hair twirls . . .  
    hair twirls 'round and 'round.  
Hair twirls, fair girl.  
Up, up.

Down.

## *CORNFIELD REVIEW*

Feminine face, veiled face, painted vase.

Shake, shake, shake, shake,  
drop.

Shake coins,  
shimmy coins,  
pop.

Cymbal-  
cha-cha-  
cymbal  
click.

Cymbal-  
cha-cha-  
cymbal  
click.

Symbol,  
symbol,  
symbol.

Symbol myself till the beat is done.





# KELLY KRIDER

## Three Poems

### Bad Habit

Divinities invented  
the squishy booths  
in restaurants;  
the seeming privacy  
of a cushioned back,  
invisible line dividing  
smoking from non,  
cancer seating on  
the left side of the line,  
we're living  
healthier over here;  
the rushing of people  
through here at all  
hours, some laughing,  
others with stories  
the bartender didn't  
listen to; the drunk  
carted away in taxis  
after ranting about  
lost loves and lives,  
drowned in pools  
of righteous self  
pity; how can anyone  
understand when they  
don't understand the  
pattern of their lives  
through the smoke  
of alcohol and cheap  
cigarettes; but I've  
digressed yet again,  
my most profound  
bad habit.

**Death Defy**

Gasping, dragging on surface,  
she breaks water,  
pulls to shore in  
the shivering cold  
and scrabbling in the rocks,  
blood runs like rivers  
from busted hands, aching  
head, groaning knees  
collapsed to ground,  
pushed to earth and  
sunk in brittle grass  
to plant a new season.

**Drunken Love**  
*for J W*

I snap the blanket,  
drifting it softly to  
mattress surface and  
stepping back as a cloud  
of cologne swirls upward,  
filling my body with his  
presence, his form wrapped  
in warmth once again  
next to mine, breath  
rising to fall over me,  
gentle whisper snores  
of drunken air until  
I open my eyes and  
he is gone.



# TIFFANY HORD

## On Adonis and Cicero

*There are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it.*

- George Bernard Shaw, from *Man and Superman*

Like Mary at the feet of Jesus  
She sits at his shoes drinking him in,  
Wondering if he has ever seen the sun  
As she looks upon his pale white skin.

But he is the sun, to her moon  
And she shines in the echoes of his words  
Attentively wondering, witnessing, waiting  
For the divine way words roll off his tongue  
As if it were licking her entire body  
Making her ascend rapidly towards heaven.

His speech continues like a sermon  
She couldn't imagine Christ more exquisitely  
As she sits and stares in wonder at his eyes  
And how they look so much like a stormy sea.

The gray and blue reflect in her dark irises  
Continually feeling she could see straight into his head,  
Into the wonderful way he articulates images  
From firing nerve endings to the spoken word.  
He's more persuasive than Cicero in her mind,  
The mind refusing sanctuary from the tempest tossed sea.

Everyone's listening to him now  
They all want to hear what he has to say,  
But she was the first one to kneel at his feet  
Even if they turned on him, she would stay.

He's set higher on a pedestal than Cicero in the polis,  
But if they turned on him like in the days of Cicero  
She would stand in the square and hold his hand.  
The detached head and hands would not move  
But she would still feel the pulsing of his words  
The unmistakable beauty of truth on his lips.

For he is beautiful, if not outside then in.  
His mind is even more accomplished to eye and ear.  
Even though she has an Adonis already,  
She still wants him to be near.

It's true she loves Adonis, a beautiful man.  
Everyone loves him the way they love a God.  
It's an exact obsession, to love a handsome thing  
Still the only fixation he has is for his own façade.  
The lack of affection in his heart, or essence in his mind  
Shows through the bright burning of his perfections.

Then is it to be Cicero, the son of a man?  
She cannot choose between her eyes and mind.  
Is it to be Adonis, the son of a king?  
She's choosing to leave it all behind.

She needs more than either alone can give.  
She needs a man strong enough to save her  
But too weak to break her heart.  
He will make love to her through his words  
And beautify her existence by breathing  
And dance . . . oh, he will dance.

She will fall in love with the world  
And every man in it to find the one,  
The father of her Superman,  
The force of Life, willing her a perfect son.

So she rides away on her own fine horse  
Towards the place where the sun touches the earth  
And God's great fingers point downward.  
She's set to roam the earth, to and fro' like Cain,  
Looking for Adonis and Cicero in one man  
Father, son, and Holy Spirit all the same.







# GAIL CASTLE

## Alone

In a black cat room  
She lies in her bed  
Quietly she cries

Her tears travel  
A cheek road seeking  
A pillow of remembrance

Flash-flood memories  
Of a love long lost  
Haunt her head

As the tear-tracks  
Map her face  
She weeps more loudly

Then she screams



# YOLANDA CASTILLO

## Blackened Midnight Sky

My blackened midnight sky  
    eclipses the glowing moon  
        with its shadow cast clouds.  
The clouds are pouring in thick,  
        like the scent of harmony  
                    on an ocean front.  
The wind is blowing in at least  
        as fast as a soul searcher  
                seeks his destiny, his depths.  
Inspiration from such a  
    sight so breathtaking is  
        as good a feeling as being  
            on one of those floating, fluffy  
clouds of ecstasy, high,  
        high above this plain.  
Intense and awestruck  
    admiration of the creation of  
        such constant emotion from  
                an ever-changing scenery  
            of undeniable perfection.  
Peace and a little sanity  
consume me as I soak  
    in this psycho-charismatic  
        panorama of my sanction.  
An easing calm finds its  
    way through my chaos to  
        soothe me from head to toe;  
cleansing my bruised mind  
                and restoring my pain sought  
            eyes every time I envision  
my blackened midnight sky.



# CORNFIELD REVIEW

I won't fit  
into your mold  
'cause I don't care  
if you accept me.  
So what if my stanzas  
don't match my style,  
and my alliteration  
falls short of my assonance?  
I want to do *my* thing,  
to hell with the rules.  
My words don't fit  
"form" in your definition.

*Too bad*  
if my ways offend you,  
but I want out . . .

MANDY LEWIS  
Grammar and stuff

out of the box,  
out of your judgment  
o u t of the n o r m  
My english might not  
follow all the rules  
of grammar and stuff,  
but does beauty require  
a blueprint to  
be beautiful?  
Poetry is made

because emotion for us rule breakers  
c s i t l  
a t n h i  
n' a e n  
t y e  
s



# AYERS RATLIFF

## The Prairie

I see —

A tin, white washed windmill overseeing the prairie  
And is next to a sign.  
Sign, made by man, in a prairie made by man.  
Sign, in the not natural prairie.

Wind blows through this prairie without song  
mimicking rattlesnakes by blowing raspy leaves,  
moving highest limb that man cannot touch,  
Causing change, but noticeable change, to the sensitive eye.

Dry air,  
Air so dry like cotton —  
moves me to old, stable crooked trunks protruding from pasture.  
Alone, unmoved, except for themselves.  
Home of the bats, like Dracula hanging movie  
Ashamed, with a cover.

Small tree in the prairie stands by a woodpile  
Not wanting to grow,  
Forever funeraling from far within this young tree.  
But the enforcer, rebel spring, is making it.  
Maybe it should grow so it can understand.

Pond is in the prairie.  
Grey and brown, but blue prairie pond has masquerading sticks.  
home to the painters and gardeners, it is important to the prairie,  
Giver of live — hidden in green grass bushes.



Big blue Lobelia, absent — Canada Tick Trefoil, absent.  
Both are absent, but surrounded.  
Surrounded by rock, little rocks, rock, little rocks — babies of rocks.  
They are supposed to be here, but *I* would not have known,  
I know more by the presence of their sign, than if *they* were here.

Or, what would I know if the absent flowers were here —  
    And the signs were not?  
I would not know the names of the flowers,  
Or, maybe, if they were even flowers.  
If they were here, I might think they were a weed —  
Or,                      weedlike, and would only be important if they had a sign.

Signs give weeds importance.  
If weeds are not weeds — signs give flowers importance.  
Do flowers need importance?  
Does everything with a sign demand respect?

Beautiful flowers standing by themselves are not as important as a beautiful  
    flower standing next to a sign.  
Beautiful flowers are not as important as a sign standing alone in a bed of  
    mulch.

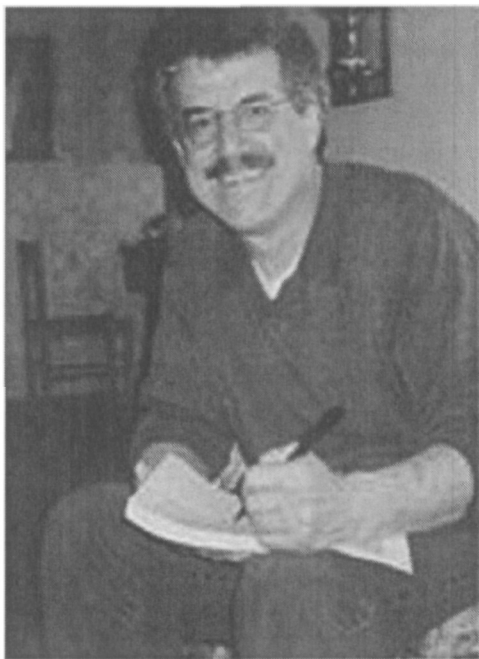
Signs should be changed,  
Signs should change to change us.  
Us as people should read all signs.  
Read these signs, and flow naturally, like we are in a prairie.

Perhaps: we need to look at the flower standing next to the sign —  
Or if he has been standing too long this flower will be sitting.  
He must be told that he is important,  
He must be watered and nurtured,  
Every beautiful flower could end up with a sign, and mimic a weed.

Everything is important which has a sign —  
If a man has a sign, then he is important —  
    *Homeless — Will work for food.*



# POSTSCRIPT.



**David Citino, 1947-2005**

It is the custom of most literary magazines to place what are called "Contributors' Notes" at the end of the issue, some bit of expository information about each of the writers and artists whose work makes up the particular issue a reader has just experienced. Normally, we at the *Cornfield Review* would follow that custom, but for this issue, we would like to make an exception. As we were preparing this current issue for press, we received word that David Citino, who founded this magazine and was its editor from 1976 through 1985, and who is one of our great contemporary American poets, passed away due to complications from multiple sclerosis. He was 58.

After all, one can argue that, although it is nice to know more about a particular writer and artist, the work itself on the page should speak for itself, should be, to paraphrase Emily Dickinson, its own introduction. At least for this issue we will let it be so. Instead, we would like to offer this page as a tribute to David, a gracious and generous heart who taught on our campus from 1974 through 1985.

For those who never had the pleasure to know him, let these words of his, taken from the 1984 issue of *Cornfield Review*, stand as his introduction:

Stuart Lishan

Ten years ago, as a student, thanks to the beneficence of good friends, I left this country for the first time and went to Ireland. I walked the Dublin of Bloom and felt closer to my native Cleveland; scaled the heights of Yeats' Knocknerea and Ben Bulbin and understood better the hills around Bellefontaine and Athens; slogged over the peat bogs of Seamus Heaney and thought of flowering beanfields around Marion. I still bear on my tongue the sweetness of the cream, the rank perfume of burning turf and tepid stout. The same words, but changed utterly. If I had three lifetimes to write through I could never get it all down. Such going to other places makes poets of us all. Returning home, like Whitman from New Orleans, we find we have picked up things to say. . . .

Place can be haunting, haunted. Where is the location on this earth where no one was conceived, born, where no one died? Every inch or acre reverberates with the beating of hearts and lungs of the living and once-living. The dead have named every place we can visit or inhabit. What they have left we can sense. Place poems enable us to be in two places at once, to live forever, to leave whenever we wish this confining tent of bone and flesh. . . .

So often the poem that lasts is the poem planted in familiar soil. The compass that points us home. The dowsing rod that, twitching, says *here* there is something good and true. Such poems are maps without which we could not find our way. . . .

Abstractions, so attractive to young poets, are *nowhere*. It is too easy to build without taking care to survey, lay the foundations, dig the well. Without putting down footers, hanging the plumb line in a steady hand. But such poems seldom last. Our senses crave phrases and lines that reconstruct houses in remembered neighborhoods plank by plank, brick by brick, that plot each creek and alleyway, each molehill and mountain, that sound and look like and have the feel of home. I remember reading somewhere that the Druids took the names of trees and stones and made them letters of their alphabet. So should we. . . .

*Where?* we feel the human need to ask. Nowhere but *here*, poems of place respond. *There*. And therefore, *everywhere*.

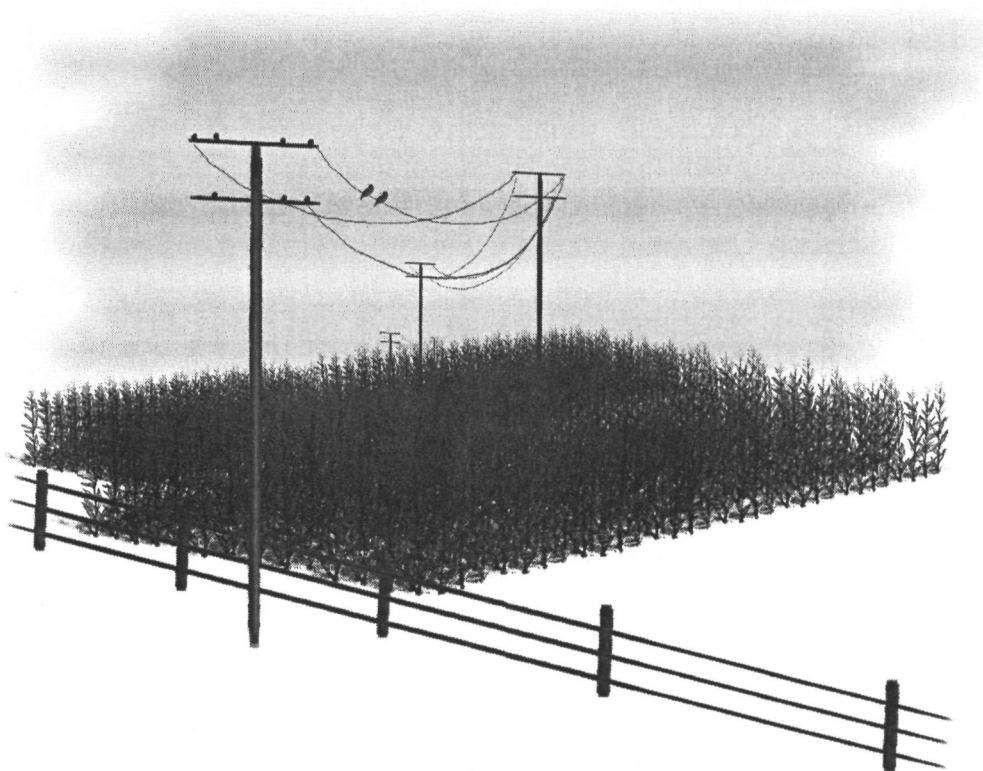
David Citino  
1984

The editorial staff of the 2005-2006 *Cornfield Review* was Candace Elliot, Steven Hill, Steph Horner, Karen Kelley, Kelly Krider, Mandy Lewis, Katherine McConnell, Ayers Ratliff, Mandy Schrader, and Megan Simmermon. The layout & design editor was Justin Bell, and Stuart Lishan was the faculty advisor.

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And thank you to David for tilling the fertile earth for the *Cornfield*. . . .









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