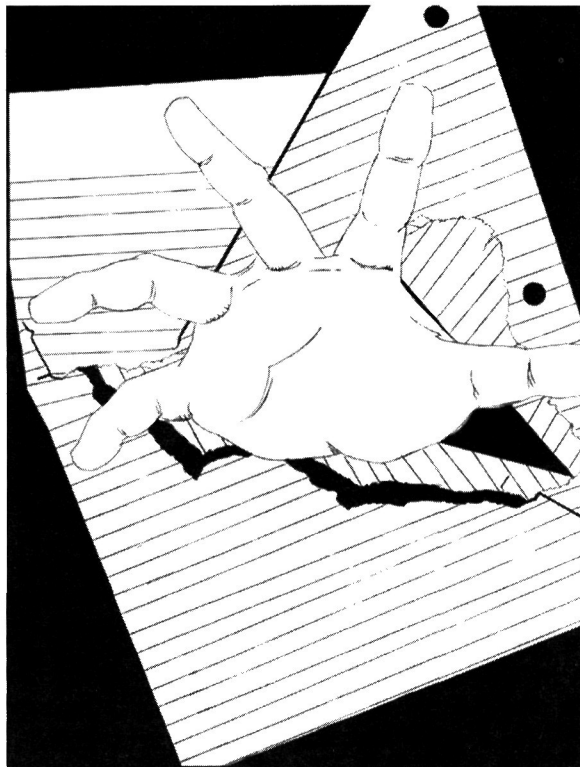


Cornfield Review

An abstract painting with a dark, textured background. In the upper left, a bright, circular, textured shape resembling a full moon is visible. A deer, rendered in shades of brown and orange, stands in the center-left, facing right. To the right of the deer, there are several dark, swirling, spiral-like patterns and some black, wavy, line-like shapes. The overall style is painterly and expressive, with visible brushstrokes and a moody, atmospheric feel.

An Annual of the Creative Arts
Volume 20 2002-2003

Cornfield Review



Volume 20 2002-2003
The Ohio State University at Marion

Cover design by Jonathan Williamson
Artwork adapted by Brenda Ackerman
Title page artwork, "Hand," by Jonathan Riddle

When the editors of this edition of the *Cornfield Review* got together we decided that our goals were to reach a wide audience, open minds, inspire, and set ourselves and this publication apart from previous editors and their work. This year's editorial staff agreed unanimously to include submissions of creative nonfiction, a genre that combines fact with fictional elements, allowing the storyteller to add an artistic twist to personal experiences. We have changed the structure of the table of contents, mixing poetry and prose, incorporating headings for individual sections, and arranging pieces we believe to be relative to one another in theme, emotion or direction. We are proud of this year's cover, the first to appear in full color. After a quarter-long debate involving surveys and much soul-searching, the question of changing the name of the *Cornfield Review* has been put to rest; after twenty-seven years, the name will remain the same. It is our fond hope that the colorful cover and artwork by Brenda Ackerman will enliven the look of our publication and help usher it in to the new millenium.

It was difficult to choose among so many remarkably talented pieces, but after weeks of discussion, voting, re-voting and slow elimination, we have selected an issue that we consider powerful and stimulating. Every aspect of this publication, from the photos, artwork and literary pieces, to the cover as well as the information provided about the staff and contributors is a product of hard work and dedication from students and professors who share an intense passion for the power of words.

The Editorial Board of the *Cornfield Review* consists of the *Cornfield Review* editors as well as students and professors from the Marion, Mansfield and Newark campuses of The Ohio State University. Along with the editors listed on the following page, the Board is comprised of Shannin Bailey, Laura Behne, Fred McKinney, Hank Osborne, and Brooke Wilson. For their support in making *Cornfield Review* an inter-campus publication, we give special thanks to James Louks, Barbara McGovern, Elizabeth Caldwell, Susan Delegrange, Lynn Fazzini, Greg Rose and Dominic Dottavio. For help with the cover, we thank Ellen Sheaffer. For their continued encouragement of the written word and the literary journal, we thank Lynda Behan, Anne Bower, Scott DeWitt, Marcia Dickson, and Stuart Lishan.

Cornfield Review is published once a year as a joint publication of The Ohio State University at Marion, Mansfield, and Newark. The Editorial Board seeks quality writing, including poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction as well as artwork and photographs. Submissions are accepted from students and faculty between October 1 and March 1 and must be accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope. Please send no more than five poems, and limit fiction and nonfiction to 3000 words or less.

Cornfield Review

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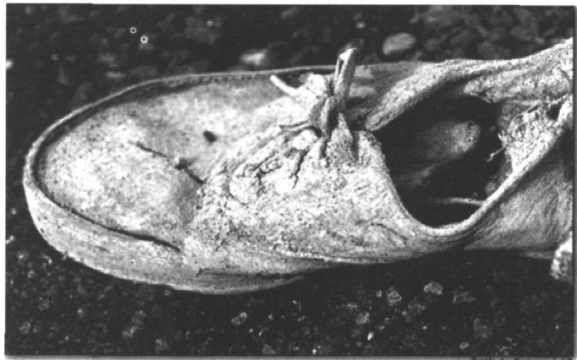
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photo provided by Shellie Shirk

Prairie Voices

I live and die in the rhythm of the earth.
In life, the song of the bugs entertains me
and the rain sustains me
As the seasons come and go.

I live to give seed
To the indolent reed
And the soil that girded me.
It has always been so.

Why do you give birth?
Is it your purpose to seed the eager earth?
Where do you go?
The oak tree wants to know.

I was born to give life;
I die to be reborn
I sow the soil to soothe my soul,
The ground is where I go.

The gurgling brook wets withered roots
And the water brings life
And the bugs' song survives
And the cycle of life is revived.



Brenda Ackerman

The Clipper

The first thing the boy saw was the fanning mill standing alongside the machine shed. It was a faded red Clipper model, used to separate the seed from everything else: the chaff, the small sticks and stones, and of course, the weed seed.

Inside the house the old woman led the boy to the kitchen.

"A dozen eggs and a quart of cream," the boy said.

"You're the Adams boy. Flora's grandson."

"Yes, Ma'am."

She brought in the basket of eggs from the old refrigerator on the back porch and took a gray paper carton from the stack on the kitchen counter. Her hands were cracked and chapped but she handled each egg tenderly, gently washing off the dirt and bits of straw with warm water, drying each egg on a ragged piece of towel, and carefully placing it in the carton. "Are you still in school?" she asked.

"Graduation's tomorrow night."

"What'll you do then?"

"Go to college. At Ohio State."

She poured cream from the jug into a quart Mason jar, wiped the rim clean on a corner of her apron, and replaced the lid.

"You making ice cream?"

He nodded.

"In the summer time Dad used to make ice cream every Sunday. He said it was the Lord's gift to the poor man. Always vanilla. Said plain vanilla's good enough for me." For a moment she stared off into the corner where the ceiling and the walls met, then she turned back to the boy. "Have you got a minute, son?"

She took him through the kitchen and unlocked the door to the parlor. The shades were drawn, the windows shut up tight, and it smelled of disuse. She lit a lamp and stood near the pump organ. "Can you sit down?"

A cloud of dust rose when the boy sat down on the edge of an upholstered chair, perching there with his back straight and his hands folded in his lap.

The old woman took off her apron, folded it carefully, and laid it on top of the organ. She smoothed the front of her dress and glanced at the half-dozen photographs ranged across the top of the pump organ, taking each up in turn and carefully returning it to its place.

"We wanted children," she began, "Walter and me, but it wasn't God's will. Walter had four sisters and I had all brothers. Six of 'em. I wanted girls so bad, but I lost the baby. The cord was wrapped around her little neck, and she was blue when she come out. Mother was there, and Walter's sister. And Jimmy was just three when his appendix bursted. There was four more, all born dead."

The boy leaned forward resting his forearms on his knees, staring at the carton of eggs and quart of cream on the floor between his feet.

"Walter always worked hard. There was the stock and the crops and the buildings." She took up the apron, working it in her hands like a lump of bread dough. "I minded the chickens and the garden. Now I have it all to do. He don't get out of bed." She looked up at the ceiling.

The boy got up and crossed the room, stopped at the glassed case. Inside it were books by James and Hardy and Dreiser.

"It's foul words now. Horrible things Walter says to me. I don't know where he heard them. Maybe the war. He wouldn't talk about it when he come back from the Somme. Just said there was some sights to see."

"Can I look at them?"

"What?"

"The books."

"If you want."

The case was made of dark varnished wood with lighter streaks. He turned the key in the lock and pulled open the door. A thin layer of dust lay on the books and the shelves, and when he slid the first book out it left a trail. It was Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and inside the cover, written in fancy script, was "To Walter with love, Martha, December 25, 1921." He leafed through the book. A half dozen pages were dog-eared, and scribbled notes filled the margins. All the pages were yellowed and crumbling at the edges.

"Walter and me was married in nineteen and thirteen." She took the wedding photograph from the top of the pump organ and gave it to the boy.

He laid the book down and looked at the photograph. The man sat tall on the edge of the chair, his huge hands folded in his lap and his dark mustache drooping over his lips. The woman stood beside him, short and homely, her hair pinned carefully in place and her dress dark and shiny. Her hand rested on his shoulder, her gaze on his face; he stared straight out of the photograph, without smiling.

The old woman moved close to the boy. "He was twenty and I was seventeen. He was strong then, Walter was, not like now." She looked down at the faded roses on the carpet. "He had big hands, Walter did, but gentle." She touched the boy's shoulder.

The boy jerked and stood up. "I ought to be going," he said.

She folded her hands against her breast and stared at the roses. "But he leaned his face up close and kissed my cheek. His beard was rough but his breath smelled like warm milk. He shushed me and it was all right. I knew we was making babies and it was all right. Part of the job."

The boy set the photograph on the pump organ and took up the book. "Can I see him?"

"Who?"

"Your husband, Mr. Wills."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded.

She led him up the narrow stairs and down the back hall to the last door. Inside the old man lay propped up against pillows, his face all a great hooked nose and his hair a wild shock of white. His mouth hung open and he snored intermittently, great buzz-saw raspings.

"There's someone to see you, Walter." She smiled at the old man, then at the boy.

"Whuh-unh?" He snorted and his eyes snapped open.

"What the goddammed hell?"

"The boy wants to see you," she said.

"Who the hell are you?"

"You know me, Walter. I'm Martha. Your wife."

"Get out of here. I never saw you before."

Tears came into her eyes and she went back down the stairs, the boy behind her. "I hoped he'd be better. Why did you want to see him?"

"I wanted to ask him about the books."

"The books?"

"Yes. I wanted to ask him."

The boy came back at the end of his first term in college and again asked to see Walter, alone this time. When she assented he climbed the steps and stopped short of the door, his trembling hand just inches from the knob. Then he turned it and pushed open the door.

"Who are you?"

"Adams. I'm Ben Adams." He took a deep breath and stood with the volume of Hardy in his hand. "I came to ask you about the books."

"Books?"

"In the glass case. Downstairs. She said they were yours."

"Books," the old man said.

"I love to read, and I thought maybe you would tell me about your books."

When he handed the book to the old man the huge hands swallowed it. The fingers were long and thin, little more than bone and sinew, with outsized swollen joints. The old man opened the book and leafed through several pages, then closed it and laid it beside him on top of the quilt. He looked out the window for a moment, then back at the boy.

"Get the hell out here," he said, his black eyes flashing like flint on steel. The boy hesitated.

"Get the hell out," the old man shouted. He hurled the book at the boy.

The boy fled back down the stairs, passing the old woman on her way up. He smoothed the

wrinkled pages as best he could and put the book back in the glassed case. His reflection stared back from the glass in the door and the mirror image of his hand turned the key and relocked the door. He went through the kitchen and out the door and down the back steps. Glancing across the yard he saw the fanning mill up against the shed, now snug in a drift of snow. The sun disappeared behind a cloud and it got colder, and the wind swirled a skiff of snow across the empty yard.

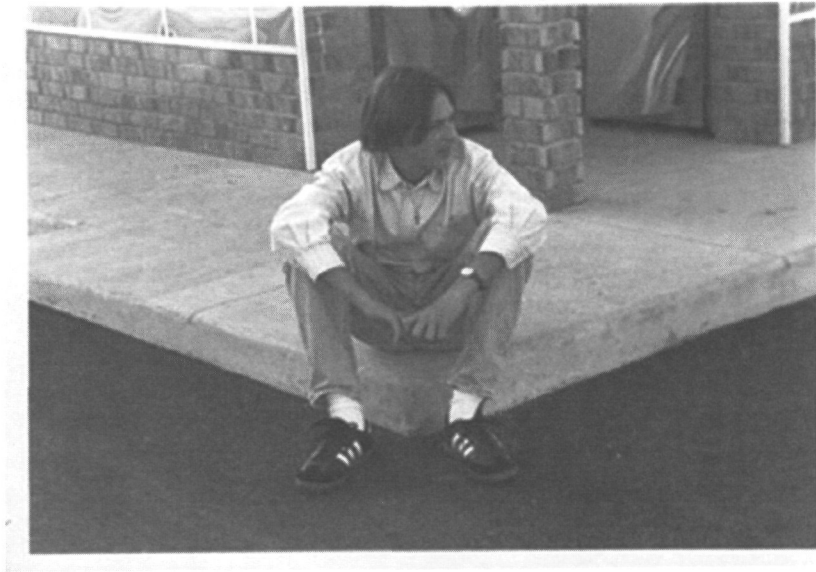


photo provided by Shellie Shirk

Words Unsaid

What have I to fear of spoken words—
Which pass so glibly from poisoned lips—
That twitch with sound and pout to kiss?
What ache should I feel over what is heard?
The soul is mute, but no less disturbed
No silence is golden, no ignorance bliss

Truth and innocence sleep with the dead
Shriveled brown roses pay tribute here
Where no voice can sing, and no eye can tear
But true unrest lies in what is read
Between the lines, those words left unsaid
There lurks the source of my unspoken fear

These passions in me, I dare not voice
From the heart's rhythm are they awoken
With one uttered word, the cadence is broken
For awe and reverence, I have no choice
But to silently feel that breath, warm and moist
Breathe out the words that are spoken

rush

come—

like a bird,
skim across pond surface thick like crust
a sight most breathtaking
explode through mountains of snow dust.

I—

to the moon
the stars blaze white as they swirl through space
in the intricate dance
leaving trails back to explosion.

must—

to the edge
of the universe where no stars dare
drift in eternal night
til 'back' comes, to rest before light.

go—

splash down deep
among rainbows dwelling on bottom
glowing softly, promise
to stay til I leave anyway.

fly—

into earth
feel warmth crumble between my fingers
try for the molten core
I'm no mole, so back out I crawl.

off—

to go soar
and keep on diving, pushing forward
into the bright new day
dawning beyond far horizon.

GET UP

It was a clear, cool morning, the kind that Ohio enjoys in October after the summer has used up most of its energy. I sat in my newly adopted wheelchair, having much earlier ignored my breakfast. The tray sat imperfectly located on the sterile metal end table beside my bed. The wheelchair made it possible for me to get around in the nursing home, but it was a constant reminder that I couldn't walk anymore.

I'd had a stroke. It sounds clean and simple, but when it happened I was completely surprised and unable to comprehend what had happened. I'd fallen, and really couldn't figure how to get up. I had with some difficulty crawled near a phone and pulled it down off the table. I had called a friend, and early in the conversation Tom realized something was very wrong.

Hang up and dial 911, he told me. I did as instructed and quickly the squad arrived. I was embarrassed and thankful at the same time. The next several days were filled with doctors and needles and nurses, and the result of all of their testing and prodding was that I was no longer in charge of my life. They all seemed to be driving and I felt like a boat hooked up to a pickup truck. I was going places, but I had few choices about the destinations.

After the test results were in, I was told about my stroke. The difficulty I had with speaking should get better and my face should quit feeling like I'd had a monster shot of Novocain. The paralysis on my left side was more difficult to evaluate. They (the doctors) suggested living in a nursing home for some time and concentrating on physical and occupational therapy. I later redefined those little pastimes as "torture by toys." I worked for hours each day, attempting to re-teach my body to do the things I expected of it. It rebelled.

I worked hard at the therapeutic tasks I was assigned, but for weeks I was unable to bounce a balloon or feed myself with my left hand. I had never been a fast runner, but I missed plain old walking. The therapists were relentless and optimistic, but my own moods changed often. I would get mad, laugh at myself, and then pout for hours in my room. I complained about the food, the noise in the halls, and about everything that didn't complain back.

One day I got a package in the mail. My brother, Brian, had sent books, a card, and a bunch of other neat stuff. After I looked at each item, I kept digging. At the bottom of the box was a tumbler package with three racquetball balls. *Go play*, was his order. Play? Did he realize how terrible life had become for me? Play? I couldn't walk! I should forget all of that? The answer was *Yes*.

I wheeled myself outside, holding one of the balls with my bad hand and pushing the wheel with the other. I wheeled up in front of one of the buildings and looked at it. Play. Go play.

I threw the ball at the building and it bounced back at me; I caught it with my good hand—easily. What if I forced my bad hand to try to catch the ball? I looked around, and saw no one who might make me feel embarrassed if I missed it. I tried it. The ball bounced past me. I retrieved it and tried again. I missed again, but the hand that behaved as if some alien marionette maker controlled it

came close to the ball. I played for what seemed like hours.

That evening I sat alone after dinner, thinking about the future and worrying that I was perhaps permanently reassigned to a nursing home. I was in my 50's and not ready. I'm sure no one is really ready for the human junk pile. The television in my room didn't help. It only showed people who were still more or less in control of their own destinies. It made me feel insignificant.

I again got out the box I'd received from Brother Brian. There was a book about baseball players in it. They were baseball players I'd cheered for in my youth—Mantle, Feller, Jackie Robinson and more. I read for a while, until the book fell in my lap while my mind picked up on other baseball stories from my youth.

... I was playing in Little League again. I was wearing the gray and red wool Fibreglas uniform I had been so proud of. I'd never been a great Little Leaguer, but good enough to make a good team. I remembered my teammates and how great we looked in those uniforms. Some of us had black rubber-soled baseball shoes and some wore the white high-top Chuck Taylor All-Star sneakers.

I could almost hear the "crack" of the wooden bat hitting a baseball. I could almost smell the sweet aroma of disturbed sod that I casually knocked out of my cleats with a tap of the bat. The pitcher wound up and fired a fastball down the middle, and I missed it. With my eyes shut, I could hear the parents in the stands—some rooting for me, some yelling for a strikeout. The next pitch came at me and I swung—a bit late—but I hit it. The ball bounced to center field as I got to first base with a single. A smile curled the edges on an older man's lips as I savored the memory.

Either Frank Sheldon or Vic Fink hit the next pitch clear out to the snow fence in center field. I took off, running at my best speed. As I rounded second base I was supposed to look at Mr. Foote, the third base coach. I didn't. I turned my head to see where the ball was and tripped, falling flat on my nose. I was lying in the dirt base path and everything else was moving and yelling. The only thing I heard was Mr. Foote yelling: "*Get up!*"

I got up. As sometimes happens when kids play baseball, the ball got away. As I got to third, Mr. Foote was wind milling his arms: "*Go! Go! Go!*" I went. I raced for home plate, this time trusting my coach to tell me the thing to do. I ran as fast as I could and about ten feet from the plate, I slid. The ball came out of the catcher's glove and bounced harmlessly toward the fence.

I scored. Whoopee! I jumped up, covered with dust that couldn't conceal the smile on my dirty face. My teammates yelled and congratulated me like I'd hit a home run. When I calmed down a little, I sat down on the bench. Mr. Pitcock, Tom's Dad, was one of the coaches and he sat down next to me. "*Good hustle,*" he said. I reminded him I'd fallen down like a wounded buffalo out by second base. "*Doesn't matter,*" he reprimanded me. "*Nobody notices when you fall down unless you don't get up.*" We won, and celebrated with a Popsicle as the memory faded away . . .

I was back in my room in my wheelchair. It was dark out and security lights illuminated the courtyard beside the building. I looked out, still relishing having scored a run so many years ago. I

heard the squeak of the rubber-soled shoes of a nurse walking down the hall as I wheeled my chair outside and into the courtyard. I had the blue rubber ball in my hand.

I heard it again in my head—“*Get Up!*”

I struggled with that chair and my headstrong leg as I stood, holding onto the chair. I heard my brother’s admonition as well: *Go play*. The ball made a “fwoop” sound when it hit the wall and bounced back at me. I annoyed some people that night, but I wasn’t embarrassed anymore.



photo by Brenda Ackerman

Dismay

Imagery flows through a waterspout, into my study drawn,
Icons on a shining screen, a mocking dance begun.
Tired grind and groan meanders, through a mental fog,
Ideas unprepossessing, fraught with miscued work,
Entreaty made to bright Electra, random specks float down,
 No succor lies before me, only dirty snow.

Not inspired begs the question, my ideas worse for wear,
My pleading is but scant relief, a watery redoubt.
Borrowed sums are tightly wound, against my future bright,
Lacking hope of sweet reward, within my beck and call,
In concatenating waves of chaos, a lesser vision forms,
Defeat this time my silver cursor, let starlight stand aside,
 A vapid bit is thus produced, an awful crop of words.

Though creation is its own reward, and knowledge often gained,
I often chafe on papers proffered, with task so lowly done.
Evolution piques truest effort, a Kantian delight,
Sagely I start to print; as caution begins to well,
But hesitation is cast aside, consider now the sun,
 Disk and paper fly about; I set off on a run.

Something with Coffee

A cozy fire, crunchy buttered toast
Sweet aroma wafting, floating
Lazy-eyed through nostrils
Widened, toes wiggling and
Downy-soft awakening.



Yolanda Castillo

Tales of a Sunny Day

“Want to go spelunking?” Jon threw the question to me with as little energy as he possibly could. Drained from the high heat and humidity, his young lanky frame sprawled out over the couch.

“What?” I murmured the question back from the comforts of the forest green Lazy Boy recliner. The heat of the day constricted any quick movement.

“You know, spelunking,” Jon replied, his movement also constricted.

“I can’t say I know what that is. But doesn’t it have something to do with cave exploring?”

“You’re kidding.” Jon’s face contorted, giving me a puzzled look. His thick russet eyebrows shifted upwards as he tried to comprehend how I could not understand the concept of spelunking.

“No.”

“Well let me enlighten you, my son. Spelunking is when an arrow is shot from a crossbow into my pond, aimed at a frog.”

“What?”

“Yep. Spelunking, spelunking for frogs.”

“Hey, Jon, let me ask you something.”

“Sure. What do ya want to know?”

“Are you an idiot?”

“No. Well, at least I don’t think so.”

“Do you want to go or not?”

“What do you plan on doing with all those dead frogs?”

“Putting them in my sister’s room.”

“I am sure Susie would like that.”

“Me, too. After all, she was the one who told Marty about my grade card’s disappearance.”

“Are you sure that you are not an idiot?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Now grab your boots and let’s go.”

I rose and ambled to the back porch. Sliding open the screen door, I squinted as the sun scorched the back of my eyelids while I groped blindly for my boots. I scratched the athlete’s foot between my toes as I tugged on my boots. The day was hot and I hated leaving the comfort of the air-conditioned living room. I already longed for the comfort of that forest green recliner. I could always be found there on such a day, when the air was thick with humidity. My boots were warm with a slightly gray mud caked on them from a previous journey into Jon’s backyard. The effort of intertwining the grommets with the stiff laces left me drained. *What is taking him so long?* I thought to myself as I sprawled out over the cool grass. I looked up to the heavens, the clouds outlined in a light blue. *Do frogs have a soul? I hope not. I don’t want to meet one in my after life. I wonder if they are even out? It is too hot for anything, especially me. I hope Mom got me those fireworks I asked for. She better have. The fourth is not that far away and I obviously can’t buy them myself. I*

wonder if Jon has any. Maybe I should ask him. I thought I saw some in the garage next to his grandfather's rusty old toolbox.

"Hey, wake up." Jon poked me with the blunt end of one of the arrows he had found.

"Hey, stop it. I wasn't sleeping."

"You looked like it."

"Well, I wasn't. It's the heat— it makes your mind wander. Oh. Hey, by the way, do you have any fireworks?"

"Yes, but they're pretty old. Dad hasn't bought me any since that last incident."

"You mean when you shot the Cooper kid with that bottle rocket?"

"Yeah," he chuckled. "Oh well, I'm sure I'll get some pretty soon. Here."

He dangled the stock of my crossbow over me in a futile attempt to help me up off the grass. I reluctantly took hold of the stock and stood on my feet. The weight of the crossbow was only a few pounds, yet it felt as if it weighted me down. I stood awkwardly, keeping most of my weight on one leg.

"So, are you really going to put those dead frogs in Susie's room?"

"Nah, I'll just throw them in the Cooper's yard."

"Hey Jon, why don't we put a live one in their pool?"

"You sure it will live?"

"Does it matter?"

"Well then, let's get started."

"Hey, Steve?"

"Yeah?"

"You're terrible."

"I know."

I turned from him and looked off to the horizon. A few yards past the garden, which inhabited brightly colored strawberries and various fresh vegetables, lay the center of the tree line, and behind it rested a small murky pond. Cattails grew on the one side, and on the other the grass was neatly trimmed to the edge. A few bright yellow lawn chairs rested on the side, with fishing poles leaning on them from a day or two ago. Brightly colored bobbers dangled from the ends of the tangled lines as the sun bounced off of them. There was a calmness that floated in the air, a tranquility that could only be felt on a hot Sunday afternoon. All things remained so very still as the sun bleached our energy. The only movement was the wind blowing over my shoulders and wrinkling the small murky pond.

"Hey." Jon was again poking me with the blunt end of his arrow. "You were sleeping again." He grumbled this time, a little annoyed with my incoherence.

"Nah, I told you, it's the heat— it makes your mind wander."

"Why is this heat making your mind wander?"

"I don't know, maybe I'm concerned that we're becoming the bastard children of Satan," I joked, trying to lighten his mood. "Why does it matter if I'm a little incoherent?"

"Well, I think you're always a little incoherent," Jon said, grinning.

"Forget it. Let's just go spelunking like we planned."

We began to amble over to the pond with only one stop along the way to eat some wild raspberries. The raspberries were very fresh, lacquered in a heavy purple that stained our hands and clothes when they were picked. I was sure I would hear about that from my mother later. I could almost hear her now, nagging away.

She would stand very erect, face with a red hue trying to keep her calm, holding the stains in front of me. She would give lessons on the morals of cleanliness and how hard it was to be a single mother.

"Why can't you act a little more responsible?" she would half ask, half order. "How did you get these clothes so stained? You think money grows on trees? I am not buying you any more new clothes." Then she would end with the line she always used: "You don't have the common sense God gave a goose." Blah blah blah, on and on she would go about some stupid stains. I don't know why I put up with her. After all, they are just clothes.

"Hey, Jon, does Marty complain about your clothes being stained?"

"Who? Martin?"

"No ya dork, Marty. You know, your stepmother."

"Oh, Marty. She used to, but now I think she has gotten used to it. You ready to get started?"

"Sure. As long as you promise to get your ears checked," I replied. I gathered up my crossbow and arrows, ate the last of my raspberries, and followed Jon towards the pond. The edge of the pond was muddy and cattails prevented any real quick movement through the banks. The heavy sent of decaying fish filled our nostrils. However, it was the best place for frog killing in the whole county. Of course, this was also the only place in the county I could do this, but I was sure it was still the best place for spelunking, or whatever Jon calls this waste of valuable recliner time. I slowly sank into the mud as I carefully sneaked through the cattails, trying not to lose my boots. The soles of my shoes clung to the smelly oatmeal surface as I made my way toward Jon.

"See any?" I whispered.

"Not yet," he replied, "but I am sure we will see them soon enough. I heard them all last night. They were singing away, keeping me up all night."

"Frogs don't sing man, they ribit."

"Whatever. Just shoot them when you see them."

I cocked back my crossbow, set the safety and squished through a few yards. After finding a suitable place to stand I loaded an arrow and waited.

After a short while I lost interest and began to look up at the sky. *I wonder if Jon is really*

going to put those frogs in Susie's room? I bet the house is nice and cool, with the air conditioning blowing—that Lazy Boy is looking mighty comfortable. I just want to go inside. We're never going to find any stupid frogs. They are probably sleeping, if they even sleep. And I don't really care about Jon's revenge. I must be daydreaming, again. Wow, look at the size of that carp.

While my inattentive mind had been wandering, a white carp had swum up close to the bank. He was at least two and a half feet in length with a slightly pink belly. The whiskers next to his gills flickered as he lazily made his way closer to me. His white head broke the surface as he scanned the terrain for food and then went just below the surface once again. I was surprised; they normally do not come to the surface like this on such a hot day. He must be hungry, I thought. I felt like Captain Ahab must have felt the first time he spotted Moby Dick. His size was unparalleled by any other fish. He basked in his own magnificence, as he glared at me without fear. He knew I was a predator, yet he continued to search for food, as if I was no threat. *That's what I'll call you. Moby Dick*, I thought, as I marveled at the size of him. He swam closer to me, stopped, looked right at me, and with a flicker of his whiskers he was off in a flash, gone without leaving a ripple in the water.

The sun continued to bake us for a while, and I could feel my arms and the back of my neck starting to burn. I was just about ready to tell Jon that I was tired of this nonsense and that I was heading inside when I heard the sound of an arrow whistling briefly in the air, slicing an occasional cattail before the final splash in the water.

"Hey, I got him," Jon sounded off like a trumpet, breaking the silence of the day. I pulled myself from the smelly oatmeal and headed over to the drier shore. I uncocked the crossbow and pulled off my boots and socks and began to roll up my pant legs. Jon was still fishing for his trophy.

"Are we done yet?" I asked, tired from the heat and longing for that recliner.

"Sure," he excitedly replied. "But first I want to show you the spoils of the war."

"Afterwards, we can go inside, right?" I started heading over to where Jon was. His back was to me as he dragged something from the murky depths. I could not see what it was, but it looked big.

"What did you shoot?" I asked.

"This." He pulled a white carp from the shallows and held it in the air. "This thing must be two and a half feet long," he exclaimed. *It's Moby, not a thing*, I thought, as Jon hiked the dead carcass on to the bank. Then Jon climbed out of the pond.

"Why did you do that?" I asked, angry with him for shooting what I had been so impressed with earlier.

"Do what?" he replied, unsure of what I was talking about.

"You killed that carp." Surprised at my reaction, Jon gave me a puzzled look as though he was trying to understand why I would get upset over a fish. "It's a fish. No big deal," he retorted.

"I know," I replied. "But it looked so cool earlier. It swam right up to me."

"Hmm. I see it's your friend." Jon tried to lighten my mood. "I'll tell you what, hang out here

for a second and I'll be right back." Jon pulled his arrow from the dead carp's side and quickly trotted off into the garage. I walked over to the body and stood silently for a moment while I waited for Jon's return. He emerged from the garage carrying a shovel and a small pine board.

"Grab your friend," he said as he walked over to the trees. He put the board down on the grass and started digging. I picked up Moby by the tail and walked over to Jon. When he had finished, I placed the carp into the hole and Jon replaced the soil. Then, using the shovel as a hammer, he pounded the board into the ground at the head of the grave, then stepped back.

"Here." He pulled a black magic marker from his back pocket and handed it to me. I scribbled on the board and stood back. Jon looked at me and recited what I inscribed on the board.

"'Here lies Moby Dick, biggest carp in the pond.' Man, you had a name for him and everything."

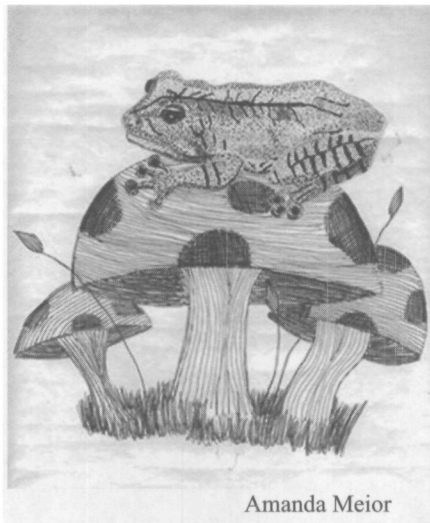
"Yeah, well, that's life," I stated.

"Come on, man, let's go inside. It's nice and cool in there, and we can watch some TV before dinner. What do you say?" Jon inquired, trying to make some penance with me.

"I guess," I replied. His gesture of air-conditioning and dinner was enough for me to forgive him. He was my best friend. I had no other close companions. Therefore, because he was the only person who could understand my desires and beliefs, I could never stay mad at him for very long. Together we turned and made our way towards the house.

"Hey Jon, do you think fish have a soul?" I asked.

"I hope not," he responded. "I wouldn't want to meet him in my after life."



Cloven

Feathery Waves of peach-plum earth
lifted me up on tremendous girth;
I pulled the ring held out to me—
it unfolded fetters, let me see:

slices of pie-moon, oranged and cool,
breezes of vision, honeysuckled pool,
cloudy sea-gaze, ocean's breeze
grandma smells and old man sneeze,
sand that's sugar, salted water,
warm hands holding, shining otter;
tree-sap, maple-tap, Mother Earth gives
powdered sugar through old woman sieves,
eddys of grass, golden and flying
soup-ladle honkers, sky-flung and sighing,
stamen and pistil, probiscus and sack,
wind-howled tree leaves, borrowed, bent back;

these minute things of earth I saw,
I wondered, gloried—it left me raw.

Fairy-Light of twinkle-gaze
commanded forth kind unicorn rays;
I twitched and rumbled deep within,
then let go dancing on earth's sweet spin:

slide to gleeful, watergun fun,
crack the egg and out comes the sun,
dimpled fingers stuck in cake,
exuberant, sensual little rake!
skinny dip deep, twirl in the dancing,
strip off the layers, kindle romancing;
herb-garden smells for wisdom's healing
prayer-hardened hands with time-spun kneeling;
heart in hot soup, spicy and pumping
bread dough—yeasted, rough hands thumping;

like newborn eyes, like scabs born fresh
I reveled in the life of flesh.

Searching Seer with binocular intent,
flung me spacious, compass descent;
I perched low wandering, teeth ajar,
births of vision transported me far:

hummingbird buzz, kangaroo cough,
jungled hairbones, dirty-kneed sloth,
amazon slide through pirauna races,
sand-dune sunsleep in soul-deep places;

I laughed from deep within my heart
my spirit twanged delicious start.

A Mime of Mirrors on birch-top perched,
refracted fragments of life-time searched;
and down he cast upon me solemn
caches of gold in pit-cold column:

bawling cow-babe, weeping candle,
mouselike new-cat, Roman sandle,
pyramid savvy, sorrowed brawn,
manhood hunted, womanhood dawn,
jew-struck starlight, jealous man,
hideous lightout, lifespan ban;

I stood as if transfixed in time,
felt pain and birth within, sublime.

volcanic god of little sight
threw orange lava with his might;
I caught it hot but knew it not
for what it was, just smoking thought:

scattered tea leaves, cross-stitched palm,
cards of taro, searching psalm;

I realized quick the desperation,
mankind's search for inspiration.

Man and Women, Girl and Boy,
looking, watching, seeking joy.
where is the real, the deep-struck root,
the well-spring of essential shoot?

Tapestry, Quilt, Painting and Poem
Carving, Birthing, Love-brung Home;
Plant the Ground, Touch the Sick,
Write the Song, Light the Wick;

I'm star-born spirals; whirl and weave
to puffs of brilliant Evidence, cleave.

(a.m.) Mornings (a.m.)

thick black
crude drink
biting back
no sugar
nor cream
strong
java
joe
cup-o-life
too hot
yet not
drink it
down
swallow
swallow
top it off
steam rolling
scented air
aroma roaming
eyes closed
hands tremble
wide awake
fast talker
quick pace
more, more . . .

Street Scene

I know the mystery wrapped in black and white,
newsboy, conman, preacher, lacquered woman.
This moment claws a snapshot of the sizzle night
prick-pasted grin on snazzed up Dude,
arm nicking side of old man's cart,
posing in the strawberry light of June.

You see flowered lady of Betula Avenue,
gussied, musk-smelling, sashaying cup of hips.
Her dance step big shanty, hopping, holy,
strolling slowly past, notice me,
in front of Daniel's Bar and Grill,
dine, drink wine, Saturday night delight

I have seen Uncle Inc. standing in the street,
Harlem's little pathway, 1939—not Dorothy's brick
but the slick Dude's road—ready to tingle,
mingle amongst the conversations
and sweat a bit in the shadowed alleyways,
taking quick adventure with a flower-petaled lady.

I know the desperate story of the broken apple man
who sleeps beneath the moldy, borrowed cart,
“yessir, nickel, got a dime? Take a bite.”
I know he dreams of dollar bills and paychecks
filled with glass, cyclone-sucked from deep within
the windowpanes, Lion cigarettes among the muck.

I have seen the flicker light, the darkened boulevard,
folks squashed tight, Sister Aimee, Brother Tom,
passing, nodding, plodding, crawling night.
I know about two hundred steps, rusty key, crumbling door,
stolen apple—pocket deep, gut hunger, cockroach mud.
Seconds tock, tick the man, wander down the avenue.

Father

You were there when I left,
And I was gone for years.
You were still there when I returned
As though you were waiting for me
To come back before you died;
As though you needed to know I was O.K.
Maybe you thought you could help me somehow
By being there.
Perhaps, you needed me.
You have changed and say new words;
I, too, have changed.
Your silent heart love
Buys me, lifts me up
To do what I have never done before.
Your years have diminished your demeanor
But not your heart;
And I am grateful.



photo provided by Shellie Shirk

The Wrong Place

The bright lights blinded Katie as she trailed behind Pam, a short, dark-haired figure scurrying down the beige corridors that snaked behind the auditorium of the historic Palace Theater in downtown Marion, Ohio. Katie's eyes struggled to adjust to the incandescent passageways, a harsh contrast to the dusky outdoors. She had just spent the two hours prior to the dress rehearsal of "How Great Thou Art" trudging around the undersized parking lot adjacent to the theater with Norman, the Easter drama/musical's notoriously cantankerous donkey, ambling along at her side. For now, he waited outside in a metal cattle trailer while Katie followed Pam down the hallway before them.

For the past four years it had been Katie's self-assigned duty to exercise Norman before his dual performances inside the Palace, first as the pregnant Mary's mount, and later as Jesus' transportation into "Jerusalem" for his triumphal entry. Norman, however, was very young and inexperienced, and he was infamous among the "How Great" crew for being excitable and difficult to handle. Being one of the few people not frightened of the mischievous donkey, Katie felt it was her duty to do her best to calm him. A two-hour walk seemed to sober the beast, and the task fell to Katie.

After a disastrous first attempt during dress rehearsal to lead the donkey into the Palace and down the steeply sloping, carpeted aisle, it was suggested that Norman might perform better if he had Katie at his head to comfort him. Katie was flattered to be considered to fulfill the small part, and she immediately consented.

At first, her position seemed simple. Katie would be assigned a costume and assist in leading the donkey down the aisle. She was directed backstage and found herself delivered to Pam, the lady in charge of costumes.

Pam was in a hurry as she led Katie down the hallway aglow with soft, white lights. The faint stench of must and mothballs seemed to seep from the cold cement blocks that comprised the echoing hall.

"Women's costumes are down this hall, around this corner, and at the top of these stairs," Pam instructed her. The depth of the Palace dressing area was overwhelming as Katie struggled to remember the series of twists and turns Pam ushered her through. "It's simple, really," Pam called over her shoulder. "Do you have any questions?"

Katie shook her head. She was quiet and rarely asked questions.

Suddenly, the duo was bombarded by a series of cast members requiring Pam's assistance.

"Pam, I need you over here!" one woman demanded.

"Pam, the men need you downstairs," came another command from the opposite direction.

"Pam, can you help me?" a disheveled shepherdess begged.

After several lengthy detours, Pam was finally able to direct her attention back to Katie's plight.

What have I gotten myself into? Katie wondered as she followed the retreating figure up a narrow stairwell. *I have no idea where I am and I don't know how to act in a play. I'm too embarrassed to tell Pam I have no idea how to find my costume tomorrow night. And how will I ever get*

back outside? Finally, they reached a short hallway filled with bustling women and lined with small, colorful rooms, each outfitted with a full length, lighted mirror.

"Your costume will be on this rack tomorrow night. Don't forget to go up to women's makeup after you get dressed. Tell them you need to look like a boy to lead the donkey," Pam instructed Katie.

Makeup? Katie wondered. This was an aspect she had not considered when she had accepted her role as donkey security blanket. Makeup was something Katie did not like and wore very little of on a daily basis, but she decided it could be tolerated for four nights, the duration of the play's production.

Katie turned away for only a second, but without a parting word Pam bustled away, already absorbed with another of her perpetual missions. Katie picked her way down the stairs and tried to retrace the steps she had taken earlier. Finally, she managed to locate the backstage mechanics area. Goose pimples prickled down her arms as she realized she had no idea where to turn. However, almost immediately, she spotted a familiar face surrounded by Roman soldiers outfitted in authentic red costumes, complete with feathered Roman helmets and leather string sandals.

"David," she whispered to the young man, "I'm lost!"

"I didn't see you in class on Wednesday," David said. "I missed you." David settled his lanky frame against the rough brick wall. His face was nearly enveloped by the shadows of the backstage area.

Katie flushed. "I'll try to make Bible study next week." She shifted her weight and moved a step back from David. Lately her friend had been making his attraction to her more apparent, and it made her uncomfortable.

"I hope you do," he said, flashing her a lopsided grin.

Katie shuffled her feet and moved further away. She avoided eye contact with David, focusing instead on the wires running from the panel switchboard up the wall behind him. "David, please help me! I don't know where I am!"

David sighed, then grinned at the eavesdropping soldiers. "Where do you want to go?"

"Outside," Katie squeaked hoarsely as she cast an embarrassed glance at the Roman soldiers. One soldier laughed and turned slightly to open a heavy metal door behind him where a handmade paper sign declared, "Please keep this door shut at all times." Katie tripped over the threshold and stumbled into the dimly lit parking lot with a sigh of relief.

Making a sound like a rusty gate screeching open and closed, Norman's boisterous heehaw filled Katie's ears as the donkey heralded her arrival, delivering his greeting from the direction of a black cattle trailer stationed in the center of the parking lot. Katie moved over to the side of the trailer and murmured quietly to the beast lurking inside. Soon a rustling of straw forewarned of Norman's approach. Gray velvet lips stretched from the trailer and between the open slats toward the sugar cube Katie presented on her flat, outstretched palm.

As expected, rather than daintily lipping up the proffered treat, greedy teeth raked across Katie's fingers and ripped the cube from her palm. She expertly jerked her hand back and chuckled as she stroked the soft nose in rhythm with the steady, contented crunching of the massive teeth. The rich scent of warm animals wafted gently in the air around her as the sheep shifted their weight in the trailer compartment in front of the donkey. *This is where I am happiest*, Katie thought. *Outside, caring for the animals. Not inside surrounded by costumes, makeup, and hectic people.*

Quickly, Katie tried to dismiss the thought. *I do so much work behind the scenes. No one even knows I'm out here. No one really appreciates what I do. If I'm actually in the play, maybe everyone will notice me. They'll be impressed that I can handle the donkey! But what if I mess up? What if I can't do it? I could only make things worse. I've never practiced in the theater, and during the performance is one hell of a time to find out it isn't going to work.*

Still, excitement bubbled within her as she thought of finally having a part in the play, her reward and recognition for the effort she put into preparing the donkey for his appearance. *It might be nice to have a little fun*, Katie decided. *In a costume I don't have to be myself. I can be whoever I want to be, and I won't have to worry about looking stupid.*

The next evening was opening night. Twilight descended and cloaked the parking lot beside the Palace as Katie strode toward the backstage door, illuminated only by a single bare bulb dangling remotely above the doorway. She gave the door a yank and slipped inside. Katie's stomach knotted as she walked across the darkened stage situated behind a crimson velvet curtain.

One hundred and fifty pairs of eyes belonging to the cast members followed the stranger's trek across the hardwood platform, silently questioning her intent. None voiced concern, but simply regarded Katie with mild curiosity. Katie turned her head away from the cast's glare and pretended to study the plush red theater seats in the auditorium as she hurried off the stage. She located the narrow stairway Pam had indicated previously and began her ascent. A door above her slammed open, and children flooded the stairwell. Katie waded through an ocean of Nazarene youth and fought her way upstairs.

Women, abandoned clothing, and mismatched shoes cluttered the short, narrow hallway before the women's dressing rooms. The heavy scent of women's perfume with undertones of empty tennis shoes permeated the still air. A long tan costume hung on a coat rack, reserved by a neon green tag bearing Katie's name. She grabbed the rough cloth, ducked into the least crowded room, and began to pull the costume over her head.

"You can't wear your clothes," an older lady admonished her. Afraid to challenge the woman's authority, Katie reluctantly stripped down to her long johns, trying to tuck her body close to the wall as she changed amidst the other women.

The heavysset matron nodded her approval. "That's fine," she said. "Don't forget to tuck the bottoms of your long underwear up above the hem line of your costume." Desperate to escape the bustling atmosphere, Katie hiked the thin white pant legs up around her calves and then quickly fled

to the quiet sanctity of the darkened backstage. Katie hurried into the Palace auditorium, through the lobby, and up the staircase to the balcony.

Katie had never been upstairs in the Palace before. *Where do I go?* she wondered. She poked her head through a nearby doorway and followed the carefree laughter of women down a carpeted hallway and into a bright room equipped with a full length, wall sized mirror. Spotting her aunt Hannah, who was in charge of the makeup department, she seated herself at Hannah's makeup table.

"Hi, honey," Hannah said. "Are you in the play this year?"

"I lead the donkey down the aisle. He's been worse than normal this year and they asked me to help out," Katie explained. "I have to look like a boy," she added.

"Makes sense to ask you. Everyone knows when that donkey's in a bad mood you're the only one who can talk him out of it," Hannah said and she smiled, her eyes meeting Katie's in the mirror before them. The seaweed-and-talcum-powder scent of makeup filled Katie's nose as Hannah did her best to make Katie's delicate feminine features appear as masculine as possible.

They do? Katie thought. *They know who I am? They know what I do?*

"Anyhow," Hannah said when Katie didn't respond, "I didn't see you at dress rehearsal last night. Didn't you wear any makeup?" Hannah dabbed some creamy pink blush along Katie's cheekbones and blended it with her thumb.

"I wasn't in the dress rehearsal," Katie admitted. "They asked me last night after it was over."

"I'm sure you'll do just fine. Close your eyes," she ordered Katie. A heavy eyeliner pencil dragged along the line of Katie's lower eyelids. "There," Hannah declared. "You're my masterpiece for tonight." Hannah stepped back and pulled the plastic bib from around Katie's neck where it had been placed to collect any wayward makeup. Katie donned her brown cloth headpiece, allowed Hannah to pin it expertly into place, then checked her appearance in the mirror.

Katie was shocked by the transformation created by the stage makeup. Her normally pale pallor was a dusky tan and her blue eyes stood out enormous from her rouged cheeks. Unaccustomed to wearing lipstick, her lips felt dry and sticky, almost frozen into place. Her slender frame was draped in yards of rough material, disguising her nineteen-year-old-figure as a pudgy old man. *I shouldn't be doing this*, she thought. *Besides, who will even know it's me?*

Katie drowned her antagonistic observation in her staccato footsteps as she rushed back to the parking lot. Norman greeted her with his usual "swinging gate" donkey serenade as she approached. Katie shoved open the trailer's stubborn sliding door and clipped a lead rope to Norman's halter. Norman balked at Katie's fluttering costume and the headpiece that concealed her familiar face. As she attempted to lead him out the trailer entrance, Norman assumed the typical "stubborn-mule" stance—brown eyes rolling until the whites showed plainly, weight shifted until he was nearly sitting on his hindquarters, forelegs stiffened—he refused to leave the sanctuary of the trailer. Not even coaxing words and a sugar offering could soften his mulish attitude. *This is not going to be a good*

evening, Katie realized as she pulled harder on the lead rope. *I wish we could both just stay outside.*

After a great deal of consideration, Norman followed Katie off the trailer. "You could try to behave," she whispered to the donkey. Norman nodded, swirling the hairs on his forehead as he rubbed it against her shoulder, seeming to agree with her. In a few minutes the wide double door leading from the back of the Palace to the parking lot swung open. A tall man, his brown-bearded face cloaked by a dark green headpiece, emerged and, with a sweeping gesture of his arms, beckoned her toward the entrance. "It's time," Katie murmured to the donkey's soft, twitching ears.

Norman hesitated for a moment as Katie led him through the doorway and into a dimly lit carpeted hallway. The donkey's hooves echoed as they gingerly danced on the solid flooring. He hopped up three short stairs, and then they were in the wide aisle that ran behind the seated patrons of the Palace Theater. Several of the other animal caretakers surrounded the donkey with their bodies, confining his anxious movements as he tried to continue past the center aisle that would lead them toward the stage. A large man grabbed the donkey's lead rope and threaded a chain through the halter's buckles and ran it under Norman's upper lip, forcing the chain to rest on his gum line just above his teeth. He pressed the end of the chain into Katie's fist.

"It's the only way to make him behave. We do it every year," the man explained quickly under his breath before turning away from Katie to help pregnant Mary alight her steed.

"But I don't have to make him behave!" Katie hissed at the man, protesting. "He trusts me! He'll behave if I ask him!" Norman curled his lip against the chain and bounded lightly to the side in a desperate attempt to unseat the girl portraying Mary. She quickly caught her balance and settled lightly upon the donkey's broad back, the characteristic dark brown stripe across his shoulders resembling a cross. Norman bobbed his head and his hindquarters danced in a wide arch, displeasure for his duty screaming from every taunt sinew.

Katie tugged desperately at the chain, trying to pull it from the donkey's mouth as the first chords of their song sounded from the direction of the orchestra pit.

"Get going," someone breathed from behind her.

Katie quit fidgeting with the chain and glanced at the girl on Norman's back, wrapping her brave fingers in the scanty, scrub-brush mane as Katie tightened her grip on Norman's halter. Taking a deep breath, she timidly began to lead the procession forward.

When Norman's hooves detected the steep declining slope of the carpeted aisle between the rows of theater seats, his oppressed aggression exploded. In a vain attempt to rid himself of his handler, the obstinate beast attempted to scrape Katie off onto the sturdy outermost row of seats as he lunged down the aisle. Katie's knuckles stretched white as her fingers clenched around the nylon halter, and she jerked desperately on the chain that chafed Norman's tender mouth and was intended to slow his thundering trot to a controlled stroll.

Increasingly distressed, Norman threw his head high, dangling Katie off her feet. When Katie landed, her right foot buckled under Norman's flying hoof, and she nearly collapsed to her knees.

Katie wrenched her foot out from under the donkey's crushing hoof and shoved Norman back to the center of the walkway. Her feet skidded on the worn carpet as Norman again swung sideways, and his massive head crushed her against a sturdy fixed theater seat, nearly tossing her into the lap of an astonished patron. Immediately righting herself, Katie no longer tried to slow Norman's onslaught but was now concerned with simply removing the raging donkey safely from the theater. Onlookers gasped as the beast flew down the aisle, Katie struggling at his side.

Katie glanced upward, surprised to find Mary still clinging desperately to Norman's back, his mane continuing to entwine her fingers and provide a subtle degree of support. Mary's lips were drawn tightly across her teeth, and her face was pale, but determination creased her brow. Upon reaching the bottom of the aisle, Mary nimbly leapt from the donkey's back and moved quickly to her mark. As she stood before the Innkeeper with his "Inn of No Vacancy" and began to sing her solo, the devoted Joseph at her side, her voice never faltered, nor even trembled.

Their passenger tousled, yet uninjured and safely delivered, Katie piloted Norman's wild flight back up the aisle that would lead the donkey to freedom. Norman strained toward the doorway and bolted.

A wide-eyed angel with white feathered wings pushed open the heavy double doors before the rampaging donkey and his trailing handler. Katie guided the donkey through the exit and then fought Norman across the shadowy asphalt of the parking lot, his strength and the agitated jerking of his head against the rope causing the rough fibers to cut into her palms. Finally, reaching a chain link fence at the end of the lot, Norman was forced to concede.

Katie turned Norman slowly back toward the theater and stopped. She slipped the chain from Norman's mouth and let it fall to the gray pavement with a satisfying clink. Together, Katie and Norman watched the various individuals hurrying between the two main side doors. All had arms filled with baskets of chickens or freshly washed sheep trailing docilely behind them. *What a boring job*, Katie thought. *I prefer an animal with a little integrity and personality.*

Norman put his wide forehead against Katie's shoulder and, with almost enough force to send her slight form sprawling, he enthusiastically rubbed his long face up and down the improvised scratching post with his bottom lip flopping. When he finally raised his head and shook it vigorously, Katie wiped at the short silvery strands of hair that punctuated the dark brown smear of donkey dust he'd left on her rough brown robe.

Katie stroked Norman's shaggy cheek for a moment, then yanked off her headpiece, her long chestnut hair tumbling down her back in a twisted cascade of hair pins. She plucked the pins from her hair, then tugged gently at the rope in her hand and began to lead the donkey in their familiar circuits between the rows of parked cars.

"Well, Norman," she murmured softly to the donkey, his heavy head now drooping low under her pressured caress. "I guess I don't belong in this makeup and burlap any more than a jack-ass belongs inside a Palace."

Burn

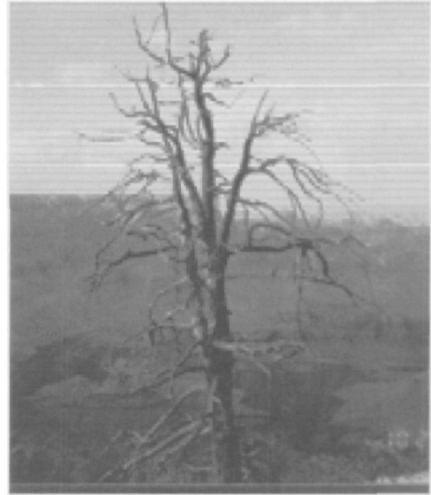


photo by Rachael Johnson

*Wicking
bright perfection
dissolves
into connection with
deep opaque
weeping;
tears impasse
on the face
of the outside. Slowly I
curl back – expose
the imposing inside, the licking-hot
flame, moist heat, thin reed of charred
tunnel; waxen pools of frozen tide-water at my
root, deepened into place, inflexibly fixed; still.*

Love Came to Visit Me

Part I: The Glory of Light

As the sunshine
slips past the horizon and
sinks cool into the
wondering waves
of the ocean—my mind sinks too,
down to a wondrous level of
amethyst colored stars
and deep cotton sheets.
I dream a little dream—where love
holds lightly to my fingertips and
brushes by my lips like a
summer breeze,
warm and carrying
the scent of spearmint
grown wild in the fields.
I see your face,
smile neatly spread across nice teeth.
I like you—your eyes, your smile, your kiss.
I've seen you and known you before.
But only here, in this
memory-laden land of
closed eye illumination,
do I know you now.
I wish for you to come to me during
the time when alarm clocks
and coffee steam fills my mind's eye,
when the everyday burden of living
seems too heavy a load to bear alone.
I look for the face I've memorized,
looking for the feeling deep within
the green shades of my soul
that will tell me you're close.

And as I watch the glory of light give itself
gently unto the night mystery,
I, too, give myself back to
my dreams where you hold me soft
and remind me that you are on your way,
but ironic is heavy and
you are in the wrong lane.

Part II: We Were Still Tumbling

Unseasonably warm
air swirled around us.
Early December
you kissed me on the porch,
pulling me close to you.
Your lips tasted of
spearmint
and your hands
lightly touched my cheeks
sending the feeling
racing through
the rainbow of
my soul.
It finally settled in
my toes, but
we were still tumbling.
I'd swear you were
the remnants of
a dream dancing
on the edge of my mind
teasing me to revel
in the memory.

Then—you kissed me again,
bringing me back.
I looked at you.
Really looked at you
and realized
I'd taken another
picture for my
mental scrapbook.
Someday I'd tell my
grandchildren
that, indeed,
Love came to visit me on a
warm December day.



Brenda Ackerman

Soul Scorched

Memory plays like a home movie,
Running on an old projector

(I hope the film doesn't burn)

The scent of fresh cut grass,
The stars twinkling,
Voices mumbling,
Feeling his body next to mine.

His cologne smelled like the taste of his kiss
The day his girlfriend left us
Together in Harrison Smith Park,
Even if he never kissed me.

(She couldn't know what would happen)

Smoke from lawn candles tasted bitter;
The sun's burn still lingered
On our shoulders and I couldn't breathe.

(He was so overwhelming)

Moonlight stole the color from his face,
Left him pale; honey-washed hair turned gray;

(The old man before his time)

His motto is:

"If honor is more important than life,
Then today is a good day to die."

(He seemed so tragically sad)
My soul burned to touch this ghost,
To prove he was real;

My soul burned to touch this ghost,
To prove he was real;
 "I'll be here forever,"
 He whispers in my ear,
 (He always knew what to say)
 Sending shivers down my spine.

The beautiful night of seclusion
 Seemed almost endless
And made our lives as boring as
 The last two minutes of a tied football game.

On this night he told me things:
 About himself, about others;
 Secrets he trusted to me alone.

 (Now it seems he told everyone)

We melded together;
 And we were to live happily ever after
 With bleak flowers lining our path.

 (We should have been so happy)

"Au revoir, mon cherie," I say to him
 As the clouds fight each other
 And stars blink bleary eyes.

 (Yet the night was so cold when you left)

Numb

I sit below the scorching
sun
Sweat trickles softly down
my face.
The heat I feel upon
my skin
I look up and stare into
the blaze.
For once, I start to
feel safe
Why? I am
not sure.
But, I sense your pres-
ence near
Nothing else could
quite compare,
To the warmth
I feel.
My eyes turn
to water
As I think of your memory
that's passed.
I must release
my remorse
I cannot regasp
my past
My longing to feel
your touch
I still cannot
over come
My every thought re-
volves
around you
And my whole body
becomes numb.

Soul Song

You wanna be some place where
Wearing a white hat isn't a fashion statement
And having spurs on is just common folk
In a west Texas town like El Paso

Where the heat rises to your eyes
Or the dust swirls around your toes
Sage brush rushes down main street
Instead of Cadillacs and Mini-Vans

Where the grasses blow free from want
The sun beats down your back in spades
There are no limits in a place like this
No signs to restrict your own mustangs

But here you are, dreaming away into oblivion
About western motifs that were made modern
Now glass cages captivate your work ethic
Turning saddles into wayward events of fiction



And the Tide Turns: Musings on Laundry and on Love

Cheer. Wisk. Gain.

Tonight is Laundry Night, I decide. Lighten my load by lightening my colors, “washing off the stink,” some call it, brightening my whites, and cleaning my grimy apparel. The task is onerous, comprised of sorting and piling and green garbage-bagging one Hefty load at a time. Serviceable bags for a dirty job that somebody has to do.

“When I’m rich, I’m hiring a maid,” I mutter to myself. In the meantime, I’m hauling garbage bags full of old clothes that I probably couldn’t get fifteen cents for if I sold them at a yard sale. Grumble, grumble, grumble. Trek through my apartment. Out the door, and down thirteen steps. Out the front door, and across the porch to my cousin’s house. Baby, it’s cold outside, and dark already. In ‘Chele’s door, across the length of her house, and down her steps to the cluttered laundry room with its trusty free washer-dryer combination. I am already pooped, but am now committed to doing the task I loathe. Flip on the wall switches to awaken any dust bunnies that may have escaped being trampled by my canvas sneakers and Hefty bags. Quickly turn on the overhead light bulb by twisting it so that light appears, and stop just before I burn my fingers on the fast-heating bulb. Illuminate the dirty job so the washing machine can see to do its whirling and whining and Wisking.

Sweatshirts, turtlenecks, knee socks, blouses, towels, and what-have-you, all sit bunched together in silent, filthy indifference as I douse the washer’s gray interior with creamy blue cleansing goo and swiftly stuff the clothes around the washer’s agitator. Whoever described doing laundry as “agitation” had the right idea. Dial the magic codes that turn on the machine, and let it beat my clothes into submission, and into some semblance of cleanliness. Twist the light bulb so that it goes dark, turn off the wall switches, and venture back upstairs.

Retrace my steps, and pause to do battle with Big Black Dog Mr. T, who sees me as a potential playmate, and pounces gleefully upon me. “Down, Mr. T! Off, Mr. T!”

I think, but do not say, *Go away, Mr. T*. That would not be friendly. Mr. T is my cousin’s dog, my godson’s buddy. According to the logic of my dog-loving family, Mr. T is family. He must be greeted, and must be embraced and greeted as warmly as I would greet my Aunt Jane. For all intents and purposes, this makes him a relative. As a dutiful family member, I must obey the ancient adage, “Love me, love my dog.” He is not, however, a particularly useful dog. Mr. T does not offer me a nip from a flask of brandy, as befitting a weary traveler, or assist with the laundry, which would make me willing, nay, eager to pull on his grimy, drool-saturated chew toy that appears to be permanently attached to his powerful jaws. Mr. T simply impedes my progress by expecting me to play with him. But he’s Mr. T, not Mel Gibson, so I can’t get too excited about his ventures. Life is not play, dog. Life is one long ever-spinning, never-ending load of laundry. If you were something other than a dog, you might understand this dismal truth. Since you can’t understand this dismal truth, get down. If you won’t scam, let me be.

I make it to the front door, and out onto my front porch. I could swear that it has gotten colder in the space of time that it took me to play my weary Washer Woman and phony Dog Aficionado roles. I retreat back into my cozy cave as my laundry spins and cavorts or does whatever it does as I sulk and moan. What goes in must come out. I will have to retrace my trek several times before I can consider my laundry, and myself, done for the night. Correction: I am already done for the night. The laundry, however, is not. I set my trusty blue long-ringing timer so I can remember to venture back down into the cold and damp to confront the cold and damp laundry, and to transfer it from the washer to the dryer. I listen to the timer's loud ticking, and heave a long-suffering sigh. Others are out sipping Sex on the Beach in bars, or prospering, or falling in love, or plotting the perfect crime to get the perfect revenge, and here I sit, prisoner to my sopping blue jeans and my soggy flannel shirts. *There is no justice in the world*, I muse.

No justice, only laundry. No love, only Cheer and Gain to be spilled—but not to be enjoyed. I glance down at my fingers, and notice my bare, ringless left hand. The white mark has long since worn off the finger that I gave to my husband twenty-six years ago today.

Well, okay, I didn't give him the finger—then. And I didn't really give him my hand, either, except in marriage. He gave me the ring that he put on my finger, and I wore it proudly for a while. It was a charmed circle. All the charm wore off when he embraced other charms, and the other charms of the other woman. I stare at my naked finger, and recall my wedding day, twenty-six years ago today. White dress, wedding jitters, insane optimism, a union that was simultaneously the worst mistake I ever made, and the best. It was an icy cold day, and no way would I wear that long lacy wedding veil now, or get married in January, or commit so blindly to two decades worth of loving a stranger who became stranger, yet more familiar, with the passage of time.

Strange pictures fill my mind. Tom, the usher whose brown shoes clashed with his black tuxedo. Charlie, my young cousin who served as altar boy for our Catholic wedding. My father, whose glum expression plainly showed both his discomfort with people, and his grief at my leaving him. My naiveté. My groom's innocence. I was twenty, moving thousands of miles away from home to wed a stranger, and no one could stop me. If our marriage was doomed to be a romantic *faux pas* as inappropriate as brown shoes with a black tuxedo, we kept our uncertainties to ourselves. The wedding invitations had gone out, and if doubt was neatly tucked inside each folded invitation inside each thick envelope, I never let on. I wanted a wedding. I wanted a new life. I wanted, more than anything, to know that someone, anyone, wanted me. I would never have to be alone again on a Friday night. That was what it boiled down to, really. I wanted to be a long cool woman in a white dress, and to be Queen for a Day, and to have a forever friend on Fridays.

The laundry bell sounds its plaintive peal, and it's back to work for the Washer Women of the World. Back to the dark and the cold and the reality of the shirts and the dungarees and the life that is mine. Back to recalling the laundry I used to loathe doing. Filthy, sweaty, smelly exercise clothes

that would make your eyes water from the stench. That was how he spent his Fridays, creating dirty laundry for me to cleanse and purify.

Cheer. Wisk. Gain. Era. Ending.

Twenty-four years of marriage went down the drain in May of 1995. When we began the slow process of physical and psychological separation, he briefly continued to remain with me in the home we owned together. Our love was long gone, but his laundry remained. It was a happy day when I realized that divorcing him meant that his dirty duds were no longer my problem. I can still remember my secret joy when I heard him complain to his mother that I had stopped washing his clothes.

"Today you are a man, my son," I sneered silently to myself.

Now, as I prepare to venture down the stairs to tend to my own dirty laundry, I silently rejoice that it is mine, all mine, and mine only. I rejoice that being alone on a Friday night holds no terror, only joy and contentment, and, okay, tons of homework to resolutely ignore.

I recall the lovely, layered wedding cake with its cascade of sugary pink roses, and the trembling hands that held the knife. Marriages begin at knife-point, I think, no wonder half of them are doomed. No wonder they become a stabbing pain, or end in murderous rage. Not that I'm bitter, mind you, just reflective, and postponing the moment when I have to confront the damned cold and the damned dog and the damned laundry again.

If I ever marry again, I think I'd serve pizza and hot fudge sundaes at my wedding. Cheese, tomato sauce, pepperoni, chocolate, ice cream, whipped cream, nuts, and a cherry on top. There'd be no knives, pretense, or formality. Nuts for the nuts who marry! I'd require a book by every paper plate place setting, and make everyone read something that they think would be useful for newlyweds to know. Someone would quote Martha Stewart, some jokester professor would quote John Milton's Satan, someone else would quote Cookie Monster from Sesame Street, and the bridal couple would leave with an assortment of useful phrases to take with them into the future. And somewhere between Satan and Sesame Street would be truth and wisdom and laughter. Just a little something to hang on to when the pizza boxes are empty and the ice cream headache subsides. Something to get us through the days when our shoes don't match our suits, and illness claims our loved ones, and dogs pounce upon us with ridiculous drooling adoration that we know we don't deserve. For that matter, I could use a wise word to ponder now that I am filled with bittersweet recollections of the day I expected would be the best day of my life, the man I shared it with, and all the joy and heartache of the twenty-six years since then. Since I don't know how to commemorate that day or its significance, I gather up my energy and gather up my laundry, recall sharing sugary wedding cake, and think about ordering a hot pizza pie for myself. Earth hath no sorrow that Donatos cannot heal with double toppings and extra cheese. And Breyer's Mint Chocolate Chip Ice Cream for dessert.

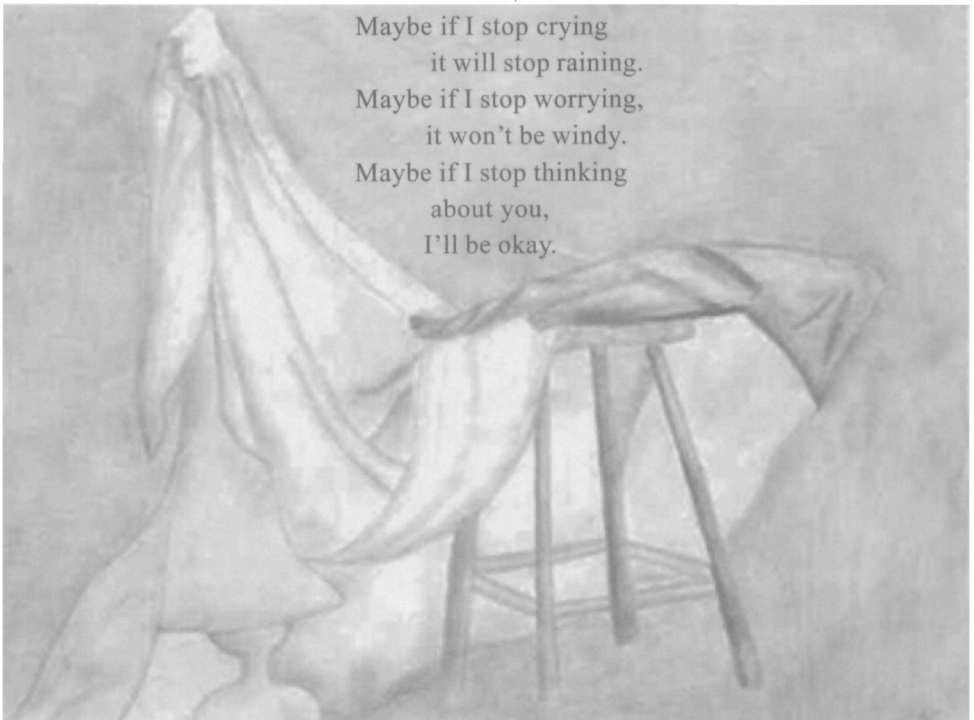
Now that's a marriage to remember.

What you can't See

It's near
nakedness that I
won't
let you see.
It's my hidden physical
beauty
you
will never see again.
It's me
fading
away behind the
curtain
you have placed there.
What I hear
Is your sour smell.
You tell me you have
never loved someone
as much as me, but yet
you are more than miserable.
Had me tied-
now I am
released.
Hate being restrained—
especially by you.
No more bright colors—
this isn't my cozy
house anymore.
This "great" girl can't stand
you.
This space you put
between us
is too wide to see.
You can't see how
you tore my heart
out, and put it back
inside my chest cavity—
bruised, broken...cold.

You watch as I
 leave, out My window-
 behind My curtain.
The floor leans, yet
you don't cry.
Yet My heart, like a concrete pillar,
 still belongs
 to you.
I remember the good times,
 I dream of them--
Us hand-in-hand, smiles,
and green pastures.
I get lost in the
light
blue, clouds.
But, we dried up like
 a brown, crinkled leaf.

Maybe if I stop crying
 it will stop raining.
Maybe if I stop worrying,
 it won't be windy.
Maybe if I stop thinking
 about you,
I'll be okay.



Oblivion

*It has bitten
into my life-
This kennel-bone
Sucked thin.
-Charles Simic, "The Spoon"*

I
The hot concrete of
hell—
A life as put together
as a jigsaw puzzle missing
pieces.
I remember us being happy,
I wonder and long for us to be like
that again.
His arm wraps around me like a snake
around the limb of a tree.
Little tongues protrude out from his finger
tips.
I taste his kiss.
I feel his passion.
I see his longing for me.
I touch his face.
I hear his promising words.
The little tongues taste the way
my heart felt.
My first grade teacher
never taught us how to love.
She taught us how to love, but not
like this.

II
We flew together, he with
ten little tongues and me, to
the moon where we drank
chocolate milk from the shoes
of Shakespeare.
I longingly watched
meteors hit the Earth.
Eventually we will read vows
to each other in our little
church on the moon, and
we will become one.
The forgotten moon
now our home forever.
I have to realize that
being home is far,
far away from being home,
but I can still see it
out in the distance.
*La luna es muy bonita a la noche**
And the man in the moon is
my neighbor who says "good morning"
and "good evening" at just the
right time.
As we sleep in our new moon
home, his arm wraps
around me like a snake
around the limb of a tree.

*The moon is very beautiful at night

Love's Way

In love's crowd, some semblance of desire,
Removes from us, any hint of restraint,
And then does crush, many loves' lofty spire,
We become fools, with seldom complaint.

Most quixotic, our lust does embolden,
Love now forsworn, as passion does mount.
Entwined in repose, our bodies shaken and stirred,
Then uncoiled we come, sex silly and blurred.

Comes subtle this scene—with nothing to say,
Flesh now past urging—this quiet redoubt.
Is sex without love, a crime never punished?
No, love is but human, and never quite chaste.

We live in confusion, our life a chimerical charm,
And if love be illusion, then what is the harm?



photo provided by Shellie Shirk

Too Good To Be Real

Way too good to be real?
That's how I feel.
It's like looking at that pretty sky,
Green invisible glass holding my eye.
As you caress my soul with just one glance.

I love it girl!
Dig it? Cool!
Me, I'm Cool out smooth.
Got ya going, flowing on,
Earth, Wind, and Fire.
What's your desire?
Blazing lightening,
Putting out magic zing,
Throw from a bow as rain pours down,
Sounds so tragic in my ear canal.
Channel of proper acoustics, caws from crowds
With empty caws going coo-coo-coo-coo,
Time for pause.

Healthy, shining, Diamond,
You are. Laced out on black velvet cloth,
Tones of your melody, I felt it, swinging so soft.
Sweet purity put your arm around me,
Looking for security.
Surely the air tonight, got you feeling right,
Cool, crisp, uncontrollable, puppet on the strings,
Only you can pull open that door.

I'm that sparkling dance off the banks of the river shore.
I'm that breeze that whispers, "*You want more.*"
I'm the Moonshine off the ocean top as you walk down the pier.
I'm that glistening virtue you smell in the atmosphere.
I'm everything you want and all the things you fear.
I'm that fire from the incinerator, I quench your thirst.
In your domain, I'm the denominator. I come first.

Mind buzzing, alone, ears ringing,
It's the door not the phone. I hear bees.
I walk over oceans and jump over seas
Blue skies raised up by doves flying all around the sky.
Fires blaze, ashes, burnt bottoms, high, Hi!
Your fragrance as you walk in,
I toke in, and inhale your smell like a vacuum.
Just another token, completely broken.

Casting radiant light beneath my pen,
Atmosphere familiar girl currents of gray haze swirl
In the corner room, Dark Caverns, malicious marks
Drip delicious, stalactites, stalagmites, make a puddle
That will freeze. Hell will too. The next time when
I will see you. I just don't have the same feelings
That you do. Don't question. Don't doubt it.
Take one last look into my eyes.
Forget about it.

Player, Player

Player, player, you think I don't know.
Slithering in my life...to and fro.
Relationship schizophrenic possessed in you.
Condescending words you spew.

 "Sweetiepie,"

 "Buttercup,"

 "Honey-suckle"

 or

 "Darling-love."

Stop!!!!!!!!!!!!

Player, please spare me vicious venom you spray.
I cannot bear to hear false truths you care to say.
Freakin' Casanova you try and portray, lover...
I'm not fooled by your harebrained con.
You think I submit because I'm blonde?

 Think Again.

 This time you better deliberate your sin.
 Sweetie, I tricked you in the end.
 Allowing you to assume I was wrapped.
 Tightly around your little finger, blondie.
 Nope, I'm not. Sorry lover.
 You were the one that was deceived this time.

 Sorry Sucker.

Twist of fate in life, I'd say...

 Sugar, you were the one that got played!
 One liar to another today.

Endless Nights

Running late, last to board
I stumble toward my seat. Too many tall drinks with
too many short term friends at the airport bar.
I find my seat
what luck
two blondes and me in the middle.
Aisle seat was a German girl.
She fell asleep as soon as we took off.
Window seat
Your typical Tom petty American Girl,
She wasn't tired.

Brushing back her coiled blonde hair
she turns to smile at me
raising her high cheek bones only higher
Even in her casual dress her snow white beauty was evident.
What was it we talked about?
I can't remember
don't much care to
topic is not important when spark makes fire.
A long trip made short as humor and outgoing personalities come together
We took to one another like bird to flight.
Laugh at me and I laugh at you,
what is to come now
as our bird in flight comes down.

LA
City of Angels
and me with a personal tour.
“Let me give you a ride.” She said
Take me for a ride
Show me this LA
Lock the doors and show me Compton.
Tell me why there are tennis shoes on telephone wire.
Show me the liquor store where the shooting was last week.
Take me down the Sunset Strip,
show me the road seen and heard in movies and music
Show me Venice beach where come morning
street vendors will sell everything under the California sun
Have me create my own memory
as we put the pedal to the floor and travel a bit too fast.

It’s now around Two in the morning
as we waltz into a tequila bar.
The stench of cigarette smoke was so thick you could taste it.
This bar revels in Mexican culture.
The sounds of a Spanish girl singing softly
as the mariachi band plays her song of love.
Pictures of sun scorched men pushing horse-drawn plows
wearing sombreros and serape capes.
The waitress comes over and we order drinks
“Si senorita, dos tequilas por favor.”

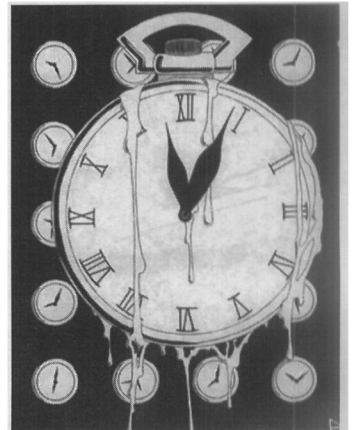
One more round leads to one more memory
as I am taught the many tastes of Mexico.
Engaged in each other's eyes we trade stories like baseball cards
and I hang on her every word.
Look in my eyes as I look in yours
junto viviremos en noche nuestra interminable!

As all good things this night must end
She drops me off at my Brentwood hotel.
She gives me her number without being asked
She gives me a hug
appropriate for the moment.
We reflect on the past hours
what a good time we had—
together.
She sits back down and smiles at me one last time.
Goodnight.
Goodbye.

Looking back at these faded memories
still seeming clear
I am left to wonder why that night had to end.
Now, I can only dream of that wonderful night
with such a wonderful girl,

whose name I can't remember.

¹ together we will live in our endless night



Jonathan Riddle

Evade

My bed is white now and my floor
a tangle of discarded clothes
not satisfactory
to an invisible image.

I have little time
for petty concerns
and yet I am enraged
by the smallest things.

I have crawled into a tree
far above the earth
and listen now to bells chiming
over even city noise and cries.

On prison walls
I wrote eloquent words
scratched deep into stone
and cried for peace.

On prison walls
I drove my fists
into pain and
chipped away years.

I escaped that somehow and now
have nothing left to say.

Skinned

ANKLE BRACKETS BIND ME TO THIS SKIN.
CELL-BLOCK WRAPPED, I LONG TO SUBDUE THIS SKIN.

CHISELING WITH A TOOTHPICK IS TIRESOME;
DARK, PINK-SLASHED BLOODWAYS HUE THIS SKIN.

VEIN-STRIPED WALLPAPER AND BONE-BARS,
BARGAINING WITCH-GANG, THEY BREW THIS SKIN.

CASEWORKER VISITS, CITES INDISCRETIONS
CRITIC INSIDE, CLAIMS TO RENEW THIS SKIN.

WHITE-GLOVED CHURCH LADY, SLICING KNIFE WIT:
CHUMMY WITH GAVEL, THINKS SHE KNEW THIS SKIN.

STANLEY MANLY FLEXES UP, EYEBALLS FLOP,
NEEDLES ERECT, STRIVES TO TATOO THIS SKIN.

FLATTERING LOVE-CALLS PATTER, SPLATTER TO
THE FLOOR; SHAMELESSLY REVIEW THIS SKIN.

I RIDE SHOTGUN WITH HAIR FLYING;
IT IS TIME TO DRIVE THROUGH THIS SKIN.

Anchors Assail

The wind whispers, like the blowhole of a whale
It shares the maturing of a young male
As a sailor pulls up the anchor of life and sets sail
He stands on the bow and through his hair the mist did plow, as he grabbed the rail.
The sun beats down on his brow, he reflects on her tale,
Optimistic, his cup has no bottom it's always full,
He joined the navy to escape the chance of prison, or parole.
He longed to get away, he never heard them say, the way, waves roll,
Or what his roll would be on the large oversized steel gray wale.
He used a diamond to cut that whole hole in his whole soul before he'd set sail.
It shined in his eyes, his love, his light, his life,
It was a heavy burden to carry but he made it light and carried that weight with no strife.
It was the smell of Liz Claiborne lying in bed with Ralph Lauren
It was as bold as a trumpet and as soft as a violin.
He was his own man with nothing to prove,
He loved the way that California would move
The ground would shake in sync with the radio groove.
Just the same unpredictable way the earth could not be tame
He received new orders and the Pacific Ocean was calling his name.
His heart was an indoor cat outside in the rain,
No shelter from fear or anxiety and grief was his pain.

He set sail for the longest time but right after the first,
He came home with a strong desire to quench a hunger and thirst.
You know the deal, hot action, tires squeal, and so do ladies
That's how it is when sailors make babies.
Three months gone out to sea, three years for three months out to see.
She said, "I won't forget you, don't forget me,"

Port after port, day after day, night after night,
A married man's nightmare, a single sailor's delight,
One day out to sea is longer than an eternity with your lover.
The night is black, but not as black as being without your significant other.

What happens underway stays underway,
That's what the whoremongers would say everyday
Mack would wonder, "what do the navy wives say?"
May be an old cliché, "when the cat's away the mice will play."
After all they couldn't be that original.
Cranky whoremongers of the south pacific
Are sick ships sinking as they sway to be specific
Port to starboard, and forward to aft
The waves of their destruction roared as the tide in their path would laugh.

Good ole Mack could not be yoked with this kind of beast
Mack had to find something to keep his soul at peace
When he hit those foreign towns of lonesome lies
He would walk the streets with quick feet and speak with his eyes
These guys knew each other for years but felt at home no one knows us
They had to smell with their ears and listen with their noses
Mack bought some more beers and dreamed of a Mandwich
Instead when Mack came back all he got was an ear sandwich
Helping after helping, topping after topping,
There was no stopping; he was sopped from the sopping,
His heart was sinking as the floor was dropping.

Lost Lovers Longing for each other to be alone with one another
Absence makes the heart grow weaker when you are around a pleasure seeker.
As day fades tonight, and night turns to day
As the sun turns the dashboard in his truck from tan to gray
As snails crawl along their path to reach that final destination
As a family waits two more years for that overdue vacation
Mack waited for his dream but it had no anchor
The fire of his desire was nothing but canker
Now he goes to places that remind him of way back when
He tried to be a good husband, he ponders on how it could have been.
As bottles of beers sing karaoke
Hazy white streams dance from the Smokey
The rise of smoke causes the ceiling to fall
Tears from Mack's memories drip down the bar room wall.

Victim of Life

Bitter ruins of sorrowed night
When darkness overtook the light
To turn the shadows bloody white
And danced the demons with delight.
For dagger that hang in thy hand
Drew to slay another man
And dug a whole to bury land
And cover his body over with sand.
While in this darkness no one cried
Though a man with honor died
While others watched but no one tried.
Was it death or suicide?
No yellow eyes or evil hate
Just a feeling that couldn't wait
That leaped out from behind its gate
And will only be recalled as fate.

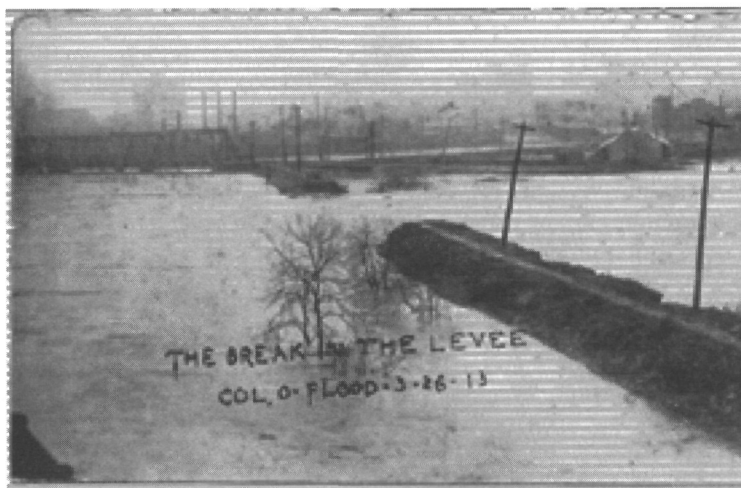


photo provided by Shellie Shirk

Death of a Home

Rod and Justine Glazier and Richard Riley, their realtor, drove along winding country roads. It wasn't a perfect summer's day; it was cloudy, but it was nice enough. Justine chatted amiably. Maybe she talked too much, but she didn't want to allow any awkward moments in which Rod would say something wrong; and Richard was delighted with her chatter. He was a pleasant man in his sixties and had known Justine as a child growing up in the community.

"So, how's Linda doing?" Justine asked Richard. Linda was his daughter and one of her childhood classmates.

"Oh, she's doing fine," Richard replied.

As he proceeded to bring Justine up-to-date regarding Linda's activities, Justine thought Rod was sulking. That didn't surprise her. In Utah, he hadn't liked her spending time with her friends. She didn't care that he was sulking; at least her conversation with Richard kept Rod quiet; he wouldn't swear or let his prejudices slip out.

But Richard didn't know that Justine wanted Rod to be quiet. "Rod, Justine and Linda both played flutes in school. I remember them practicing together."

"Um hum," was all Rod offered in return.

Justine couldn't understand why he resented the time she spent with friends. As she and Richard talked, she wondered how Rod was going to react to their family's move to her hometown—where there would be so many friends and family asking for her time.

As they neared their destination, Justine observed, "Oh, this is the road that led to the church camp where I worked when I was younger." Then they rounded a corner and pulled into a short driveway. Justine was speechless for only a moment.

"I know this house!" she exclaimed. "This is the Rose House! It belonged to the church camp when I worked there!"

Justine loved the house; she loved it for the past she had with it. She loved it for the future it immediately offered. Memories of happy summer days at the camp ran in rapid succession through her mind. She felt sad, remembering the camp manager, Levi, who once lived there and had died years before. She felt surprise that the house and its property had been separated from the camp. And she felt an intense desire to be the new owner.

Rod, Justine and Richard stood outside for several minutes assessing the exterior. The house looked solid, and Justine was sure that it was. Levi had taken good care of it for the camp. Justine wasn't crazy about the color. It was painted beige with brown trim. Justine imagined how nice the house would look painted white—traditional. *Of course, one thing would have to go*, Justine thought. The front door had a concrete block front porch. *That wasn't original: a wrap-around porch would look nice*, she thought.

Still, the house was attractive. It was obviously old. As a matter of fact, it was nearly one

hundred years old. There was also a bay window which added to its charm. The window beckoned from one side of the house in the shade of a large maple tree. Justine remembered it well.

The house sat on a country plot with large trees bordering the backyard, a gurgling stream, and raspberry bushes on the large lawn. Justine took this all in and imagined a garden out by the raspberry bushes. She looked at Rod to see if she could gauge what he was thinking.

Rod was looking at the house. His gaze lifted to the roof. *God, I hope it looks good. I hope he doesn't say 'No' to the house just because it's part of my past.*

Justine looked at Richard. He seemed to be studying Rod, and she followed his gaze. Rod was tall with broad shoulders. His brown hair fell to his shirt collar and was slightly receding. He was ten years older than Justine. She knew that people often thought that he looked intimidating. At present, though, as he looked at the house, his expression was placid. None of the sharpness was there. Richard saw Justine looking at him, and he smiled at her.

"Let's look inside," Richard suggested, waving an arm toward the house. He led Rod and Justine through the front door. The past converged on Justine. She glanced at the room to their left. When the house belonged to the camp, the room was the camp office. The room was now empty except for a wood-burning stove which was a new addition.

When fifteen-year-old Justine had been in the house, the rest of the rooms were devoid of any furniture or decoration, so it looked familiar now. The rooms were empty. Justine yearned to run room to room exclaiming at the best features. She uttered, "Ooh, it's so big."

Richard smiled indulgently at her.

Rod glared at her. She interpreted the look to mean that she shouldn't show her enthusiasm to Richard. She looked back and frowned but nodded in agreement.

They walked through the empty "office" to the kitchen. Recent owners had cut a doorway through one of the walls to allow access to the kitchen. The kitchen was bright, as Justine remembered it. The long windows, typical in old houses, provided plenty of light and also afforded a view of the trees and stream behind the house. Justine imagined washing dishes at the sink and looking out on that scene.

When the house belonged to the camp, the wood flooring was painted gray. Some of it was still gray, but someone had stripped some of the floors and refinished them. It was a welcome improvement.

There was a small bathroom off the kitchen. It had been remodeled, but not well done. A cheap vanity supported the sink, the bathroom smelled, and Justine thought that they would probably have to replace the linoleum flooring.

While Richard pointed out changes and positive features, the three continued walking through what had once been the pantry and into the room with the bay window.

Justine recalled how she, as a young girl, sat in the window seat thinking, *This house would be really pretty if someone bothered to fix it up.* It was the first time Justine had ever dreamed of a

home of her own. Prior to that moment, home had been a place of disappointment. She despised the household chores that her mother assigned to her; she never did them to her mother's satisfaction. She didn't want a house to take care of. But at the camp, Levi approved of her work. He rewarded her efforts by giving her more responsibility—showing her that he thought she was capable. Perhaps that is what allowed her to sit in the window seat and dream.

Now, she stood looking at the seat in which she had dared to dream. She looked at Rod. When she met him, he shared the details of his youth, and she recognized that it was a difficult time for him. His father died when he was still a toddler; his mother had to work to support six children, so he had little parental supervision or nurturing. Justine felt sorry for him and wanted to give him the love he had missed out on. He was untrusting, but he could begin to trust, she thought, if only allowed the benefit of time. Fifteen years later, she was still waiting for time to heal his wounds and for him to open up in the relationship. Their move to Ohio offered a new beginning.

Other than the charming window seat, the two large front rooms displayed some beautiful craftsmanship. The wall between the two rooms contributed one of the house's most striking features. It had a wide opening into the next room and was bordered by square oak columns resting on bookcases with glass paneled doors. All of the wood had been refinished and the rich wood grains gave additional detail to the already dignified feature.

Justine didn't remember it from her youth and couldn't resist exclaiming, "God, that's beautiful!"

Rod retorted quietly through gritted teeth, "Get hold of yourself."

Justine glanced at Richard to see if he had heard Rod. Obviously he had, because he smiled reassuringly at her and nodded as if to tell her not to worry.

The three completed their tour of the downstairs and stood at the base of the stairs leading to the second floor. Justine explained to Rod and Richard that when she worked at the camp, Levi lived upstairs, and she had never seen that part of the house. Levi was concerned about impropriety and said it wouldn't do for young women to be in his living quarters. Justine looked forward to going upstairs; but as they approached the stairs, Rod stopped them, saying, "I want to see the basement."

Disappointment was evident on Justine's face. Richard led them to the basement stairs as he noted, "It won't take long to tour the basement. Its walls are sandstone block and there is no evidence of seepage."

After the diversion to the basement, the three again stood at the base of the stairs leading to the second floor. The stairs were oak and curved at the bottom. With their complementary banister, they beckoned the threesome up the stairs to a spacious open hallway. At the end of the hallway was an impressive built-in linen closet with drawers. Justine wanted to exclaim over its beauty but knew that she had to keep the peace with Rod. Besides, she understood what he was trying to do. He wanted to demonstrate that they were only mildly interested in the house so sellers wouldn't press for a better price.

There were four bedrooms—not particularly large, but sufficient. One of the floors had alternating strips of light and dark wood. It was a striking contrast.

In her head, Justine was planning which rooms would be the children's. She and Rod had four children; she chided him that he wanted to keep her home barefoot and pregnant. Actually, she suspected there was some truth to it; but after Thomas, their youngest, was born she had gotten her tubes tied. Rod had not been supportive of the decision, and Justine felt their marriage had been more strained since then.

The girls, Ashley and Sarah, were the oldest; they were twelve and ten. They could have the room with the pretty floors. The room across the hall was probably the largest; she and Rod could take it. The other two rooms were the smallest; Levi, eight, and Thomas, six, could have those rooms.

The bathroom on the second floor was horrendous. It had a cracked tub. The vanity in this bathroom was also cheap and unattractive, and Justine thought she had never seen uglier linoleum. To demonstrate to Rod that she understood his tactics, she remarked to Richard, "This is awful; there's a lot to be done in here."

"I have to agree with you," Richard replied. "It is probably the worst feature of the house. Let's finish our tour by looking at the attic."

A closed off stairway led to the attic. They climbed the stairs and all three stood on the narrow patch of flooring that surround the top of the stairs. The rest of the attic was unfinished. Justine took it all in and saw the potential for two large rooms including an escape for herself. Then again, it would be better if they turned the attic into a large recreation room for the children. Dormers provided a view of the lawn below, and Justine imagined the boys pretending that this was their castle and they could spy out enemy soldiers coming their way. As the girls became teenagers, they could bring their friends to the attic for the secretive gossip girls enjoy.

"Well, that's it," Richard said as they descended the stairs. In the downstairs foyer, Richard told them the seller's price; Justine practically shouted with delight knowing that they could afford it.

They had made a nice profit on the sale of their home in Utah where Rod was a supervisor in the maintenance department at Cooper Container, Inc. Justine had worked in the product development division until they began having children; then she quit to be home with the children. It was what she wanted, and Rod said he wanted that too, but she knew that for him, it also kept her away from other people. Rod had found his first wife in bed with another man, and his jealousy told her that he feared she would do the same thing. She almost had, and the guilt made her apply herself even more to their marriage.

When they left Utah, Rod had withdrawn his retirement income and profit sharing. Coupled with the profit from the sale of the house, they could pay the \$58,000 asking price in cash.

With a cautionary glance at Justine, Rod made a counter offer to Richard—one so much lower than the asking price that Justine feared the sellers would reject their offer. After they left Richard,

she complained.

“You heard Richard. Houses like that are hot. They’re going to sell it to someone else.”

“It’s my money!” Rod retorted. “You’ve got to trust me once in a while. I know what I’m doing.”

“Yes, Rodney,” she said evenly, using his full name—knowing he hated it because he didn’t think that it sounded manly. He shot her a stern look and she fell silent, thinking, *It’s always his money.*

All they could do was wait. Justine threw a few prayers in for good measure. When they learned, a few days later, that their offer had been accepted, she was elated. Rod was smug, but she didn’t care. For her, the fact that they got the house was an omen that they finally had their lives on track.

Rod had wanted to get away from the growing black population in their neighborhood in Utah. He had certainly accomplished that by moving them to this white conservative farming neighborhood. More importantly, he wanted to get her away from her friends in Utah—particularly Steve, the man at church that Justine had befriended. She and Rod separated briefly in Utah over that friendship, and only to herself did she admit that she had cared more than she should have. But now there were hundreds of miles between them; and that was just fine. Justine was reunited with her extended family, and she and Rod just purchased a home that she loved. She welcomed the chance for a fresh start.

Justine carried happy memories into the house with all of their boxes and furniture. The church camp, and more specifically, Levi, was her first employer. Her work as second cook and in maintenance gave her the first sense of competence that she could remember. Levi was like a father to her. She remembered when Andy came to work at the camp, and she fell in love with him. Levi had been protective; he loaded Andy with work details so that he had barely any spare time to spend with her. Justine chuckled to herself, *Poor Andy.*

Justine also made a lifelong friendship with Nancy, the lifeguard who shared her cabin. She smiled remembering the first day she met Nancy. Justine was in the kitchen baking cookies for the next day’s snacks. Nancy had just arrived for the summer and came into the kitchen for, unbeknownst to Justine, her evening ritual of tea and cookies. When she saw that Justine was baking cookies, she assumed the personality of Jim Henson’s Cookie Monster and chased Justine around the kitchen growling, “cookie,” over and over again. Over the years, they laughed about it because it took a couple of years before Justine told Nancy that she had been genuinely frightened by her charade.

“I thought you were plum loco!” she confessed.

As Justine moved about the house, she thought of Levi as a benevolent spirit overseeing her efforts. As the family settled in, Justine worked to help the children get acclimated: taking them to the library, joining the reading program for the boys’ classes, and encouraging the girls to invite new acquaintances home.

Rod began remodeling the upstairs bathroom and making a workshop for himself in the basement.

Two months passed, and Rod had not said anything about looking for a job. Much as she hated to disturb the peace, Justine decided to ask Rod about his plans. Questioning Rod was not an

easy place to go. He always became defensive—even over something as practical as how he was going to make a living. He always reacted as if she were prying into his personal affairs. *His personal affairs?* Weren't they supposed to be partners? A couple?

Well, time for the new beginning. He promised her that when they moved to Ohio everything would be different—better. It was time to start acting like it.

Justine wandered into the bathroom, leaned against a wall, and watched as Rod taped drywall. As nonchalantly as she could, Justine asked, “When are you going to look for a job?”

“God!” he retorted. “I’ve got to get this bathroom done.”

“I know,” she answered, “but the money won’t hold out forever.” They had applied most of their cash to purchasing the house; but with such a large down-payment, the bank had not hesitated to extend them a home equity loan. Consequently, they could keep some of their cash liquid.

Rod continued with his work. *He’s so good at fixing things*, Justine thought. *Why can’t he be as talented at working on our marriage?* His self-sufficiency was one of the things that had attracted her to him; they never had to call a repairman. Her grandfather and father were the same way; but watching Rod now, she almost resented that he was so capable with his hands. If she could have her wish, she would rather he had more interpersonal skills.

When she didn’t leave, Rod added without looking up, “If you must know, I plan to take a whole year to work on the house.”

The announcement stunned Justine. *I know what he’s doing! He’s not going to trust me, even here in Ohio. He wants to stay home and stand guard over me.*

Struggling to keep her voice even, she countered, “Well, we need health insurance. What if Thomas has an asthma attack?” Then, in frustration, she added, “And I am not your ex-wife.”

Without waiting for their discussion to escalate into a yelling match, she turned and left the bathroom. Years of experience taught Justine not to press too hard. Sometimes, when their relationship was strained, she wrote him letters. It allowed her time to think about what she wanted to tell him; it helped her avoid face-to-face confrontations. If he got too angry he might refuse to speak to her for days. Once it lasted for an entire week, until she finally capitulated and apologized for some minor infraction that she knew was not cause for him to alienate her as he did.

Rod never mentioned their exchange. No surprise to Justine. He never pursued a discussion; he hated talking—about anything. But he did begin looking for a job, and found one. It was some distance from home, and it offered an income comparable to the one he left in Utah.

Justine thought everything was perfect. The children liked their new school, and she was involved with their activities. Rod was working. They had her dream home. And then, Justine found an opportunity to write for the local newspaper.

She had seen a small article in the paper with a plea for a writer, and she responded. It wasn’t a paying position, but it gave her an opportunity to write. When they moved to Ohio, a couple of former classmates had asked, “Do you still write?” She didn’t remember that she had had that much interest in

writing. It took their questions, asked at separate occasions, to remind her that she had once enjoyed writing as a hobby. It was something that she wanted to do; she wanted an activity that was her own.

Rod, however, was not pleased. "It's not making us money," he complained. "It's costing us money!"

"What is it costing us?"

"Gas costs us every time you go do a story. And the ink and paper for the computer are not free," he retorted.

"Well, fine!" Justine shot back. "But it's good experience, and you don't know where it might lead. I have the right to have my own interests."

"Why? I don't!"

Justine didn't know what to say. He was right. When she met him, he enjoyed photography and hunting; but he gave those up long ago—*probably just so he could make this point—so I had no argument for my own interests. What he's more concerned about is that he can't monitor my activities.*

When a few days later she found a password protect on the computer, Justine confronted him. "Damn it, Rod, let me on the computer!"

As usual, he didn't answer, but when she checked the computer later, he had complied. Then a week later, when they ran out of computer paper, he demanded that she not "waste" money on more. And the checkbook was in his name only—after all, it was *his* money.

Justine wrote him a note, leaving it in the kitchen near the coffee maker. She wrote, "Rod, you said we would start over when we moved to Ohio. Is this our new beginning? If we love each other, shouldn't we be supportive of each other's interests? If you wanted to go hunting, I wouldn't stop you—I never did. I like writing for the paper. I'm happy taking care of you and the kids, but I want to do something for me."

Rod didn't respond; he didn't say anything, and he didn't buy more paper. He had chosen his stance; now she would have to choose hers, and she wasn't going to cave in. She knew that she wasn't being unreasonable in her request, but she would try to meet Rod halfway—a half-hearted attempt to pacify Rod while still doing what she wanted.

Refusing to be deterred, she went to the editor of the newspaper and asked him if he would supply her with paper. He told her he would supply her with paper and floppy disks.

Rod had delivered one of her stories to the office the week before, and he had been argumentative with the editor. Concerned, the editor said, "Justine, I don't want this to be a problem in your marriage."

"Don't worry about it," Justine replied, brushing off the comment. "I can handle Rod." She didn't want to discuss her problems with the editor. *Getting paper is the least of my problems*, she said to herself.

When Rod saw her return home with a ream of paper, he seethed, "You don't listen to me." Justine tried to look unmoved.

“No, you *won't* listen to *me*,” she answered.

Rod turned toward Sarah, who was sitting at the dining room table making friendship bracelets, and said, “Do you hear something whining?”

Sarah looked up with a quizzical expression. She squirmed uncomfortably in her seat, and then gave her attention more intently to her project.

Oh, don't use the kids to attack me; I won't let you turn them against me, Justine thought, not allowing herself to respond aloud to his taunt. She bristled, but turned and carried the computer paper upstairs to the desk in their bedroom.

Everything was definitely not perfect. The problems they faced in Utah were not just resurfacing—they never went away. After that last comment, Rod became distant and started drinking. Beer bottles stacked up along the wall in the kitchen, waiting to be carried to the recycling bin in the basement.

Justine pleaded with Rod to stop drinking and talk to her. His only reply was a blank expression that seemed to say, “I don't hear you.”

Justine hated the bottles sitting in the kitchen where the children could view them, but she was determined that *she* wasn't going to touch them. Staring at them one morning, she decided to act. She pulled the camera from a kitchen drawer and took a picture of the bottles; then she went into the family room, where Rod was sitting on the floor playing a Nintendo game, and said, “I just took a picture of the beer bottles in the kitchen. If you don't do something about them, I'm going to show the picture to Children's Services and asked them to declare you an unfit parent.”

She had no idea if Children's Services could, or would, react, but hopefully Rod didn't either.

Rod didn't even look up from his game—he didn't say anything, either.

Justine's spirits were failing, even when she tried to antagonize him, for the sake of opening some line—any line—of communication. Rod refused to respond.

Later that day as she drove to the store with the cash that Rod had given her to get groceries, Justine mulled the broken promises over in her head. She was spending a lot of time in her own head. Forget the marriage vows; that was too long ago. She thought of the love they professed for one another. It seemed distinctly lopsided. All of the years of trying to prove to Rod by her constancy that he was lovable and deserving were futile, despondent years.

Their brief separation in Utah had brought them back together with passionate fervor. Even then, she knew her reason for reconciling was for the children and driven by guilt—not because she held out any hope for their love. She knew that deep down she had not genuinely trusted Rod's proposal of a new beginning in Ohio. But outwardly, she did want it, even if it was for the kids' sake. Besides, how could she have made it on her own?

As she drove to the store, she glanced at a large maple tree near a bend in the road. She imagined plowing her car into the tree—hoping for death to bring closure to the sense of futility that was threatening to overwhelm her.

Yet death did not seem to be an option. How could she leave the children with *him*? Perhaps if she could imagine that Rod would be a good father, then death would offer an escape. But Rod teased Levi because he was emotional, he doted on Thomas, and he ignored the girls. She knew the children needed her.

A week later, Justine asked Rod for money for groceries. He refused, saying, "I'll get the groceries."

So Justine made out a grocery list. Included on the list were feminine hygiene products. When Rod returned from the store, the items that she had requested were not in the bags. *So, she thought, that is how it's going to be. Now, what do I do?*

Getting a job would be difficult because she would have to find, and pay for, childcare. And her car was in need of new tires and brakes, and Rod had refused to give her the money for the repairs.

Several days later, when nothing had improved at home, and Justine was driving home, she again found herself thinking of wrapping her car around the nearest tree. Suicidal thoughts were not new to her; when she was a young teenager she had contemplated suicide. Her home life was troubled by her parents' unhappy marriage and her inability to please her mother. She didn't commit suicide then, and she didn't think she would now; but now there was no camp to escape to.

She decided to make an appointment at the local mental health clinic. When she arrived, she explained that she had no money. The clinic waived the fees when they learned she was there because she was thinking about suicide. She was ushered in to see a nurse. The nurse suggested that anti-depressants might help for the short-term.

"I don't want drugs," Justine complained. "I just want to know what's wrong with him."

In her first session with a counselor, the counselor suggested that she was in an abusive relationship, and she should contact the domestic violence shelter. Justine protested.

"Rodney is not abusive. He doesn't beat me," she replied.

"Domestic violence does not have to involve physical abuse," explained the woman. But Justine looked at her, taking in her conservative dress, glasses, and out-dated hairstyle. She thought the woman looked like an old maid; she'd probably never been married, and if she was, it was to some mousy bookkeeper type. Justine decided that the woman didn't know what she was talking about—didn't understand "dynamic" relationships. Despite her skepticism about her counselor, Justine was not ready to give up.

At her second session, the counselor insisted that Justine call the shelter and at least talk to them.

"If you don't do something," the woman told Justine, "I may have to call Children's Services because you're transporting the children in a car that is unsafe." Then she dialed the number and handed Justine the phone.

Justine spoke to a pleasant-sounding woman who explained that emotional abuse was just as threatening and harmful as physical abuse. If Justine wanted to attend support group sessions, or

ever needed to come to the shelter, she could call them any time. Justine thanked her for her time and hung up.

She still wanted to believe that the relationship would improve. If only Rod could see what a good life they had. But the counselor's cautionary words threatened her and made her feel guilty about jeopardizing the children in her effort to keep the family together.

During the next week, Rod remained cold and distant, Justine decided that if the children's school year ended and there had been no sign of improvement, she would take the children and leave.

To resolve the problem with the car, Justine went to the bank and withdrew two hundred dollars, even though her name was not on the checking account. Rod had allowed her name placed on the home equity loan, in an effort to show goodwill. She felt guilty for dipping into the money, but she had to take care of the car. Justine got the brakes fixed and had a little cash left over.

Rod was furious when he learned what she had done. "Good one, Justine," he fumed. "I put your name on the account, and you take advantage of it!"

Justine looked back at him. She wasn't angry. She wasn't hurt. She couldn't even feel guilty anymore. Calmly, she replied, "Well, I had to get the car fixed." Then she turned away, knowing he wouldn't say anything. She knew that if she looked, she would see that he was seething.

Though they slept in the same bed, Justine and Rod had not had sex in weeks. That night, Justine lay alone trying to allow sleep to overtake her. Rod was downstairs in the family room playing Nintendo, and she could hear the sound of weapons firing on the game.

Sleep eluded her, and she finally heard Rod moving about. Then she heard him ascending the stairs. She heard anger in his steps, and when he entered their bedroom, she heard him panting as he pulled off his clothes. If he had had on a buttoned shirt, she was sure he would have ripped the buttons through their holes. She knew that he intended to "make love" to her. *Nothing to get excited about*, she told herself. Sex was a means of diffusing tension in their relationship. *Maybe this will set us back on track; it had worked before.*

In truth, she held out little hope. But she knew what he was about to do, and she didn't want to fight him. It might lead to a physical fight—one she knew she couldn't win. She knew his strength. Once when they were arguing, she had dared to poke him. He swung his arm and knocked her across the room. Afterward, he apologized profusely.

I've had sex with him often enough. This isn't a problem, she tried to persuade herself. She could argue with words, if she could dart in, parlay, then withdraw. She could make a more extended argument, if she could write. But more direct, more potentially explosive confrontations were scary.

Rod yanked back the bedcovers, and without a word—certainly not a caress—he jerked her loose pants down her legs. He mounted her roughly and thrust himself into her. His thrusts were forceful. His hands were balled fists beside her shoulders.

She lay there—unresponsive, continuing a dialogue with herself. *I don't even get the satisfaction of deflecting a kiss. I can only lay here, wondering if he knows that I'm not participating.*

Rod didn't take long. When he was done, he lay down beside her. He didn't say anything, and he didn't touch her. *What? He can't even show me that his anger is spent? I guess this was not his usual attempt to "make up."*

Justine just lay there staring into the darkness—waiting—feeling numb. *Never again.*

The next day, she wrote him a letter. As they had breakfast, he didn't speak; and she didn't want to speak either. She wrote only to inform him of the decision that she had made. She explained that until he agreed to talk to her and get help, she would not sleep with him. She knew this would not bring reconciliation. From past experience, she knew that the only way they would "work things out" would be if she apologized—apologized for anything, for everything. He always waited for her to capitulate. She always did. But not this time.

Justine began going to bed each night in one of the children's rooms, placing her body behind the child's so Rod could not accost her while she slept. Thomas was particularly pleased; he enjoyed the security of Mommy sleeping in his room.

Still, Rod did not react. He neither replied to her letter nor answered her verbal treaties.

One day, Levi asked Justine for a cough drop. Knowing that he didn't need it but merely wanted to eat it as candy, she refused. Moments later, she found Levi asking Rod for a cough drop.

With a smug glance at Justine, Rod replied, "Sure, Levi, you can have a cough drop."

Great, she thought, glaring at Rod, *one small example of how he undermines me with the kids.*

The next day, Rod left for work. Much to his consternation, he had to work third shift because he was the newest employee at Superior Technologies. Justine agreed that it wasn't ideal; but she pointed out that the pay was good and eventually, as he built up his seniority, he would get a better schedule.

His complaint was justified. It was unpleasant to have to leave home late in the day and miss evenings with the family. The children were at school all day, and he only had a few hours at home with them before he had to leave for work. Yet Justine felt that that was a superficial complaint. The reality was that he couldn't know *her* evening activities.

It was late—perhaps 11:30. Justine was sewing pillows to put in a craft show and watching television. Long ago she had been an "early to bed, early to rise" kind of person; but after she had had children, she found the quiet hours of the night the best time to be productive or to enjoy her own idle pursuits. She enjoyed doing needlework, reading, and writing letters to friends. During the day, the demands of Rod and the children disrupted the quiet contemplation she preferred, so she had taken to staying up late—waiting for the house to become quiet. Suddenly Rod was in the room standing behind her. "Oh," she said. "You're home early. What happened?"

"They didn't need me," he replied, looking not at her but at the stitching in her hands.

Likely story! she thought. *You came home to check on me. Well, ha, ha, here I sit embroidering a pillow. What a disappointment it must be.*

Justine arrived at this conclusion after considering Rod's abrupt appearance in the room, and

knowing that their marriage was plagued by his fear that she would duplicate the infidelity of his first wife.

Rod's sudden appearance was not a fluke. She was sitting in a chair facing the television and the bay window. The bay window faced their parking places outside where she would have seen him pull in, and there were only lace, tied-back curtains in the window. She would have seen his headlights.

Even if she had failed to observe the headlights, the outside lights would have come on. Rod had installed a motion sensor light on that corner of the house shortly after they moved in. The light would have come on when he crossed the yard and ascended the stairs of the back porch. But the light hadn't come on, and that meant only one thing; Rod had skirted the light by crossing the lower yard and ascending the stairs on the other side of the porch. Then, he must have quietly entered the kitchen door.

How sly he is, she thought. What did he expect? To find me in the arms of a lover?

Well, she had tried to look up a high school boyfriend when they moved back to Ohio. She assured herself that it was only to catch up on the intervening years since she had last seen him. Or was it?

She confronted Rod one night after the children were in bed. "We've got to do something about our problems!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said casually.

"C'mon," she pressed, "talk to me." She was not going to avoid a full-blown confrontation if it came to it.

"I am talking to you," Rod replied with a shrug.

"You're impossible!"

"Well, you've got a big nose!"

Justine couldn't help herself. She laughed. *Typical! He can't say anything productive, so he uses my one-time complaint, that I think my nose is too big, to try to hurt my feelings. Well, you know—no more. I'm not going to be humiliated; I'm not going to try to pretend nothing's wrong; I'm not going to do this any more.*

With building anger, Rod shot back, "And by the way, you're no writer. Everybody in town knows that the only reason you're writing for the paper is that you're sleeping with the editor!"

"I don't believe that," Justine countered, stunned but not intimidated.

"You will if I tell you often enough," he threatened through gritted teeth.

Later, in bed, Justine mulled over what he had said. *Could people really think that I'm sleeping with Dave? Geez! I can't let him get to me.*

But the fact was that he did "get" to her. It wasn't just the mind games. Rod threatened to take the phones out of the house, claiming that their phone bills were too expensive. He was still buying the groceries, but not purchasing items that she needed. Surely, the strain in their relationship was hurting the children. And for all her bravado, Justine felt the same despair that she felt when she first went to the mental health clinic. It was the fact that she could lift her chin a little higher, but

inwardly, she couldn't shake the rising tide of futility. All the hope that she felt when they moved to Ohio was gone. She only had fifty dollars left in her wallet. She had to leave.

The next day when Rod left for work, Justine called the domestic violence shelter and said she needed help. The woman explained that the location of the house was not to be shared with anyone, and then proceeded to give her directions.

Justine hurriedly began to leave with the children. She packed all her clothes because, once, in anger, Rod had threatened to burn them. Then she packed some of the children's clothes, knowing that they would return some time in the future to visit their father.

She called to Ashley, Sarah, Levi, and Thomas and told them to get in the car. Not until they were in the car did she tell them their destination. "Kids, we're going to a shelter. Daddy can't know where we're going."

The children responded with dismay, though Ashley, as the oldest, had begun to sense that there was something wrong between her parents. She was, however, fearful of the unknown. "How are we going to go to school?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Justine. "We'll work it out when we get where we're going."

Sarah was sobbing quietly. Levi, his voice quivering, asked, "Where are we going to sleep?"

"I don't know," Justine said again. "We'll find out when we get there."

Thomas wailed, "I want to see my daddy!"

"I know," Justine answered, trying to sound reassuring. In reality, she was praying that she was doing the right thing.

The shelter was in a large old house that reminded Justine of the home she had just left. But this house seemed safe. She had to identify herself by intercom before the front door was unlocked and they were ushered inside. A friendly woman filled out intake papers while another woman took the children into the family room where a few other children were watching television.

After the intake process was completed, Justine and the children were given a tour of the downstairs. It consisted of a large living room, a parlor, a family room filled with toys, books, television and video games, and a large kitchen. In the kitchen, Debbie, one of the staff members, explained the house rules which included rising early, participating in group meetings, and cleaning duties. A cleaning schedule hung on the refrigerator and each resident was assigned to make dinner and clean bathrooms and the other rooms used in common.

Then they were led upstairs to the bedrooms. Justine and her children were given a room to themselves because they were such a large family. The room had a chest of drawers, two sets of bunk beds, and a twin bed. They shared a bathroom down the hall with other residents. Justine hated that but knew that was a small price to pay for having somewhere to stay.

The next morning, she and the children rose and dressed and went to the kitchen for breakfast. While they ate cereal, they met two of the other residents. One was a black woman with two children.

Justine observed her children looking at the woman curiously. Rod's prejudice was reflected by the children's reaction to the woman. *As much as I tried to ward them from some of his negative influences, I have a long way to go to give the kids some new attitudes.*

When she called home two days later to allow the children to talk to him, Rod yelled at her. He demanded, "I want to see my kids!"

"It is not my intention to keep you from them. As soon as we can, we'll arrange for you to see them," Justine responded, grimacing at his anger. She grimaced only because she imagined that one day she would have to face that anger outside of the security of the shelter, but for now, she knew that her voice was firm and confident. Not only did it reflect the security that she felt in the shelter, it also reflected her resolve—she would not submit to him again.

When he talked to the children, Justine could tell that he was trying to coax them into revealing their hiding place. She took the phone away from Thomas and told Rod that if he persisted in trying to locate them, she would not let him talk to the children. The shelter staff had warned her that if Rod learned their location, they would be asked to leave.

It took weeks for Justine and the children to work out the details of where they would go next. She had no idea how she was going to support the children alone. She was afraid that Rod would kill her if he could get his hands on her.

Separately, Justine and the children met weekly with a psychologist; it was a requirement of the shelter. Justine found a lawyer that would handle the divorce, with fees to be paid when the house was sold. Then finally a family member offered to pay the deposit and first month's rent for an apartment. They prepared to leave the shelter.

The children were excited. They would see their father soon. Justine was afraid. She was afraid of what Rod would do when she was no longer in the security of the shelter. Rod had somehow learned the shelter's location; he proved it by describing the house to the children on the phone. But the staff told Justine that they could stay because Rod had not tried to approach the house. She still felt more secure there than she could imagine feeling out in the community. The shelter had an impressive security system.

Justine was also afraid for the future. She had to find a job. She had to meet a budget. She had to ask for public assistance. The future arrived, despite her fears, and it offered hope.

Six months later, Justine had a job as a secretary. The children were in a school and meeting weekly with the school counselor. Justine and Rod met in the police parking lot to exchange the children for visitations because her lawyer had explained that the parking lot was monitored by video cameras.

The divorce continued to drag on. In one hearing the magistrate ordered that Justine should be allowed back in their house in two weeks to remove her possessions. Rod was furious. "She has no right!" he yelled, as the magistrate looked on disapprovingly. "She left! Everything is mine now!"

The court disagreed.

One week later, a friend, whose husband worked for the volunteer fire department called.

"Justine," she said in a strained voice, "your house is on fire."

"Oh my God!" was all Justine could say. Shock and horror stunned her.

A few moments later, she located the phone book. Finding the number for the fire department, she placed the call.

"I understand a house is burning outside of town," she told the man who answered.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied. "I can't talk right now."

"Well, I don't know if you're the one I should call," she hurried on, "but that house is involved in a divorce. I want it investigated."

Unsurprisingly, the man then took the time to question her.

Two hours later, two investigators arrived at the apartment to talk to Justine. She spoke to them in hushed tones because she had put the children to bed and did not want to alarm them. Justine and the two men sat at the kitchen table, talking in low voices. She told them her story—the story of why she left Rod, of their time in the shelter, and of their new life. They asked her where she was that night, and she explained she had been trick-or-treating with the children. Could anyone corroborate her story? Yes, she told them, various family members had seen her.

As the investigators prepared to leave one and a half hours later, one of them said, "You were our suspect."

"And now?" she asked.

"I don't think you did it," he replied.

"I didn't," she answered confidently.



Contributors' Notes



BRENDA ACKERMAN is a sophomore at OSU Marion. She is an English Major, wife and the mother of four children. She has a variety of interests, which include but are definitely not limited to: reading, writing, gardening, painting (walls and canvases!), good conversation and teaching. A non-traditional student, she says, "The return to college has been interesting and fun. Who says getting older is a negative thing? I think my age and experience help me to understand, appreciate and enjoy this experience more than ever!"

MIKE ANDERSON is a student at OSU Mansfield. He says, "If ignorance is bliss, than the people in front of him must be orgasmic."

ROSALIE BENET is a junior, majoring in English at OSU Marion. She transferred from Marion Technical College, where she earned an Associate Degree in Paralegal Studies. She attends New Vision Community Church in Marion. In the past she has been in Real Estate Sales and Property Management. She likes to read and is interested in writing.

WALTER U. BOLTON, JR. graduated from OSU Newark, having majored in English. He is currently in his fifth year of coaching baseball at that campus. He has published two books, *The Pitcher's Cookbook* and *If It's Farther Than a Bike Ride It Doesn't Exist*. He writes Op-Ed columns for *Our Town*, a local newspaper, and for WCLT radio. He has taught courses at OSU Newark and Ohio University-Zanesville, and was AMA in charge of Administration for Central Ohio's Census in 2000.

KRISTINA BRAUSE attends OSU Marion and works as a server/bartender/cook at Steve's Dakota Grill. She is a Psychology major with a minor in English. She enjoys fishing, camping, hiking, reading and writing poetry.

YOLANDA R. CASTILLO attends OSU Marion and is a hair stylist at Famous Hair. She is working on a double major in Psychology and Art, and says, "I love to make people laugh!"

JOANNE FITZGERALD is a fiction-writer-wanna-be. She has the part about starting a short story down pat. It is past page three when she gets into trouble; her ditzzy old-lady characters have by now bored the hell out of her, the plot is from the fifties and no longer pertinent and her grammar is strange and her sentence structure backward. Her former editor (when she was a whiz at non-fiction) used to blue pencil her work up one column and down another and yell, "You write backwards." Somehow he blue-penciled her into being a competent non-fiction writer. But it is fiction that is glamorous, academic, would give her an entree to the fame—maybe fortune—that she craves. So onward she goes—and backward she writes. She starts another story, great beginning, and gets along swim

swimmingly until halfway through page three. Right now she is hunting yet another fiction writing class to take at OSU-Marion, a different professor to fool for a while, or for at least through pages one, two, and three.

KRISTI GROLL is a sophomore at OSU Marion. She is an Animal Science major and hopes to continue her education at The OSU College of Veterinary Medicine after completing her Bachelor's Degree. She is employed by Dr. Klinefelter at the Waldo Animal Clinic.

CHRISTOPHER W. HOOVER is a senior at OSU Marion. He will be attending Main Campus in the fall as a Business major. He has been playing rugby since 1997 and is planning to play at OSU next year.

KELLY KRIDER attends OSU Marion and is majoring in Biology. She works at Video Connection in Upper Sandusky and enjoys reading, writing and drawing.

AMANDA MINOR is a freshman at Ohio State Marion. She enjoys poetry, drawing and spoiling my two labs, Chasen Tails and Cokomo Jo.

FRED MCKINNEY is a retired die maker after 34 years at General Motors. He is nominally an English major at OSU Mansfield, though he is not working toward a degree. He says, "Next to my wife, writing fiction is my first love." He has been writing for over 30 years, and his works have been published in *Immaculate Cauldron* and *Cornfield Review*.

DAN McMULLIN is a twenty-eight year old freshman at OSU Marion. His major is Human Resources. He has enjoyed poetry since he was a young age and imagines that is what led him to the hip hop culture before it was a trend. He served almost seven years in the United States Navy, and he finds that a lot of his poems are inspired by those experiences.

RHONDA NELSON is a non-traditional, full-time, graduating senior at OSU Mansfield. Any more descriptive titles might suggest that she is resistant to labels: so we won't mention that she is an English major and, outside the academic discourse community, a single mother of three children. After three years as a writer and editor of a small community newspaper, Rhonda decided to return to school in order to expand her potential as a writer. Her short story was her first venture into the field of creative writing, and she feels the endeavor's success may be attributed to the advice of a writing mentor. "Death of a Home" won first place in this year's Florence B. Allen Award in the Short Story category at OSU Mansfield.

HANK OSBORNE is a fourth year undergraduate at OSU Mansfield. He is working toward a double major in History and English.

SARA RESTA is a senior majoring in English at OSU Newark and works as a tutor in the Writing Lab. She is a “non-traditional” student, and her aspirations are to graduate before she needs to add the word “citizen” to her class rank. She writes because writing allows her to sit down, to live inside her head, to complain, and to justify her laziness by renaming it “creativity.” Her hobby is waiting for the Publishers Clearing House Prize Patrol to arrive at her doorstep. It’s past her time to “already be a winner.”

JOHNATHAN RIDDLE dedicates his poem to Margo Amanda Hinojosa. He says, “If people want to know that this is my second year as an art student as OSU Marion, or that I waste my writing and drawing skills on such meaningless drudgery as cartoons and comic strips, let them come and ask me personally. I say! I’m not the important one here. Those special people who serve as our muses deserve recognition as well. I’d like to thank the Academy.”

STEPHEN SPIEGEL is a student at OSU Marion. Writing has become a hobby for him and he especially enjoys the short story genre. He says, “I feel I can articulate about myself best in the short story.”


MONICA WINEGARNER is a senior at OSU Marion, majoring in English. She hopes to one day write a best seller to promote herself and tell all her secrets!

TIFFANY RENE WYRICK is a student at OSU Newark where she is involved in the creation of a literary magazine. She is acting in an improvisational theatrical club, *Scattered Thoughts*. She is studying English and German and has received the Literary Honor of Circle Award and has had her artwork reach the Regionals in the Governor’s Art Show. More of her artwork is displayed in an exhibit at The Knowledge Works Museum in downtown Newark.





THE EDITORS

An abstract artwork featuring a central figure of a person with long, flowing hair, rendered in a warm, golden-brown color. The figure is positioned in the middle of the frame, surrounded by swirling, dark, and light blue patterns that suggest movement and depth. The background is a mix of dark, textured areas and lighter, more vibrant blue and white sections, creating a sense of a vast, ethereal space. The overall composition is dynamic and visually rich.

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monica wineGARNER
tiffany WYRICK