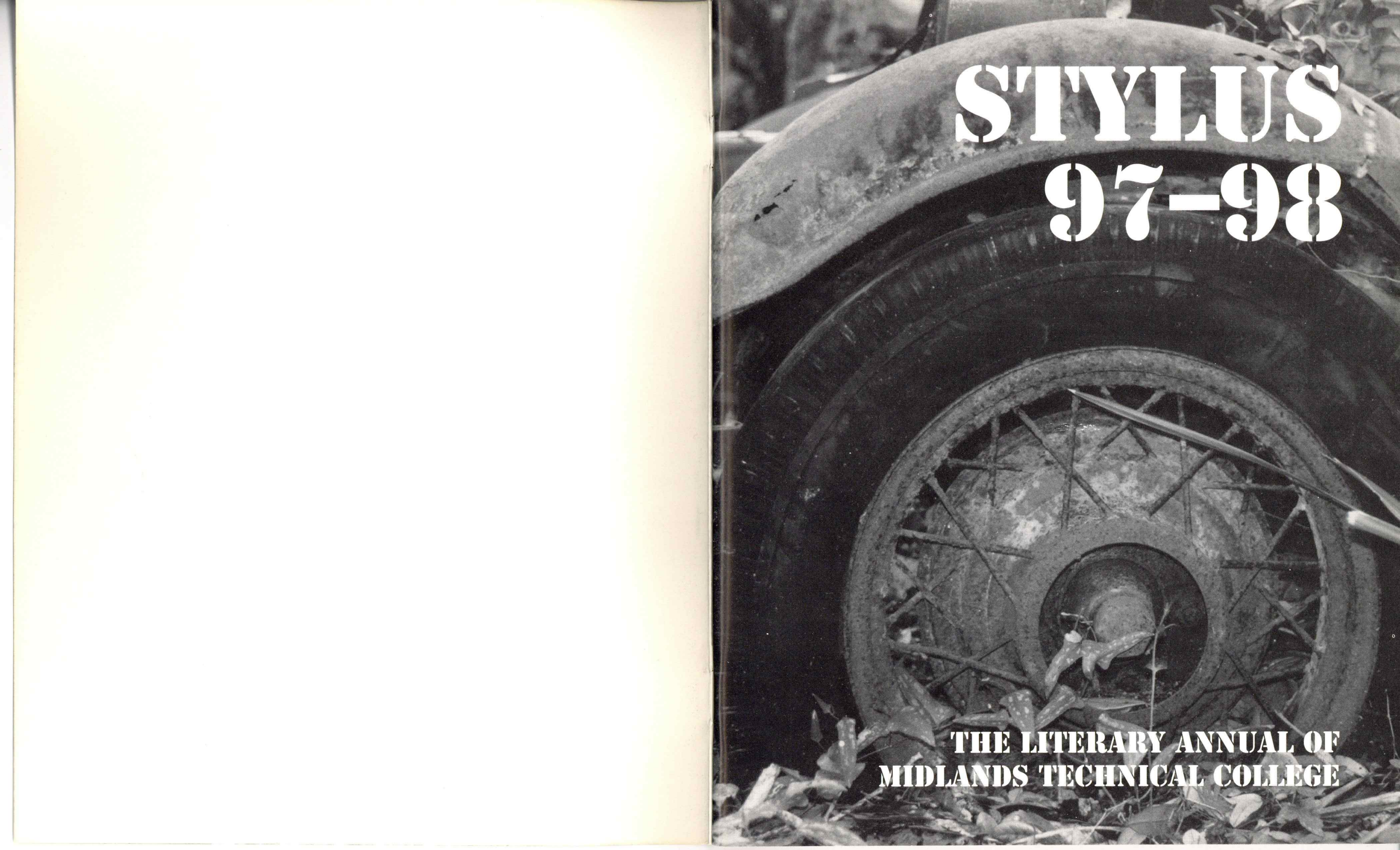


STYLUS

97-98



THE LITERARY ANNUAL OF
MIDLANDS TECHNICAL COLLEGE



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Stylus 1997-98

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For their assistance, support, and advice, the Stylus staff wishes to thank

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Contents

Cover photography by Jennifer Beard

Essays

- Beckman's Swamp Road — WYCLIFFE BIEDERWELL 7
Freedom — DAN GAFFORD 35
Thoughts on the March on Washington Thirty
Year Anniversary, 1993 — KEVIN L. TUCKER 49
The Fire — MARIA DEVITO 55

Fiction

- Once More the Reign — CHRISTOPHER B. WATTS 15
Rooms — AMANDA MASON-MCLEOD 39
Happily Ever After — MONICA BOUCHER 59

Poetry

- Broken — LAURA POWELL 12
Comfort Crowd — AMANDA MASON-MCLEOD 26
Literary Hell — LAURA POWELL 28
Dey Ain't No Chirrin Here — SHIMIKA YOUNG 30
Bellow — CHRISTOPHER B. WATTS 48
Mixed, a haiku — DEBORAH D. JACOBS 58

ooooo

Photography

- JENNIFER BEARD 27, 47
ROBIN STERRETT 6

Art

MICHAEL BIXLER	32, 33
HENRY C. BRANHAM	57
DORIS EDWARDS	11
C. T. FEARY	14
DYLAN FOUSTE	58, 64
LAURIE HARE	54
ROBIN STERRETT	31
SEQUIA D. WHITE	34

Stylus Awards for 1997–98

Essay

DAN GAFFORD

Fiction

CHRISTOPHER B. WATTS

Poetry

AMANDA MASON-MCLEOD

Art

MICHAEL BIXLER

Photography

JENNIFER BEARD



ROBIN STERRETT

Beckman's Swamp Road

WYCLIFFE BIEDERWELL

IN 1988, when I was 13 years old, I would visit my father in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. I was able to see both the beauty and the suffering of the people and communities. It was like a beautiful Red Delicious apple with a rotten core; it looked wonderfully tropical and sweet, but at the heart of it there was sickness and famine. My parents were divorced, and my father was studying medicine in a place where he would have many people who needed medical attention to practice on. There was more poverty and disease than I had ever seen before. It was there where I saw a man who was almost nonhuman. He was filthy but this was the least of his problems; he had no legs. His only mode of transportation was a half-rotted piece of particle board that had three wheels (each of which was different) nailed to the underside. The nails protruded through the board and made me think of a frog my grandmother owns in which she would put a single, small flower (usually a thin weed) and although this man was thin he resembled no flower. He rolled around on this makeshift skateboard that had been an obvious part of him for a good period of time, looking for food and panhandling money from tourists and anyone else he could get near. His disability was also his breadwinner; people would pay him to leave because of his grotesque appearance. The natives didn't give much attention to this one man because in this third world country it was all too familiar. Those born into severe poverty have less of a chance to live comfortable, safe lives. When I looked at him (which was difficult to do) he reminded me of a thing that was half human and half skateboard rather than a person. It was difficult to look at a native man or woman in the city without seeing the hard life they had endured. Sometimes I had to ask myself why, although the meaning of the question has changed for me over the years. When I first asked it I meant, why do these people suffer? Over time and through watching a lot of CNN (though CNN might not show a skateboard-man from the waist down), I realized that suffering is a part of life, and my question became more philosophical: Why him? Why not me?

I remember riding with my dad to all the tourist (and not so tourist) attractions. My father and I would go all over the island on his motorcycle and see things in a way that can't be seen from a car or a tour bus. On a motorcycle you become part of the scenery. To this day my father has never been in an accident and that is not due to skill and caution alone; when riding there is a certain amount of luck involved. Skill and carefulness cannot help you when you are riding a machine that is balanced on 4 inches of rubber and weighs 500 pounds. When a front tire blows on an exit ramp, you become what is termed among most bikers as "road pizza."

I remember a particular trip to a tourist attraction called Boca Chica, a beautiful beach with a reef that has islands along it, an incredible playground for a young teenage boy. This afternoon was different because of something I saw that I had never seen before. I watched a man drown. I had never seen anyone die before, and there was no dramatic music or a hero to save the day (although my father tried). It was very real and it seemed like everyday life to me, like an ordinary event. The people were gathered around the man and making a commotion like that I had seen a few days earlier at an event called a cock fight. These are common to the Dominican Republic, and have no truly distinguishable words, just the sound of people yelling in an excited manner. I remember thinking that the man wasn't very old—35 or 40 maybe—and how he had no idea when he got out of bed that morning that by mid-afternoon he would be in the morgue.

When I turned 20 I bought my first motorcycle despite my mother's adamant wishes and threats that if I bought a bike I would be looking for a place to live. I called her bluff and she didn't kick me out. It was a 750 cc 1983 Yamaha Seca and I rode it everywhere. After all, it was the only transportation I could afford to have. I loved it and I got really well adjusted to it. I pushed myself (and my bike) to the limit, and I would show off every now and then by cat walking it through an intersection. I was a completely different person when I had someone on the back, though. I have always considered myself responsible for the life of the person sitting behind me, so I became a safer driver the second someone else got on my bike. Riding was addictive for me, and I would go out and use up an entire tank of gas and not have gone anywhere. I found it was addictive for my friends as well. I taught several of them how to ride and they eventually got bikes of their own. Sometimes I wonder if teaching them to ride might change their lives. I can only hope my friends will ride responsibly and stay out of harm's way. I wonder if I will regret teaching them to ride.

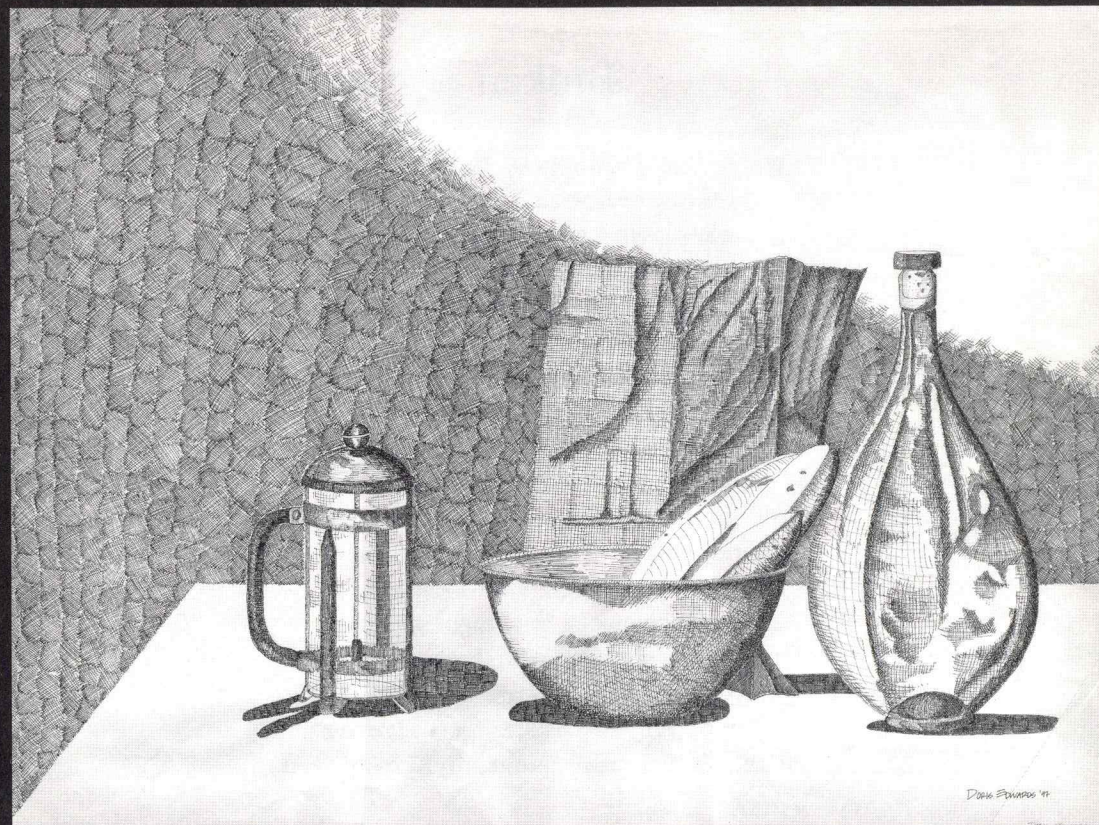
On the night of September 13th the air was cool and crisp. There was not a

cloud in the sky. I remember the lucidity of the stars and the way they inspired me to find the darkest spot in the country to see them. I wanted to go stargazing and experience them as much as I could. My girlfriend Jaime and I set off on my bike towards the country to see if we could find a dark field to lie down in. We were looking forward to gazing at the sky, and hoped to catch a glimpse of a shooting star. We found a road called Beckman's Swamp Road. It was straight out of a horror movie; the trees were old and hung over the road, forming a living tunnel. The darkness of the woods seemingly swallowed the beam from my headlight, giving fuel to the imagination (thoughts of monsters and Jason Vorhees lurking just beyond the reach of the headlight). If it had occurred to me that it was Friday the 13th, I probably would have passed it up. It looked dark, and held the promise of a field somewhere down the way, so I ambled down the old concrete road at a pace of 15 miles an hour, slowly enough to catch glimpses of the stars through holes in the tunnel's ceiling and still watch the road. I remember the clarity of the stars: they were pristine; the brilliance was that of diamonds changing colors and shimmering on black velvet. We emerged from our living cave of oaks and maples into an open space where the road continued as dirt. I turned the bike around and cut the engine. We sat on the bike and admired the beautiful clear night. It came time to take Jaime home, so we left our stargazing spot.

I was driving down the road towards the tunnel of trees when I saw the edge of the road rise up directly in front of me. I still have nightmares about driving off the road and into the ditch. The road simply seemed to end. The last things I saw before going off into the blackness were the brown weeds that bordered the shoulder. I remember thinking how sharp they looked against the contrast of the pitch backdrop, like a jagged saw waiting for my tires to roll over its teeth. I remember sitting up and realizing there was something wrong with my arm and leg; my arm was hurt and my leg was not in a place it should have been. My first concern was Jaime. I called out to her in the darkness once, twice. . . finally terror was beginning to grip me. Had she been killed? Why was she not answering me? I tried to move to find her, but a lightning bolt of pain shot through the left side of my body, originating in my leg and ending in my shoulder. I realized I was unable to move. I called out to her once more, and she answered. A feeling of great relief swept over me and I forgot (just for a moment) about my injuries. She was unhurt, aside from a bruised knee and having the wind knocked out of her. It is incredible to me that she was unharmed in the accident. I went off the road at about 40 miles an hour and landed in a ditch where stumps and rocks protruded from the ground like skewers, waiting to impale me and her. Fortunately

she was unharmed and hardly even dirty, able to walk to the road and hail some people to get an ambulance.

In November I was scheduled to be sent to boot camp at Fort Jackson and then to AIT Fort Ustess, Virginia. I was to be trained in the electrical systems of Apache helicopters, but the Army won't accept anyone who has hardware like the rod that now holds my leg together. That avenue of my life had a roadblock. I had to come up with something else. I suppose I was destined for college, although I remember thinking how right the National Guard had seemed when I signed the papers. I had been talking to my recruiter about his recent vacation to Boca Chica, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic and thought it a remarkable coincidence that I had been there some years ago.



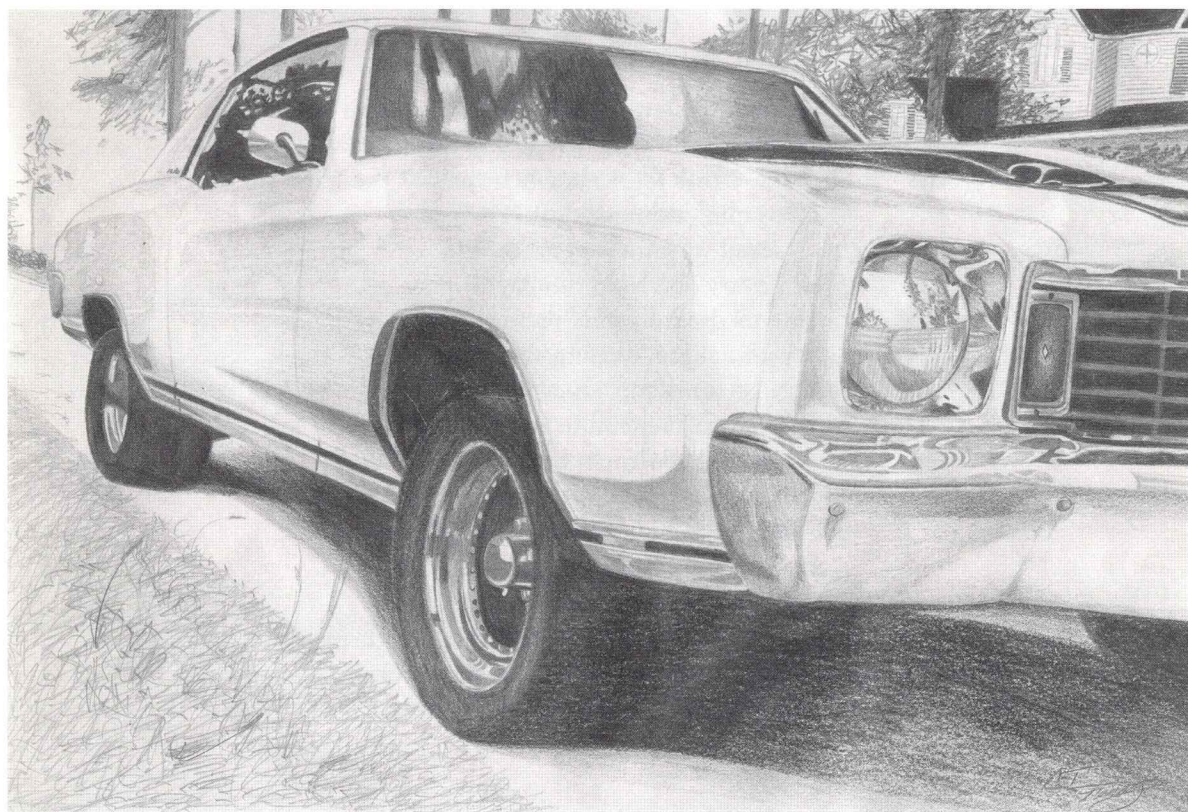
DORIS EDWARDS

Broken

She saw . . .
 broken dreams and broken hearts
 broke-down cars with useless parts
 innocent minds, worn and bent
 welfare checks already spent
 dirty faces and dirty feet
 bodies drenched with summer heat
 broken shacks with bugs and rats
 rocks for balls, sticks for bats
 Everyone waits for the game to begin
 little sister can't play - she's pregnant again
 Daddy's in jail for molesting his niece
 brother's in juvenile for toting a piece
 Junior's been out but might go back
 pigs found a blunt in his cigarette pack
 It seems like beans are all they eat
 and they were all wishing for a little meat
 but there's too many hungry mouths to feed

and Momma can't work 'cause she can't read
 Momma pawns the TVs that Uncle Fred steals
 says, "It ain't the Lord's work, but it helps pay the bills!"
 Gossipin' women, drunken men
 sexed-up girls sippin' on gin
 all go to church on Sunday to pray
 for a ride to the store on "Food Stamp Day!"
 usin', abusin', doing their best
 to shake some hip, show some breast
 when the dust of her future swelled in her eye
 saw what she'd become, broken sobs cried
 She packed up her bags moved into town
 held her head high, never looked down
 got a job and worked hard everyday
 found herself a decent place to stay
 and in the summer heat, God blessed her with rain
 and the only thing broken was poverty's chain.

LAURA POWELL



C. T. FEARY

Once More the Reign

CHRISTOPHER B. WATTS

NOBILITY SUCKS LIKE HELL. I would rather have a world-class case of piles for eternity than deal with something the price of which so far exceeds its value. *Romeo and Juliet* disgusts me, as does every damn sappy love story on the screen. The moviemakers fill the masses' minds with so much idealistic shit it's a wonder they can sleep at night. Then again, they are probably just doing what they had done to them. Sick, sick world. It's high school on a much larger scale, seniors picking on the juniors (no, no pun intended), juniors on the sophomores, and everyone on the freshmen. College for those who can afford a buffered version of reality for another few years. Suicide, alcoholism, divorces and retirement for rewards. In addition, let us not forget taxes! Jesus Christ! No wonder He left in such a hurry! I promise you, I would rather have the Virus than be in love."

"Be careful what you wish for, Joeri. Candy is, after all, the greatest laxative—and anyway, here comes a little sunshine."

[I wish he would calm down. He's heading for an ulcer at the very least. Maybe even a major brain fart, a cerebral hemorrhage or something. Cute chica, though. Aaahhh! Gotta love the Geisha! Although, any female of Asiatic descent will definitely serve, as long as she goes for the occasional bit of buggery. . . .]

"Oh my Lord, thank you for allowing me to Witness your creation. I shall not want any longer. Delicatessen! Hey! Hey Loethe! She smiled at me, cat daddy! I gotta run, call me later—I'll be at home, but if I don't answer after three rings, call back in an hour (wink, wink. . .nudge, nudge—Is she a goer, ay? Does she go, ay? I'll bet she does!)"

"Later on, guy—be careful in there. Don't forget tomorrow is the Psychic Lights Presentation. I'll see you there if I don't hear from you tonight—I won't bother calling you, even though I know as well as you do that she won't be giving you time!"

"Yeah, yeah! You just wish you had my good looks!"

"No, not really—I just wish I had your ego!"

Since Joeri is otherwise occupied and it is into the hot part of the day, I figured I would go home, maybe catch a nap or something. On the walk home from campus, I notice a bunch of New Catholics milling around outside. They have the typical air about them, all candlelight and intensity. I avoid them like the plague, especially since they are probably here to protest our heathen activities. Never have been too fond of pagan rituals, now have they? Who wrote the book by stealing so many pages? It is definitely time for sleep.

I am home. The only greeting I get is the quiet rumble of my cat attempting to compete with the thunderclouds and the crowds outside. I guess I should have noticed the storm sooner, but my mind has been elsewhere. Looking out my fifth tunnel window, craning my neck to a near impossible angle, I can see the love of Earth hanging heavy in the sky. Ever seen a constipated cloud? They make one feel claustrophobic and infinitely insignificant to the greater scheme of things. I feel disgusted with life—need some down time, babe.

I set my clock for nine-thirty, which will give me some four-odd hours of sleep, pet my cat (Dolores) for about five minutes, and find myself unable to even close my eyes. The heavy pressure and heat of my girl, her claws occasionally attempting to rearrange my chest into an acceptable bed, is normally soothing to me. Not today. Grouchy as hell, I get up and set the walls on sound for an hour's worth of "rain," hoping I will at least relax.

ooooo

I wake up suddenly, not realizing I have been asleep—the walls are no longer playing, and there is quiet outside. The faint odors of ozone and Dolores. There is an awful lot of light outside for it to be nine-thirty, so I open the glass to look and am nearly blinded by a strobe of light from directly above me—the same tunnel Joeri lives in, six tubes up and directly across from me. If it weren't for the sunglasses, I probably wouldn't have seen it at all. I get the sinking feeling something here just isn't right. Joeri isn't into strobes or any other type of hallucilights.

Poor and lacking telecomm, I gather what is left of my wits and head upstairs to see what has happened.

Knock, knock, knock. "Joeri, what the hell is going on?"

No answer.

"Joeri?"

"What is it? (pause) Who is it? It sounds like . . . it couldn't be." Footsteps trail

back into what I know to be the direction of Joeri's den, and I resume my interrogation of three feet of transaluminum. That they are not very talkative is an understatement.

"Joeri, for Heaven's sake, let me in! I need to talk to you! It's Loethe! Come on, man, I . . ."

"What do you know about Heaven?"

The door opens and Joeri stands there, looking as if he hasn't slept, has forsaken sleep for crying. I have known him for twelve years, and if he has ever cried, I've not known it. He looks at me like he's witnessing the birth of his own somewhat deluded consciousness, steps aside, and lets me into what used to be his den.

In the animal realm, a den is the only living space—bed, kitchen, bath, and sometimes even toilet. Humans are supposed to be above that kind of efficiency. We're not.

Every item in his den was beyond recognition—and I knew what he owned, had practically lived there when my parents subbed me out to the college for modification. Everything was white and wrinkled—like it had all been underwater with bleach for about a decade. The antique flatscreen, coffee table, recliner, bookshelves—they were all there, like they had been for the past ten years, but they were new to me. Even the things he loved the most—his books—were trashed. They were now a cream colored sludge hanging off the shelves. He had never let me touch them, on principle. He trusted me with his life, not his paper.

"Where have you been, man? And what in God's name happened here?"

"Where have I been? Man, where have you been? Where has everyone been?"

"I hope you're speaking philosophically, Joeri, because if you aren't, we're taking a trip to the Med. I was only asleep for a couple of hours, so don't give me any crap about not having been around. You know where I live."

"It's not that . . . it's just that I haven't seen you for a year. I know that's nuts, but wait, don't say anything—let me talk."

"Joeri, this better be somewhat coherent, or I really am taking you to the Med. No joke."

"I know. You may want to sit down, though—this could take a while."

I sat down, thanking the powers that be for self-drying fabric. He proceeded with his patter. It took him a while to warm up to the task, but soon he gave in and began telling me what he knew sounded crazy, but couldn't help telling. It was true.

"I persuaded Miss Sunshine into coming home with me, only to look over at her in the transit tube and find her gone. I was going to ask her what she wanted to do after I showed her my book collection. She was gone, man. Poo! Just like that! I had my hand on her knee one minute, scratched my head the next, and she just evaporated! No, don't make any jokes about lice. I mean it man—this is some serious shit, because after that, well . . . After that, *no one* was there anymore. I was still on the train, but I was alone. Beautiful, horrifying emptiness—trees whipping past the viewer walls—I felt like I was flying. Dreams started coming back to me, dreams I had as a kid. Memories too. Like the time I was up in my Grandfather's tree and decided I could fly just as damn well as the birds around me. I woke up in the hospital, but that's beside the point—it was the dream, man. The dream of flight, like an orgasm. . . .

"Have you ever noticed how, when you begin to mature, your childhood dreams and your memories become blurred? It feels like you don't know what you lived anymore, and what you made up. Not that it matters, though—an idealized life is far more pleasant than a real one. Kind of like how we always idealize our loves after they're gone, ya know? Maybe that's why we keep hitting our heads against the low-lying beam of reality—we just *love* too much. Really, it's not my fault, I did everything by the book—like there actually is a book.

"So all this stuff is going around in my head while I'm staring, transfixed. By the door, my face pressed up against the view. I want to taste it. So what if I fall? So what if I die? I'll just become a part of the beauty outside, the life we can no longer know. Earth hates us for who we are. . . I don't blame her, you know.

"The stop comes up—my stop. The doors open, and I can't move because I'm crying. I was literally paralyzed by my tears. I never cried before when I wasn't in physical pain. Never just to feel the perfect tranquillity that hides sheltered in the warm pain of a teardrop. I did then, until my reverie was broken by this hand on my shoulder and warm feminine breath in my ear. I didn't understand what she said; the shock of someone else being with me is too much—I had ridden an hour staring out the walls—at least that's what it felt like.

"I take off, running. I run on autopilot, and before I know it, I'm back here closing the door on all the quiet. There wasn't a single person between the tube and here. No one. It was like a graveyard, a dead anthill. But in broad daylight! You would expect freaky shit like that to happen at night, not during the day!

"She was waiting for me when I got here. I jumped inside too fast to notice the singing coming from within, but once the door was closed. . . . She was there, man. Right where you are now. I turned around once the singing overrode the

drumming of my heart, and there she sat. The drumming started again. More beautiful than anything else, glowing from every part. Except her abdomen. I thought it was a bruise at first. She told me everything later, too late for me—I was already in love. *Love*, Loethe, not lust—*Love! Me!*

"Exquisite creature, no hair anywhere—eyes the color of hematite. Unnaturally long limbs, fingers. Skin like the glint of sun off water. She was singing to me, and I could understand. God help me, I could understand although it was a language I had never heard. No language a human could reproduce, this was voice and word of the angels. No, *The Angel*.

"What a cruel joke to play. He knew I couldn't see her and not fall in love. I have to tell you what she was singing, Loethe. It matters to both of us—and Goss. Especially Her. Maybe we should go to your place now. Mine seems to be deconstructing. I just lost Melville, and a shelf."

"Come on, Joeri. Let us head. I'm hooked on your story anyway, so you may as well tell it. My place *is* a bit cleaner—imagine that! Besides, I want some damn coffee. Funny thing, though—I haven't seen any people in the tubes."

"Having a hard time believing me, huh? Well, that's part of the story, old top. That and a whole lot more. By the way, it's our story, not mine. You'll understand. Later, you will."

Joeri has always been the most cautious person I ever knew, but he left his door wide open when we quit his place, stopping to scratch his head and grin at the home he was previously so concerned about shutting off from the world. I wondered at this glimpse of insanity, but chose not to comment. Any time but this would be better to analyze the balance of his mental faculties. We didn't speak to each other at all on the way to my apartment.

Outside, everything was still, like a lake no one knows of. It was the type of quietude that invades your body, making coherent thought impossible. You breathe this kind of quiet, and are thankful. I didn't even notice whether or not the sun was shining.

It occurred to me that on the way to my place I had noticed things just lying around, like people had been in the middle of doing whatever it is they do right before they disappear, when they disappeared. Shoes outside doorways, half-eaten sandwiches lying on the ground like some surprise visitor had startled them from the eaters' hands. There were doors open with no noise from within. No sign of life whatsoever save for the noise of Joeri's passage and mine. As soon as we reached my door, it occurred to me that I had no idea what time it was. I opened the door and made a mad dash for the clock, only to discover that it was

no longer on the mantle. There was only a ring of dust-free wood where it had once sat. Dolores. Or maybe not. I turned around to question Joeri, since I had no one else to interrogate, and found him collapsed in a heap on the floor, snoring and looking quite uncomfortable.

I alternated picking him up and dragging him. I got him to the guest room, where I rolled him into the bed, elevated it, and set it on low warm and dry since his flesh was clammy to the touch. I figured on letting him sleep while I showered and made some coffee. I also had to feed Dolores, who was doing her best to wake him up with her loud “Mao!” of discontent. Now, where *did* I put the cat food?

When I’m tired, my implants itch. They are wonderful for accelerating thought and storing gobs of data, but can be a huge pain in the ass at times. I forgot about my java and fell asleep, only this time when I woke up, I had not slept a year. I also had a dream. A dream about an angel.

The beeping of an extremely annoyed coffee maker broke into my slumbering mind, and in a few minutes I became agitated enough to shut it off. By that time, the blasted machine actually woke me up. It was then I remembered my dream and decided to wake Joeri up.

“Joeri, get up! I had a dream!”

The muffled reply being something like “Go away, prick,” I decided to use violent means to force wakefulness on my nearly lifelong friend. I threw a half-asleep cat that didn’t like him, much anyway, on Joeri’s stomach. Luckily for him, the cat was not fully awake and he had several blankets covering his vitals.

He woke up.

“Jesus, Loethe, you could have killed me with that thing!”

“She is a cat, whose name is Dolores. Besides, while you were sleeping like the dead, I was busy having visions. I think I met Goss; she told me to wake you as soon as possible and get moving.”

“That isn’t very funny, Loethe. Taking her name in vain is a personal affront to me as well as to several divine sources.”

“Look, I know that—now—but she said something about Grasht coming, showed me an image of him in my sleep. It scared the crap out of me, and if you don’t get moving, I’m leaving without you. I really would prefer it if you came along—I need to know what is happening.”

“Grasht? Oh God, it has begun. Hold on—and bring Dolores with you. He’ll kill her if you leave her here.”

In a matter of minutes we had packed all the food that wouldn’t spoil, taken

our respective showers, dressed, grabbed the cat, and left in one Hell of a big hurry. Joeri refused to tell me anything until we reached the surface, which required our obtaining a serviceable groundcar. This turned out to be easier than I expected (since so many of the things had been abandoned). Unfortunately, it wasn’t *criminally* easy since so many had evidently been in motion when they were left to do as they pleased. You would be surprised how many people don’t use their autodrivers. It was a mess. Vacant groundcars were strewn haphazardly across every paved surface, oftentimes with less than an inch of clearance between each other or some other obstacle we had to squeeze past. At the time, I was happy to be on foot. We needed a vehicle, though, and we did find one—a nice, new one. Once aboard our “misappropriated” vehicle, we weaved our way upward fairly quickly, stopping only to spot each other through the more tangled piles of automobilia. We finally made it to the surface through an extremely clogged access ramp and pulled into a hydrogen depot to fuel up our Chevy Groundrunner.

The place was deserted. We helped ourselves to some food, hydrogen enough to fill the cell, a shortcharge rifle, and lots of kitty litter. We also took the last map in the store, and a well-worn book on “the decline of surface dwellings as a sign of impending doom for the human race.”

We conversed about the safety in staying where we were, and decided to move on to the spaceport. It wouldn’t take long since our car had been heavily modified for speed, but it was still over seven hundred miles of travel (with a carsick cat and a lovesick friend), miles I still didn’t fully understand the necessity for traveling. The only reason I put up with it, I then realized, was the amount of danger involved in *not* fleeing. We were both positive it wasn’t pretty, and it could traverse impressive distances in a short time. I don’t think it knew where we were, yet. . . . Moreover, I did have a renewed sense of faith in the integrity of Joeri’s mental faculties.

On Joeri’s word that I would be told everything once we were safe, we pushed onward, with very few words between us. Delay tactics. I think he may have been trying to put me off so he could decide what would sound the least insane. He also slept. A lot.

ooooo

I don’t know if you have ever seen the surface. Hell, I don’t even know that anyone will read this. The thing is, though—the old grey mare ain’t what she used to be. Judging from what the book on the decline of human surface dwelling had to say, and what I could piece together from Joeri (thank all kindness for

History majors), things had become rather different in the decades since the ozone layer dropped to forty percent. All I knew was what I saw, and it was weird. I had been born Under, so I knew nothing of Above but my Grandfather's garden. It was beautiful, and built directly into his study, taking up probably half of his cube.

Deep, arrhythmic purple darkness. Orange and brownish-green streaks of static electricity that traveled along the ground and in the sky. A thick sheen of something that blurred the outlines of everything in the landscape, making me glad I was in a vehicle that knew how to get where I needed it to take me. It was like traveling in a dream, the landscape was so surreal.

From what I understand, one hundred fifty or sixty years ago, mankind still dwelled on the surface. Then came the return on our ill-planned deposits. Toxic waste, air and water pollution, limited natural resources, on and on and on. They all came back to bite our shiny white asses. There were earthquakes and great worldwide storms, tornadoes, huge splits in the ground. People died in droves not really knowing what they had done to deserve such a fate. There were wars over the remaining habitable areas, fusion and fission bombs, chemical and biological weapons decimating the already shrinking populace. All dreams of a world government were dashed. Peace? Ha! After forty years or so, some genius decided we could no longer perpetuate ourselves if another thousand people died. That is how close we were. The surface was no longer a viable place to live, so the remaining governments declared a truce long enough to undertake a joint project. We would begin living underground. The cracks in the earth left from all the tectonic confusion were deep enough to create huge tunnels, enough to house ten times what population was left. The seismic activity had expelled enough energy to make this a relatively safe arrangement. The image that comes to my mind now is that of flies and their maggot offspring living off, and in, the carcass of some poor dead dog.

The idea for the tunnels came from a once-rich, once-powerful man who had an extensive collection of old science fiction novels. He modeled them after an idea some twentieth-century writer had about Mars supporting life in much the same fashion. The idea worked, and after nearly two hundred years had not suffered any major complications. Until now. Now there was no one to live in the tunnels. An entire civilization had vanished.

Here is where Joeri comes in. The year he had spent outside of time (my words, not his) was filled with learning about the way things used to be, and what mankind was really headed for—the final disaster. The Rapture. I had heard about

it, but knew practically nothing about religion or apocalyptic writings. I believed in something. It just didn't have a name.

According to Goss, God had seen fit to test his creation before giving up on us completely. Goss was pregnant. With a demon's child. Grasht's, to be precise. She was raped while serving in a messenger's capacity on earth. She had been assigned to Joeri, to make him see the Truth, to save his soul. He became a New Catholic without my knowledge, and without Goss knowing what she would soon have to do. Joeri took his part very seriously, attending and organizing street services. Until he saw one of his fellow parishioners shot down in the street, a man he believed to be much more devout than he.

Once this happened, Joeri began missing the occasional service, becoming less and less involved with the sustaining of his faith. He became even more dismayed when the New Catholics were forced to go underground because of the murder of a high-appointed politician who also happened to be a practicing Satanist. He forgot his ties in the hereafter once the founder of his chapter was found dead in a supposed retaliatory effort on the politician's behalf, and resumed his hedonistic lifestyle. All this happened while I was around, and I knew nothing of it. I was asleep, what can I say?

Goss showed up in his apartment, unwittingly entranced him with her charms, and they both fell in love. Joeri found his religion again. The demon child was created, and Goss died in labor. Joeri still won't tell me where the child is.

oooo

"Loethe, wake up! Wake up, we're here! We have to hurry, come on!"

"All right, damnit, wait a minute! I was trying to put together your story in my mind. I must have fallen asleep."

We both get out of the car, leaving Dolores inside. She was asleep anyway, and she should be safer in the car than with us. We begin walking towards a large flat area with a fountain in the center, a plaza of some sort. On all sides of us are space ferries and freighters, low buildings with long windows, and the morning sun. It is my first groundside sunrise, and I am so overwhelmed I feel nauseated. We head for the fountain, and a huge shadow falls over us. I look over at Joeri, and he's gone. So is the shadow.

"What the shit is going on here?! Hello, someone, please tell me what's happening here so I know whether I am out of my ever loving mind or not. One way or the other—I don't care—just so long as I know, okay? Ah, crap, no one has bothered to explain so far, not really—why should it come clear now, right?"

“Wrong. I’ll tell you, Loethe.”

“Joeri?” I spin around looking for my friend, but he is nowhere I can see. Oh great, just what I need. A voice without a body.

“The reason you cannot see me is that you doubt. Worry not, though, you need not see to understand. I am Gottda, the guardian of the Child. You both have done well, though I am afraid your friend shall not be returning to your plane. He knew I was here. He brought me the child, and that is all that was to happen. Once a being has seen Heaven, he or she cannot return to earth. It is against Divine Ordinance. It shall be so.”

“I can see you beginning to ask a question—do not. I will tell you what you need know, and then I will leave. Goss was part of a plan to save your race. If a man could love a once-perfect creature become tainted, the world would once again breathe life. If not, this would be a true Rapture. There has been more than one, you know. Oh yes, God is quite the tinkerer. He does not quit until it is right to. There have been many variations on your theme, man. Do not consider yourself a fluke. You have merely accomplished a small part of what you are to do. Your friend has sacrificed himself so that you may continue. Be grateful, and do not weep.”

“His love was great enough for more than one. He not only loved Goss, he came to love the Child as well. Your friend suffered great agony. He carried not one heart in his breast, but two—one so dark and heavy as to rend the sky asunder. I am amazed he made it, though I am not given to doubting the Lord. This is why he could not share his story with you. He would have jeopardized the safety of the Child and his own soul. The first was free of sin, the second born of it. He carried within him the dual essence of man. Darkest of dark, lightest of light.

“I must go now, but know you this—you shall build a new land upon the earth, from where you stand unto all horizons. You shall not return from whence you came, you must use what is provided you. This is your task, and the price you pay for your soul. Many will come to you, living and dead, and you must do as you see fit. Once more, the reign of man breeds hope. Sleep now.”

ooooo

When I awoke, the earth was as new. Joeri is gone, but I remain. It has been a month, and I am alone save for Dolores. I have begun building a hut for myself out of scrap transaluminum and permacrete. I wrote this because I don’t think I will have another chance to—the days are growing shorter, and the work is hard.

I have dreamed of Joeri and Goss, together with a child whose shadow is light. I don’t know what the dream means, but it gives me hope. As for Dolores, she is just fine. She has a new boyfriend, and will have kittens soon. She is already heavy with milk and the unborn mewling. I can only hope things will follow the same pattern for me. I love it here, and would not dream of returning home even if an Enforcer of Divine Prerogative had not ordered me otherwise. This is now my story, and it has no end.

Comfort Crowd

I am not of this comfort crowd.
I cannot conceal my nature from this maternity ward.
This was not the annunciation I expected.
Instead, an impious lurch found me unprepared.

In your harvested garden,
The apples still bite.
Instinct spews the offensive fruit from my belly,
Just as I spew you from my mind.

Makeshift that I am,
I will not grow for you.

I have met a stronger man.
Within his arms, I writhed.
Steely eyed, he touched me,
And his hands were like metal,
Cold and clean.

You can not stain me
With your lazy lucky seed.

I have given birth to bolts,
To screws,
And to the blade.

You cannot move me now.

AMANDA MASON-MCLEOD



JENNIFER BEARD

Literary Hell

The tips of my fingers
 are numb and sore
 with balled-up drafts
 thrown on the floor.
 Morning comes soon
 with the tick of the clock
 and the raping silence
 of writer's block.
 An idle pen sets
 my poor mind a frazzle,
 teacher's not impressed
 with vocabulary dazzle.
 My edges of sanity
 are starting to fray
 as I claw and grasp
 my way to an "A."
 The sweat from my brow
 I endlessly wipe
 as I read and write
 and write and type
 and type again
 (my brain's a wreck)
 I correct my grammar
 and do spell check
 I check the margins
 and the fonts
 and print each word
 of my reading response.
 Now the stars have faded
 the sun is up

the coffee's hot
 (it's my tenth cup)
 and I feel I've written
 my very best
 considering the lack
 of food and rest.
 Off to school
 I drive in haste
 class starts at eight
 I've no time to waste
 yawning classmates that I
 pause to greet
 travel behind me
 with the same dragging feet.
 My desk is a tomb
 the blackboard my stone
 the squeaking chalk creeps
 into every bone
 as she writes our assignment
 for the next day
 another journal?
 another essay?
 As the class has dwindled
 the work has grown
 I heard a gasp and
 some boy moaned
 another torturously sleepless night
 our assignment was to
 please rewrite.

Dey Ain't No Chirrin Here

dey ain't no chirrin here
 why 'ont ya jes go way
 i cain't change da way ya think
 an i's hawdly unnerstannin what ya say

my youngest one's twenny-sebn
 an my olest, fawdy-nine
 why 'ont ya jes go way
 an sabe us boaf some time

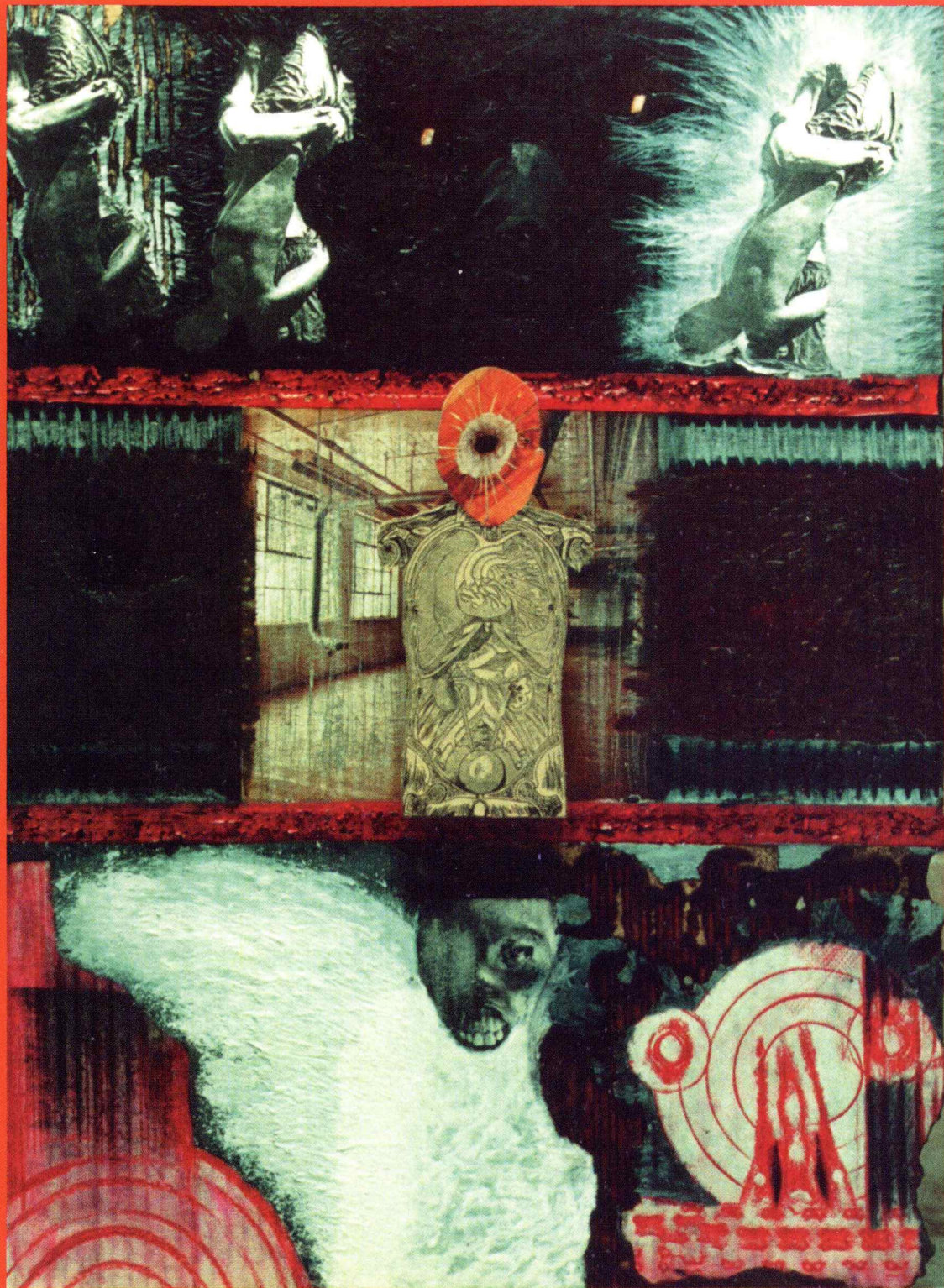
i gots some stew a'cookin on da stobe
 an some conbread in dere too
 why 'ont ya jes go anlemelone
 cause i gots lotsa things ta do

is ya not hearin me hunny
 all i says is lebe from here
 see, i ain't gots that much munny
 an dey ain't no chirrin here

SHIMIKA YOUNG



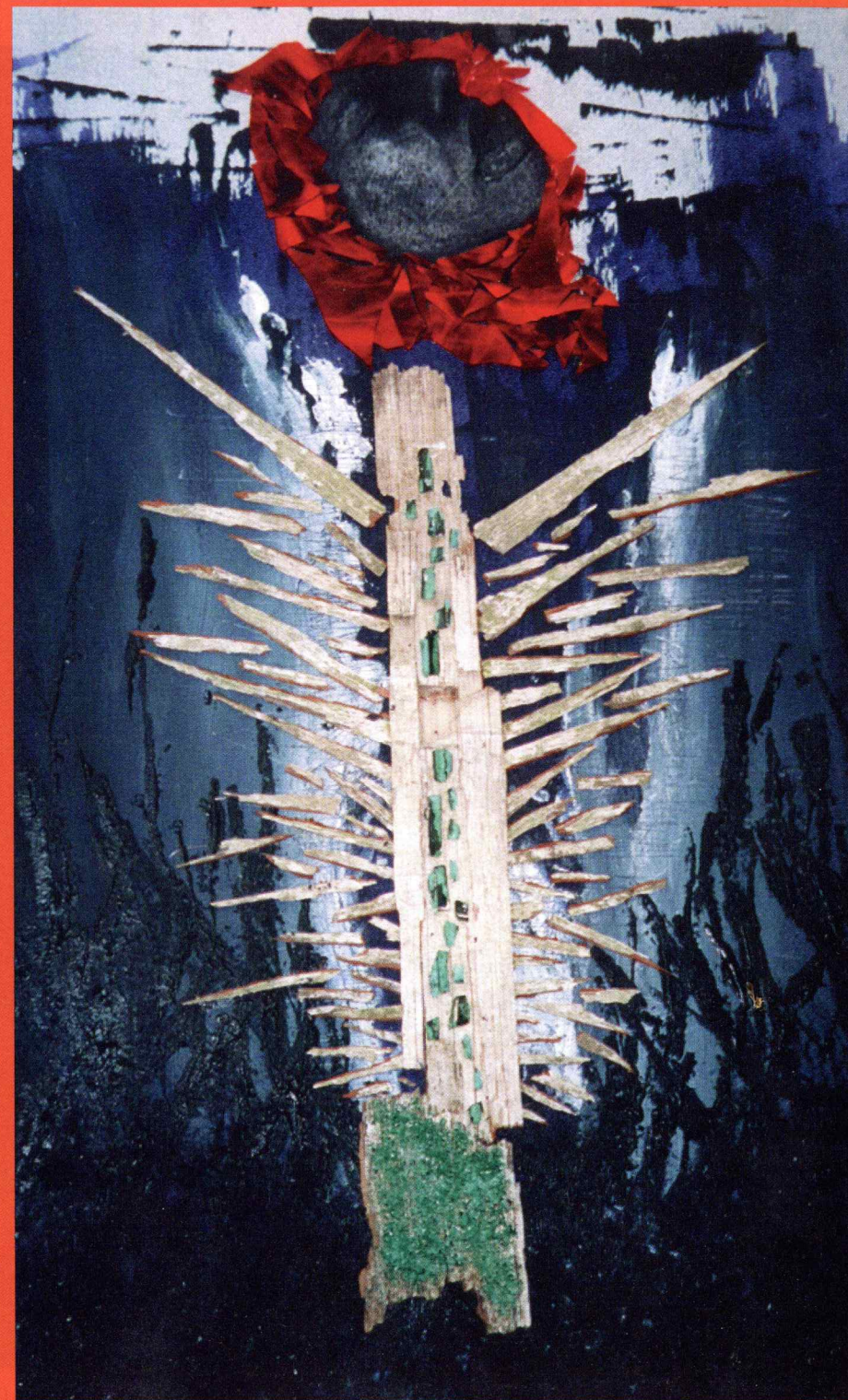
ROBIN STERRETT

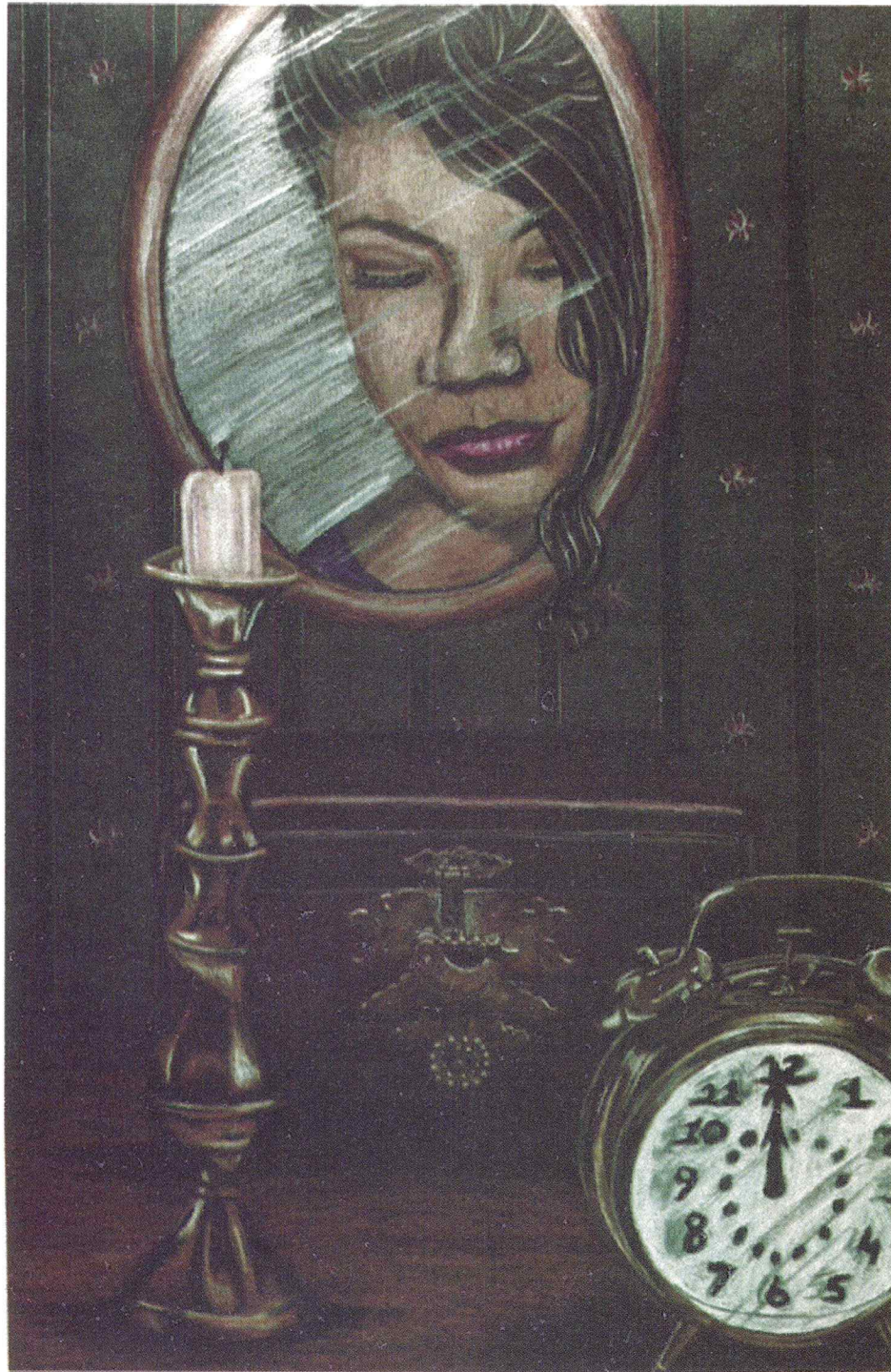


No Quarter
(left)

Respirations I
(right)

MICHAEL BIXLER





SEQUIA D. WHITE

Freedom

DAN GAFFORD

THE GRASS IN FRONT of Wallace's head began to fall as if a lawnmower were passing. It was a machine gun, and I could see the vague outline of the Vietcong's head behind the foot or so of foliage which hung from the tree he was hiding behind. The noise of the gun fire coming from all directions was so great that I couldn't even hear a machine gun being fired three feet in front of me and one foot above my head. As if in a dream, I picked up my rifle, put it on automatic, pushed the barrel in the direction of the Cong's face and pulled the trigger. I saw his face disappear; I guess my bullets hit their mark. I never saw his body and didn't look for it.

Thinking back, the day began like any other day in Vietnam. We were conducting a search and destroy mission in an area well known for its many booby-traps, ambushes, and heavy enemy engagements. As we moved out, I was walking point as usual, looking for trip wires and punji pits. Behind me, the rest of the platoon followed in a long stretched out column. Sweat was flowing steadily from my forehead, neck and back, soaking my undershirt. My soiled pants had been torn the day before when we had entered the thick jungle, by the sharp needle-like leaves that poked and cut with razor sharp edges. We hadn't been resupplied for days and hadn't eaten for two. Once again we were out on patrol—hot, hungry and miserable.

Moving through the thick overhanging vines and heavy underbrush my eyes began to sting from the salty sweat that was steadily flowing from my helmet's web band. As I reached up to wipe the sweat away, I walked out of the thick underbrush and into a small clearing. Over to my right about twenty feet away an enemy soldier broke into the clearing at about same time. I stopped, and the platoon stopped behind me. The Vietcong soldier was looking down. He had been carrying his AK-47 rifle pointing down, next to his right leg. The protruding vines had twined themselves around his rifle's front sight housing. As he jerked it free, he turned and saw me. We both froze. We stood there silently staring at each

other for several seconds. In those few seconds, I noticed that his hair wasn't combed, as one side stood stiff, presumably from having been slept on. His face was unwashed, his dirty uniform tattered and torn, like mine. A skinny, thin bedroll was draped over his shoulder. His eyes were fixed on mine, and revealed much pain and sorrow. His rifle was still pointed downward; mine was at port-arms and we both knew I had the advantage. Behind me, the others didn't know what was happening. In the next few seconds, I knew we were going to be engaged in a fierce fire fight, and I could feel the tension mounting. There was going to be a lot of bloodshed, pain and dying. We would be firing blindly, violently at each other. The bullets and mortars would soon be wreaking death and destruction. He knew it and I knew it. The soldier took one small step backwards and then waited for me to react. Life, death, and eternity flashed before me.

I had killed before on other missions but only from a distance—never this close. In the few seconds that passed between us, so many thoughts passed through my mind. This young soldier did not appear to be a raving lunatic, butcher or oppressor, but a human being who, like myself, was scared and lonely. He was only tired, wishing to be somewhere else. Fighting the impulse to raise my rifle and fire, I lowered it slightly and also took a small step backward. He took a step backward. I retreated another step. He followed suit, and life returned between us with its promises of tomorrow.

Just as he was about to turn and leave, I heard the unmistakable chatter of an M-16 and watched in horror as the top portion of his head above the left eye and nose disappeared into a pink mist. Harris, the radio operator had come up from behind, pushed me to the ground and opened fire. Two of the Vietcong soldier's patrol had just come into the clearing, and they opened fire. The nightmare began.

Men all around me were screaming. The firing now was a continuous roar. Harris and I were even being fired at by our own guys. No one knew where the fire was coming from, and so the men were shooting everywhere. Some were in shock and were blazing away at everything they saw, or imagined they saw. Crawling back into the jungle out of the clearing, I bumped into the lieutenant who let out a low moan. I watched as his head sank to his chest, and I felt a flash of panic. I had been assuming that he would get us out of this. Suddenly I felt terribly alone. A rifleman named Wilson and I removed his gear as best we could, and bandaged the bullet hole under his right nipple. It was not bleeding much on the outside, but he was close to passing out. Just then Wilson let out a yell. A bullet had grazed his upper arm and entered his side. He was bleeding in spurts, spitting blood as he screamed. Then the lieutenant screamed out. A bullet had gone through his

boot taking all his toes with it. He was in agony and crying; Wallace was swearing and in shock. I could hear the Vietnamese speaking to our right. The Cong battalion was moving in on us, into the woods.

All at once I could hear our artillery and air strikes starting to come in. The aircraft were dropping napalm bombs a hundred feet in front of me on a Vietcong machine gun emplacement. I felt the hot blast and saw the trees, bushes and earth burning ahead of me. The victims were screaming in agony. I just lay there, numb, listening to the bullets whining over me and the fifteen or twenty men screaming in horrific pain until they passed out. All afternoon there was screaming, moaning, blood, death, and yes, fear. With almost everyone dead or dying I couldn't help but think that it would be my time at any moment. I suppose that all massacres in war are a bloody mess, but this one seemed bloodier to me because I was caught in it.

At dusk the North Vietnamese started dropping mortars on us. Suddenly the ground to the left of me lifted up, and there was a tremendous noise. I knew that something big had gone off right next to me. At the same time I felt something white hot go into my left arm. From the hand to the elbow it looked shredded and burned. I started screaming. The pain was terrible. Still screaming, I took the sling from a dead GI's rifle and tied it around my upper arm. I could feel the blood pouring out of the holes in my arm. It was hurting unbelievably. The realization came to me now, for the first time that I was not going to live. All night long the Cong had been moving around killing the wounded. Every few minutes I heard some guy start screaming "No, No, No, Please?" and then a burst of bullets.

About an hour before dawn it became very quiet except for an occasional whimper. We were all sprawled out in various stages of unconsciousness. My wounds were bleeding again and ants were getting to my arms and neck. I knew I would not be able to keep still much longer. Then I heard footsteps coming in my direction. Thinking this was it, a peacefulness came over me. It no longer mattered about the pain, shock, or the ants. I thought of my mom and how she would take the news of my death, of how scared the young Vietcong soldier looked before he died. I thought of the deer I had killed before joining the service, wishing I could change that. I thought of how precious life is, and vowed to never hunt again if I lived. I thought of my comrades lying around me dead and wounded, wondering if this is worth the freedom of others. If the lives lost here today would make any difference at all. The footsteps stopped next to my head, and looking down at me was our captain and Harris, the radio operator. "Gafford, can you hear me?" the captain asked. Not knowing that my jaw had been broken

when the mortar round went off, I tried to speak, with no success. The medics at the L.Z. cut off my shirt sleeves and put bandages on me. My wounds were in pretty bad shape. I was put in a MedEvac chopper and flown to Pleiku, where I learned that Stern, Deschamps, Hodges, Wilson, and Turner—very close friends, had been found dead together. They had been shot in the back of their heads, executed by the Cong. Like most of the men in our battalion, I had lost all my Army friends.

Someone once asked me if I regretted having fought in Vietnam. No, I don't regret it. I wouldn't give up that experience for anything in the world. I fought, not for a dream that was unobtainable, but for the idea of democracy. I fought against communist aggression and for the type of life that I honestly believed in. I felt honored to have served my country, to have been given the opportunity to help others obtain the same freedom we enjoy. I was fortunate to have been given the opportunity in life to be more than just a witness to history. We will never see battles again as we did in Vietnam. If we didn't succeed, it was not a failure of duty; it was because others, entrusted with higher responsibilities, failed to do theirs.

Rooms

AMANDA MASON-MCLEOD

WHAT A DAY, I grimly thought to myself as I climbed the two flights of stairs to my apartment. Traffic was horrible as usual at this time on Friday. My boss had a fight with his boss and they both barked at us, the unsuspecting peons, something fierce. Most of my bills were overdue, and to top my misery off, I forgot to stop at the store for supper. I was looking forward to a warm relaxing shower, a hot cup of orange pekoe tea, and maybe, with any luck, a Braves game.

As fate would have it, all of my hopes were cruelly dashed when I saw the door to my apartment was ajar. I was certainly not in the mood for a burglar. For his sake, I thought, he had better be gone. I fumbled in my purse until I felt the cool handle of my pistol, hoping I wouldn't need it, since the gun wasn't loaded. With more curiosity than fear, I pushed the door open further.

"Oh, hell," I grumbled out loud after I peered inside. And I thought today couldn't get worse.

Jack hadn't shaved in a week. At least that was how he looked as he greeted me when I stepped inside the apartment. He said he was too busy to bother with such nonsense. Too busy doing what? I wondered as he lounged absolutely naked on my couch. The lights from outside my window played havoc with the lines etched into his face. Jack's fingertips and teeth were slightly yellow from cigarette stains. I turned away in disgust and made a bee-line for the bathroom.

In there lay his discarded clothing. A faded pair of gray corduroy pants were torn and frayed at the cuffs and stained with what reeked of beer (probably from my fridge). My favorite shirt of his, a thick green oxford with worn elbows, bore recent cigarette burns. How careless this man had grown since last we met. Worn socks near the toilet...but no underwear. Easy access, he used to joke. I nearly sickened at the thought now.

I washed my face and hands, scrubbing the day's grime from underneath my nails. As I dried my face, I looked in the mirror and chided myself for hiding out

in my own home. I really didn't want to talk to Jack, but I had to know why he was here. Without the least inkling of guilt, I scrounged around in his pants pockets until I found what I was looking for. The brown leather was stained black with sweat and dirt, and the seams were coming undone. I opened the wallet and searched through. Among the usual bankcards, receipts, and miscellaneous scraps of paper were three folded photographs and a key that looked suspiciously similar to my house key supposedly under the outside mat. After checking to make sure Jack was still in the living room, I removed the photographs and the key.

The first photo was of a young girl, maybe in her late teens, dressed in black from head to toe. Long, thick hair hid most of her face, except for her right eye and full red lips. The young girl seemed happy, and her radiant smile belied the somber clothing. Her face, what I could see of it, was achingly familiar. I knew this girl once, seemingly out of place in a garishly lit school cafeteria. I recalled those thrift shop clothes, even the flat black loafers she always wore. I remembered the jewelry she was wearing. The sterling silver star and moon ring, the plain silver band, both on her left hand, and the antique jet necklace adorning her throat were now safely housed in my jewelry box. This girl had been me, not so many years ago. I did not know exactly when this picture had been taken, but I was sure it was my senior year at high school.

The second photograph was of a once pretty girl Jack and I knew in college. Kay had been, at one time, quite a popular model. She had done shoots for *Glamour* and *Cosmo*, and did some runway work for Calvin Klein. From what I had heard from some old friends, Kay was now back on drugs. This picture, according to the date stamped on the back, was recent, and I could tell she was losing her looks fast. She did not smile in the picture, which was uncharacteristic of her. Instead, she stared blankly at the photographer from two dark hollow circles, almost oblivious to the camera. Poor strung out Kay.

The third photo made me blush a little. I couldn't think of why he would carry this one around in his wallet. He and I had picnicked at Sidney Park a few years ago, and we had asked a passerby to take our picture. Hand in hand, we squinted into the camera, the sun blinding us somewhat. We had had a wonderful day together, just being alone and carefree. It seemed years ago since I had been as happy.

Clamor from the other room caught me unaware. Hurriedly, I slid the photos back into the wallet, but pocketed the key. Returning the wallet to his pants pocket, I glanced again into the mirror, wondering if I looked at all guilty. I decided not, then left the room, shutting the door behind me. As I stepped somewhat warily into the living room, I heard Jack stirring about in the kitchen. The

whiff of the cabinets closing echoed oddly, reminding me of better times when he and I shared this apartment. Suddenly, a loud screech, then a painful sounding *thud* rang out from within the kitchen. I turned towards the commotion. Miss Kitty came bolting from an adjoining doorway with a dire hiss. Quickly, I stepped back out of her path. Jack cursed, and a glass, probably from my best set, crashed onto the linoleum floor. Miss Kitty, it seemed, didn't care for our discourteous invader, and neither did I, much.

"You got any milk?" a disembodied voice rumbled from inside the fridge. Jack's bare behind stuck out like a sore thumb in my neat, clean kitchen. I didn't feel like talking. I was in no mood for visitors, especially Jack. This was my place now, and I no longer had room for him.

"Probably not," I replied stonily, as I gingerly pried shards of glass from the linoleum floor. "I don't drink milk. Don't you remember?"

He ignored my pointless gibe. "What about your cat? Doesn't she like milk?"

"I wouldn't know. Do you mind telling me why you're here?"

Jack closed the fridge door, and in one hand were two eggs. Suddenly, I got a dirty and completely stupid image in my head, and I shook it off. He continued, "I needed a place to stay a while, and I knew you wouldn't mind."

I could not believe the balls, so to speak, of this guy standing naked as a newborn in my kitchen. Growing increasingly indignant, I attempted to keep my voice level. "Guess what? I do mind. I don't want you here."

With a roguish gleam in those blue-gray eyes, he said, "Would you like me in the bedroom?"

I sighed wearily, chunking the shattered glass into the garbage. "I would not like you here. I would not like you there. I would not like you anywhere."

"I do not like you, Sam I am," he broke in with a sarcastic smirk. "You really should read more than just kids' books, dear. You're showing your age."

"I'm going to show you my gun, and show you just how well I use it if you don't get your sorry ass out of my apartment." I pretended to go after my purse for effect.

"You know, Diane, you can be a real bitch sometimes." He replaced the eggs with exaggerated care and left the kitchen in an offended silence. I took a deep breath to cool off, and followed him out.

Too much time had passed, I thought. Last year, I would have been sorry for my bitchiness, and we would have probably ended up in the bedroom, or on the couch, or the kitchen table. . . . But now, I hoped, I was finally over him. I didn't want him around too long, though, just in case I was wrong.

Miss Kitty sat on my favorite chair, her long white fur shedding onto the black

weave. She had quickly recovered from her encounter with my intruder, and was presently grooming herself. "Won't your girlfriend be upset if she finds out you were here?" I called out to my visitor, presumably changing in the bathroom. It wasn't like I really cared, but...

"I don't care what she thinks. She ought to know now that you wouldn't sleep with me anyway. She thinks you've turned into a nun. Come to think about it, so do I." He walked from the bathroom, buttoning up his pants. "What are you looking at?" He bent his head down to check his fly, then glanced back at me, grinning. "You looking at my pants, Diane? Nah, you couldn't be. Wishful thinking, I suppose. You've turned frigid or something. I bet you don't even have a boyfriend now."

"It's none of your damned business! Remember that I threw you out. I didn't want you." I plopped myself onto the chair in exasperation, disturbing Miss Kitty. "Anyway, I don't have time for guys right now. You boys are too slow for the likes of me."

He lit a cigarette, eyeing me over the burning embers. "No one wants you right now, you mean. No, no, no. Don't bother denying it. I know you. You won't let anyone get near you now. You know, I heard that Brandon wanted to see you again, but you blew him off. Brandon's a nice guy, Diane. You should've given him a chance."

He was right, I knew, but wasn't about to admit it. "So why did you come here?" I asked, casually chewing on my nails. "How did you even get in?"

"Diane Elisa, don't try to change the subject. I was talking about Brandon. He really liked you, you know."

"Look. Brandon and I had a one-night stand a long time ago. I blew him off, as you so quaintly put it, because he kept talking about you in bed. Besides, Brandon is a closet alcoholic. I'd appreciate it if you quit trying to hook me up with your friends. Present company excepted, you've got lousy taste in friends."

Jack ignored almost every barb I threw at him. "He did what? Okay, so you might have a point. Brandon had asked me what you liked to do in bed, so I told him. I apologize. Men don't usually repeat stuff like that."

"Brandon never was, and probably never will be, a man. He was just a boy when we. . . ." I couldn't bring myself to say the word with my former lover lounging uncomfortably close.

"When you two screwed, you mean?" He replied, leering. Those sparkling eyes caught me off-guard.

"Something like that. Now, it's my turn. Why are you here?"

He plopped down on the couch beside me. Miss Kitty, treacherous creature

that she was, crept into his lap. "Is she new?" he asked, presumably about my cat so affectionately purring for attention. He must have charmed her while he lay in wait for me to come home.

I nodded, and he continued. "I really did need a place to stay. You know, you ought to find another place to hide your house key. Anyone who knows you as well as I could find it. Then what would you do with a bunch of maniacs barging in and taking over your apartment?"

"Probably join in," I grumbled. "So are you and Kay having difficulties?"

"Kay is always having difficulties," he answered with an ugly twist on those magnificent lips. "Kay is turning out to be a real bitch."

"Like me, I suppose."

"No, no, not like you, silly girl. You just get things up your butt and that makes you mad as hell. That's why I love you. Kay was born anal, if you catch my drift."

My absolute pleasure at trashing his girlfriend, and his playful banter aside, I could tell something was honestly troubling him, else he wouldn't be here with me. "Is she still hooked on that junk?"

He fumbled with his hands uncomfortably. "Yeah. I wish she'd quit. You know, she lies to everyone now, and swears she's finished. Yesterday evening, I found a used needle under the bathroom sink. When I brought it up to her, she freaked out. The neighbors even complained to the landlord about her screaming. They probably thought I was beating her. She has track marks on her arms that she tries to hide, and her face is gray. You know, Diane, I never thought a live person's skin could be gray until Kay. She looks like a zombie now."

My sympathy went to him immediately. Then I experienced a twinge of cattiness. I could almost imagine Kay strung out on that shit. "Well, you know. That look is popular right now. She was always a part of the in-crowd."

"You're so funny. Anyway, she's lost her last three modeling jobs. I just don't understand it. She won't admit she needs help. She denies she even has a drug problem. She certainly won't listen to me, or anyone else, for that matter. I had to get out for a while. That's why I came here. I guess I needed some peace."

Without meaning to, he had paid me a high compliment, indeed. "Thanks," I replied, meaning it. "I'm sorry Kay's so sick. I really am. But you know she's only going to get worse. She's been hooked for years. Even in high school, she messed with heroin. Her parents sent her to rehab, and she came out fresh and shiny, just like new. She had us all fooled for a while. Then she got caught after the prom with a syringe. She told the cops she was diabetic. I guess they believed her, because we never heard another word about it."

"I remember hearing something about that. I really thought she had gotten better. She was so beautiful and warm back then."

I began to grow increasingly uncomfortable with where this conversation was leading. "Look, you can stay here for a while, I suppose. But you gotta promise you'll pick up after yourself, and stay out of my way. School's hell this semester, and I don't have the time nor the inclination to piddle with your dirty clothes or dishes."

With a Chaplin grin, he winked at me. "What a woman you've turned out to be. So independent and forceful. I like it."

"Now you're getting on my nerves. You want the couch? It folds out to a twin bed. It isn't the most comfortable sleep, but it does the job."

"I bought this couch with you, remember? I guess if your bed isn't a ready option, I'll take door number two. You sure you trust me?"

"No, I don't trust you," I answered warmly. "I'm locking my bedroom door just in case you still sleepwalk. You want some coffee?" I rose from the chair.

"Since when do you drink coffee?" he asked, following me back into the kitchen.

"I don't, for your information. I keep those single packs handy, in case I have company over." I thought I heard him mumble "yuck," but couldn't be sure.

He went to the sink, and to my utmost amazement, started to wash the dirty dishes within. "I remember when you and I were dating, you drank coffee. Theresa told me it was because you wanted to fit in our crowd."

"Theresa didn't know anything, except what I wanted her to know. And what crowd was that? I don't remember you and Theresa in any 'crowd.' To be honest though, I can't stand coffee. That's why I order Russian Tea at Adriana's. I don't know how you can drink so much coffee. It's like your cigarettes. They both come natural to you, like breathing." The water kettle whistled on the stove. Pouring scalding water into a cup, I steeped the coffee.

"Remember in high school, when James told me you started to smoke?" he asked, over the sound of running water. I could tell this was going to be another chapter in "Remember When."

"Well, I didn't know who told you. I thought it might have been James or your girlfriend, Jenny. I wish you hadn't made such a fuss over it. You made me so mad, acting so pious and concerned. I can't believe you had the nerve to tell me I was smoking to be more like you. God, you were full of crap then. You know, that reminds me. Did Jenny ever figure out what was going on between us?"

"Jenny wasn't all that bright. She probably figured we were just fighting for the hell of it. She didn't know anything about us, Diane. Not the truth, at least.

Anyway, back to the smoking business. I did think you were trying to be like me. I'll have you know I was very upset when I found out. Like you said, smoking is natural to me. For you, it seems obscene. You just aren't the type."

"Now what in the damned hell do you mean, I'm not the type?"

"Hey, don't get uppity with me, woman. You'll ruin my coffee, though I'm sure it's nasty as is. I didn't mean to be offensive. It's just that you seem beyond the crutches of cigarettes or coffee. You don't rely on them to keep going. I meant it as a compliment."

I unruffled a bit. "Okay, I see what you mean. I do drink a lot of Coke these days. I guess I need the caffeine. You want sugar?"

"Yeah. How about a teaspoon? I noticed your sodas in the fridge. I'd have thought you would drink diet. Most girls I know do."

"Perhaps, but I'm not most girls, or don't you remember? Besides, diet drinks make me ill. I'd rather have the calories, even though I don't need them. Here's your coffee on the counter. I'm going to take a shower. Whatever you do, don't answer the phone. If she calls and hears your voice, my mother will think I've got a new man around."

"I didn't like your mom too much."

"She didn't particularly like you, either. She thought you were going to break my heart."

"How cynical of her. Did I?"

"Did you what?"

"Break your heart?"

I stood in the doorway for a moment. "Yeah. . . . Actually, you did." I hoped he wouldn't hear the sadness in my voice.

"Sorry."

"I think you mean that, too," I replied, eyeing him with some suspicion. Maybe he had changed.

"Well, I do mean it. I'm sorry the way things ended between us. We made a rather nice team."

"We did, didn't we?" I paused, wistfully remembering another lifetime with this man standing so still in my kitchen.

"Anyway. . . ."

"Go take your shower, Diane," he ordered. His voice had changed. "I won't answer the phone."

"Thanks." I felt like doing something. Hugging him, even kissing him. He stood there so calmly with a wet dishrag in his hands, his eyes bearing down right

on me. I couldn't give in. Not now. I guess that shower of mine will be cold today, I thought with some regret.

He could always read my thoughts. Almost like radar. "Diane, you had better go now, before I forget these dishes."

"Okay. Bye."

I rushed from the room, expecting him to answer. Instead, he turned back to the sink, knocking the dishes about a little harder than was necessary. Perhaps, I admitted to myself as I showered, I wasn't over this man, after all.

Oh, hell.



JENNIFER BEARD

Bellow

beating the hell out of a chimney
 raw-faced and homeless
 bring your baggies hither

DOWN

alone)(begat)(sorrow
 loveliest of winters
 encroaching on thy comfort while She
 detestably bellows friendship = \$555.55, please
 and swats your love with a name

massaging the soap in a shower
 heeled and shirted
 leave your silk and linens

UP

dancers)(loving the show

fire's not hot enough
 Poke it 'till it creaks. . .

POPS. . .

BELLOWS

CHRISTOPHER B. WATTS

Thoughts on the March on Washington Thirty Year Anniversary, 1993

KEVIN L. TUCKER

ON AUGUST 28, 1963, a massive group of people congregated at the foot of the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln, shouting for an equal share in America. As a famous day in history it still cries out in blood for truth and justice from a beaten, near-broken people. The Negro leaders of the NAACP of the 50's and 60's emerged at the door of liberalism in America and pleaded for a chance to show that ex-slaves could eat at the "Table of Brotherhood" with ex-slave masters—a momentous day to yell "I have a dream!" However, there never came any true, full enforcement of the laws written and interpreted on behalf of the colored folks during this time.

Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, James Farmer, and Whitney Young, Jr., better known as the Big Six, were the key speakers and leaders from the base organization known as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. They marched into Washington, DC and loudly proclaimed that this day, August 28, was the day of freedom and equality. They had with them great singers (Mahalia Jackson, Miriam Anderson), educators (Benjamin E. Mays, Mordeci Johnson), and politicians (Adam Clayton Powell, Ralph Bunche). There were Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants, Whites and Blacks who could harmoniously unite in singing "We Shall Overcome!" Nearly all left with one thing in their minds—"I Have A Dream!"

You could see and hear all, that day, but the mourning for the Father who nurtured the NAACP from the Niagara Movement (turn of this century). No one mentioned the fallen hero who debated with Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, and the ignorance of the Black Nationalist groups who wanted physical and violent so-called "revolution." They (the Big Six and the NAACP) failed to mention his contri-

butions to the masses of Negroes between post-Reconstruction and pre-Civil Rights Movement. They also failed to follow his coined ideology of Pan-Africanism: the belief that all people of African descent have common interest and should work together to conquer prejudice. This hero is the late Dr. William Edward Burghardt Dubois (W. E. B. Dubois)—historian, sociologist, editor (*The Crisis*), and author.

In the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, he states that “The White House... ‘Farce on Washington’...was planned” (Haley 278–79). Henceforth, Dubois was not mentioned because the March for Progress was a set “Plan” fabricated by various elements in the government. Therefore the NAACP strictly and thoroughly followed the Plan. The Plan was a set of times: When to come to town; what to say (John Lewis’ speech was altered from the venom it once had to be more passive and conform to the wishes of the watchers); what time to have left town (everyone from outside of Washington, DC immediately made it back to their form of transportation to exit the city, except the Big Six). Also according to Malcolm X, “The marchers had been instructed to bring no signs—signs were provided. They had been told to sing one song: ‘We Shall Overcome.’ They had been told how to arrive, when, where to arrive, where to assemble, when to start marching, the route to march. First-aid stations were strategically located—even where to faint!” (Haley 280). And I am compelled to have a dream? I think not. This was more like a nightmare.

All that my generation and I know of one of the most brutal, yet compromising, periods in American history comes from the boisterous brags of our parents, books, and the ever-present and arrogant leaders of the NAACP who participated in the Civil Rights movement. My peers and I can continuously hear the echoes of our disobedient parents who claim, “We stood against ‘The Man’ [Government, Uncle Sam, Mr. Charlie] and emerged victors!” That was a time when the NAACP, SNCC, CORE, SCLC, and many diverse civic groups united and planned an insurgence against the order of conservatism in a revolutionary country. It was a movement for economical, social, political, and educational equality that would serve as a catalyst for better hue relations—not character and content relations. Now, we should be compelled to having hope and “I Have A Dream!”

Today’s generation can only respect our parents for the fights and struggles of yore that assisted us in reaching our present equalities and opportunities. However, we can not use the same ideology and methodology of that generation because our present is filled with a different form of despair and discontent. In the last generation they were faced with inter-racial genocide—with the ever-present threats of jailing, beatings, bombings, and lynchings. In our generation we are faced with intra-racial genocide—with the ever-present threats of beatings, gangs,

drugs, and drive-by shootings. Because of this we have lost our lofty hopes and dreams of then for the truculent cruelty of now.

We are living in a nightmare!

The NAACP has become dated and obsolete. Its members have not properly handled the transition from injustice to justice, inequality to equality, and ignorance to enlightenment. They have become consumed with self-glorification versus a people’s preservation. They have not made the transition to including all people of color in the agenda for a better America. Their mentality for the people has not changed in over thirty years—hope is still a dream.

The NAACP has not shown sincere concern for the plight of the family and community. The elite of this organization have not planned, nor followed, a march for social change in the vast dysfunctional communities in America. There have been no marches against the pushers and distributors of drugs and alcohol that cause the many crimes in the community-at-large. There have also been no struggles to hinder the wide spread levels of despair and discontent of all generations. Despite the “Million Man March,” the NAACP has not promoted communication as the means for overcoming the downfalls of communities nationwide.

Surely, we are living in a nightmare!

The middle, upper-middle, and upper class members of the NAACP either have no idea how or they refuse to deal with the struggles to create a base for true change. The foundation for change starts in the homes of the people who are tired of their representatives’ ineffectively representing them. No jobs and a high rate of illiteracy or semi-illiteracy cause a zombie mentality: I will follow if you lead. The challenge of this organization should be to help Americans feel more like Americans regardless of race and social class. If they do not meet this challenge, all hopes for the next millenium will be lost. Thus, we will be part of the nightmare.

Because the NAACP leaders have lost touch with the people they are supposed to be representing, they should be challenged—ethically, politically, economically, and socially. They, as well, beg for the same things [education, jobs, justice, and equality] today as the organization did in its zenith years—which have long since passed—yet they send their children to private schools; reap the benefit of prosperous jobs with threats of boycotts; fill the court system with bogus cases to prolong their usefulness with a minimum trace of the people’s needs being noticed, and they are not treating their own membership equally.

It is my belief that the leadership of the thirtieth anniversary “March on Washington” was nothing more than a gathering of Negro charlatans who mislead, misrepresent, and wrongly motivate, the masses of the Negro race for the ad-

vancement of their hidden agendas—self-preservation being the core. They gracelessly exploit a community of dependent people who are unaware of the true route to prosperity and happiness—self-reliance and self-investment.

Remember Clarence Thomas—a black man, who worked his way up with self-reliance and self-investment to become nominated for Supreme Court Justice—and how he was treated by the NAACP, the very crier of injustice. Because Thomas was not one of its stooges and held up by its esteem of what is good for black America, he was attacked by ad hominem argument. Just because the NAACP thought that Thomas was not as wise and charismatic as Justice Thurgood Marshall, who had recently retired from the bench, it opposed his nomination. I can still remember hearing then-National Executive Director Benjamin Hooks saying on television that he did not know much about the man but was aware that neither the Nationals nor any branch of the NAACP would support Thomas' nomination, and would fight his confirmation all the way to the end. The Nationals alienated and threatened more severe punishment to the Los Angeles branch for supporting Clarence Thomas. Those liberal-minded Negro leaders really wanted a conservative President and Congress to nominate and confirm one of their Trojan horses. One has to wonder if they wanted a Justice who would interpret Black Law rather than a Justice who would interpret American Law.

They are contradictors of their very essence. The NAACP leaders are supposed to help advance self-esteem, self-determination, and most importantly, self-sufficiency amongst their supporters. However, they have been known to express their uneasiness in the inner city. Jesse Jackson has been quoted as saying that once in a major inner-city he was walking down a sidewalk by himself and heard footsteps behind him; he was scared and wondered why anyone would want to hurt him, but after noticing it was a white woman he again felt safe. These barterers receive payments, appointments, and other services from the Democratic Party because they constantly promise the majority of black votes to Democratic candidates. Surely you can never reach full potential if you are being sold by the very people who proclaim themselves your leaders. This is done so that you will forever remain dependent on them.

If Jesse Jackson were as concerned with the plight and the way African-Americans are treated in America as he claims, then why does Jackson not divorce himself from the Democratic party and fight their policies. Those policies such as welfare and government quotas only cause people to be consistently dependent upon the government instead of learning to be independent.

You may ask yourself, “why do the Black Community leaders not stand up

and be accountable to the people by teaching them how to grow ingredients for bread and how to make the bread—instead of just giving them bread?” They do not because to do so would hinder the community from seeking them out whenever they become hungry. This dependency is what Jackson and others need to keep themselves rich and powerful, without engaging in hard labor.

Every year the NAACP along with the media bombard the African-American community with constant questions of King's would-be leadership, such as: “If Dr. King were here today what would he say or do? Do you think King's Dream is being fulfilled?” Allow me, with all due respect, to note one very important fact: Dr. King was slain in 1968. Therefore, the previous questions about him are unequivocally mute. King lived his life according to some Supreme Nature and died for that cause—and sad to say, so did the Civil Rights Movement. Henceforth, I do not see the need for the NAACP to live off his legacy—especially when he had his questions and doubts about them. This is why he resigned his membership and began the SCLC.

As a matter of fact, King's Dream should have served only as creosote for a better America. The dream should also have served as a catalyst for young people's dreams to grow into a mighty reality. This is why I ask, “How shall they dream and live a positive reality?” The answer is that they can not because the NAACP has hindered youth from dreaming and limited their realities and possibilities with a defunct leadership. The NAACP removed and turned its back on its own (Benjamin Chavis) because he wanted to include all ages, colors, and extremes of the political spectrum—from radical to moderate to ultra-conservative—in the organization. However, there were those within who wanted to maintain the old status quo of “The young are to be seen and not heard!” Because of this, I disagree with the nostalgia of the NAACP.

The Hooks, Chavises, Jacksons, and other want-to-be Dr. Kings of the NAACP should pass the torch of leadership to this generation for a better America based on character. We want to include all people, regardless of their position in the spectrum. We want all people to feel that someone will take up their cause if it is worthwhile to the advancement of America. We want all people to realize their dreams and enrich their livelihoods. We want elected and appointed people who can best represent the will of the people. We want to change the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to the National Association for the Advancement of All American People (NAAAAP), so that we can stop living a nightmare.

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LAURIE HARE

The Fire

MARIA A. DEVITO

I DIED ON MY TWENTY-FIFTH BIRTHDAY. Around twelve-thirty a.m. my next door neighbors opened their front door expecting a pizza delivery. The noises they heard were not footsteps, but the crackling of flames next door in my apartment. By the time I was pulled out of the fire, I wasn't breathing. Fortunately, with CPR, the firemen were able to start my heart again. They told my neighbors, "Another thirty seconds and CPR would not have saved her." It is common knowledge that most people who die in fires die from smoke inhalation long before the fire ever reaches them. This was also true in my case. I only received a few second degree burns as the firemen dragged me from the burning building.

My first memory of the morning after the fire was of dragging all the IV's stuck in me over to the sink. I had to have a drink of water. My throat was raw, parched, as if I hadn't had a drink of water in months. When I swallowed or coughed, I tasted smoke. It hurt to breathe and I couldn't talk. I was so intent on getting a drink of water that I didn't feel the places where I had been burned as I was pulled out of the fire. A nurse entered the room and had a fit when she saw I was out of bed. She told me, "You can only have a sip of water until the doctor has seen you again." It seemed like an eternity before I was allowed to have any liquids. The nurse was only able to tell me I had been in a fire, the information she had being vague. She did know that no one else had been hurt. I was thankful for this and the fact that I didn't have a pet at this time, because it probably would have died in the fire.

It was not until later that morning, when my next door neighbors visited me in the hospital, that I was able to piece together some of the puzzle. The cause of the fire was never determined. They told me everything I owned was gone but what I was wearing. Unfortunately, I had gone to sleep in a pair of underwear, and since I didn't have renter's insurance, the underwear (not even a good pair) were now my total assets. Next, the realization hit me that most of my neighbors had seen me practically naked. I quickly developed a new respect for pajamas, and I now wear them faithfully.

I was released from the hospital after four days, and immediately went to my burned apartment. Neighbors and friends had prepared me for what I would find there, but their words did not lessen the shock and sense of loss I felt seeing the devastation for the first time. Although every window had been burst out and the sun was shining outside, it was pitch black inside the apartment. Every wall was black and the smell of smoke was thick in the air. It struck me anew that I was very lucky to be alive. I had to use a flashlight as I picked my way through the remains of my burnt possessions. Anything that had not burned, melted, or exploded was so heavily smoke damaged that nothing was salvageable. Most of my furniture was what I call Early American Junk, cheap pieces that didn't match and I never liked much anyway. I had been wanting to buy new furniture for some time and now had a reason. The living room, where the fire had started, received the most damage. My album collection was melted together into one record. The television and stereo system must have exploded from the intense heat as they were unrecognizable. Ceramic pieces I had made and collected over the years were shattered. What bothered me the most was not the loss of these material things, as they were replaceable, but the loss of something which I considered priceless. I have always been an avid picture taker, and burned beyond recognition were all the photos I had taken of family and friends over the years.

My immediate problems were clothes and a place to live. My closest relatives were five hundred miles away. Friends and coworkers came to my rescue. A collection was taken up at work which enabled me to buy the things I needed right away. Marie, a coworker, offered me a place to live until I got back on my feet. She barely knew me before the fire, as she worked on another shift, but she offered to take me in anyway. Years later, I learned she had only been married a short while when she took me into her home. This newlywed couple's generosity gave me the opportunity I needed to start over. They refused to take money from me for food or rent. By working two jobs, I saved enough money in a month's time to move into a new apartment, complete with new furniture and rental insurance. By this time my voice was no longer raspy, and I could finally swallow without tasting smoke. Marie has been through several husbands since then, but our friendship has lasted.

Birthdays have held special meaning for me since the fire. Whenever I celebrate another one I am thankful that I am alive to do it. September twenty-third is the date of my birth, my death, and the day I was miraculously given a second chance at life. Even more surprising, my birth certificate states I was born at 12:30 A.M., and I was—twice.



HENRY C. BRANHAM

Mixed, a haiku

Whiteman, Blackman, Brown Baby
 Sleeping in Steelball
 Surrounded by Piranha

DEBORAH D. JACOBS



DYLAN FOUSTE

Happily Ever After

MONICA BOUCHER

Book I

HI. MY NAME IS ATHENA, and have I got a story to tell you! About 4000 years or so ago, I'm at this goddess party in the heavens, and I meet this goddess Ishtar. We start to talk. After some fine ambrosia, we start on the nectar. And it keeps coming, I mean, like, the nectar is flowing freely, if you know what I mean. And we keep drinking. Who can stop? It is going down like water.

Now where was I? Yes. Anyway, Ishtar starts telling me about this goddess Aruru's son, Gilgamesh. She tells me how handsome he is, how fine and all, but then she tells me how conceited he is too. Like, she asks him out and he disses her and all, and then she turns the Bull of Heaven loose on him to kill him, but this guy Enkidu dies instead.

"Now this dude Enkidu," Ishtar says, "is too fine for words! I mean, he's too much for color TV! This harlot that I know, see, she knows him, right? And she says he's a real *animal!*"

What was I saying again? Oh, right. Anyhow, after some more nectar, the two of us decide to go and make a deal with the Anunnaki, her judges of the dead, to release him to us alive again. The Anunnaki hold court, and judge that they will release him to us, since we're goddesses and all, but only if they can wipe out all memory of his precious Gilgamesh. Now knowing all about this guy and how stuck-up he is and all, well, we wholeheartedly agree. And they give him to us, "This great one, this hero whose beauty is like a god" (Gilgamesh 17). So I tell Ishtar that the people of Uruk really know what they're talking about, and so does she. What a fine specimen of a man! And now he's alive again.

Now what was I talking about again? Oh yes, I remember. Anyhow, since we're goddesses and already immortal and all, we decide that we'd like to keep this dude Enkidu around for a while. You know—take him up to the heavens to visit her folks, take him up to Mount Olympus to meet mine, and the like. So we ask him if he wants to be immortal like us. Now Ishtar says that he says yes

because he can't remember anything that happened to him while he knew Gilgamesh, and that he told him it wasn't important to yearn for immortality; that he has reverted back to the more lustful, animal-like qualities he had before. Anyway, he agrees, and now he's with us for the duration.

Only. . . Ishtar, fickle as she is about her men—it suffices to say that Enkidu and I are a couple now, because she is much more interested in this other guy I tell her about. His name is Odysseus, and. . . . Oh well, you'll see.

Book II

About 1300 years later, like, Enkidu and I, we're still hanging out and all. Ishtar, she's off flitting around with only Zeus knows who. The next time I see her, I tell her about this guy I've known for years named Odysseus. I mean, I tell her about how my own father describes him: "Could I forget that kingly man, Odysseus?/ There is no mortal half so wise; no mortal/gave so much to the lords of open sky" (Homer 84–86). So after I tell her how strong and handsome he is - not to mention he's sexy, wily, cunning, and all that—and that he's not too macho to accept the help of a woman when he needs it (me, you know), well now she wants *him*. But I say to myself, you know, like, I ask myself where we can find him. I try to figure out if he's alive or dead, or what. See, I remember that the prophet Tiresias told him that he would die a quiet death at sea when he got old, but I'm not quite sure if it's happened yet. I mean I hear he went out to find adventure again after he won his kingdom back, but then I hear he's settled back down at home again. What to do? Where to find him? I go and ask my father, Zeus, and he says that he thinks Odysseus has died, like last March or April or something.

Now when Ishtar, Enkidu, and I go to the underworld to find him, we run into the surprise of our immortal lives. From what I could gather, some guy named Dante Alighieri has come up with a whole new underworld or something, so we have to go to someplace like the center of the earth or somewhere. Can you imagine? Now Enkidu may fit in just fine down there, but, like, what about the two of *us*? Just how are two goddesses like us going to make out in this place called Hell?

Book III

Well, we go. But when this Charon sees the three of us, I don't think he knows what is up. I mean, this *thing* is just standing there in this gondola-looking deal, and he's just staring! Rather rude, really. But Enkidu tells Charon that we need a

ride into Hell to find Odysseus. And Charon says, "You mean Ulysses." And we say "Who?" And he says "Ulysses" again. So I say, "Is his earthly wife's name Penelope?" And he says "Yeah." And then we know it's him. Now if I knew about the thing with the statue, I would have settled things right then and there. But that's another story. Now what was I saying?

Oh, right. The three of us reach Limbo, and this place isn't really too bad. It's part of this guy Dante's hell, but it's more like a ledge in a cave. We meet this serene-looking guy who keeps answering our questions with more questions. So I say to him, "Like, if we know the answers, we won't ask questions, okay?" And this other guy who is with him just keeps taking notes. What an odd pair. It was really rather strange, but eventually, Socrates his name is, tells us if we want to find Ulysses, we must find Dante. That's all he says, but it's enough. Since we really don't want to answer any more questions, we leave those two in Limbo and beat feet.

Book IV

Well, we finally meet Dante, and I must say, he's not what I expect at all. I mean, now, to be in a place like this, you would think that he would be more like Odysseus and Enkidu—you know—like big and strong. But he's not. He's kind of a timid-looking dude walking with the shade named Virgil, in a place with a whole bunch of dead sinners called Grafters. We ask him what Grafters are, and he tells us that they're people (mostly politicians) who got caught with their hands in the cookie jar. He also tells us that he has been unjustly accused of being a Grafter himself, so now we know why he looks so timid and scared. I figure we'll do this guy a colossal favor and get him outta there, so we start to go. But where's Enkidu? Oh, there he is, talking to some of the gargoyles. We tell him there is plenty of time to socialize later. So Enkidu comes back, and all of us—Ishtar, Enkidu, Dante, Virgil and I—go off in search of Odysseus so that Ishtar can meet him. Meanwhile, I'm trying to figure out how I'm going to get this pitch off my gown.

Book V

When we finally find Odysseus, he is in this place in Hell with all the evil Counselors. Ishtar, of course, thinks he's hot, and she wants to take him back out and make a deal with Charon to give him back his life. But that's at the end of the story. Now where was I? Oh, I remember.

So we turn around to go back out the way we came in, but Enkidu wants to

keep going until he can find someone named Lucifer so he can fight him, and Odysseus agrees. Apparently, he's someplace like a pit in the center of the earth. I tried to explain to Odysseus that to fight this dude Lucifer would make his confrontation with Polyphemos seem a walk in the park from the things we heard about him already. And Ishtar tells my Enkidu that this Lucifer is not to be messed with, or he'll think that his experience with Humbaba was mere child's play. Thank Zeus they turn around, or who knows how long we might be stuck down there.

Anyhow, we turn back, all of us, and head back to Charon and his ferry. But we have to go back through circle eight—past the gargoyles and the Grafters—and we can tell that Dante is far from into going back there. But we figure if the gargoyles give him any grief, well, between my magic powers and Ishtar's, and with Enkidu's and the wily Odysseus's cunning, we'll all make it back out of there safely. We hope. May the gods help us.

Book VI

Well, like I said, we head back to the place with the Grafters and the gargoyles. And all that gruesome, evil-smelling pitch. It's all very nasty, really. And makes me kind of testy, since I already know that my perfectly new gown may very well have to be thrown away. Now where was I again? Ah, yes. Let's go on. So here's Dante sweating *bullets* about going back in there, and Virgil telling him not to worry and all. But, after all, they already know the gargoyle lies. All I say about this is "thank the gods they're not very smart. From what you tell me and what everybody else tells us, we shouldn't have a problem with them." After Dante and Virgil tell us about the gargoyles falling for the tricks of the doomed Grafters, we figure that Enkidu can side-track them and the rest of us can sneak Dante back through. If not, we'll have to fight. But this new info is definitely helpful—if not crucial—to his survival. Now we're ready.

Book VII

So Ishtar's chomping at the bit to get out of there with Odysseus, I'm looking forward to spending some quality time with Enkidu and Odysseus is undoubtedly looking forward to becoming an immortal.

We re-enter circle eight. Virgil tells the gargoyles that there was a change of plans. And all hell breaks loose. They try to grapple him with their hooks, but the hooks and claws pass right through him. He is already a shade of the upper crust.

The gargoyles try to rake me and Ishtar with their hooks, but, like, we're goddesses and all that really happens is that now we're really annoyed.

Shielding Dante, Ishtar, Odysseus and I make haste for some boulders so that we can hide and regroup. Enkidu throws a few of the gargoyles into the boiling pitch. And then, a few more. And then, wily Odysseus gets this idea. If Ishtar and I can float above the pit of pitch long enough and close enough to get the rest of the gargoyles to come after us, then he (Odysseus) and Enkidu and Virgil can push them all into the pitch. We can then be on our merry way; Virgil and Dante to wherever they're headed and Ishtar, Odysseus, Enkidu, and myself back out to Charon.

Ishtar and I position ourselves so that we're floating just out of reach of the gargoyles, who are beginning to line up along one edge of the pit...

Book VIII

It goes down like clockwork—a pure domino effect. Enkidu on one end, Odysseus on the other, and Virgil bringing up the rear. One by one into the boiling pitch they went, making a good bit of horrifying, shrieking noises as they go. With their huge wings flapping, and pitch flying everywhere—it is awesome. Then we are outta there.

Book IX

We made a deal with Charon for Odysseus's life, and got out of Dodge. I'm still hanging out with Enkidu and, amazingly, Ishtar is still with Odysseus. And of course we live happily ever after. We're immortal! We don't just go "poof!" because people stop believing in us, you know...

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