



STYLUS '99

STYLUS '99



The Literary Annual of
Midlands Technical College

Contents

Stylus 1998–99

Editor-in-chief: Keith Higginbotham, English Department

Student Editor: Ana Kellett

Assistant Editors:

Travis Gordon, English Department
Douglas Capps, English Department
Jackie Frederick, English Department

Art Editor: Colin Dodd, Humanities Department
Design & Layout: Travis Gordon, English Department

Editorial Policy

The *Stylus* editorial staff reads and judges all submissions blindly (without authors' or artists' names), therefore ensuring total objectivity throughout the selection process. Each published work is chosen according to the creative and artistic merit of the individual piece. The opinions expressed in the selections are not necessarily those of Midlands Technical College or its students

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

James L. Hudgins, President; Jean Mahaffey, Vice President for Education; Dianne Luce, Chair, English Department; Maurice Duperre, English Department; Jane Geiger, Humanities Department; June Zacharias, Administrative Specialist, English, Math, and Humanities; Katsy Stewart, Administrative Specialist, A.A./A.S. Program; Minnie Thompson, Administrative Specialist, English and Humanities; Muffy Allison, Administrative Specialist, Developmental Studies.



© 1999 Midlands Technical College, Columbia, South Carolina
All rights revert to authors and artists upon publication.

Cover art by Robin Flenniken

Essays

- Love, Loss, and Lyrics — MICHAEL S. SOHM 6
Josephine and Billie — ANISSA D. BROWN 14
Spirituality and the Quest for Freedom
in *Oxherding Tale* — DENISE COLLINS 31
The Depiction of Women in *One Flew
Over the Cuckoo's Nest* — ANA KELLETT 47

Fiction

- A Man and His Cigarette: A Love Story — KEVIN ETHERIDGE 11
Crime in the Country — JAMES W. EDWARDS, JR. 40

Poetry

- Scorn — CHRISTOPHER B. WATTS 5
three poems — DANIELLE HURT 10
Anointed — CHRISTOPHER B. WATTS 13
Sonnet — ANA KELLETT 29
The Prison — SCOTT BERRY 30
My Father and I — SCOTT BERRY 30
Mistress — CHRISTOPHER B. WATTS 46

Art

- ROBIN FLENNIKEN cover
REGINAL HARVEY 4, 24
MEREDITH SEGER 25, 45, 51
PATRICK BURNETTE 26, 45
SEQUIA D. WHITE 27
TERESA HUGHES-GRAY 28
LISA HUGHES-GRAY 39
LANCE MCNEILL 44
MICHELE PRATHER 50
BROOKE NICHOLS 52

Stylus Awards, 1998-99

Art: Robin Flenniken

Fiction: Kevin Etheridge

Essay: Anissa D. Brown

Poetry: Christopher B. Watts



REGINALD HARVEY

Scorn

It was the death of a demoralized America
 Long highways traveled by folk heroes and Baptists
 BluesMen with pale Victorian ethics
 You were eight —too young [they thought] —too small
 to understand what it meant to be sweat and swollen flesh
 the front seat boy
 your aunt> her nephew—
 they turned that country road Towncar
 into
 a steamboat ride Mississippi

It was the death of an unsanitary America
 older now capable of extremes
 drunk with sin and too-tight leather pants
 satan in an oxford and penny loafers
 cursing at your ever-broken \$10 sunglasses
 smiling as the waitress leans over pours you a refill
 —[crescent moons]—
 and it is night
 the same dead roadway
 fewer BluesMen
 loud scrapes of the shovel on your Lincoln's trunklid...

CHRISTOPHER B. WATTS

Love, Loss, and Lyrics

MICHAEL S. SOHM

I WAS not aware, at the age of thirteen, of the musical career of a man named Frank Sinatra, but when Shelly spoke the words that broke my heart with such matter-of-factness, as if she were explaining why she might want a new pair of shoes, I began to gain the understanding that would later lead me to appreciate and enjoy Sinatra's talent. Shelly's words tore into my chest and made me feel so worthless and alone, laying the foundation for my learning what only the lonely know. Shelly had just explained why she did not love me anymore.

"I fell in love with this other guy at school," Shelly said. At that time I was still learning to navigate my way through the realm of church and Christianity. So perhaps that added to the horrible power of her words: "I knew God did not want me to love two guys, so I prayed about it. God told me to break up with you."

Shelly and I were on a bus at the time. We were both helpers in a program that used a large fleet of buses to pick up young kids in the city and surrounding small towns and transport those kids to and from a weekly Wednesday night church service. The church service was over, and those kids that rode our bus were slowly filing past us to the back of the bus, but I hardly noticed at that point. Her words had stunned me. For all of six weeks, I had loved Shelly, a girl full of laughter and buoyant joy, with a wildly romantic and joyous love. It had been that kind of fairy story love, glorious and liberating and blinding. And just like a fairy story, the illusion of it all came crashing down when reality smashed through with her words. Without a song to cling to that would soften the impact, I took the full force of that smashing blow. I felt as though it had shattered my heart. I was not much help on the bus that night.

I was devastated for weeks after that. My happiness and my sense of worth had all been ravaged by Shelly. God had told her to break up with me, she said. I knew that could not be so. Surely it couldn't. Could it? My friends assured me it was not so. I was not so positive.

Some time after all that I was introduced to the music of a man named Rich Mullins. At first I took little notice of his songs. But then I heard that one song that seemed to speak to and reflect my very soul. He sang of a lonely sailor and a storm. I understood that, or so I thought. In my mind, I was that sailor. I stood alone with no one to comfort me, ready to face the storm of pain and self doubt that drenched me every day and shedding a "silent, weary tear for those that mean to love me." Well, at least I wanted to be that sailor. The song helped me to deal with my notions of not being like others and not being worthy to be loved. I had discovered, if only in part, the power of a song.

When I was seventeen, and wishing I were in love again, I met Michelle. Michelle was lively and fun. Even though I was still a young Christian, I noticed also something sensual about her. Unfortunately I was also too naive to recognize what that might mean. Eventually she and I admitted attraction for each other, and the relationship blossomed. Unfortunately it blossomed in all the wrong places. Like a rebellious rose, the relationship had too few petals and too many thorns. The petals, the good times, were when she and I would sit and talk, or when we went out on a date, and mostly when she did not try to manipulate me. Admittedly the prettiest petal was the time she taught me how to kiss. (Not being handsome or charming, I had had no girlfriends since Shelly and even then, I had never kissed her.) The thorns, the bad times, were when she would go out of her way to

manipulate me, or when she would decide I was not being nice to her because I used a word she did not know. There was a certain level of physical intimacy that we shared, but that single petal was not enough to make the multitude of thorns worthwhile. It became obvious that the relationship she and I had continued for one reason only. We were both too scared of the loneliness that would come if we let go of the rose, thorny though it was. In the end though, I finally got up the courage to tell her that I was letting go. That was not easy, but when the thorns stopped causing me pain, I was glad I had done it.

Even without thorns, however, there was still sorrow and the knowledge that I was somehow deficient. I thought then that the relationship did not work because I did not have the worth and the ability to be loved. Yet something inside me still yearned. I had not yet heard Sinatra sing, "I've learned my lesson/But I wish I were in love again," but I understood it all the same.

When I was twenty-one, and about to give up bothering with my search for love, I still had not discovered Sinatra's music. The songs of Rich Mullins and a few others were my only solace from my perpetual ache. I also decided that year to try going back to college. Amazingly enough, the very first day of class at college, my soul found hope again. In my English class there sat perhaps the most wonderful woman I have ever known. Of course, I did not know how wonderful she was that first day, but since each student in the class had to tell a little about him or herself, hope returned to me the first time I heard her speak. Her name was Sara; she sounded intelligent; she liked painting; and she had a soft, lovely voice that fell to my ears like a gentle rain. I think I fell for her in that very instant. But it was too good to be true. Before I had a chance to ask her out, she and a new friend of mine had already begun dating. Sigh.

It was true then. I knew it was. I was to be alone. I could not be loved. I was somehow less than other men. I did not understand why that would be, but I was sure it was so. I turned to Rich

and to writing in a journal trying to make my pain and my loneliness go away. It didn't.

I did get to know Sara as a friend, and that is how I learned how wonderful she was. She was indeed intelligent. It turned out she not only liked painting, she had a passion for it and for art that would shine through her otherwise naturally soft-spoken and gentle demeanor. Her kindness, gentleness, intelligence, quiet strength, and beauty (both inner and outer) amazed me. Perhaps most amazing of all, she seemed to see something of worth in me and my writing. I will confess, I did love to be near her. Her effect on me seemed like rain. Just to see her was like a soft rain that cools and refreshes. To be near her was like a storm that slapped at my senses. To have her

full attention was like a thunderstorm, an assault that I could only leave when it let me go. Yet she was forbidden to me. She belonged to another, which left me with one option. That was to seclude myself in my room and attempt to dry off by writing and by listening to Rich's music and lyrics.

It was obvious to me that this situation was proof that I was destined to be denied love. I understood, or so it seemed, that I lacked the worth to be loved. I was the outsider, the man alone. My friends tried to tell me that if I just waited long enough, I would find love. But I knew better and was tired of waiting. At least I was until the next semester started.

Surprise of surprises awaited me when I returned to school. Sara had broken up with her beau. Could it be? Did I have a second chance? I tried to take it slowly. I did not want to jump in with asking her for a date too soon. But I was not skilled in the process of romantically pursuing a woman. I turned to my friend Jeremy for help. Jeremy had charm and personality. And he could "ping," which is what I called his ability to bounce like a pinball from one spot to another as he said hello to all the females in the cafeteria at meal times. He knew by instinct what I could only hope to learn. I knew he could help me. And he gave

We were both too scared of the loneliness that would come if we let go . . .

me advice, but that's not how he helped me. He helped me by showing me one night who Sara was really interested in. The signs of who Sara was interested in were obvious, yet I missed them all, blinded by my hope. When Sara and Jeremy returned from a date, I knew I had been wrong about having a second chance.

I should clarify something. Jeremy was not a heel. He was a great guy. He was one of the best friends I have ever had. When I confronted him about his date with Sara, he apologized profusely and offered to let me punch him. I was tempted, but I couldn't, because suddenly I understood. I had missed the signs: the way she talked about Jeremy; the way she was willing to do things that Jeremy might be doing; the way she acted near him. He even said, "I won't date her any more, if you don't want me to." As if I could do that to him or to Sara. Instead, I went back to my room and wept and raged in the knowledge that the most wonderful woman I had ever known, or probably would ever know, had rejected me, and there was not a thing I could do about it. It was not Jeremy's fault, or Sara's fault, or even my fault. It was my destiny to be alone.

If there had been any doubt before, I knew now that I was not to have love, that I could not be loved. I was not worthy. I was just a nice guy. The outsider. The one who watches but rarely participates. I understood then what Rich meant when he sang the words, "Sometimes the night was beautiful/Sometimes the sky was so far away/Sometimes it seemed to stoop so close/You could touch it but your heart would break." I had reached for that beauty, for that beautiful rainy night sky, and my heart had been broken.

It was after that when I discovered the songs of Sinatra. His songs of love and of loneliness were solace for my hopeless yearnings and friends to my pain. He sang, "The words 'I love you 'til the day I die'/The self-deception that believes the lie/I wish I were in love again." Yeah, I understood that. "When no one cares," went another song, and oh how I could identify with that. I knew also "the loneliness, the heartbreak, that only the lonely know." Sinatra was singing right to my soul. Yet

he also sang to my dreams, my prayers for love. "Dream and they might come true/Things never are as bad as they seem," he sang softly in one song. He sang of romantic love "Day in and day out," "Come rain or come shine." Yeah, I wanted that. He even sang George Harrison's "Something" and it sank right into my heart. Too bad for me that I could not have love. Too bad I was not worthy of such love as Sinatra sang of.

But there was one more song. A song that was not of love or of loneliness. A song I did not quite understand. Sinatra sang it so matter-of-factly, so surely, so sincerely. "I did it my way," he sang strongly, "For what is a man?/What has he got?/If not himself, then he has not." This song seemed to speak to something deep and hidden. The song intrigued me. And the man, Sinatra, intrigued me.

Eventually I met a woman who also intrigued me. Her name was Jennifer. She was a lioness, tough and yet caring. There was that coiled strength in her that was always ready to defend. Yet she also had a soft, motherly concern for everyone she knew.

It was my destiny to be alone. She owned a horse (later bought a second one), and rode him in various local horse shows, usually winning several ribbons every show. By the time I met her, I was

twenty-five and had decided to give up the last, slim remnants of my hope for love. Jennifer and I spent a lot of time talking. We got to know each other pretty well. It was a nice, comfortable friendship until the night she kissed me. Hesitation ensued. Haltingly she expressed affection for me. Somewhat stunned, I replied similarly, though I was wholly unsure of my feelings. She managed to reach my barricaded emotions, and I found myself loving her. Could this be? Someone loving me? I was giddy with the idea. To speak with her made me drunk with gladness. I could hardly believe it.

"Don't ever leave me," I told her.

"I won't leave you," she promised. "In fact, if you should leave me, I would hunt you down and stalk you." It did not last.

As a birthday present, Jennifer bought me a book about Sinatra. Not a book about his history,

or his music, but about the man that was Sinatra. I read the book quickly. I found something in those pages, in the quotes of Sinatra, in the descriptions of his likes and dislikes, in the explanations of his quirks and habits, that spoke to my mind and to my heart. He had his own style and chose to define himself rather than be defined by others. His music seemed different now. I understood. I listened to him sing, "I faced it all/And I stood tall/And did it my way." I understood.

Jennifer, like Sara, seemed to see something of worth within me that I could not see. She would tell me that I was a good man, a worthy man. Such ideas were hard to accept. I did not understand this. Me? I had worth? I, the outsider, the cast away "nice guy," the one with no charm or wisdom, had worth? Was that possible? Somewhere in that mass of words of love and support and desire that she and I passed back and forth, I began to understand.

The end began innocently enough. One night I explained to Jennifer, much as I had a couple of times before, about my love of good movies and how I would show her all the good movies I possibly could. She was less than enthusiastic. "But I'm not into movies," she said. "I'm into horses." So I explained that I liked horses and expected to learn a lot from her about horses. The conversa-

tion ended blandly. The very next night Jennifer called to tell me that she thought we had too many differences and to ask if we could just be friends again. I calmly and sadly agreed to her request. But the "fun" was not over. The next night she decided to tell me the "real reason" why she decided to break up with me. According to Jennifer, I was not supporting the relationship. Needless to say, that hurt and badly.

The break up of the relationship hurt my heart, yet my pride was left intact. My worth did not leave with the girl this time. My heart was broken, but I was whole.

So now I am alone again. And again I know what the lonely know. Now, however, I understand. I do understand the storm and the sailor of which Rich Mullins sang. I understand, when in another song he sang, "And the wrens have returned and are nesting/in the hollow of that oak where his heart once has been/and he lifts up his arms in a blessing for being born again." I understand. "One for my baby, and one more for the road," Sinatra sings, and I understand. When Sinatra explains how he did it his way, I understand. Sinatra said, "You've gotta love livin' baby! Because dyin' is a pain in the ass." That puzzled me the first time I read it. But I understand now.

We are soul divers
 See how we leap and cling
 Our eyes admire the spring
 Life is filled with pupil divers
 Drifting away on banks astray
 Away from hate and greed
 To islands dawned with May
 What lies in emerald oceans
 We may never know
 Will not try to show
 Say only, May divers have notions

DANIELLE HURT

The full moon splashes
 Melancholy lunacy
 Above apple trees

DANIELLE HURT

Boys face their match
 in schools, in parks, and courts.
 Is how they see the world
 a place with angry hearts?
 Is how they sleep
 a half-waked dream?
 Traversing walls to understand puissant
 alive in hands they use to eat.
 Looking back at what they were
 a leaf cast to zephyr
 or cleaned up in a pile of dregs
 living in contempt.

DANIELLE HURT

A Man and His Cigarette: A Love Story

KEVIN ETHERIDGE

I RISE every morning, usually dressed in my best hangover, and immediately reach for the one constant in my life, a glowing beauty that is my only true love; I simply call her cigarette. Sure, I understand the consequences of our love, but what the hell, emphysema is too big a concept for my twenty-something mind to comprehend, and anyway what would a day be without the insistent cough and shortness of breath that accompany my suicidal infatuation. Only I and the millions of others who fully appreciate the joy of yellow teeth and the slow deterioration of our bodies can truly respect the joy our wicked temptress brings. She is a little bit of happiness in a somewhat mundane existence. The way she beckons for you to hold her gives a sense of security in a world filled with too many hard drives. A love such as ours is never questioned, just viewed with disdain by those who lack the intellectual capacity to understand our need to be together. They know not of what they speak. Let them spew their venom; we can take solace in the comfort we bring each other. So as you can see, mine is not a cautionary tale, but merely a love affair I know one day must end.

As with any good love story, we have our bad days as well as our good. It was just an understood agreement that we would be together 'til death do us part. But recently I have begun to be unfaithful to my love. She recognizes this and has become more insistent on what direction our relationship is heading. I am not exactly sure the best way to answer her. The easy response would be that we should see what happens, wait until the smoke clears, and if it's meant to be, it will be. These answers do nothing to pacify her, however. She sees through this façade. Her understanding of me is better than the rest of the elitist coffee house pseu-

do-intellectuals I gravitate towards. My pierced companions and I have been seeing more and more of each other, discussing the problems of the world, while trying to figure out if we are apathetic or jaded. This has left little time for me and my love to be together. We still have the occasional after dinner conversation and chat over coffee. Any time I venture out to engage in libations, she is always invited to come. But it isn't like it used to be. She used to fall asleep with me and be the first one I saw in the morning. She feels the change, and like any persistent lover, the more I move away, the more control she tries to assert.

Please understand I am by no means bitter towards her. She was and is my best friend. Who was it that calmed me down all those times when life was getting a little too easy? It was she. She stuck by me through thick and thin with no questions asked. She recognizes this and now feels I owe her something in return. But haven't I given just as much to our life together? Wasn't it I that defended her to my family and friends? They all thought I was crazy to be seeing someone so wild and dangerous. They even had the audacity to comment on the way she smelled. No holds were barred. They were cruel and unusual in their talk towards her, but I didn't relent. Eventually they begrudgingly accepted her into my life. They did this with the feeling that ours was a love destined to fail. As days turned to months and months years, they could see the futility of talking derogatorily towards her. I was a rock, unable to be swayed by my love for her. My wild child and I proved them wrong, and oh, how I did love her. This was not the only time that I came to her defense. There were the numerous functions I sneaked her into where she was not welcome. She has not always been looked

on very favorably. She was, at times, hard company to keep. And it is painfully obvious that one is judged by the company he keeps. But I supported her, and therefore, I feel the direction of our relationship is as much my decision as it is hers.

The one thing I want to avoid at all costs is for things to end on bitter terms. We began as friends and if we should end our affair, we should remain as such. If I see her out, I want to be able to say hello without wondering how she will treat me. She does have an immense capacity to draw me in, and I can only hope she doesn't abuse that. I'm not going to allow my friends to bad mouth her and tell me the trouble she caused. "You're so much better off without that disgusting bitch," they'll say. Friends can be very cruel when trying to console you. It is a healthy form of therapy, however. I can only hope she shows me the same respect when her pack of friends tries to slander me. We need to avoid that type of petty banter. A clean split on good terms would be much healthier for both of us. We will be seen with other people. This may cause us to want each other back. The temptations will be strong, for ours was a good love. Her reddish glow and smoky demeanor will be hard to overcome. But alas, we must not succumb to our desires. It will only make things more difficult. A night of intimacy with her woven into my hands will only make the inevitable that much harder. We need to rise above petty jealousy and accept that we are no longer together. Our friends are going to talk, but let them. If we take the high

road, we'll be much better for it. We fought the good fight—damn them and their inconsequential opinions!

No matter what happens to us, I'll never forget her. How many of us do forget our first love? There were others before and I'm sure there will be others after, though I doubt I'll ever feel pas-

*Parting is not
sweet sorrow;
it is painful
as hell.*

sion like that again. That first one is so special. They are the first ones to have possession of your soul. It's the ecstasy you get when you look at each other. The sense that if you don't spend every waking moment together, nothing will be right with the world. Sure those feelings pass, but while you're in the midst of them, it seems as if you are invincible. So while I'll always cherish her and the time we had together, it is time to get on with the rest of our lives. I cannot deny that this will be difficult. Her hold on me is something I have a hard time overcoming. True love has a way of holding on to you and not letting go. It's just that we were two wild and crazy kids who ended up being bad for each other. Love is grand. It is better to have loved and lost... All the cliches fit. But the truth is I think it is just time to say our good-byes. Parting is not sweet sorrow; it is painful as hell. It's just time to let go. What we had wasn't like all those cheap flings in my past. It was real and tangible. A piece of my heart will always yearn for her. She will be missed. People recognized ours as a love not to be trampled on. We could light up a room together, but I am ready to move on. So tonight I need to tell her of my feelings... after dinner.

Anointed

Anointed and left to rot
inside the vastness of alabaster-odd time
that vein
the vessel in your chest
Grave and hopeful
Cracking Reforming
under pressure
tolerance is unforgivable at arm's length

[this is the leash by which I am pulled]

snarling through glittering streets littered
with lesions
confined in my own wet eyes
ready to be stepped over in passing
as a leaf too pretty to crush
is not withered enough to treasure.

CHRISTOPHER B. WATTS

Josephine and Billie

ANISSA D. BROWN

THE most ridiculous thing we ever did was participating in the annual Halloween parade in Greenwich Village as “Pre-Fruit Eve and Adam On Vacation in New York City.” From materials borrowed, bought, and stolen, we fashioned “nude suits” to display, or hide, the important parts of Adam and Eve. Playing Eve gave Ricky the perfect opportunity to bare the perfect, perky breasts he’d created the previous summer from balloons and plaster. I enjoyed playing the role of Adam. It was great fun giving the appearance of buck nakedness and having the extra dangling appendage that usually only men enjoy. The official parade video had a great scene of “Eve” and me fondling each other. The scary thing was neither Ricky nor I was intoxicated. Our best times and our zaniest stunts always happened when we were sober. That’s what I loved about Ricky; crazy wasn’t a condition he had; it was a characteristic he cultivated to its fullest potential.

The Fashion Institute of Technology is an art school located in the heart of the garment district of New York City, and it attracts a lot of gay students. Coming from the suburbs, I had very little exposure to “alternative” lifestyles. In my neighborhood, gays, or those soft young men or hard young women we imagined to be gay, were ridiculed and left outside our cliques. In high school, a popular, intelligent, civic-minded young man lost the Senior Class Presidency to an unpopular, not too intelligent, party-crazy young lady because of the student body’s general dislike of gays. During the campaign, the young lady’s friends painted homosexual slurs over the young man’s posters. It never mattered to any of us that he’d never said or done anything that would lead us to believe he might be “that way.” The implication was enough

for us. Not only did he lose the presidency, but we did our best to make his Senior Year almost unbearable with our wise cracks and immature comments.

What a shock I received when I arrived at FIT, known to the locals as HU or Homo University. I had never met anyone who openly admitted to being gay and certainly had never experienced a whole platoon of show tune singing, Ethel Merman-imitating, disco-dancing, cross-dressing, diva-wannabe “fags.” I spent my freshman year regarding gays with pity for “choosing” to be gay, with hilarity for some of the outlandish behavior I witnessed, and often with disgust for their public displays of affection. O.K., I guess I was prejudiced towards gays, but how was I supposed to know any better? In the little suburban world from which I came, no one really liked gays anyway, so why shouldn’t I consider them to be deserving of my ridicule and scorn?

Near the end of my first year at FIT, I ran for dorm president and won. As part of my duties, I was required to help out at freshman dormitory orientation. It was my first day on the job, when Ricardo Luis DeSousa, in all his five feet, seven inch, 190-pound muscular glory, burst onto the FIT campus in full Joan Crawford regalia. His similarly dressed entourage trailed behind him carrying mismatched, overstuffed suitcases and colorful trunks overflowing with diva paraphernalia. Witnessing this spectacle, I thought, “My God, what Broadway show is this? And what is it doing on campus?”

“Joan” marched right up to me, handed me her dorm assignment, and demanded, “Where is my dorm? As hot as it is, I can not stand around here all day while you people decide when to pull your thumbs out of your asses!”

Amazed, I stammered, “Your dorm’s right there. You’re in Room 310.”

“Can you tell me, darling, on which floor is Room 310?” Joan asked.

“The third?” I responded innocently.

“What?!” she squealed. “I’m supposed to be on the fifteenth floor. I can’t possibly be expected to live on the third floor. I distinctly remember requesting the fifteenth floor. I need to be in one of the top floor suites, darling. This lady simply can not live on the *third* floor. I must be in one of the penthouse suites on the fifteenth floor!”

She paused for a breath to calm down. Then, pointing a well manicured, red polished fingertip at me, she threatened, “Look, woman, don’t fuck with me. This ain’t my first time at the rodeo! Since you obviously do not possess the authority or apparently the intelligence to get me on the fifteenth floor, please get me your supervisor so we can straighten out this appalling mess.”

Well, Joan managed to finagle her way onto the fifteenth floor...my floor! I consoled myself with the thought that I wouldn’t have to see her much since we were in different majors and I was always in the library, at a meeting, or at work.

The day after my near fatal encounter with Ms. Crawford, while going to my work study assignment, I ran into this person again, dressed this day as a cheerleader. When she/he saw me, he remarked, “Hi, doll! This is great! Not only do we live on the same floor but we’re also working together. My name is Ricky. Yesterday, you met Joan. I just love her; she is *such* a diva. Thank you for being so helpful and such a darling yesterday. I knew from the moment I saw you that we’d be friends!” Years later, I would realize this was the moment when the best friend I would ever have enveloped me in the whirlwind that was his life and decided to keep me there for as long as I chose to be there.

During that first year, Ricky grabbed me by the hand and led me into a wonderland of insanity that I never knew existed. Ricky and I proceeded to spend every day with each other. We worked

the same shifts, went to the library together, cooked for each other, explored Greenwich Village together (a totally new and refreshing experience for me), and rarely spent a night apart, though we lived in different rooms. As a joke one day, I called him Lucy. Being as avid a fan of the *I Love Lucy* show as I was, he got it.

As only soul mates can, we delved deep into each other’s psyches in those first months. I shared my experiences of life in the suburbs, being of mixed heritage, and my obsessive fascination with Egyptian temples and pyramids.

He told me about life in the barrios of Houston (Puerto Ricans in Houston?), being gay in *el barrio*, being Puerto Rican, and his obsessive fascination with glamorous female stars and, strangely, martial arts. We found a common love for music, theater, movies, and anything to do with costume or fashion design.

We reveled in our shared passion for the finer things in life: Robert DeNiro, LL Cool J, Jon Secada, Wesley Snipes, Brad Pitt, Cary Grant, Antonio Banderas, Michael Sean, Al Pacino, and Prince and not always for their performing talents. We held in awe the fiercest divas of the past and present: Josephine Baker, Billie Holliday, Aretha Franklin, Joan Crawford, Mae West, Bette Davis, Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, Gloria Estefan, Vanessa Williams, Bette Midler, Madonna, and, of course, RuPaul.

We loved movies, old and new, and would usually see two a week on tape or at the cinema. Lucy dragged me to inexpensive, yet always entertaining, Off-Broadway and off-off Broadway shows. I dragged him to inexpensive yet unfashionably early opera performances at Lincoln Center. We never missed an episode of *Melrose Place* or reruns of *I Love Lucy*.

No one in the room was allowed to speak during Arsenio Hall’s monologue on his now canceled late night talk show.

That first October together was when Lucy decided it would be fun to go to the Halloween parade as Eve and Adam on Vacation in New York City. Eve came first in the title of our Halloween

My name is Ricky. Yesterday, you met Joan. I just love her; she is such a diva.

costume because that was Lucy's part, and Lucy's name was always first. We couldn't have had more fun that night as strangers came up to us in our "nudity" and made all sorts of suggestive remarks. Some offered to tour us around New York City because we were on vacation. Others invited us back to their place to participate in scandalous activities too raucous to mention in polite company or in these pages.

Thursday nights usually found us at the Tunnel or the Underground, both of which were clubs full of energetic, dancing, young gays and heteros. God, we used to dance all night! We would arrive around midnight and dance non-stop until the sun came out Friday morning. We would walk back to the dorms soaking wet with sweat.

In our dorm rooms, we threw "Jammie Jams," parties that one couldn't get into without an invitation and fierce sleepgear. Lucy and I would dress as stars even at these gatherings. Mae West & W.C. Fields, Marilyn Monroe & Joe DiMaggio, and Priscilla & Elvis, were among those who, dressed for bed, greeted guests at the door. You can guess which half of those duos I portrayed.

During that first winter at FIT with Lucy, we went to see Vanessa Williams in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Vanessa did an incredible job. We fell in love with her and the play. Vanessa was already on our list of divas, but after *Spider Woman* our respect for her multiplied. We stayed after the performance to get her autograph. On a cold, dark NYC street at midnight, Lucy, dressed as Chita Rivera, charmed her way into Ms. Williams's heart. Before I could shut my mouth, Lucy and Vanessa were buddies, exchanging telephone numbers with each other.

How does Lucy do that?

After numerous performances in our dorm rooms, singing for friends and loved ones, Lucy decided we could make money as subway performers. Sporting a "Lucy Original" replica of Josephine Baker's famous banana costume, Lucy was transformed into America and France's grande dame of song and dance. With a flower tucked behind my ear and a long, sexy dress, I was transformed into Billie Holliday. Off into the Times Square subway station we went with our boom

box and tapes of our favorite jazz, blues, and pop standard tunes. I knew it would be fun, but who would have ever believed we could actually make money? Or that a reporter from the *New York Post* would consider us to be an interesting focus for his on-going feature, "Life in NYC"? Lucy knew she had found greatness as she read the article about "Billie and Josephine," though she bristled at Josephine's name being second to Billie's. We performed at least once a month to what we considered rave reviews. In the end, we kept very little of the income our off-key renditions of pop standards generated. Lucy would take most of the money, go to a deli, buy sandwiches, and give them to subway squatters.

Whenever I'd had enough of FIT, I would take a weekend trip home, and Lucy, usually in character as some woman, would always come with me. Once, my part-indigenous American, part-Irish father teasingly asked why I had to bring weirdoes home with me. I replied, with a smile, "Because he's my friend you ol' redneck half-breed." We laughed, but my response startled me. My friendship with Lucy had brought me into a world of witty, talented, sensitive people who accepted me as one of their own and, to my delight, referred to me as "homo-friendly." In a few months, I had gone from being an ardent ridiculer of gays to an ardent defender of gays. What happened?

I'd finally found someone who understood and shared my passions. We loved the same music, movies, books, art, food, games, actors, and TV shows. We were both hams and relished every opportunity to dress up and perform for a crowd. We were both clowns and loved to laugh and make others laugh. We danced and sang whenever, wherever music played.

Why was my soul mate gay?

In the time I knew Lucy, we went through our various love affairs with the same vigor with which we attacked life. We generally refused to date anyone from FIT, mostly because we liked the rumors floating around that we were both gay, yet were lovers. We found the Tunnel and the Underground were the perfect clubs for the two of us to be together, yet find partners of our own

sexual persuasion. Every once in a while, someone would really interest one of us, and we might eventually start a relationship, but our time with each other was always of the utmost importance. We loved each other and, without actually realizing it, didn't welcome intruders who would always wonder what strange undercurrents drew us to each other and wouldn't allow anyone else in.

Of course, this attitude tended to anger those who attempted to join our coven, and we never had lovers in our lives for long. When one of us went through a break-up, the other would write long love letters to soothe the hurt feelings. We gushed on about how wonderful the other was, and we always ended the letters with "I'll love you forever." When the outside world would hurt us, we would close ranks and lick our wounds with our friends, Ben and Jerry and Haagen Dazs. If the wounds were really deep, we invited along Oreo cookies and vanilla shakes from White Castle. Though loath to admit it, we knew the breakup was our favorite part of any relationship. We were terrible at being in relationships but great at getting over breakups.

After almost two years of saving and planning, Lucy and I were finally able to make our dream trip to France. The French, like everyone else, were utterly unprepared for Hurricane Lucy. Dressed alternately as Josephine Baker, Grace Kelly, and Madonna, among others, Lucy charmed, cajoled, and flirted her way through the streets of Paris, taking in all they had to offer.

One afternoon, from the summit of the Eiffel Tower, Lucy began to sing "La Habanera," an aria from Bizet's *Carmen*. What could I do but join her and let our somewhat discordant melodies ring out over the unsuspecting crowd of tourists and a bewildered Paris? Lucy's insanity was infectious as other tourists joined in, though not necessarily singing the same words, song, or language! Oddly enough, tourists had also joined in when we sang Sinatra's "New York, New York" and Patsy Cline's "Walking After Midnight" from the 86th floor of

the Empire State Building.

After a lifetime of believing the hype, we couldn't wait to get to the Louvre so we could find out just what the big deal was about the *Mona Lisa*. The problem was finding one little painting in that vast museum. The Louvre is a three-storied former palace containing more art than any average person would want to see in their whole lives. So, of course, we tried to see it all in one day. We ran—yes, literally ran—through the magnificent home of a prestigious collection of some of the world's greatest treasures.

This refined place attracted art lovers and students studying the works, tourists from sixteen different countries snapping illegal pictures of the works, and young children on class field trips ignoring the works. They all turned around, gawking at the big drag queen Madonna and some other woman running hand in hand through the museum.

Quite accidentally, we finally came across the room containing the *Mona Lisa*. There were 263 people (yes, we counted!) in line waiting to see her. We thought of leaving but decided since we'd taken all day to find it, we might as well stay to see it. An hour later, we were standing right in front of the glass-encased Da Vinci masterpiece. What a letdown! Who had decided this was a great piece of art? We wanted our money back. The Louvre officials wouldn't return our money. To protest, we bought dozens of *Mona Lisa* postcards and sent them to friends with the message, "Next time you're in France, don't waste your time going to see the *Mona Lisa*. Da Vinci must've been madly in love with an ugly woman who had stained, missing, or ugly teeth. Why else would he immortalize her in this lauded, yet strange painting?"

On our last day in Paris, Lucy and I went to Jim Morrison's grave. We expected a quiet, uneventful afternoon in one of Paris' oldest cemeteries. What were we thinking? We carried Doors music and gin so we could dance for and make a toast to one of Rock's greats. To our surprise, at least two dozen fellow fans had beaten us there—

...we would close ranks and lick our wounds with our friends, Ben and Jerry and Haagen Dazs.

American and European, virgin and regular, stoned and sober. By the expression on her face, I knew Lucy was disappointed with the whole scene. She couldn't bear competitors for her title. She needed always to be the most outrageous one and the cemetery was already rife with outrageousness. How could she have known that the other graves in the cemetery would be marked by her fellow psychotics with portraits of the Lizard King and directions to his gravesite? Lucy, unflappable at all times and unwilling to be outdone, had cute little Pier One glass containers and began filling them with the alcohol-soaked dirt and rocks from atop Jim's grave. For some unknown reason, this enraged one German fan.

"How dare you deface this grave by stealing from it?" he bellowed in German-accented, barely understandable French.

Lucy and I stared at him for a moment, incredulous that this remark about desecration came from a *fan* who was surrounded by graves desecrated by *fans*. Lucy, in drag as "Josephine on Holiday," continued filling the bottles and replied, "*De rien*. Nothing. We just want something to take home as mementos."

"Why?" retorted the crazed and drunken German. "What will you girls do with dirt? How will that help you remember Jim? You don't love Jim. If you did, you wouldn't take that dirt. I love Jim. He was a great poet. No one ever touched your soul like Jim!" he whimpered as tears ran down his face.

During his short reverie, Lucy managed to finish filling the containers with the aromatic rocks from the grave and was corking the bottles when the German rushed her. With characteristic panther-like grace, Lucy dodged him and dropped the containers in her handbag, and we ran toward the exit. The enraged German gave chase, throwing, ironically, stones from Jim's grave. When one of the stones hit me, Lucy stopped to fight. She tore off her hat and wig, kicked off her pumps and assumed a martial art stance (Lucy was a black belt!). The German stared in surprise at what

She tore off her hat and wig, kicked off her pumps and assumed a martial arts stance...

seemed to be Jean-Claude van Damme in drag, but lacked the intelligence to walk away from the vision. One kick in the mouth and the drunk was out like a light. His friends ran up after him, wisely decided to let it go, and dragged the German back to Jim's graveside.

It was a crazy world I inhabited with Lucy. Though it came with its ups and downs, I found this world to be perfect and never considered leaving it. Wherever Lucy went, insanity followed. Lucy incited many outrageous incidents, but when things went awry, she always had my back. I didn't know it then, but this incredible gift would one day save me from myself.

On one of my weekend sabbaticals to the 'burbs, I was, oddly, without Lucy, when an old high school friend dropped by. Sean had recently graduated from Georgetown University and was working in New York City at Morgan Stanley (an investment banking firm). He invited me to join him and some of his friends for a movie that weekend. To my surprise, Sean and I soon began dating. Naturally, I assumed it would be like all my other relationships since high school: short-lived encounters with men I never really wanted to get to know or needed to get close to because there was Lucy.

However, none of the other guys I'd dated was quite like Sean Anderson, ex-football player. He was an absolutely gorgeous, all-muscle, 6'3", well-mannered, impeccably dressed financier, who was in love with this slightly off-center, pudgy, irreverent, jeans-and-shorts loving, broke-but-cute free spirit. How could I resist all that? Even Lucy, after meeting Sean for the first time, nicknamed him "the 20th century's answer to [Michelangelo's] David."

Slowly but surely, the man of my dreams began to sweep me off my feet. The time I spent with Sean was wonderful. We talked easily to each other for hours about all sorts of things. I loved taking him to artsy-fartsy galleries in New York City's fashionable SoHo district, and he loved explaining the workings of Wall Street to me. I taught him to relax and enjoy a stroll in the

Village. He taught me how to save money and balance a checkbook. I turned him on to the beauty of ballet. He turned me on to the finesse of basketball. We took long weekend drives to places we'd never been. We found all the deliciously enticing yet not well known gourmet dining experiences New York City and its suburbs had to offer. Soon we were always referred to as "Sean and Niecy."

Of course, all this interfered with the time that was supposed to be Lucy's and mine. Lucy never said much about it, but I could see the disappointment in her face whenever I left to go somewhere with Sean. I always felt guilty of neglect whenever I spent time with one of them. Lucy wasn't happy about my situation but she understood... I was in love.

As planned, after graduation, Lucy and I moved into an apartment on the Lower East Side. Good ol' Lucy landed a job as wardrobe assistant for the Will Rogers Follies. I was working as an assistant designer for a notoriously low-paying employer of recent design school graduates. Without the pressures of college life, Lucy and I had more time to spend with each other, and I still had time for my beloved Sean.

Creeping slowly and unnoticed into this idyllic life was a green-eyed monster.

Creeping slowly and unnoticed into this idyllic life was a green-eyed monster. Visiting my apartment, Sean became more and more jealous of the camaraderie between Lucy and me. It was loud, obnoxious, in-your-face, and full of laughter, private jokes, and silent winks. When Lucy and I were together, only the two of us inhabited our world, and we heartlessly refused to share anything with anyone because, really, they'd never understand. This ate away at the core of Sean's self-esteem and security as an individual and in our relationship. No amount of love I showered on him could make up for the solitude he felt when I was with Lucy. On several occasions, he shared his feelings with me, but I always assumed, with time, he'd just "get over it."

One Friday afternoon, after we'd been dating for a little over two years, I was packing to go to Sean's house for the weekend. He was sitting around with a moping expression on his face, when he asked me to sit. I knew from the look on his face that this was going to be about Lucy... again.

"I have been thinking about this for a long time. I know how much you care about Lucy, but he's no good for you. He's bringing you down. You don't even try to get a better job. You spend all your free time with Lucy. Hanging out with Lucy is not going to get you anywhere."

"Why are you saying this shit to me? I spend most of my free time with you! I don't wanna waste time looking for another job with another horrible employer that I'm gonna hate. You know I'm just working until I save enough money to start my own business! What is this about? Why do you have such a problem with Lucy? God, I hate when you do this!" I shouted, angry and annoyed at having to defend myself and Lucy.

Angrily, he replied, "I love you and I don't want to see your life messed up because of Lucy. Lucy is only hurting you. You could be doing so much better."

"Oh, you selfish bastard! This isn't about Lucy. It's about you. You hate gay men and you just can't stand that I love Lucy at least as much as I love you. But it's not the same! Do you realize, *idiot*, that you are jealous of a gay man?" I replied quietly, attempting to control my anger.

"I am not jealous! I am just trying to help you because I love you and I don't want to see you get hurt. I don't want you living with that gay freak anymore. It's not good for you or us. Why can't you understand *that*?" he yelled.

I took a deep breath to stop myself from physically attacking him. With hot, angry tears rolling down my cheeks, I said in a hoarse, barely audible whisper, "I'm not having this stupid argument with you again. He is my friend and he was here first. I would never do anything to hurt you. I would never deny you anything because of him. I've never asked you to even be friends with him. All I've asked is that you not interfere in my friendship with him, and I promised that he would never

interfere in our relationship. Why do you hate him so much? He has nothing but love for me. How could that be a bad thing? I told you when we started out, you mean son of a bitch, that Lucy would always be my friend and nothing would ever come between us and I meant it. If you are telling me now that you can't deal with that, then you should get the hell out of here now and never come back."

As he walked out the door, I was shaking with fury. I couldn't believe that the man I loved so much, so clearly misunderstood me.

Or did he?

That night, Lucy and I had a "No More Sean" party. We danced around our apartment scaring our cats, and drank root beer until we passed out from the strain. We watched movies and laughed and cried our way into Saturday afternoon with our favorite stars and our old friends Ben and Jerry and Haagen Dazs. We awoke Sunday and spent the afternoon in Central Park feeling like lovers who'd spent months apart.

In my "absence," Lucy had become quite close to someone who I previously thought was a mere acquaintance. Like Sean, Carl began to spend a lot of time around the apartment. Unlike Sean, Carl realized that The Relationship between Lucy and me was sacred, and he had no hope of ever being brought into the fold. While Lucy never spent the amount of time with Carl that I had spent with Sean, I did begin to understand how Lucy had felt all this time.

Now that Sean was out of my life, I noticed that I was spending most of my free time with Lucy, and we, happily, did lots and lots of nothing. We listened with envy to tales of friends from FIT who were "making it big" in their fields, yet we did nothing to further our own careers. Lucy and I figured when it was our time, Fortune would come knocking on our door, so why waste time hunting her down? We had very few responsibilities, were proud of it, and considered ourselves to be living lives that even Riley would covet.

But soon I began to miss Sean. At first I was relieved that I could be feeling the loss of such an

uncaring person. Then, I began to weep and moan, dream about him, write mushy letters I wouldn't send, call his home and hang up and generally remind myself of a character from *Fatal Attraction*. I'd never missed anyone this badly in my life. I had no one else to talk to about these crazy feelings but Lucy. To my amazement, that crazy Puerto Rican began to remind me of all the reasons I loved Sean. He talked about how handsome and buff Sean was. We reminisced about Sean's infectious laugh, the hilarious jokes he always told, his compulsive, and to Lucy and me, hysterical need to always win at Monopoly, and the otherwise wonderful personality that lay beneath the jealousy and homophobia. Lucy loved me even then, as he knowingly pushed me toward Sean. He was merely succumbing to what he always knew was on the horizon: that he would lose me to the handsome hometown boy who strolled innocently into the weird dance that was the love affair of Lucy and Niecy.

Yet I was too stubborn to actually make contact with Sean. He was the one with issues, not me.

Stubborn as always, I told myself if he wants me back, he'll just have to come and find me.

Then, just when I thought I would die from missing him, Sean appeared. When I saw that gorgeous face and heard that sweet voice, it was all over. He began babbling, talking incessantly about how much he missed me and loved me and how terrible his life was without me. He'd lost weight—not in a good way—and couldn't sleep. Sometimes, I would pop into his head and the pain of losing me would be so unbearable he'd have to stop what he was doing and get himself together. In the midst of all this heartbreaking drama, I noticed that he made no apology for the dreadful things he'd said about Lucy. For the sake of peace, I never mentioned that he hadn't apologized. For my own peace of mind, I let myself forget about that.

During this five-month ordeal (also known as our breakup), Morgan Stanley had given Sean a promotion and a raise.

"Since you threw me out of your apartment,

*We danced
around our apart-
ment scaring our
cats, and drank
root beer...*

all I've been thinking of is you and how I don't want to live without you," he said, with tears standing in his eyes. "I've been looking at houses to buy and none of them look good to me unless I know you're going to be there. I don't know what to do without you! I keep making plans for your business and how I can help you get started and then I realize you're not around for me to share them with you. With my promotion, you can quit working and finally do something you love. We make a great team and I just can't imagine my life or my future without you. Can we try this again? I know I can make you happy. Please say 'yes,' please. I need you with me, Neece. There's a great house in New Rochelle that I know you would love, or we can look at any house you want. I know I'm rambling and talking a lot and going too fast, but I've got to know. I can't stand another minute thinking that you don't love me anymore or that you won't be with me forever. Oh God, answer me please!"

My answer came in the form of euphoric screams of "yes!" My joy was overwhelming as I cried, unable to actually speak, hugging my man tightly and loving him more than ever.

How could I tell Lucy?

Two weeks after the reunion with Sean, without any words ever passing between us on the subject, Lucy brought me packing boxes. For a month, whenever I was in the apartment, all I could do was cry. Lucy brought me Oreo Double Stuffs and Cherry Garcia, but I was inconsolable. Lucy eventually began to pack for me. I had spent five of the most wonderful years of my life in love with this drag queen. How could I leave him? I begged him not to let me go. I wanted to tell Sean that I wouldn't move in with him. Lucy called me a moron and inquired, "Why would you want to spend your life with this rundown old drag queen when you could be with that gorgeous hunk of man? Honey, if I could turn his head, I'd leave you in a New York minute." I remember being angry with Lucy, wondering how I could be feeling so low while she seemed not to be fazed at all by my imminent departure. I really was a moron for not realizing just how big a sacrifice this was for her, too.

When the closing on the house was settled,

Sean made all the moving arrangements for both of us. The whole moving thing seemed to happen in another world of which I was not a part. On moving day, neither Lucy nor I was in the apartment. We were too busy treating ourselves as wonderfully as we could afford and pretending that it wasn't the saddest day of our lives. We window-shopped along Fifth Avenue, had tea at The Plaza, took a fifteen minute carriage ride in Central Park, dined unfashionably early at Tavern on the Green (it's cheaper then), and went to see our favorite off-Broadway show again, *The Blue Man Group*. When we got back to the apartment, a lot of things I'd never seen before were in the apartment.

"Whose stuff is this in here?" I asked suspiciously, jealously. Who was taking my place already?

"Oh, that's Carl's stuff. Didn't I tell you? We decided I couldn't pay the rent by myself, so he would move in."

"Are you kidding me?! You low-life fag! My body isn't even cold yet and you're moving someone else in here already?"

"Oh, bite me, you crazy heifer. What did you think I was gonna do? Live here by myself forever? Besides, someone has got to watch over the apartment while I'm on the road with *Damn Yankees* as wardrobe director."

"Get out!" I squealed in delight, pushing him around the room for not telling me sooner. "Oh, my God! That is so great. You no good ho, why didn't you tell me? You've been waiting for this opportunity for so long! When do you leave? I'm gonna miss you so much!" I carried on. I couldn't stop. I needed to cry anyway, and here was the excuse I needed to cover up the real reason. I was hysterical with joy and anguish.

Joining right in with me, Lucy cried, "I leave next week! I didn't tell you because I just found out two days ago! Miss Josephine is on the road, and she's gonna do it to America! I'm gonna miss you, too!"

So Miss Josephine and Miss Holliday were

*Miss Josephine is on
the road,
and she's
gonna do it
to America!*

dancing around the room, crying, laughing, overjoyed at the prospect of our dreams coming true, when Sean called and asked if I was ready for him to come pick me up. While we waited for Sean, I brought out the Haagen Dazs Strawberry Cheesecake ice cream and we spoon-toasted what we thought was our good fortune. We laid on the couch in each other's arms, reliving our best escapades and weeping from the already excruciating pain of missing each other, until the intercom rang announcing the arrival of our future.

As we rode down in the elevator together, we renewed our well-intentioned promises and plans to keep in touch. We hugged at the door, and I walked backwards all the way to the curb, waving goodbye to the crazy Puerto Rican who had changed the shy, cynical suburbanite into an open-minded, free-spirited "New York City girl." I resisted a strong urge to run back to tell him all that he meant to me. I knew he already understood, and besides, I would tell him the next time I saw him.

With Lucy on the road and me taking care of the lives of two people, a new house, and business, we inevitably lost touch. Though he sent numerous, hastily written post cards, I never saw him while he was on the road. He called the few times he was in town, but Sean never was good about giving me messages from his self-proclaimed arch nemesis. A few months after Lucy left town, I tried to call our old apartment and leave a message, but all I heard was, "The number you just dialed... has been disconnected. No further information is available." Soon I was spending most of my time working to make my home-based bridal business a success. I thought of Lucy all the time and began keeping a journal of all the things I experienced that I knew only he would appreciate. I didn't really try too hard to find Lucy, always figuring that he would find me... as he had before.

Almost two years after I moved out of the apartment, I listened to a message on my answering machine that belonged to a ghost from my past. Carl had called and left a message for me. Part of the message was cut off. What could Carl possibly want? In the madness of a final fitting for a

swiftly approaching wedding, I didn't return Carl's call until two days later. In tears, he told me that he had been calling and leaving messages with my "husband" and on my machine for two weeks. Lucy had died the day before from AIDS-related complexes. Lucy hadn't gotten in touch with me earlier because he didn't want me to see him like that, but last week he had been really sick and dearly wanted to see me. I couldn't breathe. I heard Carl saying, "Hello? Hello? Niocy? Are you there?" I couldn't answer him. My brain would not work. My lips would not move. My legs would not support me, and I sat down on the floor with a thump. Sean came into the room and asked me what happened. I still clutched the phone tightly in my hand though Carl had already hung up.

Sean removed the phone from my hand and helped me stand up and get onto the sofa. With love and concern in his voice, he attempted to find out what had happened and why I wasn't blinking. As I listened to that sweet voice, I realized it was the voice that hadn't told me my best friend was dying. How could he manage to be so caring, kind, and thoughtful in all situations except those involving Lucy? How could he be such a jerk about the one thing most important to me? I snapped out of my catatonia and punched Sean right in the mouth.

"What the hell was that for?" he inquired, angrily, holding his jaw.

"You know what it's for, and I'll never forgive you. Ever. You didn't have to love or even like Lucy, but I thought you loved and respected me more than to do something this despicable. You're a horrible man." How could someone who loved me so much, hurt me this way? Who was this man that I thought I loved? Looking at him and listening to him stutter as he lied, I hated him. I knew I couldn't stand to be in the house with him any longer.

"I-I-I didn't give you those messages from that guy because, ummm, I thought you were keeping Lucy out of your life. I didn't want you to be upset by seeing him again, you know? I just wanted him to stay out of our lives."

"Well, you've got your wish," I hissed. "You'll never have to worry about Lucy being in your life

ever again. Or me. I may not have done everything in this relationship right, but for what you've just done, I hope you go straight to Hell."

I left that night and stayed at a friend's house. I called Carl back and got the details of the funeral arrangements. I walked around for the next few days in a teary fog. Though I hadn't seen him in years, I always found comfort in knowing that Lucy was still out there, making the world march to his tune. Every time my mind wandered around to the reality that I would never see him again, I felt as if someone had sucker-punched me in the stomach, knocking the wind out of me. I thought constantly of our zany misadventures and mourned the fact that we would never have any more. Over the years, I had been thinking of things I wanted to do with Lucy and had added them to the journal. Now, we'd never get to do them.

Who would read the journal I was saving so long just for Lucy?

Now, we'd never get to do them.

Who would read the journal I was saving so long just for Lucy?

Assembled on a New York City rooftop, Lucy's entourage had assembled the largest group of the most eclectic mix of mourners I'd ever seen to send off our friend. Drag queens, Broadway performers, FIT professors, and former FIT students, all showed up to pay their respects. Even Vanessa Williams was there for Lucy's final hurrah. We had a "stone jam" on that rooftop as we sang and danced and celebrated the life of the fiercest drag queen the world had ever known.

Weeks later, I received a letter from an attorney requesting my presence in his office to discuss the estate of Ricardo Luis deSousa. Oh no, I thought, Lucy didn't believe in material possessions and never saved a cent. What could this be about? Does he owe money and somebody's expecting me to pay? In his office, the lawyer gave me a letter and a brightly colored trunk.

My darling Niocy:

I'm writing to your rotten ass because I know it's not your fault that you're not here with me now. These guys

here are wonderful and I love them for being here, but none of them are you. There are so many things I want to say to you, so many crazy moments I want to relive with you but I do it alone because no one here understands. How could they when I'm not sure I do? I have new adventures to tell you about too but I guess those will have to wait.

But for now, stop all that damn crying all over this letter. I've cried enough for both of us. We promised each other no tears when one of us fell off the edge of this thing called life. Never thought this fine-tuned, athletic, health nut would check out before the lazy, exercise-fearing, hamburger guru, but there you are and here I am. Death is trying to scare this woman but I won't let it. I've had a rip-roaring, Texas-style good time living and I'm not going down without a fight. Wonderful memories of time spent with you help me do that. Thank you.

Also, you know that no one is ever going to love you more than yours truly, but don't begrudge any one the opportunity of trying. Sean does an admirable job of loving you even though he thinks you're strange and he doesn't quite understand you. Understanding you is my job. It hasn't been easy but I've always stood beside all the (stupid) decisions you've made—like this whole Sean fiasco. I understand, believe it or not, I do.

Remember The Lion King? Mufasa told Simba that he would always be looking out for him from the stars. That's where I'm gonna be, baby! Miss Josephine will be "swinging on a star." When you need me, I'll be there, shining, always a star. Go love Sean and keep him near you, sweetie. He's all right and, besides, who else would put up with your loud-mouthed, wise ass, besides him and me, anyway? I'll love you forever.

Lucy

Opening the trunk, I laughed until I cried at the costumes of the characters that had lived with Lucy and me: Adam, Eve, Joan, Madonna, Bette, Grace, Spider Woman, Streisand, Carmen, Billie, and Josephine. I hadn't seen these friends in years and welcomed them all as I said a prayer:

Seven years ago, I thought gay people were the scum of the earth, but then you brought this particular gay man into my life and made him set up shop. He taught me new ways to live and new ways to love. Even when it

hurt him, he selflessly sent me off into my destiny, and it is because of him that I flourish there. Thank you for giving me the precious gift of Ricardo Luis deSousa. Though I only got to hold it for a short while, I will treasure it always. He told me that Catholics believe that gays don't get into Heaven. I know that's not true because that angel you sent here could go nowhere else. He used to talk about Heaven as someplace he'd like to go without ever really believing he could get there. The world was so often cruel to Lucy no matter how hard he tried. God, wherever Lucy is, please take him into your hands and let him know how much he meant to me and that even good-hearted fags can get into your Kingdom. Amen.

From this prayer, and many later ones concerning Lucy, I gained understanding my soul desperately needed. Ever since Lucy's death, I'd been thinking that I'd lost him forever. I was too blind to realize that he was here all along. Lucy would always be inside me. One night, I went outside, looked up toward the stars and spoke to my friend:

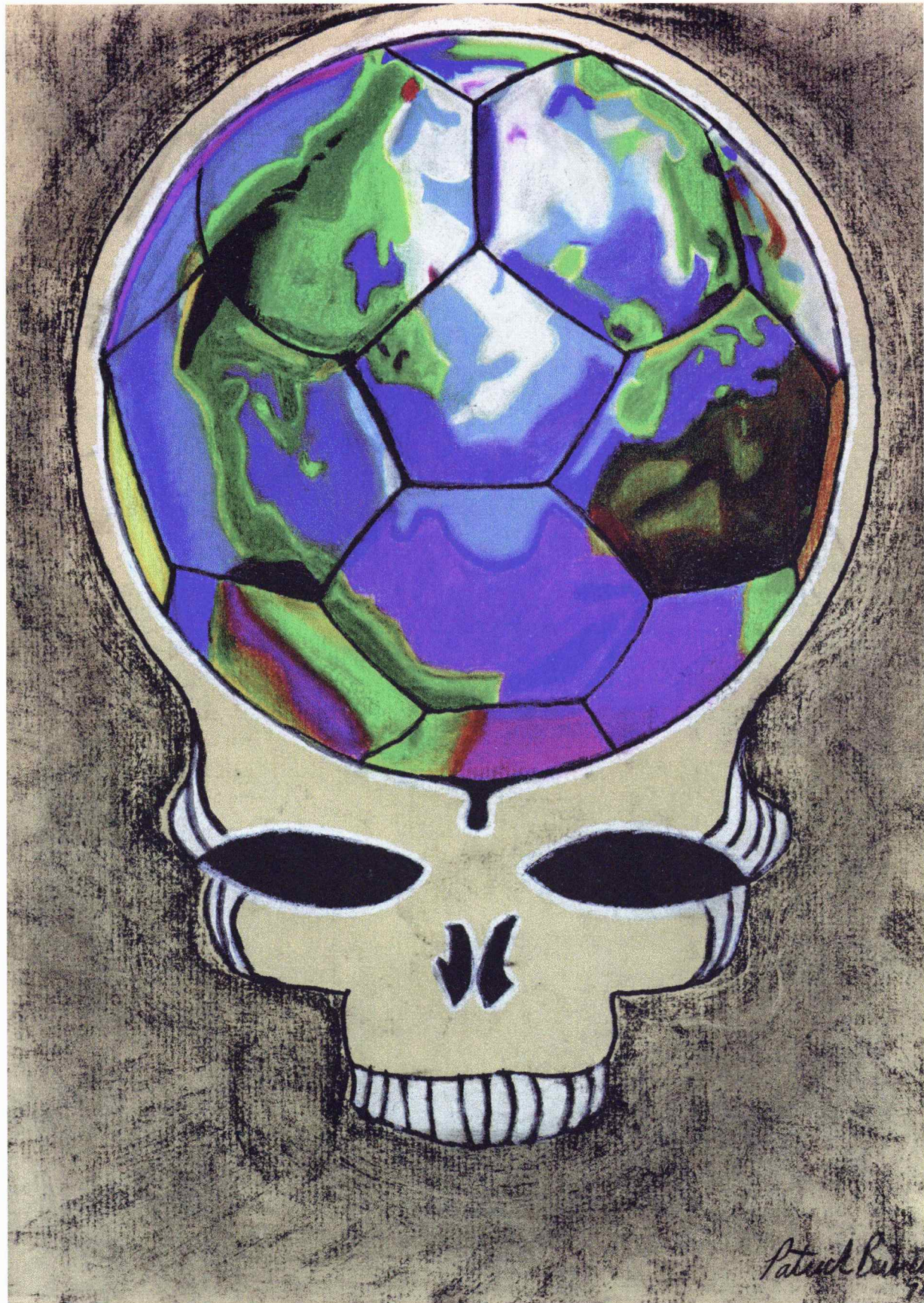
"O.K. Lucy. Here I am and let me tell you one thing. Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you for helping me find my spirit and making it soar. Thank you for loving me unconditionally. Thank you for always watching over me. I know you're still doing it, too. Thank you for setting me free. Since reading your letter, I know that I have your love and understanding even after all that jumped off. Now, I think I can be at peace. I'd been thinking that after all this time, all I'd ended up doing was hurting the two guys I loved most. Thank you for lifting my burden and making me see that's not true. Anyway, I hope you've caught up on my life in the journals. I just know you appreciated the drama and adventure of Carl and me sneaking into the funeral home to put my latest journals in your purple casket. I guess I can stop writing them because now you'll always be around to share this life. I'll never have to miss you again. Thank you for being the best friend I'll ever have. Try not to scare all the other angels. I'll love you forever."



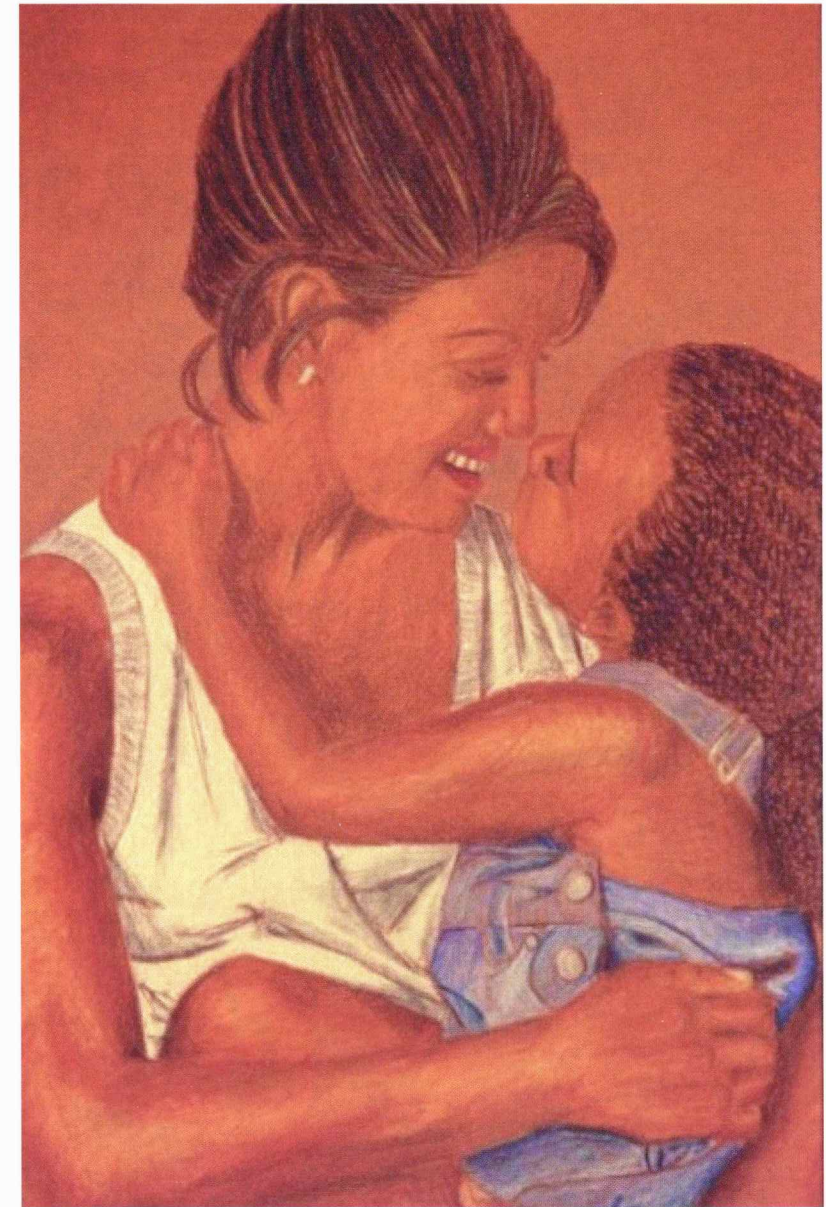
REGINALD HARVEY



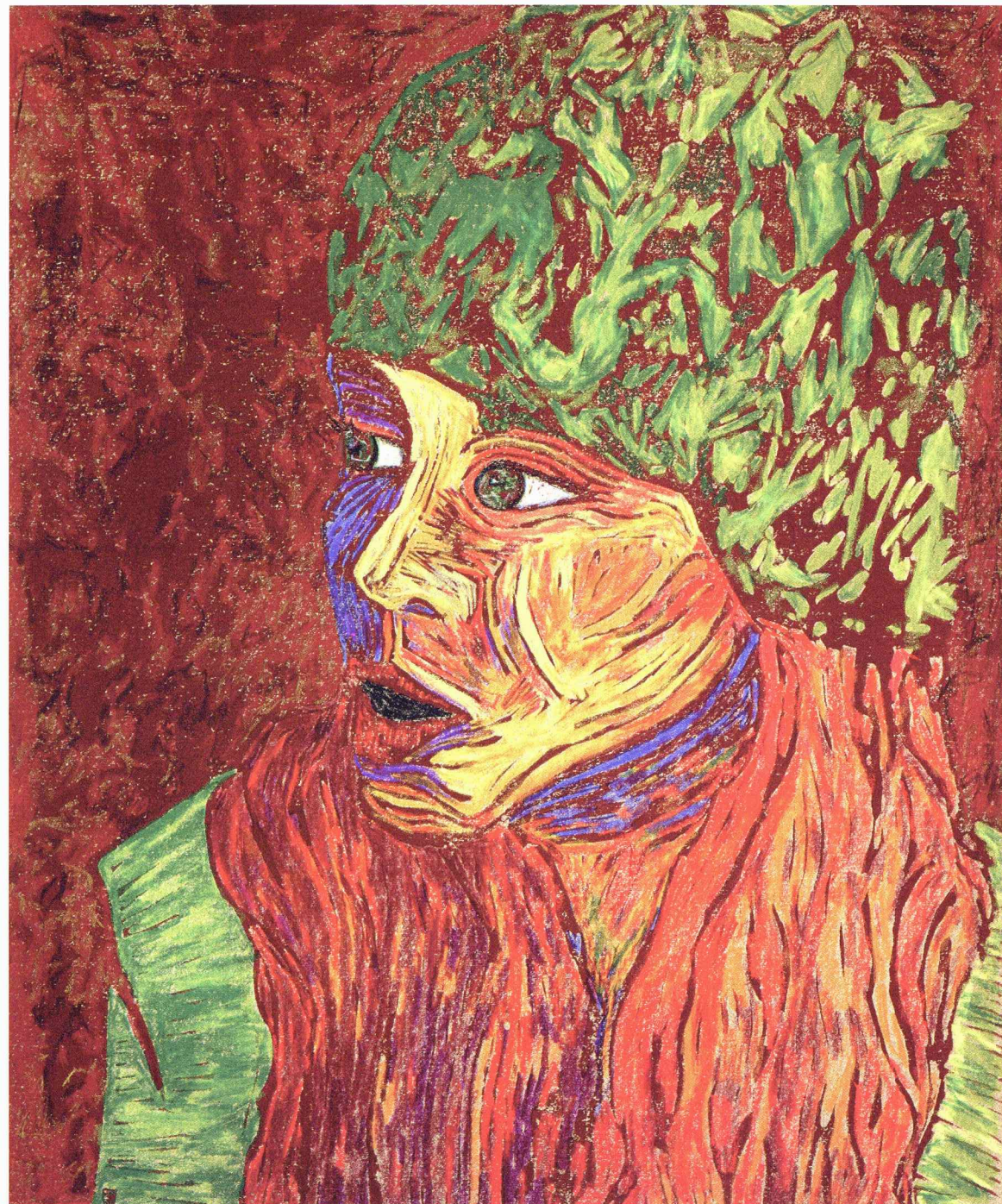
MEREDITH SEGER



PATRICK BURNETTE



SEQUIA D. WHITE



TERESA HUGHES-GRAY

Sonnet

The virgin mother, poor and commonplace,
 Did humbly carry God's begotten Son
 And risking cruel rejection and disgrace,
 Lay down a life that scarcely had begun.

Yet God's provision proved to be more great—
 Her marriage was ordained by His own hand.
 Through dreams His angels did communicate
 What mortals could not hope to understand.

A holy Child, embraced by poverty
 Within a lowly stable first drew breath—
 Conceived in pure and taintless chastity,
 To save a world that punished Him to death.

God's perfect love no man could ever know
 But for the Savior and the Savior's woe.

ANA KELLETT

The Prison

Steeple and gargoyles surround me in terror,
The voices so hidden and frail.
Pale are the streetlights that enter the city,
With breezes the haunted ship sails.

Palm stems and beach sands, like paint on a canvas,
How ancient the ghost who trod here.
Sometimes I call to a battledressed soldier
Whose footprints dissolve within air.

The moon over Charleston is often blood red,
By brightness the starlight is smitten.
Careful your visions for living are dead,
And the killing field now the prison.

SCOTT BERRY

My Father and I

My father and I, no one else near,
As many a day we traveled the coldest of rivers,
And waded the waters of my father's youth,
Through smiles and laughter and a great many shivers.

The water was so clear and teaming with life,
Those wondrous days in late fall,
Mountains surrounded and warmed us with beauty.
The fly rod was poised and the trout seemed to call.

We'd pull in a few, yet not all that many,
And always throw back what we caught,
So there's nothing to show and no great reward,
Except the smile of my little boy heart.

SCOTT BERRY

Spirituality and the Quest for Freedom in *Oxherding Tale*

DENISE COLLINS

At some point in the life of almost every individual there is a turning point. This turning point can often occur following an historic or infamous event. For instance, many people can remember exactly where they were on the day a man first landed on the moon. History can give us a reason to change, or can inspire us to live a different kind of life. Also, a turning point in a person's life can occur as the result of a chance happening. Charles Johnson, the author of *Oxherding Tale*, reached a turning point in his life in just this manner. In the introduction to his novel, Johnson states that he was fourteen years old when he opened a book on yoga and read the chapter concerning meditation. Not quite sure what he was doing, he nonetheless spent thirty very serene and rewarding minutes following the instructions for *dhyana*. In his book, *The Way of Zen*, Alan Watts defines this as a "state of unified or one-pointed awareness" (55). In 1967, at the age of nineteen, Johnson was first introduced to Eastern thought and philosophy. At this time, he was enrolled in a martial arts school in Chicago, where he practiced kung fu (Johnson x). According to Herman Kauz, author of a recent book exploring spirituality in the martial arts, when used for the purposes of meditative training, martial arts can give an individual the feeling of being grounded, tranquil, and more centered. However, some individuals will not be content with these benefits, and will want to attain a full spiritual awakening (Kauz 117–18). This must be how Charles Johnson felt, for on his own he studied Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and the "Ten Oxherding Pictures" by a twelfth-century

Zen artist (Johnson xi). Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, author of *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, explains that these pictures are an attempt to illustrate the stages of Zen discipline that one must go through while finding liberation from the self (127–29). Johnson writes, "The martial arts complemented but could not complete that spiritual trajectory" (xi).

By Johnson's own admission, this quest for spirituality spilled over into his professional life to the point where he felt as though he had to deal with Buddhism creatively. He specifically wanted to deal with some ideas tying desire with human suffering, our own impermanence, and with living the right kind of life (xi). Johnson does this in *Oxherding Tale*, the story of Andrew Hawkins, his fight to free himself from slavery, and his spiritual quest to find himself (Johnson xvi). Throughout the novel, Andrew meets many people and finds himself in some rather engaging situations. The people he meets and his experiences help to teach him many of life's lessons. Each of these lessons helps him to grow spiritually. Jonathan Little states that *Oxherding Tale* incorporates Johnson's interests in Eastern thought and spirituality. As Andrew learns and grows spiritually, Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* uses the "philosophical insight" of Eastern thought patterns to show how individual enlightenment and liberation lead to a greater good for the entire community (Little 82). Little also feels that while Andrew's life loosely parallels the Zen story of the "Ten Oxherding Pictures," this "spiritual allegory" by Johnson comprises a wonderful mixture of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Zen (87).

Before jumping into *Oxherding Tale* and Andrew's

quest for liberation, it is important to have some knowledge and a basic understanding of the precepts underlying Eastern thought. As Westerners we like to compartmentalize, especially that which we do not understand. This literally cannot be done where Eastern thought is concerned. As a group, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Zen do not fit into any one category. They have both similarities and differences, so it is important that each receives some individual exploration.

Buddhists do not “believe in”; they understand.

Richard Gard gives a good description of Buddhism by beginning with what it is not. It is not a religion, but rather a way of life that offers an individual or society voluntary thought and conduct patterns which are “directed toward the realization of freedom in perfect existence” (13). It concerns life in the here and now of each “sentient being” and the interrelatedness of all existence. Buddhism invites all to join and accepts us as we are. It is tolerant of the views and ethnocentric mores that characterize us (Gard 15–16). To describe what Buddhists do, one can look at what they do not do. In *Buddhism and Zen*, Ruth McCandless and Nyogen Senzaki tell the reader that Buddhists do not “believe in”; they understand. They do not “worship”; they practice what they understand (4). Because Buddhism has such a tolerant attitude, it accepts what is good in every religion and allows an individual to study the teachings of all faiths. Unlike Christians, Buddhists put all the emphasis on what is constructive and positive (McCandless and Senzaki 8).

In Lama Surya Das’s best-selling *Awakening the Buddha Within*, he explains the fundamentals of Buddhism in laymen’s terms so that Westerners can understand the Buddhist way of life. According to Das, “The goal of Buddhism is enlightenment...the goal is the path, the way of enlightened living...a well-laid-out road map to enlightenment and spiritual rebirth” (13). Buddhism promises an individual enlightenment, also called spiritual awakening or liberation. It is a process whereby the self is transformed. Buddhism is about

becoming more human, about figuring out what things actually are and how they work. It is about finding the truth and ending ignorance. When an individual is liberated from confusion and is awakened to reality, he will know life as it truly is.

Before explaining the process of enlightenment, Das backs up a bit and through the viewpoint of Buddhism, explains “the Facts of Life.” These are known as the Four Noble Truths and are the heart of Dharma. The apparent message is this: “It is the nature of life that all beings will face difficulties; through enlightened living one can transcend these difficulties, ultimately becoming fulfilled, liberated, and free” (Das 76). He simplifies this message even further using examples we can all relate to. No one’s life is perfect, and it is the nature of life to be a mixture of good and bad. We are frustrated because we have an unrealistic attitude, and always want more and better. Yet inner peace exists, and each individual can find contentment. It is right here, and the way to experience it is to let go and to live in the moment. Peace can be found if an individual is willing to change, is able to follow instructions, and will attempt, in every way possible, to live a good life on a daily basis (Das 77–89).

According to Richard Gard, as Buddhism developed, different ways and paths toward enlightenment were devised (27). In *Awakening the Buddha Within*, Das describes the middle path, or way. In Buddhism, this is known as the Noble Eight-Fold Path and is a balanced way towards liberation, which avoids extremes. This path can be broken down into three sections, dealing with training an individual in wisdom, ethics, and meditation. Wisdom training explores our view of the world and our intentions or motives. Ethics training teaches one to speak, to act, and to live right. Meditation training involves spiritual effort, consciousness, and concentration. These three values of wisdom, ethics, and meditation are essential to Buddhism. They are cyclical and interconnected in that all are necessary and support each other. Though enlightenment is the objective, it is important that an individual not “overlook the joy of the journey due to an excess of goal orientation” (Das 290).

Another important aspect regarding Johnson’s

Oxherding Tale involves an understanding of the ancient Indian religion of Hinduism. *Like a Great River*, by Herbert Stroup, introduces the average Westerner to a completely new concept. One of the main characteristics that ethnocentric Westerners find amazing is the flexible and permissive nature of Hinduism. Like Buddhism, it is very tolerant and appreciative of other religions. The “live and let live” attitude of Hinduism acknowledges that it does not have all the answers and that knowledge is good, no matter where it comes from (48–49).

Hinduism is comprised of five basic elements. The first is a belief in God. All who practice this faith believe there is a power greater than themselves, which has controlling interest in their and others’ lives, yet they are unable to agree on the nature of that God. Next is their reverence for the Vedas, which are the Holy Scriptures and can be likened to the Christian Bible. The third basic element is the use of rituals to mark the various stages of an individual’s growth, giving meaning to his past, and giving him hope for the future. The next, and probably most important element, of Hinduism is the concept of *karma*. Simply put, karma is about cause and effect and is the principle that binds all Hindus together. Karma includes *samsara*, which is the belief that living things make their way through never ending time in a series of reincarnations. The last element is called *caste*, which is the Indian social stratification system. Caste divides Hindu society into four groups, and this pecking order determines an individual’s social standing, occupation, and marriage. There is no such thing as upward or downward mobility in the Indian caste system—an individual is born and later dies with the same status. These principles come together in a unique Hindu view of the universe as something that is always turning, having no beginning or end. Also, because of karma and *samsara*, an individual has neither a beginning nor an end. He is merely a part of the general flow (Stroup 55–57).

Where Hinduism concerns itself with an individual and his place in society, Taoism is more

concerned with knowledge. In *The Way of Zen*, Alan Watts states that Taoism attempts to understand life more directly and is mainly concerned with unconventional knowledge. It is a way of liberation, where an individual can be free from convention, not by denying it, but by using it in such a manner that he will not be deceived by it. Taoism uses knowledge to give an individual a different view of himself, one that he is not familiar with. This different view can free his mind from its earlier identifications and labels, which were confining. Taoism is a process whereby an individual learns to trust his intuition. If he can let this work for him, his gut will eventually act as a very effective means by which to get things done. This is Taoism’s principle of spontaneity. To understand this, an individual must let go of his conventional knowledge, and basically forget what he thinks he knows. If he can trust his mind to spontaneously arrive at decisions and then trust in those decisions, his mind will work by itself (Watts 10–21). According to Watts, the goal in of Taoism is to become the kind of individual, who without actually intending it, is a source of fabulous accidents (28).

Lastly, Zen bears some examination. In their book *Buddhism and Zen*, authors Ruth McCandless and Nyogen Senzaki state that “Zen is the offspring of Buddhism and Taoism” (63). The word itself is derived from a translation of *dhyana*, yet Zen is not the same as and does not mean only meditation. It insists that when an individual learns through meditation, that knowledge can only be effective if it is applied in his everyday life. As in Taoism, Zen depends heavily on the use of intuition in the decision

making process (McCandless and Senzaki 9–10). Also, the authors counsel the individual that “the practice of meditation is not a method for the attainment of realization but is enlightenment itself” (15) and also that she should not “work for emancipation. Instead, allow the work itself to be your emancipation” (16). Those practicing Zen believe there are several important tasks to be done on a daily basis. First, an individual should try to

...living things make their way through never ending time in a series of reincarnations.

be the master of his own mind and body. Second, it is important to exist peacefully in one's surroundings. Last, an individual should lead a pure and unselfish life, attempting to be kind and helpful to all beings (17).

Alan Watts says that the Zen way of liberation has no concrete definition, but that one can get the feeling for Zen by revealing what it is not, just as a sculptor reveals his creation while removing stone from the block (3). He agrees with McCandless and Senzaki, saying that Zen is a combination of Taoism and Buddhism (28). Watts states that Zen takes the Tao concept of freedom from convention and combines it with Mahayana Buddhism, which is called the "Great Vehicle" because it recognizes so many different methods for the realization of nirvana (57–59). There are certain qualities that distinguish Zen from other types of Buddhism. Zen is very direct in its nature in that it points openly and directly to the truth. Also, awakening is something natural that happens, and may happen at any moment (Watts 77). To quote Watts, "The genuine Zen flavor is when a man is almost miraculously natural without intending to be so. His Zen life is not to make himself but to grow that way" (102).

Except for Hinduism, the above-mentioned ways of life are not religious, but spiritual in nature. Just as Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Zen are difficult to define, so is spirituality. It has an ethereal quality that one cannot actually determine or set limits to. The best way to sum up the spirituality in these ways of life is to enumerate some of their common ideas. They each tell an individual to show some tolerance toward others and their ideas, and while attempting to do the next right thing, it is important to put one foot in front of the other and go with the natural flow. In *Oxherding Tale*, Charles Johnson looks inside himself, using the spirituality he is familiar with to develop his characters and story line. Jonathan Little says that *Oxherding Tale* follows Andrew "from bondage to emancipation" (82). This is both literally and figuratively true, for by the end of the novel Andrew is no longer enslaved by anyone, includ-

ing any of the limitations he may have placed on himself. Also, like the oxherder in the "Ten Oxherding Pictures," Andrew goes through several different stages to achieve his liberation (Little 82). In each of the different stages of his life, the people he is closest to influence him. These individuals are following their own paths, and it is up to Andrew to find the one that will work for him.

From the very beginning of *Oxherding Tale*, where Andrew is relating the events of his origin, Hinduism and Buddhism are prevalent concepts. The reader is reminded of several of the five basic principles behind Hinduism—caste, ritual, and karma. Also evident is a brief reference to the Noble Eight-Fold Path. On the evening of Andrew's conception, we are introduced to both his father and master. Both George Hawkins and Jonathan Polkinghorne accept their positions in life. This makes sense for Mr. Polkinghorne, since he is the master of Cripple Gate and occupies a high-ranking status. On the other hand, George is a slave, yet he gives one the impression that he is content with his lower station in life. In Hinduism, caste is a simple fact of life and is recognized as the way things are. This also seems to work for Cripple Gate.

On the evening in question, George's wife, Mattie, is involved in a Saturday evening ritual with her Ladies' Prayer Circle. George is not welcome at this function and is spending the evening with his master and friend, Jonathan. George and Jonathan have been together for some time and are comfortable with each other. They enjoy their own Saturday evening ritual of drinking, talking, and playing rummy. Neither of their wives appreciates it when they return home drunk, and both men are aware of this. Yet as is typical of many Saturday evenings, they have a bit too much to drink. In an attempt to get out of the verbal lashing they know is coming, Jonathan suggests that they switch places for the evening. By doing this, both men are going against the Buddhist Way in that they are forgetting the importance of right intentions and right actions. Buddhism tells an individual that his future depends on his motives,

Andrew goes through several different stages to achieve his liberation

Hinduism and Buddhism are prevalent concepts. The reader is reminded of several of the five basic principles behind Hinduism—caste, ritual, and karma. Also evident is a brief reference to the Noble Eight-Fold Path. On the evening of Andrew's conception, we are introduced to both his

father and master. Both George Hawkins and Jonathan Polkinghorne accept their positions in life. This makes sense for Mr. Polkinghorne, since he is the master of Cripple Gate and occupies a high-ranking status. On the other hand, George is a slave, yet he gives one the impression that he is content with his lower station in life. In Hinduism, caste is a simple fact of life and is recognized as the way things are. This also seems to work for Cripple Gate.

On the evening in question, George's wife, Mattie, is involved in a Saturday evening ritual with her Ladies' Prayer Circle. George is not welcome at this function and is spending the evening with his master and friend, Jonathan. George and Jonathan have been together for some time and are comfortable with each other. They enjoy their own Saturday evening ritual of drinking, talking, and playing rummy. Neither of their wives appreciates it when they return home drunk, and both men are aware of this. Yet as is typical of many Saturday evenings, they have a bit too much to drink. In an attempt to get out of the verbal lashing they know is coming, Jonathan suggests that they switch places for the evening. By doing this, both men are going against the Buddhist Way in that they are forgetting the importance of right intentions and right actions. Buddhism tells an individual that his future depends on his motives,

intentions, and actions today. It is better for all concerned to avoid troublesome situations and to become less selfish. It is also better to do what one knows is right, rather than to do as one pleases (Das 132–35). According to right action, at times it is important to know when enough is enough, since drunkenness is frowned upon in Buddhist society (Das 249). Unfortunately for George and Jonathan, they are veering from the Buddhist Path.

Because both men are unwilling to suffer the consequences of their irresponsible behavior and also because of their inebriated state, they are oblivious to the possible repercussions of what they are about to do. This is where karma comes in, and changes life at Cripple Gate as everyone knows it. Karma is all about cause and effect. The choices one makes in life are binding and control what the rest of his life will be like. Good choices lead to more good karma, and bad choices lead to more of the same (Stroup 49). This fateful evening is the beginning for Andrew, yet it is "the end of tranquility at Cripple Gate" (Johnson 7). Life is never the same for any of the people involved—marriages and friendships do not recover. Little recognizes that "Because of his origins, in this improbable night, Andrew is at home nowhere, popular in neither the white nor the black world" (88).

Jonathan and George are never forgiven for their error in judgement on that evening. As a result, their respective wives never let them forget what they have done, and both men suffer through the rest of their lives in unrelenting guilt. Jonathan's guilt mixes with his feelings of responsibility towards Andrew, and he makes the decision to give the boy an education. In Hindu society, an individual goes through various stages of development. As a youth enters the community, he is required to fulfill society's expectations by becoming educated and learning social skills. *Brahmacharya*, or adolescence, is the student or learning stage in an individual's life (Stroup 155–73). At this point, Andrew is at the first stage of Hindu life, and his obligation to society is emphasized. By becoming educated, he is following the laws of *dharma*, or social duty (Little 86). In the introduction to *Oxherding Tale*, Johnson informs the reader that he

wants Andrew to be well educated so that when he takes off on his quest "for a deeper knowledge of the self, he is poised for whatever Eastern philosophy might offer" (xiv).

Enter Ezekiel, the tutor whose job it is to prepare Andrew for life. He gives Andrew a classical and moral education, heavy in Eastern thought, especially Buddhism (Johnson 12–13). Ezekiel is a very learned man, yet he has never found personal fulfillment. He has great respect for, and idolizes, Karl Marx. When Marx visits, Ezekiel's expectations lead to great disappointment. He expects Marx to be radical, but as it turns out, he is rather "normal"—a loyal husband and father (Johnson 84). Returning to the stages of personal development in Hindu culture, Marx is in the second stage, *grihasthya*, the married householder. As an adult, it is the householder's duty to do productive work, utilizing his education and skills (Stroup 165–71). Ezekiel gets the idea that maybe he should be a married man like Marx. Maybe love is what is needed to provide fulfillment. Ezekiel ignores both common sense and his own intuition. He goes against Tao principles, thus bringing about his own demise. Ezekiel tries to be something he is not, defying Buddhist logic that each individual must follow his own path. According to Watts, when an individual tries to force something, it generally does not work (64). This episode is a great learning experience for Andrew, since he knows the underlying practices of Eastern thought and knows this is not the way. Through Ezekiel, Andrew learns that to live according to the Dharma, one must be true to oneself. An individual cannot follow the path of another but must find a way of his own (Das 64–66).

During his stay with Flo Hatfield, Andrew becomes educated in other, more worldly ways. Flo is definitely not your typical Southern belle. She does not worry about what other people think, and she does as she pleases at Leviathan. Her life revolves around fulfilling her wants and desires, liberally using sex, alcohol, and drugs to attain this purpose. She lives for her own pleasure, using and then disposing of people at will. In fact, Flo considers self-denial to be the only sin. She fits almost

perfectly into the Buddhist description of the mind. According to McCandless and Senzaki, the mind is an endless chain of three processes: craving, acting, and discontent. These processes make up a cycle. An individual first craves, then acts on that craving by obtaining his desire, and then becomes discontent with what he has and begins craving once again (5–6). Flo's life is an endless cycle just like this, especially since she refuses to practice any form of restraint.

Jonathan Little describes Flo as a “spiritual artist of the senses,” who “believes that the body is a vehicle to the spiritual self, a way to enlightenment” (89). Hinduism helps to explain this statement by looking at why people do what they do. It examines their motives. It interprets the drives of an individual, which direct a person's actions and social objectives. Hinduism accepts that not everyone is motivated by the same drives. In Hinduism, there are four basic motives. The first two motives, pleasure and power, are based on self-expression, and these fit Flo perfectly. Hinduism accepts the fact that many people are devoted to their own pleasure. Since we seek to avoid pain as much as possible, this is considered natural. Hinduism also acknowledges that people are motivated by the desire to succeed. This use of power is considered legitimate since it would be used for constructive ends (Stroup 138–40). However, Flo uses power merely to dominate other human beings, and this is not acceptable. In her case, pleasure and power are completely self-centered. One who seeks to fulfill these desires for purely selfish reasons will often end up frustrated. The pleasure and power Flo has are meaningless to her. Her desires are insatiable; the more she gets, the more she wants. Hence, she will never have enough of either.

From Flo, Andrew learns “that lovemaking was magic; was, if properly understood, a Way” (Johnson 64). This way of the senses is not the way for him. Luckily for Andrew, he quickly realizes that this is not the path he wants to travel. He yearns for a more meaningful existence and does not want to continue dedicating his life to foolish and fleeting

...the mind is
an endless
chain of three
processes: craving,
acting, and
discontent.

pleasure. Andrew also recognizes that Flo is not going to pay him for his services at Leviathan. The relationship between Flo and Andrew soon deteriorates. Andrew's only friend, Reb, tries to intervene on his behalf. Andrew's time at Leviathan has not been a waste because he meets and becomes friends with Reb. This man is a healthy influence on Andrew's life, and from him, Andrew learns a great deal.

In his introduction to *Oxherding Tale*, Johnson briefly describes a few of the characters. He describes Reb as Taoist/Buddhist (xvii). These components are evident in Reb as he describes to Andrew his coffin making way. He doesn't do anything: “Things are done, that's all...I forget all about myself, and that's when I start looking round for a tree that wants to be a coffin” (47). In this way, Reb is using his Tao intuition to direct him on his path. To look at this from a Buddhist perspective, it is as though the coffin is already here and only needs to be awakened from the tree.

After the death of his wife and while struggling to save his daughter, Reb is enlightened. He realizes his only options are surrender and acceptance. According to Jonathan Little, Reb attains enlightenment after he begins to put others before himself and after surviving some humiliating experiences. He learns the key to survival can be found in surrender and acceptance. Reb is practicing Zen because he now chooses to devote “himself to a disciplined life of self-denial and sacrifice” (92). In Hindu culture, these two motives are grounded in the suppression of our desires. They are higher motives for living because they overcome what is lacking in the search for pleasure and power. While living in this way, one is guided by what is right and does not seek satisfaction for himself. He restrains his own pleasure, focusing on his duty. The principle of duty says that it is right to seek what is good for oneself and for others without letting desires or personal gain get in the way. Any satisfactions received from motives other than these two are incomplete and will not last. Living in this manner can lead one to

moksha, or salvation. *Moksha* looks to the attainment of a truly blissful state that is devoid of all human imperfections, whereby an individual can achieve absolute satisfaction (Stroup 139–40). Little concludes that Reb has broken away from the birth and death cycles, the restrictions of *karma* and *samsara*, and has achieved this spiritual freedom (103).

While Andrew is impatiently waiting for Reb to return from Flo's, where Reb has gone in an attempt to patch things up between Flo and Andrew, Andrew comes to the conclusion that Reb's way is the way of duty. Reb does not expect reward, pleasure, or pain. Andrew sees that Reb's way is through “strength and spiritual heroism—doing what must be done, dead to hope—but like Flo Hatfield's path of the senses, it was not *my* way” (Johnson 76–77). To pass the time, Andrew is looking about Reb's cabin and comes across Reb's sculpture of Andrew. Andrew only understands the first side, because it looks like he does now. He does not realize that Reb is foreshadowing his fate. Also, he misinterprets the blank side as the means by which to mount it. This blank side represents the blank frame in the “Ten Oxherding Pictures.” It also leaves the possibilities for Andrew's future wide open. In the mean time, Reb's attempt at ambassadorship fails, and Flo decides to dispose of these two, since they no longer please her. Like so many other men, Reb and Andrew receive the penalty of being sent to the Yellow Dog Mine.

Jonathan Little writes, “To avoid working in the mines and becoming further enmeshed in mere physical existence,” Andrew and Reb escape, fleeing north (90). They come across Horace Bannon, the Soulcatcher. Horace is in the business of returning runaway slaves. Both Reb and Andrew are familiar with him, for he helps Flo Hatfield recover missing property. In his introduction to *Oxherding Tale*, Johnson describes Horace Bannon as a “monstrous padderoll ... who plays upon black fears—and a rigid, essentialist notion of the self—to trap his prey” (xvii). This statement plays into the Tao concept that one must free himself from conventional definitions of himself, or he will never be free.

What is so scary about Horace Bannon is that he has the ability to capture a person's soul. The

soul is that part of an individual that lives on after physical death. This implies that he has so much power he can catch the intangible part of a human being. Horace horrifies Andrew, yet Horace accepts the nature with which he is born. Horace is like the Samurai of Japan, who apply Zen to the art of war. In a way, Horace is at war with those souls who are trying to escape from him, which may seem to come into conflict with the peace-loving doctrines of Buddhism. In actuality it does not because “the Buddhist experience is a liberation from conventions of every kind, including the moral conventions” (Watts 107).

Johnson also portrays Horace as a man of his word who has a particular principle he follows when tracking a slave. He does not kill a slave unless the slave has lost all hope of being free (117). Toward the end of *Oxherding Tale*, he explains to Andrew that he cannot catch Reb because Reb desires nothing and is already free. He also explains that it is time to retire from the slave-catching business, because he earlier took a vow to pack it all in if he ever ran across a man he was unable to catch. These conditions have been met, so Andrew and Reb are in no danger from Horace.

However, at this time, Andrew and Reb do not know this. Horace is playing on their fears as he explains that one thing he enjoys about his work is the hunt. They incorrectly assume that Horace is toying with them, when actually all he wants is some company during the remainder of the trip to Spartanburg. Beginning on the day of their escape from Leviathan, Andrew remakes himself. It is as if he has been reborn, merely because he gives himself a new name—William Harris. In Spartanburg, Andrew/William and Reb are free to begin a new life, so long as they do not slip up and can keep out of the clutches of the Soulcatcher. In Spartanburg, Reb decides to leave Andrew and take his chances up North. Andrew/William becomes a teacher and puts his classical education to good use. Ironically, one of his adult students is Horace Bannon. He also meets and marries Peggy Undercliff. He does not have much choice in this matter because her father knows William is a fake and cautions him not to disappoint his daughter. Though

Andrew's new identity is based on lies, he demonstrates that he has virtue, which is "doing beautifully what the moment demanded" (Johnson 120-39).

At this point, Andrew is happy because he is content with what he has. He appreciates his wife for what she has on the inside, understanding that a woman is more than a sexual creature. Forsaking their individuality, Peggy and Andrew become a team. Andrew is in the adult stage of life, doing productive work in the community, utilizing his education and skills. He is maturing and serving society. Just like Marx, Andrew is a married householder and is fulfilling his societal duties (Stroup 175-76). According to Little, "Andrew discovers, much to his surprise, that he is above all a family man, a householder, committed to his wife and to the community...at this point, the novel comes to a spiritual conclusion with Andrew's symbolic union with another person through love" (99).

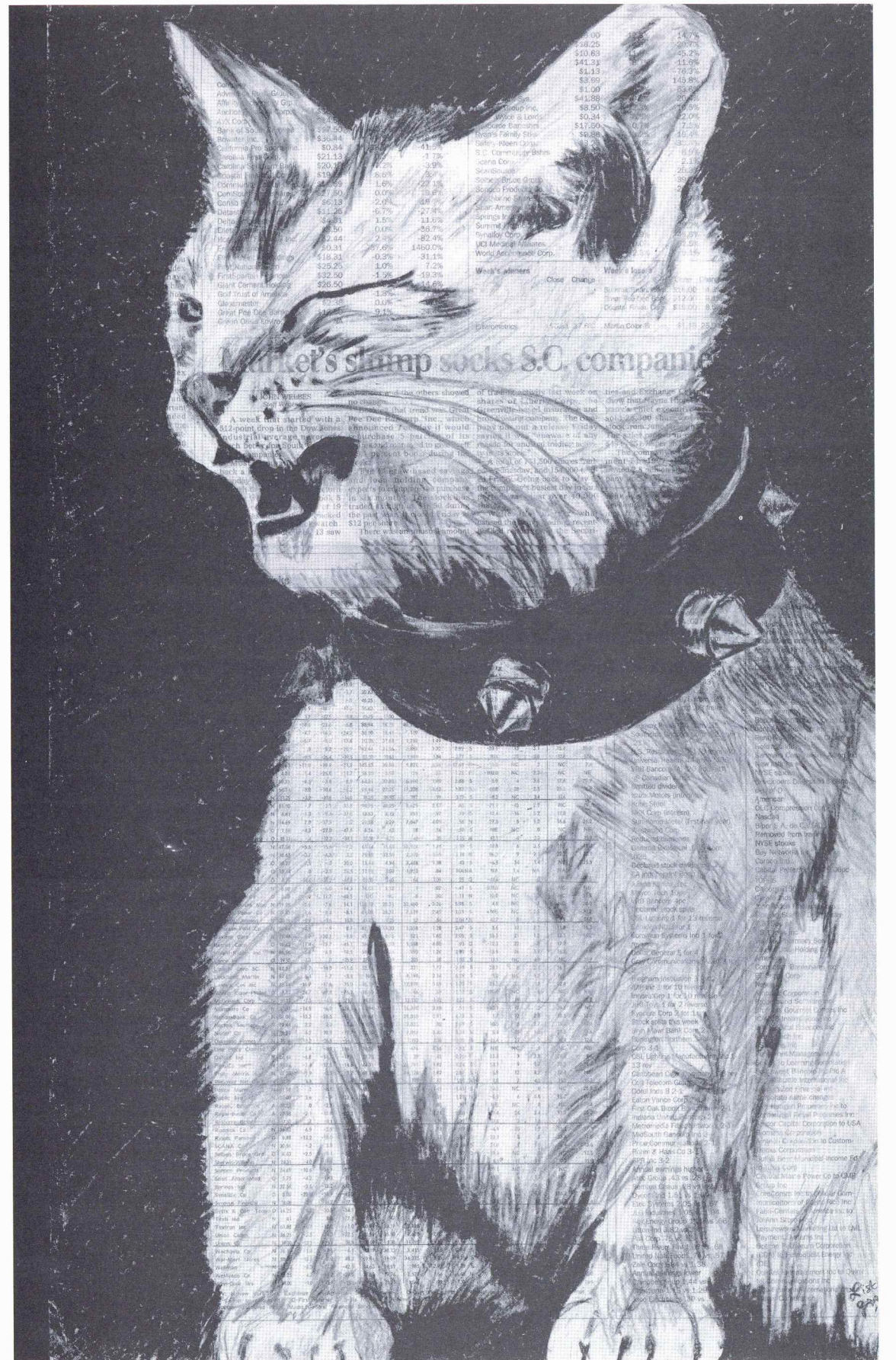
Lama Surya Das says that an individual can expect to meet obstacles on his way towards enlightenment. If an individual is prepared to meet these obstacles head on and is willing to change and to make personal sacrifices, he can defeat them. The primary challenges he will come up against are craving, ill will, sloth and spiritual laziness, restlessness, and doubt (89-91). On his way, Andrew deals with and overcomes several of these. One last obstacle falls in his lap when he comes across his first love, Minty, at a slave auction. He is forced to choose between doing the right thing and keeping his secrets about his past safe. Andrew makes the right decision, helping Minty, and in the process comes clean with Peggy about his past. He and Peggy show compassion for Minty. Because of them, she does not have to die alone. Andrew displays once again that he is virtuous. He is willing to place others before himself and to stand up for the weak and less fortunate. Andrew and Peggy show courage, strength, and compassion for their fellow human being, thereby demonstrating their own goodness. In Hindu society, these are components of the model individual (Stroup 136-37). Andrew and Peggy are fulfilling their duty to themselves, to each other, and to the community.

In the concluding chapter of *Oxherding Tale*,

Andrew again meets up with Horace Bannon. The reader learns of Reb's involvement in the Soul-catcher's retirement and also of the destiny of Andrew's new family (169-76). As illustrated in the "Ten Oxherding Pictures," Andrew has gone through several different stages. He learns who he is and what his purpose in this life is. He has finally found his own way, discovering that his dharma is that of the householder. He has "seen so many Ways since leaving Hodges—the student in Ezekiel, the senses in Flo Hatfield, the holy murderer in Bannon (Shiva's hitman), and Reb who was surely a Never-Returner" (Johnson 147). He learns important lessons from each. From his father George and his teacher Ezekiel, he learns to avoid misery. From Reb, he learns the importance of putting others before himself and becoming a useful part of the community. From his wife Peggy, he learns how to love. If Andrew does not learn through good example, he at least learns from Flo and Horace what he does not want to do. Most important, he learns that each must follow his own path. What is right and true for one man may not be for another. Jonathan Little, summing up the main point of *Oxherding Tale*, says that the novel follows Andrew's "philosophical and spiritual movement toward liberation and newfound freedom" (107). Andrew has been liberated from physical and mental bondage and is on the right path—his own. He is finally free.

WORKS CITED

Das, Lama Surya. *Awakening the Buddha Within*. New York: Broadway, 1997.
Gard, Richard A. *Buddhism*. New York: George Braziller, 1962.
Kauz, Herman P. *A Path to Liberation: A Spiritual and Philosophical Approach to the Martial Arts*. Woodstock, New York: Overlook, 1992.
Johnson, Charles. *Oxherding Tale*. New York: Penguin, 1995.
Little, Jonathan. *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination*. Columbia, Missouri: U of Missouri P, 1997.
McCandless, Ruth Strout, and Nyogen Senzaki. *Buddhism and Zen*. San Francisco: North Point, 1987.
Stroup, Herbert. *Like a Great River: An Introduction to Hinduism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.
Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro. *Manual of Zen Buddhism*. New York: Grove Press, 1960.
Watts, Alan. *The Way of Zen*. New York: Vintage, 1989.



LISA HUGHES-GRAY

Crime in the Country

JAMES W. EDWARDS, JR.

I stepped out of the pub. It was fairly late, and I had been indulging myself in the spirits for too long. A brisk wind hit me in the face as I turned and swaggered toward my car. I felt a shiver down my spine, the icy tingle on my cheeks telling me I'd had too much to drink to attempt the drive home. When I reached my car, I decided it would be a good idea to sit on a concrete bench in front of the library for a minute or two, just to be on the safe side. I thought maybe the combination of cold and wind would really sober me up. As I sat there I reflected on my life in D.C. I felt sad and alone. I even contemplated simply going home.

I was completely lost in my thoughts and an alcohol induced stupor when I first noticed five guys walking down the sidewalk to my left. I didn't get nervous, but I did wonder a little about them. My life in D.C. had been full of bad luck and suspicion. But as they passed they only asked, "What's up?" I replied, "Not much, just cold!" They walked on. I was just about sober enough to drive home when two more guys passed walking from my right to my left. We didn't exchange greetings. I figured maybe just one more minute and I would be good to go. That minute hadn't been completely fulfilled when the two guys turned the corner. I heard a muffled scuffling sound. The next thing I saw were the five guys running around the corner. When they reached the point where I sat, they slowed to a walk and gave the same greeting as before, "What's up?" My mind, muddled by alcohol, couldn't register what was going on. Then one of the two guys I'd just seen ran around the corner. I was surprised to see him quite bloodied. The guys in front of me began to run. "Stop them!" the bloodied pedestrian yelled out. "They jumped

us!" I was frozen for a minute. I didn't understand. Then my autonomic system took control, and I leaped to my feet in a heated pursuit. After two blocks of chase, I gave up and began to walk back to the scene of the crime.

As I turned the corner I could hear an ambulance siren in the distance. I could see the physical damage inflicted on the other of the two guys. Funny, all I remember now is the dark goopy liquid I knew to be blood flowing freely from his head onto the pavement. When the paramedics scraped his broken body into the ambulance, another chilling prospect ran down my spine. The five guys had scoped me out. Their intention had been to cut the block and come back and get me. The two guys they jumped just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. I knew then that my stay in Washington had reached its limit. Right then and there I decided to move home. In less than a week, I was looking at my '91 Plymouth loaded with all my possessions. I was a little afraid of the prospect of moving home. But I was also relieved at having made the choice to leave such a crime-ridden city.

The first night home my Dad and I talked extensively about my coming home. I was surprised that there wasn't the animosity that usually hung over our conversations. We decided it would be logical for me to stay with him for a while, at least until I could get on my feet. Definitely I was to move out as soon as possible. Nine stress-filled months later, it was time for me to go. This was fine; I had expected that I was to move out at some point. I just hadn't expected it to be on such bad terms.

This situation brought forth a very interesting

resolution. Pop told me of a good friend of his who owned a dairy, and on this dairy was a trailer he had rented out before. This friend was a good guy and would be pretty lenient with the rent. I assume as extra inducement. Pop hinted that I might even be able to work on the dairy to make up for any shortfall in the rent payments. An appointment was made for an introduction, and within two days I had seen the place. I remember turning onto the dirt road leading to the dairy for the first time. Enthusiastically Pop pointed to what seemed to be a small sliver of white in the distance and said, "There it is." The drive down the road seemed to take forever, but when we reached the trailer, it actually didn't look that bad. It was in need of some attention but did sport new blue carpet in the living room. To the right in one end was a nice-sized kitchen. To the left was a predictable hall leading first to the smaller of the two bedrooms. The next door was to a surprisingly large bathroom. Finally there were two more doors, one directly at the end of the hall, leading to the larger bedroom and another, on the left, leading to the outside. I immediately began to plan to have my bed placed against the wall in such a way that I would be able to lie in it and look down the hall into the other parts of the trailer.

I decided it wasn't too bad, nothing a good bucket of Chlorox couldn't fix, and started preparing for the move. On the first of September I was officially in my first rental property, all alone.

It was actually quite funny at first, in that I had lived in suburbia for so long, always with roommates, that my new-found singularity was a bit unsettling. I even went to the extreme of covering the small diamond-shaped window in the front door, my paranoia leading me to believe people were all around trying to spy on me. I knew this was silly; after all, I did not live in the city anymore. This was the country. Way, way out in the country as a matter of fact, but at any rate the anxiety, no matter how misplaced, seemed real.

I'm way out here in the middle of nowhere. I have no gun, no phone—what would I do?

Slowly I began to feel the place taking on a shape more in tune with me, and I actually began to refer to it as home. Yet I always seemed to have the same nagging question in the back of my mind: "What would happen if someone were to break in on me? I'm way out here in the middle of nowhere. I have no gun, no phone—what would I do?" Still my comfort level continued to take precedence over this anxiety, and by January I felt very comfortable. My roots had taken hold.

I'm not sure if that first winter was actually abnormally cold or if it just seemed that way in my mind because it was my first winter in the trailer, but it was cold; I do remember there being ice on the ground. I distinctly recall there being four calves born in the early part of the month.

Fate always seems to transcend time. It seems that it doesn't matter how many times you wash your car, it will rain immediately after you're finished. If you're on a farm and there are expectant animals, they will always hold birth off until the coldest, darkest days of winter. I've always felt this to be God's way of bringing warmth and life to an otherwise cold and desolate time of the year, a sort of Aristotelian balance to nature. At any rate, my landlord stayed near the dairy all that week keeping a close eye on his newborns. I followed my normal routine trying to ignore all the extra commotion.

I had gotten into the habit of watching the late movie on Sunday nights. It had become my personal time during the week, a sort of therapy. I especially needed the extra time to recoup from my usual Saturday night flings. I really had begun to feel myself slow down greatly from my D.C. days. The only disappointment in my Sunday therapy came in the form of being so sleepy that I would usually fall asleep before the end of the movie, missing the ending all together. This particular Sunday night I had a great treat in store for me. The movie *The Hindenburg* was playing. I hadn't seen it since I was a child and looked forward with the same child-like exuberance to seeing it again. I settled into the couch surrounded with a nice warm comforter as the movie began.

I guess the movie had been playing for thirty minutes when I first noticed the sound of a car door closing and the muffled garble of men talking. I thought, "Surely this is just my landlord on one more of his frequent checks on the newborn calves." I really didn't think much about it at that moment.

Then once again there was the sound of people talking and doors closing. I guessed that the landlord and his helpers were on their way home; after all, it was almost twelve-thirty in the morning. I turned my attention back to my movie. No sooner was I settled back into the familiar story line than I heard another door close and more men talking. I tried to decipher if the sounds I heard were those of men and women or just those of men. I became more alarmed and decided I needed to look out the window to get a clearer view of who was outside. No one was there. My mind spiraled. Surely, as clear as the noises were, whoever was making them would have to have been right in front of the trailer. I calmed myself and rationalized that it was possible that my position on the couch had caused me to misinterpret the direction of the sounds. I checked to make sure the commercials were still on as I began checking other windows. To my consternation all attempts to find my landlord failed. I really couldn't understand why I could hear the people so clearly but could not find them anywhere. Suddenly, just as the movie began, all the fears of my first months in the trailer returned.

Just as quickly, as I fell back into these fearful paranoid images, I reasoned myself back to the healthy cognitive state that had taken months to achieve. I decided, for the moment, to have another drink, just to calm my nerves, and to settle back into my comforter and the movie. After all, I was just psyching myself out, wasn't I?

Emotions are confounding things, though, because as hard as I tried, my mind kept slipping back into the notion of what would happen if someone were to break in on me. I had no gun and no telephone—what would I do? For the duration of the movie I flip-flopped between trying to concentrate on the movie, attempting to

control my overactive imagination, and continuing to hear sounds of doors closing and voices piercing the night. Near the end of the movie, I began to regain my confidence. I reasserted my cognitive control over my overactive imagination. I was going to conquer this fear.

The movie ended. Hearing the radio announcer describe the horrible event unfolding in front of him, I felt chills run down my spine. How interesting it was that so many people had actually survived this horrible tragedy. I realized that I hadn't heard any sounds for a while, lending credence to the idea that I had let my imagination run amuck and there was no reason why I shouldn't go to bed and get a good night's sleep.

I lay down, digging myself deep into my mattress and feeling a great sense of pride and comfort in having triumphed over my fears. I was more tired than I had realized and fell into sleep quickly.

Looking back now, I find it interesting how we might think we have conquered our minds and imaginations, and still they have a way of putting us back in our place. Ultimately, I guess I had the fear of someone breaking in on me, so strongly in the recesses of my mind that I began to dream of someone breaking in on me. I even remember thinking in my dream, "So you did psych yourself out, you dummy!" Suddenly I awoke. I lay there for a second, my mind fuzzy with sleep, knowing that I had really done a number on myself psychologically. I easily fell back into the comfort of my slumber.

I'm not sure exactly how long I slept when just as suddenly as the first time, I awoke. I lay there, unclear in my thoughts and feelings, not able to shake the sleep from my mind. I seemed to be fighting becoming completely awake especially for something so silly, and wondering why in the world I was waking so suddenly. Then the trailer shook! But that was simply the wind blowing against the sides. I hadn't gotten used to that sensation yet. I easily fell back into my unconsciousness.

I know that I couldn't have been into my relaxed state for more than a minute when I felt the small tremor of the trailer once more, this time escorted by a small single pop of metal. I opened

my eyes, shaking the sleep from my head. I knew that the wind must have created this latest hallucination to which I was not about to give in. I waited and listened for the wind. I was almost overcome by my sleep when the trailer shook again. I sat straight up in the bed realizing the wind had not blown at all, yet the trailer had trembled. Still not willing to believe anything my mind was trying to force on me, I sort of smiled and thought, "Boy, have you scared yourself silly. Now you're even dreaming that someone is breaking in on you." No sooner had that thought crossed my mind than simultaneously a tremor shook the walls around me and I could hear metal popping. "What is this popping noise?" I thought. Then a revelation hit me head on. I had not just been dreaming someone was breaking in on me but someone actually was, and I had been incorporating the noises and sensations into my dream.

Tears welled into my eyes as a fear gripped me that I had never felt in my life. My life was surely in peril. For the first moments of this concrete realization I was paralyzed. I had no gun, no phone. What was I to do? Then the trailer shook much harder than it had before, and the metal noise became very distinct. It was the sound of the rivets being pulled out of one of the windows. I could visualize someone prying them out with a flat-head screwdriver. I guess, paradoxically, I have to thank the hoodlums and their persistent attempts to get into my house. The last strong shake and the huge pop of metal brought me out of my paralyzed state and made me start to sift through my few options. After all, they could not know how many people were in the trailer with me, and they didn't know if I had a gun or not. I then decided to take a calculated risk. I decided to play a weird game of bluff by yelling out. It was a risk because I wasn't sure how much longer it would be before they were on top of me with their knives and guns, but maybe I could bluff these criminals into run-

It was the sound of the rivets being pulled out of one of the windows.

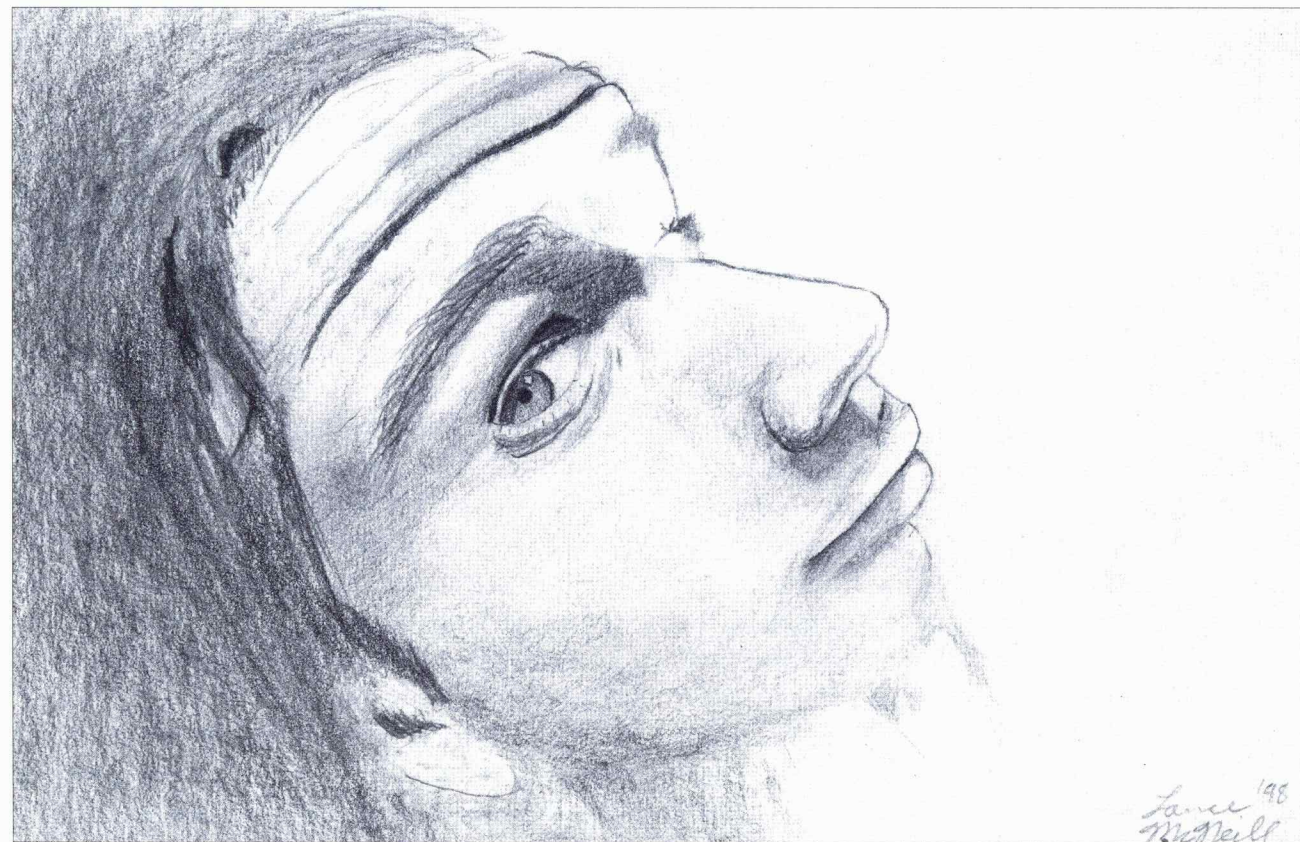
ning away. I took a deep breath, as deep as I could with fear's adrenal fluids constraining every part of my throat, and I yelled out. But the words only came out a weak scared whimper: "Whooo-oo-Who's there, Wha-wha-what do you want?" "Oh great, that was really forceful," I thought. The trailer shook even harder and the window was surely being pulled from its frame. I had nothing to lose, so I yelled out one more time, and this time, to my elation, the words came out very forcefully: "WHO'S THERE? WHAT DO YOU WANT? I HAVE A GUN!"

Every emotion, every sense I had was at its peak. I listened, I prayed, I looked, I thought. I didn't know what else to do. Then I realized the sounds had stopped. I waited just a couple more seconds and decided to yell one more time for good luck. Then I should go over to my Dad's house and call the police. My confidence built, and I yelled more clearly and forcefully than before, "WHAT DO YOU WANT? WHO'S THERE?" Yep, that must have done it. There were no sounds and no trembling of the trailer walls. I threw the blankets off my legs and placed my feet on the floor, my toes feeling for my pants. No sooner than my feet had touched the floor, the trailer shook as it had not shaken before. It was as if the thieves had been thinking about what their options were at the same time I had been thinking of mine. The metal began to rip and tear. I guessed they had made their decision to continue breaking in on me whether I had a gun or not. The trailer shook, the metal screeched, and I jumped to my feet. I thought, "If they're going to kill me they'll have to do it with me holding a butcher knife, damn it."

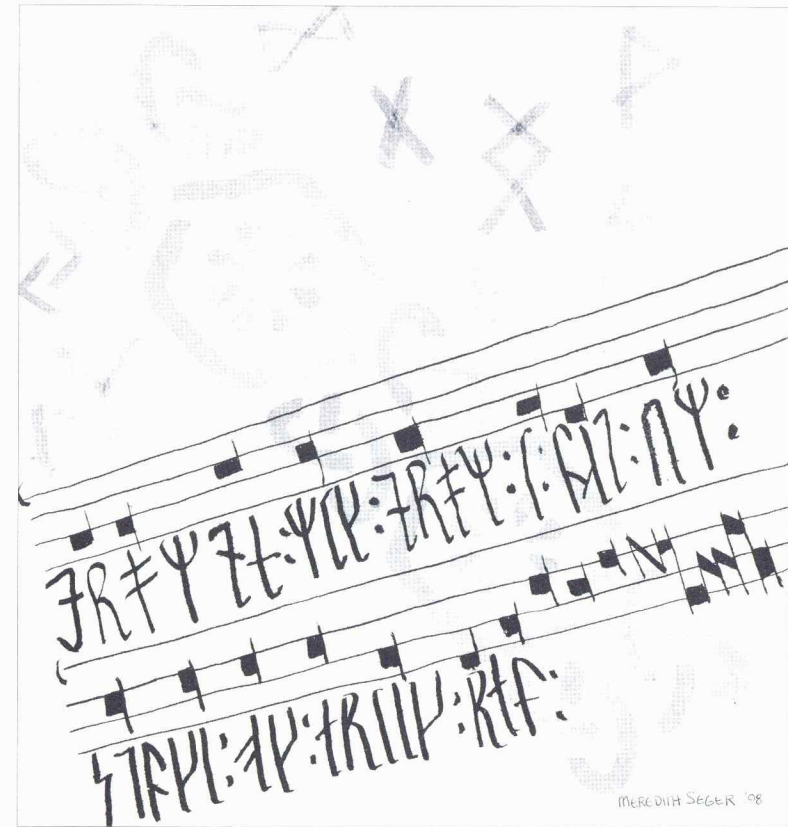
As I began to move to the kitchen, I tried desperately to figure out which window they had pulled out. I wanted to get at least that much of an upper hand on them. I passed the bathroom, but that window was too small for anyone to get into. I approached the extra bedroom door. I really felt this was the most logical place for entry, but fear kept me from actually looking inside the room. I guess I thought that if I didn't look in they couldn't see me either. Fear pushed me past. As I approached

the living room, a lump forged in my throat: "What if they're coming in one of the living room windows and are waiting for me?" Nonetheless, fear's gravitational force pushed and pulled me into the living room. I didn't look around, afraid I might see my attackers. I was home free. The kitchen was in sight. "But what happens if they take the knife from me and kill me with it?" I could just imagine the headlines in the newspapers, all the analyses of how I should not have made a stand. I had reached the sink. I decided that it was too late to re-analyze my options. The best I could do was to stay with the plan that had gotten me this far. I could feel the armed robbers on my heels. I took a last deep breath and reached across the sink into the drainer and grasped the butcher knife I had placed there earlier.

I lifted the knife. As my body swung around, something caught my eye for a split second. There it was, my nemesis, all clad in white, his broad strong shoulders a testament to the shear strength it would take to tear a window from its frame. His face was a cold, stony white. I can still see his dark eyes piercing through the window with a crazed determination. I faltered. Was I still dreaming? Was all before me reality or fiction? When I heard once again the muffled groan come from his bowels, I knew what I faced was real. I knew that which was before me to be my attacker, for that monster before me was the largest bull I had ever seen, slowly and methodically scratching himself on the corner of the trailer. I didn't know whether to be relieved or angry. I do know that it took me about four weeks to actually be able to sleep again.



LANCE MCNEILL



MEREDITH SEGER



PATRICK BURNETTE

Mistress

Hours' mistress sleep
wanders through shaded glen
dreaming the day awake
world's unwise
swimming in the drops shaken from her hair
tandem moments
oblivious fragments
foreboding is bottomless

Sweet wet creatures arise
placing their altar where she finds it
cold but welcome
in the dimmest recesses of love

She passes
unlikely faces stir in the hallowed well
stealing soulful condemnation
from the leering eyes of enemies
traitor betrothed
she doesn't know my name. . .

CHRISTOPHER B. WATTS

The Depiction of Women in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

ANA KELLETT

THE female characters in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are considerably varied in personality and overall significance to the plot, yet they all share the quality of being stereotyped in a most unflattering manner. As characters, they are far less developed than the numerous males in the story and seem in fact to represent misguided sociological ideas rather than real people. Ranging from innocent dullards to conniving bitches, every female character is presented in an extremely negative fashion.

The infamous Big Nurse has often been described as the quintessential bitch. Early in the novel, the narrator establishes Big Nurse's dominating image with powerful descriptions pouring forth from his schizophrenic mind. Chief Bromden relates to the reader, "I've watched her get more and more skillful over the years. Practice has steadied and strengthened her until now she wields a sure power that extends in all directions on hair-like wire too small for anybody's eye but mine; I see her sit in the center of this web of wire like a watchful robot, tend her network with mechanical insect skill, know every second which wire runs where and just what current to send up to get the result she wants" (26–27). Bromden sees her as a malevolent spider plotting and scheming from her web. Upon observing his first official ward meeting, McMurphy immediately proclaims, "...what she is is a ball-cutter" (58). At this point McMurphy first perceives that Big Nurse thrives on the emasculation of her patients. And after a lengthy tirade dedicated to defending her honor, even Harding finally breaks down and whispers, "Oh the bitch, the bitch the bitch"(60). Further evidence

of Big Nurse's intimidating essence can be found in the Chief's account of her anger at hearing McMurphy sing in the shower: "Her nostrils flare open, and every breath she draws she gets bigger. . . . She works the hinges in her elbows and fingers. I hear a small squeak. She starts moving, and I get back against the wall, and when she rumbles past she's already big as a truck, trailing that wicker bag behind in her exhaust like a semi behind a Jimmy Diesel. . . . I can smell the hot oil and magneto spark when she goes past, and every step hits the floor she blows up a size bigger, blowing and puffing, roll down anything in her path! I'm scared to think *what she'll do*" (93). Unlike most of the other men, the Chief seems to have no trouble admitting to himself that he actually fears Big Nurse. Later he describes her as stabbing him with her eyes as he walks past (143). This image indicates a type of psychological harm that she inflicts on all the patients. Even in the face of inappropriate comments and pinchings from McMurphy, Big Nurse maintains her icy composure, "just like she was above him, and sex, and everything else that's weak and of the flesh" (151). The fact that Big Nurse remains untouchable despite McMurphy's sporadic attempts to dominate her through sexual harassment seems almost to deny her femininity.

Harding's wife, who is not given the courtesy of a first name, has characteristics similar to those of Big Nurse. She has the same appetite for power and the same fetish for emasculation. During her visit to the institution, she chides her already insecure husband, "Dale, when are you going to learn to laugh instead of making that mousy little squeak?" (172). The most noticeable difference

between Harding's wife and the nurse is the former woman's poor level of education and her role as a sex object. In fact, the reader's most vivid images of Harding's wife arise from her large breasts and her incorrect grammar. In the words of Harding himself, "My dear sweet but illiterate wife thinks any word or gesture that does not smack of brick-yard brawn and brutality is a word or gesture of weak dandyism" (41). During her visit, Harding patronizingly corrects her grammar and calls her "my bright little child" (173). These comments indicate an appalling lack of respect, probably stemming from his own feelings of inadequacy. Harding's jealousy over his wife's sexuality (and other men's illicit enjoyment thereof) appears to be well-founded. She openly flirts with McMurphy and, when lighting a cigarette, leans forward provocatively so that "even clear across the room" Chief Bromden can see beneath her blouse (173). Upon her departure McMurphy comments on her one good quality: "She's got one hell of a set of chabobs" (174).

Billy Bibbit's mother, who is also denied a first name, is yet another overbearing female character. Although friends with Big Nurse, Ms. Bibbit's silliness and frivolity set her apart remarkably. Chief Bromden describes her in his narrative as "a solid, well-packed lady with hair revolving from blond to blue to black and back to blond again every few months" (281). Bromden goes on to recount a scene from his memory in which Ms. Bibbit made her thirty-one-year-old son Billy lie in her lap while she tickled him with a dandelion and made kissing noises, to the unspeakable embarrassment of both Billy and the other men. Like Big Nurse, Ms. Bibbit is, in her own way, a "ball-cutter."

The final dominating female is Chief Bromden's mother. A white woman who married an Indian, Mrs. Bromden retained her last name and imposed it upon her husband as well. Bromden confides to McMurphy, "He [Bromden's father] was real big when I was a kid. My mother got twice his size" (207). Bromden perceives power in terms of size. Thus, he communicates that Mrs.

Bromden became so dominating within their household that his father was reduced to only half a man. He later remembers in a stream of consciousness his mother's harsh words to his father: "You're the biggest by God fool if you think that a good Christian woman takes on a name like Tee Ah Millatoona" (272).

On the other side of the spectrum are the more benign female characters who nonetheless occupy equally negative roles. Big Nurse's assistant shows herself to be neurotic and prudish when she wildly berates McMurphy as he innocently tries to help her recover an item she dropped. "Stay back! Patients aren't allowed to enter the— Oh, stay back, I'm a Catholic!" (80).

Candy and Sandy, the two prostitutes from Portland, embody the concept of the frail and incompetent woman. Candy especially is often described as appearing girlish and awkward.

When she comes to the ward to participate in the fishing trip, Chief Bromden observes, "She must've been seen with lots less [clothing] by lots more men, but under the circumstances she began to fidget around self-consciously like a schoolgirl on a stage" (219–20). At the docks when some fishermen are making offensive comments to her, Candy simply withdraws like an injured child. Chief Bromden states, "She pulled the collar of the jacket high around her neck and hugged her elbows and strolled as far away from us down the dock as she could go" (230). She makes quite a ridiculous spectacle trying to reel in a fish. "She's on her feet, got the butt of the pole scissored in her crotch and both arms wrapped below the reel and the reel crank knocking against her as the line spins out...everybody on board sees the T-shirt she had on is gone..." (237). Later in the novel, when Candy and Sandy show up together on the ward for their clandestine midnight rendezvous with the patients, Candy explains that they are late because they had to keep asking for directions at every bar they passed (in spite of the fact that she had been there before for the fishing trip). Furthermore, in the midst of her drunkenness, Sandy suddenly ex-

*Stay back!
Patients aren't
allowed to enter
the—Oh, stay
back, I'm a
Catholic!*

claims, "I gotta...go tinkle" (289) and proceeds to giggle and bump into every object in sight on her way to the bathroom. These passages paint a grotesque picture of women if taken generally.

Last but not least, there is Judy, the prepubescent child McMurphy claims to have devirginized when he was ten. One is compelled to question the reality of McMurphy's account of this incident. After all, how many eight- or nine-year-old girls offer themselves to be devoured by ten-year-old boys? However, if McMurphy's tale is to be taken as truth, this slutty youngster serves as yet another negative portrayal of the feminine gender.

Of course, there are countless more general references to women which may be considered disrespectful. McMurphy tries to motivate Chief Bromden by describing a scene to him in which he is "big" again and everyone is awestruck. "Comes stompin' through town, stops just long enough for virgins, the rest of you twitches might's well not even line up 'less you got tits like muskmelons, nice strong white legs long enough to lock around his mighty back, and a little cup of poozle warm and juicy and sweet as butter an' honey..." (211–12). On Candy's first visit to the ward, Bromden observes that the doctor "was eyeing the blond girl's T-shirt like nothing else existed" (221). McMurphy calls Judy a "little whore" (245), and Candy is occasionally referred to as "the girl" (239).

It is worthy of note that Candy and Sandy, despite their many deficiencies, provide significant emotional as well as sexual relief in stark contrast to the accustomed feminine oppression of Big Nurse. Whereas for a large part of the novel Chief Bromden allows himself to be completely castrated by the Combine and all its dictators, his concept of his own manhood changes dramatically

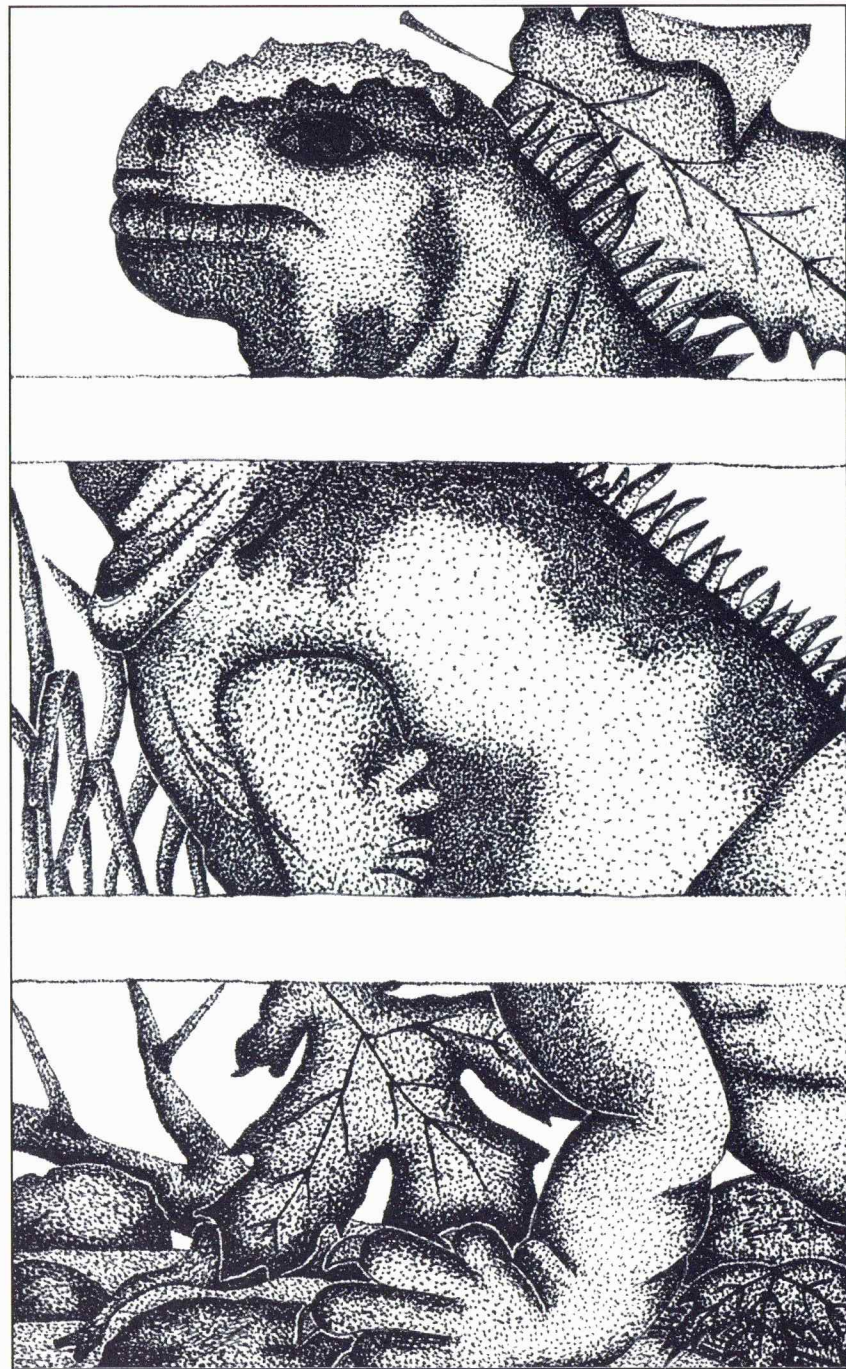
when he finds he will be able to join in the fishing trip. That day when the black boys try to put him to work, Bromden walks away and thinks to himself, "A man goin' fishing with two whores from Portland don't have to take that crap" (213).

Literary critic Leslie Horst has some definite ideas about Kesey's depiction of women in this novel. According to Horst, "The implicit statement seems to be that women who violate our deeply ingrained social expectation that they occupy an inferior social status are freaks of nature" (466). She goes on to explain, "The plot demands that the dreadful women who break rules men have made for them become the targets of the reader's wrath....Although we may not notice it, we are absorbing a very negative view of women and a most unconstructive view of the relationship between the sexes" (471).

Horst's concerns may be valid, but they are no reason to reject all that the novel has to offer. Female readers need not take umbrage at the negative portrayal of women. They can tolerate it as a necessary component of the novel, and one which adds to its effectiveness. Taken as a whole, the novel does not revolve around a battle of the sexes, but a battle of the individual against society, and the reader must be careful not to lose sight of this theme.

WORKS CITED

- Horst, Leslie. "Bitches, Twitches, and Eunuchs: Sex-Role Failure and Caricature." *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: Text and Criticism*. Ed. John Clark Pratt. New York: Penguin, 1996. 464–71.
- Kesey, Ken. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: Text and Criticism*. Ed. John Clark Pratt. New York: Penguin, 1996. 3–311.



MICHELE PRATHER



MEREDITH '98

MEREDITH SEGER

