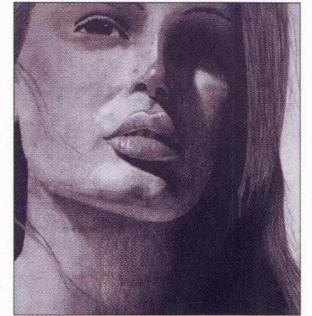


STYLUS



1999/2000

the literary annual of midlands technical college

STYLUS

1999/2000

THE LITERARY ANNUAL OF
MIDLANDS TECHNICAL COLLEGE

***Stylus* 1999–2000**

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Stylus Awards

Creative Nonfiction

FEI HE

Fiction

CHRISTOPHER B. WATTS

Poetry

KEIANA PAGE

Art

JOSEPH L. JAMES

ANTIGONE

I stand for
 The ones I don't necessarily like
 but adore;
 Sweet with a sting
 like the honeybee
 Black Antigone
 that's me
 Cocoa butter before it's rubbed on
 the skin;
 that's the color
 This Antigone
 is in
 Full kissable lips
 can tell
 more worth than womanly space
 between hips
 Peace of mind
 and knowledge is key
 words from
 KMGP
 Black Antigone
 inside me.

KEIANA PAGE

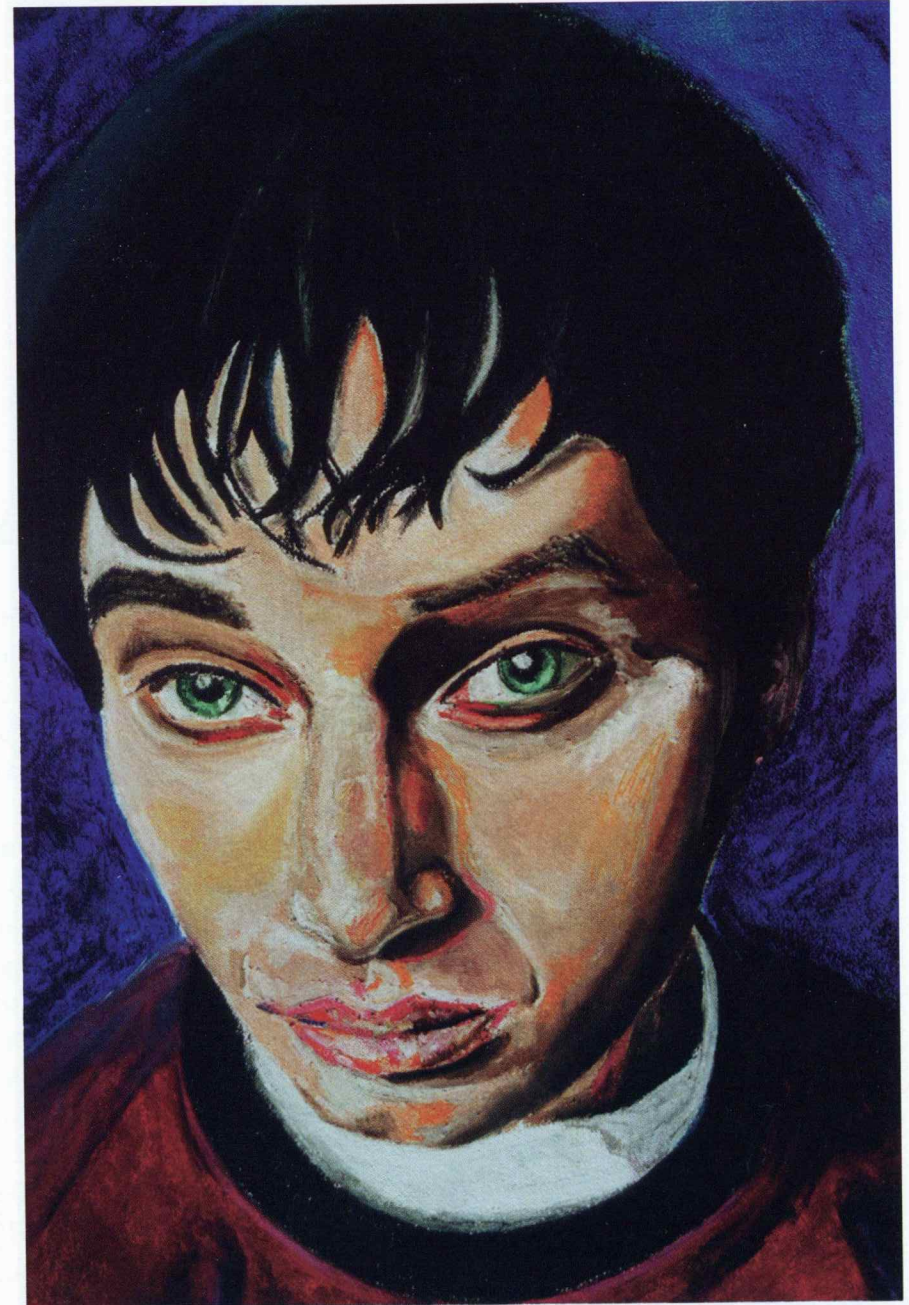


MICHAEL BOLIN

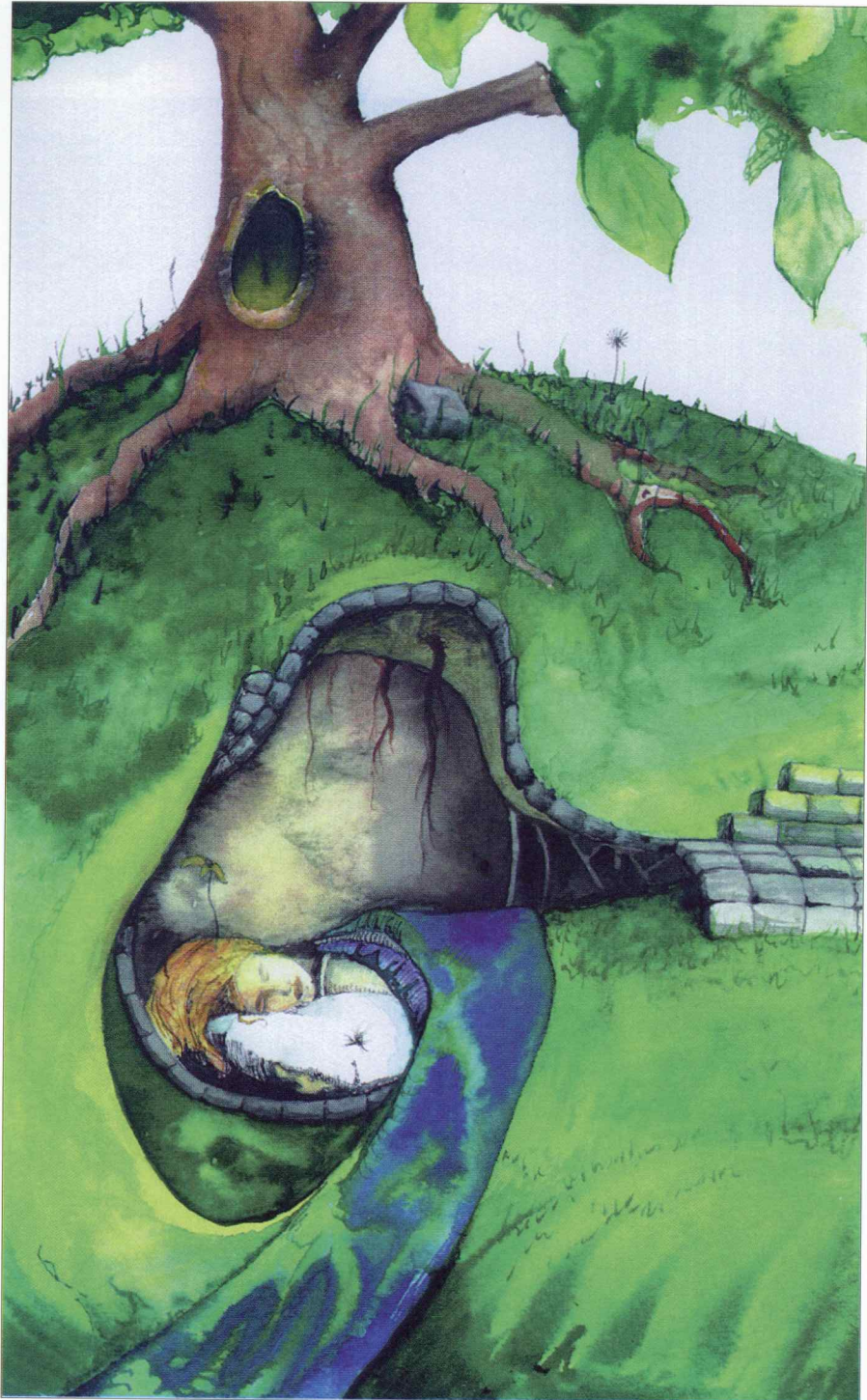
A Turtle with a Glass Shell

A turtle with a glass shell has nothing to hide
Because everyone in the world knows what's inside
Like if his heart gets broken he doesn't have to show
He doesn't have to shed a tear 'cause everyone will know
Or when he pulls his head inside you can see when he's crying
He can't hold them back, no matter what, he keeps trying
He's all alone and he can't break the spell
Just a lonely turtle with a glass shell

HERMAN MIDDLETON, III



JEFFREY SMITH



DYLAN FOUSTE

Folktale

CHRISTOPHER B. WATTS

A LONG TIME AGO, nearly ten times as long as anyone living can remember, there was a little boy born out of the bark of a tree. He was born at night, in the bough of a great oak, in a forest full of very old and very large trees. He sprang from the bark of the oak into the night, with the sounds of crickets and cicadas welcoming him into the world. There was no mother or father to lift him up and hold him. When he opened his eyes, and heard the insects singing around him, he asked himself: “What lovely music is that?” Since no one came to answer him, he stood, and stretched, and leaped from the tree to the ground.

The bugs in the grass below heard his question and had come out to greet this boy from the tree. They danced out from the grass, quivering and shaking in their precise little insect movements. They gathered around him in a large circle, swaying back and forth with antennae and eyestalks waving, thoraxes and legs bouncing up and down in a great frenzy of excitement. Moths and fireflies spiraled around him. Curious, they occasionally landed on his pale skin or his dark hair before flitting off again. For a long while the bugs stared at the boy, as if deciding something. The boy looked back with his eyebrows raised. He hunched down on his heels to see them better, and waited.

Just when the boy was beginning to think they were going to let him squat for the rest of the night, a large blue beetle came hobbling out from the crowd. All the other insects moved aside to make room, and most lowered their heads at its approach. They continued to jitter and twist around their legs, but the ones closest to the beetle were almost still. Its shell was smooth and glowed from the

inside, and the boy thought he heard a slight chime every time it moved another foot forward. The beetle raised its head, and the boy was delighted to see its face was very feminine and beautiful. The beetle motioned with a foreleg for the boy to lean nearer.

“I am Chyrsta, the elder of minutes. Welcome to us.” She rubbed her front legs together and grinned. “We hold a festival this night every year, hoping each time will be the night when a boy is born from the sacred oak. We are pleased you are here, and that the time is at hand. Come with me now, if you are cold or hungry — I’m sure you must be, as you’ve just been born.” The rest of the crowd jumped up and down, laughing and applauding at their leader’s acceptance of the boy.

The boy smiled and followed as the great beetle turned about and began moving back into the dense vegetation. The boy was given beautiful silk clothes and plate after plate of food, more food than he could ever have imagined. He fell asleep just as the sun began rising over the tree where he was born, settling into the fine soft grass of the clearing.

He spent many months with the insects in the clearing, not wishing for anything more than what the insects provided him. Seasons changed, the days flowing like a river around the bugs in their happy home. Then the trees lost their leaves, the grass died, and the boy began to fear for the safety of Chyrsta and the other bugs. He felt the cold was coming. The insects began preparing to retreat below the ground. They told him that he must go out and find others of his own kind so that he could last through winter, as they had no hole or nest big enough for him. They told him he could come back when the world had warmed up again.

“Well, before I go, I would like to know something.” The boy stood with his hands on his hips, a strange look on his face. The bugs gathered around him, staring and waiting for him to ask his question. Chyrsta ambled up to him and smiled.

The boy knelt in front of her and asked: “Why is it that you always dance? I don’t ever hear music, but you are always moving in those shaking, jittering movements; you must be dancing, and you’ve done it every minute of every day that I’ve been here.”

“We will tell you one day; right now we have to prepare for winter, and we

have no wood with which to make fires. Will you go to the lady across the woods and get some from her? She’s one of your kind and should be willing to help.” The bugs went back to work and would answer no more of the boy’s questions, no matter how he whined. They were singing:

*What do you ask, so deep in the woods?
Why do you ask us? Our dance is understood.
The winter is coming and we have no wood.
The winter is here and there is no wood.*

The boy agreed, and the bugs went to work once more. He walked and walked, over hills and through vast clearings in the forest. Finally, he came to a wood hut with smoke coming from the chimney and went to the door. The house had a red roof and a large woodshed with piles and piles of wood sticking out from underneath. He knocked at the door.

Knock, knock, knock. “Hello?”

A song came to his ears, quiet on the wind:

*What do you want, so deep in the woods?
What do you need, here at this house?
The winter is coming and we have no wood.
The winter is here and there is no wood.*

The boy scratched his head and knocked again, this time harder. Nothing changed, and not wanting to take the wood without first asking, he left for the clearing and the bugs. He walked and walked, through streams and across fields. Finally, he returned to the clearing where the bugs were dancing and working, working and dancing. This time their dance was more frantic, and their movements feverish. They were still singing their song.

*What do you ask, so deep in the woods?
Why do you ask us? Our dance is understood.
The winter is coming and we have no wood.
The winter is here and there is no wood.*

When the boy told Chyrsta what had happened when he reached the house, she suggested that he didn’t wait long enough. She told him to go back, and to wait until someone answered. The boy walked and walked. When he reached

the house it was dark, and a light was on inside. He knocked on the door:

Knock, knock, knock. "Excuse me, is anyone home? Hello?"

The wind was still, but he heard a song from far away, singing:

What do you want, so deep in the woods?

What do you need, here at this house?

The winter is coming and we have no wood.

The winter is here and there is no wood.

The boy beat on the door, but no one answered. It was cold and dark. He went to the side of the house, to the woodshed, and took some wood. Not many, just two or three pieces. Then he went back to the bugs' clearing. The bugs were still dancing, but were no longer working. They were having a party, dancing in a great circle, the rings moving in opposite directions like a hoe-down. The smallest ring, on the inside, moved left to right. The next largest circle moved the opposite direction, and so on. There were sixty rings.

The beetles were wearing tuxedos, except for Chyrsta who was wearing a long robe and a crown. The crickets were wearing tee shirts and jeans, and the slugs weren't wearing anything — if they had, it would be dirty as soon as they had put it on. Besides, it is fashionable to be nude at a party. Especially an all-night party, as theirs was. The boy watched them, laying the wood near the fire and sitting cross-legged in front of their circle. He fell asleep to the sound of a song floating in the air:

What do you see, so deep in the woods?

Why can't you hear? Our dance is understood.

The winter is coming and we have no wood.

The winter is here and there is no wood.

When he awoke the next morning, all the bugs were gone — all except Chyrsta. The beautiful blue beetle's shell was dull and dirty. He walked over to her, and leaned down to ask her if she was all right. That was when he noticed her shell was empty, and that a smooth white circle had replaced her body and her lovely feminine face. There were little black dashes at even spaces all the way around the circle, and a soft chiming sound came from within the shell, in rhythm with the movement of two arms with black triangles on the end. One arm was smaller than the other, and moved much more often. The big one only

moved a little — once every sixty movements of the little arm. There was a slight "click" when this happened. Chyrsta's pretty blue bug legs were stretched out and were hard together in a horseshoe shape. He picked her shell up and held it in his hand. He walked around calling for his bug friends to come back out, but they never did.

The boy was saddened, but he left for the small house again, cradling Chyrsta's shell in his arms. He walked and walked, over hills and through vast clearings in the forest. Finally, he came again to the wood hut with the red roof and smoke in the chimney. He went to the door and knocked. As the door swung open, the shell clicked against his wrist, the legs closing together on the underside, the face with the black hands up. It fit perfectly, and as it did, he left it there. There was a beautiful young woman sitting inside, and she looked at him as she sang:

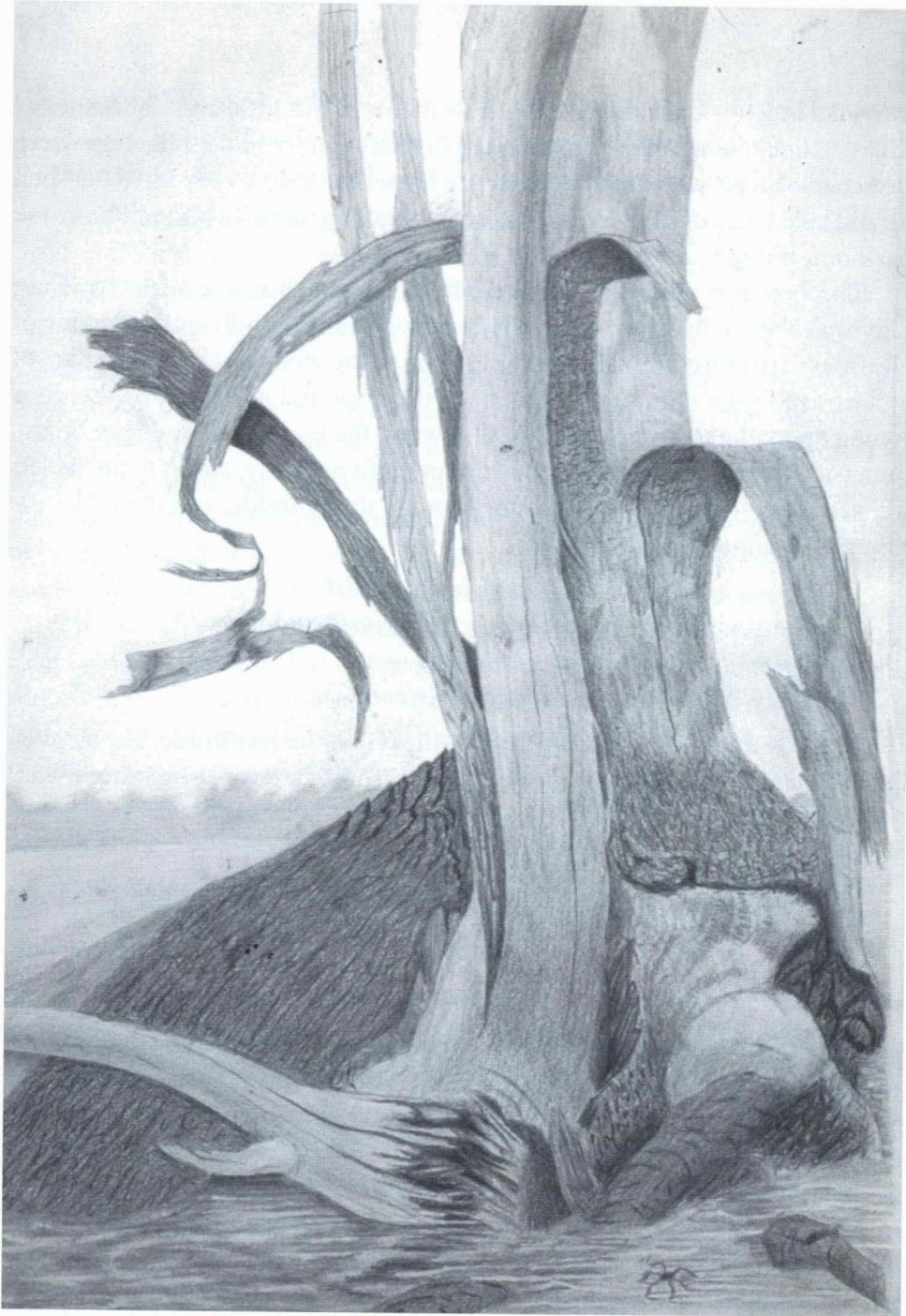
Do you hear the time now, deep in the woods?

Can you make sense of our dance, the dance we understood?

The winter is coming and we have our wood.

Our friend on your wrist, this time for our wood.

The boy closed the door and stepped the rest of the way inside. He was well fed and well clothed for the rest of his life. And he was never late getting wood.



JOSEPH L. JAMES

For a girl I do not know:

golden

holy un-girl
swaddled

in pain & ink
velour surface] skin
white grape (eye) — hair/flat
stalking
40's)men in)

cold waiting...blank
laughter cue fag

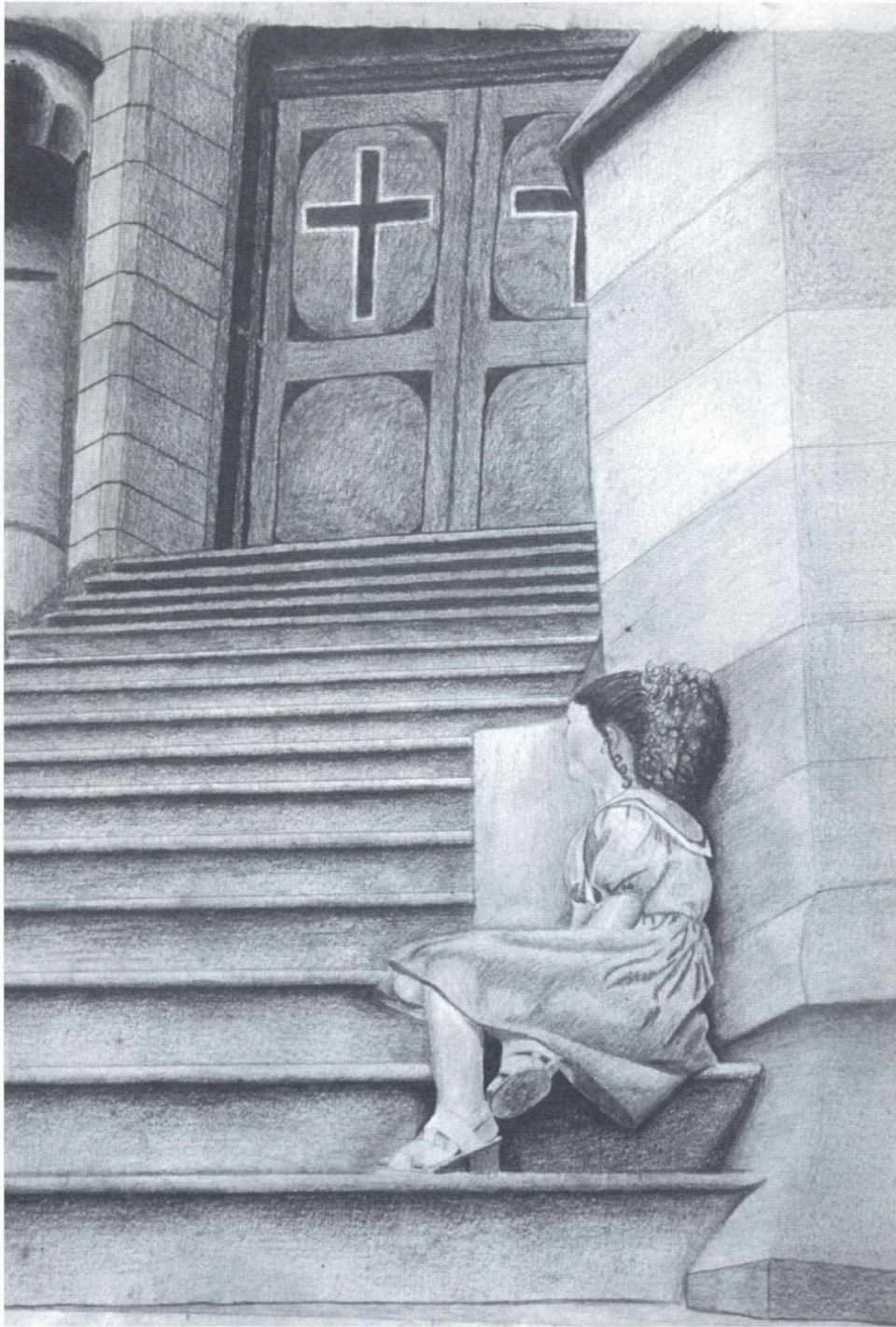
SOLID

SOILED

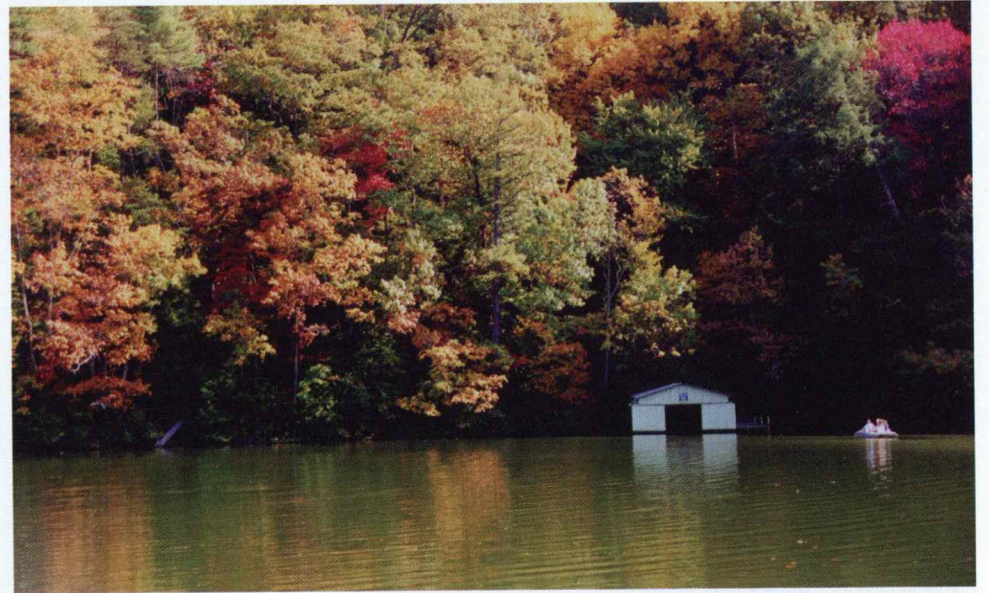
hairless pink
thumb \ atrocity
quiet bathroom heels
coached
in tuxes
booze
&metal

RODS

CHRISTOPHER B. WATTS



JOSEPH L. JAMES



JIN HEE KIM



JIN HEE KIM

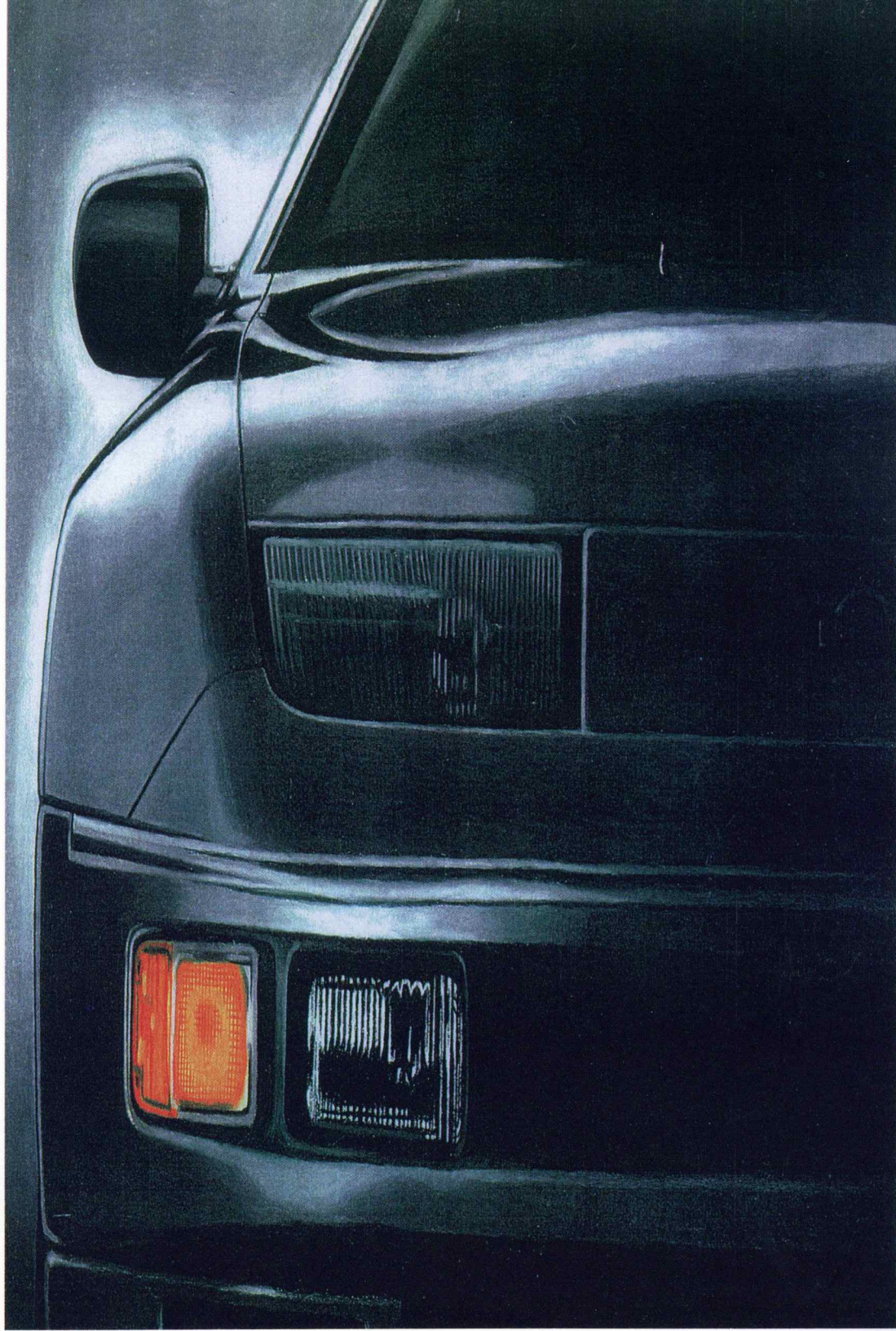
A Love Affair for over Forty Years

ANN FITZGERALD

I've had a love affair for over forty years. I've been personally involved and legally tied to the likes of Ford, Chevy, Plymouth and Datsun and — don't let me forget — Yamaha! I have a passion for anything with wheels, and the bigger the engine the better.

One of my earliest snippets of memory is of my car seat — it had a steering wheel! I went through the roller skates, homemade skate boards, go-carts (that one ended when I ran into a Mr. Softee ice cream truck. Mr. Softee had a foul mouth that day!). When I graduated to bicycles I'll never forget begging my mom to "Please! Take the training wheels off my bike! I know I can ride without them I know I can!" She took them off and after a false start or two I did it! Then one day I inherited my older cousin's bike. It was much larger than my old bike. It had boy's style frame. I rode it everywhere for years. To this day I still own a boy's style bicycle and just can't get used to a girl's style bike. I keep swinging my leg over the top bar, even though it's not there!

Like any teenager, I just itched for the day I could legally drive. My mom never knew I didn't wait for the driving lessons she finally gave me. I was riding the back roads of the area and having a ball long before I was sixteen. The day I passed my driver's test was one that I will always remember. It was the start of freedom. With a license and vehicle, nothing or no one could keep me down. The legal



right to operate a vehicle is as sacred to me as my wedding vows. Though I have jeopardized my driving privileges. You see, I have a physical deformity in my right foot. It's called "Lead Foot." It can be a real burden. It gets me into trouble faster than anything else.

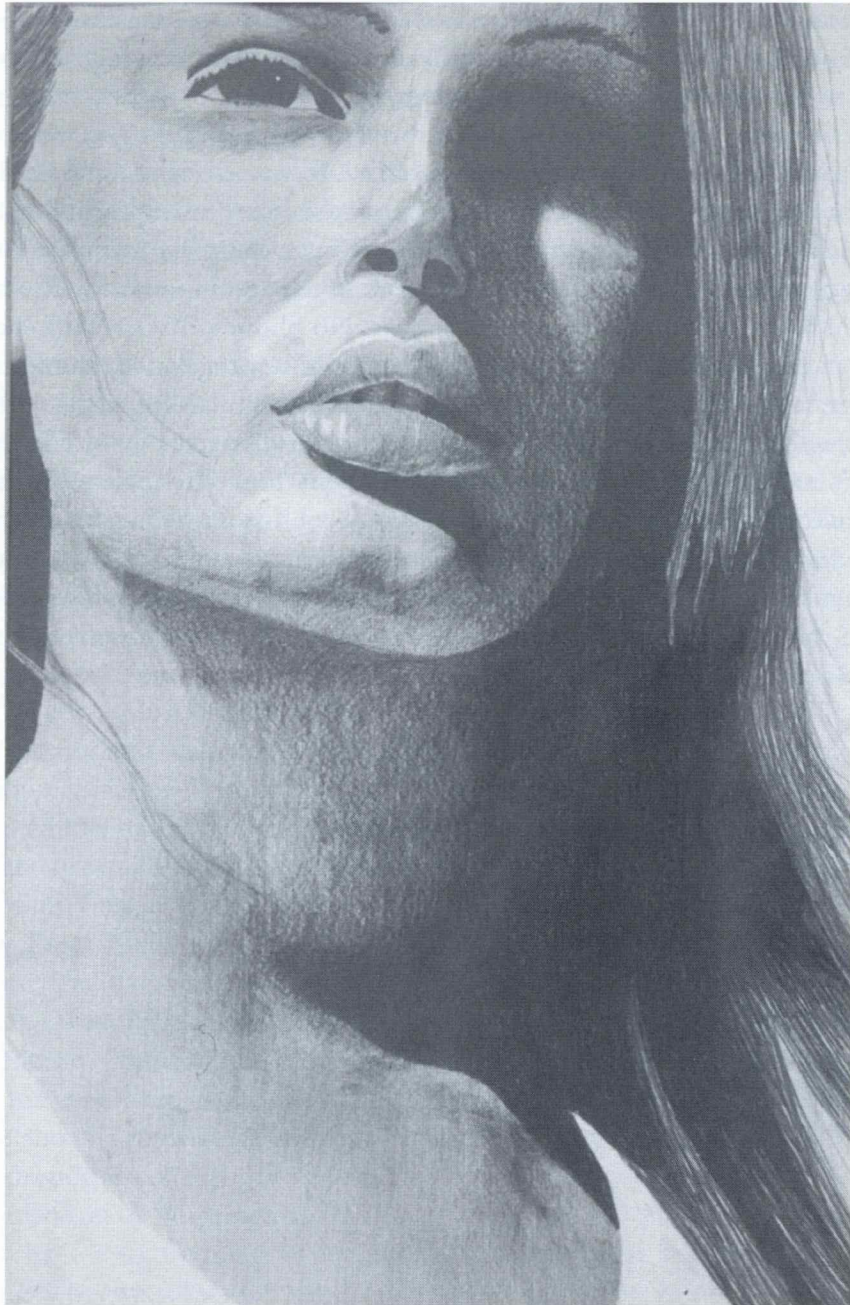
You know, driving — or rather the word *driving* — is a big part of our everyday vocabulary. Just think about it. We have terms like: you're *driving* me crazy, pure as the *driven* snow, *driven* insane, she/he is a *driven* individual, *drive*-in movies, *drive*-by shooting, *driving* range, and in the world of computers, let's not forget the C *drive*!

I have slept and eaten in my car, changed clothes in parking lots, changed clothes while driving, changed drivers while driving, lost my innocence, started relationships, ended relationships, almost ended my life, met my husband and seen a vast portion of the USA from my car. I've traveled from Maine to Florida and all points in between. I drove myself and eighteen-month-old son to New Mexico just to visit my sister. Been chased by bad guys, stopped by good guys, stuck in the sand, changed a few tires, been towed, wrecked and challenged to race. One thing I've been lucky at, though, was in picking up hitchhikers. Never got a bad one, except the one that stole my hand-embroidered jean jacket.

I suppose my love of travelling and the transportation comes naturally from my mother and her family. I am part Lebanese on my mom's side and so I attribute this need to be on the move to some desert nomad gene. My mother was a widow with three young children and when she saved up enough money to get us a car, it was a great day! It was a '66 Plymouth Valiant, V6, automatic. She let me help pick out the color. It had a maroon exterior and deep red interior. I was about fifteen when she got it and anxious to get behind the wheel. Once she got that car, there was no stopping the woman. She drove everywhere. When I was eighteen she wanted to make a pilgrimage to a famous church up in Ontario, Canada. I did most of the driving and I learned all my city parking and maneuvering, do-or-die habits from the Canadians. They drive like the Parisian taxi cab drivers you see in the movies. They are crazy! Now I look at city driving as a challenge to be enjoyed. I can now drive with the best of them from Boston to Washington, DC.

The love of driving goes beyond just getting around. It's all mixed in with the need to control something powerful and bigger than you but you have the

key, you position the car, tell it when to stop and go. Driving can take your mind off of problems or take you temporarily away from them. Driving is mobility and knowing you are free to come and go. It's the means of getting away from a bad situation, and the means of going forward with your life. You move to a new town, go to a new job, start a new life. Of course this can also be done without owning a vehicle, but driving opens up so many more possibilities and new adventures. Sometimes my husband and I are so busy before a trip that we don't get to talk for several days until we're in the car on our way. We have several hours of uninterrupted time to talk. No phones, TV or work/home obligations. When my son was growing up, sometimes it was more comfortable to take a drive and then talk about what was on his mind. My car is one of the few places I am most comfortable, and if that is where I need to be to talk about what's bothering me, then let's go for a drive. Just think, the automobile is the "mobile psychiatrist's couch" of the twentieth century. And now I really have it made. You see, my other passion besides cars is reading. I love to read. I consume books, and thanks to the local library, I now have unlimited access to books on tape to play on my drive to work or on trips. Now I can have my cake and *drive* it too!



JOSEPH L. JAMES

B & W

RENÉ BAZEL

It was almost six o'clock and I was just getting to the check-out slot at A & P grocery store. My new job working for the McAllisters was unlike any other housekeeping position I ever had. They almost demanded that I stay to finish my work, whether it was a quarter to three or not. Instead of debating the situation — because I knew my family had to eat and my husband and I would not have made the decision for me to work if we did not need the money — I often stayed late to finish the job. As I stood there with a small bag of pinto beans, rice and a pack of chicken thighs that had been reduced in price because of yesterday's date that was on the outside of the pack, I wondered why things had to be the way they were. I have a large quantity of faith in the Lord, but I wondered if we were ever going to be seen as equals or always considered worth less than others.

The slot I was in had eight people in front of me and the cashier had been extremely rude to the young mother of two who just left the store. The bus was due for pickup on the corner in less than thirty minutes and the slot with a young man about nineteen was open for cashing out customers. Of course his line was for WHITES ONLY and I was not permitted to enter it. There was only this one slot for Blacks, which I was standing in, tired and achy. As I gazed out the window I knew I was going to miss the bus. I was not looking forward to the walk to the other side of the tracks, which is where my family and I lived.

"I SAID ONE DOLLAR AND FORTY-FIVE CENTS," the voice shouted out. Everyone in the store was paying close attention to the

confrontation at the front of my line. “CAN’T YOU HEAR, YOU DUMB NIGGER? HURRY UP, I AIN’T GOT ALL DAY,” the voice shrieked out again.

The old lady was continuously asking the man to beg her pardon. “I’m sorry sir, I’m hurrying it up,” she said, standing there in a deep brown and burgundy striped coat. Her hair was so gray it almost looked silver. Her voice was as content as the Master’s above and you could tell her persona was as gentle as a baby’s bottom. As she searched her over-used pocketbook for the money he demanded, the manager came over.

“Look, you old nigger lady, if you can’t count then don’t come in here no more,” he said sternly. These two grown men did not show one ounce of compassion for this old woman. Not one ounce of respect poured from their mouths as they spoke to her. I was taught by my parents to respect my elders, regardless of their color. Evidently no one had taught these two men anything about respect.

As the old woman was leaving the store, three girls entered. Every White man in the front of the store, who had a good view, had their eyes on these three particular young ladies. The nineteen-year-old cashier was their most adoring fan. He watched the girls move from the aisle containing the juices and cookies to the canned goods and pasta aisle. I must say, I was overwhelmed by what I saw as well. They barely had anything on at all. As they pranced in the store with smiles as wide as the beach itself, they seemed puzzled about why they were there, unless they were there to simply be seen. Watching these three girls in action made me wonder why White people always call us dumb.

As I watched these girls pity-pat around the store, I totally forgot about the problems and situations I had on my mind. One of the girls, who was fat, was wearing a bright green two-piece. She had chubby cheeks and every time one of the other girls laughed, she thought it was so funny—whatever it may have been—her laugh echoed all through the store. This girl was so pale. I could not understand why she even wanted to present herself in a two-piece bathing suit. It was not becoming for a girl of her size. As the girls walked to the front of the store, one of the girls that was also a member of this “rat pack” was looking at the woman in line ahead of me as if she knew her. Her eyes seemed to be trapped in this woman’s face. The tall, slinky girl was starring so hard that she bumped

into the display of Tide detergent. The woman then noticed her and to my surprise she must have known who she was, because her facial expression was in a total state of shock. The slender young lady quickly looked away with her sunburned eyes.

“Now she knows better. Mrs. Parker would fire her if she knew she was in here with those thief’n girls, dressed like that,” the shocked woman replied. As I caught a side view of this lady, I realized who she was. It was Henrietta, the Parkers’ housekeeper. The girls noticed the woman by this time and shuffled off to the back of the store, all except one of the young ladies. The young cashier had finally got a good view of her and she really caught his eye. I watched them gaze into each other’s eyes, like two sick puppies, as I stood there shifting my weight from one leg to the other.

This one girl seemed to be the leader of the pack. I must admit she was the prettiest of them all, but her attitude was quite ugly. You could tell by the way she pranced and carried herself. She was shrewd and I am usually a good judge of character. Her bathing suit was light pink, almost an off-white color and she had the straps of her suit off her shoulders. It was like she came in the store for a purpose only she and the other girls knew, especially the fat one that was constantly laughing. As the cashier and this one girl admired each other, being a woman I could tell she was definitely up to something. She swung her deep brown hair from side to side and asked the young man in a very seductive voice, “Where can I find Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks?”

The boy responded, stumbling over his own words, telling her, “they’re on..uhm..uhm..aisle two.” The attractive young lady walked toward aisle two, while the other two girls disappeared over by the cooler section of the store where the milk and beer were kept. By now I was so interested in what these girls were up to — and was going to miss the bus anyway — that I left a huge gap in the line. I completely separated myself from the rest of the people in line who have other things to do besides being nosy. There were about three new people ahead of me in line and there was nothing I could say because I was not minding my business. I realized while standing hopelessly in line that I did not have any hot sauce. As I walked across the store, I passed the cooler section where the two girls had gone. They were shuffling beer out of the back door! I’m not talking about one or two beers; I’m talking about whole six-packs. They

were moving extremely fast, so fast that I had a chance to slip out of sight without being seen. I was breathing really hard because I was so nervous. I knew if they saw me, they would turn the whole situation around and I would not be going home any time soon. I totally forgot about the hot sauce and went back to standing in line. Trembling nervously, I stood there wanting to cut in front of everybody in line to get out of there.

The girls met back up at the front of the store, with only one can of herring snacks. I closed my eyes hoping they would not say anything to me. I was praying to the Father above that I did not let my curiosity get me in trouble this time. I was now fourth in line and the girls were second in the line with the young boy cashier. The girls were constantly laughing. It got so loud that the manager came out of his office. As soon as his bright pink face appeared around the corner, his eyes seemed to bulge out of his head. "What are you girls doing in here like that? This isn't the beach," the manager said. The girls looked shocked and turned their heads from side to side, as if they were trying to find out whom he was talking to. "You girls are not allowed in here dressed like that." The pretty young lady looked at the cashier as he looked back at her and then at the manager in disbelief. He seemed shocked to know that this guy would speak to people like he did. The boy rang up the herring snacks and took the money for the purchase. I was now second in line and overly anxious to get out of there, almost as anxious as the girls were. They were on pins and needles. You could see the fear in their eyes. The scheme they pulled off was now being put to the test. The girls responded to the manager by politely saying they were sorry to cause any problems and they were on their way out. After the cashier returned the change and gave them the bag, the pretty girl's attitude was back to normal. "Thanks, kid," she said conceitedly. The young boy did not really care about her attitude at this point. He was in love. He watched the girls walk out of the store until they disappeared from in front of the big glass windows.

I was now being rung up at the check-out slot and I was ready to get the hell out of there. I stood there while the man rang up my stuff, steadily listening to the conversation between the young cashier and the manager. The cashier bluntly told the manager he did not appreciate how he treated the young ladies. If they both only knew what type of sneaky, backhanded scheme the girls played, I'm sure the conversation would not have taken place between the two

of them at all. The boy continued to voice his opinion, while the manager continued to justify his actions. "Two dollars and four cents," the man replied to me. As I handed him my money with a shaky hand, I heard the boy say in a sure voice, "I QUIT." I could not believe he was going to quit his job over this. White people had the comfort of just being able to quit a job, while a young Black woman, in good health like myself, had to beg for work. I had to settle for a low down and dirty job like being one of their maids.

"What did you say Sammy?" the slow-minded manager replied.

"I QUIT."

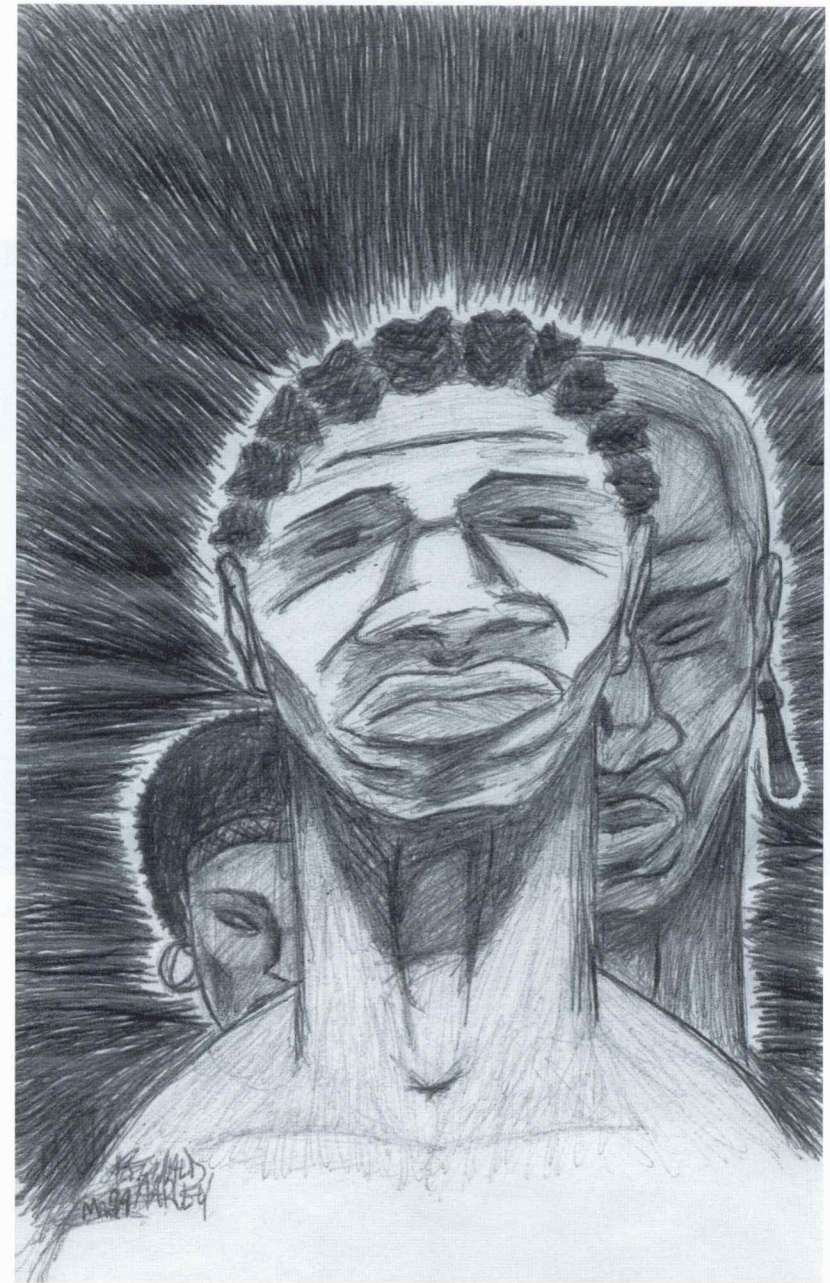
As the man handed me my bag and kicked me out of the store, the young boy took off his smock and bow tie and slammed them down on the register.

We both walked out of the store at the same time. He went in one direction and I went in another. Even though we were literally in two different situations, from two different worlds, we both had to find a way to cope. We both had to find a way to deal with the problems life had issued to us, without losing our minds. This situation made me realize that all people are equal and problems of everyday life are not just for "BLACKS ONLY."

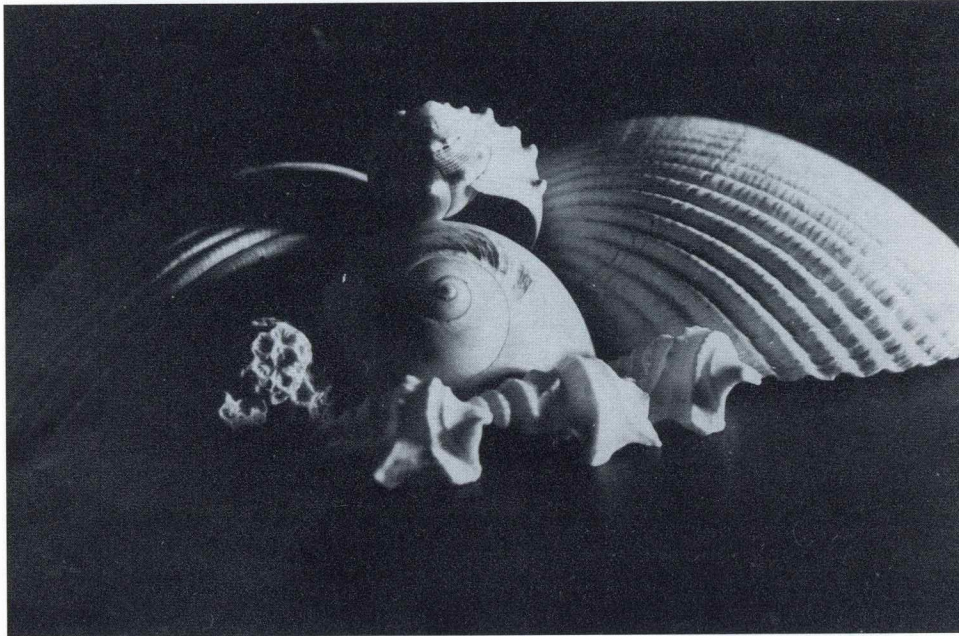
The Search for Truth

The wisdom of the aged and aging is lost on the youth,
They seek their own advice in their quest for the truth.
Their open minds get filled with thoughts
Which leave their stomachs tied in knots.
So much knowledge of everything,
So many ideas leave them wondering.
So look to your peers, look to your mentors,
Search the great books, and listen to the vendors.
Try out your theories on those you respect,
And examine them closely for every defect.
It's up to you to decide the right way,
To aid you in your journey every day.
To enrich your life, or to confuse your mind,
What is life's mystery? Only you can find.
In the end it's all revealed.
The decisions you make now can't be repealed.
As you take the time to sift through it all,
Be very careful lest you fall.
Remember that others have gone before;
They questioned life and so much more.
Just as you must now decide:
How much truth can you abide?

SUE BELL



REGINALD HARVEY



JENNIE RIVAS

You're Like a Cat

Slick, loveable, squeezable
Kind of guy
But everytime someone reaches to grab you
You give that "I don't want to be bothered"
Kind of sigh
Annoyed lazy man
Who would rather
Play with string
I guess I'll see you when
It's feeding time again?

KEIANA PAGE

Mental Drainage

It's moving too fast for me now, all these things in my life
I've done so many things to be so young
Now trying to make up for lost years
Lost time I will never get back

Being quite young, yet feeling so old
Is this what life is always like?
Growing up too fast, though not my fault
Causes much grief, some relief
Relief from the younger mistakes

Relating to the elders is my way
Looking for a father figure, they might say
You know "they" know it all, so they think
But I observe and learn more that way on instinct

DAWN BOZARD



JOSEPH L. JAMES



JOSEPH L. JAMES

My Cocoon

I feel like a caterpillar at a quarter till noon
The sun is shining bright; it's time to come out of my cocoon

I've been trapped inside for far too long
It is now time for me to share my heartfelt songs

I long for the day when I can spread my wings and fly
And see all the wonders in life before they pass me by

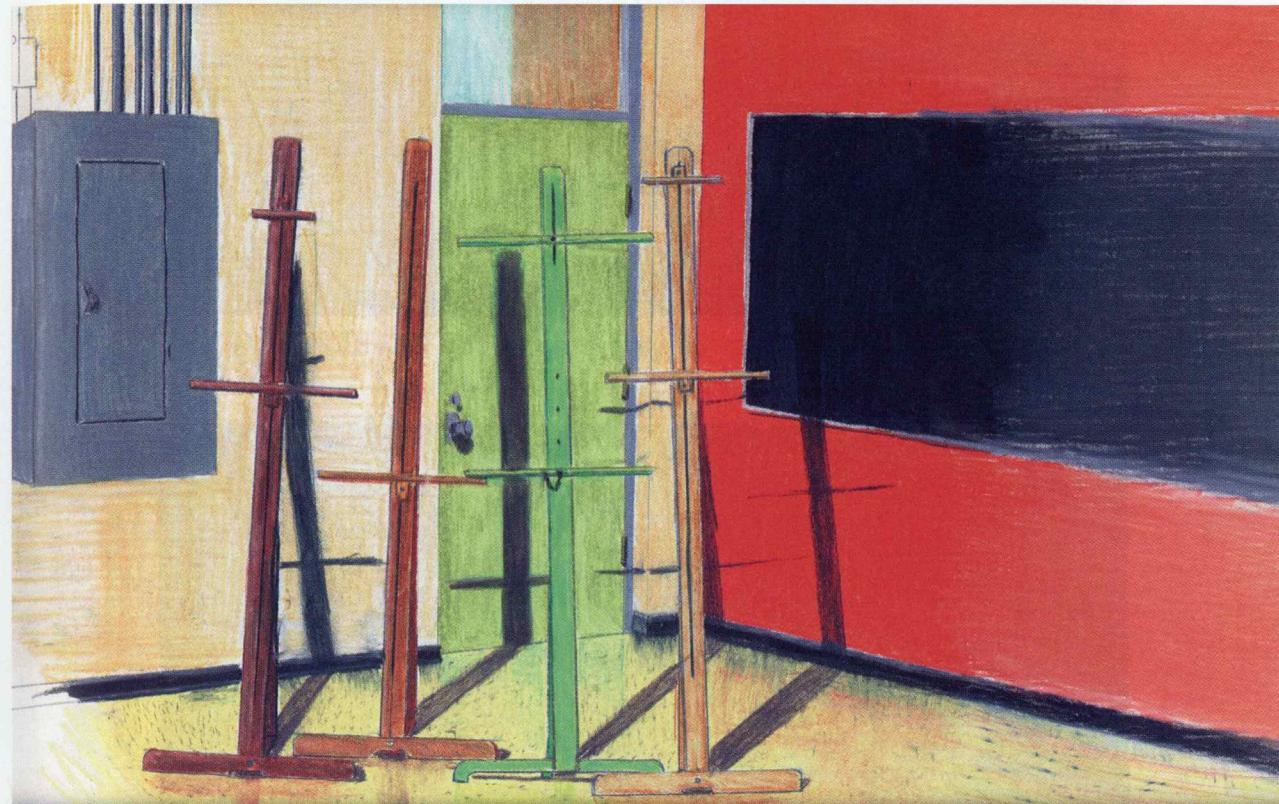
I can't wait for the day in which I can share my joy
Like a child on Christmas Day with a brand new toy

I want everybody to see the new and improved me
And see how special this caterpillar grew to be

Unfortunately, I'm still trapped in here and I can't wait for the day
In which I finally become a butterfly and put all my joys on display

But in the meantime, I'll just stay to myself, until a quarter till noon
Just me, myself, and my one bedroom cocoon

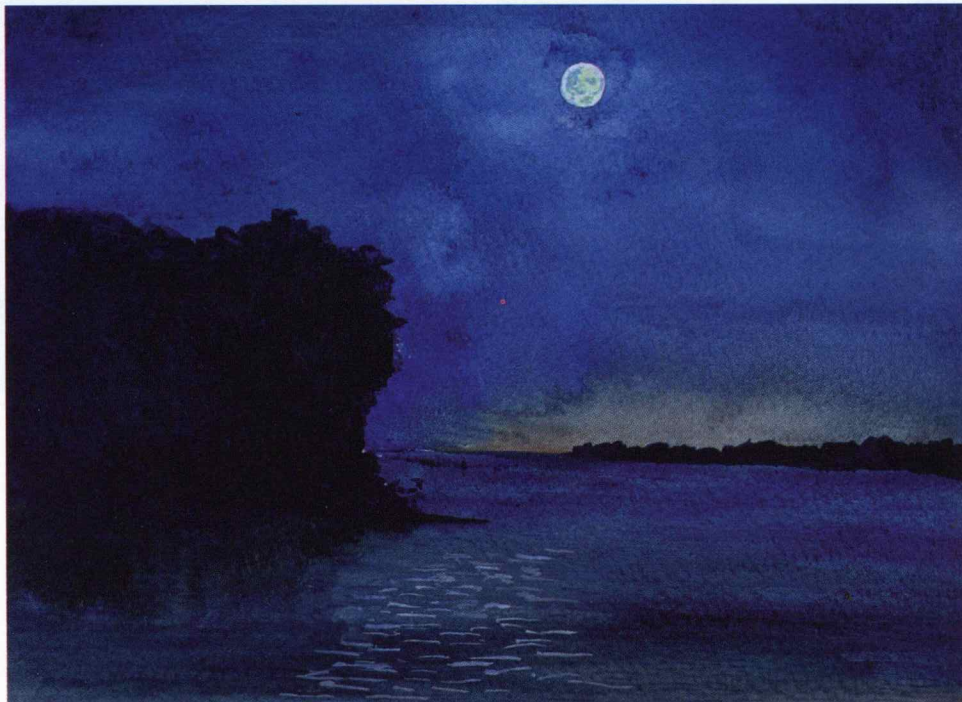
HERMAN MIDDLETON, III



SCOTT WARREN



SCOTT WARREN



DYLAN FOUSTE

Blood Ties

FEI HE

We learn a lot in school and from books. Society is a big school in which we are educated for our whole life. Similarly, life is a big book from which we can study and never finish. Everyone needs to experience the joys and sorrows of life. Different kinds of people and different kinds of events are around us. We can experience life and view truths about human relationships. Recently, I heard an American saying about relationships: “Blood is thicker than water.” Do human relationships always stay the same? Can the ties between family members be broken? In special situations, people want to avoid being hurt, and human relationships could be changed. Even the blood tie between parents and children could be destroyed.

When I was young, there was a movement known to all the world as the Great Cultural Revolution, which happened in China. The Great Cultural Revolution was a social change. It fought against the old culture, old tradition and the old social system. At that time, I was too young to understand what the political meaning of the movement was. However, I remember some unusual things that happened around me. From those things, I realized some truths about human relationships.

There was a famous surgeon in our neighborhood. Although only two people, he and his daughter, were in the family, their house was always bustling and exciting. The friends, students and relatives visited them quite often. They were all smiles and treated the doctor respectfully. Sometimes, even when only the father and daughter were in the home by themselves, songs, music and

laughter still streamed from their windows. It was a happy family picture.

However, the lucky star did not always stay with them. The Cultural Revolution brought a big change to this family. At that time, professors and doctors were all defined as “bad men.” They were forced to change their positions and even lose their jobs. My neighbor could not escape it. The doctor was not allowed to work at the hospital any more and was ordered to sweep lanes and alleys every day. Additionally, his property was confiscated. Most of his friends, students and relatives disappeared. Some of them were facing the same situation and others were afraid to be involved. Of course, I no longer heard the songs, music and laughing from their house. The air of the house seemed to solidify. Dirty looks substituted for the smiling faces.

The doctor’s only daughter, whom he loved very much, was an excellent student. Moreover, she was good at playing the piano and singing. She received lots of applause and admiration when she sang a song at the celebrations of her school. She was her teachers’ and classmates’ favorite. But after her father became a “bad man,” they separated from her and did not want to talk to her. She was sad and felt frustrated. No matter how hard she tried, she just could not please them. All of this happened because her father was a “bad man” according to the policy. She loved her father. Her mother had died many years before, and she and her father were dependent on each other. The doctor father did everything he could do for her and gave her all his love. I believe that if his daughter had wanted to have a star from the sky, he would have tried to do his best and pick it. But with such a disgraced father, the daughter would have no future. After a while, she began to hate her father also.

The blood tie was like a chain tied tightly on her neck. Her desire was to throw off the yoke and break the tie. In order to bring about the strong desire, one day she used her own blood to write a letter to separate herself from her father. Later, she was accepted and became a member of the Red Guard. It was a student organization. Red guards were pioneers of the Cultural Revolution. They felt they shouldered heavy responsibilities to change the old culture, traditions and system. They were absolutely antitheses of “bad men.” If one joined this group, he would be in the right position and have a good future. When I saw her carrying a Red Guard marker on her arm, I always felt that the red color was made from her blood and it made me scared.

The doctor was very poor. He felt pain in both spirit and body. One summer day I watched him as he was pulling a heavy wagon and steaming with sweat. His body was bent over and he walked with difficulty. His hands, those once used to perform surgical procedures, were shaking as he exerted his strength. Suddenly, he lost his balance and fell down. His forehead was broken and bleeding. . . . Some people passed by, but no one tried to help him, because he was a “bad man.” I feel sorry every time I recall this story and wish I could have helped him, but I was too young.

A few years passed, and finally the government changed the policy. The doctor’s property was returned and the hospital offered him a high position. His daughter came back to his side. He wasn’t angry with her and even didn’t complain. When his daughter called him “dad” again, he hugged her and said, “I understood you had your own difficulties. Now everything is over. You are always my daughter.” Tears were rolling down the daughter’s cheeks. “I am sorry, Dad. Nothing can separate me from you again,” she said through her tears. He became a VIP again. The friends, students and relatives visited him often like they used to. The ties tied again. They were all smiles again. His house was filled with noise and laughter again.

I felt confused, and meanwhile I realized some truths about human relationships. People need love and need others to take care of them, especially when they are in trouble. In our daily life, lots of people do not like to send help where it is badly needed, but they like to make what is already good still better. “A friend in need is a friend indeed.” Human relationships are not simple relationships; they are dependent on many factors, such as social position, political elements, economical level, interests and habits. They do not always remain the same and can be changed. Blood ties are usually declared as strong. They are tied with blood and history. They are tied with heart and head. As strong as they are, sometimes they cannot withstand life’s pain. Sometimes, they can be broken. Sometimes, even blood, history, heart, and head are not enough.

Diamond in the Rough

JANET W. OBENSHAIN

Although neither my parents nor my grandparents had attended college, I planned to attend a college in New York upon graduating from high school. I would be the first in my family to receive a college degree. I didn't know exactly how to go about applying or paying for college, but, by God, I was going to do it! Since I was an honor student, the bright kid that didn't have to work for good grades, I figured all I had to do was study, decide which college I wanted to attend, and off I would go! I never discussed my plans for continuing my education with a counselor or teacher at school nor did they inquire. Maybe, like me, they just "knew" that I was going to go to college after graduation.

About midway through my senior year in high school, I talked to my father about my desire to go to college. My father refused to pay, saying that he wasn't "going to waste hard-earned money to send a girl to college." I was devastated to learn that my father felt that I was not worthy of a college education. I also had no idea how I was going to get the money for tuition, books, and dorm costs now. I knew that I couldn't obtain a scholarship since I had been told that in order to qualify for a scholarship you had to be dirt poor and/or brilliant. I was neither. My family was middle class and I was smart, not brilliant. So here I was — seventeen years old, a senior in high school, a kid with big dreams without the knowledge or guidance to achieve those goals.

Being the "smart" kid that I was, I decided to proceed to Plan B. If my father wouldn't pay the expenses and I couldn't qualify for a scholarship, then I would

work my way through college. I went to work immediately after graduation in order to save the money that would be necessary to send myself to college. I was making \$2.35 an hour working as a cashier in a department store. At that rate, I knew that I would have to work a long time to be able to send myself to a good design school in New York City. But, hey, I was young. I had all the time in the world. Even if I had to put off school for a couple of years, I would still be able to go eventually.

I worked diligently and I saved money in the same manner. Then I bought a car and selected new furniture for my new apartment. I met a man and got married. Before I knew it, I was celebrating my thirtieth birthday and I still hadn't gone to college. We bought a house. We bought cars, more cars than I can remember. On a whim, we bought an \$800 dog. We decided to purchase a motorcycle to ride in the country on the weekends in summer. We traveled to Mexico and climbed Mayan pyramids. Life was good. We were able to afford most of the things that we wanted but we never had enough "extra" money for me to go to college. Besides, I didn't have the time. My husband and I both had to work in order to afford the necessities of our lifestyle. And we liked our life just the way it was. However, just when you think you have things under control, something happens to throw a wrench in the well-oiled machine of life. I became very ill. I continued to work even though my health suffered from the effort. I was also making myself sicker by worrying about trying to keep my job during my illness. I finally came to the realization that this situation was ridiculous. I was more concerned with my job status than my health. And for what reason? So I could afford to buy a better car? So I could take a trip to Ireland? At that moment, I decided to quit my job, recuperate from my illness, and then fulfill my dream to go to college.

I applied to Midlands Technical College in October of 1998 with total confidence in my ability to live up to the standards of college academia. However, when I received a letter informing me that I had to take a placement test before my application could be considered, my confidence faltered somewhat. Who am I kidding? My confidence faltered a lot! It had been almost twenty years since I had graduated from high school. With much trepidation, I called to reserve a time to take the placement test. I scheduled to take the exam on the last day and time available so that I would have time to "cram" to re-learn long-forgotten skills such as algebra.

I arrived, a bundle of nerves, to take the most important test of my life. Getting married or taking the driver's license test was a piece of cake compared to taking this placement test. My entire future rested upon this single test. What if the results came back that I was just too dumb to go to college now? I had already told all of my friends that I was going to go to college. I would die of embarrassment if I couldn't get into school. All of them had already graduated from college, many with advanced degrees. I was the only one in my clique that had never attended college. Besides, I didn't have a job now, either!

I somehow made it through the test without passing out or throwing up. However, when we were told that we would get the results that evening, my heart sank. I was hoping that I would be able to go home and prepare for the approaching doomsday notice that I was not acceptable to attend Midlands Tech or any other college in the United States. I would be branded for life. All my friends and family would finally know the truth: I wasn't smart after all. I was downright stupid. Stupid for not going to someone to ask questions about college. Stupid for not checking into scholarships. Extremely stupid for listening to my father say I wasn't good enough to go to college. Stupid, stupid, stupid. How could I be so stupid when I was supposed to be so smart?

When my name was called, I trudged over to pick up my test scores. Dare I look now or wait until I get to a safe haven? Finally, I could take the suspense no longer. As I looked at the results, I felt as though all eyes were on me at that moment — that one defining moment in my life. This was the moment that would determine the fate of my entire future. I looked at my results and almost cried. The tears welled up in my eyes and my nose began to sting as I fumbled through the scores. I could feel my face turn red with embarrassment as I discovered that I wasn't too dumb! I was going to be a student at Midlands Technical College that January.

That was the proudest moment of my life! To remind myself how proud I was at that moment, I purchased a diamond necklace. Whenever I get discouraged over a homework assignment or a test score, I look at that diamond and remember what I am working to accomplish. It may have taken a little longer than I anticipated, but I will be a college graduate someday. After all, it takes a long time to create a fine diamond out of a rough ol' rock!

A COMMENTARY

I hear the wind chimes.

The dog's howls

turn to wolf's cries.

I am carried back to the same place

yet, it is a different time,

a time before the human race.

The wind blows fierce and free.

I feared for the animals that

wander close to me.

They can not see

how evil myself and

my kind can be.

People come; I am no longer alone.

The animals and trees

no longer have a home.

People begin to reign.

The trees and animals stand

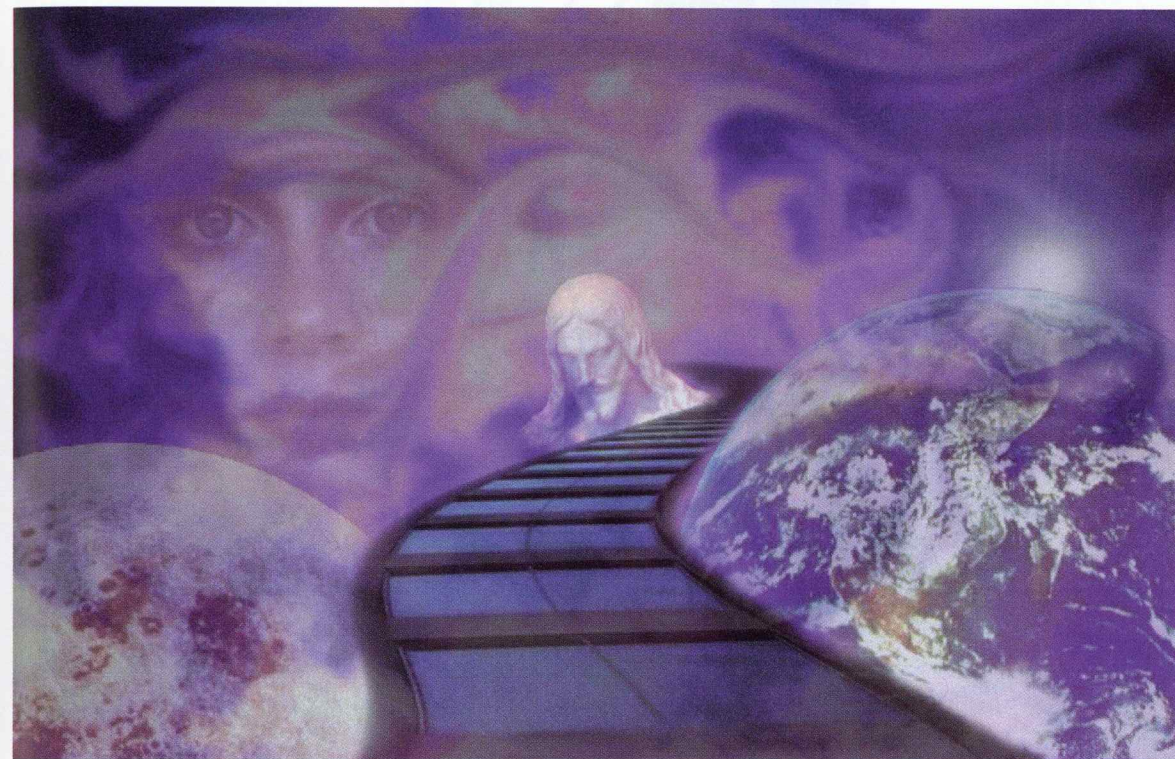
together but all is in vain.

The trees begin to fall.

There are no animals,

there is nothing at all.

LYRA LORING



TONY FLING



SCOTT WARREN

The Mumbler

CHRISTOPHER B. WATTS

The office building at the corner of Assembly and Gervais is the most modern structure in Columbia, with mirrored one-way glass windows and dramatically curved pillars that make the face of the building seem to lean out into the intersection below. Inside are offices, a few restaurants, and many unfriendly, chronically tardy employees. Most of them take the stairs in order to dodge the video cameras in the lobby; they want as few people as possible to know that they are late. In the stairwell they take in the mornings there is a small maintenance hatch. The hatch is overhead on the third floor landing, a smooth, white metal flap whose hinges are worn shiny from repeated openings and whose presence is largely ignored by the people passing below it. Inside this hatch dwells a short, plum-shaped creature called the mumbler.

The mumbler lives among the insulation and electrical cables in the building, eating the blind albino snakes in the ceiling as well as the occasional insect. His favorite meal is a nice juicy roach. When he spots one crawling along the wall, he will snake his long skinny arms out in a flash, the tight gray skin of his fingers making a blur as they move toward his victim. His mouth is wide open as he chews, smacking loudly and drooling down into the insulation below. You can tell when he's been around by the yellowish-brown stains on the acoustic ceiling tile. His eyes are a brilliant yellow, set in a small, almost human face that squats atop a giant beachball torso. He often sings the saxophone and piano lines of corrupted Christmas songs and popular favorites in a watery falsetto that always seems to come from the speaker grills in the building. He is

particularly fond of Kenny G and John Tesh. His arms and legs are inordinately long, and he can stretch them beyond all reasonable limits in order to catch his meals and hitch rides on the back of an occasional executive.

The mumbler finds people, and especially women, particularly fascinating. He loves to open his hatch in the morning, stick his little head out and watch as all the well-dressed self-torturers pass underneath him. That's the thing about the mumbler — humans can't see him. He is apparently too strange to fit into the paradigm of the modern world, for he can sit on the shoulder of a young businessman or woman and no one will pay him any attention. He has had a few close calls with cats and dogs, which is why he now lives in the ceilings of a business building.

One day, feeling grumpy from being up all night with indigestion from a bad ceiling snake, the mumbler noticed someone special. She wasn't special at the time, but she grew to be. A beautiful young woman, who from all appearances had just graduated college, passed below the mumbler in a frantic state. She looked disheveled and sleepy, newly hired and terribly afraid of being fired. He grinned and passed gas as she crossed beneath him on her way up the staircase. The stench was too much for him anyway, and she intrigued the little guy's mind, so he stretched out an arm and hitched a ride up on her shoulder.

The first thing he noticed was how wonderful she smelled; like fear and sleep all mixed together with the rose scent of her perfume. He buried his face in her hair, rubbing his eyes back and forth across the long blonde strands, and becoming intensely aroused. His color changed from a dull gray to a most appealing purple as he rode along with her. She ran up staircase after staircase, beginning to sweat. The mumbler was jumping up and down with joy on her shoulders, and had taken to occasionally licking her neck to prick her anxiety further. He howled with laughter as she fell to one knee in the landing of the sixth floor, swinging from her hair and making obscene pelvic thrusts on the up and down arcs of his pendulous swing. She quickly got back to her feet though, and redoubled her efforts up the rest of the stairs. She continued to fall occasionally, and the mumbler was having so much fun he forgot all about his indigestion. He found himself a real prize, he thought. They just keep getting crazier and crazier.

By the time she reached the eighth floor, she was a complete wreck; hair

loose from its pins, sweat running down her face, and her pantyhose torn from falling so often. The mumbler became quiet, waiting for his moment. She limped down the threadbare carpeting into the main office area, trying to straighten her clothes and put on an innocent smile. He could feel her heart thudding underneath her clothes, and began to move around on her back until he was sure he could effectively muffle her words from where he was. He was ready, and so excited he couldn't breathe. He saw another of his favorite victims headed her way — the boss. How he loved to interfere with that one's phone calls especially the ones to his wife when he had to work late. Many a happy hour had his hands been around the boss's throat!

He grinned evilly, and planted his feet firmly on the new girl's shoulders. His claws dug in, and he closed his eyes to meditate. It's hard work to make people mumble, for there is more to it than just physical appearance. Sometimes, if the person was a real pro, he would have to push his consciousness into theirs, thinking about clouds and insulation and diesel fumes (he had ridden a bus once, and found it rather boring). These thoughts would then seep into the mind of the person he was manipulating, and cause them to stumble and go blank. He could never let down his guard though, because most of those types (the boss was one) were proficient manipulators themselves and could often recoup their conversational losses in very little time. They were the greatest challenge, and he loved every minute of it.

As he reached into the mind of the girl beneath his feet, he saw her mind flounder about, thoughts thrashing to and fro; gray wisps of fright dancing in her head like snowflakes in a strong wind. He felt the urge to giggle, but forced himself to concentrate further, to guide her fears into a pattern, a wall that she would be powerless to move around. Her head whined under the tension, terrible thoughts about her life and her new job, what she would say: Should I run? *[stairs again]* Has he seen me? *[looking for an open door]* I can't lose this job... Maybe if I give him a kiss, he'll forgive me this time. *[his office door, slurping sounds, darkness outside the office window]* Or will I have to seduce him? *[the copy room, staples on the floor, a janitor with a flashlight seeing them and laughing]* That's disgusting — look at that slob, beer gut and eewww! Maybe I can kill him. *[letter opener]* Maybe I should kill myself. *[overdose on Valium, slit wrists, slippery warm bathtub]* Why do I always do this?

The mumblor had never been happier. He wouldn't have to do much with this one, whose name he had learned was Samantha, just guide her thoughts a little. Maybe make sure she didn't get too clear on him — that would ruin his day. He hoped the boss wasn't too forgiving. He normally wasn't, in the mornings.

"Well, hello Samantha. My, what time is it anyway? Oh, look. It's almost ten o'clock. You should have been here an hour ago. I did mention the meeting, didn't I? The one you've missed? Come into my office, please." He led the way, not bothering to hold the door for her when they got there. He walked in, sat behind his desk, and adopted his best employer-frown. He motioned for her to sit with a wide sweep of his right arm, the watch on his wrist catching the sun and momentarily blinding Samantha as she sat.

"I'm so sorry...I...umm...ghjksrtg...sjdfhs...mmhmmmm. I can't explain...I...sadjfh...dfhskjdtghr." She sat there pale and helpless, unable to speak clearly while the mumblor had one hand on her throat and the other on the soft white tip of her ear. He felt great.

"Well, I didn't mean for you to get so flustered, but really this is a bad way to start here at Smith, Hamner, Coates, Stein and Blarney.... I trust you do have a valid excuse?" He sat back in his chair, the leather creaking under his weight. He looked potentially dangerous, like a giant bloated bullfrog.

"Well, sir, I really just wanted to say that I...oiwersafdhuyr... hhhmmmm...my throat is really...ihusdfbn...jsdkfh, mmmnnsasgd. I don't know what to say, I can't..." She began coughing roughly, her body seizing and trembling with the force of the coughs. She went paler and placed a thin hand on the edge of the giant oak desk. The boss looked concerned. He raised his eyebrows and poured her a glass of water from the pitcher on the dry bar behind him. He handed her the glass, and again the watch crossed the sunlight from the window, blinding her for a moment. She opened her mouth to say something else after drinking a large quantity of water, and the mumblor dug deeper. She said: "I...ohhh...oiuyoi..." and passed out.

The mumblor jumped off her back, brushed his palms against each other quickly, and let out a loud laugh. The boss didn't notice, but was on his way to the young woman's side. He took care to grope her breast and one pale, slightly exposed thigh before he began shaking her wrist and calling her name. The

mumblor watched a few seconds more, then went back up the wall into the air conditioning vent for lunch, his long arms pulling him from the floor like a released rubber band.

The mumblor got to play with Samantha a few more mornings, with similar results. She didn't pass out again, but she did start wearing pants instead of a dress, and she never figured out what was happening. He also got to temporarily agitate her fiancé into canceling their engagement when he called to speak to her one afternoon. That was fun.

Then one morning Samantha started coming to work on time, and she was wearing headphones. He didn't know what to make of them at first, but couldn't see how they would get in his way. He waited for her in the ductwork above her desk, looking down from behind the narrow grillwork onto her desktop. He had grown particularly fond of Samantha, and spent most of his time wrecking her life. Of course, he still enjoyed making the boss's wife jealous, but Samantha.... Oh, what joy she brought him. He sometimes dreamed of her at night, what it would be like to be human and kiss her, smell her breath in the mornings before she could brush her teeth, dig through her garbage. If he had been a younger mumblor, he might have attempted to ride her to her house, and live there. He wanted to dedicate himself to her, to completely wreck her, but he couldn't. He couldn't risk it. It was safe here, and there were always others to manipulate if she wasn't there, or didn't talk to anyone.

He jumped down onto her desk and sidled over to her, wringing his hands and licking his lips. She still had the headphones on, and he could hear some kind of chanting from them. He noticed she was also wearing a new perfume, sharp and unpleasant. He couldn't concentrate. This was a nightmare! He jumped on her shoulders anyway, trying to hide his sensitive nose from the smell by burying it in her sweater, but it didn't work. All he could think about was the chanting and the horrible smell. A few minutes later, the boss walked by her cubicle and stuck his head in the door. A nightmare! He quivered silently, slouched low against her neck, whining to the tune of the chants. Samantha noticed the boss and turned.

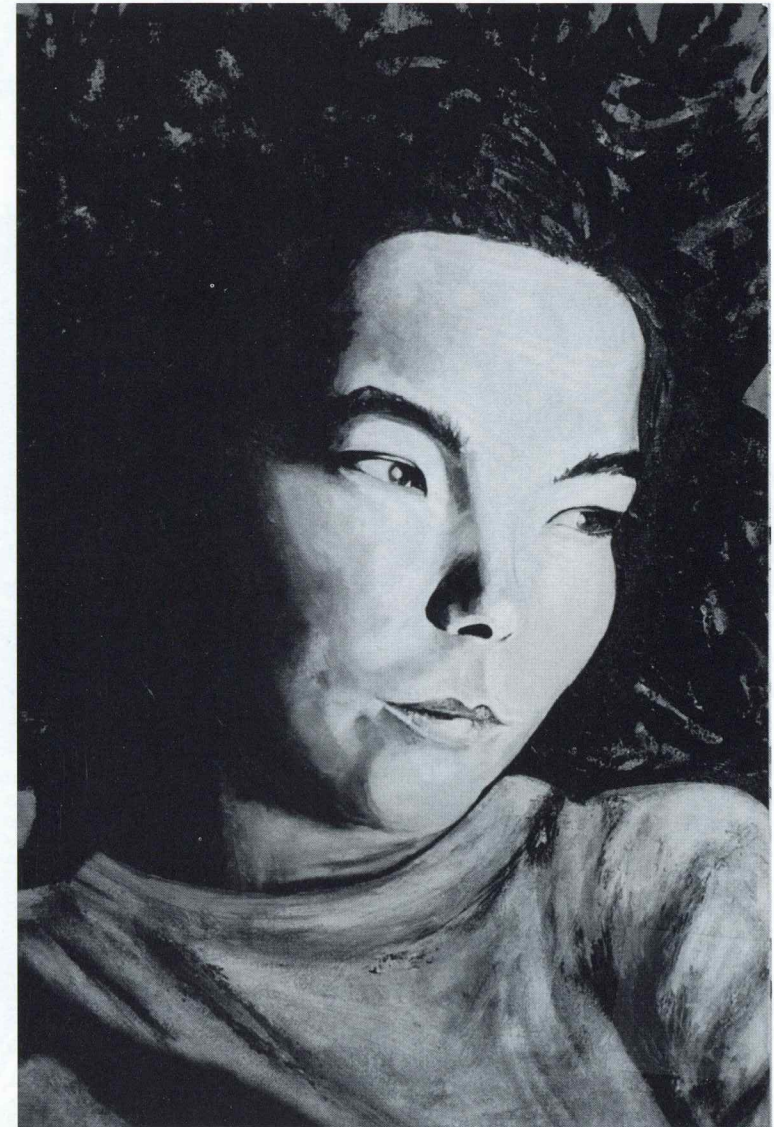
"Hello, Mr. Johnson. How are you?" She smiled prettily, slowly lowering the headphones to where they framed her throat. The boss looked stunned.

"Your voice. Are you okay now? I notice you're here on time as well; are

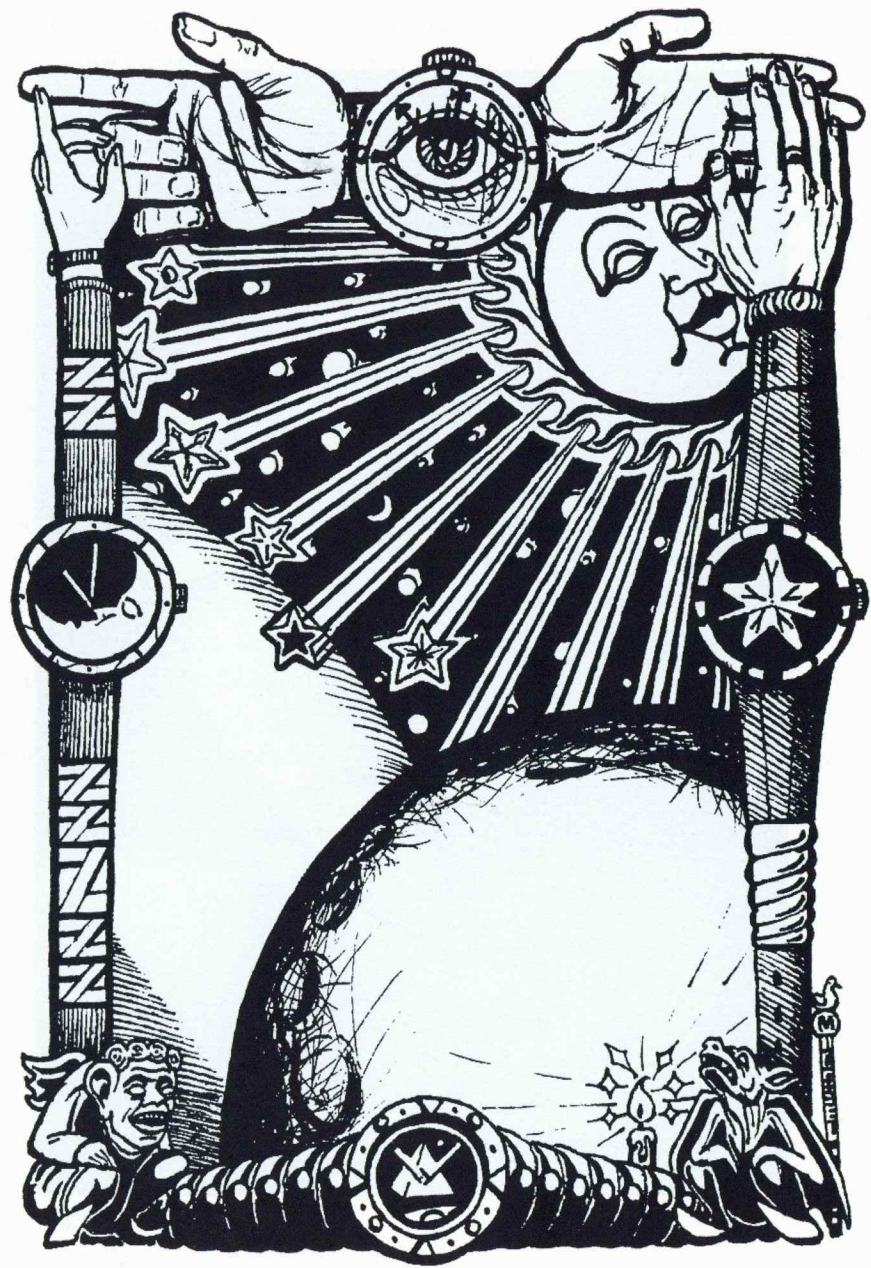
you feeling better?" He looked nervous, as if afraid she had not really been knocked out the last time when he felt her crotch. The mumbler had seen him then, how he slid his finger into her while she was passed out. It disgusted him, and he left. People are so stupid and sickening, he thought. Why can't I get into her mind?

"Yes, much better, thank you. I trust you are well. You look somewhat pale today. Maybe you're working too hard. You should take a vacation." At that, two men in black uniforms moved around the corner, one in front of the boss, one behind. They cuffed him and carried him off as Samantha smiled prettily into his face, then spat. The saliva hung on his closed eyelid, slowly running down onto his cheek.

"You dirty creep. I hope you like rear entry, because where you're going it'll be an *ass-et*. Get it? *Ass-et*. Bye now. Be sure to write." The mumbler was shocked. As many times as he had been in her mind, he had never seen any indication that she was so aggressive. He felt proud for a second, until he remembered he could no longer interfere with her mind. He slunk off into the duct and disappeared. A week later, Samantha was promoted to the position that Johnson had so suddenly vacated. She still wore headphones and that noxious perfume to work everyday and the mumbler left a few days after the party for her promotion. He hitched a ride on a delivery guy's shoulder, and rode off into the sunset hand on hip, eager for the next office building. He didn't think he would ever meet another Samantha, though.



JEFFREY SMITH



MICHAEL BOLIN