

STYLUS

fishing with Jim Dickey

new!

web page competition

the literary annual of midlands technical college

2000-2001

Tony Fl...

STYLUS

the literary annual of midlands technical college

2000-2001

Stylus 2000–2001

Editor: Keith Higginbotham, English Department

Assistant Editors:

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

Design & Layout: Travis Gordon, English Department

Editorial Policy:

The *Stylus* editorial staff reads and judges all submissions blindly (without authors' or artists' names), ensuring objectivity throughout the selection process. Each published work is chosen according to the creative and artistic merit of the individual piece. Only works received by the deadline were eligible for awards.

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

Barry Russell, President; Jean Mahaffey, Vice President for Education; Dianne Luce, Chair, English Department; Lisa Cheeks, Administrative Specialist, English, Math, and Humanities; Minnie Thompson, Administrative Specialist, English and Humanities; Muffy Allison, Administrative Specialist, Developmental Studies

Cover art: Tony Fling.



Stylus is printed on recycled paper.

© 2001 Midlands Technical College
Columbia, South Carolina

All rights revert to authors and artists upon publication.

CONTENTS

FICTION

Invitations	ANN BAILEY KELLY	5
Prince of Noble	JASON BIONDI	12
Winter Story	ANNE BAILEY KELLY	20

POETRY

Jazz	ANDREW WHITE	25
On Account of Maya	JENNA MORRISON	26
Once Blindly	ANNE BAILEY KELLY	27
Sunset Rising	JASON SHEPARD	28
Thirty-One	ANNE BAILEY KELLY	29
Uncomfortable Silences	ANDREW WHITE	30
Windfall	JASON SHEPARD	39
The Moon is a Pilot Light	DELIA HINSON	40
Awake with Walrus	JENNIFER H. YBARRA	41

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Fishing with Mr. Jim	DELIA HINSON	42
Hidden between the Pages	ANDREA L. FREDIANI	47
Father Figure	TIMOTHY A. SNODGRASS	54
Large and in Charge	AUBREY TRAPP	57
The River	LONNA COUFAL	60
Though It's Cold and Lonely...	ABRAHAM PERNICKA	65

ART

CARL CRAWFORD	31, 33, 34–35
TONY FLING	31
MICHAEL BOLIN	36, 53
RONNIE MATHIAS	37
DYLAN FOUSTE	38

PHOTOGRAPHY

ADRIANNE SCALES	11
NEIL DUBOIS	18, 19
TERESE COX	64

WEB SITES

KAREN KUSTAFIK, SCOTT SERBIN, JASON WARREN	17
--	----

Stylus Awards

Creative Nonfiction: Andrea L. Frediani
Fiction: Anne Bailey Kelly
Poetry: Andrew White
Stylus Art: Michael Bolin
Photography: Adrienne Scales
Web Design: Karen Kustafik, Scott Serbin,
 and Jason Warren

William C. Goodwin IV Memorial Art Award:
 Carl Crawford

This issue of Stylus is dedicated to

MAURICE R. DUPERRE

who several years ago started the literary annual which eventually became Stylus. He has continued to contribute to the magazine through his support and encouragement of students in his creative writing courses, many of whom have appeared in the pages of Stylus. Upon his retirement, we bid him a fond farewell with the knowledge that his influence will be felt for many years to come.

Thank you, Mo!

Invitations

ANNE BAILEY KELLY

ERIN KNELT ON THE COLD FLAGSTONE WALKWAY as she tried to salvage the bag of organic couscous that had fallen out of her groceries, scattering golden beads all over the ground. It was her first autumn in Vermont. In August, married for two weeks, she and Thomas had packed the rented truck and headed up from Georgia so that he could start his new job as a traveling puppeteer. Erin had cried the whole way up to New England, afraid of the strange life that she had volunteered for, wondering if she was ready to be a wife, to begin the task of creating a home so far away from everything that was familiar to her. That October afternoon, however, her homesickness seemed distant and slightly ridiculous to her, and she laughed aloud as she continued the task of saving that evening's side dish. Every unfamiliarity had become an adventure.

Thomas came up beside her, set his bags on the ground. "What's so funny?" he asked, and brushed his lips against her chilly forehead. "These goddamn bags are so flimsy. Eco-friendly plastic—now that's something you wouldn't see back home." He grabbed the empty bag and held it together as Erin filled it with the tiny grains.

They looked up at the same time to see a young couple approaching them on the path. He was tall with dark auburn hair and a sullen bee stung mouth, carrying a violin case balanced dangerously atop a milk crate filled with books. She was the bohemian ideal of the All-American girl, slightly unwashed, willowy in her faded Levis and bulky Ecuadorian sweater. She wrestled with a huge

gray tiger-striped cat that struggled against her chest. They came to where Erin and Thomas blocked the path to the doorway, simultaneously veered to the right, and continued into the building. Before Erin could manage a Southern newlywed's greeting, the screen door slammed behind them. She watched as they disappeared into a one-room studio apartment on the first floor.

"How long are you going to be on the road?" Erin talked over the sound of the faucet. She was attempting to remove the stubborn remains of an apricot chicken casserole from the Pyrex baking dish that had been a wedding gift from her first cousin.

Thomas emerged from the bedroom with his duffel bag. "We should be back by next Wednesday. We're just doing the Boston school gigs and then taking *Sleeping Beauty* up to Portland."

"Nine days? I'll miss you." Erin turned off the water and wiped the counter down with a bunny dish towel. "I was thinking about the couple downstairs. I think it would be nice if we went down there and introduced ourselves. I mean, they just moved in here and so did we, and what if they don't know anybody either?"

"Do what you want. I just don't see the point in disturbing them. They didn't exactly put themselves out there to us the other night when they were moving in."

Standing behind her, Thomas put his arms around Erin's waist and snuggled his nose against her ear. "I know you're lonely, baby. I just don't know if I want you hanging out down there with Elvis guy and boho chick. Where's my gray cardigan? I want to take it with me. Sons of bitches never turn the heat up in that van."

"It's in the front closet, I think." She put down the bunny towel and started looking through the pantry. She grabbed a box of apple muffin mix and some foil cupcake liners.

Erin headed down the stairs. The Village Green. Funny name for the building, she thought. Its only resemblance to the name that she could decipher was some peeling forest green paint on the banisters and landings. As she reached the first floor, she hesitated, and self-consciously reviewed the contents of the basket she carried in her left hand. One tin of apple muffins—from a mix but doctored with

some Granny Smiths she had bought at the Co-Op, a jar of peach preserves, four Earl Grey tea bags, a gardenia votive, two biscotti, and a small container of lemon curd. She reached in and pulled out the lemon curd. Too pretentious, she thought, and backtracked up to the second floor landing to hide it.

She stood at the door and tried to convince her hand to move to it and knock. The muffled sounds of an Elvis Costello song were coming from inside. Erin wished Thomas had come down with her. He had told her he needed to get to bed early because of the early morning departure for Boston, but she suspected he was trying to distance himself from what he considered her frivolous hospitality. What's wrong with coming down to welcome new neighbors, she thought, and with that she speedily drew her hand to the door and rapped on it with tentative eagerness.

From the apartment she heard the sounds of someone moving around, the creak of a bedspring and a sigh. *What if I interrupted them while they're having sex?* Erin thought and turned to rush back up the stairs just as the girl opened the door.

The girl stood at the door and stared at Erin, leaving it ajar just enough for her to see the boy stretched out on the bed on his stomach, making notations in a book of Dylan Thomas poetry. He didn't look up. From what Erin could take in at a quick glance, the room was simple and uncluttered except for books, which lay in piles all over the floor and shelves. The candlelight from inside gave the girl's hair a tousled halo as she stood in the doorway. She didn't speak.

Erin babbled, "Um. Hi. My husband and I just moved in upstairs and then I saw y'all moving in the other day, and I thought it might be nice to just come down and introduce myself." The girl remained silent from her position in the doorway and kept the same bemused—or irritated—expression on her face. It was difficult for Erin to tell which was her true emotion. "So, I brought you some things and thought maybe you'd like to—well, anyway welcome to the building!" Erin shoved the basket at the girl enthusiastically and she caught it with surprised reluctance.

The two women stood across from each other, the basket growing more and more ridiculous to Erin; the girl held it as though she had been handed a baby elephant in a tutu as her face continued to register the same confusing expression.

Finally, she spoke. "Well, thanks," she said and moved to close the door. Erin practically lunged forward and giggled self-consciously. "Oh—I

completely forgot to introduce myself. I'm Erin and my husband is Thomas; we just moved here from Georgia. He's a puppeteer, we moved up here to..." She stopped and waited for a response. There was none but a slight sigh from the girl who moved once again to close the door. "Umm—what's your name?"

"Allison. Well, we're really busy, and thanks." This time she didn't wait for Erin to start talking again, but shut the door.

Erin turned and walked back up the stairs, forgetting the container of lemon curd on the landing.

"Hey, baby, where are you? Did you catch the snow or did it miss you? We had three inches last night and I took some pictures for your mom." Erin sat back on the couch, picked up a small silver Christmas Ball and began to print Joyeux Noel on it with a red paint pen.

"We're in Brookline for the night. I should be home by tomorrow. I can't talk. We're going to the Tiki Lounge in the hotel to get out of the room. The assholes think they're going to pick up some girls." Thomas sounded tired. "I love you."

"I love you too. Bye." She put the phone on the coffee table and put on her llama poncho. She walked out of the apartment into the frigid hallway and started down the stairs quickly, tucking her hands up under her wool wrap. Reaching the first floor, she opened the door to the basement, reached for the light switch, and continued down toward the laundry room. Even with the cold fluorescent light, the basement was eerie. She always fantasized that she would meet a neighbor turned serial killer boiling heads as she passed one of the storage stalls that lined the passageway. The only comfort she found down there was the warm smell of the dryer and its scent of fabric softener and burning lint. She opened the dryer and took out the load of clothes, put them in the wicker basket, and went to the washer to transfer the last laundry to the dryer. As she leaned in to pick up a stray sock, she heard the sounds of an argument above her head.

Erin paused and listened to the exchange. She couldn't hear what they were saying, but she could tell the guy was very angry and the girl seemed to be trying to calm him down. There was a final explosion of fury from the male and then a door slam. Quickly transferring the clothes, she practically ran up to the first floor with the basket trailing socks.

The front door was closing as she reached the top of the stairs, and Erin put down the basket and walked out onto the front porch. Allison stood there in the dark with just the glow of her cigarette butt intermittently illuminating her puffy, tear-weary face.

Erin walked up beside her and handed her a peppermint from her pocket. "If you need to talk, just let me know. We live on the fourth floor. Top left." She stood for a long and awkward minute and then walked back in the building.

The car started slowly. Erin switched on the heat, got out and began scraping the ice off of the front windshield. She looked up and saw the violin boy walking out of the building and toward a blue Dodge sedan. He pulled a cassette tape case out of his pocket and started to work on the windshield, pulling thin lines of crystals off the surface of the glass.

"Do you want to borrow mine?" Erin called across the parking lot, steam pouring out of her mouth to lay a misty carpet for her words.

"Thanks." The boy walked toward her and pulled his lips back in a smile. "I'm Tony. Allison says your name is Erin. Nice accent." He took the scraper from her and finished her windshield then walked back over to the Dodge.

"Just leave it in our mailbox. 4D. Nice to meet you." For a moment she could hear her drawl, as he must have. I must sound like a hick, she thought, and got into the car. The driveway was slippery and she was mortified thinking she might reveal further depths of Southern ignorance by skidding as she left the parking lot. Luckily, however, she managed to delay such an occurrence until she had cleared his sight and entered the morning thoroughfare, almost sliding into the median.

The too tall Douglas fir was crammed into a corner of the living room, bare except for the patchy strands of white lights that Erin pulled at, working feverishly to even out among the branches. Thomas sat on the sofa, freeing a salt dough gingerbread man from his tissue paper shroud.

"I left Tony and Allison a little note. I thought they might like to come up and help decorate," Erin said from behind the tree.

"What's your deal with them? Do you have a crush on him or something?" Thomas pulled out a small crystal angel and leaned back on the sofa with a sigh.

“Very funny. No, I do not have a crush on him.” Her face was flushed as she extracted herself from the fir’s branches and walked toward the kitchen. “I’m just trying to be a good neighbor. Hot chocolate?”

Thomas got up and tackled her in the doorway, licking the side of her face and nuzzling his head against hers. “Give it up, Scarlett,” he said and steered her toward the couch.

Erin put her canvas grocery bags down and stopped on the porch, her gloveless hands shaking as she dug in her pockets for her keys. As she entered the building the heat teased her frigid nose with burning laps. She paused at the mailbox and pulled out a handful of bills and a letter from her best friend in Georgia. Across the lobby, she heard the sounds of a violin and looked to see the door of the studio apartment wide open. Tony stood just inside playing, but when he saw her he stopped, put the bow down on the bed and smiled at her.

“Hi. Was it too loud?” He walked to the doorway and leaned against it, pulled out a cigarette and tilted his head down to light it.

“No. It was really beautiful.” Erin backed up against the mailboxes, almost tripping over her groceries. “Did you guys have a good Christmas?” she asked, trying to casually conceal her Southern accent.

“Yeah. You?” He brushed his hand through his hair and stuck his free hand into the pocket of his jeans.

“Yeah. It was great. Thomas’s folks came up. We had a good time.” She turned to pick up her groceries and suddenly felt like a very old, very boring married woman.

“Well. Glad *Y’ALL* had a good holiday. Let me know if the violin’s too loud.” He laughed and returned to his violin.

Erin felt herself blushing and started quickly up the stairs. She practically ran up until the third flight and then stopped at the landing to catch her breath. As she got to the top of the fourth flight, she stopped again. She could hear the sounds clearly from inside her apartment. Thomas’s sighs and a woman’s low and breathy giggle.

She stood in front of the door and tried to think. Without her consent, her hand reached up and put the key in the lock and the door opened, slightly, blocked by a basket containing an empty muffin tin.



Price of Noble

JASON BIONDI

DOT WENT TO MAINE by way of Greyhound a week and a half ago. She lost her job here. Her car broke down. She has no money to fix it. Her cousin in Maine has a car and maybe a job for Dot.

Calvin and Dot used to go over to Addy's apartment and drink cheap wine and beer. Calvin is Dot's husband. Addy used to work with Dot before she was laid-off. Calvin and Dot are creeping up on their fortieth birthdays and have no children. When Calvin was thirty-two, he was hit by a car while walking home from work. As a result, Calvin doesn't say much. He chain-smokes and slurs out incoherent thoughts. He knows faces and names and remembers to be polite but is not really able to connect one event in his daily life with another. Unable to work, Calvin collects \$472.00 a month.

Calvin and Dot used to live near the railroad tracks at the northeast end of town. Now, Dot is gone and Calvin spends \$70.00 a month out of his disability check on the small rent-controlled apartment. He cannot drive; he barely reads. He has Addy's phone number, though, and Addy truly is glad to help. Addy and his fiancé, Dina, live so comfortably, in fact, that they would have offered to help if Dot had not approached them first.

"We should do things like this," Dina tells Addy. "It builds character."

Together, they sit in their spacious immaculate living room, hand in hand, watching cartoons, listening to the music thump against the walls.

"Dot's never coming back," Addy says to Dina. "You know this, right?"

Dina nods. "Probably not...but what can we do? Someone has to take care of him. Besides, it's *noble*."

Tuesday, Dina takes Calvin shopping after work at the Department of Motor Vehicles. Calvin smokes all her cigarettes on the twenty-minute ride to the grocery store. Orange juice, peanut butter, crackers, wheat bread, bologna, mustard, hot dogs, canned boiled peanuts, a little jar of pig's feet, soda, soda, soda—can Calvin have soda? She doesn't know; she hasn't heard from Dot in a while—more soda, cereal, milk, and cigarettes.

At the apartment, Dina is in the kitchen sitting with her fiancé. They are sharing a cigarette. "Is Calvin supposed to have soda? He bought four bottles at the store today."

"I don't know, Dina, Dot was supposed to call Sunday," answers Addy.

They haven't heard from Dot since she left two weeks ago. They sit in the kitchen on the apple-green countertop with Dina's head resting on Addy's shoulder, listening to the music thump against the walls.

It's Sunday. Dina and Addy are over at Calvin's cooking dinner. Calvin is slurping at a glass of grape soda. It is making his lips sticky. Dina thinks he needs to shave. The hamburger smells almost done.

"Addy, start the macaroni," Dina calls.

"I'm getting there," Addy says. He does everything very slowly.

Mirapex, the important one: Monday, 30mg, three pills; Tuesday, 20mg, two pills; Wednesday, 30mg, three pills; Thursday, 20mg, two pills; Friday—no weekends off!—30mg, three pills; Saturday, 20mg, two pills; Sunday, 30mg, 3 pills.

Valium, the easy one: Monday through Sunday, 10mg four times a day; 40mg, four pills across the board.

Halcion, the good one: .25mg at bedtime, Monday through Saturday. Sunday is the day of rest. Calvin doesn't need his sleeping pill Sunday; on Sunday, he's got the Lord's help.

Stelazine, the emergency one: 2mg, one pill each across the board, just in case.

Dina sits filling Calvin's pillbox. Whites, yellows, pastel blues....

"He has a new prescription," Dina mutters to herself. "He'll need a bigger pillbox! Stronger pills for the pain that won't go away. What were they called?" She counts out his pills once more and leaves to eat. After dinner, they settle themselves into the Discovery Channel with beers. Calvin soon tires of the television and disappears outside with Addy's full pack of cigarettes. Addy and Dina barely notice. Instead, they sit dazed on the ripped couch, with Dina curled against Addy, listening to the music in the background thump against the walls.

It is Wednesday and Dina is picking up Calvin's new prescription. She is at the expansive discount store wandering the aisles waiting for the orange bottle to be filled. She is tired of being at the store; she has been shopping both Tuesday and Monday as well as today. *It's noble*, she reminds herself. *You'll be home soon enough.*

Dina quickly fills Calvin's pillbox. *This probably isn't right*, she thinks. *It'll be fine for tonight, though.* The pills won't fit no matter how she arranges them. Frustrated, Dina pulls out the new pills and puts them in her purse with the rest of Calvin's bottles.

At Addy's expensive apartment, Dina boils potatoes and bakes fish. Addy will be home soon. The pill bottles are the centerpiece of the kitchen table. Two bright yellow plates and two green glasses accompany them. Dina thinks the plates would look better with the whites, yellow, pastel-blues, and pinks of Calvin's pills scattered on them instead of the fish. She smiles to herself at the thought.

Addy and Dina slowly eat their fish and potatoes. They chatter casually about their days and the poor condition of Dina's Honda. They finish dinner and wash the dishes. Dina mentions that Calvin needs a new pillbox.

Addy chuckles at this idea. "Poor fella...he must never know whether it's night or day as many pills as they have him take. Mirapex, Valium, Halcion...jeez."

Addy and Dina retreat into the living room and begin watching a black and white movie Addy had brought home. An hour into the classic, Dina and Calvin are dead asleep in each other's arms. Calvin's pills are spread out on the glass coffee table in front of the couple. The phone rings four times.

Then, Addy's voice greets the caller. "Hello! This is Addy and I'm not home right now. Leave me a message!"

"Addy, this is Dot. Have ya'll helped Calvin pay the phone bill? I can't get a hold of him. I might have a construction job that'll have me travelin' some. I got some more applications out, too. I guess I'll give ya'll a call later on. Tell Calvin I love him. Bye."

Thursday, and Addy has missed work. After Dina leaves an hour late for her job, Addy collapses back onto the couch and sleeps another two hours. At noon, he flips on the television and finishes the movie he and Dina were watching last night. How far had they gotten? Addy cannot remember. After ten minutes of rewinding and playing the video, he finally gives up and starts from the beginning. By four, Addy is showered and dressed and in the kitchen looking for a snack. He walks by the phone and plays his messages: "Message One. Eleven-o-two P.M. 'Addy...this is Dot. Have ya'll helped Calvin pay the phone bill? I can't get a hold of him. I might have a construction job that'll have me travelin' some. I got some more applications out, too. I guess I'll give ya'll a call later on. Tell Calvin I love him. Bye....' Message Two...."

Calvin's *phone* bill? Dina had paid that early. Addy *knows* that Calvin's phone bill has been paid. He has a receipt from the company. They would have to run over there when Dina got home. Addy continues to meander around the sleek kitchen until a box of raisins finally catches his appetite. By the time Dina gets home, the raisins are gone.

"We need to run over to Calvin's," Addy tells Dina after she has changed into her jeans. "Dot called and can't get through to him. His phone's not working."

"You talked to Dot? What'd she say? Where is she? Did you get a number to reach her?" Dina asks.

"She left a message last night. We missed her."

"Oh. Well, I just paid Calvin's phone bill a week ago and it's not even due 'til *next* week."

Calvin's apartment is ransacked. No one has broken the door down, but inside, the apartment has been ripped apart. Clothes out of drawers, food out of cabinets, doors swinging open everywhere, couch cushions gaping open, phone

off the hook. The place is absolutely wrecked. The couple cleans up as well as they can.

Dina doesn't want to think it but finally she says to Addy, "Could the cops have been here? What the hell would the cops have been doing here?"

"Maybe he let someone in and...where do you think Calvin is?"

"The TV's still here. Everything's still here. Where *is* Calvin?"

Calvin is in jail. When the police came to the door, they had a warrant, and eventually they found two ounces of cocaine. Calvin will be in jail for a while, Addy and Dina decide. Calvin will be in jail and so will Calvin's pills.

The next morning, Dina calls her physician. When the chipper receptionist answers, Dina makes an appointment. "I have been having problems with my...nerves lately," she tells the woman on the other end.

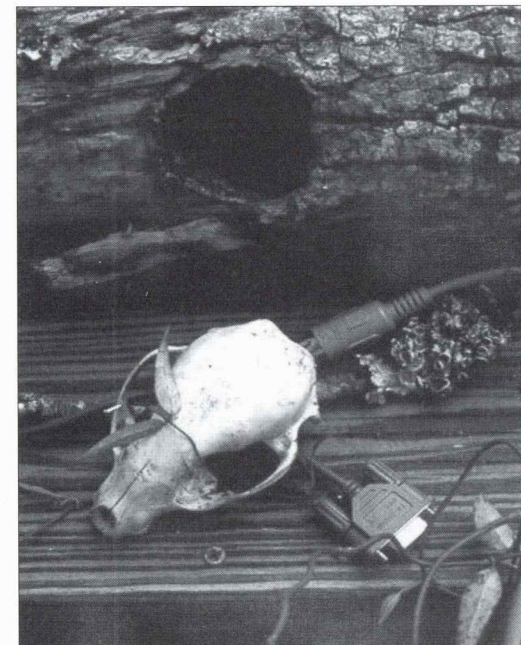
When she hangs up, she sighs and looks at Addy.

He half smiles and shrugs. "No more free pills, I guess."

An Introduction to Hypertext Fiction

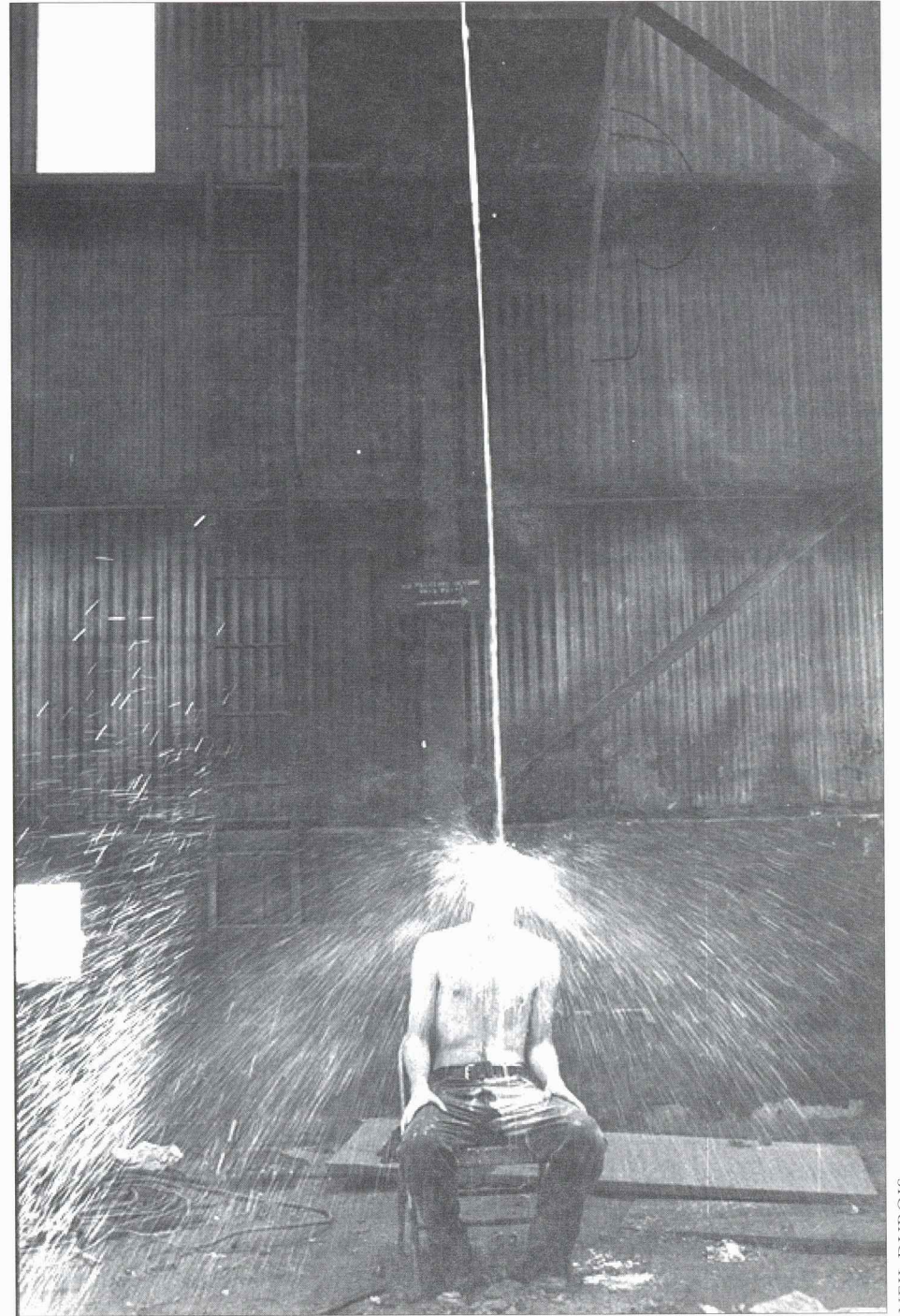
<http://www.mid.tec.sc.us/classes/eng214/webprojects/hypertext/index.html>

This year for the first time, *Stylus* offered a competition for creative web sites. The winner is *An Introduction to Hypertext Fiction* by Karen Kustafik, Scott Serbin, and Jason Warren. The site is designed to help readers new to the world of hypertext fiction negotiate their way through the brambles of Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*. In Joyce's narrative, the reader mouse-clicks through a fictional world without beginning or end, encountering bits of landscape and fragments of conversations and thoughts. You will find *Introduction to Hypertext Fiction* a challenge since the creators mimic the seemingly random organization of the genre.





NEIL DUBOIS



NEIL DUBOIS

Winter Story

ANNE BAILEY KELLY

THE NARROW DOOR OF THE BAR, made out of a bright red English telephone booth, opens onto Second Avenue, and a small group of actors emerges. The choreography of their overlapping voices and enthusiastic gestures gives the impression of a mass of clowns piling out of a tiny Volkswagen. Once outside, the actors succumb temporarily to the winter air's own rhythm, the analysis of the evening's performance arrested by the stark and solid avenue wind.

They walk quickly towards the subway station, as if their swiftness can somehow confuse the cold and outrun it before it becomes too perceptible.

"Well, I think we're going to have to do something about Silvana. She's just not getting it." Bill slows to let the others catch up and rubs his self-consciously shaved head with a gloved hand.

"She was all right. That woodchuck thing she did in the interview scene was okay. And with the suggestions we got tonight...."

"You can't blame the audience, Frank. Bill's right. She's dead weight up there. I mean, that was the worst split personality bit I've ever seen. She's got it confused with schizophrenia. And who ever heard of a DUCK in a film noir? What the hell was that? This is supposed to be COMEDY improvisation, not friggin' DADAISM!" Sal says. He is just buzzed enough to get a little bitchy.

"Maybe if you had a few more of those private sessions with her," Cassie says with a naïve smile. "I thought those were working out pretty well." It is a

personal joke with her that Bill thinks no one knows what his intentions are regarding Silvana.

"I don't know. She's either gonna have to get it or we can't use her anymore." Cassie notices that Bill's tone reflects what he must think is the proper amount of authority and finality that a director should have. She wonders if the others in the group are as irritated as she is by these modulations. He'll never kick her out, she thinks. Not as long as he thinks he has a chance to sleep with her.

"Shit." The voice comes from behind Cassie, and she looks back to see her husband Michael stepping out of a puddle on the street corner. His shaggy, thinning blond hair hangs around his face as he shakes his foot free of the filthy slush that soaks the lower left leg of his blue jeans. She tries to turn back around before he sees her, but as she does, she catches the glint of his glasses glaring in her direction. She waits for him, shifting her weight in impatience as the cold flirts with her skimpy red tights.

He walks unevenly towards her. His long black wool coat makes him look like an irate and limping priest, and she tries not to laugh as he approaches her. They continue without talking up the street together, following the hollow sounds of winter conversation.

Sal calls out, "Hey, Cassie, what do you think about doing a theme show for the Gay Pride March? Some kind of spears and orchids motif?"

Cassie takes the opportunity to escape her position beside Michael. "I don't know – what about that lesbian lounge act idea—the Ovarian Cysters?" The group continues toward the subway station, laughing out ideas for the upcoming show and wrestling with pockets and gloves to pull out tokens as they reach the staircase leading underground.

The actors run down the steps of the station's entrance, pause at the turnstiles and land on the platform. In the summertime the platform is permeated with the smell of roasted urine, trapped and intensified like the heat itself. Winter brings with it a reprieve of sorts, with its ambiguous odor of exhaust and burned chestnuts.

"How's your leg?" Cassie asks Michael.

"Cold." He leans in the direction of the tunnel, just as the floor begins to vibrate and the sound of a whistle preempts further conversation.

The train whips into the station, the doors open and the actors move forward, assess the car in front of them, and step onto it.

This time of night the trains are never crowded, but Cassie hesitates before leaving the platform. Once, when she and Michael had first moved to the city from South Carolina, they walked onto a subway car whose only passenger was a pile of human feces. The incident had left her feeling jarred and vulnerable. It embarrassed her to think that she had never even thought that such a thing would be possible, and she made up for the randomness of the situation by filing it away as a given rather than an exception. She collects these examples of urban treachery and feels that her acknowledgment of them will somehow protect her from any real harm.

This car doesn't provide her with any new amulets of indignity, just an abandoned copy of *The Voice* strewn across the floor with a mosaic of muddied boot prints underneath. The group scatters among the dingy but luxuriously empty orange plastic seats.

"I'm going to tell her, that's all." Bill continues the conversation about Silvana as if it has been progressing all along.

"Yeah, and what are you going to tell her? She's the only T&A in the group. Hey – yeah – maybe we can play it up. Do like some kind of Gracie Allen meets Chrissie from *Three's Company* thing." Sal Rozzi, king of the layered reference, Cassie thinks.

Bill sits up and squints into the space directly in front of him. "You know, that's a pretty good idea. Cassie, maybe we could have a couple sessions with her, see if we can't work on the idiot savant schtick."

"Perfect," Cassie sighs. Not bad for a talentless misogynist. Semi-private sessions with both the babes in the group.

The train lurches to a stop and Sal and Bill make their hurried goodbyes. As the doors close Bill sticks his face against the window and mutely reminds Cassie and Frank of the next rehearsal.

As the train resumes speed, Frank sits down beside Cassie and Michael. "Did you see that girl I was talking to after the show? I wanted to introduce you but I didn't want it to look like I was introducing her to anybody. She's Southern too. From Alabama, I think. Works for one of those shoe designers in the West Village. Kenneth or Timothy something. Anyway, I'm going to ask her out this weekend."

"I thought she was great," Cassie agrees. She points her words at Michael to include him in the conversation, but his focus is intent on the advertising placards near the subway car's ceiling. The photograph of a well-known television star smiles the importance of childhood immunization while the testimonies of middle-aged Manhattan residents extol the miracles of Dr. Mohtar's chemical facial peels.

"I was thinking about taking her to that performance art space down on 18th Street. Isn't that where you directed that puppetry piece, Michael?" Frank continues.

Cassie winces and resists the desire to turn around. She waits for her husband to respond, knowing that he will not. He must have moved on to the Bronx abortion clinic ad. Say something, goddammit, she thinks.

The fluorescent lights flicker as the subway leaves the tunnel between Manhattan and Queens. Cassie is always relieved when the train reaches the elevated tracks, when she can look out the window and see the skyline of the city behind her. She is still surprised and elated at the scale of the landscape. The view of the bridges and buildings from the tracks gives her a deliciously uneasy feeling of insignificance, like standing on the roof of a tall building and daring herself not to jump.

Frank's stop is next and he gets up just a little too early. The train pitches forward as it stops, and he is knocked onto Michael's lap. "Hey, there's an idea for the Gay Pride show. Two straight boys find love on the N train." Michael grunts a half-response and the train deposits Frank onto the platform at Steinway.

The doors close and Cassie watches as Frank moves towards the stairs to the street. The train groans and jerks as it gains momentum, like a mechanical representation of geriatric sexual performance. She turns to Michael, who is examining the movie schedule page directly in front of him on the floor.

"Why didn't you answer, Frank? He was talking to you. Didn't you hear him? He was asking you questions." She is surprised at how strident her own words sound to her, how shrill the quality of her voice is. "I know you heard him. I know you heard all of us. I tried to include you in the conversation. It's rude."

Michael breathes in and lifts his head slightly, then resumes his concentration on the dirty scrap of newspaper.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Did you not want to come out tonight? I’m sorry about your leg but it’s not my fault. You don’t have to come out to the shows if you don’t want to. I’ve told you that. Why don’t you just SAY something?”

The door from the car in front opens and a tall, white haired man enters. He carries a sign that says, “Repent! Repent! Repent!” in bold but shaky black magic marker letters. “Jesus is coming soon Jesus, God, God is coming God,” he chants over and over in an Eastern European accent. He lingers and shakes the sign with apocalyptic significance and then exits the car.

Michael lets out an audible sigh and leans back in the plastic seat. He begins once again to stare at the advertisements on the wall of the car.

“Hello, can you hear me? I...” Cassie starts to continue but realizes the futility of it. The more I talk, she thinks, the stronger his silence becomes. She sits back and lets the motion of the train calm her. She looks out the window directly across from her. Against the outline of the warehouses and the faraway bridge she sees her husband’s solitary reflection. Quietly, as the train slows to its final stop, she zips up her coat and puts on her gloves to prepare for the chilly walk home.

Jazz

The music flows outward,
twisting, turning, inside out
like a theme park ride,
notes flailing outward from speakers.
The rhythm is consistent —
an old grandfather clock in a silent room.
The bass is playing lines
you can actually walk to.
The trumpet and sax
scream their notes like a baby
waking in the darkness.
Hearing ideas change from mind to music
enchants and mesmerizes.
The improvised melody
disappears as the carnivorous drums
eat at its time.
Solos take flight
in instruments of passion and rage.
The final theme
cuts in one last time.
Silence.

ANDREW WHITE

On Account of Maya

Her honeymoon was
 just another one of *my*
 sweaty metal money smelling
 Sundays.
 Ravished absolutely
 by the night before and
 laughing alone at the glow of the wit
 of the well-acted script,
 I remembered how we had insisted:
 “She shouldn’t or couldn’t,”
 (or *please*, just say, “I *wouldn’t!*”)
 But she did. And
 during our lifeless winter nights
 when paranoia ran rampant
 and rural drug dealers were
 written up and read about,
 we snaked around their silent city,
 under their pugged pig noses,
 cleaving to anything
 we perceived stable, as always...
 But somehow (and in spite of the
 fact that she *was right*,
 as usual)...without her.

JENNA MORRISON

Once Blindly

Once blindly, and before, I took this leap;
 Toward what and with what haste I had not known.
 But marriage may not stay with those it keeps,
 And darkness left its ripples as a stone.
 Eyes open now reborn with passions green,
 So certain but aware of the abyss,
 I see within your gaze what was unseen,
 And turn in joy to face the precipice.
 But what disguised will break from pain accrued,
 What phantoms surface in such blessed bliss?
 And if in time affection comes unglued,
 What light will hold away pain’s bitter kiss?
 Yet fate dims in your whispers I have kept;
 Seek not to know the future, but accept.

ANNE BAILEY KELLY

Sunset Rising

Sunset rising
 Seeps through
 A shattered pane
 With veins
 Of gold and blood
 Pierced at points
 With steel and lead
 As clouds gather
 Their wraith's cloaks
 Billowing behind
 In their wake
 Frozen feathers
 Come unseen
 Out of the North
 An ancient song
 Of frost and of
 Memories as
 Trees start
 Whispering
 Of times past

Nodding drowsily
 In the wan light
 As fire descends
 Ice awakens
 Her silver bell
 Glinting over the edge
 Of Eternity's beginning
 Glancing longingly
 Downward
 To the silent land
 Where small things
 Gather
 In their small worlds
 And continue onwards
 Faster, farther they
 Scramble towards oblivion
 Seeking those things
 They could find if only
 They would see.

JASON SHEPARD

Thirty-One

Valentine's Day night and I
 Succumb to the house
 Merlot, sit listening to
 The boy who loves
 Me pour out his
 Thoughts with the wine
 While Steely Dan
 Plays on the stereo
 An appropriate reminder of my
 Long-left husband
 Kiss him goodbye and give him
 One Perfect Rose
 (they were free at the bar)
 Wobble home and
 Call the boy I love
 Who is sleeping next to
 The girl who loves him
 Hang up when she answers
 In silent obedience
 To the rules of
 Blatant infidelity and laugh
 Alone
 At the hangover
 I wish I wouldn't have

ANNE BAILEY KELLY

Uncomfortable Silences

Silence crawls
in florescent doorways of anxiety
through needle point intensity
surfacing arctic spines.

From gold-plated souls
between ego summits
stare rain's
murky contradictions.

ANDREW WHITE



CARL CRAWFORD



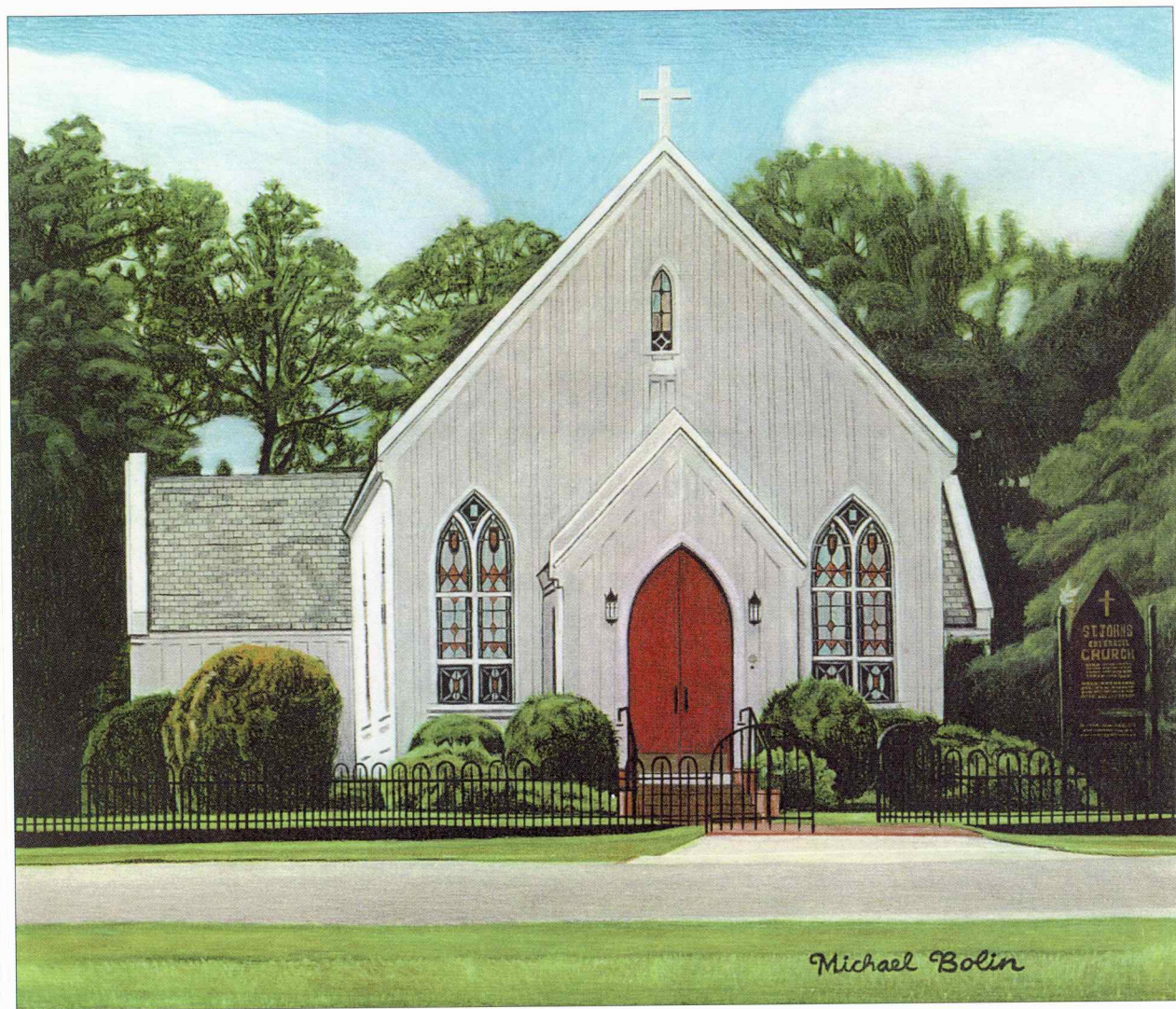
TONY FLING



CARL CRAWFORD

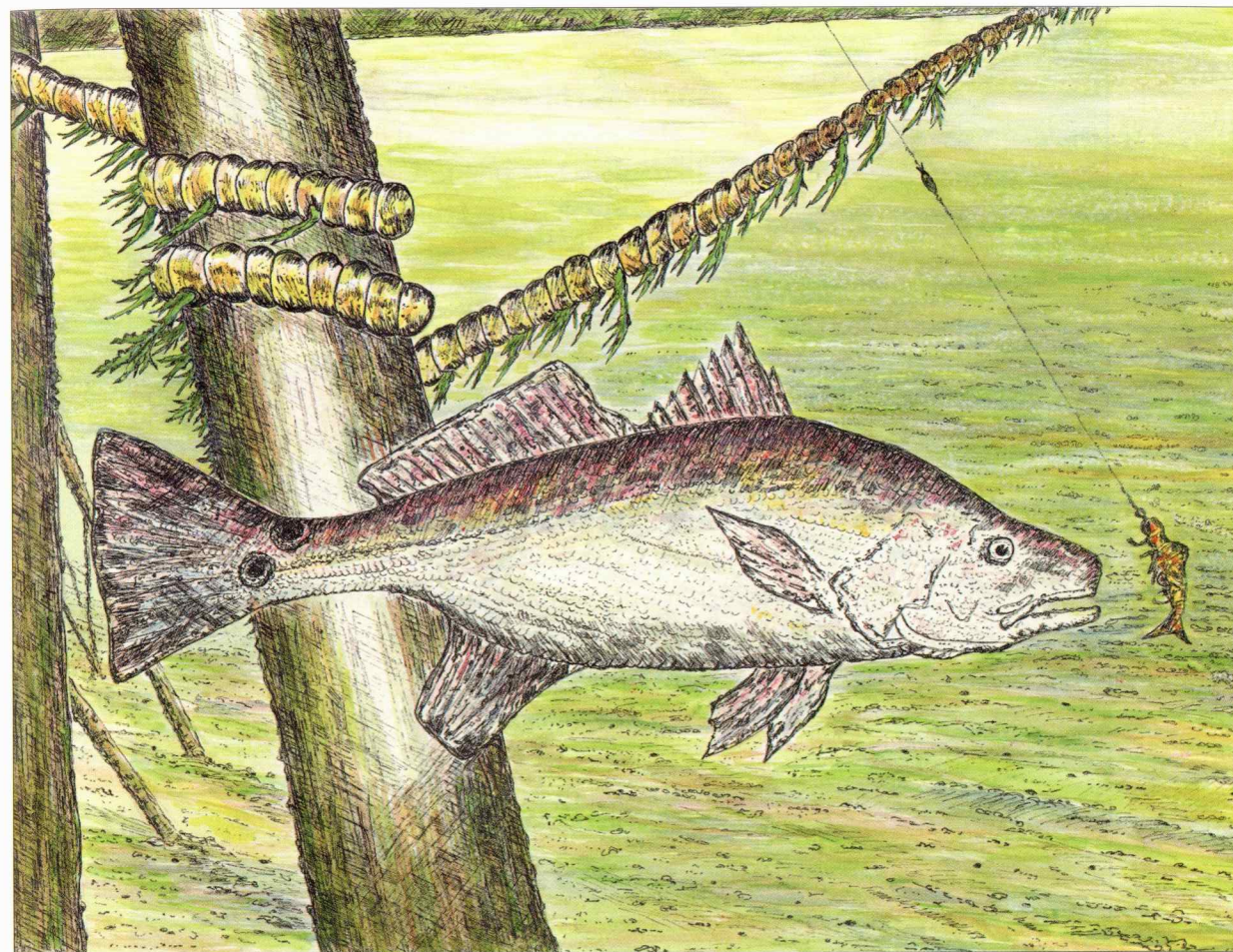


CARL CRAWFORD



Michael Bolin

MICHAEL BOLIN



RONNIE MATHIAS

Windfall

The sky was slate from end to end and
 Pierced with frozen lances of rain, I
 Gathered my thoughts and spoke with the wind.
 Old friend, I said, I am back yet again, as
 I seem often to be. Dusk has begun to
 Settle into the cracks and the air grows chill, yet
 In this slow freezing I made peace with the sun.
 A pool once empty I have started to fill.

In times now past I questioned the night and
 Wandered the darkness dredging for dreams, I
 Sought out forgotten places, hidden from sight. The
 Places where most just avoided it seemed. And
 In these shadows what horrors I found! There
 Was the scent of damp earth perfuming the air, the
 Winds and the whippoorwills the only dark sound. To
 Think these were the shades that most people fear.

And so I return in silence to divine from the sky and
 Wonder at the ease with which some people forget and
 The winds and the rain can't seem to say why. The
 World has wonders that few seek and even less regret.
 Secrets are as distant as we choose them to be, blatantly
 Hidden they mock with their simplicity.

JASON SHEPARD



DYLAN FOUSTE

The Moon is a Pilot Light

The moon is a pilot light
 that won't stay lit.
 In the intermittent darkness
 you embrace me
 as if I were the prodigal son.
 Trace the topography of my face
 with disbelieving fingertips.
 Sift through my hair
 as through soft sand on a beach threatened,
 by time's inevitable erosion,
 to extinction.
 When I finally feign sleep
 you hold a mirror over my mouth until the fog rolls in, lifts,
 rolls in again.
 Why do you still not believe
 that I will stay
 even after I have been here so long?
 I murmur words of devotion,
 of reassurance, that fall on ears
 deafened by the roar of trains that
 take away, take away, take away.
 You stay awake,
 your eyes still searching
 for the cloud of smoke in which
 I will disappear.

DELIA HINSON

Awake With Walrus

Clandestine conversations on the shore
 On a night that is not nearly dreaming
 In someone wishing to swim and not soar.

The beach is laden with seashells galore.
 Thoughts left for the mind's unrelenting
 Clandestine conversations on the shore.

Moments in conscious stars of the day before
 Blink so brightly in a sky competing
 For someone wishing to swim and not soar.

Relaxation is changing to a chore.
 A vengeful assault on the dissenting
 Clandestine conversations on the shore.

The mind and world are going to war.
 The latter is alliance seeking
 With someone hoping to swim and not soar.

Awake not just by walrus and his snores,
 The Neutral body lies just being
 Clandestine conversations on the shore
 In someone hoping to swim and not soar.

JENNIFER H. YBARRA

Fishing with Mr. Jim

DELIA HINSON

I AM STANDING BEHIND A TREE, listening for the low rumble of cars, squinting at the newly present sun, waiting for Mr. Jim to arrive. My younger brother is running circles around the well-aged oak trees that line the small red clay trail leading to the river. We have been anticipating the arrival of my father's friend for over an hour. Mr. Jim was supposed to meet us here on the muddy banks of the Congaree River at 6:30 A.M. It isn't often that my father chooses to partake in a recreational activity such as fishing, so today will be quite special. He certainly would not be here with us, but he doesn't trust Mr. Jim to care for his only two children. The thought of what might happen in the wilderness, on a boat, nonetheless with James Dickey, the author of *Deliverance*, is a disturbing thought to anyone. God forbid we get lost. I sure as hell will not scream like a pig for anyone. We all know Mr. Jim is a wisecracking smartass, but I don't think he is a pervert. However, I could be wrong.

"Dad, here he comes!" My brother looks overly enthused that Mr. Jim has finally arrived. Don't get me wrong; I like Mr. Jim. He is greatly entertaining when he tells stories and is certainly great company for conversation as long as a bottle of Tylenol is easily located.

The pick-up truck Mr. Jim is driving halts abruptly. The truck door opens and Mr. Jim steps out in a manner that is quite far from graceful.

"Good morning, Jim!" My father nudges me disapprovingly at the fact I am calling an elder by his first name, but I don't care. How many of my friends would believe that I am standing here with a famous writer who somehow or other managed to befriend my more-than-stoic father?

Everyone grabs their fishing poles and tackle boxes in preparation to begin the descent down the narrow path which has been reclaimed by mother nature and her various poison ivies and briars. Mr. Jim clears his voice.

"Today we have two boats. Neither my boat nor this loaner is in very good working order."

That is not a very comforting thought. Today the river's current is especially rough. "We will go in pairs. Who wants to share my boat?"

"I would love to share your boat, Mr. Jim," I say. "In fact, it is probably best that I ride with you. The only other option is to let Zeke ride with you but he whines like a baby, so I will save you the headache."

Finally, after winding through a maze of briars and ivy, we arrive at the small rickety dock that consists of overlapping two-by-fours that have warped from years of exposure to sunlight and water. The four of us are standing at the end of the dock, indifferent to one another. Zeke bravely decides to lead us down the short dock where we find two boats. Both look as if they need to be land-bound for eternity.

"Well, why don't you go first?" Mr. Jim says as he turns my way.

"Okay, no problem." I stoop down and gracefully place one, then the other foot inside the greatly less than sea worthy boat. Soon everyone is situated and we begin our descent slowly down river to a "secret" fishing hole located about one half mile down stream. Mr. Jim and I are in the lead.

Well, I think to myself, this will be the only chance I will have to be one-on-one with Jim. He is someone who truly fascinates me. One day I hope to be famous...a famous poet. In fact I think I will tell Jim this. Maybe he will be highly impressed at the fact that I not only admire him and his chosen profession, but hope to one day be known for my work.

"You know, Jim, I would love to be a famous poet one of these days." Jim does not even look up from the lure he is fumbling around with in his hands.

"Why the hell do you want to be a poet?"

I slowly turn the other direction in shock at his pointed remark. For a few seconds I absorb my surroundings. The birds are singing, the sky is a wonderful blue canvas with an early morning peachy tinge and the varying greenery gracefully lining the riverbanks seems unusually vivid.

“I have always enjoyed writing. The pen has been my only voice, my only tool. That is why I want to write.”

Surely this is an acceptable response. Without so much as skipping a beat Mr. Jim continues fumbling with his reel.

“You don’t look like a writer. You look more like a nurse or a secretary.”

Now, I don’t feel that anything is wrong with either the nursing profession or secretarial work. However, I felt so liberated saying I am a writer, and now I feel insulted that I was told that I don’t resemble a one. Somehow that comment has insulted one of the pillars of my identity. One of two things is going to happen next. Either I am going to be insulted further, or Mr. Jim is. I was taught that in life, as well as in baseball, after three strikes you’re out. At this point I have two strikes against me and I am not going for a third.

I place my tackle box next to my feet and look directly at Mr. Jim searching for a reply that would be pointed, yet not overly intrusive. Oh, what the heck. Either I can end our friendly relationship or make it stronger.

“I might not look like your idea of what a writer should appear to be, but you don’t look like an asshole even though it is becoming more apparent that you are one.”

Mr. Jim stops fumbling with his lure long enough to settle a little more in his seat. Sighing at this new loss of conversation control, Mr. Jim leans back, his dingy shirt and wrinkled pants scraping against the dirty edges of the boat. Only briefly he glances at me with his head tilted, his eyebrows arch inquisitively.

“You know, there is something I should tell you.”

I grasp my fishing pole so hard that my knuckles begin to turn white. Here it comes. I can feel it. Here I sit with a man who has fought in two wars, written several books, taught, spoken or visited most of the well-known colleges and universities in this country, and I just called him an asshole. I see his lips begin to part as if he is anticipating his own comment.

“You know, there might be hope for you after all.”

“That is it? That is all you are going to say to me?”

At this point I oddly yearn for conflict with this man. If not conflict, I am yearning for something that would strike up a conversation or bring about some sort of enlightenment.

“Do you drink?” Mr. Jim asks me with a half grin lining his mug.

“Not that often,” I reply. After today I might start, though.

“Here, taste this.” Jim leans slightly forward reaching for his tackle box. He carefully removes the top shelf in the box, which contains some floaters, and what appear to be dried up worms from a previous fishing trip. Underneath is a silver flask with wood grain trim. Jim slowly removes the shiny object with a delicacy that can only be compared to that of handling an infant or an artifact many centuries old.

“Try this. It doesn’t taste so good at first but then you get used to it.”

I slowly loosen the cap as Jim observes.

“I don’t know if my dad would want me to drink this. You know I am only seventeen.”

In my mind I want to drink the whole damn thing.

“Go ahead, you only live once.”

I slowly take some of the strong concoction in my mouth. Well, it doesn’t taste entirely bad, I think to myself. So I take another sip. Then another.

I feel a warm sensation in my chest. It moves like the curtain of a grand stage across my body. Jim looks at me so close, as if memorizing the details of my face, pore by pore. I begin to laugh, first to myself, then out loud.

“Do you find something to be amusing?” Jim says as he slowly sips the bitter liquid from his flask.

“It is funny that I am on a boat with you. I should have brought my guitar or rented a banjo.” Mr. Jim evidently thinks this is slightly funny because a small grin emerges out of his emotionless face once again.

“Can I ask you a question?” Now I feel as though I can say or ask Jim anything. Especially after the dose of liquid bravery he just gave me. For a brief moment I pause as thoughts of the late fees I incurred at Blockbuster Video, due to my returning a poor quality copy of *Deliverance* three days late, run through my head.

“It actually happened, didn’t it? On a river that is. You were one of the guys on the riverbanks. Not one of the guys in the boat.” My father and brother are only thirty feet behind. Mr. Jim scoffs at my comment. Finally we arrive at our destination. I bravely lean toward Jim so that it is undeniable that I want a response.

He looks at me and says, “I only write about what I have seen, or what I have experienced.” Now this comment only leaves me with more questions than answers. At that moment the other half of the fishing party arrives. I feel a sense of urgency, as if I might need closure to our one-sided conversation. I reach out and grasp the well-aged poet’s arm, lean in to him and say, “This conversation really needs to be continued one day in the near future. If you don’t mind, that is, I would enjoy finishing this conversation one day.”

Mr. Jim smiles sarcastically and leans back toward me. “I think we have already finished. Besides, if I tell you all my secrets one day they might end up in some undergrad or grad school paper. Then my secrets will have no value.”

A quiet satisfaction runs through my body. Now my focus for the rest of the day will be on catching the big one—if I haven’t already.

Hidden between the Pages

ANDREA L. FREDIANI

I RECEIVED A PACKAGE from my mother recently that contained two of the most precious gifts I have ever received: *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* and *Poems of Byron, Keats and Shelley*, books I had not seen or thought of in the many years between junior high school and a visit with my parents last year. By sending those particular books as gifts, my mother was acknowledging my feeling, which I had shared with her during our visit, that it was the memories I found hidden between the pages of the book, and not the words printed on those pages, that made the books so significant to me.

When thinking of those books I recall the summer, when I was eight years old, that I stayed with my grandmother every day while Mom was working. It was unusually hot that summer, with the temperature exceeding 100 degrees many days, and I had no desire to be outdoors. My grandmother, on the other hand, felt that lounging around the house playing solitaire and driving her to distraction with my incessant chattering was a waste of time. To her it was important, as it should have been, for young children to get plenty of fresh air and exercise. It did not hurt anything, in her opinion, if they accomplished something productive simultaneously. Her attitude is not surprising when you consider that she raised eight children and taught elementary school for twenty years. As it was, soon after I arrived each morning she would shoo me outside while instructing me to find something useful to do. This was an act she would repeat many times throughout the day, as I would inevitably return to say that I was bored and had nothing to do. Because of my complaining, grandma started

arranging to keep me productively occupied. I didn't mind walking a quarter mile east to the neighbor's farm each morning to gather the chicken eggs and help them brush and feed their horses, but once she had me mow the acre lawn with an old fashioned push mower and white wash the fence surrounding it, I decided to keep myself occupied.

That thought led to a week of pretending I was an Indian. I would sneak through the woods at the back of grandma's property in my best Indian imitation until I reached the eroding hillside bordering the neighbor's pasture. Once there, I dug out the red, green and white natural clay that had built up over the years to form the hill. Back at the house, I would mix the clay with water until I could form it into the type of pots I imagined the Indians would have made. Once they were completed, I painted them and left them out in the sun to bake dry. Unfortunately, when searching for paint to use on my pottery, I discovered my grandmother's best art set and decided that the acrylic paints it contained would be perfect. When she found out what I had done, she immediately put me to work weeding her garden and shelling peas, half of which I ate before they had a chance to hit the bowl. At this point, my thoroughly frustrated Grandma gave in and I spent several days lounging in the house, my long, gangly legs and awkward, bony arms sprawling across the living room carpet as I played solitaire, Lincoln Logs and Pick-up Sticks. Someone, probably grandma, once told me that idleness would rot my brain and looking back, I'm inclined to agree, because after only a few short days in air conditioned bliss I forgot the lesson I had spent three weeks learning and repeated my mistake by uttering those two words grandmother dreaded hearing—"I'm bored."

I have never been able to figure out if what happened next was a carefully executed maneuver or a split-second decision, but whichever it was, her response was instantaneous. She spun on her heels, flew to the bookcase and grabbed one of the thickest books I had ever seen. Thrusting the book toward me, she said, "Then read this!" When I took the book the weight of it felt as though it would pull me to the ground, but sensing that grandma's patience was down to the last thread and not wanting it to unravel, I beat a hasty retreat through the house and out onto the screen enclosed front porch. The expansive porch, full of redwood patio furniture that held cushions as plump and soft as cumulus clouds, was my favorite part of the house and about as far as I could go

to get out from under grandma's feet without actually being outside, so I figured it was the best place to hide out. I settled into the chaise lounge, which was my favorite seat on the porch, and turned my attention to the book I held. Coarse fabric that was time worn and faded covered the book, but the lettering was still clear and easy to see. The title said the book was *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* and judging by the size of it, Shakespeare had done a lot of work!

Nevertheless, I settled in and began trying to read it, but it was slow going as there were many words that were unfamiliar to me. I had to ask my grandmother for help many times and although she answered my questions pleasantly, it was obvious that her patience had not fully recovered from the trials of the previous weeks, so it was for both our benefits that she greeted my first question the following day with a dictionary and instructions to look it up. I went back to the porch, and there I stayed alternately reading the book and looking up definitions, until the words became familiar. When that happened I was able to set the dictionary aside, which allowed my reading to develop a flow and concentration so intense that it was very nearly impenetrable. On numerous occasions, after having called out to me several times and not having received any reply, my grandmother had to remove the book from my hands in order to get my attention. I spent the rest of the summer on the chaise lounge with that book and managed to read it from cover to cover.

Soon after my summer with Shakespeare, I developed a voracious appetite for the written word that was due, primarily, to the example my mother set. Until I was about ten years old, she was a single mother working hard to make ends meet and failing miserably more often than not, which is another story entirely. Working two jobs, even with my older sister and me looking after one another and the house, left her with little time or energy for anything else. Reading was the only exception as it helped her relax and escape the drudgery her life was at that time. She read continuously in every spare minute she could find and, although she would never complain or get upset if we interrupted her, the one unalterable rule in our house was that you did not disturb mom when she was reading. It was a rule my sister and I both made and enforced because we saw how exhausted she was and realized that the time spent reading was crucially important in maintaining her ability to cope. The fact that reading was free, if she went to the library, and cheap, when she used the book exchange with

her friends, was important in our financial situation as there just was not any money to spare. My sister, who understood this and many other things about our lifestyle better than I did, had begun following mom's example about four years before my Shakespearean summer. Considering that books and avid readers surrounded me, it is surprising that I had not followed their examples sooner, but after that summer with grandma I did not just follow their footsteps, I ran far ahead of them. I began devouring books, magazines, newspapers and anything else in print that I could get my hands on freely or cheaply and always, as grandma had taught me, with the dictionary by my side.

Because of my newfound love for reading, I had several memorable experiences throughout the remainder of my grade school years, none of which would have been possible otherwise. One of these occurred when I participated in a read-a-thon while in the fourth grade and raised more money than anyone else in the school. My success surprised many people who did not know me well, but none more than the woman who had pledged \$1.00 per book and ended up owing over \$60.00! She never pledged over \$.10 for anything I did after that. Inevitably, when word of my triumph spread, people started saying that I had lied about the number of books I read. Actually, I only heard the kids at school saying this, but I felt like everyone was thinking, if not saying, the same thing. In retrospect, I was probably right—kids usually mimic their parents in thought, word and action. Regardless, I was very upset by it all. I knew I truly had read all of those books and enjoyed them too, but protest was futile and as a poor, awkward preadolescent lacking any self-worth, I simply chose the easy road and withdrew into my books and myself.

Another important school experience resulting from my love of reading took place during my sixth grade school year. Over Christmas break, I found a dusty, leather bound book on my mother's bookshelves. The glimmer of light shining off the fading, gold embossed title and the satin ribbon bookmark trailing down its spine and dangling slightly beyond the edge of the shelf are what initially drew me to the book, but my curiosity soared when I saw that the cover said *Poems of Byron, Keats and Shelley*. I had spent the majority of my life, up until a year before my discovery, living in a town called Keats so I was curious to know who the Keats of this book was. I began reading the book intending only to answer this question, but soon ventured beyond the biographical information,

through the poems and to the back cover. When I had finished reading the book from cover to cover, I was bubbling with excitement. I felt sure that no one in this tiny town (the population had peaked years before at about 350 and rapidly descended to approximately 250 people) had ever heard of these three men, let alone actually read their work. For months, I relished every moment spent with that book rereading each poem several times, because I thought I had discovered something that no one else (in my immediate area) knew!

When we returned to school after Christmas break, we began reading, studying and writing poetry. The final test of our poetry studies was going to be each student's recitation of their favorite poem, from memory, in front of the entire class. While the other students were racing to the library and fighting over the remaining books of poetry, I was polishing my delivery of a poem I had memorized during the break. The poem, originally published in the book *Hebrew Melodies* and republished in my mother's volume of poetry, was "She Walks in Beauty" by George Gordon, Lord Byron. I am not sure what the cause was, but when the time came to recite my poem, I was not nervous and nauseated as I had always been before. In fact, I was barely aware of my classmates and teacher.

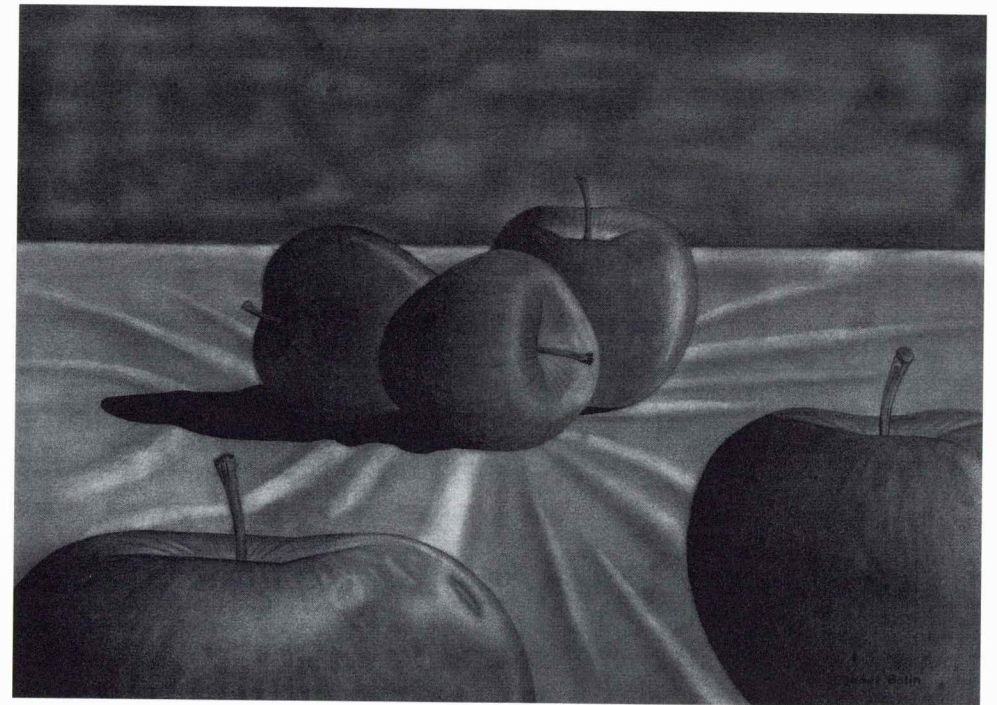
When I finished, the few students who had not fallen asleep looked decidedly perplexed and the teacher wore an expression of extreme surprise. I did not receive applause or congratulations as most of the others had, but I truly did not care. I felt my recitation had done the beautiful poem justice, and everyone's reaction confirmed my belief that I held secret knowledge. My classmates, who could not understand my love of reading or my choice of poems, began thinking of me as a bookworm and a number of other unflattering things that they did not hesitate to share with me. In their minds, nothing else could explain my willingness to memorize and recite such a long and boring poem. No matter though, because my appreciation of that poem had allowed me my first taste of both confidence and victory, which left me feeling invincible. Besides, a few months later we moved to the city where I made new friends who both appreciated and related to my passion for these masterpieces created with nothing more than words.

There have been many other times in my life where reading has been especially important. During a particularly difficult two-year period, my grandmother passed away unexpectedly, my grandfather endured a near fatal heart

attack, my uncle died shortly after being diagnosed with cancer, my 21-year-old half brother was murdered, and my cats ran away and I never saw them again. I was depressed, confused, and even angry about these things, but so were many of the people around me. To my way of thinking it wouldn't have been right to compound their misery by adding mine to the mix, so I put on a brave face and a strong front and carried on as if nothing were amiss. At the end of the day, exhausted by the burden of the façade I was displaying, my mind would start to race with the inevitable, unanswerable questions of why—why me, why them, why now? I needed to escape, to relax, to forget, and reading was the perfect solution. Reading became my source of comfort, my friend when I needed a shoulder to lean on and a companion when the waves of loneliness that accompany grief came crashing down on me. Without my reading, I do not know how or even if I would have managed to cope.

About a year ago, my mother and I were discussing our lives: where they started, how far they have come, and the long, twisted, and sometimes arduous paths we took to get to where we are today. It was a time of shared memories—happy and sad, new and old—and the perspective we had gained over the years changed the meaning we had previously found in many of those memories. During these conversations, I shared the newly discovered significance of the same memories I have related here. My mother was stunned both at the clarity of my memories and the significance I had found in them. She had never attached any importance to these events; in fact, she only remembered a few of them, and so my revelations took her quite by surprise. Soon she surprised me in return, with a gift of two very special books. It was her way of honoring the significance I attributed to the events we had discussed. Although my grandmother had passed some thirteen years before, my mother went in search of my grandma's copy of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Unfortunately, finding it proved impossible, so she located and purchased a new copy. Later, while sorting through her belongings during spring-cleaning, she found the same copy of the *Poems of Byron, Keats and Shelley* that had captivated me years before. Knowing that the gift was complete, she rushed to get the books sent off to me. I opened the package, not knowing what it contained, when it arrived a few days later and was overwhelmed by the flood of memories and emotions that seeing them again called forth. They now hold places of honor in my living

room bookcases where they are constant reminders of how much more reading has meant, and will continue to mean, in my life than the creators of all the literacy campaigns could ever imagine. And in the evenings, when I sit reading with my daughter and hope that it will mean as much to her some day, as it has to me, I would swear that the light reflecting towards me from the gold embossing on their covers shines just a little brighter than at any other time of the day.



MICHAEL BOLIN

Father Figure

TIMOTHY A. SNODGRASS

I CANNOT DEFINE my earliest recollection of my father. Some of my most vivid memories of him are of my childhood and adolescent years. He was, without question, my hero.

He was the second son of poor mountaineers, reared in the heartland of Appalachia that was impoverished not only by the natural poorness of the region, but also by the bitter sting of the crash of Wall Street in '29. In my teens he told me that, relatively speaking, they were just as poor before the crash and were not substantially hurt by it as those who had something to lose. The real difference after the crash was not having the opportunities of employment.

His mother was the granddaughter of a full-blooded Cherokee Indian who moved his family by drawn wagon and on foot from East of the Appalachians to the Western side of those mountains later in 1863 to be named West Virginia, to escape the rigors and devastation of the on-going Civil War. His father was a Scotch-Irish man who at best could boast of only a third grade education, but whose wisdom would have placed him at the top of any graduating class. This simple man and the granddaughter of a Cherokee Indian would meet and marry under a large White Oak tree by a running brook in the winter of '23, with nothing visible to exchange for their vows but a promise of lifetime loyalty and devotion to each other. They would rear three sons and one daughter in a small, rickety house built out of lumber that had been cut out of the trees that adorned the existing land on which it sat. All three sons would go on to serve Uncle Sam in an effort to suppress an ill regime that wanted to engulf our world.

It wasn't until the summer of '80 that he told me of his personal effort in that war. He openly wept at the morbid memories that had taken thirty-five years to surface. That was the first and the last time that such things were ever discussed about those times. Even then I didn't realize the extent of his experiences until after his untimely death in the fall of '91. After digging through his personal military files, I found letters of meritorious service and awards that I didn't know existed until then. Later I would take these things and have them framed and mounted on the walls of my own home. I asked my mother why he had never bothered or took the time to have them mounted or at least framed. She related that dad had once told her that "there is no glory in war."

He was a short, sturdy built man with strong arms and hands that were scarred and callused from years of work. He never was outspoken. I never heard him curse, but his quiet demeanor commanded respect in a way that was not offensive. I only remember being on the receiving end of a spanking one time, this due to the fact that as a curious five-year-old I decided to see if the all the tires on his vehicle really would go flat if the air was let out. They did, and upon the final release of air on the back right tire of that old '48 coupe Chevy, I looked up and to my utter dismay, had been watched. I could even then realize upon receiving that spanking that it wasn't the physical pain that was really hurting, but knowing that he was disappointed with me. Mean-spiritedness was not in his nature, for once, in an infantile moment, I did something seemingly foolish and he gave me a rare tongue-lashing. Sometime later, after realizing that the spirit of the child might have been injured along with the will, he apologized for the errant words he had used.

He as a child had never witnessed conflict or how to resolve it within the confines of his own home, between his parents. They just never had disagreements in front of their children, so he thought that all households were run the same way. I don't remember anything that would indicate that my grandparents ever had a disagreement that would cause a visiting family member to realize that there were bad vibes between the two. Simply put, they didn't fight.

Once, when I was about twelve and he would have been about thirty-nine, my mother had cleaned and put away the afternoon meal dishes when he returned from a visit with his own parents. It was then that mortality dawned on him and he knew that his own father would soon die. He cried hard, my mother

cradling him in her arms like a small child. The sting of death would make him cry once again as he stood over the place where his dad was laid to rest, thinking of the good times they had in earlier years past. But the most heart-wrenching, soul stirring sobs came one morning in the fall of '78 as we all stood on the front porch and watched the vehicle that carried his eldest son's family to live four states away. As the vehicle grew smaller and smaller and finally melted away in the distance, he slowly walked through the house to the back yard, knowing then that the family unit would never be the same.

It was in the course of my own life, especially at the birth of my own children, that I would come to appreciate the immeasurable wisdom this man had possessed all along. Funny how I had watched him transform over the previous years. I concluded that he was the strongest and smartest man that ever lived.

As he lay on the hospital gurney, the life ebbing away from wounds received earlier in the day from an auto accident, it seemed as though all the wisdom that he had possessed would transfer to me as I held his hand. It was then that it occurred to me that it wasn't how much time spent on earth that matters, but what we do with the time given us. His time and accomplishments were complete. Had he been the mighty CEO of a large corporation that traded stocks on the market? Had he been a president or sat on the board of directors delegating jobs for subordinates to do? Had he even owned a large, immaculate home with modern features?

As my own children grow and continue to mature—with two already in college along with their dad, with one in the seventh grade and the last in the first grade—I can only hope that the foundation he laid for me is being laid in return for them, and that someday if not already, they will do me the proud honors and think of me as I have thought of him.

Large and In Charge

AUBREY TRAPP

THERE IS A DEFINITE INFATUATION in America with the sport utility vehicle (SUV). They scurry about here and there. From grocery store to soccer practice to home, these multi-passenger beasts of burden carry their cargo. Or do they? Day in and day out they are seen traveling town and country (mostly town) with a sole occupant. Occasionally there will be a passenger, bringing the number of riders to a grand total of two. One may ask, "Why is such a car needed for so few riders?" The answer is simple: America's love of the large.

There were forty-nine major models of sport utilities for sale on the U.S. market last year, and SUV sales went up nineteen percent in 1999. This seems surprising considering America's large urban population. The SUV is, by nature, a heavier, larger vehicle than the average passenger car. Everything about it is bigger: tires, height, engine, and yes, the fuel tank. It generally seats between four and eight people. Being larger leads to higher fuel consumption. So why is America so hell-bent on the SUV? What does it say about us to want such big cars with such big gas tanks, cars that are known to cause more damage in accidents than passenger cars?

Our obsession with the SUV is not a surprise. Americans have always been fad seekers. Since the industrial revolution, when more people got into factories and out of the fields, people have sought things of large stature to please them. Have you seen a fast-food hamburger recently? They are too big to bite. I won't say much about Wal-Mart because that is another topic all in itself, but just walk

in and you will see that large is in charge. Televisions, surround sound systems, entertainment centers. Big, big, big. At Wal-Mart's wholesale sister, Sam's Club, you can buy a box of cereal that is bigger than a suitcase. Only a decade ago McDonald's started the "Super Size" craze. Now almost every fast-food chain has its own version of it. Enough just isn't enough. We glut ourselves until we cannot eat anymore. But we all love it. We just keep on consuming because it is available.

We are addicted to big things. The SUV shouts this. We all know that they use an outrageous amount of fuel, but it does not stop us. The average SUV can go under twenty miles for every gallon of fuel used. The average passenger car can go about thirty miles on that same gallon of fuel. Many people drive them to work, park them in a garage all day, and then drive them home at night. Moms cruise back and forth from home to school, then to ball practice. Lastly they stop to buy their forty pounds of groceries, which they throw into the cargo area of their heavy-duty monsters. They are seldom used for what they were intended. America wants the biggest, the latest, and consequently, the least economical product on the market. We love to waste. It is because we have so much that it is too easy to use it without thinking or caring. A replacement or solution to a problem seems too easy to come by.

Sport utility vehicles are practical for some things. Many have four-wheel drive ability and a higher ground clearance for traversing mud, snow, and brush. They also have a large cargo area and outstanding towing capacity. An SUV should be purchased and driven with the intent to use its special features. I own an SUV. It is a 1992 Ford Explorer Sport. I bought it in September of 1998. Since then I have used it to haul firewood, building supplies and tools, furniture, and gardening materials and instruments. It has also kept belongings dry both of the times that I have moved. It has seen its share of off-road action and log pulling. These are all practical uses for my sport utility vehicle. It has not been a *suburban* utility vehicle or a *social* utility vehicle. Too many others use them for joyriding on the highway and as a suburban shuttle bus. Can these things not be done with a more economical car?

Sport utility vehicles represent American neglect for conservation and an over-zealous attitude to fit in. Their number increases daily, as do the number of accidents associated with them and the tons of pollution they vomit into our

atmosphere. No one cares; they just want to drive a Jeep or a Path Finder. Americans have just found a new way to waste. The SUV is just one more way to quench our thirst for something bigger and better: the proverbial battle with the Joneses.

The River

LONNA COUFAL

IT WAS EARLY, so early I could hardly get my eyes to open. "It's time to get ready," my dad whispered into my bedroom doorway. A moment later, I could hear him tiptoeing around in the kitchen, trying not to wake my mom as he fumbled around in the cupboard looking for his coffee cup. Although Mom loved the river and swimming, she was afraid of boats, and refused to go in one unless it was a thirty-foot cabin cruiser. She always said she didn't feel safe in smaller boats. Consequently, she never shared any of our early morning adventures.

Struggling to look across the room, I was barely able to squint at my clock, which read 4:30 A.M. Was it really morning, or was I just dreaming all this? Soon the smell of coffee from Dad's old electric percolator was beginning to drift into my room. I took a deep breath and sighed. The fresh outdoor smell of my sheets was comforting, and it was really tough to move my head from the pillow. Mom had hung the sheets out on the clothesline the day before. I sat up in bed and gave my head a quick shake. A light breeze from the window near the head of my bed blew in. It felt cool and moist as it washed over my tired face. I sat up slowly, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. The night light in my room gave off just enough light for me to see the clothes laid out on the chair across the room. In a couple of minutes I was dressed and on my way to the kitchen.

After a quick breakfast, we started out toward the back yard. The fog was so thick you could cut it with a knife, as my Dad would say. It was still dark, but we somehow managed to get the fishing rods and life vests from the shed and

make our way down at the dock. Just as we crossed the front yard, the sound of a foghorn echoed across the river and seemed to bounce off the hill behind the house.

It was common for both "lakers," as we called them, and ocean liners to come down the St. Lawrence River at any time of the day or night, and once in a while, when the fog got really thick, these huge ships would drop their anchors and stay in one spot until morning, when the fog cleared. When they anchored, the front of the freighter would be left pointed toward the shipping channel, and the stern would be allowed to drift around toward shore. Then the crew would put out the rest of the anchors and go to sleep until daylight arrived and they were able to safely continue on their way. When the back of the ship would swing around toward shore, it would come quite close in. These ships were often several hundred feet long, and when they were anchored in this position, they looked so awesomely huge. Many of the people who stayed at the river during the summer would get up early just to see the boats as they came so close to shore. They would get out their binoculars and peer out at the huge freighters. Sometimes you could actually see the people moving around on the upper decks, tending to the cargo and cleaning up the ships. Most of us had flag books, too, and we had great fun trying to figure out what country each of the ships came from. Mom was an avid ship watcher. She would run for the binoculars often when the ships came by.

Once Dad and I got down to the dock, it was time to begin loading our gear into the boat. My job was to stand in the boat, while Dad handed down the poles, one by one. Then he would bring the bait bucket and drop it slowly into the boat. He always instructed me carefully on safety tips to be sure that lines would not be tangled or gear would not fall over when we least expected it to. I got to hook up the oars as he was untying the boat. Slowly, silently we rowed around the end of the dock. Just then, I heard a clattering noise to one side. "Good morning," said Ross, one of our neighbors. "Looks like a good day to go after a big one." Ross and his wife were busily loading their fishing tackle, picnic jug, and life vests as the lift was lowering their fiberglass ski boat. Down the river a ways, I heard another bunch of neighbors loading up for their morning fishing trip, too. As we all moved out of the shallow water, motors cranked up, one by one, and off we all went.

About a quarter mile out, we turned off the engine and began slowly drifting into a weedy inlet. As the sun began to creep over the trees, I could hear the ships gearing up their engines, preparing to re-enter the shipping channel and make their way down toward the Canadian border. As the water lilies around us began to open up, a few fish began working their way to the water's surface, feasting on some of the water bugs they were able to sneak up on. Just as I baited my hook, I heard a big splash behind me. Tension built as I early anticipated a tug on the other end of my line. As I slowly let some line out, the boat drifted leisurely along. There was barely a ripple on the water now, but that would soon change as the wind picked up. The sudden, sharp whine of Dad's reel startled me. "I think I've got something," he said. As he anxiously reeled in the line, we noticed that a long, green weed was attached to the end, and the bait had been snatched clean off the hook. "Tricky devil, he is. He took the hook down into the weeds so he could get the bait off. Oh, well. Better luck next time." I was already looking forward to next time.

Soon there were boat engines whining here and there, and we could occasionally hear the chatter of people on the shoreline. Some were working on their docks, others cleaning their boats. Many of them were busily preparing for river sightseeing trips. The world of the river was waking up, and the familiar sights and sounds of our home soon surrounded us. Sea gulls raced over our heads, occasionally swooping down to pick up a dead fish floating on the surface of the water. A crowded tour boat passed by, busily humming along while people remarked about the gorgeous view and the many beautiful islands around us. "Time to go in now," Dad said. "Water's getting too choppy. We'll try again just before dark."

"Okay," I nodded, eagerly looking forward to another fishing trip. And yet I was happy to go back to shore, because that meant that we could go swimming or seashell hunting shortly thereafter.

After I got married, my husband and I moved to a city about eighty miles away from my parents' place. Everything was so exciting there. There were new places to explore and new people to meet. Job opportunities were plentiful, too. After growing up in the boring small town I had come from, this was quite an adjustment. My husband was excited that he had gotten a job in an electronics plant. "Sure beats that dumb snow plow factory," he would say. His job at the

factory had been to operate the electric scissors that cut sheet metal used to make the plows. The snowplow factory employed about one-quarter of the town's people, and it was one of the few steady jobs around. Meanwhile, I was busy trying to get my own career together. It was lucky that our landlord was a lawyer, and happened to be desperately in need of an assistant. Of course, I jumped at the chance to get the job. My attempt at an early career was slowed somewhat when I discovered that I was expecting a baby only eleven months after we had been married. My son, Ryan, was the first grandchild in the family, all nine pounds, twelve ounces of him. He was a joy to us and one of the happiest babies I've ever seen. He bedazzled my parents and early on Mom developed a close relationship with him. She would say, "Bring him to the river this weekend and let him stay with me. You can pick him up next weekend when you come back."

We visited Mom and Dad often, and Ryan learned to swim, fish, and hunt for seashells. As time went on and life got busier, the frequency of our visits to the river declined somewhat. Once in a while, Mom and Dad would visit us. In particular, I remember that on one visit my Dad paced nervously around the yard, examining the houses on either side. "These houses are too close," he said. "Can't even breathe here. No room for a shed, for a clothesline...your mother always has to have a clothesline." He simply could not imagine how we could live in this place without one, and Mom agreed. So, we went shopping after lunch that day and he bought me a clothes "tree." It was one of those clothesline poles that looked like a topsy-turvy umbrella, just like the one Mom had in their yard. I didn't have the heart to tell him that people usually did not hang their clothes outside if they lived in town. That was a country thing. People would look at you kind of funny if you did that.

After Dad died, we moved again, this time several hundred miles away. I often reminisce about my younger years, and all the fun I had growing up on the river. Somehow I used to think that was all the excitement I needed. There was always something exciting to do. Back then, I was more of an outdoor person. Now I spend a lot of time inside, often working late into the night on my computer.

Somehow, there is something about the river that I miss, though. Thinking back on those cool summer nights and remembering the rushing of waves

against the shoreline helps me drift off to sleep when I've had a stressful day. It is hard to believe that most of the people I knew from the river are gone now, and many of their families have sold the river property, choosing to remain in the city. I remember that the pace of life there was pleasant and unhurried, and it seemed like each day brought new and exciting adventures. It can't be that I'm the only one who misses those times. So many of my parents' friends had returned there each summer for years and years, until they became too feeble to travel. Maybe I miss the feeling of well being just sitting in a rowboat, rocking with the waves and soaking up the warm sun on my back. Whatever it was, whatever it is, it's magical, even haunting. Even when I have visited other rivers, other lakes, even the ocean, I have not experienced the same peacefulness. I still dream about the river and, although I'm too far away to visit now, it is my true home, and always will be.



TERESEA COX

Though It's Cold and Lonely in the Deep, Dark Night...

ABRAHAM PERNICKA

THEY SAY THAT NECESSITY IS THE MOTHER OF INVENTION. This is true, but if necessity is the mother, then boredom is the older brother who chases invention around the house to get it moving. In my particular case I was home alone and bored out of my mind. My mother was at work and none of the few friends I had were around.

So there I sat in front of my computer. Light slanted in through the venetian blinds, painting prison bars across my bed. The bleak reality of hours of loneliness stretched before me and I sought listlessly through my computer's hard drive for something amusing.

I happened upon a file where I'd written down a phone number, login name, and password a friend had given me for something called "Midnet." He'd never explained it very clearly, but it was apparently some sort of internet service and the dialup number was at the USC library. "Well," I thought, "at least it gives me something to do."

So I unplugged the phone line and plugged it into my computer, fired up hyperterminal and listened anxiously to the furious static issuing from the PC speaker. Finally the welcome screen appeared. I entered my borrowed login name and password where prompted and was confronted by a list of options. I picked "gopher" out of curiosity. Surely there wasn't anything so vastly inter-

esting about gophers that they deserved to be ranked with choices like “email” and “www connection.” I was pleasantly surprised to discover that “gopher” here was actually a sort of menu, not a type of rodent. It listed topics and places and became more specific as you selected choices.

A few stumbling steps later I found myself on FieryMUD, linked from the University of Michigan’s MUDlist. MUD, I now know, stands for Multi-User Dimension. A MUD is like a chatroom combined with a computer game. In those days online games like Quake or UltimaOnline hadn’t been invented yet. Text-based MUDs were as immersive as they came. And, equally important for me, were a link to other people.

Here was a whole world of people like me, sitting in front of computer terminals in California or Michigan or Taiwan or wherever. I leaned back into the cushiony softness of my chair and the only sound was the staccato clacking of keys. Day faded into night and the soft glow of the monitor replaced the sun-painted prison bars across my bedroom. I had, at long last, found a place where I belonged.

It was raining the night I met my girlfriend. The water beat a staccato rhythm against my windows and played counterpoint to the tapping of the keys on my keyboard. Her name is Ivy, though in the time and place I met her she went by Peridot. The twists and turns of a couple in love are seldom of interest to any but those navigating the road, so I’ll spare you them here. The point here is that we met on the Internet and there we fell in love, having never seen one another. We talked as close to daily as possible for years, having never been within a thousand miles of one another.

It was raining the night I met my girlfriend. Luckily I was flying in, not out, of Saskatoon or I’d likely have been grounded. Flight schedules were pushed back incrementally as thunder roared through the night and the terminal was crowded with damp, unhappy faces arched up toward the off-green light of departure listings. I sat nervously, the novel I’d brought to read on the flight sat forgotten in my carry-on bag while I futilely tried to distract myself. I’d expected her to be there when my plane arrived, but no sign so far. I told myself it was merely the storm, that she’d had to wait longer for a cab in that weather than she had expected. I told myself a lot of things, but my heart still raced, hoping she’d

not simply decided not to come. I don’t know how long I waited there, wedged into one of those horrible airport chairs that seem designed of all the pieces they take out of ergonomic seats. It was one of those times that seems to drag on an eternity with every tick of the second hand and even the perspective of memory cannot shorten to their proper span. However long I waited—minutes, hours, eons, whatever it was—the thousand horrible scenarios I’d concocted for why she hadn’t arrived fled my mind when I saw her. She walked around a corner, her long brown hair hung with the diamond stars of scattered raindrops. Her eyes searched the span of the room before alighting on me as I stood. I saw her smile and my heart melted. With the flood of happiness, though, came a flood of worries. How could I be good enough for her? What if I did something wrong? A million fears cascaded through my mind as my feet carried me forward, the leather of my trench coat flowing around them with soft shushings, as though to ease my troubled conscious.

I’d spent days pondering what to do when I saw her. What do you say to a person you’ve known forever but never met? What would she do if I dared hug her? If I kissed her? Again my own body betrayed my unwitting and confused thoughts. I found myself on one knee, staring at the blue-gray carpeting of the terminal floor as I drew the single purple rose, her favorite color, from the inside pocket of my coat and held it aloft. I had the presence of mind to say, “For m’lady” and thankfully the self-control to say it without mumbling or stuttering. Again time stretched to an eternity and the fears crashed back in on me like a flash flood engulfing a sleeping town. Memory can reduce this span to its proper frame of a mere few seconds. I heard her gasp and felt her take the flower from my hand. I looked up cautiously, fearing reproach, but saw her blushing as she said, nearly whispered, “Arise m’lord.”

She’d not gotten to the second syllable before I was up and had her engulfed in my black-clad arms. I crushed her to my chest and sighed, “I’ve missed you.”

It was raining the night I met my girlfriend. I stood out in her garden, my hair blown by the cool breeze and the vivid swath of colored flowers rendered a parti-colored smear by rain on my glasses.

“You know it’s raining, right?” she asked, walking up behind me from the door to her apartment.

I replied, “Mmm,” noncommittally.

“You shouldn’t stand out in the rain, dear,” she said, taking my hand and leaning on my shoulder, “you’ll catch pneumonia or something.”

“Oh?” I asked, looking at her over the rims of my water-streaked glasses, “So what’re you doing then?”

“Well, if you get pneumonia you can’t leave tomorrow.”

“Ah.”

“So why are you out there, anyway? Had enough of my company already?”

I looked shocked at her and she grinned, asking, “Really, why’re you standing out in the rain?”

I shrugged, “I don’t know. I like the rain, it’s soothing. It started to drizzle and now here I am...all wet.”

I was really only damp. It hadn’t gotten much beyond a light, though steady, fall from the darkening heavens above. Here and there starts even shown through gaps in the clouds, though the moon was little more than a bright smudge over my shoulder.

“We should go in,” she said, though she only squeezed my hand and stood looking up at the clouds with me.

“Yeah,” I said, “probably should.”

I don’t know how long we stood out there. It was one of those times that seem so fleeting then but become a blissful eternity when viewed down the tunnel of memory. Eventually the rain came down harder, and we were left no other choice but to go inside. I didn’t get pneumonia, didn’t even get a cold.

It was raining the night I met my girlfriend. I love the rain.