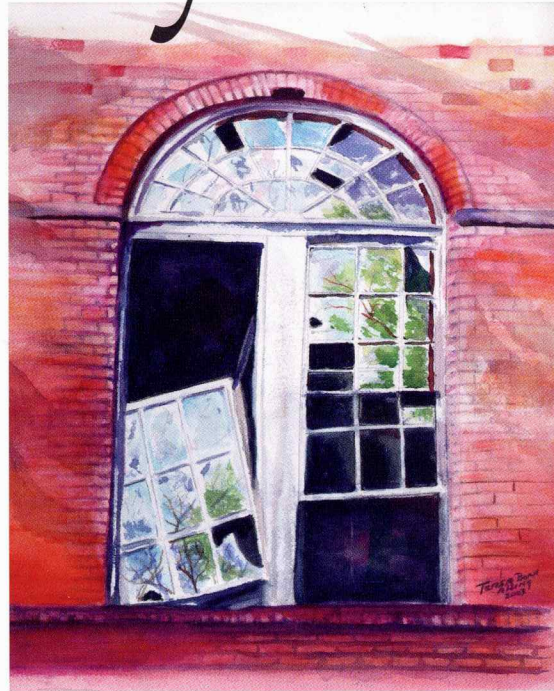


Stylus 2003-04



the literary annual of midlands technical college

STYLUS

the literary annual of midlands technical college

2003-2004

Stylus 2003–2004

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Stylus Awards

Creative Nonfiction: Lynda Curtis
Fiction: Randy Pfannenstiel
Poetry: Amber Carter
 Joseph Michael Floyd

William C. Goodwin IV Memorial Art Award:

Lily Todd

Sunday Driving

JOSEPH MICHAEL FLOYD

SOPHIA STOOD STRAIGHT UP. She walked directly into the kitchen. The teapot was first; she poured warm water into it, letting her fingers play in the stream, testing it for heat. There were leftover grits from the night before, and the smell of fried salmon was still in the room. *The grits are still good*, she thought to herself; *just pour more water into them*. She searched in the refrigerator for eggs but didn't find any. She knew she had bought eggs, remembered it when she picked up ham and bread.

Normally she turned on the radio later in the day, waited until R.J. was taking a nap and would listen to the music from the sixties. She liked it when the girls sang harmonies. She kept the volume low and as she tapped her feet turned around to see her husband was awake. "You're up early. I hope it wasn't the music." He nodded his head. It wasn't the music; it hadn't been playing long enough. He sat at the table smacking his lips letting her know he was ready to eat. "What kind of big plans do you have today? Are you going to the lake?" The grits weren't ready yet. He raised his hand and waved it back and forth. "Do you want to go to town with me? I'm going to visit Murielle, see how she likes that woman who moved into the bed next to hers. You know that woman seems awfully quiet, but that's good for Murielle, she doesn't like a lot of noise."

After his first stroke R.J. was still able to speak well. There was nothing different about him, really. The second made him foggy, he seemed confused sometimes. Years later, when he had his last stroke, he wasn't able to say many words at all. Sometimes, though, a half of a sentence would roll out of him. Often this was while he watched the news; the president would be speaking and R.J. would curl his fingers into a fist and squeeze them fast and hard. It was months before Sophia noticed this. He never threw anything or yelled as his doctor had warned. His doctor was short and young. R.J. called him Boy until the last stroke

when he was unable to speak well and would try to make out "sir." The doctor had graduated from the same college as their son. Sophia would ask the doctor if he remembered certain buildings and professors that she had heard her son talk about.

The grits were not good. During the night they had gotten hard and cold. She used the knife to get more butter and it coiled up on the side of the silver utensil. She added more to his as well. He made a noise, like clearing his throat but something she knew meant that that was enough. "You think Murielle likes it there? I think she does. I think she knows its best for everybody." He nodded. "They have a garden there. It 's pretty and every single room has a couple of African violets to make it cheery." She was clearing the plates then, as she spoke of Murielle. "I think she likes it there. I think she does."

He put his slippers on and scratched his head. Tufts of brown and grey fell in his eyes. She smoothed them over so that he could see and licked her fingers so it would stick. Standing up she noticed his slippers, probably as old as their oldest daughter she thought to herself and with holes in the top and the bottom.

Sophia pulled the sheets back on the bed, not quite making it up, not perfectly, but putting it into place. She opened the bedside table and there were the eggs. Innocently sitting there. She almost wanted to yell at them, the eggs, ask what they were doing in her bedside table. Instead she closed the drawer and went to her vanity.

Sophia rolled the lipstick from the tube slowly. She had worn the color for years. Almost orange but with a hint of what she liked to think of as fresh peaches. Her hair was still brown with a patch of grey near the temples. She brushed it down with her hands and hummed to herself as R.J. washed his hands. "I know you want to get home before dark so we'll probably want to leave the home by at least six." She heard him grunt and she nodded. "Why don't we stop by that chicken place on the way back? We can get dinner and eat outside. You know, I think Murielle really likes that place. I think she likes it there fine."

The drive to the nursing home was short, only ten minutes. Sophia knew that the drive wouldn't be bad when she did it every day; it would almost be like walking into the living room to see him. It would not be bad. He took off his hat and sat in on the dashboard. It was corduroy with a small brown feather on the side and far too big for his head. R.J. leaned his seat all the way back; he was going to nap until they arrived. "I can't believe we are going to have a gas station right down the street from us. Remember when we used to have to drive into town

to get gas, and now just a jug of milk is gonna be right down the road? I don't know what I am gonna do not having to go into town."

Sophia drove slowly, occasionally looking out of the side window as she drove. The buildings were all new. When their home was built it was surrounded by only trees and a lake. Now there were shopping malls on both sides and an elementary school down the road. The children from the school would play from noon until almost two, sometimes R.J. would take a walk and the children would wave to him but he would pretend not to see them and stare straight forward.

R.J. was the first to walk into the building. He had his cane in his hand and strode into the nursing home as if he was on business. Sophia could smell sweet magnolias and walked behind him, realizing it was her perfume that he was wearing.

Mrs. Jones

JEANNETTE GILLESPIE

H*mm...nice ass*, thinks Janet, as she walks up behind the tall man in the checkout line. She stands close enough to catch the scent of his cologne as it mingles with the antiseptic smell of the drug store. His dark tailored suit contrasts sharply with the whites of the wall and display cases. Her eyes wander slowly up from his well-formed asset, to his broad shoulders, then past his sun-tanned neck, and drift softly on a mass of thick black hair.

After paying the clerk, the man turns to leave and their eyes meet. A smile traces his lips. Janet smiles back at the twinkling blue eyes staring down at her. She thinks he's going to say something, but his eyes linger for a moment...and then he's gone.

Janet gives a heavy sigh then glances down at her watch. "Oh shit—six twenty! Give your hormones a rest and get yourself in gear, girl," she mumbles.

"I'm sorry, what did you say, Miss?" asks the gangly young clerk, his skinny eyebrows raised, and his long pointy nose staring at her from beneath wire rimmed glasses.

"Oh, nothing," she says to the nose. "How much do I owe you for this hairspray?"

Her thoughts still on the tall man with the pleasing *derrière*, she argues with herself. *I'm acting like an idiot. Here I am, a thirty-one year old mother going through a divorce...and all I can think about is the possible size of some man's "willy."* Okay, so it's been over nine months since I last had sex, that's still no reason to be getting weak-kneed over some hunk in a check out line. With my luck, he probably doesn't have any teeth, she decides, and pays for the can of hair spray.

The clerk's inquisitive eyes follow as she walks to the pay phone by the door. He stares appreciatively at the long brown hair moving in pace with her quick lengthy stride.

Outside the drugstore, Robert chastises himself as he walks across the scorch-

ing pavement. "What a dope!" he shouts to the heavens. "Why didn't I say something to her?" His voice chokes off as he opens the door of his brown Pontiac and the heat from the interior comes rushing out like a blazing hellhole. He quickly starts the engine as beads of sweat begin to escape his underarms. His foot reaches for the gas pedal. He pauses, then steps out of his car and looks back through the glass doors of the drug store. He sees the woman standing beside by the payphone, digging through her purse.

How, in this life, did I manage to get so much crap in the bottom of my purse? Janet wonders, as she searches for a dime. Finally, after retrieving the buried coin, she dials the number and her foot taps impatiently to the sound of six rings.

"Hello," the surly voice of her fourteen-year-old answers.

"Hi Danny, it's me, Mom. Is Charley home yet?" she asks.

"Yeah," he answers. "He's out back peeing on the neighbor's dog."

"What!" she shouts, breath quick and eyes wide, but relieved that she hadn't shouted the *big* word.

"Ah Mom, I'm just jerkin' your leg," he says in his dry, condescending manner.

"Real funny, Dan," she snaps. "Maybe I'll come home and jerk *your* leg if you don't watch yourself!" She glances out the glass doors and notices the man with the "hot looking hunky" leaning over the roof of his car.

"You keep an eye on Charley till the baby sitter comes, okay? She should be there any minute now. Don't leave for football practice till she gets there. You hear me?"

"What about Cathy? She's here, why can't she watch him till Marsha gets here?" he argues.

"We've gone over this before, Danny. She is too young."

"Oh, all right. I hear you," he grumbles, and deliberately drops his half eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich behind the couch.

"Do well at practice tonight, Baby," she says, forgetting he hates her to call him that.

"Yeah, sure," he answers.

"I love you, Dan," she tells him, and waits for his response, but only hears a click, and then silence.

Why is he always so angry? Janet wonders, as she walks across the parking lot of the strip mall. Droplets of perspiration trickle down between her breasts as she tugs at the hem of her new mini skirt, feeling self-conscious. Most of her friends don't have the nerve to wear a mini, and Janet feels half naked.

She has completely forgotten “Mr. Tight-ass,” until she pulls her station wagon from its spot and sees him sitting in the brown Chrysler—watching her. *No, no, no*, she thinks as she starts to drive past...but she can't resist. Her car stops next to his and she looks over at his grinning face. Head tilted, she lowers her lashes. A slow, easy smile spreads across her face, lingers a few seconds...then she drives away.

Robert's jaw drops. *Okay, now what am I supposed to do? If I'm not mistaken, she just gave me a catch-me-if-you-can look. Hmm...This might be interesting*, he thinks.

* * *

A block away, Janet looks in her rear view mirror and sees the brown Chrysler. *Is he following me?* She checks her mirror again as she pulls onto the interstate. *Yes, he's still there.* Two miles down the road, she takes the exit to the Holiday Inn. She had worked there last summer as a part time waitress, and Janet tells herself, *What the heck? Surely it won't hurt to have one drink with him in the lounge.*

Hmm...a hotel, thinks Robert, *she doesn't look like the type of woman that would move this fast.*

The parking lot's full, so she parks all the way back by the rooms. “Oh shit! This guy's going to think I'm a prostitute!” She anxiously grabs her purse and jumps out of the car as he's walking toward her.

“Sure is a long way to come just to get a drink,” she says quickly, her voice climbing each word.

“Can I buy you one?” he asks, in a slight southern drawl.

“Sure,” she says, taking in his full set of teeth and again looking into the most penetrating blue eyes she has ever seen...the kind of eyes that always make her want to act stupid and drool on herself.

The small lounge is dark. Three people sit at the bar and five businessmen sit at a table next to the door. *Everyone must be in the dining room*, she thinks, as they slip into a private little booth tucked behind a lattice screen.

They both order Scotch and introduce themselves. He says his name is Bob Richardson; he sells sports equipment, and lives in German Village. “No, I'm not married,” he says in answer to her straightforward question. The ice cubes clink as he puts down his glass and turns to read her face. *She cuts right to the chase*, he thinks admiringly.

“Well, my name is Janet...Janet Jones, and I live here in Westerville.” She

sighs heavily before continuing. “Wish I could say that I'm single, too...but no, I'm not. My divorce is almost final, though, if that helps my case any.”

Robert smiles and moves smoothly to her side of the booth. The scent of her perfume is soft...like the softness reflected in her eyes. *Don't get too caught up in this woman*, he warns himself. *Lots of baggage comes with this package. The soon to be ex-hubby will probably be lurking in the sidelines...and maybe even some kids. On the other hand, that's her baggage, not mine.* He likes her silky voice, her hands...and the way they move.

His soft eyes trace over her as he says, “Darlin', I'd be willing to take on your case any day.”

His arm goes up to the back of her chair and rests warmly on her shoulders. Small tingles course through her body as his leg eases against her thigh. She thinks she should move her leg, but somehow, it just won't move.

They sit talking for over three hours, telling each other about their lives, (mostly her telling and him listening) their likes and dislikes. It feels completely natural as he leans over to kiss her.

She's unprepared for the consuming passion that quickly flows through her veins. *Wow*, she thinks, *can this man ever kiss!* His lips are soft, warm, and exciting. She savors the scent of his breath and the taste of his tongue as it teasingly brushes against hers.

Here you go, acting like an idiot again, she tells herself. *Haven't you had enough trouble with men in your life?* She thinks back to the day she had finally had enough of her husband John's infidelity, and had tossed his clothes out on the sidewalk. *Okay, so the sex with John was great, but women seem to let sex control their emotions. I thought I'd finally learned my lesson*, she reflects.

Now someone please tell me what I'm doing with my hand rubbing the inside of this guy's thigh? His tongue slips further into her mouth as she questions her sanity. *Man...I'm so friggin' hot I think my panties are starting to smoke!*

“Do you think we could get a room?” he whispers.

“What!” Her offended eyes stare at him coldly. “Just what kind of girl do you think I am?” She quickly removes her hand from his inner thigh where she had almost, but not quite, reached the critical spot. “Why, for all I know, you could be Jack the Ripper!” But then she thinks, *Yes, and by the way I've been acting, he could think I'm Linda Lovelace.*

He leans close and teasingly says, “Excuse me, Miss. I don't know what could

have given me such an idea." His laughter starts in his eyes then flows from his mouth in amusement.

Janet laughs in spite of herself, then regretfully looking at her watch she says, "This has been a very interesting evening and I wish I could stay, but I really do have to go now." He calls the waiter over, pays the tab, and takes pleasure in the scent of her hair as he helps with her coat.

Evening has smothered the heat and moonlight paints a silvery pathway as they walk to Janet's car. As he reaches to open her car door, Robert smiles. He feels like he just stepped off a roller coaster...and he's keenly looking forward to the next ride.

As she rolls her car window down, he leans over to ask, "Are you sure you won't give me your number?"

"Let me think about it," she answers.

He stands watching as she pulls away and the taillights of her car disappear.

★ ★ ★

All the way home, Janet keeps glancing at the cocktail napkin he gave her with his phone number written on it. She argues with herself: *Now don't let your brain turn to mush girl. Go home and toss this number in the trashcan!* She often has to give herself a good talking to. The problem is...she seldom listens to herself.

As she pulls into her driveway the car lights splash across the cozy brick ranch nestled in trees and slightly overgrown shrubbery. Janet prefers the natural look to the stuffy, well-pruned lawns of her neighbors. At least that's what she tells herself.

"Why can't I just once pull into this stupid driveway without having to move a stupid bicycle!" she grumbles.

As she steps into the living room, the dim light coming from the kitchen outlines the relaxed contemporary look of the room. She takes off her shoes and her toes dig into the long shag carpet as she calls out, "How are the kids, Marsha?"

The seventeen-year-old baby sitter quickly walks from the kitchen to meet her. A short, mousey haired girl, she stands there in all her bulk, eyes averting Janet as she speaks. "They're fine, Mrs. Jones, they're all asleep. Uhh...Mrs. Jones," Marsha mumbles, "I kind of had an...ah...accident while you were out. The glass on the oven door kind of...ah...shattered when I put a loaf of frozen bread dough in it." Her voice trails off as she follows Janet's quick steps to the kitchen.

The kitchen is small with an open breakfast bar dividing it and the combination family room/dining room. Janet's heart sinks as she looks at the mess. Splin-

ters of glass tossed around the linoleum floor like a hailstorm of broken shards, dirty dishes still on the table and a half full carton of milk souring on the counter. The hellish screams of *The Exorcist* jump from the family room TV and bounce off the walls.

"Marsha, why didn't you sweep up this glass?" asks Janet. She crosses to the family room and angrily twists the knob until the screams fade to a choked silence.

"I couldn't find the broom," she answers weakly.

Janet marches quickly to the broom closet next to the stove. "Right here, Marsha, where it always is," she says, holding the broom aloft and scowling like a drill sergeant.

"Uh...I got to go now, Mr. Jones," says Marsha, backing five steps—then turning to escape. *Yeah, get your little fat ass out of here,* thinks Janet. She hears the door slam, and her broom smacks at the floor with vengeance.

Bent over, the dustpan still in her hand, she hears a noise and glances up. Her twelve-year-old daughter, Cathy, stands in the doorway rubbing her eyes and yawning. Her tangled bed-hair hangs down over one eye. She's short for her age, with delicate little bird bones, blonde hair and green kitten eyes.

"Kit Cat," says Janet, "What are you doing out of bed, sweetie?"

"I heard the door slam," her sleepy voice answers.

"Come on baby, let's get you back to bed," Janet says, as she shoulder guides her back to the bedroom.

Cathy's bedroom hasn't changed in the last five years. Her stuffed teddy bear and her Raggedy Ann doll still sit watchfully staring at each other on the dresser...as if daring the other to move. The dandelion paint on the walls blends with the soft yellow, blue, and green of the flowered comforter on her small twin size bed.

"I need to talk to you about something, Mom," says Cathy, parking herself under the covers and propping sideways on one elbow.

"Sure, what's up, Kitten?" Janet asks.

"You know that boy, Billy...the one that lives next door to old man Sweeney?" she asks.

"Yes, I know his mother, and it's not nice to say *old man Sweeney*," she scolds.

"Well anyway," says Cathy, "I let Billy kiss me today, and Mom, it felt really strange." She sighs heavily and stares up at Janet with large puzzled eyes. "I don't know for sure, but I think maybe I'm in love with him."

“Oh baby, that’s not love,” says Janet, squeezing her lips to hide a smile. “That’s just hormones. Your body is going through a lot of changes right now, and you’re going to have this same feeling about a lot of boys. I’ve been known to have a few hormonal attacks myself. Now you get to sleep; you have to be up early for school in the morning,” she says, turning off the light.

She walks down the hall and opens the door to Danny’s room. The hall light falls on chaos...clothes scattered everywhere. A half full bottle of Doctor Pepper sits precariously on the edge of his nightstand. Walking over to retrieve the critical bottle, she looks down at the sleeping boy. A childlike innocence plays across his features, and seems in conflict with the six-foot-one body. She reaches over to brush the hair from his face...He scowls, and rolls over.

Being a single mother is no picnic, thinks Janet, as she turns to go to Charley’s room, but I guess it still beats the alternative.

“Oh no...Not again,” she moans, and turns to go check in the living room. He’s not there. As she walks down the hall to the bathroom, she wonders why he can’t seem to spend even *one* whole night in his bed.

“Wake up, honey,” she says, as she gently pulls her six year old out of the bathtub. *At least he doesn’t put water in it, she sighs.*

“What’s wrong, Mom?” asks Charley, rubbing his eyes with the back of his fists.

“Come on, baby, you’ve been wandering around in your sleep again,” she whispers, as she tousles his thick black hair, and envies his dark brown eyes—with lashes a woman would die for.

Helping him into bed, she moves Daisy, the stray Benji-looking family dog they found eating out of the neighbor’s garbage can, to the other side of the pillow, and tucks them both in. Glancing down at Charley, she again thinks how lucky she is to have such a sweet child. *He’s not perfect, mind you. Oh no, none of my brood is perfect, thinks Janet, but neither is their mom.*

Back in the kitchen, she rushes through her mundane chores then takes a break to watch the late news on TV. Nothing really grabs her attention...her mind is too distracted by her own day’s events. The off button sends the outside world into blackness, and Janet retreats to her bathroom shower.

The water descends with hot stinging satisfaction as Janet stands face upward, inviting the steamy liquid deep inside her pours. She squeezes the shampoo from the soft tube, and sighs with pleasure as her fingers massage the thick slithery lather through her hair.

Reaching for the bar of soap, it slips from her hand. As she bends to retrieve it, her eyes come level with her archenemy. *You are the problem, she thinks, looking at the soft mound of hair. Why do you keep harassing me, she asks her silent nemesis? Just when I’m getting my life halfway back together, you have to come butting in!*

She quickly finishes her shower and walks to the dresser. The hum and warmth of the hairdryer soothe her as she stares at her mirror image. *I’m certainly not a teenager, she silently tells her image, so why do I insist on revisiting that age? I really do have to learn more self-control.*

After changing into her warm pajamas, Janet crawls into her bed and turns out the light on her nightstand. She lies there with eyes closed for a long time. Her body is still, but her mind keeps traveling. She crosses years of mindless wandering sprinkled with moments of clarity and purpose. *In truth, I’m probably being a lot harder on myself than I deserve, she finally decides. I haven’t had much luck with men, but I’m a good mother...At least, I try to be.*

Realizing that cooperative sleep is evading her, she drags herself from the bed, goes to the kitchen, and makes herself a scotch and soda. After walking to the living room, she fumbles with the radio until the soft sounds of “Me and Mrs. Jones” float across the room. Lowering herself languidly onto the sofa, she lights a cigarette and inhales deeply, then studies the cocktail napkin on the sofa table. The numbers in black ink show up vividly on the white napkin. She leans forward and gingerly picks it up.

Hmm, she thinks, as she slowly leans back and closes her eyes. The romantic notes of the music drift across the room as she softly sings along with Billy Paul: “Me and Mrs. Jones, we got a thing goin’ on. We both know that it’s wrong...but it’s...”



AUSTIN TURNER

Mr. McGehee and Me

RANDY PFANNENSTIEL

MICHAEL PFIFENWALLER SAT BEHIND HIS DESK reading the morning paper. He struggled with the news he was reading. He reread the article to be sure the names were correct. As he finished, he laid the *Atlanta Journal* down in front of him, and he drifted back fifteen years where the article truly began.

Mr. McGehee walked around Bus 4 looking for obvious problems. Although this was his first year as a bus driver for the public school system, the walk-around had been routine for him for twenty-four years. Mr. McGehee looked the bus over as he did the Spitfire before crawling into the cockpit. Satisfied, he turned the key and the engine responded accordingly.

“I love the sound of a diesel engine,” he thought.

He sat for a moment waiting for the engine to warm up. He stared at nothing as he sat in his Fighter waiting for the dramatic signal from the flight officer. The action seemed like yesterday. His heart raced, anticipating the catapult. Before the ship could launch him from the steel deck, he returned to his bus.

The “ready” light lit just as the instructor last week said it would, but he was still apprehensive to put the forty-passenger bus into gear.

“The question is are *you* ‘ready,’ Mac?” He mumbled to himself rhetorically.

Some of the buses had already left. Not one of them enjoyed the walk-around check Bus 4 received. The gears slid neatly into place and, ready or not, Mac was ready.

Bus 4 exited the terminal’s parking lot on its first run of the year. Mr. McGehee had driven the route in his personal vehicle until he had it memorized, but not at this time of day. The sun filtered through the trees, blinding him for a moment as he pulled onto the rural route. He enjoyed the feeling of the early

morning sun and allowed himself to return to the catwalk that circles every aircraft carrier. He made it a point to take his morning coffee to a control box where he witnessed the sun slowly reveal herself over the horizon. The gentle breeze and the smell of the salt were his breakfast at sea.

In a moment of panic, Mr. McGehee turned his head right and then left and back again until he realized he had not missed his turn.

“Thank you, Lord,” was his response to every bit of good news.

Finding his right turn, he replaced the rural route for a dirt road. The trees were thick and kept the road as dark as it was three hours ago. A quarter of a mile further was his first pick up. The bus slowed and the image of the first passenger of his first solo flight appeared. The huge panel to his left lit up every button and its purpose. He looked them over until he found his target and just as indicated “red flashers” began flashing and the stop sign extended.

“By next week I’ll have these buttons memorized,” he thought. “I won’t even have to look,” he promised himself.

The eager passenger did not have to adjust his step right or left as the door folded open directly in front of him. Mr. McGehee looked down as the child looked up. Their eyes caught for a moment as they examined each other.

“What’s that on your back?” Mr. McGehee asked.

“My books,” came the reply with somewhat of a proud tone of voice.

The child lifted his foot as high as he could while trying not to allow the weight in his backpack pull him backwards to the ground. McGehee looked for the parents of the child to see if someone was coming to help him. A lady in a long pink robe with white fuzzy house slippers stood with arms folded opposite the bus, leaning slightly as if her body language could help her child. McGehee set the brake and stood up. He reached down his right hand. “Grab hold,” he commanded. The boy refused the help and managed to pull himself up with much twisting and turning.

“I’m in the third grade now. I can manage,” the boy informed his driver.

“I reckon you can,” McGehee said.

McGehee waited for the boy to sit. The child had his sights on the back row where the big kids sit, but he stopped half way, realizing the seats were hidden in the dark. McGehee forgot to turn the backlight on and was glad he did as the boy returned to front of the bus and sat.

With the boy situated, the red flashers stopped flashing and the stop sign returned. McGehee pulled off leaving the pink robe and white fuzzy slippers, engulfed in a cloud of road dust. McGehee felt guilty for smiling at the sight.

“My name’s Mr. McGehee. My friends call me Mac.” It seemed like a good introduction, but there was no reply. “I bet your name is Michael, and your last name begins with the letters P-f.” He dared not try pronouncing the last name. He memorized the names in order of the pickups, but there were a few last names he felt unsure of.

“My friends call me Luke.”

McGehee was thrilled to get a reply. He loved kids more than people his own age. While Luke wanted to seem older than he was, McGehee wanted to be accepted by the youth.

The second pickup were Dee Dee and Demona, also known as the D twins. The D twins were in the sixth grade. They talked about everybody as if they represented a gossip column. If there was a secret to be kept it needed to be kept from the D twins.

By the fifth pickup, the rural routes, courts, ways, drives, roads, and streets were awake. The fifth pickup interested McGehee the most. The other bus drivers had warned him about Blake Rogers. “He has yet to last more than a week on a school bus, due to write-ups for various bus infractions.”

“Good morning Blake Rogers, I’m Mac.”

“Yea, whatever, dude,” the tall thin boy replied as if life was a bother.

“Blake, that’s ‘Mr. Dude’ to you,” Mac insisted.

Mac saw the smile Blake was trying to hide. As he moved toward the back row, those who were sitting there quickly chose new seats a few rows up. Blake sat in the last row as if it were a sofa in his living room. He slouched down so low that Mac could only see the top of his baseball style hat in his rearview mirror.

Bus 4 arrived at the elementary school with laughter and signs of potential chaos. Two riders ignored Mac’s order to remain seated until the bus came to a complete stop. Mac pulled them aside before they exited.

“Do you like school?” Mac probed.

“Not really,” said one while the other shook his head in agreement.

“Then why are you so eager to get off the bus?” Mac reasoned. The two boys looked silly.

“I don’t want a child to get hurt following your example. Are we clear?”

“Yes sir,” replied the one while the other nodded compliantly. Blake saw the conversation and decided that Mr. Dude was cool. As Bus 4 pulled away from the elementary school, it was half empty and now on its way to the middle school and then the high school, where Blake was dropped off.

It took Mac five days of pickups before Luke grabbed Mac's hand for help. His hand got lost in Mac's huge grip. Luke trusted Mac's strength to pull him and his burden up the steps. The lady in the pink robe and white fluffy slippers stood with arms folded watching from the front porch of the house that was dimly lit.

Mac and Luke had an unspoken agreement that no girls, especially Katie "Goldie Locks" Brannon, were allowed to sit next to Luke. Katie liked Luke, but she made the mistake of treating him like one of her dolls. During the second week of pickups, Mac made an announcement to the entire bus that he wanted to keep "just one person in this seat" as he pointed to the seat where Luke sat, "just in case a policeman wants to ride with us." As Mac turned to take his seat, Luke gave him a third grade style wink. Mac winked back.

By mid-October there was no sign of the sun until half the pickups were finished. The weather showed indications of winter. Most of the leaves were yellow and many had begun to fall. Mac was moving a bit slower as he did his morning walk-around. His arthritis hurt, but he was determined to walk as natural as a man half his age despite the pain in his hips.

He was distracted this morning. His wife of fifty-four years was not doing well. She had been in remission for eight years and had been told that if there were no signs of cancer for eleven years there would be no more blood tests. She would be cancer free. The cancer had not only returned, but the news three months ago gave little hope they would see their fifty-fifth year together. On this particular cold October morning, Mac climbed up the bus steps with more effort than ever. He was tired. His wife couldn't sleep last night and she had trouble breathing. Mac spent the night in a chair next to their bed praying for Alice and ministering to her needs until she fell asleep. He woke with his right hand on her forearm. He concluded that he must have fallen asleep since he did wake up. He called the Hospice to let them know he was ready for their help.

Forty-five minutes later, he was sitting in the bus anticipating the "ready" light. There was no time for Morning Prayer. From the driver's seat he could see only what the headlights allowed. Daylight saving time was getting close. He drove a little slower than usual and finally Luke illumined on the side of the road. Mac forgot the routine he and Luke had every morning. Mac was so distant that he forgot to pull Luke up the bus steps.

As Luke reached the top of the steps he said, "hello," but Mac gave no response. His mind was on Alice. Luke wanted to say something, but he was new at this sort of thing. Mac looked very sad. Luke noticed that his hands looked wiggly.

The darker mornings had an effect on the bus. The children were quieter, maybe sleepier. Blake, however, entered with a "Hey Mr. Dude," as he did every morning, following it up with a high five. Mac made a meager effort with his right hand but missed the tag. Blake walked backwards to the back of the bus signaling to Luke to come join him. Mac didn't notice that Luke was half way to the back when he pulled off sending Luke to his knees as if his backpack had tackled him.

"Dude, what's up with Mac?" Blake asked Luke. Luke situated himself for the second time. He was honored that he was sitting in back with Blake. He knew the others were looking at him.

"He looks real sad. He didn't even say hello to me today!" Luke paused a moment to reflect then added, "And did you see how wiggly his hands are?" Blake nodded, although he didn't notice that.

Blake said, "I don't think he's sick but something's wrong. Let's find out. My uncle knows one of the bus drivers. I'll go to his bus right after school and see if he knows anything."

"Let's cheer 'em up. I got lots of gummy bears. I'll give him some," Luke recommended.

"Yea, he will like that," Blake said trying to humor him.

"Is this Bus 4?" Luke demanded.

"Yes, it is. Let's go. You're holding up the line," responded the substitute bus driver.

Luke struggled with the first step as he did at the start of the school year. The passengers were surprised that Mac was not driving them home from school. Every passenger missed Mac's afternoon high fives and fun afternoon spirit. Even the D twins quieted for a moment. They noticed that Mac was different this morning and were now concerned for him since he was not driving them home. Most of the children asked, "where's Mac" to the point of irritating the replacement driver. "How am I supposed to know? I don't even know him," he finally said.

Katie made it a point to sit with Luke. This concerned Luke. "Mac was so sad this morning," Katie said with a motherly voice. "I just wanted to give him a big hug." Luke wasn't irritated that Katie was sitting next to him. He wanted to talk about Mac, too.

"I gave him ten gummy bears this morning," Luke remembered. "I would

have given him more, but Blake made me give him five for letting me sit in the back." Luke forgot that he wasn't going to mention that last part.

Mac sat on the bed, one leg stretched out under the blanket and the other supporting his weight from the floor. Alice laid flat on her back, up against her husband. Mac held her right hand in his with his left arm lying just above Alice's head on the top of the pillow. Their bedroom was dimly lit.

"You are the love of my life." Mac was hoping beyond hope that Alice could hear his final words. Her wrinkled face, framed by her white hair, showed no sign of coherence. The last three months had sped up the aging process, but to Mac she was the same as when he first saw her at the VA hospital in Denver.

Alice was a Navy nurse assigned to rehab at Fitzsimmons VA Hospital and to Lieutenant Charles McGehee. Mac had to bail out of his fighter. Although his parachute opened, he broke both legs during ejection. Mac's confidence attracted Alice. To her he could do anything. Mac was at first attracted to Alice's legs, but he didn't tell her that until after they were married. Mac had to propose three times before she would accept. She would have accepted on the first proposal, but she like the attention so much that she remained "undecided and she'd have to think about it" until the third time. On top of that, Mac had to sign on a hospital napkin that he would survive the war before she finally agreed to marry him. Mac eagerly did so. Fifty-four years later, their union was coming to an end.

"Alice, remember that boy, Blake, I told you about? He's beginning to open up to me. You were right in telling me not to ignore him, even though he's rude to me. Anyway, he holds down a job stocking shelves at Red and White. He said his dad died in prison and his mother died shortly after he was born." Mac paused for a moment to think what his last words to his beautiful Alice should be. He looked up and noticed the nurse peeking around the corner. She lifted her eyebrows in a wordless question. Mac shook his head indicating "not yet."

"Alice, you were a good mom." Speaking in past tense did not bother him like it did last week when he and Alice were talking over coffee on the patio. "I can see Little Robert sitting on your lap like it was yesterday. I'm so sorry I wasn't there when he was born. I don't blame you for not having another child. I know it's not because you didn't want another child. Little Robert's waiting for you. You'll see him soon. His four years with us were the greatest four years of our lives. It was painful sending him home to God. It is painful sending you home,

too. But . . ." Mac was falling apart. Tears dropped from his cheeks to Alice's cheeks, "please tell Little Robert 'hello' for me. I'm glad you are going before me. . . I love you. . . I know that you love me." Mac felt his wife's hand squeeze his. His eyes widened with the response and he lifted her hand to his face. Mac chose his final words, "Goodbye Alice, I won't be long." Alice breathed a final sigh as if being relieved of her turmoil.

The Hospice nurse sitting in the living room silently observed Alice and Charles' last moments together and made the necessary phone calls.

"Thank you Lord for the years you have given me with Alice. Thank you for taking her first. This hurts too bad. What do you have for me in my remaining years? I've done very little without her. Use me as you desire for Jesus' sake."

The meeting was starting a few minutes late because Dr. Friesen, the principal, needed to settle an argument in the assistant principal's office. Begging their pardon as he entered his office, Dr. Friesen took his seat and introduced, Mac to Miss Lofton. Miss Lofton was the head of the English department and acting guidance counselor of Normandy High School.

"He's just like his father. I was his teacher back when he was in high school, too, ya know." That didn't surprise Mac. She seemed as cranky as she was old. She continued, "Mr. McGehee, Cameron Rogers was executed three years ago for killing two police officers during a drug bust!" Mac knew Blake's father died in prison, but he didn't know the circumstances. "The apple doesn't fall from the tree," she concluded.

"Didn't Blake's mother die giving birth to Blake?" Mac said as if trying to figure out a puzzle.

"That's right, her name was Cindy. She was one of my students also. She was such a sweet girl. I could never understand what she saw in Cam."

"I believe there is some of Cindy in Blake as well, just as that apple saying goes, wouldn't you say, Dr. Friesen?" Mac added. Dr. Friesen sat wordless letting the two work through the issues.

"With who was he staying?" Mac asked.

"It is not 'who,' Mr. McGehee, it is 'whom,' 'with whom was he staying?' I don't know. That would be the State's problem," Miss Lofton corrected. "Look, Mr. McGehee, Blake sits in the back of the room totally despondent. He has turned in two homework assignments this semester and is failing the class. If we

don't move him into the military alternative school, he's sure to drop out of school altogether."

Mac pressed on, "What were his SAT scores?"

"Let me see," Miss Lofton flipped papers in the file she held on her lap. "Near perfect!" She said doubting the numbers. "1530 is his total score. The breakdown. . . 800 in math and 730 in English and writing skills." The scores pushed the old English teacher back in her chair as she tried to reason the numbers.

"Thank you Miss Lofton," the principal said in his "You may leave now" tone voice that all his staff was familiar with. She shook Mac's hand politely. "I really do care about him, but I see no other alternative for him."

As the door closed behind Miss Lofton, Mac also stood to shake the principal's hand. "Dr. Friesen, do you believe in life after death?" Mac was mysteriously leading to something.

"Are you referring to Blake or Blake's father?" Dr. Friesen replied. Mac didn't respond to the question. Nor did he ask for his opinion on Blake. Mac had already made up his mind. He thanked the Headmaster for his time and then departed.

"Why aren't you sitting in the back today?" came a snotty as possible comment from one of the D twins. The comment, as rude as it sounded, alerted Luke to the fact that Blake was not yet on the bus. Luke wrenched his neck in both directions to look for Blake but he was not present. He was sure that Blake rode this morning.

"Hey, we can't leave yet. Blake's not on the bus," Luke announced.

"You snooze, you lose," the substitute replied. "I can't wait any longer."

As the bus doors closed, the last row was immediately filled with foreigners. Luke wanted to tell them all to "Get out of Blake's seat!" He'd already been talked to rudely about the back row; he wasn't about to chance another ridiculing. Besides, what could a third grader do about it?

Blake sat by himself on a cot that folded out from the wall. Jail food wasn't as bad as he imagined it to be. He set the dinner tray aside and picked up a novel that one of the guards allowed him to pick earlier from a pile on a cart. He could hear

people talking about him from down the hall. The conversation echoed between the concrete walls and steel bars.

"Well, he is seventeen years old," one voice said sternly.

"Yes, but this is his first time being incarcerated and remember he's only a junior in high school. Let's work with him. Let's try to help him." Blake knew that voice from somewhere but the severe echo made it difficult to put a face with it. He laid the book aside and tilted his head to concentrate on the conversation.

The argument continued: "Okay, so we let him go, who will he stay with? His uncle who was his guardian has been arrested, not only for possession but also with intent to distribute to a minor! He'll do at least fifteen years, hopefully more."

"That's 'with whom will he stay?' Not 'who'." Mac corrected.

"Whatever. Blake was right there when the sale was being made."

"No!" Mac argued. "He was in the car waiting for his uncle to return. He may not have even known the sale was being made! He can stay with me."

With that Blake approached the bars. "Who said that?" he mumbled. He put his left ear between two bars. "Keep talking," he said just loudly enough that the inmate across from him could hear.

"Yea right! A seventeen-year-old juvenile delinquent under the supervision of a seventy-five year old school bus driver. Only a judge could approve such a thing."

"With your urging he might . . . I mean if you suggest it, the idea stands a chance. What do you have to lose? You're the D.A. in this area." Mac reminded him. The attorney loved a good debate.

"My re-election for one thing. If this boy screws up again. . . ."

"But if he succeeds, you would be credited a hero in the eyes of the voters." The statement quieted the District Attorney. Mac knew he was gaining some ground.

"Blake Rogers . . ." Blake stood immediately in response to his name. "No need to stand, Blake. This is not a hearing. Just relax. I want to tell you your situation and ask you some questions." Blake expected the judge to be in a black robe. His casual attire caught him off guard. He expected to be standing before a huge judgeline desk looking up at some sort of god figure. Instead, he sat in a room full of books with expensive looking chairs forming a half circle in front of the judge's large desk. It was just he and the judge.

“Your uncle is being charged with a serious crime, Blake. The question is whether or not to charge you as well. This State is within the boundary of charging you because you were present when your uncle attempted to sell cocaine to students at your high school. Some of the students saw you.” The judge waited for a response. Blake remained quiet.

“Did you know that your uncle was selling to minors?” The judge finally asked.

“He didn’t tell me he was, and I didn’t ask him.” There was a long pause. The judge had heard enough of the lawyer’s jibber-jabber; he wanted to hear from Blake.

“I didn’t want to know if he was selling. If I knew, then I would be accountable and taken away . . . and if he got caught, I’d be taken away. I was hoping there would be no trouble until after I finished high school. Then I would be on my own. I have nowhere to go. My father . . .” Blake wasn’t sure if revealing his father’s story would help or hurt his situation.

“I know all about your father. Your mother died shortly after you were born. . .”

Before the judge could finish Blake began, “The whole world knows about my father. The teachers treat me different. It’s as if they want me to be like him. Did you know that one of the police officers my father killed has a niece teaching at my high school?” With that the judge looked concerned.

“Blake, what are your dreams? What is it that *you* would like to become?” The judge picked up a pen and drew an oval shaped circled on the right side of the yellow pad resting on the desk. Then on the left side he made an ‘x’. “This ‘x’ is you right now; the oval is you ten years from now. If you could do anything or reach any reasonable goal in life, what would it be?” The judge drew a very slow path with his pen from the ‘x’ to the oval. Then, he tapped the circle three times for emphasis.

Blake thought about the question and began to grin before he began to speak. Blake’s grin evolved into a smile affecting the judge who began to smile with him.

“A police officer, your honor,” Blake said half laughing. The answer combined with the giggle sent the judge laughing. The judge’s response did not offend Blake. He knew why he was laughing. They took their time regaining their composure.

“You’re not trying to make up for your father’s crime, are you?”

“At first, I guess that was the reason. But when I talked to our school’s resource officer, Officer Tony, I really thought that it would be a cool job,” Blake insisted. “I’ve been interested ever since.”

“Have you ever used illegal drugs?”

“No sir, never,” Blake said without hesitation. “My daddy killed because of drugs and now he’s dead because of them. Just before he died, he made me promise never to use them and to be good like my momma was.” Blake succeeded in fighting back tears.

“I have just one question, Blake.” The judge moved out from behind his shiny oak desk. After repositioning a chair close to Blake he sat down. Leaning forward to position his elbows on his knees, he folded his hands together, “Would you consider living with Mr. McGehee, at least until you finish high school?”

“You mean Mac!” Blake said with a surprised voice. The judge nodded. Blake did not ask what the alternative was. Last week his English teacher warned him that he was headed to alternative school. That meant uniforms, marching, washing dishes, and inspections. As a result, whenever his teacher called him to the front, he would march up to her desk and do an about face before returning to his seat.

“Was this Mac’s idea?” Blake asked cautiously.

“Yes it was, and I agree with it. I don’t think you’ve been given a fair chance. You’ve been riding on the coattails of your father. Your uncle lives as your guardian in the house that belongs to you.”

“Yes, I would like to live with Mac, that is . . . I mean, I’d like to have Mac, uh, Mr. McGehee that is, as my guardian.”

“This decision is contingent on certain conditions.”

“What does contingent mean?” Blake asked.

“Simply put, you screw up at school or with the law and you’re out of there, and you become property of the State. Are we clear on this?” The judge said sternly.

“Yes sir,” Blake agreed. With that the judge reached over the papers on his desk to push a button and called for Mac and an attorney to come into the Judge’s Chambers.

There were no hugs or shaking hands, though it seemed to everyone that there should be some sort of manly response to the situation. Neither Mac nor Blake knew how to approach each other. As all parties sat in their chairs, Mac broke the awkwardness with a high five to Blake, who eagerly passed it on to the judge, who felt good about receiving it. The attorney just smiled but was left out of it. For the next twenty minutes the judge went over the terms and many papers were signed.

As the foursome reached the door the judge said, "Blake, there's something you should know. Your grandfather Kramer left you his estate. When you turn twenty-one, you are entitled to it. Mac will go over this with you in the days ahead."

* * *

Blake felt very uncomfortable entering Mac's place. It was more like a sanctuary than any house he'd been in. Everything was neat and orderly. He was afraid that he would break something. He whispered when he talked as if he was in the waiting room at the doctor's office.

"There's no need to whisper, unless you have a friend over before I wake up in the morning. But I doubt you'll get up before me. Look around and make yourself at home. The refrigerator is yours, the sofa is yours, everything is yours! The only thing off limits is my bedroom, and your bedroom is off limits to me. Come, I'll show you to your room." The stairs carried the two up until they reached the large room over the garage.

"This used to be our son Robert's room. It's yours now." It took Mac two days to clear out all the items from the room. He carefully boxed and labeled everything. Except for cleaning, the room remained untouched since he died 36 years ago. Blake walked over to the window that overlooked the neighborhood street running in front of the house. He liked the room.

Mac said, "There are only a few rules in this house. One of those is attending Sunday morning services."

"I've never been in a church building before," Blake said. "But I'd like to see what goes on inside there."

After returning the way they came, Blake took his time looking at all the pictures on the walls.

"I see several pictures of this little boy. Who is he?"

"His name was Robert. Alice, my wife, called him Little Robert," Mac explained, waiting for the next obvious question.

"He's young in all of the pictures. Why aren't there any high school pictures or pictures of him older?" Blake wondered.

Mac had already prepared himself for the question. "He died of cancer when he was four. He would be forty-three years old now."

"I'm sorry, Mac," Blake said.

Blake continued to look around. Some of the hangings were not pictures. There was a Bible verse, military ribbons and medals, and an old looking bayonet inside a glass frame.

"Mac, can you explain this piece? I can barely make it out."

I hereby promise Alice Rice that I will survive Vietnam so that I can marry her.

Signed *Charles McGehee*

"I'll tell you about Alice one of these days. There are a lot of stories on these walls. Do you have any pictures you want to hang up?" Mac asked.

"Not yet . . . Well, I do have one of my mom and dad before I was born."

"Well let's get a frame for it and hang it!" Mac replied.

* * *

The school year began as the previous school years had. The halls were filled with confusion and laughter, and the front office was jammed with students. Most teachers were committed to last minute class changes in their rooms while some were in the halls assisting students with room locations. Mr. Pfifenwaller was one of the few teachers who sat relaxed in their room. He was held fast to the "International News" section on inside cover of the *Atlanta Journal*. The headlines read:

Missionary couple killed in Columbia, South America

Blake and Elaine Rogers, who have served as missionaries with "Regions Beyond" for sixteen years, are confirmed dead. It has been reported that terrorists kidnapped and killed the American couple just before sunrise. Their two children, Charles age ten, and Alice age five were unharmed. "The details are sketchy as the Columbian government continues to investigate," the US Ambassador told reporters.

The *Atlanta Journal*, now dotted with tears, lay flat on the desk before the stunned teacher.

"Is this English 101?" Asked a student sticking her head in the door just to be sure. Mr. Pfifenwaller didn't hear the question at first but seemed to wake up in his own classroom.

"Excuse me, what?" he quickly responded.

“Are you Mr. . . .?”

“You can call me Mr. Wall.” He said trying to ease the embarrassment of the student. With that, the two-minute bell warned students that their summer break was ending. Students reluctantly filtered into the classroom until the final bell ushered in the school year. Mr. Wall quickly counted the number of students and realized there was one student absent. As he looked down the list of the names the classroom door flew open. With a look of too much confidence the last student entered.

“You must be Cory. Welcome to English 101,” Mr. Wall said.

“Yeah, whatever, dude,” Cory replied.

“Cory, that’s ‘Mr. Dude’ to you,” Mr. Wall replied.

Wasted Petals

KC WILLIAMS

H E’S YOUR MOTHER,” said the tall, lanky man behind the large oak desk, causing the petite strawberry blond sitting across from him to spew her natural spring water all over it.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Doc!” she squealed, wiping the dribbling liquid from her chin and brushing off her forest green cashmere sweater with the other. “Remind me again of how much I’m paying you to come up with cock-a-mamey crap like that! Now I know what you got your B.S. in!” She sputtered, pointing at the framed diplomas on the wall behind him. “B.S.!”

“Really, think about it. This guy is your mother, figuratively speaking, of course,” he insisted, chuckling to himself. “Every aspect of him that you are obsessed with is exactly the same one you despise in her. They are exactly alike, except you want to heal him, but you can’t tolerate her.”

Crushing up her Dixie cup and tossing it in the wire wastebasket next to his desk, she picked up her backpack, tossed it over her shoulder, and quipped, “Thanks so much, Doc. Now my life is as straight as Boy George. Gotta go.”

“Before you run away again, Gabriella...”

“Gabby!” she cracked loudly with her back turned, shaking her head at his insolence.

“Okay,” he conceded, carefully examining the back of her rigid form before continuing. “Before you run away again *Gabby*, answer this one question.”

“What?” she replied stiffly, her back still turned.

“Why did you come to me in the first place and why do you continue to do so?”

“Foul ball, coach. You said one question; that was two,” she countered, still facing the closed door, but this time placing her hand purposefully on the door-knob and turning it.

“Okay, Okay,” he sighed, throwing his hands up in defeat. “I recognize the

basis for your therapy; however, each session tends to get shorter and shorter, less is said, and each visit concludes with you flying out the door. There is no progress here, so why continue to see me?"

"Because, I can't get lukewarm bottled water in a fancy paper cup anywhere else in town!" she snapped, dropping her hand from the doorknob and placing it on her hip.

"Jeeesuuus..." he breathed, rolling his eyes up into his head, simultaneously rocking back in his chair, and placing both hands behind his head.

"Okay, all right," she said, and dropped her backpack at her feet with a loud *thud*, then turned only halfway around, still not facing him, but focusing her eyes on the ceiling instead.

"I'm redecorating my apartment and I'm trying to steal your *fabulous* designer décor. Love it," she replied, making a kissing sound with her mouth and fingers, waving her arms around the small room in a dramatic sweeping motion towards the dull beige carpet, sparse brown furnishings, and flat white walls that were void of pictures except for his diplomas.

"How many degrees in B.S. did you say *you* have?" he muttered, flipping through some papers in front of him, ignoring her antics. "I can't seem to locate it on your history? Oh yes, here it is; junior year, Associate in Arts," he mused, lifting his glasses and rubbing his bearded chin thoughtfully. "You missed your calling, my dear; a B.S. is what you really should be working towards. You're a natural."

"No, really, the truth of the matter is that for the past eight months I have had the strong suspicion that *you* are my mother!" she yelled, finally facing him and pointing an accusing finger at his chest.

Just then the office door swung open and the receptionist stepped in looking strangely from one to the other.

"Is everything all right, Dr. Hardy?" she asked wearily, clutching a mobile phone to her chest.

"Fine!" Dr. Hardy and Gabby responded in unison.

"Everything is fine, Kim. Thank you," he said, shooting his patient a scolding look. His patient turned her back, stuck out her tongue, and made funny faces mocking him.

"Would you like me to leave the door open?" asked the concerned receptionist.

"No," said Bob. "That will not be necessary. It is quite normal..."

"...For a medical facility that treats the 'emotionally unstable,'" Gabby interrupted, making quotation signs with her fingers.

"Are you new here?" she asked Kim. "Whoa! Wait a minute. Maybe *sheeee's my mother*. Whadda ya think, Doc? Could she be my mother? Are you my mother, Receptionist Kim?" Gabby rambled, as the confused woman stood staring at her, unsure if she should answer or not.

"I know the fact that you're Asian may pose some doubts," Gabby continued. "But, with medical science and freaky genetics, a woman can now spit out eight younguns at one time in all assortments. White, black, Asian, Mexican, Calico, Presbyterian, Vulcan, alien hybrid; I believe Mulder, too..."

"That's good enough," Dr. Hardy said, trying to intercede.

"...Three tall, two medium, one short, uh... for cleaning things down low. Purple eyes, pink hair, and I *must* have it match the Bill Blass toss pillows I just purchased for the new family room," her escalating Betty Davis impression ground to a halt as Bob finally slammed his notepad on his desk. Gabby and Kim jumped in response to the unexpected noise, jerking their heads around and looking at Bob as if to say, "What's your problem?"

"Please close the door, Kim. That will be all," he instructed the wide-eyed woman.

"Yes, Doctor. Call if you need anything," she said, closing the door behind her.

"I would like..." Gabby started, placing her order for the receptionist.

"Gabiella!" Dr. Hardy taunted, knowing this would put an end to her rambling.

"Gabby! Damn it! Gabby!" she yelled in response.

He didn't flinch, but cautiously said, "He doesn't love you."

"What the hell did you say?" she growled, whirling around to finally face him.

"Since you do not seem able to answer my question, I will give you my professional opinion as to why you keep coming into my office twice a month behaving like a maniac," he proposed, while placing his elbows on his desk and clasping his hands together.

"You just told 'Receptionist Mother Kim' that my behavior was, quote, 'quite normal,' unquote," she challenged, her small shoulders heaving and visibly trembling now.

"Yes, well, perhaps I should consult with a therapist myself. I have the distinct feeling that by the time you and I have made any documented upward progression, I will be too far gone to realize it." He picked up his pen and twirled it between his fingers. "Nonetheless, you must get through this state of avoidance and denial, Gabby, before you self-destruct," he said softly. "The fact of the matter is he does not love you. You know it and cannot face it."

“More crap,” she said flatly, once again turning her back on him as her breaths quickened and her voice cracked.

“The answer to the question is that you keep coming to me until *I* tell you that he loves you, because *he* hasn’t. He doesn’t, and he never will,” he suggested quietly, while carefully watching her afternoon shadow on the wall.

“That’s...it’s just...crap...you don’t...” she muttered incoherently and shaking her head in denial, then wrapping her arms around herself for protection.

“Every session is a fishing expedition. You keep coming to me for ‘how to’ information on what to do, say or how to act, in order to get those three words out of him that you so desperately want to hear and you’re frustrated because I am not telling you how,” he informed her solemnly, noticing the negative shaking of her head did not stop, nor did the trembling of her shoulders. Yet he continued.

“I can’t give you that information, Gabby, but I can tell you this. You cannot force him to love you. Each week it’s the same routine: ‘he loves me, he loves me not’. Stop wasting your petals on something that will never be. Pick them up and move on. He simply does not love you, Gabriella,” he finished dryly, dropping his pen into the glass penholder on his desk with finality.

“GAAABBBYYY!!!” she screamed like a wild wounded animal, her chest furiously pumping in and out as her breath struggled inside of her.

Whirling back around, she snatched the glass penholder from his desk and smashed against the wall sending shards of glass all over the room, this time ignoring the dribbling liquid running onto her sweater. She stared at him for a moment with a look of hatred and disgust that was obviously meant for someone else. Snatching up her backpack, she flung open the door, banging it against the wall with a loud crash. She ran out, not bothering to close it behind her.

Bob sat still for a moment then silently dialed the front desk from his intercom.

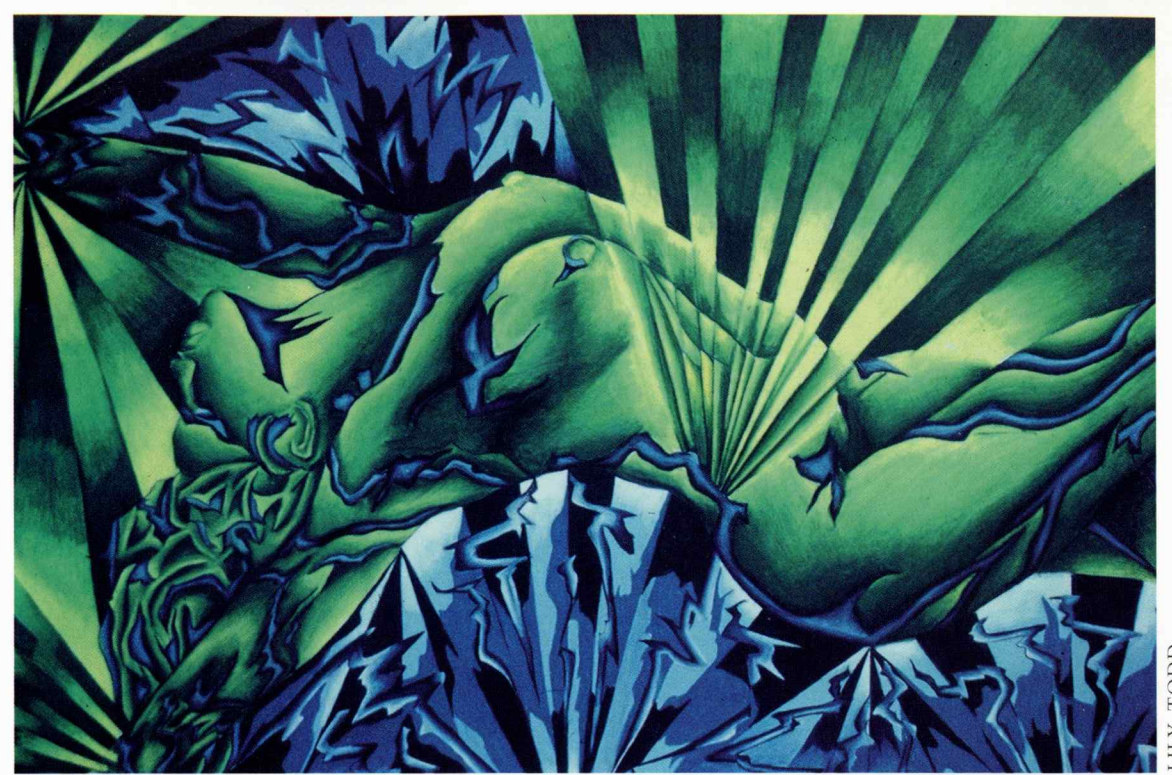
“Yes, Dr. Hardy,” answered Kim.

“Kim, could you get custodial services to bring a vacuum to my office?” he inquired.

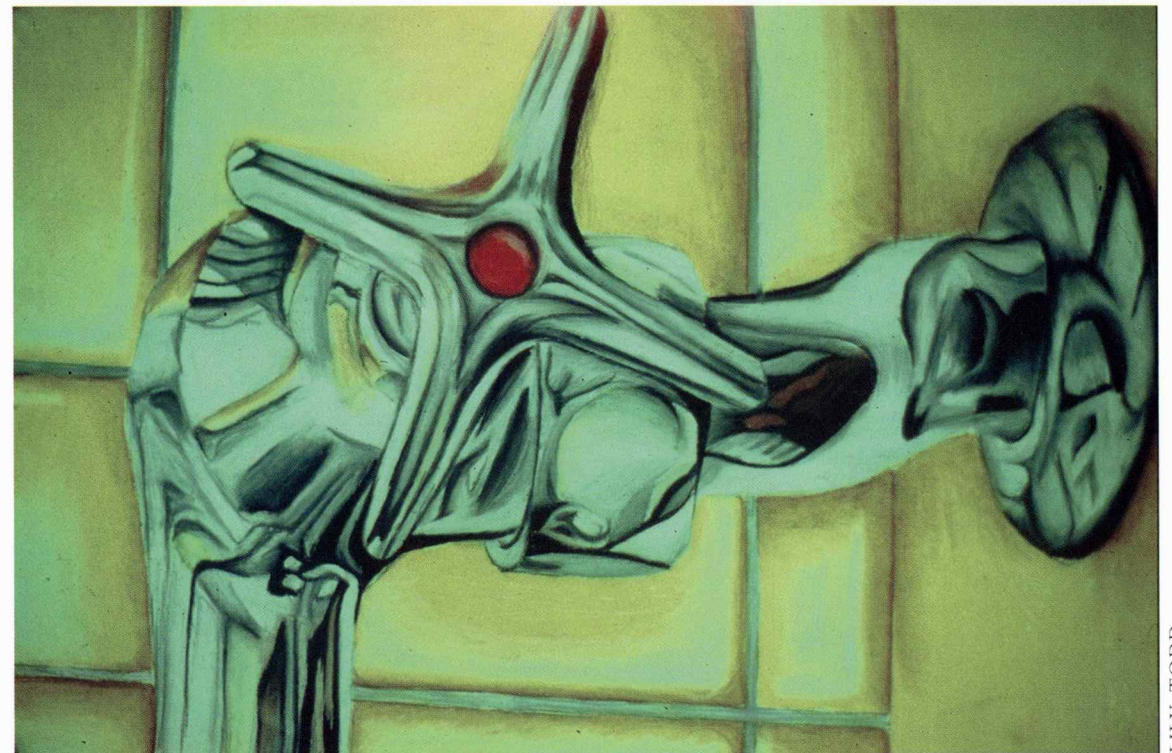
“Right away, sir,” she responded.

He hung up the phone and began shuffling through the papers on his desk. Suddenly stopping, he glanced over to the shards of glass on his office floor and began to study them carefully. Then he reached into his shirt pocket for a pen and made the first positive remarks on the blank progress report of Gabriella Sinclair.

“See you next week, Gabby,” he said to himself and prepared for his next appointment.



LILY TODD



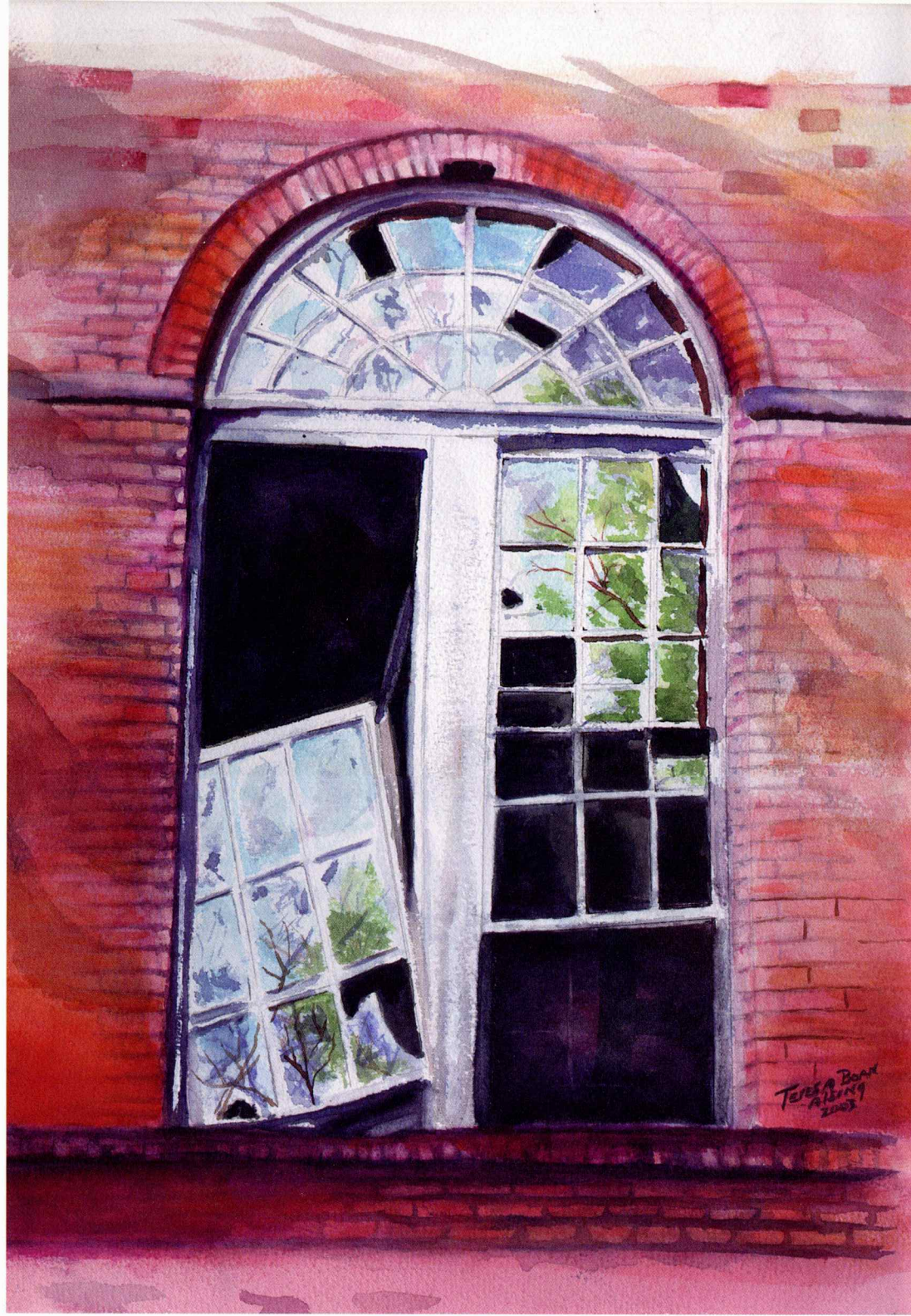
LILY TODD



AUSTIN TURNER



AUSTIN TURNER



TERESA BOAN ALSING

First Water

Sitting midway down the basement steps,
I see soiled laundry in careful piles,
and hear the steady roil of tub water.

Pipes and furnace ducts snake across the ceiling,
exposed to the peering bulb that
clings to an umbilical cord
suspended from the cobwebbed ceiling.

My young eyes rake the creepy shadows,
I feel the murky dampness concealed there.
I see a centipede's splattered go-away walk.

Awareness shifts as she speaks.
She tells me of her growing years.
Hands travel down in steamy water to
lift the tangled fabric.

I sit attentively, amid the smell of Tide and Clorox.
She wrings the murky water from the cloth.
I watch it sink beneath clear water.

JEANNETTE GILLESPIE



LILY TODD

Luna

maybe I think of you like the moon
my personal satellite
hanging silently, waiting
just over my shoulder
ever-present and distant
illuminating the darkest times
with a soft and calming glow
fading away after offering
your nightly comforts
patiently as I turn elsewhere
subtly swaying
profoundly influencing
impacting in ways you could never see
to depths hidden deeper than the oceans

perhaps I pushed you past my atmosphere
placed you high in the ether
forced the space
and feigned indifference
knowing you couldn't
turn your face away

now I want to pull you down
bring you close
defy my physics to
live by your eternal light

the cultivated distance
offers no consolation
regret and despair
fill my mouth and ears
as I watch out my window
waiting for you to appear

AMBER CARTER

Homecoming

I've never seen the street light
 so bright, so proud
 on the stained sidewalk
 as when my exotic sister walks under
 glinting off her golden skin
 reflecting in her peacock green eyes
 The door's bells never sing
 so clearly, so vibrantly
 as when her scented hand,
 manicured and jeweled
 pushes them to life
 Her sly smile and eye's clever glimmer
 erase all the years of her absence
 and fill the café with the
 Costa Rican air she brings
 "Beautiful weather we're having"
 she says to me,
 grinning to topple the world
 as the rain pours down behind her
 her voice sweet and lyrical,
 like the tinkle of crystal and silver
 My restless little songbird,
 up from the tropics
 to mourn our mother
 and back to the sunshine by
 tomorrow evening

AMBER CARTER

The Morning After

late morning sunlight slices
 through the half open blinds

 and across the sleeping cat, curled
 into herself on the fallen coverlet

 faint lilac of the candles
 mingle with yesterday's cologne

 in the air and on the sheets — crumpled
 to one side of the empty bed

 discarded clothing leads a trail
 past the bureau and the clock

 to the gentle roar of a shower —
 steam fingering the crack of the door

AMBER CARTER

Rebirth

My childhood ended with the vision
of you, striding down to the water's
edge, trailing promises in your wake.
I felt then the desire
to have your hands in my soul,
felt the need to keep you always within

my grasp, my line of vision.
The longings grew with the desire
of a lust fresh awakened,
quicken my heart and breath; within
minutes the bliss spread through my soul,
muddying the purification of Christ's clean waters.

No Virgin you, a raw, tumultuous soul —
no Saint me, shackled with desires,
in servitude to your every vision
of Heaven, trapped by my love within
the confines of your Hell, awake
and blossoming, nourished by your sacred waters.

You bathed me in that coveted water,
taught me secular ecstasies, awakened
me to my humanity. I desired
your wisdom; you were my sole
instructor, my teacher, my visionary.
I gleefully placed myself within

your care, desiring
only your love to fill my soul,
to fill the void left within.
And when your life-giving waters
finally spilled over, visions
of joy and eternity came flooding in the wake.

My damnation, my redemption, my soul's
perfect contradiction — my every desire
manifest. It is within
you that I find the will to wake
and only with you can I envision
my salvation, baptized in your blue waters.

AMBER CARTER

Nature Has Lost Its Way Here

Indifferent man-made machinery
Mountains in a miniature world
Right angles give way to right angles
In every direction no direction is evident

Wires overrun each conceivable cranny
Wires feign direction to the uninitiated
Ever bending plasticized surfaces
Unseen multitudes beneath the surface

Geometrically sound boxes flatter fluorescence
The only sound the ear hears here is pallid
Throaty whooshing auditory threshold
Quiet is thick and tangible

Olfactory indifference disinfects life's breath
Breath is hurriedly whisked away
An insatiable hidden void pushing and pulling
Ceaseless revision of an invisible ocean

Brilliance is measured by on and off
The brilliant have already existed
The voice of the brilliant still resonates
An unending hum stands as its testament

Man facilitates the greater purpose
Sparsely scattered no longer needed
I have become part of it
It me

NATHAN HOGUE

One More Saturday Night

Disc
O. it was
A PimP
Le ON
the face of
Music HI
Story.
And while poly
ester suits had the
ir fifteen minutes of
Fame, RocK
n' RoLL
is he
re 2 stay. So i
s the c
hevy Cam
aro Z28. Wit
h eight cylinders and 2eighty5
ho
rses, its
the
ONLY way
2 BOOgie!

DIANA M. DELOACH

My Sister At Ninety-Seven

Yesterday,
My sister
At the age of ninety seven and four months
Began bathing

Nude

In the moonlight
Amid the African violets
And dogwood trees,
Her long white hair
Covering her chest
And keeping her warm
Against the
Brisk air of
February

Then, after almost a century long life
Of bible studies and
Child-bearing

In the clean light of the moon
She lost her voice

Yet found something greater

JOSEPH MICHAEL FLOYD

Adam

His hair
Creeping up his shirt

Hoping it might strangle him

Other poems have been written about him
Better poems

Yet

It is my turn to put the pig on the spit.

And just by writing this I've lit the fire
Haven't I

His breath sweaty monkeys
Dead for weeks

Cowering behind god for all to see

JOSEPH MICHAEL FLOYD

Two, three, four

Weaving slowly
Through streets

A car smashed

Two, three, four

People examining

The ground as if
The pieces might suddenly
Reattach themselves

You wonder when it was that moment you know you
Are about to meet another vehicle

JOSEPH MICHAEL FLOYD

The Stench That I Don't Mind

Little brown skinned hula girl smiles up at me
Time fades away her grass skirt

Large cracks in a blue dashboard
Cradle the dust from an open window

"Don't forget" inscribed on a wheel
That makes continuous lefts and rights,
Remind me of where I need to be

Pennies and crumbs in a seat cushion
Plastic bottles in the floor
And a butterfly charm dangling from a mirror
Follow me to the parking lot

AUSTIN TURNER

Opposite Sides of a Hundred Dollar Bill

SHELLEY FOGEL-SCHMIDT

One Side

I HONESTLY BELIEVE THAT ALL PEOPLE, regardless of gender, social status, or ethnicity have to face moral dilemmas at various points in life. The ideas of right and wrong and good and evil will be questioned, pondered, and, hopefully, answered within the confines of each individual's mind many, many times as we travel through our own little space in time which we term "our lives." Whether the question is macro, such as a President having to decide whether to cover up some government scandal for the sake of "the people," or whether it is micro, such as a person telling a "little white lie" to protect the feelings of a friend or family member, is irrelevant. What is important is the conclusion a person stumbles upon and the effect his or her decision will have on future actions, not only in a short-term sense, but further on down the road of life. Ultimately, has that person's karma been routed in either direction, good or bad, to a point that places it in jeopardy? I faced such a question in my own mind just the other day.

But first, let me explain some things....For much of my life, I didn't believe in consequences, second chances, corollaries of an action, or any other ideas that "new-agers" have made popular again. I existed for the here and now, holding desperately to a live-or-die-by-the-seat-of-your-pants doctrine that made more sense to me than any karmic philosophy ever could. But, as the proverbial saying goes, "that was then; this is now," and my beliefs have gradually altered to provide for ideas of consequence. Now, I *do* believe that if I steal money, harm others, kill innocent, cuddly animals, or participate in other dastardly deeds, I will be penalized by some entity other than myself. I am also convinced if I drop a

pebble in the ocean, the repercussions of this act will be felt by a butterfly in China (or however the hell that theory goes — I've never been one for physics). All of these beliefs have become an integral part of my overall system of theology which, although mystifying to some, makes perfect sense to me.

The bottom line is this — I now adhere to a completely different system of values than those of my teen and young adult years. One of these values states that life is what you make of it. It can be enjoyable and exciting, or it can be difficult and disheartening. Sometimes it can be a complete contradiction of both extremities at once. So now we get to the crux of my story...

I had been feeling flustered by a barrage of wonderful highs and equally devastating lows. My life was changing fast, entirely too fast for me to keep up, and being a Taurus sun-sign, change wasn't necessarily a condition I gracefully embraced. After a few too many days of being cooped up in my all-of-a-sudden-really-messy house, I decided to go out, get some fresh air, maybe breathe a little stimulation into what was fast becoming a mundane existence. The day was hot, as humid and sticky as only a day in the Deep South can be, a day in Myrtle Beach that could rival anything "N'awlins" has to offer. Before I could second guess myself or give my depressed mind a chance to talk my body into *another* Oprah rerun, I jumped into my car and headed toward the ocean. At the last minute I decided to skip the beach, thinking that a stroll downtown might be revitalizing. I parked my car and started walking, feeling the brisk scents from the ocean actually lift my spirits as if they were in a balloon filled with helium, and then it happened: I experienced a brush with morality.

I was walking beside a bank (ironically my own), when I noticed a newspaper on the ground a few steps ahead of me. Underneath it was what appeared to be a crisp one hundred dollar bill. Parked along the curb was an empty armored car. I glanced around and instantly realized there was no one else within at least a hundred yards of me and that big-headed picture of ole Ben. What to do, what to do? Should I open door number one or door number two? The lady or the tiger? Common sense told me the money had been dropped by one of the armored car occupants (who still had not returned), and that I should return it to them, while that devil who lives in the other side of my brain whispered gleefully to just "take the money and run." Isn't THAT funny? The devil was speaking to me, quoting the Steve Miller Band. More irony? Well, *sure*... So this was how my day was progressing. I go outside to feel better, and something that could really make my day (hey, a hundred bucks'll buy a couple of pairs of decent shoes) was

lying on a dirty sidewalk right in front of me. The biggest slap in the face was my conscience telling me that taking the money would be *really* wrong. "Bad Karma! Bad Shelley!" Of course, on the other end of the spectrum was the devil's voice (he can be *so* seductive) urging me to "Go on, take the money and run." I wiped the sweat off my brow with the back of my arm, all the while thinking about the money and how darn HOT it was...hot it was? And then it hit me! I had an epiphany! Before that day, if anyone had even hinted that it was possible to have an epiphany ANYWHERE in Myrtle Beach, SC, especially in the middle of downtown, (even with the devil crooning in your ear), I would've said, "no way, Jose!" But there it was. The answer I was asking the universe to provide had arrived. I reached down, grabbed the bill, stuffed it in my shorts pocket, turned around, and strolled nonchalantly away. Well, actually, I sort of walked (trotted, ran) pretty quickly back to my car, occasionally checking over my shoulder the way you do when you feel a tad bit guilty about something you have done. Of course, I wouldn't personally KNOW that guilty feeling, but I have heard about it before. *Ahem*...

Other Side

I had had a rough week. Well, maybe every week is rough, but this one was worse than usual. My husband's diabetis was actin' up, and the weather had been really hot, so hot that on my bi-weekly walks to get his medicine and what food we could afford, I was having a hard time keeping my old self going. Well, I'm not that old, really, but when life is hard, sixty-five feels like ninety, or at least that's what I suppose.

We are poor, always have been and always will be. When I was a young girl, and still holding on to my looks (they were, after all, what got me Herb), I used to dream I was adopted. Now, in these dreams, I'd *know* that some day my real parents — a great lady and rich, handsome gentleman — would come back to claim me, feelin' sorry as hell for givin' me away and sayin', "Gloria, we want to make up for all those years we lost." But dreams are seldom reality, and my reality has always lived just one step short of absolute poverty. Sometimes I swear we *are* living in absolute poverty, but the government swears otherwise, you know, based on those little charts they keep. We are classified as *poor*, but, to me, poor is more than a classification — it's a life-sentence. Poor means I can look, but never have, it's the places I'll never see, and the food I can't afford, the people whose circles I will never belong in. And, believe you me, sometimes poor can

get to be a great big pain in the ass, especially if you have dreams which never seem to come true.

We live in a single-wide trailer in a mobile home park sorta on the outskirts of Myrtle Beach — you know, one of those areas the local rich purposely avoid and the local poor migrate into. Anyway, I haven't driven for nigh on 10 years or so, and that leaves my two dogs as primary transportation, except for the ever-so-often time our daughter is in town. Then she drives me around to do our errands, (and it sure seems like a never-ending list of bills to pay, doctors to see, and medicines to get — lots of stuff for two old farts like me and Herb). And then there's that strange girl who picks me up occasionally. She pulls over whenever she sees me huffing my way down the street and gives me a ride. No reason at all, she just gives me a ride — it's the damndest thing I've ever known. Today, however, our daughter wasn't in town, and I hadn't seen the strange girl on the road, so I'd walked the whole way to and from the store. I'd picked up some sugar free cough syrup for Herb and some potatoes, carrots, and meat for a stew. That was it. All we could afford. Today was Monday, and we weren't gettin' another check from the government 'til Friday. Sometimes *poor* meant hungry...

One Side

I felt at peace with my decision to take the money. I know, I know. I stole money. I knew where it came from, and I took it anyway. How can this be OK? How could I be calm about it and feel like my karma had not been seriously jeopardized? I had a reason. Her name was Gloria.

Gloria was an old woman, at least sixty-five or seventy, who I had (somewhat) befriended a year or so ago. I first noticed her walking along the road near the apartment complex I lived in at the time. It was a hot day then, too, and she was looking all red in the face. She was carrying a grocery bag, and she seemed definitely overheated and overexerted. I whipped my car around and pulled up alongside her. I told her not to worry — that I wanted to help her. I offered to take her wherever she needed to go. After some hesitation (she obviously needed time to figure out whether or not I was a psycho killer), she got into my car and directed me to the trailer park where she lived. From that day on, any time I saw her, I'd pick her up and give her a ride. I gave her my number on numerous occasions and told her to call me when she needed to go somewhere, but she never called. I'd just see her on the road sometimes and, I have to admit, she'd

look pretty relieved when she saw me pull up beside her. So you see, Gloria was my justification. I went to her house, knocked on her door, and...

Other Side

...and so I was standing in my kitchen, trying not to worry about how I was gonna make the teensy bit of roast and veggies stretch all the way to Friday (we've done it before, but it ain't easy or stomach-fulfilling, for that matter), when I heard wheels crunchin' on the gravel outside our trailer. I looked out the window and lo-and-behold! There was that strange girl I mentioned earlier. She jumped out of her car and headed straight for our door. I wondered what in blue blazes she could possibly be thinking, but I reached for the door handle anyway, my curiosity getting the better part of me, and...

One Side

...when she opened the door, I handed her that one hundred dollar bill. I turned around without a word and headed back to my car while she stood in her doorway, stunned and stammering. I knew she could use that money for something important, and the way I looked at it, if those men carrying the money into the bank were careless enough to drop a little of it, then that gave me the right to take it and put it to good use. A little bit of a stretch, I know, but all was right in my world and my karmic scale still felt balanced.

Other Side

There it was — the answer to our food problems (although I certainly never would've thought of *this* girl as the answer to my prayers). I guess the Lord really *does* work in mysterious ways (and all that other jazz), 'cause I sure can't think of any other reason why this miracle could've happened to me and Herb, here in this little single wide, with our cupboards next to bare. I felt the tears getting gritty behind my eyelids, and the only thing I could think of to say to her was...

One Side

...“Why?” she asked. I turned back around to face her, and although I can't swear by it, I'm pretty sure there was a tear in her eyes (I know there was a twinkle in mine). I answered as truthfully as I could...“The Steve Miller Band made me do it.”

Secret Weapon

MYRA BROWN

I CARRY A CONCEALED WEAPON. It's a wallet I purchased last year after Christmas — a flashy red Liz Claiborne I discovered under the cover of scarves and other accessories relegated in the afterglow of the season to the 75% off sale table. It wasn't until I got it home that I discovered the label tucked inside that read *Secret Weapon*. Wow! It suddenly became even sexier than it had been an hour earlier when that splash of lipstick red compelled me to a mad dash across the store with a clean swipe of my credit card. Just opening this wallet transformed me into an amorous James Bond girl and whisked me away to an exotic underworld filled with intrigue inhabited by beautiful and dangerous people. Exhilaration engulfed me, as I envisioned a triumphant escape from the grasp of my enemies in a climactic employ of the secret weapon at the last chilling second.

Health insurance costs soar, slam S.C. workers

Employees bear brunt of skyrocketing premiums

— *The State*, Columbia, SC

November 2, 2003

Not only did the unexpected glamour that was unearthed in my new wallet generate a fantastic end to my shopping excursion that day, the sense of adventure renews every time I use the *secret weapon*. A furtive smile launches across my lips and emerges as the twinkle in my eyes when I hand my check to an unsuspecting cashier. A less stealthy exchange occurs as my daughter, in pursuit of some cash, quips, "Mama, where's your secret weapon?" The metaphor will stick around long after the bold color and sex appeal of the wallet are worn and faded.

Most of us carry a secret weapon of our own stowed away in our wallets. Small, compact, and versatile, our insurance card stands guard 24 hours a day, an

ever-present protection against the financial pitfalls of injury, illness and disease. Lately, though, the security of our system has been breached. We find ourselves parachuted into unfamiliar territory, uncomfortable with the same level of confidence we have previously entrusted to our secret weapons. They are now more expensive and no longer guarantee as sure an escape from the dangerous world of healthcare costs as we are conditioned to expect.

In the swift current of rising medical costs, employers scaling the walls of insurance benefits are opening the dam and allowing a greater portion of the costs to flow to their employees. Accustomed to the safety net of low deductibles, minimal office visit co-pays and generous prescription drug plans, employees are feeling the squeeze, as the escape hatch by which we avoid monetary disaster shrinks. The masterminds behind our secret weapons are re-programming them, so that they no longer recognize a higher level of vulnerability to healthcare costs as dangerous to us.

Americans are opting for faux glow

Spray-on tans becoming popular alternative to sunbathing, booths

The State, Columbia, SC

November 1, 2003

In a world of ever-present danger, how are Agent 007 and his woman supposed to get their tans? Even while relaxing on the Riviera, they're on constant alert for the move of the enemy, postured to pounce in the scare of a second. Ah, life on the big screen does have its drawbacks. Despite them, we crave that golden look that says we just flew in from a month of sunning at the shore, even in the middle of winter. Thanks to the capitalist vigilance of entrepreneurs, we can rest safer tonight. The newest option for achieving that desirable tanned body seals our sexy fate quicker and easier than ever before. No more valuable time wasted in the tanning bed. No need to risk damage to our soft, luxurious skin by over-exposure to those harmful ultraviolet rays. Tomorrow, we'll duck into the local spa, indulge in sun-kissed radiance via spray on tans, and enjoy a whole week of bronzed romance.

Cell-phone dumping could present hazard

The State, Columbia, SC

November 8, 2003

Can we afford the hazardous distraction of concern for the environment due to the discarding of cell phones? I think not. Communication is imperative in our line of work. We need our cell phones. They are an important prop, too. We can't proceed without caution into our top-secret mission without that sleek, small accessory pinned to our ear. People might get the mistaken impression that we are not involved at the highest level in an all-important maneuver of mind-shattering proportion. It is imperative to present the extreme sense of urgency that is implicit in our activities. Besides, we may need it to communicate our location, should the enemy discover our whereabouts and the secret weapon fail to deploy.

S.C. Lottery

Monday, November 3:

Pick 3 Midday: 3-8-9

Pick 4 Midday: 1-8-8-7

Pick 3 Evening: 8-2-8

Pick 4 Evening: 8-9-8-6

Sunday, November 2:

Pick 3 Evening: 0-7-3

Pick 4 Evening: 0-1-8-4

The State, Columbia, SC

November 4, 2003

Gambling! 007 does it in pure, unadulterated Las Vegas style. Glitzy. Glossy. High class, high stakes gambling. Dressed to kill in a black tuxedo and red bow tie, he downs a martini and casts a sideways glance my way, spinning his charm with a roll of the dice. I sip champagne by his side, seductively poured in a sequined, black cocktail dress, wisps of sleek blond highlights framing my face. Long acrylic nails with a satin scarlet finish accent the glitter of the diamonds that dangle from my ears, caress my hands and arms and embellish my neckline. All eyes are on us. Even the poker chips unwittingly join the collusion. It's red glamour, black intrigue, and green money.

Road Test: 2004 Mercedes-Benz SLK 230

Warming up to a good thing

The State, Columbia, SC

October 31, 2003

Optioned out, this car drives for \$44,620 and goes from zero to convertible in 25 seconds. With the press of a button on the center console, the windows go down, the rear deck lid rises, the top unfastens and folds itself into the rear, and the deck lid closes to cover it up. Race car red, of course. Base price \$39,600. Sound extravagant? Not compared to a James Bond ride. And, not much more expensive than the high-end mommy-mobiles laying claim to those tight parking spaces at the mall. I know. I know. We digress here. Mommy-vans at the mall are not exactly the sultry stuff Bond movies are made of, but the life of 007 isn't for everyone. Someone has to raise the little agents of the future.

If NASCAR revs you up, check this out

The State, Columbia, SC

November 8, 2003

So maybe you're Bond material and maybe not. Maybe the mini-van is your style and maybe not. Either way, check out NASCAR. Lose yourself in the roar of the engines. Bask in the cheer of the crowds. It's an exciting sport the whole family can enjoy together. A profitable one, too. Sales of licensed NASCAR products total approximately \$2 billion a year with an estimated average of \$700 per fan. You've just got to feel for the overwhelmed licensees of NASCAR. Clothing, accessories, collectibles, electronics, toys, gift novelties, and home furnishings. They have the pedal to the metal to keep up with all that demand. Don't fret for them, though. There's a rest area — oops, I mean a pit stop ahead. Sales will drop speed when the little pit crew gets their check ups next year.

Many uninsured are middle class

Soaring premiums, job losses have left 43 million in U.S. without health care coverage

The State, Columbia, SC

November 16, 2003

Oops! Agent 007, in an uncharacteristic and unexpected departure from his usual svelte style, slips while secretly searching an enemy locale and breaks his leg. Definitely not a sexy turn of events. But, not to worry! The beautiful, physically fit Bond girl of the hour leaps quickly to his rescue. Beads of moisture enhance her flawless complexion as she clutches him close to her well-sculptured body and

dodges the beams of the building security system in a breathtaking run to the rooftop. As they bolt into daylight, they are instantly exposed to forces of dark clad security. They make a daring dash to board the enemy helicopter and complete their airborne escape amid the blare of the sirens.

Next scene...007 relaxes in his luxurious and secure hospital accommodations. He rests, seductively reclined in bed with his leg elevated. His room is guarded 24 hours a day by a dozen sleek, long-legged women, armed and highly skilled in martial arts. His silk pajamas and tousled appearance set the stage for this latest act in the play of his inescapable sex appeal. His recuperation is quickened by the attentions of the carefully screened nursing staff whose skilled hands prove the healing powers of massage on his body.

Maybe I'm getting carried away with my fantasy at this point. But, hey, wouldn't we like to see a strong woman rescue a helpless man for a change? And who gets hurt if I embellish the hospital scene a little? After all, the British government is footing the bill for Mr. Bond.

Peace at twilight

Hospice care helps people die with dignity — and helps families say farewell

The State, Columbia, SC

November 16, 2003

Everyone knows that should he ever be caught between that proverbial rock and hard place, 007 would never allow himself to be captured alive. It's unspoken and understood. If he succumbs to one of the enemy's poisoned darts and his capture or death is imminent, he'll use his secret weapon to self-destruct. Truth is, in the movies, old Bond agents never die. They retire from active service (i.e., replaced by younger actors). Why, I don't know. Honestly, can anyone argue with the fact that Sean Connery is still the epitome of 007?

In real life, though, when death's inevitable stalk manages to penetrate the force field shadowing 007's door, his cruel fate is still protected. The mission is still secure. Mercifully dosed by morphine, the old agent dreamily relives his youthful days of red glamour and black intrigue with the roomful of aging yet still beautiful Bond girls.

Bybee, Kentucky

LYNDA CURTIS

YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT YOU'LL FIND when you're not looking for anything. This held true recently for my husband, Rusty, and me during a long road trip. On a meandering drive in eastern Kentucky, I had one of my impulses to travel the back roads and stop anywhere that seemed promising. My instincts have led us to some fantastic finds, some weird ones and sometimes some rather dangerous places.

There was the time we snuck into a forgotten 1950's roadside zoo in rural Georgia. The long, concrete building was covered with weeds, but we could still make out fading lions roaring across the façade above the old entrance. A Ford station wagon from the 70's had been parked in front of the main door many years before and was now so embedded into the earth that it was a permanent part of the landscape. We were quiet as we tiptoed around the side of the building, amid overgrown cages and lots of bottles, boxes and bones. I wanted to see what secrets had been left behind, so I led Rusty toward the back to find another way in. He was reluctant and half-heartedly tried to convince me to return to the safety of our truck. Rusty knew from my enthusiasm that I was on a mission and his protestations were for naught. I was thrilled to find a heavy wooden door that creaked open easily to let us into the abandoned building. We knew we were the only people around — likely for years, but we whispered anyway. Among the vast mounds of junk, I found an old lion skull and a plastic kid's toy and decided they would make good souvenirs. After a while we relaxed and chatted a bit more normally, and then, all of a sudden, we heard a loud squawk as something flew in the window. My heart stopped until I saw it was only a huge chicken that had found his way in. That was when we noticed the power cord snaking in the open window.

“Why would an old building like this need power?” Rusty asked, as I wondered the same.

I gathered my courage and followed the chicken’s trail to see where he had gone. Rusty hung back as I made my way around the piles of trash and dusty furniture towards the back of the building. There was just enough sunlight sneaking in through the broken glass and boarded up windowpanes for me to make out what appeared to be some surprisingly new cages. The tall pens filled with sweet-smelling sawdust were full of more chickens. The roosters were the biggest I had ever seen and had sharp and pointy spurs on their legs. It was then I realized these were no ordinary chickens but were actually illegal fighting gamecocks! I spun around to find a big burly guy who was about to flatten my head in, and seeing no one, I grabbed Rusty’s hand and wasted no time in finding my way back to the truck! The back roads’ culture of rural Georgia lived up to its reputation that day!

Then there was the time we stopped at the bottle man’s house. He had tables full of glass bottles of every size and color in the front yard of a timeworn wooden house. Being an antique bottle aficionado, I had to stop! The guy was likely a lot younger than he looked and not yet an old man. He was tall, very thin and had long scraggly hair and a beard to match. I didn’t get close enough to be able to smell him, but from his appearance, I knew he hadn’t seen soap for a while. He seemed harmless enough though, and when he said he had a big stash of blue cobalt bottles in the back, I felt obliged to follow him. Rusty dutifully came along, but I sensed this adventure wasn’t too thrilling for him. I really thought we’d enter from the back of the house, but no, we went right onto the cluttered front porch, into the living room and through the house’s innards.

By the time we got to the back, I knew that he was a serial killer and we were toast. The poor lighting was just enough for us to have seen the most horrid conditions in someone’s home you could imagine. Food that had changed form completely, many days before, was resting in various places. There were bags of trash and soiled clothing strewn about. Nothing white or clean was in this house. I tried not to breathe for fear of contamination, and I knew I was in big trouble with Rusty for this one. Surprisingly, we actually arrived alive to a small room with — can you believe it — blue cobalt bottles! As much as I knew the guy needed cash, and the bottles were a great price too, I fibbed our way to freedom by claims of a vast cobalt collection, which contained nearly every one of the

types he had. We then swam back through the human waste to the beautiful air and front yard where I quickly purchased a few clear bottles in thanks for his not adding us to his list of victims.

As unpleasant as those excursions might have been, we survived and even brought home well-earned souvenirs. Places like those can’t be found on major highways, so our trip planning always contains less traveled routes of adventure. Sometimes we get lucky and find the most surprising jewels and meet amazing people. This was the case when we were on our way to hike Kentucky’s Red River Gorge and stumbled upon Bybee Pottery.

Rusty and I discovered a few years ago that Kentucky is a wonderland of nature-based opportunities and has a unique cultural history to share. We have been thrilled many times by the botanical richness of the Bluegrass state, the impressive geologic formations and the abundance of wild rivers and streams. Native Kentuckians live close to the earth and have a deep understanding of their land.

One Tuesday afternoon in early fall Rusty and I were headed to the gorge by way of Irvine and State Highway 52. We had just passed the town of Waco, which was named after Waco, Texas for some inexplicable reason. I noticed a little town on the map called “Bybee” and told Rusty we should check it out. He kind of grunted but followed my directions to Bybee. The tiny hamlet was very simply laid out, and we saw only a handful of buildings. I immediately noticed a weathered clapboard building with a plain sign that read “Bybee Pottery, Est. 1809.” Rusty, being an aspiring pot spinner, was as excited as I this time! We parked and ran up to the door only to find that they were closed. By the hours posted on their door, it seemed that they were closed most of the time. Their hours were 8:00 — 11:00 and 12 — 3:00, and they did not open on Saturday or Sunday. The handwritten sign also said, “We close for lunch.” I was disappointed but decided we should at least peek in the windows to see what we were missing. The main room was as spartan as the town itself. Long wooden shelves held various types of functional pottery. There was an endless array of pitchers, plates, bowls, and mugs in various colors and patterns. The check out counter held a shiny brass cash register — no computer versions here! Other than a calendar, window box fans and a few chairs, there was not much else to see. I walked around to the other side of the building and noticed that a door was propped open at the back end. I called to Rusty, who was still analyzing the shelved pottery, and we edged our way towards the door. What we found inside was more than I could have hoped for.

We leaned in the open doorway and saw the workings of the pottery. Immediately to the left was a short, rounded and balding man who was at that very moment throwing a pot on the wheel. He smiled broadly as he kept his hands on the growing pitcher and welcomed us inside.

“Don’t be afraid; step inside. Quickly now, and you can watch me finish this!” our greeter exclaimed.

The friendly man wore a bright pink t-shirt that contrasted with the pale clay color of literally everything else I could see. I asked him if I could take pictures, and he insisted that I hurry to get shots of his pitcher in progress. Not to worry, though, as the entire time we were there he never stopped making his creations. As Rusty chatted with the potter about his work, I soaked in my surroundings. Even though it was a fairly warm day outside, the air in the pottery was cool and moist. The ceiling was low, or maybe it was the floor that was high. The irregular ground was made of thick clay, and the main paths were well worn. Everything in the pottery had a purpose and everything, including the potter, was splattered with clay. The clipboard by the clay-coated telephone was crusty; the Madison County map would need to be wiped before it was read. There were handprints of clay on the overhead beams, and even the ceiling was spotted with little clay bits. I noticed that the thick ceiling planks and the solid wooden walls appeared strong even though they were not aligned evenly. This type of construction wouldn’t pass inspection today. The potter told me that the building we were in was built in 1845 and was the second location of Bybee Pottery. He insisted I visit the room behind him to see where his clay was kept. The storage chamber was even cooler than the main section, to keep the clay pliable. Large bricks of pale muddy clay were stacked along heavy wooden shelves that were eight inches thick. The ancient walls were made of huge and uneven granite blocks and had been laid by hand over 150 years ago.

Rusty continued to chat with the potter and asked about the machinations that ran the wheel. There was a wide belt running in front of the spinning table that ran vertically and up into the ceiling.

“That goes upstairs where a motor runs it now. Used to be they used a steam engine to run the wheel. I can fill this tray with four pitchers in four minutes. I take my clay, weigh it on the balance scales and throw it. It takes exactly two pounds to make one pitcher,” our host told us.

“Wow,” Rusty was impressed and exclaimed, “You’re just mass-producing this stuff!”

Well, that was the wrong thing to say! The potter puffed up a little bit taller and brusquely replied, “Boy, ain’t nothing here mass-produced! We make everything by hand. Always have! We heat the pots up to 2200 degrees in those kilns back there, then we hand-glaze all of our pottery. We put our “BB” stamp on the bottom of everything we make, so you’ll know it’s authentic. Bybee Blue is our most requested.”

“So, why is the pottery here, in this part of Kentucky?” Rusty asked next.

“Well, boy, if you’re gonna have a coal mine, you put it where the coal is, don’tcha?” our host answered. “You see, the Kentucky River is just three miles down that-a way,” he nodded his head towards the doorway as he deftly turned a new clump of clay on the shiny twirling wheel. “We go down to our clay mine with a backhoe every week or two and get us a load. Then it goes to our old pug mill for grinding; that’s just over yonder, down that road there.”

The potter was a native Bybeeian who had worked at the pottery his whole life since he was a teenager. In his singsong voice, he told us about the town of Bybee as he continued to churn out more pitchers. We looked out the doorway as he explained that the empty, white brick building on the left corner was the old general store and had been a stagecoach stop and gas station over the years. I noted that even though there was no longer any business there, the grass was freshly mowed and the building was tidy. To our right, we saw what had been the town’s post office. The potter told us that “Carter closed the post office,” and it’s been idle since. Our knowledgeable host had an obvious passion for the history of the area and told us about the beginnings of the town of Bybee. Settlers discovered the clay deposits as early as the 18th century, during the time when Daniel Boone’s namesake settlement, Boonesborough, was established nearby. They used the clay to make crude plates and drinking vessels. The current day pottery is mined from the same deposits that the settlers used! By the time the Civil War began, there were many potters in the town of Bybee. The town was named after the Bybee family who ran the stagecoach stop there. However, no one with the pottery’s namesake has ever been employed there, and the same family, the Comelisons, has owned the pottery since the very beginning. Bybee Pottery is the oldest working pottery west of the Allegheny Mountains and is the second oldest in the nation!

When the potter found out that we were headed towards the Red River Gorge, he advised us on the most scenic routes to take. He went on to tell us about the geologic history of the area and its relation to the clay he held in his

hands. The natural stone arches in the area are second in number only to Arches National Park in Utah. With waning daylight coming we knew we had better be on our way, so we could enjoy the views as we approached our destination. It was difficult to leave the engaging gentleman whom we had gained so much from in such a short time. The mystique of the pottery and the little town of Bybee were captivating. We said our good-byes and thanked him profusely for letting us intrude on his workday. Leaving Bybee and getting back onto Highway 52 was jolting; it felt as if we had morphed into another era.

Since our visit to Bybee, I have found out much more about Bybee Pottery, and what I learned has reconfirmed my positive impressions of the potter and his town. Of all the information he shared with us, he never mentioned that the pottery is famous throughout the world, even though the government took away its post office. He didn't brag about the fact that Bybee Pottery has been written up in such publications as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Southern Living*, *Smithsonian* and the *New York Times*. He didn't tell us that even though the state of Kentucky considers Bybee a "no longer populated community... that was absorbed by nearby towns," when they are open for sales, you had better come early because there is usually a line out the door. Some folks have described the buying crowd as a "madhouse." The artisan didn't boast that his pottery is considered collectible and is found on many Internet auction sites. He wasn't conceited that even though Bybee Pottery doesn't make deliveries, doesn't ship their pottery anywhere and doesn't have a web site, they are always busy filling vast numbers of orders. The productive potter didn't tell us that when the local elementary school kids stop by, he makes them little clay animals to take home with them.

You never know what you will find when you're not looking. Rusty and I can't wait to see what treasures we will find next! It might be another wacky bottle man or irate law-breaker, but then again, it might be a humble, world-famous potter with stories he loves to share!

Decade of the Sloth

KC WILLIAMS

December 21, 2002

I WAS HAVING A CHRISTMAS PARTY at my house, and my best friend's husband was coming over after work and was running late, so she asked to use the phone to check on him. I showed her to the phone in my bedroom to escape the noise of the party, and when she began to dial, realized it was a rotary phone and remarked, "I can't believe you still have one of these! Let's see if I can remember how it works." I proceeded to demonstrate in the air and gave her careful, explicit directions, then let her practice on my goddaughter's Sesame Street Play Phone. When I was certain she was ready, I let her try it for real. But when she dialed the first digit, a mysterious thunderstorm erupted sending a bolt of lightning through the phone line. Now she must use the assistance of a live monkey to perform all task requiring motor skills, including the dialing of a phone.¹ True story.... at least that's what I was visualizing would have happened after she made that ridiculously fatuous statement....

**Note to self:* Remarkable and verifiable proof that Evolutionists have been correct in their scientific theories; Evidence that *Homo sapiens* are losing the use of two major digits of the hand.

September 10, 2003

Just when I thought I had reconciled with my conscience to all those sadistic fantasies that separate man from beast, sane from insane, civilized from savage, I witnessed a perfectly able-bodied person with two unencumbered arms stop two

¹ Name withheld so as not to embarrass the imbecilic.

feet from a door and press the “handicapped” button to open it for him. At this moment, all self-forgiveness vanished to that unknown abyss where an “out of the dryer” sock mate goes. This is when I become technology’s biggest fan as I envision a bat swinging out from the bottom of the door when the button is depressed, breaking both of his legs. Hey, at least he would have a legitimate reason for pushing the button and time to reflect upon his fortunate and advanced capabilities....

**Note to self:* The Human arm is becoming ineffective and apparently shorter. With the lack of the opposable thumb and pinky, grasping seems to be becoming quite difficult. I am afraid.

October 16, 2003

Christopher and I are sitting outside in the courtyard on this unseasonably warm, sunny afternoon discussing his summer trip to Nevada with the University’s Geology Department. He is telling me that his group project was to hike and map a thirty-mile circumference of a specific area for a grade. His group produced an “A,” he says, but not because of anything he did. I offer support by reminding him that carrying the beer cooler is important to the success of any outdoor excursion. I then notice someone parking in a “permit only” space without a parking sticker and politely point out the error. The person in question then responds, “There aren’t any spaces close to the building, and I’m not walkin’ *that far*.” I tell Tisdale (Christopher), “It’s a good thing that guy wasn’t the ‘designated beer cooler carrier.’ They would have gotten an ‘F.’”

“Yeah, an ‘F!’” says Tisdale. “We would have gotten a freakin’ (that’s not what he really said) ‘F.’ That far...”

**Note to self:* Select members of the human species seem unable to move at quick or even moderate paces and can only travel for short distances. This sometimes happens to Tisdale, but only after the beer cooler is empty.

November 14, 2003

You know how we label our decades “The Seventies,” and “The Fifties,” and so on? What do we call 2000 and on? Well, here is my proposal: “The Decade of the Sloth.” Readers bear with me, and I will explain.

Each Chinese calendar year is named after a particular animal that indicates fortune, personality traits, and character strengths assigned to the people born under that year. We are in the decade of the “Two Thousands,” and honestly this analogy sounds quite ridiculous. But, before I go any further, let me give you a clear definition of the sloth. The sloth is a small arboreal (pertaining to living in trees) mammal of South America. They have either two or three toes, small round heads, large bodies and are depicted as resembling a “*drab mass of characterless vegetation*.” Sloths have low intelligence, sleep 18 out of the 24 hours of day, and are extremely lazy. They move only about 14 feet a minute along the ground and two feet a minute if in a tree. Now, let’s visit *Webster’s College Dictionary* and define the word sloth. *Sloth*: “Laziness, torpid, indolence.” *Torpid*: “Dormant, motionless, idle, and inert.”

**Note to self:* Cannabis elicits these effects on the human being and certain small dogs.

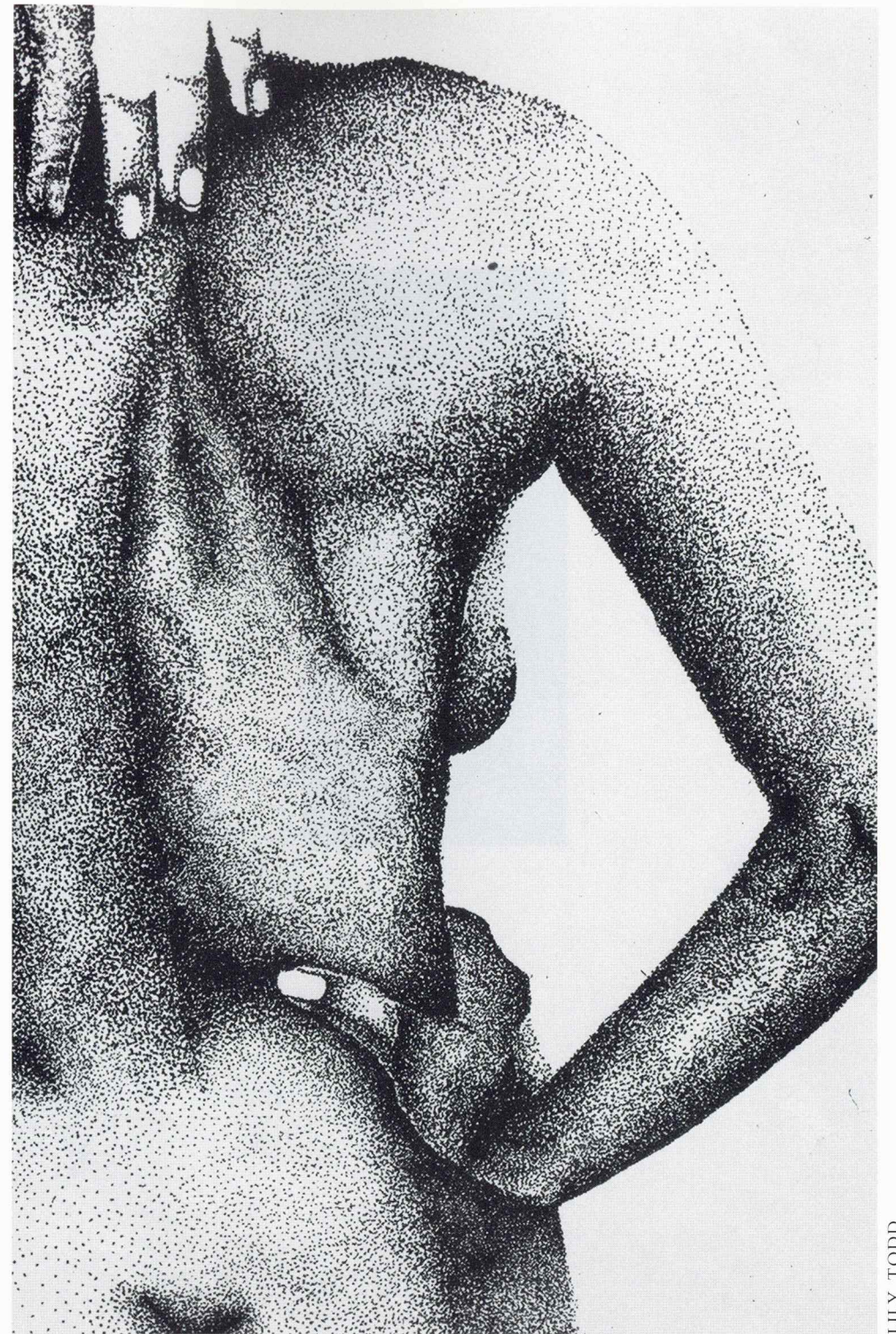
November 24, 2003

I do not have a cell phone or a beeper. My computer is a dinosaur, 93’ I think, and comes with a 14-inch monitor, hard drive with floppy and CD-ROM, a dial-up modem, no speakers, and Word 95/97. I check my e-mail once a week (if I have nothing better to do) and would not even have the damn thing if necessity didn’t dictate it. As a matter of fact, I only acquired it when I returned to school and paid only \$50.00. I do not have cable, a satellite dish, or a DVD player, preferring to read, create something with my hands, hike, work in the garden, or write. I still cook in pots on top of the stove. I manually shift gears, roll up my car windows, use a key to unlock my car door, trunk, and house doors. I prefer to write in longhand calligraphy, seduced by the smell of the ink, the wisp of the paper as the pen skates across it, fascinated by color fusing into mulched and pressed wood that once was a tall, standing tree with someone’s name etched into it.

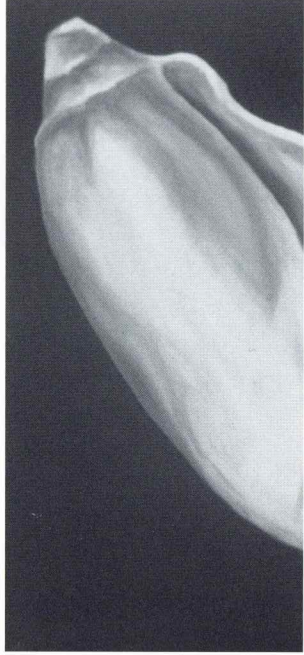
These antiquated processes may seem iconoclastic to many, and this prose may seem snide; however, there is no harm intended in this. I am constantly berated because of my lack of “techno” conformity, and *I* am the one labeled soporific and backwards. I am confused. Appreciation for human capability as a priceless heirloom is being substituted for the technological advancement of

mankind with the only result being a backward evolving species of “drab, characterless, vegetative-like” masses, incapable of production by hand, thought for self, or a concept as simple as movement by motivation for the grace and artistry of creation.

**Note to self: $E=mc^2$. Brilliant, Al. Totally brilliant, dude. P.S. Don't forget to pick up new batteries for the “clapper.” Flipping the light switches on and off with my hands totally wastes me.*



LILY TODD



LILY TODD

