

Stylus 2004-05



the literary annual of midlands technical college

STYLUS

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2004-2005

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

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Columbia, South Carolina

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Creative Nonfiction: Wes Brown

Photography: Travis Ellis

Poetry: Mary Elkin

William C. Goodwin IV Memorial Art Award:

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Flash Flood

QUENTIN CANTRELL

“Y^O MON, HAVE YOU HEARD anymore about da storm?” asked Jean-Paul Percot.
 “Yeah mon, for sure Fidel’s going to get a snootful!” Balfour Baptiste threw his large head backwards and erupted into laughter. “Us, I don’t think so, mostly just rain. It’s been a busy season though, we’ve been lucky, just lots of rain.”

“Yeah, too much rain, mon. It’s rotting my plants’ roots. Everything, all of the time it is wet. Too much water’s as bad as not enough.” Jean-Paul shook his head morosely. Balfour laughed at his best friend’s demeanor. Jean-Paul was always fretting about his crops. This time, though, Balfour felt that Jean-Paul was right, there was too much rain.

The two men slowly pulled the seining net through the tributary to the Nord River on the Northeast coast of Haiti near the port city of Cap-Haitien. The overhead sun beat down on the men in the late September afternoon. The barometer had been steadily falling and the flat calm that always precluded the storms had descended over the small island. A steady drizzle had been falling for two days and the winds had begun to pick up. Tropical storm Jeanne was coursing her way through the Caribbean and Haiti was projected to be in her path.

“Ja mon, a reporter asked me if I had tape. I say ‘for what?’ She said, ‘to tape up your windows.’ I told her that I don’t have any windows but I do have some tape if she needed it. She got mad at me.” He shook his head and chuckled in amusement.

“Ja mon, another crazy white woman...” said Balfour.

The two men laughed as they made their way to shore with their catch. Balfour was half Jamaican and half Haitian. He had inherited a boat from his Haitian father and he primarily fished for a living. Many a time he had had to decline an offer to carry cargo far pricier (and riskier) than his fish. Modern day pirates prowled the waters trading in everything from drugs to humans. Fishing had become much more dangerous in the past decade as pirates had become equipped with increasingly sophisticated boats and navigational tools. Balfour persisted, though, because it put him above the average per capita income of \$1300 per year and because it was a tradition in his family. When he had been out fishing the previous day, the swells generated by the storm hadn't been large enough to cause him undue concern. This storm had been unpredictable, though, and already there had been a few more major storms earlier in the season that had unleashed their fury on the small, poverty-stricken country.

After thinking about it for a minute, Balfour told Jean-Paul, "Da storm shouldn't be too bad, mon, but we should go to Auntie Sarah's on the hill anyway...you never know."

Auntie Sarah was Balfour's only living relative. The sister of Balfour's father, she was the matriarch of a large family that included many sons. The men had all pooled their money together (three of them lived and worked in New York City and sent their paychecks home every week to their family) and built her a four-room cinderblock home on a foothill to the mountains. The elevation protected the home (a mansion by Haitian standards) from flooding but it came at a price. Because the only water source was a small stream way down the hill, the men had had to carry the water one bucket at a time up the hill to mix the mortar for the cinder blocks. Sometimes cabbie friends of the family's would bring tourists to look at the countryside and they would drop off a jug of water. So, slowly, over the course of three years, the home was built. They constructed a large watershed and placed it on top of the hill and trailed a pipe down to the house so that their mother wouldn't have to climb the hill to get her cooking water. Auntie Sarah knew she had been very blessed and she never turned away anyone in need. So, the men finished salting down their fish; put their fishing nets and radio in a bag, and headed for Auntie Sarah's house.

The storm gathered strength as it greedily sucked up the warm moist air and exhaled its fury throughout the atmosphere. Sheets of rain pelted Cuba. Wind ripped up trees and flipped cars around like coins being tossed in the air. All the while it rained and rained and rained all across the Caribbean.

"It's not a hurricane mom, it's a tropical storm!" shouted Daniel Silverman into the phone that hung from a pole on the edge of town. Rain pelted at his back as he cupped his hand over the receiver.

"Get on the next plane out of there! I just don't understand why you're there in the first place and now this," Ina Silverman half sobbed as she yelled at her son who was thousands of miles away from her Fifth Avenue apartment.

"I don't know, mom, I just thought, well, I thought maybe I could help..." Daniel trailed off as his mother began her tirade again.

"Help?" His mother laughed into the phone. "For god's sake Daniel, you're a plastic surgeon, what help would you be? You need to come home right now. I did not pay for medical school so that you could pay hero in some third world, AIDS infected country," she said. "What does Julie say about all of this?"

Daniel paused; he hadn't been able to tell his mother about the breakup. Julie Fisher had been his mother's first choice for his wife. Pretty, an only child and a rich father. All of his mother's qualifications were met. They made the perfect couple; they had had the perfect engagement, were registered at all the right stores, and were going to have the perfect wedding to preclude the perfect life. Then suddenly, Julie announced that the perfect part no longer included Daniel and replaced him with an investment banker. In shock, he had peevishly declined her offer to return the ring. The ring that had cost him every penny he, and his mother, had. Rather than face his mother's wrath, he had signed up to go with one of his professor's to Haiti to help distribute AIDS medication. The skyrocketing infection rate had been the topic of a paper discussed in a seminar he had attended. He didn't really care about the AIDS pandemic, it had just seemed that providence had provided him a way to avoid his mother until he couldn't put it off any longer. Besides, airfare and meals were covered, and he got credit too, which saved money in the long run. All in all it had seemed like a good deal. Nobody ever said anything about storms.

"Um, well, Julie's gone, mom," said Daniel.

"Gone? Gone where?" she asked.

"We broke up," he said.

"The ring. Oh, my god! Did you get the ring?" she shouted.

"No, mom. No, I didn't," he sighed.

"Daniel Silverman, I demand that you get on the next plane out of there and come home right this instant. What did you do to make her mad? Whatever it is you have to go and apologize. Get her back or that ring back!" she shouted.

"Mom, please," choked Daniel. "I..."

His mother shouted, "You're just like your father..."

Daniel tuned his mother out as he stood with his back to the driving rain. His hands went numb and his eyes glazed over as he remembered a childhood full of his mother railing at his father; always about money and expensive things that she wanted. After his father had died from a heart attack (in no small part caused by his wife's incessant need for material possessions and wealth), she had used the inheritance to groom Daniel to be a Fifth Avenue plastic surgeon. She would be set for life.

The sound of a branch cracking in the wind caused Daniel to snap out of his reverie. He caught the tail end of what his mother was saying "...spineless. Just can't do anything right."

Daniel ached for his mother to say something to soothe him. Something to make the sick feeling in his stomach go away. Something that would make him forget that there was going to be no honeymoon, no marriage, and no Julie. His eyes watered up and his bowels constricted as he fought his emotions. His palm sweated as it gripped the phone handle. "Mom, please, it wasn't me," he begged.

"Get on the plane and come home right now!" she shouted angrily.

"There are no more planes mom, I'm staying here," he said with resignation. He had turned away from the last plane primarily because he was more terrified of his mother's wrath than Mother Nature's but, also, in the back of his mind, he harbored the childish wish that the storm would somehow cause his death and he would escape the misery that now occupied his life. He paused for a moment, hoping one last time that she would express some kind

of concern over his wellbeing. Waiting for something, some kind of acknowledgment that would never, ever come from her.

"You lied to me? How dare you lie to ME!!" she shouted.

At that moment, Daniel Silverman began his true journey toward manhood.

"Screw you, mom," he said softly. Daniel hung up the phone on his mother and turned to face the impending storm.

Jean-Paul and Balfour made their way down the muddy, unpaved street. It was slow going and they reminisced about their lives as they walked.

"Ah, what about the first crazy white lady?" asked Jean-Paul.

"The nun?" said Balfour.

"Ja mon, the holy sister Teresa," said Jean-Paul.

The two men laughed; they first met each other at school when they were six. Balfour's Catholic father had insisted that he go to Catholic school when he was young. His mother, however, had still believed in Voodoo and Balfour had received an extensive education in his ancestral customs and beliefs. The good sister Teresa had had her hands full with Balfour. He had openly resisted the rigidity of the instruction process and had consistently exasperated Sister Teresa by referring to similarities he saw between Voodoo and Catholicism. The final straw had been when Balfour, in an ill-fated (yet good-hearted) attempt to marry the two religions, replaced the communion wine with chicken blood. Much to his father's anger, Balfour Baptiste was asked to not come back to Catholic school. Not much longer after that, Balfour's family had been killed by rebels and he had only escaped being shot by lying with the bodies and pretending to be dead himself. After wandering the countryside for some time, Balfour ended up in an orphan camp on the coast.

Jean-Paul's family had fallen victim to a cholera outbreak and an uncle in the Cabinet (Jean-Paul was a direct descendant of the much revered Haitian leader Jean Jacques Bessalaines) had taken him in. When the uncle was assassinated, Jean-Paul had also been sent to the orphan camp. They didn't stay long in the camp once they met up with each other again. The friendship developed quickly and on a deep kinship level. They were all each other had.

For a while they had run with the Cannibal Army but they were against the looting and had decided to go back to the coast.

"Aristide, now, he could be a crazy white woman, just in disguise," mused Jean-Paul.

Balfour laughed heartily at his friend's joke. Rarely though, did the mention of the former president elicit laughter. Balfour and Jean-Paul had survived years of oppression and military rule. The riots and carnage that had accompanied the last twenty years were permanently emblazoned on their psyches. The natural disasters that wrecked their tiny country in the form of earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes were nothing compared to the human atrocities the small country had borne. From the plantation and slavery times to the current oppressive regime, the people of the country had been manipulated for the gain of others and then discarded with no second thought. The social unrest that was bred from this warped system coursed like blood through the natives' veins. The spiraling decay of the infrastructure and living conditions in their country made Jean-Paul and Balfour madder and madder as the years went by. The tumultuous reign of Aristide and the intervening parties had ruined the country's economy making it harder and harder to earn a living. In a country full of fighting, though, they couldn't find any way to win any real change.

The men paused at the base of the foothills to take a break before starting up the hill. Balfour pulled a piece of bammy bread from his pocket and broke it in half. Jean-Paul cracked open a coconut, caught the juice in each half and handed one to Balfour. They ate together in silence for a while, looking out onto the countryside. Most of the area around them had been stripped of any kind of vegetation. Trees had been chopped down to use for firewood and to sell. All the bushes and plants had been pulled up and used for fuel. The coconut Jean-Paul opened came from one of the first coconut trees they had come to in their hour of walking. When the men were growing up, coconut trees had been abundant. Now, hunger and poverty had forced the people to rape the once plentiful land, stripping it of not only the fruits but also the trees that bore them.

The men passed by dozens of pairs of different styled shoes sticking up out of the mud on the ground. People who lived in the hills would often go to town all dressed up but with no shoes. Once they got to town, they would go

buy a pair of fancy shoes. When they started walking back up the hill to their home, their feet, unaccustomed to shoes to begin with, would begin to hurt and they would abandon the shoes on the roadside. Often, many different people would wear the same pair of shoes on various trips to town. Right now, though, they looked like strange skeletons rising up out of the ground, a bizarre vision of some kind of Dali-esque shoe cemetery.

At last they reached the clearing in front of Auntie Sarah's house. Dozens of people stood in the yard clutching bags, children and chickens, seeking refuge. The men passed a bucket of homemade beer among them, took a final piss and then all filed inside to find a spot on the floor. Auntie Sarah welcomed them all with an especially big hug for Balfour. "I knew an hour ago you were on your way," Auntie Sarah laughed and poked Balfour in the ribs. "I can always tell by the mismatched sizes!"

Balfour and Jean-Paul joined in the laughter; they were used to people making fun of the disparity in their heights and appearances. Balfour stood at nearly 6'2", ebony dark with wide features. Jean-Paul though, was 5'6", light skinned with fine features. Balfour spoke primarily Kreyol, a patois of French and African dialect that is one of the two national languages in Haiti. French, being the other, was what Jean-Paul spoke. Jean-Paul was a devout Catholic while Balfour believed in Voodoo. Despite these differences, and many more, the two were best friends. In some unspoken way, they seemed to want to shelter one another until they finally met up with whatever untimely death stood in store for them.

"Auntie Sarah, we have fish for you. Surely you can refill the beer bucket?" ribbed Balfour.

"Quiet, you silly man! You think I need a houseful of drunks during a storm?" she retorted.

"Oh, it won't be so bad a storm. I promise. We need beer after that long walk. Please woman, be kind," Balfour jokingly pleaded.

"Oh, be quiet you silly man. one more bucket and that is all. You can go home and drink beer!" said Auntie Sarah as she dipped more beer out of a barrel on the floor into the bucket.

The men passed the bucket around again and a silence fell over the group as they listened to the wind and the rain outside. They lit several votive candles

and the adults talked quietly as the children began to go to sleep. Balfour prayed to the voodoo god Sango (god of storms) to not unleash his fury on the already crippled country. For good measure he said a few Hail Mary's too.

★ ★ ★

"Hi, my name is Dr. Daniel Silverman, I'm uh, a doctor on the AIDS team with Dr. William Clarkson. I was just, um, wondering if you need help." Daniel hesitantly introduced himself to the small, dark haired woman just inside the Doctor's Without Borders tent. Her nametag identified her as a UN worker from Italy named Marcella Gianno. She smiled at him but grew immediately stern.

"Dr. Silverman, why didn't you leave when they evacuated? Do you have any idea what it could be like here in a few hours?" She demanded in heavily accented English.

"I, uh, well...it's a long story," stammered Daniel.

"Looks like it," said Marcella with a smile playing at her lips. She arched her dark brown eyebrows and looked at him over her glasses.

"Have you seen yourself recently?" she asked.

"Huh?" said Daniel.

"Look," said Marcella as she pointed to a tin mirror hanging on a support post. Despite the blurry image, Daniel could see that he was disheveled. His eyes were red rimmed from crying and his hair, sans gel, was sticking out everywhere. His clothes were muddy and his shoes were soaking wet.

"Okay, I look terrible and I've had a rough time. But I *am* a doctor and never mind how or why, I want to help! Here is my I.D., my passport, whatever you want. Call Dr. Clarkson in New York," said Daniel with rising emotion.

"All right, all right," said Marcella as she inspected his passport. "I saw you around this last week with Dr. Clarkson, there aren't many six feet tall white Jewish men around here, yes?"

"No" said Daniel. "I mean, yes, uh, I mean...."

Marcella started laughing at his embarrassment. "What field are you in?" she asked.

"Reconstructive" he said.

"Hmm" she pursed her lips, "We don't get much call for that here" She looked at him sideways to see if he caught her humor but on the tail end of his mother's comment the remark didn't sit well.

"Look, do you need help or not?" he demanded.

She didn't understand the source of his anger but she could see that he was sincere about helping and there *was* a lot to be done.

"Well, what I need right now doesn't require much medical expertise anyway. There's a pregnant woman up in the hills that needs to come down to the clinic. I need you to go get her and help her back here," said Marcella in a challenging tone.

"Babies!" exclaimed Daniel.

"No, not yet anyway," laughed Marcella, mentally adding to herself, *if we're lucky*.

Daniel got beet red at the very utterance of the word baby. He turned a deep scarlet as his thoughts progressed.

"Don't worry, you'll be fine. With any luck, the storm will get its fill in Cuba and move on," said Marcella.

"How am I supposed to get there?" he asked.

"Well, you're lucky on that. Your guide happens to have a horse," she replied.

"A horse? You want me to transport a pregnant woman on a horse?" Daniel exclaimed.

"Well, it's better than if she walks; especially in all the mud. Besides, even if we did have a vehicle, there are no roads up the side of the mountain where she is," said Marcella.

"I, uh, well, I don't know..." Daniel stammered.

"Here's your guide now. Chris, come on in, I found a doctor for you." Turning to Daniel, Marcella said, "the woman you are going to help is his sister. Her husband was killed in the fighting in February. This is her brother Chris."

Daniel nodded at the thin young man with dreadlocks in front of him who flashed him a toothsome smile from his ebony black face. Chris spoke to Marcella in his native patois. She turned to Daniel and translated. "Chris says thank you very much. His sister really needs our help, but you must go quickly. He knows some English. Don't worry, you'll be fine"

"Uh, Ok, do you have any rain gear?" asked Daniel.

"Well, we have these Red Cross emergency kits. Take a couple of them with you; they have a poncho and some basic rations. They also come in this nice, souvenir backpack."

Marcella laughed as she handed Daniel the army green backpack emblazoned with the Red Cross symbol.

"How about a walkie-talkie or something?" said Daniel in a quiet tone.

"Nope." Marcella shook her head. "Are you backing out, Dr. Silverman? Because I don't have time to stand here. Yes, this is dangerous, but certainly you knew that before you came in here and volunteered to help. Now please decide what you're going to do because I have a storm to prepare for."

Daniel stared at the small woman with fiery eyes who stood in front of him and felt a twinge in his heart for the first time since Julie had crushed it. He reached into the backpack to get the poncho and headed for the door. "Come on, Chris, show me where the horse is," he said over his shoulder. At the door, he glanced back and saw Marcella standing there watching him with the half smile on her lips again.

An hour into the journey, Daniel began to think that Marcella's wish that the storm would turn and miss hitting Haiti might just come true. He and Chris stood at an overlook staring out at the harbor town they had left. Trees leaned low, pushed by strong winds. Whitecaps extended out as far as the eye could see and rain lashed at their face.

"Look," Chris pointed out to Daniel far across the horizon where the storm was speeding to the north.

"Lucky, it goes away," said Chris. "Still, much rain, it will get worse. We go now to my sister." He pulled on the bridle of the horse and led it back toward the path.

"You mean this is it?" asked Daniel. "There really is no hurricane?"

"No, mon, no hurricane, just storm and lots of rain," said Chris as he navigated the horse up the trail.

Daniel felt a sense of relief flood over him as well as a perverse disappointment. When he had shouted at his mother that it was just a tropical storm, he had been hoping that the storm would strengthen and become a hurricane. The complicated emotions that led to him not getting on the plane when

everyone else was evacuating also made him want to be in the most dangerous situation possible in order to cause his mother the most distress possible. She had trained him well.

At one clearing on the trail, they looked down onto what appeared to be a tree farm. Upon questioning Chris, Daniel learned that indeed the long rows planted at the base of the mountain were seedlings that were to be used to reforest the denuded countryside. An international humanitarian organization had started the effort and it was funded by various donations. Daniel watched as small streams of muddy water washed down the hillside taking the remaining topsoil with it.

Further on they came to a group of people huddled under a large cottonwood tree. They were incredibly skinny. Several were wrapped together in a threadbare blanket while the rest stood half clothed and drenched by the rain. Chris exchanged some words with them, they seemed to Daniel to be asking for food, but Chris and the horse kept moving. "What did they want?" asked Daniel.

"Medicine, food, beer, anything. They all have AIDS. Soon they will die," said Chris.

"Why don't they go home and get out of the rain?" asked Daniel.

"They are home," said Chris simply as he urged the horse up the trail.

Daniel couldn't help but glancing back behind him. Sure enough when he looked more carefully, he could see a cook pot, a couple of chairs and a small lean-to that was made of sticks and woven leaves. A woman with gaunt cheeks and hollow eyes stood at the edge of the clearing, two toddlers at her feet. She was holding a baby to her breast. Her head and chest were wrapped in a faded red fabric. Her vacant stare bore into Daniel for as long as he could stand. He whipped back around on the horse and stared rigidly ahead, trying to comprehend all of the thoughts that had suddenly begun to buzz around in his head. His head was telling him that he should help, but in his heart he was terrified. Despite his education, he was afraid of the disease; afraid of all the ramifications it bore; in short, he was afraid of a government created stigma. These weren't prostitutes, or drug addicts, or homosexuals; these people weren't wandering the streets or subways of Manhattan. They lived under a tree, for God's sake. What kind of moral depravity did that breed? If indeed the fallible human

condition could be so neatly boxed by “morals and values.” The same people who denounced the morality of homosexuality and labeled AIDS as a “homosexual” disease had put in place many of the embargoes and sanctions that now caused these people to be ill and to lack food and shelter. An unfamiliar feeling of discomfort overcame Daniel.

They rounded a bend in the trail and came upon a small cinderblock house. Daniel dismounted the horse and Chris lashed the bridle to a tree. Daniel followed Chris into the house that was actually a recent addition to a fallen down colonial manor home. The large house had been built overlooking the harbor. Stretching for below was a long abandoned sugar cane plantation. The crumbled façade of the older building served as a buttress for the newer one and protected it from the lashing winds.

Daniel stepped into what was an incredibly small but charming and immaculate house. Warm and dry, it protected its inhabitants and their belongings from the elements outdoors. The walls were covered with paintings in the traditional Haitian amate style. On a pallet on the floor was a chocolate colored woman with large black eyes who was obviously in the last stages of pregnancy. Three other children sat huddled under a blanket.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Daniel Silverman,” said Daniel as he knelt by the woman.

“Thank you for coming,” said the woman in perfect English. “My name is Lucia.”

Daniel was slightly shocked at hearing the woman talk because of the way her brother spoke. Sensing his surprise, Lucia smiled and said, “I was educated at parochial school. Chris was always more interested in art, and the nuns never approved of the traditional amate painting style. Besides, the school closed later on after the embargoes anyway, so I’m teaching him to read.” She leaned on stump that served as a table and slowly stood up.

“It is hard though,” she continued, “because we have no books, and I have no paper or pencil. But he does get the supplies to do his painting. A nice American man that he sells the pictures to helps him with that. There aren’t many artists left, traditional or otherwise. When he sells them, Chris gets a lot of money for the pictures. But we have to be careful that no one knows because they would kill him for the money, or else steal the pictures.”

She stopped suddenly and dropped her eyes. “I am sorry I’m talking so much, it’s just that I am here alone with the children all day and I have no one to talk to. All of the neighbors are gone now...” her voice trailed off.

He was shocked by her words. Not for what she said, but because his sister, in her ten bedroom, eight bathroom home in Connecticut, had said the exact same words to him on his last visit there a few weeks before. Slowly, the shared face of humanity was becoming visible to Daniel. He was startled by the sound of a tree outside being ripped up and hurled through the air, whistling like a bottle rocket as it went. The storm accelerated outside and one of the children began to cry.

Chris said, “I think we need to wait a while, mon. Come with me. I have lots of pictures; maybe your American doctor friends would like to buy? Maybe I come to New York with you?”

“Come with me!” Daniel exclaimed. “I don’t know about that, Chris, but yes, I’d like to see your pictures. And maybe I know somebody who would like to buy some.” He stammered upon seeing the hurt look on Chris’s face.

“Ah yes, buy some,” said Chris with his face lighting back up. “Come look.”

Chris led Daniel to the back wall. The artist pulled back a blanket that hung on the wall and revealed a small door. The two men went through a low tunnel coming out after a short ways into what turned out to be the wine cellar of the manor house. Piled on top of old wine caskets were dozens and dozens of canvases. Each one was unique in its colorful depiction of everyday island life. Chris told Daniel that he would paint the pictures in the front house, hang them on the wall to dry and then move them to safe keeping in the wine cellar. A couple of times a year, American collectors would come and buy the paintings. Chris had also hidden much of the money he had been paid because the banks weren’t trustworthy. He swore Daniel to secrecy about the location of his treasure trove and the two men went back through the tunnel.

All across the country, the storm raged. Rain pelted the bare hillsides. Runoff filled the streams and rivers. Already saturated fields got inches more rain dumped on them. Low lying areas started to flood, turning reddish brown

from the mud running down from the mountains. Morning came and the winds subsided. A collective sense of relief owing to the fact that the storm wasn't as bad as it could have been was felt across the land. Slowly, people emerged from their shelters and returned home to begin cleaning up the debris.

Balfour and Jean-Paul left Auntie Sarah's as soon as it got light. They were intent on getting to the beach and collecting whatever shells and fish may have been washed ashore. Plus, Balfour had to check on his boat. They went carefully back down the mountain trail. Not only did they get very little sleep the night before but they ached all over from sitting on the floor all night. They were highly motivated, though, by the thought of what, in the poorest country in the Americas, amounted to a seafood buffet.

Daniel and Lucia started down the mountain a little later than Balfour and Jean-Paul did. Lucia rode the horse and this time, Daniel acted as guide. Chris was staying behind to watch the other children. He had lashed a cart onto the horse for Lucia to use when she came home with the baby. The morning sun had just broken free from the horizon as they picked their way down the muddy path. A light rain still fell as the sun slowly rose burning its way through the early morning haze.

Jean-Paul and Balfour parted ways midway down the mountain. Balfour was going to the harbor and check on his boat while Jean-Paul was going to the valley to check on his house. They were going to meet back up with each other at the beach. Despite their fatigue, their spirits were high and Balfour was thanking the Sango for sparing them his wrath and sending Jeanne on her way. Jean-Paul admonished his friend to not be late and then disappeared around the bend. Balfour hurried toward the harbor, anxious to see his boat.

Daniel and Lucia had been talking quietly when they neared the area where Daniel had seen the people huddled under a tree the day before. He gasped when they rounded the bend and before them lay a gash in the mountainside.

A mudslide had wiped away the whole copse of trees that had sheltered the AIDS victims. Lucia cried out and pointed a few feet down the hill. An arm hung by a red cloth caught up in a mass of tree roots.

Daniel shouted and tried to get closer, but the mud shifted. His brain refused to accept that the arm wasn't attached to anything. Tears welled in his eyes as he realized the implication of the red cloth. The horse whinnied and tried to shy away from the mud. Daniel told Lucia to dismount and carefully they made their way across the washed out stretch. With every step, Daniel was terrified that the mud would shift again and they would go hurtling down the mountain. He was barely able to control the horse and Lucia was beginning to tire. When they got back on the path proper, Lucia had to lay in the cart and rest for a while. Daniel continued slowly leading the horse down the path that was awash with runoff rainwater.

As they neared the valley, Daniel could see where the reforestation nursery had been. All 100,000 seedlings had been washed away. A gaping swatch filled with angry red mud was smeared over the former nursery. All along the hillside he could see people slowly making their way out of the mountains down toward the valley. Far off in the distance, he could see the storm clouds still roiling across the Caribbean. Lucia cried out in pain from the cart and Daniel rushed to her side.

"The pains," she said. "They're coming."

"How fast?" asked Daniel anxiously.

"Not very," she said. "Fifteen minutes or so. Plenty of time to get to the clinic. Don't worry, you'll be fine." She patted his arm as he tucked a blanket around her.

He blushed at the role reversal. *He* was supposed to be the one giving words of comfort. Lucia laughed at him. At first he scowled but then he was able to give her a wan smile. "I guess my nervousness shows," he said. "I'm sorry. I just haven't had any experience with this kind of thing and...."

Lucia interrupted him, "Don't worry about it, Dr. Daniel. I think you're doing just fine. Life in our country makes all of us nervous. None of us knows what to do anymore. Be thankful it's not a way of life for you."

Daniel stood staring at the woman in the cart. How very different from his mother she was. For a moment Daniel wondered what it would be like to have

had Lucia as a mother. He smiled at her and they continued down the path. The trees had thinned out again and the water rushing down the hill had gained momentum. They passed some other people on the path that allowed Daniel to get around when they saw Lucia in the cart. Greetings were exchanged and blessings for the baby were called out. Someone suggested that Lucia name the infant Jeanne in honor of how polite the storm had been to them. Something that sounded like wind rustling in leaves was playing at the back of Daniel's subconscious but his conscious mind was saying, *there aren't any trees*. Suddenly, someone further up the path shouted out, "Flood!" And the mysterious sound came into focus.

Daniel shouted out, "Hold on Lucia," and kicked the horse into a gallop. The cart bounced wildly behind the horse as Daniel headed for the other side of the narrow valley. A roaring sound like a hundred trains echoed through the valley. The ground shook as the wall of water thundered down on the people in its way. Daniel glanced over at the water for one horrifying second. Like an angry red dragon breathing muddy fire, the flood swallowed up the ground and everything on it. Riding the crest of the front wave like some bizarre hood ornament, was the impaled body of a young boy. Pieces of houses, trees, farm animals and all types of debris were churned around in the thundering water. With no warning at all, flood after flood hit the low-lying areas. People who had been out visiting or checking on their homes in the valley were swept away. Three of the floods had come together right up from where Daniel was with the cart. He was getting ready to lead the horse further away from the flood when he saw a man wedged between two trees. Daniel tied the horse to a rock and went back toward the man. He called out, "Hello, hello, can you hear me?"

The man looked up and winced in pain. "Ja, I can hear you. My leg's broken. This tree, it's not going to last much longer, then maybe I don't last much longer?" he gave Daniel an ironic smile.

Daniel looked to where the man had nodded. It did look like the tree the man was holding onto was about to snap. Daniel's eyes strayed to a large gash on the man's head that was bleeding heavily. The man must have sensed Daniel's hesitancy.

"Don't worry, I'm not HIV," the man said.

For the second time in one day, Daniel felt cut down to the quick of his existence. He suddenly felt haunted by every homeless person he had ever stepped over in Manhattan. He pulled off his shirt, stepped into the raging water and wrapped it around the man's head. Just as the tree branch the man was holding snapped in half, Daniel reached his arms around the man's waist and pulled him out of the water toward higher ground. The man collapsed, unconscious, in the cart next to Lucia who helped cover him with her blanket.

Disheveled, covered with mud and about to collapse from exhaustion, Daniel led the horse on toward the town and the clinic, all the while beginning to realize that he had found a new home.

Much to his relief, Balfour found that his boat had survived the storm unscathed.

He gathered up some bags and was headed for the beach to meet Jean-Paul when one of the other fishermen began shouting and running down the beach. Balfour rushed up toward the street to see what was happening, people were pointing at the water in the streets and talking about a flood in the valley. The valley was where Jean-Paul's house was located. Balfour began to run. He couldn't even make it into the area where Jean-Paul's house had been. The whole area was flooded and looting had already begun. People floated down the streets on logs, calling out the names of loved ones. Balfour felt overcome with a blinding, dark rage. He began shouting Jean-Paul's name, wading through the water searching for his friend. After a couple of hours, he became exhausted and headed back toward the town to see if he could find some food.

Daniel stopped outside the Doctors Without Borders tent and went back to the cart. He carefully lifted Lucia out of the cart and staggered toward the tent door with her in his arms. Jean-Paul could vaguely hear the street sounds around him. Incredible pain from his leg sent waves of nausea through him. He looked out and in his delirium he thought he saw Sister Teresa standing beneath a mango tree just like she had back in parochial school. He had always had tea and done sums under the mango tree on the school grounds. In his hallucination, he asked the sister to find the priest so that he could have last

rites. His throat was parched and he looked vainly for Balfour. Balfour was the one that climbed the mango trees, Balfour would get the fruit for him. Jean-Paul dragged himself to the base of the tree and waited to die.

Once he got to town, Balfour walked along the street praying to both of his religions. He remembered where the relief workers had set up after the last storm and headed in that direction to see if they had any provisions yet. Right before he got to the

Doctor's Without Borders tent, he looked over and was astounded to see Jean-Paul lying crumpled beneath a mango tree. Balfour rushed to his friend's side and pressed his head to his chest. Upon hearing a faint heartbeat, Balfour shook his friend. Kneeling by Jean-Paul's side, Balfour raised his massive head to the heavens and prayed for his friend's life to be spared. In his agony, he was surprised to see a single mango still hanging in the tree. He bounded to his feet, pulled his knife from its sheath, clutched it in his teeth and scaled the tree. With a quick flick of his wrist, he cut the fruit free from the tree and returned to the ground with it tucked in his waistband. He cut a piece off the fleshy fruit and squeezed it in his huge palm. The juices ran down from his brown fingers mingling with the sea salt that had been permanently rubbed into his skin. He cradled his friend's head in the crook of his arm and let the sweet nectar fall into Jean-Paul's mouth. The sounds around Balfour blended into a dull din in the background as he focused on his almost dead friend and willed him back to life.

Josh

KAREN NOLEN

WE TURNED ONTO A HILLY, rugged dirt road lined with cypress trees, and followed a group of trucks and cars headed toward the main house. As we bounced along I gradually could piece together how large the estate really was. The top of each hill exposed a different part of the farm: first a house, then a rolling pasture, then another house or a barn. By the third hilltop, I could see a clearing where long buildings stood; the area where the horses were quartered; two barns, weathered to a coarse gray with rusted tin roofs. At the foot of the hill, we turned onto another bumpy dirt road that would take us there. I glanced over at Eric. Hot sticky air whipped through the truck, kicking his muddy red hair around like a wildfire. I was glad I thought to wear mine in a ponytail, though once in a while a couple of blond strands would pull away and I'd have to tuck them behind my ear to keep them at bay.

The stalls were numbered one through twenty, ten on each side, and they opened to the outside. "What number are we?" I asked. They were the first words spoken between us since we left the farm, over an hour ago.

"What do you care?" He looked straight ahead, not really expecting an answer. I went back to my window, not about to give him one. He had been acting this way all morning, which is exactly why I hadn't spoken until now. He was mad at me because his father made him transport Josh all the way up here — while we still didn't have anyone to ride him — when he would rather be hanging out with *Brennn-duh!* Her name made my skin crawl! Anyway, I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of knowing he got under my

skin, again. Instead, I went back to my window, clenching my jaw, trying not to lean over and grab the wheel, and force him off the road — into a tree!

We pulled into the parking area and he jumped out, immediately unloading Josh and escorting him toward the barns, leaving the saddle and the rest of the tack for me. I lowered the tailgate, hung the bridle and lead ropes around my neck, and dragged the saddle toward me. Leaning over, I pulled it onto my back, shifted its weight, and then started up the hill toward the stalls. The equipment was heavy and my shirt was quickly soaked with my own sweat. Bent over like that, it was hard to see where Eric had gone; I still didn't know the number of our stall, and I couldn't see him anywhere.

The place was buzzing with horses and trucks and people with little dogs dressed like their owners. A man with the nametag "Cowboy" pointed me in the right direction and I headed up hill toward the second barn. Country music blared from the back of an SUV and I could smell steaks or hamburgers; the SUV people were grilling out. Drink stands sold sodas and snacks, priced way too high. It was like being at a carnival. This was supposed to have been my first event.

When I finally reached the stall, I dropped the saddle and tack at Eric's feet, plopped down on a bail of hay and fanned myself with my hand. A slight breeze gave some relief to the heat as it pushed around the musky odor of manure and hay.

"Oh, no you don't — get up and start getting him ready," he ordered.

"But I'm not riding him," I argued, not intending to sound so whiney.

"Then after you get him ready, you'd better find somebody to ride him."

"Why don't you ride him?" I braced myself; I knew the words would anger him that much more but couldn't stop them from coming out.

"He's your horse, your responsibility. Besides, your mom is going to sell him if you keep this up."

"Keep what up? Did she tell you that?"

Eric let out a sigh and turned and headed downhill. "I'm going to get a soda."

Josh stomped his feet and swished his tail at a fly. He huffed and tried to crane his long neck toward me to see if I had something good to give him, but the rope he was on was too short and wouldn't let him get very far away from

the wall. I reached into my pocket and took out the small apple I had been saving for myself and held it out to him. The coarse hairs surrounding his nose tickled a little as they roamed over my palm; until he was sure he had the whole thing in his mouth. Thick foam gathered around his lips while he worked his jaws, grinding the apple into sauce. I grabbed a thick brush and started getting him ready.

I hadn't ridden him for over two months. It had been about nine weeks since I had fallen, and I hadn't had the nerve to get back on him. I had gotten him about three months before. He had been rescued by the humane society; his last owners had underfed him. And as if starving him wasn't enough, there were thick shiny scars where stitches were healing over. They had been beating him too. When we got him, his ribs stuck out so much you could put half of your hand between them, and he wouldn't willingly come to anyone — even if you had a bucket full of feed, or an apple or carrot. And he was so shy; if you raised your hands above his head to put on his bridle, he would bolt in the opposite direction. I didn't know what to do with him at first; I had never owned a dog, much less a horse.

Some days I would go out, into his pen, and just walk around. I didn't call him or try to get him to come to me. I just wanted him to know I wasn't going to hurt him. Eventually, he started following me, but he'd stay way behind, and if I stopped walking he would stop, too. Not long after I finally got a bridle on him, he let me put a saddle on him. I found out he had been a racehorse before his last owners had bought him at an auction. We didn't have a track to run him on, so I set up a couple of barrels in his pasture and we slowly began working our way around them. After a while, we flew around them like lightening. One day, after we rounded the second barrel and were headed back toward the first, he just kept going. He was running so fast he grunted each time his front feet hit the ground; the impact was loud and thunderous, like a team of horses instead of just one. As we were reaching the end of the pen I began to pull back on the reins, but he didn't slow down. And before I knew it we were in the air, over, and on the other side of the fence.

For weeks after that, we were both addicted. We jumped anything and everything. Then one Saturday morning we were running on a trail through the woods when we came up to a ditch. I thought Josh would jump over it,

just like he had jumped everything else, but as soon as he got to it he turned. I had been ready and braced for the jump, but when he turned I lost my balance and started to slip off his side. My foot got caught in the stirrup and I lost the reins, but hung on to the saddle; he was still running. I lost my grip from all of the bouncing around, and he dragged me for about twenty feet; knocking the air out of my lungs, before my boot came off and set me free. The whole time I had my eyes shut and was praying for it to end. After I finally caught my breath, I laid there in shock and cried for a long time. And when I could stand, I walked home; Josh had kept running until he reached his pen. Eric was the only person there when I got back and I made him promise not to tell anyone, especially my mom. He kept his promise, but not without giving me a lot of grief; he's been around horses his whole life and he doesn't understand that I can't get back on him. Not yet, anyway.

Just as I was finishing dressing Josh, Cowboy showed up. "You must be Jessica," he said, shoving a large calloused hand at me. My arm looked like a noodle under the force of his handshake and he chuckled. "I see you found your horse. My, he's a big one." He patted Josh on his rump as he walked around to inspect him. A cigar hung loosely from his teeth, the ones he had left; and he had sort of a spicy, old cigar and leather smell about him. He ran a hand over the scars on his side and shook his head. "Oh, you've done a real good job with him, Missy."

"Excuse me?" I was confused. I was sure I would have remembered meeting *him* before.

"He looks good, real good. His stitches have healed real nice." He ran his hand over the scars again.

"How do you know who he is?" We had gotten Josh from Eric's father, a local veterinarian; I couldn't imagine how this man knew him.

"I was the first vet to see him; I put those stitches in him."

"Really, I thought Dr. Cottingham rescued him?"

"No ma'am," he smiled at me and adjusted his hat. "Dr. Cottingham got him from me. He said he knew about a young girl that stopped by his farm everyday after school. Said she would save the fruit from her lunch and feed it to his horses then lie and tell her mother she ate it all."

I blushed, embarrassed at how hearing him tell it made me sound childish,

much younger than sixteen years old. I stood there staring back and forth, between him and Josh. Before I could gather my thoughts enough to ask any more questions, he shoved a couple of pieces of paper at me and began explaining, "The top one there's your number, you gonna need to tack it on the back of your shirt; the other's a map of the trail. Most people get here early enough to run the course at least once but you, and a couple others I've got to find, won't get that chance. There's water on the last jump, but as you probably know, Josh here don't like water."

"What?" As soon as he said it, I realized why Josh had turned at the ditch that morning. I plopped down on the hay bail, playing the accident over in my head.

"You okay?" Cowboy asked, a little confused by my behavior. My hands were cold and clammy. "I'm fine," I smiled at him. "I was just thinking about what you said about the water."

"Well, don't you worry about that. Just go around it."

"Won't that disqualify me?"

"No, but you'll rack up a couple of faults. The paper explains it all. I've got to go now — good luck!" He grinned widely and waved goodbye before turning around and heading for his next stop. I looked down at the papers he had given me. A large, red five was printed on the first one and it had two safety pins stuck through the top corners. The second page was the map with course instructions.

Overhead the PA system rang out, "Riders one through five, riders one through five, please meet at the trail entrance." I looked around for Eric and saw him, down hill a little ways, talking to Cowboy, shaking his hand and patting him on the back. Fine, if he didn't want to help, I didn't need any. I grabbed Josh's reins and pulled him out of the stall and we headed up hill. According to the map the trail entrance wasn't far. Ahead, riders one through four were making their way up, as well, on top of their horses.

At the opening of the trail everyone was waiting on us and when we finally reached them one of the three judges began reviewing the course structure: A mile long, the first quarter of it through the woods. The rest was an open stretch. A bell will chime once the person in front of you makes it to the half

way point, that is the queue for the next person to start. When she was finished she asked if I needed help with my number. I said I did, so she pinned it onto the back of my shirt.

“Do you need a lift up?” the same judge asked. I looked around at the others and figured I must look pretty out of place. I shook my head no and faced Josh. Putting my foot into the stirrup, I grabbed the front and back of the saddle and hoisted myself up; I had forgotten how much I could see from up here. I looked down the hill for Eric but I was too far away; I wouldn’t be able to make him out from here.

A bell sounded and the first rider was off. We could hear him long after he left our sight, hooves pounding. My heart began to jump and my palms became sweaty again. What am I doing up here? The next bell rang. Overhead one of the judges was giving information about each horse to the spectators that lined the trail. Josh was moving around nervously so I was pulled back on the reins trying to keep him still. This was not helping me keep calm at all. The next bell rang. I was beginning to wonder if I had made a huge mistake. I hadn’t ridden Josh in so long. He seemed so jumpy; maybe he wasn’t ready either. The next bell rang. I was stuck; the next bell would be for me. I looked down hill wondering how pathetic I would look walking him back to the stables. Josh continued to dance as my mind raced. He isn’t ready. I’m not ready. There’s the bell.

Josh lunged forward, almost leaving me sitting on the ground. I didn’t have time to react. He whipped through the trees, his hooves pounding like bass drums, the rhythm raising my curiosity. When we reached the open trail, he thrust forward, picking up his pace, the wind gusting past my ears. I could see people on the side of the trail yelling and waving, but I couldn’t hear anything they were saying, we were going so fast. The first jump appeared on the other side of a hill and Josh took it with energetic grace as I braced for the worst, but I was only tossed forward a little when his feet finally reached the ground. I looked back. He had clipped the top rail with one of his back hooves; it hit the ground with a ringing thud. We took the next turn in the course and before we headed back up hill Josh took the second jump with the same effortlessness as the first, with no faults; the jump was intact. Down another slope the jump with the water waited. The rails were higher than the first two.

Hindsight told me I needed to turn him away, but the rhythm of his hooves and the whipping wind fed my adrenaline. This, and our rhythmic, paralleled breathing, was all I could hear; my ears had shut out every other sound. As we reached the jump I held on to the reins – and the saddle. When Josh’s front feet splashed the water, my grip tightened. I was sure he would stop, and then I felt a jolt from his hind legs as they pushed off. We were airborne. We both held our breath; the silence was deafening. When his front feet finally made contact with the ground a loud grunt escaped both of us as we exhaled. He had cleared the jump, with no faults. I leaned over the saddle and squeezed his long neck, unable to remember what I had been afraid of.

Fifteen other horses had followed us. Some made better time, others fewer faults, but by the end of the day we had placed eleventh. Not too bad.

Eric and I were packing up when I noticed Cowboy, just down hill from us; getting into a truck that was old and badly dented on every fender, and the paint didn’t match anywhere on it.

“What are you looking at?” he asked.

“That guy down there getting in that truck. For a veterinarian he sure drives a hunk of junk!”

Eric began to laugh, “He’s not a vet.”

“What? Yes he is, I saw you talking to him earlier — and he knows your dad!”

“He’s not a vet,” he repeated, grinning.

“Wha-?” It took me a second but I finally understood. He tricked me! “You could have gotten me killed.” I threw the brush I was holding at him but he dodged it gracefully, still smiling at me.

On the road, headed home, he asked. “You want to go riding in the morning?”

“What about Brenda?” I asked trying to sound unconcerned, not leaving my window.

“Don’t you mean Bren-duh?” he laughed.

I blushed, and laughed too. Then I returned to the window, trying to concentrate on the landscape. But I stared at his reflection instead.

Last Call for Credence

RYAN KING

I

I AWOKE TO A SUDDEN BURST of fiery red light from beyond the horizon. At first I thought it might have been an explosion, but upon arriving at the window I found that it was the sun that was responsible for the lurid brilliance. The riots and the protests from the night before had left a thick radiance of smoke atop the town. It was pink now from the haze of the freak sun that gazed upon the morning with a solemn sovereignty. As I recall, it was the dawn of a Saturday morning in the city of Credence.

Having had no place to go, I shut the blinds to stifle the obnoxious variation of sunlight. I lay back in bed and stared at my pregnant wife, Carrie, who was angelically silent and still. The faintest hint of pink light lit her face in such away that the light was not obtrusive anymore.

Carrie woke me just as I was reentering my dreams from the evening before. I could feel her cold tremble and knew immediately that something was not right.

"Wake up, Willie," she said to me. "Please wake up."

"I'm afraid I can't," I told her, "it's my day off and I don't plan on getting out of bed for anybody. As a matter of fact, you can steam me because I'm going to be a vegetable — all fuckin' day."

"Quit fucking around. There's some crazy shit going on outside."

Her fear began to frustrate me. I took her hand and dignified her apprehension with a question.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Listen," she said.

I stared at the ceiling silently and waited for something out of the ordinary to catch my attention. First there was nothing, only silence.

"You're just having a pregnant delirium or something. Go back to sleep."

"Listen."

I focused my attention once again on the silence. After a moment, I began to hear the static of something far off in the distance — outside the house. It began to grow louder. It was deep and consistent.

"Thunder," I told her. "They were calling for scattered storms today."

"That isn't thunder," she said. We were silent once again. The low rumble continued to grow until it became quite clear what we were hearing.

"They sound horrified," I whispered. "What's going on?"

She walked slowly around the edges of our room. She kept one ear close to the wall, monitoring the alien clamor that had seized our attention. Finally her eyes shifted from the wall to me. They were wide as though she had just seen a ghost.

"Where is it coming from?" I asked.

"Everywhere," she said.

II

There was a knock on the door a few hours later. I opened it to an unearthly blast of dry heat. It was as though the neighborhood had been placed in a giant oven. There in the cataclysmic weather stood an old friend of mine, Ray. We had grown up together since the sandbox. Back in the day, we ran the old neighborhood. Until that Saturday, he and I still lived right around the corner from each other.

I welcomed him inside and we sat down in the living room. Carrie greeted him and went into the kitchen to make a pitcher of her Bad Ass Long Island Iced Tea. She returned and sat a pitcher, two glasses, and a tall Irish cream liqueur and milk, for her and the baby, down on the table. We sat there silently and drank, each of us engulfed in our own complications of reverences and anticipations.

"Did you catch the Pistons game the other night?" I asked, trying to change the subject.

"Yeah, it's turning into the '04 season all over again," Ray said. "I don't care what the mascot calls you: you don't pull out your cattle prod and shock his ass in the middle of the second half of the game. It seems like you can't say shit anymore without starting a damn war. And now I hear they're suspending the player who did it."

"I had a c-note riding on them," I said.

"You said you weren't going to fucking gamble anymore, Willie," Carrie said to me. "What the hell goes through your head anymore?"

"Don't give me that shit. Look around, baby — it doesn't fuckin' matter." "Excuse me, prick," she mumbled as she stood up. She took the empty pitcher into the kitchen to make a second round of booze.

"Bitch," I called after her.

"So what do you make of all this, man?" Ray asked me as he threw back the remains of his drink and signaled towards the window.

"I'm not sure what to think," I said. That was a lie. I was thinking about how I needed a line.

"How about Carrie?" he asked.

My attention deficiency took full affect and I trailed off into my own simple and narcissistic direction of thought. It came to me like a blur.

"Do you remember that time," I began, "I stole two hundred dollars from my Dad, and I spent it all on cocaine? I was pretty bad into it for a little while back then — you saw me, man. It's pretty unfortunate that I had to pick such an expensive habit. I should have just taken up tennis or something, like a normal person — you know — like a *good* person."

"Did you ever get the chance to pay him back?" Ray asked.

"No. Maybe. I don't know. Fuck them."

"It seems like I remember you getting along with them?" Ray asked.

"I wish I remembered that, but I don't."

I felt Carrie place her hand on my shoulder.

"Looks like I'm just in time with round two," she said as she placed the pitcher on the coffee table.

We sat there in reminiscence for a couple of hours. I always felt good after having a conversation with Ray. He had a pastoral quality that you don't often find in human beings anymore.

After cutting up for so long, we had all grown tired. Ray and I were a little drunk and Carrie was having some of her morning sickness. I figured neither one of us wanted to sit around and listen to her puke all day so I decided it would be best if we left the house for a while. Ray said that we should go outside watch all the action taking place out in the streets, so we left the house and I walked him home.

The skies were the color of open flesh, the sun still as fiery and untamed as a rabid phoenix. The impending thunderstorms had moved in, and there were great entanglements of electric lightning that spread across the sky like a giant shrimp net. Excited people ran hysterically in the streets. Some cried. Some laughed madly. There were maniacs whaling around violently, scared and angry. I saw two of them shot down where they stood.

"Look at all the burning houses," I said to Ray as we passed a row of them. The flames were tall, as though they might have originated from the sky rather than the ground. The fire was spreading along all of the white picket fences, creating a barrier inferno that moved from house to house.

"Yeah, I see," said Ray. "It is going to be a long day. What do you plan to do after this?"

I thought about it for a moment. I hadn't considered all of the many things that I wanted to do before the day was over.

"I don't know," I told him. "I might visit some friends. I wouldn't mind having one more Philly cheese steak from Giglucci's. I don't know."

"Are you scared?" he asked me.

"I don't know," I told him. "Are you?"

"Fear suppresses us. I gave it up a long time ago."

"Funny," I said. "That's exactly how I felt about the coke."

We arrived in front of his house. It seemed as though it were the only one in the area that wasn't engulfed in flames. I suppose it was fortunate that Ray had never built a fence like all the others.

"Well I guess this is it then, isn't it?" I asked.

"Don't be so sure. After all, you don't know. Remember?"

"So true," I said. I gave him a hug goodbye. Ray was the coolest motherfucker that I had ever known. You would think that with age it would be easier saying goodbye to friends, but I don't think that it ever does.

"Take care of yourself, man," I said.

"You do the same," he told me as he turned to enter his house.

With that, I turned around and walked back into the street. My thoughts were broken by one last call from him.

"Hey, Willie," Ray hollered from the porch.

I turned around.

"Try to go home to your wife!" he told me.

III

It has been said that man views nature, women, and God all in the same regard. I can understand this in relation to the truism that we indulge almost pleasurably in disobeying these representations of morality. We do, despite sincere perceptions of right and wrong, have tendencies to be litterers, adulterers, and blasphemers. We can't help it, however. The unruly nature of deviance is so much fun.

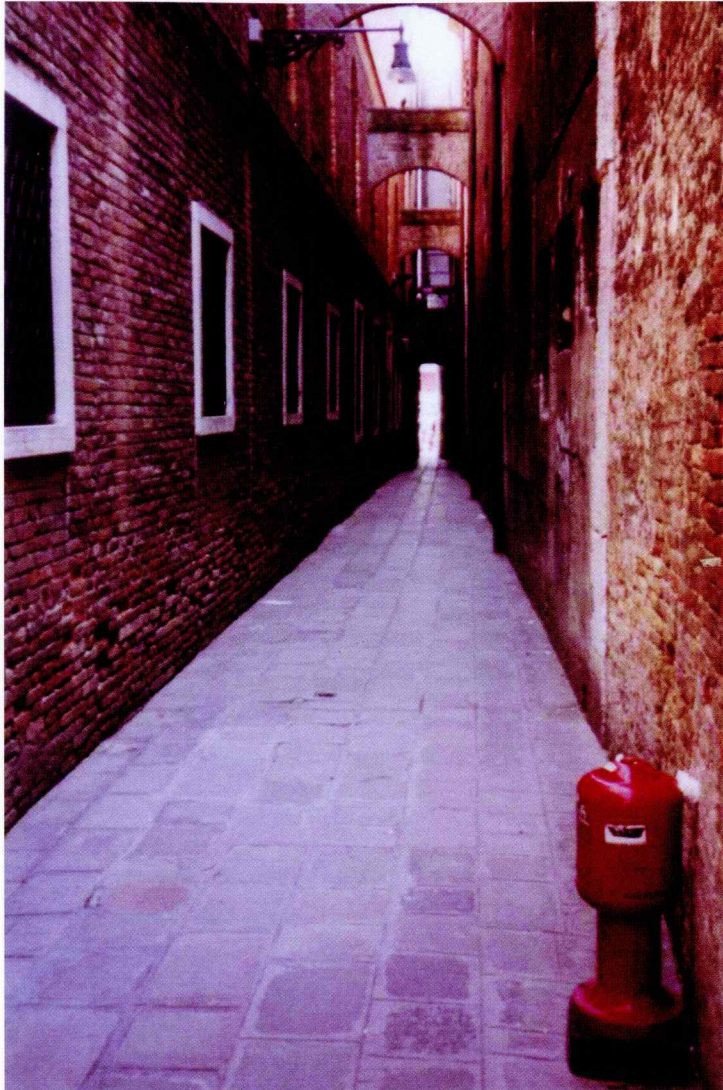
Upon leaving Ray's house, I had originally planned to just walk home. I couldn't stop thinking about things: the baby, Carrie, Althea, Ray and his logical concepts. What did everything mean and, more importantly, what would it all mean tomorrow?

As I was pondering all these things, I walked right passed the street that led to my house. I continued walking downhill, out of the neighborhood and towards the city. Going downhill on Run Street gave quite a view of downtown Credence. I had thought the neighborhood was sabotaged; however, when I saw the city, I could not believe my eyes. There were entire buildings on fire. Great trails of smoke ascended toward the heavens. The crazies were crazier in the city too. Thugs and addicts were robbing people at gunpoint. Some were even killing for sport. The Credence Police Department was far too outnumbered to do anything productive. What would it have mattered anyway?

I found myself at the bottom of the hill facing a house that I had been to far too many times. It was an old house; you could see the water damage from any angle. Thick willow trees surrounded it; their long leaves blew severely tranquil in the wry winds. There was no picket fence around this house either. Anyone was welcome; often times they never wanted to leave.



MONIKA TORRES



TRAVIS ELLIS



TRAVIS ELLIS



TAMMY COX

I walked up the pathway to the front porch and knocked on the rusty screen door. A beautiful, scantily dressed woman answered it. Her skin was the color of caramel, her hair black like midnight. Then there were her big, radiant blue-green eyes. They were gypsy eyes.

"Hello, Althea," I said to her.

"Hello, Will," she said to me.

She welcomed me inside. The house was old and filled with relics from another time. She had inherited it from her grandmother years ago, never changing any of the furniture. It was like stepping into a time capsule from the nineteen-eighties. I sat down on the dusty brown ragged couch and Althea poured me a neat bourbon from a glass vase she had sitting by the front door.

"How have you been?" she asked, standing over me, next to the couch. Her eyes stared passed me, toward and out of the window.

"Not any better than anyone else," I told her, sipping my bourbon. "Yourself?"

She smiled. "You know," she began, "when the world flounders around in its finale, everybody forgets their whore."

"Althea," I told her, "you'd be surprised. I've tried to forget you; it isn't easy."

"Thanks," she said dryly, her eyes still melting the glass panes of the window.

"You're not a bad woman," I told her. "It's almost ironic — you are the best woman, the only woman. You are an angel."

"How is that ironic? Because I'm a whore?" she asked, unattached.

"Well, yeah," I said honestly.

"I guess that is ironic, isn't it?" she said, laughing a little. I hadn't heard anybody laugh all day long. Of course she would have been the first. I smiled back at her.

★ ★ ★

"Tell me, Will," she said much later, wrapped up in her ivory sheets like a fleshy taco. "What do you regret the most?"

"I wouldn't know where to start," I told her. "Maybe not being a better husband. Maybe just being a husband. Maybe the baby... maybe you."

She stared at the ground and nodded her head, the left side of her mouth curved upward a little into a pseudo smile.

"How about you?" I asked. "What do you regret?"

She began to pace around the room, those gypsy eyes deep in thought. "Well," she began, "I guess I wish I would have stuck with cheerleading."

I laughed now.

"I couldn't see you with the pom-poms and what not," I told her, "but I guess, in your own way, what you do is kind of like cheerleading."

We both laughed. She sat down on the couch and laid her feet on my lap.

"You're so funny, Will," she said. "Why couldn't I have just found a man like you to take care of me? I could have had the little ranch house in the 'burbs, a little mini-van, hell, maybe even a little baby."

"Someone has to do what you do," I told her. "All the men in town would go crazy if you weren't around to take care of us."

She massaged my groin with the backside of her hand. "Why me?" she asked with the most vulnerable sincerity that I had ever heard in her tempting little voice.

"I don't know. Perhaps you are a martyr."

She smiled and smacked my cheek playfully a few times.

"I like that," she said. "A martyr..."

We sat there in silence for a few minutes. I suppose she still thought about her newly realized title of a martyr. I pondered the choices I felt I had to make in these desperate hours.

Was I a fool? I decided I might be, but I'd rather die a fool than a prisoner. I had no desire to be a martyr.

"Althea," I began, "maybe I could stay here with you today..."

She stood up from the couch and walked towards the door. She lifted the bourbon and drank it straight from the vase.

"I think you should leave," she said. "You are a husband — a father. You don't belong here. This place is for the wicked. Get out of here and save yourself."

"Althea," I yelled as I stood up in a furious confusion. "How could you say that?"

"I'm not martyr," she said relentlessly. "I'm a whore."

I finished my drink and walked from the bedroom toward the front door. She held it open for me. I stopped in front of her to try to change her mind. She looked out of the door in the direction that she wanted me to go. I turned to kiss her and she turned away as I walked out of the house. I stopped and turned around to pay her and say one last farewell.

"Althea," I said as she threw my own money at me and shut the screen door in my face. I was left standing alone on her front porch.

"You're my favorite whore," I whispered.

IV

Ever since I was a child, I remember going to Giglucci's Italian for practically every meal. When I was growing up in the city Theodore Giglucci lived next door to me. He would always bring food to my family. My father, being a mechanic, would always work on Mr. Giglucci's Cadillac for him. It was sort of a trade.

Mr. Giglucci was a very kind man. He had his temper, of course, but overall he was a fair and brilliant man. He could have done a lot more in his life than open a restaurant, but that was all he wanted and that was all he ever did. His wife died when I was a child and he never remarried. The neighborhood kids were all like his children and I'm not sure if he ever loved again. Perhaps he visited Althea or one of the other community women in town, but I doubt it.

I was already near the metropolitan area after leaving Althea's, so I decided that I would stop in at Giglucci's for lunch. I figured it might be a long shot, but it would be like Mr. Giglucci to show up for work even on a day like this one.

I entered the restaurant around four o'clock. Things had started to simmer down outside in the streets; I assume it was this way because people had begun to realize that looting was such a waste of time in the denouement of things.

As I had suspected, Mr. Giglucci was at the restaurant when I came in. He sat there at one of the booths by the window in the dark. I had never seen him smoke before, but the only things I saw near him were a pack of cigarettes, an ashtray, and a bottle of Jack Daniels.

"If it isn't little William Fisher," he said to me, still facing the window.

"How are you, Mr. Giglucci?" I asked.

"I've been better; I've been worse," he told me.

"I hear that," I said.

I came in from the doorway and looked around the restaurant. I had not been here in many years, yet it did not seem to have changed at all. The walls were dark green with artifact pictures from the old neighborhood hanging up all around the room. The booths were red vinyl, and the tablecloths were red and white checkered. He sat in front of the only light source in the room: a tall picture window. I took a seat across from him.

"I was hoping you might stop by," he said to me. "I haven't had anybody to cook for all day long."

"You know me," I said. "I can't go too many days without one of those Philly cheese steaks."

"Seems like I haven't seen you in here in ages," he said. "I thought maybe you had run off or gotten arrested again."

"No," I began, "those days are all over with. I'm married now."

"No kidding!" he said excitedly. "To who?"

"Her name is Carrie. She's from Georgia and she's pregnant."

"Oh goodness," Mr. Giglucci said. "You're quite the man now, aren't you?"

"I guess I am," I replied.

"You've got it all!" he exclaimed.

"I guess I do," I said.

We told a few jokes, and made a little more small talk. We walked into the kitchen where he turned on the grill. He went into the freezer to retrieve some steak, cheese, peppers, onions, and bread. Within a moment he was done. I had one of those sandwiches I hadn't eaten in so long. We went back into the front of the house to sit down and eat. The room was still dark.

"This is damn good," I told him with my mouth full.

"You want another one?" he asked.

"Nah," I told him. "I'd better be getting home eventually."

"So tell me," he began, "are you happy with this new life of yours?"

I sat there and thought about it for a moment. "I guess so," I said, finally. "I mean, I love Carrie, and everything, but it all just seems so simple, so plain."

"Fuck you, William," Mr. Giglucci said to me, after staring for a moment in disdain. I was thrown by his sudden outpouring of contempt.

"What's your problem?" I asked him defensively.

"I would have killed for what you have. I spent my whole life trying to raise a family, and it all turned to shit. Ever since Maurine died I haven't had anybody. You know how long that's been? Thirty fucking years."

"I'm sorry..." I began.

"Bullshit!" he exclaimed. "If you were really sorry you'd be home with your little wife, waiting on your little baby. But here you are, and how do you think your wife is?"

"She's asleep," I told him.

"Women are not fools," he told me. "They know. She must know."

"Listen," I started, "I'm sorry your wife is dead, but..."

"Don't start," he said. "You know how my wife died? It was about ten years after we were married that I felt that I had grown bored with it all — much like you. I went and toured the Far East and met a Thai woman named Lily. Lily was one hell of a woman. She sent me home to my wife sadder, more miserable, and even diseased. My wife died from that disease. It was my philandering that killed her."

I didn't know what to say. My hero was conceivably an animal after all.

"I never loved again after her. I never even knew how much I loved her until she was gone. I never sought pleasure from another again. It's been thirty years, and there was never a day when I didn't miss her."

"Oh, no," I managed to say.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Yes, and it is what you are doing right now. It's so easy to be damned, William. You must find the will to persevere. You must find God."

I finished my sandwich.

"I think it's time you left," Mr. Giglucci said. "Go home. You'll do the right thing. We have it in ourselves to execute both vice *and* virtue, not just one or the other. We wouldn't be human if we were only devout, or only evil. We're all a little bit of both. Life is somehow trying to regulate all that. We must conquer our urges and bear our crosses silently."

"You're right," I said as I stood up to leave. "You're a good man, Mr. Giglucci. I only wish that I could be half of the man that you are."

"I'm no saint," he said to me, "Nor am I a bastard. I'm just a man, son — just like you. And as Credence falls, William, honestly... I'm so scared I could shit myself."

V

I stood in front of my home for a long while before entering. I felt naked, somber, and sober. I missed my wife now, and it was as though I was watching myself watching the house. I could see that I was wrong, so wrong. I wondered if Carrie was still inside, yet I could not bring myself to go in and see.

I sat on the porch and watched the sun go down. Brilliant pinks and oranges turned into deadly violets and auburns. Fires had turned into smoke, and the smoke had turned into a hazy obstacle anywhere you turned. There wasn't any action in the streets anymore. The neighborhood looked like a ghost town; the dead tree limbs shook like rattled skeletons in the smoke.

I put my key into the lock and opened the front door. The house seemed so quiet, so normal — as though it was safe from the impending undoing outside. The windows were open, letting in the smell of smoke that blew through the delicate curtains like wind through a sail.

I put my keys down on the table and unbuttoned my shirt. The night had fallen yet the temperature continued to rise. I walked into the kitchen and made a glass of ice water. Suddenly I heard a cry come from the bedroom.

"Willie," I heard the little voice say, "Will..."

I entered the bedroom to find Carrie sitting alone, sweaty, and stark naked on the floor next to the bed. Her pregnant body glistened in the heat, and her eyes produced tears that collaborated with the beads of sweat that fell from her brow.

"Willie," she repeated in that condemning frailty, "Willie, where have you been all day?"

"I've been out, baby," I told her, placating her woes, "but I'm here now."

"Willie it's been awful," she said, "it's been hot, so fucking hot."

"Drink this," I said as I handed her the glass of ice water.

She drank half of the glass and threw the rest on her head and her body. She closed her eyes and reposed in the newfound comfort of the cold.

"Thanks," she said, her eyes still closed.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I took a seat over her on the neatly made bed.

"I'm not doing so well," she said. "I haven't been able to move that much all day. And the heat, Will, baby, the heat is so fucking unbearable."

"The heat is bad," I said. "I'll get you a cold rag."

I walked into the bathroom and removed a rag from one of the little painted baskets Carrie had made in her spare time. I turned on the faucet and dampened the rag to a cool, comfortable temperature.

"Here you go," I said to her as I handed her the rag.

"Thanks," she said again.

"So other than the heat you're all right?" I asked.

"It's not just the heat, Willie," she told me. "There's something wrong, something inside me. I'm afraid it's the baby."

"Oh God," I said, scared for her, the baby, and myself. I was even more frightened at the fact that there was nothing I could do. The phone lines were dead, and there was no service on my cell phone. I could run for help but it was nearly guaranteed that I could not find it, and I didn't want to leave her alone.

"Willie," she said from below, "please lie down next to me."

I lowered myself from the bed and sat down against the wall. I wrapped my arm around her torso and embraced her naked, sweaty body. It was a cold sweat.

"You feel so cold," I told her, rubbing her head as she began to cry on my shoulder.

"I'm burning up," she said to me. "I can't take it anymore."

"It's okay, baby," I told her as I caressed her head with the backside of my hand.

We sat there on the floor and embraced each other for what seemed like hours. The sun had gone down now, and with the electricity being dead, the only light was that of the red moon that shined over the layer of destruction. I wanted to go search for a lantern, but I could not bring myself to leave Carrie.

She was not doing well at all, and I could feel it. I didn't want to alarm her with worry, though. So I just sat there in silence and held her.

"Will," Carrie cried suddenly from the darkness.

"What is it, baby?" I whispered into her ear.

"Willie, it's coming," she whimpered. I could feel her feet beginning to kick.

"The baby is coming?" I asked in sheer fucking shock. "The baby is coming!"

I stood up suddenly and Carrie's head fell from my arm and hit the wall.

"Willie! It's coming!" she cried in helplessness.

I got her another cold rag from the bathroom.

"Just tell me what you need," I said to her. I turned to stroke her head but she grabbed my arm so tightly that I felt compelled to scream myself.

"Will! I can feel it!" she wailed. "Good God Almighty!"

★ ★ ★

Turns out it wasn't the baby. It was something far more miraculous than that — something I can hardly describe to you in words. Photographs would not have done it justice. This was no miracle that could be defined, much less confined into something so meager as a sentence or a painting. I could have seen it with my eyes closed.

Carrie sat there in agony on the floor. She began to convulse heavily in the darkness, so much that the floor began to rumble. Before long I realized that it was not Carrie who rumbled the floor, for while pregnant and a bit heavier than she had been previously, she herself could not have created such a thundering rumble.

And then could you believe that the darkness ceased? And what heavenly light there was, from every angle. There was not one certain source of this light; it did not come from one particular direction as we could only fathom. It was like watching a television with shitty reception. Everything in the room had become far too luminous and intense for simple sight.

Within a moment the light ceded and the darkness returned as though the entire experience had never happened. My ears were buzzing as they do after a rock concert or from under a departing airplane. For a moment I felt complete madness, my thoughts having been too overwhelmed for mere sense. And then it occurred to me: Credence had fallen.

And there was Carrie, on the floor in the darkness. She looked so peaceful and serene lying there. She did not move at all. It seemed that her panic had vanished completely. In the absence of light I caught the vague impression of a smile on her face. It was almost nothing at all, but I saw it. Everything was still now as though time had stopped. In the darkness, on that barren last Saturday night, I sat there next to the mortal remains of my wife.

...And I waited.

A Tradition of Nautical Nightmares

Clinging to the rail,
white knuckles wrapped
tight around hopes and prayers

The horizon dropping out of sight
My iron-sided salvation is
sliding like a jack-knifed rig

The crushing reappearance of towering waves
Morale dwindles in gasps between swells
while echoes of lost sailors call

Unforgiving wind and ice
hollow my expression into
a chiseled deadhead floating aboard

Riding giants unendingly leaves my
body battered and broken
Unable to carry on the fight

Sound of a fog horn alerts
others of my unfortunate standing
Sailing around the perilous Cape Horn

IAN YATES

Bearded Beauty

Up the folding steps
Into this rolling home.

Bright curtains adorned with lace,
Through them, colorful lights of a Ferris wheel.

A mountain of festive dresses lie on the floor,
Casting a smell of sweat and perfume.

In the corner sits a dresser,
Tiny coarse black hairs scattered about.

Above, a lighted mirror,
An old straight razor stabbed into shards of broken glass.

MARY ELKIN

Greyhound

Cradled maverick in my chair
 waiting for the red-eye.
 A patchwork veteran is on the street
 looking for a buck.
 There's a black-eyed mother of two asking
 for a cigarette. She is quick to receive.
 Thinking about last night
 hoping this one's better.
 Inebriated air sways through the crowd,
 running into everyone on its way. Leaving the smell of
 a bad part of town in everyone's nose.
 An intimidated youngster sits never being
 away from home, trying to make it as a man.
 The ticket counter beauty queen is taking shit
 from her boss. Every night wishing
 she'd have finished school.
 Now the bus has pulled in announcing
 its presence through the hiss of air brakes
 A heavy man doped up on caffeine and NoDoz
 loads the last remains of our previous lives.
 The sun better be coming up soon.

IAN YATES

Oak

Lumbering through the jungle
 on my pachyderm
 from way up here
 other animals look like ants

Limbs reach up and out
 the long gray trunks of elephants

Today I am on a safari

Tall branches jut out from its hull
 strong, weathered masts
 endure legendary storms
 on my pirate ship

Leaves are sails
 puffed up with wind

Today I am crossing the ocean

Moss hangs from the top
 the gray hair of an old man
 a knarred hand
 holds me in its palm

Wood creaking with each breeze
 secrets whispered in my ear
 telling me its stories

KAREN NOLEN

Sing Anymore?

Now,
I am at the table.
I have eaten my fill, becoming fat
like them.

Still, no challengers come.
No one tells me to
“Eat in the kitchen”

Yet,
They have not seen my beauty,
and I have forgotten.

Does anyone sing anymore?

My strength has
faded into
trivial pursuits,
sex and cell phones.

Where is my song for America?

I hear death
at the door.
None of the guests
will rise to
stand in its path.

Feeding on ignorance,
it spreads,
destroying me.

I have reached out,
tried to be heard,
helped.
But it never comes.
They laugh as they see
it spread, a
virus among us but
feeding on me.

Yes, the ever-present
chains have shifted.
Once binding my arms
then my movement
and into my mind...
Now that you see
one of the chains...

Will you sing America?

I have doubt,
sitting at the table.
Is the song worth singing?

If no one is listening,
Do I sing?
Can I be
loud enough,

can I be
clear,
can I be
precise, and strong?

The forgotten beauty!

Being fat,
I sing a different song...
"Lean Back,"
"Here's a pillow, bite that."
"Bend over to the front, and touch your toes."
"Move bitch, get out tha way."

Is this my song for America?

There is strength.
in me,
fleeting and strange.
Deep down in my soul,

in my eyes.
In the schools without tables.

I can hear them.

Outside,
away from
the kitchen and
the table.

Singing ... something.

CHRISTOPHER NISKE

The Forgotten Guitar

Elegant curves distraught
By expectations of uselessness,
Remaining strong yet melancholy,
Hollow hopes of hidden hands
Sliding over silken strings.

PHILIP NORDSTROM

Midnight Beach

The softest curls of salty seas are breaking
In vain attempts to conquer the dry shore.
Shadow clouds flitting cross the pale horizon,
Each tuft of sandy grass drenched ever more
In silver light, as heaven's goddess of the night
Pours a river of diamonds on her floor.
The balmy, briny breeze seduces my resolve;
My helpless hand is stayed outside my seaside door.
Compelled beyond desire, lured by sight,
My weary soul is cheered straight to its core.

PHILIP NORDSTROM

Little Man

WES BROWN

THE PROSPECT OF SPENDING THE SUMMER at my father's mining operation brings indescribable joy. I'm nine years old and this is the first time my dad has taken me on one of his many trips back and forth to Oregon. For the past couple of years my father has been gone for three, sometimes six, months at a time, getting everything running at the mine. We as a family have learned to adjust to my father's absence, but he is still missed.

After fourteen hours in my dad's truck, we get there. Our camp is nestled in the middle of a valley decorated by rust-colored oval shaped rocks containing black ore that somehow mean gold. No running water means no bathroom, so my father constructs an outhouse out of two by four's and a big blue tarp. The actual "commode" is a toilet seat settled on top of four rusty pieces of metal, salvaged from who knows where, with a bucket underneath to catch the you-know-what. Summer heat causes an aroma to emanate from the outhouse the likes of which I have never smelled before. Still it's far better than going into the woods to take care of business.

Over the next two months I meet the strangest people I have ever had the pleasure of coming in contact with. Upon questioning my father about the inhabitants of this town of Cave Junction, I am told that this was where all the old bikers and hippies and Vietnam Vets who never quite made it out of the jungle, came to settle down and grow pot. Marijuana, as I later come to learn, is the cash crop of that area. My father stands out completely among this crowd. He is a handsome, proud looking man, with a slick southern drawl that possesses the power to make you feel as if you were on a plantation in the

antebellum South. Unlike my stately father, who is arrayed in the best in cowboy hats and boots all tied together by pressed shirts and blue jeans, everyone else is dressed in overalls and flip-flops and is sort of bent and gray, missing various parts like teeth and fingers. At our home in Salt Lake no one would have given us a second glance, but here we are looked upon as aristocracy. He seems a great man and I am his little man.

A definite highlight of the summer is the amount that I am allowed to shoot guns. Back home in Salt Lake it's illegal to fire a gun in the area we live, but out here there are no such laws to prohibit one of my favorite types of recreation. My dad's current collection of armament includes a Mossberg 12 gauge that I really come to think of as mine. It is all black with a heat guard over the barrel that makes it look evil, like something out of a sci-fi movie. A friend of my dad's, who is ex-military, teaches me how to fire from virtually every spot on my body. The first time my father sees me going through my gun drills is magic, a look that seems to be a mixture of joy, pride, and completion rises on his face and I can tell he is pleased. I shoot from my inner thigh then my groin then my abdomen then my right shoulder and then over to the left side and down again. My father is so proud he even takes a picture of me standing out in front of our living quarters, which is an old WWII mess hall tent, posing in my army boots, camouflage pants, and holding the gun that I had, in my mind, come to master. Snakes are abundant in Southern Oregon so I am required to carry a .22 with me at all times. The .22 is cool and all, but it really can't compare to the Mossberg. Walking around the campsite with my father, guns strapped to our legs, he with a 44 magnum and I with a .22, he seems a great man and I am his little man.

★ ★ ★

I have now transformed from a gentle child into a rage of adolescence. My view of the world and of my father has changed due to an unfortunate mixture of pubescent hormones and various illegal intoxicants. At sixteen my anger has a broad range, but he is the center. Violence fills my thoughts and I can hardly contain the fury that lies within. Physical violence occurs between my father and me when for unpredictable reasons my simmering rage boils over from time to time.

One such occasion finds me tripping on acid and my dad quite inebriated on wine. I am having a nice “trip” with my then girlfriend. We walk into the living room and he notices I don’t have any shoes on. He actually starts to lay into me because I’m not wearing shoes! This is not to say my dad is unreasonable but more of a testament to the unpredictability that alcohol can create in an otherwise rational human being. My frame of mind while on LSD is very fragile and subject to severe and drastic change at the slightest negative stimuli, which in this case is a drunken, angry, 250 pound gorilla of a man. To be honest, his provocation of me is something that I have secretly hoped for for some time now and maybe even subtly worked towards. All I need is for him to lose his cool one good time and I’ll have an excuse to completely let go and kill the motherfucker. He jumps up from his chair and comes at me. His fists are clenched and there is a snarling sort of animal-esque look to his face that makes me question if violence is what I want after all. Since I really don’t know how to throw a punch, I lunge at him with all my weight. My “jump-punch” knocks him off balance and we fall over the love seat and onto the floor. My advantage doesn’t last long against this veteran of many a bar fight, and I am soon on my belly, arms pinned behind me. Mom breaks up the fight and my dad storms off to the garage.

His name, which was Hero ever since I could remember, has changed into Enemy seemingly overnight. Our house is a war zone except for one small piece of neutral territory, Blue Monday. Blue Monday, named after a radio show, is the time when we sit in the garage, just the two of us, listen to Blues on the radio, drink beer, and simply talk about nothing and everything. No matter what has transpired in the course of the previous week we always have Blue Monday to look forward to. For some reason the promise of time with my father, to just sit and hold his attention, still has value to me, even if I do not openly acknowledge it.

The first time we have Blue Monday begins with my father calling me to come from the house out to the garage. The thought crosses my mind, “What did I do now?” I just know he’s going to ream me out for something. When I arrive in the garage he smiles at me and says, “Sit down a minute, I want you to listen to something.” On the radio I hear guys like Smokey Wiener and the Hotlinks, Robert Johnson, SRV, and others. I love the blues and so I am

interested even if it means being in the same room with him. Sitting there in the old retired recliner rocking back and forth in the dusty garage that was cramped with various acquisitions from the past, my father says three little words that will stay with me forever: “Want a beer?” I can hardly believe it! This means something, but what? My desire to be acknowledged as a grown man has been present for some time, but was this it? My veins are rushing with excitement as I gladly take him up on his offer. Cold, foamy mouthfuls of acceptance are flowing down my throat when something strange happens — we become civil. We begin to talk and joke and laugh and smile, it’s wonderful! I tell him about the music I’ve been making and what’s been going on in my life and he tells me about what’s going on with him. We go over our favorite government conspiracies and talk about UFO’s and the end of the world. All the hatred I have felt for him melts away like the frosty residue on the side of my mug. When I finish my beer he pulls out another glass. He didn’t keep mugs in the freezer. This could only mean one thing and that was he planned this! He wanted to be with me! By the end of the night our cease-fire is a considerable success. He retires to his room and me to mine, but I know this is not a permanent situation. The sun will come up and along with it my rage, but for now he seems a great man and I am once more his little man.

★ ★ ★

For the past two years my wife and I have been making our way across the country with her job as a travel nurse. We stay in a city for three to six months at a time and then move on to take a new assignment. I am now twenty-five and much has changed in me since we left South Carolina. Insecurity has been replaced by confidence and I am surer of myself than ever. Not only have mental and emotional changes transpired, but at 100 pounds lighter I am physically different as well. Coming back home, while a calculated decision, is a scary one. There is this persistent, nagging feeling that the personal and spiritual growth of two years will somehow be taken from me at the South Carolina border. A recurring thought plagues my mind: Will I be able to be me, the man I’ve become in my father’s absence, in his presence, or will I revert to my old ways? I will find out soon enough.

Not long after my wife and I arrive at my parent’s house, I am motioned to come and join my father outside. I know the deal; we’re leaving behind the

womenfolk (who stay inside because of the heat) to talk, listen to music, and drink the requisite beer. Our conversation is wonderful and we have a great time except for when I go to leave. Failure fills my mind because I have drunk too much and relapsed into an old pattern of excess. Around him I smoke even though I don't really smoke. I drink even though I don't really drink. The image of Marlboros and alcohol equaling manliness still has a hold on me. Around my wife I am different, evolved, a man of wisdom beyond my years, but somehow around him I regress into the teenager who is only content in the garage on Blue Mondays. This becomes the pattern of our next few visits: into the house and out to the porch with Pop. He seems too great a man; I am just a little man.

A few weeks have passed since we have been to see the folks. This time I am focused on spending some time with my mom but I know what will eventually come. I'm at the dinner table laughing with my mom and sister, when my dad motions me from the kitchen to come outside. This was it! Would today be the day I resist, or simply become a child again? Something rises up inside of me and I blurt out, "I demand you stay inside with us!" I'm half joking because who really talks like that? "I'm only here for tonight and you can go outside to smoke tomorrow! Come in here and sit down!" This creates an awkward tension in the room and all attention is now on my father's next move. He pauses for a moment, smiles at me and slowly swaggers over to sit down in his chair at the head of the table. I passed the test! He came to me and I did not have to go to him. Truly, he seems a great man and I no little man.

Mike T. and the Buffalo Nickel

NICK JOHNSON

IN JUNE OF 1993, I was a Marine Sergeant in Somalia. I had been in many countries. I had seen battle before, and I had encountered death and destruction in such places as Panama in 1989 during Operation Just Cause, in Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm in 1990-1991, in Liberia in 1992 during the evacuation of the American Embassy, and Bosnia in 1992. I had been to forty-eight countries, and probably half were hostile towards American servicemen. However, nothing could have prepared me for the experiences that I would endure in this small east African nation. Acrid smoke and the rancid stench of rotting corpses were constantly in the air. The heat, the swarms of relentless flies, and the Somalis that wanted us dead made this an almost unbearable place to be.

One day I received a letter from my father. He did not write to me often, so I thought that he was delivering bad news. I took my letter to the bunker that I slept in and, sitting there alone, I read my mail. My father explained to me that he knew what I was going through. He was a veteran of the Korean War and had experienced many horrible things. He then told me that when he was in Korea his mother sent him a letter containing a buffalo nickel. She explained to him that it would bring him good luck and get him home safely. My father kept the coin with him at all times. He swore that the coin actually did bring him luck, keeping him alive when in all probability he should have been killed. In closing, my father said that it was time for me to have the nickel. He asked me to keep it close. I sat there staring at my present, and I remember thinking that I could use all the help that I could get in order to leave this place

in one piece. So, I took the nickel, drilled a hole in it, and put it on my dog tags chain.

The next day I went out on a combat patrol with about twenty other Marines. Not long after entering a hostile neighborhood, we were ambushed. There were bullets and explosions all around us. I was behind a small wall with my back against a building, returning fire. Suddenly a rocket-propelled grenade slammed into the building only feet above my head. It did not detonate, though. Then, as quickly as the firefight started, it ended. We received no casualties that day. I remember looking at the hole in the building from the grenade. An RPG is usually very dependable. It is a rugged, durable weapon that rarely has malfunctions. Was it by chance that the round did not detonate, or was it the luck of the buffalo nickel? I wasn't convinced.

A few days later, my platoon was engaged in another firefight. A round from an AK-47 assault rifle went straight through the bush cover that was on my head, coming so close that it sizzled the hair on my head. Was it luck? I still wasn't sure.

Though I had a few other close calls the six months I was in Somalia, the most vivid was the day that I got shot. I was a sniper. My partner and best friend, Corporal Mike T. Spencer, and I were to travel outside of our safe zone and find "targets of opportunity." We were in the second floor of a building. I was scanning the surrounding area with the scope of my .50 caliber rifle. Suddenly bullets came tearing through the walls. We were being shot at from down below and from the other buildings across the street. We returned fire but quickly realized that we were heavily outnumbered. I was carrying a secondary weapon. It was a small 9mm. submachine gun called a MP-5. In a matter of seconds I had fired sixty rounds from it. Mike had been hard at work also, firing nearly ninety rounds from his M-4 assault rifle. I was changing the magazine in my weapon when a bullet ripped into my right shoulder and exited my back. At the time I wasn't sure if I were shot. I thought it was some debris hitting me from grenade explosions. When I felt the warmth of the sticky blood, I knew that I was in trouble. Everything was in slow motion. Mike helped me up from the floor and told me that we needed to go. As we were leaving the room, I remember looking back. The walls were riddled with holes and sunlight was streaming in giving the structure the appearance

of Swiss cheese. We fought our way out of the ambush and made a radio call for help, and I was medically evacuated by helicopter to a hospital ship. When I was stabilized, I was flown to a U. S. Air Force base in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia. After surgery I spoke with the doctor. He told me that the bullet had barely missed an artery and had come very close to hitting my spine. The surgeon said, "You are very lucky to be alive." He was right.

After four months of convalescence, I returned to full duty. Mike T. and I continued to find ourselves in sticky situations in various places around the world. I kept the buffalo nickel close to me, though. I do believe that something other than my knowledge and experience kept me alive in tight spots where death was certain. This coin, this measly item that was worth only five pennies to anyone else, was priceless to me. Not only did my nickel bring me luck, but also it became a symbol of hope and of home.

I was never one to believe in superstitions. A black cat walking across my path, walking under a ladder, stepping on a crack, all of these stories and urban legends we heard while growing up, were silly to me. I believed that men forged their own destinies. There was no such animal as luck, good or bad. That is what I believed until the summer of 1993.

In the spring of 1996, I decided to leave active duty. On the day that I got out of the service, I went to my friend Mike Spencer's house. We sat outside on his porch and talked about our times together. I had known him for nine years. We had saved each other's lives on more than one occasion. Before I left, I handed him the nickel and asked him to keep it safe. He was fully aware of its origin and gratefully accepted it. I remember his voice cracking, becoming shaky, the tear that ran down his cheek, and I remember the smile on his face that spread from ear to ear.

Last week I received an email from Gunnery Sergeant Mike T. Spencer. In the letter was a picture of him in Iraq. He had written only one sentence. It was, "Guess what's in my pocket?"

My Early Education

MARIA RUSH

AS A CHILD GROWING UP in a Spanish-speaking home, it never occurred to me that there was anything different about my upbringing. I didn't realize that not everyone spoke Spanish or that most of the outside world functioned in English. My parents had very little formal education. My mother spoke only Spanish and my father, even though he was bilingual, had only a middle school education. His family and my mother's family had no relatives who were educated. They all had survival skills, but were doomed to menial labor for a living. My father, though, had been in the military and had seen places his relatives could only imagine. I could sense from the beginning that they expected more from me. They wanted me to do more and be more than they were. Menial labor was not for me.

My introduction to the outside English-speaking world occurred when I entered first grade. My hair was combed, my face washed, and I was strongly reminded to behave and not embarrass myself or my family. I felt my family's honor was on my shoulders. My mother admonished me that "those white people are different." How they were different, I didn't ask.

I walked into the first grade class and discovered to my horror that I didn't understand anything that was being said. The teacher, however, had a kindly smile and welcomed me warmly. The other children looked as frightened as I did. The teacher escorted me to a seat and put a name tag on me. The bell rang and school began.

We were led to the bathroom and the water faucet, and shown where to go during a fire drill. That first day we also had recess, ate lunch, colored, and

received our books. I was surprised that my classmates didn't know how to write their names either, but had to copy them from their name tags. Their advantage was they understood the language. Later in my life, I realized that my first grade teacher probably didn't have experience with non-English speaking students. Her common sense told her to show me what to do while telling me in English. If it hadn't been the sixties, I probably would have been put in an English as a Second Language class. But these classes were still at least 20 years into the future. Education at this point didn't make allowances for a different type of student. Everyone was expected to learn the same, taught by the same methods.

Academics weren't the only foreign ideas to me. The lunchroom menus were also strange. The food was different from what I was used to. At that time, Mexican restaurants were not popular; therefore, tortillas, tacos, and burritos were unheard of unless you were Spanish. On the reverse side, meat loaf, mashed potatoes, rolls, and fried chicken were quite different, though tasty to me. For a while, I refused to eat my mother's cooking, feeling it was below me, and insisted she learn American cooking. She, on the other hand, threatened me with starvation! Needless to say, my self-imposed fast didn't last long.

I also had to deal with recess. I found that the other little girls were excellent teachers. Even though they were familiar with the language, we were all on equal footing as new first graders. We were in awe of the older kids and kept to ourselves. The rope jumping rhymes, string games, and pretend games all contributed to my education. Most of us can remember the words to these games years later. I can remember them as teaching moments that furthered my vocabulary.

All the feelings I had at first about my strange new environment soon left me and I settled down to learn and succeed. I made friends with my classmates who never seemed to see anything different in my appearance, or my initial lack of understanding. They didn't even act shocked or put off when I spoke to my mother in Spanish when they visited my home. They also loved her cooking. On one occasion, my best friend ate half a dozen tortillas and several servings of *frijoles refritos* (refried beans), proclaiming the meal one of the most delicious she'd ever had, a fact that my mother repeated over and over again when, as a teenager, I refused to participate in anything Spanish.

In thinking about my elementary school years, certain aspects stand out: the two story red brick building surrounded by big leafy trees, the stone fence surrounding the building and schoolyard where children played. Certain smells evoke memories: the smell of freshly waxed wooden floors, chalk and crayons, hot buttery rolls, and the smell of the face powder which the teacher wore.

Some would think that having difficulties in school would make a person hate learning. To me as an adult, every learning success, no matter how small, is seen as a victory. My language difficulties were overcome. I became a voracious reader and I still am. I graduated with A's and B's and received a college scholarship. My love for learning has never ceased and my curiosity is limitless. My early difficulties have made my knowledge something to be cherished.



TRAVIS ELLIS



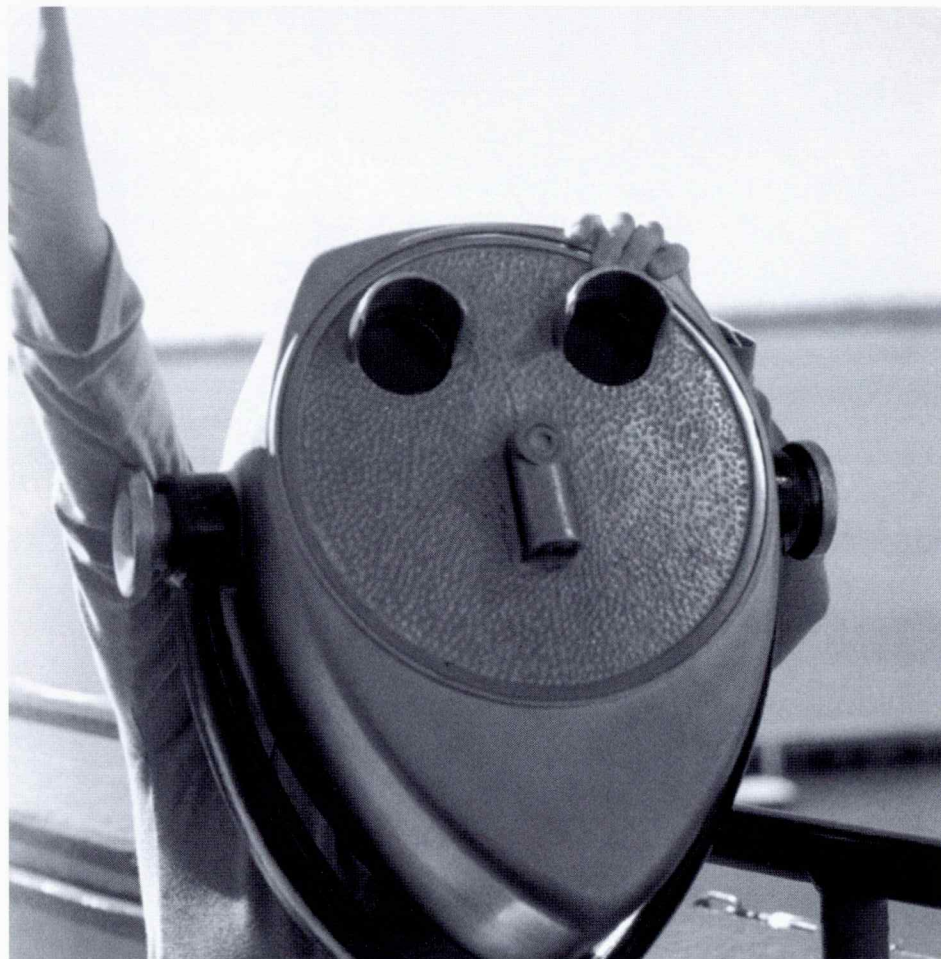
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