

STYLUS

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Stylus

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Stylus

2007–2008

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Front and back cover art by Rebekah Rice



Stylus awards
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Nonfiction: Justin Sunday

Fiction: Christina McCaw

Poetry: Leah LaCroix

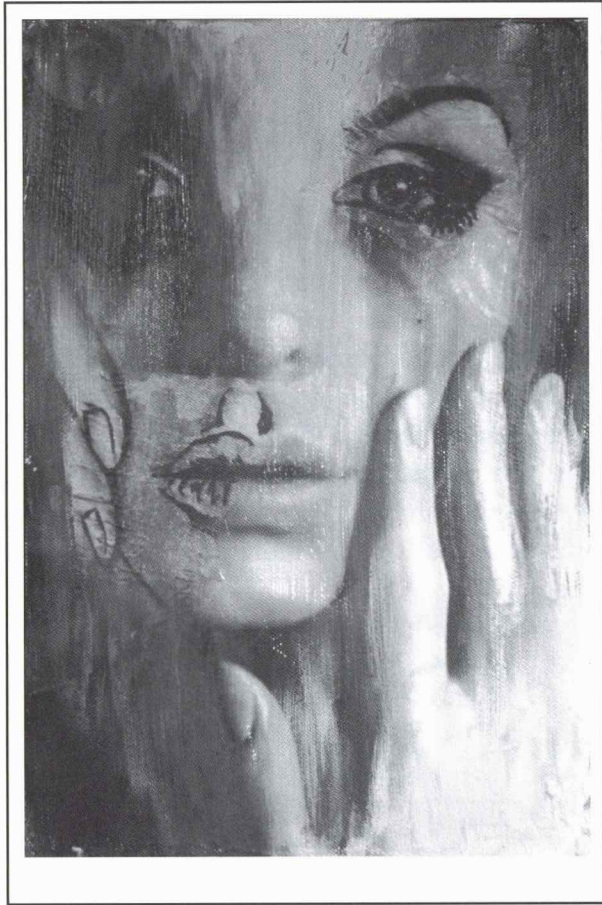
William C. Goodwin IV Memorial Art Award:
Rebekah Rice

Web Design: Andrew Clark, Tiffany Busby
Craig Livingston, Shannon Myers
Chris Judge

Reminiscing with a
Dead Raccoon

After the flood, I found a small, sun-bleached raccoon skull.
It was bare of flesh down to the hull.
With no eyeball there to blind the view,
I picked it up and peered right through.
And in its tiny crevices, the Alabama red clay
Gave forth a pinkish hue.
And I was reminded of time more grey
Than merely blue.

ANTHONY PICHOFF



REBEKAH RICE

Baldwin Hills Dam

Dark avocado leaves
through Venetian slats

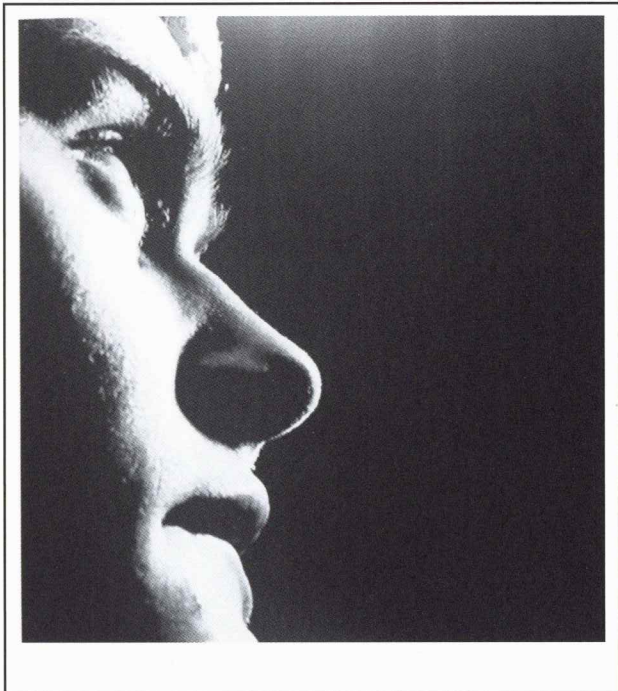
The dining room corner is
curved and windowed

Ceramic Señorita
on the moon's balcony

watches bronze slaves
carrying the sun in chains

Over three sudden feet
of rancid mud.

CERIDWEN KEELEY



REBEKAH RICE

Liquid Sky

LORENA HILDEBRANDT

THE SMELL OF PINE LINGERS INFINITE THIS SUMMER; children have the faint essence of chlorine and boredom. Naomi is waiting. Tedium sinks deep in her pit, and her muscles ache for excessive movement. If she didn't know her Aunt Lorie would punish her, she'd jump from the roof, just to feel the air rushing and her body giddy. Something must happen.



Naomi notices his hair first. It's a bowl cut and has a deep rust hue. He's sitting at the edge of the pool alone, his skinny shoulders taut as he leans back. She doesn't know him, and she knows all the children who haunt the public pool in summer heat. She approaches him from the side, sitting down on the scratchy concrete to dunk her already pickled feet in the water. She tilts her head to see him in the sun. "Hi."

The boy squints his eyes against the sunlight and looks back at her. "Hi."

The first words spoken, Naomi smiles and tells him her name. He somewhat reluctantly takes her outreaching hand and shakes.

"Where you from?" she asks brightly.

"I'm Paul Samson's nephew," he said, as if these words explained his whole existence.

“You mean the guy who owns the junk shop?”

“It’s not a junk shop, it’s a...” The boy trails, unable to finish. Silence.

“What’s your name? You never said.”

“Tobias.”

“I like your name, Tobias.” Naomi’s mouth turns up, mischievous as the Cheshire cat. But before Tobias even has the chance to smile back, Naomi grasps his bony shoulders and playfully pushes him into the pool.

He twists and flaps in the water, shoves off from the bottom, and surfaces with a loud smack. Shaking his hair like a wet dog, he glares at her. For a moment, Naomi looks abashed, but only for a half-second, and her grin returns. Tobias’ glare melts, and he laughs.

“Cannon-ball!” She yells, joining him.



The summer is halfway over. Tobias and Naomi both notice the unusual slowness of the clock’s hand in Naomi’s living room. Tick... Tock... Their eyes catch, with the same thought of escape.

A few sweltering minutes later, they run by the pond’s edge, attempting to catch a green and yellow tree frog that caught their eye. Naomi wears a pair of worn overalls with an image of Winnie the Pooh on the front pocket. The overalls straps are continuously slipping off her shoulders; sometimes she slaps them back up, but mostly she just lets them slide. Tobias doesn’t notice or care; he wears holey tee-shirts and jeans anyways. The frog hops up a tree and disappears somewhere in the glowing leaves.

Naomi collapses on the green beneath the tree, Tobias beside her. Tobias shakes his head, and she sighs dramatically. “Those things are *so* fast.”

He nods, but doesn’t reply. Suddenly, he stands, testing his hands on the tree bark. Wrapping his legs around the trunk, he scoots up agile as the frog.

“Wait for me!” she calls, the story of her life. When she says this, “me” sounds like two syllables instead of one: “Me-ee.”

Tobias pokes his head down through the leaves with a dry grin. She narrows her eyes and climbs with ferocity. Grasping her arm, he pulls her up to

sit beside them. It is cooler in the tree canopy, and a slight breeze brushes Naomi’s temple.

She glances at Tobias, who is gazing towards the sky. “Don’t you wish you could fly?” he says softly.

“Yeah. I would fly back to my mom.” Naomi doesn’t know why she says that. Her mom died when Naomi’s hair was still white-gold, and the only thing she remembered of her mother was the soft body that embraced her and of feeling wholly safe.

Tobias knows this; she told him when they were hiding together under an old tarp, playing hide and seek with the Collins boys. It was dark and musty in the tarp, and Naomi was terrified of spiders. But Tobias told her not to worry and soothed her. Now, Tobias doesn’t mention it, and nods in understanding.

“Look!” Naomi says, nudging Tobias. She tries to speak softly, but succeeds about as much as usual. (Her Aunt Lorie always says Naomi has the softness of a bullfrog calling his mate in the evening.) Her body nearly shaking in excitement, Naomi points to a small frog resting on a branch by their heads. Its little green body heaves, and its black googley eyes stare at them in surprise, as if to say: *Hey, I know you.*



Naomi lounges in her aunt’s parlor, her eyes drooping with boredom. Their house is on a relatively quiet street. Old houses with Victorian decorative moldings and large porches dress the neighborhood like a town of doll houses. Unfortunately for Naomi, there aren’t many children on her block, and so she’s lying on the couch with her legs propped up, watching the clock and seeing how long she can hold her breath. It makes her woozy and she giggles for no reason. When she looks at the rose patterned carpet, the flowers move, dancing.

This is how Aunt Lorie finds Naomi. Aunt Lorie does not like bored children; she knows what bored children are capable of, and so she gives Naomi a two-dollar bill in exasperation. “Here you go. It’s time for some ice cream.”

Downtown isn't but a block from their house, and sometimes Aunt Lorie lets Naomi walk to the café on the corner to get a cone. Naomi ties her shoes extra tight and runs out of the house with a whoop. She hopes she sees Tobias in town. She knows his uncle runs a junk shop in town—though she's never met the man, only heard his name.

The day is muggy and a gray overcast teases Naomi with the possibility of cool water. She ignores the tease and tries not to step on the cracks in the sidewalk. It's rather difficult, as the sidewalk is full of cracks. It's as pocked as the moon; veins and crevices scar its surface. Naomi kicks a pebble and crosses the street, hopping onto the curb of the café.

Looking up at the swinging red and blue ice cream sign, she thinks of Tobias. He would like ice cream, she's sure. They could split the money, or split the ice cream. Her steps lighten at the thought, and she passes the café, walking with a purposeful air to the junk shop three stores down. She doesn't remember having been in there before, only passing by. The store before it is abandoned and derelict, and if one walks in a certain spot, a horrid stench emanates. The junk shop looks dark from the window and a sign reads *GUNS! GUNS! GUNS!* Naomi feels a little queasy when she pushes her hair from her eyes to read the sign. In the window it says *Open*; Naomi takes a quick breath of determination and pushes the door.

Its official title might be "Trading and Thrift Store," but Naomi knows junk when she sees it. Random scraps of metal, instruments, and weapons crowd the walls in confusion. A case of old guns hangs above the counter. Naomi's heart gives nervous flutters as she looks about the room.

"Hello?" she says, quietly for once. Even softer, "Tobias?"

A banging noise emits from the back and she turns to its source. A late-middle-aged man in a dark blue jumpsuit towers over Naomi. He has a gray beard and scary eyes. Usually, Naomi isn't scared by old men; they remind her of Mr. Henry, two doors down from her house, who always gives her peppermints and a smile when she's out walking with her aunt. But this man is different; he doesn't smile a bit, not even a hint of one. He just stares at her, and Naomi gets the strange notion that he's like a rat snake about to bite. Her belly sickens.

Naomi backs towards the door. "Hi. I'm looking for Tobias. He's living

with you over the summer, right?" She barely squeaks the words out, and the jumpsuit man only grunts in agreement. "Well, could I talk to him?" she asks.

The jumpsuit man motions her to the back. "He's upstairs," he says in a hoarse voice. "I can show you to him, come on." He reaches out to touch her cheek. Naomi shudders her head away from it, and the man's eyes become thin in frustration.

"Toby wants to see you," he murmurs, his voice low.

Naomi freezes. "It's okay. I'll talk to him later," she speaks hastily. She turns and walks as quickly as she can without running out. She lets the door slam shut behind her, hands shivering.

Outside, rain empties in torrents. She'd been so distracted inside she hadn't noticed that it was raining. From each building's gutter, dirty waterfalls erupt. Naomi lets her legs loose. She runs towards the café, but looks back in a feeling of unease. The jumpsuit man stands in his doorway, staring at her. "Hey, girl!" he yells, gruff. This time, she doesn't hesitate, and she flings herself towards the café.

She will be safe there, with chocolate ice cream, and smiling grownups who love to give children sweets, not unsettling stares.



When she was seven years old, Naomi swallowed a penny. She did this halfway accidentally and halfway because she was bored and sucked on the penny because it tasted funny. Her Aunt Lorie just about had a seizure; her head started shaking and her mouth opened so wide she looked like a shocked cartoon. "What?" she screamed. "You swallowed what?"

Aunt Lorie called up the preacher from the big Pentecostal Holiness church they went to on the corner. The only thing Naomi liked about church was the loud singing. For once, she could be as loud as she wanted. She also liked it when the preacher said: "JEE-SUS!" The way he said it made Naomi giggle, but Aunt Lorie pinched her arm when she giggled. So she mostly tried not to. Anyway, the best thing about Sundays was when they were over.

Naturally, Naomi wasn't happy when Aunt Lorie called the preacher to come give her a blessing. Not only was she certain the preacher could not get a penny out of her belly, the preacher was fat and bald and made Naomi bored, very bored. Sometimes she got so bored she could feel tears in her eyes.

Aunt Lorie made Naomi lie on the daybed and drink lots of water while they waited for the preacher. Aunt Lorie reminded Naomi of a mother rabbit the way she jittered about. And when the preacher's voice boomed at their entrance, Aunt Lorie rushed to the door like it was the Lord Almighty himself. She trailed him as he strode to Naomi's side. "Why, hello little girl," he said. "I hear you've swallowed something bad."

"Yes," Naomi said, and wished it all would be over soon.

The preacher placed his hands on her head. "Lord God. We ask you to bless your little child..." He paused and Aunt Lorie whispered: "It's Naomi."

"Oh, yes," the preacher said. "Please bless your child Naomi and let the toxin in her body be vanquished. Amen."

"Amen," Aunt Lorie said too loudly, nudging Naomi.

"Amen," Naomi said.

The preacher scratched the back of his bald head. Naomi could see his upper arm jiggle from blubber. It reminded her of their next-door neighbor's dog. Scottie was so fat that when he moved his whole body shook.

"That penny's gone now," the preacher said, smiling down to her. "The good Lord gave his gift and took it away."

And that was that. The preacher left with one of Aunt Lorie's lemon cookies and Aunt Lorie shushed Naomi out to play.

That was the first time Naomi realized that grown-ups make up things to feel better. Because Naomi knew for sure that penny had stayed in her body until a few days later. If it makes them feel better, grown-ups will ignore unpleasant things, like pieces of copper in children and the neighbors who are always screaming at their kids.

Naomi hates this. She doesn't ignore anything, especially the bad things. She thinks of the penny while she sits on the red stool of the ice-cream shop, sucking on her cone. The strawberry ice cream makes her sick; it's

never tasted so sweet. Her brain freezes from the cold. She squints her eyes in pain.

Naomi slides off her stool and goes outside into the heat. The door's bell jingles behind her. The rain has stopped. Puddles deep as her knee surround the sidewalk. The old downtown's drainage system is shot, and the water piles like a flood. Naomi tries to jump across the puddles but her legs can't reach far enough. She slops home, water swishing in her shoes. Her white socks with pink flowers are squishy. Even though she is humid and miserable, Naomi walks home slowly. But when she passes the junk shop, she runs as fast as she can.



Naomi sits at the green checked kitchen table with her head in her hands. Her brown-gray hair is sweaty and hangs limp. Aunt Lorie's yellow dress by her side goes unnoticed; and she starts when Aunt speaks.

"Did you have a good time at the ice cream shop?" Aunt Lorie asks cheerfully.

Naomi doesn't look up; the green checks seem to wobble. "I don't feel good," she says. "I was going to get Toby, but when I went to his uncle's junk shop I couldn't find him. Only his uncle."

Aunt Lorie takes a breath. "What? You went to the junk shop on main? Isn't that the Samson place?"

Naomi nods. "Yes," she says. "Tobias's uncle isn't very nice."

Aunt Lorie pulls a kitchen chair out with a screech and takes Naomi's hands. Naomi notices little creases in her aunt's forehead. "Naomi, what did the Samson man say to you? It's very important."

"He wanted me to go upstairs with him."

Aunt Lorie stands quickly and her chair falls over. "You didn't though, please say you didn't," she yells.

Naomi flinches. Aunt Lorie doesn't usually yell. She is a soft woman, and Naomi always thought of her as a grandmother. "No. I told him I'd find Tobias later and I went to get ice cream," she says.

Naomi has only seen her aunt cry once. That was when Naomi asked

about her mother. But Aunt Lorie's face crinkles and Naomi can see her eyes reddening.

"Don't go back to that place again. Ever. Do you understand? If you want to see your friend he will have to come here," she says.

"Okay." Naomi wants to cry but she doesn't. Her cheeks and eyes ache. She feels very bad. Aunt Lorie gives her hug. "Well, that's settled then," she says, and doesn't let go for a long time.



Naomi wakes up thirsty. Her throat is scratchy and her head hurts. She kicks her sheets off and rolls over. Slipping from her bed, she stumbles into the hallway. The living room clock ticks nine, almost to the curly twelve. It is way past her bedtime, as auntie likes to say. She creeps to the kitchen but stops midway. She can hear Aunt Lorie's voice coming from the yellow light in the kitchen. Naomi leans against the wall and listens.

"You know what he is, Mae. I knew what he was. I just never thought I'd get tangled up in that family's mess." Mae is Aunt Lorie's friend. She has curly hair and big boobs. That's what Naomi thinks. Naomi likes her because Mae gives her a whole quarter whenever they come over. Quarters add up.

There is silence, and Naomi knows Aunt Lorie is speaking on the telephone because it takes her a while to talk again.

"I just don't know what kind of people would leave their child with a molester."

Pause. "I know they're kin, Mae. That makes it even worse. Honestly, someone should do something about those people," she says.

"Yes, I suppose you're right. There's no one way to know for sure. But I certainly have heard rumors."

Naomi's leg is tired from staying one place. She shuffles her feet and the floorboard creaks. The sound startles her and she's scared Aunt Lorie heard her. She'd be in so much trouble, she just knows it. Running back to her room, she closes the door behind her and falls into bed gasping.

Lying in bed, she thinks of what Aunt Lorie said. She doesn't know

what most of it means. Naomi hates words she doesn't understand, because she usually forgets to ask about them. She's sleepy. So much for the cold milk, she regrets, and drifts.



She finds Tobias at the public pool the next day. The pool is warm in the sun, so they sit in the shade by the pool building sipping lemonade Naomi's aunt sent with her. Tobias is quiet; Naomi feels awkward speaking.

"Where were you yesterday? I came to your uncle's shop and called for you. Didn't you hear me?" She speaks in a hurt tone.

"Oh, I wasn't there," he says. "I was at my Grandpa's house for the day."

Naomi stares at him, her eyes wide. "But your uncle said you were upstairs. He wanted me to come with him, but I had to leave."

Tracing circles in dirt, Tobias does not look up. "He probably just wanted you to see his collection."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing. Forget it." Tobias's face splotches, and he stands.

Naomi follows him to the pool. "Your uncle's kind of scary, don't you think?"

"No." Tobias jumps into the shallow end of the pool.

"But he kept staring at me without saying anything or smiling."

"He does that to kids sometimes."

Naomi bites her lip and stays at the pool edge. She feels like crying. "Why do you have to stay at his stinking shop anyway?"

Tobias doesn't look her in the eyes; his hands grasp the edge of the pool so tightly Naomi can see purple veins. "My mom and dad couldn't keep me over the summer."

"Oh," she says slowly. "Is your uncle mean to you, Tobias?" She asks, her eyes downward.

Tobias looks around to see if any other kids are close enough to hear; satisfied, he pulls himself up to sit beside her. "He was really nice at first, nicer than my own dad. He even took me fishing once."

Naomi waits for him to continue, but he doesn't. So she asks instead:
"What did he do to you?"

"Nothing." Tobias pulls his wet hair from his eyes and stares in front of him. Naomi feels anger begin to well in her throat.

"Why don't you ever care about anything?" She picks at a string that unravels from her yellow swimsuit. "Can't you feel anything?" She says this more as a statement than question, and her voice is harsh and loud. But he doesn't flinch or show any hint of emotion. This is what bothers Naomi most, and she lashes out in her anger. Quicker than running water, she hits his side and pushes him into the pool. He cries out.

Naomi stands from her seat and turns away, tears blurring at her eyes. She runs out the pool gate, leaving dark puddles on the hot cement below her. When she looks back to the pool, she sees Tobias floating face down in the water. She hopes she did not hurt him, but she does not return to the pool. Slipping into her rubber sandals, she cycles home.



This water is a mirror, a world that reflects his, but without ugliness or pain, only shimmering light and everywhere of blue. Tobias wants to be still forever, staring up through the liquid sky. But the happy cries of other children reverberate in the water, distancing the dream; he breaks the surface, gasping.

It'd Make a Puppy Pull a Freight Train

CHISTINA MCCAWE

Part I – The Wake

That boy was high as a Georgia pine and grinnin' like a jack-ass eatin' briars – Uncle Roy to Uncle Beau at Grandpa's wake about Aunt Tildy's oldest son, Kurt

FAMILY. A WORD THAT ENGENDERS PRIDE IN SOME and strikes fear and dread in others. And when it comes to cringe producing, no one does family quite so well or so interestingly as Southerners. We have such a way with words in the South that we can make shooting our wounded sound like a mercy killing and insulting someone's momma sound like a prayer. In my middle Georgia family, this has been raised to an art form, and no one is better at it than my aunts, Tildy and Bertie.

My grandma and grandpa must have had a grand time naming their children, and that is where I think the trouble may have started. My grandparents had five children in seven years, and in birth order they are Uncle Beau (short for Beauregard), Aunt Bertie (short for Bertha), my dad Auggie (short for Augustus), Aunt Tildy (short for Matilda), and Uncle Roy. I think the only reason Roy got stuck with his very ordinary name, instead of

something like Frankincense or Rudolph, is that they were just plain tired and out of ideas. Being close in age, bickering was bound to ensue, but Bertie and Tildy developed an unequalled rivalry at an early age that continues today. When Tildy got married and had her first child, Bertie got married and had twins. When Bertie went back to school to get a certificate to do medical transcription, Tildy decided to get a Bachelor's degree in nursing. On and on it went, until one day it all came to a head, and the under-the-radar rivalry became an out and out feud. Some say it was an argument over something their children had done, while others have said Aunt Bertie hired a mafia hit man to have Aunt Tildy "knocked up." (This last came from Great Aunt Myrtle, who turned three shades of magenta when someone explained to her what "knocked up" really meant.) But whatever the reason, the chasm between the two of them widened and became a gulf of silence that neither crossed for a solid decade until Grandpa died.

Now Grandma had died some years before the sisters stopped speaking. She had a massive allergic reaction to shellfish at the last family reunion before the feud started. (Great Uncle Hugh hasn't made his famous crawfish boil since that tragic day!) That left poor Grandpa to referee the feud between his daughters, but he was no better at getting through to them than were any of the rest of us. So it was dramatic irony to say the least that it was Grandpa's funeral that brought them together again—well, together in the same room at least.

There they were at the funeral home, Grandpa laid out in his Sunday best in a shiny mahogany box in the center of the big meeting room, Aunt Tildy in one corner and Aunt Bertie in the other, looking like two boxers facing each other across the ring!

Bertie pursed her lips and said sourly, "Hmmm...look at Tildy wearing beige to a funeral! Bless her heart, that woman has no shame!"

She herself was dressed in severest black, a sharp jacket and skirt ensemble complete with a pillbox hat with a delicate short black veil, matching clutch purse, and black patent leather shoes. She heard Tildy laugh at something someone said, and her hands tightened so convulsively, I thought she might break the pretty little chain on her purse!

Not knowing what to say to Bertie's comment on funeral fashion (or

lack thereof), Uncle Beau chimed in, "Is that Daddy's good tie tack they put on him? You know he only really liked to wear his Masonic lodge one. He'd be right pissed if they laid him out in that tie tack Roy's boy gave him for Father's Day three years ago that looks like a pig on a spit!"

Bertie continued fuming as if he hadn't spoken, "And look at her holding court by Daddy's coffin like the belle of the ball! If it wouldn't be an insult to my Daddy's memory I'd leave right now! Have you been over to talk to your Aunt Tildy yet, Kate?"

I knew if I stayed in once place too long I'd get sucked in. You'd think after 27 years of living in this family, I'd see an ambush coming better than this, but she had pounced so quickly I was snared before I knew it!

I quickly stammered, "Not yet Aunt Bertie, but I intend to get around there soon."

"Well, don't tell her I said so, but if you happen to speak to her you might want to tell her that her slip is showing, too. No shame at all!" Bertie just shook her head as she muttered that last part as if it was something obscene that you shouldn't say out loud.

"Yes, ma'am," was all I could say as I retreated to see how the other camp was faring. My dad and older brother, Rob, had joined the fray on the other side of the room, so I figured it might be safe to slide in next to them and test the waters.

I came up just in time to hear the tail end of a story Tildy was telling, "Then there was the time Ma and Daddy had to carry Bertie to the doctor cause she got poison oak on her behind after Beau and Auggie told her if she rubbed those leaves on her butt all her freckles would go away! Remember? We laughed about that for ages!" Oh boy, I thought, *not* embarrassing childhood stories! Bertie was going to blow a gasket if she heard this.

Daddy caught me by the arm and warned, "Don't get too close honey—she's just warming up!" I took Daddy's warning and went on my way to see a man about a horse.

Part II – After the Funeral

“Well, that was so good, it’d make a puppy pull a freight train,” – Great Uncle Hugh’s comment to no one in particular after consuming half the banana pudding the church people brought to Grandpa’s house.

My cousins, parents, and other aunts and uncles spent the day like that, trying to be diplomatic without rocking the boat. It was the longest wake I had ever been to, or at least it felt like it. Uncle Beau summed it up when he said it had been a “rode-hard-and-put-up-wet kinda day.” It was finally time to go, but not home. Now we had to head over to Grandpa’s house where the neighbors and members of Grandpa’s church, Second Baptist Church of the Devine Savior of Monticello, Georgia, had brought in more food than a small army could eat—baked ham, biscuits, macaroni and cheese, potato salad, crock pots full of beans, chicken and dumplings, buckets of fried chicken, rice and gravy, deviled eggs, banana pudding, and cakes and pies of every variety. No one goes hungry when there is a death in the family, that’s for sure! So we all ate until we were full as ticks, and Tildy and Bertie set up camp on the back porch and in the front living room, respectively. This arrangement seemed to work well enough—as long as they kept their distance from each other, the fragile cease-fire was observed. Then, blessedly, the day was over and we each went home and steeled ourselves for the funeral the next day.

The funeral, thankfully, went over without a hitch. Everything went as planned except when Grandpa’s sister, Great Aunt Eunice, decided her already loud and copious weeping wasn’t enough drama and decided a good faint would do the trick. The music was uplifting, the words were inspirational, and the chapel and graveside were standing room only—which everyone knows is the single most important determiner of success for any respectable funeral. Grandpa was a veteran of the Great War, so some men came in uniform and did an impressive twenty-one gun salute, and Uncle Beau was presented with a folded American flag. There wasn’t a dry eye in the cemetery! Aunt Tildy and Aunt Bertie were only separated by four

people on the front row, but neither said a word to the other until after the ceremony.

As the family started to file back to the family cars, the strangest thing happened. Tildy and Bertie had ended up walking back to the cars side-by-side. They weren’t looking at each other or speaking, but there they were, close enough to take each other’s hand. Finally, a breakthrough! Well, almost. It happened kind of quick, but since I was only a few paces behind I saw the whole thing. One minute they were side-by-side, next Bertie’s high heel caught on a weed and she was sprawled on the ground next to the grave marker for Ronald FitzHugh, born 1883 died 1956! Tildy was just standing there with her hand over her mouth in shock. People started running, voices were shouting, and then she did it. Tildy started laughing. Now, Bertie can be a person with an excellent sense of humor upon occasion, but this moment wasn’t one of them. So instead of having a laugh at her own expense, she kicked out and swept Tildy’s feet from under her, landing her on her rump next to the headstone of the second Mrs. Ronald FitzHugh, born 1931 died 2002! Then Bertie laughed.

Part III – When the Dust Settled

“That boy is so buck toothed he could eat corn-on-the-cob through a keyhole.” – Aunt Tildy to my Dad, Auggie, about Roy’s teenage grandson Lewis, after she heard what Roy said about her Kurt at Grandpa’s funeral.

It’s true what they say, “A good attitude is like kudzu—it spreads.” After the funeral, after they both ended up on their rear ends in the grass, things got a little... “easier” is the only word that comes to mind. Tildy seemed to take getting knocked on her arse in stride and Bertie seemed not to hold it against her that Tildy laughed herself silly when Bertie found herself lying in the grass with a broken heel on her brand new pump and a run in her hose. We were all so proud of them for making progress that we decided to test this new found peace and have a family reunion.

So six months after Grandpa’s funeral came the first official family reunion to be held in over fifteen years. It was bound to be a very different

experience without Grandpa and with both Bertie and Tildy in attendance. But somehow it seemed a fitting tribute to Ma and Grandpa and a good opportunity for Tildy and Bertie to expand their new found tolerance for one another. So we packed the picnic baskets and met at the ball field behind the local elementary school on Sunday afternoon for a day of outdoor fun and family togetherness. I decided this might be a good time for me to introduce my boyfriend, James, to the family—and it was. Nothing like bringing a new man to a family function to shift the tide of gossip!

Aunt Bertie and Aunt Tildy were each behind the food tables when I came through the line. Tildy was serving drinks while Bertie was slicing and serving pie. I had left James in relative safety under the dugout with Daddy and Rob awaiting his turn at bat, so the aunts took this opportunity to do a little digging. “Who’s that good looking young man with you today, Kate?” asked Aunt Bertie pointedly while tilting her head in the direction of the ball game.

“Yes, Kate, he seems very nice! What does he do again?” chimed Aunt Tildy in a sweet voice.

They were like a couple of seasoned tag team wrestlers, and by the time I had my apple pie and lemonade, they had all they wanted to know about James and pronounced him “a keeper.”

It came to me, as I watched the two of them working behind the table side by side, how strange family works sometimes—feuding and forgiving, but never forgetting a thing. It’ll make you crazier than a run over dog if you let it.







REBEKAH RICE

The Blotter

LISA AUDETTE

THE DESK WAS HUGE. Well, maybe huge isn't exactly the right word to describe its size, but the antique mahogany creation was certainly impressive as it stood almost as a sentinel in the center of my father's large office. The oversized, solid brass drawer pulls—lions heads with oval rings clutched securely in their powerful jaws—only added to the ominous nature of this massive piece of furniture.

On its heavily grained burgundy leather top were scattered about little tissue paper packets that held, safely tucked within their neat folds, diamonds and other precious gems. Of course, there was also all the other stuff that master jewelers keep on their desks; a diamond loop, a gold scale, and gem holders. A stunning Tiffany lamp with its multi-colored, stained-glass shade cast eerie images on the ceiling. However, despite what this room contained, I was neither impressed nor inspired by these "trappings" of wealth and success. For a youngster in grade school, they were just everyday things in my world.

Funny, now that I think about it, that statement may not be entirely correct. I have forgotten to mention the one thing that created a sense of awe and respect. The pure white plain paper desk pad or "blotter," as it was called by my father's generation, which simply rested atop the desk in cold contrast to the warmth of the rich mahogany.

I distinctly remember being fascinated by this blotter because it was

covered with hieroglyphics that only my father could decipher. Scrawled upon the smooth surface in pencil, in an almost illegible style (which I was certain was “secret code”), were numbers, simple drawings of jewelry, and the oddest thing of all, dozens of words that had no apparent connection to one another. The words were almost always misspelled, often attempted two or three times, the letters *printed* in different combinations with the correctly spelled word underlined.

Thinking back to that time, I now recall that the blotter had always been there, a part of the desk. While growing up I had often played for hours at the side of my father as he sat at the desk and worked. Every once in a while, I would sneak a peek at the blotter and try to make sense of it, but always in vain. It remained a mystery to me until I began to learn how to read and write fairly well, around the age of eleven or twelve. Then some of its secrets were revealed, and my education really began. Now, over three decades later, I can distinctly recall the day that I learned not to “judge a book by its cover” and finally understood the value of a good education. It is said that we should not criticize others until we’ve walked the proverbial mile in their shoes, and my long trek in those of my father began on a rainy Saturday afternoon in the spring of 1973.

Usually on Saturdays, while my parents worked, my younger sister and I would eat popcorn washed down by sodas at a matinee at the local theater. But on that particular day, she had the flu so my mother kept her at home and sent me to the store to help my father. I was still too young to wait on customers, but I could vacuum floors and dust shelves. So, with my father at the barber shop, I decided to “earn my allowance,” and began to clean his office. With him away, I would have plenty of time to gaze at the blotter that had become one of my favorite past times whenever I was “stuck” at the store.

So with dust rag in hand, I carefully cleaned the antiques nestled in the mahogany bookshelves, ran the cloth over the buttery soft burgundy leather chairs, and dusted the antique globe that stood in a corner of the office. I turned my attention to the desk, wiping the dust cloth over its mirror-like surface, making sure not to leave a smudge or fingerprint, and rubbing so hard that I remember thinking that I might take the finish off the wood

in my zeal. It was at that moment while feeling very “mature” and “full of myself” that I made a decision that was to teach me a lesson.

Ever since I could recall, my father had always forbade my sister and me from ever touching, writing on, or tearing the paper off of the blotter. When asked why, he would always respond by saying that there might be tiny diamonds on it and if we bothered the blotter we might accidentally knock them onto the floor.

Being a child, that reasoning made sense and up to that point in time, I had always adhered to that rule. To me, the blotter held too many secrets and was so mysterious that I had never dreamed of doing anything to it. That was, until that fateful day.

The turning point of my young life came when I decided that the blotter with all of its scribbles, numbers, doodles, drawings, misspelled words, and underlined words made the gleaming desk, in my opinion, look “cluttered” and “messy.” After all, shouldn’t a clean office have an equally clean blotter? Besides, my father had put all the diamonds into the store’s vault so there were none to be knocked onto the floor. Therefore, I reasoned that it would be fine if I simply tore the top page off.

Not understanding how wood ages and dries, I rested my hand upon an old joint in the top of the desk as I applied pressure on the tablet. This caused the sentinel to let out a loud low groan which startled me so badly that I “ripped” the paper in half, crumpling what was in my hand. Out of frustration, I then tore the rest of that piece from the blotter until all that remained were bits and pieces of what had once been the “Rosetta Stone” of my childhood.

Looking upon the shredded paper, I grieved that the mystery was gone and that I would never know what it all had meant. It was then that I knew that I had, through a single selfish disobedient act, forever changed the lives of my father and me. It was also then that the realization of what I had done came barreling down on me like a freight train as I was snapped back into reality by the sound of my father’s voice as it resonated throughout the store.

No human being has ever moved as fast as I did at that moment. With shaking hands and a racing heart I scooped up the precious “remains” of

the blotter's page, shoved them into my pockets, and made a mad dash for the bathroom. As I rushed past my father, I mumbled something about having the flu and feeling sick to my stomach. Once there, in a state of sheer panic, I flushed the evidence, confident in the belief that if he couldn't find it, he wouldn't be able to figure out what had happened to it. Of course, I was wrong.

After staying in the bathroom for what I was sure was an appropriate amount of time, I casually strolled into my father's office, something I had done a million times before. Only this time, the atmosphere in the office felt different. Instead of being busy and productive, it was sad and mournful, almost as if someone had died. As I stood there confused, I saw that my father was seated behind the huge mahogany desk, which dwarfed his small frame and made him look like an old man. It was the way in which he was leaning over the "blotter," with his head in his hands that gave him the appearance of a defeated man in despair.

It was at that moment, he looked up from the desk and as he did, the glow from the delicate Tiffany lamp gently touched the tears which were running down his cheeks and falling onto the clean white page of the "blotter." He motioned for me to sit in one of the soft burgundy leather chairs and it was then and there that I took my first step on a long journey that to this day, I am still on.

I learned my father had never gone any farther in school than the sixth grade. The child of an alcoholic father and domestically abused mother, he grew up in the Appalachian Mountains during the Great Depression. Due to his dire circumstances, he roamed the pool halls and back alleys hustling games or throwing dice in order to make enough money to buy food for his family. As a result, on the days he actually did go to school, he had learned to read and write just well enough to survive from day-to-day.

Furthermore, what made his education even more difficult was the fact that he had a speech impediment, which in the early 1940s was thought to be a sign of mental retardation. To his detriment, his teachers had tried to improve his speech by forcing him to talk with pebbles in his mouth. This only led to teasing by the other students, which resulted in fighting, which progressed to absenteeism that eventually caused him to lie about his age in

order to join the Air Force where he eventually became a supply sergeant. He explained to me that he had always avoided doing jobs in life which had required a great deal of reading and writing. After leaving the military he had found employment as a jeweler's apprentice and only through years of hard work, had become a master jeweler.

After listening to him recount his life as an uneducated man, I finally asked him what the numbers and words meant on the blotter and why he had forbidden us to touch it. With a heavy sigh, he explained that the numbers had been the only math he knew how to do and that every time he learned a new way to figure out a problem, usually by watching someone else do it, he would quickly jot it down on the blotter for future reference. He went on to tell me that the words were those that he had found hard to spell. He would write them over and over again on the "blotter" trying to figure out the correct spelling. If he happened to see them in a newspaper or magazine, he would compare what he had written to what was printed. If he had spelled it right he would underline it; if he hadn't, he would correct his mistakes and then underline that. The blotter had been his reference sheet for everything from how to figure the price of a gram of gold to writing a receipt for a customer's purchase.

With an embarrassed and shamed look on his face, he finished by telling me the reason why he had asked my sister and me never to touch it. He explained that at night after everyone had gone home, he'd study what he'd learned that day and if the blotter was too worn or full of things he no longer needed, he'd carefully transfer that precious information onto a new sheet before coming home. He had been doing this for years without his secret being discovered. It was then I realized that over the years I had noticed that the blotter did change from time-to-time but had never seen anyone but my father write on it. Mystery solved. Life lesson learned, but all at the expense of his self respect and self confidence.

After hearing his remarkable story, and feeling ashamed of myself, I finally admitted to him that I had been the one who'd destroyed his precious document, and in an effort to make things right, that day I began helping my father to start a new blotter by writing the phrase "I love you and I am so proud of you" on the tear stained paper. As a result, over the years, with

my help, he learned to use a calculator, a dictionary, and eventually a computer. As far as his speech impediment was concerned, when I was older, during important meetings I would sit at his side and speak on his behalf and, when necessary, review documents for him before he “signed on the dotted line.” I became his teacher, interpreter, proofreader, and guardian of his secret.

Because of that one afternoon, I quit viewing school as a place to socialize and spend a few hours a day. I began reading everything I could get my hands on, and books became treasures. I would write my spelling words over and over again until I wore my Eberhard Fabers to a nub. Getting good grades in school became a challenge as well as a goal for me. I also concentrated on speaking well with attention to enunciating my words. School now became very important to me because of the struggles that my father had gone through in his life.

As for my father, he’s still a master jeweler in Kentucky. He still has the mahogany desk, although now it has a calculator, a dictionary, and personal computer. And yes, the blotter is still there, with all of its hieroglyphics, numbers, simple drawings, and lots of underlined words, all of which are written under the phrase, “I love you and I am so proud of you.”

Imagine

JUSTIN SUNDAY

Imagine there’s no heaven
It’s easy if you try.
No hell below us
Above us only sky.
Imagine all the people
Living for today.
Imagine there’s no countries
It isn’t hard to do.
Nothing to kill or die for
No religion too.
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...

BEAUTIFUL, NO? Now, imagine those words in a slow, somber, wishful, and yet demanding voice sung to log rolling bass lines, thought-provoking peaceful piano, and sharp burst of violin. The tone makes one think of a funeral dirge, or requiem. It makes one think of a doctor marching through a hospital that is torn time and time again with the screams of the violin from the mouths of the wounded veterans in their beds. The doctor is singing his requiem about a world with nothing to tear apart the “brotherhood of man.” This is what I heard when the second song “Imagine” from the album, *eMOTIVe*, by the band, *A Perfect Circle*, started playing in my car.

This song is a remake from a John Lennon song by the same name. Of course, appreciating the lyrics and the provocative nature of the music so

much, I went out and bought the Imagine album by John Lennon just to hear the piece that inspired this work of art. The first thing I did was smile and laugh. I just couldn't help it. If you've never heard the original and yet have listened countless times to Maynard James Keenan's version, as I have, you would've done the same thing. More a ballad than a song really, which is not a bad thing, because I, personally, like the original. However, giving the same feeling as the original, the remake is a complete contrast to the original.

The original is considerably lighter than the remake, and John Lennon seems to really be enjoying himself in his imagining. It is typically hippie from the '70s. No disrespect intended, of course. The piano, the main instrument, is the first thing you hear. It starts in the same manner as the remake: a somber low march; however, it is played from opposite ends of the keyboard. Then it makes a kind of twill in the march as of children marching to see who can do it best. John Lennon, then, along with a low dreamy violin in the background, sings in a kind of spoken word with the occasional dip and bend. He breaks these with the occasional "whoohoo." All this is sung by a mind in a day dream, while lying under the shade of a tree, after frolicking through a meadow with a flower in one's hair.

The true meat of these two songs, really one in the same, is, of course, the lyrics. Of course the tone of the music and voice can send stronger or weaker signals, but it is the lyrics that make these songs so thought-provoking. They sing of a world where people don't try to live for an afterlife; they live strictly for the present. They sing of a world where there are no countries and no religions, the biggest causes for wars. And they sing of no possessions, no money, no wealth, and no need for greed or hunger; a world where everyone lives equally. "Imagine all the people sharing all the world..."

Do it. Imagine. Imagine the world John Lennon imagined. As he said, "it's easy if you try / it isn't hard to do." Yes, I imagined it, and I think the world would be better without the causes for war, discrimination, greed, and all-around hate. If people lived for today, and didn't worry about what happens to them in death, there would be no need for religion. There would be no need for people to protect their beliefs or try to impose them

on others through force or sheer annoyance disguised as kindness. There wouldn't be people going to war over lands thought to be holy or over other people thinking differently about their beliefs. The lyrics are of a world where there's no heaven or hell. There's no place to go when you die. They tell you to live a meaningful life while you're here, while you can.

However, I know it is impossible for humans to exist without religion. Humans, like animals, have an innate fear. Religion and the afterlife were created by man to curb his fears of wasting his life. After all, what's the point in living if you're just going to die and be forgotten? Nobody wants to think of that. And so, religion was born from a need. They need a reason to live and what better reason for you to live meaningfully than a promise for an eternal, perfect, afterlife?

Again, I imagine the world of the lyrics. I imagined a world where there were no countries and everyone lived under the same sky that was not divided by different beliefs, different laws, different customs, and different views of the world. The people in this world had "nothing to kill or die for." That's what the lyrics were saying, "Imagine there's no countries." With no reasons to start wars, the world would be in peace.

But if there are no countries, no different beliefs, different laws, different customs and different views in the world, then, isn't there no humanity as well? Where is the individual in all this? Where would be the appreciation in all this? Different opinions are what make people individuals. Without different opinions everyone would have the same thoughts, the same opinions, and ultimately, the same mind. There would be no individuals, there would be nothing to differentiate. There would be no art, no music, no poetry, and no writing. There would be nothing, in short, beautiful in the world, except the world itself.

"...Imagine no possessions / I wonder if you can / no need for greed or hunger / a brotherhood of man / imagine all the people / sharing all the world..." I will admit that I had trouble imagining this one: a world with no possessions. But, once I did, I was able to see the positives. Of course, a world with no possessions would mean there would be no greed. This is another reason for conflict and wars. A world with no greed would be a more peaceful world indeed. Everyone would be equal in their nothingness.

No one would be hungry or impoverished. It would be “ a brotherhood of man.”

Unfortunately, this, too, is impossible due to the nature of man. Of course, it sounds possible if the whole world lived as one with nature. but eventually someone would see another person living in a cozier cave. And that would start up a whole confrontation. Eventually people will see things that are better than what they have and want it for themselves. That’s just the way man is. Besides, even in nature things are not created equally.

As beautiful as this song may seem in its imagined world, it is impossible. The actual song is a contradiction in itself. This idea of no countries, or no government, is impossible as long as there is the innate need for people to be individuals and is only possible through a communist rule over the whole world. This is, by the way, a form of government. As long as there is a world being ruled, someone will come along who will want to possess the title of dictator, king, god. There will always be someone who will want more.

I love the lyrics and the song, and especially Maynard’s version. I also love the whole idea of world peace and I didn’t mean to focus so much on the negative aspects of this imagined world. I’m just being a realist about all this, I suppose. So, by all means, go out, listen to the song, get your own opinions of it and, by all means, *Imagine*.

Trophies

Sightless eyes once alert golden
brown motionless coat once rippling
muscle twitching muzzle riveting ears
magnificent horns, forever silenced.

Sightless eyes once roaming splendid
bristly black spiky hairs grunting
squealing rooting tusks scenting
subterranean snout, forever silenced.

Sightless eyes once rotating open
mouth suffocating in space slimy
scales skimmed with dust flexible
fins unyielding stiff, forever silenced.

Sightless eyes once mischievous rosy
false flush paints pale cheek silky
tresses showcased on satin backdrop empty
hands folded touching Sunday’s best dress.

Forever silenced.

LEAH LACROIX

The Place

Smoke curls out the door
repelling, inviting

scarred oak floors proceed
ramshackle bar

smell stale peanuts
rotting whiskey

starkness, anguish
recorded in shadows

LEAH LACROIX

In My Microscope

We

narrow minded humans
oblivious of drama
minuscule drop of water

Cilia beat, flagella whip
lives are lost
new beings created

Opalescent arms reach out
hunters stalk, engulf prey
translucent bodies depict

life and death
struggle for existence
busy bodies go about living

just like us

LEAH LACROIX

Insomnia

Racing thoughts, mindless worries, never-ending cycle
sleep eludes, dreams forestalled
troubles grow substance in silence

should have, could have, what if, if only
marching unwanted across consciousness
pursuing the wind, no answer unearthed

Sunrise beckons, tendrils of light intrude
lost sleep never recaptured
vicious cycle evaporates as dawn breaks

LEAH LACROIX

The Visit

Excited to see him I rush to his side
Softly, he says "my girl."
My name is hidden in an unused room
among damaged and broken neurons

Paper skin etched with bruises emaciated lay
arms within a lap that used to hold me.
Eyes once sharp and crystal blue bear wounds
of time, echoes of lost knowledge deep within

The soul within remains true
though the body is depleted
An aged hand reaches for mine
an unspoken token of affection

Words have escaped but none are needed
in the hand mine becomes small.
Whispers of memory flit through
cloudy eyes that look into mine

In his eyes I see him
Not aged, fragile, and broken.
but strong, invincible, my champion
always will he be

LEAH LACROIX

Premium

Thanks to our
processed
steak you'd expect
a restaurant even better
Remember
15 minutes
tastes
that long.

ALEX CORSI

Lot of Trouble

CERIDWEN KEELEY

THE PARKING LOT WAS BUILT like they built the Parthenon, its low walls wide at the street, narrowing toward the rear of the church, making the lot seem deeper, the back of the church seem wider, than they really were. A light left on for the members of the district choir gleamed softly through the windows. Street lamps began to come on. As evening deepened, an old Rambler bumped into the lot and stopped at the back of the church.

"No one's here!" complained the teen-aged girl in the back seat.

"You're the one who wanted to leave so early," her mother reminded her.

"Don't argue," said the man. He reached across his wife's knees and opened the glove compartment. After fishing around, he said, "Hand me the flashlight, will you, Emmy?"

Headlights cut through the gloom. The girl sat up straighter and tried to peer sideways through the window. Her mother grinned; her father sighed and opened his book. She was waiting for one particular tenor.

The dog jumped over the seat and rested his chin on the man's thigh.

"I remember when we used to come here," Emmy said. "Do you remember, Bill? That was when Reverend Moorehouse was preaching."

"I remember," her husband replied.

"Joy was just a baby then. I wish we hadn't moved away."

Bill raised the flashlight higher.

"Do you remember the time someone shot at Reverend Moorehouse, and he jumped over the pulpit and chased them down the street?"

"When was this?" asked Joy.

"Oh, way before you were born. Or, was it when I was pregnant with you? I know you weren't around yet. Bill?"

"Hm?"

"When did someone shoot at Reverend Moorehouse? Was it when I was pregnant with Joy? Or earlier?"

Bill adjusted the flashlight again and propped the book on the steering wheel. "I don't remember, Emmy. I wasn't there."

"But, I told you about it! Now, think. When was it?"

The flashlight cut off. "You told me a lot of things. I don't remember when you told me."

Another car pulled in from the opposite direction and stopped beside the Rambler. Four doors opened and a family spilled into the lot. Joy opened the back door and was soon walking with the other family's daughter, their heads together as they shared secrets. The dog whined. Emmy got out and stood, grinning. Orley Moorehouse came around to the driver's window and poked his hand in.

"Hello, stranger!" He beamed at Bill. "Are you going to sing in the choir?"

Bill marked the page and closed his book. "No, I just brought these two down. Emmy doesn't like to drive at night. How've you been?"

Orley stepped aside so Bill could get out of the car. Bill had been a svelte man at one time, never thin, but sturdy and lean. Years and illness later, he needed twice the room that he used to need to get through a door.

"Oh, pretty good, pretty good. I'm supervising now, so I don't have to go on as many calls. June's been trying to set Davis Hurley up with one of her friends, so we've been having him to dinner. I hear Emmy had him over with a swim instructor?"

"That didn't work out." Bill chuckled.

Orley's daughter ran over, Joy trailing at her heels. "Dad? Did someone shoot at Uncle Walter here?"

"Oh, that was a long time ago, when you were just a baby."

"Oh, thank you," Emmy said from across the car. "I was trying to think of when that was. If Debbie was a baby, then Joy was, too."

Two more cars pulled in, one behind the other. Debbie's brother met his friend and the adults shifted positions. "David Asher!" Orley Moorehouse exclaimed, shaking hands with one of the men. "What brings you to the choir?"

"I brought a couple of kids who want to be in it. Hullo, Bill!"

Bill shook hands with the paunchy, gangling Asher. Poor man had lost his wife to a visiting preacher, back when they had all attended this church. The preacher wasn't preaching any more: men who took other men's wives had no business in the pulpit.

A third car rocked into the lot and Joy hurried over to meet its occupants.

More people arrived, some old friends, quite a few strangers. The lot filled quickly, since it was a small lot to begin with; cars lined the back street. Bill sat in the sanctuary as long as he could stand the small, hard chairs. Then he went to the car to read.

From where he sat, with the window down and the night air filling the car, the choir sounded fainter there, the dissonances less jarring. Bill remembered the song meetings of his childhood, when everyone from DuBois to Byrnedale would gather at one church or another and sing. The women would prepare a tea, and everyone would meet afterwards and catch up on news.

Something like that was happening that night, though there were too many strangers; it was a city, not a small town; no one had thought to bring sandwiches. Bill hadn't thought of it. His stomach rumbled. Joy had been so eager to see her young man that they had rushed out of the house with barely anything in them. The poor dog had almost been forgotten in the rush.

The dog wasn't about to be forgotten again. He was already insulted when Joy abandoned him for her friend. He put his paws on Bill's shoulder and wagged his tail, looking hopefully at the window.

"You want out?" Bill said.

The dog wriggled and snuffled until Bill got the leash on him. When the door opened, the dog jumped onto the broken concrete and waited, tail stiff and wagging, until Bill lumbered out of the car. It was a nice night. Bill walked the dog to the corner.

He was forgetting something. Bill looked at the lot, dark under the few remaining trees; there was something he ought to be remembering about the church he helped to build.

The dog strained at his leash and sniffed at the base of a lamp post. They were close enough to hear the choir again. Bill listened, thinking about his childhood and the people he missed.

David Asher was sitting on the low wall, smoking a cigarette. Bill switched the leash to his right hand and pulled his chew out of his pocket. He tucked a pinch into his lip and stood by the wall while Asher patted the wriggling dog.

"Brings back old memories, doesn't it?" Asher asked.

"It does," Bill agreed. "I hear you moved down by the airport."

Asher shrugged. "I thought I'd get me a smaller place. The boys don't come so much, now they're older."

Bill nodded. The boys were the only remnants of Asher's marriage that he would talk about.

Luckily, Asher decided to change the subject himself. He shifted on the wall and looked back into the crowded parking lot. The cars nearer to the building were lined up on only one side of the lot, since it was so narrow there. "Do you remember when we were building this place?"

Bill had to laugh. "Do you remember when Orley rolled off the scaffolding and was hanging by his fingers?"

Asher laughed too. "I still think he fell asleep. That was back when he was working all hours. What about the time Hilda Bankie was in the ductwork and Reverend Moorehouse almost drilled through her leg?"

"She come out of that opening screeching at whoever done that, until she saw who it was," laughed Bill. Her face had been so red it was almost purple, and a large vein throbbled in her neck. She went ash-white when she saw who she was yelling at, and apologized to the poor man, who was beet-red himself.

The choir had stopped singing. A man's voice, sounding official, spoke.

Bill tapped Asher's arm with the back of his hand. "And the time we were all building this parking lot. There was you, me, Orley Moorehouse, and someone else, I forget."

"Davis Hurley. I remember, you couldn't just say 'Dave' or we'd both answer."

"Remember when Orley, or was it Davis? lost his shoe in the cement trough?"

"That was me." Asher chuckled. "I never did get all the cement off that shoe."

"What beats me is you wearing your good loafers to brick up the wall."

"Young and stupid."

Asher looked toward the main street, where the church opened to the public. The dog strained at his leash and whined. Joy came around the side of the building with a lanky young man. Three steps behind them, Debbie Moorehouse and two other girls were trying to walk with their heads bent together.

The dog yipped. Joy raised her head resentfully. She wouldn't like her solitary walk with her young man interrupted by her father and the dog.

"He's a little old for her, isn't he?" Asher asked.

Bill turned the leash loose. "Get her, boy! Go on!" Raising his voice, he called, "Joy, get the dog!"

Joy lunged for the leash, but missed. Her young man valiantly loped after the animal, stumbling over the uneven ground.

"She'll get over him," said Bill. "She's thirteen. It isn't like it was, when girls got married at fourteen. They don't grow up as fast any more."

Asher sighed. "Maybe that's good."

Others were coming around the side. Some went to the cars on the back street. Engines roared. Headlights flashed to life. Talk and laughter filled the air.

Emmy was still inside. Bill spit on the dry ground, bending some thirsty stems with tobacco juice. He liked talking to Asher, but he'd come to a good part in his book. He wanted to get home and read it, and maybe catch the news before bed.

Joy and her young man had stopped short of the open church window with the dog. Debbie and her friends wove around them, still chattering. David Asher got off the wall.

“Are you two ready to go?”

The girls looked up, suddenly guilty. Debbie gave Asher a pleading look.

“A couple more minutes,” Asher said.

A knot of people had stopped at the far corner of the church, the women’s legs pale in the light from the street lamps, the men dressed dark with triangles of white below their chins. Their voices murmured like the babble of a brook. Emmy was in the center of the group, grinning this way and that as they talked.

Bill looked at his car in the parking lot. It was sandwiched between Orley’s car and the back of the church, where a small window overlooked the lot. Dry leaves lay on the cracked cement, caught in the cracks, scattered over the aging surface. The trash bin, large and black in the shadows, was off-kilter, behind both his car and Orley’s. A lonely round tin can stood, misshapen, in the corner.

“We built this parking lot,” he said, as much to himself as to Asher.

“Yeah.” Asher was frowning at his car, just on the other side of Orley’s. The lot was wider there, but not quite wide enough. “We really did ourselves in, didn’t we?”

“We thought we were something!” Bill couldn’t help but laugh. “We thought we’d teach those early-birds a lesson, didn’t we?”

Asher took another cigarette out of his pack and stuck it between his lips. “I guess we changed. Now we’re the early-birds.” Flame flared. Smoke rose into the night air. Asher nodded toward the girls, who were still bunched together like frightened chicks. “I better find a phone and call their mothers. We won’t be getting out of here too soon.”

Bill spit the last of his juice and dug for more tobacco. The way those people were moving, they would be there a good, long time.

