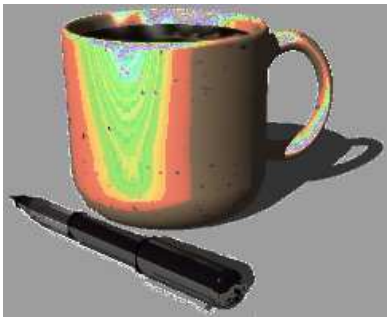
eSCENE 1996



The World's Best Online Fiction

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eSCENE 1996

the world's best online fiction

ROBERT SWARD — Guest Editor

JEFF CARLSON — Series Editor

SHANNON CHRISTENOT — Assistant Editor

KIM CARLSON — Editorial Assistant

eSCENE is a yearly electronic anthology dedicated to providing one-click access to the Internet's best short fiction and authors. The stories featured within are culled from a collection of electronic magazines ("ezines" or "zines") published on the Net from across the globe during 1995, and feature both established and previously unpublished authors.

eSCENE 1996
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Foreword

Global Caffeination

by Jeff Carlson, Series Editor

So, what is it about coffee lately? Whether you're drinking a cup of French Roast in your kitchen, cradling a now-familiar green and white Starbucks cup on your drive to work, or just hanging out in your favorite coffeehouse, you know that coffee and espresso have become hot items. Now, as with seemingly everything else, the bean is moving to the Internet.

Blame it on Sun Microsystems, with their "a-good-name-is-better-than-a-fully-realized-technology" Java programming language. As soon as Java began its caffeinated marketing buzz, the media pulled out their well-thumbed thesauri and began an onslaught of synonyms not seen since we were all promised a dizzying ride on the information superhighway (complete with its speed bumps, potholes, roadside attractions, and the overabundant road kill).

Or, maybe you can blame it on the new phenomenon/fad of cybercafes, springing up in most major metro areas. You no longer have to grow a goatee, buy a used PowerBook, and hang out at your favorite coffeehouse pretending to write while actually playing Solitaire. For about ten bucks per month, you can set up an account and seat yourself in front of a computer (usually sporting a fast T1 connection) where your email is delivered alongside your double-tall nonfat no-whip half-decaf mocha with extra chocolate.

On the surface, this pairing of drab office technology with the warm atmosphere of a coffeehouse seems likely to produce a bizarre hybrid, some venture capitalist's multi-genre wet dream. But surprisingly, the two realms blend together like Bailey's and espresso. For over four centuries, coffee and coffeehouses have brought together people's ideologies, arts, discussions, and writings. With the Internet growing larger and broader than anyone can accurately track, these same people are taking their ideas online.

I don't think it's an understatement to say that coffee (and other forms of caffeine) are fueling large chunks of the Net. It's the propane that keeps most of us up late into the night, working on our ezines, our short stories, our Java applets, our games (developing and playing), our multimedia apps, our novels-continually-in-progress. It's what wakes us up at ten o'clock the next morning at our "real" jobs, and keeps us coherent enough to function before we can go home and start all over again as readers, programmers, and, for the purposes of this introduction, writers and publishers.

Armed with a cup of coffee and an Internet connection, anyone can become a modern-day publisher. Forget about raising capital, developing business models and drawing up marketing plans. Publishing online doesn't require a tie or a degree. It requires initiative, ideas, a lot of spare time, and coffee/tea/Coke/Jolt/Pepsi/Water Joe/Mountain Dew to stay awake enough to do it all. Most of us publishing on the Internet aren't making money from what we do. We have day jobs to pay the bills, and work online at night to soothe whatever it is that drives us to get lost amid bitmapped typefaces, RGB color palettes, and some of the best electronic words online for hours on end.

Throughout the process of editing and producing this year's *eSCENE*, my own level of coffee appreciation has grown considerably. Numerous cups of espresso have proved invaluable as I've found myself staring at my computer, trying to figure out why StudioPro is eating all my RAM while rendering a mug with phong shadows; or, when I needed that extra kick to keep me awake enough to read another of the 117 stories stories we received. Pausing to occasionally check my email at 2 a.m., I've found solace in the fact that there are other editors, writers, and friends who are just like me, staring at pixels through the steam of a fresh-brewed cup of java.

It seems natural, therefore, that this year's *eSCENE*, a forum for reading and discussing the year's best Internet-published short fiction, should revolve around a coffeehouse theme. Despite the graphics, sound files, plug-ins, and QuickTime animations on the Web, the Internet is still largely a text-based, word-based, written-content-based medium. Although the graphic designer in me has striven to make your stay here visually enjoyable, theimpatient, I'm-sick-of-waiting-for-graphics-to-load side of me has prompted me to create text-only and minimal-graphics routes through the site as well. The benefits of text can't be understated—sure, you can design a site with all sorts of graphics and animations and sounds (and there are cases when that's entirely appropriate). But when it comes to writing on the Net, nothing beats the ease of displaying a story and printing it out for reading later on the bus ride home. It's mostly for this reason that I believe publishing online has a promising future.

I started *eSCENE* two years ago because I wanted to be able to find good fiction on the Internet. With the help of many editors, authors, and readers, I've been able to enjoy the best works being published online and offer them in one easy-to-access electronic anthology. Hopefully, you'll agree that *eSCENE* is definitely worth viewing and downloading. The next time you're in a cybercafe, or exploring the net in the early hours of the morning, brew yourself an especially strong cup of coffee, drop by <http://www.etext.org/Zines/eScene/>, and spend some time with this year's stories. They're worth the hours, the espresso, and the occasional sunrise.

Jeff Carlson,
Series Editor *eSCENE* 1996

Jeff Carlson, Series Editor **kepi@halcyon.com**

Some vitals and not-so-vitals about me:

- editor and producer of *eSCENE, The World's Best Online Fiction*
- freelance writer
- managing editor for Open House, publisher of great computer-related titles :
  - *Real World Photoshop 3*, by David Blatner and Bruce Fraser
  - *The QuarkXPress Book*, by David Blatner
  - *Real World Freehand 5.0|5.5*, by Olav Martin Kvern
  - *Real World Scanning and Halftones*, by David Blatner and Steve Roth
  - *Zap! How your computer can hurt you - and what you can do about it*, by Don Sellers
  - *Real World PageMaker 6*, by Steve Roth and Olav Martin Kvern
- occasional HTML hack and conference bouncer for Thunder Lizard Productions <http://www.thunderlizard.com/>
- freelance graphic designer
- web designer <http://www.halcyon.com/kepi/>
- crowded house fan
- used to talk to my dad's toes on saturday mornings

Introductory

This Digital Miscellany

by Robert Sward, Guest Editor

The word anthology comes from the Greek anthos (flower) and logia (collecting). An anthology is a garland, a treasury, a miscellany representing the gleanings and judgment of one or more editors. Series Editor Jeff Carlson describes *eSCENE* as the world's first anthology of the best Internet-published short fiction, enabling readers to pick up the year's finest electronically published short stories without having to download a random collection of epubs. "With the number of ezines rapidly increasing," he says, "readers just aren't making the time to read through four or five publications they're not familiar with."

eSCENE 1996 is also an electronic literary stage, a review or compendium in cyberspace. As a "best of" collection, it also serves to showcase new writers and the growing community of onlinemagazines that are publishing them.

What is the process for selecting the World's Best Online Fiction?

1. Jeff Carlson and Assistant Editor Shannon Christenot begin by querying ezine editors for the top stories they published in the previous year.
2. Jeff and Shannon request permission from the authors. Stories are not formatted or read until the author gives his/her permission for review to avoid copyright violation; the author, for example, may have submitted the story to another market.
3. When permission is received, Jeff and Shannon read the stories and rate them on a scale of 1 to 5. This year, beginning with 117 short stories, they narrowed the field down to 21. Anonymous, identified only by a number, these 21 were sent to the Guest Editor (yours truly) who chose what he felt were the nine best.
4. Jeff, Shannon and I agreed on all but 3 of the winners. It took a while—email messages flew up and back between Seattle, WA and Santa Cruz, CA—but we eventually came to a decision we could live with.

I agreed to serve as *eSCENE*'s Guest Editor (an unpaid, honorary position) because of my interest in online publishing and fascination with the work I've recently discovered at this *eSCENE* site. But I need to acknowledge to readers of *eSCENE* 1996 that I began reading contributions to the anthology with certain expectations. I imagined I'd see more science fiction or fantasy, more writing that reflected the language and culture of cyberspace. *eSCENE* and many other online magazines, after all, are associated in some readers' minds with what has been called "fiction in a postmodern medium." Bizarre, hip, cool, weirdly psychedelic, satiric, laugh-out-loud narratives like Pat Dillon's interactive The Last Best Thing, serialized this Spring in the San Jose Mercury News.

It was a surprise, therefore, to receive so many promising stories written in a traditional manner, with careful attention to the details of structure, plot, setting and character. Apart from the story "Wife," a hypermedia piece, many of this year's winners might also have found a home in traditional hard copy magazines. Different as they are from one another, I admire and would not have been surprised to see "Spots," "Eating Buzzards," and "Pandora's Dogs," for example, in good literary quarterlies.

One of my favorites of the 21 stories I read is "Spots," which I recommend for its quirky, oddball humor, its effective use of dialogue and air of menace (which erupts into violence). Not everyone will agree, but to my mind "Spots" is a believable and memorable story.

Overall, the quality of the submissions I read was high, and I found it difficult to decide, for example, which warranted a 2 (among the best), and which a 1 (Tops!). Some pieces I read were under two pages and, to my mind, needed development. Others, however well-written they were, appeared to be anecdotal sketches lifted from someone's autobiography. As editor/reader/judge, I tended to favor those that were well-crafted, believable—in terms of plot and characterization—and written with wit, originality and a distinctive point of view and voice. Those were my standards. The nine stories I selected were those that came closest to fulfilling those ideals.

It was a pleasure reading this material. Quarrel with the decisions of the editors or not, I guarantee you, the reader, will be provoked and challenged by this most unusual garland, this treasury, this miscellany from cyberspace.

For now, congratulations to the winners whose names, even as I write this, are unknown to me. And thanks to all those who contributed to *eSCENE* 1996.

Why I Publish in Ezines:

One Writer's View of Online Publishing

by Robert Sward, Guest Editor

Computer-phobic writers, teaching cronies and fans of old style lit-mags ask why I have chosen to publish in ezines like *Blue Penny Quarterly*; *X-Connect*; *eSCENE*; *Fiction Online*; *Gruene Street*; *The Hawk*; *RealPoetik*; *Recursive Angel*; *Transmog*; and *Zero City*, to name a few.

1. I publish on the Net and World Wide Web because it's cheap: email, after all, is free.
2. It's more efficient: no SASEs, no International Reply Coupons; fewer trips to the office supply store.
3. It saves time: I don't have to wait 18 months to hear back and the rejections, when they come, are less annoying because (a) I've invested less in the submission process and (b) it's easy enough to send the work somewhere else.
4. It gives me the opportunity to improve on what I write and make changes even after publication. Zen Buddhists say, First thought, best thought. I say, Think again.
5. It allows for interaction: timely feedback from fellow writers, editors, publishers, agents, and students.

I recently sent a poem to *RealPoetik* ("rpoetik, the little magazine of the Internet, a moderated listserv..."), got an email acceptance message and saw the poem published, all within 24 hours. Editor Robert Salasin claims he has approximately 1,000 subscribers. All I know is that over the next few days I got more responses ("fine work...," "wish you continued success in Cyberspace...," "would like to use excerpts from A Much-Married Man...") from that single appearance than I got from 30 years of publishing in magazines like The Antioch Review, The Hudson Review, The Nation, The New Yorker, The Transatlantic Review, etc.

Yes, it's a form of instant gratification. Just what the world needs, right? In my opinion, instant gratification has gotten a bad rap. Or maybe I'm late to the game and am just beginning to catch on. Anyway, I write for myself and always have, but I still agree with Whitman: it doesn't hurt to have an audience.

I still use pen and pencil to write and revise and turn to my Olympia portable to type envelopes. I'm still doing what I did in my 20s: writing, revising and sending the best work I have to the editors of the journals I admire.

Writing is rewriting, and I spend just as much time revising now as I ever did. To this day I send poems and stories to traditional print journals and, when the publication appears, sometimes long to remove a line or two or correct a typo or printer's error. A while back The Transatlantic Review published "Thousand-Year-Old Fiancee" and destroyed the poem, made it meaningless with a record 13 typographical errors. They never sent me page proofs and, once the poem was printed, there was nothing I could do except rage at the editor, the inattentive, lackadaisical schmuck.

Now, when I submit work to an e-journal there is no typographer involved because there is no type to set. And if an error occurs or I change my mind, voila! I can email corrections and see the fix made promptly and at no expense. I like that.

Apart from a responsive audience, what's the payoff? Payment used to be in contributor copies. Now with magazines appearing in electronic print, there are no contributor copies to send. Still, a few mainline lit-mags and e-journals do make an effort to pay. In all the years I've been writing, I haven't come close—not one year have I come close—to covering the cost of postage. How much is poetry worth? In 1958, in an effort to determine the dollar value, if any, of my poetry, I engaged in an experiment. A student at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, I sent half a dozen poems to the local phone company as a way of paying my bill. Not only did Ma Bell send them back, but she disconnected my phone. So be it.

I'm doing multimedia stuff now combining poetry, fiction and non-fiction with photographs, paintings and—soon—music and the human voice. I'm collaborating with visual artists, computer scientists, and other writers. If you're interested, check out Earthquake Collage and Highway 17 on my home page. Please come visit me at my virtual home:

<http://www.cruzio.com/~scva/rsward.html>

My first computer was an Apple IIe and my first word processing program was Magic Window. Today I use Microsoft Word on a Mac Performa supercharged by my 18-year-old son. How does it all work? I have no idea. I just switch on my modem, gaze into cyberspace and type away. It's still Magic Window to me.

"So what's the point?" my partner wants to know. "Isn't this just one big ego trip? Who really reads those e-journals? Do you actually think you're going to sell copies of your book on the Net? And what about copyright? How do you know someone isn't going to rip off that new novel of yours?"

Of course she's right, but I have all those virtual magazines and editors on the Net waiting for me to check in.

"Gee, honey, I don't know," I say. "I'm just gonna go upstairs for a moment and check my mail."

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Winner of a Guggenheim Fellowship, Robert Sward is the author of 12 books including *The Jurassic Shales, A Novel* published by Coach House Press and *Four Incarnations, New & Selected Poems*, published by Coffee House Press. Lucille Clifton selected Sward for a Villa Montalvo Literary Arts Award, and his fiction has been heard on National Public Radio's "The Sound of Writing." Sward currently teaches for the University of California Extension in Santa Cruz. His serio-comic novel, *A Much-Married Man*, will appear in 1996. Excerpts of his writing, including *A Much-Married Man*, can be found at: <http://www.cruzio.com/~scva/rsward.html>.

Afterglow

by Terry Engel

My mother called the plant in Georgia where I worked to tell me that my father had been killed in a powerline accident, an event she had predicted for years. She tried to explain what happened in a very matter of fact voice, something about induced voltage and faulty safety grounds, but I couldn't draw an accurate picture from what she said. She talked as if all her worry had been vindicated, which somehow made my father's death less of a surprise. I left for Tennessee right away.

I drove all afternoon and got to the funeral home just before the evening visitation. My mother sat in the chapel with her sister, my father's brothers Lester and Albert, and their wives. Mother looked to be in good shape. She wore a nice dress and had her hair fixed. As we hugged I felt how tiny she was, thin shoulders, my hand almost covering her whole back. I breathed hair spray. Lester put one arm across my shoulder and we shook hands.

"Good to see you, Gerald. You still down in Georgia?"

"Yes sir," I said. Lester smelled of whiskey. He was a short powerful man with dark hair going gray. He always looked angry to me, and I remembered how I had been afraid of him when I was a kid. Something I hadn't quite gotten over.

Albert moved in and took my other hand. He was short and round, with a red face. His eyes jumped behind his glasses and he was still crying a little.

"I'm glad you're here, Gerald," my mother said. "I wanted you to spend a few moments with your father before the public visitation."

The director introduced himself and led my mother, Lester, Albert and me through double doors into a back room. My father's face was made up so that he looked like something unreal, a badly done wax impression. I'd seen the work at other funerals and half expected it, but seeing my father that way was a disappointment. I'd expected more from him. He was dressed in the suit I'd only seen him wear a couple of times. His hair was combed back and oiled, his forehead pale above the tan of his face. One hand was folded over the other, but I could still see the black, burned skin of his bottom hand.

"Don't he look nice, Gerald? They did a good job."

Everyone was quiet for a few minutes, waiting for me to say something, until Lester leaned in and whispered: "I climbed up and cut him off the pole, Gerald. Tommy would've wanted that."

"Yes, Gerald," my mother said. "Lester finished the job for your father."

"Thank you," I said.

The service was at eleven o'clock the next morning, but relatives and men who'd worked with my father began showing up at the house around nine. I sat in the kitchen and looked out the window, watching cars and trucks pull in and park in the front yard. My uncles and older cousins sat on car hoods while they waited on the time to go to church. My aunts and other women I didn't know worked on lunch in the kitchen, moving quietly around my mother and me, guiding us back to the table whenever we tried to help.

After a while I asked my mother if she needed anything and she said no. I went out the back door and walked around to the front porch steps. It was a sunny fall morning, warm. The last of the trees along the river were blazing orange and yellow, littering the ground. The river rippled beyond gaps in the trees. The men in the front yard were telling stories about my father. All of my cousins and the other men had worked for Valley Power at one time or another. They fell quiet when I sat down on the porch steps.

Lester wore a stiff black suit with a bolo tie. He had a pint flask of whiskey and was sharing it with his brother and son and nephews. He nodded at me, said "Gerald," and held the flask toward me, but I shook my head.

A man I didn't know opened his trunk and passed out cans of beer. He handed one to me and introduced himself as Lee, said he'd worked with my father almost ten years.

We drank our beer and some of the men smoked. The younger kids were playing football around the side of the house, yelling and laughing. The ball landed close to Lester. He picked it up and threw a perfect spiral.

"You kids move to the back yard," he yelled. "And you better not get dirty. This is a funeral."

Albert looked at me and punched Lester in the ribs. Lester mumbled "sorry" and squatted. He opened a pocket knife and scratched some lines in the dirt.

"How old was Tommy?" Lee asked.

"Fifty-two," Albert said.

"Goddamn," Lee said. Everyone nodded, looked at their drinks.

Lee shook his head. "Both of my brothers died when they were fifty. Billy had gotten off work early and was bushhogging the side

of the road he lived on. Dropped the tractor wheel into a culvert and it rolled on him, pinned him underneath the steering wheel. The other one had cancer."

Lee tossed an empty can into the trunk and opened another. "I'm fortynine. All I know is I'm not leaving the goddamn house after my birthday."

"That's the worst thing you can do," Lester said.

"I don't know," Lee said. "Much as I hate thinking about the old lady, I'd hate to see her spend that insurance without me."

"You won't miss money in heaven," Albert said.

"The last heaven he saw was on the triple-X channel in Murfreesboro," Lester said. Everyone laughed.

"We had some heaven up in Peoria, didn't we Lester?" Albert said.

Lester got a look on his face like he was actually having a pleasant memory. He sat beside me on the steps and gripped me just above the knee, hard enough to make me wince.

"This should interest you, Gerald. It's about your daddy."

The windburned cracks in the corner of Lester's eyes moved as he talked.

"The first job we ever worked was in Illinois. The wind blew so hard that no one would turn loose of the structure to work, except your dad. He tied himself to a piece of steel with bull rope.

"I cussed that bastard for two days," Lester said. "We'd met two sisters in Peoria dying to give it up, and the last place I wanted to be was tied to a piece of steel."

"I still say he was afraid of those girls," Albert said, "or he would've come off the structure. Hell, Tommy couldn't have been more than sixteen or seventeen."

Lester cut his eyes at me. "That was before he knew your mother, of course."

I nodded.

"One day last year your dad was adjusting the shoe on the conductor wire," Albert said to me. "He hung upside down from the steel in his safety belt, drunk as Katie Brown, got so dizzy he couldn't pull himself back up."

Albert moved his big shoulders inside his coat. His face was flushed.

"He kept yelling: 'Would someone please tell me how the fuck I got up here in the first place?' I finally swung the crane around and lowered him down on the hook."

My mother and the other women walked onto the porch. My mother walked past Lester without saying a word, but her look would have frozen water. She climbed into the passenger seat of her car and waited for me to drive. Aunt Mary grabbed Albert by the arm and steered him toward their car, asking, "Couldn't you wait until after the service to start that?"

In the car my mother brushed my bangs to one side, but I moved my hand through my hair, parting it in the middle again. She worked the snap on her purse, opening and closing it.

My mother walked past Lester without saying a word, but her look would have frozen water. . . . Aunt Mary grabbed Albert by the arm and steered him toward their car, asking, "Couldn't you wait until after the service to start that?"

"Those things they were saying about your father, not all of them are true."

"I don't believe everything I hear, Mama. But enough of it's true."

"Well," she said. "They just worked with him."

The man who preached the funeral described a stranger to me. The preacher told about a day that he'd dropped by our house and found my father alone, reading a Bible at the kitchen table. He said my father was a maverick, a good man despite his inadequacies, who had earned a home in heaven through the grace of God. I felt my eyes watering even though I knew it was all wrong.

I thought instead of the man who took me hunting when I was fourteen. We went to a powerline and he made me climb thirty feet up a tower. I sat on a horizontal piece of steel and hooked my feet under a diagonal brace for balance. My father passed my rifle up on the end of a rope.

"I'm going to that tower on the next hill," he said. "We'll have them in a crossfire."

I watched his orange vest move through the scrub brush and waist high brown grass that grew in the bottom between the two towers. The weather wasn't cold, but the sky was covered over with gray, fast moving clouds. The wires above me crackled and the wind made a lonesome noise blowing through the steel. Looking at the ground made me uneasy. I stared up through the tower, making diamonds and trapezoids and parallelograms. Drifting clouds cre-

ated the sensation that the tower was moving and the clouds were still. I grew dizzy and looked for my father, finally picking out the dot of his vest as he climbed the next tower.

I saw eight deer that day, two groups of three does each, and two single bucks—a four-point and a spike—that crossed the right of way along a creek that ran closer to me than to my father. When I raised the rifle my body shook. I thought about the kick, imagined flying backwards through the tower to the ground. I hugged the leg of the tower with one arm and tried to aim. Holding on to something felt better, but I didn't shoot. I hoped the brush was high enough that my father didn't see the bucks.

It was nearly dark when he came back for me. I watched the splash of orange float down the dark hill like a firefly, appearing for a few seconds and then disappearing. I let down my rifle on the rope and then climbed down carefully, my father reaching up to steady me as I slid the last few feet of the leg where the step bolts had been removed to keep people off the towers.

"See anything?" he asked, handing over the rifle.

"All does." I stepped a few feet away to pee, turning my back on him.

"I thought one of those singles might be a buck." I smelled his cigarette and listened to him exhale. "Too brushy to shoot?"

"I scoped it out," I said, looking over my shoulder. "I couldn't find antlers."

"Well, poor light for scopes anyway." He smiled at me as I walked over. We started out the fire road toward the truck. His cigarette arced in the dark as he swung his arm.

My parents called every week when I went to college to study engineering. I told them I was working hard, putting in hours at the library and on the computer. It was true and they believed me. My father quit school in the eighth grade to farm, barely missed Korea, and then went to the powerlines. My mother finished high school and went to work in a furniture factory. They were proud that I had the chance to go. When I got the job in Georgia my mother told me that she would sleep better at night knowing that I'd never have to climb a pole in a thunderstorm, or sit in a crew truck and talk sports and sex with muddy men. But it was a different kind of work that I did, designing fiber optic cable, and I was never sure how my father looked at that.

After the funeral everyone went back to the house for lunch. The mood was more family reunion than funeral. My cousins played touch football. Albert's son Ronnie, a fourth year apprentice lineman, smoked as he played, holding a cigarette in his mouth each down to free his hands.

When I went to the porch the sun was low, deepening the color of the changing leaves. The house was quiet, like a Thanksgiving afternoon when everyone looks for a bed to sleep off dinner. Lester was slouched in the glider, moving it slowly with one foot, a brown grocery sack on his lap.

"Gerald. Been looking for you. Let's go for a ride."

We climbed into his company truck and didn't say anything as he drove. The pickup floated over the gravel, using the whole road, straying too close to the ditches. The seat and floorboard were littered with tools, empty cigarette packs and beer cans, an old carburetor.

Lester opened the sack between us and pulled out my father's hard hat. The white plastic was scuffed and dirty. "VPC 4547" was stenciled over the bill and there was writing on it.

"The whole crew signed it. Thought you might like to keep it."

I turned the hat over in my hands, trying to read the signatures. Someone named Stump had traced a sawed off tree stump under his name. Lester handed me nine one-hundred dollar bills.

"Everyone chipped in," he said. "There'll be more coming when we hear from the other crews."

"Why not flowers?" I dropped the crisp bills in the hard hat and placed it on the seat between us.

"Give that to your mother. She won't take it from me."

"What's the deal between you two?"

Lester took out his flask, but it was empty. He put it back in his pocket.

"I have to tell you, Gerald, Tommy was as drunk as I'd ever seen. I tried to make him sleep it off in the truck but he wouldn't listen. You know how he was."

Lester ground the truck to a stop, spraying gravel. The engine jerked and died. He turned on the dome light and rolled up his left sleeve. He pointed to a wine colored scar on his forearm, erupted flesh the size of a silver dollar that had healed over long ago.

"I got into some static once. I gripped the wire and it went through my hand, came out here. Tommy wasn't that lucky, Gerald. It went all the way through his body, went to ground through his hooks, blew the soles of both boots off. We couldn't show you that at the funeral home."

"I didn't want to see it."

Lester looked at me, his face blank, uncomprehending. He started the truck up and idled down the road.

"There could be trouble over the insurance," Lester said. "Tommy went up before we got the safety grounds on either side of him. I told him about the induced voltage but he wouldn't listen."

I didn't say anything. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes again. I reached up and turned the dome light off.

"I falsified my accident report. We went back and put up a worn out ground before the inspectors could get out there, so I think they're with us on this. Hell, they don't have a clue. We'll take good care of your mother."

"I'll take care of my mother, Lester. You just keep on covering your ass. I'll take care of her."

Lester stopped the truck again, stared hard at me.

"I'm not going to let the company fuck a man out of twenty-two years of good work," he said.

"Why did you let him keep going up there, Lester? You knew he couldn't handle the work anymore." I cried for real and couldn't help it. I wanted Lester to turn the truck around and go home. "You were his foreman, for God's sake."

Lester didn't say anything for a minute. He rocked the steering wheel back and forth, testing the play, then he said: "I'm going to show you something, boy, something I don't want you to ever forget. Go ahead and cry if you need to. It don't bother me none."

He drove to the end of the gravel and turned onto the blacktop. We rode a few miles in silence, winding up into the hills. I rolled my window down and let the air rush in. It smelled like mint. Lester stopped outside a cinder block bar called Snuffy's and told me to wait. It was full dark and the neon beer signs glowed through the barred windows. He waved at someone in the parking lot as he came back with a pint of Jim Beam and a sixpack. He opened the pint and took a drink, then passed the bottle to me.

"Have some. It'll make you feel better."

I passed on the whiskey and took a beer instead. Lester got back on the blacktop. The beer was cold and hard to choke down past the lump in my throat, but it got better. After a while he turned off on another gravel road and then onto a muddy fire road. Lester shifted into low range and we bounced through the ruts at a crawl.

The road paralleled a powerline right of way. We stopped on a bluff beside a thirty foot wood pole. Two hundred feet below the town of Crawford lay nestled between the hills and the Tennessee River. The town was three blocks long, laid out in straight lines of house lights that sparkled against the black velvet ground. A pair of car headlights barely slowed as it entered the town limits. The red and green running lights of a barge moved down the river.

"Looks peaceful, don't it?" Lester said. He shut off the engine, took a long drink from the bottle. "There wasn't shit here until me and Tommy and Albert strung a line off this bluff in 1962. Once they got cheap electricity that fertilizer mill started up over there. Crawford tripled in size overnight."

He waved his arm but the mill was shut down for the night and was only lighted by a few security lights. Lester plugged a spotlight into the cigarette lighter and handed it to me.

"Do me a favor," he said. "When I tell you, turn this on the top of that pole over there. "

The cigarette fell in an orange trace. Bluegreen fire flashed at the top of the pole with a simultaneous explosion, then sizzled down the side of the pole and disappeared into the ground, starting a small grass fire. The lights of Crawford dimmed once, then disappeared.

I pushed the switch and flooded the cab with light and turned it off.

Lester went to the back of the truck and strapped on his climbing hooks and tool belt. I opened the truck door and watched. He leaned an eight foot orange stick with a hook on one end against the pole. "That's a hot stick," he said. "Good for eighty thousand volts." Then he showed me a long piece of wire coated in yellow insulation with matching clamps at both ends. "This other thing is a safety ground. It's what would have saved your father's life."

Lester strapped his safety belt around the pole and started up, his hooks clanking as he stepped into the wood, the hot stick hanging from his belt and banging against his legs. Somewhere near the top I heard more banging. After a few minutes Lester yelled: "Hit me with that spot."

Lester stood a few feet below the wire. He attached one end of the safety ground to the ground wire running down the pole and the other to the end of the hot stick. He measured the distance to the wire, looked down at his feet.

"Okay. Turn it off."

Everything went dark. All I could see was the afterglow from the spotlight burned into my retinas. Lester lit a cigarette at the top of the pole.

"Got your night vision back yet, Gerald?" he yelled.

"Go ahead."

The cigarette fell in an orange trace. Bluegreen fire flashed at the top of the pole with a simultaneous explosion, then sizzled down the side of the pole and disappeared into the ground, starting a small grass fire. The lights of Crawford dimmed once, then disappeared. The valley was so dark that I couldn't tell where the river ended and the land began.

"Wake up and call the power company you bastards!" Lester yelled. "No more Johnny Carson, no more microwave popcorn. Say hello to the fucking stone age!"

I walked over and stamped out the burning grass at the bottom of the pole. Lester clanked to the ground, shaking the pole as he descended. He dropped the scorched, smoking safety at my feet and went to the truck, leaned in the window for the six pack, and sat on the hood of the truck still wearing his tools.

I climbed up beside him and took another beer. "What about them?" I asked, motioning toward the town.

"The boys at the substation will warm up the line after a few minutes, see if it goes out again."

We sat there for a few minutes listening to the insect sounds in the grass. An owl screamed somewhere off in the woods.

"You ought to come down sometime and let me show you the plant where I work, Lester. We make a lot of cable for Valley Power."

"Yeah, I know all about that," Lester said. He opened another beer and handed me one.

"Was my daddy disappointed when I didn't go on the powerlines?" I asked.

Lester didn't look at me. He leaned forward with his arms across his knees and held his beer with both hands.

"Tommy was disappointed by a lot of things. I'd say you weren't one of them."

I leaned forward like Lester and smiled. "I was never sure."

"My brother Albert hurt his back on this job and couldn't climb anymore. The company tried to fuck him out of his disability and lay him off. Me and Tommy went to the company president one night and told him that if he didn't take care of our brother we'd burn every piece of equipment Valley Power owned—chop down every goddamn pole and structure we ever stuck in the ground for them. And they took care of Albert too, let him operate the crane."

I drank the rest of my beer and set the can on the hood, but it fell to the ground. I hopped off the truck and picked it up, turned back toward Lester.

"Like I said, I was never sure." I started to go on, but Lester poked me in the side with his elbow and I stopped.

"Listen," he said. The wires over our head snapped and popped. "They're warming it back up." The lights in the town came on dim and then slowly burned up to full power. Lester beamed at me, his smile crooked and half drunk.

Terry Engel **Lisa.Engel@UCHSC.edu**

After spending several years working as a lineman for the Tennessee Valley Authority, Terry Engel attended the University of Southern Mississippi, where he earned the Ph.D. in Creative Writing. Presently, he teaches part-time at Metropolitan State College of Denver and dreams of having a full-time job, or at least making some real money.

The story "Afterglow" explores a portion of the lives of two characters from Engel's novel "High Range Driving" (unrepresented at present). Gerald Ballantine is floating through life, unsure of his relationship to anything or anyone, and when his father dies, the unresolved issues between the two give him even more cause for doubt. Ballantine's Uncle Lester provides him with the confidence and assurance that he needs to continue on. Lester is based not so much on actual linemen with whom Engel worked, but the general attitudes of the high voltage linemen with whom he worked. That is, there wasn't a job they couldn't do, or any men that they weren't better than. Ballantine is so impressed with the performance that Lester puts on, the ability to turn the lights out on the town, that he eventually decides to follow in his father's and uncle's footsteps, and become a lineman himself. "High Range Driving" is the story of how Ballantine leaves the powerlines and begins to live his life for himself.

A Brief Stay

by James Katowich

Gerald woke and for a moment thought he was still at the hospital. Outside his open window a car groaned and hissed as it cooled in his driveway. He heard the car door open and shut.

He saw it was noon and his first thought was that the outpatient nurse was coming by to check on him. He raised up from his stomach to yell at him to get lost and saw instead his son Clayton hurrying to the front door. He lay down with a grunt. Moving was like being shot again. Every hole in his back where they'd dug out the pellets flamed up and he had to grit his teeth to keep from yelling.

He heard the front door open; Clayton must have remembered the rock Gerald kept over the spare key. Clayton came into the house and stood for a moment in the door to Gerald's room. Clayton looked as if he hadn't had a bath in a week. His skin was a mess and his scant beard did little to hide the fact.

"Where'd they hit you?" was all he said.

"Look, how'd you find it out anyway?"

"They had it on the news, sir. They caught the woman who did it."

"The woman. Oh, yeah. Well, it makes sense," he said, "It was her house I was turnin' her out of." He hadn't expected her to be the type to keep an over-and-under behind the seat of her Chevy Luv. She'd looked too dead inside to have that kind of will. Gerald evicted as many as three people a week and had been doing it for sixteen years. He didn't see how she'd been any different from the rest. Most times, the job was easy. People would yell and get mad, but with a wave of the eviction notice and his badge they'd die down quick like a wet match and then give up. He never even took the sheriff with him anymore. This woman, she'd walked stiffly to her truck. He turned to put the deadbolt on the door and that's when it happened. He felt it like a kick in the small of his back and he fell off the porch and his ears rang as he lay there with the pain sizzling. It felt like red hot worms boring into him. Then he'd blacked out.

"Does it hurt, sir?" his son asked.

"Not too much."

"But they said you almost died. And that you're paralyzed."

Gerald managed a shrug.

Clayton put a fist to his mouth and coughed. "Well," he said, "I think I can stay here awhile and take care of things."

"Yeah, well thanks, but I don't need any help."

Clayton frowned and grunted. "You can't even walk."

"That's right. I can't even walk. I got this wonderful goddamn wheelchair right there takes me around alright."

"Well, I can cook. I work in the servery at the dorm."

"You can cook. You got another roommate yet?"

"No sir."

Clayton had called him one night during his freshman year, crying about his roommate. It was the first time they'd talked in months. Clayton called because the guy that shared the dorm room had slapped him in the head and kicked him a few times. Then the guy had packed up and left the dorm. Gerald told Clayton to unhook a spring from the bed frame and put it to the guy's face. Clayton only wanted to cry into the phone and Gerald hung up on him.

"And hell," Gerald said, "it's middle of the school year."

Clayton shrugged his shoulders. "I'll just take a week off. Until you're better. Let me make you some pancakes."

Clayton's mother used to make them both pancakes on Sunday mornings. Gail had been dead eight years.

"I don't want any damn pancakes."

"I'm going to go make them."

"Fine," Gerald sighed. "Fix'em."

Clayton smiled broadly. "Yes, sir," he said.

Gerald closed his eyes. He didn't want the boy in the house. He'd had the place to himself since he and Gail divorced twelve years ago. The courts didn't even consider him for custody after Gail told them how he'd disciplined the boy for dropping matches into a gas can. After she was gone, Clayton lived with Gail's parents. When they died, their money put him into college and the dormitory.

In the first years after the divorce Clayton stayed with Gerald in the summer and during holidays. But Gerald worked even then, and he often had to leave Clayton at home all day. One Easter, when Clayton had chicken pox, Gerald put him in the car and did his rounds. That day, he had to take a mover out to an old man's trailer and evict him and remove everything from the trailer.

Gerald and the mover carried the man's bed and furniture from the trailer. They threw everything into the yard beside the street. They put the rest of the man's property in boxes and carried them out also. The man kept retrieving small things from the boxes and carrying them back inside. Finally, the mover had to kick the old

man in the side of the knee and the old man lay on his side holding his leg.

Apparently Clayton had seen it all from the car. Gerald returned, and found Clayton had vomited across the front seat. His forehead was moist and hot and the small sores from the chicken pox were dark against his white face.

After that Gail's parents didn't let Clayton come over during holidays. Gerald got used to being by himself. Then, Gail's parents died, and Clayton started calling often from the dorm. And now he was staying a week.

Clayton returned soon with a tray of pancakes and milk, but the pain had increased and Gerald couldn't eat. Clayton sat there watching as he pushed the food around the plate. They had been sitting like this for some time when there was a knock at the door. Gerald looked out the window. A tall man with unnaturally blond hair stood on the porch in light blue scrubs.

"It's that damn nurse," he said.

Clayton stood. "I'll get it."

"No, let him knock."

"Mister Lassett!" the nurse yelled.

Half a minute passed. Gerald pulled the shade away from the window.

"We're all fine in here," he shouted.

"Well, good to hear it," the nurse called. "But I'll come in and see just the same."

"I don't want you to."

They heard nothing for a moment. Then, the nurse yelled, "I don't have to see you, you know. I can just tell them at the hospital that you're fine. I'd like to sleep in late too. I work sixteen hours a day and I don't much care for getting out of bed just to argue with you, Mister Lassett."

Gerald made a circular motion with one finger. "He goes on and on."

The nurse went on. "I could just stay in bed. I can do that and let you get an infection. Your legs may not work now, but at least they're still there."

Clayton made as if to stand. "Stay there," he told him.

"Or I can come in —" They heard the door open. "— and change your bedpans give you a nice bath and we can work those legs." There were footsteps, and the nurse appeared in the door of the room. Sweat had collected on his forehead above his dark eyebrows. He was not a fat man, but a plump belly clung to him, filling out his shirt. He carried a black zippered satchel.

"I didn't ask you in," Gerald said.

"If I waited for you to ask, Mister Lassett, I wouldn't have ever gotten in." The nurse talked fast. He came to Gerald's side, raising the flap of his shirt to look at his back.

"Very colorful, Mister Lassett. You should see this."

Gerald said nothing. He imagined the nurse's face yellow-brown with bruises, and pellet-holes.

He felt the nurse poking his skin with a pencil. Each touch blossomed a flower of fire that shoved roots across his back. "Having much pain?" the nurse asked.

"Feels fine."

"I'll bet it does." The nurse sprayed something from a can across his back. It felt cold. "You have a little bit of infection setting in. Your medication should take care of it, though. Long as we keep you clean and antiseptic."

"I can wash myself," Gerald said.

"I don't think so Mister Lassett, and besides you can't keep your legs toned by yourself, now can you?"

"My boy there can do it."

Clayton looked over, wide-eyed and nodding yes.

"I don't think he's had quite enough schooling."

"Hell, he's a genius."

"Well maybe so, but—"

Gerald pushed himself up on his elbows and turned around as far as he could. "Just show him the therapy and get the hell out."

The nurse fumbled in his bag. Mumbling to himself, he brought out a book and ripped two pages from it. He handed the pages to Clayton.

They heard nothing for a moment. Then, the nurse yelled, "I don't much care for getting out of bed just to argue with you, Mister Lassett."

Gerald made a circular motion with one finger. "He goes on and on."

The nurse went on. "I could just stay in bed. I can do that and let you get an infection. Your legs may not work now, but at least they're still there."

"Do that twice a day and make sure his back stays clean." He turned to Gerald. "I'll call you on Saturdays to check up." Then he left.

Clayton stared intently at the pages. He came beside Gerald and started bending his leg at the knee. Each time, a glow of pain settled in Gerald's back.

"Stop that," Gerald told him.

"You have to do this, sir. You told him." He bent the leg back.

"For Christ's sake," Gerald said, but he couldn't say anything more.

Clayton washed his back and moved his legs each afternoon. After the first days, the pain dulled, and soon when Clayton massaged his thighs Gerald thought he felt them tingle. The stiffness left his back and he was able to move from the bed and sit a few hours in the wheelchair. Clayton did not return to school. They watched television in the evenings, mostly old war movies or westerns. Gerald's favorite movies were those in which the hero was wounded or badly beaten and had to hide out until he was well enough to seek revenge. He would grip and slap the padded arms of the wheelchair and curse the villains bitterly.

"Look at that," he'd say. "This damn world will get you in a second. You never forget that. It got your mother quick and it almost got me."

Each night Clayton would massage Gerald's legs a second time and then wash him. Gerald's legs would resist at first and he would feel the tightness in his back. Then, gradually, the pain would lessen, and Clayton would say to Gerald how smoothly the muscles still worked. Gerald often watched Clayton from the corner of his eye. He watched his foot rise and fall and for moments he could not believe that it was something of his own body. It seemed attached to him arbitrarily, a non-living thing.

The nightly ritual seemed also to relax Clayton. Gerald noticed during this time the boy's manner was less forced. Clayton talked constantly as he massaged or cleaned Gerald. Gerald would lie with his cheek against one arm and half-listen to his son, feeling the rhythm and pause of the words and the cool touch of the wash-cloth against his shoulder or side. And abruptly when the bath stopped, Clayton would regain his clumsiness and he would put the things away hurriedly and pause at the door sometimes while his mouth closed and opened as he tried to speak. This would irritate Gerald, and he would flip off the lamp and put his head to the pillow, leaving Clayton to shut the door.

Clayton spent much of the day away from the house, driving around the county in his car. He told Gerald that he often went to his mother's grave. The cemetery was a two-hour drive away. Gerald wanted to do something kind for the boy and agreed to visit the grave. They hadn't driven more than ten miles before the vibrations of the road began to sear into his back. He made Clayton stop the car and he leaned the seat back as far as it would go. Gerald felt as if all the feeling and pain that his legs were denied gathered at his back and flamed at the borders of his feeling. After a few minutes Clayton turned around and drove slowly back home, creeping over railroad tracks and potholes.

Clayton had a dark look to his face as he drove. Gerald felt angry with himself for being unable to take the pain. He felt worse that Clayton had to see it, and now the boy looked as if he were disappointed in him.

Gerald braced his arm against the car door to support his back. "Son," he said, "your mother ever tell you about our first date?"

Clayton shook his head.

"Well, I'd seen her several times at the bank where she worked. I'd always go out of my way to get in her line when I cashed my paycheck on Fridays. It turned out she lived in a neighborhood I passed through on the way to work. She'd be getting in her car in the morning lots of times I drove by. So I went to call on her one time; I had some flowers I'd gotten by the side of the road. Before I even rang her doorbell this other fellow came up the walk with a fancy suit and a bottle of champagne. Seems he had the same designs I did. We had words, and I took the bottle from him and belted him over the head with it. He dropped like a wet mattress and I drug him around the side of the house. I rung that doorbell like nothin'd happened."

"And Mom never knew?"

"Nope. Wasn't more'n a month later we married. I never did tell her. Never saw that guy again, either."

"I can't believe you did that," Clayton laughed.

"You see what you want, you got to go get it. And it don't matter who's standing between you and that. Next time you see some gal, you think about that."

"Yes, sir," Clayton said.

Gerald half-slapped his shoulder. "Hey, no more of that sir stuff, alright?"

Clayton smiled and drove.

One night after dinner they sat on the back porch, in the shade of a twisted old walnut tree that leaned over the house. The sun had

gone down, but the sky still glowed palely. Around them was the repeated screech of cicadas in the air, on the tree and bushes around the house. Gerald could see them clumped along the wire fence that separated the back yard from the adjacent houses. When he was five, Clayton had snipped the fence apart with wire cutters so he and the neighbor boy could play football. Gerald had spanked him and made him apologize to the neighbor and Gerald had tacked the wire ends to a scrap of wood to reconnect them. Often when he thought of Clayton he thought of how the boy looked after he'd been disciplined.

Clayton started to speak but stopped.

Gerald turned to him. "Clayton, what's on your mind?" He tried to keep the anger out of his voice. "You're a man now, son. Speak your mind."

Clayton's face reddened. "Well—it's just that I never knew why you guys split up. I mean, what was your problem with her?"

"What makes you think it was my fault?" he said.

Clayton looked down. "I just figured. She left you, didn't she? And gave you the house. She didn't like it living with her parents. She must've wanted away pretty bad."

"She must have."

"Well, what was it?"

"Jesus, Clay," Gerald said.

Clayton went on. "I think about it all the time. When I was a kid I'd planned to get a car when I grew up and bring her back here."

"It takes a lot to live with a woman, son." He shook his head.

"Sometimes you have to talk, sometimes you got to shut the hell up. Or you got to be jealous when you're not and not jealous when you are." He spat into the yard. "I never had the timing for that shit."

"She always told me it takes more guts to talk about how you feel."

"I'll bet she did."

"Yeah, she did and I remember she said once if she was in a place where she couldn't express herself she'd go crazy. Was that it?"

"She called it expressing, I called it complaining," Gerald said.

Gerald could remember taking Gail to a restaurant for her birthday. It was the first time they'd gone out since Clayton's birth. The restaurant had just been built, a nice Italian place with vine-covered stucco walls, and fireplaces and a singing waiter.

Gail wore khaki shorts and a sleeveless red shirt. It was an outfit she'd worn when they dated. Seeing her in it made Gerald see how she'd changed. Her face looked to him lifeless; she was listless and quiet.

"Cheer up, will you?" he said. "I'll be glad when you figure out what's the matter with yourself."

She straightened her back and touched at her hair and looked across the room. "Nothing. There's nothing the matter, Gerald."

He remembered how securely happy she'd been when they learned of the pregnancy. But as the months went by she'd had a worse time of it and her labor was long. Still, Clayton was more than a year old and she hadn't shaken free of the depression.

"It takes a lot to live with a woman, son." He shook his head.

"Sometimes you have to talk, sometimes you got to shut the hell up. Or you got to be jealous when you're not and not jealous when you are." He spat into the yard. "I never had the timing for that shit."

"Good. That's good." A muscle tightened almost involuntarily in Gerald's cheek. He had an urge to slap her.

The waiter came. Gerald ordered for both of them. "Something special for the birthday girl," he said. "Oh," the waiter said. He raised his eyebrows and smiled. "For birthdays, we have something special!" He patted Gerald on the shoulder.

Gail smiled weakly. "Oh, Gerald. You don't have to do that."

Gerald said, louder, "It's her birthday, I said."

"Gerald, please no," she said.

The waiter clapped his hands and several other waiters came to the table. Then came the busboys and the cooks. Gail blushed and put a hand to her forehead. She cursed under her breath. Gerald put his hand up to stop them but it was too late. They clapped their hands, marching around the table and singing in Italian. She put her head to the table.

He prodded her arm. "Gail, hey. Christ. C'mon now." She put her hands over her ears. The singing stopped. The men looked at them. Some still had their hands raised. He could hear the soft chink of silverware against plates around them. Gail jumped up and pushed her way past the ring of men. He stood up and she turned

back to him and screamed that she hated him and ran out. And he'd sat back down there at the table with the cloth napkin in his fist.

He turned in his wheelchair and looked at Clayton. The boy was Gail all over. He had her round face and her hands, slender and fine. And she'd somehow in her death pressed into him a tender weakness, passed it on like a family heirloom. He watched Clayton trying both to speak and to not cry beside him on the porch. He felt pity seep into him like water into cloth and he spat in disgust at himself.

"I planned a talk," Clayton said. "Planned this word-for-word talk that we'd talk about her. That you'd—you'd say something. That I'd tell you how she was when she died and that I was there and you'd tell me how strong I was." He laughed and wiped his nose on a sleeve. "They released her from the hospital when it was too far gone. She wanted to be home with her parents. With me. And one night she knew she was dying soon and she called for me to be with her. But I couldn't do it, couldn't make myself go in there, I just hid in the closet under the stairs. Even when Grandpa went through the house yelling for me. And she started yelling too but I couldn't go and in the morning she was gone."

Gerald found he was tapping the armrest of the wheelchair and held his hands to stop himself. Clayton sat there with his shoulders stooped and Gerald thought that he could say something, only he could not think what and his mind moved quickly and sporadically until he could not think at all. And past this cloud of thoughts he saw his son in the chair beside him and he could not even unclench his own hands to place one of them upon the boy's shoulder.

Gerald sat like this for some time until Clayton went to his room. He sat there in the thickening night as the shrieking of the insects multiplied and the breeze sifted through the trees. He rolled himself into the house and to his bed. He tried to pull himself from the chair but lacked the strength. He made a racket in the attempt and Clayton came to his room and wordlessly lifted him into the bed. Gerald realized how easily Clayton moved him. Clayton left without exercising Gerald's legs for him. His back felt stiff and he wanted to ask Clayton but found himself unable to disturb the silence.

He could not sleep for the pain and the night passed by him slowly. Sometime before dawn he heard Clayton moving about in the house. A door opened, shut. He looked out the window and saw Clayton's car light up for a moment as the door opened. He pulled himself from the bed and into the wheelchair. Clamped whimpers escaped from him and when he slid into the chair the pain darkened his vision. Breathing heavily, he brought the chair out of the room and opened the front door. The car coasted from the drive and stopped in the road. He could see dimly the shadowed form of his son within the car. He flipped on the porch light so Clayton would see him. The car's engine came to life. It rose, whining for a moment, and dropped as the car moved forward. Gerald tried to move the chair from the porch but a wheel slipped. The chair tipped forward. He pitched to the ground and the pain seemed to encompass and outstrip his ability to feel it. Gasping, he strained his neck to watch the car gain speed and distance until it was gone.

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"I'm a first year MFA student in fiction at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, where I live with my wife of one year, Karen, and our cat and rabbit. Besides taking classes and teaching freshman composition, I play guitar in a quiet acoustic band and write songs and talk about books with my friends James Martin and Marc Bunn. I also am an associate editor of *Kudzu* with James Martin.

"The *Blue Penny Quarterly* was the first place I ever submitted fiction to, and though that first story didn't make it, Doug Lawson was so friendly and encouraging that I later sent him this story."

Eating Buzzards

by Gerald Thurmond

Jim paced over each railroad tie, looking for the body he didn't want to find. He marched up the steep grade and turned his head left and right with each measured step from tie to tie. The ties were marking his memory, moments that passed through him like a second hand that would not sweep, but paused on each mark of the clock dial.

He focused his attention between the extended rails, not knowing what was around each turn. What did a dead person look like? Did it look like a dead fish, deer, or quail? He didn't want to keep walking, but he forced his feet on and up the track.

The track wound up Signal Mountain and through the narrow passage between the Great Smokeys. It climbed steeply and switched back across the mountain face. He guessed that three more miles separated him from the railway crew. He wondered if he would see a state line sign. No, that was only on the highway he had taken to the mountains with his mother and neighbor.

It started when he was in the kitchen making his lunch for school. He was listening to WSB, trying to decide if he should wear his raincoat.

"Good morning, it's seven o'clock. Nationally, the stock market continues its sharp decline," the metallic voice said. "President Hoover has scheduled a press conference for one o'clock today to discuss the apparent collapse of Wall Street. WSB will cover the press conference live.

"In local news, Pullman Car No. 28 derailed between the Georgia and Tennessee line last night. It was carrying freight and passengers bound for Chattanooga. Railway officials are on the scene where bodies are being pulled from the wreckage of the overturned train. Over 100 passengers were thought to be on board. Railway officials said the derailment was most likely caused by mechanical brake failure on the switch-backs of Signal Mountain, but details of a full investigation will be released later. We will update this story as it evolves. In the weather today, rain is expected throughout metropolitan..."

Jim wondered if he had heard the announcer right or if he were still dreaming from last night. What car did he say? No. 28? Pullman? His heart beat faster, irregularly. He stood up, fought off a mental blackout that tried to draw him into a tunnel of darkness, and pulled the printed schedule down from the refrigerator. The magnetic clip released the document, fell from the refrigerator, bounced off the floor and rolled under the sink.

"Mom!" he yelled upstairs. "Come down here quick! There's been a railroad accident!"

His mother came down the stairs in her pink bathrobe and black furry slippers. Without heels she stood under five feet in height, magnifying her childlike looks. She was often thought, by strangers, to be Jim's sister—they were only sixteen years apart in age. Only the crow's feet and deep lines beneath her eyes belied her true age of thirty-one. Her hazel eyes opened into slits and stared at her son.

"What's going on, Jimmy?"

"Car 28 derailed on Signal Mountain last night."

She paused, looked at Jim as if he were lying, and tried to swallow against a dry mouth.

"Where's the schedule?" she stammered.

He unwrinkled the paper from his fist and handed it to her. She looked at it, then back at Jim, then returned her stare to the paper.

"What did you say?" she asked, combing her fingers through her tightly curled hair.

"The radio just said that Pullman car No. 28 derailed last night in Tennessee. They're searching for the bodies."

Mrs. Williams sat down slowly. She rubbed her eyes, put the schedule on the kitchen table and looked at it again. A gradual, grim realization fell across her face. Her eyes widened and scanned back and forth across a field of empty space between the unraveled schedule and her contracted pupils.

"Call the railroad and ask them what's going on," she said from her trance. "And put on some coffee."

Jim picked up the phone and asked the operator to connect him to the Pullman information office. All lines were busy. He hung up the receiver with an unsteady hand.

"Mom, the lines are all busy," Jim offered, "but the radio said they would update the news when more information came in."

Jim sat down next to his mother and held her hand. They listened to the radio for an hour, waiting for news.

The screen-door slammed shut and startled them both. Their neighbor Mrs. Reardon, stood in the foyer that lead into the kitchen. She was in her bathrobe and curlers, and was wearing no makeup.

When she saw the railroad schedule in Mrs. William's hand and the confusion on Jim's face, Mrs. Reardon sat down in silence.

They drank coffee and watched their plates of grits and bacon solidify and congeal. Jim wondered if he could build a brick outhouse using grits as mortar.

By ten o'clock the radio reports were still vague.

"Bodies are being recovered from the mountainside;" the scratchy voice said, "but no names will be released until positive identification is made and the families of the deceased are notified . . . "

They called the railroad office again, finally getting connected to the information clerk. She told them what the radio had said. Bodies had been thrown from the train. A search was in progress. Details would be announced over the radio.

The two women could wait no longer. They decided to drive the 110 miles to Signal Mountain, and listen to the radio in the car.

Jim sat in the back seat and wondered what was going on. Why hadn't they announced anything? Were there any survivors?

Riding up to Signal Mountain, Jim thought about both sides of Papa. The man of the house and the man in the woods. Papa was so different when they were hunting or fishing. He was almost kind and loving. He was the naturalist John Muir and Jim was his disciple. He was the nature lover and master-hunter; Jim was the apprentice-cleaner who had to pass countless tests before he could cast a line or load a gun.

Jim was not allowed to bait a hook until he could clean a fish, gut it, scale it, and lay the fillet flat across the ice. He was not allowed to load a shotgun until he could field dress a deer, skin it, bleed it, carry it to the truck, and carve it into steaks. Those were the rules. When he had learned these basics, Jim was given a rod and reel for his birthday and a shotgun for Christmas. He wasn't allowed to touch them until he could describe each of their components, where they fit, what function they performed, and how they could hurt a man if he didn't know how to treat them with respect. Not until he was twelve was Jim allowed to fire his first shotgun or cast his first line. When he finally went out with his papa, rod or shotgun slung over his shoulder, Jim felt like he was a man. Papa then let him go into the woods with the neighborhood men and their sons.

Their first hunting season together was three years ago. Jim couldn't imagine a hunting season without Papa. He still had a lot to learn about calling ducks, flushing quail, tracking deer, tracking, tracks, railroad tracks . . .

"Jimmy, why are you so quiet?" his Mom asked from the front seat of the northbound car.

"I'm just thinking."

"What's on your mind, son?"

"I'm thinking about how much I like hunting and fishing with Papa.

That's the best thing we do."

"Don't you worry now, we'll find out soon enough and—God willing—this day'll be over before you know it."

Mrs. Williams and Mrs. Reardon returned their attention to the two lane highway. The new Ford droned up the graded hills and ascended toward Signal Mountain and the narrow railway pass. The whining of the differential gears lulled Jim back to thoughts of Papa.

He was thinking that his favorite times with Papa were when they were up before sunlight, silently preparing for the group hunt. Each was responsible for himself. Each was treated as a man, though the sons knew they were second-class sportsmen, competing for the acceptance of their fathers. Jim Williams, Freddy Reardon, Bobby Jones, and Johnny Fulcher wanted to be men. They chewed secret tobacco at night in their bunk beds. They put a spit bucket in the center of floor and took turns spitting into it. Whoever missed the most, after five rounds, had to clean it up.

After a day of hunting or fishing, the boys were sent to their bunks while the men stayed up late, making noise, shouting and carrying-on in a way that men only do when they are away from their wives. The boys stayed up too, chewing their tobacco and telling stories about the hunt, girls, and school.

While the men shouted and smoked cigars, the boys talked about how they were going to set up their own still, just like the ones on the police page: a bathtub with a boiler and coils of copper pipe. Bobby knew where a bathtub was in the woods. Jim and Freddy could get copper pipe from the railroad yard. They could get corn from the market. They could build a shelter around it and camouflage it like a field blind. But they were just talking, all except Johnny who had little interest because his Dad secretly served homemade wine with every meal, even on the sabbath. But he feigned interest by listening with open eyes.

They agreed that their fathers would whip them sober if such a thing were found out. The illegality and immorality of it only sweetened their cunning, planning, and deception. Each knew he would get it bad—the risks were high—so they talked it up like

prisoners planning an escape that would lead either to their freedom or execution.

Bobby's father was the preacher. He would get it the worst, so he was talking the most manure. They said that Jim and Johnny would get it the least, probably have it "confiscated" for medical purposes. Jim knew better. He knew from church and Papa that drinking was the devil's poison, a sin that sent you to hell unless you "moderated" and only drank when it was "appropriate," like at private weddings and bachelor parties. If anyone got caught, Jim would get it the worst. He would get the belt, not the switch. It would land on his hide with a sudden stop.

The Ford and Jim's thoughts halted under a railroad overpass. Mrs. Williams reached her hand out to Mrs. Reardon, paused, then turned her head back over the bench seat to look at Jim.

"Jimmy, you get up there and start walking the tracks to the mountain top," his mom said with a tremble in her voice. "Mrs. Reardon and I are going to start from the Tennessee side and meet you at the wreck. Don't touch no dead people, except if they look like Papa. And if you find Papa, run to the wreck and wait for us there. Radio said it's on the Tennessee side, third switch-back off the mountain top. Now go on, boy and be strong. Your papa'd want you to be strong now." She turned her head from Jimmy, her hazel eyes holding pools of suppressed sorrow.

"Jimmy, you get up there and start walking the tracks to the mountain top," his mom said with a tremble in her voice. "Don't touch no dead people, except if they look like Papa. And if you find Papa, run to the wreck and wait for us there.

Jim paced on. He felt like a steam engine, straining against the mountain, pulling the weight of passengers, freight cars, mail, coal, fire, and water. What was a baptism by fire? Jim wondered. Bobby's dad preached about that in church yesterday when he and Mom went alone. Papa couldn't come because he was hauling freight to Charleston. Jim liked looking at Papa in his Sunday clothes. Papa looked like Clark Kent on Sundays.

In the church pew Mrs. Williams and Jim sat so close to the pulpit that Jim could see the breath trails coming out of Rev. Jones's nose. The combination of cold air and visible breath made Rev. Jones look like a gothic statue from a New York stone building. Jim knew about New York because Papa had taken him there last Easter break.

The New York-bound train clickety-clicked over each state line. Seven hundred miles north of Atlanta it was still winter. Jim didn't know about that. He sat in the back of the coal car, sweating like a hot horse and admiring Papa's command over the train. Papa stared at a point one mile down the track, ordered around the shovel boy, watched the gauges, and shouted commands at the other engineers and firemen. Jim watched the whole world race by as the train hauled crates of peaches, oranges, and grapefruit up to the city where "folk don't know what fresh food is," Papa said. Papa knew everything and traveled everywhere. To Jim he was Marco Polo on wheels.

The wind was cold, but the engine was hot with steam. Jim's sweat evaporated off his face like pan water from a wood stove. By Pennsylvania he was shivering. In New Jersey he was coughing, and for three days in New York he lay ill in the railroad bunk bed, guarding Papa's grip-bag, and waiting for him to come back each night.

Jim didn't care if he was stuck in bed sick, it was still the best trip ever. He didn't even mind when the Pullman nurse gave him bitter medicine and sat on his legs while taking his temperature. What made the trip so good was that each night Jim and Papa talked in the bunkhouse, like real men did.

The railroad workers would reel in after a night of "seeing the sights." Papa, red-eyed and tired from "speaking-easy with the Yankees," sat at the edge of Jim's bed and told him colorful stories about the people in the big city. Papa smelled like cigars and the medicine from the Pullman nurse.

""" You smell like medicine," Jim said sleepily.

"I just took some preventive medicine tonight, son," Papa said, cocking his head to the right and looking at Jim through his glassy left eye.

"Now go to sleep. We're leaving tomorrow."

Jim watched Papa stumble, undress, and fall into bed. He wondered why Papa would have taken medicine if he wasn't sick yet. He hadn't seen the nurse give him anything; and Papa sure smelled strong. Jim listened to him snore, matched his breathing to Papa's, and was soon asleep.

The next morning, after a phone call from Atlanta, Jim's Mom made Papa get him a passenger ticket for the ride back to Georgia. Jim felt important sitting in the Pullman coach car. He told his fellow passengers that his papa was driving the train and they'd sure

get there safe and on time. That was true. Mr. Williams had the best safety record in the Southeast Region and Jim was proud of it, at least until that morning.

Left, right, look with the eyes of a buzzard sweeping a valley.

At the mountain top Jim descended carefully and looked for the switch-backs that were hidden by rows of pine trees. On the second turn he saw the first body lying on the gravel. Actually all he could see were the shoes and pant legs sticking out of the brush. The pants were old and ratty and the shoes, exposed from the brush, had holes in the bottom and tape over the toes. Jim guessed that it was a hobo who was free riding. He had seen one arrested in Baltimore on his trip to New York. The conductor and caboose-man swept the train at each major city and threw the bums off, arresting them if cops were around. This bum didn't escape being kicked-off by the railroad men, Jim thought. Pullman mechanics who didn't keep the brakes fixed had caused him to be thrown from the train, had caused his unnatural death.

Curiosity drew Jim closer. He pulled back the pine tree branch that covered the upper body. The body was stomach down; but the head was turned around so that the man looked like he was wearing a clerical collar. Jim knew that after shooting birds, you grabbed them by the neck and spun their bodies around like a ferris wheel, breaking the neck and quickly killing the wounded bird. Papa said it was merciful to break their necks if they were still alive after you shot them. Papa said that it was a sin not to eat what you killed, even if it was by accident.

Jim looked on the body again. He had never seen a dead man before, but figured that the bum's neck was broken, so he died with mercy, quickly and suddenly. Jim felt creepy. He didn't want to but he couldn't help wondering who would eat the man and absolve the accidental sin of the railroad killers. Buzzards? Jim started thinking about two years ago when he had to pay for his murdering sins. He had killed a buzzard while hunting with Papa and his railroad buddies.

"Son, don't you know the difference between a buzzard and a black duck?"

"Yessir, but I thought it was a duck, coming into the field to eat."

"Boy, it may have been an accident, but you have to be responsible for your actions. You have to eat everything you kill. That's the law of nature," Papa said. He looked down at Jim, switched his cigar from one side of the mouth to the other, and spit on the ground. He towered over Jim at six feet three inches. His black hair curled out from under his hunting hat. His face twisted up and looked on Jim with scorn, then pity.

"Son, you might get sick from eating this buzzard," he said, "but if you cook it all night it will taste less like crap."

Jim learned a valuable lesson in mercy. Killing for fun, no reason, or accident was a sin. Killing for food was not a sin; but the buzzard still tasted like crap. Buzzards tasted like crap because they ate crap, dead flesh, trash. Black ducks tasted the best because they only ate plants. Mallards tasted fishy because they ate fish.

While Jim tended to the buzzard all night, the railroad men and Papa played cards and drank hot cider. Jim wondered why they carried on so much. They drank a lot of cider and Jim was only allowed to drink cocoa. Coffee and cider were only for the fathers. Coffee was nasty anyway, Jim thought. And it was bad for your aim. Jim didn't understand why the fathers told the boys that coffee was bad for their aim, but necessary for the men. Jim guessed it had something to do with staying up late and needing to wake up. It couldn't be anything else.

On the second turn Jim found more bodies, some in really gross conditions. They were cold and swollen up, like flesh balloons. He wasn't looking at faces any more, just the clothing. He knew Papa's uniform of black and white stripes, almost like the convicts in the picture shows. On the third switchback he saw some railroad men carrying stretchers down the track. He smelled smoldering coal and burnt pine. A tall, skinny cloud of smoke was rising from down the mountain. Jim figured it was the engine coal, still burning against the brush.

"Hey boy, get down from that track!" one of the skinny men shouted.

"This is an accident scene. You get on down the mountain, heah?"

"I'm looking for my papa," Jim said, trying to choke back a crack in his voice.

"Come on down, boy," the man repeated, grabbing a stretcher and turning around. "Go ask the foreman near the wreck." The man shouted those last words with his back turned to Jim. Jim acted like he didn't hear the man and kept on looking for his papa. He looked at every body he could see. Some were thrown clear over the tree tops and down onto the mountain face. Jim wondered if any had survived. Some must have, he guessed. Maybe some people only got broken legs or something. Not everyone could have been crushed or killed.

After looking at another ten bodies, Jim made it to the wreck: a hideous vision of twisted track and torn metal. The freight cars had jumped first and cleared the mountain face like a forest fire or team of lumberjacks with chainsaws. No plants, trees or anything were left where the freight trains had scraped the earth. Cargo had spilled everywhere—torn boxes of machine parts, crushed equipment, and punctured, leaky barrels of oil.

About a hundred feet further, at the sharp turn of the third switchback, Jim looked in awe at the scene of destruction. The track was wrenched from the ground. Passenger cars and the steam engine were lying on their sides fifty feet down the mountain face. The mountain was so steep that the cars and engine were almost upside down. Up on the track Jim could see about twenty men pulling up stretchers of bodies and loading them onto a passenger car that had become a hospital on wheels. Among the rescue vehicles there were three hospital cars and one fire engine.

About a hundred feet further, at the sharp turn of the third switchback, Jim looked in awe at the scene of destruction. The track was wrenched from the ground. Passenger cars and the steam engine were lying on their sides fifty feet down the mountain face. The mountain was so steep that the cars and engine were almost upside down. Up on the track Jim could see about twenty men pulling up stretchers of bodies and loading them onto a passenger car that had become a hospital on wheels.

Jim saw his mother walking from the other side of the wreckage. She was arriving at the scene the same time Jim was. Mrs. Reardon walked with her, but they didn't make good time. They were wearing heels and carrying umbrellas. Jim just then realized that it had been raining. He hadn't noticed before. The rain was beaded and dripping from his papa's hunting jacket and the Yankees hat he bought at Penn Station.

Jim felt like he was watching the world though the eyes of a bird flying overhead. He was sweeping around, looking at the wreck and wondering what it all meant.

"Jimmy, come down here son," his mother called. "Did you find Papa?"

"Nome," Jim said blankly.

"Let's go ask the foreman."

They held hands with Mrs. Reardon and walked toward a tall man in a dark suit, overcoat, and hat. He had a clipboard with papers that he was checking off with a pencil. He put the pencil behind his ear and turned to look at the two women.

"Ladies, what are you doing up here?"

"Her husband was on this train," Mrs. Reardon said. "He was the chief engineer. Where is he?"

"I'm sorry to tell you this ma'am," the foreman said, lowering his eyes and looking at the piece of railroad track in front of Mrs. Williams and Jim. "The chief engineer is dead. He was crushed by the train when it overturned."

The foreman raised his eyes from the railroad track and looked into Mrs. Williams's face. "When we found the wreck, his hand was still on the brake, ma'am, so he died trying to save others. He didn't jump the train like the other crew did. Arthur Bennett will be considered a hero for his bravery."

Mrs. Williams gasped and dropped to her knees, grabbing for Jim as she fell.

Jim watched his mother fall to the ground. He hovered over her like a bird circling an inlet cove. Jim reflexively reached out for her arm, but he missed, and she fell on gravel between two ties. He fought off the sensations of distance and estrangement and reached down to her, picking her up and regaining his own awareness, like Proteus changing from a flying bird to a grounded man.

"Sir," Jim said with a strained voice. "Did you say the chief engineer was Arthur Bennett?"

"Yes, son," the foreman repeated, looking down at Jim's wet boots. "I'm awfully sorry, son."

"But my papa is James Williams," Jim said.

The foreman's face changed. Color returned to his cheeks and he began to smile broadly. His eyes lit with the single pleasure he had felt that day.

"Your papa's James Williams? Son, it's your luckiest day. Your papa called in sick yesterday. Boys say he's down at the speakeasy, drinking it big and gambling hard," the foreman proudly said, looking around in a half circle. His voice suddenly hushed and

as he regained his somber composure. "Your papa must be the luckiest man in the world today."

Jim looked desperately into the foreman's face. "But that can't be my papa. He doesn't drink or gamble."

"Son," the foreman said, "calling in sick saved your papa's life. Now count your blessings."

Jim was stupefied. He started feeling like a buzzard again, soaring in circles over the wreckage. He looked down at his Mom, who was now supported by Mrs. Reardon. "Thank God he's alive!" she said and collapsed across the gravel, tie, gravel, and tie.

Jim felt dizzy. His head was spinning and spiraling upward, lifting him to the hovering heights of a preying buzzard. He wondered what the body of a dead hero tasted like.

He wondered who would have to eat it.

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Gerald Thurmond teaches English at Westbury High School in Houston, Texas and instructs teachers for the Rice University School Writing Project. He publishes *SLUMMIT*, a quarterly literary magazine for student and teacher writing, and edits *SWIPE*, the Rice University anthology of teacher writing. When not in the classroom, Gerald leads a high adventure Explorer Post for urban students and plays guitar with tolerant, tone-deaf friends. He is hoping that life will only improve with his June marriage to Shannon Butler, a social worker and fellow dog lover. His dog Blue loves to go camping and catch frisbees.

"My grandfather's stroke loosened his imagination and memory. We would sit in the basement of his Atlanta ranch house and watch Braves games while he chewed tobacco and exercised his paralized arm. The arm was nerve-dead, but he kept working it with a homemade rope and pully system we had bolted to the ceiling. With Red Man juice jetting from his lips he would tell stories of his fictional heroism in World War II. I was about 15 before recognizing his stories as the TBS war movie of the week.

"One story that was true was of his drunken, railroad engineer father calling in sick the day his train wrecked in Signal Mountain. Before learning that his Dad was "laying out" in a bar, my grandfather—then 15—had walked the railroad pass looking for the dead body. At the wreck scene he was told the 'good' news.

"'Eating Buzzards' explores what my grandfather could have been thinking about as he walked the tracks. The only truth is of his searching for a dad who had never left Atlanta. What went through his head I can only imagine."

My First Shot

by Steven Sanders

"Wilbur, when you pull that trigger, you'll be standing here, and the seat of your pants'll be on the Grand Canyon."

Why should I have remembered that then?

Dad said that to me seventy-five years ago. He was an awful tease, and he had me believing that firing the shotgun would hurt me more than whatever it was I was planning to shoot. It came back to me as I sat by Pearl's bed, watching her thin chest struggle to lift the weight of the yellow sheet covering her. We had been married for fifty-three years, but the last eighteen months of her illness had compressed our lives into something flat and unrecognizable. It was like living in a period room at a museum—everything was background and suspended movement. On the surface it looked nice—an eighty-five-year old man taking care of his terminally ill wife— but underneath, the living part that used to be there had dried out, and I felt more and more out of place moving through a house drained of everything but the past.

When Pearl fell into a coma the last month of her life, I knew she didn't want the feeding tube in her stomach or the IV in her arm. She had told me as much every time we visited a friend hooked up to pouches and bottles. The problem lay in the gap between knowing something and doing something about it. I had a gun in the closet, and Pearl would have wanted me to use it, but an end like that freezes everything forever. It's not entirely right to say you can't live on love, because you can, but sometimes love draws down hope so much that what you're left with is not life at all, just a room in a museum marked by a plaque, and a dim sense of what was.

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My constant chafing at Dad to let me use the shotgun paid off the year I turned ten. He finally figured out I wasn't going to be scared off by his exaggerations of the kick. He gave me one shell and instructions not to point at anything I didn't intend to kill. Before turning me loose, he also made a hard case against shooting near livestock. It was the same year we had taken to bringing the cattle into the barn at night because of wolves.

One July day that summer I found a heifer acting strange near the stock pond. She was a beautiful animal—a registered, Polled Hereford, deep hindquarters, perfect udder, nice markings—but one of our Angus bulls had gotten loose during her first heat and mated her. She was too young to calve though, and Dad was sick about what had happened.

She was standing in a circle of trampled clover, tail hitched high in the air, her curly white face hanging down on her brisket. Unable to decide whether to lie down or stand up, she'd drop to her knees for a minute, and then struggle to get back up. The hide across her belly was stretched tight as a drum; so tight that Dad thought she might be carrying twins. With the birth sac starting to push out of her, she looked scared. I felt sorry for how uncomfortable she must have been with all her getting up and down.

The bird I downed with my first, closed-eye shot was a rust-colored sparrowhawk. I don't recall the make of the gun, but I do remember the sturdy, mute power of it in my hands, and the way the one shell weighed down my pocket like a chunk of hot uranium. Like Dad had told me, I carried the gun open at the breech, hoping that whatever I happened to scare up wouldn't be frightened away by the cold click of it snapping shut.

Pearl's coma had descended on her like a cloud of hushed crows, and I needn't have worried about the chance of her hearing the lighter sound of cylinder meeting barrel in my revolver. Sometimes to make sure, I took the gun out of the closet and practiced sitting with it in my lap by her bed. I watched for signs that might have shown she sensed the nearness of death: the flare of a nostril, a movement towards the other side of the bed. There weren't any.

It was obvious the heifer needed help. I slipped around behind her and started to tap her flanks with a switch, hoping to get her pointed to the barn. She seemed almost grateful for the choice, and responded to the switch by setting off slowly for the barn. It was around a quarter mile away, and Dad was waiting in the dark when we got there. We steered her into the pen on the south side of the barn and put down fresh hay. Dad took one look and told me to fetch some lanterns, along with a rope and halter. The sac was the size of a cantaloupe.

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The sparrowhawk was perched on a post of an abandoned fenceline that cut through a stand of pin oak and walnut north of the barn. It was near dusk, and I had already passed on a sure shot at a meadowlark, as well as an outside chance at a rabbit. I didn't see the hawk right off. Adjusting my eyes to the spotty sunlight in the trees caused him to look like the jagged top of a rotting fencepost—but as I stood just inside the treeline staring hard, his head swivelled and his body came into focus. I couldn't make out a color, but the hard and clean shape of his silhouette told me it wasn't a potbellied meadowlark or a curlicue-topped quail. Dad loved the quails' sing-song whistle, and he had forbidden me to shoot them. It was perfectly quiet in the trees.

Other than an occasional soft groan, Pearl hadn't made a sound in a month, and the silence that surrounded her had crept throughout the house. The only interruptions to it were the sounds of my cooking, or the clink of the mail slot in the front door.

It was getting harder for the heifer to get back on her feet after she lay down in the pen, and she finally gave up and rolled on her side. It was an unusually cool July night, and clear. The stars shone as though someone had thrown handfuls of sugar to stick against the blackness of the sky. I could hear the heifer's drawn-out lowing all the way back at the house, where I had gone for the jackets.

The quiet in the trees was interrupted by the quick chattering of three red squirrels who scolded me as I fumbled in my pocket for the suddenly slippery shell. I squatted down, hoping they would stop betraying me if I could somehow make myself smaller by being closer to the ground. They weren't fooled, especially after the tightening muscles in my legs pitched me forward onto my knees, crackling last year's oak leaves. I saw the almost-pink underbellies of two of them circling down the trunk of a nearby walnut tree, angrily clicking their tongues. The other one kept his distance, twitching his spindly tail from his post on the branch of a small oak.

The area I was kneeling in was overgrown with oak scrub, and one of the sapling's branches made a jagged 'V' that framed the sparrowhawk. Surprisingly, all the commotion hadn't frightened him away, and he kept stock-still on his perch as I slid the gun into the crotch of the 'V.'

The last time I got the revolver out and sat by Pearl's bed, her face was lit up softly by the lamp that stood on the bedside table. It was amazing how much she looked like her mother Sarah, when Sarah was near death in a nursing home. A healthy Pearl bore little resemblance to her mother, but the cancer had taken its toll, and her face seemed to have drawn tight to her skull the same way Sarah's did right before she died. We were with Sarah that night, and together with our pastor, we held hands and prayed at the foot of her bed. The wrinkles on Sarah's eighty-seven-year old face had been pulled smooth and shiny, and the round domes of her cheekbones sloped down to thin blue lips, parted a bit by her shallow breathing. We didn't pray for miracles that night, only a painless end. That was miracle enough for all of us.

I didn't ask for guidance when I knew Pearl's end had to come, because it wasn't guidance I was after. I thought I knew what was right for her. It was a hard stretch to call her life living, but when that's all you have, who's to say? Our fifty years together counted for a lot in my mind, and her sad assurances that she did not want a lingering, painful death, assurances she made to me each time we visited a dying friend, made up for most of the rest.

I was with her throughout her sickness, and I watched her transformation into the very image of Sarah, with her high cheekbones, and wispy white hair brushed back from her shiny forehead. Right at the end I couldn't do much more to comfort Pearl than to hold her cool hand while I sat in the chair by her bed. By then I was worn out by hoping; what I prayed for instead was forgiveness for what I had decided to do.

When I got back to the pen with the jackets, the calf's head had emerged. One of its front legs had gotten ahead of itself, and was hung up under the calf's chin. Dad said that would never do; one of them, the heifer or her calf, would surely not make it in that awkward position. Somehow he got the heifer to her feet and put the halter on her, tying the lead to a fencepost. Being that the calf was all twisted up, he said we needed to get the other foot out, or get the one that was already out back in. The heifer was pushing too hard for us to reposition the calf, so Dad took off his jacket, rolled his shirtsleeves up to his shoulder, and began worming his hand into the heifer's vagina. There wasn't much leeway in there, and he was in up to his elbow before he caught ahold of the other leg and guided its small hoof out next to the one under the calf's chin. He had a worried look

on his face, and the heifer's backside was starting to sway. The short lead on the halter forced her to keep her head up and facing straight ahead, but she was fighting it and trying to turn around to see what was going on behind her.

By then, the calf's head was completely out, but its legs were choking it. Dad grabbed the rope and tied a half-hitch around them, just above the small, pointed hooves. He played out the rest of the rope straight across the pen to the opposite side, pulling up the slack and tying another half-hitch around a fencepost with the other end. He told me to stand at the midpoint of the rope and push down on it.

The heifer let out a bellow when I pushed the rope. I let up right away, but Dad yelled at me to push down harder or we would lose them both. It pained me to do it, but I did as I was told.

In the trees that long-ago summer day, forgiveness for shooting the hawk was not on my mind, only the hope that my one shell wouldn't be wasted, and that I wouldn't part with the seat of my pants. Boys that age don't think of themselves as cold-blooded killers, and the power that comes from a gun is in some way disconnected from the actual taking of life.

The two chattering squirrels had given me up as a lost cause, and they joined the one in the oak tree. All three of them pranced nervously on a branch, snapping their tails in unison.

The heifer's eyes were darting frantically, her pink tongue waving around, licking at the bubbly mounds of saliva stuck on her jaw. I was pushing down on the rope for all I was worth, but I couldn't pull that calf out one inch more. Dad came and helped, but even then it was all we could do to get the calf out of her to its shoulders. By then it was too late, the calf was dead.

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I swallowed hard to keep my heart down in my chest as my finger closed around the cold curve of the shotgun's trigger. The barrel pointed at the hawk seemed a mile long, and the BB-sized sight at the far end looked like a buoy bobbing in the middle of the ocean.

The heifer was confused and hurting, and she had stopped making noise. There was a dark rivulet of blood pulsing out of her, tracking down the slick leg of her calf. Dad told me we had to get it out fast or she'd hemmorhage to death. There was a catch in his voice that told me he didn't hold out much hope of saving her, but he leaned his two hundred pounds into the rope anyways, telling me to climb the fence near where the far end of the rope was tied. He wanted more leverage, and he told me to get on the rope with my feet and push down with everything I had. Every time I pushed down, the heifer let out a painful yip, and I found myself trying to go easy on her by not pushing so hard.

I swallowed hard to keep my heart down in my chest as my finger closed around the cold curve of the shotgun's trigger. The barrel pointed at the hawk seemed a mile long, and the BB-sized sight at the far end looked like a buoy bobbing in the middle of the ocean.

The hawk was still motionless, and as the tip of the barrel roamed up and down his body, I tried to keep my eyes open so I could steady my aim right on his middle.

I didn't have the luxury of distance when I aimed at Pearl. I could recognize her mother's drained face on hers, even under the yellow sheet I had pulled over it. I held the gun against her forehead and fumbled with the safety before settling my finger on the trigger.

In the end I couldn't keep my eyes open. I closed them when the sight passed over the breast of the bird and tugged at the trigger.

The blast exploded the silence.

When my eyes opened to the dry smoke of gunpowder, I saw that the hawk wasn't on the post anymore. After realizing that I was still in one piece, I got up and ran through the underbrush towards it.

He was fluttering in an elderberry bush that grew up around the base of the post. There wasn't much life left in him, but the only wound I could see was a small, red stain, high up on his white chest. His milky-pink eyelids were half-closed, and the black centers of his eyes were glassy and unfocused.

All of his fluttering had sifted him down through the outer branches of the bush to the middle of its tangled base, and when I snaked my hand in to get him out, he opened one wing in a last try

to get away. The coppery underside of that wing flashed for a second, and then it was over.

The heifer's hemmorhaging had gotten worse, and there was a dark stain spreading on the hay under her rear end. Dad knew we had to hurry, and he climbed the fence and put his big boots next to mine on the rope and started pushing like he was the one going to die if we couldn't get the calf out.

There wasn't enough time. A whole night of tugging and pulling had worn the heifer's insides out, and right when the sun started to light up the eastern sky, she keeled over, her head held up at a crazy angle by the halter, and her rear lifted slightly off the bloody hay by the rope tied to her three-quarters born calf.

Dad said that calves sometimes have congenitally dislocated hips, and he figured that was what was wrong; the calf's hips had caught on the immature heifer's, causing her to hemmorhage from all of our fighting to get it out.

It was one of the only times I ever saw him cry—losing both of them after trying so hard was a heavy blow. "We can't pretend to know God's plan," he said. "We did all we could."

I pulled the hawk out of the bush by his neck, and when I laid him out in my hand, his soft head drooped over the side of my palm. The branches of the bush had ticked up some of his feathers, so I preened them until he looked like a picture out of a book. He was warm, and his feathers were satiny and stiff.

The sheet covering Pearl had been ruffled by the shot, and I ran my hands over her one last time, smoothing the sheet over her quiet body. Blood soaked the yellow sheet over her forehead, reaching out in spidery veins like stray blood that finds its way into an egg yolk.

I went to the closet and got down a blue calico quilt she had sewn, unfolding it quarter by quarter over the bed. It tented up over the tubes running into her stomach and arm. I remembered her working on that quilt in her sun-filled sewing room, her sure hands gathering up stitches. She could never have imagined that it would someday be used for this. How could she have? How could she have imagined her slide into unconsciousness, her husband with a gun sliding out of his hand?

How could I?

I turned the lamp off, shut the door, and went into the kitchen to call the police.

Waiting for them to come, I washed the one cup and plate from my breakfast and cried over our life together. My father's congratulations on my one-shot aim in killing the hawk skipped through my thoughts.

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Steven Sanders lives and writes in Lauderdale, Minnesota with his wife, Katherine and son, Kell. His stories have also appeared in Mississippi Review, and CrossConnect.

"I think of 'My First Shot' as a story about memory—the power of unbidden memory, and the emptiness of memory as a substitute for the future. I wanted the focus to stay on the moment the old man pulls the trigger, rather than on any elaborate and, most probably, unsatisfactory reasons for doing so. What interests me as a writer is moments like those; moments in which our frailties are laid bare, and our humanity has a chance to be heard."

Pandora's Dogs

by Mary Soon Lee

Ann lit a cigarette and slowly inhaled. The cheap tobacco smoke scraped her throat raw, but the kick of the nicotine unknotted her shoulder muscles. Ann leaned back in the chair, one eye on the clock. Five minutes to four, almost time to go home. Hell, if a call came through now, she'd ignore it.

She took another drag on the cigarette, blew a smoke ring gently to the ceiling.

The phone rang.

Ann turned her back on the customer service screen, and watched the white curls of smoke instead. Two rings, three.

"Priority call. Picking up automatically," the desk computer said. Shit. Ann stubbed out her cigarette. Bad enough that the computer could override her line; there was no need for it to sound smug. She forced a smile as the screen dissolved to show the customer. Her smile slipped into a grin before she managed to control it. Where had the man found that suit? It looked like a period prop for a movie, maybe even manufactured from real animal fur. Come to think of it, the man could have been a prop himself, metal-rimmed glasses pushed up onto his bald head.

"Simoco Limited," she said. "How may I help you?"

"I want you to collect this . . . object . . . immediately." He brandished a model 232 robo-dog, shaking it vigorously. A gash in the soft orange synth-fur of the dog's head exposed a pale net of optical fibers. The old man must be stronger than he looked if he'd caused the damage.

"If the unit is defective, I can order a replacement. We have a wide selection of . . ."

"I don't want a replacement. I don't want your sales pitch. And I most certainly don't want this . . . thing . . . lurking in my apartment, sticking its steel snout into my private business."

"Sir, I assure you that Simoco is in full compliance with the UN guidelines on reasonable privacy."

"Don't treat me like a senile dotard, girl. The guidelines are worth rat's spit. I know precisely what that thing's doing, with its beady little eyes watching me."

Ann took a deep breath and counted to three. Never raise your voice at the customer. She glanced at the information highlighted at the bottom of her screen. "It says here that the robo-dog belongs to your son. So he's the only one who has access to its video logs."

"Exactly! He's spying on me." The old man thumped the dog on the table, and its bright orange ears wriggled in protest. "Now would you please get rid of this thing?"

"I'm sorry, I can't authorize the unit's removal without your son's consent."

"Bullshit. You're the senior service representative on duty. You can issue a recall whenever you feel like it. So shift your backside and get on with it."

Beneath the edge of her desk, Ann made a rude sign. Every so often, one of these centenarians would call up wanting their unit removed. At least this one hadn't started ranting about the Good Old Days. Turning to the camera pickup, Ann gave her best saccharine smile. "I'm sorry, sir. We only issue recalls if our equipment is hazardous. Apart from a little cosmetic damage, there's nothing wrong with your unit. Even so, I see that your son requested an auxiliary unit as backup. It should arrive tomorrow morning."

"Another one?" the man asked hollowly, all the energy seeping from his voice. At Ann's nod, he sagged in his chair, his mouth working silently. Ann bit her lip. The fragile kind were worse than the Good Old Days brigade. Sitting there, his face all crumpled, the old man reminded her of her grandfather. In the months after Grandma's death, Grandpa would spend whole days alone in his apartment, staring at a 2-D photo of their wedding, not even bothering to look up if he had a visitor.

The old man straightened up. "Please. Ann. I'm not asking you to break the rules, just to bend them at the corners. All I ask is a week or two . . . find some excuse to recall the units for that long. Please."

Ann hesitated. "Why? What are you planning?"

"To subvert the government."

Ann's eyes widened before she noticed the corners of the man's mouth twitching upward. "Oh, very funny. What are you really doing?"

"I don't want to discuss it over the phone. Why don't you come around and see for yourself?"

Ann hesitated.

"I have a few packets of Marlboros you might care to sample . . ."

"How do you know I smoke?"

He shrugged. "I scanned the files on Simoco's employees, cross-checking with the public databases. You're one of the few

who opposed compulsory sterilizations in South America, and of those you're the only one who smokes. I can't stand tobacco myself, but I like people who don't just do what's fashionable. So, how about it? Will you come over?"

Ann bit her lip. For all his grumbles about privacy, the old man had no scruples about poking into her background to try to manipulate her. Contradictory and devious and charismatic—and that, too, reminded her of Grandpa, but in the years before Grandma died.

"Okay," Ann said. "I'll come."

The transcity lines terminated half a mile before the old man's address, so Ann had to walk the rest of the way. Even with a robo-Alsatian tagging her heels, she didn't like the narrow streets, fetid with decomposing garbage. Boarded up windows and discolored graffiti-streaked walls loomed above her. The old man had money, so why was he living here?

Ann quickened her pace, careful to look straight ahead. From the corners of her vision, she glimpsed faces peering out at her, the whites of their eyes pressed to cracks in the buildings.

The route-finder beeped: number 572. The old man's place. Ann blinked. A yellowing brick house squatted between two plas-frame slums, its windows picked out in fresh green paint. Despite the building's age, the walls were free of graffiti. Puzzled, Ann pressed the doorbell. "Mister Warnell?"

The old man opened the door. "That thing stays outside." He pointed at the Alsatian. "Don't know why you had to bring it."

"I don't want to leave it on the street. People might —"

"If it stays where it is, no one will bother it." Warnell closed the door firmly behind her.

Ann sniffed; there was a rough damp smell that she didn't recognize, a bit like a wet rug, but more agreeable.

"Through here." Warnell waved her forward. As they passed a locked door, something metallic scraped behind it. Warnell grinned. "Your robot's in there; I tricked it into a small trap. But first, come see my dark secret." He wiggled his eyebrows theatrically, and opened another door.

Wet rug smell and high-pitched yaps assaulted Ann before she sorted out what she was seeing. There were patches of brown fur jumping around the floor at her feet, like miniature robo-pets, but there was something wrong with them. Brown hairs littered the worn carpet. Alive, the creatures were alive. Ann backed away, her throat dry as sand, trying not to inhale.

Images from school holo-vids ate at her: the plague, children with their skin peeling from their faces, rats and cats and dogs being hurled into the incinerators. Gulping, she saw Warnell standing there calmly, letting the animals touch his bare skin.

One of the things bumped against her leg, its cold wet nose snuffling her. She pushed past Warnell, but the door was locked. Images from school holo-vids ate at her: the plague, children with their skin peeling from their faces, rats and cats and dogs being hurled into the incinerators. Gulping, she saw Warnell standing there calmly, letting the animals touch his bare skin.

Ann forced herself to breathe normally. If the dogs were carriers, it was too late anyway. "The penalty," she said carefully, "for keeping mammals is life imprisonment. But I didn't think there were any left, and I certainly didn't think anyone was stupid enough to try. What if they escape outside? What if —"

"They're called dogs, and they've all been vaccinated."

Ann shook her head. "No. When I was eight, I asked my grandmother what animals were. At first she wouldn't answer, but I nagged at her. And eventually she told me about the plague. How tramps were shot in the streets because people assumed they were infected. And the morning her mother put the cats out in a box for the incinerator man. I'd never seen Grandma cry before. If there had been a vaccine, people would have used it."

"Don't be naive. The military had a vaccine almost from the start, but if they'd used it people might have suspected they knew a little too much about DY22 to be natural." Warnell held one of the puppies in his arms. His thumb rubbed gently back and forth across its fur, but his voice was harsh. "And, as one of the generals pointed out, it was hurting our enemies worse than us."

Ann's flesh prickled with cold goose bumps. "That can't be true. Someone would have told the doctors —"

"One of the technicians tried. They caught him taking serum from the lab; a week later his name was listed as a plague victim."

His mouth twisted. "Hell, it wasn't all bad. At least there are no more rats."

Ann stared at the bundle in his arms, a little scrap of fur with pudgy legs and moist eyes. It wasn't what she'd imagined: neither a manic beast prowling for victims, nor the calculated cuteness of the holo-vids. The vids never mentioned the smell. She'd have to do so if she was interviewed: "Woman Who Smelled Real Dogs."

One of the dogs bumped insistently at her calves. Ann bit her lip. The vaccine must be safe; there hadn't been any cases of plague in over a decade. She bent over and lifted it up. The dog was warm and wriggled in her grip, struggling to free itself. "Woman Who Held Real Dog In Her Bare Hands." Ann giggled; the situation was ludicrous. "What's the matter with this one? It won't stay still."

"Support it properly, and then pat it," said Warnell.

Gingerly, she stroked the dog's back. There, it seemed happier, its head lolling against her. Odd how satisfying it was to hold it. Ann stopped that thought angrily, and set the dog on the ground. There was no sense in getting attached to the creatures. Vaccinated or not, they were bound to be killed. When the news had broken about a laboratory in Switzerland that still had live monkeys, UN forces buried the site beneath 400 feet of concrete.

Ann cleared her throat uncomfortably. "You know I have to report this."

"And there I was, erroneously assuming you had free choice." Warnell's gaze pierced her sarcastically, before returning to the puppy in his arms. "Canis familiaris, a species renowned for their loyalty and trust, the first animals to be domesticated by man. And, barring any other reckless criminals harboring disease-prone beasts, the only land-based mammals left alive. Other than man, of course. How proud you'll feel when you've exposed my scheme, how safe when the soldiers eliminate the last dangerous specimen."

Ann flushed, her fingernails digging into her palms. "That's not fair. You were the one who asked me here. What'd you expect me to do?"

"I expected you to have more guts."

"You're trying to manipulate me."

"Of course I am! Six hours ago, that metal monstrosity with its prying camera eyes landed on my doorstep. I never guessed that Mark, my son, would do that to me. I'm out of time, and I need your help. Please."

"Sorry. There's nothing I can do. Now if you'll unlock the door, I have to leave."

Without a word, without looking at her, Warnell undid the door.

Her lips pressed into a hard line, Ann marched to the entrance, and let herself out onto the street.

Ann knew she should call the police immediately, but she told herself that it wouldn't hurt to go home first, have a shower. They'd probably question her for hours, and then keep her in some hospital isolation ward for tests.

She stood in the shower for half an hour, letting three days water ration course down her body. But it didn't help. Even the last of her cigarettes didn't help, the smoke souring in her mouth. Each time she thought of reaching for the phone, she felt sick. But she didn't have any real choice, whatever Warnell said. She wasn't prepared to spend years behind bars because of some old man. Dogs were only dumb animals, less sophisticated in many ways than Simoco's robots. Why did it matter what happened to them?

Finally, she sat by the phone, pressed the emergency button. A sunburnt man appeared on the screen, his uniform stretched taut over his paunch. "Police, fire, or —"

"Sorry. Mistake." She disconnected the call. Her fingers shook as she selected another number. One ring, two.

"Yes? Who's there?" Warnell had switched off the video link.

"Ann Connor. Look, even if I wanted to help you, there's nothing I could do. Right?" This wasn't coming out how she'd intended. She tried again. "Suppose I got rid of the robo-dogs for a week, that would only delay things slightly."

"Long enough for a friend of mine to drive down to see me." Warnell's face solidified on the screen. "She's a good friend, with a large transport truck. She tells me she's found homes for forty breeding pairs."

"Forty pairs? You have eighty —"

"Just so. You didn't wait to see the rest of my house. Or to sample my cigarettes."

"All right." Ann had the distinct impression she'd regret doing this, but her mouth carried on by itself. "I'll come back over, take your robo-dog away. But that's all. Okay?"

Warnell grinned. "It's a start. Thank you."

Ann sat in her office, waiting for Warnell's son to phone. Every day for the past nine days, he'd called at precisely noon. She took a final drag on her cigarette, and braced her shoulders.

The phone rang.

Gritting her teeth, Ann pressed the receive button. "Mister Warnell, what a surprise."

"Ms. Connor." Warnell, Jr. lounged in an executive water chair, his scarlet tunic conspicuously filigreed with designer holos. "My lawyer tells me that the two Simoco units are still on your premises. Is that correct?"

"I'm afraid so. Their diagnostic routines are—"

"Don't bother to fabricate another excuse. At first I assumed you were merely incompetent. But it's become clear you're deliberately stalling. Unless both units are installed within the hour, I'll ensure that you lose your job. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Mister Warnell," Ann grated. Her blood pressure was doubling, and her jaws ached from her frozen smile. "But if you would just give me a little more time, I assure you —"

"You have one hour. I'm confident you'll decide to cooperate."

That smug, self-assured . . . Ann flicked up the volume of her outward transmission. "You pompous asshole. I'd rather lose my job than help you spy on your father. It's none of your business what he does in his own home."

"But it isn't his own home," Warnell, Jr., murmured. "Under UN rules I assumed legal guardianship on his hundredth birthday. Purely for his own best interests, you understand."

He clicked the disconnect, and the screen flickered back to Simoco's logo.

Ann hummed to herself as she approached Warnell's house. In the autumn sunlight long shadows flowed across the buildings, the light piercingly clear. She felt as though she'd been turned inside out, upside down. She'd lost her job, yet she was happy.

A sheet of plastic shifted in one of the windows, and a boy peered out at her openly. She waved at him, then jumped as a man appeared beside him.

"Ann?" Warnell leaned out of the window. "Come in here for a minute."

The front door creaked open.

Cautiously, Ann stepped through. There was a wet . . . doggy . . . smell in the hallway. Warnell ushered her into the single downstairs room. Two foam beds were folded against the walls, a small rusty cooker in the corner, but the place was clean. And in the center, clutched in the boy's arms, was a golden-brown puppy.

Warnell nodded at it. "Half Labrador, half the Lord knows what. And this is Thomas, he's minding the dog while the others are out."

"Hello, Thomas."

The boy sniffed noisily. "Hello. Don't mind if you sit down."

Taking that as an invitation, Ann eased down onto one of the beds.

"Thanks." She looked around, noting the three hardcopy books on a makeshift shelf, the neatly patched clothes.

Warnell raised an eyebrow. "Not what you expected?"

"No, I, that is, on the vids . . ." Ann stopped, unable to continue while the boy was listening.

"On the vids, unemployables are always criminals. That doesn't make it the truth. Don't watch like a dope-dulled idiot. Think for yourself." His mouth twisted sourly. "Not that I ever did."

Ann sat there awkwardly, her cheeks hot. She played with an object in her pocket, taking it out as the silence stretched.

"What's that you got?" The boy gazed round-eyed at her.

Glancing down, Ann focused on the little hand-carved dog with its pointed muzzle. "The man in the antique shop said it was a Border collie. Here, you can have it."

"For real? I can keep it?"

"Sure. I was going to give it to Warnell, but he won't mind." She glanced up at Warnell, but the old man didn't respond. Ann frowned. "Maybe I should come back tomorrow. Warnell?"

He didn't react as she stood up.

"Warnell?" She laid her hand on his back. "Is something wrong?"

"Sixty-nine years," he muttered. The muscles bunched in his arms, and he swung round. "Sixty-nine years ago to the day. I was eating oysters in a French cafe when the lab director phoned, priority message. There'd been a power surge, half the networks had gone down, and several of the DY22 rats were missing."

He shook his head. "I'd never had any qualms about our research, thought we needed to maintain a covert strategic advan-

That smug, self-assured . . . Ann flicked up the volume of her outward transmission. "You pompous asshole. I'd rather lose my job than help you spy on your father. It's none of your business what he does in his own home."

tage. Arrogant, self-deluded fool." His voice trailed into silence.

For a minute, Ann couldn't think of anything to say. She stared at the old man, at the boy crouched on the floor beside him, his arms wrapped tight round the puppy. There was an odd pressure in her chest, and her voice emerged thickly. "You've done what you can to make up for it. Just standing there blaming yourself won't help anything." She paused. "Besides, you're a centenarian now. I thought that meant you weren't responsible for what you did."

Slowly, Warnell looked at her. His mouth crooked into a smile. "Are you calling me old?"

Ann grinned at him, her throat too full to speak.

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Mary Soon Lee is British, but has been living in the U.S.A. for the past five years. She has sold over 30 stories, including "Ebb Tide" in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, May 95, and "The Tinkerbell Theory" in *Interzone*, December 95. Her story "To Have and to Hold" came second in the Best of Soft SF Contest 1995. She also runs the Pittsburgh Worldwrights, a speculative fiction workshop.

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"'Pandora's Dogs' was the first story that I wrote after moving from Boston to Pittsburgh. I had been wondering about the creation of robot-pets, and also about possible futures in which all mammals (other than humans) were extinct. It distresses me to think how many strange and wonderful animals—from rhinoceroses to elephants to types of bats—may be extinct in a few decades."

Sanctuary's for the Birds

by Lucy Harrison

They went to the ocean, to the Gulf, because Josh had read that it was the best thing to do under circumstances like these. He had read it in a John D. MacDonald paperback novel; that the ocean was a healer of pain, and time, and weariness, and that the salt water licked wounds clean with the rhythm of each swell and long curl of wave. MacDonald meant, of course, on a boat, a real Travis McGee girl-trap of a boat. But Josh didn't have a boat, didn't have any money for a boat, didn't have any friends or even vague acquaintances whom he could tap for the use of a boat, so they went to the Gulf empty-handed and hoped that things would sort themselves out.

Josh watched her while he drove the car down the straight arrow of black two-lane asphalt leading to Yamarrack Island. He watched her out of the edges of his eyes, not wanting her to know she was watched. He stole quick glances at her when he turned his head slightly to look at a turkey buzzard huddling over something dead on the roadside, and again when a black snake swished its coils across the hot asphalt in front of them. She was leaning back in the passenger seat, her right elbow propped up against the open window, her chin resting in her right hand. Her left hand lay open, palm-up, across her lap, and he could see the old scars across her wrist.

The air-conditioning quit on them an hour north of St. Pete. He worked himself up into a righteous wrath about that, too, over the next half hour. "I just got that fixed two months ago, I swear to God, those Krazy-Kool guys are con-artists or something. I knew I should have gotten that warranty, but goddamnit, why should I have to . . . "

"Josh," she said. "It doesn't matter."

"Yeah, but damn it all . . . "

Then she turned back and resumed staring out at the gray expanse of Interstate 75 and the palmettos that jutted up here and there among the swamps.

"Well," he said. "Wind down the window, at least. You don't want to sweat to death."

And she had. It pleased him when she did these little things for him, because he'd asked her to, for no other reason than that. She certainly didn't care if the window was up or down. She cared about very little, anymore. Josh liked the windows open as well because her hair now twisted about her face in damp tendrils, the wind tangling it and setting it free, and every few miles she would lift her right hand and push it back off her face, tucking it behind her ears. Her left hand stayed in her lap.

He wasn't one for talking much, but he tried. Her silence, or her short tired answers, left him casting around in his head for something interesting to say. He saw another turkey buzzard rise up flapping from the grass as they rushed past. If nothing else, Josh knew his birds.

"Turkey buzzard," he said.

"Yes."

Perhaps it wasn't the best topic of conversation. He let another half hour's worth of road slip behind them before he tried again. They passed a green sign announcing Yamarrack Island 5 mi., and then another faded white one which said Last Gas B-4 Yamarrack, Next Left.

"Nearly there," he said.

"Yes." Looking out the window still, at the dark tall pines flying past.

"I wonder, don't they have gas on Yamarrack?"

"Don't know."

"Because, I thought everybody had gas from time to time. Even Yamarrackians."

She said nothing. This was her punishment, of course, silence. A few words doled out like candy when he was good, when he understood her. But it was so damned hard to understand.

"Or Yamarrackites. Which do you think, darling, Yamarrackians or Yamarrackites?"

"Josh, please." She turned from the window to face him. Her left hand curled in her lap into a fist. She bit at her lower lip.

"I was just wondering," he said.

"Well don't," she said. Her anger was rising fast now, unstoppable. "Just don't. Why do you always have to talk? Will you please for God's sake stop." She scowled at him and ran her nails through her hair. "Stop trying so goddamned hard. Just leave me alone. Please."

There was no pleading in her please. This was her anger, always so close to the surface, behind her vagueness and boredom. It was

like the filthy water beneath a bright green layer of duckweed. It was so easy to misstep and break through. The doctor said it was a good thing, this anger. But he had never held her in bed while she shouted and cried, never held her arms tight against her body while she tried to beat them at his chest.

The anger, he told himself, was all she had to hold on to.

"Well, anyway," he said. "Nearly there."

They pulled up at the Blue Heron Hotel, which was really a series of white-washed cottages scattered at ten-foot intervals right along the side of the road. But that didn't matter because on the other side of the cottages was the Gulf itself, lapping at the mud and sand not twenty feet away. Josh noticed a high-water mark halfway up the white wall of the nearest cottage, and a clump of seaweed stuck in a crack on the roof. Probably left there during the last hurricane. Another thing to worry about.

The doctor said it was a good thing, this anger. But he had never held her in bed while she shouted and cried, never held her arms tight against her body while she tried to beat them at his chest.

Josh shut the car door behind him, stretched, and breathed deep. "Smell that! Tide flats and mud and fish. Bet it reminds you of when you were a kid, huh?"

She said nothing, but he saw her nostrils open wider as she smelled it.

"You want to wait out here or come in with me?"

"Wait," she said. Her shoulders hunched forward and she wrapped her arms about her chest as if she were cold. Cold, in the middle of a Florida heat wave. He hoped she would go down beyond the cottages and walk along the edge of the water. Not go too far, but just to see it and perhaps take off her shoes. She leaned back against the car, and looked down the highway they had come in on. The breeze blew a strand of hair across her face, and she pushed it back.

"Back in a minute, then," he said.

The woman at the front desk wore a bandanna around her forehead, had a gold left incisor, and suspiciously blond hair. She stubbed out her cigarette in an oyster shell ashtray as he walked up.

"Welcome to the Blue Heron," she said. "Got reservations?"

"Yes. The name's Litton."

"Don't matter much anyhow," she said, flipping through a stack of index cards held in a child's Spiderman lunch box. "Ain't like we're full or nothing." She held up a card and squinted at it. "Here it is. Two of you, huh?"

"Yes."

"Married?" She pronounced the word like the French say "shit."

For a moment Josh was blank. "Oh," he said. "Yes."

"Uh huh." She eyed him under half-lowered lids, then looked back at the card. "You ain't honeymooners, are you?"

"What? Oh . . . no. No."

"Cause if you was, I could give you the special discount rate for honeymoon couples."

"But we're not, though. Sorry."

She shrugged. "Heck, we're slow, like I said. I could give y'all the special discount rate anyhow, and just put down that you was honeymooners."

Honeymooners. God. It had been so long, and now here was this woman trying to make them out as honeymooners. The very, very last thing from what they were. He felt slightly ill. The beginnings of a headache.

"No," he said. "Look, give us the special rate if you want to, but don't put down that we're on honeymoon. Please."

"Can't give you the rate unless I put it down." She nodded over her shoulder at an ugly green door marked MANAGER. "The old bastard checks on me."

Josh clenched his fist and watched his knuckles turn white. He didn't feel at all well. He felt a sudden panic and wondered if she was all right, standing by herself against the car. She was so . . . fragile, these days. He shouldn't have left her alone for this long.

"Fine," he said. "That's settled. We'll pay the regular rate. How much?"

She shrugged. "Okay, then. Forty-two fifty a night."

He handed over his money, and she took it without another word.

Josh went back outside and looked around. For a moment he couldn't see her, and he raised his hand to cup out the bright sunlight, sweat breaking out in a shine on his forehead. He opened his mouth to call her name, and then saw that she was sitting inside the car, with the window rolled up.

He knocked on the window. She turned her face to stare up at him.

"Come on, darling," he said. "We'll leave the car here and walk down to our room."

Our room. It sounded good, normal. They could be any couple on vacation, going to their room. He took her hand as they walked across the path of broken oyster shells to the cottage, and opened the door.

It was a blue shag-carpeted, glitter-ceilinged throwback to the fifties, complete with a Magic Fingers Vibrato-Motion (Just Insert Two Quarters) double bed, occupying the precise center of the room. A double bed. Not the two singles he had requested. He looked sharply at her, but she was standing by the window, looking out at the distant gray line where sky met sea. Perhaps it would be all right. They had slept in the same bed at home until a few months ago, until the dreams got too bad. Perhaps here it would be all right.

"Darling," he said. "How is it? Does it remind you of home?"

She turned back from the window and smiled at him. "Yes," she said. "It does. It's the same water, after all. Just a few hundred miles south. The same water I learned to swim in. The same fish, I expect, and the mud and sand." Her voice was calm and flat. She looked out at the water. "But that was before . . . "

"Yes," Josh stopped her. That was the word, before, the word he had to stop her from thinking about and speaking. There was no before for them anymore, for either of them. But if he didn't stop her she would say it, and he didn't want to hear. "Darling . . . "

She frowned. "Did I ever tell you I'd cut myself once, Josh, with an oyster shell? On the foot. It bled all over the place."

He grabbed her arm and pulled her a step closer. He laughed. "Just like silly old you. Now, what shall we do next? Let's leave the unpacking for later, shall we? Except for your swimsuit, I'll get that out and you can get changed here, and then we'll go down by the beach. Or should we get some lunch? Or we could go along the boardwalk—I hear they have a boardwalk and a big dock you can fish off—and we could throw bread to the seagulls. Whatever you like, darling, we'll do it. It's your decision. Whatever you want."

Her mouth tightened and he knew the anger had come back. She pushed his hand off her arm. "I want," she said, "for you to stop treating me like a goddamn child. I am not a child. I have not been a child for a long time now, as you very well know. If anybody is, you are. So stop it now."

Josh let go of her and walked over to his suitcase, began unpacking. He could feel his headache throbbing in his temples, the blood pulsing in his ears. "You know, I don't exactly enjoy all of this, either," he said. He threw a balled-up pair of socks on the bed. "Look. I just want you to have a good time. That's all."

She walked past him and sat down on the double bed. "I am having a good time," she said. "I always have a good time. A damned good time."

He looked at her, her face blotched red and white. She was close to tears. "Darling," he said. "Come down to the dock with me."

"I'm tired." She closed her eyes.

"You won't be when we get there," he said. "It'll be fun."

"Josh . . ."

"All right. Stay here then. Amuse yourself." He opened the door.

"I'm going to feed the birds."

He walked down the same black-top road they'd come in on, on the way to the dock. He stopped off at the Suwannee Swifty store on the corner of Main street, to buy a loaf of bread. He walked past the hotels and restaurants that crowded together along Bay street, and stepped onto the dock jutting out into the waters of the Gulf. He walked down to the very end and stood there, alone, tearing up the bread into little pieces. He threw them to the bold and cautious gulls who circled, waiting for them, screeching. He felt the sun burn through his T-shirt. He smelled the salt in the air and the sand gritting underneath his feet. He looked out at the blue water and the line where it met the sky. He was alone. Out there, somewhere, was Mexico. Texas. Louisiana. He was alone. He could go on being alone. He could go.

He threw the last piece of bread to the birds. He crumpled up the plastic bag and stuffed it in his pocket, so they would see he had no more. They kept circling him for a while, and then moved off to dive at the fishermen's nets again. He walked back off the dock and up the street to the hotel. He found her still sitting on the bed in their room. She stood up when he walked in.

"Josh," she said. "How . . . how were the birds?"

"Hungry," he said. "And you?"

"Hungry," she said, and smiled, and so it was behind them, for now.

They ate lunch at the Captain's Hook, which Southern Dining magazine had given four stars out of five, and had called "interesting, with a breathtaking view." Josh had wanted to save it for that

night, so they could sit at a wooden table on the wooden deck and watch the sun sinking pink into the sea, pulling the light down behind it. But if she was hungry now, they would eat now. They ordered crab cakes, which Southern Dining magazine had called "a must-eat."

"You have to have the crab cakes," Josh said when she tried to order a salad. "It's like a law or something."

"Oh, all right then," she said, handing her menu to the waiter. "And a bottle of your house white."

"Iced tea," Josh said.

Her mouth tightened. "I want some wine."

"Have some then. If you must."

"It's just wine, Josh. You'll have some too."

He shook his head.

"It's very nice wine, sir," said the waiter.

"Well," he said. "You know best. Darling."

The waited moved away. "I wish you'd stop calling me that," she said.

"You make me feel like an old woman. Like an elderly relation or something."

"I've always called you that," he said. "You said you liked it."

"Yes," she said. She traced a pattern in the tablecloth with her fork. "Well, stop it."

The wine came, and she poured them both a glass-full. The glasses were chilled and when he sipped, it was cold and delicious and exactly right. "Cheers," he said. He took another sip. "You were right, this is very good."

She drained her glass and set it back down on the table. Looked at it.

"More?" he lifted the bottle. She looked at him. "It's all right," he said. "I'm going to have more, too." She nodded.

The waiter came back and set the big plate of crab cakes between them. "Enjoy," he said, and was gone again.

They sat looking at one another, each waiting for the other to reach for the first one. She wasn't even pretty. So why was her face stamped on his mind? Blue eyes, good eyelashes, nice hair, perfect elbows and knees, but it didn't add up to anyone pretty. He could have someone beautiful, if he wanted. But her—she had a face you would always remember, even if you left.

He wondered if the doctors, the emergency nurses, the men, if they remembered her face. How long would it take to forget? Would years be enough?

He took another swallow of his wine, and smiled brightly at her. She was pushing a crab cake around on her plate with a fork. Josh reached for one too. "Darling," he said.

She looked up sharply. "Josh, it's bad. Don't eat it."

"What?"

"The crab's gone bad, rotten. Just smell it."

Josh did. It smelled faintly of ammonia. "But . . . Southern Dining gave them four stars out of five. That's good. It can't be bad." He cut the crab cake into little pieces with his fork, looked at it.

He wondered if the doctors, the emergency nurses, the men, if they remembered her face. How long would it take to forget? Would years be enough?

"Just trust me, all right?" She tipped back her glass and emptied it again. "That's a smell you don't forget, once you've gotten sick from it."

"Well," said Josh. "Should we send it back? Start over?"

"No point. It's probably all like that." She lifted the bottle to her glass, and a dribble of wine came out. "Anyway, I'm not hungry anymore. Let's just go."

"Well, I really think we . . . "

"Josh," she leaned forward across the table. She put her hand over his.

"Will you take me out in a boat? Now?"

He stared at her. How drunk was she? Not very. She'd only had three glasses. How much damage could a gutting knife do, or a fishing hook? Could he protect her from all the sharp edges in the world?

"We don't have a boat," he said. He had to say something.

"We could rent one."

"We don't have much money."

She pulled her hand back slowly, and put it in her lap. "I bet it wouldn't cost much, not if we didn't get a big fancy one." She looked down the dock, where fishermen were coming and going, or sitting and mending their nets. "We could ask one of them."

Even Josh knew that you couldn't just walk up to a fisherman and ask to rent his boat. Bad manners.

"Look," he said. "I'll rent one tomorrow, if you want. It's too late to go out now. It'll be dark in a few hours."

She stood up, pushed her chair back. "Just for once . . . ," she said. "Oh, forget it. Never mind." She threw her napkin down on the table. "I'll do it myself."

"Do what?"

"Get a boat."

"From where?" He laughed. "Don't you think you're being just a little precipitous?"

"That's another thing. I hate it when you use words like that. Precipitous. What the hell does that mean?" She flapped her hand at him. "No, don't answer. Look, Josh. Are you coming with me or not?"

The thought flashed into his mind of her dead, swollen with water, drowned. Her hair braided with seaweed. Mud dribbling out of her mouth. Her eyes gone.

"All right," he said.

She walked out of the restaurant ahead of him, and by the time he'd finished paying the bill, and arguing with the waiter over whether the crab cakes had or had not gone bad, she was already on the dock. She was talking to one of the fishermen who was tying knots in his net, mending it. Josh watched him, his big hands moving the rope and twisting it into a pattern. He said something to her, looking up at her and squinting his eyes against the sun. She laughed, and tossed her hair around like a schoolgirl. Josh walked towards them.

"Darling," he said. "Come on."

The fisherman looked up at him. "Want to rent the boat, huh?"

Josh looked at her. She was biting her lower lip. He had told her time and time again not to do that. She bit the skin through and made her lips ugly. "Come on," he said.

"It's okay," said the fisherman. "As long as you get it back in an hour or so. I want to go out and check the traps one more time before it gets dark."

"Josh," she said. "Mr. Smalls here knows Eastin Island, where I grew up. You know."

"Yup," said the fisherman. "Been oystering there. Good water."

"He knows my grandparents' house."

"Pink one," said the fisherman. "Right on the water." He grinned up at Josh. "I don't mind. Take the boat. Ten bucks should call it even."

Josh looked down at the boat. There were nets piled in it, with white floats sewed onto them. There was a dead fish floating in an inch of water on the bottom. He thought of the water of the Gulf, warm and flat and calm. He thought of the far-off blue sky and the water leading them away. The breeze slapping little waves against the wooden hull of the boat. A fine spray misting over them. Out there was Mexico. Somewhere.

He looked at her. "Where do you want to go?" he said.

She smiled at him, and turned around to point at a black-green shape on the water. An island. Perhaps a mile away. "There," she said.

He squinted at the bright flashes of sunlight off the water, and tried to see the island. "What is it?"

"Escanteria," said the fisherman. "Island. Used to be, folks lived out there. Good fishing. But then a hurricane came, and whoosh," he laughed and pulled another rope into his net, "some folks got blowed away. The rest moved on back here. It's a bird sanctuary now."

"Well," said Josh. "We can't go there, then."

"Why not?" She said. "It's not like it says No Trespassing or anything."

"That's what it means," he said. "Sanctuary. No trespassing."

She pushed her hair out of her eyes. There were little beads of sweat on her forehead. "I want to go there," she said.

"What for?"

"I just do. Can't you just do what I want to, for once?"

He took a step towards her. "Why don't we just go out in the boat, just keep going and see where it takes us? We could go anywhere. You don't need to go to there."

He bent down, gripped the edge of the dock, and stepped into the boat. He straightened up, feeling the boat moving under him from side to side, testing the way his hips and legs felt. He balanced. He held out his hand. "Come on down," he said.

"Josh."

"Please," he said. "Let's just go drive around. Or sail, or whatever you do in a boat. Come on."

She bent down and jumped in the boat and set it to rocking, the water sloshing about in the bottom of it. "Fine," she said. "I want to go to the island first. Then we'll do what you want."

Josh shrugged, and went to start the motor. "You know best," he said. "Darling."

The motor roared to life, shattering the silence, drowning out sound. Josh pushed forward on the throttle, and boat edged away from the dock.

"Hold on," he shouted.

She cupped her hand around her ear, then smiled and shook her head. She turned around and sat down in the bow, her legs curled under her. She gripped the side of the boat with one hand, then leaned over and trailed the other in the water. Josh pushed the throttle some more, and the boat opened up. The dock was behind them, and the island was dead ahead. The world became nothing but

the sound of the motor, and the boat slapping against the waves. The spray of water against his face. The sun on his back.

She was already staring out at the dark green trees of the island, watching them as they grew larger. Imagining them, perhaps, as they had been when the big hurricane came. When they were smashed, uprooted, dead. Or when the tide rose with the rain, and their roots and trunks were washed with saltwater and fish swam through their branches. Or now, when the birds flew about and sang and bred and died in their sanctuary.

Josh could see a beach now, a silver strip of sand with a dark line across it where the seaweed lay at the high tide mark. He made the boat go faster. They came toward a white sign sticking out of the flat water. Escanteria Bird Sanctuary. Josh could see the place where he would land the boat, a flat piece of sand with a gray tree stump to tie the rope to. He would walk across the sand barefoot, leaving his prints behind him in a single line, and they would be the only markings in that sand. They passed another sign. Warning, it said. Protected Area. Escanteria Bird Sanctuary.

Josh cut the motor down to an idle. She turned around and looked at him.

"What is it?" she said. "Why'd you stop?"

"You don't have to go there," he said. "There's nothing there except birds and bugs and trees."

Without the sound of the motor, he could hear things he hadn't heard before. The wind moving through the trees. The creaking of the wooden boards in the boat. The waves moving across the sand of the beach. He could smell the gasoline from the motor, the fish-smell of the nets, the mud and sand of the beach.

"It isn't anything I can say or do," he said.

He thought about the double bed waiting for them back at the hotel. He wondered if it would be all right, if it would be good. If she yelled and cried out in her sleep, or tried to beat her hands against his chest, he would let her. He would turn away.

"Get through this somehow," he said. "If it takes you years, do it."

She stared at him. "You don't understand," she said.

"No," he said. "I don't."

She looked back at the island, lying low on the water, the roots of the cypress sticking out of the mud. The sun made long black tree-shadows across the sand. She put her left hand in the water, trailed it there.

"Let's go," she said. Josh opened up the throttle.

The motor startled the birds. They rose up from the tops of the green-gray trees in one chaotic mass, a cloud of them, black wings, beating wings. They went up into the blue sky, circling, rising up. He tried to yell to her. Birds, he tried to say. She already saw them. Her face was tilted up against the sun, her mouth open, her skin wet with spray. She stood to watch them go. She watched them above the tops of the tall trees, followed them with her eyes, the black wings beating, trembling, and rising up, up.

She put out a hand to steady herself.

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"Born in Stratford-on-Avon, England (yes, the birthplace of Shakespeare), I moved to Denver, Colorado on my tenth birthday. I came to Florida in 1988, decided I liked it, and stayed. I enrolled at the University of Florida in Gainesville, and signed up for a creative writing class with Harry Crews. I've been writing ever since (well, in-between jobs and school).

Currently I work as a reference librarian at Indian River Community College in Ft. Pierce, Florida, answering questions on every topic under the sun.

"Damon Sauve, editor of *Oyster Boy* asked me to write something for the fall '95 issue, as I had for the two previous issues. This story was the result of a trip to Cedar Key, Florida, where my boyfriend grew up. I wrote it out longhand, because I didn't have a computer at the time (still don't), and then transcribed it into electronic format at the computer lab. This story would be vastly different if it weren't for Damon, who forced me to rewrite the ending several times. SEVERAL times. Next time I'll use the U.S. mail to send my stories to him—done electronically, it's too easy for him to tell me to redo it!"

Spots

by Frederick Barthelme

Cheryl was fourteen years younger than me and a hundred pounds lighter, my new girlfriend of a month. She'd bought a carving knife at K-Mart, a serrated cut-anything deal like guys demo on TV slicing aerosol cans and sawing finger-size bolts that hold fly-wheels on generators. She was playing with this knife, cutting things for fun—a book I liked, a shoe-polish bottle—and waving the blade at me to make a point, which was that I shouldn't have been messing with my brother's wife Susan the week before while my brother Knox was out in California on his annual visit. She was right, of course. The playing around didn't amount to much more than teasing, some little body wrestling, but I regretted it already, for the right reasons and the wrong ones. Cheryl regretted it, too. There wasn't anything I could do about it, though, and I was trying to get it behind us.

"You haven't told me everything," she said, training the knife tip on my chest. "Not the whole story. Knox told me his side, and his side makes you guys look slimy, especially you. At least Susan was upset about him going off to California."

"The whole deal is I said I'd always liked her and one thing led to another," I said. "That's all." I waved and reached for a banana that was turning black on the counter. "At least we had enough sense not to go to bed."

"Yeah, that's a big deal. Thanks. Besides, how do we even know that? Can you prove it? What if you two just agreed to say that and stick to it? How would we ever know any different? Why don't you just say how close you got, in detail, describe all this rolling and tumbling shit, and that'll be that? Just go ahead and tell me."

"I don't want to do that," I said. "I don't see that helping anything."

"Blah blah," Cheryl said. "It's really great being your new friend. Really. If I'd known what you were like I'd have stuck with the last bozo I was with, that fat one with all the hair down his back."

"C'mon. Susan and I go way back. We like each other," I said. "There's this natural affection. We just let it get away from us a little."

"Yeah, a couple hundred times. You tell me you have to stay over because she's nervous, and I just buy it. I'm over here watching TV. Jesus." She shook her head and took another swing in my direction with the knife.

We were in the kitchen. It was tiny, things were tight. Cabinets were full of cookery, spices, electronic aids. Her stuff was all over, stuff she'd just brought, packed in, crammed onto the counter tops.

"It wasn't anything," I said.

"Yeah? What, you hugged, kissed? That it? Never got your clothes off, right?" She swerved the knife at my shirt, then my pants, then did it again not seeing that I was headed for the refrigerator, and accidentally caught my cheek. I got a slice from my ear to my chin and forward.

I was surprised more than hurt, startled by blood scattering down my neck. The cut wasn't deep, I couldn't imagine it being deep, but it stung and bled like crazy. I grabbed a paper towel roll and used the whole thing to mop my face.

Cheryl screeched for a second, holding the knife out in front of her, then suddenly stopped, as if realizing she was in some kind of fright-movie act. "Are you all right?"

"I think so," I said. "It's not that bad I don't think."

"I'm really sorry," she said, her body curling down on the word, as if to demonstrate how sorry she was.

"Not that bad," I said. "It wasn't that hard, was it?"

She got another roll of paper towels and reeled off big swaths she used to wipe my shoulder and shirt. I bent over the sink, dropping blood onto the metal.

When the phone rang I said, "Will you get it?"

"I don't want to answer," Cheryl said. "What if it's Susan? What if it's for you?"

I wedged her aside and reached the receiver mounted on the wall by the kitchen door. "What?" I said into the handset.

I listened for a second then shut eyes and handed the phone to Cheryl. "It's your mother. Tell her you sliced me up and we've got to call the hospital."

I leaned over the sink again, watching the blood, which was slowing some, thread its way into the running water and slide fast into the drain. There were white specks in the drain and I couldn't figure out what they were. I was trying to think what we'd eaten that would end up these tiny white bits in the kitchen sink, and at the same time I was soaking towels in faucet water, pressing them to my chin.

Cheryl was calm on the phone, chatting with her mom. All the time she kept wiping at my neck. She said, "I just cut Del accidentally with this knife and it's bleeding some but we don't think it's

that bad, at least we hope not." Her mother must have missed it, and Cheryl repeated it right away, louder. "I just accidentally cut his face with a knife. We were playing around and I cut him. He's bleeding now. We probably have to go."

She listened another half minute, then hung up the phone. "You ready? We'll go to St. Christian's, okay? They have an emergency deal."

"Urgent Care," I said. "They're quicker." I had my head turned sideways, cut side up, trying to stem the bleeding.

"Yeah, but they're like vets," she said. She was leaning on the counter next to me, twisting her head around for a better look. "They're going to have to stitch the hell out of this."

"That's great news."

She said, "I didn't mean to do this, you know. I was just playing around. I wasn't playing around about Susan, but the knife stuff . . ."

"You didn't mind sticking me."

"Oh come on. Like I really want to slice your face in a million pieces."

"Okay," I said. "You didn't mean to hit me."

"Later I want to rip skins off rabbits and stuff. That's me. Carjack some Cherokees, okay? Spit at people, crash store windows, whatever. I want to be modern, sleep with my brother's wife, you know."

"Fine," I said. I was bleeding, but it was slowing down. "Can you hand me a towel?" When I pulled the paper towels off the cut, blood only bulged out, making a line down my face, dripping off. I pointed at the cut. "Would you get with it? Are we going to the doctor?"

"Fine," she said. "If you think it's necessary."

I was mopping with the towel she'd handed me, going into the next room looking for my shoes.

"I'm sorry," she said, following me. "I'm nervous, I think. Are we going? What're we doing?"

"Have you got keys?" I said.

She shook the keys.

"Okay, let's go," I said. I was at the door.

Cheryl was driving, fast but not too fast, whipping her head back and forth checking cross streets. "I didn't really cut you," she said. "Maybe if I was Mexican, I'd have cut you. White trash, cut you. Middle class, no. Too many jobs, too many cars—I can't cut anybody. Unless I go crazy, and then I can cut shit out of whoever—there'll be an explanation. If I'm not crazy I can only screw around in the kitchen and nick you a little by accident." She stopped and tilted her head looking at me. "You know, this might look pretty good after a while. Before it heals up."

"It's going to look like a cat scratch," I said.

"Way too big. You'll be getting lots of compliments on this at the shop. They'll regard you with a new respect, maybe even fear. It's just what you want."

At the emergency room a tiny doctor, an Asian, took a look at my face, then looked at Cheryl, then back at me and just shook his head. His black hair was shivering. He pointed to some plastic seats in an examination room. "I'll be back," he said. "Keep the towel on it."

Then he left. Cheryl sat at the opposite end of the room. It was cool in there, lots of aluminum and shiny steel.

"How's it feel?" Cheryl said.

"It doesn't feel," I said. I took the towel off, tossed it to her, then unspooled paper towels from the roll she'd brought, folded them, dampened them under the faucet.

"If you're thinking I did this on purpose you're crazy," Cheryl said. "I just wanted you to know that. I don't like this Susan stuff at her place, or in the fucking elevator, the two of you riding up and down like teenagers watching the sun go down, but I'm not crazy."

"I told you I don't think it was on purpose. I think you slipped."

"Right," she said. "But that was stupid for you guys to do that in the elevator."

"I was leaving," I said. "She didn't want me to leave."

"What's this, no fault sex? How do I know that's where it stops? Wouldn't you rather have this really open relationship, tell each other everything—that way it'd be easy for the other guy, you know?"

"We have that," I said. "I told you everything."

"Sort of. I'm thinking seriously open. Who I think about when I masturbate. Everything. It'll be great. We'll tell the truth. We'll tell more truth than anybody ever told before."

"Fine," I said, pulling the towels across my face.

"And we won't have to pay too much attention, because everything will be up on the surface. We won't have any peculiar or difficult thoughts, either, you've got to promise that. It'll be like CNN."

"C'mon, Cheryl. Settle down, will you?"

"Let's go on Arsenio, anyway," she said.

"What?" The bleeding was slow, almost stopped. I smeared it with my finger, then blotted with the towels.

"He's Black, he's modern, he's happening, he's huh-huh-huh." She made the grunting noise and did that business circling her arm.

"He's canceled," I said.

She slumped on the stool. "I know. He's bad meat. He's over—I know that. It's fast out there. What do I think, they're going to wait for me?"

"Jesus," I said. "Put a rag in it, okay?"

"What a romance this is," she said. "Here we are in the middle of the night at the hospital, and you're telling me that. What is that?"

"You're babbling," I said. "We're trying to get my face fixed and you're raving about Susan and sex and I don't know what."

"Hey," she said. "It's not sex, I got plenty of that." She got up and leaned against the wall of the exam room, popping her shirt snaps, loosening her pants, and slipping her hand down under the zipper. "All you have to do is watch. Every man I ever met wanted to watch. Get over there, stand this way, stand that way—"

I shut the door and stood in front of the little glass porthole so nobody could see in. "Please, Cheryl. Christ. What's wrong with you?"

She was like, "Do this, do that, move this way, rub it, finger it, squat, bend over, twist that, squeeze it, hold 'em up, pull it this way, lick it, bite it, hold 'em apart, rotate, ride it way up, kiss it—every man I ever met. That's the kind of babbling I get. You're no different."

"I agree," I said. "Fine. Just get dressed, okay? Snap the little snaps."

"I don't know what happened to the old days when people felt things for each other, touched each other, cared for each other—I had better sex in high school than I've had since."

"If that's what you think," I said. "Just button up for the here and now, okay?"

"What, am I scaring you like this? Hey, we can tape it and sell it to Cinemax. We'll be ahead of the curve," she said. She closed her pants and started on the shirt.

"What's with all this?" I said. "Have we been sticking a little too close to The Week in Rock or what?"

"Well," she said. "Being modern is making a difference, it's having our voices heard."

"You gotta have one of the nine recognized voices to get it heard," I said. "And it's gotta be saying one of the nine recognized things. Outside of that you can forget it."

"There you go again," she said. "So what are the nine things?"

"Check your local listings," I said.

"See, when you say stuff like that you sound like Susan," she said, sitting again. "I mean, I can take a certain amount of cynicism, but after a while it's as phony as anything else. It's just depressing. Besides, I pick and choose the stuff I pay attention to. I don't buy it whole."

"What's with all this?" I said. "Have we been sticking a little too close to The Week in Rock *or what?"*

I opened the door and stuck my head out, then re-dampened the paper towels. "Thank God for that," I said.

We had been in the exam room about ten minutes when a nurse came in, took the towel pack off, dabbed some Mercurochrome on my face, pushed the towels back into place, and told me to go home.

"I thought he was coming back," I said.

"Who?" the nurse said.

"The doctor," I said.

"We saw a Japanese doctor," Cheryl said to the nurse. "Short guy? Black hair?"

Right then the Japanese doctor came in. "What's going on?"

I said, "I don't know. The nurse was thinking I was ready."

He said, "No dice. We've got to do a few small stitches. We're very well trained in stitches, but we've still got to practice sometime, don't we?" He grinned at Cheryl.

The nurse went to get some things he needed, and meanwhile he washed his hands in the metal sink, whistling something I couldn't figure out. He had me sit on a low white stool and cleaned the cut with cotton and alcohol, then shot my face in three places with tiny bursts of anesthetic from a yellow plastic syringe. When the nurse returned he took twelve black stitches at the front end of the cut along the curve of my chin.

When it got to be four in the morning and I still wasn't sleeping, I decided to clean up the kitchen. I wiped the counters and the floor, rinsed the sink with soap, then alcohol, packed up all the garbage I could find in the house and took it out to the dumpster at the back of the property, across the parking area from the building.

The street that ran alongside the condo dead-ended into Highway 90. It was a quiet, tree shaded, narrow street lined with

a couple of old houses and a bunch of renter townhouses. There was a flash of heat lightning as I carried the garbage bags across the parking lot, and then the sky looked a calm, midnight blue. I flipped the two bags one after another into the dumpster, and I was standing there looking distractedly around when all the street lights, and the porch lights on the buildings across the street, suddenly flashed off. There wasn't a noise, just the sudden withdrawal of the light—I could still see, of course, but the buildings were all faced in shadow, were almost silhouettes. It put me on edge, gave me a pleasant but slightly nervous feeling, as if something might be happening. It was like one of those movie scenes where the intruder cuts the power to the house where the woman is hiding before he goes in. It was silly to think anything at all about it, but the anxiety was pleasant, so I stood for a minute there on the blacktop, arms crossed, scanning townhouses across the street for a clue, a movement, anything out of the ordinary. There was nothing. I waited another couple of minutes, then started on a walk toward the highway and the beach. The air was peculiar, the way it just hung, drifting off the water, and the only sound was the faint hiss of little breakers running over rock jetties. There weren't any cars on Highway 90, and only one street lamp burned about a hundred and fifty yards down the road. I stood on the corner in front of the condos looking up at our place, the dark bedroom where Cheryl was sleeping, then walked out into the middle of the empty highway and crossed to the beach side where the sand was gritty under my shoes, then came back, looking all around, soaking up everything. With the lights out things seemed to have lost their power. It was like nothing was holding anything, the resistance was gone, that little pressure that's always against you, obliging you, keeping you in place. I thought about calling Susan on the telephone, about walking up the beach highway until I found a pay phone that was working and giving her a ring. That seemed like a good idea and I started walking. I thought if my brother Knox answered, well, I'd ask him how he was, and then I'd ask to speak to Susan. Just straight out. Just like that.

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"As for 'Spots,' I remember it as a piece of a novel that I was so fond of that I took it out and rewrote it after-the-fact to make it this story of brother-wife-coveting. I liked particularly the sense of the ending leaning far out of the frame, headed somewhere difficult."

Traffic

by Evan Zall

It was the strangest thing that ever happened to me. At ten to five on Monday, after a long, disappointing day of pushing my pencil back and forth, writing nothing that anybody will read, wiping sweat from my brow that wasn't from exertion or anxiety, but simple boredom. Something to remember.

It had started out just like any other evening that followed such misery. In a traffic jam. Packed bumper to bumper, on the bridge, no less (I could just picture the news clip after the bridge collapsed, concrete and steel twisting in the wind, cars clinging for precarious seconds and then dropping the five hundred yards into solid water), with the air conditioner sucking up the gas and the seats sticking to my legs through my suit. I was flipping through the radio stations, trying to block out the grinding of gears and horns bellowing around me, when the phone rang.

Yes, the phone. The very one I bought almost a year ago to the week that has never been touched before. Sitting under the seat, for a full year, with only the slow drain of its battery to amuse itself. It rang.

At first, I didn't know what to do. I felt like I was on a crashing plane and I suddenly had to remember how to get to the oxygen mask. I figured that it must be Nancy, of course, who else could it be, and maybe she had some sort of emergency. I answered it. I even said, "Nancy?"

But it wasn't Nancy, it was a man's voice.

He said, "Uh . . . hello?"

And I said, "Who is this?"

And he said, "Um . . . who is this?"

He actually said that. So then I figured I had some sort of wiseass. But I still wondered why he would call me, now, and on a car phone. So I didn't hang up yet. Instead I said, "Robert."

He paused, and I thought maybe my answer had bored him enough to hang up. But he wasn't gone. He was just . . . thinking. After a minute, he said. "I'm Jackson."

Then there was another pause, and maybe it was just some guy looking for a friend or something. Or he could easily be some jerkoff getting his kicks. I said, "Can I help you with something, Jackson?"

He said, "Call me Jack . . . I was thinking . . ."

Then he stopped. He waited for a second; maybe thinking some more. I was getting pretty curious, and then I remembered that this was probably expensive, that he could be calling from anywhere. "Listen. Jack, this is getting kind of expensive," I said.

And he said, almost at the same time, "You should inch up a little."

I realized that I had been staring down at the phone this whole time, and when I looked up there was a good car and a half of space up ahead, and only then did it occur to me to wonder how the hell this guy should know where I am. Of course I asked him, while I was inching up, "Where are you?"

He laughed and told me to look in my rear-view mirror. "Back here, on your left. In the blue Volkswagon."

I looked up in the mirror and there behind my baggy eyes and wired forehead, in the left lane, I saw him. In the driver's seat of a blue Jetta, waving out the window. I waved back. "What the fuck?"

He laughed, and now I could see him actually throw his head back and laugh; it was odd to watch him there and hear him in the car, like he was two different people in different places. "Sorry to surprise you."

My eyes were still wide in the mirror, and I was starting to feel a little stalked. "Who are you?"

He shrugged in the mirror. "Nobody. I mean. I'm Jackson, but you don't know me."

"How did you get this number?"

"Move up again." He shook his hand out the window, waving me forward. "I just got lucky here on the dialing game." I saw him stick his phone out the window and shake it.

I just shook my head and crawled up a few more feet. I could make out a sign, now, about three hundred yards and twenty minutes away. "The dialing game."

"Yeah," he said, and took the phone back in. "I was just trying to pass the time. Nothing on the radio and my air conditioner's broken. I was just sitting here, hot and tired and just plain fucking bored. Excuse my language. Anyway, I started just dialing numbers, to break the monotony. After a while, that wasn't enough to hold my concentration so I started people watching, too. You know, just studying all the people wrapped up, all probably feeling the same way. Except for the guy in the gray Nova, he's singing up a whole damn aria in there. Looks like he's having a great time."

He paused, and I could see him in the mirror, looking across the lanes. In the right side, I found the

gray Nova, and the fat man sitting behind the wheel, pouring his heart and soul into something. His mouth was wide on every note, his brows raised, then furrowed, then raised again. He was losing his hair, it was combed back, with no shame of exposing more than the average acreage of forehead. I wondered what he was singing; if he was horrible, or if he had some magnificent tenor voice that would bring tears to my eyes and make me beg for a recording. "I see him," I said. "But what does —"

"Sorry, sorry, I just got caught up again. So where was I? Yes, the people-watching. I was just dialing the phone, all different numbers, on autopilot. My eyes were wandering from car to car, and then I saw you. You were wiping your forehead, just like everybody else, and then you leaned down. And it was interesting for me that you leaned down because a number I had just dialed was ringing. And then you never came up. And I just guessed maybe it was you." He shrugged again, and waved his hand forward out the window. "Wake up."

I pulled up more. Then I laughed. "Well. That's pretty amazing."

"Pretty goddamn amazing."

I laughed again, and then I ran my hand through my hair. "What should we do now?"

He thought for a second. "I don't know. What should we do?'

I suddenly felt a little better, sharing my misery with him. "We can't just hang up and pretend the other one's not there."

"No, no. Keep me company. Can you tell me what the bumper sticker on the car in front of you says? I can't make it out."

I read the sticker. "It says. "No Dukes. Bush for President."

He started laughing some more. "Jesus, people are crazy."

"For voting for Bush?"

He shook his head and waved his hand down at me. "Just for being people, that's all. I mean, why leave a losing candidate's bumper sticker on your car for five goddamn years? People just leave things everywhere. We have an insurmountable compulsion to leave. To litter."

I weighed this, and thought of the gum wrapper in my pocket, left from after lunch. Would I really throw it out when I got home, or would I wait for it to turn to lint and then toss it on the ground? "Maybe you're right."

"Of course, I'm right. When was the last time you really recycled all your bottles?"

I thought. "I don't know, Jack. Are you trying to make me feel guilty?"

"No, just making a point."

We bitched, then, for a good few minutes. I was pissed off about everything, anyway, and I needed to ventilate. Get it out. So I told him about my job and my boredom and just stagnation all over the place. I had been in a crappy mood since Christmas, about everything from velcro to the greenhouse effect. He said he had problems with his boss and his girlfriend. "Although I guess they only count for one problem," he said, and laughed.

"Your boss and your girlfriend?" I asked. "Nah, that's too terrible."

He made the sign of a cross out his window. "I kid you not, Bob. Rita and Mr. Tuffman. She told me a week ago."

I shook my head and thought about Nancy. Wondered about her. "My wife's about the only good thing I've got left."

He laughed. "Don't hear that out of many people."

"Well, it's true. Marriage isn't all bad, once you get used to the whole name-sharing thing." I felt like I was probably depressing him. and I looked back to my radio. "Hey, what station do you listen to?"

He shrugged. "I don't listen, really. Too much crap."

I flipped it on and started scanning the channels. "Well, we got NPR . . . "

"Too depressing."

" . . . we got Barbara Streisand . . . "

"Too old."

" . . . we got, umm, punk? . . . "

"Too young. Too loud."

"CSN."

"CSN?"

"Crosby, Stills and Nash."

"Hm." He was intrigued. "What song?"

"Not sure." I racked my memory, churning up the old tunes and titles, mixing and matching. "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes, I think."

"What station?"

I told him the station and he turned to it, turned it up loud. "I love this song, this is my old girlfriend's song. Turn your radio up."

We rolled down our windows and turned up the volume. I could hear him; Jackson was singing over David Crosby, going for the high notes and missing.

I looked over at the fat man, who still sat, mouth opening and shutting, maybe on a recitative now. His arms moved every once in a while to accentuate a beat, or a lyric. His eyes were squeezed shut, letting his own sound mingle with the recording, filling the inside of the Nova with emotion of the barest and loudest kind.

Jackson didn't say anything for a second, and then he started to laugh again. "This is great. This is just what I needed."

And then I realized that I hadn't moved in about ten minutes. I was afraid my car would overheat, or just get sick of sitting there and shut off. I could barely see the end of the gates, about two hundred yards away. A while, yet.

"We need a break," said Jackson.

"Yeah, a vacation," I nodded.

"No, no. Just a break. From everything. From all these little annoying problems that make our lives crap from six in the morning until the alarm is set again. We need a break from this fucking traffic jam."

"Yeah, let's just go on strike." I laughed.

There was a long pause.

"Jack?"

He cleared his throat. "Robert. Bob, let's do that, let's go on strike."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's just quit for minute. Let's stretch out, and yell, and feel like fucking people, like individuals. Just for a minute."

I considered for a second. He could easily just stop the car for a minute; nobody would even notice. "We could just stop the cars."

"And get out."

Another pause, and the ludicrous idea started to seem not so ludicrous and we both laughed, at the same time, and opened our car doors. I heard his engine die, I heard his radio cut off, and I turned the key backwards in my ignition. That constant, omnipresent low groan that had shaken my body for so long tonight just ended, ceased. I felt a wave of relief, like I had seldom felt before, and Jackson and I stepped out of our cars. I suddenly felt like a teenager again. Just a goofy sixteen year old kid in his Dad's car on a Friday night, calling Chinese fire drills at red lights.

"We're on strike," I yelled, not just to Jackson, but to the people around me, watching me take off my sportcoat and shake out my arms.

I went over to Jackson, who was smiling and loosening his tie. His beard was stretched into a beaming smile, bright white teeth on black, while his whole face crinkled with indomitable joy. We shook hands. "Good to meet you."

I nodded, and then the lady in the car behind mine stuck her head out her window. "What the hell are you doing?"

Jackson shook his head. "We're just taking a little break. Don't worry, the cars weren't moving with us in them, either."

I looked at her closely, then, and saw that her face was drawn, that her eyes were a little glazed, a lot tired. Her hair was undone and twisted from being curled around her finger so much. "Why don't you come out and play?" I asked.

She gave me the finger, then rolled up her window.

I looked at her closely, then, and saw that her face was drawn, that her eyes were a little glazed, a lot tired. Her hair was undone and twisted from being curled around her finger so much. "Why don't you come out and play?" I asked.

She gave me the finger, then rolled up her window.

"I'll play." An older man in a three piece suit, he was at least fifty, got out of the car next to hers, in front of Jackson's. He took off his coat and stretched his arms out, revealing the perfect ovals of sweat that had gathered under his arms. "This is just what I need."

Jackson and I laughed, and then I jumped up and waved down the bridge at the gate openings and all the cars and all the people. I could hear horns blasting at me from behind.

The older man extended his hand to me and Jackson, then motioned for the unwilling lady to come out. She smiled coyly and shook her head. He insisted, with a slight bow, that she join him. She laughed, covered her mouth delicately with her hand, and opened her door.

And it went on like that. Like the rings that spread out on a pond after you throw a pebble. Like a spiral starting at a tiny point and whirling

outward, people got out of their cars. At first, they were all coming up to me and Jackson, introducing themselves, shaking hands. Then they started to branch out, talk to each other. Somebody took his shirt off, commented how nice the weather actually was, traffic aside.

Jackson climbed up onto the roof of his car and sat down, Indian style. He called me over and he said, "I know what we really need, Bob. We need quiet. I want to relax."

I went back to my car, and as he repeated the same thing to the people milling about his Jetta, I told people around me as I climbed onto the roof. I sat Indian style. The older man and his new lady friend climbed gingerly onto his roof, him holding her arm as she struggled onto the bumper. Soon, like a wave, all up and down the bridge, people were sitting Indian style on their roofs. Some were meditating. Some were just watching, listening to the wind rip around their faces.

I looked back at Jackson, who had his eyes closed. "Jackson, you did it. We did it, Jesus, everybody's out here."

He shook his head. "Almost everybody." He paused. "Listen."

And I shut my eyes, and I focused my ears. And above the whipping of the wind, above all the people sitting on all those cars, above the bridge and the city and the sky, was the fat man, singing his aria; and his beautiful, eloquent, Nova-muffled tenor voice was the only sound in our world.

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"When I first started writing, I knew what I wanted to say. I wanted to write about the Cold War, about growing up in the suburbs, about racial tension and the uselessness of war. "But I was only eight, so I settled for something with a little less depth. After I had mastered the handwriting exercises, I went straight to the notebook and started my first novel. It was called The Adventures of Harry and Henry, and featured two ants who boasted more ambition than most people I have met to this day. They left home to make their own way, they built their own house, they even started their own detective agency. These ants did it all.

"And they taught me all I needed to know. Because as far as I could see, the ants out in the garden next to my house couldn't talk. But Harry and Henry did. The real ants spent most of their time just milling around on a little pile of churned up sand; on the written page they encountered dangerous snakes, followed footprints with tiny magnifying glasses, and jailed the neighborhood squirrel for stealing the missing nuts. "You see, I had an active imagination, and I found out, with the help of the ants, that the one accessible place where anything is possible is at a desk. With paper, and a pen. Anything can happen.

"That stuck with me, and as I grew up in Concord, Massachusetts, among the graves of the nineteenth century all-star authors team (Louisa May Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson), I never passed up the chance to pick up a story, or to write one of my own. Through high school, through my education at Trinity College in Hartford, into my independent life, I never let that go. The pen has been replaced by a keyboard, but the imagination hasn't changed. "As for 'Traffic,' here is a story about people needing other people. Survival of the fittest, depend on ourselves, trust no-one, those are chunks of advice I just don't buy. Nobody is superman, nobody can do it all by themselves; there is always a time when we need a push to get us where we want to go. We need a hero to spark us up, put us on top of our cars, give us a hand to lead the way from the horror of stagnation or defeat into contentment, even if it's only for a few minutes."

Wife

by Lidia Yukman

[Web images/Collaboration—Elizabeth Fischer]

ONE

You don't see radiators much anymore. They are old fashioned, they are inside of old buildings. People have learned. Almost anyone knows not to lean on one. She lived in an old building, the kind with radiators. Up close, they seem like magnified bars. She took a deep breath. She touched her cheek to the radiator for three long seconds in a perfectly calm gesture, a kind of uninspired gesture, but deliberate all the same. "One, two, three. . ." she said, letting the air out of her mouth with each word. One, two three; the heat singed silent and deep through the layers of her skin, through the fleshy part of her cheek.

What patience. What brave, glorious, undaunted patience. When she had finally thought of it, how proud at her own intellect she had been. And even then she had realized it would take patience—patience to sit in front of the hot metal, patience to draw her face near, and nearer even as the heat became evident, whispering toward her cheek. Patience at the moment itself, so as to do it right, to pull away slowly, because she did not, after all, want to rip half of her face off and leave it staring back at her from the radiator. She wanted a controlled effort, a specific result. Only a wound, a perfect wound. She was absolutely confident at the idea of it, because what was this patience compared to her life? Three small seconds.

She either winced or smiled as she peeled her cheek away. Burnt, sweet flesh tickled her nostrils. Her eyes welled, swam in their little sockets. When she could see properly again, she rose and staggered, flesh screaming, from the living room to the kitchen.

The first thing she did was pour herself a glass of whiskey. A glass one might fill with milk. She drank it down until the heat in her throat and chest challenged the fire in her right cheek, the fire filling up the whole right side of her face now, making her nostril flare a little, her lip quiver, her eye close. The whiskey streamed down the center of her body: high voltage.

She thought of things her women friends said to her. Advice, consolations over scripted lunches. Come on, be serious, get a grip. You don't really hate him, do you? How cliche. For Christ's sake grow up, be sensible, have a little self control. Go on a diet—herbs and tofu. Change your hair. Your wardrobe. Your perfume. Your heels. Make something of your life. Sex isn't everything, don't be ridiculous. You are obsessing. You are playing the victim. You are just being lazy. I wish I had your problem! Or her personal favorite: Honey, what you need is a good fuck.

How do you tell women who wear false nails and baby powder between their legs and order chicken salads with vinaigrette dressing at linen-covered tables and who are busy trying desperately to chew without smudging lipstick that women must keep moving or die?

She walked around her living room holding her drink, feeling animated. Alive. Gesturing with her drink to the T.V., the couch, the different objects in the room, speaking aloud from time to time. What advice, she wanted to know, was there for epic anger and hate equaled only in intensity by need? She bent to confront the end table. "Have you guessed at my sense of desperation? Where should I put my anger? Who can my anger take care of? Make love to? Where does a woman put her anger? In marriage? In children? Lovers? Contact sports? Alcohol, drugs, violence? Because buddy," and here she took a step back from the endtable for effect, "we're not just talking about the kind of anger you can bake away or submerge in dishwater or paint with red lips or do lunch over or cover over with some Victoria's Secret silky little treasure . . . I'm pissed . . . I mean, I am fucking pissed off . . . " she paused. She looked serious at the endtable. "Well?" No one answered, the room swelled with shame, silence and ignorance. The now cold pain in her cheek pierced all the way through her skull. She thought maybe her right eye had swollen shut, anyway, she could no longer open it. She went to the bathroom to have a look. On her way to the bathroom she realized this was all a little disgusting, a little over dramatic, a little raw. She realized if she were to tell someone about it, they might just as soon not order anything to eat, they might lean a little away from her in the listening. They would really rather not, not in public, not so close. She whispered to the bathroom door before she opened it, "Should we keep quiet?" She opened the bathroom door, looked herself in the face. Hey! It really was a beauty! She examined it: the outer edge was deep red and crimped, then a kind of purplish welt rising on either side like mangled lips. In the center of that a pus-filled, long, yellowish bubble of blistered skin oozing and retreating like sea foam. An amazing wound. The perfect. The living end. By the time he got home, she'd be out already. By the time he got home, she'll have outlined her own eyes in black, blue lashes. By the time he got home, she'll be blushed and lipsticked—what else, red as a

Coca-Cola can. By the time he got home, after she's stared at the tools of the face for a long while, she'll decide on a gold dust shadow, she'll trace a glow around the thing, precious metal. By the time he got home, she'd be sitting in a bar with the most perfect wound imaginable. There'd be no way to miss it.

TWO

Goddamn it to mother-fucking hell, she says. I'd say that just about covers it, he says. He wants to know why she feels the need to swear so much, so deliberately, what depends on it and why is it so important. Why for so long hasn't she grown tired. Worn-out in the mouth. As he says this he rubs the back of his long neck with long-fingered hands of grace. He thinks of a painting of a woman who is only mouth. Any mouth but hers. He has everything to say but rarely speaks. She looks straight into his eyes, straight into his skull, says fuck you. It's curious, he says, curious because now when she uses profanity it sounds like everyone else's ordinary speech. Like when she says goddamn it she may as well be saying the kettle is steaming. She would not say that she is angry but her eyes flash hard at him saying this to her, as if her language did not disrupt, did not slice open the air and slash him across his goddamned stupid too- beautiful face. She knows he is lying. What really is curious is that these two are lovers. This is love.

It's curious, he says, curious because now when she uses profanity it sounds like everyone else's ordinary speech. Like when she says goddamn it she may as well be saying the kettle is steaming.

At any rate, the reason she is swearing is because they are on their way to an evening party. He knows what she means. The parties they attend together are full of falseness. Because he is an artist in San Francisco. There is nothing real about artists in San Francisco, not the art, not the women who live with them, not the galleries, not the critics, not the men who live with them, not even San Francisco—everything is filmy, filmy as bay fog. Except maybe for their hands. The hands are priceless.

All of them together make one big pile of shit she declares grabbing hold of his hand as they approach the door of the evening party. He squeezes her hand. She squeezes back thinking how meaningless, wondering where is the risk in squeezing a lover's hand while walking to a party?

They pass rows of colored houses remarking at the features like so many faces. Her descriptions: the fucking amazing view, the goddamn little rows of windows stretching for fucking miles. His: more azure evening light, warm glow from the inside out, houses alive. Doors, windows, roofs speaking. They make a good pair, or rather, their mouths make a good pair—hers pushing out, exploding, his soaking everything in slow and sweet.

Near the house they will enter she suggests wild why don't they run back down the hill, past the houses again, past the doors and windows and faces into only the evening. She unbuttons her blouse. He can barely see her, the light is dim. She tugs at his arm and he half believes her, as always. But they do enter the house because someone sees him and calls out his name. She leaves her excitement standing in the yard, leaning in the direction of the night, eyes wide, chest heaving, naked.

Inside everyone calls him Pater. His name is Peter she keeps reminding them, but she is the only one who calls him this. Finally some man with a mostly bald head except for some gray on the sides which he has had styled and sculpted explains to her that Pater sounds more like the name of an artist—that more people will buy from a Pater than a Peter. She is astounded that he thinks he must tell her this. The paintings: what is being bought? Sometimes she can't remember his name at all, simply his painting.

There are a lot of drinks. Language in the rooms of the party suddenly turns liquid. Animals begin crawling out. One man becomes a lizard, his belly scraping the carpet, his arms and legs sticking out stiff from his body. Another man who has been pinching the asses of women all night turns into a crab, with one, huge, red, heavy claw, so heavy he cannot lift it anymore. A woman with big lips becomes a blowfish, bubbles rise from her face now and then, her eyes move to the sides of her head and look magnified. Pater or Peter becomes a bird with heavy, colored plumage, terribly magnificent: his back sways, his chest protrudes.

She drinks continual scotch. She still feels like a fucking person.

She goes into the bathroom and removes her bra and underwear from underneath her clothing and stuffs them into the medicine cabinet. She emerges from the bathroom some new animal no one has ever seen before. Everyone notices her. She names herself

something between the color red and the word devour. She looks for him.

Some small man who might be a ferret or a weasel is talking to Pater/Peter, the rooster or the peacock. Everything swims. She watches her lover shrink. She moves closer. The ferret/weasel's mouth is making sharp, jerky movements. Closer still she hears words like ridiculous and no talent and not a chance in hell. Her lover is shrinking before the weasel into a small bird, then into a chick, peeping uselessly. The ferret-man's tongue looks long and dangerous, his lips are knives moving together, slicing and clicking.

She hates. She hates the ferret, she hates the smallness of the chick. She hates the alcohol, she hates the party, the animals, the body who came into the house. The ferret's mouth becomes the only thing she can focus on, even as a crowd is gathering because by now of course she has started swearing, even as the fish-woman swims up and blows diplomatic bubbles between them, even as the giant red pincher drags itself near, the ferret's mouth clicks and slices and becomes more clear than is possible, so that finally she has a direction for her hate to aim at, and she punches his mouth right off his face. Everyone is a person again, humanly stunned.

A man rests on the floor. Her knuckles ache. Some quiet hands lead her away, a man whose name she cannot remember. She thinks he is saying it's alight, it's alight. She suddenly realizes this is how she feels every goddamn night of her fucking life. His hands are on her face, her shoulders, he tries to sculpt her O.K. Her own hands hang useless.

This love cannot live unless she fights him every day of her life. He paints, will paint. She aches for the years, the marriage, the waiting to be over, to summer over into a different life. She runs toward summer with no hands. He will paint with or without her.

THREE

Truth is, I don't like to talk first or drink wine or pretend there is something significant that can occur in the space of time before fucking a woman. But I usually do a lot of talking, drinking wine, seeing films, and discussing moral issues in an intelligent and meaningful way before the bedroom. See, what I would really prefer is to get them down on the floor, get in them and watch their faces reveal just how much they can't live without it, how they might die if they couldn't have it. I like to finger their nipples hard, I like to hear them say fuck me again and again. But the thing is, I am thirty-five and successful and well-educated and sensitive. So I treat them with respect, as an equal, while at the same time adoring them, because of course you can't leave out adoring them—then they wouldn't be the kind of equal they want.

But on the other hand, she could be crazy, all that disease out there right now, or perhaps pregnant and ready to claim paternity later, or even worse, a man dressed as a woman . . . I saw a movie like that.

Last night I was at a movie, a German movie, or film, with an intellectual audience: lots of black clothing and designer glasses and shoes with exotic names. A blonde woman sat down next to me after the film had started. I looked at her. She looked at me. There were maybe twenty other people there in the dark. Do you want to fuck me she whispers as if she has just said excuse me but do you have the time. Same quizzical look as do I know what time it is.

I know, I couldn't believe it either. I'm not sure what to say, I mean, on the one hand, here she is, the woman I dream of saying fuck me in just the right tone, the answer to my prayers, no small talk, no seduction, no familiarity. She doesn't know that I am successful, sensitive, and civilized. She doesn't care.

But on the other hand, she could be crazy, all that disease out there right now, or perhaps pregnant and ready to claim paternity later, or even worse, a man dressed as a woman . . . I saw a movie like that. But then she slid from her seat onto the floor and spread out down there where you usually see old popcorn glowing in the dark and your feet stick a little. She unbuttons her blouse and exposes two luminous globes. She unzips her jeans and I smell gold like hay. I try to watch the movie and her at the same time but eyes were not made to look up and down simultaneously. And she pulls me by the eyeballs down onto her.

I'm thirty-five years old. I'm at this goddamn German movie alone because the woman who was supposed to meet me canceled. A young flip thing. Canceled dinner, canceled the movie, the talk, the wine, the sex. I have a headache in my pelvis. And now I am on the floor, not wondering about disease or paternity but will we be heard. I hold my breath, move in her using only the muscles of my belly. Something German speaks to us.

Suddenly she is on top. I am pinned. I hold my wrists over my head. I imagine the whole thing in a movie. Her hair hangs down in my face. I am still trying to figure out how she got on top and if I care when I realize she is sitting straight up now, riding me for all she is worth. My penis is screaming but my brain is terrified of being seen. I begin to fear an usher-police figure. I try to pull her by the hair back down, out of view, but she won't have it. Now she is arching, her neck and hair make a silhouette against the glow of light which is the film, the film, my god. I reach for her nipples but she slaps my hand away, fingers her own nipples. I wonder if she has drawn the audience away from the film.

I feel it welling up in my thighs. I feel it prickle the surface of my skin. I feel it being sucked out of my body. She wants it so bad, I'm going to give it to her. I close my eyes, dig my fingers into her ass, feel the shiver of the body overtaking the brain. It's coming . . . it's coming . . .

Then she stops. I almost yell goddamn it, don't stop, for Christ's sake don't stop, you can't stop now, but the Germans are yelling already, and she has turned to watch. I hear some kind of brawl accompanying my torment, slapping and screams and chairs being thrown. I hear it is a woman screaming, a man slapping. I tug at her hips because I think I may explode from the inside out if she doesn't move again soon. Just ten seconds more. Please, just ten more seconds. I shake her from the waist. Her wet wiggles a bit. I get that pain in my temple and throat I got when I tried not to cry as a kid, only worse. Please, I beg. I grab my own penis because I can't stand it anymore. I come like an ocean, a hydrant, a whale, ridiculous, I bite the inside of my cheek to keep quiet. When I open my eyes she is dressed, she is sitting in her seat, eyes forward, having slid off of me long ago. I am the sticky on the floor at her feet.

My rage is all whisper: how could you do that to me? Are you some kind of weirdo? Who the hell do you think you are? How could you do that? Are you a psycho? Some looney? She doesn't whisper, though she speaks in a low voice.

You actually think I did it for you? Why, I don't even know you. I must have seen over fifty foreign films that year.

FOUR

How'd you get the name Eddie?

Father gave it to me. Edwina.

I like the way she wants to watch, to see what's going on, even if she doesn't get it. I mean, when she came in to the garage, she tells me, the car makes a strange sound when I shift the gears. What kind of sound. This is usually where people make asses of themselves. They try to sound like a sick motor. But she says, you know that noise you hear when your alarm goes off in the morning, only you're not awake yet so you don't exactly hear it, you sense it, something between a buzz and a ring, and for a moment you don't know if it's a hangover or a dream or the phone or the alarm or an insect or a snore? I had to admit I knew what she meant. I overslept a lot. Didn't help me worth a shit to guess what was wrong with the car, but it did make me curious. She knew what she was talking about even if she didn't.

So when she came over to where I was under the hood, I said, could you hand me that Allen. She picked the tool up and looked at it a long time before she handed it to me. She got some oil on her hand, and she looked at that too.

I worked on her car. She stayed very near. So, she says, how long did it take you to learn to be a mechanic? Now she is making circles with her ring finger in a blob of oil near the battery. She's leaning right under the hood with me. Better watch all that hair. I picked it up real fast, I say. Think I had a knack for it. I've been around a garage all my life, it seemed natural. The oil, the smell of gasoline, the chrome, the black innards of an engine. I was helping with repair work by the time I was twelve. Now she is fingering the tools. She's asking me their names, what they are used for. It is the kind of conversation that makes you feel good about what you know.

I kind of start enjoying the company. I mean, I still think she is a little weird, like when she starts asking me about the engine parts, like when she says that tube over there that curls underneath that other thing looks like a penis, and that thick curved thing like an arm with a flexed muscle, that big thing in the middle with all the compartments could be the lungs, it even looks like it's meant for air, and all of it together here under the hood, and us inside it tightening and screwing and greasing. Now all this not only sounds weird, but it starts sounding sexy.

So now we're both oily and curious, I guess. When you were little, did your dad teach you things? You know, like how to throw a baseball?

Not really. Just mechanics. He was real busy. What about you? You look athletic. Big!

I was very good at sports. Better than the boys.

Good for you.

I guess I was a tomboy. I didn't have many girl friends. Except for two. One was a cheerleader. The other was one that nobody else talked to. She had red hair and glasses. She used to sit in those cement tunnels all through recess. One time I went in there, just to see if she really was a spastic like everyone said. I sat in there with her. I said, is your mamma spastic too like everyone says? And she lifted up her skirt and I thought I saw a peach between her legs. She pet herself and I could see the little hairs were reddish. And she said, see this? This is very rare. I was scared, but I believed her, because when I got home I couldn't find any hairs. I didn't think she was spastic anymore and I went in the tunnel more after that.

Pretty weird stuff. I just keep working even though by now I'm getting horny, I don't know, I guess it's the weirdness. Everybody gets excited by things that scare them a little. Not that she scared me, not really, except that now I notice that she is holding the biggest tool of all and swinging it a bit. I've read stories, you know? Women are doing strange things these days. I think, don't be silly, don't be so paranoid. She's weird, not crazy.

Then she says the weirdest thing of all, what do you think about pain, just out of the blue.

I play it real cool. Don't like it, I say. Not even a little? Like when you get a back rub and they hit a muscle that is very sore and it hurts how they rub but you just can't get enough—what about that?

Well, I guess everybody likes that.

And what about fear?

Now the tools are a little slippery in my hands and I start sizing her up, thinking if that arm raises even a little I'll swing this Allen around into her stomach, just hurt her enough to scare her, because after all I really am bigger than her and could pin her to the garage floor easily. But the second I imagine her really trying to hit me I realize that I am wet and throbbing and she is just setting the tool back down like the most normal person in the entire universe.

You little tease, I think, but what I come up with after all this is that I want to take her home, I want her on the floor, and it makes me feel like somebody besides myself. And I think, is this how it feels? I bet she busts a lot of balls.

Lidia Yukman **nubin@gladstone.uoregon.edu**

"managing editor of two girls review/phd english/teaches fiction/likes: lickingscotch pantiesinthefreezerinsummerdogswater bodiesboysgirlsscabsknivesinterlockingpsycheschaoticstrugglesjazzby deadpeopleleavinglasvegasexcess andothermovieswherepeopleinthetheater wereaudiblygaspinglikenaturalbornkillers mostanythingshamefulcarriedoffwith delightgirlswithnamesthatbeginwithl,p,ork/ work has appeared in *postmodern culture*, *ART:Mag*, *Left Bank*, *Rain City Review*, *Northwest Review*, *FC2*, *NWHQ*, *puerto del sol*, forthcoming short story collection *HER OTHER MOUTH* blah blah blah all this jacking off is just so much word spoo.

"the man i am married to now doesn't mind. other ones did. there is an invisible strain, sinewy, ready to rip, between a woman and words. i like to push on words until they rip. i like to leave the wound unsutured, not for shock-value, but to combat ignorance with mildy interesting questions. 'Wife' is like a tattoo, or a cut, something into the flesh to battle complacency about gender, monogamy, and heterosexuality. i'm just curious and driven. those are my best bets."

Elizabeth Fischer **efischer@wimsey.com**

Elizabeth Fischer is a visual artist, writer and musician living in Vancouver, Canada. Her visual work has been exhibited, her writings have been published, and she performs in many places. She seemingly prefers infamy to fame-fortune, for which societal aberration several people consider her rather reality-impaired. She is the editor and designer of *NWHQ* and the instigator of the listserv list wire. "Wife" is the result of a collaboration beween Lidia Yukman and Elizabeth Fischer. First conceived on wire as a series of texts by Lidia, the pieces were consequently integrated into a hypertextual and visual interface by Elizabeth. The resultant work was published in NWHQ.

1996 Nominated Stories

This is a list of all stories nominated by each ezine for this year's eSCENE.

AfterNoon

"Book of Lazarus," Dick Grossman
"Burying Grandma Mugwump," Doug Rice
"The Flannel Bomb," David Kushner
"The House," Henry Rasof
"Post-Adolescence," Susan Shapiro
"This Quintessence of Your Blood," Eugene Thacker
"When Did She Infect Me," Bayard Johnson

Blue Penny Quarterly

"A Brief Stay," James Katowich
"Dogfight," Michael Knight
"Ilfinesh," David McNair
"The Leave-Taking," Taylor Stannard
"Shawanigan Bingo Queen," Joseph Boyden

Burst!

"Chad," Jeremy Barnett
"Escape from Bondi," Jeremy Barnett
"The Stuntman," Jeremy Barnett

Circuit Traces

"The Age of Anything," Brad Bostian
"Captain America," Todd Brendan Fahey
"Nine Years," Nocholas Royle

Crisp

"Paris, Arkansas," Matt Bonner
"Traffic," Evan Zall

CrossConnect

"Experiences in Handicapped Camping," Michael Mcneilley
"The Long Dirt Road," Raina von Waldenburg
"The Motorcycle Thief," Elizabeth A. Mills

CyberKind

"My Great Grandmother's Baseball Bat," Phil Dubitsky
"Route 66, Revisited," Jonathan Baskin

DreamForge

"Lunch in the Park," Francis U. Kaltenbaugh
"Melusine Revisiting," Gay Bost
"Pandora's Dogs," Mary Soon Lee
"Roadkill," Jack Hillman
"Virus Verses," Lisa Morton

E-scape

"The Cactus Watchers," Steve Olson
"Finding Warren," David Phalen
"Penny Annie and the Space Monsters," Bruce S. Levine

Edifice of Writing and Literature

"Expensive Bread," James O'Malley
"Family Business," Diana Hannon Forrester
"Seven Deadly Sins," Raymond Busler
"Soul Food," Raymond Busler

Enterzone

"7 Pinoak Lane," Levi Asher
"All My Bad Luck," Peter Gannon Crumlish
"Girl Birth Water Death," Martha Conway
"Government Secrets," Martha Conway
"The History of the California Burrito," Levi Asher
"I Am a Gondolier," David Alexander
"Jac Tellier, Laura and Grapes," hargitai
"The Last to Know," Peter Gannon Crumlish
"Never Been a Finer Chicken," Bruce Sherin (aka Dr. Kovacs)
"Paulie," David Alexander
"Some People," John Humpal
"Spots," Frederick Barthelme
"The Way You Live Now," Gary Percesepe

Far Gone

"Down on the Farm," Todd Brendan Fahey
"Mr. Hull," Sean Brendan-Brown

Garrett County Journal

"Family Stunts," Peter Davies
"Garters," Meg Kavanagh
"Matches," Meg Kavanagh
"The Nirvana Seizures," Alec Michod
"Saturn Santa Faction," Cory Kapczynski

In Vivo
"Counter Service," Edmund Goppelt
"Flashback," Jerry Reynolds (aka Roosevelt Casey)
"My First Shot," Steven Sanders
"The Refugee," John Caddel

Interbang
"Alice," Samsara Vagabond
"Blood," Mark Adam Hartzell
"Butter Molocom," Ben Ohmart
"My Wet Mom," Stephen Flood
"Now... Alone," James Groom
"Professor Jar," Samsara Vagabond

Intermix
"The Bright Wood," Amelinda Berube
"Devil's Architect," Edward Willett
"Dooley's Wake," Russell Shaddox
"Her Mother's Eyes," Gayle P. Nastasi
"Lay of the Kings of Dale," Michael Hicks
"Smoked Meat," Charles A. Gramlich
"Stephen's Folly," Brian Mortensen

InterText
"Bludemagick," Jacqueline Carey
"Genetic Moonshine," Jim Cowan
"Ghostdancer," Ridley McIntyre
"Handlers," Ceri Jordan
"River," G.L. Eikenberry
"Shipping and Handling Extra," Laurence Simon
"Two Solitudes," Carl Steadman

Jolly Roger
"Nantucket Ghost Story," A," Bootsy McClusky

Kudzu
"Eating Buzzards," Gerald Thurmond
"The Jigsaw Man," James Goodwin
"A Marriage," Richard Cumyn
"Not a Shadow, Not a Sigh," James Katowich
"Transit Delay," Thomas J. Hubschman

Mississippi Review Web
"Afterglow," Terry Engel
"Escape," Doug Lawson
"Hello Marge," Mario Rossilli
"Kissing Randy," Caroline Prince
"Landlord," Andrew Plattner
"Party Girl," Terese Svoboda
"Sleeping Utensils," Ron Nyren
"Tall Folks," Elizabeth Gilbert

Morpo Review
"A Girl and Her Dog," Mark Bothum
"Jericho to Jericho," Amelia Franz

Net Books
"Missed Connection," Michael Marshall Smith

NWHQ
"The Left-Hand Turn Game," Bill New
"Lily," Elizabeth Fisher
"Mud Love," John Young
"Red Rooster," Elizabeth Fisher
"Wife," Lidia Yukman

Oyster Boy
"Sanctuary's for the Birds," Lucy Harrison

Practice
"Why I'm Happy All The Time," Adam Prince

Quanta
"In The City," Jacqueline Carey
"Moonifest Destiny," Peter Gelman

Sour Grapes
"Buzz," Jon Brooks
"Down a Dark Alley," Will Viharo
"Mastodon: The Case for Nuclear Winter," John Dolan

Sparks
"If the Moon Won't Rise Tonight, I'll Bury Us," Stacy Tartar Esch
"On the Best Days," Paul Ford

Super AM
"Holodram," Foster Johnson

Twilight World
"Cronos in Wonderland," Richard Karsmakers
"Obviously Influenced by the Devil," Richard Karsmakers
"Wild Horses," Mark Knapp

A Quick (trust me) Overview of Online Publishing

(from *eSCENE* 1995)

by Jeff Carlson, Series Editor

I could probably spend days talking about this and still not get very far. Like the Internet itself, the scope and implications of online publishing continue to grow, both in size and complexity. Industry professionals and casual users alike are attempting to answer questions such as: What exactly is online publishing? Does email count as publishing? How (or if) does copyright apply? Will books soon be obsolete? And this is just the short-short list.

In its simplest incarnation, online publishing is the publication of material in an electronic format. This encompasses several forms: magazines ("zines" or "ezines"), novels, scholarly journals, Usenet (newsgroup) postings, and Frequently Asked Questions files (FAQs), to name a few.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that the state of online publishing remains in constant flux. The rules are literally being made up as we go along, especially in the areas of copyright, ownership, and distribution. If you're a writer, a good general rule is to assume that by posting your story, poem, essay, or whatever to any publicly-read area (such as a newsgroup or web page), you're "publishing" it, and therefore may not be able to offer certain rights (such as First North American, for example) if you try to sell it to a print magazine. More detailed information can be found at "The Internet Writer Resources" Page, or in the misc.writing FAQ.

A common misconception—and major hurdle to the idea of online publishing as a legitimate venue—is that publishing a piece online is somehow "lower" on the totem pole; that if you publish your story online, it means you can't hack it in the real world. After all, if you have a computer, modem, and Internet access, it's extraordinarily easy and inexpensive to make your story available to thousands of people. This is the idea behind rec.arts.prose, a newsgroup repository of uploaded writing that, in many cases, hasn't been edited or even proofread. (I won't get too deep into this, because, honestly, I haven't spent much time exploring what's available there. As with most everything related to the Net, I'm sure there are gems in that mineshaft, but you probably have to do quite a bit of digging to find them.) With the growth of online zines and work being done by the people involved with Project Gutenburg (volunteers who are creating libraries of electronically stored books that can be downloaded for free), however, online publishing is gaining credibility.

And momentum. Once word got out that thousands of people are reading online materials, many of the major print publications began scrambling to establish a presence on the Net. Although this bandwagon mentality has resulted in many hastily- and poorly-executed digital shadows of otherwise respectable print publications, it has also created a movement towards forming standards by which works can be protected, and authors paid for their efforts. These standards are still only flickers on the digital horizon, but unless the Net collapses or the Earth burns up, they will have to be defined to accommodate this movement.

So, should you cancel your subscription to the New Yorker or Time? Has the day finally arrived when bookstores will fold, and we'll do all of our reading on laptops and Newtons? Of course not. I think the people who have been predicting the end of the printed word are sitting too close to their monitors without proper shielding. People aren't going to want to buy a half-dozen batteries along with their copy of The Newly Repainted Bridges of Madison County or Newt's current bodice-ripper. Besides, you just can't put a cup of coffee on a well-worn electronic reading tablet without worrying about the warranty.

For a more in-depth discussion of online publishing, see L. Detweiler's excellent "A Vision of the Future." Or, feel free to wander the many links to writing- and literature-related sources.

Colophon

eSCENE 1996 was produced, proofed, coded, and uploaded entirely on a combination of Apple Macintosh machines: a PowerMac 7500/100, a PowerMac 6100/60, and a PowerBook 100.

HTML coding was done primarily in BBEdit, with some HTML conversion by Chris Hector's rtftohtml utility.

Graphics were created and manipulated using Strata StudioPro Blitz, Macromedia FreeHand 5.5, Adobe Photoshop 3.0.5, and BoxTop's PhotoGIF plug-in.

Word-processing was completed in WriteNow 4 (the best WP for a PowerBook), Microsoft Word 5.1, and Microsoft Word 6.0 (only when absolutely necessary).

PostScript and PDF versions created with Adobe PageMaker 6.

Fonts used included Harting, Rubino Serif, and Rotis Sans Serif.

Coffee of choice came from Torrefazione Italia.

Assistant Editors' Bios

Shannon Christenot — Assistant Editor

Many aspects of editing fascinate me, but the effective use of language is more stimulating to me (for the sake of a now very extended metaphor) than a good cup of coffee. Language can be both startlingly aggressive and powerfully delicate. Therefore, I spend as much time as I can, while still making the rent, reading both literature and garbage. In the midst of a horrible novel I'll find a brief passage of lyrical brilliance that simultaneously amazes and depresses me. Amazing, because it captures and immortalizes a brief piece of truth; depressing, because the rest of the novel is so bad. In these instances, I flash back to a childhood fascination with those globe paperweights full of snow that look suspiciously like that Southern delicacy grits. The trappings were tacky, the snow swirled sluggishly, but at the heart of it was an immutable scene.

When I'm not dividing my time between the literary canon and whatever else in reach from the couch, I passively-aggressively garden in my window boxes (I will grow peas), ignore both my refrigerator and my treadmill (they cancel each other out in the great cosmic weight battle), see an occasional movie, and take an occasional walk.

Kim Carlson — Editorial Assistant

In an effort to see my husband Jeff and ex-roommate Shannon more frequently than during work on eSCENE 1995, I offered my services as grunt-worker and head cheerleader for the 1996 edition. They gave me the glowing title of Editorial Assistant, taught me some basic HTML coding, then made me beg for work.

In my off hours, I work for a Seattle biopharmaceutical company, secretly read an occasional romance novel when my job gets stressful, sing in a regional choir, and design and create stained-glass windows.