

Touchstone

No. 35

Spring 2003

Kansas State University



Cover Art

Domain (reversed for cover)

by K.A. Settle

Touchstone

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Touchstone is published by the College of Arts and Sciences at Kansas State University with assistance from the KSU Creative Writing Faculty, the KSU Fine Arts Council, and the KSU English Department.

Touchstone invites submissions of poetry, prose, and art (with suitable SASE) from students enrolled in college or university writing programs. Contributor's payment is two copies.

Send submissions or inquiries to:

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Visit our Web page for submission guidelines at <http://www.ksu.edu/english/touchstone>, or email questions to touchstoneksu@hotmail.com

Single Copy Price: \$4

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Printed by Kansas State University Printing Services, Manhattan, KS

Editors' Note

What is *Touchstone*? *The American Heritage Dictionary* provides two definitions of the word "touchstone."

touch·stone: 1. A hard black stone, such as jasper or basalt, formerly used to test the quality of gold or silver by comparing the streak left on the stone by one of these metals with that of a standard alloy. 2. An excellent quality or example that is used to test the excellence or genuineness of others.

"Hast any philosophy in thee, shepherd?" asks Touchstone, in *As You Like It*, Act iii. Sc. 2.

Judging by the volume and quality of this year's submissions, we here at Kansas State University would have to say *we do*. Our greatest disappointment was that we couldn't publish all the gems that came to *Touchstone* this year. We're proud to continue the fine tradition of publishing quality student writing that began over three decades ago.

We're also excited about some of the changes we've incorporated into this year's issue. We have decided to bring art back to *Touchstone*, with a full-color cover and 18 black-and-white illustrations. We've also updated and revamped our online version of *Touchstone*, with an online-only interview with slam poet Taylor Mali and much of this and previous years' contents available at <<http://www.ksu.edu/english/touchstone/>>.

We would like to thank this year's editors and readers for their time and commitment to creating a quality publication. We couldn't have asked for a more committed, hard-working, and enthusiastic staff. (Love the T-Shirts, guys.) We would also like to thank all the students who submitted to this year's journal: thank you for allowing us to showcase your work.

Finally, we'd like to extend a special thanks to our faculty advisor, Steve Heller, and our art faculty advisor, Dane Webster, as well as the KSU Fine Arts Council, KSU English Department and creative writing faculty for their continued support.

Erin Billing and Stephen Sink
Editors-in-Chief

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Justin Cameron

Hustle

by Jason Skipper

I can see my breath in this Texas morning where the sunlight's layered in orange, purple, and green like watercolors brushed across the pale blue sky. The ground is still wet outside my father's from last night's rainfall. I slide a large plastic cooler across the backyard, gripping one of the thick handles, pulling with my knees bent. Shrimp jostle around inside the cooler; the day is early and the ice is still solid. The time is eight or so on Sunday morning. I wasn't supposed to work today. But my father's sick as ever, his nerves shot to hell. He called me away from my friend's house after sunrise. I suspect he didn't sleep last night, that he sat up waiting until he figured the time was right.

I smell grease in the steam that comes from the back door of the house. From frying eggs, bacon, and the hamburger patty that my father, Wrendon, is cooking for me to eat for lunch today. I can picture the food, smell it, but not taste it and my stomach grumbles. I am tired and hungry, and before I know it the cooler catches along a corner of the porch; I pull too hard too quickly to get it moving again and the whole thing topples. The lid opens. Fifty pounds of shrimp and ice roll out on the ground. The small pink bodies are now speckled with dirt and grass. I step back and put my hands on my hips and say, *Shit*. Wren is suddenly there in the doorway. He wears faded Wranglers, a three-button collar shirt, a cap that's too big for his head. His shoulder is pressed against the screen door to hold it open. He holds a large iron skillet from which steam rises. A year ago he would have freaked out from me doing this, would have run into the yard and started pointing at the mess. But not today. Today he says *Uh-oh* and smiles in a playful way. Then he turns and goes back in, letting the screen door close behind him.

After the shrimp have been picked up, set into a different cooler, hosed down, drained, and set back clean in with the old shrimp, I grab the two sides of the cooler, bend over, then lift it to my chest. I place it in the van beside the other two coolers. Only when the pain jabs my spine like an icpick do I remember to lift with my legs and not my back. I jump in the van and check underneath the cabinets to see if we have the two extra things we sell: shellers and crab boil. We do. I clean my hands on the knees of my jeans, cross the porch, and hop over the steps. I wipe my feet, then open the door. Wren's standing at the stove. He points with a fork to a plate of eggs, bacon, and grits on the countertop. *That's yours*, he says. Sit down and eat. I run my hands underneath the kitchen faucet, pick up the plate,

and cross the floor. I sit down at the kitchen table and start shoveling food in my mouth, barely tasting anything aside from butter because the smell of disinfectant is still thick on my fingers. Through the screen door I can see the white van in the backyard, its doors still wide open, the three coolers side-by-side. Right now it smells of pine cleaner and soap. Later it will reek of warm shrimp and stale water.

I'm wishing I could have stayed gone this morning and that I could have slept in. I'm wishing I didn't have to do this any more. But I have to take my father into account. There are his elbows, his arms, his bony hips, and I think of the forty pounds he's dropped this year because of treatments. The only thing paying his bills is this business, and the only thing shutting us down would be the Health Department; if they checked in on us, there's no way we'd meet their standards. The last time they shut us down was three years ago, and we busted ass installing things like cabinets and sinks and running water. We laid linoleum on the floor and had to buy all new coolers. Because of his health, there's not a snowball's chance in hell we could pull off that sort of overhaul right now. We can hardly handle things like leaks in coolers and cracks in the scales. It's clean as a whistle, though. We make sure of that at the start of each weekend before we even consider heading out.

After a few bites my stomach starts to settle, and I notice the sun has risen further over the truck, past the backyard where there's the shed and the garden. I think to myself that maybe I'll sell out early, come home quick, and make an easy day of this. I'll probably only make twenty-five or thirty bucks, though. I swallow the food and take another bite. My fingers are still pink and burning from the cold ice, but I'm used to this and try not to take much notice.

§

Two years have passed since Wrendon and my mother, Emily, split up. I've been living with him and Loren since July. I moved in twelve hours after I packed my duffel bag in the middle of the night, grabbed my Gibson SG copy, and left my mother and her husband's house at one in the morning. My jaws no longer ached from my teeth grinding. I never looked back once my feet started moving. I walked thirteen miles through grassy back-road ditches beneath an audience of stars to get here.

Wren and Loren's place is average sized for Burleson, Texas: a single-wide on an acre of land with a couple modular sections set on either side. Oak and pine trees are planted throughout the yard. Behind the shed out back is a garden with tomato plants, some squash, some cucumber, and three marijuana plants that almost reach my waist, planted dead center of the tomatoes. Wren's joked about it a couple times, but I won't touch the stuff. The

smell's almost as bad as that of boiled shrimp. I won't tell him I think dope is for white trash because I know it eases the cramps and headaches that come with chemo.

Loren's all right. She's like my mother in looks, somewhat heavysset with dyed blonde hair and brown eyes. She laughs louder than my mother, which isn't a quality trait. She doesn't fawn. I can tell she feels imposed upon with me here, but Wren is sick and sometimes a handful. I make his life easier by being around--that's what she says. Throughout the week, I help her keep the house straightened up and lend a hand to my father in the yard when he needs it. Every other weekend I switch off selling shrimp by the roadside with Wren unless he's not up to it. Then I take over so he can do his thing, canceling whatever I've got going on.

§

Today I will remember, in part, for my clumsiness. After dealing with this customer for something like ten minutes, trying to wheel and deal and get him the hell out of here, I manage to extend his stay a little longer by spilling shrimp from the hanging scales with my elbow. I've done this three times in my life, and, in those instances, I'd been forewarned by the sound of the shrimp sliding along the metal. This time the cold water gets to me first. It, the shaved ice, and limp bodies pour down my back until finally slapping to the coolertops and floor of the van. Some scatter across the counter and rest in the metal sinks. The water adheres my shirt to my back, and some of the shrimp cling to me with their whiskers.

The jerk who's been standing on the ground in front of the coolers, wearing these mirror glasses and grinning with these huge teeth, throws up his hands and says, Ahh, shit man. I ain't paying for them things. He waves a pointing finger at what's scattered about. Cars zip by on the highway behind him. The sky is clear except for sparse, cottony clouds. The sunlight's so bright it reflects off everything, even the black pavement of the street and the gravel beside it. Across the road from the van is an open field of high grass, sunflowers, and bluebonnets.

I shake my head and say, I know, my friend. I wouldn't do that to you. You couldn't, he says.

I give him one of my looks, but keep my trap shut. Always let the customer have the last word, especially after you've just made a jackass of yourself. Turning back to the cooler before he can say more, I dig my hands into the icy brown water again. You have to go straight in with fingers loose, reaching deep for the cooler bottom, then clasp them together like a tractor's claw pulling what you need together. If you press too hard the serrated prongs on their heads will jab like splinters into your fingers. I've been doing this three years now--since I turned twelve--and know instinctively

how five pounds feels. Better to end up with more than necessary at first, it's easier to dump some back than stick your hands in again. Sometimes it's best to convince yourself that only the bones in your fingers exist--no muscles, no nerves, no feeling at all.

The guy stands on his tiptoes and looks up at the scale, making sure I'm not screwing him over.

I tell him that I tossed in a few extra.

It's just those heads, he says, and all that ice.

I tip the scale slightly to give him a better view. I ask him, How much ice do you see in there?

He flashes me those choppers again, saying we're all right.

Once weighed, I empty the shrimp into a small, white garbage bag. I spin it, then wrap the bag inside itself, twirl it again, and snap a brown sack open behind me. I slip the bag in, roll the sack end-over-end, and put a tab of white masking tape over the edge. I wipe my right hand across the thigh of my jeans and pull a Sharpie from my pocket. I press my forearm along the bundle. Moisture presses at the creases. I spell out "Saxton's Fresh Seafood" in thick curvy letters that end in pointed wisps. To me, this is clockwork, but Dad calls it flair. Says it helps to bring back the business.

I ask him if he needs a sheller for the shrimp. I hold one up; it's red and hard plastic with one end pointed and the other large for gripping. It's supposed to look like a shrimp. I show him how they work by deadheading a jumbo and putting the pointed end in the center of its tail. Gripping the shrimp, I run the little tool through its body, along the single vein that runs through its center. When the pointed end pokes out, I grip the shrimp tighter and twist the larger end of the sheller. It pries the shrimp apart down the middle, removes its legs and tail and skin. I dangle what remains for him to see. Only seven bucks, I tell him. And it'll last a lifetime.

Don't need one, he says. But can you cut me a deal on that crab boil? That's what I'm doing with them.

I have to push my smile back. Sure, I tell him. \$4.00?

He counts the extra from his wallet and hands me twenty-five dollars. He starts walking away. Have fun cleaning that shit up, he says, laughing.

Sure thing, asshole. I laugh with him, but I can feel my ears turning red. No big deal; I'd like to see him after he cooks them. Shrimp that size taste like a tire if you boil them. I turn around and write the sale in the spiral notebook: 3 lbs for \$20.00. It's the sale we have on the 21-25's. Otherwise, they are \$7.50 a pound. The 48-50's go for \$4.99 or 5 lbs for \$20.00. The 8-12's are \$8.99. I open the register and slide the twenty beneath the cash drawer. The ones go into the slot with the others. The fifties and hundreds stay in my hip pocket. I toss the sheller up to the dashboard. The guy waves

good-bye as he drives onto the highway.

§

Around his buddies at the bar, my dad calls me Hustles. It's a pretty stupid name, but I know what it means, that I always take care of business and can hold my own when it comes to talking and pushing these shrimp. Say they're five days old and we've had to bleach them because they look bad. I won't hesitate to look you right in the eye and say, We drove these up this morning. Straight off the boats down in Galveston.

Or else, Sure you can butterfly these popcorn shrimp. Fry 'em on up. They'll taste better than any Jumbo. But I've also got these Tiger shrimp that I've been hiding for someone special.

I'll say, Listen up. I'm damn near giving these away to you. But only now. This second. You can take it or you can leave it.

Eight out of ten times you'll reach for your wallet. Unless you're some cheapskate who stopped just to bother me.

It's important we sell out before Sunday evening, otherwise we have to throw out what's left. On weekends, we set up outside a flea market in Grand Prairie. My dad sometimes works by a car lot on Fridays, and on Thursdays, we send someone south to get the shrimp. We do business with a guy down there whose dogs live off fish guts and squid that fish sorters toss on the docks. The man dealt with my grandpa when he ran the truck, but now deals with Wrendon since my grandfather, Buddy, passed away.

Buddy was the one to start me out with this. In those days we'd clear a thousand bucks per weekend. That's when shrimp cost half what we pay now. And believe me, Buddy could shoot the shit. Most of my hustle I took from him. He used to sit there while women of all ages brought him fruit pies, cakes, fried chicken, whatever. He would tell me to hold down the fort and tell the lady thanks for my dinner. Then he'd split for an hour or so. That gave me practice. Back then it was cool. I was just this little kid trying to talk big.

The best thing these days is closing that last sale on Sunday. Sometimes, when I'm really busy, time flies and the day's done before I know it. Often, the cars line up five and six deep. That's when I've really got to get in gear. I don't even have to talk too much at those times; one guy's opinion is as good as the next. Money's not bad, I get fifty cents per pound even on the small ones. In a weekend, I can clear eighty dollars, more dough than any other fifteen year-old that I know. Still, most of my friends are getting jobs sacking groceries or working at some place in the mall. I keep pressuring Wren to maybe hire outside help, especially for weekends like this when I've got plans. He wants to know why I'd work for someone else when out here I can be my own boss.

Wren says his nerves are bad. I know he's spending most of his time at the bar. He tells me as soon as the chemo lets up, as soon as the cancer goes into remission, we can start talking about me getting another job. Right now, he tells me, money's just too tight.

Lay off those cigarettes, I tell him. Steer clear of those beer joints.

Someday, he says. But don't order me around.

§

Everything happens in three's, Buddy'd say. When my grandfather died of emphysema, Wren stayed distant from everyone for a while. He started knocking back the hard stuff. Then came Loren. When my mother found out, she changed the locks on the doors of our house. Usually, my father's the one laying out guilt trips, but somehow she managed to pull a real fast one. Just after that, the doctors found his throat cancer. Talk about timing. No one could have predicted it.

Months passed and the radiation treatment didn't work. It burned Wren's saliva glands so that he can barely swallow; he has to spray down his mouth with saline before eating. Now they're trying chemo and hopefully it'll work. But it's taken away his hair, made him skinnier than ever. If this doesn't fix it, there's the last ditch operation to remove his larynx. My father's proud of his voice. He says it's how he makes his living. I've seen people who've had this surgery done, and they speak through their noses. Their mouths are shaped like O's. Their chins look collapsed.

Wren's said to me while gesturing at his throat: Just imagine. Your voice. One day here. The next day gone.

During the radiation, I still lived with my mother, but since then I've moved in with Wren. He and my step-father have different ways of dealing with me, particularly when my mouth gets out of hand. I don't know. Maybe if I'd been raised by him, I wouldn't really notice, but I wasn't and things turned all fucked-up in the year I stayed there. I don't blame her because she never raised a hand to me. But she never really came between me and one either. I won't go on about it. Everyone's got options. I'm not an idiot. I picked mine. The morning that I showed up on Wren's doorstep, we sat outside and drank coffee and watched the sun rise. He said, Your mother just called. I told her you were here. And safe.

Next time she calls, I said, taking a sip of coffee, tell her I'm not going back.

§

Around 4 p.m. she pulls up, a convertible LeBaron. Black. Needs washing. She's got black hair feathered across her head. She's wearing a red blouse, black jacket, black skirt, black pumps. Probably just getting back from church. She comes up to the van, barely making it across the gravel in

those shoes. I smile. I start to give her the spiel. She tips her glasses down her nose, looks up at me and, between smacks of gum, asks, Where do you go when you need to use the restroom?

Excuse me?

That's what I thought, she says. She pushes her glasses back up her face and taps one of the coolers. Stick tight, she says.

It's the Health Department.

I look around the van to see if there's anything I need to adjust or fix up. Some of the shrimp that fell earlier are dried out on the floor. The weighing scale's face is cracked. The page where I mark down sales is hard from placing my wet hand against it. The running water's broke. Coolers are in bad shape. There's nothing I can do about any of this right now. I leap to the glove box and dig for our permits, then sit on the roughest looking cooler.

She returns and tells me to open the rear doors. She walks around, I open them, and she steps into the van with a clipboard and checklist. I feel torn between wanting to welcome her and wanting to shove her out. She wants to see permits, and I show her what I've got. She examines them and says, You've got one here for Texas, but not Grand Prairie. Where's your permit for this area?

I tell her Texas means Texas, all inclusive. This line has worked before. Just play the quick-to-shrug, ignorant kid.

She shakes her head and says, Yeah, right.

I almost smile with her.

She starts at the front of the van where I normally sit. First, she looks at my laid out homework, my Geometry. For a second, I think she's going to tell me which ones are wrong. She notes the grease-stained paper bag which held my lunch. She goes through the van, moving things with the tip of her pen. First the trash bags, then Ziplocs and brown paper sacks. She measures the scales and makes note of the face. She sticks thermometers in the coolers and turns some of the shrimp in her palm. She yanks up their heads and peels at their skins. She asks me about the lines running up their middles. I tell her it's a vein, not what she thinks it is, and besides, people can buy one of the tools if it irks them.

She says, Oh, and throws the shrimp back in the cooler with the others.

Some of these look as though they've been dropped on the ground, she says. And, either way, those things are at least three days old.

No, they're not, I tell her. In a really weak voice that may as well have said, I guess so, maybe.

The longer she stays the dirtier things seem. The floor is layered with a sticky brown film, and whiskers of dead shrimp bang from the scales. The thirty-gallon coolers sit faded burnt-orange and most of their drain plugs

are corked with plastic baggies. The makeshift brown cabinets of plywood and screws are splintered and warped beneath the strain of the sinks. There is no running hot water to clean my hands.

She asks how often I mop the floors. Where do I keep the drained dirty water? Again, where do I go when I need to use the restroom?

I want to hustle her, but my head's too cluttered. I wonder what would happen if she shut us down, if it would get me out of this and help my father to start helping himself out more. I can't think and say the right words without stammering. I respond to each question with a half-hearted lie. Part of me is wondering how Wren and I will make the bills, while the other part is thinking of all the weekends I've spent doing this.

I tell her, Sure, on a normal day my dad would be here. But you see he's got chemotherapy in the morning. I'm out alone today. The pump on the sinks broke an hour ago. I've used towelettes to clean my hands since then. I change the ice regularly--two or three times this morning. I drain the old water into large plastic jugs that we give to a neighbor with a squash and tomato garden. You could call and ask her yourself, if I had the number. I close up shop when I need to take restroom breaks. I walk to the 7-11 up the street.

All the while, I feel an urge to yank the whiskers from the scales or else scrub the floors right there in front of her.

She closes the cabinet doors beneath the sink. For the first time since entering the van, she shuts up. She settles down on one of the coolertops beside me. A warm feeling threads through my stomach, in my chest, up my neck.

Shut the doors, she says. She holds out her hand. In her palm are two small pellets, the sort I've seen only in Wren's shed or behind the fridge, but never in the van.

You've got rodent problems, she says. This van is a mess and you don't have the permits to set up in this county. I'm shutting you down. You won't sell here again. Not after the city sees my reports.

I look at her hand thinking I'm going to get sick. I feel a rush to do a million things or say all the right words right now, no more messing around.

Go ahead and start packing up, she says. I need to make some phone calls. She takes a cell phone from her purse and goes outside. She paces in front of the van as I pack up my signs. At one point, a brand new Mustang rolls up. Inside, there is a man with a boy of about ten, maybe a little older. They are sitting side-by-side wearing matching shirts and sunglasses. The gold wire frames make the kid's face look tiny. When the man reaches over his son to roll down his window, the lady walks over to the car and leans over.

This truck has been condemned, she says. Health code violations. There's a store down the street if you are interested in seafood.

The son looks up at me, squinting his nose so the glasses won't slip. The man waves to the woman and she waves back. I feel like I'm watching all of this from far away; it's got everything and nothing to do with me right now. Before she goes she says, I don't expect to see your truck here again, okay? The next time you park here, I'll confiscate the goods and have your truck towed. Show your father all those papers that I gave to you. Each of those citations is worth a ticket. He needs to call tomorrow morning to find out how much he owes.

I go ahead and tell her: Look, my father should have noticed that stuff yesterday morning. I'd never have let that slip.

She says, Take care of yourself, Chris.

This is the first time all day that anyone's said my name. She must have seen it when she was looking at my homework.

She hands me a card. I read the name. Rebekah Clark.

I close the doors of the van. I sit down on the cabinet, rest my feet on the coolers. There's only the sound of cars passing by. The only light is that filtering through the windows. Not much of it reaches the floor. The linoleum is yellow with diamonds of beige and dark brown. I remember picking that out with Wren just a year ago. Beneath it lies a sheet of three-ply pine that he and I measured and cut and fit into the van. Beneath that is white corrugated metal. The van started out as "business expansion," something my father purchased when he actually owned a seafood store years ago. Right here on this floor is where I've followed both him and my grandfather around, trying to learn how to talk as well as they could. Here's where they've told me a million times to speak up, to pick my words wisely, to not give the customer a second to even think; to tell them what they want to hear, confirm what belief they have. If they think you believe with them, they will trust you. Right here's where I let the moment get the better part of me.

The van shudders in the wake of a passing semi's moan. I still need to call my father and tell him what's happened.

§

Wren looks nervous when he arrives. He steps out of Loren's Nova and tells her it's all right, she can head on home. He puts his hand on the back of my neck and steers me toward the van. Get inside, he says.

I climb into the passenger's seat. He doesn't start the engine. Instead, he grips the steering wheel and glares ahead. I'm not mad at you, he says. You should know that. But you've got to tell me, for the business's sake, exactly what that woman asked you.

I can't remember everything, I tell him. She looked at the coolers and looked at the shrimp. Then she said she found mice stuff underneath the sink. That's when she said to shut the doors. I hand him the copy of the checklist.

Mice stuff? He turns to me. What do you mean?

That wasn't the only thing, I say, pointing to the list.

Wren pulls it away from me. What did she find in here?

Droppings, I say. Something about rodent problems.

Rat turds? he says. Speak up now dammit. This woman told you she found rat turds in the van?

I don't respond just yet. It's that word that makes me feel every bit of grime and stench that covers the van. I want to yell at him every time he says it, but I think that if I talk I'm going to start bawling. I don't want that. Not now, not here.

Still, he keeps on. What did she ask you? What did you tell her? Answer me when I talk to you.

Finally, staring down at the floorboard, I say, Stop it. There was nothing I could do. Not without you here. You should have seen that stuff on the floor yesterday morning.

He shakes his head. Five years, he says. Down the motherfucking tubes. That's just not smart thinking.

In silence we drive the fifteen minutes to the beer-joint called Greener Acres where Wren's been all day. I sit by myself at a booth in the back beside the two pool tables. Layers of cigarette smoke sway inches above the carpet. Women playing cards argue with men at the bar over the volume of their yelling. My father is amongst these men watching the Cowboys on a television set in a corner above the bar beside the liquor bottles and large mirror. This cocktail waitress sometimes strolls over to give me an order to fill in the van.

At one point, I come back to a plate of plain Lays and barbecued brisket. I chew the sandwich slowly, taking large gulps. A bleach-blonde woman I've never seen before is shooting pool with this obnoxious guy. She thinks it's funny to wink a caked-blue eye at me.

At one point she says to me: You're gonna be so handsome some day.

Her boyfriend looks at me and smiles. Spots of dip dot his gum line. He says, Why that's old Fishhead's boy.

My father looks over, then back at the television.

I notice the bread from the sandwich is wet with some of the shrimp water. I throw it down on the plate and spit my food into a napkin. I walk across the dance floor and enter the men's restroom. It smells like old urine, but luckily no one is inside. I run hot water into the sink until steam rises. I

clean my hands and avoid my reflection. I think to myself, Now this fucking sucks. I lift the receiver from the payphone by the condom machine and start shoving buttons.

In the background, I can hear my step-dad. You hang up that phone, he says. Tell him to call back from his dad's at a decent hour.

My mother whispers it's late and now the dogs are awake. Her voice is soft and hurried. She's probably cupping the receiver. Her eyes, I would bet, are as scattered as her voice, looking at him next to her, the ceiling, then the phone. She asks me to hang on. I hear the screen door slam. The dogs' barking grows distant. She picks up a separate phone, probably in the living room. I grow nervous that he might be listening in their bedroom.

I really want her nothing-but-complaints tone of voice when I ask how work is going, but she whispers, Just fine. Real quick. How are you?

Real quick. I want to tell her how my back aches from lifting heavy coolers all day. About this stupid woman in the bar who keeps staring at me. I ruined the business today. Down the motherfucking tubes. I don't think I meant to. Either way, it's gone now because I didn't talk fast enough, soon enough. I fucked up. Everything. I have no idea how we're gonna make the bills. Dad won't take me home. He's saying we've got to sell the rest of these shrimp.

Fine, I say. Had a run-in with the health department today. That's all.

Yeah, but knowing Wren, she says, he'll have you back out in that van by next weekend.

I say, I don't think so. Not this time.

She says, Look. Are you sure this is what you want? I mean, I know things weren't easy here with Davis and all, but we've been talking and he's agreed to ease up. You have to understand. He's just not used to having kids around. You just have to try and be patient with each other.

The bedroom phone picks up. Davis starts in. He says, This business of collect calls at ten o'clock is bullshit.

I miss you, Hon', she says. Next time, try to call from your dad's. Okay?

Sure, I say.

Davis hangs up his line.

She says goodnight and hangs up hers.

I replace the receiver and turn around to see Wren leaning against the bathroom door. He asks, Who are you calling at this time of night?

I shrug and say, Nobody. Just time and temperature.

He takes me by the elbow and walks me through the bar. I feel a whirl of caked eyelids, football calls, and smoke around me. We head out the door, into the cool night air, through the parking lot, behind the van. He places both of his hands on my shoulders and kneels in front of me.

I've raised you to be the type of person, he says, that can talk straight with folks. The type of person who handles his own problems. Now, you're your own boss. I can't make you do anything, including help out with this business and my treatments. But you will hear me out on this. You came to me, remember?

I know.

You know. So you just give the word. If you want to go back to your mother and Davis, I'll drive you myself. I'll take you there now. But you tell me right now. Decide, once and for all.

I search the dark pavement at my feet for some answer, hug myself tighter, close my eyes and shiver. I'm just tired, I tell him.

You think I don't know what you're going through these days? I went through the same thing with your grandpa not long ago. But you and I have got to stick together, Christopher.

I look him over again. There's a look to his eyes. It doesn't matter what I've got to tell him. He's all set with what he's going to say. This is his hustle, the way he wants to work. My initial response is to take his hands off me, tell him to lay off with this guilt-trip shit. Maybe then he'll get a feel for the steady frustration that I keep tucked away. But there's the cold in the air, him standing there, waiting. With his cheeks darkened in, his eyes squinted, his throat strained. His narrowed chest inside of his shirt. His ankles ill-fit at the bend in his white tennis shoes. His forearms that fit too easily in my grip, and I wonder for a moment what this must be like for him.

Because he is my father, because there is the cancer, because we're doing the best that we can for ourselves, because I want him out, I tell Wren that I'm sorry. I say it so deeply, I believe it myself. Otherwise, he won't believe me.

I tell him I should have called from the lady's cell phone, told the woman to stay. Maybe we can get the van fixed up just right, then we'll be back out running in a couple of weeks. I tell him this sort of thing won't happen again. When I speak I look him right in his blue eyes, just as he and my grandpa reminded me time and again to do. I speak from my chest and not from my mouth. Before I finish, before letting him say anything else, I tell him: This is nothing but a bump along the road. Just like everything else, we're going to get through this. We're going to be better for it. I believe almost all of it. Even if it's not what I want.

Wren grits his teeth and looks hard in my eyes. He grips my shoulders.

I look at my watch. Look, it's already 9 o'clock, I tell him. I've still got to drain out those coolers and hose the van down. I've got homework to finish.

He stands and smooths his jeans. He eyes the door of the bar, then me.

Let me go ahead and settle up in there, he says.

I nod and walk the opposite way around the van from him. I climb in the passenger's side and sit down. The air is warm. I crack the window to let the night air in. The sound of traffic on the highway behind me comes with it. I sit there waiting, knowing he's taking his time. I reach for the spiral notebook on top of the dash so I can tally the day's sales, but I get distracted by the sheller I tossed there earlier. I take it in my right hand and stare at it for a moment. I close my left hand into a fist, as if a shrimp's in there. I close it tight and I place the pointed end of the sheller to the right side, against the very small hole in the center of my hand. I push the pointed end in and attempt to keep my grip. It stays until I turn the handle, at which point the edges pull at the folds in my skin until it hurts too much to keep my fist tightened. My hand opens up, I stare down at the little lines, at the small red creases from where I gripped the sheller, and the red spots from where the tool had pulled against my hand.



Luci Hull

Sad little arbitrary word poem

by Carol Christ

I'm tired of talking.

Words, strings, webbed
Ziggurats tied to the tongue.

Somewhere the sun
is sun.

Where are you, Walt Whitman?

Tramping some parallel universe.

And I,
a corpus of vowels.

Perpetua

by Carol Christ

We raised one another.
Ditched school with Hell's Angels,
rowboat to Palace Island.
Paddled back one-oared, bug-bitten,
braless.
When have we had so much fun? you wondered.
Red birds flew over summer field--
flowers gone mad smelled as green
as sharp as sticks in the eye, moldy feathers
ensconced in museums
the red birds flew
scattered like apples rolling from limbs.

We raised our children.
Learned to cook with babes on tit,
canned, quilted, and smoked good dope
(now a misdemeanor) read book on
Tantric sex, grew pumpkins and slept
outdoors with the babies a lot.

Perpetua

When will the pumpkins ripen? you wondered.
Pumpkins gone wild taste as rich as thick
as raisins at dawn, clots of blood
against white thigh
the pumpkins grew
covered our houses ceiling to sky

We lost husbands.

You--
pawned wedding ring,
drove to Reno to bail me out,
laughed so hard, pissed driver's side seat
I--wore bar hair, tight pants, ate red meat
(now a vegetarian). Cried all the time and
fucked too much

When will she ever grow up? You wondered.
Tongue as spiked as barbed as
cactus in June a shattered windshield
an ochre bruise

You've taken to spoiling your grandchildren
sticky fingers reaching for you
little cat voices crying.

When will she ever come home? You wonder.

I am alone--a lifetime away
No one knows me here.

And I wonder at the love of which we never speak
as the roof moans under darkening leaves,
and red birds fall from trees . . .

And I see you often now
at the edges of my consciousness
that space before I
fall

asleep

your body white
and young again
you smile and call me
to the boat.



Tyler Dirks

Blue Yonder and Beyond

by Karen A. Patterson

“Come on, Karen, let’s fly!” Dave called out as he ran toward the pair of yellow Piper Cubs sitting peacefully like bright canaries on the tarmac. “Come on, hurry up, before it gets dark.”

“OK! OK! Be right there!” I answered dropping the sponge in the bucket I was using to wash a Cessna 182. I closed the door of the hangar and ran toward the Cubs.

The sun beat down on us and caused shimmering waves to rise from the asphalt of the Butler Airport located in the rolling hills of western Pennsylvania. I had been home from college for only a week and I was already into the invigorating routine of the airport life.

This was the second summer I had the opportunity to pursue my dream of being a pilot, flying both the small private planes and the larger charter aircraft as well. The airport was only a half mile from my house and when I could not find a job the previous summer, I drove myself and my parents crazy with boredom. My Dad, a World War II pilot, said, “Why don’t you keep busy up at the airport. Maybe you can get some type of job and at the same time learn to fly.”

That was all the encouragement I needed. After talking to the airport manager, Leo Frakas, I discovered the office jobs were filled, but I could refuel and help the maintenance crew with the planes. Leo said that if I had any extra time and there happened to be an instructor available, I could also start my flight training.

Though it would be expensive, my Dad said, “The desire to fly ran in the family and it would be worth it to carry on the legacy.” I was not sure what he was referring to, so I disregarded the comment.

Dave and I bounded into the front tandem seat of separate planes, hitched our seatbelts and yelled “Clear” to notify those in the area that we were about to engage our engines. In unison we both pushed the start-up buttons that activated the propellers and allowed the engines to kick in with a burst of power. We sat for a moment until the violent vibrations subsided and the engines began to idle smoothly. Giving it full power to get the light-weight planes moving and then gradually easing back, Dave pulled in front of me and we taxied to the end of the taxiway. He did his run-up first, checking the fuel mixture and each engine’s magnetos at 2200 RPMs, listening for misses or irregularities. After reducing the power, he gave me the thumbs up sign, pulled his plane onto the end of the runway, lined it up,

and let her roll.

I taxied my plane into position and started my run up. The roar of the engine was deafening, but exhilarating. Once on the runway, I checked that Dave had cleared. It was thrilling to take full control of the plane and lift off the ground long before the end of the runway. There was no danger of running out of runway, however, with a small craft like a Cub, but the larger birds, like the two-engine DC-3s, needed extra space especially if the weather was hot or if the take-off was in a higher elevation, like in the mountains.

I pushed the throttle all the way to the hilt, giving it full power, and gradually pulled the control stick back towards me in order to bring the plane off the ground. As I brought the nose up above the horizon, the plane sailed into the wide-open sky, causing my body to feel momentarily lighter in the cockpit. The rumbling of the wheels on the ground was replaced by a quiet stillness. Pulling the nose too high would cause the plane to stall, so I watched my angle of ascent and kept the wings steady, making a right turn until I exited the flight pattern. Squinting against the glaring sunlight, I reached into the breast pocket of my shirt for my sunglasses, which allowed me to clearly see the puffy mushroom shaped clouds hanging in the sky. The air was noiseless, except for the rhythmic humming of the engine, and I was immersed in a sea of tranquility.

I strained against the resistance of the air pushing my arm as I rested it on the window pane. With the cockpit open, the wind billowed my sleeveless shirt and blew my hair straight back as though I were in a wind tunnel. The older pilots recommended that we always wear helmets when flying the open cockpit planes, but it was too cumbersome and inhibiting, hampering the freedom I felt with the cool air beating against my hot face. Many of the old timers wore the classic pilot garb--silk scarves around their necks flapping wildly behind them along with a worn and wrinkled leather bomber jacket and wire-rimmed dark glasses. I felt the scarf was dangerous around whirling props and the leather jacket impractical in 85-degree temperatures and providing very little warmth in the winter. Besides, in a snug cockpit heavy clothes were constricting.

Ahead of me I saw a yellow speck that was Dave’s plane. I gradually caught up with him and gave him the okay sign, forming a circle with my thumb and index finger. Since the Cubs were not equipped with radios, we communicated with commonly understood hand signals. Dave motioned for me to go to his left as he went right. This was his signal for a maneuver called “Turns About a Point.”

After I turned, I looked down at the earth below and saw the grid pattern of deep green and dull brown squares representing plots of land so common in Pennsylvania. My father’s words echoed in my mind: “. . . the desire

to fly ran in the family.” Of course it did. He had flown in Europe during World War II, less than 25 years before, over land that looked much like what was below me. As a B-24 Liberator pilot, he was only 20 years old, a year older than I, and had the immense responsibility of commanding a heavy bomber.

I could barely imagine what he must have felt as he crossed the English Channel to drop his payload somewhere in Germany. He described his job as the best way to fight a war. From his vantage point, he would only see the bombs explode in fire balls below him and never have to see the casualties that resulted. He said he felt removed from the action unless his plane took flak, and still, it seemed to him an impersonal war. He was grateful for not being in the trenches engaged in hand-to-hand combat until the fateful day that he was shot down and taken prisoner by the Germans.

Within each square, whether in Pennsylvania or in Germany, as Dad described it, there were miniature houses, barns and roads with black spots that were grazing sheep, cows and horses. When I flew I could imagine how Dad zeroed in on his target, and with the bomb bay doors opened, let his cargo plummet to earth. This required unerring focus as did the “Turns About a Point” maneuver. In both instances, the pilot had to control the craft and choose a point on the ground.

In my case during a training flight, I had to carefully lower one wing and revolve on a designated point, at the same time keeping the lowered wing stable. This is a crucial maneuver in coordinating the aileron and rudder to keep the plane in a consistently steep bank, not veering left or right, up or down. From this odd sideways angle, it also made the world seem cockeyed.

Dave performed the procedure at the same time choosing a separate point and eventually gave me the signal to pull out by flashing his thumb pointing upwards. I gradually decreased my bank angle and leveled my wings so they were even once again with the horizon.

Dave came up behind me. I could see him simulating a machine gun, Red Baron Style. He was imitating the famed World War I flying ace, Manfred von Richthofen, who was known for his persistence in pursuing the enemy. I banked to the right to get away from him, but he stayed on my tail. I banked left, but he still stayed with me. There was no way to shake him except with an unexpected maneuver.

I pushed the stick straight forward into a steep dive, watching the altimeter drop quickly from 3200 to 2400 feet, and as an added measure banked the plane sharply to the right to make sure I had lost him. Once I leveled the plane and maintained my altitude, I looked around to see if I could give him a little of his own medicine. There he was still cruising at about 3000 feet and seemingly unaware that I was below and behind him. Essentially, I

was in his blind spot, creeping up ever closer. When he finally saw me, it was too late. I stayed on his tail like a coon dog and he could not shake me no matter what he did.

Suddenly I felt a loss of power and glanced down at my fuel gauge. I was dangerously low and realized I had forgotten to check my fuel level before take-off, just assuming the plane was full. I had been busy washing planes all day and didn't realize this one was sitting on the tarmac waiting to be refueled. I pulled up beside Dave and crossed my neck in a cutting motion with my thumb, which indicated I needed fuel. Regretfully, our little game was over for the day.

We reentered the flight pattern; this time with me leading. On my down wind leg, I checked gauges, corrected my heading and turned onto final approach. I always loved to see the runway stretched out like a ribbon before me, but it was at this crucial point I had to judge my airspeed versus any crosswind that could blow me off course, cause me to be too low or, in extreme cases, catch a wing and turn the plane over. I was coming in fast and high so I gave it two notches of flaps, turned slightly into the wind, and shortened the throttle by a half inch. I held the nose tight and when I felt the front wheels touch the ground, I gently lowered the tail wheel. The plane bumped a little, but I was down. The old timers said that, “Any landing you walk away from is a good landing.”

I taxied, parked by the fuel pumps and switched off the key. As I climbed out of my “bomber,” Dave pulled up beside me.

“Good job, Captain. You avoided my shells and blasted me out of the air, just like the Red Baron would have. That's one for your side,” he laughed.

“Just one?” I asked. “I think I'm ahead, but someday you might know what you're doing enough to get even,” I teased, knowing that he had clocked more hours in the cockpit than I had and was a much more skilled pilot. He had been around planes all his life since his father was a charter pilot for a local company. Dave had not only been a dear friend, but a flying buddy for the past two years and had taught me how to handle the plane and how to relax at the wheel, not letting distractions draw my focus from my responsibilities as a pilot.

This exercise allowed me to practice putting the plane through its paces, and having fun was secondary. Both of us realized that flying was serious business and my oversight of not checking the fuel gauge before take-off could have had serious repercussions.

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I had started flying in 1967, the summer after my freshman year in college. I loved the job of refueling and washing planes. Even though it was a demanding job, it kept me close to the action. When I was not washing

planes, I was looking for an opportunity to catch a ride flying right seat with one of the airport's regular pilots. Many flew charters, mostly on the East Coast, and liked another set of eyes and hands in the cockpit, so I was able to get valuable flight experience in twin engines, like the Piper Aztec, or the DC-3, my favorite, which was known as the Gooney Bird. This was also one of the planes my father flew during his early training and after a few hours in the cockpit, I understood why he liked it. It was easy to handle despite its massive size.

Introduced in the 1930s as one of the first commercial passenger planes, the DC-3 was a 21-passenger workhorse that had two powerful 1200 horsepower engines and cruised at 230 miles per hour. The most challenging aspect I found flying this plane was that it was a "taildragger." In other words, it had a small landing wheel on the tail, which meant it had to land level on the front wheels located under the wings and after touchdown, when the tail was gently lowered, the cockpit was elevated high in the air. From the pilot or copilot's seat, this angle limited visibility of the ground beneath the plane.

Often I was fortunate enough to catch a ride with a charter pilot, which assured that the day would be long and eventful. Sometimes we would eat breakfast in the Pittsburgh airport, have lunch in Toronto where we picked up passengers, and eat dinner in Myrtle Beach where we delivered them. On occasion, if it was late, we would stay overnight, all expenses paid, until the next morning when we would return to Pittsburgh.

One particular flight, when I was still a novice, I copiloted a charter Aztec with Steve Lowery who was the pilot in command. After hours of flying, Steve asked me to land at our destination airport while he talked with the two passengers on board. I contacted the control tower, was briefed on the designated runway and adjusted my heading. I entered the landing pattern and as I lined up the runway on my final approach, I noticed a number of people and trucks gathering along side the runway. I thought it was most unusual, but I chalked it up to southern hospitality. Steve suddenly realized that I was about to land at the Myrtle Beach Air Force Base not too far from our intended destination, the Grand Strand Airport. Those gathering people were military personnel and they were going to nab us upon touchdown and probably haul us off to jail. Steve turned the radio to the Base's frequency and we both received a reprimand that we would not soon forget. We aborted the landing and headed over to the correct airport just a few miles away where we landed without incident. I had to wonder if my father had ever done anything so absentminded.

During these trips, the only crew on board was usually the pilot and me, and any down time, such as waiting for passengers, gave us the chance to

analyze the plane's capabilities, inspect its records, and review navigational procedures. Flying with many of the commercial pilots based at the Butler airport gave me an edge with my training that some of the other students did not have.

A couple of my instructors were old-time barnstormers who actually flew stunts through barns and under bridges. One pilot, Captain Bill McGown, had performed in air shows doing aerobatics not only in the Piper Cub, but in a variety of bi-planes. Once he casually described a rather dangerous routine involving a female wing-walker.

"I had this pretty young lady, you see, that I worked with. Well, we'd take off with her in the cockpit, backseat, and when we got up to about 900 or 1000 feet then she'd climb out there onto the wing," he explained in his deep gravelly voice. "She'd hold onto the special handles riveted to the plane so that the strong cold air wouldn't blow her clear off the plane. One day she came pretty damn close to fallin'. The wind was fierce and she lost her grip. Just by sheer luck, she caught the plane's guy wires in her hands. I slowed the plane down some, but I couldn't grab her cuz I was flyin.' When I got her back on the ground, that sweet young thing just up and quit on the spot, saying something about fearin' for her life. Can you imagine? I thought she had more guts and gumption than that... she just didn't have the spirit for adventure, I reckon."

Those were the days when the "spirit of adventure" could kill you pretty quickly. Captain McGowan, however, was fortunate and died years later safe in his bed.

As one of the only female pilots in our region, the general attitude toward women piloting a plane had not changed much in the 30 years between the time Amelia Earhart took her final flight and I started my flying adventures. This famous aviatrix had to overcome deep-seated discrimination before she was accepted as a legitimate and capable pilot. Surprisingly, she was asked to only ride in the planes that set some of the records attributed to her, while male pilots actually did the flying. When she refused to continue the charade, she was given her own government-funded, customized plane--an Electra--and in it she made history. She was blazing the trail so women could freely fly the skies in the future, and I personally benefited from her determination and persistence.

In the 1960s, while I was working on my license, I flew my solo cross-country flights to airfields in western and central Pennsylvania. Legally the trip had to be a minimum of fifty miles from my home base at Butler Airport. Instructors favored their own students and competition was tough. Bets were placed on which students would be back from their cross-country flights on time, who would be late and who would get lost. Since I was the

only female student, odds were high on my getting lost. The other students and instructors alike assumed that if I did make it back I would at least be late and would more than likely need to be “rescued.” After all, they assumed that women could neither fly a plane nor read a map since that was traditionally a “man’s job.”

Much to their chagrin, time and again I rolled my little Cessna down the runway at the approximate time I was scheduled to return according to my flight plan. I was often met with an icy reception as I confidently exited my plane. Occasionally, I heard a quiet, hesitant “‘Atta Boy!” A reminder that it was still a man’s world. As I closed my flight plan and checked my plane in, nervous instructors were waiting to hear from their students who were late and no doubt lost. Sometimes there were frantic calls from the air asking for instructions as to how to get back to the airport.

What my flying buddies didn’t know is that I loved to read maps, both air and ground, and had developed a knack for it. I enjoyed selecting a spot on the map and making my way there either by car or plane with very few detours. For me, flying was just an extension of driving and since I knew most of western Pennsylvania like I knew my own name, I was rarely lost. This drove my skeptics wild with wonder and envy . . . and I loved it.

Navigational instruments were very basic in those pre-computer days. Before sophisticated equipment like the Loran and the GPS (global positioning satellite), most planes were equipped with a compass, a VOR (very high frequency omni range) radio indicator, and an ADF (automatic direction finder) to hone in on a signal from a non-directional beacon on the ground. All were instruments that helped the pilot find his or her way in the sky. A transponder, on the other hand, helped air traffic controllers locate the plane. Surprisingly, not much had changed in 30 years because these were the very same instruments that Ms. Earhart herself used.

Picking out pilotage points to follow on the ground was a popular method of finding direction combined with the use of charts and aerial maps that identified the names of cities, mountains, lakes and waterways. If visibility was clear, flying along roads, rivers and streams worked quite well.

Radio communications and standard operating procedures were necessary back then, but were not very refined. A flight plan was required if the weather limited visibility and the pilot was forced to fly on instruments, which was and still is considered flying IFR (Instrument Flight Rules). A call into the area control center before and after the flight, to open and close the plan, was mandatory. But if visibility was more than three miles, there was no need for a flight plan and the pilot could fly VFR (Visual Flight Rules), thus making it unnecessary to check in with the control center. Eventually, the FAA (Federal Aviation Agency) tightened its restrictions as

air traffic increased.

Flying instilled in me a spirit of adventure and the freedom to go anywhere. The challenge of mastering the plane, knowing its capabilities and limitations, and learning navigational techniques gave me self-confidence in a field where very few women had entered. The sense of power and control was at times intoxicating. At other times, however, it was quite humbling.

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One particular day I spent buzzing around solo in a low-winged Piper Cherokee enjoying the serenity of the expansive blue skies. With little traffic in the area of my small uncontrolled airport, I was shooting landings and take-offs, a process of landing and taking off in continuous succession.

As I lifted my plane off the runway in what was intended to be my last take-off for the day, I was no more than 300 feet above the ground when I saw a plane take off from the rarely used perpendicular grass runway. The last thing I saw was his nose heading for the belly of my craft. I panicked and pulled my nose as high as I could without stalling, giving it as much power as I could muster out of that plane. I prayed and waited for the inevitable impact. The summer heat in the plane intensified and my skin stuck to the leather seat. Beads of sweat rolled down my face and drenched my shirt.

Time seemed to be suspended as the excruciating moments went by, but there was no impact. I never saw him pass out from under me on the other side and, in fact, never saw him again. Badly shaken and hardly able to regain control of myself, I realized that the crash I had just avoided would still occur if I didn’t pull myself together and fly the plane. I gripped the wheel, cleared my mind and tried to remember how to land. Fortunately, the downwind leg was a long stretch and while I checked over my instruments, and kept an eye out for the phantom pilot, I calmed down. By the time I turned onto my final approach, I was focused on getting my plane down safely. With no crosswind, it gently glided onto the runway.

When I parked, my hands were shaking so badly I could hardly turn off the engine. As I entered the pilot’s lounge, there was much talk about the near collision. Someone had already reported the flier to the FAA and a number of the pilots told me that I was in the right, that the man was not watching where he was going and had just barely missed me. Fortunately, he had or I could have been “dead right.”

Through the years, I gained a greater respect for flying and took it more seriously, especially after I experienced the loss of a few friends due to mistakes, oversights or arrogance. I learned that despite whatever situation occurred, it was best to always follow the rules for the benefit of everyone’s safety.

A pal from the airport, Joe Wilkins, demonstrated this lesson the hard way. After a night of drinking at a local bar, he wanted to impress his wife and friend with an aerial view of the Butler area. At some point, though, Joe either became confused or miscalculated his altitude and air speed, and all three people paid the ultimate price for the oversight. He had obviously forgotten the rule of “Eight hours from bottle to throttle.”

A good friend and experienced pilot, Pete Weise, miscalculated a landing one night in bad weather. During a driving rain storm, with the runway lights barely visible, he ran the plane into the ground 25 feet off the end of the runway, killing him on impact.

A family member, Bill Dresbach, who was a seasoned pilot, took off in his sturdy homemade aircraft on a bright sunny central Ohio day in perfect flying weather. Shortly after he was in the air, he banked severely to the right. The plane suddenly and unexpectedly rolled over and crashed nose first, killing him immediately. Whether it was an oversight, poor judgment, or the condition of the plane before the flight, no one will ever know. Some speculated that maybe he had had a heart attack even though he appeared fine all afternoon while he socialized with fellow pilots at an air show.

The reality of a potentially fatal accident is always with me, especially after knowing people who have gone down. The awareness that even competent and accomplished pilots can have accidents is important, but it does not paralyze me with fear because the risk I take is worth it.

Flying is more than just the power of controlling a large piece of machinery. It has become an integral part of my spirit that has stayed with me for life. From my first flight at the age of thirteen, I developed a natural feel for the plane, and later after I completed flight training, the plane had become an extension of myself. With each flight, we are a team working together as one entity.

I feel perfectly comfortable sitting in the pilot’s seat and running the plane through its paces, easily manipulating it in any direction and engaging in challenging maneuvers. It takes a firm but sensitive touch to control a plane, similar to controlling a horse. Both will respond with the right direction and guidance, patience and persistence.

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As sometimes happens, life interfered with my flying pursuits. Priorities shifted and my attention turned to finishing college, raising children and getting divorced. Many years went by and flying remained a distant memory until I accepted a new job and moved to a small Ohio town in the summer of 1985 where, surprisingly, flying was a popular pastime at the two uncontrolled airports in the area.

On a crisp fall afternoon, after years away from the controls, I slipped

into the pilot’s seat of a Cessna 182 and renewed my love affair. Like a hand in a glove, it was a perfect fit and I savored every minute of the flight. Some of the technicalities were rusty, but my good friend and hand-picked instructor, Val Mowery, helped refresh my memory and perfect my technique.

Through Val and another friend, John Patterson, who was also an accomplished pilot with multiple certifications, I was able to build up much needed flying hours and regain my confidence. No more playing out Red Baron tactics in the air. John and I gave new meaning to restaurant-hopping by flying his Piper Arrow to various airport eateries in the tri-state area over the weekends. We eventually made our partnership permanent by getting married and have been co-piloting ever since.

When I returned to flying in the mid 1980s, I found that much had changed. The FAA restrictions had tightened up considerably and flight procedures and communications had become much more rigid. Twenty years earlier I could fly the countryside and never talk to another living soul until I landed, but the new communications regulations directed that a pilot had to check in at certain points along the flight path. This was foreign to me and I felt intimidated talking on the radio with the various control towers and regional control centers. Their garbled messages were incomprehensible until I finally got the hang of the type of information they were supposed to give me and anticipated their instructions. In time and with practice, I became comfortable with the new procedures and realized that expanded communications with the increased traffic and additional student pilots in the air were reasonable and improved safety for everyone in the cockpits across the country.

The one change I welcomed was that women were more widely accepted as pilots and their numbers had increased dramatically since I first started to fly. There was even a handful of female traffic controllers and female commercial pilots, which was an indicator of what the future would hold.

Flying later in life also brought into clearer focus my own mortality. Mindfulness, diligence and caution played a bigger part in my life especially when dealing with the unpredictable factors of flying, factors such as the fickle and ever-changing weather patterns that get pilots into trouble before they realize it. Mother Nature’s idiosyncrasies can often play havoc with the best laid plans.

I learned this lesson during a trip with John one night. Shortly after taking off from the Butler Airport following a visit with my family, we were in the “soup,” a pilot’s term for thick, vaporous fog. Visibility was less than a quarter mile on the ground, or as the old fly boys used to say, “It was so bad, you could barely see the wings from the window.”

As certified instrument pilots, we had filed the mandatory IFR flight plan and checked in with the Pittsburgh Control Tower. As we climbed through the dense fog we were enveloped in darkness and a storm that was bound to get worse. We felt like we were wrapped up in a pile of sheets in an unlit room and could find no way to get out. The only light we had was the warm glow of the cockpit lights.

We relied on our instruments to take us the 320 miles to Columbus, Ohio, along with the expert direction of air traffic controllers, as we contacted each control center along the way. They kept track of our progress by watching our slow-moving blip on their radar screens and providing us with regular weather and traffic updates. Their garbled talk was welcomed company in the lonely cockpit, and it was with their guidance and our knowledge that we made it home without incident.

When a pilot is in the clouds, not knowing which way is up or down, he or she cannot rely on equilibrium alone as an indicator of direction or even stability of the plane because often that “feeling” is inaccurate. The motion of diving or climbing is imperceptible when sitting in the cockpit.

This theory was proven to me during instrument training when a long-brimmed metal hood was placed firmly on my head shielding my vision from anything outside the windshield. I was forced to focus on the instrument panel and fly using only instruments. Until I learned the function of the bank and turn indicator, the attitude indicator and the altimeter, my training as a pilot was incomplete. These are the main instruments that indicate both the position of the plane as it cuts through the air and especially the wings in relationship to the earth’s horizon. This knowledge can be a lifesaver.

It is thought that John Kennedy, Jr. was not familiar enough with the instruments on that fateful night when he crashed, killing his wife, sister-in-law and himself. He was flying at night over the ocean with no visible horizon to guide him and in bad weather: the worst possible combination of flying conditions. He had limited experience with instrument flight, possibly became disoriented and most likely did not know he was diving the plane directly into the ocean until it was too late.

Intense hands-on flying experience, extensive ground school training, knowing the instruments and the ability to read the plane are essential elements for a successful pilot. But even with this background and hundreds of flight hours, pilots have gone down because of unforeseen circumstances.

At dusk one evening, John and I were flying at about 5000 feet, heading to our favorite restaurant in Muncie, Indiana from Columbus, Ohio, when a sudden thunderstorm blew up into our path. Usually, finding an alternative

route is the best diversionary tactic under such conditions, but the storm path was so wide, we could not get around it. We chose instead to fly a direct route through the storm and take our chances. Heavy rain and hail pelted our windshield so hard it felt like we were a target in a shooting gallery. Lightning flashed all around us, illuminating the sky and the cockpit at the same time. Rain and oil from the engine streaked over the wings and blew onto the windshield, obscuring what little visibility we had left. The radios crackled with the noise of flight controllers’ voices barking commands and tail numbers of other planes also battling the storm.

Our plane floated in the air as though it were swinging on a hammock suspended between two invisible points in the sky. It pitched forward causing us to lose altitude and skidded sideways, yawing back and forth, causing us to lose our heading. The compass spun like a top and the numbers on the altimeter changed rapidly. It was all that we could do to keep the craft in the air and barely under control.

As quickly as the storm overtook us, it was over. We suddenly emerged and flew into clear sky after almost an hour of being battered about like a cat’s toy. The shift of conditions was like day and night. I had been so tense from focusing on the instrument panel that I had a throbbing headache and my eyes were blurry. But the gleaming metal of the plane in the sudden sunlight was a welcome sight. We had made it, and I must admit that I was scared, really scared. Not afraid enough to give up flying, but afraid enough to keep closer track of weather forecasts, especially just prior to departure.

Despite the close calls and near disasters, I still enjoy flying, but I have often wondered what scared my adventuresome father so much that he quit piloting altogether when he returned home from the war. He did, however, feel comfortable on both commercial and private planes as long as someone else was “doing the driving.” He was also pleased that I had become such a devoted pilot. I recall him standing by when I completed my first solo flight. The instructor stepped out of the plane and allowed me to take it around the pattern myself. After I finished my go-around, my father gave me a hug and said, “Flying does run in the family and you’ve kept the legacy alive.”

My father has since passed on, and I am settling into middle age, but the one desire I have is that when I reach the end of this life, I want to float out as gently as a plane soaring into the highest reaches of the sky, fading into the Blue Yonder where I may once again be with my father in the Great Beyond.



Reflections - *Kyle Wilson*

In the Guise of a Seventeen-year-old Blonde, the Spirit of Tu Fu
Breaks a Three-Year Fast at Arthur Bryant's, Kansas City's Best
BBQ Joint

by Ryan G. Van Cleave

Ch' Yuan, dear friend, you would've appreciated
how these rib-bones, when snapped in half, spill
amber light that reminds me of late Spring; oh, how we ate
rivercrabs then, smashing their bodies open
like oak limbs cracked loose by rocks off Yellow Mountain.

Oh, Li Po, you too have known the soul's sad desire
to know hunger, to cross the empyrean red line into
the shadowed land of ten thousand punishments,
eternal longing, where every tantalizing morsel of food
& water tastes like a lizard, river loam, sewage.

Even now, Li Po, I break my fast and think of you as my heart
roils like a water motor, an engine that is its own body
in motion. An invisible plane of air, of guilt, soars around me
now as I plunge waterfall-like into the streetcorner potatoes,
okra, beans that cling to the memory of the sacred blue

winds of heaven. I am a weak man. In an arctic
expanse of peach-colored snow, I might fall to my knees, &
my hands, shaking, might scoop the fleshy coating of
earthy coldness into my mouth, & I might eat & eat. A wise man
accepts weakness, though this song comes harshly

through the lips. My friends, like a chill wind off the great
sea, you are with me, your ghosts the reminders of
holy days on Dragon Hill; together we make war on the
imagination-high pile of meat, & despite not having
rice wine and plum pudding, we find peace in richness, voluminosity.
The white sun races high above. See how it is full, so pure?

“All the troubles you have will pass away very quickly.”

--Fortune Cookie Poem #19

by Ryan G. Van Cleave

During a turtle hunt at Lake Lucerne,

my father told me that the moon
dipping behind the distant lip

of trees) looked like a miniature
brown-and-orange tiger. I said

he was nutso. He said *it's all*
in how you look at things, and perhaps

that's a lesson I still haven't learned.
Maybe two crows who pecked each

other to death atop my weathervane
is a good omen, a sign of coming joy.

Maybe maggots in the trash signals
a short winter, or unexpected money

heading my way. But it's the phrase
“pass away very quickly” that hooks me,

makes me feel curious and human,
like a criminal pressed up against a

concrete wall topped with barbed wire,
spotlights zeroing in, loudspeaker blaring,

the weight of what might catch me
deadens my limbs, my lumbering mind.

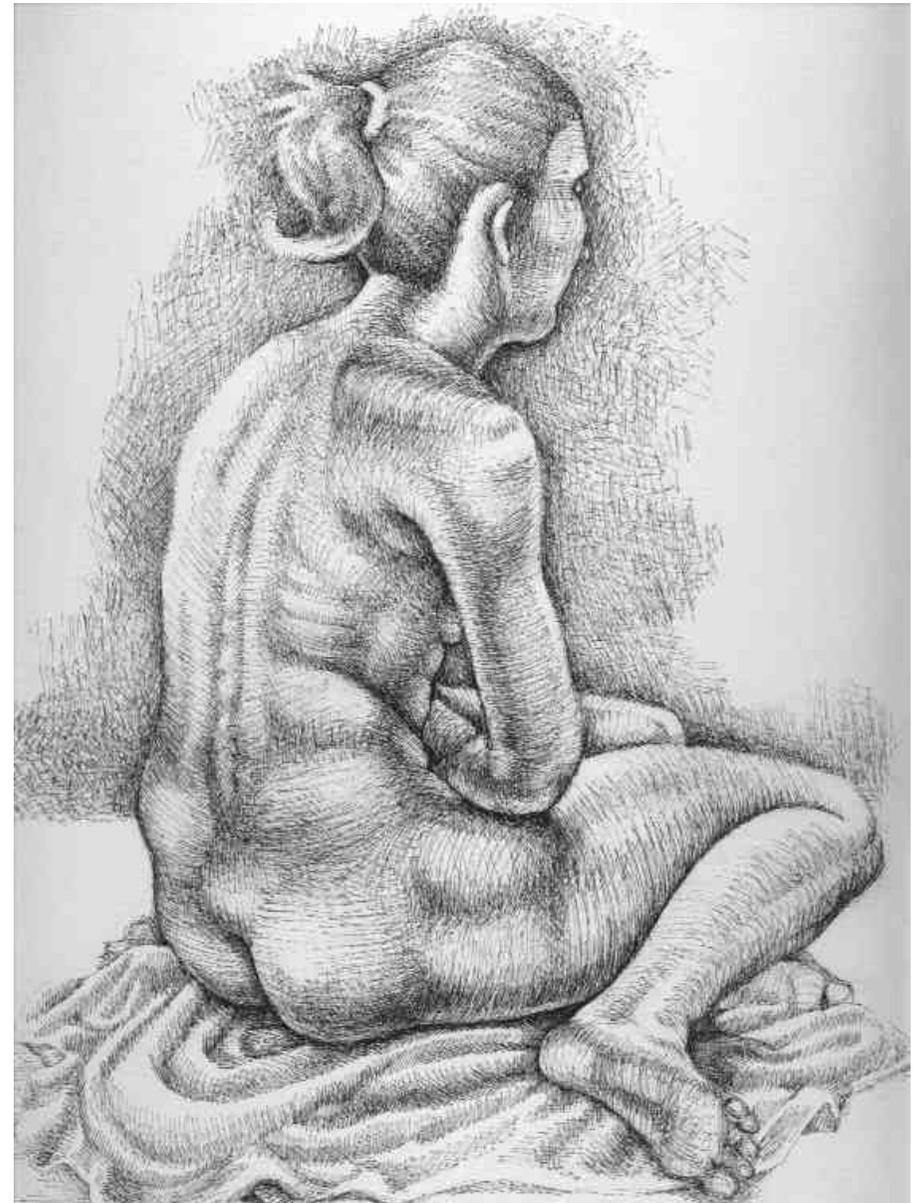


Figure Study - Rachel Spacher



Grandma's Hand - Lisa Kruse

Physical Anthropology

by Heather Varnadore

Assortive Mating

It's a dark house. The only sounds are the arthritic snaps and pops of the floor under my tread. Love is the sticky film I wash off my abdomen in the close pink bathroom. I warm a thin washcloth, wring it, rinse it again.

Inclusive Fitness

There are notches along my pelvic girdle. I have studied this. They come about from widening and re-fusing during childbirth. They are the scars on the inside that no one sees. But I know what they look like, have held someone's mother up to the light to trace the tracks of atrophy with a forefinger. I wondered, if like me, the woman from box #5 prayed for death as her bones wrenched, and was amazed by her powers of creation.

Fossils

Flesh is boiled from bone. It looks like mince meat or stringy beef brisket, and it falls away so cleanly. The skulls are all along one wall, blanched and dry as toasted almonds. Their jaws are fragile arcs splayed in front of them and the teeth have a tenuous grip at best. Nasal apertures and eye orbits are chipped like cheap dinnerware by the hands of irreverent students.

Para-Mortem Trauma

“You are lucky that Mom and Dad would not let you see her like that,” my other sister said years later. “You never would have been able to forget it-- she didn’t even look like herself.” She was displayed only for the family. Her skull had been reconstructed, buttressed, I can’t think how. They washed her fearlessness off when her strawberry blonde hair, matted by blood and tissue, was tediously cleaned and combed over.

The Human Cortex: Allows Reasoned Behavior, Memory, Abstract Thought

Later, in bed, after I finish in the bathroom, I wipe the hot wet hope from my eyes. But deep down in my marrow I know: we are spokes and pegs and sticks. Tinker Toys and Lincoln Logs that we bounce off each other in play until bedtime comes and we’re placed into boxes and covered with lids.



Figure Study - *Tyler Dirks*

 Thirty

 by Jenny Morse

I turned 30 last weekend. After 17 years of school, eight years in the advertising department of Blue Cross Blue Shield, and about six failed relationships with men I never really liked, I finally made it around the curve. I was officially old. At my birthday party, my nephew Jason, with the insolence of a seven-year-old, ran through the door of my parents' house, jumped around, and asked me if I knew Moses personally. Did I mention my nephew was a brat? Of course, next in the door was my younger sister. Younger by a year, but if you took one glance you'd think she was still in college. She is happily married with two beautiful children, and 29 hasn't kept her from being skinny, fit, and full of annoying energy. We don't have the best opinions of each other.

She bounced in the door, 6-month-old in tow, perfect husband following, carrying the diaper bag and the bucket of metal cans. I cursed her under my breath in hopes that she too would wake up on her 30th birthday and find her petite, sorority-girl body sagging in all the wrong places. I smiled, gritted my teeth and said, "Lisa! You look great!"

An hour later we sat around the dinner table. I slouched and stared at the few peas left on my plate. I always hated birthdays. This one, though... this one had been the worst. Jason kept reminding me I was as old as dirt. I'm certain now that it was some conspiracy in my family to make me feel like crap. Then, to shut him up, I opened my presents. I thought this would be the best part. Wrong again.

At work I had received three black balloons, a pair of control-top panties, and a basket of black licorice. I hate black licorice. Thankfully my parents avoided the gag gifts and went, instead, for the medium-sized George Foreman grill I had wanted. My 30th birthday had started looking up until Jason read the box. He asked, "Why does auntie Kate need a fat gwillling thing?" Lisa says he's gifted. Did I mention I want to slap him every time I see him?

Then my sister handed me an envelope. "This is from Jim, the kids, and me," she said smiling. Who else would it have been from? I slid my finger under the edge and tore all the way to the end. I must admit, I was a little disappointed when there wasn't any money in there. Instead, I pulled out an official looking piece of blue paper. I smiled and raised my eyebrows, catching Lisa looking at her husband for affirmation of her perfect gift.

Unfolding the paper, I was greeted by four big, black, ominous letters at

the top: YMCA. Below, in smaller print it read:

"Thank you, KATE OWENS, for your ONE-YEAR MEMBERSHIP to NORTHTOWN YMCA. This membership entitles you to ONE FULL YEAR of access to ALL YMCA SERVICES at NORTHTOWN YMCA as well as discounted rates to SOUTHTOWN YMCA AND PRAIRIE VIEW YMCA Membership effective JUNE 8-2002 to JUNE 9, 2003."

"Kate, I originally thought we could go together, but Jim and I are members of the Southtown Racquet Club and I thought the Northtown YMCA would be closer to your apartment." Lisa looked concerned.

I knew she wanted me to ooh and ahh and say how perfect it was. "This will be fine, thanks."

"I was gonna try that YWCA on Monroe, but I thought you could maybe meet a nice guy here." She smiled as though she had just told me I had won a cruise to the Bahamas. My parents chuckled.

"What a wonderful idea, Lisa!" Mom stood up. "Can I take your dishes?"

So that was it. That was my birthday. I got a "fat gwillling thing" and a membership to the YMCA. I honestly felt like moving to Alaska after that night. At least there you get to wear a lot of sweaters so everyone looks a little chunky. Here in Iowa I had that luxury only in the wintertime.

That's what brought me to the point I am at now. A week later, 5:30 in the morning and I am about to reap the benefits of my sister's birthday ingenuity. It is June 9th and Lisa called me yesterday asking how I enjoyed my first day at the Y. Guilty, I told her I didn't make it. All she could do was tell me how wonderful her morning runs are with all of her friends and how being fit makes her feel so much younger. I figure if I go once then I can make up some story of how an old guy at the weight machines grabbed my butt and I will swear never to go back again. Maybe I'll donate the membership to someone at work.

Rummaging through my drawers, I find the least offending thing to wear: sweatpants. While pulling them up over my pooch, I wonder if Lisa realizes that I haven't set foot in a workout center for ten years, unless you count the time I started my new-century resolution and took up stationary biking. My shoestring had gotten caught in the gears somehow and, in an attempt to get it loose, I had fallen off the bike and landed on my knees, butt in the air, legs twisted to the point of hopelessness. The only thing I saw before I started crying were the tan, hairy legs and white Nike shoes of the trainer, chuckling above me in his singlet and running shorts. That was probably the longest I'd ever kept a workout resolution. I never tried again.

But here I am now with a stupid *year-long* membership that my perfect little sister probably spent more on than anything she has ever bought me, and, out of sheer anger and obligation, I am giving in. In all of my 30-year-

old, baggy sweatpants, oversize T-shirt, and worn, off-brand tennis shoe glory, I am going to spend an hour at the YMCA. I need a bumper sticker that says "I'd rather be dead."

I read in a magazine somewhere that you should drink something while you work out, so I check my refrigerator. All I can see, hiding behind Tupperware dishes of moldy leftovers and misshapen lumps of tin foil, are three cans of Coke, a carton of milk, and a bottle of wine. None of these really appeal to me. Not to mention the fact that my body will probably not even make it a lap, let alone several laps, with a glass of wine sloshing in my stomach.

Food? Should I eat before working out? It sounds a little odd, but in high school I remember my sister eating a banana before she ran. I squat uncomfortably and pull out the drawer labeled "fruits and vegetables." Doubting that an onion or a sprouting potato would do anything for my metabolism, I grunt back to my feet and leave the kitchen. Food and drink will have to wait.

Big Yawn. "What the heck am I doing?" I ask my goldfish, Wanda, as I reach for my keys. She swims in a circle. Fish just don't understand, but my apartment manager wouldn't let me have a dog. I lock the door on my way out.

Driving at 5:30 in the morning when you're going to a place where you don't really want to end up is almost like going on a date with that horribly obnoxious guy from work. It's the last place you want to be, but you know if you don't say yes at least once, he will torment you forever, so you're kind of in for the long haul. It's a vicious cycle. Turning at the first stop light, I glance down at the passenger seat: hopeful. If I forgot the membership certificate, then I can't get in. If I can't get in, then I can go home. If I go home, I can go back to bed for a few hours. But, the envelope is there, a little blue piece of paper sticking out the top taunting me. All I can read are the big, black letters: YMCA. Did I mention I hate my sister?

The building is actually new, which is probably the only positive thing about this situation. I read in the paper that it has a five-lane elevated track over two basketball courts, a new weight room, six racquetball courts and an Olympic-sized pool. Maybe it's not the Southtown Racquet Club, but at least it's not dated back to Eisenhower. Rolling into the parking lot, I'm shocked at all of the cars there so early. I thought I could avoid a scene. As I park, though, I notice the one thing I had dreaded the most. All of them are selections from about five different models: a handful of shiny Cutlasses and Lincoln Towncars, about ten station wagons, and a load of the Buick Park Avenue/Oldsmobile 88's. My sister's brilliant idea to wed me has failed. I could've pulled into a nursing home and had better luck finding an attrac-

tive male.

"One time. One time," I keep breathing to myself as I snatch up the envelope and my purse and head for the door. On my way in I notice a Ford Mustang. Maybe it belongs to something attractive? I walk a little faster.

Inside it smells like chlorine mixed with sweat, and I try not to gag. The woman at the front desk smiles as I hand her the envelope. She's wearing a T-shirt that says, "NORTHTOWN YMCA" with a distorted person raising their hands in victory. Her nametag says "Pamela." I want to crack a joke about her not having the boobs to be Pamela Lee, but, before I can say anything, she stands up, hands me back my envelope, and, leaning over the counter, points down the hallway to my left.

"Down there is the pool. You can check towels out right here, and the pool locker rooms are on your right." She points to the set of double doors across from the main entrance. "Through there are the racquetball courts. Once again, you can check out equipment right here." Finally, gesturing around the corner beyond her desk she says, "And the gym, weight room, and track are down that hallway. Can I do anything else for you?" Now that she's standing up I notice she's wearing spandex shorts over her well-toned legs. Ugh.

"No, I think I'm fine." I start to walk away but pause. "Oh, um, are there any vending machines with, like, Gatorade or Power bars?" I try to sound like I know what I'm talking about. Her look is kind of blank, though, and she doesn't speak, so my eyes are forced to follow her pointed finger to the wall directly behind me.

"Right. Thanks." I feel like a moron.

So, I've come to the conclusion that I have no place here. The only people I'm going to find are old bent-over men and women shuffling around a track in polyester shorts and Keds. I will not be graced by the greasy muscles of the men at the Racquet Club or the cute, well-toned basketball players I used to watch in college. I am 30 now, and forced to subject myself to outdated company since I don't seem to fit in anywhere else. Walking down a bright yellow corridor, I glance at the signs on the doors that I pass by. "Men's Locker Room." "Women's Locker Room." "Track." That's me. I think I'll just walk a mile or so. The most walking I ever get is around the mall so I figure this will be a decent way to put my one morning at the YMCA to use. Besides, I don't really know how to do any other kind of workout.

My first challenge is the stairs. I succeed with flying colors: I only have to slow down once. At the top, however, I stagger over to the railing, realizing that my hopes for the morning are dashed. There, coming toward me in the

third lane of the track is the obvious owner of the Ford Mustang. She's tall, skinny, blond, and pumping out laps like she's done it her whole life. I watch her pass. She's got short spandex shorts and a tight tank top. Her long golden ponytail bounces in rhythm with her stride. I'm about to crawl under a rock and die when someone bumps into me from behind.

I turn and look . . . down. There, at about the five foot level is a little old lady in a "Fight for the Cure" T-shirt.

"Oops! Sorry, honey. Guess I wasn't paying much attention to where I was going." Her voice is a little shrill, but her smile beams up at me through permanent laugh lines and spidery crows feet.

"That's alright, ma'am. Excuse me." I step aside.

"Oh, nonsense. Go ahead." she asks gesturing toward the track. "I know you're not leaving, I followed you in!"

"Really, uh . . . I forgot to put my purse . . ."

She interrupts. "No, you're fine. See over there," she points across the track to a small room with benches in the middle and cubby holes lining the walls, "you just walk around and you can put your stuff down over there."

Before I know it, she has nudged me onto the outside lane of the track. Mustang girl is making her second round. Sigh. I feel like a chubby frog in the middle of a busy street, about to get smashed. Before I can sink into my pity party of mid-life depression, though, my little grandma-figure steps confidently onto the track and takes off. I stare, dumbfounded, as she struts away rapidly. She too, is wearing spandex, and, with Mustang girl in the background, I come to the conclusion that this is a new rule. You can only wear spandex if you're: a) young, sleek and beautiful, or b) old and saggy.

We in the middle are cursed with sweatpants and big T-shirts.

I hear someone loudly proclaim, "track." My initial thought is, "yes, this is a track" when suddenly six old men with pot bellies and sweatbands are stepping around me. I clutch my purse in horror, too afraid to move.

"Morning."

"Excuse me."

"G'mornin'."

"Ma'am."

One of them banters back, "You better get a move on, girlie, there's a stampede a-comin'." The rest of them laugh. The stampede has just come through, I think, but no. I jump and begin walking forward as quickly as I can to avoid the next wave. Behind them is, no doubt, a slew of chattering women with silver hair led by none other than Mustang girl. She whizzes past. At this point I consider walking a lap and calling it good when a shrill voice snatches my attention.

"Still over here, honey?" Grandma lady pats me on the back as she scoots

by. She smiles back, crows feet winking at me from the corner of her face. The back of her shirt points out that whatever event is on the front was sponsored by Southtown Racquet Club. A war has just been declared. If I live through this morning, I'm going to kill my sister.

Finally, I reach the cubby hole room. Half a lap and I'm already panting. I can feel the sweat beading up on my face, so I wipe it with the back of my hand and stuff my purse into a hole. A blue piece of paper is sticking out the top. Still taunting. I decide to stretch before stepping back onto the track. Or at least I hope it looks like stretching. While struggling to touch my shins, I look up to see Mustang girl fly by, followed several yards behind by Grandma lady. I nonchalantly nod and smile at her as she walks by.

"Glad to see you made it over here without gettin' hurt, honey!" She jeered.

My smile turns to a scowl as I step out onto the track. That's it. It's one thing to have my sister, Miss Work-out Princess, and her friend Mustang Girl smashing my self-esteem, but dammit, I will not be patronized by a woman thirty years older than me! I am a raging bull, ready to take on saggy butt spandex woman, and off I go . . . walking as fast as I can to stay up with Grandma lady. My walk isn't exactly what you'd call graceful. An additional twenty-five pounds to my ideal body weight has gone straight to my hips and tummy, leaving me with more of a waddle. Regardless, I manage to remain only a few steps behind her.

I look around and notice the other people on the track. I was right. The only exceptions to the feeling of being in a nursing home are the fact that the elderly here are actually walking, and Mustang girl is weaving in and out of them like a race-car driver. Sigh. I can't help but notice that this little woman in front of me is a bundle of energy, constantly patting people's backs as she passes and exchanging friendly banter with the group of old men. I would be amused if I wasn't struggling so hard to keep up.

After a lap, I can feel the muscles tightening in my legs and, if I could, I would kick myself for buying such cheap shoes. Worst of all, my breathing has become short and labored. I glance around me. I know Grandma Lady can hear me heaving in and out. She's probably afraid of getting sucked in, but I won't give in to the humiliation of the whole situation. So, I fight to maintain my ungraceful shuffle a few paces behind her. For the first time, I notice the writing on the top of her shirt. It reads: *For Jeanie. After your 15 years of fighting. I'm still fighting in your memory.* As I realize what this woman has done, my breath catches in my throat. Not good. Getting choked up over her T-shirt causes me to cough and sputter loudly, and I'm forced to stumble over to the railing of the track and catch my breath, my legs screaming their thanks. Before I can recover, though, I feel what I should've

known was coming. Suddenly my back jolts with a few solid slaps.

"You all right, honey?" Grandma Lady asks.

I turn to see a genuine look of concern on her face.

"I'm . . . (cough, cough) . . . I'm fine." I try to get her to leave.

"C'mon." Much to my dismay, she grabs my arm and begins walking me down the track.

"You don't want to get runned over, do ya?" Part of me is thankful that she didn't make a scene in front of the herd of old men coming our direction. We walk slowly around a turn while I catch my breath.

After a few moments of silence, Grandma Lady is the first to speak, "My name is Jan. Jan Conwell."

"I'm Kate . . . um . . . Kate Owens. Nice to meet you."

"No, no. It's my pleasure Kate. Ready to walk some more?"

"I guess so," I respond; reluctant to be walking with the enemy, but as she speeds up I recognize my chance. We start out at the same spot this time. If I walk faster, then I win!

"You wanna walk together, Kate?" She looks up expectantly, her laugh lines cocked up on one side of her face.

"Really, ma'am, I don't want to bother you . . ."

"NONSENSE," she insists shrilly. She looks over and pats me on the arm, "I'm here to pick up men and I figure with a young girl like you, the guys'll come a' runnin'!"

I'm too shocked to speak at this point. Why is she talking to me?

She hits me on the arm again. "I'm just teasing you, honey. Haven't you seen those men down there?"

I glance over the edge of the track where a group of eight older men are trying to play basketball in their soaked gray T-shirts and sweatbands.

"They're too slow for a whipper snapper like me, huh?" She smiles.

I can't help but laugh, picturing her scooting circles around them, pinching them on the butt, only to shuffle down the court and make a two-handed layup.

As we walk, I'm too distracted by keeping up to think about any strategy for beating her. Every time I speed up, she doesn't lose a stride. A full lap later, I'm back to my huffing and wheezing, this time, trying desperately to conceal it. I spy the gold band on her finger and disguise my pain with a question.

"So . . . you're married?"

"No. You see, my husband Earl died about two years ago. I could've been like all the other widows and sulked in my home for a year until I died, but I said to myself, I said, 'Jan, you've got a lot more life left to live, so here I am, seventy-two years old and I feel fifty!' Her little gray head turns to me

for my reaction.

"That's . . . that's great . . ." I manage to wheeze out.

"Oh goodness! I'm so sorry. I don't know what's come over me!" Her rapid scoot slows to a saunter.

My body rejoices at the slower pace.

"Sometimes I get going and don't realize anything going on around me. Are you all right?"

I can't let her see my weakness, but I shamefully respond, "It's my first time walking."

"Well," she says eyeing my sweatpants. I cringe. Here comes the mockery. She knew I was a rookie. She knows I can't keep up. "I started when I was two, but you're looking pretty good for your first time walking."

I manage to let out a laugh between my huffing and puffing.

"I'm sorry, Kate, I've been going on and on. You tell me about yourself."

I take a deep breath. Relaxation under strenuous circumstance was never a strong suit of mine. Now, I find myself in a place I hated before I ever walked in, with a woman that represents everything I'm not, I'm wearing naive workout clothing, I can hardly make a lap without feeling like I'm going to keel over, and she wants me to tell her about myself?

"My name is Kate Owens." Breathe. "I work in the advertising department . . ." Breathe. "at Blue Cross Blue Shield . . ."

Praise God, she interrupts. I resume my deep rapid breathing.

"Really! Well, I'll say! I have my health insurance through them!" She beams at the fact that I work for her insurance company? If I could function properly I would hug her. "What exactly do you do in advertising?"

Here I go again. "Well . . . I'm a graphic artist," Breathe, "so I design brochures . . . newspaper ads . . . and different logos."

"That is wonderful, Kate!" She pats me on the back. "Do you have a family?"

Ah, the million-dollar question, "No . . . no, in fact I'm single." I can't help but sound bitter. She reminds me of my sister, so I brace myself for her sermon.

"Well, that's all right. You've got your whole life ahead of you to find a man." I'm shocked. There is no joke, no gasp of disbelief, no sermon on marrying before your eggs dry up. She sure has a lot of confidence in the world for a woman who has been in it so long.

"I never really thought of it that way."

"What, are you 25?"

"No. Actually . . . I just turned 30 last weekend," my response is less than enthusiastic.

"Honey, you don't look a day over 25. Besides, when I was 30 I already

had four children and a lazy husband. I wanted to be in your shoes.”

Right. I can tell our pace is picking up, but surprisingly my breathing is beginning to even out. I get brave. “So, Jan . . . how often do you come here?”

“My daughter actually bought me a membership two Christmases ago when it opened.” She laughs. “I was so mad at her. I thought, ‘What? Am I fat? Is she trying to tell me something?’ My daughter is almost forty but looks your age. She ran in a marathon last year. Got three-thousandth out of five-thousand runners. I don’t know how she does it. I think she was really trying to get me to meet people after my husband died, so finally I came, and when I got here I met this nice woman. We became friends and I’ve been coming three times a week for almost a year.”

“Where is she?” I’m beginning to wonder why she picked me to talk to when there were so many others she could swap war stories with.

“Well, she passed away a few months ago after fighting breast cancer for 15 years. It was really sad, but I knew her well and she always said she was ready when the good Lord was ready.” Her laughter lightens the solemn mood I had quickly taken as I remembered the back of her T-shirt. “I guess when He’s ready, there’s not a lot we can do about it, huh?” She pats my shoulder.

“My sister gave me my membership for my birthday.” The words come out before I really think them through. I become rigid. Jan seems excited that I’m sharing though, so despite my hesitation I continue. “She’s only a year younger than me . . . but she’s married . . . has two children, and is as skinny and fit as a teenager . . . I wasn’t as excited about her gift as she was.”

“This isn’t so bad, though, is it?” Jan gestures to the track. “I mean, all that’s here is us old folks and we don’t judge anybody. It’s better than going to those darn racquet clubs and fitness centers where everyone you see is built like Kirk Douglas.”

I feel bad about my personal war. She’s not as patronizing as I had originally thought.

“Only ten percent of the world is shaped like those people, the rest of us get to really appreciate our bodies the way we are, right?”

I smile back.

“I guess you’re right.” My voice has a hint of doubt, but despite the throbbing soreness creeping up my legs, I’m in awe of the rhythm of my body. Legs: left, right, left, right, alongside Jan’s. My arms: swing, swing, swing, powerfully moving my body forward. My breathing: In, out, in, out, the huffing has reached a minimum. I can practically feel the calories and fat burning off. I’m leaving a trail of myself behind me in neat little puddles on

the floor. I hope Mustang girl doesn’t slip.

“Pride, honey. Take pride in who you are. You only get that pretty body for a few years, then suddenly you wake up one morning and your face is drippin’ off, your arms wave back at you, and your boobs are on the floor. Then you really have to dig deep to find som’n to appreciate.”

We both laugh and take another turn on the track. Mustang girl walks by briskly, obviously on her cooldown. Sigh.

“You see her?” Jan asks, leaning close to my slyly. “She started coming two weeks ago, little speed demon . . . I been trying to catch her ever since.”

Before I know it, my watch reads 6:30. I have been here for an hour and I walked two whole miles without even realizing it. Grabbing my purse, Jan and I walk out to the parking lot. She waves at a few older men on the way out the door. I shake my head, chuckling.

“I’ll see you on Wednesday, won’t I?” She asks, unlocking her white Buick Park Avenue.

“I think so, Jan. That’d be nice. Same time?”

“Five-thirty. Have a good day at work, sweetie.” She gets in her car while I fumble with my keys. Pulling out, I notice her license plate reads SXYGR-MA. I laugh out loud.

As I pull out of the parking lot I take a few deep breaths. The sun is climbing the sky and the city is beginning to wake up. I decide to stop by the market on the way home. I think I’ll need some bananas. Then after work I might go shopping and get some better shoes. Maybe some spandex?

No, probably not. I think I’ll tell my sister to get me some for Christmas.



Anne - Adam Scott

In the scandalous clear

by Don Gilliland

Once upon a time, the story
was molded from spit and dirt.
But what I'm exercised
about is what's here--

(1) pitless apricots (2) the thin
skin of attention (3) music to eat
to and (4) the ploys--i.e., the god-like
creature's traffic in disarming

clarity, its urge to gild with clear gloss,
make pity merely apparent, glow
with new varieties of soil and scandal--e.g.,
(1) the not-okay (2) the okay (3) the in-

between (4) the soup of okra-mucous.
I'm scared to even think about "out there"
and "back then." I can't even say if there's
a there or then I'd want to trample.

At the Bar with Bella

by Jim Reese

“Give me a shot of Cuervo with training wheels,” she said. “And fill this guy up.”

That’s all it took. She had me. I watched her hammer one back and then another. She sucked on the limes, tore them to their rind, then ordered a bloody beer and slid to the stool next to me.

“Wedding cake and funeral ham are my two favorite kinds of food. I’m serious,” she said. “Think about it.”

So I thought about it. And she made all the sense in the world.



Luci Hull

What I Expected

by Jess Adams

When I asked Tena to meet with me on Monday night, I had hoped to gain a new perspective on the trade that I had practiced for the past year, and that she has practiced for the majority of her adult life, bartending.

That's what I had expected.

What I got instead was to step into the beer-soaked shoes of a person not entirely unlike myself, but at the same time, someone whose life I could not have pieced together even in my overactive author's imagination.

§

To look at her, Tena is not an imposing woman. If I didn't know her I might make the mistake of calling her slight--which might get me punched in the nose. She is about five feet tall and fit, especially for a 38-year-old mother. The taut skin of her abdomen is showing under the red "My Place Tavern" shirt she has tied just beneath her breasts, and her dirty blonde hair is pulled back into the pony tail I have come to expect to see. She is a woman of constant motion and energy, traits attributable as much to her vitality as to the drug habit she nursed for the better part of her adolescent and adult life. The combination of her tightly pulled hair and vibrant personality give her the illusion of being in constant motion, even when she is simply sitting across the table from you--as she is now.

We are sitting in my bar, the Gin Mill, and between us on the oak-veneered table are two full bottles of beer, a Bud Light for Tena and a Michelob Ultra for me, as well as an ashtray that will soon be full of the Marlboro Red cigarettes that are ever present in Tena's mouth. I realize just before the interview starts that I don't know Tena's last name. I have seen her in my bar for the past year, know to have a bottle of Bud Light ready when she walks through the door at 12:15 a.m. after closing "My Place," know that she will always ask me to turn up the jukebox (no matter how loud it is) when Pat Benetar's "Hell is for Children" is playing, but never got to know her last name. She has always been Tena, more identifiable to me as, "Tena from My Place" than Tena Stilley, which is probably how she likes it.

§

I came to the idea of writing about being a bartender after practicing the trade for the past 15 months. The impact it has had on my psyche and outlook has been immense, almost comparable to the impact coming to college has had on me. I thought that other bartenders would have had similar

experiences, but as is often the case, I was wrong. After my two initial interviews with other bartenders the thought crossed my mind to simply title the essay, "Bartenders are Unintelligent People." As a collective, we seemed to have no greater depth of thought than a pool of condensation on the bars we keep. I don't want to lead you to think that we serve no purpose, though. Bartenders always have great stories to tell, and anyone who has spent a considerable amount of time on the serving end of a jigger will confirm the fact that it takes a specific personality to go back to work night after night, even without giving a thought to the greater impact you have on your customers' lives. It is simply difficult to deal with drunk people for a living. However, an essay full of stories about beating drunks up, and girls behaving as their fathers fear they do, simply had all the literary weight of an issue of *Maxim*. In short, this essay was going nowhere except the garbage until I got to dive into Tena's world.

§

Dive into Las Vegas, Nevada, circa 1979. Not the Las Vegas from the Travel Channel, more like the Las Vegas from the movie *Casino*. Where rules are rules unless the right person wants to break them, and games are played fairly unless you want someone to break you. The Circus-Circus casino is our backdrop. The focus of our picture, and most likely the focus of the primarily male clientele, is the black jack dealer with the blond hair, bod' and attitude. This is of course Tena, holding down a job as a dealer two years before the legal age even then. She and her dad blew into town running from the people he owed money to in small towns all over southern California. Tena claims to have had twenty different houses in the first fifteen years of her life. Her nomadic existence is attributed to her alcoholic father's inability to hold down a job, or desire to.

Either two years in Vegas, or simply two more years of maturity were all it took to make Tena realize that Vegas, and especially Vegas with her father, was not the place she needed to be. After spending a night at her favorite bar (whose name she can't remember, "probably 'cause I never got a check from 'em"), telling some Hell's Angels about how much she wanted to leave Vegas, she hopped on the back of one of their motorcycles and blew into Phoenix. (She found out where they were headed after they left town.) After driving through the morning, they arrived at Frankie's Biker Bar, and Tena liked it so much, she didn't leave for eight years.

§

I looked at Tena across the table that now had twice the number of beer bottles on it and at least five cigarettes reduced to ash in the ashtray, with what must have been a plain look of disbelief on my face, because she laughed at my asking, "You got a job at the first bar you stopped at?"

“Yeah, I was hot back then,” she said with a laugh, shrugging off an accomplishment that dumbfounded this author.

“Unbelievable.” That was all that came to mind. Unbelievable that an eighteen year old girl would want to work in a biker bar. Unbelievable that the Hell’s Angels had packed her down to Phoenix on what was basically a motivated whim. Unbelievable from anyone other than Tena.

§

Tena at work is the modern-day version of the Old West saloon barkeep. Give her a crowd of rowdy people, most of whom are slightly dangerous when they’re sober and just plain dangerous when they’re drunk, and Tena will be on cloud nine. I got the same feeling watching Tena work behind her bar that I got the first time I saw Aerosmith’s Steven Tyler sing in concert. Some people are put on this planet to do just one thing: for Tyler, it is to sing rock n’ roll; for Tena, it is to be in charge of a bar. To take either person from their field of expertise would be taking a fish from water. Not only would they be out of place, I have a feeling they might die.

To see Tena working for the first time, it might seem simply like she is having the best time in the bar, so they put her in charge. But upon closer examination, it is evident that she is working with the ease that comes with twenty-plus years of experience. When she moves around the bar her eyes never drop to the floor. She knows where every barstool, table, and chair is like second nature. She is always focused on her customers, but primarily on what her customers are doing. She is watching two men argue over a pool shot, and is between them settling the dispute before either can even think about how hard he would have to swing to break his cue over the other’s head. She is constantly looking toward the doors, looking out for who might come in that isn’t welcome, and for those who are welcome so she can have their beer on the bar before they even get there. She is simultaneously entertaining, serving, and controlling her crowd without ever breaking a sweat. It’s enough to make this bartender jealous.

§

Tena has been calling My Place Tavern home for 12 years now. She decided to move here on another motivated whim, not unlike the one that found her on the back of a Harley in 1981. The motivation came about when in one week she: saw a man get shot and killed in his car for driving drunk into a line of Harleys outside of Frankie’s, knocking them over like dominoes; learned that her mother had passed away; and lost custody of her three-year-old son to her ex-husband who lived outside of Manhattan, KS. Her desire to stay in Phoenix and at Frankie’s had been extinguished, and now her internal compass was pointing East. So on a whim and very little gas money, she headed to Manhattan.

Once again she got a job at the first bar she applied to, although this time it was because she knew the owners. They had just bought the bar; Tena was the first bartender to work there. Since then she has seen fights, shootings (again), and people behaving in ways that would make a biker blush. To most people this would be an eye-opening experience, but to Tena it is just another day at the office.

§

The table between us is now littered with eight beer bottles (three of mine, five of hers), and the butts of the better part of a pack of cigarettes. Tena has just described the basics of the last ten years of her life to me in less than 15 minutes. She has blown through the description of the past decade because, true to form, her ceaseless energy has bubbled to the surface and she needs something else to do. I thank her for talking with me, and she thanks me for the beers and heads off to the other end of the bar to play pool with some of her friends.

As I watch Tena walk to the other end of the bar, I wonder where she will be when I leave Manhattan. The day before our interview she was fired from the bar that seemed like such an integral part of her just days earlier. It seems now is the perfect time for one of her motivated whims to get her onto the back of a Harley and into another town. I know that wherever she ends up, she will find her way into another bar--this fish needs water--but in the back of my mind I know it will not be what I expected.

Circling

by Tonya Kitchel

I had to run
to keep up with you.

Four strides to one,
tethered by your grip,

craning up to glare.
We flew past the swings

and merry-go-round;
such speed would crash

my head against the gravel.
I brought home my license

doomed to wreck and die.
I can't say where or how

I lost three points.
My heart can still beat

as loud as your foot-stomps.
Did I take off my shoes?

Am I using a coaster?
We glare eye-to-eye now

as you tell me to slow down,
take it easy on your heart.

Mine's ambivalent as you admire
the ancient rings on your table

as though you're proud of me.

Jerrold Hein



 Love Letter to Kansas

 by Pamela Yenser

I have always wanted to recite love letters written clear as the unfettered rivers out of the West--the silver-shored Snake, the Salmon and clear St. Joe--so unlike those rivers of our youth that muddied our baptismal whites and darkened the canoes lovers rent for love's languishments.

Our brown bodies listened too, to love's insistent tune, strung high up like the song cicadas hum when they are banging on the bark of river cottonwoods, their insides emptied out by ants and blown through yards and yards of backyard laundry lines, barbed claws hooked on our underwear, mostly mine as I recall, more silky and more bright.

It's summer now and I'm thinking all the time along river lines, how the warm brown riverbath of the past eddies out of the ecstatic blue pool that draws my lightning fly line--now a whip, now an S in the sky, now passing (*psst-psst*) downstream so I am one with the fly in her fuzzy coat. Lustrous. That is, until we are snagged.

I know this is not what is meant by "catch and release" but look how I've tried: to channel my rivers of fear, to thread hope through the smallest eye, to tie the knots that will not come untied.

I want to get this right, to extend my hand just so far, to cast myself upstream where the trout jump and your catfish won't be biting.

I tell myself it's love I'm fighting. That you must be released like letters let go.

I think that's half true, the way home is a river run through the great dead sea of childhood.

The way I want you. The way I turn you loose.

As Much As My Sorrowful End Denial, Unperceivable And Clean

by Hai Van Huynh

how can you love unhappiness and let it slink below towers
winding around the sinking
torrid mud enslaved by the rain.
the gray clouds of tomorrow are here.
the wind is enslaved by the stillness of the torrents.
the calmness is but a storm in disguise.
the truth is the conviction of feeling wind.

look into ancillary rooms of the blind man.
he has always believed the unseen
waking in the day to acknowledge his sight
beyond unending sorrow and denial

you cry and utter words of despair but are repulsed
by the sound of me dreaming.
let us sleep then and deny the ancillary room.
let children wander inside
and let the old man, sightless
fall into muddy rivers
and drown according to rain.

A Case for Moving Onward to Spring

by Hai Van Huynh

it was an afterthought
and the poets after awhile
began to curse the drought
I would tell her that it was true
that I'm sorry for loving her
but
some days you stand there
alone with her falling leaves
swirling around your ankles
disbelieving the phases of the earth.



Grove IX- K.A. Settle



Extemporaneous - Paul Houston

Mail-Order Bride--1973

by Leta Reppert

He answered the advertisement to correspond with beautiful Filipino girls such as myself. I spoke little English, but that is not what he wanted, anyway.

So I left Manilla
for Oklahoma. I came,
and met my husband
(in deed, if not by law)
and lived with him four years, because
I knew no one else
and learned only
a few words of English--
ones he used often at home.

But yesterday
a man came leading
ten cows and a calf, and
my husband
sent me away with him.

The cattle stayed.



Promises - Adam Scott

Crazy He Calls Me

by Cheri Johnson

We don't deny him any of the pleasures of life the young man was saying I want you to know that. We don't just let him sit there and howl. Listen to that I whispered to Albert Listen to *that*, and Albert giggled like a child waving a tiny painted bell; he spoke to me as if he were peering around a door; I love you oh I love you he said. Oh do you said I.

Upstairs the bar had been close and cluttered, postcards tacked crookedly to the walls as if over a kitchen sink. Every time the door jingled people looked up with mismatched cups at their lips hoping someone had been sent over to cook. Downstairs was filled with smoke. In the corner a young woman played jazz piano so frenetically that a thin glass of *limoncello* that had been placed atop the dark wood trembled.

That's the only reason they like us you know I said We've ruined everything with McDonald's and all but at least we've given them jazz. If it wasn't for that I don't think they'd even let us in the country.

Uh huh said Albert I don't know much about it.

Listen to that I said *Listen* to that.

We listened and the hot night air of that city came tripping down the little stairs steaming and full of horns and cobblestones' rattling. A woman came with it, small, wearing a black dress. It was as if she had been cut from a slender piece of olive wood with a curved knife. Albert did not look at her.

We couldn't do it the young man said We couldn't have lived with ourselves if we had done it.

We had somehow seated ourselves by the only other Americans in the bar, a young woman and man like we were. The girl had ash-colored hair and a blue scarf around her neck. They giggled over their small brown sticky table, and I poked Albert's leg under ours. Around the room were more of the tiny wobbly tables, unbolted to the floor, scraping across it as groups joined. People were speaking Italian and waving their hands, then stopping to pat their legs to the music, young women, and men of all ages. We had no idea what they were talking about.

Look at that Albert said I hadn't noticed, how beautiful, that wall is covered with stars.

Look at that I said There are even the constellations. The wall was painted the dark cerulean blue of the city's sky as it was between the hours of nine and ten o'clock. Squawking birds filled the air at that time with the

sound of monkeys being killed.

Don't you think he's beautiful? I said of the young man to Albert.

But we didn't want him to have to just sit there the young man said Poor jealous little bitch, and listen to us going at it.

His cheekbones said Albert We always have the same taste.

Jealous of me anyway the young man said Watching Keith probably just makes him sore. The two of them laughed suddenly and with a wickedness that spun sharply to our table with their musky hiccups of beer.

Albert sat up straight. That's disgusting he said *Keith*. How can he sleep with someone named that.

What? I said.

If my name was *Keith* I would change it.

There is nothing wrong with that name I said.

He'll dump him said Albert He can't go on sleeping with someone with a name like that. He giggled and his face untwisted out of its disgust and his green eyes filled with yellow like candles. Let's go get another drink upstairs said Albert The waitress is never going to ask us if we want another drink.

No I said I want to hear the rest about the cat. I want to hear about what they do with the cat. But they did not talk again about the cat right away. Instead it was more about Keith, who was a gardener and painted landscapes.

Oh honestly said Albert It just gets worse.

I am so awake I said I love the nap in the afternoon. I think tonight I will stay up until five.

I will stay up until six said Albert It fits us perfectly. It fits our personalities. Like how we both like a big dinner and no breakfast and we both like to wander around and look at things in the morning and then read until we fall asleep in the afternoon. We should stay here forever together.

We could do research here I said.

I am so comfortable with you said Albert I can't remember ever being so comfortable.

I'd like to do research on music I said On music that comes here from America. I would go all over Europe but start and end here in Rome.

You know they're obsessed with the Beatles here too said Albert.

You could do research on that I said.

The postcards upstairs were from New York and Chicago and were of the Blue Note and Thelonious Monk and wide smooth streets lit up and busy and wet. Anita O'Day sang out of little speakers in the wall as the men all smoked their pipes.

You have to be in school Albert said They don't just let you do research.

Who's they? I said I should have finished school.

No Albert said You got enough of that. You can't be in school forever.

The young man was saying We take him out to a place in the country. Do you remember Julia? We take him out to Julia's. She has a female and we let him go at it with her. For a while she wasn't neutered either and she had some batches but now they've got her fixed.

At the piano the woman's bench creaked as she reached far down the length of keys. A swallow of *limoncello* plunged like a lemon-scented dagger down my throat. The girl in the blue scarf said something we couldn't hear. She still seems up for it the young man said.

I coughed and covered my mouth. I don't believe that I said through my fingers Doesn't the desire go with the neutering?

Once he tried to jump on one of his own daughters the young man said We put a stop to that.

§

I went to the bathroom and when I came back Albert was kneeling by the table of the girl and the young man with the black hair and dark burgundy-rimmed glasses and the pronounced cheekbones that made him look like a fine strong maverick of a fox.

§

Do you remember when we first met said Albert You had come into the store to work.

It was three months ago I said.

Maybe you were even in before that he said.

Almost every day I said I never knew when someone might bring a Sun Ra in.

The Sun Ra Albert said I remember. I feel like we grew up together. I wish we had. Do you remember when we found out we had listened to all the same music as kids?

Eddie Rabbit I said.

We were standing in Pop he said We knew all the same lyrics. I can still remember how calm you seemed to me. I always feel so calm around you.

It wasn't that long ago I said.

I'm so glad I've told you Albert said It is such a relief in a way. Do you remember how I told you?

It was just last night I said.

But you were very drunk said Albert I never know how much you remember.

I remember I said You kissed me and I laughed and said Albert, what are you doing, I'm not a boy.

I told you I loved you he said.

Albert, what are you doing, I'm not a boy I said.

I laughed too he said because I was so happy you kissed me back.
 I thought it was a joke I said.
 It's not said Albert It's not.
 You're too old for this I said You're too old to be switching around like this.
 I'm not even thirty said Albert I still have all my hair. Some people switch around their whole lives.
 Not you I said You were in love with Eddie Rabbit.
 You remembered said Albert and beamed.
 Winton Marcelis I said Bon Jovi when you were nine.
 That's great said Albert.
 Oh is it I said So do you think that when you get bored I'll just take you tripping off into the country and help you find a cat?
 What are you talking about? said Albert.
 Never mind I said.
 The young man and the girl in the blue scarf had left an hour before; the young man had given Albert a look and Albert had looked down then glanced at me.
 Do you remember said Albert now.
 Oh lord I said.
 Do you remember how we sat across from each other on the school bus he said and how we were both quiet children and looked at the floor or read a book?
 What are you doing? I said You're drunk.
 We didn't talk for a long time said Albert because you were two years older and we didn't see each other at all in school. There was one other kid who was all right. He pulled the arms off his Star Wars men and put his Hershey bag over his head. But the rest of them were mean. One punched me every day on the shoulder and wrote all over your coat in pen.
 I can't believe this I said Put down that drink.
 Then one day said Albert a girl yanked my head back by my hair. Faggot she said Fat little faggot. And you sat up in your seat and said Hey and she turned to you and said Mind your own business, four-eyes, and you said Leave him alone and stood up and almost fell over because we were bumping over the train tracks but you managed to get over to her and grab her arm and kick her in the back of the knees.
 I always minded my own business I said.
 After that we started to talk said Albert and when you got on the bus in the morning you would sit in my seat. We went to your house after school and your mother had made brownies from a mix and you never said a thing to me about eating a lot of them. You ate a lot of them, too. Then we went

out to the field behind your house and sat on the rocks with the tall grass around us and read books and talked about them and decided that we were smart and nice and all the people around us at school and on the bus and the teachers who let everything happen were stupid and mean and someday we would grow up and show them.
 Oh really I said.
 I told you my mother wouldn't let me play with dolls Albert said and when I stayed over you let me tuck yours in before we went to sleep.
 Oh I said Well. Albert's eyes were bright like a bird's. I used to sing to myself on the bus I said.
 Yes Albert said I heard you.
 There were only a few people left downstairs, some men, and the woman at the piano, and one of the men began to cough then as if he would die. He bent over with his hands pressed to the graying hair curling out of the top of his shirt, his fingers grazing his neck as if he would choke himself. His pipe wobbled on the shuddering wood. In the corner the pianist paused for a moment and peered over the top of the tall instrument and plinked out only the melody with her right hand.
 We should do something I said.
 Yes said Albert and he got up and crossed the stone floor and crouched at the old man's table as he had earlier at the beautiful young man's and patted the old man on his back. I came and stood over the both of them. The man turned his head slightly towards Albert then squinted up at me. He coughed a few more times but gently and the piano groaned low again.
 Is there anything you need? I said.
 He said something in Italian then looked at me for a moment. Oh children he then said with a heavy accent oh my babies. His voice was an aria filled with tar and smoke. I knelt by Albert and curled my hungry little paws over the edge of the table. Albert reached over and pushed the nail of my pinky finger as if it were a button.
 Oh dear said the man. He put his hands to his face. Then he smiled through the gaps and said Oh little babies I am only joking. Albert and I looked at each other and laughed and the man looked back and forth between us then frowned and closed his eyes in the same moment. I guess he said I guess you might as well. I have nothing wise to tell you. Will you live a life that is a circle or one that is a square? Of course it doesn't matter. I will give you forty years to answer. Excuse me, I will get another drink. He stood slowly and made his way for the narrow staircase, tottering. Albert and I watched him go.
 Then I got up and followed the man. He was making his slow drunk way up the stairs. When he was nearly to the top I trotted up behind him and

Crazy He Calls Me

tapped him on the back. Excuse me I said I don't know what to do.

He sighed and did not turn around and kept going until he had stepped off the last stair and was in the brighter light of the second level. He turned to me and blinked. I think you should sleep with him he said.

I've already done it I said.

You should do it again he said You should do it until you're tired. He sighed again and rubbed his eyes. He gazed at the bar with a tilted head.

You don't know how it is I said.

Oh he said and waved his hand.

It is different from that I said. He shrugged. I think you should not sleep with him he said. He shook his head and yawned and left me. I went back downstairs. When Albert saw me he beamed and sprang up and swung me around on his clumsy feet and sang along to the music from the corner, where the woman with her hair dyed blond as a rabbit had been playing with hardly a pause all night; Albert could not hope to catch the tune; I smiled and kissed him and smelled the *limoncello*, a scent which is light with citrus at the same time as it is dark with liquor. You used to sing this song on the bus Albert said Do you remember? I gripped his hips and arched my back and pushed my stomach into his waist and smiled and said I always made up all my own songs. You say you love me, and you don't even remember that.



Patricia Mason



Vamey's - Lisa Kruse

Toward an Ars Poetica

by Jackie White

d deeply earthed and encircled
as if

mind were nimbus or another
globe, both

within and surrounding, rooted
vine climbing myth

scented air given off from green
revery and death

human breath exhaling
§

in the dark
you sit open to what solitude proposes--
the things of this world, dream-torn incantations,
work-maps memory in bud-tight grotto roses,

what's unspoken in any given
car on the common highway,

what's unheard over bristled fields
birdsong to the dark window at dawn,

the murmur when movement stops mid-
tunnel, turned silent debris; again,

breathing in night rain occluded moon
§

I took a step into the middle of a journey.
There was a letter left in an empty cabin.
It said, forgive the river its flowing.

I felt what the body feels at the lover's
hand soft flat against the small of back,
momentary, the finger tips eyelids closing.

 Best Offer

 by Jen Hirt

In June of 2001, I really needed to sell my car, a jade 1998 Honda CRV with 47,000 miles on the odometer. The reasons were multiple but somehow simple--I had quit my job, and my parents, who had helped with the monthly car payments, were rerouting all the money into a lengthy divorce after 30 years of marriage and joint ownership of twelve cars--two for me, two for my brother, and eight for them. A year out of graduate school, with all my peers hot for jobs and trying to buy cars, not sell them, I was doing the opposite, and at a time when twenty-somethings like me were all well-adjusted to their broken families, I was just learning how not to fall through the domestic rifts. It seemed like keeping the car would be a fast way to accelerate headfirst into one of those rifts. There was the practical financial rift of no longer having an income to counter the \$383 monthly car payments, which would drain my savings by Independence Day. There was the complicated emotional rift of no longer wanting the gift car, a heady symbol of what my once-married parents had been eager to bestow.

So on a humid afternoon I angled into the only open parking spot of the South Main Used Car Sales in Ames, Iowa. The lot was modest, urban, crowded. It occupied a wedge of asphalt between a tobacco outlet store and a restaurant. The lot was owned by Honda, but sort of secretly--the Honda "H" logo was tiny on the sign. It was such a minor place, illogically small for a car dealership. As I found out later, the main dealership, a couple blocks away, with their acres of headlights and hoods, kept many of the used cars at that location. The little used lot, near a busy intersection, displayed the more sellable cars.

Used cars were lined up three deep. Clearly, my Honda CRV was the newest kid in the lot, a youngster held in distrust by the tired minivans and rusted sedans, their trend long over. I sat still for a full minute, nervous like the day I had to take my driving test through the tricky one-way streets of Medina, Ohio. I had never dealt with a used car salesman. I didn't know the customs of this trade--the lot could have been a foreign nation. I didn't have a guidebook or a companion who spoke the language. I considered the embarrassment of getting swindled.

§

For my entire life I had seen people cling to their cars, no matter what--through oil crises and recession, through bankruptcy and defaulting, accidents, suspensions, fatalities. Cars seemed to define so many people--as long

as they had their cars, they were OK. But cars limited, too, and I was ready to admit the limitations of my car.

My Honda CRV was a "small" compact sports utility vehicle. Like a trendy station wagon on a truck frame. It was not as goofy looking as its immediate competitor, Toyota's RAV4, and it was more reliable than the KIA Sportage. It was not so, shall we politely say, *large* as a traditional sport-ute. Not the Ford Excursion, which is nineteen feet long and does not fit well into garages or parking spaces. Not an Expedition, not a Suburban, not a Mountaineer.

In late 1997, Honda marketed the brand new CRV to my demographic--the young educated female, single, maybe childless and career-oriented, probably with a decent job in the suburbs or a small city, ready for the occasional jaunt to a campground. In other words, someone who was a DINK--Double Income, No Kids. My boyfriend and I laughed at ourselves when we learned the DINK definition. We met the requirements with near perfection. Along with the double income part, DINKs tended to put off marriage, earn graduate degrees, and own expensive pets--undeniably evidenced by the three sable ferrets who resided with us and our graduate degrees and our lack of wedding pictures. Being pegged as DINKs was somehow better than YUPPIEs, but not much. We had to concede. We couldn't see any way out of it. The fact that I drove a Honda CRV capped it off, and I felt more than a little unsettled.

§

I did not grasp the true meaning of *unsettled* until my parents pursued their divorce, which proved to be a stunning financial drain on a family used to well-off conditions--a big house with horses and a barn, computers and televisions for everyone, loanless college educations, and cars, cars, and more cars.

The CRV was a going-to-grad-school present. Around my twenty-third birthday, I announced I was moving from my home state of Ohio to Ames, Iowa for the creative writing program at Iowa State. The next week, my car, a blue Beretta, retaliated. Wires frizzled in the engine, causing the car to stall, first only in rain and then whenever it felt like it. Then there was a flat tire, and rust spots damaged the hood after a harsh winter. The car was seven years old, and it was not nearly as eager as I for the 700-mile drive from Ohio to Iowa. My parents were worried. Then they offered to buy me a new car. They had it picked out--the CRV. "For Iowa."

I expected the offer but was somewhat suspicious--did they really have the money for this? On the other hand, I was certainly not going to turn down a chance for someone to buy me a \$20,000 car. Dad explained that they would use my brother's college money. My brother, two years younger

and “having a hard time maturing,” had dropped out of college, twice. He had also wrecked his truck a number of times, and had been arrested for a variety of minor drug offenses.

Because my parents had always executed financial maneuvers with non-chalance, and because my winning streak in the stacked contest of sibling rivalry had been complete and absolute for a long time, the monetary details were not a big deal to me. The big deal shifted to the quirks of the car, like its picnic table. How absurd--a car outfitted with a table, of all things--but there it was. The back floor of the cargo area could be removed, and plastic legs unfolded, and you had yourself a table. The brochures hyped it as a picnic table, but it was more like a novelty card table. Everyone raved about the picnic table. I never used it.

Two years after I drove that shiny car right off the lot, a fat envelope arrived in the mail. From Mom, it was full of payment coupons for a loan for the car. It was barely halfway paid off. I was stunned. Why hadn't they used my brother's college money? Was that a joke I missed?

The payments were \$383 a month, and with three years left on the contract, I was suddenly in debt for over \$13,700. I felt like I'd been had. Tricked. Slapped down for my privileged assumptions. My parents had made it easy to feel entitled to this car, and the reverse stopped me sharp. Struggling with their divorce, they had done more than toss me from the nest. They had tossed me from the garage. I wanted to complain, but with whispers of *spoiled* haunting my conscience, I didn't. I was stuck.

§

Every American teen goes through a phase when they are initiated into the family garage--either given a car, or allowed the keys to a car, a million strings attached but it doesn't matter, because the teen is finally on the threshold of one undeniable tenant of American life--to drive anywhere, at any cost, coast to coast or border to border and all the main streets in between. My parents' manic excitement on the afternoon they brought home my first car made me wonder if they had conceived me with that moment in mind. For a week before my sixteenth birthday in February, 1991, they had been applauding the virtues of a 1991 Chevy Beretta, blue, two doors, cassette deck and radio, air bags, power steering, anti-lock brakes. A class away from the little sport-ute I'd end up with down the road. But that didn't matter. I was about to attain a level of independence otherwise unknown in my rural Ohio life. I was on my way to at least 200,000 miles of driving, to maybe 10,000 gallons of gas costing \$12,000, to flat tires and snow storms, speeding tickets and near-accidents, two summers of pizza delivery, and more freedom, more glorious freedom, than I could ever imagine.

I have often considered exactly why my parents bought the Beretta. They just paid for the whole thing and handed me the keys and there I was, the only teen in my class, maybe in my entire high school, who had a new car. The first reasons for this bestowment of wheels were practical--my parents' cars were sport cars, stick shifts. Mom drove a sleek Dodge Stealth, Dad a shocking red Toyota MR2, with its engine in back instead of under the hood. Insurance would have been outlandish. And if I was 16 and had a driver's license, I wasn't going to just sit at home.

The other reasons were more abstract, more convoluted and difficult. My babyboomer parents grew up in fairly well-off families, but they never quite had everything they wanted. They spoke bitterly of how their parents would give to each child only what they could give to all their children. It was an effort to dispel sibling rivalry. (It failed.) Mom and her three younger siblings did not get new cars; Dad and his two older siblings did not get new cars. They didn't get cars at all in 1963, when they were sixteen. They constructed grudges and unhappy childhoods. By giving me a car, my parents were seeking reparations. I tried not to think about it too much. I appreciated the Beretta unconditionally and the freedom it gave me largely defined who I was able to become in my final years of high school and all of college.

§

Waiting in the used car lot with my Honda CRV, I checked out used cars for the first time. All had mileages over 80,000. No other SUVs, compact or full-sized or behemoth. Which made sense. America loved, still loves, her large automobiles. Not wanting one was anti-family, anti-capitalism, maybe even communist. I had read the anti-SUV articles. One was about a car co-op on the West Coast, where tenants in an apartment decided to pool their money and buy one car for the apartment, and they'd take turns using it. I was pleasantly surprised--what a good idea. Another one in *Harper's*, “Bad Sports: How we learned to stop worrying and love the SUV,” by Paul Roberts, smacked me upside the head because it laid out the startling facts about America's car cult.

Roberts reported on his day at the Ford Dealership and his test drive of a Ford Excursion, at the time the “largest passenger vehicle on the planet.” He wrote about the slick salesman pitching the thing as a “needs-based” car, for a mere \$40,000 dollars. On the test drive around town, Roberts noticed the Excursion was averaging four miles to the gallon. There were other disturbing facts--like that the year before, Americans purchased almost 6 million sport-utes, despite their appalling gas mileage and their propensity for rollovers. He covered the psychological aspect too. First, there was the propaganda effect--sport-utes gained support immediately after the Gulf

War, because so many people had watched Hum-Vees hunt down Saddam. Then there was this--as Americans grappled more and more with complex feelings of despair and hopelessness, someone in automobile marketing latched on to the idea of promoting a car as *capable*. Family cars were waning, and long gone were muscle cars. Capable car, capable person. It didn't matter, the marketers quickly realized, whether or not the buyer *needed* off-road capabilities. The buyer wanted to buy the *potential* for capability. Roberts reported that 89% of SUV owners never drove off-road. I was one of them.

§

Capability. I ended up with a Honda CRV for that reason alone. After grad school in Iowa, I secured a good job as a reading teacher, content to work for a year while my boyfriend completed his degree. But with the divorce, the surprise car payments, I realized something--I wasn't emotionally capable of owning this car, even though my salary, my lifestyle, and all the advertisements and family precedent that tapped into my psyche told me I was.

I paid for the Honda for a year. I had never set aside that much money, each month, just for a car. My wage was \$15 an hour full time, which made me downright wealthy compared to the salary I'd drawn as a grad student, but the irony of the vicious financial loop ate at me--I needed a car to get to work forty miles away, but I was obligated to work to pay for the car, which was costing me over \$400 a month. I called the financing bank and tried to negotiate lower payments, with no luck. My parents had never paid more than the minimum payment each month, had even been late a few times. Reality rolled into view, like rows of nines on an odometer.

Gas prices topped off at \$1.80 a gallon for the cheap stuff, the highest in all my years of driving. Twenty-five dollars filled the tank, and the fuel lasted a few days. Insurance rates caught me by surprise. A ball bearing disintegrated somewhere in the engine, a \$200 week-long repair. Central Iowa hosted the worst winter in years, and every night as I drove home along the icy interstates I saw accidents--the big SUVs toppled in ditches, smashed against compact cars near the median, skidding in front of trucks. That's when I looked at my Honda CRV, really *looked* at it for what it was, and I thought, *expensive. That is all you are. You are an expense.*

§

Most of the cars in the used car lot were at least a decade old. Some of the minivans were more recent. There were six dirty pastel minivans and they filled the spots facing the traffic. Their windows sported oversized neon price tags and words like WOW and BARGAIN framed in starburst explosions of marketing excitement. Two mechanics on the far side of the

lot watched me.

I entered the small office. There were cubicles. One was empty. In the other, two men were signing papers and shaking hands. A simulated wood grain nameplate on the dividing wall identified Roy Smith as the Used Car Manager. I sat in the empty cubicle, jingling my keys so someone, perhaps Roy, knew I was waiting.

Roy and his customer emerged from the cubicle. Roy was outfitted in a casual, solid white get-up, as if he moonlighted as a cabana boy. The customer wore faded thin jeans and a bland windbreaker. They approached a gray Volvo parked next to my Honda. Roy started explaining the Volvo's features to the customer, who was jittery and malnourished. The Volvo Man's cheeks were sunken. He turned his back to the thunderheads and chain-smoked and adjusted his sunglasses and answered his cell phone, all while nodding in Roy's direction at the appropriate times. I couldn't hear, but I could tell the guy had just purchased the Volvo. He motioned to the luggage rack and Roy flagged a mechanic who removed it. I wondered why he needed a Volvo. Maybe he had kids, maybe he needed cargo space. But why remove the luggage rack? A Volvo was not a very sporty car with or without it. Every Volvo I'd ever seen had been gray. And if it wasn't gray, it wanted to be gray.

The Volvo Pageant lasted twenty minutes. I was hooked. I absorbed everything Roy and the Volvo Man did, until Roy waved off the Volvo Man, who merged his new used car into the traffic, a malnourished minnow in the belly of a whale. My turn. With minimal words, we exchanged hellos and got down to business. First, Roy peered up into the wheel wells. Apparently, this was where to look when buying a used car, which confused me because I was thinking he'd check the engine first. He immediately found the two dents. One was on the plastic molding above the back right tire, from when I misjudged the distance to the garage wall. A surface dent. It happened years ago. Roy didn't think the metal was dented. He was right. I'd checked.

The other dent, ironically, happened that day. It was on the front right side, above the wheel. On my way to the used car lot, near a construction site, a backhoe tearing asphalt sent a hefty chunk of debris catapulting through the air. I was stopped at a light when it happened. I saw the chunk hurtling toward my car and had the solid understanding that it would hit my car, cause damage, and there was nothing I could do. It hit with a thunk and I swore.

Roy kept looking at the wheels, two, three times around. He examined the engine for a total of six seconds. I was curious about what Roy was seeing. I wanted him to talk to me the way he'd spoken with the Volvo Man.

So I made an offhand comment about the car needing a wash.

Roy responded, flatly, "I see through all the dirt."

He noted the mileage. I was disappointed when he didn't compliment me on the low 47,000 miles, the overall good condition of the car. I took appropriate care--an oil change every 3,000 miles, the expensive maintenance at 15,000 and 30,000. I even scraped bugs off the headlights. It had a garage in the winter. I kept the interior spotless, always vacuumed. No smoking permitted. I fastidiously picked up straw wrappers and French fry remnants. I stored the owner's manual in its original plastic bag, plus the maintenance book was filled out, and I had receipts in chronological order for everything from oil changes to tire rotations.

Roy dismissed all this. He asked, "Are you interested in buying a different car?"

I was not. I waited, mindful of Roy's packed car lot.

Roy looked at my knees. "Why do you want to sell your car?" He was, perhaps, wondering why I wasn't trying to sell it on my own.

I looked at Roy's knees, his clean white pants. That was, indeed, the question of the hour. Why the hell was I selling this very nice automobile my parents so wanted me to have? I had already paid a lot for it, an amount shadowed only by the generous money my parents had also paid--why not hang on and get it all paid off? I had not even mentioned my plans to my parents. I was drafting the explanatory email in my head, not to be sent until after the car was sold. The plan, regarding my parents, was to weigh costs and benefits, compare use now to projected use over the next few years, make a case for the environment, explain oil-guilt and the jeopardy of the National Arctic Wildlife Refuge, point out hefty gas prices, and finally, elaborate on my growing distrust of "the American way of life," this destructive car culture, the false premise that every person needed a car, a big car, regardless of long-term costs.

The plan was not to invoke the divorce. Not to point out that they had said they would pay for the entire car. Not to rationalize that if I had known the payments would fall back on me, I sure as hell would not have chosen such an expensive car. Nor was I going to let Roy know that I had no idea how to sell a car that I didn't fully own, given that I owed the financing bank so much money. I wasn't sure how to transfer the title and tags, how to make sure some stranger's check was valid.

I told Roy that for the next three years I'd be back in grad school, teaching part time, living ten minutes from campus. I owned a great bike, sturdy and reliable. And my boyfriend leased a car for a mere \$100 a month, which we'd share.

If Roy had a reaction, I didn't know what it was. He continued to stare at

my knees. Stoic. As was I. Like a standoff. There was so much Roy did not need to know about me. He was not my counselor. He was a used car salesman. Did he think anyone ever told him the total truth? Did he really think he could see through all the dirt?

Roy flipped through a booklet he had pulled from his back pocket. He nodded toward the car. "It's a 1999 CRV?"

"1998."

"List price is \$13,000."

"So you'll buy it for that much?" I was floored. That was a lot of money. Enough.

"Long as there are no major engine problems."

We talked a bit about how the \$13,000 would be more than enough to cover the remainder of the loan, which was around \$9,000. The amount left over would be all mine. Roy gave me some basic advice on contacting the bank and clearing the loan payoff through the Honda dealership. He offered his business card, white and crisp like his cabana-boy slacks. I realized that if I knew a damned thing about cars, I'd probably try to haggle him up for a better offer. I realized I didn't care. Roy caught my urgency and apprehension and he did an incredibly kind thing--he suggested I think about it for a few days.

Because I never imbued my car with human characteristics, I didn't think my car was wondering what the hell we were doing at a used car lot that afternoon. I didn't worry that my car's stomach was knotting in anxiety. I didn't listen to my car cry and promise to do better tomorrow, if only I would not sell it. I didn't think it was getting lippy with me, demanding a definition of "used," because dammit, it still felt very new, if I wanted its opinion. I was not fretting about the next owner who might shove empty beer cans under the seats, play loathsome music, run a stop sign, cause accidents. I looked at my car's shiny headlights and thought, *expensive. You are an expensive piece of metal. That's all you are.*

I drove the car home, not listening to it make me feel bad for what I was about to do. *And all this time I've never broken down, not even when the ball bearing disintegrated. Never even stalled. And now. You. Are. Selling. Me.*

Five days later, Roy and I made the official transaction at the new car dealership down the road from the used cars.

As I sat in my car for the last time, I created a scenario for this event. I imagined that my car never liked me in the first place, driving it a dull 80 miles a day between Ames and Des Moines. I imagined my car was confused, with most of its ample space always empty, its headlights politely viewing the interior of a garage, its truck frame never splattered with mud. Maybe my car tried to steal its keys and run away, get a canoe rack, and

meet a more compatible driver.

It was 93 degrees outside, with humidity nearly as high. The new car lot had significantly more space than the wedge of the used car lot, as well as a glass-walled showroom. Not a single Iowan was interested in buying a new car on this stifling afternoon.

Roy, again in white slacks, but with a pink shirt, invited me into an office that wasn't his. Framed prints of prototype Hondas lined the wall. Near the door was a magnetic board chronicling which salesmen sold which cars last month. Someone named Bill was in the number one slot, with fifteen gold Honda magnets to his credit.

While Roy slowly completed paperwork, I observed four salesmen. They had nothing to do. Absolutely nothing. They all climbed into a minivan--one of two cars in the showroom. The other car was a 2001 Honda CRV, just like mine, but electric blue. There was a Post-it note on the windshield that said, "sold." The salesmen in the minivan talked about their golf games and made jokes about who could or couldn't play 18 holes in 93-degree weather. They looked comical, their identical slacked legs bent at sharp angles, their hips twisted so they could face each other. They engaged in an opinionated debate about whether or not kids should have to attend school in such hot weather. Although it was June, when most schools were done for the summer, Iowa's harsh winter meant extra days. One man claimed that kids couldn't learn if they had to fidget and sweat. Another asserted that he never got a day off due to the heat, and he turned out just fine. Another thought that most schools had air conditioning. Another said they didn't.

There were many forms to fill out, many places for my signature. Roy could have scripted the Constitution with his precise, smooth lines. My signature looked powerful--the slash of the "J," the fast slant and sweep of *Hirt*, drastically different than my father's heavy thick lines or my mother's careful cursive. I asked tentative questions, pretending that I knew what I was doing. But I didn't, so I shut up, signed there, dated there. I had no idea. No idea if the offer was fair, or the best, or if I would regret selling a car that, although it was expensive, was fairly useful. No idea how my parents would react.

I signed the final form. Roy took the keys. He cut me a check for \$4,000, the largest single amount of money I had ever received all at once. I placed the check and the paperwork into a blue folder which I slid into a faded denim backpack, the one I carried in high school, the one that was humming with good luck, keeping me together in this scary I-am-an-adult-I-can-sell-my-car-if-I-want-to moment.

"You want your license plates?" Roy stood up, was halfway out the door.

I was not expecting this question. I was suddenly coping with the fact

that I hadn't planned a way back to my apartment, on the other side of town.

"You don't need them?"

"No. They're out-of-state."

He was right. They were Ohio plates. Three years in Iowa and I never bothered to switch.

I waited in the air-conditioned showroom and watched Roy remove the plates with a massive, blue, battery-powered screwdriver gun. I was trying to recall the summer bus schedule. My boyfriend was at work. He didn't even know I was here. Didn't really know I was selling my car today. I searched my pockets for quarters and dimes.

Roy handed me the plates. His face was wet. "Hot out there," he said.

"Sure is." I was aware that everything had halted. The salesmen in the mini-van were silent, watching us. All the cars on the road paused at red lights. A phone rang softly in a back office, as if it knew no one would pick it up.

"You need a ride home?" Roy switched the screwdriver gun to his other hand. It was heavy. Then he held it with both hands, in front of his waist.

"What?"

"Home. I can give you a ride home." Roy's tone was polite but awkward, like he was trying to decide how to conclude our second date. I had the awful epiphany that he felt responsible for me.

"No thanks," I lied. "I've got some stuff to do on this side of town, then I'll catch the bus."

"Oh." Roy gave the slightest of nods, like a boy coming to terms with the girl who won't go out with him. He looked at the screwdriver gun.

I felt horrible, instantly and completely. This was all a stupid mistake. All of it--these three years in Iowa, the car, my ethical aspirations not to depend on a car, my job and my quitting of the job, the fact that I'd told no one that I was selling my car, not my parents, not my boyfriend. Not even myself, in a way. Plus the fact that selling this car was an underhanded tactic to get back at my parents for divorcing. And now I had turned down Roy's nice offer for no reason other than my own bullheaded self-sufficiency. It was a million degrees outside, I was miles from my apartment. I had a \$4000 check but not three quarters for the bus. I had no clue what to do and I was concocting minor lies to cover for myself.

I was a bad liar. I felt like Roy didn't believe that I really wanted to wait for the bus. He might not have believed that I wanted to sell my car. For a moment, Roy's reaction merged with my image of my parents' disappointment. I was the angry daughter bullishly walking away with old license plates in a faded backpack, content to wait for the bus, determined to force my lie

into truth, and I didn't need the help of a middle-aged salesman, and I didn't need my own car, and I was hurling my distrust at my broken parents, at money, at the whole world.

I considered shaking Roy's hand, invoking the classic symbol of a done deal, but he was holding the massive screwdriver. The way he held it, with both hands, suggested his life depended on not letting it go. He almost crouched against the wall, like I was scaring him. Maybe I was.

So I thanked Roy with a lie that was a smile, and walked out, into the searing high noon.

I hoped I would never see my car again, not in the used car lot with giant neon numbers taped to the window, not being driven across town by a stranger. I hoped I could forget it. I had yet to forget the Beretta. I hoped Roy could sell it quickly, so he wouldn't look at it day after day, wondering. I hoped I hadn't just made the mistake of a lifetime.

I glanced back once. I wanted to see what Roy was up to. He was leaning into the minivan, the one still filled with salesmen. One of them reached out, patting Roy on the shoulder. Perhaps it was Bill, Champion Salesman for May. Roy carefully set the screwdriver gun on the showroom floor. He stepped up into the minivan. His compatriots consoled him with promises of customers buying car after car in an endless, profitable stream. And maybe they teased him about all the women they had driven home, and maybe Roy blushed, but most likely he didn't. Then he probably drove my Honda up to the used car lot, handing it off to the mechanics who were wondering what to do with a used Volvo luggage rack.

I walked home.

A week later, a woman I had never met called me. She said her name was Maria. She explained she was considering buying my Honda. She was confused about why I had sold it, if it was in such good condition. Roy had given her my number.

"So there's nothing wrong with it?" she asked. From her tone I pegged her as mid-30s, short brown hair, administrative assistant job, owned a cocker spaniel, liked diet colas.

"Nothing," I assured her, once, then twice. I gave her my going-to-school spiel. Then, before she could dig deeper, before I gave in to the temptation to recant and rant about everything that was wrong, I asked her why she was buying a new used car.

A male voice answered. "My wife was in an accident last week. Totaled her CRV."

Apparently, Maria's husband had been listening. I thought it weird.

"Are you OK?" I asked. I pictured her brown hair hiding browner bruises. I wondered if she and the husband were in the same room, mouthing answers to each other.

"Banged up, nothing serious" she said. "I loved my CRV. I miss it. Yours is just like mine."

The husband concurred. He said he was surprised they'd found such a similar CRV.

"Oh." I paused. There were thousands of identical CRVs in the nation and I didn't fully understand what the husband was getting at. I waited. Something didn't feel right.

Maybe Roy was also listening, like this was some huge secret conference call meant to coerce a confession. Maybe everyone was listening--Roy, and Bill the Champion Salesman, and my parents, and the four salesman, even the Volvo Man--waiting to hear how much money I'd scored, how much I was enjoying that \$4000 check, I, the spoiled, vindictive mastermind behind an elaborate scam.

"We're probably going to buy it," said the husband. "We just wanted to talk with the former owner. To make sure."

"Right," I said, "Makes sense." Which it didn't--it was a car, not a dog, not a child up for adoption. And they really had not asked me any worthwhile questions, and the husband had blown his cover by speaking, and it made no sense that there needed to be any level of coyness at all.

Then I said, "It's a great car. I would have kept it if I could have afforded it." I felt obligated to reassure these people.

Somehow, this was true enough for Maria and her husband. They could now fit me into the paradigm of their world, a world where anyone who could afford a car obviously owned one and loved it righteously, without reserve.

"That's a relief," said Maria.

"Yes," said the husband, "We were worried there was something, you know, really wrong with it."

§

I assumed they purchased it. I thought a lot about what I said to Maria--that I would have kept the car if I could have afforded it. I think that was true enough for me, too. I sensed, for the first time, that to *afford* a car meant much more than being able to make the payments. There was something dangerous in keeping that car, something abstractly unaffordable, and it went beyond my mild activist intentions. The car had been from my parents. And now that they were splitting I reverted to a deep anger, an anger that said *I will not take what you offer because you are ruining everything with this divorce.*

Best Offer

To say I could afford something also meant I had to consider the cost beyond the dollars. Months later, I attempted to chronicle the 47,000 miles, the approximately 783 hours I had driven in my Honda CRV. I could account for 31,650 miles, and my estimates were not exact but not conservative. I don't know what to conclude about this. I don't think I'm supposed to remember every mile, but it somehow seems a loss that those stretches of road, attached to so much time and money, attached to the expensive item my parents so wanted me to enjoy, are missing from my memory.



LeAnn Bauman

Navigating the Alternative Landscape: An Interview with Patricia Traxler

by Erin Billing

*EB - You published poetry first, and then more recently published *Blood*, a novel which received a lot of critical attention. What led you to begin writing and publishing fiction? What is the difference in the approach you take toward writing these two genres?*

PT - Well, actually, I've always written both poetry and fiction, but many people didn't realize that, because until *Blood*, all my published books were poetry collections. When the novel came out, people seemed to think I'd "switched," but the truth is I was just always more comfortable sending out my poems for publication than my stories. My relative comfort with the idea of publishing poetry was probably due to the fact that my Irish grandmother, who lived with our family during my childhood, was a published poet whose work appeared in both Irish and American periodicals. Around our house on a daily basis, I saw Gran working on her poems in a green cloth-bound ledger, and I often heard her reciting "Thanatopsis" or "To a Skylark" while she did household chores, so poetry just seemed a part of ordinary life to me. I didn't know anyone who wrote fiction, though, and I was shy about sending out my stories. More than shy--terrified. Eventually, I found a way around that by entering fiction competitions in which the identity of the entrants was not known until after the judges had made their decision. I won some awards, and that gave me more confidence, which helped a bit.

I wrote one novel before *Blood*--that "cutting the teeth" novel everyone seems to need to write first. Then in 1999 I wrote *Blood*, and things began happening with a kind of alarming speed: *Blood* was taken on by a terrific literary agent who quickly sold it in the US, and then a number of foreign publishers bought it (it's currently out in the UK, and also in Swedish and Spanish translations; a German translation is scheduled for later this year). The sale of *Blood* gave me my first chance to stay home and write without holding down a "day job," and as a result, I've had the time to finish a new novel, *The Hunger Season*. Now I'm putting together a book of short stories and working on my fourth poetry collection. I'm a writing maniac! It's bliss.

As for differences of approach between poetry and fiction writing, I think any answer to that question would have to begin with provenance, because poetry and fiction seem to spring from two very different sources within the writer--separate wells of creative thought. It makes sense, then, that the processes would be different, too. Eugenio Montale wrote that in

any work of art, there must be a "dominating idea" that drives the process. Whether you're writing poetry or fiction this is equally true, but I've found that my life is easier when I have a poem in the making than it is when I have a novel or short story in process. It's all about immersion: I mean, of course you become obsessed with a poem you're working on--you try out its phrases and images in your head as you go through your day and you can feel its cadences in your step--but when you're writing a novel or a short story, you've created an alternative landscape that becomes real to you, and a sort of "total immersion mode" kicks in if the work is going well. Sometimes you even find yourself a bit punchy and disoriented when you step outside that fictive landscape to negotiate your way through the so-called "real world" after days of working on a story. I think that's especially true with a novel's sustained narrative. I write seven nights a week when I'm working on a novel if it's really cooking--usually from 9 PM until 4 or 5 AM. At the tail end of the process, work sessions can go round the clock. I realize that's nutty, stupid, foolhardy, rough on your body and brain, not to mention your relationships, but it just happens. You don't feel the movement of time, you often forget to eat (or pee) until that physical need asserts itself in the form of real discomfort or pain! All of that--for me anyway--is why starting a novel is a lot like falling in love: When you feel yourself heading into a new novel or seduced by an idea for one, you know it's going to take over your life for the foreseeable future, and simultaneously you want to run away and hide from it, *and* you want to leap "into bed" with it and let it swallow you up. It's awful, and it's sublime. It's what we all dread, *and* what we pray for.

*EB - In *Blood*, you visit some of the themes of what leads an artist to create, and the role of distance when attempting to write about "violent" or "chaotic" themes. You write, "Anyone who believes that an artist's best work springs directly from the belly of grief and trauma is just romanticizing the place of pain in art's creation. . . . I've come to feel that the most lasting and affecting art probably grows out of constancy and order rather than out of violent emotions, and that violence should be saved for the work itself. . . . time must pass after passion or emotional chaos before the experience becomes truly useful to art or informative to life because only time can give experience the necessary context and meaning." This is clearly Norrie's voice saying these things, but would you say that these are also your own conclusions concerning these themes? What led you to visit these themes in your writing? It seems that, historically, the poet and the artist have been seen, perhaps wrongly, as the kind of people who must live chaotic, unpredictable lives, then depict them for the rest of the world. What are your thoughts regarding this assumption of the poet's/artist's life and work?*

PT - I think that's a great question. When I was younger, I guess I bought into the idea that a crazy, painful life can make for richer art--or anyway, I comforted myself with the thought that something good might come out of the chaos and struggle I seemed to be encountering in my own life and times. So many kinds of pain or chaos, observed or experienced, have made their way into my writing, as they do anyone's--that's what it is to be alive in the world as a writer. No one can avoid chaos, pain, or conflict, but there's a crucial difference between *using* these elements to inform your writing and *needing* them in your life in order to be a writer! Eventually, I decided that Flaubert was probably right when he admonished writers to "Be quiet and orderly in your life so that you may be violent and original in your work." That's what I aim for, what I aspire to. I'm not saying I avoid passion, joy, or necessary confrontation--only that I function very consciously from a secure base, within a quiet and solitary sort of work regimen--and life--that will allow all hell to break loose on the page if I'm fortunate enough to find the inspiration for it! It's like controlled burning, I think--those crop fires we see around Kansas in late summer. I'm well aware that my Kansas life probably seems quiet, boring, and even *small* to some people, but it's what works for me. If it's not pompous to give advice, then here's what I'd tell any young writer today: Write regularly--find out what sort of routine and setting works best for you, and then stay with it, even when others think it's crazy. Ignore them! Only you can live your life, and no one else can understand how it feels from the inside.

There's another part of your question that particularly interests me as a novelist: The issue of an artist using his/her own life within a work of fiction. I think it's a given that every writer brings actual emotional experience, personal philosophies, and real locales into a work of fiction, but I like to invent my characters and the specific circumstances of the plot. I enjoy the challenge of transmuting real-life emotional experience into a realm of fictional particulars. When *Blood* came out, maybe because it's written in the first person, some people assumed it was about me, and they spoke of the story as if it were my diary. One woman said, "I had no idea your father was a Jewish psychiatrist!" Norrie, *Blood's* protagonist, is a never-married, childless woman; the only daughter of a Jewish psychiatrist and a retired home ec teacher. I'm one of eight children of a Methodist auto-body repairman and an oil-painting, Shakespeare-reading, Irish-Catholic high school dropout! I've been divorced and remarried, and I have two children. Norrie has had many casual love affairs; I haven't. Still, I won't deny that, like the protagonist in *Blood*, I once fell in love with someone who was mar-

ried, and I know how that feels; I know the moral, ethical, and personal conflicts that arise from it. In writing *Blood*, I was interested in making a story that depicted such a struggle--an artist wrestling with creative, erotic/romantic, and spiritual conflicts and desires. Personally, I don't admire fictional works that are strict portrayals of real-life characters and events. I find them lacking in imaginative energy.

EB - Both your poetry and your fiction deal with themes of love and romantic relationships, often gone awry. How does your approach toward writing about these things in particular differ from one genre to the next?

PT - Well, I wouldn't put it exactly that way. If I had to isolate dominant themes in my writing, I'd say my work deals with three particular threads of human desire, and *Blood* portrays all three: artistic desire, romantic or erotic desire, and spiritual desire. I was raised a Catholic, and was taught in childhood (or so it seemed to me) that nearly everything a person really longed for was, under a variety of circumstances, a sin. My childhood religious training made me very curious about desire, about all sorts of passion, and although I'm no longer an observant Catholic, that has become a constant theme in my work--the struggle with desire in opposition to one's social, religious, or moral frame of reference. It's certainly not a unique theme, but I find it compelling and it makes its way into a lot of my work. The difference between those thematic representations in my poetry and my fiction can be explained according to the differences between the two forms: in poetry, everything is codified in images, lineation, language, and form; in fiction, such themes are incarnate, embodied in characters who walk and talk their way through a narrative landscape. Each form is interesting to me in its own way, and I couldn't bear to live without one or the other.

EB - The character of Norrie in Blood is a visual artist, a painter, but many of her realizations concerning her own approach to art seem very applicable to writing as well. What do you see as the similarities and differences in working as a visual artist vs. writing?

PT - I should preface my answer with the proviso that although I've always been a student of visual art--especially painting--and though it's true I sometimes paint, and have some facility for drawing, I'm *not* a visual artist myself, just a dabbler. But I believe artistic expression is similar for artists of all persuasions, in the sense that certain elements exist within the creative process itself, regardless of the discipline: inspiration (when we're lucky);

that “dominating idea” Montale spoke of; immersion and often obsession; a crafting of the chaotic or passionate impulse, the esoteric or abstruse idea, into a coherent, persuasive, and engaging form; and of course, behind everything and driving it, *desire*--the desire to *make*, and to communicate.

EB - Many of your poems deal with the speechlessness of women, of their inability to communicate what might be considered “secret” things. I’m thinking particularly of “Night Bloom,” and “The Widow’s Words.” As a writer, you certainly have a voice that many women may not feel that they have. How does that affect your choice of subject matter? Do you feel you have an obligation to be a voice for others? Does it ever feel overwhelming?

PT - I’m very interested in this idea of muteness, which I’ve observed in both men and women. I’ve addressed it mostly from a female point of view because I’m female, but I do believe men in our culture have been deprived of emotional equality in their upbringing and their acculturation, which is very sad. I think the muteness I’ve observed in women arises from a feeling of powerlessness that was more prevalent in previous generations than it is in today’s young women. I can’t bring myself to feel I’ve a right to speak for others except in imaginary ways, but I’ve made it sort of a mission to try to help women find their *own* voices. For two decades, I’ve taught creative writing workshops for many groups of “senior” women, for example, and have collected two books of their reflections and reminiscences dating back to World War I. It’s tragic to see the pervasive and deep-seated muteness that’s found so often in older women. Many of those I’ve worked with had never written anything at all beyond a grocery list or a letter, and at first they were uneasy with the very idea of expressing their feelings or writing about their lives, their pasts. To see the budding awareness in such women, the realization that their feelings, memories, and observations *do* matter and may be of vital interest to someone else, has been one of the greatest satisfactions of my teaching life. And yes, as a writer I feel very fortunate to have this means of expressing myself. Even many years ago, when I was married to a man who was abusive and violent, I had the page to retreat to, the solace and silence of writing, and I learned how the anger, the longing, and the grief, as well as a burgeoning sense of personal power and determination can grow there, can give a woman--or a man--a path to follow, even in the hardest of times.

EB - I’ve also noticed that much of your writing deals with the conflict women feel between duty and personal desire. How does that issue affect you as a woman working as

an artist?

PT - That’s an interesting observation. As a California woman who married very young and in her early 30s ended up raising two children alone in a small Kansas town 2,000 miles away from family and lifelong friends, I had no support system near at hand, so I often had to put aside my writing impulse for the sake of family needs. I had no independent means beyond a modest savings account, and thus I had to make choices as to how I allocated both money and time. There wasn’t much wiggle room: obviously I couldn’t opt out of motherhood, nor would I have wished to; neither could I forego having a paying job that would support the three of us; I never considered stopping my writing, either. The one thing I could give up--and did, for quite a long time--was the career aspect of my writing life: working at getting my writing published, going to AWP or MLA functions, doing out-of-state poetry readings to promote my books. I couldn’t do those kinds of things because my kids had only me, and while I realize this probably held back my writing career quite a lot, in another sense it allowed the writer in me to focus on what really mattered: the writing itself. Yes, the issue does affect me, because I often meet women who still have to make these choices. I encourage them to write something, however short, every single day, and to read everything they can get their hands on, in the belief that eventually their time will come, if they’re steadfast and stubborn as hell. The issue also remains personal to me because I often struggle to stay afloat now that I’m supporting myself through my writing. It’s not the most secure life--especially in such uncertain economic times--but it’s a rich life in other, more important ways. I have no regrets.

EB - It’s obvious that you’re concerned with women’s issues in your writing. You’ve been published in Ms. magazine, and have edited a compilation of women’s voices over the age of sixty. How do you see the role of women in the writing world? How has that changed over the course of your life as a writer?

PT - Our world has become a much better place for women writers within my lifetime. I remember in the early ‘70s, when I was very young and just beginning to send out my poems, you could check the contents page of, say, *Poetry* magazine and find maybe 50 male poets and only two or three female poets represented in any one issue. This was the norm then. I used to make a habit of going to the San Diego Public Library each month and counting the male-to-female ratio in all the current literary journals, and it was pretty discouraging. (It’s important to point out, I think, that female editors were

often as guilty of this bias against women poets as male editors were.) I remember once in 1972 I sent three poems to *Chelsea* magazine, and a male editor there wrote back to say they'd liked my poems very much, and he ended with the request, "Please send us more of your woman-poems!" *Woman-poems*. What the hell was that? In those days it often seemed as if a woman's biologically-determined subjects were home, family, and relationships, while a male poet could address the universals, the grand themes. It was ridiculous and reductive, but that's largely how it was. Sometimes I wonder what some of our better known female poets of the 20th century might have accomplished, what subjects they might've addressed, if they were writing today. It was in the mid-'70s that the tide began to turn, and I'd say the burgeoning interest in women's writing made its way to the NY publishing houses well before it filtered down to the established literary magazines. I wrote my first book of poetry when I was in my 20s, and it was taken by the first publisher I sent it to (*Blood Calendar*, William Morrow, 1975). If I'm honest, I have to acknowledge what part the women's movement probably played in that publication. It was considered edgy and courageous to publish a feminist writer then, a woman writing in a strong voice about those issues. Suddenly a woman had opportunities *because* she was a woman. You can't speak about one side of this subject without acknowledging the other.

EB - You live in Kansas--an area of the country of which many people may struggle to find redeeming qualities. Why this choice of home? How does living in Kansas affect your writing--themes, subject matter, perceptions you and others have as yourself as a writer?

PT - Whew, that's a loaded question, considering that I do have to live here after I answer it! I'll try to be frank: If a writer is looking for publication and networking opportunities and has no contacts already, this is not the place to be--unless you make liberal use of the local airport! And no matter how much you travel, living here will still hold you back in certain ways--including teaching opportunities. However, this is the greatest place in the world to *make* art, to work seriously as a writer! It's quiet, and you can focus on your work without distraction; it's not expensive to live here; people are genuine, and they seem to understand when you stay to yourself for long periods to work on a book. Even so, whenever I've stayed on the East Coast for any period of time--for example, when I was Radcliffe's Bunting Poet and lived in Cambridge for two years in the early '90s--I've found myself absolutely staggered by the opportunities that present themselves there without being sought! If you give a public reading in Boston or New

York, afterwards two or three magazine editors are waiting to ask for a poem or story you read that night. Editors will phone to tell you about an upcoming special issue of their magazine, and ask you to send something. You'll run into other writers everywhere you go. As Norrie comments in *Blood*, "Everyone in Cambridge is a writer. If you see some guy walking down Mass Ave. with a bad look on his face, it just means his book isn't getting reviewed." Here in Kansas, so far from all that stir, as a writer you begin to feel you've disappeared. Disappearing can work *for* you in a creative sense, but it works *against* you in terms of publication opportunities and name recognition. And of course, if you live here when you publish a book, you have to travel a lot more just to get word of it out there. I love giving readings, but too much travel can be a pain in the ass. I'm always relieved when I get back here to the quiet of the prairie. When I wonder why I stay here, I often think of a fragment from Roethke's "The Far Field," about his having come to a welcome stillness in his life, "a point outside the glittering current." That's how life feels to me here on the plains, and though it has its distinct disadvantages, I've accepted that because it nourishes my craft.

No, I don't think living here affects subject matter at all--nor should it, really. People in the Midwest feel isolated in a number of ways, but it's important to remember that no matter where we live, no matter how far "outside the glittering current," we're still citizens of the world. Our frame of reference is only as small as we make it.

EB - I have heard that you often visit schools, sharing your writing and writing life with students. Do you think that the current school system encourages children to write creatively? What kind of reaction are you getting from the students you visit with? What kind of writers are our schools churning out right now?

PT - I did a lot more of that in the '80s and '90s than I do now, but yes, in the last couple of decades, I've worked as a visiting writer at all levels of the public school system, K-12, as well as in creative writing programs at universities around the US. In working with younger students, I've found a tremendous hunger for expression, an enthusiasm and energy that moves and inspires me. But I've spent an equal amount of time working with adults outside of academe--often aged, disenfranchised, or disabled adults--and I've found that very compelling, too. I've developed creative writing programs for the deaf and hearing impaired, for homeless women in a shelter, for victims of domestic violence, and for mental health patients and stroke patients, and I've loved every single one of those jobs and have felt honored to be allowed to do them. Now, though, I'm teaching less and hop-

ing to spend a few years devoting myself mostly to writing. I've never had the opportunity to do that before, and I'm increasingly aware that my time is finite.

I think teachers are focusing more on creative writing now than they were 10 or 15 years ago, but I do often worry about literacy standards in public schools around the country, and about the people being turned out of our university systems to teach English when they're not particularly functional in the language themselves. So many supposedly educated people today simply do not know how to write or speak proper English, how to spell or punctuate, or how to structure a sentence. It's worrying, I think, especially when one encounters people with English degrees who think "a lot" is one word! That's pretty scary. I think technology plays into this quite a bit--and there just isn't much value placed on reading and creative writing in the homes and extracurricular activities of lots of kids who are growing up right now. It's a shame.

Still, I meet many astonishingly talented young writers, and I believe this will never change. If the writing impulse is alive in a person, it will find its way out eventually, even without the proper encouragement, the way a seed will germinate underground in the most arid conditions and come bursting through the surface and into the light of day.

Visit www.ksu.edu/english/touchstone
for the full text of this interview

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Kinetic Piece, detail - *Eric Ryser*

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