lights & shadows

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Art & Literary Magazine, 1998
University of North Alabama
Florence, Alabama 35630
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The judges of the college competition for 1998 were:
Fiction: Jennifer Lane is a graduate of UNA who currently is completing an M.F.A. in Fiction at Wichita State University. “The act of writing at times is a journey of discovery. I was excited and proud to be at the beginning of these writers' journeys of discovery. From the quality of all the entries, they already have a wonderful start on this journey.”

Poetry: Dr. Susan Luther has been the associate editor of Poem magazine. Her poetry has appeared in numerous literary journals.

Creative Nonfiction: Chris Heaton has taught college English and currently is the copy editor for the Journal of Forensic Economics.
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**JUDGE**

The judge of the college art competition for 1998 was Elizabeth Richcreek. Elizabeth is a graphic designer and digital video artist with the Morse Group, Inc. in Florence. A graduate of the University of North Alabama with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and a minor in marketing, she has worked in the graphics art and design business for over five years and has been involved with digital video editing and design for over three years. She designed the W.C. Handy poster in 1995. As a former art director/designer for the 1992 Lights & Shadows, Elizabeth was pleased to judge this year's competition.

"This year's Lights & Shadows competition has a strong show of work throughout all mediums. The artists' use of technique and choices in composition create expressive, well-designed works of art. Their creativity and knowledge of design will be useful in the fine arts or graphics field."
Okra
Jodi White
Poetry

A weathered crucifix
With an empty shirt
Stands in the garden

In its shade
There they are
“Pods of the gods”
Robert E. Lee and
Dr. Martin Luther King

Firm green pods
They hold the seeds together

Seeds
They remember Africa
The hostage woman was their friend

Seeds
They fed Confederate soldiers
And they remember

Seeds
Mama has them in the kitchen
Cornbread and two catfishes await

They are all at the table
“C’mon in this house
Sit down
Eat with us,
Ma’, get him a plate.”

Such delicate structures
Keep the seeds together.
Slice it up
Heat it up
And you’ve got something nasty.
I prefer mine whole.

A wind blows through
The empty shirt of
The old weathered boards
In hope
Of keeping old crows
From picking the pods apart.
The Ceramic Nativity

Once again
I unwrap the news from Baby Jesus
And then a sheep
And a camel...

One by one I set them out
Like every year
The bottom of Mother Mary says
DW '71. Mom’s initials.

What was Mom thinking about
When she painted Baby Jesus
Thirty years ago?

After ten years
She knew Cinderella lied
And I knew the Holy Spirit
Was not my father
Wasn’t in him.
And I’m not the Christ child.

The pieces are full of Mother’s thoughts
From thirty years ago
And now the secret of the Nativity
Belongs to me.

The angel’s wing is broken.
What would we do without the angel?
I thought about fixing it.
I didn’t.
I just accepted her the way she was
And let her chant
“Pray for us sinners Mother Mary...”
Officer and Laughing Girl
After a Painting by Jan Vermeer

Jodi White
Poetry

There are two at the table
A man and a woman
The woman
Is not a member of
The National Organization for Women

The man
Is dressed in the
Glorious authority of
A servant of the king

His countenance
For 350 years
Has been for her alone

A light shines through the window
It shines on a map
And her
And she is intoxicated with this man’s presence

I don’t know this map
It’s not from the 20th century
It is definitely not from the 20th century
“Mama, when can we go home?” the fat-cheeked boy pleaded.

“Not now, Levi. We’ve got two more tickets to hand out before the Lord’s work has been done,” and with that stated, Inez Riddle began to chant “Oh, Jesus. Sweet Jesus. Yes, Jesus. Help me, Jesus.”

She stepped side to side in rhythm with her chanting. Closing her eyes, she didn’t see Levi any more, nor the big Wal-Mart parking lot full of sinners; she saw her Jesus, with his broken body hanging from the cross. Tears rolled from Inez’s dull brown eyes, but she didn’t open them. She wanted to savor the picture of her Lord, the only man that would love her for all eternity, the one man who would not forsake her.

“Boy, I feel that the Lord is stirring me again. Walk with me down to the pay phones.

“We’re going to give someone another chance at everlasting life,” said Inez as she raised a fleshy arm and pointed at a tall, long-haired man rummaging his pockets for change.

As Levi followed his mother’s apple-shaped body down the sidewalk, he thought of the things that his mother had told him before they had begun their mission this morning. She had told him about his father and Miss Wren, how they were going to suffer after they died for doing something called “fornicating.” Levi wasn’t worried much about Miss Wren suffering, but he didn’t want his Daddy to be twisted up and set on fire, like his mama described.

Inez had reached the tall man standing at the pay phone just as he was putting his quarter in the slot. The man stared at her with an open expression, a question mark stretched across his scraggly beard. He was 6'5" and he towered over Inez’s 5'4" frame.

He started to turn away from her and had raised his dirty fingers to punch out a phone number when Inez moved in closer to him. “I’ll be off of here in a minute, if you’re wanting to use the phone,” he said in irritation.

“Oh, I don’t want to use the phone. I want to invite you to a revival at the Light House Assembly of God Church on West Richardson Avenue. And if you’d let me, I’d like to talk to you a little bit about Jesus,” Inez’s voice came from somewhere in between her nose and throat, not completely making it to one or the other, and resembling the sound of a horn on an old-model car.

The man was already shaking his long, uncombed hair.

“No, that’s all right, I, ugh, don’t talk about religion.”
“I’m not talking about religion, sir. I’m talking about your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The Son of God that loved you so much that he’d died for you on the cross.” Inez had moved in closer to the man and was now leaning her elbow against the outside of the phone. Levi noticed, not for the first time, that his mother’s shoulders were hunched and that her large bra straps dug into the flesh of her shoulders.

The man smiled, revealing teeth stained at the gum line from Skoal. The smile was not nervous but it wasn’t friendly, either. “Now, listen here,” he said, slinging his tangled hair to one side and looking at Inez full in the face, “I ain’t going to listen to no preaching. I’ve got car trouble and I’m trying to make a phone call for help. So you’re just going to have to go talk to somebody else about Jesus, right now.”

“The Lord told me that I was to talk to you. He sent me here, this day, to give you a choice: you can have everlasting life eternal by repenting of your sins and confessing the Lord, our God, Jesus-Christ, as your personal Savior, or you can live in hellfire with Satan as your Master for all eternity. That’s the choice you’ve got to make today, for your time is a-wasting. What’s it going to be?”

“Lady, I just need to make a phone call.” For the first time, the man’s eyes rested on Levi.

The man almost looked as if he were pleading with Levi, searching for a way out of the confrontation with Inez. Levi felt sorry for the man, he felt sorry for his father, and he would’ve felt sorry for Miss Wren if she hadn’t been such a “harlot,” like his mama told him she was. Miss Wren might lose her job over all this trouble his mama was causing outside her place of work. His mama had handed out six tickets already this morning, and there were six people who were plenty mad, right now, ’cause they were doomed forever.

****************************

My mother is going to Heaven. She talks to Jesus and he told her he was coming for her. At night I hear her making her special prayers. Her words are “music,” she says. That’s why I can’t understand her; I’m only eleven years old. That’s too young to speak to the Lord with music. Mama says I’ve got to feel the power before I can speak in the songs of rapture. I’m too young to understand rapture.

My mother has a power in her. A power that can do anything and never get hurt. Mama says she can pick up poisonous snakes and never get bit by them ’cause she has the power. She can also cast out demons, too. And if she wants, or if God tells her to, she can call down the “wrath” on people. That’s what I think she’s doing today, calling

**Lights and Shadows**
down the "wrath," 'cause my daddy won't repent and come home to us. I just wish she'd hurry up and hand out those last two tickets so that I could go home and ride the new bike my daddy got me. I've been getting a lot of great stuff from Wal-Mart here lately, 'cause Miss Wren works there, and Dad goes in there all the time to see her. Miss Wren gets a discount.

My mother is busy today, calling down the wrath on my daddy's girlfriend, Miss Wren. Mama says Miss Wren is a whore, and because my daddy lives with Miss Wren, he is now a whoremonger. Sometimes thinking about Miss Wren and Daddy makes my mama do stuff—that's a little weird. It's okay when she just talks in music and it's all right even if she hollers out when she says the holy one is visiting her, but I don't like it when she dances. She looks like a zombie when she dances with her eyes staring off, not seeing me. She hops on one leg then the other leg, making everything on her jiggle and look angry. Sometimes she rolls her head from side to side while she's hopping and singing. Those are the times that I am quiet because I don't

Chris Rohling, *Rena*

*Merit Award*

Black and White Photograph
want her to forget who I am. She might make a mistake and call the wrath down on me like she has Miss Wren. So I don’t bother her, ’cause I don’t want to burn forever by accident.

But Mama says she’s helping to save Daddy’s soul by handing out these tickets to hell. She says daddy has been taken over by his own flesh—whatever that means. So, mama’s going to save daddy by making “retribution,” that means seven tickets to hell are for the seven deadly sins and then one extra ticket for the “whore of Babylon.” Mama says that’s Miss Wren.

Before she handed out tickets to hell, mama tried to make daddy repent by putting up signs for him to read. The signs said “God Hates Adulterers,” in big black letters. I helped her nail them all up. We put up over twenty signs all around Miss Wren’s house and all down the street she lives on, but it didn’t do any good. Daddy never came home.

Maybe these tickets will help my daddy. I don’t want my daddy to die. I don’t want my daddy to go to hell either, even if he’s “fornicating.” I just want him to come home and take me fishing down at Mohawk Lake, or watch me ride my bike or sit in his chair by the lamp and read.

I hope these tickets bring my daddy back, so my mama will stop crying. I want my mama to smile at me again.

Floyd  I have to save Floyd  God will destroy you forever  Forever  It was the Harlot that lured him down into his own skin  Now he’s sunk  Sweet Jesus  Don’t know  not sure if I can pull him out of his own flesh  Sweet Jesus  Help me  Sweet Jesus

I did right by him  Yes Lord  Stood beside him  was his rock  Yes Lord  He didn’t cleave  he left me  Jesus  Oh Jesus  He left  jumped back into his skin  fell down into the sinkhole of flesh  Oh Jesus  Left me a good woman  a woman right by God  Yes Lord  left me for the Harlot  snakes in her hair  seven snakes  seven sins  three breasts  demon breeder  whore of Babylon  Help me  Sweet Jesus

Got to get on fire  got to feel the fire  got to save Floyd  from the fire  The man  The man at the phone has the fire  Help me  Jesus  Touched me  burned me  had Hell in his hands  Satan  He was Satan  answered to called out  his own name  Lucifer  Yes Lord  Tried to cast him out  Tried to use the power  Sweet Jesus  Used the power  the music  the dance  Called down the Wrath  Yes Lord  Sweet Jesus  God will destroy  God will destroy you  God will destroy her  Forever  Forever  Help me  Sweet Jesus

Lights and Shadows
Man, I've been on some trips, but this was the wildest thing I ever saw. And I've seen a lot. I've seen damn voodoo Queens smoking cigars and blowing smoke in your face. I've been there when they cut the head off a chicken and drank the blood from its neck. I've seen them dance around the fire naked to the beat of a deerskin drum. But I ain't never, Never, been handed no ticket to hell.

I've seen lots of drunks, lots of junkies and dopers too high to know what world they were in, but none of them ever freaked out like the little old lady that handed me my ticket to hell. I thought it was a joke at first, until she just kept standing there. That bunhead was squaring off with me, now. All I was trying to do was make a phone call. That hunk of shit my brother calls a car broke down on me about two miles away from Wal-Mart.

Well, she marched up to the phone and started preaching. I tried to be nice. She had a kid with her. But she just wouldn't go on. Well, she broke all the laws of proximics, when she backed me up into the phone and started mumbling some wild talk at me. Then she hands me this little red piece of construction paper that says "GOD WILL DESTROY YOU FOREVER!" That was it! Kid or no, I wasn't going to listen to any more of her crazy shit.

So, I asked her if she had a couple of extra tickets because I had a few friends that would be going too, and that really stirred her up. That crazy old bitty started hissing and shouting, waving her arms around screaming "Satan! Get thee behind me!" All the people in the parking lot stopped and started looking at us—well, they were looking at her, but they was acting like I'd snatched her damn purse or something. Then the bitch started spitting on me! So I told her that I was Satan and that she could use that other ticket in her hand to come with me. I was considering taking her on a date.

Awww, I wished I would've never said it, 'cause after I did she started screaming and jumping up and down and saying "The wrath! The wrath! You're going to burn!","over and over until she stopped and her eyes rolled up till nothing was left but the whites and then she just fell out, right there. Shit, I didn't know what to do. I'm Catholic. I ain't never seen no shit such as this. After about five minutes of her laying there, I knew she wasn't getting up. I threw my coat over her cause I thought she'd went into some kind of shock. I've heard of diabetics doing that when they forget to take their insulin shots, you know. The kid that was with her told me that she fell out like that all the time. He said she was "slaying in the spirit" or some such shit as that.
I didn’t trust him. I still thought she was having some kind of diabetic fit, so I went in Wal-Mart and called 911. Then I called Carla. I couldn’t go back out there. I needed my coat, but didn’t want to be there with that crazy woman and that kid, who was too quiet to trust. I told Carla to get there in a hurry and bring a fifth of anything—fast. And I told my brother to cram that piece-of-shit car up his ass.

***********************

I think Jesus came early for my mama. Me and my dad are taking her to Mooreville tomorrow so she can get help. My dad said that it was all his fault. He said, “Levi, just remember that what you do to people will always come back to you.”

I’m not supposed to say nothing about us staying at Miss Wren’s house. Dad says that would make Mama sick again. I think my daddy doesn’t understand that mama’s just spending a little time with Jesus, right now. She’s coming back after she’s made “retribution” for daddy’s soul. I don’t know how long she’s going to be gone, but Dad says we can go see her on weekends. Dad will be going to see her, too. Now, the Lord’s work is almost done. My dad is coming back—as soon as I get rid of this last ticket.
March 9, 1998 2:00 P.M.

Sharon had better things to do than sit in the waiting room all day. She looked at her watch. Her exasperated sigh told those around her in the doctor’s office that she was tired of waiting. She glanced at some of the other patients, trying to figure out how many had been waiting for the doctor even longer than she had.

Just ten minutes before they had let a ratty-looking family of five walk in the front door and see the doctor promptly. What are they doing here? slipped through her mind before she could stop it. That’s just something Mother would have said, she thought as an apology or as an excuse. What was it she called people like that? Breeders. Only existing to make more just like themselves, giving nothing back to society. She told herself that it was just her mother’s voice intruding in her mind, and she wasn’t to blame for thinking it. How much longer are they going to make me wait for these test results?

The door chime announced the entrance of an elderly couple. She gave them a weak smile, though her eyes made a subconscious challenge: I was here first.

She picked up a wrinkled Newsweek from a scattered pile of old magazines on top of the table in front of her. Her mother had never read Newsweek, and certainly wouldn’t have touched a magazine lying about in a public place. Sharon remembered hearing the story about aloof mothers who supposedly wouldn’t touch their children without
gloves. She remembered the tight white gloves her mother always wore, with lace around the cuffs. They were what she saw when she pictured her mother’s hands; not the flesh inside. She never quite knew when those hands went from smooth and soft to gnarled and arthritic, only that the risk of soiling her gloves precluded much contact.

June 10, 1978 1:10 A.M.

Sharon woke, realizing she had heard a sound. She decided it was probably Mother still yelling at her father. She had known her to stop speaking for days at a time, but never to raise her voice like this, until tonight while standing outside her father’s office in the east wing where she was never allowed to go, especially not when her father was working. She had listened outside for half an hour, finally going back to bed after hearing the same words over and over and not knowing what they meant. Maybe they knew she was listening and wanted to confuse her. Words like IRS and reputation couldn’t be that important.

She climbed out of bed and walked barefoot across the thick carpeting toward his office, red in daylight but now a gray with the lights out. Walking down this hall at night usually bothered her, but tonight she was reassured by the yellow light from underneath the door to her father’s office. The door opened and her mother came out.

“Don’t you think you need to be in bed? You’ll need to look your best tomorrow.”

Her mother escorted her back to her room, turning the lights on as they entered. Sharon climbed into bed with her eyes squinted to block out the light, but still saw the red glow. She heard the closet doors crash open, and the scraping of coat hangers. She looked to see her Mother rummaging through her dresses.

“Mother, I’m tired! I can’t sleep with the lights on!”

“Just a second, I need to pick out a nice dress for tomorrow.”

Since Sharon thought she should probably know what was so special about the next day, and didn’t want her mother to know she’d forgotten, she decided to wait until tomorrow to find out. After fifteen minutes of falling asleep and awakening again to the screech of a coat hanger against the metal bar, the lights went off.

The lights came back on, and she saw the sun was shining. Her mother showed her the outfit she picked out and told her to put it on.

“Aunt Helen is here, and so is Uncle Robert. Your cousins Christopher and Bobby are going to be here in an hour, so you’ll have someone to play with today. And I’ve called
Wentworth Academy and told them you won’t be coming
in today.”

Sharon was delighted with having the day off from
school to have fun, and couldn’t remember a treat like this
before.

“Is Daddy staying home today, too?”

“No, he’s already gone and won’t be coming back. He
died last night. Don’t forget to brush your hair.”

With that, she left.

July 23, 1978 11:00 A.M.

Sharon rode through the cemetery gates and up the hill
in her father’s Jaguar, or what used to be her father’s Jag­
uar. Now it belonged to her mother, as did everything else
that hadn’t been stained with his blood when they found
him on the floor of his study with a gun in his hand. The
only thing she remembered from that night was her mother’s
screaming at him.

“And what about Sharon? What kind of life do you
think she’s going to have with this hanging over her head?
She’ll have to give up everything she’s ever known!”

It continued until Sharon fell asleep. She woke later to
the remnant of an echo from the other end of the house,
and went back to sleep once she had convinced herself there
were no ghosts in the room.

Sharon decided her mother’s yelling that night must
have been an attempt to stop her father from killing him­
self. She wouldn’t start for several years considering that
the opposite might be true.

She still wasn’t accustomed to riding in the front seat.
She had been allowed only a few times to sit up there with
her father, and only when her mother wasn’t in the car.
Sharon could still remember the sight of the back of her
father’s head very well, though the details of his face were
fading.

This was her first visit to the monument that had been
constructed above her father’s grave. The only other time
she had been here the grave was freshly dug, with the cas­
ket suspended above it.

Her mother pulled the car to the side of the road near
the top of the hill. Outside the window she saw a white
marble temple, with four thick columns supporting a trian­
gular, Parthenon-like roof. She had had no idea there would
be a place for her to play here. She threw open the car door
and ran up the stairs of the temple before it had even oc­
curred to her mother that she’d have to open her own door
today.

She danced in circles under the stone roof, the view of
the city spinning around her. Her straight blonde hair flew free of the nape of her neck and fanned around her as she twirled faster, looking down to see the hem of her dress widen with the force. She came to a dizzy standstill, to see her mother staring disapprovingly from the base of the staircase. "What if someone saw you dancing on your father's grave? Just think how that would look." Sharon, still dizzy, fell down, and saw her father's name on a shiny brass plaque fastened to the marble between her outstretched hands. His birth date was there, as was the date he had died the previous month. A vague rectangle cut into the marble revealed the location of the burial site underneath. To the right, three evenly spaced brass plates, each blank. She unsteadily stood up and walked back down the stairs to the dirt bath below.

"Who are they going to bury over there?" She pointed at the three empty spaces.

"They're going to bury us, of course. My place is next to your father's, and you'll be buried next to me. The space on the end is for your husband."

Sharon couldn't speak. Her heart felt like a cold stone, and she heard a small buzzing inside her head. She tried to decide what to do if Mother opened the grave to put her in it.

"Of course, that's a long time from now. Buy then you'll have a new name and be much older than I am now. And you'll be in a place overlooking the most respectable cemetery in the city. Nothing but the best for my family."

May 23, 1995 3:25 P.M.

Sharon waited on her mother in the oncologist's waiting room until the nurse timidly approached her.

"Your mother is finished with her appointment."

"Oh, so she'll be out shortly?" Sharon asked, wanting to know more about her mother's declining health, yet eager to finally leave this place. She hated the thoughts of dying being in a doctor's office gave her, especially when that doctor was a specialist.

"She's already left. Through the back door. She's wait­ing in the car."

Of course. I should have known. And she left me sitting in here. I guess she's the only one of us above walking out through the waiting room. Always a lady.

When Sharon got to the car, her mother was sitting in the passenger seat. Sharon did all of the driving when she was with her mother, who always insisted they go in her white Mercedes.

"I would just hate for you to have to put all of those miles on your car for me."
Sharon knew the real reason. Mother didn’t want to be seen in her Toyota Corolla.

Not that she minded driving the powerful Mercedes, though it was a bit larger than she was accustomed to. She put the car in reverse and pulled out of the parking lot, still not having spoken to her mother. She knew better than to question her about her health, having given up on that years ago.

“One does not discuss things such as illnesses. My mother passed on gracefully, and so will I. That’s the way it’s meant to be. Though I suspect when it’s your time you’ll make a horrible spectacle of things. You never could maintain appearances.”

Sharon didn’t speak. Tomorrow morning she’d be flying back to Seattle, and didn’t want to leave on a sour note, and didn’t think her mother really meant what she said, it was just her way of making conversation.

“Let’s stop by your father’s grave before we go home. I’d hate for you to leave without visiting him, it’s been so long.”

Sharon headed towards the interstate, wanting to find the quickest way to enter and leave the cemetery. When she was a few blocks from the on-ramp, her mother startled her.

“Wait! We must buy flowers. Imagine not having proper decorations for your father’s monument! People might think we can’t afford it. Or that we are lacking in class.”

“People who can’t afford flowers rarely drive an $80,000 car, mother.”

For once, her mother let her comment go by, fixated by the need to find a good florist.

“There’s one.” said Sharon, seeing a small flower shop sandwiched in between a deli and a used CD store.

“I don’t like the way that one looks, keep driving. Ah, up ahead on the left!”

They arrived at the cemetery thirty minutes later with the scent of $129.99 worth of cut flowers flowing from the back seat. Sharon drove through the front gate and stopped where the main drive separated into several smaller access roads.

“I think you remember which way it is.”

“Of course, mother, at the very top. The highest point in the cemetery.”

With that, she turned off onto the road leading up the hill overlooking the rest of the graveyard and accelerated briskly to the top. As she reached the crest of the hill, the horizon rolled into view.

She pulled over and quickly exited the car, eager to
absorb the site of the city spread before her. She started walking toward the summit of the hill to be able to see in all directions, and looked back at the car. Her mother was still sitting in it, looking at her.

Oh, damn. How could I forget. One doesn’t open car doors oneself. As long as you’re her, that is. She walked back and opened the car door, slamming it shut after her mother had made her graceful exit, neither one speaking.

“Where were you going? It’s over here, on the right. The plots at the very top were already taken before we bought ours. But don’t worry, our site is still much better than all the ones beneath us, and even those are better than most people in this city will ever have.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“I’m sure.”

As Sharon sat on the marble stairs, her mother removed some dried stalks from the metal vase bolted on the floor above her father’s brass name plate and replaced them with the fresh flowers. She removed a silk handkerchief from her purse and polished away the haze which had formed over her father’s name, and said without looking up,

“This will be the last time we come here together.”

That was all that needed to be said.

March 9, 1998 2:15 PM

None of the reading material scattered before her appealed to her. There were homemakers’ magazines she didn’t think were worth picking up off the table. That’s what you should be reading, the imagined voice of her mother told her. I would be with the ladies at the garden club, instead of spending all my time at that dreadful laboratory.

Thinking of the lab she worked at reminded her that she’d already missed an hour of valuable research. Sharon was employed by the Institute for the Prevention of Aging, and spent her time trying to develop methods for prolonging life. After two years with no significant findings, her team had recently had a big breakthrough with a newly discovered enzyme that could extend the life of human cells indefinitely. She’d felt that day as if she were immortal. But not now.

The nurse appeared from the door next to the registration desk and smiled at her. It’s about time. She stood up and steeled herself for what was about to come.

“Mrs. White, come right on back.”

What?! The heavy set lady who had been sitting beside Sharon stood up and lumbered with the nurse through the door leading to the rest of the doctor’s office. I was sure I was next! But I guess she was first.
She had started to move toward the nurse when she saw her walk in, and didn’t want anybody to notice her mistake, so she picked up the closest thing on the table she was now standing next to and returned to her seat.

Oh, great, classified ads paper! She certainly wasn’t going to get up and walk back over to the table again this soon, so she flipped through the pages and skimmed the ads. Make money fast, no experience required. 1992 Ford Aerostar for sale. 2 Burial plots in Peaceful Pines Cemetery.

Sharon reread the classified ad. It was very vague. There were two plots for sale, eight hundred dollars for both. They were in a cemetery she’d never heard of. She looked through her purse for some change, and walked with the ad over to the pay phone. She dialed the number, and an elderly lady answered.

“Yes, I’m calling about the burial plots for sale.”

“Yes, well, certainly, but you sound very young for someone buying a plot in a cemetery. Unless... no, I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be rude. My husband and I are moving east to be with our family, and see no reason in being tied to this place after we... pass on, so the speak. They’re fairly ordinary plots, and you have to use the flat markers like most cemeteries make people buy these days. Why don’t I describe the cemetery for you...”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s necessary, I’m pretty sure I want to by them. In fact, I’d like to go ahead and get this taken care of today. Would it be possible to meet you there in an hour?”

When the nurse called Sharon’s name, she was already gone.
RAM (random access memory)
Robert O. Brannon

A rush of warm country wind
On a bright October day
Brought back old memories
Of a field, a blanket and you

Sharing secrets and a bottle of chablis.
Our bodies molded to each other
As leaves fell from trees
Like brown paper raindrops.

As the guineas sang in the soybean field,
Making sweet love to you
Was like silent-film incendiary bombs
Exploding beneath scarlet-tinted lids.
Reliquary
Aaron Thompson
Poetry — First Place

Obsidian floors and tiled walls
encase the tanned leather,
mimicking its very nature.

Its contents lie forever concealed
behind glass and beneath flesh,
unknown to the casual observer.

A woman enters the loggia
and admires the folds of animal flesh
and wonders what it holds, or held.

In another time, it was more than this,
more than an object to be admired.
It was a coffer for the female of the species.

"Ironic," she says and glances
at her personal containment device
held together by a small metallic clasp,
cosmetic in nature, a tool in use,
and can't help but see it as fragile,
subject to antiquation or eradication,
its treasures to become future relics,
perhaps to inspire more women
to cherish the treasures they keep.
War
Aaron Thompson

The wet pavement glistened, like a black snake in the moonlight. The boys laughed, and sometimes cursed, as they rode their bikes along the street, around the curve, and onto the worn path that led among the trees. Then they split up, each team protecting its home base. Boys fell one by one and would lie in the mud until the game was over, blond hair in their eyes, smooth faces yet to meet a razor. Hopefully, a plane would fly somewhere above the trees, and the last boy standing would wave frantically, in need of a quick rescue. If no plane flew over, the game ended anyway. They’d get their bikes and push them up the path to the street. No one would speak as the cars hissed by them.
Our Hero Sits In A Bar Watching The Crowd And Then Goes Home To Call His Girlfriend And Dump Her Before She Has A Chance To Dump Him

Aaron Thompson

It's one-thirty in the morning, and the bartender calls out: “Last call for alcohol,” a familiar song to our hero who watches as, at the bar, a man drinks rum and coke, downs the last swallow, scrunches his face, and orders another. The woman beside him, her red hair a mess, thinks she is beautiful and smiles to impress him with her crooked teeth. They would make a nice couple except she only wants another drink, and he only wants to get laid. She gets her drink, and they disappear from the scene, but our hero still watches the crowd thin as the dim lights get brighter like the sun rising with glaring reality: People look better in the dark. Outside, in the night, people are laughing and talking loudly, allowing the party to go on, trading the darkness of the club for the blackness of the world, keeping up their whirling dance until there are no more last calls to send them fleeing into the night.

With these thoughts in his head, our hero feels his way through the crowd, finds his car, and drives home to make his own last call. The floor of the apartment is pretty much hidden by paper containers: Trash of the single man. Smiling at this thought, he kicks over a styrofoam cup, sits on the sofa, and stares at the phone, thinking he has the balls to call her, and the first six digits are easy, but he loses his buzz as that familiar operator tells him how sorry she is, and he wants to tell her how sorry he is but knows she isn’t real. So, he hangs it up, sobered by reality. He will make no last call tonight. But she might. He unplugs the phone from the wall and wraps the cord around it as though trying to strangle it. The call will come, he knows, but, affected by the alcohol, he falls asleep beside the phone, knowing that tonight, at least, it will not ring.

Helen Foss, Tied
Merit Award
Alabaster Sculpture
A Walk With Moses
Joel Hays Pass
Creative Nonfiction - Third Place

The alarm clock blared out its annoying reveille, rousing me and Brenda from a very comfortable sleep. The snooze button was found and depressed without my ever having to wake up enough to actually say I was awake. I pulled my exposed arm back into the cocoon of blankets and wrapped it around my wife's dozing form. I shifted my pillow beneath my head and, as was my usual custom at 5:30 in the morning, adjusted myself for the nine-minute power nap allowed by that wonderful miracle of modern technology. Then, outside our bedroom door came the all-too-familiar whine of a dog in dire distress, immediately followed by a loud sniffing coming from the crack underneath.

"Honey, I think Moses wants to go outside," my wife prompted. I lay there immobile, contemplating how much longer I could sleep if I skipped my morning shower. The whining and snuffling again pierced the dark, silent room.

"Are you going to take Moses outside or not?" Brenda turned onto her back. I could feel her eyes as they stared at me through the darkness, searching for an answer. I rolled over, pulled my clothes on, found my boots and headed sleepily to my task. The shaggy black and tan dog jumped to his feet as I opened the bedroom
door. He just sat there wagging his tail, waiting to see if I was really going to take him outside or was instead going to relieve myself first. With my eyes still very full of sleep, I grabbed the leash, the dog, and a doggie biscuit, and we went.

The cold dark morning greeted us with a chilling breeze. October mornings are a bit confusing around here. A person never really knows what to expect in Alabama as far as fall weather is concerned. It can be a sultry 88 degrees during the afternoon and plunge to a frigid low of 34 for the night. Moses pulled hard against the leash knowing relief was within reach. In a stupor of sleepiness I ambled along behind. "Slow. Slow," I repeated over and over with mock authority. Moses realized who was in control this morning, so we headed for the grass at a good trot.

The cool air and the even cooler breeze—along with the shaking that was uncontrollably wracking my body—began to wake me up. It was early and the sun was still ten to fifteen degrees or so below the horizon. The clear sky was still filled with a wide array of stars, all shining in various colors against the deep black.

"The sky sure is pretty this morning." Moses was too intent on locating that perfect spot to relieve himself to be concerned with me or my meaningless jabbering about the sky or the stars. He only knew the relief that the steam from under his belly indicated he had found. I sighed. My breath billowed out in a spectral haze, catching the eerie glow of the street lights.

The silence of the morning was broken by the powerful pulsing of a slow-moving train. The train was not all that loud, just raw. The sound waves were felt more than heard. The low, dull pulses of power emanated from the diesel turbine engines and flowed outward the way stones send concentric circles rippling across the surface of a mud puddle. In the light of the train's lead engine I could see the birds high atop the bridge's twin engine houses as they rose in a flurry of feathers and then alit again in perfectly-timed rhythm to the tangible waves of sound.

We live right near the river in Decatur, next to the old railroad bridge that spans the Tennessee River, providing the only north-south link for trains in North Alabama. Even though CSX is our neighbor, the nights are actually very quiet. The trains slow down almost to a crawl before crossing the ancient drawbridge. And this bridge is old. The pilings that the bridge spans rest upon predate the Civil War by a good many years. The original wooden structure was burned by Northern troops in order to break the supply lines of Confederate forces. The concrete pilings survived the
war and were refitted with the more durable steel spans, many of which are still being used today. Pictures from the era of the steamboats show the bridge minus the movable central section. The irony of the pictures is unmistakable. The proud steamboat in the foreground with the railway bridge in the back. No one knew that in only a matter of a few years the one that was then in the foreground would become all but obsolete in the shadow of the iron horse.

The drawbridge portion wasn’t needed in the early days. The ships were still quite tall, but the river was considerably lower. Not until the completion of Wheeler Dam was there even a need for a drawbridge in the area. The water level rose, making it impossible for anything bigger than a cuddy cabin to pass. Ironically much of the structure that is still in use today is that same one which was installed to replace the original wooden bridge burned on April 26, 1862. It is remarkable to watch the ingenuity of yesterday functioning in a world where things are designed to be expendable.

The huge counterweights rise and fall in direct synch to the middle span. As the weights come down, the bridge rises. As the weights go up, the bridge descends. Fifty feet in three minutes, that’s the rate. That’s been the rate for at least 70 years. Huge cables connect the weights to the power houses that adorn the tops of the north and south spans, like the bulging biceps of a disproportional bodybuilder. The power houses, also, have for years been treated as aviaries by the hundreds of pigeons that roost in the safety of their heights.

The train and the railway industry meant a lot to this town; one of the state’s largest railway complexes existed here for a while. It had several buildings, including a round house and a machine shop. Not only did this small town repair the locomotives, it built them. Over two thousand people worked for the railroad in this area at one point. Eventually the complex died out and moved south to more major cities, like Birmingham. The great barges began to swim the river again, and many of the train’s supporters were lured away.

Moses pulled me onward. We headed toward a vacant lot right next to the tracks. From that vantage point I could see the State Docks and the massive barges loaded with coal. A tug maneuvered between several individual barges. Looking more like a sheep dog trying to round up its herd, its glaring searchlight kept an ever-present eye on the antique bridge. I had lived in Decatur only a short while, but realized the closeness of the city to the river long before. The river is the city’s history, the two are inseparable, en-
twined so closely for so long that at distance they merge. The river carries within its banks a great deal more than the people of this community realize. The blood of the city runs there. At the river the city lives, or at the river the city dies.

There used to be a shipyard just to the west. For months Brenda and I would pass this huge old building, a wide assortment of cranes scattered around it, never knowing what it was or the purpose it had served. It was not until I read an article in the area paper that I learned it had been a place where hundreds of barges, boats, and tugs had been built. There men had sweated for hours on end as they labored over the children produced by the relationship between the city and the river. For years it fed families and drew honest men into the area in search of a life. Now, the cranes are being disassembled and carted off to some foreign land over in Mississippi to once again assemble barges and boats and tugs. Funny how people turn their backs on that which made them who they are, that which birthed them, even more so than their own mothers.

The steamboat was replaced by the train, the train was all but replaced by the barge. Currently both are making a stable living for several families in the area. But now a new force is coming. The sound of trucks vibrates the highways and streets of the city constantly as construction goes into full swing. Boeing is coming. They say they are going to build rockets for the government in a plant that is expected to have in excess of three thousand employees. There are also predictions that four times that many other jobs will be created in order to support that single facility. Decatur is aiming for space. Space is a big beast, far bigger than the river, or even the land the railroad tamed. Space is not a forgiving place; it's a forgetting place.

Moses danced around the tall grass, chasing something he finally feels superior to, probably a cricket slowed by the cold temperatures, or a leaf carried on the wind. The sky was incredible. Every star that could be seen from the northern hemisphere beamed brilliantly back at me. Cassiopeia, Draco, Ursa Major, Ursa Minor all dominated the northern sky. A meteorite arced its way through the upper atmosphere, burning into nothingness in a fraction of a second. A thought blazed its way through my still sleep-dragged mind. That protective coating we call an atmosphere is proportionally as thick as that thin orange membrane on the peel of a navel orange. We count altitude by scant feet and consider anything above 50 miles outer space. Those men who piloted the old X-15's had to be given astronaut wings, for when everything was said and done, they
were the first men in space. The history books still do not completely acknowledge that fact.

The stars were bright, so bright, in fact, I could see the details of the open field and the bouncing form of Moses as he again pursued his leaf. I stared out into the depths of space, for that is what it is. It is not the sky as much as it is a vast open universe with no imaginable bounds. A faint star caught my gaze. An astronomer would probably know that this particular star was no star at all, but instead a galaxy, a galaxy nine times larger than our own puny little Milky Way. That light source, the astronomer would say, is ten billion light years away, but that would not be an accurate statement. The light we see left the source ten billion light years ago, then traveled at 186,000 miles per second across open nothingness for ten billion years to grace my sky that particular morning. The "star" was ten billion light years away ten billion years ago. This is no big, mind-boggling discovery, but now our own little blue ball is only an estimated four billion years old. The photon of light, that little packet of energy my eyes detected was almost three times older than the very Earth itself.

The cold wind pushed the air harder against my face, taking my breath. It was then I realized I had been holding it, anxious. The first rays of the sun exploded across the sky, eight minutes old and loosing energy by the millisecond. The earth would not feel the benefit of those rays for another hour, instead it would continue to radiate what warmth it had managed to steal from the day before out into the cold blackness of space. I felt small, insignificant, fleeting. I pulled my coat further up around my neck and then pulled the dog and went back inside, into a world scaled more to my liking, a world of rivers and railroads.

Lights and Shadows
My favorite money is a fifty-cent piece. I’ll probably never have a dollar bill, or any bill, but even if I could, I’d still like the fifty-cent piece best. It’s big and shiny, and has a nice ring to it when you flip it in the air. My Papa gave me one two years ago when we went to Little Rock to visit Uncle Henry and Aunt Mary. I keep it in my fruit jar money bank. It’s a treasure for keepin’ not spendin’. My cousin Mary Ann has one, too. I imagine a lot of people save fifty-cent pieces. They must, because you hardly ever see them and it’s a common fact that you don’t spend them when you get them.

But I know this one lady who spends a fifty-cent piece ever’ year, the third Sunday of May. That’s Decoration Day at Lone Cedar, where I go to church. It’s the only Sunday of the year that ol’ Miz Slaughter ever comes. She used to always sit beside Pa and Ma and me — she on the pew end facin’ the inside aisle, and me next. Even though Ma and I still sit together on the second row from the front, on the
left side goin’ in, Pa never sits with us any more. He finds his own seat, usually toward the back. Most people know that the first three rows at Lone Cedar are reserved for deacon and elder families, but Miz Slaughter didn’t pay this no mind. People let her alone, though, and didn’t say nothin’. They don’t say nothin’ to Ma and me either, even though Pa ain’t deaconin’ no more.

Takin’ up the offerin’ is an intense time when ever’body is watchin’ ever’body. On our row, the offerin’ plate comes from the opposite end of the pew. Ever’body always has their money ready, so the plate passes quickly. Sometimes it gets held up for a second or two when money sticks to somebody’s hand. (That’s how you know they’re puttin’ in less than a dollar.) I’ve had that happen to me before and it’s awfully embarrassin’. Ma puts in a dollar, folded tightly around a quarter — part of her egg money. I put in two or three cents.

Used to, on Decoration Sunday, I knew the plate was goin’ to get held up when it got to Miz Slaughter. She would wait until it got right to her before openin’ her drawstring purse to take out the fifty-cent piece. She was real careful to be sure she didn’t drop it on the floor. I always felt embarrassed for her like I feel for myself when pennies stick to my hand. The people in the pews behind glare at the back of your head when it happens. I know because I used to turn around a little and look.

My Pa lets Miz Slaughter live in this old sharecropper shack we have on the far back side of our land. She’s either a widow, or her husband ran off, or somethin’, I’m not sure. I just know that she lives alone with her daughter Bessie, who’s foolish. Bessie Slaughter was sixteen and in the sixth grade when she dropped out of school. People at church say that God frowned on her father’s seed and that he is cursin’ that family until the third and fourth generations.

There was this one Decoration Sunday that wasn’t like any before. Ma and Pa had argued in the kitchen on Saturday night, after I’d gone to bed. I could hear them through the living room. You could tell it wasn’t the normal fussin’ like they do when I get a slip from school. I wasn’t the usual Bullen sorriess and she-gets-it-from-your-side jazz I hear when it’s me. This time it was like they were discuss-arguin’ and you could tell it was serious. Ma was talk-cryin’ like she does when she’s had enough of somethin’, right before Pa pulls a major shape-up and does some big chore that’s totally unlike him, like givin’ me a whippin’.

Hearin’ Ma go on so made me nervous. I couldn’t sleep. Pa kept sayin’, “Gertie Slaughter ain’t never harmed a soul.” Ma would talk-cry some more. The most I could make out
was "...Bessie's shamin' her and us both." They went on for what seemed like hours. The last thing I heard Ma say was "...well Jerry, you're puttin' up with it too." After that I must have gone off to sleep. I don't remember hearin' another thing, except a pan clang in the kitchen. Ma was gettin' breakfast.

It was Sunday mornin' and everythin' seemed usual again. I slopped the hens, went to the barn to milk, and ate a sausage biscuit and blackberries before gettin' the wide-toothed comb for Ma to re-plait my hair. I wear two plaits on either side of a straight and clean middle part. Ma likes to do it herself. She plait it tight till my eyes pull slanted. My hair is washed with pure lye soap on Saturday, along with the rest of my body. It gets plaited on Sunday and that's the end of it until the next Saturday night.

On the way to church, not a word was spoken. You could tell that somethin' was amiss, sure amiss. As we turned onto Stutts' Road, Pa told me that we'd be sittin' on the back row this Sunday. He said it was because Bessie had disgraced herself and Miz Slaughter was puttin' up with it. He said the elders had met and made a rulin' and we were puttin' up with it too because we let them live rent-free.

I had no idea we were gettin' into a such a stirred-up ant bed. When we got to church, none of my bunch came to meet me like they usually do. Donnie and Billy and Frankie Sue, who live up the road from Lone Cedar, always get there first. They had always waited for me to go flower switchin' with them at the cemetery or puttin' rocks behind car tires. This Sunday, though, Ma and Pa and I walked straight into the church without speakin' to a soul. Nobody spoke to us either.

Ma and I sat next to Pa on the back pew, he on the end, Ma next, then me. We weren't the first in the church. Ol' Miz Slaughter was there in her rollin' chair. Even though she doesn't know she's in the world, Brother Gibbs or one of the elders always stops by Lauderdale Christian Charity Home to pick her up. She hasn't missed a Sunday in years. Miz Slaughter, though, wasn't there. Her place on the second row, on the end, was empty. This was the first Decoration Sunday she'd ever missed, I reckon.

After a couple of minutes, the church filled up and the singin' service was commencin'. After about five songs, singin' the first and last verses, it was time to split up for Bible study classes. I was about to leave for my class, which is held in the preacher waitin' room up front, when Ma pushed me back in my seat. Brother Gibbs had come up to the pulpit and was directin' the congregation to sit down.
This stirred ever’body to murmurin’ and question-askin’ right and left.

“Brothers and sisters,” Brother Gibbs said in his loud pulpit voice. “I know you’re wonderin’ why I’m up here this mornin’, interruptin’ Bible study classes and all. I know you’re wonderin’ what could be so important as to take our attention away from studyin’ the Word of God. I tell you, it brings me great pain and sorrow to come before you like this, brothers and sisters, great pain and sorrow...” He paused, with ever’body sittin’ on edge, hardly breathin’. And he just kept on pausin’, lookin’ out at each person, from side to side, row to row. Ever’body just kept on sittin’, beatin’ tiny puffs.

Then, just before the whole congregation busted with gossip-grippin’ curiosity, he continued: “...but...it has been reported to me...that we have amongst us...one who is harbordin’ white trash. A general gasp went over the whole congregation. Then the murmurin’ started again — louder this time. After about one minute, people started cuttin’ glances back at us. Some turned around and outright glared — like they do at Miz Slaughter when she holds up the offerin’ plate.

Pa and Ma just sat there, starin’ straight ahead. I stared too. The strangest kind of scared started creepin’ over me. I felt alone or somethin’ — like I didn’t know Ma and Pa for a second. I was relieved when Brother Gibbs broke into a sweatful sermon about Jesus’ clearin’ out the temple and about the abominations God hates, especially fornicatin’. He went on to preach about playin’ with fire and gettin’ burned, and about how Christians are a separate bunch and oughtn’t to take part in the world. (They shouldn’t let themselves get dirty.)

That sermon lasted forever. Ever’body listened like it was about to be the rapture. I got bored, but I was still scared, so I started lookin’ around. Ma and Pa sat there, backs straight, starin’ into the beyond. Brother Gibbs preached on. He got wound up so tight, he was pure winded and forgot to invite the sinners. It was a good thing. I don’t think Ma and Pa would have gone up — I sure wasn’t about to.

We were the first to leave the church. Pa drove home slow and steady — just like always. Neither he nor Ma spoke a word. I didn’t venture a peep. We drove up our driveway without stoppin’ and on up to the gap leadin’ into the pasture. Pa cut off the truck engine, jumped out and opened the gap. Then we headed straight down the pasture, bumpin’ over terraces, to Miz Slaughter’s.

Ma and I sat in the truck while Pa went in. He had to
duck to get on the porch. Miz Slaughter was standin’ in the doorway. Pa said some things to her, but I couldn’t make out what. He came straight back to the truck and we drove home just the way we came. No one ever spoke a word about that Decoration Sunday. Miz Slaughter still lives with her daughter Bessie on our place, but she doesn’t sit with Ma and me on Decoration Sunday any more. She sits in the back now, same as Pa.
Dr. Leonard’s Waiting Room
Lynn Frost
Poetry — Second Place

A young man is bustled in by his mother. 
Even in her neon-blue sweatsuit, 
she still fades into the severe side part of his yellow hair. 
With their heads almost together in scrutiny, 
they study the doctor’s information sheet. 
Their mouths possess the same feature — 
the jutting underbite of a barracuda.

The boy has worn knees in his faded blue jeans, 
a thin dollar store shirt with a pocket 
that holds a pack of generic cigarettes 
to his concave chest. He moves his patient 
finger across the paper as he sounds out the words 
his mother is stumbling over. He wears 
a heavy gold class ring that catches the light of the sun.

After, they’ll go to the county welfare office 
and collect this month’s food stamps. He’ll drive 
her to Roger’s Supermarket and read the sale paper 
to her as she guides the cart down the crowded aisles, 
recognizing each item on the shelves.

Saturday he’ll take his best girl to the American Legion 
where the big event is the wrestling match of a tag team called 
“The Moondogs.” As “Moondogs” emerge from the dressing room 
chewing raw chicken and spitting it on the crowd, 
the young man will withdraw from the warmth 
of his sweetheart’s hand. He’ll raise an angry fist. 
But no one will notice the lonely middle finger he holds 
high above the crowd. No one will hear the shouted protests 
that cause his thin chest to rack from over-exertion. 
No one will see the light that radiates from his brilliant, gold ring.
Today I pass rows of flowers ragged after many seasons
of shouting shades of purple and orange. I reach your plot
and stop. Don’t think you are innocent, cemented there
underground. Your image seeds itself outside like dandelion. One
of you floats over by the cookstove, where canning time unending
holds me a child, near you, but silenced by my doubt and your
adult sighs. It’s discipline that makes you haughty still as your
image stares at me through the veil of your homemade dress,
work-stained beyond repair, and the hair falling in your face, grown last fall
too short to stay pinned.

Today no one will believe what I could not tell you then.
In July I was ten when the man waited for me to pass the place
where the gully carved earthen clouds from mounds of red
clay. And the sparsest grass pieced broken glass into
a quilt of years, designed by blue willow china
amber snuff bottles, and a shattered conch shell with pink insides.
I passed it many times, and said how hard things spread exactly
like the soft kind that pieced together my bed. On his face
was a frozen smile. Didn’t I trust him?
But why did his hands grab for what I could not understand?
Because I could not tell. You were canning
then, I was just a child. So today, mother I will speak of the images appearing
beyond my voice: Without doubt the man and child will die.
For Sale: Racing Go-Cart, 4HP, Blue Ribbon Winner
Erin McCook

Four horses racing on towards a continuous consciousness and an even longer gasp for air. I told them they were winners.

Around a cycled circle, not stopping for direction or thinking of the scenic route, pressed metal passed for gold.
Benji's Battle
Michael Richardson
First Place—Fiction

The bus ride, as usual, was bumpy, and Benji couldn't get his math homework finished. Each time he tried to write down a number, the harsh dirt roads they traveled over made his hand jar, sending erratic streaks across his notebook paper. He sighed and surveyed his work: all his sevens had elongated tails and his threes looked like eights.

The bus was almost at school, so Benji put the books into his backpack. It was a nice, new backpack that his mom had bought at a department store. Cartoon characters adorned the fabric, and it was plenty big. He could fit his math book, his science book, and his notebook into it without it even being half-full. He also had plenty of room for his lunchbox. That way he wouldn't have to carry two things.

Benji felt the bus decelerate at a place where he didn't remember stopping before. Looking up, he saw a little boy his own age aboard the bus. He didn't look familiar.

A new kid, Benji thought. I wonder what he's like? The bus began rolling again as Benji watched the new kid pick out an unoccupied seat and sit down. He seemed a little frightened; he didn't look up, but kept his head down instead. During the remainder of the bus trip, the new kid
didn't even move.

Finally, the bus stopped. As the students filed out through the narrow passageway between the green seats, Benji found himself directly behind the new kid. *Wonder what grade he's in?* he thought. Benji didn't have many friends, and he found himself almost hoping that someone new might join the class for him to play with. Maybe, just maybe, the new kid might be a third-grader like Benji.

After unboarding the bus, Benji let himself walk behind the new kid, being careful not to pass. The cold morning air stung his cheeks, so he dug his hands deeper into his coat pockets. Finally, after drawing up a little bit of courage, Benji decided to talk to the new kid.

"Hey, what's your name?" he said, coming up from behind to walk beside the quiet newcomer.

"Billy," the little boy answered. Benji noticed a drawing of R2-D2 on the new boy's single notebook; Billy apparently had no backpack.

"I'm Benji," he returned with a smile. "Did you draw that?" he asked, pointing to the surprisingly detailed portrayal of the robot.

"Oh," Billy said, looking embarrassed. "Yeah. I like *Star Wars* and stuff like that."

"Me too," Benji said, now feeling relaxed with the new kid. "Did you see 'em when they came out at the movies?"

"Yeah, saw all three. My mom took me," Billy said.

"Cool. All three. What grade are you in?"

"Third. What about you?"

"Third."

"Good. Now I got somebody to show me around."

Benji hated school. He sat through the gray morning at his little desk, drawing purposeless triangles and circles on his paper as the teacher droned on about fractions and math things. Benji hated math too.

A strong kick came from behind, shaking his desk and making his No. 2 pencil roll off onto the floor. Benji didn't have to look behind him; it was Eric. Benji hated Eric, and maybe Eric was why Benji hated school.

Finally, he turned around to face the bully. Eric was awfully ugly, and he was pretty dumb, too. He was so dumb that he was supposed to be in the fourth grade. Benji and his classmates had heard that the school's principal had ordered Eric to stay a class behind, and just because he was so stupid and mean.

Eric's fat finger flicked Benji in the nose. "I heard you like the new boy. Are you a fag or something?"

Benji didn't know what a *fag* was, but he sure didn't want to be called one. He scowled at the overweight boy
Eric smirked and flicked Benji’s nose again. His index finger was sticky with the remnants of popsicle; he hadn’t bothered to wash his hands, and merely wiped the finger on his camouflage jacket. He also hadn’t combed his hair.

“Just don’t want to sit behind a queer, that’s all.” Eric laughed as he returned to his fractions.

Whatever, Benji thought. He looked at Billy sitting in his desk on the other side of the room, and hoped that he had *Star Wars* action figures to play with. *That would be really cool!* Benji thought, but forced himself to attempt solving the mystery of fractions.

“Eric’s going to kick your butt at P. E.,” a girl named Amy whispered into Benji’s ear at the water fountain. Suddenly, the cold water took on a bitter taste.

Benji was a little scared, but he didn’t want Amy to know it. He took on some bravado and stood up from the fountain. “Why’d he say that?”

Amy’s face showed concern. She wasn’t really Benji’s friend or anything, but they talked sometimes. She thought Benji was OK, and Benji felt the same about her. “I just heard somebody talking about it,” she said. “Maybe you should get one of the bigger kids to be a bodyguard, or something.”

Benji smiled. He knew he was a small, little boy, but he didn’t like Eric. He could handle himself in a fight. “He won’t do nothing to me,” he said.

“I don’t know. He told some of the boys how you were in love with the new kid, and now they all know.”

“What?” Benji said. “I’m not in love with anybody, and I sure ain’t in love with no boy.”

“Well, then, you better go tell Eric,” Amy said. “He thinks you are, and he said he’s going to beat your head against the ground.

*Ouch,* Benji thought. *That would hurt.* But still, Amy wanted him to tell Eric, so he would have to.

“I’ll tell him at P. E.,” Benji said. “I’ve got to eat lunch now.”

Benji had wanted to eat lunch with the new boy, Billy, but now he was afraid to. Everyone would see them together and think they were in love. He didn’t think Eric would actually *kill* him — maybe beat him up pretty bad, but not *kill* him. Benji knew that the best way to avoid getting beat up was to avoid Eric entirely at P. E., even if that meant he couldn’t defend himself against the accusations. So Benji ate lunch alone. Or, at least he tried to eat lunch; his stomach hurt and he didn’t feel like eating. The spaghetti sprawled on his pale blue lunchroom tray had taken
on a new tasteless quality, so Benji left it mostly uneaten. Suddenly, in the huge lunchroom crowd, he felt very alone and very scared.

Back in the classroom after lunchtime, Benji sat down in front of Eric. After a while, he got the courage to turn around and face the overweight sloth.

“I’m not in love with the new kid,” he said sternly, hiding behind thick layers of bravado.

“You are,” Eric said with a wave of his pudgy hand. “You’re as gay as the day is long.” He smiled through yellow teeth. “And you want the new kid.”

Benji was still afraid of Eric, but he was angry now, too. “Don’t call me names,” he instructed, pointing at Eric.

Eric saw the gesture and smacked Benji’s hand aside. “You don’t point at me,” he said. “I’m going to beat you alive at P.E., you know.”

That was a threat, and it scared Benji a lot. He was about to say something, but the teacher came back into the room. One hour until P.E.

As Mr. Hamilton read about the wonders of kinetic energy, Benji thought about fighting Eric. He knew he couldn’t win. Eric was big and mean, and Benji was frail and wimpy. I’m just a little wuss, he thought to himself.

He felt alone because he knew no one would help him. No one liked Benji much. He was different because he liked video games instead of sports and reading instead of TV shows. Amy was his only friend, and she only liked him some of the time. Besides, he couldn’t get a girl to help him fight. That would make him even wussier. Come recess, he could either run away or fight and get pummeled, and getting pummeled would hurt.

When the class made its way to the gymnasium, Benji made a point of playing in big groups. He didn’t know what was going to happen, but keeping himself invisible seemed like the best idea. He joined a group of boys playing basketball, but he didn’t really feel like playing. He only got the ball occasionally, and he always missed the basket when he took a shot. He didn’t seem to be very energetic today. Usually, he was a hyper little boy, running all over the place.

As he thought of the impending confrontation, he mostly just passed the ball and hoped he wouldn’t get it again. Then Benji saw Amy waving to him from the corner of his eye. He left the game, knowing that no one would miss him.

“Eric told me to tell you that he’s waiting for you outside,” his friend said as he approached her. “He doesn’t think you’re going to show up, but he’s waiting beside the janitor’s building, if you want to fight him. If you ask me, you’d better stay in here. He’ll kill you.”
“No, he won’t kill me,” Benji lied.

“Well, stay in here anyway.”

Benji didn’t know what to do. As he watched Amy walk back to her girl friends, he debated between going back to the basketball game and going outside, away from Mr. Hamilton’s watchful gaze, to get his brain bruised. He knew that Eric would see him in class after recess and would taunt him about not showing up. He didn’t want to be taunted in front of everyone. He could get beat up in private. Billy, the new boy, was at the opposite end of the gym, playing dodgeball with a few other kids. But Benji couldn’t ask for help from his new friend; he had to fight Eric alone. He shrugged and walked to the gym exit. He looked at Mr. Hamilton at the gym’s east side bandaging a little girl’s arm. Benji slipped outside into the cold afternoon.

The janitor’s building was a small shack of wood, poorly built and falling down. Inside were shovels, buckets, and tanks of pesticide. Eric was leaning against the right side, looking like a jerk.

“Glad you came, faggot,” Eric shouted over to Benji. “I was starting to think you were going to play hop-scotch with the new kid and forget about me.”

“Shut up,” Benji said sharply. There was no point in being nice now; he might as well yell back because he was going to get beat up anyway.

Eric came toward Benji with slow steps. He had taken off his camouflage jacket and put it on a post next to the janitor’s building. His fat arms emerged from a US Navy T-shirt like big pipes. Benji braced himself as the bully came closer.

Then Eric was on him, pushing Benji to the ground. The thin little boy hit the ground with a thud, then looked up to see Eric stepping on his face with a mud-caked shoe.

Still on the ground, Benji grabbed Eric’s foot and twisted it around as hard as he could, creating a small cry from the bully. *That only made him mad*, Benji thought.

“You turned my ankle,” Eric seethed as Benji slowly rose. He was so mad, he couldn’t even say anything else, only breathe hard. He reached for Benji’s arm, but the swifter Benji was able to dodge the move. He ran behind Eric and planted his foot on Eric’s fat ass. He knew it wouldn’t hurt, but it was sure humiliating.

As Eric tried to turn around to beat Benji to a pulp, he tripped over Benji’s skinny legs. “You tripped me!” Eric cried.

Benji ran to the post where Eric’s jacket lay. He picked it up and ran back to Eric, who was still on the ground, and covered Eric’s face with it. When pressed, Benji found, he
could fight dirty.

Eric’s muffled curses emanated from his covered face. Benji knew that the boy couldn’t see, and resisted the urge to kick him where it hurt. Instead, he decided to wait until the dumb boy could see before he fought him some more.

Benji felt good. He was still a little scared, but suddenly Eric didn’t seem so unbeatable. He was very slow and not bright. He was not a very good bully.

As Eric pulled his jacket from his face, his eyes got big. “You got mud on it!” he cried. As he rose to his feet, he made a charge for Benji that surprised even Eric himself; it was a speedy run. Benji didn’t have much time to react, and fell to the ground and Eric toppled over him. He felt the air leave his body as the fat boy punched him in the gut.

Eric got up to survey the damage to his jacket while Benji struggled for breath on the ground. He hurt. His lungs burned, and even when he did regain his breath, he thought that he might lose it again. Breathing became a chore; he deliberately worked at maintaining air flow. He saw that Eric was still looking at his prized coat.

“Dipshit got mud on it and everything,” Eric whined to no one in particular. “Look at that,” he continued, finding a new patch of red mud that he had missed seeing the first time.

“If it stains,” the bully said as he turned to the now-standing Benji, “I’m going to kill you again tomorrow!”

Benji would have no more threats. He couldn’t be afraid of Eric forever. He would fight today so there would be no need to fight again tomorrow.

He charged his aggressor, and planted a right hook into Eric’s jaw that stunned both of them. He looked slowly at his thin arm and smiled at the pain in his fist. Eric was shocked that he had been hit so hard by such a wimpy little kid, so shocked that he didn’t react when Benji pushed him away, using his left leg to trip Eric as he went down, a move learned in one of Benji’s street-fighting video games.

Benji knew that he had not hit Eric all that hard; he was just a small boy, after all. But for some reason Eric was crying now, mumbling something about lost teeth and mud-stained jackets. Benji only watched as Eric sat on the cold ground, rubbing his jaw while tending to a slightly swollen ankle. When he was convinced he would survive, he gradually calmed down and did not protest when Benji walked back inside the gym.

The bumpy bus ride was not so bad when you had someone to talk to, Benji noticed as the day neared its end. “So you beat him up?” Billy said wide-eyed as the bus
rumbled on. "Wow. I mean, he's pretty big, and you're little."

"I didn't beat him up," Benji reminded him.

"Well, you got him to leave you alone."

"He'd better. I'll fight him again, and he knows it. I'll tear him up next time."

"Next time I'll help you," Billy said as the bus driver turned on the warning lights and rolled to a stop in front of his house.

"Okay," Benji said, happy to have a comrade.

"So you're coming over Friday?" Billy asked as he made his way down the aisle.

"Sure! I'll bring all my Star Wars stuff over."

"Good," Billy said from the door. "Don’t forget your Nintendo stuff, either!"

The door closed and his new friend was gone, but Benji felt pretty good anyway. He couldn’t wait to see Billy tomorrow, to see if Eric would be on crutches, and to see if Amy had heard of the fight.
Jesus and the Baby
Cara Vest
Fiction — Second Place

Her momma was up again. Rebekah always woke when she heard her momma roam the house at night. Momma always thought she heard the baby cry. She would always go into his room, but he was never there. He is never there. Momma’s tears would get louder and louder as she remembered, and Rebekah could never sleep.

Momma would be fine most mornings, cooking breakfast and washing the dishes from the night before. Lately, when Rebekah got up in the mornings, Momma would still be sitting in the baby’s room in the rocking chair. Daddy would work during most of the day, so Rebekah and her younger brother, Robert, were left to tend to themselves on those days Momma was stuck in the chair.

Rebekah would help Robert into his clothes, which was why his clothes never matched. He did not mind. He was too busy deciding what wrongs he would right with the Million Dollar Man that day. He was happy, as long as he got to wear his cowboy boots.

Rebekah would make cold cereal on those mornings Momma was stuck in the chair. The hardest part was getting the milk out of the refrigerator. One of them had to hold the refrigerator door open while the other tried to lift a full gallon of milk off of the top shelf. Getting the cereal down was easy. All she had to do was open the doors and climb the shelves of the bottom cabinets, then place two big books on the counter. Standing on top of those she could reach anything on the top shelf. She was convinced she made cereal better than anyone else, even if she spilled the milk sometimes.

“Bekah, I want the prize this time,” whined Robert.

“You got it out of here yesterday. Remember the tattoo?” said Rebekah.

“Oh yeah. There isn’t one in there today?” asked Robert. He really didn’t remember getting the prize, but he didn’t want to risk being called a dummy for not remembering.

“No, dummy, now go turn on the TV and see if Mighty Mouse is on.” She waited until he had turned the corner of the living room, pulled the toy water gun out of the cereal box, and shoved it into her pocket. She could not reach it yesterday.

Momma never got stuck in the chair on Sundays. She would always make muffins and wake Rebekah and Robert right before they were ready. Rebekah and Robert loved Sundays. They would go to church and color in Sunday
School, and then they would go to Granny’s for dinner. She always made green Jell-O for dessert. Green was their favorite. Much more tasty than the red.

After the muffins were gone, Momma would put them in their church clothes and make them sit at the edge of the bed until she was ready. She would put on the perfume she only wore on Sundays and special occasions. Her clothes were always so soft and silky, even the slip. Not like the one Rebekah wore; it always scratched her. Rebekah could feel a forgotten straight pin in the new dress Granny had made her. Granny always forgot one, and it was usually under the arm. Between the rough slip and pin, Rebekah was about to scratch herself out of both of them.

“Rebekah, stop scratching. It’s not ladylike,” demanded Momma.

“I can’t help it. I think Granny left another pin in my dress,” said Rebekah, scratching.

“She will take it out after church. Until then, sit still and behave yourself. A real lady always smiles, even when pins are biting her,” said Momma. “Look at Robert. He is sitting still.”

“Yeah, and Robert eats worms, too, but that doesn’t mean I’m gonna eat one,” said Rebekah.

“Young lady, I will not have you talking to me that way. Besides, he would have never eaten that worm if you hadn’t of told him it was a live Tootsie Roll. I swear. Sometimes I think he would jump off the roof of the house if you told him to. Now, if you are going to have a smart mouth all day, you can stay at home with your daddy and help him clean out the chicken houses. Is that what you want to do?” asked Momma.

“No ma’am,” said Rebekah.

“Good. Then sit still,” said Momma.

“Yes Ma’am,” said Rebekah.

Robert turned and smiled his “you’re-in-trouble-and-I’m-not” smile.

Just wait, Rebekah thought. It won’t be too much longer before he will be jumping off the roof of the house. She decided she would wait until Sunday School, then go to the bathroom and remove the pin herself.

Getting the dress off without unbuttoning the back of it was going to be hard. Maybe if she could just get that one arm out, she could find the pin and be set free from the pain she was in. Just as she almost had her arm out, Rebekah heard the dress rip. Momma was going to be mad. Rebekah looked and saw the whole side of her dress was torn. She started to feel tears well in her eyes. What was she going to say to her teacher once she got back into her room? Maybe
her teacher would not notice. What was she going to tell Momma? She got her arm back into the dress easily after the hole had been ripped in it and tried to think of some way she could possibly blame the rip on Robert. Anyway, she had gotten the pin out.

Rebekah did not even make it out of her Sunday School classroom door before Momma had noticed the rip. Momma had Rebekah and Robert in the car so fast, Rebekah was not sure what had happened.

“What did you do to your dress, Rebekah?” asked Momma.

“Nothing,” said Rebekah with her head down.

“Wait until I get you home,” was all Momma could say, and tears started streaming down her face.

Rebekah felt bad. She made Momma cry. Only the baby had made Momma cry and now she had done it. Robert turned and gave his “you-are-in-big-trouble” look to Rebekah. Keep grinning, big boy, she thought. Next time I’ll have you.

After they were dressed, they went into the baby’s room with Momma.

“Momma, are we going to Granny’s?” asked Robert. Momma did not say anything as tears were streaming down her face.

“Robert, shut up!” Rebekah said. She remembered she usually got into trouble for telling Robert to shut up, but Momma did not say anything.

“Momma, what are you doing?” asked Robert.

“Robert, I said shut up!” Momma did not say anything that time either. Maybe, she finally realized shut up was not that bad of a word, especially when talking to Robert.

Momma turned and looked at them standing there at her feet.

“I’m waiting for the baby,” she said.

“But I thought the baby wasn’t coming home. That’s what Daddy said, anyway,” Robert said.

“Daddy was mistaken. Jesus wanted the baby to go live with him for awhile, that’s all, but I’m sure he will be back.”

“What does mistaken mean?” Robert asked as he climbed into Momma’s lap. Rebekah was wondering if she should call her Sunday School teacher, Miss Ruth, to let her know that Jesus was coming back to bring the baby. Miss Ruth was always saying how Jesus was coming back, and that we should be ready to go with him.

“It means he was wrong. The baby will be back. I am sure of it,” said Momma. “Why don’t ya’ll two wait with me? Then we can all hold the baby when he gets here.”

“OK,” the children said at the same time.

“Are you two hungry?”

Lights and Shadows
"Yes ma'am," they both answered.

Momma went into the kitchen and made two cheese sandwiches, and poured glasses of milk. She also took some peanut butter and soda crackers down from the cabinet and brought them into the baby's room where Rebekah and Robert were waiting. Then she took a screwdriver out of the drawer in the kitchen, shut the door to the baby's room and locked it, and took the door knob off the door.

"Now, we are locked in so no one can make us leave," said Momma.

"What does locked in mean?" asked Robert.

"Shut up, Robert. You ask too many questions," said Rebekah.

"What have I said about using that word, Rebekah?" asked Momma.

"Not to," said Rebekah.

"Right, and if I hear you say it again, I am going to put you in a corner for a week."

Rebekah was confused. She had just said the forbidden word twice and Momma did not say anything, but now she was in trouble again. Rebekah scolded herself for not telling Robert to "shut up" more while she had the chance.

Momma sat in her chair and started humming. Rebekah told Robert that because peanut butter is so sticky, if he put it on his hands and feet he could walk up the wall and hang from the ceiling like a bat or fly. Then they heard Daddy come home.

"Rachel! Kids! Where are you?" called Daddy.

Rebekah and Robert put the peanut butter down and ran to the door.

"Daddy, we're in here!!!" they hollered at the same time. Both of them were banging on the door.

"What are ya'll doing in there?" he asked as he tried to open the door. "Where is your Momma?"

"We are waiting for Jesus to come back with the baby. Momma said he won't be too much longer. Do you want to wait with us?" said Rebekah. Turning to Momma, she asked, "Is Daddy going to stay here with us?"

"No. He wouldn't understand why we are waiting in here for the baby to come back. But you understand, don't you Bekah?" Rebekah only nodded and Momma gave her a big hug. "I knew you would. You were always so smart."

Rebekah went back to putting peanut butter on Robert's hands and feet, while Momma was talking to Daddy.

"Please come out of there Rachel. The kids must be starving," said Daddy.

"No. We are waiting. He is going to come back. I hear him crying all the time, and I am never here when he cries."
He has to be here if I can hear him. If I wait for him here, the next time he cries I will be able to hold him,” said Momma, and she began to cry again.

Robert was about to begin his climb when they heard Granddaddy’s voice through the window. He was talking to their Uncle Charles.

“Jimmy says he needs a flat-head screwdriver to take the hinges off the door. I have one in my truck, but that door is so old I’m afraid he is going to need a crowbar to pry the hinges loose,” said Granddaddy.

“I’ll run up to the shed and see what I can find,” said Charles.

“Hey, Granddaddy,” said Rebekah as she stood on the bed and looked through the window. Robert stood next to her and put his peanut butter hands on the window.

“Guess what, Granddaddy! Bekah says I can hang from the ceiling like a fly if I put enough peanut butter on my hands.”

“I’ll bet she did. Boy, when are you going to stop listening to her?” asked Granddaddy. “Why don’t ya’ll open the window and climb out here with me?”

“The last time we did that, we got into trouble. Momma said we better not do it again or she won’t let us watch cartoons for a week. She says it scares her,” said Rebekah.

“She won’t mind this time,” said Granddaddy. Both of them just shook their heads and turned their attention back to Robert’s climbing adventure. So far he was not able to stick to the wall as they had planned. Rebekah convinced Robert he needed to jump from the bed to the wall as hard as he could and see if he would stick to the wall that way. Just then they heard the sounds of the door being taken off its hinges, and torn from its frame.

Granddaddy grabbed Robert from the bed as he was about to take his first jump at the wall, and Daddy took Momma away. Momma was gone for a long time. Rebekah and Robert was beginning to wonder if they should sit in the chair and wait for Jesus to bring Momma back.
To My Lilith

Mike West

As we walked together
through the velvet leaves of the Garden
your naked flesh tempted
me more than any forbidden fruit:

Even after the Fall,
when I close my eyes,
I still see you.
I try hard not to think of you leaving.

If only I had explained my condition
to you, that when you were on top,
that piece of me between my legs fell asleep.
I can’t remember the name you gave it.

I thought that you understood.
After all, we were both made
in God’s image.
Not like that bitch Eve.

Oh yea, Eve.
Maybe you’ve heard of her big screw-up.
She blames it on a talking snake.
I tried to explain to her

that snakes do not talk but I suspect
that the poor girl is either dumb
or really bad at making excuses.
(Excuses is a word I made up after you left.)

The Fall was mighty unpleasant.
Unpleasant is a word Eve made up.
She sure is getting fat;
she blames that on a different snake.

Well, I hope this finds you well.
I sent it with my son, Cain.
He’s a good boy,
just a little hot-tempered.

If you get this, my sweet,
and you miss me, then please
come and rescue me from this....
I never meant to hurt you.

P.S. Lilith, I need to know something.
Eve told me that the serpent’s voice sounded
sweet like a woman’s. Was it you? Some people
are blaming it on an angel named Lucifer.

Tim Martin, Lament
Merit Award
Synthetic Black Stone Sculpture
A Father's Legacy
Joel Hays Pass

The old bridge is through now. They'll be planning to tear her down, soon as the State can find the money. I worked in this tower for forty-five years, another fifteen before that with my Pa. We raised pigs on that piling over yonder, wasn't nothing but dirt on top and the pigs couldn't go anywhere. They just ate and grew and grunted. No one ever messed with them either. Pa, he started this job, first one they hired. Looks like I'll finish 'er out, though. Took them twenty-five years to build, before that everyone had to wait for the ferry to take them across. When she was complete, they even had a parade with a motorcade, a marching band and all. Biggest thing seen around here in a long time. They don't need this old bridge no more, though. As soon as the state finds the money they'll be tearing her down, and selling the metal for scrap. Funny, with the spans raised like that, kinda looks like she just up and surrendered.
The Wrestling Match
Jason Wilcoxson
Creative Nonfiction

When my best friend Jason and I were in young school, he became interested in professional wrestling. Every time I visited his house the World Wrestling Federation would be on, a white-trash soap opera where long-haired, sweaty men in tights would disparage their opponents before going into the ring to stage a choreographed battle between good and evil. There was one wrestler who would spit red or green dye into the faces of the opponents to “blind” them, and sometimes a manager would become physically involved in the match, jumping into the ring with a folding chair to pomme the competition. To top it all off, everyone had a theme song that played during their solemn procession to the ring.

As Jason became more involved in wrestling, his collection of wrestling paraphernalia, including video games, VCR tapes, posters, and a foam replica of a championship belt grew. His collection of his own trophies and medals also grew as he became a prominent member of his school’s wrestling team.

“But it’s fake!” I’d tell him.

“I know, but it’s still fun.”

I learned several wrestling moves from watching it on TV at his house. A clothesline was a popular move where one wrestler threw other against the ropes, which acted like a slingshot and sent them back, where an outstretched arm awaited their chest to knock them backwards. A pile driver involved picking someone up and dropping them on the mat, with all of your weight behind them. Punches were often thrown, with a stomp on the wrestling mat warning the opponent what was about to happen.

The moves weren’t limited to the floor of the ring. Often a wrestler would lie moaning on the mat, while his opponent would climb to the top of one of the four posts, called turnbuckles. He’d leap off and land on his opponent, though the person on the floor was usually saved by a gap between their opponent’s bent elbow and body. Even so, the father a wrestler was, the more the fans enjoyed it.

Sometimes, though, the person on the mat would roll away at the last minute, leaving the airborne opponent to land on the mat and roll around in agony, to be pinned quickly. A moral lesson for the masses: Pride goeth before a fall.

Jason always rooted for the “good guys,” but I could never understand how to tell which ones were good and
which ones were bad. They were all there to fight each other, or to pretend anyway.

My freshman year of college, my parents had taken the week before off from work to visit relatives in Virginia. Their main plan for the house was to have aluminum siding installed while they were gone. Mine was to sleep late every day. They got what they wanted because of a dependable person they had hired to install the siding. I didn’t get the sleep I wanted because at 7:00 every morning they arrived and started hammering. I cursed the reliability of the men hammering at my bedroom wall. Why couldn’t they show up late like many laborers did?

The man they hired was Jake, the brother of Becky, one of my mother’s co-workers. My parents had heard that he was reliable and good at his job, and he was also willing to do it for $10,000 less than the other places had estimated.

“Oh, and did you know he’s also a wrestler?” my dad had mentioned as he told me someone would be doing work on the house while they were gone.

“Why would he do that? I had asked, though I really didn’t care.

My mother was the one to answer. “I guess he likes it. Though Becky said she doesn’t go to his wrestling matches. She doesn’t like to watch her brother get bounced around a ring while people in the audience shout mean things at him.”

“Or maybe she has better taste,” I replied.

My parents returned from Virginia the day the work was completed, pleased to find out the work done a couple of days ahead of schedule. As my dad wrote the check, Jake told him that he’d be in a wrestling match in a Wal-Mart parking lot in Huntsville to promote the wrestling events at the State Fair going on later that weekend.

“It’ll just be a couple of matches, and we’ll take up a collection for retarded kids.”

“Sure,” I said. If I can’t think of a good excuse to get out of it.

The next day my dad and I went to a store in that area of town, and he decided he wanted to stop and watch the wrestling match.

“But what if someone sees us there? They may think we’re a couple of rednecks who enjoy this.”

“It’s not like we’re going because we believe in it, or it’s our kind of entertainment. It will be fun to watch what goes on at one of these things.”
"Fine. But as soon as it's over, let's get out of there."

The ring was already set up on a wooden stage when we arrived. Several trucks and vans were parked near the ring, and a crowd had assembled, mostly male, and mostly dressed in working clothes. A bearded, balding man holding a microphone stood in the ring and announced the start of the show.

While he talked about the scheduled events, my father told me he could probably guess what would happen.

"They'll bring a muscled-up pretty boy out here to face off against some fat guy about twice his size. The better-looking of the two will probably win, which will be what the crowd will want to see. But if they were really fighting, I think the bigger one would win."

I looked around to see who had come to watch the wrestling matches, afraid I would see a local news crew shooting footage with me in the picture.

My father's prediction was accurate. A body builder with long brown hair and green spandex shorts entered the ring. The announcer introduced him as Captain Magnificent and gave him the microphone, after which he started telling the children why they should avoid drugs and stay in school.

So you don't end up in a sideshow like this, I thought.

His opponent entered the ring, with a yellow-and-black striped outfit stretched over his overweight body, and a tight yellow mask over his face. Two puffy lips protruded from an opening below his nose.

"Is this supposed to be some kind of bumble bee?" I asked my dad. "That isn't very intimidating."

The announcer handed the microphone to "Clyde the Killer Bee," as I tried to guess what he was going to say. It couldn't be the same thing as Captain Magnificent, since they were about to fight each other. And he probably wouldn't tell the children they should go ahead and try drugs, it wouldn't really hurt them, and that school was for suckers. Instead, he told Captain Magnificent he was going to crush him and the crowd booed.

The bell rang, and some of the moves I had seen on TV at Jason's house were reenacted for us. A wrestler was thrown against the ropes. He rebounded, running toward his opponent, who was waiting to knock him down. The audience had already favored Captain Magnificent, cheering him whenever he had the upper hand, booing Clyde whenever he had Captain Magnificent in a hold.

"As soon as Jake's match is over, let's get out of here," I told my father, trying not to appear interested.

With a loud stomp, a wrestler threw a punch which
landed lightly on his opponent, who was already leaning back in anticipation. They spent about half the match engaged in various “death grips,” “sleeper holds,” and other grapples. No one jumped on his opponent from the top of the ropes, though. Finally, Captain Magnificent was captured in a hold and yelled in agony until the crowd rallied behind him as he gradually overpowered the Killer Bee. The crowd cheered.

Do they actually think they helped him win? I wondered.

The door to a windowless black van opened and Jake came out wearing a tight green outfit. I could see he had a beer gut, and without his baseball cap, he was bald except for hair on each side of his head that stuck out like two black horns. He thanked us for coming, and told us he’d be going up against the announcer next, who also was a wrestler, the organizer of these events, and a friend.

I decided he was doomed to lose the match from the start. There was no way he was going to beat the man who had already established a rapport with the audience.

The announcer started to speak, when Jake grabbed the microphone and made an ugly face. “I want everyone here to know that the last place I want to be wrasslin’ is Alabama where you people are nothing but trash!”

The crowd began yelling and booing and I started laughing at the surprise of Jake’s complete transformation and at the crowd who bought it.

Jake and the announcer grappled with each other and began throwing each other around the ring, bouncing each other against the ropes, trying to clothesline each other, a crowd favorite. The crowd cheered whenever Jake was losing, and shouted in protest whenever he gained the upper hand. Near the end, his opponent had him in a headlock, and he yelled to the referee, “He’s pulling my hair!”

“You ain’t got no hair!” shouted a man from the audience, triggering laughter from the other spectators. I laughed too, not at his grasp of the obvious, but at the ease with which which Jake had been setting the audience up. Then I knew who was really in control of this wrestling match.
Is the Red Bird Gone?
Anne Jackson
Creative Nonfiction

It was Edmond who killed Kristian and he’s going to find out next week that she wasn’t really Kristian at all, but Penelope, his fiance’s quadruplet sister! Friday afternoon and Big Star was crowded with shoppers. I had only a few items, so I searched the checkout area, looking for a short line. I eventually settled in behind the shortest line I could find. While standing in line, I picked up a copy of *Soap Opera Digest* to get a sneak preview of the happenings on *Days of Our Lives*. I flipped through the pages over to the weekly astrological predictions. Next to *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* this magazine gave the most reliable account of the horoscope forecast. I knew that last week’s reading was meant for me when it stated “a new beau with a sweetheart of a disposition will come into your life and you will find the happiness that you have been searching for all of your life.”

Mother and I sit on the front porch watching the red bird perched on a thin leafy branch of the tall huckleberry. The red bird flitted among the branches, splattering water left over from the early morning rain while he raided the tree of its tart red berries. Before long, having its fill of huckleberries, the bright red cardinal spread its wings wide and swooped down to land on the grassy lawn in front of the porch where we were sitting.

We watched in silence as the red bird skirted through the grass, abruptly stopping to peck the ground in search of more food. “I haven’t seen a red bird in a long time,” Mama said.

“Some folks say that a red bird means that a stranger is coming and others say that if you close your eyes and make a wish, and if the red bird is gone when you open them, your wish will come true.”

“How do you know which one it is, Mama?”

“You just wait and see.” “Come on, let’s make a wish.”

She hooked her little finger around mine and we closed our eyes.

“Don’t open your eyes until I tell you and don’t say your wish out loud because it won’t come true.”

I was relieved when we opened our eyes that the bird had gone. I can’t remember if my wish came true or not, but I believed with all of my heart that my wish would come true.

My belief in superstitions and fortune-telling came from my mother, handed down from generations. My father al-
ways thought they were silly, which may explain why my brothers never believed in any of them. I believed it when mama said it was bad luck to let an umbrella up inside the house or if you swept trash out of the house after dark you would sweep out the life of some one you loved. According to Mama, crossing fingers or making a cross in the air would undo most of the bad spells.

One day the fortune tellers came to our house. I’m sure there were only two or three of them but at the time it seemed as if it were a whole band. Mama said they were gypsies. I can’t remember how many of them were men or women, or even if any of them were men. They had smooth dark skin and they wore bright colored clothes. The ladies wore long flowing pleated skirts and had scarves tied around their long straight hair. Shiny, dangling earrings hung from their ears and rows of bangles covered their arms. My brothers laughed when they talked among themselves in their own language because we had never heard people talk like that before.

When they went inside to talk to Mama, I scolded my brothers for laughing at them.

"Ya’ll better not laugh at them gypsies. They’ll make snakes come in your stomach and you will have to go to a witch to get them out."

“That’s stupid. How can they put snakes in your stomach?” my brother Leonard sneered.

“They will too! Mama said they would!”

“You’re always believing all that old stuff that Mama says and ain’t none of it true. Let’s don’t play with her no more,” my brother said, draping his arms around my younger brother Richard’s shoulders, and they took off without me to play down in the ditch. My two brothers knew it would make me mad if they went to play in the ditch without me, because we always played in the ditch together. “Something bad is going to happen to ya’ll,” I yelled after them. “Just like the time when you let the umbrella up in the house and the kitchen cabinet fell on you while you were stealing those cookies.” I ran behind them, intent on going in the ditch with them but they threw rocks at me and chased me back to the porch.

I don’t know how the ditch got there, but it was there as long as I can remember. Mama could never find us when we played in the ditch. The ditch was over twelve feet deep and a mile wide. We would up run and down the deep abyss playing hide-and-seek, cowboys and Indians, and other games.

I remember one time when some of our friends were
over we decided to have a seance to call back the spirit of Otis Redding, a rhythm-and-blues artist who had recently died in a plane crash. We rolled an old steel barrel, that mama used to burn trash to keep the mosquitoes away, down into the ditch. We started a fire and holding hands, we formed a circle around the barrel. With me acting as the spiritualist, chanting and moaning, we called on the spirits to release Mr. Redding and allow him to come to us. Giggles emptied when someone broke out with the popular Otis Redding tune “These Arms of Mine.” All of a sudden a walnut fell into the can with a loud thump from a nearby tree. Everyone screamed! Tumbling all over each other, we ran up and out of the gully faster than we had slid into it.

“T’m going to tell Mama on ya’ll,” I yelled after my brothers, following behind them as they neared the entrance way that we used to slide down into the gully. One of the rocks hit my index finger, almost knocking my nail off, and sent me wailing back to the house. I was crying so hard that my mother ended her meeting with the gypsies to come out to see what was wrong.

“They laughed at me, mama, and they laughed at the gypsies too,” I snorted between snifflies. Mama shooed me off, not wanting the gypsies to hear me talking about them. She reached under her blouse and pulled out the white rag, untied the end which contained her money, paid the gypsies and they left. They headed down the well-trodden dirt pathway talking that funny talk.

How long has that sign been there? I have passed this red frame house many times, but I have never noticed it before. There it was; “Tarot Card Reading,” wedged in the perfectly sculptured lawn near the pond which circled the bottom of the slope where the house sat. Now every time I pass the house, I make it a point to look over at the sign. If only there was a number on the sign, so I could at least call and get more information. It was one thing to have your fortune told through the magazine but it was quite another to talk to an actual psychic. Suppose they told me something bad and suppose they knew things about me that I didn’t want anyone to know, or what if they put a hex on me.

One day, after a year, I passed the house, and to my surprise I saw a boy and girl playing outside near the pond. Today, my curiosity got the best of me, causing me to turn around and come back. As I turned into the gravel driveway, I noticed a man and a woman standing at the side of the house. Several ducks that were swimming in the pond waddled up and surrounded my car, forcing me to stop. The children stopped playing and stared, and the couple on the
hill stared as well. Eventually, the ducks wandered back
toward the pond, releasing me from my holding pattern.

I continued up the hill and parked my car in the drive-
way. The couple had disappeared into the house, and the
children, still standing at the pool, turned around to stare at
me. I walked up to the house and knocked on the door.
“Come in,” a male voice called out.

“I came about the tarot reading.”

“Please have a seat; it will just be a minute.”

I sat in the mauve chair the man had directed me to,
and he disappeared down the hallway. From the outside the
house seemed plain but the inside was quite fancy. Ner-
vously glancing about the room, I noticed the black and
white bear rug spread over sparkling hard wood floors.
Jumbo cast iron pots sprouting tropical foliage sat along
the bay window, shrouded by fringed brocade drapes that
matched the mauve furniture. Something moved against the
back of my leg, causing me to gasp — it was just a little
white kitten. After what seemed, like hours, the man finally
came back and told me to follow him. He led me down the
hallway to a back room and ushered me in.

I opened the door to a dimly lit room with the only
light provided by a candle on a large round table. Sitting
behind the table was an attractive olive-skinned lady. The
candlelight flickered across her face as she opened a Bible
and asked me to put twenty dollars inside.

She shuffled the cards and placed them on the table for
me to cut. Then she stacked several cards in rows along the
table. As she maneuvered the cards around the table, the
sound of the shuffling invaded the thick silence that filled
the room. She selected one card from the pile and placed it
on the table.

“This card deals with your finances, I see lots of money.
This money will come to you soon, through a court battle.”
She went through the same shuffling process and selected
another card.

“This card deals with romance. You will meet a nice
man named Johnny and he will bring you much happiness.
He is just around the corner, but first you will need to get
rid of this man you now have. He is an alcoholic and he is
not good for you.

“The last card deals with your health. In the past, you
have been surrounded by people who pretended to be your
friends but they only wished bad things to happen, and there-
fore, caused you to be surrounded by bad luck. But now
since you have moved away from them, good will happen
to you. You will go through the change early.”

I started to speak to tell her how accurate her readings
were, especially about my friends when I lived in Illinois, but was silenced by her cryptic stare. “You must not speak, you will say too much.”

I’m looking out of my office and I can’t believe it! There is a red bird. I close my eyes.
He sits and remembers his wife, tears running down the cracks and lines
of his weather-beaten face
as the eyes search each image
for the woman she was before.
Her likeness begs *Listen to me...*

In one picture she is young,
laughing while the snowflakes
dance through her hair — in his mind,
she is twisted, her face a mask of pain

while the cancer eats away
at her stubborn refusal to die.

Now he is alone, his only resort
to leaf through the yellowed pages
of time contained in photographs
in an attempt to combat the silence.

The pictures have no voice of their own,
but in his thoughts he hears laughter.
Olive You
Kevin Kannenberg
Poetry—Third Place

It stares at me: a glaring red eye,
accusatory, demanding.
Pulpy green flesh,
puckered at one end with an X
like a badly-healed wound.
Just an ordinary olive, yet much more
to my bloodshot eyes.

It floats in the gin,
suspended in formaldehyde—
deep memories of love.
Only an olive, I tell myself.
But the sliver of pimento
becomes its mouth instead of its eye
and I give voice to the pain.

"Why did you hurt me?"
she tentatively asks,
as if the olive's pain is hers.
Torn off the vine,
held down and gutted,
the black pit of its heart removed
by a faceless man.

"Why did you do this to me?"
the voice insists.
It wasn't me! I cry at the olive
and the echoes in my mind.
I didn't hurt you—I loved you.
"Then love me now," she begs.
But I can't... or I won't.

My trembling hand reaches out
to pluck it out of the martini.
Biting into its bitter flesh, I sigh
at the momentary relief.
It is the alcohol not the olive,
her voice only a ghost from the past.
And I drown it with gin.
The Old Men Read a News Story about the Worst Tornado in 25 Years

W. Scott Whitlock

He had watched until the weatherman's warnings were silenced by the 200-mile-per-hour winds. Two minutes later, he emerged from his untouched house and saw the girl who held a doll in her hand and screamed her parents' names.

Three days after, snow blanketed the remains of houses and trailers and all of the scattered memories. When it melted, the old people downtown sat on their stools, read the paper, and said the crazy weather was a sign from God that the end was near. One took a dip of snuff, wiped a trail of spit from his chin, and asked if they had read the story about the girl and the man.

And someone mentioned him, as someone always does when struggling for meaning or gossip, the railroad man, who steered his train into another three days before his retirement. Who tells the same story after dinner about how he recognized his best friend's shoe dangling from a severed leg—how sometimes being left alive is not necessarily a blessing—And as he tells the story night after night, he picks, sliver by sliver, ten-year-old glass out of his forehead.

Brian Tull, Forever
Merit Award
Synthetic Black Stone Sculpture

Lights and Shadows
Life's Not Fair
Lynn Frost
Creative Nonfiction—Second Place

My father's philosophy about life was that "life's not fair." I have always hated that saying because it meant tolerance of life's whims, powerlessness, and the sacrifice of my own desires. Whenever my dad would say this to me, I wanted to smash something, usually my sister's face. Life wasn't fair to me when I had to share my bike with her, but my dad told me that I had to be fair to her nonetheless. It wasn't so bad to share my bicycle with my sister, until I found out that while I was away at school my sister spent her leisure preschooler days smashing frogs with my bike. The motivation for her frog-killing sprees was the froggy funerals she would have for them after they croaked (yes, pun intended). She would give them a very decent funeral, making up heartfelt eulogies, decorating their graves with Mama's roses, and searching for hours for the perfect rock to serve as tombstone. But sometimes when she was in a very sadistic mood, she would just run the poor froggies down and smash their guts out unceremoniously. It was when my sister grew careless of the amenities of death, that I first began to suspect the brownish-black stuff on my front bicycle tire was something other than dog shit. By some bizarre accident, Nature gave me a clue to the mystery of the unknown substance, when I found the whole body of a frog that had dried stiffly to the front tire. After an interrogation of my sister with many creative torture techniques, she confessed to countless murders. I ran in the house to tell my father of my sister's heinous crimes and after ten minutes of frantic pleading I finally succeeded in getting him to come outside with me to view the smoking gun. As I pointed to the murder weapon, I screamed "Tell her she can't ride my bike ever again!"

I'll never forget his response to my pleas for justice, "Well now, your sister doesn't have a bike and it won't hurt you to share yours with her for just a little bit longer, until I can afford to buy her one. It won't hurt you."

"But... but... that's not fair!" I cried in righteous indignation.

"Seana Lynn, life's not fair," and that was his verdict.

Oh, if I had only been old enough to know about the Humane Society!

There were no appeals to be made in my father's justice system; and he had only one sentence for every court case, "life's not fair." In some ways he was right, but I shudder to think of myself in agreement with his philosophy,
since I rebelled against it so much as a child. But in some instances life can be very unfair, I will catalog a few.

Life was not fair when ... my mother named me Seana, instead of something ordinary like Kathy or Judy. She named me after Sean Connery, her hero and the man she lusted after while I was in her womb (that makes me kind of nauseated in a Freudian sort of way). I had an unusual name, with an unusual spelling, and I dreaded it the most when a substitute teacher would call roll. At an early age I was already set apart from the other kids, whose parents had named them with average American names. I wasn’t exactly the boy named Sue, but I was named after 007.

Many times was there occasion to hate my unusual name. There were my softball games, when my mother would stand up from the top row of the bleachers and scream until the shrillness of her voice echoed like it was in the bottom of a canyon, “Seana Lynn, hit that damn ball! You can do it! Just knock the hell out of it!” At times like this, it wasn’t her profanity that bothered me, it was the fact that there was only one Seana in the whole park and it had to be me. I couldn’t disclaim the little five-foot raving maniac who was jumping up and down on the bleachers and screaming like some kind of forest banshee. If my name had been Lisa, Jenny, or Kim, I could’ve saved face by ignoring my mother and pretending she belonged to someone else who went by the same name, because in my softball league and elsewhere in the world I assumed, there were several girls named Lisa, Jenny, or Kim. But, no, everyone knew it was my mother who shouted so loudly the coaches had to ask her to sit down, because it was distracting the other players. And everybody knew that it was my mother who, in the last inning of the game, marched over to the fence where the coaches were standing so she could yell directly into their ears without being accused of distracting the players out on the field. So instead of trying to reason with her, the coaches asked my mother to leave the field entirely. But Mama just couldn’t leave the field without taking me down with her, “Come on Seana Lynn, you’re not going to stay here and play ball for this bunch of shit asses!” What could I do? I belonged to that name. I belonged to that woman.

Seana was the name of my mother’s daughter; but when I became my own person, I took my middle name, Lynn. I gave myself the power to belong solely to myself when I changed my name. It angered my mother when I began using my middle name because she said the name Seana made me special, because it was a special name to her.

But I was thoroughly sick of being special, and was more than willing to be insignificant if it meant that I was
my own person. It was a very powerful moment for me when I enrolled in a new school with my new name and not one of the teachers who called out the name, Lynn, stumbled over it. I was no longer mispronounced.

Life isn’t fair when ... at this moment, my mother is sitting in a hospital room in Dallas, Texas, crying as she looks at her lover’s disfigured face. She cries, not only because his brain was swelling to such an extent that two nights ago he almost died, nor because he has permanently lost his hearing in one ear, nor because his once-handsome face is now scarred forever, but because she lied to him. Her lies drove him to impulsive actions, where his naivete was his own worst enemy — a weapon, like the gun he was beaten with. She didn’t mean for this to happen. She never does. She has a problem common to most alcoholics — she’s oblivious of consequences.

I confided in my best friend, sharing with her this story about my mother. My friend asked me how I could keep loving someone who behaved as my mother behaves. I responded to her question by telling her what my Nanny always told me, (when I was young and telling anyone who’d listen that I hated my mother), that I hated my mother’s ways but that I still loved her.

Nanny taught me that it was best to love and accept all people, even those who treated you the cruelest. It has taken so long for me to let myself love my mother. I wasted so many years hating her for leaving me.

I remember a time when I was about eleven years old, my mother dropped me and my sister off over at Nanny and Papa’s house for the day (at least that was what she initially told us). Four days later Mother still hadn’t shown up or called.

We (Nanny, I, and Missy) finally went in search of mother after Nanny had called every bar listed in the “City of Corinth” phonebook. It was strange that it was so easy to find her; we found her the first place we looked for her, at our apartment with a man nobody recognized. As we stood at the door and watched this strange man saunter into the kitchen, sit down and light up a cigarette at our kitchen table, it all seemed to begin ringing, like your ears after a hard slap in the face. We all stared at Mother, then at the man, then back at Mother, until we forced her with our gazes to explain herself.

Mother, under extreme duress, began stammering with a couple of excuses. During this pathetic lying session, Missy began crying. I think that’s what finally widened the fissure in Nanny’s normally solid reserve. She stepped in front of my sister and me and yelled at my mother, “Leta!
Stop it! Just stop it! You can lie to me if you want to, but I will not stand here and let you lie to these girls!"

On the way back to Nanny’s house she refused to let me say bad things about my mother and she told me once again, “You do not hate your mother. You hate her ways. You can love someone but not love their ways.” Nanny, through her example that day, taught me when to stand up for myself and how to love the unlovable. But she didn’t teach me how to surrender until she died.

Surrender is not the same as cowardice. I had always thought it was until now. It is more like having faith in the air you breathe. I remember before my Nanny died she told me, “You have to trust God whether you live or die. You have to believe that no matter what happens, you will land in God’s hands.”

I wish I could say that at my Nanny’s funeral, I stood up like Xena, Warrior Princess, with my ancient sword and my flying scourum and beat the Grim Reaper senseless while laughing in his bony face. I wish I could say that I felt awed with the mysteries of life and death when I stared at the wilting yellow roses my Nanny held in her bruised hands. I wish I could boast that I “held up nicely,” at the funeral services or that I was “strong” for my family, for my father. It was not a powerful time for me. I didn’t possess that strong reserve that in my Nanny I had so much admired. That just was not my way to power.

My moment of power came about three months after Nanny’s death, when I went, for the first time after Nanny’s funeral, to visit her gravesite. I’d had several dreams about going to her gravesite and seeing her there. In every dream she always told me the same thing, that she was still alive. Naturally, I took this literally and on some childish level I actually hoped that I would see my Nanny when I got to her tombstone.

As I positioned the clump of marigolds that I had picked from my own garden, I regretted tying them together with a piece of green yarn. I thought about how childish they looked as they lay next to an elaborate bouquet of purple silk flowers. But as I stood there, I knew that my ragged-looking marigolds would be my Nanny’s favorites.

I kept thinking that I might cry, but I didn’t. I just stood there as the silence of the cemetery enveloped me. I don’t think I said or did anything powerful. I made no bold battle cry, nor did I raise my hands to the Heavens in some gesture to invoke the angels to comfort me in this moment of capitulation. I didn’t even say a prayer. But in the stillness of the graveyard something powerful happened, I finally surrendered.
Life isn’t fair when ... my husband and I go to collect the rent from our family-owned trailer court (I am living in a house in the middle of a Mississippi trailer court; can this be fair?), and when the tenants don’t have the rent, we are forced to stand there and listen to them tell us about life’s unfairness ad nauseam. Meanwhile our own bills go unpaid, and we must try to recount the tenants’ whiney-butt stories to Trustmark bank when they call to ask us when we’ll be making our next car payment.

But our trailer court actually has had some tenants who paid their rent on time, such as Bill and Darlene Hudson. They were beautiful people, even though they drove a 1976 Ford Fairmont and had a total of only ten teeth between them. Their beauty was in the honesty and the straightforwardness of their words. After the big ice storm of 1994, when everyone’s power was out for about two weeks, Bill came over to talk to my husband about hiring an electrician to get his power turned back on. We hired an electrician but he was so swamped with business that it would be another week and a half before he could even get around to fixing Bill and Darlene’s trailer. After about a week of waiting Bill came over again to talk to my husband about his lack of electricity. When he walked over to the house and stood in front of my husband, he didn’t complain about the unfairness of sitting in a cold, dark trailer for three weeks, nor did he rant and rave about having to cook his meals outside on a barbecue grill in freezing temperatures. He didn’t tell us how inconvenient it was to have to keep all his food in a styrofoam cooler, either. He just smiled and said in a very calm, very respectful manner, “Now David, I want my motherfucking power.” That was all there was to it. He got his power back on that day.

Bill taught me a great lesson about the fairness of life: The key to being treated fairly is to be gracious about setbacks for as long as it is reasonable to accept them, but there comes a time when you must demand your power. And you won’t get your power through self-pity; you’ve got to defeat the cycle of disappointments that life is going to throw at you, by moving on to your next lesson without dwelling on the unfairness of it all.

So what if my sister used my bicycle as a killing machine? So what if my name is not Kathy or Judy? So what if I’ve had to experience loss, as has everyone who has ever lived and loved? I haven’t had a “fair” life. But there is nothing to be gained in a fair life. It is when your life is turned upside down by injustice that you make the greatest discoveries of personal power.
Wonder Woman
Renée Byrns
Creative Nonfiction

Water sprayed above my head in an arc, misting down over my body, which was clothed in a Wonder Woman swimsuit. The sun reflected off my metallic armbands and shone through the mist, surrounding me in rainbows, which I used to zap the enemy birds and squirrels running around my yard. Zap! There goes another one. That bird was flying in for attack and I got him. I practiced my kicks on the trees, not getting too close, so I would not scratch my feet on the bark. Kicking backwards, then swinging my long black hair around made me look just like her.

Suddenly, a blast of freezing water hit me in the back, knocking me out of my fantasy world and into a muddy puddle filled with razor-sharp sweetgum balls that had fallen from the trees scattered around our yard. I started crying and looked over my shoulder to see Brett dancing around with the water hose and laughing his head off. He tormented me the way only an older brother could.

Anita Collins, Emerging
Second Place, 3-D
Marble
I was no longer Wonder Woman when he was around. I felt more like one of the Three Little Pigs who built a house not strong enough to withstand the evil of the Big Bad Wolf. My emotion towards him was one of fear: fear of his wrath if I did not do what he said, and fear of his decision just to be mean. Like the time that Brett and the boys from next door threw firecrackers at the tires of my Sundance bicycle as I rode through the pine forest next to my house. Never had a ten-year-old girl ridden as fast as this! Even with the wind rushing past my ears and my heart beating so loudly I could hear it, the crackle of their laughter rose over the crackle of limbs beneath my bicycle tires and all other sounds, while my embarrassment became greater than my fear. I pedaled harder, not noticing the partially hidden branch mixed among the undergrowth on the path ahead until too late. I tried to swerve, but that made me more vulnerable when my wheels connected with the branch. I flew through the air and landed with a thud. With skinned knees and hurt pride I cried so hard that I could not even get up to walk back to the house.

It was like that all through my life, and my mother just accounted for it by saying that all boys acted that way when they were growing up. I didn’t think that was a very good excuse, but who was I to say that? I was just a girl who shouldn’t have been out in the woods playing anyway, or so she thought. It was expected of me to play house and have tea with my dolls, but I never wanted to do that. I wanted to be like my big brother and be a tree-climber and a dirt-biker and an army soldier, but girls weren’t cut out for that sort of thing.

Brett would sometimes let me play with his G.I. Joes, but only when he was trying to get out of something. Even then, he would give me all the loser G.I. Joes, that had arms missing or legs broken off, so he could use the excuse that they couldn’t possibly fight because of their ailments. That way, he could run off and play by himself, and leave me there to “man the base,” which was the dirt clinging to the bottom of a tree that had fallen over. If I complained about getting the bad ones, he would say, “You should just be happy I’m even lettin’ you play with ’em.” His brown eyes would squint down to a hairline and his face would scrunch up under his black hair, which would scare me into agreeing with whatever he demanded.

Off he went to play with his toys, while I stayed at the base to take care of my men. Unfortunately for my guys, I didn’t know that you couldn’t let go of the men when sticking them in the holes. I decided one of my men needed to take a nap and rest his missing arm, and he was lost forever.
When asked of his whereabouts, I told Brett that he was missing in action. I understood all that army lingo from watching M*A*S*H every week, and so did he. He would never have hit Hot Lips the way he hit me, but then I was living in a fantasy again and the bruise he left on my arm brought me back to reality.

I immediately ran to my mom to tell her what had happened, but she didn’t have time to deal with a petty thing like a bruise. She had a house to keep clean, three children to raise, and a card shop to run all by herself since my parents had gotten a divorce a few years before. Instead of punishing him, she told me that I shouldn’t have been trying to play like a boy if I couldn’t take the consequences, and sent me to my room to play with my own toys for a change. “You love him more than you love me!” I screamed with the logic typical of young children. I would have caught all kinds of hell if I had done half of what he put me through. She just chalks it up to his being a boy living in a house full of girls.

I have heard that excuse all of my life, especially when I get in trouble for doing the same things that he got away with. Is there so much difference between boys and girls that we couldn’t possibly be capable of doing at least half of what they do? I don’t think so. I climbed trees with the best of them and I can fight for what I believe in just like a man does now. I have a mind inside this womanly body that is perfectly capable of thinking and deciding for myself. I am a Wonder Woman.
My Kingdom for a Car
Kevin Kannenberg
Creative Nonfiction — First Place

My father has never owned a car in his entire life. He just turned sixty-seven this year, and he's pretty proud of the fact that for those sixty-seven years, he's never had to worry about auto maintenance, haggling with used car salespeople, or parking on the streets of New York.

When Dad was twenty-one, he moved from the tiny town of Cedarburg, Wisconsin, to the heart of Chicago. He took a bus. After five years in Chicago, he headed to Manhattan to seek his fame and fortune. He took another bus. He's lived in New York ever since, and whenever he absolutely needs a car, he rents one from the Avis Rent-a-Car down the block on 76th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam. However, as he doesn't really like to drive, he usually ends up taking a bus — or the Long Island Railroad.

"If I lived in an apartment building that had its own parking garage," Dad is fond of saying, "maybe then I'd have a car."

Many New Yorkers who don't have the luxury of parking garages in their apartment buildings simply opt to rent a parking space in a local neighborhood parking garage.

The cost? At the parking deck across the street from Dad's apartment building a modest five hundred dollars a month or so will get you a roomy ten-by-fifteen slab of concrete in which to park your precious automobile. Of course, that doesn't include tipping the parking attendants every single
time they get your car from the deep dark bowels of the garage.

However, using a local parking garage is the easy way to go. Parking on the streets of New York is no small feat. It can sometimes take literally an hour or more to find a spot, especially on Sunday nights, when it seems like every single person in the entire state of New York who owns a car has come into the city. Driving around block after block like some metallic vulture in search of a vacant parking space is certainly not on anyone’s list of favorite things to do.

If you prefer to brave the streets in search of a spot, there are certain things to keep in mind. When — or rather, if — you finally find a parking spot in the city, don’t forget the urban answer to car theft: the Club. Walking down the street in Manhattan, you can generally spot the sign of a tourist’s car by the absence of this one essential auto accessory. The Club locks onto a car’s steering wheel, theoretically preventing a thief from moving the car. The Club has become so popular that it even comes in designer colors now — to match your car’s exterior or interior.

If you want further reassurance that your car will be intact the next day, be sure to put a sign in the window blatantly stating, “NO RADIO. NOTHING IN TRUNK. NOTHING OF VALUE IN CAR. EVERYTHING HAS BEEN STOLEN.” However, keep in mind that this will not deter illiterate or suspicious thieves who will break your windows or pop your trunk lock with a screwdriver simply in search of anything to sell.

Adding to the frustration of parking in Manhattan is alternate-side-of-the-street parking, a bizarre custom, imposed by law, supposedly designed so that sanitation trucks can clean each side of the street every other day. One look at the average side of the street in New York, whether north or south depending on the particular day, and it’s obvious that this law is virtually pointless. Still, every day New Yorkers shuffle their cars from one side of the street to the other in a humorless game of musical cars with the only musical accompaniment the honks and blasts of the horns of other unhappy motorists. Somewhere a lawmaker is probably giggling in a mad frenzy, pleased to death that the alternate-side-of-the-street parking rule causes New Yorkers so much grief. Every time a car is towed away, a large portion of the two-hundred-dollar impound fee no doubt goes into that lawmaker’s pocket. The amount of money collected in fees from impounding tourists’ cars each year probably makes possible all those “I Love New York” commercials that air throughout the country.

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Lights and Shadows
Growing up, I missed having a car, but it wasn’t a void in my life. My grandparents were pretty much the only people I knew who had a car, and they had retired to Florence, Alabama, when I was two. However, every time they came to visit us in New York or when our family went down to Alabama, my younger brother and I would get into tremendous arguments over who would get to sit in the front seat with Opa. Much to our dismay, my mother usually settled the argument by taking the front seat herself. 

“See what you get for fighting about a seat?” she’d ask from her vantage point up front.

“Yes. We’re sorry,” we’d answer in unison, promising that we’d behave in the future.

“Okay. Remember that.”

We agreed. Sandwiched between Dad and Oma in the back seat was, in our opinion, no way to ride in a car. Plus, with my mother’s cigarette smoke drifting back at a precise angle to gag us, we usually ended up piling out of the car retching horribly.

“Have you two learned a lesson?” One of the four adults would ask this very question (or one of its many cousins) at every opportunity, especially when Keith and I were coughing furiously. We would nod eagerly, the “lesson” learned simply that it’s no fun to be in a cramped car filled with smoke.

Of course, the very next day we would be back at each other’s throats, vying for that front seat. After all, the prize was to sit beside Opa, to watch the world zooming into focus through the windshield of the 1971 Volkswagen Fastback, and maybe even to get a chance to sit on Opa’s lap and hold the steering wheel for a minute or two! It was worth fighting over.

Another challenge facing my brother and me was finding the little baby-blue Fastback in a sea of other cars in a suburban parking lot. However, this was more of a good-natured sport than a potentially violent contest. Opa used a bright orange ball impaled on the car’s antenna as a means to locate the car. No matter where he parked, Keith and I were able to find the car with little difficulty. Opa and Oma would thank us profusely, claiming that without us they might have been stranded forever, wandering aimlessly through the parking lot looking for their car. We were more than happy to be of service, especially considering the somewhat frightening alternative.

Inevitably, the little ball would disappear every time Opa and Oma came up to New York. Although no thief wanted the old AM radio badly enough, the orange ball was too much of a temptation to resist. However, the next
time we went down to Alabama to visit our grandparents, there was another ball on the antenna. Opa claimed he got them from the Little Orange Ball Store, but he wouldn't tell us where it was.

"If I told you, you would tell everyone," he told us time and time again. "The next thing I knew, I would never be able to find my car because everybody would have one!"

We believed him. It made sense.

We also believed that Opa controlled the weather. After all, every time he washed his car, it would rain the next day without fail. If we were scheduled to go swimming at the Florence Recreation Center the next day, we would beg Opa not to wash the car.

"Please, Opa! We don't want it to rain tomorrow!"

"I don't know..." he would say, shaking his head.

"Come on! Please?" We would beg and plead, hopping around in what Dad always called our "pants-on-fire dance."

"Okay," Opa finally agreed. "but tomorrow you both will have to help me wash the car when you get back from swimming." 

So we'd go swimming the next day, without the threat of rain. Later, Keith was frequently — and conveniently — exhausted from paddling around with his floaties on. So I, being the big brother, would let him take a nap while I helped Opa wash the car.

When the rain came the next day, I often found myself outside, admiring the polished car. As the rain fell, making machine gun sounds against the metal patio cover, I marveled at Opa’s command over the atmospheric conditions. It never failed to amaze me.

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In 1985, Opa died. A year later, Oma decided to sell the Fastback. She had never learned to drive, so the car was unnecessary. A Florence man bought the car for one thousand dollars. Although it was fourteen years old, the car didn't have a scratch on it, even after making more than a few trips back and forth to New York. The engine sounded the same as it had the day that Opa bought it from a Volkswagen dealer in New Jersey.

Oma could have easily gotten much more for it. Sometimes I wish that I had been old enough to drive at the time. Several years later, after Oma had passed away too, I moved down to Alabama myself, inheriting my grandparents' house in Florence and beginning college at the University of North Alabama. In the years since I moved to Florence, I’ve often seen the baby-blue Volkswagen around town. It looks a little worn now, the paint a little faded, but a part of
me always wants to go up to the man driving it to make him an offer.

I would have loved to have that car, a physical reminder of all the fun we used to have. And I would even have let my brother sit up front with me.

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Although I had visited my grandparents every summer from when I was two years old, I wasn’t really prepared for life in a small town. For one, I didn’t own a car, and in Florence a car is pretty much a requirement.

My house is within walking distance of the college campus, so I put off buying transportation for nearly two years. I knew a few of the neighbors and made friends fairly quickly, so I could always find a ride if I really needed one. However, most of the time I walked.

As a general rule, New Yorkers walk. Being a New Yorker, I didn’t mind trekking up to the Jitney Jungle for a loaf of bread or a gallon of milk. Although it was slightly embarrassing to be seen walking the streets of a town where everybody drives, I soon became accustomed to the stares and the occasional malicious honk from passing juvenile delinquents.

Friends of mine seemed perplexed at my decision to walk in favor of using some of my inheritance to buy a car. “I like to walk,” I’d tell them.

“I don’t get it. Why?”

“It’s good exercise,” was the best reason I could give. However, it was a feeble excuse. I liked to walk for the sake of walking.

But Florence is a driving town, and it conspired to make me into a driver. In order to change my status from non-resident to Alabama resident to lower my tuition costs, I had to get an Alabama driver’s license. For what, I’ll never know. I didn’t drive, so what was the point? However, it was a requirement. In addition, I had to have a car registered in the state of Alabama.

“What if I don’t have a car?” I asked the imposing University of North Alabama official.

He was nonplussed.

“You don’t have a car?” he asked, as if I had admitted that I had lived nineteen years on this earth without a functioning brain.


He was understandably unimpressed. He simply told me that I’d have to get a car and have it registered in my name.

My father, being the non-driving person that he is, was less than thrilled when I told him that my tuition would
remain that of a non-resident. He promptly called the school and straightened out the matter. I was absolved from registering a car in order to meet the requirements for an Alabama resident. However, my journey toward becoming a motorist had already begun; I had a driver’s license.

I am a senior now at the university and I’m still considered an Alabama resident. After all, I’ve owned not one, but two cars since I’ve been in Florence.

The first went to the junkyard some time ago. The second now sits in my driveway with a flat tire, oil leaking from its damaged engine. For the last three months, I’ve depended on my girlfriend for transportation to the store for that loaf of bread or gallon of milk.

Walk? Not me. I’m a driver now. Even trudging the five minutes to class seems almost a Herculean feat sometimes. Oh, how I wish I could simply get in that silver automobile in my driveway, turn the key, and hear it purr to life, eager to whisk me on my way.

Without a car, I feel less than whole. I am helpless, unable to fly out to the mall at a moment’s notice. I am naked, exposed to all the world’s laughter.

I would give virtually anything—a pint of blood, my firstborn child, and more—for a car. And if you don’t believe me, simply make me an offer.
I repeated what I heard, mixed with the sounds my new voice created.

I said, "I am alive," "I am here," though the sound was nonsense to the untrained ear.

No one listened; I was a child with nothing much to say. I wasn't yet one.

My teacher called about a test: a number said gifted.

but it was a gift only I appreciated. When I spoke I was interrupted.

No one listened. I was nine years old and when I laughed I was the only one.
Papa's daybed was in the hallway across the aisle from an oblong mahogany drop-leaf table where two Queen Anne chairs usually stood. It faced the french doors that opened out onto the front porch where, bordering the yard, a gravel road made a horseshoe curve that ran over the knotted and calloused roots of three venerable, towering oaks. Everything in the hallway belonged to Papa's side of the family, including a clay pipe that lay, like a tribute, cradled in an octagon-shaped dish on the table underneath a picture of my Aunt Puss. The pipe had been a cherished belonging of hers. It was encrusted in a peacock-blue enamel on the outside; inside was black. Aunt Puss stood in the picture beside Papa, holding the pipe proudly in one hand. They were brother and sister. I don't know what Aunt Puss's real name was. Maybe it was "Puss," even though that's an awful name to give somebody. Anyway, my mother commented one time that Aunt Puss had inspired some of Papa's heartiest laughter. Her hair was bobbed off short in the picture, and parted on the side with a thick wave dipping across her temple, half-covering one eye. It looked dark in the black and white picture. I strained hard to see if there might be something about her that looked like me. I wondered if she talked with an accent since she married a man from Kentucky and lived there for maybe a hundred years before she died. I thought of her as a foreigner, sort of, which made me admire her even more. I pretended I was her in

Helen Allman, *Hot, Hot, Hot*  
Merit Award, 2-D Color  
Color Photograph
the picture every time I scratched up a cigarette butt from where Papa had ground it with his toe in the ground. Sometimes I got two or three puffs before my fingertips and lips began to blister. I would then grind that last pinch of the butt into the dirt with the heel of my shoe, making sure I buried it forever.

I yearned for things to stop changing and stay in their right place, like the things in the hallway, but Papa was real sick. Most of the time he was asleep and you were supposed to come inside through the back door. When I looked inside, trying to decide whether or not it was safe to tiptoe in, I thought of how the house seemed to be waiting for things to stop changing.

All kinds of things were moved because of Papa’s liver. The Doctor said it was dead and breaking apart inside. When he threw up in the aluminum dishpan, sometimes there were chunks in it. He always wiped his mouth real hard afterward, over and over. His lips puckered like crepe paper. Afterward he would smile and look at me and say, “now then daughter.” That meant it was time for me to take the pan outside. I carried the dead mess to the edge of the yard and threw it into the plowed-up dirt in the field. Sometimes the dogs came to sniff at the remains of Papa’s insides.

This is how I entered the adult world: Reality just burst in the door one summer and no one said a word. I was admitted to this new place because I had a strong back and strong legs and arms. I had also learned to bear up under being tired without complaining. I guess what made me feel confused and strictly alone sometimes was that my mother yelled at me when I knew I didn’t deserve it, like one day when Leonard Cotton came to eat dinner with us. I was supposed to add a cup of water to the creamed corn cooking on the stove and turn the heat up to so it would thicken. But after I turned the heat up, I got distracted for a minute or two, just being neighborly with Mr. Cotton. There was a terrible scorching smell that started puffing up in the steam. The corn started popping out of the pan in hot, sticky droplets all over the stove. It popped blistering droplets out on my arms as I snatched the pan off the red-hot eye. The whole pot of corn was ruined, and since it was the main dish for lunch, Mother equated the situation with no less than an earthshaking disaster. “I declare if this don’t beat all,” I remember her saying. “I can’t trust you for nothing. This just goes to show how petted you are.” These became her hallmark phrases that she used against me for several years to come.

There was much my mother didn’t know about me, especially how grown up I was. I had known since the past
several Christmases that she and daddy were getting tired of having to do the Santa Claus thing with me. This past Christmas I made a point not to ask for anything from Santa. I’d learned the truth about him last Christmas when I found the presents I’d asked for underneath the bed in the back room. I never said anything to anybody, but I knew from that point on that Santa was a lie. But even though I didn’t mention Santa this year, on Christmas morning a shiny black bicycle was waiting on the front porch for me. This was much more of a surprise than I had ever had at any Christmas before. I carefully pushed my new bike down the steps and rolled it through the yard onto the driveway. When I started to coast fast, I tried to put on my brakes to slow down, but the peddle wouldn’t catch. The bicycle’s brakes didn’t work. I had to quickly jump off the seat and drag my foot in the gravel to stop.

I pushed the bicycle back up the hill with my knees shaking. As I walked, I noticed that the paint wasn’t as shiny as I’d thought. I also noticed that the front fender was slightly bent and the paint was scraped off one corner and chipped in several places. With a surge of disappointment, I knew my father had fixed up a junker and hadn’t had time to finish it. All the rest of Christmas Day, I refused to let any of the other kids try out my new bike. I didn’t try to ride it again either. I just rolled it around the yard until I was satisfied that everyone saw me being happy with it. Then I parked it in the shed behind some old lumber.

Other things besides Queen Anne chairs in the hallway were moved out of the house when Papa came to stay. In the wellhouse, a few feet from the back door, the burlap sack of peanuts meant for in-between-meal snacks had been set on a shelf, just barely within reach. Every time I went to get a handful, I almost scraped the skin off my knuckles on the rough burlap. Just underneath the shelf was an antique baby carriage that was full of dusty, sun-faded paperbacks and magazines. That’s where I had found *God’s Little Acre*, *Grapes of Wrath*, and several more of the books I read that summer. My mother never read books and had never heard of John Steinbeck or Erskine Caldwell. My uncle, who worked on an excursion boat, gave us large sacks of books and magazines that he was ready to discard when we visited. Mother brought them home to start fires with. Anyway these faded, yellowing remains from last summer’s visit, which hadn’t gotten burned through the winter, were this summer’s entertainment for me. I couldn’t wait to sneak off to private realms with *Tobacco Road*, a Mickey Spillane detective mystery, or one of the five or six Zane Grey west-
In the transformation of the hallway, one rather shocking item was added to the scene. Near the head of the daybed, within easy reach on a bedside table, was an ice-white bottle of gin, which bore a silver label imprinted with black and red lettering and jade-green pines. Leonard Cotton, Papa’s oldest friend, brought the bottle, and two more besides, which remained in the sack until they were needed. At the end of visits, Leonard would point to the gin before leaving and say to Papa, “You’d better git ye a snort, Uncle Sid, you need somethin’ to burn that ague out of ye.” The Doctor said the liquor should not be moved. I couldn’t help but stare at it. Papa would motion for me to come over and help myself to a piece of candy that had been placed in a carnival glass dish beside the gin. It was hard candy, formed into novel, colorful shapes like fish and little square pillows. The colors bore no correspondence to the fruit flavors they mimicked. I always fingered around for the white ones. They tasted like pineapple, though pineapples are yellow inside. Sometimes I put two pieces in my mouth at once. There was a kind of mystery to the way sweet things tasted so good. I supposed the gin tasted like candy to Papa. Leonard Cotton would help him press the bottle tight to his lips while he took quick, short sips: one, two, three.

Two weeks passed without Papa listening to me read. Someone had removed the frosty white bottle and the carnival glass candy dish. In their place was a small brown jar of Wizard pine-scented air freshener and a large box of Kleenex. Papa was getting morphine shots now, every two hours. The last dishpan I had taken from his bedside to empty into the field was mostly liquid. I yelled at the dogs.
as they came sniffing, always hungry no matter how many
scraps they’d been fed. I wanted to cry, but I didn’t. I waved
the pan at the dogs to shoo them off and then went to the
pump to wash it out.

The next day my mother called on everyone she could
to clean up the yard. She wanted the place to look nice
before the Little Rock relatives came. Leonard Cotton
brought his two grandsons and promised each of us five
dollars if we’d clean the whole yard, under the condition
that we’d finish it up all in one day. The end of the drive­
way blended into the yard at the side of the house. Weeds
dominated the edge of yard, and just beyond, and all but
obscured a mess of rusty, worthless farm equipment. Un­
der Leonard’s direction, removing this from its present vis­
ible site to an out-of-sight location behind the barn was the
first order of the day. The plan was to hitch the rusty con­
traptions to the tractor and drag them behind the barn. I
took my position right alongside his two grandsons, who
were several grades ahead of me in school. By lunchtime
the heavy labor took its toll on me. Leonard’s grandsons
looked in unison at me, shaking their heads and grinning in
confirmation of my weakness as my grip gave way under
the heavy weight of an antiquated cultivator tongue. I en­
dured the wrenching pain with cold calmness as the tongue
tore from my grip to the ground, slipping from the entire
length of my shin a long, thin layer of skin as it fell.

I felt extremely proud of myself because of what hap­
pened the next day. It was soon after Papa’s early-morning
morphine shot. Dew was still moist on the tree leaves and
the sun held open a brilliant view of every nook and cran­
ny of the world’s outsides. Shadows were hardly noticeable,
just like Papa’s body, which was almost hidden inside his
light gray pajamas. He struggled onto the front porch, but­
tressed on either side by my mother and myself, both weav­
ing under our burden. “I want to look at the earth, daugh­
ters, one last time” he said in a shadowy voice. “That’s a
fine crop of Irish potatoes,” he mumbled almost inaudibly.
In my struggle to withstand my burden and to accept what
was happening to Papa, I stared at my mother’s huge,
sprawling, white-striped spider plant. In my concentration,
my focus revealed hundreds of spider plant babies. New­
born, they seemed to hang, waiting for instructions about
what to do next.

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The Queen Anne chairs were placed side by side in the
hallway, opposite the drop-leaf table where they’d been
before Papa came to stay. The children had free run of the
house again. Leonard Cotton was there, secretly meting
out gin to upheld bottles of Coca-Cola from a small gathering of men who were sitting in chairs from the kitchen, outside about the oaks, smoking, talking, reminiscing about their youth, and about Papa's. Food was everywhere. Ham, browned in an iron skillet, buttermilk biscuits, beef roast basted with garlic-butter, small whole white potatoes swimming in pot liquor from the roast, fresh garden vegetables picked that day, and white loaf bread bought from the store in Belmont. German Pink tomatoes, ripened to a dark cherry-red, thick-sliced and piled high on a platter, lay next to crystal dishes adorned with colorful corn relishes and an assortment of pickles — sour and sweet and crisp as ice. Fruit pies and cakes with thin, delicate icings of lemon, coconut, and chocolate, flanked exotic desserts of whipped cream, cherries, and chopped nuts. Far away from the table, in another extremity of the house, on the mahogany table underneath Aunt Puss's picture, was a box of Sugar Daddy suckers, for which I'd spent a good portion of the five dollars I'd earned from Leonard Cotton's yard cleaning incentive.

All the visitors and the food seemed to intensify my mother's sorrow. She stood off next to the plowed field where I'd thrown out Papa's remains when he was alive. The dogs stood nearby in askance, though they'd had more than generous portions of scraps from the table. I had managed to bite off a piece of one of my Sugar Daddy suckers and decided I would keep her company as I savored its milky caramel flavor. As I stood beside her staring out at the field, she suddenly burst out crying as if I wasn't even there. "It was all those Masons," she said bitterly to herself between sobs. "Now he won't go to heaven. Oh my Jesus, my own Daddy won't go to heaven. I told Henry I was opposed to having them at his funeral. He knows that Jesus was the only one allowed to have secrets. Did you see the way they took over? What on earth was in that apron they buried with him? And did you see the sheer idolatry in those pieces of cedar they put on top of his grave? He's going to go straight to hell right in front of mama up there lookin' down on ever'thing."

"Oh honey," she said finally turning and acknowledging me, "Follow the straight and narrow no matter what you do. How do you suppose I will ever bear this burden of knowing my own daddy is twistin' and tormentin' in hell?"

I was so surprised by what she said that I spit out my piece of Sugar Daddy right in front of an old blue tick hound. It instantaneously lunged after the candy and grabbed it off the ground before any of the other dogs could
get to it. The sticky caramel adhered tightly to its teeth. The dog began raking furiously at its mouth with its paws. The more it chewed and raked, the more ensnared its mouth became. I had hated this dog in particular because it belonged to a neighbor, but never went home. It had always been the first on the scene when I’d dumped Papa’s dishpan. Sometimes it’d growl at the other dogs when I’d throw out scraps.

What happened next I can’t explain. I had never, through the whole funeral or any time before, thought that Papa could ever go to hell. That was unthinkable then and it’s unthinkable to me now. I couldn’t believe what Mother had said. But instead of telling her that, I did the most unexplainable thing, something I don’t understand to this day: I burst out laughing. I was laughing so hard I couldn’t stop to tell her that I was laughing at the dog. I don’t even know if I was laughing at the dog or not, since I hated that dog and I didn’t think what it was doing was particularly funny. But I just kept laughing nevertheless.

Mother must have thought I was laughing at her. I saw shock and disbelief replace her tears as she walked away from me. The dog kept trying to get free its mouth from the grip of the Sugar Daddy. It was lying on its stomach, still pawing at its mouth. I kept on laughing for a long time.

When I finally stopped, I was exhausted and giddy. I walked back to the house.

Several days later, after all the relatives went home and my mother and I had resumed the never-ending work details that filled her life, and mine as a result, I could only guess what she was thinking and feeling. I stood around in the hallway where Papa had been. I sat in the Queen Anne chairs. Then I went to water the white spider plant, maybe it would grow.
literary Winners

Creative Nonfiction
First Place • “My Kingdom for a Car” • Kevin Kannenberg
Second Place • “Life’s Not Fair” • Lynn Frost
Third Place • “A Walk With Moses” • Joel Hays Pass

Fiction
First Place • “Benji’s Battle” • Michael Richardson
Second Place • “Jesus and the Baby” • Cara Vest
Third Place • “Miz Slaughter” • Patricia Robinson

Poetry
First Place • “Reliquary” • Aaron Thompson
Second Place • “Dr. Leonard’s Waiting Room” • Lynn Frost
Third Place • “Olive You” • Kevin Kannenberg
Best of Show
"Sower's Melancholy" • Clay Bedingfield

Campus Bookstore Award
"Untitled" • Melanie F. Waye

Art Winners

2-Dimensional Black and White

First Place • "Nocturnal" • Salina Evans
Second Place • "Three Boys" • Adam Robison

2-Dimensional Color

First Place • "Greenhouse" • Russell Stafford
Second Place • "Reflections" • Brian Tull

3-Dimensional

First Place • "My Soul Poured" • Demetrius Pendleton
Second Place • "Emerging" • Anita Collins

Merit Awards

"Flux" • Melanie F. Waye • 2-D Color Painting
"School Bus" • Adam Robison • 2-D Black and White Photo
"The High" • Chris Rohling • 2-D Black and White Photo
"Rena" • Chris Rohling • 2-D Black and White Photo
"Hot, Hot, Hot" • Helen Allman • 2-D Color Photo
"Backdoor Still Life" • Russell Stafford • 2-D Black and White Printmaking
"Lament" • Tim Martin • 3-D Sculpture
"Tied" • Helen Foss • 3-D Sculpture
"Untitled" • Jason Behel • 3-D Sculpture
"Forever" • Brian Tull • 3-D Sculpture
"Gertrude" • Mary White • 3-D Wood Sculpture
High School Creative Writing Competition

WINNERS

Poetry
First place, Kari Thomas, Brooks High School
Second place, Kari Thomas, Brooks High School

Essay
First place, Will Lyndon, Bradshaw High School
Second place, Sarah Beasley, Muscle Shoals High School

Fiction
First place, Amanda Dana, Bradshaw High School
Second place, Josh Defoor, East Lawrence High School

JUDGE
The judge for the high school competition was Thómas Rabbit. Rabbit is a professor of Creative Writing at the University of Alabama. He has published several volumes of poetry.
Manuscripts and fine art for Lights and Shadows magazine are submitted by the English Club of the Department of English and art classes of the Department of Art of the University of North Alabama. These departments sponsor creative writing and art competitions annually. The 1998 contest winners are featured throughout this publication. Winning manuscripts are also included from the High School Writing Competition, sponsored by the University of North Alabama English Department.