

# Garland



*Spring 1992*



G a r l a n d

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# Garland

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## Stanzas on Starlight

By Kevin Lomangino

Gazing up from the chasm of my soul,  
The speckled blackness of night fills my eyes.  
Bringing wonder bright and terror so cold,  
To my aching heart like resplendent lies.

In blind fascination of light so keen,  
Awe accompanies the infinite sky.  
Every sparkling miracle of light seems  
Both ringing joy and perceptible sigh.

Like a distant ocean of promises,  
Wandering spirits there find a beacon.  
Searching for angels, they don't fear the ledge,  
Faith in that order cannot be weakened.

But, my soul, poorly fed by such splendor,  
Finds not this awe to behold here on earth.  
The tears are proof that the stars can't render  
Wondrous glory where there is such a dearth.

Within us all there lies a deep wellspring,  
A lake from which wretched cynicism pours.  
Through misery and shattered hopes it beings,  
Melancholy to a world always torn.

From this spring a stream of sorrows now flows,  
A river which empties into the dust.  
My shaking countenance betrays the woes  
And swelling anger of a broken trust.

Amid such beauty, forced to suffocate,  
I flail against my unseen tormentor.  
End of the innocence upon my face,  
Cursed experience I now must enter.

Deep, dark, the divine truth has been buried,  
Like the horrid facts of Oedipus' birth.  
No matter how we struggle or hurry,  
We have no effect on the universe.

## Sonnets

By Doug Davidson

I

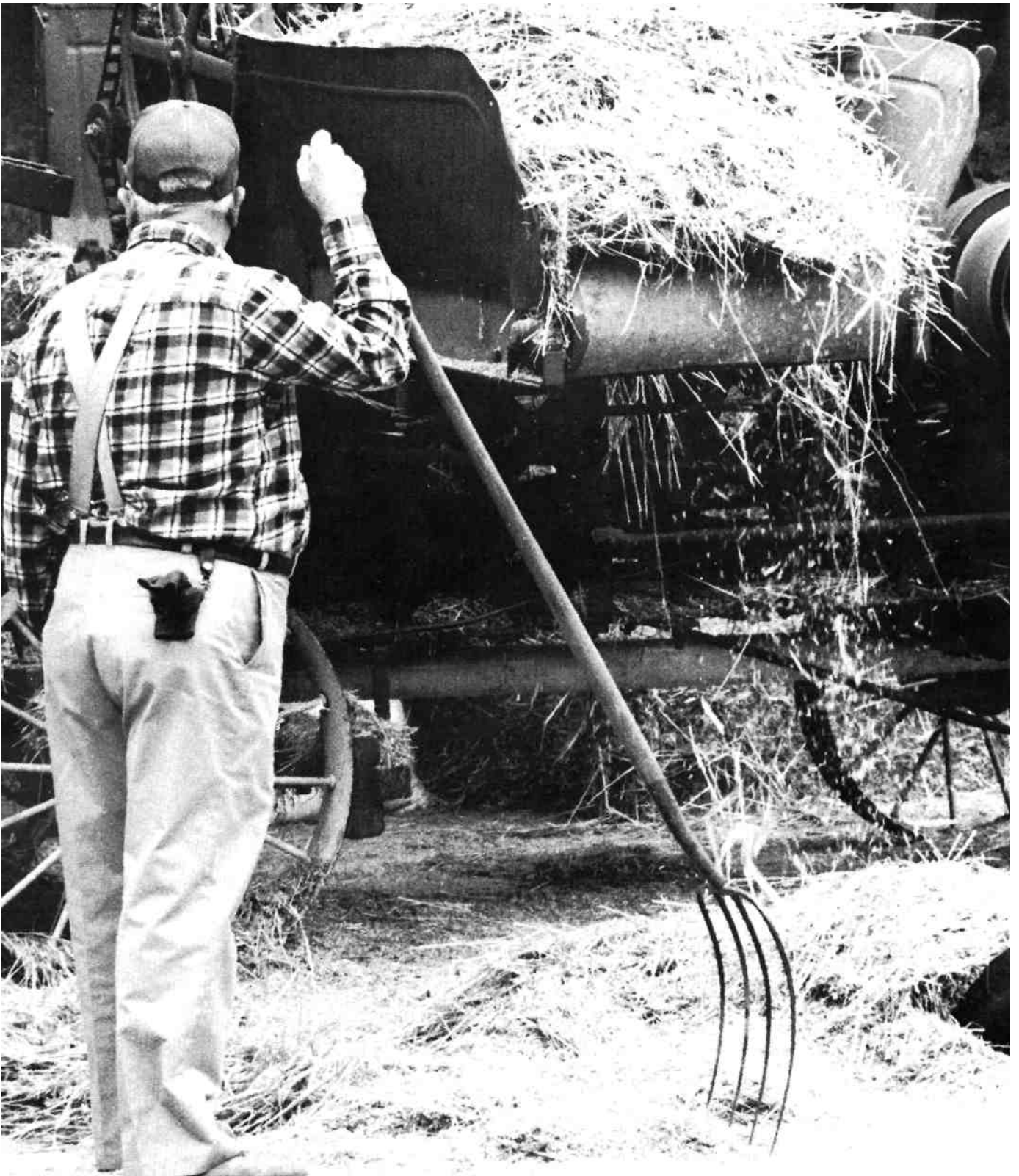
Frayed, haunches failing, wholly I collapse.  
My walls lust's rain's syndromal seepage racks.  
You bear me (not as Fate which plucks the napes  
—with steely pinchers— of the weary out)  
but as an incensed, slowborn, buzzing calm.  
I: a spire to your corporal apse.  
My knees would bash your floor, Incarnate Good,  
except your upward tugging me forbears,  
until no suppliant to You prostrate  
lags at your pews, frequents your fleshy nave,  
when I, expanding into gothic domes,  
affix my stony spirit as an arch.  
My heights your cornerstone will steadfast bear—  
and we the swelling chapel of our young.

II

Amble, righteous, we into a bakeshop  
where pastries not religiously devoid  
the void fills up of some old, oiling sot.  
He bakes instead of waning, won't desist  
until he satiates our tongues; he sears  
the insides of his wrists, removing dough  
slivered and glazed (less than his eyes) from stoves.  
He drinks because his bent, pocked wife reveres him,  
her reeking breath adoring through demise.  
An aesthete, like all aesthetes, leers at youth;  
He drinks to dream unguilted of its guise  
and burns his flaky wrists to spare his wife.  
Who celebrates a martyr for his ways?  
We cannot want but force a sacrifice.



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# Bobby Eclipse and the Pumpkin Patch

By Joseph Tobin

The time was 1:15 and 26, no, 27 seconds. Tommy watched the big hand hover over the three and the skinny red second hand orbit the clock's face, slowing on the upswing and speeding up on the way down. It was for this same reason that he believed the first half of every hour went faster than the second — it was less work for the clock. Usually at this time, Tommy reminded himself, I would be in Social Studies right now listening to Mr. Columbus rambling on about the chief exports of the New England colonies. Instead the class was waiting for Sister to come on the P.A. and dismiss them. 1:16.32.

Tommy fidgeted in his desk, test-sitting one position, then glancing upwards and stretching with mock coolness, trying another. There she is, he thought, looking across the room to Kristin, one of his classmates. She had penetrating blue eyes and shimmering blonde hair, the ends darkened from where she had been chewing on them. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen in all of his fourteen years. He loved the way she would swing her feet under her chair, her scuffed saddle shoes clanging against the skinny metal legs of the desk. He loved the way she would gather up her hair like grain in her left hand, then feed it through the navy blue elastic band in her right, leaving it to fall down between her shoulders like a horse's tail. To him she was a reason to go to school with his own hair brushed and shirt tail tucked in and a reason not to burp out loud at the lunch table. She had to have been the one Bobby Eclipse had been talking about when he wrote "Best Girl in the World." That song was on his second album, Sun and the Moon, and they'd probably play it tonight at the

Harvest Dance.

Oh man, the Harvest Dance! Tommy thought, sitting up in his desk. Was she going to be there? What would she be wearing? He pictured her in various gowns he had seen on his mother's soap operas — a ruby-red full length, a teal strapless, a cocktail dress the color of night... She looked so grown up in anything besides the blue plaid of the school uniform. He tried for fun to imagine her in one of those leopard spandex get-ups he had seen on MTV. But it wasn't right — that wasn't what she was about.

What could I possibly say to her? Why would she want to listen? He felt drops of sweat collect above his eyebrows. I don't even get this nervous before taking tests, Tommy thought, not even the hard ones. I bet Bobby would know what to say.

The public address box on the wall came crackling to life, and the placid voice of Sr. Rosetta Stone, the principal, spilled into the classroom. Tommy only heard bits of what she was saying, turning his attention instead to counting the leaves ("...Harvest Dance tonight...") on the maple tree outside the window ("...dismissed early...") and to Kristin, leaning her chin into her palm ("...agreed to help set up...") and chewing reflectively on the end of her pink pencil ("...report to the gym...").

The class stood up and droned out an Act of Contrition and an Our Father. Though his mouth formed the words, Tommy's thoughts continued to meander around the classroom. Someone had outlined some hand turkeys on the blackboard, and the words "Happy T-Giving" were stretched out above them. He watched the wrinkles on Sr. Veronica's folded hands as she

led the class in prayer, and he thought about the time that Eddie O'Malley, on a dare, yanked off her headdress, revealing a tightly bunned mass of shiny silver hair. Talk about your Kodak moments! The look on her face was priceless. Sure, he thought, Eddie spent the next week on suspension doing assignments in the principal's office, but it was worth it. Tommy had instantly admired him for his crazy courage.

At the prayer's conclusion, the teacher told everyone to have a good time tonight, and Tommy walked past the stained wood flip-top desks and over to the coat closet. He noticed that Eddie was talking to his friend Greg. The two were laughing and scribbling something on a piece of crumpled paper. Probably a cheat sheet, Tommy thought, or one of Eddie's goofy drawings of Sr. Veronica. He yanked his jacket off its hook and began to slip it on. His left arm bumped up against the scarf that he had stuffed into the sleeve.

In the hallway he passed Kristin.

"Hey, Tommy, what's up?," she asked.

"Fine, how are you?," he replied, swallowing a tiny lump at the base of his Adam's apple.

"I'm fine," she said, partially squinting her eyes in confusion. "You are going to the dance tonight, aren't you?"

"Oh, absolutely." He fingered the lucky penny in his right jacket pocket, wanting to say, "Actually, Kristin, My heart opens like a flag unfurled, 'cos you're the best girl in the world," but he couldn't manage more than four syllables at a time.

"You better," she warned. He watched her skip down the stairs.

You better! What does that mean? Tommy thought, as he strode toward the gym. Well, obviously, he answered himself, it means she wants me there. Or, no, wait, maybe one of her friends wants me there. Yeah, one of her friends. Stephanie! The girl with yellow teeth and one giant eyebrow who scowls all the time and smells like she bathes once a week! Oh, no,

not Stephanie, anything but that. She was looking at me kinda strange during the Pledge of Allegiance this morning. Maybe I should stay home.

He imagined himself upstairs that night in his room. His parents would be downstairs watching an old Humphrey Bogart movie, his Dad complaining that it just isn't the same in color, his Mom knitting the American flag blanket she had been working on for years. "Oh, hush up and watch the movie," she would say. Upstairs, Tommy would have his door shut and the stereo on.

He continued down the school hallway and thought of himself smuggling some Double Stuff Oreos up to his room, and listening to both of Bobby's albums back to back. Midway through Raining Love, the first album the phone would ring. "Tommy, I'm sorry, I had no idea," Kristin would say, "what do you say we go to the movies tomorrow night?"

Tommy turned the corner of the final corridor on the way to gym. He thought of himself playing air guitar to "Shake the Walls," one of Bobby's better rockers. He didn't really want to be a rock star, but he thought it would be nice to be known for something besides getting straight A's. That kind of stuff didn't matter to Bobby Eclipse, and besides, any girl would be crazy not to want to dance with him. Tommy pictured himself in his room playing an imaginary encore when, suddenly, a knock on the bedroom door. Before he has time to say anything, the door swings itself open, and there, in the center of his room, is Bobby Eclipse: his brown cowboy boots, his blue jeans, his white T-shirt, his black leather jacket, his wayfarer sunglasses, his hair, dark, greased-down, and wavy, his acoustic guitar slung upside down over his back, and that Bobby Eclipse smile, a toothy smirk that was always up to something; all of this in the midst of Tommy's room — a poster come to life. But before Tommy could speak, Bobby flipped off his sunglasses and stared down at him: "Why aren't you at the

dance?"

Abruptly awakened, Tommy found that he had reached the gym. Ms. Woodwind, the music teacher and dance moderator, had already gotten the other kids started. Liz was walking around along the walls, pausing to speckle them with turkeys and pumpkins that the first graders had made out of construction paper. Hope was off in the rear corner emptying bags of thin pretzels, powdery cheese curls, and greasy potato chips into cornucopia-shaped bowls. And Greg was unloading cases of soda and bags of ice into trashcans behind her.

Ms. Woodwind, a young woman whose glasses rested atop her head, spoke from behind her clipboard: "Now, Tommy, you do the...um, let's see...you do the pumpkin patch." Oh, goody, he thought, as the word "omen" flashed like a neon sign through his mind. The pumpkin patch was the place you had to stand if you weren't dancing the slow dances with anybody. As of now, though, it was ten square feet of gym floor that Tommy had to carpet with straw and populate with pumpkins.

He began scattering some straw around the floor. I suppose I'll start by making the scarecrow, he thought, that should take the longest time. He took an old brown shirt that Ms. Woodwind found in the janitor's closet and filled it with straw. With a quiet "hi-yah" he jammed a broom handle violently into the middle of it, and tried to make it stand. It looked very little like a scarecrow.

Just then Greg, the captain of the football team, broad-shouldered and slightly taller than Tommy, approached, carrying one pumpkin by the stem and another cuddled under his arm. He dropped them with a cold thud to the floor.

"How's the patch coming, there, Tommy?"

"Great, until I got to Mr. Scarecrow." He indicated the brown spiked mass on the floor.

"Oh, is that what that is," Greg said, returning to the lump, "I thought it was a big fudgsicle." He began to laugh.

"Ha, ha, ha, you're so funny I forgot to

laugh," Tommy said, raising his thumb his nose and wiggling his fingers at Greg.

"Well, I hope you make it nice and comfortable in there."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that you're going to be spending a lot of time there when you're too scared to ask a certain someone to dance." As he walked away, Tommy heard the scratching of paper and the clinking of coins in Greg's pocket.

Thanks for the support, Greg old pal, Tommy thought. Boy, is it really that bad that everybody thinks I'm a coward? That's just wonderful. Well, I'll show them. "Never underestimate someone afraid of being underestimated," — "Estimation," the B-side of "Sunrise," Bobby Eclipse's first number one.

A few minutes later Greg returned with another pumpkin and a basket filled with orange, green and yellow gourds. He dropped them in the corner and pulled a tissue out of his pocket, awakening the coins.

"Hey, Greg, what's that in your pocket?"

He held back a sneeze and spoke through the tissue. "Oh, that's just the, uh, football pool."

"Oh." Tommy was about to ask Greg why he waited until now, mid-season, to start one up, but Ms. Woodwind approached, with Liz and Hope trailing behind like the Pied Piper's mice. "Everything here looks pretty good too," she declared, generously overlooking the scarecrow/fudgsicle in the corner. Greg led everyone in a rousing chorus of "On Top of Spaghetti" as they marched proudly into the schoolyard.

Liz's mom scooped both girls up into her maroon minivan, and Greg and Tommy talked as they unchained their bikes from the skeletal metal of the bike rack.

"Are you really going to ask her to dance tonight or are you going to chicken out like you did last week at St. Dorothy's?" Greg slung his olive green schoolbag over his shoulder.

"I did not chicken out," Tommy retorted,

"and, yes, I really am going to." He envisioned the moment. She would be anxiously eyeing the door waiting for him. He would play it cool for a while; let her sweat it out. I'll be worth the wait. Then slide up to her, "Hey, Kristin—" "I thought you'd never ask," she'd say, and the rest would be history. This, of course, would not happen, but Greg didn't have to know that.

"I'll guess we'll find out tonight," Greg predicted, and rode off on his ten-speed.

I guess we will, Tommy echoed.

As Tommy rode home on his bike, he continued to think about Greg's "challenge" as he whistled "Confidential Dancer," a tune from Raining Love. He pictured Kristin's tired face behind the greasy smudge of the schoolbus window. Why Kristin? he said to himself, where did this all come from? His mind wandered back to one morning last November.

His hand had delved through a hat filled with folded pieces of paper. Slowly and deliberately he plucked one out and unfolded it. There was Kristin's name in her own light purple handwriting, the i's dotted with tiny plump hearts. At the time he was just beginning to see her as something more than a classmate. The sight of her would make his stomach twist gently and his chest get a bit warmer. He inundated her with gifts, feeding on her smiles of joyful ignorance: one day a bag of red and green wrapped Hershey's kisses, the next a bunch of Santa Claus-shaped butter cookies he had begged his mother to make. "But, Mom, it's Kristin," he pleaded, dramatically emphasizing her name. He had even considered writing her a song, but he figured nothing could top "Y.S.A. Everyday," another cut from Raining Love. "I don't know just what to say, but I'll admire you from far away. I'm your Y.S.A. everyday," he would sing to himself as he dropped pouches of goodies unseen into the hood of her jacket.

When he got to his house, an early dinner

was already being served. Quickly he washed his hands and sat between his parents at the circular kitchen table.

"So," his father had unfastened the top button of his shirt and shifted his tie a third of the way down his front, "tonight's the big night, eh, son?"

"Yes, it is," his mother answered, "and he's going to sweep that girl Kristin right off her little feet." She kissed her son's chilly face and loudly spooned mashed potatoes into a lump on his plate.

"Aw, Mom, come on," he wiped the kiss off his cheek with back of his hand. Do you know something that I don't? What makes you so sure? Nothing's going to happen tonight, Mom. I don't know what you're so excited about.

"Don't 'Aw Mom' me, young man. I am so proud of you, and you are going to look so handsome tonight." She sat down and fought back a sniff. Tommy shifted his eyes to his father. Please make her stop, Dad. I hate when she gets like this. "I know," his father's glance would say, "just eat your potatoes and don't say anything; otherwise you'll make it worse." His father's support was more subtle — some extra spending money, a few words of encouragement, but his mother was far too emotional. Either way, he thought, I'm not going to sweep anybody off anything, so can we please talk about something else. They ate in silence and Tommy excused himself to get ready.

That night the parking lot of St. Bernadette's school became a parental demolition derby, set to a symphony of beeping horns. A line of eighth graders in their Sunday best— suits, dresses, clip-on ties, cardigan sweaters— began at the entrance and wound down the cement stairs into the lot. Tommy arrived in a navy blue blazer his mother had bought for him last Easter. His hair was slickly parted on the left and

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moistened down onto his head. He smelled faintly of the Old Spice his father had sprinkled over him, "since it's a special occasion," he had said, with that go-get-em-son-that's-my-boy tone in his voice. A black plastic Ace comb stuck out of his back pocket, and his shiny loafers clicked as he bounded up the stairs. He imagined the roar of a crowd as he entered. "And now ladies and gentlemen, would you please welcome...Bobby Eclipse."

By eight o'clock, the gym was filled. Hundreds of kids stood beneath bulbous paper-mache pumpkins which were tied to the lights

that dangled from the ceiling. The music was loud and fast, pulsing through the walls. Some danced sporadically, in circles, nervously mimicking the moves of the person they danced with, unaware that their partners were doing the same. The rest formed a garden of wallflowers, drinking tinny-tasting sodas and screaming small talk over the music.

Tommy stood at the rear of the gym, by the food, gazing at the door. Is she here yet? Is my tie straight? What time is it? His mind worked quickly. Do I have soda breath? He sighed heavily into his cupped palm and sniffed. I



don't even get this nervous before a test, he thought, not even a hard one.

Greg ran up behind him: "What are you looking for?" Tommy started, and answered quickly, "Duh, your mom."

"Duuuh," Greg slurred, as he stuffed fistfulls of pretzels and cheese curls into his tinfoil-lined pockets. "You know," he raised the pitch of his voice, "I hear there's a slow dance coming up."

"Yeah, I know just what you mean. Don't rush me. It's only...uh, what time is it?"

"Almost 8:30."

"Yeah, it's only almost 8:30. I'm not ready yet."

"Well, you'd better get ready, and soon."

"Don't worry." Tommy spoke with artificial confidence. "I will." No I won't, he thought. Who am I kidding? I'm nothing special to her. Someone as pretty as her could pick anybody she wanted to; she could even go out with a high school guy if she felt like it. I doubt she would settle for me.

"Famous last words," Greg warned. "Oh, hey, are you coming with all of us to the mall tomorrow after the game? My dad said he'd drive us out and Liz's mom said she's pick us up."

"I'm not sure," Tommy said, thoughtfully feeding himself a potato chip, "I had to get an advance on my allowance after last week. There's only so much garbage at my house for me to take out."

"That's your own fault, big guy. Nobody asked you to buy Kristin's lunch when she forgot her money. —"

It was in the McDonald's in Sherwood Mall a week or so ago. Tommy, Greg, Kristin, and the rest of the band of "merry men," as they called themselves, had all ordered their hamburgers, cheeseburgers, Big Macs, fries, sodas and shakes. Suddenly Kristin's face reddened, her hand frantically ransacking her purse. She whispered to the other girls, who tallied their leftover coins. Tommy looked at Kristin's "What am I gonna

do?" blush and saw his chance. Just this once I can make her need me, he thought. He had been looking in the record store for "The Little Things," the first single from Bobby's upcoming album Heart's Revelation. But they didn't have it, so he handed Kristin the money instead. She took his hand and the money together and thanked him, winking as she did so. Tommy meant to say, "You're welcome," but his tongue had melted and slid down into his stomach.

" — that day. Although," Greg nodded in silent praise, "it was a nice touch." He straightened his jacket and licked the cheese curl powder from his fingertips. "I'm gonna go scope out the cheerleaders. Think about tomorrow though."

"Rah-rah," Tommy swung up a closed fist. Suddenly the music slowed, and the crowd began to shift. Glances darted aimlessly around the dance floor, as if suddenly everyone was on an elevator. Nope, not yet, Tommy thought immediately, it's still too early. I don't want to walk around half the night looking stupid when she says "no." He darted for the water fountain out in the hall. Tommy noticed a ghostly wisp of smoke escaping from beneath the boy's bathroom door as he bent over the fountain. He gulped slowly, stopped, then gulped again. He pulled a peppermint Life Saver from his blazer, launched it into his mouth, careful to make that popping sound with his palm, took some more water, and moved cautiously back into the gym.

He watched the couples rocking slowly back and forth. Small squares of light bounced off the metallic globe that hung from the center of the ceiling. He saw Mr. Columbus patrolling the dance floor with a broom handle, prying apart the couples that were getting just a bit too friendly for Catholic school protocol. Tommy scoured the dance floor for Kristin, and he saw that she was dancing with Billy young, the teacher's pet. Billy had bright greasy black hair, one red pimple on his forehead, and braces that made him spray spit when he talked. "Oh, Shhishster, I'll erashe the boardshs for you," he

would say. What a dork. I can't believe he's dancing with Kristin and I'm standing her watching. He began to get angry at himself. At least she doesn't seem too thrilled about it, Tommy remarked to himself. Kristin had her head turned around 180 degrees and was talking to Liz, who was dancing right behind her.

I can't watch any more, he thought, deciding to abandon this dance to save up his courage for later. He slithered over to the pumpkin patch. Sure enough, there was Greg, standing in the far corner, head down, and back to the dance floor. Tommy tapped his shoulder. "Don't try and hide. I see you, Mr. Captain-of-the-football-team."

"I don't know how it happened. I turned around to grab some pretzels, and when I came back, all of the good ones were taken." He fished a snack out of his pocket. "And you, what are you doing letting Kristin dance with him?" He craned his neck towards a couple on the dance floor. "He's a weenie."

"What about Stephanie?," Tommy asked, "she's not dancing with anybody. I'm sure she'd—"

"Don't try and change the subject. You really ought to ask her, I know you want to. Heck, everyone knows you want to."

"Everyone?" The pitch of his voice rose.

"Yep, Tommy, everyone."

Slowly he shook his head. It was flattering that everyone shared his dream, but he wasn't as enthusiastic about sharing the embarrassment if she said no. "I don't know."

"Look, you gotta ask her; I mean, I got money on—" He quickly stopped himself and began to clear his throat.

"You what?"

"Look, there's money on the floor." Greg bent down as if to pick up something.

Tommy remembered the "football pool" from earlier in the afternoon. "You guys are placing bets on me, aren't you?"

"Bet, my friend, is an ugly word." Greg stood up and smiled broadly. "Insurance, that's

all it is."

"Did you bet for or against me?"

"Now, come on," Greg smiled, putting his arm around Tommy like a used car salesman, "do you really think I would be against my good friend?"

Do I really think I want to know the answer to that? Tommy wondered, letting the question drop. He jingled his hand in his pants pocket. "My dad gave me insurance too, kind of. An extra fifty cents so I could buy her a soda." He gazed down at the red and green checkered linoleum of the floor.

"Well, see, there you go. You know what'll happen if you don't spend that money?"

Tommy looked up. "What?"

"Nothing."

Tommy watched the night go past. "Dreams that long to see the light, first must pass the test of night," Bobby had sung on "The Test of Night," another single from Sun and the Moon. He watched Greg try his luck with the better part of the cheer-leading team. Usually he was successful, and he would throw "that's the way it's done" winks over to Tommy. But mainly he watched Kristin. He watched as she danced with Jimmy Watson, Steve Coogan, Tony DeMarco, even Eddie O'Malley. He felt time pressing on him. People were already starting to leave, and he knew there couldn't be many dances left. He studied the expressions on Kristin's face, from the pensive squint to the playful smile, trying to convince himself that they were looks of expectation. Maybe, just maybe, she was thinking, "I wonder if Tommy would dance with me."

Later that night, the music slowed once again, and the D.J.'s raspy scream announced that it would be the last dance. Tommy turned and began to walk toward the door. Oh, well, he sighed to himself, I knew I couldn't do it. I'll

just have to be sick on Monday so I won't have to see everybody. I don't care, she wouldn't have said yes anyway. Suddenly he stopped himself. No, wait a minute, how do I know that? He turned around, leaning up on his tiptoes to look for Kristin. She was still standing by herself. O.K., Tommy, he said to himself, this is it. In his mind he sang the chorus of "You Never Know," Bobby's very first single. The song was Tommy's anthem of hope; he had played it earlier when he snapped his clip-on tie over his collar and squeezed into his new shoes. "You never know when the coal becomes the diamond in the rough. You never know; even the last minute is minute enough."

He took a powerfully deep breath, stepped forward, stopped, took another breath, and stepped again. I can't do it, he thought, there's no way I can pull this off. No guts. He felt his nerves rising up within him along with all the cheese curls and chips he had eaten. One more deep breath; no way, it's not going to happen, he thought, even as his feet shuffled him across a circle of dancers and right next to Kristin. She turned around to hear him whisper, "Would you like to dance with me?" He felt as if he had stepped off a cliff; there was nothing he could do now.

"Yes, I would", she said.

His mind stalled. "Would what?"

"Like to dance with you."

"Oh, right, right." Now what? he thought, Oh, God, what do I do now? He had memorized the "No? Well, O.K." speech but hadn't even thought up the "You would?" one.

Tommy led her further into the dance floor by the wrist, afraid to take her by the hand. This is really it, Tommy, he told himself. This is what you've been waiting for. He put his arms anxiously around the small of her back, the fingertips of his left hand just touching those of his right, while she rested her forearms on his shoulders. The smooth cotton of her dress was pink and warm; her hair was shadowy in the spotlights, her eyes were suddenly stronger,

heavier; he couldn't raise his head to look at them. Someone's going to cut in, I know it, Tommy thought, either that or I'm going to faint. My God, it's hot in here.

There they danced, at arm's length, swaying around the giant "B" on the center of the gym floor. He expected to hear his alarm go off any second — there was no way this could be happening. I wonder how much money is changing hands right now, he thought. Finally he looked into her eyes. Whatever you do, he warned himself, don't open your mouth. Don't ruin it. The music swelled, soaring orchestrally. Tommy realized that the song playing was none other than "Sunrise" by Bobby Eclipse: "It rises like a new day, the burning beauty of the sun. But most beautiful of all, Is that the day has just begun." Now I think I know what he means, Tommy thought. But just like that, it was over. Lights came up, and Ms. Woodwind began picking up soda cans off the sticky floor.

What? Tommy screamed in his head. That's it? Boy, that song seems an awful lot longer when I listen to it alone in my room. He unwrapped his arms and placed his dampened hands back in his pants pockets. Don't let her get away, he ordered himself, following her as she walked off the dance floor.

He slid up behind her as she removed her sweater from the coat rack in the corner, and waited for her to turn around. He exhaled a long and quiet breath. I'll make Bobby proud, he thought, and as she turned around, he spoke:

"Would you by any chance like to go to the football game with me tomorrow morning? I think we got a shot at beating St. Dorothy's this time."

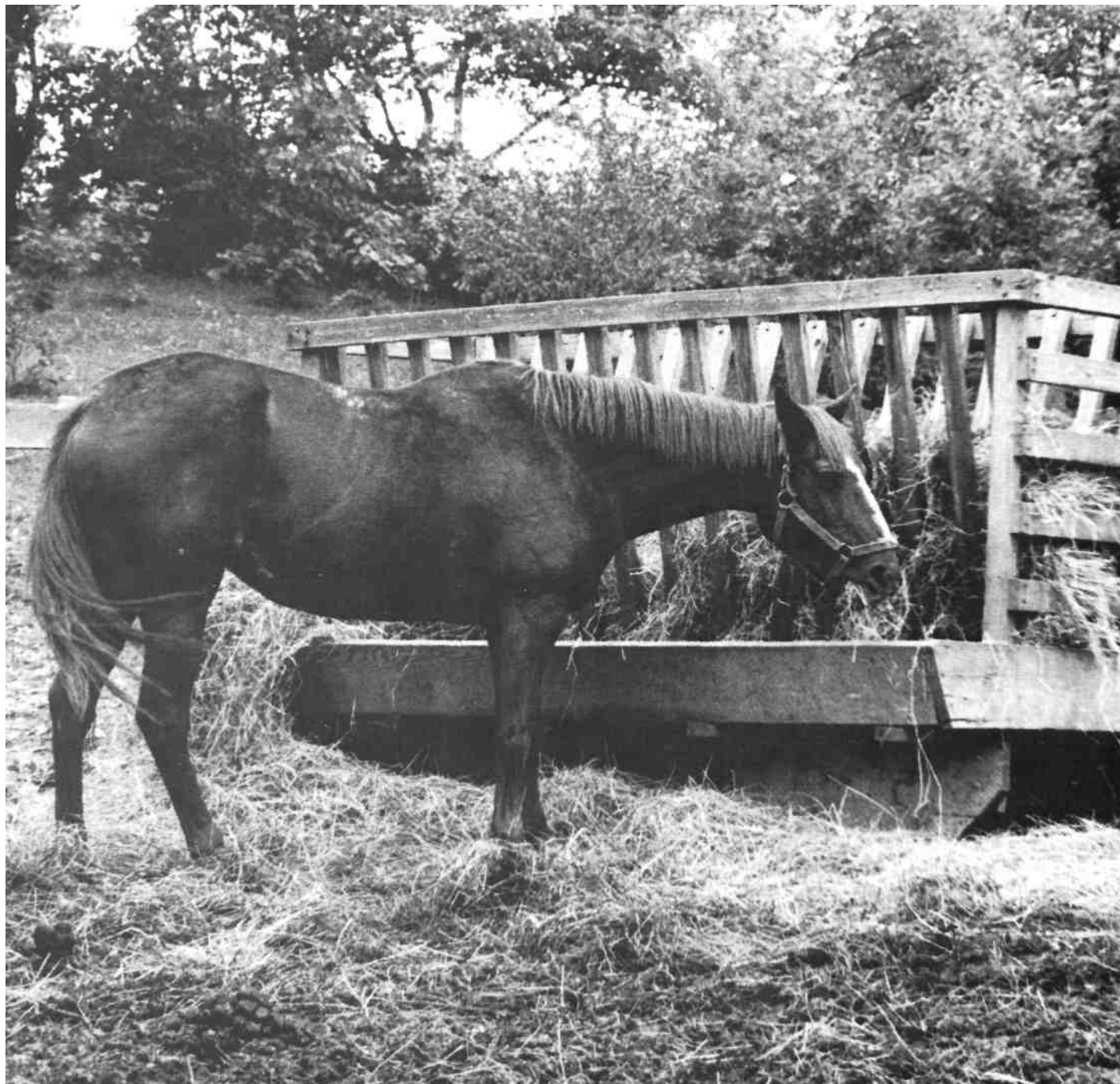
She smiled. "I think that would be a lot of fun."

They walked together to the exit, and as they passed Mr. Columbus at the door, Tommy remembered that he had a history test next week. Who cares, he thought, that test didn't matter.



*Garland*

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# Vortex

By Allison Kelly

*(Every day half a dozen Soviet workers venture into the exploded shell of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor. These men receive four times the national average salary but also hundreds of times the normal radiation dose.)*

They can't see it, but they know it's there.  
But still they climb down into the blackened core  
to poke uselessly through the rubble -  
it's a job.  
But it's more than that.  
Standing in the huge bombed - out crater  
of the nuclear reactor, these men  
  imagine they feel the awesome pulsating power  
that once radiated from this tomb.  
Strangely, they feel no fear,  
just fascination at the way the flashlight's beam  
dissolves in the liquid shadows.  
In the empty darkness one can hear noises  
and know the sounds are only in one's mind -  
a thumping like a heartbeat growing slower,  
a scraping like a coffin being dragged  
through the dirt outside.  
Each day the workers leave reluctantly,  
dirty ghosts drifting, looking back  
to the silent mouth, it looks like a mouth,  
it looks open, of the cavern  
an immense black hole  
that calls with all its tempting nothingness.  
They will return to its depths,  
lose themselves again in the swirling horror  
of their own minds - think of the notion  
of trying not to think.  
These men - swallowed by the indifferent pit  
where fear is suffocated  
and death breeds not the question "if"  
but "when."

# Patty Cannon's House

By James Schultz

This is Patty Cannon's House, unassuming  
on the intersection of country roads.

This comes from gossip,  
the story I always heard when I was growing up  
about families of escaping slaves driven here...  
I think they must have moved on a night like this,  
through the safety of blackness dotted with stars.  
Guided by rows of corn, they couldn't tell the house was green  
and two storied.

    This was a station on the underground railroad.

The house faces east, the first  
to acknowledge the sun.

It is natural for a child to cry in the morning,  
instinct as the tool of survival,  
of profit like the whip  
like the whip of the Southern taskmaster  
but here, unnatural silence  
among the ripening furrows  
    becomes the only way to continue.

They walked most of the way from the cottony South,  
sometimes they slept in the fields  
like the mice we put poison out for.  
    A green two storied safe house.

They moved like thieves, as if  
freedom was something tangible,  
something they could steal—  
    a loaf of crusted bread here, some stale water there  
and on to the next safe place...

Looking up at midnight they would see  
perhaps, a light in the second story  
asking them to feel,  
so close to the Mason-Dixon,  
a Northern sense of freedom.

I know there was no prophet leading them,  
    no one to part the Chesapeake or the Potomac  
there were only clouds or  
                                an occasional clear day,  
and the woods that encircled the plantation  
inviting  
17                      dark and hymnal.

# Thief

By Jeffrey W. Edwards

He was in Montgomery Ward's. He was going to steal a tape. His parents were waiting for him outside of the store, in the mall, on a thinly padded brown bench seat next to the fountain. The fountain was a weak attempt at glamour, pizzazz - a feeble grasp out. The new four-level mall closer to the town center was sure to bury this place.

Rick stood in front of the cassettes, pushing his glasses up on his nose. His left hand was in his jacket pocket, a leather jacket his father had bought cheap in Korea on a business trip.

Every store had its own solution to theft. Montgomery Ward's put each cassette into a brown plastic holder, about twelve inches long. It didn't set off any alarms when you left the store. Just made it awkward to sneak the tape out.

Rick kept a list at home of the cassettes he had stolen, about a dozen so far. He'd worn the same jacket each time.

Tonight he finally decided to steal Judas Priest's "Defenders of the Faith." He held the tape briefly, looking over the list of songs, then set it at the edge of the display shelf.

Rick looked around him, into the hardware aisles of paint and thinner, step ladders and hammers; then into the little cafeteria section where no one ever ate.

He picked out U2's "The Unforgettable Fire" and headed for the cash register. He had to stand in line behind a black woman in a fuzzy purple sweat suit. She was buying a utility knife and a tape measure for her husband. The clerk told her the 32 foot tape measure was on sale for less than the 25 footer she'd selected. Rick shifted his weight from one leg to the other while she went and got the better bargain.

Hurry up, he wanted to shout. He thought of his parents, wondered if they were

looking at their watches. He'd been in the store for a long time, maybe almost fifteen minutes.

Rick had a flash of his mom walking into the store, angry, impatient, her brow creased as she said, "What are you doing in here?" Everyone would turn to look at him as he put the tape into his black jacket. Rick's heart continued beating as usual, but now he could hear it.

As he paid for the U2 tape Rick stared at the clerk, who was chewing gum. His lips moved as he chewed and Rick could see he was growing a mustache. The man had a pencil stashed behind his ear. Rick wondered if the clerk could hear his heart. It seemed loud enough.

Receipt stapled to the thin paper bag, thank you, walking out now, headed for the exit that led to the hallway, the one used by delivery people. Rick veered over by the tapes, snagged the Judas Priest he'd left sticking out, shoved it into his half-zipped jacket, and left.

He was in the hallway, a mop and bucket against the wall, the wall painted a functional off-white. Rick walked faster, towards the rest of the mall, away from Montgomery Ward's and that back exit. He couldn't swallow all the way. Had anyone seen him this time?

"Hey." A muscle in Rick's left leg started to throb. His feet stopped working properly. He turned and looked.

"I think you just left the store without paying for something." The black man, twenty feet away, wore a jacket too, but tan, and not leather like Rick's.

The man was getting closer, fifteen feet, ten. Rick's mouth was open but not to speak.

He thought of running. Bolting away, out of the hallway, into the mall. What would he say to his parents? Meet me outside by the car? Can't talk now?

He didn't have the energy for it. When he heard the voice behind him, Rick gave up. He was caught. It was over.

Silent, he slid the tape from his jacket and handed it to the man, who looked tense and coiled, as if he knew Rick had considered running.

"Come on back with me." The man motioned Rick with two thick fingers pressed together, leading him back down the hall, that sickly white hall, past the mop and bucket and into the store. They went through the paint aisle and entered a small room.

"Have a seat. This all you stole?"

Rick said, "Yeah." The voice didn't sound like his. It sounded like a scared kid's. He could picture himself, in the low folding chair. A boy with brown hair, feathered over his ears, glasses, a couple pimples, a leather jacket, corduroy pants and Nikes.

The man was seated now, hiding some of his bulk behind a small gray metal desk. Taking off his jacket, he could have been at home, in a favorite chair under a reading lamp. He shook the cassette, listened to it rattle. He sighed, then cleared his throat slowly, in two deliberate installments.

"But you bought another tape, didn't you?"

Rick nodded and showed him the bag, the receipt.

The black man sighed again. His nostrils flared. He put his lips together tightly, threw the Judas Priest cassette into a shoebox on a shelf next to the desk, and shook his head.

"Take out your wallet," he said.

Maybe he wanted some ID.

"How much money do you have in there?"

Rick started to count.

"No, no, just tell me about how much."

"I don't know." Rick kept counting.

"About sixty, sixty five."

"Sixty five dollars. Now why did you

steal that tape?"

Rick shrugged. "I don't know." It was the only thing he seemed capable of saying anymore.

He didn't try to explain that he felt like stealing the cassette, grabbing it off the shelf and wrapping it in his jacket. Afterwards he was going to run into Chick-Fil-A for a minute, like he always did. He had planned to order a small Coke and pry the plastic holder off the tape with his house key.

Why should he have to pay for the cassette? He liked Judas Priest, but not enough to buy the tape. He'd stolen lots before.

"This is your first time, huh? You look pretty scared."

Rick nodded again.

"I'm gonna have to call your folks."

\* \* \*

Rick was a hostage in the parked car, sitting with his father until his mother was done with the grocery shopping. The numbers on the radio glowed a dull orange and Rick, in the back seat, focused on those numbers. His father sat in the driver's seat, elbow on the door's arm rest, fingers rubbing circles at his temple.

"This wasn't the first time you shoplifted. Was it?" The words came out like he was asking someone to please pass the butter.

The orange dot, meaning that 94.7 was broadcasting in stereo, began flickering on and off.

"Was it?" Rick's rather had turned to face him now, the bald spot at the back of his head reflected in the rear view mirror.

"No."

"Jesus Christ." The heel of his hand thudded against the steering wheel, once, then three times fast, staccato. The orange dot blipped out for good. "I'm not going to tell your mother that. I think she's had enough for one night."

Rick saw other families outside in the parking lot, some coming from Giant, some loading grocery bags into their cars. He could tell which considered themselves "environmentally conscious" by which bags they had chosen - paper or plastic. The pine trees that surrounded the lot made the place look like a fortress. Through the branches, Rick could see car lights moving in a slow progression.

"I can't believe you," his father said.  
Rick felt stupid for getting caught.

\* \* \*

He'd started shoplifting seriously just before turning 14. One couldn't really count those three postcards from the gift shop on the class trip to Williamsburg, Virginia. That wasn't a big deal. It was an odd impulse, not really repeated until Disneyland in '86. Those three white cards, each with a pencil drawing of early

American colonists— loading a cannon, standing with rifles, building a house— slid easily into the back pocket of Rick's jeans. He couldn't believe no one saw him. Of course, he never mailed any of the cards.

He forgot about the postcards until he was caught years later with a stolen bicycle, and then again after getting in trouble for stealing tapes at Montgomery Ward's. The postcard thing seemed a nice starting point, the Prologue to the story of his short-lived shoplifting "career."

Chapter One would begin with him at the mall, the same mall where he eventually got caught, with his friend Michael. Michael was shorter than Rick. His blond hair parted in the middle of his forehead and shot off to the sides. Michael constantly leered. He smoked. He wore a scruffy old brown leather jacket through most of the seasons. The only thing Rick and he shared was the same school bus. For some reason that's why they became friends.

"Are you ready to go?" Michael asked,



whining a little because he needed to use the bathroom. The only place they knew to go was at the movie theater, where you had to duck under the ropes and sneak into the bathroom if you didn't have a ticket for one of the shows. The theater was at the other end of the mall.

"Yeah, just hold on a minute. I want to buy some blank tapes."

Rick had forgotten he needed tapes until they passed Sam Goody's. A table display just inside the store was overflowing with blue-plastic-wrapped Scotch DX 60-minute cassettes.

They stopped walking. Rick looked in the store, but nobody was manning the cash registers.

"Just take some," Michael said.

Something broke out of its shell inside Rick's head, something that said it was perfectly reasonable to steal because if he bought the tapes, he would have to go into the store, find a cashier, and then pay, and that was too big a hassle.

"Goon. Take some."

Rick, almost automatically, stepped in, grabbed two packs of tapes, turned and walked quickly away from Goody's. Michael caught up with him and fell in step.

"Cool, man. That was cool!"

Rick kept looking back over his shoulder. No one came for him. No alarms. Nothing. Just six new tapes.

"I don't even like this brand," he said.

"I'll take them."

Rick grabbed the tapes back from Michael and they headed for the movie theater bathroom.

\* \* \*

The day after the black man caught him shoplifting, Rick was sitting on the stool in his room, the tall wooden stool his father had painted blue and white. The stool served as a chair at his desk. The desk was a mutant—

pieced together by his father from an old metal file cabinet and an L-shaped piece of wood he'd sanded and varnished.

"So you really did steal that bicycle, after all," Rick's mother said. She was pushing her palm against her forehead. Both his parents had been doing that a lot lately.

Rick didn't answer at first. His mother brushed her hair back; strands of gray floated loose and curled around her ears. She said she got her first gray hair the day he was born.

"I knew you did. I wanted to believe your story, but something told me you were lying. Was Michael with you?"

He and Michael had stolen a bike from a kid that lived on Rick's street. Rick hated the kid, with his tight curly hair and tinted eyeglasses. The boy always wore black - black corduroys, shoes, and ugly shirts with zippers and snaps all over the sleeves. The whole family was weird. The boy's mother had broadsided Rick's mother's car on the way home from work once.

So one day, Rick and Michael were walking up the street, and started to cut through the Burnett's yard, the ugliest yard on the street. A lonely and twisted tree grew by the driveway; Rick had never seen a leaf on that tree. The house had no landscaping, no bushes with mulch or flowers. Just grass growing up to the aluminum siding and cracked concrete leading to the front steps.

They saw the BMX bike in the car port, next to the plastic garbage cans and the old refrigerator used as a tool cabinet. As cool as you please, Rick stepped into the car port and listened. The house seemed silent and he took the bicycle by the handles and wheeled it backwards into the driveway. The spokes clicked like popcorn as he and Michael continued cutting through the yard.

They left the chrome and blue Murray in the woods for a few days, then Rick went back with some of his father's tools. He was taking

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the bike apart when who did he see coming through the woods but Mr. Burnett and the kid. Rick probably could have gotten away without being seen, but he didn't have enough time to pick up all the tools, part of a special bike kit his father had bought when Rick was five, so he just stood there, waiting as the Burnetts got close enough to see him with the bike.

He went home after the confrontation. Blackbirds had been perched on the trees, watching him loosen nuts and bolts, but when the Burnetts appeared the birds scattered, first flying in separate directions and then coming together. Rick could not figure out how they flew so close without hitting each other.

The police came to his house. Through it all, Rick claimed innocence. He said he found the bike in a nearby dump and was dismantling it for parts. It was possible. It was possible. Rick even had to go to Juvenile Services at the county seat and make it through a session of questioning. He got away with it. When he noticed his left leg bouncing up and down as the woman started asking questions, Rick folded his hands and pushed down to keep still. He quietly wiped his sweaty hand on the back of his pants before shaking the Juve worker's hand at the end of the questions.

"You fooled everybody, didn't you?" Rick's mother said.

What else was he supposed to do? Admit that, yeah, he stole the bike, hid it, and was now taking it apart, please arrest me and send me to Boy's Village for a short vacation? He didn't even want the damn bicycle.

"And after that, after being caught, and getting away with it, and nobody knowing, then you go and start shoplifting." She was shaking her head.

His mother left the room, left Rick hunched over on his stool, looking at the picture he had been drawing of Colossus, from the X-Men comics. His mom blamed herself for his being a thief.

Rick's parents had always made him feel important, special, above other people. When he made the honor roll and told his parents how some of his friends got ten dollars for every A, his mother said that cheapened the grades. She didn't have to bribe her son to do well in school. Then Rick's parents would take him out for pizza, or hamburgers with extra fries.

Maybe that's why he could steal, because he thought everybody owed him something. Rick felt absolutely no guilt when he took things he figured he deserved anyway.

And yet his mother blamed herself. How could she be blamed for loving her own son? But the world is a complicated place—seismographs predict earthquakes yet the houses collapse anyway; "severe thunderstorm watches" are nothing better than advance notice for the TV crews.

\* \* \*

Rick was at Michael's house<sup>0</sup>. They had gotten out of school half an hour ago and now Michael was retying his shoes, brown suede shoes like all the burners wore, and then started looking for his wallet.

"Seen my wallet?" he asked Rick.

Rick shook his head. He was reading the lyrics to the Iron Maiden album that was playing on Michael's stereo, the cheap Emerson record player that only worked if you balanced a penny on the needle's arm. Rick had never listened to Iron Maiden until Michael made him borrow the record; actually Rick still liked the album covers better than the music.

Michael found his wallet, blue nylon with red and white bars forming a British flag, beneath a spiral notebook. He opened it and pulled out a wrinkled plastic bag, shaking it in the air like a bullfighter shakes his cape.

"Ole!" he said.

Rick tried to smile, to act like he thought it was funny, but he was bored. These were the



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times he wished he had never agreed to come over to Michael's house that first time, after the second week of school. They had sat next to each other on the bus and Michael asked if he wanted to come over, listen to some records, watch some TV. Rick got off at Michael's bus stop and they walked together to the drab one-story house, all tan and brown and gray. The lawn was diseased; bare earth showed through in patches and the grass couldn't decide what color to be.

Rick even slept over a couple times, watching stupid Ozzy Osbourne and Aerosmith videos on the Betamax. The plaid couch kept Rick awake until light seeped into the living room and started the dust moving.

Those visits were okay, but now he'd have to tag along with Michael, around the corner and into the old barn, where Michael would pull his ugly plastic pipe out from under some boards and do bong hits. He offered some to Rick every time. Rick tried to come with original refusals. He usually ended with a simple, "No, thanks," and left Michael behind in the barn and went home to his mother and father and meatloaf with mashed potatoes.

It was a classic line he always tried to use with his parents whenever he got into trouble. "Yeah, but at least I don't do drugs like some of the kids at school," Rick would say. And he also got good grades.

\* \* \*

School was out and almost three months stretched ahead of Rick like miles of highway at night. Rick never told anyone that Michael was with him the day the bike was taken, and he never told Michael about getting caught shoplifting. He didn't want to scatter those grains of information.

Some days he would find himself halfway to Michael's house before realizing where he was headed. They didn't do much after getting

together. Usually Michael wanted to listen to records, or watch TV, or play video games. All he had was one of those ancient Pong things that hooked up to the TV and could only play two black and white games: Pong and Squash.

Once Rick persuaded Michael to come outside with him. The weather was warm and dry - Rick wanted to pretend he was being baked; he was sick of hanging out in the dim basement with the pillowcase over the window, listening to the TV blip bleep.

"Hey, I know what we can do," Michael said as he put on his leather jacket. He pulled a lighter from the jacket lining, like a magic trick.

Michael led the way outside to the shed in the yard and jiggled open the padlock on the door. The shed was painted barn-red, but the wooden planks had weathered where the grass rose up and clutched at the tiny building.

Michael grabbed a can of Krylon spray paint from a shelf in the shed. "You ever done this?" he asked.

Rick said no. He had no idea what Michael was talking about.

Michael shook the can until the metal ball inside was moving freely through the paint, rattling off the sides to the rhythm of the shaking. He held his lighter away from himself, out toward the shed. Then Michael sprayed the paint into the lighter's tiny flame.

The air wrinkled around the lighter and burst, the flame becoming a rush of orange and blue, leaping onto the shed and spreading out and up. Michael stopped spraying.

"Don't do it too long, or the flame goes back into the can and it'll explode," Michael said. He handed the paint and the black lighter to Rick, who was staring at the shed.

A black circle was left where the flame had touched, like a newsprint smudge. The shed was a mess.

"Here!" Michael was still holding the can out to Rick.

"What are you, stupid? I'm going home."

He started toward the road, away from the scarred shed and the pyro.

"Hey man, hold up!" Michael yelled. He threw the spray paint to the ground and put the lighter back into his jacket as he hustled after Rick.

"Don't go back to your house, man. Let's go see if Rob's home."

Rick looked over at Michael, but kept walking. "You dumb ass. What are you wearing a jacket for, anyway?"

A few drops of sweat had welled up from Michael's forehead, just below the roots of his blond hair. "Let's go."

They took a left and headed down Rob's street. Rob Mueller was Michael's friend, not Rick's. Rick had always thought Rob lived in the trailer park. He belonged there. The boy had long, reddish-brown hair and a hint of freckles. His expression always made Rick think of a man who had just come out of the desert. Rob was shorter than Rick, but he always made Rick feel like the smaller one.

"Here we are," said Michael. They had stopped in front of a brown brick house. Most of the blinds were drawn. No cars were in the gravel driveway, and Michael headed straight for the side of the house.

Rick followed to the sliding glass doors that faced the woods. The doors were open, and Michael was examining the unlocked screen.

"I figured they'd have the doors open on a nice day like this."

"Hey, what are you doing, Michael?"

"Come on." Michael was already in the house, picking up a glass ashtray from the coffee table and pocketing it.

Rick stepped warily into the house, closing the screen behind him and then looking down at his hands. He wiped the screen's handle with his Ratt shirt, the black T-shirt with the bloody jawed metallic rodent.

Michael was drinking an RC from the refrigerator and walking down the hall. "Let's

make this fast," he said over his shoulder.

Rick found Rob's room and went in. The shades were down and the bed was unmade. He looked at the stereo, not much better than Michael's, then at the records Rob had. Rick took Quiet Riot's "Metal Health" though he already had a copy, an old Iron Maiden album he'd never heard, and a Twisted Sister tape, he also found a cassette Rob had gotten from buying Kool cigarettes. It only had fifteen minutes worth of tape on each side.

"Let's get out of here." Michael stuck his head in Rob's room and looked at what Rick was holding.

They walked down the street, the same way they'd come. Nobody seemed to be around. Michael had found a *Forum* magazine and was flipping through it.

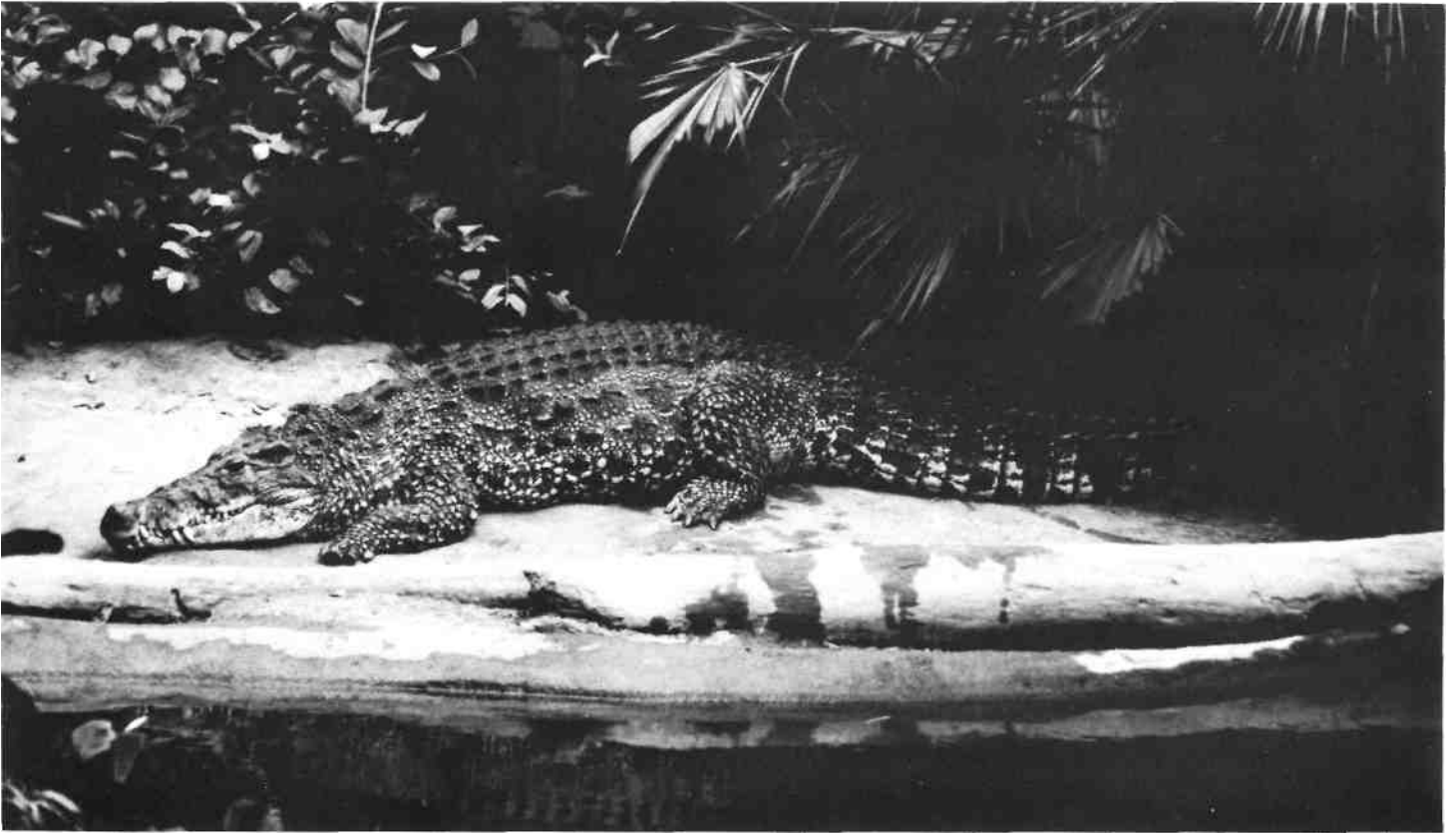
"Boy, Rob's older sister is a real pervert," he said, showing Rick where the girl had filled her name in on all the order forms for dildo and vibrator catalogs.

At the end of the street they split, Michael going to the right, probably headed for the barn so he could smoke up and look at the *Forum*. Rick went left, back home to listen to what Iron Maiden sounded like before they got the new singer.

\* \* \*

Three days passed, and Rick did not go to Michael's. Joey, his other friend, had to go to Texas with his family for the entire summer, so Michael was the only one left in the neighborhood to visit.

So Rick went for bike rides by himself, and floated around the pool on a raft and read. But he did not want to see Michael; he was afraid he would get the sinking feeling again, like when they walked into Rob's house. Michael had urged him to shoplift in the mall, and they had stolen the bicycle together, but Rick was the only one who had the scars.



Rick got bored, and stared at the square blue kitchen clock for long stretches when he was inside the house, as if he thought one day a voice would come out of the clock and give him something to do, like the "101 Rainy Day Activities" books his mother used to buy for him.

He had brought his Atari up from the basement, and was wiping the dust from it with a damp paper towel covered with ducks and barns with silos, when the telephone rang.

The phone was loud, rude, and it jarred Rick. He looked down at the shreds of paper towel in the grooves of the Atari. He answered the phone.

"Hey man, where you been?"

"Just hanging around," Rick said.

"When are you going to give Rob his stuff back?"

Rick realized how dry his lips were. He

licked them and his lips stung, as if they were chapped and he'd drunk tart lemonade.

"What are you talking about? We stole it."

Michael laughed. "Hey, you hear that, Rob? Rick says we stole it from you. I guess he doesn't want to give you back the records."

"Where are you?"

"I'm over at Rob's. Look, he knows we stole the stuff. Mrs. Leeds saw us go into the house. He just wants the Iron Maiden record back. You can keep the rest."

Iron Maiden was the only good thing Rick had taken. He's rather give back everything else. Rick didn't hear anybody on the other end but Michael. What he did hear was Judas Priest in the background. Rob did not like that band.

"You're full of shit, Michael. You're not at Rob's. Are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Let me talk to Rob."

"Well, he just went to the John."

"You're in your room."

For a minute nothing came through the phone but "Some Heads Are Gonna Roll." Rick and Michael made up a video for that song once, with a kid getting chased around and having his head cut off after shoplifting.

"Okay, you got me. But listen, man, I'm gonna tell Rob it was you that stole his stuff unless you give me that Maiden album."

Rick cursed at Michael and hung up.

\* \* \*

Michael called again when Rick's family was having dinner. Rick pointed to his mouth and pretended to chew, so his mother took a message. Michael was going to the movies with his parents, and he wanted Rick to call back before eight.

After dinner Rick's parents left, his father carrying a bottle of wine. They'd promised some neighbors they would come over for drinks, and couldn't put it off another day without seeming rude.

Rick watched the headlights drift back out of the driveway, then swivel and start down the street, pulling the car behind.

He got his black jacket from the hall closet and locked the door behind as he set out through the yard. It was cool outside now that the sun had quit for the day.

Rick's feet carried him, like a horse that finds its way back after losing its rider. Michael's house was dark. Rick thought he could make out the black burn mark on the shed, he wrapped his thumb around his fingers as he circled the yard, passing the house and then doubling back through the neighbor's pines.

He climbed the steps to the deck at the back of the house and lifted the dog's water bowl to reveal the spare key beneath. Rick unlocked the door and opened it slowly, listening as the hinges first complained and then

warned that an intruder was coming in.

He went straight to Michael's room. Rick sat on the bed for a moment, the bed covered by a brown blanket with designs that made the whole thing look like a wooden crate. He picked up the drumsticks from the floor. Michael didn't have a drum set, just a rubber practice pad. His parents said he was welcome to get the real thing, after he moved out. Rick stepped on one of the stick and pulled. He couldn't break it. The wood was too strong; it just cracked a little up the side.

He grabbed Michael's gym bag and dumped the pencils and rolled-up socks out of it. Rick started putting cassettes into the bag. One of them was a Motley Crue Michael had borrowed from Rick four months earlier.

Rick reached underneath the bed's mattress and pulled out the plastic bag full of pot. He threw that in the gym bag and was about to leave, then had a better idea. He dumped the grass in the toilet but didn't flush. He checked for more stuff under Michael's mattress and found the *Forum* and a poster-size centerfold of *Playboy's* Playmate of the Year. Rick took these, then peeled a poster from the wall of a woman wearing nothing but a washcloth. Rick's mother didn't let him have pictures like that, but at least he could look at them with a flashlight when everybody else had gone to bed.

Rick decided to search for cash in Michael's parent's room. He knew he was going to get caught for this. Michael would know who had been inside the house. He would have to tell his parents that Rick had broken in, especially if they found their money gone.

So what. Rick didn't care what Michael did anymore. He didn't need Michael. Rick didn't need his parents' disapproval and disappointment, his mother blaming herself for his shoplifting. He didn't need any of that. He didn't need anyone.

# Of Pansies and Potatoes, Flowers and Hope

By Colleen F. Halley

Life in Petersburg —  
Home where aristocrats & intelligensia  
Spent afternoons in the park,  
Danced the mazurka, scolded their serfs.  
The remnants of a time past  
Now, decaying buildings crumble and flake  
Falling to dust in the streets,  
Laid heavy by the weight of years unkept  
And now the desiel scars from yellow buses' coughs,  
Carrying the descendants  
Of high life, St. Petersburg.

And who are the inheritants?

1.

A babushka, stuck half-bent  
A smooth but sharp right angle.  
Perpetual sacks carrying a day's work  
Slung over back. But too,  
Always the touch of freshly gathered flowers  
Mirroring a spirit that didn't yet die.

3.

And so every day these souls go  
Maybe out of habit, without thought,  
Or maybe with new found hopes?  
*Hope?*  
*But the future isn't here yet,*  
And for the Russia, no promise.  
*Tomorrow may never come for us*  
I've been told again, and again, *Hope?*

But perhaps, if it does, for one more day  
Like sardines, they'll ride this bus  
Along the streets, down Nevsky Prospect  
Where troikas carried  
The class of the class, Russia's elite ....

Reflected are history's remnants: the architecture  
And the palaces, domes, and spires  
Of Petersburg pansies,

The cultured fathers of despair.

2.

The potato harvester, dressed in rags  
And a comrade's cap,  
Up from the southern steppes - to big city life.  
They're all the same, covered brown  
With raped earth; fruitless, dry.  
Their fingers black, and like ears  
Of the potatoes,  
Nerveless protrusions.  
There's a sadness in his eyes, frozen still.  
His cold motionless face won't show it,  
or anything....  
A rock - the Great Russian  
Inherited nature, cope and survive?

# **We Ask These Things**

**By Jason Santalucia**

1.  
This wooden figure is the Cristo,  
with thorns pressed into painted skin  
and brushstrokes of red running over the forehead.  
The women of Huexotia come from the river each morning,  
set down palm clothes baskets,  
and look at the dead eyes,  
dark and shrinking back from grainy lids.  
Under their breath the hooded mothers and grandmothers  
whisper things to the statue,  
and when they feel the likeness has heard them,  
these poor kiss the carved feet,  
touch the robe,  
stroke the dirty wood face  
with the backs of curved fingers.

2.  
"Jesus died a horrible death,"  
my uncle, a minister, once sputtered in my face,  
so close I thought he'd bite my nose.  
He was practicing a sermon on wickedness,  
waving his bones in the air  
and pacing from the kitchen to the dining room table,  
where I sat, chewing a bologna sandwich  
and watching birds sift through blades of grass  
in the back yard.  
There were thick robins, black birds,  
quick sparrows,  
and as they jerked their way across the lawn  
I imagined heat and sweating under the dark feathers.

It was August, and the sun, focused through the windshield  
of my Uncle's car, made my head ache  
as I counted phone poles slipping past,  
tar blistering out from the bases.  
We were on our way to see my Mother  
for the first time,  
under the lights and easy chairs and checker boards  
beyond the nose of uncle's huge Chrysler.

That day, there would be a pressure  
pushing into the room,  
even filling into the cracks in the walls  
and splitting the petals of painted yellow flowers.  
It would be the static of silence,  
absent feedback,  
and dark sedated eyes, which no expression could hold,  
weighted down to the floor.

And there would be a stone slipped to me,  
a worthless pebble become make-shift rosary,  
rubbed smooth and glassy  
from the oils in soft fingers.

# Maya

Past gray church steps it is a windy fall Sunday,  
wasps dropping stunned from the frost air  
and struggling like moon men on the sidewalk.  
Maya asks me here, "When you're dreaming, are you alive?",  
and she will not take her eyes from me,  
as if glancing out at the stiff brown grass would allow  
This kept secret to escape  
like a clever prisoner  
seizing the moment a guard shift ends  
and a new one begins.

Ruffles defining her blue dress  
and buckled leather shoes slightly pigeon-toed,  
she is only five years old, my Maya,  
and she wants to know this.

Out in the parking lot  
engines are warming under a ring of trees,  
the shadows of bright leaves  
tracing random patterns across car hoods and gravel.

She is so thin, this child.  
Her knees, hazed with fine blond hairs, stick out like knots,  
and her neck, from behind,  
two stiff tendons disappearing into a bob of dark waves

Like the autopsy when I was in school.  
On the television screen  
the shaved head slashed cleanly just over the waxy ear  
and the tension relieved,  
the skin puckering open like a weak kiss.

I watched the scalp come away from the bone  
and flop down over the face like a mask.  
Then the saw, and the chisel,  
People are pieces of work.  
Above us is the one sky of history, divine peace,  
and its face has seen us all.

Now peaceful Guatemala sitting in the green forest  
with the people around him,  
asking if he is a god, or an angel, or a saint.  
And when Buddha denies these things,  
The entranced ask in frustration,  
"What are you, then?"  
"I am," the Blessed replies,  
"Awake."

# By Jason Santalucia

## Emmett Till

*In 1955, in Mississippi, a fourteen year-old black boy, visiting his uncle from Chicago, was severely beaten, castrated, shot through the head, and finally dumped in the Tallahassee River for saying "bye, baby" to a white woman as he left the local general store. His murderers were, of course, found innocent.*

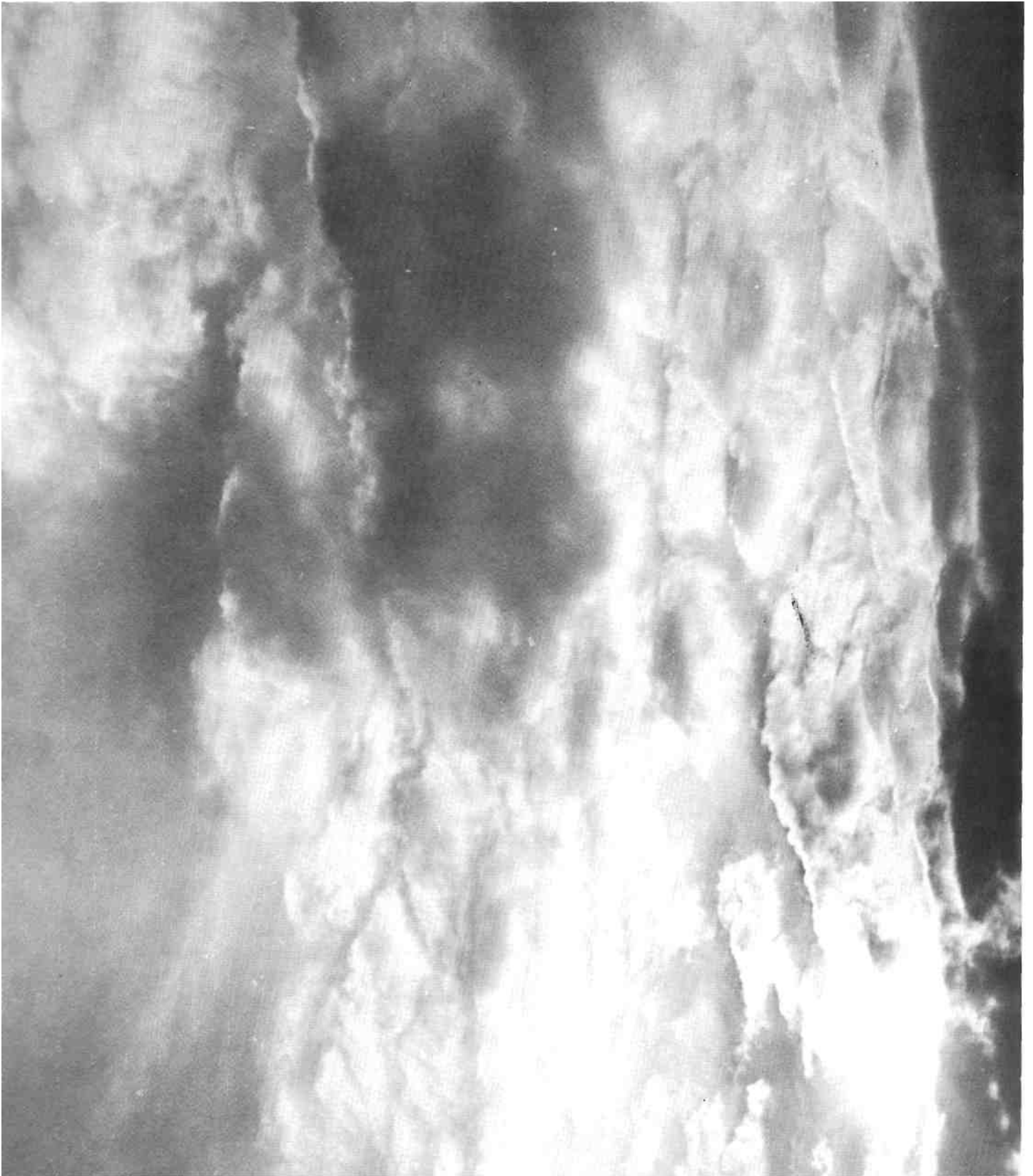
Arms waving in a deep current,  
the trees give themselves  
to the slabs of thick summer wind,  
the blastings of an August downpour

opening. Early evening.

I think it was a white boy fishing  
who found it some days later.  
Gray skin swollen smooth as gristle,  
the neck had twisted free of the old cotton gin fan.

The body is a contradiction in function.  
At once home in fitful sleep  
and easy motion alike.

Now my mother is up and around, he says,  
finally out of the bedroom  
with its drawn curtains set in fine dust.  
There is movement in the house again,  
its heart has not stopped.  
Things need to be cleaned, put away,  
set back in order.  
The train will be coming up soon,  
and this woman will be ready when I come home.





## **Reflection**

**By Jennifer Eibner**

The night should have been dark.  
I stood with the unseen rain pelting my slicker,  
My shoes slogging in the mushy grass,  
As I watched the glowing, water-filled sky,  
Looking for some sign of You.  
From the top of my hill I could see  
    The faint lights of the street below me,  
And still I waited— staring, trembling  
Anticipating some unknown,  
All the while not realizing  
My folly in looking above for power  
--And not really living freely—  
When I could have dominion over  
Those below the hill  
Without sacrifice.

## **Spring Rain**

**By Jennifer Eibner**

From Knott Hall, fourth floor  
The storm clouds are closer than God,  
Floating like restless children over the new green leaves.  
    Closer than Charles Street  
With its apathetic yuppies of metal  
Rushing closer, farther, closer, farther  
Never touching me, paralleled above,  
Looking on the road where we walked.  
    Closer than you, who are worlds away,  
Where Charles Street never reaches,  
You, never thinking about us,  
Or even me, on the wrong side of the rumbling.  
    Closer than this lobby  
Where the image of you steams  
    In the spring dank of the building.  
I wonder how the people can walk here without shivering  
From the oppressive shadows the sun doesn't see  
The place God doesn't touch.  
Or maybe they don't need to look out  
And stand on the tops of the trees  
Trying to catch a glimpse of the old days.  
Maybe, if they were me  
They'd forget you  
And see only springtime and storm clouds

## miles to go

By Nicole E. Fisch

as i walk along  
endless shoreline  
i think of the  
many miles you have walked  
to get here  
no map  
to guide you  
marking progress not by numbers  
but by peace of mind  
and as i slowly trace the timeworn path  
you have laid  
i stop to look  
at how much further  
i must travel  
and then i notice that  
the footsteps  
never end  
my friend...  
you are walking still.

## The Promise of May (for Dad)

By Laura McLoughlin

As the child grows,  
the apples fall  
shedding seeds of  
life  
on the freshly  
cut grass  
under mounds of  
brown that her  
father told her to  
rake away,  
but she never did...  
and he didn't care.

And they sat  
together  
under the tree  
eating apples  
shiny red  
with the skins still on,  
and they  
planted the seeds in  
the earth by  
mother's garden  
full of blossoms.

## Cobblestone Alone in 1599

Jumbled together with roots and leaves,  
A riverbed of granite forms a road of cold stone.  
Frozen over;  
The street salad awaits Spring's Sun.  
When the chill and nippiness  
Came the bed froze over leaving a jello mold of stone  
Imbedded in Winter's Ice.  
The constable in wool overcoat and top hat pokes his cane  
In disbelief.  
-He prods the crystalized rock.  
The glacier bed rejects the infection and spits back...  
A thousand shards of ice.

6:00am (Dawn over Liverpool)  
Above the letterbox on the corner, the gas lamp burns  
Saturating the air  
With traces of overcast whisps of rain skys.  
-The fog rolls through Nottingham Gate and sweeps  
Dwon Breburge Street,  
Smothering the street-light shine.  
The constable retires but speaks before returning  
To his slumber:

"And no horses shall tread upon a slippery clime.  
For Breburge Street shall stand as cobblestone alone  
in the winter of 1599."

# The Enlightenment

By Karen Conley

I keep seeing the image in my mind over and over. Just replaying and expanding and stretching out closer to me every time I see it. It is a baby, no not a baby, a fetus. The thread-like fingers of its hand are webbed into a fist. The bulbous head is out of proportion with the rest of the body. The head is the only solid thing on the child, as if the mind was formed and protected first and the body that would carry it was an afterthought. The skin is translucent. It glows and palls in muscular shades of pink and blue. The skin itself has no color. Veins are scribbled over the arms and legs. The heart pulses in tiny hectic bursts, pushing out the first pure proof of life. The eyes are fused shut, just domes of tissuey flesh. I know this because I can see it. God, I can see it now.

The childhood security of white, plastic Barbie dolls and orange juice and Oreo tea parties faded when I started working at St. Francis Church in Philadelphia during my senior year in high school. When looking out the rain streaked Septa bus window I subconsciously expected to see the mirror image of my childhood looking back at me. A spot of guilt contracted in my neck every time I'd see a dingy lump or a man crouched in a granite doorway nodded off to sleep with a frayed cardboard sign shielding him that said, "WILL WORK FOR FOOD."

If life is a journey, a progression, that would imply that I was walking, step by heart-wrenching step toward some sort of ultimate goal, struggling over the obstacles in my path alone and coming out stronger. Not quite, I was given a free ride. I only had to look at hardship like it was Rubik's Cube. When it became too difficult to understand I could put it down and do something else. Drifting, I watched the torments of other people on television, their

wispy, fly-covered hands and pooly, black eyes reached out desperately to the camera as it filmed their demise. Swarms of my girlfriends dribbled rumors into my empty ears. Amid the tinny slam of lockers, we passed judgments on other people when they "got into trouble." In my mind they were condemned, victims of their own stupidity. "I would never do that," I would exclaim.

There were three round tables in the basement of the rectory. There was an ancient turn-about blackboard covered with a veil of heavy white dust. The record player in the corner was set up on red plastic milk crate with a couple of albums propped up against it: Barry Manilow and "Free to Be You and ME" by Mario Thomas. The brown and orange speckled carpet had black-rimmed holes in it from being salvaged from a fire. The walls were sparse and white, except for a blond wooden crucifix on the wall. The lid of the cross slid off and revealed all the necessary tools to administer Last Rites: a small plastic bottle of Holy Water, a thin, cracked white candle and a copy of the prayer and ceremonial verses. It was sort of like a first aid kit, a "you never know" measure of spiritual safety.

"Okay hon. Today, for the first hour we'll help them with their homework. Remember, don't give them the answers, just try to steer them in the right direction. These kids need to learn. God knows they don't get help at home," Sister Rose Marie McNevin lectured.

"What do you mean?", I pursued, sensing she wanted to justify her statement.

"Either both parents work in their families or they don't work at all. I think quite a few of them are on drugs and don't have any idea or concern for what their kid is doing," she explained.

"Oh," I said meekly, looking down at my watch. 3:15, any minute they would arrive.

"After we do homework with them, we'll take them across the street to clean up the playground. Then they can play when they have finished," she said. "Have to learn responsibility somewhere."

The buzzer at the rectory door rang upstairs and pounding footfalls trampled down the ceiling. My eyes followed the rumbling across the ceiling. I was scared. Shrill voices bickered all the way down the flight and finally penetrated the musty room. They stood there in a cluster like grapes, sticking close together as they looked me over silently. "Who are you?" asked a tall, skinny girl. Her legs, like tree branches stuck out of her too big A-line skirt.

I sat at my desk. The top was covered with scratch and sniff and silky quilted unicorn stickers floating around the white painted sky. There was a pile of looseleaf paper, construction paper and a brigade of rainbow colored pencils lined up symmetrically. Workbook sheets from my third grade phonics book fanned over my desk according to page number. I sat there on my chair facing my student. "Now, Terrance, you have to try harder. If you do well in school and get good grades you will be happy and get somewhere in life. Now let's go through Lesson Two again, Okay?" My student and I went through the lesson together and I instructed him on the proper way to pronounce words. He still didn't understand. "You have to work hard, Terrance. You can do anything you want to if you work hard," I said. Once more we pronounced words, him repeating after me. He finally caught on. The hot sensation fluttered in my nose and behind my eyes when a flicker of understanding spread across his invisible face. "I knew you could do it. Good job," I said.

"Who are you talking to?" my father asked from the doorway at my back.

I gasped and looked at my father through

my blurry eyes. My face throbbed with embarrassment. "Umm, I was just pretending I was a teacher is all, dad," I stuttered. My father scrunched his face in confusion looking at me for a moment before walking away.

The kids took a while to talk to me. They were wary of me for the first half an hour as I helped them with their multiplication tables and spelling words. The seven girls bombarded me with questions, asking me how old I was, what grade I was in, if I was wearing a bra, where I went to school and if I had a boyfriend. They kept stroking my hair which was very fine and blond. Over and over their fingers passed through the "Golden ribbons." The boys were quieter. I asked them if they needed help and they refused by saying, "No, I don't need your help. Gawd," and crossing their forearms and hunching concavely over their papers. One boy, William, wouldn't even respond to my question. He was sitting alone at the third table. He wasn't doing anything.

"Uh, William, where are your books?", I asked.

Silence.

"Don't you have any homework?", I inquired again.

No response. His arms were crossed and his face was downcast at the table. His vinyl bomber jacket was covered with plasticky looking military badges. His t-shirt, emblazoned with the Philly Phanatic, was covered with pilly balls of fiber from being well-worn. The cracked black sin of his hands gripped his elbows. Ripe lips puckered out into an impatient frown. His cheeks sagged and a little pink wisp of a scar marred his burnished skin. William looked at me for a second and said too much. I backed away. I only saw red in those eyes.

I stood behind him feeling a little vulnerable and embarrassed. In the course of an hour had I offended him somehow? William stayed at the table by himself. From across the room I noticed him pull a pencil out of his pocket and look at it

for a moment. He gripped it in his right hand and started driving the blunt lead tip into the worn pale palm of his hand, leaving silvery dots indented in the flesh.

"Why does that little boy William sit by himself? I tried to talk to him and he wouldn't say one word to me," I asked Sister, as I watched the kids scurry home through the front glass door of the rectory. William trudged, kicking gravel about ten paces behind. Their black faces were washed in lavender light under the sodium street lights. They ran circles around each other, dodging the grasps of one another that grabbed their books, hats or mittens and sent them sailing into the street. Before the victim of the game could run out and get his or her book or hat, the light at the corner had changed and the one-way traffic burst by, crushing and stretching whatever was held in his or her hand seconds before, into bits. I opened the door and urgently yelled out to them in the taut, bluesy night, "Hey, stop it! Stop that!" They didn't hear my vacuous cry. They rumbled, some laughing, some crying to the corner, then shot off to other corners toward home.

"That kid is very difficult to deal with," she said.

"Oh," I said, pausing for a moment, picking up a cream-covered Twinkie wrapper from the floor. "I just want to know why he is so quiet. I mean, can you talk to him?"

"Listen, William is MY responsibility when he is here. You don't have to worry about him. He started coming here about four months ago. He causes a lot of trouble in school, to the point where his teachers have all lost patience with him. He lives with his Aunt Roberta in the alley a half a block behind the church."

"What about his parents?"

"His mother, Jackie used to live somewhere around Miami, Florida, but no one knows where she is now. She sent William up here the summer before last for a "vacation." His mother was arrested for drug use and possession with intent to sell. Social workers in Miami contacted

her relatives to find places for William and his two younger sisters to stay. William came up to Philadelphia and his two sisters were sent to their grandmother's in Baltimore. Their father disappeared about eight months before. He was also an heroin addict. While the kids were staying with relatives, Jackie was arrested again for prostitution and drug possession. She got out of prison three months later and her daughters were sent back to her, but she never sent for William."

"Why not? I can't understand how a mother could do that," I said.

"I doubt you could..." , Sister said.

"Anyway, Roberta lost track of Jackie, and William's grandmother in Baltimore recently had a stroke so she certainly can't take care of him. Basically, William is here to stay. His Aunt Roberta loves him, but is single and doesn't have much money coming in. Father Murphy and I take care of William a lot here at the rectory, when his aunt is working."

I never thought about what the kids did after they left each Wednesday night or any time. I didn't know if their parents loved them and took them into their arms asking them how their day at school was, or if the parents sat apathetically in front of the television oozing through the crash after crack or if there was anybody home to acknowledge them at all. I never thought about them or their lives outside that two-hour window. I opened it and pulled them through, showing them the structured way I thought things should be. Life was a ladder. I believed in the American Dream: "If you work hard in school you will get good grades, if you maintain good grades you will get accepted into a good college, and if you do well in college you will get a good job and have a good and happy life." Right? Anything those kids depended on rotted away inside their life-sustaining grasp or was torn away by bigger, angry hands. William wouldn't come through the window to my side. He never asked me questions about my life. So, I decided to follow him to the other side.

There was always an hour or two that I was alone with Rich after the lunch rush. Hordes of pin-striped executives would bustle in the door at noon and eat their body weight off the buffet. Individual faces eventually melted into one of three categories: the men, usually nobly graying and very polite; spoiled Jewish women with lacquered nails and expensive perfumes talking of vacations in Europe and massages at spas in California, and finally the bohemians; usually struggling thespians, artists and musicians; dressed in black turtlenecks and babbling words like "bourgeoisie," leaving me a few lint-covered silver coins from the pockets of their faded black jeans.

In less than an hour the crowds would stream out like ants into the maze of city streets. While cleaning the splattered tomato sauce off the walls and resetting the tables, I would think about the beauty of mindless work. It was easily accomplished and complete in front of your eyes, the forks, knives, and spoons lined parallel and gleaming on white paper napkins rested on a freshly changed red and white checkered tablecloth still smelling of chlorine and lavender. Why couldn't everything be that simplistic and visible?

I usually rushed through the job so I could have time to talk to Rich. He was the cook during the day shift. The first few days of that summer working at Gino's I hardly exchanged a word with him. His eyes darted around me, never catching my gaze. In a way I'm glad he never looked at me, because I was studying the warm brown angles of his face. Explosive waves of hair floated from his head, like ringlets of choking black smoke. Pink gummy scars covered his hand. A half a blackening tooth poked out of his raw looking gums. His smiles never exposed his teeth, but tensely wrapped around their pink, stubby bases. If he could stop himself, he didn't smile at all.

Justo, the dishwasher from Peru could only say "busy" and "mucho money" in English. Thai, the Vietnamese salad maker, never

stopped talking about babies or how much Italian food made her sick. Neither made for good conversation. Rich was used to doing his job silently. He bitterly cursed out the owner, Frank, who thought himself to be omniscient. Frank impotently tried to pose as an authority figure to his employees, beginning all his lectures or ultimatums with "You know why that is? I'll tell ya..." He was the Mr. Wizard of restauranteering. He stood obtrusively to the side, sloppily chewing on the tattered end of a cigar, rolling with the gluttonous layers of fat squeezed under nylon golf shirts, clouds of cigar smoke obscured his smug grins as he watched for our mistakes. Rich didn't talk to him and neither did I. Frank left at 1:30 every day with a blue vinyl bag of cash stashed under his sweat-soaked armpit. He had other "business deals" on the side.

Rich and I fell into the habit of eating lunch together everyday, basically because we had no other options. We talked about stupid stuff at first, the Phillies, "that fat shit, Frank" or made fun of the customers that staggered in after two. One day he said, "Do you wanna see a picture of my daughter?" I thought he was kidding. Though appearing to be about my age, he was almost ten years older. He pulled a tattered wallet from his blue New York Mets sweatshorts. He delicately slipped the picture out of its floppy plastic pocket. He glanced at it for a moment before handing me the dog-eared photograph. The buck-toothed little girl stared intently from a nebulous blue backdrop. Her slightly crossed eyes popped out of her head like two jet beads. She wasn't smiling, but looked perplexed. On the back in black, smeary ink she scrawled unevenly, "TO DADDY—FROM: YOUR DAUGHTER, CRISTAL," with distorted, little red hearts floating around it. She was an ugly girl, but I exclaimed, "She's so cute," out of pity anyway. He knew I was lying.

"She looks just like her mother, but she's like me...", he said holding a clenched fist to his chest, "inside."

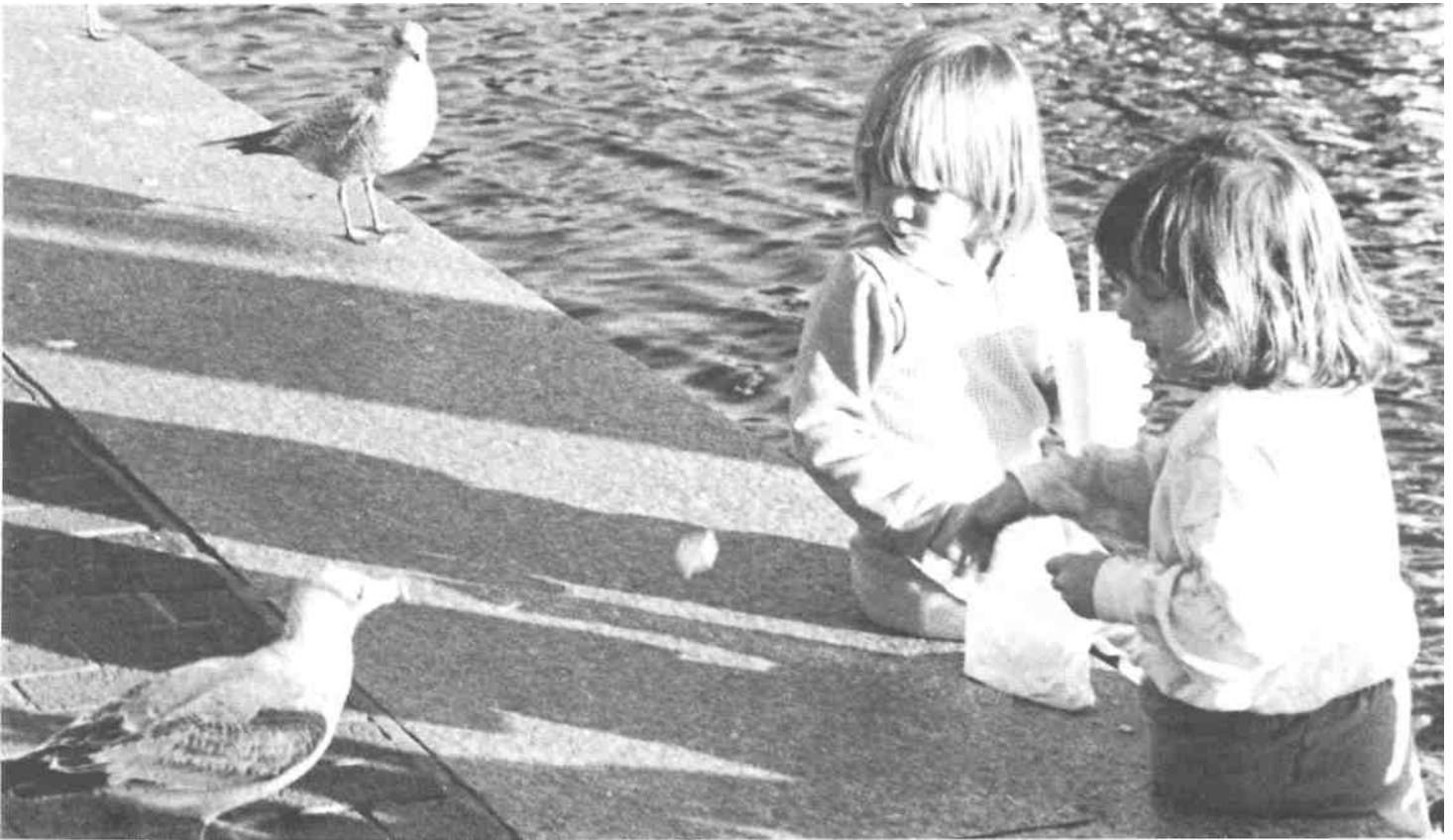
Sister Rose Marie was supposedly a model Catholic, an overflowing fountain of love and all that, but inside she was cold. Her frustration was understandable. She was old and these kids were downright wild, but sometimes even I felt powerless in the face of her unpredictable anger. I learned what the kids already knew, you can't trust someone that's dead. One girl fell direct victim to sister's outbursts. Tiah was a sunflower. Her face was bright and the lashes on her eyes swept in dense petals around her easy gaze. She swayed gracefully amongst the other children like dandelions. Their thin necks craned upwards to join her, they loved her. Sister got mad at Tiah for interrupting her with incessant questions while she was talking. Sister never answered a single question with words, she responded by smacking her in the head. "Tiah! That's enough already!" she yelled. Tiah shook with tears, "You have no right to do that! You can't do that to me! Nobody hits me, not even my mama! You ain't got no right!" she screeched.

I don't know how to explain the way I felt the first time William hugged me. His sinewy arms wrapped tightly around my neck and his cold, damp cheek pressed against mine. I caught the number 62 bus home a block away from his house, so I had taken to walking him home every week. He cowered behind me at first, looking down at the sidewalk or past me at the endless progression of beckoning traffic lights. Soon he walked quietly next to me, his small stride stretching to meet my own. On December 15, 1988 we stopped at the corner where I always said previously, "Bye William. I'll see you next week, right?" and then continued on my own. But on this particular dry icy night William stood still facing me, when I said goodbye to him instead of walking with his back to me and his voice trailing, "See ya later." He said instead, "C'mon, I wanna show you my house." We walked down the alley. His house was set back behind the other uniform brick row houses, enclosed in a chain link fence.

The house was a boxy miniature compared to the others and peeling a bright blue paint. A piece of wooden paneling covered the right upstairs window. The other windows were dark. I crouched down next to him, "Hey. Is there anybody home now?" "No. My Aunt Roberta is still working. She'll be working until ten," he said. I hesitated and then said, "Would you like me to keep you company, until she comes home?" "No," he said emphatically, "She would be mad. I'm not allowed to let nobody in, not nobody." I crouched there for another minute or so, feeling helpless. He was going into an empty house and there was nothing I could do about it. I wanted to take him home with me, let him eat dessert before dinner, help him with his homework, play with him, listen to him, hold him, tuck him in and tell him honestly, "See you tomorrow." I couldn't do a damn thing for him, but watch him go, small and alone, watch him pull the key on a leather cord around his neck from under his sweater, unlock the door twice and disappear into the enveloping darkness. But before he opened the gate and walked down the narrow broken concrete path to his stoop, he wrapped those strong arms around me. I picked him up and held him solidly against me. He was so light, but his sobs were heavy. I don't know if you've ever felt insignificant and cursed yourself for being who you were at that time, in that place. I triumphed in his sign of trust, but felt I betrayed him because I could do nothing with it. That trust was a tiny bird in my hand that I could keep warm in the moist grasp of my hand and be careful not to crush its frail hollow bones. I could protect him while I held him. But, never would that little boy stand free and solid on MY hand and take flight.

"Friendship is a teacup, drop by drop, little actions and gestures fill it up until it runs over with love."

I loved Rich in some strange, but honest way. It was just a pure feeling. We spent afternoons sitting at the corner table in the harsh



streams of July sunlight under a cheap print of the Mona Lisa. Eating and talking about our lives, I told him about the courses I took at college and how intense the pressure of papers and exams could be. I told him about my friends and imbroglios between us about stolen boyfriends. My plans for the future were set. My intensions were to enter into the Peace Corps after college for two years, then entering graduate school to get a masters and possibly a doctorate in English. I envisioned myself as a college professor teaching minority literature and splitting my students' minds wide open. He listened to everything I had to say, nodding, looking into me and didn't believe a goddamn word.

"You know what?" he asked.

"What?" I responded.

"I learned a long time ago that you can't plan everything," he said.

"Why not? You can do anything you set

your mind to," I said.

"You really believe that shit, girl?" he asked, "You can't tell me what you are going to be doing tomorrow or five years from now. Nothing ever turns out the way you expect it, at least it never has for me."

I agreed with him there. Rich was hard and always wanted to break through to him and gather the last bits of vulnerability and hope and bind them together. He knew that life gets in the way of dreams and fucks them up. I did for him. His father died when he was five, so he was raised by his mother. She owned a dingy diner in South Philly that he worked in from the time he was 11 years old. He was kicked out of his school district in the ninth grade because he got into fights constantly.

"I never picked any fights. I never bothered nobody. I ended up defending my friends and getting them outta fights. I couldn't stand to watch my friends get the shit beat out of them



for nothing," he explained.

"Oh God, Rich. Why did your friends get beat up all the time?" I asked.

"Because of this," he said pointing to his face, tapping his cheek.

Rich just started working at his mother's diner full time and put money away. He met a girl and got her pregnant when he was seventeen. He married her and bought a car and a small house, where he lived miserably for eight years, until he divorced her. He crashed his VW Bug into a brick wall after veering onto the sidewalk to avoid a car full of white teenage boys cackling vultuously in a Trans Am. "They came straight at me, speeding the wrong way down a one way street," he said, "And they was laughing." His car was crushed into a red metal ball "small enough to fit into his pocket."

"That's how I lost all my teeth," he said, "I broke six ribs and had a gash in my head that needed 25 stitches to get closed. You know what?" He asked puffing cigarette smoke through his nose and sneering, "I had to walk three miles to my house after the accident. Nobody asked me if I needed help, they just stared at my t-shirt soaked through with blood."

I wondered what I would have done if I had been a passerby. Would I have helped him? Or would I have gaped at him like he was sort of side show freak, thinking deep down, "God, look how bad things can get." At that moment though, my heart fisted up in a sort of vicarious pain. I tried to imagine what Rich felt like. He was alone and had nobody to call for help. He took steps, each seeming to be an hour long. His lungs were pinned and poked by his broken ribs, gasping for breath. He couldn't think about anything, but how far each street sign and store front was to his house. Cars, people, trees, buildings wavered behind a crimson fog. Home was the only thing solid to reach for. When he walked through that door, he could let go and feel pain. He could cry. The mine salt of his stinging tears seeping into his open flesh. He could ask, "WHY? WHY? WHY?" knowing

there was no answer. He could then crumple onto to the floor and whisper to himself, "I give up," before falling asleep. So much for the American Dream.

The more Rich got to know me, the quieter he became. After telling him about my plans, the only thing to talk about was me inside.

"Did you ever read *The Color Purple*?" I asked.

"No. Never heard of it," he said.

"Oh, you should read it. That book changed my life," I said.

I knew about black history: Malcolm X, The Black Panthers and the riots in Watts, Los Angeles. I knew about how slaves were treated, even after they were freed, living in fear of white men and being lynched by the grating hatred wrapped around their neck. They hadn't come much further since then, they were being choked off in the ghettos and killing each other for a chance to breathe. I knew the facts, I knew the struggle.

"Hey, Rich. Did you hear that the apartheid was lifted in South Africa? I saw it on television last night," I asked.

"No," he answered.

"Isn't that great? I can't believe it, after all that fighting for freedom. It's about time," I said.

"Yeah, that's great," he responded.

"Don't you understand the implications of this? This is a triumph for those people," I said.

"No, I don't get it," he sighed, "and you know what? I don't care."

Eventually, Rich stopped talking to me. I couldn't understand this. Had I offended him in some way? How could I have? I listened to him and tried to show that I could understand him. The silence hung in the sultry air of August. I would greet him every morning and he wouldn't look at me. His eyes darted around me, but never caught my gazes. I didn't care, it was his problem. I was going back to school in a few weeks and I wouldn't have to deal with it anymore.

"Rich? Rich. Why aren't you talking to me anymore? Why won't you say one word to me? Do you hear me?" I asked desperately one day.

He didn't answer me. He clanged down wrought iron pans and filled up five gallon pots with water for spaghetti. He opened and closed the refrigerator door, pulling bags and bags of raw, purple chicken.

"Where's all the goddamn eggplant?" he muttered to himself.

"Rich, answer me! What have I done to make you ignore me for all this time? Why won't you talk to me?" I yelled.

He rushed from behind the pickup station, passed me and slammed through the swinging door into the empty dining room. A white powdery trail padded behind him from the flour he was using to bread the eggplant. I followed behind him, my feet falling right into his footprints. He went down into the basement, crashing down the brittle wooden stairs. He heaved open the metal door of the walk-in fridge that seeped light and cirrus clouds throughout the darkness. I stood there with my arms folded across my chest, shivering. "Rich, do you hate me for some reason? Why won't you say a single fucking word to me?" He didn't answer. His hands frantically picked through the crates of vegetables. A flaccid paper bag of lemons toppled to the floor and rolled out towards me. Shaking, I yelled out one more time, "Why won't you answer me anymore? Why won't you talk to me? I care about you."

He came barreling toward me. "Do you wanna know why I won't talk to you? Do you wanna know why you are not worth my time?," he screamed in my face, his eyes red. "Because you don't care, you think you do. Even I'm smart enough to understand that."

"How can you say that?," I said, not believing the words stinging my ears.

"I know it. I feel it. You're white and I'm black. I wanted to know you, not your color. You spent all your time and words talking about my color," he said shaking his outstretched

hands in front of him, "Friends show love to each other by finding things inside them that are not the same, not pointing out the ways they are different. You don't know nothing about me inside, you only see my blackness and you think I'm blinded by your whiteness."

He reached out and took my hand and intertwined our fingers and held that contrasting grasp in front of my eyes, "That's friendship," he said, "That's real love."

I don't know what his words meant exactly, but I felt them. All those nights lying naked on cold vinyl carseats, desperately trying to hold onto the writhing pale body on top of me. Those skinny white legs made sickly by moonlight. Hot breath and spit covering my lips, not having any real meaning to me. My mind wandered, I would think about my curfew and whether my clothes would be stained when it was finally over. The deep strength of Rich seemed so much more honest and real to me, than those clumsy nights with my boyfriend, Patrick in high school. His dark skin was more solid and powerful over me. Rich didn't say a word to me during the whole time. I didn't dare speak either, I clenched my teeth as the disks of my spine scraped across the gritty cement floor among the cases of red Coca-Cola cans and boxes of Sweetheart straws. I remembered Patrick weakly whispering "I love you, I love you, I really love you," in between groans - then was swallowed into that vital silence again.

Big wooden beads flew everywhere when the fishing line necklace finally snapped. The square red, yellow and green beads ricocheted off the brick walls, pelted the blacktop and stung William's cheeks, though he didn't feel them. The little boy under him wailed holding his hands over his face as he convulsed with fear. William straddled him, pummeling the runty third-grader with his fists after the necklace broke. Kids circled tightly around the filth, watching and screaming. A teacher broke through the wall of frozen children and tore

William off the little boy, just about yanking his arm out of the socket.

He was kicked out of the school district and the wooden bead necklaces that kids made and wore to school were banned. A social worker was contacted and she investigated William's background and present living situation. It was mutually decided by William's Aunt Roberta and the social worker that he should be sent to the Frankford Reformatory School in Northeast Philly, which was just the proper name for juvey hall.

William was resting on his side, knees drawn into his crumpled chest. His eyes were closed tight and lips stretched into a mile-wide grimace. One hand rested in a fist next to his shoulder and the other reached out like a little empty cup waiting to be filled. Crimson rivulets seeped into the cracks of ghostly white concrete. We were on our way inside the Gallery to get William's favorite mint chocolate chip ice cream minutes before and now I was slumped over the cement barrier of a parking garage of the mall. Gasping his name over and over, my hand was still hanging torn open from the broken grasp. William was just too heavy. I couldn't pull him up, oh God I tried, I just couldn't pull him up.

I screamed, "Hold on baby, hold on baby."

"I'm trying," he screeched, choking on his thickening tears. His eyes were flooding. I was drowning.

"Pleeeaaase hold on," I begged, "Please."

He looked up at me with his face suddenly calm, but still glimmering. Beckoning eyes blinking to clear his sight. His grasp unraveled finger by finger and then slipped off. His body floated down in the empty air. Straight down, no breezes caught him, swirling him playfully against the inky January sky. Straight down and silent he fell. The cold cement crushed my lungs as if on top of me and not under my draping body. William slept alone for a minute, then one horrified scream after another gathered around him until a dense crowd molded over him. One woman bucketed her accusing gaze up at me,

her bright, waxy red lips gaping. My ears hummed with guilt and rage. She just kept staring. "Don't you look at me! Help him! Don't fucking look at me, look at him!" I screamed so hard my throat ripped from the force. "LOOK AT HIM!"

William made the television news that night. I am sure people stared blankly at the screen as they heard the "big story" and listened to Jim Gardner describe the tragedy of the incident, while red and blue lights spastically flashed behind his head in the darkness. I am sure people stared at their TV screens blankly as they heard the horrific description of the nameless ten-year-old black boy's suicide and shook their heads in disbelief like a shiver to cast off a chill. "My God, how bad are things going to get?" they asked themselves before clicking the remote control a couple times to watch "Happy Days" reruns or gameshows.

"I just want to ask you what you would do if you were in my position. I'm only a sophomore in college and have my future planned out. I have dreams of traveling and going to grad school. What am I supposed to do, have it?" I explain to the counselor.

"Does the father know about this child?" the counselor calmly asks.

I scan the room and stare at a puerile painting of a hand passing a loose bouquet of multi-colored flowers to another open hand. Thick, pasty strokes form the petals and stems in primary shades of red, yellow and blue.

"Does he?" she repeats.

"No," I say turning back to her.

And he is never going to either, no one can ever know.

# **I Killed God, Yesterday**

**By Josh Mooney**

I killed God, yesterday.

I did.

he's out rotting beneath  
the apple tree  
with dead babies.

Oh, I'm all right,  
thank you.

I did it for you.

Kill God, I mean,  
continue

go on

he's not watching

he's dead. remember?

Oh, you wanted to do it,

Kill God.

deep down inside you  
you did.

I know it's there,

so do you.

what do you feel?

disgust or jealousy?

or is it awe?

that doesn't matter,

it's done,

he's dead.

and there is no one to ask for forgiveness.

## Tide of Nature

A stream,  
guided,  
knows where to go  
and how  
through rocks, over pebbles  
unrestrained, natural,  
like i.  
    but that water may be muddied.  
    that stream damned.  
As a leaf falls from a tree,  
blowing high, circling in the wind,  
it tries to hang on,  
like i.  
    but that leaf will fall.  
    that tree may fall.  
And when i lie with you,  
it's nature, love natural,  
which directs me,  
provides a purpose,  
brings me confusion.  
and all the time,  
in the back of my mind,  
i know nature can take away.

By  
**Josh Mooney**

## Mrs. Lee's Rose Garden

Mrs. Lee's Rose Garden,  
do not send me there,  
beneath the deep blue sky,  
and cool fresh air.  
death is  
death  
honorable  
or not  
at Mrs. Lee's Rose Garden,  
every body  
rots.

*\* Arlington National Cemetery was originally the home of Robert E. Lee. It was confiscated by the Union when more cemetery space was needed to bury the Union soldiers. The General in charge of finding this cemetery space bitterly chose Lee's home when he received word that his son was killed in battle. He buried his son in Mrs. Lee's Rose Garden because he felt Lee was responsible for the death of every Union soldier.*



# The Briny Strip

By  
**Kevin Hannan**

What's left when a raging, determined  
River  
Breaks up desert upon desert  
Into two vast and desolate islands  
A wedge driven-  
                    To lose and be lost  
In an Act of God

The water sieged our trees  
Severing our rooted connections  
Leaving a mysterious legacy  
In circles in the sand

We know these tides well now  
Though you have drifted away  
I believe I can still see you  
In the far-off, exotic shade of dusk  
Pacing the briny strip  
Where the fluid hammer  
Repeatedly strikes its anvil  
You walk in circles about the island  
Over and over—it seems to be  
Endlessly the same

Still, I sense your thrill in the  
Crash of the waves  
Rolling in to meet you  
And its magical, misty spray  
Rushes in to greet you and somehow  
I know that, for you, this is different.

From my isolated abode I wistfully  
Recall the days we rejoiced in  
The unity  
Akin only to that of twins  
Before the ungodly silver knife  
Found its home in the heart  
Of the Gemini

Straight through that last link of faith  
That there was one rolling terrain  
Before the smaller two.

