

Creative Voices



Creative works
by members
of the
Osher Lifelong
Learning Institute
at the
University of
Cincinnati

*includes the
2010-11 report
to the membership*

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Now in our 19th year, we continue to invite OLLI members to contribute their creative work in the form of short fiction, poetry, non-fiction and graphics. Creative Voices is published by the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Cincinnati.

The editors of Creative Voices wish to thank all of those who submitted their stories, poems, and artwork.

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Orchid by Jane Tougas

Good Neighbors

by D.J. Martin

RETURNING FROM TOWN to my cabin in the woods, I surprised Espresso, my black pussycat, holding court on a tree stump. I killed the engine and watched. He appeared to be communing with a fox lounging in the grass. Mr. Fox had a full brush, tipped with white cream, and a thick, rich, coppery coat. He displayed no fear, only a regal curiosity, but seemed to appreciate that I, in some strange two-footed way, belonged to the cat. When Espresso finally jumped down and meandered toward me, the fox rose, yawned, stretched, and followed. That did it! Composure be damned! I snatched up the cat and tossed him into the car. The fox glared at me, disappointed that I had questioned his intentions or had deprived him of lunch; I'm not sure which. He paused to taste the air in several directions and finally moved on, slowly picking his way through the low brush and weeds, several over-the-shoulder appraisals punctuating a dignified retreat into a pine thicket. I was sad to see him leave. He was beautiful, and his trust a benediction. One of the many wonders of my sojourn in the Appalachian woodlands has been the willingness of the wildlife to accept me. The deer, opossums, raccoons, rab-

bits, snakes, birds and squirrels seem to understand that I have no interest in them excepting the wonder of our sharing the natural aesthetic.

One afternoon, my mind otherwise occupied, I stepped out the cabin door straight into the muscled black loops of a snake sunning himself on the deck. A quick apperception assessed no danger since his coloring and head shape contraindicated the local poisonous varieties. So I waited, one foot in the cabin, one planted on the deck, while the snake, warm and equable, uncoiled his smooth scaly length from about my ankle and glided peaceably across the warm boards. He chose a likely gap between the planks and slid headfirst into the abyss. It would have been a simple exodus, excepting a small bulge, probably a recent rodent snack, which brought his progress to an embarrassing halt. Back out and seek another route? No way! He demonstrated his confidence in choice of exit strategies by elevating the entire following half of his person and doing an upside down hula dance until the rest of him finally slipped through. For many months Mr. Snake and I shared

our quiet forest clearing as the best of friends. Later as snowflakes fell and wood-smoke rising curled away, we kept the silent peace.

The Blue Door

by Joan Murray

Dogs barking their frenzy
Hearing snow-clad footfalls
Leading to the blue door of her house

Failed to warn of the stranger
Who would steal an open heart

Ancient times past
The heart was frozen
Into errors of embrace
Foraging for the mythic promise of love

A man of some years
The man she dreamed
Entered upon the welcome she offered
He said something worthy

With silent agreement
They flew toward ecstasy
Within the ordinary house
Behind the blue door

For seven days and nights
They left all rational conventions outside
Immune to doubt

She claimed him as her person
He did not resist
He fed her open heart with new blood
They were sanctified beyond dry dogma
The rest is private

At their parting
He retrieved his gaze from her soul
She returned his heart
I love you, he said, with good reason
Yes, she said, then blessed his journey
home

In Spring, she murmured
I'll come to you in Spring

The blue door closed softly behind him



Untitled by Monica Petrosky

Batter Up

by L. Ellis

I NEVER SHOULD HAVE let them talk me into it. Baseball was not my game, but the Company women's softball team needed one more player.

"So who cares about winning, Murph," they said shortening my name, Marianna Murphy, to one syllable. "We'll get uniforms and have a lot of fun."

The following week I drove to the ball-park, which bordered a thick, entangled, wooded area on one side. The diamond itself was set close to the woods. The only

thing between the catcher and the trees was a high, chain link fence to catch the foul balls.

I don't know how, but I was up to bat first.

"Don't face the pitcher, Murph. Turn sideways," the coach called.

Two balls zipped past me as I swung with all my might, knocking myself off balance both times. On the third pitch I got lucky. The bat and ball connected like rams fighting in the Alps. I hit the ball out of the park. The only problem was that the ball went high and backwards over the fence and into the woods.

"You can get the ball, Murphy, along with the poison ivy and everything else in those woods!" the catcher yelled.

I dutifully dropped my bat and headed for the woods.

"Not now! After the game!" This time it was my coach.

I returned to my position but I didn't bother to swing at the next ball. I wasn't in the mood. I struck out.

After the game, which we lost sixty-two to three, the teams dispersed to their cars while I went to look for the ball. It was dusk in the park and darker in the woods. The orange light that filtered through made it look spooky, Like Macbeth's Birnam Wood. However, there was no reason to be scared. This wood had no power to move against me like Macbeth's. I forged deeper into the green growth kicking a path through twigs, bushes and trailing ivy looking for a round, white shape.

Then, all of a sudden, the wood moved, not en masse, but in a leafy flourish to my left. It was impossible to see what it was. I froze. What could it be? My mind raced with wild possibilities, a wolf, a bear, Big Foot. I took a deep breath and calmed myself with the knowledge that suburban Ohio did not produce such animals. The noise was probably a dead branch that had fallen. I slowly began walking again straining my ears for brushing sounds and crunching twigs. Nothing moved but me. I became braver and picked up my pace.

As I pushed a small clump of bush

aside I heard it again. I looked up slowly and turned my head from side to side stretching my neck as far as body construction would allow.

"Macbeth?" I called for lack of anything better to say.

No one answered me, but they didn't have to. I needn't have heard anything else to arrive at my conclusion. To hell with the ball. I was getting out of there!

I started running but didn't get ten feet before my fear materialized and jumped in front of me. He was not much taller than I, overweight, and wore a mustache.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here? Babe Ruth?" he queried, mockingly polite.

I didn't answer. I couldn't. I was trying to swallow and catch my breath at the same time.

"Whatcha doing here?" he demanded in a voice that was nothing but mean.

"I'm looking for my ball," I answered trying to speak calmly.

"Sure ya are. In the middle of a wood." The mocking tone was back again. "Do you realize what it would take for a ball to go so far astray as to land here?"

That did it. Anger overtook my fear. No one was going to insult my talent, or lack thereof, and get away with it.

"Look at me!" I yelled pointing to my ball cap and uniform. "What else would I be looking for?"

It was definitely the wrong question. He grabbed my wrists and pulled me to him.

"That's what I intend to find out," he growled.

He pulled me a good fifty feet then threw me to the ground up against a log.

"Joe put you up to this?" If possible, his tone was nastier. "And who's Mac?"

I tried to tell him that I didn't know a 'Joe' or a 'Mac' and that I had no idea what 'this' was.

He glared at me with desperate eyes, but not for long. Before either of us had a chance to act a man with a shovel appeared and began talking. He was tall, rugged and grimy looking.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "My car..."

Asanas for the Cat

by Vickie Cimprich

First position:

Spine along the best rug,
feet in the air,
belly to the sky,
nethers to the wind,

reach with the east paw
at the next dawn.

Second position:

The haunches are hidden
under the rear;
the front paws are parallel.

Close the eyes and
curl the ears around

all sentient beings.

Third Position:

While the head is down
to lick your bottom,
loft the top foot like an umbrella
over the self.

IF YOU MEET THE BUDDHA

SMIFF HIM.

he began, then stopped as soon as he saw me. "I thought I told you no one else, Benny. You want to screw everything up? You want to go to jail?" By his anger and the authoritative tone in his voice I could tell he was the brains behind whatever they had schemed.

"I didn't bring her, Joe! I swear! I found her sneaking around here, looking for someone by the name of Mac."

I tried explaining everything, from arriving in my car to the baseball game to searching for a foul ball, but Joe didn't believe me either. What was worse, Joe didn't believe Benny. He thought Benny and I were trying to put something over on him.

"You think I'd steal a hundred grand to share it with a broad?" Benny pleaded convincingly. "I'd keep it all myself,"

he said, then added, "cept I can't find it. Where'd ya hide it?"

Joe laughed sarcastically. "Oh, Benny. I knew quite well you would keep it all yourself given the chance. I also knew you would spend it immediately if I didn't bury it until it cooled off a little. Don't worry. I'll get it. First we have to decide what to do with little Miss Baseball."

"Kill her," Benny replied coldly.

To my relief, Joe wasn't interested in instant murder. However, he wasn't opposed to gagging and tying me to a tree in the thick of the wood.

"No one ever comes here. There aren't any trails," he said. "We can get rid of her car and by the time she's found she'll be dead and we'll have been long gone."

Benny was sent to his car for rope and a rag while Joe dragged me with him to fetch the loot. Benny wasn't happy about the twenty-minute round trip to his car which was hidden somewhere along a back road. However, without the money in hand, he couldn't argue.

The loot wasn't more than ten feet away. The spot was easily found if one knew where to look. A large tree lay on the ground, split from its base by lightning. In the triangle formed by the split trunk and the ground was a mound of dirt a little less compact than that surrounding it.

"Sit over there and don't try anything," Joe threatened.

I sat obediently about four feet away, against the fallen tree, but my mind was whirling with what I could try. Whatever it was had to be done before Benny returned. It would be less difficult trying to escape from one than two. Running wasn't very hopeful. With Joe's long legs I wouldn't get far at all. Fighting him was more ridiculous. It was going to have to be a battle of wits.

Joe began digging for his buried treasure. It must have been deep because it took him at least fifteen minutes to dig it out. He looked up often to make sure I wasn't moving. When he was finished he threw the shovel down and pulled out a locked, metal box. Then he sat against the tree and rested, the box and shovel on one side of him and me on the other. It was time to throw him a wild pitch.

"You were right about Benny," I said acting like a woman scorned. "That bum!"

"What?" he replied wiping the sweat



Wishes *by Sue Wilke, October 2010*

When I was just a small girl, my Auntie took me into the garden behind her big white house, and quietly told me about making wishes. She pulled a dandelion gone to seed out of the rich brown soil, told me to make a wish and blow. "Blow hard," she said. I did scattering hundreds of seeds. Could all this blowing really bring my brand new doll?

On a hot, summer day, a blue-sky day, I wandered into a field of flowers. Standing in the midst of a patch of daisies, white and some of those pink ones with red-orange centers, I wanted to take a picture, a really good picture, sharp, not blurry, not over exposed. Snapping away, I captured a fat bumble bee having its way with a black-eyed susan, and followed dancing butterflies, hoping they would sit still long enough. The black and orange of a monarch drew my attention to a large thicket filled with some kind of brown pods. Split open by time, they were protected by a white filmy substance. It was as if whatever flowers once lived there died, and were now covered with tangles of messy cob webs. Entranced by the look of the pods and little, bushy white flowers nearby, I readied my lens. In the exact moment the camera clicked, silky white filament-like hairs began to drift away carried along by an ever so slight breeze. Milkweed seeds, delicate tufts leaving their nest. How far would they go, where would they find rest?

At six, my daughter Abby chasing after them would laugh with delight when she happened to catch one. "My wishes, my wishes," she would say as she watched them toss and turn until they disappeared from sight. If only wishes were still this simple.

from hi brow.

"I agree to help him and where does it get me. I should have known he'd turn on me," I scowled.

"What are you talking about?" Joe fired back.

"You weren't supposed to catch me with Benny. You were supposed to find me looking for a ball. I was to be a decoy to distract you so Benny could stab you from the back."

I waited for a response. I knew neither of them trusted the other. He stared at me and finally commented.

"That two-bit swindler!" Wait till he comes back."

Strike. He had swung at my pitch. I decided to keep throwing.

"I doubt that ol' Benny is coming back," I said and then laughed. "Boy, did you make it easy for him."

He turned on his knees and grabbed me by the shoulders, forcing me to face him. Strike two.

"How?" was all he said in a low, deadly voice.

Just keep pitching, I told myself, checking my panic.

"Benny's been here before. It took him a while but he found the loot," I said throwing another lie at him.

"He doesn't have the key to the lock," Joe pointed out looking back at the box. Foul ball.

"Even a moron can pick a lock," I rebutted. "There's nothing in that box but paper. The only reason he returned was to kill you. He knew once you had discovered that the money was missing you wouldn't stop till you found him. And let's face it. Benny's smart enough to know he's no match for you."

He shoved me down next to the shovel and turned toward the box grabbing in his pocket for a key. He had bought my story. Strike three. He was out.

It was my turn to bat. With his back to me for the first time I quickly picked up the shovel and swung it like Babe breaking a record. I was too close to miss. The shovel connected with a sickening thud as Joe fell over the box. I continued with the swing, the shovel flying from my hands and me falling backward.

Before I could reconnoiter and focus on the outcome of my hit, I heard Benny returning with the rope and rag.

"Joe!" Benny cried less than twenty feet away. Then he looked at me and threw down the rope.

Pure instinct made me attempt to get up and run as Benny came after me full speed with his hands holding the rag in front of him ready to clutch my neck. Before I could stand up my foot caught on a stringy vine and I fell back to the ground. Two more strides and Benny would be on top of me.

The next few horrifying seconds passed as eternity in my mind. It wasn't until afterwards that I realized what had happened. Benny came at me in a flying leap that would have qualified him for the Great Wallendas. I rolled out of his path, but not before I had heard his scream and saw the look of fright on his face. He overshot me and landed with his head hitting the trunk of the fallen tree.

For a full five seconds I stared without blinking. Benny was unequivocally out. I looked back at his path still confused and saw my ball rolling innocently along the ground.

I used the rope to tie them up and ran back to the ballpark with as much of the money as I could carry, just in case anyone else doubted my word. I jumped in my car, locked the doors and called the police on my cell.

The police, skeptical of me or not, acted swiftly and efficiently, justifying the respect due them. They also solved a year old bank robbery.

The next morning the sports headlines read, "Baseball Player Bats One Hundred Thousand." I returned the ball along with my uniform. My baseball career was over. I could never beat my own record, nor did I want to.



"Pollock's BMW - 1955" by Sam Hollingsworth

In 1975 BMW motor car company commissioned Alexander Calder to design a painting scheme for an exhibition automobile. Since then sixteen additional artists such as Frank Stella, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, Jenny

Holzer and Jeff Koons have created designs.

This painting envisions a design that might have been created by Jackson Pollock. The car is a 1955 BMW M 503.

Pollock died in an automobile crash on Long Island in 1956.

Copper Treasure

by Glenn King

ERNEST IS AN ELDERLY MAN ... eighty-one to be exact. His bones are fragile, and his face has the deep lines of one who has spent long hours outdoors. His weathered hands, only partially covered by a pair of unraveling, soiled knit gloves, show that he has worked hard in his lifetime. The rusty stains on his index and middle finger are telltale signs of years of smoking. He huddles against the biting wind in his tattered Army coat and pulls his black knit cap tighter on his head. The swirling leaves of autumn whip about him as he sits on a cold park bench watching nannies push babies in prams. Women avoid his shivering form and ignore his sad smile as they quickly guide their chattering children toward the play area.

Where have those happy years of care-free, questioning childhood gone? Only yesterday he was a cheerful boy showing off his new penny to all who would look. This included his best friend, Francis, a pretty little redhead who lived in a big house on an even bigger hill on the right side of town. Ernie, as his buddies called him, came from a family that didn't have much in the way of worldly goods, but he always wore clean hand me down clothes from an older brother, and his engaging smile was irresistible to all who knew him.

In 1931, when Ernest was nine, a well-dressed man he didn't know tossed an unbelievable copper treasure into his jacket pocket. It was a shiny, new penny.

"Go buy a penny candy, kid," said the generous man as he hurried on his way.

How could I ever part with this shiny penny, he thought. If I spend it, it will be gone forever, and the sweet candy taste will only last for a short while. I will keep it in my pocket for good luck.

So, for seventy two years, this is just what he did.

Ernie's "good luck" began in grade school when Mrs. Williams, his seventh grade teacher, was assigning classroom seating. Ernest asked if he could sit next to his best friend Francis. The teacher knew that could possibly be a disruptive idea, but she liked the young boy and

said, "All right Ernie, let's see, does anyone have a coin we could toss?"

He quickly pulled his shiny copper penny from his pocket and said, "I do!"

"Heads you win and tails you lose," she proposed

And that's how Ernie got his wish. This good luck continued through high school, and when the football team asked to use his copper penny for the beginning coin toss, they always won. This may have been coincidental, but he thought the coin was magic. Every night, he placed the coin on his nightstand, and when he decided to sign up for the army, he took the lucky penny with him.

That special coin went through many World War II experiences. It was tucked into the corner of his uniform breast pocket. Occasionally, he would take it out and think of all the good fortune it had brought. It made him smile to think of home. During one intense battle, Ernie was shot, and once again, his wonderful penny worked its magic. It saved his life. A stray bullet hit and ricocheted off that precious coin. The corpsman who answered his call for help was speechless. Ernie was stunned and bruised, and very lucky to be alive. The little copper penny was no longer shiny, no longer round, and no longer flat, but after all these years, it was still working its magic.

When the war was over, Ernie married Francis, the love of his life, and the tarnished penny remained in his pocket. He fingered it nervously as he repeated his vows and gazed at the lovely woman, with copper colored hair and freckles, who was to become his partner for fifty-nine joyous years.

His wife was gone now, and the coin burned a hole of regret in his pocket as he sat on the cold metal bench. For the first time, his copper penny had failed him. It had lost its magical power and couldn't save his precious Francis. She had taken such good care of him. She lovingly mended his old coat when it needed a few stitches and always made sure the penny stayed in his pocket.

Ernest had decided to give his little

PRESERVED

by Nancy Jones

Gramma's
jelly dish

pressed glass of the Depression
on the table covered with oilcloth

on a pedestal
small and clear.

I remember the heat.

Stoking the wood fire
again and again
hot, hotter.

Jelly jars
boiling in water

waiting for the bubbling
strawberry preserves

or the steaming red
of crushed crabapples.

And then
and then
after they gelled

the hot paraffin
poured
on top

dulling the color
cooling
for a Sunday morning breakfast.

treasure to another child at the park, but, as he slowly rose from the bench to shuffle off, the old coin fell from his torn pocket and bounced into the street. He watched sadly as his faltering attempt to retrieve it was preempted by a street sweeper that briskly pushed the fallen coin into a storm drain ... his precious treasure, no longer magical, floated through the cement sewer pipe under the street and on into a distant body of water to be lost forever

The Charms of Music

by Rollin Workman

WHEN I WAS A SOPHOMORE in high school, our family acquired two objects which came to be related. One was a V-Disc which had been smuggled out of navy hands. V-Discs were extra large 78 rpm records made for the armed forces during WWII. We valued the V-Disc in question chiefly for one band, which contained a song by Spike Jones entitled “The Danube Isn’t Blue, It’s Green”. The only words I now remember from the piece went as follows.

“Though the blueberry looks a little purple,

And your maple syrup looks a little murple,

Don’t believe what you have heard or you have seen,

The Danube isn’t blue, it’s green.”

During the period when the record was being played repetitively, we acquired the second object, a new born puppy, which we named Josephine. Josephine was half chow, half something else, perhaps Labrador Retriever. She had the reddish brown hair and curled tail of a chow. Her hair, however, was straight; her body eventually longer and leaner than a chow; and her head like that of a Labrador. She had a generally playful and friendly, un-chow-like temperament.

Josephine’s geographical beliefs were

warped by hearing the V-Disc so often at an early age. She uncritically accepted Spike Jones’ picture of the European river. Consequently, she developed a strong dislike for Johann Strauss’s Blue Danube Waltz. That was unfortunate because the Strauss composition eventually supplanted the V-Disc in frequency of performance.

The substitution came about for the following reason. From first grade through high school, I was unsuccessfully given piano lessons. In the latter years of that period, my teacher added cello instruction, not because she had any hope that I would become adept at that instrument, but because she needed a cello in what she called her “Ensemble”. The Ensemble was made up of some of her pupils, and included a few pianists, a number of violinists, 2 violists, a cornet player, and me. We practiced once a week and performed at an annual recital. Our theme song was a simplified version of the Blue Danube. My brother, sister, and I had to practice our parts at home, which we did with enforced regularity.

It wasn’t long before Josephine became quite irritated at having to listen to a composition which she regarded, not only as descriptively false, but also as profoundly boring. During her adolescence, she developed a contrapuntal moan with which to accompany the music. As she advanced in maturity and sophistication, the moan gained melodic complexity. She introduced sharp changes in pitch to create dissonance and sustain the listener’s sense of surprise. Her volume range grew to include everything from pianissimos to climactic crescendos of the sort regarded in Soviet Russia at the time as proletarian realism and in America as canine howling.

Josephine also learned to accompany herself on percussive instruments. One of her favorites was an upstairs closet door which was slightly warped so that it would stay latched for only a couple of seconds and would then spring open. The closet was large, and hence the inside air pressure did not cushion the door when it was rapidly closed. Josephine

learned that she could sit a couple of feet from the closet, slam the door shut, wait for it to spring open, and then repeat the process. Because the door had a natural period of motion, she was unable to bring the timing of the slams up to anywhere near the Strauss waltz tempo. But because her sense of rhythm was fashionably contemporary, she was never bothered by that defect.

Actually, Josephine usually turned to the larger instrument of the door after she had performed on smaller ones. When she was downstairs, she liked to pick up her metal water bowl and pound it against the kitchen floor. She was particularly pleased if the dish was full of water when she began to play. The dish was then more like a kettle drum, the pitch of which could be changed by splashing out the water. The dish had greater rhythmic flexibility than the door, but, as implied by the previous remark, Josephine never made proper use of that advantage. She pounded slowly or rapidly in direct proportion to her irritation, rather than in reference to anything the piano, violin, or cello was doing. Upstairs, Josephine made use of shoes as a substitute for the water dish. It took her nearly two years, however, to discover that a louder thump could be obtained by holding the toe of the shoe in her teeth and knocking the hell against the floor, rather than vice versa.

It was possible to play the Blue Danube in the face of moaning or shoe pounding by Josephine. But either Strauss or sanity eventually had to succumb as Josephine escalated toward the full vocal and percussive orchestration of her major composition, *The Great Portal of the Closet*. Therefore, except for occasional demonstrations for interested friends, we always sacrificed Strauss and retained sanity.

Josephine’s most memorable Blue Danube performance occurred in connection with a group to which my mother belonged, named, simply, the Sewing Circle. In those days, socks which developed holes were darned, not thrown away. Most women had what was called



Jane by Jean Crandell

a darning basket, which was always filled with socks needing repair. The Sewing Circle consisted of about a dozen women from a two or three block area who met on Wednesday afternoons. One of the members read aloud while the others darned. The afternoon ended with light refreshments, occasionally preceded by entertainment. The entertainment option was introduced mainly to accommodate Mrs. Reeves. Mrs. Reeves was a widow, probably in her late 60's or early 70's. In my teenage classification, she was very old, older than my grandparents. As such, she was too old to have a first name. Mrs. Reeves had been a fair pianist in her earlier years, who erroneously imagined herself to be even better in her maturity than she had been in her youth. She liked to play for the Sewing Circle and usually did so whenever the group met at a house with a piano. Our worn upright, with one missing ivory key covering and two top notes which could not be tuned, suited her well.

One Wednesday in March of 1945, the Sewing Circle met at our house. My mother felt a certain apprehension when, after the period of darning, Mrs. Reeves announced that she had prepared a medley of Viennese waltzes which she hoped the ladies would find agreeable. Though the ladies did not commit themselves to predictions of whether they would or not, Mrs. Reeves moved from her chair beside the piano to the piano bench and began.

A rendition of Wiener Blut was received with polite applause. When the third of the introductory slow notes of The Blue Danube rang out, there was a warning moan from upstairs which only my mother detected. As Mrs. Reeves launched into the familiar melody, the moaning became noticeable to everyone; and a thumping began which some of the women found disturbing. When a door began to slam, they looked at my mother with eyes which strongly suggested that something should be done. Nothing, however, deterred Mrs. Reeves.

The door slammed six times. My mother counted them. Then, to the relief of the other ladies and the anxiety of my mother, the noise unaccountably stopped. Two waltz figures later, Josephine appeared, silently and rapidly descending the stairs. She stopped mo-

mentarily on the final step to analyze the situation in the living room. Then, loping to the chair vacated by Mrs. Reeves, she jumped into it, and from there to the top of the piano. In less time than Strauss allowed young imperial officers to close the basic waltz tri-step, she established a solid, sitting position; and, leaning down until her head was directly in front of that of Mrs. Reeves, she uttered a distinctive critique of Strauss. It was a superb vocal achievement, starting at about middle c, rising continuously with increasing volume for two and a half octaves, and falling back to C as it died out. The clarity of tone, vibrato, and breath control was faultless.

Mrs. Reeves rose on the wings of song. Or, more precisely, she shot upward from the piano bench, barely missing Josephine's head, and flew backwards, all with no visible effort on her part. During the flight, she tried to imitate Josephine's aria, but the result was quite painful musically. All she could manage was a collection of staccato yelps at random pitches, mostly in the high registers.

She landed in the arms of my mother, who had stood up in anticipation of some unusual movement of Josephine and was thus ready for the unusual movement of Mrs. Reeves. Mother eased Mrs. Reeves onto the davenport, where she half sat, half lay, uttering little squeaks. Meanwhile, Josephine descended from the piano; greeted with much tail wagging a couple of ladies whom she knew; licked Mrs. Reeves' hand, turning an incipient squeak into a screech; gave my mother a



Stairway to Where by Elaine Shinkle

look of moral righteousness; and ambled back upstairs.

Mrs. Reeves eventually recovered, in part by having a cup of brandy instead of a cup of coffee with her afternoon cake. Nobody ever asked her how many unplayed waltzes were part of her Viennese medley nor did she perform the medley again. It was in fact almost a year before she returned to playing for the Sewing Circle, and never again at our house. She always kept a maximum possible distance from our piano.

Josephine grew to old age, without mellowing in her musical opinions. When she died, we buried her in the back yard, with her head lying on the Spike Jones V-Disc. Though it has been many years since the house was sold and the family dispersed to all parts of the country, I like to think that the V-Disc is still there, with its grooves filled with soil which was once Josephine.

Of Parakeets and Pearls

by Ann Plyler

HAVE YOU EVER WANTED something so much that you knew your heart would break into a million smithereens if you didn't get it? Bee-bee sighed as she glanced out the window at her son, Jackie, shooting hoops with his dad. Jackie would be heartbroken if they had to cancel his trip. Every year, Tucker's eighth-grade class chartered a bus to Washington, D.C., for their graduation trip. Jackie had talked about this incessantly since fourth grade. He was a history buff like his dad. It would be his first time away from home for a whole week; a rite of passage along with his diploma.

Normally Jack, her husband, would be at work this time of day. North Louisiana was doing well in these post-war times. The reason the trip was in jeopardy was his temporary joblessness. His plant had been on strike for six weeks now and it looked to be long and ugly.

Bee-bee sighed again. She couldn't dismiss the overheard conversation from her head. Last week at the social following New Hope Baptist Church's services, Sara Ledbetter had confided to her group of gossips: "There's an opening at the Palace for a saleslady. That white trash Gwen

Sew got herself in trouble with some soldier out at the base, and Randall Bryce gave her her walking papers."

The Palace. It was the only department store in the region of North Louisiana where the Smiths lived, in Monroe, about fifteen miles away from Tucker. Monroe was situated along the Ouachita river, boasting a population of about 25,000. It had enough Southern pretentiousness to have a country club, and junior league.

At the same time, its shopping opportunities were limited; a large Woolworth's, a Montgomery Ward catalog outlet and of course, the Palace. Most everyone in Monroe, West Monroe, on the other side of the Ouachita, and the half dozen or so small towns like Tucker, that skirted Monroe's borders, shopped the Palace.

Bee-bee faithfully shopped the Palace every year during the back-to-school sales, laying in a good supply of underwear and jeans for Jackie and his brother Stephens. Her boys were her pride and she enjoyed the anticipation of a new school year. Her sons were more like Jack, confident and outgoing and for them, school was challenging and fun.

Her own youth and school days had not been sunny. She had been christened Phoebe but one year, her two brothers got bee-bee guns for Christmas. Almost immediately, her older brother sing-singed to her younger one, "Phoebe's a Bee-bee; Phoebe's a Bee-bee," and the unfortunate nickname stuck.



Untitled by Lynn Wertheimer

Nicknames are funny. For some children, they signal belonging: you're one of us; we like you so much we gave you a pet name. For children afflicted with a crippling shyness, children like Bee-bee; the hated nickname only increases the feeling of isolation and being different.

Jack and Jackie interrupted her reverie as they burst into the house, elbowing each other as they kidded about their athletic prowess. She forced a smile to mask her worry and pushed the terrifying thought to the back of her mind. Jackie could have his trip, his dream of many years, if she filled the vacancy at the Palace.

Back-to-school prices were good at the Palace and Bee-bee would not have missed the ritual of shopping, but she always felt uneasy as she pushed her way through the revolving door. For one thing, to accommodate the country club set, the Palace had a dress code for its salesladies. Each

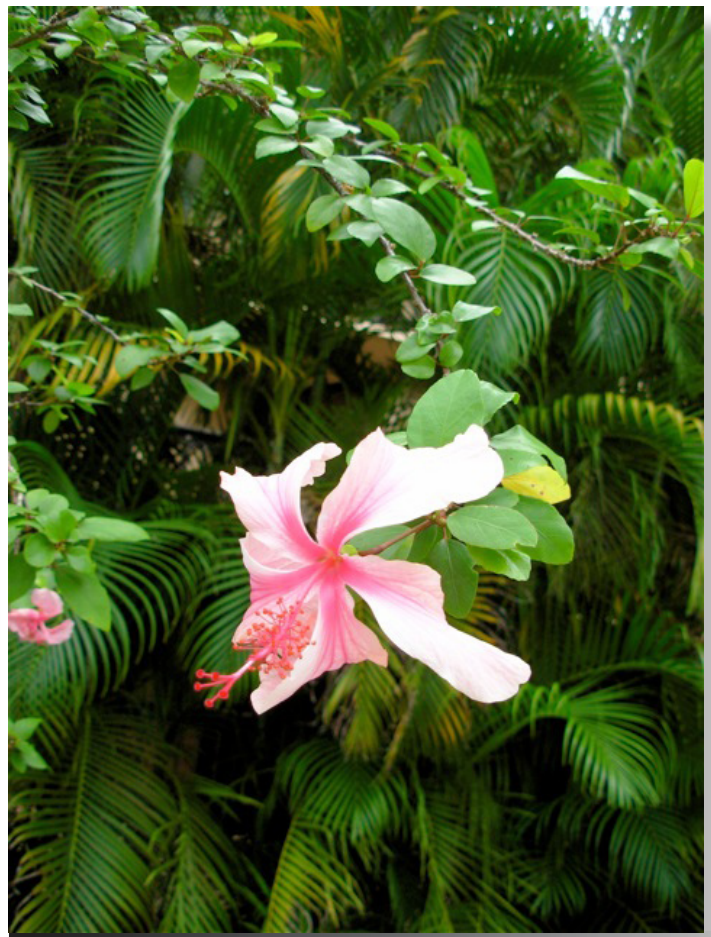
Cleaning a Closet

by g peerless

I sat weeping
as I was cleaning
a closet today,
Memories of parents dying
30, 40 years ago,
sliding through surprised eyes
a reliquary of pain - rising
to be free, reminding me
that sorrows of life are not completely
swept away
But lie waiting
till deep in an old closet some day
tears come spilling
on the hidden ossuary below.



Untitled by Lynn Wertheimer



Untitled by Lynn Wertheimer

new saleslady was instructed to go to Fine Dresses and be fitted for a black dress. Her next stop was Faux Jewelry for pearls. This formal attire intimidated Bee-bee as she pressed money into the hands of the saleslady for twelve pairs of jockey shorts. And the hands! Another expectation of the Palace's salesladies was a weekly stop at the Beauty Salon for a shampoo and set and manicure. Bee-bee was acutely aware of the contrast between the hands of these fine ladies and her own, which were rough and calloused from weeding the garden.

No one on earth would have expected Bee-bee Smith to metamorphose into a Palace saleslady. Her sturdy frame and plain features belonged in her country setting, tending the garden or canning tomatoes. But her unprepossessing appearance belied her inner fire. Phoebe Smith was an impassioned woman. Her passion was for her sons and their happiness. She was absolutely determined to fill the vacancy at the Palace; Jackie would have his

eighth-grade trip to Washington, D.C., so help her God!

The next morning, Bee-bee became an interviewee. Randall Bryce was the Palace's manager, but he delegated hiring to his assistant, Emmaline Loughton. He liked taking credit for good employees, but was quick to blame Emmaline when problems arose, such as with that white trash Gwen Sue. Randall had an unconscious mannerism. When he was feeling especially superior to someone, which was often, he arched his left eyebrow ever so slightly.

Bee-bee desperately hoped that Emma line didn't notice that she was trembling. If the Palace salesladies in general intimidated her, Emma line left her quaking. It was more than just the black dress, pearls and manicure. Emma line was the most graceful creature that Bee-bee had ever been this close to. Her skin was perfection; her auburn hair gorgeous. Her voice was well modulated and she radiated self-assurance. Had she not been so

fearful, Bee-bee might have picked up on Emmaline's essential kindness.

Bee-bee could not make eye contact and mumbled the answers to Emmaline's questions. She rubbed one sweaty palm into the other and tearfully realized it was a lost cause. But then, the back-to-school sales came into the conversation and Bee-bee started talking about her boys. How she always shopped the Palace, every single year. Emmaline wanted to know their ages, their grades.

Before she knew it, Bee-bee was spilling out, "I've got to have this job. Jackie will never have this chance again, at least not with his friends from school." Her desperation took Emmaline back, back to when she was desperate for a job at the Palace eight years ago. Her husband had been shot down on one of his last missions, leaving Emmaline with two children to raise on her own. Grief was threatening to encroach on her sanity; she had to get out of the house and be around people.

The hiring decision was an easy one for Emmaline. Bee-bee would be a natural with the other mothers, cross-selling an extra shirt and matching tie without even realizing she was cross-selling. She could easily switch Mary Beth to Fine Linens and place Bee-bee in Boys

“Mrs. Smith, Fine Dresses is on 3. Faux Jewelry is on 1. Pick those up now. Report to the Beauty Salon for your shampoo and set and manicure on Monday at 9. The Palace opens to customers at 10. You’re hired.”

The following Monday, Bee-bee got there early. She parked Jake’s pick-up truck in the parking lot, but did not get out. Instead she clutched the steering wheel nervously as she waited for the Palace’s beauty salon to open for the employees, all the while thinking, “I can’t do

this.” Finally nine o’clock came. Bee-bee left the safe haven of the pick-up truck, approached the side entrance of the beauty salon, and knocked on the door. Janey opened the door right away and said, “Good morning, you must be Mrs. Smith, Emmaline told me to expect you.”

Bee-bee couldn’t help it. She actually began to relax a bit as Janey shampooed her hair, adjusting the water to pleasant warmth. The shampoo smelled good, real good, like the kind of shampoo fine city ladies used. Janey set Bee-bee’s hair, then placed her under the dryer, even bringing her a magazine to read like she was a regular customer. About five minutes later, there was a knock on the door, really more like a pound. Janey opened the door and a chorus of “Good morning, Mrs. Culpepper” arose in unison.

Bee-bee gasped. It was Mrs. Henrietta Culpepper. Her picture was in the society pages every single week, doing this or that at the country club or chairing this or that at the Junior League. Henny snuck in with the employees to have her roots dyed every other week. Her mother had always told her, “Honey, your hair is your very best feature; be sure you always have your hair done.” Actually, Henny could have avoided the conspiracy with the employees; the entire western hemisphere knew her red hair came out of a bottle.

Bee-bee left the salon at 9:45 and walked over to the Boys’ department, where she was shown how to operate the cash register. A mother with a screaming baby was her first customer. A few minutes later, to her horror, Bee-bee saw Henny Culpepper approach the Boys’ department. Henny looked around for a few minutes and then called Bee-bee over. It was her practice to size up the new salesladies and break them in to assure that she would be treated as a very preferred customer.

“What’s your name?”

“I’m Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Culpepper.”

Good! This new one at least had enough sense to read the society pages and to recognize one of Monroe’s leading socialites. Henny’s husband, Bud, had made it big in the oil patch over in Dallas and he was always on Henny to move over to Texas. But Henny was so fool. She reveled in being a big fish in this itchy bitsy pond. She’d hardly be noticed with all the competition in big D, and she knew it.

“Mrs. Smith, I want to buy my grandson an Easter outfit. Do you have any suggestions? He’s five.”

“Why, Mrs. Culpepper, when my boys were that age, they hated like the dickens to have to dress up. So when I bought them dress pants, dress shirt and tie, I’d always let them pick out something fun too, like a Captain Marvel tee-shirt.” Just the memory of Jackie and Stephens and the Captain Marvel tee-shirts had a calming effect on Bee-bee. Henny took her suggestion to heart and clasped Bee-bee’s hands in her own after signing the charge slip.

“Welcome to the Palace, honey.”

Randall always thought of the Palace



Untitled by Karen Neuhaus

as a necessary evil to be tolerated until he could move on to something more prestigious, perhaps the Maison Blanche in New Orleans or something on Peachtree in Atlanta.. He had recently attended a trade show in New Orleans and the theme of the show had been theme, theme, theme. So Bee-bee had only been at the Palace for a few weeks when Randall called Emmaline into his office.

“Emmaline, I’ve got a winning idea for a Spring theme. Live parakeets!” His left eyebrow arched ever so slightly. Emmaline picked up the telltale cue, assumed a poker face and kept her mouth shut. Randall stared her down until she finally said, “Sounds great, Randall.”

“I knew you’d appreciate my genius. I’ll handle the details myself on this one.”

For the next week, Randall outdid himself. He had the parakeets shipped in from a wholesale pet outlet, specifying a variety of Spring colors. When the time came, he ran a full-page ad: “The Palace welcomes Spring! Come do your Easter shopping at the Palace, the store that welcomes Spring!”

The next morning, workmen came in about 6:30 a.m. or thereabouts and installed the parakeets. They were everywhere in wondrous profusion: Ladies, Cosmetics, Faux Jewelry, Infants, Boys; no department was unworthy of participating in the Spring theme.

The store opened at 10 as usual, and the morning customers sort of got a kick out of the parakeets. You had to admit, they did bring Spring to mind. Randall threw Emmaline a superior smirk.

The first hint of a problem arose about 2:30. The birds started to get restless. The surroundings were unnatural. They began to flap their feathers nervously and their chirping became high-pitched and grating. After about three days, everyone was questioning Randall’s judgment, even the preferred customers. Henny dropped by the Palace to pick up one more outfit for her grandson and stage-whispered to Bee-bee, “Sugar, this smell is awful. Shouldn’t the management be notified?”

Henny wandered over to Girls, but returned almost immediately. This time she did not bother to be discreet. “Sugar, one of those damn parakeets went to the bathroom right in my hair. You be sure and tell that so and so Randall Bryce that

by god, I’m a damned preferred customer and he’d better get the hell those parakeets out of this store!”

After that, whenever Henny came into the Palace, she specifically asked for Bee-bee. When Bee-bee complimented her on her latest hair-do, they exchanged knowing glances and if Randall happened to pass by, they suppressed their giggles. Bee-bee’s awe of Emmaline also began to fade as she realized Emmaline had to suffer Randall’s foolishness on a daily basis, just like the rest of them.

A few weeks after the Parakeet debacle, Emmaline told Bee-bee to call home at her coffee break. Her first thought was that something had happened to the boys. One or the other of them was always falling out of trees or getting stung by a bee. She nervously called and the minute she heard Jack’s voice she knew the news was good.

“Honey, it’s over; the strike’s over. I’m going back to work.”

Bee-bee held back her tears as she returned to her cash register. That night she composed her resignation letter and was visited by unexpected emotion. She was going to miss the Palace. She had become a confidant for many of her customers and she knew their stories: which boy could not learn arithmetic, which boy was on his way to the state spelling bee, and sadly the boy whose mother needed to buy extra pajamas when he became Monroe’s latest polio victim.

There was a lump in her throat as she handed Emmaline her resignation letter. The ensuing days took on an air of unreality. When Henny Culpepper heard the news, she burst into Emmaline’s office. “Now look here, Emmaline, Mrs. Smith is one of the best salesladies the Palace has ever had. You have to give her a raise or something to keep her.”

Bee-bee was flabbergasted when Emmaline approached her with an invitation to stay at the Palace.

She responded, “I’m sorry; I have to say ‘no’; Jack and the boys need me at home.”

Emmaline was thoughtful for a moment and then said, “I’ve got an idea. Why don’t you come back just for the back- to-school sales. We always need extra help then, and your salary would buy your own kids’ clothes.”

Women in the Kitchen

by Judi Morress

Women in the kitchen
Using skills remembered
From a bitter learning
Keeping home fires burning
Cooking on their own.

Women in the kitchen
Spreading peanut butter
Children running past them
Got to do it faster
Now they’re never home.

Women in the kitchen
Whisp’ring family secrets
Keeping family customs
Washing family linens
Never all alone.

Women in the kitchen
Drinking cups of coffee
Staring out the window
Wond’ring where the days go
Frozen to the bone.

Women in the kitchen
Moving round each other
Doing it by memory
Knowing each and every
Rag and hank and bone.

Women in the kitchen
Holding Grandma’s ladle
Seeing Grandma’s hand there
Knowing I belong there.
Now I’m finally home.

Joy and excitement tugged at Bee-bee’s heart. What a perfect idea! All she could say was “yes.”

On Bee-bee’s last day, Emmaline gave her parting instructions. “Have your dress dry-cleaned and return it to Fine Dresses.” And then, she added with a warm smile, “Mrs. Smith, why don’t you just keep the pearls.”

AMEN

by Barry Raut

IF YOU EVER SEEN HIM, youda remembered, that's for damned sure. And Lord help you if he ever seen you back—I mean looked you square in the eye like he did me most Sundays when I was little. It'd curl your blood, and that's God's honest truth.

He had long white hair that had turned yellowy, like old men's hair gets. He combed it straight back, and it hung an inch or two over his wore-out collar. The shoulders of his old black coat was covered with dandruff most days. I never seen him that he wasn't in that undertaker's suit he wore every Lord's Day, mornin' and night, and at Wednesday prayer meetin's and Campground in July when it was hotter'n holy hell and when he done funerals and weddings and such.

His face was the color of wallpaper cleaner, if you can remember that, like he lived his whole life in the church cellar. Come to think of it, it was like the dead body I seen 'em fish outta Greasy Creek once, up by the dam, or the corpses I seen over at Dale Duckett's funeral parlor next door. His hands were soft and sweaty, not like my daddy's which were hard and rough and dry from his work.

His eyes were the queerest part. *Pig's* eyes—*tiny* little eyes, and *blue*. They were the Devil's eyes, swear to God. And when he'd rise up over that old carved-mahogany pulpit of a Sunday mornin', clutchin' his ole tattered bible and workin' us over good, them creepy baby-blues glowed like red-hot pokers. They made me sweat, and I was only a little kid.

The long and the short of it was, Daddy Duncan was the scariest son-of-a-bitch I ever did see in real life, not counting the mummies and such at the Saturday matinee.

We never called him *rev'rend* or *pastor* or any of them other names set aside for preachers. He was *Daddy* to us. *Daddy Duncan*. Daddy Duncan, along with his daughter, Esther, hair white as Jesus's robe, who played the organ, they ran the Wesley Methodist Church, the both of 'em together, from the tip of that squatty old bell tower down to the rat-holes in

the pantry—and to the lives of every sorry soul he called *the sheep of his pasture*.

Our Father, that was God, like in *Our Father who art in heaven*. No argument there. But Daddy Duncan was numero uno in the here and now. You watched what you done, or covered your tracks like a damn Indian. If he found out, *look out*. The shit would fly.

Any of us who *took a drink* was going straight to Hell—do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars. This was really hard for the guys in our railroadin' town where we had a saloon on every corner, where they'd send any kid who could find his own way home to fetch a bucket of suds after supper. The fact that *Jesus drank wine*, we boys used to tell him, cut no ice with Daddy Duncan. *Jesus could drink what he pleased. You can't*. So under the double whammy of Daddy Duncan and the evil eye of sister Esther, who'd scan the pews from the organ bench like a hoot owl on a tree branch and take careful note of who was screwin' around or dozin' off during her daddy's sermons, I signed My Pledge of Abstinence, was what they called it, at

the sweet age of five. This pleased my grandma, who was a hard-liner in the local WCTU – that stands for Women's Christian Temperature Union. Because of my *strong character and iron will*, that's Mama's words, I held out till junior high.

Daddy Duncan hated Catholics. *Mackerel snappers*, he called 'em. He was really hard on 'em during Easter, when they'd shuffle two-by-two from Good Shepherd past our building on Palm Sunday, not makin' any trouble, just waving their palm leaves, *tauntin' us*, he'd say (which I could never quite figure... tauntin' us about what?) He had a thing, too, about prayin' to the Virgin Mary: *If I'm sick, I call the doctor! I don't call the doctor's mother!*

Daddy Duncan never said much about Jews, except how they crucified Jesus and all. And as for *Jesus bein' a Jew hisself*, he never talked about that, but it's right in the Bible! Go figure. They weren't any threat, I guess, since nobody knew any Jewish people anyway. But Catholics were another story. They were right there in our own neighborhood. They walked among us.

I remember the smell of Daddy Duncan. An old man smell, sour-like. Like the smell in a nursin' home or in Uncle Ned's house after Aunt Florence passed. I remember the smell of the church, too.



Untitled by Muriel Foster

If it burnt flat to the ground, like the Lutherans over on Elm Street that got leveled by a bottle rocket on the Fourth of July, 1943, those smells'd still be hoverin' over the ashes long after like a cloud, and I think I could pick 'em out, one by one: the moldy plaster, the damp limestone foundation, the wormy old wood floors, the steam of a thousand church suppers seepin' up from the kitchen—sauerkraut, German sausages, boiled potatoes, green beans cooked in hog fat till they turned black, the drift of snuffed-out candles from a hundred Christmas Eves and five or six generations of weddin's gone good, bad or downright ugly.

Even the wheezy old pump organ had an odor to it. An oily, machinery odor which I liked, actually—like the locomotives down at the yard. I sat next to it most Sundays, in the cool breeze of its cracked leather bellows, up front where Daddy Duncan could keep his old pig's eye on me. But when a good whiff of that old harmonium, which was okay by itself, mixed with the smell of Esther Duncan's perfume, it was all I could do to keep from pukin'.

Daddy Duncan never preached much about sex, far as I can remember. Or maybe he did and I just didn't know it. But the way the women buzzed around him at socials and after service like bees

in the hollyhocks, *he* clearly knew a thing or two about it. *An eye for the ladies*, you might say. I guess they couldn't smell him.

Anyhow, once I seen him put his hand on my Aunt Sarah's be-hind, and she didn't do a thing. Either she was afraid, or she liked it. I never asked. And there was stories about some of the ladies whose men-folk just walked off for no good reason, or so they said—the men skulkin' away to God knows where, but the women stayin' put and still flouncin' around Daddy Duncan every chance they get. He was somethin', that's for *damn* sure.

And don't get me started on *Esther* Duncan—a *maiden lady*, Mama used to call her. The way she'd google the young bucks in the first couple'a rows (her pushing sixty) while she played *In the Sweet Bye and Bye*. . . *We shall meet on that heavenly shore*, made 'em laugh. *Good Shepherd has their virgin, we got ours*, I heard 'em wisecrack one evening at prayer meetin'. Sometimes they'd egg her on, sit up close on purpose, make little puckers at her that nobody else could see, which made her play faster and louder and louder and faster, pumpin' the old pedals for a fare-thee-well, until Daddy Duncan gave her a look, and it was back to business.

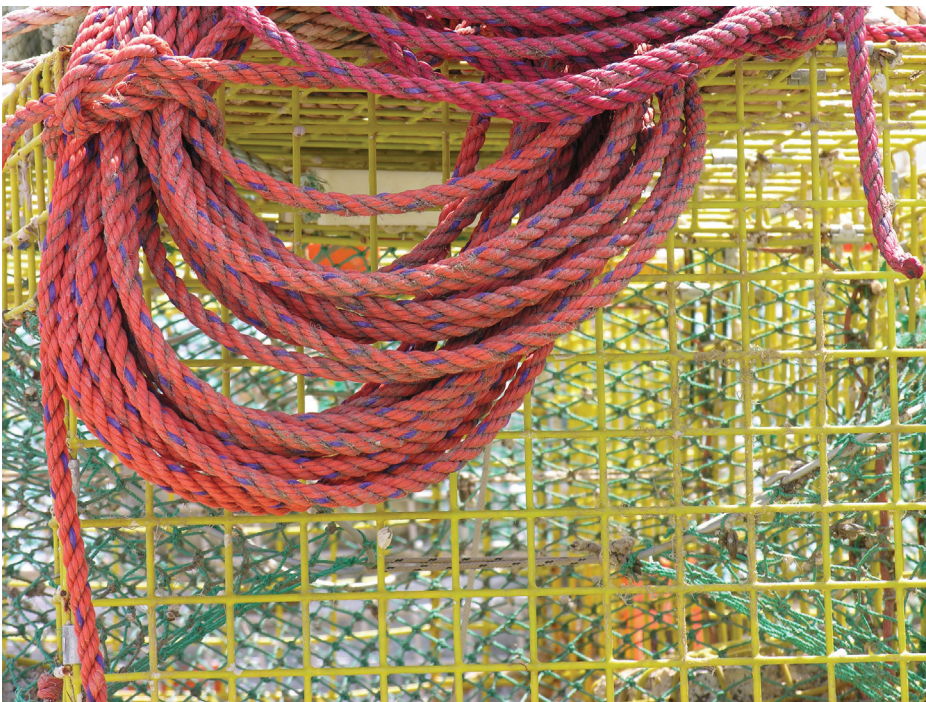
Just about when we thought the old man's pencil had pretty much run outta lead—I mean, what was he, eighty-two, eighty-three?—they find Daddy Duncan shot dead as a doornail in the bed of sister Judd, whose German chocolate cake took first prize three years runnin' in the summer bazaar. Shot once, right through his Ladies Eye. She was plunked twice in the chest, the extra one for good measure, I guess—like the extra egg, which Mama said was likely how she got her cakes so moist. We mourned for some time, mostly for the loss of sister Judd's German chocolate cake...except for sister Baker, I expect, whose Amish apple pie took two seconds and a third them years. Brother Judd give up his old Colt from the War, still smokin', some say, and went quiet as a church-mouse with Sheriff Studley, an easy smile on his face and visions of sister Baker's little green apples dancin' in his head, no doubt. More power to him.

Brother Judd got off, if you're interested. And sister Judd took her recipe to the grave. A sad day.

Daddy Duncan woulda got off, too, if he'd'a made it. He woulda preached the sermon of his life, weepin' about how if sweet Jesus can forgive him, we can, too, and how *all* men're weak because they're *not* The Almighty. Then, skewerin' us with them icy blues like F. Lee Bailey eyeballin' a jury, gathering wind like a hurricane hell-bent for Tallahassee, he woulda twisted it all around in one mighty blast with somethin' like *You've got to know sin to fight it, my children! And believe you me, Daddy Duncan knows sin!* The ladies woulda bought it. And most of the men, too, I suspect. He had the gift...he definitely had the gift.

Well that's just about it on old Daddy Duncan. We started with the Baptists right after that because Mama was so upset. Aunt Sarah went, too, and a bunch more. Said they could never darken the doors of the Wesley Methodist Church again. Don't know what happened there after that, but they had to get 'em a new Daddy Duncan, don'tcha think? Or a Daddy *Somebody* to keep the flock in line. *The straight and narrow for the here and now*, he used to say.

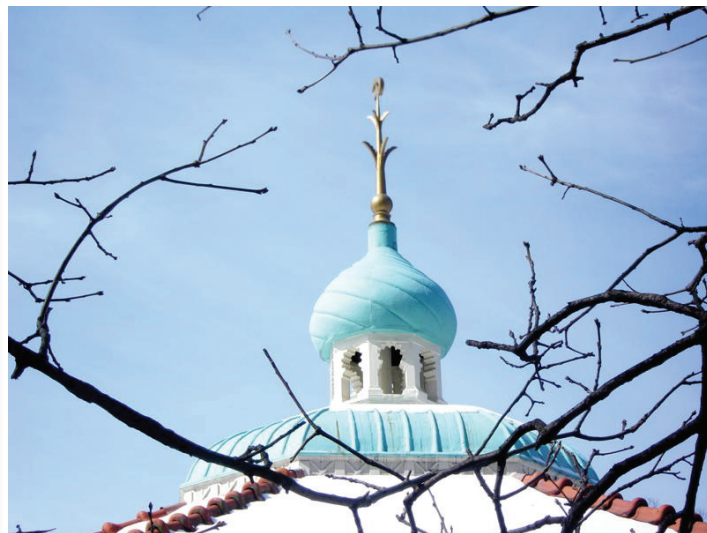
And I say *Amen* to that.



Untitled by Muriel Foster



Untitled by Melissa Goldstein



Untitled by Melissa Goldstein

The Production: Curtain Call

by Daphne Williams Robinson

BRAD COULDN'T GET comfortable. Every time he tried to get to sleep, he felt the weight of his anger getting in the way. He and Cynthia had a big argument just before he went to bed. Cynthia's unreasonable jealousy was more than he could take. She had just begun her long ritual of getting ready for bed. As she lathered moisturizer over her neck and face, she verbally continued to hash over a never ending argument about Brad's straying eyes.

He thought to himself, 'Good Lord! I am so sick and tired of this.'

"Brad! I saw you staring at that floozie in the red leather dress." Cynthia's harsh voice interrupted his thoughts. "You try to act like you don't know what I'm talking about, you lying cheater. You're too old to try to act like a player."

Brad interrupted with a big sigh. He had tried to get a word in, but Cynthia wouldn't let him.

"I saw you at that last party we went to. I tried but I couldn't see her face. Although you insist she's a stranger, your actions make it clear that you know her. You thought I couldn't see you. Well, I did! I'm not blind. In fact, there's something familiar about that woman. I haven't figured it out yet. I just can't put my finger on

"Cyn! This has got to stop! I don't

know what woman you're talking about. Where do you get these crazy ideas?"

"Listen Brad, I'm not crazy. You can't fool me. Mona spilled the beans. She told me she saw you eating lunch the other day at an exclusive restaurant on the outskirts of town ... said there was some thirty-something woman with you. Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

"Cynthia, you are being foolish, ridiculous really. You know you're the only person I've ever loved. Don't you remember when we met during our freshman year in college? You know. That's when we co-starred in the college drama production?"

"Bradley Lyons ... that was twenty-five years ago. How dare you tell me I am foolish. I know I don't look the same as I did when we first married. After all, no matter how hard I tried, having your babies helped change the way I look. Furthermore, you are somewhat to blame. You come home ... barely speak. I never get a hug or a kiss when you leave nor when you get home, and then you claim you're too tired to carry on a conversation."

"Cynthia, you are usually fussing and arguing as I come in the door. What do you expect?"

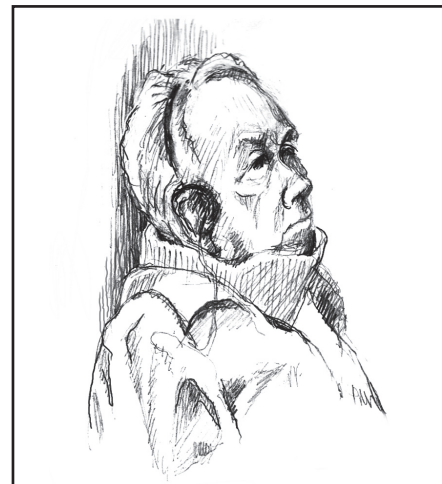
"We used to never run out of things to say to each other. And another thing,

we hardly ever make love anymore."

"Cynthia! I'm through talking about this. Just shut up and let me get some sleep. I have a big meeting tomorrow."

For a moment there was silence, but the air in the room was so thick you could cut it with a knife. The vibes were still bad. That there was hostility between them was obvious. Brad knew there was no sense in trying to get to sleep, at least not in this room listening to Cynthia's haranguing.

He got up and put on his robe. "Listen Cyn, I am going to work on the computer for a while. Why don't you finish getting



AI by Jeanne Crandell

yourself ready for bed. Then perhaps we can talk reasonably over a cup of hot coffee or hot cocoa ... for just a few minutes. Maybe then we can settle down for the night and try to get some sleep. This jealous tirade is getting us nowhere.”

Bradley left the room, but much to his sorrow, Cynthia was hot on his heels. He hurried to his home office with the intent of locking her out.

“Don’t you dare, Bradley Lyons. This conversation is hardly over. Now you’re trying to say that I’m crazy. I am a reasonable person; at least other people think so. I even thought of talking about our problems to our kids, but they’re grown and have their own issues, so I haven’t shared my frustrations with them.

Bradley took a big breath, and then sat down at his computer. He was so sleepy, he could hardly keep his eyes open. Under his breath, he muttered, “What the hell am I doing trying to get along with this mad woman? Our kids are gone ... there’s no need for me to put up with this any longer.”

No sooner did this thought cross his mind when he heard Cynthia’s sharp voice. “You lying dog. You think you can fool me. I discovered your email password and logged into your information. All the evidence is right there. You are involved with someone else.”

“Okay Cynthia,” Brad said in a resigned voice. You found me out. I admit it. There is someone else. Do you wonder why? Now that you know the truth, will you let me get some work done here so I can get a few hours sleep before it’s time for me to go to work?”

“Cut!” The director, Jenny Marsh yelled. “People! The acting is great! This is going well. We just might have a hit on our hands. We have a few rough edges to smooth out. I think we’re about ready to practice without our scripts. Thanks for agreeing to take part in my play. Cut the cameras Joe ... that’s all for today.”

She thought a moment. “Listen everybody! I’m going to collect your scripts. Put them here in this box. Let’s get out of here. Soon as we all change, let’s to head over to The Thespian Cocktail Lounge. It’s my treat. We can have a drink or two before we head home ... Brad, I need a few moments with you tomorrow to address some issues about the production.”

Everyone went to shower and change their clothes.

Cynthia and Brad were more than just actors in Jenny’s production. They were truly married to each other.

As they walked to their car, Bradley

looked uncomfortable. Cynthia stared with a self-righteous, angry look on her face. Both Brad and Cynthia bore expressions that told the real story.

Together they saw Jenny climb into her BMW, wearing a slinky red leather, form-fitting dress.



A Day at the Races

by Linda Doctor

I want to capture a racehorse.
I know well the odds.
I study their moves,
The look in their eye,
Their spirit and sinew.
Sizing up each silk-clad mount,
I note the grit in his grip.
How fierce,
how gentle,
how intuitive,
The curl of his shiny boot
inside the stirrup.
I gamble
With my camera alone.
Its viewfinder
My only betting window.
I calculate a trifecta
Of light, aperture, perspective;
then bet to win across the board.
“They’re OFF!”
My heart pounds
With each click, click, click.
In breathless collusion
With beast, man, machine
I collect my winnings;
Mourn each near-miss.

It's Nearly Sunset in Florida

by Ella Cather-Davis

It's nearly Sunset in Florida,
The elderly are arriving for
happy hour at the pub.
their drivers deposit them
at the door, like package delivery.

At an outside table, a lone red-faced man
sweats in the remaining sun.
He's nursing his beer, cynically
observing their slow debut.

Life teems within the dark interior.
At the wooden bar a news-channel
drones monotone, while the beer-brave
crescendo, raucously laughing at nothing.

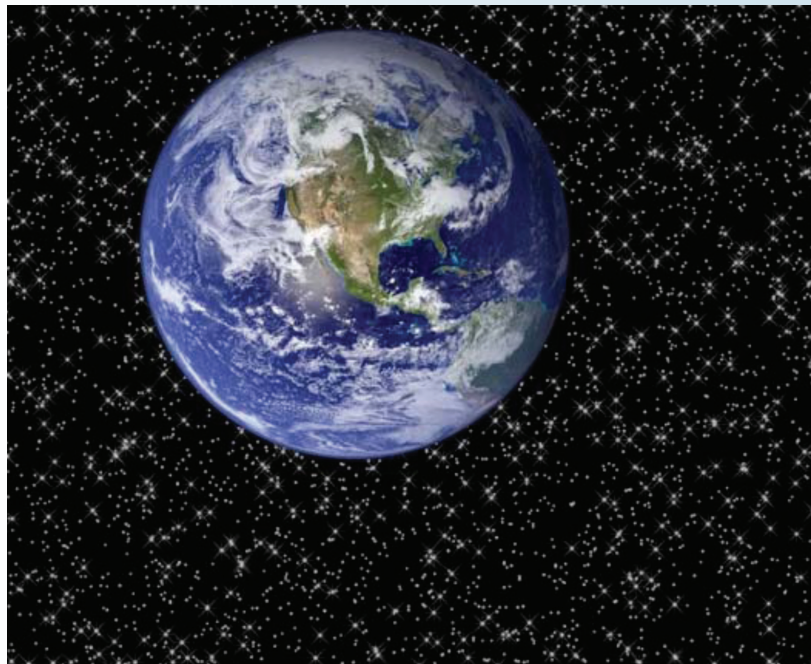
Nearby, in the shadowy dining area
the hungry relish the food and contact
for which they have waited all day,
in their secure air-conditioned cells.

This eternal day's heat and loneliness
are mercifully receding on a sigh.
Set aside is the ever-present fear of
predator, pain, and what lies ahead.

It's nearly Sunset in Florida.



Kathy by Jeanne Crandell



You and I are Stars

by Ralph Meyer

You and I are stars, my Friend,
When first the stars were born,
'Twas from the Universe we came
On that the world's first morn.

Electrons, protons, neutrons that Of
which we all are made. And when
the time has come for us, We'll
return them unafraid.

Listen to the Universe,
Listen to your heart, my Friend.
You and I are stars, you know,
Stars that shall never end.

The Turkey's Last Stand

by Jane Biddinger

THANKSGIVING WOULD BE different this year. It was her first without George.

Norma offered to pass the roasting pan on to a new generation of bastards, but her daughters balked at breaking tradition. Susan, the youngest, had even suggested they set a place at the table for George. Norma nixed that notion. President Obama may pardon the White House turkey, but Norma wasn't that lucky. She was doomed. Doomed to prepare yet another Thanksgiving dinner. She requested off the three days leading to the holiday burning the remainder of her vacation days.

Norma spent Monday tidying the house. There was a time she'd clean the place from top to bottom checking each corner for cobwebs, routing dust bunnies from under the couch, and washing windows. But this year, she limited her efforts to the areas where the action would be—the kitchen, dining room, and bath. She prayed for a cloudy day, making the dust harder to spot. Tuesday was shopping day. Norma circled the parking lot of Porky's Butcher Shop and eased her silver '89 Civic into a spot vacated by one of those SUV's all the young folks drove nowadays.

For the past forty-five years, Norman's order had been the same—a thirty pound turkey and Porky's special marinated oysters. The oysters were the secret ingredient in the stuffing George loved so. This year she could ax those nasty slimy things. Ah, there was something to be thankful for after all.

Norma could always count on George to be amorous on Thanksgiving night, claiming the oyster stuffing to be an aphrodisiac. Year after year as Norma stuffed the turkey, mashed the potatoes, assembled the green bean casserole, baked both pumpkin and pecan pies, and set the table, George promised later that night he'd make her the most grateful woman on the face of the earth. That first Thanksgiving she'd thought he meant he'd clean up after the meal, but just as she'd put away the roasting pan, there he was



October by Bernadette Clemens-Walotka

sporting only the Pilgrim hat she'd used as a centerpiece.

The line at Porky's looped around the store and stopped at the door. Norma took her place at the end of the line. Porky caught sight of her on his way to the refrigerator and called, "How's my favorite red head? I've got you a great bird. I'm short on oysters, so I put back the last three pounds for you." He winked. "Got to keep George happy, you know."

Evidently Porky hadn't heard about George. She thought everyone knew.

It all started with a cell phone Norma bought on Ebay for George's July 4th birthday. George was technically challenged and bound and determined to stay that way. The one exception was the remote control which he managed to master in less than fifteen minutes. Norma had planned to have him buried

with it in his hand.

When George unwrapped the phone, Norma teased that she'd drag him into the age of technology. And this way she'd be able to reach him in case of an emergency. As fate would have it, several numbers were programmed into the phone and while experimenting with it, George accidentally dialed a woman named Gloria. Gloria was bored and chatty as well as half George's sixty-eight years and double Norma's cup size. In time, George and Gloria were checking out more than one another's APPS. By Halloween George lost 17 pounds, exchanged his faded flannels for turtlenecks, and moved in with Gloria. Norma filed for divorce.

Norma forced a smile, thanked Porky for the oysters, and shoved them

into her recyclable bag.

Once home, Norma jammed the turkey into her over-stuffed refrigerator and tossed the oysters into the trash and emptied the grounds for her morning coffee on top just as the doorbell rang.

A man dressed in brown matching a truck parked at the curb, handed her a package and said, "Overnight delivery for George Bungler. Sign here, please."

Norma shook the package. It rattled. The return address was a drug company in Canada. Norma convinced herself that opening a UPS parcel was not tampering with the US mail as she ripped open

the envelope. It was a huge bottle of pills. Those male enhancement drugs she got all those annoying emails about.

The next morning George called. From his cell phone. "Hi, Norma. Anything come there for me? I'm expecting a little something."

Norma asked, "And why would anything for you come here?"

George stammered and said, "Well, I might have put my old address on it. Out of habit, you know."

"Came yesterday."

"Thank God. I'll stop by in a few minutes. On my way to the airport."

"Airport?"

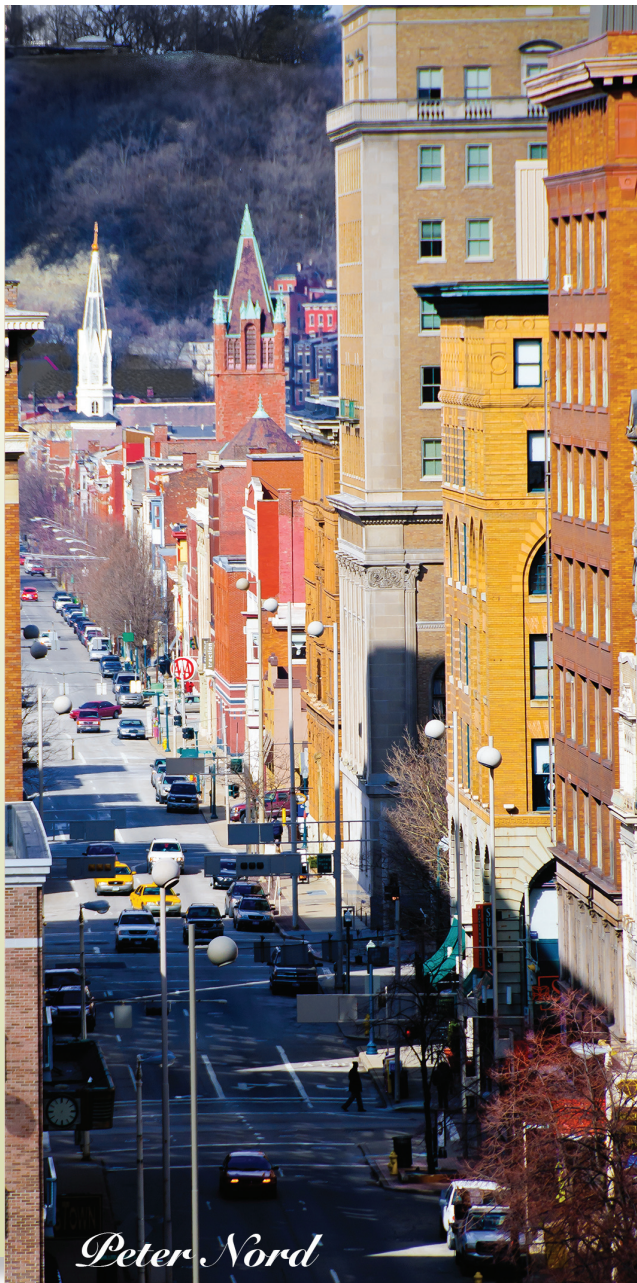
"Glo doesn't cook, so no sense hanging around here. I'm taking her to Cancun for a long weekend."

"Cancun?"

"Norma, don't start on me. Just have that package ready for me." Click.

Norma dumped the pills from the container and dug the coffee-covered oysters from the garbage. She tossed the mixture into the blender, poured the pulverized concoction into the bottle, slipped the bottle into the mailing envelope and resealed it.

George's package was ready. So very ready.



From Pogue's Garage

by Judith Lubow

A friend showed a photo, taken, he said, from Pogue's Garage, looking up Race street: beige buildings, church steeples, etched against the bright blue sky.

Old sweaters mothballed to bottom drawers bear witness to the Grand Old Dame. Her ice cream bridge had stretched across Race Street, beckoning new shoppers,

soothing the weary laden with packages, or destination for ladies lunching with children. The bell of the first floor elevators arriving and leaving had punctuated the genteel hum of the counters displaying cosmetics, hose, purses and scarves. Further up Race Street

Shillito's had served a wider range of shoppers. Surviving name changes and corporate takeovers, Lazarus turned Macy's was built over the teardown of an elegant movie theatre, when Movies were a Designation, like Opera.

Once upon a time horse clopped up Race Street. Once upon a time there was a Cincinnati flood, before the sam was built, and canoes sailed up Race Street, all beneath the same blue sky,

as seen today from Pogue's Garage.

Average Equality

by Dottie Rockel

THERE IS A TERRIBLE TRUTH OUR family has always had to live with, but I'm finally ready to out us. We suffer the ignominious fate of being average Americans. We are not Irish-Americans, African-Americans or Pan Americans and because we lack diversity we are the least celebrated of all people. Perhaps you don't realize how rare average is. Oh sure, people say they are average, but that's just before they announce that they've seen a UFO or won the lottery or done something phenomenal. Sully, the pilot who saved all those lives after the plane crash in the Hudson River said he was an average guy. Hardly!

Years ago when people asked us about our son Doug (and they seldom did since they equated asking parents about their children to asking old people how they are.) Well – if they did ask us about Doug we told them about our average child. They were astounded. “What? You have an average child? You mean he's not gifted or special or in the 90th percentile of anything? How rare! Surely he excels at something. When did he get his first tooth? When did he crawl?”

We, of course, thought he was outstanding in all ways and his “averageness” made him an easy child to rear. We didn't have to employ any Yo Yo Ma relatives for his music training or travel across state lines for select soccer games or drill him on impossible spelling words for competitive bees or agonize over his Hamill camels in the Olympics. He played knothole baseball, and neighborhood football. He was abnormally normal.

Adults will tell you in an instant how special they are. If you don't believe me then just hearken back to your last cocktail party or class reunion. Surely it crept out that the person voted least likely to succeed in high school had become a corporate CEO and had three vacation houses, the class cutup was now a priest, and someone had slept with someone who had slept with Madonna. People with prison records seldom attend these events and if they do it's because they've

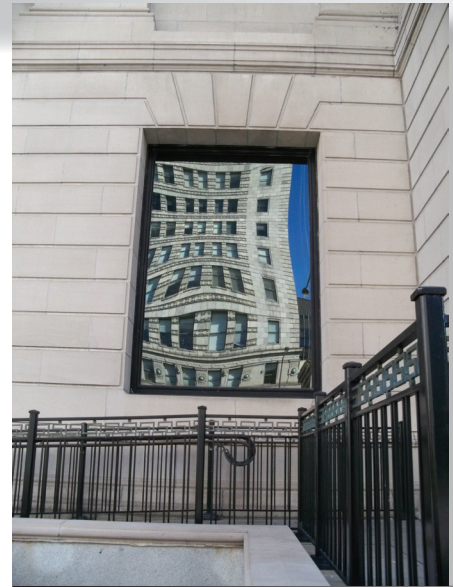
had a come to Jesus meeting that resulted in a conversion they'd like to share with you over the next hour and a half. Either that or they may have a sudden relapse and rip off all of the purses in the ladies room before the night is over.

Some adults are more clearly defined by their stuff – the guy who arrived in the '56 Corvette, (he may have just rented it for the night, but you'll never forget it) the homely woman with the massive three carat diamond ring, a fourth husband, and a fifth of vodka, or the wealthy but infirmed ninety year old who has found true happiness at last wedded to his impoverished but buxom twenty two year old caretaker. A snazzy chalet, an interesting tattoo, charges pending – these are all things that can save you from appearing drab and elevate you to above average.

Ernie and Bert and Mr. Rogers were right. We are each special in our own way but some of us think we are more special than others. A generation ago people wanted to blend in but now they demand to be individuals. They examine the ways in which they are singular, then they form a special interest group of other singular people just like themselves to express their individuality.

Being average has definite drawbacks. There is not a not-so-special Olympics. Where would you go to raise money in support of the straight WASP parade? There are millions of vanilla people who are either decent leaders or followers, who deal well with success or failure, who plod along in a realm with no spiking highs or lows, whose lives, jobs, houses, and vacations qualify as conventional, customary, or downright ordinary, but you almost never hear about them.

So I ask you, “Where is the “Average Rage?” What's happened to the indignation, the outcry for recognition and breast beating self acknowledgement?” Three cheers for the middle of the road, I say. A latent but rumbling voice that dwells inside each of us is beginning to bubble up. It cries out, no, screams for average equality.



Untitled by Karen Neuhaus

Great Blue Heron

by Karen Jaquish

A Lyle Lovett sort of bird,
gawky-footed with ruffled pompadour,
yet we've taken a shine to him, seek him
on our evening walks when he flies
low over the creek,
neck in an S-shaped arc,
toes flapping like Chaplin.
The books say what
magnificent hunters they are,
patient, standing perched on one leg
quick-eyed for the flash of prey
through meandering water.
We only see him on his own
which is why I call him widower,
and wonder what you'll be like
when I'm gone. You single again
and growing old. Driving home at night
to whiskey and jarred spaghetti,
talking to your buddies on the short-wave
and crawling into bed for first few months
I hope, alone. I can just feel how your arms
will come sneaking across to rest
against my empty pillow.
Thwarted, your hands will wake long
before the morning chorus of birds.
Sometimes it's weeks before
our favorite bird appears and I worry
about where he is, what company he's keep-
ing.
We've yet to hear his song which I'm told
isn't melodious at all; instead is deeply gut-
tural
like the sound of a man keening.

Generations

by Kandy Witte

DECEMBER 6, 1941

Dear Ruthie,

The mail finally caught up with me and I was pleased as punch to find five letters from you in my batch. I've read them over so many times I nearly got them memorized! The ink is starting to fade from rubbing my fingers over the lines. I like to picture you sitting at the kitchen table in the morning, that old cracked mug I made you in Mr. Koenig's art class our senior year filled with steaming hot coffee, writing and listening to your stories on the radio. Is Young Widder Brown still your favorite?

I got the cookies you sent too. My buddies say 'thanks' as well. We all sure enjoyed them. Marty stuck a lighted match in one and the guys all sang 'Happy Birthday' to me. After lunch today, a bunch of us got shore leave so we'll probably do a little more celebrating then. Don't worry though cause we have to be back by 24 hundred so I don't have enough time to get too loaded. Ha ha.

Are you feeling any better? Is the morning sickness passed? I sure wish I was there. I'd put that soft old flannel

shirt of mine on the linoleum for you to kneel on and hold your hair back outta your face while you upchucked. Then I'd wrap my arms around you and hold you till your stomach settled down. I'd fix you some cream of wheat or tomato soup and I'd even clean up the dishes while you ate. Bet you never thought I'd be the mushy type, did you? War changes a man, Ruthie. Makes you realize what really matters in life. Getting back to you and little Arnold (ha, ha) in one piece is the most important thing to me. I swear I'll never leave you again. Well, enough of that stuff.

I'm learning a whole lot about radios and electronics, Ruthie. I'll be able to get a real good job when I get home. Maybe get myself my own shop. Everett & Son, Electricians. How's that sound, hon? Want to be the wife of a business tycoon?

You asked me if there's anything I need. Well, there's a couple of things I could sure use. One is some kind of kit, maybe a crystal radio or something small that I could work on in my off time.

There's an awful lot of time with nothing much to do and as you know I'm not much of a card player so the time can really drag. Not that I want to see some action like these young guys who don't have a wife or family to worry about. But something so's I can improve myself while I'm killin' time until I come home. I'd also sure love some new pictures of you. I know you said you're as big as a house but you're the only pinup girl I

want to see hanging over my bunk.

Tell little Arnold, (okay-or little Susie) that the old man can't wait to meet him – or her. By the time I get leave in three months, we'll be real parents. I'm awful glad your mom and dad will be with you when the time comes. I get kind of sad knowing I won't be there but then I cheer myself up thinking about the next six or seven kids and I feel a little better. The first, though, that's special.

Ruthie, someday, when the kids are grown, I'm going to bring you here 'cause there ain't no sight like this in Indiana. The colors are like a whole box of Crayolas, the jumbo box, just tossed into the sky and scattered around as far as a man can see. The air is warm, but not hot or humid like home. Just right with a soft breeze blowing all the time. There's ripe fruit for the picking and fish practically jump right out of the ocean onto your plate. I'll buy you a Pina Colada – that's a fancy drink with rum and coconut – and make sure it has one of those little paper umbrellas that you can put in your hair afterwards.

Keep the letters coming Ruthie and I'll do the same. I'm gonna wrap this up so I can get out in today's mail. I love you, honey.

Always,
Les

The woman smiled at the baby nestled against her breast. A tiny hand wriggled free of the fuzzy pink blanket wrapped papoose style around the little girl.

"Your Daddy was a real, honest to goodness hero, Susie. See here, President Roosevelt says so," Ruthie smoothed the blue and gold lettering of the official document signed by FDR himself. She read aloud, "The Medal of Honor is presented to Leslie Christian Everett, Radio Electrician, U.S. Navy. Born: 6 December 1920, Harrison, Indiana. For distinguished conduct in the line of his profession, extraordinary courage and disregard of his own safety during the attack on the Fleet in Pearl Harbor, by Japanese forces on 7 December 1941."

"Yes-sir, Susie, a real hero," she said wiping the child's cheeks, damp from her own tears.



Sunflower by Jane Tougas

Fragrant Memory

by Sally Moore

BEAUTIFUL, FRAGRANT freesias revive ancient memories. Whenever I catch the scent of these sweet-smelling, pastel-colored flowers, I am transported back to the maternity ward which I endured for a week after my son was born. I still recall the pretty trumpet-like flowers stretching along each bending stem, with a scent particularly powerful and haunting for such a small flower, hardly bigger than a crocus. The freesias were the brightest spot in my ordeal, and I remember my joy when I was finally released to go home.

I was living in the north of England in the early sixties, a time when the Beatles were emerging and values were beginning to change, even though we hadn't yet reached the height of the Counter Culture which arrived a few years later. I was assigned to have my first child at the Princess Mary Maternity Hospital in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. This was a forward-looking hospital, striving to be progressive, and caught up in the start of a decade of freedom which would culminate in Flower Power and the Hippie revolution.

I was not prepared for the situation I encountered after my baby was born and we were both transferred to a ward of eight mothers and babies. Following the new philosophy, we were given no guidance about how to care for or feed our babies – it was going to come to us “naturally” I suppose. There was no attempt to establish a schedule - it was the rule that all babies were to be fed on demand. The babies were at our side day and night, so there was never a moment during my stay when a baby in the ward was not being fed or changed or crying.

For an entire week, I have never had less sleep; lights were on during the night, and one mother or another was heating a bottle of formula, changing a diaper, or rocking a crying baby. I don't recall seeing any nurses around - we had to fend for ourselves and help each other out. I don't even recall interacting with my new baby, although I do remember he was in a cot on my right hand side. I was too disori-



Just One by Bernadette Clemens-Walatka

ented with the unstructured environment and lack of help in coping with a newborn.

Daytime was better although, naturally, all the same baby activities continued. But I had the pleasure of a daily visit from my husband, and as we had no relatives in the area and not many friends, having recently moved to the city, I received a large number of flower arrangements from different parts of England and even from overseas. And it must have been the time of year for freesias because I was overwhelmed with them, and their glorious scent. Mine was the only table on the ward overflowing with flowers. It wasn't the custom then in the north of England to have extravagant flower deliveries - instead my neighbors had visits from their families.

The other mothers were so bemused by the colorful display that one asked me, “Are you the Duchess of Northumberland?” whom they had heard was a patient in the hospital. Of course, she was in a private room.

Did I take the flowers home with me? I can't remember. But I do know my son is indelibly connected in my mind with freesias, a story I'll have to tell him some day.



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Mission Statement

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