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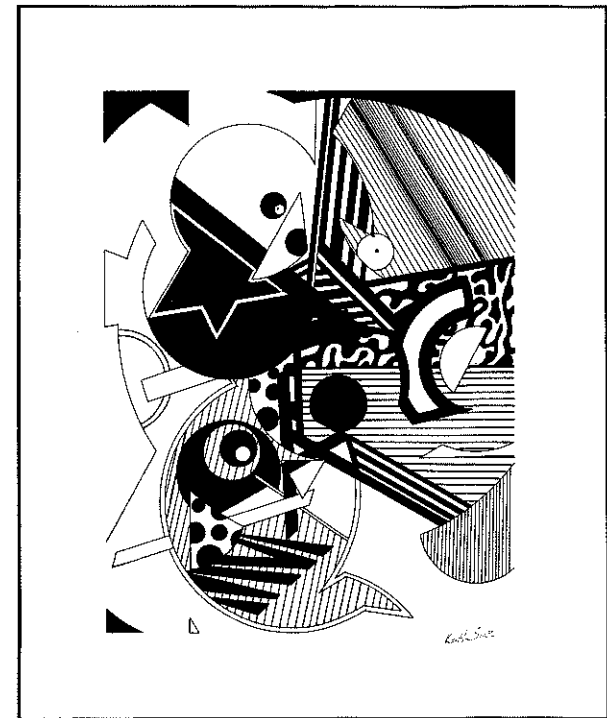
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ZEPHYRUS

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Award Winners

Geoffrey McCelvey Memorial Award
Tracy S. Epley

Browning Literary Club Poetry Award
Michelle Smith

Ladies Literary Club Fiction Award
Carrie E. Ragland

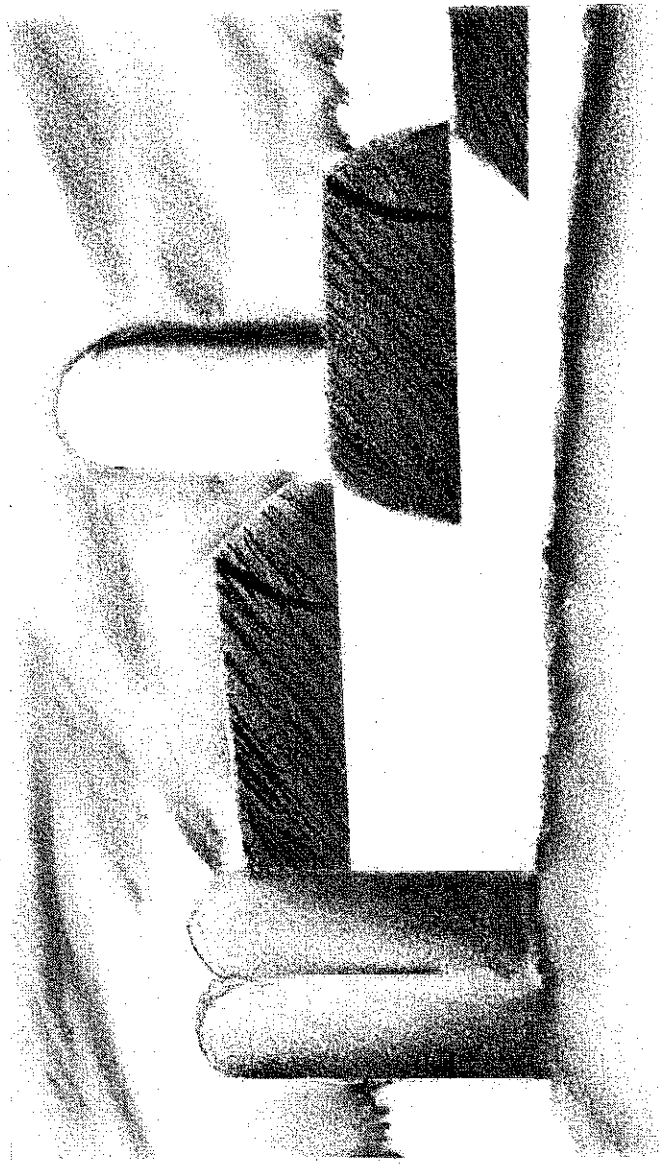
Wanda Gatlin Essay Award
Trish Lindsey Jagers

Zephyrus Art Award
Keith Sinz

Writing award recipients are chosen by the Creative Writing staff of WKU; the art award is chosen by *Zephyrus* staff.

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2/12/20

Miles

Tracy S. Epley

To see you stretch
like a river or a road,
your back arched
bow string taut.
Your mouth locked
around a sensual yawn,
your muscles as rigid
as pipe
and pink parts softer than
the underbelly of a cloud.
To walk beside you down this
river or road
free of history, scars and
clothes
I would even learn from
my mistakes.

200 Amp Three Phase Sex Poem

Tracy S. Epley

Here in my 150.00 a month flying buttressed
efficiency pleasure dome,
(By my decree!)
you pool under my tongue
like a hot summer asphalt image
that rises in waves
phase after phase.
Nectar becomes electric in my
stomach as you melt like
an orange sherbert sunset.
One single scoop
that spreads out in quivers and twitches.

Stupid Orion

Molly Harper

In the downy, purpling quiet of my Mississippi night,
I lie alone.

My limbs weary from growing—
awkward age, awkward stage—
sticky and soaked by the ticklish, wet grass.

My face upturned to drink the night sky,
I see Orion.
Stupid Orion,
the only constellation I can find.

Others find the Big Dipper, Ursa, Andromeda.
All I see is the Archer.
The story of my life—
I'm different, but not special.
Apart, but non-descript.
Plain.

In the sightless dark,
there are no skinned, knobby knees.
No thick glasses.
No doubt, no shyness.

So I lie in the honeysuckle-sweet silence,
staring at Orion.
Stupid Orion.

Greasy Spoon Existence

Travis Newton

Crystal the Waitress jots order on ticket:
ham and cheese omelet, hashbrowns, no grits.
Yellow and orange permeates the walls,
flows through the translucent stained glass,
drips from the cushions.
Steel monster of grills and griddles awaits.
Crystal calls the order.

Macey the New Guy mops the floor as
Bobby the Grillman says,
"You're doing a fine job, but
don't put the pies in the fridge.
Let the women do it."
Sweat beads on Macey's brow like a
lemon meringue left on the counter.
Macey nods his head.

Crystal the Waitress deposits plate on table.
Chocolate milk in the clear, rough, plastic glass.
Greasy yellow mocking smile with
cheesy outstretched tongue.
Hashbrowns schmooze with the ham,
while the ketchup frisks the onions.
The bacon seethes.

Observations of a Culture On My Spoon

Taylor Loyal

Oh, the coffee shop.
Purple mohawked,
Baggy pantsed,
Pierced and tattooed
Coffee shop.

Obnoxious wrinkled lady cackle
From the back of the coffee shop.
Gold plated earrings and
Gold plated necklace and
Boldly stated opinions.

Quiet man on a barstool.
Watching. Refills
of coffee and
Karma and Boredom and Concern.

Half-filled
Red, white and blue containers
Containing "Half And Half":
Ultra-pasteurized, Homogenized
Grade A Real.

Coffee cups and cigarettes and cowboy hats
and dinner mints and silverware and nightmares
And sugar.
Lots and lots of sugar.
And inflatable paintable waitresses' faces
With smile similar to the "Hello, how are you?"
At Blockbuster Video.

Oh, the coffee shop:
Where a corporate junkie robot
Poses as an herbal, natural, homegrown intellectual.
He talks about his big ideas and his bright shining future
And his palm trees and his paradise and his social
equality.

But there's a booger in his nose
And his shoe is untied.

Oh, the coffee shop:
Where a Drunken Sorority Political Science Major
Confuses Marx and Engels
With Rocky and Bullwinkle
And giggles.

Last time I checked, it was still legal to think.

But I haven't studied law much since America traded
Huey Newton and Fred Hampton for
The Home Shopping Network and Jerry Springer's Final Thought.

Things just haven't been the same since Ginsberg died
And a Magnavox became
The Conscience of the Coffee Shop.

The Life and Times of David C. Meredith

Carrie E. Ragland

He was the kind of man who always came in the middle of the night, blowing his horn and flashing his lights as though his was the lead car in the presidential motorcade except there was no president behind him. Mama and Daddy would be jarred out of bed, wondering aloud in their still-asleep voices who could be causing all the ruckus, but my feet would hit the cold hardwood floor a step ahead of theirs, running to open the door. I knew it would be David.

David C. Meredith. The youngest of Mamaw's thirteen children, he was the only one with a middle name. It was only an initial, really, but he said it stood for "Charles" or "Claude" or "Connard," whatever suited him. Mostly he said it stood for "Christopher Columbus" because he had discovered America one acre at a time.

Since he was Daddy's brother, I could have called him "Uncle." He wouldn't have liked it, though. At fourteen I was a little too old for such "respect your elders" titles, and he was a little too young. He acted twenty, and he could have passed for it too, if the deep creases in his forehead hadn't betrayed him, forty years of worry stuffed into thirty-five years of living. The worry never showed up in his hair. It was black and slick like the buckets of used crude he saved to pour into whatever oil-guzzling clunker he was driving that month. It lay in natural waves across his head, a genetic gift from the Meredith family.

He wore white T-shirts with the short sleeves cuffed and dark Levi's everywhere he went. Probably it was less of a fashion statement than an attempt to get by on a limited wardrobe that didn't get the benefit of too many washings. Maybe it was only a throwback to his prison days.

Whatever it was, with a Pall-Mall cigarette dangling from the corner of his grinning mouth, I thought he looked just like James Dean.

Mama called him a "drifter" when he was in her favor, a "thief" when he was not. No matter which name she used her sound was the same, soft as a newly-stuffed feather pillow, but begrudging it a little, as though she couldn't help but love him.

She was right on both counts. When David was twelve, Mamaw and Papaw sent him to "a home for wayward boys" in Louisville.

Daddy said it was mostly because he was the baby of the bunch and, after twelve kids, Mamaw thought she was just too tired to raise another one. Even then his charm was working for him. The headmaster would let him come to our house on the weekends, riding his beat up old bicycle or hitchhiking the 97 miles to Bee Spring. It might have been on the highway, full of cars and people all hurrying toward or away from the forces that would shape them. Maybe it was on the winding country roads, sweet and hypnotic as the honeysuckle that grew up beside them, but somewhere between here and there, he got the "wander-lust." In his lifetime it carried him from shore to shore, criss-crossing 48 states again and again like telephone wires, and it never let him be still.

It must have been those trips that made him yearn for a car, too, because when he was sixteen, he stole one. His efforts earned him two years free room and board at the Eddyville State Penitentiary for Grand Theft Auto and a reputation with most of the folks back home.

The first time I realized Mama was afraid David would steal me, I was standing barefoot on the hood of a black 1949 Chevy. David had come home for a few days and set me up on his car so Daddy could take our picture together. The summer sun made the dark metal hot on my tender toes, and we giggled together at the way I wrinkled them up, trying to stand still for the photo. Just before the shutter snapped, I glanced at Mama. I knew by the way she chewed her bottom lip she was afraid that David would love me too much.

After that she cautioned me often in her low, deliberate, "don't talk to strangers" voice.

"Don't you never go nowhere with David," she'd say. "He's just as liable to run off with you as not."

I listened respectfully, big solemn eyes focusing on her face, nodding my agreement, all the while thinking that if he ever asked me, I would go. To me, David was no criminal, no danger. He was like my father, back before the years of factory work and family had changed him, full of magic and mischief, free to be or not, whichever he pleased. Excitement went before him like a whirlwind turning the world and the town and the house upside down in the dread-desire of his coming. Nostalgia was on his heels, sorry to see him go. And I would have followed him anywhere—all the way to Dodge City, Kansas.

"Dodge City, Kansas"—he always said it like that, the whole name, as though he wanted to be sure you knew which one he meant. He talked about Dodge City like it was the other half of Heaven: wide,

flat prairies as grand as our mountains, clay dirt as red as our trees were green, and sky that was never so blue except in Kentucky. Some hoarseness in his throat, something in the way he said the words, high and mournful like a fiddle tune, made me long to see Dodge City, Kansas, to breathe its air, to be wherever else it was he called home.

I was the only one at the house that damp September evening when he called. I'd been washing my hair and didn't get to the phone until the fourth ring.

"Hello," I said, not quite talking into the receiver.

"Hey, Sis," David said. "I was about to hang up. How's my girl?"

"OK, I guess. School's keeping me pretty busy. How about you?"

"Fair to middlin'. I've been kind of tied up lately, seein' to some business, settlin' some scores."

"You'd better not get into trouble," I chided him.

"Nah, Sis, I'm just gettin' out of it."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. I could hear him breathing, cars going by in the background.

"Where's Mama and Your Old Man?" he asked finally.

"Out in the tobacco patch. Want me to holler for them?"

Silence again.

"No, no, just tell 'em I was checkin' in."

When I told Mama that David had called she said we'd better go to the grocery because if David was calling, it meant he'd be home in a few days. Mama knows best. Three nights later he was banging on our front door, and we were hustling to warm up the supper leftovers, put the coffeepot on to perk, just like all the other times.

That night David told us he was finished traveling for awhile. "Fast livin's about got the best of me," he said, winking at me over his coffee cup.

He stayed on with us, working with Daddy at Firestone during the day and playing the French harp or the banjo or the guitar—whatever he could get his hands on—at night. Daddy sang with him, a deep, clear bass that I'd never heard him use. Those were happy times. The only bad part about David's coming was his leaving, and he seemed so glad to be with us that I didn't worry much about that anymore.

One evening he came home before Daddy. He didn't speak to me when he came in, only took off his dirty white T-shirt and threw it absent-mindedly on my bed. He went into the bathroom, leaving the door open, and began running water in the white porcelain basin to shave. He was whistling, a tune that I didn't recognize.

I followed him, perched on the side of the bathtub. I watched him

splash a few drops of water into Daddy's shaving mug.

"Where you going?" I asked.

"Down to Noel's," he answered, working the bristles of the red and white brush back and forth across the soap until they were full of thick white lather.

Right away I was uneasy. Noel was Daddy's brother—and David's of course—but that didn't mean they could get along. Already there had been trouble between Noel and David, some quarrel over a woman David wanted, or said he did. The fact that Noel was married did not dissuade him from wanting her, too, and the two brothers had argued. The whole family was quick with fighting words, even quicker to grab a gun or a knife. Oh, it was all empty threats, just little boys showing off for each other. Still, Mama always said you couldn't expect to play with weapons all your life without somebody getting hurt.

David paused for a second, billowy foam covering one side of his face and half his chin. He looked at me, never turning his head around, just watching me in the mirror. I could see his reflection there, too. I got the feeling he was going to ask me something—maybe if I wanted him to stay home; maybe if I wanted to go. But then the second was over, and he was lathering again. He drew the sharp straight edge across the leather strap a few times and slid the blade confidently up his right cheek.

"You know, Sis," he said, talking out of the side of his mouth, "a man's whole life is a journey, and sometimes, when he gets to where he's goin', he finds out it was the goin', not the gettin' there, that was important."

He wiped his face on Mama's "just for company" towel and reached into the medicine cabinet for Daddy's Old Spice.

"Take me, for example. I've traveled the whole USA, and now I'm right back where I started."

His words were muffled as he bent forward, wetting his dark shiny curls under the tap. "You're young, Sis'. You ought to remember to pay close attention to the goin'."

He raised up, slinging his damp hair back over his head in one fluid motion. He ran Daddy's comb through the tangles, and the black silk rings fell obediently into place.

I wanted to say something. Maybe "I do pay attention," or "I'm glad you ended up here," or "You know I love you, don't you," but none of them felt right in my mouth.

He must have sensed the tension between us because he looked at

me then, grinning, and said "Well, I can't go riding around in Bee Spring half naked. I might get preached at on Sunday. Be a good girl, and get me a clean shirt."

I watched him pull out of the driveway in that '49 Chevy, trying to remember the rumble of the engine as it picked up speed, trying to memorize the smell of the exhaust, trying to pay close attention to the going.

That night I dreamed about David outside Noel's house. They were fighting, hollering about something that I couldn't make out. Then David was in the car with his shotgun, shooting out Noel's bedroom windows, aiming high, trying to scare him a little. Only the cops didn't know that, and they were coming, tires screeching, sirens blaring.

There were two of them, two cops, and one of them was saying *Open the door, and come out with your hands up*, but the other one was shooting, shooting into David's car, through the doors, shattering the windshield.

David was screaming. Noel was screaming. I was screaming. But the first cop just kept yelling *Open the door, and come out with your hands up. Open the door, and come out with your hands up. Open the door...*

"Open the door. It's James Vincent." I started from sleep to hear our pastor, Reverend James Vincent, pounding insistently on the front door. I sat up in bed, tongue at the back of my throat where I might have swallowed it if my mouth would have only made saliva. I listened as Brother James explained that David had been involved in a shooting, that "it was bad." I heard the sudden screech of the bed springs as Daddy sat down hard on the edge, pulling his pants on both legs at once. The thud of his work boots and the scratch of the shoestrings he had not taken time to tie hurried together over Mama's waxed hardwood floor and across the concrete porch behind James.

The light from the living room shown faintly across my bed and landed on David's worn T-shirt lying crumpled on the floor beside me. I picked it up, running my hands over the soft cotton back of it, feeling the part that I always felt when I hugged him. I buried my nose in it, breathing his warm, earthy smell into me, telling myself that the scent was life, and it was strong. I put my tongue against the shirt, tasting dust and salt and cloth, wanting it to somehow taste like that mix of cologne and Dentyne I got when I kissed his cheek. Finally, I slipped the shirt on over my nightgown and waited.

It seemed like hours before Daddy came home. Mama met him at

the door.

"How is he?" she asked.

"He's all right."

"Oh, thank God. I thought he was dead." I heard the weight of her sit down on our vinyl-covered couch. A sigh of relief escaped her lips. I breathed it with her.

Daddy did not sit. "He is."

I made a book about David that winter—The Life and Times of David C. Meredith. I put postcards in it from all the places I could remember him saying he'd been. I put some Dentyne Gum and a cotton ball soaked with Old Spice and a new pack of Pall Mall's and Daddy's comb in the book. I even sneaked out Daddy's French harp and taped it to one of the pages. On the inside cover I put the picture of us from the day my toes got burned on the hood of the Chevy. I wrapped the whole thing up in David's T-shirt, the one he took off before he went to Noel's. Then I packed the book in a big cardboard box with extra postage and mailed it to "David C. Meredith, Dodge City, Kansas." I put a return address on it, but it never came back.

I want to go west more and more these days, to follow some winding country road into the sun, to see the other side of Heaven. I haven't gotten there yet. But I am going. I try to remember that it's the going that's important.

Down at the Farmers' Market

Scarlet Blandford

Watermelon is like a belly, fat and round, but sounding hollow to the thump. How curious it is to find the perfect watermelon. My mother taught me how. She didn't know much about farming fruit, couldn't tell Rome from Gala in picking apples, but she knew how to pick the perfect watermelon. It's all in the thump, she said. How curious that the most juiciest, most melt-in-your-mouth and run-down-your-chin piece of fruit is the one that sounds the emptiest. Another thing my *mamá* knew about fruit. The best fruit in the world is the kind you find down at the farmers' market.

She took me there every Saturday. I could swear she set her alarm clock by the sound of the trucks moving in. As the farmers set up their tents, she sat up in bed, wiping the sleep from her eyes, pulling her dark hair into a bun at the top of her neck. Wake up *mi chiquita*. It's time to go *al mercado*. *El mercado* had been our tradition for 11 years, since she carried me across the border strapped to her back.

I loved Saturday mornings. I didn't grow up watching cartoons, Bugs Bunny narrowly escaping rabbit stew and Tweety writhing from the hungry grasp of that elusive tomcat. I grew up watching the farmers' wives do what they do best - swap recipes and secrets, sell fruits and vegetables.

I had my favorite farmer's wife, Bessy. Her teeth were like corn on the cob, yellow and crooked, her hair as orange as pumpkin pie. One day she let me weigh my own zucchini when her husband wasn't looking. The numbers on the scale were heavy and dark, for poor eyesight, I think, and the needle sighed under the weight of the produce. I dug through the zucchini, carefully choosing the shiniest ones. I put them on the scale and moved them around until it groaned one pound. Bessy dropped the ones I picked into a sack and then snuck in an extra one. For *buena suerte*, she said, good luck.

I had my first peach down at the farmers' market. Bessy let me taste it. Zucchini farmers don't usually sell peaches on the account that they grow those out at the orchard and not on the farm, but Bessy bought a basket from her friend down the way. She said if I liked it

maybe one day she'd take me to the orchard so I could pick some myself. Bessy liked me to do things for myself. I think she should have been a teacher instead of a farmer's wife.

I held the peach in my palm, massaging the fuzz between my fingertips. I didn't want to put it in my mouth, afraid it would feel like a fuzzy-worm wriggling down my throat. But I could smell it already and the aroma was sweeter than my *mama's* favorite perfume. It came in a pink glass bottle with a rose etched on front from her boyfriend Ricardo. He told me it cost a hundred dollars for that tiny little thing and it smelled no sweeter than the fuzzy fruit I held timidly to my nose.

As my teeth slid into the soft orange-colored flesh, I thought nothing of worms, but of juice and heaven and warm hallelujahs!

I learned about boys down at the farmers' market. Sometimes I'd squirm away from my mother while she was negotiating the price of a watermelon. Even though the farmer had scribbled \$5.00 on the rind with bold black marker, she'd thump it hard and say, I'll pay \$4.50, *señor*. To them it was a game. To her it was a way of life.

Anyway, sometimes while all of this was going on, I'd slip down the row, past Bessy and her friend, to the flower vendor, Miss Martha. She was like my mother, young and beautiful, but *muy Americana*. She wore long dresses, the kind you could almost see through if the sun shone just right. Her buttercup yellow hair barely brushed her freckle-covered shoulders, and I think it must have tickled her sometimes.

Miss Martha had a son. His name was Jesse. Jesse taught me how to kiss. His feet were too big for his body and you could have played connect-the-dot with the freckles on his face, but he got those freckles from his mother and she was beautiful. I liked to imagine her working in the garden, *el jardín*, my *mamá* would say. I imagined she would sit down on the ground right in the middle of all those flowers, melting into them like candles left burning too long on a birthday cake. Her hair dripped into the gardenias, her eyes oozed into the lilacs, her lips, the rosebuds, her skin, spotted orchids. I think Jesse probably learned to kiss from his mother, quick but sweet, like something stolen rather than given. You know how mothers have to steal kisses from their sons sometimes.

Mamá would come fetch me after a while, when she missed me or needed me for something. She always knew where to look. I'd be crouched down behind the flowers playing tic-tac-toe in the dust. Come on, *mi hija*, help me pick some apples. Goodbye Jesse. *Adiós* Miss Martha. Off to pick some apples.

They all looked the same to me, pale green and about the size of a tennis ball. Sometimes a few had patches of red, dropped in a can of paint and rescued just before swallowed whole. Prima apples, mellow and tart, great for making sauce. Gala apples, crisp and sweet, perfect for eating or frying. Empire apples, crisp and tart, ideal for cooking. I didn't care, really, I liked the red ones. Seems to me they were all going to be eaten anyway.

Around the corner from the apples rested what really brought *mamá* to the market. Wagons full of corn, like mounds of gold waiting to be transformed into precious treasures. Her specialty was crafting fresh *tortillas* from corn she selected with care and ground by hand. When you ate those *tortillas*, you tasted the love she sprinkled into them like a secret ingredient.

Across from the corn you found the rest of the bounty, staples necessary for every Mexican-American kitchen. Rows of tomatoes for salsa and sauce. Onions and garlic for flavor and kick. And then there were peppers. Peppers in every color you could imagine - green, yellow, red, purple, orange, and tie dye. Sweet peppers on the table, hot peppers in baskets, and others strung from the top of the tent like dried-up fingers of children who had touched too many and not bought enough.

One Saturday, as we made our final purchases and lugged the heavy bags to the car, Jesse ran up behind me, tugging at the end of my long, dark braid. Mother would like you to come to our house for Sunday brunch, he whispered in my ear. My eyes popped open with delight and the heat rushed to my cheeks like the oven door to my heart had just been opened wide. I would finally see Miss Martha's garden, would bow down to sniff her flowers as Jesse swept my hair away from my nose.

When Sunday morning finally came, I was greeted at the door by Jesse and Miss Martha and a waft of cinnamon air that wrapped itself around me like a giant gift bow. It reminded me of the time Ricardo took us to the Cracker Barrel, where the scent of pumpkin pie and apple cobbler rise to meet you as you walk through the doors to the enchanted country store.

Miss Martha's house had a little less of the enchantment, but all the heart of the Cracker Barrel. As Jesse led me by the hand to the kitchen, I heard Tchaikovsky's "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy" from the Nutcracker Suite prancing in the background (at least that's what Miss Martha told me when I asked her what was this marvelous music).

We dined at a table set for three, me in the center peeking out the

window for a glance of the garden where Miss Martha got the dirt beneath her feminine fingernails. She must have been out there already this morning, picking daisies to match the tablecloth.

Brunch was buttermilk biscuits with apple-cinnamon butter and strawberry preserves, eggs-over-easy or any way you liked them, fresh-squeezed orange-grapefruit juice and country ham so salty that after you chewed it up and swallowed it, it became part of your tongue, that incredible saltiness. I ate slowly, wishing it to never end, savoring each bite as if it were the first, the only. Jesse smiled as I sucked in the salt and Miss Martha told him to please eat some more eggs if he wanted blackberry cobbler for dessert.

After I couldn't consume any more before it consumed me first, I excused myself to go to the restroom. Third door on the right, Miss Martha said as she cleared our plates from the table, and I wandered down the hall looking at pictures of Jesse kicking a soccer ball, Jesse petting a puppy, and Jesse trying to scrub the freckles off his face. I must have forgotten to count, because the door I opened was the second not the third, and it was a closet full of long flowered dresses and open-toed sandals. On the inside of the door hung a crooked little picture, and it wasn't Jesse. It was a lady with corn-on-the-cob teeth and pumpkin pie hair.

I forgot about the restroom and ran down the hall and into the kitchen, almost smacking into Jesse as he helped his mother scrub the dishes. Miss Martha, why is Bessy in your closet? Jesse bent down to pick up the pieces of the plate that crashed to the floor. Miss Martha scooped me up and carried me to the couch. All this commotion and we were both shaking and with a tear in her eye she brushed my hair from my face and whispered, Bessy is my mother.

Miss Martha had gone off to college. Her mother had wanted her to stay, to go to the local community college, to help with the farming on weekends and to sing solos at church with that angelic voice of hers. But Miss Martha wanted to be far away from the farm, in the big city where girls sang in smoky lounges to married men, not in stained-glass churches where the light caught the dust as it drifted down from heaven. She wasn't a bad girl, Miss Martha, just misinformed. She thought the world would just open up and swallow a kid like her, sucking her sweetness and licking its lips. And she was right. She did get swallowed by many men, and then spit right out again.

She told me these things, even though I was just a kid myself, but she said she only wanted me to know because she was afraid I'd grow up just as sweet and tasting just as good as her. She didn't want me

chewed up and spit out by anyone.

She told me she had come home from the city, her belly round like a beach ball stuck up under her dress, and Bessy said where's the father, and Miss Martha said she didn't know. Bessy raised her hand and slapped her daughter across the face as hard as she could, knocking Miss Martha backwards through the screen door and out onto the porch. She said don't come back until you find out, and as Miss Martha got up from the ground, a bouquet of wild flowers she had picked out by the road fell from her hand-woven purse. She left them on the porch along with the dust that settled after she peeled down the gravel driveway for the last time.

Saturday came again. I still felt uneasy about the whole situation, but I was ready to go to the market. I had work to do. I marched up to Bessy and I said, how could you? How could I what? How could you not tell me about Jesse?

Her head sunk to the left, sigh, and then to the right, and then her eyes looked up at me with her head still pointing down and she said, boys deserve a father. She looked back down at her hands, fingers twisting, knuckles popping, turning white from squeezing too hard. And boys deserve a grandmother too, I said, pulling her chin up to mine. All these days I had been angry at her, but as a tear formed in her eye my anger dissolved into pity, my disgust into wonder. And I felt bad for surprising her like this, for not walking up and putting my zucchini on the scale like every other Saturday. I had peeled her of her pride and thrown the skin to the wind, leaving her soul exposed and pouring out on the table between us.

Bessy was crying now, as I took her hand across the table and kissed it with my quivering lips. He's so beautiful, she said, just like my Martha. He's right down there, I said, and then left to play tic-tac-toe. I slid a zucchini into my pocket as I walked away, carrying the guilt over my shoulder like a knapsack.

The vegetables didn't look alive today, just like objects sitting on a table. I guess that's what they always were, but today I knew it. Neither did the flowers look alive and Jesse looked surprised to see me standing there. Miss Martha rose to give me a hug and I graciously accepted, nuzzling my head into her breasts, sobbing between them. I smelled the dirt. Dirt from the flowers, dirt from the potatoes, dirt from the trucks that rolled in from the farm.

My *mamá* came up and said, there you are. Haven't you bought anything? It's time to go. I picked up a spotted orchid from the table when Miss Martha wasn't looking and left the zucchini in its place. I

told *mamá* I'd meet her in the car. Bye Miss Martha. *Adiós* sweet Jesse. Off to grow some flowers.

I slid around the back of the table where Bessy was staring with empty eyes out over the crowd. I tucked the spotted orchid behind her ear and whispered, she's right down there.

The days drudged on like soldiers slopping through mud toward their next battle. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, halfway, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, halt! Saturday again, and me with no ammunition. I didn't know what to say to Bessy, to Jesse, to Miss Martha. I wished it would rain, giant drops of liquid to smear away this mess. But the sun shone brighter than it ever had before. Outside my window birds chirped a piccolo's melody and butterflies danced with ballerina grace.

I asked *Mamá* if I could wear lipstick today because inside my shirt I felt my breasts growing. She painted my lashes with a magic wand and blushed my cheeks like a frosty kiss. I had left the child in Miss Martha's closet, wrapped up in dresses and open-toed sandals.

When we arrived at the farmer's market, Bessy swept me away before I could even say hi to Jesse. She said my you look lovely today, and I thought the same about her in her big flowered dress. The week had renewed her. *El tiempo cura toda herida*; time heals all wounds.

We wove around the countryside in Bessy's faded green Ford, uphill and down, she was stealing me away. I wanted to ask, why today, after that silly charade, but her mysterious smile as she watched the road told me she had forgotten all about that or at least put it up on a shelf somewhere. *No hay virtud más alta que el perdón*; there is no higher virtue than forgiveness.

She slowed as we approached a narrow gravel road lined with trees. A tall, weathered sign said Welcome to Pearson's Orchard. You've never had a peach 'til you've had a Pearson's peach. I wished I was fingering that fuzz right now, juice running down my chin, hallelujah. A gate opened wide and there was Jesse, letting us in. I looked to the right, and there was Miss Martha spread out on a white blanket like a bouquet tossed atop the snow. I thought it was heaven and Bessy must have too, because she was giggling and sobbing, all at the same time. *El amor obra milagros*; love works miracles.

She wiped a tear from her eye, then brushed her hands across my cheeks, cradling the softness there. You, child, are my angel. Jesse handed me a single white rose, then we drifted away in a sea of peach juice. *La memoria de la niñez, dura hasta la vejez*; childhood memories last a lifetime.

That's Me and You, Abbott Scarlet Blandford

The drizzle massaged Abbott's face like a thousand sympathetic fingers. He felt the people standing around him, but not too close because they knew how he needed his space. He felt the warmth of the crowd, despite the chill of the wind blowing in from the North. He heard their sobs and snuffles, despite the slush of the cars gliding down the showered street below. He smelled tossed earth, musty wetness, and fragrant bouquets. He tasted the quiche lorraine lingering on his tongue, prepared by his sister-in-law in an effort to make him please just eat something.

His wife of thirty-three years lay about five paces ahead of him in a box they had picked out together. She said she liked the dark cherry wood and white satin lining, because it would make her feel like she was soaring to heaven on the wings of a dove. He'd liked the rounded smoothness of the lid and the ornate pattern around the edges that he could trace with his fingertips. The design showed that someone cared about creating that box as much as he cared about the woman he would lay to rest in it.

He had dropped a wet kiss on her prematurely wrinkled face. Soft petals blanketed her coffin with a smell of sweetness beyond all the passion he'd ever felt for her. She was the only person who had ever treated him like a whole man. To her, his blindness was not a loss of sight, but a different way of seeing things.

When he turned away from her coffin as it was being lowered into the ground, he wondered if he would ever be whole again.

"Abbott, I'm ready to take you home," Margaret said, tapping the back of her hand against his. He grabbed his sister-in-law's arm just above the elbow and allowed her to lead him to the car.

She had suggested that she might stay for a while, but he'd insisted that she return to Chicago and take care of someone who might really need her, like all those cats she had running around the house.

"Gloria would want me to stay," she said. "She wouldn't want for you to be alone."

"I'm glad you're still concerned about Gloria's well-being,"

Abbott said, fumbling for the automatic window button to get some air.

"It's still raining, Abbott."

"I'm wet already," he said. "It's stuffy in here."

They rode in silence the rest of the way.

He could tell by the movements of the car when he was almost home. A left turn, followed by two closely spaced stop signs, then a short little hill with a right turn at the bottom. Margaret took the turns too fast. On the left turn his head bumped against the window, but he braced himself for the right turn, gripping the handle so as not to fall head-first into her lap.

Margaret pulled into the circular driveway and stopped in front of the peeling wood house where the couple had lived out Gloria's last few months. Knowing that the cancer was terminal, they had moved to a smaller house that would be easier for Abbott to navigate alone. He said he didn't want much, just a couple of rooms and a fence in case he decided to get a dog someday.

He got out of the car, unfolded his collapsible white cane and said, "I'll be expecting to hear from you soon."

She knew him well enough not to argue or offer assistance. He was on his own territory now. "See you soon, Abbott. You can call me, you know."

He let himself into the house, sank into his favorite chair and cried.

People brought him things. Carved hams and sliced bread, casseroles and pies. They brought canned goods which they placed in a wide wooden structure that had been built just for that purpose. It was quite a piece, that can case. It had three shelves, each divided into eight compartments deep enough to hold five cans. That's 120 cans fully loaded, if you're counting. Each compartment was labeled in Braille: corn, green beans, chicken noodle soup.

They brought him toilet paper, toothpaste, batteries, aspirin and anything else they could think of to keep him from having to go to the store for a while. They deposited everything on the kitchen table so he could put the items away himself. The batteries belonged in a drawer by the refrigerator, along with the can opener, the old-fashioned kind that sliced cans open with a twist of the wrist. The aspirin had a spot in the medicine cabinet above the bathroom sink, bottom shelf, third bottle from the right.

He spent many days organizing things. Moving them from this place to that, and then right back to where they were in the first place. He spent hours in his worn leather recliner, playing solitaire on one of those fold-up t.v. dinner tables they'd bought at a garage sale for fifty

cents. Gloria didn't tell him it was Ken and Barbie in their pink convertible until he'd been using it for months. No wonder she had giggled every time he pulled it out from behind the chair.

He read a lot too. Some of the classics he had in Braille, but he listened to the others on tape. Books let him see the world. He formed pictures in his mind, and who knows if they were right, but they were his and they were magic. When he listened to books, the hours melted into days like chocolate puddles at his feet.

Margaret called once a week, usually interrupting him in the middle of a good book. She wanted to know if he'd like to come up for Thanksgiving, but he had other obligations. He would be expecting the call from the University soon.

For several years now, Abbott and Gloria had housed students that couldn't make it home for the holidays. They had first done so at the suggestion of their counselor after their son had been killed by a drunk driver on Christmas Eve. It would ease the grief of the holidays, he suggested, if they could take other people's children into their home and care for them in the absence of their parents.

A lot of times they got International students who didn't care much about the holidays; they just needed a place to stay while the dorms were closed for break. Other times they got kids who couldn't afford to fly home or who couldn't get off from their jobs long enough to have a real family holiday. They almost always received thank-you notes from the kids but they seldom kept in contact, because after all, they did have parents of their own and tests to take and papers to write.

And just as he was thinking about that call from the University, it came. "Mr. Gott, how are you and your wife doing this year?" The young southern voice was honey oozing out of the telephone.

"My wife is dead, but I'm just fine," Abbott said.

That last word, *fine*, dripped off his tongue like water from a leaking faucet, filling the deep silence that separated them. Fine, fine, fine. And to him it sounded good.

"I didn't know," she said. "I'm sorry."

"But what is your name, Miss?" Abbott asked.

"Julie Jernigan," the voice said, softer now.

"Miss Jernigan," he said. "These kids still need a place to stay?"

"Yes sir."

"I would be happier more than ever to take one, as long as he has a driver's license."

"A driver's license?"

"Yes, I'll need someone to take me to get the turkey."

Abbott was getting ready to leave for his morning walk when he heard the knock on the front door, three taps followed by a brief pause and four more taps, a knock he would come to expect. He pulled open the heavy wooden door and waited for someone to speak through the screen.

"Mr. Gott," said an unfamiliar voice, "I'm Jack Jenkins, your weekend visitor."

Abbott let him in and stuck out his hand for the boy to shake. "How old are you, Jack?"

"Nineteen, Sir."

"My name's Abbott," he said. "Don't take off your coat. We were just leaving."

The air outside was brisk and a light wind nipped at the back of his neck. He shivered and pulled up his collar a bit, careful not to cover up his ears. Abbott told Jack to walk behind him so he could lead the way.

"Where we going, Abbott?"

"You'll see," he said, chuckling a little to himself. You'll see was his favorite joke.

They made the left turn and climbed up the hill, continuing on until they came to the curb of the first stop sign. Abbott stopped, listened.

"It's safe to cross now," Jack said.

"Rule number one, Jack. Do not offer help in ordinary circumstances. I cross this street everyday, alone. I know before you look both ways whether I can cross or not."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Be smart."

When they got to the next sign, Abbott crossed without Jack saying a word. Abbott didn't think Jack's feelings were hurt, he was just being smart. Like most sighted people seeing him for the first time, Jack was probably surprised by the ease at which Abbott listened briefly and stepped down off the curb. He walked a straighter line with that white cane darting back and forth than most people could looking straight at the ground.

"I've done this for years, you know."

"Have you ever been able to see?" Jack asked.

"Not really, that I can remember. Maybe, for a little while.

"I was born six weeks early, at the height of World War II. I weighed only three pounds and nine ounces. They put me on oxygen

for a while, until I was strong enough to support myself. The oxygen saved my life, but stole my sight. It's called retinopathy of prematurity."

He stopped briefly, as if searching internally for something. He concluded his serach and started walking again.

"What I saw, I don't remember," he said.

"Have you ever eaten marshmallows, Abbott?"

"Huh?"

"You know, marshmallows. Have you ever eaten them?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, I guess I have."

"The clouds look like marshmallows today, white and fluffy like you could chew on them forever."

"We'll need to get a turkey later on," Abbott replied. "You know how to carve a turkey?"

"Do you like it when I tell you things, Abbott?"

"Tell me what?"

"You know, like the clouds. Do you like it when I tell you about them?"

Abbott stopped, turned, stared right at Jack with his empty eyes.

"Would you like it, Jack?"

"I think I would."

"I think I do too."

They continued in silence a little while longer. Abbott tried to remember others who had cared enough to tell him what things looked like in terms he could understand. It had taken Gloria a while to know how to do that. As hard as she tried, she would have said something like it's cloudy today, don't you think?

The two finally neared where they'd been heading all along, but there was one more obstacle to cross. Abbott stopped at one of the busiest intersections in town. The Catholic church guarded one corner.

Across from the church stood a twenty-four hour drug store, the only one in Starkville. He faced the drug store, cocked his ear to the left.

"Can you do this, Abbott?"

"Be smart," he reminded him.

The traffic moved one direction at a time through the four-way intersection. Abbott listened. Tires glided like sandpaper across the concrete, tension increasing as they slowed to a stop. Air swirled around him, pushing him forward as cars began to move in the direction he was heading. His cane sniffed the pavement like a dog picking up a scent. He stepped up onto the opposite curb and

continued to the right without a moment's pause.

"I could never do that!" Jack said, catching up to him.

"You will," said Abbott.

"Huh?"

"You'll see."

"My heart was beating like a thousand drums, and I *could* see," Jack said.

"Here we are," Abbott said. He opened the door to a small bakery and bagel shop, with white Christmas lights framing the windows.

"You came all that way for this?" Jack asked. The smell of fresh bread, savory cinnamon and dark-roasted coffee slapped on them like handcuffs, pulling them inside.

"Best muffins in town," said Abbott.

Thanksgiving came and went and Jack returned to the dorms. The two had talked for hours, cooked dinner, played games. Abbott knew Jack didn't take too kindly to being beat at Scrabble by a blind man. The boy tallied up the score three times before finally admitting he'd lost. Of course he demanded a rematch. But Abbott kept winning. For a weekend he felt like he had a son again.

Before Jack left, Abbott asked him to please come by once a week to take him to the grocery. He'd pay him, he said.

"You know how if you get super glue on your hand and then pick up a piece of paper you can't shake it off?" Jack said. "That's me and you, Abbott, that's me and you."

He'd heard it before, but not quite that way exactly. That was one hell of a promise. And it was a promise well-kept too. Every Monday at three o'clock, tap, tap, tap, pause, tap, tap, tap, tap.

Sometimes he came more than once a week, and it wasn't for the money. He wouldn't take that. "Did you ever have a job, Abbott?" he asked one day, while looking around the room.

"Do you remember rule number one, Jack?"

"Be smart," he said, fumbling with his zipper.

"Did I ever tell you rule number two?"

"Don't ask questions about your past?" he guessed, looking around the room again.

"Look at me when you're talking to me."

"Huh?"

"Rule number two, look at me when you're talking to me," Abbott said.

"But..."

"I can tell by the sound of your voice, by the zazz-zip of your zipper that you're not looking at me. Do I make you nervous?"

"No," he said looking at the ground. "I didn't know."

"Jack?"

"Sorry," he said.

"Don't be sorry. Be smart."

"If you could see anything, Abbott, anything at all, what would you want to see?" Jack asked.

"Just one thing?"

"Yeah, just one thing."

"I would want to see the face of that drunk bastard when he hit my boy on his bicycle. I'd want to see his head as it shattered the windshield, blood splattering into his lap, a piece of jagged glass poking through his eyelid."

"Abbott..."

"What'd you expect, a rainbow?" he said, standing and turning toward the window. "I ain't no woman."

"It's not that, I just thought..."

"You thought I'd want to see rainbows."

"What about your wife?"

"I saw her every day for forty years. Her hair was long and heavy, with curls my fingers got lost in."

"Her cheekbones were high and sharp like little mountains, her eyes deep and watery. Her legs, short and stubby, her bottom round as two apples," he said, as if cupping it in his hands.

"Was she beautiful?"

"The most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Abbott stared out the window for a while, farther out than anyone else can see. He was dancing with Gloria's soul out there. He barely heard the birds singing outside the window, then the dishwasher clicking off and the sound like a hand swishing into a pocket.

"I've got to go now, Abbott," Jack said, ending the dance.

Jack rushed out the door and Abbott went to put away the dishes. Four knives, three forks. He ran his fingers across the floor of the dishwasher and found nothing. There had been four forks earlier. How curious, he thought.

Jack's visits grew more frequent. He came in the morning sometimes, and sometimes in the afternoon. Sometimes they'd play Scrabble until really late and he'd stay there instead of going back to the dorm. Some days he'd talk excitedly before he left, moving about

quickly, asking Abbott questions.

"Did you ever swing a golf club?" Jack asked.

"I used to swat at the grass when I was a boy. Mammie would come out of the house and I'd be swinging, grass flying, falling on my head like snowflakes."

"It doesn't snow down here," Jack said.

"No. It never snows."

Other days he'd come all depressed-like, act like something was on his mind, but hardly say a word.

Finally Abbott asked, "Jack are you doing all right?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Is there something the matter?"

"Nope, nothing Abbott."

And that was that.

There were some things Abbott still did even though his wife wasn't there anymore. He fluffed her pillow before he went to sleep at night. He washed her housecoat, sprayed it with her perfume, and hung it on the back of the bathroom door. He brushed his hair with her brass-handled, soft-bristled brush.

But one morning the brush wasn't there anymore. He got on his hands and knees and searched every inch of the bathroom floor in case it had dropped. He searched the kitchen counter, the bedroom dresser and the living room coffee table in case he had carried it somewhere and forgotten about it. It simply wasn't there. And neither was the tape of Canon in D with ocean sounds that he kept beside the stereo, or the bottle of apple cinnamon air freshener that he kept near the trash can. His fishing hat, gone. His pocket knife, gone. The watch with the dead battery, it was gone too.

Jack arrived that day. Several seconds passed before Abbott heard him step inside.

Abbott's cane was a weapon clutched tightly in his hand, his belongings scattered around him like fallen victims. He made his way toward the door, stumbling.

The t.v. dinner tray lay in a twisted heap on the floor. Scrabble pieces everywhere, couch cushions on the ground, coffee table upside down. Trash littered the kitchen floor, stinking like rotten meat.

"Have you seen my brush, Jack?" he asked. "Did you borrow my pocket knife?"

"You never asked me why I stayed with you for Thanksgiving."

"You're right. I never asked that at all. Have you seen my ocean

sounds tape?"

"I'm on probation, Abbott."

"This isn't funny at all, Jack." Abbott said, raising his voice.

"Have you seen my wife's brush?"

"Abbott, I steal things."

"You came here to steal my things?"

"No, I came to have a place to stay. I kept coming back to be your friend."

"You came to steal from a blind man?" he screamed, crashing across the living room to where he could hear Jack breathing heavier and heavier now.

He wanted to strangle him, to shove his cane down the back of his throat.

"Listen, Abbott. I have your things. They're in my car. I don't want them, really."

"You don't want them?" he yelled. "Why'd you take 'em if you don't want 'em?"

He paused for a second, trying to make sense of it all. "Old blind man, what a fool," Abbott mumbled to himself.

His anger dissolved into self-pity, bubbling beneath his skin. He hung his head low and picked at a scab on his hand, waiting for Jack to insult him even further. He should have known he'd trusted him too soon. It was unlike Abbott to let his guard down so easily, but then again, Gloria had always been there to watch out for him. She had been his bifocals.

"Do you remember what it felt like when you crossed that busy intersection by yourself for the first time?" Jack asked.

"I'll never forget."

"Did you feel like you had conquered the world?"

"Something like that."

"It feels something like that when I steal. I feel like if I can do that, I can do anything. I can cross that street with my eyes closed."

"I don't understand."

"It's a disease, Abbott. I don't steal from you because I want to, or even because I like your stuff. It's just the urge to steal anything, from anyone. I won't do it again. I'm sorry, Abbott. I'm really sorry."

He was fumbling with that zipper again.

Abbott listened as Jack began picking up Scrabble pieces, dropping them back into the box that was coming apart at the corners. He put the cushions back on the couch, swooshing them together until they fit just right. He moved into the kitchen, sweeping the trash into a

pile, turning over the tipped garbage can.

He was fixing things.

"You'll never do it again?" asked Abbott.

"Cross my heart," said Jack, moving toward him.

"You wouldn't lie to a blind man?"

"Never."

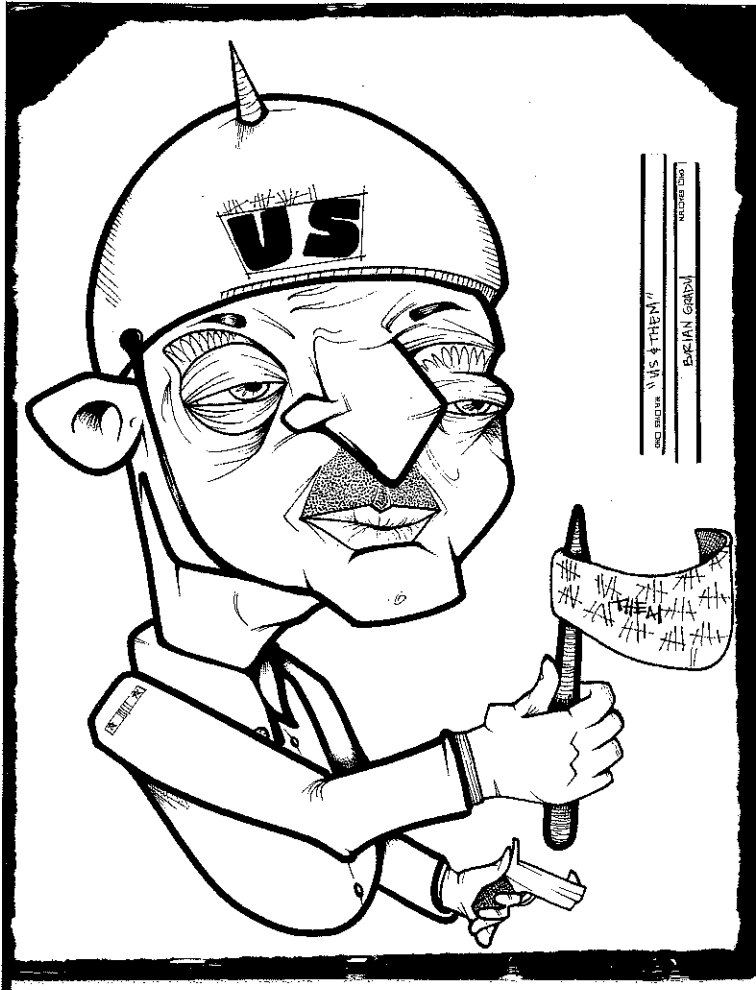
"You really think you can cross that street?"

"Did I say that?"

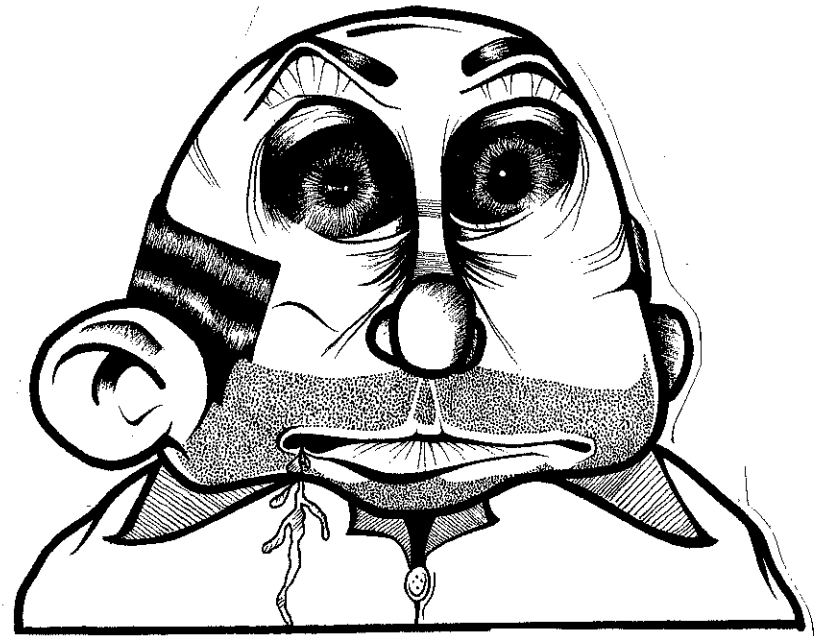
"You said you could do it with your eyes closed."

"Will you help me?"

"You know us. Like glue. That's me and you."



Brian Grady "Us and Them"



Brian Grady Love at First Sight

Union

Michelle Smith

I want to kiss a poet

feel my mouth on that mouth that molds words
into tulips, into barbs, into violets, into wasps.

The word *remember* tastes like black plums:
my teeth dig into the sour skin before the sweet pulp.

Lover tastes like early spring strawberries: one sugary,
the other bitter—impossible to tell by looks alone.

Loneliness is greasy, heavy in the stomach, coats
the lips—nausea ripples at the back of my throat.

I want his words to slip one by one into my mouth,
feel their round edges and jagged tips slide

over my tongue. His words are dark and rich
like Merlot. I want to eat his words spun together

in sentences, like cotton candy—let them dissolve
against my palate. I want to eat entire books

of his words, consume them, until they
consume me.

Lotus (For Margaret)

Michelle Smith

He wants you to grow long fingernails,
polish them colorful—
Amaryllis—
because it's *beautiful*.

But hands like ours, Margaret,
were not meant for such trivialities.
Our hands were made to dig
into dark soil; to feel
the cool dirt, the grit, lodge
beneath short nails—which
chip and peel like old paint,
show the wear of ages.

Amaryllis.

Such flowers are made of air.
Even as their color wanes and their blooms
brown and shrivel, petals scattering
around the bottom of the vase—impotent;
they know they were cut to bloom and die,
never to return. They are so limited.
But from *our* fingertips sprout
gerberas, ginger, oaks, majestic
sunflowers, flames of red maple—
immortality.

Women like us make our roots
in the rich mud; we rise through water
and break the surface, to bathe
in the moonlight and stretch,
opening the fifteen petals of ourselves
to take in the night and all its mysteries.

Such beauty is rare.

My Best Friend

Danielle Mitchell

Skinny legs with bruised knees clamber up
an ivied tree to a secret honeysuckle lair
where two pony-tailed girls could
mull over ten full years of life.
Indian style, the girls bathe in yellow sunlight
poking its way through branches
to paste cotton T-shirts to suntanned backs.
The girls pluck a hundred honey-suckles
between dirty-nailed fingers
that choose the yellowest because
“there’s more in ‘em.”
They drop emptied flowers to the ground
and laugh and talk out of sticky mouths.
Sunset bites their naked arms with mosquitoes as
distant voices calling familiar names penetrate the dusk.
Pony-tails flying, the girls jump down in a pile
of discarded blooms already being scattered by time
and the breeze.

Raising a Family

Danielle Mitchell

How many times have I watched you
dipping twisted, spotted hands into water so hot
that I could see the steam from my chair.
Those hands carefully washed every side, every inch
turning each plate, each glass
as you longingly gazed
out the window
overlooking the dead-end road.

Jessie's Leaves

Anna Allen

Jessie's leaves sleep quietly,
preserved between the pages of her Bible
or the dictionary
or any other heavy book
that will press them dry and flat
like leaves on a paper tree.
They mark days long forgotten,
spines crushed straight
under the weight of words,
edges brittle by ink
and years
of tumbling into her lap.

The Cellar

Anna Allen

When April storms broke
hard and fierce
and spit hailstones
into the yard,
Dad lifted
the kitchen floor
and we all climbed down
into the dark belly
of the house,
tip-toeing down the stairs
like stooped dancers.

Lantern light jumped
along the walls
and lit up
the empty bell jars
that stood along the shelves
like soldiers in formation.
Ancient spider chains
clung to the ceiling
and knitted the room together.

The sweet smell of
rotting wood and earth
seeped ghost-like
from the walls,
while we scraped our feet
against the dark smooth floor
and listened for
the return of quiet.

Cripples

Gene Griffin

The plastic grocery bag that I had put over my left foot crinkled inside my boot as I worked the clutch and turned into the driveway. I glanced up at the chimney and saw that there was no fire going in the stove. I didn't feel like building a fire. I had just worked my sixth twelve hour shift in six days, and all I wanted to do was grab a sandwich and a beer and curl up on the couch with a detective novel for an hour or two.

I limped up the warped plywood ramp to the front porch, and sat down on the swing to take off my greasy steel toed boots. The left one still smelled like kerosene. On my first day as a mechanic at the big aluminum mill, I had stepped into a puddle of coolant in a tunnel underneath one of the big rolling mills. The stuff filled my boot, but I couldn't do anything about it until later. At lunchtime, I went to the locker room and threw my sock away. I washed the boot out in the sink, and washed my foot off. My foot was red and burning a little, but I needed the job, so I put the boot back on and went back to work. When I took my boot off that night, all the skin of my foot went with it.

The next morning, I put some of Dad's antibiotic cream on my foot and a baggie over my sock. I couldn't afford a new pair of boots. I should have reported the injury to the safety guy, but I was only a temp, and I needed to get hired full time. If I had a safety record, it might blow my chances, so I kept quiet, and tried not to limp while I was at work. After five days of bloody socks, I was starting to wonder if it was worth it, but the big maintenance outage would be over in three more days, and I was pretty sure I would get laid off then. I decided I could tough it out.

As soon as I walked into the house, I knew something was wrong. It was 7:20, so Dad should have been parked in front of the t.v., watching Wheel of Fortune. He never missed Wheel, but the house was silent. It only took a minute to check both bedrooms, the living room, and the bathroom. No sign of him. In the kitchen, I found his insulin and a used syringe on the table, so I knew he had been here for his afternoon shot, but there were no dishes in the sink, so he hadn't

eaten supper. I figured he was passed out somewhere, from low blood sugar. There was no note on the table, so I didn't think anyone had come to get him, and I knew he couldn't get far on his own. I went back through the house, looking for clues.

It was the first time I had really looked at the house in a while. The linoleum was covered with a thick layer of dust, except for some clean trails where Dad and I had gone from room to room. I thought about it, and realized that the only house work I had done since Lorraine left was washing dishes. Nearly everything in the house was dusty. It reminded me of Granddad's house when we went there after his funeral. None of the Guthrie men seemed to do too good without a woman around. We didn't do too good with women, either.

Not really knowing what I was looking for, I began to follow the clean path. I went from the kitchen to the living room, where it forked. To the couch was my path; to the recliner with the trapeze hung above it was Dad's. Still looking for clues, I followed the path back down the hall, into the bathroom, and back out again. Further down the hall, another branch, Dad's to the right, mine to the left. That's where I found it. Dad's trail was wider, and I could see where it had disturbed the dust on either side of mine. I followed his trail into my bedroom. It veered off at the foot of my bed, and struck out across virgin dust, parallel lines straight to the gun case.

The Marlin 30-30 was gone. I tried not to think about what an old man with no legs wanted with a gun. I grabbed my sneakers and pulled them on over my sock and my sack. I didn't bother to untie them first. In the kitchen, I grabbed some fast-food squeeze packs of strawberry jam and dropped them into the pocket of my jacket. I also got an injectable glucagon kit out of the refrigerator and put it with the jelly in my pocket. The flashlight was on top of the fridge, I grabbed it on my way out the back door.

At the bottom of the ramp, I could just make out the twin tracks of his chair where it had crossed the lawn. The grass was almost finished straightening back out; it had been a while since he left. I followed the trail into the woods. I had spent nearly the entire month of May carving out and smoothing a trail he could wheel down in the woods. He liked to go watch the squirrels and birds. The path went about 100 yards to the edge of a small bluff, then looped back through the woods to the house.

His trail went straight to the bluff, then got strange. The twin tracks ended about four feet from the edge, in a spot where the leaves were all scuffled up. The scuffle went all the way to the edge. I shined

the light down. The bluff was only about twenty feet high here, and at the bottom, I could see the chair, folded up, and laid out flat. Tracing the light back up the bluff, I found Dad about six feet from the top, wedged against a little hickory tree growing out of the face of the bluff. His eyes were only half-open, but he was still breathing. The rifle was slung around his back.

I went around to the closest end of the bluff, and came back up so I was directly below him. I heard some coyotes yipping down in the river bottom. Coyotes always run from men, but sometimes, wild dogs will run with coyotes, and they aren't scared of people. I tried not to think about what they would do to an unconscious double amputee.

I used the flashlight to pick out where I would put my hands and feet, committed the spots to memory, and put the light in my pocket. It would have been an easy climb in the daytime, and even in the dark, with a sore foot, it wasn't very hard. I wrapped one arm around the hickory, and braced my feet against a little ledge, so that I was hanging just below Dad. Maybe I could keep him from rolling off the tree as he came around.

I took one of the packs of jam out of my pocket and bit the corner off. Tilting his head back against the tree, I tried to get him to open his mouth.

"Dad! Can you hear me? Open your mouth! DAD!"

He groaned a little and started waving his arms around. I called it swimming when he did this, because that's what it looked like he was trying to do. He was probably trying to get up, but was too disoriented and uncoordinated to do anything but flail around. He finally opened his mouth enough for me to get the end of the jelly pack in, and I quickly squeezed the goop into his mouth. This was the risky part. Swallowing is a reflex, but if he's too far-gone, even that can get screwed up. If he choked, I would have a hard time dealing with it hanging here on the bluff.

He gurgled and snorted, and finally swallowed. I waited about five minutes, and fed him another. It went easier than the first. The stuff was nearly pure corn syrup, with just enough fruit to give it flavor and color. Once it hit his stomach, it would be just like flipping a light switch on. In another five minutes or so, he would be alert enough to start talking. I was glad I wouldn't need to give him the glucagon injection. The kits cost nearly \$50.00 for one shot, and I didn't know if I could handle it with one hand. I was ten years old the first time I had to give him a shot, and he had a bruise on his arm for a week afterward. After 25 years, I was a lot better at it, but I still hated to do it.

"Hey, Dad!"

"Huh?"

"Dad. You know where you're at?"

"Uh, yeah, out here, uhm, climbing down the bluff."

"You o.k. Dad?"

"Yeah, I'm all right. Just need a minute to catch my breath."

"Do you know what time it is?"

"Some time after seven, I guess. I can't see my watch. How long you been here?"

"Are you sure you're o.k.? Do you know what day it is?"

"Yes! I said I'm all right! It's the first day of deer season, and if you stop pestering me, I'm gonna climb back up this bluff."

"O.k., I'll shine a light for you."

His arms and shoulders had gotten stronger since he lost his legs. I had seen him using the trapeze to get in and out of his recliner, and the bed, but I was still surprised to see how easily he climbed the bluff. He still had his thighs, above the knees, but he only used them for balance. His arms did all of the work. I watched until the rolled up ends of his jeans slithered over the top.

"Hey Dad, I'm going down to get the chair. I'll be up in just a minute."

"I'll just wait here, then."

He handed me the rifle, and I held the chair steady while he got into it. I knew better than to try and help him, so I just shined the light on the path and followed him back to the house.

"I'm gonna have a ham and cheese sandwich. Want me to fix one for you, Dad?"

"Yeah, I'll have one. How's that foot doing? I see you're still wearing that sack over it."

"I'll live."

"You need to get it looked at."

"I will, soon as this outage is finished at the mill. I need to stay until they lay me off, or I'll never get on full time. If I can get on permanent, I'll have insurance, and you can go to a real doctor, instead of that damn quack in Lewisburg."

"They sure won't hire you if you lose your foot. And getting insurance for my sake isn't worth your foot either."

"Dammit, Dad! If I'd had insurance, maybe you would still have *your* feet. And this is the third time in a week that I've come home to find you passed out and hungry. You can't regulate your blood sugar,

and that quack can't figure out why! What if you had fallen off that damn tree? What if a pack of dogs had found you? What the hell were you trying to do?"

"I was trailing a deer. The biggest buck I've ever seen. And if you had left me alone, my insulin would have worn off and I'd have woke up and come on home."

I shut up, and got a beer out of the 'fridge. If I hadn't found him, he would probably have died of hypothermia. It didn't do any good to talk about Dad's health. I was supposed to pretend like there was nothing wrong with him, just like he did. He had three small heart attacks before he went to the doctor. When he did go, he didn't tell me about it. I found out when a nurse called from the hospital, and told me he had just had quadruple bypass surgery, and would need someone to drive him home in a few days. That's when I made him move in with me. He lost his first leg after an ingrown toenail got infected. His circulation was bad because of his diabetes, and the toe never healed. The doctors had started cutting at the toe, and just worked their way up, a little at a time. He spent so much time on his back, that the other foot went bad too.

"Look Dad, if you want to shoot a deer, just wait three more days, until the shutdown is over at work. I'll build a tree stand, with a rope and pulley so you can get up in it."

"That's not hunting, and you know it. Sitting up in a tree, waiting for something to walk under you, so you can slaughter it. I taught you better than that. You've got to give the animal some kind of chance."

"Dad. You can't stalk a deer with a wheel chair. You need legs. Just think about the tree stand for a couple of days. Right now, I've got to get to bed. We'll talk about it again, after the shutdown. O.k.?"

For the next three days, Dad and I didn't say much more than "Morning" or "See you later." That wasn't anything unusual. Neither one of us was very talkative, and even when I wasn't working, we might go for days without speaking. It's one of the things Lorraine complained about before she left. She said it wasn't normal for two people to sit in the same room for four hours and not even say one word to each other. She said Dad and I were both emotional cripples. I didn't know how to answer her, so I just didn't say anything. She left about the time that they took off Dad's first foot.

By the time my last shift was over, my foot was starting to scab over, and feeling a lot better. The maintenance supervisor had told me I should send him my résumé, and that he would probably have some

permanent positions open by spring. I got paid, and I was in a good mood when I got home that night.

I heard Pat Sajak as I walked in. Getting a beer from the fridge, I asked Dad if he had decided where he wanted his tree stand.

"I told you, I will not climb a tree, and wait for a deer to wander underneath."

"O.K., you won't use a tree stand, and you can't stalk in a wheelchair. How about a blind down at ground level?"

"That's just as bad as a tree stand."

"So what's left?"

"I don't know. You know that boy that wheels all over town on that little electric buggy thing?"

"Yeah, that kid with muscular dystrophy."

"Well, I met him at the hospital one time, and we got to talking. I thought about borrowing his buggy, and called him up to ask about it, but he said if he ever got it off of the pavement, it would just bog down and spin its wheels. You got any ideas?"

I looked at him. He had never been a big man, had probably never weighed more than 160 even in his prime. With both legs gone, I bet he would barely weigh 100 pounds. I had carried packs that weighed almost that much for miles when I was in the marines, but that was a long time ago. Still, I thought it might work.

"I might have an idea, Dad. Wait right there."

I ran out to the shed, and after a quick search, found an old aluminum framed backpack that I hadn't used in over 15 years. It was dusty, but still sturdy. I cut the pack part of it off, so I just had the tubular frame, with the shoulder straps and waist belt attached. Next, I took the seat off of an old bicycle. Using a short two-by-four, and a half a dozen pipe straps, I got the seat attached to the backpack frame.

I shrugged into the straps, and looked at my reflection in the window of the shed. The bicycle seat was mounted about six inches behind me, just below my shoulder blades. Someone sitting on it would have a clear view over my head. Now I just had to figure a way to free up his hands for the rifle.

I thought about the safety harness I had to wear whenever I went into the tunnels at the aluminum mill. It had big rings on the front and back, so if you passed out in a pit, they could just hook a rope to you and haul you out. Mine was still in the cab of my truck. I got it and a short lanyard and went back in the house, still wearing the backpack.

Dad looked at the contraption on my back, and didn't say anything. I held up the harness.

"Dad, this here is a safety harness."

"I know. I had to wear one a lot like it, back when I was working construction. You really think that thing is going to work?"

"Won't know until we try."

I handed him the harness, and he got it buckled on and cinched all the straps. I snapped one end of the lanyard through the chest ring, and kneeled down with my back to him. He grabbed the trapeze above his recliner, and swung onto the bicycle seat. He wrapped the lanyard once around the cross bar of the backpack frame, and snapped the other end onto his chest ring. I stood up, and we both wiggled around getting adjusted.

"Ready Dad?"

"Ready."

I nearly brained him going out the front door. Once we got outside, things went a lot better. I walked down to the mailbox. I had to squat to look in. I was too top heavy to bend over, but I couldn't think of any way around that. I went back to the house, and duck walked back through the door. Dad grabbed his trapeze and dismounted.

"Do you think you can pack me all the way to the river bottom like that?"

"Well, we might not have to go that far to find your deer, and even if we do, we'll be moving real slow. Stalking. I think I can manage."

"O.k. I guess we'll try it. We better get to bed, I'm hoping to be tracking at first light."

The next morning, the weather was nearly perfect for stalking. There was a light wind blowing up from the bottoms. It would help keep the deer from smelling us, and also help mask any sound we might make. It had been a damp fall, so the leaf litter wouldn't be too noisy to walk through.

I picked up the buck's trail, almost as soon as we got to the woods. He had walked down Dad's path towards the bluff, fairly recently. I knelt down to get a better look at his tracks. Going by the depth of the tracks, and the width of his stance, he was huge. There was something strange about the prints, but I couldn't figure out what. There were prints from several does mixed in with his, so I decided that maybe I was confusing two sets of prints. We set off on his trail.

When you stalk, you have to act like a deer. I took two slow steps, and stopped. I slowly swiveled my head, watching for movements, and shapes. Seeing no deer, I took two more steps along the buck's trail,

and stopped again. I knew Dad was swiveling his head, just like me. Some people call it still-hunting, or still-walking, because you spend more time being still than you do walking. I always just called it stalking. If you've ever watched a cat sneaking up on a bird, you know how it's done. Just move slow, and silent, to get as close to your prey as you can, without spooking him.

I had to keep reminding myself to watch out for any limb across our path that was lower than seven feet. As we inched our way towards the river bottom, I could feel Dad's weight shifting slowly from side to side, as he scanned the trail, and the woods around us.

We came to a pile of deer droppings, like a little pyramid of glistening, black beans. Dad reached his hand over my shoulder, and made a little "come here" gesture with his fingers, towards the pellets. I knew what he wanted, so I kneeled down, and putting my hands on the ground in front of me, I lowered us, like I was doing a push-up. I didn't go all the way down, just far enough for Dad to reach the ground.

He laid the back of his fingers on the ground for a few seconds, to get a feel for the temperature. After his fingers got used to the ground, he lifted them onto the pile of droppings, and eased one into the middle of the pile. My arms were beginning to tremble from the strain of holding my chest off of the ground, with Dad's weight pressing down on my back. I didn't want to lie down and rest my arms, because I was afraid I wouldn't be able to get back up.

He finished with the droppings, and wiped his fingers on the leaves lying in the trail. He made a four, then a five, with his hand, and then waggled it side to side in a "maybe" gesture. I nodded, and he laid the gun across my shoulders, and used his hands against the ground to help me push back up to my knees. I figured his hand signals meant that the droppings were at least 45 minutes old, maybe as much as an hour. It was a good sign. If nothing had spooked him, the deer wouldn't be too far away.

A little over an hour later, we were approaching the edge of a field that lay between the woods and the river, when I heard buck snorts. I froze, and listened. It sounded like two bucks, facing off out in the field as they fought for ownership of the harem. There was a giant old oak tree at the edge of the woods, between us. I eased over to it. When I got there, I put my hands on the trunk, and started inching around it. I felt Dad click the safety off the rifle.

As soon as I got a clear view of them, I felt Dad tense up. Both bucks were trophy size, but there was no doubt which one we had been trailing. He had to weigh at least 230 pounds, and I counted fourteen

points on his antlers before he jerked his head and I lost count. The hair on his face had gone gray. When he tried to paw the ground at the other buck, I saw what had been bothering me about his tracks. He was favoring his left foreleg, the one he was trying to paw with. It had a big knob on the part that would be a shin on a person, like it had been broken and didn't heal right. Since he wasn't putting his full weight on that leg, its track didn't come out as deep as the other three did. I was surprised that a three legged deer had survived as long as this one obviously had.

The other buck wasn't much smaller, but looked a lot younger. He snorted and pawed the ground. They both lowered their heads and charged each other, locking antlers with a tremendous crash. I felt Dad raise the rifle to take aim, and then the deer separated. They backed off a few paces and got ready to charge again. This time when they hit, the younger buck gave a quick jerk of his head towards the older one's bad leg. The old one couldn't keep his balance, and went down.

The young buck backed off, and looked like he was strutting, enjoying his victory, but the old one got back up and snorted again. The young one practically flew at him, and again gave that twist of his head, throwing the older one down. It took the old one longer to get back up this time, and his chest was heaving when he finally made it. I figured one more hit, and it would be all over for him, with the younger one taking the does.

They faced each other and snorted. They charged. Just as they hit, the gun went off beside my ear. I was caught up in watching the deer; the shot took me by surprise; and I clenched my eyes shut. When I opened them, both deer were down. The younger one was thrashing around, trying to get up, but his antlers were still tangled up with the old one's. The old one wasn't doing anything. I wasn't sure which deer was shot, but I knew I shouldn't move for a few minutes. If you move too soon after shooting, a wounded deer will try to run, and you might have to track him down again. If you stay still and wait, they usually just lie down and die.

After a few minutes, the young one quit thrashing. The old one looked like he was still breathing, but I wasn't sure. I waited another five minutes, and Dad tapped my shoulder. I walked towards the two tangled deer. As we neared, I could see that the old one was breathing, and his ears twitched toward us, but he didn't do anything else.

We got to them, and I saw where the bullet had gone into the young buck. It was a good kill shot, just behind the shoulder, a tiny spot of blood, about the diameter of a pencil. I knew that when I rolled

him over, I would find an exit wound the size of my fist, where his heart had been torn from his chest.

The old buck was blowing and rolling his eyes, but he wasn't moving. I guess the young one had jumped when he got shot, and broke the old one's neck, paralyzing him. Dad reached over my shoulder, and handed me his old K-bar knife. He always kept it as sharp as a scalpel. I kneeled down beside the buck, and I could see his pulse racing in a neck vein.

I looked at his eye as I leaned across him. It was a deep, liquid brown, like melted chocolate, and it reflected the sky. It also reflected our silhouette; we looked like that four-armed god from India. I made a quick cut with the knife, and then sat back. The buck's blood arced out away from us, making sparkling burgundy rainbows, until it splashed down, and soaked into the cold, quiet earth.

Takes Effect Gently and Naturally, As You Sleep

Gene Griffin

What's it like getting old? Is that what you said? Well. Now that's a tough one. I'm going to have to chew on that one a spell. I'll tell you though; you've always asked hard questions. And never would take an easy answer either.

I remember when you weren't no bigger than a minute; you came and said, "Granddaddy, why do bees buzz?"

First I said, "Just because they do", but you wouldn't have none of that. So the next thing I tried was, "Because they fly." That one didn't go over any better than just because.

You told me "Birds fly, but they don't buzz, so why do bees buzz?"

That's when I knew you were gonna be smarter than a whip, and I was going to be busier than the devil trying to stay ahead of your questions. That's the day we first went to the library looking for answers.

We asked the librarian about bees buzzing and she found us books about bees and books about sound. We read them right there and found out about wings beating, and sound waves, and vibrations, and how to make a kazoo with tissue paper and a comb. Your Granny never would say anything to you, but you like to drove her crazy marching around buzzing on that comb kazoo.

After you marched around with it for about a week, she made me take you to the library to find something to make you forget about the kazoo. We checked out *Little Black Sambo*. Lord, you loved that story. I bet I read it to you six dozen times.

Then one day while I was taking a nap, your Granny came home from the grocery store and there you were, with her old yellow tabby cat tied to that little old dogwood tree. You were in your BVD's, chasing that poor old cat around and around that tree just as fast as you could go. When she asked what you were doing, you told her you were trying to turn that cat into butter like Sambo did with them tigers.

No, I haven't forgotten what you asked. I'm still thinking on it. I think getting old might be kind of like breathing. Is that right? No, not

quite. Not breathing, but something like it. I'll think on it some more. I do know this though. The older you got, the tougher your questions were.

Remember when you wanted to know how lightning got made? We got all those books about electricity and built that Van de Graaff generator? We had some fun that day didn't we? You had one hand on the collector and a curtain rod in the other. When you got charged up good and all your hair was standing up, you would reach out that curtain rod toward that old brass coat tree. Lordy, some of those sparks were a foot long.

Then that old white longhaired cat of your Granny's came by. You grabbed him up and held him under one arm while you put your other hand on the collector. Your Granny even thought it was funny to see that cat's hair all poofed out like that. But when that cat jumped out from under your arm onto your Granny's lap, oh lord, they both yowled when he discharged that static. Your eyes got just as big as hubcaps when you saw what happened, but Granny got mad at me for laughing. I couldn't help it.

The next day she made me tuna salad for lunch. While I was eating, she opened a can of cat food for that old cat and fed him too. I thought my tuna tasted kind of funny, and I've always wondered if maybe she mixed those two cans up that day. She always did have a sneaky streak, just like all those darned cats of hers. I never did ask her though, and now it's too late.

I guess that's part of getting old. You accumulate regrets. Things you wanted to do but never did get around to. That's not the biggest part, but it's a part you ought to take heed of. If you got something you want to do, make sure you do it while you can.

Another part is losing people. Well, not just losing, I guess you have to gain too. It wouldn't matter that she was gone if we hadn't had all those years together. And when your Dad got married we thought we were losing our son, but instead we were gaining a daughter. I know it sounds like one of those cheap cards from the Rexall, but it's true. And then we lost both of them, but we gained you. You helped keep us both young a little longer.

Now, I think I've figured out what getting old is like. At least for me. I hope your Granny can't hear me from where ever she is. She wouldn't appreciate the analogy I'm going to make. You're surprised that I know what an analogy is? Well shoot, I didn't quit trying to keep ahead of you just because you went to college. And since you know all that fancy legalese now, I guess I ought to put a 'qualifying clause' in

front of my analogy.

So. My opinion of the nature of aging is solely subjective. I make no claims, expressed or implied, about its application to the experience of any individual except for me. Hah! I thought you'd like that. Well here it is: Getting old is like taking a dump.

I'm going to explain it. Just give me time. Now see, both of them are kind of personal. They're things that you can't talk about with just anybody. Think about it. You don't talk about your bowels with anybody but your wife or your doctor. And I never did feel too comfortable discussing it with either one.

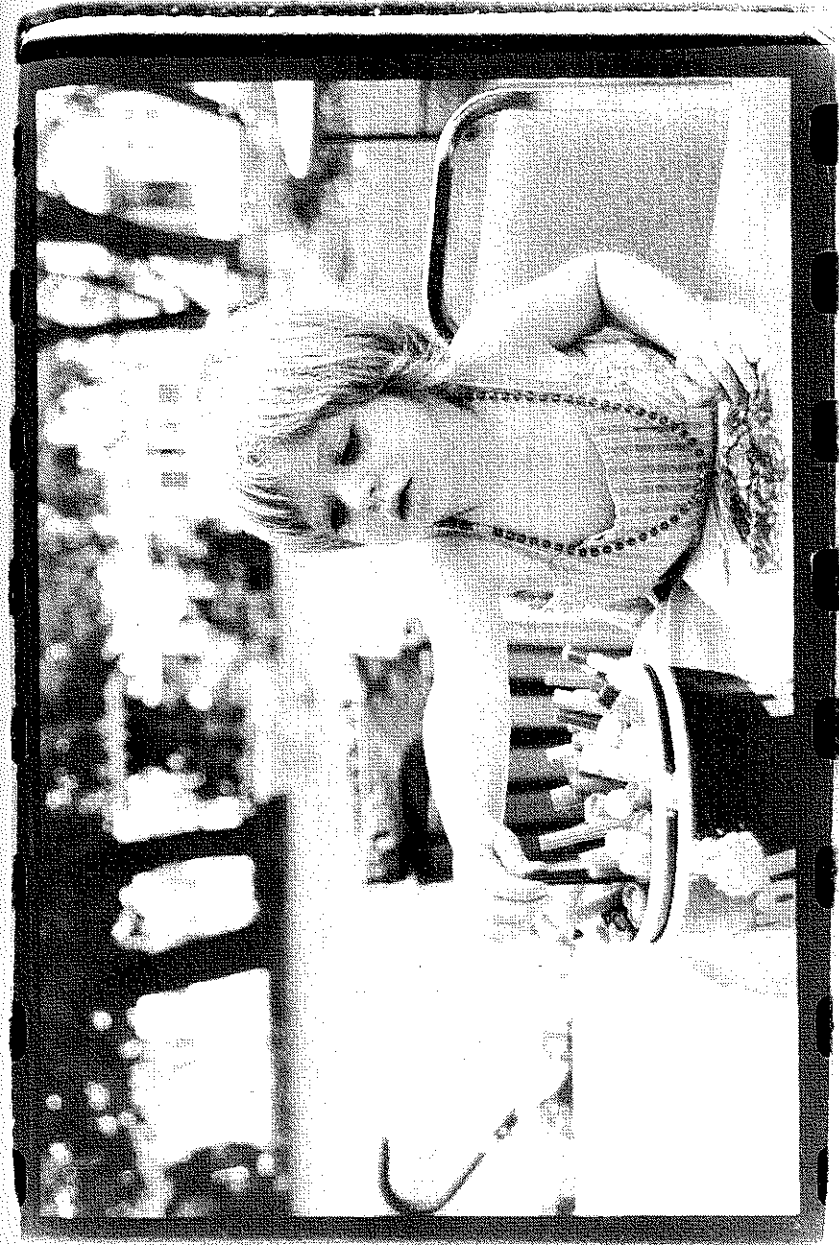
Plus, neither one of them is really a pleasant activity, but doing them is a whole lot better than not doing them. And that's another thing. You never really spend too much time thinking about either one, until something goes wrong, and then that's just about *all* you think about.

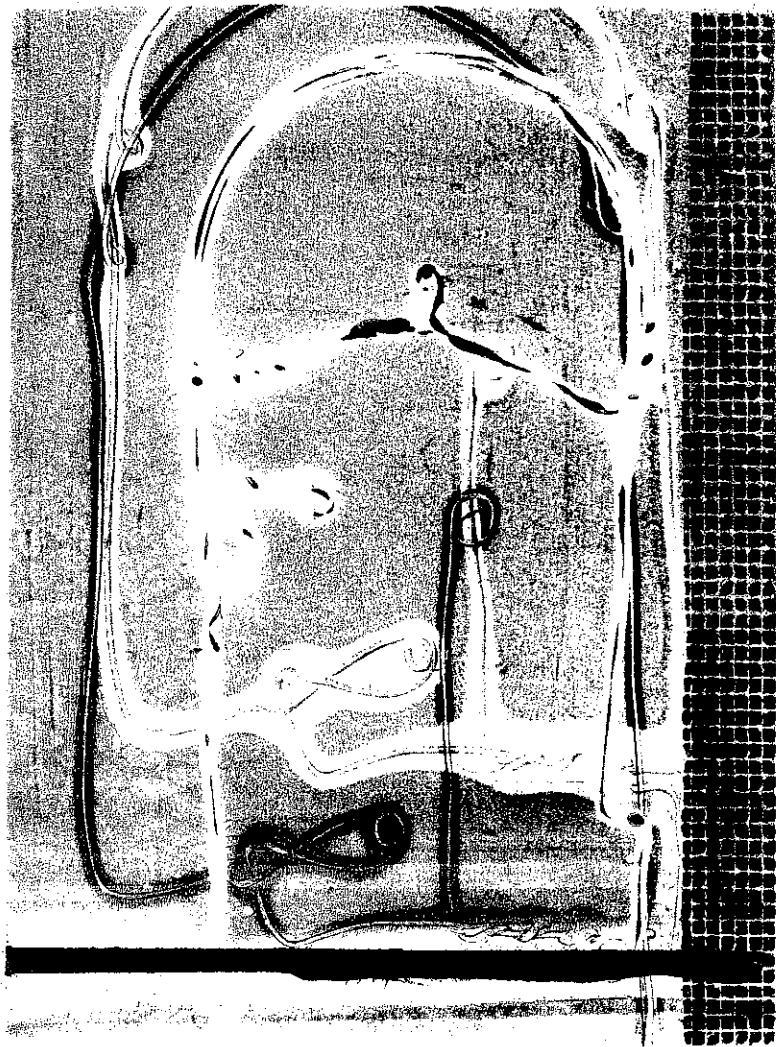
You can't not do either one unless you're dead. Oh, you can struggle and fight and hold them off for a little while, but sooner or later, it's going to happen. And they both can sneak up on you. You know how sometimes you get an unexpected urge, and you know you have to go RIGHT NOW? Well, getting old can surprise you just like that. I felt that kind of queasy surprise the first time I found a gray hair on my chest.

Did I hit a nerve? I guess I probably was just about your age that first time. I found it and I just clenched up and thought, "Oh gosh, I'm getting old." But soon enough, that surprise wears off and you forget about it and just go on about your life. At least until you get another uncomfortable surprise.

But all in all, you don't really spend that much time thinking about either one. They're just something that happens natural-like, and don't take up your attention. It's just a part of life. You can't eat a good meal without having to take a dump afterward, and you can't have a good life without getting old while you do it.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go get old.





'mystique'

Neli Ouzonova

Neli Ouzonova

Mystique

Handrail

Chris Hasara

How many have been the hands,
Gripping and sliding,
Begging for support
Or to steal steadiness?

There must have been many,
The rail worn down,
Stain removed.
The wood now naked.

Rail, the only help.
The steps
To the choir loft
Were made too steep.

Poetry on Demand

Amanda Gibson

They told me to write
a pretty poem
one filled with
butterflies streaming
off flowers
but I said
I have no time
to chase butterflies
to crush their fluttering bodies on paper
to pen their wings flat
to tear them apart in stanzas
so I will write
you a poem
filled with turtles
old even in their youth
that gather to chat
in the sun
about
days following days
and the crispness
of lettuce stolen
from gardens
where the soil
is as red as the blood
that veins to their
cool reptilian hearts

I grab three or four
without trouble
their slow legs
no match for deadlines
and my impatient hands
I will break open
the green gold shields

of their backs
so that I might
lift out the soft naked bodies
to mold into meter and verse
that I may epic the ancient Triassic
the depths of the sea
and my own backyard
seen from beneath the leaves
of a white azalea

The Photograph

Amanda Gibson

He catches me in mid-motion
hair frizzing crazily from my braid
my lips pulled into the grimace
of a smile not carefully tucked into
the corners of my mouth
He has caught me unready
I want time
to smooth down my hair
for powder to soften
the red in my cheeks
the bruise on my chin
I want to put on a dress
that clings to the curves
of my hips
I don't want this girl
so wild and unpolished
to be me

The Landscape

Amanda Gibson

Goose bumps mountain
and valley along my back
cool mornings map
my skin like Genesis
on a Tuesday
and I wish
I could slide my way along
those same hills
and find the mole
I lost
two years ago last May
that I know used to be there
along the shoulder
but it has been displaced
I think
it has slid down
the ridge of my spine
and now finds itself
in some hidden valley
that I wait to discover
on some morning
when I can
do nothing
but reacquaint myself
with all the hollows and plateaus
of this body
so dear
and unfamiliar

Thoughts

John William Keabler II

(upon listening to most conversations)

I wonder if the deaf sign,
Just for the sake of movement

(upon the concept of time)

No one can see a tree grow. One just wakes up in the morning
to find a thousand years of history soaked up by the bark.

(upon honesty)

Our souls know how tall we are,
even though our shadows stretch the truth a little.

The Affair

Trish Lindsey Jagers

I'm in love with a poet.
Every night, I slip away
to be with him
between his sheets,
beg him to
whisper more, more,
against my ravenous tongue.
I kiss him
as he speaks—
eat each word
raw.

The Writing Chair

Trish Lindsey Jagers

You remember that professor who once said, "The use of expletives in writing indicates a seriously immature, unintelligent individual who would be better off shrink-wrapping others' books in a Barnes & Noble warehouse," or something to that effect. But right now, you feel as intelligent as a week-old loaf of bread—and about as green.

You sit with fingers poised, mouth shut, and no words escape you. They must be in there. They must! Only a minute ago, you had a swirling mindful of imprisoned energy just begging to be released, and now it's vaporized into a smear like a child's soapy bubble on a sidewalk.

All you can think is, "Damn."

You worry about what others will think when they read your work. You worry if they'll ever read your stuff; because, how can they read it if you can't put it out there, and no one seems to want to listen to or read it so you *can* put it out there—and you dread rejection letter after rejection letter . . .

All you can think is, "Damn."

You worry about every comma and adjective and adverb and should the modifier come before or after the verb and what type of phrase is that and whether or not your not knowing the name of the phrase or not remembering how to diagram a sentence makes you less of a writer or if it means you're not even a writer after all because, hell, you don't remember half the rules let alone their exceptions, and all you can think is, "Damn."

Everyone chides you for spending so much of your time alone with a pen or computer screen. "How do you *sit* like that all day and do *nothing*?" they ask. You have no answer. Okay, you're afraid of the answer. For Pete's sake, you can't say, "That's what writers do," because that would be saying, admitting even, that you're a writer, and you can't do that unless you've been published, can you? And even then, you're not a "real" writer unless you make a living at it; otherwise, it's called a hobby, right? So you try to think of an answer, because

they are still blinking innocently at you, wanting to know you, yet they won't even read you, and you're not sure if you want them to read your work anyway, and all you can think is, "Damn."

Then you decide, "What the hell? I not only want to write, I really *need* to write, and you grab a bagel, and toast it—it seems more elegant that way—then empty the cream cheese container, brew a cup of gourmet coffee—for inspiration—sit in your favorite chair so you can get down to business, but your chair squeaks. You figure the WD-40 *has* to be somewhere, so you scratch around in the hall closet, then in the garage, finally finding it in the kitchen cabinet (what was it doing in there?), and one blast stops that annoying squeak. As soon as it's silenced, you realize it reminded you of a porch swing—your grandmother's porch swing—and the sound the chains made as you lay in it in the cool, breezy shade of the porch, swinging sideways, with your legs dangling over the armrest, and you instantly wish you hadn't been so quick to spray that chair, that it might have been your grandmother guiding your muse with the squeak, and now *you may never write another word*.

And all you can think is, "Damn."

You sit in the silent chair, cold coffee in hand. Words—nothing. Words—nothing. This goes on. Elementary garble spreads across the sheet, and you reach for the thesaurus and wonder, "Did Kate Chopin have to do this? How much use did her thesaurus get? Did she even own a thesaurus? See? I have proof! I must not be a writer; words should flow easily to a writer."

Picking up the latest copy of a writer's magazine—your shelves are full—you check out some of the poetry and short stories, and you try to spot errors, patting yourself on the back when you do. You think, "I could've written that; mine would've been better, much tighter." Newly inspired, you ink up the fountain pen and decide you want the keyboard—works faster—and you try to think of the first sentence of a story you don't even know yet, and you wait for the words to come. And wait. And wait.

But only one word comes to mind.

**A College without a Campus:
Virtual Universities of the Millennium**

Trish Lindsey Jagers

Outside the university's English hall, a mist falls. Inside, the building smells of new rain, old wood and leather. Up and down the marble-trimmed halls, doors stand ajar. Voices carry into the hall outside a classroom. The instructor speaks both with her voice and her hands—her pacing to and fro matching the rhythm of her syllables. Each student watches her and listens intently as she delves piece by piece into the short story the class just read. In the back of the class, a hand raises, and the student points out that the author used a repetition of sounds throughout the piece. A smile breaks. "Perfect, Matt!" she says. "Did anyone else 'see' this in the story?" and the class buzzes with responses. Touch. Smell. Hear. See. The environment is conducive to reading, writing, creative thinking, and learning. Stories, drama, and poetry live here.

Elsewhere, a student sits in front of a computer in her pajamas. A snack, a soda, and a notebook sit on her desk. She takes brief notes. Every now and then, she clicks her mouse, then types a "response." She's a junior in college, and this morning she's also in class—a virtual class on the web.

On the cusp of the twenty-first century, technology promises the best, the fastest, and the most advanced. The latest advancement in technology penetrates the classrooms of the nation's universities, and the new promise on the list is a plethora of virtual classrooms, classes where students from any part of the country "come together" (via the Internet) by coming apart in an environment distanced from the university geographically, yet linked by a common tool—the computer. The older methods of alternative instruction were known as "distance learning," and video and satellite broadcast classes evolved for studies such as math, history, and psychology. Distance learning could be achieved through the use of those videotapes and television broadcasts, and the student received college credit. Now, if a student has access to the web through the Internet, he or she can enroll in a variety of "virtual" college courses. If colleges continue to perpetuate the virtual

learning environment, what will happen to universities in the twenty-first century? Many currently view the web as the future of education. Given, the web offers students—students who might not otherwise have the means, or the opportunity—the chance to attend college and receive college credit as well as the chance to develop skills that will enhance their ability to function in a society that, in the twenty-first century, will depend more on the productivity, the speed, the convenience, and the accuracy of computers.

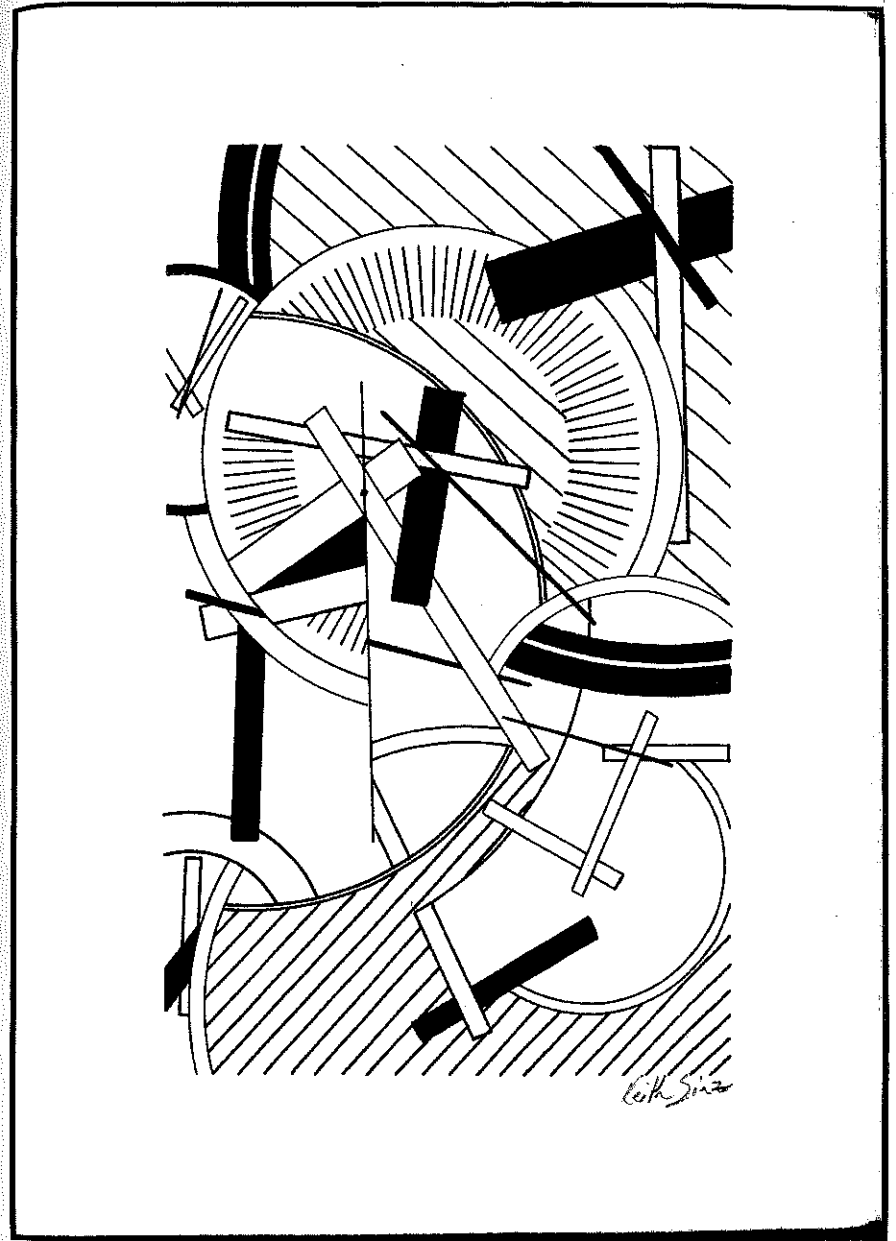
However, in the new millennium, virtual learning threatens to replace physical, communal universities. Many universities tout what I will call Electronically Distributed Distance Learning (EDDL) as the learning institution of the future—the not-too-distant future. But by jumping on the bandwagon (pardon the cliché) of technology-powered education, universities may be contributing to their own demise. Universities now compete for distinction in the wake of technological advancements. Each wants potential students to believe they will get the highest, most up-to-date education by committing to one of its degree programs. The Internet has made it easier for colleges to "advertise" their credentials and academic offerings. As a result, nearly every accredited university sports a website. The websites feature online catalogs, syllabi from various instructors' courses, university information, libraries (including—you guessed it—virtual libraries, so students may dig through mounds of information much faster than the old card catalog method), and page after page of Information Technology paraphernalia. A quick inquiry with a search engine produced nearly 113,000 links to pages of "virtual" courses within university offerings. Without a doubt, universities will create even more courses as the demand increases, and the courses will not require the use of "physical" university premises.

Demand for improved access to education (a.k.a. faster, more convenient degrees) generates an increase in the offerings of EDDL's. Society desires a more efficient means to an end, such as wanting faster cars and other modes of transportation, faster computers and modems, overnight delivery of packages, and instant delivery of messages via email. People are inundated with the message that faster is better, so if an education can be obtained without cutting into precious time (time that would otherwise be spent commuting to class, waiting for class, and so on), certainly that education will be the most popular one among society. The response to the demand is the implementation of virtual classes. If society's quest for instant everything succeeds in eliminating the common classrooms, the new century may look bright for

technology, but the future looks bleak for college campuses and the social learning that takes place there. No technological substitute exists for social learning, and social learning cannot take place in the isolation produced by a computer screen.

In other words, replacement of traditional classes will lead to the dissection of student-teacher interaction, social integration, and exposure to a diverse environment—the very foundation upon which campus universities often pride themselves. A future campus-less university could not offer student clubs and organizations, sports or extracurricular activities, fraternities, sororities, or connecting of the minds of students in a classroom—their voices coming together in the halls of learning.

Without a doubt, virtual classrooms will dominate the next century; however, hopefully, society will see the need to attend classes in standard classrooms. Otherwise, we ultimately remove an integral portion of “social” from society—the push for instant everything leading to instant nothingness.



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