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UA68/6/1 Zephyrus

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ZEPHYRUS



1997

Zephyrus

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Editor's note: Our selection process is based on complete anonymity. If an editor recognizes an author's work, he or she abstains from the decision-making process for that work.

Dedication

This issue of *Zephyrus* is dedicated to the memory of Jim Wayne Miller, a respected member of the Western community and a true friend to the English Department.

Sowing Salt

This is a season of small miracles.
Dreamt from his rock by the barn, the fossil fish
swims in the light between barn roof and moon.
Scattered in the mountains, all my days
heave to their knees like cattle and come bawling
down from the mountain pastures overnight,
starved for salt I sow over the rock.
I am restored. I salt the fish away.
Mother light licks me dry in a pasture.

--Jim Wayne Miller

Dialogue with a Dead Man, Green River Press 1978. By permission of Mary Ellen Miller for the estate of Jim Wayne Miller.

Award Winners

- Geoffrey McCelvey Memorial Award
Linda Watkins Price
- Browning Literary Club Poetry Award
Kim Kremer
- Ladies Literary Club Fiction Award
Sharon Payton
- Wanda Gatlin Essay Award
Amanda Elliott

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Leaves

I look at the sea
Of yellow and orange
That now covers my backyard
And I remember.

I remember
Hiding behind the trees
Watching my father rake
And gather
And rake
And gather
While I sat silently
Waiting for the wind
To whisper the time was right.

And I wonder.

I wonder
Where my father
Found the patience
To watch
As I ravaged his work
Only to begin again
As I disappeared into the trees.

But now I rake.

I rake.
And gather
And rake
And gather
And as I finish

I wonder how
And I wonder why
My father found such joy
In all his work.

And then . . .
Leaves fly!
Laughter!

I draw a deep breath
Of the crisp autumn air
To scream.

But the air,
That same cool, crisp air
That coaxes the leaves from the trees,
Smells of patience.
It sounds of laughter . . .
And it tastes of joy.
And I know my father smiles
As the boys vanish
Into the trees.

So I rake
And gather
And rake
And gather.

Christmas Spirits

"Merry Christmas to you too, and you come back and see us!"
The bells that hung from the door made a rusty jingle, and Robert walked to the front of the little store. He looked through the front windows up and down the street. Few people were stirring downtown. He reached to turn the "Open" sign around on the door, but stopped, and instead undid the ribbon which held the rusty little bells to the front door.

The bells were no longer silver, but a greyish-brown. Even the ribbon, one of many these three little bells had seen, was worn. They were held together at a deep green base that once connected to stems of plastic mistletoe leaves, long since gone. He tossed the bells in his hand, and walked slowly to the office in the back.

It was a small office, with two desks, a small table, and a coffee machine. Stephen sat at one desk, a small stack of receipts in front of him. Myra sat at the little table, her hands rubbing her coffee cup.

Robert sat the bells on Stephen's desk, but Stephen did not look up. He just continued turning tickets and writing. Robert did not disturb him, and instead turned to Myra. "There won't be many more of them this year."

"There never are after lunch anymore." She paused to sip her coffee. "I guess they get their shopping done early now. I can remember when we used to wait till almost six before we'd close on Christmas Eve. Seems somebody was always rushing in at the last minute."

"It's those damn discount stores. And the malls. They put their decorations up in October! Nobody wants to shop downtown anymore. And they couldn't if they wanted to. Just look out there. You can't find a place to park. And it's nothing but the cars of employees too lazy to walk from the city lot."

Myra looked into her cup and smiled. "Of course, your CHARMING personality wouldn't have anything to do with people

not coming in!"

"Sorry if I'm not JOLLY enough for you!" Robert turned to walk back out into the store, but stopped. "Damn! I'm 68 years old! I thought I was supposed to retire and enjoy my life now. But here I am, every day, trying to keep this place afloat. And do you know why? I'll tell you why! It's so you have a place to live. I do it so you won't have to live in the street. And to top it all off, I have to work with YOU?! You expect me to be happy about that?"

Myra's eyes widened. "You think I'm any happier about having to work with you? You think I LIKE coming here and having to listen to your attitude? This wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I threw you out of the house 20 years ago!"

"Threw me out?! I . . ."

Stephen spun around in his chair. "Will you two PLEASE knock it off! It's Christmas Eve, for Christ's sake. I swear, your grandchildren behave better than this."

"Yes, threw you out," Myra continued quietly. "And see, you're still bothering the children."

Robert clenched his teeth and looked at Myra. "Sorry, son. Your mother just knows exactly how to get under my skin." He walked and looked over Stephen's shoulder. "You know, that's not how I would do it."

"Dad, do you mind. I'm trying to get some work done here."

"Fine. OK. If you don't want my advice. That's fine."

Stephen buried his face in his hands.

"Sorry. I know, it's your business now." Robert looked at Myra and laughed. "You know, Steve, I shouldn't let your mother get to me like that. I know she's just uptight because we haven't had sex in 10 years." He started through the door which led to the little apartment in the back.

Myra waited until he was just inside the doorway, then mumbled, just loud enough to be heard. "YOU haven't had sex in 10 years. Speak for YOURSELF, asshole!" She immediately buried her head on the table to hide her laughter.

Robert stopped in mid-stride. "WHAT!? Who is he? I'll kill the . . ."

"HEY! HEY! Calm down!" Stephen came out of his chair. Robert stopped, took a couple of breaths, and glared at his wife.

"Wait a minute!" Stephen looked suddenly puzzled, and turned to his father. "10 years? But . . ."

"So?"

". . . Never mind." He shook his head. "I don't want to know."

"We are still married, you know."

"I know. Just never mind."

"You think just because we're older . . ."

"I don't want to hear about my parents' sex life! Will you PLEASE stop!" He went back to his work shaking his head. Myra remained with her head down, still chuckling.

There was no conversation for a few minutes, just the sounds of Myra trying to contain her laughter, Stephen mumbling under his breath, and Robert taking slow deep breaths. At last, Robert regained his composure. "So you were just seeing if you could get to me again."

"No, I knew I could do that. I just enjoy it."

Robert looked to the sky. "And that, Your Honor, is why I killed her."

"Why you killed me, huh? It's not like I haven't had offers, you know. I could if I wanted to."

"Oh, I'm sure. So could I, you know! Anytime I wanted." The room fell silent again for a moment. "You'll have to watch the front, I need something to drink." Robert quickly disappeared through the back doorway.

"Oh yeah, sure you could! Just like you could QUIT DRINKING anytime you wanted!"

Robert stopped in the hallway, but shook his head and continued on.

Stephen stopped from his work. "Mother! Was that really necessary?"

Myra looked as if deep in thought. "No, but it sure was fun."

"Look, if you two can't get along, why do you stay married?"

"Well . . . I don't know."

"You don't KNOW?! You bark at each other like this and you don't know? Your kids are all grown now, Ma. You can't claim you're keeping it together for the sake of the children."

"Maybe that is what we're doing. You realize we both put our heart and soul into building this business. You certainly can't expect either of us to give it up to the other. Besides, here, we need each other."

"Need each other? You two barely speak. And when you do, it's always hateful. It's a wonder this place is still standing."

"Maybe so. But you have to remember, your father and I said 'till death do us part.' To get rid of him I'd have to kill him."

"And she's trying!" Robert reappeared with a glass in one hand. "Your mother wants to kill me with a heart attack so she can have it all. That's why she loves getting my blood pressure up. You see, then she and her boyfriend can collect the insurance."

"Boyfriend?! I can't get along with the man I've had for the last 45 years! What the hell would I want with another one! But I won't have to kill you, you're going to take care of that yourself with your drinking. What's that? You've switched to vodka."

"It's 7-Up. It's all I've got back there."

"Oh, did you run out of gin?"

"Nope. Not that you would ever notice, but I haven't had a drink in over two years."

"Oh, that's terrible!"

"Terrible? I thought you'd be pleased."

"No, I think it's great that you've quit drinking. I think it's terrible that your personality is really THAT obnoxious!"

"MOTHER!" Stephen threw down his pencil.

"You see, Stephen, I have proof." He smiled as he pointed at Myra. "Your mother DROVE me to drink. One day, your wife will do this to you."

"My God, I hope not! All I want for Christmas is for us NOT to turn into my parents." He closed his book and put the receipts away. "I'm going home and get the kids ready. We are still having dinner at your house tonight, right Mom?"

"Of course! In fact, if your father thinks he can handle the rest

of this rush we're having, I'll go on home and help your sister with dinner."

"I can handle it! I've handled it for 40 years without much help. I can handle it another couple of hours."

Stephen put on his coat and picked up the little set of bells. "You are coming tonight, aren't you Dad?"

"I wasn't invited."

"That's it! I give up! Mom, you and Sis have a nice time tonight. I'll stay home with my kids where it's sane." He shoved the bells into his pocket and stormed toward the door. Myra and Robert followed him into the store front.

"Good Lord! See what you've done!"

Robert looked bewildered. "What I've done?! You started it!"

"Stephen! Wait a minute."

He kept walking.

"Stephen!"

He stopped and looked at his mother.

She turned to Robert. "Asshole, would you like to join us at the house for Christmas dinner tonight, so that your grandchildren can enjoy it!"

"Oh, that was good, Mom. Really convincing!" He continued toward the front door.

"I'd be glad to come. I wouldn't want to disappoint MY grandchildren."

Stephen stopped at the front door. "So you are coming, then?"

"Yes. Provided I don't get drunk on 7-Up first."

"Fine." Stephen reached in his pocket for the keys, and pulled the bells out with them. "You know, we really should get a new set of bells for the door, these things are too old." He shook the bells and they made their rusty little sound. "Listen, they can't even ring right!" He tried to pull one off its plastic base, but it held fast. "What did you put these on with, Dad? Cement!"

"They don't make anything like they used to. Maybe we ought to hang onto them for a while yet."

"You're right. New ones probably wouldn't last one season." He tossed the bells back to his dad. "See you tonight at six. We'll

pick you up on our way to Mom's."

"Merry Christmas, Steve!" Myra elbowed her husband.

"Yes! Merry Christmas! See you and the kids tonight!"

"Yeah! It's a Merry Christmas, alright." Stephen closed the door behind him.

After Stephen left, the store was silent for a few minutes. Robert would look at Myra and open his mouth as if to speak, but nothing came out. Myra looked at her coat and then back to Robert, but moved toward neither.

Finally, she broke the silence. "I guess I should go home and get dinner ready."

"Yeah. Wouldn't want the kids disappointed that they didn't have Grandma's desserts tonight."

Myra took her coat and headed for the door. "I'd better hurry. I need to stop by the store and get some bananas to make pudding with."

"Oh, the kids wouldn't miss that. I'm the only one who really likes banana pudding."

"I know." Myra smiled and stopped in the doorway. She stood silent for a moment.

"Forget something?"

"No." She paused a minute longer. "Two years? Really?"

"Yes, really."

Closing the door, she shook her head. "I'll be damned."

Writers Cramp

Reaching into the depths of my soul
listening to tortured shrieks
of words that won't come out
the fiery burning in my mind,
fierce resolve betrayed by a tear.
The will of my pen to rage against
the world, the will of my will to be
silent and serene. Anguish!
How my brain shrieks, Enough!
Let it be.

Words spew forth like venom,
ink squirted against paper
wordsruntogetherintheirhaste
to escape from their master
Yearning, longing to breathe.
Feelings, emotions hiding in the pools
of my memory, a dragon in ambush
waiting to slay the valiant knight
riding into the deep, dark realms of fear.
Lurking behind smiling brown eyes
the bestial heart of a killer wolf
a rogue hyena ready to rip limbs
from a passing prey and then
laugh

Time Flies

Kim Kremer

As the butterfly
sat on my blue book,
outstretched proboscis
searching for nectar
that wasn't there,
I thought of my life
with you, and laughed.

Sticky

Kim Kremer

He gets mad when I talk about my
old lovers. But I can't help it.
Their memories wrap around me like
their bodies are still sweat-sticking to
mine. I use exfoliants to scrape
off my sticky skin. It doesn't work.
As soon as we are in bed, it is
obvious that no one sticks to him
like they do to me. Suddenly, my
side of the bed seems crowded
while he huddles far away on the
barren sheets, alone, cold and smooth.

Clinical Depression

Rust rings march around the
drain like the brown
surrounding her pupils. I scrub
the sink with salt and lemon juice
while spiced pumpkins squeal in the
oven. The cinammon smells like
her breath as she sat in the hospital,
drinking out of plastic, shatter-proof cups.
Llamas paraded around my sweater neck
and loped into her hair when I
hugged her. I left her sandalwood oil
and tangerines and flacks of mud
off my boots. I came home, put our
greasy, cast-iron skillet in the sink and
went out to harvest pumpkins in the
October rain.

Tim

The necklace
you made,
earth shaped and
rain colored,
lies cool on my
neck and
reminds me how
we would hold
hands and laugh.

Scars

Kim Kremer

I got off the subway outside the train station.
An old black shawl came up to me
and started talking in broken English
I gave her a few coins and talked
to her for an hour. I'd just had a fight
with my friends and she said "God bless
you." Her hands were shiny and pink
like the inside of my mouth. There
were cracks from work on her palms.

I was bitten by a cat once. A white cat.
The marks are still on my arm. Four holes.
When I tan in the summer, they stand
out like white anthills on red clay soil.

Inspiration

Amy Crosslin

Sometimes
I like to go away
without anyone knowing
and take only my paper and pen
sit beneath an experienced tree
ponder nature a bit
watch people pass at a distance
stay quiet
smile at squirrels and birds
pick out man-sounds and God-sounds
smell the old trustworthy ground
think of music
sigh
dwell
rest
write
learn
observe
enjoy
and then
I pick up my paper and pen
to fall back into a routine
of business and schedules (but always)
feeling like I am a part of the World
and knowing it is a part of me.

Spiderweb

Sometime in the summer of '96 in the Dominican Republic
Written 1/29/97

It was early morning in the Santo Domingo ghetto and I stumbled over the broken cement of the doorway into still, soft daylight. Behind me, inside the house, lay a family of four toe to head in a drooping double bed and a boy on the cracked cement floor. Dania's two girls were still in our bed but Dania was up and gone. My head was foggy and I had a sort of gritty feeling inside my stomach because I had stayed up all night watching rats and giant roaches run amuck on the walls and listening enviously to the dreaming breaths of the other eight people I was sharing a room with. Some breed of noisy birds were talking like parrots at full volume in the neighbor's trees and they were starting to wake everyone else up. I ducked under the cherry tree branches and made my way to the side of the house where I found Dania and Tia Punita. Dania had her shower already, she was standing in sandals and a worn bathrobe with a surprisingly white towel wrapped around her head in stark contrast with her skin. We smiled good morning to each other and Tia Punita offered to heat some water for me on the makeshift stove so I could wash before we set out for the Dominican countryside.

As I waited for the water I looked around the back yard, there was a cage of fighting roosters and a lot of scattered trash. The bathroom, where I was to bathe, was not much more than a tattered wooden shack with a mud floor and a bucket inside. Dania stood near me and, as always, I felt comforted by her familiar presence, we had been friends for a long time now and had saved for three years to take this trip to her home. I was discovering a whole new person in her here in the Dominican Republic.

As my thoughts meandered something glittered above me and caught my attention. I looked up, quite curious, and saw a spiderweb. It was perfectly crafted and still jeweled in the night's

dew. A group of sun rays had broken through the leafy ceiling created by all the tall trees. These rays lit up the spiderweb brilliantly, behind it was a muted backdrop of green foliage lying in yet unbroken shadow. There in the dead center of this web an exquisite butterfly was caught as if petrified in mid-flight. The angle of those sunbeams struck its richly colored wings so they glowed supernaturally. It was a delicate stained glass piece of flaming red, burnt orange and warm yellow all thickly outlined in charcoal black. Dania must have spotted it at the same moment for when I looked to tell her she was gaping too, both of us intrigued by this unlikely sight. For a while we just stood there in the dirty back yard staring at the web. I looked at her expression and I knew she was just crying inside for that butterfly.

"Come on Dania, let the spider have its breakfast," I said.

She just gave me that look that says, "Try and stop me."

I was going to plea in favor of the obvious hard work of the spider versus the tiny life span of the butterfly. I figured by the time that spider gets its web rebuilt and catches a fly that old butterfly will already be dead, and a web that well-structured probably couldn't be duplicated. I began preparing my speech, but then she did something that froze me mid-thought: I actually couldn't believe it as I watched. She reached up to the web and slapped it with her palm like it was a Conga drum, shaking the beads of water and breaking up those rays of undisturbed sunlight and in so doing she set that fated butterfly free. It fluttered shakily and then sailed gently upward in slow circles.

Now I am not so old that I've forgotten the urgent distress of seeing a butterfly in this predicament. In former days I would have been vigilantly pulling down that "evil" spider's web. I am no stranger to the process of carefully plucking the strands of impossibly sticky string off a similarly terrified creature. I have stood tall in my four-foot frame to watch victoriously as the subject of my crusade flew off, albeit fairly miserably, with its wings impaired and its heart about to quit from being trapped in the lair of a predator and then picked at by a gigantic monster. This I had done, this I had seen, but what she had done was in a whole other

realm of butterfly rescue and I'll be darned if I ever would have come upon the idea in all my imaginative youth.

As I was still recovering from my shock and calculating the odds of this event, an obvious aberration of nature, I noticed something extraordinary: not a single thread on that web was torn. It shimmered, perfect still, as if we had never been there. A feeling that I had witnessed something magical came over me. I stared and stared at that web, I had forgotten the water the shower the dirty back yard the squawking birds and the long night of roach gazing. I had forgotten the knife wound under Tia Alphenia's eye, even the bed bugs. I truly don't know if it was because I was in awe or because I was ashamed, but I couldn't look at my best friend. I knew that moment with the butterfly would forever epitomize the difference between us and all the reasons I love her.

Finesse

I have a friend
Who paints cool blue ladies
And red rapes
And a woman of many colors
Who can't decide how she feels
All tied up in the chains
Of her chosen life.
She is a poet on canvas.

I am in that Joseph's coat
Bound by many colors
Yet not embraced by any one
I've been cool and blue
And angry as red & rape
Then swirled into yellows at sunrise.
I see myself
Everywhere she paints.

She knows me
And I envy her knowledge
Of my many colors.

All I have is black ink
With which to paint my life.

Pink Letters

The post office sat in the middle of a grove of cedars. No one in the little town was sure which was older, the trees or the building. The trees were thick and heavy and majestic, and Belinda had never known cedars could grow so tall until she and her husband David had moved to these hills four months ago. In damp, cool weather the cedars' bark cracked and peeled from the excess water, and when the wind blew, the tangy, sweet scent of cedar was in the air.

While they actually lived three miles by the road from town, Belinda had found she could walk straight down the hill through the woods behind their house about a half a mile and be at the post office in just a few minutes. She went down daily to check David's mail, not only because he was so busy getting his sculptures ready for the new show in Atlanta but also because she needed interaction with another adult occasionally. When David was working Belinda hardly saw him, and she missed their conversations. Getting ready for a show preoccupied David to a point where he was so tired he barely remembered to eat, and he usually fell into bed at two or three in the morning when Belinda was already fast asleep. She was glad he was becoming successful as a sculptor, but she missed him terribly when he was in this state. He had been working almost constantly for three months now.

Making her way now through the trees, she wished David would come with her and see the beautiful foliage. The damp leaves beneath her feet had somehow maintained a crunch that was both contradictory to the rainy weather and exhilarating, as if the air was warm and dry. The wind brought the scent of cedars up the hill. Belinda looked down the hill and saw the little post office nestled in its grove. The postmaster always had a cup of tea for her when the air was chilly; in summer it had been a glass of iced tea. Sometimes they ate a cookie or two while they chatted. Miss Green, who had been the postmaster for only two years, was a very kind young woman and knew everything about everybody in Cedar

Grove, which was the way of small towns. She usually didn't resort to gossip because she preferred to let private lives remain private. She and Belinda talked instead about what books they'd read lately, what new television shows were worth watching, and how David's art work was progressing. Miss Green was surprisingly knowledgeable about art. It turned out that she had gone to college in New York to study art herself but had quickly realized she didn't have the dedication to be a full-time artist or teacher. Miss Green's father had gotten her the job at the post office, and she claimed to enjoy the work far more than she did studying art. "You might be surprised at the variety of things we get here," she'd told Belinda once. "Mr. Beckwirth's son has a pen pal in Shanghai, China. I liked looking at the stamps and thinking about what it would be like to live in China." Belinda had nodded knowingly and secretly thought that she just might go crazy in Cedar Grove if all she had for stimulation was stamps from China. She'd never even have come here at all if she hadn't loved David so much. Shanghai, China seemed a good alternative at times.

She reached the post office door just as a gust of wind caught the upper branches of the tall cedars and shook water loose. It was like a sudden shower of rain, and Belinda felt several cold drops go down the neck of her sweater. She'd certainly welcome that hot tea today. She might even stay a little longer this morning, since she knew she'd be eating lunch by herself again. Maybe she'd go shopping for a while, she thought as she opened the door. Or not. The shops in town weren't exactly Saks Fifth Avenue. She was horribly bored in Cedar Grove.

Miss Green smiled at her brightly as she walked in. "Hello, Missus Majors," she said.

"Miss Green." Belinda opened their box with her key. "How are you?" She took out David's mail and sorted through it quickly. Nothing from Atlanta yet. David was still waiting to hear what the exact dates of his show would be. All they knew so far was that it would be in November. David was hoping for the week of Thanksgiving and the week after--they had given him fourteen days of floor space--but as yet they hadn't heard from the gallery

Belinda was getting nervous about it, but David just said that she knew how gallery curators were, a little spacy, and not to worry about it. She just couldn't help it. She wanted him to be a great success. She wanted to be on his arm when it happened. She wanted to affirm her faith in David to her family. She wanted to be able to say I told you so. Belinda smiled at Miss Green. The letter that would change their lives would come tomorrow, she felt certain.

"What'll it be today, Missus Majors?" Miss Green was asking. "Earl Grey or herbal?"

"Earl Grey, I think. I could use a shot of caffeine."

"Chilly out today." Miss Green poured tea from a china pot and handed Belinda the warm cup.

"Yes, I got showered by the trees just before I came in. You know, I never knew cedars got so big."

"Well, nobody remembers when they were planted, or who planted them. Old Mr. Jacobson wanted a biologist to test them once to see how old they are, but the rest of the town council wouldn't let him. The said God put the trees there." Miss Green smiled. "I agree with them, but it would be interesting to find out how old they really are." She sipped her tea. "Want a cookie? A friend of mine in Hawaii--a girl I went to school with--sent me some macadamia nuts and I baked them in."

"No, thanks. Tempting, though." Belinda put the mail on the counter and leaned on one elbow. "What are you doing for lunch? We could go to the diner."

"I'm going home. Daddy hasn't been feeling well and I want to go check on him."

"Oh. Maybe some other time."

"Sure." Miss Green put her tea cup down. "Besides, I'd think you'd want to be home for lunch today."

"Why is that?"

"Well, what with the letters and all. I mean, your husband sure is happy the day after he gets one of those letters. Must be quite an afternoon for you. I think it's really sweet and romantic, you all writing letters like that."

Belinda had no idea what Miss Green was talking about, but she didn't let on. "Yes, I guess it is." Then something occurred to her. "Did one come today?"

Miss Green beamed. "Sure did. Same pink envelope, same perfume on it. That perfume is really something. Where did you get it?"

"Oh, someplace back home. I can't even remember the name of it, I've had it so long." Though she spoke casually, Belinda's mind was turning somersaults. What was this woman talking about? She hadn't written David any letters! And if there was a perfumed letter, why hadn't she seen it? She'd just gone through all of his mail.

"Well, look at the bottle next time you write to him and let me know what it is. Smells expensive, but if it isn't too much, I'd like to have some of it. Might even get me a husband. Sure is sweet, the way you write to each other like that. Really romantic."

"Sure. Listen, I have to go. Got to pick up a few things from the store."

"I gotcha." Miss Green winked. "I won't tell Mr. Majors I'm onto you when he comes down to get the letter either. You know, I thought it was a little strange at first when he insisted in having that separate box just for your letters, but now I think it's really special. He sure is sweet. You're a lucky woman."

"I sure am." Belinda gathered up their mail and went out, her mind speeding through a thousand thoughts. She put the mail in her purse and walked up the street to the diner. She ordered a salad and sat down at a table where she could see the post office. The trees suddenly looked ominous, like a circle of druids guarding a secret. She realized she no longer cared how old they were. She ate without tasting anything, then ordered a cup of coffee. Her eyes never left the post office.

She was on her third cup of coffee and thinking how she'd have to leave Hattie a really big tip today when David came around the side of the post office. He wore a hunting jacket and plaid cap she didn't recognize, and his face was obscured, but Belinda knew it was her husband. He stepped inside briefly, and as he came out

he held a letter in his hand. She watched him put it to his nose for a moment, then tuck it into his jacket pocket and disappear back around the little building. She spilled coffee onto her lap.

She left money on the table and pulled her sweater tight around her as she went out into the chilly air. She walked home slowly, not seeing the cedars, the post office, or even the path. The damp crunch of the leaves under her feet reminded her of breaking glass. It was a long way home.

Belinda lay awake for a long time that night, and when David fell into bed, he went to sleep immediately. She lay in bed for a few minutes after she heard his breathing slow down and even out, then rose and crept out of the room.

David's studio was the largest room in the house. It had a bay window with a window seat made of cedar, and the seat was cluttered with chisels, hammers, and other tools Belinda didn't know the names for. Those old cedars which had grown in the woods near the house had been cut down to make the bench and the paneling for the room, too. The studio smelled vaguely of cedar and varnish mixed together, with a few unidentifiable odors mingled in. Belinda stood in the doorway for a minute, looking out the window at the moon. It looked lonely as it shone on David's sculptures. They were beautiful: tall, wooden men and women, some with wings, others with tails like dragons and horns on their heads. He had decided to do a mythology series this year, and standing among the statues now, Belinda felt them as a heavy presence, destructive and mysterious. The newest one, a woman figure taller than Belinda, was being carved slowly and surely from the stump of an old cedar that David had excavated himself. He had hired a man from town to help him move it into the house, and Belinda had not seen it since then. She respected David's work and didn't like to disturb him until a piece was done. He always covered them with an old sheet and made a big show of unveiling them for her. She had always thought of the unveiling as an apology of sorts, an act of contrition for his neglect of her during his frenzied work periods. She was beginning to wonder what else he was apologizing for.

Now she walked around the newest carving, examining her

husband's work. The body of the figure was still rough, but she could see that the hooves of a horse and the upper body of a woman were taking shape, and the beginnings of wings sprouted from its back. The face, however, seemed already complete. The eyes had pupils, lids, and even eyelashes, and the irises had been painted blue with streaks of pale pink for highlights. Belinda narrowed her own eyes at that; David had never painted any of his statues before. The woman-thing's face had high cheekbones and full lips, pursed slightly as if getting ready to kiss someone. These had also been painted pale pink. The statue's hair swept back from the forehead in waves, and for some reason Belinda thought of it as blonde. A strong smell of cedar emanated from the carving, and Belinda realized there was an aura of perfume about it, too. She put her hand over her mouth and turned to leave the room.

The glint of the moon off the key got her attention. Hanging on a small nail over the door, it reflected the moonlight eerily, almost as if lighted from within. On tiptoe, Belinda stretched toward the key but found she couldn't reach it. She could see it was a key for a post office box. There was nothing in the room she could stand on, either. David kept no chairs or stools in the studio. He said he always thought best on his feet and things to sit on only got in his way. She also realized David would notice if the key was missing tomorrow. Not wanting a direct confrontation until she had some evidence in hand, Belinda knew she'd have to think of something else. She went into the hall and closed the door.

Dawn found her sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, flipping through a magazine. She had made David's customary toast with the last of the jam--it was all he ever ate for breakfast--and he barely acknowledged her as he passed through on the way to his studio. She didn't mind this morning; she was in no mood for idle chat.

After she dressed, Belinda decided to go into town to get some more of the homemade jam they sold at the diner. The woman who owned the diner made it, and the jam was the best Belinda had ever had. Hattie always saved one jar of blackberry for Belinda under the counter, in case someone sold all the rest of them. She picked

up the market basket she always took to the grocery and stepped out into the morning sun.

The leaves were drying quickly now that the sun had come out and the wind was blowing briskly. That shattered glass quality remained in the leaves, along with the sounds of crumpling paper and rattling bones. She could smell the cedars. She walked quickly.

After the jam was tucked safely into her basket, Belinda made her way to the post office. Miss Green hadn't brewed tea yet, but Belinda told her she was just out early today and would have to skip the tea; she had things to do at home. When Miss Green inquired as to how the previous afternoon had been, Belinda shrugged and said, "Well, you know." Miss Green smiled and the slightest hint of a blush appeared in her cheeks.

"I just think it's so sweet and so romantic, the way you two write letters to each other."

"Yes," Belinda replied. "By any chance did the latest one come today?"

"Why, yes it did," Miss Green said. "Only there's no perfume on this one. Did you run out?"

"Actually, the bottle got broken. Made quite a stink around the house, let me tell you."

"I can imagine. Well, I promise not to say anything to Mr. Majors when he comes in today."

Belinda leaned on the counter. "Could I ask you a favor? You see, there's something I forgot to put in the letter--something very important. Secret rendezvous sort of stuff, you know, and it'll take all the fun out of the game if I have to tell it to David instead of writing it in the letter. Could you give me the letter back and just tell him there wasn't one today?"

"I really shouldn't--" Miss Green began.

"Please? I mean, you won't really be breaking any rules since it's my letter to begin with. And it would mean so much to me, it'd be so much more romantic, if I could just do it over and then mail it." She winked conspiratorially. "I'm driving into the city this afternoon to get some more perfume. It's not the same without it."

"Well . . . all right. Since it is from Mr. Major's wife, and you

get his mail every day anyway, I guess it'll be okay." Miss Green disappeared for a moment behind the rows of small metal boxes and returned with a pink envelope in her hand. "If you really need a second chance at doing something right, then you should get it. I always say, especially when it comes to love." She laid the letter on the counter and pushed it with her fingertips toward Belinda, as if she were somehow violating their privacy by touching it.

"Oh, thank you," Belinda said. "You have no idea what this means to me. Now remember, it's our little secret. When David comes in today, you haven't seen any pink letters at all."

"Gotcha. My lips are sealed." Miss Green made the childish motion of a key locking her lips, then smiled. "See you tomorrow."

"Sure. And thanks again."

Belinda's fingers twitched and trembled all the way up the hill. She paid no attention to the wind or the sound of the leaves under her feet or the smell of the cedars. When she got back to the house, she put the basket on the porch and carefully opened the letter. There was no return address on the outside, but inside the pink envelope was a card with a pale pink rose on it. The card shook in Belinda's hand as she opened it and read:

My Dearest Dave,

I can barely wait until we go to Atlanta. Have you thought how to keep your wife away yet? I am simply dying from the suspense of wondering what my portrait will look like. I know you've told me that it will be unlike any other thing you've ever sculpted before, but please give me another hint! Waiting to see it is almost as hard as waiting to hold you again.

Sweetheart, you may have noticed from this letter that I've run out of that wonderful perfume. Would you be a darling and send me some more? You know I can't afford it on my own. You are so good to me. Oh, and I'll be expecting my best present of all in Atlanta! (I wish it was a divorce from

your wife, you know, but the portrait will do for now.)

All my love, Dee

A tear splattered on the card, unexpected, like the reserved rain that had fallen out of the cedars and made her cold. She thought suddenly of the cedar shavings in the bucket beside the fireplace. She had been sweeping them up out of the studio and saving them so she could have the scent throughout the house. She thought of David's jam in the basket. She thought about how her family had been right about him all along. She wondered if she would ever be able to go to China. She wondered if a jar of jam in a fire got hot enough, would it explode? She thought about the wooden pink lips in the studio behind her. She wondered if pink paper was made from cedar wood. She thought about the pink letter in her shaking hand. She thought about moonlight and keys and leaves that sounded like shattering glass. She shivered. It was awfully chilly out here. She thought she'd go in and build a fire.

Linda Watkins Price

Cracking Shells

They were sitting on the front porch shelling peas. Mam worked quietly, staring off into the space just over Laura's shoulder, her fingers thickened by age yet still strong and agile. Laura had to watch her own hands while she cracked the dry hulls. She'd tried to do it by feel, the way her mother-in-law did, but she hardly ever visited this time of year and hadn't done this for a long time; as a result, she lacked confidence in her ability to think about what her hands were doing and what was on her mind at the same time. Mam was somewhere in the past. Laura knew, and she didn't want to disturb her by asking for further instruction. So she watched Mam's long, thin hands and her own small ones and tried to make their movements identical.

Though Mam was a slight woman, her old wicker chair squeaked and groaned as she leaned over to gather another rustling handful of pea pods from the bucket. The pods had been drying for over two weeks and were finally brittle enough to crack easily. Laura paused for a moment, watching Mam. The old woman deposited the pods into her apron--Mam hadn't understood why Laura wouldn't wear one, "You'll git them crumbs all down in your folds," she'd say--then went to work on them, squeezing a pod between forefinger and thumb, opening it up with those same two fingers, then running her thumb down the inside of the pod to send the peas down into the metal bowl. Ping, plunk, into the steel bowl. Ping-ping-ping-plunk-ping. Crack another. All the while, Mam's eyes never left the past. *There was that time Pappy went to town and taken my three brothers but not me. He went to buy an extra bushel of peas to make sure Mammy had enough to make soup with over the winter, went with his heavy denim coat on, and I didn't have no coat since I was a girl and I didn't work outside in the winter. I was mad and so I taken up some rocks and threw them at the car and they pinged off the side and Pappy whipped me for that, said girls don't act like boys and you specially don't throw things at your Pappy's car, now you just git up on that*

porch and set there until I get back with them peas, and you 's going to shell ever one of em yourself, just for that rock throwin bit. Wonder this family don 't starve to death with all you lazy women round here. Well, she 'd shelled plenty of peas since then, and nobody Mam knew had starved to death yet.

Laura looked around her, seeing the same things she 'd seen in the sixteen years she 'd been married to Carl. The porch was still the same, but it seemed to Laura that something was missing. *My father-in-law Jeff always sat in his old armchair on the porch, waving at everyone who passed on the street. Every time we came to visit he insisted on shaking my hand. "How're you doin'?" and going on without waiting for an answer to ruffle the kids' hair. "That's ole number two," Jeff would say as he rubbed little Jeffrey's head. "Maybe naming him Jeffrey II wasn't such a good idea," Carl would grumble, but we never did give up that game while his father was still alive, and when we came here after the funeral Jeffrey sat in the chair and Mam just looked at the boy and burst into tears.* That was it. The chair was gone now, the corner of the porch empty. Laura didn't know when or how, and she didn't ask. Instead, pinging the last of her peas into the bowl, she leaned back in the battered kitchen chair she 'd dragged out to the porch and rubbed her neck. "Kind of hard on the back, this job," she commented, but Mam seemed not to hear her. "I think I'll go get some lemonade. Would you like some?" Mam gave the briefest of head shakes, and her lips never moved. "All right then, I'll be right back." Laura stood and stretched her legs, then went into the house.

Entering the kitchen, Laura marveled that a house could stay exactly the same for so long. The collection of glass vases along the tops of the cupboards was the same as ever (maybe a little dustier now that Mam couldn't climb the stepladder any more), the old lace tablecloth still on the table, the wrought iron baker's rack still full of old iron pots and pans in the corner by the refrigerator. "This has always been Mam's kitchen," Carl said the day he took me home to meet his parents. "Dad don't do anything at all in here except eat. See this plant here? I gave her that when I was in

the eighth grade. How she 's kept it alive I don't know. Don't know how she kept all eight of us alive, for that matter. Some women just know how to handle life. Say, Laura, why don't you come over and help her dust that crystal up there sometime? She really ought to get rid of it but she never will since some of it she got when her Mammy passed on and the rest of it was about the only thing Dad ever gave her that was ever worth a half-dollar." "But these antiques on the baker's rack," I said, and Carl laughed me. "Those aren't antiques, those are her pots and pans. Whenever anybody dies, she drags those things out and uses every one of em. Cooks two or three days, sometimes. Come on, let's get some lemonade and go out on the porch. My brothers 'll be home soon and I want em to see my good-lookin woman."

She made two glasses of lemonade even though Mam had said she didn't want one and made her way back to the front door. Mam kept the heavy door open in the fall to air the rooms out, and Laura stood at the screen and watched the old woman. The lifting, the cracking, the running of the thumb up the pod, ping plunk ping into the old steel bowl. It was the biggest bowl Laura had ever seen, so big that Mam had to spread her feet to sit over it and wrap her arms around it to carry it. The edges had been worn shiny by the touching of finger over the years: it had belonged to Mam's mother and grandmother before her. Laura sometimes felt awed by this bowl that was older than she was. She had nothing in her own family that had endured so long.

Opening the door with her elbow, she went back out onto the porch and set the glasses down on the little round table beside Mam's chair. "Thanky," Mam said. "I reckon I did want it after all." She wrapped her fingers around the glass, leaving smudges of dirt from the pea pods, and took a long drink. "Nothin in the world better'n cold lemonade when a body's workin, you know it?"

"You are right about that," Laura said. She rested her head on the back of the chair. "Who'd have thought sitting down all day would make you so tired."

"Jeff never understood it either," Mam stood up and went to the edge of the porch to shake the crumbs out of her apron. "He

always thought I had it pretty easy, but men never do know what it's like, do they? Even Carl, when he knew how hard I worked, saw me doing it every blessed day, still expects you to be done with the work and lookin' purty when he gets home, don't he?"

Laura closed her eyes. "Something like that." Suddenly she opened her eyes again and looked at Mam. The old woman stood at the edge of the porch, one hand resting on the wrought iron ribbons curling around the frame of the stairs. "Did you always love Jeff?"

"Well, we had our troubles, everybody does, but now that he's gone . . ." *I sat at the kitchen table ringing my hands. The big steel bowl sat on the table full of shelled popcorn. Jeff shelled the popcorn just last night, and now he is gone. Impossible, I said to myself, last night the bowl was right there at the foot of his chair and his thick thumbs went round the cobs, and the corn went ping-plunk-ping into the bowl. He is not lying dead in the hospital.* "Yes, I can say that I always loved him. What about you? You always loved Carl?"

"I honestly don't know." Laura stood and put her hands in her pockets, came to stand beside Mam. "Lately we seem not to love each other at all."

Mam's mouth made a smiling motion, but her lips were tight. "Now, I ain't going to make any excuses for him, but I reckon a man's got a lot on his mind with a wife and three kids to take care of." She reached up and took the wedding band that hung around her neck in her hand. *I watched the man reach for Jeff's hand to remove the ring and said, "Wait. I want to do it." Slowly taking the dry, cold, unfeeling hand in my own, my heart shrinking to an old pea in my chest. Sliding the ring backward for the first time, the last time. Fifty-two years and this was the first time it had ever been removed. Jeff used to joke that it had grown into his finger and couldn't be removed. I don't even know why I wanted it, why I didn't want that man to touch Jeff. It wasn't even Jeff any more, but the ring was the part of him I'd had. It was worn shiny from wear, and very thin in places. It was beautiful.* "You ain't one of them women thinks that the honeymoon lasts forever, are you?" she asked Laura now, letting the ring go to thump against

her heart. She winced. "I taken a few lumps now and again with Jeff, but I loved him."

Laura stepped off the porch and began to walk around the small yard. Eight kids and this is all the space they had, she mused. I've only got three, and an eleven room house on four acres isn't big enough for Carl. I guess I know why. She turned back toward Mam. "Did Jeff ever get cold, stop talking to you?"

Mam shrugged. "It's just in a man to be that way sometimes, I guess. Jeff--" *We fought. He hadn't come home until two in the morning and I was furious. He was so drunk he didn't even realize he was home. When I asked what the problem was, Jeff just told me it was none of my damn business, and did he have any whiskey in the house. I pulled the bottle out from under the sink and threw it at him. "If your whiskey's more important than telling me what's going on, then welcome to it!" I screamed. "Woman done come from hell to torment me," Jeff said, picking up the bottle. He shifted it into his other hand and the first hand came away wet. "You cracked it, you crazy witch!" Seeming to lose his mind then, picking up the bowl with the dry peas that had taken me six hours to shell, that had taken me months to grow because I knew if I didn't we'd never have enough food for the winter because Jeff hadn't had any work since spring, and he flung the bowl across the kitchen at me and all I could do was stare at him as peas flew everywhere and the bowl struck my chest and then clattered to the floor. The sleepy child came to the door and I threw out a hand, warning him back, hoping he'd go back to bed before Jeff decided it was none of our son's damn business either and started in on him.* "Jeff had more to carry than any man ought to have sometimes. He did the best he could, and when things was bad, I guess he just decided talking about it weren't going to do no good nor harm. He got better in the later years, though. I think the kids being gone eased his mind some, knowing they could take care of themselves now." She came down the first step, put her hand in the pocket of her house dress. "I think he had some peace before he died." Looking out over the yard, Mam sighed. "I just wish I had some now. You see those mums

there? I taken them home from the funeral home. Wished now I didn't, but there they are. Every day they remind me of the hardest thing I ever had to do, putting that man in the ground, and I don't know why I let Carl and David plant them out here. For the life of me, I just don't know."

Laura knew. Mam was holding on. It was all she had, those mums, and the thin ring that had been skin-polished for fifty-two years. Most of the kids lived far away and hardly ever came to visit. She wondered if her kids would be like that one day, and felt a little shiver run down her back. Laura was afraid of getting old, especially now that things were the way they were. "Mam--" but she couldn't finish. Couldn't tell her right now why she came to visit this of all days. Couldn't tell her that pretty soon she might not be coming at all any more, that Carl would have to bring the kids to visit while they were visiting him.

Mam stooped over to smell the mums. *The scent of all those flowers together was too heavy to bear, especially the mums, the only flowers Pappy ever claimed to like. Nice flowers, someone remarked behind me, but my eyes couldn't even see them, too swollen even to see the body in the casket, too full of shame at thinking well it was over, it was a relief to be facing it at last and not having to wonder when it would be, Pappy had been so old and sick and I didn't understand why Mammy was so upset to lose the brute or why I was crying so much. I chug to Jeff and I was glad Pappy's small, cold pea-green eyes were closed, now they couldn't look at me in disapproval any more. Jeff wasn't like him at all, he kept holding me up and just letting me cry, never telling me things would be all right and to hush, the way Pappy did when his mama died. Pappy didn't understand grief, thought it was a waste of time. But Jeff understood and he was going to marry me and move to the big city where a man could get rich, just as soon as we saved some money. I hadn't told him yet that I was pregnant. "They did take to this ground good, didn't they? I bet they'll double their size by next fall. Funny, here I am, trying to get em to grow--I guess I just feel beholden to all them people that sent mums for Jeff, but I never did like em myself."*

"Me either," Laura said. She leaned over and brushed the petals with her hands. They were soft as baby down but made her think of death. Carl had planted dozens of them in front of the house when his father died, and when Laura's mother had been killed in the accident, her last remaining family member, she had flatly refused to accept any. *"Take them back and replace them with carnations." I told the florists who came to deliver. "Roses, lillies, anything. Just no mums." "But, madam," one protested, and I looked at him with eyes rimmed red and black and dared him to go further. He hadn't. Then I turned to see my mother's companion with a pot of them in his hands, the pot wrapped in purple foil and the mums themselves obscenely pale and yellow with purple streaks when my mother loved red, setting them down right in front of the casket and I kicked them over in plain view of everybody, the clumps of dirt scattering everywhere and ping-pong off the brass urn full of red and white carnations that Carl and I sent. Bradley, whom I had never called stepfather, grabbing my arm, "Laura, what do you think you are doing? This is your mother's funeral, for God's sake." "Exactly," I said, "my mother."*

"Why do we remember so clearly?" she asked Mam now. "Why is it so easy to remember every bad thing that's ever happened to us and not the good ones?"

Mam smiled a real smile at her now. "Oh, child, because those are the times we learn the most."

Laura stared at her, astonished, and Mam laughed out loud. "See? This old country woman ain't as dumb as you might've thought. Come over here." She took Laura's arm and led her back to her chair on the porch. "If'n we don't get shucking, we ain't never going to get these peas done." She lowered herself into the wicker chair against its protests and the pods rattled as she dropped them into her apron. Crack, split, thumb, ping ping plunk plunk ping. Laura followed her example, watching the peas bounce off the sides of the bowl. *Carl came home at two in the morning, drunk. I could smell perfume mixed with the whiskey and saw the lipstick he had tried to wipe off. At least he had been sober*

enough to realize denying anything was useless, so he had simply challenged me, "So what are you going to do about it, then?" I could not think of a thing to say. Instead I took my wedding ring and flung it at him. Carl swatted it with a hand, laughing at my anger, and it sailed across the room with the force of his hand and struck the brass corner lamp, ping! It might still be there, for all I knew, I hadn't bothered to look for it since it was no longer a thing of value. She looked at the ring hanging around Mam's neck, at its mate still on the old woman's finger. Still she said nothing. She didn't want to hurt Mam, didn't want her to think any of it was her fault. She cracked another pod, but then could no longer bear to listen to the peas pinging against the bowl. That sound was making her think too much. She dropped the rest of her pods back into the bucket.

"So, when are you leaving him and where are you going?" Mam asked quietly. "You will still come to see me, won't you?" The old hands never stopped. Ping plunk ping ping.

"Oh, Mam, I'm sorry."

"Well, it's out of my hands. I don't want to know who she is or how it happened. Just because he's my son doesn't mean he's a good man, and I'm sorry too." Ping ping plunk. She finished the last pod in her apron and stood up, holding out her arms over the bowl.

Laura, reaching out for the old, thin hands, began to cry. "I just didn't know how to tell you."

Mam held her, smelling Laura's cologne. It was gardenia. *Jeff came home with his shirttail out and smelling of perfume and whiskey. "All right then," I said, "just don't get her pregnant."* "What are you talking about, woman? I ain't done nothing wrong. We was just dancing," Jeff growled. "Just dancing down at the bar in the back room." *Huh, I thought, dancing on your backs. "Just don't get her pregnant," I said. It was the only thing I could think of to say. From that moment on I didn't trust him, not until years later when he finally put down the bottle and stopped going to the bar and no children had shown up at the door to claim him. I don't really know why I even stayed, except*

maybe that I had nowhere to go and with eight children, but in the end I was glad I did, for he came to love me again, and I loved him and more important, trusted him again, and with the children grown and gone we were all right, even with our past troubles. But that kind of weakness and acceptance wasn't in Laura, and Mam was a little envious of her

"We all make choices in life, Laura," she told her daughter-in-law now. "I made mine and you made yours. You'll see, it'll all work out in the end. Just don't abandon me because my son is like his father."

Laura pulled back and looked at Mam with wide eyes.

"You--"

"We all make choices, child," Mam said. "Some are easier to live with--or without--than others." She released Laura and sat down. "Now, are you going to help me shell these peas or not?" Laura nodded numbly. Mam extended her hand in an invitation to sit. "Are you sure you don't want an apron? I hate to see you with crumbs in your folds." She smiled and went back to work. Ping ping plunk.

Laura looked at her mother-in-law. Mam's thick, strong fingers were steadily cracking, splitting, running the pea pods. The steady ping plunk ping would continue bouncing off the bowl until the bucket was empty and night had fallen.

My love is like a rock--

My love is like a rock--
raw edges worn down,
polished smooth,
spent,
in many rounds of the tumbler.
Once-wide divides--
crevices whose precipice
have been reduced.
Now slim creases
and low indentions
my thumb glides over--
a constant rubbing motion on
this worry-stone in my palm.

Glitter Angel

if i walked out dripping
gray skin, blue lips
poodle skirt and bobby socks
calling myself SUZI Q
would you question your sanity
huh, JOHNNY ANGEL?
would i kiss you crazy?
sing me asleep in my
bitter sweet dreams
could you please rape me on red shag?
i know it will offend you . . .
i won't apologize
smother me with your prophecies
and insight which i have yet
to master in my dumbnumbness
Johnny? would you spread me eagle
like peanut butter on virgin white bread
and pin my arms back
and tickle me to life?
would you peel my sour skin like
a rotten orange and
reveal the bloody sweet
nectar pulp inside?
could my hair wash clean
red like kool-ade or wine or blood
or all three?
would you could you huh
kool kat skat ta-ta-tat?
would you wrap my naked lifeless body
in strands of colorful exx-masse lights
and rest a star crown upon my beautiful head
(I wish you would crown me.

come adorn me, baby)
would i blink or chime in
rhythmically "yessir" and "luyuh2shug"
and nail me to the scarecrow
you so cleverly named jesus
wrapped in a red lace curtain and silver tinsel
buried in lily pad water
drown me, libertine barracuda
i love my pale blue eyes
and the pink and white map that
glows bright against tawny white skin
i am the epitome of beauty and winter
and you wish like hell you were me
but you're not
I don't love you
my name **IS** suzi q
and I will end you

The Nature of Man

"Good morning. This is your wakeup call."
Catherine started from the cot. Disoriented, she swerved her
gaze around the sparse room and finally rested it on the man who
had woke her.

"What are you in for?" he asked almost childishly.

She didn't answer immediately as she continued to survey her
surroundings. Cold steel walls reflected a psychotic and distorted
image back to her. Two other men sat on similar cots across the
room from her, and far above their heads a single window provided
their only light.

"What did you do?" the man standing above her pressed.

Catherine ran a nervous hand through her crop of hair. "I ...
uh," she began an uneasy laugh, "I don't remember."

"None of us do. How's that for a screwed-up justice system?
They put you in to dwell on the error of your ways, and you don't
even know what the errors are."

She muttered a distracted acknowledgment.

"That's Peter over on your right and George on your left. I'm
Alex." He sounded a little too eager for conversation.

"Catherine," she said as she rose and began feeling along the
walls for a door.

"It won't do you any good. I tried it already," George told her.

Alex nodded. "Yeah, and he's been in longer than any of us."

Catherine ignored them and stubbornly kept feeling.

Alex overlooked her obstinance and continued. "You know,
it's good to have somebody new. We've all run out of things to talk
about."

"We know everything about each other," George added.

Peter huffed sarcastically. "'Cept what we did."

"Yeah."

Catherine abandoned her fruitless search with a frustrated sigh
and sat down on her cot. The window naturally attracted her eyes

again. "Any of you ever seen what's out there?"

The three men gathered around her on the floor like children before their teacher. "We tried once," Peter offered.

"We stacked ourselves on each other's shoulders--"

"But the higher we got, the window just seemed farther away," Alex finished the sentence.

"So now, we just wait for the sun to shine through in here and pretend we're outside," George explained further.

"And what do you do for fun?" she asked.

"Fun?" Peter said it as if an alien word had been spoken.

"Alex used to sing to us," George put in quickly. "He could sing really well."

"What do you sing, Alex?"

Embarrassed, he looked down to play with his thumbnail. "Nothing much anymore. I used to sing gospel songs."

"Let's hear something."

"Well, I haven't in a long time--"

"Come on," Peter urged.

"Just a little something," Catherine added.

Alex reluctantly cleared his throat. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound/ That saved a wretch like me." He faltered, grossly out of key. "I . . . uh . . . can't remember the rest of it." He blushed.

Catherine smiled supportively. "It's okay."

A long moment of silence passed among them. Catherine broke it hesitantly. "So you don't have any idea why you're in here?"

Alex looked up, glad to have the subject changed. "No. We woke up in here, just like you did. Except we were a lot more scared at first. You must have some nerve."

For a moment, she didn't know what to say. "Just trying to make the best of a bad situation."

George piped in. "Yeah, you're a lot cooler than any of us were. Alex shouted for two days for them to let him out. Peter didn't talk at all for a month."

"Tell her about you," Peter laughed.

George followed Alex's example of embarrassment by staring

at his hands. "I just kinda talked to myself 'cause I was alone, you know."

"Then when that didn't help, he cried all the time. Isn't that right, Alex?"

"He was crying when I got here."

"Shut up!" George grew redder every second.

"I heard everybody takes it differently," Catherine attempted to hush them.

"That's for sure," George said quietly, sensing her coming to his defense.

"Do you remember what it's like outside?" she continued quizzing them.

"A little. Just the sky and grass, mostly. People and places are a little fuzzy," Alex took the lead.

"Do you remember stuff like that?" Peter asked anxiously. She seemed a bit wary. "Some."

"Tell us," George pressed.

"No. I don't want to destroy any visions you might have."

"Come on. Things can't be all that bad," Alex cajoled.

"Well, they're not all that good."

Peter joined in the insistence. "What are the people like? Have they changed much?"

"Let's not get into it."

"Please," all three sounded together. Catherine chuckled. They sounded for all the world like a trio of eight-year-olds.

She relented. "People are the same as they've always been."

Alex laughed. "Now, that's a philosophical answer. It hems on the very nature of mankind."

"I didn't mean it to be."

"Well it was. 'People are the same as they've always been.' Is that basically good or bad?"

"That's something we're all trying to figure out," she answered.

"Sometimes I wonder if we're in here as subjects in some experiment; you know, a government study or something. 'The Effects of Social Isolation on Man.'" George spread his hands in

front of him, visualizing the title.

"There he goes off on his conspiracy theories. You'd think the creation of the universe was a conspiracy, to hear him talk." Alex spoke to her as though to a confidant.

George turned the joke into a pulpit. "Creation myths in nearly all world cultures might only be a means of perpetuating ancient man's collective obsession with male authority. Who do you think wrote the Bible? Does God only speak through men? Give me a break."

Alex rolled his eyes to Catherine. "Theology's always fun when an atheist's involved."

Thirsty for debate, George raised his voice. "Well, what god is spiteful enough to leave us in here? Answer that, good Reverend."

"You're boring her," Peter intervened.

"No, not at all. I'm fascinated," she said, seemingly sardonic.

Again, silence pervaded the room. Alex rose from the floor and sat sullenly on his own cot. "Even if they were studying us, it's no different than any other situation. Everybody examines everybody else; it's a basic fact."

"Basic facts don't count for much when you're alone. When you can't remember anything about your life except your name," George retorted. "Example: Catherine, you ever killed anybody?"

Taken aback, she frowned at the question. "No. I mean, I don't think so."

"You see? It's a basic fact that people generally know if they've taken another's life. But here, basic's been thrown out that window."

"Don't get so worked up," Alex finally said in appeasement.

"You know what would be funny?" Peter entered the discussion. "What if we were all figments of somebody's imagination? What if words are being written on a page for us to say right now as we speak?"

"And if one of our characters were erased, none of the rest would know the difference. He would have never existed for us," George continued.

"Somebody could have been scratched out of our lives just . . .

now."

Catherine laughed and shook her head at Peter. "Is this what you do all day? Come up with crazy philosophical debates?"

"What else is there to do?" Alex observed as the other two sat abashed.

"If we didn't think up grandiose discussions, we'd pretty much become animals," George added. "I mean, we just eat, sleep, defecate . . . talk about our existence, and wait for the sun to make a puddle here on the floor so we can stand in it."

"Speaking of the sun, it's starting to come through. Look up there on the wall." Alex motioned to the beam above Catherine's head.

The other two men sat in preparation. "Just a few more minutes," Peter said.

Catherine shook her head again. "It is a big deal to you."

"The biggest," Alex explained, his eyes following the beam down the wall. "We weren't meant to be cooped up inside like this."

"What were you meant to do?" Catherine asked with a hint of cunning.

"How should I know?" he asked distractedly.

George eyed her suspiciously. "You ask a lot of questions."

"How else am I going to learn?" she replied nervously.

"No, it's more than that. You want to know who we are, but you haven't told us a thing about yourself. It's like you're studying us. Who are you?"

Alex glared derisively at him. "Get off it, George--"

"No, I'll answer him. I'm a government scientist assigned to gain information on subjects we created and programmed. I'm seeing if you're capable of functioning properly in confinement. You just about hit it on the nose a while ago--'Effects of Isolation and Desocialization on Creations A-3152, A-2280, and A-1245.' Those are model numbers, by the way, of which you are the prototypes."

They stared at her a dumbfounded moment until Alex burst out with a roar of laughter. "That was great."

"Yeah, you had us going."

"I had me going," she added.

"I don't think it's funny. You never know when they could send in somebody to study us," George sulked.

"Shut up, A-1245," Alex taunted.

"Don't tell me to shut up. This is the most talking I've done in forever."

Catherine held up her hands as peacemaker. "Hey, hey. I'm sorry I said it. Nobody's coming in here to observe us. They could just as easily put cameras on us to watch everything we do. I guess we gave them something to talk about today, huh. The nature of man is pretty heavy material for a prison cell conversation."

"All this talk kinda makes you wonder why they put you in with three guys." He rocked back and forth on his feet.

Alex watched the action in amusement. "Probably to see how we'd react to her. To see if the 'Social Isolation of Man' has an effect on the libido."

"You joke, but that could very well be it."

Peter's attention had remained on the spot of light moving down the wall, which was now near the floor. "It's almost time."

"Who's turn is it, today?" Alex asked no one in particular.

"Mine," George said quietly.

"You went yesterday," Peter complained.

"It was cloudy yesterday, so today is my turn."

"It doesn't work like that," Alex argued threateningly.

"You mean I gotta wait two days after this--"

"Three days with her," Peter interjected.

"Three days when I didn't get a chance in the sun to begin with?"

"So, what, we should wait extra days so you won't have to?" Alex yelled.

"It's on the floor," Peter warned.

George waved the discussion off. "I'm going."

"It's not your turn!" Alex pushed him out of the puddle of light, and was in turn shoved by Peter. The free-for-all ensued as Catherine pressed her finger to her ear.

"Open the door," she said in disgust. A panel in the wall slid up silently and unnoticed by the combatants, and went back down after Catherine had stepped through it.

Finally, Peter caught a glance at her cot through the brawl. "Hey, look," he yelled above the others. They stopped abruptly to gape at her absence. "I . . . guess they didn't like her character."

The Cane Patch

Sharon Payton

"Henry, get your face outta that winda. If we don't get home before Daddy, he'll whip us, sure." Danny walked out of Calhoun's Mercantile with a pound of flour under one arm and his customary stack of books under the other. I didn't see him until I felt his shoe connect with my rear, and I spun away from the boots in the window with my fists clenched. Not that I'd ever actually think of hitting Danny. First, he was relatively good to me, for a brother. Second, and most importantly, he was almost twice my age and big enough to put the fear of God in 'most every boy from the 10th grade on down.

"I said, let's--"

His last word was drowned by the wild neighing and kicking of the horse at the hitching post. The cause of his near heart attack soon became apparent. Too erratic to be an act of God, the cloud of dust speeding down the road could only be Zeke Calhoun and his brother Richie in their father's new Pierce Arrow.

Mama used to say every soul God ever made has a purpose on this earth, but I must admit, I still don't understand his reasoning in creating Zeke and Richie Calhoun. Zeke was bigger and slower than any man has a right to be, but Richie had enough brains for both of them. He was a year or so older than me, but with a lean, spindly look that made him look smaller. I guess his size is what caused him to act so big. I never bought it, though.

"Don't say nothin', Henry," Danny told me as they drove up. "We don't have time."

"Hey, Henry, whatcha doin'?" Richie asked as he jumped out of the car.

"Goin' home," I answered coldly.

"Looks like to me like you're doin' a little winda shoppin'. You like them boots?"

"I reckon they're awright."

Richie stepped up on the sidewalk, and Zeke followed. "Look a whole lot like your Daddy's, don't they?"

"I guess they do, a little bit."
"Scuse us, Richie, but we gotta get home." Danny put his hand on my neck and turned me around toward the road.
"Too bad you'll never have 'em," Richie called after us.
"You'll be lucky to get Danny's old uns. 'Cause your Daddy's nothin' but a shiftless old farmer, who can't even farm his own land."

I know I shouldn't have turned back towards Richie. Daddy hated fighting, and I would have a whipping in store later that night, but I wasn't going to allow that little grass snake to hiss his tongue about my Daddy. I ran up to him and glared.

"What did you say?"

"I said--"

I made sure his mouth was wide open when I knocked him into the pile of horse dung on the ground. Zeke didn't think to retaliate for his younger brother, but just stood there laughing. I will say this for the dumb ox; he knew when something was funny.

Danny stifled a grin as he pulled me away from the store. "Are you outta your mind? You can't just knock somebody down, especially in front of his father's store!"

"How can you expect me to have stood there and took that off him? Just 'cause his Daddy owns 'most everything for twenty miles--"

"That's exactly why you have to take it."

We were both silent the rest of the way home. But as I kicked ruefully at the Alabama clay beneath me bare feet, I vowed I'd find a way to get those boots, if for no other reason than to spite Richie Calhoun.

The next day was the last of the spring term, so after school, I stopped into Calhoun's Mercantile for the traditional first cane fishing pole of the summer . . . and to carry out Dad's stern instructions.

"Well, young Mr. McBrand, what can I do for you?" Mr. Calhoun asked from behind the counter.

"Daddy said I should apologize for what I did to Richie yesterday afternoon, so," I took a deep breath and swallowed, "I'm

sorry."

Mr. Calhoun tried to keep a straight face. "Well, he probably had it comin'."

My eyes widened.

"Is there anythin' else, Henry?"

"Yes sir. I'd like a fishin' pole, please."

"You're in luck; this is the last one," he said as he pulled the piece of cane out of a barrel.

"The last one?"

"These things have been sellin' faster than I thought they would. I may have to cut into my own crop if I don't get some more in soon."

"I know where a patch is, and I don't think anybody owns it."

Mr. Calhoun thought a moment. "Henry, I'll give you a nickel a bundle if you cut it and bring it in."

"I'll have to ask Daddy," I said excitedly.

"You do that, and if he says it's okay, I'll see you tomorrow mornin'."

That night I broached the subject head on.

"Daddy, can I ask you somethin'?" I started as we settled around the radio after dinner.

"Make it quick, son; President Roosevelt's fixin' to speak."

"Mr. Calhoun's asked me to cut some cane for him. He'll pay five cents a bundle."

Daddy looked over to Mama in her rocking chair. She pressed her lips and raised her eyebrows--that "It's up to you" look.

"Do you think you can work for him and me both?" Daddy asked.

"Yes sir. I'll wake up extra early, go cut the cane, and have it sold 'fore you're ready to go to the fields."

"What if you start slackin' off in your chores?"

"Then I'll stop cuttin' cane. I know I can do this, Daddy."

He paused a minute, then sighed and smiled at me. "All right. We'll try it."

I was up well before dawn the next morning, running with my hatchet toward my cane patch in the woods across from the school

house. I cut from the middle and left the outer edge alone so no one would know what I was doing and take up a hatchet to my newfound wealth.

This technique worked for two months, then all that was left of the patch was the virgin edge. This did not concern me, however, in that I had already accomplished my goal. I wore the boots I'd wanted on the first day of school and quite literally rubbed them in Richie's face.

Not long after, while I was cleaning the board after school for pushing Richie into an uncovered outhouse pit, I saw Mr. Calhoun and Zeke walk into the woods across from the school house with a couple of hatchets in their hands. I waited at the classroom window for several minutes, my stomach sinking a little more each second as I realized where they were headed.

Mr. Calhoun finally emerged with a dumbfounded look on his face. He took off his hat and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. In doing so he glanced toward the school house and me. He threw the hat down on the ground, huffed a minute, then shook his head and laughed at having paid five cents a bundle for his own cane.

Few tables bear the
 Lives of those long since
 Past conspicuous display,
 And none can be found here.
 Still, I wonder who
 Belonged to that Hamlet with
 Yellowed leaves stubbornly stuck
 To a musty spine or that
 Platinum band newly polished
 In hopes of recapturing moon glow.
 He was probably some graduate
 Eager to leave Shakespeare
 In the attic
 On his way to
 Wall Street Fortune.
 She was probably some wife
 Eager to sleep through
 Moonlit hours before rousing to
 Boxed lunches and minimum wage.
 I buy nothing at this
 Antique Sale.

And Your Fifth Grade Teacher Was Named What?

"Which floor?" a friendly stranger asked as I entered the elevator of the office building, waiting for both of the doors to shut. "Fourteen, please." I say, accepting his kind gesture. And before I can even thank the man, he does it: that dreaded comment just comes rolling out, sending an unrelated-to-the-outdoors chill up the middle of my back. "Pretty brisk outside, hey? Last night, the weather man said Ole Man Winter's gonna make a comeback this month. Boy, am I ready for spring!" AHHHHHHHHH!

Several years ago, I worked for a law firm on the fourteenth floor of a high-rise in downtown Lexington, Kentucky. When I wasn't imprisoned within my receptionist box answering the telephone--eleven lines at once--I was a runner which meant catering to forty busy attorneys' needs: color copies from Kinkos, motions filed by 4:00 p.m. ("It's 3:59 . . . Don't be late!"), the judge's signature on the top of page three, faxes that should have been sent five minutes ago, and important duties like packing the Sweet-and-Low packages into those little baskets that sat by the coffee machines in every corner as well as remembering to get lemon-filled doughnuts because the cream-filled pastries have too much fat.

On all my errands to the courthouse and the bakery, I shared elevator rides for fourteen floors with a multitude of busy people: both strangers and familiar faces. I learned quickly that a pleasant smile was not enough to withstand 32.7 seconds of elevator lifting or descending time. What most elevator riders desire in order to feel completely content sharing a small space with a stranger is small talk. Small talk is a way of reaching out to strangers when silence seems awkward. Small talk topics, though, have grown into overused, typical comments about the weather, while the idea of silence or a discussion of greater worth is unheard of.

But my question is what is wrong with silent, idle time shared in the presence of another person instead of filling peaceful periods with empty questions like "How are you doing?" and comments

about the predicted blizzard? What can we actually gain by discussing Mother Nature's whimsical mood? Sure, talking about the past or future weather makes strangers *appear* friendly, warm, and sociable. But think of how much more a person could take away from these daily brief encounters if we all made an attempt to broaden our small talk norms. Let's find a new, mind-engaging ice breaker to overcome those unfriendly or awkward elevator rides.

The internet has more closely connected the world than ever before in the form of small talk through chat rooms. So why, then, don't we strive to become better acquainted through verbal communication as well? I'm not suggesting any type of intimate brief moment in a hot, crowded elevator. Instead, I propose that we consider how a random, brief conversation about wallpaper or Sweet-and-Low drifts away from the expected discussion of the weather and can allow more of us to think for a change. Instead of spending time swapping opinions about how many more inches of snow Clearville got than Blindville last night, why not discuss, for instance, why blueberries often stain clothes when dirt washes clean away? That stranger might offer insights or facts as to the make-up of each stain, providing a conclusion to a previously unknown or an even mind-muddling dilemma. A question and answer of this sort seems much more intuitive and worth a person's while. But getting off the elevator after a discussion of the clouds and rainy weather involves nothing more than a remembrance of the ride to work and the walk from your Camry to the office building.

Rather than letting our brains weaken into Jell-O, let's get away from shallow, small talk not only about the size of yesterday's hail, but also about the seven foot, eight inch draft star of the Center City Hurricanes. You got it--sports. "Hey, what about the big game tonight? Who are you rootin' for? The Cats or the Dogs?" When faced with this situation again, try surprising a total stranger with "Hey, do you remember learning to tie your shoes when you were a child?" You may find that you share a similar situation--you both wore buckled oxfords!

The other day, I waited in express lane twelve at the

supermarket and a man spoke to me, trying to avoid the latest *Enquirer* headline about O.J. and aliens: "Nice day out today, huh? I sure didn't expect this sunshine." Though the gentleman wanted to *appear* friendly and communal, he also kept a distant personal space between us. After all, I was a stranger. And weren't we all taught as kids to "Never trust or talk to a stranger!"? Or if personal space and trust weren't the issues, time could have been the reason since we were waiting in the express lane. Time provided him with an excuse for avoiding any penetrating, mysterious subjects like "Why does orange juice taste so disgusting right after you finish brushing your teeth?"

Nonetheless, I offer a challenge to cross those undefined barriers of space, time, or trust and engage in more atypical, unexpected small talk. On that next radiant, seventy-three degree afternoon in which a congenial mood prevails while out in public, (even if the meteorologist predicts nine feet of snow by morning), ask that stranger in the nearby chair who also endlessly waits to see Dr. Weatherby, "So, what was *your* worst fifth grade experience?"

Prospector

Prospector strikes his claim
in Lady Liberty's foot
although he's miles away.
The southern California sun
beats his back
and burns him.
It burns like the cigarette
he smokes
after he plants
tobacco in Kentucky summer.

He's tired
like his daughter is tired
of being away from her daddy,
tired of reading
his brother's name in the paper
tired of going
to the grocery store
watching them refill
the tacos and burritos
as he walks in the door
and tired of
getting a suspicious eye
from the cashier
when he goes for
the checkbook
in his back pocket
like it was his name in the paper.

The legal gunslingers
spit in his face
call him Spic and Chico

put 'panic in his name.
His daddy died back east
but there's gold in these hills.

He was English, French, and Spanish
But to them he's a Mic and a Kraut
Who think he's a Kike, a Chink, and a Nigger

He's at the hem of Liberty's robe.