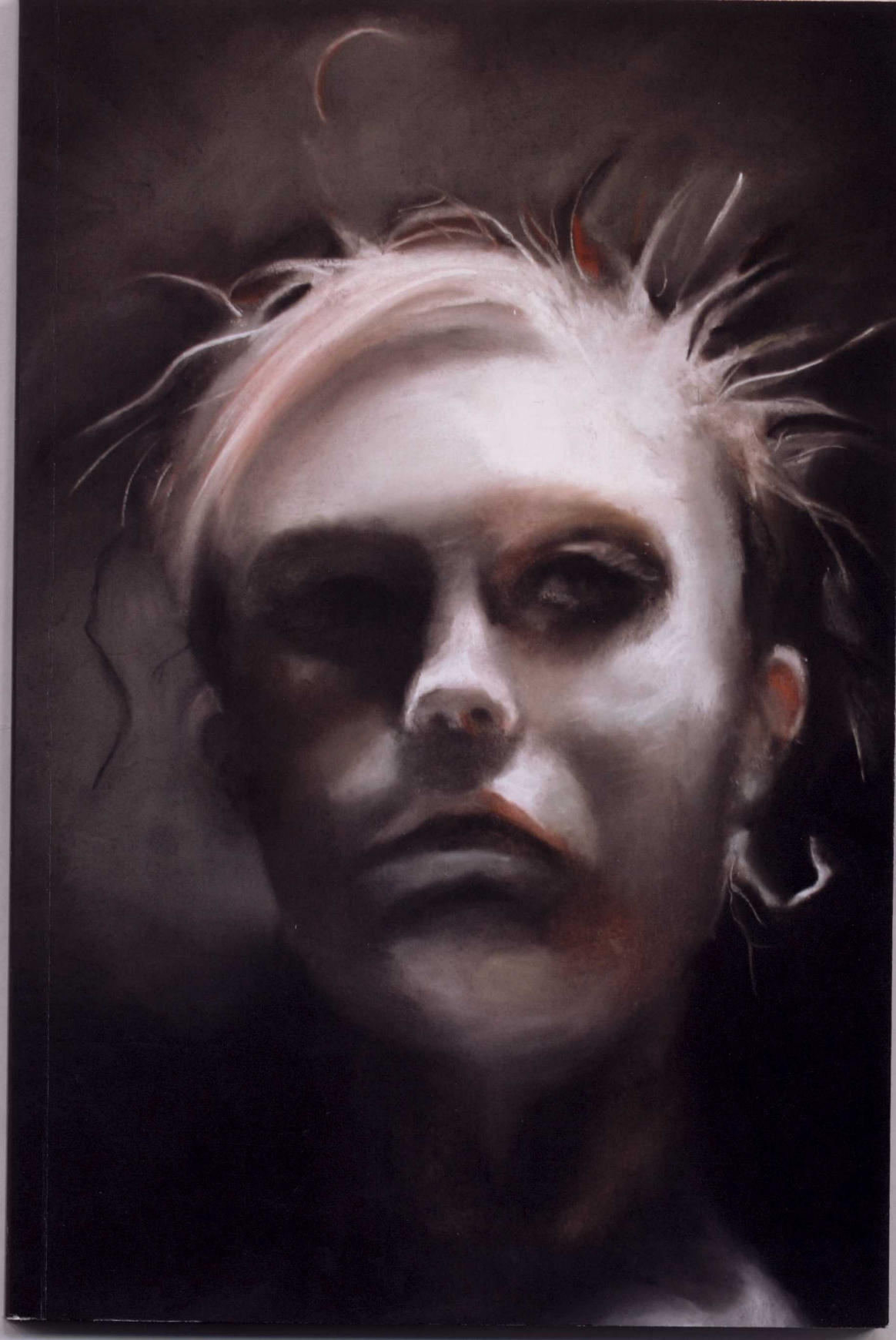


Quercus

a journal of literary and visual art
Volume 15
2006

(kwûrkûs) Latin. n. The oak genus: a deciduous hardwood tree or shrub.

Quercus publishes creative writing and artwork by St. Ambrose University students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Copies available for $7.00 each. Address orders, contributions, and submissions to: *Quercus*, c/o Carl Herzig, St. Ambrose University, 518 W. Locust St., Davenport, Iowa 52803 or HerzigCarl@sau.edu.

cover image
Brendan Gould '02
Pride
2005, oil pastels, 28 inches x 20 inches

intro image
Amy Koch
Autumn Leaf
2004, linoleum cut, 7 inches x 9 inches

inside image
John Shumate
Dante's Inferno
2005, pen and ink, 30 inches x 22 inches

inside back cover image
Beth Van Der Molen
untitled
2005, black and white photograph, 9 inches x 6 inches

back cover image
Brendan Gould '02
Little Monkey
2005, oil pastels, 30 inches x 12 inches

Special thanks to Leslie Bell and Deb Duley.

Thanks also to Alumni and Parent Relations.

words

images

Still Frames

It was a long walk.

The afternoon sky crept
along your skin,
plotting its course in shadows
before you could even mutter
an objection to the wind.

"The city's got my life mapped out in its streets."

I've got days stuck in my pockets—
moving them from one finger to the next,
recollecting each fixation,
adapting each you and me
as we attempt to breathe each reservation
into the road.

I saw you dance through my eyes—
each vision flutters by and
I've pressed myself into your corners
to better breathe in your company.

The sounds of cars echoing on my window
drown out your idea of beauty
seen in my shadow, and I agree,
This place is cold without space for you.

"I can still smell you in the air above me."

—*Alicia Levi '05*

Flying Geese

Yesterday afternoon when the October wind—
which earlier mauled trees, stripping leaves from branches,
tossing them in spiraling clouds—had stilled,
we went fishing.

They were jumping at the mouth of the river,
where the Wapsi joins the Mississippi,
little eddies and growing circles
patterning the flat brown water.

Together we cast,
sending silvery lines far out
towards beckoning ripples,
and waited in a friendly hush.

Five vees of geese raced overhead,
not chatting or calling as they usually do,
but huddled together in wavering lines
intent on reaching their destination.

How I yearned to join them!
To hear their honking, whistling welcome,
to fly like they did,
wild and free.

Sand hill cranes (unusual for these parts)
tagged lazily after,
while herons, absorbed in daily tasks,
solemnly watched and stood their ground.

Overhead, the evening sky glowed purple-rose
and one timid star signaled night.
Taking the rods apart,
we stored our gear and started back.

Heading out, we were worry-wrapped,
tangled in the net of everyday cares.
Heading home we were at peace,
for, like the geese arrowing the sky,
we were facing the unknown together.

—Eda P. Hoffman '81

Violão Solo

for Raquel

Light sits on the morning like a bruise,
the light that floated through your skin
behind the thrown halo in the City of Angels.
Too many cities have yet to find you,
take you dancing, and carry your luggage
to a bridge standing between flesh
and the forced closing of your full eyes.
Yes, I would take you dancing home,
but the dead still inhabit your domain.
Slow voices are descending tonight
calling after us with untranslatable reason
and rooftops converge from the five rivers
washing over the favelas of Porto Alegre,
dragging the sky down into the loom of day.
Books carry quotes, hints of jazz, papered life.
You fear the rhythm of the hours and
the soul, and keep them close at a distance.
Here Machu Picchu dreams from fog,
ripples and weaves on the streets' dirt walls
and gathers alluvial soil for the sun.
An escaped owl also floats in that sun,
languidly repelling all the sojourns of light—
when do you go back to her desert? To risk
the lexicon of questions and known fingers
locked in the theater of the water's reply
is all we, the wanderers, ask going forward.

—*Chuck Blair* '76

Violão Solo – Guitar Solo (Portuguese)
favelas – Brazilian slums

All This

All this on a tweaked ankle
at age 87, leaning in a phone booth
at the Golden River Truck Stop
just off Highway 61, runaway
from a nursing home in Dubuque
where no one lives.

All this with the hem
of her frayed cotton print dress
pushed between her legs.

All this written in exposed dust
on a folding glass door:
dear daughters i wiped your asses
day after day you sent me away
to school & visit only on xmas

All this set in burnt snow—
and more she has outlived.

All this without makeup
or a travel bag, a wisp of hair
tucked neatly behind each ear.

All this under clashing suns—
one pearl, one scarlet,
both in commanding orbits
guarding the easy light.

All this as it should be.

All this and a pewter sea
of concrete and starved ice
as she dials up her Lord
to make reservations in heaven.

All this while moonlighting
as a truck driver
down a cobblestone highway

in an absence of light and lines
paring the crusts of being.

All this and only the scrubbed
potatoes and soiled mittens
in the pot of her smile.

—*Chuck Blair '76*

a sudden rushing of wings
a scattering of dark shapes across the sky
and as the pigeons streak overhead
they seem so menacing somehow
with the deserted street below them
and the gray clouds behind them
and the abandoned factory before them

they settle on the ridge of the roof
and my eye strays from the grayness of their feathers
to the rough, uneven roof below their claws
i note the dips, sways, the scattered pieces of original shingles
which speak to once burnished harmony
and now highlight the present state of disarray

the walls depend drunkenly
from under the sloping eaves of this shattered roof
some windows have been smashed by rocks
projected by a randomly passing vandal
the soil is sown with shards.

i want to tend this old building myself
scatter the pigeons with vicious energy,
mend the walls with my two hands
nail down new shingles one by one
until the roof again presents a united front
against the rain and wind

but i lack the energy, the impetus,
and no one will ever again tenant this building

i wonder, does it happen overnight?
or does it take time for the process of erosion
to wear away a structure
until it barely suggests the original design?

day by day, i learn for myself.

—*Mary Kate Dunne*

"we are sentences that run and run and run"

and run on top of you
and over you write me a poem
leave it on the fridge
while it has nothing to do
with the deliciousness of plums
anyway it says

sunday's beginning

it's plastic
bottles and dark
lipstickthatilove
and when you
bite my ear
and it's listening to Josephine on this
justabout october sevenoclock

hour that quiets me
a little just for this glass minute
that is choking. And it's this
quarter-length poem
that makes me feel the most alive.
it's themostmelancholic
color blue.

so i
leave my post-it
where yours was
and it says

wearing your t-shirt
i can almost taste
the darkroom chemicals
and the way
we used to love
we were born into stories
you say this was
killing me

and i think when you're not
wearing skin you are
crimson
the kind that cradles
those first tides of november
and maybe this is the love poem
i tried to write once
and maybe i knew
it had already died then
see it still feels
like cliff-edged words

and your next note

you say that i'm building some dead road,
writing dead letters.
this must be some liquid desert, elbowing my way
though the dark corners of that most seamless word.
you say things like hell yeah that make you look beautiful
when that blue light from the radio hits them
from a particular angle,
everything is right.
i can feel myself getting older and it isn't
ugly at all and it's not like broken windows here it's more like
glass breathing . . .
feeling like God in an airplane looking down over this city,
it's just a "goddamn
little dollhouse."
but it's okay with me or if it isn't,
i just don't know
any better right now.

so i open the fridge
start
spilling things
and when he comes
i go.

—*Amy Falvey '05*

My Hips

My hips they aren't small
They are wide and sturdy
They're made to support my self and my family
My legs they're big and powerful
They're definitely not long
They're made to stand strong and get away
My shoulders they're not quite feminine
Some say they look like those of a linebacker
They're made to hold and embrace life as it comes
My arms they're not big nor are they flabby
They're slender and strong
They're made to lift myself and everyone else
My back is muscular and toned
It's not smooth and flat
It's made to carry the load
My feet they're not beautiful
They're callused and tough
They've been worked and walked on
My skin it's tanned and freckled
It's eau-naturale why cover it up
It's radiant and glows with my emotions
My body isn't perfect but it's good to me
My body isn't perfect but it's good enough for me
My body is the way God my mother and I have made it
That's the way I'm meant to be
I will listen to no one who says to change it or cover it up

—Kaitlin Hermiston

The Words that Won't Come

what is, where . . . am i

beep, beep, beep . . .

who is this strange person
touching me
prodding
stop

bobby is that you, and richard
and nancy
you're all here
why are you
all yelling
"Stop."
can't you hear me
aren't you listening
you're all staring now
at me
what're you saying,
to me?
"Na-cy."

"It's okay, Mom; this is Dr. Turner. He's a nice man, and is going to take good care of you. He's going to make it all better."

better
what's wrong with me
oh God, it must be my time
just let me,
"Die."
no procedure
"Just let me,"
die

"No Mom, you're not going to die, it's not your time. You just need a really simple procedure. You're going to be just fine, as good as new."

no God, please
just let me die,
why can't i talk, tell them,

i just want to,
"Let me die." . . .

. . . "She just got out of surgery. The procedure went fine; the ulcers gone. But of course she'll still have the other symptoms from her stroke—lack of speech and bowel control, numbness of the left side."

what's going on
i think, am i in the hospital
nancy, is that you
and robert
can i
go home
nancy, robert, are you listening,
how long until
i can go
"Home."

"What's that Mom? Oh good, you're awake. You had a tiny procedure on your stomach, but you're fine now."

"Home."

"Home? I know, Mom, you want to go home. If you're good, and do everything the doctor says, we can go home in a couple of days."

"Home!"
i'm still alive and i can go
"Home." . . .

. . . "So who's going to tell her she has to go into the nursing home?"

"Let's just tell her we're taking her home, and take her by surprise when we get there. There's not much she can do about it once we get there."

"That's awful, we should have just let her die."

"Robert,
Nancy,
Richard."

"Oh she's up again."

—Emily Clifton

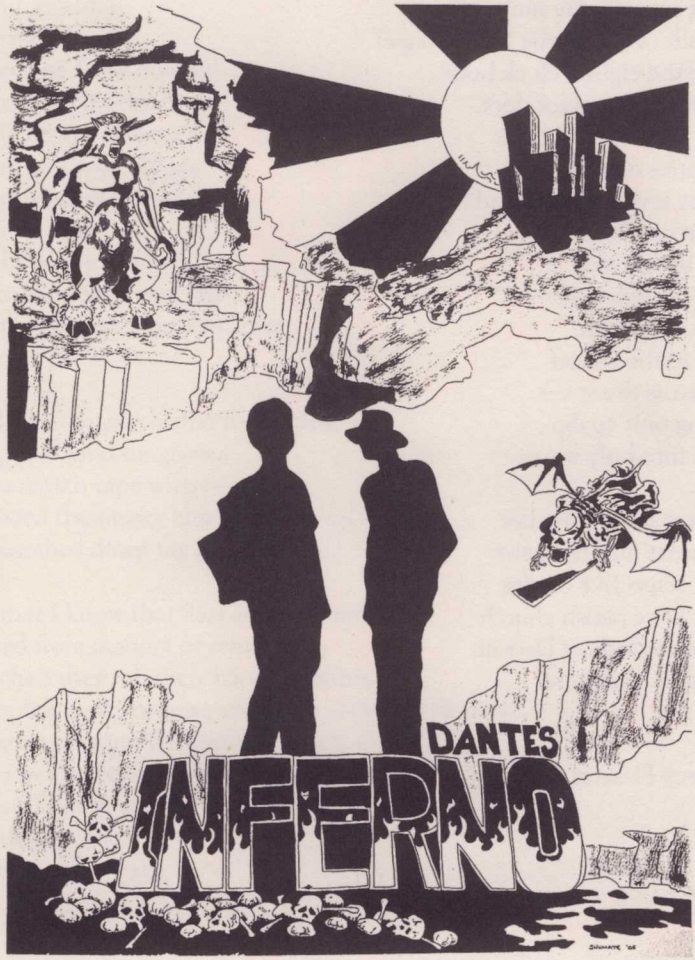
Sweet and Gentle Murderess

Vil suezie senftiu toeterinne,
War umbe welt ir toeten mir den lip,
Und ich iuch so herzeclichen minne,
Zware vrouwe, vur elliu wip?
Waenent ir, ob ir mich toetet,
Daz ich iuch iemer mer beschouwe?
Nein, iuwer minne hat mich des ernoetet,
Daz iuwer sele ist miner sele vrouwe.
Sol mir hie niht guot geschehen
Von iuwerm werden libe,
So muoz min sele iu des verjehen,
Dazs iuwerre sele dienet dort als einem reinen wibe.

—*Heinrich von Morungen (late 12th century)*

Sweet and gentle murderess,
Why do you wish to murder me,
And I love you so faithfully,
True lady, above all women?
Do you believe that if you kill me,
I will never gaze on you again?
No, your love has required me
To make your soul the mistress of mine.
If I do not fare well
With your dear body,
My soul must assure you
That it will serve your soul beyond as its lady pure.

—*Nancy Hayes*


DANTE'S
INFERNO

The Bells of St. Ambrose

I can't suppress my smile when
the bells of Christ the King Chapel
chime the eight o'clock hour
as I unlock my office door.

Memories tumble
like my seven siblings and I
did out our front door
every school day:
8 A.M. church bells
called us to dash
down to the corner
and across the street,
slowing only to dip
hands into holy water.

We were always the last
to squeeze into the pews
of our respective classes
in our large parish church
on the east side of Detroit,
named St. Ambrose.

—*Nancy Flaherty*

When I Was Little

When I was little
you frowned at me
just because I was holding
my hand out for the fly
to walk up and down
my arm and you told me
that was a dirty thing to do.

But I liked the way it felt
with those whiskers of legs
so softly massaging my skin that
it tickled.

And I liked to watch that fly up close—
its big blue solid sunglasses
and its scotch tape wings—
all shaded the murky blue fly color
as it marched down my freckled arm.

Now that I know that flies are older maggots
hatched from manure or refuse,
that when they rub their hands together
they're not really coming up with a sneaky little plan,
but excreting their fly-waste,
And now I've been bitten a few times.
But I still like it when they walk up and down,
even though you frown
and tell me I'm dirty.

—*Ashley Johnson*

Mayflies/Fish Flies

Born once, maybe twice a year
hundreds of them each hatching,
maybe millions.

One scattering herd,
chaos.

All together,
frantically,
they search for mates.

They find their mates,
lay their eggs,
and die before the day is up.

A few weeks later, the eggs hatch
and scatter
all together frantically
then mate,
lay eggs,
And they die.

Hatch.
Mate.
Lay.
Die.

—*Ashley Johnson*

The Passing World through My Window

Just when I decide
to hop off the train,
check everything out,
I change my mind;
snuggle into the corner
by the window to see
how far I can go.

I pass through downtown,
an odd mixture;
Small shops
Tall buildings
People scrambling,
out to the rolling hills:
cows and corn
rather than
bison and blue stem,
until the cornfields too disappear
replaced by a wild world
I'd forgotten existed:
Sparse rocks
Bitter cold
Animals I've never seen
with their antlered heads to the ground.
I'm just passing through.
The train picks up speed.
The tracks turn straight up
headed into the deep void.
Blue sky dissolves
into pink to purple until
I cross into blackness.
Suddenly there are stars
bigger and brighter
than on any rural Iowa night.
I run to the caboose,
stare out the back window
with both hands
pressed open on the glass.
I close my eyes,

make a wish
and pass through
like a ghost.

— *Jeremy Burke* '99

And the Rain Still Fell

They sat in the car listening to the rain and watching the lightning bullwhip across the night. Wayne on the passenger's side remained quiet. Not more than half an hour earlier he had witnessed Bobby Ray Eyman's tirade against Communists, Satan, and Democrats, that ended with him taking his pool cue and leveling an unsuspecting patron who had just started a beer.

"Think he's still up there?" Wayne finally asked. Instead of his uniform, he had on what he'd worn to Hank's Place, a roadhouse nearby on the Jefferson state highway. The cigarette smell off his Levis and the Remember-the-Alamo t-shirt he had gotten on a vacation to Texas dominated the moist heat inside the closed car.

"Where else would he go? He always runs back home after he gets himself into trouble."

"I don't like the rain, Mike. A warm, muggy rain puts people on edge."

"It'll be harder on Bobby Ray. We've got the benefit of surprise. He's probably feeling sorry now for what he's done. You know how he gets."

"You didn't see it, Mike. That man. All he'd done was order a beer. That's all. And on my night off, too."

"Nothing new about someone dying like he did," he said. "Nothing unusual about a dead person who shouldn't be that way. Just one more thing we have to do."

Wayne scratched his arm above the tattoo of a flaming sword he'd had done that time in Texas. The sky danced with a spider web of light, then was gone. "The guy just wanted to have a beer and sit out the storm. That's all. He's driving through town and decides to let the rain pass and drink a beer. Didn't know Bobby Ray from wallpaper, or how crazy he gets when he's off his meds. When a guy gets himself killed, it's better that he knows why and who's doing it. Don't you think a man deserves that much?"

"This rain's not letting up. It's better we get him than Corning and Mead. They don't have the history with Bobby Ray that we do. We know Bobby Ray's not a bad sort at heart. He's just different."

"He needs to be put down," said Wayne. "He's like that pit bull of Galen's that mauled his little neighbor girl. Maurice wouldn't hurt anyone, Galen told us. Playful as a beagle, he said. But you know that breed, Mike. They can turn on you fast and for no reason, the dog's genetics just catching up with it. It's a shame when it happens to anyone, but to a cute little girl like that. She'll never be the same." Wayne wiped the sweat beading the window with his palm as the rain fell harder. "Bobby Ray's just like that. You don't know when he's going to turn on you."

"This will be hard on his mom," Mike said.

"She must be a tough old bird living up here practically on her own. I hear she was an old lady when she had Bobby Ray."

"Mid-fifties maybe. But her husband was older."

"And she still had one good egg left," Wayne said.

"And he had a swimmer strong enough to make it up the channel. Shame about Big Jess. Fell asleep and turned over his rig between St. James and Armitage a month before Bobby Ray was born. The fire killed him and destroyed the only real family asset."

"Like I said, she's tough."

"Tough, but old. Bobby Ray's taken his toll." Mike sleeved off the window fog and looked into the storm. "My folks said Bobby Ray had outgrown his father by the time he finished grade school. He was big allright, but that's misleading. Bobby Ray and I started school together, but they made him repeat the second and fifth grades. The summer right before he would've been starting junior high, he got accused of stealing underwear off Flo Tucker's clothesline. He denied it, but juvenile court sent him to the hospital in Pikesville anyway."

"Didn't know you two were classmates," said Wayne.

"For a while. He got teased a lot. What kid his size who wore the same overalls everyday and repeated grades wouldn't?" Mike closed his eyes and listened to the rain pound the car. He had never teased him, never once. So why Bobby Ray challenged him to that fight had remained one of his childhood puzzles.

They had met on the playground after the buses departed, beneath a sky so dark it looked like dusk by early afternoon. Bobby Ray took the first swing, missed, then kept swinging. Mike ducked and moved until Bobby Ray's arms grew heavy and dropped to his sides. When that happened, Mike stepped in and landed a gut-punch. Bobby Ray dropped to his knees gasping for breath and looking up dumbfounded by what had just happened. The onlookers took off when the principal yelled from his office window. What everyone missed, and what Bobby Ray wouldn't have wanted anyone to see, was Mike helping him back up.

"Let's get going," Mike said.

By the time they got outside and put on what rain gear they had, their clothes were soaked. "Loosen your weapon, but keep the safety on," Mike said.

Wayne pulled the hood over his eyes and turned away. "I know the drill, boss."

The Eymans lived in the country up a dirt road in a house that hadn't been painted for so long the clapboards had weathered to bare wood. Mrs. Eyman had to make do living on Jess's Social Security. Except for the odd jobs he'd do around Hank's Place, Bobby Ray never had steady work. But he did enjoy Hank's, where he could shoot pool and spout off about politics and religion. He also developed a tolerance for alcohol. Worked out well for Hank. He got back Bobby Ray's wages, and most of his customers considered Bobby Ray's unpredictable nature another form of entertainment.

"You don't suppose she still keeps guns in the house, do you?" Wayne asked.

"Everyone up here has a weapon or two of some kind. You know that. Getting old or having someone like Bobby Ray at home doesn't change the way a family lives."

"Just hope she keeps the ammunition locked up and hidden. I sure would, having a son like that."

The rain had pounded the gravel deep into the earth, leaving behind a paste of slick mud. They kept to the road's edge where the ditch grass provided traction.

They came around a curve in time to see a lightening strike illuminate the little four-room house. Candles flickered through the window. The Eymans, like most families on the hillside, worked hard and kept to themselves. They considered the generosity of others as either interference or, worse, charity.

"You go around back in case Bobby Ray tries to run on us," Mike said. "I'll talk to Mrs. Eyman."

"Just because you're native to these parts, don't go up there thinking you can sweet talk Bobby Ray out."

"What are you talking about?"

"People say she once worked for your dad."

Mike turned away. "Long time ago." He rubbed his forehead. "You see, after Jess Eyman died, my folks did what they could to help. Then a year or so later she came to the store with a list of everything we'd given her along with her calculations of how many hours she'd have to put in to pay it back. The way Mom told it, Dad said he didn't want a volunteer, but he did need a part-time employee to help out around the store. For ten years, she came in every Tuesday and Friday even though she had that list paid back in six months." Mike looked up at the dark sky letting the rain hit him like a morning shower. "Then something happened at school between me and Bobby Ray that embarrassed her so much she never came back. Listen, I'm

not going up there planning to sweet talk anybody. I don't expect Ruth Eyman to put much stock in what happened close to thirty years ago. Not tonight. Not now. Okay?"

"Sure. Just asking."

Mike watched Wayne walk to the rear of the house before climbing the porch. The hard rain masked the sound of his footsteps on the creaking wood. He paused, and then knocked. When no one responded, he knocked louder.

The front door cracked open, and from behind it Ruth Eyman called out, "What do you want?" In the storm, her voice sounded distant and overwhelmed, like a match in a firestorm.

"Mrs. Eyman, it's Mike Killian. I've come for Bobby Ray. Is he here?"

"I allow no visitors this time of night, so just turn yourself around and get out of here. Go on, now."

"Can't do that, Mrs. Eyman. I got to see Bobby Ray. Either send him out or I'll have to come in."

"I'm not letting anyone in, not even you, Mike Killian. The only visitors we get anymore is when someone thinks Bobby Ray's done wrong. He's trying to be good, if people just leave him be."

"I've got to see him. This time he's gone too far."

"Go knock on Hank Skaden's door and talk to him. Letting Bobby Ray do those jobs, giving him beer. I can't control him no more, and you people don't stop it."

"I keep an eye on him as best I can, Mrs. Eyman. But as long a he's behaving himself, there's not a lawful thing I can do." He removed his hat and slapped it against his slicker. "I'd like to work this out."

Ruth Eyman made him wait another minute before opening the door. It had been so long since he'd seen her that Mike didn't recognize the woman in the doorway. She was bent so far over her cane that her body formed a right angle. Time and illness had reduced Ruth Eyman to the size of a child. "State your business where you stand, then leave."

"We have witnesses who saw Bobby Ray kill a man tonight. No cause, no provocation. He picked up a pool cue and brought it down on back of a man's head, a man who only wanted a cold beer and a little conversation."

Ruth Eyman's body shook under the worn-out and nearly see-through house dress. "Bobby Ray's no longer here." Her stockings gathered at her ankles, pulled down by gravity.

"I can come in, you know. Don't need a warrant. I'll call it hot pursuit."

"You can call it anything you want. People like me don't have a say

anyhow, not when you folks want something. But he's gone now. He ain't here no more."

"Then can I come in out of the rain?"

She waved a hand as if to say, do what you want, then turned from him. Mike followed her into the room and remained near the door as she fell into a rocking chair.

With the windows closed, the room was still and thick with humidity. Pings and splashes sounded as raindrops landed in a dozen saucers and tin cans placed around the floor.

"Like I told you, he ain't here," she said, starting to rock.

Mike pulled the flashlight from his belt. "You lose your power?"

"These days it's off more than it's on anyway." The candle flames weaved and flickered, and shadows moved on the walls.

Mike went into the kitchen. Outside the window threads of light appeared and disappeared, followed by thunderclaps. An old Frigidaire towered over a gas range upon which rested a well-seasoned skillet. The floor linoleum cracked with black lines and curled at the seams. Two glasses sat on the counter. Mike saw all of this, but he didn't see Bobby Ray.

He left and passed Mrs. Eyman, who looked out the window, ignoring him. In the far bedroom he found a single, well-made bed pushed snug against the back corner, its middle sagging as if it bore an invisible weight. A picture of Jesus hung above the headboard, and on the nightstand Mike saw a lamp, a fingernail clipper, and a small Bible. He knelt and lifted the bedspread to look under the bed, then stood and opened the closet. Inside he discovered three shirts on wire hangers, dress shoes, and dirty clothes on the floor. Leaving, he noticed on the dresser twenty-eight cents in change, an opened package of spearmint gum, and a *Watchtower*.

"I've got to look in your room," he said.

She crossed her arms. "He ain't here, Mike Killian. I've already told you that."

"I have to look, Mrs. Eyman. Right now that's what I have to do."

Mike started for her bedroom but stopped when someone pounded on the front door. They both turned towards the sound. He crossed the floor and opened it. Wayne stood outside dripping water.

"Come on, "Wayne said. "I found him."

Mike glanced at Mrs. Eyman. "Got him secured?"

"As secure as a man can be."

Mike followed his partner on the muddy trail to a tool shed behind the house. They stood under the eaves. In the black night, the rain fell like a

waterfall, and the earth flashed and faded with each web of lightning. Mike jerked when he heard a tree crack in the dense hillside stand of scrub oak and sedge.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"It didn't take long to notice it. There's enough lightning to illuminate a small city." Wayne pointed to the ground between where they stood and the back door. "Over there."

At first Mike noticed only the white propane tank. Then another flash came and he saw a dark tarp on the ground covering what could have been a mound of dirt. Pools of water had collected in the folds of the tarp. Around the edges and beyond, the mud looked thick enough to trap a large animal.

"You look under it?" Mike asked, leaning back further under the eaves.

"It's him. Our boy's been shot in the back."

"Get a pulse?"

"See for yourself, but I'm telling you he's dead."

Mike lifted the tarp and held two fingers to Bobby Ray's neck. "Let's go," he said.

At the front door Mike started to knock, hesitated, then entered. "We found him," he said. "We found your son."

She rocked slowly in her chair, humming some old church hymn Mike recognized from his youth. When the song ended, she opened her eyes. "I sent him to the shed for nails and wood scraps. The house leaks so bad, you know."

"I'd like to know what happened, Mrs. Eyman," Mike said.

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Her lips moved, but without sound. Then she spoke. "Bobby Ray knew he went too far. He wanted me to help him, thought maybe I could do something to help him. The boy got awfully confused without his pills."

Wayne stood behind Mike just inside the front door. Both men dripped water onto the wood floor sagging beneath their feet. The rain fell and the room flashed white as veins of lightening appeared and disappeared.

"Bobby Ray started out life facing the wrong way and just kept walking," she said. "Never could turn himself around. He came back from Pikesville all different. They said he needed those pills. Sometimes we had them, other times we didn't."

"Where's the rifle?" said Mike.

"My room. Where it's been ever since Jess passed."

Wayne stepped towards her. "Where you going?" Mike said.

"To get her. She's as good as confessed."

"Leave her be."

Mrs. Eyman resumed humming, her hands still folded in her lap.

"You mean we come back tomorrow and finish things up?" asked Wayne.

"I mean we're finished."

"I don't get it."

"We found him, found him along the road. Someone either with a grudge or who mistook him for someone else must've shot him. We don't know, but we're investigating. That's what we're going to say."

"But . . ."

"But what?"

"Bobby Ray's a good boy, you know," Mrs. Eyman said. "He wanted to do the proper thing, he did. He started each morning by saying, 'Mama, I'm going to do right today. You'll see. I'm not making those mistakes any more.' But Bobby Ray wasn't strong, and we didn't always have them pills. Then Hank gave him those jobs. Some folks get all the luck they need without trying, while others just try to make do. Jess used to say life evens out. Maybe it does, but I ain't seen it."

Mike touched Wayne's shoulder. "Come, I need your help."

"I couldn't let anyone take him away. Not again. They said punishing Bobby Ray would teach him to behave himself. Pikesville didn't teach Bobby Ray that. I told them it wouldn't. I said, let him come home and let me help him. But they took him, did what they pleased. And when he told me what he'd done tonight, I knew someone'd be coming. Don't know whether having it be you's a good thing or bad, Mike. Guess it don't matter, not with having to care for my boy and getting things settled. I don't have much time left to get things settled."

When Bobby Ray's body was in the trunk, Wayne said, "I don't like this."

Mike glanced between his partner and the house where through the rain and the window he saw the small figure of Ruth Eyman. "We're setting him beside the road to make it look like he was on his way home. Then I'll report it and say I'm going out to inform his mother. We'll investigate Bobby Ray's killing, or course, but the chief won't press much. No one's going to complain."

"I still don't like it."

Mike turned his chin to the window where Mrs. Eyman rocked and the candles flickered. "Think the county will be safer with her in jail? That

with having her tried and sentenced we'd be averting a crime wave?" He slammed the trunk shut.

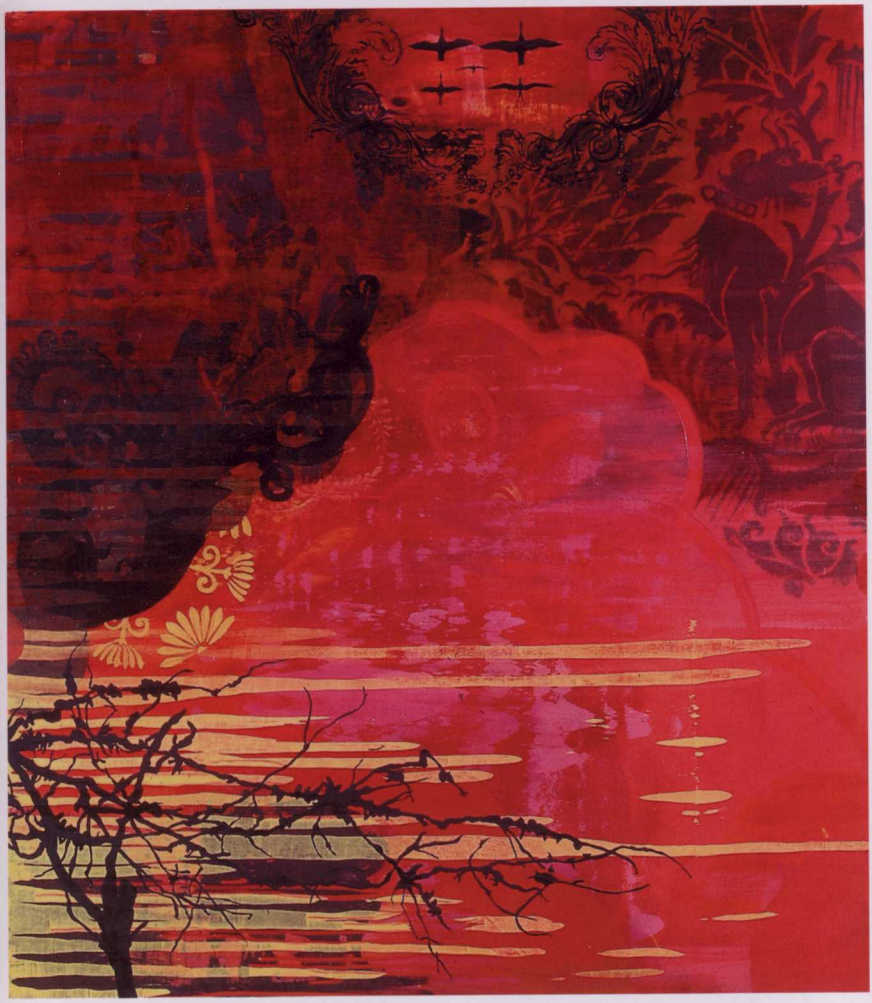
Wayne turned away. "Man, it's miserable out here."

"It's done now. We got a long night ahead of us."

"She's going to need help," Wayne said, getting into the car and closing the door.

Mike started the engine. "She always did," he said, as the rain fell. "If she'll let me, I'll do what I can."

—*James O'Gorman*



Kristin Quinn
The River Rose

2005, oil on canvas, 55 inches x 48 inches

Brendan Gould '02
Inspiration

2005, oil pastels, 32 inches x 20 inches

Anne Brown
The City

2005, oil on canvas, 48 inches x 48 inches

Anne Brown
Spaceman, Number One

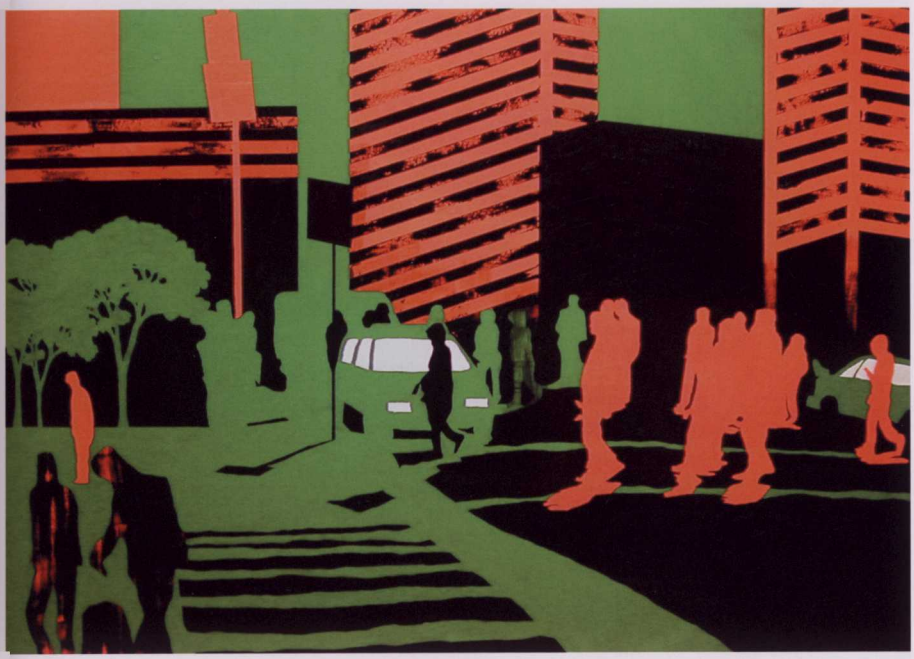
2005, oil on canvas, 48 inches x 48 inches

Eric Tufte
untitled

2005, oil on canvas, 36 inches x 48 inches

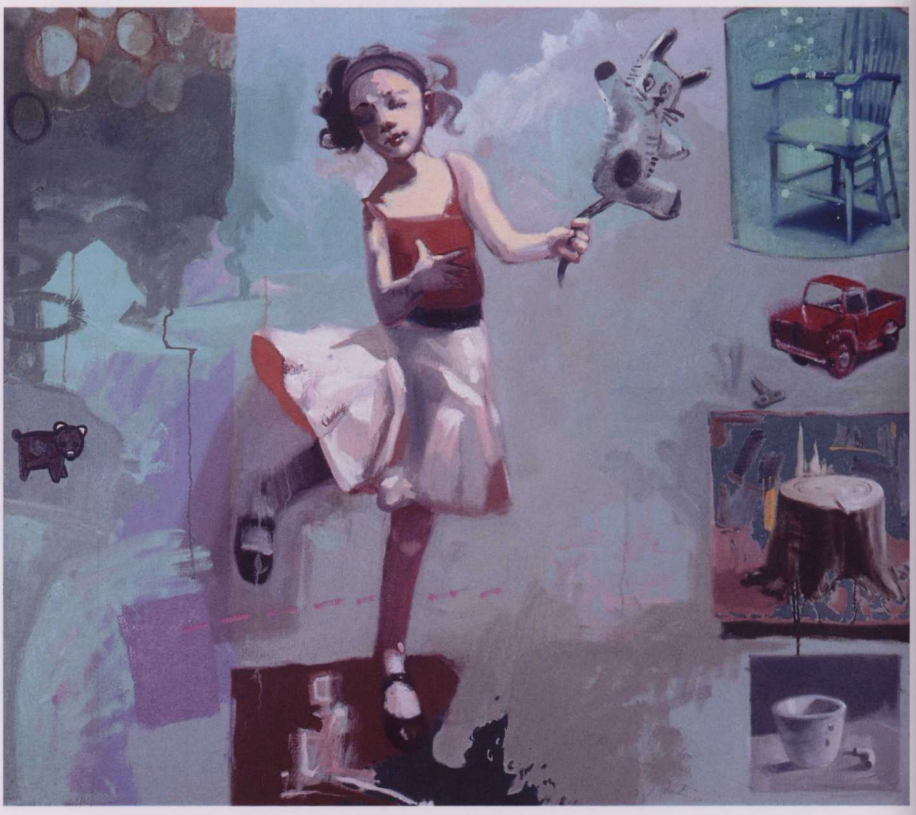
Heidi Hernandez '05
Smell My Flower

2005, oil on canvas, 16 inches x 16 inches



Andrew Moeller '05
Creatures (For a While)

2005, oil on canvas, 42 inches x 60 inches



Leslie Bell '72
The Imperfect World of Beauty

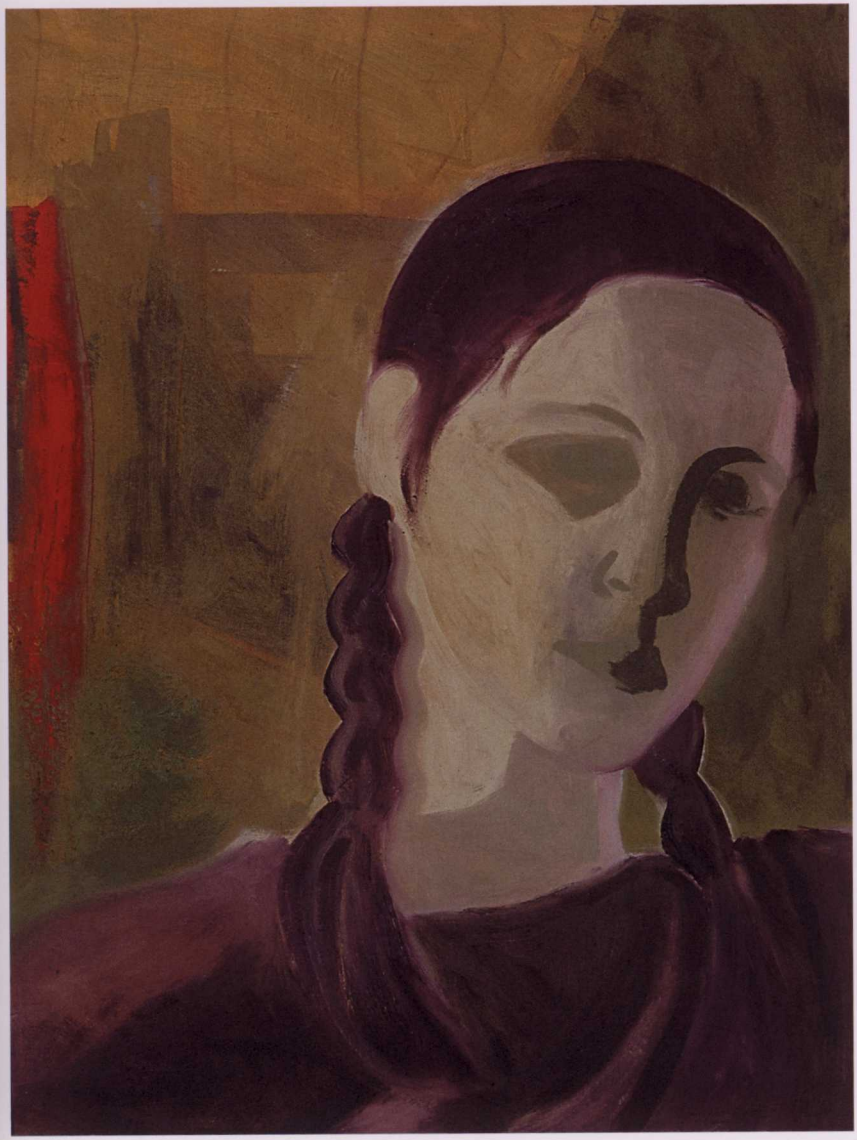
2005, oil on canvas, 48 inches x 55 inches

Leslie Bell '72
A Fresh Start after W

2005, oil on canvas, 48 inches x 55 inches

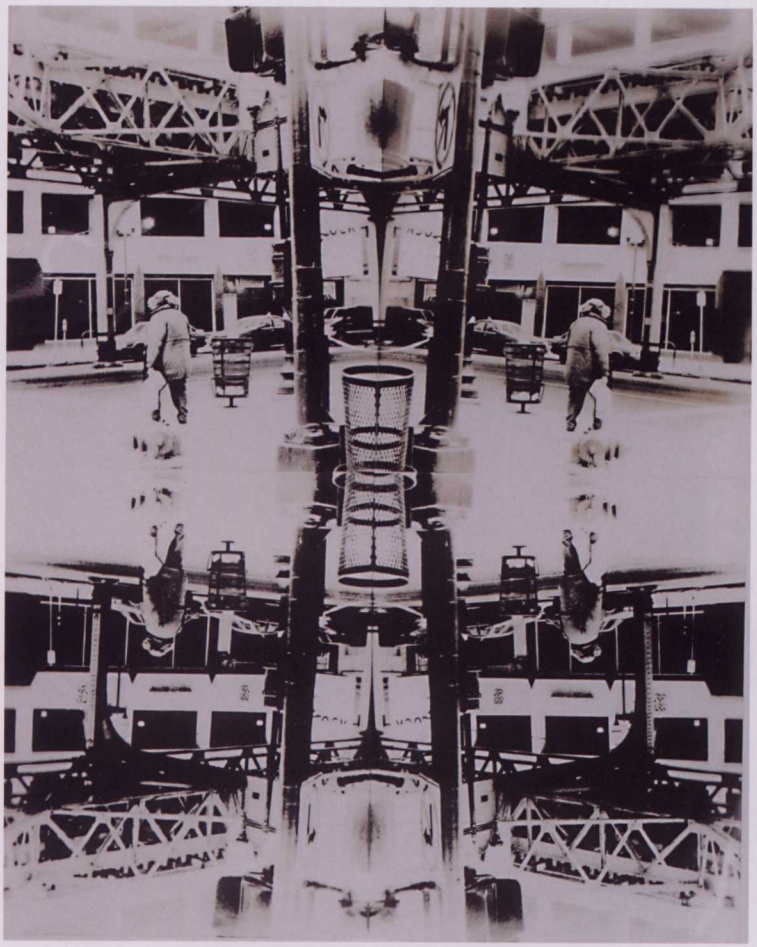
Jayne Lunz '05
Rockets Invaded

2005, oil on canvas, 60 inches x 42 inches



Dana Soedt '03
Self-portrait

2005, oil on canvas, 24 inches x 18 inches



Jane Hart '76
Under the El in Chicago

2005, photography, 20 inches x 16 inches

Kathryn Anderson
Kitschy Kat in the Middle

2005, linoleum cut, 9 inches x 7 inches

Adam Hurlburt
Apparition of a New Age

2006, monotype, 14 inches x 11 inches

Kathleen Ratzlaff
Turtle Pond

2006, oil on paper, 22 inches x 30 inches

The Broom and the Dustpan

Flamboyantly, he came out to the right of the fluttering flag with a broom and a dustpan; he went back with the flag on his left this time, climbing the steps toward City Hall.

Who carries a broom and a dustpan at nine in the morning—while the debtors everywhere ask not to balance their accounts but plead for more time, if he isn't proud of his two candles while the decorated flag to him is like trash—but the leader?

Perhaps this morning his very being shook when a rat darted out looking for a piece of cheese and who but the leader this morning, was the man of fine cheese?

Get him.

He scuttered among the rabble, climbing to the top of the sixty steps, the flag on his left, without even asking the elderly guard, who was armed with a pistol just for show and a stale sandwich, advancing toward the door, smoothly springing on the leader's table, luxuriously eating his breakfast.

He raised his head and took off his glasses seeing a rat nonchalantly eating his breakfast (him too!). "It's either you or me this morning, you damned rat; didn't the secretary tell you who I am? I'm the leader of the sewers that shelter you, shelter your eaters, your killers!"

The leader of the district did not know which direction to take in order to face the battle. He looked around his trench and found only picture frames, pens and paper, brought to him by a newly employed secretary so that he could decoratively sign on the lines that would seem like the pulse of a blueblood.

He stood ready for a new battle, trying to reassemble his soldierliness and his tank, but found in his office only sculptures given to him at the awards ceremony: a sculpture of a gun to his left and an expensive bullet-shaped lighter, also to his left. But he'd learned in his first military training lessons that he had to find the enemy's strengths to plan his confrontation. "But you're just a rat!" he said with some despair, his legs still spread for attack. "I don't know anything about him except that he took my place and stole my morning! Ah, and he lives in the sewers . . . that's important . . . very

important . . . but why me, when City Hall is teeming with snakes and simpletons?"

His majesty did not know that this damned, ugly rat had a sharp sense of smell and was an intuitive hunter of scrumptious things.

The leader tried to think with a simplicity he was unaccustomed to; here he's been for twenty minutes, seething, to catch a rat, when he could have been overseeing many villages, disemboweling them. O leader, you're in a ridiculous position; if the enemy knew he could catch you being led by an army of rats, he would have chased you out long ago.

(But he doesn't know, so there's no reason to worry.)

The barely-there-skirt girl came in with a cup of coffee and found her lofty leader (who she was used to seeing behind his great desk, checking out her legs, ignorant to the transparency of his own glasses) battling a black ghost coming at him from the void, sweating fuel.

The Miss (or Lady) took off one of her shoes, and butterfly-like, started floating in the trench, dreaming of the hands that would clap for her after she devoured the damn thing.

And what a romantic, envy-inspiring scene: the Miss and the leader dancing around in the same trench. She on the left and he on the right; so close that the point of her heel landed, as hard as they were dancing, on the leader's organ, and the other heel, thank God, hit the morning again. The leader cried out in pain and suffered along with the rat's wounds and they bled together.

The butterfly tried landing to console the leader's bleeding manhood but couldn't. He rose, asking for a broom and a dustpan and brought the crime to the flag of trash.

—*Ali Issa '03*
Translated from the Arabic of Zahiye Kundus

المكنسة والمجرور
هذه المرة، صاح الدكتور المكنسة والمجرور في الساعة التاسعة صباحاً والمدانون يحتلون المكان، لا لسد ديونهم بل لمنحهم الكثير من الوقت، يعني راجون، إن لم يكن فخوراً بشمعتي والعلم المزين له كمزبلة، كالرئيس؟
لربما اهتز كيانه هذه الصباح بفرار فأر يبحث عن قطعة من الجبن ومن غير الرئيس صاحب الجبنة الفاخرة هذه الصباح.

فعلية.

مشى بين الجارين متسلقاً العلية والعلم على شماله المدرجات الستين غير سائل الحارس الهرم مجمد البندقية والسندويش البائت، متأملاً نحو الباب منهاراً بأنقاض على طاولة المدير متأنياً بأكل فطوره.

(وهو آخر!) غفر رأسه خالعاً نظارتيه رائياً فأراً يتسكع في أكل فطوره
أنا؟ أكون الرئيس، ألم تخبرك السكرتيرة من أنا؟ إما أنت وإما أنا هذه الصباح أيها الفأر اللعين، الجارين التي تؤويك وتؤوي آكليك وقاتليك!

لم يدرِ الرئيس البلدية أي الجهات يتخذ وجهة للقتال. نظر حوله فندقة غير واجد غير أطر وأقلام تناثرت هنا وهناك السكرتيرة حديثة التوظيف ليوقع عليها بزخرفة خطوط تبدو كأنها قارورة صابون مزرقة.
وقف على أهبة الاستعداد لمعركة جديدة محاولاً استرجاع جنديته والدبابة فلم يجد في مكتبه سوى تمثيل البندقية على الشمال وقداحة على شكل رصاصة باهظة الحياة، على الشمال أيضاً. لكنه تعلم في الدروس الأولى للمعسكرات الحربية أن يعيه الوقوف على كرسي العدو ليعرف مسلكه مجابهة!
ولكنك مجرد فأر قالها بقلة حيلة وما زال فاراً شرقاً مدماً للهجوم! لا أعرف عنه شيئاً سوى أنه احتل مكاني وسرق صباحي! آه ويعيش في الجارين.. هذا.. مهم.. جداً.. لكن لماذا أنا؟ مبنى البلدية تظل بالأفاعي والبساط؟

لم يدرِ صاحب الجلالة أن هذا الفأر اللعين، القبيح الهيئة حاسة شم حادة، صياد ماهر للملذات حين يلمحها.

حاول الرئيس أن يفكر ببساطة التي لم يعتدها، وما هو ولمدة عشرين دقيقة آتي الصباح الباكر أكابداً.
فأر، في الوقت الذي فيه استطاع تشريف عدة قرى قبل أن يكتشفه جيش من الفأران لهزيمة قبل زمان.

(لكنه لا يدري، فالداعي القلق)

دخلت صاحبة التنورة القليلة القماش مع فنجان قهوة رائية رئيسها الشامخ الذي اعتادت رؤيته من
وراء طاولته عظيمة الكتفين ناظرة ساقيها غير دار بشفافية نظارتيه، يقاتل شبح أسود
منها الى عليه في الفراغ ينزف وقود.
خلعت الآنسة (أو المدام) نعليها بفراشية أخذت تطوف الخندق حالمة بالأيادي المصفقة لها
بعد افتراسها للعين. وبيا له من مشهد رهيب باعثا للغيرة، الآنسة والرئيس يتراقصان في
خندق واحد، هي للشمال وهو لليمين تعبيرا للخصوصية التي كانت بينهما وقع حذاء بقوة
الرقص على وضوء الرئيس والنعل الأخرى اصطادت، والحمد لله، الصباح من جديد. تولول الرئيس
من الألم تتألم مع جرح الفأر، ونزفا معا.
حاولت الفراشة الهبوط لتواسي رجولته النازفة ما استطاعت. نهض طالبا مكنسة وهجوم آتيا
بالجريمة على المزبلة.

—فيرونيك سندوس

The Band Plays On

Albia, Iowa is a lot like any small town, the place my father called home when circumstance permitted. When it didn't, when the aches of depression carried his mother away, the Pacific Northwest became home—a long way from the dog-eared Kodachrome image that I hold. To me Albia was like Appalachia—a hundred miles from nowhere—a place where coal tailings stained the earth a sickly red while rusty Burlington-Northern diesels carried scrap iron and the last of the coal from mines soon to be abandoned.

The images, like the picture I hold of my grandmother, could be found in a 1970s *National Geographic*: the tired, dirty faces of those who worked the land, or were worked by the land; cars with paintless fenders and shining Airstream trailers parked in yards beside neglected miners' houses; the town square where the city gathered glowed in the dim streetlight as young and old danced to the band that played. They were proud Americans, caught stop-frame in the lens of an old Graflex.

My father's hometown, to him, was alive and full of adventure and memories. Circling the square on his bicycle in relaxed, boyish arcs, he saw piles of corn bound for Europe filling Main Street.

July 4, 1943

Midnight bombers and nightingales sang over Paris and London. At home black cats exploded. The polished chrome fenders gleamed in the sunlight as captured submarines and airplanes foretold the end of the war. Away from the summer heat, inside the clammy dark skin of a U-boat, my father dreamed of growing up and inventing a cure. At five he didn't know what it would cure. But he knew what he wanted it to fix: the misfiring neurons and ganglia that erupted like barkers hawking the elephants and tigers at the yearly circus. My grandmother's broken heart. Unlike the Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey that townies and miners danced to, she swayed to the intoxicated moan of an Emmons pedal steel on a hazy Friday night. He wanted to find the cure, wanted nothing more than to call one place home.

Hidden under my parents' bed is the red leather case of the Bundy. My father pulled his trombone out on occasion, threaded the slide to the bell and inserted the mouthpiece. He would play Moten Swing and "A" Train. The tubes of the trombone caught the light as he moved to the rhythm. He smiled and stopped playing, let the trombone fall from his lips, cleared the spit valve, and wiped the slides with Ponds cold cream. The Bundy has been his only trombone. It was special: a hammered bell and silver fittings, six months of rationed food, dirty clothes, and extra work though

it took all her strength. It made his mother happy, for once. The Bundy learned to travel the same circuit, carefully packed into the '50 Ford or his uncle's Chevrolet. My father, Eugene, his brother Charlie, and my grandmother left Albia, stopped in Aberdeen or Bakersfield, Seattle or Portland, any place with a spare room. Although they always returned home to the sulfurous smell of coal ash that turned the city gray and the air thick, the smell of burning coal was an odd reminder for my father that they would soon leave for the Northwest and atomic power. At times she longed for the ash-laden air, but nuclear energy kept her well and restored her—for a time. The town band would hold my father's chair, awaiting another healing spell, but each journey carried my grandmother further from home. For her, hometown became nothing more than a place that wouldn't remember another kited check or the promises that she would work the debt off.

Everyone knew the story. Across the rail bed the Coca-Cola gang had heard of my grandmother's illness, the way she forgot to pay bills and the way most of her stories made little sense.

December 13, 1955

He would cross the railroad tracks, stop at home before practice, drink Pepsi, pull the trombone from its case, and begin playing as he walked across the tracks again. The echoes of the Bundy filled the air. He thought, "maybe it will make her happy; maybe it will make her forget whatever has left her so broken." As the band practiced on the streets, my father's grandparents and brother stood on the porch; my grandmother slept.

Like so many small town people in the fifties, Albians were good American folk. They hadn't read the same books as my father so he couldn't explain what Fitzgerald meant when he wrote or what being awakened at 3 A.M. to my grandmother's cries felt like. It made him hard: he wanted to fight; it made him soft. My grandmother told me, "He wanted to cry. A man couldn't cry in 1955, but your daddy, he was different—he understood." On Friday nights the townies, farmers, and miners shared stories of an America out there that they couldn't imagine: television, FM radio, natural gas, and medicines that worked. The rural air waffled like corrugated cardboard, each sinuous fold was a growing portrait of life: the comforting smell of roasted corn and pork; the brassy sound of the town band; kids on bicycles with baseball cards stuck between spokes. Salk had perfected the polio vaccine. My father would graduate, leave Albia, and join the Navy. It wasn't what he wanted. He wanted to go to medical school. He wanted to peer inside and fix what was broken, but it wouldn't happen. In the Navy

he learned to fight. He learned to tear down diesel engines. He began to look like those pictures from *National Geographic*: sunburned, wrinkled, the taut-sinewy body of a sailor.

March 22, 1985

The Bundy re-emerged as I entered fifth grade. The red leather case that had remained hidden under the bed was carried on countless school busses and band trips. The last time it emerged, I brought it to my grandmother, played Moten Swing quietly, and handed it to my father, who played, eyes closed. My father placed the Bundy under the bed, its case cradling the fragile bell bronze frame. He walked away, tear-soaked eyes wandering the Iowa plains for something that none of us understood—the memories of being stationed on the Atlantic during the Cold War; the memories of being carried by ship, train, and auto from the place that he called home, and the helplessness he felt as he read the letter. "Eugene, I am so sorry to send this news. Your mother has been taken to the Monroe County Home. She is happy. Talks fondly of the Bundy and the way you looked in your white bucks marching with the band. Be sure to write her."

I look at the picture, the last memory of my grandmother. We are dancing at her last home, the state hospital. The ghost notes of the Emmons pedal steel fill the air. Neither of us is listening as it cries. Her grey hair is curled tightly, her thin cotton dress neatly pressed; her brown eyes stare into the distance. She's smiling and speaking softly.

"Your daddy's a really good player. I'm coming home. I've got some money and the Ford." Three weeks later, on my eighteenth birthday, my father stood with his toes pointed, back straight, chin level and looked across the plains. She smiled as he put his lips to the trombone and played unlike he had played before. I saw the light—no more darkness, no more night. And she died quietly as her heart quit keeping time. I look at the picture and her effusiveness echoes—your daddy was different, he understood. No more darkness. I imagine tasting the bronze mouthpiece like a penny as I watch my father staring into the distance.

—*Michael Clark*

from *Ten–Seventy-nine*

Chapter 1

Emerging from the surrealistic glow of the strobing fire truck and engine lights, two firemen dropped the smoking corpse unceremoniously onto my ambulance cot. I'd been listening in on the fire ground radio and heard that there might have been a victim, so I hauled the cot out of the rig as close to the fire as I could without having to drag it over hoses.

Tendrils of smoke wafted from the body with the sweetness of barbecued pork, overpowering the smell of burning wood. It didn't look too cooked, a contrast to the grisly condition of most fire victims, little more than charred hunks of meat, their ordeals etched in leering grins of death left by lips curled and burnt away.

I shuddered. It was a sight I never really got used to and provided a reminder of my own fear of burning to death. It was too easy to imagine the odor of my own flesh cooking, the excruciating pain before I drew my final tortured breath.

he body showed only a couple of obviously burned patches. Translucent strips of flesh hung from what had been a male chest and set of arms, exposing weeping pink tissue. The man appeared to have been in his fifties. Scorched black hair and a hawkish nose dominated a weathered face etched with a roadmap of a hard life.

One of the firemen pulled his air mask away from his face; his breath frosted the midnight air. "He's all yours, Tom." His voice was detached, an instinctive response when it became clear the victim was dead.

I looked around the scene as I pulled my radio from my belt and said, "Dispatch, Rescue 3, we have a victim."

The dispatcher said, "Ten-four. We'll get another rig on the way."

The crackle of the radio rousted my partner from her nap in the front of the rig and let her know we actually had something to do. Beyond, the inferno licked through the second-story eaves of an old white wood-shingled house while a masked fireman stood on the roof struggling to start a chain saw. Hoses snaked into the house, twitching to life and leaking water onto the snow-covered grass.

A fire scene is a cacophony—diesel engines straining at high RPM's, the incessant interruptions of the radio, the muted sounds of men and women working, and the shouts of commands and situation reports.

Clusters of bystanders, bundled against the cold and held back by yellow police tape, watched the scene with a mixture of fascination, curiosity, and wonderment. To someone not familiar with a structure fire, the

scene of bunker-gear-clad firemen performing any number of strange tasks seemed completely disorganized. I suddenly remembered my first blaze as a probationary fireman. When I expressed my dismay at the apparent chaos to a grizzled veteran fond of reminiscing about the old days, he simply said, "Just look for the white and red hats." If you knew to watch for the battalion chief wearing his distinctive white helmet and for the captains and lieutenants in red helmets, you could recognize a pattern. Upon completing a task, groups of firefighters would report to their lieutenants and captains, who would report in turn to the chief on scene. The men would then be assigned other tasks.

I snapped back to reality. It was hard to believe that only six or seven minutes ago, I was in bed tossing and turning through a restless sleep.

"Engine 3, Truck 3, Rescue 3—1719 West 9th Street—assist Company 6—structure fire."

Shit, I thought as I bolted upright. I quickly pulled on my glasses and reached for my boots. *I hate structure fires*. Most of them were false alarms, and to me, the ones that weren't were pretty dull. I worked out of Rescue 3, also known as the ambulance for Engine Company 3, Riverview Fire Department.

I've been a paramedic for the last ten years, following in my old man's footsteps as a fireman, but not necessarily the way he wanted. I stood by at fires "waiting to render aid," as the job description stated, but always distanced from the thick of the flames. My father hated my job, stubbornly holding to his conviction that fire departments were wrong to involve medical treatment. Arguments aside, from my perspective, drinking coffee at a fire scene sure beat dodging a collapsing roof.

The dispatcher repeated the alarm in monotone as I buttoned and tucked in my shirt. Her voice over the radio was smoldering, but we all knew she carried close to two hundred and fifty pounds on her five-foot frame—five foot tall and five foot wide we liked to say.

Men stirred excitedly from their sleep as lights clicked on. Undoubtedly, some of them had already been up since they'd heard the tones go out for the first company.

I trotted down the stairs to the truck bay. We were no longer able to use the brass pole; some city bureaucrat had decided it was too dangerous: we could get hurt sliding down. I guess the nameless paper pusher forgot about the nature of the job itself.

Trundling down the steps, I inhaled the unique essence of the fire sta-

tion: drying hose canvas, diesel, dinner, rubber, and smoke-soaked bunker gear. The odor is instantly recognizable to anyone who has ever been in a station. Number 3, where I worked, was one of the newer stations, built during a city budget surplus to house the bigger multipurpose fire engines that were new to the fire service. The city ran out of money before it could buy the new engines, but despite our older equipment, it was a tight and well-run station set in the center of the city.

Amid the clamor of men climbing into their bunker gear, I slid into the driver's seat of Rescue 3. My partner, Janelle Crawford, Janey to her friends, was usually a bit slow in waking up—not slow enough to cause a problem, but sluggish enough to be annoying. She was still pretty green as a paramedic, with only six months in the field, but I could see that once she got past her new-kid-on-the-block jitters, she had the potential to be an outstanding paramedic.

That Janey and I were dating outside work had no bearing on my opinion of her professionally. We had learned to separate our work and private lives. And so far, everything was flowing fine. She had broached the subject of us possibly moving in together, and we had even checked out a few apartments, but I wasn't quite ready to take that leap.

The big turbo diesel engines of the fire trucks rumbled to life and built to a thundering din, their vibrations resonating throughout the bay. Strobes and flashers lit the area as the trucks started pulling out onto the tarmac.

"Come on, Janey," I mumbled to myself. I turned the key and waited for the "Wait to Start" dash light to go out. Though the rig was only five years old, Rescue 3 was considered close to retirement as it had 150,000 miles on the clock. It would probably be pulled out of service later in the year. I had mixed feelings about her impending retirement. She and I had shared a lot of history together: 3 A.M. calls sliding through the snow, plowing through rainstorms so severe that windshield wipers were useless, the scrapes and scratches that bore witness to her many callouts.

I turned the key and the engine protested to life. Janey climbed into the cab with a smile and a toss of her black bobbed hair, pulling on a fire department ball cap as she buckled her seat belt. She was wiry thin and cute without being pretty; intelligent sky-blue eyes balanced a too-narrow face. She was young in looks and spirit, helpful in a business that burns most people out before they make five years. She was also one of the paramedics who weren't firefighters.

Five years previous, Riverview Fire Department had not had an ambulance service. When the local private ambulance service went out of busi-

ness, the city instructed the fire department to start one. While technically part of the fire department, the ambulances were staffed with paramedics who weren't firemen—they worked fewer hours, weren't part of the same union, and didn't have same wages and benefits. Paramedics also worked on the fire engines, which is where I had come from, and were often the first on the scene, since not every fire station housed an ambulance. When the new service was founded, they needed a training cadre and I had volunteered. Technically, I was still a firefighter-paramedic, unlike Janey, who was simply a paramedic. I grew to like the hours on the ambulance so much that I stayed. It had been years since I had donned bunker gear and an air pack and run into a burning building, and while it annoyed my father, I was pretty content.

Smiling, Janey said, "Sorry I'm late. Did I miss anything?"

"No," I grumbled. She knew I didn't like being the last one out of the bay; it made us look bad. Being a paramedic crew in a station of hardcore firefighters was difficult enough. We got less pay and less respect and had what the firemen considered an easy job, working only 12-hour shifts compared to their 24.

I put the rig in gear, flipped the switch for the strobes, and pulled out onto the tarmac just as the first engine pulled out onto the street, siren scything the night air.

Double shit—we were the last crew out of the bay and would have to buy donuts for the rest of the company.

"I'll buy the donuts," Janey said, reading my thoughts. I flipped on the siren and pulled out into the street behind the ladder truck, Truck 3, another truck that was to be taken out of service later in the year. Truck 3 belched a cloud of smoke in protest of the hard driving of the kid behind the wheel.

I turned down the radio broadcasting the din of men engaged in battle with what sounded like a huge blaze.

"That would be nice," I said dryly. It had been a dull shift offering no more than a couple of routine chest-pain calls and a frequent-flier asthmatic who stubbornly refused to believe that smoking was bad for her.

Janey reached across and placed her hand on mine, resting on the air horn button on the center console. "What do you want to do for breakfast?" Our shift was over at six, and she and I made a point of going to either her place or mine and spending the day together. Since we both had the next day off, I had considered sneaking to Chicago, renting a hotel room and checking out a couple of blues clubs I had heard about. Janey

didn't understand my fascination with the music, but she was starting to come around, even as she tried to convert me to Folk. She would also appreciate a nice dinner and some shopping.

"How about we play it by ear," I said, double tapping the air horn as we pulled through an intersection. The problem with following Truck 3 was that it was slower than hell; I wanted to get to the scene.

Janey broke my reverie by reaching around me and checking for a pulse at the patient's neck. She'd been napping in the front of the rig while I'd been out with the cot.

"Faint carotid pulse, not breathing."

"You really want to work him?" I asked as I finished strapping him down. We both knew that if he'd been in the fire too long, he didn't have much of a chance. Since we were the second company called, he probably was as good as dead. The first whiff of a burning VCR tape will knock you out and the second will kill you. The byproduct of the combustion is hydrogen cyanide, the same stuff used in gas chambers.

Grasping the end of the cot and dragging it toward the rig, she shrugged and said, "He ain't a crispy critter, so I think there's a chance."

Janey and I had both been on fire fatalities where there was no doubt that the victim was dead.

Shrugging, I said, "I'll get the IV. You get started on the airway."

I popped open the rear doors of the rig and grabbed the wheels as Janey lifted up the end of the cot.

From the way she strained to lift her end of the cot, I could tell the victim wasn't as light as he looked.

With the cot secured to the latch on rig floor, I walked back around front. There was a probationary fireman standing nearby watching the others work. I thought his name was Phil. I grabbed his arm and asked, "You have a CPR card?"

When he nodded I said, "Good; climb on in. We need some help." I pulled open the side door of the rig as he climbed in reluctantly.

Janey said, "Hey, Phil; good to see you. Just stay out of the way and we'll have a bit of fun." Phil instantly relaxed. Janey had an easy familiarity with everyone, something that made me slightly envious. I was on the fire department because my dad was a hero, but she was here because she loved her work with a contagious youthful enthusiasm.

In the time it had taken me to walk around the side of the rig and grab Phil, Janey had hooked up the heart monitor and was peering at it intently.

The monitor showed what looked to be a slow, lazy, wide heart rhythm indicative of a dying heart.

Janey handed the bag-valve-mask to Phil and said, "Bag him for a bit, would you?"

I was climbing over the still-smoking victim, trying not to bang my head on the grab bar overhead, when she looked up at me and asked, "What do you want?" In a two-paramedic crew, we alternated calls, and this one was mine.

Almost gleefully, Janey reached for the airway roll. We all needed intubations, a skill we didn't often get to practice, but I figured that she needed the experience more than I did.

Reaching for a tourniquet, I wrapped the band around the victim's upper arm and reached for an IV set-up. By the time I had the bag primed and ready to go, I could see a big vein in the crook of his elbow. I swabbed the site with an alcohol prep and slid in an 18-gauge catheter, the "big green one," as Janey called it. I felt the very slight pop as the catheter entered the vein and then saw the blood flash into the back of the needle. I slid the catheter the rest of the way in and hooked the line up, glancing up to see that it was running. The saline dripped as I taped down my handiwork.

Phil said, "I don't think I'm getting any air in."

Janey had set up an ET tube and put her favorite blade, the big curved one, on the laryngoscope handle. She was going to use the metal blade that had a light on it, the laryngoscope blade, and look for the vocal cords before she slid a tube between them and down his trachea so we could breathe for him. She motioned Phil back, pried open the victim's teeth, and slid the blade into his mouth with practiced ease.

I unlocked the drug box, slid out an ampule of epinephrine, screwed it into the IV, and pushed it in. Dumping drugs into his arm wouldn't do any good unless someone was doing CPR, and that wasn't going to happen until Janey got him intubated.

"Epi in," I said, hitting the event key on the monitor. Epinephrine, epi, was synthetic adrenaline, a way of kick-starting a heart into action.

"I can't see it. Bag for a minute, will you?" Janey asked Phil.

Phil stepped in and started squeezing the bag while clamping his hand over the mask using his best fresh-from-CPR-school technique. I looked down and saw that the victim's abdomen was rising—we were pumping air into his stomach. He was likely to vomit, and too much air in his stomach meant we wouldn't be able to ventilate for him or perform effective chest compressions.

I reached for the blade in Janey's hand. "Want me to try?"

"Sure," she said. Normally, paramedics fight each other for intubations, but Janey knew that with my experience I would be more likely to get the tube in. Intubation was critical but also complex.

I motioned Phil aside and slid the blade between the victim's teeth. Lifting straight up, I saw the esophagus, which led to the stomach—not where I wanted to put a breathing tube. But I couldn't see the vocal cords, the landmark that would help me locate the trachea, where I should have been placing the tube.

I lifted up a little further and saw the epiglottis, the leaf-like structure that covered the trachea. It was possible that the smoke and heat had caused the trachea to swell closed, so I hazarded a guess and punched the tube down where I thought the trachea should be. I was rewarded by a puff of smoke in the face as the tube pushed through the vocal cords.

Coughing, I withdrew the wire that held the tube in shape and motioned Phil to hook the attachment on his bag valve mask to the end of the tube. I held the tube while he squeezed in half a dozen breaths. While he pumped the bag, Janey positioned her stethoscope over the victim's stomach and then over his lungs.

Tossing her stethoscope over her neck, she said, "Good breath sounds in the lungs; none in the stomach."

She clamped the tube in place with a specially made holder.

"Start CPR," I said to Phil and took the bag from his hands.

Janey looked up at me. "You need anything else?" Usually, there were at least two people helping in the back of the rig, but with everyone else busy, it looked like I'd have to use all available resources.

I shook my head. "St. Francis is probably closest."

She watched Phil laboring over the victim. Reluctantly, she climbed out the side door. I heard her put the rig in gear and turn on the siren while talking to the dispatcher. As soon as she was finished with the radio, I'd use it to contact the hospital.

I was reaching over to turn the heart monitor so I could see it when Janey shouted, "Shit!"

There was a violent bang from the front of the rig and my head slammed back into a cabinet. The world went black.

—Joe Collins '05

It's Cold

It's cold, but not that cold for the middle of November. It's dark too—darker than 98% of the folks living in this country can even imagine, but not as dark as it would be without the farmyard floodlights every half mile or so. Then there's that great ominous glow coming from the power plant down on the river, what, some ten miles away? And it's quiet. All I hear is the sound of the horses' hooves scraping the gravel and the occasional snorting back and forth—as if to console one another with their near presence. Oh, and once we turn back west for the last two-mile stretch, the wind comes right at us with a whistling *soto voce* howl all its own. Otherwise there are the odd farmyard dogs that somehow sense our coming long before we could possibly be visible, and in the whole three hours of riding we meet exactly three cars—all of them in the first half hour (on the road that forms the most obvious transept between two paved roads). The first two slow and dim their lights, no doubt incredulous that some jackass is out for a ride in such conditions, but still respectful of the fact that they're approaching big animals that could lurch out into the road. The third car flings itself past us on the same side of the road at breakneck speed—I can just catch the image of a kid talking on a cell phone: I am sure he never even sees us.

My horses are good around vehicles: they never spook, don't need to see them coming up from behind, just don't care. Nonetheless, I'm not about to bring them home by the blacktop and risk passing a whole lot more furiously speeding cars that close to Duke, whom I lead on the road side of the roadside (because on the other—the ditch side—are mailboxes, and I can't risk getting him on one side and me on the other with the lead rope tangled between). Anyway, fortunately, the kid in the car doesn't kick up any gravel, and the dust is minimal thanks to an early rain shower.

I'd cinched up the saddle knowing that I'd have to tighten it after Pete loosened up, but now I realize that with reins in one hand and a lead in the other I can't get down, cinch up, and re-mount. Of course, the boys would almost certainly just stand there and wait for me, but since I'm retrieving them from their break-out God knows how many hours ago (I'd been on the other side of the state visiting family when I'd gotten the call: "Ah, coach?" "Yea, Ryan?" "Ah, I came to do chores for you, but the horses are gone. What do I do?"), I wasn't about to let go of either's head for even a second.

This means that the saddle keeps slipping to the starboard, which makes for a damn uncomfortable seat. I lift myself up, put my weight on the right stirrup, sort of hop a couple of times, and we're good for another

few hundred yards . . . but it's getting looser and looser of course. I want to pick up speed but can only too well imagine the saddle and me just toppling off in front of Duke's hooves. I still wouldn't let go—I know that for a fact—but it would be a mess. Anyway, what with the darkness-disguised mailboxes, the inevitable roadside trash (mostly Budweiser cans—the king of beers in this part of the world anyway), and the likely gopher holes, I won't try. Or rather, I'll try real hard not to try.

The wind picks up and even in the darkness I can see the approaching low rain clouds darker than the darkness and clearly spitting rain. I laugh out loud; this is just too perfect. On top of it all, I'm gonna get a good soaking. You wouldn't put that much bad luck in a novel; it would snap the illusion of credibility. Anyway, the rain holds off for the most part.

Yard lights look closer than they really are, and it takes about a quarter of an eternity just to reach the nearest one. They also all look alike, at least in the dark and from a distance, which means I am forever tempted to the optimistic belief that this next one up ahead marks the place I can turn north . . . but I am fully aware of my penchant for overly optimistic appraisals of distances to travel and try to do my best to keep it in check, which is well, since it isn't (that is, it isn't the place I can turn).

Once, years ago, on a hiking trip with JD and a younger guy (we called him "the pack mule": being fitter and stronger, we made him carry a heavier load), using a topo map we'd pulled from the pages of an atlas, I was wrong so often about how much progress we were making that the kid—Jimmy—just got downright depressed. JD finally had to yell at me to stop with that goddamned map. On every trip since, I've tried to exercise the wisdom I thought I'd learned: the journey's the thing, not the destination. And on all those trips I just couldn't help myself: I had to know that we were making progress, that we were traveling at a certain rate, that we were near this or that point, that we'd be at our campsite by a certain time. See, I understood Zen and the Art real well—intellectually—but I couldn't ever get my damned Catholic soul out of its teleological yearning to arrive at the Beatitude.

All the way back across the state today I didn't listen to the radio or my music. I just thought. I wasn't too worried about the horses—some, but not too much. I sped a bit and imagined my excuses to the cop, but not too much. Around Des Moines—that is to say, not quite half way home—I got another call from Ryan: "Coach?" "Yeah, Ryan, how are you?" "Ah, good. Well, we found the horses. They're fenced in at this place. It's quite a ways from your farm. I can just see it in the distance." "Ryan, that's great news;

thanks. Do you think you and Sean can ride or walk them home?" "Well, sure. We can. If you want. It is a long way." (I knew better: neither kid knew how to saddle or even halter a horse, though Ryan had ridden several times with me). "Ryan? Is anyone at that house I can talk to?" "Ah, no. I waved down a pick-up on the road and asked if he'd seen a couple of horses. He said, 'Yeah, follow me' and brought me here. But I guess this woman that lives here, his niece, isn't home." "Ry, are you sure they're my horses?" "Ah, I think so. Red [he meant sorrel] with white stripes down the noses?" "That's right, but look at Pete's front left hoof; do you see a circular shape cut out, about the size of a half dollar?" "Yeah. Yeah! That's Pete for sure." "O.K., Ryan. Listen, I owe you big time. Leave a note with this phone number and I'll take care of it when I get home."

Ryan and Sean, another of my soccer players, had spent most of their Sunday afternoon driving around country roads looking for the horses. God bless them. The only clues I could give them was that the horses head would down a road, not overland, and be very happy if they found other horses . . . or an apple tree. Not much help, even if it did turn out to be true; there are lots of roads and a fair number of horses in the neighborhood, though only one apple tree I know of.

I got another call just outside Iowa City. The niece. "Howdy! Did you lose a couple a critters?" "Yeah, I sure did. Sorry about the bother." "Oh, it's no problem!" She was laughing the whole time in a warm and understanding way (she has horses herself). She'd insisted on trying to round up a truck and trailer for me to haul them home, no problem, even though Ryan had said he could make out my place from hers. She called back about twenty minutes later, just as I crossed the Cedar River, all apologetic. No dice on the trailer, but she'd ride one back for me, no problem. Her country-friendly laughing voice was already getting a bit annoying. She sounded like a person who doesn't get too much company or too much excitement in her life. And I didn't fancy supplying either, despite my genuine gratitude.

I got a lift to her place; it was already dark. She offered to ride with me again, "no problem."

I'd ensured against that by bringing only one saddle. She was laughing at the cuteness of it all as we brushed Pete down so I could saddle him. I found myself kind of anxious to get going, both because I realized that if Ryan had indeed seen my house, it was "as the crow flies" and that avoiding the blacktop, I'd have a good long ride ahead. Besides, she reminded me a little too much of the castle of virgins in Monty Python's Holy Grail . . . too willing to help out, "no problem."

A long weekend at my folks, mostly spent reading, cut short for a five-hour drive home, so I could end up on the back of a horse in no particular hurry to get where we were going. That adds up to more time on my own to just think than I've had in months.

No e-mails to compose, papers to grade, games to plan. No meetings to attend, proposals to write, or chores to do. Sure, all that stuff is still out there, but there's not a darn thing that I can do about any of it. I do have my phone, but it's stowed securely in an inner pocket, and anyway, I can't possibly reach for it now that both hands are busy. I hope it doesn't ring, and that, if it does, the horses don't jump.

I try to tell myself that this is all-good thing, that I need it, that I should conquer my ever-loving urgency to be constantly doing something, making progress, gettin 'er done, taking it on. But I just don't buy into the notion of a divinely ordained or even just a fortuitous opportunity to get what's good for me. Funny fact of the matter is that I really don't feel any urgency. I know that I'm in for a long ride, that I can't hurry it, and yet I don't even want, say, a radio program to listen to for diversion or instruction or entertainment. Still . . .

The probability that I'll be soaking wet by the time this ride's over doesn't bother me either—which is odd, as I hate getting wet more than almost anything. I opt to leave my headlamp off too. For one thing, I don't want the shadows to spook the horses (I don't really think it will, just as I don't believe the phone going off would, just as that car flying by didn't), but I opt for the darkness for the same reason I'd opted for a quiet car ride here. I don't know that reason; it just feels right somehow.

There is a danger that I could romanticize this little jaunt, invest it with adventure or meaning that it just doesn't have. I'm a cowboy out on the range with my best horse and a spare; I'm an itinerant preacher with a saddlebag full of Bibles; this is the lesson finally learned: slowing down and relishing what's right around me at this moment; I'm just out for a nice quiet pleasure ride. Nope, not even that. I sure wouldn't be out here if it weren't necessary, and even though I don't mind the ride—in fact, I am oddly enjoying it, wind and loose saddle and my nuts getting squashed under me and all—I would never do it again for leisure, even in the daytime. It's my duty, and I am fairly privileged in that I happen to enjoy my duties. So much time to think, and yet I can't think of a single thing worth thinking about. I'm not as cold as I'd expected I'd be. The rain is still holding off. The wind disappears when I turn my head away from it—Why's that? Duke rides up alongside us, for the company, I suppose, and nibbles at Pete's

neck. He's a fine animal: his round back and long neck make a beautiful shape in the darkness, broad enough I swear I could comfortably ride standing up with one foot on each horse.

Goddamn, I would like to stand up; my knees are aching. She was a nice-looking woman—Why'd I discourage her company? Couldn't take the chirpy no-problem laughter. Are those coyote or just dogs calling back and forth? Out west I'd know for sure, but I'm skeptical that we've got coyote here: no decent cover for miles in any direction, 'cept that wood stand my dad once told me was put up intentionally back in the day for firewood . . . now outa control, and a dang miracle it's still there, all surrounded by miles—miles, not acres—of corn fields, flat and without texture since the harvest. Is there a bridge or just a culvert at the bottom of this little hill? The boys don't like crossing bridges, but they will—just steer to the middle. Can they see those mail boxes in front of us? What if I didn't rein Pete around 'em? Would he naturally go around on the right side? I'm not gonna find out. I wonder how their night vision is—better than mine for sure, and mine's not bad, especially for a guy that has to carry his drugstore reading glasses everywhere. I can't read a road map and drive at the same time anymore, so I can't be checking my progress every few minutes.

This ride, this night, seems like such a waste of an opportunity, even if I don't believe in such things. I should make some plans, review old discussions with colleagues, make mental notes of things I gotta do, pray maybe. But my mind won't land on anything, not even to fret about shit. Haven't seen a car in an hour—I like that I can say that. It is dark. Is that house up there the one just east of mine, or am I tricking myself with my old nonsense again? Don't matter; it will come when it comes. What if those damn neighbor dogs come out at us? Why don't they? My Mary would, for sure, if she were out when some crazy idiot rode by in the dark. But Mary doesn't worry the boys, so maybe no dog would. Well, we'll see if it should happen, I guess.

Sometimes I look at my students' faces and wonder what goes on behind their foreheads: could be anything; probably nothing. One of my favorite things about soccer season is walking the length of the bus on the way home from a long road trip and just looking at the guys as they drowse, play cards, watch Redneck Comedy or some such claptrap on laptops, fidget with their iPods, or flip listlessly through school books. Often their looks are blank, a glossy bliss of placidity. I've never had that gift. To be honest, I've never really considered it a gift. Still, I enjoy observing it in them, and it makes me feel curiously paternal and defensive, like a watchman on

guard duty over a sleeping village, or a farmer watching his milk cows bed down in the straw.

Right now my mind may have slipped into their undergrad coma mode. Is this what it's like? My mind's not blank; it just isn't having to process. My brain is like an old cluttered private library room full of books that I just don't have to open; I note the titles, smile in recognition, and muse at the arrangement, but I don't touch 'em. This is really an amazingly nice place I'm in; it is, to use a funny word, cozy. My head is taking in sensory information from what's going on around me, and there just isn't that much, which is nice.

This is more like how I imagine my horses' minds to work. They're always aware, but that doesn't make them tense. They don't know anxiety. Sure, they can bolt in a heartbeat, but aren't really a tightly coiled wire just waiting to be sprung. Once, riding in my old pasture, I got lazy and inattentive to Duke's ears (ya gotta watch the ears: they rotate like NASA's radar and are just as sensitive). We were plunking along at ease one second, and the next he was somewhere to my left and I was sittin' on air—he'd jerked that quickly from the sudden wind-snapping slap-sound of a plastic bag snagged in a tree branch beside us. Before I even got up, reins still in hand, he'd already stopped, yeah, still side-heaving and nostrils flared, but by the time I was back on board he'd completely forgotten it—like it'd never even happened. The other day I was mucking out the barn and the two of 'em were just hangin' out, and for some God-knows-why reason first one and then the other just exploded: Pete actually slipped on the concrete he recoiled so bad. They can go, my point is, from dormant to full flight faster than a blink . . . and then back again.

Mostly they're as placid as sleeping cats. It's only their senses that are alert; their minds are becalmed. That's my brain tonight—I have horse brain. I'm an animal. It is nice, I gotta say. I hear the wind, my joints ache fiercely, and my heart is so full of the shapes and smells and soft noises that it hurts—like love. I'm connecting with the boys. I'm less the boss than just their pal. We three are ready for the tire-hurled gravel shard, but not really worrying about it; eyes scan the darker-than-darkness ditches for movement but don't expect it. We pat or nudge or coo at one another as our different physiognomies dictate, but we get the same message. We enjoy one another's company. Yep, that's my place ahead on the left. And the rain is still holding off.

—*Bud Grant '80*

Three Schnooks

I. Face up to gouged-in marble face.

I watch the firmest set of female features ruminate over chiseled cheekbones. It's not as though I care, it's as though I notice. He is not beautiful, in fact those cheekbones are majorly mossed by a grade of mutton chop that would make James Hetfield cringe. What disgusting inconsistencies may lie beneath are left to speculation, but the exposed facial flesh only lends to the belief that if what we see is carved like a statue, what we don't is even better.

When he talks, solid slabs swim. She must find it gorgeous. Not an ounce of facial fat, several ounces of facial hair, and the gargantuan grimace of a real xman. She must find it so sweet the way that 'stache pulls back lovingly on his simple sunken slits?

Could it be his proclivity to look exactly
like a certain feminine hygiene product?

I surmise this must be the case. For I have seen many of those subjected to my own infatuations turn their gaze toward someone bearing that very same resemblance. It's striking really. These products are generally not at all considered a necessity by the female majority, and in fact are widely considered to promote only dryness; irritation; infection; i.e., nothing at all beneficial. Yet there are still those who pine for that certain higher level of cleanliness, and in the light of such negative postulation regarding artificial cleansers of this sort, it is entirely plausible that these ladies may turn to more natural, but not entirely so, methods.

Now, I can only imagine some (or most) of these fairest ones do desire to be clean. It really seems only logical, considering in my experience, those who are most fair tend to be not much more than one cavernous, gaping, hollow. A trait which likely has a huge habit of accumulating filth. What's better a detergent for such upright tunnels, than an organicly locomotive, rinse-producing male to claim as useful property. Especially a bearded, buzz-cut one with pirate rings dangling from *both* ears.

II. Conjunction

The bond is harmonious between that purgative man and his dearly pneumatic femme. They blow me down as perfectly fitting. A working, reliant, and completely necessary relationship. I guess I find it almost beautiful. They always walk out together, as I stand at my post. Not jealous, but

something else. For I would probably not, in any instance, want to be close to either one of them. I would certainly never want to perform the duties of that neatly unshaven salad stacking man. I have no interest in his crevasse of a woman, or the assistance to dispelling its less-than-desirable contents (though I may if I had some indication I would be welcome to indulge the opportunity).

It's sick really, the back scratching ideal of companionship. I don't find these people particularly fascinating. But I have witnessed enough interactions between the two, as well as their individual interactions with others, to make my wholly biased and pretentious assessment.

They are perfect for each other.

I have never once seen either of them laugh, giggle, or show any semblance of capability to take a joke. Yet, for some reason they are interested in the stone face that either one affectionately shoots the other. They're hot, and it would be absolutely ridiculous to assume that they would be perusing anyone other than each other. I suppose that is what warrants my engagement. I envy that immaculate alignment of beings. Even if it is built upon necessity, and possibly the inability (or lack of itch) to trouble with multi-facets and/or layers. Whatever. Drinking and fucking are probably a lot more fruitful a base than I would ever give them credit for. Why not, really? The two acts are not nearly as ineffable as I once perceived them to be. People don't really have much to say to each other. At least these two have drinking and fucking. I know. I have heard both the darling and her douche speak lovingly of both. Each time it was simultaneously cute, and hard.

III. Surveilling the Mutates

From my station, I can see their clutching paws. This is a sure sign of what's to come. It is 8 P.M., and the three of us are clad in khaki and denim, as always. They did not notice me. He had just slid into his macho man black leather jacket. She would let her hair down to signify the night coming on if hat-hair weren't such an atrocity. They clock out, imbued with the vigor and exuberance only two lovers leaving a shit-job could know. Of course, this joy is not entirely evident in their intrinsically vapid facial expressions. They gallivant through the automatic doors nonetheless, and I am left behind to bask in the jaundice glow of a thousand fluorescent lights. Oh, retail!

The following five minutes consist of me pondering the vast oddity of relating to the opposite sex, the obligatory concern of my age and ilk. Odds seem insurmountable, especially when faced with the likelihood of myself finding a petite pretty one to happily bound about with in the same manner in which they do.

This kind of inner turmoil rages for five minutes. Five minutes only, because frankly, it's stupid, and I know it. I would rather devote the remaining 55 of my last hour to something a bit less consuming. I spend my time make-believing I'm a rocketship as the clock eagerly counts down my liftoff. (Even the time pieces want to see me go.) Minute hand hits nine. I clock out, bundle up, and make my own way through those automatic doors.

Upon entering the parking lot, what do I see?

'Twas none other than beauty and her enzyme reducing beast. He was a sac and syringe. She was undoubtedly, feeling the need for some post-work/pre-debauch sanitization. He, as suspected, is obliging her true self. Kneeling, before fine folds of labia—human sized, and fully spread across the hood of her partymobile. His sides are gently cuffed by her prehensile dangles, and ever so slightly, they are squeezing. Simply spraying his water/vinegar dilute. The sound is soft. Not nearly imbibed, the wash splashes down the bumper and on to the asphalt. It carries with it the fetid filth of a long hot, hard day in the grocery business.

I don't stop immediately. The scene is easily taken in by a glance, but I begin to think about their ideal connection, and how common it seems. Once again I'm struck. First, and perhaps most eminently by the desire to slink up behind the two and let loose their crimson to reduce into the putrid puddle that has coalesced beneath them. I can't though; I've no real reason to dispose of even the most one-track pair. Instead I follow my second inkling.

I approach slowly. In my wake I leave the air of curiosity, and determination to feel the slinking of cell reconfiguration. Maybe its natural, uncontrollable, and possibly it is merely the fact that I keep myself always such a safe distance from those in these forms that prevents it's occurrence. My steps hasten with the hope that I will be subject to transformation upon proximity. The breeze begins to tussle with my hair, and with it brings the sweet slurping sound of a lapped at spurting nozzle. I try twitching as I near within five feet, but I feel nothing aside from the slight untucking of my shirt from such a vigorous jaunt. I want my cranium to extend into a narrow concave tipped shaft. I want to balloon into a bulbous reservoir ripe

for dousing a cavernous counterpart. However, despite my desperation, I do not. I manage to make it within one foot, and that is when they turn on me. Literally.

The sound of that once man, now rubber bubble twisting to face me on the pavement brings to mind dry flesh on tree bark. The baster stares and the chasm glares as I'm slain with an onslaught of dirty, dirty looks. I bate my forward progression, and he inches toward me. The subtle wind carries a hiss now, along with a mist of fluid. His scoots are hostile, and she exudes menace from her sweet pedestal of a sedan. The fear of being drenched in what smells like lukewarm Easter egg dye prompts my retreat. Physical harm never really crossed my mind, though it probably should have The blatant obviousness of my line-crossing fueled my still fully human legs as I played Olympian and dashed to my automobile. As the door latched, and I settled into the fuzzy grey of my car's interior, I see that spewing sterilization monster of a man turn back to his humongous hole. His work is resumed, and their perfectly flush jigsaw fit relationship continues unadulterated. It makes sense.

IV. Soulmates

He n' she are forever buckled and swashing. They are slaves to the magnetic pull of attraction. Even if the word connotes a hierarchy of possible lovers, neither will stray far from his/her designated stratum. Opposites don't attract. If they do, one is inevitably, eventually outshone by the overwhelming allure of stereotypes. My venture to defile those conventions only left me a little soggy, and hardly wiser. But even the verification of what was always apparent is a form of edification. It's a pound-over-the-head lesson. What works, works within boundaries, and rarely beyond.

—*Braden Rapp*

For the Birds

Pete Nelson stepped out onto his back deck, breathing in a large dose of the dusk air and keeping a tight grip on the plate of raw steaks in his right hand. God, there was nothing like grilling out in your own backyard. You could hear the birds chirping, the wind blowing through the trees, and see nature all around you. The screen door slammed behind him, rattling the rain gutter directly above the door. He took another deep breath and headed for his grill.

Pete had lost the battle for the grill with his wife, Catherine. When their old Weber grill had given out on them a few years back, Pete's first inclination had been to replace it with another Weber, and he had told Catherine as much. But she had been against it from the beginning. No, she'd said, it would cost too much to keep stocking it with charcoal. Gas was the only way to go. Pete could've told her that gas would have to be restocked, too, and when you factored in how much more expensive it was than charcoal, it was a pretty even trade, but after almost thirty years of marriage, he knew when his wife was set on something, and this was one of those times.

So he had broken down and settled for a gas grill. It wasn't all that bad, but he did miss that taste you only get from charcoal. But meat was meat.

He opened up the lid, getting ready to put on the steaks, and then stopped. Well, that was the last thing he had expected. He stood there, a man just turned fifty, shaped like a pear, with his mouth hung open underneath his salt-and-peper mustache in a gape of surprise.

"C-Catherine?"

"What is it Pete?" she called. She was in the kitchen, washing two potatoes for baking.

"You'd better come out here for a minute, honey."

Pete heard her turn the water off and, as he heard the screen door slam, he saw she was still drying off her hands with one of her dish towels. It had cows on it.

"Pete, what in the world —" she stopped when she saw what Pete was pointing at in the grill. "Oh my."

It was a bird's nest. Where the bird who had built it had gone to, neither of them knew, but she hadn't left her nest lacking—there were three eggs in it.

"Well, Pete, would you look at that," Catherine cried. "We've got house guests!"

"Yep—looks like we do," Pete said with an audible swallow as he saw the look of amazement (and a little happiness) on his wife's face. "But

Catherine—"

"Yes, Pete?"

"How am I going to cook the steaks?"

Catherine baked them.

Later that night, after Catherine went to bed, Pete took a beer and a cigarette out onto the porch and took another long look at the nest in the light of the moon.

No matter how much he looked at it, it stayed the same—a nest in his grill. He took a sip of his beer and a long drag of his cigarette, wincing at the funny taste in his mouth. He'd only had steak that was cooked on the grill before—never baked. It was . . . different. He inspected the nest as he had done while Catherine cooked. He didn't quite know why. He supposed nothing had changed. They hadn't even seen the mother return.

She must have gotten in through the holes in the back of the grill. There were still some stray bits of straw poking out from the space—it was just big enough for a bird, even a large one, to squeeze through—and once she got in, she'd have plenty of room. Pete wondered what kind of bird he had on his hands here. He was no more of an outdoorsman than anyone else here in town—he'd go camping and fishing every now and then, and he could find his way in the heavily wooded countryside that surrounded town, but he couldn't tell you what kind of eggs these were.

They were large, bigger than he would've expected, and light blue. He couldn't see any markings, but only part of each egg was visible to him, and Catherine wouldn't let him move them around to inspect them—she kept shrieking that if he touched them, the mother would catch his scent on the eggs and abandon them, leaving them to die. Pete tried to tell her that she was thinking of rabbits, but she wouldn't listen.

Pete lit another cigarette and inhaled deeply, trying to get that odd taste out of his mouth. He wondered how long these eggs would take to hatch.

The next morning, as Pete was making the coffee and pouring a bowl of cereal for breakfast, he heard a twittering outside that sounded closer than the usual batch of morning birds. He looked out the kitchen window and caught his first glimpse of the mother. It was a starling.

"Well," Pete said to the empty kitchen, "at least it's not a sparrow."

While he was at the office, Pete looked up some facts on starlings during his down time. Those were the right eggs. And their incubation period was two weeks—so in probably a little over a month, he'd have his

grill back. He wasn't too wild about that long without some kind of grilled meat—he used it almost every Sunday in good weather, and had even been known to throw on a coat if it was raining, or his warm clothes in the winter if the mood struck him to barbecue—but he supposed he could live without grilling for that long.

He came home and found Catherine on the phone, chatting with one of her girlfriends. She flitted a hand of greeting at him and continued her story.

"Well, Pete opened up the grill, and, abracadabra, there they were! Big ol' baby-blue eggs. Three of them. And when I woke up this morning, I was getting a cup of coffee, and I looked out the window, and saw the momma bird—now, what kind of birds do you suppose we've got? Starlings!" Catherine paused and Pete heard whoever she was talking to rattle something off. Catherine's eyebrows knitted in frustration, and after a sigh, she simply replied, "Well, I know it's not that special, but I happen to like starlings," as if her friend had no idea how pretty they really were.

"Never would've happened with a Weber," Pete muttered as he went to change out of his work clothes. On his way to the bedroom, he peeked into the kitchen, as was his custom, to see what was cooking for dinner. The stove was cold. The oven was turned off. The microwave wasn't turning. There wasn't even anything thawing. That was odd. Peter wondered what in the world Catherine was up to.

After changing, he went back to the living room, where he found Catherine just hanging up the phone.

"Say, honey, what's for dinner?" he asked as he settled into his chair and unfolded the paper.

A puzzled look came over Catherine's face, which passed in a moment and gave way to high, tittering laughter.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, you know Pete, it's the funniest thing," she said in between giggles. "Between watching that momma bird and calling people to tell them about our little houseguests, I forgot all about dinner. Isn't that funny?" Her giggles started up again, this time even louder.

"It is?" Pete couldn't find the humor in forgetting a meal. His stomach growled.

"Oh, Pete, don't be such a stick in the mud. I'm sure there's something out there I can whip up." Catherine gave him a playful slap on the shoulder as she passed him on her way out of the room. Pete watched her scurry out to the kitchen.

"Pete," she called from the kitchen, "how about a couple of pizzas?"
Pete sighed. "Sure."

After Catherine had gone to bed, Pete stepped out onto the deck with a cigarette and a beer (his seventh in the last hour-and-a-half). He lit the smoke, trying to get the taste of cardboard out of his mouth. Frozen pizza had never tasted quite right to him to begin with, and tonight was no exception. He'd only agreed to it because there wasn't anything else ready. But now he couldn't get that taste out of his mouth. He looked at his grill, wanting to see the nest, but the cover was shut. Catherine had decided that it would be safer to keep the grill covered for the mother bird—that way, Catherine reasoned, she wouldn't feel threatened to come back and keep her eggs warm. Pete wasn't sure if she'd been back—the last time he had seen the mother was just after dinner tonight when he'd thrown his paper plate away, and he hadn't caught a glimpse of the grill since then. He ventured closer to the grill and put his ear up to the lid, trying to find out if she was in there. He strained, pressing the entire left side of his face up against the cool surface, but couldn't make out any noises that could be identified as the mother bird. He knocked on the grill twice with his free hand and was bombarded with a maddeningly loud fluttering and chirping, which startled Pete so much that he backpedaled, tripped over a deck chair, and fell straight on his rear end, spilling his beer, and, as he braced himself with his right hand, crushing his cigarette butt-end first—out right into the palm of his hand.

"Ow—shit!" Pete whispered sharply as he lit his Zippo to examine the burn where he had inadvertently snuffed out his cigarette. It wasn't anything too serious, but it hurt like hell. He lifted the can of beer and found it empty, then looked down at his pants and saw where it had all went. They were soaked. He sighed and went into the house for a fresh pair of pants, slamming the screen door on his way out. The rain gutter above it rattled (a little louder than usual—he had to fix that), startling him even more.

Pete came back out onto the deck and lit a fresh cigarette. An idea started creeping its way into his mind as he paced back and forth in front of his grill. He tried to push it away, but it just wouldn't stop.

"Go on, do it," the little voice inside his head was saying. "You've got the cigarette in your hand already. All it'll take is just one little flick, and this'll all be over."

"No," Pete said out loud to no one. "I can't. I can't kill them. Besides, what would I tell Catherine?"

"That's easy," the voice replied. "Tell her there must have been a gas leak, something came along, hit the ignitor switch, and boom! Poor little birds. They didn't even get a chance to live."

Pete stopped his pacing and considered. That would work. He knew of at least three families on this block who had cats. They could get loose—it wasn't out of the question. They could have smelled the birds, come around looking, and accidentally flicked the switch, sending his and Catherine's little houseguests up in a blaze. The fire'd burn itself out.

"There you go," the voice said, and cackled with glee. "That'll do just fine. Now do it—just toss it in. And everything'll get back to normal."

"All right, I will," Pete answered, and gave his own little giggle. He smoked the cigarette down to the filter, stepped up to the grill, and tossed it in the hole where the mother bird must have first gotten in. There. That should take care of that. Blame it on a cat. Or even better, some kind of wild animal. Sure, they were in a town, but Pete had seen racoons and possums out wandering the streets late at night. It wasn't completely out of the question that one of them could have come along as well and sent the birds up in smoke. Why not? He chugged half his beer as he went back inside to go to bed. It hadn't lasted long, but he was glad this problem was over.

Just before Pete opened the door, he heard a soft rustling sound come from behind him. He turned to see what was making it and for the second time in as many days saw just about the last thing he expected.

The mother starling was hopping out of his grill, looking just as she had this morning, except now she had the remainder of his cigarette in her beak. She hopped over to the edge of the grill and dropped the butt over the side, where it landed on the deck. Then she turned around; faced Pete; and, while appearing to look directly at him, squawked once, lifted her tail, and laid down a dropping directly on his cigarette butt. He heard it extinguish with a hiss. The mother starling turned and hopped back into his grill.

Pete watched the event, horrified, then approached his grill to make sure he wasn't just imagining things. He looked down, and, sure enough, there was the cigarette, still lying in the bird's droppings. And as he looked back up to the side of his grill, he saw several more droppings.

She had marked her territory.

Pete sat in the office the next afternoon, his head pounding. He was hung over and tired. After his encounter with the starling the previous night, he hadn't been able to get to sleep. He kept seeing the bird looking right at him, and every time he got past that and managed to shut his eyes,

he would hear it squawk outside, although he couldn't be sure whether it was real or just in his head. It didn't matter. When he heard that noise, his eyes would shoot back open, and sleep would be impossible.

So here he was, barely awake, with no appetite, just waiting to be able to go home and go to bed. He didn't know what Catherine had planned for dinner, if anything—this morning, she had still been enamored of their "little houseguests," hardly able to wait and get the girls she babysat from next door over to see them. She probably had forgotten about dinner again, but even if she hadn't, he doubted he could eat anything. His stomach was a constantly rolling mess.

"Hey, Pete, what's up?" someone shouted, startling him out of a near-doze. He looked up. It was one of the young guys he worked with—Matthew Tidwell. He looked like the polar opposite of Pete today.

"Hey, Matt. How are you?"

"Great, Pete! Hell, if I was any better I'd be twins!" he laughed and grinned. Pete winced at his volume.

"That's . . . that's fantastic, buddy." There was a long pause. "So, Matt, what can I do for you?

The young man searched for a minute, as though he had forgotten why he came over to Pete's desk. "Oh, right! Hey, you look like hell, man."

"Yeah, I know—didn't get much sleep last night. So, what do you need?

"Right—just stopping by to see if you needed me to bring anything to the barbecue this weekend."

"What?"

"You know—your big barbecue on Sunday. You sent out the invitations last week, pal."

Shit! Pete's annual Memorial Day barbecue! He had sent out those invitations, but that had been before . . . well, before all this bird nonsense had started. Matthew was still talking.

" . . . me to bring anything—potato salad, baked beans, beer?"

"How about a Weber?" Pete said under his breath.

"What's that, Pete?"

"Nothing, Matt, nothing—don't bring a thing except yourself and that pretty little wife of yours."

"Hey, watch it you old dog—I've got my eye on you!" Matthew laughed as he started off.

"See you Sunday, Matt!"

"I'll be there!"

Pete turned back to his desk, his smile vanishing. How in the hell was

he supposed to have his barbecue while those starlings were hatching in his grill? To have the cook-out he'd need . . .

He'd need a new grill. Or, to get those birds out of his old one.

Suddenly, Pete felt a whole lot better.

Pete almost danced into the living room, trotted over to Catherine, and bent down to give her a kiss on the cheek, but she shooed him away. She was on the telephone again.

"Well, the two little girls next door are just thrilled. They can't wait to see them hatch, and then see the baby birds!"

Pete mouthed, "I need to talk to you" to Catherine as he went to change clothes. He saw her give him a quick nod.

As he was changing his pants, Catherine knocked on the door.

"Pete, what do you want to talk about?"

"Just a second," he called as he pulled his pants on and opened the door. He decided to cut right to the chase. "Catherine, we need to either get a new grill or get those birds out of this one, and we have to do it soon."

"What do you mean, Pete?"

"The barbecue! It's this Sunday. If we don't get rid of those birds, what are we going to do?"

"Oh, the barbecue. Is that all? I've already thought of that. It's taken care of."

"You've thought of something? What?"

"I'm going to bake chicken."

Pete's face dropped. "What?"

"I'm going to bake chicken, and I've called everybody and asked them to bring something."

"Baked chicken? But, Catherine, it's suppposed to be a barbecue!"

"Well, Pete I knew that, but it can't be helped. I'm not moving those birds and you're not getting a new grill."

"But—"

"No buts. It's been decided. You know," Catherine said over her shoulder as she went to the kitchen, "none of this would've happened if you would've covered up that grill with a tarp the way you were supposed to. If you'd have done that, no bird ever could've gotten in there."

"If you'd have let me get a Weber, like I'd wanted—"

"Oh, we're not going to start in with that again, are we? I told you, the charcoal!"

"Fine, you're right." Pete knew when to stop arguing with his wife.

"What's for supper?"

"TV dinner."

Pete sighed.

Later that night, Pete went out on the deck for his cigarette, but couldn't finish it. He was about halfway through when he heard a squawk from above him. The mother starling was perched on a telephone line. She stared at him and flapped her wings as if she was going to attack him if he made another move. Pete threw the unfinished cigarette into the yard and ran back into the house, almost tripping over the deck chair again.

Sunday at the barbecue (no one could think of anything else to call it) no one noticed the baked chicken replacement enough to comment on it. Or at least they pretended not to. Pete thought he could see it in the men's faces—they looked like they were missing something, like some part of them hadn't been satisfied. As Pete picked at his chicken, he knew how they felt.

After dinner, the women gathered around the grill (closed—Catherine had decided not to take any chances today, especially when someone might bump up against the grill and knock one of the eggs loose), oohing and aahing as Catherine explained that the eggs were just a week at most away from hatching.

Pete and the husbands stood in a little group at the other end of the deck, smoking and drinking. Pete had given up his usual beer for gin and tonic, and he was on his fifth. All the husbands asked the same questions as the wives, but tried to make them sound more practical.

"How long ago?"

"How long 'til they hatch?"

"What kind of birds are they again?"

Then Matthew Tidwell asked a question Pete wasn't expecting.

"What are you going to do when they're gone?"

Pete took a moment to process this. "What do you mean?"

"Well, the mother's already been living in there for a week—and soon you're going to have three chicks—eating, sleeping, and most importantly, shitting inside your grill." Matthew took another long drink of beer—he had been drunk for the last hour, and it showed. "If it was me, I'd have killed those little pricks a long time ago—the second I first saw them."

"Jesus, you're right!" Pete cried, his mind still focused on what the birds were now actually doing inside his grill. He hadn't thought of that. Sure, he knew that the mother had marked up the side of the grill, but . . . inside it!

"So, what are you going to do when they all fly away and leave you with a grill full of straw and bird shit?" Matthew asked as he cracked open another beer.

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

"You know," Matthew said, as if he was about to impart some heavy widsom, "this never would've happened if you had a Weber."

The men all noddeed agreement. Pete sighed and looked up at the roof. The mother starling was perched at the highest point, staring at him.

Pete made it through the following week pretty well, all things considered. He and Catherine ordered out a lot—she kept saying that they could afford it, and Pete supposed she was right. He found himself drinking more and more out on the deck, watching the grill. In fact, a week after the "cook-out" (Pete either made the quotation marks with his hands or indicated them with his voice whenever he referred to it), he was the first one to see the babies.

He was out on the porch having a drink and a cigarette while Catherine made dinner. Tonight it was baked porkchops. It seemed that everything she made these days was baked in the oven. He supposed it was her grill. She kept telling Pete how much healthier it was for them, but he wasn't so sure. He swore he could see the exact same amount of fat on the meat as he always saw when he grilled it. Sure, the food all looked the same, but it always tasted different.

He took another drag off of his cigarette and a long drink of his gin and tonic. He had started to calculate exactly how much it took to get him drunk enough—drunk enough to stop caring about the birds, but not drunk enough to either have a hangover or to try and kill the birds again. He still thought about it—almost every time he was out on the deck—but he still hadn't worked up the courage to try it again. Every time he thought he could, the image of the mother starling hopping out of the grill with his cigarette in her beak popped back up in his mind.

Plus, he thought Catherine might know about his disdain for the birds. Once or twice, when he had followed her and the two little girls from next door out to look at the nest, he had seen Catherine shoot him some mistrustful looks when she thought he wasn't looking.

He could swear the mother starling knew, too. He had seen her almost every time he went out onto the deck—she'd always fly away, but never out of sight. She would perch in the tree in the backyard, or on the roof, or on a telephone line, and she would stare at him with her yellow eyes, and

ruffle her feathers or squawk at him, almost as if she were threatening him, or as if she were daring him to try something.

And, the one or two times the grill accidentally got left open after the girls left, Pete could see that Matthew was right—the bird had been living in there. There were white marks all over the grill racks, the artificial coals—she'd even somehow managed to mark up the underside of the lid. Pete didn't know how she'd done it—hanging upside down was something he'd never heard of starlings doing, but his grill had the marks to prove it.

As Pete was pondering all this and staring at his grill, it suddenly occured to him that today was two weeks since he'd first found the nest. The eggs should be hatching any time now.

Then, almost as if on cue, he heard something tapping against the inside of the grill, and series of chirps—much higher and in quicker succession than the mother starling's, whose squawk were low and monotonous. Soon, this new chirping coming from underneath the grill was joined by two more sets of chirping—these seemed to start right at the same time, as if the eggs had a predetermined agreement on when to hatch.

Catherine came rushing out, flustered. It was a cool summer evening, and they had decided to leave the windows open and keep the air conditioner off. She must have heard the noises.

"Oh my God, Pete, they're hatching! Where's my camera? Where's the phone? Where's the momma bird?"

Catherine rushed around for half an hour, calling her friends, fussing over the new starlings, and scanning the sky for their mother.

The porkchops burned.

"It's no problem," Catherine said, flapping that condescending hand at him. "We'll just order out."

Later that week, after a Hamburger Helper dinner, Pete sat out on the porch, drowsing. He hadn't been able to get any sleep all week. Between Catherine's incessant calls to her friends to inform them of the birds' progress, he couldn't nap indoors during the day, and at night he had other problems.

The baby birds went to bed at night, but after hearing them in the morning when he was getting ready for work and then at night when he came home, he couldn't get their chirping out of his head. It stayed there, constantly in the background, like a broken record he couldn't hope to stop. It got especially bad at night, when everything else was quiet. As he lay there in bed next to Catherine, Pete could hear the voices of those

birds in his head just as clearly as he heard them in the daytime. Sometimes he could hear them even louder. As the days wore on, Pete began looking more and more haggard and worn down.

Catherine, on he other hand, appeared to have taken years off of her life. She seemed more alert and vibrant every day. The little girls next door came over almost every day to marvel at the little piece of nature right next door. And, through it all, the "little miracles," as Catherine now referred to them, never shut up—whether it was real during the daytime or imaginary at night, as though they were ticking away the seconds of sleep Pete was missing out on.

But sometimes they seemed to at least quiet down, and right now was one of those times, so Pete intended to take advantage of it. He escaped Catherine on the phone (her constant gibbering on it was starting to sound an awful lot like those birds), and seeing the mother bird gone, Pete retreated out back to try and catch a nap.

He was just dozing off, his head nodding down to chest, when the screen door crashed open. The rain gutter above it rattled.

"PETE!"

It was Catherine. She was shouting to him through the back door. She had startled the birds, too—they sounded rested, even if he wasn't.

"What is it, Catherine?"

"I'm going to the store. Do you need anything?"

"No."

"All right—I'll be back."

Pete tried to doze back off, but Catherine starting the car as she left for the store and the freshly awakened birds kept him up. Plus, he now had a headache.

Pete got up and headed for the door, stretching out the joints that had stiffened during his almost-nap. Well, maybe he'd gotten more rest than he'd thought.

As he shook two aspirin out of the bottle for his headache, tried to block out the birds, and watched the water for the pills run into his glass, a thought crept into Pete's head. It wasn't all that far off from the idea to torch the nest, except . . .

No. He couldn't. For one thing, they weren't just eggs now. They were born. They were really there. And for another thing, the mother bird would catch him—he was sure of it. She had it out for him.

"Oh, come on," the little voice in his head said. "She's gone. You saw her fly off when you went out on the deck. It'll only take a minute."

The next thing Pete knew, he was considering the idea; and the next thing he knew after that, he was plugging up the hole on one side of his grill with one of Catherine's dishtowels—the same one with the cows on it that she had brought out the night he found the nest—and running his hose over to the other side.

Sure. It was so simple. Drown them. The mother bird could get rid of his cigarette butt, but she couldn't get rid of the water he'd flood his grill with. It was foolproof.

Of course, there was the matter of explaining to Catherine what had happened to the little miracles, but he was sure he could come up with someting. First, he'd take care of them; then, he'd take care of the story.

Pete ran around the house to the spigot, attached the hose, and ran back to his grill to steady it.

He was holding the end of the hose, hearing the birds chirping and the water filling up the grill, when he felt something by his ear—a bug or something. It might be a mosquito. Lord knows they were bound to start coming around, with summer pretty much here. Pete lifted up his free hand to swat it away and felt a sharp sting. He pulled back his hand and saw that it was bleeding.

"What the hell kind of bug is this?" Pete half-said to himself as he turned around and came face-to-face with the mother starling, who now made a direct beeline for his ears, which she started to peck at—quick and sharp. Pete tried to swat her away, but she caught hold of his hand and put a few cuts in that, then headed for the hand that was holding the hose. Pete got it moving just in time, but she managed to get a few pecks in, and one or two felt like they went deep. The mother starling landed on top of the grill. Pete felt something wet on his ankle, looked down, and discovered that the hose had come loose. He picked it up and aimed it back towards the grill, but the mother starling took flight and started in on the top of his head, screeching and squawking at him.

"All right! All right!" Pete screamed. He had never been more terrified in his entire life. He ran back to the spigot with the hose in his hand, turned it off, and ran back into the house through the front door.

Pete stood in the front hall for a few minutes, shaking and sputtering. He walked on legs that were trembling to the bathroom, almost sure at any minute that he would collapse.

He checked his head, ear, and hands in the bathroom mirror. It was nothing too severe. For the most part, they were shallow cuts. One or two went fairly deep, but nothing to get too bent out of shape about. He put a

little alcohol on them and then sank down on the toilet, shaking. He could hear the baby starlings chirping again, more loudly and shrilly than ever.

Two weeks later, Pete sat at his desk, completely asleep. This had become somewhat of a bad habit, but he hadn't been caught doing it yet.

He still wasn't sleeping at night. The chirping—whether it was in his head or real—never stopped.

After his violent encounter with the mother starling, Catherline had come home and demanded to know what happened. Pete told her he'd gone out to feed the birds and the mother had attacked him for no reason—at least not one that he could think of. Catherine had given him one of those mistrustful looks and said she believed him, but he had his doubts. He was pretty sure she knew that something had gone on. She checked over the cuts and suggested that maybe he should smoke out front from now on. Pete agreed.

Now it was just a matter of waiting—waiting for the birds to learn to fly and get out of his grill and his life so that he could sleep, be at peace, and grill again.

Pete was dreaming about just that—grilling—when the phone on his desk rang, waking him up. He picked it up while wiping the sleep from his eyes.

"Pete Nelson."

"Pete - It's Catherine. Look, I'm on my way out to George's"

"George's? What are you going out there for?"

"I'm watching his kids while he and Nikki go to Cleaveland, remember? I told you already."

"Oh, right." Pete supposed she had. He couldn't remember.

"I just want to make sure you'll be all right for supper. I have the time to fix something."

"No, go ahead and go. I'm sure I can think of something."

"All right—I'll see you on Monday. I might bring the kids out to see the birds—Oh! Pete, if they fly off this weekend, you call me right away and let me know."

"I will." Pete smiled—his first genuine smile in weeks. If Catherine was going to be out of the house all weekend, that meant it would be just him and the birds. And Pete had a little surprise for them. This time he didn't even need the little voice in his head. He worked it out all on his own.

Before he went home, Pete made a quick stop at the hardware store in town for a few supplies. If he was finally going to do this, he would have to take a few precautions. The bill wasn't all that much—he even had enough

left over to stop at Hardee's on the way home.

Once he got in the front door, he threw away the fast food bag and unpacked his things—a pair of heavy-duty gloves, a helmet, a ski mask, and a bottle of charcoal lighter. It was the only one he could find, and he'd decided that his first instinct really had been the best—burning them was the only way to go. He put on the clothes, grabbed the bottle and a book of matches from the kitchen, and went out onto the deck. The rain gutter above the door rattled more loudly than ever, seeming to be on the point of falling off.

Catherine had left the grill open, and the baby starlings were right there in it, chirping away. They had gotten much bigger in the past weeks. You'd hardly know they were the same birds. Pete approached them with the bottle of lighter fluid extended and had just begun to spray the nest when he felt the mother bird by his head—just like before.

But, this time, he was prepared. She couldn't get to any part of him she had before. The clothes he had bought at the hardware store covered that. He'd also thought ahead and put on three shirts, so she couldn't even get to his back or chest.

Pete laughed and continued to spray the nest and recently-hatched birds, who were now flapping their wings, trying to get the excess liquid off.

He emptied half of the bottle on the nest, all the while swatting at the mother starling with one hand—he even got a few good shots in, but never enough to send her away for good. When he thought the nest was wet and flammable enough, he pulled the book of matches out of his pocket (his Zippo would've required him to get too close, and he couldn't find their oven and stove lighter inside the house to save his life) and prepared to light one.

This was what Pete had forgotten to plan for. He couldn't light the match with the gloves on—the material kept getting in the way and making the match impossible to grip. He took off the glove to get a better grip.

That was the opening the mother starling was looking for—she went straight for the exposed skin, digging her feet into his wrist and pecking at the hand that held the match.

Pete fell to the floor of the deck, trying to swat at the bird with his gloved hand and hold onto the matches. Finally, he was able to smash the mother starling up against the leg of his grill. He heard something crunch and she fell off his hand, leaving it and the wrist she'd dug her feet into a bloody mess. The whole affair had taken less than a minute, but she had been bound and determined, and had cut his hand deeply.

Pete crawled over to the body of the bird, and found that he had crushed her skull when he had swung her up against the grill. He checked to see if she was breathing all the same, and didn't see any signs of life. He had killed her.

He kept crawling around the deck, looking for his matches. He tore the ski masks, gloves, and helmet off, trying to retrace the steps he had taken while fighting with the mother starling. He finally saw that they had fallen between two boards and were underneath him. Pete ran down the stairs, grabbed the matches, and was running back to his grill when he heard wings flapping. He tripped on one of the stairs, fell, and covered himself with his arms, certain that he'd made a horrible mistake and that the mother starling was somehow still alive and going to try to get him again, crushed skull and all. But he never felt an attack, or even heard a rush of wings come toward him. The wings were going further away from him, their sound becoming more distant. Pete uncovered his head and looked up.

Perched on his roof were three young starlings, chirping away, their heads turned, snapping this way and that, getting their first real look at the world outside of his grill. They were also shaking, trying to get the lighter fluid off of their feathers.

Pete went back to their former home. It was empty—just the nest, the egg shells, and, of course, the droppings. He heard the young chirping get distant, and looked up to see the baby birds flying away.

Pete pocketed his matches, sighed, and went inside to call Catherine and tell her the news.

The rest of the weekend was spent cleaning up. He took all the straw out of the grill by hand (with gloves on both to protect his lancerated hand and so neither hand would get soaked in lighter fluid), dumped all the straw and the body of the mother starling into a trash bag, and went into town to get new racks and fake charcoal briquets. Then, before he installed the new equipment, Pete got out the bleach and the steel wool and scrubbed off all of the droppings.

Pete didn't know anyone who had obsessive-compulsive disorder. He knew what it was, and he knew he didn't have it, but he felt after that weekend that he had at least some understanding of what those people went through. His thorough cleaning of the grill gave him that idea. In fact, anyone who didn't know him or what had happened to his grill in the last month would think Pete was an obsessive-compulsive. He spent every spare minute of two days getting every trace of bird out of his grill. He ate

frozen food that tasted like cardboard and slept like a baby.

When Catherine came back, Pete showed her the new and improved grill. She inspected it, pronounced it clean, and said they should cook out on the weekend. Pete agreed.

The next Sunday night, Pete stepped out with his plate of raw steaks and smiled. He was rested, and his mouth was already watering. He stepped towards his grill and removed the tarp—it was always covered when not in use now—and opened the lid. Clean as a whistle. He lit it up and threw the steaks on. They hissed as the flesh started to roast. Life was back to normal.

Then, suddenly, he heard a rattle from behind him. That damn rain gutter. It was windy, and the thing was probably on the verge of falling right off the door. Pete turned to see how bad it was, and before he was all the way around, he heard a flap—like wings—then another, then another. The rain gutter rattled twice more. Pete knew what he was looking at before his eyes focused.

All three baby birds were perched on the rain gutter, looking at him. Their attention never wavered, no matter if the wind blew the gutter, a car horn blew in the street, or the neighbors' screen door banged shut. They kept their eyes on Pete. He stood there, with his tongs in his hands and a plate full of dried blood, transfixed by three baby birds.

One chirped and took off, flying above the grill and circling. The other two soon followed suit and were all circling the grill. Then one lifted his tail and laid a dropping. It landed perfectly on one of the steaks. The other soon did as well, and both steaks were marked. The three birds then flew back to the rain gutter, landed and stared straight at Pete again, as if nothing had happened. They had marked their territory.

—Rusty K. Koll '05