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C
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No. II

9 3

Vol. 29

19

RCC
R

No. II

Vol. 29

CONTENTS

FICTION

A BOY AND HIS DISHWASHER

By Brian Hamrick

THE NAZI TUNNEL

By Steve Yate

GESTATION

By Laurie Fooss

RUNNING FROM THE GRAVITY

by Elizabeth K. Johnson

CONTEST POETRY

MIX

by LeShawn Jackson

THE SPIDERS ARE LEAVING

by Robert McDonald

HERE

—for Bob Burkett

by Malcolm Glass

CONTEST FICTION

A SLOW THAW

by Linda Godfrey

KNITTING

*by Karen Halvorsen
Schreck*

HYBRID

by Peter Donahue

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A BOY AND HIS DISHWASHER

By Brian Hamrick

On Thursday nights I used to get really sad. That was the night my dad made me take out the garbage. I would always get this bad feeling in my stomach because I could tell the garbage was really scared. It didn't know where it was going, and my mom had told me that it sat in the ground and rotted like a stinking corpse. But I got over my sadness when Barry Manilow didn't come bringing the a-pop-lips. Instead it rained and my dad came home and told me it was all right and later my mom came home and seemed to be okay again. And I was happy for a little while, because things were okay again. But then my mom made me learn how to run the dishwasher, and I knew it was gonna kill me. She said not to get the powdered soap in my mouth or eyes, because it would burn out my insides and I'd spend the rest of my short life writhing in pain and coughing up parts of my stomach. And then she showed me how the soap can sometimes stay inside the glasses and bowls. She told me about a little boy like myself who accidentally swallowed some soap and died in his mother's arms.

Tonight I look real hard at the dishes, so hard that the steam from the dishwasher burns into my face. I can't really see if there's any soap left, but I probably should wash them again to be sure. This will be the third time tonight I've washed the dishes, but it's better to be safe than sorry and dead. When the dishes are washed in another thirty-eight minutes I'll take them out and wash them again real good in the sink to be sure there's no killing soap left.

"Tony palomy talks too long on his telephony!" Suzie Horman shouts behind me as I walk to school. She's just sore because I made her have an abortion.

Suzie yells, "My mom says that your mom is still a nut case, and that your dad has his head stuck up his butt!"

I can hear Liz and Jamy giggling next to her.

"Well my dad says that your mom has poop breath!" I yell back without turning around.

"I'm gonna tell that you said poop!" Suzie promises.

"I'm gonna tell that you said butt!" I yell back.

Besides, she can't tell on me for saying poop without saying

poop herself.

Suzie's mom and my dad used to talk a lot while my mom was gone. Suzie used to tell me that they were fucking, but when I asked my dad if that was true he called Suzie a little bitch and told me to stay away from her. And when my mom came back home my dad stopped talking to Ms. Horman. Ms. Horman used to come over in the middle of the night and ring our doorbell and run home, and sometimes she'd call on the phone and wouldn't say anything. It got so bad that my dad had to go to the police station and get a restaurant order, which means that Ms. Horman can't bug us anymore or she'll be thrown in the slammer.

2 Tonight my mom and I are making Chex snack mix for picnic day tomorrow. She shows me how to put together all the pretzels and nuts and cereal and bake them in the oven. She helps me turn the knobs on the oven to get the right temperature then set the timer so it stays in there for fifteen minutes. Mom makes me check three times to be sure that the oven is on, and that the pan isn't on fire. Then when we are done, I keep checking to make sure that the oven is still off.

"Are there any special girls in your class, Tony?" my mom asks me.

"No way! Yuck!" I tell her.

"That's good," she says, "right now I need to be the only special girl in your life."

"Okay," I say.

Right now we are sitting down at the kitchen table and I'm picking all the nuts out of the Chex Mix.

"Be careful with those nuts," Mom says. "You know what happened to Uncle Dave."

"What happened?" I ask.

"He was fooling around and stuck two nuts up his nostrils. They got sucked way up to here and the doctors had to get them out."

"Ouch, was he bleeding?" I ask.

"Yes, very much," Mom says.

My dad comes into the kitchen and grabs a handful of Chex Mix. He asks my mom if she'll go to the bank for him tomorrow.

"I don't think so," she says. "I just don't feel like it yet."

"Come on hon, its been three months now," Dad says. "If you don't get out of the house one of these days..."

"Dad, do you want more Chex Mix?" I ask him. "Mom made extra for me because she says it's gonna be real popular tomorrow."

"Not now Tony." My dad says. "Why don't you leave Mom and Dad alone. We want to talk now."

I start to leave then turn back for the Chex Mix. Mom smiles and says she'll wrap it in a Tupperware container for me. I don't know why Mom and Dad always have to talk alone. I never know what they are saying anyways. Dad uses big words like zaniterium and gory phobia. Ever since Mom came back she won't leave the house. Instead she cleans all day and makes sure that the oven is turned off.

"What you got there, Boobie Breath?" Suzie yells to me as I walk to school.

"Its Chex Mix," I say, "For the class picnic."

"No one's gonna want to eat it," she says.

"Why not?"

"Because no one likes you."

I hum real loud to myself and walk very fast. When I get to school Miss Mayflower takes my Tupperware bowl and smiles at me just like my mom. I sit down at my desk next to Bridget Bodly who is really pretty and talks to me sometimes. She is peeling rubber cement off her desk and making little rubber bouncy balls. It smells real good. Bridget has a little scar right over her lip that I like to stare at. I heard her tell Bobby once that she got the scar from her brother's friend when he tried to kiss her on the porch swing. If I had been there she wouldn't have got a scar, he would have got a black eye. Bridget looks and sees me staring at her scar, and I look down at my desk.

"Hi Tony," she says real friendly.

"Hi Bridget." I say. I want to say more, but I can't think of anything, so I stay quiet.

Later for lunch we have our picnic. I go and get my Tupperware bowl of Chex Mix and set it out on the table for everyone. There are potato chips, carrot and celery sticks, and all kinds of desserts. I go get my hot dog and fill my plate up with Chex Mix then sit down by myself. There's a whole bunch of kids sitting

by Suzie and I hear her say my name and see her pointing at me. Everyone is making a scrunchy face.

"Hey Tony," Bobby says. "did your mom really pee on the Chex Mix?"

"No!" I say.

"Well then your dad must have pooped in it," Bobby says. "because it sure smells gross!"

I look down at my hot dog and twist away from them. That Suzie Horman is a damn liar. I try to tear open my ketchup, but my fingers are too greasy. I grip the package tight in my hand and try to tear it open with my teeth. As soon as I rip it the ketchup comes splooshing out and hits me in the eyes. I've got ketchup all over my face and I know Bobby and Suzie and everyone else will laugh at me if they see me this way and I just want to go home and take my Chex Mix with me and we can eat it for dinner and tomorrow too if we have to until it's all gone and we'll make sure that it's okay to eat and I know my mom and dad didn't pee or poop on it and we'll make sure that the oven is turned off and our plates and glasses are clean and don't have any soap in them.

4

"Tony, look at the mess you've made," Miss Mayflower says. "Let's go clean you up." She takes my hand and leads me out of the classroom past Bobby and Suzie and probably past Bridget, but I can't see any of them because I've got ketchup on my eyeballs.

When we get to the bathroom Miss Mayflower asks me if everything is okay at home and if my mom is back yet.

"Yeah," I say.

Miss Mayflower wipes my face with a wet paper towel and says, "If there are any problems you want to tell me about, I'll listen. I know it can be difficult when your mommy and daddy have problems."

I wonder if Miss Mayflower is talking about the soap in the dishes.

"I remember when I was a little girl. I had a brother whose mommy and daddy got a divorce," she says. "Have your mommy and daddy ever talked about that?"

"I don't know," I say. But I did hear that word before when Mom was away. And I know what it means, too.

"Well, it's probably not something you need to worry about

anyways."

Miss Mayflower finishes cleaning my face and pats me on the head. I don't want my parents to divorce because then I'll have to live on the streets all by myself and eat food out of people's garbage cans and get eaten by a bunch of rabbit dogs.

When I get back to class everyone is just about finished with lunch. The potato chip bag has a big rip in its side and little crumbs are stuck to the table. All the hot dogs are gone and only one carrot stick is left. My big Tupperware bowl is still full of Chex Mix. I find the lid on the floor and try to put it back on, but it's too tough. So I wrap the bowl up without putting the lid on tight. I sit back down at my seat and see that someone has stuck my pencil in my hot dog. Bridget smiles at me.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say.

"I had some of your Chex Mix," she tells me. "It was very good."

"Thank you," I say.

Later I imagine that Bobby is trying to kiss Bridget and I sock him a good one in the eye. Bridget gives me a big kiss and helps me wash all the dishes.

"You like Bridget the Snidget," Suzie says to me on the way home from school.

"No I don't," I tell her.

"Yes you do, and I'm going to let her know," she says.

"Don't!" I say. "I think she's ugly." I lie to Suzie so she won't tell Bridget that I like her.

"Bridget only ate your poop mix because she felt sorry for you," Suzie says. "I'll bet you want to fuck her!"

"No I don't," I say. I tried to fuck Suzie once, but her mom caught me and said she was going to call the police and put me and my dad in jail. She never did.

"What did you say?" Suzie asks.

"I don't want to fuck her!" I yell. Just then Ms. Horman comes up to me and grabs my shirt collar.

"What did you say young man?" Ms. Horman yells in my

face. "What kind of vulgarities has your father taught you now?"

"Nothing," I say.

"That's not what I heard you say."

I start to cry and Ms. Horman lets me go. She grabs Suzie's hand and takes her away.

"How many times have I told you not to talk to that boy!" she yells at Suzie.

"I know Mom, but he won't leave me alone," Suzie says as she walks away with her mother.

Once they are gone I stop crying. My bowl of Chex Mix has spilled on the sidewalk and there are ants crawling all over it. I pick up as much as I can and scoop it back into the bowl. Maybe Mom can clean it up when I get home.

"How was school today?" my dad asks me. We're all in the car on our way to Baskets and Robbers. This is the first time Mom's left the house since she came home.

"Okay," I say.

"Do you want to play baseball on a team this summer?" Dad asks. "I remember when I was your age I loved to play baseball."

"I don't know," I say.

"How did your friends like the Chex Mix?" Mom asks.

"OK," I say. I haven't shown her the leftovers yet. I'll try to eat the rest tonight before she finds out.

We are in the driveway of Baskets and Robbers and my dad starts to get out of the car. I wait for my mom to pull the seat forward and get out so I can get out, but she doesn't move.

"Come on," my dad says. Mom just stares ahead and holds the seat tight.

"Oh Christ!" my dad says. "Not now, we're here!" He tells me to run inside and figure out what flavor I want.

When I get inside I stare through the glass counter at all the different ice creams. I like ice cream because its so easy, you can eat the cone and there's no mess to clean up afterwards, no washing dishes. I decide on the pink bubble gum. Through the window outside I can see my dad walking my mom up to the door. She is walking very straight and holding onto his arm

tight. We all order together, my dad gets chunky chocolate and my mom gets vanilla. The guy behind the counter asks if I want a little dude's cone or a big dude's cone. I look up at my dad and he smiles.

"Give him a big dude's cone," he says.

We sit down at a table and dad sticks his nose in his chunky chocolate ice cream.

"Look at me, I'm Mr. Poopnose!" he says. I laugh and my mom tries to smile. Through the glass outside I can see Suzie Horman and her mom walking up to Baskets and Robbers. Dad turns to see what I'm looking at and when he sees Ms. Horman he gets really serious. Ms. Horman comes in and sees us then stops and stares at my dad. She turns red then comes over to our table.

"Hello Jane," she says to my mom. "I'm glad to see you're finally out of the house."

My mom looks at my dad then back at Ms. Horman. Suzie grabs the edge of my jacket and pulls on it hard, so it almost rips.

"I was just telling Suzie that we don't ever see you at the PTA meetings," Ms. Horman says. "It's a shame too, because Tony could really benefit from more parental involvement."

My mom looks at my dad again. I'm not sure if she's going to cry or what. My dad is staring at the floor. Suzie pulls even harder on my jacket. I want to say something to make Ms. Horman go away. I wish the dishwasher soap would kill her and rip her tonsils out and burn a hole right through her throat and neck and make her writhe in pain and cough up parts of her stomach and die and then rot in the ground like a stinking corpse. Why doesn't my dad say something?

"If you need help with anything I'd be more than willing," Ms. Horman keeps talking, "of course, there's a little legality that prevents any interference on my part." Her voice is getting real loud, and everyone is staring at us.

"If your husband wasn't such a liar and you weren't insane, Tony might have a chance of being normal," she says.

Suzie pulls again on my jacket. This time I hear it rip.

"Fuck!" I yell.

Ms. Horman shuts up and stares at me. I'm afraid she's gonna hit me.

"Fuck you Horman!" I yell at Suzie and her mom. "Fuck you all the way to Disneyland!"

I don't look at my mom or dad as I run out of Baskets and Robbers. The door knocks my ice cream cone out of my hand and it rolls away on the floor. I run past our car and out to the busy street. There are cars zooming back and forth in front of me, and I'm too scared to run through them. I don't even want to run beside them because one might run up the curb and hit me on the sidewalk. I sit down by a tree and try real hard not to cry.

I'm thinking about the dishes. I wonder how much soap I can eat before I die. I wonder if the pain I feel would be worse than what I feel now. Maybe it's time to stop washing the dishes three or four times. I know that at school they just put the dishes in the machine and it only takes three minutes. And they only do it once. Maybe I won't wash the dishes at all. I'll just let the crud get thicker and thicker on the sides until I can barely fit a fork in my mouth. I'll never have to worry about soap again.

8

"Hello Tony," Bridget says to me. I'm sitting by the swing set during recess, playing with two marbles that I found lying in the grass. "Suzie told me that you like me."

My face gets really hot and I don't know what to say. Bridget has a dandelion stuck in her ear.

"Well?" she says.

"Suzie is stupid," I say. "She lies."

"Oh," Bridget says. "Did you know that I'm moving away?"

"No," I say. Bridget is leaving?

"Do you want to say goodbye to me?" she asks.

I want to touch her scar, feel what it's like before she goes.

"Goodbye," I say.

"Is there anything else?" she asks.

I want to hold her hand and squeeze it real tight.

"No," I say.

"You're cute," Bridget says as she walks away.

I want to say something but I can't. The thought of Bridget moving away puts a big empty feeling in my stomach. I want to run after her and tell her I love her, to kiss her goodbye like I see on TV, but I can't move.

"Hey Tony Mac-a-Roni", Suzie yells from behind me. "My mom says that your dad is a pussy!"

mom says that your dad is a pussy!"

I can hear Suzie and her friends laughing at me as they run inside the school. Recess is over. I look hard at my marbles and wonder what they'd look like being washed in the dishwasher. I wish I could sit in the machine once while it was on, just to see what it looks like. I polish the marbles on my T-shirt then stick one in each nostril. Closing my mouth and shutting my eyes, I suck up through my nose as hard as I can. But the marbles are too big to go very far. Mom would be very disappointed.

This story is a continuation of "Saving Barry Manilow's Garbage", published in The Red Cedar Review, Vol. 29 #1. Brian Hamrick is working on more stories about Tony and Suzie, as well as several ideas for screenplays. He is the co-writer and co-producer of the Emmy Award winning Seduction Story, a student film shot on the campus of Michigan State University in the spring of 1992. It will receive its world premiere in 1993 and will be available in local video stores. Brian Hamrick is also the recipient of The National Society of Arts and Letters Michigan Teleplay Competition First Place Award for Ambulance Story.

The Nazi Tunnel

By Steve Yates

If Martha Bright lost her bikini one more time, Joe Martin was going to stand up, lean out over the diving well, and blow his lifeguard's whistle until even the kids in the wading pool stopped pissing and saw her. For the third time, Martha had leapt off the three-meter board, lost her top and treaded water. She rolled her eyes at her friends as if she just couldn't understand why her boobs kept flashing out.

Joe wanted her to quit because once was enough, because she didn't have enough boob to matter, and because every time she flashed her breasts at the world, there was nothing he could do. He sat through her diving, though, knowing how white-cross speed made him edgy. He was fifteen, and this was his first summer as a lifeguard. He had no desire to show edginess to anyone at Green Briar Hills Swim Club.

Joe really wanted to see Stephanie Smithson leap off the board. Or maybe she could stand by the poolside and slip the straps to her teal one piece off her shoulders. She could stretch her plump arms above her head in triumph and say, "Martha, don't you wish." But Stephanie wouldn't be here until most of the pool cleared.

11

The four o'clock high school crowd churned in the pool now. Joe loved how water changed them. Like liquor, the pool sloshed them into their true selves. Martha, primpy, blonde, over-social, became a breast-flashing eye roller. Twenty-five years from now, when Martha was forty, when she sat with the other pool mothers smoking cigarettes and saw her daughter leap from the three-meter board, Joe wondered if she wouldn't drop her cocktail and turn livid.

Evening sun warmed the middle of Joe's back. He avoided taking speed after six o'clock. Sleep had to come in about five hours, and he could feel the promise of it hum like the lights that flickered on in the parking lot.

Below him, the blue water was quiet and probably cool, but the Smithsons, father and daughter, were still taking their evening swim. The Smithsons lived up the hill from the pool and rode bicycles down to swim every night that it didn't rain.

Mr. Smithson stepped on the one-meter board. He raised his arms and slapped them against his sides. He looked like an inverted red pear, and Joe could not understand why Smithson's bulk didn't jiggle as the man pounded to the edge of the board and launched himself into a violent series of twists, always yelling "Yaaw!" throughout and ending with a quiet swish into the water.

His entries were miracles. Smithson was always sunburned, drunk, and hollering, but the water took him like he was a raindrop, and Joe lurched with surprise each time.

Aside from Smithson's pounding and shouting, the pool was silent. Smithson's only child, Stephanie, was not swimming, and no one else was at the pool. Joe fought the urge to look at his watch. He didn't want time to creep any slower than it was.

Joe knew some of the board members of the pool did not like Smithson. Smithson's wife had left him, too, so maybe Smithson was easy to not like.

12 A cold streak ran down the back of Joe's calf. "Hey," he said, and brushed his hand along his leg where Stephanie had run her soda can.

She was smiling, leaning against the stand with one hand and waving the soda with the other. Her short, black hair was not wet and was parted exactly down the middle. Silver Nose-Kote glared out under her mirrored sunglasses. Her freckled cheeks swelled beneath the glasses.

"My dad was a diver in college," she said, facing the water. "Made it to the NAIA nationals."

"Yeah," Joe said. He knew this fact all too well. Maybe Stephanie was too young. She would be a freshman next year, and Joe would be a junior. She was getting fat, though, very fat, and all just this year. Every time Joe saw her she was slowly inflating.

Another lifeguard had told him she was eager.

Joe wanted her to look up, but she didn't. The moon-shaped bulge of her stomach had to be solid like her father's.

"Want anything?" she asked, the mirrored glasses flashing up at him. He couldn't answer, and she shook her head, then turned and walked to the far end of the pool and into the

darkness of the snack stand.

"Yaaw!" Smithson yelled.

His daughter padded out and lounged in a deck chair. Her stomach flattened, and Joe thought maybe her breasts bobbed. "Bobbed" was what they said in the *Forum* magazines that were kept in the lifeguards' office. He shifted in the chair.

Joe heard Smithson's arms slap. The big man rushed out. "Yaaw!" he yelled, arching himself into a back somersault, his red belly curving as he descended; then his head cracked against the end of the board. His arms flailed as the board flipped him back up. His eyes were enormous, and his mouth twisted like he was about to vomit in mid-air.

Joe teetered on the edge of his seat. Smithson crashed belly down into the diving well, sloshing waves out onto the white concrete. Joe did not know whether to reach or throw or go, so he sat. Through the trickles of blue and yellow light Smithson floated upward. The man's eyes were closed.

Joe stood, then sat down, then crouched somewhere in between. Smithson surfaced amid a fizz of bubbles. His eyes peeled open. He shook his head, then glared at Joe; the man's face was red and furious, as if Joe had seen something he shouldn't have.

"I'm fine," Smithson said, then slid off, side-stroking toward the ladder.

"Sorry," Joe said. He hunched down in his chair as Smithson stormed past, dripping water and cursing.

The man said nothing to his daughter, who, still seated, handed him his towel. He stomped through the gates of the pool. Stephanie shrugged at Joe, frowned, then looked away and popped the tail end of a candy bar into her mouth.

Joe slouched in the chair and put his sunglasses on. He leaned his head back and stared at the sky. It was pink and lavender, sunset beginning behind him. If Stephanie didn't start swimming in two minutes, he would ask her to leave so he could close the pool.

He heard a soda can open. He leaned forward. She was still sitting in the deck chair.

"Aren't you going to swim?" he asked.

She cocked her head and pouted. "Do you want me to?"

Joe took his sunglasses off. "I want to close."

"It's not nine," she said. She set the soda down, stood up, and

came toward him.

"But you're not swimming."

"You can't close before nine. It's club rules." She put her hands on her hips.

"But no one is swimming," he said.

Her glasses reflected the blue, calm water. "I'll let you close, if you let me watch."

He fumbled with the idea. "Fine," he said. He put his sunglasses down, slipped on his tennis shoes, took the ring of keys off the stand, and climbed down the ladder.

He unlocked the pump shed and began dragging out the hose and automatic cleaner—a rolling vacuum head which would scoot along the bottom until seven a.m. when he returned to open the pool for morning swim lessons. The shed was cramped, the hose long and ungainly, and he could sense Stephanie right behind him. He grunted and swung the hose out the door, then hauled on the hose to free the rolling vacuum. Stephanie giggled.

The weight of the cleaning head made the hose recoil as he jerked the apparatus forward. Stephanie leaned against the door and covered a smile. Pinned to his hip, the hose flopped like an angry third limb. Stephanie laughed, and Joe blushed. He thought of her father's scowling face, wondered if he could make himself look that angry.

He flung the hose and cleaner into the diving well, then flipped on its engine. He stood at the pool's edge and watched the cleaner to make sure it was working right.

When Stephanie moved up and touched his shoulder, he jolted. She leaned hard on him to look only a few feet over the lip of the pool. At first he wanted to shrug her hand off his shoulder, but then he let her stay there. Her skin felt cool.

"That cleans, right?"

He nodded. His throat was tight and dry.

She leaned harder as the head scrolled almost directly under them, then away, then back again, then over the drain. He liked her leaning against him, cooling him.

"How long do you have to watch it?" she asked.

"Oh," he said, moving back. "Not long."

She followed him across the pool side and stopped to pick up her towel and soda. He locked up the lifeguard office, then the snack

bar. While he waited at the door for her to finish her drink, he swung the keys back and forth on his index finger, catching them in his palm.

She threw the can out and watched him as he closed and locked the gate. "What are you doing now?" she asked.

"Riding home. I got to be back here at six."

"Seven," she said.

"Early, okay." He began unchaining his bike. "Why? Anything you want to do?"

She shrugged, and smiled. "Want to see the Nazi Tunnel?"

He stopped. "You don't know where that is."

She shrugged and smirked at him.

The tunnel was mythical. Pat Turrin grew dope behind it, and skinheads guarded it, or had taken it over and burned the dope, or called on the ghost of Hitler there every midnight, something like that.

"I'll show you, unless you have to go home," she said. She walked away from him off toward her bike, her thongs flopping on the sidewalk.

"Wait." He wrapped the chain on his bike. "Wait."

She hung her towel over her shoulders, pushed her sunglasses above her forehead, and unlocked her bike.

She led him up the hill and through the circling roads of Green Briar Hills Subdivision, past places he knew and into places he'd never seen. They came to a long stretch of road with fields on each side. The subdivision was far behind them, and Joe wasn't even sure if they were still in the city. Stephanie's behind bounced ahead of him, until the road ended at a fenced utility station and its empty gravel parking lot bordered by a dark stretch of forest along a series of hills.

Stephanie insisted that they hide their bikes in some bushes by the chain link fence. There were clots of transformers and wiring inside the fence. Thick power lines sprung from the machines and trailed back to the city. Stephanie walked across the parking lot and into the trees. Joe followed.

A drainage ditch ran along the bottom of the hills. Stephanie stuck close to the ditch, latching onto Joe's arm when the grove grew dark. At one point, he felt his elbow sink into an incredible, slick softness.

Again the softness brushed him, and his arm sank into it. It was her breast, and the way she pulled his arm into her made him sure she must want his arm there. His heart sprinted. He leaned into her to feel the heft of it.

In the darkness, he stopped and tugged twice at the leg of his swimsuit.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing. Rock in my shoe."

"Get it out, silly," she said, easing away from him.

"No, it's fine. Let's go," he said.

She laughed.

"What?" He was frantic and wondered if she knew what she was doing to him, how uncomfortable he was. He was glad the grove was dark. "Are you even taking me to this thing?" he asked.

"Of course." She grabbed his arm, and they moved on.

Their bikes were far behind them when Stephanie stopped and sat down on a fallen tree trunk. "Let's rest," she said.

"No, come on. It'll get late."

"Just for one minute," she said.

Joe sat down but not close to her. The bark stung through his suit, so he sat on the ground and leaned back against the trunk. He picked up twigs and snapped them in two.

"Are there really skinheads at this?"

"You'll see," she said.

He searched for a twig. "What if you're late? What's your dad going to say?"

"He will be asleep," she said, emphasizing each syllable as if it were a pool regulation.

Joe dropped the twig, but did not search for it. The man slept, while his daughter did as she pleased, learned as she pleased, even in places like the tunnel. Must be nice, Joe thought.

"The pool's not even closed yet, remember?" She nudged him.

Joe nodded. "Why's he always dive and not swim laps or something?"

Stephanie shrugged. "He thinks he has to or he'll lose it."

Joe nodded and stood. "Look, let's go."

"If you're so worried about time, go home," she said, crossing her legs.

"We're out here. Let's go."

"All right," she said. She extended both hands to him, but he didn't move. "Help me up, stupid," she said.

He took her hands and leaned back. He felt ridiculous again, and somehow younger than her.

The grove thinned out and a steep embankment of dirt rose up. The sunset shone on two bent sycamores and, in between them, the tall mouth of a tunnel. The drainage ditch Stephanie had followed ended in a wedge of sediment that poured from the tunnel's concrete bottom.

"This is it," Stephanie whispered.

"Whoa," Joe said. He stayed in the darkness of the trees as she snuck forward. "Are they in there?"

"Sun's not down," she said. She turned and pushed her sunglasses down over her eyes. "Little scared, Joe?"

"When I can't see what I'm walking into, yeah."

"Nothing will happen. It's not that big a deal."

He walked out of the trees, and they approached the tunnel together. Joe's shoe hit a rock and sent it skittering into the mouth of the tunnel. The dry echo scratched back at him.

A street light lit the far end of the tunnel where thistle grew tall and thick. Dusk made the inside purple for about ten yards, then there was darkness, then light at the end.

Stephanie pressed against him and took his arm. "Look up there."

Where she pointed, someone had spray painted a red swastika. Its top was too long, and the angles were off. A blue circle tried but failed to enclose it. Further down, the purple light fell on the words "LOVE TRACTOR" sprayed in pink balloon letters. Someone had written "SUCKS" across this with the same blue paint that circled the swastika.

"See. No big deal," she said.

She drew his arm toward her, and he felt it engulfed by her breast. She leaned forward. He swallowed.

"And there's that guy's dope," she said, pointing at the thistle. She leaned closer.

He struggled to breathe as she rubbed against him. The tunnel was hot, and the air that came through it was moist, smelling of soil. There had never been skinheads here, and Joe realized what Stephanie was doing.

"Do you like being here with me?" she asked.

He nodded, lying and not lying. He wanted to grab her chest, squeeze her, or turn and run. He stepped away, then felt his footing become unsure. He leaned back, and she pulled tighter.

"Look at me," she said.

He looked down. The front of his suit was stretched and swollen.

"Joe, look at me."

He kept his chest very close to her, but kept his middle away. Two purple circles of light shone from her lenses, and in the center of each reflected tunnel was the pinpoint of white at its end. She inched forward, and a bead of sweat from above her lips brushed his own. He tasted salt, and then she kissed him.

He groped to return the kiss, had to make it a good one, cringed, thinking *my kiss is lame*, and he felt her hands grab his hips, bringing them tight against her. She stopped kissing him and smiled. She was as tall as he was and as strong.

He wondered if he should kiss her again, but before he could decide, she asked, "What's this?"

"Huh?" he asked, then caught his breath as she traced two fingers along the front of his suit.

"My," she said, pressing her palm against his crotch. Behind her a single, white star glared. "Take your suit off."

Joe stepped back from her and hesitated. Then he untied his suit and pushed it down around his legs. The suit, dry and cold, buckled against his thighs.

She stood very close to him and took him in her hand. He shivered. Her stomach bulged next to his, small silver S's coursing across the teal. When he touched her stomach, his open hand sank into it as if her suit held nothing but water. Her glasses were dark, looking down at him.

He hooked a finger under the strap of her suit and began to pull the strap off her shoulder when she stopped him.

"No," she said. She sounded startled. "Just let me, okay."

Joe took a deep breath.

She stroked; her fist seemed very small. Her touch was rough, much more painful than when he touched himself, but somehow, as she pulled, the feeling became infinitely better. Her motion rocked him back and forth.

He held her stomach, his eyes adjusting even more; then he noticed the concentration in her cheeks, the set of her jaw, and he saw her father, his rigid fix on the water as he rose off the board. Was that what she was doing, he wondered. Had she done this over and over again? "Stephanie," Joe said.

Her glasses flashed blankly at him, but her cheeks softened. "Shh," she said, and touched his chest with her fingertips.

She stroked again, and he closed his eyes and felt lifted. His back arched, and he sensed the pressure increasing between his legs. His hips jerked with surprise.

He opened his eyes, and she had cupped one hand between his legs while the other still enclosed him. When his hips stopped, she let go, and he sank against the side of the tunnel, his chest knotting.

She stood still for a moment, her cheek pressed against his shoulder, both her hands cupped in front of her as if she held sand. She snapped one hand downward, and in the darkness he heard a spatter against the concrete. She backed away, looked around, then stood on tiptoes to pull off a sycamore leaf. As she wiped her hands with the leaf, she smiled at him. Her lenses reflected only the two points of light at the ends of the tunnel.

19

"It's all right," she whispered. "I knew it would do that."

The forest loomed and snapped and pressed on Joe, as if he were walking through a storm cloud. She walked ahead of him, a bobbing silhouette against spaces of light. They did not touch, and he did not seek her hand.

As he stumbled in the dark, he felt as awkward as he had when he held the vacuum hose flailing against his hip. If she would turn around, Joe was sure she would laugh again.

At the edge of the forest, they stopped. The parking lot of the utility station shined white in its security light. A car hissed by on the road, headlights scooping the darkness into a tunnel of light, then releasing it.

"Shit," Joe said.

"It's nobody," she said. She had taken off her glasses and was fixing them in her hair. The pale of her thick arms saddened Joe. She was not magic, but he had been helpless, clumsy, completely in her control, and he saw no difference now.

"How do you know?" He sank back into the line of trees.

"You can go," she said, glaring at him. "You can go ahead if you want." She gazed at the lot.

"Leave you?" Joe asked.

"You can," she said so quietly that Joe had to think to hear the words.

She wanted to be left, or did she, Joe wondered. He thought maybe he had done something to her, and then his stomach tightened; a pain like the start of a charley horse streaked his groin.

Joe touched her hand, and she pulled away.

"If you want, I can ride with you," he said. He walked from the trees but did not hear her follow him.

"I don't need you to ride with me," she said. Her thongs scraped as she left the trees.

Joe paused in the circle of light gushing from the station. The transformers hummed and crackled. He faced her. "It's on my way, okay," he said. The hair on the back of his neck tingled.

In the light he watched her move, watched the thick planting and replanting of her calves, the bustle of her chest, her scowl. He was the one who was not magic, he thought. He had done something to her, but, surely, had done nothing for her. Her thighs shuffled as one, and he knew she would balloon her freshman year, more her sophomore year, strain against the lip of her trembling desk, and be, to him and his classmates, only that girl who had taken them under the bleachers, behind the evergreens, or deep in some tunnel. The Marthas would circle her, giggle as she swelled.

She balanced her bike under her, set her jaw and glared at him for half a second, the glasses above her forehead appearing wide and open in the silver light. He mumbled, but could not speak her name before she turned to the road and the house where her father slept.

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GESTATION

By Laurie Foos

After Bill left it seemed my life was being overtaken by cows. They came to me in dreams, hordes of them trampling through my backyard, their huge black spots filling my driveway—my life. One even sat at my kitchen table, though I later came to realize it must have been a symbol for Ida, with the way it nodded at me and spoke through a telephone.

Ida said things came to an end for me around that time, the way I quit teaching so soon after Bill left. I might have projected reasons myself, made certain inferences had I been the outsider. I tied Bill into the whole thing, the degeneration of my ability to cope with fourth graders. But at the time I thought only of cows.

I guessed Bill had been gone a few weeks when the dreams started. I admitted to making a guess because I didn't see the things in direct succession. There were a few weeks in between when I functioned rather well. I cleaned out what he'd left behind in his closet, graded multiplication tables, and even gave a tea for the class mothers. Bill left a pair of hiking boots, unlaced, an untouched roll of kite string, and of course, the empty fruit jars. In the beginning it bothered me that he insisted on the purity of water drunk only from jars, but Ida said it was another way of his manipulating, like the way he stirred ice cubes in jars filled with soda just to make the foam. It gave him a feeling of power. When Ida told me this I began to see the kind of ideas he had, all his talk about the hunger of virgins and mothers, how neither could ever be fulfilled. Not quite.

I called Ida after the first cow dream, right out of sleep so it was like I was living it with her on the phone. I told her how I stood in the backyard, close to the fence, with my toes pushed into the dirt. I could sense the importance of bare feet. There were no leaves on the trees, everything was barren because I could see straight through the cyclone fence, like I was looking through diamonds.

I could hear Ida breathing into the phone.

Bill was there, I told her, and when I put my hand on his sleeve, the cows started to approach, hundreds of them slow-moving, with their black spots and heavy breathing. Bill stood waiting.

"Bill is there, all this time?" she said, like she couldn't believe he

would stay with me even through a dream.

"Yes," I told her, "and then he speaks."

She took in her breath, sharp so that I could hear it. Ida was one for dramatics.

"My God," she said. "What does he say?"

I thought about the day he left, how he patted my bulging stomach and kissed my forehead like I was some virgin. He talked about the importance of feeding, said that I was a great one for nourishment. He was dazzled by it all, he said, the inflation of my body weighing down upon him like something slow and drugged with sleep. He said he needed time to wake up, to stretch. When he came back he would be refreshed. I could feel myself yawning as we said good-bye, as if I would sleep, waiting for him.

"He says," I told Ida, "look at all these fucking cows."

Poor Ida. She knew where I was headed even then, listening at five in the morning to my invasion of cows and the way I held onto Bill's sleeve. He was a man who talked about life in terms of gestation.

24

"My God," she said again, only this time the tone in her voice got to me, like I was about to come upon a meaning. "What did you do?"

I held my blanket over my head.

"I look," I told her. "It's all I can do not to look."

At times I had convinced myself that if it weren't for that movie theater and the line for popcorn we never would have given each other the time of day. While Ida waited for her buttered popcorn, the ice cream from the bon-bons in my hand found its way through the sides of the box and down the length of my arm. A milky river, he said, was headed straight for me. It was then, while Ida was waiting for her change that I licked my arm, reached with my tongue to clean it away. He was watching me, my tongue flattened across my wrist, with this look in his eyes. Hungry, he said it was. Ask for another box, Ida was saying, the ice cream down my arm, but I was absorbed in his looking. Later he would go on about the kind of woman I was, lapping at my wrist in front of a line of people, forsaking the use of napkins. I was only trying to save my sleeve, I tried to tell him, but I knew right away he had ideas about me and was not the type to accept anything less. It's the kind of

thing you sense, even from the beginning.

Bill had this thing about motherhood, the power of planting something inside me. When I missed my month, he took to staring at his fingernails, reminiscing about his cells, and tickling crazy pictures across my stomach. He said he could feel himself growing, the stretching of his seed.

"Why do you suppose he assumes the role of the woman?" Ida said when I told her about it. "Is it some sort of reverse penis envy?"

I thought school psychologists like Ida were supposed to have a certain authority, talk about fourth graders in terms of Oedipus and think kindergartners who couldn't make it to the bathroom were trying to drown their parents.

"Well, it is a part of him," I said, with my hand on my stomach, though I wasn't even showing at the time. I could feel myself defending him.

She shook her head and sort of smiled. "Tell me that again," she said, "when it comes time to take his name."

I stood in the hallway as she walked away from me, waiting for the kids to come back from gym with the sweat shining on their foreheads. I could smell their T-shirts and the dampness of polyester shorts.

"How can she understand?" Bill would say at night, feeling at the darkness where the stretch marks would appear, long and purple like drips of candle wax.

And we would laugh at Ida and her creaseless tweed, the way she talked about cognitive development. I didn't know I would need her.

He decided to get me pregnant during sex education week at the school, the week when I showed the girls filmstrips of a cartoon uterus and passed out sample tampons. When a tampon fell to the floor, they got themselves into a fit of giggles, their tiny chests bouncing through training bras. I picked up the tampon and slid it into a letter-size envelope, so they could look at it like it was some sort of message.

He was watching outside the door, waiting to take me home, his arms folded and nodding his head. In the car he kept glancing at me from the corner of his eye as he patted me on the hip.

"I see the way you look at them," he said while I was getting

undressed. "Motherhood is just what you need."

In bed I felt him pulling at me, his lips along the line of my throat and his mustache grazing. Squeezing my breasts until his thumbprints dimpled my skin.

"What is it?" I said to him afterward. Even under the bed sheet I still felt him pulling at me.

He lay smiling, as he opened the envelope on the nightstand and pulled at the tampon with his fingers, spreading the cotton hairs out across the bed.

The next day one of my girls got her period. She spent the day in Ida's office afraid that the other girls would know, see the napkin bunched at the seat of her corduroys. Ida went on about the importance of the day.

"But we all get it," I said to the girl. "It's just something that happens."

"And when it's gone, you miss it," Ida said, and I felt a heaviness inside.

26

The second group of cows arrived during my fourth month, before the end of saltines and the flutter in my stomach. This time there were only three of them, standing outside my door.

Come in, I said to them.

Two of them went into my bathroom, nudged open the cabinet and began to chew on a box of tampons, the strings hanging from their curving mouths. Ida came and stood between them, stroked their black spots.

"I told you that you'd miss it," she cooed to them, scooping up a tampon and feeding them.

I backed out of the bathroom and found the third cow, its belly sunken and nipples hanging down, scraping along the carpet. There were fruit jars near its feet and I heard the squirting.

"Is that you, Bill?" I said. He smiled up at me, his eyes red and heavy-lidded as the jars tipped over and bathed my feet in warm milk.

The first time I felt it kick, I was doing a lesson on measurement, explaining how many pints to a quart and the number of cups it would take to fill a gallon. They were having a hard time of it, trying to imagine sticks of butter instead of bottles of milk. These are not

pounds, I was telling them, when I felt a pushing from inside me, like someone turning in a heavy sleep. I imagined Bill standing at the doorway, stretching, the class making deep sounds in their throats, lowing. I could not go on with the lesson.

"Why did you moan that way?" Ida was saying, with her arm around me as she wiped my face with a cool paper paper towel.

"I can feel him," I told her, "he's beginning to emerge."

Of course, she was saying, my time was not very far. I held onto her, shook my head, and tried to explain that I was talking about Bill.

"It's all right to think about him," she said, "after all you've been through. What he did to you is coming to life, it's beginning to take shape."

I held onto my belly with both hands, as if it would fall away if I let go.

That night I ate ice cream from his fruit jars. I waited until the scoops were melted before I drank them in, swirled them inside my mouth in long circles.

They put me on maternity leave soon after, saying perhaps it was getting to be too much for me, all this weight of a fatherless body. Ida had told them it was normal to feel sluggish in the later months, especially when someone was left the way I was. She told them about the dreams, and they said it was a shame to see me go like this, that maybe I should get support, join a group. Ida said I would not be alone, that in fact I was never alone with an unborn child. But I began to feel a sense of wandering, an aimless waiting for Bill.

I could see the cow from my kitchen window, its belly hanging low to the ground and scraping along the driveway. I waved to it through the glass, but it stayed where it was, looking at me. A group of children came running toward it, poking its sides in the hope that it would speak. I tried to run out toward it, to keep the children's hands away. Their fingers left deep marks, almost puncturing. But the door would not open. "Let me out!" I screamed and I felt Bill at the other side of the door, tugging. I pulled so hard there were wet stains down the front of my shirt.

"Save the cow," I tried to tell him through the door, but my

voice wouldn't come.

The milk came all at once, filling my driveway in a huge white spray. The children spread out their hands, the milk sifting through their fingers. How many cups, I could hear them asking, how many cups to the gallon?

I went to the window and pressed my face against it, trying to find Bill. He was standing by the cow, milk running down the length of his arms. I felt the urge to drink it, lap it from his elbows. As the cow stepped closer to the window, I could see the trail of blood it left behind in my driveway. Through it all I could see Ida in the distance, waving a tampon and clapping.

Ida was with me when the doctor said it would not be long. I could feel her elation at the breaking of my water, the way she stared at the brown thickness, the swirling traces of blood.

"Do you think Bill will come and see it?" I asked her as they swabbed ointment on the dark thickness of my belly, the skin stretched into colored spots.

28

"When it's over, you'll be back to normal," she said, and I closed my eyes trying to imagine it, a class of fourth graders poking at me, my body swollen with milk.

"Do you think so?" I said with the pushing, the splash of brown fluid just before the whiteness. They laid the baby on my stomach and I stroked it, urging it to stretch and come out of the sleepy thickness.

When Bill came back, I had little to say, with Ida's warning about adequate pads for the blood flow and the importance of being stitched. He stood in the doorway as I was nursing, his arms folded and stared at the suckling, the nervous rasping sounds of hunger. When I pulled the baby away, he came closer, a line of milk running over the pouch of my stomach. He nudged the baby aside, stretching out beside me on the bed, and lapped at the fluid that settled into the crevices of my stretch marks. Ida stared at me and shook her head, but already I could feel myself expanding, my swollen body heavy with sleep.

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RUNNING FROM THE GRAVITY

by Elizabeth K. Johnson

You know how when you go back through your mind trying to figure out when the changing started? When you knew deep in your gut that the winds were whipping up, so to speak, and the dust wasn't ever going to settle the same way again?

Well, it was like that with Maisy. I think I knew before she did that she'd leave, and whatever I learned from her or she from me would be lost or turned around and we'd never get it back.

It started with the cleaning. I mean I'd go over for our morning coffee and there she'd be, moving furniture, dusting light bulbs or vacuuming drapes. She even washed the bathroom carpet and re-tacked it to the floor, like she was getting things ready in some final way. Even the way she vacuumed the floor. She pushed really hard—back and forth, back and forth—as if she weren't going to do it a second time.

She said she was spring cleaning.

Except it was fall and she'd never been much of a housekeeper.

"You okay, Maisy?" I added cream to my coffee, making small swirls. I guess I didn't want to make too much of it yet, but I didn't want to be too far away from whatever it was that might happen that I'd miss it all together.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Why?"

Maisy had this way of looking at me, like she knew what I was thinking. Sometimes we even finished each other's sentences, but I didn't want her to know what I thought I was thinking right then. Not yet.

"No reason. Just seems early to start cleaning."

I kept stirring my coffee. Her eyes narrowed as she turned to look at me.

"Well, yeah." Then she looked away and started on the kitchen window. "But right now I just need to do this."

Maisy was one of those perfectly beautiful women who didn't act it, although I think she knew it. I'd caught her a few times checking herself out in the mirror or when walking past a store window. In all honesty, I don't think she thought about it much, but other people sure seemed to.

Like when we'd go shopping to look at the shirts on the sale at Lady Red, this big department store right off the main road that leads into town. We usually looked for those bright-colored shirts that never go with anything you own, but because they're on sale you go ahead and buy them.

Anyway, Maisy would be bent way over, leaning into the sale pile and I'd see people staring at that shock of long black hair swinging around her face, those dark green eyes and, of course her butt, the kind that rich ladies paid big bucks for. Her whole body kind of swayed and moved as she pushed shirts from side to side until she'd found the one she thought she wanted. People just stared.

One time, I heard a little boy actually ask his mom if "that lady" was a movie star. His mom looked hard at Maisy, puffed out her cheeks and replied, "No, 'course not. No movie stars around here, for sure." But she did a double take before grabbing one of the shirts Maisy'd tossed back into the pile.

32 We both lived in Old Oaks Estates, one of the first trailer parks set up in Charlesville, off Harper Road across from a field. Dust from the road always drifted through the open windows, never really settling, just circling around the rooms, sometimes landing in cracks on the paneling. Some of our neighbors got window air conditioners, but Maisy said air conditioning closed her in. Made her chest tight and her skin feel dry.

"Besides," she'd say, "the heat's good for us. Cleans out our pores, restores our sense of being. And if it's too hot, we can always go shopping."

Then she'd laugh—a kind of gurgle coming from the back of her throat that always knocked me over. I never had a friend who could make me laugh so much or so hard over practically nothing.

She hardly laughed like that anymore when Dean was around. Dean was her husband, who worked with my husband, Bud, along with most all the other husbands in the park, at the only place any of them had ever worked or probably ever would work. Campbell Metal Company turned out sheet metal, and you could hear it clanging away fifteen hours a day. Dean worked second shift so he could make an extra fifty cents an hour.

"Keeps us in beer, Babe," he'd say.

Only Maisy and I didn't drink beer.

Late in the afternoon sitting in lounge chairs outside one of our trailers, you'd find us sipping peach schnapps over ice. As soon as that light breeze came up around four or five, Maisy'd give the high sign through her kitchen window and there we'd be.

Every fall Charlesville celebrates Field Harvest Day, which has nothing to do with anything since most of the farms went belly-up and the factories have taken over. But it gives the town a reason to have a party. On Saturday afternoon there's a parade, which usually has four or five floats made of chicken wire, colored Kleenex and cotton balls with some stupid theme like "Corn and Beans Make us Mean".

Then at night, a dance is held at the Town Hall, a big square, dark red brick building in the middle of town that separates the good side from the bad side. But even the good side is kind of run down now.

The houses there are long, sprawling ranch types that used to be modern with lots of glass and wooden beams built down from the overhangs. But what I like are the perfectly kept lawns. I imagined the wives outside working on their flowers and having backyard barbecues on Sundays. And sometimes when Maisy and I'd walk through that neighborhood late at night looking into windows from the sidewalk, I could swear the air still smelled of grilled meat.

Maisy never seemed as interested in this side of life as I was. And even though she never talked about it, I had a feeling from the books she read and the way she talked about things that a fancy kind of neighborhood wasn't anything new to her. Which is why I never really figured her and Dean.

I met Maisy soon after she'd gotten married and moved into the park. She and I hit it off right away. Whether we were out shopping or drinking schnapps, or just talking about our men and when we'd have babies, there was always this good-time feeling between us. Maisy liked to talk about our being 'connected' and what that meant in a friendship. Whatever you want to call it, for us it worked. Bud used to just shake his head when the two of us got going, but since he and Dean were best friends, for the most part it worked out perfectly.

If I remember right, Field Harvest Day came up about three weeks after Maisy started cleaning. And then a few days before the dance, she suddenly announced she wasn't going to go.

"I don't know. Seems like such a waste of money to spend on a dress I'll never wear again. Besides, Dean doesn't like to dance anymore, and we'll probably just end up fighting, as usual."

"C'mon," I pleaded. "Let's just go for it. You and I can at least party. We did last year."

But part of me knew she was right. The year before she'd been in a funk for days afterwards, and it about wore me out trying to lift her spirits.

Dean pushed it though, and for some reason wanted to go again this year.

So Maisy and I hit Lady Red and bought these great looking dresses with matching shoes. She was in red and I was in blue. And for one afternoon that fall, I forgot all the signs that seemed to be pushing us forward to someplace neither one of us had been before. I even suggested we get our hair done special for the dance.

In the dressing room, Maisy fingered the neckline of her new dress while staring at herself in the mirror. She glanced at me and smiled.

"You want everything perfect, don't you."

"Well, what's wrong with that?" I asked. "Look, the dance is a good reason to spend some money and do something a little different. You're always saying you want to 'spread out', do something 'new'. Here's our chance and, besides, we've never gotten our hair done special before."

"But it's all pretend."

"Well, what's wrong with pretending?" I finally asked.

"Nothing, unless it's all we do."

"You girls going to the big party tonight?" Marge Quigley was the biggest woman in town. She also ran the best beauty parlor in the county. Some people thought she was too nosy but I liked her. She got right to the point and cut through a lot of "crap", as Bud called it.

I told Marge about the new band they'd got and about our matching dresses and shoes. The whole thing was getting me excited because the four of us hadn't gone out together in months.

Maisy stared in the mirror while Josie, Marge's assistant, brushed out her curls.

"You're mighty quiet today, Maisy. Cat got your tongue?"

Maisy turned her head, watching her profile from both ways. "Just thinking, Marge. Hey, how about putting all of this on top of my head?"

"Want to be the queen tonight?" Marge laughed. "No problem. Josie, get the pins."

I watched while Marge did one of her famous, what we called semi-bees. Within minutes, Maisy's hair became a black crown with wispy curls around her face. As usual, she looked gorgeous.

Marge did what she could with my short hair, brushing it back and layering the sides real nice, the way I always wanted it to look but could never do myself.

"There you two go. Belles of the ball, if I do say so myself. Now, if Maisy here could just get a smile on that pretty face, you all might have some fun."

When we got back into the car, I tried to ask Maisy what was wrong, but she waved me off. We both looked back into the beauty parlor and saw Marge standing by the window, hands on her hips, just staring at us. Maisy turned to me and laughed.

"Lady's cool, but she gets too close sometimes." Looking down at her hands, she spread her fingers across her knees and mumbled something about doing our nails before the dance that night.

I wish now I'd stopped her right then and there. Made her tell me what was going on. But I let it go. First the cleaning, then the moods. Those times when I was over at her trailer and she'd just sit and stare at the walls. Or she'd get real excited and talk to me about something that made no sense. At least not then.

There was this one time when we were outside drinking schnapps and she'd turned to me and asked if I'd ever gotten lost.

"You know. Have you ever been someplace that you've been to lots of times before only, suddenly, you didn't have a clue where you were or why you were there?"

I laughed. "Only when I was dead drunk."

"No, seriously. Have you ever felt that where you were or who you were right now had nothing to do with what you really were?"

"Doesn't make any sense, Maisy. I think we're exactly where we should be right now. Who we are just kind of follows. Naturally.

Jesus. What the hell did you put in your drink?"

She had settled back into the chair. "Never mind. It probably doesn't matter, except sometimes when I look in the mirror, who I think I am isn't looking back."

By late afternoon it'd gotten really sticky. That kind of hot, dirty air that gets on your skin and won't wash off. Just right for a storm, I thought.

Dean and Bud refused to wear ties, and through the kitchen window I could hear Dean already complaining about the heat. By six o'clock, he was shouting about not wanting to go at all.

"Suit yourself, asshole," I heard Maisy yell.

Bud put the paper down, got up to look out the window and then turned back to me. "You know anything about that?" he asked.

"No," I lied. Well, it wasn't actually a lie. I mean, I already knew something was up. I just didn't have the whole picture.

"She's fine, Bud," I said. "Probably just hot, like the rest of us."

"Well, I hope she doesn't wreck the evening."

36 The four of us got to the dance right when it started. I had hoped we'd got out for a drink first, made an entrance, as my mom used to say, and get there at least a half an hour late. But Dean seemed restless and so we trailed in with everybody else.

The band was playing a song by the Doobie Brothers, Bud's favorite group, so he and I started dancing right away. I saw Dean walk over to the bar and leave Maisy standing by herself at the front door.

We'd only danced to a couple of songs when I spotted Maisy over by the speakers, her arms folded against her chest. When the band began playing an old Otis Redding tune, she suddenly dropped her arms and moved closer to the dance floor. Swaying slightly, I watched her slowly lift her arms to the ceiling and begin turning in circles. Her feet barely touched the floor as she kept turning, sort of out of sync with the music, yet still keeping time with the beat.

To me she looked like she was having fun. She looked beautiful with her dress clinging to her as she moved faster. And I think that's when I knew she'd leave. Even before Dean looked away from the woman he'd been talking to since he'd gotten there. Even before he marched over to Maisy and pulled her off the floor. And even before

Maisy pushed Dean away, turned and left the dance, I knew.

She didn't look back, and sometimes I wonder if she simply forgot I was there, because I realize I always thought she'd at least say good-bye.

Now when that breeze comes up and I'm sitting outside my trailer late in the afternoon, the dust up and spinning, I like to think about what Maisy might've done when she left. I don't wonder so much where she went anymore, but how she went.

My favorite thought is of her running from the dance outside up to this old wooden wall that separates the hall parking lot from a field. I have her climbing the wall right to the top, hoisting her legs over and jumping down. When she kicks off those red shoes, she goes for the perfect ending: running through the broken cornstalks and out to the main road.

Elizabeth K. Johnson received a B.A. in English at Michigan State University and an M.A. in communications from Western Michigan University. While trying to earn a living as a fiction writer, she continues to pay her dues by writing non-fiction for various publications and corporate clients in Southwest Michigan she is currently running her own writing and marketing services business.

CONTEST WINNERS

This has been the first year in the last two decades that we have tried to take our contest nationally. Why wait so long? The first one, honestly, was a flop. We were very nervous about the outcome of this contest. The worry was unnecessary. With thanks to AWP, Poets and Writers , and numerous universities across the country, this contest was a great success. The selection of only three stories and three poems out of the hundreds of submissions we received was an extremely difficult task. As you read the following winning selections, I know you'll agree that we made the best choice. Thanks to all the entrants, with all your wonderful concepts and talent, we'll be looking for your submissions at another time.

Sincerely,

Jackie Justice

Editor-in-Chief

Poetry

MIX

by LeShawn Jackson

every fall the white girls used to put
their suntanned arms against mine
inevitably they chuckled and said
i'm darker than you are
it amused them being browner than a black girl

my sister used skin lightener
we'd stand in front of the bathroom mirror and she'd say
i'm almost your complexion now
she wasn't

When one of my aunts visited from alabama
she said i was pretty
prettier than my sister
destined for big things
i'd fit into the man's color scheme

41

when i was in high school a group of girls attacked me
they thought i thought i was cute
they needed to bring me down a peg or two
said i was mixed up like a mutt
said my mother had been tied to a tree by a gang of white
men

when i was waiting for a bus
a guy's voice shouted
hey you wannabe
hey you half-breed
hey you middle class wannabe
your black is showing
you think you're something
but your black is showing
your black is showing
i looked the man was black

a few years ago i asked my mother

what are we exactly
what do you mean she asked
you know what i mean
look i don't know what all we are
all i know
is that we're here like everybody else
but ma people want percentages
want me to break it down
girl we ain't living in louisiana
all you can do is live like everybody else

so i try to live like everybody else
not considering myself
tragic or otherwise
but yesterday when my sister introduced me to her friends
they said
really
same parents and everything

LeShawn Jackson received her BA and is currently working toward her MA at Wright State University. Her goal is to support herself by writing poetry in the same manner as her many role models, one of whom is Maya Angelou.

THE SPIDERS ARE LEAVING

by Robert McDonald

the spiders are leaving and taking
their web,
from nightshade bushes
bejeweled in the morning,
from lettuce damp
in garden rows,
like party decorations
left up too long,
the spiders are leaving and taking
their web.

the spiders are leaving, the flies
rejoice, with their soot-winged purr,
a fest of maggots
in the alleys of the city,
in dumpsters in doorways, the flies
rejoice.

43

and i raise my arms
and will them
to spiders, as if spiders
would dandle
like puppets
from my hands,

but the spiders are leaving,
and the leaving is grim,
they swallow their children
and shoulder their packs

your leaving is spiders,
and the spiders the wind,
the phantomed dust
that devils
the storefronts and low cracked stoops—
it is the leaving

of the spiders, those mothers,
those knitters,
they have tailored and birthed,
there was blood
and loving and the captured pause,
it is a sadness in me
to want something more
as
the spiders are leaving,
and they do not return,
a thousand tiny spiders in the eye
of a storm, a thousand
tiny spiders
on the head
of a pin, a thousand tiny spiders
in a wedding
bouquet, the brisk weaving fingers,
the scissoring kisses which are
doses
of sleep—

and without your legs,
without your eyes,
the spiders of your hands,
the spiders who bed
in your growing
hair,

there are no spiders
and there is no you,

and i do not
sleep.

*Robert McDonald, a graduate of Michigan State University,
has been published in several literary journals. He currently
resides in Chicago.*

HERE
—for Bob Burkett
by Malcolm Glass

For all I know, my first college roommate
may be in Munich, or a small town
two counties away. He may have lost
himself in the bliss of a vocation he'd always
been dying to follow or, he may have
appeared in a copy of the alumni news
I missed seeing, under "In Memoriam."

Every few years he turns up in a dream,
and I wonder if our brains have sparked
the gap like crossed wires.

Last night
in a narrow alley we ran in panic
to escape an old man running us down
with a Lincoln sedan. I woke thinking,
"Bob, are you safe? We both escaped
this time. Or so it happened in my dream.
What of yours? Are you reaching out
to slap the clock to the floor and sleep
on, as you did those mornings you had early
classes? Has your dream dissolved in adrenaline
as you slam a drawer, cursing a lost
sock? What loyal woman is frying your eggs
too hard while you shave?"

I stumbled
in slipshod light to the bathroom mirror
and stared: my hair had turned dark; my skin,
swarthy. Burkett and I had swapped bodies
in the room of the dream. For all I knew,
I might be lying crumpled under the wheels
of the Lincoln in his dream, while he
sleeps on secure under the thin cap

of my blond hair.

No. My breath cleared
from the mirror: my blue eyes found
my blue eyes; my skin came to pale life
in pre-dawn shadows.

Bob, can you
hear me out there? I haven't rid
myself of myself yet. And you?
Wherever you are, you're still here.

Fiction

A SLOW THAW

by Linda Godfrey

Here is the story I tell myself. I live in a nice house in a nice town with a nice husband and two nice kids. True, it is winter, the time for stories and high-banked fires, but when I tell you the real story, the one that lives outside my head when I'm not looking, you'll know why I'm a story teller, a liar speaking truths.

Pay attention. Here goes. The sky hangs low, dull as oxidized silver. Another winter in upstate New York thirty miles from the Canadian border: sub-zero nights, snow banks high as giraffes, cars docked in driveways, their die-hard batteries electrical flatlines. At least a dozen people will kill themselves: cabin fever, full-spectrum light deprivation pulling the trigger or tying the noose.

It is February. What would you like for your birthday, my husband asks.

49

How about a divorce, I say.

He laughs, pops open his eighth can of Bud, turns up the volume on a Knicks game. Dribble. Dribble. Pivot. Dunk. My nice house swells with the stomp, clap, hurrah of a basketball-frenzied crowd. I look at my watch. 2:00 p.m. Four more hours until he passes out on the couch.

Here is the story I tell myself. I live in a nice house in a nice town with an alcoholic husband and two nice kids.

Spring will never come. Not this year, so I grow it inside me, feeding myself stories about morning glories, rainbows, hummingbirds and a little old lady who lives in a big shoe, eats strawberry-rhubarb pie and dates a crooked man who has walked a crooked mile and is now tired enough to finally settle down and make a commitment. When he moves in, her big, high-buttoned house suddenly seems a tight fit. Bunions begin to sprout. She sells,

makes a killing in real estate and avoids paying capital gains tax by buying a sprawling crooked house where she and her crooked man live together with a little crooked mouse.

Jack and Max are six and seven. They look like their father, heavy-lidded and uninspired, so I try to wrap them in stories, my thermal underwear of words to warm their genetic winters.

And the horse goes lumpety-lumpety-lump, I say. Or clumpity-clump or cloppity-clop. Its tail goes wiggily-waggily. This horse has a friend, a squirrel, who goes hippity-hoppity, its tail a whirly-twirly, its teeth a snappity-crackity.

Fiddle-de-dee said the bumble bee and I laugh and laugh, flying away on the wings of my words then zooming back to lay them like a magic carpet at my children's Reeboked feet.

Aw, that's sissy stuff, says Max.

Yeh, stupid, adds Jack. Geez! Who cares about a dumb old horse or a squirrel named Whisky Frisky.

50

So I stick them in front of the upstairs TV for the rest of their lives, let them fight undisturbed over the remote, and wait. This year their father bought them a Rambo Christmas and they pull on camouflage clothing, strap on toy sub-machine guns and fire rounds into me until their ammo clips are empty. They get mad when I refuse to drop to the floor and play dead.

Here is the story I tell myself. I live in a nice house in a nice town with an alcoholic husband and two contemptuous kids.

Spring does come as springs do. Then another and another right on schedule. But I like to think crocuses and daffodils and budding trees have nothing to do with a rotating mass in space turning on its axis. I like to think that old man winter just gets tired of weaving snowflakes, icicle trees and snow blankets and simply takes a break to survey the damage: tally the number of body bags zipped, anti-depressants and pints of alcohol sold, pounds gained per person.

I begin to dream. Sometimes I am a waitress on the early shift, my hair batted down by a bun, eight bobby pins and a hairnet, my eyelids patches of pale blue, my mouth a professional pucker of fuchsia. Not-very-savvy businessmen in cheap Sears 'n' Roebucks suits eat high-cholesterol business breakfasts of eggs and bacon. I pass out copies of *Fortune* and *GQ* to every table as I refill their coffees. What are these things they ask, opening the magazines vertically, searching for a centerfold.

What are you going to wear? Every year my husband asks the same thing and every year he's just as excited about our excursion to the only country club in town. His father's a member, big in real estate, so we get invited to the Christmas ball where everyone drinks too much and still manages to feel superior heaving over a toilet bowl.

Other than this, there are eight cinemas at the mall, the Veterans of Foreign Wars' parade, Saturday bingo at Holy Family School, two dozen bars and rival band every weekend at the Ramada and Sheraton. Top forty country and pop, easy listening with synthesizers.

That's it. That's all there is.

Are the new doctor and his wife coming, I ask. (This is news. We live in the county seat, population 35,000, and this is the first black family in residence since the old days when the paper mill was still operating and three blacks worked the loading docks.)

I hear they're Jamaicans. Lovely accents. The wife is a knock-out. Well, do you think they'll come?

Ha! Fat chance, he says, gulping down his gin straight.

Carrying my heels in my hands, my pile-lined boots clomping over the slick, hard-packed snow, I stare at the club's double oak doors. On one side hangs an elaborate wreath, on the other a sign printed in red and green magic marker: NIGGERS NOT WELCOME HERE. Someone has even drawn holly sprigs in each corner.

Here is the story I tell myself. I live in a nice house in a redneck, culturally and morally bankrupt town with an alcoholic husband and two contemptuous kids.

Sometimes I dream myself into the stratosphere—a perky flight attendant nuking chicken divan at 10,000 feet. The plane crashes (as planes will) and I am the only survivor. Not a bruise, not a nick, not a hair out of place even though I have to dig my way out through mangled bodies, bags of salted peanuts, a fuselage, a propeller, then walk to the nearest patch of civilization (which happens to be Paris), where I sip wine at Deux Maggots on the Left Bank, then buy a red skirt and big gold-looped earrings. I change my name to Isabeau, marry a starving artist named Guillame who somehow dies in an upstate New York white-out while I inherit his posthumous fame and fortune.

Paloma Picasso calls to ask me to lunch. We dine on lobster bisque and asparagus tips.

It is January again. My husband loses his sales job. Perhaps now he'll believe we're in a recession, won't blame it on left-wing liberal bleeding-heart propaganda. Maybe now he'll stop comparing Bush to John Wayne, George Patton and Jesus Christ.

The white paint on the clapboards crack and buckle in the cold. The oven thermostat blows but I can still use the burners and buy a cheap toaster oven as a pinch hitter. The ice pokes its curious fingers under the eaves where it sits lurking, thawing, then freezing until the foyer ceiling tumbles down in an avalanche of soggy sheet rock and insulation. We staple plastic to the rafters and use the back door.

After five months he finds another position, not as much money but I help out waitressing at the Ramada Inn, serving ham and eggs to cheesy businessmen.

Here is the story I tell myself. I live in a house any real estate appraiser would market as a fixer-upper, situated in a dying town in the wasteland of upstate New York, with an alcoholic husband and two kids who used to be contemptuous but are now contemptible.

I tell myself this story because if I say it often enough maybe then I'll finally believe it, maybe then I'll know what to do with my story, which has only a beginning and a middle and waits, as do all tales, for its teller to give it an end.

Linda Godfrey currently teaches creative writing at Ithaca College in New York. She has published fiction in various literary magazines and is a self-proclaimed Catholic in recovery—she says she is always one votive candle away from a life of perpetual guilt and shame, plaid jumpers and bad thoughts.

KNITTING

by Karen Halvorsen Schreck

A loon calls, sounding farther away than the lake is big. Two notes linger unanswered in the few moments it takes for me to draw my knitting needles from the loose ball of yarn. Although the sky is almost dark, the entire deck of the cabin is bright in the wide beam of the outdoor lamp set above the sliding glass door. Its white light shows the flaws in the knitted swatch draped over my knees. I have been knitting for only six weeks now—this same simple pattern, this same simple sweater—following the directions of a how-to book. Gaps open between the stitches, and smudges of newsprint cover the once creamy-white yarn. Until today, I did most of the knitting on a commuter train, jolting to and from my office in the city, after I'd finished reading the *Times*.

My son Charlie calls back to the loon. His red sweatshirt can no longer be seen between the trunks of the silver birches, and I imagine him sitting, Indian-style, at the end of the dock. A bamboo fishing pole lies beside him, or perhaps he has pushed its end between the planks, and the pole stands straight up in the air. He cups his hands together, as if there was a moth inside, or lightning bugs, and places the bridge of his thumbs against his mouth. When I was his age, when I was newly ten, I could whistle this way. Not a human sound.

The loon doesn't answer Charlie's four long, low notes, the last flicked into a piping tremble by his lifted fingers. By the time I unwind a length of yarn and settle the needles into place, ready to knit two rows, then purl two rows, then knit two rows again, the fishing pole must be in Charlie's hands; he must be playing the bobber up and down on the water, gently, enticingly.

This morning at breakfast we made a bet. Charlie said that within the first twenty-four hours of our vacation he would catch a fish. I said that he wouldn't. Not from the end of the dock anyway, which is where all fishing will occur since a boat doesn't come with the cabin. There is a canoe lying belly-up, beached on the gravel driveway. And Charlie and I will probably drag it down to the lake soon. But not in these first few days, when all I can possibly do is sit with my feet up, either in the reclining lawn chair on the deck, as now, or on the couch by the fireplace. I haven't had more than a

weekend away from work in over nine months.

So Charlie has been fishing off the end of the dock since 9:30 this morning, with only a half hour break for lunch. I brought dinner down to him. It's quite dark now; in a few moments I'll call for him to come in and get ready for bed. All day, the lake had been churned up by the engine of motor boats, and sliced by water skis. Even in its deepest reaches, this isn't the kind of water that breeds great schools of bluefish or bass. There are no bays to speak of, no inlets. It's a small lake, for recreation. If Charlie pulls a fish from the shallow, algae-free water surrounding the dock, I'll tell him it's a miracle. Tomorrow, I'll fry it for his lunch. Afterwards, we'll drive the forty-five miles into Traverse City, and he'll choose a reel for the fishing rod I gave him three weeks ago for his birthday.

"What if I do catch a fish?" Charlie asked this morning. "What will I win?"

"A fishing reel for your new rod," I answered immediately, because I'd intended to buy him one anyway, before we left home, but ran out of time. What good is the whip-like rod without a reel?

56

Charlie was seven when he found the bamboo pole underneath the workbench in the garage. One his father left behind. It was the first of the paternal memorabilia that Charlie searched for, and actually found. He has been using that pole ever since, at the narrow, sluggish rivers near our house that act more as boundaries between counties than as habitats for fish. In the last three summers, Charlie has brought home two carp, and innumerable turtles, caught with his bare hands. I gave him the rod—will give him the reel, whether or not he wins the bet—with this vacation in mind, hoping he would have a chance to catch something, if not mountable, at least edible.

This afternoon, I spread a towel out on the dock and lay down on my stomach, watching the dragonflies light on Charlie's back like pieces of turquoise jewelry, and boat wakes weave over and under each other, their last waves like echoes ending as they broke against the dock. And I realized this isn't the kind of lake his father used to find—where after a few hours of slapping mosquitoes in the dark-green dusk or the orange-grey dawn, he would bring back a line feathered with fish. This isn't that kind of lake at all.

I rubbed sun block on Charlie's shoulders, and imagined him standing at the end of the dock, casting and reeling in, casting and

reeling in for the rest of the week, becoming more sure in his aim, more slow and steady as he drags back the lure. And not catching a thing. The pressure of my hand against Charlie's back left white marks; his skin looked only faintly pink, but he was already burned.

"You know," I said, spreading one more coat of lotion over his shoulders, "some weekend this summer we'll have to try fishing off one of the piers on Lake Michigan. I've heard they've been bringing in some pretty good-sized fish there—trout, I think."

"That'd be great, Mom."

But now I wonder whether he'd need a different rod, one that's stronger.

I've almost finished the back of this sweater. Next, I'll knit the sleeves. It's for Charlie; I hope to finish it by the time he goes back to school. The pattern is several sizes too large for him and the sweater will probably be even larger yet, the way I've stretched the wool. Charlie is small for his age, but I think he'll wind up about the same size as his father—who was all skin and bones until sixteen, when his growth exploded, shoulders widening and legs lengthening. When Charlie was a baby, everyone said he resembled me. His hair came in as white and fly-away as shreds of cotton, as fly-away a towhead as I would be if my hair weren't cut short and tamed. "Goose," his father called him, because of his hair, and because of the way his feet turned out. The first morning Charlie left for kindergarten, he wore special shoes; corrective shoes. It was only a year and a half later, when I took those black things out of his closet for the last time, that I finally dug mine out of a trunk in the basement. Both pairs, so similar in style, went out into the street with the rest of the garbage. Why, I asked myself then, did I carry these shoes around for so many years, in that little, mildewed box my mother brought them home in? But now photographs lie in boxes on the top shelf of my closet—and letters; saved, supposedly, for Charlie, for when he is old enough.

I walked down to the dock and told Charlie he'd had enough fishing for one day. In the moonlight, his hair gleamed clean white, as mine does. We stood together silently for a few moments, watching a slow-moving pontoon boat cross the lake, the air filled with the voices and laughter of the unseen family on board. Charlie had already gathered several large rocks, half a cinder block, and a

few stray pieces of wood, left from another season's bonfire. We laid these things on top of the bamboo pole. Charlie believes that fish will bite while he's in bed. And since I said that he must sleep until at least six o'clock tomorrow morning, and then he can do as he pleases; but quietly, he had decided to leave the pole here and the line dangling in the water overnight. He hooked two worms for good luck.

After his bath, Charlie lit a fire in the fireplace. It ignited quickly, and he practically crowed. He didn't know I'd spattered the kindling with charcoal lighting fluid. We ate popcorn and played a game of checkers. Then I followed him up the steep, wooden stairs to the attic which serves as a second bedroom, unfinished. I'm afraid that he'll brush against or fall into the thick, pink rolls of insulation, and spend the rest of the week in misery while the tiny fragments of glass work their way out of his skin. Last night, he screamed once in his sleep, as a girl might scream on a playground, but never, if his life depended on it, a ten-year-old boy. And so tonight, after I tucked him into bed and warned him once more about the insulation, I read to him from *The Yearling*, until his eyelids were slowly dropping, and then flying up again, dropping, and then flying up again, with the regular rhythm of a breath or a heartbeat. After he was asleep, I stroked his damp hair with the tips of my fingers, traced patterns on his forehead. Even now, I hear the lullaby I hummed.

The fire is dying as quickly as it flared. I'm thinking of turning on the television; I'm thinking of writing a letter to my mother, maybe a postcard to a friend; I'm thinking of running down the path to check if the worms are still on the hook. My index and middle fingers ache from all the hours of knitting today. I clench the needles far too tightly, but, oddly enough, my stitches are so loose they're almost loops.

Just before Charlie's father moved out, he began to play a game with Charlie. "And in the center ring," he would say, and our living room would become a circus. Charlie would raise his arms up—as his father had taught him—until they stretched out from his shoulders, and stand as tall as he could for his five years, his face solemn and proud as the greatest trapeze artist of Barnum and Bailey. His father would strut around the room, barking out superlatives, cupping his hands over his mouth and roaring like a

great crowd, applauding, and then finally stand behind Charlie. A few moments of utter silence. Then, his father created a drum roll, his lips vibrating as he blew air out through them, and Charlie closed his eyes, drew in a deep breath, and fell backwards. His father always caught him under his arms, just before he hit the floor.

Perhaps a month after Charlie's father and I were divorced, about the time I knew that the woman he'd fallen in love with also had children, I found myself running around the living room, clapping my hands, and announcing, "Ladies and gentlemen, we are proud to present: The Greatest Show On Earth." When I stood behind Charlie, he lifted his arms, and we waited. Then he turned to me and said, "No." I didn't tell him of the afternoon in August when he was two years old, and his father stood in a swimming pool at the bottom of a bright blue slide. "Don't worry, I'll catch him," his father said, his arms out-stretched. And so I set Charlie on top of the slide. I was laughing hysterically, as I always laugh on a roller coaster or in a haunted house. Charlie skidded down the dry plastic, his skin squeaking, and shot off the end, plopping into the chlorine water a few feet away from his father, and sinking to the bottom. His father dragged him to the surface, and carried him to the side of the pool. Charlie sputtered and screamed, but his eyes were shut tight then. He didn't stare, too wary to blink, knowing that his breath might be lost somewhere between my hand and the living room floor.

59

It's morning, but the light is too pale for it to be late, and perhaps I can fix Charlie some eggs and bacon before he fills up on cereal. Some bird is cawing, as loudly as if it's brushing its wings against the bedroom window, and when I roll over, I see Charlie standing in the doorway. In one hand he holds the bamboo pole, and in the other, raised out in front of him, a line that quivers and twists from the flashing of the sleek, grey fish caught on the hook. Drops of cold water fly against my cheeks and neck. "I won," Charlie shouts, and I sit up in bed and hold the fish while he works the hook out of its lip. Its belly is the color of pearl, its flesh smoother than any child's.

Karen Halvorsen Schreck is currently finishing her PhD in English and Creative Writing at the University of Illinois at Chicago. It is her hope to someday teach creative writing and literature in a university. Around and through all this, she'll continue to write fiction and non-fiction essays, and collaborate on phototext projects with her husband.

HYBRID

by Peter Donahue

Gene took the apartment on the spot. Something about the nine-story, L-shaped brick building appealed to him. People could live there undisturbed, it seemed—no one to interfere with their lives.

Last week his father, who immigrated from Korea 23 years ago, had forbidden Gene to breed butterflies in their home. "What a crazy idea," his father had berated him in Korean. "No, not even in the basement."

So Gene moved out. It was as simple as that. He was eighteen, he had a job, such decisions were his to make.

"Careful there," he told his buddy Al the same afternoon he signed the lease.

Al bumped the twenty-gallon fish tank against the door frame as he negotiated it through the Cornelius Arms front entrance. The iron gate of the freight elevator was propped open with a blue milk crate full of books so they could load Gene's belongings. He watched as Al set the tank down.

People were always commenting on what a pair the two of them made: Al, big and bulky, blond-headed, pink-skinned, with scraggly eyebrows over blue eyes and a tiny goatee on his chin; himself, lithe and tall, black-haired, clean-shaven, with pasty-beige skin, and high cheek bones.

"What's that smell?" Al complained and screwed up his face. The building had a distinctly unsavory odor, something between old bacon grease and cheap industrial cleansers.

"It's not so bad upstairs," Gene reassured him and dropped a bulky, twin-sized futon onto the elevator. "I think that's it. Let's take it up."

The freight elevator creaked and groaned its way up the elevator shaft as its two passengers exchanged uneasy looks. When it reached the sixth floor, Gene propped open the gate and sprinted down to his apartment at the building's southeast corner. He let himself in and right away heaved open all three windows, allowing a cross-current of air through the empty 20-by-15-foot room. He then hustled back to help Al.

As they unloaded the elevator and hauled boxes, lamp, framed

poster, and other assorted junk into the apartment, a man carrying a paint can stepped out of an apartment down the hall and stopped to regard the commotion. His navy blue T-shirt, charcoal grey hair, and weathered-brown face, arms and hands were speckled with white paint. He put the paint can down and approached the two friends, his head cocked slightly to one side as he scrutinized them with a suspicious, upward-looking glance.

"You two moving in?"

"Just me," Gene replied.

"I see. Just you. So you two are just friends?"

"That's right," Al said. "Just friends."

"I'm the manager."

Gene hefted up the futon. "Good to meet you, " he returned. "My name's Gene."

The manager didn't bother introducing himself by name. Instead, he continued to carefully watch the two young men. "You from China?" he said at last.

Gene stepped off the elevator and looked directly at the man. "Seattle," he replied. "Northgate to be exact. Born and bred."

The question didn't surprise Gene. He got a lot of that kind of thing: What country are you from? How long you been in the US? Do you like it here? And if by odd chance someone granted he could be a US citizen, they guessed he was Chinese or Japanese or even Vietnamese by origin—rarely Korean.

The manager grunted. "Just wondering," he said and pointed to the fish tank. "You going to keep fish?"

"Butterflies. Or at least I'm going to try to."

"Insects, you mean?" the manager returned, his eyebrows pressed together. "You aren't serious, are you?" He then added, "'Cause I'll tell you right now, we've got all the bugs we need around this place. And what's more, there's no pets allowed."

Gene stood before the manager still holding the futon in his arms. He and the manager were oddly similar in size and build, both 5'9" or so and sinewy, like a couple of bantam weight boxers. The manager, though, was much older, probably in his mid-forties. Gene noticed on each of his arms a tattoo: on the left a coiled and hissing cobra with Regiment 36 beneath it, and on the right the unfurled stars and stripes of the American flag over an outline of Vietnam.

"I checked with Ellen in the office," Gene explained, "and I guess butterflies don't count as pets."

The manager glared at him, then snorted and said, "Whatever you say." He turned away and strutted back to the apartment he'd come out of.

Wishing he'd been a little less snide, Gene looked over to Al.

Al wheeled Gene's mountain bike off the elevator. "A real sweetheart," he remarked, and stepping on one of the pedals, coasted the bike down the hallway.

Gene's grandfather, whom he'd visited in Tae Jon, Korea when he was fifteen years old, had also collected butterflies. The old man was a Buddhist, which had annoyed Gene's father, who'd joined The Assembly of God Church prior to immigrating to America. Gene, for his part, was generally indifferent to the family's religious dispute, or if anything, he admired his grandfather for holding out, for neither converting nor immigrating. A diminutive, straight-backed man who rarely laughed but smiled often, he'd shown Gene where butterflies lay their eggs, and then had shown him the large clear glass bowls in which he bred a dozen *Sericanus Telamon* Koreana, a beautiful mid-sized butterfly with yellow and black wings and inch-long wind tails.

63

When the family—father, mother, younger sister, and Gene—returned from Tae Jon to Seattle, Gene went to the library the very next day and checked out an armful of books on butterflies. That week he began collecting. His father wouldn't let him keep live butterflies, as he'd wanted to, but insisted that his collection consist of only dead ones, suspended by pins above cardboard in rows of five, looking like some tidy diorama of an insect torture chamber. Nonetheless, he went ahead and built up his collection and then finally, two years later, after winning First Place at the Ingraham High School Science Fair for it, including detailed entomological information on 5x4 index cards, he gave up the hobby, donating his extensive collection to the local Wildlife Center. There was something about it that had become too morbid for him. Then just last year, not long after he was told by his father that his grandfather in Tae Jon had died, he once again set his heart on collecting. But this time, only live butterflies.

Exactly one week after moving into his apartment, Gene rode the bus with Al to Discovery Park. Finding butterfly eggs, especially on such a warm day, among the wildflowers and weeds in the enormous park would be a cinch, he told Al.

The bus let them off just inside the park entrance. From there they walked the narrow dirt paths that led through stands of cedar, past rhododendrons the size of small houses, to the large open fields where on weekends people flew stunt kites and hang-glided off the nearby sand bluffs overlooking Puget Sound.

"Okay," Gene said finally. "We're looking for nettles, hops, fennel, milkweed, and Queen Anne's lace."

"Milkweed's got the pods that ooze the white gunk, right?"

"Right," Gene said handing Al a jumbo-sized mayonnaise jar he'd gotten from a restaurant and scrubbed clean. Air holes were punched in the lid. "And fennel's this thin, reedy plant that smells like licorice. Over there's some Queen Anne's lace...with the bunches of little white flowers." He pointed to a cluster of Queen Anne's lace about twenty yards away. "The eggs will be on the underside. Just tear the leaf off and lay it gently in the jar. Simple as that."

Each with his jar, Gene and Al wandered through the fields inspecting the various plants, checking the undersides of leaves, and occasionally tearing off a leaf or stem and placing it in the jar. The sun warmed the loose, sandy ground, while a mild sea breeze both fresh and pungent blew across the field from the Sound. Every now and then Gene looked over the bluffs at a cargo ship out on the bright blue waters and thought what a luxury it was to be hunting butterfly eggs in a park as the rest of the world slaved away. Fortunately, he did not have to work again until the next afternoon.

"Butterflies, Al," Gene began, making his way through some tall heather, "are like people. They're metamorphic and polymorphic. They go through big changes all at once, and they change a little all the time. And if they're lucky, a bird doesn't swoop down and eat them."

Al handed his jar to Gene. "How's this?"

Gene examined its contents. "Some of these don't have eggs. Those must be leaf warts or something." He unscrewed the lid and removed several leaves. "The eggs are slightly conical or roundish,

usually a soft whitish color," he explained and handed the jar back.

Al tucked the jar under his arm, tipped a cigarette out of a pack of Marlboros, and lit it. "You're not turning into some kind of mad scientist on me, are you?" Al laughed at this idea. "*Help me. Help me,*" he squeaked out in a tiny voice and began choking on the cigarette smoke he exhaled.

"Blow your smoke away from the jar, okay?"

Gene had to admit that sometimes Al's ribbing ticked him off. Collecting was a hobby, like any other, so why did people have to make such a big deal out of it? Nobody would get sarcastic if he kept goldfish or birds or even snakes for that matter. Something about insects simply didn't sit well with people.

They spent another full hour in the fields before Al began complaining that burrs were sticking to his pants' legs and his hay fever was acting up. Both jars were about a quarter filled with leaves spotted with eggs like small dew droplets.

They hiked a cut-back trail down the far side of the bluffs to the pebbled beach, sat on a bleached-grey piece of driftwood and ate the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, fig newtons, and ripe red cherries Gene had packed in his knapsack.

They talked about different things for a while and then Gene said, "That manager dude in my building...remember him? I think he's got a real grudge against me." He spat a cherry pit into the water and watched two screeching seagulls vie for it.

Al was carving his initials with a pen knife into the log they sat on. "What makes you think so?"

"Last week I asked him to fix my bathroom sink because it leaks, you know? But then a whole week passes and nothing happens so I go down to his apartment and he tells me he has things to do and can't get to mine for a while. Then he says—get this—'You're all so good at making things, fix it yourself.'"

"Wooh," exclaimed Al, and reached into the bag for a handful of cherries. "Maybe he's got a problem with Asian folks."

"Maybe," Gene repeated.

Al put his pen knife away. "My advice is—stay clear. Close the bathroom door and let the damn sink leak."

They dropped the topic and finished eating the cherries. After skimming stones over the water's calm swell for a while, they gathered up their things and started back up the bluffs and across

the fields. When they reached the parking lot, the bus back downtown was pulling away and they had to shout and sprint after it to get the driver's attention.

Gene had all he needed within a week. Another twenty gallon tank and two additional ten gallon tanks that he'd discovered at the Goodwill store, plus several more mayonnaise jars from neighborhood restaurants, crowded the efficiency apartment. As soon as the first eggs hatched in the jars, Gene transferred the hungry larvae to the glass tanks, making sure they had plenty of leafy matter to feed on. He even went out and dug up a few aphids for the carnivorous Harvester caterpillars.

After another two weeks had elapsed, the larvae began forming the chrysalises which then would eventually metamorphose into the imago—the broad-winged, sexually mature adult butterfly. Yet to Gene's disappointment, the first chrysalis failed to molt. Days went by during which the hard pupal casing dangled from the small twig propped slant-wise in the tank. Gene tapped it to see if the half-formed butterfly would react, but nothing happened. It remained half-formed and finally began to soften and rot, at which point he flushed it down the toilet. Since there were already three more fully developed chrysalises, he decided not to worry, and to let nature take its course. Besides, he had other things to take of, like getting to work.

The Mariners had a late afternoon game with the Toronto Bluejays, a team that always drew big crowds, and so as soon as Gene got to Kingdome he was kept incredibly busy scampering up and down the aisles, a tray slung around his neck, hawking peanuts first and later hot dogs until his voice nearly went out. Fortunately for him, the game was a wash out. The Mariners got behind early and never caught up, and by the time the last out of the ninth inning was made, half the crowd had already gone home and Gene was getting ready to do the same. He cleared his take-in with the cashier and walked down the winding Kingdome ramps. A flush of evening light still hung over the city as he hurried across the vast parking lot, past the two totem poles in Occidental Park, and at the cast-iron pergola in front of the Pioneer Building hopped a bus up First Avenue.

When he got back to the Cornelius Arms and reentered the

apartment, he flicked the overhead light on and immediately began searching the tanks. Where two chrysalises had earlier hung, there were now two moist-winged Monarchs folded again. A mild, ammoniac odor, barely detectable, that defended Monarchs from predatory birds, emanated from the tank. Gene removed the screen lid and instantly one of the butterflies flitted out and landed on the windowsill. The second one quickly followed, rising toward the overhead light and perching on the dusty glass covering. Gene leapt onto a chair, rescued it with a small butterfly net before it singed itself alive, and promptly returned it to the tank. He then went after the other.

"Here, *danaus plexippus*," he called to it, "come to Papa."

But before he could scoop it off the windowsill, it flew straight back into the tank on its own. After quickly setting the screen on top, he squatted down to examine the rambunctious butterfly closely. Sure enough, a black spot like a dab of ink marked the male scent organ on its hind wings. The other Monarch, without the spot, was obviously then a female, which meant that with any luck the two would soon be mating!

Gene straightened up, checked his pockets for a quarter, and then left the apartment. He bounded down the stairs to the lobby pay phone to call Al with the good news.

67

By month's end Gene had a small menagerie of sixteen Monarchs, four Black Swallowtails, two Harvesters, and one Regal Fritillary—the Fritillary a rarity so far north. At the Goodwill and Salvation Army stores, as well as garage sales around town, he picked up five more tanks, bringing his total to nine. With Al's help, he constructed two four-foot-square cages to help incubate the eggs and chrysalises, bought potted flowers from the Pike Place Market nursery—geraniums, chrysanthemums, and primroses—and sowed marigold seeds in Dixie cups filled with potting soil.

Amidst all this, Gene welcomed his father, who'd finally agreed to visit the apartment his son had moved into five weeks earlier. The stern-faced, 49-year-old man was several inches shorter than his son and more compact, his straight black hair clipped very short while Gene's was tied in a ponytail down to his shoulders. He inspected with great suspicion his son's jars, tanks, cages, and plants along the baseboards and on every available surface in the small

apartment.

"What's all this?" he asked Gene, abandoning his stilted English for fluent Korean. "You call this a hobby?"

Gene could hardly make sense of his father's rapid-fire pronunciation. Raised to speak Korean at home, he preferred speaking English ever since he'd started school—though to admit such a thing would invite swift and certain scorn from his father who despite having succeeded in America still resisted much of the culture, including the language, and at times even held it in contempt.

"I don't understand," complained his father, sweeping his arm about the cluttered room. "Why?"

Gene had explained his enthusiasm for lepidoptera many times over. It was different. It was science. But it was myth too. He explained the intricacies of the butterfly's life system. He cited Chuang Tzu, the Butterfly Philosopher, and quoted Walt Whitman: "Those beautiful, spiritual insects!" He even evoked the memory of his grandfather, but nothing convinced the stubborn, bull-dogged man. So he let his father vent.

68

"You've been accepted to Harvard, to Columbia. Do you know how many students wish to go to these great universities? I raised my only son with all the advantages. I worked night and day so he can improve himself and be better than the rest. Not so he can lead this aimless, grubby existence—a bug man!"

"There's plenty of time for college," Gene said. He couldn't see the point of going to college right now: He was learning plenty on his own.

His father stooped to peer into a tank filled with fifteen or twenty Monarchs. He shook his head and straightened up to face his son. "Come to work for me, for one year," he said right out, apparently assessing his son's appearance as soon as this offer had been made.

Gene knew his father couldn't be pleased by what he saw: baggy jeans, Pearl Jam T-shirt beneath a faded brown and purple plaid shirt, ratty Converse, blue bandanna, beaded leather necklace a girl had given him last year—in other words, genuine grunge.

"I got a job already," Gene answered in English. His peddling peanuts in the Kingdome, he knew too well, humiliated his father, the founder and owner of Kim Soo Heating and Air which

employed twenty people, mostly Koreans, and held major contracts with the city of Seattle. "Maybe I'll enroll in the U.W. next fall," Gene suggested, a peace offering, upon seeing his father scowl at him. "And take some biology courses"—entomology, he quickly qualified to himself.

"Pre-med courses are good," his father rejoined in English. "Good idea. You can take summer school courses. I know you..." His father began to smile, reminiscent of his own father, Gene's grandfather. "You will catch up fast and pass everyone in no time."

"Maybe even summer school, Dad."

Apparently relieved by this prospect for his son, Gene's father zipped up his tan golf jacket and put on his baseball cap with the company name and logo stenciled on the dome above the visor. Seeing that the visit was coming to a close, Gene hoped his father would return his peace offering with a gesture of his own—say to the tune of \$40 or \$50—but instead his father dropped a firm hand on his son's shoulder, nodded twice—proud nods—and stepped toward the door.

"You should get the manager to paint in here," his father advised. Without looking back at Gene or saying another word, he opened the door and began heading down the hallway.

"So long, Pops," Gene called after him, "thanks for coming by." He watched his father, straight back and squarish head, board the elevator.

He stepped back into his apartment and closed the door. From his knapsack he took the latest copy of *American Entomologist* and lay down on the floor with it. A feature article by a leading lepidopterist examined cross-breeding, the pros and cons, the do's and don'ts. Gene read the lengthy article with interest, looking up occasionally to consider his butterflies. When he finished with the article, he began flipping through the back-page ads and notices. That's where he spotted the little box with three lines in it that sped his heart:

Exotic breeds shipped direct. All varieties, from Ornithoptera Paradisea to Sericinus Telamon Koreana. Larvae Guaranteed. Write for Catalogue.

Gene tore the notice from the magazine, went to work on a

letter, and ten minutes later was depositing a stamped envelope in the mailbox at the street corner.

When the catalogue came, Gene wasted no time in ordering the *Serycinus Telamon Koreana*, the breed he remembered his grandfather showing him when he was only fifteen. The next two weeks for Gene passed in unmitigated anticipation, and when the *Koreana* larvae finally arrived in the mail, he immediately set it up in a tank of its own and began carefully feeding it. Not too long after that, to his sheer amazement, the first imago emerged with sunlight yellow wings swirled through with black extending down into matching hind-wing tails.

When several more adult *Koreana* dropped their pupal casings, assuring his stock, he right away set about cross-fertilizing. Using a flat-sided toothpick, he delicately transferred a sperm sample from a Monarch butterfly to the ovum of a *Koreana*. From all he'd read, cross-breeding between the Papilionid family (which the *Koreana* belonged to) and the Danaidae family (the Monarch's clan) rarely succeeded—though nature was known occasionally to pursue such aberrations. While admittedly the Swallowtail, another Papilionid, may have worked better, Gene favored the Monarch since it seemed to him like the all-American butterfly.

When the cross-fertilized ova finally hatched, the result was a small green-and-white striped caterpillar with black speckles. Gene was beside himself.

"Damn," he muttered as it crawled toward its food source, shortening and lengthening its abdominal segments in wave-like motions. He watched it feed for several minutes, and then once again checked to see if he had a quarter and scrambled down to the pay phone to call Al, who told Gene he'd hop on his scooter and come right over.

"What are you going to call it?" Al wanted to know twenty minutes later when Gene admitted him into the apartment and he squatted down to check out the voracious new caterpillar.

"I don't know," Gene said. "People usually put their last initial after the scientific name when they discover a new breed."

"You didn't discover it, man. You made it."

After a few minutes of consideration, Gene decided not to worry about it; the name didn't matter, at least not at this early

stage, and especially since the other cross-fertilized eggs still hadn't hatched. "I'll wait until it molts," he said and crouched next to Al in front of the tank.

They were watching the inch-long tube of flesh edge up a twig when a series of hard, startling knocks came at the door and Gene sprang up to answer it.

In the hallway, in a rayon shirt with the cuffs rolled up, the manager stood holding a tool box. The bothered look on his face shouted his impatience.

"Hey, Lonnie," said Gene. Two days ago he'd at least learned the manager's name when, fed up with the leaky sink, he'd reported the problem directly to the building's secretary.

"You want that bathroom sink fixed?" Lonnie said and brushed past Gene into the apartment. The bathroom was immediately to the left, but he walked right past it and stepped into the room. "Jesus," he seethed. "What've you got going here?"

"I told you already," Gene returned. "I breed butterflies."

Lonnie gave Al a sickened look as if he were an accomplice in some perverse experiment, and then glared back at Gene. "It's a bit weird if you ask me. Some kind of Oriental thing I suppose?"

"A hobby," Gene said flatly. "Just a hobby." He pointed behind him to his left. "The sink's in there."

The manager shook his head and ambled toward the bathroom, scoping out the room as he went. A moment later he was banging away violently at the pipes beneath the bathroom sink. Gene closed the bathroom door to muffle the noise and glanced over at Al, who looked back at him with a contorted expression and mouthed back Lonnie's words—"Oriental thing?"

To his great delight, Gene witnessed the entire molt of the hybrid larvae. He watched as it peeled back its skin, exposing a fluorescent green blob underneath, and then hooked its abdomen to the silk button it had earlier attached to the small willow branch inside the tank. The transformation completed itself around midnight when a fully formed chrysalis, as smooth and opaque as an emerald, hung motionless from the twig.

For the next week and a half Gene kept the space heater on low in front of the tank whenever it rained or became overcast. On the eleventh day, the Mariners had an evening game, so he asked Al to

watch the hybrid chrysalis while he was out, which Al agreed to do, although he remarked it was one bizarre way to spend an evening, baby-sitting a butterfly cocoon.

Gene explained that if the chrysalis cracked and the imago failed to shed its casing, it would die without someone to help it. And then, concern straining his face, he left for work.

The high-scoring game between the Mariners and the Baltimore Orioles went into extra innings and Gene didn't make it back to Cornelius Arms until after midnight, by which time he was exhausted and barely able to keep his eyes open. Still, after getting off the elevator, he hurried down the dark hallway anxious to learn if there had been any developments with the chrysalis. He took his key out and was inserting it into the lock when he spotted the piece of paper taped to his apartment door. He tore it off and took a quick glance, but the 6-watt bulb which lit the hallway was too dim to read by.

"Anything happen?" he called out to Al as he entered the apartment.

72

Al sat on the futon with a set of headphones on. He clicked his Walkman off and pushed the headphones back. "It's an insect, dude, not a damn baby. Relax."

Gene went straight to the tank. "So nothing happened?"

"Nothing happened. It just hung there, like it's hung there all week."

Gene bent down to examine the chrysalis. A day ago the shell had turned from light green to teal and become nearly transparent. The folded wings were visible, yet the opaque shell blurred their exact color and pattern. Still, nothing new had happened in the five hours he'd been gone, and it began to occur to him that Al might be right: maybe his hobby was getting out of hand. He straightened up.

"Who won?" Al asked.

"Baltimore."

Yet the fact remained: the hybrid had not emerged and he was disappointed. He plugged the space heater into the wall and turned it up to medium. Then he remembered the notice and read it. "Shit," he said and held it up for Al to see. "Get a load of this. It was on the door just now. It says that tomorrow between eleven and noon they're going to spray the entire floor for cockroaches and everyone should be out of their apartment for a least four hours after the spraying."

Al didn't respond at first. Then he said, "Well there are roaches, man. Just turn the kitchen light on and watch them scurry for cover."

Gene ignored him. He'd already set to worrying. What about the jars and tanks and cages filled with scores of butterflies and their offspring? What would he do with them all?

"I'll talk to the manager tomorrow," he announced. "Maybe he can skip me."

"Maybe," Al said, sounding somewhat disinterested and looking rather tired himself. "I'm heading out."

Gene watched him gather up his cassettes. Even if the manager skipped his apartment, the spray would seep through from next door. And if it could kill roaches, it would wipe out his dainty butterflies. None would be spared. Wholesale slaughter in a single whiff-ovum, larvae, pupae, and imagoes alike. The hybrid included!

"Hey," he stopped Al. "Could you come by tomorrow and help me move this stuff out?"

Al slung his knapsack over his shoulder and opened the door. "I wish I could, Gene. But I'm meeting Lydia—Lydia of the Red Locks, remember her?—at the Neptune for a matinee." He gave a tired shrug. "It'll work out. We'll zip over as soon as the movie's over."

73

"What if it doesn't?" Gene worried out loud.

"It will, and don't fret. And if worse comes to worse—which it won't—I suppose you could just let 'em go." Al grinned, gave Gene the thumbs-up, and stepped into the hallway. Then he turned around and said, "If you really need help in the morning, call me. I'll see what I can work out. Maybe Lydia and I can catch a later show." He waved so long and walked down the hallway.

Left to himself, Gene began planning how best to save his butterflies. He couldn't just sit by. Their existence depended upon him. So first thing in the morning, he determined, he would go downstairs to talk to the manager and get him not to spray his apartment—no matter what. And if Lonnie gave him any trouble he'd go talk to the secretary. The brute listened to her. Then he'd carry every single tank, jar, and cage down to the basement on the freight elevator and as soon as the spraying was over he'd return to his apartment and open all the windows so the place could thoroughly air out. It was what he had to do.

Confident his plan would succeed, he turned the space heater down to low and placed a bottle cap of sugar water in the hybrid's tank in case it molted while he slept. Then he laid out the futon—which by day served as a chair against the wall—pulled a blanket and pillow down from the top chosen shelf, and stretched himself out to sleep.

No sooner could he rehearse his plan to himself than he was out—color-rich dreams, vivid and lively, crowding his sleep.

His father, in gas mask and white protective suit, dragged beside him a canister with a long spray nozzle which he aimed at Gene, who was resting quietly beneath a willow tree watching giant cumulus clouds roll by. As his father squirted the sticky, toxic substance at him, Gene watched him transform into his grandfather, who wore traditional red and saffron Buddhist monk's robes and held several butterflies on each finger like fancy jewelry. When a loud crack of a baseball bat sounded somewhere in the remote distance, Gene turned abruptly and from far back in the 3000-level seats in the left field bleachers he saw the empty Kingdome spread out before him, astro turf and all. A baseball soared toward the cavernous concrete roof and then sailed over the left field wall, where it instantly turned into a butterfly, half Monarch and half Koreana, before plummeting between the seats. Gene desperately made his way toward it, stumbling over rows of folded plastic seats, a small creaking noise like a rusty door hinge growing more audible as he advanced. When he reached the spot where the butterfly should have been, there was only a scattering of cracked peanut shells littering the concrete floor. He began laughing uproariously, then weeping, then laughing again.

The room was hot and bright when he awoke the next morning. He got up and gulped several handfuls of water at the bathroom sink and then turned off the space heater and opened all the windows. When he bent down to glance in at the hybrid chrysalis, it was gone.

In its place, a large butterfly, smaller than a Monarch yet larger than the Koreana, rested peacefully on the small twig where its chrysalis had dangled the night before. The butterfly unfolded its wings slowly and folded them again. For an instant Gene wondered

if he was still dreaming. Yet unlike the divided imago in his dream, the true hybrid blended the two breeds perfectly. It shared the Koreana's waves of yellow with the Monarch's solid patches of orange, while thin ribbons of black swirled though the breadth of each wing and small white specks dotted the delicate peripheries. Its wings had the well-defined venation of the Monarch and the long tear-shaped tails of the Koreana. Twice more the hybrid opened and closed its wings in synchronous muscle contractions, drying itself off.

Gene squatted on the floor and sat cross-legged before the tank. He gazed on the new butterfly in awe. A new breed. His breed. Koreanus-Americana G. Hybrid of two entirely different, two entirely opposed types.

Reaching for his watch beside the futon, he glanced at the time. Already 11:28. He'd really been beat last night, he reflected, and returned to admiring the hybrid—at which point it struck him.

Scrambling to his feet, he threw on pants, T-shirt, sneakers, and raced out of the apartment and down to the lobby. When there was no answer to his rigorous banging on the manager's apartment door, he tried the main office. But the office door was locked and a sign read: Closed For Lunch. He began to panic and ran across the lobby and knocked steadily at another door until Joe, the fifty-year-old co-manager who drank himself stupid every night, opened the door, one shirt tail hanging out and his pants fly half down.

"Where's Lonnie?" Gene demanded.

"Can't find him?"

"No, I can't." He pushed his hair back. "Tell him if you see him not to spray my apartment." He turned away, thinking he should call Al but then realizing it was too late, headed up the stairwell. On the second floor he began to smell something, a severe odor, different from the day-to-day stench that was as much a part of the building as the rickety elevators, thread-bare carpets, and occasional lunatic tenant. This smell was sharper, more threatening to eyes and nostrils.

Just as Gene reached the sixth floor, Lonnie was exiting an apartment at the end of the L-shaped hallway opposite Gene's apartment. A white paper mask covered his mouth and nose. He wore goggles, gloves, a long-sleeved shirt, and pants tucked into his work boots. Lugging a galvanized metal canister behind him, he

stopped and removed the mask as Gene hastened toward him.

"Listen, you can't spray my apartment, okay?"

Lonnie put the canister down, grasped the handle on top, and started to pump up the internal pressure. "Sorry, got to."

At the end of the hallway, midday light filtered through the glass section of the fire escape door underscoring the frayed carpet, drab walls, and darkly lacquered apartment doors every few feet.

"What do you mean?" Gene demanded. He wanted to pick up the canister and slam it over the back of the stooped figure before him, squash it out, and rid himself of the menace permanently.

"Hey," Lonnie snapped back, "I put that notice on your door a week ago. That's all the notice we've got to give. The inspectors say we have to spray, so we spray. Else wise the fine comes out of my pocket."

"That notice wasn't on my door until last night," Gene protested. "You know it."

The manager didn't flinch. He finished pumping the canister and dragged it down to the next apartment. "Pets aren't allowed." He knocked at the apartment door and then unlocked it with his master key.

"They're not pets, for christsake," Gene nearly yelled. Then, "Just give me until tomorrow."

"'Fraid not."

Gene glared at him as he entered the apartment. From inside Lonnie turned and looked at Gene standing in the hallway. "It'll take me about a half hour to get down there." He then flung the door closed in Gene's face.

For several moments Gene stood paralyzed, stupefied, unwilling to do what he had to do next—whatever it was. He heard Lonnie inside the stranger's apartment knocking about with the canister full of insecticide. This brought him back to his senses. He kicked the wall beside the door, leaving a small dent in the plaster, and strode back to his apartment.

He let himself in and looked out. He couldn't possibly carry everything to the basement in the next thirty minutes, there was no way. It wasn't even worth attempting, not with over a hundred butterflies in the various tanks and cages. He had to act now.

Hurriedly he removed the lids off every tank and pulled back a side of wire screen from all three cages. He turned the space heater

on extra high, to the bright crimson mark, and as soon as the small coils began to redden the butterflies started moving their wings to absorb the heat. He watched them a moment and then anxiously sat down on the futon to wait. Wrapping his arms about his knees, he could feel a balmy breeze blow in through the open windows.

Within seconds several of the more adventurous Monarchs explored the edges of their containers and wafted out, five or six at a time, landing on various surfaces about the room. Swallowtails, Viceroy, and Mourning Cloaks followed. Several butterflies sought the direct sunlight that poured through the windows and fell on the floor. Some sunk close to the space heater and quickly to the floor. Some sunk close to the space heater and quickly fluttered away from its scorching heat. All the butterflies moved their wings steadily to warm their blood and gain the strength to fly. The room gradually filled with them, a colorful kaleidoscope, a 3-D collage of wings in multiple shapes and patterns and shades of blue, yellow, orange, red, brown, and black, adorned with various speckles and stripes. They crowded every surface in clusters, mulling about together as if waiting for a signal. Several found the chrysanthemums, marigolds, African violets, and primroses about the apartment and probed them with their fuzzy proboscises. Some landed on Gene, his shoulders, chest, legs, and head, which made him wonder what special ultraviolet light he gave off that only their highly light-sensitive eyes detected, a light that deceptively promised nectar or a mate. The tanks and cages emptied quickly. Like confetti, lepidoptera littered nearly every inch of the room. Gene could almost feel the air rippling about him from the combined wing movements. Yet oddly, not a single butterfly escaped through the three open windows.

Down the hallway a door slammed closed, signaling that Lonnie was getting closer. Since the Koreanus-Americana remained in its tank, Gene grew worried. Was the hybrid hesitant or was it an invalid? Maybe its dual evolutionary instincts sent it mixed signals, confusing its impulse to capture the air beneath its wings and fly. Or maybe it had lost its aerodynamics through cross-breeding, grounding it as a freak. Gene crawled to the tank to tap at the glass. The hybrid did not stir. When he reached his hand in to give it a nudge, it quickly lifted past his fingers, escaped from the tank, and flew straight out the nearest window.

Gene scrambled on his knees to the window, causing a wake of butterflies to spread before him, and then leaned out as far as he could without falling and watched as the Koreanus-Americana G. glided six, seven, eight stories high, drifted downward suddenly toward the parking lot below, and then fluttered up again, mastering the wind currents, rising higher and higher until it perched finally atop a lamppost. It rested there only an instant before it wafted off again, this time circling southeast toward the high-rise hotels and office towers that crowded the downtown. Gene leaned further out the window, his arm wrapped around the center post of the window frame, and followed his hybrid as it flew across the street, around a building, and out of sight down Fourth Avenue against the one-way traffic.

As if on cue, several other butterflies promptly flew out the open windows. Gene stood up and swung his arms about, urging them on, shooing them out, until scores of butterflies were soon billowing from the side of the building like colorful smoke plumes or gusts of autumn leaves. They rushed forward through the windows, tested the air currents, ascended briefly, sank, then rose again before dispersing across the neighborhood. Gene watched, awe-struck.

Within minutes all his careful breeding had taken wing. As he coaxed the last butterflies out the windows, he heard Lonnie enter the next door apartment. Hastily he retrieved three trash bags and filled them with the remaining eggs, chrysalises, and larvae from the jars. He put a twist-tie around each bag, pocketed his keys, and headed out.

It was a relief to be outside again. In front of the apartment building, a myriad of butterflies still flitted about. Many appeared as specks in the sky high above the street or far off on the horizon. Many had found the flower beds and blossoming azaleas that bordered the grounds of the office building across the street.

Gene walked to the corner and waited for the next bus to Discovery Park. As he waited, he watched his butterflies with regret and delight, and remembered his grandfather, who knew he would be pleased.

Peter Donahue lives in Norman, Oklahoma. Hybrid derives from a cycle of fifteen recently completed stories about the residents of the Denny Regrade neighborhood in downtown Seattle.

Fiction Judges:

FIRST LEVEL:

Jackie Justice, Jill Frank, Wendy Morisi, R. Mike Russ, Nann Barkiewicz, Rosemary Ezzo, Jill Hosbein, and Jim Collins.

SECOND LEVEL:

PrePress Publishing Of Michigan principals: Tim Brostrom, Bruce Brown, Elizabeth Johnson, Valerie Roberts.

PrePress is a publishing company devoted to publishing the talented unknown Michigan writers. Their latest anthology, The PrePress Awards will be available in stores the fall of 1993.

FINAL JUDGE:

Dr. W.S. Penn

W.S. Penn is an associate professor at Michigan State University, where he teaches creative writing, Native American Literature, and Comparative Literature. Of Nez Perce/Osage descent, he is a member of the Wordcraft Circle of Native American Writers, ATLATL, and a member of the National Advisory Council on Native American Writing. Widely published—stories, essays, and poems—and the winner of numerous prizes, awards, fellowships and grants, his novel, The Absence of Angles will be published next year.

Poetry Judges:

Jackie Justice, Jill Frank, Wendy Morisi, R. Mike Russ, Nann Barkewicz, Rosemary Ezzo, and Zachary Chartkoff.

FINAL JUDGE:

Anita Skeen

Anita Skeen is currently an Associate Professor of English at Michigan State University where she teaches Creative Writing, Women's Studies, and Canadian Literature. She came to MSU in 1990 after teaching 18 years in the MFA program in Creative Writing at Wichita State University, where in 1988 she won the Regents Award for Excellence in Teaching. She is the Director of the Creative Arts Workshop at the Ghost Ranch Conference Center in Abiquiu, New Mexico every June. She has published two collections of poems, EACH HAND A MAP, and PORTRAITS , and is currently in residence at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in Sweet Briar, Virginia where she is completing her first collection of short stories. She is widely published in literary magazines and anthologies, and has done readings, lectures, and workshops at universities and conferences all over the country.

The Red Cedar Review is published twice a year, funds permitting. We accept year-round submissions. All correspondence should be sent to: The Red Cedar Review, 17C Morrill Hall, Department of English, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, 48824. Submissions may be either one story or up to five poems each, typed, double-spaced. Each submission must include a S.A.S.E for manuscript return. Allow two to three months response time. Unpublished work only, please.

Subscription costs are \$5/copy or \$10/year. Sample copies are \$2.

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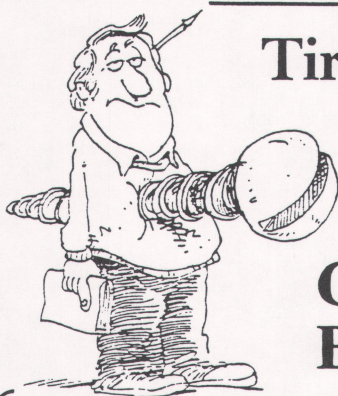
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