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Anthology

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A Publication of the English Department
Gary Streit, Chairman

Members of the department are patrons of the magazine.

Not Enough Room

"Moving out?"

"Yeah."

"Just saw your sign yesterday. You're already leaving?"

"There's no reason to stay, and it's not my sign."

"Wonder who put it up."

"We both know."

"Do I detect a hint of irritability?"

"No, I'm merely stating a fact."

"You liked this place, didn't you?"

"No, I love it."

"Why are you leaving so soon? Stay around awhile. At least 'til someone responds to the sign."

"Someone already has."

"You confuse me."

"Do I? That's not my game."

"If you like the place, just stick around. We could share it awhile. That is, if you're willing, and I arrange it with the owner. I have some connections."

"I know. No, I don't share. Not houses anyway."

"You call this place a house? It's a dump."

"It was home."

"Didn't do too well with the upkeep, did ya'?"

"Towards the end, I only had part ownership."

"So you're a businessman, too?"

"No. Not at all."

"But you said you had owned it."

"It was given to me."

"And you lost ownership? Gotta be careful with management. Keep the tenants happy."

"You're the voice of experience. Tell me, how do you keep them happy?"

"I give them what they want, you know, a lot of space. Your problem is that you hover. You try to be too involved. They don't like that. They just want to be left alone."

"I'm arranging that."

"Another thing is that you give up too easily."

"You think so?"

"Definitely. If you were a little more determined, you'd stay. I would."

"Perhaps I need more space."

"So you're just going to quit. Just like that?"

"I'll be around."

"Suit yourself. Where are your things? I'll help you carry them out."

"I have no things."

—Heidi Vastbinder



867-5309yine

My hair blew freely in the wind (I'm a leftover flower child my parents tell me whatever that means) as I flew past houses on Court Street. Carefree and happy, I sang the popular tune that was playing on the radio. "Oh, Jenny, 867-5309yine, 867-5309yine: I won't lose your number cause you're too important. I want you to be mineyine." I bounced in my seat and made a drum of the steering wheel as I came to a stop at the traffic light. I glanced to my right. A car full of girls ready to flirt. "Hey big fella, wanna come party with me and Jack. Jack Daniels I mean." Giddy with laughter, she promised, "It'll be the time of your life." In response I glanced over to my left to ignore them and saw a dilapidated old house overgrown with weeds, some windows broken, the paint chipped and peeling, the screen door torn and off the hinges, and the fence around the house broken and splintered. I chuckled, thinking of my dad's saying about our farm, "That fence couldn't keep our neighbors in or out, let alone our cows!"

On the front door of the old house was a for-rent sign with a phone number. Then it hit me! Hey! We could use that house for our Halloween party! It would be perfect. Man, what a terrific haunted house. I could hardly wait to tell my friends. I drove through the red light in a hurry to get to basketball practice. Wait a minute I said. I've got to get that phone number. I quickly glanced in my rearview mirror to get the number but could only see a strange word on a sign above the for-rent sign. A really strange word. Yahweh. Yahweh? Wonder what that means? Maybe a rock and roll group. Oh well, I guess I'll have to get the number later. Don't have time now. "Jenny, I won't lose your number, cause I want you. 867-5309yine! 867-5309yine."

— Tami Guenseth

Vacancy

Yahweh on the sign,
with a number to call.

Is God leasing salvation
or a
 room at
 the end
 of the hall?

—Kevin Parker

A Project or Something?

Pine needles pricked me as I ran in the rain. Ugly, overgrown trees. They belonged to Miss Dean at the top of Dillwyn hill. As long as anyone could remember she'd been up there with her pine trees that grew so close to the sidewalk they pricked people and made them mad.

At the foot of the hill I clambered onto the bus, my clothes sopping, hair snaking across my face. I dropped into the seat behind Tammy as the bus lurched forward.

Miss Dean made a lot of people mad never giving out candy at Halloween or buying cookies from Girl Scouts. Once mom knocked at her door to collect for March of Dimes. She answered the door, interrupted to say please-go-away-and-take-my-name-off-your-list, and closed the door in mom's face. Dad has a lot to say about people who holed themselves up in their houses like she did, shut away from the world. The Langstons, next door to her, said she'd had a bad experience teaching high school and to leave her alone. My mother was glad to oblige.

"Hey, Cheryl, how often do you comb your hair?"

(Silence.)

"Who does your hair? Do you get it done at a beauty shop?" (Look at how frizzy her hair is.)

"No. A lady at our church does it." (I thought of the lady who did exactly the same thing with your hair no matter what you wanted.)

"I want to get my hair done like that. It's pretty." (loud laughter) "Why do you read so much?"

(quietly) "Why do you think?"

(loudly) "What?"

"Never mind."

(Tammy hung over the seat gurgling her gum in my ear.) "How many hours a night do you study? Hey, Cheryl, do you study every subject each night for an hour?"

"No."

"How come you never smile?"

That afternoon I dusted off the Montag rose cards I got at my grandmother's funeral when they passed out her stuff and I wrote Miss Dean a note. I ended by saying she had friends she never knew about. I wanted to be anonymous so I signed "Cheryl" which I figured was safe since she didn't know anyone but the Langstons. Then I snipped some chrysanthemums, rubber-

banded them in a wet paper towel, and sneaked out while my parents watched television.

Unruly branches hovered over her cracked driveway, casting shadows on the house. The screen door was locked and her front porch was empty. All the shades were drawn, so I couldn't be sure she was gone. Holding my breath, I eased the card under the doormat, propped up the flowers, and fled.

I didn't tell anyone, not even when I got back. A few weeks later I crept back with more flowers and a note, mostly about the weather.

When it grew too cold for mums, even in Delaware, I stole back periodically to deliver the notes. They didn't say that much, just hasn't-the-weather-been-nice-hope-you're-enjoying-it-have-a-good-day and stuff like that. Whenever I had a bad time on the bus I wrote her a note.

Spring came and I brought her our first crocuses, and a blueberry pie. This gift would be offered in person—after all, you can't leave a pie on the doorstep—suppose she stepped in it. My hands shook slightly when I rang her doorbell. A dog barked inside and I jumped, unbalancing a flower. As I squatted to pick it up I detected three crocus shoots nearly ready to bloom.

I felt like a fool. Should I leave or just stand there and try to explain? Heavy footsteps paused as she unlocked the door. I decided to go just as the door opened.

She stood, expressionless, on the threshold, hand on the doorknob. She said nothing.

"Hi, I'm Cheryl. I brought you a pie." I stuck out my hand with the pie and crocuses and tried to smile, grimaced really.

She looked me over, then pushed the door open and invited me in. I squeezed into the kitchen, where she placed the pie on the table beside my last note propped up as a centerpiece.

She led me to her living room, cozily decorated with homemade afghans and furnishings. "You're the girl who sends me notes. Is this a project or something?" She eyed me suspiciously.

"No."

She asked about me—what did I like to do, what grade was I in, what made me send notes. I told her my dreams and my hobby of writing when I felt bad, and she told me about when she was young and lived on a farm with her father and sister. I said I was writing a book about islands.

"Why islands?" she wondered.

"I want to live on an island where no one will care what clothes I wear or how I do my hair and everyone will leave me alone."

She didn't laugh like most people did. And she kept smiling and saying "I don't know what to say" about the notes.

It seems like it was Christmas the first time I saw her house—poinsettias in that living room and a tree in the corner covered with homemade crochet and needlepoint ornaments—but I can't be sure. And maybe I baked a blueberry pie in the winter because it was too cold for crocuses, but I know there was a fireplace and a cozy feeling in the room and around her. Her hair was snow white and her eyes were bright blue and sparkled when she smiled.

On my birthday she surprised me with a spring green scarf from Newark Department Store—even delivered it herself. My mom nearly fainted when she showed up at our door.

Another time I ordered flowers for her from the florist, the first flowers I ever bought. And she didn't close the door in the nurseryman's face.

I left notes now only when I couldn't see her in person, like on the way to the bus stop.

"Cheryl, sit here."

"Thanks, Tammy."

"Cheryl, how come you're so smart?"

"I'm not."

"Where do you buy your clothes?" (laughter)

(Silence) "Dear Miss Dean," I wrote on a rose card, "I just wanted to say hi. Thanks again for the scarf. Also, I've been thinking, would you help me make a dress? I want something pretty to wear to the awards banquet in May."

I visited her that afternoon.

"A dress? On my machine?"

It was her most prized possession, that sewing machine, wiped off and oiled and handled with care. She'd told me no one but her had touched it since a careless home ec student had mishandled it in class once. Miss Dean had yelled, the girl had complained to the principal, and Miss Dean had been asked to retire. She hated retirement, and she hated people, and she allowed no one to come near her machine.

"You want to make a dress?" she repeated. "Well, I guess it's okay." I bought silky mauve fabric she said was impractical, too slippery to sew. But she went along good-naturedly.

"How long will it take me to finish?"

"It depends on how hard you work."

I worked hard for a while, pinned and cut, then sewed the skirt, while she coached. I must've tried it on twenty times a day. It would have been beautiful, but I burned a hole in it ironing one day and gave up.

The next day I knocked at her door, but she told me to come back later because she was cooking a big meal and couldn't talk right then. I was afraid she was mad, so I stayed away for a while. But the last time I walked by her house the pines were cut down and crocuses bloomed in the new flowerbed. It was about that time I gave up on islands.

—Cheryl Shira

The Fall

The red-headed tree
shivered
as it watched the icy sky
and waited for
the rape of the wind.

—Jim Pence

Sidewalks

Windshield waterstreams
pour back and
forth,
pulled by the pressures
of Chicago.

—Phil Davisson

Confluence

A
hot
tear
falls on
a pale face
and mixes with
cold rain
drops.

—Trudy White

The Life You Save

Cigarettes
the ads are glamorous
at the bottom
way at the bottom
a warning
Surgeon General has determined that Cigarettes
are harmful to your health.

Army
the ads are glamorous
at the bottom
way at the bottom
no warning.

—David Dreisbach

Yield

It doesn't matter what you say
It's how you say it.
It doesn't matter what you see
It's how you see it.
It does matter that you say it
And see it my way.

Be creative.
Be yourself.
Be different.

But do it my way.

—Deena Gray

Light-headed

The light broke into her bedroom early the morning Diane turned thirteen. Earlier than the day before, and just in time; Diane had been waiting. Waiting for the sun, waiting for thirteen. Her head was leaning against the window when the first light split the curtain and hit her eyes. She couldn't sleep much that night, so she had stayed by the window to wait for morning. Leaning against the glass, she had fallen asleep, her steady warm breath steaming up a half-circle in front of her face where the window was exposed through the white lace curtains. Now the light shined in past trees and rooftops to her window, focusing on this spot, waking Diane, and forming a small drop of water, then ran smoothly down the pane.

"Darn sun," she said, opening her eyes and moving her head back away from the window. She closed her eyes again and shivered; the early June morning was cool. Summer was here but the heat wasn't. A lot of things were early these days. She breathed deeply a few times and then yawned, trying to remember why she was sitting on an old chest by the window instead of being where she usually was, under the sheets in bed. The oak chest. A hope chest. It had been her mother's and Diane would have it for her own when she was thirteen. Thirteen. She remembered, and the excitement of the night before returned to wake her up. Her father had moved the chest to her room the previous day, straining his back as he pushed it slowly across the carpet to the corner.

"There. Do you like it there?" He straightened up, red-faced.

"No, Daddy. I want it over here by the window, closer to the bed."

"What's wrong with the corner?"

"It's not even. The dresser's too close."

"Diane."

"Please?"

"Okay. But I'll have to move the desk. Can I put *that* in the corner?" His eyes closed, wincing as his back shot pain to his head. The desk went to the corner, too close to the dresser. It stayed there and the chest rested under the window by the bed. Diane stepped down off the chest this birthday morning and walked to her door to listen. The kitchen was down the hall past two doors and through the living room. She peeked her head around the corner and looked down the hall; the sun hadn't yet cut through all the shadows in the house. She would wait. Diane hated dark halls.

She went back to her bed and sat cross-legged. She began to think, looking out the window at the white sun that now had a pink fringe creeping up from the horizon. Not like the darkness. Dark and shadows and things hiding, hiding and waiting to come out and grab and bite kill squeeze and kill to death and dark. Your teeth would fall out from gnashing in hell. Dark like white couldn't be unless you burned it, ashes are black and dark and make shadows. Jimmy Brooklyn was hiding in the shadows and grabbed her from behind the tree; she pushed him and he ran out in the dark into the street, laughing, right into a car that screamed at the night for killing Jimmy. Screamed long black lines into the road, and the road was black and the night, dark; Diane ran without breathing back to her house, to the lighted porch. She stared back to Jimmy through the dark, and the shadows came into her eyes, so that she wasn't really seeing, but thinking with eyes open. Shadows, thoughts, heavy enough to block even June birthday morning sunlight.

Diane's head turned at the sounds of bacon frying in the kitchen. The light was everywhere in the room now, spilling out to the hall. She walked toward the kitchen, stopping in the living room to listen to the radio. She turned it on and flipped the tuning dial. Static; a fuzzy, penetrating sound. Her hand moved it

more. Hall and Oates. Static. Downtown Ford Super Sales Event. Static. Sunday: sunny and warmer. Static. Will the Reds meet the Tigers in the Series? Static. She began moving her hand on the dial without listening, resting her head against the end table that held the radio. Static. The curtains in this room were white like the ones in her bedroom, but these in front of her now she could see through better. Through to the outside, with the light, light forcing itself through the weave of the curtain. Light like the ceiling lamp in her bedroom seen through summer sheets held close to her face right before the light went out with her mother's hand. Sheets, folded up and stored. Folded and placed in the oak chest. Diane had filtered through all the sheets in her new hope chest, pulling out a few and wrapping them around her. The chest, sheets. Dark. Dark inside with the sheets and the top of the chest down. Down like a closed coffin. Dark inside. Sheets. Does a corpse get cold? Summer sheets are thin.

The radio crackled and popped. "...and all those who inter into this communion-ah, who are not cleansed-ah by the blood of the Lamb-ah, will surely suffer eternal damnation-ah, lest they repent-ah. It will be a black time for them-ah. Praise ye the Lord-ah..."

"Diane, turn that radio off. Come to breakfast now or you'll be late."

"Late? I have to go today? It's my birthday, Mom."

"I remember; but you're going. And if you don't come to breakfast now you'll not be in the choir for this morning's service."

"Good, I hate the choir. I hate the whole darn church."

"Diane. I think maybe you need to pray about that attitude. You shouldn't talk that way. And you do too like to sing. Now turn off that radio."

"And I hate breakfast."

"What's that silly man saying, anyway?"

"I hate eating."

"It's a wonder people ever listen to that kind." She walked to the table and put a plate out for Diane; two eggs, sunnyside, and toast settled in on the plate. Orange juice waited beside the plate, small drops of juice and pulp congregating on the side of the glass.

Diane waited by the radio, not listening, but planted, with head cocked back against the table so that her hair muffled the sound. "And let me tell you now, my friends-ah. I would not even step outside that very room-ah, before I asked for forgiveness-ah. Your sins will find you out-ah..."

"Now. Come and eat now. I don't want to have to wake your father."

Diane's right hand reached over her lap to her left side to stop the communion plate that was coming at her. Her breathing had stopped long before the plate started making its way past each of the other choir members to her side. All Diane could manage now were shallow gasps between dry swallows. Her sweaty hand touched the silver, cold from the air, and Diane felt her muscles in her arm weaken as she strained to tighten her grip on the plate of tiny bread pieces. She knew that she could not drop it; her tendons would rip out and her bones snap before her grip would loosen on the plate. The left hand separated one wafer from the rest as she chose her piece of Christ's body. The plate tipped back toward her, catching the light. A bright silver then yellow flash lit Diane's face, blinding her for a moment. As she looked down on the congregation, she saw only black figures scattered through the room. She passed the plate on.

A large silver tray began making its way toward her. It was filled with several tiny plastic cups, each capturing a bit of the light. Diane took hold of the tray and stared quietly at the cups. Faint red spots moved across her face as her body shook slightly. She handed the tray to a tiny woman next to her to hold, then took a cup for herself. The single spot of pink rested on her choir robe, a large white gown with a gold "v" on the front, and with a rusty zipper that would catch loose threads and twist them in the metal, making it a strain to

take off the robe. The spot bounced in and out of the “v” as Diane’s hands moved around trying to balance the bread and the cup. *Why today? she thought. I’m thirteen. And I’m here; I want to go home and blow out candles and eat my cake.*

She stared out to the congregation, not seeing them, but thinking. The preacher began the story. The piece of bread was sitting still in the palm of her hand as she waited. If the wafer were a live coal it would have burned through her hand, the wait was so long. But it just sat there, trying only to stop from being dissolved in her nervousness. The cup of red waited in her other hand, the plastic cup steaming from her hand’s heat; the water mixed with the juice as the small droplets around the lip of the cup were shaken loose by Diane’s quivering.

The preacher hit a high note with a scream, piercing the darkness that had enclosed Diane’s head. “And He said to the Twelve, He said, ‘Take, this my body, and eat.’ Do so likewise.” Diane put the wafer on her tongue and broke it in half with her front teeth. The two pieces fell back to her molars where she ground them to dust; she swallowed and wiped her lips. Her throat was still dry, so she swallowed harder, drinking from her glands. Diane waited for the blood.

She picked up the cup with her right hand, wiping her left on the robe, leaving a stain where sweat soaked in. The choir began to sing; Diane stared again, first at the light from the window above the cross, then at the people. The black dots made notes on the lines of the pews, but there wasn’t a pattern. She mouthed the words the others sang. A sick feeling began to grow in her stomach, and the dryness in her mouth closed off her throat, pushing down against her stomach’s pushing up. Her heart and chest began to ache, her head, spinning. She put her head down and closed her eyes; her hand played with the robe. The material was cool where it was wet, cool and softer on the knee than around her neck; the “v” was rough. Curtains didn’t zip, and sheets don’t have gold stripes, but they’re white and light and they can fold and stay in chests, in the dark and not scream; did Jimmy scream? No, just the car; maybe she had; on the porch she didn’t breathe. How could he stay in the box?

She pulled her eyes open as the preacher began again. “He said to Them, saying, ‘Take, this my blood, and drink.’ Do so now likewise. ‘And as often as you do this, do it in remembrance of me.’”

Diane looked down at her cup. She saw a reflection of the light. The bread in her stomach continued to swell, begging for the blood, her throat still blocked with dryness. Her robe began to tighten around her neck, and static started playing in her ears. She swallowed quickly, pausing only long enough for it to burn the back of her tongue. Her throat clotted up, most of the juice staying closer to her head than to her stomach. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back, the blood flowing away from her brain. Dizzy, she fell forward, then thrust her head back again; through her closed eyelids she felt the light, saw it red and glowing. She stopped her moving and opened her eyes, but saw a flash of white that faded to black. The light and heat passed through her forehead and pierced her chest, battling with her stomach. She grabbed her ears and screamed a long, dry, silent note and fell forward against the pew in front of her, hitting with a force that stopped the blood from her lips from moving for a moment. Then it trickled down slowly from her mouth to her chin and neck. Diane swallowed hard and tried to taste her lips. Part of her tongue was stuck to her chin. Blood came forth more readily now; the small woman beside her laid Diane on the bench. Diane looked up to see sheets, twisted and crossed, and zippers gnashing and static hissing as darkness covered her face, an oak-thick lid on her consciousness.

“Finish your breakfast, now, or you won’t have time to get ready.”

—Phil Davison

My Smashing Experience

It was a typical sixth grade day. Mr. Haugen was pacing back and forth in front of our class pleading with those who listened to him to ask their "fellow-students" to be quiet. Occasionally, he would go to the board and yell out threats of detention as if to write down names, knowing that to gain the respect of all twenty-seven of us would involve some small miracle or something. This was not an uncommon practice for him. We had found the limits of his authority within the second week of school, and now, two months later, were perfecting our skills as a class in "teacher control." We had him where we wanted him. Often, we would disregard the seating chart and sit where we wanted. We enjoyed the control we possessed as a class.

On this particular day, Tom sat in the back, as normal, but had chosen a different row. He peered through his straggly hair, smelling of Marlboros, and flexing his tenth-grade physique. He often times had a sassy comment or reply to make toward Mr. Haugen. We all respected Tom in terms of his physical appearance, but behind his back we talked about him as though he were a third-grader, ever since the day he spelled balloon, "B" "O" "L" "U" "N" "E."

Ryan decided to sit in his normal seat since it was in the center of the room, center aisle, center seat. The rest of us chose seats around him. After all, he was the fastest kid in the class and could kick a playground ball farther than anyone else.

Rita sat behind me, across from Ryan. She was the best-looking girl in the class and always had a smile to give me. She, along with the other cute girls in the class, had a big crush on Ryan, but I could tell that Rita had a 'kinda big crush' on me, too. It really showed on the day Ryan was home in bed sick and she gave me all her attention instead of the 65-35 split when Ryan was there. After all, I was only 4.7 seconds behind Ryan in the 600-yard run, giving me second place, and I did do twelve more sit-ups in the Presidential Physical Fitness Test in gym class, but I couldn't quite kick a playground ball as far.

Jody sat directly behind Rita. Jody was the class brain. She was quiet and shy. Whenever someone got yelled at by Mr. Haugen, Jody would always blush and turn red in embarrassment for them. We knew we could rely on Jody for help on an assignment if we ever needed it. (Actually we knew we could make Jody help us on the assignment because she was a persuadable, shy person.)

David, my best friend, sat across from me in front of Ryan. Throwing a paper airplane at the blackboard as Mr. Haugen pretended to write names down for detention was a common practice for David. He had unanimously earned the title of class clown the day of the big rainstorm that came during recess time, when he felt it was his duty to snatch a worm from a nearby puddle and bring it into class to tease the girls. Among many more pranks he is known for, the funniest thing he did was when he took a stick pin and poked a tiny hole in the bottom of Mr. Haugen's styrofoam coffee cup and soon it began to leak all over the desktop and Mr. Haugen thought that his cup was defective and whispered something about the faculty lounge vending machines. David glowed with pride that day.

Big, fat Kurt sat in front of David and often became our subject of much fun-poking. Weighing a hefty 235 pounds, Kurt rarely wore jeans that met the bottom of his shirttail when he sat down, always revealing his pale, white bare back along with a small dark shadow stretching down into the seam of his jeans, beginning above the size 40 Fruit of the Loom tag that peered above the waistline of his jeans. David successfully dropped paper-wad number three into the crevice making up that hairy shadow.

The rest of the class talked among themselves while others gazed out at the empty playground, which would be filled with energy-filled kids just moments from now.

"This is the last time I am going to ask you to be quiet!! Next time I ask, we will skip recess altogether!"

"And I mean it this time!" barked Mr. Haugen.

The class as a whole dropped silent. Something was different this time. No one flinched, except Tom. He continued to chomp his Bazooka bubblegum and then proceeded to blow a bubble and pop it. The smack of the gum explosion echoed throughout the room. Tom sank into his chair in embarrassment after seeing we did not give him the response that was so typical.

We continued our attention on Mr. Haugen as he held his breath, began turning red, clinched his fist and began his dash toward Tom's desk.

I had never seen him look this way before. He had fury in his eyes. We had heard the threats before, but this time we were not sure if he would keep us inside from recess. We knew that recess time was the only chance in the day that Mr. Haugen could mix the alcohol into his coffee, or so we accused. But for the first time ever, he had an 'I mean business' look carved into his face.

He came to a halt in front of Tom's desk. Fists pounded a rest against the slate top desk, as he bent over it to peer past Tom's hair in an effort to look him in the eye. No one turned. We were silent. Mr. Haugen's echoing voice told us the story.

"Mr. Page, you seem to think I am playing games." David and I looked at each other without turning our heads. The story from behind continued.

"Therefore, Mr. Page, not only will you stay in from recess today, but also the next two weeks straight, and also you will stay after school each night for those two weeks cleaning, straightening, and other odds and ends!"

The class was frozen. We were afraid to make any movement. From the back of the room, we heard a deep giggle. We all recognized in an instant, Tom's adult-like giggle, and simultaneously, the class turned to Tom wondering what he was doing, but really more interested in what Mr. Haugen would do. Tom's giggle turned into a laugh and soon the others began semi-cautiously joining in; even in the midst of a bright red face little Jody had a smirk on her face. Mr. Haugen turned 'round as quick as a top upon hearing the class begin to giggle. His face was still red, while his glaring eyes began to search each of us.

I became fearful of what punishment he might inflict upon the class. I knew I didn't want to miss recess. I felt that I needed to do something to save the class from punishment, so I reached across the aisle toward fat Kurt's chair, and clinched the size 9½ dingo boot complete with steel toes in each end. They were still warm and moist from when he had changed into his tennies for recess. I stood to my feet and swung the size 9½ boot above my head and continued in one swift movement to land it onto the desktop, while simultaneously commanding "QUIET" at the peak of my voice.

The loud crack of boot against desktop mixing with my voice and the sound of shattering split the air into silence. All eyes moved in perfect rhythm from Tom and Mr. Haugen to me, and then the desktop. Or, that which remained of the slate desktop. The once bright, shiny desk was now nothing more than a size 9½ boot-hole with the circular trace from the pressure that caused the cracks surrounding it.

Stunned as I was, I managed to hear Mr. Haugen, through what seemed like a long tunnel, excuse the class to recess amidst their shock, snickering, and relief because they were going to recess. My eyes fell upon the desk and remained there until Mr. Haugen was finished with his little lecture, and then he ordered Tom and me to follow him to Mr. Rosenbloom's office.

On the way down to the principal's office, I sorted out my emotions of feel-

ing like a “Tom.”

The tension in the office frightened me. The “bulldog” frightened me. We called Mr. Rosenbloom the bulldog because he had a fat little face (to match his stomach) that held his saggy, chipmunk cheeks up near his bloated lips of which the bottom one protruded out beyond the top one forming a constant frown, therefore giving him the appearance of a bulldog. And he frightened me. As I started in on my story, the unstableness of my voice scared me and I began to whimper. The sternness of Mr. Rosenbloom’s voice, along with the unchanged expression on his face, triggered the mist which began to form in my eyes. He informed me that the school district would send a “vandalism” bill to my parents. He then suggested to his secretary to phone one of my parents to come pick me up. It was at this point that I began to feel the hot burning mist in my eyes roll down my cheeks, and I heard myself breathing faster and heavier, with sniffles coming more regularly.

My crying had stopped, until my dad walked into the office and gave me a look of disappointment, which sliced deeper into my emotions than anything I had experienced so far, thus causing me to cry heavier and harder than before. He requested a short, private meeting with Mr. Haugen and Mr. Rosenbloom. As the three of them went back into Mr. Rosenbloom’s office, the door banged shut. Moments later, the three of them reappeared in the doorway and my dad simply called my name as a signal that it was time to leave. The ride home was quiet. I was going through the story in my own mind, reorganizing the order of events so that when dad questioned me I could give him a good version of what took place. The anxiety of that question was burning me up. I went to bed that night without him ever asking. The next week was filled with anxiety, and then I realized that he was not going to ask.

I do not know what happened in the private conference between dad and Mr. Haugen and Mr. Rosenbloom, but I do know that my “vandalism” bill never came.

—Paul Riley

Temptation

Pieces of white
Lined up
In several
Evenly spaced
Trails
Tiny, tiny, tiny crystals
Powdery prettiness
They sparkle
Beckoning
Innocent little sparkles
Paradise

—Jessieca Exum

A Sunday Half-Circle

We sat there
In Sunday school
I in the chair
Because I was the teacher's sub
And you on the floor
Around me in a half-circle.

I wanted to "inspire"
To make you remember me
And the lesson for the day
So you could say, years from now,
As you sat in my place,
I remember.

I saw in your faces
Preachers, teachers,
Pianists, and leaders of
A new church.
In one lesson I wanted to
Drill God into your little heads.

Then one from your ranks
In a clear, high voice said,
"Is our story going to be about Jesus?
I know everything about him."
I stumbled over my tongue.

—Angela McCord

I'd Never Seen a Bruised Flower Before

"Stop dat cryin', child. Lawd, but you're gonna' have a goose egg on dat fo-head tomorra." Grace stroked Elizabeth's head with a big brown hand.

I watched her hands. They were dirt brown but pink on the palms. Just the opposite of when Mama worked in the garden. She ground in the dirt on her palms. And I asked Grace how she'd worn the color off her hands. She laughed in a low rumble that shook whatever happened to be dangling from her ears that day. Grace loved earrings. Elizabeth told me that one time she wore such a heavy pair when she went out waltzing that they ripped right through her earlobes. I didn't believe her but I pretended like I did and I covered my ears in disgust.

"Aw-you're gonna' be okay, child. I know what'll hep. How 'bout another lemon bar?"

Elizabeth sniffled and rubbed her eyes. She blinked and reached for the cookie. Molly whined in the corner.

"You stop that," Grace commanded in her deep laughing voice. "Dogs don't need no cookies. What would a dog want with one anyhow?"

Molly, the tangle of white curls, blinked in silent understanding. I thought it

was understanding. "Dogs don't belong in de house. Especially in de kitchen" she scolded the blinking mop.

"What are you lookin' at me fer? I ain't said nothin' to get treated like that fer. You just stop that whinin' right now. It ain't gonna get ya no food tonight!" she rambled on to Molly.

"Grace, why are you talking to the dog? She's not real. She can't answer back."

"Maybe she ain't got a voice, but she's talkin' alright. She's talkin' up a storm on the inside-behind them beady little eyes! Ain't ya?"

"How can she talk with her eyes?"

Elizabeth took everything so literally. I waited for Grace to answer.

"You just watch her. Watch her real good and you'll see. I think she's tryin' to tell ya' somethin' right now! Look! See? She's sayin', 'I wanna' go out in the yard and play!' She is sayin, 'I want ya' to come with me!'"

I got up to leave but Elizabeth lingered. "But Grace, what about my head?" she whined.

"I think it's alright. At least you didn't break the bed! What was y'all doin' anyway?"

We shrugged. We both knew. We had been warned before about jumping on the bed. We knew the rules. Grace already knew, too. She just wanted us to tell her. It would be okay except Grace would want us to tell Mrs. Kingsley, too.

Grace stood there in her white clingy dress. She was softly padded all the way around. She had no sharply striking features like the Kingsleys' noses. That's where I always saw her—in the Kingsleys' yellow kitchen or the little breakfast room. Except for the times I met her in the hall dusting the telephone with the feather duster. I could see all those pieces of lint scatter in sunlight filtering through the gaps in the heavy drapes.

Despite Elizabeth's protests, she hurried us on our way. Molly immediately reached the limits of the driveway and started running in circles. I thought of Grace again. Grace had run in circles like that for all of Elizabeth's birthday parties. All us "little-un's" circled the dining room table in and out. Poor Grace in her white apron—but she never avoided us.

The cold droplets trickled off my paper Raggedy Ann cup just like the sweat off Grace's forehead. I didn't like that day. There were twelve of us "young-un's" and there were too many pastel kazooes and matching nutcups and way too much noise for us to really notice Grace. Grace was alone a lot that day. And we were the losers.

Grace could tell the best stories. All about "life in gen-u-uhl." (I never understood where that was.) She didn't talk much about herself so Elizabeth and I were forced to make up our own version.

"Maybe she's from Africa," Elizabeth offered one day as we sat in history class and did worksheets on black people in chains.

"No. There are too many of 'em on that ship. Wherever Grace is from, she's the only one," I reasoned with third grade confidence. "But if she was from Africa those people there wouldn't look half as upset. Grace would make 'em laugh."

"It would take more than Grace to make them laugh," said Elizabeth poking me.

"Well, I think she's from . . . the moon."

The idea cost Elizabeth and me a whole recess period for giggling. Giggling was a valuable commodity to be saved for the playground and sharing hour when appropriate. "When appropriate?" It was appropriate when I said Grace was from the moon.

But I meant it. Grace had to be from somewhere that no one else was. I

wanted to ask her, but I liked not knowing too. What if she said something like New York? I could see that. Grace, all dressed like a queen parading down the city street. It was funny. I had seen Grace in other clothes, but she always looked best in the white polyester dress and thicksoled shoes. Sometimes she put a little pin on her dress. At Christmas she always wore a wreath. It had a jingle bell on the bow but Grace had taken out the clapper “‘cause it makes too much noise” when she worked. What she really meant was that she couldn’t find out what we were into when she wore it. She always knew somehow.

In the spring she wore a huge purple flower. I wanted to touch it. She let me. She bent down and I fingered it. I had never seen a flower like that so I decided that wherever Grace was from, she must have found that flower there. Elizabeth’s mom saw us touching the flower and fussed at us, “You’ll bruise the petals!”

I didn’t understand. I’d never seen a bruised flower before. Mrs. Kingsley thought I was sassing so we spent the rest of the day in the backyard with Molly. Grace understood, though. She came that afternoon with ice cream bars and a couple of stories about Jesus. I didn’t understand everything she was saying about how He was bruised and all for us, but the ice cream was good. I think Grace understood.

“Ya’ll be careful out there. It’s kinda’ muddy yet,” she hollered from the breakfast room window.

Elizabeth wanted us to make pies like Grace made. So we got some old Cool-Whip bowls and made chocolate cake with the mud. We lost track of all time, but Molly got blacker and blacker as she circled past us. Neither of us wanted to take a bath that night. We just wanted to look like Grace.

“Come back in here you two!” she yelled from the screeching screen door. “It’s gettin’ dark.”

We saw her silhouette from the yard. She had a mop in her hand and looked like a shepherd the way she was holding it. But since the only shepherds I had seen were all boys, I decided she must not be one. Except once when my two girl cousins and sister and I did the Christmas story. I was a shepherd. My cousin Jackie was too when she wasn’t being Joseph. Deanna and Jenny were the angel of the Lord and Mary. With baby blankets over our heads we “did” the Christmas story. We always fought over who got to be the Angel of the Lord, though. She got to wear the bobbie pin with the fake rhinestone in it. Mary’s honor was unquestionable. She got to look sweet and fold her hands over the baby. But she never held Him because all the Christmas cards we looked at showed Him down in the straw. If I ever got to be Mary, I was going to hold Him. Except even the doll was a girl.

We came in the screen door and she met us with white towels she just took out of the dryer. I felt bad wiping the black dirt off my hands on the clean white towel, but Grace just smiled and said that was what she was for—to take care of us.

“What would I do without you children to make my day? Ya’ll keep me young. Don’t ever get old. It’d be a shame.”

“What are we havin’ tonight?” Elizabeth always spoiled the moment. Grace just smiled at her.

“Lizbeth you can’t be hungry, child. Why, you just had that cookie an hour ago! Now how’s that fo-head? I know what it is. All them cookies went rat up there and got stuck. That’s what’s makin’ it lump up like that! Don’t ya’ spouse?”

Elizabeth nodded slowly while trying to see the knot on her head without a mirror. She crossed an eye and pressed the lump with a dimpled finger. I knew she was thinking about the cookies.

I knew I had to tell Grace how it really happened with Elizabeth’s head and all. I didn’t want to tell her but I couldn’t stand it, her standing there like an

angel in her white dress smiling at us. So I told her everything. I thought she already knew but I guess I was wrong, because she said when I finished, "Was y'all jumpin' on the bed again?" with surprise.

I nodded in guilty response. Elizabeth blinked, probably in disbelief that I told. I couldn't stand not telling though. She didn't know how lucky she was to have Grace.

One time before, we tried to pay Grace thirty cents not to tell that we were jumping on the bed. She gave the money back like the silver coins would have burned holes in her palm if she held them any longer.

"Ya'll know I wouldn't betray you, but Lizbeth your mama's gonna' know anyway when she sees that bed all ruffled like there's been two alleycats fightin' on it. You ain't got a cat, remember? Now wouldn't it be better if we just told her?"

So we told, and I was glad because Mrs. Kingsley being upset with us for a while was okay, but Grace being upset with us wasn't.

Grace put on her tan raincoat while we were eating dinner. She made us some special chocolate pudding for dessert and we watched her pack her paper bag with leftovers. I wondered if she ever made chocolate pudding for herself.

"Ya'll two try and stay outa' trouble," she winked because she knew better. It made me think of all the times she had kept our secrets and all the times she talked in her warm rumble to Mrs. Kingsley, pointing out how cute we were when we played. Elizabeth and I pretended not to notice.

Mr. Kingsley drove Grace home. I wondered what they'd talk about. Grace would say, "You shore do look tired. Are you workin' too hard?" Mr. Kingsley's office was on the first floor. It had a bathroom and a little kitchen right at the office. Grace kept all three stories of Elizabeth's house.

The next morning Grace didn't come. We thought she had missed her bus. The French phone rang in the hall. Grace had dusted that phone with the feather duster. Elizabeth and I came down the stairs. We made our own breakfast. Frosted Flakes. Mrs. Kingsley's voice came from around the corner. "Yes, I see."

We kept eating. Elizabeth flipped milk at me with her spoon.

"Stop it!" I cried.

"A stroke?" came the voice in the hall.

Elizabeth kept flipping the milk until a stream of it crawled down my forehead into my eyebrows and on down my face. I closed my eyes and felt the long brown hands stroking my hair. "Now how's that fo-head feelin'?"

—Heidi Vastbinder

The Masterpiece

She painted
radish reds into passion pinks
bashful blues upon greasy greens.
She smiled,
making her own Picasso.

—Jim Pence

Love

I have lost something.
It used to be all around me.
It was high and I was safe inside.
Hidden by its darkness
I thought no one could see me until
A hand reached in
And gently removed a small part of it.
A light shined in.
I squinted.
The hand reached in to me
But I was afraid.
It continued to work.
My sight began to adjust.
The hand reached in
But I could not move.
It returned to work and slowly
My eyes became accustomed to the light.
I looked around.
The hand reached in.
I reached back.

—Diane Whitaker

Winter

The wind blows hard.
The kitchen window rattles.
It's time to use the matchbook.

—Bobbe Belden

My House Never Burned Down

Write about childhood. Why does Macrorie keep saying to write about childhood? I don't remember much about my childhood, and what I do remember isn't worth writing about. Most childhood stories are boring anyway. And when I did do something worthwhile as a child I didn't spend time worrying about the tension it showed between childhood and adulthood. I just did it for heaven's sake. When I was a kid I played dodgeball and foursquare and jacks, and I rode my bike and bossed my little sister around, and did all the other things normal little kids do. My parents didn't beat me, and they aren't divorced, and our house never burned down because I set fire to the curtains like the kid in *Black Boy* did. I was a normal, everyday kid, nothing anyone would want to read about. I was an average kid except:

1. I was a brat, but only when I thought I could get away with it, like at

neighborhood kids' houses and in Sunday school. My dad was the Sunday school superintendent. He was outspoken and stubborn, and he didn't know all the Sunday school teachers were afraid of him. I knew it, though, and I drove them crazy. I could because my mother is one of those people who remember picky details nobody else cares about. Mom knows the birthdays of everyone in the family, including in-laws. When I was three she convinced me to recite John 3:16 in church with her class of six-year-olds. I was like one of those tiny kids at the ice rink in a ruffled tutu who glides over the ice with the greatest of ease while normal people clutch at the rail for dear life. My mom would've killed me if she'd known how I acted in Sunday school. But she didn't know, dad was too dense to figure it out, and of course none of the teachers tattled. So I was a brat. I put my hand up for every question and got called on a lot. Dad had taught me to ask a lot of questions. Mom had taught me to know a lot of answers. So if a teacher so much as misspelled Nebuchadnezzar or forgot the name of Joseph's Egyptian wife (Asenath) I was there to correct her. And I made enemies even when I wasn't trying to, and I never quite understood why.

2. When my parents flew to Kansas City for missionary interviews little old ladies at church pestered my sister and me with questions. They said things about wearing bones in our hair and getting shots. They laughed a lot, but they confused me. Then one day I overheard Mrs. Smith say something about headhunters. That was when Janell and I decided we did not want to be missionaries. But of course I still smiled and said yes, we were going to Swaziland if we "got approved"—whatever that meant. I did most of the talking because I was older.

3. When I was eight we spent six weeks in Puerto Rico building a memorial chapel dedicated to one of dad's best friends who'd died suddenly. Mom took a notebook for a diary and bought me one too. We were all excited and she kept saying how much fun it would be and how I would want to write things in the notebook to remember the trip by.

Every day she sat on the Porters' veranda in San Juan and wrote. Sometimes I took my notebook there too, but I usually wrote my friend Carol about how many lizards I had seen that day and things like that. It took me forever to finish a letter because every time I saw another lizard I had to rewrite it. Today the diary is full of unfinished letters to her.

The Porters had two verandas and one son named John. They had other sons, but only John lived there. He liked to surf and read Peanuts books. He had more Peanuts books than I'd ever seen in one place before. I had one Peanuts book I'd ordered from the Scholastic book forms we got at school—but he had ten or twenty! I would find them lying around and crawl under the lower veranda and read by the hour in the shade while Mrs. Porter and my mom talked inside. That was on the weekends. During the week we were on the campground at Torro Negro living in the missionary cabin while dad worked.

5. I read all the time through middle school. I didn't get along with most other kids so I read. During sixth and seventh grades I read a novel a week. In gym the kids called me prissy.

—Cheryl Shira

To Autumn

Walking

through the countryside

is like

Walking

through a box of crayons.

—Angela McCord

The “A” Word

I looked at her bent over. Her ribs poked fun at the skin on her back like the skull and crossbones on a deadly container. In the mirror danced faces who never knew her yet shaped and formed who she had become, her unconscious reality, her obsession. She saw laughing faces and pointing fingers, round women gorging their fixation. The reflection was clear only to her. The layers of skin choked and consumed her like an image reflected in a fun house mirror. She tortured herself, pulling at her limp skin, measuring it. I stared at her in disbelief. Her dead blue eyes blended with her glazed expression, dulled and speechless from the personality capsules the doctor prescribed. This stranger crept into our home and took over our dinner table, seducing our appetites with the pleasure of starvation, challenging her existence as she played with her food, moving it from one side of the plate to the other. It gave no answers. She asked no questions. Her body was her church as it kept countless rhythm with the creaking floor in the shadows of every haunting morning and lulling night.

My first introduction to this stranger was in speech class my senior year in high school. We were to report on something controversial and one girl picked the “A” word. She enjoyed ugly topics. She would capitalize on the morbid details. I remember the gleam in her eye as she announced her topic and waited for a reaction, as if she were about to tell a dirty joke. I never thought sickness or pain was funny and I guess that’s why I didn’t get along with her. Her level of depth was based on the alphabets. Which will it be, A, B, or C? She found it hard to swallow anything lower than an “A” and a “C” was repulsive to her system. So she had her obsession, too. I watched her and thought to myself. How can she talk about pain in sterile medical terms? At that time I couldn’t even pronounce the “A” word. I had no idea I would later spend two years living with it.

—Trudy White

Life

Waiting, waiting, waiting, in line, waiting, waiting, waiting.

—Deena Gray

The Writer

Sometimes I dream I am on a deserted desert island with two palm trees for a hammock. Like one of those cartoons where the island is barely big enough to stretch out on. I want someplace just like that. I want a phone plugged into one palm tree. I will have an unlisted number because I won't use it unless I get homesick. I won't have an address, so you can't write me because my island will float 200 miles off the coast of Galapagos. I won't need clothes because no one will see me and no one will care if my hair is a mess, and I won't miss you because I'm taking my books. And the sun will shine every day of the year but one, when it will rain enough to water the palms. And when I get there I will yawn and

clamber into the hammock. I'll pick up a Papermate and reach for the top sheet of lined paper from the box at my feet and I'll write.

"Well, what do you think?"

"I'm sick of your island."

"Why?"

"It's old."

"So?"

"Well, you said you turned it in to four teachers in three years."

"I revised it each time."

"As long as different people read it you'll be okay."

"So why are you sick of it?"

"Because sometimes I think you could live there by yourself and be happy—for the rest of your life."

"I could not."

"Why?"

"I'd run out of paper."

"Call home. That's why you have a phone."

"How will they get it to me?"

"You don't have an address. You could write on the sand and have a new tablet every day."

"Yeah, and take pictures of it so it'll last."

"What about when you run out of film or it gets cold?"

"It doesn't get cold."

"What will you do when a storm sweeps over your island?"

"Drown."

"You know how to fish?"

"I like fish."

"Who's going to clean them?"

"I'm not going to eat them."

"What are you going to eat—ants and bugs?"

"Okay. No—they're coconut palms."

"What will you crack coconuts on?"

"My head."

"Well, you're not going to believe this, but your head's not hard enough."

"Another coconut then, or the tree."

"Have you ever tried to open a coconut? You need a hammer. What if you crush your thumb? Who's going to take care of it?"

"No one. But I won't crush my writing hand."

"Who's going to read your writing? Or are you going to send it off in bottles or something?"

"Somebody's got to send those bottles."

"You can have your island."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm leaving your island."

"David!"

"Have fun."

—Cheryl Shira