

[Vol. 74] 1994



n *o* *w* *e* *r* *s*
northern illinois university

literature ^{and} **I E** annual

The moving force is the **creative faculty** which takes this product as material, uses it and originates the next step.

HOWARD ROARK

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When one hears the word *passion*, many images come to mind. One of these images is not likely to include the pages of a literature and art annual. However, the particular passion that I am referring to is that of artists. Artists realize the beauty in everyday life, they take that beauty and manipulate it in some way until it is a reflection of the self. **No matter what one's particular craft is, be it of image or word, as artists, we look at life in a different way. The way that we respond is through passionate expression. One of the primary objectives of Towers has been to capture the creative statements of NIU's students and present them as a whole. We believe this compilation represents the collected artistic passions that are alive on our campus.**

editor-in-chief:

Jennifer C. Mach

This issue would not have been possible without the passion and devotion of these individuals...

Special thanks to: Tim Stouffer, who was invaluable in the early stages of the annual, the art directors, Bryan Kriekard and Michael Petersen for giving Towers a character and creative voice reflective of the work within, to John Bradley for his gracious investment of time, Joe Gastiger, a contributor to the annual for several years, and finally the editors and staff, who dedicated their precious time to reading and critiquing the numerous submissions.



MIRAGE AND BEYOND



Whenever each of us conceives of a new creation (i.e. literary work, painting, design or invention), we subconsciously set an objective. Our objective, without fail, is to produce something **ideal - ultimate and complete**. History, religion, philosophy, and something known as "the human element" all suggest that perfection is impossible. Nevertheless we who share the *yoke and title of "creators"* strive forth.

the art directors



Mike and Bryan

○
Ideal: ¹ A conception

of something in its

– *Random* House Dictionary

perfection. ² An ultimate

object or aim of endeavor.

Whenever each of us conceives of a new creation (i.e. literary work, painting, design or invention), we subconsciously set an objective. Our objective, without fail, is to produce something **ideal - ultimate and complete**. History, religion, philosophy, and something known as “the human element” all suggest that perfection is impossible. Nevertheless we who share the *yoke and title of “creators”* strive forth.

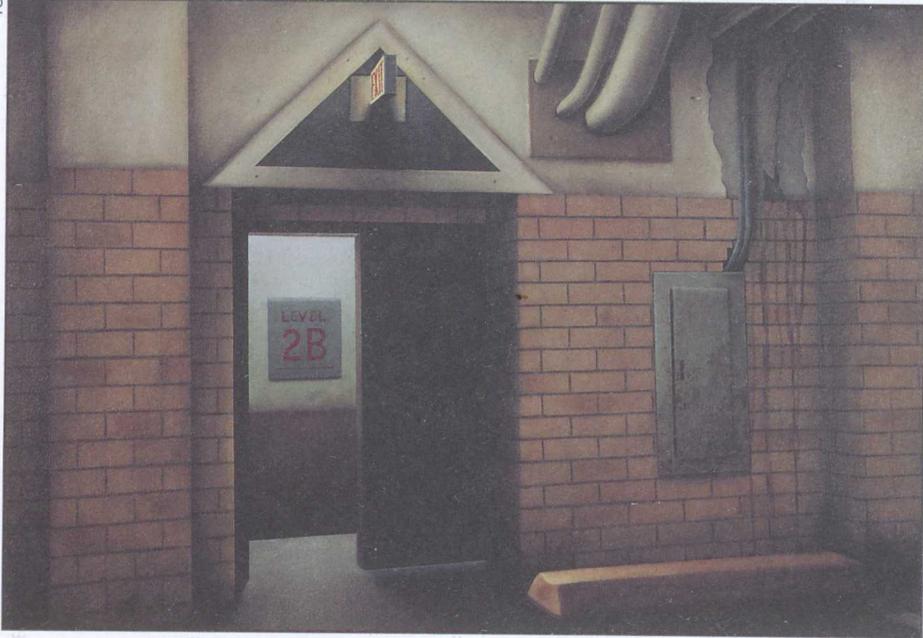
t h e a r t d i r e c t o r s

I cut pieces of apple. Not sliced not diced. Just jagged cuts that don't ever fit
back together.

“ **diana b. damkevala** ”

level 2-b

carol luc



His eyes spot
the toy.

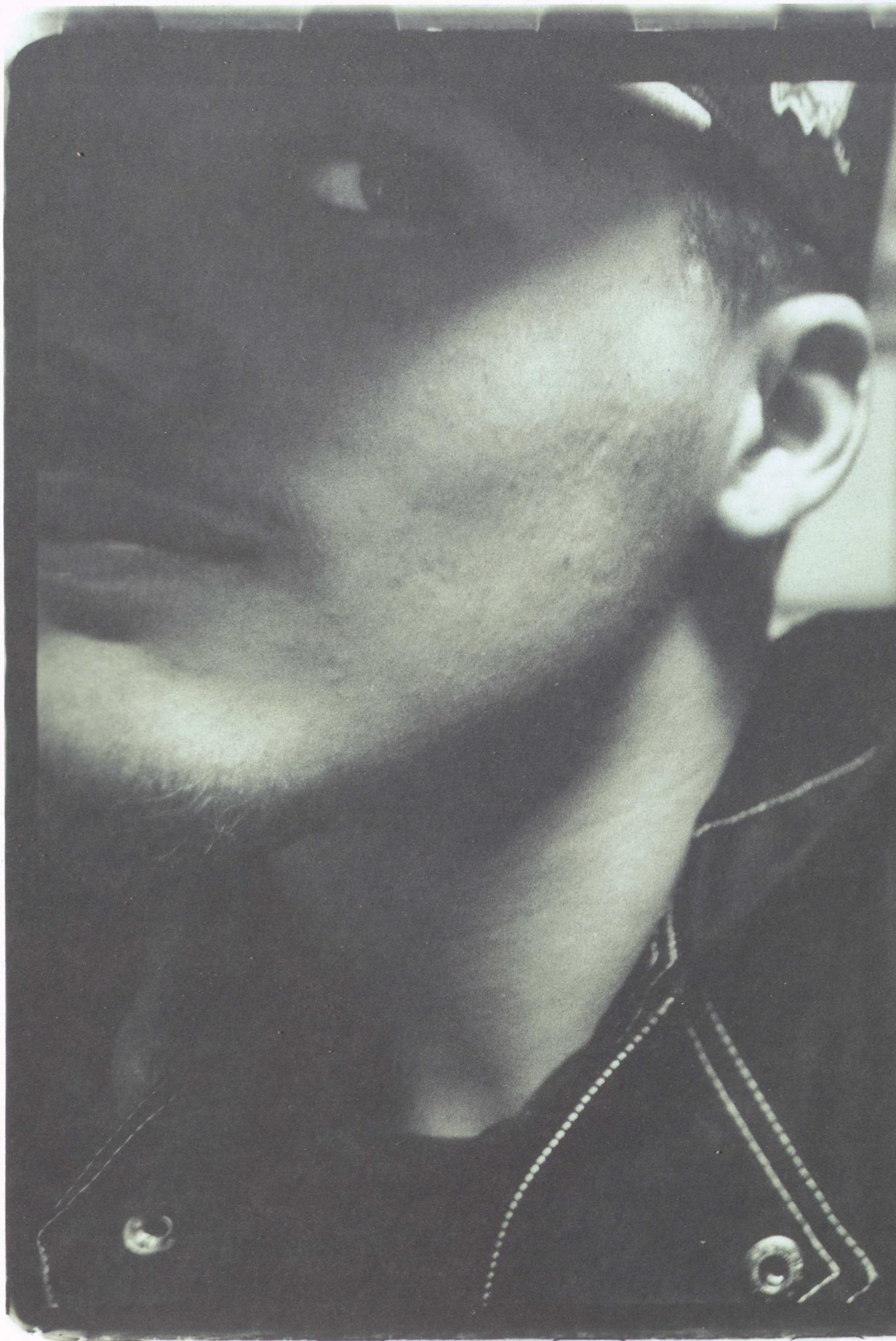
Teeth clench,
cheeks puff,
dimpled hands
grip the side
of the stroller.

One dumpling
of a knee
lifts out,
then the other.

Feet planted,
arms swinging
he grabs
the red dinosaur.

Prize
in hand,
he runs,
grinning slyly
over his shoulder,
as his laughter
trickles down the
hallway.

A Boy in Gabel Hall
Terrill Birch





u n t i t l e d .

Jim Qui^{gg}

Dark outside. And sinister. Sinister:

but that didn't make him sinister. Would his left hand be placed over his right? Probably the morticians didn't bother with little details like that. Still, it was more than a detail. People believed that the right side of the brain operated the left side of the body. Meaning Stephen's brain was dominantly right. The right side was responsible for the hole in his heart. No, it wasn't right. He had passed on. Passed on — the phrase reminded her of passing gas or playing hot potato. What had passed on? She pictured his hands passing nothing to her. His thin fingers. They weren't so thin that the knuckles stuck out, though. They were smooth on the edges, straight. And the nails were dirty, and usually the fingers were too — smudged with paint and pastels and charcoal. She used to tease him that he never washed and he would complain that the soap in the art room wasn't strong enough. And P.I. laughed and told him to use paint thinner or bleach because all that dirt and crap on his hands was not respectable. ¶

Latin for left-handed. Stephen was left-handed,

Casey Pennel

She stopped. She forced all the crap to stop moving around her head so violently and focused again as people and billboards and houses flew by. Scenery. That's all. Something to look at, something to set the stage for what would happen. The background for Stephen's death. But she didn't mean to keep bringing that up. She blotted her mind and watched again. She didn't see anything.

She saw. "Forest Funeral Home." The car stopped and she was walking towards the door, still not thinking about Stephen. Her father opened the door and she was inside and it was quiet, but not because it was empty. There were so many people. Too many, of course. And they collectively kept it quiet out of respect for the dead. She felt like speaking, like chattering and flirting and laughing gaily. She felt crazy giddy.

Women looked at her and whispered and smiled sadly. They thought they knew what she was thinking. She was thinking that the woman across from her was fat. She looked disgusting in the tight mourning dress that she sported. It was indecent, really, that they let her come here wearing that. Somebody should have told her what this was.

Shelby spotted her and broke away from her own friends.

"Bri. You're here." Brianna nodded. "How are you?" Shelby was whispering, which was ridiculous because everyone could hear her anyway. She looked at Shelby: she'd been crying. Too bad. Her eyes weren't red or swollen or watery, though. The end of her nose was shiny where her powder was rubbed away with a tissue. Shelby was still whispering, but Bri couldn't concentrate.

"Where's Stephen?" Bri asked. Where's P.I.?

Shelby looked shocked for a second; Bri couldn't understand why really. Then Shelby realized. "Oh. He's in there."

Bri was moving towards the display room. Really, she had thought it would be somehow more impressive, but it was just like her living room with couches and easy chairs and end tables set up all over. Only hers didn't have a cadaver hanging out in it. She smiled to herself. It wasn't really funny, but she smiled anyway. Bri vaguely noticed people sitting in chairs, some sobbing, some sniffing, some stony. She stood before the casket.

Stephen. Shoot, he looked pretty good. Course, he didn't have any stubble. But that was because he had — or rather, someone had shaved it for him. He looked pretty darn nice in that getup. Stephen wasn't really such a great-looking guy, he was a little homely, but he looked so dignified now. Unnatural for him really. Bri studied his face. His lips were so thin and wide, his big head so glossy and bristly. His chubby cheeks. She was amazed at how much pizza they fit — used to fit — in them. The pink still touched his face. Jesus Christ. This was going into the ground. Dirt would smear his pink into grey. And worms would fill his cheeks. She didn't mind so much that his skeleton would rot away, or that his pancreas would deteriorate into oblivion. Jesus Christ. His hands. "Jesus, not his hands." She said it loudly; everyone had heard. She didn't know.

She didn't want to see his hands, but she had to look. She wasn't sure if they would be there or if they had ascended with his soul. His hands were spotless. Not even the dull grey which permanently marked them as artist's hands. They were pink like his face. She told herself that of course they were pink; they had been washed, finally, with soap that was strong enough. But she sweated. She couldn't stop. She felt suddenly that he

had forgotten his hands in the rush to don his wings and halo. He would miss them, of course. Surely he would be frantic when he realized his hands were missing. He'd be back for them surely. Very soon probably. But she couldn't be sure how soon. She'd have to keep his hands for him. She looked around contemptuously. None of his supposed friends had remembered to save his hands. P.I. had probably remembered, but he wasn't here yet. So she would take care of it. She leaned into the reek of embalming fluid, grasped Stephen's hands, and pulled.

It wasn't working so she grasped his wrist with both of her hands and tugged. But he was so damned heavy. A chubby, bordering on fat, body. She grabbed his forearm for leverage. "I've got 'em, Stephen. I've got your hands, Stephen, so when you want 'em I'll be holding 'em for you." His shoulder raised from the pillow and his chin tilted back and finally he was coming out. Then she was dragged away from the casket, from Stephen, by silent arms. She flailed and kicked and bit and scratched. When this failed, she screamed. She lifted her voice and threw it up to heaven for Stephen to hear. Stephen, Stephen, they want to take your hands away. Stephen...where are you? Jesus Christ. Her high-pitched wail wavered. She swooned and passed out.

P.I. was looking at her strangely. "What's sinister?" he asked.

"The left hand," she said. The left hand was sinister. It was Latin. Pater was father, Frater was brother, So was sister.

"So?" he laughed.

She looked at P.I. stooping over her, smiling. She wanted to smile. His eyes were blue. Blue was cold, it was impersonal. Blue was a cool color, red was a hot color. That's what the art classes taught. But, no. Blue was the very hottest part of the fire, wasn't it?

"P.I." she said.

He laughed again. "Brianna's back from the — sleep she was in."

"Back from the dead," she said. P.I. smiled the same sad smile as — someone. Who? Somebody had looked at her the same way, a fat lady. The woman in too-tight mourning clothes, the one at the funeral.

"The funeral," she said.

"It's over, Bri. You passed out and they brought you in here I came to watch you. Everyone else is at the grave. They'll be back soon."

"No. Just you, P.I." Passed out, like passing gas or distributing. Or making a pass. Thank God P.I.'s here. P.I. Peter Ichobod. Petey. Ichy. Pete-ich. Private eye. Pie. Peter. Pater. Father.

"Peter. Stephen's hands."

"I heard you made quite a ruckus trying to get Stephen out of the coffin."

"Yes. Save his hands, P.I. Please."

"I can't, Bri. He doesn't need his hands to be saved. He doesn't need them, Sweet Bri. He can't use them."

"Peter. Ichobod. You are a two-faced bastard. You said you loved Stephen. You don't even know that his hands turned pink instead of grey, and his face is turning grey instead of pink. Did you know that, Peter? Did you ever stop to think once, just once, that they're putting Stephen underground?"

"Not Stephen, Bri. His body."

"Why don't you stop them P.I.? How can he paint without any light?"

"Jesus. Sweet Bri."

"Don't shake your head at me. I'm not a lost cause."

"Just lost, Sweet Bri." He smiled sadly.

The lady at the funeral. Her sympathetic smile menaced. She grinned. She was fat. And sinister.

Bri was silent and P.I. watched her silence and then she was watching more scenery from her car and then she was in her bed. She was sleeping and then she woke and was creeping down the stairs and she was outside moving toward the field. She was kneeling in a pile of dirt and she was shaking and gathering dirt into her fists. She was jamming it into her

Pink



mouth. Dirt. Soil. Dust. She sucked the dirt and her head shook. She chewed the dirt until her jaws cramped. She swished the dirt around with her tongue until her mouth was coated. Then she was spitting it out, coughing, hacking, throwing her body into the dirt and rubbing it over her bare skin. It scraped her and burned her and she was rolling in it. Then she was exhausted and she was sleeping and she woke and found herself bloody and dirty and she fled to her bed and she slept.

When she awoke, Bri was not sure whether to get up today. Her body ached, her sheets were bloody. She thought of P.I. and was overwhelmed with hatred. She had explained the pink and the grey to him, but he didn't care. Didn't care about Stephen. And Stephen had known and then he had died. She wouldn't see Peter ever again and she wouldn't go to school ever again. Maybe Stephen wouldn't be working today and he could come over except he was dead and buried six feet under, pushing up daisies. She could go dance on his grave, but why bother? He wouldn't even see her. He couldn't hold her feet with his hands and tell her to dance for him, his little dancer. Then Mom was coming in and telling her to shower, her friends wanted to see her and she was showering and the scrapes burned. The dirt washed away. And Shel was walking in and looking very concerned.

"Bri. Are you okay?"

"Shelby. Of course." Was P.I. here?

"P.I. came with me. He's so worried about you."

"I won't see him, Shel. He's a bastard and a sonuvabitch. Tell him to get the hell out of my house and stay the hell away from me. I hate him. I wish he were the one..."

"Bri..."

Bri studied Shelby's face. She had been crying again, this time her eyes were still red. Really, she was crying right now. Too bad.

"Shel, don't cry. You'll ruin your makeup."

Shelby cried.

"All right. Cry if you want, but please not here. Please go away."

Shelby left without answering, still crying. Then Bri was getting ready for school and sleeping through her classes and not speaking to P.I. She apologized to Shelby and she smiled at her other friends, but she looked into P.I.'s blue eyes with her own coldness.

He was trying to talk to her, he was calling her every night and writing her letters, but she wasn't answering. She was telling her friends to have him leave her alone and Shelby told him Bri wished he died instead of Stephen. And then she was in peace, silent and alone. P.I. didn't look at her and Shelby wasn't calling her because Bri was being selfish.

Then Bri was in her room and it was night and she looked out the window and there was darkness outside. And sinister. And she was scared. She remembered the funeral. She looked at the calendar and saw that two months had passed since the funeral. She sat on the floor and she ached. She tried to remember anything from the last two months and she couldn't remember anything at all. She was slamming drawers and tearing apart her desk and throwing things out of her closet. And she sank to the floor and stared at her hands. They were dirty. And she remembered Stephen's hands. And Peter. Peter. They were such good friends, something had happened to make them stop, but she couldn't think what. She was sure he was far from her, though.

She took out paper and pen and wrote.

Dear Peter,

Was it something I said?

Brianna

Dear Peter,

Wish we were friends.

Brianna

Dear Peter,

My apologies.

Brianna

Each letter she sent after waiting one day for a reply. Peter still didn't look at her. Then school was out and she was absorbed in loneliness. She laid in her room looking at the ceiling. Dirt, that was important. The earth. Whether you're on it or under it. And whether your heart can beat with a hole. She was so tired of thinking and she looked outside. The sky was tired; it was grey. Every time it turned pink, when the sun rose and when the sun set, the sky only turned grey again, like charcoal blended into pink making grey. Grey, like dirt which coated the sky. She had sucked on the dirt.

She took out pen and paper and wrote.

P.I.,

There's a hole in my heart.

Brianna

Peter was in her room two nights later. He looked pale, gaunt.

"Peter. You can't know."

"Bri. Sweet Bri." He moved towards her and wrapped his arms around her. She felt his thinness. Peter. Peter. Stephen is gone. Stephen is gone. Jesus Christ. He's gone.

"Peter." and he was squeezing her so she couldn't breathe and when he released her, she breathed deeply and felt the air rushing into her lungs. And he was smiling at her, shyly. And he was looking with his blue eyes, intensely hot.

"Bri." He looked troubled. "I came — what did you mean about a hole in your heart?"

A hole in her heart? She didn't remember anything except a hole in Stephen's heart.

She looked at Peter and grabbed his hands.

"No. No hole, Peter." And Peter's eyes looked suddenly like Shelby's had at the funeral. Crying. And she was crushing Peter and he was crushing her back and she felt her cheeks wet and her shoulders shake.

"I'm dangerous like a cow.," I said.

No one noticed.

I climbed the steps, "I'm Dangerous like a cow."

Still no reply.

I traveled to the rooftop.

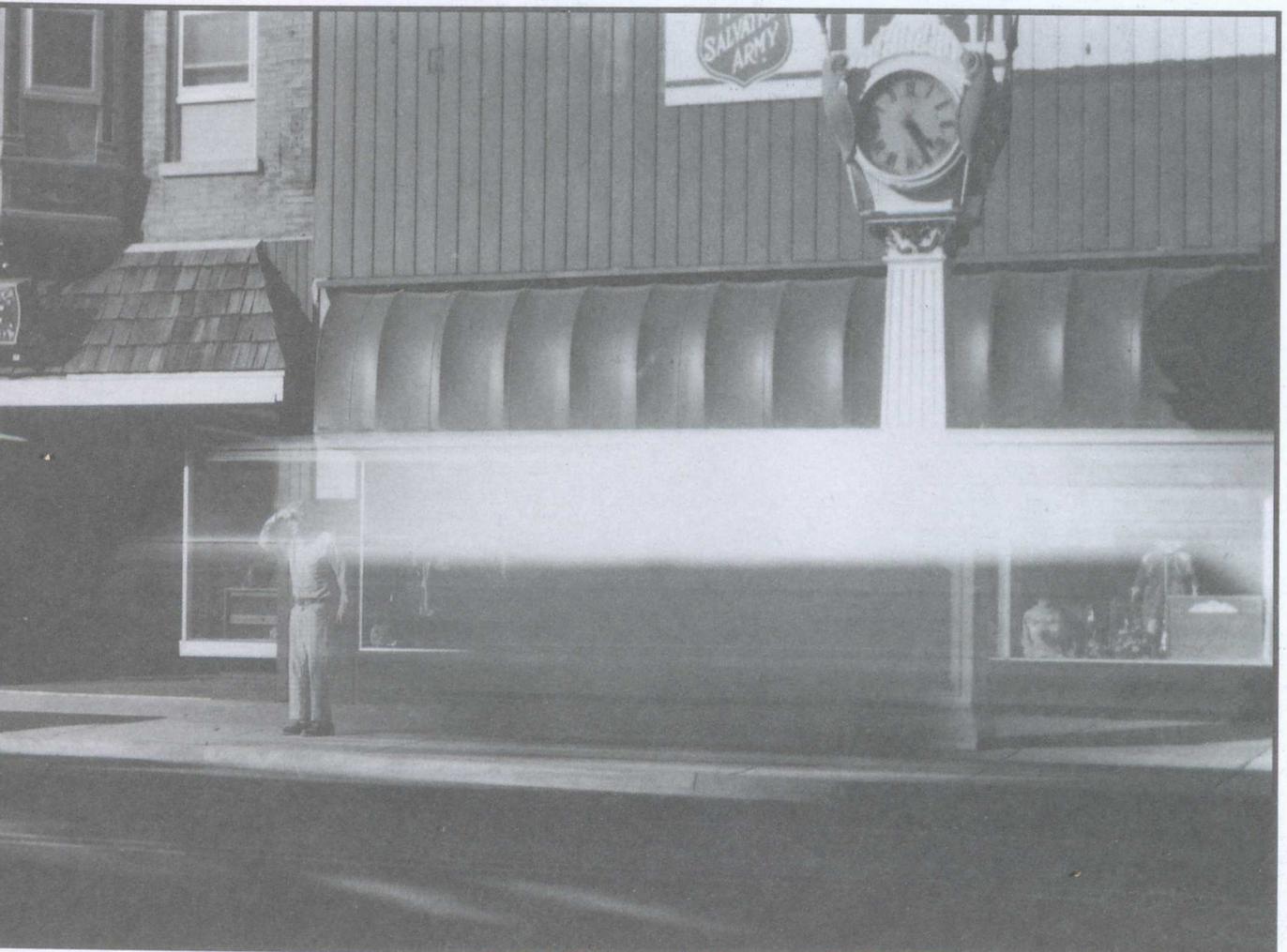
HOW I GOT NOMINATED

"I'm *dangerous* like a C OW"
A man stopped, looked up and asked,
"In what way?"

andrew j. ZIOL (k o w) SKI

b r i a n w a l k

untitled





w a i t . . .

your hands run through my hair in gently desperation
(do you feel the urgency too?) my head falls back my neck
is exposed to you . . . feeling sorry in your shirt
I'm showing more skin than I should. I can't see my reflection in the
steamed-up windows but I can feel the blush
that spreads until I have to pull you onto me what goes through your head
when you hear my gasp break the sickly stillness feel the tiny buttons
between your fingers my hands on your back
l a u r i e k r u g
the soft cool of the sheets the daytime that didn't die
it's hotter inside me twisting straining under your touch
feeling your mouth your fingers on me the intoxicating rhythm
of your heart pounding against my chest
you whisper I look like an angel
I quietly plead with you don't let it end.

your hands run through my hair in panicky desperation
(do you feel the urgency too?) my head falls back my neck
is exposed to you. feeling sexy in your shirt
I'm showing more skin than i should. i can't see my reflection in the
steamed-up windows but i can feel the blush
that spreads until i have to pull you onto me what goes through your head
when you hear my gasp break the sickly stillness feel the tiny buttons
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of your heart pounding against my chest
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i quietly plead with you don't let it end.



. . . a n d w a i t

v a l o l a f s o n

Uris awoke early and left the village. He wished for none of the customary reverence and ceremony which usually accompanied a send-off. There were many who believed Uris was not yet ready to receive a vision; his heart was not right, they said. As he thought of this the blood rushed to his face once again, and the long fingers of his left hand curled inward, absently rubbing the Y-shaped scar on the palm. He would hate them forever, and they would see their error when he returned to sing the young man's song.

The sun told him that it was not yet midday when he abandoned the labyrinth of well-worn trails and began to enter the darker depths of the forest. Walking became slower, but he wanted to insure his isolation. Scant light penetrated the tree-top canopy. Wind and sound were also muted. Bright greens gave way to subdued shades of brown and cool gray. Uris stopped.

By the end of the third day of fasting, Uris knew that he had never been so painfully hungry. He had not slept and was growing weaker. After five days the hunger subsided a bit, yet every muscle in his body begged to stand and stretch. On the seventh day Uris felt no pain. He was somewhat aware that his sense of hearing had become greatly enhanced, still he did not listen. He did not hunger. He did not move. On the ninth day

U r i s

s c r e a m e d

U r *i*

S'

The old man approached slowly on the cobbled road, leaning heavily on a thick oaken staff. His eyes cast downward, stepping carefully, he appeared beyond old – he was forever. He stopped short of Uris and said, *“Give me your hand.”* Uris presented his left hand palm up, as if holding a coin. In an instant the old man inserted his thumb in the scar where the three legs of the Y met and began to peel Uris’ hand.

As he screamed, Uris tried to pull his bloody hand back, but the man held on easily, seemingly not noticing his protests. The second flap of skin began to peel back with a sound like the tearing of heavy cloth, and the old man raised his head for the first time and met Uris’ gaze.

Uris had not expected the warmth and understanding he found in those bright eyes - eyes framed with beautiful wrinkles of wind-burned leathery skin. Those eyes conveyed sorrow and love as the man began to tear the third and final flap of skin from the hand.

“You have to get the poison

out, he patiently explained. “But it hurts,” Uris replied.

“I know son, I know.”

When Uris regained consciousness, he found himself still sitting upon the ground, soaking in his sweat. He felt an emotion he had never known before – he would later call it calm. Head high, he began the long walk back to the village.

V i S i o n

W

INSPIRATION

EXPLORE & EXPAN UPON ID

THOUGHT - REASONING

PROCESS

ANALYTICAL THINKING

INDIVIDUAL

REASON
PRODUCT (EVALUATION)
SOLUTION

Think about it. The images and words in this book were created to

CREATIVITY IS THE

As creators, we are charged

INFORMATION

Univer LOGIC
Creative process toward
the purest form
of creative products
innovation

r e
thought and incite reactions.

PRODUCT OF THOUGHT.

with the responsibility to not just passively sniff the work on the pages before us, but to inhale, devour, chew on, taste and aftertaste it.
(burp!)



The intelligent are the source of creativity



mikel samson

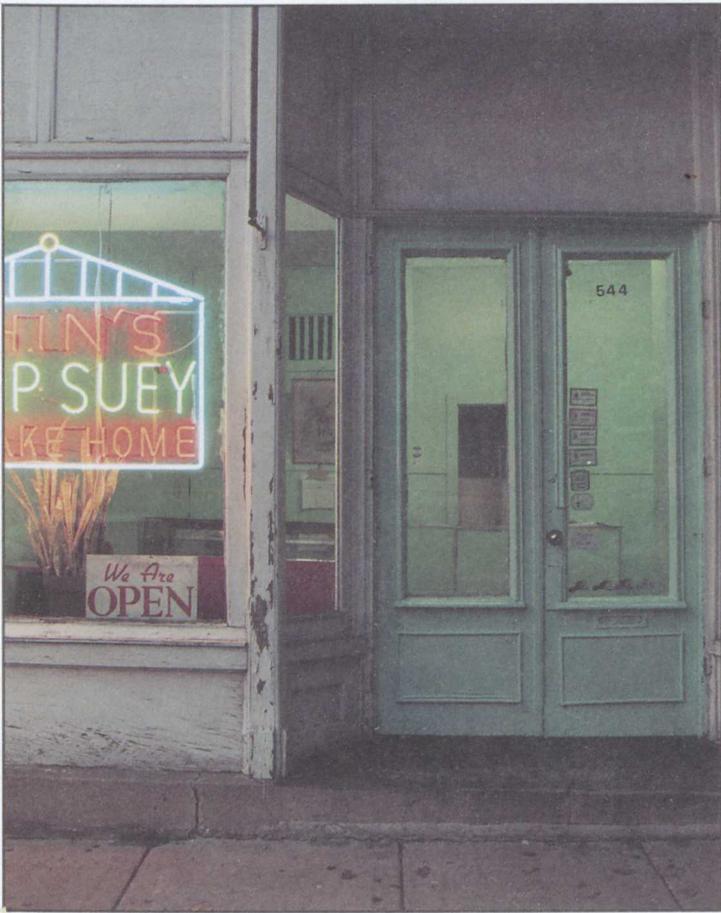
FOOL'S

u j n o !

faded memories

Jason Pax Crowell

Clouds of grey and foggy mists
 seek my thoughts, my emotions,
 and try to forge a deepening void.
 The light of my dreams, under siege,
 defies the dark encroachment.
 The cancerous nothing occludes my spirit,
 forcing the flame of life to falter.
 Violent waves of chaos assault
 the faded memories of time.
 The sinking juggernaut of hope
 resists the nightmarish onslaught...
 until the last fire dies,
 and the cooling embers hiss no more
 as they silently slip beneath the waves.



U n t i t l e d *Jay Austin*

g a r y ' s t r a i n

When Gary came home from school, he noticed the bruise beneath his mother's left eye, covering the whole cheek, and he glanced away when she saw him staring at it. She turned her head and self-consciously covered it with her palm then took a drag from her smoldering cigarette. She had on her white robe with the yellow stained sleeves and her hair was wet like she just got out of the shower, all matted and stringy. Last night, when his father came home, Gary heard them arguing about something again. He was drunk and his mother was screaming, then crying.

no daggers
no shrieks of pain
oh no it's much more formal
so dignified
like the pain from a paper cut
is it there
not sure are you

it's hard to tell
but try to touch the skin
feel how the chills go through yet?
this virgin pain
more formal
don't try to move up or on or over
it's there.
sometimes all you see is

dried up roses isn't it
funny how you feel
the roses yes they are dead
has it killed you
they were so red so black
now so dry

cactuses are dry and fragile too
but they are sharp and
they hurt.
is this what it's come to?

cactuses
l a u r i e k r u g

"Come here, Gary."

"What?" He could barely hear her above the talk show blaring on the television.

"I said come here." Her voice was stern, always stern and angry, yelling whenever she talked, unless his father was around.

Gary dropped his book bag on the floor by the door which irritated his mother, but he always did it anyway, then sat on the love seat opposite her.

She looked at him sideways through her right eye, hiding the bruise with a lock of hair and her hand. **"I got a call from you school today. They said you got in another fight again."**

Gary stared at the television, waiting for her to continue. He never knew what to say when she approached him this way.

"Why do you keep getting in fights?"

He was always fighting at school. Sixth grade could be rough sometimes, in a new school, not quite the older fifth grader anymore, but just a dumb sixth grader below all the seventh and eighth graders. A lot of them liked to walk by in the hallways and slam the smaller kids into their lockers. And Gary was smaller for his age, but he had a mean streak people said.

"They said you hit some boy on the ear and he had to go to the nurse."

"He pushes me into my locker every day, mom."

His mother crossed her legs and lit another cigarette, glanced at Donahue. They were talking about transsexual or homosexual something or other.

"Why didn't you tell someone about this? Or tell me?"

"I did tell you..."

"When?"

"I dunno." He knew he had told her, or at least he thought he did, but even if he did, he knew she wouldn't say anything about it until he got in a fight about it.

"Well, I'm going to have to tell your father then."

Tell his father about it. Make him black and blue like she was. She wanted that, didn't she? She didn't want to be the only one who got beat on. Otherwise, she'd be all alone. When Gary got beat on, she would take him in her arms and rock him until he stopped crying, even though he rarely cried anymore over it, and she'd tell him how sorry she was that things were like this. But she always had to tell his father anyway and start the whole thing. And when his father would start yelling at Gary, and hitting him, his mother would cower behind his father and join him, screaming at Gary for doing wrong until his father was done and went to the kitchen for another beer. Then she'd hold Gary. Whose side was she on?

Gary went outside to the backyard to get away from her, the instigator. He picked up a stick and batted stones across the yard, aiming at the neighbors' rotted fence and missed. The dog, Mickey, raised his ears, stretched and jumped out of his dog house, body shaking with excitement. He ran towards Gary but was jerked back by his chain, then started barking. Gary's mother stood at the back window and he knew she was there with that pitiful look, like she felt sorry for him, like she had nothing to do with it. He glanced up at her, caught her right in the eye and stared. She finally went away.

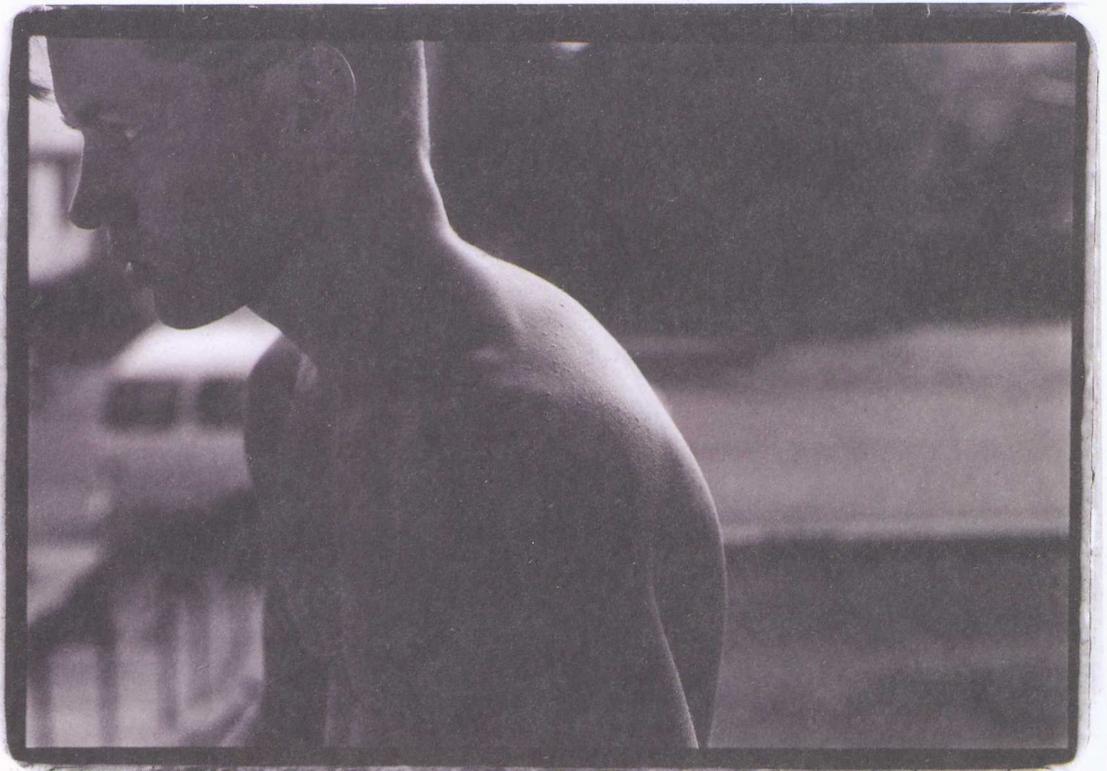
Mickey barked and howled, like a wolf, his body shaking happily. Gary had wanted to name the dog Werewolf, but his mother said that wasn't an appropriate name for a dog and that they should give him a happy name like Mickey. It made Gary think of a mouse. He didn't even want a dog. He heard his mother talking to his father one night about a year ago, saying that maybe Gary needed a dog or something like that because of the problems he'd been having. Fighting and bursts of anger. Even the counselor suggested it, she said.

m i c h a e l J. h u l t q u i s t

He picked up a few stones and whipped one at Mickey. The dog yelped once, the stone hitting him square on the back leg. He threw another, and this time the dog skirted aside, ran once about the dog house, wrapping himself up in the process. Gary threw the rest of the stones in a final volley and went around to the front porch. It was hot outside, early June. School was almost out for the summer. In the front yard was a giant maple tree that curved at a strange angle from the stump upward, at such an odd angle that Gary could jump right onto it and climb up to the first set of branches. Most of the time, he would climb up and sit on the thick branch and lean back, his face only inches from the power line. He would touch the lines with his fingers and pull them back quickly to see if he could feel any shocks. The neighbors or his mother would always come out and yell at him to stop. You might electrocute yourself, they said, but that seemed to make it more interesting.

So Gary sat on the front porch with his face in his hands because he didn't feel like climbing the tree. Who knew when his dad would get home, or what kind of mood he'd be in. Sometimes he came home after 8:00 at night, or sometimes he'd be home before Gary was. Most of the time he'd be drunk. When he drank beer he wasn't so bad, but when he drank Jack Daniels was when he was violent. He must've drunk Jack Daniels last night judging from his mother's eye, and he rarely got violent two days in a row, unless you gave him reason to. A lot of times he came home angry because work was slow, but it was nearly summertime and a lot of people needed construction workers in the summer. So Gary hoped he'd be in a good mood.

Across the street, past the row of houses, was a row of trees. There was a little trail with a knotted ladder thing that led downward to the railroad tracks between the bushes. When he heard the train far off, coming, Gary bolted between the houses, down the trail and stood at the base of the tracks like a nervous deer, absorbing any signs of the coming train. There! He heard it again and stared down the tracks. More than a mile away, the tiny looking engine rounded the far off corner, waves of heat distorting it down there. Gary's heart flew into his throat. Something about the train played with his body and his brain, made him both excited and nervous, anxious and afraid. It was so fast and enormous and powerful. It drew Gary in and entranced him, and then wouldn't let leave.



Jim Quigg
u n t i t l e d

The train grew larger and Gary quivered, crouching in the bushes in case he was noticed. It felt as if the train was a living monster that could see him, that had eyes and arms and might snatch him right out of the bushes. His eyes flew wide as it passed, gigantic, throwing out dust in its odorous breeze. It smelled like heat and oil.

And when it finally passed, Gary peeked out from the bushes, eyed the caboose to ensure his safety, then stood shaking his fist in the air, triumphant, a survivor, following the train with his eye until it was gone.

"Gary!" He heard the faint yell of his mother from the house.

"What?" She was always yelling for him.

"Dinner!"

He trudged up the trail through the row of houses and froze when he caught sight of his house. His father was home. Out front was his rusty white El Camino, nudged up against the telephone pole again, which meant he was probably drunk.

He started walking slowly again, heading home, half tempted to run back down that tracks and keep going, but they'd catch him and things would only be worse then. Mrs. Crimp, their neighbor, an older, white-haired lady, was standing on her front porch watching Gary, shaking her head. He didn't know if it was a pity shake or an accusing shake. In either case, he didn't care what it meant. She was the town busy-body, always spreading rumors, especially about Gary's family, and people actually listened to her. Word eventually got back to his teachers and they all tried to talk to him about alcoholism and how he felt about his father's drinking. That only made him more angry because it was no one else's business.

When Gary walked in the house, his father was sitting at the kitchen table, hunched over a plate of hamburger and pork and beans, shoveling it into his mouth. A can of Old Style was next to his plate, beside another crushed one. Gary wondered if he noticed any of his beer missing, because every now and then he'd sneak a can into the basement and sip half of it until he felt sick, or drunk, or whatever that feeling was. His mother was standing at the stove, stirring the beans. His father lifted his plate, handed it to her, thrust it more like, and she scooped a few more spoonfuls onto it. She was silent and looked nervous.

Gary's father was a big man, tan from working outside. His hair was all mussed and spotted gray from dust and dirt. He wore a faded gray tank top that reeked of sweat and oil. While he ate, he kept wiping at his mustache to keep the food out of it.

When Gary walked into the kitchen, his father threw his entire arm backward, swatting without even looking. It caught Gary full on the chest, like a baseball bat, and threw him into the next room onto the floor.

His father took a few more rapid gulps of his food then swiveled on his chair toward Gary. His eyes were heavy lidded, but angry, a piercing gray. He stared at his cowering son, sprawled against the floor. He seemed annoyed that Gary wasn't crying.

"That's what ya get for fighting," he slurred, his head bobbing up and down slightly in an "I told you so" manner. He stared a few more seconds, as if deciding whether or not he should leave his chair and slap his son silly.

Gary eyed his father with awe, fearfully. He suddenly noticed his mother. She had stopped stirring the beans and stood almost dumfounded, as if she was frozen solid, only her head moving just enough to glimpse Gary from the corner of her eye. She tried to separate herself from everything around her, to distance herself from his father's rage, to channel it away and keep it from her. Gary glared into her eye for just a second, focusing every bit of anger and blame onto her, and he knew that she felt it.

His father finally returned to his plate and gulped the rest of it down. **"I'm sick of comin' home to this shit,"** he said and shoved his empty plate into the plastic fruit bowl. He continued to stare at the table top, motionless, eyes down. He stood then, flung open the cabinet above the counter and produced a bottle of Jack Daniels and a dusty snifter.

"I'm sick of comin' home to you," he directed at Gary's mother, **"and that damned kid always getting in trouble. Can't you control the little bastard?"**

As he talked and yelled, he seemed to grow more and more angry at his own words. He poured a glass and gulped down some, glanced back at Gary still on the ground.

"Look at him! He ain't gonna learn!"

Gary stood and rubbed his chest where he father struck him. It burned but it didn't hurt anymore. He saw his father remove his belt.

"You're gonna stop fightin'," he yelled and practically leaped from his chair, flailing his belt over Gary. Gary fell to the ground against the wall, covering his head with his hands and knees. He screamed in fear. The belt didn't really hurt; it just stung when it landed, but the intensity of his father's rage put fear into him. Even his mother screamed through stifled sobs.

When his father finally stopped, he sat back at the table to gulp down more booze. Gary rolled away and ran to his room. The belt marks were starting to hurt. He pulled up his shirt and inspected them in the mirror. A dozen belt length welts were starting to rise, red and painful. He hated his father. He knew his mother would be up before long to apologize, to hold him and cry. It made her feel better. It was all her fault.

Three weeks ago, at school, Gary's gym teacher Mr. Boot noticed a welt on Gary's leg. He pulled him aside after class and asked him a lot of questions about his family. He said he'd heard from some people that his father drank quite a bit and wondered if he wanted to talk about it. He asked about the welt.

"I got it in the woods from a tree," Gary said. He shifted when he spoke, kept his eyes on the floor. He felt uncomfortable talking about his family, especially with Mr. Boot leaning so close to him. He wondered what Mr. Boot would say if saw the new welts on his back.

Gary's mother came into his room within an hour. Her eyes were puffy from crying, but dry. She opened the door very slowly, knowing she wasn't welcome, peeking in. Gary was sitting at the window, staring down towards the train tracks, his radio softly playing.

"Gary?" she said quietly.

He ignored her. She crept up behind him and lifted his shirt.

"Oh God, honey. I'm so sorry for this..." Her arms fell around his shoulders and she squeezed.

Reflexively, he twisted and shoved his arms outward. His mother pulled away.

"Stop it, Mom!"

"Gary..."

His eyes were burning with... something he didn't know what. He had the urge to punch fist through the window and scream.

"Go away!"

He heard the door slam behind him. **"I don't care what you do then,"** she screamed, her voice heightened in pitch and frantic sounding, as if something snapped in her.

"Go away," he mumbled under his breath, mostly to himself.

"Hey," his father yelled from downstairs, muffled and drunk. **"Quit screaming up there damnit!"**

"Fuck you, Daniel!" She just said it. Gary couldn't believe he heard his mother swear like that. She never swore at his father, at least he never heard her.

Then there was silence. It hung thick in the air like fog, dark and ominous. It stifled the music from the radio and Gary turned his head like slow motion. He heard some slow, distant thumping, heading toward the stairs. It grew louder, faster, beating against the stairs, pounding footfalls. His mother screamed. A cool shiver went through Gary's neck. He heard his father mumbling angrily.

"You don't tell me to 'Fuck you' bitch. You stupid bitch!"

Her pleading echoed down the hallway and stopped suddenly each time he struck. Something thumped against the wall, then the floor, and it sounded like the carpet was being pulled from its staples, like a dog sharpening its claws.

"Damn bitch! Stupid bitch!"

His mother stopped crying, but Gary could hear the hollow, flat thuds as his father struck her, the wind pushing out of her, and the moaning. Then he heard sobbing. It was from his father this time.

"You stupid bitch. You see what you do to me. You want me crazy... you just want me to go crazy and kill myself don't you...fine bitch...I'll do it! I'll do it! You just fuckin' watch what happens to you when I kill myself!"

The pounding against the floor led down the stairs and Gary heard his father slam the basement door. Hard. Then silence again. Finally, there was silence.

Gary wanted to open the door, go to his mother and look at her, to let her know how sorry he felt that she got beaten. She didn't deserve that. But he couldn't open the door, because then he'd have to admit that it wasn't all her fault. He'd have to go back on all the feelings he had about her and he couldn't. He had hated her for too long. He had to hate her and he didn't know why.

The family counselor that Gary and his mother used to go to asked Gary alone once why he hated his mother.

"Because she makes my father drink and hit me."

"But that's not your mother's fault," the counselor said, rubbing the lenses of his shaded glasses. **"Your father is sick."**

Gary didn't believe that because how could someone be sick for that long.

"So how do you feel about you father?" the counselor asked. His voice was always smug, and Gary thought he looked down on him.

"I don't like him when he's drunk."

"Do you think he needs help?"

Gary didn't answer anymore questions. They were stupid questions and he never paid attention after that.

At 7:00, his mother came into his room. Her head hung low and she moved as if exhausted. A new bruise reddened across the length of her forehead and her lip was swollen. She jerked her head to the side as she leaned against the wall, flipping the hair from her face.

"Go check on your father."

Gary was lying on his bed, his hands under his neck, staring at the ceiling. He couldn't recall what he was thinking about when she walked in.

"Go check on your father, Gary," she repeated.

"Why me?"

"Just do it. He's in the basement."

Gary didn't know why he rose from his bed and marched down the stairs to the basement door. A large lump formed in his stomach and he was afraid somehow, afraid of his father and afraid of what he might find down there. His mother said nothing, following behind, then stopped as they reached the door.

"Go on," she prodded, her hands cupped against her mouth.

Gary knew she was afraid and he hated that. He didn't look back to her when he opened the door, stepped in and closed it behind him. He was determined to never look back to her again.

There were three sets of faded, paint-chipped, gray stairs that spiraled down into the basement. An empty bottle of Jack Daniels was shattered at the foot of the stairwell and Gary carefully stepped over the shards so they wouldn't make any noise. He lifted his head and cocked his ear to listen for anything. Nothing.

To the left were the washer and dryer, and to the right was a storage shelf his father built years ago from plywood. It held several large cardboard boxes and the old model train set, still set up, that Gary and his father used to play with years ago. Beyond that, the rest of the basement opened up to the right into a larger room. He couldn't see into that area from where he stood. His father was probably there. Above him were steel girders that held up the house and were strong enough for Gary to jump to and hang from.

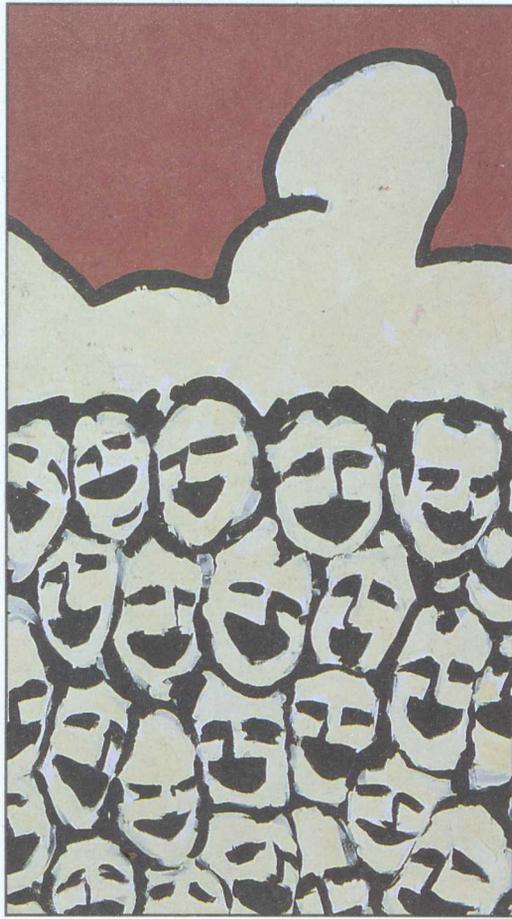
When Gary was younger, his parents weren't like this. His mother would have never made him go into the basement to check on his father. He used to ride on his father's shoulders and play in the backyard. When he came home from work, Gary would run out into the yard and leap up to him, and he'd twirl him and laugh and laugh. Now he had to see if he was dead. His head hurt thinking about it.

He listened again. Nothing. He could only see part of the far wall, the ripped up styrofoam covering the gray, cracked bricks. When he stepped forward, a bit more of it became exposed, but he couldn't see him yet.

He didn't want to go any further. He imagined turning the corner to find his father dangling from the ceiling, his face all swollen and red, his tongue protruding, eyes bugged out. He wondered if there would be any blood.

When he reached the train set, he stopped. The model engine faced him, tipped on its side. It was dust covered and old, so old that it would never run again.

everybody now



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Then he heard a noise. It was a strange noise, like pipes gurgling, a snore, like the sound he made with his nose when he teased the girls at school.

“Oink, you ugly bitches,” he thought. **“Bitch school girls.”**

Then, **“bitch,”** he whispered under his breath. He could swear now. He was old enough.

“Bitch,” he repeated, louder this time, testing it to see how it felt in his mouth, on his tongue. It felt good.

“Bitch!” This time he yelled. **“Bitch! Bitch!”**

He grabbed the model engine and flung it across the floor, shattering it to pieces, then turned and ran up the stairs. When he opened the back door, that led outside, his mother opened the other door. She had been waiting.

“Gary! Wait!”

He didn't look back when he ran out the back door and around the house. He didn't look back when he thought he heard her tired yelling as he ran to the trees and down the ladder-thing. Far off, the train was coming, and he stood there, shaking his fist at it, positioned beside the bushes, just out of its reach.

I

*Had in my hand
a tiny tin box;
sweat and metal made the air
smell like change and children
at offering time.*

II

*Had to wait
until everyone
cleared away.
Must be strange
being in the limelight
finally,
after thirteen years
of solitude.*

III

*Just needed to see
you off;
two peas in a pod,
one young,
the other dead.*

J e n n i f e r M A R C U S

Four Stages of Grief

I
*I slid the miniscule tin
into your powdered palm.
My throat tight,
fighting hard, really hard,
hard to breath and sob
simultaneously;
I understood
you weren't coming back.*

Voyeur

Waving a lantern at your runaway train just like I
could have stopped my mom from burning my ass with
her cigarette.

I'm driving in the spit of a spring night.
It's almost cold outside.

I've got the window down, sucking in some kind of
forgiveness, all that life will provide. All those
words handed out real good for real cheap
and those hot tears come bought real goddamned expensive.
The blond in you buying a pair of red and black pumps
while I buy a pair of restless cowboy boots.

I have my driving to memphis bag packed and its ready at
the bottom of the stairs. I have a pair of very scary
sunglasses stashed in my purse, I bought them special
for the trip. I'm in ball wondering if I'll have
the courage to stroke your hair before we hit the
Mason-Dixon Line, and will you lose your fear to hold me
in a highway motel somewhere before Mississippi.

I wake up every night at 2 a.m. tasting you like a truckstop
coffee etched on the back of my tongue printed on a roadmap
we keep on the floormat under our feet.

a road map **We** keep



V a l O l a f s o n

e dith



gyuchan h. steele

i held

a sign with your name on it,

a juice for you and a watch that kept ticking.

the story you told me was still vivid in my head

the autumn wind kicking and pulling;

a mother; a father

that never

came to cheer you,

to victory.

jennifer marcus

waiting for the *fall*

but i am better than your parents, i made a sign

with your name on it;

the wind took that sign and twisted it,

yet i waited for you

in that field and no one came

not your parents

not even

you.

but i was there, with that damn sign

with your name on it

tucked under

my arm.

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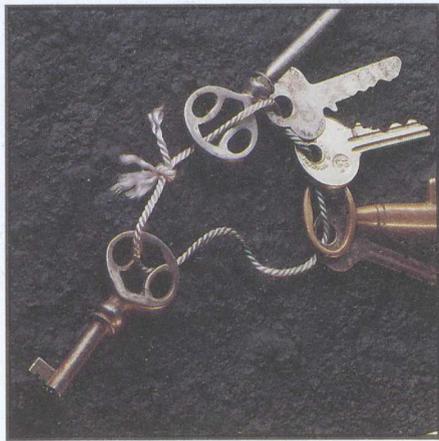
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In order to liberate yourself from

pain;

you must eliminate your capacity for



d e s i r e .
- W . M . K .