

Bayou Review

Bayou Review

Fall 1991

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Bayou Review

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Bayou Review contest winners for the Fall 1991

Poetry **Between Rows of Sage and Parsley*
W. Lee Gay

Short Story *Daddy's Girl*
Virginia E. Staat

Essay *Confessions of a Middle-Aged Student*
Barbara Quattro Nelson

Bayou Review awarded three \$50 prizes for winning submissions in the categories of poetry, short story, and essay this semester. All student submissions were considered for the contest.

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HEADACHE OF THE GODS

Alice Wolke

I crawled here from my safe, dark bed of hell
and fell prostrate, and gripped a towel
until some of the evil flew from my mouth
and I lay gasping, heaving and
spitting, cursing God.

The evil pins me again in a panic,
This laser pain over an eye, a thin stand, drawn out
taut as dental floss; steel fishing line.
Sometimes it's Christmas in July
and I am an ornament in a pine tree.

Head tipped back, arms flung out,
Dead weight dangling from a single thread of barbed wire.
Kneeling before the throne, wearing
that thorny crown passed down through the blood,
forever crucified, a daughter divine.

BETTER OFF DEAD

LeCriss Smith

My life is a waste, but I live.
The days go by, so I give.

By this slackness I breed
Only to life what I need.

I was never told life would be hard.
Given sound advice I disregard.

Now it's the wrong side of the world that I'm kept.
Like mere debris, under the rug I'm swept.

I'm a dark creature in the land of light.
I vanish by day and roam all night.

Maybe you're wondering what's on my mind,
or why I live this life of crime?

You see it's in shackles where I remain.
Not of the hands, these shackles incarcerate my brain.

Society has restricted my mind.
So it's bustin' rocks where I spend my time

It's not the rock of the earth
It's the rock a mad scientist gave birth

Why didn't I listen, why didn't I learn
Now it's poverty I've earned.

Instead, I prey on others.
Robbing my sisters and killing my brothers

I'm the lowest crook on earth.
Killing my own, how could I be of any worth?

One thought lingers in my head
Maybe I'm better off dead.

NEVER ALONE

Dorothy D. Sliva

No man is an island,
No where can he roam,
Where God is not with him,
The head of his home.

Men make a country,
Men make a home,
Together with God,
Never alone.

Working together,
Striving for peace,
The fight for liberty,
Never to cease.

Till all days are prayer days,
All churches full,
All souls Godly,
Following God's rule.

IF YOU SEE HER

D'Ann O'Brien

They might see her if she's with him.
They will know he isn't proud.
She looks sad and really frumpy,
She's too sassy and too loud.

They might see her if she's with him.
It will show through the eyes and face.
She's become what she has hated,
Hard and strong to keep the pace.

They might see her if she's with him.
How hard to smile instead of cry.
'Cause she's trapped inside this sadness,
She is living in a lie.

They might see her if she's with him.
He will "shelter" her, he said.
But he made sure that she could stand it.
Don't let this go to her head.

When you see her and you see him,
Look deeply in her eyes to find,
She is hurt beyond your knowing
In her heart and soul and mind.

If you see her when she's with him,
Be just as kind as you can be.
For what is in her broken heart
Your eyes will never see.

THIS IS NOWHERE

Brian A. Pachuca

On a trail to nowhere
where newspaper lichens
Swell yellow in the mouths
Of concrete pores leading
Into the shadowlands,
Senses are turned in and wired tight
Beyond lamplit evenings
Warning of predators creeping
Without moving their eyes,
Behind every gaping wound
And rustling leaf,
Reaching and waving.
Only a pulse of fast walking
Closes the distance between here
And there.

Even the grass seems to breathe
And shiver as the wind
Sighs and rushes past
Desperate steps
Across curbs of verucose sod
And concrete rot
And dogs barking
Threatening a quickened trot
To a dash through Memorial Park
Running mad, laughing,
Get from here to there
Because I live here.

THE EARTH SPEAKS

Erana Holbert

For years have I existed
And expanded my crops
I yielded my fruit
So you could flourish

My rivers flow
Bring life to you
And my flowers bloom
Making your countenance bright

But now the fresh wind that blows
Is choked by the unpleasant smog
And my waters are defiled
By your harsh chemicals

You slay my savage creatures
For personal gain

Oh imprudent creatures
What have I done to you
That I deserve
Such a grisly chastisement?

Have not I been faithful
Always supplying your needs?
Have not I made that increase
Which you planted

Do this one thing
I ask of you
Restore my health
Because I am dying

WITHERING ROSE

Ricardo Rendon

In a dream
I saw your face,
beautiful as a rose, but full of
thorns with a sign that read,
“LOOK BUT DON’T TOUCH.”
I looked but I didn’t touch.
As time took its course,
the rose started to wither away
and lost its thorns.

Now the rose has no thorns
and there is no protection against
my touch,
but who wants to touch a bitter,
withering old rose.
Time is short and you wasted
happiness for us both.

CAFE PROGRESS

Tommy N. Thomason

“Used to be,” he said to no one.
(me?)

Then stopped suddenly
As if he forgot what to say.
He took a long, slow drink from his glass.
Took a look around the cafe. (long, slow)
Took a look at me.

(me.)

Looked at me with
Something like sadness,
Something like anger,
Something like-

“And not too long ago,”

He didn’t forget.

“Wasn’t nuthin’ but trees ‘round here.”

(not my fault)

MY MOTHER- MY FRIEND

Mary M. Stewart Jones

One last wave of hand,
going our separate ways.
The breeze was fresh,
the sun warm.

A piece of you with me,
a part of me with you.
Confidants now,
separating all the lighter.

I watched the feather
float on the porch.
What I gave to you,
and you to me.

The breeze was fresh,
the sun warm.
Remembering, we are
all the lighter still.

LAST THOUGHTS ON BRETT PRASSE

Daniel Rich

one night we sat and talked
about nothing
all night-
nothing.
that night a thousand sentences
changed hands.

I don't know where he is buried
or what his tombstone says
it might say "HE DID HIS BEST"
or "BELOVED SON"

I never saw him
sneeze
cry
angry.
I never knew him

SWEET JAMAICA

Tanya Palmer

Columbus called you Land of Wood and Water
for those you have in abundance.

I call you Land of Sweet Serenity and
Unselfish People.

Some people call you Fruitless and Unstable;
but who is without shortcomings?

Others call you Fertile and come to eat of
your Fruit a thousand times fold.

Land I call Home;
Where I am without blemish, unscorned and intact.
Where I will die and be missed dearly.

SOMETIMES

Erana Holbert

Sometimes this life
Becomes unbearable
Things happen
And I don't know why

Sometimes I do
What is not pleasing
I say words
That bring pain

Sometimes I feel
So isolated
Life a drifting isle
In the sea

Yet at these times
I realize
Others feel this way
Too

PRETTY BOY, PRETTY GIRL TALKING

Tommy N. Thomason

Pretty boy, pretty girl talking- Weather, classes, teachers,
"How's your mom?" He asked about her mom
I listened without looking. •
(People don't think you're listening unless you're looking.)
From the discourse I discerned, felt, believed
That he wasn't kidding
A nice boy- good intentions
I trust my intuition- always have, it never failed me
Don't worry momma, he's a nice boy.
A nice boy.
The conversation ended.
"See you later," he said honestly, sincerely.
She was gone.
He stayed- spoke to someone else.
"Man, I'd like to screw her!"
Honesty? Sincerity? Good intentions?
"Goddamn Catholic virgin "
Nice boy.

DEATH

Angelita Martinez

The day was bright,
yet I could not see.
Darkness embraced me
body and soul.
The room was icy cold,
yet I felt only the heat
I felt alone and scared.
Though I was surrounded by many,
I could not see their faces
for what they were viewing
I could only see
the backs of their heads.
I am so afraid and I want to see.
Though I must be strong
not just for me
yet also for you.
We must be filled with might
throughout the rest of the night
As we fight off the dreadful chariot
Which will carry us off to DEATH

STEPFATHER

Veda L. Winfree

His soul has drifted
to a better place.
His suffering sleeps like a fetus in the womb.
No longer will he be prey
to the parasitic pain which inflicted him so long.

His soul slumbers peacefully
in the cradle of God's enormous arms;
ultimately free from despair and harm.

TO DADDY

Rita N. Patel

Every morning I wake up early to see you before you leave.

I fix your tie.

I help you with your coat.

I find your keys and briefcase.

I give you a big hug and kiss before you leave.

Every evening I wait for you to come home.

I take your coat and briefcase.

I bring you your slippers.

I fix you a drink.

I ask you about your day and tell you about mine.

Now you're gone.

It has been almost nine years.

I still can't believe it.

Sometimes, I find myself still waiting for you to walk

through

the door in the evening.

I wait to tell you all of the things that have been happening
in my life.

Where are you Daddy?

I'm still waiting.

I didn't get a chance to say good-bye.

I wouldn't even let myself cry.

But that was nine years ago.

I'm crying now.

Daddy, I miss you.

Daddy, I love you.

Good-bye Daddy.

WILBERT'S VISIT

W. Lee Gay

When you came to me that night
I proudly showed you how I could fly-
And did a slow, lazy somersault
Suspended in mid-air

But you were not impressed
Saying "just imagine how hard
It was for me to visit you here;
After all, this is a dream and I am dead "

TRAFFIC

Twila Drybread

Cars creeping like caterpillars

Tires spinning in circles

Purr of the pavement

Silence of horns

Rainbow of colors

Virgin cars

Mature cars

Senior cars

All creep together

I WAS NOT IMMUNE

Brenda E. Rodgers

His moves were smooth and quick
Polished words and wit,
Spinning his web of lies and deceit
Around unsuspecting prey

I felt the sting of his crippling venom
And still could not admit
That I was not immune

Slowly I began to die
Still quite unaware,
My eyes open, I could not see
The root of my despair

Wrapped in his love, safe in his arms
I looked into his eyes
What horror in the reflection
I was to realize

For there I was -surrounded-
Wrapped in the web he had spun

How could this happen?
How could this be?
I wondered what I'd done.

My heart was bleeding
My spirit weak,
But my life had just begun.

BETWEEN ROWS OF SAGE AND PARSLEY

W. Lee Gay

Wandering through the dusty furrows
Of my vegetable garden,
Surrounded by deep green chiles
And robust ripening tomatoes,
My youth comes back to visit me.

Wild laughter and games
With my three older sisters.
Wonderful, scratchy tunes
Played on the old Victrola.
Visits to the clinic and
Papa, so respected, as he tended
To the ailments of the townsfolk.
The old stone hearth where Mama baked
Fresh sourdough bread and its aroma
Wafted through the crisp, dry air.

Gazing over silky corn and succulent squash
Appear the tepees of string beans.

Sunny afternoons when
Little blond-headed Eric
Roared and scouted with me
Across our big, hill-country ranch
And then we skinny-dipped
In the clear, cool waters
Of the stoney, spring-fed creek.

Standing guard above
Odorous, green onions and sprawling, fuzzy okra
Is the lonely scarecrow,
His ragged checkered pants
And tattered brown jacket mine.

Where have they all gone?
Why have they left me here alone,
Between rows of sage and parsley,
With sagging sun-spotted skin
And balding, yellow hair?

MR. MILTON'S PLACE

Jerry S. Dworaczyk

Gazing at his throat, I knew the thirst-quenching fluid was reaching its destination. His arched neck and pumping esophagus worked in machine-like unison to drain every drop of cool liquid. Once again I was there to provide a much needed service, but knowing the battered road my life has traveled in the past, I knew I was about to embark on an adventure that would make previous adventures appear insignificant. Subconsciously, I knew that all my ordeals had a distinct purpose in mind and a message to reveal—this one would be no exception.

Confirming my thoughts with a quick side motion of his powerful arm, I soon discovered myself in a rather precarious position with no recollection of what transpired save the roar of an engine and a trail of blue slate smoke and dust trailing behind his weather-beaten, rusty spotted convertible. The choking fumes overwhelmed me and numbness from the fall set in, but a cool breeze brought me to my senses, coursed throughout my hollowness and gave me an inkling of hope; it whispered into my ear, persuading me that something beneficial would come from this. Carried

away by that same rejuvenating breeze, the burnt smell of oil no longer lingered. I was alone. This wasn't the first time I was tossed aside as if I harbored a contagious disease. Many of my friends, who are of comparable employ, have also been treated in a similarly degrading manner.

Not knowing where to go, and weary, the gentle wind became my guide. Tumbling along the endless expanse of black asphalt, I began to notice familiar surroundings such as the dusty sidewalks meandering between blocks and blocks of towering concrete and glass, and the oily streets as well as the stench of sewage from a nearby polluted bayou. The smell of exhaust, billowing from an endless procession of confused cars and buses seeking a destination, filled the air. Multitudes of colored lights dancing above appeared to mesmerize these great beasts on wheels. In a constant state of confusion, they would quickly dash off only to become captivated by the next set of lights swaying to and fro. Inside, their passengers, with heads protruding and fists frantically beating the air, squirmed impatiently.

Stopping long enough to view this spectacle allowed

me to ascertain where I was. I have been here before, but I remember very little. Sitting next to a curb on the corner of State St. and Confusion Avenue, the stench of a nearby garbage cluttered alley reminds me of how long it has been since my last visit. It was in this alley that I met Doc. I never found out what his real name was, he never offered and I didn't ask, but he had a distinct air of concern about him like one who made it their calling in life to help others, so I called him Doc. He found me a home at Milton's and for that I will never forget him. Several people have contributed to my welfare through the years, but Doc had shown a greater interest in tending to my needs. He did not leave me to lie in the streets wishing things were different.

As I recall that painful winter, when Doc found me a home, I cannot help but think of all those in my predicament who were forced to make a home in the streets, along the banks of bayous and streams, and under bridges. I never knew if anyone found shelter at Milton's, or places like his, but I do remember a few who arrived there the same day as I. Most of them mentioned a shoddy-looking individual who

cared for them; after further conversation, I knew it must have been Doc who came to their rescue. Doc found me in an alley, between Carla's and the Main Street Delicatessen, lying amidst garbage cans and scattered debris. I will never forget the look on Doc's weather-beaten face when his piercing blue-gray eyes spotted me lying there helpless and battered. A warm glow danced about his face as he reached down with a leathery, calloused hand and gently transferred me to the warmth of a plastic tent located to the rear of the alley. Once there, leaning two pieces of cardboard together, he made a temporary shelter.

"Another friend for Milton," he said with an air of relief, as if finding me was as beneficial to him as to as myself.

Inside the confines of his cardboard tent, I noticed several others (like me) sleeping like babies, cuddled next to one another for warmth. I took my place beside them, ever so gently, not wanting to disturb them. The next morning, bright and early, we were taken to Milton's.

As thoughts of Doc and Milton's faded into memory, a strong gust of wind catapulted me down the street. I dodged

several cars; some tried to avoid me while others tried in vain to crush me beneath their rubber shoes. The brightly colored lights began dancing above me. Like a hypnotist, they held the gaze of the great steel machines and allowed me safe passage. As I lay next to the curb, the autos regained consciousness and continued on in a stupor.

I found my way through many intersections in relatively the same manner, escaping within an inch of my life, but I was not so fortunate toward late afternoon when countless numbers of panic-stricken cars and trucks appeared as if flood gates were suddenly opened. Vehicles of all sizes and shapes spilled into the streets covering it like sheets of torrential rain. Pushed by an angry wind, I could not control my destiny, I was much too weak! I tumbled and turned, helplessly dodging everything I could! In an instant, a truck with red and blue flashing lights came bearing down upon me! It was screaming for me to get out of the way but I could not—the wind had stopped...I was stranded! My eyes transfixed on the screaming, ear-piercing sound emanating from the truck with flashing lights! In a matter of seconds it was upon me...

Feeling one with the oily asphalt, I was numb and could not move as the red and blue lights faded in the distance. Not a soul rushed to my aid, life for the countless numbers of individuals in the streets continued as if nothing of any consequence had taken place. Watching the angry siren and blue lights disappear, I lay there with the smell of dried, dusty mud in my nostrils. As more cars and trucks rumbled past, a sternfaced man in a coal black suit kicked me further into the street, out of the path their rubber shoes traveled upon, and quickly strode away mumbling to himself.

Hearing the familiar sound of a young, energetic voice I tried to call out but could not.

"Here's one Tod!" yelled a spirited young boy across the street to an eagerly awaiting companion, "As soon as the cars pass, I'll get it!"

"Be careful Jason!" his friend shouted back, "you don't want to end up like that!"

The young lad jumped into the street and scooped me up with his dirty hands. He rushed over to a grinning boy of about seven, held me up and exclaimed, "Wow, this one

got flattened like a pancake!"

"It sure did!" Tod agreed, "Hurry, let's put it with the others and get to Mr. Milton's place before it gets dark."

When I heard Milton's name an exhilarating feeling swept over me. I knew I was in caring hands, and it would be only moments before the healing process would give me another chance at life! The young boys in tattered jeans and funny shoes mounted their brightly colored two-wheeled contraptions and sped away. I lay in a wire basket, between a curved bar of bright steel, watching the cotton soft clouds against a canvas of creamy blue sky above me. I was looking forward to seeing Mr. Milton.

We arrived at Milton's rather quickly, considering this crude means of transportation; yet, it was a ride I will always remember. All the while, Tod and Jason talked of places they would search. They mentioned places where more in need of help might be found. They talked of combing the alleys and the banks of the bayous, the open fields and abandoned dwellings throughout this massive city; they talked of searching for those like me, rescuing them and

bringing them to Milton's. What a joy it would be if others would follow these young boys' example of concern and dedication, their unyielding determination and zealous efforts to help those in need.

"Good evening boys," said a bass-like voice from behind a splintered wood desk. "What do you have for me today? Kind of late for you boys to be out isn't it?, but never mind that, I can see by the looks of those sacks that you have been working hard!" he grunted as he raised his enormous frame from behind the desk.

"Yes sir, Mr. Milton, we've been out late, but look at all we've found!" Jason smiled, his bright teeth reflecting the light from the setting sun.

"Set them up on the table there, and let's see what you've got," declared Mr. Milton as the young boys hurriedly deposited me and the others upon the smooth surface of the wooden table and carefully spread us out as if we were about to be examined by a team of surgical experts. I have been through this examination before, but never with such scrutiny.

"Very good boys, not much debris; they all look

salvageable. Let's get them weighed and you can be on your way," directed Mr. Milton with an air of a seasoned professional about him.

Tod and Jason jumped off of their bicycles (as they called them) about a block away from Mr Milton's and quickly emptied their pockets. Both stared in amazement at the gleaming bits of metal in their hands reflecting the moonlight onto their ecstatic faces.

"At fifty-two cents a pound, it won't be long and we'll be rich!" exclaimed Tod. They both held out a hand and took turns slapping each other's outstretched palm in some type of symbolic gesture.

As they rode off into the darkness, the reflectors on their bicycles danced in the moonlight confirming Tod and Jason's sense of accomplishment. I knew I would miss them

LOVE ON THE HALF SHELL

Alice Wolke

His eyes followed her graceful, catlike movements. Yes, there was definitely something electric between them. She felt it too, he knew, just from the way her eyes lit up. And she'd smiled at him with that beautiful mouth...if they had kids, they would all have perfect teeth, her teeth. He wondered if a brown-eyed man could father children with eyes as blue as hers.

He knew he could take her away from this life, and bring her into his. Sweep her off her feet, and carry her to a mountain cabin, a paradise of two people. How perfect their life would be! With such beauty surrounding him, he could finally write his book. And when that fabulous novel was published, they'd come down from their mountain hideaway and bathe in the rays of his success.

And then he saw it, on the third finger of her left hand. He winced as the full force of her betrayal plucked out his heart. How could she do this to him? He'd taken her from this thankless life and treated her like a queen! He caught her eye, and she grinned guiltily. Oh, sure, now she comes, begging forgiveness, mincing her way across the floor.

"Are you ready to order, sir?"

Ignoring her, he lit a cigarette and stared out into the restaurant.

TERESA SANTOS'S STORY

Hemina Patel

The final bell of Sutton Middle School released the students. They stampeded out and swarmed in all directions. About ten minutes later, Theresa walked out. She had been held back by Mrs. Lockett, her history teacher, who had insisted upon having a conference about her grades. Who cares about grades when you've got other problems?, Theresa questioned herself.

She reluctantly started home. She knew what would be waiting there for her. Her mother would yell at her for being late, then say she was ungrateful, stupid, and lazy. Mrs. Santos never listened to her daughter's excuses and if she did, Mrs. Santos thought that they were lies. So Theresa would not say anything.

Mrs. Santos had started keeping tabs on her. Theresa had to tell her mother if she was going anywhere, even if she was going to the neighbor's house. She knew that her mother listened in on her phone calls. Theresa thought that she would do just what Sharon, her best friend, had done. Sharon had slashed both of her wrists.

Theresa walked onto the driveway of her house and

saw her father's blue Toyota. She smiled as she picked up the *Santo Domingo Chronicle*. This was one of the rare days her father was home. Gino Santos was a traveling salesman and, unfortunately, away from home most of the time.

Theresa opened the door and heard shouting coming from the kitchen. Her smile faded as quickly as it had appeared. Her parents were fighting, again. She quickly shut the door and sneaked a look in the kitchen. Her father's face looked scarlet with anger.

"You never keep an eye on Theresa!" Mr. Santos was shouting.

"I am keeping an eye on her, but she's always sneaking around!" Mrs. Santos said defensively.

"Well, where's Theresa right now?" he asked.

She replied, "I don't know and I don't care. Why aren't you here more often to see that Theresa comes home on time?"

Theresa wanted to scream. Instead, she went to her room and quietly closed the door. She could still hear the faint sound of her parents arguing. She stood in the middle

of her room and looked around. She saw the portrait of Shawn Carrice on the wall. She had spent hours laboring over it. Shawn was in her math class. He and Theresa had become fast friends. She was hoping that Shawn would ask her out, but he had once told her that he thought of her only as a friend. She dived onto her bed, and buried her head under the pillow so her parent's wouldn't hear her crying.

After a while, the tears dried away and her parents had stopped arguing. Silence reigned the house. She went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face. She didn't want her mother to see her tear-streaked face. She looked in the mirror to see if she needed any Visine. Theresa gasped as she saw her reflection. Her thick black hair was matted. Her wide, ebony-colored eyes were swollen and red. She needed Visine all right.

She opened the cabinet looking for a brush. There she spied her father's heart medicine. The thought of suicide flashed across her mind. Why not?, Theresa thought. She had every reason to: her parents would stop fighting if she weren't there, Shawn didn't think she was pretty enough to like, and

Mrs. Lockett wouldn't have to worry about her grades.

She took the large bottle of medicine and opened it; it was about three-fourths full with dark red capsules. She stared down into the bottle at the capsules and wondered whether there would be enough to do the job. She thought about taking the medicine right away, but decided against the idea. Soon, her mother would be calling her for dinner. The medicine wouldn't have time to take effect before she was discovered. So she brushed her hair and put Visine in her blood-shot eyes.

Theresa went back into her bedroom and lay down on the bed. Her mother was right; she had been sneaking around. Her mother offered her no privacy. A 14-year-old girl has to have some secrets from her mother. She did not know why her mother was always on her back. Maybe she thought Theresa was on drugs or something.

Theresa heard her mother call her for dinner. This would be the last time, she thought. A peculiar smile appeared on her face. She took a deep breath and walked towards the kitchen where she started to set the table. Her mother brought

out a pot of spaghetti. Theresa wanted to gag. They always seemed to be eating spaghetti. Dinner was a morose affair.

Neither of her parents had said a word to her since she had arrived home. Theresa was sure they resented her presence at the table. The meal ended, and Theresa cleared the table. Her mother started washing the dishes while her father switched on the television.

Theresa went back into her bedroom and closed the door. She put a glass of water down on the table adjacent to her bed, found the bottle of capsules, and unscrewed the child-proof cap. She had read somewhere that if you swallow too many pills at once, it makes you throw up. So she took one capsule about every five minutes. Soon she was feeling drowsy, but she relentlessly forced herself to swallow the final three capsules. She could feel her arms and legs relax. Suddenly, her knees buckled beneath her and she sprawled onto the bed. Her breathing became faint. Soon there wasn't any breathing at all.

The next morning, Mrs. Santos found her daughter dead. Theresa's face was pale and her body ice cold.

IT'LL BE DIFFERENT

Christine Higgins

Tammy and Monica enjoyed the warm, soothing sun of the first day of Spring as they strolled through the downtown park. It was like newfound freedom to be outside without a coat.

"Lunch in the park was a great idea. I needed to get out of the office," said Tammy.

"Well, I needed to get away from the smell of the smoke. I couldn't breathe in there. The grass smells so much better, and I could listen to these honking horns all day if it would keep me away from the smoke," said Monica.

The women walked past a pond, circled a statue, and started across a courtyard. They continued soaking up the warmth and talking incessantly.

As they came upon a row of benches, Tammy began another story, "On the sailing trip...."

But those were the last words Monica heard her friends say. Monica could see that Tammy was still speaking, but all she could hear was the sound of feet running up behind her.

Darkness was everywhere, and a cold mist hung over the ground like a blanket of droplets as Monica walked through the grass. What is that noise behind me, she thought to herself.

All Monica could see over her shoulder was a man running up behind her in the darkness. He drew closer and closer, coming faster and faster. Monica wanted to run away, but her legs would not move. Her breath quickened as she realized he was going to catch her. In the darkness of 2:00 a.m., she was alone. Again.

Every step grew louder and louder until each footfall thundered in her head. Monica's heart raced as she felt her body tensing. Her arms and legs stiffened as she braced herself. She knew he was about to deliver his blow to her back, shoulders, and head. He's going to knock me down again, she thought.

Monica clenched her fists so tightly that her fingernails felt like knives cutting the skin of her palms. The pain angered her. She felt that there was nowhere to go, there

was no one to help her, and her only weapon against him was her fear.

As the sweat ran down her back and forehead, Monica screamed to herself, It can't happen again He's not going to get me to the trees this time.

I'll protect myself. It's going to be different, she thought.

Monica forced her left foot forward, dropped her purse, spun around to meet his approach, and raised her arms to defend herself. Through the darkness she could barely see his face, but she recognized him I'm ready this time, she thought.

Out of the darkness and into the bright sun light, a 10-year-old boy ran past her and up to his mother. "Look, Mom. I found a dollar over there," he said as he smiled up at his mother.

Cars honked, people talked, birds chirped, and all these sounds tore at Monica's ears. She thought her pounding heart and breathing had stopped. Slowly the knife-like fingernails were extracted from her palms. Monica stood

motionless as the sun warmed the bones that seconds before had been so cold in the midnight mist. The sun poured down on a courtyard full of people enjoying a pleasant outing, completely oblivious to the midnight trauma Monica had just experienced alone in front of them.

Monica picked up her purse with her left hand and raised her right hand to wipe the sweat that poured down her face.

"Monica, are you OK?" asked Tammy. "What's the matter?"

"I'm fine," Monica said. She took a deep breath and squelched the tears that were fighting to come out. "It's time to get back," Monica said, quickly. "I have a lot of work to catch up on."

As the two quickly walked back to the office in silence, Monica remembered her last midnight trauma. Each became more vivid, lasting longer and longer. Pretty soon, she thought, I'll see his face clearly Then I'll be able to find him.

Next time. Then, it'll be different.

CONFESSIONS OF A MIDDLE-AGED STUDENT

Barbara Quattro Nelson

A few weeks ago a lady in my office celebrated her fortieth birthday. There was the usual assortment of “over the hill” and “getting close to retirement” comments which she received with grace and humor. Right in the middle of the festivities a horrible thought struck me: since I passed my fortieth birthday several years ago, I must be MIDDLE AGED!

Denial was my first reaction. I’m still young, I told myself. But, unlike me, the young people in the group were wolfing down cake with wild abandon, feeling no need to go to the gym and sweat for hours to pay for cake sins. And, unlike me, they weren’t wearing long jackets, chosen to hide past cake transgressions. I could feel the beginning of an Olympic-class depression.

Needing someone to talk to, I called a friend who could be counted on to counsel me and prop up my self-esteem. She confirmed the fact that I am still young, because she is middle aged. She is 62 and believes that “elderly” might possibly apply to someone in their eighties.

I decided to do an in-depth study of the subject so

that I will be prepared to handle the situation when it happens. The term “aging gracefully” came to mind. My in-depth research (which consisted of talking to friends, reading *Lear*, hanging out in bars, and suffering through aerobic classes) revealed that there are definite perceptions and symptoms of middle age.

It didn’t take a rocket scientist to deduce that our culture places a high value on youth or the appearance of youth, especially for females. Men become distinguished; women get old. Personal ads placed in newspapers request female respondents between the ages of 23 and 35 — no matter how old the man placing the ad might be.

At work, I talked to a 30 year old about school and told him I will be nearly 50 when I complete my degree. He was absolutely shocked, exclaiming, “Then why are you doing this?” Was his reaction typical? It seemed to indicate that he thought people my age couldn’t possibly have any aspirations and should pick one- (a) be put in homes, (b) have lobotomies, or (c) be banned from institutions of higher learning. (Since college algebra just about did me in, I’ll vote

for (c).

My research also revealed that the mental/emotional problems of middle age are compounded by the body's rebellion. It doesn't matter if you were once on good terms with your body. Ingrate that it is, now the body just doesn't want to cooperate. Response time, to just about everything, is off by a shade or two. Aches and pains appear more frequently. Blood pressure readings and cholesterol counts are important numbers in your life. The memory misbehaves; lists (if you can find them) are essential. The possibilities of Retin-A, liposuction, hair transplants and estrogen are discussed with the anticipation of the Second Coming. Bifocals are now a fashion statement and every scale in town is wrong.

Middle age is one of life's transition stages, and the term "the middle-age crazies" is often true. Children leave home; parents, especially mothers, feel unwanted and useless—the empty-nest syndrome. Life-styles are questioned and re-evaluated. Those with perfectly good jobs suddenly decide they hate the way they make a living. They seek career changes, a means of rejuvenation. Divorces are common. Many middle-aged men pick out their next wife from the aisles of Toys-R-Us. If a woman is single, desperation may

set in; she'll consider marrying anyone short of Atilla the Hun. Her biological clock begins to sound like Big Ben.

Some middle agers try to accept it. Parents of grown children begin dropping not-so-subtle hints about grandchildren. Those with grandchildren carry bags full of pictures to show strangers. They may wear little gold charms that say, "World's Best Grandma," or "World's Best Grandpa." They actually wear them around their necks and in public, no less.

Still trying to shake my depression, I reasoned that there must be some advantages to being middle aged. Even the framers of the Constitution recognized some advantages of age when they decreed that to run for president a man had to be at least 35 years old.

So, you ask, what are the advantages? Well, for one thing, the middle-aged population is a major cog in the economy. They do, after all, buy all those ugly recliners. And many middle-aged men no longer have to worry about the part in their hair. Middle-aged women can now safely regard themselves as mysterious. And true middle agers no longer have to know or care about the difference between models and makes of cars.

A WHALE OF A TALE

Judy J. Kennell

It was the last day of our Christmas vacation in Maui. God, I didn't want to go home. We had enjoyed three wonderful weeks that just seemed to evaporate away. Maui was always hard to leave; I feared that when I returned it would be changed and spoiled by development. Maui is rich with the abundant beauty of lush green mountains, sapphire blue waters, black lava cliffs, and crystal-clear skies. Amongst all this beauty, it is still possible to find a deserted, white sand beach to quench your senses, enjoy solitude, and learn about life in and around you. On this particular day, I did learn about life; I looked death in its huge eyes.

I decided to make the most of this last day. I headed to the beach to find my daughter, my adventurous companion. We shared a love of the ocean and all the water sports associated with it. Allison was there on the beach with a group of people who were craning their necks and pointing toward the sea. This was not an unusual sight during the winter months, for this is when the Humpback whales migrate from the coast of Alaska to the warm waters of Maui to bear their young

"Did you see a whale?" I asked upon joining the group.

"No!" the group responded in unison, sounding disappointed.

"I haven't seen a whale all season," added a man wearing enough camera equipment that he could qualify for a *Life Magazine* photographer.

"I'm afraid they are becoming extinct. I guess all the news you see on television about whales getting lost and dying because of our endangering environment is true."

"It really is sad," I added not wanting to think about anything other than enjoying our last day.

"Let's get a board and paddle around the bay," I suggested while pulling Allison toward the rental shack.

We rented our equipment: an oar and a board which resembled a surfboard but had straps on the top front and an indentation for your seat toward the middle; you sit on it and use your oar as you would in a canoe. As we paddled across the bay toward the open ocean, it became obvious that this was a rare day indeed; the ocean was as calm and smooth as glass. A mirror of the sky. Not the slightest breath of wind

caused an occasional ripple. Usually these waters are churning with waves of six to ten feet, concealing fast moving currents of the treacherously deep water.

Each stroke of our oars seemed to send us gliding miles across this emerald-green sky. It was heaven, and seemed to beckon us further and further out to sea. It seemed as though we were somewhere mystical, not of this earth and not of these waters. The shoreline and the people on the beach disappeared. We stopped our rowing and dangled our legs over the sides of our boards.

There was no sound, only an eerie silence.

I turned to Allison and spoke in a whisper, "I wish we would see a whale."

At that precise moment, as if God himself heard me ask, this enormous black creature came out of the water. My body jerked back. I could not utter a sound. I felt my heart race. He was no more than one whale length away. His eye was as large as my head and I could see it move as he focused on one of us and then the other. He was still. The only movement was the water running off his back. His body

shimmered in the sunlight. But as he dried, I could see his flesh was cracked and marred, as though he had seen many years of life and the turmoils of survival. I felt I could sense his thoughts, and they were about us.

The three of us drifted motionless in the ocean for what seemed like hours. Time had stopped. Everything was in slow motion, yet my mind raced with fear. I wanted to run, but where? We were in his world with no way out. With these thoughts in my mind, he slid back underwater, and my fears accelerated. It was far worse not being able to see him. We started screaming. Our screams just seemed to bring him back to the surface, closer to us.

He studied us again, but this time I felt it was different. In a discerning way, out of the silence, he blew through his blowhole a spray of water that seemed to reach endlessly toward the sky. I will never forget, for the rest of my life, the sound this made. It echoed on the glass-like surface of the water, reverberating endlessly, until the sound was magnified like that of one hundred elephants roaring in harmonic song. Hearing took on a new dimension; I was hearing not only with

the ears but with every nerve of my body as though I were touching this thundering sound.

At that moment, my fears vanished. I had a calm feeling. I sensed a knowing and sharing with this giant creature. I didn't understand my feelings, but my lack of understanding at the time didn't seem to matter. All I can remember is that I really wanted to be right where I was, sharing his world. He dived underwater and resurfaced, but this time far away from us and on his way toward Molokai.

DADDY'S GIRL

Virginia E. Staat

She was just a down-right cutie. There's no other word for it. She lit up that office the minute she came in, checking it all out, standing on tip-toe to see up on the counter, giving the post card stand a whirl. Made my desk her own, sneaking a pencil and twiddling the cord to the phone, all in seconds. Smiling like a pansy in a bottle, she was decorated in a freshly pressed cotton dress with the tiniest blue cornflowers and an eyelet pinafore. Her bright, little face had one dimple and that sideways glance that let you know her Momma had her hands full. But she had this grin and giggle that would just melt you. I told her how pretty her new dress was. She bent one leg up like a little prima ballerina in saddle oxfords, held out her arms and twirled around for full view. "My Momma made it." She grinned that cock-eyed grin, eyes big, almost blue, so wide — absolutely enormous eyes, not quite blonde hair, bobbed. Probably couldn't sit still long enough for her Momma to fix it.

Her dad was completely opposite, a tall, dark man. Wavy black hair, eyes greener, much darker than hers. He was sullen and edgy; kept looking back behind his shoulder

like someone was hot on his tail. I never saw him without those Camel cigarettes. First thing you smelled about him. No ring. Paid for two nights' stay. He was handsome, no doubt, but with a tight, drawn face, hard-boned and hawkish, instantly snappish. Drove a maroon Chevy, an old one. He caught that baby mid-spin and told her, "Enough!" and to sit and shut-up. I made the mistake of offering her a lollipop. He glared at me and barked at her, "Not a word!"

It was amazing, the transformation, like a fancy, sugar Easter-egg with water thrown on it; the peep hole ruined. A whipped pup couldn't have looked so fallen. I swear, even the dress went limp. Those wide eyes turned gray and she slid to his side, running a tiny finger up and down the groove in the paneling. Two fingers on the other hand in her mouth which trembled just the tiniest bit. He left her a second to get the number of his tags off the car, mumbling curses under his breath about filling out his life's history for a damned room. I asked her where her Momma was. She looked over her hurt and whispered that she was home waiting for her. "Wisht Momma was here," was all the more

she could manage before he traipsed back in.

Bill held out the key, and was pointing his pudgy, grease-stained finger at the room when she saddled back up to my desk. "Do your closets have doors?" she asked real timid-like. "Of course they do, Sweetie," I said, and at that second her father tore the keys from Bill's hand, grabbed her by the arm, yanked her off her feet and out the door, scolding about her and her mouth and, "You know what's coming if you don't watch it."

It was this room. Bill used to call it the "corner suite." The typical simple double, the kind that old folks and strapped Gypsies use, just shy of a dump and not much better than the "Y," clean john and an almost color T.V., if you fiddled with the buttons long enough. They had the lights out in an hour, and he was up and gone by 7.30 the next morning. Rosy went to clean the room, but the baby wouldn't let her in, said her daddy told her he didn't want it cleaned. She only cracked the door, and Rosy being Rosy didn't waste her time trying to convince the child otherwise. I guess it was about one o'clock when she made the first call. "What time is it?"

she whispered into the phone. "It's one," I said. "When will it be 3:30?" she asked. "Another two and a half hours, Sweetheart," I said. She sighed a thanks and hung up.

By 3:30 she had called no less than seven times. Probably nothing but soaps on the television. "Just three or four more T.V. programs," I said, hearing it blare in the background. I figured she was hungry, but when I offered something, she insisted no. I even offered her a clock, but she couldn't tell time. He promised her he'd be back by 3:30, I got that much out of her. But it was obvious she was more scared of him than she was of being by herself.

I went up at five to give her some coke, peanuts, and a Snickers bar. I was by myself all day so I couldn't go for a burger. She wasn't going to let me in, said her "Daddy'd kill" her. I could see she only had his T-shirt on, hanging off one pale, little shoulder, it was so big. She squinted from the glare of the setting sun, her tiny fingers clamped across the door as if the next big wind would blow the whole place away. I left the bottle opened on the step with the Snickers, as if I were feeding a wild chipmunk, and promised her I'd wait for the

empty so he'd never know. It was gone in a second. In just about as much time, she put all the empties back, including the wrapper to the candy bar. I told her to brush her teeth. Didn't want him to smell the peanuts.

By 8:15 she had called thirty-one times. It was getting dark, and you could hear her little voice crack when she talked. I offered to go to her room or stay on the line and talk with her, but she wouldn't have it. Said he may find out. My heart just went out to the poor little thing. Told her I was keeping an eye on her and wouldn't let anything happen. I asked her at 8:30 if she knew how I could get in touch with her Momma. She whimpered that she didn't know "where my Momma is" "Does Daddy live with you and Momma?" I asked. "No, they're 'vorded. Daddy comes to get me sometimes" I don't know, maybe he'd kidnapped her to get even or something.

Bill was off work by then, and while I told him what was happening, you could see that Irish temper of his climb, flushed up past the ears. We couldn't decide what to do — just leave her in there or go get her and God knows what

her Daddy'd do if he found out. Wondering if he'd abandoned the little waif. At least we could feed the starving creature. About that time, a car wheeled in, and he jumped out. I was on the phone with her and told her quickly it was her Daddy and hung up.

Bill handled it like a beer-full ex-fighter pulling a punch. Told him he wasn't fit for a father leaving that baby by herself, and that it'd cost him an extra \$7.75 for the calls because it was 25¢ for every call, and he could've paid for a sitter with that. Maybe that'd teach him a lesson. Her daddy was stiff and galled, said it was more than the room, which it wasn't. Said he'd raise her any damned way he pleased, and it was none of our damned business. He had this look in his eye. Made you chill. Black and hot like a sultry night with the dogs tight on their chains. Threw eight bucks at Bill, not blinking, and stomped out and up those stairs. Never did find out what he came in the office for in the first place. Watching him slam that door, I knew deep in my heart that that poor baby was going to pay for our stupidity. God, we never should have said a word to him.

I slept in Number 29, the room next door to theirs, that night, with Bill minding the late-comers, both hoping that I'd hear a ruckus so I could call the police. I'd talked to Jer — you know he was a deputy sheriff before Loretta and he started the restaurant. Jer said there had to be “justifiable cause” or some such nonsense, wouldn't come out to throw him in jail anyway. Laws to protect the innocent? At any rate, he must have done all the screaming and hitting before I got over there, 'cause it was dead silent. Maybe he never touched her at all. I just don't know. All I heard was the closet door rumble back and forth a couple of times across the rollers, and the baby sobbing, muffled-like.

He left her again around midnight. I heard him. Lord knows these walls aren't as thick as they should be. He woofed out something about the floor and snakes and midnight, his voice raw. That she was gonna have to deal with IT, and she damned well better still be in that bed when he came back. Slammed the door and left her. God, you could hardly make out any of what she said back to him. She was crying so hard, a hiccoughing terror I called Bill because I couldn't see if the

bastard had left the motel. Bill said he was just leaning against the car having a cigarette and a bottle. Tried to call her, but he'd taken the phone out. Not yanked from the wall; no, he was smart. I could've made charges against him for that. Found the phone the next day on her bed, the cord all wound over one side. So I knocked hard on the wall and talked as loud as I dared — promised her I would stay in the next room and if she needed me to just yell out. Bill flashed the lights when he started back up the stairs so I'd know to quit talking. “Daddy— don't,” was all she said when he came in. But no whacking, nothing more than crying. Just the toilet swooshed. I was leaning against the adjoining wall, my heart wrenching, dizzy from holding my breath until the next of her sobs.

There was silence the rest of the night, except only once when she inhaled like the wind had been sucked from her tiny lungs and screamed out loud. Goblins in the dark; the miseries like my Stevie use to have. Don't take no genius, any Momma has heard from the demons living in children's heads when lights are dim and their universe is whittled down

to a narrow bed with cold edges and blackness I prayed I could hold her, smother her in angel wings, tell her that ole' witch wasn't here — didn't live in my motel because big red-faced Bill had run her out long ago for Stevie. Me knowing she braved those demons alone without even a teddy bear for protection. I wanted to tell her to cup her hands close to her ears to hear the ocean and dream of the sun and beaches and chocolate-covered frozen bananas. But sheer evil was waiting for her in deep, black closet caverns of eyes with wicked, sticky hands that reached, crawling up the sides of the bed, chasing her through those never-ending tunnels with pits and snakes, and all cheered on by the devil himself taken form as Daddy.

I don't know that I slept or dreamt that night, leaning upright against that wall. The cowboy prints hanging over the bed seemed to turn into those ghost riders in the song With hot, steamy breath they heaved and thundered, all converging and charging towards the next room I couldn't stop them, though I swear I tried. The knotty-pine paneling was pocket-sized black holes that sucked in babies and spun them off to

wretched hellions in marqon contrivances with unspeakable intentions. I grabbed her by the ankles, her flowery dress flying over her head so I couldn't see her horror, baring little white cotton panties with an eyelet ruffle The vacuum pulled my arms long, aching and rubbery until I lost her into the neighboring hell-hole. Would a brighter bulb on the porch cause more monstrous shadows? I wrestled with redecorating, plowing down every single thing that could be imagined in the dark I called Bill and whispered in the dark, rambling, an aversion to being alone without at least a wire attached to the slayer of former dragons

Next morning, I was down with Bill by six, calling Zack Turner to see if he could think of anything we could do to stop him. Nothing. The lights came on in their room around 6:30. Not much later, he popped down those stairs with her tossed over his shoulder like a Raggedy Ann. Just chunked her head-first into the front seat, rough, but it was clear he didn't bump her. Went back up for their things after that. He stopped to drop off the key, parking sideways and close to the door so we could get a good look Said really

nasty, "See, you nosy busy-body, she's just dandy," and tossed the keys on the counter. She had her little head pressed against the window on the passenger's side, hair matted and wet, fingering a design on the foggy glass. Those eyes were so wide and bare. She never even looked at me — at least our eyes never connected.

Cleaning the room after they left, I found his hobbled-up phantoms. He took this pillow and plumped it up on the shelf, then hung the extra blanket over the hanger below. There were other hangers all bent out of shape; maybe he put gloves on them to look like hands, I don't know. Everything that could be lumped and bumped, wet towels, blankets, all tossed around and on her bed. Found this sketch of a horrible-looking ogre crumpled in the trash along with ashes, butts and an empty Wild Turkey bottle. Battered by ghosts in the night. Zack said there wasn't a thing we could do, no real proof Don't seem right

I think of that child nearly every day. Wondering what that horrible, warped man did to her, wondering if her Momma ever got her back. He'll go to hell God knows what

demons will follow her. Don't take a psychiatrist to know the trouble she'll have. And then, sometimes I think maybe a psychiatrist could tell me a thing or two, too. Like what's so symbolic about making sure the end of the toilet paper is folded into a point like they do in those fancy hotels? Or why folks steal soap and towels, but not pillows? Or why there's no magic or miracles anymore, for that matter? If there were, there ought to be a way you could automatically make sure that every closet door around the world is closed, say at eight every evening. I check and close every single closet here — anything to keep from hearing that baby cry out in the night

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