Kudzu

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Off the Vine

Steven W. Jarvis

The first signs of spring are appearing in the Ozarks. It has been a long, dreary winter this year. Record amounts of snowfall, the bitterest cold I remember in years — it was a long tough one. I won't bore you with law school stories. Let it suffice to say that the rumors and horror stories are true, completely true. But, spring approacheth. Even with the heavy weather that this part of the country is famous for—tornadoes and squall lines of ugly thunderstorms rolling out of the Red River valley between Texas and Oklahoma and across Arkansas—some Spring will be welcome. I'm still waiting on the first jonquils, my personal harbinger of Spring.

I have been depending on Spring arriving more or less on time this week, relying on faith, I suppose. Faith seems a recurring theme in this issue *Kudzu* also. When chosing stories for this issue, I was drawn to those stories that explored the wonders —both glad and dark— of faith and what happens when faith is challenged. In particular this issue, I was struck by Wendy Cholbi's contemporary retelling in "The Gift" of one of my favorite short stories, James Joyce's "Araby." Just as in Joyce's version of over fifty years ago, Cholbi's story explores that painful time when the veil is lifted for the first time. Susan Adkins' non-fiction story about a pilgrimage in Pakistan challenges as it draws you into its second-person narrative (always a tricky way to present a subject, but particularly illuminating here). And, as he did for politics in "The Politics of Cyncism and the Cultural Elite," my good friend Blake Wilson gives us his take on what happens when accepted belief runs up against something powerful and unexpected. "Death Visits the Yogi" (literary reference #2 for this issue—though in title only) is a powerful piece. If he keeps up his writing schedule, Blake's essays are set to be a fixture of *Kudzu.* Take heed; you'll be able to say you remember him when.

Some of the work here may not seem to be about faith at all to many of you (John Sheirer's haiku "Basketball Images," for example), but they are.

Trust me.

Wheat Notes

James E. "Wheatbread" Martin

I'm always happy when Steve Jarvis forwards email from readers to me. We've received some very encouraging comments from readers in recent months. It's that sort of praise that make the time that we spend working on this magazine worthwhile. Please keep the comments coming. Tell us what you like and which stories, poems, or essays you've enjoyed the most. We're happy here at Kudzu that this is the first issue of our second year of publication. Most magazines (paper or otherwise) don't make it this far and many that do make it go no further. We hope to be here years from now, and with the growing readership and increasing number of quality submissions we are receiving, I see no reason why we won't be. We're also happy that the magazine has remained true to its original goal: to bring quality writing together on the internet in a format that makes the best of both traditional print literary magazines and the obvious advantages of the World Wide Web. Jarvis keeps improving the web pages and the design (the new design for 1996 is elegant and beautiful), but the most important element of any literary magazine is the literature in it. We're happy that the content is as solid as ever.

For that, I'd like to extend my personal thanks to the contributors featured here this month, to the others who submitted their work, and to you for returning again and again to read it. It is important to note that this is the first issue featuring the editing talents of the latest member of the Kudzu staff, James Katowich, my friend and fellow office mate here at the University of Arkansas, where he is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing. You can read some of his fiction and poetry in Kudzu 95/2. I'm also happy to mention that Blake Wilson is back on our staff as Editor-at-Large (though I'm still not sure exactly what that title is supposed to signify). [It basically signifies his position as Spiritual Advisor and Frequent Contributor. -ed.]

Bobby, Pete, and I

David Appell

Bobby walked into our dorm room an hour after my parents had left, set his suitcase on the other bed and asked if I wanted to go out for a beer. "I know a place that doesn't ID," he said, like he'd been in this small-college town for years. Even then it seemed he should have been taller, with brown hair almost black, with dark eyes and a handsome face. We walked to Tavoli's, where he said hi to some people sitting in the corner then asked the bartender for two beers and the darts.

"Loser buys the next round," he said, smiling at me, a smile that changed the character of the room, that said the world was OK, something simple and clear that a person could draw on when he needed it later. It is the last thing about him I will have forgotten.

Two hours later I bought my fourth round, and after he beat me again we walked back to campus along Kiser Street, the air already cool at night, the trees dark and calm, and we said only a little, because we had just got here and had just met and there would be plenty of time.

The next day he came back to the room, someone coming in behind him, tall and thin, with a brown beard full of loose curls. "This is Pete," Bobby said. "He's in my calculus class."

I shook his hand, dirty up to the edge of his sleeve.

"He's looking for a place to sleep," Bobby went on. "He's been in a tent the last couple days, waiting for a spot to open up but it's not happening and I thought we could help out, let him move in for awhile."

"Well, OK," I said. "I mean, I guess it's OK."

"Don't worry," Bobby said, smiling. "It'll be great."

We pushed some furniture around, and Pete slept on the floor in front of Bobby's desk. He'd sit on his bag

late at night with his guitar, playing one song after the other, quietly but so we could still hear, like a radio, and if Bobby or I asked for a certain song Pete knew it every time, his fingers finding their way around in the dark.

A couple of weeks later our Resident Assistant found out and said sorry but it wasn't allowed, and Pete was going to have to leave. "No way," Bobby said, but an administrator in a pink suit and white heels came by the next day with a couple of rent-a-cops, and they waited while Pete got his backpack and guitar.

If Bobby or I asked for a certain song, Pete knew it every time, his fingers finding their way around in the dark.

Bobby pulled his suitcase out from under his bed. "I'm going too, then," he said all of a sudden, and then he stopped and looked right at me and waited until I said OK, I'd go too. We slept in a park that night, Pete playing until his fingers hurt from the cold, and in the morning we shook the dew off ourselves and went to find a place to live.

It was the second floor of a rundown house, the kind landlords get away with renting to students, but we repapered the walls, made it livable. We were there for three and a half years, falling for the same girls, making jokes only we understood, drinking on the back porch roof. Bobby fell off during our second year and broke his arm and Pete and I took turns taking his notes in class, shared typing the term papers he'd dictate to us, manic and giddy late at night. A year later when Andrea told me it was over and I slapped away the beer Pete held out for me, he knelt on the floor and wiped it up, and with Bobby watching stood back up and said, quietly but firmly, "Just remember, not all dogs run in the same pack, but those that do, run 'til they drop." As he was walking away, he turned and said, "And do me a favor, huh?" He held up the empty bottle. "Would you let me know when you're ready for one of these?" That was how it went. We were always there for one another. We were tight. We were insepa-

rable.

When Bobby proposed to Diana at the beginning of our last year, he asked both Pete and me to be the best men the following summer. "I'll find a way to work it out," he said, and we believed him.

It was only the first thing to grab at us that year, to begin pulling us steadily forward. In spring we rented a condo in the mountains, something we'd been saving for, a week of late-season skiing during our last break together. For four days we rushed breakneck down the sun-drenched slopes, over the patches of ice instead of around them, ignoring everything else that tugged at us but the pull to the bottom of the hill.

On our last day Bobby suggested that we ski cross country along the back side of the mountain. It was another warm day, Bobby in the lead, and after an hour the snow suddenly gave way beneath our skis. We started downhill, on top of the avalanche at first, but quickly sinking down inside it, the snow coming up over my skis, then grabbing my pole, pulling it around behind me, twisting my wrist strapped to the pole's end. A moment later the blue sky disappeared and I was in the snow's current, nothing but white around me, the snow bending my pole and arm up over my other shoulder, like a long rotor, thin crystals of ice scraping across my face, my ankle pulled behind me towards my head. I tumbled like this, newly aware, taken down and down, until everything stopped and I remembered to breathe, and felt the cold snow slide into my throat and stop.

Bobby had been swept ahead of me and crushed to death against a boulder. Pete had been able to swim to the surface, but came up to find only the roar of the echo. I lay there under seven feet of snow, my right arm behind my neck, the elbow touching my left shoulder, listening to Pete scrambling above, yelling, the dense snow bringing his words down to me, one after the other. Pete dug for an hour, scratching until his hands were numb, then went for help. It wasn't until the next day that they found my body, face purple, broken bones frozen into oblique angles, my throat long-since clogged shut, tight with snow and ice.

Diana fainted at our funeral. At the eulogy Pete stood silently at the pulpit, tears falling down across his cheeks, a small scrap of paper in his hands, until someone stepped

up and helped him away and he went back to live alone in the apartment we had worked so hard to fix. He stopped going to classes, stopped shaving. He kept the blinds drawn and stayed inside, and he looked so haggard that when Diana came for some of Bobby's things he frightened her. They began talking, and ended up holding one other until late. She came back the next evening and they did it again. On the third night they made love, hard and fast, a quick respite from the thick feelings of numbness, but the next morning Pete raised up the blinds. He always fell hard, and Bobby and I would always pick him back up and spend a week or two dusting him off.

He kept the blinds drawn and stayed inside, and he looked so haggard that when Diana came for some of Bobby's things he frightened her.

Three weeks later they were on the couch in the afternoon when he looked straight at her, smiled, and said, "Let's get married."

She smiled back and said, "Don't be silly, Peter."

"I'm not being silly. Let's get married."

Diana moved her head back and looked at him. "Pete, come on. I can't marry you."

"Why not?" he said.

She laughed, nervously. "What do you mean 'why not?'"

"I mean, 'Why not?'"

They let go of one another and sat up. "Because of Bobby, that's why not."

"But Bobby's not here."

"I know that. But… "

"It's what he would have wanted." Diana stood up.

Pete watched her and then said, "I just thought… "

Diana paused, then said, "Pete, listen. This is hard for me too. I miss them. I can't stop thinking about how much I miss them. And I know you miss them too. I like you a lot, and you're really helping me deal with this. I don't know what I would have done without you. I don't know, maybe I shouldn't be here, but it just seemed… "

Her voice tailed off. "I don't know, maybe it was wrong."

"But I thought all of this meant something… "

"Pete, it does. It means a lot." She leaned back against the arm of the couch, away from him. "But I'm just not over Bobby yet. It's going to take a lot of time. I thought you understood that."

"Sure," he said.

"I'm sorry. I really am."

Diana picked her clothes off the floor and went back to the bathroom. Pete sat on the couch, his stomach beginning to knot up. The sun was beginning to set when she returned.

"Pete," she said, "I don't think I should stay here tonight."

He looked up at her and said, "Please don't leave."

"Peter, I'm sorry."

When the door closed something scraped across the floor, long, thin branches going back to the dark corners from where they had come. Pete stared out the window while the room darkened and the tears dried on his cheeks.

He sat still for hours. After midnight he rose and came back with a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of pills. Over the next few minutes he emptied both, opened the windows wide, then stretched out on the couch. The night air was chilly, and he reached for his guitar, picked at a string, remembering how he would play in the dark, how his fingers hurt the night we slept in the park. The memories mixed with his drowsiness as he drifted away. It must be like swimming in an avalanche, he thought to himself, only slower and softer and without the panic. The pain's going away now. They must be around here somewhere. I'll see the blue sky again soon and they'll stand up and we'll all laugh and brush the snow off each other and say wasn't that close. Then we'll push off and race down the hill and laugh out loud at the danger. And the next day we'll go up and do it again…

Like I said, we were inseparable.

Not Time's Fool

Colin Morton

"When forty winters shall beseige thy brow
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field"
–William Shakespeare

1

At forty, you're beautiful. Your child's
callow face is no more than a sketch
life will fill in, in good time;
but you're the portrait now, posed on a hill
amid ripening fields. That you have lived
is clear, but your blood is hot for more,
for the unfulfilled
ambitions, lusts, plans you shelved awhile
but—surprised?—did not forget. Look—
their traces remain, you can't erase them
if you try. And would you? You want
and, wanting, place yourself in the foreground
of a landscape overgrown with shadows
only your brush stroke can define.

2

You know every crop, each fruit has its brief
mellow season. Like Cezanne, you
study colour, light and shade, the balance
of ripeness and decay. Your canvas
glows; the sky for an hour past sunset
strives to reflect that earthly grace
in vain. Stars burn long, but with a cold
hard light; your place is not among them.
All flesh is grass—you laughed at that once.
But in the waning light look back
to your own face in the mirror—those lines
that shadows darken round your eyes. You know
one morning you will wake, look out
and see first frost whitening the fields.

3

When I speak of you of course I mean
myself as well; you've seen
my red beard grey. Half yours, half mine—
this lifetime we have spent together;
and still, weary at the end of day,
we hurry to our bed. It's hard
to turn our minds to sleep;
tomorrow may be too late for this.
Or if you do turn in at pumpkin time
I'll often, like tonight,
turn on the light again, prolong
the day in writing lines we'll read
in greyer years, remembering
how once we made the darkness glow.

4

What a glorious morning it is
to spend between sweaty sheets.
The sun colours our walls through prisms
hung in the window. Outside
it makes the yellow maples shine,
dries the dew in the fading garden. But look—
we have leaves to rake, flowerboxes
to bring in so our winter
will be brightened by some of this
abundance. Time is short.
Today is Sunday; by next weekend
there may be snow. So rise my love.
Tonight we'l light the candles and
the windows of our room will sweat.

5

Well, in days like these an hour of joy
is much, though it brings disarmament
no closer; jails no child molester;
deters no grafter from seeking office,
winning a cabinet post and then,
when caught, becoming a director
of a Crown corporation; though it won't
cure AIDS, make virtue triumph, foil
the Contras or the ayatollahs
or the SDI; though the image,
not the policies, elects our leaders,
and the image, well manipulated,
lies; still an hour of joy is much
to find in our harried lives.

6

There have been hours, I admit, and years
our life didn't run on rails. It's true
I've hurt you. Worse: I've hurt you knowing
how betrayal hurts; how near
the double solid line I drove and how
the drug I was on impairs the sense;
how often innocent passengers
are injured worst. But that
won't bear retelling or remembering.
We both lived recklessly, on credit,
when the interest rate was high—
but close that account. No wrong
can ever repay another
and once forgiven no debt is owed.

7

There's a game you used to play in school:
first pupil finished an assignment,
you'd stare at the hour hand on the clock
to catch it moving; you'd try to
trick it, trip it—telekinesis!—
forward to three-thirty. Now
you'd slow it if you could; you swim
and work out to keep your figure.
But you're not fooled by the experts
who turn back the doomsday clock;
you've seen in satellite photos
the dark line of night sweep smoothly
across time zones. Watch with me
awhile longer, then, good night.

Pilgrimage

Susan L. Adkins

You are an unlikely pilgrim. Your hands carry no offerings to any deity and your heart is devoid of any urge toward penance. You seek only transitory landscapes, novel faces, exotic shapes, shades of green and red, little more. When you wander, you leave behind nothing and return with only filmed images—their identity soon lost in the blur of your saturated memory. You are but a traveler with a Nikon and a pair of dark glasses. Perhaps you could be more, seek more, ask for more. Perhaps you could capture the colors and shapes and aromas and sounds and flavors and feelings not onto film but to some hidden, protected part of you. Let them work their silent spell on you, and lead you on a pilgrimage to an ancient place called Taxila.

You must drive to Taxila. Drive out of Pakistan's noisy, dusty capital city of Islamabad and head northwest along the Grand Trunk Road. Along your way, you must pass the cloth vendors as you drive up the four-lane highway rutted from the weight of huge dinosaur trucks always overloaded with gravel or sand or handmade bricks. These are Pakistani trucks, belching potent black diesel fumes and dripping with bells, pinwheels, reflectors, flags and brightly colored panels. You must snake between these speeding caravans, but hold back to watch the racing Pajero vans and Suzuki motorcycles disappear into the dust storms trailing behind the shiny, fat buses which bulge from the weight of men and women and children—all travelers yet not all pilgrims.

You must navigate like a highwire artist up the left lanes of the double road before bullying your way through the confusion of a truck depot which clogs the pass through the Margalla Hills. The pavement seems to fester and crumble into a wide expanse of loose stone chips. Tornados of dirt sow chaos as they whirl in and out among the legion of trucks bivouacked there like a disheveled army preparing for battle. Hundreds of "soldiers" dressed in white shalwar kameez move franti-

cally—some looking for fuel, others for tires or work or a ride into the city. You can stop here. Ease over to the side a bit and call out from your car. Friendly men with dust in their eye lashes will peel back the cloth protecting their faces and point northwestward, measuring the distance to Taxila in kilometers.

The terrain peaks before sloping down the back side of the Margallas, passing large quarries in the distance, each carved from the mountainside, each marked on the horizon by a thick cloud of dust. Close by the motorway the opposing embankment is scarred with crisscrossing paths leading to hillside bunkers of the cave dwellers. Outside each grotto stands a neat mound of fuel — twigs and sticks scavenged from the surrounding area. Women and girls climb the steep paths, their heads laden with water urns. Methodically they disappear inside the dark, cool burrows, never looking back to wave or nod or to notice you there in the distance.

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When the road flattens out, watch on your right for the sign to the cantonment and the munitions plant. Bear quickly here to cross the rush of southbound travelers. A quadrille of tunes from the trucks' blaring horns warn you not to cross. The Pajeros following behind threaten you just as loudly, demanding you move on, get out of the way, hurry up, disappear. All about the horns blast, the traffic pulsates, the tongues wag, the hands beckon you stay, the fists demand you go. Pushed to the precipice, you hold your breath, stomp the accelerator, and prepare to die just as you amble like a sleepy water buffalo in front of three dump trucks racing abreast on a two lane road. They do not slow for you, they do not swerve to miss you, but Allah has decided to let you live another day.

Once safely across, the new road is narrow but quiet. Eucalyptus trees line its edges, separating you from the wide, golden fields tended by men milling nearby,

women walking far in the distance. It is Friday and warm, not hot. It is May and time to harvest the winter stands of wheat. It is time for prayers, and the mullah sits in the nearby mosque, broadcasting his message out across the fields. It is time to drive slowly and enjoy the land. It is time for you to breath deeply and to listen.

The cantonment and munitions plants are merely signs set back on the righthand side of the road. You can forget them easily, forget what they harbor, forget they exist. Just look the other way when you pass the gray barracks set close by the road. Simply ignore the tall fence and the razor wire. You can see that at home. Instead look into the distance and watch with all your senses as the Taxila Valley rolls out before you, green and gold and at peace. Without you noticing, you will begin to feel differently. You will begin to be different.

Just ahead, the road narrows even more and disappears into a cool, thick grove of tall trees. Unexpectedly, a rotund bus launches from its dark center, thundering toward you. Pull far to the shoulder of the road and wait as it flies past, its aluminum carcass bulging with arms and useless curtains dangling from the open windows. Raise a hand to the young men and boys hanging on behind, their white shalwar kameez pulled taut against their strong, slender bodies by the force of the dry wind. They stare your way with friendly, inquisitive looks but do not dare free a hand to acknowledge you.

Turn off the air conditioner and expel the stale refrigerated smell from your head. Inhale the aroma of dry grass and feel the warm dust against your skin

Turn right just before you reach the trees. Turn right down an isthmus of pavement stretched out across a sea of farmland crowded with men, women and children—all at work—none at play. Drive slowly, and roll down the windows. Turn off the air conditioner and expel the stale refrigerated smell from your head. Inhale the aroma of dry grass and feel the warm dust against your skin.

Maneuver carefully around the mule and the cart it pulls along behind. Smile at the driver, and he will smile back.

Drive on to the village where an incredible chestnut horse grazes in the tall grass beside the road. Unlike his bony brothers working the streets of Islamabad and Rawalpindi, his body is strong and majestic, obviously cherished by a wealthy villager. Not far away men rest in the shade of a small store. Perched on the edge of cots set haphazardly next to the road, the old and the young look to be serious students. While they read Urdu-language newspapers, a well-fed camel stands opposite the road, tethered next to a large home with small, flat circles of dung drying on its compound wall. Your passage only raises an eyebrow, maybe two.

The countryside opens to the fields and wide grasslands before once again closing in on an oasis of marble and stucco houses surrounded by high walls and leafy shade trees. Men and boys are about, lingering in cool doorways, hurrying along the roadway, standing close, talking, laughing. The youngest will wave and shout out, "Hello" in English. The oldest will raise their hands and smile after you do. You will wonder where the women are.

The youngest will wave and shout out, "Hello" in English. The oldest will raise their hands and smile after you do. You will wonder where the women are.

Suddenly the road ends in a hollowed out ridge, a rutted dust bowl of rich brown earth. If you are to go further, you must abandon your car at this spot. Leave it quietly behind to bake and gradually cool as the sun ebbs. Then stand for a long moment and listen to a dry rustle rising from the surrounding fields of wheat. You have never heard this sound before and must look beyond to see the men bent in the tall grain. Sickles circle round and round, trimming the tall shafts at their base. A worker stands with a fist full of stalks which he expertly twists and ties off into a bundle before throwing it onto a mound. There is no tractor. There is no truck. There are only men—saying nothing. Only the air is

permeated by the loud hissing, scratching, crackling, swishing, itching sound of the wheat.

It will be hard to leave the sound, to pull yourself away from its hypnotic whispers which call to some strange, forgotten piece of you, but just as you do you will hear the rush of water. When you turn there will be men bathing in the reeds of the Tamra. Their chests are bare—dark and hairy—while their submerged bottoms are covered with their white shalwars which balloon out large and wide with the strong current. The young handsome one closest to the path will call back to the others, warning them. You must look away and pretend not to see the heads which bob up and down among the green rushes. You must look for the stepping stones. You must ford the shallow waters of the creek while brown eyes peek between blades of tall lush grass to stare at your pale eyes and skin.

You must climb now, for once the trail emerges from the water, it curves up a grassy embank ment, wedged in on either side by tall cedars. Just when you think you have reached level ground, the land gives way and folds into a deep hollow where yet another branch of the creek meanders slowly, infested with dragon flies and exotic-colored pests skating atop the water on delicate, spindly legs. Abruptly the earth thrusts up, and you reach, first one foot and then the other, into narrow steps which climb the backside of a precipice. Do not stop to admire the small peach orchard which lies below for your footing is unsure and there is no railing. Your thigh muscles will begin to warm and then burn as your sandals slip against the loose dirt. When you finally reach the plateau, you will have arrived at the remains of the ancient city of Dharmarajika.

Let your eyes settle over this tiny, isolated site—the heart of a once holy land known as Gandhara. Cutting a wide path down the spine of Pakistan, Gandharan remains hug both sides of the Indus River as it tumbles thousands of miles from the heights of the Himalayas to the Arabian Sea. Alexander the Great marched his legions onto this bit of Asia, uniting East and West more than 300 years before the birth of Christ. Gaze over the wide plain with its low, terraced land stretching northward to the treeless hills, and you will see the dust from his army's feet still settling in the distance. On this land you will sense the ghosts of the hundreds of thousands

who came before you. The worn foundations of their cities echo the joy and sadness lived here, and the surviving stone relics hint at their story.

Long before the time of Christ, Buddhist religion, art and civilization flowered from this piece of earth. With the stone footprints left by monasteries, temples and religious shrines, touch the handiwork of a 700 year flood of Buddhist pilgrims who journeyed from as far away as China. Rub your hands across the scars of its decline—those left by the Dark Ages brought so long ago by the marauding White Huns. Many pilgrims and barbarians alike stopped at Dharmarajika as you do today. Many stood before the Great Stupa as you do at this moment. Built by 3rd Century B.C. hands seeking only peace and serenity, legend embodies this knob of earth with the relics of Buddha himself. Large and strange, you will feel its magnetism, but do not ignore its wounds—the deep gash left by 19th century hands seeking only gold and jewels, the eroded edges worn by centuries of wind and rain and drought. You must listen closely, for its silence and age will speak to you.

Large and strange, you will feel its magnetism, but do not ignore its wounds—You must listen closely, for its silence and age will speak to you.

The carefully laid stones of the circular stupa rise more than 46 feet high above the plateau. Outside, the structure is disintegrating in slow motion, sagging, drooping and giving up stones after centuries of push and pull from gravity and human hands and feet. Inside, buried beneath its shroud of weeds and flowering grasses which root from each rocky crevice, 16 stone spokes radiate from its secret hub, reaching out to link forces with the outer stone rim of the stupa. Thus dissected the wheel of law survives to stand before you as it has for countless others over the course of thirteen centuries.

You will not notice the small man approaching, the little man who carries such a short walking stick, the strong man who guards this ancient Buddhist site from

Muslim fundamentalists who on dark nights translate their fears and suspicions into vandalism. For you the Westerner, the American, the naive middle aged traveler set afoot in a world with but a few familiar landmarks, the little man will just appear, as if by Eastern magic. He moves quickly, taking long strides with his short legs. Circling behind the stupa, he leads you along a path meandering through the debris of fallen stones. The climb up the stupa means placing your feet in his nimble footsteps, stretching your stiff limbs to reach from one precarious stone to yet another small nitch among the weeds of the high course. You will expect him to look down and offer his hand, but you are a woman and he is a Muslim man. Out of respect he stands quietly looking down from the heights of the stupa, smiling as you grab at grass handholds and pull yourself up along the rough mound, past sharp edged stones and on to the top.

Be silent and listen. You may hear the whispers. You may even understand them...

You have reached these heights without a ski lift. You have found your way without passing a gift shop stocked with Buddhas, miniature snow-globe stupas or canned Cokes. There is no costumed guide spouting facts and figures in immaculate English. There is no background music to pace your breathing or to regulate your heart. Stop here atop the Great Stupa—this earthen periscope, submerged in another time, its stone lenses reflecting that past into this present. Be silent and listen. You may hear the whispers. You may even understand them.

Rest here in full view of the distant hills and the wide, rolling valley scattered with orchards, rambling creeks and small villages. Above, two rose-ringed parakeets glide with the wind, one following the other. Below, at the foot of the Great Stupa, lie the clustered remains of small chapels and chambers built there over several centuries by pilgrims and resident monks. Though empty now, your mind will

fill them with stone monuments to the Enlightened One, and your imagination will crowd the grassy passages with early worshippers. Here Buddha's first image emerged as human hands fused the profile of the Greek god Apollo with Indian dress, shirt and robe. Here Buddha rested in stone for centuries—sometimes standing, other times sitting, frequently suffering, often at peace. Along this ancient Silk Road which connected Rome and China, this mortal came to be worshipped as a god—his human likeness cleft from the local schist stone. All around you art and religion and life synchronized to give birth to a great civilization which thrived and then faded. A cooling breeze will startle you as it moves up the plain and whips through the white, brushy stalks of the wild grass which covers the area. You will look West where the sun sags low on the horizon and then toward the East where the silver day moon is waning. You will want to stay here forever, but instead you must leave forever. Like all its other visitors down through the centuries, you must quietly fade away from Dharmarajika. Unlike many of the others, you will leave no offerings to the gods nor add any monuments to the small chapels. When the rains come, even your footprints will disappear.

But when you are far away, when you have returned to the other side of the earth, when you can no longer feel Pakistan's strong sun and the tingle of its dust against your aging skin, when this part of your journey is over, you will discover that you have brought something of it with you. From time to time, you will conjure up a mystery from deep inside yourself, never sure of its reality or its identity. In quiet moments when you are alone, you will remember your journey, the chaos of the open road, the peace of the Taxila Valley, the generous man who guided you to the top, the rustle of the wheat and dark heads bobbing behind the watery reeds. You will feel your senses purified, enriched and made keen once again. Then the ancient voices will whisper to you as they did atop the Great Stupa. There will be no thunderbolt of knowledge, no charismatic rebirth, but a fleeting sense of pleasure and recognition. For a fraction of a second in time you will feel a continuity with all of life which has gone before you and all to follow. For all eternity, you will have become a pilgrim.

Basketball Images

John Sheirer

first shot
in the bright spring air
airball

wind alters
his jumpshot
more than my defense

from a cloudless sky
high-arc set shot
barely touches net

slam dunk
holding back
to spare my wedding ring

perfect in my mind
but behind-the-back pass
sails out of bounds
old enough to be his father
but he wants to fight
when I block his shot

game point
when the downpour
began

after the winning basket
the losing team
grabs a smoke

Christiaan Stange

poems

Tonight the Minstrels Are Drowning

tonight the minstrels are drowning
their voices dark hopeless puddles

in a world with no eyes to see and
no mouth to taste the muddy water

of this sanctuary (or the blood of
Catherine's ghosts in the wet grass)

and how many floods it would take to
wash a thousand grimy faces and how

many more tragedies it would take to
sex this crooked land seems impossible

to know - still a beautiful tree grows
that was planted by your mother long ago

and still there is a crusade in your
eyes that is far far better than cold

cement and the tears that dance and sing
of how they killed your sister only a

block away and how for three days they
didn't find her body and how for three

days she lay there slit open like a fish
yes tonight the minstrels are drowning

and you and I with them, world be damned!

— Montreal, Canada 1994

On the Road of the Man

the sorry horizon
carries your voice

on a furnace of wind
kissing eternity on the

cheek

the arid sands
dizzy and exposed

they seem fingered
by the rise and fall

of the seasons
they seem obvious

beneath the burden
of another successful

hunt

only

remember one thing

lust like rain
soaks in over time

and everyone comes
to this savannah

of your skin for
the same reason:

to feed

Poseiden Almost Went to Bed

Poseiden almost went to bed last night
without thinking of you
as a mountain wearing a shawl of mist
Raki gushing down your blue sides
into the raucous surf

Poseiden almost went to bed
without thinking of you at all

you who refused to walk
shoeless in the mosque
dancing skinny legs
through the back alleys of Aksaray
kicking up garbage and bones
singing to the wounded dogs
as you unravelled your carpet
that was ten years in the making

you that they saw racing taksis to the sea
to shells and starfish bleached by the sun
to the salty end of your last thread

did you believe that there
would be no death?

did you believe those who said
that from the bottom
waves look awfully
like clouds?

—Paros, Greece 1995

The Gift

Wendy J. Cholbi

I had had the entire weekend, and I just couldn't find exactly the right thing for Aimee. I jingled the quarters in my pocket and checked my watch. Time was running out and I had to do something about it. I nudged my dad, who was engaged in the sports page of The Denver Post. I had already read most of the paper, even that section, and the Nuggets were on a losing streak, but the Nuggets were always on a losing streak. I didn't care, anyway. The paper didn't have much to say about my home team, the Blazers. "I'm going to go look at the gift shop, OK?"

He frowned at his watch. "OK, but make sure you're back here in fifteen minutes. They're going to start boarding."

As I got up I heard the little boy two rows away screaming again. His extremely large mother was swatting him. I tried to figure out what he had done this time, but all I could see over the back of the woman's seat was the fat on her arm quivering as her hand collided with his scrawny butt. The last time she yelled at him was for petting a lady's seeing-eye dog that was sitting a few seats away, and the time before that he had asked for a drink, and whined and whined until she smacked him good. I felt real sorry for him, because he was just a normal little kid, and it was his mom's fault that she dragged him to the airport. But I guess it was just normal for them, that they needed to yell and fight at least once every five minutes.

What's normal for me is that I can never decide on anything. Take my watch, for example. My dad, a few weeks ago, said it was time I had a new watch instead of "that cheap digital thing that beeps every hour." So he took me to Nordstrom's and told me I could pick any one that was under a hundred and fifty dollars. It was my Christmas present, only I didn't know it at the time because it was only the second week of December. I should have figured it out, I guess.

Anyway, what happened was that the saleslady

showed us about twenty watches, and I just couldn't see any reason for choosing one over another. They were pretty much all what you'd call a nice watch, except that some had those little lines instead of numbers, and some had Roman numerals, and some were square and some were round. So I made a big show about poring over them until we'd been there an hour and my dad finally picked one for me. I was trying not to exasperate him but I didn't really want a watch, because what I was hoping for for Christmas was a camera. So I ended up with this watch with a metal band and Roman numerals, and after wearing it for fifteen minutes I knew I would have rather had a leather band and good old regular numbers. I don't know why he bothered with trying to let me pick it out myself. He might as well have just picked it out and given it to me like a normal Christmas present. But there was nothing to do about it, so I wore that watch until I got to school, when I switched to my cheap digital thing, which was better anyway because I had it timed to within fifteen seconds of the school bell schedule, and the new one didn't have a second hand.

My indecisiveness was also why I was sweating away my last fifteen minutes in Denver in a panic. I had to get Aimee something. She'd never notice if I didn't, because she didn't know I was going to, but somehow that made it even more important. A surprise would be better than if I'd told her I'd bring her a souvenir. Each time I saw something that I thought she might like, I figured I should wait and see if I found something better. I had been at the Stock Show for a whole day, plus to lots of stores downtown, and here I was at an airport gift shop. Typical.

I had twenty dollars plus the one seventy-five I'd made at the airport. We got there an hour early because my dad always gets everywhere early, and right away I saw my opportunity for some quick change. So while he checked in, took care of the luggage, and found a place for us to sit away from the smoking section of the terminal, I hunted for luggage carts people had left at the gates. People in a hurry don't bother to take them back to the little racks where you rent them, and when you take them back you get a quarter. So if you're careful and don't let security see you hauling six carts around, you can make a fast buck.

I made a fast buck and three quarters. I stopped because my dad wanted me to stay close to the gate. If the

gift shop weren't less than fifty feet away, he probably would have even told me not to go there. Well, not told me exactly, but he would have looked at me in that way he does, and said something like "Christine, you really should be in sight of our gate at all times in case something comes up." What was going to come up? Were they suddenly going to announce that our plane was leaving half an hour early? I doubt it. He's always so responsible. His look is reserved for times when he thinks I should be more like him. Not for when I do something dumb, like the time I tripped the burglar alarm at home by going in through the basement window because I'd forgotten my keys. Those times he just gets mad. It's the times when he believes I could have been "a tad more thoughtful" that he gives me the look.

So I was lucky that he was busy with the sports page, and I was lucky that the gift shop was close. I had this sinking feeling as I got closer, that all I would find would be creepy romance novels with half-naked women on the covers and garish sweatshirts that said "I love Colorado." That's all they ever have in airport gift shops. Actually, once I was in the airport in Houston and they had all this dumb stuff like pencils that were two feet long and key rings as big as your hand, because in Texas everything's bigger, ha ha. I wondered what was in airports in New Jersey.

I had this feeling that all I would find would be creepy romance novels with half-naked women on the covers and sweatshirts that said "I love Colorado."

We had flown into the Denver airport on Friday morning, because my dad's first squash game was in the afternoon. I got to take the day off school and everything. Normally he doesn't accept invitations to tournaments that are held outside Oregon, because he doesn't like to travel. I pride myself on having been to nineteen states, but all of the trips I've taken have been with my mom, to visit her relatives. My dad never goes. But this time, as he said, "there were too many opportunities."

Like that the National Western Stock Show and Rodeo was being held the same week. The way he talked sometimes, you'd figure the whole trip was a big sacrifice he was making for me. I was supposed to be glad for this opportunity to broaden my horizons. He didn't like to fly, he hated hotels, blah blah blah. It's true that I was looking forward to seeing Denver, but it's him who's into rodeos. He was talking about how I'd love the Stock Show and everything, but I just knew that what he really wanted was an excuse to see the biggest rodeo west of the Mississippi.

What she doesn't know is that by the time my nose stopped bleeding, I was in love with her.

The only one who knows all this stuff about me and my dad is Aimee. She understands how he always wants me to do things "for my own good" and how my mom never really says much about it, and how he really wants me to be like him. As soon as he told me about this trip, and how it was all planned and how I was getting the opportunity to see the Queen City of the Plains, I called her up.

She was very sympathetic, and then she told me to pick up a buffalo drumstick for her. She always knows the right thing to say without it getting too mushy. She hates it when people are mushy. I cracked up when I thought about me walking into my dad's hotel room with the hind leg of a buffalo over my shoulder. But when she said she hoped I'd have a good time and that she'd miss me, that's when I knew I really had to get her something special. We've been best friends for almost a year, since the day when we were freshmen when she served a volleyball right into my nose in gym class. What she doesn't know is that by the time my nose stopped bleeding, I was in love with her.

She's not what you'd call beautiful. She has black hair, cropped short, and two earrings in one ear and one in the other, and light brown eyes. It seems somehow daring for her to have one ear pierced twice, but then, I don't have my ears pierced at all. She's not exactly thin, but I would never describe her as "chubby" the way my

dad did after she came over one afternoon. "She's a nice girl, even if she is chubby," he said. I didn't say anything. It wasn't the first time in my life I had wanted to punch my dad in the face. I think I showed the better part of valor, if you know what I mean, because if I had tried anything like that, not only would he have kicked my ass to California, but he probably would have sent me to a psychologist. So it's just an occasional fantasy of mine. I didn't tell Aimee that part. About punching my dad, I mean. I just told her he said she was chubby and she laughed. With some people, just hearing a remark like that would make them go on a diet. The only reason I could tell her what he said was because I knew she wasn't like that. She plays the guitar and sings soprano in the choir. She's not athletic, which she has proven many times since that ill-fated volleyball serve. I once accused her of doing it on purpose, and she said sarcastically, "My last three serve attempts went right into the net. It was just my luck that my first serve to actually make it over hit you in the nose." Then she laughed. "Who are you accusing, anyway? You have to be some kind of sports genius to get hit in the nose with a volleyball."

"She's a nice girl, even if she is chubby," he said. I didn't say anything. It wasn't the first time in my life I had wanted to punch my dad in the face.

She's right. I'm not athletic either. I think my dad has always been kind of disappointed in that, because he's so into physical fitness. He's always on the squash A ladder at the athletic club, which is why he goes to so many local tournaments. He wins a lot, too. We have a big box of silver trophies in the basement because there are too many to fit on the mantelpiece without looking "cluttered", as my mom says. He was on all kinds of teams in high school and college.

I think my dad wanted to have a son he could play catch with, and take to basketball games, and do all that father-son sports stuff. When he got me instead, I guess he figured that girls could be athletic too, so for as long

as I can remember he's tried to sign me up for community soccer teams and coach me on my baseball swing. But that kind of thing just isn't me. The only sports trophy I have is a blue ribbon for winning the three-legged race in sixth grade.

I tried out for the cross-country team last year when I was a freshman, because my dad wanted me to. I didn't make it. I was secretly glad, and I never tried out again. I think that's another reason he wanted to bring me on this trip. To show me a lot of people who were really good at a sport, to try to inspire me. It wasn't working. It's never worked. I watched him play a couple of matches on Friday and that was all. I mean, they were good players and everything, but I'm much more into other stuff, like photography. Seeing Denver would have been really great if I had gotten the camera I wanted for Christmas. But you can't exactly take pictures with a watch.

She started doing this crazy model imitation, "Dahling, make sure you get my GOOT side," and pretending like she had long hair that she was swishing.

Aimee also understands about me and photography. We were starting to hang around together a lot when I was taking my first photo class with Mr. Rhoades. One of our assignments was to take a roll of pictures of someone we knew, sort of candids, I guess. I was going to do my mom. I was going to shoot her while she was working on a pot for her ceramics class. Mr. Rhoades thought that would be a good idea, since she would be involved in something and probably wouldn't be self-conscious. He said it would show something about her soul. So that was my plan, except that I ended up shooting the whole roll of Aimee instead.

We were just fooling around at lunch, and I had my camera, and she started doing this crazy model imitation. I was cracking up. She was saying "Dahling, make sure you get my GOOT side," and pretending like she had long hair that she was swishing around. So I took a bunch of pictures because she was making me laugh so

much, and I just kept taking them after she had already gone back to eating. I got one of her cramming a huge forkful of school-lunch lasagna into her mouth, and when she realized that I had taken that one, she pretended she was going to throw up on me, so I have this out-of-focus closeup of her with her cheeks all puffed out and her eyes bulging. I ended up buying a new roll of film so I could do my mom, because I couldn't show the pictures of Aimee to Mr. Rhoades. I felt like it would have been wrong. Some of them were so beautiful. I got one of her face in profile as she was looking over her shoulder. And once she was looking down because she was putting something she found, a lost earring or something, on the charm bracelet she wears around her ankle. Her eyebrows are kind of crinkly and the tip of her tongue is just showing at the left corner of her mouth, because she's concentrating. The best one is from when she looked up at me after that. She just looked up and I snapped a picture. Her eyes are so open and clear, and she's not smiling, but she's beautiful.

After I developed them, I showed them to her. I told her she looked good. She picked the one I liked the most, without even asking me which one it was, and wrote on the back, "To Chris, the world's worst photographer." She knows I like being called Chris instead of Christine. And she gave the picture back to me and we just smiled at each other. I wondered if she knew then that I was in love with her, but she didn't act any different afterwards. So either she didn't know or she knew and didn't mind. I'm a quiet worshipper.

I wondered if she knew I was in love with her, but she didn't act any different afterwards. So either she didn't know or didn't mind. I'm a quiet worshipper.

Talk about the world's worst photographer. At the stock show they had this booth where you could get dressed up in western gear and sit on this fake stuffed bull they had, with a background that was supposed to look like a rodeo arena. They took your picture and you were supposed to lean back like you were really being

bucked by the bull. It was so fake, I laughed. And the tourists were lined up for it. Right next to that booth was one selling rattlesnake meat. And there were lots of people who were advertising their stallions for stud service. It was kind of a trip seeing all that stuff.

My dad's much more into the sportsman aspect of the rodeo, the rugged outdoor manly events. It's funny, because he's not really that type, even with all the fitness training he does. I mean, he plays squash. I guess he just sort of likes to watch things like calf-roping and bronc-busting, and he wouldn't actually enjoy doing them himself. I just can't see my dad in his shorts and white court shoes lassoing a calf.

Our waiter was very nice and polite, but when he went back to the kitchen my dad leaned over and said, "They don't call it the queen city of the plains for nothing." It made me feel kind of sick.

But seriously, sometimes when I realize stuff like that, my dad makes more sense. It makes him easier to live with. Sometimes, though, I just want to give up, like when we went to dinner after the Friday afternoon matches. We went to the restaurant in the athletic club, and it was pretty good. Our waiter was very nice and polite, but when he went back to the kitchen my dad leaned over and said, "They don't call it the queen city of the plains for nothing." It made me feel kind of sick. Like when these two guys from my high school, who everyone knows are gay, got beat up at the prom last year because they went together. I didn't bother telling my parents about that. When my dad said that in the restaurant, it made me think that he probably wouldn't care that there are people who do things like beat up gay guys in the parking lot of the senior prom. I didn't say anything, just ate more of my steak, even though I didn't feel like it. I wished I hadn't had to come on the dumb trip.

If he had asked me about it, I might have had a chance. I could have told my mom that I didn't really

want to go, and usually if I can get her on my side, she has some veto power with my dad. But by the time he told me about it, he had already gotten the plane tickets and the hotel reservations and everything. Maybe he did that because he knew I might get out of it if he didn't. So I went along with it, and I actually like to travel, so it was pretty fun. It was just moments like in the restaurant, and when we were watching the rodeo and he was whistling and stamping like he knew what he was doing, that upset me a little. But I never say anything. Sometimes I think I'm spineless.

AIMEE, ON THE OTHER HAND, has charisma. The first time I learned that word, it was in some book we were reading for English class. A girl raised her hand and asked what it meant. Good thing, too, because most of the rest of us didn't understand it either. Mrs. Connor asked if anyone could explain it, and Brent Walker the drama stud said, "you know, charisma," sounding like a game-show host with this huge smile on his face. For a long time after that I thought it meant smiling like a jerk and trying to impress people. Then I heard my mom call her ceramics instructor charismatic, and I knew she liked him and thought he was funny. So I looked it up, and I knew what it meant by the time Aimee helped me stop my nosebleed. She had this look on her face, like she was embarrassed and worried at the same time, and she didn't try to hide or run for the teacher. She just grabbed someone's towel and came over to me and said, "I'm sorry. Lean your head back." I knew she had charisma. And that's what makes her beautiful.

I knew I had to find something beautiful for her. It had to be just right, though. If I gave her candy or flowers or something, it wouldn't be right for her. Besides, it would be mushy. There had been lots of stuff to buy at the Stock Show, but none of it seemed perfect, and besides I couldn't decide. We went to the show on Saturday afternoon. My dad was in a good mood because he had made it to the finals of the squash tournament. We watched the rodeo for awhile, and when they started roping calves I told him I wanted to look around some more. He stayed in the arena because he was all excited about the calf-roping, but I was glad to leave.

There were endless rows of booths and displays, with everything from the best motor oil for tractors to knife-

throwing competitions. It was all pretty Western, I guess. They actually had buffalo meat for sale, fresh or dried, and that's probably really what I should have gotten her. I mean, she did ask for it, even if it was a joke, and buffalo meat is interesting and non-mushy. I would have just handed it to her and said, "As you requested." And it wouldn't have been just some dumb souvenir that you'd get a friend, like a miniature cowboy hat or something. But I just kept thinking I'd find something better, something absolutely perfect, or that at least I'd be back the next day to buy the buffalo meat in case there wasn't anything better.

As it happened, there wasn't enough time to go back on Sunday, even though my dad really wanted to see the kids chasing the greased pig. Yippee.

As it happened, there wasn't enough time to go back on Sunday, even though my dad really wanted to see the kids chasing the greased pig. Yippee. So, not realizing I wouldn't have another chance, for most of Saturday afternoon and early evening I wandered around looking at the animals and displays, waiting for something to scream Aimee at me, instead of buying the buffalo meat like I should have.

If I could have smuggled it past my dad, I would have thought about getting her a ferret. I was surprised, they had this whole room full of cages of rabbits and ferrets and guinea pigs, which you don't normally think of as livestock. And they had a bird room, with chickens and geese and ducks and even pheasants in cages, and in the corner a pair of swans in a pen. They seemed very intimidated by all the noise and bustle and movement. They just stood there, or sat in the corner of their pen, ducking their heads anxiously when something loud would happen nearby. Their necks were so long and thin. I would have loved to take some pictures of them. I was lining up shots, checking the lighting, watching for things that would make good composition. But I had to stand there and watch them, and I felt sort of helpless without a camera.

Anyway, a ferret was what I wanted to get for Aimee. They're kind of catlike, but smaller and thinner and longer. They have markings on their eyes that make them look kind of raccoony. Aimee would have flipped for a ferret. A rabbit would have been too cute and cuddly, and a cat or something would be too normal. A ferret would be interesting and unusual, but still cute.

Of course, there was no way I could sneak a live animal on board the plane, even if I could have afforded to buy it. So I didn't seriously consider that option. I hadn't seriously considered enough options, and now I was running out of them.

I didn't seriously consider that option. I hadn't seriously considered enough options, so now I was running out of them.

The gift store was crowded. I was right about the romance novels and sweatshirts, but there was more stuff. They had geodes, miniature Colorado license plates with peoples' names on them, typical tourist stuff. I wanted to hit myself in the head for not getting the buffalo meat from the stock show. I had passed up the perfect gift. Nervously, I checked my watch. Any minute now I had to go back. I scanned the key rings, t-shirts, post cards, and everything else. There was jewelry in the corner, and bottles of perfume shaped like Pike's Peak. I looked closer at the jewelry. Some of it was made of real aspen leaves that had been dipped in gold or silver or something. They were pretty. And there was something familiar about them.

I felt hopeful when I remembered that there was a charm on Aimee's bracelet that looked a lot like these. I didn't know if it was an aspen leaf, since aspen trees don't grow in Oregon, but it was some leaf that was kind of bronze-colored. She might like something like this. I picked up a necklace from the rack to look at it more closely. The leaf was very thin and you could see all the delicate veins. I tried to imagine what Aimee would think of them. I had missed my chance to get her some buffalo meat, but I still wanted to get her something that was really from my trip, from Denver, even if it was bought at the airport at the last minute.

Besides the necklaces like the one I was holding, there were also bracelets and matching earrings. And when I looked at the earrings, and imagined them in Aimee's ears, I knew they were what I wanted. I picked some small gold ones because they would go so well with her eyes. She wouldn't wear a necklace, I thought, and she didn't wear earrings that were too dangly, but even though these were technically dangle earrings, they were very small. I hoped she'd wear them. I hoped I could give them to her and keep my cool. I'd die if she said I was being mushy.

I TOOK THEM TO THE FRONT of the store. I had to fight down the panic again when I saw that there were four people in line in front of me. One of them was the woman with the whiny kid. He was just sniffling now and looking at the license plates. I tried to count the things each person wanted to buy, to see how long they were going to take. One woman had three postcards, and another man had a little container of aspirin and a magazine. They would go quickly, I hoped. I couldn't see what the woman with the kid was carrying, and the last person in front of me was this girl who was probably twelve, who was chewing gum and carrying what looked like six t-shirts and a geode. Great.

I shuffled in line, fidgeted with the earrings. They were $19.95, which was a miracle considering I had made just enough to cover the tax by returning all those luggage carts. I almost wanted to thank my dad for getting us to the airport early.

The mother was grumbling about something and her little boy started saying, "Mommy, mommy, look, dey have my NAME!" Evidently he was just old enough to read his own name. He said it about six times before his mom looked over at him and said "Get over here, Andrew." His little face crumpled up and he looked like he was going to start to wail again, but just as he started to stamp his feet, the woman buying the postcards turned around and said, "Do you want that, Andrew? You can bring it over here. Do you have a trike you can put it on?"

He looked as astonished as I felt. He was still gulping back tears as he brought the little green license plate with ANDREW stamped on it over to her. "You had to

wait a long time with mommy for Aunt Trudy. I'll bet she'll let Aunt Trudy buy you a little something." She gave the mom a look that said, you better let Aunt Trudy buy him a little something. She grudgingly nodded, and the little kid was beaming by the time they left and the girl in front of me stepped up to the counter. I watched them walk away and wondered if Aunt Trudy and Mom were sisters. They didn't look at all alike.

I glanced back down the concourse and saw my dad heading my way. I almost dropped the earrings. There was a line forming at the gate to the plane. They were starting to board. Now, anyone who has ever been in an airport and has half a brain knows it takes at least twenty minutes to get everyone on board an airplane. And they always have a final boarding call, and all the people riding in first class get to go on first. So I knew I wasn't going to make us miss the flight or anything ridiculous like that. And I also knew I had to buy these earrings for Aimee, even though my dad was going to want me to come back to our gate right that second. This was my last chance to buy something in Denver and I wasn't going to miss it. I'd missed too many chances already. I braced myself.

This was my last chance to buy something in Denver and I wasn't going to miss it. I'd missed too many chances already. I braced myself.

The girl in front of me was arguing with the saleslady about the markdown on one of the tshirts. "Well, but the sign said twenty percent off."

"Yes, but the price tag has already been marked. This is already twenty percent off the regular price." The saleslady was pointing to the tag with a pink-nailed finger.

"Well, is it the same for these two?" The girl popped her gum doubtfully.

I couldn't believe it. And here was my dad.

"Come on, they're boarding the plane." He motioned at me to come over there.

"In a minute, dad, I have to buy something." I tried to be cool.

"You should have thought of that an hour ago. We

need to be over there." He was giving me the look.

I wasn't going to let his look get to me, not right now. I glanced at what was happening in front of me. "Well, I guess I'll just get these two, and not this one. Don't forget my rock." The girl pushed her geode forward on the counter.

The saleslady separated one of the shirts and started to ring her up again.

I got my money out of my pocket so I'd be ready. "Dad, our row hasn't even been called yet. This'll just take a second."

His look was starting to change from the look to just plain old being mad. "You buying some silly trinket is not going to make us miss this airplane. Now." He pointed at the floor as if he was calling a dog. It was an order, and I knew better than to disobey an order. But I also knew that he was overreacting, and that I had to buy the earrings for Aimee.

"I'll be there in a second." I tried to keep my voice calm. The girl in front of me was being handed her receipt. I stepped forward and placed the earrings on the counter as my dad grabbed my arm. I yanked it back as I put my money on the counter with my other hand.

He knew better than to haul me off screaming, in front of a saleslady to whom I had just given a twenty-dollar bill and seven quarters. He waited as she gave me my change and handed me the earrings in a small bag. I gave her a big smile and said "Thank you." She smiled back a little hesitantly. Then my dad was propelling me towards our gate with one hand on the back of my neck and the other on my arm. I shook myself free and put the bag in my pocket. "I can walk by myself," I informed him. Not even his anger could really bother me now. My mission was accomplished.

He was furious but there was nothing he could do. Sure enough, our row was just being called as we got back to where our coats were. I knew better than to say I told you so.

"I saw what you were buying." He snatched up his coat and strode over to the ticket-taking counter. "Do you mean to tell me that you almost made us miss our plane so you could buy a dumb present for one of your friends? Some other girl?"

I didn't bother to answer his claim about missing the plane. "Yeah, dad. Some girl."

Stinking Water

this is the place
hard place of prairie heat
mother of drought buffalo place
the center called Spirit River
over the high table curled
with stinking gourd and buffalo grass

this place
muddy beaverskin water
where nettles sting and mud
soothes water washed welts
of fishing lines
reeling in cats on one end
drunks and giggles on the other

quiet frost-softened place
beneath fat-softened boots
then the boom and reel
wing over wing over wing

“meat mother”
for your depression table

this is the place
of the summer that burned
while Watts and Detroit smoldered in rage
sun was pure
heat was scented
time melted
into mulberry stains and macaroons

this is the place
of the Holy Closet
wireboned coats buttoned with eagles
rainbows over pockets heavy with naphtha
among the empty shoulders of boys
who escaped the hard place
of chicken sundays and pinto bean mondays

this is the place
where bones break the skin of hills
and sluff into washes
where rattlesnakes raid fractured joints

and pant in foramens of skulls
the bones of Saint and Sinner side by side
beneath the bones of hill
and moonbones of grama grass

this is the place above all places
where the deepest white root
draws on time
where flesh and earth
beetle and bison
blood and dung
spring the arc of a life
away and back
to dream of water
rotting in heat
decaying into life
singing the living dying song
of this place called
Stinking Water

Grandfather

what did you see grandfather
beyond the screened porch
past the scrawl of tobacco
from the thin paper of your lungs

why did you sit on the edge
of your cot for hours and hours
watching while cousins
and porch swing squeaked and squealed

we were not afraid of you
just afraid to speak to you
you never spoke to us
not even to quiet the noise

when the fag burned to a few
smoldering curls of leaf
yellow fingers snubbed the butt
you put on your slippers and rose

and floated like smoke to Scotty's Tavern
where Deutschland Uber Alles echoed
in bottles and barless windows
where the captive Wehrmacht sang

POWs never tried to escape
there was nowhere to escape to
no escape from the great
blizzard wracked sun blasted plains

they finally went home to Germany's
rubble you finally came home
to your porch your cot your porcelain
bowl of Bugle Boy

and the place was farther in your eyes
farther away than any of us could see
you rolled another cigarette
and smoked into the dark

We Bury Our Dead On Bison Plains

for Christina, Anna Clara, Ima, and RuthAnna

we bury our dead on bison plains
five sisters suffer wind as brothers
mothers fathers sometimes children
lower in sealed blue steel and brass
through roots of grama and buffalo grass

suffer wind that always blows
from south in summer dusty and yellow
from north in winter icy and feathered
suffer wind on this prairie of the dead

where loved ones plant eternal green hopes
in thin bluegrass sucked pale by drought
where prairies speak in rhizomes and roots
the firehard sod sunsoaked bisonproofed
overcomes always always the anemic seed

we bury our dead beneath shag bone hills
unchanged from days five little girls
rolled down their socks in wind brick shadow
played tag on tangled hair
white as a brain tanned buffalo robe

unchanged in eyes that bleed blue
in old faces and not so old
that squint lines of sun and wind
unchanged in webs of shivering cousins

we plant seeds seeds grow bodies
we plant bodies gone to seed
beneath empty arcs of circles
crescent moons seasons undone
the hoofstruck prairie waits

Death Visits the Yogi

Blake Wilson

I wasn't born into a religious family. This isn't to say that there wasn't a sense of faith in the family—there was. You might even say that I was given a sense of spirituality. When I say that my family wasn't religious, I mean that no one in my family attended church services on Sunday mornings. There also wasn't a copy of the Bible anywhere in the house. My only direct experience with organized religion was the year and a half that I attended Grace Saint Luke's Episcopal Day School in Memphis, Tennessee. This was where I began my education, though my parents didn't send me there because it was affiliated with the Protestant Episcopal Church. They probably didn't know what the Protestant Episcopal Church professes as The Truth, or that it is an offshoot of the Church of England. I was sent to Grace Saint Luke's because it was private. In Memphis in the late sixties a busing policy was instituted. If I had attended a public elementary school, it would have been in a "bad neighborhood." My parents didn't want that, and they wanted me to receive a good education. Grace Saint Luke's provided that education, and it was safe.

The school administration realized that a number of it's students weren't Episcopal, and they respected that. The administration did, however, feel that some basic moral guidance founded in Christian faith, if not strictly doctrinal, was necessary in any young person's life. Every morning, then, before learning the alphabet and learning shapes and colors, my classmates and I would go to the small chapel and listen to stories that the school's priest told us. These stories introduced us to the figure of Christ, and the priest used stories about his life to show us that Christ, and God, loved animals and children, and indeed all things. The priest also gently told us, in ways that six-year-olds can understand, that we should never willfully do evil things to one other or to anyone else. He never mentioned any hell, or talked about God as some punishing, jealous deity. All in all the stories were soft focus tales of Christ saving lambs and

helping small children and other things like that. I liked the stories very much. The priest was young, and he was kindly toward us. The stories he told made me feel safe, and this was good, as the world can be a very scary place for a little boy.

I had discovered death by that time. My grandfather had died the year before I started school. I remember being scared out of my mind when my mother told me that he had died because I didn't understand what had happened. My only sense of what had happened were vague images of unspeakable horrors, and I had nothing to guide me through this trauma. My parents obviously comforted me, but they really couldn't help me understand what death is, that death is a part of life. That's something that you have to grow into as you get older, and in many ways it's something that only religion, however vaguely explained, can help you understand. The priest's stories helped explain death in a way that I could understand, and these stories made death seem much less frightening to me, and also very far away.

The morning stories continued through the first grade. When I started the second grade, though, things changed. My schoolmates and I still made our morning pilgrimage to the chapel, and the priest still told stories, but we also witnessed something else. Every other week the priest didn't tell stories. Instead, he and some other clergymen taught us the liturgy of the Church by performing the actual service. These men, including the kindly priest, would walk solemnly through the center of the chapel dressed in long robes, and approach the altar. Once there they recited passages that were completely foreign to me. No one tried to explain the significance of what we were witnessing, and I doubt seriously that we would have understood any explanation. I only recall being incredibly bored by the service and wishing that we could just have stories every week like we used to. The only exciting thing that ever happened during these services was the morning that I grew ill during the ordeal. I was afraid to draw attention to myself by telling my teacher, Miss Bowman, that I didn't feel good, so I tried to control my nausea until the ceremony was over. This effort proved futile, and halfway through the ceremony I threw up on my new Davy

Crockett buckskin jacket. This is not to be taken as a comment on what I watching, I was far to young to understand what was going on. It was merely a comment on the corn flakes and the probably just-gone-bad milk that I had eaten for breakfast.

My family moved to the Houston suburbs over the Christmas break, and I finished the second grade in a public elementary school in Seabrook, Texas. Not only did the move introduce me to the various public schools that I would attend through the rest of my education, it also ended my personal involvement with formal Christianity. This isn't to say that I became either an atheist or an agnostic, these things are not the concerns of an eight-year-old. I still remembered the stories the priest had told, and I had a sense that could be called spiritual. I was possessed of a moral compass; I didn't do evil things to other children, my parents, or anything else. I did what all children do: I rode my bicycle, played in the sandbox at school, did my homework, and spent Saturday afternoons with my dad searching for interesting seashells along the shores of Galveston Bay.

As I grew older and my thinking became more sophisticated, I did form opinions about organized Christianity. These came largely after my family moved to rural Arkansas. I was eleven when we moved to Greers Ferry, which is in North-Central Arkansas, so my formative years were spent in The Bible Belt. I can't remember religion having ever come up with my friends while we lived in Seabrook, but this wasn't the case in this isolated little town in the foothills of the Ozarks. The children that I went to school with here attended church regularly and spoke openly about it. This was new to me. I'm sure that some of the kids in Texas had been church goers, but it just didn't come up.

In Greers Ferry, I met children who professed to be Pentecostals, Southern Baptists, and members of something called The Church of Christ. I heard them speak about something called salvation, and learned that they believed that the only way to gain spiritual purity was through this salvation. Their Fundamentalist faiths had taught these children that only by turning your life over

to Christ could you guarantee your entrance into Heaven, into everlasting life. They also talked about their belief in an everlasting, all-punishing Hell that awaited anyone who was not "saved," had not turned their life over to Christ. There was no debating this issue with the believers, and there was no compromising in their belief. Their Fundamentalist doctrines had taught them that no amount of moral purity was worthwhile if you weren't "saved." Christ demanded strict obedience, nothing less would do, no matter how moral you might otherwise be. Unless you went through this act of salvation, you were a damnable sinner, and was all there is to it.

This didn't sound like the Christ that the priest had talked about in Memphis. The older I got and the more I heard about this strain of Christianity, the less I liked it. I had always been taught to think for myself, that this was both good and necessary, that a certain amount of self-reliance was crucial to the development of a strong character. To my thinking, turning yourself over to some all-demanding, jealous God flew directly in the face of self-reliance, and I wasn't going to have any part of it. I also knew that I had never committed any consciously evil act toward any person or thing. I had certainly harbored petty ill-will toward various people from time to time, but I hadn't done anything to deserve an eternity in torment. I wasn't a sinner in the Fundamentalist sense, and I knew it.

My attitudes toward Fundamentalist Christianity were solidified when I was fourteen. A friend of mine was a believer, and one day she asked me to attend a Wednesday prayer service with her. Her Fundamentalist beliefs and my lack of them had never caused any problems between us. I knew that she hadn't asked me to attend so that she could save me, but because she wanted to share something that was very important to her. I agreed to go with her because she was my friend, and also because I was curious about the service.

The church was The Lone Star Baptist Church, and I met her there. The congregation was small, perhaps fifty people, and the building was modest. We entered the plain brick structure and sat in the plain wooden pews. The walls were covered with brown paneling and the only embellishment in the room was a cross - not a crucifix, just a plain wooden cross - behind the pulpit. The

minister entered the room and took his place at the front of the congregation. He was as unadorned as the church itself. He didn't wear robes, he wore brown pants, a plain shirt, and a clip-on tie. As soon as he began to speak I could tell that he was untrained. He didn't speak with the sweeping, passionate oratory of Martin Luther King, but with a nearly unintelligible stutter. It was obvious that he felt passionately about the things that he spoke about, but his struggle to make himself understood was painful to listen to. I was embarrassed for him. He wasn't an ordained minister. He had never attended a seminary. It seems that he had experienced a revelation that had driven him to profess the Gospel as he understood it. The congregation didn't seem to notice his speech impediment; he genuinely moved them.

At the end of his sermon, he asked if anyone would like to come forward and give their soul up to Christ. The call for salvation made me uncomfortable. I was afraid that my friend or others that I knew in the crowd would expect me to lay my soul down for God. But no one turned to me expectantly, and I was relieved. In fact, nothing happened. It looked like no one was willing to make that leap of faith on this night. As the minister turned to leave the pulpit, though, someone cried out. The minister turned back, and I saw another student, one a few years older than me, rush to the altar. He fell prostrate before it and began to weep uncontrollably. Between sobs he choked out admissions of various sins and begged forgiveness. The minister knelt next to him and put his arm around his shoulder. The sobs continued. The congregation was mesmerized by the spectacle. The minister got the boy to his feet and proclaimed that a new soul had found his way to Jesus. The crowd sounded their approval, and still the boy wept uncontrollably. The minister asked everyone to form a line and one by one welcome the boy into the fold, and still he wept.

Everyone in the room was glad for the boy, everyone but me. I was embarrassed. Not because he had found salvation. If that's what he felt he had to do, that was fine with me. I was embarrassed because he couldn't stop crying. He had been crying for about ten minutes when my turn came to shake his hand. I shook his hand, but I also thought that he had lost his dignity in this un-

stoppable display of emotion. I didn't think that I should be witnessing this moment, or that anyone else should, either. The whole ordeal seemed like something that should happen completely in private, that this matter was between this boy and his God and no one else. My friend and I didn't talk about what we were witnessing. I don't know if she knew that the spectacle embarrassed me, though the scene never affected our friendship. I left the church that night feeling that if this was what getting saved was all about, I wouldn't have any part of it. If giving yourself up to Jesus meant losing your dignity like that, it wasn't for me.

I wasn't a believer in the Christian sense, and after that night, I never would be. I did have a spiritual sense, however, and it was being fostered in a completely different way. My mother's younger brother, Vernon, had experienced his own spiritual awakening right after my parents and I had moved to Houston. On our Christmas visits back to his home in Memphis, I had heard him speak to them about his faith. Shortly after the move to Greers Ferry, I started asking Vernon questions about this faith. I had always been curious, and Vernon seemed perfectly willing to answer any questions that I put to him. He would visit often, especially during the summer, and he and I would go on expeditions - camping and canoeing and swimming - and we would talk. The faith that he professed couldn't have been further from Fundamentalist Christianity.

While we were away in Houston, my uncle had discovered the teachings of a Hindu Yogi named Paramahansa Yogananda. Yogananda first came to the United States on a lecture tour in 1920. He remained and lectured on religion for five years. In 1925 he established The Self-Realization Fellowship in Los Angeles. Yogananda's goal wasn't to bring Hinduism per se to the West. He believed that orthodox Hinduism wouldn't translate to the West, that its essence was Indian and that many cultural barriers simply couldn't be overcome. He also believed that the essence of all religion is the same, that all religions aim to direct people toward a personal experience of God. His aim, then, was to teach the practices of Yoga, among other practices, that would

lead people to this direct experience.

This is what Vernon and I talked about. He told me that he, like me, had found Christianity too restricting. He told me that he didn't believe that anyone was a sinner in the Christian sense, and that what Christians called acts of evil were merely acts committed by people who hadn't developed their spiritual selves. Vernon also told me that Yogananda didn't believe that Christianity was wrong, but that he formulated God in a different way, and that this formulation was just as valid. Vernon introduced me to the notion that God is not so much a personality that looks over us, rewarding spiritual purity and punishing spiritual shortcomings, but is more a force, an essence, that is present in everything. Vernon didn't talk about Salvation, but about Enlightenment. Vernon told me that it's possible to achieve perfect consciousness, to be aware of the God-consciousness in everything, and, through personal training, to live in harmony with the world, indeed, with the universe. What Vernon was giving me was a spiritual sense that would allow me to develop my own spiritual self because it was good for me and would benefit me. Christianity motivated through guilt, used everlasting punishment as a way to guide people to God. I couldn't see myself as a sinner, and until I did that, I couldn't be led to a Christian God.

He also introduced me to the idea that the physical world is essentially an illusion. The only thing that is real, he said, is the God-consciousness. Everything else is a merely a projection of that consciousness with no validity or reality on its own. The only way to understand the universe, he said, is to understand this fundamental essence. He told me that Yogananda taught that science and all religions are unified through this underlying principle, and that the purpose of life is to work toward the direct intimation of this principle. Vernon told me about his meditation routine and his various Yoga practices. He told me that he had gained fleeting glimpses of this profound insight through these routines, and also that it would take him many years to achieve the God-consciousness. He told me that it would take longer than the life of his body.

This confused me, but Vernon explained that the body is as much an illusion as the rest of the material world. Our essence, he told me, is the God-consciousness. The fact that we exist in bodies is a sign of our spiritual imperfection, an imperfection that we can all overcome.

He told me about reincarnation, about how people must exist in the flesh until they reach a certain level of enlightenment. Once this occurs, he said, the body is unnecessary. The journey won't yet be over, he said, but the transcendence of the body is the first hurdle on the road toward complete enlightenment. Death, then, is an illusion. Our essence doesn't die, it is merely transformed from one impermanent material state to another until each individual has developed beyond the need for it.

As soon as the time came for one of Vernon's visits to end and he pulled out of the driveway, swinging his old Ford Falcon toward Memphis, I started looking forward to the next one. I honestly can't remember us talking about anything else. These conversations captured my imagination for several reasons. Not only did they present a view of the world that was essentially benign, a world in which conflict was not the result of evil but of misunderstandings about the true nature of things, they also provided a path toward spiritual development that demanded self-reliance. Indeed, Vernon had said that the path to enlightenment is different for everyone, that everyone must find their own way. What Yogananda gave you in his teachings about meditation and Yoga was the way to find the path's beginning, not a road map for the soul. That part of it was up to you. And it was obvious that Yogananda's teachings had affected Vernon profoundly. He was always at peace, both with himself and with the world. He never spoke crossly of others, and expressed sorrow for those who acted with ill-will toward him. If they would just start on the journey, he would say, then they could free themselves from all their misguided misery.

In the summer of 1979 I was fifteen years old, and it was the summer that I learned that my visits with Vernon would soon come to an end. Vernon had long wanted to move closer to the headquarters of The Self-Realization Fellowship in Los Angeles. His job as a graphic designer in Memphis provided him with a comfortable living, but his spiritual self needed something more. Eastern thought hasn't penetrated The South to any real degree, and aside from a few friends who also followed Yogananda's teachings and me, Vernon was

alone in his beliefs. My parents were accepting of Vernon's beliefs and didn't object to my conversations with him, but they didn't understand the East, and they never would. Vernon felt compelled to immerse himself in Yogananda's teachings, to surround himself in a community of Yogis.

He wrote The Center and expressed his desire to work for them in a layman's capacity, and in the summer of 1979, was informed that they could employ him in their publishing enterprise. The Fellowship couldn't afford to pay him much, but Vernon thought that he could earn enough to live in Los Angeles. On a visit in June, he announced that he would move to Los Angeles in September. He had secured a moving van for the trip, and he told my parents that he would like to take me with him. He had always gone on family vacations with us, and saw this as an opportunity for me to see parts of the country I might not have the chance to see otherwise. Besides, I could help drive the van. My parents agreed. They talked to my high school principal about the trip, and he allowed me to take a week off from school for it. We figured the drive would take about two and a half days. This would leave us three full days to find Vernon an apartment, and on the seventh day I would fly back to Little Rock. My mother loved her brother deeply, and was sad that he would be moving so far away. But she also knew that this was something that he had to do. Vernon promised that he would come home as often as he could, but that these visits would have to be few and far between. His income from The Center would only provide subsistence, so saving for any expensive trips would take much time.

Vernon arrived in Greers Ferry with the moving van two days before our scheduled departure. He wanted to spend time with my mom and dad and visit my aunt Faye and her husband, Jerrell. The day before Vernon and I left the family gathered to do what families do when a member is leaving: eat a lot of food, talk about old times, and make promises for the future. Vernon talked about the route we would take and what he would be doing in his new job. He also assured my mom that I could be trusted to drive an eighteen foot moving van. As the evening wore on and the time came for him and me to get to bed - we were planning to leave at three the

next morning - he promised that he would see us all again, soon.

Almost all of us. My uncle Jerrell had lung cancer, he was terminal. While he still had some of his strength, the disease was taking its toll. He was able to dress himself and sit in the front room, and he still had some appetite, but it was obvious that he was dying, that he would not live much longer. Vernon wanted to speak to him before we went to bed, and I went with him. Jerrell sat in his pajamas in his favorite chair, a big recliner, watching television. He was thin, and he was pale, but the conversation was full of life. He and Vernon told old stories and laughed about Vernon's childhood pranks. After all, Vernon was the same age as Jerrell and Faye's son, Jerry, and had spent many afternoons with Jerry exploring the mysteries of his huge back yard. It was obvious after a time that Jerrell was getting tired, and Vernon and I got up to go. He walked to Jerrell and held out his hand.

"You ought to go with us," he said with a smile on his face as he took Jerrell's hand.

"I don't think I can make that trip," Jerrell said calmly as he looked into Vernon's eyes. There was no irony in his voice, he was speaking a truth that we all understood.

It was the only time that day that Jerrell's condition was ever mentioned. No one tried to avoid the subject, there was just nothing to say. Jerrell was dying and we all knew it. But Jerrell wasn't dead. He had made his peace with it and wanted to spend the time that he had left living. Vernon talked about this at length as we drove across the plains of Oklahoma, headed for Texas. He talked about how much insight it took Jerrell to speak so openly and so simply about his offer. He said that the fact that Jerrell was so calm about the imminent death of his own body showed how close he had come to achieving the God-consciousness. I had noticed the calmness, too, and was glad that Vernon was there to explain it to me. The fact the Jerrell was close to death scared me. No one in my family had died since my grandfather, and I hadn't even known that my grandfather was sick. My mother had just come in one day and told me that he was dead. Vernon's thoughts on Jerrell, along with our

talks over the past few years, helped put my fears to rest. Death was an illusion, I needn't be afraid. And whenever I was afraid, I could console myself not only in Vernon's teachings, but in the calmness that these teachings gave him.

We arrived safely in Los Angeles and managed to find Vernon a very small apartment that he could afford. He had been forced to sell the Falcon before making the journey. He wouldn't make enough in Los Angeles to afford a car. One of our first jobs after finding the apartment, then, was figuring out the complicated transit system. We did that and used the system for a trip to The Center. While Vernon met with the director of the publication center, I talked with one of the women working there. She was Indian and literally radiated contentment and inner peace. She told me that many people feel compelled to make the pilgrimage that Vernon had made, but that the material sacrifices were great. She told me that she hoped that he would succeed, and also wished me well.

When the day of my departure arrived, I told Vernon good-bye. I told him I loved him and that I would miss him. I also told him how much our talks had meant to me, how much they had influenced my growth. I also told him how much he had helped me in my worries over Jerrell's coming death. Vernon listened and responded, then he asked me to check and make sure that I had my ticket. We stood on the street corner under the brown Los Angeles haze, waiting on the bus and talking in subdued voices about the man sleeping on the sidewalk. As the bus pulled to the curb, he gave me instructions to tell everyone that he loved them and that he was content. I paid my fare and took my seat, and as the bus pulled out I looked out at Vernon still watching the man sleeping on the sidewalk.

The Indian woman was right about the material struggles of working for The Center, and at Christmas Vernon returned. He called the house while my mother was at work and told my dad to pick him up at the Little Rock Greyhound Station on Christmas Eve. He also told us not to tell my mother. My dad and I concocted a story that my mom believed about wanting to

go look at the stars and left for Little Rock. It was the best Christmas present my mom ever had. She had missed Vernon greatly in the weeks leading up to the holidays, and she was so happy when we walked in the door, I thought her heart would break. We actually made it home about five in the morning, Christmas morning, so there wasn't any reason to sleep. We opened presents and Vernon explained that he hadn't made enough money to live. While he hadn't been starving, that prospect was never very far away. The Center was unable to pay him any more money, as they are a very small organization. He didn't want to leave, but he knew that he had no choice. Later in the day we visited Faye and Jerrell. His condition had gotten worse, but he was still able to sit during the day a visit with the family. He was glad to see Vernon, and said that he should have gone on that trip.

Vernon moved back to Memphis and his work as a graphic designer. In the spring his weekend visits resumed. Jerrell's condition became critical, and he died in March, 1980. The funeral was held in Stuttgart, a town of about ten thousand in Southeast Arkansas' Grand Prairie. He and Faye had lived there before retiring to Greers Ferry. My parents and I made the two hour drive down the night before the service. We gathered with the family at the Methodist Church the next morning. It was like the Baptist church I had attended with my friend a few years earlier, at least in appearance. The building was understated both outside and in, and as before, a simple cross was the only embellishment. We gathered quietly in the pews and sat in solemn reflection during the eulogy. While we were all sad that Jerrell was gone, we knew that he had suffered, and that it was best for his pain to end.

When the service was over, we rose and formed a procession to view the body. I walked with my parents toward the casket, and I was nervous. I didn't know what to expect, I had never attended a funeral before. As we passed the casket and I looked down, I was surprised to find a form that looked nothing like the uncle that I had known. It was pale and very small. It was not horrible-looking. In fact, it seemed very insignificance. The expression on the face was also one of peace. As I

walked out of the church I looked over at Vernon. He had lined up well behind me and hadn't viewed the body yet. I smiled slightly as I looked into his eyes. He had been right, death was an illusion, a passing of the God-consciousness from one impermanent form to another.

I walked out of the church and stood with my parents in the cool March air. The spring bloom had begun, and pale green leaves covered the dark branches of the trees. I looked up at the overcast sky and wondered if it would rain before the graveside service was finished. My parents asked me if I was all right and I told them that I was. We agreed that everyone had held up very well, that Jerrell had been remembered with dignity. My dad talked about his plans for a summer floating trip. A cry sounded from somewhere inside the church. I turned and saw Vernon leaning on Jerry's arm at the door. He was crying. My mother went to him and led him away from the church. Vernon wept softly and talked about what a good man Jerrell was. I was stunned. I didn't know what to do. I wasn't embarrassed like I had been at that church service a few years back. There was no reason to be. Vernon wasn't out of control, he hadn't lost his dignity.

I was shocked because I had thought that Vernon would understand, that he would know that this was merely an illusion, a passing of an essence, and nothing more. I thought he would know that the real Jerrell wasn't dead, that an essence can never die. I thought he had known this when I had looked at him and smiled a small smile across the pews. It was the sight of the body that had done it. Vernon and my mom's parents were still alive. This was the first death that Vernon had ever experienced personally. He gathered himself after a bit and we all walked to our cars and formed the procession to the cemetery. I stood next to him during the graveside service. We didn't speak for a long time. We both just looked out at the trees swaying in the distance in the gentle March breeze, each in his own private reflections. After the service we all wished each other safe journeys home. I looked into Vernon's eyes and we hugged. I knew that he would be all right.

Contributors

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John Sheirer <as_jsheir@apollo.commnet.edu> has been very active as a small press poetry reader and writer for about 15 years, particularly in terms of haiku and related forms in English. His haiku have appeared in just about all of the haiku journals in the U.S. and Canada, and he has published several collections, most recently one called Rumblestrips. He teaches writing at Asnuntuck CommunityTechnical College in Enfield, Connecticut.

Christiaan Stange <ursulas@einstein.unipissing.ca> was born in 1970 and grew up in North Bay, Ontario. He recently graduated with a B.A. in Anthropology from

Concordia University in Montreal, where he lived from 1990 to 1995. Even more recently, he spent six months travelling and writing in Eastern Europe. His poems have appeared in hard-copy literary periodicals such as *Gridovoce, Dracaena & Arachne*, and *Corridors: The Concordia University Anthology.* On the Net, his work has been featured in *The Acid-Free Paper,* the ezine version of *Arachne,* and *The Amateur Canadian Poets' and Song Writer's Page.*

Richard Todd <rtodd@unlinfo.unl.edu> grew up at the confluence of North and South Platte Rivers on the Great Plains of western Nebraska. When he came of age he wandered from Nebraska to New York City, Montana, Colorado and back to Platte forks. He now writes, grows kids, and lives on the edge of the valley. Poems and essays appeared in Denver's Mile High Poetry Society 1995 anthology *Ariel,* on the Internet in *Morpo Review*, and in the Grace and Karma Press 'zine *Dragonfly.* Other work is found in recordings *Fax The Pax* and *Diesel Town* released by Nine Ball Records and *Late On The Rails,* a collection of lyrics and essays published by DuneWorks.

Blake Wilson, who lives and writes in the Ozarks in Arkansas, is *Kudzu*'s "Editor-at-Large." He is a frequent contributor of short fiction and essays to *Kudzu.* His essay "The Politics of Cynicism" from *Kudzu* 95/2 will be appearing in the print version of *cafe.blue* (a project from Metronetics, the folks who bring you *Blue Penney Quarterly* and *ping.interactive*).

The Kudzu Staff

Steven Jarvis <kudzu@etext.org> is the editor and publisher of *Kudzu.* He is currently working on degree number four at the University of Arkansas School of Law.

James E. Martin <jemartin@comp.uark.edu> is associate editor and is currently a graduate student in English at the University of Arkansas. **James Katowich** is the newest member of the *Kudzu* staff. He is currently working on an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Arkansas. His poetry and fiction talents are on display in *Kudzu* 95/2 and in the most recent issue of *Blue Penny Quarterly.*

About *Kudzu*. . .

Submissions to *Kudzu*

Submissions of fiction, poetry, and essays may be sent via Internet email to <kudzu@etext.org>. Files should be sent in one of two formats: a compressed, binhex'd Macintosh word processor file, sent in the body of the email message; or plain ASCII text. For submissions of art, please contact the Editor to work out a suitable format. The *Kudzu Writer's Guidelines* are available via email <kudzu@etext.org> or on the *Kudzu* web site at:<http://www.etext.org/Zines/Kudzu/writers-guides.html>

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Design and Production Notes

Kudzu is set in various weights and widths of Times and Helvetica, with some banner images that use Utopia (though there's no Utopia in the PDF itself, to avoid rendering problems, though we *really* like Utopia).

Kudzu is created on Apple Macintosh computers using Adobe PageMaker 5.0 for layout and Adobe Acrobat 2.1 to spif up the PDF. MicroFrontier ColorIt! 3.0 is used to create the images (with some Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop for a few things). Text munging is done with WordPerfect 3.1 and Tex-Edit Plus 1.3. The HTML versions are assembled using BBEdit Lite 3.5, BBEdit HTML Tools v1.3 by Lindsey Davies. Graphics for the HTML version are tweaked with GIFConverter 1.2.7 and a few other utilities for imagemaps and GIF animations.

We would gladly accept donations of bigger and faster computers or publishing software; we're not proud.