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OPUS

SPRING 1982

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Honorable Mention

POETRY

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BODY POEM Nancy MacArthur

PROSE

THE FALL Betty Buikema



BODY POEM

Sometimes my face doesn't seem to fit right
and my shoulders are on crooked, too.
Sometimes my feet aren't there
—right when I need to step on them—
and often my eyes cave in.
(Then the world is fringed with hair
and framed with the sides of my eyes
so it is difficult to see my smile.)
Often when I yawn my body is empty
and crying for air
but my throat is too small to fill it.
My hands take care of me when things like that happen;
they are very responsible.
They write poems and dial the phone
They smooth my forehead and open books.
And when my heart is folded inside out
They press out the creases with ivory music.

Nancy MacArthur

BILLY

Curling
around his teddy bear
Billy dreams
of a Victorian mansion
in his storybook;
he explores a labyrinth
of corridors
and twisted staircases
with fear lurking
in shaded corners.
Fear snickers
and swings a door
on rusty hinges,
or laughs
with billows
of destroyed curtains
hanging at dusty windows.

At sunrise,
fear releases
Billy, a discarded rag doll.
He wakes comforted
by the floppy ears
and soulful brown eyes
of his basset hound,
and rediscovers the mansion,
fear's palace,
in the storybook
on his bedside table.

Kristine Ann Barnes

SOLITAIRE

Solitaire.
Black six,
Red seven.
Ace out.
Spade on heart.
Laughing jokers,
Not needed.
Cast aside.
Shuffle again,
Lay them down.
No moves.
Reshuffle.
Red on black,
Black on red.
No gain,
Just pain.
Solitaire.

Steven A. Poortenga

DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

In the twilight of winter,
the quaint yellow house across the street
looms like a dragon . . .
and I'm afraid to go out.
The icicles hang from the eaves like sharp pointed teeth
twinkling in the fading sun—anxious to bite.
I watch in horror as innocent victims
casually waltz up into the monstrous jaws
and the wooden mouth slams shut.
In practiced savagery,
the bloodthirsty dragon
tosses the struggling flesh around inside his mouth,
past the firelit windows,
past the glowing shutter-edged eyes.
Then without warning he greedily gulps his prey
and sits dark.
Emitting contented puffs of gray smoke
from the opening of his shingle scaled head,
he quietly awaits the morning.

Heather Uecker



A DANCE

No flowers wilt or sag with dwindling grace—
Their scent is present only in my mind.
No other thoughts I muster can replace
How couples danced, in flowing motion twined.
Yet we did not, nor later dared embrace—
Our efforts dimmed and kept the evening blind.
The empty shoes lie still where tossed; a trace
Of perfume from the dress remains behind.
Releasing liquid on chipped, painted nails
I rub until the mordant evening pales.

Ashley Tucker

Pour more champagne and
doesn't she make a beautiful bride?
look at the cake—sweet
Mrs. Durban—it must have
taken days an
accordian player?
such a novel idea where
ever did you find him?
Bring out more breakfast pizzas;
the guests are requesting them it's
getting too crowded in here
too steamy, stuffy some
should go outside perhaps
Mr. Parker no longer drinks so
get him the sparkling cider
birdseed? it's the latest; rice
makes such a mess, you know
Smile Granddaddy we're
sorry too that Grandmommy's
not here
comes, there goes the bouquet we
should have known that Ginny
would be the one to catch it
Pour some more champagne again and
Doesn't she make a beautiful bride?

Birdseed everywhere
clings to sweaty feet
just got up
it's too quiet in here
piles of crystal plastics
lie haphazardly with
dried cream cheese icing
great bouquets of blue,
orange, and purple
beam their radiance at the walls
It's too quiet in here
Outside, the sun already is
too hot
these flower-trees are going to
wilt before they make it
to Grandmommy's gravestone
more birdseed here on the sidewalk
the birds will have it well today
A stray tin can
lies bent on the asphalt
and trails a single
broken string.

Carla Johnson

A WOMAN AT THE STORE

peeking silver hairs
pinned down beneath a silky tarp
she tugs a basket free
and merges with the Monday flow

releasing her purse to the cart
like a penny in a well
her simple wish is lost in aisle one
amid the screaming specials of the day

two young ones too young for school
do Maypole dances about her heels
as she moves through the items
upon her unconsulted list

Tommy has the TV brand over his shoulder
before she can say no
and proudly heaves the Flintstone bread
up over the basket's side

the younger waddles confused but eager
to pluck a familiar object
from the balanced walls
to match the score as brother dashes on

the paper said that chicken
ahhhh yes
too much bone
but this one's plump

her slip in back falls short
of her hightop boots
with fur on the cuffs
and porch scuffs on the side

peas were cheaper last week
but milk is down
she leans into the worn-wheeled cart
weary for a daughter's shampoo loyalties

and on she plods
a shopping cart conductor
on an endless track of prefab stations
more blurred by each passing trip

the little one now faces her
from the basket
his nose runny and eyes sleepy
for the crib

pausing at produce
she moves close and draws
his cheek for a sweetened instant
to her breast

and then moves on
the woman at the store

David Cheadle

SONNET #2

When autumn swirls her colours 'cross the sky,
I leave—and lofty thoughts now fill my brain.
Amid the factory drone you must remain;
Your questions yield a crashing steel reply,
And gray's the only colour for your eye.
The presses sing their bitter, harsh refrain,
Your fate's to be King Automation's thane.
And in my heart a voice cries softly "Why?"
Yet you see colours other men can't see;
The song you raise no other man can sing.
Despite the yoke you bear, your soul is free.
Now I, your child, can see the hope you bring.
And for this gift I know you want no praise,
Except the hymn of joy you taught I'll raise.

Chris Simons



THE SACRIFICE

The lamb remained silent
As it was led
To the butcher's block.
Its throat was parched,
But no water was given to quench it.
It gazed forward
As the butcher's knife
Parted its throat like an apple,
And blood splurged
Upon snow white wool.
It bleated once . . .
Only once.
Not for itself,
But for the butcher.

Steven A. Poortenga

A chair
 i want to sit upon
decides to move
 when i am not looking.
Now everyone is laughing as i
 recover from the floor,
 they all
spray red blended watching on my
 face and neck—so i
Put my coat on backwards, with the
 hood up
Now i leaning on the wall, they
 seem to forget
but i can hear the
chair is moving towards me, he
Jumps on my head
 Pulling him off of me, everyone is
 kind of quiet

Wendy Hanson

THE RECLUSE

Forgive my sitting alone by the window
and letting the snow drift in.

Forget how easily I slipped into the heads, the hearts,
and the kitchens,
of total strangers I found living in black letter houses
on hills and hills of white pages;
But they took me places . . .
I hit a World Series homerun,
survived a plane crash in the Swiss Alps,
saved a blue whale from a harpoon's destruction,
and performed the first successful brain transplant.
(I did things.)

Overlook the fences that locked me safe
in blankets of unfinished poetry
and disorganized plans of attack.

Realize that I didn't notice we were growing apart . . .

Understand I never meant for you to go . . .

Heather Uecker

IVY TAPESTRY

In spring,
threads of ivy wind
their way
up brick walls,
climbing
the waft
of a forgotten past.
Creeping stems
claim the brick
with tiny fingers,
weaving
a new pattern,
changing
the picture, twisting
in upon itself,
a tapestry.

Kristine Ann Barnes



A GOOD WOMAN

He could only have conceived the idea in a dream, but once conceived it would not leave him. He turned it over in his mind in a purely hypothetical context, as a youth might consider alcohol without ever intending to drink. It rooted itself in alien ground, forbidden by his upbringing and his sense of his own moral goodness, and by the Midwestern Protestantism to which he had grudgingly acquiesced throughout his life; it was a fantasy, an occupation for his mind while he loaded his truck in the morning and unloaded it at night, and for brief moments during the long periods of driving in between.

Sometimes at night he would watch his wife sleep, and attempt to weigh the conflicting emotions which slid under his flesh. He loved her far differently than when they had first married; those were days of moonlight and porch swings and bars and restaurants, and of the wooing which doesn't quite end yet with marriage, but continues briefly in its eagerness to please and to prove itself worthy of its new prize, and to pretend that life will always be just that way—that they alone will escape the slow wear of liquid time. He had loved her then passionately and energetically, first with his loins and then with those emotions in him which only she had ever seen. And then they had had a child, a boy, and he had forgotten that he loved her in his daily push to establish a strong household and a firm financial base, and to be the husband and father that he had seen in his own father. He had succeeded, and he had failed, but the boy had grown regardless, and become a person, and had gone to become a husband and father.

He looked at his wife of twenty-seven years, and watched her delicate breathing, her closed lids, her slightly graying hair against the pillow, and knew that he loved her. But his love now was a mature love of commitment and devotion—offspring of a youthful promise to love her even when he didn't want to, when his mind and body recoiled at the thought of her. Those moments, too, came and went. His affection for her was mingled now with respect and dependence, and a sense of duty. He knew, as well, that she had never been unfaithful to him—would not consider it, in the farthest reaches

of her imagination. And he had never been unfaithful to her. Yet on the loading dock at night, in the privacy of his own mind, he nurtured a new fantasy, which he would never allow to become reality.

In the morning she wore her bathrobe, the one he had given her four Christmases ago, now with thin patches at the elbows. She poured two cups of coffee and set them on opposite sides of the table, and sat down. He brought his cup to his lips, letting the steam warm his face, and tested the coffee. Too hot. He set it down again. He looked across at her eyes, until he saw the eyebrows raise, noticing his examining gaze. He lifted his cup again, and heard her speak.

"Where's he sending you today?"

"Gary."

That meant he would be home at 6:15. She stood and walked down the hall toward the bathroom, and he watched, looking at her in a way he was no longer used to. He watched the shape of her, the form; his gaze traveled down the curves of her hips, which were larger than they used to be, and he wondered how he felt about that. Then she disappeared into the bathroom.

At 6:15 he closed the door behind him and kissed her lightly on the lips. He took off his jacket and laid it over the back of the Laz-E-Boy.

"What're we having?"

"Pork chops."

He nodded, and sat down in the chair, and took his shoes off. He leaned back, and the chair leaned with him, and he sighed.

"Peas or green beans?" he heard her call.

"Whatever's easier, love." The word rolled off his tongue as it had for twenty-seven years. He heard the hum of a can opener, and he thought about the word. He had married a good woman. His eyes scanned the room: there were the artifacts of their years together—the afghan she had crocheted, the shaky end table their son had built in a shop class long ago, the various gold and brown furnishings collected separately over the years and so matching only in color, and then only vaguely—and nowhere was

there anything out of place or untidy, save three NATIONAL GEOGRAPHICS fanned out at one end of the coffee table. He closed his eyes. Yes, there were prettier women, but none better. And what he had thought about on the loading dock—well, that was a daydream. He remembered his adolescent dreams of the same brand and grinned. He opened his eyes and she was sitting on the couch.

"Green beans," she said. He blinked.

"Jean—" he cleared his throat. "You know—I mean, you do know that I still love you. I do." There.

Her eyes widened a bit, and she looked puzzled. She nodded, and slowly smiled. "Why, yes, Henry. Thank you." But the pronouncement had strained the air, acting as a catalyst for realization, as the sight of water will make one suddenly aware that he has been thirsty. And so of course there was nothing for her to do but go and stir the green beans.

It was a week later that neither of them remembered to put the trash out at the curb on collection day, and so it wasn't taken away. But he needn't have hollered at her, and he knew that. So the next morning they spoke even less than usual. Even Mary noticed that he was unusually edgy when he stopped in at her office for his route slips. Mary was in her thirties, tall, with a good figure. She did her job well; she probably knew the routes better than the boss himself did.

"I've got the Portage run today, Mary. Got a bunch of bathroom fixtures and a few thousand reams of paper on my truck; tell me where you want 'em to go."

She tossed him a handful of yellow slips, held together by a rubber band. "Oh, and one more thing, Hank," she said, walking over to a file cabinet. "A pick-up. This afternoon." He couldn't help but glance at her hips—she had managed to keep them thin. She handed him a green slip. He looked at it and cursed.

"What's he sending me out there for?" he demanded. "F'r Pete's sake, that's back west!"

"The boss is the boss, whether he's got a mind or not. Look at it this way—you've got no afternoon deliveries; you'll be back early all the way around."

"Yeah, I know," he said irritably, starting for the door. He was stopped by Mary's voice, speaking a bit more softly than before.

"Hey, Hank—something eatin' at you?"

Mary came as close as anybody did to being his friend, and she was a good woman, so Henry didn't mind telling her.

"Yeah—I've been a little rough on Jean lately."

"Yeah? How come?"

"I dunno. I've been touchy. I think I've been taking things out on her, y'know?"

Mary smiled. "You have to be careful with women, Hank, or you'll be in trouble. I mean, I don't bet YOU know how to make beef stroganoff." They both laughed.

"No, but neither does Jean." They laughed again.

"You've got a good woman there, man," she continued. "The best. You trust me."

"She isn't perfect. What kind of woman won't make hot breakfasts? Or—or—can't drive stick? You know she spends more time crying than I spend eating? Hormones, she says. Open the window, close the window. Turn up the heat, turn down the heat. She's not so easy to live with." He wished he could believe this.

"Whoa—calm down, fella. You take it easy today, huh?"

Another driver appeared at the doorway.

"Hey, Hank," he said.

"Hey, John." He stepped toward the door. "Yeah—we'll see ya, Mary."

As he stepped out into the lot Scout ran over to him, wagging her tail. "Hey, pup," he said, patting her back. She wriggled around and between his calves, foraging for scraps and attention. He bent down and picked her up. "Hey, Scout, what'cha doin' Friday night, you cute little thing?" Scout lapped at his nose. He frowned, disturbed at his own jest, and put her down.

The morning and afternoon were a hodgepodge of incongruous moments of loading, driving, and unloading: the dusty clutter of the cab; the sweaty, not unpleasant smell of the docks; the disembodied monotone of Mary on the CB. She had spoken kindly to him, so it made no sense that the thought of her disturbed him. He felt strangley nervous, and he didn't want to think about why. So he let his mind wander to Hawaii, and Florida, and all the lovely, exotic places he had always dreamed of seeing, and always in his mind there was a woman with him, young and slender and fresh. He tried to

replace the image with that of Jean, but her form could not fit the contours of his imagination, and the image faded into fury, and the fury into reality, and he was on another dock, another road—another long, narrowing stretch between himself and his destination.

At 4:20 he eased the back of his truck up to the dock and got out. Scout bounded over to him and he gave her a few pats, but his mind was detached from his actions, which felt distorted and unreal. He walked into the office and tossed his slips on Mary's desk.

"Told you you'd be in early," she said, lighting a cigarette.

"Yeah." He was eager to leave. He started for the door.

"Hey Hank—you okay?"

He stopped and turned back toward her. He nodded slowly, avoiding her eyes. "Yeah—yeah, Mare. I'm okay."

"Hank—" she lowered her voice, "I've known you a long time. You don't have to tell me everything; just be sure it doesn't get in the way of your driving, or it'll be problems for you."

"Yeah, I know." Something in him was pleading desperately for permission to open the door, step out, and go. Go where? He shuddered.

"And Hank, if there's anything I can do—"

"You mean that?"

"Huh? Oh—yeah; you bet, Hank."

"Like if I needed someone to talk to—"

"Of course."

"Would you like to—talk—Saturday? Afternoon?" He looked toward the door.

She looked surprised; then, very slowly, she smiled.

"Sure, Hank. You got it."

Giovanni's was nearly empty when he walked in; before it closed that night, however, every table would be filled, and the air would be vaguely pervaded with smoke and conversation. He walked to a table near the middle of the room, paused, and looked around him; then, after a moment's consideration, he moved to a table against the wall and sat down. His watch said 3:28. He picked up the ashtray and set it down again. He chewed on the cuticle of his forefinger, and gazed around at the gaudy decor of the place. The walls were a deep scarlet, adorned with several small, dark pic-

tures in heavy frames. He heard steps behind him and turned with a start.

"Ready to order?"

"Oh! Ah—no; I've got a—someone's joining me. I'm sorry; you scared me."

The waitress walked away, and he resumed his nervous vigil with a deep breath. He wasn't sure what he expected; just a talk, he told himself. But here he was wearing his best shirt, and chewing a breath mint, and trying in vain to recall a suddenly distant fantasy. No, it would be just talk. Mary would be his friend.

"Hi, Hank."

He felt his heart hit his Adam's apple, and for a moment he couldn't speak. She was dressed casually; she slid into the chair opposite him and set her purse down on the floor beside her chair leg. Henry cleared his throat.

"How are you, Mary?"

"Oh, just fine. You?"

"Okay. I—I appreciate your coming." He struggled to find the right words.

She grinned at him. "'Salright, Hank."

"Henry. I like Henry better."

"Okay—Henry."

The waitress reappeared.

"Are you ready to order yet?" she asked.

"Um, I don't know—" Henry fumbled, "—are you hungry? I mean, would you like to eat something?"

"No, no. Just a vodka sour, please."

"Scotch and soda for me."

"All right. Thanks." She walked away scribbling. Henry looked back across the table, and tried to understand what he was doing here, and who this woman was that he was with.

"Frankly, Henry, I've been worried about you lately. You sure you're okay?"

"No—no, I'm not." There—he would pour out his troubles to her; then it would be impossible for anything to happen. He'd outsmart himself. "I've been having kind of a rough time of it with my wife, like I was tellin' you. She's really been gettin' on my nerves lately. Every little thing, y'know? And it's not her fault; it's just that you live with a woman for so long—"

The waitress was back with their drinks. He sighed and paid her, then looked across at Mary. She was far prettier than Jean, with darker eyes and smoother features. They sipped their drinks in silence for a moment; finally Henry gathered his courage and spoke again.

"Mary—have you ever felt—" He paused, and took a deep breath. "See, it's just that somewhere along the line I got to wondering what it would be like to be, uh—married—to someone else." He quickly took another drink.

Mary smiled and nodded. "I understand, Henry. Really I do. That's why I left Pete. You just can't tie yourself down to one person and still be happy." She looked down, suddenly embarrassed. "I guess I'm not cut out to be married."

"It's okay," Henry said. "Not everybody is." Candles, he thought. The place needs candles. He had stopped trying to analyze what was happening to him; he had placed himself in the hands of fate, or of the woman opposite him, if there was a difference.

They finished their drinks with little conversation; Henry was wondering whether he should summon the waitress again, when Mary broke the silence.

"Henry, why don't we just level with each other?"

He stared at her, mute. She was leaning toward him. Slowly, cautiously, she brought her hand to rest on his.

"Henry," she said softly, "would you like to leave now?" He nodded. He shifted, and stood, and they walked together to the door. He opened the door for her, and they stood outside.

"My car's in the lot down the street," he said. They began to walk that way, and almost unconsciously he put his arm around her. With the movement, however, his body grew cold; he felt her arm slipping around his waist, and he stopped walking.

"Henry." She looked at him, puzzled. He shook his head. Slowly, gently, he lifted his arm from her shoulder and brought it down to his side, and she pulled her own arm away and faced him.

"Listen, Hank—" she began, perturbed.

"Mary, go home. Please," he interrupted quietly.

"Man, what do you think this IS?" she demanded.

"I'll see you at work Monday," he said and turned from her, wondering how he would face her on Monday—how he would face Jean tonight.

He walked mechanically down the sidewalk, hearing nothing behind him and knowing she must be watching him in bewilderment. He headed away from his car, but there was a train station up

ahead. He would board, and ride, and transfer, and ride again, with no goal but the end of the line. And then he would board another train headed in the opposite direction. He blinked, and felt a tear drop to the cement. This surprised him; he could not remember ever crying. He would stop it at once. He was not one to cry. He did not know who he was; he was living within the person of a stranger. He felt he was a far worse individual than he had ever imagined. He did not know who he was; he did not know what he would do. But he knew that Jean would be worrying about him, and he knew that it would be very, very late when he finally arrived home.

Betty Buikema



EXHIBITION

"Mom, me and Tim are going to the carnival over in Beaumont tonight, o.k.?"

Gary's mother looked up from her plate. "Tim and I," she corrected automatically. Slowly she wiped her mouth with a Spiderman napkin, the legacy of some long forgotten birthday party. "What are you going to do up there?" she asked with a trace of suspicion.

Gary avoided her eyes. "Just bum around awhile. I don't know."

At the other side of the table, Jimmy, Gary's little brother, broke into the conversation eagerly. "I wanna go, too!" He gazed pleadingly at his brother with puppy eyes. "Take me, Gary, please!"

Gary stuffed a mound of meatloaf into his mouth. He managed to chew and sneer simultaneously. "Fat chance, numb-nuts."

Their mother rose from the table, carrying her dishes to the sink. "Don't talk like that to your brother, Gary," she intoned absently. Turning back to the table, she muttered, "You should take your brother. He'll enjoy it."

Gary leaned back in his chair, balancing on the back two legs. A scowl spread across his face. Jimmy noticed a crumb of meatloaf nestled in his brother's wispy mustache. It looked like a bugger. Jimmy sniggered into his hand. Gary didn't appear to notice. "Mom, I don't wanna take him," he argued plaintively. "He'll just get in trouble."

Looking up from the sink, she laughed, a hard humorless laugh that had the same unpleasant, sharp quality as a crashing screen door. "If anyone gets in trouble, it'll be you. And don't balance on the chair like that. You'll break the legs." Gary brought the chair down with a thud. She plunged her hands into the suds. "Besides, you two should see each other more than you do. You're always off somewhere with your freak friends while Jimmy and I sit home alone." Self-pity began to worm into her tone. "It hasn't been easy for me, you know, since your Dad died."

Gary sighed and rolled his eyes up into his head. God knows he'd heard this before. "Yeah, Mom, I know."

His mother looked out the small window that squatted over the sink. The dirty trailer pictured there, surrounded

by cement blocks and assorted motorcycle parts, vanished. In its place danced days long past and irretrievable, ordinary days golden only in comparison to the present. Quietly, she launched into her narrative of how things had been back when Owen, good, old Owen, had been around to care for them.

Gary cut her off. He barely remembered his father himself. Good old Dad had skipped out on them eight years ago, just after Jimmy had been born. Gary had been nine at that time. He'd always kind of figured Dad would be back, like he was just on a long vacation or something. That illusion had been shattered when he woke up one morning two years ago to find some strange guy with a tattoo in the form of a dragon on his arm at the breakfast table. He obviously had spent the night. Inwardly, Gary had raged. On the surface he was silent, refusing to speak to his mother. For almost two weeks he refused to talk, unmoved by threats or pleading. He relented when he was sure she had gotten the message. No one was going to replace Dad. "Tell you what," he said, looking at Jimmy loathingly. "I'll take the little snot to the fair."

His mother smiled gratefully, "Fine, I'll give you each a couple dollars, though Lord knows I can't afford it with the money I make at the diner."

Jimmy smiled smugly.

Gary gave him the finger.

Jimmy was watching a rerun of GOMER PYLE when Gary trudged into the room. Car keys jingled in his hand.

Gary watched for a moment, then turned to Jimmy. "How can you watch such a stupid show?" he asked.

Jimmy shrugged in the depths of his beanbag. "I like Gomer. He's funny." Actually, he thought Gomer was a dork, but nothing else had been on.

Casually, Gary nudged the beanbag with his foot. "You coming or not?"

Jimmy looked up. The light from the television flickered over his older brother's features. It made him look scary, like a goblin or something. Jimmy felt a thrill of unease bolt through him at the thought. Gary was wearing faded jeans and a Led Zeppelin T-shirt. Something glinted dully on his shirt. Peering closer,

Jimmy saw that it was a button with the legend "Hey, Iran!" running across the bottom. Above the words stood a grinning Mickey Mouse, with a triumphantly raised middle finger.

Gary kicked the beanbag again.

"Well, you coming or not?"

Jumping out of the bag, Jimmy scampered over to the sofa and began pulling on his shoes. His tongue slipped out of his mouth in concentration as he struggled with his laces.

Finally, he jumped up. "Ready!" he announced, grinning broadly.

Gary ignored him, heading for the door. Sullenly, he went outside. After a moment's hesitation Jimmy followed, the grin rapidly fading from his face, leaving no sign that it had ever been there.

"Hey, aren't we going to pick Tim up?" The question broke the silence that had held sway since the two of them had gotten into the car. Gary hadn't even looked at Jimmy, apparently content to concentrate on the road.

There was a moment's silence. "Tim didn't want to come when he found out you were coming," he answered softly. Slowly he turned, his eyes boring into Jimmy's. "You know what you are?" he asked almost gleefully. "You're a leech."

"Am not!" Jimmy replied promptly. He wasn't sure what a leech was, but he had a feeling it wasn't such a hot thing to be.

Gary glanced over at his brother coolly. Nonetheless, a flicker of cruel amusement shone in his eyes. This was going to be fun. Jimmy had a notoriously thin skin when it came to being teased. He wondered if he could make Jimmy cry.

"You know what a leech is?"

Jimmy didn't answer. Instead, he kept his eyes on the road ahead, watching nothing. He steeled himself for the verbal onslaught that loomed.

"Huh?" Gary paused. "Do you?"

Slowly, Jimmy's head swiveled to meet Gary's gaze. "What?" he said slowly. The word came out like molasses.

"It's a bug. A big, ugly insect that drinks blood. It lives off other people." Gary glanced at Jimmy. Nope, not crying yet. But he noticed how his brother's little fists were balled helplessly, how his face was hot and flushed. "And it's all wet and smushy, like somebody's tongue." Gary grinned. He liked that. Somebody's tongue. That was pretty good. "Yeah, it's

real slimy and gross-looking and that's what you are." He turned to Jimmy with a blank face, as if he was a professor finishing with a lecture. He felt a surge of triumph and something else (guilt?). Tears welled in Jimmy's eyes, full of pain and anger. "I am not a leech!" he cried out, filling the car with his pain.

"Yes you are." Gary said it calmly. "You're just like a leech. You always have to do what I do, or go where I go. You can't do anything yourself. You're hopeless." Gary clucked his tongue and shook his head sadly. Then, almost to himself he murmured, "Yep, you're a leech, all right." He clucked his tongue again.

"Oh yeah?" cried Jimmy. Scalding tears ran down his soft cheeks. Helplessly, he clenched his little fists together. "You wanna know what you are?" Struggling for words, he burst out, "You're a big, ugly turd, that's what you are!"

Gary snorted.

Snuffling, Jimmy sank deeper into the seat, looking out miserably into the uncaring night.

The carnival was at its peak of activity when they reached Beaumont. Gary parked in a field where a number of other cars sat. Impatiently, he jumped out of the auto, slammed the door, and made his way to the fair, the tinny music and fluorescent lights in the distance promising excitement. Jimmy had to run to catch up to his brother, almost falling headlong into the weeds several times. He wanted to call out to him, ask him to slow down, but the humiliation he'd endured in the car was still fresh in his mind. Finally, he caught up, glancing nervously at Gary as he bounced along at his side. His brother showed no signs of recognition, his gaze centered directly on the nearing carnival, his long legs quickly closing the distance between himself and the fair.

Suddenly, they were there. They slipped through the gate after paying their admission and abruptly found themselves in the middle of it all. Gaudy lights illuminated the whole area, giving everything a plastic sheen. Various riders capered around them, their grinding gears providing background music for the scratchy music that wailed out of the loudspeakers. People jostled them roughly as they made their rounds. Loud, raucous conversation conspired with numerous whistles, bells, and honking horns

to batter at their ears. Gary felt a slow, hot grin form on his face. All right! Party time! Jimmy looked up at him anxiously. The cacophony of noises and images scared him a little. He wanted to hold Gary's hand. He didn't dare.

Gary set off across the middle of the fair area, Jimmy trailing meekly behind. Stopping every few seconds to greet acquaintances, Gary pointedly ignored him, even when those he was talking to inquired as to who Jimmy was. Only once did he acknowledge his presence, referring to him as "my shithead brother."

The words hit Jimmy like a bludgeon. The world turned off around him. Images were meaningless, sound incoherent. Grimly, Jimmy fought off a wave of dizziness. Holding back tears that struggled to escape, he stared up at his brother in shock, his pale face gleaming in the artificial light.

Gary loomed over him, snickering. His head was silhouetted by an overhead light. The glow made a kind of infernal halo around his cold eyes, those eyes that trumpeted hatred, misery, envy and blame. The world came back. The sounds of the carnival rushed into his face, the cold impersonal sounds chilling him. He grew aware of other people around him, shouting and jostling and grunting like a herd of slow hippos wallowing in the mud of a riverbank.

Jimmy turned back to his brother. A cigarette perched cockily between his lips. His cold eyes regarded him unfeelingly. Casually, Gary bent down slightly until their faces were only a few inches apart. Jimmy eyed him with trepidation, his chin quivering uncontrollably. Still keeping the cigarette clenched in his mouth, Gary whispered, very softly, "You gonna cry?" Then he blew smoke in his face.

Gary's friends roared with glee.

Rubbing his eyes, Jimmy backed away, his mind a turmoil of conflicting thoughts and emotions. Instinctively, he turned and fled into the crowd, a rabbit running from a jackal. Jimmy plowed headlong through the pile of legs and arms, his mind filled only with thoughts of escape. Escape from the cackling monster who wore his brother's face. Finally, he emerged on the other side of the crowd, trembling with fear, confusion, and hatred. He could hear his brother calling him over the throbbing noise of the car-

nival. Jimmy glanced into the mob of people. Gary's head bobbed over the crowd like a buoy at sea, gradually coming closer. Jimmy ran. Bright lights and streamers and stuffed toys flashed by as he scurried into the shadow of a big tent. Blankly, he watched the carnival's activity before him. Inside, his mind seethed. Boy, did he ever hate Gary! He hated him! I'm never going to talk to him again! That'll show him! Jimmy grinned. Mom's gonna whip Gary but good when she finds out what happened. Jimmy chuckled happily at the thought. He looked out onto the carnival grounds for a sign of his brother. He saw nothing.

He didn't want Gary to find him. At least not yet. There was no telling what cruel tricks his older brother had in store for him. He didn't want to stay crouched in the shadows of the trailer though, either. Frowning, Jimmy searched for a solution to the problem. Finally, he determined to count to one hundred and see if there was yet any sign of Gary in the area. If not, he'd take off and look at the fair himself. He didn't need his brother anyway. He wasn't a baby any more. Quietly, he began counting. His spirits rose as the numbers dwindled. At sixty-six, Gary appeared. He was with a group of his friends, laughing and shouting. He appeared quite unconcerned about the whereabouts of his little brother. Jimmy felt a pang of sadness as he watched his brother amble out of sight, one with the crowd.

Sometimes Jimmy wondered if Gary had ever loved him. He didn't think about it often but once in awhile, at the supper table or when Gary was absorbed in a T.V. show, Jimmy would watch him, pondering why Gary disliked him so intensely, hoping to find some clue in Gary's face that would enable him to mend their torn relationship. Jimmy doubted if Gary actually hated him. There were times, times Jimmy treasured, when Gary would treat him kindly, as though the two of them were as close as could be. But these periods never lasted. It was almost as if Gary would come to the realization that he was breaking some unwritten law or code by being considerate of his brother. Sometimes, Jimmy thought Gary didn't let himself love his little brother.

Jimmy knew Gary blamed him for the departure of their father. Gary thought

that if Jimmy had never been born, their father never would have left. He had said as much many times. Gary had never forgiven him for, in his eyes, taking their dad away. In addition, their mother had doted on Jimmy constantly, as if by pouring love on Jimmy, the reason for her husband's leaving, she could somehow make him reappear. She gave Gary only token affection. This unequal distribution of love further alienated Jimmy from his brother. Gary's resentment deepened and festered. Consequently, their relationship slowly disintegrated.

Hesitantly, Jimmy slipped out of the darkness and squinted in the direction Gary had taken. He spotted him throwing darts at balloons, unsuccessfully so far, but urged on by a fat man in a flannel shirt. Jimmy headed for the other side of the fair. Here tents and rides replaced the trailers that housed the many games of the fair.

The voice of a barker hawking his attractions reached his ears. He turned towards the disembodied voice that floated over the crowd like smoke. Squirming through the throng of bodies, he accidentally jarred a hot dog out of the hand of a teen-age girl. Jimmy looked up at her. Boy, she was pretty. "Gee, I'm sorry," he said meekly. She gave him a disgusted look, then drifted away, seemingly carried by the tide of people that overran the area. Despondently, he watched her disappear from view. The voice of the barker captured his attention again. The man was standing on a platform, extolling the attractions waiting inside the tent that squatted behind him. His thick hands waved and cut through the air as he talked. As the barker finished his performance, Jimmy paid his way in, giving his money to a slack-jawed young man who gathered in the money with cold, wet hands.

Jimmy walked in uncertainly. The smells of beer, popcorn, sawdust, and sweat mingled and formed an invisible lather in the air. The air seemed to wrap itself around his head. Jimmy shook his head and the invisible lather dissipated somewhat. Jimmy noticed that the place was filling rapidly. Squirming, Jimmy managed to reach the platform that dominated the interior of the tent. The platform was old and worn, seemingly on the verge of collapse. A thin coating of sawdust covered its top, which was at the level with

Jimmy's chin. On top of the platform sat a gaudy chair, sullenly watching the gathered crowd. Restlessness shifted through the throng, making them kick and jostle for position like penned-up cattle. Finally, the barker made his way to the platform. His heels clattered on the rickety stairs as he huffed to the top of the small stage. He held his arms out dramatically for quiet. The expectant crowd hushed. Outside, the tinny music and grinding of gears went on and on. The noise was muffled only slightly by the canvas. The man on the platform took a deep breath.

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" He called in a clear voice. The barker paused to make sure he had everyone's attention. "You are about to see a sight that will shock and amaze you!" His eyes gleamed as he spoke. "There are many carnivals that claim to possess the World's Fattest Lady. But," he raised a finger in the air to emphasize the word. "But none, I repeat none, of those carnivals have someone who can even begin to compare with Lu Lu, the world's fattest woman!" With that, the barker began clapping his hands rigorously. The audience joined in half-heartedly. Jimmy looked in the direction that the barker was facing. There was a rustling of curtains by the stairs and then out burst Lu Lu. Wow! thought Jimmy. She must be the fattest lady ever! Behind him Jimmy heard gasps and stifled laughter.

The stairs screamed in pain as she struggled up them. She reached the top of the platform and waddled across to the chair, sitting down heavily. The crowd was rewarded with the crack of wood. Jimmy stared at her, fascinated. Her entire body appeared to be a massive roll of pale flesh. Pillows of fat bulged out of the openings in her outfit. Her head squatted on a thick, mottled neck.

Laughter surrounded him at the sight of the woman. Jeers and catcalls floated up above the crowd, mixing with the hazy light in the tent. Voices filled with disgust, amusement, and cruelty lanced through the air, pounding past Jimmy to reach the ears of the Fat Lady. Jimmy watched the Fat Lady silently as muttered insults capered around her. He noticed how her clear, blue eyes were never still, instead darting back and forth like those of a trapped animal. He saw how she trembled and how the perspiration on her pale

face gleamed in the light. Jimmy shook his head. It was unfair. So goddamned unfair. Out of nowhere came the urge to jump up on the platform and protect the Fat Lady from all these people, from the world that lurked outside the canvas tent-flap, plotting ways to hurt and maim. Jimmy fought the urge. After all, he didn't want all these people laughing at him, too. Instead, he stood there numbly, flinching inwardly each time an insult was hurled across the space between the audience and the Fat Lady. Jimmy didn't even notice when the tears started, tears that ran down his cheeks in big, liquid drops.

Finally, the Fat Lady was permitted to leave. With a curt nod, the barker dismissed her. Lu Lu left the stage and disappeared behind the curtains to the accompaniment of smattered applause and jeering. The crowd filtered out, looking for more fun things to do. Jimmy was alone with his misery. No, not alone. Someone else stood behind him. Jimmy whirled around and the tiniest whimper of fear escaped his lips. Gary flinched at the sound.

"Hey," the word escaped hoarsely. Gary cleared his throat. "What are you crying for?"

Jimmy was silent. He watched Gary warily, prepared to bolt in an instant. The older boy recognized this. Slowly he kneeled down till he was sitting on his heels, his face level with Jimmy's. "Hey, come on, I'm talking to you."

Still Jimmy was silent. He glanced over to the chair that squatted dismally on the platform, a thin coat of sawdust blanketing it. Gary followed his gaze and shifted uncomfortably. The chair seemed to condemn him with nonexistent eyes. Guiltily, he dropped his head.

"Let's go."

Gary looked up. "Yeah, o.k. If you want to."

Silently, Jimmy stepped by Gary's hunched form, his eyes blank. Jimmy stepped through the curtain. Quickly, Gary followed. For a moment they both watched the furious activity around them. Wordlessly, they started for the car. They reached the gate after a few minutes of jostling through the crowd. Leaving the carnival grounds behind, the two of them tramped through the tall, wild grass that led to their car. Both noticed the gathering storm-clouds but neither commented on it. Gary began to raise his hand to pat his brother on the back or muss his hair playfully, but an invisible sheet of glass, impenetrable, seemed to stand between them. Gary lowered his hand helplessly. They reached the car and got in as the first drops of rain pattered on the hood.

Gary put the keys in the ignition but made no effort to start it. Instead, he turned in the seat to face Jimmy. The younger boy was pressed up against the passenger side door, looking out into the cold drizzle. Gary tried to think of something to say. The words wouldn't come.

Kevin Hillstrom

