

HOME | CURRENT

HOMESPUN

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of tennessee technological university*

2001 - 2005 Issue

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First Place
2003-2004 Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize
Judge: Dr. Kevin Christianson

John Brown III

A History of the Universe Spelled-Out in Crushed Bug Parts

Everest is a liar
 Because mountains are fragile
 Because mountains aren't so tall.

A black beetle
Skitters across my bleached kitchen counter top
A dark thought bleeding across white paper.
 My body is the Lincoln
Monument. To buggy eyes I'm a lumbering slab
Of scenery, a hunk
Of historic architecture draped in amber tank top.

Leo and Capricorn gyrate
At noon behind an aqua-colored curtain dancing
Merry-go-round mammals that ride
A continental drift.
 I trace the sky's fault lines
 With a seismologist's pinky, point
My tongue at Orion to taste the falling
Stars, cinnamon dwarfs and blueberry nebulae snowing
When the big one hits.

Before a comet killed the lizard monarchs
And Noah built a boat for a raincoat.
Before a month was a day, before a sea was a drop
Before a word.
 An eight year-old man named Phil
Got a universe for Christmas. He pared away the emerald paper
Devoured the box and slyly snapped together
Plastic black holes, planets and suns.
Phil soon tired
Of toying with the universe, shoved it in his sock drawer,
Lost it
 Because it was dull
 Because it was tinier than mouse turds.

The cosmos is imprisoned in one atom
Inside a molecule of mud on the shell
Of the black beetle that I killed
With the comet of my Sunday edition.
Scrawled with dark thoughts, a headline in it reads
"Everest is shrinking."
I smirk.
Everest lies in purple mountain's majesty
An exoskeleton easily compacted.

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Maria Ramirez

Memories

Blindfold me sharply.
Strap my pain.
Devour me lightly.
Console my brain.
Undress the lies.
Collapse my mind.
Replay behind my eyes.
Please me for this moment in time.

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Was it when you stopped painting your toenails?
Did the bottles of varnish that once liberated you
Dry forgotten on a crowded shelf, grown solid and hard?
Did all the colors lose their shine?
The glitter sparkles die?
I wish I could take you back to then
By painting your toenails and let you live again
 I wonder when I will no longer care to paint my toenails
I wonder when I will become my mother
whom nail polish alone might have saved

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First Place
2004-2005 Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize
Judge: Dr. Kevin Christianson

Carla Welch

Monica

red hair, sexed
metal in mouth;
a living laughter
that cries joy.
dorm room drinks
and tori amos songs;
dreams filtered through a weak body's tenacious attitude. swimming
south to sunshine,
far away from here.
late night talks
and infrequent letters.
bigger dreams, a new school, and red-petal love.
no insurance, troubles; hell-o o o to sterile white walls dripping
infections.
in and out, in and out;
back to work.
things seem better; laughter continues, seared with pain. can't afford
medicine
and the process repeats.
hell-o o o to sterile white walls dripping infections.
in and out, in and out
back to work.
coughing, bleeding, dying red in the bathroom stall.
a call, a friend swam west
in an ocean of bittersweet blood. i tumbled to the floor in the middle
of
walmart; crying out and screaming
till thoughts disintegrated, numb, knowing sorrow would come. i drove
all night
south to sunshine
and tori amos songs,
to fill balloons with
her red ashes.

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Honorable Mention
2001-2002 Lora A. Printz Memorial Prize
Judge: Prof. Tom Saya

Tallu Scott Schuyler

the plane ride

this is our story.
it can be told quickly now.
it was so short,
like a plane ride.
a trip,
just across my backyard.

we boarded each other
shy at first
and then anxious.
we bit nails at the awkward departure.
we lifted the arm rest and
nourished a touch.
we never knew our fellow passengers
or the plastic woman
standing in the aisle
breathing directions and
shoving warnings
into our ears.
we were all we could hear.
you,
and the plane we now owned,
were my only company.
on a plane, the flight is all.

we pushed a button
and we let our backs down.
months, it seems, we were flying.
we spoke with our eyes.
we slept on shoulders.
we touched with tongues.
we sucked on clouds.

but anything besides
the sedimentary arm to armrest
and glacial head to back of chair
feels comfortable on a plane ride.

our playtime
was to pass time.
we arrived at the sensation of falling.
we passed through air pockets and
you stowed your traytable away.

and our final destination
was hardly recognizable,

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sort of like
not knowing your hometown
through the airplane's window.

I don't think we crashed
if we had,
we wouldn't still be so tired
it would have been an instant thing -
a boom and a fire.
but we avoid each others glances in the hallway
and we silently have resumed our living
on the ground.

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Honorable Mention
2004-2005 Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize
Judge: Dr. Kevin Christianson

Lee Ramsey

Sleepless January

Now you lay me down to sleep
I weep and weep and weep and weep.
Tears saturate my pillowcase
Please do not look into my face.
I sob and moan
Cough and groan.
Wish to die, pray to die
Stab myself in the eye.
Pull out my eyeball from its socket
Wrap it gently and place in my pocket.
Endless hours of fun, fun, fun
While I bake my eyeball in the sun.
Sizzle like bacon, fry like eggs
Now it's time to chop off my legs.
Toss them out the window and into the yard
Knocking out my bodyguard.
It does not matter anyhow
He has nothing left to do.
I cannot see, I cannot run
I cannot have any fun.
I lie and wallow in my self-pity
Gee, my life is super shitty.

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John Brown III

Eyes of Glass

Their Technicolor eyes called me faggot
When we first made hand contact
Your palm was slick with butter and spit
While we sat in the abortive womb
Of a spindle-thin moment, we held hands
Like lovers in our comfy sensory
Deprivation tank.

You are a lanky orangutan when you see me.
Arms that last for parsecs, toes tripping
Like a toddler or a sailor with gelatin for legs.
You seize me like taloned prey
Goofy grin, drooling like a 24 year old infant.
You squall, "I missed you" and "I'm crazy"
And "My friend."

Their sermon was stentorianized through teeth
Squeaking with cotton colored maize.
The feature presentation: two adult males
A tangible convergence of camaraderie
That condemned us to fire
And sin stone funerals. My stomach became an upside-down vortex
Of ants tunneling for Kool-Aid. Your hand felt
Like a sweaty fungus, but I held it
Like a last breath. You yoyo-ed with excitement
Virgin to the taste of Eden's fruit.

You move in August
Slobbering a stream down the window
Of the van you are doomed a life-long passenger of.
You call me when I'm busy and I'm sick
To my intestines again because I don't have words for you.
Never did. You live in an unparallel universe where
Evil is dead and strangers and enemies are specters.

I envy your Taoist mastery, the Zen
Of an otherworldly lamb.
And I'm glad I can't make sense of acrid laughter
That christens you Dummy or Dimwit or Retard.

The surreality of your skin
As our life lines formed a vertex, the slow
Novocain of an awkward moment. A gradual
Dawning familiarity, like the first kiss, when I realized

I want to touch every person in space-time
But they will never let me through that half-crescent
Glass that non-exists in your reality.

But you will never read this poem.

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Amy Knox

Sounds of War

The sounds of war, the hints of war
Are beating in our bosom
To fight to win, 'tis noble sin
The battle scene is gruesome.

A mother's cry, the sucking child
Were better `twere not born
The man's great deed, better hold his creed
Than bear his neighbors' scorn.

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First Place
2002-2003 Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize
Judge: Dr. Kevin Christianson

Elizabeth Deanna McMillan

"12"

12 days since the lights blew out
12 days late one came back on

maybe we can find anything new under the buzz
maybe we can see the colors on the tv

maybe we can stop winding
until we break holes in the table-?

12 days later the basement flooded
and all the food was gone

12 days later the basement flooded
the floor cracked

maybe we can die from laughter
maybe the barn will rebuild itself

maybe we can shout from boxes
maybe the ocean will pay a visit

12 days late was the shot
maybe we can finish breaking the table

12 days late we found
a marsh in the living room

12 days late the floor cracked
and we filled it with the ruined food

12 days late was the sound
of a barn rebuilding itself

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Second Place
2004-2005 Golden Eagle Prose Contest
Judge: Prof. Michael O'Rourke

Nora Anderson

My Turn to Drive

I caught the keys Dad tossed at me and the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach got worse. The keys were rough against my palm and still warm from Dad's pocket. "Do we really need to do this today?" I asked.

"You've been putting this off too long, Marlene," Dad said. Great, this lecture again. "It's time you started driving yourself around instead of relying on one of us all the time." I shoved the keys in my pocket and hunted for my shoes, only half-listening. "You're almost twenty now - time to show a little responsibility." Shoes were behind the couch. I sort of remembered tossing them there the night before, after I tripped over them on the way to the kitchen.

Shoes on, I looked around for my sunglasses. "Seen my shades?" I asked Dad, who was standing by the door out to the garage, one hand on the doorknob.

"There's a pair in the car. Quit piddling and come on."

"Drive safe!" Mom called from the kitchen. A new catalog from Dell had come in the mail that morning, and she was comparing prices and specs on all the different computer models. Probably comparing them to old catalogs while she was at it. When we got back, Dad and I both would have to listen to the breakdown. She did the same thing before picking a cell phone plan - spent almost a month torturing the rest of us with plan comparisons. Suddenly driving didn't sound that bad.

The garage was warm from the afternoon sun and smelled like gasoline and old grass clippings. Our old lawn mower was still in pieces along one wall from when Dad tried to fix it. I always felt a little silly that we had a garage, like someone transplanted our house out of some suburb into the country. For most people, parking in the driveway was good enough, but Mom could be pretty paranoid sometimes. She always thought someone was going to steal the car right out of the driveway. Her minivan was the only thing ever parked in the garage though. Dad's company car and his truck stayed in the driveway, parked in the little turnaround lane that curved around the side of the garage toward the back yard.

It felt weird to open the driver's side door of the van, like I was getting in backwards. Dad tried to knock his cap off getting in on the passenger side and had to push the seat all the way back. I stalled a little more, making adjustments to my seat then messing around with the mirrors. The red parking tag marking me as a commuter hung from the rearview mirror even though the van had never been parked on campus for longer than five minutes.

"Make sure you can see out of all the mirrors," Dad said. He finally gave up on the cap and took it off. In the stuffy heat inside the van we were both sweating already, and Dad's bald head was shiny and slick. I rolled my window down about halfway before starting the ignition. The sound of the motor rattled off the garage walls and I could barely hear Dad telling me to hit the remote to open the garage door. I knew to do it anyway, but grinned at the mental picture I had of the back end of the minivan smashing through the garage doors.

"What's so funny?" Dad asked.

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"Nothing, just had a thought." I shifted into reverse and eased out of the garage. I backed up and turned around, since there was plenty of room in our driveway for it. The way the idiots living on our road drove, I wasn't brave enough to try backing out onto the road. Probably get creamed by somebody flying over the hill or around the blind curve coming from the other direction. Three or four people had died over the years on that little stretch of road, either smashing into trees in our yard or running off the road on the other side, where the bank dropped away sheer for ten or twelve feet before sloping into the woods.

"Down the hill or toward town?" I asked. If we turned left out of the driveway, the road followed the ridge another mile or two then snaked down into a hollow to follow Morrison Creek out to the river. It was a nice drive, but didn't take you anywhere. Turning right eventually got you out to the highway, and from there it was just a few minutes into town.

"Town for now," Dad answered. "We'll circle the square and get you used to driving again." The square, built around the one-hundred-year-old courthouse, was about all there was to town.

I pulled out, hitting the gas a little harder than I meant to. Gravel from the driveway pinged against the underside of the car. "It's not like I've never driven before, y'know."

"I know," Dad said. I glanced over and his knuckles looked a little white where he was holding onto the armrest. "But you're out of practice. When was the last time you actually drove anywhere? Not since the accident, was it?"

"Bull! I drove to the grocery store last month sometime." Yeah, I was a little out of practice, but it's not like driving was hard. It's like a bicycle -you never forget. Dad was really making a big deal out of me not wanting to drive. I could, if I had to. I just preferred to avoid it.

"Don't forget your turn signal here," Dad said. I had to wait for five or six cars to pass before I could pull out onto the highway. "Wonder where everybody's going," Dad said, sounding a little impatient. I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel in time to the clicking turn signal, until it was clear again and I could go.

"You're doing really well." When I glanced over, Dad had let go of the armrest and looked a little more relaxed. "A few more trips out like this and you'll be ready to drive to school all by yourself," he said.

"Great." I rolled my eyes and checked my mirrors, trying to ignore the nervous flutter my stomach was doing at the thought of driving myself to school.

Mom drove me to school in the morning, like always. I was taking just enough classes to be full-time, so I could stay on Dad's insurance. Didn't feel like pushing myself much more than that. The campus is only about twenty minutes from the house, but I guess I might have gone somewhere else. Got away from home and lived in a dorm, maybe. I thought about it. Even filled out applications to schools all over the state. The problem wasn't getting accepted -that always confused me, when they'd show kids on TV getting their application letters back, and they were all worried about being accepted. Maybe schools around here have low standards, or maybe those kids were just dumb. Transportation was the main concern. How would I get there and back, and how would I get around while I was there? Anyway, I was stuck at home for the time being. I was looking at an art school though, thinking about transferring in another semester or two.

"I saw your friend Janey at the grocery store the other day," Mom said. She hates silence, always has to make conversation on these rides. "She's working as a checker there now."

"Yeah, what about her." I stared out the window, not really that interested in hearing about Janey. Sure, we used to be friends, but we're completely different people now.

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"She said she hadn't talked to you in forever - you should call her sometime."

I rolled my eyes. "It's not like we have anything in common anymore." To tell the truth, I didn't know if that was the case or not. After graduation most of my friends went away for school, including Janey. I tried to keep up with a few people who were close, but it was embarrassing for them to always have to come and pick me up. They'd always ask the same thing: when are you going to get a car? I had no idea Janey was back in town. I'd quit calling people a long time ago.

"That just means you have a lot of catching up to do." Mom fiddled with the sun visor - it was kind of bright this morning. Pretty sky today, lots of those high, thin clouds and then the sun bouncing off of them so they turned this intense gold that was hard to look at. I love painting clouds, and these were some of the best kind. That's what I usually do. Stare at the scenery, absorb it so I can use it later. Saves me from listening to Mom and her small-talk.

I glanced across, checking out the other side of the road. With the leaves off the trees, I could see a big chunk of a gravel road that eventually intersected the road we were on. Some guy in a red pickup was really booking it down that road too - a big white dust cloud covered the whole road behind him. Even after I lost sight of the truck behind some scrubby little cedars growing up next to the road, I could still see that cloud of dust. Mom was still trying to adjust the stupid sun visor.

"Just put your sunglasses on, jeez," I said.

"I couldn't find them this morning. They weren't in my purse." She gave up on the visor and just held one hand up to shield her eyes. The sun wasn't bothering me that much, because I could shift around until the frame of the van blocked most of it. I think that's why I saw the red pickup first.

"Mom, watch out!" The guy blew right through the stop sign - didn't even slow down. Mom slammed on her brakes and I felt the whole car sort of slide toward the edge of the road. I couldn't say anything else. It felt so much like before, when I was with Tim. That same helpless, aware feeling - you can see what's coming but can't do anything about it.

Mom blew her horn at the guy and got us back into the road before we hit the ditch. "You turkey!" she yelled. I tried to see his license plate, but he was already too far away. The only thing I really caught before he was completely out of sight was a big plastic scrotum hanging from his bumper.

"Did you see what that guy had on his bumper?" I asked.

Mom laughed - it was a little shrill, like nervous laughter. "Yeah, wonder if he's compensating for something."

I laughed then, and it sounded just like Mom. My heart was still going nine-hundred miles an hour, and I'd bet if I held my hands up my fingers would be trembling. We hadn't been anywhere near going to wreck, I knew in my mind, but my body thought differently. All of the sudden I needed to pee really bad. I squeezed my knees together and went back to staring out the window, but I didn't see the familiar scenery anymore. All I could see was Tim.

He used to have this junky little blue Ford Tempo - I don't even know what year it was - he had paid some guy five hundred bucks for. It would run most of the time though, got me and him to school and back, at least. We'd sometimes run errands for Mom, too. "Run and get some milk for dinner," she'd say. Tim could have gone by himself, but if I went he sometimes let me drive home, once we got on the back roads. My license was still brand new and I wanted to drive any chance I got. I couldn't wait to get my own car.

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Lori Poston

Focus

Stepping out of the shower
Water just dripping off me
The phone rang
And rang
I just let it ring
Not caring
All my focus on rubbing the towel
Down my breasts
Over my stomach
And still the phone rings
I rub the towel over my legs
And between
The answering machine picks up
My focus is still on drying my body
A voice sounds
Not mine
As I slowly bend
And dry my feet
A voice says "Tag you're it"
And my focus changes

The feel of soft cotton
Sliding down my body
Over my breasts
Past my stomach
Down my back
Coming up my legs
Covering my feet
Wet hair tangling
Down my back
Exhaustion takes hold
As I curl up
Hugging my pillow
Hair like a fan behind me
My focus wavers
As sleep fills my mind
And my body stills.

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Matthew Ross Mabrey

Pretty Is a Special Nothing

Pretty is a special nothing
To whimsical everywhere thrown.
Light is of a certain hollow,
And shadows lay in doorways.

Fire is a knowing heat
With tangerine tongues to kiss the dark.
But dark holds no hue to verb;
It likes no better company than solace.

Solace is an empty something,
But only darker violet.
No one will
For no one knows
How to make good company of solace.
(except for dark)

Gleaming is a fortune hue,
But glint, is glint is glint.
Solace is a empty something
Pretty is a special nothing.

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Matthew Lewis

Numbing the Semantic Hue

Phosphate fingerprints tip-tapping the glassy shards
left from the broken pseudo-science of feeling,
hoping that amnesia can be capsulated
and synthesized
and taken in pill form.

And it can, if only temporarily.

Blurring until the tempo of a word
is only the vibration of aphid legs in silent scream
of space,
the syllables crawling
until the particles of speech
slur and slosh across the jagged cliffs of
forgetfulness.
An insect in its death throes to forget
the utterance of a word; that is myself
struggling to misplace your name.

The same word used to invoke
notions of music box masterpieces
attuned to Bach by candlelight.
The same figment of imagination
used to play a special kind of pretend.
Pigmentation of oceanic overviews,
the kind once called forever,
complete with sonnets
and an "I love you"
that contaminates
even the ruins of relating.
Each sound hieroglyphic; pictographs
showcasing how a world
still burns.
Each breeze, a winter attuned.

All this clear-cutting
just to forest the tree we carved our initials on,
wanting so much to deplete the treasury
mentality culminates.
Lifetimes, it seems, spent losing the
self
in order to displace something.
My world is off-roading now,
not wanting to follow the road sign heartbeats
that have always loved "You."

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Leasa Darine Jones

Angel's Wings

On angel's wings we found you,
lying in your bed.
The call from home was hopeless,
we thought you'd be dead.
But you were strong for all of us
the pain you set aside.
The fear we fought to hide from you
in god we must confide.
You show such strength, no worries.
A smile dawns your face.
The courage set inside of you
our little girl of grace.
To ask god why is pointless,
we know not what he does.
Or why that this must happen to a little girl he loves.
Small hopes are our saviors,
they come from day to day.
Our prayers will be with you,
and your faith will guide your way.

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Honorable Mention
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Wally Trevathan

TIME CHANGES; TIMES CHANGE

Times, they change. Or I guess we say time changes. It matters, you know? Not just so the subject and verb agree, but because one way says one thing and the other another.

Long before Marshall Mathers rapped about Vicodin and L'il White `bout "OxyCotton," I sang with Axel about Mr. Brownstone long before I ever danced with Mr. Brownstone; long before I even knew what it was.

Long after the hippies Hoffman and Hendrix and the Gypsy Sun Band at Woodstock spoke of the horse and long, long after Bayer trademarked the name, I snorted its fraternal twin brother, breathed it into my brain long after Master P pronounced it "herone."

And in the East, the Crew called on Dr. Feelgood before Dre and Eazy dropped the china white on the West Coast, and afterward, in the mid-South, I crushed the pills too, as useless as a Captain D's on the seaboard, as useless as a razor and a straw and lid in anyone's hands save the hands of one who crushes "them thangs."

Long after hydromorphone was all but worthless, I found a better, cheaper way in Percocet long before the price of Tylox dropped in Tennessee, long before the meth labs skulked into the small towns about which Cougar sang.

Long before it became a problem but long after it started, I learned it long before the times or time changed.

How'd they say it? "I used to do a little, but a little wouldn't do it; so the little got more and more."

Long after I knew it took more and more before I had enough, I knew I needed more and more than before and even more the next time.

Long after the straw for olfactory bliss but before the rig in mainline, I learned that time changes and the times change. But there is a difference. The time changing is simple – it happens in most places sometime around the equinoxes: fall back, spring forward.

Times changing is different. Watch eras flow and settle, eddy and ebb, wax and wane. It's the life and death of time, the grit of time.

And you'd better watch the times changing because they do – even if they change before you know. Or after you die.

Hold on, I've got some mysterious white substance in a thin white line between the thin blue lines between which begin the creative process and a presidential portrait, a Jacksonian likeness rolled tightly on itself. Well, here goes. Time changes while the times change. And all and none of it stays the same.

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Stephen B. Hewett

City of Lost Children

Meandering through the labyrinth
trying to solve the maze, the orange
glow of street lights hang abandoned
at the mouths of urban caves. Children
tucked snugly into bed, dream the dreams

of the damned. Stolen from school yards,
playgrounds and Church yards, then sent to
a far away land, pawns of the King
with cold, clammy hands. When they wake
crying, tears streaming down their cheeks
every drop is collected for the King

who cannot weep. The pawns clash
in battles of some forgotten war
some falling on the field, dreaming of home
they will no more. They go missing
on a map with no names, buried in graves
with no markers dug by friends

feeling no pain. Innocence lost
to time and place, hope diminished
to accepting fate. Home is gone
and death has faded, leaving them
alone and jaded.

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Matthew Voyles

Amatory

Unsuccored, pale faced, world weary,
pseudo-inebriate, nonentical,
One too well acquainted with fragility,
I made love to a strange woman one night,
Her name was solitude.
Bearing her insouciance,
I read her love poems till dawn,
While in the luminescence of candle light,
She vehemently plucked the strings of my heart,
With a cool green hand.

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Honorable Mention
2001-2002 Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize
Judge: Prof. Tom Saya

Elizabeth Deanna McMillan

Stalemate

When my beloved O2
Halted wavelengths diffused
And the sky refused to be blue
In the bathroom

I held it
And it settled and sifted and shifted and shrank
Then it was gone in a flash
The test found a new home in the trash

The tunnel stormed
Through the abdomen field
Flickering like
The mucus on my thigh

Within minutes
The dying for the first time circumvented
And my own growth inhibited
His digits formed a fist

Steam crawled from crevices
I never knew existed
My uterus rammed, I heralded action
The bank doctor pumped through death

We could not keep the son in a jar
So I threw him in a dumpster
Maybe skunks adopted him
Or ate his curdled brains

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First Place
2001-2002 Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize
Judge: Prof. Tom Saya

Chris Blankenship

Hole in the Clouds

Every so often I like to go
Wandering through an open field
Drifting through the blades of grass
Wondering what my thoughts will yield.

One such walk in the autumn wind
Turned my thoughts up to the sky
In the endless expanse of the heavens
I watched a few clouds meander by.

These clouds were strange, though
Seeming to have their own threshold.
On one side, the sky was empty and blue
On the other, the clouds hung dark and low.

At first, I thought to stay on the sunny side
And bask in the warmth of the day
Then, to my surprise, I saw a beam of light
Shine down from the clouds of grey.

A hole in the clouds, letting light shine through,
Down to the world below.
And though it was quite far from where I stood
My heart told me that I must go.

A few steps and the brink was crossed
From field to forest, into the murky light
Pursuing that one spot in the trees
Where radiance shattered the blight.

Finally, I reached a small clearing
And spied the sunlight flowing down.
A burst of color and life
To the forest of grey and brown.

I stepped forward, past the threshold
Basking in the sunny glow.
Then I realized that here, only I stood apart
Illuminated in a world of shadows.

After a moment, the wind shifted
Closing the rift in the sky.
And still I stand in a world of shadow
Waiting for the clouds to pass me by.

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Honorable Mention
2001-2002 Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize
Judge: Prof. Tom Saya

Andrew Schnell

Hallways

How
in a world of six billion
can one person be
alone?
The halls are
teeming with people,
each with agendas,
each with a purpose
(although most don't know it)
Can any of them be
alone?
Not the sanctuary sought in solitude,
Not the time needed to think,
Not the aloneness sought for in escape,
but emptiness,
the inability to connect,
the lack of the option, the need, to seek silence.

The secrets of the universe are revealed
here
everyday.
Some revealed on the blackboards,
(who will hold these secrets, again)
some on scraps of paper,
and some
(probably the most important ones)
taught on the stairwell
in transit
(in silence)
when we're spending the least attention to them.

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First Place
2004-2005 Golden Eagle Prose Contest
Judge: Prof. Michael O'Rourke

Elizabeth Ayres

Virtual Union

So I plan on being in Georgia in 2 wks, Bob Crawford typed on his laptop, waiting anxiously to read GA_PEACH142's Instant Messenger response.

Really? What calls you back to GA?

My son's graduating from college. You remember me talking about Bryan, at UGA? I'm flying in for his commencement ceremony so he doesn't think I'm a complete bastard father.

No, I'm sure he appreciates the gesture. Are you coming by yourself?

Bob looked out the window from the couch to make sure Alison's car wasn't pulling up the drive.

Yeah, I thought it would be best if I should go alone. My ex Susan is nice enough to let me stay at her house, so I didn't want to inconvenience her with more houseguests. Bob laughed at the thought of bringing his wife along with him.

I guess that makes sense. How long are you going to be here?

I'm coming in Wed. the 8th, and going back home to CA on Sun. night.

That's nice. You'll get to spend some time with him before you go back.

Yeah. Linda, I don't think I could be more proud of him. I just wish I could see more of him. The only contact I really get with him nowadays is the occasional phone call every month or so, and even then, we don't have much to say to each other besides 'how's the weather?' or 'how's school going?' The conversations never last more than ten minutes. He pressed "Enter" and read the "GA_PEACH142 is typing..." prompt that appeared in the corner of his screen. The sound of a guitar strum evacuated from the speakers, and a new message popped up in the window.

When he gets older, I'm sure he'll call and visit more. We all were broke during college at one point in time, right? Laundry was more important than long-distance phone calls. I remember learning how to shave phone calls home down to five minutes flat, lol.

He laughed at her response. He knew full and well how broke a college kid could be. He was on the six-year program during his school years.

So, back to the Georgia thing - I'm coming in on the 8th, and I don't have any plans set in stone until Friday night, so I was wondering, would you want to meet up or something during the week? He finally said what was on his mind, and his heartbeat sped up the longer he had to wait until he could read what she thought about the idea. She took longer to respond than normal.

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Meet up?

Dammit, she asked the question again - she's stalling, that's not good, Bob assessed his situation, rubbing his palms on his pant legs. His fingers rushing across his laptop, he typed, Yeah, I mean, we have been corresponding for a couple months now, so maybe it's the next step. We could go out and get a drink, maybe dinner. You could show me around the town, fill me in on all the things I've missed in the past 10 years. He second-guessed his approach. *Shit, I sound like a desperate teenager.* Then there was a longer pause than before.

I don't know, Bob. We'll see.

"We'll see" was a better response than what he was expecting. Bob wiped his brow and returned his fingers to the keyboard.

I'll tell you what - you name a place and time, and I'll be there waiting for you, okay? Just go by the picture that I sent you. Simple as that. More pausing. Waiting for an answer was a bitch, especially during times like this.

His ears picked up another guitar strum emitted from the computer, and **Be right back** popped up on the screen. "Shit," he said out loud. He leaned back onto the couch, intertwined his fingers and grabbed the back of his head. With a furrowed brow and closed eyes, he pondered the possibilities of what she could be doing right at that very moment. She could be grabbing the phone book and looking up a fun restaurant; that was good assumption. She could also be blocking his screen name from her buddy list, never wanting to speak to him again. It could go either way; it was a toss-up. He had to ask himself: Was asking a girl out in high school ever this nerve-wracking? At least when you asked her out, she couldn't run away for an unknown amount of time before she gave you an answer; it was a yes-or-no question, and you had to give a response. Maybe she didn't like how he looked; he sent her a picture of himself a month ago, and maybe the sheer idea of meeting this ogre from the picture in public so repulsed her that she was inclined to heave. He didn't think it was too bad of a picture. He was in his fire gear leaning on a slightly burnt marble statue of a limbless woman that he had salvaged from a modern art gallery that caught on fire earlier that year. It showed him in action, working hard on the job, and he thought that might impress her. Bob never thought himself a drop-dead gorgeous fellow, but he tried to keep in shape, and for 52 years old, he was in peak form. His mother always told him that he was a handsome man, that he looked just like his father: blue eyes, straight nose, prominent chin, and all. His thinning blonde hair did give him grief, but he was sure there were some women out there who found that attractive. He always thought of that saying, "Grass doesn't grow on a busy street." Maybe it meant that he was smarter than those stupid saps with a full head of hair.

Sorry about that, there was someone at the door.

That put to rest some of Bob's insecurities - at least she came back to the conversation. So would you wanna meet while I'm there? I'd love to meet you and talk to you in the flesh. Pausing became unbearable; he wanted an answer now.

Flanagan's Bar and Grill on 3rd and Peachtree. Thursday, 10:00 pm.

Bob found a note pad and scribbled the instructions down as tires crunched gravel outside the window. Bob saw the nose of Alison's white sedan from his seat. It was perfect timing to sum up the conversation. Okay, Flanagan's on Thurs. @ 10pm, I'll see you then. Linda, you do trust me, right?

Yeah, I guess so.

Great. Well, see you then. Bye. He closed the IM window and opened up his email account as jingling keys opened the door.

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"Hey, babe," a tall, shorthaired brunette walked in the living room with a paper grocery bag under each arm. Alison walked over to Bob and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "How was your day?"

"Alright." Bob closed his laptop and put it on the couch. He got up and grabbed a bag from her and walked into the kitchen.

"What'd you do today?" She opened a cabinet and shoved in cereal boxes.

"Nothing much, pulled an early shift at work, came home and played around on the Internet."

Okay, what do we have: suit and tie, nice shoes, knock-around clothes and sneakers, underwear, toothbrush, toothpaste, razor, blade replacements in plastic bags, aftershave, deodorant, and plane tickets. Bob went through the stuff in his suitcase in his head before he zipped it up. He wished he could bring his laptop with him so he could talk to Linda in private, but somewhere along the line his wife Alison tried to convince him that he wouldn't want the extra carry-on, and, like a whipped married schmuck, he agreed. Bob wanted to make sure he didn't forget anything important for his trip to Georgia. It was a sure thing that if he did, Bryan would remember it and most likely talk about it with his mother as soon as he boarded the plane back to California. Bob wished he had a better relationship with his son, but then again, what could he have done? Divorcing Bryan's mother Susan was an action agreed upon by both of them, so it wasn't like he deserted his only son with no good reason. The truth was, the marriage was crumbling anyway. When Bob got a prime job offer as one of the fire chiefs of the San Francisco Fire Department, and Susan didn't want to pick up and move her whole life, the decision for divorce seemed to already have been made.

He and his current wife, Alison, were together for about eight years now, and they seemed to have been falling into a similar slump. He heard there's a time in every marriage when the fun, exciting aspect starts to fade away and the simple routine feeling sinks in. Bob and Alison were crossing that bridge. Maybe that was another reason why Bob opted to go alone to see Bryan graduate - to get away from the routine. The first reason was his son didn't exactly get along with Alison too well. About seven years ago, he invited Bryan to California to visit and see where his dad worked and lived. Being around each other was a little awkward. Bob could imagine how Bryan must have felt, visiting a person he once thought abandoned him only a few years back. He certainly didn't expect him to run from the tarmac into his arms crying, "Daddy, I love you!" He had to be satisfied with a handshake and a few one-word sentences until Bryan started to open up a bit. Alison didn't make the situation any more comfortable. She was born, raised, and educated in New Hampshire. Bryan's Southern accent and middle-class background didn't exactly mesh with Alison's upper-crust Dartmouth personality. Also, she was young, and she'd never been a parent before. Bob could tell Bryan was having a hard time respecting a stepmother who was only fifteen years his senior. To put it bluntly, Bryan hated everything about Alison.

Bob started dating Alison seriously about four months after his divorce with Susan was finalized. He didn't really get a chance to sow his single wild oats for long, and, for some reason, he felt cheated. Getting away from Alison and California was what he needed at the time. Linda, better known as GA_PEACH142, seemed to help him during his most chaotic moments. The two met in an "Over-Forty Friends" chat room about four or five months ago; her screen name caught his attention, and they hit it off from there. They've talked to each other through IM ever since. Bob relished the fact that they could talk to each other for as long as they wanted, and, if the conversation started to slip or one of them was tired, they could say goodbye and sign off until next time. There was no general conversation to fill time, no awkward silences. GA_PEACH142 and BCRAWDADDY1 could talk about anything and everything - children, work, the Braves' dismal opening season - you name it, they probably discussed it. Linda was almost like a non-committal girlfriend. They were there for each other if the other wanted to talk, but they both had their own lives without the other.

Bob looked forward to being near Atlanta again, but he knew it would be a little uncomfortable being around Bryan and Susan the whole trip; meeting Linda would be a connection back to

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his comfort zone. He wasn't really sure about his feelings for her, though. He and Linda seemed to have a connection, a sort of chemistry with each other. He saw the picture she'd sent him a few weeks ago, and she certainly was a looker. She had a great personality, she was funny, and, to top it off, she was beautiful. She reminded him of Jane Fonda in *On Golden Pond*. The picture she sent was taken when she was in the Smoky Mountains on a camping trip with her daughter. Linda was wearing hiking shorts, a tee shirt, and a ball cap, and her blonde hair was in short pigtales. She stood behind her daughter; her arms were slung around her little girl's shoulders in a tight hug, both of them sporting huge smiles. Linda had the prettiest smile Bob had ever seen. Bob wasn't really sure what he was going to do when he got to meet her, and that scared him.

After about the thirteenth time looking in his carry-on bag, he was assured that his plane tickets were in the front pocket with the Velcro closure. His luggage was standing together in a huddle in the corner of the bedroom. Bob set the alarm on the nightstand, took off his glasses and climbed into bed. The cool cotton sheets seemed to have a relaxing effect on Bob's tired brain, and after a few minutes, he fell asleep.

"Welcome to Atlanta International Airport on this fine Wednesday afternoon. The current temperature is a comfortable eighty-five degrees Fahrenheit with a humidity level of thirty-three percent. Skies are mostly sunny with a chance of clouds later in the evening. The current Atlanta time is 4:17pm Eastern Standard Time. If you have checked any luggage before boarding this flight, your baggage may be picked up at the baggage claim station designated on the sign next to the exit passageway. If this is your first time visiting the Peach State, we hope you enjoy your stay and come back soon. If you are a Georgia native, we would like to be the first to welcome you home. Thank you for flying United Airlines flight 9066. Have a safe and wonderful afternoon."

The pilot's soft soothing voice over the intercom wasn't enough to calm down Bob's nerves. He didn't know what was making him more nervous: meeting Linda for the first time or seeing Bryan and Susan again. The plane touched down with a little scoot felt in the cabin, and it wasn't fifteen minutes before the plane was ready for de-boarding. He sat back for a few minutes while the majority of the people bum-rushed the exit of the plane. Looking down at his white knuckles and his hands forming what seemed like a vacuum seal to the armrests, he took a deep breath and eased up a little. When the bottleneck at the door had seemed to dwindle, he got up slowly and removed his bags from the overhead. He made his way to the door and smiled at the cute flight attendant standing at the door.

"Thanks for flying with us today, sir." Bob looked at her nametag just above her wings: "Melanie." "Enjoy your stay in Georgia."

"Oh, I'll try," he said as he pushed the strap of his carry-on a little bit higher on his shoulder and headed for the terminal.

The connecting hallway from the plane and the airport seemed like it got longer with every step he took. He emerged into the terminal turning his head all around. Neither Bryan nor Susan was in sight. He walked a little bit further and stood there for a few minutes. Groups of people around him were hugging relatives or friends, smiling and exchanging pleasantries. He made the executive decision to head over to the baggage claim to pick up his suitcase and come back when he saw them sprinting toward his general direction. Bob's heartbeat sped up and his shoulders tensed again. He first recognized his ex-wife, Susan Mitchell: she still wore her red hair short and curly, but she looked like she'd gained about twenty pounds since the last time he'd seen her a couple of years back. Even so, Susan had the kind of face that you could recognize even if she'd gained 200 pounds. She was wearing khakis and a blue short-sleeved sweater. Before he could make eye contact with her, she turned her head to say something to the person walking beside her. Bob looked over to the young man to her right and almost didn't recognize him. The last time he'd seen Bryan Crawford, his son, in the flesh was when he visited California seven years ago, when he was fourteen. Now twenty-one years

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old, Bryan was taller than his father, about two or three inches taller. He'd bulked up some, gained some more muscle. Bob had seen pictures of Bryan since then, but there was a difference from how he looked then and the last picture he received from Susan's Christmas party two years back. He was dressed nicely, wearing a polo shirt and nice pants. His hands were shoved in his pockets; that must have been a trait he picked up from his father when either one of them was nervous. He was handsome, that was no lie. He looked more like his mother now than he did the last time father and son were face to face. Bob was at an impasse with his emotions. Bryan was the first to look at Bob standing there with a smile on his face. He gave a quick smile that hid his teeth and waved a little. Susan looked up and gave a similar smile as she approached him.

"Hi Bob," she said as she touched his arm and gave him a short hug. "How was your flight?"

"Oh, it was fine. You look great." He rubbed his right palm on his pant leg before extending it to his son. "Hello, Bryan, how are you doing?"

"Good, glad you could make it." He mimicked the motion, and the two men shook hands then leaned into a light hug, all the while being watched by Susan. Bob had a smile on his face that looked semi-forced, because he didn't really know how to feel or what to say at that moment. There was a short moment of silence when Susan spoke up.

"Do you have stuff at baggage claim?"

"Yeah, I do. They should be unloading it about now." The three made their way to the escalator and went down to the bottom floor where several of his fellow passengers were waiting around the matte silver curly-shaped conveyor belt. Bob still had that awkward smile on his face.

"So, Bryan, are you excited to be graduating?" Bob asked, trying to begin conversation, praying to God it wasn't going to be another string of one-word replies.

"Yeah, I guess so," he said. *Good, up to four words, nice start.*

"Bryan's already got a job at a D.A.'s office for the summer, and then he drives up to Lexington to UK for law school in the fall," Susan spoke up for her son. Bob looked into Bryan's eyes only briefly before his son turned them back to the opening of the baggage claim. He noticed Susan looking up at her son, beaming from pride before their attention was reverted back to the little square doorway.

Black and green suitcases were already moving on the conveyor belt, parting the hanging pieces of black rubber and making their way to their waiting owners. Bob pondered silently why his son had decided to choose law as his profession. He hated lawyers, and somewhere in the back of his head he thought maybe that was the reason Bryan wanted to be an attorney.

Bob's bag was one of the first out of the doorway, and they were soon headed to Susan's car in the parking lot. He walked a few steps behind Susan, and Bryan was not far from his mother. As she rummaged through her purse to find her keys and eyed for her car in the giant parking lot, Susan spoke over her shoulder.

"Well, we've planned something for us to do every night you're here. Sorry we don't have an extra car for you to use while you're here, but there's still that Avis in town, and a new Enterprise office too, if you want to rent one. I took off Friday to help Bryan pack his stuff at his apartment and move back into his old room for the summer. You wouldn't mind lending a hand, would you?"

He was looking back at the airport before he realized she'd finished her sentence. "Yeah, I'll help," he turned back around. "If you don't mind, I kinda made some plans to meet up with

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someone on Thursday night. You don't have anything big planned for that night, do you?" He saw Susan turn her head back towards him with a quizzical look through her sunglasses.

"Uh, no, nothing that can't be changed. Who are you meeting?"

He pondered what to say next. "Just a friend of mine that I met in California." Technically that was true, so his conscience wasn't going to get him for that one.

Susan hit a button from her keychain, and a trunk door of a silver Chevy Lumina three cars down popped up. They loaded his bags and hopped in the car. Pulling out of the lot after paying the toll, Bob felt another round of discomfort beginning to set in as the Lumina made its way to their small hometown of Braselton, Georgia.

Looking at the tag on the key he was just given, Bob searched the tiny Enterprise parking lot for his assigned car, an emerald green Dodge Intrepid, license plate number "NQI 371." He'd gone out to dinner with Bryan and Susan the night before, and Susan had something planned for every night but Thursday, when Bob wouldn't be around. Thursday afternoon was the only real time he had to himself until he flew back to California. He had just finished signing the agreement with the rental car dealer before he'd walked out of the glass door and onto the lot. He checked his watch. 4:53 pm. He had more than enough time to get ready and be there at 10:00, but he still felt edgy. Braselton was only about thirty, forty minutes away from Atlanta; he could easily fit in a shower and a good shave, eat something light to settle the butterflies in his stomach, and just relax until 8:45, when he would get in his car, get to Flanagan's with a few minutes to spare, and have drinks at the table before Linda even walked in. Yeah, that sounded right. Hopefully, the interstate systems hadn't changed much since he was there last. Ten years was a long time for him to be gone, but he could still find his way around. He jumped in his rental car and pulled out. He needed some music to calm him down. Luckily, the last person who drove the Intrepid had already programmed the radio stations. He hit button #1 to review his musical options.

"She had dumps like a truck, truck, truck, guys like what, what, what, baby move your butt, butt, uh, let me sing it again..."

"What the hell?" Bob questioned out loud. His face grimaced as he pushed another button on the radio console.

"On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair, warm smell of colitas, rising up through the air..."

Don Henley and the Eagles were just what he needed then, a song that reminded him of home. Bob couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, but he still tried to sing along, and he kept time by thumping his fingers on the steering wheel.

"Welcome to the Hotel California, such a lovely place (such a lovely place), such a lovely face (such a lovely face). They livin' it up at the Hotel California, what a nice surprise, bring your alibis..."

Fifteen minutes later, he was pulled into Susan's driveway. He was lucky tonight. Susan was out shopping with her sisters for a dress to wear for commencement, and Bryan was back at school visiting his girlfriend, Christy. Bob had the house to himself for most of the night; he could run around naked if the need called for it. He threw his key on the counter and headed for the bathroom for a long hot shower. He got out and waited until the condensation on the mirror had mostly disappeared before he started to shave. He looked at his watch. 6:22 pm. He put on his pressed pants and started buttoning his shirt. Bob walked around the living room as he was tying his necktie. An old episode of "Full House" was on the TV in the living

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room; he didn't much care for "Full House" - those damn little Olsen twins grated his nerves - but he couldn't find the remote, and he wasn't really paying attention anyway.

Before he knew it, Bob was dressed and ready to go at 6:45. *Only two hours to go before I take off.* He sat down in the middle of the couch and stared at the TV, but that brought him no ease. His patted the tops of his knees with his fingers and looked around. The computer desk in the corner gave him an idea. He had to talk to Linda. Bob stood up, but sat back down just as fast. He pondered his options. *That's not my computer. Besides, what if Susan comes home early and sees me?* Bob walked to the window and parted the curtains with his fingers, looking out to see if Susan's car was coming up the street. Nothing. Bob ran to the computer chair and saw that her computer was already turned on. *Thank God,* he thought as he went online and found the "IM Express" page. *God, Susan's computer takes forever to load up.* He typed in his screen name and password with fingers of fury, looking over his shoulder for headlights in the driveway. Bob shook his knees rapidly and bit his nails as he waited for recognition of his request; his nerves made him fidget like a crack addict in detox. *Please be on, please be on,* he repeated in his brain. Then his buddy list finally popped up in the upper right-hand corner of the screen. *She's not online.* Bob felt let down, like a partially deflated balloon. He really wanted to talk to her before he saw her; he hadn't spoke with Linda since the day they set up their plans to meet.

7:00 pm rolled around slowly. *God, I gotta do something.* Bob couldn't hold still much longer. He grabbed the car key from the counter and drove to a nearby ATM. He pulled out some cash and went through McDonalds and ordered some fries, something that would fill his stomach and possibly calm him down. Driving around town managed to take up thirty minutes. He went into a grocery store and bought a bouquet of flowers for Linda. *She might appreciate that,* he thought as he looked at the selection. To take up some more time, he wandered around the aisles, picked up the latest copy of "Stuff" magazine and headed toward the checkout line. Bob got in the car and peeled the price tag off the cellophane wrapped around the flowers; he got her a bouquet of carnations, daisies, and other types of flowers he couldn't identify if you held a gun to his head. He stuck the key in the ignition and turned it far enough so the radio would come on. The clock on the radio prompted "8:14," and that was good enough time for Bob to hit the interstate to Atlanta.

Traffic got a little sluggish about forty miles into the drive. *There must be a concert in town or something.* He was glad he left a little bit earlier than expected. Bob finally hit the exit ramp into Atlanta and paused for a bit. He looked out his windshield at the tall buildings that were in front of him. It'd been ten years since he'd been in this part of the country, but he felt it was as if he'd never left. Restaurants and nightclubs filled the majority of the strips in Atlanta, whereas if Bob were still in California, the streets would be consumed by fitness centers and spas. It was about 9:15 pm by the time he pulled into the valet parking area at Flanagan's Bar and Grill. Bob passed the rental car key to the valet driver, a small Puerto Rican man in a red vest whose nametag read "Miguel." He walked into the restaurant to the hostess' podium and asked to be seated.

"Can I by any chance get a seat where I can see the doorway?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, we can do that, but it may take longer to get a table," the hostess replied, sounding slightly agitated by the request.

"That's fine. I'll sit at the bar." She handed him a little black box that would blink when his table was available.

Bob pulled up to a stool and ordered a Guinness, thinking that if he should be in what was supposed to be an Irish restaurant, he should probably order an Irish beer. The place smelled like corned beef, the special of the day. Judging by the conversations he had overheard, there was a couple meeting on a blind date to the left of him, and a group of college men behind him. He sat there for a while, listening to the distinct Georgia accents around him. Bob wondered whether Linda would have a thick Southern drawl. He liked women from the South, especially compared to the women in California. Southern belles seemed to be more at ease

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with their surroundings. When Bob lived in Georgia, it wasn't a shock to see a woman eat something like fried chicken. A Californian woman would go to Spago or some other obscenely expensive restaurant, order a small salad with no dressing, take three bites, and say she was full. Georgian women had more confidence with their bodies, and that was a welcome sight to see. He sipped his Guinness slowly and watched the bartender work. After about twenty minutes of intense watching and learning how to make a martini, the little black box started to blink, and he found his way back to the hostess to retrieve his table.

He sat at his table with his Guinness, smoothing his tie every five minutes. Every time he'd see the door open, he'd flinch. He still hadn't seen Linda, and it was about 9:45 pm. *It's still early. Take it easy, big guy.* So far, he'd seen four couples, a black woman and her teenage son, and two sets of friends come through the Flanagan's entrance, and none of them looked like Linda. Fifteen minutes and another Guinness rolled by, and there was no sign of her. Bob rested his elbows on the table and stretched his shoulders. *Come on, she's probably busy putting on her makeup. Probably running a little behind.* He gave himself a pep talk every time the bell above the door rang, sounding the entrance of somebody who was not Linda. The waitress came by again, and he ordered some cheese sticks, something that would keep him busy enough not to think the worst.

It was 10:30 pm when Bob started to think of excuses for her: she'd run in apologizing for her tardiness, saying something like, "my car wouldn't start," "I lost track of the time," or "my daughter got a button stuck up her nose and had to be taken to the ER." He would've accepted any excuse then, just as long as she'd be there to tell him in person. Bob wanted another beer more than anything then, but he didn't want to look or act intoxicated when she did show up. He needed something to take the edge off, though. Bob motioned for the waitress to come back, and he ordered two glasses of Beringer White Zinfandel. *If I go ahead and order her drink, she'll show up in a few minutes,* he assessed. He could see a quick glimpse of the traffic every time the door would open and slowly close back. *It had to be traffic. It's getting worse. It's gotta be traffic, I feel it.*

11:35 pm. Still nothing. Bob had watched the couples come and go and the black woman leave with her son, and he overheard the raucous college men pay for their drinks and stumble out the door. He was unfamiliar with the feeling he had; he'd never been stood up before. He'd gone through two glasses of Guinness, both his and what was supposed to be Linda's Beringer, a basket of cheese sticks and a plate of buffalo wings since he'd been there. Through the stained glass partition between the restaurant and the bar, Bob could see the shape of a waiter flipping the chairs seat-down on top of the tables. In a booth near the kitchen, some waitresses and the hostess were dividing their tips, occasionally peering over at Bob and saying something amongst themselves. Bob grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair and slid some money, \$40, into the black faux-leather check holder on the table. One of the waitresses walked over to ask if he needed anything else before he left.

"Did anybody call for me, leave a message for a Bob Crawford?" he asked, his forehead crinkled enough to form a wrinkle between his eyebrows.

"Let me go ask," she said as she turned back to her booth of coworkers. Bob saw the hostess shake her head. *No.* The waitress walked back to Bob, but he already knew what she was going to say.

"Thanks for your trouble. You ladies have a nice night."

Bob walked around for a little while, trying to work the alcohol out of his system so he could drive back home. He went into an all-night coffee house down the road from the restaurant to just sit, drink some coffee and think. His self-esteem had never been as low as it was right then. *What am I going to do now? Do I not talk to her? No, I can't do that. I just wanna know why.* After about an hour and three cups of black coffee, Bob was ready to hit the road back to Susan's house in Braselton. He checked his pocket for the extra key she'd given him so when he came in, he wouldn't disturb her. He left a couple dollars on the counter and walked over to his car. He realized he'd left his flowers in the restaurant when he saw petals in the passenger

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seat; he didn't care anymore. He locked the doors, turned on the ignition, and pulled out of the parking lot.

Bob helped Bryan move out of his apartment on Friday and went to his commencement that Saturday. He was so proud of his son, but something else was gnawing at his mind. Linda. *What went wrong? I don't get it.* That Sunday, Susan and Bryan drove Bob back to the airport and sent him on his way to California. When the plane touched down, his wife Alison was waiting for him in the terminal with a smile and a kiss.

"How was the trip? Was Bryan happy to see you?" she asked.

"Yeah, trip went really well. He certainly is handsome. He's gonna go to law school in the fall," Bob replied, and smirked.

"Oh, that's nice. Wait a minute, I thought you hated lawyers."

Back at home, Bob threw his suitcase on the bed and sat down for a minute. Traveling made him tired. He began to unpack his clothes and throw stuff in the hamper when he saw his laptop computer sitting on the desk. He paused for a second. Bob crooked his neck and peered out the open door of their bedroom - Alison was busy in the kitchen making them a late-night/early morning snack. He sat down at the old creaky desk covered in papers, receipts, and semi-important documents. He opened his laptop and began to call up his IM when he stopped. *Wait a minute - what do I say? What'll she say? Who's gonna start talking?* Bob sat and stared at the screen and just thought. With a crinkle of his brow, Bob closed the laptop and walked in the kitchen to help his wife.

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