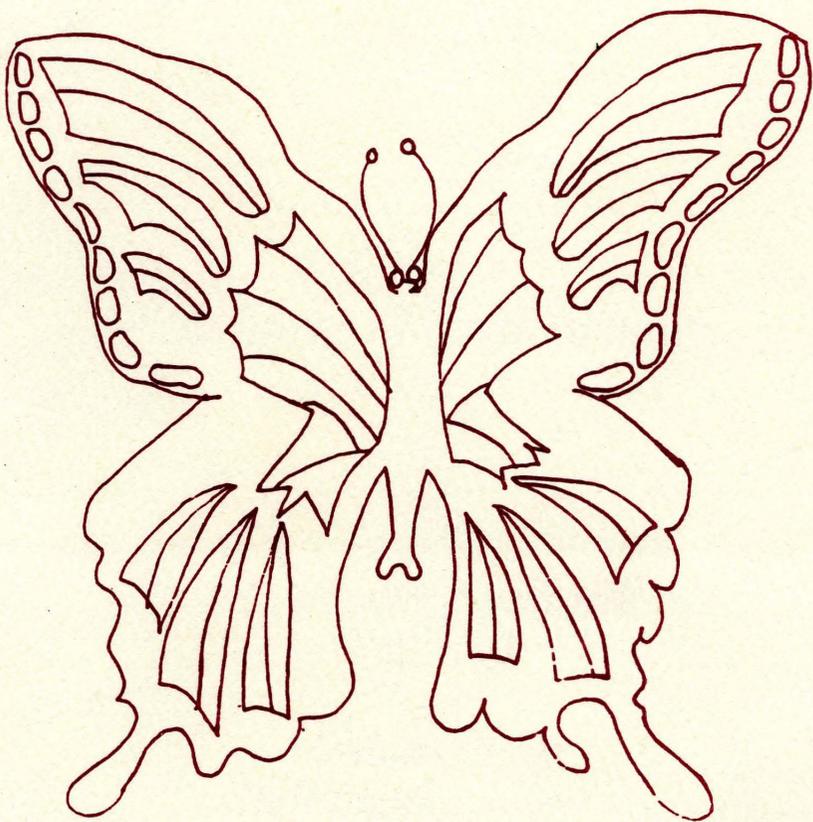


Fioretti



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Contents

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a literary anthology

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Art Work

cover \ Betsy Uhl

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Contents

The Perfect Couple -- A Fairy Tale \ Kerry Dearth	4
Love Production \ Noelle Marie Gasco	7
Tomb Essence \ Todd Gavin	9
My Aristocratic Life \ Deadra Webb	10
The Comma, Cal Hy-phonical Conspirasay Daniel A. Felicetti	14
Mythological Puns Holly Fehlinger and Jeanne Lovins	15
We've Come A Long Way, Baby Sandy Barnett-Daulton	16
Beauty \ John J. Mathis	18
Love \ Carrie Rajchel	19
The Reality War \ Noelle Marie Gasco	20
Strobe \ Claudine Elzey	26
Love Incandescent \ Greg Knipe	27
Daydreams \ Kerry Dearth	28
M.Goo Says Nursery Rap \ Alex Swifden	34

The Perfect Couple – A Fairy Tale
A Story of Love in the Twentieth Century

by Kerry Dearth

Once upon a time there was a man and his wife. They lived the regular married life that they had lived for more than fifteen years. On one particular Friday afternoon, an unusual episode took place. The man, while in his office, decided that this Saturday he would give up his regular indulgence of sports on T.V. Instead, he would spend the day with nature, the great outdoors, and, of course, a twelve-pack. He discussed his plans with two of his office buddies. They suggested that he go canoeing with them Saturday, but since the two buddies were already committed to sharing the same boat, the man would have to find his own partner.

After a long day at the office and a few hours in the tavern, the man returned to his home with a remarkable idea and, by coincidence, still no partner for his Saturday excursion. He thought it would be a very nice gesture to offer his wife the excellent opportunity to be his partner on this most wonderful canoe venture. The wife, in turn, thought it to be a nice gesture on her part to say “yes” to her husband, since she knew he would not have a partner otherwise, even though canoeing excited her not in the least, and it seemed more a bother than an amusement.

“It’ll be fun,” said the man. “We’ll have a great time. Drink some beer...”

So they arrived Saturday morning at the canoe sight. The man thoughtfully chose to sit in the rear of the canoe, considering he was more apt to control the direction of the vessel. Now, the man, being wise in strategical maneuvers such as these, had also secretly considered the size of his wife. Knowing that the person in front had the unique task of power-

ing the boat, he positioned his wife in front. The buddies, respectfully, took their canoe, and the foursome set off after consuming a sufficient amount of alcohol.

Everything went smoothly at first. The wife paddled very strongly, and whenever she looked back, the man appeared to be working just as hard. Soon, however, they experienced a few mishaps, such as running aground or bumping an occasional rock or two. This always prompted the man to give his wife a few pointers on the art of canoeing while at the same time providing numerous adjectives so that she would be sure to get exactly the point. All the while the two buddies snickered to themselves.

Now it got to the point where both the man and his wife began to entertain thoughts that this trip was indeed a bother, and at one climactic point, the vessel was misguided somehow and ran smack into a rock. The magnitude of both the jolt and the alcohol caused the man and his wife to lose their balance, turning the canoe and tossing them into the river. There was no escape. After coming out of his ill-fated plunge, the man screamed at the woman:

“You stupid _____! I told you _____(this and that. _____ this and _____ that). Everytime I take you somewhere, you _____ up. _____!”

The woman in tears cried, “It wasn’t my fault. You always blame.” Then in anger, “That’s it! I don’t want to see a canoe ever again. I didn’t want to go boating in the first place. You can go by yourself if I’m such a handicap. I’m not stepping foot in there again. Never ever!” She started to walk to shore when the man grabbed her.

“_____! You _____! I _____ done _____ everything for you and you _____! _____!” And he gave her a powerful shove to her forehead that sent her falling backward into the mucky water on her behind. With that she stood up, went to the canoe, grabbed the paddle, and began

swinging at the man. All the while, the buddies chuckled to themselves up river. The man took the blows from his wife undaunted and grabbed her by the neck, forcing her to her knees.

“You _____,” he grunted, as he cast her head beneath the water, as if to drown her. He held her there for more than an ample amount of time to make his point clear, before letting her up. She, panting for breath, ran out of the river into the woods.

The man stood for a while with his hands on his hips and stared disgustedly into the woods. Then he went over to talk to his buddies and drink a beer. Meanwhile his wife cried on the trunk of a tree. The buddies, seeing that it would be difficult for the man to control the canoe the rest of the way by himself, convinced the man to talk to his wife. So he did. He thought it to be a nice gesture on his behalf to go all the way into the woods to reason with her. He said things like: “My temper got a hold a me,” and “It wasn’t all your fault,” and “C’mon. We’ve gone this far. It’d be a waste quittin’ now.”

The wife sobbed, “Okay.” So the two returned to their boat and completed the journey without speaking another word to each other. The man spent most of his time steering and conversing about nothing with his buddies, who spend most of their time snickering at the man. The wife spent most of her time admiring the birds and the butterflies.

The canoe trip ended in due time, and they all went home. Everyone was content. The two buddies were content that they had many stories to tell behind the man’s back at the office come Monday. The man was content. He got to spend the day with his buddies and drink beer, and he still had all of Sunday to watch sports on T.V. and drink beer. The man’s wife was content. She was the man’s wife. So the man and his wife went home. They drove off into the sunset in the man’s rusty to pickup truck and lived...together.

Love Production

They say I love you with
a kiss good-bye.
But these are men who
Manufacture peace and
protection with weapons,
Men whose hearts burn red
Like the rose they gave you,
Which when plucked from black soil
Will soon wither. It will
Die a thousand deaths
Like the city aflame
in the aftermath
and when the dark clouds clear,
the soil, barren of love,
No longer bears roses.
Yet, thorns remain like the
Missiles aimed to prick your
Passionate heart with the accuracy
of Cupid's single arrow,
Until you cry
Pools of blood on red
Stained soil. They
Promise to write
as they sign peace treaties
with only true intentions.
Some do, but the letters
Always stop when the bombs
are dropped and dead
Silence is your explanation.
They promise they'll call.

Some do, but the phone eventually
Stops screaming
Numbing your ears
to the painful cries
of Hiroshima, and to their
Words once spoken, to calm
the famine of a broken
Nation. But, they were not
Enough to satisfy the
Hunger for peace and love.
Nor were their promises
that rested in the arbor
of your heart
like an overwhelming
Fleet of ships, waiting
on a calm black sea.
Under the white moon they sat
and you were so entranced by
Their gentle drifting
that soothed you into security.
You were so intent
on searching for the fish
that swam like hidden meanings
Below the surface, hoping
Some deep commitment
Motivated their actions.
Yet, you failed to notice
the smoking guns on deck,
Turned in your direction as
They said I love you with
a kiss good-bye.

Noelle Gasco

Tomb Essence

A million men with lover's eyes
have spread themselves in deep green grass,
and watched the pillowed heavens pass
on feathered folds of dreaming skies.

In meadows you have never seen
I've lain on blankets thick and green,
and in me swirl an appetite
to dine on clouds of dainty white.

A silver spoon! an endless plate
of plushy, sweet immaculate!
The stuff that angels steal to eat
when God is full, and fast asleep.
They hide in heaven's shadowed places,
cloud juice dribbling down their faces.
Sweet addiction! All their own,
a flavor God has never known.

So how could one suspect that I
would let those luscious lumps roll by?
I stood,
my mortal tongue unfurled--
and licked the candy-coated world.

So all the clouds my tastebuds stole.
And of their flavor? I cannot say.
For one had caught me by the soul,
and with her I was blown away.

Todd Gavin

My Aristocratic Life

by Deardra Webb

I usually do not grant interviews, but, confined as I am to the house now, it gets a bit boring seeing the same people day after day. I used to have quite a large circle of friends, but perhaps I'd better begin at the beginning, if you're interested in my life story.

My life began quite dramatically, I think. My mother was residing with a family who lived in Canada, Stratford to be exact. This is where I was born. She was quite well-bred, given to quoting Shakespeare, and she simply adored Mozart and Beethoven. I was never completely sure who my father was, but he must have been very "aristocratic" also.

As I said, my life began dramatically. It was storming the night my sisters and I were born. There were four of us all together. Quite the most lovely litter of kittens for which a mother could hope. Everyone oohed and ahed over us. Although I couldn't open my eyes at the time, mother told us our first bed was filled with down and covered with the softest velvet. What an elegant beginning!

Growing old enough to have a family of my own, I was placed with an acting family. One of the members was part of a Shakespeare group located in Stratford. My mother's fondest dreams for me had come true. I had a very good chance of appearing in a Shakespearean production.

I grew to an adult cat and, indeed, I did appear in a play or two. This was exciting for me, of course, but I truly enjoyed best being at home with the family. There were two children who enjoyed playing with me and most importantly had been taught to be gently respectful of my station in life and in the family.

One early spring the family visited relatives in the States.

Of course, they couldn't go without me. We were traveling through Indiana and they stopped for gas. Now here is where the story gets a bit sad. A bird was pecking in the dirt, as birds will do, and I saw it. Being by nature a hunter, I could not resist the impulse to give chase. I jumped from the car toward the bird. Unfortunately, a dog was sitting nearby and the ugly cur began chasing me. I could hear my family's cries for me to come back fading in the distance as I ran for my life. Sadly, I never saw them again. The dog finally grew tired of the game and went home. I of course was lost in a strange and bewildering city and beginning to grow very hungry.

What was I to do now? It was the first time in my life I had ever been on my own. How would I eat? Where would I sleep? What if it rained? All sorts of worrisome thoughts flew through my head. Well, I knew I had always been very clever with my claws (thank God, my family had never had me declawed). I could snarl up yarn or string in a jiffy and could shred the backs of furniture in record time. Surely I would be able to catch a meal or two, disgusting as this seemed at first.

Well, of course, I did survive this free life I had been forced into. Gradually I almost came to like it. I travelled around neighborhoods begging for food. This might seem quite demeaning to some, but I think it shows the true artistry of a cat. Cats instinctively know how to approach an individual. Whether it's telepathy or just plain old cat know-how I'm not sure, but I was very successful in gleaning enough food not only to live, but to become a little plump. The real fringe benefits of this vagabond existence was the number of lady friends I acquired. Ah, what a life!

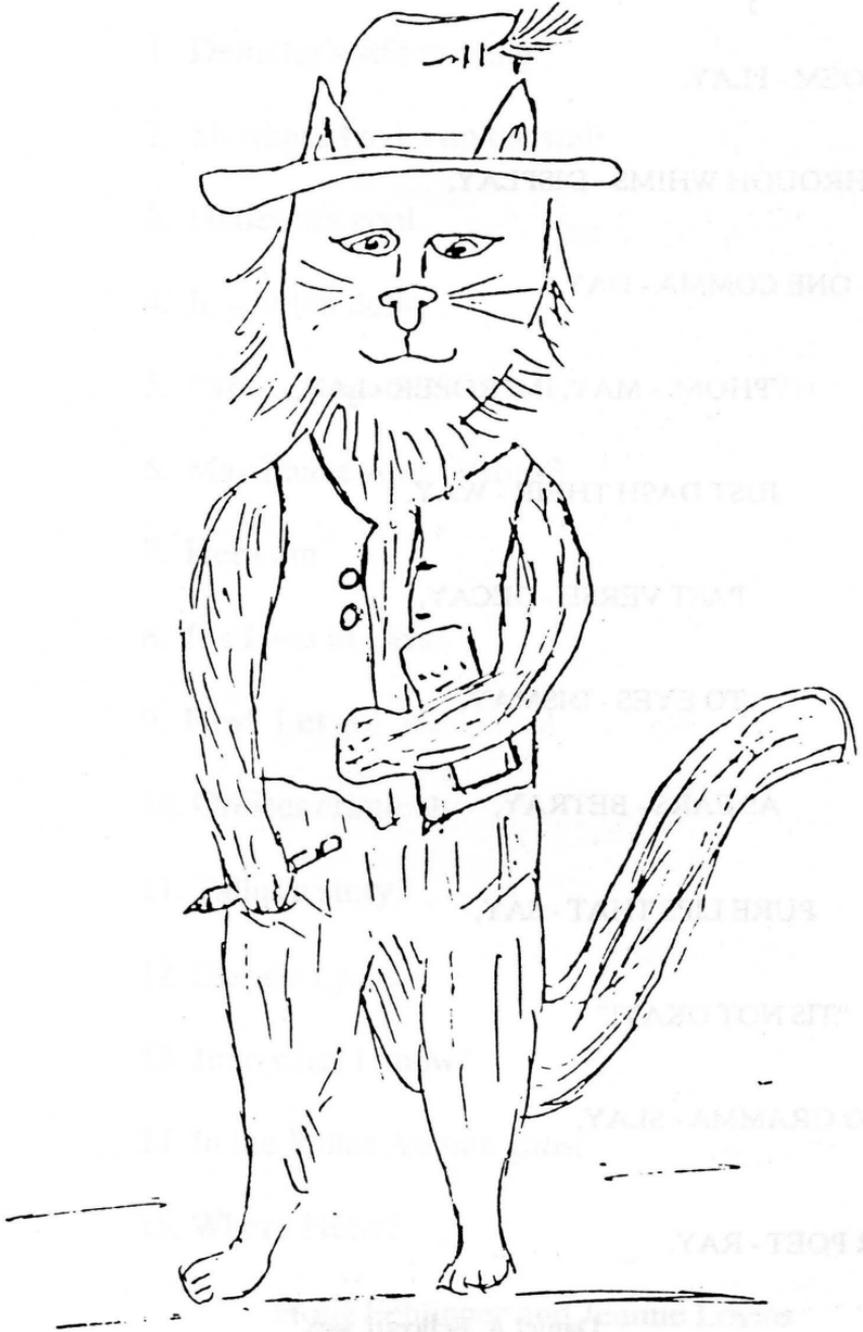
Soon, however, the weather began to turn colder and I began to think of settling on one particular family to honor with my affections. I don't really like this term, but this family was a real "pushover" when it came to stray animals. I even saw them feed the birds and squirrels. I kept appearing on their porch,

mewing on cue and, in short, endearing myself to them. I knew I had them wrapped around my paw. They would sit on the porch and I would sit on their laps. This really won them over. It was ever so much warmer for me too. I finally made the decision that they could have me in to live with them.

They already had another cat, an old codger named Mittens. He was almost as handsome as I. We got along quite well. This new family of mine was very kind to me, but in one area they were not very intelligent. Besides Mittens and me they had two dogs.

Now one dog was very affable. Actually she was quite lumpy and lazy. Her main interest in life was food and fawning over the family; no problem for me at all. The other dog was another matter all together. She had the nastiest habit of barking right in my face. Can you imagine the audacity? She was reprimanded by me and the family, but it did not good whatsoever. We live together in an uneasy peace.

Well, this has been my life thus far. Since I have used only three of my nine lives, I feel I will live to a ripe old age. It will probably be very ripe and very old since I am not allowed out anymore. My doctor has advised that cats live much healthier lives if kept indoors. The closest I come to being outdoors is sitting in an open window. Ah well, I suppose I have had a wonderful life (with apologies to Frank Kapra and Jimmy Stewart). If you care to visit in a few years for a follow up story, I would be most happy to oblige.



The Comma, Cal Hy-phonical Conspirasay

IN POEM - PLAY,

THROUGH WHIMS - DISPLAY,

ONE COMMA - DAY,

HYPHONS - MAY, IMPROPER - LAY,

JUST DASH THEIR - WAY,

PAST VERSE - DECAY,

TO EYES - DISMAY,

AS EARS - BETRAY,

PURE LIPS THAT - SAY,

“TIS NOT OKAY!”

TO GRAMMA - SLAY,

FOR POET - RAY.

Daniel A. Felicetti, yay-

Mythological Puns

1. Demeter's still running
2. Myrrha, Myrrha on the wall
3. Hades are cool
4. Io you ten dollars
5. Paris up together
6. May I have your Creons?
7. Hera am
8. Iris I was in Dixie
9. Hey! Let go! Euripides!
10. Orestes criminals
11. Tallus a story
12. Do you Lycus?
13. Juno what I know?
14. In the Pallas Athena ghost
15. Where Hebe?

Holly Fehlinger and Jeanne Lovins

We've Come A Long Way, Baby

by Sandy Barnett-Daulton

I was the best looking cow in the pasture. I watched my diet, eating all the right grass and grain and even did extra laps on the hills to maintain my physique. Finally, my time came and I walked proudly into the truck and rode off to the slaughter house.

The ride was a little bumpy. You can imagine all of us standing side by side trying to keep our balance around those corners! They stopped and picked up some of my cousins. It was nice to visit with them on the way and catch up on the where abouts of other relatives.

Once we arrived and finally got in, the stretching and tanning of my hide felt pretty good. It was the stitching that I didn't care for. I think they needed new needles instead of those square tipped ones!

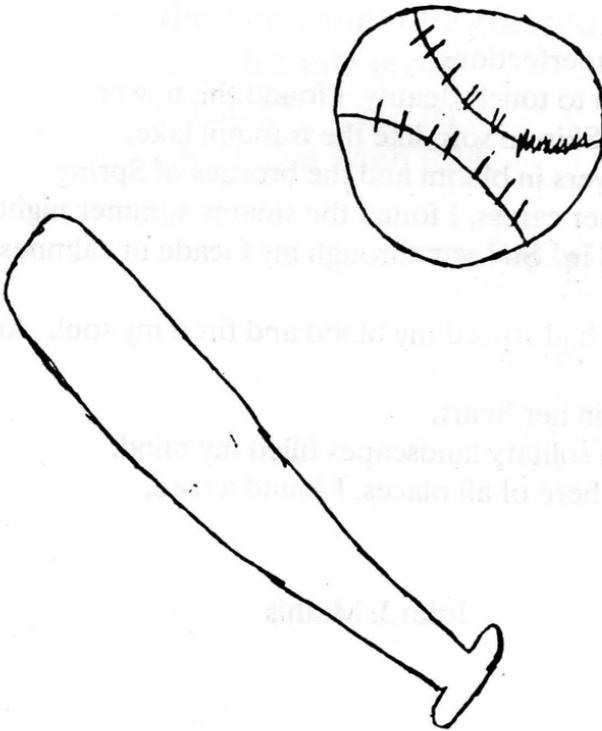
After they stamped my brand on me and added a price tag, I was off to the store. I was just hanging out, complaining to my friends about those bratty kids who were so rough, when another potential buyer came by. I heard her say she finally had to retire her old one. She picked me up, looked me over and tried me on. She commented I was about the right size and she liked the fact that I was already partially broken in. It was a sale. They poked me in a sack and off I went.

She was really nice at first, massaged me with oil and kept a ball in my pocket all the time. Finally, the big day came, my first game. Hey, we even started! Luckily, we were in the outfield and I didn't have to worry about getting all that infield dust in my eyes. We caught all the balls and won. Of course, we mitts didn't get the credit!

As the season went on, not all the games had that good a turn out. I got thrown on the ground, soaked in the rain and locked in the hot trunk. It was a winning season though, and we

had a lot of fun. I made a lot of new friends and was even fortunate enough to have cousin Bessie on the team. I looked forward to hanging around the dugout with them the next year.

During the winter, I hibernate in the closet where it's warm. I snuggle up to the cleats and dream of my next season on the diamond, snagging flyballs and discussing strategy with my teammates. We have to be ready because, let's face it, we know who the real stars of the game are!



Beauty

I met a woman last night. Beauty was her name.
Her eyes held great wisdom and pain.
And yet,
the warmth of the Sun was in her smile.
She called herself Grace, and rightfully so,
for it was the very virtue that I sought,
and found.
I was pleased to discover the compassion
and trust she gave to me.
I watched her every move,
her sighs,
and stretches,
and found no imperfections.
When permitted to touch Beauty, I found the power
of the Seasons. Skin so soft, like the tranquil lake.
Cheeks like flowers in bloom and the breezes of Spring
in her hair. In her caress, I found the steamy summer nights
that lovers revel in. She saw through my facade of calmness
and
proved that she had stirred my blood and fired my soul. And
yet,
I found Winter in her heart.
Cold, bleak and solitary landscapes filled my mind.
So strange that here of all places, I found a rose,
in bloom.

John J. Mathis

Love

To Love another is to accept
the most of the least,
or so I've been told.

To Love another is to see
the perfection of the beast,
and this tale is old.

In the presence of Love
the worst can be the best,
or so I've been told.

In the presence of Love
the fate cannot be guessed,
and this tale is old.

Or so I've been told...

Or so I've been told.

Carrie Rajchel

The Reality War

by Noelle Marie Gasco

Cautiously, the black nose poked out from beneath the gold armchair. His whiskers twitched nervously. Shy, one of the Hubert's cats, then stuck his head out all the way and frantically scanned the room. The coast was clear. Confidently, he emerged. But, as soon as the last inch of his fluffy tail was in full view, Dylan, who had been waiting patiently on the chair, dropped a brown clothes basket over the unsuspecting cat.

The mistake that Dylan's father had made was buying all of that stuff for him in the first place. The camouflage pants, the gloves that were two sizes too big and the wool lined cotton cap--all mistakes, and his father, Richard, as well as everyone else in the house, regretted the fact that they were ever purchased. But, by now it was too late. Dylan was already transformed into a soldier heavily engaged in a war. It could have been World War II, some war that never actually existed, or a war that was yet to come. Whatever the case, his son was in the middle of it all, grenade in hand, hiding behind the barbed wire trench that Richard usually sat on to watch television.

The "wars" usually commenced every evening around 6 p.m., a time Richard used to set aside to watch the news. Yet now there seemed to be no point in watching the reports on terrorist bombings when Richard was actually living them right in his very own front room.

To Dylan, Richard was simply one of the many enemies. He was greatly outnumbered by two parents, one sister and five cats. Richard tried to convince his son that they were in Switzerland, the neutral country, where there is no fighting. But Dylan refused to believe him since the enemy can never be trusted. Instead, he waited in the trench behind the couch, with his trusting attack dog Bro, until his father became so engrossed

in his favorite program that he was vulnerable to Dylan's attacks.

Every week, Dylan's sister managed to rescue the feline prisoners at least a dozen times from underneath the clothes basket cage that he captured them in. Their parents began to give up hope of ever living a normal family life again. After all, their son never stopped making sound effects long enough to speak to anyone, let alone eat, unless of course he was busy applying fake blood to his many fake wounds. So after all of this built up, they finally threw him outside to release his energy and to give the entire family some peace and quiet.

Outside, the sky was dark and gloomy, a perfect atmosphere for a war to take place in. Dylan was quite pleased that it was raining allowing him to test his flowing camouflage raincoat for the first time. However, there was a rip running down the right side like a crack in a window pane that practically sliced the jacket in half, rendering it useless. When Dylan realized this, he began to seek shelter, darting first behind trees then behind an old Ford "army" truck, until at last he slipped unnoticed into an abandoned barn.

A crisp, clean smell of hay filled his quivering nostrils as he tried to catch his breath. The rain pounded so persistently on the roof that Dylan feared it would cave in at any given moment. After replenishing himself with a granola bar that he had managed to grab before the enemy had spotted him, he peeked out into the rain. Thousands of tiny droplets stung his tender face and the wind whistled through his jacket, but there was no sign of the enemy. Then Dylan spotted a huge willow tree with its gnarled ancient branches just waiting to be climbed.

He burst out of the barn entrance into the rain as if he was shot out of a cannon. When he reached the tree, he stopped momentarily and pulled off one of his gloves with his teeth so that he could undo the button on his coat pocket.

When this was completed, his hand reached inside the depths of the pocket and came out clasping a garbage bag that was to serve as his parachute. He then began to climb the tree where he felt he could survey the land much more thoroughly. Once he felt he was high enough, not to mention the fact that he was afraid to climb up any further, Dylan began to scan the area for any signs of movement. Overhead, a skywriter flew, its smoky exhaust mixing with the black storm clouds. Nevertheless, Dylan read the message clearly. Bomber planes weren't far behind and the look out tower would be a primary target. In order to survive Dylan knew what he had to do. He firmly grasped his black garbage bag, hoped for the best and leaped off the tree limb. It seemed like he was falling forever. In these few lingering moments, everything was black and silent.

Dylan hit the ground hard. His white parachute slowly caught up with him to lay in a folded pile around him. The parachute was the only bright thing for miles around, although it too was now quite dirty. The rest of the landscape was barren and gray. There was no tree. There was no tower. Signs of recent bombings littered the field. Dylan heard the faint rumble of an engine in the sky. He looked up to see a plane disappearing over the horizon. Dylan stood up and, feeling nervous and anxious, he decided to investigate his new surroundings.

Dylan had no way of knowing how long he had been walking since he didn't have his watch with him. It may have been only hours but it seemed like days. From a distance he must have looked like a small wounded soldier wearily marching home from a battle. In truth, however, the battle was just beginning.

He could stand the heat and even the bugs swarming around his head, biting at his flesh any time he stopped moving. But the hunger pains knotted his stomach and his throat ached with thirst. Thorns grabbed at his jacket and scratched his face.

Finally, Dylan's exhausted body collapsed disappearing in the tall grass.

When he awoke, he found himself on a small mat of dried grass in a tiny bamboo hut. Tiny beads of cool water trickled down his face. Dylan stuck out his tongue to catch the drops of water that landed on his dry cracked lips.

"There's plenty more where that came from," a sudden voice pierced the silence, "especially since the rains started."

Dylan sat up, startled to hear a voice other than his own. But the moment he did so an overwhelming feeling of blood rushing to his head forced him to lie back down.

The stranger sat up and addressed Dylan as if he had known him all of his life, "You just lie still for a while. I imagine you're feeling a little queasy from a lack of food. When was the last time you had a decent meal, boy?"

But, he didn't wait for a reply. He just pulled himself to his feet and limped toward the doorway of the hut. Dylan noticed the white bandage wrapped tightly just above the man's knee that was stained with deep red blood, as well as the gun hanging at his side.

Out of the corner of his eye, the man saw the way Dylan looked at him. At one time, before the war, he was very handsome and tall with jet black hair. He was still young, but now he felt old and tired. As he turned his unshaven face, his deep brown eyes met Dylan's. Dylan's gaze confirmed his sorrow and he was forced to look away.

As the man disappeared through the doorway, Dylan suddenly realized that it was raining. For the first time since he woke up, he became aware of his surroundings. The rain seeped in through the thatched roof and, for a moment, Dylan almost believed that he was back in his familiar barn, and that if he were to look out the doorway, he would see nothing but his own backyard. Instead, when Dylan glanced toward the open doorway, he saw the mysterious man entering the hut carrying a

clay bowl filled with rain water. For some reason Dylan couldn't understand. He welcomed the sight of this man. He felt no need to ask the man's name, just as one feels no need to ask for the name of his own father. He felt a silent friendship between him and the stranger that was not acknowledged, yet it was understood.

"It'll all be over soon." The man sighed as he set a bowl of steaming food down before Dylan. Dylan could not recognize what was in the bowl and he cautiously lifted it to his lips trying to ignore the smell.

"It's not poison," the man assured Dylan, "although you'll wish it was when the enemy catches up to us."

Finally, Dylan felt strong enough to speak after finishing his meal. "How did I get here?"

But the man just sighed once more and glanced out the door as if speaking to the rain. "How did I get here?" he echoed.

"How did any of us get here? We don't belong here, you and I. This is a terrible world. No one is innocent, not even the villager who hid us in this hut. Do you think he won't betray us? No, No, he has himself to think of, if not out of greed then certainly out of fear." He shifted his gaze from the doorway of the hut, where the rain softly drizzled, to Dylan. "Why can't the rain just wash away all this hate?"

After that Dylan spoke no more. The man turned once more to the rain. But Dylan could still see his tired face. His eyes reflected the dark sky and his wounded leg, a losing battle. The man touched the bandage and let out a discouraged sigh, as if trying to find reason where none was to be found. The rain sprinkled peacefully and there was a moment of misty silence.

Screams filled the empty air. Dylan realized that the enemy had arrived, although he still wasn't sure why. But, he never had time to ask. The strange man grabbed Dylan, who was still clasping the small clay bowl, and began dragging him

through the village as fast as his tired body would allow.

Dylan closed his eyes, but his eyelids were useless, for he could still see the dead bodies on either side of him in his mind. He could hear the gunshots and he could not escape the cries of the wounded, calling out for death to free them of their pain. The dirt beneath his feet seemed to become a red river of blood that he felt he was drowning in.

There was a final explosion as the bomb was dropped. A huge black cloud of death covered the entire village and the screams were silenced. The heavy smoke cleared and Dylan realized that the rain had stopped. The dark clouds still hung threatening over the willow tree in Dylan's backyard.

"Oh, Dylan!" His sister stuck her head out the back door and scanned the yard for a sign of her brother. When she saw him lying under the willow, she raced outside to help him, "Dylan," she scolded, "have you been parachuting again? You must have been because you're filthy dirty. How many times have we warned you about that? You're lucky you didn't break your leg!" She helped him to his feet, "Hey, Dill, guess what? I bought you a fake machine gun today at K-mart. Now you won't have to make your own sound effects anymore!"

"I-I don't want it," Dylan mumbled as he leaned against his sister's arm.

"Boy, you must have had a pretty bad fall. But, it's all right," his sister gave him a loving squeeze, "I'm sure you'll be back to your old self in no time and you'll be fighting battles and capturing cats again before you know it!"

But, Dylan just shook his head and stared beyond their yard. He wondered if his friend had survived. His sister interrupted his thoughts as she sarcastically agreed, "Yeah, okay, I believe you. No more war ever, that's right." She glanced up and the dark clouds began to release the rain once more, "We'd better go in now. It's starting to rain again and you're going to have an awful cold."

As she led him inside, the rain began to fall behind them. It fell softly on the old barn roof. It fell on the ancient willow tree. The rain that slipped through the willows branched began to fill, drop by drop, a tiny clay bowl that was lying near a torn black garbage bag flapping ever so gently in the wind.

Strobe

Small streams of flowing
smoke rolling away from the flame
in scrolls slashed and broken
by darkness emitted
by the strobe. dancing
in slow motion, telling secrets
through form; stealing
time from the day, to be
seized by the heart and
swallowed in the
flash of
the strobe

Claudine Elzey

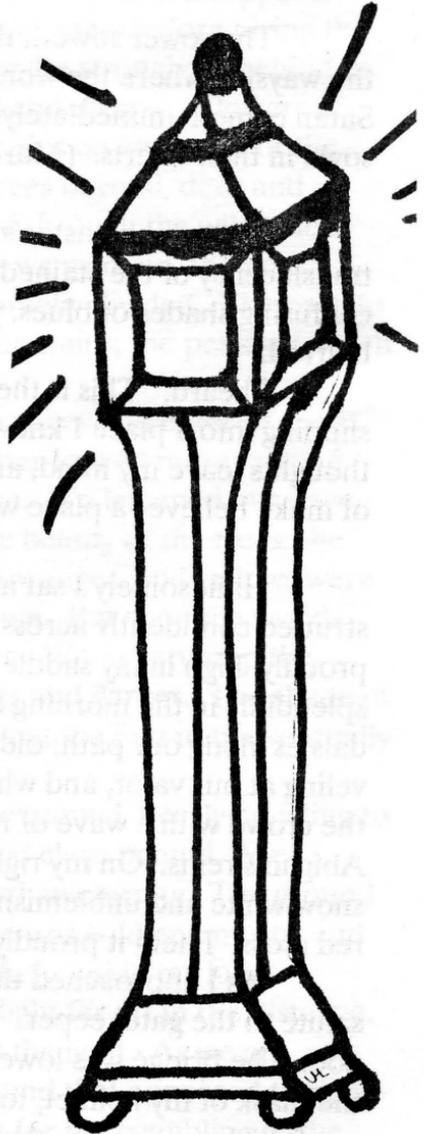
LOVE INCANDESCENT

I walk through the silent
New York streets as
the moon struggles to pierce
the clouds above.

Its beams battle through the
darkness which even
the streetlights cannot totally
overcome,
and add their sparkling reflec-
tion to the puddles on the
sidewalk.

Come...take my hand,
and we shall walk together,
you and I...one with each other
at last, our very beings
melding to forge a new reality
beyond our single
capabilities.

Greg Knipe



Daydreams

by Kerry Dearth

The sower soweth the word. And as these are they by the wayside where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts. (Mark 4:14-15)

I heard the pastor's monotone preach as I stared at the translucency of the stained glass window. I tried to focus on the confusing shades of blues, yellows, and reds, but my eyes blurred.

I heard, "This is the word of the Lord," before I fell, slipping into a place I knew very well. I felt all the twisted thoughts leave my mind, and for now, I was locked in the reality of make believe--a place where everything makes sense.

Handsomely I sat atop my trusty steed, Abigail, as she strutted confidently across the grassy courtyard. I, too, shifted proudly, high in my saddle. My shiny suit of armor sparkled splendidly in the morning Sun. Women and children tossed daisies along our path; old men stood silently to the side, marveling at our valor, and white doves flew overhead. I honored the crowd with a wave of my left hand; with the other I held Abigail's reins. On my right arm, I carried my shield of honor, snow white and unblemished, decorated brightly with a large red cross. I held it proudly.

As I approached the drawbridge, I waved my hand in a salute to the gatekeeper. He acknowledged solemnly with a nod. The bridge was lowered. I paused for a moment, lowered the mask of my helmet, took a deep breath, then gave the horse a soft kick to the ribs. Abigail responded with a whinny and a quick jaunt through the open gate. I heard the cheers of the

women and children, and thought I detected a few sobs.

We left the fanfare and the blessed castle behind in our dust. I set off on my search for adventure and, more importantly, the search for myself. The gatekeeper, in disappointment, watched us ride off into the wilderness before giving the nod to raise the drawbridge, securing the stronghold behind us.

The wilderness was beautiful and diverse. Flowers of every shape and color adorned the fields on each side of the path. Wildlife scampered into the trees beyond, deer and rabbit, wolf and hound. We galloped through the wilderness following a well trodden path, but as we went on, the path became less and less worn, and eventually divided. The path to the right led high into mysterious mountains, the peaks of which were masked by clouds.

The other path twisted into a valley and entered a vast woodland of autumn colors. The latter looked more inviting, and by instinct, that is the one I chose. We lessened our pace, taking time to admire the nature, the beauty of the trees, the color of the leaves. The bright reds, oranges, and yellows were magnificent and reminded me of home. But soon the woods began to thicken and close around us. With every step the afternoon vanished, becoming darker and darker. The shade of the trees no longer beautiful, closed out the Sun until eventually all was pitch black.

I dismounted and combed the ground, nearly crawling to feel the path; faithful Abigail followed close behind. We stumbled in the dark for what seemed an eternity. The ground became very damp. The atmosphere was cold and musty, and with every breath, the air froze painfully inside my lungs.

Finally, at one point, I saw a light far off in the distance. Cautiously we made our way toward the light. As we approached I heard a low rumbling sound that appeared to make the trees around us tremble. Except for the trembling of the trees and the rustling of the leaves above, the forest was still.

The air had heated up considerably.

When we reached the light, I froze. I could not believe the terror before my eyes. There, sleeping in a wide shallow pit, atop the bones of both men and beast, lay the most hideous of creatures--a fire breathing dragon, black as night, horned and deadly.

He slept belly-side up, exposing his underside, smooth like polished stone, yet impenetrable. Rough scaly skin covered the rest of his body. The fire inside his stomach glowed like red hot coals. As he inhaled, the forest shook with his snore, and as he exhaled, wiry flames of fire spiraled forth from his nostrils. All about him lay a hazy cloud of smoke, and the stench of death hung in the air.

I thought to myself, "What better way to prove my character than to conquer the dragon, and what better opportunity than when he is napping?" I nervously tied Abigail to a nearby tree, and quietly made my way down the pit. The heat from the dragon was intense. My armor began to singe my skin. I was forced to remove it and go forward armed with sword and shield, wearing only my undergarments.

I planned to thrust my sword between the monster's eyes before the dragon awoke. I tiptoed among the charred limbs and skulls of past heroes, careful not to make noise. I was well within thirty feet of the dragon when I faltered in faith. My nerves took over. I trembled at the presence of the beast. It caused me to lose my balance and step on a thin bone. The crack of the bone echoed among the dark trees and sent my heart beating in frantic pace. I stood motionless. All was still. Then, instantly, an eye opened, glaring at me. One single bloodshot eye, the pupil, evil and black, deep and endless, froze me.

In one moment the beast rolled over and stood. The creature must have been fifteen feet tall. He stared at me now with two slantedly evil eyes. He reached out with hideous black

claws, and as he raised his arms, he exposed his angelic wings. He wagged his snake tail back and forth; then slowly, he tilted his head back and opened his mouth, showing off his six-inch fangs, dripping with human flesh. Without warning, he thrust his head forward blasting a cone of red-orange flame in my direction. Quickly I covered myself with my shield. The shield saved me from the onslaught, but a good portion of it melted under the extreme heat of the attack. Abigail whinnied in the distance.

The magnitude of the attack caused the dragon to become winded, and before he could recuperate, I tossed the shield aside and instinctively rushed forward, waving my sword. I leaped at the dragon's heart, but the beast intercepted my thrust and smacked me with his hand. The smack sent me flying upwards, where I became entangled in the branches of the overhead trees. I remained there, calculating my next move.

As I hung there, the dragon spoke, "Fool! Those who dare enter my realm die in my realm. I shall kill you and reek havoc upon your brethren. But tell me where your castle is located, and I will spare you your life.

I replied, "Never will I hand my people over to you. You may kill me, but my brethren will overcome you."

"So be it, brave knight," the creature snarled. "Let yourself drop, and I will catch you."

"Cursed, foul creature, do not tempt me with false words," I answered.

"Climb down then, valiant warrior, and all the riches of the greatest kingdom shall be yours, and you shall never die if you serve me."

"Be gone, devil, for I will serve only my king."

With that I raised my sword and swung at the branches above my head. The limbs dropped, exposing the Sun. A fountain of brilliant light fell down upon the dragon and his

putrid pit. The black beast let out a terrifying roar that shook the forest. I nearly fell but hung on with replenished strength and continued to hack at the trees. I let more sunlight in, and eventually, the evil dragon was forced to retreat into the darker realms of the forest.

I climbed down the tree and mounted my horse. Abigail and I quickly backtracked through the dark forest. We passed the trees that we had earlier admired for their beauty. Now, however, they were as dark as the rest of the woodland. In time, we arrived at the split in the road. This time I chose to take the road leading into the mountains; I chose to search for myself on the path to higher ground.

“The service is over. Young man, the service is over.” An elderly woman nudged me on the shoulder. “Why, if you young kids would pay more attention to the pastor’s sermon, the world wouldn’t be what it is today. I don’t know why you fellas come to church. If I was your mother....”

I stood to walk out. The lady’s shrill words ran together. Soon I was a World War II flight commander, heading out on a do or die mission....



M. GOO SAYS NURSERY RAP

Monday's child is hungry,
Tuesday's child is stoned,
Wednesday's full of fungus,
Thursday's been deboned,
Friday's child is stumbling,
Saturday's child is numb,
Sunday's child's our only hope
And he doesn't want to come.

Alex Swifden

