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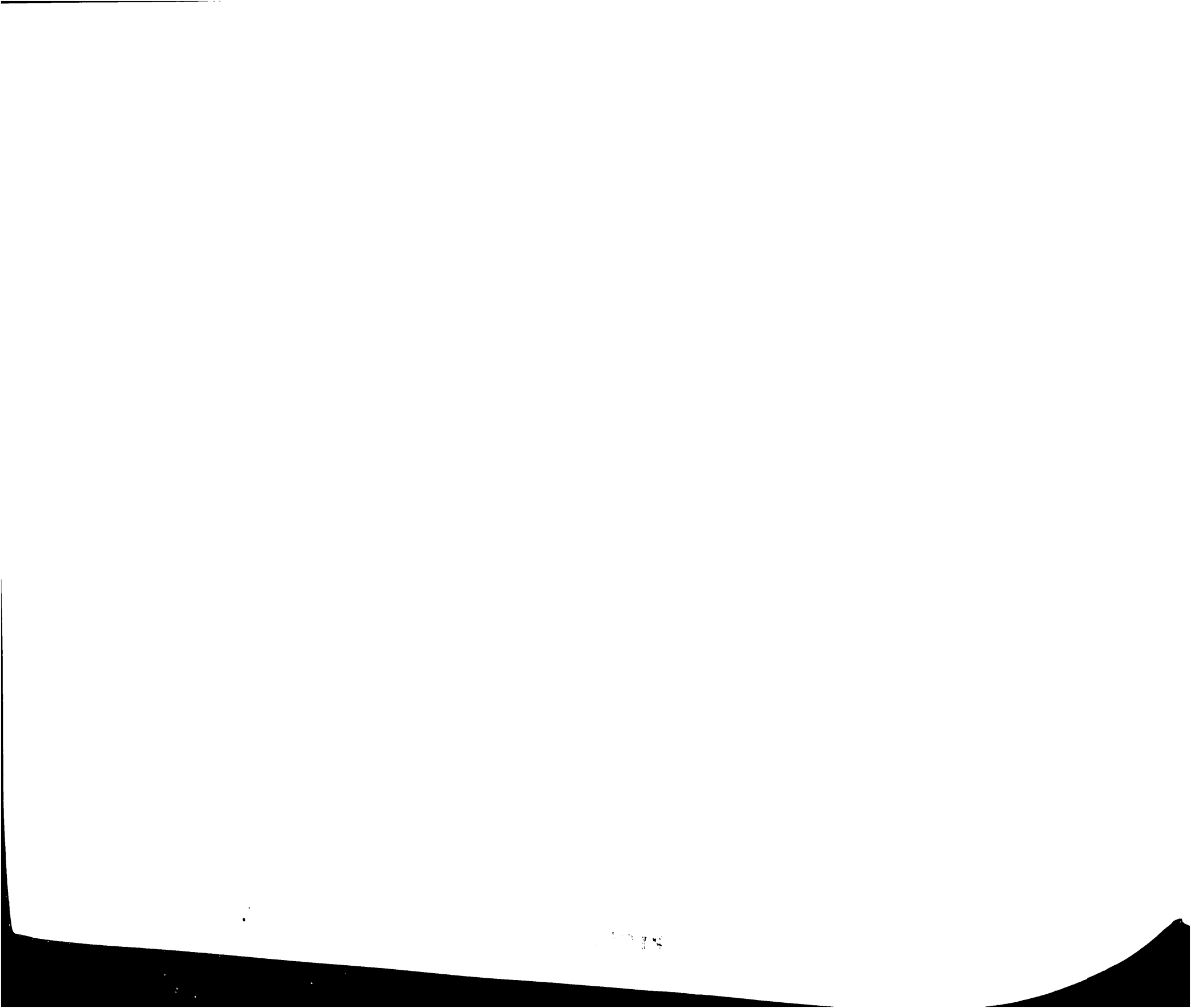
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LITERARY REVIEW 2006



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When you're dead and your body is at rest,
It becomes a brand new journey, plus a few guests.

The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out.
Even the roaches play checkers in your snout.

Nothing compares to having flies lay maggots in your hair,
And when the smell of rotten skin hits the air.

It gets to be a pain,
When spiders start mating in your brain.

And the taste of blood,
Seeps down into the sand, gravel, and grain.

Don't you just love it when the body decays
For a couple of days,
And your intestines are served on slugs' lunch trays.

It gets to be pretty mean,
When the crickets are fighting for the juices in your spleen.

The wind gives a quick shiver,
When the centipedes make a trampoline out of your liver.

And I hope you don't feel much disgust,
But I have to say, the image of this is a must.

So live your life the best you can,
Too bad your body is full of your greatest fans.

Isn't it great that you have so many friends,
And they will be with you until the end.

The end, that's when your body is but of bones,
And all your juices, tissues, and blood are gone.

I hope you will never get this out of your head,
Because this is what happens when you're dead.



When
You're
Dead,
I
Hope
You
Never
Get
This
Out
Of
Your
Head

Mortality

Death----I'm sick of hearing about it.
My shrink (actually, he's my gynecologist) tells me
I have headaches because I'm getting old
and won't face the fact of my own mortality.

Hell, I face it
every time I look in the mirror
every time my knee goes out
every time I forget the name of someone
I've known for forty years.

I know about the Human Condition,
for whom the bell is tolling,
the carriage that will kindly stop for me.

But I still haven't cleaned out my closets.

Two Pieces of Paper & Four Melons

a true story from China, written first in Chinese
and also translated by Ren Wang

Doesn't matter how hard I try, I couldn't remember his name. I think his last name is Zhuang. There are times when I think of him. I wonder if he has many children and grandchildren. Are they all well educated? At times I wonder if he or his parents had been cataloged as "landlords" during the 1950s land revolution. Had he suffered?

We only had been classmates for two years, when we were in third and fourth grade. The elementary school was in a small town of Jiangsu Province.

At that time the World War II just finished. Like all Chinese people, my family had a hard life during the war. Finally, my father could go back to Shanghai to work. The circumstances had become better for us, but we children still lived in the hometown with our mom. My dad usually brought gifts to us when he came back home from work in Shanghai, such as cookies and candies. Sometimes, he brought books and stationery for the older children. Once, he gave me some notebooks. The quality of paper was very good. They were easy to tear, and if you face one piece to the sun, you can see the

English words embroidered on it.

I was excited and couldn't wait for the next day to show off to my friend. We shared the same desk. She was surprised and envied. She asked,

"Give me two pieces, Ok?" It is, of course, ok. She is my best friend.

"Give me two pieces, too. Please!" The girl who sat in front of me asked timidly.

"Ok." She is good girl, too.

"Please give me two pieces, too." A boy asked, too. He is my neighbor. He usually played with my brothers. My mom liked him. I can't say no to him.

"I want two pieces, too!"

"I want, too!"

"I want, too!"

... ..

Almost all of the classmates came to me and ask for paper. I couldn't say no to anyone, so I gave everyone who asked two pieces of paper.

Most of the pieces of notebook were gone. Right at moment that I tried to put up the rest of the paper, I saw a boy stood in front of me and was looking at my notebook. He came from a smaller village. He looked very country. All his clothes and

shoes were hand made. He didn't like to talk or socialize with the other kids. When I was distributing the paper, I didn't notice that he was in the classroom. Now he was right in front of me with the eyes that said everything. I handed him two pieces, too. He gave me a smile, didn't say a word, and went back to his seat.

Next day, when school was over, I was arranging my school bag before left for home. He came over and put another bag on my desk. Without a word, he ran back to his desk. The bag was open and could see there were a few of apple-melons laying in it. They were huge and looked so fresh. After a little hesitation, I brought the bag back to him and told him it was too much and I could not have them. He did not say anything and did not look up, but when I left the class, I found out that he was following me. I walked faster, he walked faster. I ran, he ran. In old days, the doors of all the houses in town were usually open during the daytime. I ran across the living room, straight to kitchen and calling for my mom. I did not find my mom there. Turning around I saw him running in my family kitchen, and he put the bag on the counter.

Without a word again, he ran away.

When we were kids, we were all taught not to accept gifts without the permission of parents. I really did not know what I should do. After Mom found out what was going on, she smiled.

“Well, let us eat all these melons. Even though he is from village, he and his family must be very proud people. Let’s respect that.”

The melons were not only huge and fresh, they were sweet and juicy also.

I can’t remember when he left school. I knew that about fifth grade he was no longer coming to school. I also remember that one day some girls talked about him with amusement.

“He got married!”

“Really? He is as young as we are!” All the girls laughed. We were all too young to understand what sadness is.

When I saw him again, I must have been in high school already, because I had already read the short story “Hometown,” by Luxun.

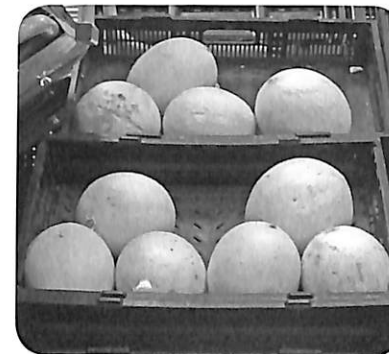
During wintertime, in our area, farmers did not spend that much time in the field. So you would see village men coming to

town in groups each weekend, to spend half the day shopping for necessities, and the rest of the day relaxing in tea clubs.

That was one cold morning. I was walking down the market street when I ran into a group of farmers coming my way. The street was narrow, and the group automatically became a line to make room for me to pass. I felt one of them staring at me. I looked up and saw him. He was wearing flat wool hat, both hands hidden in his opposite sleeves, holding an empty basket. I was searching for his name to say “hi” when he looked away and passed me. I was shocked a little bit. From Luxun’s short story I remembered the name, the name of the poor boy separated from his friend by money. The name Run Tu.

That was last time I saw him.

I do not know if he will happen to read this, or if he remembers the afternoon long ago with two pieces of paper and four melons, or if he remembers the last time we saw each other. If so, has he ever wondered at the cards fate has dealt to people?



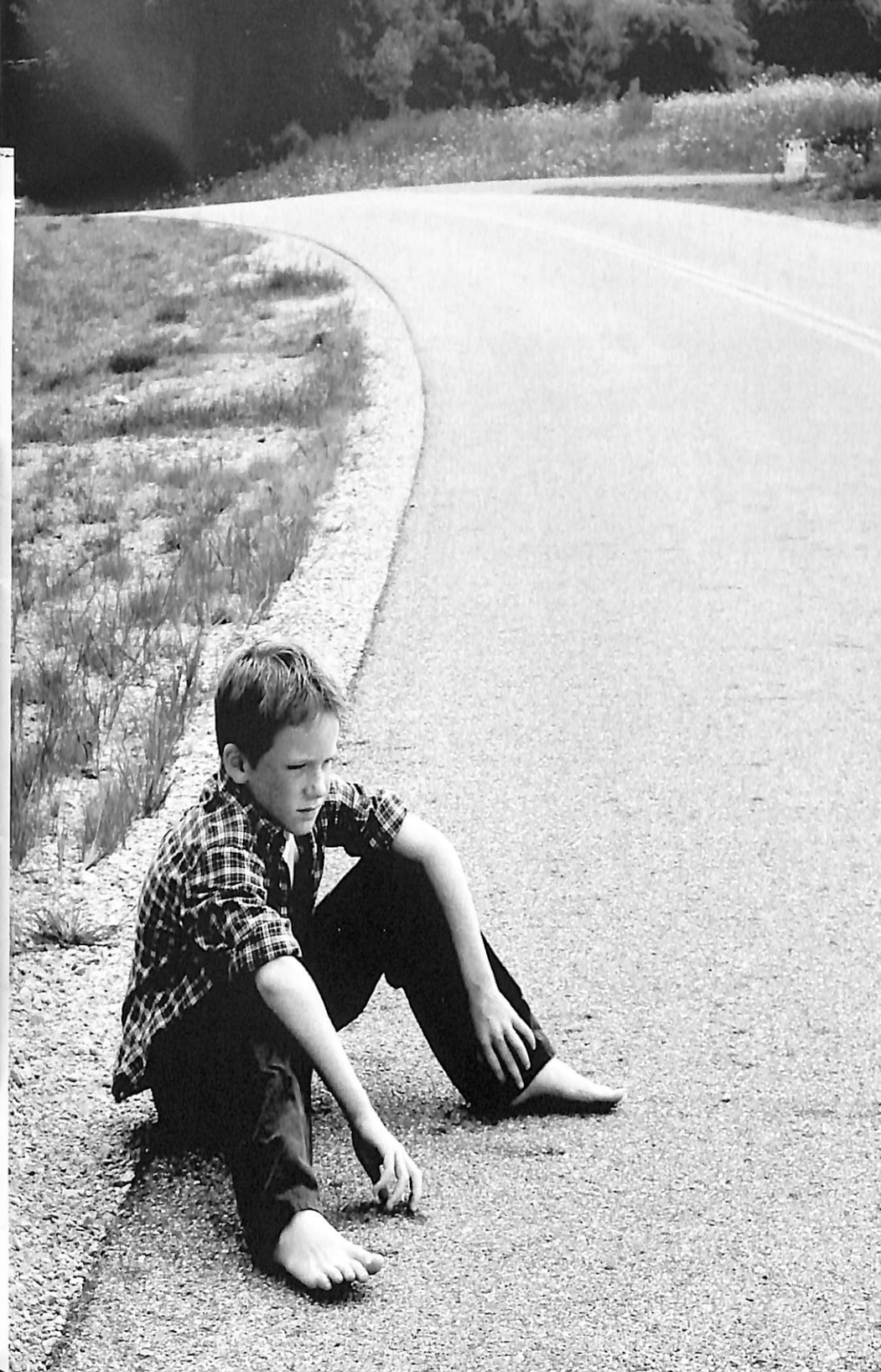
Sisyphus Days

Too often my life becomes
the tritest of Greek tragedies.
The worn wood door opens on my classroom-room
I step in as Prometheus
ambrosia-fed
Dickinson and Plath
Frost and Cummings
fill heart and battered brown tote
with fire to transfigure, refine,
burn away the dross
of unthinking childhood.

By the end of the day
I am battered and bruised.
The gods are sullen and filled with ennui
and do not interfere.

The boulder I have been pushing
uphill
with such foolish optimism
crashes across me
as it races
unthinking
bell-driven
to the door
to the bus
to the sweet Lethe
of television-video-game-all-night-phone call
and I sit in the abandoned room
alone.





Six

"Look here, son, I don't think Grandfather meant to upset you so," father says. "He only knows the old ways."

I'd been slouched over the front edge of my bed, trying to blend in, trying to sink into the bed so no one could see me. I was fully dressed for the blessed event when father called upstairs to see if I was ready to go. I jumped to attention and wiped tears from both cheeks with the backs of my hands, transferring the wetness to the bedspread tucked beneath my pillow. I'd answered, "Yes, father," in my best voice but before I could add anything else, he'd bounded up the stairs, taking two or three at a time, and crossed the landing to my room. I was busted. He knew I'd been crying and that's how he came to be sitting here beside me.

It figures. All this, on my thirteenth birthday, the day I'm to become a man.

"Look here, Six."

That's what he calls me. That's what everybody calls me on account of my being a legacy. My real name is Cornelius Constantine Crabtree. I'm the sixth generation of firstborn Crabtree men to bear this name. My nickname is no mystery. The story is that people in town took to calling Great Grandfather "Crabthree" instead of Crabtree. He'd thought they'd all grow out of it eventually, but the name stuck. When Grandfather was born, the joke passed to him, though they didn't call him "Crabfour." Just Four. Now the counting joke is a source of family pride. Six generations in Hankins County. So, call me Six. Everybody else does. Even Momma.

"Six, look at me when I'm talking to you," commands. But I'm not looking at him. I can't. My eyes are wet. My eyelids, filled with sand, scrape against my eyeballs with every blink. "Crabtree men don't cry."

Grandfather reminded me of this fact again this morning. After he made me cry.

So I stand.

I stand and walk toward my window to survey the vast Crabtree Empire, to think. Almost-white paint, carelessly applied so many years ago by lazy men who were - according to Grandfather - more interested in getting finished than having pride in a job well-done, extends beyond the putty framing each glass pane, cracked, crazed, and peeling in large, rectangular chunks. Tiny black rivers run North and South. East and West. They run off the right-angled panes and onto the outer window frame where they stop; they stop just-short of crossing the narrow gap to the adjacent wall where they could run free, unencumbered. The paint, once pure white, now ugly and mottled, will never look the same again. I stand mesmerized by the overwhelming pattern, and for a while, I do not acknowledge the world outside.

Still, my back is to father because I don't want to see his face. I don't want him to see mine. He's talking to me now, but I'm not listening. I taste the salt of my tears in the corners of my mouth. I take a deep breath to steady myself and wipe both eyes with the backs of my hands. They are as wet as if I had spit on them. Twice. And just as sticky.

In the background, I realize he's still talking, and now that my face is dry, I turn to look at him. His lips are moving across his teeth at incredible speed; he's making a high-pitched, monotone sound - not words, exactly - just a single, insistent tone.

His teeth.

His crooked, discolored, Crabtree teeth. One day, my teeth. My attention is drawn to the teeth marks on the windowsill and I imagine two, three generations of Crabtree boys cutting teeth on the painted poplar wood, each board hand-hewn from the Crabtree Empire Forest.

One day, all of this will be mine, I think. Screw

'em all.

"Listen, I know you're upset about wanting to play with your new little handicapped friend this morning, what's his name?" father asks.

"Phil. His name is Phil. And he's not handicapped, he's, he's differently-abled."

"Right. Phil. Phil," father repeats to himself. "Your Grandfather was simply suggesting that you might not want to spend so much time with Phil. That's why he called the boy's father to pick him up and take him back home."

"Why? Because he's different?"

"Look, Six. There's something I want you to understand. It's not just about Phil. There's a bigger issue here. A big picture that you need to be able to see. We're Crabtrees. Crabtree men, see? There are certain expectations...certain, well, certain...considerations."

He looks at me like this means something to me.

He continues, "It's not that the boy - What's his name? - Bill? - is different exactly, it's that we are different, you and me. Grandfather, too. And you know what? It's always been like this, since One laid claim to this land and built this town from the dirt up with his bare hands. Later, he built this very house the same way. Other people - most other people that is, don't understand us. They never have. They want what we have and that's not, well, that's not gonna happen. See? It's us against them, the Crabtrees against everybody else."

I cut in saying, "But what's all this got to do with me playing with Phil?"

"As long as we stick together, as long as we stick together as a family, nothing can hurt us, see?"

"But he wasn't -"

"We live in a world of opposites, Six. Rich - Poor. Ugly - Handsome. Stupid - Smart. You can't be one thing *and another* at the same time. It's God's way. Do you see?"

He takes a breath and levels his voice and keeps going. "Black or White. Red or Yellow. Do you understand?"

I shake my head dumbly.

"We look at others and define ourselves not so much by what we are but by what we are not. You see?"

I suck some snot, and I shake my head again.

"Comparing ourselves to others in the outside world gives us a sense of belonging, a sense of family. Some people call it prejudice, but prejudice in itself *isn't* bad. It's whether we *act* on the prejudice and discriminate against others that makes the difference."

More snot.

"*Difference*, my boy, is what makes the world go round. And don't you feel bad. You belong to your group - they belong to theirs. Christian or Jew. Muslim or Hindu. Atheist or Agnostic, though I don't think they have groups - but you get my point. Anyway, feeling that you belong to something bigger than you is what keeps us going, it's what keeps everyone going."

I listen. I suck more snot.

"That boy, Phil, he's not like us, not at all. He needs to find people who are like him so he'll fit in. Handicappers with handicappers, see? That's all your Grandfather was trying to say." Father takes a deep breath and looks satisfied. "Does this help? Do you understand now? I'm sure that you can see how Phil will be better off without you in the long run, right? He needs to be with his own people."

I stop crying, probably 'cause I'm out of water.

Could it be? Could it be that father is right? Maybe Phil and I don't need to hang around each other. I mean, he's cool and all, but he can't just take off into the woods and play with me and other boys. And how in the hell is he supposed to get up in the tree fort anyhow, on my back?

"Six. Six. Turn around and let me get a good look at you. Turn around!"

So I turn slowly and face Five, finally.

"You sure do look nice in your uniform. Your Momma is going to be so proud to see you," he says beaming. "People say sewing is a dying art, but by God, your Momma did a fine job on this here. A fine job."

I throw my shoulders back like the finest soldier who ever was, standing like I am at attention ready to salute a superior officer.

"Here, try this on," father says with a wink. He makes a few adjustments and when he backs up and I can finally see his face again, he says, "Would you take a look at that! You look sharp as a tack!"

I look through tiny slits at my bright white reflection in the chifforobe mirror, but I don't recognize myself. Instead, I see a starched white, miniaturized, four-foot, nine-and-a-half-inch version of Grandfather, nodding his approval at me.

"It's almost dark. Go on downstairs and start the pickup. Grandfather and I will be there directly," father says. "You can wear your uniform to the ceremony, but take this off until we get to the meeting," he says as he reaches toward my head. "Some folks just wouldn't understand."

I suppose they won't.

"Here you go," he says. "You can put that back on when we get there," he calls out to me, as I make my way down the stairs, one measured step at a time, with my freshly starched hood in my left hand, and the keys firmly planted in my right.



LET'S GET TOGETHER

Most people have rapidly forgotten the joy of lending a helping hand to someone less fortunate. Some have even forgotten to value the qualities of life and its rewards to humanity. These people are every day Americans who have lost sight of being of service to one another. Now it is time to take a stand by showing them how to build bridges of understanding through commitment and service to humanity, by learning to be more open-minded, by making a commitment to be of service, and by sharing the gift of charity.

Many people often do not help others because they do not want to get involved with someone else's problems. In order to help, take the time to ask questions about the person's situation, and do not automatically judge that person by race and appearance. Without giving it a second thought, we as Americans should be considerate and try to help that person or situation. Just knowing that someone cares can lift a person's spirit.

One thing people as a whole cannot seem to do is make a commitment to help. Committing to something can be very hard for some people to do. Committing one's self to the well being of another can be very rewarding and can cause a chain reaction of people helping people. Some commitments only take time and love; money is not required.

The last thing we can do is to build bridges of understanding through our commitment and service is to share this experience with others. How can the generations to come know how to help others if the ones before did not show or teach them? Children can easily mock what adults do, so why not let them see the adult performing a gracious deed for another person. It just takes one person to make a difference. Imagine millions making a difference and bringing joy back to the people that need their help.

It does not take a rocket scientist to build a bridge of compassion and understanding, but it does take one person to listen and pledge to help those in need. If many decided to commit and to continue to aid people in their community, state, and country, this will be an awesome nation! It is past time for America to shape-up and get in tune with helping others for a better America. There is no better way to show people love than to express it through care, consideration, and service. It is time for us to get together America!

Hummingbirds and Hydrogen Bombs

Including those initially listed as missing or who died afterward from a loosely defined set of bomb-related ailments, including cancers, Hiroshima officials now put the total number of the dead in this city alone at 237, 062. – MSNBC 8.5.05

I spent some time this evening sitting on my front porch petting my dog. I am home so little that I don't get to spend much time with him. He's a lap-sized dog, and it was pleasant to sit out in the cool of the evening on my porch in a rocking chair.

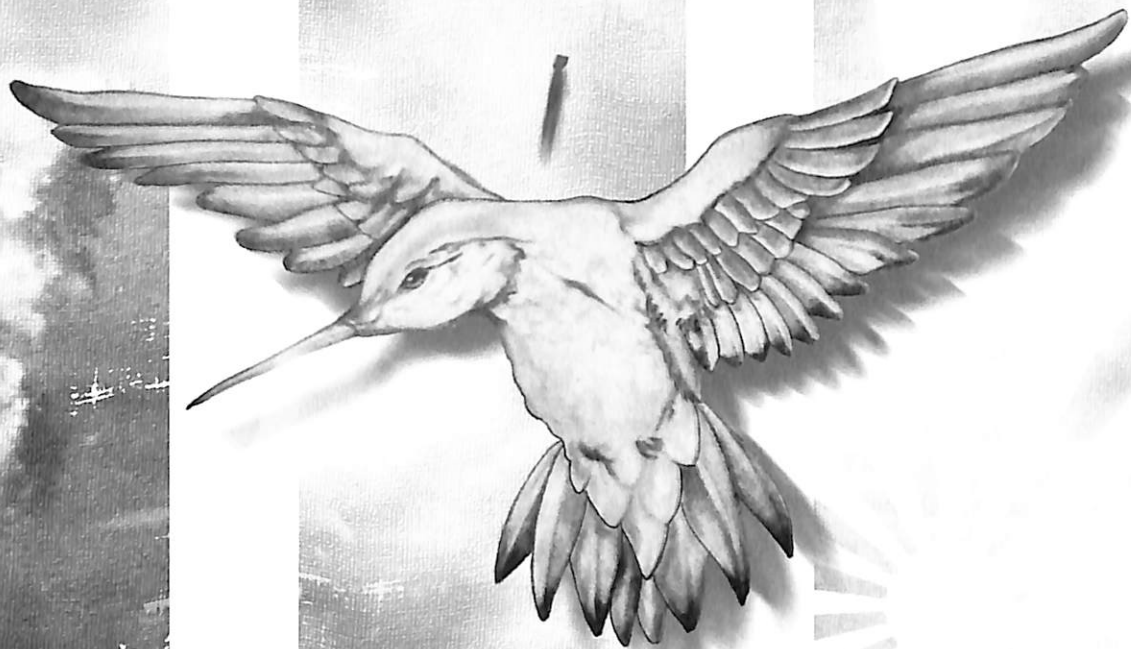
While I was out, the hummingbirds were furiously buzzing around the feeder I have in my rose bed. I guess there were about five of them, and they dipped and swirled, fussing at the top of their tiny lungs. One of them had decided that he was the sole ruler of the six-seat feeder, and he wasn't allowing anybody else to have any of the sugar water inside.

I never really knew hummingbirds fought like that. I always think of them as fragile creatures. They seem to be so tiny; they must be almost glass-like, ready to shatter at the slightest blow. The aggressive little birds poked each other with their beaks and became so involved in their combat that they almost crashed to the ground before one of them broke and fled.

Something about that scene was so metaphorical to me. How much of the current strife in the world is caused by someone hoarding plenty? How many times do people destroy in their single-minded goal for possession? How often do we acknowledge our own mutual fragility, the glass-like delicacy of a human life?

Today marks the 60th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. I did not go to Hiroshima when I was in Japan. It was a conscious choice. Just thinking about the magnitude of pain and death that happened in moments and the suffering that continued and continues for generations makes me weep.

It's just another instance of humanity's seemingly endless well of cruelty and terrible skill at creating new methods of destruction. Like the hummingbird at the feeder, we are so good at pushing away and keeping out when we should be sharing. I can't help but wonder how much longer it's going to be before this spiral of battle and fighting causes us all to crash to the ground.



Women have no place
outside the home, they would say
made to tend to kids
and watch men go out and play

Well, I have some news
for every man, woman, boy, and girl
that age has passed on
and it's now a woman's world

Women hold the power
to money and politics
go Condoleeza!
media can't stop that chick

Women hold the key
to solving the world's problems
faith, love, hope, and truth
the world needs to be taught them

In order to know
why this power is profound
we'll go to the past
when women got pushed around

Anthony, Stanton
and countless other women
fought for suffrage
which was only for a man then

World-changing ladies
are way too many to list
I will name a few
there are some I will miss

Dorothea Dix
Oprah, Madonna, Jackie
Eleanor, Reno
Julia, Grace, Hilary

Florence Nightingale
Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks
Billie Jean King, Mary
Ella Fitzgerald, Joan of Arc

Queen Victoria
Jane Austen, Cleopatra
Amelia Earhart
Venus, Princess Diana

Let me not leave out
my personal favorites
Emily Dickinson
and Alanis Morissette

Wishes can come true
for dreaming little girls
the path has been cleared
it's a woman's world!

It's a Woman's World



It's A MAN'S World



Where to begin
Other than to say,
When it comes to men
They are better than dames.

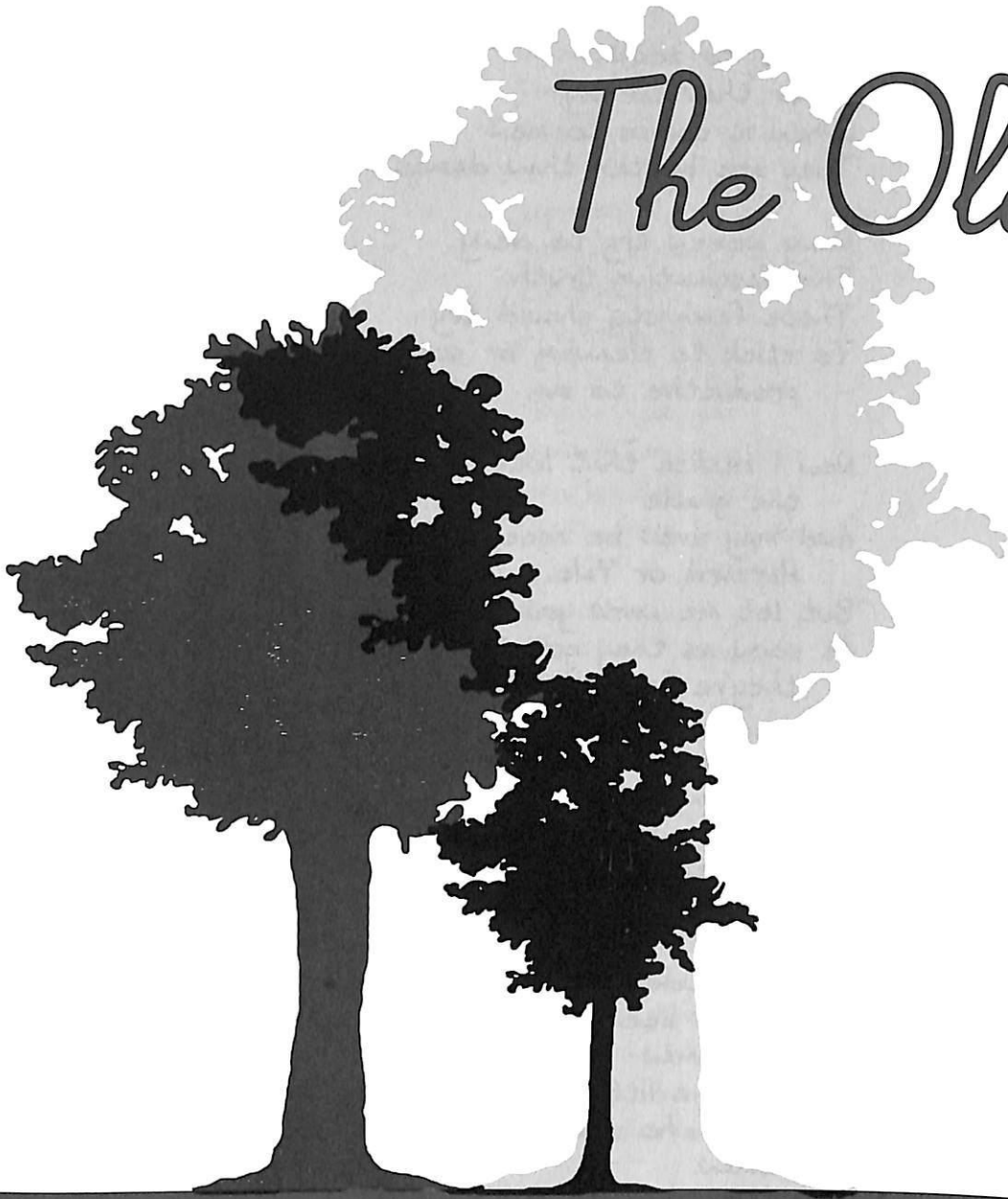
Many women try to deny
This fascinating truth.
Those feminists should try
To stick to cleaning or something
productive to do.

Now I realize that lots of girls make
the grade
And may even be accepted to
Harvard or Yale.
But let me warn you as a sage,
As soon as they get that check,
they're headed to the sale

Sure they are pretty and sweet
Fun, darling, and intellectual.
But that isn't true of all the women
you meet
Most are mean, devious, and hateful.

As I conclude this astounding poem
Which has been written by a real
MAN'S MAN
I do feel a little like I own 'em.
But, hey, who really cares about a
WOMAN.

The Old Oak Tree



The old oak tree had stood there by the Benson home through the years, had weathered the storms which threatened its existence as the family had weathered those that threatened theirs. It had been only a young sapling of five or ten years when my parents arrived in 1910 from Yazoo County by horse and buggy. After a day and a half on the road, they, with their two small children, pulled up at their new home in Neshoba County and tied the reins to this little oak tree.

The house, which many decades later would be referred to as the Bensons' "old home place," was a five-year-old, unpainted structure, not yet turned gray from the hot sunshine and violent thunderstorms that were to come. My mother said, later, that she'd felt the house was "so big and roomy," compared to the small tenant houses they had left behind. But the chief difference was that they were buying this house! It would be their home throughout their lives. Their next five children would be born in one of these rooms, all would grow up here, and my father would finally die in the front bedroom.

Meanwhile, the young oak would be growing into a tall, sturdy tree. My

oldest brother, as a little boy, could climb up into its branches. But, as the years passed, the other children could not reach its bottom limbs. Two of the other boys nailed little planks onto it, their "ladder," to climb up and fasten a rope swing to a lower limb, and the little girls played under it in their "play-houses." Mom planted flowers under it - blue and white irises, called "flags" in those days - the heralds of springtime.

Once all of us had grown up, we often came back in our fine, new cars, pulling up and parking in the shade of the oak's long limbs. We commented on what had happened to our oak tree. Summer thunderstorms with their lightning had struck it, searing its trunk from top to bottom. But we knew that, because of its height, its topmost limbs caught the damaging flash that might otherwise have struck the house and set it on fire. By the time 50 years had passed, the old scar on the tree had healed over several times, leaving a streak of dead wood eight-to-twelve inches wide down its entire large trunk. Still, the big oak had not been defeated. It curved new bark around the edges of the scar and kept on living. The moss covering much of its large limbs often dried up



and appeared to have died, but when the next rain came, its small tendrils turned green again, as promised by its name: "Resurrection moss."

Among the various kinds of oak trees on our land, this one was classified as a "white oak," a valuable hardwood which might be used for furniture, flooring, railroad ties, baseball bats, etc. The rich green leaves of our oak were large and thick, though light tan and leathery when we raked them in the fall, and its bark was a light gray except for the darker-gray scar.

All members of the family, at one time or another, had their picture taken standing by the trunk of this old tree, often with their backs against the dark scar. The oldest grandson, at age

17, managed to climb from the top of a car to the lowest limb and have his picture taken up there, leaning against the big trunk. Because of its size, nobody could catch the entire tree in a small camera, of course. In its maturity, its limbs stretched out for quite a distance. One day my oldest brother stepped them off, estimating the footage. One limb separated 50 feet to the south and, on the opposite side, another spanned 50 feet to the north. One hundred feet of ground, shaded by this one old tree! Its lower limbs coming out from the trunk had grown as big as telephone poles! This tree had no competition and thus had been able to spread out at will.

During my childhood, each summer a small screech owl built a nest at an invisible high spot in the oak tree. When the early darkness fell, her eerie, quivering cry would suddenly break into the quiet of the old house, sending a shiver up and down one's spine. Then, when this mother's gray-white babies began to fly, my mom said, "We need to be careful, Nan. The old owl might swoop through the air and scratch our heads." We often kept

leafy oak twigs handy at twilight, to wave over the tops of our heads as we ran across the yard. It was a wonderful game, dodging the mother bird! But her sharp claws did manage to leave a small scratch or two.

A baby owl sometimes came out of its nest a little too soon, and, more than once, I found the tiny bit of fuzz sleeping on the ground through the day beside the tire of Dad's truck parked there. But, I was cautioned, "Don't touch it, or else the old bird might reject it." The baby just dozed through the day, waiting for darkness. Then its mother would help it to fly away.

Finally, in 1992, the old oak tree, having for some time been a symbol to the Benson family, had reached the age of 90 years or more. My father had been dead for 30 years, and even Mom, who had lived to 97, had now been in her grave for a decade. One of my brothers had built for his family a nice house across the road from the old home place, and another brother and his wife had retired and had fixed up the deserted old house in order to live out their last days there. But by

now, even he had died, leaving only his wife Emma. I had retired from teaching and had come to spend the summer, staying in my deceased sister's house a few miles away. Still, the old oak, even now, stood in the edge of the yard at the Benson home.

One summer day a fierce thunderstorm came through. As I watched through the front windows at my sister's house, I became quite concerned about the strong wind. The young saplings along the highway were being blown so hard that their tips were very nearly flattened to the ground. It's that straight-line wind, I thought – the kind which has caused planes, in the process of landing, to crash!

As soon as the storm had passed on, my phone rang. It was Emma. "Nan," she said, "the old oak is down."

"Oh no." It sounded as if she'd called to announce someone's death.

"Yes, it's down."

"I'll be right there."

I jumped in my car and drove the several miles. My brother and his son were there already, and they just stood looking, as if transfixed by the sight. The huge, broken limbs were lying

across the entire front yard, the road, and, in fact, all over the hillside. The sky seemed empty.

"But it didn't hit the house, you see," one of them remarked.

I looked at the edge of the porch. No, the house was not damaged.

"Just brushed the corner with the tips of its limbs," Emma said, "but it didn't even break the window." I could almost believe it had been intentional!

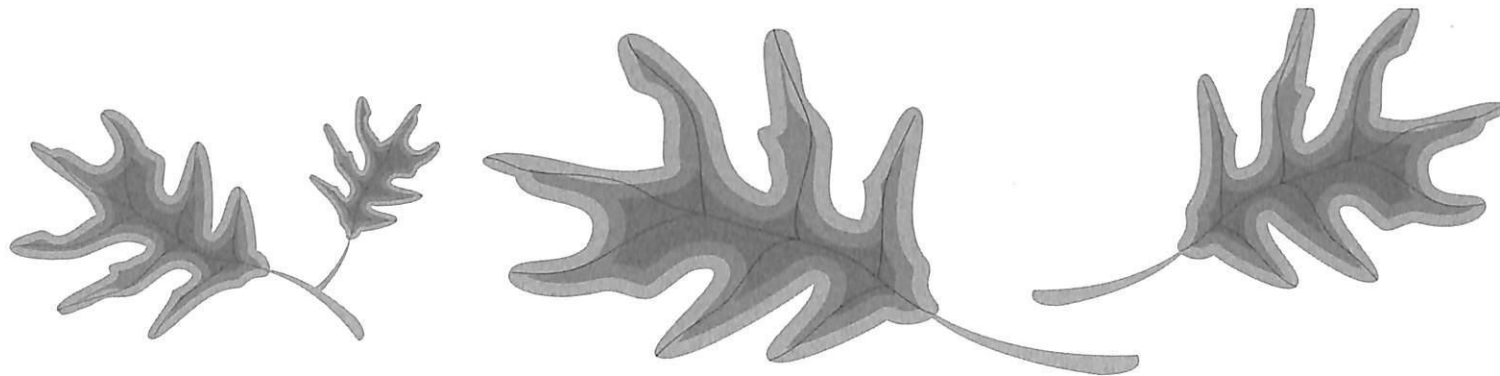
We looked at the tall spire of the tree's trunk, split apart, with 12 feet of it still standing. We could now see how deep the gashes from lightning had been, how extensive the injury, all through these many years. How had the tree kept on living, in spite of this terrible wound, for such a long time? We looked at the size of

the huge limbs where they'd broken away from the trunk, limbs which, themselves, were the size of many full-grown trees. We marveled at the sight. What a struggle the old tree had been through! Tears came to my eyes, and Emma was sniffing, too.

But soon, here came another grandson with his chainsaw. He began sawing into those big limbs lying across the front yard and into the road. The practical solution had begun: clearing away the huge carcass of the old oak tree. But many days would pass before the buzzing of chainsaws no longer disturbed the quiet of the Benson farm.

Emma left the tall spire standing, planting flowers that could thrive in the bright sunshine. In the months to come, grandchildren came from dis-

tant places to look at what was left of the old oak tree. They took pictures with their fine, new cameras, and many of them gathered up pieces of the oak's wood to take home with them. Several, skilled in crafts, made picture frames, knife-blocks, etc, from pieces of this beautiful, light-colored wood. Thus, years later, in quite a few houses of the large Benson clan, some item, some reminder of the old oak tree might be pointed out and identified to friends who had dropped by – a couple, perhaps, who might hardly understand why it had any significance. Still, the family member would notice, if one of these visitors reached for the other's hand, they perhaps were thinking of something which they, too, had once loved and lost.



Dylan Harris

HAND OF BLOOD

The twilight of a midsummer's eve was beautiful, subtle ripples drifted across the steamy, green lake, where the frogs and crickets were just beginning to perform their sincere song that accompanies the dusk turning to night. In the lake, the rotting, gray-wood rowboat was tied to the ancient pier in which many small birds made their homes. There was the continual, rhythmic sound of the boat buoyantly, yet somberly, floating back and forth across the glossy surface of the lake, hitting the pier with every return. The flies and mosquitoes had just begun to swarm across the small garden, sparsely planted with dead sunflowers and puny cornstalks that seemed years beyond harvesting. A faint shadow, cast from the chipping white house situated at the lake's edge, was slowly beginning to fade into the humid, night sky. The clay shoreline had eroded so far that it was inches away from lapping into the house's back screened porch. The roof was brown from the dead oak and pine leaves that had accumulated over the years to form a moldy blanket. The bare trees above the house were enormous, but rotting from the inside because of the animals that lived inside them.

Above all the noises that surrounded the house, there was a dominant, creaking sound that emanated from the back porch. The sound was audible above all the others and could be heard echoing through the woods. Although the sound silenced the night, it was not uncommon. Instead, it had become a sound of security for all of the surrounding animals. On the screened porch sat two, sinister figures with cracking, calloused skin and eyes that never blinked. The two twins, Rosa Lee and Odetta, were the fifth generation of a family of black slaves that had descended from the great kings of Africa.



The disease of poverty had in perfect synchronization, seemed to disappear into the

Suddenly, out of the Odetta's home. The twins spread to the South. As the fog that had created a sisters' dark eyes met, and

The white man was hear him fidgeting in his ters rose and began to go in their tracks, the sisters the white man began two sisters have been that their footsteps made



blossomed into full, and the twins sat hopelessly in their white, ancestral cabin. With impeccable timing, the two sisters rocked not only with themselves, but also with the nature they had come to love. Much had been troubling their minds lately, but it all night sky, which had now become consecrated with a full moon. Perfect silence, there came a crackling noise, that of a car's tires traveling down the old, dirt road which led to Rosa Lee and the creatures of the swamp became stone silent, the car could be heard clearly, and the headlights could be seen drifting through wall in the scarce-looking woods. The two sisters quit rocking when the car stopped, a door opening then slamming shut. The their hands closed together. nervous. His continuous footsteps slid across the broken driveway, and his breathing faltered every other step. The sisters could shallow, denim pockets for something. The sisters thought that they could smell the tobacco packed in his lip. In unison, the sis- inside, when nervously, the white man, wearing a cowboy hat, began to read something off a long, yellow piece of paper. Stopping knew why he had come and hesitantly turned their heads to meet the now quivering white man. After taking a few steps backward, talking. "Now Rosa Lee, Odetta, we down at town hall have suspicions that you may be in-humane. We've heard rumors that you buryin' your dead family in that lake right over yonder." The sisters, still hand-in-hand, walked towards the man. It was quiet enough the porch wood crack under their weight as they advanced forward.

They opened the porch's screen door slowly, so that the sharp, shrieking noise common to rusty hinges echoed into the white man's head. Then, the sisters appeared. Out of the shadow of the porch, the sisters' dark skin shone as if it were reflecting that moon, still floating above. Their poverty was apparent in their ragged clothing and sunken skin. The white man could not make eye contact, for the fear of seeing their gaze staring straight through him.

In a hoarse cracking voice, Rosa Lee whispered, "We got no money." At the sound of her voice, the white man fled to take refuge in his car. The spinning tires threw rocks and dead leaves as he left, and looking in his rearview mirror, he saw clouds of dust envelop the two sisters who were still watching him with their desolate, piercing gaze. Their eyes met in the mirror before the two sisters faded into the dead woods.

By the lake, which had developed an eerie blanket of fog, stood the two sisters until the sound of the car was no more. A mosquito landed on Rosa Lee's nape. Odetta watched as it filled with her sister's crimson blood. When it was bulging, Odetta pinched it, smearing blood into her hand. The red blood seemed to glow in her pitch-colored palm. It moved fluidly between the lines in her hand, leaving a dark stain. The small pool of blood caught the eye of Rosa Lee, and she observed as the blood moved across Odetta's hand and dried onto Odetta's cuticles. Then Odetta closed both of her hands together, as if she were about to pray. Rosa Lee closed her hands in the same fashion around Odetta's hands. Together, they began to mumble a faint chant. As the chant grew louder, the entire forest came alive. The crickets and frogs began singing, and the boat began to hit the pier. The whisper reverberated intensely throughout the entire swamp, but suddenly it stopped. The sisters' eyes met, and they each nodded. Odetta and Rosa Lee walked solemnly to the eroded shore of the green lake. With the pain of advanced years, Odetta awkwardly stepped towards the lake. She held up her bloody hand once more. Then she bent, dipping her hand into the green water, sending ripples across the reflection of the full moon.

The red blood washed into the green water, gradually dissipating. Odetta was helped up by the cracking hands of Rosa Lee. In unison, the twins began to make their way back to the screened-in porch, disappearing into the shadows. The sounds of nocturnal creatures and the gentle susurrant of the wind filled the night, accompanied by the squeaking synchronization of two rocking chairs.

Just a Knot Away from

Purr-fection



I have a GrandCat and his name is Harley. Believe me when I say he is just a knot away from purr-fection.

Here is Harley's story. This is just too good of a story to be made-up, so get comfortable and I'll tell you all about it.

"I just can't live without Harley!"

Harley is a red Persian with almond eyes – a little flat-faced fuzzy one with a real low scratchy meow. He and his sisters were part of a prestigious cat show at Mississippi State University several years back. Now all of you of the Oxford or Hattiesburg persuasion need not hold that against little Harley; after all, he's not a Bulldog.

He was just an innocent babe at the mercy of his then cat show owner. That was until my 6 foot 5 inch policeman son fell in love with him. My son tells the story of viewing the kitties on display, and there were many gorgeous cats that day, but somehow little Harley was the star of the show. There he was in total control strutting his stuff, rolling and tumbling, blinking those big almond eyes and meowing out with his signature gruff baritone. His little sisters just sat back and let him receive all the attention.

He seemed to be used to the star status and carried it off more than just exceptional, but seemingly perfect.

Finally my son inquired about this little Mr. Personality – I think the question was, "Is he for sale?" The owner answered in the positive and a deal was struck. Actually the selling price was much lower than my son had expected. Not to question a gift horse in the mouth, so to say (sorry Harley!), my son then took the chance as to inquire the reason for the lower price for this little bundle of red fur in comparison to the selling price of his sisters. The answer was a knot in his tail! Yes! It seems that this little handsome kitty could never be shown or be a competitive show cat because he was not perfect, flawed only by a knot in his tail! Oh, and please don't breathe a word of this of which I've confided to you. You see, Har-

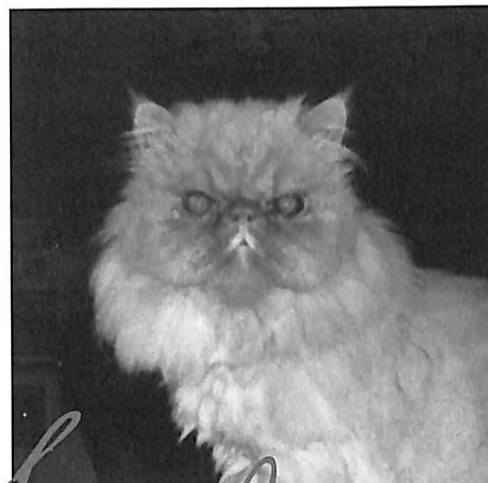
ley still thinks he's perfect!

So little Harley became a member of the McKee household and that was nearly 10 years ago, and what a perfect little kitty he has been – that is, perfect to the McKees.

It came a time that my son was married and little Harley moved to the newlywed's household. I can remember distinctly my sorrowful plight to lose this little almond-eyed bundle of joy as I searched and searched for a good reason for him to continue to live at my home as my GrandCat, but I knew he really belonged with his Dad and new Mom, so off he went. However, I didn't give up easily. I actually remember sobbing the words, "I just can't live without Harley!" But I did....and I was allowed visitation and every other Christmas.

Now to the good news – parents, grandparents, as you know, sometime, just sometime those loved ones, those family members who move away, move back into your household. Oh happy day... little Harley is back! And yes, he still has that knot in his tail. I just like to say, “We paid extra for that knot!” Not just any ole kitty cat can brag about this privilege, this claim to fame. Perfect, no, maybe not in the competitive world, but purr-fect! Yes, this GrandCat invented purr-fection ten years ago when he won our hearts and we made him our own.

I suppose we all could use the moral of this true knot in the tail story. Remembering that none of us are perfect, yeah, none of us, but there’s a knot somewhere in our lives. It’s what we do with that knot that matters, I think. So as I once again enjoy the charm and companionship of my little purr-fect one, I challenge myself to make my own knots more purr-fect. You know, I did pay extra for them somewhere along the way, and I can work them out – yes, only a knot away from purr-fection, that’s close enough for Harley and me!



Harley

Brette Bullock

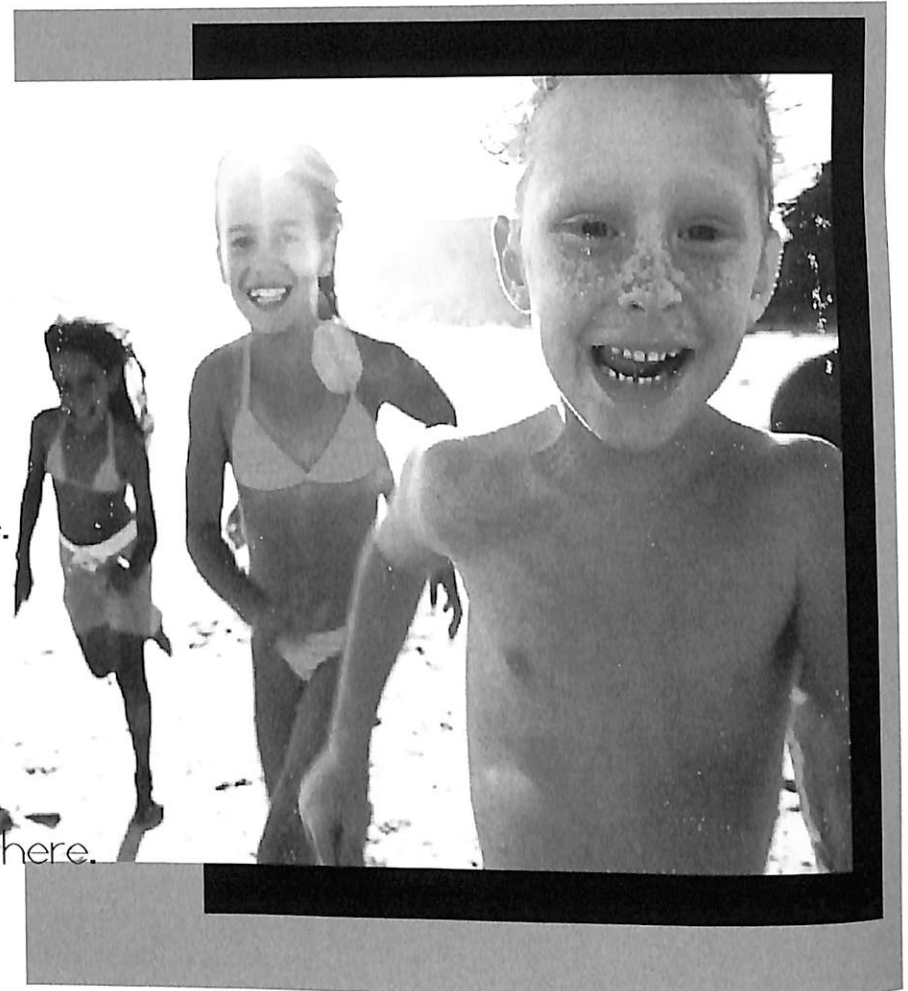
Spring Break is Here

Happy and free, I can act like a fool,
No getting up early to go to school.
No homework or projects hangin' overhead
Staying up late, no set time for bed.

My teachers and principals, will I miss?
Certainly not, are you kidding, I hiss.
We all deserve more than a week, it's true,
We've worked really hard and a vacation is due.

A trip to the mountains, or maybe the beach,
Skiing or shopping, anything but teach!
The countdown is on 'til the end of the year,
I know school's almost out when Spring Break gets here.

My backpack and books, I'll gladly deposit,
Until Spring Break is over, on the floor of my closet.



Eula Mae

Eula Mae sat in her favorite rocker on the front porch patiently knitting a blanket for her newest great-grandchild – Jamie Katherine. Now what kind of name was that? First name sounded like a boy, didn't it? Her hands stilled as her mind wandered. So many children now. She'd had five children who'd had sixteen kids among them. Now she had twenty-four great-grandchildren. She couldn't remember a lot of things now. The past seemed more immediate than the present. She grew drowsier; her gentle rocking gradually stopped.





When she was a child, Eula Mae lived out in the country near Thomasville, Georgia during the summer. She would help her Uncle Darryl in the cotton fields. Every morning, except on Fridays and Sundays, they would get up at the crack of dawn. They would eat breakfast, that Granny Curls fixed them, then go feed the cows. Next she had to feed the chickens, and she always hated feeding the chickens. They would peck at her legs and feet and then start pecking the bucket.

After everything was fed, it was time to get on the tractors and go down the road to the big cotton field. All Eula Mae could see was cotton for what seemed like miles. Uncle Darryl would drive the big cotton picker, and Eula Mae would drive the smaller picker. At lunch time, Granny Curls would bring them sandwiches and home-made sweet tea. They would sit under the pecan tree and eat and talk about anything. When they finished, they got back on the tractors and went to picking again. At six o'clock they would go home and eat supper. Granny fixed cornbread, chicken, and turnip greens almost every night.

On Friday mornings they went to the stockyard to sell and buy cows. They would stay there until around lunch, then go eat at Daisy Bells on the way home. Eula Mae and Uncle Darryl ate cornbread, cabbage, and pork chops. When they got home they'd unload the cows and feed all the animals.

Eula Mae remembered one particular afternoon well. That day around two, the cows broke the fence and got out. So Eula Mae and Uncle Darryl

went to town in the old truck, with Leroy in the back, to get barbed wire. They spent hours fixing the fence.

Sunday morning would come around and they'd all get up to get ready for church. On this special day they wouldn't work in the fields. They went to Mt. Vernon Baptist Church. Eula Mae's cousins, Cecil, Ross, Sheryl, and Michelle, all went to this church. After church, they all went to Daisy Bells to eat Sunday dinner.

Come Monday morning, they'd start working in the fields again. Eula Mae did this every summer until school started. Then, she would go back to Mississippi with her parents.

One day while Eula Mae was in her junior year, her parents called her to tell her that Uncle Darryl was in the hospital. The tractor had flipped over on him. He was hurt very badly, but she still wanted to go to Georgia to see him and Granny Curls. When she got there eight hours later, he was lying there with all these scratches and a broken leg. She started crying when she saw him lying helpless. A couple of weeks later, he was back at home, but he still had a cast on his leg. They didn't pick any cotton for about a week.

Eula Mae suddenly woke. These little cat naps punctuated her days. She resumed her knitting as fragments of memories caught between waking and sleeping flitted through her mind. It was real pleasant, she thought, that the past visited you so often when you were older and needed the comfort of memories.



Fifth Grade

"Square teeth or pointed, Rosie?"

"Pointed, please."

"Four on top, two on bottom, okay?"

"Can it have a mustache like yours, Papa?"

"Bono – good!"

The perfect pumpkin came from Uncle Tony's grocery store near our old house in Little Italy. Transformed by Papa's knife, it was ready to win the school jack-o'-lantern contest. Then, on Beggar's Night, it would leer out our front window at all the hobgoblins running wild in the suburban darkness.

Today began well: a fine, fall day tasting of almost winter with crisp brownish-red Maple leaves drifting to the dry ground. The sun warmed the clear air as I trudged the mile to Sunview Elementary School, pulling the pumpkin in my red metal wagon. I struggled to transport my sculpted masterpiece while dreaming of winning the contest this year.

I wore this season's "I really wanted to be a cowboy, but Momma made me a ghost" costume. Yeah, one of her old, bleach-yellow sheets with ragged eyeholes cut in and a couple feet of new clothesline for a loose necktie. It did cover my

pudgy body, curly brown hair, and dark olive skin, serving my main purpose – to celebrate the one holiday where I didn't have to be myself.

The class party wasn't until afternoon, but we could wear our costumes all day if we brought an entry for the jack-o'-lantern contest. So, I really had two chances to win this year. They might not like my simple costume, but they had to admire Papa's artistic carving. I'd never won before, but I always hoped.

We spent most of the morning playing outside. I crunched the multi-colored leaves at the edge of the blacktop playground, pretending I was in Sherwood Forest with Robin Hood. The rowdy boys concentrated on a kickball game, their efforts flushing their pale faces. Meanwhile, the other girls sat whispering and laughing and looking like little blonde Barbie dolls. At least, they were all too excited about tonight to bother with their usual sport.

After lunch, the whole school assembled in the gym for the costume contest. The judging didn't take long. I wasn't surprised that Beth Drake won with her shades-of-pink ballerina outfit, or that

Johnny Phillips' Zorro took second place. I knew that my sheet-and-rope ghost wasn't very good. It'd be okay. My special pumpkin was sure to win.

Back in the classroom, our teacher retrieved a crinkled paper sack from under her desk. "I bought these just for you, children." Mrs. Becker cracked her face with a smile as she gave us each a flavored wax candy treat. I got those cherry-red lips that covered the lower half of my face, so I took off my costume to enjoy them. Letting the sweetness trickle into my mouth, I hoped that my jack-o'-lantern would win that contest, at least. Maybe someone would want to sit with me if I won.

"Now everyone line up. No, this way. We're going to play 'pin the nose on the witch.'" She stooped to tie a blindfold on squeaky-voiced Cindy Smith just as Mr. Jones, our math teacher, ambled into the room. Mrs. Becker's rigid posture melted into curves and her eyes sparkled. He looked at her like the neighborhood kids looked at Mr. Kraus' candy counter on Saturday afternoons.

When he passed me, I tugged on his suit coat to show off my wax lips. He glanced down at me with those huge blue eyes and smiled. I tried to smile back, but the lips got loose and I had to catch them before they landed on the dirty linoleum floor.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" Mrs. Becker said through her tightening jaw. She gripped my arm, yanked me out of line, and marched me to the back of her classroom.

I just stared up wide-eyed at her. "What did I do wrong?"

"Well, you just stand right here and think about it!" She shoved me into the corner, smoothed the wrinkles from her shift, and returned her attentions to Mr. Bradley Jones. "Will you judge the jack-o'-lanterns, please?" She smiled and pointed at the counter by the wall of windows. "They're right over there."

I stood facing the familiar mint-green cinderblock corner. The class squealed and laughed while playing their game. "A little to your right, Bonnie," my teacher encouraged



the class princess. "Most of the children are darling, only that one is a problem," she said in an aside to Mr. Jones. "So, which pumpkin did you decide on?"

He whispered something in return.

"Oh, I agree. Suzie Malone's is absolutely the best. Most of them are good. I think I liked Rosie Lombardy's the least. Didn't it seem rather ordinary to you? That mustache was ridiculous, too."

My heart sank. I didn't hear the rest of what they said before the two teachers strolled out into the hallway.

"Cootie!" Bobbie Green yelled when he slapped me on my shoulder. He darted away, only to be replaced by Jimmy Bartlett.

"I've got the cooties!" They threatened to spread the dreaded disease by touch, so the other kids scattered in pretended fear. I ignored them. They'd played this game for five years now. I used to cry or try to run from them when I was just a little kid. It only made them chase me, so now I just stood still.

"Children, in your seats!" Mrs. Becker's shout rattled the windows. She turned her verbal ammunition on me. "Just what did you do to them

this time? Am I going to have to send you to the office again?" Clutching my shoulder, she whirled me around. Her nose was almost touching mine! "Haven't your parents talked to you about your behavior? You know I've asked them to. What am I supposed to do with you?"

I could only cringe. She ranted on and my thoughts retreated. I'd lost both contests. No matter how hard I tried, my classmates would never like me.

Now I realize that my teachers hate me, too.

Sleety-rain plunk-plink-plunks against the classroom windows. The ice falls from a dark and threatening sky. I'd overheard Mr. Jones say it was supposed to last all night. Guess there'll be no Trick-or-Treating this year. That's okay. I've had enough of Halloween. It's only my second-most-favorite holiday, anyway. Maybe Christmas will be better. Maybe I'll get to have a part in the school play this year.

To Be or Not To Be... Me

Hamlet states "To be or not to be"
 Humph, that is the question.
 But mine is a little different.
 My question is – To be ME or not to
 Be...
 Me...
 Because, you see, it's so hard just to be me.
 Crazy looks, crazy stares,
 Just from being me...
 Keep it under control, don't let them know
 You're not a beauty queen, you can't really
 sing –
 Doe, ray, me...
 So you see!

To be or not to be –
 To be the three personalities that are all in me?
 There is the one that looks down –
 "Get it together or you'll drown,"
 She states, questioning my actions
 While acting out her true self in fractions.
 She whispers – can't you hear her –
 "Read more."
 "Study more, more, more, more."
 On the other hand, there is the other –
 She takes no chances:
 "Stop before you start, you'll just fail!"
 She exclaims in almost a yell.
 Her encouragement is a heartbreaker.

She whispers – can't you hear her –
 "No don't do it."
 "No you'll blow it, No, No, NO!"
 But the last...I like to call her Me –
 Frustrated, confused, analytical,
 But Me.
 Exhausted, scared, hypocritical
 But Me.
 Because, you see, she tries.
 Listening to others, she may, let's just say
 she may...
 Me, she doesn't always do what is right.
 She doesn't try to be anyone but Me.
 She's what you call...Real.
 So which would you choose?
 To be Me or not to
 Be...
 Me?
 That is the question.



literary review staff 2006

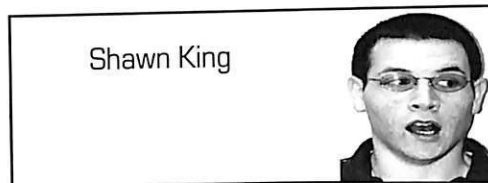
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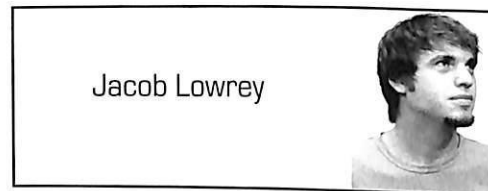
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photography credits

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"It's a Woman's World"
"It's a Man's World"
"Fifth Grade"
"To Be or Not To be.....Me"

Carlie Webster

"Two Pieces of Paper and 4 Melons"
"The Old Oak Tree"
"Just A Knot Away"
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GAYLORD M

THE BACK PAGE

The Language and Literature division of Meridian Community College is pleased to sponsor the Literary Review contest each year as a method of encouraging writers to submit poetry, short stories, and essays. Our entries are always outstanding, and we are blessed to have so much creative writing talent in Meridian and surrounding areas. Therefore, the Literary Review contest and magazine seeks to showcase some of the best writers of our area.

The contest is open to any high school sophomore, junior, or senior from any school in our area. We are pleased each year to receive so many outstanding entries from the local high schools. Furthermore, we welcome entries from anyone in our community. At MCC, we strive to meet the needs of our community, and this is just one more way we reach out to any creative writers who write for the simple pleasure of putting their ideas on paper.

At the conclusion of our contest each year, the entries are divided into two categories, high school and community. Then, the entries are further divided by genre. Outside judges evaluate the works and award first, second, and third places in both high school and community poetry, short story, and essay. The Language and Literature division is grateful for the support of the MCC Foundation in funding our monetary prizes.

Finally, Meridian Community College publishes the Literary Review magazine. This magazine is a compilation of the best creative works we received that year, both high school and community. The magazine is developed by our graphic design students, and they are responsible for the layout and art work found in each year's magazine. We then use the magazine as a showcase for the following year's competition.

If you would like information on our Literary Review contest, please call Meridian Community College and ask for Morgan Boothe, Language and Literature division coordinator of the contest. We would be pleased to talk with you about submitting your work and answer any questions you might have.