

# Prairie Ink

A literary Annual



## **From the Editors**

“There is a way to see inside by looking directly through to seed or marrow.”

-Joan Halifax

Summer 2016

Dear Readers,

Our magazine this year, as always, represents a glorious diversity of age, gender, culture, race, and perspective. Something we can all be especially proud of, for reading these submissions are a gift we can give ourselves. They are reminders to us that no matter how different we seem outwardly, inwardly we harbor the same paradoxes that make up all of humanity: cowardly and courageous, cruel and kind, ignorant and brilliant. So, here they are freely shared, lovingly labored over: glimpses into our most human condition.

-Jaime Oss and Teresa Johnson



Cover Art by David Barnes

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## **Making a Family**

By Louanne French

Jake parked outside the school yard humming, “Hi ho, hi ho, it’s off to work we go.” He’d delivered Marybeth and Sammy, his children, second and first grades respectively, to the gate and watched them scramble up the walk. Seeing they were safely inside, he drove off smiling, pleased at how much Beth and Sam loved their school. Mornings they raced to the car for the ride to Baker Elementary to meet with their adored teacher, Mrs. Jennings.

Jake, himself, had never liked school, possibly because his father kept him home too often to help with plowing or planting or whatever farm job needed to be done. His pa often spouted, “Jake can read and write and cipher, and all the rest of school is completely useless.”

Jake was eternally grateful to the school counselor who recognized his talent for computers and technical innovation. She helped Jake get a college scholarship, and from there he evolved into a businessman. He now owned his own computer company—sales, repairs and supplies. His firm also wrote programs for a variety of businesses. He loved his work; he loved his children. He loved his ex-mother-in-law who moved in with them after his glamorous, fun-loving wife ran off to a more tantalizing world with her favorite rock star.

At first Jake was distraught at losing his beautiful blonde wife, but he was growing used to living without her, as were his kids. Grandma Jean happily lived with them. For two years she’d helped Jake raise the children to be loving and honorable.

Jake had been too busy with his firm and spending time with his children

to have a dating life. "Let me get Beth and Sam started on the right path, then I might have time for a woman," he'd say to his friends.

His buddies replied, "You'll be old and worn out by then. The gals won't look at you anymore."

"Tough. My kids come first," was the usual reply.

He'd had a brief fling with a programmer who worked for him, again blonde hair with a Sports Illustrated swim suit figure. She remarked, "I love eating with you, Jake, but you're so handsome I forget to chew and swallow. You overwhelm me."

That comment generated a vision of her clad in a red devil suit with horns. He knew enough to back off before Tracey issued wedding invitations. He told her, "I have to stop seeing you. It's not good business for me to date an employee."

Tracey stomped/tottered away on her four-inch heels and immediately composed her resignation. Since Tracey, Jake had avoided women.

One noon while Jake was eating with his vice-president, his cell phone rang. Jake had asked never to be disturbed at a business lunch; it must be an emergency.

"Hello, Jake Nygard here. What's the problem?"

"This is Principal Roberts at Baker Elementary. There's been an accident on the playground and your son hurt his arm. We called Emergency and the ambulance just took Sammy and a school nurse to Wesley Hospital. You'll need to contact them to give your consent for Sammy's treatment."

Silence.

“Hello, hello, Mr. Nygard. Are you there? Did you hear me?”

“Yes, I heard everything. What happened? Is Sammy in pain?” Jake asked.

“A swing broke and Sam fell. He was pretty shook up and crying for his father.”

“I’m on my way. I’ll be at Wesley in ten minutes.”

“I’ll tell Mrs. Jennings to hang on to Marybeth until you can pick her up.”

“Thanks so much. I’ll give you my cell phone number just in case,” he said as he slid out of the booth. Jake asked Jim to take care of business. He rushed to the hospital, searched for Emergency and found Sammy stretched out on a gurney, sound asleep.

“I’m Sammy’s father,” he whispered to the attendant. “How’s he doing?”

“The accident and ambulance ride wore him out, poor little guy. Good you’re here. The bone broke totally through the skin. We need to do surgery immediately, after a little paperwork.”

Jake dug out his insurance card, signed the requisite forms in the office and talked at length with the surgeon before Sammy was anesthetized and the treatment started. As Jake prowled in the waiting room, his cell phone rang.

“Hello, this is Mrs. Jennings, Sammy’s teacher. I plan to stop at Wesley on my way home to check on Sammy. Would it help if I bring Marybeth with me? ”

“It would be a great help if you brought her. Sammy is in surgery now, and I don’t know how long it will take. The school nurse just left.”

“We’ll be there in twenty minutes. Don’t worry, we’ll find you,” she said.

When they found him, it was the first time Jake had actually seen Lori Jennings. He’d spoken with her on the phone, but Grandma Jean handled enrollment and school’s opening day. Mrs. Jennings taught first and second grade classes in the same room. Sam and Beth were devoted to their teacher. She had short curly hair, a sweet smile and a slight figure, and was unequivocally no Sports Illustrated swim suit model. Jake was intrigued.

“Let me get us some coffee and hot chocolate for Marybeth while we wait. Would you like to help me, Marybeth?” Beth felt important to be included in helping them all feel better. Jake was decidedly impressed with his children’s teacher.

They discussed how Mrs. Jennings could send work home for Sam if necessary.

Jake called Grandma Jean to bring her up to date on Sammy’s condition.

Finally they were allowed to see Sammy, whose left arm sporting a cast. Sammy’s eyes were teary, but he smiled at Jake. “You’re here, Daddy. See, I broke my arm.”

“I see that, Son,” Jake said, picking Sammy up.

The doctor said Sammy could go to school next Monday. He’d need to be careful of his broken arm but wouldn’t feel pain from the surgery. While the doctor talked, Jake snuggled Sammy, held him close. Afterward he spoke to Mrs. Jennings, “I don’t know how to thank you. You made the waiting tolerable for Marybeth and me.”

“It was my pleasure. I enjoy having Sammy and Marybeth in my classroom.”

“And they seem to enjoy you, too. We’ll be heading home. Thanks again for bringing Marybeth. You can go home to your own family now.”

“I guess you didn’t know. My husband died in Afghanistan, and we didn’t have children. My students are my family, and I love them all.”

No family? No husband? The light flashing in Jake’s brain teased him, tried to tell him something that eventually penetrated. Maybe, just maybe, this was a woman he could ask out.

Later, talking to Jim Blane, Jake mentioned Mrs. Jennings. Jim immediately picked up on Jake’s interest and said as he shrugged his shoulders, “I know Lori Jennings. She’s all right. She’s no glamour puss, but she is single and must like kids.”

“And she’s very sensible and comforting and a pleasure to be around. I don’t remember when I’ve felt so attracted to a personality,” Jake said.

“Personality? Whoeee! What about sex appeal?”

“Hmm. Don’t forget, I’ve lived through an experience with sex appeal. It isn’t high on my list just now,” Jake said.

Several days later Jake stopped after school to ask Mrs. Jennings how Sammy was doing in his school work. “He’s doing fine, the only child with a cast, and the other children are all jealous. They all want casts, too.”

“Umm. Would you like to go to dinner with us Sunday after church? We’ll go home to change clothes then eat at the Lake Cafe and watch the boat races,” he said.



“That sounds like fun. I’d love to go.”

“We’ll come by at one and pick you up. Is that too late for you to eat?”

“Not at all. I’ll see you then.”

“Sunday it is. Grandma Jean will be along, too. She lives with us and feeds us and takes care of us,” Jake said.

“I look forward to seeing her again. I’m sure she’s a wonderful grandmother.”

It was the first of many family outings. Eventually Jake and Lori attended movies, dined, danced and did all the things couples do without family presence.

Sammy finally lost his cast, and Jake almost lost his cool when Sammy asked, “Is Mrs. Jennings going to be our new mother?”

“Umm, ah, would you like her to be your mother?”

“Well, yeah. Me and Beth think she’d be a really neat mother.”

“Thank you for that endorsement, Sammy. I’ll have to study the situation.”

Jake pondered the question most of that night as sleep eluded him. He felt so comfortable with Lori.

Was it fair to ask her to marry him when he didn’t feel passion?

He’d been careful to end each date with a friendly good night and a gentle kiss. He wondered how Lori really felt about him. It was time to find out.

Saturday night, after dinner at an elegant restaurant, Jake asked Lori if she’d ever thought about remarrying.

“After Tony died I had all I could do to pull myself together and teach school without bursting into tears sporadically. The pain became less each week until I realized I had fulfilled my wish—I could enjoy being around people again.”

“And how do you feel now? Do you plan to remarry?”

“It’s not the main thing I think about. If I meet someone, great, but I’m not going to bars, for instance, just to meet single men,” she said.

“How would you feel about a guy with two kids?”

She stared at him. “Are you asking me to marry you? Is that what you’re saying?”

“It’s what I’m trying to say, but I can’t seem to find the right words. Will you think seriously about us getting married? I’d love to have you be my wife, Lori.”

“I’ve already thought about it—a lot. Yes, Jake, I’d love to be your wife and help you raise your wonderful children. I was afraid you’d never ask. I’ve been in love with you almost from the time Sammy broke his arm.”

A frisson of delight zipped through Jake’s loins. Why had he worried about lack of passion? Right now he wanted to grab Lori and kiss her all over.

Jake realized he loved her; he just hadn’t let himself feel it until he knew she loved him, too. “Oh, Lori, Sweetheart, I’m so in love with you, I’d marry you tomorrow if you agreed.”

“I’m agreeing now, Jake. The sooner we marry the better.” Further conversation was temporarily replaced by a passionate kiss (which was appreciated by all the diners in the room). When they came up for air, Lori looked

around, a little embarrassed. She asked, "How do you think Beth and Sammy will feel about our getting married?"

"They'll be as thrilled as me. They both told me they wanted you to be their new mother."

"Did they really? They're wonderful kids. How about right after school lets out for getting married, then the kids and I will have the rest of the summer to get used to each other."

"What about us? When will we have our time alone together?" Jake asked.

"I'm definitely looking forward to all the private time with you that you can spare."

And so they were married. They had two wonderful romantic weeks to themselves in the Bahamas before returning home to become involved in family life.

Once home, Jake said to Lori, "Marrying you has changed my life, made it complete. You and I are happy, Beth and Sammy are happy. Even our dog Buster is happy."

Lori said, "I agree. Out of two halves of lost marriages we've clearly made more than a whole."

Jake gently closed his arms around her, kissed her and said, "Together we've made a family, and I couldn't be happier."



## **Children's Church**

By David Barnes

I remember the sound of chert and limestone crunching beneath the tires of our car as we drove up onto the patch of graded mud and conglomerate that passed for the church's parking lot. I remember watching my father's stolid face as we sat and watched the billowing of dark clouds and the play of static discharge as the electrical storm approached. I remember that his body language told me he did not want to be there.

I remember many things about that evening, but I do not know if my memories are true. I know about false memories. I know that memory is a reconstructed phenomenon that can often be influenced by emotions, fantasies and the beliefs of others. I know that on some level we are all fabulists.

I also know having false memories doesn't make you a crazy person even if you believe that what you remember cannot possibly have happened. I have a friend, a serious and sober physicist, who remembers, at the age of eight, kicking a soccer ball into the air and that the ball did not return to earth. He knows as a scientist that this event could not have happened but he remembers it nevertheless.

I remember that, during my ninth summer, my father bought a parcel of land on a little spring-fed stream somewhere near Blue Springs. We spent several weekends camped upon this beautiful piece of the Ozarks. I remember damming up the little stream just below where it fell between large limestone rocks forming a natural shut in. I used fallen logs and dis-lodged rocks to create a temporary pool. Almost as soon as my labors were finished, the surface was covered with a

legion of long legged water skimmers creating phantasmagoric patterns of rippled and reflected light.

I remember on one particularly hot and humid day making a sweaty climb with my father to collect the fruit of two twisted persimmon trees that stood like sentinels at the top of a nearby bald knob. And I remember meeting the preacher. He was standing there, at our camp, when we returned from our climb. He was long in aspect, dressed in black from head to toe, with thin shocks of brown hair that flipped greasily along the sides of his balding pate.

“Mighty glad to make your acquaintance Brother Barnes. Folks round here been saying a preacher from Sprangfield finagled a piece of this here drainage. Nicely siche-ated. Yep, a might perty spot, might perty.”

“And looky here what a fine husky boy. Must make you mighty proud. Keeps the drippin’ jar empty, I’ll wager.” The man in black chuckled, or more precisely, cackled. I could imagine him slapping his knee in cartoon delight.

“Reckon you got more at home, don’tcha.” Even at that age, I could tell when someone was laying it on thick.

“Don’t often get dignitaries round these parts. I heard you represent the National Church Office. I don’t ‘magine you executives pay much mind to the goings on of us po’folks out here in the hills, and, ‘tween you and me, Rev-Er-Rend, we don’t pay you much never mind either.” He gave a short guffaw.

“Well I declare, where be my manners? I be Jackson Bois-darc. Most folks just call me Preacher Jack.” He extended an unusually elongated hand and gave a slight sarcastic bow of his head. My father did not respond with his signature friendliness, but silently took the apparitions hand and shook it without emotion.

“ Well now, we be having ourselves a revival out at the church and my little flock would be most pleased to have an important church leader liken yourself out to our service this evening. Truth be told, we're having a special service just for the young folk. I reckon your boy would find it most interesting.”

I do not remember how my father replied but I do remember that the sound of the man in black's voice encouraged me to move closer to my father's side. This man scared me. What I remember clearest is how my father sort of hunkered down into his own body and subtly swayed from side to side. He focused on the preacher's eyes and never for a moment broke contact. It was not unlike the way an old experienced tom cat will size up a snake before striking out with a lightening quick swipe.

“Now I know you don't come all the way out to these hills to be pestered by the likes of me, but you're not too important and fancy to come out and worship with my humble congregation, are you?”

The faint of friendliness had left Preacher Jack's voice and hardened into sarcastic accusation.

“Fact is, I know you Johnnie Barnes, yep, Johnnie the Bare Foot Dreamer,” he cackled again. "betch you don't member me though. Fact is, you was the reason I figured on being a preacher myself. It was a time ago in Rhome, Texas. You was endin' a two week re-vival. I never knowed the spirit to move like that. That last night when you was preachin' bout the second coming of our Lord. Well sir, i'twere the most powerful thing I ever seen. Lord a'mighty when you got to that part about the blood a bubblin' up to the horses' mane, children were cryin', the ladies were fainting and grown men were pissin' their pants."

"Careful now ..." admonished my father.

"Pardon my language; I mean no offense, but you was fiery, and I knew that I wanted what you got. That power, Lordy, the power to reach out with words and squeeze a man's heart dry. To leave a congregation floppin' and gaspin' for breath like a mess of fish. You could do that. Why, I done heard you called Elijah. Heard you could call fire down from heaven. A regular righteous hero of the faith."

"Yes sir, that night I nearly danced up to the platform for your anointin'. You and your posse a 'deacons lined up like crows on a saggin' line. When you put your hand upon my brow, I done swooned right on down to the floor."

"I had nere been slain in the spirit before, and indeed I felt as though I would surely die. But I did not. When I come to, them deacons were on me like a bunch of chickens round a june bug, a spittin' and cacklin' trying to prayer me through to the baptism. I knew then that that power must flow through my hands, the fire must be kindled by my will as well."

The preacher sighed audibly, "Too bad it come to this."

He shook his head in resignation, "Well, I suppose things change and to their season. Never took to child evangelism myself. No sir, no coddling snotty nosed kids fer me. I reckon you got soft, John. For Judah's sake, you, a mighty man o'God, dressing up like a heathen savage and singing round your council fires with your khaki rangers and all."

My father sported the slightest smile when he replied, "Might be, I grew up a bit. Might be, the Holy Spirit grew me up. I've come to learn that the fiercest fires are laid with the most delicate tinder, green even, if you know what I mean. But they must be nurtured and cradled a bit."

"Possible, but be that as it is, I reckon our children are good enough fer you. As good as your own. 'Sides," the preacher almost sneered, "might be you could use some humbling. There be more than one powerful preacher on this here ground."

I remember that the rest of the conversation was short and direct, and that before he back-stepped his way out of our camp, the preacher had elicited my father's promise to attend the children's service that very evening. As the old, black crow jumped the little stream and disappeared into a thicket of dogwood and fledgling redbud trees, he called out, "The Holy Ghost abjures you to be there."

My father responded to himself in a barely audible voice, "That may well be so."

§

The little church was bathed in the gray green light of the approaching storm. It was suspended on old stone pilings; the black gaps and deep breeches here and there made the church look as though it was floating above rotten jagged teeth. It was a simple box structure with a roof of weathered tar shingles and walls tacked together with cracked and broken asbestos tiles. The front of the church was distinguished only by a crumbling concrete porch and a great screen door over which hung a flickering bare bulb. Beneath the lamp and above the screen door were hand scrawled letters that demanded, WATCHMAN WHAT OF THE NIGHT?

We stopped about 20 yards in front of the decrepit structure. My father put his arm across my shoulder and pulled me close.

"Stay near me tonight, don't stray away from my grasp."



"Why, Daddy," I asked anxiously.

"You're a smart boy, Son, sometimes too smart for your own good." He smiled warmly, "So I know you realize that not all who speak in God's name know God's heart. Some preachers become mis-guided, some are just vain and full of themselves. Sometimes they don't realize the damage they can do to gentle young spirits. Sometimes they just don't care. I guess I was as guilty as the next fella on that score, but some have filled themselves with darkness in their love of spiritual power. Those preachers don't preach love at all but have become like vicious wolves. Do you understand Son?"

"I guess so," I replied and squared my shoulders fearing what the evening held. "Sometimes, well, some of your preacher friends scare me."

A momentary smile graced his face, "Well, sometimes they can scare me."

Then a wave of gentle sadness spread across my father's face, "And I know that I've scared you too, scared you awfully, haven't I?"

He spoke of the nightmares that plagued me as a child. Dreams that woke me screaming in the middle of the night and drove me weeping to the comfort of my parent's bed. Dreams of graves opening and the dead rising. Dreams of my little dog Bullet, on fire, howling in pain and panic racing down a devastated street. Dreams of great winged beasts that ripped apart the very fabric of the sky revealing a terrifying abyss beyond. Dreams that made me fear more than love God. Dreams that made me dread being left behind and of being abandoned. Dreams of the Rapture.

I simply lowered my head and whispered, "Yes, Sir."

He wrapped his arms around me and quietly sighed, "Believe me son, that is something I will always regret."

My father gave another heavy sigh and spoke more to himself than to me, "Please trust me tonight, for we battle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers..."

## §

We were greeted heartily at the door by a lanky creature who humbly proclaimed himself the deacon. He guided us down the single aisle of the church past plain wooden pews where sat a dozen or so serious country folk in clean overalls and neatly pressed and tatted dresses.

At the end of the aisle a flurry of Pentecostal bunned vivaciousness introduced herself as Mrs. Morney. Behind her in lock step came the Gloor sisters. The Gloor sisters were twins as best I could tell. They were beside themselves with enthusiasm. Our presence was, as Mrs. Morney chanted in spontaneous canticle, "a sure sign the power of the Holy Ghost will visit us tonight and or'take us each one, so that even as the serpent sheds its old skin, naught will remain of what we once were." I wasn't at all sure that sounded like a good thing.

They herded my father and me into a pew occupied by several small children. In the pew in front of us were more children ranging in age from four to twelve. Some were quite dirty wearing ragged clothes while others were well scrubbed in their Sunday best. They barely noticed our arrival. They seemed mesmerized by the figure before us on a small platform. It was the preacher.

He did not acknowledge us but only grinned as he made eye contact with my

father. We were in his domain, and he would certainly make the most of it.

The service began in good Pentecostal fashion moving through song, testimony, more song and then into a disorienting aural wall of glossolalia. Then as voice by voice the well-practiced gift of tongue speaking ceased, the preacher stepped down off the platform and stood in front of the gaggle of children sitting in the front row.

“We have celebrities in our midst tonight. This fine gentleman,” he gestured towards my father, “is a famous child evangelist, right here in our humble house of sacrifice. As I am sure our Brother Barnes would agree, our Lord said suffer the little children to come unto me. Well, I will surely suffer them gladly, though tonight they may also suffer a bit for their eternal good.” The preacher smirked, well pleased with his inversion of scripture.

“Tonight I want to tell you youngins a story. You young folks like stories don’t you? Well this ain’t no ordinary story. This here story may rock the soundness of the ground beneath your feet, it may show you the monsters what lurk behind the veil of light and day. Monsters, slaverin’ to taste your sweet meat and devour your living soul.” And with that jovial introduction he began his sermon.

§

“My daddy, he was not a particular mean fella.” Here was the first of the preacher’s many pregnant pauses. He smiled with an almost condescending leer as we all shivered in response to the vibrating bass of thunder that rolled across the little church.

“I reckon,” the preacher continued, “he had his nights of hard drinkin’ when you wanted to be clear his boot. But in the main he weren’t unkind. Most folks

round here thought him the salt of the earth, but, you see, his hard thinkin' about life and such had sloped over into his notions about God."

"My momma and I tried, oh Merciful Lord how we tried, but there were no beseechin' or debatin' could git him to see one whit of sense in redemption or in God's own sweet plan of salvation. Nor could any amount of readin' from the good book or crying out for his eternal soul convince him of the horrors awaiting the unrepentant ones in the bloated belly of Hell. Fact is, the longer he hung onto his bitter life the harder become his heart and the more hateful he were to the rest of us."

"My momma called me back to the home place a few year ago to minister to my daddy in his last hours upon this earth. Unrepentant Sin had et up his innards; colon chancre some nurse said. Well, some folk take well to dying, and my daddy seemed made fer it. His anger had turned to grit, and despite terrible suffering, his stubborn vow to utter no cry of despair had become his religion and reason for bein'."

"By the time I had arrived, things were 'most done. I knew the moment I strode into his room that he were barely there. I seen he wore that pearly pallor of the departing, and I touched his sheets what had become sopping rags of sweat and moist decay, and of course," another lingering pause ... "there was the smell."

"I would have wanted a final moment with my daddy, not to share some sweet farewell, but to give him a last warning; I feared a terrible fate waited to snatch away his soul to places infernal. He was far too gone for that. There weren't nothing for it but to put my momma to bed and prepare for an evenin's vigil."

"I myself repaired to the front porch. Slipped into one of the old worn chairs,

hooked the heels of my boots over the bottom rung and eased on back against the wall. Betcha I'd sat on that very porch with my daddy and his kin a thousand times. Fer hours they would sit saying nothing like they was a watchin' fer something. I could never right figure out what. Well I sat there that night awaitin' too."

The preacher surveyed the congregation making eye contact with all who dared meet his gaze. The impact was most pronounced on the children. They seemed to wilt like delicate flowers at his approach. I was not excluded and nuzzled in closer to the protection of my father's shoulder.

"It were not a bit like tonight my darlin' congregation. It were so quiet that I believed I could hear the crawdads cussing down in ole' boggy crik." A flash of lightening and a roll of thunder punctuated his remark.

"After a mite, my eyes become heavy and my breathin' deep. Now I don't rightly know if I fell asleep or not. Fact tis I don't rightly know if what I am about to tell you'n is a dream, a vision or some deep woods phan-tasm. I believe it twer a vision."

The preacher now looked up towards the exposed rafters of the church and dogmatically exclaimed, "But what ere' it be; it be truth and no denying it! Be prepared! I was not prepared for the deep well of horror what Man should not behold in this here life. I was not prepared, and it was opened up unto me!"

I began to feel a crawling dis-ease as the preacher continued his narrative. I could tell that my father was feeling it too. He fidgeted in his seat with the same anxious energy as the children surrounding us.

"Over behind my daddy's house there be a hill, a knoll you might say, and on

the tother side of that rise is a patch of swampy ground not fit for growing living things. Instead of planting there, my daddy had put up some pens and sheds for to keep his hogs. Then he dug up some of that putrid ground to make hissif a slop for them hogs. Some year it was a right regular pond but mostly it were a filthy puddle surrounded by a dried up plain of mud and a forty year heap of hog slop and, pardon me ladies, ex-CREE-ment. It was all covered with a crust of dried up pond scum and drew flies liken it was the kingdom of flies. You could hear the infernal buzzing of them maggot mothers long before you could see 'em. I reckon even Beelzebub, himself, never seen nor heard the like."

"In my mind's eye there were a troublin' on the scum covered surface of that pond. At first the meanest of bubbles gurgled as they erupted through the mud. Then come up bigger ones, faster and more. Then even bigger ones faster and more. The commotion continued till the surface of that pit seemed to agitate into a rolling boil. It was then that all that bubbling stopped dead."

"At first I could not see it. It was as though globs of mud and scum were being thrown up into the air without no sense at tall. Then I slowly began to make it out. It had no flesh, as we reckon flesh. Even in vision I could hardly receive what mine eyes commanded. For as it thrashed in the muck, the mud, scum and shite stuck to his carcass makin' like a filthy mask visible to my sight. I will not describe what it appeared for I cannot. Words been made for this world—not for the place whence this beast done arose."

The preacher turned to the children again and spoke now in a low conspiratorial voice as if only we could hear. "It was not an easy birthin'. The horrid thing had to fight and push for to free itself from that sticky bog. Then after much contention, it pulled itself out and onto a solid perch. I have never dreamed

nor 'maged nuthin so heinous.”

The preacher jumped back up on the platform and began to pace back and forth. He seemed energized and yet aloof as though speaking from a faraway place.

“I won’t say it walked, for what it done was more like lumber up that little rise towards my daddy’s house. It labored and groaned with each step as though the air itself pushed with some desperate will agin its progress. Yesir, laboring up that hill, the vile thing seemed assaulted as it spewed mud and slime from holes and gashes what appeared here and there upon its loathsome carcass.”

The preacher paused and slowly cocked his head to the side. He rolled his eyes up into his head rapt as though listening to some lost melody and whispered, “ It moved through space as though it wern’t made for the texture of this world.”

“I reckon I slept, but I know what I seen; I seen in my daddy’s room a fine white vapor arisin’ up through his nostrils. It twisted and worried itself into something unspeakable then faded away like the mist in the holler when the sunlight touches its depths.”

“My daddy’s lips, they begin to twitch liken he wanted to whimper, cry out maybe, but there were no life there; instead, from outta his mouth and between those old cracked lips come slithering a small white poorly thing. It were naked and as pale and clear as them albino worms. Sally minders they call 'em, what swim with huge blinded eyes in the dark pools of bottomless caves.”

The preacher paused gathering his thoughts, “And as I watched the little pale thing crawl across its own dead face, I knew, oh yes, I knew in the very deep of my heart, that it were my daddy’s own soul.”

He whispered again making us strain to hear, "Poor pitiful thing, poor pitiful, pathetic, damned thing."

Beyond the cracked windows and tattered screen door of the old church, the storm responded to the preacher with a counterpoint of crashes and pyrrhic beats. Speaking with the forked tongues of tremendous electrical discharge.

In the pew behind me Mrs. Morney and the Gloor sisters began to rock back and forth. Their silk handkerchiefs spun around in short agitated circles. They chanted softly with words syncopated to the rhythm of their rocking, "Save us Jesus, save us Jesus, save us Jesus, save us Jesus ..."

As the words gained momentum they inevitably slurred together becoming one long aspirated hiss.

"Listen close now children, hunker on down next one t'other, for what I say is God's own mercy. You see, that heinous thing, that obscene, unnatural thing, come over the hill right on down to my daddy's house. It moved up besides me on the porch. Be I dreaming or not, it was so close I could not catch breath for the foul stench what come offa his putrid being."

"That abortion proceeded cross the threshold and plowed dreckly round the corner into my daddy's room. The little white thing what crawled outta my daddy's mouth sensed it coming. It were a pitiful sight to see. When it reckoned the beast, it were more afraid than anything I hope never to see again. It ran terrified up and down and up and down the length of my daddy's bed. In downright desperation, it flung itself offa that bed and grabbed the edge of the coverlet, swung on down to the floor and ran. Ran from the very pits of Hell. Ran with all its puny might. Ran from its gruesome end."



The preacher spoke with a frightening intensity.

“But i'twere all to no good children, all to no good,” the preacher continued, “for that loathsome beast swung its arm down and scooped up that little soul like a hawk may snatch a chick from under a momma hen’s wing. That poor pitiful thing commenced to writhing and wailing in the beast’s vile embrace.”

“There were no escape though, no escape from the wages of sin, no escape from the doom, from the damnation. My daddy’s rebellious disregard of God’s own laws had brought hissif to terror and to anguish that defies all knowing.”

The storm outside intensified with loud booming retorts and crackling ejaculations. The children seated around me were becoming visibly frightened. They began to huddle close against each other, the littler ones holding onto the hands of their elder peers. One little blonde girl hypnotically pulled her hair back and forth across her saucer sized eyes.

I glanced up at my father who had become grim and stone faced with an expression of what I can only describe as disgust. His eyes were focused on the preacher with a cold steeliness. As steadfast as a gargoye, he made no effort to wipe the sweat that now flowed freely down his brow. He seemed called to bear witness. To what exactly, I could not be sure.

The preacher continued, “Back over the threshold of the cabin and over the gentle hill, like an infernal locomotive, that thing from the pits made hast. Pushing against invisible bars, hell bent towards the sty and swill of its birthin’. Quickly now, with not a moment fer mercy, it stood on the edge of the shite and scum covered pool. It hesitated fer but a second as if listenin’ to the whimpering of the little white bein’ in his grasp, then plowed full bore into the slough.”

The preacher crouched down in front of us directing his full attention to the cowering children. For just a moment he glanced up at my father with a look of defiant arrogance.

"I shall nere forget, as the thing began to sink, the pool parted into an awful swirl of filth. My daddy's soul straining against the tow seemed to swell and lengthen, its eyes bulged outta its sickly white head, and its mouth widened and strained to utter a most obscene and pathetic sound. A sound like that of infant kitten cats, sacked and carelessly tossed inna dark lake, all a' squealing and gurgling their last gasp."

All became quiet. Even the storm outside lay still. Then in a sad small voice the little blonde girl in front of me began to sigh, then whine, then cry, then weep.

Ignoring the little girl, the preacher started up again, "Oh and look at you children, such sweet and tender children, you think you be safe in your momma's love, hah, without dread in your daddy's arms. But I kin see, oh yes, I kin see just behind you now, little boy there with that snotty nose, the beast be lingering near. And you pretty baby with them golden locks, behind you be a shadow of strange proportions like unto that beast what dragged my daddy to his eternal doom."

The preacher slowly raised an elongated boney hand, "I kin see it even now. It extends what might pass fer fingers to paw and streak with vile issue the yeller of your vain hair. It waits for that moment that we know not, when the veil of life be lifted, when the soul be freed from its bodily shield. It waits to pluck without pity what pretends to see but cannot. Seek what shelter, seek what salvation you may find now before your sweetness is sucked away like sop from a bittered sponge."

The preacher began to wave his arms in a mysterious musical way.

It was as though he were directing some sort of invisible choir. And sure enough in my mind's eye I began to believe I could see it. It was a spectral ensemble composed of dark liquid shadows that rose up behind the children in front of us. These smoky apparitions seemed to quaver in and out of existence as they poked their tendril like appendages about and through the children's bodies.

In that very moment, my father seemed called to action. He rose to his feet with arms outstretched. He stared at the preacher with a focused attention allowing some strange energy to rise up within his spirit and explode with wrathful authority, "Shame on you, shame! Whoso shall offend one of these little ones let that millstone drown him in the depth of the sea."

The preacher chuckled in response. "I may be the ointment what burns away the pison of yo' momma's baby suck love. No Jesus meek and mild. Nossir! I be the blade that slays the lamb. I be that ancient spirit of jealous retribution what demands jus-ti-fi-ca-tion! I am as hard and as fast as what lies beneath the rock and within the twisted trees of these here hills."

My father lifted both his hands towards the ceiling of the church and commanded, "In the name of Christ's love I rebuke you! By the power of his Holy Spirit, I bind you, son of the pit, child of perdition!"

## §

If it is in fact memory at all, I remember that the little church was transfigured by a blinding cloud of light. At first it was non-specific; the light fully present here and there in equal brilliance. It seemed to emanate from every corner of the structure. Then meandering like a stream between the pews the light coalesced behind the pulpit into a swirling ball of pulsating plasma.

I remember that the orb of scintillating light seemed to hover just behind the preacher, creating for a moment a grotesque skeletal silhouette. I remember that it then shot with a blast of terrifying energy down the aisle and out through the devastated front door.

Then quiet and calm. Like the depth of a mother's sigh when her child's fever breaks in the heart of the night. A momentary repose that swaddled the little church.

But the peace did not last. In the pandemonium that ensued, my father gathered the children around him as best he could, marching us through the roiling congregation to the screen door, now damaged and dangling by one hinge. We pushed and bullied our way past the flailing, disoriented deacon guarding the threshold and into the electrified night beyond.

Here, my memory ends. I have no recollection of how we crossed the lawn or of our drive home in the dread of the night. In truth, my mother denies that my father ever bought land near Blue Springs or that any of these events could have possibly happened.

David Barnes



## **If You Really Knew Me...**

By Austin Levingston

You would know that I was diagnosed with Autism when I was born.

You would know that I don't talk much because sometimes it's probably that I'm shy or I know what to say but I just can't say it.

You would know that sometimes I make strange facial expressions.

You would know that sometimes I make strange body movements.

You would know that I'm one of the nicest and most positive people you'll ever meet.

You would know that I graduated elementary school, middle school, and high school.

You would know that I swam competitively for four years in high school.

You would know that I'm a very talented artist.

You would know that I am currently succeeding in college and already

halfway to getting an associate's degree.

You would know that I strongly stand up for people with disabilities just like me.

You would know that I'm an uncle to a little nephew who means almost everything to me.

But if you also really knew me....

You would know that I got bullied and taunted in elementary school and middle school because of my disability and nothing was ever done about it.

You would know that I also got bullied and taunted in my junior year of high school by a group of seniors and nothing was ever done about it.

You would know that I stood up for a kid in high school who got bullied by the same group of seniors that bullied me and today he is one of my closest friends.

You would know that I had a therapist tell me a while back that I wasn't college material because of my disability and still to this day I been proving him wrong because I'm

currently succeeding in college right now.

You would know that I also had the same therapist tell me a while back that I was never going to be able to land a job anywhere because of my disability but then I got one and been working at the same job for almost 2 years now.

You would know that I have come a long way and been making a lot of good progress in my life especially with the disability that I have.

You would know that I haven't had and never will let anything hold me back or let anybody tell me any different with this disability that I have.

You would know that I have had and always will have a big support system around me.

You would know that there are millions of people in this world who have a disability just like me.

You would just know that, this is my life.



## **You're Such a Happy Girl**

By Kara Gosfield

I never really expected my life  
to turn out the way it has.

I love so many people, so many people  
you see.

Every day I walk down the sloped  
sidewalk to school

I have a giant smile on my face. They all  
see me, happy.

But I wonder if maybe just one of them  
knew, if just one wanted to.

Behind the happiness I show is a world,  
to most it's unknown.

I have spent my life hiding it just to  
survive.

They say your demons fade in due time.

My demons haven't faded, not for many  
years.

But still here I sit waiting for the day

The good and happy people will take my  
screams away

Now if you ask yourself "is this girl  
insane?"

Just remember this

Pain stings so deep that may last a  
lifetime

Bruises fade

So I shall walk with a smile for you all

But inside I am dying.



**When You Needed More**

By George O. Martin, Jr.

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When you had to go back

When something wasn't right

And all the terms the surgeon used

Were frightening beyond

Simple perception

I signed

I gave permission

I allowed without question

I signed and waited

I had given my permission

I signed you into the hands

Of healers.

I signed

Too numb to weep,

To wonder, to say, to ask.

And then I prayed, and signed.

Later I ate, and signed a napkin.

I waited next to your bed

I waited for your eyes to open to me.



And I sighed and counted  
The miles of separation  
Measured in breaths,  
Your breaths assisted  
Then your breaths alone  
Then your raspy voice  
Then I sighed  
As my eyes clouded  
With the rain of joy  
Signed my cheeks  
The pen was gone  
The papers, gone  
The napkin used  
And thrown away,  
I had you back  
I followed each arrival  
Each sign of your return  
With a sigh of the deepness  
Of my love for you.



## **Counting Blue Cars**

By Ash Norton

“Becca,” inquired my wife, Kate, “what color is that car in front of us?”

“Blue,” replied her only sister.

“What?” exclaimed Kate, turning the one word into several rising notes.

Before we proceed further, readers should know that my wife and I happened, at that time, to have a long standing cease-fire regarding the actual color of the car that happened to be in front of our own. Rest assured, we’ve never come to blows about it. I simply labeled it as a “blue car” one day and she proceeded to correct me. I re-chose my words and the matter was quickly dropped. Upon the second instance of precisely labeling the color of the car, I felt my position was more defensible and proceeded to explain my judgement. But it was wholly insufficient. Not compared to the power or precision of her artillery, but the incredible momentum in which the front shifted in her favor.

You see, Kate takes a certain pride in describing colors accurately. She isn’t by profession or hobby a painter, photographer, fashion designer, or other artist that works closely with colors. Nor is it a peeve, a compulsion, or obsession. It is simply an activity she does not pass up. Thus, when I venture my best speedy estimation between one of two primary colors and proceed, after being corrected, to explain why someone could easily think so, I was perplexed -stunned- as she ventured from casual conversation into unfathomed scientific research regarding female advantage with these cone thingies in the eye that allow her gender to perceive color in five dimensions. She had it bookmarked on her Internet-connected phone, which she handed to me like a footnote in our conversation that wasn’t a conversation at all.

Thus, I was surprised and fearful when she resurrected the two year old issue without warning and with all her cannon properly sighted. Her sister did not know it was a loaded question, but was perfectly poised to be a reinforcement or -more likely- witness to a hasty retreat if not outright surrender. Imagine my delight, then, when my wife's most loyal and finest ally -born of the same stock, nurtured by the same hands, and united in blood as well as tears,- confirmed in the most nonchalant and unknowing manner that her response to this fatal question is indeed exactly what I, the opposing camp, have always maintained.

"It's blue" she repeated.

"Becca, it's green."

"Naw, it's a light blue."

"Becca, this car is blue," which was undoubtedly a fact, "That car is mint green."

I couldn't see -with my inferior cones- through my wife's eyes but I could understand her opinion. I considered several concessions at once: money, soreness, supplication. They would have to be unconditional, perhaps even in writing. ('Is it even possible to make ink from my tears?' I thought.)

"Well," replied Becca in her teacher voice, "since you're not wearing your glasses, let me inform you it's blue."

Kate was in the middle of unfolding the very same spectacles, ones she keeps in the car for driving during night time (which it wasn't). I hadn't noticed her retrieving them. Without thinking, I began to snicker. It was a nervous, high-pitched type of snicker.

“Oh my gosh, that is definitely mint green.” Kate’s tone was flat and efficient. Had it not been for her opening expression, I would not have known her vexation with her own witness. My laughs grew louder.

“No, it’s sky blue. Compare it with the horizon. See?” Becca was still in casual conversation, not an ounce of impoliteness or unpleasantness from her. We all gazed upon the horizon and saw a fitting analogy. I howled like a hyena.

“Don’t you think it’s more sea-” Kate attempted but became tongue-tied. I was too raucous for her to continue. The whole setup was a farce! Because she was debating with her sister, Kate wouldn’t allow either of them to be wrong. Now that they had most definitely shared their opinions and found no common ground, Kate instinctively sought compromise. Yet sister Becca had already plainly stated her reasoning and there was more evidence for it than anything I or Kate had ever offered in our jousts together.

Kate poked me several times in the side. “Stop your whinnying, you little pony!”

The car in question, turned into our driveway. It was actually my mother’s car. I stepped out jovially and inhaled the fresh air of peace. As my mother approached, I overheard my wife making a wager with her sister. It involved chocolate! “We were just settling on what color your car is,” began Kate.

“It’s green,” replied my mom nonchalantly and unknowingly.



## **Window of Opportunity**

By Ash Norton

I drove along the expressway through the darkness of a rural plain. As my family slept in the back seats, I thanked God for the peace. If my toddling son was awake, he would be screaming in his car seat, refusing whatever kind of appeasement my wife would be desperately trying to give him.

Up ahead was some traffic. An 18 wheeled truck ventured to pass a gargantuan camper on wheels. There were only two lanes and another car four seconds ahead of me was quickly approaching the slow moving blockade. Then I witnessed the truck retreat behind the camper, giving way to the cars behind it. It was more than foresight, it was thoughtful.

I wanted to signal my appreciation. Standard procedure mandated that I roll down my window and wave an expression of gratitude as I pass the truck. This posed a conundrum because the noise produced while doing so would likely awaken my child. Not wanting to miss the single opportunity to thank the truck driver, I gambled.

My fingers rested upon the switches which controlled all four windows. The buttons were not illuminated and operated inversely to my training. (When I was a child, toggling the button toward your body descended the window.) As the moment approached, I actually had to visualize the process. You see, my window was special. If I tapped the button, the window would descend completely, however, holding the button for a time would initiate manual control. In doing the latter, I would be able to minimize the disturbance for my family by opening the window just enough for my arm to fully extend for an appropriate hand signal.

Wiggling a finger in the dark at the truck driver would not suffice at all.

The queer thing about technology is that it tends to create more problems than it solves. In this case, I do not think any amount of practice would have prevented me from missing the mark of controlling the window the way I desired. As my window descended fully, a roaring noise filled the car and I felt an explosion of refreshingly cold air upon my face and chest. I quickly compensated by pressing the button oppositely, only to have the window ascend to a portion that prevented me from putting my arm through the opening. In the meantime, my wife awoke to a sudden and terrifying startle. Surprisingly, the baby did not make any detectable noise (thank God), though it would take many decibels to be heard anyway. The whole situation was compromised, so I felt compelled to complete it anyhow. (Keep in mind these are microsecond thoughts and feelings I am processing, all while driving very fast, trying to perform under pressure...)

My hand repositioned itself over the window controls. Due to the darkness, I couldn't accurately determine where the edge of my window glass was. The dark tree line was all I could see in that direction. I pressed a button to calibrate the glass. My wife's window descended instead. (She sat on the other side of the car in the back seat. I wasn't even in an adjacent quadrant.) By the time I realized how to correct this error, I somehow saw her, in the corner of my eye, grab hold of a sun screen as it was sucked out her window. She retrieved it as quickly as it left. I couldn't hear her, couldn't really see her, but I felt her objecting thoughts in my mind:

"What's happening?!" shouted the imaginary she.

"I don't know." responded me, telepathically honest.

"No! Stop. Stop!"

"Okay."

"WHAT are YOU doing?!?!"

"I'm trying to get things back to the way they were."

"What things?! Why?"

"You know, so I can signal this truck driver my gratitude."

"Just because we are having this imaginary communication in your mind does NOT make me omniscient, or the antagonist, or dense."

"So what are you?" think-blurted me, really curious now.

"Apparently I'm the voice of reason, of unclouded and rational thinking in this profoundly thought-impaired situation."

"I think therefore I am."

"So what are you?" demanded she the very moment me uttered it.

"...In trouble??" guesstimated me.

"NO SHI-" was all I got because I interrupted it with a glance at her in reality, with my real eye. It was dark and somewhat obstructed by the stuff of our car; I could barely see the outline of her form. Her eyes were not wide, they were narrowed a bit. I realized then, in her frown upon frowns, she was a living legacy of all of Don Bluth's scowling characters.

Only 3 seconds elapsed since the time I last pressed a window button. At my

new and invigorated attempt however, I was able to correct my mistakes. I even waved to the truck driver, with my arm fully extended high into heavens -though it was more triumphantly than appreciatively. Then all the windows were shut. Several moments of silence passed. I didn't dare look backward. My child was still asleep! My wife had several puffs without any detectable huffs. I contemplated my farewell prayer.

After what must have been a minute, I couldn't help but chuckle about the event. With my eyes on the road and one hand on the steering wheel, I reached back and blindly searched for the hand or knee of my wife. We were alive and in love! Our baby slept on!

Amidst that dark world only illuminating a path of unending asphalt, I had to share this precious moment of joy with some kind of physical touch. Then it came: a swift, exact, and gentle karate chop. Chop, chop, chop.





## **Silent Knights**

By Patrisha Reed

T'was December 17th and no one was here...except one Barton Elf, who was delivering good cheer.

The phone wasn't ringing, the corridors still....In the halls no one lurking, not one – not even Bill!

No Fedex or UPS deliveries to sign... Or packages to carry to your desks, from mine.

Every task was completed, all textbooks turned in....One semester now finished, another waiting to begin.

Dexter was dying from all the endless requests....And the trees were all mourning the loss of their best.

Paper clips were untangled, and the staplers were full....The pens were all 'working,' and the pencils not dull!

The keys all accountable and clear out of sight...while the monitor hung in the shadows, like a Dark Barton Knight.

The cars and the trucks and the

trailers all parked....Every classroom  
now vacant, not a sound or remark.

PC's were shut down and "MOST"  
files put to bed....The desks all a clutter  
with post-its, instead.

The shredder still full from the feast  
that it ate.....is now waiting for New  
Years to  
regurgitate!

But the real life at Barton isn't "all  
the above".....It's about folks working  
together with teamwork

And such.....

It's not the funding, or the cutbacks,  
or KBOR and such.....Any Degree of  
Wisdom clearly, doesn't rest upon

A budget, or the cost of oil, or the proof  
of our success.....It isn't based on mere  
projections, it is "what drives u?" on  
the quest (for knowledge).

So, remember

"Higher education" is not defined as an  
executive sport.....And careers are  
never founded upon those legislative  
reports.

But if we maintain our focus toward  
the Highest Degree.....Wisdom will  
become the profit margin that will  
motivate students to succeed!

Merry Christmas to all!!!



## **Texas**

By Justin Scarbro

Texas is not just another state. It is the second largest state and is one of the most diverse, from the deserts in west Texas to the pine forests in east Texas. Texas can be considered its own nation.

Texas isn't just extreme climates and high school football. Texas is eating Whataburger late at night after the game. Texas is listening to George Strait. Texas is real barbeque. Texas is Blue Bell ice cream. Texas is deep fried. Texas is chili. Texas is crazy gun laws. Texas is pecan pie and banana pudding. Texas is sweet tea. Texas is a yellow rose. Texas is bluebonnet fields. Texas is longhorns. Texas is oil. Texas is lifted trucks. Texas is starched jeans and cowboy boots. Texas is beautiful sunsets. Texas is Ranger games in the spring and Cowboys games in the fall. Texas is seventy two degrees on Christmas day. Texas is the friendly state. Texas is go big or go home. Texas is where students can ride horses to school. Texas is where back yard football games become emergency room trips. Texas is rodeos on Saturday nights. Texas is the basic structure for state fairs. Texas is a better example for "southern hospitality." Texas is holding the door for strangers over five feet away. Texas is saying "y'all" when addressing more than one person. Texas is saying coke when asked for any soda besides Dr. Pepper. Texas is ruby red grapefruits. Texas is Frito pies. Texas is driving 8 hours in any direction and still being in Texas. Texas is pride. Texas is home.



## **How Dedicated Are You?**

By Alfredo Smith

Dedication is that very fiber of your being that will forever be within. Whether it lies dormant or not is up to the individual. Dedication is not some trifling thing that is thrown around simply for props or to create clout. Dedication is like Time. It has always existed and will continue to do so for eternity with or without us. To truly understand the meaning of dedication one must understand what it is and what it is not.

Dedication is the sun that shone upon the back of the West African with only the will to survive as he was forced to pick cotton in a strange, foreign land. Dedication is the unrelenting slave that carries on despite the constant whips against his back. It is what caused Thomas Edison to exhaust hundreds of different materials in order to give the world light. Dedication is the ability to run into the face of failure and embrace it each time only to emerge with a new perspective. The need to ascend beyond your social and economic background is that dedication. The very epitome of dedication is that powerful and magnificent brilliance that allowed Lee Kuan Yew to transform Singapore from a third world country to a first world in simply one decade.

However, dedication is not is a façade put before society to disguise one's need for self-importance or public show. Dedication is not something that can be swayed by money or wealth all for the sake of boosting the ego of mad men who wish to bring grandeur and privilege to their existence. It is not that thing which goes bump in the night or that wicked force that makes men topple buildings, destroy characters through their influence or even destroy lives. Dedication is not the body that falls and refuses to regain its posture. It is not an existence to

be turned by the tides and blown by the winds. Dedication is not something that topples empires and resigns them to the history books.

Dedication exists in the heart and in the mind. It will not forsake us nor will it be as a shadow fully devoted to us until our darkest hour. Dedication is that perfect mix of circumstance and self-knowledge aligning themselves to achieve a specific goal. How dedicated am I? That is a question that we seldom ask ourselves. Am I willing to put one-hundred percent into something? Am I willing to give every last ounce of confidence into a task? Dedication is simply my will to go on and pursue whatever challenges life may issue.



## **Lucifer and the Locust**

By Jenalee Rodriguez

Spring is my favorite season. I love the longer evenings, the warm breezes, and the smell of an April shower on hot concrete. The melody of birds singing their return echoes in the air, and the world becomes vibrant with fresh greens and pinks and reds as nature blooms in all her splendor. People clean their houses and open their windows and rejoice in the birth of life as we thaw from our wintry prison.

Busy sounds fill spring, and one sound in particular marks the season for me. As the evenings wear on and the noises of life die down the sound of a buzzing wail cuts through the silence. For some people the almost electronic siren call of the cicada is a major annoyance. For me it symbolizes life.

Unfortunately, spring does not always denote life. One such spring nearly marked the end for me, and will forever remain imprinted in my memory. Although years and years have now passed, I still remember my ruffled Sunday dress and ignorant, childish innocence. The blades of grass and the tips of the leaves in the trees became steeped with a vivid aging yellow as the afternoon waxed on. I walked with my cousin along the cobbled pathway behind her home. I loved her house with all its trees and bushes and flowers and the creek that ran right through the backyard.

We continued exploring, as small children do, when I saw him. To me, a mighty lion scanning the horizon for danger with glinting predatory eyes; his massive, dirty golden coat a heap of fur and muscle, tethered down by a heavy chain draped around his bulging neck. They called him Lucifer.

“Don’t go near him.” My cousin cautioned. “He’s mean.”

My six year old mind reeled. I loved dogs; surely none knew the sense of mean. I heeded her warning, though, and we made a wide circle around him. However, when I saw the cicada on the ground, my disappointed evaporated.

“Look Ashleigh, a locust!” I exclaimed in excitement, never actually having seen a cicada before, and pointed out the mistakenly labeled insect.

“They’re not locusts.” She argued.

The cicada began vibrating on the ground wailing and clicking intermittently. Its shining transparent wings made a mosaic of the dramatic greens and blues and blacks slipping down its torpedo shaped body. I would prove it to her, I thought, and reached down to pick it up.

The whole world stopped. Not a leaf rustled, no wind blew, and even the sparkling motes stopped their sunlit dancing. For a moment halted in time noise ceased completely, as if the very breath of life had shuttered. I froze, suspended in the void of a trembling heartbeat, every second a quiver of time; until it broke like the violent cracking of a branch over a knee.

No sooner had I snatched the cicada from the ground into the safety of my tiny hand when I smacked the ground with force enough to knock the wind out of me, a deafening roar blasting through my eardrums. Lucifer lived up to his name, and began dragging me to the depths of hell. In my ignorance I hadn’t anticipated the length of his chain, but he had counted on it. His colossal jaw writhed with activity, muscles rippling through every inch of his purebred Mastiff body as he wrenched me closer; my little legs pitifully lost to a chasm of oozing, undulating tongue and throat.

The world violently whipped back and forth in my vision as he brutally shook me between two sets of powerful dagger-like teeth.

I could feel the end nearing. Aside from an initial scream of shock, I could make no sound. I could only look up through dirt-caked, tear filled, bloody eyes at my cousin-the last person I would ever see. A hiccup of ache went through my heart and scalded my soul. I didn't want to die.

My cousin, though, an angel in a dark abyss, although terrified and screaming, grabbed me in the only place on my body not overcome by gnashing teeth and gore: my hair. The pain of having half my locks ripped from my scalp felt like a tickle compared to the hell unleashed on my torso and legs. She yanked back with all her might, dragging me precious few inches from the devil himself, and fell back into the dirt crying as the adults ran outside. I could still hear the demonic growls of Lucifer as he lunged against his chain, infuriated that his victim had escaped. The world faded out.

I remember later the adults telling me that the dog was sick. Mad, they described him. They euthanized him, right there that day, Old Yeller style; condemned back to the depths of the hell that had encased us both. I learned a valuable lesson about dogs then, and although I still love them, I have an unceasing respect for their space and behavior. I also didn't hate Lucifer for trying to kill me.

The ambulance ride was mostly a blur. I faded in and out of consciousness, closing my eyes to the blinding lights of the paramedics as we sped to the nearest hospital. They worked feverishly, trying to close the wounds and stop the blood as much as possible until we arrived where they could stitch me up; I couldn't stay



awake. Dazed, I arrived at the hospital. I think I heard my mother there, but I can't be sure. Sounds of panic and crying buzzed and hummed around me. I couldn't make sense of it all, until a voice asked me,

“What have you got there?” He pried open my ghostly white and still clenched fingers.

I stretched out my palm and looked down. As clear as a dazzling spring sun, buzzing and clicking in rhythm to the chaos sat the cicada. I pulled him to my chest and closed my eyes. The cicada was still alive.

And so was I.

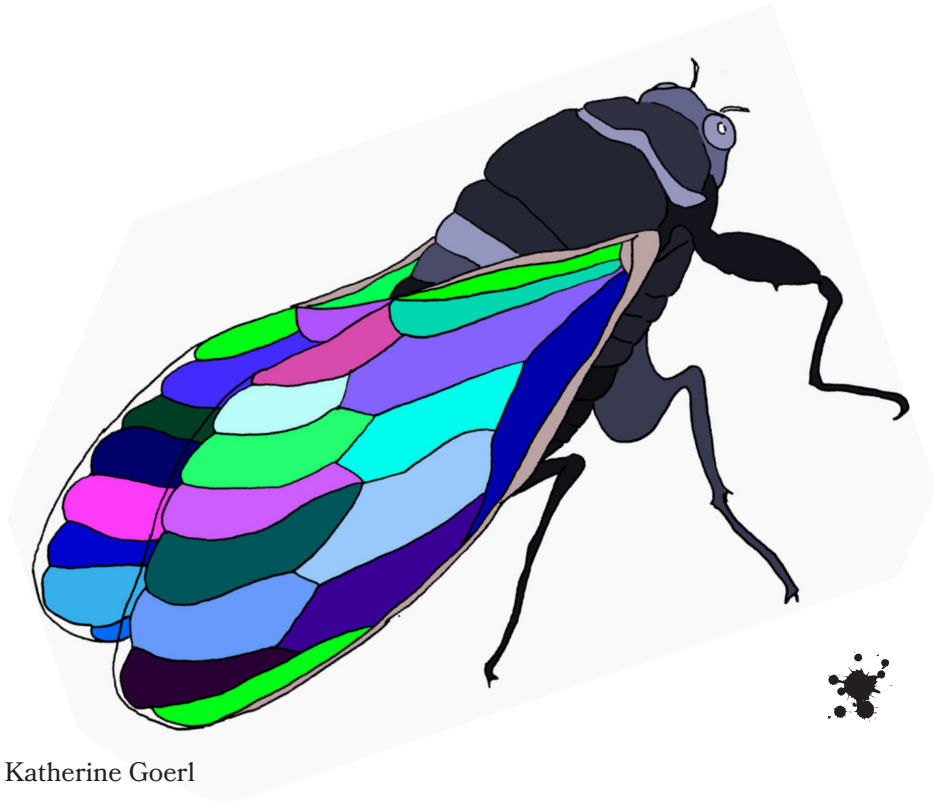


Illustration by Katherine Goerl

Barton Theatre presents

# OUR TOWN

by

# Thornton Wilder

Directed by Dr. Rick Abel

SEP 29, 30 - 7:30 pm

OCT 1 - 2:00 pm

Barton Community College Fine Arts Auditorium

**Students with ID - FREE**

**General Public - \$6.00 advance,  
\$7.00 at the door**

**For ticket information, contact:**

**Barton Box Office • (620) 786-1150 • [theatre.barton.edu](http://theatre.barton.edu)**

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ENGLE 10/02/16

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**There is a way  
to see inside**