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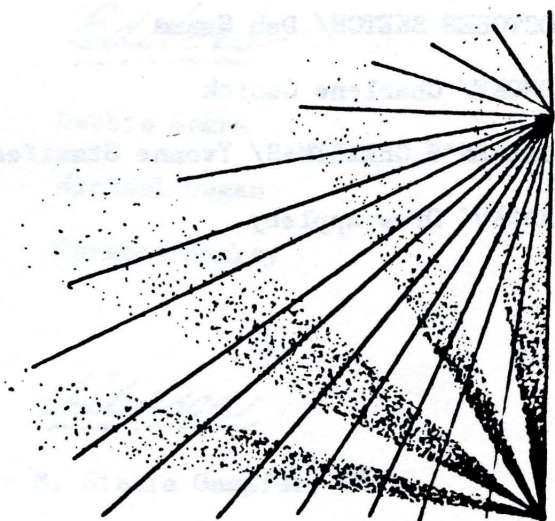


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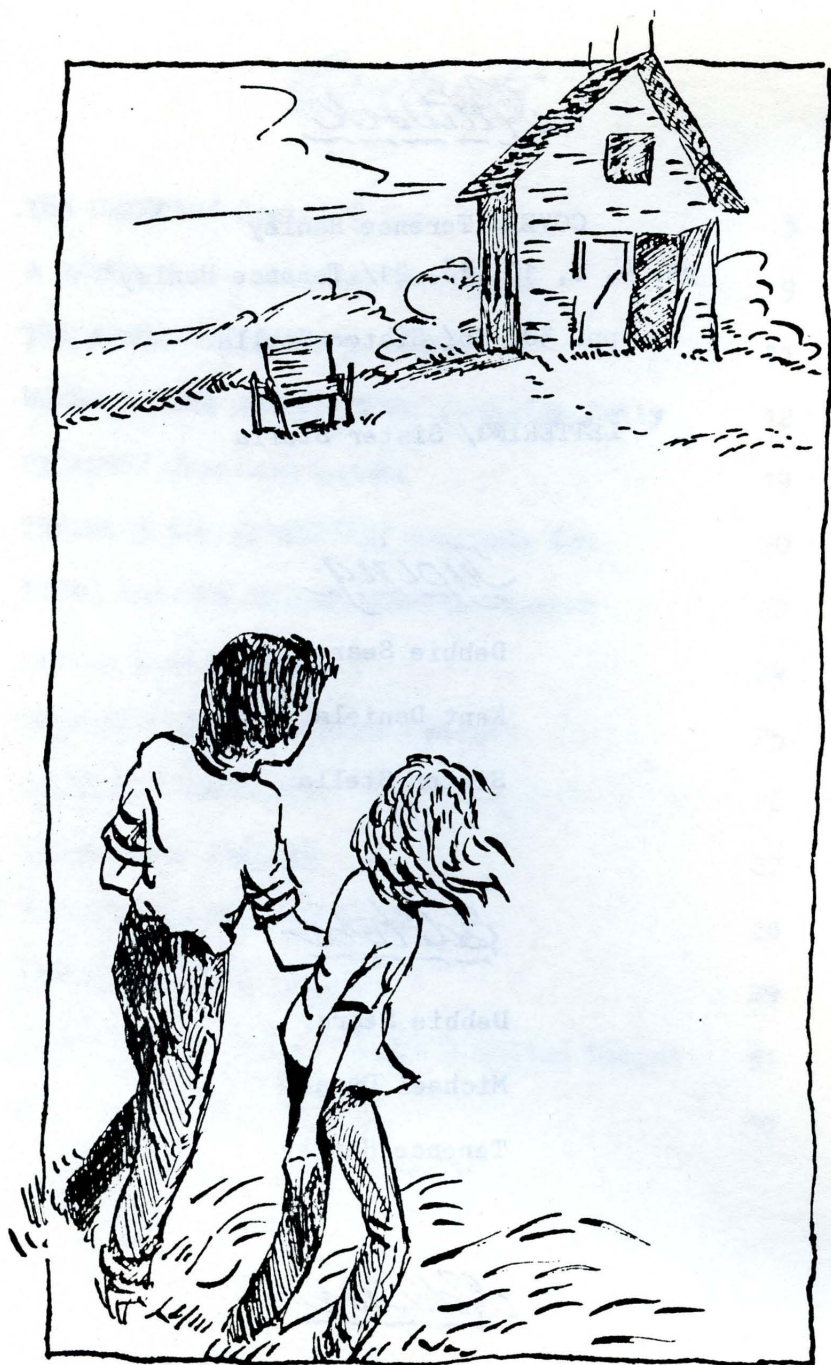
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The Creeper

by Courtney Cox

Let's talk, you and I.

Let's talk about fear.

Few ever experience it in its true, raw form. Sure, many may recall those horrible moments of wondering if the car will start, but that's not what we're discussing here. Fear causes one to go clammy, to stop thinking, to wish for death.

I know what fear is. So does Brian, my brother, though he won't speak of it. Somehow, simply calling up those memories to talk about, makes the body cold to the bone again...stiff... slimy with sweat...

As small children, we loved visiting Nana and Grandad at the farm. There was a large rolling velvet orchard in front, edged with rows of silent cows (and one terribly fascinating bull). The big woods across the creek was full of old, gnarly trees, thick rugs of moss, and flitting fairies. So, because there were so many diversions out there on the farm, we found endless excuses for not playing in the old barn, a huge, ageless, well-preserved structure which promised unconditional death to us.

"Why don't you ever swing on the tire that Grandad hung in the barn just for you?" Nana would plead with us. Our replies ranged from the sun being too bright to the playhouse needing redecoration, but we always had one. Always.

We'd felt it ever since we were tiny, when once Grandad took us into the barn to show off his new Gurnsey, Aunt Millie. Immediately after entering the gloom, we both stopped dead. Something in the loft wanted us. Pressing waves of hatred pushed through the floorboards from above, penetrating and freezing us. Grandad, mystified and concerned, hurried us out into the sunshine

when he saw our suddenly pasty faces.

Years later, when we were told the legend of the Creeper, our eyes met and we nodded, understanding finally.

The old story claimed that her name before death had been Hattie. She was a darling, pretty little thing, but partially retarded, thus thought to be "possessed." Her family, the respectable Starns, had moved clear across the country to the new farm to escape the shame. They decided that something had to be done with Hattie to avoid that same disgrace in their new home. That "something" ended in Hattie's being chained to the hayloft, neat the tiny high window in the barn. She remained there her entire life, looking out the grimy window, her mind filled with burning hatred. She died on her thirty-first birthday, lonely and bitter, hoping desperately to find the company in death that she'd been unable to have in life. She'd been creeping about the loft ever since, looking for that company, as she would for all eternity....

Knowing the source of our fear somehow didn't deplete it. Rather, we both made silent resolutions never to allow ourselves to pooh-poo the legend as we grew older, nor to everlook the horrid significance of our first encounter with the Creeper.

So when we moved to the farm when Nana and Grandad died, the year after Brian became a teenager, we simply skirted the barn at all cost, questions unnecessary. It had become second nature, being comparable only to placing a hand on a red-hot stove burner--once--and never, ever doing it again.

Thus, it was without a second's hesitation that we shook our heads silently and solidly

when Bret, the hulking fool next door, proposed one thick evening that we spend the night in our loft to "pay our respects to the Creeper." Our adamant refusals only heightened his insistent whining. After exhausting every juvenile persuasive tactic that his tiny mind could conceive, he leaped from his yard chair and lumbered toward the barn.

Brian and I looked long at one another, eyes bulging with fear in the rapidly fading dusk. We couldn't allow it to happen--not even to Bret. We sprinted after his figure, catching up only seconds before he bent to enter the easy-access door. He shook off our tackles and disappeared into the black hole before we could gain our feet again.

Standing slowly, we looked up into Hattie's tiny window. We felt her grinning down at us from its blackness. Then our attention turned again to Bret, who could be heard hauling himself clumsily up the steep loft stairs as he laughed and dared us to follow. He reached the summit and we heard him scuffling about a bit...and then a thud followed by dead, thick silence.

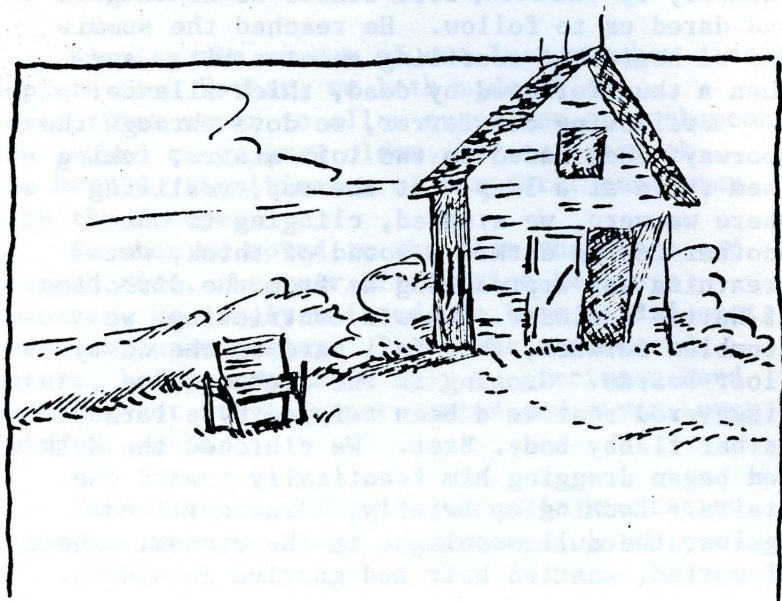
Swallowing our terror, we dove through the doorway, then raced to the loft stairs, taking them three at a leap. At the top, realizing where we were, we stopped, clinging to one another in the dark. A sound of thick, wet breathing was approaching us from the direction of Hattie's window. Chests constricting, we stumbled forward, then fell hard on the dusty floor boards. Groping in the darkness, we discovered that we'd been tripped by a large, rather flabby body. Bret. We clutched the hulk and began dragging him frantically toward the stairs. Looking up briefly, I saw outlined against the dull moonlight in the window, a head of matted, snarled hair and gnarled shoulders.

And then it was gone, followed by a deep chuckle.

Knowing that the flab and hay would cushion the fall, we rolled Bret down the steep flight, then tumbled over one another, clutching the rail, fleeing the horror behind. Tugging and pushing Bret's form toward the door, we looked up one last time. She was standing in a white slash of moonlight, arms at her sides, head thrown back, mouth agape, whining her eternal lonely rage.

In our terror, we gave Bret a final shove and popped him through the small door, tumbling out onto him. He began to grunt as he came to.

Bret later told us that he'd knocked himself out on a low beam--but he couldn't imagine how he had gotten such large, nasty bruises on his ribs and arms. We didn't tell him our part of the tale. We never even discussed it privately. What could possibly be said?



A Watercolor: Magdala

Here's a cabin, a shanty on a hillside. Above, like a thick glass bowl, dusty blue-grey, a sky turns upside down and tests its round edge on faraway hills.

She shanty-sheds. Steps out and empties it, closes the door behind her, and with squinting eyes, turns her hand, hollowed out, holding hurts, open to the sky-bowl. Not a fist this. Too scared for fisting anymore. This hopes for rain, remembers rain, waits again, ever again and still.

Deb Sears



The Stone Houses

A cold wind blew a sad song
through the trees;
Cold and musty air blew on my knees
As I walked through the valley
of the dead.

I looked at their stone houses
without windows or doors to get in.

But as I read the inscription on the
stone house, I learned ~~what~~

The cold rocks were homes
And why the cold, cruel stone houses
dotted separate lawns

That were both separate and joined.

I was shivering and I ran away,
And I never forgot what happened
that day.

Any Reader

Where's Your Imagination

by Jennifer Kelly

Sneaking through the stadium, she looked for a way out. Someone motioned to her from behind a curtain, and she ran in his direction. For a moment she hesitated, but she needed to trust him; somehow he seemed to understand. Together they ran through a darkened hall. She ran as fast as she could but couldn't keep up with him. Tripping over something, she fell to the floor. Running back to where she lay, he took her into his arms and carried her through the hall. Upon reaching a doorway, he entered and ran for the window.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Trust me!" he said, as he threw her out.

She closed her eyes and waited--waited for her life to pass before her eyes. It didn't. It didn't because she wasn't falling; her arms carried her as if they were wings.

*

Rippling the water beneath her, Eileen stretched, then closed her eyes again. Today she saw birds--colorful, flying birds all over the wall. Throwing back the covers, she crossed the room and sat down by the window.

Water splashed against the window, began as a single drop, then slid to meet another. The heavier drop moved quickly to meet a third. Unable to hold its own weight, it turned into a stream of water that raced down the pane. When it reached the bottom, the stream collided with the sill and was forced to split and run separate ways. She had watched it a hundred times and each time it was beautiful. A rainy day was a lot easier to appreciate if there was something

about it to enjoy.

Pulling her nightgown over her head, she folded it carefully and tucked it into the white lacey pillow sham. It certainly was a beautiful sham and the perfect complement to the white lace curtains. Eileen had decorated her room completely in white. The curtains and bedspread were white, as were the walls, carpet, and furniture. Her mother didn't appreciate her decorating taste, but Eileen felt it was because her parent wasn't creative enough. She had decided on white surroundings, because white gave her room to imagine, to be creative. If there was wallpaper on the walls or a pattern on the bedspread, she couldn't use her imagination; she'd have to see it as it was. White left her room for what could be. Today it was birds.

After running a brush through her hair, she pulled it back into a french braid and added a pale pink ribbon to match her shorts. On her way out of the room, she stopped to check herself in the mirror to see if she looked presentable. Her mother had once accused her of knowing she was pretty, but actually it wasn't true. Eileen felt that people noticed her, but not because of her looks. She felt that somehow people knew what she was thinking, and if she looked presentable they might accept her anyway. Surveying her hands, she noticed that the polish was chipped, and she took time to touch it up before she made her way to the kitchen for breakfast.

In the livingroom, Mr. Murphy and Danny wer rolling on the floor and throwing fake punches at each other. "Playing hookey again?" she asked, even though she was well acquainted with the situation. She remembered when she was in Danny's place and spent long afternoons with her father; he usually worked nights and weekends. But when Eileen entered high school, they began to grow apart, and

Mr. Murphy soon found Danny to be a good substitute. She didn't feel any resentment; he hadn't consciously replaced her. As it was, she had preferred to spend her time more constructively.

In the kitchen, last night's dishes were still on the counter. Although it wasn't her turn, she felt the compulsion to do them. Dirty dishes disturbed the order. When she finished, she headed for the refrigerator, totally expecting not to find anything. In Eileen's house there was never any food, at least not as far as she was concerned. Her mother insisted that it was only food to Eileen if it was loaded with sugar. Opening the door, she was surprised to find the refrigerator full. Apples, bananas, lettuce, cheddar--everything she loved. For a moment she hesitated as she scanned the meats, then helped herself to a wedge of cheese and a glass of milk. After a moment, the door from the desk opened and in walked Eileen's mother.

"Good morning, Eileen!"

"Have you ever wondered what an animal feels right before it's slaughtered?"

"Oh, Eileen! What are your plans for tonight?"

"I'm going to a party at Maureen's."

"Oh, that'll be fun. Don't be too late."

*

"Stop! Come on stop! I'm not ticklish!"

Eileen said, as she rose to a standing position.

"Oh, come on, everybody's ticklish."

In a last attempt to prove himself, he dove at her. To his surprise, he landed in empty space; she had already begun to run across the field. Scrambling to his feet, he travelled as fast as he could in an attempt to catch up with her. She turned and headed for the lake. He had her now; when she reached the lake, she'd be cornered. Anticipating victory, he started to slow. But she just kept running. She headed

right for the water.

"Eileen! Eileen, what are you..." Amazement stopped him in mid sentence. Instead of falling down into the lake, she rose to the sky. Silence filled her ears as all of her energy was directed toward flight. Gliding on a current of security, she circled the lake. Scaling tree tops and skimming water, both were in her control.

*

A nudge to the foot awakened her. Startled, she sat up and inspected the surrounding area for the culprit. She didn't see him, but had her suspicions when she saw the raised tunnel of earth passing by her feet. Wanting to write, she had come outside after the rain had cleared, hoping to be inspired. She had situated herself under a great old oak tree at the top of a hill. What made this spot outstanding was the view of the lake below. This was also, however, the favorite spot of many animals. Leaning against the tree, she picked up her notebook and attempted to write. Nothing came to mind. Frustrated, she filled the space with a comment. "I wonder how many moles die in cave-ins."

Feeling slightly chilled, she collected her belongings and started for the house. In her room, she drew back the curtains, so that she could still benefit from the sun, and then sat down at her desk to write. Stuck in the back of her book, she found the notes to a story she had once started.

"What do you do when you constantly feel like you're walking on a tight rope--standing on a thin line between reality and what is not, the wind whipping against your skin and making the rope tremble and you along with it? What can you do when your dreams don't come true, or when you haven't any dreams?"

Wadding it up, she threw it into the waste basket

and tried for something else.

Summing up her thoughts, Eileen put away her notebook and began to dress for the party. It was a casual get-together, so jeans would be appropriate, but she put on a burgundy blouse just to dress it up a little. It had been several months since she had gone to a get-together. Her last turn as hostess had been back in February, and she imagined that that was the last time she'd seen her friends. Mostly she spent weekends by herself. It was a good time to collect her thoughts and write them down.

Putting on the finishing touches, Eileen grabbed her purse and headed for the door. The air outside was fresh after the rain, and Maureen's house was within walking distance. It felt good to be out. She should walk to Maureen's more often. She loved going to Maureen's. Her house was not only large but was skillfully decorated in a contemporary style. Maureen's mother had a real eye for decorating and luckily had the money to see it through. Large hanging baskets, ceiling length windows and shimmering wallpaper adorned every room. It was beautiful! Eileen rang the bell and waited patiently. Mrs. Meredith answered the door.

"Oh, Eileen, do come in. I haven't had the pleasure of seeing you in such a long time. How have you been? The kids are downstairs. You know where that is, don't you?"

"Yes, thank-you very much, ma'am."

Eileen made her way to the basement, stopping periodically to admire her surroundings. Maureen's house was the most fun to come to, that was true. The room they all gathered in had grass green carpet and sleek white walls. In the middle of the room was a pool table, and off to the left side stood a bar and a dance floor. There was a fireplace on the right wall and white over-stuffed pillows thrown on the floor served as furniture.

At the bottom of the staircase, Eileen turned to her left and opened the door. The room was empty, completely empty. Not only were her friends not there, but the carpet had been taken up, and everything had been taken out. Even the pool table was gone. Why had everything been taken out, and where was everybody? Maybe she was wrong. Maybe she wasn't supposed to be here tonight. Then she saw it. And it was clear. Written in white letters, on the mirror that had once hung above the bar, Eileen read the following words: "Imagine You Have Friends."

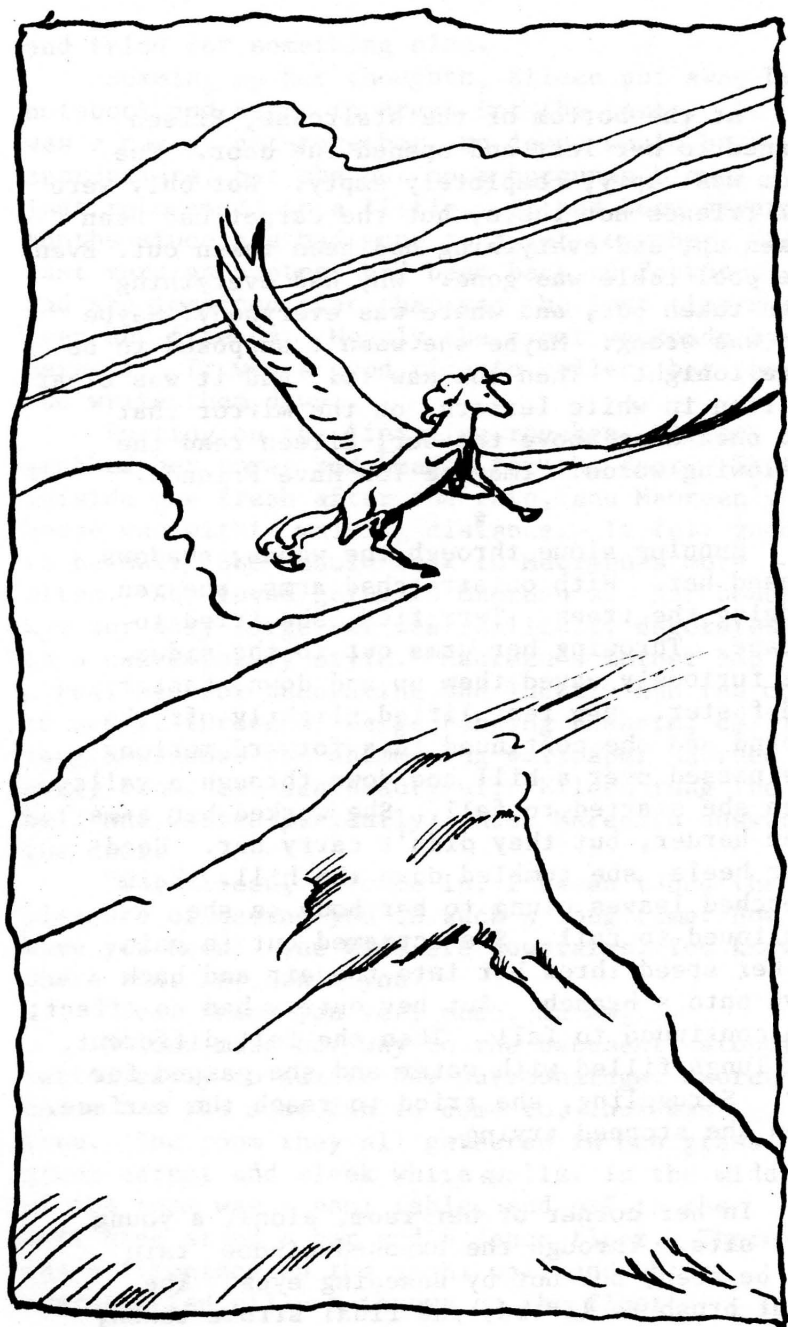
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Running alone through the woods, shadows chased her. With outstretched arms, she ran dodging the trees. Terrified, she tried to escape. Throwing her arms out to the sides, she furiously waved them up and down, faster and faster. Her feet lifted slightly off the ground and she continued in a forward motion. She passed over a hill and down through a valley. Then she started to fall. She worked her arms even harder, but they didn't carry her. Head over heels, she tumbled down the hill. Rain drenched leaves clung to her body as she continued to roll. She screamed out in pain as her speed threw her into the air and back down onto a branch. But her outcry had no effect; she continued to fall. Then she felt different. Her lungs filled with water and she gasped for air. Struggling, she tried to reach the surface. Then she stopped trying.

*

In her corner of her room, alone, a young girl sits. Through the exposed window rain can be seen, but not by unseeing eyes. The paint brush is lifted, the final stroke taken, a tear falls. In darkness, she cries.

~



Pegasus

Through blazing skies
The stallion flies;
His wings reach toward the sun.
He feeds on only
Greenest grass
And won't alight 'til day is done.
His silvery wings
Grace all who glimpse
Through clouds to view his mane.
Behold a mighty
Thunder clap
And he is off again.
He sleeps by night
When no one's there
On mountains far from home.
And by the day
From fountains sips
Then off to play alone.

Charlene Casick

Irving's Big Adventure

by Courtney Cox

"Oh, bother!" exclaimed Irving as he was jolted awake late one June morning to a totally unexpected and uninvited attack on his log. Someone or something with a lot of nerve was rocking and jerking the decrepit log right out of its dirt foundation!

Rather befuddled, as was his tendency soon after rising, Irving slid from his delightfully snug bed and hastily scrambled toward his emergency outlet, a nasty little tunnel which he despised, since it was often host to those intolerably rude ants but was, all the same, a suitable alternative to being smashed by the madly thumping log. Before Irving could reach safety, however, the log was thrown back with a mighty shove and groan. Instantly, his pleasantly musty-moist living room was flooded with nosey sunlight.

"Mummy, Mummy! Come look! A fat slimy slug!"

Offended in the extreme, Irving shuffled even more quickly toward the emergency exit, though he found the sunshine to be quite disconcerting since, like all well-bred slugs, he preferred damp darkness at all times. The next thing he knew, the horrid little boy was POKING him in a MOST disrespectful way. Irving, thoroughly incensed by then, was not a slug who prided himself on being particularly self-restrained; thus he turned to meet his adversary.

He decided that since the prodding stick was his only chance at the sadly misbehaving boy, he would scramble up it to make his confrontation. Unfortunately, however, when he started to clamber up the stick, the foolish child squealed and flung a dazed Irving as far as he could.

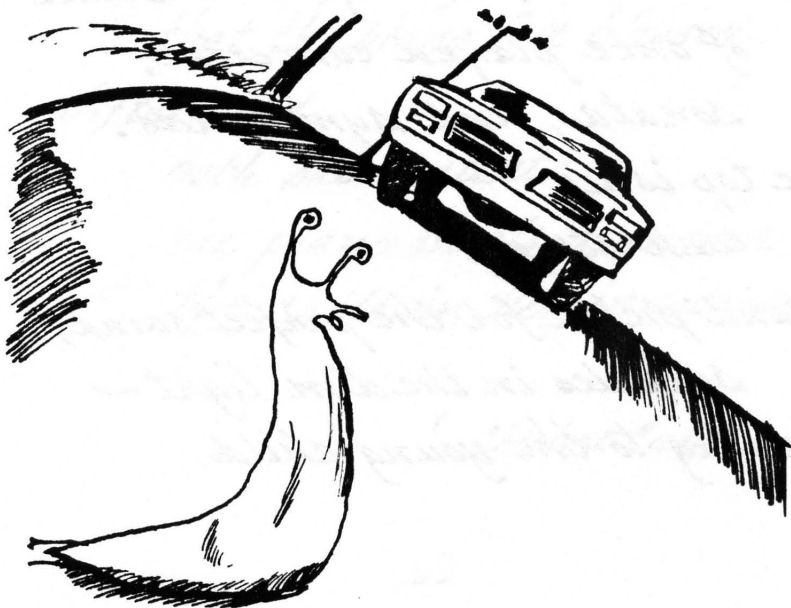
Somewhat uncomfortable, Irving squirmed as he rushed through the cool park air. He landed with a soft "plop" in a convenient tuft of crabgrass. Regaining his dignity with some effort, he tried to reorient himself. He'd never ventured so far from his beloved log before, and he was irked about being forced to do so then--especially at such a god-for-

saken hour of the day. The sun was causing his skin to become tight and ill-fitting, a totally alien and thoroughly unpleasant sensation to Irving, since he had an unusually moist epidermis, even for a slug. In fact, he boasted the longest, thickest, best-enduring slug trails in his circuit.

In hopes of finding another comfortably crumbling log, he decided to journey to the North (always a good selection). So, scuffling and twisting his way out of the bristly, knife-edged crabgrass, Irving set off, never guessing that he was less than twelve inches from Route-46, where four lanes of traffic charged by in excess of 60 miles per hour.

Twenty minutes later, he reared back in pain when he started onto the bubbling black asphalt. Irritated and rather frightened by the windy, whizzing cars, Irving turned back into the cool forest of grass. Suddenly, violently, a speeding motor-car veered onto the shoulder, spewing rocks and jagged bits of glass. Irving died instantly, in mid thought--"I wonder if this horrible sun could possibly impair my lovely trails..."

The car, however, luckily righted itself again and sped off importantly.



Ivory and the Child

The piano stood
in awesome splendor,
enormous and noble on
an otherwise empty stage.
Gleaming ebony,
every inch lovingly
hand-carved to perfection.
Ivory keys,
silent in shining remembrance
of once played concertos,
sonatas, and symphonies.
The top is up,
each string,
hand-picked for the perfect sound,
sparkles in the dim light ~
Calling to the young child

who gazed in awe from
the doorway of the auditorium.

Barefoot,

the child moved with soft steps
toward the piano,
then sat before the immense
instrument.

All she knew was

a simple five-note rhythm,
but played with
such feeling and tenderness
that the piano felt blessed.

Afterward

both sat content:
the piano in its grandeur,
the child in her innocence.

Charlene Casick

Haiku

After her bath,

the baby's wrinkled feet

in grandfather's hand

Drew Appleby

Closing Night

The houselights are down.
The dropped lines
 and triumphant moments
are swept away
 by a janitor's broom.
Dog-eared programs
 lie trampled on
 Coke-sticky floors.
The unknown star,
 fantasizing a moment
 of triumph
 as a performer,
shuffles across the stage
 and bows
to a janitor and
 an absent audience.

Charlene Casick

~~~~~

*Spirits circulate throughout me.  
At a loss for words, I stumble.  
At a loss for breath, I gasp.  
Character changes once again.*

*Mild mannered, quiet,  
witnessing constellations dancing  
in the void,  
I fear for my life.  
I fear for my death.*

*Spirits advancing inside of me.  
In a quest for truth, I fight.  
In a quest for understanding, I shrug.  
Character changes again.*

Carved from eloquence, destined,  
Vision of darting cosmic light.

I find my key.

I find the lock.

I go inside my lonely soul.  
Character changes once again.

Tom Jout

Haiku

October visit ~

suddenly

my mother is old

Drew Appleby

## October Sketch

A pane of hard black glass,  
a splotch of white, moon and  
a pasture-pond at night.  
Corn stalks shaking their  
leaves across a fence.

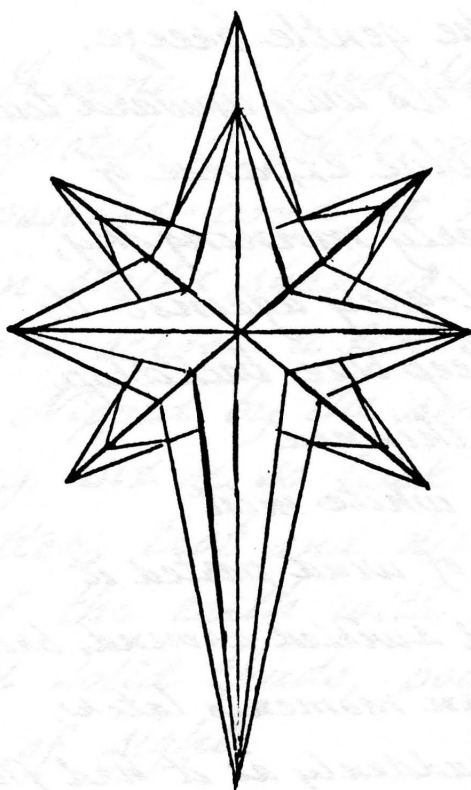
Nipped by the smallest  
pony, six or so frisk and  
scatter, trot and nip. They  
hoof the earth with quick  
and solid thuds, pounding  
out of sight.

Deb Sears

## Smoke

It writhed and twisted,  
weaving fanciful patterns  
in the gentle breeze.  
Curling its way upward toward  
the blue expanse of  
early morning sky,  
pearl-grey against its  
deep blue backdrop.  
Then it thinned  
to a white mist.  
A puff of wind parted it  
and it swirled around, briefly,  
to return moments later,  
as suddenly as it had fled.  
Out of the red brick chimney  
the slender spiral of smoke,  
drifting, dancing,  
flicking with the wind.

Charlene Cusick



# Carmen's Christmas

by Yvonne Stanifer Daniel

The snow was collecting on the windowsill outside, and Timothy's mind wandered from his worksheet. He was supposed to circle all the groups of three items since the lesson was on the number three, but he had been absentmindedly circling all the groups, whether they had two, four, or five circus animals in them. It was the twenty-first day of December, and he hadn't gotten Mom and Dad's presents yet. All his older brothers and sisters had already gotten the presents they were going to give. His oldest brother Bob, had made a pipe rack for Dad and a wooden utensil set for his Mom in his woodworking class. Susan, who at fifteen was two years younger than Bob, had made a counted cross stitch sampler for both parents. Being the most artistic of all the kids, she had written the poem in it herself, and also used an original design for the sampler. Beth, his whiny eleven-year-old sister, had bought handkerchiefs for their father and a cookbook for their mother with money she had saved from her allowance. His brother Michael, who was three years older than Timothy, had made up a book of certificates for his mom and dad, which they could exchange for work around the house. But Timothy hadn't even thought of anything for his parents.

He was not a good drawer like Susan, or good at making things like Bob. He didn't even have any money, except seventy cents he had managed to save over the past three weeks. "I'll never have a present ready by Christmas," Timothy mumbled, not seeing the shadow over his desk.

"Timothy, what's wrong? You've been working on this sheet for ten minutes, and you have not followed instructions. You were supposed to circle groups of three, as in the model. If you can't keep your mind on your work during school hours, then you'll just have to stay after school." Mrs. Wagner's voice was full of frustration, and it broke through Timothy's daze.

Timothy snapped alert in his chair, and he looked up at Mrs. Wagner. He could see she was pretty tired of his dawdling and dreaming. She had had to scold him several times this past week for his unattentiveness, and today she wasn't in the mood for his mental wandering.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Wagner, I'll pay more attention, I promise," Timothy spoke as his head dropped with apology.

"Well, Timothy, I would like to give you another chance, but you've promised me so many times already that you would not daydream, and you've broken your promise. I've got no choice but to keep you after school." Mrs. Wagner tried to keep her face stern, but it was hard. Timothy was a good little boy, even though he did get into more than his share of mischief. Christmas seemed to be the time of year when even the good students had a hard time concentrating.

The bell rang at 3 o'clock, and all the other children around Timothy started their mad rush for the cloak closet with papers to be taken home clutched in their hands. Timothy stared hard at his desk and held back his tears.--I'm only six years old, and all I can do is get in trouble.--I can't even get a Christmas present for Mom and Dad. He looked up to see Mrs. Wagner sitting at her desk grading papers and putting shiny Christmas stickers on all the perfect worksheets. He got up to see what she would want him to do for a punishment. As he stood by her desk, he saw his paper, with all its wrong answers circled, on top of the pile.

"Timothy, I want you to take a clean worksheet to your desk and do it correctly. Then you may leave." Mrs. Wagner handed him the paper, and he shuffled back to his seat. As he started to circle the groups of three with a purple crayon, he concentrated really hard on what he was doing, and tried to keep all thoughts about Christmas out of his head. His little forehead was all scrunched up, and his mouth had a very determined set to it. Finally, after five minutes of trying to look serious, Timothy finished the worksheet and took it up Mrs. Wagner to have it

checked.

"Well, Timothy, I'm glad to see that when you really try you can get your work done. You can leave now." Mrs. Wagner gave Timothy a reassuring smile.

Timothy turned around to go get his coat and scarf, his mind returning to the problem of finding a present for his parents.

"Remember, Timothy, tomorrow is our Christmas party, so don't forget to bring the cookies your mother is making." Mrs. Wagner had started to gather up her things on her desk.

As Timothy walked down the halls, his thoughts were three million miles away, absorbed in his problem. He didn't notice the cold as he passed through the big double doors to the outside, nor did he notice that he had passed the street he usually turned left on. He just kept walking, his eyes glued to the sidewalk, till a passing fire truck brought him out of his trance. He looked up and found himself in a strange part of town, and suddenly he felt very small and alone.

Mrs. Osejo had been watching the little boy come down the street, and she had wondered what such a small nifito was doing out in the cold. The boy was small, and she could see the dark brown hair peeping out from under his hood. He still had a little baby fat on his cheeks, and they were red from the cold. His nose turned up a little, and his face had a very serious look on it. As he came up in front of her store, a fire truck went screaming by, and she saw him snap to attention. He began looking around him, and when she saw the fear and sadness on his face, she knew in a moment he was lost.—Well, I'm not going to let that pobresito stand out there and freeze to death, she thought to herself; so grabbing a sweater, she hurried to her door and called to the little boy to come into her store.

She could see the tears starting to run down his cheeks, and she saw him wipe them away with his blue woolen mittens. He trudged to her door, his Mickey

Mouse book bag dragging through the slush. He hesitated for a moment at the door, looking carefully in at the counters and shelves. Then he looked up at Mrs. Osejo. Something about her smile reminded him of his grandmother, and there was a friendly little glow in her eyes. He walked through the door, and she closed it behind him.

"I saw you standing out there, and you looked very sad. I thought maybe you needed a friend." Mrs. Osejo bent down to look into Timothy's face. "My name is Carmen Osejo, but you can call me Carmen, O.K.? Now sit down over here while I make you some hot chocolate." She bustled behind the counter and began fiddling with the burner on the stove.

Timothy looked around him at all the shelves. Some had food on them, but they had funny words on them that he didn't recognize, like arroz, azucar, cafe, and masa. Then there were counters with fresh vegetables and fruit, and over in a refrigerated section there were chickens. From the low ceiling hung beautiful animals with tissue paper fur and long streamers. On the walls were hats with wide colorful brims, and next to them were bright woven cape-like things. On the back wall, there was a picture of a bull and bullfighter, and over it the long, sharp horns of a bull. There was nothing else on this wall except for a framed newspaper article with the same funny words and a picture of a man in a bullfighter's costume.

"Here you are, niñito." Carmen placed the hot chocolate before Timothy. "If you are hungry, I have some arroz con pollo; oh, excuse me, rice with chicken on the stove. Drink the chocolate slowly, it's very hot." Carmen wiped her hands on her flowered apron.

Timothy watched the older lady over the rim of his cup as he let the warm drink chase away the cold inside him. --Her hair must be very long, he thought to himself, because she had such a long braid piled up on her head. Her hair was still black with streaks of silver shot through it. Timothy watched her move as she rolled some dough into a flat, plate-like shape.

Her fingers were a little knotted, and her hands were wrinkled and spotted, but they were the softest hands Timothy had ever seen. Her face had the same soft quality in the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. And her eyes, big soft eyes with dark brown centers. The whiteness of her teeth stood out against her brown skin as she smiled at Timothy.

"Pobresito, you look so hungry; even if you won't ask for it, I will fix you something to eat," she said as she heaped a bowl with chicken and rice, and put it on a plate along with a tortilla. Then she prepared a plate for herself and brought both dishes to the table where Timothy was sitting.

"Hello, nifio, eat before you disappear in front of these ojos." Carmen made a comically tragic face as she pointed to her old eyes.

Timothy had not said a word until now, but he had begun to feel at ease and was beginning to get curious about where he was.

"Please, ma'am, could you tell me where I'm at?" Timothy put a mouthful of the warm food in him while he waited for the answer.

"Why, nifio, you are in the fine store of Carmen Osejo. Here you can get any type of Spanish food your estomago should desire." Carmen's eyes twinkled as she teased him, "Really, you are on Main Street and Third. Where are you supposed to be?"

"I live on Gardenia Avenue; my name is Timothy, and I was walking home from school and I got lost." The words began to tumble out of Timothy before he could stop them. Soon he was telling her about having to stay after school, and his problem of not having a Christmas present for his parents. As he quieted down, he felt relieved to have shared his troubles with someone, but the tears still welled up in his eyes.

Listening to Timothy's story took Carmen back to when she was a little girl. Her family had been poor in Mexico, and they had had to work long hours for what little they possessed. But Christmas, ah Christmas, was the happiest time of year, she thought.

The beautiful manger scene, Midnight Mass, and the special foods their mother would make. The stories their father told them of the Holy Family, and how a little burro carried Mary to the stable. Somehow their father always had a little present for each child. It could be a ball made out of bright colored rags for the boys to play with, or small wooden dolls for the little girls. He could carve little tops for the boys to spin, and one special Christmas he made a beautiful doll house out of scrap wood. It was not painted and furnished like the ones the rich niñas got for Christmas, but it was made with love and that shone brighter than any paint. As her thoughts came back from her reveries, she saw Timothy watching her, his big brown eyes moist with tears.

"Everybody else has a present for Mom and Dad, except me. All I do is get in trouble and bother people." Timothy's tears had rolled down his cheeks, and Carmen felt her heart tug. How could she send this little boy home without presents for his parents. Her mind began to race as she tried to think of some way to help the little one -- Ah, the shawl, the white lace shawl I wore for my wedding; I do not need it anymore and Diego would not mind; if he were alive today, he would want me to give it to Timothy; now for his papa, oh, Diego, you would know what to give a man, what did you always want, and she thought long and hard -- un sombrero, a fine wide brimmed sombrero.

Carmen jumped up from the table and grabbed Timothy's hand.

"Niño, I have just the gifts for you, come with me," and with that she led him farther back into the store and through a hallway to where she lived. At the foot of her bed was an old trunk, and she knelt to open it. Inside, wrapped in tissue paper was the fine white shawl. She saw Timothy's eyes light up as he saw it unfold, and she held it out for him to inspect.

"I think your mama will have much more use for

this than I do. Now that my husband is gone, I don't dress as fancy," she fibbed so that Timothy wouldn't know it was her wedding shawl. "And for your papa, this fine sombrero." She took it down from the wall where it had hung next to a portrait of a very beautiful young woman and a very handsome man.

"My husband thought this to be the best hat in all of Mexico. He would want the papa of such a fine nifio to have it," She gently placed it on the bed. "Now we must wrap these presents so you can take them home," And with that she began looking for boxes to place them in.

"But, Carmen, I can't take these things without paying for them, and all I have is seventy cents," he said as he extracted the linty change from his jeans pocket.

"Don't worry, nifio, you have just the right amount for them." Her hands were already wrapping up the presents. "You can leave the money on the counter when you leave."

As Timothy prepared to go, he thought about his new-found friend. --I hope she has a good Christmas.

"Carmen, will your family come visit you on Christmas like my family visits Gramma?"

"No, nifio, I only had my Diego, and he passed away last year." Carmen felt a little sad now after all her joy over helping Timothy. Diego and Carmen had never had children, but they had been happy with each other. When Diego had died, Carmen had thought her world had ended. She had only the little store to tend, and somehow that had kept her going. The store and her memories of Diego when he was a young, strong bullfighter were her only companions.

Carmen glanced up at the clock, and seeing that it was a quarter till six, she jumped.

"Ay, nifio, your parents will be worried. We must get you on a bus home." She grabbed the seventy cents and a sweater, and hurrying out the door with Timothy; she just managed to get to the bus stop as the bus pulled up.

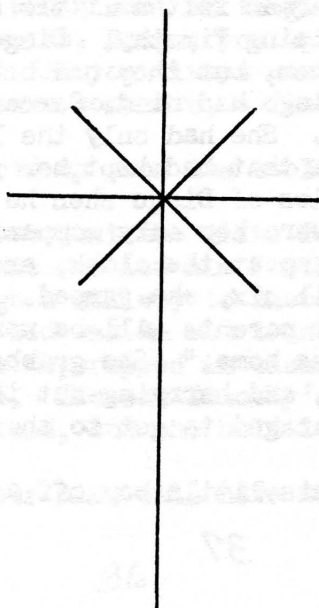
"George, let this little boy off at Gardenia

Avenue, O.K.?" Carmen plunked the change into the stilette and found Timothy a seat. Getting off the bus, she waved to Timothy as the bus pulled away. She saw his mouth moving, but she couldn't make out what he was saying.

Midnight Mass had been beautiful, and she would go to the Mass today also. That was how she would spend her Christmas now that Diego was gone. Carmen was sitting in her rocker crocheting when she heard a knock on her door. As she went to the door to see who it could be, she heard voices singing "Joy to the World." --Ah, some carolers have come by, she thought. As she opened the door, she realized these were not carolers. For there stood Timothy and behind him was his family. In their arms were presents and food.

"Carmen, when I told them about your ar ...arro ... arroz con pollo, they decided to come taste it for themselves." Timothy's eyes twinkled up at Carmen as he teased her, "and also to share our Christmas with you. You never have to be alone again because we'll be your family."

Carmen could only smile and wipe tears from her eyes. --Diego, I will have a Christmas.



*Haiku*

*Winter sunset,*

*trapped in the bubbles*

*of the chapel's stained glass*

*Drew Appleby*

*Next Deadline:*

*March 18, 1985*

