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by Richard Cox

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Awards

Eleanor Poetry Award

"Windows" by Flora Lutz

PULSE Prize

"Cayman Nor'wester" by Martha Burnett

Professor's Award

"Grandpa" by Bill Gill

Staff Poetry Award

"The Learning Experiment" by Donna Longino

PULSE Fiction Award

"The Magnolia" and "But Fear Itself": a tie, both by Bill Gill

PULSE Essay Award

"A Valid Proposal" by Andrew Preslar

PULSE Art Awards

First - Charl Segura

Second - Richard M. Cox

ELEANOR POETRY AWARD

Windows

This is the room of dreams,
white with wicker and linen
lighted by pure sun
through tall French doors

Standing open to inhale
the fresh breeze.
Bright ferns breathe
deeply the morning air.

Sheer window hangings
diffuse the brightness
into every corner until
a breeze waves gauze aside

And a mote plays here then there
in the luminous lance
so dense it appears to have
a substance of its own.

No sound penetrates here
and the music of silence
wraps round her like a veil
soothing and shielding.

But this is a room of dreams,
and this dream ends
as she closes her magazine
and looks out the window.

In harsh fluorescence
her face looks back framed by
chintz, reflecting the hollows
beneath her eyes.

by Flora Lutz



In Candlelight
by Chrystal

Here's Looking at You Kid January 23, 1985

The morning deejay says,
"If today is your birthday
you share it with some famous folks.
Humphrey Bogart would have been
eighty-six today."

Would-have-been-but-isn't
is the way I want to go
when it's my turn. Immortalized
and ageless in the memories
of those who know me.

Not wrinkled and senile
but vibrant and successful,
suspended in the prime of life
remembered as I am now,
not as I might be.

Think of it! Recalled as
one who cheated waning years,
dotage, gray hair, retirement homes.
How do we picture Bogey?
Doddering? Alive!

"So why not I?" I say.
Of course on a lesser scale
in step with insignificance,
natural causes being
an absolute must.

No more than just a thought
then even that unravels
when I mention the birthday boy
and my twelve-year old's response,
"Who's Humphrey Bogart?"

by Flora Lutz

U.F.O.

Unidentified,
or identified,
or partially known...
Gods?
or darkness,
Spacemen?
or swamp gas.
Exeter, 1966.
many hallucinate
misinterpret
or fade...
An adult fairy tale
that could not be real
...could it be?

by Keith C. Simon

U.F.O., Part II

Lonely farm road
vast expanse
of thin, moon lit ribbon.
a small, dark car
almost imperceptable
shines dimly
on the side of the road
searching the heavens
for something
that never comes...
but the myth (?)
persists
to keep me in wonder:

by Keith C. Simon

PULSE PRIZE

Cayman Nor'wester

On the beach with baring Casuarina roots
stand the visiting men
clad in batik trunks.
They face into the northwest wind
that fingers their hair
thick and bottle silver
wispy white, pink glowing through
marching fringes
and cools bellies
protruding and bronze
gym-knit and bronze
new-softening and bronze.

They angle elbows
hands at waist
or fingers laced
at skull base
some gesturing to sea or sky.

Their eyes appraise the young men
retrievers of black coral
escorts of lonely women
scullers of food to large liners
guides to marlin
bearers of four courses
cleaners of conch
cooks of plantain and parrot fish

freed by the northwest wind to heed
the ancestral blood call to ride the sea
wedded to their wind surfs
they dip and race with V-winged sails brilliant
purple, pink, white and orange
orange, yellow, black and white
white, azure, navy and yellow

approach the shore on crashing wave, yet
limbo about and reefward calypso
in counterpoint with overhead frigate-bird.

"Mens" call the wives of the musing men
"Mens" they call with voices facetious
voices of laughter and chic
"Mens, time for noonses!
Bloody Mary time!"

They turn slowly their bodies
to mount the high balconies
to be cooled by electric fans
to swizzle tomato juice with dreams
spiked with Tabasco.

Of the nor'westers the locals say;
A day to come
and one to stay
and a third to go away.

by Martha Burnett

STAFF PRIZE

A Learning Experiment

You,
look up
and see the
forty year old
women who have come
back to get what they
chose against the first time
around and still don't know who
Pavlov is but salivate for knowledge
like experimental dogs when the bell rings.

by Donna Longino

PROFESSOR'S POETRY PRIZE

Grandpa

I see his wrinkled face in memory now,
His flowing beard and eyes of woodsmoke-grey.
His bony hand was thin, blue-veined and rough,
Atop my head to ruffle sandy hair.
He was Grandpa, my friend and confidant
Across eons unknown to my young mind.
Mother often believed my lies; not Gramps.
He never tattled, but he knew, he knew.
Forbidden swims in Mister Simpkin's pond
Or stolen fruit from neighbors' fields were safe
For him to know about. He wouldn't snitch.
And yet, his stories, told before a fire
At night, while sparks and smoke went soaring up
To smudge the moon, were glorious tales of men
Who fought--and died, if need be--to protect
Their sacred honor. Men who knew the right,
Who never stole, or told their mothers lies.
Such trite and simple tales were neither trite
Nor simple then, for I, a child, believed.
Believing, I became as one with men
Who carried banners, men who flipped cigars
into the very mouth of death, and laughed.
I froze and starved at Valley Forge with men
Who never died. Proudly, I rode with Lee
Into defeat with honor; flipped my gum
(Cause smoking stunts your growth) at screaming Utes,
And sailed into Manila Bay unscathed.

* * *

Before me now another face, unlined,
Like mine so many, many years ago.
"I stole a candy bar, but you won't tell,
Will you, Gramps?" Impish gleams in dancing eyes.
"No, Grandpas never snitch. But come, sit down,"
I say. "Right here. The fire is nice and warm."
The tales of heroes and honor come back
Across the years. A light begins to glow
In young grey eyes as once it grew in mine.
I see my grandpa smile above the fire
While sparks and smoke soar up to smudge the moon.

by Bill Gill

Old Tom

I seldom started work before he came.
Better to wait than have him interrupt
While I was deep in thought, and, truth to tell,
His visits brought a smile to boring days.
His knock was always short and sharp, two raps
Demanding entry. Time to put away
My books and silly papers. Now the time
To ponder rising prices, politics,
The changing weather. "Welcome, Tom, come in,"
I said. He sat, his faded, bandless hat
Held upside down upon his skinny knees.
He'd not look at my desk. Such things as books
And chicken-scratch on paper were all right
For kids and women. Men were made for work,
For using axes, shovels, turning-plows
In fertile, sun-warmed earth. So he ignored
My bookish, woman's chores. To speak of such
Might discompose me, and Tom was polite,
A fitting man. "The weather's good," he said.
"My corn is near about head-tall." He grinned.
"Be bringing you a sack of roasin' ears
Before the month is out." His toothless smile
Was a new moon, his face a wrinkled sky.
"Thanks Tom," I said. "I'd like some roasting ears."
Complaints of arthritis, our common bond,
Then he was gone, to garden-truck and corn,
To work the land beneath a firey sun.

* * *

This morning's knock is soft. A woman's knock?
A child's request? Not Tom's; not two sharp raps
Demanding entry. The boy stands outside.
"It's Gramps," he says. "He died last night. Asleep."

* * *

I walk among your rows of waving corn,
Your grandson keeping pace, his calloused feet
Half sinking in the warm, soft dirt. He's much
Like you, the same slow smile. Bare-headed now,
In time to come he'll hold a floppy hat
Turned upside down upon his skinny knees.
A wager, Tom? I bet he'll bring a sack
Of roasting ears before the month is out.
The wind blows, rustling rows of head-tall corn.

by Bill Gill



by Richard Cox

A.B.F., Died 1856

I've wandered through this lonely
graveyard many times, yet
never noticed you before.
Your stone is small,
the epitaph brief:
"Asleep in Jesus' arms."

Sleep on.
I will make a life for you.

by Gwen Whitehead

Gramps - for Bill

We're burying Gramps this afternoon.
Folks are gathered round,
heads bowed, listening
to Brother Johnson
preach his sermon about knowing God.

Gramps knew God, too,
knew Him as the breeze
that rustles through the corn,
the clean smell of dirt,
the ache in an old man's joints
on a winter morning.

Brother Johnson tells us
to bow our heads in one last
prayer for the dead,
and the living, too. I see
your hand drop something into the grave.
It's a tiny wreath of corn silk.
Fashioned by your rough hands,
it is a man's work.

by Gwen Whitehead

Swamp

The clouds are hanging low
the way clouds will in winter.

From the northeast the wind
slips in, teasing the water

into foaming waves. I'm
sitting on the pier, sheltered

from the cold by the blue
jacket I got for Christmas.

It's down-filled. No ducks or
geese, few downy birds at all

waste their time passing through
here. I'm waiting for sunset

anyway. So the sun
fades slowly, touching the tree

tops before sliding down
behind the bank of dark pines.

It isn't dark yet. I
know that the last colored strands

are hiding just behind
the tree tops. Now they appear.

The sky is red and blue,
so blue it's almost purple,

overwhelming the swamp.
I stand to face the clouds, stamp

my feet, blow into hands
not quite frozen, and never

take my eyes from what I
waited here all day to see.

by Gwen Whitehead

In The Backyard

I've spent the summer in the backyard
watching the light from the plants
glitter on the horizon,
a sunrise in the south.

The wind blows in from the Gulf
tonight, bringing the odors with it.
It ruffles through the grass and tugs at my shirt,
leaves its imprint in my hair.

The porch light is out, it draws no mosquitoes
and the crickets are getting used to me
in their midst each night.
Their reed-like music grates on my nerves.

I interrupt the insect chorus,
falling back in the dewless grass,
watch the play of light and breathe in
the rich smell of my town.

by Gwen Whitehead

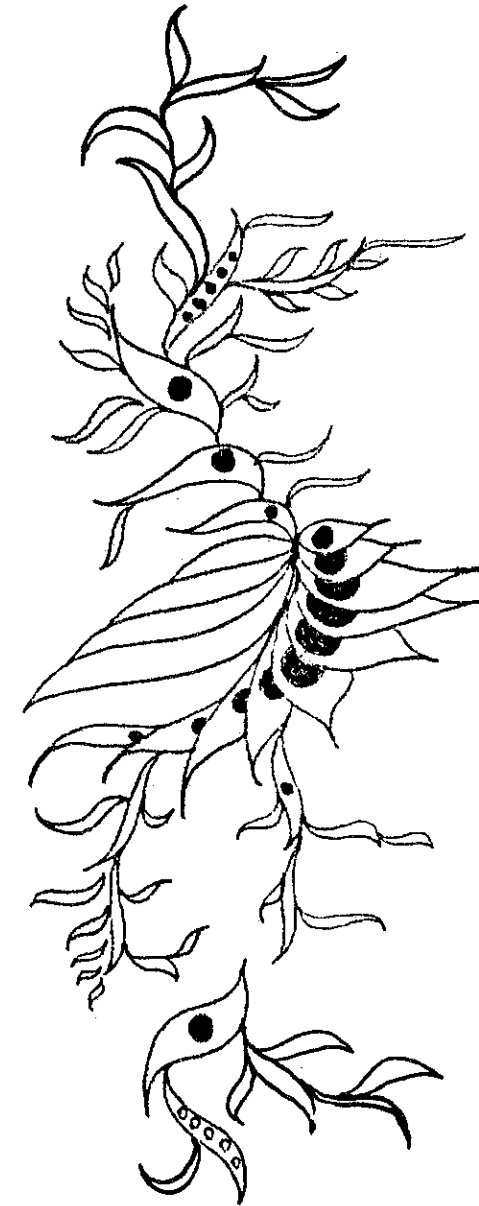
The Carnival

The carnival came to town today.
through the open window we watched it go up.
The ferris wheel towers into the sky,
The tinny music of the calliope
flits through the window from time to time.
Night falls, and the ride begins.

From here we delight in the sounds, sights.
We climb the steep incline to the first drop
of the roller coaster, screams
echoing in our ears. We fall
into the lulling motion of the carousel.
Then, atop the ferris wheel we sigh,
and descend.

by Gwen Whitehead

On October 5, 1919, in Mexico City, Enrico Caruso
gave an open-air performance of "Carmen" in El Toreo--
the first time he had ever sung in a bull ring--before
22,000 spectators.



by Richard Cox

The Finger of Enrico Caruso (Je vous le don-ne-rai Bizet)

The finger of Enrico Caruso
Is his greatest weapon in a bull ring.
I hear the tenor cry of Don Jose
Sing up to Bizet his love of Carmen.
I, as Micaela, know of forbidden love,
The thunder of rain, and the closing of acts
Not that all acts close with some great thunder,
But that there is sometimes a sea of sighs
When umbrellas open to keep out the rain.
And here and there I see some red and blue
Lost in the sea of blackest umbrellas.
And now Caruso is pointing to me,
"There you are Micaela, what a surprise."

When arrows are released into quiet maids,
I know how the best and worst of them feels
When hearts beat grander than the greatest drums,
And tongues are silent because of their true loves,
I know how they feel for I am the same.

"THERE YOU ARE MICAELA, WHAT A SURPRISE!"
What is this great pain I feel at my side?
Shall his finger become my final call?
With him at my side, I know where we are.
The finger of Enrico Caruso
Shall be the greatest weapon of the day.

His finger in my side, it was my cue.
"I bring you a message from your Mother."
The joy in his face can't betray the rain,
Emotions in wet faces should always be sad.
And why are all these teardrops falling from Heaven,
To wet the heads of 22,000?

My sweetest, "So you come from my mother?"

"Yes, she sends love and a little money."
Supple was that happy face in the rain.
No man should laugh at another's mistake.
But no, it's not laughter, I think it 's pain.

"For I also have another message."
Only now the rain is falling too hard.
Downward I look, ashamed for forgetting.
Again the pain of a finger I feel.
It is Enrico, his finger of steel
Is the greatest weapon in the bull ring.

by Mark Lang

The Abscission of Time in a Peculiar World that Counts with Clocks

There once was a man
Who would set his clock back
To make up for the time
That he had lost
While he slept.

After he sets down his clock,
He looks out his window
To see a vain girl
Chasing after
Butterflies
In the Sky.
He
Looks at
Her foot as
It squashes a
Buttercup while she
Chases after all of
The butterflies in the sky.

And a butterfly lighted
To drink the spilled butter,
And the man said to the girl,
"You're far too pretty to be chasing butterflies in a field.
Butterflies should be chasing you."

by Mark Lang

Ostrich

Why do you wear those feathers to school?
You look like an ostrich from where I am.
I wish I had, with me, a bucket of sand
To stick your head in my feathered fool.

Does plumage help your casual learning?
It doesn't help mine. I just want to pick
A feather out to see what makes it stick,
But I calmly sit here, while I'm burning
With desire to find out why you're an ostrich.

by Mark Lang

From My Eye

Alas my love,
You are like a dove
I once knew of.
I went hunting once
with my friend John,
A veteran of
Vietnam.
The gun was a .410
With a barrel
Long, maybe bent.
It was John's gun
That he never shot.
So I held the gun
Up to my chin,
Higher than the sun,
When I saw the dove
You remind me of.
And just before it fell,
I saw it look my way.
There was something
In its eye
That made it all seem wrong.

by Mark Lang

Oil Well

Each day I come
To school and the
People ask me,
"Are you crying?"
I say, "I'm dying
From all the oil
Fumes in the sky
And in my eyes."
They all just look
At me and laugh
and smile, smile, smile.
The people here
Are all so nice.
So, I just turn
Away and cough.
But then I grin
And dry my eyes.
I'm so polite,
It makes me sick.

by Mark Lang

Realizing the Distance

You will go,
without knowing why I will stay.
You're vision is too narrow
for realizing the distance
between here and Hong Kong.
You are too straight and
sure and strong.
You didn't grow up
and grow into
a place so small
it is almost nothing.
For you it is only
blue oceans and clouds away,
not a mind full of fences
and walls,
and faces that would fall,
voices that would call
and bring me back,
back to this place
with its breathless air
and still brown water.
I am its sister, its mother,
its daughter.
It is a long way
from here to Hong Kong.
You don't realize the distance.

by Regina Bartley

Dana

I smile to see you
running up the walk.
Again I realize how much we are alike
The same blonde hair--
with a little help.
The same bad posture--
as if bent by an invisible hand.
I straighten a little when I see you.
People ask if we're twins,
I always want to lie and say yes.
We are even more.
The years behind us
bind us in a single form.

I remember holding your hand
at the bus stop
and pulling up your knee socks.
We'd lie close beneath faded sheets
and worry about the morning.
Would our house be quiet tomorrow?
Would our house be empty?
We made family figures
out of sinewy, green vines
that grew in our sunny yard;
strong, bendable families
that wouldn't break.

You smile the smile
that crinkles our eyes
and ask to borrow my white blouse.
I clip the tags and you pull it on,
we smile at the mirror picture.
I decide it looks better on you.
You hurry down the walk again
and wave our wave over your shoulder.

by Regina Bartley

Teeter-Totter

Silent images gather
I feel a smile for you coming on
And reaching for the ring on a finger
Now bare
I remember you
Allowing for the gentle moment
It flows softly from behind
To blanket me in idle peace
You and I
On a rare occasion
Alone
Unexpectedly you arrived deserting your duties
Unwilling to wait
You absconded me from school
You a brazen thief and I a willing accomplice
Off to the park we fled
To the playground
You were in love and wanted to teeter-totter
With me

by Kerry L. Fare

Convertible

It has taken us a long time
to get to this point
Where our silences are not
something to be filled with
idle chatter or uncomfortable
laughter
but to be enjoyed
shared
Lost in thought separately
together
I am going to find it difficult
my friend
to say good-bye to you
I reckon I'll just have to
take you with me
when I go

by Kerry L. Fare

Dostoevski's Cat (in reply to Dostoevski's Dog)

Woof Diddy Woof Woof

by Kerry L. Fare

Winter

Winter
is an old crone.

Her gnarled fingers--
ice-cold fingers--
clutch the Earth
around her neck
to strangle her.

Earth falls asleep
and is unaware.
She lies numbly
in a frigid grave.

by Kyle J. Ambrose

Impression

I found a marvelous shell once
when I was a boy
I was startled by the snail
still calling it home
he was as safe within those walls
as a pre-born infant in the womb

I drowned the snail
and flushed him from the shell
it seemed a boyish thing to do

I heard no thunderclap
I made no solemn gallows-march
I just felt sick from horror
too scared to utter my inward screams
as I watched it die

what a weakling I was
after all it was just a snail
it was just a snail

by Kyle J. Ambrose

Aged Man

Aged man,
I see you walking every day;
Ambling down the side
Of the road that never ends.
Your gray and worn-out clothes
Are but a bag of brittle bones.

I noticed that you stoop,
That your shoulders always droop,
And that your arms hang ape-like
By your side.

You are gnarled and twisted by your many years
Bent-over by the burdens you have borne
It seems to me
Your steps grow slower
Your arms droop lower
But you hold your head up higher
Every day.

Where are you going, aged man?
What will you find at journey's end?
You must be headed home.

by Kyle J. Ambrose

Allegory of the Knave

As blind as deaf,
as deaf as dumb,
as dumb as you and me,
instinctively he
wants to feel the
things he cannot see.

Once as a boy
while in a cave
there came a sudden light
which threw a shadow
on the wall-
perhaps this could be sight?

And then the light
went out and he
crawled over to the wall,
and touched his face, then
touched the rock-
they weren't the same at all.

The light, the dark,
the image gone-
he couldn't come away;
the skin, the stone,
the shadow-there
was nothing he could say.

He stayed all day,
and all that night,
and not a whisper heard-
our caves abound
with silent sound
admitting not a word.

He doesn't speak or listen;
I don't know if he can see,
But I suspect he does them all
as well as you and me.

by Andrew Preslar

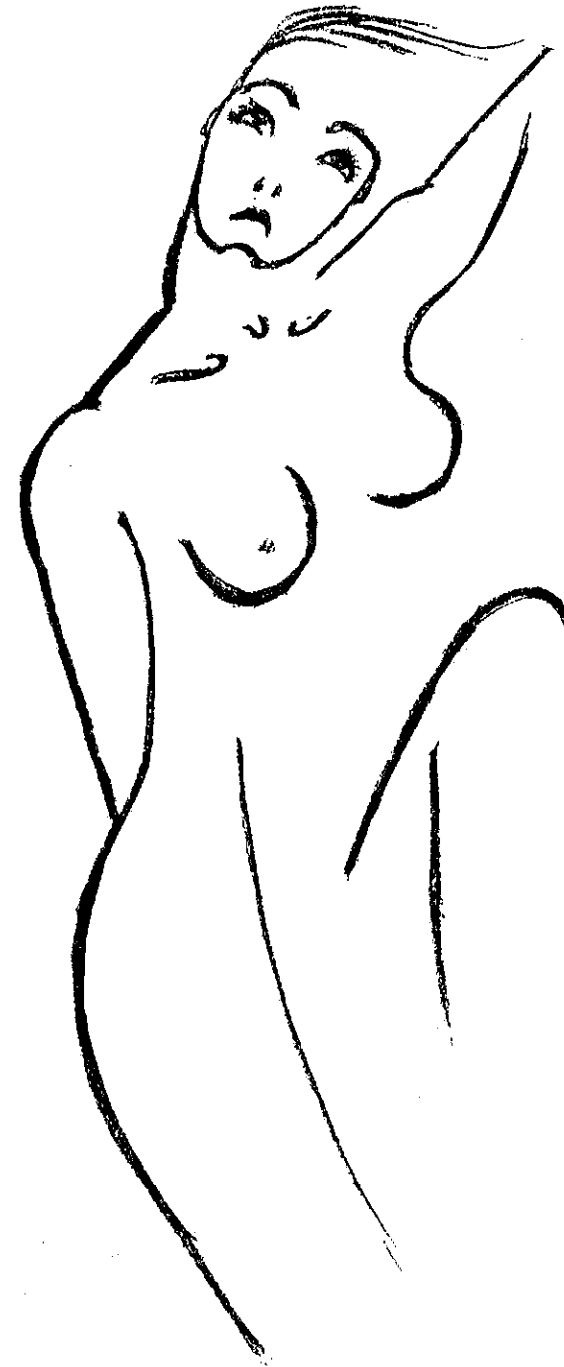
Metamorphosis

Sir Francis once read old hand-outs and wrote
on unruled paper on these brave March days--
Francis the Great, dread havoc to the French,
the scourge of Turks, poet-king of mighty cities,
with flashing eyes and steel-strong thighs--a pity
to need such suns and tempests when a wench
could quick dispel that piper of our world who plays
his one sad, ancient song we all know note for note;

Spring gave Sir Francis winter's barrel to scrape,
that he might have a taste, if not a meal
of power and freedom and long ago. Berate
the day he, who had never in his life
harmed any, had seen soldiers take his wife
until she died; choke-throated, foul-breathed hate
was all a man who'd lived through that dared feel;
he could gouge their eyes out with his thumbs
and squeeze them flat like grapes.

And now he'd give his books and house and land,
he'd give his life to kill them with his hands.

by Andrew Preslar



Womaness
by Chrystal

Icon

His vacant eyes stare dully at the camera
and the only spark of life is a fly
that tentatively investigates his nostrils
and the corners of his mouth.
Gray-brown skin curls over his beri-beri arms
like parchment tatters left too long in aching desert sun.
His swollen belly arches toward a blue inverted bowl.

The camera lens are eyes that burn like blind meteors
through my brain for countless empty nights
while I kneel sightless - staring from
whatever dark to whatever lightness is.

by Sue Wright

A Valid Proposal

If you could see me, you might mark the menace in my scowl, because I am mad. We are all mad who daily see humans being denied the most basic of all civil liberties. In his January, 1985 State of the Union Address, President Reagan called for legislators to unite in passing into law bills to stop abortion. The House Chamber thundered with Congress' response. Congress is mad. We are all mad who will see abortion banned. We call abortion murder; it is an unconscionable waste of human life at best, for, as the President pointed out, thousands of people across America sit sadly beside empty cradles, waiting for a chance to adopt a child to care for and raise into a good citizen. It is the responsibility of government to protect the civil liberties of all of its citizens, even, and perhaps especially, the unborn ones. The controversy surrounding the issue is made obscure, impenetrable and inflamed by the volatile emotions always generated by a conflict between good and evil, but the central question is apparent and ancient: What is our definition of a citizen, and what rights must society preserve for him?

Even without the unchallenged scientific evidence put forth by the President in his address, the case for defining a fetus as being a citizen is unimpeachable. Pro-abortionists may indeed have proof that a fetus of less than twelve weeks has no chance of survival after delivery, but such proof has no bearing on the definition of that fetus before delivery as a citizen. They may then offer evidence that none of the major organ systems of a fetus less than twelve weeks old are sufficiently developed to contain cells sufficiently differentiated to perform the most basic life functions; fetuses less than eighty days old cannot feel or think or in any way exist apart from the female parent, and from that evidence some even advance the idea that a fetus is not a person until it is at least three months old, and therefore cannot be protected under civil law as a citizen. They do not argue the question of its being human, but of its being a human being. That sort of logic makes me mad, and I will not even respond to it. Lawmakers must look beyond such matters of small significance and see the greater moral question. Congress's response to Reagan's Address' remarks suggests that lawmakers do see the moral issue; pro-abortionists have good reason to fear for their present liscence to murder helpless citizens.

Surely when Congress reconvenes in the spring of 1985, it will swiftly enact legislation bringing the butchery of our nation's potential tax base to a long-overdue stop. When that happens many anti-abortion activists will take a well-deserved rest. They have performed heroic service to our society by protecting its unborn voters from the horrible deaths they were doomed to without our intervention. Our workers have risked arrest to throw bricks and bottles through the windows of death clinics across the nation; they have shouted themselves hoarse in an effort to educate and convert young females whose moral vicissitude, swinging wildly with the extremes of the estrous cycle, is responsible for much of the murder. Our activists have saved lives, and have, furthermore, condemned, with guilt and horror of the soul, those pernicious, wicked wretches who whould sin on top of sin. But our workers grow weary from bricks and vixens; the time is now for lawmakers to stop the slaughter.

Without doubt they will; the mass of public opinion demands it of them. but is it sufficient to stop these obvious murders? Will we extend the shield of liberty only to those protocitizens whose progenitors seek legal abortions? It is the responsibility of government to protect the rights of all citizens; what effort has been made to protect the one fetus in three that is spontaneously aborted, or miscarried? For the 16,500 infants born each day in the United States, 8,250 died who might have been born. Compare that figure to the 3,560 deaths each day by abortion, and the scale of the horror becomes apparent. Over twice the sin of legal abortion, miscarriage doesn't execute fetuses; it tortures them to death. In just one week, all the lives that could be saved by stopping miscarriages could repopulate southeast Jefferson County; all those empty cradles across the land would soon be filled, and in two years the very streets could be too small to hold them all, eating, fighting, living, and procreating for the world to see.

Each year almost 3,000,000 citizens are conceived but not born, besides those 1.3 million murdered by abortion. What is causing these three million failures to be born? Some of the spontaneous abortions without doubt are the results of faulty genetic recombination or freak genetic mutations of crucial chromosomes. How many of them, though, are killed by mothers who selfishly refuse to stop smoking, or who, against advice, climb

stepladders and fall? Countless scenarios suggest themselves; each of them involves a parent who is guilty of, at best, criminal negligence, and who at worst might be guilty of heartless murder. I grow mad thinking of the thousands of families wanting to adopt, while thousands of fetuses miscarry each day. Those potential citizens, millions of helpless, oblivious half-lives, call in frightened, wailing cries from their lonely twilight shore; we must respond - but how?

I have conceived what I believe to be a valid proposal, one which, if it were to become law, could secure to government forever the means of protecting our nation's greatest asset: its unborn future, the promise of its seed. Affecting my proposal would cost relatively little; considering the ten, indeed, the hundreds of millions of lives it would save, any cost would be low enough, but my suggestions could carry a startlingly low price tag, using existing facilities and departments of government and requiring little increase in government payrolls. I propose that all females of adolescent age or over be required to submit to a monthly blood and urine analysis by a federally approved agent, each female would be tested for evidence of pregnancy, disease, and drug use. Those with nothing to hide would have nothing to fear from such examinations, and those guilty of depravity and debauchery would be revealed as the pernicious, tainted and promiscuous evildoers that they are. Perhaps some of them might even be saved themselves; at any rate, the abortion saves pregnant females from financial and social ruin; I say they deserve ruin. A female mature enough to commit evil acts should be mature enough to accept the consequences of her own profligacy. The President would undoubtedly agree. The rights of an unborn citizen must be protected all the more strenuously, as he is blameless and innocent, while the female is assuredly not, and never has been. The fact that any female could, for any reason, want a miscarriage suggests that women are morally weak. The fact that so many women have them confirms the suggestion.

Any female becoming pregnant, therefore, would be monitored carefully for evidence of malnutrition, drug use, and disease. Any evidence of behavior threatening the health of the unborn citizen would, of course, make the mother guilty of child abuse, and she would become a ward of the federal government for the duration of her pregnancy, after which, to fill our nation's empty cradles, she would be required to relinquish the citizen for adoption and to repay the government for the cost of her care. The examinations could be administered in schools' nurses' offices, converted abortion clinics, university facilities, and even in post offices and federal buildings. The cost of care for pregnant minors would be born by the parents of the offender, and those unable to pay for their care would, for the purposes of preventing further crimes, be sterilized. Females with negligent or malicious attitudes towards their own young should not be allowed to bear any, and my proposal would assure that they would not be able to, with the added benefit to society of reducing the birth rate among the ranks of the poor and indigent, where the least desirable elements of our society grow the fastest, and whose birth rate is almost three and one half times greater than the rate for those more socially secure. In a decade the ratios could be reversed, which could only serve society at large.

Surely the President and our lawmakers agree with my proposal, and one of the most attractive features about it is that lawmakers could conceivably enact it. I draw comfort from the fact that the people with the greatest political power are the very ones who whould benefit most from making the proposal law; our elected officials are morally upright and honest, and neither they nor their children would ever need worry about having to pay for promiscuity or social indigence. I cannot readily explain why the District of Columbia has an abortion rate 200 times that of Wyoming, but certainly it could have nothing to do with our legislators, who have spent many nights in their offices probing deeply the pages of the Library of Congress in efforts to counter that very problem. Many of the people who would support my proposal have, you may be sure, never even been near either an abortion clinic or an abortion patient, and would refuse any offers to become acquainted with either.

The principles on which my proposal is founded are the very ones which demand that we stop abortion, at any stage of fetal development, and are the same ones that made us require school children to be vaccinated: the rights of the innocent must be protected from infringement by the guilty or the impure or evil. The government is the only social organ large enough to penetrate the emotional tangle surrounding the problem and the only one with power to see it to its logical end.

by Andrew Preslar

The Actress

Popov gives me tea, which he blows on first, and says, "Tell me the story about the actress."

"I've got no story," I say and cup the hot glass in my hands. Every inch of me is freezing and I've only come in out of the cold to avoid my death. Popov has the mind of a simple animal or a child and I avoid him if at all possible. For all his winking and childish laughter he thinks he shares a joke with the universe.

"Go on," Popov says, blinking, "you've told me before."

"Then leave me alone," I answer irritably. "I can't remember everything I've ever told you. I tell lots of stories."

He just closes his eyes dreamily. Really, he's the model of persistence.

Outside I can hear the wind blowing shovels of snow against the door. I still have to get to market and home before dark.

"Sometimes I wish I could be back in school again."

Such a stupid statement shows you how simple he really is.

"All right," I say. "I've got only a few minutes to spare. You want the story about the actress?"

He nods and sort of rolls his head to one side. You know, you want to be nice to him if he's not a pest.

"A friend told me this story," I begin, "so I know it's accurate and it's true." I wait for interruptions but Popov is listening quietly.

"This friend of mine was at the university in a classroom..."

"... that actually was an old theatre," Popov interrupts.

"Right, an old theatre. And when the students settle in the lights go down until they are sitting in darkness. And then, after a moment of silence, one light comes on the stage. They hear steps..."

"... and it's the professor!" Popov is delighted already.

"Listen, don't tell the story for me if you want me to tell it. Yes, they hear the professor and finally see him stride into the circle of light.

"Students," he says, "today we will learn something more than literature and stories from books. We will learn about breathing life into an author's words, about courage and skill and outlandish passions."

"This was unlike anything this old man had ever said before," I say, peering out the window to check the weather, "and his students are spellbound."

"Thrilled," Popov says.

"All right, they're thrilled. Anyway, the professor talks of art and courage and sacrifice like he's never talked before. Then he talks about the role of the audience, about the plush, comfortable seats they have in which to relax, to forget themselves. Each student feels as if the professor is speaking directly to him."

Already Popov is chuckling.

"Finally, when the old man is ready, he steps to the side of the stage and turns up the lights. He jumps into the pit and strides up the aisles staring deliberately into each student's eyes. They become uncomfortable and look away. The professor seems to be searching someone out."

I remain quiet long enough to determine that snow is still falling, and continue.

The professor selects a boy and sends him up on the stage."

"Your friend," Popov says, winking.

"Yes. Well, seemingly at random he chooses my friend. The boy stands there awaiting instruction. None comes. The houselights go down and the boy is left standing there alone, in a tiny circle of light, facing an audience he can feel but cannot see."

"Can he hear them?"

"He feels alone." I consider a moment. "He hears the shuffling of feet, a muffled cough. Finally he says, 'What do you want?'"

He hears the professor's voice, 'Your name is?'

"My friend says 'Dimitri Karlovich Leonov' and he stands there with nothing to do or say. Really it is impossible. He just stands there feeling sweat tickle the back of his neck, playing the fool for the pleasure of this

devilish professor. The old man has taken a seat in the auditorium. He asks the students what is wrong with the boy on stage, why he's not amusing, why he seems a buffoon, and the like. Dimitri wants to jump off the stage and come after him but he's afraid to be charged with that kind of disobedience. He swears to me that he felt a wave of sympathy from the class and that he knew his friends felt sorry for him."

I am beginning to warm up and it seems to me the snow is falling more lightly than before. Popov's eyes shine behind his glasses and his mouth hangs open in delight.

"After what seems an eternity on the stage alone, facing voices in the darkness, Dimitri hears a light step coming toward him. He sees the hem of a skirt and suddenly, beside him, is the loveliest, fairest young woman he has ever seen. She smiles."

We are coming to my favorite part and already Popov is smiling gently.

"This woman is a complete stranger to him but she begins to speak in a conversational way, addressing him as if they are young marrieds, calling him 'dearest' and 'sweetheart' and pretending she is in love with him. Out of the darkness she pulls up a chair and has Dimitri sit in it. She pretends to set a table in front of him and she chatters away as though they are completely alone before their own fire at dinner. Already Dimitri finds such relief listening to her that he begins to play act with her, commenting on the food on the table, asking how much he should put on his plate and declaring everything delicious. This goes on and on, the girl saying one thing and Dimitri another until they have eaten their dinner, cleared the table and put their nonexistent children to sleep and are ready themselves for bed. To Dimitri it seems an eternity, this play acting, and yet he swears to me now that only a second passed from the first time he saw her to the moment, before they prepare for bed, that she steps into his arms and kisses him. He can scarcely breathe for the throbbing of his heart that tears at him like a wild thing. The faint pressure of her weight against him tightens his every muscle. He wants to gather her to him, to lift her. He cannot hold her close enough in his arms.

"And then, when she pushes back gently, pushes back from him and smiles, she is gone, out of the circle of light and into the darkness so that he blinks and waits, not understanding."

Popov sits motionless. Sunlight has finally sifted through the snow powdered window and onto my legs. The tea in my hands has gone cold and, refreshed, I want to move on. In a better mood, I say, "When the lights come on suddenly my dear Dimitri hears thunderous applause. He sees a swarm of uplifted faces grinning like cats."

I put the glass on the shelf over the fire. "He's a big success for a change."

Popov smiles dreamily. "What a lovely actress. What happened to her?"

Poor Popov, who never gets the joke.

"She disappeared," I say hastily, gathering up my things.

"Lovely lady! And did Dimitri see her again?"

"You know perfectly well that he didn't." I shout, my irritation returning. It takes patience telling stories to fools. They always miss the best parts. "She was a friend of the professor's. A professional."

Here, instead of the laugh I can always count on whenever I tell this story, Popov only sighs.

"Your friend has found that he has a great talent," he says, "how sad that he never saw her again."

"Friend Popov," I replied, "justice finds its way into the world. Dimitri recovered from his humiliation to find himself something of a lucky hero and the professor was forgiven his cruelty for his able wit."

"But if only they could have married," says Popov who always misses the point. You can't argue with a man who dreams while he's awake.

"Better to be content with the truth," I tell him. Suddenly, I am anxious to leave. He always says, "Come back and see me," but he never understands a thing you tell him. Still, they say his mercies keep him safe in the world.

by Karen Dwyer

But Fear Itself

Stonewall Jackson Daingerfield awoke to a beautiful day. It was still too early to tell what the weather would be, but Stoney was seven years old and this was Saturday-no-school. It was a beautiful day.

He bounced out of bed and ran to the window. Outside, a hunter's moon soared above the treeline. The old pickup truck was a great shapeless monster crouching to spring. Stoney and the truck were different in a way past understanding. It was a 1928 model, and Roy, Stoney's father, referred to it as 'old.' Yet, Stoney was even older, he was a 1927 model, and still too young to go fishing or swimming alone.

He looked toward the barn, and all of the elation drained away. He crawled back into bed and pulled the covers to his chin. This was the day. Last night, Roy had talked for a long time. He had said many things, some of which Stoney hadn't understood and much of which he had forgotten, but the message was clear: it was silly for a big boy to be afraid of horses, and today Stoney would ride.

He hated—feared, he admitted honestly—horses. That was funny. Not laugh-funny. Just funny. Roy seldom walked or drove if it was practical to ride a horse, and Sharon, Stoney's mother, sometimes rode. And JEB Stuart, Lordee, what a cavalryman! He and his troopers had whipped damnyankees sky-western-crooked while straddling horses.

It wasn't fair.

Suddenly Stoney remembered that he'd had the dream again last night. It wasn't even his dream, but it always gave him the shivering-trembles. It was about a baby so small that he fell on his bottom when he tried to walk.

In the dream, Roy sat astride a great black stallion, and his head was higher than the trees. The horse upon hoofs large enough to crush the baby's tiny bare feet, and its huge, corn-yellowed teeth could tear tender flesh. The baby wanted to go to Roy but dared not venture near the horse.

Suddenly Roy leaned over in the saddle and lifted him—no, the baby, lifted the baby—high into the air. He was going up and up, he was up among the clouds, and he was screaming, screaming, screaming.

Stoney sat up, cold. He used the sheet to wipe tears and sweat from his face. The dream, the same stupid, stupid dream. Why couldn't he ever dream of anything else?

Well, one thing for sure, he wasn't going to ride a horse today. Nor any other day. He'd run away first.

The idea was appalling but he recognized its possibilities. If he ran away, they'd be afraid he would drown, or get cottonmouth bit. Then when he came home, they would be so glad to see him that there would be no more talk about horseback riding. He leaped out of bed and grabbed his pants and shirt from the floor. They were dirty, and the pants had a rip in the seat, but if he left his shirttail hang out the rip couldn't be seen.

Dressing, he wondered where he would run away to. Maybe to Murray Cole's house. Sometimes, Murray was okay, but other times he poked fun because Stoney looked about for grownups and girls before saying a dirty word, or because he said 'isn't' instead of 'ain't'. No, he wouldn't go to Murray's house.

Carrying his cowboy boots, Stoney tiptoed outside and sat on the steps. The sky was getting light so he'd not have to walk far in the dark. He began tugging on his boots.

"Git some socks on them feet, boy."

Stoney jumped. "Grandpa! Why are you up so early?"

"I'm up early 'cause I always get up early."

Actually, the old man was Stoney's great-grandfather. He was eighty-nine years old and, a lifetime ago, had made the disastrous trek with Robert E. Lee's army to a little town in Pennsylvania. It was the only thing of importance that ever happened to him, and the only thing he cared to talk about. He bored all adults, but Stoney never tired of his stories.

"I reckoned you'd cut and run, this morning," Grandpa said, "and I aimed to go along." He squinted toward the eastern sky now fast turning grey. "The fish oughta be biting in a few minutes."

"Let's go."

"Of course, you know you have to face your pa sooner or later."

"I'll do it later. What are we waiting for?"

"We're waiting for you to get some socks on them feet." The rocker squeaked as Grandpa struggled to his feet.

"And be quiet. You made more noise than a troop of damnyankee cavalry when you came outside. I'll get the fishing poles."

Half an hour later, they were sitting on the creek-bank. As with all their fishing trips, the catching of fish was secondary. They didn't object if a perch managed to snag itself on one of their hooks; it was little trouble to pull him in. Otherwise, **Grandpa told stories.**

Stoney closed his eyes, the better to see. Powder smoke swirled low to the ground. Banners waved, gunfire flashed and twinkled in the fog-like smoke. Cannon boomed, rifles crackled, and, over all else, came the high, quavering rebel yell.

All too soon the sun was high, and Grandpa sat against a tree, snoring softly. Stoney took in the lines, wrapped them around the ends of the poles, and stored the hooks in the old man's hatband. "Time to go, Grandpa," he said.

Halfway home, they stopped to rest. Stoney sat crosslegged before the old man and chewed a twig. "Grandpa," he said, "you reckon I could learn to ride a horse? Really?"

"Bet your sweet-patootie you could." Grandpa leaned against a fallen log and used both hands to straighten his cramped, skinny legs. "I once knowed a feller who rassled alligators for fun, but he'd run like a scalded dog from a little old mouse. Deathly afraid of mice, that feller was."

Stoney thought of wrestling alligators. He conceded to himself that some things might be worse than riding horses. "Sometimes I think I can," he said. "I think I'll just jump on one of them critters and ride him to who-laid-a-chunk. But when I get close to him, I just want to run and hide. Silly, huh?"

"Not silly, a'tall. Ever'body's afraid of something. But if that alligator-rassling feller had ever once stomped a mouse, he'd never have been afraid of them again."

"I don't know if I can ever do it." Stoney spat out the twig and stared at the ground. "You rested up? We might as well get it over with, I guess."

When they came within sight of the house, Stoney's spirits soared. The truck was gone. That meant his father was gone, too. Maybe he would be gone all day, until it was too late to ride. And tomorrow was Sunday; they would go to church, and the preacher was long-winded. They couldn't ride before tomorrow afternoon, a whole lifetime away. Beside him, Stoney heard a relieved sigh, and knew his grandfather had also feared a scene.

Grandpa disappeared into the house for another nap. Stoney whistled loudly and off-key while he put away the fishing equipment, then went to play on the dirt pile.

Roy had hauled the dirt, good top-soil, from the bottomland near the creek to put into the vegetable garden. Before it was spread, Stoney used it for his wargames and Grandpa had dubbed it Cemetery Ridge, after that mighty battle ground at Gettysburg. Then Roy hadn't had the heart to take the dirt for its original undignified purpose, so it remained Stoney's property.

Now he was the sad, grey-bearded general. "The enemy is there," he intoned, "and there I will strike him." Now he was the battle-hardened sergeant, dressing the lines, calming the troops. "Men," he roared, "the damyankees are dug in like moles and mean-mad, but we've got to take the high ground." Now the best part, always and forever, the best part. He was Stonewall Jackson Daingerfield charging up Cemetery Ridge.

The confederate army (was there ever any other army?), defeated but still full of fight, was marching back to Virginia when Roy drove into the barnyard. He was towing a borrowed horse-trailer. The army stood with its mouth open.

Roy got out, hollered, "Catch any fish?" and, without waiting for an answer, walked to the back of the trailer. He disappeared inside, then came out leading a pony.

It was a sad excuse for a pony. Its muzzle had grown grey with the years, contrasting oddly with what had once been a sorrel coat. It was sway-backed, and carried its head low, as if the effort to look about was too much. Roy dropped the reins, and the pony began to graze.

Roy knelt beside Stoney. "Your mother and I were talking last night," he said. "We agreed that, if we was your size, the big horses we have here would scare us, too. Times are hard, Son, a dollar is as big as a wagon-wheel, but we thought you needed a horse near your size to learn on."

"Y—yessir."

"Tell you what. It's almost time for lunch. We'll eat before we ride, but go and pet him anyway. He'll love it."

"Yessir." Stoney edged forward. He could do it. If that alligator-rassling feller had ever once... He froze.

"You can do it, Son." Roy's voice was gentle.

Stoney took another step. He didn't want to cry. Nobody liked a crybaby; only damnyankees cried. Another step, and the tears came.

"I'll ride him." Murray Cole leaned against a post, laughing. He was Stoney's size, but appeared larger and stronger. He pulled a blade of grass as he walked and stuck it into his mouth. Then he hopped upon the little animal's back and drummed his feet into its sides. The pony gave him a reproachful look, then went back to grazing.

"Get down, boy." Roy's voice was ominous.

"Yessir," Murray got off, casting a grin at Stoney.

"Goddam you!" Stoney screamed and started toward Murray, his fists already swinging. He was jerked up and back, and Roy's big hand slammed against his backside.

"Into the house, young man," his father roared, "and don't come out until I tell you to."

Stoney went.

He had never seen his mother so angry. She wasn't just fussing-mad, nor even butt-spatting mad. She was knock-down-and-drag-out mad. Her normally soft blue eyes looked like chunks of blue ice. Her lips were thin and tight. Even her long yellow hair seemed to ripple with anger. Only when she held him close and crooned the soothing wordless sounds did Stoney realize her anger wasn't directed at him. His sobs subsided, and he slept.

When he awoke, his father was sitting on the bed beside him. Stoney felt the tears coming again, and swallowed hard.

"First time I ever saw a puppy dog turn into a he-wolf." Roy grinned.

Stoney managed a smile. "I shouldn't have said that to Murray," he said. "He didn't do anything."

"That's true, but I understand why you did." Roy's hand was over his mouth, but Stoney could tell he was smiling. "We all make mistakes," Roy went on. "I almost made a big one. Tell you what. You needn't ride until you're ready. If you're never ready, that's all right, too." He got to his feet.

Stoney didn't want him to go. Not now, since the rift between them was gone. He sought for something to say, anything to keep his father there a few minutes longer. He could think of nothing, so he told about the dream. He told it all while staring at the ceiling. Even the telling made him shiver.

Finished, he looked at Roy.

"I'll be damned," his father said. "I'll just be God-gosh-darned." He smoothed Stoney's hair back from his forehead. "You'd better come and eat, Son." His voice was curiously gentle. "Take your time, we've already eaten."

Things had changed. Everyone was too nice to him. His mother piled his plate with things he liked, and not once did she say, "Eat-your-vegetables-they-are-good-for-you." Roy paced, his big arms dangling uselessly. He looked as if he wanted to hit something, but wasn't mad. Even Grandpa, who never went out of his way to be nice to anybody, was nice to him. Things weren't the same at all.

Finally, Stoney escaped to the dirt pile. He was the sad-eyed general, looking—Murray Cole stood at the crest of Cemetery Ridge.

"Your old man ain't here, now," Murray said. "I'm going to get you."

He couldn't beat Murray fighting. Maybe he couldn't beat anybody; he had never tried. Stoney glanced toward the house. His mother was watching from a window. Good, he needed only to call her, or to run. "The hell with it," he said. Stonewall Jackson Daingerfield charged up Cemetery Ridge.

A boot in his chest sent him back down. He went up again. This time rock-hard fists sent him sprawling. Up again. Down again. Again. And again. Far away, he heard his mother screaming at his father to "do something, do something."

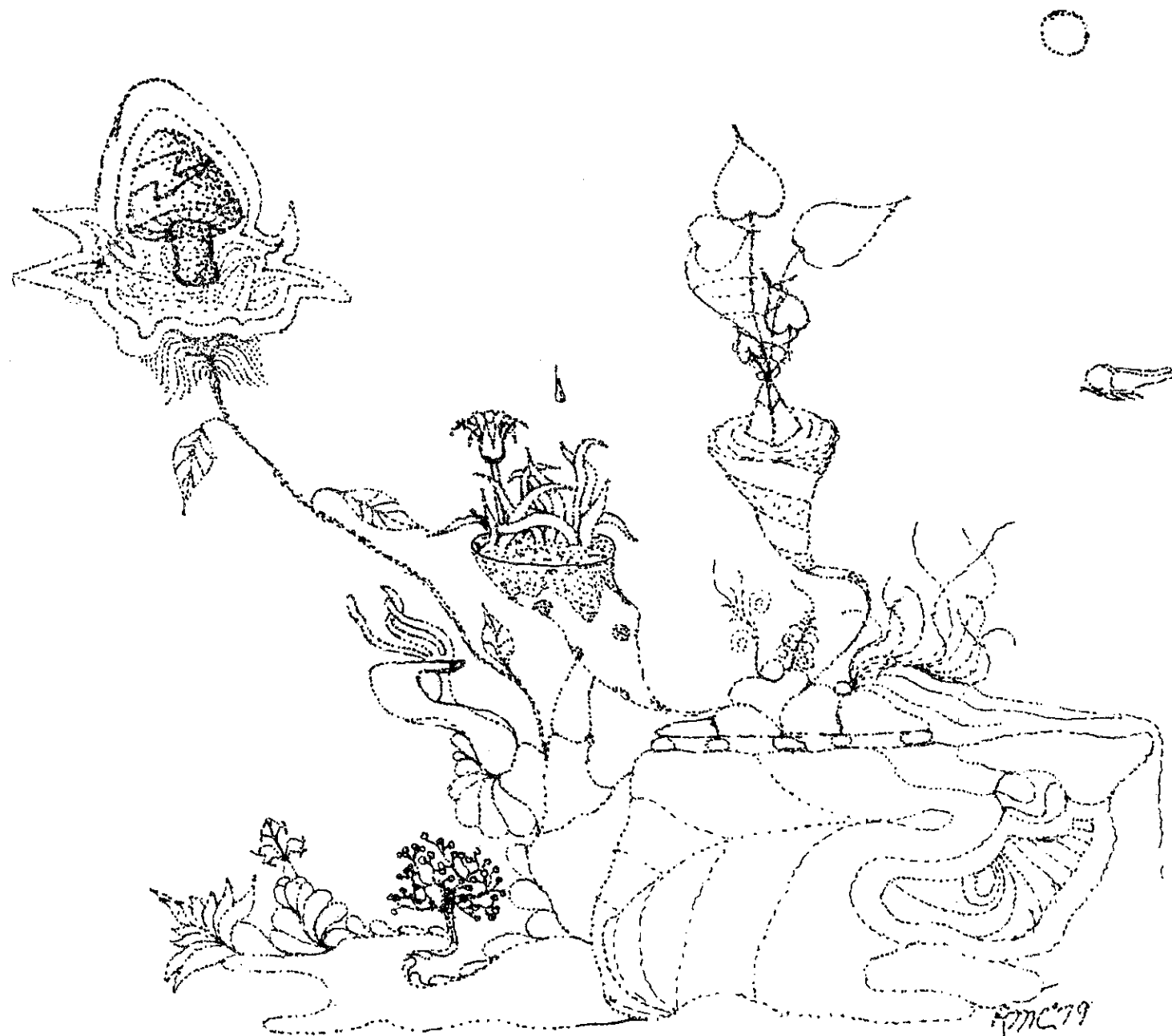
"Aw, shut up," Stonewall said, and struggled up the pile of dirt.

Then it was over. Sharon held him close, crooning that silly, wordless noise, as if he were a baby. Roy kelt beside him, trying to help. Didn't grownups ever learn? Stonewall looked at his grandfather, who offered nothing but a toothless grin. That was more like it.

"Not now, Mama," he said. "Not now." He struggled out of her arms and walked toward the pony. The old fear came back, but he knew he wouldn't stop this time. One mouse stomped and one to go.

White clouds drifted overhead as if they had no place special to go. The sun was warm on Stonewall's back, and a breeze ruffled the hair on his sweaty forehead. It was a beautiful day.

by Bill Gill



The Magnolia

Sharon Daingerfield was dying and was not afraid. Sitting in her wheelchair that spring afternoon, on the porch of the disgustingly mediocre Louisiana farmhouse, she worried about the tree. Seventy-four years of living had worn her body down to sagging wrinkles, and her heart, she often said, continued beating only from force of habit. There was nothing anyone could do, except maybe God, and Sharon didn't think God should waste his time on folks who had outlived their usefulness. The tree, now. It could be saved, and she couldn't. Therefore the tree was worth a worry and she wasn't.

She made a mental note to phone Mark, her eldest, and have him send out a tree surgeon. Mark was a doctor; surely he would know a tree doctor who could cure her magnolia's ills.

She tugged the shawl closer around her shoulders. It was an atrocious thing given her by the new minister's flighty young wife, but it shut out the nippy little breeze that strutted across the porch and tickled her scrawny body with goose-bumps. Besides, piney-woods politics dictated that gifts from kin, friends and neighbors be used.

"You want anything?"

"Oh!" Sharon jumped. Becky, her housekeeper-nurse stood in the doorway.

"You trying to scare me to death?" Sharon asked. Through her bifocals, her eyes looked owl-big and hawk-mean. She was angry that her chain of thought had been interrupted, angrier that she couldn't remember what her chain of thought had concerned.

Older than Sharon, Becky had diapered and spanked and buried Daingerfields for generations. She was unintimidated. "Do you want anything?" she repeated.

Sharon's anger disappeared as suddenly as it had come. "I don't want anything," she said. "Do you have time to sit with me?"

"I got time." The screen door squeaked, and Becky's bare feet whispered across the porch. She sank into a rocker. They sat in companionable silence.

Sharon studied the scabby blight on the tree. Roy had planted the magnolia back in—, Lord, was it fifty years ago? Yes, Mark had been five then, and Stoney seven months. It seemed like such a short time. Yet, Roy had been dead ten years. Mark was a fat, bald physician who didn't practice what he preached about staying slim and eating right and getting plenty of exercise. Stoney was an army officer, a major or a general, or something. He was halfway around the world in a country whose name Sharon could seldom remember and never pronounce.

"Yep, been a long time," Becky said.

Sharon glanced at her. She wondered if Becky could read minds. It wouldn't have been surprising. Over the years, Becky had shown an aptitude for everything from midwifing to undertaking. If she chose to read minds, Sharon would have bet she could do it.

"I 'member when you were birthing Mark," Becky said, suddenly garrulous. She motioned toward the yard. "Roy walked a path in the grass and trampled the flowers, all the time cussing me because I had locked the door. He cussed beautiful, that man."

Sharon laughed. She guessed good memories had been given to the very old to make up for their lack of a future. "Do you remember the argument he had with Grandpa Aaron over Stoney's name?"

Grandpa had been in Stonewall Jackson's corps during the civil war, and he wanted the baby named after the general. Neither man had thought to ask if Sharon had a preference in the matter. As she recalled, she hadn't. The baby nestled warm in her arms and, at least for the time, that was enough.

"I'm glad Grandpa won," she said. "Blackjack Pershing Daingerfield would have been a terrible name for such a little boy."

A lump formed in her throat, and she jerked her mind back to the present. Memories, especially good ones, had a way of bringing on attacks of self-pity, and she wasn't having any, thank you.

The sun was now at just the right angle to bring out the freshening colors of the countryside. The trees were showing off their new green like flouncy-tailed girls wearing their best dresses to prayer-meeting. Wildflowers bloomed, and the birds had come home now that winter was gone.

Sharon hoped she wouldn't die in the springtime. Summer, with its heavy, oppressive heat and breezeless days, was a good time for dying. Winter was even better. Winter was ideal. But spring was a time of awakening, a time to live.

She wondered what Heaven was like. She hoped it was more than sitting on a cloud and strumming a harp, singing hosannas. Such had been her concept of Heaven all of her life. She guessed it might be fun for a few hours, maybe even for several days, but what a boring way to spend eternity. Surely God had something better planned. He'd shown a great deal of imagination and a knowledge of human nature when He told His children to go forth and multiply. And folks had sure-Lord taken Him at His word, she thought, smiling. Well, she'd know, soon enough.

She shivered. The evening chill was coming on. Becky arose wordlessly and wheeled her into the house.

Sharon wasn't hungry but she ate, knowing she could never stand firm against Becky's tight-lipped, disapproving silence. They watched Dallas, and Sharon wished Miss Ellie would sit J.R. down and have a talk with him. Miss Ellie was a nice lady and she shouldn't put up with that kind of behavior, not for a minute.

Finally, bedtime, thank goodness. It felt good to lie down, to let her tired old muscles sag and flop any darned way they pleased. She sighed and closed her eyes.

She knew she was dreaming, and tried to force herself awake but she was too deeply asleep. She seemed to float near the ceiling, looking down upon her own body. People were gathered around her bed, all of them wearing somber expressions. There was Mark, looking older than fifty-five. And Becky, who hadn't aged a day in thirty years, was as stolid and strong as ever. The new minister was praying, and—, well, for heaven's sake, his young wife was crying.

Sharon, the ethereal Sharon floating near the ceiling like a ninny, wanted to tell them to cheer up, that she wasn't dead, it was only a dream. And even if she were dead, it was a sad thing that Becky was the only one who could keep her composure; where was their pride, anyway? And where was Stoney?

As if in answer to her unvoiced question, Mark said, "Stoney's flying home. He should arrive tomorrow."

"Thank you," the ethereal Sharon said primly.

She awoke, feeling a sense of well-being and a delicious drowsiness. There was a damp stickiness at her side, uncomfortable, but not so uncomfortable as to make her investigate. She tried to go back to sleep, dreading another day of weakness and uselessness. Full awakening had been nothing to look forward to for a long time. But she felt so good!

She'd slept a long time. She stretched, yawned, and rubbed her eyes. Her face felt funny; soft, but not flabby-soft, as it ordinarily did. She opened her eyes. The sun was shining through her window and a breeze ruffled the curtains. There was a strangeness about something but she couldn't make up her mind as to what it was. The sun? The curtain? But what could be strange about either? Maybe it would come to her later. She hoped this was going to be one of her good days. She'd read somewhere that spring had a rejuvenating effect on old folks, but she hadn't been one of the old folks then so she wasn't impressed.

Bare feet slithered across the floor, aiming toward her room. Becky, coming to wrestle her into that darned wheelchair again. Well, Becky could just go climb a tree because Sharon didn't intend to get out of bed until she pleased, and she wouldn't please for another hour at least, maybe longer.

The face that peered around the door wasn't Becky's.

"Oh, my Go-o-o-d!" Sharon closed her eyes, and her mind shut out everything else in a frantic search for a word. Senility. That was it. She was senile. Or crazy. Or both. She counted to ten. I'll look now, she told herself, and he'll be gone.

She looked. Five-year-old Mark Daingerfield had no intention of being gotten rid of so easily. "Get up, Mama," he said. "I'm hungry." He had tried to brush his hair but had succeeded only in plastering it down with water. Droplets dribbled down the sides of his face.

"Go away." Sharon sneaked a hand under the covers and pinched herself. "Ouch." No question then, she was awake.

She had always prided herself on taking life as it came. This was just another of life's hard knocks. So you are senile, she told herself. It's not the end of the world, and even if it were, it's not as if the world were a major planet. Still, it seemed like a dirty trick for God to play on her. Especially since he could have let her die quietly with absolutely no fuss.

"You're not real, you know," she told Mark. "You're middle-aged, and your teeth are store-bought, and you puff when you climb stairs. And I have lost all of my marbles. How do you like that?"

He didn't look impressed. "Quit funning and get up," he said. "I'm hungry."

He'd always had a one-track mind where food was concerned. Sharon was glad he remained in character within her hallucination. He could have been wearing horns, or wings; he could have been the president with all of his G-men, and she could have been naked.

"Where is Becky?" she asked.

"In the garden. It will be a long time before she comes in to fix breakfast, and I'm hungry now."

Heck, maybe this senility business wasn't as bad as folks thought.

"Scram," she said. "I'll be there in a minute."

The door closed. Sharon looked at her arms. They were young arms, firm and round. And her legs. "Ummm-hmmm." She'd always had nice legs.

She knew what the dampness beside her was, now. "One minute, General," she said, "and I'll change your diaper." She was still admiring her legs. Where was Roy? Husbands were like cops, never around when you wanted them.

Her eyes went back to the sunlight flooding through her window. There was something—out of place, maybe? Or something in place that shouldn't be?

She moved the curtain aside. Of course; that little sprig of a magnolia Roy had planted last month was greening. Someday that darned thing would grow into a giant tree and block the sunshine from her window. She was tempted to ask him to remove it, but no, he'd planted it because he knew she loved to smell magnolia blossoms. Besides, magnolias were slow growers. It would be twenty years before the tree blocked the sun, and twenty years was a lifetime away.

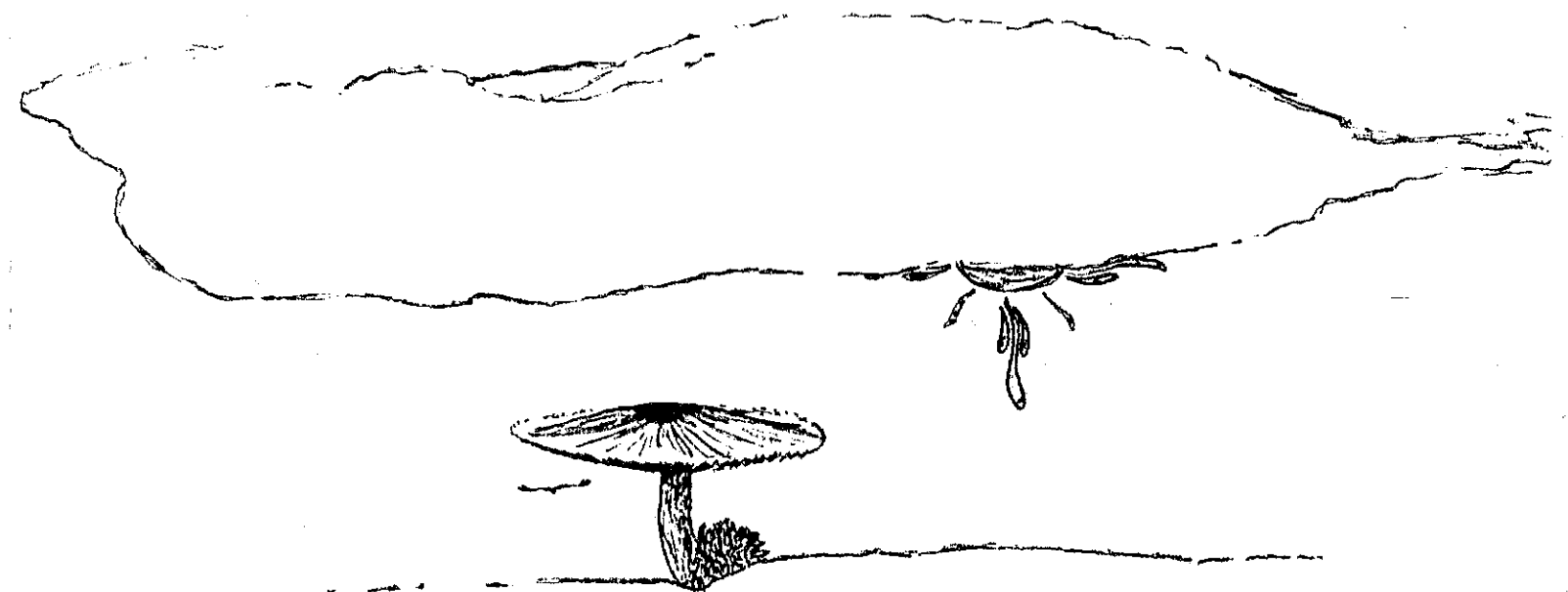
What an awful dream she'd had. What an awful, awful dream. But it was only a dream. Wasn't it? Her brow furrowed. Wasn't it?

Then she didn't remember anymore. There was only a hungry little boy and a wet baby and, somewhere in the fields or in the barn, a husband who would soon come into the house and track mud and other smelly stuff on her clean floors.

"Not while I'm alive, Buster," she said.

She got out of bed and began to dress.

by Bill Gill



Ro

by Richard Cox

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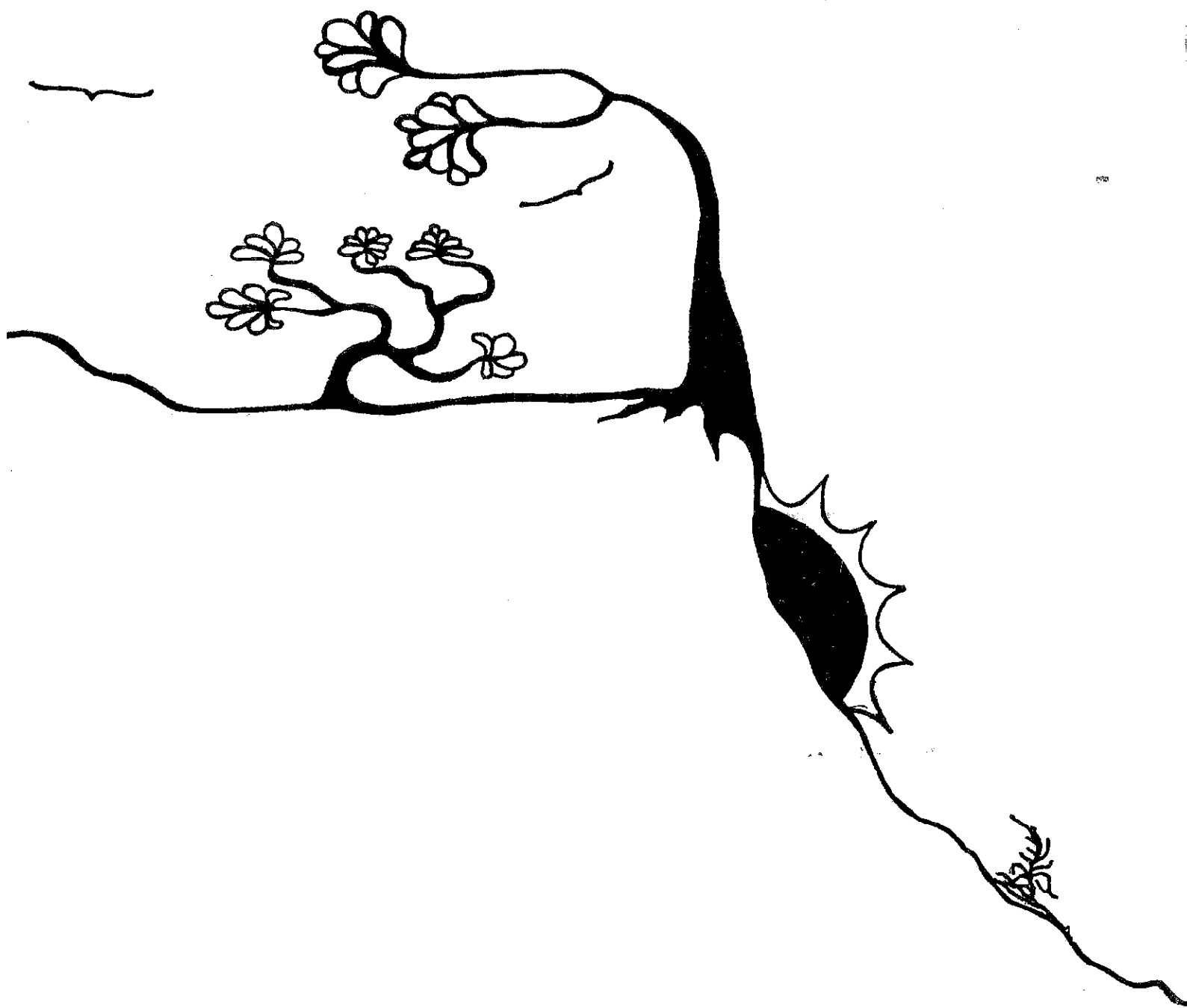
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