creativity: characterized by originality; imaginative.

diversity: the fact or quality of being diverse; difference; variety; multiformality.

creativity + diversity = PERCEPTIONS

-Thomas Kauke, Pam Niles, Kimberly Potts, Jason Rimelk

Diversity encompasses every aspect of the individual. It is what makes us different, unique, and intriguing. It makes life interesting—never boring. Diversity "speaks" to the creative impulse of the mind. It opens the doors to other peoples, cultures, and worlds. It allows us to not only see the uniqueness of ourselves, but also of others. Diversity teaches the child in each of us to find his own "spark," his own light, his own dreams....

-Jason Bonner

Every writer and artist is unique: no other shares his or her vision, experiences, outlook, or insights. Yet from this great diversity of individuals comes art aimed at universality. The tension between such diversity and the desire to reach all other individuals produces a creative impulse. We hope that Perceptions reflects this impulse and gives it space to flourish.

-Brad Strickland

Cover design by Kenny Sawyer
Perceptions is a creative arts magazine published by the Humanities Division and Student Activities of Gainesville College to encourage the arts among students, faculty, and friends of the college. Some of the works published here are the creative products of art and writing classes; others are contributions from friends of the creative arts.

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Special thanks to: The Anchor staff; The English Club; Sally Russell; Thomas Sauret; Barbara Thomas
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Mute
by Chris Lambert

There is a song in the breast of the mute boy and a soliloquy in the mouth of the tongueless John and a pianist who's played as well as Beethoven his first try.

It comes down, some of the time, to luck, and the textbook is eventually forgotten.

In painting, poetry and music, the vehicle fades into grey, marks on paper and the method takes second to message if it is good.

Not what academia calls good or what drunken poets call good or mother or the girl beside you, but what leaves you with nothing and everything to say.

Primavera
by Paul J. Ramirez

Andaba un día por un bosque
Y a un árbol noté callado
En medio del mes de enero
Cuando fruto todavía no ha dado.

En mi recogimiento sentí su via escondida
Y tras de sus ramas secas,
Descubrí una esperanza de creación
Y bajo su sombra una buena acogida.

El frío parecía haberlo dejado muerto,
Paro el calor hizo resplandecer
Las flores y el dulce fruto de sus ramas:
Las bellezas y grandezas de un nuevo amanecer!

Bear Mountain
by Claire Porter

Up through the brambled trails the Saab would go landing on the underbrush twisted on the scalp of the mountain. Pails grabbed, I'd throw them in a pile on the ground, and yawn in sweet smells of blueberries soon to be plucked!

My mother gathers me before I'm gone inside the mossy mazes and grey stone.

"Bang the pails, sweet!" So romping, I would slam the empty tins, singing "Oh no! No, no! the bear can't catch me!" Secretly longing to see his bared yellow fangs in a doze!

Dashing inside a grove, I saw a fawn.

Its head left a dent in the briars, moist where blood congealed, and the bear had rejoiced.

for A.
by Frank McCoy

ashley has blue dreams and soft pink pillows on a puffy, little, satin bed in america

she has terrorist eyes though and some dead friends and me all this a contradiction of course in a woolly, little, white sweater with blood red lips that taste like candy

The Dream
by Kim Potts

In this real or are we sleeping in the safe bed? Could we be in the house of our Father and unable to wake until we visit the dream world?

I cannot believe He sent us away. Maybe we're safely tucked deep in the blankets of our heavenly home.
The King
by Kim Potts

Circle above me
gliding—rising and falling
close yet far away,
hovering and waiting for my fall.
Wanting my glory
but it can't be taken.
It is a never-ending
circle of feathers.

Introspection
by Barbara T.

Gentle and untrusting
As a doe
Who never strays too
Far from protective cover
Alone
She stands and stares
For what seems an eternity
Her gaze unwavering
As nearness approaches
She bounds for cover of safety

Independent and courageous
In battle
As a Mountain Lion
Who proudly hunts and roams
In high, mountainous terrain
Where the land is often
Barren and rocky
Always in solitude

Passionate and intensely alive
As a smoldering volcano
Who has lain dormant
For what seems ages
Ready to erupt
And consume
With red-hot lava flow

Undaunted as the Wild Rose
Who grows in lonely, deserted
Places with only the earth to nurture
Whose prickly vine clings
And covers
As if for warmth and love
Whose tenuous flowers have a fragile,
Wild beauty
Distinctly their own
Heaven and Hawks
by Pam Niles

One summer eve after the funeral, I stared out the window watching the aerial show.

The brown bombers soared through the air then dove down like B52s searching for prey.

But there were no animals playing in the grass, no bushes, no trees, no masterpieces.

Somewhere along the way they escaped.

My eyes followed the hawks as they traveled upward. The heavens were still but allowed the flickering heat through.

Once again, both dominating a sun filled day.

What, a Game
by Jason Rimek

Black and White, squares that are to be traversed I always start first; I always finish last, When I finish at all.

Life picks me up, Moves me around. Life puts me down. Life mostly puts me down. I must sit opposite those whom I oppose. I am forced to clash with them, conquer them, destroy them.

Why? Why must I be a pawn in this masterful game?
Confused
by Matt Thompson

From across the room, he saw her.
He studied her features.
She seemed so different, but how could she?
He said that of everyone.
Something stood out, something he could not
put a finger on.
Her eyes? Her face? Her lips?
Her actions? Now there was a
possibility, maybe she acted differently
than the others.
He glanced at his watch, five minutes
had passed, yet she was the only thing
that had entered his mind.
His mind reeled, "But she was so different,"
or was she?

prophet
by Frank McCoy

and suppose Jesus is having a bad day.

he has looked into the vacant eye of them and
sees only his reflection.
he has told them it will be o.k and that he or
something will help them, but
he doesn't believe that anymore.
he is frustrated among the others now, because
they are the same, only smiling.
he thought it would be a mathematical equation
or perhaps a musical phrase.

he is hungry for something
driving home every day looking all around with
his car doors locked and the windows closed tight
looking everywhere.

searching . . . .

A Sleeve Flapping in the Wind
by Pam Niles

Walking down the boulevard
she almost mated with a
Southern Bell pole
while checking out the backside
of the finest specimen of the male gender.

The Levis fit snugly
on his tooty booty
and she felt a tingle
coming to rest in her loins.

He turned to the front and
"ooh yeah" seeped through
her teeth as she eyed the
goliath sized bulge.

Then she noticed the one
sleeve flapping in the wind
as if motioning to come closer.

Lowering her head she pushed onward
like wildfire running through a forest
never noticing the familiar face
she knew ten years ago.

Mi unico amigo
by Garry ke Merritt

Los cielos tienen todo de mis pensamientos
y que profundo avces son.
Nadie mas puede saber sobre mi corazon
herido ni mis secretos callados.
Mi vida con amor,
mi vida con dolor,
pero ahora estoy mejor porque solo confio
en las nubes.
Estamos enamorados.


**downtown**  
by Frank McCoy

In bohemia  
The men are named for dead  
symbolist poets  
and the women are named for animals

In bohemia  
she is cool as pain and death  
with metaphysical black hair

In bohemia  
words are shadow puppets  
that painters take out in rages  
in screaming, little, black sketch books  
in bohemia  
the poets are killing the moon  
in matinees

In bohemia  
we are peeping keyholes in the wee wee hours  
burning exile candles  
in the names of saints, assassins and children

In bohemia  
I am finished  
with love and silence  
I vanish into some dark, sweet, secret, earth  
forever

In bohemia  
I am enormous and eternal  
as grace and disease  
carrying sadness like a song in my chest

---

**Swimming Lessons**  
by Kim Potts

It slowly licks the sides  
A shiny penny on the bottom

Quiet--

The smell of humidity and sweat--  
it is hot and still.  
In the distance a train goes by.

Suddenly they are here  
A wave of future fish clinging to their parents.  
I am ready.

The bathtub is waiting  
The fish are dry

1-2-3 Reach the copper penny.

---

**Good-bye**  
by Paul J. Ramirez

To those that have not seen  
The wonder of such reality.  
For many death seems mean,  
And life nothing much but formality.

Now the sun sets, to begin darkness:  
To end the light of our day without yield,  
Never to rise again the same awareness  
That its rays shed softly on the field.

Awake, sleep no more and stay standing,  
For sweet sleep later will be landing.
**Brother**  
*by Matthew Rundell*

Firmly footed on the ground  
Serious and stable  
Everything in black and white  
Lying on the table  
Push aside the foolishness  
Reason to the letter  
Strong and selfless  
Man of steel  
I think I know you better

---

**At His Wife’s Funeral**  
*by Matt Thompson*

He stared on in disbelief,  
black-clothed figures passed before him.  
He looked at her wedding band  
in his hand, the worn gold  
scratched etches from difficult times.  
He stood quietly, each word bringing pain, sorrow.  
His mind wandered back  
to the fishing trip, the argument.  
He sheltered in the fact that only he knew.  
Perhaps he should tell,  
each word stung at his ears.  
He tried to speak, his voice gone.  
The door was shut and covered,  
the lie trapped within.

---

**for my parents**  
*by Frank McCoy*

Jesus was arrested yesterday in Athens, GA,  
for writing ambiguous prose  
they called it public drunkenness and pissing  
the street  
but, I knew better  
and I know that soon he will be crucified  
they will take him in the night and burn  
all his notebooks  
he is different  
and it becomes necessary to kill all of  
those who matter at some point  
they kill you  
and Santa Claus  
and all the other good ones

---

**You’ve Got to Love Country Music**  
*by A.J. Kline*

You’ve got to love country music...  
Homer did and the singer of Beowulf’s deeds,  
Who sang from men’s bones and their guts  
And their needs.  
You’ve got to feel country music...  
Kings did and swineherds and poor Grendel wept  
At those well-wrought words of promises made  
And promises kept.  
You’ve got to know country music...  
What it is and isn’t and can be when right.  
Not tricky or dull when it cuts  
To the soul like a light.  
You’ve got to hear country music...  
Homer and Hank ring in your mind and your heart  
Like the bell that tolls at the end  
Or the cry that signals the start.  
You’ve just got to trust country music...  
When a thousand years pass and they look back at us  
And scan all the vinyl and tapes that aren’t dust.  
A new Homer will conjure a new song of this time  
From Waylon and Willie and Haggard and Prine.
Absurd?
by Clark Adams

My existence, it seems, has been troubling me;
What purpose is there in this absurdity?

Freedom is my condemnation;
Liberty, my dedication.

The world is shackled in creeds outdated;
The bulk of mankind so fervently sedated.

A passionate skeptic, I remain awake;
My cause for living, not that easy to make.

Oft it is pleasures that give life some worth;
Struggles for comfort, knowledge, and mirth.

But the lusting, the laughing, the loving, the learning
Don't produce the direction that I am yearning.

It's an indifferent world of which I'm a part
With nefarious terror, hardness of heart.

Often tortuous, though, I cannot disguise;
Look forward, I not, my own demise.

Through all of the madness, the pain, and the strife,
The only reason for living... is LIFE.
on creative writers
by Frank McCoy

I do not understand
this need to talk about it.

It just hurts me, like
a yellow sun in November.

I have watched them
with their notebooks
having to hide myself
and run away.

There is something
cold about them.

They do not seem to
dream the same as me.

I just don't understand
it, really.

writers, I mean.

Sins of Omission
by Matthew Rundell

Words unsaid
Hound around me
Untold words and lessons
Have done more harm
Than any speeches given
Kind words neglected
Can't be resurrected
And the cold floods in
To my silent soul

Notebooks
by Frank McCoy

I have 1000
notebooks full
of bad directions
and nothing as
important as
a toothbrush
or a tire iron
The Pomptetian Statue

by Claire Porter

Jes had begun walking around campus late at night. Nikki, a girl in Jes's sociology class with the most opalescent skin Jes had ever seen, had given her the idea that she could be more independent. Jes's sisters teased Jes about her walks. Waiting to way downstairs they would ask why Jes had given her the idea that she could be more independent. Jes's sisters anything about She and walked out into the cold streets. 

The girl's hair was cropped and blond. The T-shirt expanded over small, hard breasts. Her arms reached out toward his face, and they glowed. Jes felt her body melting away from her, replaced by green, frothing liquid.

It was Nikki. Of course it was Nikki. Jes turned and walked back through the stadium, trying to keep her balance. What had she thought? Nikki was beautiful. Of course she'd have boyfriends. Jes tried to laugh at herself as she came to the sorority house. Did she think that because of her friendship with Nikki that Nikki wouldn't . . . weird. Gross, Jes ran up the stairs into the house.

After that night, Jes went through a lot of stages. She canceled her dates with guys. Her cheeks were always hot and she had to cake deodorant onto her armpits to keep from sweating through her blouses. She drew sketches in her notebook. She argued with the teacher. Then, during one of these arguments, Jes turned to the teacher and said, "Professor," she had said over the whispers, "Could you . . . I mean, I don't understand why such a big group in America, and a harmless group, would be a counter culture." Jes had run out of class at the end of the period, still blushing. Nikki caught up with her, belly laughter echoing down the hall, shaking Jes.

"The sorority sister's got balls," Nikki had said.

As Jes made out the white lights of the soccer field, she thought of standing in the hall so close to Nikki. Her thoughts were interrupted by yells coming from the field. She thought some people must be playing a game. Weaving her way through the bleachers, she saw a man and woman playing a violent game of touch football. Jes came closer and squinted. The girl hurled herself into the guy's stomach and they went down in a pile. Laughing, the girl straddled him. The laughter made Jes quiver. She saw the ball roll away from them, but they didn't try to get it. They were silent, except for panting, and they were looking at each other. Jes studied the girl, and as she traced the pointed jaw and long neck, something green washed over her. She saw the blue shower curtain, which got thumped from the inside. The belly-laughs made the drunkenness leave Jes, and replaced it with a deep burning. Walking through the streets on the way home, the air, which was getting warmer every day, seemed to blow a film of dust off her face.

"I found it," she said. She was not relieved. She knew this was the beginning. She was scared, but she knew what she wanted.

Little breezes fluttered at her T-shirt as Jes swept the fallen muscadines off her parent's front porch. It was spring break and she had told them that she would take care of the house while they were gone. The lake to her right was outlined by parched red clay. It reminded Jes of a mouth that kept opening and twisting into the horizon. A throb jittered her stomach. She looked at her watch. Ten minutes. Flipping the
broom handle from one hand to the other, she smiled at her nerves. It's just casual, casual. Walking into the kitchen, she hummed "You Send Me."

Jes walked around the house, examining objects that Nikki would see, things her parents had collected on trips to different countries. On the ledge over the fireplace was her father's collection of miniature statues and carvings. The ones hidden in the back were the nudes. Since no one else was there, she pushed the front pieces to the side and looked at the naked ones. David and a stocky man by Gauguin were there, but these weren't the ones she was looking for. Then she saw it. It was coated with dust. She blew on it and the particles dispersed into the air like sparks. It was a miniature statue from Pompeii of two women twisted around each other, one with her head against the other's knees. She followed their curves, stopping at each dimple.

Jes left the sculpture when she heard Nikki's car coming down the driveway. Jes came out on the porch in time to see the Rabbit jerk to a halt a few feet from the gate. The motor cut off. Jes jumped as the door opened.

"Christ!" Nikki said, jumping out of the car, "what a road!"

Nikki went up the steps to Jes, and the glowing arms surrounded her for at least ten seconds.

"I almost hit a cow! Mooooooooo!"

Jes giggled at Nikki's cow noises. She asked Nikki to please come in. The sky had darkened and it rumbled. Jes watched Nikki shop and looked up at the black clouds.

"Oh, I like rain!" said Nikki. "Don't you hope it rains? You seem like you would, Jes."

"Yeah, I do actually ...especially when it thunders."

Jes followed Nikki inside. Nikki looked around the house, asking questions about paintings, trinkets, and the antique furniture. Jes's legs tingled as Nikki stopped to look at the carvings over the fireplace. Nikki picked up the Gauguin and laughed, putting it down. Nikki's face shined as she looked at the Pompeian sculpture. Nikki's forefinger traced the curves, stopping at the hips of each woman. Jes was suddenly bombarded by Nikki's wide eyes.

"Isn't it wild!" Nikki said. "Jes could only smile back, her lips quivering."

The flashes in Nikki's eyes were so bright it was like stars being reflected. In a blink, the stars were gone and Nikki turned away from Jes to look in her backpack. When Nikki turned back toward Jes, there was a bottle of pink wine in her small hands.

"I hope you like red wine. It was cheap."

Then Nikki's smile disappeared. "You do like to drink, don't you? I do..." Nikki said, "but only around friends."

"Oh yeah, me too."

Jes sat a foot from Nikki on the couch. She could see the statue sitting on the mantle. They drank more and more, the thunder growing more guttural around them. Jes wondered if Nikki could see the statue too.

Nikki's amber eyes became hot and swung from one object to another in the room. Nothing seemed to be able to hold her attention. Jes saw that Nikki's hand was about to crush the glass she held.

Nikki's eyes landed on the sliding glass door which faced the lake. She got up and leaned her back against the door.

"Is that the lake down there?"

"Yes."

Jes saw millions of tiny knots come loose in Nikki.

"Wanna go down there?" Nikki hummed.

"O.K."-

Before Jes had finished speaking, Nikki was pulling back the door and running outside. Jes followed Nikki to the edge of the short wood which led to the lake. The thunder crackled. Nikki began undressing, Jes stood there, mouth open, as Nikki's pointed breasts appeared.

"Come on Jes! It feels so wonderful!"

Jes turned her back and took off her clothes. She could feel Nikki's eyes on her. She tried to pull in her stomach as her underwear came off.

"Jes! You're a Greek statue!"

Jes smiled at Nikki, but she felt her whole body blushing. She took Nikki's hand and drew her into the woods toward the lake.

When they got to the edge of the water, Nikki cannonballed in. Jes went in slowly, edging along the slick clay bottom until she felt the end of the shelf with her toes. Then, she did a breast stroke toward Nikki. Nikki was farther out than Jes had realized. As she watched Nikki thrash, she thought of all the wine Nikki had drunk. One minute, Nikki would do a thrashing crawl and the next, she would be gasping and sinking. Jes moved through the water more quickly.

"You all right, Nikki?"

"Oh please, you think I don't know how to swim."

On the word swim, Jes saw Nikki choke on a gulp of water. Nikki started coughing that terrible choking cough of someone starting to panic. Jes moved faster as she saw that Nikki had choked on another gulp of water. Jes felt her heart thumping fast.

"Nikki stay still. If you stay still I can swim you in."

"Fuck you. I don't need help. I can swim."

But even as Nikki said this, she was bobbing and wheezing and Jes saw fear in her eyes.

Jes realized what she was going to
have to do. When she got to Nikki, she clasped her hands together and brought them down hard on the back of Nikki's head. She caught Nikki's body as it went limp and, with shaking hands, slipped cold neck into the crook of her arm. On the shore, Jes held Nikki around the waist, thrusting her fists into Nikki's gut. Nikki retched, water coming out of her mouth. It looked horrible to Jes.

“'Oh God,'” Nikki said. "It's all right," said Jes. "Hold on to me!" said Nikki. "I am holding on to you." Jes felt Nikki's purple fingers gripping her thighs. "Stay near me! Stay near me!" "I'm here. I am." Jes stroked Nikki's muddy hair. "O.K." The shaking stopped after Jes had held Nikki for a long time. She sat beside Nikki, keeping her arms around Nikki's waist.

“You saved me,” said Nikki, her face aimed at the mud. “Of course I did.” "Do you love me?" Nikki's eyes bombarded Jes again. "Yes. I do. I want you." Jes thought her head would explode at this confession. Then she saw Nikki's lips curl up. "I can't right now," Nikki said. "I know... I mean I didn't expect you..." Jes flushed hard and Nikki laughed a weak belly-laugh. They got up slowly and started toward the house, but Jes had a question burning inside her. She squeezed Nikki's arm tight.

"Did you know all this time that I... wanted to be with you?" Jes stared as Nikki drew back her lips, showing the top row of white teeth. Then she felt Nikki's cold fingers wrapping around her hand, leading her up into the woods.

**
I met her at an abortion debate. There she was leaning in the doorway, arms pulled close. The hair was long and dish water blond. She wore two or three layers of make-up base that made her face shiny, and a post orgasmic shade of lipstick so red that every time you looked on her your eyes inevitably fell on those lips. It annoyed me, the fact that I couldn't take my eyes off her and the lipstick, but the overall picture was pleasant, and after all, with a little prodding I could probably talk it off her, kiss it off or at least, flick the lights out.

She was in my periphery and I in hers. The speakers rattled on and even when I tried to listen I couldn't make out their words. I leaned up sticking my nose just inches from her ear. No matter how I tried I couldn't get the Freud out of my head: nose and ear, coitus. The correlation was so obvious.

"I think they should promote masturbation as a form of contraception," I said. She nodded and laughed in a low voice. Perhaps a little too much testosterone, I thought. "Ya come to these functions often?" I said. Ignoring my choice of words.

"Only when I'm in need of an acquaintance." She smiled, made eye contact, and walked out. I followed and we walked together. I caught myself avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk and averted my eyes to the shop windows.

"So, where do you stand on the abortion issue?" she asked smiling as if she didn't take her own question seriously.

"Where do I stand? Well, for choice," I smiled, not taking my answer seriously. It all seemed extraneous, irrelevant. I stood for a fuck, and a kiss, and a little companionship, and occasionally, talk. Sometimes you wanted somebody to agree or disagree or maybe just listen as you picked the world apart, as you diagnosed the pestilence and then dismissed it all as trivial. I didn't ask her where she stood and she didn't offer information. It didn't matter. We read each other's faces in the silence and laughed. It was understood. She would be out by morning so I could make the bed.

"I like to pass the time easily with music and wine," she said just like that. It was at this moment that I realized I didn't know her name. It didn't actually matter. We could've continued like this.

"I'd have to say I like that too: music and wine. What's your name?"

"Vera, and yours?"

"Arthur."

"Well, tell me, Art, is there a place we can grab a drink around here?"
"Yeah, right down Fifth. This way."
I took her to the Delray Saloon and the dark hall smoothed the edges of her appearance almost changing her to something new. We drank beer as the bartenders and bimbos played across the mirrors in the pink and blue neon.

"So, Art, do you always pick up your women at places like this?"
"No. Usually at places like this. I motioned with my beer. "And your men?"
"It depends. I don't just walk out with anyone. I always have a certain kind in mind."
"As in?"
"First off, I notice the eyes, the mouth, and how they move. It's all right there on the face."
"Anything on my face?"
"A mouth like an asshole: a school teacher's mouth. Tight." With this her whole manner changed. Doctor by ordering a beer and looking away. It was dangerous, so I cut the analysts short and placed my hand on the knee of the man.

"Look anywhere."
"Yes.
"What?"
"No, no. Just somewhere else."
We walked out and after finishing a few beers bought at a corner store, ended up at my apartment. I didn't think to ask. I just went up and she followed. I stuck the key in and she came to mind. The last girl I brought home. Black-headed Alicia with a fake beauty mark and nostrils that almost let you count her nose hairs.

"Watch her. What do you think?"
"She's nice," I said.
"Wanna dance?"
"No, I'd rather drink."
"Ok, I'll dance." Vera pranced away and placed her hand on the knee of an unsuspecting drunk. She mouthed some words and pulled him off onto the dance floor. I turned in relief, and her image fell away.

Staring at my own reflection for awhile and then finally refocusing, I concentrated on the bar: The lights, the neatly placed bottles, and the cigarettes of different sizes and colors burning in metallic ashtrays. Faces stared; countenances of indifference that looked beyond the room or that concentrated inwardly, never meeting my eyes. They laughed, spit, pinched, and drank, all adding to the rising sound in my head. I noticed Vera and the toy man she dragged around the dance floor, and stifled my irritation with three fast gulps of beer. I'd known her for a short while, but the feeling came still. I considered the time we'd spent a promise. She tapped my shoulder.

"Art, let's go. Maybe we can dance somewhere else."
"Are you sure?" I said.
"I'd like to go."
"I won't be taking you away from anything?"

"No, no. Just somewhere else."
We walked out and after finishing a few beers bought at a corner store, ended up at my apartment. I didn't think to ask. I just went up and she followed. I stuck the key in and she came to mind. The last girl I brought home. Black-headed Alicia with a fake beauty mark and nostrils that almost let you count her nose hairs.

from comer to comer, and I stood in front of her. I thought
of the loss of my virginity at 14. We ended up in a used car parking lot between a Pacer and station wagon. I'd discovered masturbation only weeks before after a wet dream involving one of the ugliest women I'd seen. It seemed like the proper progression: my hand for a girl. It was over in minutes. I remember thinking of masturbation and how much easier it was. I'd worked out ways of entertaining myself with imaginings. The girls were always better in my head. The flesh and voice made it too real. There was always something to correct, to polish with the hand. With the first word, touch, I saw a rock for the sculpture. Something to be refined to an unnatural beauty.

Every time I tried to sit I felt invisible palisades poking at my rear, so I stood. I couldn't remember it ever being quite this hard. It was 3:10 P.M. and I noticed that Vera didn't fit into the picture. She was sloppy and the smeared lipstick hadn't worn off. As a child she had probably colored outside the lines habitually. I wanted to pluck her like Queen Anne's Lace or Blessed Thistle and arrange her in a vase. I wanted her nice and neat. "It might be a good idea for you to go now, Vera. I'm feeling ill," I said blankly, no energy for melodrama. She stood, smiled, moved across the room and was gone without a word. I had turned her off like a television, pissed on her little flame of existence. It was getting harder to bring them home now.
Soon the orderly came out of the office. "You may go in now, sir, but be careful," cautioned the orderly. "He's moody today."

Captain William "Stallion" Grafton stiffened as he checked his uniform one last time for the defects the colonel was sure to find. Satisfied, he stood and walked into the office. Standing stiffly at attention before the colonel's desk he stared, eyes forward, at the portrait of the army's special attack helicopter, commonly known as the Apache, which hung behind and slightly above Colonel Doug Adams.

Adams muttered a barely audible "at ease" and resumed reading a report. Grafton stood at ease and began to examine his commanding officer, noting the square cut hair and immaculate uniform. After a couple of minutes, Adams looked up and cleared his throat.

"Well Grafton, how was your trip?"

"It was enjoyable, sir," Grafton commented.

"Are you ready to take the Apache back through her paces?" Adams asked.

"Yes sir."

"Well, you'll have to do it with another co-pilot," Adams said.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Gunner was transferred."

"Why s...?"

Adams was quick to cut him off. "It's none of your concern," he said. "Your new co-pilot is first Lieutenant Kelly Jaars, call sign 'Gander.'"

"Is he any good, sir?"

"She is very good."

Grafton's voice quivered: "She, sir?"

"Yes, she. Congratulations 'Stallion'; in thirty years of this outfit you will have the first woman co-pilot this outfit has seen."

"I beg your pardon, sir, b..."

"Are you going to have a problem, Captain?" said Adams, his voice rising to an octave just below yelling.

"With all due respect, sir, but yes. I have a wife and son."

"What does your family have to do with this situation?"

"It's just that I don't want to have my life endangered because a woman couldn't make a life and death decision in a split sec. . ."

"THAT WILL DO, MISTER!" boomed Adams, bringing Grafton to immediate attention. "You will work with this woman and get along with her as if you were living with her, whether..."
you like it or not, and you will make sure that the other men do the same, and if you ever make another comment like that, I, personally will kick your ass around your ears." Adams regained his composure and added, "If my wife had heard that comment, she would have already done the chore and probably would have kicked mine for having you on the base."

"But..."

"That will be all, Captain. You are dismissed."

"Yes sir." Grafton spun around and was halfway out the door when Adams spoke.

"Oh, and by the way, next time you're in my office with scuff marks on your shoe, I'll have you written up. Good day."

As Grafton closed the door he looked down at his spotless shoes and muttered, "The sorry bastard." Quickly, he walked out of the building wishing for all the world he was somewhere else besides Fort Mitchell, "Home of the Apache."

Lt. Kelly "Gander" Jaars walked into the Officers' Club hoping to meet her new pilot. She was a very attractive woman and very smart. She had graduated at the top of her class and had achieved a lot for her age of twenty-four.

She finally spied the only captain in the mess and eased her way over. Grafton was brooding over his drink, trying to figure out how to get ot of the mess Colonel Adams had put him in and had decided that getting totally shitfaced might get him out of the bad mood that the colonel always managed to inspire. He gradually became aware of the youthful lieutenant who had been staring at him for the past few minutes.

"Captain Grafton," Jaars said with a salute.

"Yes, what can I do for you."

"I'm Lt. Jaars, sir."

"Who?" said Grafton as he squinted through glazed eyes.

"Your new co-pilot, sir."

Grafton gestured for her to be seated.

"Is this your first trip up in an Apache, Lieutenant?" Grafton asked.

"I've had over 200 hours in the simulator, but in the actual bird, yes, sir."

"Well, what do you know about the army's most advanced helicopter?"

"She was actually built for tank warfare where she would sit behind a hill and be able to launch a missile with the accuracy of penetrating the muzzles of a tank without ever being seen by the enemy. She is heavily armed with AGM-114A Hellfire Anti-tank missiles, a semi-active laser homing missile with a armor piercing warhead capable of taking out the Russians' main battle tank, the T-74; 2.75 inches folding fin aerial rockets, which contain a high explosive, fragmentation type warhead quite effective against ground troops; AIM-9L Sidewinder air to air missiles which homes in on the heat of any aircraft; and the advanced 30mm chain gun mounted under the nose of the helicopter. The gun is unique as it aims at whatever the pilot looks at and is quite effective against most vehicles but will not penetrate the thick frontal armor of a main battle tank.

"I see you have done your homework," Grafton said.

"Yes sir, I am quite familiar with the. . ."

"That's enough. Okay, maybe the colonel didn't screw up quite so badly," Grafton said. "Want a drink lieutenant? You must be out of breath after that little documentary."

"Yes sir, thank you," Jaars was confused. She had expected him to test her but hadn't expected to drink with him. She didn't respect most men in the military simply because they didn't respect her for what she did. She was beginning to feel unsure about herself in front of this man. Grafton signaled for the waitress.

"What will you have?" asked the waitress.

"I'll have a Tom Collins... replied Jaars.

"How about you. Captain?"

"I'll have another margarita, salt the rim."

They were waiting in silence for their drinks when a pilot came over from the bar. He appeared to be egged on by a group he had just left, but Jaars could see his attitude carried him most of the way.

"Hey Captain, how's it going?"

"It's going. What do you want?"

"I just wanted to pick up the little lady here."

Grafton looked at her for a response.

"Maybe I don't want to get picked up."

"Aw, come on now, you look like you need a good time," the pilot said as he sat down adjacent to her. Jaars saw that Grafton was going to make no attempts to intervene. It appeared to her as if he was mildly amused as she adjusted herself in the chair to meet this threat.

"I was having a good time without you, thank you."

The pilot reached out to grab her wrist.

"Now calm down..."

That was as far as he got for Jaars in adjusting herself had raised her foot and thrust it into the arrogant pilot's crotch. The pilot released her wrist as if it were burning and thrust his hand between his legs as he pushed it between her. Grafton had been curious as to what Jaars was up to when she adjusted herself and had leaned back in his chair to look below the level of the table when Jaars had made her move. The mess had fallen silent and all eyes turned toward the group as the pilot, trying to catch his breath attempted to get up.

Rising to his hands and knees, the pilot gasped, "Captain, you're a witness... I would like to press charges."

Grafton smiled and said, "It appears to me, young man, that you had your balls in a bind and the Lieutenant here helped you unbind them." Then his look turned serious. "I might suggest you leave, and when we fly mock air to air battle, I will try to restrain my co-pilot here.
from actually trying to shoot you down. Dismissed."

The pilot turned to leave when Jaars saw Grafton take on a stern, yet almost playful look.

"Young man, I suggest you stand at attention and salute a higher ranked officer before turning your back, or I will shoot you down myself."

The pilot painfully turned around to stand at what resembled attention and made a half attempt at a salute.

"Don't forget to return the lady's shoe if you ever find it."

At this the crowd roared with laughter as the pilot limped out of the mess.

"I beg to say sir, but you were a bit harsh don't you think?"

"Not quite as bad as you were."

"I guess you're right," Jaars laughed.

They were enjoying their drinks when Colonel Adams walked in. He walked over to the bar and got a beer, looked around, and after spying them, he sauntered over.

"Sir, I think I will retire for the night," said Jaars.

"Okay, be on the pad at 05:00."

"Yes sir. Thank you for the drink."

Jaars got up, saluted, turned, saluted the Colonel as he arrived, and left.

Colonel Adams returned the salute and stood beside Grafton for a moment. "Heard you had a problem, Grafton."

"Me, sir? No. No problem at all."

"When we're back here, don't call me sir, and you know what I mean," Adams said, indicating Jaars as she walked out the door.

"The new co-pilot?" Grafton said. "She just helped a pilot who needed help adjusting himself."

"She has an interesting way of doing it."

"It's unique, that's for sure," Grafton laughed.

"I hope the rest of the flight at the bar don't need adjusting, or the Apaches will never fly straight again."

"I doubt they will."

At that they both chuckled and took a swallow from their drinks.

**
He raised his head and starred groggily at what the world held for that morning. His standing up to stretch his two-year-old bulky body was all the advantage his sister needed to try for the ground held by her slightly lighter-colored brother. With a snarl and snapping of fangs he shook off his sister’s attack and forced the smaller bear to give ground. It was really no great feat, since his sister was considered to be a runt by nature’s standards.

He was just in the process of charging his sister to finish playing the game when his mother appeared. To him his mother was a literal black giant. Weighing close to five hundred pounds, she was capable of taking on just about anything. She grunted and walked between them to quiet them down.

Both of her offspring, now on the verge of adulthood, had noticed a change in her at the time the leaves fell. Alert at all times, now she would suddenly become nervous for no reason at all. Her mood change had happened on more than one occasion. In their travels the group would find a huge ant mound, or find a cache of nuts long forgotten by some squirrel, or find a carcass and be on the verge of gorging themselves silly when their mother would suddenly perk her great head up and face one direction, her nose smelling something they had yet to recognize. Then she would take off in the other direction, her youngsters in quick pursuit.

Their stomachs were rarely ever full, and when the opportunity to stuff themselves arose, they felt frustrated that their mother would ruin the occasion by performing this cowardly act. Often when she behaved in this manner, the male cub wanted to satisfy his curiosity by following up and seeing just what petrified his mother. But this curious nature would change quickly when he remembered exactly how big his mother was, compared to his smaller, immature body. This behavior of his mother, however, only lasted throughout fall, and when the white stuff fell from the sky she would become relaxed and begin looking for a place to sleep out the white season. For the moment he decided the best way was to keep a weary eye on his mother and follow her course of action whenever she acted suspiciously.

Just as mother stepped between them to break up their play, he stole the opportunity to charge between her legs to seek some sort of playful revenge on his sister. Before he
knew what happened, his mother
cuffed him with such force that he
sailed, much to the delight of his
sister, through the air before im-­
pacting with breath-­driving force
upon the hard ground.

He rose from the ground
thankful that after two years of rough
play he had become accustomed to
such abuse so he could take a lot of
punishment.

His mother began walking away
with his younger sister in tow. He
was quick to catch up, recovering
from his mishap at the same time.
He and his sister ran ahead of their
wary mother to satisfy their curios-
ity. But they would only get so far
before the insistent grunting of their
mother would bring them back. He
began to feel impatient with his
mother, and he sensed that his sis-
ter felt the same way when mother
steered them towards a small group
of beech trees.

It had been a good year for beech
nuts, and all that had to be done was
to cuff the leaves aside and rum-
mage with tongue for the succulence
of the nuts. In their first year their
mother had cuffed the leaves aside
for them, but this year she cuffed the
leaves aside and licked the nuts up
for herself, driving off him and his
sister whenever they tried to get in
on her action. So he started cuffing
his own leaves aside and worked at
filling himself up. Occasionally he
hit upon a small rodent, but he never
knew the difference between the hard
shell of the nut and soft fur of the
mouse and swallowed each the same
as the others.

He had not realized how far he had
grazed from the others when he
smelled the scent that usually sent
tremors down his mother's body. It
was faint so he just raised his head
to look around, for he did not want to
ruin his feast by alarming his Mother.
He could barely distinguish a spot
where the leaves had been kicked
aside. How odd, he thought, that
whoever did this did not eat any of
the nuts, for they were there as plain
as day. It looked like whoever had
been there had just sat down on top
of the exposed nuts, had waited,
then gotten up and left.

Oh well, he decided, whoever's
work it was, he would benefit. He
was in the process of licking up the
nuts when the scent became stronger
and left a bad feeling throughout his
whole body. Whoever this strange
creature was, he had not belonged
here; therefore, the cub felt he did
not belong, either. He slowly backed
away before turning to run to his
mother and sister.

His mother turned towards s hJm to
see what the commotion
was. He
had just reached her when she de­
tected the scent and stood up to her
full height of about seven feet. He
watched with interest as she stood
testing the winds with her sensitive
nose. Then with a grunt of danger
she turned to run. His sister was
quick to follow, but he hesitated,
rearing on his hind legs to stand as
his mother had done, to determine
what she saw. He stood for a mo-
ment before falling to all four legs
just as a clap of thunder rang through his ears and the bark of a tree exploded in line where his head had been. He wheeled to follow his mother, but she was nowhere to be found. Confused, scared, he ran in the direction that took him away from the awful noise.

After running along a pair of ridges, he stopped to rest and decide where his mother could have gone. It was then he detected the motion and smelled the familiar scent. He had not been seen and decided to back away slowly out of sight before running. When he could not detect the motion any longer, he turned and chose another direction to run in.

He ran for a little while longer before stopping to look around. He could still smell the scent, but it was not quite as strong. He began to feel terror as his heart pumped faster. Although not strong, the scent seemed to be all around him. Not knowing what to do, feeling that rise of panic, he began running again.

He had not run far when again the clap of thunder struck. This time, though, he was deafened and just kept running. The loud noise happened again, and he felt a stinging sensation as if he had been stung on the shoulder. He turned to bite what was stinging him in mid-stride and was amazed to see nothing but blood as it oozed from his shoulder.

He could no longer hear because of the ringing in his ears, but could feel another impact as he was knocked harshly to the ground by the unseen force. He took the punishment he had never felt before and rose to take two more strides before being knocked upside-down on his back. Grunting with pain, he tried to roll one way, but that shoulder was totally useless. Rolling the other way, he got up but could no longer run on all fours. He rose onto his hind legs and tried to run awkwardly that way.

At that moment he saw for the first time the creature that was inflicting all this pain. He was confused as to whether to charge or run when the creature was replaced by a bright orange flash. This time he felt no pain, but only a great impact striking his neck. He tried to crawl but could only raise his head. Suddenly a white light flashed throughout his head, and then darkness settled in. He could no longer hear, see, smell, taste, or even feel. In fact he could no longer know, as the creature, just as much a juvenile as the cub was, walked up and stroked the rough, black fur in admiration of the unknowing.

**

Beth Baltes  Computer graphic
Helene answered the phone because it was too early for her secretary to be in the office. She had a case on the court docket this morning, and she'd come to the office early to make sure there were no loose ends dangling about. Helene didn't like loose ends. She didn't like surprises or impulsive decisions, either, and the phone call caused her to be in the office. She was by the door, and she answered the phone be­cause she didn't expect to see you. Did the courthouse burn down?" She attempted a smile that didn't quite take shape.

Minutes later, she was asking about their injured brother when a familiar voice interrupted from the doorway.

"Well, if it isn't the concerned sister," David's sarcastic words ricocheted around the room, empty except for the two brothers and their older sister. "You're early. He's still alive." Helene felt the muscles in her back and shoulders stiffen when she heard the accusation in David's voice, and she pulled in a quick breath of air. With her next heartbeat she wished David was the brother upstairs suffering, his body smashed and broken. Willing her shoulders to relax, she placed the confident expression on her face that she used to cross-examine witnesses and turned to face him. David slouched against the door frame.

"Hello David," she knew her voice would be strong and even. "No doubt my presence will cause him to live." He stared at her.

"What are you doing here?"

"Maggie asked me to come."

"You didn't rush out here when mama was hurt. Why bother now?" David shot the words at her.

Helene took a deep breath. Ten years before, their mother had been in a car accident. On her way from Atlanta to Springfield, Helene had been watching snow fall during a two-hour layover in Denver, when the airlines announced a delay. By the time her flight should have left, all flights had been canceled because of a snowfall that had become a blizzard. Before the airport had been reopened, her mother had died.

"I'd like to see your conscience on trial. If anyone could find it." David turned and walked out of the room. Helene started to follow him, but Ben grabbed her arm.

"Let him go," Ben said in a quiet voice. "He still needs somebody to blame.

"He needs to grow up." Helene started after David, and again Ben took her arm.

"Leave it alone, Helene." The quiet command in his voice stopped her, and the sad weariness in his eyes changed her mind. She'd set David straight later. Ben led her to a chair and described the accident that had injured Mel and the horse he was riding, and the all-night search before Ben and the neighbors found them.

"His ankle's smashed up pretty bad. So's his leg, an arm and a couple of ribs. Clean breaks, not like his ankle." Ben took a deep breath and continued, "He was out cold when we found him. He's been in and out all day. Maggie's upstairs talking to the doctors now."

"How is Maggie?" Helene had met her sister-in-law ten years ago, and had admired the spunky, vivacious woman.

"Strong as ever. She put the horse down. Wouldn't let anybody else do it."

Upstairs, they waited outside the closed door of Mel's room until a nurse told them they could spend a few minutes with him. Maggie rose from a chair by his bedside, and the two women met in the middle of the room.

"I'm glad you came." Maggie was tiny, with long red hair. Faith and resolve radiated from eyes so shadowed underneath they looked bruised.

"You need to get some rest." Maggie had been out with the searchers all night; yet Helene knew it was useless to suggest resting the moment she opened her mouth. Maggie shook her head. Helene walked over to the bed and stood beside her brother. Maggie's soft voice followed her.

"The doctors say he'll be fine. He has a concussion, but the CAT scan didn't show any brain damage. He's sound asleep now."

Helene had expected to see the casts on his arm and leg, but she wasn't prepared for the sight of his face. She had imagined his rugged face marred with cuts and bruises. Instead, except for a few little scratches and something different she couldn't quite identify, Mel's face looked the same. Helene remembered chubby, dimpled cheeks,
and a summer day when they were little. She was four years old, maybe five, and they were sitting on the grass in Grandma's front yard. Mel, two years younger, was making faces at her and wiggling his ears. She had laughed at him until her belly hurt. Tears blurred her vision and she blinked them away. Those days belonged to another lifetime that was gone forever.

"He shaved his beard!" she said. "When did he do that?"

"About a year ago," Ben answered with half a smile. "Said there was too much gray in it."

A nurse walked in twenty minutes later, told Helene and Ben they had to leave, and advised them to go back in the morning. "Don't come back in the morning. Would you?"

"I'll see you in the morning," Ben said, and stuck out her hand.

"Yes, hello." Helene shook her head. "Dorrine shook her plump hand. It surprised her with its softness. Dorrine cooked and cleaned for Maggie. Dorrine was fired, trained, and showed all over the Northwest. Helene smiled. It felt good to glimpse the results of loving care and prosperity instead of ruinous neglect caused by mind-numbing poverty, the way it had been when she was growing up here. Her father had moved to this valley from a shack in the hills of Tennessee, expecting a better life. He'd ended up searching in desperation for the answers to life's questions at the bottom of a whiskey bottle, and found death instead. Maybe, after all, he'd found the answers he'd been looking for.

Dorrine was waiting for her on the back porch.

"You must be Helene," she said, "and you're wearing your best hand."

"Yes, hello." Helene shook her hand. "I intend to settle it." Dorrine's bite to eat could be had with a cheap suitcase filled with new clothes, enough money left over from disgusting summer jobs to last her until she found another one, a bus ticket, a full scholarship to Stanford University, and a stubborn determination to erase any memory of her life until she stepped off the bus in California. The ridicule, embarrassment, and humiliation of being the daughter of an ignorant, drunken, impoverished dirt farmer and his weak, obedient wife had been left at the end of the dusty, pot-holed driveway.

"You aren't eating anything, Miss. No wonder you don't have any flesh on you." Dorrine's bite to eat could have fed three hungry men. The woman had chattered constantly from the moment Helene entered the house beyond the mud room and remodelled it. Dorrine was still talking, so she tried to concentrate on what she was saying. As she followed her into the living room, she started to breathe normally again and admired the rock fireplace which dominated the center of the east wall. It was flanked by glass that soared from the floor to the roof line. Nothing looked the same. Nothing felt the way it had when she'd left with a cheap suitcase filled with new clothes, enough money left over from disgusting summer jobs to last her until she found another one, a bus ticket, a full scholarship to Stanford University, and a stubborn determination to erase any memory of her life until she stepped off the bus in California. The ridicule, embarrassment, and humiliation of being the daughter of an ignorant, drunken, impoverished dirt farmer and his weak, obedient wife had been left at the end of the dusty, pot-holed driveway.
house. Helene had heard details about Mrs. Fullbright's gall-bladder operation and poor little Emily's difficult delivery and Mr. Brandt's beautiful funeral. Helene didn't have the faintest idea who any of these people were and didn't care. But Dorrine's gossip had helped her push away the unwanted memories that had knocked her off balance in the mud room.

Dorrine left for the night, and the house was quiet. Helene sipped a glass of wine and watched lights outlined with shimmering halos disappear one by one in the valley below. It was too quiet. David's words were all she could hear in the silence.

Helene imagined David creeping through the night toward the house, bent on some kind of twisted revenge. The touch of alarm she'd experienced outside Mel's hospital room returned and grew until Helene realized she was being foolish. She would not be intimidated by her childish fear of David's ridiculous delusions. Springfield was still a small town, and David's apartment wouldn't be hard to find.

An hour later, Helene knocked on David's apartment door. She heard a lock click, and David opened the door. Surprise flashed across his face for a moment before anger jerked his mouth into a straight line.

"What are you doing here?" He spoke, Helene walked into the room. She was more than grateful that the chain was off when she heard it rattle against the door. She'd learned a long time ago that the best defense was a good offense; surprise aided and abetted.

"Explain to me exactly why you think I had anything to do with Mother's death." Her eyes stayed riveted on David's.

"You should have been here." He folded his arms across his chest, and Helene's mind flashed back to a warm afternoon when David stood before her, looking as he did now, while she scolded him for throwing rocks at the chickens. She smashed it down. Childhood memories belonged to the past and had no place in the present.

"That didn't cause the accident that killed her." So? She kept calling for you. You didn't come.

"Mother died because another car smashed head-on into hers! Not because I couldn't get here." Helene slipped her jacket off without looking away from David's face. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and lit one.

"Right. But she died wanting you. She wouldn't even listen to me! Nothing I said made any difference." David turned away. "She didn't even care that I was with her." He spoke so softly she strained to hear his words. Helene thought she understood the reason he blamed her. David had been Mother's favorite from the day he was born. It was a fact of life. Mother didn't ignore or neglect the other children, but she didn't treat them in the special way she did David. She simply preferred him to the rest of them. David must have felt that his importance in Mother's life had been denied when she'd called for his sister on her deathbed.

"Mother cared, David. She knew you were there."

David turned around so fast that Helene stepped back.

"Yeah? How would you know? You didn't care when she died. Or Dad either." He was shouting. "You hated her. You stayed away. You wanted her ..."

"That's a lie." She didn't hate Mother or Dad. It had been terrible when he'd died. It had been worse when Mother died. He had no idea of the pain she'd suffered. Alone. She'd had no one. The only one who knew the truth about her past was Julia, her roommate and best friend at Stanford. She was married and practicing law in Vermont the last time Helene had heard from her. Helene had to pretend in front of her friends and co-workers. They believed her parents had died when she was a small child and that she'd been reared by a loving aunt in a beautiful home. Helene felt her throat tighten, as it often did now when she thought of the lies she'd told and trapped herself into living with. That she'd been an only child and shortly after her graduation from college, her dear, old aunt had passed on peacefully. Helene had created a past filled with everything she'd ever longed for as a child, but one thing was true. "I loved Mother and Dad."

"Sure. So much that you left and never came back." His voice was hard. "Mama walked down to the mailbox every day hoping she'd hear from you."

"I wrote letters." Cigarette smoke floated in the room. Helene wanted a breath of cold, fresh air.

"No, you wrote notes that didn't say a thing. And mama acted like it was a national holiday when we got one. She read them over and over."

Helene remembered the long letters from her Mother filled with every detail of what was going on at home. Between the lines, she'd recognized her Mother's longing to see her. She'd just been determined to live her life totally differently than Mother had lived hers. She'd wanted to forget the sad, defeated look on Mother's face that matched her old, faded dresses.

"You didn't come home once!"

"I couldn't afford it! Mother couldn't either, and you know it." Helene heard her voice raising. She'd allowed her emotions to override her reason, and that wasn't supposed to happen.

"Yeah. When you were in school. What about after you got to be a hotshot lawyer in Atlanta?"

"This doesn't have anything to do with the accident that killed Mother." Helene wished he was on the witness stand so she'd know what he was going to say next. She kept losing control of this conversation. "What happened after I left home isn't important."

"Maybe not, now." The begrudging tone of his voice made her think
he might be beginning to listen to reason. "But it sure as hell was important when Mama was alive. And it had everything to do with how Mama felt when she died. How you reason. "But it sure as hell was he might be stricken from the record. David was foolish urge to ask that his words be hanging the case she had come made her feel all those years was cause Mother died asking for me instead of you. " David's eyebrows lock of blonde hair that fell across was going to be resolved in a minute.

"Yeah. Maybe you're right."

Finally, he was listening to the facts and dealing with reality. He smashed and she sat across from him, trying away.

"Then I'm glad I came over." She was desperate to leave and fought back the urge to run out the door and down the stairs.

"Sure you are. You know something? I held on to some good memories of you for a long time after you left. I missed you. Then things changed. I wasn't special to Mama anymore. Mama didn't care about anything after awhile. You didn't know that, did you?" Helene shook her head. She had cut herself off from her family so successfully that she knew her clients more intimately than her brothers. "When I got older and realized how Mama hurt inside, I started to hate you for what you were doing to her and to me. At the hospital before she died, I prayed that you would die and God would let her live."

"David... "

"Listen!" It was a sharp command that she obeyed. "Until tonight I wanted you to die, but you're already dead. Your heart shriveled up when you turned your back on everyone who loved you. You could buy the whole world and you'd still be nothing. There's nothing inside of you, Helene. Not a damned thing. Now get out of my house." David opened the door. "You can't hurt Mama, or me, anymore."

Helene walked down the stairs holding on to the rail because she could barely see through the unfamiliar tears that filled her eyes. Helene was having trouble trying to think over the loud echoes of David's last words. She wanted to catch the next flight back to Atlanta. She wanted to stay because of Mel. Tears kept sliding down her cheeks. She'd prove to David that she wasn't as unfeeling as he accused her of being. In high school, she'd proven to those stuck-up, rich, hateful, town kids that she wasn't a dumb hillbilly. At first, she'd cried like a baby when they made ugly remarks about her hand-me-down clothes, or the way she talked, but then she got mad. Feeling angry was a lot better than hurting. She showed them all she wasn't dumb when she was chosen class valedictorian, but the bitter taste of humiliation lingered until she arrived at Stanford. Helen added an "e" to her plain name and the carefully constructed lies began. And now, Helene couldn't believe that David's opinion of her
mattered so much.

Helene drove back to the home place, and the rest of the night was filled with memories, tears, self-re-criminations, and tentative resolutions. Shortly before dawn, she remembered the tree. Helene borrowed a pair of Mel's Levi's, pulled his rubber boots on over her tennis shoes, and left the house.

Walking through the wet grass in the upper pasture, she could hear birds chirping and the gentle whish of a light breeze through the tree-tops. Huge, ancient fir trees stretched into the cloud filled sky. Helene stepped on a small, rotten branch that crumbled quietly beneath her foot and saw the special tree in front of her. The one that was so big, she and her brothers couldn't reach around when they were children, even when they all held hands. In this spot, she had spent hours planning her escape from the "hillbilly" family that lived in the farmhouse below. What those town kids had said so long ago meant nothing now. During the night Helene had acknowledged that the words should have meant nothing to her then. She stood under the tree and asked the God that she had last talked to in this place to, once more help her change her life.

Later, Helene walked back to the house. After a long, hot shower, she ate as much as she could of Dorrine's breakfast feast, picked up the bundle for Maggie, and drove to the hospital. She thought again that the last twenty-four hours hadn't gone the way she had expected, but it had turned out to be right. Before she reached the hospital entrance, it was pouring down rain. Some things never changed.

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*Perceptions 1992*

is typeset in Bookman with New Century Schoolbook main headings

using Pagemaker 3.02 for Macintosh.

1500 copies: $4300