

SYD'S JOURNAL

April 10, 1990

Louisville, Kentucky

One Dollar

Windows

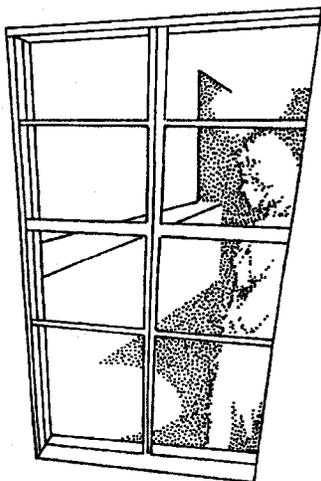
Syd Weedon

It's 2:30 in the morning. I go downstairs for a package of cigarettes. For me, none of this is unusual. Downstairs I notice that all the lights are on and the shades are up in the apartment next door. A woman about my age lives there. She has blonde hair which is not bleached but lightened. She is in her pink bath robe and talking on the phone. I've seen her coming and going from her apartment, dressed and ready to deal with the world, and she usually looks nice. Now she looks like hell. She is obviously distressed and I wonder who she's talking to at 2:30 in the morning. All of this is unusual, at least inasmuch as I can watch her going through whatever she's going through. She's not home much, and when she is, she usually keeps her shades down. Probably, in the larger scope of human experience, this is all quite usual.

I watch her for awhile, my sense of curiosity battling with an awareness that I'm violating her privacy. It's intriguing to watch people who don't know they're being watched. I am worried for her in a detached sort of way, wondering how extreme the circumstances may be that have caused her to do these unusual things. A car pulls up in front of her building and I wonder if it's the person she was talking to, or if the conversation ended in an angry hang-up. I can't go over to her place, knock on the door, and say, "Hello, I happened to be watching you through your window at 2:30 AM, and it seems that you are having a bad time. Is there anything I can do?" although the guardian angel of my psyche (who I have bound and gagged in a back room in my brain) thinks I should.

I know but remember in a way that feels like learning it new that we are private people leading private lives, lives we never show the rest of the world, never show even those who are closest to us. Occasionally windows open in our solitary spaces giving someone else a momentary view into that real, singular life we inhabit—a shade left open, a revealing sentence, an unguarded comment, an unexpected outburst of laughter—the windows can be almost anything. Perhaps we live for the windows and just exist and endure the isolation that stretches between them.

Maybe I've solved the evening's mystery. The windows say, "Look in on me. I'm having a bad time a 2:30 AM. Don't leer, or pry, or come over and create an awkward situation. Just see and be interested for a minute." □



ON RAISING THOUGHTLESS CHILDREN

By Holli Quinn

Your old piano teacher, you should not ask him why. We were taught such things: to be seen not heard, to respect our elders, to know our place, that place almost disabling.

Which one is it? Which one isn't? Am I looking far too long? I need to see, I need to know answers to my questions, questions they would tell me not to ask.

My older sister, born piano paragon, hated to look at him, his oddity the glassy eye that floated in the wrong direction, filled his sockets out of emptiness. Unknowingly, her repulsion fueled my curiosity. Unseemingly, her comments turned to questions for me.

How did it happen? When did it happen? Did it hurt to put it in? Do you take it out and wash it? Do you like the feel of it?

I took my lessons just for him, un-tuning tuned pianos. I watched his eye of glass magically turn to look at me. I stared one eye open, one eye closed, practicing with sheet music he gave me to play just for fun.

I know how you can see. I close my eye and see like you. You still can see a lot. What makes them think not seeing is so wrong?

So serious they thought him. They knew so little of him, so distracting, his unattractive eye. I practice being human more than my lesson on piano. I found (continued ☺)



unending facets to his facetless eye.)

I know you see me looking at the eye we do not talk about. Can I ask you questions when my mother's on the phone?

I carry in my mind an eleven-year-old's memory of answerless questions I knew better than to ask, answers that begin and end --"Because, you just don't." □

THE SCHWINN

By C. Darren Butler

Approaching my bicycle, I see a man unlocking a bicycle of his own. He has a small body and an old wizened vulture head with a zigzag mouth.

He is taking in interest in my bike. Not the interest of a thief, or a lover of bicycles, but a perverse intrusive interest, the interest you would take in a celebrity, or in someone you wanted to murder. As I approach and begin to unlock it, he takes the same interest in me. I feel his eyes fixed on me.

He speaks violently, "So how many gears does that thing have? Eighteen? Fifteen?"

Just ten," I say, a little surprised.

"Humph. Peugeot makes bikes now, do they?"

"Yes, I guess they do."

Then, pointing to his old broken-down schwinn, he shares something with me. "You know, once this thing wore university license plates that read 1967. Had it more than twenty-five years."

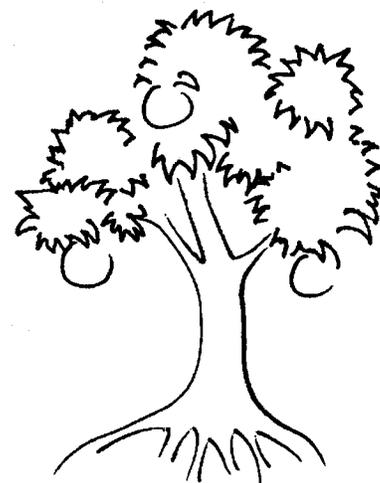
I stand impaled by the venerability of his Schwinn. I am without defense.

Having maintained his honor, integrity, and self-respect, he mounts and rides away, smiling. □



Peach Tree

Syd Weedon



G ranny lived in a white frame house in Bryan, Texas. It wasn't terribly big, but it was big enough to do the things you needed to do in a house. It sat up off the ground about three feet. They built the old houses in Texas this way to keep the snakes out. It was covered with white asbestos siding. She surrounded the house with plants—a neat bed about four feet deep in which she raised delicate plants which required great care: ferns, elephant ears, caladiums, wisteria, roses, poinsettias. I could break any rule at her house but one: Stay out of the flower bed. The only reason this rule had been omitted from the Ten Commandments is that it simply did not need to be said twice. In the back yard she had a peach tree. It was large for a peach tree and carefully pruned to yield abundantly.

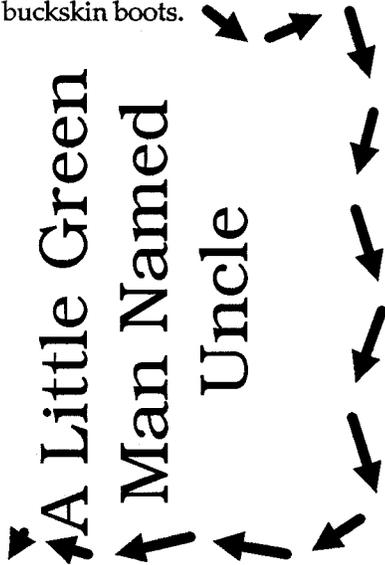
One summer, some boys in the neighborhood took to stealing peaches from the tree. They didn't take many, a couple to eat and a couple to throw, but the thievery tormented her. The tree made plenty of peaches, and she would have gladly given the boys peaches had they asked, but their preference was to steal them. She even waited for them on several afternoons in the hope that she would catch them, not to punish, but to rescue them from their moral lapse. It was the stealing that afflicted her. Stealing was wrong, a sin, a moral failure and a threat to the soul. In her eyes, she was aiding and abetting the crime by providing the lure. Failing in her attempt to confront the boys, she had the beautiful tree cut down.

It was the stealing that afflicted her. Stealing was wrong, a sin, a moral failure and a threat to the soul...

It's been twenty eight years since I last walked in that yard. I only went back a couple of times after she died. My grandfather died three months later, and I haven't been back there since the day of his funeral. I returned to Bryan once when I was seventeen but didn't want to go by the house. Today, you couldn't force me to go back there at gunpoint. I can remember every rusted nail where things hung, the place of every plant, the initials carved in the hackberry tree on the corner, the smell of the dry dust in the garage—everything. It's all there, etched in the clarity of a little kid's mind, and I don't want to go back there with my grown-up eyes and ambiguity.

Why? I'm not a nostalgia hound. My life is full and interesting. I don't need the escape. The fact is that my thoughts go there often when I need to be seven and remember things—the stealth and creativity needed to rescue a prized toy from the ferns without hurting them, the bright mornings when I awakened easily with the roosters and walked barefoot in dewy grass before the sun was fully up, the solemn awe with which I pondered the empty space where the peach tree once stood, and that strange and arduous set of values which helped to shape me. □

I was sitting in my lab one night cooking a load of prime matter in my alembic when I heard this knocking sound coming from inside the vessel. I thought this was a little strange since it wasn't the winter solstice or anything, so I opened it up to take a look. When I did, this funny little man popped out with a long nose, bushy eyebrows, and sparkling blue eyes. He couldn't have been more than ten inches tall, all dressed in green satin and soft buckskin boots.



I was astonished, and asked in amazement, "Who are you?"

"Homunculus is my name, but you can call me Uncle," he said while tipping his green satin cap.

"Nice to meet you, Uncle. What brings you here?"

"Well, YOU did, you ignorant widget, with all your gadgets and goop. I was taking a vacation in Jamaica."

"I'm sorry," said I, "I would have used another recipe had I known."

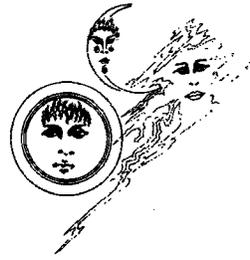
"Happens all the time. Some dimbo buys an accelerator and I can't get time to take a dump. Well, what do you want?"

"What do you mean?"

"Surely you haven't conjured up a homunculus without a purpose? This is going to cost you extra," he said, a little exasperated. He whipped out a tiny pocket computer and entered some quick notes.

"Well, I haven't had a chance to think it through that far. What can you do?" I asked.

"You're a real piece of work," he



snorted, "I can make ships sail on dry land, animals talk, trees dance, and show you the deepest wave."

"Sounds good," I said, "Show me." He

did a little dance and sort of whistled through his teeth. I felt myself spinning through the seven worlds. When the spinning stopped, I found myself standing in an enormous cavern which turned out to be Madonna's belly button. It undulated and moved like the sea. Turns out that it wasn't the belly button of the real Madonna at all, but a video tape playing on the cable TV network. He'd converted us into some kind of electronic energy or something so that we were experiencing the television signal directly. I said, "Surely, Uncle, there's a deeper wave than this."

He said, "Nope, that's it."

"That's IT?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "You mean after all those philosophy classes, abstract discussions, stuffy books, boring teachers, and gut-wrenching quests for the meaning of life THAT'S IT!"

"I hate to be the one to break it to you, kid. Oh, by the way, here's my bill." I looked at the beautifully typeset invoice complete with clever graphics and fourteen different typefaces. It said: "Homer Homunculus, Enlighten-

Syd Weedon

ment Enterprises, Inc., 0101 Satori Way, ClearMind, CA; Enlightenment, Unit Price \$30,000 (USA dollars), transportation and miscellaneous fees \$17,467 (USA dollars), total \$47,467 (USA dollars), Terms Available.

We worked out a payment schedule I could almost keep up with if I worked nights and weekends. He tipped his hat and vanished in a puff of purple smoke. I ought to just about have my karma paid off by 2047. I'd say it was quite a deal, considering what I got out of it, but I've learned to be careful about what I say to little green men who like to be called "Uncle." □

YET MORE BABBLE

Ryck Neube

Last year, when I toiled the Lgraveyard shift at the IRS I devoted my 2 a.m. lunch break to walking around Covington. A mile or three pounding the pavement and I was a renewed neube, ready to process the most difficult paper du jour. Covington is sliding into the realm of decay. Four times the size it was in the 1900 census, yet the population is virtually the same. Cobbled alleys, five-way intersections, and precious few yuppies--you can't beat the atmosphere! On a foggy night you can stroll the turf and listen to the wind whispering Chandler and Hammett's immortal prose.

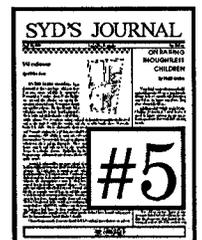
Walking down a side street one night, I noticed a van. It'd passed me twice, now it snailed beside me. I pulled out my pocket knife. The adrenal tsunami fed me images of Conan the Bureaucrat stomping late-night perverts into greasy stains. The ursine driver began cranking down the window. I began scanning for lines of retreat.

"Hey," he shouted, "we still have some empty beds at the mission."

"No thank ya," I replied, "I'm a Federal employee."

Perception is subjective. No better example exists. To the bear-guy I was another bag-person. To Personnel I was 14-896237. To my manager I was...another bag-person. (Bad example.) To my friends I'm a writer who...looks like a bag-person. (Oooops, another bad example.) To myself I'm a writer who may one day become a bag-person. Huh, so maybe the bear-dude was right. I see, I see, it isn't subjective, but relative. He was seeing beyond the facade. Never mind, I am a bag-person with a typewriter. Ergo...

All this potential in a small-town boyo. Doesn't it make you wonder? □





I Remember Waking Up In Whitley Strieber's Dream

By Tom Browning

I remember waking up in Whitley Strieber's dream. He was lying in his four-poster with his wife, Anne, snoring and grunting his nightmare towards its conclusion. I moved, or rather floated, effortlessly around the bedroom and was startled when I saw my reflection in the vanity mirror near the north wall. I appeared as a four foot owl of sorts, although that is only an approximation. I thought this guy surely could dream something more exciting than me. Especially since he seemed to have a rich vocabulary, judging from the constant babbling of his brain. Then he woke up and stared at me for awhile.

I could hear his thoughts and he seemed very frightened of me. Here's a man who has studied every weird pseudo-science available (when animal husbandry and ivory poaching can scare the daylight out of me), has above average intelligence, doesn't work for a living (he's a writer, you know), and the best he can do is dream that I'm an alien or some kind of pan-dimensional being. I find the four foot owl symbolism particularly insulting.

Had this been a one-time experience I probably would not have minded, but every night gets old real quick. I can't afford to lose this much sleep, not to mention that I need my own dreams.

The first time it was fun. Being that small was interesting. I am a rather large scoundrel and this was certainly a change of pace for me. I scared him several times, and made him go outside. He even invented a dream spaceship for us to enter and be examined by other "aliens." I recognized my uncle Babar as one of the taller extraterrestrials. He apparently didn't recognize me, but then Uncle B. hates owls so I didn't push it.

"Oh my God," Whitley thought, "it's an alien!"

"Kiss off," I replied, "You're a lima-bean-breath-lazy-good-for-nothing-Zen-pimple."

No response. Well I guess he can't read my mind. I wish he would quit thinking though. Suddenly I had this strange urge to eat a field mouse (and I am terribly frightened by these creatures).

That's it. This is ridiculous. I decided to wake up his wife to see if she could do anything to stop this. "Woman, please curb your husband."

"Hey lady, wake up and smack him once for me." She awoke and I disappeared.

"Another bad dream dear?"

"Yes, this time I dreamt that you were being kidnapped by an owl."

I awoke and shook the straw off of myself. Still early in the day, there was plenty of time to make it to the watering hole before the lions came out. My mother told me to be careful as there were ivory poachers in the area. Growing up in Africa can be rough. Living in Anne Strieber's dreams was even rougher. I threw my trunk over my shoulder and embraced the day. □



SYD'S JOURNAL:
Home for Homeless Writing

I WISH I DIDN'T BELIEVE HER

By Ann Brooks Gould

I sat at a dirty table and took a hard look at my fear. She was wearing a dirty, short-sleeved shirt. She chain smoked. She had big bags beneath watery eyes, stained teeth, and graying hair caught up in a hair net. The loose skin on her arms swayed as she reached for her lighter and Winstons. Flicking ashes in my tea, she said, "You see me? I'm Loneliness. I'm you in twenty years."

She had this horrible laugh. She laughed at me, and her laughter gave way to a throaty hack.

"I'll never be you," I said. "For one thing, I don't smoke."

"It doesn't matter what I do, or what I look like," she choked. "What counts is that I'm what you think of as loneliness, and *you fear me.*"

I looked at her face. I tried to memorize it. She was very real. She terrified me. She terrifies me now as I write this. Maybe I can get past the monsters of nuclear war, or of AIDS. Maybe I can get past the monsters of unemployment or of failing those who love me. The monster I am most terrified of, and probably won't be able to face, is loneliness.

She said, "You get tough, you know. The older you get, the tougher you get. It makes you ugly, though. Ya know what they do with old chickens? They wring their necks. That's you in twenty years." I wish I didn't believe her. She's right, though. She's right because she's part of me.

I wish I didn't believe her. □



The Trailing Edge

By Eddie Tor

Bastards of the Week Awards go to UK Credit Union for turning us down on a \$3000 loan to buy a much needed computer after we had faithfully paid off a \$14,000 car loan with them (without even a late payment) because we're self-employed; Huffman Nissan for trying to stick us with a \$785 main seal and clutch job when the clutch is nearly new and the work needed was an \$85 axle seal job; The Russians for shutting of the fuel to Lithuania.



I guess a bunch of you would include IRS and Social Security, but since I came out not owing anything, I'd better be nice.



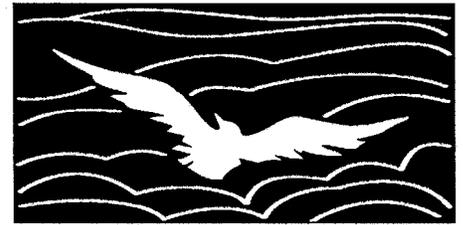
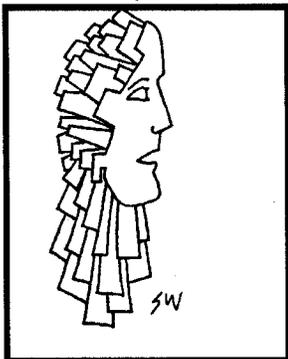
Bouquets go to Reece's Auto Service for doing the honest \$85 axle seal job; Starkist Tuna for throwing their muscle into the fight to save the dolphins; Tom and Lea for following me all over town trying to get the afor-mentioned \$85 axle seal job; Scott, Joyce, and Neube for visiting and taking us out for Texacan food.



Jeff Chapman-Crane has a bunch of his paintings hanging in the Homestead Shoppe and Gallery in the Louisville Galleria downtown. Some of the paintings are really good; the rest are merely outstanding.



Tom's almost finished with his new album. I'm putting this in here so that everyone will ask him about it so that he'll get really neurotic about getting it finished and call me up and leave obscene messages on my answering machine. If you don't know him personally you can write him: Tom Browning, c/o The WordWorks, Box 4817, Louisville, KY 40204. I figure that if he gets 20-30 letters about finishing the album, it'll be enough to send him over the edge during the editing--it could well be the next "White Album." □



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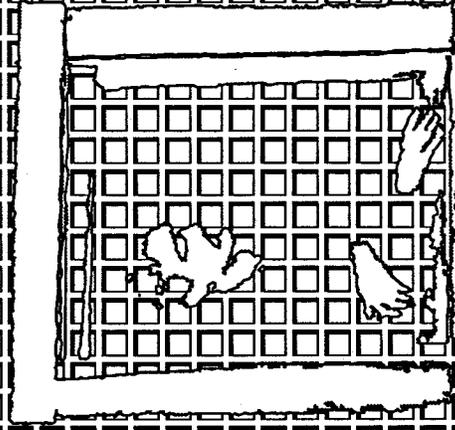
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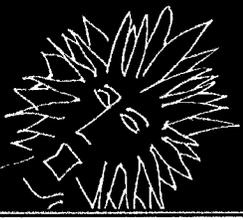


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