

Old, mean Edith who lives across the alley, sits in her house all day and dreams up new ways to scare the children. She never fully dresses but comes out in her pajamas and house coat at four in the afternoon with a sauce pan of cold chicken fat or god-knows-what to throw on the kids playing basketball. Kevin, who is twenty and sometimes lives next door with his parents, says it isn't a racial thing. I had wondered out loud if she was a bigot since most of the kids who play basketball in the alley are black, and Edith, Kevin and I are white. Kevin says, "No, Edith just hates kids. She's always been like that." If a ball goes in her yard, she comes out raising hell. If someone sits on the rocks that keep her yard from sliding into the alley, she comes out and raises hell, or if the kids yell, or if they play army – if she even sees them, she waddles out waving her broom and

threatens them with some dire fate. She'll give them this rambling bull shit about how that part of the alley is her property and the kids can't play there. Kevin says she's called the police so many times that they won't come out anymore. She's on the "crank list."

Once, she started in on a half dozen basketballers, and they let her know that they weren't taking her seriously at all. They hopped and danced, teased her and made faces. She got really exasperated and maybe a bit scared and said she was going to go in and get a gun. Alex and Daniel, then 4 and 2, watched and heard this whole thing. Wise little people that they are, they came streaking into the house to give me the news. (Had it been me as a kid I probably would have hung around to see who got shot.) I told them that they'd done the right thing, and that if they ever saw her with

anything that looked like a gun to get into the house right away. That's a hell of a thing to have to tell a four-year-old in his own back yard. Hatred breeds hatred. I found myself almost wishing that she would come out with a gun so we could call the police and have her picked up. The scene gets replayed every two or three days. I've learned to watch – sometimes even laughing – without getting wound up, but I keep the boys close to me when she comes out. I always take threats involving weapons seriously, regardless of how feeble the terrorist might appear. Any twisted piece of slime can pull a trigger. Most of the time I just wonder how she got so twisted.



In the alley the black kids play basketball. In the yards, the white kids play with their toy guns and vehicles. This

WHO KILLED TONY BROWNSTONE?

BREWSKI MCFARLAND

FIVE, SIX PICK UP STICKS

GENE GRYNIEWICZ

ALLEY

SYD WEEDON

BASE 5

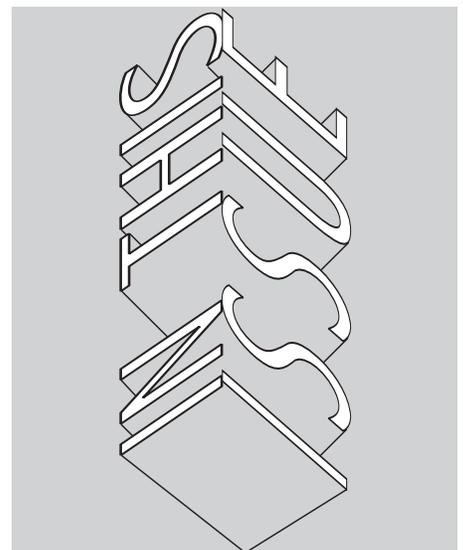
NORWICK GRAY

MORE BABBLE

RYCK NEUBE

STAR WARS

WILL TODD



sounds like a double-pronged cliché guaranteed to offend nearly everyone, and I wouldn't even commit it to paper were it not true. It offends me.

I dislike basketball because I could never play it very well. The cliché of black kids in the alley playing basketball offends because it is a cliché, and they're living it willingly, unable to see that it will leave their dreams as empty as the hoop they're shooting for. Most of them are about as good at it as I am, but in their minds they're the next Michael Jordan, Kareem Abdul Jabbar, or whoever the superstar of the week happens to be. They have bought into the myth without a second thought, and all myths seem to demand that lives be sacrificed to sustain them.

The white kids with their toy weapons is a cliché, and it offends me as well. It foreshadows the grown-up violence they will face and perhaps do to each other. It offends me because I see myself in it and remember my own zest in playing that way. I am forced to remember that real violence is never very far away. I try to tell my little boys That guns are not fun; they hurt people; it's not like TV; there's no commercial breaks when you're bleeding. They listen to me intently for a moment and then return lustily to their imaginary warfare. I want to say, "Let me tell you about the war. It's not what you think," but they're already off conquering their dream-world Hamburger Hill. I'm just an old spoilsport. "These aren't real guns, Daddy..."

The black family moved. It's been weeks since I've seen Edith or her saucepan of chicken fat. That, at least, is a positive development, but I miss those kids. The alley and basketball goal are so much quieter now. My kids can get their naps because there's no thump... thump... of basketballs or playful yelling matches. Two squad cars full of uniformed officers eased up into the alley two days ago looking for the oldest boy, Germaine. I knew where the family had moved, but didn't tell the police because it felt like a roust, like a bunch of white cowboy cops were picking up a black teenager on suspicion of something they never mentioned. One slick haired, ferret-faced cowboy asked me if I knew him. I told

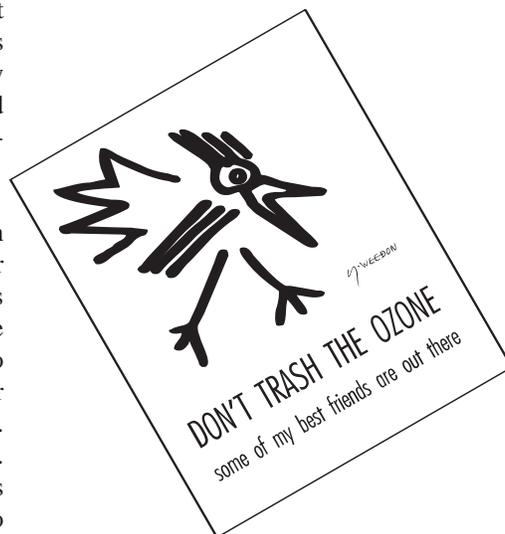


I had been living in my car a '53 Nash Rambler station wagon, for a week,

subsisting on only Vienna sausages, soda crackers, and beer, so I was in a totally rotten mood already. Malnourishment and the lack of a good night's sleep were starting to take their toll on my grasp of reality. The pictures I was seeing weren't pretty. I had been waiting on an advance check from my publisher, Haughty & Triflin, to pay my rent. Waiting is something that I do well, but my landlady, Mrs. Angular, still needed some practice in the ancient art. She had the locks changed while I was in Panama on the Noriega story, and wouldn't even give me my stuff until I came up with some cash. The trouble was that my computer – not just any computer, but a nuclear powered, AM/FM, tri-modal artificial intelligence,

quantum graphic transponder equipped, portable, water-proof, fully paid-off kind of computer that I had worked most of my adult life to assemble – was locked in the apartment at Mrs. Angular's house. I considered storming the house – your basic frontal assault with smoke grenades and an Uzi – but I figured that if the old hag happened to be killed in the melee, it wouldn't take the police more than a couple of months to narrow down the range of suspects to those she had evicted in the past week. No, it was going to take something a bit more subtle than D-Day to get my beloved computer out of that roach-infested fire trap.

I was having paranoid flashes: While in Panama City I had resorted to a few doses of the local color when deadlines were pressing. By chance, I got close to "la organizacion" (but if you want to know more about that, you'll have to buy the book, assuming of course that Haughty & Triflin sends me the damned check and Mrs. Angular meets an untimely demise in



him that the extent of our relationship was that I had loaned him a pair of pliers once. "Did he bring them back?" "Yes, as a matter of fact, he did." "That's a miracle." *Sorry, officer, but you'll have to find him yourself. I don't want to play today.* □

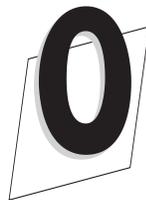
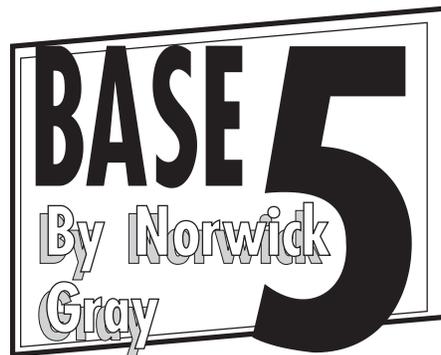
the jaws of her cocker spaniel). The book had some sensitive information in it, but I wasn't exactly sure what it was. While assembling the manuscript, I had worked continuously for three days and nights. With the heaviest elements of the "dignity battalions" still roaming the streets, a photocopy of the manuscript was out of the question. I bribed a dock worker to slip the single, original manuscript on board a freighter for New Zealand where it was picked up by a confidant and forwarded to the publisher. I had no idea what was in the book. I found myself wishing that I had never heard of Panama. The sound of an Hispanic accent could trigger a bout of incontinence. I kept expecting that a swarthy dude in shades and a white hat would step from a alley with a Mac 10 and send me hurtling into the next world altogether unprepared.

I forced the old Rambler up a couple more streets I was exhausting my list of supportive friends upon whom I could drop in around supper time, but I was in Brandy's neighborhood and she hadn't fed me this week. She was a dark-haired beauty sensual, slightly off-center, with the flavor of gypsy in her features and style of dress. She wasn't much of a cook – cooking wasn't the reason you dropped by Brandy's – but I figured there would be something organic left in the fridge. Perhaps some food and sympathetic company would ease the crawly, anxious feeling that was churning my stomach. I'm not a nervous type. In fact, my tolerance for disaster is way too generous, so I noticed and was troubled by the waves of apprehension breaking across my awareness.

I turned the corner and it was Panama City again. As if in a dream, I swerved the car to miss a street vendor's cart. A team of American executives in gray suits and red ties were surveying the bombed-out wreckage for the site of a new luxury resort hotel. A salsa band was playing a slow tune from a bar that had two walls blown away. George Bush and Manuel Noriega danced, arm in arm, across the street, locked in a fatal embrace. Noriega turned his face toward me for a moment, his eyes glistening, fixed, and black like a cobra's and said, "Burritos and blow are the path to enlightenment, gringo." I slammed on the brakes, throwing forward a barrage of my belongings from the over-burdened back seat. My Oxford Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language caught me right below the medulla and I saw stars, but it

was enough to snap me back into the real world. Am I just too hungry and tired, or has the general sicced his voodoo priests on me? I didn't really want the question answered, not right then at least. It was only two more blocks to Brandy's. I would be there in just a minute, provided the cosmos would hold still that long. □

TO BE CONTINUED



Begin with a point. Out of nothing, from non-being, the potential, the possible. It happens.

She grows. We all come from there. We always have. Or so we think. Until the end where motion stops, mind blanks. Earth rest in mother-death, until next.



The points accumulate, line up. All is one, one being, in motion, alive and individual, taking particular form,

human-born. This body, air-fed. We sing, animals draw near. Red the blood, the planet to come. The gods rave red-eyed, hieroglyphic in their lust, counting down hours in the melodies of atomic nuclei, till kingdom come.



A flat plain stretches, far as the eye sees. The sex rises, life flows – a son is born, who drinks at the cutting river. He then

chars wood, paints heroes at the outskirts of the arch aristocrat's fields. His spirit hovers, a chemistry of years pyramiding to a logical culmination of computer dust.



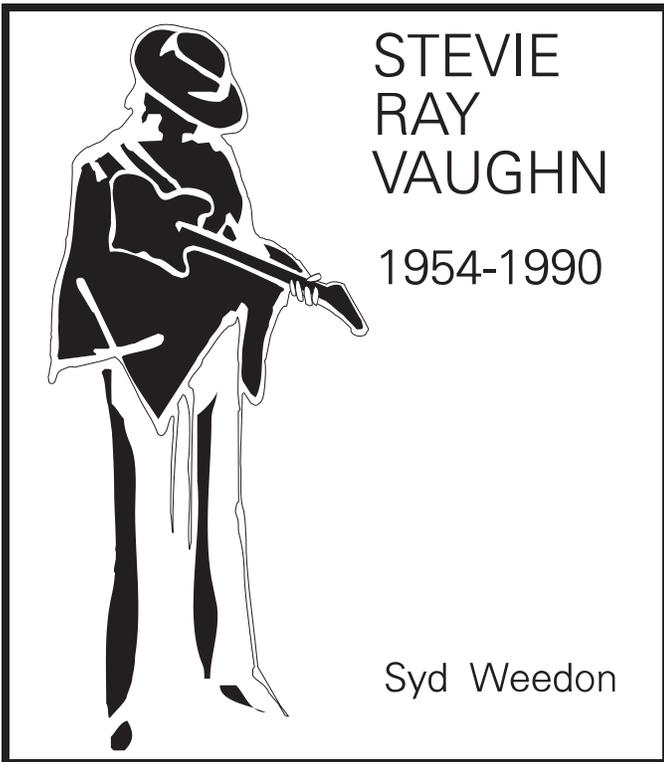
Imagine solid space, all mass: this the meaning of death and degeneration: the hard earth, frozen

in the glare of the reflecting moon. In this white light of the astral physis, mere men worship rocks, assembled, that is, into their constituent electromagnetic and commercial properties, for millennia equated with actual worth, for the work of industry, sci-tech and miniaturized truth



Finally, the dreaming begins. The inner vector does its energetic best to bring him back to life. Will his spirit

catch the motion? He dreams of magma, awakes to the night-fire, the light-lush sky, moans "Father" and rolls sway, creating plush and pliant fictions until day. Then the cybernetic truth of his demonic knowledge dawns: he is a political creature, a heavy. But he needs an audience, a lover, a divine mirror. For millions of years his yellowing eyes have been waiting for the magic of your smile, the mythical splendor of your otherwise chaotic karma. You are meant for each other, to remake the world in your own inner images. You, too, are finally human. □



My days of idolizing rock stars are past. I feel pity for them more often than not. Stevie Ray never got to the level of rock godhead for me, not a Lennon or Hendrix, just another Texan with a weird fire in his guts, and the map of the meanest southern road houses etched into his music. There was a sort of connection I felt with him, not identification, but a connection. Being a Texan is something you never really escape; you just learn to live with it.

When I was coming up, Texan boys were raised with a hero myth. The Alamo. One hundred and eighty

Texans and Tennesseans held off the entire Mexican Army for a while, ostensibly to give Sam Houston time enough to raise an army. But military tactics had nothing to do with the deaths of these men. They died to prove a point: some, to prove to the Mexicans that no compromise was possible, some to prove that they were as brave as the next guy. Some, I'm sure, did it simply to prove something to themselves. The Texan hero goes to any length to make a point and pays any price for honor and personal integrity. Stevie Ray was raised with this, at least as a sort of nagging background noise. People were trying to build a hero in Stevie Ray – a comeback kid, the winner in a hard fight with addiction and self destruction. Stevie Ray didn't die a hero's death. He was just a fatality. He got into the wrong place with a machine, and it was over in a second. No great words, no point made, his life just ended. He won a personal victory over his addictions. I assume he died in possession of himself. Maybe no greater victory is possible. But his death seems like just another bite-in-the-ass tragedy that makes no sense and doesn't win anything for anybody.

Maybe that bothered me, or maybe it's only the loss of someone whose songs I was beginning to memorize, but I've thought about it for the two days since I caught the report on Cable News Network. Maybe I cherish blues men who grow old and sagely like revered medicine men and

I don't like it when the story gets cut short. Maybe it was just an unwelcome reminder of how fragile and tenuous everything is. As St. Don of Henley said, "In a New York minute everything can change."

I don't want to eulogize. I don't think that's called for. The cable news didn't carry the story very long. Stevie Ray was no cuddly crooner like Pearl Bailey. There were no memorable sound bites or anthems burned into the consciousness of a generation. Jimi, John, and Janice had theirs but Stevie Ray was still working on his. His human form was never very clear, obscured for most us by the dark Spanish hat and serape – A dark hulk against the southern sky. Even in concert, it was only the guitar that was projected and it was a singular and undeniable force. You could tell he was proud of his music's power. His was a seasoned, grown man's sort of blues and rock-n-roll, the kind that if you walked into the bar and heard him playing, you'd buy a beer, sit down, and listen. You'd stay through the last set, even though you knew that each passing minute increased the odds that some cow poke would either propose marriage or try to rip your face off. The bar would have a neglected pinball machine, a neon Lone Star Beer sign, the smell of smoke, beer, and people closer to each other than they usually get. The upholstery would be vinyl and wood, and a little bit sticky (the unknown ooze again). There would be one guy at the bar in a business suit and loosened red tie. Everyone else would be in denim, black leather, and truck stop t-shirts. There would be a lot of boots and pickup trucks in the parking lot. The bathrooms would have wet floors and condom dispensers decorated with pictures of sexy girls whose most interesting features have long since been obscured by multiple retracings with ball point pens. Assuming that you made it through the evening without marrying a cowpoke or having your face torn off, and assuming that your car started promptly and you didn't sideswipe a pickup with "Born to Lose" airbrushed on the fender, you would come away with a feeling that some kind of victory had been won. The blues man had made his point although, were you asked to put it into words, it would be hard. □

Sweltering August night, air so thick you don't want to breathe it, so close that it seems to crowd you in your own skin. Stevie Ray Vaughn was killed on a foggy hillside in a Bell chopper yesterday or the day before; I'm not sure. People noticed that the wreck had similarities to the crash that killed Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and the Big Bopper – a last minute substitution of seats and flights which brought the star to his sudden and premature end. What was left of the machine was hard to recognize as a helicopter. I saw Stevie Ray live back in November with Jeff Beck at Louisville Gardens. It was the first rock concert I'd been to in years. Besides the music, the most memorable feature of the event was the stickiness of the floor. I won't speculate on the origin of the ooze, but it made me want to wash my shoes off before I walked into my own house. Jeff Beck didn't impress me much that night, but then he never has. Stevie Ray had the presence of a rough cut genius from the bad side of the tacks. I don't like the sound quality of most live concerts, but this one was good enough to get me listening to his albums. The hard edge in his music spoke to me. For at least a little while, Stevie Ray played the background anthem for the changes I was going through, "...stranded, caught in the cross fire..."



MORE BABBLE



RYCK NEUBE

I have a social disease. I'm a pedestrian.

Not owning a motor vehicle makes me part of America's smallest minority. (Okay, it's artistic license time. I know fully well that crack-addicted CPAs who have given it all up to become chain saw dealers in the upper peninsula of Michigan are the smallest minority, but...) Otherwise normal people refuse to believe I might actually want to walk five miles beneath a dazzling spring sun. I find myself cajoled, hassled, even humiliated by good-hearted people who WILL NOT take no for an answer. People will screech to a stop in traffic that would terrify Indy 500 drivers to ask if I want a ride. Risking their lives...

They insist. I refuse. Some folks take it personally, spreading tales of my bitterly anti-social attitude. So, sue me.

Why do I walk? Why not? Hair isn't growing from the soles of my feet. Vast mountains of sensory input enthrall me. The streets offer knowledge and mystery, insight and – if your standards are low enough or your wallet full enough – romance. After dark, you don't see the broken glass and garbage. In the name of Charles Fort, why did three blocks of Holman Street have gutters lined with fresh straw? Is that someone following me? Did Tennessee Williams script that domestic argument? Could Groucho Marx have choreographed the knife fight in front of Wigg's Cafe? A walk down midnight streets provides you with the ultimate stir of the brain cells, the ultimate journey into mundane-ity and insanity. Try it. □

Susyne Joi, I call her; her name is Susan. In Muskegon, Michigan – she has just come off-duty at the restaurant where she works. I do not know its name; I cannot remember it, even sitting here, even though I know I passed it on my way in, its name... And we are sitting opposite



FIVE SIX

PICK UP STICKS

EUGENE R. GRYNIEWICS

each other at a corner table, our hands touching across the black formica.

Cream soda. And ginger ale. Two emptied cans we have pushed to one side – a cigarette eases its grey breath into the air, to the right of our hands. I am staring at it. The smoke. I trace its 'growth' slowly – leaf, branch, trunk – until it roots again in white ash. I study the smoldering tip of the cigarette. I breathe, slowly. Draw the thick restaurant air into my throat, my lungs...hold it. Warm air, swelled with grease, and onions, and sweat...release...it... At last, "Nerves?" I ask. "Yeah." Joi plucks uneasily at small flecks of lint on her uniform – almost invisible against its unnatural whiteness. "Nerves," she repeats. She smiles. There is no hint of occult laughter. Then she catches her cigarette between thumb and ring finger, flicks the ash with her pinky. She snaps it to her lips where she dangles it. Inhales. And grey smoke escapes into her hair.

I think Joi looks older than her nineteen years. She is only nineteen...and I am thirty-one. I have just turned thirty two, I remember. The cigarette contributes, I believe, but it is her eyes, I judge after a heartbeat. Two. Yes. Her eyes are antique gold, are green-tinged. They spark when she turns her head. Catch the light. Toss it. Her hair is an unwashed, dull blonde that frames the easy oval of her face, that spills over her shoulder.

When she works, Joi wears her long hair pooled in a net at the back of her neck. She threatens ever to cut it. Now, off-duty, she has released her hair, and it tumbles to her breasts. She will not cut it. She will never.

Her lips are her youngest feature. They are full and...sensual. I don't know – I can't imagine how else to describe them. She moistens them with the tip of her tongue as she speaks. "Jim wants to marry me." Jesus, but I love her mouth!

"Gene?"

"Yeah?"

"You heard?"

"Jim wants to marry you. Yeah," I answer her. "I heard."

She says nothing. She stubs out the

cigarette and snatches at her cream soda. She tips the can toward her. "Damn," she mouths. She stares into the empty can.

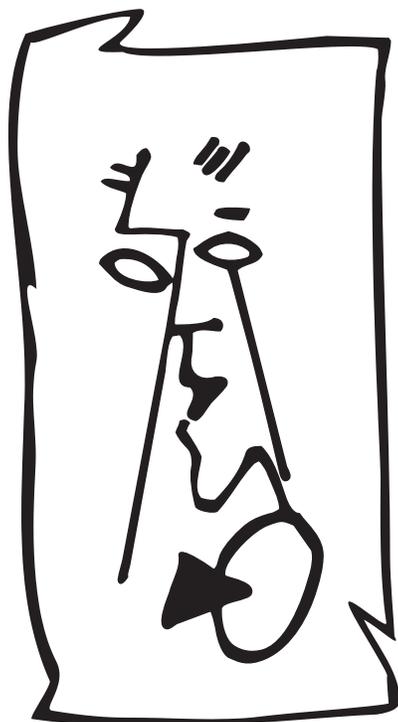
"So?" I add.

And she repeats, "So?" Exasperated. Do I understand? Don't I? Her voice trembles, excitedly. Breaks. "So!"

"Damnit, Gene!" Anger galvanizes her long spider-like fingers as they climb her arms to her shoulders. She trembles. Then, "Damnit!" They leap to the tabletop, forcing her to her feet. She spins. She rushes from the restaurant.

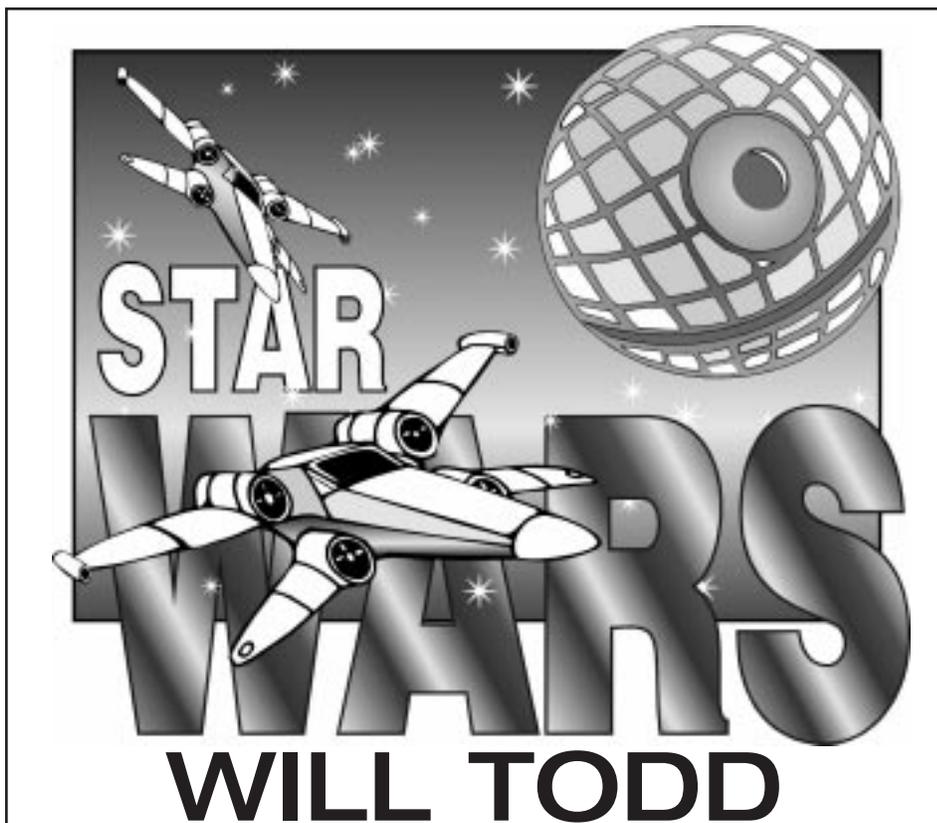
A door slams.

I do not follow her. I do not need to follow her as she storms along the beach; she will return, her head bowed. The spiders, certainly, she will have balled into white-knuckled fists...and we will return to her apartment – we will not speak of Jim – we will not mention marriage – where I will unbutton the buttons on her white waitress uniform. I will remove her bra. She will step out of her half-slip. I will lie down beside her, and she will lay her head against my chin. She will – she does – she smells – of lavender. When she sleeps, at last, I will rise and find my jacket, my car keys, my wallet. I will begin the long drive back to Chicago. I will think about Celeste, and about our daughter. □



painting of a man on thursday

G. WEE DON



Star Wars is romantic. Oh, not in the sense of love and relationships of course. I mean it is romantic in the sense that for each person who views it for the first time, it fulfills a fantastic dream somewhere within the depths of the soul. It sparks an emotional response and is timeless in that the basic meaning behind the story is vague and left up to the imagination to fill in the missing pieces. The perfect bed-time story.

We pulled into the theatre parking lot, my dad and I. I told him before we left that we should get there early. It started at 12:15 PM and we pulled into the parking lot at exactly 11:30 AM.

I looked upon the area with stark terror. The line began at the ticket booth and stretched for two miles along the edge of a brick wall next to the theatre itself. At least it looked like two miles to a thirteen-year old. This is it, I thought. He'd see the line and be out of the parking lot before I could spit. To my utter amazement though, he went down the first aisle, turned and entered the second, coming right up to an empty space.

"We'd better hurry," was all he said.

We bought our tickets and took our place in line against the brick wall. I hated that wall. We'd missed the first showing. Sold Out. He'd gotten tickets for the next showing at 2:45 PM. A long wait, but he didn't say a word. My dad? I checked twice just to make sure. This was strange behavior indeed coming from this man.

The bright orange ball of a sun seemed to know when we were out in the open. It was extremely hot, so we took turns standing in line while the other sat in a cool shaded area about twenty-five feet away. When we finally did get to our seats it was in an air-conditioned, modern theatre and at that moment I don't think I'd ever been more comfortable in my life. The wait was over – Star Wars. I had only seen the preview once the night before. That's all it took. I was hooked. There was going to be something different about this one.

We sat there with our popcorn and cokes, my dad and I. Something about going to a movie made him hungry for popcorn and a coke. I guess it was an environment thing. The wait at the concession stand seemed to be part of the ritual.

The movie began. It played. We watched. It ended and we left. I saw it twelve more times each weekend after that, and to me it got better each time. It was the best movie I ever saw and for a time after that everything else just played in it's shadow. It brought my dreams to life, and, for a thirteen-year old, that was quite an event. □

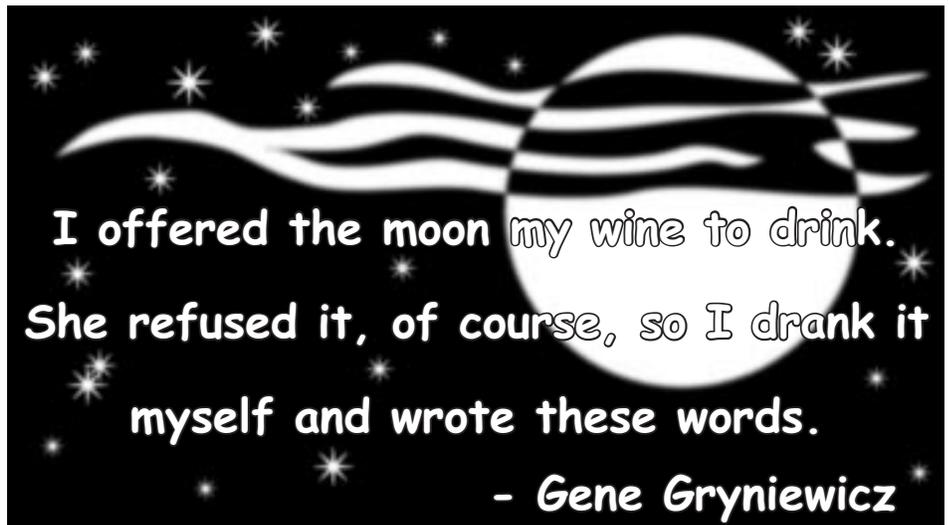
Nantucket and the Whales

Syd Weedon

Nantucket was built around whaling, and its fate was guided by the fortunes of that industry. By the 1840's Nantucket was in serious decline. By the time of the War Between the States, whaling from Nantucket had ceased. That civilization is long gone, but it lives in our imaginations in the common lore of America as the backdrop of Moby Dick. Melville walked these streets. Nantucket is a tourist trap now, but its history and symbols still speak chapters and verses as you walk down the street.

Everywhere you go on Nantucket you find whale somethings: teeth with ships scrimshawed on them, carved whales, paintings of whales, embroidered whales, cartoon whales, whales on belt buckles, on jewelry boxes, on pillows, and jars of beach plum jam. Nantucket gave its name to the "Nantucket Sleigh Ride" (slay rite), the harrowing experience of being towed in a small boat by an injured whale which has been harpooned. Nantucket is a celebration of the wholesale slaughter of the whale, one of the most gentle and intelligent creatures ever to live. After seeing the whales at Sea World, I know that the whales have great intelligence and personality. Their intelligence may very well be on a par with our own—different, but not necessarily inferior.

What did they make from whales? Candles, lamp oil, corset ribs. If the East Coast sinks as geologists say it will, perhaps the whales will come some day to visit the spot as we do Nazi death camps, telling grim tales to their children about the time when they were hunted like animals. Of course, they won't tell the tales; they'll sing them. It is said that the great Blue Whales can sing to each other across whole oceans. That's not the kind of animal to render down into a candle no matter how dark it gets. □



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