Alchemist Review

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From The Editor

With our respects and gratitude to the vibrant Razak Dahmane. His wisdom and intellect graced Sangamon State University, now UIS, from 1993 until 2004. The loss of this scholar, teacher, and friend so suddenly last August was a tremendous blow. We celebrate his joy of a well turned phrase in our modest way with these stories and poems of our peers. May we all be lucky enough to glean as much delight as Razak from the art of the word.

Maureen Skube
English Program Graduate Assistant
Editor

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Thank you to this year's reading panel:
Erin Tepen, Nikki Overcash, Anne Marie Anos, and David Kim

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Alchemist Review Prize for Short Fiction

The Busy Part of 127

Rodd Whelpley

He stopped traffic
on the busy part of 127,
and then just slowed it down.

Sometimes, when it's quiet,
I wonder
why the whole world hinges
on that wet, bedraggled dog,
limping,
weaving forward and back
across the double-yellow line,
getting smaller and smaller
in my rearview mirror.

Hyde Park

Rodd Whelpley

Up from the underground and straight to speaker's corner,
We move against the grain of workaday London,
Bound home, away from the heart of the city of the empire.
I snap a shot of you hurling invective, rallying the empty air.

We watch the middle-aged rugby scrums scattered in the groves,
The after-hours leagues bereft of pitches
By workmen erecting scaffoldings and stages
For VE-Day plus fifty.
The dirty barristers and bankers grunt and tumble.
A whistle signals for the work crew to knock off.

A coffee-and-cream colored boy, his rollerblade giving way,
Drops on the walk far before us.
We arrive on scene to find his Indian Elephant tears and blood on the concrete.
A twiggy woman swipes her chestnut hair away from her Lancôme face
As she bends to him.
She reaches for his shoulder.
He roars to his feet, to his friends hidden behind a shrub.
We hear shouts and high fives, the three of us staring blankly
At the tube of fast-food catsup the young skater left behind.

You and I sit on a stone bench and kiss down the last sunset of our holiday.
I conjure the green-gray moss-scented air
Into thirty, forty, fifty, a hundred bottles full.
In twenty days, and then again in fifty years, they will celebrate like mad:
The war is over.

From the Marble Arch back home in nowhere Illinois we will hear them:
"Hip, Hip. The war is over."
And in twenty days, and any day, and for fifty straight St. Valentines
I will uncork our bottles of Hyde Park honeymoon dusk,
Their pops echoing along the Serpentine our continual reply.

Take Our Daughters to Work Day

Rodd Whelpley

I like the muddy smell of April, especially in my ex-mother-in-law's neighborhood. It reminds me of the spring Cindy and I were dating and I picked her up for the Reds' home opener. Out on her front stoop, I told her it was a worm squishing good day nd she laughed at me.

But this morning when I knock on the door, it's my little girl Tracy who answers. I can't get over how much she looks like her mom — same thin lips, same chestnut hair. Only she's got those freckles the way kids do. Her mom walks up behind her and takes her hand. "Jeez, Tracy, you look pretty," I say. "You sure you want to go to the dump?"

"Beats another day in third grade," she says.

"Yeah," I say, "And the pay's better, too."

Cindy gently pulls Tracy back a little so I can step inside the house. Tracy lets go of Cindy's hand and hugs my leg as I stand in the front hallway.

"Sure this is OK?" I ask Cindy.

She nods yes. There's black in the hollows below her eyes. She hasn't had a lot of sleep.

"How you getting along?" I ask. "You and your mom getting along OK?" I look deep inside the house for any signs of my ex-in-law.

"Look, Frank," she says. "Don't let the guys talk rough around her."

"Yeah, sure," I say.

Tracy lets go of my kneecap, and I tousle her hair that way that she pretends she hates.

"Dad-dy," she squawks at me.

I look hard into Cindy's eyes. "Hey, on Saturday do you want to maybe go to the..." But I don't finish. Her eyelids rise up — almost flare — and I see how it's going to turn out.

"Don't let's start that now," Cindy says. "Just be safe and make sure she has some fun."

"But it's OK if I let her steer the CAT all day?"

For a second the corner of Cindy's mouth twitches up a little and her eyes crinkle back down the way I like. She catches herself and stops it right away.

"Be good," she says to Tracy. She hands her a little book bag and the morning paper and gives her a kiss.

"Be good," she says to me, but I don't get kissed anymore.

As I drive to work, Tracy opens the Cincinnati Enquirer and stays quiet. She almost looks grown up. But at the long stoplight on Ridge and Madison I steal a look at her and I can see that, though she's trying her best not to, she's moving her lips.

"What's in the funny papers?" I ask.

"I don't read the comics. I read the news," she says.

"What's happening in the world today?"

"For one thing, the zoo is meeting with Proctor and Gamble to ask them to buy a new mate for Linus."

"Buy a what? For who?" I ask.

"A new mate for Linus the giraffe. Loretta was the one that died a few days ago."

"Oh," I say.

"Now I'm reading about women taking their daughters to work today. There's this one woman who's an astronaut and another who is an actress in a Broadway show," she says.

"You mean all over the whole country kids are going to work today? I thought it was just your class."

"It's everywhere, Dad. Don't you even see the TV news?" She shoots me a flirty fake scowl. "But it's only for girls. Really you're supposed to go with your mom. But, I asked Miss Dubsky if I could go with you instead. We have to give a report. The rules say homemakers are OK, but I'll get a better grade with you."

"Poor kid," I say. "I'll try to pop a wheelie on the track loader or something. How's that?"

She rolls her eyes and goes back to her paper

The light finally switches to green, and I take the 275 on ramp.

* * * * *

I let Tracy pull my card from the rack, and then I lift her up to pound it into the time clock.

We leave the shed at the bottom of the hill and walk to the row of Caterpillars parked by the fuel pumps. The wind is brisk. "It really stinks today. Are you sure you want to bulldoze garbage? We've got to go all the way to the top of the hill, and it only gets worse up there," I say.

"I'm OK," she says. She smiles at me. And it makes me think — just for a second — that maybe she is OK. I want her to be OK. But how can she be? How can a kid be OK when she sees her dad only on the weekends, except for when MS Magazine makes up a "take your little girl to work" day? And how will she turn out if the only women she knows teach her never to give a guy a break?

I lift Tracy into the cab of my CAT 963. In her hands she clutches the newspaper and a little steno pad that she's dug through her book bag to find. I'm glad she's got the paper with her. I know she's going to be bored way before lunchtime.

I climb up around her and get her situated on my lap. There's really not enough space for two, but she's little, so I decide I can work around her.

I reach over to the right side and twist the key to start her up. The engine turns and surges. The EMS panel beside the starter lights up.

Tracy sets aside her newspaper, opens her steno pad, and does a crude drawing of the starter and the panel. I explain to her that it monitors the electronic systems and tell her what the lights mean.

Then I turn my head forward and look at the dash. "Oh my God," I say. "Somebody stole the steering wheel."

Her mouth drops, and she starts taking furious notes.

I laugh at her.

"Dad-dy," she whines at me when she catches on.

"There's no steering wheel on a CAT," I tell her. She scratches out several lines of writing.

I show her that the two outside foot pedals do the steering and that the one in the middle is the brake. She takes notes like there's going to be a quiz.

I show Tracy the throttle and transmission control. Then we put the CAT in gear and move up the hill in line with the other bulldozers.

"There's five of us CAT drivers." I tell her. "Macky's up front, then Tommy. Then behind us is Sullivan and Chauncy."

She looks ahead of us and then behind and nods at me. I wait till she's finished writing down Sullivan's name and then Chauncy's.

"Us CAT drivers can take this road to the top of the hill, but it's too steep for the trash trucks. They have to take the winding road around and around. They dump at one of three dumpsites, and we CAT drivers push the garbage and use the loader buckets to compact it. One of the engineers told me that they bring four thousand tons a day here."

Tracy is writing as fast as she can go, so I let up a minute. Besides, I don't want her

to miss the ride — a thousand feet to the top. It stinks like sour tomatoes and fish, but still its fun. The steel tracks grip the hill so good you think you can go up at a ninety-degree grade. You can't really, but we come damn close.

She stops writing, looks around, and sways when she realizes how tippy the CAT feels as it climbs. At the bottom, where the grass has started to grow, it looks like a real hill. But when you get half way up, it gets steeper — more gray — until you can tell you're climbing up a wall of garbage. She grabs my knee and gives it a squeeze. It reminds me of when I took her and her mother to King's Island amusement park for our company picnic. She and I rode that coaster — The Beast — again and again until Cindy wouldn't let us anymore.

We top off the hill, and she eases up on my knee.

"This is the best part of the day," I tell her. We all line up at this end of the hill. And then, when Macky toots the horn that he's custom-fit into his cab, we race over to the other side of the hill where those three dump sites are. "Listen. Listen" I tell her. I point her in Macky's direction. She gets quiet, and I can feel her trying to breathe more slowly, more softly as she sets her eyes on Macky's hands, anticipating the signal.

And then we go.

It's never much of race. Macky's got a CAT 973 that has about 55 more horse power than we do — he's the boss — and he smokes us all the time. But, I think because he knows I got Tracy with me, he lets me win. I wave over to him when he pulls in second behind me, and he gives me and Tracy another toot of his horn.

"What now?" Tracy asks. She's got her pad and pencil ready again, and I'm thinking this is going to be some report.

"Well," I tell her, "When the trucks come in — you know, the ones that come to the neighborhood to pick up the barrels — they dump at one of these sites and we push the trash over to our areas. We pack it down, so everything's smooth up top, so we can drive around on top of it and so that it's compacted. We don't want air bubbles. You don't even want to know how a gas pocket smells when it surfaces. And you sure as hell don't want to smoke."

She's writing like mad. I hope she doesn't write "hell" in her report. I'd have to hear about that at parent-teacher conferences. And that not smoking part is made up anyway.

"How do you know where you need to push the garbage?" she asks.

"The hill is divided into five parts," I tell her. "What brain surgeon thought that up, I don't know. Anyways, today we're one of the swing drivers, which means we push the loads over to the farthest edge of the hill — away from the dump truck sites. We'll push less loads than three of the other guys, but we'll cover more turf. I like the swing."

We get the first load and start pushing. I've lowered the bucket so it scrapes the ground as we move ahead. It makes a craggy sound and stirs up a whiff of rotten fruit that seeps through the windows of the cab. When we get to the right place, I show her how to ease up the lever to slowly raise the bucket so that we let out a ribbon of trash as we go. The steel track belts start smashing it into the hill as we drive along. We back up over it a few times so the new trash packs down, and then her favorite part is when I bang the bucket up and down to pound it in. "It's just like when we went to the beach and you used the back of your shovel to pat your sand castle," I say. "Remember?"

"Like you're making a castle out of garbage," she teases.

"Well it ain't no castle, I admit. But it could be worse. And at least it's something. It's something that me and Macky and Tommy and Sully and Chance did. We did this. We made this hill. Think about it. This used to be garbage, garbage from Cincinnati and Indiana, from Butler County, and down into Kentucky. And they truck it all up here where not too many people have to see it or smell it. So we make this hill out of it — the second tallest in the state, one of the engineers told me. And look down at the bottom. There's grass growing already. So it ain't so bad. Not really. And hey," I say to her and wink, "Somebody's got to do it. Right?"

"Look, seagulls," she says to me when she sees a few fly by.

"Yeah," I say, "Who knows where they come from. They're just like the crows, you know: Rats with wings."

"What happens when the hill gets too big?" she asks.

I think I see where she's going with this.

"We have to make another hill. That's the way it is, I guess, till somebody thinks of something better." I look at her. But she's not writing anymore. She's looking at me.

"Hey," I say, "If you're the somebody who thinks of something better, make sure it involves driving a CAT, would you? Don't put your old man out of work."

"But Daddy," she says, "Aren't you ever worried you'll get sick or something? Cancer maybe?"

"Because of the garbage? No, don't worry about that," I say. "I won't let that happen. I know you care about me, so I won't let that happen."

"But wouldn't Julie care? Mommy said that's how come you got divorced, because of some woman named Julie. Because you love her more than Mom."

"Look," I say. "That's not right. It's a lot more complicated...I can't..." I don't know what to say, and deep down I'm kind of pissed I have to say anything. It ain't no mystery where all this is coming from.

"You're just a kid." I say to her. "You shouldn't have to worry about that stuff."

I put the CAT in reverse. It jerks a bit. And then we smooth out some of the trash that lies behind us.

Then we get back into gear to go forward. She rocks a little and tucks the notebook between the seat and her bottom. Then she takes out her paper and she's just staring at the headline of the newspaper. The silent treatment. She's done with me.

"You know," I say. "I never loved Julie. I told your mom that. If she would just forget about Julie everything could be OK again. I tell her that, but she doesn't listen. Every time I try to talk, she just keeps digging up Julie. But she was nothing."

I feel funny telling my daughter this. And she must feel funny hearing it, because she looks away from the paper. But instead of looking up to me, she stares out the cab window across the top of the hill.

"Daddy," she says. "Drive over that way. I want to see why all the seagulls are there."

"OK," I say. "You want to see what this puppy can do?"

I open the throttle, and we race over toward where maybe fifty gulls and crows have gathered around a pile of garbage. They make a gang war of black and white feathered rats.

I like the ride. I like the speed of it. I like the way the engine cranks up so loud you can't talk above it or hear yourself think, so you don't think at all, you just feel.

We race up to maybe fifteen yards in front of the birds. Their squawks are as loud as the CAT's engine. If I had Macky's horn, I would have blasted them all apart. But they don't move.

Tracy makes a noise. She's yelling at me, wanting me to stop.

I press the brake and stop the CAT hard.

"What now? What is it?" I ask her as I lower the throttle.

But Tracy has opened the cab, stepped onto the track, and taken the big leap to the ground.

I look at the Enquirer she's left on the seat. Then I look at her as she runs. The birds scatter before her as she nears the mound of garbage they've been fighting over.

I jump from the cab to chase her. "Tracy. Don't." I shout behind her.

But it's too late. She's too far ahead of me, and she's too determined.

By the time I catch up, she's already in tears.

"Oh, Daddy," she says between sobs, and she collapses into my arms.

I hold her close to me. My hands cup her small head. I can feel hot tears squirt out of her eyes, shut tight as they can be. But it's too late. She's already seen it, and she can't forget.

We are standing in front of Loretta the zoo giraffe's half exposed carcass. The gulls and the crows have opened her neck and taken hunks of meat out of her. But still, you can see flaps of her skin. Her once-red freckles are pale pink now.

"Oh sweetie," I say to Tracy. "Why did you have to see that? I'm sorry sweetheart. I'm so sorry."

I hold her and she cries. And it busts me up to think she's had to see this thing. She's only eight, but already she's got that disease her mother's got. She's got to see. She's got to see everything.

My Leg

Lola Lucas

What the doctor said was true:
The pain shifts around,
Numb here, a tingle there,
Then it changes. I run my hand
Over the plate and screws
Beneath my skin, the very lumps
And swellings move, it'd make
For curious time-lapse photography.
Like a restless dog it turns
And turns again before settling down.

My leg has its own agenda.

The eve at Monmouth Hospital

Tricia Owsley

he just couldn't figure it out
how was he going to get out of that damn chair
they'd put him in a geri chair and left him at the nurse's station
after he tried to Houdini from his bed

how was he supposed to get out of that damn chair
and didn't I have the combination to the lock
didn't I know he needed to get home to his wife of 68 years

tissue thin gown showed gaping skin stuck to the chair
uncombed hair formed gray wings on the sides of his head
his eyes matted with tears when told he could not go home

finally, his painful understanding sunk in
and he sighed defeatedly, but wouldn't I please call
his wife and give her a good report

when asked what should be reported
he firmly stated
"why, the truth"
of course

when asked what
the truth was
he saddens
and his lip puckers
"that I'm *stranded*!"

a winged Zeus
indignant at being captured
after all these years in a chair.
a damn chair restrained him
from getting home to rescue his love

strength abandons his weakened arms
as he flailingly tries to propel his body
and fly away,
oh so far away
from these ties
that bind him

The Blind Man

Tricia Owsley

the blind man
who sits on the Old Capitol sidewalk every day
in the rain and in the snow and in the burning sun
plays gospel songs on his accordion
the worn case for the donations
bears a tattered sticker that reads
"today
something
beautiful
might
happen"

Among the Leaves

Nikki Overcash

Billy Blake saw a tree
of Angels gleaming down at him.
My eyes – sewn shut. As I ripped
the stitches out (my eyelashes along with)
I saw only wax fruit
buried in Eden's branches.
This is a story in which nothing
happens
twice.
I'm given to personal anecdotes,
like that time with Billy
and the tree. It seemed so harmless
but I'd forgotten how imagination
has a gift for creating
unhappiness, tapping us on
the shoulder to give us
a look at what we can't have.
I ache for Angels
but always get stuck
with wax fruit.

To Ships That Pass In The Night

Martha Miller

On a black granite wall in Washington DC there are 58,209 names inscribed. Next to each name is a symbol. The diamond denotes a confirmed death and about 1,150 crosses represent those missing in action or prisoners of war who remain unaccounted for. My friend, Bob Lawson's name has a cross.

I met Bob the summer after I graduated from high school and I left home. I had a small apartment and worked first at a coffee shop in the train station and then at a cafeteria at the bus station. I was doing an off-again/on-again dance that one could liken to cat and mouse (at the time I thought I was the cat) with, Lloyd, the man who would later become my first husband. Anyhow, Bob was driving for Lincoln Cab whose offices and parking lot filled the corner of Sixth and Jefferson Streets. The Greyhound Bus Station, where I worked, was next door on Sixth Street and the City Police Station was behind the Cab Company on Jefferson. Bob was a couple of years older than me—nineteen, maybe twenty. He lived with his mother and a new stepfather in a small house in the Cabbage Patch. At least, that's what he told me, I never visited him there. When I started working the night shift at the bus station that fall, he came in on his break, and I'd take one too and have coffee with him. For me, it wasn't a romantic relationship. Not in the traditional sense, anyway. After all, I was seeing Lloyd, though we weren't living together or married yet. I was only seventeen years old and Lloyd was twenty years older. Sometimes I longed for company my own age, and I went out with other guys. But nothing ever lasted long; I was too dependent on the relationship with Lloyd. He took care of grown up things for me, the most important of which was alcohol.

In the beginning Bob and I just talked, really. He was on his way to boot camp. He had been drafted, and he was looking forward to leaving in October. I had finished high school and was just out on my own, learning how to use a Laundromat, buy groceries and support myself. Bob was a quiet guy. Sometimes we didn't talk at all but stared out the front window at the empty street and the falling rain. We were a couple of kids, up past our bedtimes, both pretty sure we'd already seen the worst that life had to offer.

One night Bob came into the cafeteria while I was working. His left eye was bloodshot and there was a scrape across his cheek. When I had time to sit with him, he told me he'd had a fight with his stepfather. The old guy had been drunk and screaming at Bob's mom.

Bob had stepped between them and got slugged.

"You had to do it," I said thinking of my own mom and wishing I had an older brother.

Bob hung his head and shook it.

I reached for his hand. He grabbed my fingers so quickly I was startled.

"What is it?" I asked.

"My mom," he stammered. "She got after me then."

"She's crazy," I said. But I had a sick feeling my own mother would do the same.

"I'm not going home," he said. "I won't." He seemed to draw strength from this. Wiping a tear with the back of his hand he went on, "I'll be gone on the fifteenth. On my way to boot camp."

Over his shoulder I could see customers lining up at my workstation. Another bus was in. As ill timed as it was, I knew I had to get up. "I'm sorry," I apologized. "Come back if you get a break around midnight. We'll talk more."

"I got a room at the Palmer Hotel," he said quickly. "If I don't make it back in tonight, call me there in the morning."

I nodded, grabbed my half-empty coffee cup, and said, "See you later."

He didn't come back in that night, and in the morning when I called him he was half asleep. We talked for a few minutes and he seemed fine.

Bob Lawson was drafted. His only choice was Vietnam, prison, or Canada. When young people went to college in those days, they either had money or started planning for it when they were ten years old. Community colleges were rare in small towns. I think Bob was typical of the soldiers we sent all the way around the world to fight. There was some idea of stopping the spread of Communism; we were scared of the Communists back then.

Bob told me that his mother came to see him once before he left. And later in a letter he admitted that he thought about that a lot. While he was in boot camp at Fort Leonard Wood, I wrote to him once a week. I told him stories about the cab drivers and the people we knew in common. I talked about the weather and movies and my job. We never talked about the war. He never told me one thing that happened at boot camp. By the time he came home for Christmas he had his orders.

Temperatures were sub zero that December. I walked the six blocks to work with my coat bunched around me, and my head down against the icy wind. Any bare skin began to sting and then quickly started to hurt. I didn't know anyone with a car, except Lloyd. But, though we lived in the same apartment building, his favors had a price, and that December I was walking.

In 1965 the nightly news reported the body counts. They were incredibly exaggerated. On my 13-inch black and white set that got three channels, Walter Cronkite would say, "Today 429 Viet Cong and 8 Americans lost their lives." On the same newscast I'd seen college kids carrying peace signs amid police with riot gear. Those kids were my age, though I wasn't in college. I was glad enough to be done with school and done with my life at my parent's house. This was before Kent State and the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. No one dreamed that America would be in Vietnam for eleven years. America fought both World Wars one and two in eight years.

"Too many soldiers come through the restaurant," my boss told me. "We're going to make these box lunches: two sandwiches, a single-sized bag of chips, an apple, and a carton of milk, meet the busses and sell them outside of town somewhere." That's how she told us about operation shoebox. They weren't shoeboxes really, but about the same size. They looked like a box an orchid would come in, without the transparent top.

Opal Eskew was a woman in her fifties with short, red and gray curly hair and bucked teeth. She wore one of several pastel sweater dresses daily with big lumpy necklaces and matching clip-on earrings. These outfits showed off her short, plump body in the most unflattering light. When she asked me if I could work, I agreed. I didn't need the extra money but thought it a chance to do my thing for the war.

With two other women we folded white boxes and made sandwiches, laying out a loaf of bread at a time, one loaf after the next. On December 15th, for the first time we packed everything into a truck and drove to a warehouse on the south end of town. The temperature outside was fourteen degrees below zero. The warehouse wasn't much warmer. When we heard the bus engine outside, someone pressed the button to the automatic door opener and the bus drove inside. Those buses, covered with frozen slush, their white bellies gray with dirt, were jam-packed with boys in uniform.

Toward the end of the second day, I was cold and tired. And I started wondering how many boys were on their way south or east or west. I thought about the lives disrupted and the people at home, waiting. We only saw the soldiers who went through Chicago to Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, or Iowa. We only saw a small portion, and our portion seemed immeasurable.

People made sandwiches and packed them back at the cafeteria all the time we worked at the warehouse. When they delivered supplies to us, sometimes the lunches were boxed up, and sometimes crates of fruit, milk and sandwiches came along with odd shaped white sheets of cardboard that had to be folded into boxes. A bus came at one point before our replacement supplies arrived, and I told them we didn't have any ham sand-

wiches left, only cheese. The driver got back on the bus and in short order a boy in an olive green dress uniform stepped out.

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "We've just had five buses in a row and we are out of meat sandwiches."

"Ma'am," he said."We're from Wisconsin. We're hungry, and we love cheese."

I smiled at him uncertainly. "I can give you extra fruit."

"That would be fine."

He was fair skinned and red faced with his whitish-blond hair cut shorter than anything I'd seen since second grade. He stood as he waited, straight with his shoulders back and his chest out—almost at attention. We counted out sixty box lunches (chips, apple, milk, cheese sandwich, minus the ham). I turned to one of several crates of tangerines, which we were to use when the apples were gone, and carried it to the steps of the bus. The Wisconsin boy was suddenly beside me, placing his strong hands on the crate. He whispered, "Let me help you with that, honey." He was more playful out of the hearing of the others. In the shadow of the black bill of his dress hat, I saw mischievousness in his eyes. He had to be eighteen, but he didn't look that old.

"Thanks," I said.

He lifted the crate onto the floor of the bus and stepped inside. The meatless lunches were being distributed. He turned briefly and waved.

I called, "Merry Christmas," to him but I'm not sure he heard. The roar of the warehouse doors was sounding. A few moments later the boys from Wisconsin were on their way home.

Bob didn't arrive until December twenty-first, my eighteenth birthday. Though the warehouse buses had stopped coming, soldiers passed through the bus station cafeteria in smaller groups or alone. They all dressed alike. They were all hungry and in good spirits. That night, after the 9:35 bus reloaded and pulled out of the station, I saw a soldier in the booth by the water fountain. He had a duffel bag on the floor next to him. He was alone.

I started a pot of coffee in anticipation of the 10:05 and refilled the dessert trays next to the cash register. The dishwasher, an overweight kid with a flattop haircut, passed my station with a tray full on the way to the kitchen.

"Guy over there wants to see you."

I looked up, "Who?" My guts clinched. I was thinking Lloyd might have come in, though I hadn't seen him in a few days. I'd warned him not to come to my place of work, but he wasn't good at following instructions.

The dishwasher hit the swinging door to the kitchen with his shoulder and pointed

with his chin. "Soldier boy over there."

The kid was standing next to his duffel bag. He reached up and pulled off his hat and laid it on the tabletop.

"Bob," I called happily.

He looked different; his tall and slender frame was thinner. His dark curly blond hair was gone. I suppose some girls would have thought him handsome. Suddenly I was nervous. Our letters had been so friendly; I knew him better on paper than I did in person.

I drew two cups of coffee and went to his table.

"When did you get in?" I asked sliding in the booth across from him.

He smiled. "Just now. I came on this last bus. I've been watching you work."

"Are you hungry?"

"My mom will be picking me up soon. She'll have a big spread at the house. "

"So, you've made up?"

He shrugged. "Only family I got. I learned a lot of things these past several weeks. And one of them is that nobody's family is perfect. Some has got it a lot worse than me."

I looked at him and the muscles in my throat felt tight.

"So, how you been?" he asked.

"Busy," I said, glad for the change of subject. "We've been feeding soldiers on their way home for Christmas."

"Going to celebrate your birthday? You doing anything special?"

I shrugged, a little surprised that he remembered. Had I mentioned it in a letter? "Day's almost over now. My parents dropped by with a card earlier. Had twenty dollars in it. I need a new uniform. That'll get it."

He said, "Gonna buy yourself something for work? That's no way to celebrate."

"Day's almost over now." I looked down at the table, which hadn't been cleaned very well. A couple of dried coffee stains and granules of spilled sugar dotted the Formica tabletop. I traced a trail through the sugar that looked like a river moving away from me.

Bob watched for a second as if he thought I was doing something of great importance. Then he turned to his duffel bag. "I have something for you."

After some undoing of straps he pulled out a wrinkled brown paper bag and slid it across the table toward me.

I carefully reached inside and slid out a small shiny wooden box with a hand-painted picture on the lid.

"Open it," he said.

I lifted the lid and heard the tinkle of the music box. Through amber colored glass I

saw the mechanism turning.

"I love it," I cried softly. I'd honestly never seen one quite like it.

He laughed, not because the situation was funny, but I think he was nervous about the gift and suddenly relieved that I was happy with it.

I wanted to embrace him and wondered what that would be like. I knew him well enough by letters to do that, but in person I felt awkward. I realized he was looking toward the front of the restaurant and I turned and followed his gaze. A tall thin woman in a red car coat and rubber boots stood just inside the front door.

"My mom," said Bob. "I've got to go."

We stood at the same time. He touched my shoulder firmly and said, "I'll be in touch. We'll do something together. Maybe dinner if you're free."

"I'm free, unless it's a work night."

He looked pleased.

I called, "Thank you for the music box," as he started toward his mom.

We saw each other twice in the following ten days. Once we had dinner and went to the bar with his friends from the cab company. The second time we ate hamburgers at Jack Robinson's after a movie.

Bob had his orders already that Christmas. In his own quiet way, a detail or two at a time, he told me that he would go to California and be deployed from there with his outfit. The night he left, his mom dropped him off at the station. Through the large windows between the lobby and the cafeteria, I watched her embrace him and then leave without a glance my direction. The line in the cafeteria was a long one, people going home from Christmas vacation. As soon as the last customer was served, I asked if I could take my dinnertime, and then I went out in the waiting area to sit with Bob until his bus was called.

I remember a sullen expression on his ruddy cheeks. He seemed glad for the company but had little to say. We watched the other people: mothers with children, other soldiers, and people carrying loaded bags.

First call, Bob stood and grabbed his bags. I followed him through the door. The cold stung my face and diesel fuel assaulted my nostrils. Bob tossed his bags in the gaping cargo hole of the bus and turned to me. We stepped out of the way of the others and I had my back to the rough brick wall of the bus station. My palms were sweating. Again I wanted to embrace him and hold him to me. I asked myself why this was so hard? Bob was different than from other guys I dated. He seemed more interested in friendship than sex. But an embrace wasn't sex. Though I had nothing to base it on, I was afraid he would push me away.

The crowd grew smaller as the bus filled.

I said, "You're going to end up with a crummy seat if you don't get on."

He said, "I don't want to get in."

"You'll be back home before you know it. This war can't last forever."

"Will you keep writing?" he asked.

"You bet I will."

"No matter what?"

I suppose he meant Lloyd, who wasn't quite out of the picture. "No matter what," I assured him.

The speaker blared "last call" and Bob turned and looked at the bus. We were the only ones on the drive. The rest of the passengers were loaded.

"I better go," he said and turned away from me.

Impulsively I reached for his shoulder. "Wait," I said, and threw my arms around him.

He was startled, but pleased.

I held him tight and whispered in his ear. "Take care of yourself."

His trembling arms went around me.

The sound of the bus horn startled both of us. I looked past him and saw the passengers at every window watching. "I'll miss you," I said, planting a wet kiss on his cheek.

He squeezed me tighter and the horn sounded again. Then he was running for the bus, stepping in, and swallowed up as the door hissed shut.

At the time Bob believed he was saving the world for democracy the same as the other boys who went. At least he told me that in one of his short letters from Viet Nam. He made a friend who was from Indiana. They were the two only boys from the Midwest in his outfit—unless you counted Chicago. He mentioned the sweltering weather and the mosquitoes. Once he told me that his outfit had rushed, marching with all their gear, to a spot near a small village between two mountains. He called the place the armpit of the world. They waited for two weeks for orders, and instead of engaging the enemy, had returned to base with no explanation. He implied this was not unusual. Instead of weekly as they had come from Fort Leonard Wood, his letters arrived sporadically. A month would pass and then I'd get three letters on the same day. As time went on, he told me less and less of Vietnam. The letters grew shorter and finally they stopped. But by then I was involved with Lloyd again.

Almost a year had passed since the last letter when I got his mom's phone number from the dispatcher at the cab company and called. A man answered. I told him I was

wondering if they'd heard from Bob.

"Sweetie," the man said. "He's been MIA since August."

"Missing?"

I heard a woman's voice in the background, and the guy said, "Some girl wants Bob." I heard them talking and waited. Finally someone picked up the receiver and gently lay it down. After a moment I heard a dial tone.

If a person returns from Vietnam alive, a circle, as a symbol of life, will be inscribed around the cross next to his name. In the event an individual's remains are returned, the diamond will be superimposed over the cross. And to tell the truth for a long time I thought he would come home. I thought one day I would look up from the cash register and he'd be standing there like he was on my eighteenth birthday in December of 1965.

So far as I know, he hasn't.

Fluff Bomb

Ashley Harvey

As I lay me down to sleep, I'm troubled
by the day's uniformity, the double
speak. Restless and wrecked, I flip the light on
to discover a curious thought-bomb
has been waiting eagerly at the head
of my bed. With ominous eyes he said,
"I come bearing pink bunnies, lollipops,
fresh posies, Winnie the Pooh, and gumdrops,
green pastures, unicorns, marshmallow fluff
galore..." *What?* I suddenly felt brain-cuffed,
paralyzed by the thought of restriction.
I let out a yawn and replied, "Fiction
minus complexity is technical,
not to mention drab and conventional."
He then honked my nose and exclaimed, "Touché!
Without those first eight crayons you just may
have never found your rainbow." Point taken.
Gnome boy knew his stuff though, I was shaken
by how far he was willing to drive it
homewards. "Each night unwearyingly I sit
and study your twitches and turns..." I could
feel his clock ticking. Fearing his blast would
detonate and leave me unheard I tried
cutting him off at, "... it's easy to lie
there, so delightful, innocent, and shy,
while mocking subdued passion, straight high
on a dream but, we both know you're starving
for conformity." I began carving
out tiny chi-shaped retorts, passing them to
him in hopes he'd burst within. Select hues,
Special spices: delectable essence.

Turns out gnome boy wasn't into presents.
He simply stood up, rather abruptly
and acknowledged, "Have it your way honey,
there are always fish in the sea worth
trapping. Plenty doomed non-stillbirths,
prematurely anticipating this
market-driven madhouse and all the bliss
that will accompany each plush sellout.
I'm through wasting blasts on you. How about
you call me when you're ready for grown-up
land." Poof! I witnessed him gracefully erupt.
Back to bed for now, I thought. Another
page to face, a good surplus to smother
and squish into some crazy structure.
Set the alarm: lest I don't recover.

Ashley Harvey

I can't seem to put a purpose to this face:
Some anonymous girl gazing despondent
Out at the looking-glass response to
Answers only capable of reflecting
The exact questions back at her. Futile.
Still fumbling forward without
Any kind of sensible certainty, any
Thing worth rendering remotely poetic,
Except every thing is ultimately
Unavoidable and inexcusable and
Therefore worthy of at least an
Aesthetic interpretation. Hence,
These musings. Hence, these clocks.
Hence, the more reason for turning
The tables, the mirrors, these tricks
Back on her self. She tried entertaining
The thought that every concept was
Eternal; she did pray too, to Gods
And monsters and puppets of the Play
That maybe one day It might all Be
Vacuumed into a momentary
Singularity: this misconstrued
Configuration that has infinitely
Symbolized Her as perpetual
Simulacrum would be imbued with
Such radiance the deceitful glass
Instead would be forced to shatter. In
Place a matter and mind unified,
Equipped with a slight comprehension-
Deficiency, only quasi-concerned with
Our inevitable replaceability; quite simply,
A Being she could both imagine and Be
Forever and temporary.

2005 The *Alchemist Review* Prize for Short Fiction Winners

1st Place

Photos I'm Not In

Gregg Cusick

Raleigh, NC

2nd Place

Waiting for Rain

Carmella K. Cosmos

Fallbrook, CA

3rd Place

Harlow's Child

Marjorie Ford

Tucson, AZ

Now in its third year, the fiction contest at UIS underwent some changes. First, the name was changed. Formerly Writer's Repertory Short Fiction Literary Award, the contest was renamed for The *Alchemist Review*. Also, the word count limit was increased from 1500 words to 3000 words. The contest received entries from across the U.S. and Spain. Thanks to all who participated in the contest.

Special thanks are extended to the judging committee: Stacey Jo Laatsch, Billie Jarvis-Freeman, Emily Welch, Penny Pennell, Anne McKinney, Rhonda Colby, and Mary Gilmore.

Author Biographies

Christine Butler: After attempting a series of careers that succeeded only in making me miserable, I am finally doing what I love: balancing motherhood and the study of language, literature and writing. The short stories I write serve to exorcize my personal demons. Someday, I hope to write myself sane.

Rhonda Colby: Graduate T.A. at UIS focusing on American Literature. I am from West Lafayette, In. I have worked as a registered nurse for 13 years. I earned a B.A. in English and Professional Writing from Purdue University in December 2004. I love to teach. My professional goal is to teach literature and ESL at the university level. When I am not reading or writing, I spend time with my family and my wonderful new granddaughter, Bella.

My name is **Ashley Harvey**. I am currently employed as a senior at UIS and this definitely feels like my 10^{th} year. I am majoring in English with a minor in Women's Studies. I love poetry, more specifically the works of the Modern Poets (Mina Loy, T.S. Elliot, and Marianne Moore, etc). I draw my inspiration from a plethora of sources (a.k.a. my muses), and just to name a hand full: lucid dreams, unpleasant circumstances, enigmas, estrogen bombs, Peter Rabbit and the Easter Bunny, the moon when it's shaped like a thumb nail, my nomadic tendencies, and of course, late night blissfulness.

J. Mitch Hopper once believed that writing was a cruel punishment inflicted upon errant students by less than stellar teachers. But, a lesson learned over a decade ago changed all that. Now, the short story is my voice of choice. More than that I am quite sure no one cares to know.

Jackie Jackson: I've been writing stories since I was a little kid and now that I'm an ol' lady I'm finding more to write about than ever.

Now that I'm into
Writing poems they're dropping
Like rabbit pellets

Carol Manley is a long-time Sangamon State student, with an M.A. in English from UIS who owes a debt of gratitude to Jacqueline Jackson and Dr. Razak Dahmane. She has read her work at numerous sites around Springfield and Illinois, has won local and national awards for writing. Her work has appeared in a number of literary journals.

Marty Whitaker-McGill (UIS retiree) began work in 1984; served on Staff Senate; volunteered at WSSR; member of Auditorium Advisory Committee; was a student. Her work appeared in one previous edition of *Alchemist Review,* several anthologies, and two books about the 911 tragedy. She is a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother.

Edward Beekman-Myers: Author of the play *The Muddy Death of Vyolet Synclaire,* which was brought to life at UIS in 1997. Author of several short stories, some of which have been published online and in *Waxing and Waning* magazine. Currently preparing a science-fiction novel, *The Totally Gnarly Adventures of the Galactically Bitchin' Comet Sweat,* for publication.

Nikki Overcash is currently an undergraduate at UIS, majoring in English. Her poem *Among the Leaves* was previously published in Prism, but she wanted to see it appear in this particular issue of The Alchemist Review because it was inspired by Razak Dahmane.

Tricia Owsley is a graduate student in the Individual Option program. Originally from the middle of nowhere (aka LaHarpe, IL), Tricia currently works on the budget at the Illinois Department of Human Services. She writes to decontaminate in bad budget years and to nurture her creative side.

Nicholas Roman was born in Chicago and went to Schaumburg High School. He is currently a third-year Capital Scholar, majoring in English. He will be graduating in May and plans to go on to get his Master's of the Arts. His favorite author and biggest influence is Joseph Heller.

Rodd Whelpley is the editor of *Illinois Parks & Recreation* magazine. He has had poems, stories, and essays published in several literary journals and news magazines. His novel, *Capital Murder*, a mystery that takes place in Springfield, Illinois, was published in 2003.