

Lumina

Fermilab Creative Writer's Club Anthology

The 1st Edition - February 2003

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Welcome

Fermilab [Creative Writer's Club](#) was founded in April of 1997. It exists to support, encourage and advance the personal writing of its member authors. The main focus of the club is reviewing and commenting on member authors' work. From time to time, we also do some writing exercises.

Fermilab CWC also conducts an annual writing contest. It is [open for all](#) members of the Fermilab family and winners are awarded prizes. The first one was held in the year [2001](#) and the [second](#) one was recently held in the month of October of 2002.

If you are interested in joining us and are [eligible](#), you are welcome to attend our [meetings](#) and be part of this interesting writing experience.

I am pleased to present to you as a sampler, the first collection of stories by our club's members.

In this edition, we are featuring works by Bakul Banerjee, David Boehnlein, Dinker Charak, Roger Dixon, Cathy Voit, Rod Walton and Bruce Worthel.

Bakul Banerjee is a computer professional and works for the Computing Division's Lepton Hedron Collider Project. David Boehnlein is a physicist and works for the Minos experiment and spends his time at Soudan and Fermilab. Dinker Charak is a computer professional and works for the Computing Division and the Beams Division. Roger Dixon is a physicist and heads the Beams Division. Cathy Voit is an electronics technician and works for the Beams Division. Rod Walton is a biologist and works for the Facilities Engineering Services Section. Bruce Worthel is a documentation and training specialist and works for the Operations Department, Beams Division, and occasionally for the Public Affairs.

Hope you enjoy reading them as much as they have enjoyed writing them. Your feedback is welcome.

- [Editor](#)

At One with Bovinity

David Boehnlein

I amble slowly down the city street and people move respectfully out of my way. I'm not in any particular hurry, but I'm content to let them do so. Indeed, I'm as contented as I've ever been. I feel at peace, a sense of one-ness with the world. Om. I'm happy to just to walk down the street at leisure, maybe looking for a bite to eat. But there isn't much grass here.

That's strange. When did I develop a taste for grass? It seems odd, but I accept it. A group of western tourists stops to take photographs of me and I look to see if any of my friends are among them, but I see no one I recognize. A pretty girl is coming toward me with a garland of flowers. I momentarily contemplate eating them, but she lays them around my horns.

Horns? How did I get horns? I've never had horns. Nonetheless, they seem natural now and I accept them. Somehow, they fit in; they are a part of the whole. I am happy with them. Om. I can't see the flowers, but I can feel them gently brushing my neck and I'm sure they look very nice.

Some other people are with the girl and they are kneeling in the street, putting their faces to the pavement. Have they found some grass? No, they're bowing. They're bowing to me. Once, before I came to India, I would have thought this to be absurd. But since I've been here, I've come to understand another philosophy. Om. It first began to dawn on me when I visited the Taj Mahal. There was a sense of mysticism that seemed to envelop me and the sense grew over the next several days. Or was it weeks? No matter. It solidified when I saw the Holy Man. He was chanting that word, Om. "Ooo-oomm," was the way he said it. I learned that it was a word to bring peace, understanding, and a harmony of the soul with the world. I wanted to bathe in the Holy River.

My friends told me not to do it. "Don't go into the Ganges," they said. "The water isn't clean, there are currents and crocodiles." I didn't listen to them. What does it matter that the water is muddy if it purifies your soul? And are not crocodiles creatures with life worthy of respect? Let the currents take me where they will. Wherever it is, I am destined to go there. I waded into the Holy River as if in a dream.

I don't remember coming out of the water. The next thing I remember is being hungry and eating some grass by the riverbank. Then I wandered into town. I have no particular destination, but I don't mind. I'm at peace with the world and it pleases me just to chant that mystic word, as the holy man did. Ooo-oom.

Strange, though, every time I say it, it seems to come out backwards.

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At the Railroad Café

Rod Walton

I settle onto my regular stool at the bar at Arly's Railroad Cafe'n order a beer from the barmaid. Things ain't too busy yet. Only four-thirty'n most o' the regulars got further to go than I do. I start on my beer'n just sorta halfway listen to the TV. The news's on'n that damn Kennedy's up there again. I cain't hear what he's sayin' but I do know he ain't up to no good. Never thought I'd see the day this country'd have a damn mackerel-snapper sittin' in the White House. It'd take somebody really stupid to screw up a invasion of a two-bit commie island the way he did for Chrissake!

Anyway, ol' Giz Davis walks in the door and sets down a coupla stools from me. Giz's prob'ly the best brick mason in Pose County, but God, if he ain't mournful! Reminds a fella of Abe Lincoln or somethin'. He's real tall and lanky an' always frownin'. So Giz sets down 'n' orders a short beer and' don't say nothin' to me. That don't mean nothin' though, Giz don't talk much anyway. So I says to Carolyn, the barmaid, I says Yeah, and give 'im a long straw to go with it! I love teasin' people like that. I don't mean nothing', I just get a kick out of it. So, he looks up at me like he just realized I was there, which I know he seen me as soon as he walked in, an' says Hi, but I don't get the impression he partic'ly liked my little joke.

So I says to Giz what do ya think o' that yay-hoo on the TV?? D'ja ever think we'd have a damn mackerel snapper sittin' in the White House? I bet he takes his orders straight from the pope, don't chew? Giz allowed how he didn' know, and didn' care much about politics. See, I do. I can't help but be interested in a lotta stuff. I subscribe to Reader's Digest and keep up on the news and the like. It's kinda like a hobby with me. Not many does around here though. Folks has their own worries mostly. Pose County ain't exactly the hub of commerce, ya know, an' people's gotta live.

Tarp Bundy comes in then and sits in a booth'n hollers at Carolyn to get'im a draft when she c'n get around to it. He takes off 'is hat and puts it down, then comes over to'rd the bar. He nods to me, says howdy 'n then says to Giz how he's heard'n's real sorry about what happened, 'n' Giz, he says Thanks 'n' his boy's really shook up. Tarp says, well. Hell, I didn't know what they's talkin' about, so I says to'm what happened? Tarp come over'n set down 'n' says Giz's grandchildren, all four of 'em, all under six, was burnt up in a fire at their house last night up in Laurel where they live. Terrible.

Giz musta felt just awful about it, cuz he gets up, without a word, an' just leaves. Don't say nothin' to nobody. Just think how that'd make you feel, I says to Tarp. Right, Tarp says and goes back to his table. Man, th things 't happens to some folks is downright awful, ain't it? Hard to understand what the good Lord is thinkin' about sometimes if ya ask me.

Carolyn says do I want another beer, 'n' I says course I do, and while I'm waitin" I'm watchin' that damn fool Kennedy – still on the screen talkin' about missiles in Cuba and destroyers 'n' such. I swear, I don't know what this ol' world's comin' to.

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Cow in a Box

Roger Dixon

I woke up smelling of cow pies. Didn't I? What am I doing lying on my back? I must be dead. This is not a natural position for a healthy side of beef. Who said that? I did. Who is I?

"Mooooo! "

Whoever I is keeps right on talking to me. Who is me? I am staring at my hand. I know what it is, but that doesn't keep me from wondering what it is. And there goes all the bawling again. It is not good. Am I remembering this? There it is—somewhere in here with me. I am looking dead into the southbound end of a northbound cow, a pretty sight to be sure. There are cows all around-- and a sizzling noise up ahead. And all the bawling, it is not good. I know where we are going. It is not good. We all know where we are going. We always go there. And then there I am looking down into those soft, brown eyes holding that terrible sizzling stick as the jolt hits with blinding terror, and then order is replaced by frenzy. Then that is gone too.

Where is that voice coming from? Who is remembering this? Where are all these questions coming from? Somehow I know what is going to happen next. It happens every morning after all. First of all there is the voice. It is making me think I am thinking, but I am not. It tells me something is horribly wrong. It puts memories in my head. Are they real? I know I am a cow, or do I? I look at my hand. It doesn't look like a cow hand with all those fingers. And this voice, why does it always have to be there telling me about me and what I am wondering? There is nothing in my mouth to chew. Where is my cud? What is a cud? And what about this strange body? The voice is telling me it was normal for me to be lying on my back, but at the same time, I know it isn't. I know I will roll awkwardly out of bed and get into a strange, upright position. Then I will hesitate for a moment as I decided whether to get down on my hands and knees and crawl into the next room, or whether to stand upright and walk in there like some kind of creature with a brain.

The woman will be in there again. She always is. Time to go. I roll out of bed and stumble into the next room. The woman has a cigarette dangling from her mouth. She always does. She sees me enter, but she looks back down at her coffee and tries to ignore me. I sit down at the table, not a natural thing for a cow to do. The Chicago Tribune is lying on the table next to me. It always is. U.S. bombs Iraq it says. It always does. I look at the date, but I know what it

says before I look. It is always February 13. Just once it would be nice to see February 14, but it won't happen. Or will it? I have to find my way out of here. I need to kill something. I need to kill these voices in my head that are making me think I am thinking. I must find a weapon today. I never do. I won't today. But, if I did, that would fix everything, wouldn't it?. I will try again.

The woman just sits at the table. Now she is scowling at me, the ash on her cigarette about to fall into her coffee. It never does. I scowl back as if that would change my state of being, as if it would let me out of this well where everything circles from one wall of nothing to another-- high thoughts for a cow. They always are. I never get out. There is no probability for that. It would violate all the boundary conditions. Whoa! How can you think like that in a box? I know I'm not really thinking that anyway.

The woman shoves a plate across the table to me. Steak and eggs? My god! I can't eat that. I pick up the crayon that is lying beside the plate and scrawl a message on the napkin that is always there. "Eat more chicken." The woman snatches the napkin and reads it. Then she throws it to the floor. It is always the same.

What's chicken? I try to moo, but a strange, squeaky sound comes from my throat, and this voice in my head says it makes perfect sense. But, does it? It is an urgent plea, "Let me out of this hole where everything goes round in circles."

The woman looks at me as she taps her cigarette with her forefinger knocking the ashes on the floor. "Well, aren't you going to work?"

Work? I think. I have no idea what she means, and yet the voice tells me I do. I see the soft brown eyes again. I always do. I answer her, "No, not this time." Yet I know I will go.

"What do you mean you crazy, bastard. Get the hell out of here, now. And, don't come back here neither. I don't want you around no more."

"I don't know where to go." I protest. Part of me is lying, but part of me really doesn't know where to go. And, part of me knows I am already there.

"Go to hell then!" She stares back into her coffee cup. She always does.

"Yip" The voice inside says. Then it screams, "Help!" The strangely jointed hind legs extend lifting me into an upright position, and the odd, elongated feet begin to shuffle toward the door. I begin bawling. Why? The voice tells me I'm going to the slaughterhouse, but it doesn't tell me why. I only know there are no choices to be made—ever.

I woke up smelling of cow pies. Didn't I? What am I doing lying on my back? I must be dead. This is not a natural position for a healthy side of beef. Who said that? I did. Who is I?

"Mooooo! ". . .

Lantana Field

Bakul Banerjee

White fields of today are filled by dead silence of snow, whipped up by fierce wind. Stubborn young oak stands waiting for spring and another cycle of birth, yet holding on to its old coat of brown leaves, cannot let go, dreaming of acorns yet to come for many years, spreading roots beyond the snowline. You live far, far away from here, away from my time, my place, my list of meaningless tasks but our memories always converge to the limits of our childhood under hidden roots touching times and places and chores. We rolled down the emerald meadow with the silver bezel of a sparse road dotted by hand carts, pushed by patient people, perfumed by roasted corns on the glowing fire of charcoal. We played hide and seek around neat rounds of shrubs with prolific flowers, but with no name, scratchy leaves holding possible poisons to protect those brilliant colors of crimson red, cadmium yellow, magenta, and lavender. You made me mad, sucking the honey from the flowers, just teasing me. I did beat you up with the scare of poison on my mind. Later, we walked past the bamboo grove of our childhood kicking shallow roots, but not the passive snakes under our feet, the rhythm of Kerosene lantern illuminating swinging tree fairies. The wick, trimmed neatly by our mother, dared not to spew up soot as it drank the foul fuel. In the darkness, I wished to name the flower with invisible roots shooting for ever to live and making memories for me and perhaps for you. It is invasive Lantana, I found out today, waiting for humming birds to drink from their numerous cups of honey. From now on, Lantana will live forever under my white field of snow.

Margaret's Charms

Bruce Worthel

Margaret stepped back from the counter. The middle aged man looking at her charms had to be a cop. His dark hair was cut close, his face clean shaven, his black shoes shined. Everything about him said copper, except for his eyes. His eyes had a sparkle, a gleam, a desire for things beyond earthly concerns.

If she'd seen those eyes at last night's meeting in L. A. she'd have sworn they were eyes of power. But here at her shop, everything but those sparkling blue eyes seemed out of place.

"Is this all you have? Just these four?" he asked, looking but not touching.

"Those are all the charms I have," she answered. "They're difficult to make. Time consuming and draining." She took another long look at the gentleman. He had to be a cop. Though he had a placid face, she sensed a hard, disciplined body and a disciplined mind.

"I'm sorry. I guess I can't help you," she said and started to slide the tray off the counter top. The man moved quickly, grabbing her forearm in a sure grip.

"No, I'm the one who's sorry. I want something special and I've checked all over town. Everyone has directed me to you."

Margaret didn't pull away. She wasn't afraid of him physically, only politically. What she did wasn't illegal. She made no claims about her charms, no promises of instant wealth, love, or athletic prowess. She would only state the driving force she felt during the time it took her to make the charm.

"Who directed you to me?" she asked.

"I was asked not to tell," he said letting go of her arm, his face turning a little pink.

She spied into his sparkling eyes and saw Rita Moller. Saw him handing Rita two twenty dollar bills and Rita handing him a piece of paper. Then, after Rita disappeared, but before the vision ended, she saw what made his eyes sparkle as they did. Stars. Not a night sky full of stars, but an endless vista of stars.

"Miss," he said gently shaking her arm. Margaret jerked as she took a quick breath. "Miss? Are you all right?" She brought her arm away and her hand to her mouth. She smiled. She hadn't spaced like that in a long time.

"Rita," she said composing herself, "had no business referring you to me without talking to me first."

The man's eyes went wide. "It's true then."

"Who are you?" she asked. "I don't think you're a cop. Are you a politician? A religious nut?" She was leaning toward thinking him a priest or minister. They at least believed in magic, understood how thought and action went hand in hand. A priest was better to deal with than a politician, but both were dangerous powers, both snakes ready to bite if it served their purpose.

The man's mouth opened as Margaret pulled her tray of charms away. It was the first sign of concern she saw or sensed in him since he walked into her back alley shop.

"I need a charm, Miss Theriot," he said. "Mrs. Moller said you'd be the one. I think she was correct."

Rita even told him my last name, she thought. She'd have to do something about that.

"I've been having these dreams," he continued. "I need a charm to protect me against fire. Mrs. Moller said you had a fire charm. Do you?"

Margaret held the charm tray tightly. He is a priest, she thought, and he's seeing his death. She shook her head, her small silver earrings tinkling. He thinks my charm will protect him.

"I'm sorry, Sir. You'll have to leave. My charms won't help you there."

"Where?" he asked, his face wrinkled in confusion.

She started to look into his eyes again, to see the truth of it, but saw the twinkling stars instead, far off galaxies. Stars. She broke away before she slipped under their power.

Margaret stared at the man as he stared back. He made no threats. No angling for position. No posturing. She felt very much at ease. Comfortable. Almost sensual in his presence. It's his eyes, she thought, a gentle but disciplined power.

The man smiled shyly. He held out his hand. "My name's Crossfield, Scott Crossfield. I'm a test pilot and plane designer." She shook his hand. It was a firm handshake, steady.

"I'm testing a new engine tomorrow, at Edward's," he said, "a million horsepower jet engine. The engine is in the plane but this is a ground test, a test to check the engine's throttling controls. I keep having these dreams." He paused for a moment. "The engine explodes." He looked away.

Margaret set the tray down. She smiled, but tried to keep it to herself.

"Crossfield? I've heard the name. It's the X-15, right?"

"Ahh, I've already said more than I should."

"No. That's all right. I understand," she said as she came to understanding.

"This is my charm of fire protection," she said, pointing to a bit of fire oak, covered with the crushed purple flower of willow herb, varnished, and set in the center of a small silver disc. "Wear it around your neck, under your uniform, with the silver next to your skin. If you are in a fire or explosion the metal of the charm will become red hot and burn your skin, but that's all the hurt you will receive." She placed the charm in Crossfield's hand. With a child's delight, he gazed at its simple elegance.

"How much?"

"Five Hundred dollars," she said. He counted out the bills.

"The test is at dawn," he said apologetically, turning for the door, "it's an hour drive back to Edward's."

"Mr. Crossfield," she called to him before he left, stuffing the money into her dress pocket. "If for some reason you don't get into space, don't give up your dreams."

He stopped.

"Charms often don't work for the charmer. I can use none of my own," she said gesturing toward the velvet lined tray. "Perhaps it would be better to let someone else take the charm you've built into space."

Mr. Crossfield's forehead furrowed, a question crossed his face, and Margaret saw a sadness dim those sparkling eyes.

"The X-15," she said, unsure if he understood. "The rocket is your charm." Margaret followed him to the door and locked it after he walked out. She turned off the lights and flipped the closed sign.

She sat in the old chair she kept by the front window and gazed at the night sky. Sleep caught her as the first rays of light brushed the Lancaster city streets.

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The bump of the early afternoon paper thrown against the door woke Margaret. As she opened her door she saw the headlines, "X-15 EXPLODES, CROSSFIELD SURVIVES." She sat down holding the paper to her chest and smiled.

She could use Crossfield's charm when he rebuilt it. A little bit of her magic would flow from Crossfield to the new rocket-plane. When the X-15 soared into space she'd be there, sailing over the horizon, watching the stars rush on to infinity. After all, charms were her line of business.

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Mooneyes

Bruce Worthel

I

Am hypnotized

By her full moon eyes,

Mesmerized

By her laughing fingers,

My hand lingers

On her face,

Wanting to touch

The moon.

The Boat Ride

Dinker Charak

Taking the boat ride is the most pleasurable thing for me. What I don't like about it is the humid air that hangs around you. It makes me sweaty. Washing my face with the river water gives me some relief. But, soon the water turns into sweat that tickles down my face and I have to wipe it each time. I like putting water in my hair. It must be making me look very clean and handsome. When my hair is wet I feel so good that I sit with my back straight, chest wide and a smile on my face.

There are many things I like about the boat ride other than my wet hair and splashing water on my face. I like to see children jump into the river from the overhanging trees, feel the boat rock gently when someone moves and watch people in the boat. I see many new faces in the boat. The boatman's is the only face I see always on the boat. Others come and go but he always remains there. In spite of the bright sun, it is not hot today. Sweat will not tickle down my face today. Anyway, I will enjoy pouring cool water on my hair and feel the breeze blows through it. Taking the boat ride is the most pleasurable thing for me.

I like thinking about the boat, the river and the two *ghats*. These *ghats* are small, stone paved places on the bank of the river from where my boat ride starts and ends. But I do not like talking about the *ghat* on the other side. Next to one *ghat* is my village and from the other *ghat* starts a road that goes away from the village. One *ghat* has so many trees, people and homes on it. The other just has stones and rocks.

I once heard the boatman say there are rocks even deep inside the river. I guess there are rocks everywhere. Wonder if there is a rock inside me too? They are surely not in my mind or else my mind wouldn't have been so free. I know my mind can wander more than anyone's in the village. Many people are jealous of me because of this and that is why they don't talk to me. They look at me from the corner of their eyes, pretending as if they are not looking at me. The other boatmen too don't like me. They keep asking me if I have money to pay for the boat ride even when they know I have none. "*Hamari kishti mai mat baith!*" - Don't sit in our boats! I wouldn't have sat in their boat even if they let me. But I like this boat. I like thinking about the boat, the river and the two *ghats*.

There are not many people on the boat today - the boatman, this lady with a child in her arms and me. I often think about this. Whenever, in my mind I picture a lady, she is either sitting in sun, running her hands through her long, beautiful hair or she is sitting with a baby in her arms. It may be so because I do not have someone like that in my life. But then, I do not have any money either. So, I wonder why I do not picture a lady counting money. Or even a lady instead of this boatman. That would be nice. That would add one more thing to my list of things that make the boat ride pleasurable.

The lady traveling with us today was sitting very still and very quiet. Although there's no one there to talk to, but still you know when people are quiet in their mind too. I know when I am like that. I spend hours like that. But I am never quiet in my mind on a boat. People are quiet in their minds when they are very calm or are so disturbed that they just shut up their mind.

Had it not been for that pestering fly, I would not have even known if she was even alive. The fly kept sitting on the baby's face and she kept fanning the face with her hand, scaring away the fly. The fly must be disturbing her mind's quiet. She covered the baby's face with her *sari* and went back to be quiet in her mind.

I knew it was no use trying to tell her things were going to be alright and she would do well in her new life in a new place. She did not want to be disturbed. There was a lot to talk about and the other side of the river was far. I turned and looked towards our destination. It seemed so near. But the river's flow made reaching there slow. I turned back my attention to the lady. There was nothing else to occupy me. There are not many people on the boat today.

They all carry the same pain in their hearts. They are all so uncertain about the future, worried about the new life and sad as if they would never know happiness again. They are all scared of their mind's strength failing them. Still, they take heart and move on. We are all poor, everyone tells me. All believe things would be different if we were rich. I do not know how different we would have been if we were rich. Me, for one, would still ride the boat, however rich I was. But some still wandered off to the other side of the river. Better life some say and destiny pulling them away from home, others say. I am happy my destiny is so weak that it cannot pull me off from my home.

My attention again drifted back to the lady. She had shifted a little from where she sat causing the boat to rock gently. The sun now shines on her back. The boatman's long bamboo is lying along the length boat. Its one end has mud on it. The boatman uses it to push the bank away from the boat. I am sitting by that end. The lady is sitting by the other end. The boatman quietly rows the boat with his other oar. A poet's moment - a lady, the sounds of river, the gentle splash of the big oar hitting the water and the random rocking of the boat.

"How long will it take to reach the other *ghat*?" she asked the boatman.

"It will take some time. The wind is blowing the other way."

Saying so, the boatman started to row a bit harder. She sounded very worried and impatient. Impatient to face whatever lay ahead of her? Some people are like that. They are scared in their mind of the unknown but also brave in their hearts. Still, if they do not face the unknown soon, this battle between mind and heart would break them down.

I wonder what worried her more. Leaving her home or the new place? The unfamiliarity of the new place would have worried me more. It took me so many boat rides to know this river well. Now it feels like home to me. Places where people live are not as simple as this river. It must take years to know them as well as I know this river.

When my mind is noisy, I get a feel of what the thought of living in a new place could do. The mornings would be cruel to her. Waking her up from the comfort of sleeping at home to the realization that soon she'll no longer be home. The mornings are ruled by our weaknesses. But the days must be gentle on her. Bringing her face to face with whatever made her leave her home and strengthening her heart. The days are ruled by our strengths.

I wish I could sing to her what a poet once sang to me - that a raindrop would never be a pearl unless it leaves its home in the clouds. Only then can it chance to fall into an oyster. Maybe there was someone waiting for her at the other *ghat*. Maybe no one was. It won't matter. Away from home, she will have only her own strength. The ones she would miss would live in her minds. In her sad moments, she would summon those memories and amuse herself.

She kept on staring at the distant view of our village from the boat. As if it's images would become inerasable from her mind if she kept on looking. As if she was holding hard to the last strands of her life here as destiny was pulling her away. I wish I could reach out and give that last tug on that strand and break her free from her bonds. The longer she held to it, the more it would hurt. I would not be surprised if she had a drop of tear in her eye. I had one in mine. The sad way they try to linger on. They all carry the same pain in their hearts.

Memories only bring pain. The same memories that she would cherish away from home will hurt her when she returns. I can see the dead past alive in their eyes when they return. Their eyes want to see what they remembered. Times change, people change, this boat would and I would, but unfortunately, their memories just won't keep up.

I wish I could tell her not to remember anything about her home. Her village will cheat on her while she is away. It would cheat by not staying the same. With

each rain, summer, festival or death, it will change. I even see it has changed each time I return from my boat ride. When she returns she would realize that her home, as she remembered, was lost forever. It would shake the ground beneath her mind's feet. This village would be as new to her as the place she is going to is now.

Homes are very strange that way. Once you leave them, they never remain the same. If memories may help her live, they would kill her when she returns. She would realize she does not have any home. She would no longer be of this village. Nor would memories of the village let her be of the new place her village has become. Memories of past do no good. I wish I could erase them for her. Memories only bring pain.

She suddenly looked at me, realizing I had been staring at her. She looked away and moved the *sari* around herself till she felt covered. The boatman read her thoughts.

"Don't mind him. He is just a madman. Travels a lot in my boat. Ignore him. He will keep himself busy playing with the river water."

She was going to make it. She would survive and do well in life. She had already taken to first step. She had already started misunderstanding people.

(Untitled)

Cathy Voit

"Call me Israel."

It was our first meeting. "Israel Davis," he said sticking out a rather bony hand.

He was just a kid compared to me but I felt an immediate affinity for him. Since he was a new employee, I was his superior only by time spent on the job and was assigned to instruct him as I had done many others.

What could a young black man in his twenties and a white woman of nearly forty possibly have in common?

We lived in the same neighborhood for one thing. I was living in a hundred dollar a month, one room apartment in an old house, which Israel informed me was considered to be in a "bad neighborhood" in a "dangerous" part of town.

He only lived five blocks away so it didn't take long for us to decide that carpooling would be advantageous to us both. We had two clunkers between us, which soon dilapidated into one clunker...mine. His wife had a high-end clunker that she used to get to her job, so Israel paid me for gas and I drove us back and forth to work...on the good days.

Somehow we managed to get to work every day and slowly became comfortable and at ease with one another. We began stopping at McDonald's almost every morning. The one on our way to work had no drive through so we always went in. I would get in one line and he in another, then we'd pile back into the car and crank our way to work.

One morning as we were leaving McDonald's he said to me casually, "I didn't have to pay for my coffee or Egg McMuffin." After a few rounds of, "Oh, you did too!" and "no I didn't"s. I relented and asked him how that could be. "I almost never pay if it's busy in there," he bragged.

His sparse explanation made it no more believable to me so he challenged me to watch him the next morning. "You'll see, he grinned"

If I saw Israel on the street I would probably assign all types of untoward behavior to him. The whites of his eyes were yellow and blood shot most of the time. He was extremely thin, almost emaciated looking and his clothes seemed to just hang without concern as to whether they actually touched his body.

But I didn't need to make any such judgments, he was employed where I was and no matter his physical condition, he was not the street person he imitated in appearance. And I liked him.

This was before the days of ultra automation that is currently in effect at McDonalds. Someone would bring your order to the counter when it was ready and at that time the cashier would accept your money. I kept Israel in my peripheral vision the next morning as he placed his order. Once placed, he stepped to the side of the line so others could be waited on. Soon his order was brought to the counter and then I don't know exactly what happened. It was as though he just evaporated. One minute he was there and the next he was waiting for me by the door.

"I'm invisible" was his excuse to me as we got into the car. "What does that mean?" I asked. I was incredulous. How had he done that? "I mean it, he repeated, I'm invisible."

After much probing and prodding he finally revealed that he believed his blackness made him invisible to whites. "And," I quizzed, "with no little help from you?" The answer was obvious to me before I asked. He used this to his advantage and even helped it along. I watched him work his 'black' magic several more times before I tried to convince him to start paying.

But to my own amazement I was not so much shocked by his stealing as I was by the fact that it was so easy to accomplish. No hold up, no guns or threats...just a quiet retreat into his own blackness leaving the white world to take care of itself.

This was the seventies...we were all equal now. No more segregation... no more hatred between the races.... no more prejudices...

How appalling to discover... the white whale lives.