

in progress...

Volume 1, Issue 2
December 2002

The Department of English Newsletter

Welcome to the second issue of **in progress...** for the fall semester of 2002. In this issue we feature short fiction and poetry from three members of the department. For extended versions of these excerpts, please visit the English Department website at <http://www.harpercollege.edu/libarts/eng/dept/inprogress>.

News from then to now—Elizabeth Turner's essay "Teaching Willa Cather in May Sarton's *Faithful are the Wounds*" is scheduled for publication in this fall's issue of *Teaching Cather*. Catherine Restovich will present "The Middle Passage as Trope in African American and Afro-Caribbean Women's Writing" at the 14th annual conference on Tropology: Text and Context (Binghamton University, NY), 21-23 March 2003. On 25 October, Jessica Walsh successfully defended her dissertation, "The Writing Cure: Women, Poetry, and Madness, 1880-1940," at the University of Iowa.

Short Fiction

Greg Herriges's most recent novel is *The Winter Dance Party Murders* (Wordcraft, 1998). The following selection is an excerpt from his short story "Connecticut Holiday," which appeared in a recent issue of *Story Quarterly*.

Marder, fresh from his morning shave, mind still in neutral, sipped tepid coffee and glanced out the living room window at the pocket of pedestrians waiting zombie-like in the cruddy slush to cross Seventh Avenue. He did not hear the portable TV in the kitchen playing the whistled theme of "The Andy Griffith Show," did not see Opie stoop to pick up the stone, throw it, and rejoin his father on the dirt road in their time-frozen world of perpetual syndication. On the small glass table beside him lay twenty or so student essays, recently graded, covered in red as though hemorrhaging. Marder was thinking about how much he did not want to attend his wife's Christmas dinner, even though his daughters, the beloved little girls who'd had the audacity to grow up behind his back and who rarely called anymore unless they needed three hundred dollars in a hurry ("Thank you, Daddy!"), would be there. A sharp pain stabbed the right side of his gut as he pictured the luxurious house in Litchfield, the one Camille's new husband had bought her five years ago as a wedding present. Howard. Howard the showy

bastard. Howard the showy, wife-stealing bastard. That had been just six months after Camille surprised Marder, made good on an old threat and walked out on and divorced him, setting a New York litigational speed record in the process.

Natural for the girls to go off on their own, make their way in the world. Ophelia, the oldest, now a prelaw graduate of DePaul University, had inherited her mother's confidence and organizational abilities, along with her mother's sleek jawbone and cute butt. Tess, the youngest, hadn't inherited anything from either of them. A freshman at Arizona State, she gathered barely passing grades and Bohemian boyfriends who dressed in black and hadn't smiled since PHISH played their farewell concert. Marder knew damned well that if he stayed away, he might be spared the painful humiliation of having rejection and failure rubbed in his face, but stapled to this considerable benefit came the inevitable outcome that he would not see the girls again till spring, if then.

(To read more of Prof. Herriges's story, see <http://www.harpercollege.edu/libarts/eng/dept/inprogress>)

More Short Fiction

Glenn Taylor's short story "Pit Bull for Sale," which is excerpted below, first appeared in *Gulf Coast* (14.1 [2002]), and was chosen by Stuart Dybek as the winner of *Gulf Coast's* annual prize in fiction.

My fingertips were dry and shiny then from the magazines. I'd sit and rub them against my thumbs while I was at red lights. One day a week, 7 am to 3 pm, I was delivering *Auto Trader* magazines to 39 convenience stores through Southeast Austin. I got four dollars a stop, and they classified me as an independent contractor, which meant no taxes, so I got a hundred and fifty-six dollars a week for eight hours total work. And the work was, as Phil this other driver put it, "nothin' but robotics" after a couple weeks. You grab your invoice off the passenger seat, pop the trunk, slit open the stacks and take them in order: *Heavy Equipment Trader*, *Big Truck Trader*, *Cycle Trader*, *Antique and Sports Car Trader*, *Boat and RV Trader*, *Auto Trader*. You wait till there's not a customer at the register and count off the old issues you're taking and the new ones you're dropping off, add the totals and subtract—you take back the difference. You get watched closely by the clerk, sometimes double-checked even though you use a calculator.

I guessed it was the thumbing through of the glossy covers that did it to my fingers. Counting them off by feeling their edges, carrying the stacks, pretty soon the tips were tingling and red. It must have been some chemical in the ink or something, but they started burning when I picked my coffee out of the holder. Then I'd rub them

together and the tips felt smooth, like when you rub double-sided silk between your thumb and forefinger real fast. I started to look close up at the swirls in my fingerprints and they weren't as deep, like my fingerprints had been sanded off. (To read more of Prof. Taylor's short fiction, see <http://www.harpercollege.edu/libarts/eng/dept/inprogress>)

And Now Some Poetry

Kris Piepenburg's seasonal poem "The Right One" seems the right way to end this issue of **in progress...**

The Right One

She nags him—

put your hat on—
*go back to the car
and get your hat—*

then turns my way—

he used to be a big man
*had most of his stomach
removed if he gets a cold
it could kill him and I
don't know it could be
our last Christmas together
I just want to get the right
one.*

He returns, after a while,
puffing along, inflated jacket
and football team cap,
his wife asking us
at every promising stake,
sharply but patiently,

whaddya think of this one?

My arms deep in the boughs
of a balsam, knife at the taut
edge of the string, about to
cut through—they change their
mind. I wave my arms, talk
and sell—

*no Canadian balsam this year, nope,
a few Douglas fir over there, though.
The Scotch are from Michigan and
Wisconsin, white and balsam are from
Wisconsin, too, Fraziers are from
the Carolinas. They're real nice
this year, nice and full, real nice,
hold their needles real well,
of course you're always going to
lose a few, no they don't spray
them with anything but they
shear 'em in the field
to get the Christmas tree shape*

Our breath flashes out in cones
of smoke, little smoky cones,
their heads turn, our eyes dart,
theirs to mine, to a tree,
a Scotch (no!), a white pine,
they go see, they cover the lot,
row by row, compare for gaps
and holes, trunk thickness,
will it fit in the stand,
but calmly,
patiently
in the raw wind,
slowly,
regularly,
without effort,
as though they'd done it
this way all along,
respected themselves,
each task,
each other.

I'm not going in to get warm.
I stamp the needle-covered ground,
the icy mud and gravel,
frayed pieces of old
rope. I swing my arms, tighten
the hood, wipe my eyes,
watch the whipping lines
of light bulbs and the clock
at the bank across the street,
and drift, remembering
the summers working here,
how after 3:30 the numbers pass
more quickly, you wind down,
sweep up, a broom against carrot
fronds, limp in the dust,
scrape of a pan. Then, six o'clock,
the boys at the awning ropes,
eager to get out, shutting out
the last cars, Bob holding out
corn through a dim gap
to some Mexican men, his son
at the last rope, ready to
bring it down—

the knife slits through, the tree
tips over, I grip the trunk,
lift and grunt to their quick words
about the warming house,
and through the forest,
they are gone—

it's a small balsam for their last one
together, thirty four dollars. I thank them
now, tie it down on top, and wave
them on. Bundled up, buckled in,
they drive away, smiling and talking
together, making vapor in the car.

(To read and hear more of Prof. Piepenburg's poetry, see <http://www.harpercollege.edu/libarts/eng/dept/inprogress>)

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