



Shorts

Traveling

by Katie Rutledge

There's an old song on the radio, one you used to know but have forgotten. The boy comes in on the choruses. You ask him where he learned it. He says his mother. He'd look like her, but his eyes when you say those words make you change your mind. His hair is like yours, yet it makes no difference to him as the wind plays with it and offers it back. The sweet smell of grass floats on the air, and you tell the boy about your childhood here, and how once you were young just like him. His eyes say he doesn't believe you. He stares out the window. It's plain he wishes he were the wind now, or back with his mother in her studio room, with the painter named Sky who teaches him about karma. But he's with you now, with the man he calls Joe, although you told him to call you Dad. You wonder what his mother has told him about you.

You look out at the road. There's nothing in sight, which makes you nervous. But then the boy was raised in a city, the way you weren't, and you know he's exulting in not seeing a subway stop for the next thousand miles. You've lived too long in the land of grass and wind. You tell him he's lucky to live in the city, so close to everything. His eyes say you're crazy but his mouth mumbles *yeah, I guess*. The smell of grass is stronger now, spreading on both sides of the road. You tell the boy about your races in the grass after school, with the wind blowing so hard you fall. How the smell was so sweet and crisp, sweeter than a fresh-picked apple on a summer's day. And the silence was deafening, louder than church. The boy says he's never been. The words surprise you. You say you'll go, the two of you, sometime.

You stop the car near a field for lunch. Food is sandwiches by his mother. Tuna fish. You don't like it but eat anyway. The boy drinks a soda and watches the wind play with the grass, forward and back. You pick up

the wrappers and stuff them in the glove compartment. You start the car and tell him you should go now to beat the traffic, and you know the boy doesn't understand the irony. You sit for a moment, and the look in the boy's eyes tells you what his mouth won't. He moves with an ease that used to be yours when you were young just like him, although he *still* doesn't believe you. You watch him as the wind plays with both your hair and his, and doesn't offer it back. No, you decide: the boy doesn't look that much like his mother. He looks like you. ★

What Is Fire?

by Alvin Carter, Jr.

Fire is a kind of rage that flows into a controllable ball I sometimes put in a little box with all the other fireballs. That box stays in the back of my head and sits there flaring and filling up. Fire makes me want to do things unordinary: juggle blocks of burning wood, punch red-hot blocks of steel. When you look into my eyes, they'll tell you to stay away from me. I am fire. I am unordinary. Alvin is fire.

I want to say the word fire and you can see it in my eyes. I want to take that fire and burn away the fear, burn away the mask of the man who tried to rob me. I want that fire to make concentrated smoke. The longer the fire burns, the more concentrated I get. I want to make that fire scare away the tough bullies, the mad dogs. I want to make that fire change colors and spit it at the sky for everyone to see. They will see my fire. They will see the fire that burns in me. ★



Monsters

by Katie Hoener

"Matilda, can I go on the swings, PLEEEAAAASSEE? I can almost work them all by myself, with NO help!" a sprite of a girl screeches at my knee. Her blonde braid swings jauntily behind her green T-shirt. I release the grubby hand, sticky from a baby-sitting peanut butter fiasco, and seat myself at the edge of the sun-drenched playground.

At the apex of the jungle gym stands a little girl, all dolled up in a pink jumper and frilly white blouse. One hand rests casually on the railing, her small fingers caressing the plastic restraints. The midday sun reflects warmly off her mahogany-colored skin; the