

# CLOVER

A LITERARY RAG

VOLUME 7 ..... SUMMER 2014



## CONTENTS

<i>Ensalada</i> .....	David Lee.....	5
Herbal Remedies .....	Takaacs.....	6-7
The Fates Hang Wallpaper .....	Vignali.....	8
Amanda Bubble.....	Bullis.....	9-11
My Life .....	Boyle.....	12
Morning Warning .....	Nikola-Wren.....	13
Chasing Buttons.....	Lawry.....	14
Kuskokwim River.....	Zerby.....	15
The White Boy .....	Ledesma.....	16-32
My Mother's Wish .....	Kendall.....	33-34
Paper Shredder .....	McDowell.....	35
Shoelace.....	Milstead.....	36-37
Basement.....	Tustin.....	38-39
Insomnia.....	Chase-Foster.....	40
Dearest .....	Leigh.....	41-50
In June.....	Belcaster.....	51-52
Night.....	Henrikson.....	53
Awaiting Sweet Nectar.....	Rolnick.....	54-56
Calculating.....	Kendall.....	57-58
At the Annual Potluck.....	Erickson.....	59-60
Listening Like the Dead .....	Erickson.....	61
Untitled .....	Perchik.....	62
In a Stiff Embrace .....	Hunter.....	63-65
The Mouse.....	Wicinski.....	66-71
One Summer Day .....	Woods.....	72-75
Whale Skeleton.....	Smith.....	76
Swallowed.....	Henrikson.....	77-78
Breath and a Bucket .....	Carter.....	79-80
Learning from the Birds.....	Hunter.....	81-82
Metempsychosis .....	Jon D. Lee.....	83

Contents continued inside.

## Dearest

Laurel Leigh

If I ever get out of Clay County, which is on the Minnesota side of the Red River, I'm going to Burleigh County, Bismarck specifically. That's two hundred miles from Clay in the middle of North Dakota—and where my momma's stone is with letters carved in that say *Dearest*. For all the cars my daddy fixes in his garage that we live over, we never get in one and go anywhere. Maybe Detroit Lakes on Fourth of July. He doesn't talk about my momma much, but one thing I remember is how she was known for her pies. Once she got cash money for winning at a fair, and I keep her blue ribbon in my dresser drawer.

That's why the raffle at fall festival is important. The prize is a new RCA color TV from the Sears-Roebuck catalog. I could give a whit who gets the TV, but whoever at school sells the most raffle tickets gets to take a bus trip to Bismarck to learn about Sacagawea. For me, it's the getting to Bismarck part that matters. So far, I'm in second place behind Mary Lee Bachman. Her momma has family just over the bridge in Cass County, on the Dakota side of the Red, and they all bought tickets from Mary Lee.

This morning I leave early for school and sell tickets on the way. I have to hurry before Mary Lee runs out of relatives and comes poaching. I turn off the street at Gooseberry Park and ride my bike on the dirt path alongside the Red. The morning wind makes the water ripply, but I don't have time to stop and toss stones off the

*Leigh, con't.*

bank. I like to try to throw all the way to the Dakota side. Once or twice I almost made it when the wind blew just right.

When I can see the old Lutheran church I turn away from the Red and onto the street, knock on doors with my dollar tickets. Most everybody takes one and sweet old Miss Trimble buys three. One for each of her cats. I say good-bye to her and get on my bike and pedal hard till I'm past Snee's house. Not sure, but I think he's looking at me out his front window. I don't know much about Snee. If that's his first name or his last name or when he arrived in Clay. One day he's just there in his faded blue house that has pebble rock in the front yard where most folks plant bent grass.

'He makes gals show their itty bitty titties,' I heard Danny Agenbroad tell some kids. Danny's in fourth grade like me 'cause he was held back.

'Snee likes bad gals,' Danny says today. 'He was probably in jail before he came here.'

I put both hands to my mouth to hide how I suck my thumb sometimes. It's recess and I'm sitting on the merry-go-round watching big kids play tetherball. After recess we have math problems, then our teacher reads from *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Billy Coleman is so smart raising those dogs and such. I wish I had a coonhound of my own, but my daddy says a dog like that would bark too loud and eat too much.

After school I sit back out on the merry-go-round and take the raffle money out of the envelope to count it. Mary Lee comes pretending to walk by but sneaking glances.

She says hi and I say hi back and wait until she leaves to finish counting. I'm almost even with her and a little over two weeks to go. Then I'll be in Bismarck saying hello to my momma's stone. Dearest. I have a map of Bismarck and marked on it where the cemetery is. I don't know my way around since I was only there long enough to get born. But it's where my momma was from, which is why she wanted to get sent back when it was her time.

On my way home I'm nearly past Snee's and forget to steer around the big pothole that's been there forever. I hit it hard and hear my tire blow and I bounce off my bike. Somehow I land on my feet and grab up the bike by the handlebars and run. Push my bike with the tire making that flub-flub noise. When I look back to see if Snee was chasing me, he's not there even though I thought I heard something. I push my bike to the church and sit on the front steps to rest. The old church is supposed to get torn down, but nobody's gotten around to it and folks started storing stuff in it. The wood pews are pushed to one end and old lawn mowers and rusted tools are scattered around inside.

At home I go in my daddy's shop and find him underneath a Buick.

'You gotta fix my bike,' I say to his legs.

'Hand me that wrench,' he says.

I get down and look underneath the car.

'But I got school tomorrow and the tire's broke.'

*Leigh, con't.*

He says my legs don't look broke and that I can walk a mile.

Next morning I ask again about the bike. He says when he has time and quit bugging. Walking to school means I won't have much time for selling tickets, so I take the shortest way I know, which still means going along the river bank. I start singing a song I know about two cowpokes who go on a trip and lasso the devil. I'm swinging my arm like how a cowboy would wind up for a toss and before I know it there goes the envelope that's got the raffle money in it. The lip on the envelope is folded over not stuck on, and the wind blows into it and out goes all the raffle dollars. Eighty-eight dollars cash money.

There's dollar bills blowing everywhere but spread out so I can barely grab at one. Soon as there's a clump ready to land on the ground the wind takes them up and scatters them. The harder I chase, the faster the dollars skitter away. The money goes out over the Red with a few dropping low enough to be caught by the water but most blow toward the other side. I run for the cross-bridge, but I can hardly see the bills anymore. There's nothing to do but stand on the bridge and watch my chances of seeing my momma's stone fly away to North Dakota.

I only saved eleven dollars. When I get to school tardy the teacher says if there's a good reason. I don't say boo, which gets me a rap on the knuckle from her ruler. It's the longest day at school scrunching in my desk listening to lessons and teacher reading, and Billy Coleman's dogs died. Then at dinner my daddy is grumpy from adding up accounts, and I lose my courage to tell him about the raffle money being gone. He goes back to the shop and I don't do my homework.

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## CONTENTS

..... *Weed* .....

..... *Truth* .....