

## A BAD THING

I got this weird call today from Chase's little brother.  
I haven't seen Chase in months  
and I don't really know him all that well.  
His brother is probably in high school I guess  
and he said he was doing a report  
on what he wants to be when he "grows up."  
He said he wanted to be a writer  
so he was calling me because Chase told him  
I wrote poetry and did readings.  
I don't know what he wanted me to say —  
he asked about money a couple of times  
and I didn't laugh.  
Which I thought was good of me.  
I told him you don't make money as a writer  
unless you write novels, best-selling novels.  
I wish I could have said something really great  
something insightful and inspiring, but I didn't.  
He ended the call by saying he guessed  
he couldn't call me a professional poet —  
he'd call me a "poetry buff" and I said, "Whatever."  
I'm no good at talking to people.  
It's a bad thing, as a human being,  
not to be able to talk to people.  
I don't know what to do about it though.  
I just seem to be very clumsy when I talk to people,  
mostly people I don't know.  
I guess I would get better with practice  
but that just sounds horrible —  
practicing talking to people I don't know,  
starting up conversations with people  
I probably won't have anything in common with  
and probably won't like.  
That's the real problem.  
I should start over.  
It's a bad thing, as a human being,  
not to like most other people.  
In fact, this is such a bad thing  
I can't even talk about it.

## KANSAS

Tim and Dave and I are sitting in Buster's  
at a little round table next to the stairs.  
Right by Dave's head is a picture of Kansas.  
It says so in pencil on the black mat.  
It's almost all sky — blue with white clouds  
all the way down to the brown strip along the bottom  
with a tiny farm in the corner.

I say, "It looks like that in Nebraska, huh?"  
Dave says, "Yeah" — that's where he's from.  
I say, "The clouds look really neat  
the way you can see them hanging in the sky  
the way you can see the space above them  
where they are and how they're hanging."  
And Dave looks at me like I'm crazy.  
"You usually see clouds mostly just from the bottom.  
You don't see how they're in the sky."  
He doesn't get it. Tim understands.  
He's from Southern California too.

— Stephanie Hager

South Pasadena CA

#### OLD HABITS

Harry and Marley promised each other never to smoke again. "However nervous we're feeling," Harry said, "we won't light up!" "Even if we're in a party and everyone is smoking, we'll just refuse to join in!" "Even if they think we're rude." "Even if our hands are trembling."

They stopped overnight. With an immense effort, they got through the week, then the month. They put on weight, got irritable, but wouldn't give in.

One evening Harry called Marley. "Have you kept your promise so far?" "Course I have!" Marley snapped, then, trying not to sound hopeful, added: "Have you?" "Yeah. Sure."

The next day Marley's apartment went up in flames. The neighbors called the fire brigade, but they arrived too late for Marley.

When Harry heard the news, he said: "He must have started smoking!" and lit a cigarette.

The police have not ruled out the possibility of arson.

#### ASSEMBLE THESE BONES

For decades on end they dug; freed the vast skeleton, fossil by fossil, shifted whole hillsides with toothbrushes, piled valleys high with unfamiliar ribs and tibias.