THE MERCURY
THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2009 Article 1

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The Mercury 2009

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The Mercury

The Art & Literary Magazine
of Gettysburg College

2009

The Mercury

2009

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The 2009 cover artwork is by Sara Tower
Cover Photograph: *Prayers*

The Mercury: An Overview

History and Process

◇ *The Mercury* is a student-run art and literary magazine released each April. It has been published annually since 1899 at Gettysburg College.

◇ All students of the college are invited to participate on the staff and to submit their work for possible publication.

◇ This year, *The Mercury* received over 400 submissions from 80 contributers.

◇ Editors are elected each year by the entire staff.

◇ Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis throughout the fall and are reviewed and chosen anonymously by the staff.

◇ Special thanks to this year's student advisor, Kelly Bennett.

Events

◇ *The Mercury* holds a reception for staff, advisors, and contributers each spring in honor of the release of the magazine.

◇ Throughout the year, *The Mercury* staff participates in several campus events such as the Appreciation of the Arts Common Hour, Midnight Madness, the Activities Fair and Get Acquainted Day. This year, *The Mercury* also sponsored an excursion to see David Sedaris read live.

The Mercury Prize

◇ Each year, the staff awards a monetary prize to the best piece of work published in each genre.

◇ We would like to thank *The Mercury* prize judges for 2009: Evan Crowder '08 for Nonfiction, Heather Simons '08 for Poetry, Geoff Calver '08 for Fiction and Marilyn Springer '08 for Art.

◇ *The Mercury* winning titles are bolded in the Table of Contents of this issue.

◇ This year's winners are Marisa Rojas '10 for Non-Fiction, Eric Kozlik '11 for Poetry, Sam Harrison '10 for Fiction and Dinesh Manandhar '12 for Art.

Publishing

◇ *The Mercury* was printed this year by Graphics Universal in Greencastle, Pennsylvania. We would like to thank them for their support this year.

◇ The production staff is deeply indebted to IKON, specifically Corey Chong, for the time devoted to this issue. This is the first environmentally-friendly edition of *The Mercury*, and it has been printed on paper from sustainably-harvested forests with biodegradable ink.

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Profesera

"Answer me," she demanded in Spanish. "Are you too stupid?! ¿Es stupida?" A smug smile crept over her face, effectively ripping my heart to shreds. The class erupted into hysterical laughter as I felt my cheeks burn with humiliation and I grew even more tongue-tied. I struggled to hold back my tears, but a single tear slipped forward, causing Ms. Masa to throw up her hands in frustration and proceed to ignore me for the rest of the day. This was my welcome into first grade.

In that one instant all the excitement I culminated in kindergarten for "real school" burst like a dropped tomato. After that one day, school became something to endure, a struggle to remain hidden and not draw any attention to myself. I spent most of my class time huddled down in my seat, silently trying to be invisible. When I was asked a question I usually just nodded or shook my head. If she asked a math question I'd hold up the correct amount with my fingers or just write it out and show Ms. Masa.

I knew that I was assigned to the wrong class, but I felt trapped and too scared to ever question the teachers about my placement. It was only later, in middle school to be exact, that I found out I was put into an ESL class. The administration put me there based on my last name, Rojas, without even testing me to see if I needed to be there. It was either complete ignorance or just blatant disregard for me as an individual. My class was set up into two parts to cater to immigrant students: Ms. Masa as the Spanish-speaking teacher, and Ms. Miller as the English-speaking teacher. I was put into the former group even though I could not speak Spanish at the time. Yes, I did understand it because I grew up with it being spoken around me, but I was not a native speaker like most of the class was.

To make matters worse, Ms. Miller was a sour old woman who delighted in making the children in her class miserable. Her tall frame wrapped in a faded housecoat over black pants and a white shirt; she smelled of mothballs. Her tiny wizened face perpetually held a scowl, puckering her mouth just so, waiting for justification of her displeasure. Sometimes she flew into rages at the smallest thing, terrifying us all with her screams. Once, we were going over a couple of math problems on my side of the class when we heard Ms. Miller nonchalantly ask Ritchie, a boy on her side of the class, "What do you have in your desk?" The poor boy was too afraid to say anything to her so she just squatted down and yelled, "How many times have I told you to keep your desk clean?!" The entirety of the class was frozen, we knew better than to move or bring any attention to ourselves because her anger had a habit of jumping to anyone she saw fit to punish at the time. Ritchie burst into tears as she tipped his desk over spilling everything onto the floor. The harsh sound of a slap followed, so loud in the deafening silence as she demanded that he pick everything up. "Look at the mess you made, aren't you ashamed of yourself?" was her closing remark as she went back to the chalkboard, ignoring the sobbing boy on the floor.

Ms. Masa was not that sadistic, just dismissive. She did not even pretend to like her students or her job. After the first month of school she just assumed I was a difficult child and proceeded to ignore me. I preferred this treatment than being physically abused, so I didn't tell my parents about what was going on because I feared being reassigned to Ms. Miller's tender care. By the time November came around, however, I was forced to explain my failing grades to my parents after my progress report came in the mail. I could tell my mother was worried, so I told her the truth. "My class speaks Spanish and I don't know it," I said. My father immediately called the school and chewed out the principal for making this

big a mistake. Plans were made to meet with the principal the next day to figure out what to do.

"There is no room for you in the other classrooms," my father told me. "So you are just going to move into Ms. Miller's side of the class, OK?" My heart dropped as my father hugged me and told me that everything was going to be fine from now on. I wanted to cry out, "No! Nothing's going to be OK! She's gonna hurt me!" but nothing came out. I went to bed that night scared out of my mind, because I only used to see what she did to her students; now I was going to be one of them. I cried myself to sleep that night and woke up feeling like I was being forced to go to hell.

I had learned by observing not to cry in front of Ms. Miller, because crying would get you a slap, so I was prepared. Since I was new to her and practically half a year behind, being prepared was good because I became her favorite toy. I became the scapegoat for everything that went wrong in the class, causing me to lose out on recess and sometimes lunches on numerous occasions. If the TV didn't turn on for some reason I had to stay in the classroom during break time to clean or to do other sundry duties for Ms. Miller. This made me angry and confused, but it was better than being slapped around like she did to some of the boys. Even as hurt as I was, I was happy to be finally taught in English.

I spent the rest of the year slowly catching up to my peers, being treated like I was dumb by Ms. Miller because I was behind, and learning how to make myself even more invisible on her rage radar. Some of my peers weren't so lucky and had to bear the brunt of her dissatisfaction. Looking back on it now, I am horrified that as a class we were molded into being perfect victims. I remember my friend Mario being hit in the head with a yardstick because he didn't complete his homework, and how red the blood was on the yellow paint. I remember Yesenia being forced to drink liquid soap because she said a cuss word, making her vomit, and how she sobbed as if her heart was breaking while cleaning the mess up. We would never offer comfort to the person being hurt at the time, because to do so would mean that you would be hurt too. While reading about child abuse cases in my psychology classes, there were times I broke down sobbing because the way we acted around Ms. Miller was so similar to how an abused child acts around his or her abusive parent. We never tried to defend ourselves because she shamed us into thinking we deserved it. We never told anyone because she said no one would have believed us over her. We were taught to freeze like scared rabbits, eyes forward, when someone was being punished. We never even talked about it amongst ourselves on the playground. We just played with such an intensity, feeling joy in the normalcy of playing tag and swinging.

Since most of my friends were immigrants, coming home with bruises from school didn't alert their parents that something was wrong. Instead, the parents themselves believed it was right because they were treated that way during their school years. So they didn't ask questions; it was all too familiar and right to them. My mother asked questions though, about how withdrawn I'd become since school started, but I usually responded by telling her I was struggling to catch up to the rest of my classmates. That put her mind at ease, even though I felt terrible lying to her.

It took me five years to tell my mother all about my time in first grade and by that time Ms. Miller was thankfully dead. In sixth grade she sat me down and said, "Remember Ms. Miller?" I nodded and she went on. "She died last night." I sat very still for some time, letting my mind comprehend this. I felt relief and happiness and I savored that feeling just before the guilt came in. I knew I shouldn't wish death on someone, but she had deserved it; yet it didn't stop me from feeling terrible guilt. I looked at my mother and let five years of pain come tumbling from my lips. She looked shocked, surprised, hurt and angry all at the same time. The look was so familiar to the ones etched in my memory from Ms. Miller that I froze and waited for the pain to come, but she hugged me instead as I cried. I cried for the first time unburdened by her memory, as my mind whispered that I was free.

My mother asked me why I hadn't told her while it was happening, and I couldn't give her answer then. I just shrugged and said I was scared, but that wasn't really it. I now think I was just so scared that telling anyone might make it worse, that she would have gone after my family in the same way she did her students. I feel like Ms. Miller would have done something even more terrible to all of us if she was found out. Talking to some of my friends who were classmates during that time confirmed that thought. Every single one I asked told me the exact same thing; we were all afraid she would have beaten someone to death.

Thinking back to my first year of "real school" fills me with such rage, at both myself and Ms. Miller. She was a twisted thing who had no right to do what she did to us, but I, we, had the power to stop this if only we just told someone. Of course we were so young and terrified that her grip was felt even when she left her classroom to join second grade. We stayed silent as the next years were treated with the same cruelty out of our fear to survive. I remember that we could tell them apart from the rest of the masses during recess; they were the ones with dead eyes, playing as if they would never set foot on a playground again. I've longed to reach out to them, to tell them I'm sorry, knowing I could have stopped their pain from happening. The regret, like the lessons of victimization, still lash out bitterly at me and will never fade even though they are never talked about anymore. All I can do is hope I can be better. That I can keep an eye out for the signs of abuse, the huddled stature and faded eyes. I feel drawn to being a teacher because I naively think that becoming a friendly, trustworthy teacher, making class fun for my future students will help erase the lingering pain that Ms. Miller left. Maybe that isn't the best motivator for a career, but as long as the students benefit from what I have to offer them I will give it freely. I know that my pain and humiliation cannot magically disappear, but I can make sure it doesn't happen to others. I am ESL-certified now, and hoping to teach in the elementary level since I know first-hand how is feels to be stuck in a foreign class, being expected to learn and speak in a language not my own. I don't want anymore children to fall through the cracks.

I can never forget that year; I still freeze when I hear an argument and flinch when someone next to me moves too fast. I cannot erase this, but I can strive to make my own meaning out of it however it may come. I know that if I truly mean to help others I must first learn how to heal myself and I hope that this lesson begins soon.

Re-enacting

Early afternoon:
The Army of Northern Virginia gathers
behind the crest of some unimportant ridge
to wait out the cannonade.
Joe Henderson, standing beside me,
sucks on a Virginia Slim.
How appropriate.
Officers pace up and down nervously,
moustaches carefully trimmed,
shouting with great gusto, but we forgive them.
They always get a little too excited.
Forward March.
The brigades lurch forward
led by the stars and bars.
The enemy is massed atop a low rise
(as usual) with bayonets already fixed,
seeming to know how it will all play out.
No one dies till they open up on us!
Let's make this look real.
I look back at Bobby Lee,
"The Gray Fox," glorious and resplendent
with his swarm of aides de camp.
He drove in this morning, in his Lincoln Continental,
after a night at the Motel 6—
he never sleeps in a tent.
Camp life is hell on his bad back.
It's hot.
Woolen britches chafe and foreheads glisten—
the price we pay for authenticity.
As the sweat begins to pour freely,
a few puffs of smoke bloom from enemy guns
but no one falls—
accuracy was never a Yankee strong point.
There is a single tree on the field,
roots spilling out across the dusty grass,
dressed in rebel gray-brown bark.
I find it sad (and slightly amusing)
that so many have fallen
clutching their imaginary injuries
and accumulated in the same place,
lying like acorns in the blessed shade
of this ancient Live Oak.
We'll rest here until the fighting stops,
letting our pretend death wounds

and enthusiasm bleed out,
swatting flies and watching casually
as some green Yankee private sees Jackson,
Good Ol' Stonewall (the accountant),
and bayonets him in the gut,
changing history with an overdramatic thrust.
In this way the past repeats itself-
like a game of telephone,
confused a bit in transmission.
And we?
We are the end of the line,
the last recipients of some garbled message,
gone to play out the circulating secret
in the fields of make believe.

How Did You Ever Get These to Grow in Decatur?

Mabel hated the dry cleaner's on the corner of Broad Street and 7th in Decatur, Mississippi. The windows were never clean and the linoleum tile inside had an orange tint from rust that made her cringe. Given that it was the only dry cleaner's in town open on Sunday, Mabel had little choice but to visit it on this day.

"That'll be fourteen dollars and fifty one cents Ms. Hoxfield," the young clerk said. His nametag read 'Jamal.' Mabel hadn't ever met anyone else named Jamal before. In fact, she wasn't even sure how it was pronounced. The new children in this town, with their new names, Mabel thought; it was overwhelming.

Mabel handed him fifteen dollars and tapped her fingers on the dirty counter impatiently while the boy counted out the change. The boy looked up from the register, his dark eyes scowled at Mabel. "Is something the matter, m'am?" Mabel didn't answer.

"Forty-nine cents is your change, have a nice day," the boy said, and put the change on the counter. Mabel slid the coins off the edge and into her hands one by one in an exaggerated motion. There was a mason jar full of change on the counter for the food pantry, and as she pulled her cleaned clothes off the counter, she knocked the jar off the counter and it broke on the floor. Broken glass and coins spilled all over the rust-covered floor. Mabel looked up at the boy, his dark face framing his accusing eyes. She looked once more at the mess on the floor and walked towards the door.

"Don't worry about it," the boy said, "I'll clean it up." There was a thick layer of sarcasm in the boy's tone; he was clearly frustrated she hadn't said anything. She could feel the blood rush to her face. She was tense and angry, though she didn't know why. She threw open the dirty glass doors, and walked out of the store.

The dry cleaner's hadn't always been such a horrible place to go, Mabel thought. Eight years ago, before Carlos, the town entrepreneur who owned half the businesses on Broad Street, the cleaner's had been owned by a man Mabel went to church with. It was a clean, respectable store then, but the owner had retired, and Carlos had moved in, with his rusty floors.

As Mabel hung her dry cleaning from the hook in the back seat of her car and started the short drive home, she though about the way Decatur had changed, and the way it was still changing. She hated that the people that worked at the gas station didn't always speak English. Decatur used to be a town where everyone knew everyone else, and now, the faces seemed different. The new children didn't seem to respect the town's old guard like she had once respected her elders. The once beautiful houses that bordered the town were now old and decrepit. Strange kids hung around corners, with no apparent business to be there. The crime rate had gone up and the police officers weren't as friendly anymore. When the high schools had been integrated thirty years ago, the new families moved into town to attend the one central high school. Mabel had seen her once beautiful and simple town run down by outsiders. She missed the Decatur of her childhood; there was less confusion and things were simpler then.

Then Mabel thought about her neighbor, Desmond. She thought about his dark brown eyes, how the flecks of silver in his curly black hair made him seem wise. He was different than these new people in the town. He had a quiet respect and a deep love for Mississippi, like Mabel. It seemed odd that he could be this way. He had graduated in the first class of the integrated high school, ten years after Mabel, and he seemed like he should

have been just like all the other things in Decatur that were changing beyond Mabel's control. But he wasn't. Since they'd met, Mabel had stopped questioning the providence that had brought him into her life, as it seemed to defy even her own expectations.

Seven weeks before, Mabel had badly sprained her ankle while gardening, and Desmond, also an avid gardener (Mabel had been admiring his black-eyed susans in secret for weeks) came rushing over to help her. She'd immediately resented it when he took off her shoe to examine the swelling, and then rushed inside to grab some ice. His hands felt course and he smelled strange and unfamiliar. He was entirely too forward. Mabel had felt mortified and violated immediately. She was clearly a decade older than this man, and yet he had no problem barging onto her property, touching her without being asked. He carried her inside, despite her protest, and set her on the couch just inside the door. She repeatedly denied his request to call a doctor and she thanked him quickly, mostly in an attempt to rid him from her house and end the intrusion. She had taken a deep breath as soon as he walked out, relieved that the awkward moment had passed.

It wasn't until later that evening that Mabel had softened up to Desmond. Around eight o'clock in the evening, he had shown up at her door. Before opening it, she was a little irritated that someone would consider calling on her that late at night, but any annoyance faded as quickly as she saw the flowers in Desmond's hands. He was holding a vase overflowing with brilliant white Cala lilies. There was perhaps nothing Mabel loved more than flowers.

"Just thought I'd bring by some flowers to help cheer you up Ms. Hoxfield. My name's Desmond Jones," he said. She remembered smiling, just a little, despite her best efforts to remain poker faced.

"How did you ever get these to grow in Decatur? I've been trying for nearly twenty years and never gotten so much as one healthy plant. Too much clay in the soil, I think," she said.

Desmond laughed and pointed from the front porch over to his back yard. "The light is just right back there. The light back there and a lot of water, that usually does the trick. You'd be surprised at what can grow here with the right amount of care."

Mabel stared at the delicate purple edges of the white lilies. Her grandmother had grown them in North Carolina when she was a girl. She remembered running through the backyard, overflowing with beautiful white flowers. They only bloomed for a couple months in the summer, and this only made Mable love them more. Their transient, short-lived nature excited Mabel. They were something pure and beautiful that needed to be appreciated in the small moment they were alive.

"Can I come in?" Desmond said.

"Yes...yes you can." She was still having trouble getting words out. Her gaze was locked on the flowers.

Desmond lifted his large boots over the threshold and onto the immaculate wood flooring in the entryway of Mabel's home.

"Let me get some water for them," she said. She made an awkward grab for the glass vase in his hands, and he released it with little protest.

"This is a really lovely home you have, Ms. Hoxfield. You have quite a knack for decorating," he said. He ran his hands over the beautiful antique pictures that were hung on the wall, each one clearly cherished, and framed beautifully.

"You can call me Mabel...and thank you," she said. Mabel filled the large vase with water, and continued to make small talk with Desmond from the kitchen.

He hadn't stayed long that Sunday, but the visits had stretched out each week after. Two weeks later, he stayed past midnight. They'd sat on her porch, smoking cigarettes and talking for hours. Mabel couldn't remember the last time she had stayed up that late, but it had seemed as though time had flown by, and before she knew it, it was well into the

night. He had a deep laugh that made her smile. She hadn't been able to remember the last person she was that able to talk to in Decatur. It had gone on like this for six Sundays, and each week's visit growing longer than the last's. The lilies would fade and be renewed week by week; it was a patient rhythm.

Two Sundays later, they'd stayed up nearly all night on the back porch, talking about Decatur, the way they both noticed it changing. Desmond worked two towns over in Gatesville managing a paper plant. His job gave him a bit of political clout in both Decatur and Gatesville, and Mabel found herself increasingly impressed by Desmond's professional life. He was so confident, yet at the same time, had a driving humility and self-awareness that kept him honest. It reminded Mabel of the way people in Decatur used to be. It seemed so odd that Desmond could be like this.

Every week after that, Mabel counted down the days until Sunday. She tried not to concern herself with cynical thoughts; she focused only on Desmond. She focused on how they could talk about politics, religion, the way Decatur was changing, anything. They agreed about little of what they spoke, and yet still fought about nothing. Their conversations had a poetic depth and yet still always seemed playful and light hearted. It was on the fifth Sunday they met, that Mabel first admitted to herself that she was romantically attracted to Desmond. She'd found him handsome ever since he'd arrived on her doorstep, lilies in hand, but now it was more than that, it was a feeling she felt in the pit of her stomach. He was beautiful, she thought, with his dark eyes, his grey hair and his scratchy voice. He made her happy.

As Mabel returned to her house from the dry cleaner's, her thoughts fell back to the Sunday one week ago. Desmond had shown up on her door with a bottle of wine, and another dozen Cala lilies in his hand. They'd spent that entire night on the back porch, drinking the wine and reminiscing. Mabel usually detested the bitter taste of red wine, but in the humid Mississippi air, with Desmond at her side, she'd found that wine's flavor sweet and wonderful. They'd talked about the people in Decatur, how neighbors didn't seem so friendly anymore, how people didn't go to church every Sunday anymore and the lukewarm paper market in the Delta. Desmond was far smarter than she, Mabel conceded. He had an ability to see the change in Decatur, the uncontrollable rollover of people as the opportunity to remake their town. Mabel wasn't sure she'd ever wanted to lose the old Decatur, but when Desmond talked about it, the enthusiasm in his voice brought her in, made her trust him. She loved to hear him talk. At two o'clock in the morning, Desmond had gone back to his house to get another bottle of wine. He returned a few minutes later, and they'd stayed up the rest of the night finishing the wine and eventually watching the sun creep up over the marshland behind her house. Mabel was sure on more than one occasion Desmond's hand had brushed against hers in a way that seemed not-so-accidental. She didn't mind.

As Desmond walked out the door that morning, he caught Mabel by the hand, and in one swing of his arm about hers, he'd spun her towards him and kissed her. Mabel was too surprised to resist. His hands no long felt rough like the first Sunday they had met; they were smooth and strong now. She felt her body press closer to his instinctually. Mabel felt light-headed, and she could feel the strength in her knees wavering. Desmond smiled at her, his wrinkled cheeks seemed even darker and more handsome than usual to Mabel. He lifted his large boots over the threshold and walked back down the sidewalk to his house. Mabel couldn't move.

Mabel hadn't kissed a man in years, and certainly had never had the breath literally taken from her like that. There was an unknown passion in it. She wasn't sure if it was the smooth, uneasy flow of her intoxication, or the fact her heart hadn't stopped pounding, but she needed to lie down. As she did, she thought about Desmond, the way he smelled, the way he touched her hands with his. There were a lot of complicated

feelings, and Mabel wasn't sure she completely understood all of them. She wasn't sure if the alcohol had given her a confident but false sense of cognizance or if the feelings were genuine, but above anything else, she was sure she felt love.

Mabel had spent the week after that in a haze. It had been a week full of comfortable, sunny days, but she'd spent most of them inside, looking at the lilies. Their immediate beauty was ever-fading, but always present. She thought about Desmond, too. She spent hours contemplating going over to visit him on a weeknight. On Wednesday, she'd even gotten as far as putting her shoes on and walking towards the front door, but something stopped her. It didn't seem right. For some reason, it only seemed natural that Desmond was the one who initiated their visits. He had a cool confidence in their relationship that Mabel needed. Small talk with him seemed interesting, and deep conversations were easy. On Thursday, Mabel had gone to the liquor store in town to buy two more bottles of red wine, just in case Desmond forgot. She wanted this Sunday to be as special as the last had been.

Mabel walked in the house, and set her dry cleaning on the couch. She paused momentarily to look at the pictures on the wall. There was a picture of her with her father when she was young, and a picture of her laughing with friends in high school. The gray, faded pictures made Mabel smile. She glanced over at the clock in the living room; it was five-thirty. That gave her two and a half hours to get ready, she thought. She walked inside and eagerly began preparing the house for Desmond's arrival. The house was already perfectly clean, but Mabel found herself checking and double-checking every room, scrubbing countertops that had already been scrubbed. She wasn't sure what this week's visit would bring, and whatever it was, she couldn't wait. Small neighborly chatter had changed slowly into far more, and tonight seemed equally promising. She walked into the kitchen and pulled out a bottle of red wine from the cupboard, paused, and then upon thinking about it, pulled out a second. She checked the cabinet to see that there were clean wine glasses, and she pulled two more packs of cigarettes from the carton in the pantry, and put them in her purse. She slowly compiled a list of things yet done in her head, but she was stopped by the sound of the doorbell.

Mabel shot a tense look at the kitchen clock; it was six-thirty. She wondered who it could be. Desmond always arrived after eight o'clock, never earlier. In fact she'd never seen him before nightfall. She opened the door, nonetheless, to Desmond's tall frame, illuminated by the sun perched on the horizon. The light made a pale white glow around him and Mabel was very surprised to see him standing there. He was holding a single white lily in a small glass vase; she looked at it.

"It's the last one!" he said, "I can't believe you cleaned out my whole garden like this."

Mabel smiled softly and looked him in the eyes. She was still a little confused why he had shown up so early.

"I figured I would make up for the lack of flowers by taking you out to dinner. I got us a reservation in town...I figured we ought to finally go somewhere together," he said.

Mabel felt her vision go blurry as he uttered the last word. She could feel the heat of the blood rushing to her face, like it had at the dry cleaner's earlier that day. Mabel looked into Desmond's dark eyes. She was sure her face was noticeably red, and she could feel her hands begin to shake.

In a single, quick motion, she slammed the door shut. Mabel exhaled. A thick layer of oak was now standing firmly between her and the black man on her porch. She stepped back slowly from the door in disbelief. There was a long pause, and then she heard Desmond step off the front porch and mumble something to himself. She waited longer, not sure for what she was waiting. There was the momentary sound of glass shattering on the sidewalk.

My Grandfather's Swing

My bare feet dig into soaked black dirt as I grip the sunflower vines like tree branches. Strands of my brown hair brush the edge of a blooming yellow flower and I peek into its dark, round face. The sun's rays penetrate the golden petals that feel thin and crisp on my little fingers, and I hide behind the tall maze of yellow bursts, waiting for Grandpap to find me.

My grandfather was a gardener. Anything that he touched grew; gardening seemed to be his calling. I once heard my Dad say that his father could have thrown grass seed over his shoulder, and a putting green would have grown there. Grandpap's flowers were always vibrant and full, his tomatoes deep red, gigantic in my childish hands. I used to play in a row of sunflowers that crawled up the side of my grandparents' house, and that's how he gave me my nickname, "little sunflower."

At the end of the sidewalk next to my grandparents' house was a shed-like structure with no walls, covered by a roof. This little porch was just big enough to hold a hanging bench swing, an old chair, a rusty grill, and some gardening tools in a wooden box. When I think of my grandfather, the bench swing is the first place I remember. The bench rocking back and forth, the rusty chains pulling the wood as it creaked with old age, my grandfather whistling softly as I drifted off to sleep. Sometimes he would sing to me. It was always the same song:

"You are my sunshine / my only sunshine / you make me happy / when skies are grey, / you'll never know dear / how much I love you / please don't take my sunshine away..."

Daisytown is what Appalachian people call a "coal patch town." My father was born there, and was named Steven after his father, although my grandfather's name was spelled Stephen. As a child, my grandfather had been given the nickname "T.B." after his little sister tried unsuccessfully to say "Stevie," mispronouncing his name. It stuck with him for life.

My father lived in Daisytown until he was eighteen years old. Daisytown sits at the top of Moose Hill, in California, a town in Western Pennsylvania. Moose Hill is steep, about half a mile long, and at the bottom is a cul-de-sac where my Dad used to wait for the bus as a kid. At the top, Moose Hill becomes the divide between two neighborhoods. To the left, small rows of houses begin to appear, forming the small three or four street neighborhood where my father lived. A basketball court with broken chain nets lies across from my father's childhood baseball field, where he spent every summer day until my grandmother called to him from down the street. His neighborhood was called Crescent Heights, which sounds like an upper middle class housing plan for white families, but the name couldn't be further from the truth. My father never went on a family vacation until he was married, and he usually got an orange for Christmas.

On the other side of Moose Hill, to the right, was a small group of bigger houses, where the steel mill and coal mine bosses lived. Crescent Heights was home to the workers. On "Crescent", as everyone called it, all of the fathers were workers in the steel mill or the coal mine. The town was racially equal, and my father grew up with African American and white friends. In 1913, when the houses in the neighborhood were first built, all of

them had red shingles, since shingles could be bought in bulk for a low price. Even as the houses changed, Crescent Heights maintained its nickname, "Red Hill."

My grandfather paid one American dollar for the house on Crescent, which was already owned by a cousin in the family. It sat at the top of a steep set of concrete stairs which started on the street, passed over a ditch, and reached a sidewalk at the top of a hill of grass which was basically at a ninety degree angle. The hill of grass was almost impossible to cut because it was so steep.

When I would run to the top of those stairs, my Grandfather would be sitting on a tiny slice of wood he had laid on the steps leading into the house. That piece of wood was his seat, where he would relax after work, where he'd hide when he got angry. I always thought of it as his throne. My father has a similar habit for these same situations: he sits in a folding chair outside of our garage.

I remember first glimpsing my grandfather as I reached the last step, his weathered skin glistening in the sunlight, his long Slovak nose and his deep wrinkles standing out as he smiled. He consistently wore the same brown boots unlaced, grey socks that crept down his ankles and dark blue corduroy pants which he had made into to shorts with a fishing knife. He usually wore shirts that my Dad had given him once they were worn out. Sitting on the piece of wood, my grandfather would be crouched over, arms on his knees, his pale blue eyes peering out from under the rim of his beaten, dusty Atlanta Braves hat. His fishing license was constantly attached to the hat with a safety pin whether he was fishing or gardening. My cousin Jamie had given the hat to him, and I can't remember ever seeing him without it on. It was one of the only presents he had ever kept. His typical response to gifts was always something like:

"What the hell did you buy this for?"

Not because he didn't appreciate them, but because he knew the money could have bought something for somebody else. When my Dad refuses to serve himself first at the dinner table, which I think is polite, my mother disdainfully says, "You're just like your father."

I remember lying on the swing as my grandfather sang, looking up at his eyes, wondering how they could be so blue. My brother, Justin, has those same eyes, even bluer than my father's. Grandpap's left eye was so blue that it was almost white. He had gone to the eye doctor once for a routine cataract surgery, and the surgeon made a mistake, detaching his retina and leaving him with a mottled eye. Even as a child, I always found it unbelievably beautiful.

My grandfather kept a batch of flowers growing inside of a tire that sat in front of the porch. The flowers hugged a statue of Jesus that Grandpap had placed in the center. When people ask me the first thing I remember about my grandfather, I tell them he was a Christian man. I tell them he really got Christianity – maybe because he didn't grow up in the church. Maybe because his Mom died when he was eight years old and he only made it to sixth grade after repeating every grade twice, and still managed to lead an exemplary life. One Sunday, when my father was about seventeen, my grandfather decided to go to Mass with the rest of his family, and he never stopped going back.

Inside the little porch, behind the swing, was a giant, black oil barrel. It was old and rusty, and always full of rainwater. My grandfather would use this water on his garden. He never liked to waste anything, so instead of turning on the hose, he'd take a little bucket

and dip it in the big barrel, watering his flowers with rain. I always thought this practice was one of holiest things about him, and I think God noticed. I think that's why his flowers were so alive, his tomatoes so red, so massive.

The side of my grandparents' house was lined with sunflowers and marigolds. When my mother plants flowers outside of our house in the spring, sometimes I hear her talk to him, and I wonder if he hears her.

I think the reason that I remember the bench swing so vividly is because that's where I watched my grandfather. Where I watched him live and move, whistle and wait, sing and plant, laugh and grow older.

The porch and the swing were old and wise to me, like my grandparents. I felt safe on the wooden swing, safer than I have felt for most of my life, passing in and out of sleep as my grandfather hummed. I remember the wind chime ringing softly as the breeze touched it and the bench rocking slowly back and forth. Sometimes Grandma would sit in the rickety kitchen chair across from the swing, drinking lemonade. The cushion on the swing was weathered and worn, and every time I stretched out on it, I began to drift off to sleep. I was usually awakened by warbled music coming from the ice cream truck at midday. I'd jump off the swing, run to the bottom of the stairs, and wait there with a quarter.

When I slept at my grandparents' house as a child, I woke up to the sound of a rooster, not an alarm clock. Sometimes I would spend early mornings and afternoons on the swing just sitting with my grandfather, holding his rough, dry, beautiful hands. He did then and still feels to me like a saint, but an accessible one, without all the images of halos and gold.

He worked in the coal mine for eleven years and in the steel mill for twelve years. One day, he got steel in his eye at work, and had to take a few weeks off. When he returned, he had to have a routine physical. The doctor told him that he had basically survived a silent heart attack and had kept on working. The majority of his arterial passages were blocked. That day, the doctor told him he couldn't work anymore, and that he would have to go on disability, something my grandfather found shameful. My father remembers that day because he was there with him at the appointment. After hearing what the doctor said, Grandpap walked outside of the office, sat down on the front steps of the building, and wept into his hands.

My grandfather always carried a walking stick, since loose dogs were abundant on Crescent. He used to walk up to his garden at the top of the backyard, up another steep hill. I never saw that garden, which my father says was about the size of a football field, since by the time I was old enough to remember, my grandfather couldn't walk up and down that hill very often anymore. He used to grow tomatoes, lettuce, onions, peppers, and corn up on that hill. After the doctor told him he could no longer work, he started collecting aluminum cans as a hobby, exchanging them for money. He put every cent from those cans into the poor box after Mass.

When I was eleven years old, my grandfather started getting chest pains in his heart, and finally decided to go to back to the hospital. He had always been stubborn about seeing a doctor. When he arrived, the doctors realized his arteries were 97% blocked. He had a choice: he could have an operation that day, or he would probably die in a few weeks. My father walked up to the room where my grandfather was laying in bed and asked him if he would like to try the operation. He only nodded his head to indicate a "yes,"

since he was hooked up to several machines. The doctors said it was a miracle he had lived with his condition so long.

My grandfather was seventy-two years old, and he died on the operating table that day. When my father came home from the hospital to tell us the news, I didn't really understand. It was like the power had gone out while I was alone in the dark.

"You mean I won't see Grandpap anymore?" my little brother, Justin, asked.

"Not for a little while," my Dad said as his voice broke. He sat down on the bed with my Mom, my brother, and I. We all cried for a while, then.

My grandfather's swing is where I began to dream. It is where I learned how beautiful the state between sleep and waking is, where I learned how to sing, how to whistle, and when to listen to the breeze. By watching my grandfather from that swing, I learned that loving God means loving the earth and other people.

I learned how to make flowers when all you have is dirt.

Sometimes when I dream, I'm on the swing with my grandfather, singing, and as we get up to take a walk I see a path forming in the grass before us. He takes his walking stick in one hand and my hand in his other, leading me towards a row of tall, golden sunflowers, blooming into bright light.

Gentle Fingers

Sitting in the autumnal tide,
The cool breeze whisks the contours of my face,
Whisking the abyss of my mind,
Touching my thoughts with gentle fingers;
Molding them with subtle hands.

The trees, weeping; stationary in their solitude,
Void! Themselves of their pride,
At that moment of most adornment
The peak of beauty. Yet,
Caught in God's cruel game,
As gentle fingers, softly, smoothly,
Run down their limbs, as their tears fall silently to the ground.

They scatter the land—The Wasteland.
Careful not to step on them,
For such disrespect they deserve not.
Their fallen beauty before my eyes,
Their colors twist in silence...
Peace, I thought, endless peace swirling slipping in between
Gentle fingers.

Why do they weep so? What qualm is theirs?
If God be the culprit—weep not
For God will rejoice with them once again,
Their tears will resurrect.
Mine will not.

How I envy them.
None is the promise of resurrection of my pride,
Whisked away as by gentle fingers...
But my stationary, solitary weeping is constant,

For God has saved a crueler fate for I.
My void—endless. My tears—eternal.
How pitiless is the hand that allows such gentle fingers,
To strip a tree of splendor—for it returns
And I watch, naked, in my guilt.

That cruel hand mocks me in the cool autumnal tide,
How uneven nature is, and I find myself,
On the shorter side...
As gentle fingers wipe my tears,
Silently to the ground.

Home

It's hard to be from somewhere else. Muy difícil. Today, I dream of slipping into the ocean. I heard the Pacific's quite nice, a bit rocky near the shore. I'll just bring boots. I could walk to Peru on the bottom of the sea, encountering octopi peeking out from coral clusters. Why do they say octopi? Why not use octopuses? Everything's more sensible in Spanish: uno pulpo y dos pulpos. Sharks flash by in pursuit of dinner, teeth winking. Far above, fishing hooks dangle, bright feathers failing to impersonate sea life.

Think of the new amigos I'd make. You don't have to know English under the sea. All that spills out are bubbles. I can speak bubbles. So can they. We're not so different, and nobody under the sea looks quite the same—fins, tails, tentacles, claws, overgrown teeth. In America, they try to fix messed up teeth. In the ocean, everyone has something wrong with them, but nobody minds. I think I'd like it there. I wouldn't even care if I reach Peru before Christmas. Maybe I'd get new boots for la Navidad. Mine would be muddy.

Sometime I pretend my classroom is el océano. With the pale green walls and the khaki floors, I don't have to make-believe very much. Everyone has their place. My teacher, Mrs. G, is the giant squid. She's as tall as a skyscraper taking jump shots with enough limbs to fix every problem and still have two left over for a hug. Alan is the narwhal, you always have to stay far away from him so you don't get spit on. Sophie is an orca, showing off her pearly whites to anyone daring enough to say hello. Beatrice has a weak stomach. Right now she's tinted green like a sea turtle. Travis could outrun a shark. He beat the fastest 2nd grader, Brad, last Tuesday during recess. Kayla's hair looks like the strands of a jellyfish are streaming down her pasty face. Danny is a catfish—he already has some whiskers. Is there an opposite of a walrus? Sammy's missing her front teeth so that's what she'd be. Everyone loves the dolphin, sleek, playful, and friendly like Annette. The rest of the class are fish—clownfish, angelfish, salmon, barracudas, cobias, catfish, and more. Most days I'm kelp waving from afar, watching and learning the routine of the tides. I'm trying to be a starfish though, capable, alive, and connected. The desks are coral reefs, rock alleys to cower between or anemones to play hide and seek in. The fake wood veneer is overlooked. Every Friday, we clean our desks with shaving cream. It could be the foam surfing the crashing waves, disinfecting the sand and keeping the crabs healthy. If only my class was as friendly as the sea.

I always wear the same leggings to school. Slate grey like the streets, dotted with yellow taxis of food crumbs. Maybe next time Papí has extra money I can get another pair. In the summer I wear my favorite pink tank top, reminiscent of twice chewed bubble gum. I have a green one too, but I don't like it as much. It's from my cousin Lupita in Cuzco, then from my sister Marita. I did get a new purple sweater as my birthday present this year. Papí calls me his little princess when I wear it, since the kings and queens liked to wear purple. If I could be queen of any country, I think it'd be of Russia. Marita did a project on Russia for school. When I'm in 5th grade, I'll do a project about Russia too. It's on two continents and shakes hands with 16 different countries! It's the largest land in the world. I would get to wear purple fur coats and purple reindeer boots all day long and nobody would say anything, since I was queen. Even boys could wear purple if I was reina. They would look beautiful. *I* would look beautiful. It doesn't count if it's only your papí and mamí who think you look pretty.

My teacher's name is Mrs. Grolinski, but we just call her Mrs. G. My tongue gets twisted and tangled around the name like the trapeze artists in Cirque du Soleil. I saw the posters for their show over the summer, such crazy costumes. *Grolinski* sounds like the rumble escaping the tiger's throat in *The Jungle Book*. Mrs. G showed us that película today. "Class, this is where our new friend Anabel is from. You can see how different it is from our town. Maybe we can use this to help Anabel feel welcome here at Limestone Hollow." I am not from India. It's not on the same continent as Peru. I didn't even live near the Amazon. I've never visited it in my whole life. Sometimes we have alpaca-jams in my pueblo, when we can't cross the road until the alpacas stop grazing and move on. I don't have tigers stalking me through la noche, or panthers saving young casí naked children. We wear clothes where I live. It's not that warm in Peru. It is rainy. After this movie, no one's going to want to share their organic peanut butter and locally produced apricot jelly sandwich with me now.

Mrs. G calls me Anna Bell, they all call me Anna Bell, with a twangy A to start off and a dragging N in between. She always pauses before she continues, like she thinks my name is two words, like she can't remember the second part. Butchered, chopped in half. She always makes the Bell ring too loud. It's not my name. Mrs. G could learn a thing or two from Mamí. Anabel glides off her tongue like a lullaby rocking my ears to contentment. The smooth Ah is a ray of sunshine sitting by a plump cloud exercising in an azure pool. Each letter connected like Siamese sextuplets ending with the whispered L that drifts off her lips and lingers in the air, hopeful.

It's Halloween. We wore our costumes to class today to parade around the school yard. I was Britney. She's my favorite singer. Marita gave me her pink plaid skirt to pair with my bubblegum tank top so I looked perfect. Even Papí said so before he left for work. He works all day at a hardware store. Entering my classroom, I was a leaping dolphin, confident in my beauty, until the snickers flattened and drowned me. I couldn't remember if I had gills or a blowhole to breathe from, so I stopped breathing entirely. Blush, red like Mrs. G's apple costume, filled my cheeks. A drop of saltwater danced in the corner of my eye, one of Britney's backups. Britney doesn't need any backups. Sophie preguntó "Are you a loony bird too?" Alan started the chant "Loony bird, loony bird," until it rattled between the desks. I don't know what loony means, but yo sé that it's not something nice. I leaped from the doorway into the hall, free before Mrs. G could say or do anything. Through the spooky school yard decorated with fake spider webs, left, right, past the corner bodega. I ran as fast as my tears, reaching for that red and white door at the end of the calle. Neighbors stared, muttering no more than normal. "Ay Anabelita, I'll make some warm milk." Anabelita is my nickname from Mamí. Papí is the silly one. He calls me Anita Belita. He says it's my name tickle, and it makes me giggle whenever he says it.

A tap on la puerta brings Mamí shuffling. "Anabel, una amiga to see you." I waddle to the door, cocoa dribbles and backup tears staining my pink outfit. Katrina the beluga huddles in the chill, her purple Sketchers shrouded by a pile of leaves. "You forgot your backpack at school. Here." Puzzled, I reach for mi mochila. Katrina is pale and a little chubby, windblown today. Her hands are warm despite the autumn wind. "I'm sorry they laughed at you. When I first moved here from Russia, they laughed at me too. My mother told me to give them time, they would see. And they did. See you tomorrow Anabel." With a quick hand squeeze, she flutters away. I wave, the warmth from her hand still humming inside me.

The days zip by like a car driving cross country on Interstate 90, cornfield after cornfield broken up by small towns and the occasional cityscape. I've been learning English and helping Mamí. I can talk with my classmates at lunchtime now. "Want to share my potatoes?" Mamí, Marita, and I practice our words at the grocery store. "Where are the peaches please? Thank you. Have a nice day." I love learning English, but I don't think

Mamí does. I wish we talked in English more at home to practice. Mrs. G learned how to say my name, in her own special way. Tumble dry low then tug the warmth close—Anabel pops out.

The embarrassment and taunting about my Britney outfit initiated me into the class. I don't get picked last during gym class to play kickball now that they've seen my rocket leg in action. Yesterday I was actually the team captain, and I chose Beluga Katrina first with a shy grin. She might not be good, but that's what best friends do. Slipping into the ocean isn't as tempting anymore. Everyone's more different here than I thought.

I woke up this morning to Mike's morning radio show. "Limestone County schools closed today due to inclement weather." Inclement? I peeled my Barbie window shade aside to reveal an off-white miracle. Nieve, Mamí, snow! It never snowed at my home in Peru. I rolled on my coat and pants while my toothbrush hung limply from my mouth. Splat went the toothpaste onto my new jacket. It might freeze off outside. Snow in the air, snow in my eyes, snow in my mouth, snow under my boots. I love snow. I wish Grandma and Grandpa could see this snow, Mamí. And Tía Carmen and Tío Alberto too. I feel sorry for everyone in Peru who never sees snow. There's lots of snow is Russia. If I was queen, every day would be a snow celebration. It's nose-numbing and mouth-muffling, each flake spiraling out of control. It reminds me of a dance show with toddlers attempting the Nutcracker. Katrina came by to give me a snow gift in the face, which I passed along to Marita. Mamí always says gifts are for sharing. We did a lot of gift sharing in the storm. My nose is blue from the cold and from the bruising snowballs, but I can still smell Mamí's barbeque slithering under the door. Where did she get the guinea pigs?

Mamí worries I'm turning All-American with my pigtails. In Peru, I always wore a tight braid down my back. Never forget your heritage, never forget your home, never forget your family. I know Mamí, yo sé. I just like the sound of my hair flopping against my raw cheeks in the snow. I like English so I can talk to Katrina. But every time I open the door to your barbequed cuy Mamí, I'm home. Don't worry.

Caution

Thinking back to Sarasota Street
And those first midnight stop sign kisses
Makes me question why I desire at all.
"Men are messy—"
Mother's voice haunts my muscle memory—
"Only want one thing."
The problem therein lies that little Loz wants the same for herself.
The sun-soaked sour lime that is summer in the daytime
Sticks in my mouth, leaves me longing,
Speaks to me in panting, broken English.
Seducing, when (that rum-bathed sun)
In long wet afternoons, I laid out
And he drank beads of sweaty water from my browning skin.
When, in (gin and hazy) whispers,
The words tangled between my legs,
In the smoky roots of my hair.
When, after frenzied thunderstorms,
Heat broke untamed across my native body
And rays spilled through,
Cooled the late afternoon into sticky sweet and long (wine-stained) dusk.
When, as that glowing sun sinks slowly into Indian summer,
Voices harp that Loz could do better—
Afternoons are shrinking,
And soon that sun will burn color into trees with warm, wet leaves.
I am a bitch in heat,
Desire—my impossible thirst.
Cold water beads on the rim of my untouched glass,
And the long dog days of summer sink, like the sun, slowly into fall—
And so without the sultry heat of the afternoon,
I drive it home in the dark, unsatisfied.

Nightshades in "Exterieur Quai"

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Removed by the Request of the Author

Pot O' Gold

Richard eats cough drops by the window of his room and dreams. He thinks about his father, his dead mother, and the box of moth balls in the facilities closet at school. Sometimes he tries to look down to the people living outside. To do this requires pulling his wheel chair parallel to the window sill and arranging his emaciated neck to look over the rusty brown radiator. Richard watches the children across the street running around and playing ball. Sometimes one of their mothers comes out to watch them play; she brings them bottles of water and smiles. He also watches the tight bodied woman who jogs by in running shorts and a sports bra. Often, he radiator creaks and the pipes slam against the wall, arousing him from his dreams. These are the things that Richard does when he's waiting by the window.

The doorbell rings, footsteps fall nearby, and Richard's father pounds on the door. "Richard, closet time," he says, his voice rough and icy. After his slower than normal brain processes the command he turns around to wheel himself towards the closet door. His father opens the closet door, and Richard rolls himself into the musty room. The door slams behind him. He knows that his father must be having a guest. That's when he puts Richard into the closet. Then, after his father locks the door and mumbles inaudible obscenities, Richard begins to do the things he does when he's waiting. He reaches for another cherry cough drop.

Richard enjoys looking at the pretty girls at school. They come into his classroom smiling at him and jiggling. This makes Richard smile, too. These pretty girls visit despite the fact that he drools, or that when he smiles, beads of saliva span the gap between his pink chapped lips. Before they leave, they give him a quarter, and he gives them one of the chocolate chip cookies that they baked with the help of the teacher.

Often, Richard would wonder why his father put him in closet time to begin with. Sometimes he thought it was because his father didn't want guests to know that his son was different. His dad used many words to express "different," such as "retarded," "slow," and "fucked up." But the word which stings Richard the most is "mentally handicapped." If Richard knows one thing for sure, it's that you cannot be handicapped and desired at the same time, especially not without cookies.

The moth balls in the closet-time room smell like the ones in the facilities closet at school. After school Richard waits for his father to pull up in his pickup truck. He sits and does the things he does when he's waiting. He thinks and he dreams. One day after school in the fall, Richard was waiting on the porch watching the squirrels vault the fence across the parking lot. He was waiting for his father, who was two hours late because he was tracking down the blood trail of a deer that he shot but did not kill. Until dusk, he waited. A boy named Rodney "Beast" Jenkins approached Richard who was still sitting in his wheel chair. Football practice was over, and Beast was on his way out of the school when he spotted Richard. Beast approached, and without saying a word he wheeled Richard back into the school. On the way in Beast passed a professor who smiled at him, who assumed he was just helping a sped. Beast turned the corner by the stairs to the basement, and pushed the wheel chair into the facilities closet. Richard saw a box of mothballs on the shelf, much like the ones that his father had in the room designated for closet time when guests are over.

Beast lifted Richard out of the chair, and placed him on his knees facing the spigot of the floor sink. The hard plastic of the sink was scratched deep with brown striations from years of use. The only sliver of light that entered the facilities closet illuminated the box of moth balls. The smell of chemicals from the floor sink began to singe Richard's nostrils. His skinny knees made contact with the frigid, slimy floor only for a few minutes. He braced himself on the spigot against the thrusting pain from behind, curling his crooked fingers around the rusted metal. Beast, also on his knees, gripped Richard's waist with his thick grubby hands and grunted, thrusting, and laughing, and thrusting.

"How was school?" his father said on the way home while browsing through his voicemail.

After a few seconds, Richard replied. "Ok," he said, involuntarily drawling out each syllable longer than necessary.

"I'm going to need you to stay in the closet tonight; I have a friend coming from town to visit. I just don't feel like explaining things to him, you know. It's hard enough as it is talking about your mother. You just had to go and take her away from me, boy. And you can't even think straight enough to understand that."

Richard stared out the window of his father's pickup truck, thinking. He processed each word slowly, and by the time he got home, he understood his father's words, but it was too late to reply; he was already in the closet.

Later that night, while midway through another cherry cough drop, Richard began to listen to his father's conversation with his guest. His father is drunk now.

"My wife died sixteen years ago. She died giving birth to a slow child..." He said, laughing after he dragged out the word "slow."

"...And by slow I mean fucked up, you know, in the head," he said, tapping his temple deliberately. "He's handicapped; we...I keep him at a home down the street..." he lied.

Once, a man in black approached Richard. The man had no hair and tight, shiny skin on his forehead. He wore a white collar. Richard focused on his shiny head. "Hey there, son, high five!" he said enthusiastically. Richard raised his arm, damp with his own saliva, and extended his fingers to the sky. They made contact, and the man in black held on to Richard's hand.

"Hey, son, what would you do if you weren't... handicapped?" he said. Richard thought about the man's words. He thought about the woman who jogged by the window every day, wearing running shorts and a sports bra. He wondered whether she, too, liked chocolate chip cookies, like the girls at school who smile and jiggle. He thought about the noises made by the men his father brought over during closet time. Minutes later, Richard knew his answer, but couldn't reply.

Sitting in the closet again, Richard reached in the bag of cherry cough drops. He put one in his mouth, and savored the flavor of loneliness. He heard the muffled sounds of his father's guest in the bedroom next door, moaning and giggling. He heard his father's deep throaty voice cackling like Beast in the facilities closet. The cough drop diminished until it disappeared. Richard reached for another, but found the bag empty. He found the strength in his useless body to stand up from his chair. He raised his arms up towards the box of mothballs. The box slipped from his hands, which were moist from saliva, and it fell. White marble sized balls scattered to the ice cold floor. Richard got to his knees bracing himself on the shoe rack in the dark closet. He held up a mothball. He placed it in his mouth, tucked it into his cheek pouch, and sucked on it like a cherry cough drop.

He thought about his father, his dead mother, the sounds coming from the room next door, and the jiggling girls at school. He forgot how to bake chocolate chip cookies. The chemicals began to burn his tongue. Again, Richard was waiting.

His body quivered on the closet floor. He writhed, his wrists contorting in pain, the muscles of his neck bulging. He swallowed his tongue. Seizing more violently now, his head flailed into the foot pedal of his wheel chair. Blood spurted from the wound.

Richard's father paused when he heard the noise of his son's bony frame clattering on the closet floor. His friend covered himself with a sheet. "Oh, what's that sound?" he said.

"Oh, it's nothing, the radiator sometimes makes that sound, you know. It's nothing, it's nothing. I got to replace that piece of shit."

A few minutes later, when Richard's father finished with the man, he walked him to the door, and thanked him before saying goodbye. He then went upstairs to unlock the closet door and let out his son to clean up the mess in the bedroom. He walked up the steps, and turned the corner to see a pool of scarlet blood in a half circle seeping from under the closet door. He stood there waiting for an eternity. Richard's father thought about his dead wife. He then looked again at his handicapped son's blood. He opened the closet door, and from under the stench of blood he could smell moth balls and cherry scented puke. His son appeared as he did on the night of his birth. The vapors of the subliming mothballs prickled his nose. He sneezed then closed the closet door, grabbed his coat, his truck keys, and left.

In Cold Bronze

I.

He is a modern day *Thinker*,
A clothed version of Rodin's masterpiece.
His visage gives no indication
Of deep inner thought;
He sits, spine ram-rod straight,
Observing the scene before him:
People dodging raindrops
And whatever else they're rushing
To escape.

Who can help but be amused by
Puddles devouring sidewalks,
Creating small seas with
No Moses to split them with his umbrella?

The soft summer rain runs
Down his face,
Trickling like tears from his open eyes,
Caressing his sealed lips,
Leaving behind a metallic aftertaste.
His arms are frozen before him,
Clutching waterproof paper and pen,
Unable to wipe the moisture from his face.

He is an observer of life
For eternity.
His pen never records
The thoughts that must be encased
Exist behind his impenetrable mask.

II.

I wonder what I have done
To enter this circle of Hell,
This Judecca
Where I'm in a perpetual pose,
My limbs locked together for all time,
My eyes turned away from the light At the end of the path
And the break in the clouds.
Like Tantalus in his hell,
I am tormented by

Paradise that is
Forever out of my reach.

The world rushes before me;
Even the dead leaves have movement
Which is denied to me.
How I envy the living,
The dying,
And those who simply exist.
I thirst for what I can't have,
Long for what will never be mine.
I am trapped by my own will.

I watch as the driven, single-minded
Stalk before me,
Drawn like moths to flame.
They disappear before me,
Swallowed whole by the light
That rejects my metallic bulk.

Grow

Sticky, I guess. Sticky is an appropriate word for it. Then again, appropriate isn't exactly a word for it at all. Splendid and dirty and sick and fun we could say, but appropriate we couldn't. We enjoyed it too much for it to be the same as we'd always been . Appropriate.

No, it wasn't a proper thing or the right thing. It was a quiet revolution thing, a four-point-oh "Fuck You" to the moms and dads and teachers we'd obeyed since birth. A, "Without further ado I present to you, world, me, fully erect and standing, too," kind of a thing that makes you queasy and crazy and new. It stuck in our minds like glue.

You saw it on faces in high school hallways. Deep smile lines, gorges of experience, baby wrinkles of wisdom and age would appear overnight. Like a revelation, like a miracle, adults replaced children in a few shallow breaths.

It was our adulthood one-oh-one class we took behind the scenes, under the tables and covers of darkness, a hands-on guide to growing up. It was our final exam, the one we'd been studying for since we'd figured out the meaning behind the purpose. We'd thoroughly read and listened, made jokes, and sat up late practicing with magazines, videos, fantasies shrouded in skin, rubbing and pulling our secret until we could taste heaven in every nerve.

It was everything we'd hoped for, and everything we'd feared.

When her time came, She was ready. She sat in classes, she lay in bed, dreaming of romance and love, her thoughts wrapped in red and diamonds. But She was just like the rest of us, the same head on a different body. She had the same eyes that sang, hands that played, the same all-knowing all-wanting attitude a blind man could recognize. She walked with her feet, talked with her mouth, and dreamed her dreams with a Hollywood passion.

He was ready, too. Raised in the concentration camps called elementary school, the prisons called day care, He too walked and talked with the same wanting knowing smile, practicing daily to achieve sweet release when the time was right.

Their lives crossed on the First, and as She walked past his stomach cramped, his heart became uncomfortable. She saw him seated, smiling, and her knees began to bump, and soon she felt faint as she boiled from the inside. They caught glimpses, and warm feelings flew, creeped from toes, up legs, to softest spots of skin they felt with fingers.

When She went back to him, She found it fit, her smile with his, and they saw in each other themselves and their own smiles. Wrinkles grew deeper as He went back for more, and fit his lips with hers. Soon they found their bodies also fit, his strong arm beneath her shoulders, her light curves around his waist, like puzzle pieces. And when She showed herself, and He himself, so nothing could be hidden between them, He bent down and pushed the last piece into place.

It is here, at their last moments of childhood, when infancy returned in fullest form. In those seventy-eight seconds he laughed, she groaned, he moaned, she moaned, she held her breath, he let his go, and they both finished crying. Naked together, a part of each other, wet, tired, reborn into a grown-up world, they lay. Sticky.

And a grown up world it was, when She found white underwear still three weeks later. She walked to the pharmacy, and her face flushed at the register. A man scanned the package, and She avoided his twisted glance. Back home now, She ran to the bathroom and lifted the seat. Red she had looked for, but her Yellow brought Blue, and she dropped

the stick like an anvil, and still fell under its weight.

When She began to breathe again, they came in choked sobs She muffled with a towel. When her legs could function and her balance returned, She stumbled down the hallway to drop the phone, the numbers too blurry to read. With shaky fingers, She pushed numbers, and her knees gave out to the sound of his voice, ignorant and innocent for the last time.

Twenty minutes later He was there, walking stiffly and looking lost. He reached for her and She fell, again, and they crawled their way to the bathroom. She saw the stick and sobbed harder, as he grabbed the box. He reached for the stick lightly, and held it like a breast, gently, as if it would shatter or break under his strong grip.

They were together now, He still awestruck, and She crying again, her chest bouncing with each short breath she forced. They crouched together, holding each other, trying to find the ways their bodies had fit so perfectly before. No ideas came to mind, yet thoughts and nightmares of conversations and lab coats circled the room like vultures.

After what seemed like hours on the tiled floor, they made their way downstairs to the sofa, where they began to sort things out. Mouths remained closed for longer, and when lips finally parted, oceans of questions flowed into the quiet room:

How did this happen?

Why us?

Why now?

Most importantly, *What do we do?*

As they both sank deeper into confusion, a key slid into the front door lock as her mother came home. Announcing herself, the mother noticed two somber adults motionless on the couch, reflecting a transition she long ago went through herself. The air lay so thick with deep thought that when she opened her mouth, no words could be heard.

They remained silent even after her mother left. Thoughts still flew through each of their heads like bees, hard to follow and painful if caught. When finally they began to think clearly, She inquired what He had been thinking.

Abortion?

The word stuck in her mouth like peanut butter, and made him wince. Abortion. Death and Doctors and Parents and Embarrassment. Abortion. To kill a child before he was even born. Purposely. Never.

But She was all for it. Quick, painless, a fix-it-all solution to their one big problem. Professional doctors, paid to help mothers end unwanted pregnancies. Oh God. Pregnancy. Mother.

She could not be a mother. He could not be a killer.

Nothing could change either mind. They sat, silent again, but this time with a hint of anger, of a lost understanding, a fading fit. Her curves no longer fit his hips. His clothes felt uncomfortable on her skin. Their neutral faces each sang a different sorrow.

He left soon after, their puzzle pieces now too different to ever fit again. He left the stick on the bathroom floor, tread marks in the driveway, a fragment of life in her stomach, and didn't look back. When She dried her damp face with tissues, and could control her quavering voice She opened the phone book, and pushed buttons like she had before, this time in an unfamiliar order. A friendly, tired voice answered the phone, and within minutes She had a time, a place, and a new knot in her stomach.

The walk to the clinic was cold and lonely, the grass beneath her feet flattening under each step. Arriving, She entered and gave a name to the friendly, tired voice She had spoken to the day before. She read wrinkled magazines in an uncomfortable chair in a poorly lit room, waiting. When the man came in and read the name off the chart, She stood, and bit her lip. He invited her in and, glancing back at the door, She hesitated, then followed him straight into an uncertain future.

Sitting

My grandfather spent his life in chairs
In the time before the hemorrhage stunted his right side,
the chairs he sat on were at construction sites, inside equipment cabs, at the head of the dinner table.
Now the chairs are scattered throughout the house that he constructed, tucked away in corners,
built up with orthopedic pillows, levers, and mechanics.

He struggles to reach each seat now, dragging his dark brown shoe across the floor,
making a sound like wet sand under the sole, grating against the bleached planks of a boardwalk.
With my grandmother at his arm he swears inaudibly, in brisk huffs, and she asks him not to
curse in front of the grandkids. To me he turns and winks.

Her white hair bobs with the weighted steps, transverse, uneven, but still powerful
in their timeless determination. She brings cookies and lemonade. Handing them to the patriarch on
the throne for half a man. The chair rocks forward.

The light burning through the window's film of condensation warms the room and his rocking chair,
sinking into the oak, melted pools of butter around the still solid joints.

A room away she is putting the handheld mounds of white sugar, egg, and vanilla back in their place.
I help by pushing his chair to the edge of the counter, my makeshift stepping stool. She tells me
that her ears are ringing. "It means someone is talking about you." She looks toward the hall.

In two days I will leave for the West; for Oklahoma where the wind spirals and destroys.
Where the land is so close to the water table, construction crews abandon basement plans.
I will spend a month away from home in a city named after the state, where the southern drawl
seeps into the skin like the red clay, rubbing off with the steam of a bath.

I will send postcards from the memorial. I will take pictures by the Survivor tree and walk
along the fence hidden under a quilt of woven photographs and yellowed paper, coated in the red
of Oklahoma and the white of bombed concrete.I will sit beside, not on, the chairs by the granite pool.
Ghosts or tombstones that glow a warm bronze, tempered glass squares in rows,
some scaled smaller, seating for a child's tea party.

On the morning of, people rushed across smooth yards of concrete and up the granite landing,
toward the revolving doors that minutes later would be shattered, the building strewn across the yard
like the contents of a women's fallen purse. The survivors crawling through a mushroom cloud of dust
and sound, stumbling over broken concrete, holding their ringing ears, bleeding noses, desperate faces.

In a month and two days I will return to the glazed window, to my grandfather's broken half.
To the table at his good side I will place a postcard of the cold squares built for those who left
seats empty on earth. At desks, dinner tables, in dusty try-to-forget corners.

My grandfather will look at the chairs and then at his own, his lap and hands wrapped in light
and he will call for my grandmother to help as he leans the chair forward.

A Platform in Reality

I returned to Manderley before they ever found his body. Two teenage stoners discovered what they thought to be a Neanderthal and reported their findings to a high school paper. They claimed the Neanderthal was frozen and preserved for millions of years, a hunter of rodents and deer and mammoths with wooly hair. The authorities weren't informed until after the boys became semi-celebrities, and after several days of determining which display case to use in a museum did they even consider he wasn't a Neanderthal at all. An autopsy later revealed the true nature of the body, and before an increasingly discouraged crowd, the doctor announced that the teenage boys did not discover ancient remains, but rather the body of Gerald Brown.

None of this, as you'd imagine, was of any interest to me—seldom news with such little substance ever is. It was delivered to me by a source I didn't trust and by a man I hardly knew. I received the paper in early January, still in the plastic. It was rolled up and neat. Fresh. On my door step in the falling snow.

I moved to Manderley two nights before the solstice. Not long after Gerald went missing. It was my way of trying to escape Midnight's chill. To avoid the frost and cold. Manderley was to be a shelter in the storm. I was told not unlike a sanctuary.

But the lust of Manderley has since faded and dulled, the lure of an inexplicable something that slowly becomes the remains of disregard. With every passing storm, I've sought a new place to stay. The Manderley I once read is not the Manderley I found. I have since moved only to hear its landowners were buried in soil.

I tried to contact Gerald's family, but mail comes rarely and travels mainly by foot. I have received no word from Mrs. Brown, but I recently obtained an article similar to the newspaper I first saw. It's a two-paragraph blurb about his life that ended, "In Loving Memory of Gerald Brown." Gerald's story lives on. In memory and in mind. You can hold these words with all truth, like the night that chills its morning with a cold and bitter feeling.

In the early winds of October, Gerald posed for his picture with the school's clock tower in back. He got his picture taken outside because he missed his appointment in the studio. He was dressed in his father's sport coat, a tie, and khaki pants he'd worn the night before. When the cameraman told him to smile, he pretended to sneeze and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"You know the most beautiful two-words in the English language?" he asked the cameraman. "'Cellar door.' But if you ask me, I don't see what all the fuss is about. I mean, you got so many good words out there, it's a shame you gotta show favorites."

In the wind, Gerald's hair was blown to the side, and he adjusted his collar. "Now I got a good phrase for you," he said, but before he could finish, the cameraman dismissed him for lunch, and he arrived much later than the others.

As the saying goes, "his mind was like a sponge." Gerald's mind was a rock. If we're supposed to think like a sponge, Gerald would cork his pores.

I told him good poetry is supposed to make you think, and he said, "There's something poetic about bad writing."

Once upon a time, there was a giant elm tree where the Native Americans and William Penn signed a peace treaty. Gerald found out about it and asked me to go. So after school one day, we went to the site of the tree—which, if you consider the distance in time from Native-America to Modern-America, the tree, as you'd suspect, is no longer living.

"The bastards," Gerald said. "They tore it down."

In place of the elm tree, there's a park. It's called Penn Treaty Park. And it's along the Delaware, in the exact place where the tree once stood.

"I could write a book about this place," he said. "I'd call it A Farewell to Elms."

Gerald had been writing a book for years, but hadn't gotten a sentence published.

He was a good writer, but he wrote for himself, and for those who didn't know him, none of it made any sense.

He said, "There are two ways to write a book. The first is to fight a bull and beat it. The second is to let the bull beat you."

When I told him I didn't understand, he said, "Nobody ever lives their life all the way up except bull-fighters." Which, at least to me, made the least sense of all.

Gerald would write a story about Penn Treaty Park that he titled, One Flew over the Giant Elm Tree. His first sentence was "Atticus always told me it's a sin to kill an elm tree." He showed his teacher the first couple of pages, and she wrote, "Your originality is lacking. For next time, why don't you copy and paste The Great Gatsby and tell me it's by F. Scott Fitz-GERALD."

"Talk about unoriginal," Gerald said. "I don't even like The Great Gatsby."

Gerald's stories were mostly fragmented thoughts, where character development was the reader's responsibility, and plot construction was ruled clichéd. Each sentence followed the one before it, which he later determined made his work unoriginal.

"I'm a good writer, but I lack new ideas," he said. "I need to stop reading so many goddamn books."

For hours, the two of us would read his manuscripts, only to repay me by having Mindy come along. "You really like Mindy, don't you?" he said. "I can tell you like Mindy."

Mindy was one of Gerald's friends who he'd met on a sail boating accident when they were seven. Or rather, she was seven. He was eleven. At eighteen-years-old, Gerald would invite his fourteen-year-old friend to come read his manuscripts with another eighteen-year-old late into the evening.

She'd always have good suggestions, but Gerald never liked criticism.

"Don't you think it would be better if this character survives?" she asked.

"Frankly, my dear, I don't really give a crap."

Beyond the park, there's a playground that reaches the river. If a storm hits really hard, the slide dips down to the water and the base is all covered in mud. By daytime, the place is a swarm of kids. By night, it catches its cold.

Gerald's father used to take him to the place as a child, but he hadn't been there for years. After visiting the spot of the elm tree, he decided to go back to the Delaware and read books beneath the monkey bars.

It was late at night and cold. Falling leaves turned to snow. By November, all the orange was brown.

"I invited Mindy," Gerald said. "I figured it would be more fun."

When the three of us drove together, we parked behind the playground and made

our way through the back woods. We carried flashlights and a copy of Gulliver's Travels, and in Mindy's hand, a bottle of wine.

Books are best read with an open mind, he said.

As we approached the playground, there was an orange glow that flickered and then went out. We could hear the voices of teenage boys and girls, laughing and coughing like mischief was a funny joke. Mindy asked if we could all go back, but Gerald told her it would be all right. "They're just having a little fun is all."

When we turned on the light to read, one of the guys came toward us. Gerald lifted the flashlight and pointed it toward him. We knew some of the kids who would go there late at night, so he called a couple of names and waited for an answer. As the guy got closer, his face was not young like a boy's but tired and gray with age. He put his hands in the air like he was being arrested and joked, "Don't shoot, I'm innocent." Laughing like he was coughing.

The old man told Mindy she was pretty. "Young meat," he said. "You guys done well for yourselves."

We said nothing. The man liked sound, not silence.

"What's that book?" he asked. "The Holy Grail?"

"The holy grail of all books," Gerald said.

"I meant the Bible."

Next to Mindy there was an open spot on the bench so the man took a seat.

"Care for a smoke?" he asked. We said nothing. Crickets chirped like the sound of nighttime birds.

"Do you hear that sound Mindy?" Gerald asked. "Do you hear the 'poo-tee-weet?'"

"What's the 'poo-tee-weet?'" she said.

"That's the sound the birds are making. 'Poo-tee-weet.'"

"Did you come up with that?" I asked.

"If you listen real hard, you'll hear it too."

Most mysteries are left unsolved. Or, rather, most mysteries are best left unsolved. Whether most of them are actually left unsolved is still up to debate.

The man on the park bench moved his hand toward Mindy's knee, while Gerald opened his book to Part II. "What's your name?" the old man asked. "Sugar?"

Gerald and I said nothing. We sat there, pretending to flip through the pages of our book. "This is when Gulliver goes to Brobdingnag," Gerald said. "I don't think it's a real place at all."

The old man lit up a cigarette and asked us to smoke. "Come on. Have a light," he said.

On the park bench, Gerald displaced his book. He got up, telling the man that he doesn't smoke. Cupping the bottle of wine to use for a later date.

Although I remember most, my memory recedes me in the moments just after. But when the three of us got back to Gerald's truck, he couldn't find his book. How he forgot it, I'm not sure. It wasn't like Gerald to misplace a book, let alone the words of Jonathan Swift. Anyway, he went running back to the bench, and there was the man and all his friends. The book was still there, left idle and untouched. The man had nothing to do with moving it.

Whether Gerald should have gone back for the book, Mindy thought not. All the men standing there, huddled in a circle—at the sight of Gerald, the old man chirped 'poo-tee-weet.'

"The boy reads the bible," he continued. "He's reading the bible of all bibles. A

real reader this one."

On a platform in reality, Gerald had no basis. Books could be burned and tortured, yet their words would always live on. The blood from Hemingway's typewriter could be dabbed with a towel and wrung out in the washbasin. The Jazz Age could lose its Gatsby and Pencey Prep torn to the ground.

Remove thought from purpose, one line still follows the next.

Later that night, Gerald went missing and no one ever heard from him again. It sounds like the end of a bad mystery novel, I know. It's like poetry that makes you think—it's like the bad writing that no one ever cares to read.

On a cold and bitter morning, a couple of teenagers found his body by the great elm tree. They found him with his knees bent inward and his hands clenched together like he was praying. They saw his face tilted toward the sky.

At least that's what they told us. They were probably making it up so it sounds like a better story.

For the most part, that's all that happened. The next week an article was published in the high school paper and everyone got a copy. Across the top it said, "Frozen Neanderthal: Two Teenage Boys Let Their Minds Run Wild."

Of course, Gerald wouldn't think this is much of a story. He'd want to know why he disappeared and how Mindy tried to cope. But it's not up to me to write this part. I've heard a rumor that if you stay outside in the freezing cold, a part of you is preserved for the moments you're not there. Like when it snows and you press your weight into the ground, your imprint remains when you go inside. It's the same sort of thing. I don't know why it happens. Maybe light travels slower when it's cold.

The morning after Gerald disappeared, a thick ice froze over the Delaware. It became so cold that the teenagers who found his body were asked, 'Aren't you afraid of frostbite?' before they even mentioned the body. Anyway, Gerald's book was frozen to the bench so none of the men could take it. A little part of him remained even after he left.

Occasionally Mindy goes back to the park to watch the kids all play on the monkey bars. I think she often joins them.

Me: I kept the book. After it thawed out I took it with me. I started reading it a little while ago, and I've gotten to the part about Brobdingnag.

Brobdingnag. All the people there are as tall as church steeples.

I don't think it's a real place at all.

Getting Lost

We drive for miles
oblivious to street signs,
state lines,
and time
flying by.
Always moving;
going God-only-knows where,
going nowhere
with hands at ten and two.

We were tired, slightly wet,
Laughing and waiting in lines
Smelling cotton candy sweet
with just a hint of sweat.
Like some burned out junkie,
you craved just one more fix,
so you jumped out of the raft
and ran headlong down the ramp
as the park began to close.
It was getting dark and
we couldn't leave you behind,
spending a night wandering
alone through empty amusements.
We followed you, like we had
when we were ten years old.
Then you turned the corner
and tripped off the curb,
rolling over the pavement
and skinning your knees.
You laughed until you cried,
looking like the girl I knew
years before your father died.

We say, "Let's drive forever,"
As day fades into night
"We've come too far
to turn back!"
"We're far too young
to rest now!"
Barreling
through
the
darkness
Getting lost.
Driving with one headlight.

Threaded Flesh

The child lay fully exposed in the crucifix position. With my fingertips I closed the upper lids of her eyes, concealing the glossy whiteness. Her feet, black and blue, shaped like oblong gourds, were bent behind her ankles. The skin on her knees was raw. I positioned the light directly over her legs and prepared to make the first incision. Dr. Kaschak was peering over me, "Hailey, we hardly encounter this condition back home yet this is the fifth child today with clubfeet. Before we leave you'll be a pro at this procedure."

He was right. The cases we had come across here were more severe than anything I'd seen in my residency in Denver. My hand trembled as the scalpel sliced into the flesh. The surrounding area became bathed in blood and iodine. Retracing the incision with the blunt end of the scalpel I dug deeper and deeper into the muscle. Her tendons were like rubber bands wrapped around the joints. The patient on the adjacent operating bed began to scream, "Dung dung tôi..dung dung tôi...dung dung tôi." Dr. Kaschak left my side and proceeded to help Cole, a fellow resident, restrain the yelling boy. Three hours into the surgery and I could feel the shards of exhaustion propagate through my body. It had been two weeks and I was still not accustomed to this heat. Sweat drooled from the pores of my forehead and was hovering at the tips of my lashes. Cole looked as if he too was struggling without air conditioning for his face was a camouflage of red and pink. As I dabbed my forehead I saw the crowds of people stashed in the examination hallway. Pairs of eyes peered into the operating room hopeful to be chosen next. The cries of infants were darts targeting my aorta. It hurt me to know that so many of these people had traveled to Da Nang from faraway and yet so many would be turned away. A slight tug on the suture and the flesh pinched together. Perfect. No puckering.

"Hailey," Cole yelled, "Do you have an extra stapler over there we could use?" I handed the instrument, crusted with blood, to the mother of the little girl I was operating on. She was instructed to rinse it in a bucket. Meanwhile, Dr. Bui, the anesthesiologist, approached my patient and repeated, "Cha^u...Cha^u...Cha^u." The little girl's eyelids rolled open.

Turning toward Cha^u's mother I began, "Everything went well with the surgery. But we need to keep her here overnight to monitor her and make sure that there are no complications. We need you to stay and let us know if anything is wrong." Cha^u's mother nodded along as if she could understand me. Luckily, Mai Cha, the interpreter, was in the room. She opened her mouth and syllables twirled from her tongue like water dancing from a fountain.

That night after work I met up with several of the doctors and residents from the clinic since many of us had the next morning off. As we entered a local bar a swarm of natives congregated around Dr. Kaschak shaking his hand and chanting, "Tommy, Dr. Tom, welcome home." These people were not just patients but friends. The locals embraced us and handed us mugs filled with Bia Hoi. "Bottoms up," resonated from Dr. Kaschak whose glass was raised high into the air. The Bia Hoi had a rich, nutty taste and soothed my parched esophagus. Aromas of citronelle and pate saturated the salty air as the waiters reappeared with dishes. Dr. Kaschak stood up from the table to give them a hand. Drawing a plate to his nose he closed his eyes and took a whiff, "My favorite—cua farci and goi du du. Stuffed crab shells and green papayas." In all of the excitement I had failed to realize that many of the Vietnamese men were staring directly at me. Dr. Kaschak must have noticed me shifting in my seat

and said, "Hailey, it's the red hair. Most of these people have never seen a red head." Laughing I choked on the frothy Bia Hoi. Just as I set the glass onto the table a waiter approached to refill it. I gestured "no more" but the waiter just grinned at me and kept on pouring until the foam trickled over the brim. Dowl, the Irish doctor sitting next to me belched. "If you don't drink they'll take it as an insult." With every gulp I could feel the lukewarm alcohol slinking through my body, making my sunburned skin even rosier. Slurred speech slithered around the table. The only person immune to the drunkenness was Dr. Kaschak. Every time he finished his Bia Hoi he would slip his mug under the table and fill it half-way with ice.

Cupping his hands over his wife's, who was sitting next to him, Dr. Kaschak began to tell us about why he started the clinic. "My wife, Cissy, and I love children but were unable to have one of our own. We tried for many years but eventually decided that adoption was the next step. Fifteen years ago the two of us made our first trip to Da Nang to adopt our son, Ty."

"He was the answer to our prayers," said Cissy massaging her palm. She was soft-spoken. Strands of blond hair had escaped from her ponytail and were now glued with tears to her cheeks. For the last two weeks she had assisted the surgeons in the operating room but she was actually a photographer. Every time I had interacted with her at the clinic she was completely composed; even when she was instructed to tell parents that their children could not be helped. But now she was so upset. Cissy, rummaging for a picture in her wallet, continued, "When we went to the orphanage to get him, they led us into a room filled wall to wall with cribs each containing four to five infants. The children were all malnourished, sunken rib cages with bloated tummies. See here," she said as she passed around a photograph of children at the orphanage. Many of the babies had dark rings under their eyes and brown rashes encircling their bellybuttons. Their necks were too scrawny to support the weight of their heads which bobbed against the bars of the crib. Cissy explained, "There were not enough caretakers to look after all the children. We were told by one of the nannies that when the children became really sick they were placed in a separate room and left to die so that they didn't infect the others. We stayed in Vietnam for a week after adopting our son. Ty was very lethargic even at home and soon died from a bacterial infection that attacked his heart, which he had acquired at the orphanage."

Rubbing his wife's back Dr. Kaschak began to speak. "Losing our son was rough but we eventually took it as a sign that God wanted us to do something even greater. We founded this clinic in memory of those children in the orphanage. Now doctors from many countries spend weeks to months volunteering here, giving hope to those that need it most. Cissy and I are fortunate that we are financially able to spend a month every year working and teaching here. And we are even more thankful for all of your efforts and dedication. Bottoms up. To Ty."

"To Ty," we all cheered. Raising my glass I began to feel slightly dizzy. I stood up from my stool and excused myself. Dr. Kaschak asked Cole to accompany me and the two of us left stumbling drunk along the beach. We had walked about a mile when Cole called out, "Hailey, I'm going for a swim, if you want to join." Slipping off my cotton sundress I tossed it further up the beach onto the dry sand. I ran towards the ocean in my bra and panties kicking the waves, salt water splashing into my face. Cole followed. The waves pushed me around but cowered to Cole's 6'4" frame. The two of us wrestled in the sand where the waves bruised the beach. His chest was well defined and I could feel his back muscles tighten as he wrapped his arms around my back. The dimples framing his mouth made him look so innocent. I ran my fingers along his chin, protruding from his square-shaped face. Latching onto the elastic waistband of his boxers I dragged him back onto the shore. Our pile of clothes had been swept away with the current. We had no other choice but to scamper back to our hotel nearly naked under the snickering stars.

The next morning it was already noon when I stepped out of bed. I ventured to the

lobby of the hotel, bought a cup of coffee, and sat on the beach gazing into the gray sea. My flannel pajamas were soaked from the wet sand. The ocean breeze whizzed through the ringlets of my hair, tangling them into one big knot. I spun my head around in attempt to loosen the knot and saw Cole sitting behind me. "Hailey, I'm sorry about last night, I hope I didn't embarrass you too much. I haven't gotten that drunk in awhile."

"No worries. I just hope no one else from the clinic saw." The footprints the waves had erased from the beach overnight had already returned. In the distance two women were entering the water dressed in layers of silk and satin. Beyond them Dr. Bui was sitting on the shore staring into the horizon. He always sat so upright. Cole must have noticed me watching him and said, "He comes out here every day and just stares. Rumor has it his wife jumped from a fishing boat into the sea. She didn't even try to swim."

It had to be above a hundred degrees but at that instance I felt like slabs of dry ice squashed against raw fish. I was filled with guilt knowing we had a limited time to help and here I was reclining on a beach. Cole and I retreated to our hotel rooms to wash up and then met at the mopeds. The streets were congested. It was the middle of the day and the fishermen were selling their catch at the markets. Tucked under the outdoor restaurants were tourists encircling pints of Bia Hoi. We passed through the city into the rural hills dotted with thatched shacks and brightly colored tarps. In my rearview mirror I could see a little boy running after us barefoot. His voice echoing over the engine of the moped, "Giúp...giúp...giúp..."

"Cole, hold on!"

We pulled over to the side of the road and followed the boy through a dirt path that meandered along a river. There lying against a canoe was a man, his white shirt stained red. He was badly beaten. He couldn't move. I knelt down and listened for a pulse. "We need to get him to the clinic, or we're going to lose him." I dug the pocket knife from my scrubs. I had bought it as a means of protection from a street vendor when we first arrived in Vietnam. Grasping the knife I tore into the cotton freeing the man of his blood soaked shirt. Cole pulled his t-shirt off and handed it to me. I wrapped it tightly around the man's side from where he was bleeding. Cole delved through the canoe and found a net. Together we lifted the man onto the net and carried him up the hill in the cheaply made canopy. His son followed. Once we reached the mopeds we sandwiched the man between Cole's back and his son's stomach. I followed on the other moped.

We stampeded through the doors of the clinic yelling for help and Dr. Kaschak emerged from the waiting area. "What's the matter?" he questioned.

"We were on our way to the clinic when we found this man lying along the river. He's bleeding from his side and his pulse is slowing. I checked his airway, it's not constricted."

We carried him into the operating room but all the beds were occupied.

"Dr. Bui, hold off on that patient's surgery we need this bed," Dr. Kaschak yelled. Cole placed the man onto the bed and red poured from his wound soaking the sheets. The man's son lost in the chaos, had followed us into the room and was now standing by his father's feet. I found Mai Cha and asked her to find a safe place for the boy to wait.

We began to peel through the serrated muscle and flesh. Grains of dirt and pebbles were infecting the incision. Lodged about an inch deep below the right armpit was a bullet. The bullet had traveled through his arm and had gotten trapped in his side. "We need to amputate his right arm," Dr. Kaschak instructed, "There's no way we can save it. See here. When the bullet struck the bone it caused it to splinter, the dirt surrounding the wound has led to an extensive infection." I felt the skin surrounding the wound; it was cold. The injury had destroyed the blood vessels—the tissue was dead. "Hailey, I need you to remove the bullet while I determine the incision site for the amputation. This man's been bleeding for a long time—medicine alone won't save him."

Dr. Kaschak began instructing Cole on how best to apply the clamps to the blood vessels in order to minimize bleeding. Using a blunt probe I poked around in the muscle for

any shards of the bullet. As I retrieved more sutures from the supply table I noticed the man's son. He was standing on the other side of the window, standing and staring at his father, at the arm that was now detached from the body and was lying on a table. The fingers of the arm were fully extended, yearning for the boy. I laid a blue huck towel over the arm. Mai Cha was standing in the entrance of the operating room. "Mai Cha," I said, "Have you found out anything about the child's mother?"

"He does not speak about any mother. He only speaks of his father."

Cole sealed the socket from which the arm was removed. The blue sterile linens dressing the operation bed were tie-dyed purple. Taking a sponge I cleaned off the blood that had covered his face. We couldn't let his son see him this way. Once Cole had finished the suturing we lifted the patient onto a clean bed and covered his naked body with fresh sheets and thermal blankets. As we rolled the bed into a private room Mai Cha grabbed the child's hand and followed.

About four hours later, I was examining a patient in the hallway when I heard screaming coming from the man's room. Mai Cha and the boy were still standing at the bedside. "Mai Cha, what's wrong—what happened?"

She answered, "He wished you would have let him die."

"What do you mean? We saved his life."

"He's a fisherman—he said he cannot survive with no arm."

"Mai Cha, tell him we can make him a new arm."

"I have. He refuses a new arm. He says it's not the same."

As I entered the man's room I could see him fighting with his breathing tube. He was still too weak to raise his arm and had resorted to biting the tube with his teeth. His lips were tightly curled around the ridges of the tube. He must have bitten his lip for blood and spit dribbled down his chin. In the corner of the room stood his son. I held my hand out for the boy. He squeezed onto my palm and I could feel the bones of his fingers through the tissue-paper like flesh. The two of us walked over to his father's bed where Mai Cha was standing. Looking into the man's eyes I began, "Sir, I know it's not fair. I know right now all you want is to die and to be in peace. But you can't. Look at your son. Look into his eyes. Look for his hope. If you leave, what will happen to him? He needs his father. I need you to trust me. I need you to fight for your son."

While Mai Cha repeated my words the man's tongue gradually unwound around the breathing tube. His lips became more relaxed. Reaching for a tissue I wiped away the blood and spit that had dried on his face. Extending the fingers of his clenched fist one by one—the man fished for his son's hand.

I awaken in the room I have spent many of my days in. My complexion is but a shade deeper than that of the white walls surrounding me. Fighting with the knot, securing the gown behind my neck, I eventually get it untied. Slowly I unroll the gown down to my bellybutton exposing the bandages that cover my chest. Peeling back the medical tape I reveal the railroad tracks crisscrossing through where my right breast used to be. I have seen enough. I slide my arms through the gown and bury beneath the thermal blankets. On the nightstand still sits the blue vase my mother had brought, the sunflowers clenching onto their petals. It's hard to think that a year ago I was the one doing the repairing and now here I am at 29 battling breast cancer.

I can hear the shuffling of a visitor but my eyes won't open. Warm fingertips gently stroke my bald head. "Hailey, I'm here for you," the voice says.

I see the face—the face with the stormy gray eyes, the face with the cracked lips, the face that complements mine, the face of Cole. He slides into the bed and continues to stroke the fuzzy patch on my head. While I watch two monarchs play outside the window, their papaya colored wings powerless against the wind.

He Kisses His Pillow

My friend bends down to kiss his pillow
Because he thinks she's still there, lying
Beside him breathless and soundless
Like she was the night before. But his lips
Come up dry, with lint in his mouth,
And he dips his head down with tears.

His eyes puff up damp, fill gray with his tears
Because he shares his bed with a pillow;
No woman to hold, no one's mouth
But his own, his body stiff and lying
At the sensual touch of his lips
No words to say, the room everything but soundless.

Less sound, no sound, soundless,
The alarm clock buzzing, no regard for tears
The snooze pressed once, the violent tug of two lips
A distant memory, a dampened pillow
On which he's lying:
The deserted love of his mouth.

He thinks of his wife's mouth
Not dry like his own, soundless
With unspoken words, lying
Felicitous and content, tears
Dried up with his pillow
His once wet, well-spent lips,

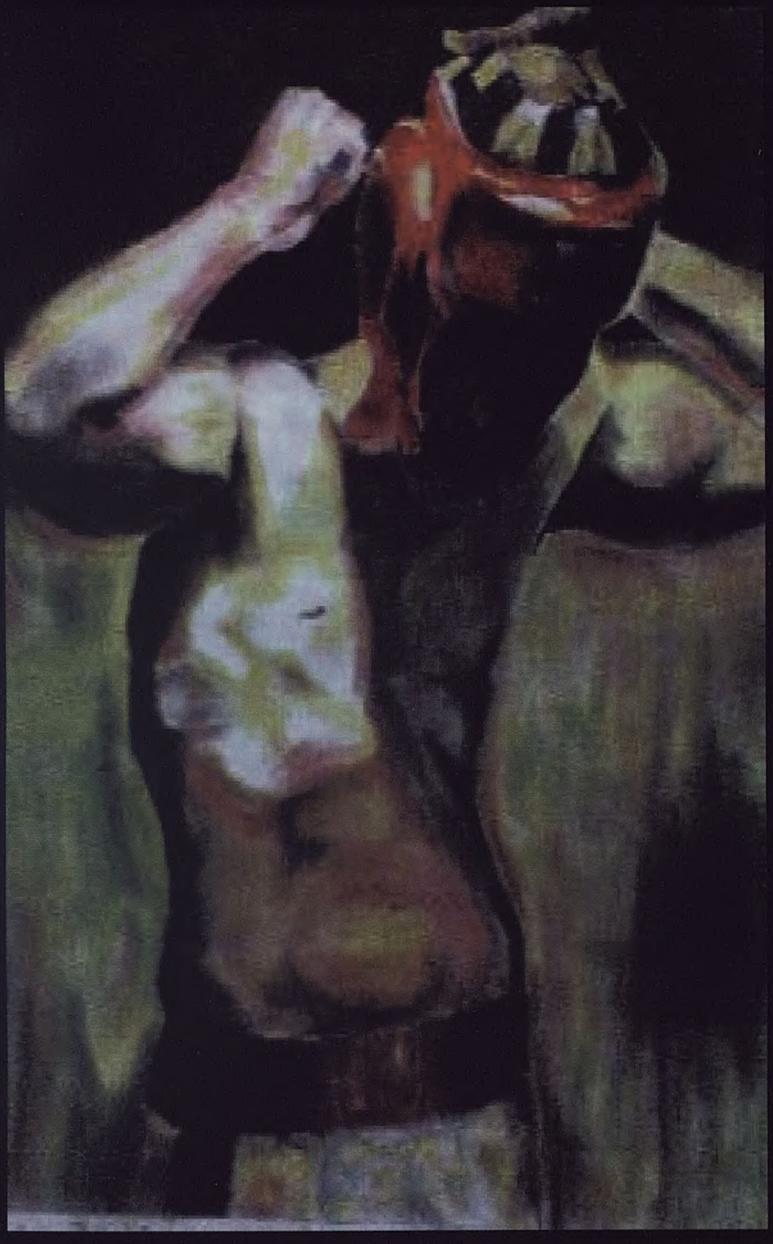
Now chapped and dry, encrusted lips
Sick with disease – his mouth
Stuffed and dabbed with the cloth of his pillow,
The street cars go by his window, soundless,
Because the sound of his raining tears
Are enough to stop his lying.

Just last night, she was there, lying,
Soft and pouty lips
Now gone, she shed not a single tear
Not a sound from her aching mouth
She walked out alone, tip-toeing, soundless
While he held her last thread, his pillow.

So now he's alone, his mouth
Is now dry and worn, his lips
Are now chapped, and he bends over to kiss his pillow.

1972

To watch the video of Prefontaine running in Munich is
To see the hard driving pendulum
Of the human machine.
The incessant clock
Shoveled the seconds forward;
I've never witnessed an empty sky take such
A backseat role.
Wing footed slave driver drumming,
You were the athletic Beatle.
Shouting your praises in "PRE,"
A language of American love,
We watched you, the undertaker,
Tire your opponents out,
Their heads hanging like haggard horses.
"And suddenly it's starting to happen and runners are losing touch!"
The announced screamed.
Call the cows in for the last lap,
Once more round the bend for the final 100 meters.
Viren was no hare and his shiny white shoes
Flared up in flames as he passed Prefontaine;
A ragged tumbleweed who collapsed in defeat.



The Warrior Within
Dinesh Manandhar

Light Shade and Emotions
Anukul Gurung

Concord, MA
Rachel Rakoff

Autumn in Wanaka, New Zealand
Christine Heerwagen

Teaset
Preston Hartwick

Childhood Revolutions
Marisa Trettel

Untitled
Chelsea Kasten

Viridian
Apparatus
Kristen Rivoli

Made in China
Arielle Distasio

Chinese Mailbox
Preston Hartwick

Frozen Trail, Arches National Park
Anukul Gurung

Discovering Eyes
Dinesh Manandhar

Cinque Terre
Storrey Morrison

Beg
Lauren Javins

Offerings
Jennifer Carrington

Fix
Andrew Maturo

How To Cope

A dream is a wish your heart makes when you're fast asleep.
Paper gowns turn waltzing silk until mid-night.
In dreams you lose your heartaches, whatever you wish for, you keep.

Magic wands summon cures, with a bop and a leap,
Pumpkin growths are transformed, there is no fight.
A dream is a wish your heart makes when you're fast asleep.

Malignant Sarcoma is salagadoola boola de beep.
A singing laugh, no white hospital light,
In dreams you lose your heartaches, whatever you wish for, you keep.

A prince to saunter in, the rescue from eternal sleep,
To be stolen from the needles with a ball invite.
A dream is a wish your heart makes when you're fast asleep.

Your mice wait to play, "When will she be back?" they peep,
They dream of the day you will be saved from your plight.
In dreams you lose your heartaches, whatever you wish for, you keep.

No daughter to lose, no crumbling body that weeps,
No little bald princess pale as snow white.
A dream is a wish your heart makes when you're fast asleep.
In dreams you lose your heartaches, whatever you wish for, you keep.

Grief Is A World Unto Itself

"Grief is a world unto itself."

He reread what he'd just written and winced. His handwriting looked cumbersome, like a dog standing on its' hind legs. Not only that, but he didn't even know what it meant. The phrase that had seemed so insightful and profound in the car ride here now appeared vague and the result of an awkward obligation to pretend to sympathize with something he didn't understand: death. He had no idea how to follow it up. But it would have to do, he resigned. He only had one greeting card and he was writing with permanent ink.

He put down his pen and reached for a cigarette. He always did his best thinking alone in the car with a cigarette. He considered the card. The light pink rose lost in a dewy mist on the front seemed so fake and forced, like the kind of art that was made for doctor's offices and hotel lobbies. But he hadn't had much of a choice from the grocery store's selection, had he? Hallmark doesn't make cards that read, "To my lover: sorry about the death of your husband." No. Much better to go with something blank.

Looking out the window streaked with raindrops, he could see cars lining up behind his on the side of the road across from the funeral parlor and people all in black climbing out of them. That seemed so appropriate. Rain on the day of a funeral comforted him, for some reason. If he had to be sad, so should everyone else.

It was then that he saw her, greeting some people at the door. She looked very pretty, he had to admit. Somehow depression worked for her and made her seem even more delicate and feminine. She managed a grateful smile as she allowed herself to be hugged and her hair smoothed. When the new arrivals had disappeared behind the frosted glass of the home, she returned to close the door and apparently recognized his car. She stared and her mouth dropped open involuntarily. The sadness in her eyes shone across the lawn and through his car window. She didn't move but just stood there, rigid, fixed in her gaze, and he could feel her needing him to be there with her. Suddenly, he couldn't help but allow himself to feel the weight of the guilt he'd been trying to bat away.

Expressionless, he stuck the cigarette back in his lips and started the car. Tears slid down her face for the first time that morning as she watched his car roll away.

The Years Without A Santa Claus

It was second grade and I was still firmly entrenched in what my mom likes to call "La-La-Land." I still believed that the Tooth Fairy would pick up my newly lost teeth and pay for those dental pearls. I still believed that the Easter Bunny would hop into my house and leave behind a trail of pink plastic eggs in his wake.

And most of all, I believed in Santa Claus with all my heart.

It was easy to faithfully believe that Santa Claus actually inhabited the North Pole with his entourage of elves and reindeer. After all, countless movies and books confirmed his existence. My mom would read The Polar Express to us every year, and she even had a silver bell that looked as if it had escaped the pages of the book. I'd recite the lines along with Susan in Miracle on 34th Street, "I believe, I believe. It's silly, but I believe." I wanted to be like Charlie Calvin in The Santa Clause; I couldn't think of anything better than travelling to the North Pole and meeting elves or flying in a state of the art sled with its cookies and milk dispenser. Fox Family's 25 Days of Christmas special alone convinced me that such a wonderful person as Santa actually existed.

It didn't help that my mother enabled my Christmas obsession. The minute anyone walked into my house, it was quickly apparent that my family was a tad overzealous when it came to the holiday spirit. Snowmen outnumbered people while numerous Christmas villages were established on windowsills and countertops. Our Christmas tree was barely constrained in its corner of the living room, its branches weighed down by numerous ornaments and lights. Every year, my siblings and I were given an ornament; one that my mom felt most represented each of us. She also made sure that we attended all the breakfasts with Santa every year and got our pictures taken with as many different Santas as possible. I wonder now why I never questioned how many different St. Nicks there were or even how Santa got any work done since he apparently spent most of his time sitting on a department store throne. My mom would also take us into New York City to look at the elaborate windows and the gorgeous tree in Rockefeller Centre. I inherited my love for everything related to Christmas from my mother, and she loved the joy that seemed to emanate from every fiber of my being in the holiday season.

The Christmas of second grade, I made the mistake of peering over the banister under the impression that this was the year I'd catch Santa at his work. I had so many questions to ask that I had heedlessly crept to the stairs and peered between the railing bars. At first, I was only slightly confused by what I saw. Why would my parents be placing presents on the couch, the same place where Santa always put my presents? Why was my father eating the sugar cookie I had specifically decorated with Santa in mind? It was as if something that had always been a part of me had been ruthlessly ripped out. Dazedly, I walked back to bed, not sure what had just happened. After that night, the world started to look different; it was less colorful with the potential for magic bleached out. I was now living in Dorothy's sepia-toned world.

The next morning, I pretended that it was simply a terrible dream, more like a nightmare. The doubts started to creep in, but I did my best to ignore them by throwing myself into the Christmas morning frenzy almost desperately. I looked around, collecting evidence of Santa's existence. There lay the remains of the half-eaten snowman cookie and the empty glass with the residue of milk coating its rim. My mother complained about how inconsiderate the reindeer were, and I could see the mashed up carrots littering the carpet.

I was convinced; yes, Kathleen, there is a Santa Claus.

I put that night out of my mind as best I could throughout the next year. It would be fair to say that I was in denial. I wanted to believe in Santa, so I put my stubbornness to work and willed Santa into existence. Every now and again, I'd slip up and refer to the Christmas gifts that I knew were hidden in the garage. I'd found them accidentally; it took several weeks before I was once again secure in my belief of jolly old St. Nicholas. I also had no one to confide in; I couldn't possibly share my doubts with my younger siblings. They still believed completely, and I swore that I wouldn't do anything to shake their faith. My mother saw my struggle with reality and knew something had to be done the next year. There was this bully in school named Allyson Laverty, and I was her favorite target. Allyson knew exactly what buttons to push in order to get under my skin. I was a socially awkward child, and Allyson was a master manipulator. I learned to keep my mouth shut and to stay out of her way as much as I could. I can remember standing by myself in the schoolyard, cut off from my friends since Allyson had decreed my alienation. My mother could sense that this girl didn't believe in Santa. She also knew that I was desperate to believe in him and that I would defend a non-existent person to the death. It was probably the one point on which I'd stand up to Allyson Laverty, and my mom didn't want to see me get hurt. She could sense that the playground would become an unpleasant place if I was allowed to continue believing in what wasn't real.

The day my suspicions were confirmed is crystal clear in my memory. I can remember my mother sitting at the computer, the screen filled with a toy website. Deep down, I knew that Santa was soon going to become just a figment of my imagination, forever out of my reach.

"Mommy, what are you doing?" I asked.

I can still hear her sigh; she took no joy in shattering my childish illusions, which had been so firmly cemented over the years. But she also knew that the doubts had started and she may even have suspected that I had stayed up past my bedtime to catch a glimpse of Old St. Nick. "Kathleen, I think you know what I'm doing," she said. "I'm looking at Christmas presents. Daddy and I are the ones who give you presents, not Santa."

And there it was: the confirmation of all my worst fears. Like anyone confronted with a harsh, unwanted reality, I ran from the room, still unwilling to believe the truth. I now realize that I subconsciously blamed my mother for shaking the foundation of one of my castles in the clouds. She was simply trying to protect me from the cruelties of certain children.

Being a bratty child myself, however, I made everyone pay for trying to wrest the rose-colored glasses from my eyes. No present could appease me. At the annual Christmas party at my father's firehouse, I threw a fit over the Penguin Pile-Up I received from the fake Santa. I knew my mother had picked it out, and I bitterly acknowledged that a mere mortal couldn't possibly be expected to know that I did not want the boring Penguin Pile-Up game. Santa would have known that I really wanted the Anastasia doll my sister had been given. I also hated the Twister game my mother had bought as my grandmother's present; again, Santa would have known better than to give me that.

It wasn't her fault, of course. She just happened to be the bearer of the worst possible news I could have received. Over the course of the next year, a few more illusions were obliterated. The Easter Bunny wasn't real and the Tooth Fairy became a relic of my imagination. I began to cling to other myths, ones in which parents and presents were in no way involved. I dove into fairy tales and resented living in New York, a place where the Little People would not inhabit. I walked into more than one wardrobe, waiting for the blast of cold air that would signal my arrival in Narnia. Glitter became pixie dust, and I wanted to find a pair of ruby slippers that would do the opposite of what they did for Dorothy and take me to Oz. Just in case I ever ran into a genie, I kept a list of three wishes

in the very front of my mind. After the Harry Potter frenzy, I waited every day for my owl. That continued for a few years since I was convinced that the owl had simply gotten lost while crossing the Atlantic. It was all too easy for me to convince myself that all of these imaginary things were real. The disappointment only hit harder when they faded away under the harsh light of reality.

As Christmas crept closer each year, I found it harder and harder to believe in the intangibles that I so longed to hold in my hands. The magic was gone; while I still enjoyed the holiday season, losing that sense of wonder and belief in the impossible really affected me. In a way, I'm still looking for something to believe in, something that everything scientific and factual cries out as wrong but that I will take on as faith. I never put Santa on the same level as God, but he was up there. Believing in fairies, elves, and even monsters under the bed merely emphasized that there were unknown entities in this world that I couldn't see. God and magic, faith and wonder, these were elements in my life that had once been so entwined and now had been jerked apart. Needless to say, this was an emotional growing pain that I resent to this day.

It hurt to grow up and find that the magic that once inhabited my world was an illusion; for me, it became all too easy to believe that there was no place in the adult world for enchantment. Over time, I've begun to sympathize with Wendy from Peter Pan; I don't think I would have been able to bear losing the ability to fly just because gray hair replaced brown or lines wrinkled once smooth skin. I never would have been content to simply give in to time and probably would have broken a leg trying to fly to Neverland.

I've become reconciled with reality as much as I dislike it. I've been able to regain some beliefs in unseen powers, but they are based on observation and adult values. I go to Mass each Sunday and believe the words I pray. However, I can no longer accept anything on face value the way I did as a child. There has to be some way for me to reassure myself that God does exist even if I can only see it in times of sorrow. Santa was the figure that I associated with excitement and joy as a child. My happiness alone was proof of his existence; today, I find that I rely all too much on seeing good in humans only during times of trouble. That is what reassures me of God's presence, a fact I find somewhat disheartening.

It took an event as horrific as September 11th for me to truly accept that there is a God. I can remember watching from the window of my seventh grade class as somber seas of firemen and policemen marched from my church. This sad procession of comrades made me hope with all my heart that there was a heaven where fallen heroes and innocent victims could go. I can remember my father coming home from funerals of his friends and praying that there was a peaceful afterlife for people I'd never met. After seventh grade, I stopped playacting at religion. God had a face now; I could finally see that the people who gave their time and love to those who needed it most were tangible intimations of a higher being. I also now know that a healthy dose of doubt is good for faith. My complete and unquestioned acceptance of Santa was perfectly normal for a child. As someone still in the process of growing up, I find that it is more important that I question what I am told. It is better that I find the answers myself and that I don't accept facts blindly.

The rose-colored glasses that were rudely taken from me were now crushed beyond repair. I had no choice but to view the bleak sides of life. However, I was also more attuned to acts of kindness and generosity since I was desperate to balance the ugliness I would see in headlines. My mother was a prime example of constant giving. I've learned from her that generosity is not limited to a specific season or holiday. Whenever someone needs her, she's there, waiting with open arms, open ears, and an open heart. And there are people just like her everywhere. If these people aren't proof that there is a more powerful being, then I'm misreading all the clues.

Christmas is still my favorite holiday, even though it has come to mean something

completely different for me. My mother has taught me the joy of giving and I've come to love the family traditions that have been established since Santa faded away. We still make sugar cookies even though no man in a red suit is going to eat them. We still get an ornament each year that perfectly matches our unique personalities. My mom still places my presents on the couch, and she does an amazing job every year, knowing instinctively what I want. I now see that she is in a way better than Santa when it comes to Christmas; she doesn't have an army of elves to help her. At the same time, I am almost disappointed with myself in that I sleep until ten o'clock on Christmas morning and have long since retired from obnoxiously waking my exhausted parents up at 5:30 in the morning. I have become a grown-up, as sad as I find that to be. It's not the same, but it probably shouldn't be. After all, I'm not the same child I was in third grade. Today, I live in a world that is in desperate need of happy endings and wishful thinking.

Although I've come to grips to the Santa-less reality, I'm still looking for something amazing, something magical to believe in. I honestly envy little children who still get to experience the breathless and sleepless wonder of Christmas Eve. This doesn't necessarily make me a crazy person, just one who wishes reality wasn't so obvious. I want my rose-colored glasses and pixie dust back. I want to fall down that rabbit hole back to a time and place where anything could happen simply because my imagination was in the driver's seat. If I could get my hands on a magic lamp, my one wish would be to erase the knowledge that Santa doesn't exist just for one Christmas. I can imagine the Buddy the Elf euphoria of knowing that Santa would be arriving any minute, and that excitement and impatience rolling around in my stomach.

Every year, I let my inner child out to play during the Christmas season. I know there's no such thing as Santa, but I can revel in the goodness that the season highlights in so many people. Even though it's apparent all year round, I love going to the toy store to pick out a present for the annual giving tree. I feel better about myself when I give a few coins to one of the Salvation Army Santas. Those people and my mother show me that you don't need a real snow white beard or velvet red suit to be a Santa for someone. I can't give any child a magic wand to solve all of her problems; I can give her that one doll or stuffed animal that will be her special friend as she grows up. I don't have ruby slippers or even ones made of glass, but I too have a shot at "happily ever after," just like so many other ordinary people.

There are nineteen ornaments that my mother has given me hanging on my Christmas tree. The majority of those ornaments are from the post-Santa years, and they mingle with the ones from when I still believed in him. There are Barbie, Disney, and book related ornaments that I can lay claim to, with very few deviations from the pattern over the years. I haven't changed much; deep in my heart of hearts, I hope I'll stumble upon a magic lamp or two. Somehow, however, I've discovered that ordinary magic isn't an oxymoron. There aren't many happy endings, but the ones that do exist aren't orchestrated by fairy godmothers. They come from people like my parents, people who give of themselves constantly in order to make their children see the best of the world. Javan once said, "Love can sometimes be magic, but magic can sometimes...just be an illusion." My parents have certainly taught me that magic comes from love; they aren't powerful wizards like Albus Dumbledore, but I've learned the same lessons as Harry Potter.

When I have kids of my own, I'll give them ornaments, too. Those pieces of glass and ceramic will be tangible touchstones for magic and family. While they won't grant wishes, they'll certainly remind those hypothetical children that someone will always love them. That's the most powerful and long-lasting magic of all.

Education

I don't get the information
That I need from education.
What are calculations,
Or scientific notation
Nonlinear correlation,
Newton's law of gravitation,
When I don't get this nation?
How many in the population
Don't have an occupation?
All these corporations
With their fucking fixations
On financial domination.
People can't afford their medication.
Let's not talk about inflation.
I want some justification
For this angry retaliation
They call a "freedom" operation.
I wish it was hallucination!
We use intimidation
To force assimilation,
Call it globalization.
This apathetic generation
With its funny inclination
For drugs as recreation
And Britney Spears infatuation.
What a humiliation!
Where's community participation?
Where's positive motivation?
I don't mean accusation
But I'm getting the sensation
That we need interrogation
To understand this civilization.
All I see is stagnation.
There was emancipation
And an end to segregation
But there's still discrimination
And much ugly separation
While some unfair legislation
Forbids loving consummation.
With all the sterilization,
I'm feeling alienation.
I hate this suffocation.
But my exasperation
Led me to a realization:

We just need cooperation,
A great imagination,
And there's no limitation.
School taught me innovation
And how to use my inspiration.
I just can't handle graduation
Until I get an explanation
About our current situation
From the Bush administration.

Removed by the Request of the Author

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Patchwork

It is an early morning in July and the wooden church floor is familiar to my bare feet. I quietly open the front door and walk onto the porch, gazing into the sun as it breaks through the misty Kentucky Mountains. There is a distant aroma of coffee as a rooster calls from the farm next to me. It is a cool morning, and after draping a quilt around my shoulders, I sit down on the floor of the porch. I lift my face up to see the majestic green mountains in front of me. The sound of feet on the stairs to the left breaks my attention, as another worker, Megan, greets me with a cup of coffee and a smile.

"What a beautiful quilt," she reminds me as she hands me the mug, "Especially on this porch."

I have traveled to the small town of Vanceburg, Kentucky several times since the summer after I graduated from high school. Buried deep in the Appalachian Mountains, Vanceburg is one of hundreds of agricultural and coal mining towns that fell with its industry, leaving hundreds of families in abject poverty. The first time I went to Vanceburg for mission work, I expected to meet poor, depressed alcoholics and drug addicts living in old shacks. Instead, I found hopeful, loving, hospitable mothers, fathers, and children struggling to make ends meet, all the while keeping the faith that God was watching. Neet was one of the women I met: an avid quilter sinking into old age not with sadness, but with hope and laughter.

The first time I met Neet, she was already eighty-six years old. It was a sunny day in late August. Along the road where Neet lived, the houses were spread out with about a half a mile between each farm. The paved road was uneven and narrow, barely big enough to be a one-way street. On one side of the road the land rolled down into a valley, but on the other side the houses stood on a steep incline of grass. Neet's house was about two miles down the "holler," as natives call it, on the steep side. It was a small white ranch house as old as Neet, maybe even older. The siding on the house was cracking and its white color had taken on a grayish tone. A broken sidewalk led up to a small screen door.

After we knocked, Neet's face appeared behind the screen door, and she smiled. I don't think she wore dentures. I can't remember ever seeing any of her teeth.

"Come on in!" she said. My boyfriend, Kevin, a veteran of the Kentucky mission, walked in first. He gave her a hug and held on for a few seconds. His parents were with us, and they took a seat on Neet's couch. Neet had no idea who I was, so I simply smiled at her. After a few minutes, she took a seat on an easy chair, and looked across at me.

"I'm Sara," I said.

"Ya, ya, ya," she answered, still grinning.

"This is Sara," Kevin repeated, much louder this time. *She must not have heard me, I thought.*

"Nice to see ya!" Neet responded, flashing me her toothless smile. I smiled back, uncomfortably. Old age terrified me because it meant dying. This woman was not only old; she was living alone in the middle of nowhere.

The house reeked. The combined stenches of moth balls, rotting food, a dirty

bathroom, and cats were overwhelming. It was unbearably hot inside her house, since she couldn't afford air conditioning. She had a calendar from 1996 hanging on the wall, fixed on October. All of the sudden, I wanted to be outside as quickly as possible.

In the corner, I my eyes fixed on a small chest. It was open, and a quilt leaned out over the wood. The quilt pattern was called "North Star," and I recognized it since my aunt was a quilter. I wanted to ask Neet if she had made it, but I didn't want to seem nosy, so I kept silent.

Above the chest on the wall was a wooden sign. On it was carved a pink rose and three short lines:

I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining,
I believe in love, even when I feel it not;
I believe in God, even when He is silent.

Neet was hunched over in her chair, her sheer, short white hair sticking out from her head. She had a gigantic nose, the resting place for her glasses, which were too big for her face. Elaborate wrinkles swam in her pale skin. She appeared to be senile yet somehow remarkable.

"How long are ya here for?" she asked.

"Just a few days," my boyfriend said, "we just came down for the weekend."

No answer.

"We're only here for the weekend!" Kevin shouted.

"Ya, ya, ya," Neet answered as she laughed.

I soon discovered that Neet was almost completely deaf. From the first time I arrived at her front door until the last time I saw her, I knew there was a chance that she'd never heard a word I said.

A year after my first visit, I traveled back to Vanceburg, Kentucky with twenty-two other Catholics my age and three or four adults to serve the families there. The missionaries travel to Vanceburg every year in July, and stay for about a week and a half. Neet is one our many stops on long rides in our big white van.

I always knew Neet's holler as "Salt Lick," since that is the name of the church on the hill where we all slept during the mission. Salt Lick used to be the main church in Vanceburg, and Neet had been married there.

During this trip, I remember her showing me a yellow and white quilt with bells on each square. It was the only time I ever set foot in her bedroom.

"That's my wedding quilt," she shouted to me, even though I was standing right next to her.

"It's beautiful," I said. And it was. The bells were patched together with different colors of yellow, probably because she could only afford the fabric scraps. She didn't answer me, but only smiled, and placed her hand on my shoulder.

Neet had nineteen cats. I never knew what Bob Barker meant at the end of "The Price is Right" when he said "Be sure to neuter your cats" until I saw Neet's yard. The cats roamed aimlessly through the grass, eating remnants of cheap cat food and small rodents out of aluminum trays. Neet always saved the trays from the Meals on Wheels she received during the week and used them as cat dishes. I found those trays everywhere: in the yard, on the porch, on the kitchen table, and in the living room. Some of her cats only had one eye, and some were missing a leg.

"Would you like us to take you to church?" I asked. Megan, another missionary,

smiled lovingly at Neet, and Neet smiled back at her.

"I already fed them cats!"

"No," I said, "would you like us to take you to church?" Now I was leaning right next to her ear, raising my voice so that she could hear me.

"Ya, ya ya," she said as she smiled.

I had to make it very clear that we would pick her up in the morning, probably before nine o'clock. I sighed, and smiled, knowing that I would have to shout again.

Neet's real name was Naomi, "Neet" for short. I never found out where the nickname came from, or who it came from. The entire time I knew her, Neet lived alone. I never met her husband, since he had died many years before I ever set foot in Vanceburg. Everyone in Vanceburg knew that Neet's children had moved away, and that they didn't visit her. The little town of Vanceburg had become her new family, and the farmers and their wives had looked after her into her old age. Neet went to bed with the sun and woke up with the chickens. It got so dark on that hill at night, and Neet was probably afraid to be awake and alone.

My relationship with Neet was in patches, since I only saw her a few times a year. I always looked forward to hearing her laugh, to appreciating the way she never heard most of the things we said, but the way she loved to see all of our faces. She couldn't hear, but she noticed our care for her, and how much we loved the community.

During the mission that July, I was cleaning up her kitchen, and pouring food into some of her silver cat trays. I took the trays outside, and the cats quickly gathered at my feet to eat the food. Some of the other group members were helping to clean up Neet's yard. She stood on the small concrete slab at the front of her house. She was smiling at us, not because of senility, but because of appreciation that she didn't have to verbalize. We loved her, and she knew that. It didn't matter if she could hear us say it.

My nineteenth birthday fell during the mission that year, and I was able to visit Neet on that day. A few of the girls went to her house in the morning to visit with her, and to ask her if she'd like to come to the revival at Salt Lick that night. During revivals, we'd all meet on the hill at Salt Lick church with members of the community, and sometimes a bluegrass band would play next to the fire. We'd sing songs, tell stories, and meet new people. It got chilly enough for a sweatshirt on the hill at night, the perfect relief from the day's hard work and heat.

When we arrived at Neet's house, Megan told her it was my birthday. Neet smiled, nodding, and I waited for someone to repeat what Megan had said to her.
Neet didn't say anything, but she got up from her chair and walked slowly into her room. She came back with a beautiful patchwork quilt, made of rows of tiny squares. Each one was a different pattern.

"Oh! How beautiful," one of the girls remarked. Neet walked over, and set the quilt on my lap.

"Oh no, I can't take this," I said. Neet only nodded, and gave me that quirky smile of hers. I reached into my pocket to pull out some money. I knew that Neet usually sold her quilts for eighty or ninety dollars. I pulled out forty dollars, and two of the other girls put in two twenties.

Neet shook her head. Finally, she spoke, and I'll never forget what she said:

"You help me, I help you."

"Neet, you have to accept at least some of this money," Megan said as she clasped Neet's hand.

Neet took one of the twenty dollar bills from my hand and put it next to her bible on the coffee table. I gazed down at the beautiful quilt on my lap. I kept trying to examine all of the different patterns, but there were so many. The quilt was vibrant and alive. I held the quilt under one arm as I wrapped my other arm around Neet.

"Thank you," I said to her, "It's so beautiful."

"Ya, ya, ya!" She said, and she hugged me back, holding on tightly to me. "Come back anytime."

"We'll see you tonight," I said.

When we left that day, I could smell Neet's house emanating from the quilt, spreading throughout the van. But it didn't disgust me anymore. I realized that old ladies and smelly houses and poverty and cats with one leg can be beautiful if you look at them with hope instead of despair.

When I arrived back at the church that day, I showed everyone in the group my quilt.

"Guard it with your life," said Father Mike, a priest from Erie, Pennsylvania who had gone on the first Kentucky mission almost twenty years ago, "You're holding Neet right there."

Megan ended up buying a quilt from Neet the following day, a North Star quilt with a beautiful white background, and multi colored stars. We covered ourselves with our new quilts inside the old church that night, the doors unlocked and mice crawling in the walls. Underneath that quilt I felt safe. I've taken it with me on every single Kentucky trip since, and it is my companion when I travel far from home.

Later that year, in December, Kevin and I went back down to visit our friends in Vanceburg. Instead of going to Neet's house right away, we stopped by Holy Redeemer, the Catholic Church in town. We knocked on the door of the house next to the church, expecting to see Sister Joseph, the church caretaker, but instead we were greeted by a woman neither of us knew. I don't even recall her name.

"Are you lost?" She said.

"No," Kevin answered, "we do mission work here in the summer with the families on Salt Lick."

"Where?"

"At the old church, the white church on the hill," he answered.

"Oh," she said, "come on in."

We sat awkwardly on her couch, and began to ask her about the families we worked for and loved.

"I just moved here a few months ago," she said, "right after the summer ended. As soon as I moved in they had a funeral for a lady up there, but I can't remember her name."

Kevin's face turned white as my stomach dropped. The woman sensed our discomfort.

"Naomi something or other," she said. "I think they called her Neet."

Without thinking about it, I let myself begin to cry. A single tear crept down Kevin's cheek, as this unfamiliar woman narrated a death to which she had no connection, about a beautiful, quirky woman she would never meet.

"Oh gosh," Kevin finally spoke.

"Did you know her?" The woman asked.

"Yes, we knew her very well," Kevin answered.

"She gave me a quilt for my birthday in July," I said, the tears relaxing in my eyes.

How could she be dead? I thought. Sure, she was old, but to me she had always been so full of life.

"There was an auction at her house," the woman continued, "but her things are all gone now."

"What about the quilts?" I said. "Did the neighbors take them?"

"Oh no," she answered, "I don't think any of her neighbors could afford them. Some people from the city came. One of Neet's daughters came from Indiana and organized the auction. She took a bunch of the furniture, and sold everything else."

I sighed. The quilts were sold, gone for good. Not given to Father Mike, or to Kevin or Megan or the other missionaries, but to strangers. Neet's daughter didn't even want them for herself.

"It was a lovely funeral, though," she went on, "they buried her up on Salt Lick, right next to the church."

The next morning, I took a walk up the hill to see Neet's new gravestone. It was cold, but it wasn't snowing. I thought of Neet's giggle, her face, her cats, and her quilts. As I walked towards the church, I drug my boots up the three stairs and onto the porch. I stopped at the edge and lifted my face up towards the gigantic mountains. The trees that had been so green on my birthday were now brown, stricken with the death that winter brings. The cool wind brushed across my face and crept around the edges of my hands as they gripped my patchwork quilt. I pulled it closer to my shoulders. It was the only color in a bleak landscape.

I took a deep breath and sighed, knowing that Neet was still in the mountains, still on the hill. More importantly, she was all around me. In the wind, she was running her fingers along each stitch of my quilt.

Neet was a lot like the quilt she gave me for my nineteenth birthday: patched together, worn, mismatched, and a little crooked, but dignified and eccentric, adding warmth and color to my life.

Dead Tired

The digital clock on the nightstand reads 4:42 am. I'm sitting on the windowsill with my back to the outside world, watching the red numbers wash over my white sheets, soaking in and staining them like red wine.

Or blood, for that matter.

I think this is the sixth week in a row like this, sitting up most of the night on my windowsill, watching my twisted sheets drown in the clock's red hi-beams. Or maybe it's the seventh?

I have never been this tired.

And who's counting, anyways?

I blink, my eyelids grasping each other like long lost lovers. When they let go, I can see dust bunnies filing out in lines from under the bed, marching along the floor like little soldiers, heading for the bookcase, the closet. They march towards my feet wearing dust bunny helmets, wielding dust bunny swords, ready to sacrifice themselves for the better of the whole.

This is what happens when you don't sleep. You fight wars against armies of lint. I used to sleep great. Like a baby, if you will. I could slip out of my work clothes, crawl into bed each night and die, only to be reborn again the next morning.

Now, well, now it's quite the opposite. I'm not the one dying anymore.

My alarm goes off, and the dust bunnies retreat back under the bed. The clock reads 6:45 am, and I'm still sitting on my windowsill. The sun came up when I wasn't looking, and now warmly rubs my back through the linen drapes.

I finally get up and make my way over to the closet, toeing lightly over the hallowed battle ground where the dust bunny armies once fought. Sliding open the doors, I can feel a heat flow from out of the closet and into the room, crawling up my legs like hot spiders.

As I peer into the closet for some clothes, I can see my old pant-suits swinging from the hangers, dancing delicately in the warm closet. They lift their arms slowly, gray sleeves covered in dust, blue sleeves with old coffee stains, reaching for each other. When they make contact, they begin to waltz, a soft, slow waltz that echoes from the dark corners of the room.

I haven't worn one of the dancing suits in two years. I haven't even touched one since I got a call late one night from the hospital, telling me Maria had been nearly beaten to death by her husband.

I used to work in life insurance. After my best friend fell into a coma for two weeks, I realized there's too much happening in our lifetime to worry about what's going to happen afterwards.

In the kitchen now, I try to remember the last time I slept. Like, really slept.

It's not that I can't sleep. I can sleep just fine. It's the dreams I've been having.

In these dreams, I'm not in a strange place. I'm in my apartment, in the park, at the grocery store. Generic places. Everyday places. I'm not with strange people either. Everyone in the dream with me, they're real people. People I'm close to. People I love.

Thing is, in these dreams, I kill the people I'm with.

For example, last night when I got in bed, I dreamed I stabbed my sister in the neck with a paring knife. Two nights ago, I shot my mailman in the balls with a nail gun.

I don't know where these things are coming from.

I pulled into the parking lot of the Second Chance Shelter for Battered Women, Maria and my gift to the community, to all women who experienced abuse like Maria had. When I got out of the car, I turned to lock it and noticed it swaying back and forth in the parking spot.

This is what happens when you don't sleep.

Last week, after a long day of work, I stabbed my mother with a pitchfork and woke up in a cold sweat. Later, I strangled grandma with a garden hose.

I don't know where these ideas are coming from. I'm a people person. Honest.

The cement walkway waves, the white building inhales.

One time, I went to the gym, came home, and stabbed my dog with a curling iron.

These things just come too easily into my head.

I sit down at my desk and just stare. Looking closer, I can see little shoots of grass start to sprout from around my keyboard. I can see vines spring out from behind my computer and start to reach for my monitor, first coiling around the base, then crawling up the screen like hungry fingers. As the grass grows, my mouse slides down and disappears, hidden now by tall green blades, laying in wait for the stapler to make a wrong move. Then...

I jump back as the phone lets out a loud ring, burning down the grass forest. I reach and lift, while I watch the ash slowly sink back into the desk.

"Louise?" the phone asks.

It's Maria. She's sending me back a girl to be checked in. I respond, searching for any remnants of my grassy field.

"You OK hun?" she says. "You sound terrible."

"Yeah, I'm alright." I mumble. "Just tired."

I lay the phone back to sleep in its cradle. The grass is gone, the whole forest now just flat brown oak. The mouse, with nowhere to hide, just watches the stapler from a distance, and the bare monitor laughs and mocks me with its blinking cursor.

I used to feel passionate. I used to make a difference.

Now I come to work and watch grass grow out of my desk. I go home and beat my doctor with a shovel.

A door opens at the far end of the room, and a woman steps cautiously through it, careful not to disturb the snoring door jam. She looks around and I wave, slightly, and she approaches with her head bowed.

"Are you Louise?" she whispers.

The first time a woman comes here, she always whispers. Maybe if she talks quietly, she can't give away too much information. Become too vulnerable.

These women have been taught the hard way not to trust anyone. Not even the ones they love the most.

She's signing her name left-handed. With each stroke, the pen grows longer. Like a lying Pinocchio. Like a bamboo stalk. Like the tongue I pulled out of my nephew's mouth. Only I'm not about to cut the pen in half with an Exacto knife.

She gets up, and turns to leave. As she walks away, the ground melts under each step like snow, steam rising in rings and waves.

This is what happens when you don't sleep. You get footprint potholes from your desk to the door.

The phone rings again. I watch it squirm and yell like it's being tortured. Like it's my neighbor, and I'm squirting hot glue in his eyes.

It's Maria, and she's wondering what I'm doing for lunch.

The windows at the Roland Diner are greasy, covered in a roadmap of fingerprints. I can see little grease cars driving along stretches of grease roads, turning this way, that way, never quite making it down to the sticky table.

"Louise?" Maria says.

I turn, and the waiter's standing there, pen in hand, looking at me as if the grease highway were on my face. I stumble quickly through my menu, and give him my order. He looks strangely at the window as he walks away, and I turn to see a grease car accident near Maria's side of the table.

"What's wrong, dear?" Maria says. "You've seemed lost these last few weeks."

"I know, I'm just having a lot of trouble sleeping." I say.

The waiter comes back with our drinks, and sits them down on the table. He looks a bit like my ex-boyfriend, though I know I've never broken this man's bones with a hammer, nor fed him his own scrotum.

A condensation track team lines up on my glass of lemonade, and gets ready for the big race.

"Are you even listening?" she says.

"Yeah, sorry."

"Well, why do you keep staring off into space?" she asks.

"I dunno, it's just, you know, I'm just kinda brain-fried right now." I say.

"You're not back on the stuff, are you?"

I look up at her, and she has that nervous, angry, disappointed look she's had since junior year in college. Her eyes are hot, and each blink sends a wind of heat over my face.

"Excuse me?"

"You're not back on it, are you? You told me you quit that shit forever." She says.

"No," I say, "I told you, I haven't been sleeping well, OK? I haven't dropped in five years."

"You sure? " she says, "Cause I can't have you in the shelter if you're trippin' again."

The condensation is marathon-ing down our glasses, the grease cars are flying down their expressways. Her eyes are on fire now, and start to melt and drip down her face.

"I'm not, Maria. I told you I quit and I did."

"Alright," she says, "alright. Then you won't mind getting tested."

My hand slamming the table is like an earthquake for the little crumbs, an act of God. Their whole plane shakes, and floods with tap water and giant ice cubes. The condensation races are brought to a halt when their track is sent flying towards a wall. But all of this and the grease traffic can fuck themselves 'cause my best friend doesn't believe a damn thing I say.

Swinging the door open, I knock a woman off her feet, but a car reaches out to catch her head before she hits the sidewalk. This seems strangely familiar, the blood on the bumper reminding me of my uncle, the cracking sound like a leather belt, but no tire tracks this time.

I head for the road, and watch the fire hydrants twirl around in circles like dessert displays. Round black ants carry cars slowly down long winding roads, and the wind blows my hair and my shirt, harassing me.

The traffic signs are bowing their heads and avoiding my glance. Trees bend away as I walk past, and houses stand tall and still like deer in headlights. Like my cousin at the end of a shotgun barrel.

I open the door to my apartment and it floats on the hinges. I turn on the light and it flickers and falls. The pans hanging over the sink knock a melody and the water

turns on and off. The carpet folds in the middle and tries to wrap my feet. I walk to the bedroom, and the closet has cracked. I turn and the mirror is melting off the wall, hot liquid glass cauterizing the screaming jewelry boxes. The dust bunnies are back, and clothes drip out of my dresser. My blanket trips me, and I try to step away, but it pulls me face first onto the bed. The pillow squeezes my ears and I scream and I scream.

At 6:45 am, my alarm goes off again. I look forward at the windowsill, and see the sun sitting outside on roofs, smiling. I look right towards my alarm clock, and reach out to shut it off. I sit up, the blankets falling lightly off my chest. The mirror sits reflecting me, and the jewelry boxes are silent and dead.

The closet it not cracked. The dust bunnies are gone. My dancing suits are just old work clothes being blown and chewed by time.

I didn't dream. I slept, and I didn't dream.

I put on some clothes and make some breakfast. The pans are not singing. The carpet is not folded.

I head out to the car, and get in. The trees are still, and the houses sit vacant.

Riding along the road, the music is on. There is no grease on the windows. The traffic signs just sit there idle and obedient. The hydrants decorate the sidewalk and are still as red pillars.

When I get to the shelter, I notice two police cars have pulled into the lot and are blocking the entrance. I park on the street and get out. The walkway is still, and the building does not breathe.

When I open the door, three cops turn their heads to look at me. The closest one walks over with a clipboard and a pen. He is right-handed, and the pen does not grow.

He asks for my name, and I give it. I look over his shoulder and the other two cops have turned back, going through papers, touching everything with yellow latex gloves.

"You work here?" the cop asks.

"Yeah," I say, "Maria and I started this place together."

"When's the last time you saw Ms. Patton?"

"Yesterday," I say. "Around lunchtime. Where is she?"

The cop pauses, and lowers his clipboard. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this," he starts, "but Ms. Patton was killed late last night."

My breath falls out and my eyes drop.

The cop's badge looks at me, smiles, and winks.

Protecting Cole

The frogs are dyin'. That water is gettin' too mucky. I guess people just don't care enough about those frogs to stop putting bad stuff in the water. My little brother picked up a Styrofoam cup from the creek once and asked me how it got there. I didn't have a great explanation and he's only seven, so I told him people were just too lazy to find a trashcan. I really didn't know if that was true, but I was happy when, for just one little second, he wasn't asking me about Mom and Dad.

That's the burden of being an older brother—six years older, to be exact—he's always asking me questions. "Why does Daddy yell? Why does Mommy cry? Why doesn't Daddy take us campin' anymore?" I never know the answers. I just tell him, "Things aren't always perfect, Cole." That never satisfies him. He wants to hear, "You just need to hug him more and he'll love you again." But, I can't tell him lies. So I'll talk about the dyin' frogs all he wants.

Last Friday, when Dad came home, Mom sent us outside to play in the itchy grass, like always. She had been fixing up a hole in one of my shirts on her sewing machine. And as soon as she heard footsteps on the old wooden porch, she shot up from her chair and scooted Cole and me out of the room. So, as soon as Dad was inside and yellin' about something—whatever he'd picked that day—I led Cole out past the broken screen door. We walked away from the house through the green grass that was almost taller than Cole. His grip on my hand was tight until we came to the marshy creek. He immediately took to playing with the frogs and drawing in the mud with a stick. I squatted and stared ahead into the woods that stood across the creek.

"Hey look, Garrett. This little guy is still pretty lively!" I looked to the right and saw Cole's bright face nearly pressed up against a small, greenish frog. The frog was still, except for the in-out motion of the white underbelly. Cole reached out his pale finger to pet the frog, but it jumped off the rock it was sitting on and plopped right into the water. The tiny splash brought Cole's attention to the creek and his shoulders slumped when he spotted a ripple of water carrying a lifeless, upside-down frog down the creek. His head turned to continue watching it and he reached out his hand toward the dead frog.

"Why does that happen?" Cole asked me when he pulled his hand into his chest. His voice was shaking a bit.

"I told you yesterday, Cole, it just happens. Sometimes things die." My voice remained flat and cold.

We both heard a sound like glass breaking and turned our heads back to the house. We didn't say anything. I just turned back around. Cole hesitated for about ten seconds before doing the same.

The dead frog floated slowly down the creek and, eventually, it was too far away for us to see. We sat in silence. The summer mugginess was bad that day and the clouds lingered over our heads. The clouds were still- still and gray. I glanced up, but looked away, fearing that my movement would make the clouds drop the water on my face. So, I watched the creek and the bugs and, after a while, Cole stood up. He exhaled and wiped his hands on his army green shorts.

"Do you think the yellin' is ever gonna stop?" Cole looked down at me when he spoke. I just stared at the trees.

"Don't ask me that, Cole. You know I don't know." I still sat, my knees up to my

chest and my arms wrapped around 'em real tight. Cole looked away and then I looked at him to see if he was mad at my response. He just slowly nodded his head up and down. Keeping the same rhythm, he started to shake his head to the right and to the left. Then, he stood still.

"I'm gonna go for a walk in the woods," he declared in a soft voice. He still didn't look at me when he said it or even when he hopped from rock to rock across the creek.

When he reached the closest tree, I yelled after him, "Don't go too far! Better be back by dinner! That's only a half hour!"

He disappeared so fast that he was well out of earshot by the time I finished yellin'. I should have known. Panic was the first feeling that crept into my stomach. But, I still waited. I should have known.

Cole had always looked up to me. In fact, he had never voluntarily left my side before that day. Even when Cole was learning to walk, he would just trail along behind me, wherever I went. Four years after that, when he had started kindergarten, he wouldn't go inside until I walked him in. I was late to school that day, the first day of school, because he didn't want me to leave. After I explained to him that his teacher would take care of him just fine, he finally let me go. He won't try new foods until I try them first. He won't go on rides at the summer fair unless I go on them with him. This is just how it's always been with us. At least, until a few months ago, when he inevitably started wantin' answers.

The breeze is always the best time marker during the summer months. When the wind starts blowing, that's when I know it's time to go in for dinner. Well, the air started to breathe on my legs, and Cole hadn't come back yet. There was gonna be barely any light left to guide me through the woods, but it didn't much matter. It was either find him myself or get a beating and an order to go find him anyway. I tiptoed across three big rocks and, before I stepped into the woods, I looked up to the sky and hoped that the clouds would hold the rain just long enough. I couldn't believe Cole would do this.

"Cole! Come on now, it's time to go inside!" I had stopped at the edge of the woods just in case he was nearby. But there was no answer. I continued to yell, but I knew I would have to go deeper into the woods to find him.

I walked about ten feet and said to myself, "I'm never gonna find him." I wondered how it had ever come to this.

When I was ten and Cole was four, the worry at the top of our minds had been if Dad was gonna bring us our treat on Fridays. He would bring home a chocolate telephone every Friday for the two of us- a solid milk chocolate chunk shaped just like an old-fashioned telephone. He had worked for Telecorp as a telephone installer and said he had gotten the phones for being a hard worker. When he came home, he would always let the screen door slam hard to make a big entrance. Cole and I would look at each other and take off from the kitchen where we'd be watching Mom cook dinner and dart into the living room. Always the same routine. Dad would pretend he didn't have the treat that day, and we would pretend to believe him. He would say "Gotcha!" and we would squeal and grab for the brown paper bag behind his back. The phone looked so huge to me and Mom usually threw it away half-eaten. We had never been allowed to have so much sugar, but Mom said Fridays were the exception. Of course, every week, she would regret that rule as Cole and I would run around the house, sugar-filled. Mom would act annoyed, but after fifteen minutes she and Dad would corral the two of us and set up a game of charades. It had sort of become a Friday tradition.

That was before Dad was fired for not showing up to work. A while back I started to think about those telephones again and how they hadn't been so wonderfully big after all. I suppose I could even eat a whole one myself these days.

The thought of the telephones made my stomach grumble. Then I knew for sure

it was time to go in for dinner. Two mosquitoes attacked my right arm at the same time. I flung my left hand around to get them away and I felt a wet drop on my arm. I looked up to the sky and could only see a dark grey splotch through the thick tree tops.

"It can't rain right now," I said out loud. "I've gotta find Cole. COLE!!!"

No answer.

I started to think that I couldn't blame him for running away. He hadn't exactly been receiving much attention from anyone. I was the one who spent the most time with him, and I usually spent that time avoiding his questions. Then I thought of last fall.

An hour and a half after school had let out, Mom had pulled up in the truck and parked outside of Cole's classroom. He had been waiting there the whole time and only he and the teacher were left. I knew because he told me once that he was afraid of that teacher—she was mean and picked on him, because he was quiet. I can only imagine how traumatized Cole had been when Mom finally came. I remember how I had stayed home that day, because my throat hurt real bad. At 4:15 my bedroom door swung open and Cole came charging straight into my room. He hadn't said a word to Mom the whole ride home, but as soon as he walked through the door, he had run right to my germ-filled bed. He asked me about ten annoying questions. I pretended to be sicker than I was and too sick to answer.

"Did you hear what happened today?" he had asked me.

"Uh-uh."

"I was left. I stayed at school all by myself. It was just me and Mrs. W. Mommy didn't come until after Mrs. W. called five times. She said that she was home taking care of you and must have forgotten."

"Well, I bet that was it." I didn't want the responsibility of telling him that Dad was supposed to pick him up that day. Mom and I had thought that Dad had already picked him up and taken him maybe to get ice cream. But he was passed out in the back-yard and laying in the grass next to our red wagon. He'd been there since the night before and had completely missed his work interview. He'd also forgotten to pick up his youngest son. Dad never mentioned a word about it. Mom also advised me not to tell Cole because it would crush him.

"He's just too young to know some things," she had said.

"What about me?" I wanted to know.

Mom's eyes stared down at me and the wrinkles around her brow were more visible than ever. "It's a little too late for you."

A few more drops landed on my skin and I wished that I had been wearing my jacket. I had run out of ideas. I didn't know what else to do to find my brother. The only thing was to keep walking, yelling for Cole, walking, yelling, occasionally slipping in the mud, walking some more. With no other distractions but the darkening sky and the noises of a humid summer, my mind was filled with thoughts of the recent past.

Back in January, my Grampy died. It happened at the end of the month, right after my thirteenth birthday. Dad was on a trip, overseeing an installation job for a big company a few hours away. He came home in a great mood, excited to see us all.

The door opened and he yelled, "I'm home!" But Cole and I were in our room, where Mom had sent us for the night. She said she was going to talk to Dad and that he might need his space to be sad. Itching with curiosity, Cole and I snuck into the hallway to hear what was said in the kitchen. As we left our room, we heard screaming. I saw the fear on Cole's face because screaming was not a sound we were used to.

"Why didn't you call me when you found out?" Dad's voice yelled in anger.

Mom tried to calm him down. "I didn't want you to have to come home early from your trip. I thought it would be okay to tell you a few days later."

"You had no right to do that!"

"Dear, please. I just did what I thought was best."

Dad must have pushed her out of the way because I heard her voice yell, "Ouch," and the sound of a body bumping into the pantry door. From the hallway, we saw Dad march out of the house through the front door. He didn't see us, but I saw the tears on his face. I don't know where he went, but he came home drunk that night.

The rain was starting to come down hard now. I tried to shield myself from it, but it was no use. Drops were going into my shirt and falling down my back. The wind was warm, but sent a chill through my body when it hit my wet skin. I heard thunder over my head and my heart began to beat faster and faster. The wind carried the smell of the trees and the dirt. I turned around to look behind me, but the number of trees had erased my tracks. It had been at least an hour and a half since Cole took off. He could have been anywhere by that time. I almost gave up, but I was lost and the thought of walking through that screen door terrified me into continuing my search.

A month ago, the sound of that screen door had been like a shotgun fired in the air. The sound wasn't like a "hey, I'm home with chocolate phones" sound. It was a mix of carelessness and rage. It had been swung open so hard that it had hit the side of the house, and when it closed, it didn't line up with the frame anymore. Cole and I had been playing in our room for the past half hour. Cole had been constructing a robot with his blocks and I was reading my comic books. We both froze when we heard noises because we knew everything that had been going on was leading up to something. Cole's robot's head fell on the floor into a pile of other blocks. Cole crawled slowly to the door and reached for the handle. But I stopped him short.

"Don't do that!" I surprised myself when I spoke, so I tried something different.

"Keep it closed, okay?"

"But I just wanna hear what's goin' on. No one will know."

"You don't need to know what's goin' on. Just finish your robot." It didn't matter if the door was open or shut. The yellin' voices had carried through the wood just the same.

I had been walking for nearly three hours. My feet were so wet and I was so confused and lost that I almost turned around. But the thought of facing Dad's anger and Mom's tears was more terrible than ever.

Water dripped into my eyes as I turned my head to look towards home. I could see almost nothing. The trees in front of my face were barely visible in the darkness. But I could hear the faint sound of the frogs. *This time I will protect you better, Cole,* I thought. *That's my job.* I whispered under my breath a prayer for Cole to be safe. I tried once again to call out to him.

"Cole! Cole?"

"Garrett?" A small squeak emerged to the right of me. I took a few steps toward the voice.

"Cole? Cole, where are you? I can't see anythin' out here."

"I'm right here." A cold, wet hand wiped my ankle and I jumped.

"Cole! What are you doing?" I spoke into nothing.

"I'm sittin' by this tree."

"Why? Why did you run off?"

"Because." He paused for a moment. "I don't wanna go home anymore. I don't like it."

"But, I've been walking around for hours lookin' for you."

"Hours? The creek's right there, Garrett. You've been lookin' for me all this time?"

"Yes! Why didn't you answer when I called for you hours ago?" My hands flew in the air, but I put them down when I remembered that he couldn't see me anyway.

"I just didn't want to go home." Cole sniffed.

"Well, I don't blame you. I don't want to go home either."

"Why not?" Even though it was dark, I could see Cole's face in my mind. His eyebrows would be raised and his whole body would turn toward me. He would look up in my direction even if I refused to look back.

"Because Daddy's always drunk and they're always yellin'. I'm scared of him now." I had tried to sound brave, but now my voice sounded so weak.

"Oh." Cole's voice was a whisper.

"Yeah." I felt ashamed, like I had let a deep, dark secret slip out that I couldn't take back.

"I'm scared, too. And they forget me. I just know it." I shifted my body in Cole's direction as he continued. "I think Mom tries to remember that I'm there, but she's so scared of Daddy that she forgets me too."

"I'm sorry, Cole." My voice stuttered on the word sorry and lowered to a whisper at the end.

"Why did our family change, Garrett? We were fine before. Weren't we?"

"Sometimes things just change." I wiped the rain off my face with the back of my hand and felt my way to the dirt-turned-mud and sat down next to Cole. Suddenly, a light shone into the woods from far away.

"Garrett! Cole!" The voice was deep and raspy and could have been heard for miles. It seemed to shake the silence, then faded away, to be replaced by the soothing ribbit of the frogs. Cole cowered close into my side.

"It'll be okay," I said. "We'll stick together. Come on, let's go." Together, we walked toward the voice.

The Autumn Leaves of Gettysburg

The earth bears the burden of a thousand corpses
That reek sweet aroma that gently wraps us.
Angels fallen from the mighty heights of heaven,
Defenders of the meek and of the craven,
They fought gallantly till they could fight no more,
Till life broke free from their every pore.
They came falling down at a rapid pace,
The tryst with their shadows then took place.

The youthful dewdrops weep their loss,
Seeking asylum below the wet moss.
The wise old mountains muster philosophy
And rationalize vainly that death sets the dead free.
No laughter occurs, no bells ring,
No farmer forecasts a coming spring.
The chilly gale forgets to bite,
The lightening turns off its lights,
The thunder falls into a mournful silence,
The meadows retreat into forests dense.

The martyrs are revered by all,
A monument commemorates their fall.
Their sacrifices are subjects of future tales
Like wind that breathes into a galleon's sails.
They inspire unborn generations with passions wild
To make a man out of a child.
With lofty words their deeds are wrought,
Engraved in books and universally taught.

Yet no elegy, however cloaked in gloom
And contrived to cause tears to bloom,
Or eulogies, however soaked in honey
And served in a golden plate so sunny,
Could conceal the naked vivid truth
Of souls struck down in their merry youth.
Below the trees they lie cold as ice.
The sky is moved, a cloud cries
Its tears rain upon the bodies as red as blood.
Now in eternal repose upon the bed of mud,
Soon to be covered forever under snow,
Invisible to the eyes of friend and foe,
These autumn leaves of Gettysburg have come and gone
But they, ever alive, linger in my memories on and on.

The Remains

The Oregon sun glared off my breakfast plate, nearly blinding me. My parents chatted happily about the grand family vacation ahead of us, one filled with excitement, love, and good old family bonding. I pushed my eggs around my plate with my silver fork. My phone rang. Thank God. It was my best friend, Katherine. I meekly excused myself from the table with little acknowledgement from my family. Katherine began to update me on all the high school gossip I had missed in the eternally long two days I had been separated from my clique.

"No, he didn't!" she said.

"I swear."

"And she did too?"

"Uh-huh."

"Brett, your breakfast is getting cold!" Not the female voice I wanted to hear.

"Katherine, I gotta go."

Reluctantly, I closed my phone and shuffled back to the table, more interested in the pebbles that danced under my feet than the conversation that was awaiting me ten steps away. I sat down, and again began to pick at my food. My parents started to talk about how they felt my uncle was too overweight, that he wasn't healthy. I wasn't paying attention. I pushed my eggs into the shape of a smiley face.

"How bout some cards?" my mom suggested. My brother and I groaned.

We were in the middle of what seemed like our thousandth game of Hearts when another phone rang. Instinctively, I reached for mine but my brother won this battle. It was my cousin.

"Are you ok?" he asked. His face dropped. He handed the phone to my mom. She was out of her seat the second the receiver hit her ear. She moved towards the door, pausing every few steps to plug her other ear from the hustle of the busy river next to us, her eyes clenched in concentration. As she marched through the glass sliding door, her shadow ran desperately to catch up. My heart began to pound.

"Was everything okay? Was something wrong?" I asked my brother, trying to act only some-what concerned.

"I don't know," he answered.

We sat in silence. It had been ten minutes. My mom still had not come back to her cards. My dad left the table to find her. I started to follow.

"You stay here," he instructed firmly.

My stomach began to knot. A lump pushed up in my throat while my tongue willed it back down. The relentless sun was beating down on my shoulders yet I had the chills. The hair follicles on my arms raised in attention as my skin began to prickle with worry. I picked up my cards and began to rearrange their already perfect order. My brother tapped his index finger softly on the table, sending a shock of vibration through my resting elbow.

Fifteen more minutes passed and the silence began to hurt my ears. With the creak of the door, my dad took a step onto the patio. I stood up. I tired to read his face but there was nothing. His eyes were blank, his smile, if you could even call it that, was crooked. He locked his eyes with mine in a stare that stung. I held it until my eyes began to burn.

"Uncle Terry died. He had a heart attack."

I dropped to my knees and began to cry.

I lay on my back, letting the life jacket do the floating for me. My legs and arms were limp, sore from my countless falls. The water was now beginning to feel warm from the amount of time I had spent in it rather than up on my skis. I could hear the boat swinging back around to coax my seemingly lifeless body into another go. I closed my eyes, praying that, just maybe, if I couldn't see the boat, the boat couldn't see me. The roar of the propellers got louder as the boat drew near, and then, miraculously, they stopped. Yes, he missed me. I opened one eye with false hope. There was my uncle Terry starring down at me with an evil smile.

"Just try one more time!" he yelled.

My heart dropped. *Not again.*

But without saying a word, I grabbed the rope and held back my tears as the boat towed around me. My butt was killing me from falling down so many times and I could feel the blisters forming on my palms from the death grip I had on the rope every time the boat tried to get me up.

"I know you will get it this time, Brett. You know what they say...the 300th time is a charm." I knew he was trying to be funny but it really wasn't working.

"Here we go..."

The engine boomed, the slack tightened and I was yanked forward. *Don't pull yourself up. Don't pull yourself up. Let the boat do it. Let the boat do it.* My knees began to shake as they straightened out. I could feel the lake water flying off my face as my body finally got out of the water. *Oh my god. I'm doing it.* But I had cracked a smile of victory a second too soon. I felt my right leg drifting farther and farther away from my left. My face broke my fall as it smacked the water first. My skis flew in opposite directions and my life jacket struggled to break free over my head. I laid floating on my stomach, not worried about my lack of oxygen because I was sure the internal bleeding I received from my wipe out would kill me first.

"I have to say, that fall was the best one yet."

I rolled onto my back and looked up at Uncle Terry who was already at the back of the boat with his hand out, ready to pull me in. His mustache curled up with his smile as he stared down at my limp body with excessive enjoyment.

"See. It wasn't that bad was it?"

I could only groan.

He draped a towel around my shoulders and nudged my arm.

"Don't worry, I'll tell everyone you went all the way around the lake. No one will have to know you could quite possibly be the worst water skier Lake Winnipesauke has ever seen."

Uncle Terry started the boat and I sat gently on the left side of my butt, the right was too tender to hold even half of my weight.

"Hey, where are we going?" I asked.

"Are you kidding? After that performance, you deserve a little treat."

As the shore drew closer, I saw the bright blue Bailey's Homemade Ice Cream sign come into view. Uncle Terry always rewarded me. He always made me feel special, even for being the worst.

When I woke up on the couch, salt had dried on my skin in the same streaks where my tears had been the night before. I checked the time. It was only four a.m. but both my parents were awake. My mom was crying. My dad held her; even he looked like he

was at a loss for words. It made my stomach turn. I closed my eyes tightly until I could feel the wrinkles forming around my face. Maybe if all I saw was the blackness of my eyelids the reality would disappear too.

I felt my leg twitch. I opened my eyes to see my dad shaking my foot.

"Wake up, Brett. We're leaving."

I looked around the room at our belongings piled neatly next to the door. My brother sat wearily on his red rolling bag, headphones in, his cold eyes on the ground. My mom busied herself around the room, checking for what I'm sure was the fifteenth time to make sure we weren't forgetting anything.

I roamed around our terminal, watching the fellow travelers hustle to make their planes, wrapped up in their own lives. They were completely oblivious and unsympathetic to the family tragedy we had just endured. Their faces were serious with determination, as if missing their flight would be the end of the world. I stared with little pity.

Tucked in a corner of our gate, I saw my family slouched in their seats. I sat down next to my dad in order to give my body a rest. My legs were aching in pain from the weight of the emotion they were carrying. No one said much, except for the occasional check-up. "You want to talk?" my dad would question. I looked him in the eyes and looked back down at the book I had been pretending to read. He didn't need a spoken answer.

My cousins' driveway seemed dark, even though it was only late afternoon. Maybe it was just my mind playing tricks on me. I could smell the New Hampshire pine, a familiar happy smell gone sour in the wake of the day's events. My mom led the way. She stopped briskly before she reached the steps. She turned and looked at me. Her eyes were tired, glazed over from either lack of sleep or the constant production of tears. Maybe both. She took my hands in hers and gave them a gentle squeeze. With one final breath of trepidation, she opened the creaking front door.

The first face I saw was Katie's. She stood and walked over to me. I studied her face; her eyes were far too transparent for the toughness she was trying to fake. I could see the grief that pushed down on her shoulders while her strength was trying to hold her up.

When she reached me, she collapsed in my arms. It was the first and only time I ever felt older than my cousin, my idol. The twelve year age gap between us seemed to vanish. Now I was the elder. It was my responsibility to make this right, to be there for her. I always knew this time would come some point, but was I ready for it now?

She buried her face in my shoulder. Her tears soaked through my cotton t-shirt, stinging my skin. She lifted her head and looked at me with pleading eyes.

Take this pain away, they begged.

My eyes stung. I looked down.

The thick green grass showed life while the plot's content showed death. Each shiny headstone mocked our comatose walk to the grave sight. The warm late summer wind kissed at my face as I tried to hide from it, feeling guilty accepting its gentle touch. My mom clutched my hand tightly as if she was worried I'd be the one disappearing into the tiny hole in front of us. I looked away from the hole to the plastic container that held the remains of Terry, a jolly, heavy set man in life, reduced to dust in death.

After all that, I thought, *this is where we go*. We live life trying to work our way up. We learn at a young age that if you want to succeed, you have to work hard. We work hard in school in order to get a good job; we work hard socially in order to be popular; we work hard in our professional lives in order to make a lot of money. We work, we work, we work. But in the end, we never finish up. We never finish with a big house or fancy cars. We never finish with our family and friends beside us. We never finish above. We always finish under. We finish in a plastic container placed underground in a tiny dirt hole.

After all that, this is where we go.

"As we walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death," my father began, his voice quivering with pain. I looked at the faces in the crowd, most of whom I recognized from years of Christmases and birthday parties spent in North Hampton. All had tears streaming down their faces, obviously thinking as I was: Terry was gone. Never again would he be there to yell at me in his loud, playful way. He would never be there to pick me up when I fell water skiing. His scraggly mustache would never again tickle my cheek as he kissed it lightly in greeting. But worst of all, he would never be there to just hug me with that great bear hug only an overweight man can give. He just left us. Left us to be. Left us to remain. Without him.

When my dad finished the Bible verse, my aunt picked up her husband. She gave the cold plastic one last kiss and lowered him into his eternal home. Friends and family paid their last respects. I knelt down and grabbed a handful of dirt. I squished the silky material between my fingers until a rock begged me to stop. My dad touched my shoulder and nodded. I walked forward, purposefully looking at nothing but my destination. I knelt down in front of the freshly dug up earth.

"Goodbye Uncle Terry," I whispered.

I unclenched my hand and let the dirt fall over him.

Mirror, Mirror

For a while I had been dreaming of a love as sugary, as sweet, as unhealthy as a caramel apple. I never thought you would have gone off with the Peterson kids to play chubby bunny in the Jewish cemetery though now I know it was an idea birthed from spiked apple cider. Tiptoeing across the floorboards in the hall, I imagined how I would find you. I imagined it vividly—the infinite plush pillows, the thick feather down-comforter draped over your slender figure, the sheets flowing underneath it all with their fresh coolness and your coco-butter, perfume-like scent. Beneath the moon, beneath the stars, beneath the silk canopy over your throne there was to be a sleeping beauty, a princess with "visions of sugar-plums dancing in her head." But you were not there. Through the shadows only an indentation of you, a frozen silhouette, remained in the mattress. Academics had not been demoted in priority. It's just that all the final exams, the term papers, the language labs were over, and you were celebrating your last night with us...although without any of us at first.

Standing in the bedroom that had been designated yours I expected to find you like I had all the other nights conscious somnambulism lured me out into the hall. Better than a glass of warm milk did the slumbering sight of you put me back into the dream world, but that night, Halloween night, the night before your flight back to Siena, you weren't there. So in the spirit of your departure, in the spirit of the ghostly electricity that circled the cool air coming through the open windows, I gathered household garments, mainly those that had been used for pretend in the toy chest, and quickly masqueraded into none other than Peter Pan. Although by the time I found you, after trudging through dewy fields of corn stalks, prickly ravished pumpkin patches, and the toilet-paper-strewn front lawns of Halloween after-parties, I was more hideous, amphibious, and green—like the creature from the Black Lagoon.

I should have known to discover you as a princess, a princess of enchanted sorts with a wand dangling from your hip, glittery makeup heavily though appropriately applied for your regality. The short blue dress you wore was simple, but elegant. It fitted you perfectly because in all reality you were a princess—a princess who had come from a far away land to feast with us, to study in our country, and to preside with our family.

What were you saying to Devin when I finally found you? I don't remember what it was, but it was loud and nonsensical and intoxicated. In your newfound natural setting you presided with the neighborhood boys who reeked of muscle and ill intent. I was thirteen then. Deep in your gingerbread skin you had brought the Mediterranean sun carrying it on your back right to our doorstep. Like a praying mantis you were all arms and legs with strange, graceful movements bending your knees and folding your elbows. You enjoyed your occasional glass of vintage California white wine with that evasive smoky taste you so sought after, and our parents, along with us, enjoyed your company and the dinners we shared. They said you would go onto Julliard and do something extraordinary with your life, but on that Halloween night where things are always strange and out of place, it seemed that their words were fiction.

It's not fair to say you were piss drunk, because you weren't, but the concoction of whatever Devin had presented to you dizzied your behavior if ever that's putting it mildly. You were screaming. You were screaming through the goopy marshmallows slobbering from your mouth and the tears converging at the corners of your eyes frightened by your own diluted mental state at the time. Imagine that—you could barely take a single step forward

and then the next day and happily ever after you were six thousand miles away. Though they hissed and belched fire at me, the jabbering blow of a thirteen-year-old boy taking you into the night was more than the guys with you could have expected. I gave you water. Even in your saddest moments the only knight I could be was one in tinfoil with rounded intentions bringing you a cup of tea or offering you an embrace. Do you remember any of it? Is it all coming back or did you leave those memories here?

Your sniffling and the clanking of high heels on macadam were the only sounds left to mask the silence. Never had either of us seen anything so surreal prowling the empty streets lost in the night of All Hallows Eve. I didn't know what to say or do for you. Drifting along the pavement like ghosts we crossed by the lattice window work of English-styled homes and their neatly trimmed hedges. A plague of hiccups made me all the more ridiculous with my costume that had become slimed and green. It was more like a croaking, a fit of inexplicable coughing that had originated somewhere upstairs near the time of your arrival. How could it not have considering all that had spilled out from your bedroom? Seeping into the hallway there had been a potion of hair spray, the sweet scent of olives, lingerie, the hard pronunciation of the Italian "c," straw from a broom, whispers in a mysterious language as if you were casting a spell.

Black was a shade I thought I never see you in; I didn't think it suited you. Yet the alcohol surged through your head, spinning it and your decisions, and when we finally reached your throne again you carelessly undressed. Terrified I watched as shadow slowly slithered across the tight skin of your stomach in between the black of lace or silk all curvaceous and wispy like your dark hair, all so very strange.

Later Devin would tell me that the best, most dreamlike experiences are followed by the worst of hangovers. We never found out if that was the case with you for the next morning you had, of course, made yourself disappear. Only that full moon night with you had harried Devin with appetite and made him howl and bark and carry on. I am ashamed to call him a brother. Before the falling of your eyelids, when the stars burnt out, and the next morning came with blinding sunlight, I am sure that the coco-butter, tangerine scent of your skin stained the inside of my head.

It's a funny thing the ever-ongoing vendetta between perception and reality. What do you do when you wake up in the morning and your own body rejects you? In the mirror it grimaces back at you with a ridiculous, matted hairstyle and a lifeless expression. A capillary in your eye bursts and reddens. Your whole body says to go back to the place the previous night you made for dreams and now make it a grave. You want to obey, you really do, but you know you have to push through the bathroom door, to the bedroom door, the door leading to your office cubicle, then to the door of a counselors office, a door through a passing face you neglect to acknowledge, through a box of tissues, a freezer-burnt TV dinner, the shower, and then, hey, back to your nest of sheets and pillows.

What about you? Do you push on the door and does the door push back? Does the door say, "fuck you," and in that instant make you appear pathetic, silly, incapable? Do the darting eyes sweep over you like their hands that never will? You probably don't mind. You couldn't have minded for some time now. The door says stay. Do you have trouble pushing open other doors now? I've closed several while opening others. I've opened the door to a Spanish classroom. I've pushed it opened violently. All the lectures and online grammar exercises couldn't make me master your third language or use it like you did as an enchanted tongue. Is it a coincidence that the Spanish word for man *(hombre)* differs by one vowel from their word for hunger *(hambre)*?

Well, I am still hungry even with the garlic, the veal, the white wine in front of us. It spills out between her and I along with the candelabra and assorted red rose arrange-

ment. I'm taking all that I've learned about princesses and the essence of women and applying it here now. The chilled salad fork is neglected, and a chug of wine masks my garlic breath. Everything is so careful and coordinated from the teaspoon of flirting to the staring, darting, fluttering, sprinkling of the eyes over one another. She's peeling away my first layer, but she will never ever reach the layers that really reveal me. I wonder if she sees through my costume like you did all those years ago. Did you peer straight through me? Did you feel the gridded texture of my shirt, my ribs underneath? I should be concentrating on what it is she's saying. Instead I'm imagining her and I on distant beaches together. My familiarity with her is synonymous with her boyfriend's, which, is to say, unambiguously minimal. She is a deep-sea treasure of pearls and gems—a mermaid sitting across from me but he knows none of it. He doesn't even know we're out to dinner together. When he finds her again they will pick up where they last left off perhaps in an argument or a kiss.

Still, the night is a ticking bomb, or at least I'm hoping it is. I want something to explode by the end. After all the meticulous tinkering to get the two of us here I almost hope drawbridges are lowered and a little red carpet unfolds to invite us to be romance's guests. How romantic have I become with my kings and queens? How misinformed? That little window in the time before or after her menstrual cycle, whenever it is, in accomplice with the emission of pheromones and other lies brewed something not so grand, but a date. So here I am with this woman, this middle-aged, overworked, under-appreciated woman in this restaurant pulled straight from the back of a postcard. But I am just a boy and behind the echoing laughter in this place there are, although rusted, men in impenetrable armor. Where is Neverland? It is the final question that will consume my thoughts for the remainder of this evening. Surely Sienna is not it because after all you ventured across the sea. Beauty catapulted you across the Atlantic. It brought you on a white horse and took you back on a broom. You said you always wanted to find love but your crowning romance is a book of blank pages. This is how I imagine it anyway. Behind the spinach pesto before me, cold and green, I wonder about you now. Do you still find the first snows of winter breathtaking? Do you drive alone in parking lots late at night? Or is that me? Does Italy even allow for such nocturnal activities?

Questions like this distract me. They are as distracting as the inappropriate notions the red roses in front of us stir. The scarlet petals, the protruding thorns – they prevent me from really being able to see the face in front of me. Arching and bending my neck I grow frustrated through dessert right up to the presentation of the bill. We are leaving. For dramatic effect to rustle the city slickers, to bend the candlelight away from me, I swing my pea coat around my back as if it were a cape and I dashing, charming, chivalrous. Outside the snow is a trickle. It is barely a snow with none of that ideal, fluffy, powdery white. Since then everything has faded to black and now I find myself here, with her, in the dark.

"Go back to sleep," I tell her. I pet the top of her head and give her all the textbook caresses she must be yearning for. I follow something formulaic that *Men's Health* must have classified somewhere and the response one will get for administering such a prescription. I get response 4A. No, it's 7D. I can't tell. Here in the dark I cannot differentiate between the satin sheets, her hair, or my hand in front of me. There is clarity in one thing alone. It comes in a green light through the open window—an emerald light emanating from the aurora borealis, or perhaps a nearby swamp, or the first surreal moments of All Saints Day. Yes, it is the ambiguous transition from All Hallows Eve to All Saints Day and apparently it comes in a haunting green light. Can I not help but think back to that night so many years ago? If your body never succumbed to sleep and the night never fell victim to morning would you have kept tilting the bottle back? Rising from the bed I am confronted with my mirror reflection basked in the lime light. And after all this time a fit of hiccupping continues. Rib-bet.

Contributors' Notes:

Matt Barrett grew up in Doylestown, PA with his sister, Kelsey, and brother, Zeke. In 2007 he graduated from Central Bucks West High School and is currently pursing English at Gettysburg College. He is a member of the Sigma Chi fraternity, a captain of intramural basketball and soccer teams, and a co-host of WZBT's radio show, The Sobriety Check. This is his first time appearing in *The Mercury*.

Caleb Baker is a Writing major and English Literature minor from Wellesley, Massachusetts. In addition to reading and writing poetry, Caleb enjoys cooking and vinyl records.

Lauren Barrett is a senior English major with a concentration in writing and a minor in Environmental Studies. She is an outdoor enthusiast who enjoys rock climbing, sushi, and jam bands. She has an affinity for turtles, and hopes one day to live in San Francisco...or Thailand... or Argentina...or anywhere she can find friends, love and community. She also really, really enjoys Ireland and Irish people, and a good pint of Guinness.

Kelly Bennett is a recent December graduate of Gettysburg College. She majored in English and Management and minored in Creative Writing. Her senior semester extracurricular activities included work on *The Mercury*, Editor-in-Chief of the Gettysburgian, charter member of Sigma Tau Delta, and co-organizer of Speak Up,Write Out. Kelly is currently working for a division of Johns Hopkins, the Chemical Propulsion Information Analysis Center, as a copy editor. (Yes, it really is rocket science.) She hopes to enroll in the MFA program at JHU this summer.

Lee Blaser is a senior Theatre major and Spanish minor from Frederick, Maryland. During her junior year, she spent semesters abroad in England and Argentina, and will be presenting a one-woman show about those experiences this spring. She likes peace, dancing, and frisbee.

Jenny Carrington is a freshman majoring in English with a writing concentration. She loves to sing, write, and take pictures of the world around her, trying in every possible way to capture the beauty of the simplest things in life.

Jen Davis is a junior studying abroad this spring in Cusco, Peru for the semester. She is a health sciences major and wants to be a pediatric physical therapist after attending graduate school. At Gettysburg, she works at the Center for Public Service as program coordinator for El Centro.

Arielle Distasio travels often with her parents. After taking the picture of the locks on the Great Wall of China, Arielle experienced her first soda with a pull tab, beheld the delicacy of roasted pigeon on a stick, and viewed, but luckily did not have to experiment with, the porcelain hole in the ground which is the Chinese version of a restroom. As a first-year at Gettysburg, Arielle thinks that Servo is just fine, but still refuses to eat anything on a stick.

Alexander T. Englert is from Colorado and is a current senior. In a three item list, he summarizes his Gettysburg College experience as follows (in no particular order): friends, philosophy, and lost innocence.

Kathleen Flynn is a sophomore English major with a Writing Concentration. For the past two years, she has been involved in The Mercury and the Campus Activities Board. Currently, she's also started writing for The Gettysburgian and working for the Writing Center. When she gets tired of reading papers or workshopping, Kathleen enjoys reading everything from Richard Bunyan to Sabrina Jeffries. As a native New Yorker, she will someday return to the Empire State and live in a tiny apartment with a great view of Manhattan.

Sarah Flynn is a sophomore working towards an English major with a Writing Concentration. She enjoys all kinds of writing–from newspaper articles to poetry. She grew up in southern Massachusetts, and her poem, "Getting Lost," captures the silliness and the sadness of the last carefree summer she spent with her three best friends.

Anukul Gurung is a senior Studio Arts major from Nepal. He enjoys outdoor adventures such as trekking, whitewater rafting, and kayaking. Anukul also loves to travel and is fascinated by the different cultures around the world. He wants to travel to developing countries and document the lives of the underprivileged in his photographs and paintings. Anukul was awarded honorable mention in the 'children' and 'deeper perspective' categories at the 2008 Annual International Photography Awards hosted by the Lucie Foundation at the Lincoln Center in New York. His work has been exhibited at the Schmucker Gallery and Musselman Library at Gettysburg College, and YorkArts Gallery in York, PA where he was one of the four recipients of the Award of Excellence for his photography.

Sara Maria Harenchar is a senior at Gettysburg College. She currently holds the world record for consecutive episodes of Golden Girls watched in a single sitting. Although birth records at a well-known Pittsburgh hospital would seem to strongly suggest otherwise, Sara has managed to convince dozens of friends that she is the illegitimate love child of Ernest Hemingway and Aretha Franklin. Sara's passions are traveling and shopping, peculiar hobbies indeed given her profound lack of funding. Her future plans include a career in editing and publishing, a vocation certain to insure continuance of a post-undergraduate Bohemian (read: indigent) lifestyle.

Sam Harrison is an English major. He wishes he were interested in things like good coffee and fine art. He does like board games. In his senior year of high school he told his guidance counselor he didn't know how to tie his shoes. She believed him.

Preston Hartwick grew up in Hong Kong. Traveling is what inspired his love for photography and other art forms. He also enjoys playing a variety of musical instruments and playing sports. He is a first-year at Gettysburg and his future is completely undecided.

Christine Heerwagen is currently a senior majoring in a self-designed major in Communication in Visual and Print Media. She spent the spring of 2008 studying abroad in Brisbane, Australia. She would like to say that she did mostly studying while abroad; however, she truly spent the majority of my time traveling throughout Australia as well as New Zealand. The photographs taken throughout her travels were not difficult to take, as the surrounding scenery was completely breathtaking. She hopes to continue documenting her travels through photography and sharing the images with others.

Brett Howley is currently a sophomore at Gettysburg College. She is majoring in Globalization Studies and minoring in Italian and Political Science. She lives in Winchester, MA and longs to be the successor to Oprah when she is older.

Lauren Javins is a freshman in college this year, with hopes to become a Chinese language Major and Art Minor. She was an art-staff member for four years and the Senior Art Editor during her high school career for the award-winning, *Sequel Magazine*. Lauren is willing to put her utmost effort into creating and living a more artful life.

Eric Kozlik is a sophomore at Gettysburg College majoring in Psychology and minoring writing. In his free time he enjoys track and field, alligator tag, and elephant tipping, but always in moderation. Born in the back seat of a Greyhound bus, rolling down Highway 41, he has always been bored by slow animals and fast women. Several aliases include: The Gettysburg Gangsta, Arthur Writis, and Cliff Hangar, but most refer to him simply as "one hell of a guy."

Andrew Maturo is a Math and Physics of Music double-major. He is a member of the class of 2011, and enjoys photography, music, food and everything in-between.

John Mazzoni is a sophomore this year from the Bronx. Majoring in history and political philosophy, he plans on graduating and moving back to persue a career as a professor while continuing his studies. Madame Bovary chooses Arsenic!

Storrey Morrison is a senior at Gettysburg. She has always enjoyed taking photographs, although more times that not the first words out of her mouth are, "I should have brought my camera." She lives in Maine and thinks Pennsylvania would be far better off if it were located on the coast.

Alyssa O'Keefe is a sophomore at Gettysburg College who has recently declared an English major with a writing concentration. She was inspired to submit her work to The Mercury thanks to her creative writing teacher, Sheila Mulligan. Other than writing, activities she takes part in at school include co-leading CHEERS and serving as a member on the Panhelenic council.

Rachel Rakoff is a junior from Newton, Massachusetts. She is a major in English with a Civil War Era Studies minor. She loves horseback riding, running, taking spontaneous long-distance road trips, taking ridiculous amounts of pictures (black and white film or digital) and camping out in the darkroom.

Kristen Rivoli is a freshman at Gettysburg College. She plans to major in psychology and become an art therapist. She loves photography and tries to bring her camera everywhere because when she doesn't, amazing things happen (of course). The next time she leaves her camera at home Jesus Christ will probably make his reappearance. Kristen thanks *The Mercury* for accepting her photo.

Marisa Rojas is an English major and Philosophy minor originally from Los Angeles California. She has been writing poetry and nonfiction since the seventh grade, and has been published in other journals across the country. Career-wise she has no idea what will come of her future, but guessing from her major she will probably be poor and living in a box in the streets of LA.

Lauren Schmidt, a biology major and chemistry minor, is a member of the class of 2010. After graduating from Gettysburg College she plans on pursuing a career in the medical profession. Lauren is the president of Habitat for Humanity at Gettysburg College. This summer she will be conducting research on frugivorous bats in South Africa alongside Dr. Winkelmann and Jennifer Merrill.

Rahul Sinha grew up in India peeping at snake-charmers through cracks in the fence, dreaming of slaying royal bengal tigers and eating vegetarian food. Now she's on the other side of the earth and with her she's brought her past along with clothes, myopia and an appetite for the works of Premchand, Dylan, Van Gogh and her cook. "I suppose I'm one of those fellows my father always warned me against." -Wodehouse

Larry Sneeringer says, "A relationship between two people, just like a sequence of words, is ambiguous if it is open to different interpretations. And if two people do have differing views about their relationship–I don't just mean about its state, I mean about its very nature–then that difference can affect the entire course of their lives." - Elliot Perlman

Sara Tower is an amateur photographer who occasionally finds herself in the right place at the right time (but not always). A freshman from Northfield, MA, she plans to double major in Globalization and Environmental Studies and minor in Religion. The year before college, she was fortunate enough to spend a semester abroad in South Asia. Someday she intends to retrieve the part of herself she left behind. (Note: The photograph "Prayers" was taken near the Boudhnath Stupa in Kathmandu during Tihar, the Festival of Lights. The mother and her children are taking donations from celebrants who come to light the butter lamps and pray.)

Marisa Trettel is currently shimmying, twirling, and leaping her way through her senior year and will be graduating in the Spring with a degree in English and Secondary Education. She has really enjoyed working as the Editor-in-Chief of *The Mercury* this year with the fabulous Amy Elizabeth Butcher, and is quite pleased and proud with how all of their hard work has turned out.

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A special thanks to all students who contributed to *The Mercury* by sending in their work or serving as staff members. Staff readers invested a tremendous amount of time evaluating and selecting submissions, and we greatly appreciate their dedication. We believe that their efforts make *The Mercury* an ecletic publication that reflects the creative side of the student body of Gettysburg College.

Finally, a very special thank you to everyone at Ikon, specifically Corey Chong, for helping *The Mercury* go green this year. This year's publication has been printed in its entirity on paper from sustainably-harvested forests with biodegradable ink. We believe this change reflects the increased global awareness of the campus community.

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