



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE


Year 2011

Article 1

1-1-2011

The Mercury 2011

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>

 Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), [Art Practice Commons](#), [Fiction Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), [Photography Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

(2011) "The Mercury 2011," *The Mercury*: Year 2011, Article 1.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2011/iss1/1>

This open access complete issue is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

The Mercury 2011

Keywords

creative writing, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, artwork, photography

Author Bio

THE MERCURY



THE ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE
OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

2011

THE MERCURY 2011

CO-EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Kathleen Flynn & Sara Thomas

PRODUCTION EDITORS

Lynn Jorden & Mark Biciunas

MANAGING EDITOR

Karl Utermohlen

FICTION EDITOR

Gus Ryer

NONFICTION EDITOR

Arielle Distasio

ART EDITORS

Chelsea Kasten & Dori Zweig

POETRY EDITOR

Vince Casmirri

STAFF

Kathryn Bucolo, Elizabeth Carlson, Tina Cochran, Becky Driscoll, Elizabeth Elliott, Emily Francisco, Kelly Hagerty, Erica Johnson, Minah Kim, Annie Lee, Alisa Luongo, Caitlin Magness, Kathleen Mulpeter, Thomas Neufeld, Katie Quirin, Sarah Parker, Dana Ragonese, Hannah Sawyer, Gregory Scheiber, Stephen Setman, Allison Siana, Larry Sneeringer, Tina Soma, Liz Williams, Charles Zange, Ashleigh Zicker

ADVISOR

Kathryn Rhett

THE MERCURY

HISTORY & 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. Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis throughout the fall and early spring semester and are reviewed and chosen anonymously by the staff.

EVENTS

The Mercury holds a reception for staff, advisors, and contributors in honor of the magazine's release. Throughout the year, *The Mercury* staff participates in several campus events such as the Activities Fair, Get Acquainted Day, and an Open Mic Night and Quiz Night co-sponsored with Sigma Tau Delta, the English Honor Society. Starting this year, *The Mercury* has also sponsored production and proofreading workshop lunches for students.

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 2011: Tony Fasciano '05 (Fiction), Kelly Bennett Freeburger '08 (Poetry), Marisa Trettel '09 (Nonfiction), and Torrey Kist '07 (Art).

The Mercury Prize-winning titles are bolded in the Table of Contents. This year's winners are Kristen Rivoli '12 (Fiction), Liz Williams '13 (Poetry), Hannah Sawyer '12 (Nonfiction), and Preston Hartwick '12 (Art).

PUBLISHING

The Mercury was printed this year by The Sheridan Press in Hanover, Pennsylvania. We would like to thank them, especially Kelly Bennett Freeburger, for their support this year. The production staff is also deeply indebted to IKON, specifically Kate Brautigam, Corey Chong, and Gene Hockley for their time devoted to the magazine. This is the third environmentally friendly edition of *The Mercury*, and it has been printed on paper from sustainable-harvest forests with soy-based inks.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FICTION

Kristen Rivoli	Red Ivy	5
Tina Cochran	Release	16
Aimee Griffin	To Live Without	28
Charles Zange	Nancy Tippersworth	34
Sarah Parker	Purple Mary Janes	56
Matt Barrett	In November	64
Ben Winston	Magnifier of Trifles	92
Austin Clark	Perspective Distortion	106

NONFICTION

Hannah Sawyer	On Writing	9
Brian Engelsma	No Wake Zone	21
Sara Thomas	Sidewalk Wandering	25
Paul Tanasoca	Like Father, Like Son	40
Austin Clark	A Case for the Human Condition	48
Lynn Jorden	The Most Awkward Boy in the World	60
Chandra Kirkland	Trapped in a Passing Storm	99
Tina Cochran	Remembering the Day	122
Kathleen Flynn	Bible Bolt	127

POETRY

Liz Williams	My Kind of Nothing	15
Gregory Scheiber	Dry Wood	24
Kelly Weitner	Paper Heart	33
Megan Hilands	Rooms (Re)Visited	46
Sabrina Marinelli	La Cloche	59
Elizabeth Elliott	Doe River Gorge	74
Loren Deron	False Truths	91
Will Buerger	Against the Wind	121
Nina Li	A Ghost on Earth, Alive	126
Eric Kozlik	Ghazal for Emptiness	135

ART

Preston Hartwick	Walls	75
Angela Schmidt	Classical Bust	76
Dinesh Manandhar	Copy of a Sculpture	77
Ashleigh Zicker	Luray Cave	78
Sara Tower	Ganga Ma	79
Gabriella Schiro	Sunlight	80
Gus Ryer	Beaufort Campfire	81
Meredith MacLauchlan	Different Spokes	82
Dinesh Manandhar	Nepali Girls	83
Gabriella Schiro	Glatfelter Hall	84
Emily Francisco	Only Heathcliff	85
Preston Hartwick	Highjump	86
Jessica Lee	Durango-Silverton Railway	87
Minah Kim	Color	88
Rebecca Fisher	Self-Portrait	89
Josiah Adlon	The Trinity (full)	90

COVER

Josiah Adlon	The Trinity
--------------	-------------

RED IVY

KRISTEN RIVOLI

Recently evicted, I sit beneath the red ivy twisting around the splintering telephone pole in an alley two streets down from where I used to live. This alley is my new home, the concrete my bed, the weeds my backyard garden, the back door of the Wiener House my kitchen, where occasionally I'll get the delicious results of a screwed up order or stale, end-of-the-day hot dog buns and sympathetic comments from the waitress. I don't remember homeless people being treated this kindly, not when I was growing up, when Dad would drag us through the city with his eyes fixed straight ahead, a compass with its unflinching needle pointing in one direction, ignoring the sea of human refuse that surrounded us from all sides. I was scolded for throwing pennies into their boxes when they played a broken tune on a tarnished saxophone or when they danced like my father danced when his Huntington's progressed into its final stages or when they just sat there looking dead.

I don't see people like that anymore. I don't see anyone else like me, digging through dumpsters, pissing into the gutter. Well, there is one woman. She walks past me occasionally, announcing her arrival at the mouth of the alleyway with her shopping cart rattling over the unevenness of the poorly paved road. She moves as quickly as her body allows her, bobbing along like a blimp filled with rocks, stopping every so often to catch her breath before she even passes by me. But once she's a few feet away from me, she speeds up as if trying to escape something, wheezing like a deflating balloon, shuffling along in her clogs with her eyes set ahead. She wears the same clothes every time I see her and carries no purse with her. Her cart is always full of hamburger meat, Wonderbread, and tubs of margarine. She seems eager to get to wherever she's going, which makes me think she may not be homeless after all.

I don't know why I do things sometimes, like why, today, I choose to spread out all of my shit, my plastic drawer of change with the worn "Hello My Name Is: *Nikolas*" tag (as if branding it with my name protects it from thieves), my single-serving cereal boxes, my booze, myself, right in her path. Maybe I just want to talk to someone, anyone, and this is the only way to get her to stop and notice me. I partially believe, fear even, that she'll continue on like a train without a conductor, like my father leading my brothers and me through the city and just trample right over me and my last possessions. But this time she stops. Stops and leans over her cart, her fat breasts molding around the handle like clay, her crucifix dangling just above a sweaty bag of hamburger buns. She stares at me through steamed-up glasses, her teeth

gritted like a whale sifting krill.

Like I said, I don't know why I do these things. Sometimes, I imagine I can feel my brain unraveling (though I know that's not how it works), shaking loose all of the sense like moisture from airing laundry, leaving it crusty and brittle. I stare at the ground beef in her cart and imagine a mound of it inside of my head, dead nerves and bloody gyri. I smile as she finds herself stuck in her path.

"Good morning."

"I don't have money," she whispers, her voice surprisingly delicate. "Just stamps. There ain't much left on it anyway so you may as well not bother trying to take it."

I pull myself up off the ground, moving slowly when she startles and takes a step back. "What makes you think I'd want your money?" I ask.

I can see her eyes wandering over me, over to the bottles I've spread like lawn decorations across the pavement. For the first time I notice how empty they are, how some are broken from the brief drunken scuffle I had with the college frat boy before his friends dragged him off.

"You can't get beer with stamps," she informs me with a hint of accusation, "and besides there ain't much left on there anyway, like I said."

"Those aren't mine," I nonchalantly assure her.

"Smells like they are," she says, braver now as she grips at her crucifix hard enough to give herself stigmata. Emboldened by the power of Christ, she steps around her cart and peers up into my face. "How old are you, son?"

"Old enough." Another lie she sees right through.

"Why don't you stop drinking that stuff," she says. "It's poison. It won't do your body any good."

"It does my soul good," I say.

She glances at my bed, a strip of cardboard, the stuffed turtle that serves as my pillow. I can see the growing distress in her eyes, and it alarms me that someone else could be more concerned about my situation than I am.

"Listen," she says, "why don't you stop by St. Joseph's up the road later today? I'm in the choir, and I sing solos at every mass. We have picnics afterwards. You can listen to the sermon, grab a little somethin' to eat. How's that sound?"

I shrug. Organized religion perturbs me with all of its rituals and strange rules, though the idea of food, a warm building, and a place to go to the bathroom is appealing. "I'll check it out," I say.

She grabs my hands and clenches them tightly. Her hands are soft and fleshy, and when she pulls away to rattle on down the alleyway, their warmth lingers in my palms.

I walk along the same path she took to St. Joseph's Parish, shuffling beneath trees the colors of candy apples. I enter the church and drop into the first pew I see. I close my eyes, fingering the flask in my pocket for

reassurance. Dim colors dance behind my eyelids, the reflections of mosaic saints from the windows. The colored glass reminds me of hard candy. I can't recall the last time I had a lollipop. Beer and vodka are the only tastes my tongue can remember.

I take a deep breath. The heady scent of the wooden pews fills my nostrils like death's cologne. I wonder if I'll get to smell my coffin, if I'll even get a coffin, or if they still dump the sad, insignificant people like me into communal, unmarked graves. I picture myself buried in a huge glass bottle, my body preserved in alcohol. Worms and maggots clink against the glass, knocking like persistent neighbors, but I am divided from the world, even in death.

I remember most of my father's funeral. How the priest mumbled archaic words, how my mother wore a veil, a son at her side at all times. I remember how my father's body was arranged in its coffin, finally motionless, and the way mine continued to shake, with delirium tremens, with a deteriorating nervous system, with the rage of having inherited the same disease that killed my father, that had me doomed from birth by the unfortunate probability that my four brothers had managed to escape.

I couldn't let my mother see me die. I wasn't going to let her aid me through my final years just to see me die, not after all the time she spent doing the same with my father. So I would hop from apartment to apartment, easing my way across state borders, slowly shedding my contacts, my living arrangements, deteriorating along with my health.

A clear, purging voice suddenly fills the church. I open my eyes, glance around and spot my shopping cart lady in a balcony just above me, her eyes closed and her mouth open, producing a sound smoother and more colorful than the stained glass surrounding me. I feel pure, the way I feel after I spend the night puking, when my stomach is finally empty and my mouth is rinsed out, and I feel like a newborn in the cool, clear dawn.

I stand when everyone else stands, sit when they sit, kneel, shake their hands. Nobody looks at me or my soiled garments strangely. Nobody seems to be able to tell that I haven't showered in days. Nobody notices how my body twitches like a metronome in time with the congregation's chants. I blend in seamlessly as we shuffle from the pews and down the aisle to the front, where I receive a wafer, a morsel that I savor while it melts on my tongue.

I arrive before a woman in a robe. She places a chalice in my hands, and when I peer inside I see a ruby red liquid: wine.

I start to salivate like a savage beast hanging over its kill as I tip the cup carefully against my lips. Just one little sip, and then I have to go sit back down. But the moment the wine hits my tongue something in my cognition goes haywire. This is the blood of Christ, the very liquid that pulsed through his sinless body, the earthly body given to him by his father in heaven. Somehow I'm sure that if I drink this I'll be cured, healed, forgiven. It will

make me whole, restore the damaged nerves of my brain, repair the broken relationships of my life, reverse the dependence I've developed on all things that lead to death. Whatever I did wrong to deserve these faulty genes, it can all be forgotten if I partake in this healing concoction.

The cup is emptied, and I drop it to the floor, my arms suddenly weak. The movement behind me, in front of me, the organized, orderly movement of the congregation ceases with the clatter. With a few gasps all eyes are focused on me. I can feel a little of the wine dribbling down my chin. I wipe it slowly on my already-stained sleeve, slowly remembering where I am and becoming increasingly aware of the attention that is on me.

Ravenous with a thirst that cannot be quelled by shame, I suck on my dirty sleeve, suck the potent moisture out of the fabric as I stalk past the pews and all the decent churchgoers that stand motionless, indistinguishable from the statues of their saints. I push open the heavy doors, and I am released from the illusion.

The sun scorches my eyes, the body and blood of a man two-thousand years dead churning in my stomach. My body is out of control, my limbs jerking and shuddering like a marionette with tangled strings. The clouds twist like fluffy spines across the sky. I don't understand how people can look up at the sky and see God with such certainty. My view becomes obstructed by red ivy, by leaves, different shades and hues, loosening their grips on their branches. Colors I never thought existed fall in a whirlwind of kamikaze leaves. I wish my death could be as beautiful as theirs.

ON WRITING

HANNAH SAWYER

1. Natural Selection

The unnatural feeling of a blindfold stifles my eyes. I want to open them, but the tightness of the covering prevents movement, forcing uniform darkness upon me. Maybe I need my eyes to breathe as well because I'm having trouble filling my nose and mouth with air, even though they remain uncovered. But, perhaps it's just the fear that's constricting my intake—fear at the thought that I sit blindfolded and tied to a tree in the middle of the forest. There is no time for this. I must escape.

The rope prickles against my bare arms. If only I had long sleeves. All I want to do is tilt my head backward. The unyielding angle of the tree has forced my neck muscles into an unnaturally straight position. They are quickly working themselves into a knot. If I could just tilt my head backwards, I might be able to think. The outline of my Swiss army knife presses itself urgently against me in my back pocket.

*

The things I write escape me. Reading the words I put down on the page is like hearing my own voice speaking in a heavy Russian accent. “Zis” instead of “this.” The words are changed somehow, laid distinctly bare on the page, and I see amongst them a desperate desire to be understood. I am that girl just off the boat struggling to remember how to ask for *spasite* in English. Do I say help, or aid, or assistance? Which one is it? I hate the neediness in my tone, the way I plead with my readers to grasp the deeper meaning of my words.

It's so different from the insinuation I use, the deception I practice in conversation, that it makes me uneasy. I can imply, exaggerate, lie when I speak. My mom called one Sunday morning as I lay in bed. When she asked what I was doing, I told her that I was just on my way out of the apartment. I had no reason to lie to her. Whether I was speaking to her from under the covers or as I walked out the door made little difference. I did because I could.

As soon as the English heard my accent while I was abroad, they'd ask me where I was from. I used to tell people that I was a Canadian from Manitoba. My friends failed to see the point. But why should I be obligated to tell the truth to a total stranger? I'm uncomfortable when I write for this very reason. My body responds to my sense that I am somehow putting myself at risk. Chest tightens and shoulders tense.

I remember being little and reaching into the wooden hutch to grab my pet rabbit. As I crushed him to my ribcage with the misplaced love of a child, I would feel his pounding heart through his thin skin and meager skeletal frame. He was so frail. I imagine that if you were to pick me up you

would feel my heart race, too, because I also feel as if I'm being laid bare and defenseless, and yet this insipid honesty is not me at all. What if characters are more accurate than portraits?

I can't write nonfiction because I can't write down a lie. I've always thought that books, nonfiction especially, held truth, but nothing I put down on paper rings true to me. I hate the way my words change as they flow from thought to pen. Nothing sounds the way I feel it should. What I produce becomes a random recombination of English genetics. Mutations and dropped signals change my work into a species separate from thought. Nothing is ever as delicate, as clear, as all-encompassing as I envisioned it would be. Maybe I can't speak nicely unless I lie. Maybe the problem is not me, but the truth, which is never pretty.

2. Adaptation

I know that I sit on bare ground because the Earth moves beneath me. Small organisms, ants, beetles, maybe even spiders stir amongst what must be tree litter. I feel the rivulets of bark against my back. I remember this feeling from when I used to sit and read at the broad base of the trees in my yard as a child. The uneven surface of the bark meant that I could chip off tiny pieces. Sometimes I'd skin my knuckles when I tried to break off a particularly large piece. I wiggle a little and perceive that same roughness through my thin shirt; I must be leaning against an oak tree.

My feet are free, and I begin to feel cautiously about with them, searching until I come into contact with something else solid and rough. It proves to be a long extension of the trunk and judging from the size of these roots, which snake outward from the base, this must be a large oak—the type which has been allowed to grow undisturbed for generations.

In my struggles to feel about me, my shirt rides up, leaving a gap of unprotected skin between jeans and hem. Small blades of vegetation scratch me intently. Although they are persistent in their discomfort, there are only a few of them, which implies that not much light reaches the ground upon which I sit.

I hear things drop from up above, hitting branches as they fall, shaken loose by something in passing. There is a sustained rustle of leaves as creatures make their way through what must be a dense canopy above me, leading me to deduce that I sit tied to not just one tree, but surrounded by an entire forest of them. I had always thought that the woods were a quiet place when I walked through them, but they are practically boisterous when I sit here still and blind.

*

I adjust my style to imitate the greats. I want to write with incomprehensible beauty of Djuna Barnes, with the candor of Salinger, with the complexity of Chekhov, the poetics of Keats. I attempt Batesian mimicry of my literary heritage, crafting my useless words into diction as sharp and powerful as Hemingway's, like the harmless milk snake who appropriates the form of the poisonous coral snake, the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing. But I hope to do more than simply adapt to my surroundings. I want to sit down and write something brilliant, too. But I can't. I find a truth perhaps,

but not my own.

I have this desperate fear of not catching every thought as it falls from my mind. I write on supermarket receipts, Post-it notes, the columns of newspapers, the back of my hand, whatever is nearby when I think of something important. I write down everything: observations, notes, phone numbers, assignments, the word “run” so I will go for a jog, thoughts on the relationship of postmodernism to the development of extremist media, a website. Writing is my remembrance. I need the permanence of print to hold my ideas, to keep them from slipping back into the unreachable recesses of my thought, and I constantly worry that I might have missed the great one. Even my grocery list never feels complete.

I’ve always felt this urgent need to write, and I’ve been intoxicated by the artwork of penmanship since I was very young. From the moment I knew what a notebook was, I had at least seven different “journals” going at once, filled with such profound thoughts as “KljM TthHi PIOPH 7.” I loved H’s, I’s, and P’s so much that I put them in my own name, which I often signed illustriously HioPH. I would practice my chunky block lettering for hours and hours. Later, I remember taking notes that my father had written in his careful cursive and tracing them over again and again. A friend’s mother told me that when I came over to play, she used to watch me fill pages and pages with any words I knew and some that I made up, happily stringing together long sentences of incoherency. I’m not sure things are so different now.

The more I write, the more questions I have, and the farther I get away from the truth.

There are moments when I sit deep in thought, jotting down notes and outlines, creating an intricate maze of letters on the page. These are the moments when I believe I’m accomplishing something, that I’m turning over rich, new material: a farmer tilling fertile soil. I write; I excavate; I uncover. The paper touches the tip of the pen that rests between the fingers leading to my arm, which is controlled by my thoughts. This is the moment when everything is connected— mind, pen, and paper.

I love beginning to write for this very reason. The elation of planning, of further discovery, and the hope that all of this thought will lead to something. Yet I go back to the notes I wildly wrote, arrows crisscrossing the page, words and sentences crisscrossing each other, and I find them to be lacking. Gone are the detailed sentences I thought I had, and the insights of the moment, because words are only placeholders. Look at them on the page. Frail, thin, black lines. There is no substance to them, no thickness, no meat. They are in fact a meager substitute for the things they describe, the real smell of wet leaves on a forest floor, the soft fur on a dog’s ears, the scratchy tone of a blown speaker. I write my way to the end of the essay and find that I did not say one single thing I actually thought. Words invoke ideas, but they are not the ideas themselves. They are now the imposters. And so the

moment of beginning, so full of fervor and new life, culminates in a barren end—the paper, an underwhelming tribute to the vivid world of intellect—and I am forced to start again. We have yet to discover the gene that codes for perfection.

3. Evolution

I test the limits of my bounds. The rope is wrapped tightly around the trunk and binds me. There is little room for movement. I can lean forward a barely perceptible amount, and I can push myself upward a bit by planting my hands firmly on the forest floor and bracing my feet against some of the roots.

How did I get here? I must remember if I'm going to get out.

My back pocket is not deep, and as I shift my weight around a bit, I can feel the knife sitting at the outer right corner of it. I push myself upward again, managing to lift my body maybe half an inch off the ground. I rotate my right hand to a painfully unnatural position, trying to get my own body out of the way. Through contortion, I am able to inch my hand towards my pocket and, with thumb and forefinger, touch the knife.

It all happened so fast I think. I was walking on the edge of the forest. I had little on my mind and yet I was oblivious to everything around me. That must have been how I missed their soft step. Otherwise I would have known that the light crunch of leaves was out of place and heard the chipmunk's bark, warning the other animals of intruders.

I was consumed by nothing at all, almost as if I was unwittingly preparing myself for the shock and horror that rushed in when the clawing hands grabbed me and wrenched me violently to the ground. Another pair crushed a bag over my head, sending sight into darkness. But I'm not so sure that the loss of sight was due entirely to the covering because there was also a simultaneous prick—a feeling distinct to the syringe.

Ultimately I have no idea who my captors are and even less of one about whether they will return or not. I grip the knife with all the strength I have in those two little fingers, (never before have they served such a vital purpose), and I yank. It is a Herculean effort on a minuscule scale.

*

I don't know where all of this is going. No one ever said that we might choose to adapt or that we can control natural selection. Evolution is a process that occurs independently of thought, and yet writing is the evolution of our mental landscape. One idea leads to another, and then another, and then to another. By publishing, we load our work into the literary canon and launch them into the realm of interpretation. The sentences which I had so carefully constructed explode into millions of tiny pieces, each reader picking up a single one.

My words in print become public property. While we might rarely think about the fact that we are descended from monkeys, a writer can never forget where he or she came from. I enter into a dialogue begun ages ago, by men like Aristotle, Homer, and Plato: names more sacred than Mary in the intellectual world. Our literary ancestors are as much a part of today's written

landscape as they were of their own. We continue the search they started. After all these centuries, we have amassed words by the dozens, hundreds, thousands, millions. Enough words to wrap 'round the Earth several times—all essentially speaking to the same question: who, or what, are we (writers are not so different from scientists, you see)?

I still think the best answers to this question are Shakespeare's. Not his plays per se, because those are as wandering and inconclusive as any dissertation on mankind turns out to be. No, Shakespeare is a poet for all the ages because he was able to write the most profound things in sentences short enough to put on a coffee mug. Open any number of his manuscripts and you will find, buried somewhere in act three, a line so simple and precise that it's utterly brilliant. And yet, we might miss it in a play that continues on for pages.

I sometimes think that our problem as writers is that we never know when to stop. Someone may have written the truth about humanity a long time ago, but we continue to cover it up with piles upon piles of useless paper. I think truth might have been lost somewhere, by myself and maybe others.

There are many methods of searching. Some of us stop and stand in the middle of the huge stacks of canonical literature, Mr. Shakespeare's included, because we must start somewhere, so why not start with the best? We gobble them up and spit them back out in literary essays which proclaim to have discovered *the* meaning. I've written hundreds of these pieces, and I can't honestly say that I've ever believed any of them. Others among us either determinedly or ignorantly plow onward, believing that we will write the new truth, or at least lead ourselves back to the old one. Yet, how can we even be sure we're headed in the right direction? No one ever promised us a plan. Writers base their work on assumption and literature is a grand experiment.

"I never found a man who knew how to love himself."

-William Shakespeare, *Othello*

4. Epilogue

I manage to pull the knife a little farther out of my pocket, to touch it with thumb, pointer, and middle finger now.

*

Who am I in all of this? In all of these letters, words, and sentences that I selfishly contribute to the stacks of paper, and in the myriad of books I devour? I still don't know. I'm not sure that any of the stories I put down on paper are ever really mine. I think they might just be on loan, really, from someone with something to say, who just needed somebody to say it. And then these thoughts found me, an empty apartment available for rent.

It's because of the way my own ideas feel like fiction when I read

them on the page, because of that urgent need to write everything down, as if it's someone else whispering these thoughts in my ear, the way that I can never really own my words because they are public property, that makes me feel as if this isn't really me at all.

Another pull and I feel the blade slide from my pocket.

I'm frustrated, nearly irate even, by the way this is all coming to a neat close, as if my writing were the stuff of fairytales. I thought the truth was ugly, but it's out of my control.

Relief overtakes me as I begin to work my hand out from under my body.

As people, we create characters, and as writers, we become them.

Reality is fiction, or maybe the other way around.

I feel my grip on the pen loosening and the knife falls from my hand.

MY KIND OF NOTHING

LIZ WILLIAMS

You say you feel nothing;
I can say that, too.

If you cut out every word on every page
of my favorite book
and let the half-inch slivers of inky white paper
flow softly in the breeze,
leaving me with a wordless book,
(I would still know every line.)
I can feel nothing like that.

Or if you collected on the tip of your finger
all the antimatter and imaginary numbers
taking up space in molecules and calculators,
fueling (in their non-existence)
theories and methods, answers and laws;
I can feel nothing like that.

Or if, perhaps, you counted the spaces
between every spindle
comprising each snowflake's intricate web—
weightless, invisible, linking and vast,
descending in millions on frostbitten grass—
I can feel nothing like that.

You say you feel nothing;
I can say that, too.
I can feel nothing like that.

RELEASE

TINA COCHRAN

SpaghettiOs taste like vomit. She battled with the spoon that threatened the very life of her taste buds. She choked on the taste, but her throat opened to the invasion and SpaghettiOs rushed through her esophagus. The warm substance set off small convulsions throughout her left side as the moving internal heat forced her to realize how cold her skin felt.

"It's good, isn't it, Alice?"

The attending RN flashed a postcard smile as she wiped Alice's mouth. Her teeth looked like they'd been scrubbed with alcohol and stuck out between over-glossed lips. It was the same smile she gave to every other resident on the block.

It tastes disgusting.

"It's so good to see you so lively today, Alice. This is your favorite meal, right? My kids love this type of food."

Child services should be knocking at your door for feeding those innocent things such trash.

"That's right—I had a feeling this would make today a good day, Alice. You've been lonely lately. Your daughter hasn't made it in a little while. I know she's only nineteen, but I'm sure you miss her when she can't get in."

Shirley was here two days ago. I don't need her to show up every single day... and stop saying my name every time you speak. I'm only forty-nine. I've got a ways to go before I'm senile.

A knock at the door interrupted them. One of the younger women who worked in the section stepped a foot into the room. "Pam, can I steal you away for a minute? I need help and Kate is helping John. Good morning, Ms. Alice."

Mrs., and when did I tell you you were allowed to speak in such a familiar way, addressing a stranger by their first name?

Looking at the girl, Alice felt badly about berating her. The girl was still naïve. Her smile was still genuine. She was new.

"Sure thing." Pam jumped up from her chair in a way that declared ex-high school cheerleader. "Alright, Alice. I'll be back in no time. I'm just going to step out with Karri. You don't go anywhere, all right?" She was out the door before she finished. They left the door open; they always did. She turned to twirl her fingers at Alice before she was out of sight.

I'm partially paralyzed and chained to more machinery than a science experiment. Where am I going to go?

Alice was left alone with nothing to do. Pam had forgotten to switch on the radio before she left. The television remote was inches from her bed

side tantalizing her. She remembered her book had been moved to the other side of the room when Pam was searching for a place to put down the food tray.

She looked around at the state-of-the-art living quarters. The bed could fold up into a chair, like it was now; there were tracks in the ceiling complete with a sling chair that could be used to carry her from bed to bathroom. It was crisp, clean, and cold. Pam had forgotten to open the curtains again. She always did. It was like the woman thought Alice would implode if the smallest amount of sunlight touched her skin.

The beeping of the heart rate monitor tore through the silence.

Will you shut up?

She sorted through the wires attaching her to different machines with her good arm, her left. She found one that when she tugged gently she could see a reaction on the heart rate monitor. She followed its trail until she found the connection point on her skin. She had been born a righty but her left hand nimbly disconnected the cords. It had gotten a lot of practice in the year she'd been there.

The heart rate monitor screamed.

Quick, efficient steps made their way down the hall from the nurses' station. Pam entered with her business face on but a look of disappointment flashed when she entered the room. The newest members of the staff tentatively peeked past the door frame.

"Alice, what are you doing? Did you take these off?" She was close enough that she took the wires into her hand and held them up.

Yup, and I'll do it again. That idiotic beeping is the worst form of torture.

Pam's eyes creased along her brow. "You need this."

All it does is tell you I'm alive, and if you can't tell that yourself, you should go back to nursing school. It doesn't actually keep me alive. It just beeps.

Alice tried to give her a challenging look, but only one eye scrunched up, giving her face a tilted look. Movement caught her attention. A crowd had gathered at the door. The new staff still peeked around each other, but the other residents were openly peering into the room. One had even passed through the doorway. They were so much older than she was. Pam caught Alice's attention again as she readjusted the wires and fiddled with the monitor.

"This helps us take better care of you Alice. You shouldn't take it off again. Do you understand?"

Within the next week, Alice had removed the cords at least twice a day every day and by the end of the week, she'd begun to investigate the value of keeping the other wires pinned to her flesh.

It had become a type of game, really. Removing the cords when they least expected, forcing them to stay on alert at all times. The time it took them to show up was slowly becoming longer and longer as they anticipated her actions. They'd brought the doctor in once to try to explain why she needed to stop removing the equipment. She'd unplugged the heart rate monitor five

minutes after he left.

Her daughter showed up the next day.

"Pam is really worried about you. She told me you keep unhooking the monitors?" She had pulled over a chair and sat in it backwards, her chin resting on the tall backing. Alice looked at her sadly. She was so young, just nineteen. Alice had married late, had children late, and now she was dying early. Shirley's tired eyes stared openly at her, searching for something.

"Are you trying to commit suicide?"

The question sent a jolt through her. Suicide? She'd never even thought about it. She raised her good hand and waved her hand as emphatically as she could.

I'm not ready to die just yet.

"I'm worried about you. You stress yourself out too much. It's why you had a stroke at forty-eight."

You're worried that the same will happen to you.

Alice didn't blame her but frustration had been growing over the past few months. Shirley reached into her bag and pulled out the notepad that was their final connection. She put a pen in Alice's hand and put the pad on the bed under her hand. The nurses had seen it done, but Alice refused to talk to anyone else in this manner. It belonged solely to Shirley.

"Tell me what's changed. You've been here for a year and you never tried anything like this before."

"I'm just frustrated, sweetling." The letters were large and awkward. "I never get to see outside because the blinds are always shut and I can't even move that far to open them."

"I know you're used to jumping back up and doing everything at once, but the doctors said the healing process would be slow. You've gained some feeling back. Remember the first day they let you eat food again instead of eating through the IV? You were so happy that day." Brown eyes pleaded with her to reason.

"Like a toddler who has finally used the bathroom on her own. That feeling was happiness for the first bite. Then I found out they would feed me every meal. It was infuriating." It took her much longer to write it out, but she refused to cut anything out.

"Everyone here knows you're not a baby, Mom." She pressed her forehead against the back of the chair so that the words came out muffled and ended with a higher pitch.

"I'm just an invalid."

"That is the truth!" The words slipped and Alice could see the instant regret and exasperation on her hot-tempered daughter's face.

The words hit like a slap and Alice let the pen fall to the pad. Alice knew Shirley could sense the change in her. They had so much in common. They'd always been close. Now they were torn apart on the days Shirley forgot the legal pad.

"I'm sorry." When Alice made no move to respond she continued. "I'll come to visit again next Saturday, ok? Please stop unplugging the monitors?" She kissed Alice on her bad cheek, bundled up her things, and left.

Later that night, Alice started playing with the wires again. She didn't unhook anything this time. It felt like she would be betraying Shirley if she ignored her request on the same day it had been made. Over the week, she had figured out which cords set off what alarms. She felt immense pleasure at disconnecting the oxygen tube and breathing on her own. It was a little more difficult, but she could do it. She had figured out how to place the mask so that the pumped oxygen never entered her nostrils, but when the nurses passed by the door they couldn't tell anything was off.

Alice repositioned the tubes. Of all the cords and tubes she was connected to, for some reason the oxygen mask felt the most intrusive. She hated the thing.

That evening everything accumulated to an intoxicating weight. Pam had scolded her after Shirley left and the doctor had come in to send her on a guilt trip about worrying her daughter.

The damn curtains were closed again. Since it was past bedtime, the door was shut, the only redeeming fact for the day.

Her body convulsed upward and for one split moment she could feel both her legs, move both her arms and actually turn her head. Her eyes blinked on and off—until she hit the mattress again and all that existed was her mind. She tried to lift her good hand. Nothing moved. She tried to look down but her gaze was glued to the beeping monitor beside her bed. She couldn't even blink.

Her panic would have had her yelling for help except that her lungs had calcified. No air passed her lips and she knew the oxygen mask had fallen off because she was staring at it. It lay right next to her on the pillow, the heart monitor in the background.

Why had she had another stroke? She was recovering. The beeping on the monitor began to slow. Lack of oxygen roared in her brain. Cells screamed out in anguish as they slowly died off. People can only survive up to three minutes without oxygen. Before Alice blacked out she finally heard the alarm that would warn the nurses and she tried to relax.

Pam, it looks like you were right about these machines. They are going to save my life.

*

"She had another stroke in the middle of the night. She survived, but it seems like her body couldn't keep up and she passed away in her sleep." Pam, the RN who dealt with her mother most often, was explaining to her. "She wouldn't have been in any pain."

Her mother lay on the bed, her body neatly arranged. Shirley thought she looked peaceful, but she knew better. There was something left in her mother's face. The wires had finally been removed, but the oxygen mask was still sitting firmly in place.

Shirley reached out to touch the rough skin of her mother's hands. Her emotions roiled but one kept rising to a crest: relief. Her mother had been an active woman her entire life. It must have been killing her to be unable to move across the room, much less go outside. Shirley noticed the closed curtains. She tucked her mother's hand back into the bed and opened them with enough force that they came entirely off the wall.

NO WAKE ZONE

BRIAN ENGELSMA

The stiff, orange blade slowly dips into the cool May water. As I look around, I see large, foreboding trees rising up from the lakeshore like mountains over a plain. Slowly I breathe deep some of that crisp Minnesotan air as I gently roll over the crest of a wave, letting some spray slap me in the face. Shaking my head to rid my face of the frigid droplets, I look ahead to my destination. Not much further to go. Maybe five more minutes and I'll be back in the cove that separates the bay into two parts: one wide open, choppy and teeming with milfoil, and the other quiet, secluded and free to spoil with my presence.

Officially the ice out was more than a month ago, back in early April, but what does that really mean? I remember my father describing it to me once, that all ice out means is that a boat can get from one side of the lake to the other, not that the lake was free of ice. I guess I never really stopped to think about it before; does it count if it's one of those ice breakers from somewhere way up north like Red Lake or Mille Lacs, the kind of boat with a big block engine and a reinforced hull, or does it have to be the kind of recreational boat that people actually use? I guess it really doesn't matter. Either way there isn't going to be anyone out here for a few more weeks anyway. Heck, they have yet to even put those white danger buoys with the thin orange line on their top and bottom, the ones with a bright diamond right smack dab in the middle out on the water.

As I lose focus and begin to stare aimlessly in the distance, I begin to notice I'm an island on the world, and like an astronaut on a spacewalk, I'm almost frightfully alone, except for maybe some waterfowl or something. I'm oddly at peace with this fact. This is really the only time of year I feel at home out here. In a few weeks' time the water will be so overgrown with the branches of drunk, twenty-somethings and high school hot shots that going out on the lake would be a little like taking a vacation to Somalia.

I guess that's why I really like being out here, especially during this time of year; I have somewhere all to myself. Whenever I'm in large groups of people I always feel anxious, like they're all staring at me, waiting for me to do something. If they only knew that deep down all I want to do is scream, scream and find a happy place to rebalance myself. Out here I don't need to worry about feeling anxious. The only things I feel are the stiff paddle in my hand and the sensation of cool droplets jumping out towards me.

Slowly I stretch out a little bit, bending backwards over the seat of the kayak and lifting the paddle high above my head. Twisting from side to

side I hear my back crack once, twice, three times. Taking my cap off, I slowly brush my hand through my hair, scratching at the hair on the back of my skull once I get there.

Off in the distance I hear the call of a loon, that majestic and mysterious bird that one can find only when it is quiet, when it is calm. I hear the loon let out one of its distinctive calls, a tremolo. It sounds a little like the high-pitched laugh that a child might let out. Just a few quick, nasally hahas and then the hoarse song is done. I hear it again and look around to see if I can find where this magical bird is. To my right, in front of some exposed rocks, I find the source of that cyclical laughing, the black and white loon. Right after I notice him, he lets out another burst of sound and dives deep below the water, surely to hunt for some fish. Known to stay underwater for exceptionally long times and to travel great distances, I'm not sure that I'll get another chance to see him again tonight.

Reminding myself that every time I stop or slow down I lose whatever momentum I had built up, I set back to work, arching the paddle back into the water, pulling it towards me and starting all over again with the other side. I try to count out a rhythm to regulate my paddling, something that will keep it consistent and keep me moving at a decent pace, but I quickly lose track and let my mind wander.

Looking ahead, I see that I'm starting to push farther and farther back into the quiet little cove on the other side of the bay. It's officially known as a no wake zone, meaning that there can't be a double wave trailing you. You can see clear enough why they do this; it's a world set aside for families and neighborhood flotilla parties safe from the ruckus of water skis, wakeboards and whatever other type of inflatable toys have been thought up this year. The amount of excitement that comes with dragging one of those inflatable coffins fifty or sixty miles an hour continues to confuse me. A few years ago they actually made one called the Kite Tube, designed to shoot up ten, twenty feet in the air and then stay up there like a seagull swooping over the water. Unsurprisingly, it was recalled from the market by July.

As I nose my way into the cove further and further, I notice off on the right, beside the shore, there is a low lying marshy area, with scores of cattails pushing through the weeds and reeds like skyscrapers in a cityscape.

It strikes me that there is something inherently magnificent about those cattails, about the trees standing shoulder to shoulder along the shore, about everything I see out here really. All of it is allowed to exist organically, to grow in a seemingly random and authentic matter, rather than the assembly line abodes that define new housing developments. These looming anonymous colonies of commodified houses always stare down at me, with a disapproval of any separation from the mean.

In between me and the Chicago of cattails, I notice a log with a painted turtle perched on top of it. In June and July, you can see bales of turtles lounging out in the summer sun, but now, in May, there is only one

solitary reptile taking a turtle nap on some driftwood.

As I push in deeper, maintaining the imperfect rhythm of my paddling, I begin to notice just how tired I am. It's times like these I wish that I could stick to a workout schedule, with the fleeting hope that maybe someday I can go more than five minutes of physical activity without taking a breather.

My mouth feels dry like evaporated milk as I try to gather enough saliva to spit. A childhood friend once called this cottonmouth, I wonder if that's a real term for it. Whenever I heard the phrase cottonmouth, I always pictured a kid with so many cotton balls in his mouth that his cheeks puffed out like a squirrel during harvest season.

Setting my paddle down on my lap, I decide to take a short break before turning around and heading home. With the sleeve of my maroon and gold University of Minnesota sweatshirt, I wipe the collection of sweat and spray from my face. Reaching forward, I grab the water bottle neatly bungeed to the front of the kayak. Mindful of how much is left, I take a couple of moderate sized gulps, careful to leave some for the way back.

Suddenly, the water becomes restless and I hear the water jump about. Off to my left, a fish, a Northern Pike to be exact judging from its long, slender body and menacing snout, has jumped up from a bed of lily pads. As he makes curious motions through the air, I notice a series of gashes on his side in the shape of a jaw; this pike was almost fish food once. As the gyrating fish slaps down against the placid lake like a watery Hiroshima, a ripple of waves rushes outwards, upsetting the forest green lily pads.

Usually, this is the part of the trip where I stop for a while to do some reading. Nothing heavy, usually just some light, little book they give to teens to make them interested in reading. Heck, I've been known to take out a comic book or two if the mood is right. But today was no day for reading, even of the light kind. The sky was a hazy shade of grey and it was starting to get dark enough that I couldn't make out what was on the shore anymore.

Reaching over the side I dip my fingers into the water to test the temperature. Pulling my hand back I immediately realize the water is colder than I had remembered.

Grabbing my paddle I ready myself for the trip back home. I take one last look around before thrusting my paddle into the water and getting my heading right. As I head back, I notice off in the distance the kind of foreboding grey clouds that announce the coming of a storm. Not the kind of severe system that a hot and sweaty day sometimes signals, but a run of the mill midnight rain shower that most people sleep through without noticing.

Licking my lips I try to establish a rhythm again, to make the most efficient use of my strokes as I can. But like always, I quickly give up and just plow through, hoping to get back before the coming wall of rain.

DRY WOOD

GREGORY SCHEIBER

Written at the park off of Carlen Drive on 7/28/10

We have minds like dead tree branches
Dry, brittle, and cracked.
Lichen and moss grow,
Devouring nutrients little by little
Until its bony carcass is all that's left to start fires.

The limbs rub together
Heating loins, shooting sparks off into the night,
Hoping they will catch and burn in the brown grass,
Bright as day in an unquenchable inferno.

The blaze will spread to our trees,
Burning down generations only to feed new ones through decaying
cannibalism.
All that remains will be ash in the mud,
But a few will survive the firestorm.
Charred, blackened, but with new determination and hope,
Clinging to life through their untouched roots.

As the mass falls,
Only the ones who dug in deep enough will be left to brave the new path
Which they'll forge,
Carving their own swath in ancientness.
Only to be remembered while they burn.

SIDEWALK WANDERING

SARA THOMAS

With inspiration from "Street Haunting: A London Adventure" by Virginia Woolf

Perhaps no one has ever felt passionately about a loaf of bread. But, there are moments when it can become very appealing to buy one; moments when we feel cramped inside a stuffy apartment, weary of a housemate's tired jokes, or hungry for a sandwich. With this mixture of escape and necessity, grocery shopping makes a plausible excuse for partaking in the greatest pleasure afforded by a beautiful historic town—wandering the streets of Bath.

The stroll is best begun at the first hint of dusk amid the cool of late fall. For in fall, the leaves on the trees emit their pied hues across the sky. In fall, the rains of winter have not yet begun to pour from the clouds, forcing us to take shelter beneath umbrellas and awnings. The dusky air, too, casts a glow of romance onto the façades and the faces of the passersby. When we leave our houses around five o'clock, we shed the confines of our daytime selves and dress in the garments of mysterious possibility. Gone are the fragments of identity that label us between the boundaries of our bedrooms and classrooms. The research paper that bears our name, for instance, written and left for dead in a folder on our desk. We would like to pretend that we did not waste hours typing that mundane essay, but the black and white scrawling font reveals our name in undeniable truth.

But when we lock the door behind us and set that first hesitant foot on the street, all restriction vanishes. Abandoning careful steps we bound down the hills toward the city. How incredible is the metamorphosis of autumn! The plugs drop away that filter our ears during the day, and we are able to hear everything. The veils unravel that prevent our eyes from staring; we can gaze liberally on anything.

The evolution of metropolitan life pulses, oscillating between the thumping sneakers of a herd of schoolchildren and the beep of a car horn. On one side of the street a performer blows into a recorder, while a bearded man paces back and forth, calling, begging for someone to purchase one of his magazines.

Here, we pass the Co-Operative, a fair-trade grocery selling organic foods that never overreach the jingle of pounds in my pocketbook. The cashiers smell of body odor, and some wear their hair in dreadlocks. We could stop here in good conscience and buy our loaf of bread, quitting the quest laid out ahead of us even before the sun hides behind the trees and the nocturnal shadows creep from between the shops. But we are not yet

ready to rest our legs. We continue marching, zipping our jackets higher and pulling our scarves tighter around our necks, bracing our flesh and bones against the chill of crisp air.

A couple of retail workers stand in a doorway dragging on cigarettes. The orange ends burn like sparklers, leaving cherry trails tangling in the dust passage. The smoke curls up around their faces and dissolves into the sky, and I raise my chin to the clouds and watch its pirouette. Then down I look, where they flick ashes onto the ground, forming tiny puddles like the pitter patter of raindrops. Their voices clink against each other, as they converse about nothing in cockney accents.

Down the sidewalk, a girl in a purple dress and pink stockings twirls, her hands grasp the hem and her shoulders sway left to right. Her eyes follow the ethereal chiffon of her dress, imagining that she is a princess dancing at a ball. Her teeth are stained, not from Royal wine, but from the lollipop of which she has bored. Her dad holds it for her like a little wand between his long fingers in case she decides to revisit its sugary deliciousness. Her hair is braided in two pigtails, but frizz sticks out from the crisscrossed sections of hair, as if she has been climbing trees and rolling down hills since her hair was plaited this morning. We see bits of dried leaves stuck between her auburn strands.

A street performer strings a tightrope between two corners of a store, and he balances on one foot while playing the violin. A crowd gathers to watch his plucky rhythm, clapping and cheering and tossing coins into his upturned top hat that rests on the pavement.

Others beg for coins in a different way, half-asleep and crouched in doorways, calling out for spare change, using words like darling and honey to summon the shoppers and making vulgar comments about the females' bodies. A woman dressed in rags staggers down the street clutching a nearly empty bottle of cheap malt liquor; she jeers and swears at everyone she sees.

At the contrasting sight of this ugly reality against the dream of the shop windows, we freeze in our steps, and our eyes only blink in disbelief. The homeless dwell mere steps away from the consumers, blurring the lines between the lost and the found, the influential and the ignored, and the sparkle from the filth. Vagabonds block the entrances of shops filled with alligator handbags in jewel tones.

This town is rich with places to purchase things; sparkling baubles strut across translucent window displays. Flashing fabric and trendy vestments beckon the shoppers with ready wallets and glamorous fantasies.

Perusing these storefronts, we can transport ourselves to the interiors of a lavish ballroom, our necks decorated with emeralds and our stomachs full with a gourmet feast. We can select the Oriental carpeting for our long hall and the gilded chairs for our sitting room. In the next breath, we can demolish this mansion and create another with sleek modern architecture and glass walls.

But are we only dreaming? It is almost six o'clock, it is fall, and we are walking through Bath for a loaf of bread. Mother Nature seems too generous in allowing the colors, sounds, and smells of life to all blur together in the tie-dyed image of Man. Is the true self this one, lying outside a shop on Milsom Street or that one, attending an elegant soiree?

Nonetheless, we remember our task, to enter the grocery store. The automatic glass doors part to permit our entry into the chilled white warehouse of food. In aisle six, a frustrated mother shakes her head at her son, who is clutching a water gun and jumping up and down. He climbs onto their cart, already full of syrupy snacks and school-lunch ingredients. "Pardon me," we say to squeeze between the pair and stare at the various loaves of bread; white bread, whole meal, whole grain, pre-sliced. So many to choose from, and the mom and her son stand in limbo as she waits to push the cart ahead until he returns the toy to its peg on the wall. Too embarrassed to continue the tantrum, he concedes and obediently follows his guardian to the next aisle.

By the time we emerge from the land of consumption, the streets are deserted. Heading home, we could tell ourselves the story of the cigarette smokers, the little princess, the tightrope walker. We could become derelicts, temper tantrum throwers, mansion owners.

Truly, to escape is the wildest adventure and an adventure is the safest escape. Back at our own doorway, we hear our housemates telling their same old stories, but now the rhythmic voices are a comfort, and we return to dock like a weathered rowboat. Here is the same tiny apartment that we left with bare cupboards and the desk cluttered with our schoolwork. And let us look with respect at the only souvenir we have discovered among the shops in town, a humble, practical loaf of sliced white bread.

TO LIVE WITHOUT

AIMEE GRIFFIN

Every workday lately felt like a lifetime, but coming home wasn't a relief anymore either. I walked into the house, through the tight foyer, and into the kitchen, where I deposited my suit jacket, briefcase, and keys in a heap on some chair. Mary Sue, the babysitter, was sitting at the kitchen table humming and reading a glossy magazine. When I came in, she didn't move right away, following me with her perpetually sleepy eyes and slow smile. She took her time gathering her things to leave, rattling off the day's summary.

"Same ol' same ol' today, Mister Fields. Katie's outside somewhere. She's been ignoring me since this morning. Got her inside when I said I made baloney sandwiches for lunch but she took one bite and I haven't seen her since. There's still plenty of food in the fridge, especially in the freezer. See you in the morning." Purse in hand and heels clicking on the linoleum, she made her exit, her fluffy white dog pattering after her.

I grasped the wooden handle of the refrigerator and eased it open to survey the contents. Casseroles, soups, stroganoffs, pasta salads, egg salads, none of which Katie would even look at. I couldn't even see what the freezer held, it was so packed with ceramic dishes made with sympathy by the grandmas and housewives of the neighborhood. The decision was overwhelming me and I began to get frustrated, until I realized that I had no appetite and let the freezer door slam. With heavy fingers I loosened the knot of my tie; it was already coming undone. I'd been wearing a tie every day for the entire length of my career; it was funny to think that I still couldn't tie it well. I'd been tying it by myself for a month, and I still couldn't get it right. She used to do it so well, and I loved that moment in the morning with her so much, I saw no point in having her teach me how. In the dark haze of our bedroom, she'd finish buttoning the top buttons of my shirt and run her hand down my chest to smooth the fabric. I could feel the light pressure of her forearms on my shoulders as she flipped up the shirt collar and slid the tie around my neck.

The silk slipped out of my fingers and onto the kitchen floor as I walked back out the front door and stood on the porch. The hot late afternoon sun illuminated the street and all the houses close by, and the tired sounds of the end of childhood games and the calls of mothers echoed out into the space.

"Katie!" I called out. "Katie Marie!"

"We ain't seen her all day, Mister Fields," a boy riding home on his bicycle called out. I lingered for a moment, then trudged back through the house to the back porch. The grass was obscenely long, a foot high maybe.

Not far from the porch, sticking out over the green summer grass, I spotted a white blond ponytail. Katie crouched low in the grass, her skinny limbs motionless, poised to pounce. She didn't hear the screen door slam; she was concentrating too hard on her mission. Something like a smile pulled at the edges of my mouth, and I quietly slid off my shoes and socks and placed them on the porch. I crept down the steps and silently came up behind the little hunter. I made my way through the grass, avoiding overturned plastic furniture, a soccer ball, a baseball bat, and swooped in to grab Katie up in my arms. Her shriek was deafening. I held her over my shoulder and walked back to the house. She flailed wildly, her scrawny arms and legs beating ineffectually against my chest and back.

"Put. Me. Down," she commanded through clenched teeth. "You ruined everything! I'm never going to find Billy." Billy was the name of Katie's pet frog. She had rescued him from the middle of the street one day, and she had made it her mission in life to protect this poor frog that didn't have enough sense to stay out of traffic. I had tried to convince her that the frog perhaps wanted his freedom, and that maybe he had just made a mistake once that he had certainly learned from.

"Billy," said the stubborn little child, "Needs my help. He won't make it alone." That was that. I placed the little girl on the cement step outside the back screen door and stood looking down on her.

"What happened to Billy?" I asked, rolling up the sleeves of my dress shirt, preparing for whatever search I would be required to perform as a sympathetic father.

"I don't know! He's gone!" Katie spread her tiny hands, palms up, in a gesture of helplessness and defeat. "After you left, I finished my breakfast and went back into my room, and he wasn't in his habitat!" Thus far, the escape seemed to be a mystery.

"Was the habitat knocked over, baby? Was the little door on top open?" Mary Sue's little dog, Sheba, had been known to occasionally wreak havoc here and there when she was particularly unsupervised. Perhaps she had knocked over Billy's plastic "habitat."

"No, that's what's weird! He just wasn't there! He disappeared!" The little girl sat, elbows on her knees, chin in her hands, surveying the back lawn. "He could be anywhere. He could be halfway to California by now!" Her green eyes were big and her mouth was set in an angry little line that trembled now and then. Her bare feet were streaked with dark grime, her grey cotton shirt was expertly rumpled, and her cutoff jean shorts were smeared with grass stains, but still her ponytail remained intact. I did her hair the only way I knew how. Every morning I stood behind her, brushed out all the knots from sleeping, gathered every lock up at the top of her head, and secured it with an elastic scrunchie. It was all I could learn, and she wore it like a badge of honor. I remembered how she had to begin sporting it the last few weeks of school, before I took her out. It was the beginning of her

in-school conflicts.

"Amanda Lake called me Cindy Lou Who all day today. Because of my hair. I didn't like it," she told me, I guess it was a little less than a month ago now.

"So, what did you do?" I already knew the answer, I had heard it from the principal.

"I told her to keep her fat, bratty mouth shut at recess. And then she wouldn't, so I shoved her a little." She had in fact shoved Miss Lake into a thorn bush. She still swears she didn't know that the bush was prickly.

After a week of getting calls from the principal about how Katie wasn't interacting with the other students well, that Katie wouldn't come back inside when recess was over, and that Katie wouldn't pay attention in class, I ended her school year early about two weeks ago and kept her home. I wanted to punish her, but I knew I wouldn't.

I sat down on the step next to her and copied her posture.

"Why didn't you eat your lunch today?" I asked as Katie picked at the cement. "Mary Sue is only trying—"

"It was wrong. She made it all wrong, just like you do. And she cut it across." I inhaled deeply. Only one person was capable of making baloney sandwiches that Katie would eat, and there already wasn't much that you could get her to eat as it was.

We sat on the porch until the peepers came out and the sun went down. Eventually I turned to look at the child next to me, and unable to return to the topic of Billy, I suggested dinner instead. In the kitchen, Katie sat on her knees on her chair at the kitchen table, stabbing forcefully at the macaroni and cheese in her bowl.

"Is that any way to eat?" I sat across from her at the small table, eating nothing, just watching her.

"I eat like I mean it," she said through a mouth full of macaroni.

"It's not very feminine."

"What's that mean?"

"It means the boys won't like it."

"Mary Sue was talking on the phone about how some boy was looking at her butt—"

"Don't listen to Mary Sue.

A whole box of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese and three glasses of milk later, my girl sat slumped in her chair, belly full and face smeared with the poor remnants of the macaroni. She lifted the back of her hand to wipe off the offensive stickiness and I caught her little wrist in my hand.

"Eh! Bath. Go." She heaved a little girl sigh and lumbered up the stairs to the bathroom. I slumped in the nearest kitchen chair and I heard the fan in the bathroom click on. I leaned my head back and rubbed my eyes and water could be heard running from the faucet. It made me think of the clink of dishes being washed. I saw the suds filling up the sink and her deft

hands brandishing the sponge at me, threatening me for never actually helping with the dishes, all with her half-smile on her face. She set to work scrubbing at the plates, her hair falling over her face as she worked. Washing dishes always brought out something nostalgic in her, and she tossed me a smile over her shoulder.

"Remember when we used to wash Katie in this sink?" she asked, staring dreamily at the wall. "She was so quiet while we washed her baby belly, and her little hands, and her little feet."

"Ah, the days before she could talk and tell me about everything I do wrong." I leaned the chair on its back legs and smiled at her.

"She's just grumpy and stubborn like you sometimes."

"Grumpy and stubborn, huh? Apparently not stubborn enough if I can't win an argument against a two and a half foot tall opponent."

"You can hardly call what happens between you two 'arguments.' She's got your heart in her little fist."

"She's not the only one."

The water stopped and Katie called out to me from the bathroom.

"Daddy! Come wash my hair!" I hoisted myself from the chair and slowly made my way up the staircase. When I walked into the bathroom, she sat in the tub, covered in suds from the neck down. I remembered how the suds used to make her giggle at bath time, how she loved to blow on them so they floated away, how the new and interesting shampoo hairstyles I came up with were always a delight. Now, bath time was very businesslike, just like every other part of our days. She sat still and quiet as I soaked her hair, massaged the shampoo into her scalp, and then rinsed it out. When clean, she stood, pink faced and wrapped in a fluffy blue towel, in front of the bathroom mirror, and I gently combed the knots out of her wet hair. Her green eyes stared straight ahead. She refrained from making funny faces or sticking her tongue out at me; she just stared.

We split up to go to our respective rooms and change into pajamas. I dropped my dress shirt in the hamper, hung my pants up to be worn another day, and left my belt coiled on a chair. I had to search for my slippers, they used to always be positioned at the end of the bed, next to hers. I had left them in my closet that morning, in a rush to get out of the house. Bending down to retrieve them, I caught sight of the side of the closet that wasn't mine, the side I had yet to clean out. I stood up and reached out to touch the skirt of a soft light blue frock, the one with the zipper in the back that was such a pain. When my fingertips grazed the fabric, I jerked back and wrenched the closet door closed with a bang. Feeling ashamed, I glanced at the doorway to see if I had startled Katie, but the hallway was empty. She never came near this room anymore. In my boxers and an undershirt, I walked to Katie's room and found her standing by the window, which I had thrown open that morning in the heat. She had her arms on the sill, her head resting on them like a pillow, staring out into the back yard. She had on a

t-shirt that reached below her knees and swallowed her in fabric. Her wet hair left a damp, dark spot on the back in between her shoulder blades. When she heard me enter she swiveled to look at me, her face smooth and sad.

"Billy's not coming back, is he?"

I turned down her covers and patted the sheet while I sat on the edge of her bed. She crawled into the spot I'd indicated and pulled the top sheet up over her lap.

"No, baby, I don't think we'll see Billy again." As she listened to me, I waited for tears, but she didn't seem shocked by my answer.

"Was I doing something wrong? I tried to give him plenty of flies to eat, I always made sure his habitat was fresh." She looked down at her lap, playing with her hands.

"No, honey, you were wonderful! It's not anything you did, I promise. It was just Billy's time to be somewhere else."

"He didn't like it here?"

"Katie, I know Billy loved it here. But you can't always stay in the same place forever. Sometimes you have to leave. It makes us really sad that Billy's gone and I'm sure he misses you a lot, but we have to think how it's probably better for Billy to be outside anyway."

Katie pulled the sheet up to her chin and thumped her head down on her pillow.

"I hope he's okay."

"I'm sure he is, baby. Now, get some sleep. I love you."

"Love you, too, Daddy."

I went back down into the kitchen and stood for a while, wondering what to do next. I pushed open the back screen door and it crashed back against the house when I stepped outside. I sat back down on the cement step, in the middle this time because I was alone, and looked out across the dark lawn, tracing the division between the black landscape and purple blue sky. The peeping crickets sang loudly in the night, a deafening chorus. I realized, as I sat there, that I was straining through the cricket refrains, listening desperately for the croak of a frog.

PAPER HEART

KELLY WEITNER

It's just a small paper heart, ripped along the edges, torn from a shiny newspaper advert.

Beside a smoky bonfire, I placed this small heart next to my real one, its anxious beating barely subdued by

the intoxicating mix of vodka and misty summer air

With a shy smile, he plucked it out of my camisole and slipped it into his wallet.

This heart has traveled the world, you see.

It walked the streets of New York City among the food carts and disinterested gazes of the Lower East Side.

Slid in between his credit card and student ID, he carried my heart in his pocket.

He held me close on the darkened streets of Rome

Just a boy and a girl whose feet could barely stay on the ground

Swallowing back tears at the Roma Termini, I watched him leave, the paper heart clutched in my hand.

Snuggled up against each other early Sunday morning, so close only a paper heart could fit between

My arm across his chest, head nuzzled into the curve of his neck.

Our paper hearts beating against each other.

NANCY TIPPERSWORTH

CHARLES ZANGE

Let me just say that it was not my idea to invite Nancy Tippersworth back to our theatre. She was Angie's friend, not mine. You know Angie, right? She's our Production Manager. She's the one who invites people to come to perform here. I'm just the Tech Director, so I'm not the one to blame. I heard what a mess Nancy left from her last performance two years ago at this theatre. I mean, I wasn't there myself because I was working my other job. It was that weird transition time for me between getting into the Tech Director spot here in West Virginia and getting out of my old job in carpentry at Bungugoogaloo in Indiana (not kidding, that's the real name of a theatre. Don't ask me about that, I have no idea where it came from). It was a pain, too, to move all my crap from one cramped office eight hours away to this cramped office in Glaidensburg, West Virginia. It didn't help that this guy Rob who worked there wouldn't leave me alone. He just sat there watching me move in and talking about some show he worked on twenty years ago when it was the hottest summer on record or something like that. I don't remember. I wasn't really listening to him.

Anyway, I didn't know Nancy personally before this but I'd heard all the stories. Angie told me that Nancy was really into environmental yoga, like stretching next to waterfalls and volcanoes and stuff. That seemed weird at the time but made a lot of sense after I met her. From my crew, I heard how Nancy was demanding, how she was stuck up, how she insulted the help, and how they were still cleaning up the paper snow from that winter scene she threw in to her show last June. Yeah, last *June*. You know, that month when it doesn't snow? Leave it to Nancy, my crew told me, she'll find a way to bring snow into a summer show. So needless to say, I was expecting the worst before she had even stepped in through the door. Her second visit was scheduled for a November weekend. I remember thinking, *Why not a beach scene this time?* Believe it or not, I've seen a beach on stage before. I don't remember which show it was, but it was in the Cadillac in Chicago about a year ago. They pulled it off pretty nicely, too.

That's the real problem that I was facing with Nancy Tippersworth: *expectation*. Nobody but a director would ever walk into a building, point to a corner of the room, and say "Put a beach there." Nancy had high expectations but little knowledge of reasonable limitations of what was physically possible in a limited period of time. She was a director with just

the wrong amount of experience. She was nowhere near top dog at the Gershwin in New York, but she was someone who has gone to that theatre enough times to have Broadway expectations for wherever she went. She'd seen a beach on stage before, so she *expected* that it could be replicated anywhere. There's nothing more dangerous than a director with a little bit of knowledge and without any understanding of practical engineering. They walk into a theatre, and I swear it's like a redneck with a case of beer trying to build himself a unicycle. It's chaos. It's sheer, unstoppable chaos. And I was defenseless to do anything about it.

So she got here last November at about five o'clock on a frigid Friday morning. I was standing in the loading bay with my crew, all of us in our blue work shirts, on time as usual. Rob was standing closest to the door but he was trying to look the most casual, you know? I think he was saying something about how it wasn't as cold that day as it was some other time he was there twenty years ago. I'm pretty sure he was only standing there so that Nancy Tippersworth would see him first and think that he was the Technical Director instead of me.

At 5:01 a.m., the Door of Destiny, as we like to call it, opened. A couple of crew members from Nancy's group filed in. We murmured hellos to them. Those guys were tired. They'd been driving all night to get here. Their crew manager walked in and mistook Rob for being the TD, just like I thought would happen. I finally got to their crew manager, and he introduced himself as Bill. He was a nice guy, you know, a straight talker. I could tell that he was very organized because of the way he carried himself. I told him where to find the hot coffee and doughnuts. He nodded, but he didn't head that way because the Door of Destiny creaked loudly again. I heard it opening, and I knew who must have been coming in. I turned around and saw a tall woman with neat brown hair under a bright red cap. She was in her thirties and dressed like it with a red blouse, black slacks, and red shoes. I don't know if I've ever told you before, but the Door of Destiny sticks a little in cold weather. Rob likes to open it, so he can talk with people coming in first. I hate that guy. He tried to say something to Nancy, but she handed him her black coat and walked right past him straight to me without saying a word. I couldn't help but smile when I saw Rob demoted to "coat guy," his plan to pretend to be TD utterly foiled. My day, it seemed, was destined only to get worse.

"Ms. Tippersworth," I said cordially to her, "it is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Tom Stiff." I extended my hand. She had a limp hand shake. There was a lot of moisturizer lotion on her fingers; she obviously had no intention of working with her hands.

We unloaded the truck onto the stage. It's a pretty easy leg from the overhead door to the big double-doors through the back wall of the stage. The truck and its equipment were very well organized. I'm sure Bill set it all up. Move in was a breeze. I showed Nancy around the building, pointing out all the dressing rooms and most of the important stuff. She didn't say much during the tour, but I was sure she would find her voice when the show started going. And she did. Our second set-up task was finishing the lighting. Five minutes into light focusing we had to stop. Nancy wasn't happy with the style of lighting that we had implemented for her show.

Now here's the thing about the lighting for that show: Nancy had *faxed us her lighting diagram*. That meant that she had known beforehand what lights we were going to put up for her show. We followed her diagram perfectly. I had put in all the side lighting myself. But that was the week before, and you know directors; they never look back, lest they befuddle the pricelessly organic lives of their performances by using things like previous experience.

So imagine me standing with Rob in the light booth above the audience and Nancy on stage yelling up to us. She was staring at the set with her arms crossed and a cigarette in her hands (yeah, she's smoking even though it isn't allowed because Angie told me that "it's just easier if you let it happen"), prattling indirectly about her own inadequate powers in lighting design.

I shouted to her from the light booth, "What don't you like about the lights, Ms. Tippersworth?"

"They aren't showy enough," she replied.

I had no idea what that meant. "What do you want to change?"

"I think we need more red."

Classic. That's a *classic* director move. She wanted to use a new color to spice up a dead plot that really just needs some backlighting to make her actors stick out. The problem wasn't that the lights weren't "showy" enough, it was that most of them lit the stage from the front, so her actors' faces seemed flat and dead to the audience. Rob and I looked at each other and we both understood that much. He just started chuckling to himself. I shook my head. I had half a mind to not even try and help Nancy just to watch her fail miserably, but it didn't feel right, you know? I don't believe in euthanizing stray dogs, either, and somehow butchering the lights to an even more disturbingly asynchronous waste of electricity felt cruel. I tried to solve a few problems simultaneously. "Well, why don't I throw in some more stuff from the back?" I yelled down to her. "You know, backlighting. It will add depth, and I can put it in red. I think it—"

She shook her hand. You have to stop talking when the directors shake their hands. "Not a chance," replied Nancy. "The audience doesn't sit behind the actors. You don't need light back there."

I don't even know where to begin with this one. Try it at home is all I can say to you. Try putting two flashlights straight at a person's face, and then try it with one straight on and another above and slightly behind the person's head. See which one gives the face more depth.

"Let me see what I can come up with," I said to Nancy. I looked at Rob again with a face of disbelief. He smiled, shook his head, and very slowly turned on some reds from the front. Nancy kept asking him to put more and more red into the look. Pretty soon the dimmers were running at 100% on those lights. Red mixed in with the blues we already had on and turned the whole stage purple. The actors looked like a demonic softball team. Every stage fabric that was even coincidentally ruffled (window curtains, bedspreads, dresses, napkins) transformed into a candy cane.

"Yes, I like this," says Nancy.

"Of course you do," I murmured to myself and to Rob. Even if directors don't like the change, they don't like to say that they don't like it, so they say that they like it. That's how they do their thing. At this point I started to seriously question whether Nancy was actually that needy of a director or if she was just as bad as all the others.

Rob sat down in his chair and leaned back. "What overarching artistic concept are we going for again?" Rob asked me. "*Dante meets Candy Land?*"

I laughed. "We're going for *Get it done so Nancy will go away*," I replied as I headed downstairs.

The worst had only begun. Because the lights had changed, Nancy needed to change the costumes. "Too flashy," said Nancy. Apparently the show wasn't showy enough without red, but the costumes were too flashy with it. I don't even know how "flashy" and "showy" are different, but at least changing the costumes would tone down the candy canes on stage. After that, Nancy took to replacing the bedspreads. "Too muted," said Nancy. I've never been comfortable with people using 'muted' to describe anything but sound. We had to send someone to Target to buy new stuff for the beds. Then, Nancy went after the paint detail on the stairs of the set. Don't even get me started there. Before I knew it we were four hours from the 7:00 p.m. opening, and Nancy was considering new wallpaper in the bedroom scene.

It was intolerable. There was no way we were going to get that show going in time. Everyone was dead tired. The doughnuts were long gone. I was so hungry that even Rob's joke about the jar of peanut butter and the

teapot sounded pretty funny when he told it for the umpteenth time. Before finalizing her decision on the wallpaper, Nancy told us that she wanted to take a walk to clear her head. She left through the back door, and we all sighed in relief. Both crews squeezed in the break room and devoured the cold sandwiches I had bought for us the night before. I got the chance to talk to Bill for a little while. It turned out that Nancy was always like she was that day. She would make major changes to the show everywhere they went.

"You get used to it," said Bill to me.

"No you don't," I said back with a smile.

He laughed and poured himself his fifth cup of coffee of the day. "With enough coffee you can get used to anything," said Bill. Bill was a real nice guy. I'm still in touch with him from time to time. He's since found new work in a town near Houston. I don't remember exactly where. Texas isn't my favorite place on earth, but he seems to like it, so it's fine.

Anyway, we were just sitting around in the break room when we heard a sort of a crumbling sound coming from outside. Bill and I rushed out to check on what it was. He thought it might have been part of the building cracking in the wind in spite of the fact that it was a pretty clear day. I knew better. Out behind the theatre there is sort of a high kind of rocky cliff. It's a pretty area, but we keep it quartered off with a guardrail, a seven foot fence, and "Danger" signs every ten feet to deter any trespassers.

Bill looked at me. "You don't think..."

Remembering what Angie said about her, I started walking to the fence ready to bet anything that Nancy "Environmental Yoga" Tippersworth had jumped it to stand on the cliff wall. Sure enough, I found an area where the rocks had fallen away. There was a pack of cigarettes and a red hat on the edge of the cliff which I retrieved by reaching under the metal wires. I handed those things to Bill who knew them to be Nancy's. I didn't want to look over the edge to see where she ended up. It's at least a hundred-foot drop to the ground from that cliff. But, I felt sort of obligated to know where she was, being that she was Angie's friend, so I climbed the fence a little just to see over. Nancy was all the way at the bottom. Not to gross you out, but it was pretty clear from what I saw that she didn't make it. I discovered that day that the heavily marked cliff fence is pretty effective against normal, risk-averse people, but it doesn't guard well against the intellectualism of the self-entitled.

I told Bill about a security camera that I had back there that might have seen what happened. We went back inside to the office to see if the camera had picked anything up (we don't have a daytime security guy; they're too expensive). When we watched the video—the same one, incidentally, that

formally absolved us of any responsibility for her death in court—we saw Nancy Tippersworth leaving the rear door and crossing the cold back lot. She was eyeing up the fence and, with little hesitation, ignored the warning signs and climbed over it. And sure enough, once her feet were down on the cliff's edge, she started stretching. Seriously. She was doing her yoga crap on the cliff of a hundred-foot rock wall. Apparently she wanted to get closer to nature or something. That wouldn't surprise me. Directors love doing that. They love to get really close to something so they can "truly" feel it and experience it. Well, not to be too crass, but she certainly got more than her fair share of "feeling" and "experiencing" that particular cliff. She tried to light a cigarette, the rocks gave out, and she lost her footing and fell to an untimely death.

It was a curious sort of moment for everyone. We hadn't been around death all that much in our lives, although actors acted it out all the time on the stage. After that, Bill and I talked for a few minutes. We needed to decide first and foremost what was going to happen with the show. In less than four hours, 3,000 people were coming and we hadn't fully set up yet. We decided that we would wait to call the police about Nancy until after the performance was over. We couldn't cancel it, after all: 3,000 people paying an average of \$50 a ticket was too much to just throw away when everyone in the crews depended on that money for their salaries. To economize on time, Bill and I simply cancelled all the changes Nancy wanted to make to the show. We put the actors back in their original costumes and did a full dress rehearsal in less than three hours, leaving ample preshow time to rest up. I even had time to throw in backlighting so that the actors really stood out on stage. The performance was spectacular. It was one of the best renditions of *Streetcar Named Desire* that I had ever seen, and that's saying something because I've never been a huge fan of that show. It's the kind of show that you either love or you hate, you know? It's in the same league as *Doll House* or *Killer Joe* as far as I'm concerned. I'll admit it, though, that performance had me converted. In fact, the performance was so good that Bill and I forgot to call in to the police about Nancy Tippersworth being missing until the next morning, and that was after we had already moved the entire show out of the building and back onto the truck. I'm serious, we were in the parking lot waving goodbye, and then he said, "Hey, did you ever call the police about Nancy?" and I said "Oh man, I totally forgot!" and he said "Me too!" So he got out of the truck and we called it in. The police came and found her. Bill and I told the police that she just went missing, and we didn't know where she had gone. All our crews backed us up, too. We weren't totally lying, after all.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

PAUL TANASOCA

Let's just say my dad is not your typical man. He has no cable and no computer. There is no dryer in his home and he never uses the dishwasher. The words "air conditioning" don't exist in his vocabulary and his only use of the heat is to keep the pipes from freezing. When he takes a shower, the water is turned on and off between lathering and rinsing off. He recently purchased a DVD player, but before that all he had was a VCR. This wasn't even a real VCR though, because it didn't have the standard recording feature.

Curiously enough, he lives in northern New Jersey. Not to say this is an abnormal environment for him, as he grew up there, but in many ways he lives his life as if he is off the grid. The suburb of North Haledon, where he now resides, is an older neighborhood that over the past fifteen years has been given an aesthetic face-lift. Many of the elderly couples who inhabited the area have died and now younger families occupy the borough. Though the glamour of a 1950's suburban utopia has faded with time, that same spirit still exists amidst the neighborhood's restoration.

There are some unspoken rules about living on Gemeinhardt Avenue. Everyone's ranch style homes are freshly painted. Their lawns are unnaturally green and little signs like, "Welcome to the Paxton's residence!" adorn the porches. The blaring sound of mowers can be heard every day of the week, and is only drowned out by the zooming of planes from Newark Airport that fly overhead. Though at first promising, the change of seasons hardly offers any noise relief at all. Mowers are replaced by the roar of leaf blowers in the fall and during the winter snow blowers take charge. The level of noise pollution is something that my dad can't stand. He often wonders why the neighbors can't coordinate their lawn care activities to the same day of the week.

To the discontent of some neighbors, my father's house is the only one on the block that didn't follow these assumed rules. His faded yellow home hasn't been repainted in years and he hardly ever mows the lawn. The only elderly neighbor left on the block, Dick, has repeatedly offered to mow Steve's lawn for him, and has actually done so a few times without permission. On the rare occasions my dad does decide to mow, a manual mower is used. His only reason for trimming his meadow is to create paths that allow him to traverse the thick plant life that has taken over the backyard.

His backyard is actually pretty cool, acting as an oasis in the desert of suburban sprawl. Though the yard is probably less than half an acre

in size, it seems endless. There are trees all around and everything is left untamed. Ferns grow wild and in the warmer months colorful flowers bloom everywhere. Deeper into the backyard there is a miniature forest that comes to an end at a stone wall. The chest-high wall acts as a buffer, preventing his little sanctuary from exploding into the other neighbors' yards. Underneath a cherry tree, you will find a homemade grill and a log table that he built from a fallen tree. He even has a makeshift archery range, concealed behind bushes to avoid complaints and startling his neighbors. Whenever you venture too far in, you feel as if you are Robin Hood in Sherwood Forest, searching for his merry men. (On this search you are unlikely to find anyone merry, but rather a giant compost pile.) There is even a small plot of land devoted to a garden, where he grows his own vegetables seasonally. This past summer he went through a phase during which he ate nothing but vegetable shakes. He insisted that I try one on numerous occasions. I respectfully declined.

To keep out intruders, he carefully places glass jars atop the windows and balances bottles on the doorknobs. During the night, the lights in his house run on timers, periodically turning on and off to create an illusion of activity. For many years, his number was unlisted in the phonebook, until the company began to charge him extra for the service. As a free alternative, he now uses his mother's maiden name to mask his own identity. He rips the addresses off all of mail that comes to the house (no shredder of course) and even burns them in the fireplace from time to time. With hardly anything making its way into the trash can, the majority of his waste goes into the recycling bin or compost pile. He bases this practice on a Native American ideology in regards to buffalo hunting: nothing must go to waste.

Though frugal, he does buy expensive things for himself every once in a while. A few years back, he purchased a motorcycle, in an idealistic attempt to be like Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape*. He wished to dash through green pastures and ride up and down the hills with nothing but total freedom (minus the part where Nazis chase after him). Sadly, there aren't many open fields in Northern New Jersey, and just like McQueen's character, my father was doomed to fail. One evening while riding alone in the winter chill, Steve fell off his bike. Thankfully, he didn't injure himself beyond a few bumps and scrapes, but it did mark the end of his motorcycle days. I always wondered what he felt like after the fall, wheeling his motorcycle back to his house in the freezing cold, unwilling to ride the bike even a few more miles. His accident didn't come as a surprise to me though, as I am terrible at riding any bike that isn't stationary.

Steve drives a jet black Mustang with flashy lightning bolts, yet consistently stays fifteen miles per hour under the speed limit. His vehicle moves so slowly that as a passenger you are often slouched down in embarrassment at what the other cars may think of you. I once thought about making a sign that said, "Sorry, not my fault," to hold up to angry

drivers passing by. I don't think traveling with him would be so embarrassing if he didn't drive a sports car. Why not buy a Civic or a Camry? Maybe he is subtly alluding to Teddy Roosevelt's big stick ideology: that he can go fast if he really needs to. His motivation for his snail-like pace has been explained to me as this: driving too quickly burns fuel inefficiently and you should never be rushing to get anywhere.

Perhaps he inherited some of these odd behaviors from his father Donald. During WWII, Donald was an x-ray technician who was sent home early due to radiation sickness. This illness is what I've always blamed his strangeness on, and others have never offered a better explanation. Donald was a bookaholic, and his house became his own personal library. There wasn't a single room that didn't have at least one overflowing bookshelf. The living room, dining room, basement, everywhere, books.

Though he never really talked about it, Donald was absolutely obsessed with Edgar Allen Poe. In his bedroom you'd find hundreds of Poe books, all protected behind a series of glass-fronted bookcases surrounding the room. He even had a license plate hanging up that he found on the side of the road. It reads "Poe 1." Sporting a moustache and wavy black hair, my dad also has an eerie resemblance to Poe. The ludicrous thought that Donald might have selected his spouse, just so their child could look like Poe, always made me laugh. This resemblance isn't so true anymore, as Steve has lived much longer than Poe did, but if he hadn't met such an untimely death, I bet they'd look remarkably similar.

My grandfather Donald was also known for collecting random things. I'm not sure if he followed this practice his whole life, or just as an old man, as that was all I ever got to witness. All of his used razor blades were saved and though he wasn't a smoker, he'd pick up cigarette cartons from the ground. He would then organize such items and neatly place them in his bedroom drawers. (I remember saving all of my razor cartridges as a young teenager just because I knew that Donald had done the same. Like batteries, I assumed that they had to be thrown away in some special fashion, which wasn't worth the hassle of regular disposal. Though I never had a problem living with just women, as a young boy learning to shave, it would have been nice to have a father present in my life. Instead, I often learned how to be a "man" by myself.) When I was a young child, he and my dad would often have silent wars over what each perceived as junk versus treasure. My dad would put out a broken chair from the basement on the curb, but it would magically find its way back inside. I always secretly rooted for Donald, as he was the older man, and I felt he had a right to keep whatever he wanted to keep.

Another odd thing Donald used to do was scatter marbles all around the backyard. He then would attach a cup to a tree, and deposit the marbles into it whenever he'd find one. Over the course of months, all the marbles

would eventually be collected and he'd start all over again. I always thought it was funny that Donald would intentionally lose his marbles, as if he metaphorically wished to seem insane.

Donald was also a writer. Out of curiosity, I Googled him once and found an article he had written about being a member of the Civilian Conservation Corps. It was strange to me, how a man who kept to himself when I knew him was so open in his writing. During his time in the CCC he was one of the boys, and describes himself as a talkative leader, and a hard worker. This Donald seemed like a different person, one that I unfortunately never got a chance to meet during my lifetime. (This always makes me wonder about my parents' past, or for that matter, the pasts of anyone I've ever come in contact with. We all have so much personal history that it is impossible to know everything about everyone. It's as if everybody has their own secret lives. I know my parents had spouses before they met each other, but who were they? Why did they decide to divorce? What are their favorite memories? I can't help but think that even the people who know me best, don't really know me at all.)

When Donald died, my dad didn't tell me for weeks. He eventually decided to just casually bring it up in conversation. It didn't really seem that unusual to me though, as I was just a little kid, inexperienced with the concept of death. Since Donald's departure, my dad has sold the majority of his book collection. Some were of little to no value, while others were rare, signed first editions that sold for considerable amounts. During the process of clearing out the books, my father and I would periodically find money tucked between the pages. Open up a copy of *The Violent Bear it Away* and you find a hundred dollars. Not a bad surprise, right? I guess that was Donald's way of remaining on earth past the time he was given.

The weirdest discovery we had while searching the books was a drawing of a strange yet recognizable design on a small piece of paper. My dad kept trying to remember where he had seen the sketch before but to no avail. When I saw him a few weeks later, Steve had figured it out. The drawing matched a stone pattern that was laid out in the backyard. He wanted to dig the spot up (probably thinking it was treasure), so we did. After removing the stones, we dug underneath the pattern for an hour or so without finding anything. Disappointed, I thought that perhaps this was all just an intricate joke set up by Donald. My contemplation was proven wrong as we eventually came in contact with two metal cans hidden deep beneath the soil. With the help of a screwdriver, my father pried open the tightly sealed cans. Can you guess what was inside? The ashes of Donald's parents.

While the ashes weren't the treasure my dad was expecting, I could tell from the look on his face that he was enamored by the discovery. For me, this was slightly horrifying yet not very shocking, as the unexpected is always bound to happen at my dad's house. I have to admit it was a surreal

experience: to hold the matter of someone in my hand that I had never met before yet had descended from. Without those ashes, I would never be here.

My father and I collected the cans we had just dug up and drove to High Mountain in the next town over. We didn't talk about why we went there specifically, but I guess my dad found it romantic for his grandparents to take their last hoorah off the top of the mountain, to blow with the wind and scatter wherever their ashes fell. Steve has told me time and again that he wishes to crawl into the woods and die against a tree in peace, without anyone knowing. His alternative death scenario is to swiftly launch an arrow from his bow during his dying breaths and be buried wherever the arrow may land. If the latter option is destined to unfold, I hope he is found in a location other than North Haledon, as I don't think his neighbors would be fond of him eternally resting in their backyard.

We hiked all the way up the spiral path until we reached the summit. (I've always liked High Mountain, particularly for the vibrantly spray painted boulders and the red rusted vehicle skeletons that line the trail. Why did so many people choose to abandon their vehicles here? It always struck me as an interesting blend of man and nature.) My dad reopened the cans and we threw the ashes off the top of the mountain after he said some poetic words that escape my memory. Regrettably, due to the wind, some of the ashes flew back in our faces. Steve asked me if I wanted to keep any of the rings and necklaces we found inside the ashes. Somewhat disturbed, I declined. Knowing that Steve would have kept them if they were of any real value, I watched as they followed suit off the mountaintop. (Sadly, this is only the second grossest ash story I have. My grandmother on my mother's side was throwing her brother-in-law's ashes into the bay he grew up near. We went to a restaurant afterwards and she came in brushing the ashes off her hands. She never went to the bathroom to wash them.)

I've never asked my dad why he is the way he is, and whenever I ask my mother she just badmouths him into the ground. (The words asshole and lazy come to mind.) I don't think this is the best parenting strategy, but then again she has done much more for me than he ever has. Regardless, I think that's a hard question to ask someone. If they don't know who they are, they'll probably start to think about it, which could be a good or bad realization.

Though his ways are strange, there is something attractive about the life he leads. He doesn't follow the status quo and he tries his best to be a great and moral person. He is a wonderful conversationalist and is undeniably charismatic, which is no doubt why other women and my mother found him so attractive. He knows all there is to know about art and he has a love for literature, history, cinema, as he is always longing to further explore any medium of creativity. Similar to the Poe collection from my grandpa's bedroom, his room is filled with nearly every version of Robin Hood and

King Arthur ever published. Of course these books are also enshrined by book cases with glass covers.

To no surprise for some of you, my mom divorced this man. After nearly ten years of marriage, they separated when I was five years old. I never questioned why they split up because it was all I really knew. All my closest childhood friends lived with single mothers too. When I am home from school, I live with my mother in Toms River, New Jersey. This is about an hour and twenty minutes away from my father's home (two hours if he drives), yet over the past few years I've rarely seen my father.

My atypical upbringing makes me wonder about the importance of family in one's life. I know I'm not always the best son. I've never been one to misbehave or break their rules, but I hardly keep in touch with either of my parents anymore. This has become truer since I moved further away from home to attend college. My mom and my sister will scream at each other for no reason at all, but then be best friends the next day. That is a bond that I don't feel I share with anyone, and that I wish I shared with my father. Instead, I'm kind of just there in my family, like a ghost, incapable of interacting in any way. I now realize that I take for granted the time that they are around, as my parents won't be here forever.

Despite his peculiarity, there are things I love about my father. I admire his individuality immensely, as he doesn't just follow the crowd. He knows how to think freely and is conscientious about every decision he makes. I also realize that our dwindling communication isn't completely my fault or his as the lives we lead only expand the gap. Meetings are less frequent and phone calls are becoming a rarity. Due to our collapsing contact, our interactions become more awkward whenever we see each other. It's as if we've forgotten how to communicate with each other. Though he is a great speaker, the conversation dwindles on my end of the bargain and eventually gets pretty quiet. Often, he'll try to convince me to explore some new lifestyle he's adopted, which usually ends up in frustration and me wanting to leave.

While sitting in a Chinese restaurant, Steve recently told me that he had failed as a father. If I hadn't had a migraine, the conversation might have pushed further, but instead, the flame he created was smothered quickly. Still, I can't say that I agree with him. Though we don't have the strongest relationship, I still have learned a lot from him and am sure his eccentricities are probably bestowed on me in some way. I do now love books, culture, art and anything creative, and while I don't place glass bottles atop my windows, I do find myself ripping up mail addressed to me into little tiny pieces.

ROOMS (RE)VISITED

MEGAN HILANDS

A child's room is a drive-thru of youth,
a box of memories
where seashells glued to paper are prized
artwork and a plastic Snow White cup sits
on the night table.

Here are the same soft white curtains whose billows
become phantoms without light.
Curtains were the first true terror of my youth;
they coiled my veins into spirals even tighter
than my mom's 80's perm.

I once read a story about how in India people believe
death comes
as a dark wimpled woman,
and I saw her ghastly hump
on the midnight walls for months.

Toys and trinkets never help us
glimpse the truth.
If I could imagine what this girl is like
from her room,
I'd picture her wearing
soccer cleats
while riding a horse
with twenty-six pet turtles trailing behind.

In 1993, my room spelled my name
in misshapen ballet slippers
though I never danced.

I wonder what she thinks
in evening's slow drawl.
In childhood my thoughts turned to God,
my prayers as pure as the ice crystals that danced

on my winter windows.

I caught thought demons in Jesus-fish
style nets, and used them as trampolines
to climb towards heaven,
Catholic school girl style,
singing with the crickets and God,
yet I closed my eyes humming Disney.

A CASE FOR THE HUMAN CONDITION

AUSTIN CLARK

My brother is taller than me. This in and of itself is not unusual, but the fact remains that his head noticeably bobs above mine when I am, in fact, a solid two years older. I am tempted to think this would be less of a problem were I a girl. However wrong it is, society holds the stereotype that women should be shorter than their masculine opposites, to the point that a fresh stereotype has been developed; one of the the tall, laid back younger brother with his shorter, more mature, sister. This, of course, is of no condolence to me. There is still a shred of that old standard of masculinity fluttering in the cultural breezes, demanding that the eldest be the best and tallest. I take comfort, though, in the fact that I am stouter, stronger and more scrappily Canadian than he is.

This fact doesn't appear to cross his mind nearly as much as it sails across mine. Nor the fact that he is smarter, funnier, more easy-going and on the whole more attractive to women than I am. He takes it all in stride (who wouldn't?) while I will kick my feet up on the edge of a table and muse on the ephemeral whys.

Of course, this is only the beginning. My brother and I are separate people, despite how much we look alike and acted when we were younger. If someone called, we would both go scurrying, even if the summons was for only one of us. That was then. Now our interests have split like the interstate highway going around a city, traveling in two different directions, with the only common ground being a maze of crowded blocks, skyscrapers and one way streets. This complexity comes out, I think, in no greater detail than when we talk about People.

Perhaps a little background is in order to put some perspective on this conflict. My brother, while a wonderful human being, was born with an astronomical intelligence and a mind tilted so dramatically to the left that when it snows, small children (and myself) are sometimes tempted to go sledding down the steep inclined plane. This is not the political Left, of course, not the capitalized Left (in fact, in the arena of politics my brother's mind is slanted almost as much in the opposite direction,) but the theoretical left brain, the dominant side of the brain. Which is to say, he is good at math. He wants to be an engineer, actually. Or a physicist. But my father (an engineer) has warned him against that, because apparently all physicists have terrible eating habits. I still remember the time playing spectator in his advanced physics class in high school, though, when the teacher wrote a problem on the board, began to explain how to solve it and reiterate the steps that should be taken to solve it. He had hardly finished writing the

problem on the board when my brother had not only solved it (he anticipated the question), but found another, easier way to solve it, using just as sound mathematical principles.

As you can imagine, this puts my brother and me at different ends of the academic spectrum. I am speaking to you about the sundry whys of the world through this essay, he is running calculations and breaking down machines that will probably solve some of the world's problems. So I suppose it stands to reason that when we talk about People, we have somewhat contrasting opinions. We do not talk about People often. People we know, more often, but People as in the common spectrum of humanity, very rarely.

In keeping with his mathematically oriented, left-slanting brain, my brother looks at the world in a very scientific light. Science has taught him, and many others, that the world works according to a set of rules, that everything can be broken down, predicted. To science and to my brother, there is a way to collapse everything into a set of numbers, to a code almost, even if that way has yet to be discovered. He firmly believes that humanity will discover it. He has told me in no uncertain terms that when it comes down to it, there is an equation for everything, from the turning of the universe to the tiniest synapse in the human brain. From there, he concluded to me on one occasion, rocking his chair while I lay concernedly on the couch next to him, it is possible to predict everything.

For my part, I could hardly disagree more.

*

Let's stop for a moment and do a thought experiment. Imagine, if you will, you wrote down a list of everything that defines you: physical traits, attitudes, quirks, loves, grievances, hobbies, talents, everything—down to the last detail you could possibly think of. Red hair, shoe size seven (US), stoic, hates the sounds of crickets, loves the game of cricket, good at math, any little detail you can dredge up. This list would be long, huge, enormous, taking up more paper (and more time to write) than you could even contemplate using.

Now imagine your neighbor did this. And then his neighbor. Everyone in the whole world, from the child soldiers in rural Africa, to the Asian bigwigs in their Shanghai skyscrapers, to the man with a white picket fence in Levittown, wrote out this list of themselves. Comparing all these lists, these billions of lists, could you find someone who is exactly you?

The answer is no. Even if you miraculously found someone who was your doppelganger, (from the red hair to the hatred of chirruping insects,) in every way shape or form according to this list, you would always find you forgot something, some seemingly insignificant thing about yourself that makes you separate. That, to me, is the beauty of humanity.

*

Humanity, I have found, cannot be categorized. Trust me, I have

spent large amounts of time, observation and unscientific experimentation to this end. Come to think about, you probably have, too. Actually, you almost certainly have. It's unpleasant, I know, but we have all at some point or another passed judgment on some group or someone unthinkingly, placing them in a broadly defined and, quite frankly, vague group of people because of something they have or haven't done.

That's the crass side of it though. We've all indulged. If you haven't, well, power to you and, in the immortal words of Clint Eastwood, "Get off my lawn." I don't want you and your perfections here. Shoo.

For some reason, despite the foregone conclusion of failure, I always attempt to categorize people. Even in high school, I began to measure the qualities of my compatriots and to place them in certain sections. Jocks, nerds, preps and hippies were all terms I'd appropriated at one point or other to group people under. Granted, this was basically pseudo-scientific stereotyping, as I tended to let (and to use, at some points, I must confess) these developing categories govern social interactions. But I had one consistent problem. People kept jumping categories on me.

What do you do about the pot-smoking video-gamer? Is he a nerd or a hippie? Or both? Maybe he's a subset, a different category in his own right. Of course, that would depend on how many more there were like him (upon further inspection, this proved to be the majority of the video-gaming club.)

Or what about Mr. Valedictorian? He can run track, throw down people in wrestling, write essays and take Algebra III at the local college all with equal aplomb. I called him a scholar-jock. This moniker sounds faintly ridiculous, but that's the only think I could think of at the time.

These were hardly isolated instances. Whenever I sat down to seriously think about it, even those I knew the best were suddenly jumping like fish; sometimes landing with a perfunctory splash in a different category or subcategory, but most of the time flopping down in one, rolling their eyes lazily up at me before another spasm of personality compelled them to flip into another. Categorization, even the act of categorization, tends to fall apart under really close scrutiny. There are too many people doing too many crazy things.

People continue to surprise.

You can pass judgment, you can talk about their jobs or country of origin, but you can't categorize them. It's basically impossible. I have learned the wisdom of Nick Carraway in the opening of *The Great Gatsby* when he tells us, "I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores." If you don't believe that, try it out sometime.

*

While this exact idea is not, strictly speaking, what my brother is arguing against, the whole issue of categorization just leads to a finer point, one that is a step up in vocabulary—though perhaps a step down in scale—

otherwise known as quantification. By reducing things to a set of numbers and equations, as my brother proposes, you are quantifying it. Labels being stuck on, tiny scratches on a page or pixels on a computer screen that stand for more than the physical space they take up. Thus, the phenomenon my brother proposes is nothing less than the possibility of an all-out quantification of humanity.

For my part, I find this idea absolutely abhorrent.

Humanity, of course, can be scientifically categorized to a degree.

Despite our subtle differences, humanity still has many broad things in common which science, both hard and soft, has done an admirable job (at least, more admirable than me) of categorizing. The whole Linnaean classification system, taught to all of us in the tender years of high school (interestingly enough, when I first began my efforts), works wonders when one is trying to understand and break down just about everything natural in the world. Humanity even has a little niche and a nice tidy little Latinate name, *homo sapiens*, to help set us apart.

Yet this is where the tidy little package of classification should, in all consciousness, end. When science begins to delve too deeply into humanity, to try to apply half-understood (and half-formulated it seems) theories of brain science, to string physics and colorful photometric images, to explain exactly why it is that you hate someone, smile at your cute neighbor or believe in God, it crosses the line. It is at this point when it becomes the proverbial fool who rushes in where other philosophies fear to tread. Despite how neatly science can classify us in the grand scheme of things, put us on a chart and waggle fingers in our direction, it can not and should not try to explain us. But it does.

That is a terrible pitfall of science.

This categorization and explanation of humanity.

This knowing, but not believing.

This idea that mankind can fully understand the depths of his own soul.

"That man can be conscious of himself in his contemplation raises him infinitely above all other living creatures on earth," wrote the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. This then, is the not-so-subtle irony of science. Not satisfied with merely putting humanity on the map the great cartographer of nature has set out, science turns its inquiry inward, proposing that mankind is *just* an animal (itself a broad classification), something that can be explained or broken down, oblivious to the notion which Herr Kant so simply expresses; simply that the act of looking inward, of being conscious of oneself, sets us irrevocably apart. Science, unfortunately, at its purest and in some ways most snobbish, refuses to acknowledge one simple factor in the history of mankind: the human condition.

Mankind. Kind of a misnomer isn't it? Humanity is not all men

and certainly isn't all that kind. But regardless of the actual nomenclature, we as humans are defined not by where we stand on a chart or by meager and trivial categorization attempts on the part of scientists, psychologists, anthropologists or luckless historians, but by the one thing we do possess that cannot be defined: this human condition. It is what sets us apart as an entity, the propensity to do what we will, regardless of what science or culture might theoretically dictate. This indefatigable human spirit that cannot be traced.

Humanity cannot be quantified, only qualified, in spite of what my brother believes. One of the (few) things astronomy has taught me is the link between quantification and predictability. *Quantification*, my short, bubbly and rudely atheistic astronomy professor enthused in front of a class of bored students, gives us predictive power. Reducing the orbits of planets to a set of numbers and symbols I could scribble in my notebook (and be tested on) allowed names greater than mine to create schedules of moon phases decades in advance and gauge the threat levels of incoming asteroids. Useful, I guess, to astronomy, but almost completely void when it comes to humanity.

If my brother believes humans can be quantified, then I will always have to stand opposite him, no matter how tall he is. Quantification means predictive power, (something I cannot even write without conjuring images of the perky little professor dancing in front of the class) and we will never have predictive power when it comes to ourselves. That is part, if not the entirety of, the human condition. It is the condition of unpredictability, almost, the unknown that sets us apart from other animals, not simply quantifiable genetic codes or patterns of behavior. This capacity to defy logic and explanation, for better or for worse, is what makes us a species apart.

*

Humans have broken our own expectations of ourselves, undermined our closest principles. It's impossible to put a man on the moon, people once said, or to climb Mt. Everest, the highest peak in the world. Yet Neil Armstrong took that one small step, and Sir Edmund Hillary won his title by pulling himself up one last, not so small, step.

Throughout time, humanity has defied its own expectations of itself. *Never invade Russia*, the old rule of thumb goes, *you'll never win*. Yet Subutai, at the instruction of his superior, Ghengis Khan, did just that, in a season, long before the axiom was ever coined and with a small army whose horses outnumbered its men at least two to one. In the process, of course, he also nabbed the supermajority of the Eurasian continent, including the equally intimidating China and even the "Graveyard of Empires."

As a fledgling historian, one of the greatest pet peeves I have always had with my own discipline are those who ignore or downplay the impact of the individual on history. I do not mean to say I subscribe to Thomas Carlyle's exaggerated Great Man Theory. There, he postulates that men

exist who are morally and spiritually above all others and are entitled to kill, oppress and do what are generally considered to be mean and nasty things in the name of a greater good for humanity that only they can achieve. But I do not specifically endorse the overextended counter-argument either. Anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists (and probably a whole bunch of other —ologists that I don't remember) straight-jacket their own understanding of humanity with one unique word:

Culture- *a shared and negotiated system of meaning informed by knowledge that people learn and put into practice by interpreting experience and generating behavior.*

Historians in the latter part of the past century have, not ignobly, become enamored with this idea and sought to include it in their work. They have done so with a large degree of success, but at the cost of writing out what is traditionally known as the “grand narrative”: the history of political decision, wars and typically white men. This “New History” or “New Left” (to couch it in political terms) has by and large developed a phobia of the scope of war, politics and individuals that have dominated historiography since the invention of the written word. Determined to let the unmentioned masses get their share of page space in the (often dry) historical literature, they have varnished history and its study with this anthropological “culture.”

I read, during one of the two times I took my SAT's, about how a recent trend in history involved knocking famous people off their pedestals. It was not until the scores I earned on those drawn out and dusty tests bore fruit that I fully comprehended what that meant. New historians were either going out of their way to demolish the famous or layering culture on so thick in their writing, like an overenthusiastic baker frosting a delicate wedding cake, that there was no room for anyone to be anything but average. This, I feel, is wrong.

People are not perfect. Environment, as all the —ologists claim, does play a huge role in shaping a person. But that does not mean there are no great men and women, or even downright exceptions to the various rules. Humanity does not create culture with one mind. The experiences being interpreted and the behavior being generated depend solely on the individual interpreting or generating them, and how it happens to interact with the interpretation and generation being done by family, friends, or strange old men living down the street.

Man is not, strictly speaking, an animal of his culture. There is in every human being, a Freudian ego, an *I*, which acts in its own unique and varied manner. You can never quite predict, as some anthropologists and sociologists claim to do, what a man is going to do based on his culture. Martin Luther, after all, split a church and divided a continent into factions that still draw blood today because, for some inscrutable reason, he questioned and thought and nailed ideas to doors in a cultural environment that very much frowned on such a thing. Japan, in the space of fifty years or so, yanked their entire society and country into modernity, suppressing many

still-dominant values of the older feudal culture.

I do believe that New History has its place. There are people, places, movements and ideas that the "grand narrative" has trodden over unjustly. It is worth knowing that Thomas Jefferson kept slaves and slept with them. But that is not say that we should respect him any less for the achievements he made and the honor he won, or write him off as merely another eccentric "Founding Father" that American culture has idolized in its pursuit of identity. He was not perfect; perhaps he could not be perfect. He was only *homo sapien*.

After all, isn't the bad in us part of the human condition also? The anger, the shortsighted stupidity, the desire to sleep with our servants, the motivation to do what we want despite the warning bells going off in our head or the obvious detriment it will bring to society? Tragic, is it not, that so many college students, riding into higher learning on the back of scholarship money, willfully choose to drink until they blackout and wake up and stumble and maybe fail a class early the next morning? And the poor old Habsburgs, ignoring the natural instinct to breed with someone outside their gene pool, a rule that the lowest rabbit knows, end up bent, crippled with a chin I could hang my coat on?

Peculiar isn't it, that Lear divides his kingdom, that Macbeth kills yet again, Othello envies and Hamlet dallies? Isn't there something like us in all of these figures, who do what they do and die because of it, when it all could have been avoided by listening to a fool, a ghost, or a friend?

Mankind can be great, but it can also be tragic. What it truly cannot be is predicted. With only a small leap of logic (I believe scientists refer to this as an "inverse something-or-rather"), it can be safely assumed that if humanity cannot be predicted, then it cannot be quantified. Hence, why my brother sits in the rocking chair and I on the couch while we discuss such matters. Our beliefs on the subject are so subtly yet so diametrically opposed that sitting in even a relatively parallel manner would be akin to tiptoeing around a mine field. It takes only one misread assertion, one lapse in argument etiquette, to explode the chain of differences that separate my brother and me.

There is a cartoon, posted on the bulletin board next to the door to one of the science professor's offices. Most other college professors only get the large, blank, inorganic expanse of the door to personalize and make their own, but professors of science get a bulletin board as well. This professor has adorned part of the bulletin board with a cartoon, whose champion is the Zeus-looking God-Man. Over the course of the cartoon, God-Man plays a largely inconsequential role in the creation of a human being, with science setting up the specifics of the man's attitudes and tendencies and with culture putting him in an awkward situation. Towards the end, God-Man does step in to confront the evil situation in the man's life, but is ultimately retired to the God-Cave.

While it is quite obviously a satirical cartoon on Creationism and religion in general (the sarcasm of the piece almost leaned forward and gave me a bloody nose), I find it to be nothing more than a loud coverage for weakness, much like the politician who, in order to throw attention off his own flaws, attempts to highlight his opponent's. Throughout the cartoon, God-Man is secondary to science, watching as it creates genes and nerve synapses and sets up evil situations for the poor character. Yet in the end, when the conflict comes to a head, when evil strikes and the situation grows critical, it is God-Man who resolves it, not the science that has taken up three quarters of the page. It seems a crucial irony that science can explain everything, every factor that leads up to being human, but when it comes down to resolving what it means to be human, the crucible of action, science is powerless and only the satirized God-Man can do anything.

I don't know that I would take religion over science in a heartbeat, or that I even believe there is actually a choice. But I do know that I would accept that indefinable human condition as an explanation, however vague, in less than that time. I would like to point my brother at this cartoon and explain to him the value of the human condition. Science cannot explain everything. Especially not the most important thing.

"For now," he would say.

"Forever," I would argue.

*

So how does this end, all this talk about the human condition? It doesn't. It's not that this essay will go on forever (for some of you it undoubtedly already has), but that the human condition is being played out constantly, being defined by you, me, your neighbor, your boss and even the man who slices your pastrami at the deli counter. We are all human, all possess that indefinable trait that makes us so and because of that, no essay ever written on the subject can be truly exhaustive.

So maybe we should all be able to hear the wisdom in Shakespeare's words when Hamlet says, quite simply:

"What a piece of work is man."

-Hamlet (II.ii.303)

PURPLE MARY JANES

SARAH PARKER

What about the water cooler? Maybe it could grow arms, each section popping out of the body all the way up to the shoulders like a telescope, and it could wear a shawl and knead bread and play Chinese checkers with me. Or just hold my hand? I could invent a water cooler that sows seeds with Dad's hands, or wears Mom's black velvet gloves and plays dress up with me, or can hold a Dr. Seuss book to read me a story but really just recite a better one *sans lire*, which is a French expression I know. Another cool thing would be if I could train my hair to be like Medusa and then I could turn anyone to stone, especially when they annoy me. And when I'm at school and the teacher assigns extra subtraction, I could spin around and look at her, and she would turn all gray and rigid, and I could stand up and shout, "*C'est fini!*"

What about a map? What if everyone had a map that they kept in their lapel pocket that had little beeping lights that showed exactly where everyone else was? Each beep would sound when a person took a breath, so if you were underwater your little light wouldn't beep at all, but as soon as you came to the surface and took a big gasp of air the light would go *beeeeeeeeeep*. It would be cool to see if everyone started to breathe at the same time, kind of like how Mom said that women who live together menstruate at the same time, which is kind of icky to think about. And at sports and stuff, the beeps would be really fast, and it would sound as if the aliens were landing, or like old computers, like the first MacIntosh that took up a whole room, were revolting against their masters, like the French did in 1789. I wonder if the computers would be mad about cake too.

And, since floating is really important sometimes, wouldn't it be cool if everyone could turn into a big beach ball?

Yeah.

My first piano lesson was four weeks ago. I was extremely interested by the big old piano in the front room, and Diane thought it'd be good for me to have a "creative outlet" other than drawing tattoos on my forearm, so my first piano lesson was four weeks ago. It was nobody but me in a dingy room with an octogenarian lady who looked at me with droopy eyes, which made me uncomfortable. She asked me to sit down on the bench beside her, but I just looked at her and asked, "*Quoi?*" and didn't move, so she asked again.

"Please come sit down, love, so that we can start the lesson." She pushed the bench so that it scuddled across the floor with a little *screeetch*. I just looked at her and stood in the doorway. "Don't you want to learn piano,

dear? You've got to come sit with me to learn, sweetheart." She smiled so that her loose skin crinkled up like nappa cabbage, and I knew that it was supposed to make me feel better, but it just gave me nausea like deep fried Oreos.

I told her, "I'm gerontophobic." Most people don't know what that means, so I told her, "That means old people creep me out. A lot." My last piano lesson was four weeks ago.

I wish I had my blue sharpie with me right now, because when the air gets too thin, which it probably shouldn't anymore but still it does, it sometimes helps to scribble out a nice drawing. The best tattoo I can draw is *Water Lilies* by Claude Monet, which was the same painting that hung, always tilted to the left, in our living room before everyone died. It's pretty incredible that I can draw that because there's lots of intricate lines and shapes, though no *chiaroscuro* because impressionists don't shade. Diane offered to buy me a sketch pad, and I wanted to tell her that gifts can't buy my love, but I asked if it would have vellum paper. "Whatever you want, sweetie," and she started rubbing my back, which I know was supposed to feel loving, but it just made me angry. I jumped forward away from her. "I have to go to the bathroom," I told her, when what I really wanted to say was "You're not my mom and you never will be."

Isn't it crazy to think that over two-thirds of the Earth is covered by water? The number of people, dead and living, is always going up, but the space we can live on is always the same, which is really weird. There are more people living today than there are dead in all of human history, and I guess there always will be, since population is always growing on both sides, but more on the living side I think, or at least I hope. Think how many more people could live on the Earth if we dammed up all the rivers and the lakes and the oceans and then people would have so much more space to move and live and breathe. Dad gave me a subscription to *Discovery*, which I don't really like because it's kind of boring, but I read it anyway because it would hurt his feelings if I didn't. He also gave me a pair of purple Mary Janes once because, I don't anymore, but I used to wear only purple. But I hated those shoes. But I couldn't tell him that I would never never ever in a million years wear them because he was so sure that they'd be my favorite. Anyway. It said in one of the *Discovery* magazines that the population density of the Earth is something like 117.2 people per square mile (129.3 if you don't count Antarctica), which makes me hyperventilate a little. But, if we dammed up all the water, we'd still have to make sure the levees didn't break.

What if all the extra water were frozen so that it would never flood? That way there would always be plenty of ice sculptures, and it wouldn't be a big deal if one thawed during a wedding, or whatever ice sculptures are used during. If the angel melted, then there could just be a conveyor belt that instantly replaced it with a new one, as crisp and cool as ever. Sometimes I think it'd be fun to send all the water into outer space so that there wasn't

such a thing as drowning and everyone'd be safe even if the all the angels did melt.

I've only ever ridden in a helicopter twice. The first time wasn't so bad because I was unconscious because of my fall from the monkey bars. The second time was awful, even though the helicopter was super. I asked if we could fly over the city so that I could see my house and even though it probably would be the size of a monopoly house, I still wanted to see it, and when you think about it, why not? No one listened to me even though I asked six times. Then I realized that I wouldn't be able to see anything anyway since it would all be under water and then I didn't want to see it. I had these big earmuffs on my head that made me feel like Princess Leia, which is a character in Dad's favorite movie. Thinking about Dad made the air really thin, and I wanted to draw a tattoo on my forearm, but I didn't have my blue sharpie, so instead I imitated the sound of the helicopter. The lady sitting across from me looked at me like *What the?* but I didn't feel like I needed to stop since what people thought didn't really matter.

Diane took me back to New Orleans six months after the funerals, though they weren't really funerals since we didn't have anything to put in the graves, except dirt. Before they sent me away, Dad always tucked me in and then told me a story about whatever he wanted. The last night he tucked me in, he told me about Custer and the Battle of Little Bighorn, which was a story he loved. He always told me stories that other people thought were only for grown-ups, like about Hiroshima and the original version of Cinderella where the wicked step-sisters cut up their feet with butcher's knives to make them fit in the glass slipper. "You know, sweetie, that battle was a horrible loss for the U.S. Army and should have shown them the folly of pride and the power of the Indians." "Native Americans." "No interrupting." "Yeah, yeah. It's annoying." "Yes, it is." He winked at me, which is something he didn't do with anyone but me. "Back to my story. Before he was killed, Custer shouted to his men," he hunched over his shoulders and scrunched up his brow so that he looked kind of like a hermit, but I don't really know why, and told me with a silly Southern twang, "'Hurrah boys, we've got them! We'll finish them up and then go home to our station.' And then he was shot." "In the head?" He paused and ruffled the scruffy bits on his chin. "You know, I don't really know." "Well that's lame," I told him. "Yeah, it is." Then he chuckled a throaty little laugh, kind of how I always imagined Boris Badenov would laugh. "And now, it's bed time, little missy!" He pulled the covers up to my chin, which I hated but never told him and then kissed my forehead, which I loved but never told him and then he was at the door.

"Dad?" "Yeah, sweetie?" "Nothing."

LA CLOCHE

SABRINA MARINELLI

I hear the ring ting of the bell outside,
of the time passing on out there, where no one
can hear me. I pull the little string of thread to hear
the musical wonder. The thread is braided like a little girl's hair
and is too tiny and likely to break. I stop with the pulling, it's enough,
someone must have heard the bell,
someone has to be on their way to save me.

The box I am in will not last forever, but
it will last longer than me. In my box I lay on top
of a sweet blanket of silk. But why does it have to feel
like the surface of untouched water?
Why does it seem so pleasant?
When, in this box, there is supposed to be no one to comfort.

If I sit up I will strike my head on the ceiling,
so my thoughts must lie on this faux pillow,
which is expected to cradle my head in eternal sleep.
I can feel the lace around its edges teasing the back of my neck,
whispering sweet nothings that are no more.

My lungs are starting to revolt against me, closing up tightly
making my chest ache. I start to claw at the too close ceiling,
and I feel multiple fingernails snap back.
They submit, defeated by my box.

My fingers, drenched in blood, are sore.
I, one by one, soothe them with my tongue,
and taste the sweet saltiness of life.

One last time before it's too late,
I pull the little braided thread

And hear the ring ting of life leaving me to die.

THE MOST AWKWARD BOY IN THE
WORLD

LYNN JORDEN

Removed by the Request of the
Author

Removed by the Request of the
Author

Removed by the Request of the
Author

Removed by the Request of the
Author

IN NOVEMBER

MATT BARRETT

He met me outside Mac's old General Store with a couple of loose coins and a helmet strapped to the handlebars. His breath smelled of licorice and I could tell, even as I looked him in the eyes, that his teeth were all stained purple.

"Mac started working again," I said.

The dusty bells rattled against the door when we walked inside and Tim flipped his cap on backward the way Mac wore his. His cap was bright orange and had a silhouette of a buck on the front. "But you don't hunt," I said. The store was mostly empty other than Mrs. Ryan and her husband and two middle school girls slurping milkshakes at the counter.

There were boxes of candy stacked one on top of the other and a container of Twizzlers beside the cash register. Tim took a handful and peeled off one of the wrappers. "I hear you're back," he said, chewing with his mouth wide open.

Mac hoisted the front of his shirt revealing a long row of stitches just beneath the bellybutton. "Makes for a good story, don't it?" One of the middle school girls glanced over at us and Mac shot her a dirty look. "Niece and her friend," he scoffed.

"Do they know what happened?"

"They think I was stabbed," Mac whispered. He leaned closer to Tim and took him by the shoulder. "I told my sister the store was burglarized and I got knifed trying to defend myself. That way she won't keep dumping her kid on me when I'm going about my business."

"Looks like it's working."

"Next time I'll have to get a bullet in the chest," he said, raising his hands in the air.

The store was quiet other than the piercing cry from Mr. Ryan's hearing aids. "Here's all I got," Tim said, shuffling the pennies in his hand and dropping three onto the counter. We took some Butterfingers and Tostitos and a newspaper Tim said was for reading. Then we reached into the refrigerator, grabbed two cans of Coke, and were on our way.

"That place is still a dump," I said as we left. Tim put his cap on forward and kicked dirt at the side of the building.

From the parking lot two round policemen approached, one undoing the holster on his gun and mumbling something as he fingered the trigger. By his red chapped face I knew it was Wayne Hunter. He had a tattoo on the left side of his neck, in neat black ink that looked like a crucifix, and writing underneath that began with "Thou..." trickling below his collar and out of

sight. He scratched at the tattoo vigorously, like a sticker that he hoped to tear from his skin. The other officer appeared young, although I avoided looking at either one directly and could only make out the dark brown of his hair.

Tim stopped for a moment, his lips parted slightly, revealing the purple of his teeth. Without a word, we began loading the food inside our pockets and Tim slid the newspaper into the pouch of his sweatshirt. "It's not stealing if he lets us do it," I said. Coke cans fit into the sleeves of my jacket. The policemen stopped momentarily at a beat-up car that I hoped was expired or stolen.

"Let's get out of here," Tim said. "I've got some place to show you."

We pulled our bikes free of the rack and pedaled past Abe's Dairy Farm and the Sunoco down on Spruce. First we stopped at Tim's uncle's house. He said it would only take a couple of minutes and I should wait with the bikes. The front of the house was rotting away; long peels of paint hung loosely to the sides and mold stretched to the second floor windows. Its gutters were reddened with rust. I figured it was the type of place where I could get away with pissing, but before I finished, Tim came sprinting back to me, sweaty and huffing. He squatted down for a moment, his hair on end and skin shining red. A single Twizzlers slipped from his sweatshirt. He buried his right hand behind his back and swayed rhythmically with each embellished breath.

"We should keep going," he said. As he stood up, I saw him slip something into his pocket.

Kicking up the bike stand, Tim started racing down the street, wobbling slightly as the rusted chain clipped the bottom of his pant legs. As he shifted into a higher gear, his helmet slipped from the handlebars and into the gutter. "Leave it," he said and together we headed down Walnut Street, past a doe and her fawn pacing carefully between the trees. The doe looked up and eyed us warily, maybe at the sight of Tim's bright orange hat, and appeared to step toward us, as if there was something she wanted to say. Then we passed Rhomer's Pond where an eight-year-old from Ferndale, Ronny Littleton, had drowned in June while swimming with his friends. There was a wooden cross by the bank of the pond and bouquets of flowers that had withered to shades of brown. If we continued to the end of Walnut, we would reach an intersection with Main Street, the only road in Rodney with two yellow lines running down the middle. Main Street led to the center of town and to the new high school, where we would graduate in May.

But Tim turned down a gravel path, through thick woods with "No Hunting" signs nailed to the trees. The path was unnamed, as far as I could tell. Occasionally Tim would glance over his shoulder to check that I was still close behind and a smile would break across his skinny face each time he saw me following his lead. Puddles from last week's rain littered either side

of the path, soaking the bottoms of our jeans as we tried unsuccessfully to swerve around them. The back of Tim's sweatshirt was already mottled with mud. "Do you know where we're going?" I asked him. An old, abandoned trailer hid amongst a row of bushes to the right of the path.

"I got a good sense of direction," he said.

A plastic bag, damp and heavy from the rain, lay in the middle of the road with an empty water bottle beside it. In solid red lettering the bag said "APEX," a chain of grocery stores that had spread to Rodney roughly three years ago. Moby's Market, a family-owned store that sold local farmers' produce and homemade bread and jam, was forced to close within a year after Apex opened, leaving Tim's mom without work. She had served as some kind of cashier and stocked shelves at the market for nearly twenty years, but after it shut down, she, along with certain members of the Moby family, applied for work at the Apex. For a little over a year, she'd been working full-time as a bagger. "Better to be a bagger than a beggar," she'd joke. Tim rode his bike over the bag, leaving tire marks across the logo.

"My mom ran into Mrs. Ryan the other day," Tim said, turning his head toward me. "The old lady said she's been praying for us. She said she knows what we've been going through, and she's seeing to it that we receive some help."

A cool breeze swept through the trees and I pulled the hood of my jacket tighter around my neck. "What did your mom say?" I asked.

"Nothing, she just kept on walking." Tim pushed down on the top of his hat as the breeze tried tearing it from his head. "But just as she was almost out of earshot, Mrs. Ryan called out and said, 'Something good is coming to you, I've made sure of it!' She's got one hell of a nerve thinking we need her prayers to make something right for ourselves."

"I think she needs to start praying for her husband," I said. "He looks like the walking dead."

There was a clearing in the woods, and we met an intersection with Limekiln Pike. Limekiln was paved and much wider than the path. I pedaled quickly to get beside Tim and we rode past a barren stretch of field where corn would grow high in the summer. Beyond the field was a thin line of trees that separated one plot of land from another. "Even if her prayers did come true, I wouldn't want God taking responsibility for our good fortune," Tim said. "My mom doesn't need any men in her life trying to make a change."

A pick-up truck with its headlights on approached us in the other lane, and I tapped my brakes to fall behind Tim. It was getting dark earlier those days and the sun was already setting behind the trees. The leaves looked red in the sunset and the grass was a bright kind of orange.

The air smelled of something vaguely familiar, like cinnamon I thought, as we passed two young boys kicking a ball back and forth. I asked Tim if he smelled it too, but he ignored me or didn't hear and instead

answered, "It's going to rain again tonight. My mom says this month is going to set some kind of record."

It wasn't much longer before Tim stopped his bike. He put the brakes on quickly, stopping all at once, maybe to create a more dramatic effect. There was a new cast iron fence about ten feet off the road that ran for what looked like a quarter mile. The entryway was still open, with a big white sign that said "No bikes and No dogs." Tim wasn't one for breaking rules that weren't worth breaking, so he propped his bike against the side of the fence and motioned for me to follow him in. The sun had dipped below the trees, leaving a hazy mix of light and dark between us.

This wasn't the first time I'd seen the cemetery. I would pass it every day on the way to school in the early hours before sunrise. It was always eeriest that time of morning, especially after a thick frost had blanketed the ground. But the reason Tim brought me to the cemetery—and I suspected it prior to him saying anything—was because his grandfather had been buried there, before he ever had a chance to meet him. Sometimes Tim would fill up entire conversations about his grandfather, mostly with negative, aggressive thoughts like he'd been harboring some kind of grudge for years. Supposedly his grandfather hit it big in the newspaper business, making all sorts of money that never trickled down to his children's pockets. He died suddenly one day, without a will or anything for the sake of his family. Tim's mom said the family's money was buried with the grandfather, and I always suspected that Tim took this literally.

"What's your plan?" I asked him. We made our way through deep puddles toward the center of the cemetery, past a family mourning over a small grave. Soon they left a bouquet of red and white flowers in the mud and pressed their lips to their palms and their palms to the headstone and then filed back inside their car and headed down the road to continue with their lives.

Tim didn't answer me when I asked him if he had a plan. I suspected that he had no plan at all. It would make sense that he didn't. He kept on walking toward the center of the graveyard, shuffling his hand inside his pocket like whatever he'd taken from his uncle's place was of the utmost importance. I watched the way he'd grab at his pant legs and then glance in my direction, as if to remind me that there was something he held that was out of my reach. It was a way of moving me forward, towards him, even if his pocket held nothing at all. Now that the sun had almost completely set, I could hardly read the expression on his face.

I had seen him pull off this act before, mostly in the week after Moby's shut down and his mom had lost her job. She had spent the week on the couch, Tim said, promising him each morning before he went to school that she would look for work—but the longer she waited, the longer they had to live without any source of money. He decided to go to Mac's one day and told him that he needed to borrow a uniform that the workers would

wear in order to convince his mom that he had a paying job. When he went home later that afternoon, dressed in his brand new uniform, his mom nearly broke down in tears at the sight of him. She thought she had seen her son accomplish something that she was too afraid to attempt herself. I always thought that Tim had inspired his mom to turn her life in a better direction, and I congratulated him when she took a job at Apex the following week.

For a while, his mom was happy, or at the very least, had acted happy. But it wasn't long before Tim stopped seeing it as I had. He came to realize that he had not inspired his mom to take a job. At the sight of him wearing a uniform, his mom had become overcome with guilt. Nothing would have pleased her more than to open her own store one day, just like Moby's, but she knew that this dream had already been lost. She was living little more than a lie at Apex, hardly different than Tim's employment at Mac's.

"My grandfather was buried with the family's money," Tim said, stopping at a small grave covered in lichen. The name on the headstone was worn down and smooth and the dates of his life were hidden beneath the growth. I figured Tim must have stopped at the wrong grave—it was dark after all—and we hadn't brought a flashlight. It was too small to be for someone important, too decayed for the person Tim said his grandfather was. But he had visited the grave as a child and was convinced that this was the one. His mom used to take him there to pray and they'd kneel beside the headstone, reaching out to God, I suppose, that something in their lives would change.

He told me that he didn't believe in praying anymore because God never did anything to help his family. If you really wanted to talk to God, he said, you had to press a gun to His head and show Him that you're not afraid to shoot.

"I think we should dig him up," Tim concluded.

"Who?"

"Who do you think?" He put his foot on the blank headstone.

"God?"

"What do you mean 'God'?"

"He's on my mind, I guess."

"He's got nothing to do with this," he said.

A pick-up truck bounded down the road playing a country-western song that echoed across the graveyard. Tim pushed his hardest against the headstone, leaning his weight into its base. His feet dug into the ground, sinking deeper beneath the surface. I joined him, if for nothing more than to follow his lead.

"I've heard stories," Tim said, breathing heavily as we pushed together, "That he walked around with a cane made of solid gold just to prove he was the richest guy in a building. He didn't even have a limp—that's the kind of person he was." He stopped pushing to regain his breath and then looked around for something to dig with. "One night he was

walking up the steps and—this is what my mom tells me—he didn't lift his foot high enough and fell right on top of his cane. Seeing as it was gold and all, it cracked his ribs right down the middle and he died before anyone could find him."

"I thought you said it was a heart attack."

"That's a rumor too, but it's not a story like this one."

The headstone wouldn't budge and Tim found nothing that could be used to dig. He was covered in mud, all the way up to his chin. His body shivered a little but he didn't seem to mind. The newspaper he took from Mac's was still in the pouch of his sweatshirt and he ripped it out, throwing it at the ground. With his left foot, he pressed it deep into a puddle until it sunk beneath the mud. "I guess that's pretty ironic," he said as he watched the newspaper disappear. "Almost forgot I had it, too."

He crouched down for a moment, swaying back and forth on his toes. His hand went through his hair a couple of times and when he looked back at me, some of the puddle water had collected around his eyes. "It's not so bad stealing," he said, wiping his nose. "It's not so bad like people say. Not all the time. Not when it makes her happy."

I wanted to crouch down next to him, but I thought the closer I got to the mud the further I'd sink. "I don't think it's so bad," I answered.

"Not the way people say. Stealing doesn't make me a thief."

"I don't think so, Tim. I don't think you're a thief."

"Not all the way," he said. "Not wrong all the way." He looked at his hands and both of them were black with mud. "How did we end up like this?"

"I don't think we're doing much wrong."

"Not you," he said, wiping both hands on his pant legs. "Every day my mom comes home disappointed with what she's doing. Every day she says she's 'compromising her principles'—and for what? She used to be happy, you know. She used to think she was making a difference back at Moby's."

I thought about what Mrs. Ryan had said and asked him if she had anything to do with this.

"My mom's been praying for the same thing," he said. "I can hear her in her room at night, wishing for something better in the morning, like some kind of miracle waiting by her bedside. Something that she wouldn't have to work so hard for, something she could just take. Praying's not so different from stealing, after all." His lips shuddered and he tried to force a smile. "I listen to her from my room every night. And I've been trying my best to make her wishes true. But sometimes it scares me to think I'm the only one who's listening."

He put his head down and buried it between his arms, his eyes closed. For a moment or two, he didn't say a word and he cupped his hands together. Leaning my weight against a tall headstone, I eased myself down

toward him.

"Sometimes I think the only way she'll be happy is if I'm different. That's what I get from her praying. She's hoping for change—any kind of change—she doesn't specify what kind she wants. I know her better than whoever she's praying to."

"What do you plan on doing, Tim?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said, shifting his attention toward his grandfather's grave. "Look at me. Trying to raise the dead for some kind of answers." He wiped his face with the bottom of his sweatshirt. "I think I've been digging in the wrong place all along." A smile nearly broke across his face. "I gotta change something. Something's gotta be different."

A kind of deep, purposeful silence came between us. In the summer months and the late days of spring we could go for minutes without talking, and the insects and the wind would break that silence—and the trees and the birds and the young kids yelling. But in November, it got really quiet if there was nothing left to say. An intentional kind of quiet. That's how I figured a car was coming toward us, from the same direction we rode our bikes. There wasn't a single sound to interrupt it.

"Do you hear that?" I asked. My face must have shown fear because Tim stood up quickly and shot me a questioning look. Then he turned his head down the road, and together we listened to an engine with an all too familiar sound.

Perhaps it was because of the cold or the fog or the damp chill of darkness—or maybe it was because of the mud, the way it swallowed us up to our ankles, clinging like freshly laid cement—that we kept standing there, waiting, even as Wayne's car approached. We could tell it was Wayne's car when it came within half a mile, maybe further, down the road. There was no mistaking his car with another. Its engine revved violently, the siren sounded mean, and its red flashing lights announced to everyone that it controlled the road. By no means was Wayne sneaking up on us. He wasn't trying to pounce on our backs when our heads were turned the other way. That wouldn't be like Wayne. He gave us plenty of warning before he pulled up to the cemetery gate, flipping on the car's siren once or twice, as if to scare us into running. He even slowed down before coming to a complete stop, as if he hoped we'd scurry away, off into the woods like two escaped prisoners who've just seen the warden. I would have liked it that way, too. But instead Tim and I stood there, exchanging empty glances as if we hoped the other would decide what to do next. We could have run or hidden, we could have shot at the car—if only we had something to shoot with—we could have been selfish and forgotten about "we," we could have left the slower one of us behind. But we couldn't decide on anything of this at the time. We remained motionless, eyeing each other blankly like two complete strangers who did not speak the same language.

Wayne's car was parked by the entrance of the cemetery; its swirling

red lights still spinning rhythmically after he closed the door behind him. He played with the strap on his holster, undoing the gun, and he raised his weapon upward to the sky. It looked like he was about to fire; instead, he brought it back down, cupped firmly in his right hand, and pointed it somewhere near our feet. He strode toward us menacingly, breathing heavier the closer he came.

As I turned my eyes to Tim, it seemed that he was in the middle of deep contemplation, the way his gaze remained focused almost solely on Wayne's gun. Inconspicuously he reached inside his pocket—the same pocket where he had hidden something of his uncle's—and left his hand there, with the other dangling quietly at his side. There wasn't a sign of fear anywhere on his face, just an unwavering determination that I couldn't comprehend at the time. A breeze picked up behind us as Wayne came within a few yards, his hair blowing to one side, holding the gun more toward Tim's ankles than my own. "You know you can't be here," he said, scratching the chapped tattoo on his neck. "I've told you before you can't be here." He stared directly at Tim. But Tim offered no response. He just aimed his vacant eyes directly at the gun.

My feet had slipped further into the mud and I felt a cool liquid dripping down my ankles. The ends of my jeans were almost completely hidden. If I continued to sink, I wondered how far it would be before I reached a coffin. Tim's hand shifted slowly inside his pocket.

Wayne didn't say anything about freezing or putting our hands up like I thought he would. The other officer, the younger one with dark brown hair, got outside the cop car and watched carefully from afar. He fidgeted beside the headlights, reaching for his gun, then thinking otherwise, scrambling for the walkie-talkies—until he stopped again, gathered himself, and fixed his arms across his chest. A quick burst from the breeze carried a plastic bag across the cemetery, rolling slowly before the headlights, with bold red lettering imprinted on the front.

"Your uncle called," Wayne said. "Told me he's missing something."

Tim shifted his attention halfway between Wayne and me, so that he was looking at Limekiln Pike. His hand stopped moving inside his pocket and he maintained his gaze on the road, as if he was waiting for something to appear out of the darkness. His bright orange cap was tilted upward toward the sky, resting loosely on the back of his head so that even the slightest movement would likely knock it off. The smell of something rotting lurked across the cemetery.

"Take your hand out of your pocket," Wayne finally said. "Raise them high above your head." Tim looked back at him but did not move his hand. The expression on his face shifted, from one of unwavering determination to a kind of subtle reflection. A biting pain struck me in the core of my stomach at the sight of their standoff. What Tim held in his pocket had suddenly become clear. "Tim," I quivered. "Tim"—but I could

say nothing more than his name. My throat felt like a sock had been pushed deep down inside, and with one last gasp, again: "Tim—"

It was then that Tim freed his hand from his pocket. Swinging his arm upward toward Wayne, two shots were immediately fired. As I stood there, motionless, my friend tumbled theatrically to the ground, and I saw his uncle's gun gripped firmly in the palm of his hand.

Between heavy but restrained breaths, Tim released a guttural cry as his body tightened against the ground. Lying beside his grandfather's grave, he tried shifting his weight to one side and his breathing quickened as he grabbed his shoulder. He was turned in my direction, and as I hoisted my feet from the ground, I began moving towards him. Where he landed, he was no more than a few steps to my right.

Wayne met me by Tim's side just after I crouched beside him. With both of his hands, he began applying pressure to a spot near Tim's chest. But he had shot him twice, and my friend's shirt was already stained with a cool, thick liquid that felt different than the mud and water around him. Wayne's hands became darkened as he pressed against him, his wedding ring muddied, and the veins in his upper arm tore through his skin the harder he pushed. The second officer appeared from behind us, shouting for back-up on the walkie-talkie, using God's name a lot as if he were speaking to Him on the other end.

As Tim's breathing continued to get faster, it also grew fainter, until it became so heavily strained that the act alone sounded painful. "You'll be ok," I said to him over and over. "Nothing's going to happen." He focused his eyes on mine as I spoke, and I repeated exactly what I had already said, nodding my head rhythmically to match the sound of my voice. But the more I recycled through these same words, sifting through these same thoughts, I began to find myself stuck in some kind of cycle, until the words themselves sounded hollow to my ears. Flashing red and blue lights—alternating back and forth with the same consistency as my words—illuminated Limekiln Pike as an ambulance found its way beside the cop car. The young officer ran toward them nervously and shouted something I was not able to hear.

There were no final words for Tim. I didn't think it was right for him not to say anything more. If only he could have brought himself to speak—couldn't he have at least tried to make a sound?—then maybe I would have found the right words in return. His mouth hung open, silent, with a dark shade of purple reflected in the blinking lights. "You're gonna get some help," I said. "Just hold on. It's almost here." But it was already too late. As the paramedics flooded the cemetery, Tim's breathing slowed until he released a final feeble sigh.

I could feel Wayne's cool, wet hands slide around me from the back, moving me further from my friend so that the others could try to save him. He whispered something to me, something to keep me following him, and

I did, as he gripped me by the arm to guide me past the graves. "We can't stay here," he said. Tim's body looked skinny, frail, curled up tight against himself. Wayne directed me away, his hand fidgeting around the buckle of his belt like he was reaching for something but did not know what. The second officer was talking on the walkie-talkie again, this time more calmly. As Wayne and I reached the police car, the smell of cinnamon collected faintly at my nose, as if it had followed me from the road. Perhaps one of the paramedics was wearing perfume.

"We have to go," Wayne said, opening the car door. Tim's body was placed onto a stretcher, hoisted off the ground with his arms spread out, dangling over either side.

There were voices from far off, screaming voices, the sounds of children running. We would head in that direction, down Limekiln Pike and onto Ferry, past Laura's Bakery, and make a right onto Main Street, where the lights would show our way through town, and past the spot where Moby's once stood—but we'd keep on past it, not like old times when there was something good to eat—and there wouldn't be a whole lot to say, we'd both know there was somewhere else we'd have to be. And Mac's would be closed tomorrow, for one reason or another, he'd have his excuses, but it would only be for a day or two, and he'd be open again by the weekend like nothing had happened at all.

DOE RIVER GORGE

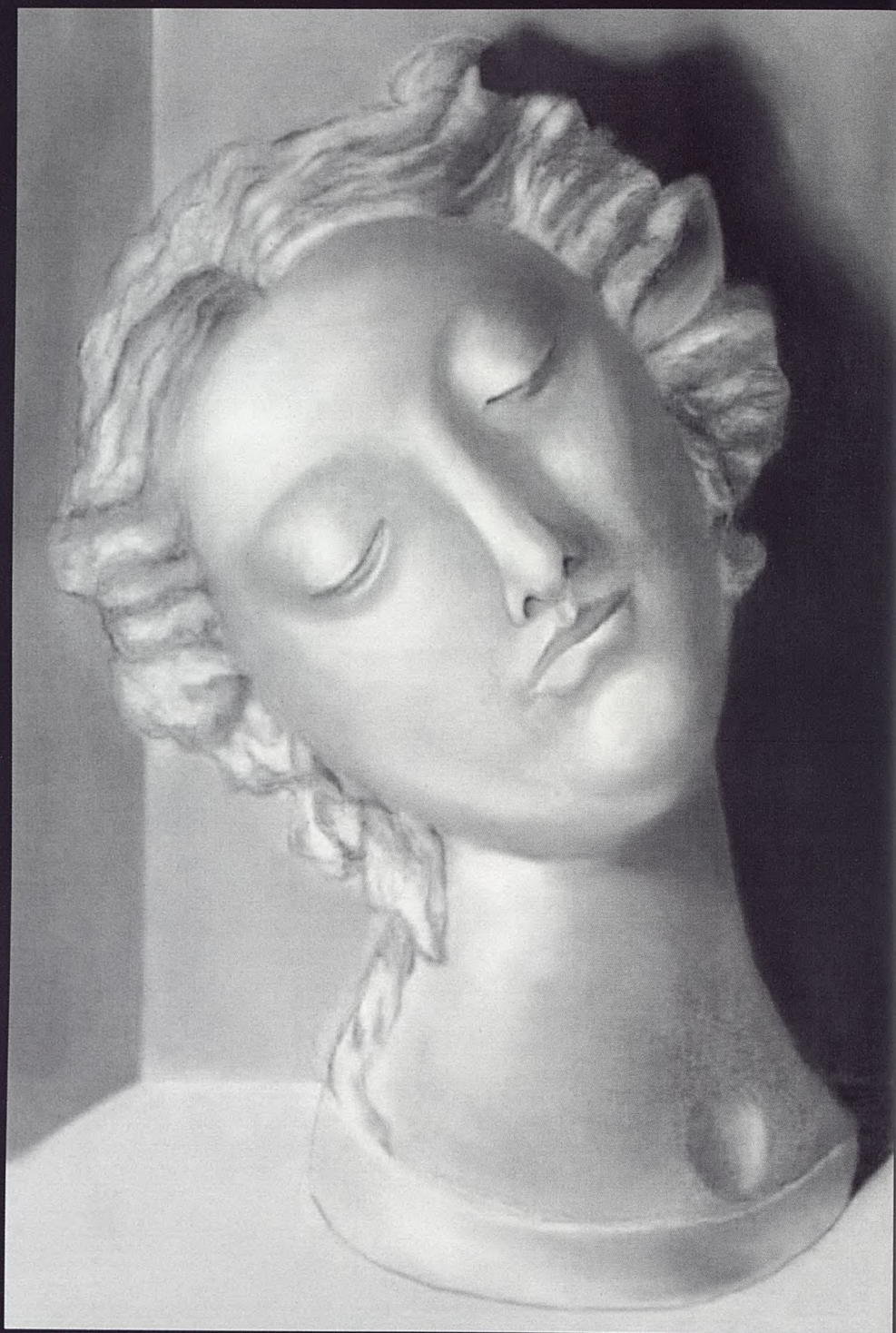
ELIZABETH ELLIOTT

The rotted remains of the trestle
reach across the water
on crumbling stone abutments,
as I sit on the river's bank,
watching the old bridge
fail to meet the tunnel,
blasted into the mountain
where there is coal
and damp things
growing on the shale,
wetted by secret springs,
and the tweetsie of the engine
echoes through,
as if it were coming still.



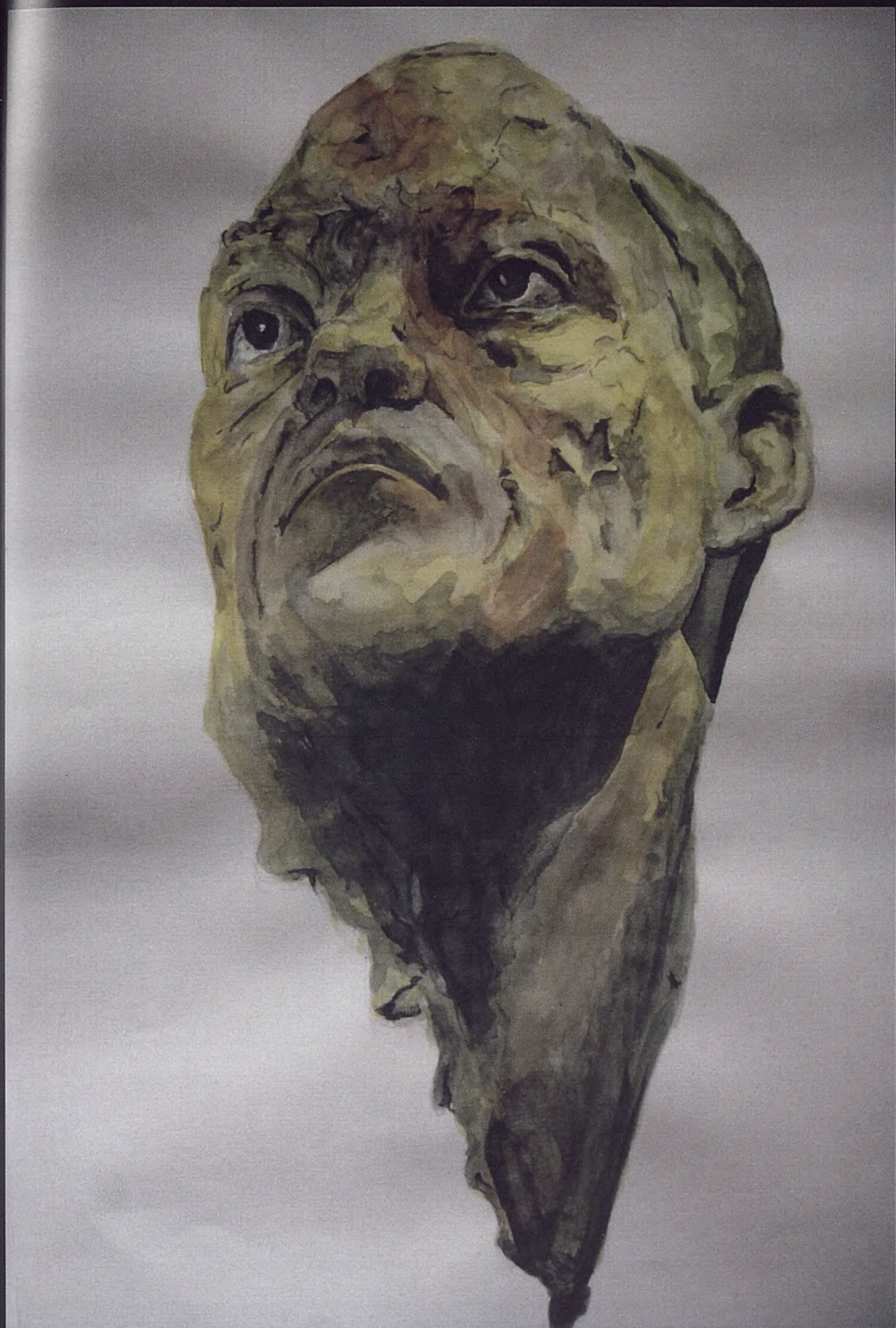
WALLS
PHOTOGRAPH

PRESTON HARTWICK



CLASSICAL BUST
GRAPHITE AND CHARCOAL

ANGELA SCHMIDT



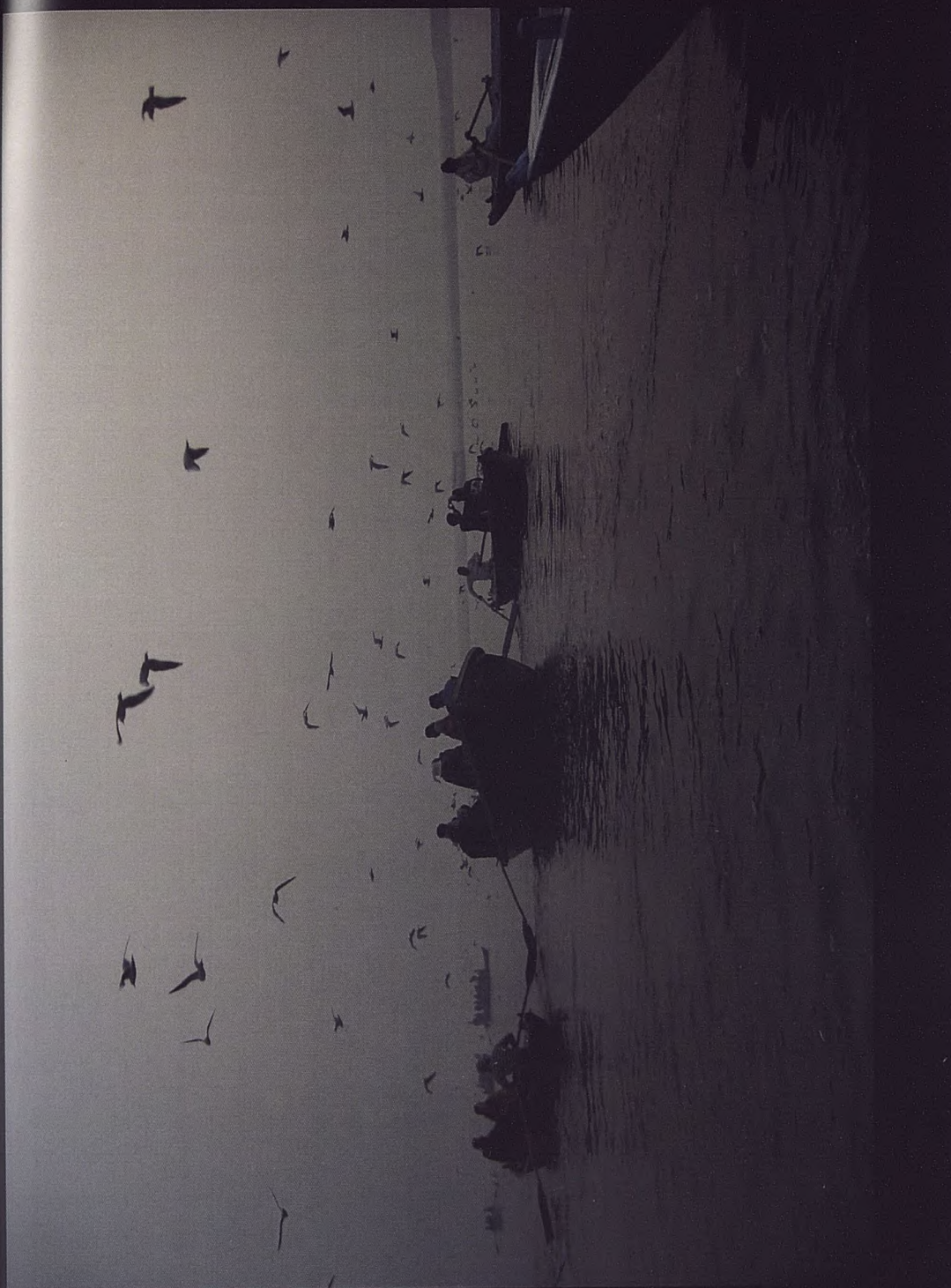
COPY OF A SCULPTURE
PAINTING

DINESH MANANDHAR



LURAY CAVE
PHOTOGRAPH

ASHLEIGH ZICKER



GANGA MA
DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPH

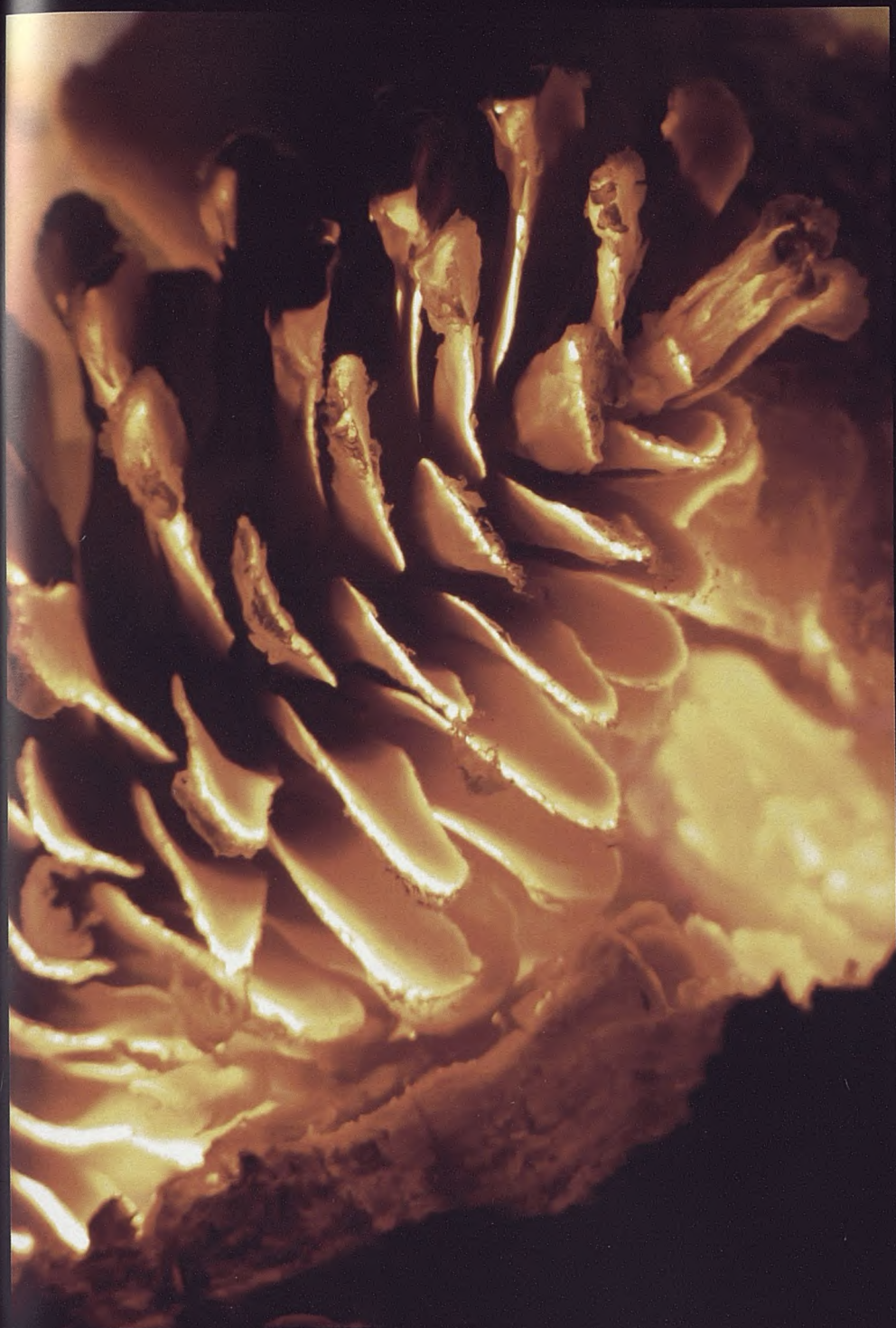
SARA TOWER



SUNLIGHT

OIL PAINTING ON CANVAS

GABRIELLA SCHIRO



BEAUFORT CAMPFIRE
DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPH

GUS RYER



DIFFERENT SPOKES
PHOTOGRAPH

MEREDITH MACLAUCHLAN



NEPALI GIRLS
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

DINESH MANANDHAR



GLATFELTER HALL
LINOLEUM BLOCK PRINT

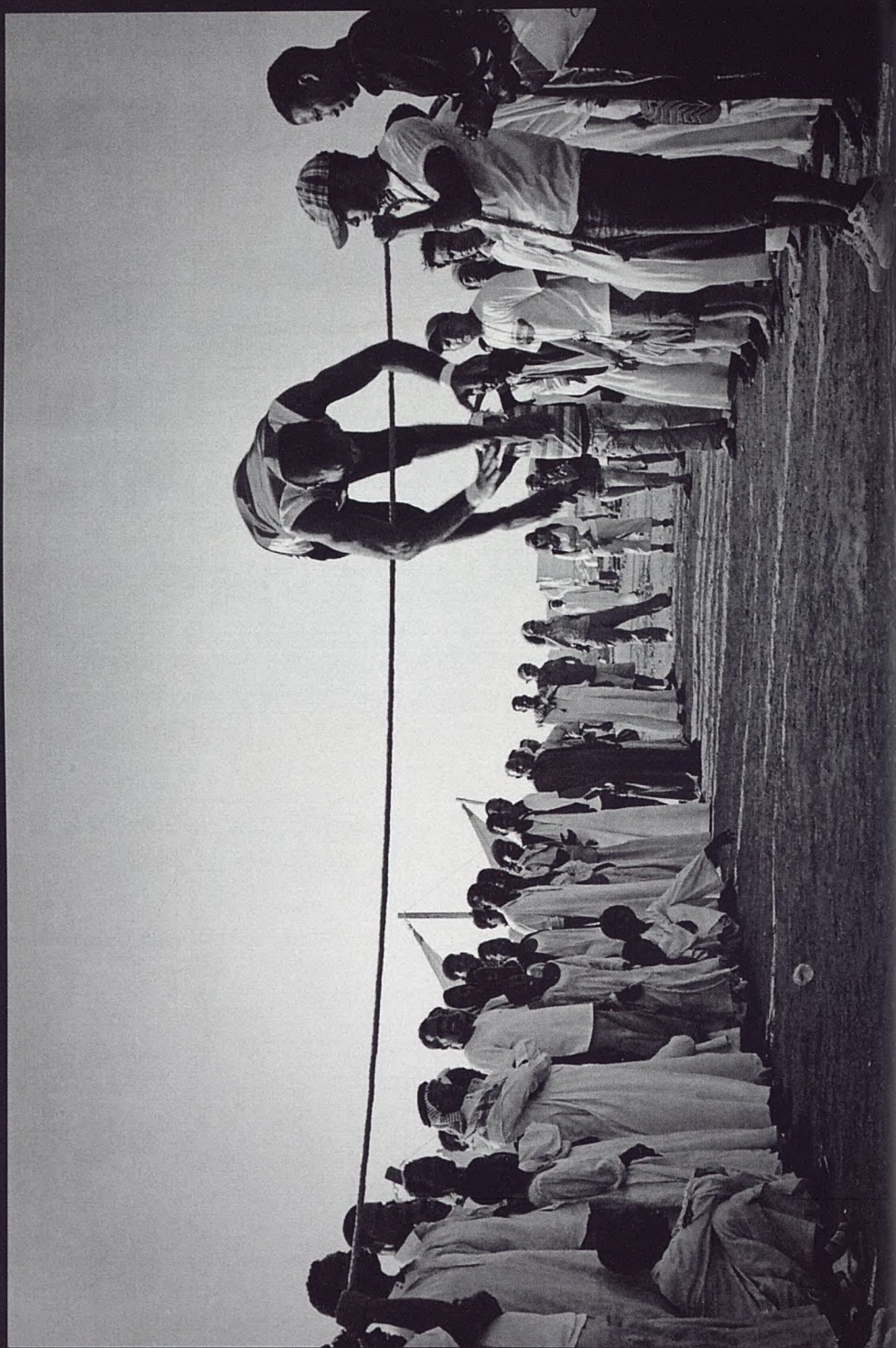
GABRIELLA SCHIRO



ONLY HEATHCLIFF

MIXED MEDIA

EMILY FRANCISCO



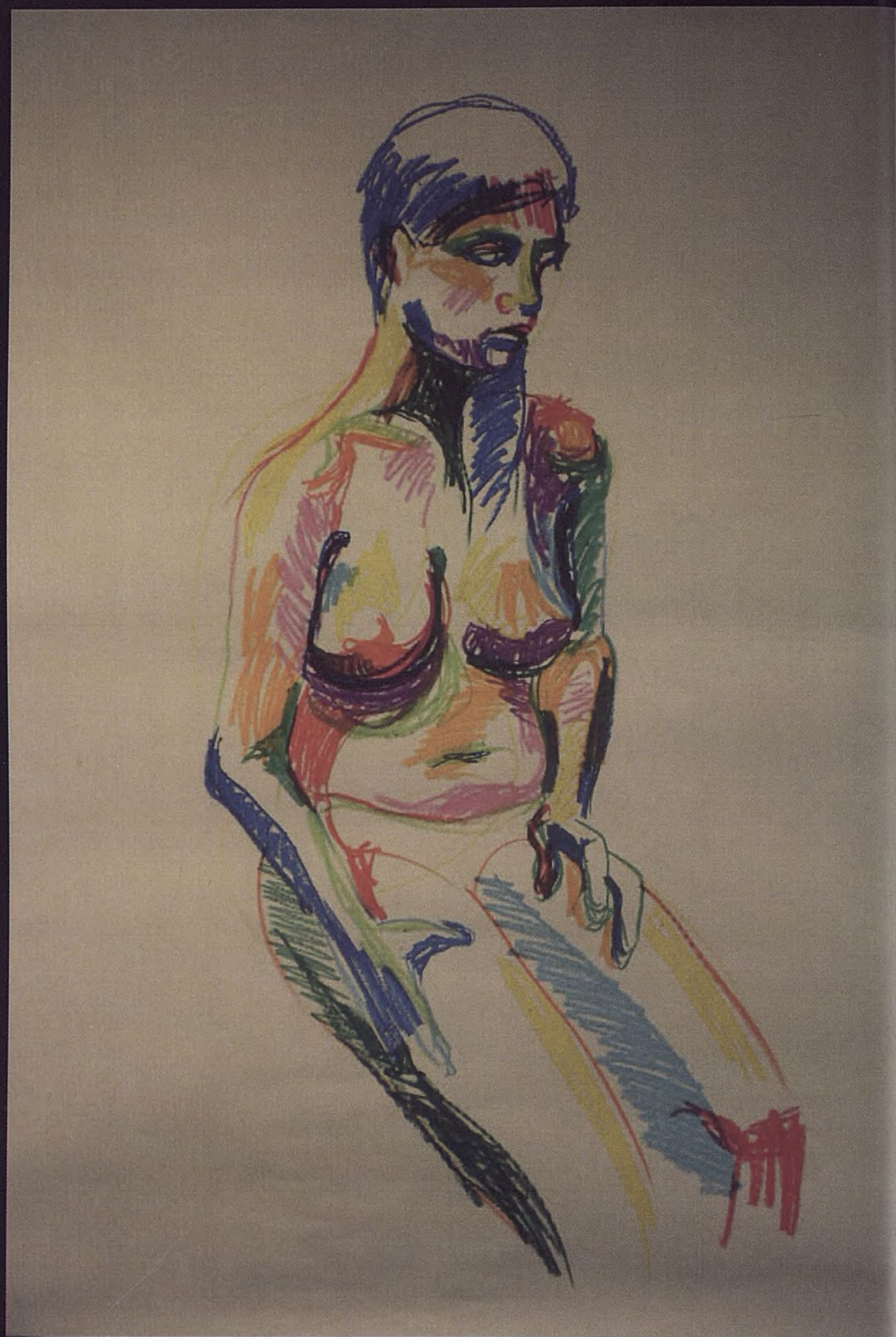
HIGHJUMP
PHOTOGRAPH

PRESTON HARTWICK



DURANGO-SILVERTON RAILWAY
PHOTOGRAPH

JESSICA LEE



COLOR
OIL PASTEL

MINAH KIM



SELF-PORTRAIT
MANIPULATED PHOTOGRAPH

REBECCA FISHER



THE TRINITY (FULL IMAGE)

SPRAY PAINT & WALLPAPER PASTE ON WOOD

JOSIAH ADLON

FALSE TRUTHS

LOREN DERON

Spiders are crawling
in my clothes, in my sheets.
I see them, I feel them, squirming.
They're my own polydactyl hands—
hideous, stared at, until they weave a masterpiece.

When I walk home through the wooded path
the trees speak their truths.
I hear them, I'm the only one who listens.
They tell me to carve their secrets into people—
fed up with the secrets and hearts etched into their bark.

People and dogs are often too similar,
sometimes I don't know which crotch to lick.
And I know they'd both drink whiskey off the floor.
—Man's ether for life, for touch. (Bullshit)
And the dog's just thirsty.

I've tried earplugs, tampons,
they only make the noises more powerful, more integral.
The splinter doesn't come out, it just goes in deeper.
For once I want to hear the ocean, and not the ruminating others—
but they've chosen me, strangled in their seaweed spiderweb.

MAGNIFIER OF TRIFLES

BEN WINSTON

The cushion on the couch in Dr. Conter's office swallows my hips and waist and starts digesting. The room is white with a wooden bookcase to one side of the door, a heavy desk to the other, and a couch with a big window behind it facing the exit. Two chairs are turned toward the couch—one has a tall back and is upholstered in not-quite-ripe-raspberry red, the other is wooden and looks a lot less expensive and a lot less comfortable. I lean back and let the couch taste my shoulders and arms.

Conter walks in and shuts the door behind him, dropping a *Hi, there* through his wide smile.

"Hi."

He walks towards the couch and lowers himself into the second chair, scooting his rear around on the seat to find the divot, the ass-shaped dent designed to give his body a false sense of comfort. He's wearing a gray sweater pulled over a yellow dress shirt buttoned so tightly his head looks like a tied-off balloon. His neck is red where the shirt collar squeezes, his eyes bug out like an insect's.

"So, how you been doin'?"

He nods at the cuts on my hands, scabbing and leaking pus. He opens a manila folder, glancing over his notes from last session, and clicks his pen on. The corners of his mouth reach for his earlobes in a welcoming smile that invites me to dive, dive, dive.

"Well, let's see."

I reach for the top of my head with both hands and pull my hair in opposite directions until the skin splits down the part line, and the two halves of my skull pull away from each other. When I've left enough clearance, I pat down my tousled hair, pull the sticky gray matter out and drop it on the floor at his feet like a heavy suitcase.

Kchunk.

Conter nods and takes notes while I trace the sparks and signals with my fingertip from the temporal and occipital lobes, up through the frontal and down deep to the medulla oblongata, the roadmap of a thought misconstrued, a not-so-equal, severely opposite reaction.

"Mmhmm," he says. "Mmhmm."

I pull and tug at the folds looking for a misfire. A tight nerve bundle holding serotonin hostage. A rogue fiber taunting the medulla, encouraging an adrenaline flood. A slice of gray matter, of myself, who insists on making Me my own worst enemy, who pins me beneath a boulder in the ocean the doctor calls Depression, Clinical. Digging through the fissures, I'm a bounty

hunter, ready to yank out the target and watch it wriggle and die on the soft green carpet until it's nothing more than a pile of limp noodles.

"Mmhmm. Mmhmm."

I'm digging and pulling out slabs of tissue, putting them to the side for later. A snide comment from my history teacher, a handful to my right. Bad conversations with Gab, a towering pile to my left. I carve out a handful of the soft spaghetti from deep in the prefrontal cortex and show Conter how the synapses flood here and here although they shouldn't, sliding neurobiology off my tongue like drool from a gland deep in my head where tenth-grade biology and countless internet articles swell and yearn to seep. There should be a neurotransmitter flood over there, not here. Or better yet, no flooding at all, just a vast and quiet desert between my ears. I could deal with a heavy head full of sand if it meant my brain would leave itself alone.

"Mmhmm," he says, and there's a sticky film covering my skin from fingertips to elbows like I've just helped give birth. Pieces of gray matter are scattered across the floor, and a damp splotch stains the carpet where the surgery was performed. I sit back into the couch, letting it swallow me again and suck my tired arms dry.

"Mmhmm. Okay." Conter jots down one last note. Clicks his pen off. Readjusts in his chair. Looks up and smiles. "It sounds like you need something to do with your hands."

"My hands?"

"Yes. You see," he says, "we need to find a way to make this"

--drawing circles in the air around the juicy mess on his floor-- "not lead to this" --drawing the circles now around my tattered hands. "Maybe if you had something you could play with, you could calm these urges when they arise. Something not sharp. A smooth rock, perhaps."

"Hmm. What about a toy car?"

"A toy car. That could work," he says, and looks down to make a note in the folder. Over his shoulder, I see a framed photograph hanging behind his desk of two young girls in white bonnets and brown frocks, an artistic piece probably taken at a renaissance fair. One girl is kneeling, looking down at her simple shoe-buckle, lost in her own head. The other looks at me from the corner of her eye, her body turning from me, a silent giggle creeping out from her tight lips.

*

The car is a vibrant red Corvette, and I keep it in my right pocket with my pencils and lunch money. I dig for it and pull it out to show Gab.

"What is it?"

"It's a Vette. I thought you loved Vettes."

She grabs the vehicle from me and examines it, turning it over in her small hands. Nodding downwards towards the car, the crest of her head

barely passes my chest. Her dark eyes are focused through thin slits in her long face, her delicate fingers toying with the chrome wheels, the pristine finish, feeling the rumble of the V8 under the hood, the warm leather interior against her skin.

"It's ugly," she says. "I like old Corvettes. The new ones are hideous. She tosses the car back to me. "Why are you keeping it in your pocket?"

"Doctor's orders."

Turning to meet my eyes, she looks perplexed. "Doctor's orders?"

"Yeah. He says I might cut less if I have something to play with."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

She scoffs and turns away. "That's ridiculous."

I squeeze the vehicle in my hand, letting the plastic wheels dig deep tire tracks in my palm. "Thanks, babe. I love you, too."

She rolls her eyes. "Oh, shut up," she says, and leans in to kiss my lips as I run my thumb hard over the car's cool hood.

*

Folded lunch tables lean against one another in the corners of the dark cafeteria. Streamers hang down from the ceiling, looping through the metal grid holding up off-white tiles. Strings of lights curl around support beams. In the dark, it's hard to see the multicolored stains on the walls and floor from hundreds of hours of high school lunch periods.

I'm standing around with a group of guys waiting for Gab. People trickling into the dark room from the bright hallway are accosted by the deejay's bass-y mix, and I'm discreetly glancing towards the door for her four times a minute.

The word of the day is suave, and all the guys I'm standing with know it. We ditched our wrinkled band tees after school for something a little classier. I'm wearing a white tee with a plaid short-sleeve dress shirt overtop, unbuttoned, and dark jeans. We're trying to look cool, and since the key to cool is disinterest, we stand in a circle and shoot-the-shit, ignoring the girls sauntering by in tall heels and short skirts.

"I wish we had a hacky sack," someone says.

I silently agree, then remember the Vette in my pocket. It's served me well these past few weeks, giving me a tactile object to work my aggressions out instead of routinely sacrificing a pound of my own flesh. The oil from my fingers combined with my constant rubbing has faded the finish on the hood from a rich red to a softer pink, and the wheels have lost their chrome shine.

I pull the car out of my pocket and start juggling it like a soccer ball. I kick it off towards the other side of the circle where it gets kicked once, then hits the ground.

“Well, it’s not the best hack, but it works,” I say, and pick it up to start again.

I kick the car straight up to my eye level, and watch as the G-Forces throw the passengers mercilessly against the windows and doors. Skulls crack and bones crunch as the car drops from eye level, spinning wildly like a dreidel towards my foot. It glides past the toe, hitting the ground with a plastic-like slap, and my foot comes down heavy on top of it.

As I reach down to pick up the wreckage, Gab peeks in from the hallway and sees our group. She’s wearing a short, bouncy black skirt and a halter top, and her eyes peer sensually through the long, dark bangs hanging lightly over her face. The top isn’t cotton, nor is it really fabric; instead, caution tape wraps her torso from just under her armpits to just above her naval, squeezing her already small breasts flat against her body, making her look more like she’s eleven and budding than sixteen and fully formed. She pushes herself through the retro beads into the cafeteria and gallops towards us. I smirk and get ready to swoop her up in a big hug.

She runs up behind one of our friends and jumps on his back, smiling and laughing. She’s hanging onto him, pressing her body against his, her skirt bouncing and riding up. In my head, she breathes heavy into his ear, reaches around and presses her delicate hand against the fly of his pants, feeling for his growth. She drops off his back and goes to the next guy, sticking her tongue down his throat, grabbing his hand and placing it on her chest. To the next, she’s bouncing her skirt up, showing him her smooth backside, inviting him to touch and squeeze and pull her close.

She meets me last with a quick peck. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Wanna dance?” she says, and leads me towards the crowd formed around the deejay, full of kids rubbing against each other in time with the music.

“Yeah. Sure.” I grip the Vette, soaking up the coolness through my fingertips. I run my thumb over the car’s hood and can feel structural damage. The roof is caved in and crumpled flat against the seats inside. I peer in through the missing side windows and see the passengers broken and bleeding and dead, dead.

*

I’m sitting in history class and my whole body is tense, my skin stretched tight over muscle and bone. I’m rocking back and forth in my chair, my legs bouncing like a jackhammer. I feel like my heart is about to explode out of my chest, like my skin might tear off in long strips like a snake’s, and I’m holding myself together with my arms over opposite shoulders.

“You’ve got a photographic memory, Mr. Winston?”

I look up and meet the teacher's eyes. He's an aging Vietnam Vet, a prune-y withered replica of the young soldier he once was.

"No?"

"Well, you better take some of this down then, huh?"

I rock harder in my seat, the thumping in my ears the echo of my heart beating relentlessly against my ribcage. I want to slam my head into the desk, or jump out the second story window behind me and fall to the hard asphalt below, or flip the table over and throw my chair right at the wrinkled corpse of a teacher telling me to get my shit together. I bite down hard on nothing and squeeze my shoulders.

Gab sits across the room, passing notes with a friend. In my head, the notes are about a guy she's met, how he was an incredible figure who just appeared and gathered her up, kissed her strong and had her in the bathroom. She's giggling about it, about me not knowing, about me being the emotional support while she gallivants off seeking sexual solace elsewhere.

She catches my eye and sees me rocking, holding my chest. She mouths, "Are you okay?"

I nod and drop my gaze so she can't push the subject. I reach in my pocket for the car, for the sweet feeling of cool metal beneath my fingertips.

I pull the vehicle out and squeeze it. The sharp corners where the roof has collapsed dig into my palm. The innocent passengers inside, their bodies now in rigor mortis, are a breeding ground for maggots. I squeeze harder and the larvae trickle out, dancing through my grip and nibbling my tight flesh.

Crack.

The plastic windshield, which managed to keep its structural integrity through the fatal accident, starts to give way. Opening my hand, I see the thin fracture stretch diagonally across the plastic. My thumb traces the crack then engages it in a thumb war until the shield snaps softly like a rib, and I feel the leather and bodies beneath the thin plastic. I push and push until a whiteness creeps up from the pressure point, around my thumb, and settles under my nail. The windshield moans, moans, moans, then pops.

The two halves jutting out of the car at different angles, I slip the corner of my finger into the fissure and pull until one lets go, hops off the freshly mangled bodies and clatters on the desktop. I pick it up and squeeze its sharp corners between two fingertips, admiring my destructive work. I pry the other half out of the car and push the wreck to the side, its contents now fully exposed to the elements, and inspect how the two halves fit together.

I look over at Gab, and she's talking to one of the guys in the class. She's laughing. She's having fun. She smiles and shoves him flirtatiously.

I pick up both shards, looking for the sharpest edge. The bodies in the Vette pull their torn and broken arms over their bubbling eyes so

they can't watch me take the plastic and push it into my hand, shaking and breathing hard, hoping, hoping for blood, blood.

*

The office of the school psychologist has no hungry couch, just a stiff green chair that I'm trying to get comfortable in. The doctor's following my hand as I move it around, trying to evade her eyes.

"What happened?"

"I dunno."

"How'd you do it?"

"A car."

"A what?"

I pull the trashed Vette out of my pocket and show her. She reaches for it and plucks it out of my hand delicately, like a grenade's pin. "It had a plastic windshield," I say.

She looks hurt, as if I had done this to personally upset her, this woman who I barely know, this stranger with a framed degree on the wall by the desk. She holds the car by its two back wheels, looking above and below, assessing the accident.

She puts the wreck down on her desk far out of my reach, gives me a stern look and says, "Can you be safe until your appointment this afternoon?"

"I hope so," I say.

"That's not good enough. You need to guarantee me you can be safe, or I'm gonna have to call the hospital."

A warm feeling swells in my chest that's equal parts fear and interest. I imagine a doctor, mid-thirties, in a white lab coat, holding a silver clipboard, staring me down, shaking his head. Then I picture myself sitting up in a hospital bed, my hand wrapped up like a boxing glove in gauze. At the foot of the bed, a cop perched on a bench, watching carefully, making sure I don't do anything stupid. He's been around the block, he's seen this kind of thing before and it's sad sad sad, but he can't help chuckling to himself, thinking, *A car? A Vette? Now that's a new one.*

Lost in my head, I wonder what Gab would say. Would she visit? Would she cry? I think of her standing by my bedside, tears welling up, yelling at me, asking why I can't trust her, demanding to know why I keep reading into every interaction she has with another guy. And my mother, she's there in the sterile room, squeezing my good hand between both of hers. I look at her and she smiles, trying to be strong, and I wonder if she's thinking of herself and of her own mother, the three of us tragic victims of overthinking, tied together across generations by blood.

I look across the heavy desk at the school psychologist, and I wonder

how far gone I am, how deep I need to dig just to hold on.

"Yeah," I say, "I think I can do it."

"You think?"

"I can. I can be safe."

She leans forward. "Are you sure?"

I'm not but I say, "Yes."

Leaning back, she opens a drawer and pulls a Ziplock bag from her desk. Opens it, drops the wreck inside, zips it shut. Hands it across the desk to me like it's criminal evidence.

"I'm trusting you. Do you understand me?"

I grab the bag from her hand and peer in at the car.

"Yeah," I whisper, "I understand."

She lets me go, and I leave the office thinking how much self-harm it would take to merit a hospital visit. I thumb the car through the plastic bag with my torn hand, gazing at the soft finish and the empty, blood-soaked interior, wondering where the bodies went.

TRAPPED IN A PASSING STORM

CHANDRA KIRKLAND

Corners. There are several things to be said about such places, but one thing in particular is important to learn: if you are being attacked, *do not* get yourself trapped in a corner. Getting into one is easier than getting out, and once you're there, you're there. I learned this fairly basic tip in two places. The first was the Tae Kwon Do studio where I have trained for eight years. The second was in my own home, and my attacker, if he could be called that, was my father.

We were in the small dining room and had just finished a meal. The large wooden table that my family gathered at twice a day (we only ate breakfast and an early dinner) was several feet away, its smooth surface gleaming in the dull light pushing fruitlessly through the blinds. Their color matched the wall my back was clinging to so pitifully—a nondescript off-white that seemed so deceptively calm and boring now in light of the violent clash of wills that echoed through the house as angered screams. My bare feet were cold against the rough hardwood floor—I had come to dinner without socks; the floor was always icy in the winter. But the cold hardly registered. My face was hot, red and throbbing slightly from the blow. The tears cooled me, but more blood rushed with the shame of this sign of weakness. I truly don't remember what we were fighting about, or why he backed me against the wall, screaming in my face. That doesn't really matter; the reason never did. It happened. It happened over and over under different circumstances for two years. And though I can defend myself physically, I never raised an arm or even a finger against him. Besides, nothing physical could protect me from the words, the screaming, the names he spat at me. And the words were always worse than the blows. Always.

Disobedience had always been punished with physical pain in my household, and in other aspects of my life. It was, as they say, the "hard way" to learn. If you make a mistake, you might fall. You might just skin your knee or bruise your arm, but you might break a bone, too. Eight or nine years ago, when I was cooking brunch for my family on a Sunday morning, an accident resulted in one of my father's usual violent forms of punishment—this incident stands out the most because it was so deeply humiliating.

My sister Ambika and I had been laughing and messing around, joking about things that are completely meaningless now. We were young, perhaps ten and fourteen (she is older), but we cooked a lot and were trusted (and expected) to do so. The flour bag had been put away upside-down, and as I hefted it into my arms the paper unfolded to release a wave of creamy white powder onto the kitchen floor. My sister and I stopped laughing. We

knew I had made a mistake, and we knew I was in trouble. We cleaned up the mess, sweeping and wiping until all of the powder was gone. The flour was expensive; it was organic and unbleached, the only kind my mom would use despite our dismal financial situation. My parents believed in quality over quantity—we never kept more than the bare essentials (flour, beans, rice, potatoes, etc.) because we couldn't afford to, but it was always "healthier." My father had been listening to our tomfoolery from upstairs, and now he came rushing down, his bedroom shoes making their distinctive *swish swish* on the wooden floorboards. As I had feared, he was enraged that our foolishness had wasted a large portion of the bag of flour we bought once each month. He dragged me to my room and beat my backside until I wet myself.

That is the way things were. Mistakes were punished by pain. Spanking was a normal part of my parents' childhood, and it was a part of mine. But spanking a child because he or she is "bad" is entirely different than what began to unfold between my father and me several years later, when I was approaching fourteen years old. That kind of punishment has a reason—children need to learn what is right and what is wrong. It is not out of hate or intense rage so much as it is out of necessity.

I always knew when I had pushed him over the edge again. The reasons for our fighting were never important. It was usually small things; he said something that I didn't agree with so I spoke my mind, and he never wanted to hear my opinions. To him, nothing anyone else said was as important as what he believed. My father is a suspicious man, distrusting and often wary. When something went missing, or something turned up broken, it was never his fault. He blamed someone else each time, no matter what they said or how much they *insisted* that they were not to blame. A lot of the time my brothers were his targets, because occasionally they really did lose or damage his things. I would listen to him shouting at them, screaming at them, telling them how stupid they were and how they should do things, and it made my blood boil.

"Where the fuck is my hammer? Every time you assholes use my shit you leave it laying around, rotting in the woods, because you're *selfish* bastards. Where the fuck did you *put* it?" His eyes were always so deadly, so enraged. I despised his eyes, because the only times I had looked closely at them was when I was forced to, and during those times he was spitting rage and glared down like a vicious predator.

"I didn't take it," Oren, my second-to-youngest brother, said loudly in a pleading voice. "I swear I didn't."

"Bullshit," our father roared. A word of denial was never good enough. He need concrete proof, and even when he had it his pride blinded him from admitting his own fault. "I want you to find it *right now*." He drew closer, threateningly. Oren drew away, hunching his back in a defensive position. I would have done the opposite, and it would have gotten me into trouble as usual.

He seemed like a bully to me—his way of fighting reminded me of the verbal tactics of a rival at school or an elder sibling rather than a father. Instead of trying to take control of his temper and be the stronger person in the argument, he tended to jab and stab away with words in a way that was only meant to hurt, not to resolve a problem. He seemed to specialize in making his “opponent” feel worthless. The tone of his voice was sometimes one of uncontrolled rage, and other times it was more taunting. He would reduce my brothers or me to hot, angry tears, and then he would laugh. More than once, I exploded. I was always exploding. I stuck my nose in things that were not my business for the sake of justice, for the sake of my rage at the sound of his verbal bullying. In the end, I always ended up trapped by my own words.

Let’s go back to that corner—back to the dining room, with the food sitting still and congealing on the table. We may have had an audience (my mother, my brothers) but they faded to nothing beneath the hurricane of raw emotion, the defiance and the anger, the hurt and the shame that quivered threateningly between my father and me. I remember the feelings so clearly, though all the details of how it came to be have been blurred beyond recognition and are hiding somewhere at the back of my head. I wish that all of it would hide. I wish that all of it would go away. I feel sick now as I remember the stench of his breath. It was hot against my face. Spit flew from his screaming mouth to spatter against my cheek, and I turned my eyes away.

“*Look* at me,” he screamed. I remember him shoving the words from gritted teeth and into my face with the flecks of spit. I looked, straight into his eyes, angry tears pouring down my burning face. My head hurt. My eyes were swollen from crying, and hot humiliation burned in my chest at my weakness. I could feel strands of my hair pulling from my scalp as his fist tightened around a handful of it, pushing my head harder against the wall. The back of my head ached from the force of it striking the wall. He was still yelling. I don’t know what he said. I don’t know what I said. I do know that he struck my face, then the side of my head, with his large, calloused, work-worn hands.

It hurt, but it was more of a mental shock, an emotional blow that started with words and was emphasized until it became almost unbearable with the addition of physical pain. It was always this way. It hurt my chest because it made my heart pound with such fright and anger, humiliation and hate. I won’t lie about that part. When my father put me in that position, that helpless and degrading position with my head forced back, my neck bared, and his face far too close to mine, I felt as if I had never hated someone more. He had complete control, and he took full advantage of it. He knew I would not fight back or strike him in his face as he struck me, and he used that knowledge. The idea disgusted me. It enraged me. It hurt too.

*

“Keep hitting me, it doesn’t hurt,” I screamed, knowing it would

bring more pain but not caring. I wanted to try to make him feel some semblance of guilt. I wanted him to see what a monster he was. My back was against a wall—again. This time we were outside, and my back was pressed against the door leading to our basement. The doorknob jabbed into my spine. I remember that we had been arguing about a bike—nothing more than that, just a vague memory.

The day had started well. I know that we had been getting along better than usual. It seemed to happen that way a lot. I felt as if the world was punishing me because each time I started to hope things would improve, it all came crashing down, breaking over my head. The unfairness of it brought me to tears. I loved my father. I love my father. But it is hard to love someone when his fist is clenched around your neck. It is hard to love someone when he slams your head against a wooden wall and hisses, “Bitch!” between gritted teeth. It is so much easier to hate, and so I did. I fought the urge to ram my elbow into his face and run as fast and as far as my legs could carry me. I fought the urge to curl into a ball and sob until my heart broke and I stopped breathing. He was too close. I wanted to throw up from the tears choking me and the smell of his breath filling my nose again. The bridge of his hat pressed into my forehead, leaving an angry red line. He was telling me that I was wrong, telling me that I needed to learn when to keep my mouth shut. He “believes” in freedom of speech. He is a liar, a hypocrite. He plays a man of peace, a believer of freedom. He is a *liar*, a hypocrite. I remained against that wall for a long time. His hard grip hurt my neck and left my breath short and painful. I remember protesting this treatment, but my words were ridiculously garbled from the pressure. I was helpless. Again.

*

At some point, you grow somewhat numb to these things. Once a beast is subject to enough pain, the pain can be blocked, pushed into the background and ignored. My father never left a mark on my face, or a bruise on my body. He struck just hard enough to make my ears ring, just hard enough to punctuate and accentuate his words with a sharp *slam* that ached for no more than twenty minutes after his hand left my head. I was used to worse. I experienced worse physical pain each week in my martial arts classroom, where I have suffered bruises, sprains, dislocated fingers, hard falls and a battered face.

It is important to emphasize that I do not consider what my father did to me *beating*, per se. It was abuse, physical and emotional. It hurt more than a deep and bleeding cut. It hurt more than any physical pain I have yet experienced in my short life, which isn't saying much, but it continues to hurt. It continues to feed off of memories. Though it has been two years since the last blow, I cannot look my father in the eye without flinching. Without even trying, I avoid eye contact. Almost automatically, I leave a room hurriedly when I suspect I may be alone with him. There is a cold distance between us that I feel will never be resolved. This distance, I believe, is almost necessary

for peace. Once I became cold and emotionally indifferent to the tiny daggers he threw at my face and body with each spiteful word, I was able to pull away and end the vicious cycle of hate, spite, fear and bruised hearts.

My mother was my only ally in the two-year war. She told me time and time again that I needed to be humble, and that he was my father and deserved more submissiveness and respect. Her words made me sick. I am a proud person. I was not made for submissiveness. I have a fiery temper, a passion, a deep-seated sense of right and wrong. My brothers once sneered at my temperament, dubbing me “rattlesnake” and “redhead,” because I lashed out at those who tread on me and grew crimson as a firecracker when I was angered. Later, an ex-Marine in my martial arts class named me his “pack of wild dogs” because at fifteen I could hold my own against him in a match. He could never catch me, and he rarely got past my defenses. To everyone in my world, I was tough. I was strong, angry, hard, and nasty when I wanted to be. Maybe this was my father’s justification, for tearing me down and trying his best to break me. No one could hurt me. How could they? Even when I was being hit in the face, dragged across the room, or beaten over the ass with a metal mop handle while I teetered on the edge of the porch railing, I still burned with an anger that everyone could see. In truth, it was more of a deep sense of hurt and shame. I was too proud to be treated as I was. I kept up a façade of toughness to hide my shame, to hide how much he was hurting me. At least in the beginning.

Towards the end, after two years, it did start to break me. At that point even my brothers—who still ignore my sadness due to how uncomfortable it makes them—could see that I was finally crumbling. I was fourteen when it began and sixteen when he said the words that ended it all. I was tired. I was sadder than I had ever been. I remember wandering down to the creek one evening after another fight. I was hurting so badly, and wanted it all to go away. I remember that there was a large tree in the woods near the creek that was easy to climb. I started toward it with every intent of scaling it and jumping. I thought that even if I didn’t break my neck, I would surely break a bone and then maybe my father would realize how much he had hurt me. Maybe he would be sad, and maybe he would show that he loved me again. At this point I wasn’t entirely sure that he did.

I never climbed the tree. I had almost reached it when a voice split the cold evening air, calling my name. I paused. Then I continued, not really caring who was looking for me.

“Chandra!” The voice came again, closer than before. Bushes shifted, and a few twigs on the dry forest floor snapped. I stopped again and turned around, making my face blank and uncaring in preparation for the assault. My oldest brother emerged from the thick walls of dead plants all around us. “What are you doing down here?” he asked me tentatively, eyeing my still, yet tear-streaked face. “Come back to the house.”

“Why should I?” I asked. “No one wants me there. What’s the

point?" I meant it. At the time, I could not think of a single reason *why* I needed to be in my own home. The endless fighting between my father and me affected everyone. They all wanted it to stop. I did too, I just didn't know how. Maybe if I climbed that tree...

"You're being stupid," he said, not unkindly. There was a pleading note in his voice. "Just come back. *I* want you there, and so does everyone else. Even Dave." He was watching my face for some reaction.

I almost laughed. "No he doesn't," I snorted. Dave was my father. My siblings and I never called him Dad.

When I was much younger, I was still scared of him. My brothers and I had all heard him and my mom fight before, and, at times, it had been terrifying. He used to hit her, too. They had both screamed and slammed doors and broken things around the house. But when they weren't fighting, it was impossible not to see how much they loved each other, and how deeply. It remains the thing I love most about my father: his love for my mother. It still brings out his soft side, and, in a way, I think that falling in love with my mother saved him. My father had a hard life—much harder than mine. He left home at fifteen due to issues with his own father. I have never met the man, and don't care to. He is racist and intolerant to the core; to him, my mother is bad enough because she is black. My siblings and I are abominations in his eyes because we are "mixed."

"Come on," my brother said. He might have taken my arm to pull me along (an unusual gesture of affection). I don't remember. In fact, I can't recall another detail from that day. It must have been quiet—the quiet after yet another storm.

*

The end of the war came during a car ride with my family. It was Sunday, and we cajoled my father into doing something very out of the ordinary: we planned a trip to a local restaurant so that we could all spend time together. I was excited. Things had been better lately. We had definitely been fighting less, and a foolish hope was awakening in me again. We were driving slowly down the winding road to the restaurant, discussing what we would order when we arrived. I must have started a conversation with my father, something rare indeed those days. I still don't know where it went wrong. Perhaps we were never meant to get along. It was starting to seem that way. The shouting started. It was mostly my father this time—I was tired, and I just wanted to go to the restaurant. I don't know who started the fight, but I know how it ended. He stopped the car. He screamed in my face and struck me. He reached back and grabbed me, pushed me. But as usual, the angry, hate-filled words were the true blows. I cried with the humiliation and hurt. After all this time, I still couldn't control my tears. Break my nose. Crush my finger. Throw me in the dirt and punch me in the face. I won't cry. Hate me when you're meant to love me and watch the tears come in an instant. I am weak in so many ways. I am not tough on the inside. I am soft.

This softness has brought me so much grief, and so much joy.

My mother managed to calm him, but the damage was done. This time I felt truly broken. We were turning around. We were going home. Everyone was disappointed, even disgusted that our fighting had destroyed the calm once again. I felt that I was to blame. I had fallen off my seat during my father's attack, and I curled in the small space between the car door and the car seat. I screamed, sobbing because it hurt so much and I couldn't stop. I cried more pathetically and with more pain and emotion than I had ever allowed anyone to see. I felt like an animal, or worse, something disgusting and lowly. The car jerked, and my mother stopped trying to calm me as my dad came to an abrupt halt with a loud "Fuck!" I quieted, but remained on the floor and could not stop the tears. The car was moving slowly, noisily. Something was wrong. My dad continued to cuss. He had been driving very quickly in his fit of rage and had taken a turn far too sharply. He said something about the transmission. Again, this was my fault, I thought.

"It will be okay, sweetie." My mom's voice was there above my head, and I wanted to cling to her. I was done. Finished. This had to stop. No more fighting.

We made it home. I don't recall how, but we made it. It was only a few miles anyway. I crept to my room. As always, I had a throbbing headache. I didn't want anyone to see my face. I was so humiliated by my lack of control. Why couldn't I just be strong, actually *strong* for a change, and not let him get to me? Why did I always snap? Hell, why did *he* always snap? He was the adult. He was the father. This was his responsibility. But I decided to stop thinking of it that way. I decided that I was done. I was tired, and I just didn't care anymore. He had pushed me to my limit, and I decided that no matter what he did I would remain cold. I would make a mask, and I would leave it on until all of this stopped. Each time I felt anger rising to choke me, begging to get out and wreak more havoc, I would smother it and clear my head. I would act calm no matter how I felt inside, for that is true strength. You cannot simply follow what you *want* to do, or even what you feel is the best or most right thing to do.

Life just isn't like that. Any relationship involves give and take—you have to be willing to step back and not always insist that you are right, no matter how much you believe you are. That is what I decided to do, and I did it. I underwent a huge change after that realization. I have become a calm and level-headed person. I am so different from the raging, rebellious fifteen-year-old I once was. I learned more about tolerance and communication during those years than I have during any other time of my life. I grew so much, and I am a stronger, more tolerant person due to the experience. That is not to say that all of these changes occurred in a single dramatic moment of realization after the fight in the car. It took at least another three months for things to begin to approach normal, and there were more fights after that. But these were different. These were "normal" fights. Because one thing did

change suddenly and dramatically that evening.

I was sitting on my bed. I could hear my parents' voices from downstairs. My mother's was low, soft, and a bit pleading. I thought at first that my father's was angry as usual, but there was something different about it this time. It was too quiet. There was a tone in his voice that I have only heard a few times in my life. Shame. I listened more intently and my heart stilled. Then he said it: The words that changed everything.

"I'm never going to hit her again."

He never did. I can only guess as to what caused this change of heart. Perhaps he had reached the same conclusion I did: it just wasn't worth it anymore. The fighting, the screaming, the endless war of wills that had been pushing us apart more and more with each passing week—it had reached a peak, a crescendo of rage that was always boiling just below the surface. The incident in the car was proof enough of that. I had done very little to provoke him; perhaps one misplaced word, or a look, or a tone of voice that had rubbed him the wrong way. Maybe he recognized at last how quick to anger he was, how easily he lashed out in response to the smallest quiver of defiance on my part. I can only speculate on what the cause was, but perhaps knowing is not so important. The important part is that storm passed. The rage is gone, hiding somewhere deep inside. The corners have dissolved, and they lack a threatening air as I move past them in the lovely wooden house my father built with his own hands all those years ago. It would be a lie to say that all is well, but is it ever? We can only be grateful for what little good there is, because no matter what you do, or who you are, a shadow of some sort will always darken your way. You can only walk armed with the knowledge that it *will* come, and bask in the light when it shows its face.

PERSPECTIVE DISTORTION

AUSTIN CLARK

Bolivar Kay is an aging, out of work folk hero. Feeling useless and somewhat cynical, he has taken a job working as a dishwasher to try and make a living. In the kitchen, he befriends two individuals, Jim the old bartender and Heather Bellamy, a twenty-year old baker working her way through culinary school. Yet most of his coworkers, despite respecting his work ethic, think he is a little crazy, as he claims his birthday is somewhere around 1790. This is one of his stories from working in the kitchen.

*

Christian Greene's mind felt like a flat tire. The digital display on the dash of his rental car jumped suddenly from D, to N, to P, which it settled on with an alarming red color. His hand rested on the shift for a moment, before deciding, eventually, to reach up and twist the keys to turn off the car. He laid his head back in the chair and took a breath.

His half-formed thoughts told him. *Maybe it's because everyone in this God-forsaken country drives on the wrong side of the road.* But it wasn't that, his conscience scolded him, no matter how hard it had been to take that right-hand turn just now.

The door to the car sprang open and the coolness of the small air conditioning unit was instantly flushed out of the car by an almost palpable wave of humidity. His dress shoes hit the asphalt and moved him slowly towards the door, the promise of more refreshing air inside urging them onwards.

There was a path to get to a large, swinging glass door of the restaurant at the opposite end of the small courtyard. The flowers were just in the middle of their July blossom, proclaiming in natural fireworks the four-star rating of the building ahead. Cold air emerged from the doorway, pulling him in, fighting a desperate rearguard against the heat and humidity, giving him time enough to move into the elaborately decorated interior. He stood for a moment and breathed in.

"Can I help you?"

He opened his eyes, taking a moment to adjust to the darker ambiance of the interior. In front of him, slightly to his left and behind a small lectern, was a tall, imperious looking lady, with graying hair and an eagle face.

Christian shook his head slightly. "Yes, well, I was wondering where the bar was?" He cringed as his accent went off like a gunshot in the subdued, and thoroughly American, atmosphere of the place.

"The bar? It's in the back." The lady gestured with one hand. "Just follow the aisle down past the waterfall."

"Thank, thank you." Christian began moving, feeling the coolness invigorate the previously sluggish extremities of his body. He walked past the groups of perfectly spaced tables, some divided by extensive half-walls with plants and flowers drooping from them.

The waterfall tinkled to his left, the extent of the actual fall being only a few inches from the top of a half-wall to a small stone-studded pool about table level. The plastic drainage tube was stuck rather inartistically to one side and covered in green algae. Vaguely, he wondered whose job it was to clean it.

Few people sat at the tables and no one sat at the bar. Christian glanced at the clock as he pulled himself into one of the cushioned barstools. It was just the beginning of the dinner hour, and the four stars and price tag was bound to keep people away for at least another thirty minutes. He stretched his hands out on the dark wood counter, trying to pull his mind out of the sinkhole it had gotten mired in.

"Good afternoon, sir." A man had materialized in front of him, skinny and bald except for a ring of thin white hair around the back of his head. By the practiced way he balanced a large round tray on one hand and stacked the beer glasses on the counter with the other, Christian judged he must be the bartender. He wore the same dark purple vest and white shirt as the maitre d'.

"Afternoon as well, though it's a bit hot out."

The man nodded sympathetically, giving no outward sign of noticing the accent. "Yes, but it is July." He finished stacking the glasses with an expert flourish. "Can I get you anything? You look like you might need something."

Christian's hand went reflexively to his straight-combed brown hair, though he knew it was more the look in his eyes and the button undone at the top of his expensive Oxford shirt and tie that prompted the comment. "Well, something, something fairly dry," he said. "I've had quite enough wetness for today."

"I hear you," the bartender chuckled and glanced down the under-lit rows of alcohol behind him. "I've got plenty, martini, gin and tonic, gimlet, take your pick."

"Eh, I'll go with the gin and tonic," Christian decided.

"Nice choice, we just put some fresh bottles of tonic in the fridge the other night." The bartender took a glass down from a rack behind him and set it smoothly down on the counter at Christian's right. "I'll be a minute. Would you like to look at a menu?"

Christian's stomach suddenly made its presence felt. The mention of the word *menu*, a term only indirectly related to food, caused it to almost collapse in on itself. "I think I may."

The bartender nodded, sliding a slim, leather-bound fold of paper

out from under the bar and placing it neatly in front of him. "Here you are," he said. "I'll be right back with that tonic." He disappeared through a doorway just to the left.

There was silence. The restaurant was almost deserted, with only an elderly couple sitting away to the right at a table, quietly spooning soup into their mouths, and the somewhat anxious murmur of a small group hidden behind a half-wall to the front where Christian had entered. He took another breath, his body almost completely cool by now, and looked down the bar.

It was polished dark and smooth, though distinctly out of its element in the menacingly bright sunlight slanting through the windows. Places like this were meant for evenings where the darkness of the wood got lost and the sharp details, like the edges of the plasma screen TV hanging at the far corner, would blend solemnly into the dim lights. Now, the sun washed out the rows of carefully polished glasses and the lighting under the bottles struggled futilely to project themselves over the rude brightness.

He glanced at the menu, noting the spirally written entrées and desserts. They looked indecipherably elegant and exotic. He looked at the TV screen for a change of pace, the sun reducing the baseball players to shadows and the muted voices of the announcers sliding faintly across the polished counter. It was amusing to him that even in the fanciest and most highbrow places, Americans must still have their baseball.

There were footsteps and a figure moved across the bar in front of him. Christian looked up, expecting to see the skinny bartender, but was mildly surprised to instead see another man in jeans, a baseball cap and a filthy looking chef's jacket.

"Sorry," he said, looking down at something behind the bar.

"Sorry for what? I just thought you had my drink." Christian watched as the man pulled a button-encrusted handle out from behind the counter.

"Ah, no, sorry. So that's what Jim was after," the man murmured, almost to himself. There was a rustle of ice and Christian saw him bring a large plastic cup up to the bar.

"Of course. Looks like you're getting a bit of a drink yourself. Must get hot cooking all of those meals on a day like today."

The man looked up and Christian was startled to see wrinkles beside his eyes and lines around his cheeks. He didn't look old, at least not in the elderly sense, but past middle age. He frowned slightly.

"I don't cook," he said. "I wash the dishes." He brought the handle up to the cup and, with a wrinkled and whitened hand, thumbed a button, letting a clear stream of water gush onto the waiting ice.

"Oh, well, sorry. I didn't mean..." Christian's embarrassment was promptly eased by the reappearance of the bartender, Jim, with a long glass bottle in his hands.

"Hey, Bolivar, are you pouring the drinks now?" he chuckled, setting the bottle down next to the rapidly filling plastic cup.

The man, Bolivar, gave a short laugh. "Not unless it is plain water. Looks like he might want something a little stronger, though." Christian looked down at himself. Was it so obvious?

"That's why I have this." Jim tapped the bottle. "Is it slow back there?"

"I'm caught-up, and I think Don decided to take a smoke break when he hauled out the trash." Bolivar's pruned fingers struck a straw into the cup. "So, this is my breath of air before the storm breaks over the plains."

"Good man." Jim took out a corkscrew. "You want a shot of this too? I don't think he'll mind."

He looked at Christian, who shrugged. "Take what you like," he said. "I'm just waiting for my drink." Jim plucked two more glasses from the rack behind him and scooped the trio full of ice.

"It's a Friday," he said. "I think I might indulge too, before the rush hits. Don't tell chef." He dug the tip of the corkscrew into the top of the bottle, and with a deft twist and flick, a satisfying pop echoed down the bar.

He set the glasses in a triangle and poured the sparkling fluid, sticking the cork back into place when he was done. Humming softly, he turned away and flicked his fingers across the labels of a few bottles before selecting one, turning around and repeating the ritual with the corkscrew. A solid splash of the select gin went into the glasses and a lime on the edge of each completed the process. Jim raised his and tilted it towards Bolivar.

"To Friday," he said. Bolivar picked up his glass and sipped it slowly. Christian took his, swirled it a little, and took a mouthful. It was good, strong and fresh. He felt some warm energy seeping back into his body.

"Capital," he said.

"Thanks." Jim nodded, taking another sip before screwing the corks more fully back into their respective bottles. "I think I needed that."

"Me too." Bolivar had drained the last of his drink. "Fridays are busy." He looked over at Christian. "In case you were wondering."

"No, no, I suppose you're right," Christian set down his glass. "It would only make sense."

"If you think about it," Jim shook his glass. "It's Friday night for everyone but us." He smiled as he took one last mouthful from his gin and tonic.

Christian took another sip and looked down at the menu again. The script hadn't gotten any less ornate, but he felt as if he could at least read it now. There was a clink as Bolivar gathered his and Jim's empty glasses.

"Are you looking to eat?" he asked. Christian nodded, eyes still on the menu.

"The cod is fresh, so you might consider that. Plus, seafood is good after a trying day. Might make you less homesick."

Christian's head snapped up.

"Just saying." Bolivar held the two glasses in one hand and his huge cup of water in the other. "But it is your choice."

"Okay. Sure," Christian said, looking at the man more closely. "What's the cod?"

"The Smoked Cod Penne Carbonara," Jim chipped in, putting one skinny finger on his menu. "It's good especially with a white Burgundy. Could I interest you?"

"Why not?" Christian said, sliding his menu toward Jim, his eyes still on Bolivar. "It's on the company tab anyways."

"Even more reason." Jim took the menu. "I'll put that right in. Excuse me, Bol."

"Have a good evening." Bolivar turned around and followed Jim out the doorway. Christian looked away, down the bar again, out the window near the opposite end. The sunlight was fading, not angrily bright in its last throes of splendor, but now dimming and giving the underlighting and the baseball players a chance to display themselves.

In the silence, his phone hummed against his leg. His hand reached down and dragged it, protesting with quick vibrations, from his pocket. The blocky white lines on the small screen read: Home. Sighing, he let it shiver once more before flipping it open and pressing the top to his ear.

"Hi, Daddy!" the small voice at the other end of the line said. "When are you coming home?"

*

"There is an English gentleman at the bar upstairs," Bolivar said as he turned the corner at the bottom of the bakery stairs. Heather looked up from the half-dozen chocolate cakes she was working her spatula over.

"Does he have an accent?" she asked, pushing the utensil back into the container of thick glaze sitting beside the sheet pan.

"Thick as molasses." Bolivar lifted his baseball cap and shook his thinning hair. "And something awful in the way of homesick."

"I told you it's creepy when you do that, right?" Heather slid her finger across the handle of the spatula, catching the glaze that had strayed from the blade. She licked it off with a perfunctory sucking sound and wiped it off on her white chef jacket.

"What?" Bolivar tapped his fingers on the stack of sheet pans and mixing bowls sitting at the edge of the sinks. "My Lord, what have you been baking down here?"

"I just got on shift an hour ago, so blame David," she said. "And you know what I mean."

"I'm sure I do not." Bolivar turned on the faucet, sending a spew of hot water down into the waiting sink, letting the crashing noise rumble between them.

"Yes, you do. Just because you're decades older than me doesn't mean

you have to play dumb. My baby sister plays dumb and it doesn't work for her, so it won't work for you."

Bolivar let the water run for a few more seconds, adding the mechanical hum of the soap dispenser to the sound of the pouring water. After a few moments, and after Heather had slid her cakes into the refrigerator, he flicked both off and watched the soapy water settle.

"I'm sorry," he said at last, picking up the largest mixing bowl, which was coated in some sort of peanut batter. Heather shrugged and glanced up as a ticket scraped out of the reader.

"Don't be sorry, just don't do it. You know, it's really weird when you read people's minds. So keep it to yourself or don't play dumb." She plucked the ticket from the machine. "Who the hell is ordering a cheese platter right now?"

"Not our Englishman," Bolivar said as he sloshed the bowl into the next sink. "He just ordered the penne and cod. I do wonder how long they extended his stay by."

"There you go again!" Heather waggled the large chef knife she had retrieved from the rack at him. Bolivar shrugged.

"By the way he looked, it must have been at least a week." He grabbed for a silver brillo pad on the far side of the stack of bowls, but missed and had to take a step forward. "His phone went off as I was leaving too— must have been his kids."

"You are without a doubt the creepiest old man I have ever met," Heather said, shaking her head as she set down the knife and moved to open another fridge. With a deft movement, she pulled out the sheet pan with all the blocks of cheese laid out in an irregular yellow grid. "And I really hate cheese."

"I'm sorry." Bolivar dunked another mixing bowl into the water. It made a disgusting slurping sound as he pushed it under.

"No, you're not," Heather said, setting the pan down and beginning to unwrap the individual parcels of cheese. "Or you shouldn't be. It's what you do, after all. It's kind of like your job."

"I meant about the cheese," Bolivar said over his shoulder, tossing the scrubber aside and beginning to haul the various bowls into the third sink, overfilled with pink sanitizer. "And my job is washing dishes."

Silence stagnated in the artificially cool air for a few minutes. Heather's knife clicked and groaned through the various densities of cheese. Somewhere in the room, a machine stopped grinding. Bolivar shook his head, thinking of the gentleman at the bar. He ground the silver mesh of the scrubber into a stubborn spot on a bread pan. At the corner of the table, the ticket machine croaked again.

"Dammit!" Heather let the knife clatter onto the cutting board. "I'm not done with the stupid cheese platter! If this how the rest of the night is

going to be..."

"It is Friday." Bolivar had stopped scrubbing and was staring into the sudsy water. Heather shot him a piercing glare.

"Yeah, well, doesn't mean I'm any happier about it. Aren't people at my age supposed to be partying or something on Fridays?" She began to rewrap the individual chunks strewn across the cutting board. "Isn't that what you did when you were young?"

"That was a long time ago," Bolivar sighed, looking up at the round-cheeked baker. "I find it hard to believe sometimes how old I am."

"What is this, your midlife crisis?" Heather rolled her eyes, depositing the cheeses carelessly back onto the pan and dropping a garnish on the finished platter. "You're almost two hundred freaking years old." Bolivar didn't say anything. "Well?"

"Well." He stopped washing and dumped the measuring cup he was holding into the third sink with a disproportionate splash. "Well, I feel old and useless. How's that? I feel useless and you're young and, well, not useless."

"You're not useless." Heather ripped the ticket from the machine and peered at it. "Crème brûlée, fantastic." She looked up. "You're a huge help here. You've been here, what, two months and already the cooks trust you the most."

"That's not the point." Bolivar was elbow-deep in the sanitizer, fishing for a mixing head.

"Then what's the point? You're telling me that, because I'm just out of high school, you feel useless?" Heather placed the cheese platter on the third tier of the metal rack behind Bolivar, who had found the missing implement and fairly threw it onto the drying space.

"Yes," he grunted. "It's nostalgia; you'll understand when you're my age. If I—"

"Whoa!" Heather poked her head out from behind the fridge door she had opened. "I doubt I'm going to live to be your age."

"Good point," Bolivar paused and then sighed, moving back to the first sink to begin the washing process all over again, this time with several small half-pans. "But you know, if I were your age, I would be able to *do* something. Something big, something to help more than just a handful of restaurant staff."

"Geez, thanks a lot," Heather said. Bolivar stopped scrubbing and hung his head. Heather snapped the refrigerator door shut and placed the crème brûlée in the center oval of a waiting dessert plate. She looked over at Bolivar, who hadn't moved. "What?"

"I'm sorry," he said at last, picking his head up and spinning on his heel to face her, his non-slip shoes protesting with a squeal. "I appreciate that I am of use here, but it's not the same." Heather shrugged.

"I wouldn't know." She reached under the table and picked up the blowtorch. "Why don't you help that British guy you were talking about?"

"Eh?" Bolivar picked his hat off his head and scratched his bald spot.

"Help the British guy," Heather repeated, reaching for the lighter that was hanging next to the spatulas and tongs on the rack above her. "You're clever, Mr. Folk Hero, you should be able to figure something out."

Bolivar placed his cap deliberately back on his head.

"Perhaps," he said slowly. "But where to start?" There was a hiss and a pop as Heather lit the blowtorch. Bolivar gave her a wary look. "It still makes me nervous when you do that."

Heather shrugged, painting the flame across the top of the yellow custard.

"You'll get over it."

*

The Smoked Cod Penne Carbonara had been delicious, but it hadn't made Christian any less homesick. When he finished, he ordered another gin and tonic and watched the light begin to fade away in the windows, blending the bar together and letting the atmosphere show through.

People had started to trickle in from the front. In response, waiters had issued forth to meet them from the back, at a doorway near where he sat, all clad in identical purple vests and white shirts. He had eaten his cod and penne automatically, watching Jim serve a couple who had seated themselves at the far end of the bar. His mind replayed the conversation he had had with his wife. She had sounded exhausted. They had kept it short, because he had been waiting on dinner, but he had promised to call back the next morning. He sighed and shook his gin and tonic, draining the last of the drink from between the fissures in the ice.

"What's eating at you?" Jim, the bartender, appeared in front of him. Christian set down his glass, another O-ring appearing beside the dozen already burned by moisture into his sliver of space on the countertop.

"Nothing major," he said.

Jim raised his thin white eyebrows before resting his elbows on the counter. "I don't think so," the bartender replied, lowering his voice a little. "I see almost every emotion sit in front of me at some point or other during the night. You seem put out."

Christian shrugged. "Fine, yes, I am." He sat a little straighter. "My stay here in your America has been extended by almost two weeks."

"Good for you?" Jim raised his eyebrows skeptically.

In response, Christian's fist thudded onto the polished dark wood surface in front of him, causing the ice to shift in his spent glass with an rustle. "Not so." He stated. "The almost two weeks more that I will be staying here happen to include my youngest daughter's birthday. She's turning five." He paused, shaking his head.

“Oh.”

“Yes.” Christian looked the bald bartender in the eye. “Additionally, I have been here almost a week already, moving from place to place. This town was supposed to be my last stop.”

“I’m very sorry.” Jim shook his head, straightening up. “I just thought I would ask.”

“No, no, thank you.” Christian sighed. “It needed to be said. I just have to explain it to my wife now...”

“I’m sure she’ll understand.” Jim glanced to his right as the ticket machine behind the bar scratched to life. “I don’t mean to pry, but what held you up here?”

The alcohol spurred another emphatic slam of his fist into the counter, which rustled again the ice in the glass. “My company,” he began, “makes cameras.”

“Cool,” Jim encouraged, glancing down at the slip.

“Usually. I’m here demonstrating new lens technology.”

“Alright.”

“And,” Christian sighed again, “as an afterthought, they decided to ship some examples over, just two days ago. So they postponed my meetings here for two weeks. I just have to stay.”

“Jackasses.” Jim turned and selected a bottle from the row behind him. “With your daughter’s birthday so close too.”

“It doesn’t get put on the company calendar,” Christian said.

Jim set the bottle on the counter. “Listen, since you’re going to be here for a while,” he said, reaching for the corkscrew and twisting it into the bottle’s top. “Do you have a business card? I know some people who might be able to...ah...” Jim creased his brow, giving a sharp pull, muting the resulting pop with his hand. Christian’s own hand moved down towards his wallet.

“Sure. I’m on a business trip. They almost drowned me in them.” He tossed down two slips of paper, with dark red lettering and blue stencils. “There you go, one for me and one for the company.”

“Fantastic.” Jim picked them up and examined them in the atmospheric glow of the bar. “I’ll keep it in mind.” He tucked them into the breast pocket of his vest.

“No problem.” Christian sighed. “Can I have some tea, maybe?”

Jim raised his eyebrows. “You don’t help the stereotype,” he said. Christian waved him away.

*

“Hey, Bol.” Jim’s thin face appeared in the space between the dish counter and the long setup that extended over the top of it. The rumps of the four different colored drink racks poked over the top like cheap page separators.

"Hello." Bolivar paused, one hand still on a trio of sauce-filmed dinner plates. "What did you find?"

"His trip's been extended by almost two weeks, because they're shipping him some new technology, or something, from England," Jim said, resting a hand on the shelf. "He's missing his daughter's birthday."

"Oh."

"That's what I said. But here," Jim rummaged with thin fingers in his vest pocket. "I got these." He handed Bolivar a pair of red-lettered business cards. Bolivar wiped his hands on his jeans and took them, looking them over in the bright, sterile light of the kitchen.

"Business cards," he mused.

"Yeah, well, gotta go. I hope those satisfy your curiosity." Jim's face disappeared. "I'll hook you up with another rack from this side."

"Thanks, Jim." Bolivar reached up to pull down the brown plastic rack Jim had indicated, before glancing behind him at Don, who was half-heartedly scrubbing a sizzle plate. "Don."

"Yeah?" The pock-faced young man looked up from the triple sinks in front of him, his hooded eyes blinking once as he focused on his co-worker.

"Can you watch this station?" Bolivar asked. Don glanced at the small pile of pans and plates at the end of his sink. "I'll take over there when I come back."

"Sure, okay." Don dropped a half-scrubbed pan into the water. "Where are you going?"

"To make a phone call," Bolivar said.

*

Somewhere in England a phone rang. A man had just loosened his belt after the night's late meal and was looking forward to untucking his shirt when the jangling of the white phone at his bedside table interrupted him.

"Hello?" he asked into the receiver. A nervous female voice greeted him. He paused to listen.

"Eliza, I don't discuss business this late." He glanced at the digital bedside clock. He usually didn't do much of anything this late, but for some reason the outing with his wife and her brother had become a catalogue of time-consuming annoyances. The voice persisted.

"What?" More noise. Her voice sounded a little whiney.

"They lost it? And they call us now?" He pushed off one shoe with the toe of his other. First, the brother had been late by almost a half hour, making excuses about bad traffic and a busy day at work. Personally, the man thought the brother a bit of a delinquent. Who would show up late to a five-star restaurant where your brother-in-law was treating?

"Right, America is a few hours behind. But they lost it?" His other shoe came off. Then to compound their troubles, and perhaps because of,

the brother's lateness, their reservation had been given away and they had to wait almost an hour to be seated.

"You're sure?" He gave into the urge and untucked his shirt, holding the phone against one shoulder as his other hand pulled the lavender fabric out of his pants. Once seated, they had been overlooked by the wait staff for a good twenty minutes and he finally had to pay a visit to the maitre d'.

"Okay, fine. They had the right stuff. This sets us back a little. Do we have anyone over there?" There was a pause and frantic clicking on the other end. Of course, if that had been the end, it might not have been so bad. But the brother had ordered his steak well-done, which guaranteed another long wait.

"Mr. Greene?" He chuckled. What a name. Better than his brother-in-law's. What kind of parent names their son Beverly and raises him to take his steak well-done? "Okay, well, have we changed Mr. Greene's flight yet?" More clicking.

"Yes, sir, just now." The man sighed, glancing at the clock again. That had been another wait and a half. It was almost like someone wanted to make him sit and listen to the idiot babble of his reluctant in-law.

"Okay, good. Tell him to ignore our last call and come home. By the time we can get another camera fitted and over there, it will be next month. Don't need to give anyone a free vacation." There was a nervous laugh on the other end.

"Is that all?" He sat on the edge of the bed, rolling his eyes. Knowing his luck tonight, it wasn't. On their way out of the restaurant, he had managed to lose his keys. More time wasted.

"Very well. Good night, Eliza." He hung up the white phone and shook his head. Maybe now, after all of this, the fates would let him get some sleep.

*

"Thanks." Bolivar stepped out of the dry storage doorway and back into the bakery, setting the small phone down next to the mixing machine where Heather was working. She glanced at him and stopped the beater.

"No problem. Have a nice chat?" She shoved the arm holding the beater up with a clunk, pulling the small utensil off the machine and letting it rest in the bowl of creamy white frosting.

"I did, actually." Bolivar stopped by the ovens and inhaled the scent of the baking bread. "Had a nice talk with a lovely British lady named Eliza." Heather made a choking sound, the mixing bowl nearly tumbling to the red-tiled floor.

"Jesus! You made a call to England?"

"That's where his company is," Bolivar said. Heather slammed the bowl down on the table and grabbed her phone, her thumb flying over the buttons.

"God, Bol! Did you think before you did that? It's going to cost a fortune!" She looked up from the phone, her cheeks flushed underneath her scattering of freckles.

"No, it won't." Bolivar leaned against the ovens, calmly looking at the flustered baker. "It doesn't even exist."

"What?" Heather tilted her head, narrowing her eyes.

Bolivar shrugged nonchalantly. "It doesn't exist. Did you finish checking your phone?"

Heather looked down at the sleek electronic device in her hand. Frantically, she pressed a few more buttons. Then she stopped. She pressed the buttons again, this time more slowly. She held up the phone and looked at Bolivar.

"Damn," she said.

Bolivar smiled. "See? If you get a bill, just give it to me. But you won't." He straightened and plucked a truffle from a sheet pan in front of him. Heather shook her head, shoving her phone back in her pocket.

"That's weird. Do you do stuff like this often?" she asked, turning back to the bowl.

"Whenever I need to," he said. "You take it well."

"Thanks," she replied, bent over her concoction. "How'd you get past chef for this long?"

Bolivar chuckled. "Chef is in the middle of preparing steak medallion entrées for a table of six." He did a little twirling dance to the doorway. "Now, I've got some scrubbing to attend to."

*

"Smile!"

Heather looked up from the crème brûlée she had just finished burning over, only to be blinded by a sudden flash of light.

"Ah!" She recoiled, throwing one arm up. "What the hell! I'm still holding the torch!"

"I waited until you turned it off," Bolivar said politely. "You know how nervous you make me when you are behind that thing."

"Doesn't make you any less of an asshole," Heather grumbled, stooping to put the blowtorch back under the table.

"Look what was in the British fellow's package." Bolivar was standing in the doorway to the bakery with his baseball cap on, but otherwise not outfitted for work. He was holding up a palm-sized, silver box of a camera, the front still aimed at Heather.

"What?" Heather straightened up, arching one eyebrow. "Didn't you take care of that last week?"

"Getting him home, yes." Bolivar stepped into the bakery, setting the camera down on the table opposite Heather and resting his hands on the edge. "But I had to make sure his package never arrived, or else suspicions

would be aroused.”

“Really?” Heather opened the fridge behind her, taking out a strawberry garnish and tossing it onto the freshly-seared crème brûlée. “So you just stole it?”

An annoyed look crossed Bolivar’s face. “No, not really,” he said. “I intercepted it.”

Heather raised her eyebrows. “You stole it.”

“No,” Bolivar said firmly. “I found the warehouse where it was being shipped from and offered to deliver it for them. They took me up on it.”

“So they just let you carry away their stuff?” Heather looked down at her dessert, frowning. “Where’d the chocolate go?”

“On your left; it was probably David working this morning.”

Bolivar pointed to the bottle of melted chocolate just above Heather’s head. “Admittedly,” he continued, “it helped I was driving a company van and wearing the appropriate outfit.”

“Now how the hell did you get those?” Heather looked crosswise at him, pausing with her hand and bottle only halfway down to the tabletop.

“Do you want me to tell you all my secrets?” Bolivar chuckled. “I used to do this stuff for a living, you know.”

“Fine, whatever. You are still the creepiest old man I’ve ever met.”

With a deft flick of her wrist, Heather painted a thin, abstract line of chocolate across the expanse of the dessert plate.

“So I decided to have some fun with the contents before I punched in.” Bolivar began to manipulate the buttons on the camera, with slow, arthritic movements of his fingers. Heather rolled her eyes.

“Here,” she said, reaching out with one hand while licking some extraneous chocolate syrup off the fingers of the other. Bolivar plunked the camera into her grip.

“Hello, Bol. Not goofing off too much, I hope.” The skinny, bald figure of Jim moved in through the doorway. Bolivar shrugged bashfully.

“I’ve got five minutes,” he said.

Jim patted him on the shoulder. “Just giving you a hard time.” He looked across the table at Heather. “Is that my crème brûlée?”

“Sure is.” Heather’s eyes were still on the camera. “Geez, Bol, why’d you have to snap it just then?”

“Snap what?” Jim asked.

Heather waved the camera. “Bol decided it would be funny to take a picture of me,” she said.

Jim raised his eyebrows. “Nice camera, where’d you get that?” He held his hand out and Heather dropped the device across the gnarly expanse of his palm.

“It was why the British gentleman was almost kept here,” Bolivar explained. “It is amazing. He almost missed his daughter’s birthday for

something that tiny.”

“Hey.” Heather shook her finger at him. “That tiny thing probably costs more than your paycheck.” Beside them, Jim shook his head.

“No kidding.” He whistled softly through his teeth, turning the silver device over in his hand. “It’s a nice picture though.”

Heather scowled at him. Bolivar took back the camera from Jim and looked down at the small, crisp digital screen. On it was an image of Heather, caught slightly bent over the small yellow custard, blowtorch in hand with a skeptical arch to her eyebrows. He tapped lightly on the glowing screen.

“It’s a keeper,” he said.

Heather rolled her eyes. “Boys are stupid.” She slid the crème brûlée onto the wire rack to her left. Jim gave a chuckle.

“We’re not boys,” he said, taking the plate in one hand. “Probably least of all Bol here.”

Bolivar shuffled his feet. “He got home alright?” he asked, looking up at Jim again.

Jim frowned. “I think so. He came in the next morning, I told you, right?” He took the dessert in both hands, looking at Bolivar more closely.

“Yes, yes, you did,” Bolivar conceded. “He ordered an omelet.”

“I think so.” Jim nodded slowly. “He was happy as anything. Wouldn’t stop talking about what he was going to bring back from America for his little girl’s birthday.”

“That’s sweet,” Heather said. The ticket machine croaked. “Goddamn it, do all these people eat dessert first or something?” She ripped the ticket out and glared at it.

Bolivar raised the camera, confused by the tiny buttons and unfamiliar symbols stamped on them. But he found the one that pulled the view out, encompassing the whole corner of the bakery, including Heather and Jim, who still had the crème brûlée couched in his hands. He hit the button on top, just as he had figured out on the way to work. The flash glared again and Heather cursed.

“What the hell, Bol!”

“Sorry,” he mumbled. Jim laughed.

“Are you going to make a documentary?” he asked, moving towards the door, the large oval plate now balanced professionally on one hand.

“Maybe.” He looked down at the fresh sliver of reality caught on the machine in his hands. Jim was smiling slightly, his eyebrows up, regarding him quizzically through the small screen. Heather was looking absently at the slip she had just tacked to the shelf above her head, her hand caught in mid-motion as it fell to join her other resting on the table.

“Just document me when I’m paying attention,” the real Heather grumbled. Bolivar nodded and looked up. Jim had left. The clock read five.

“I guess,” he said. “I have work to do.”

AGAINST THE WIND

WILL BUEGER

You wore only white,
As though color were some vile adulteration,
An intrusion into your otherwise organized existence.
And while you displayed the purity and flavor of porcelain,
You did nothing
As life's little luxuries killed time right before you.

But why would you?
You had never been formally introduced,
and so she meant little to you.
And while you have every right to destroy that which you created,
It's still terribly insensitive to wear white to a funeral.

Yet it was not your tactlessness which bothered me,
so much as your indifference to the Devil
in the details.
For as the world burned all around you,
Singing a song which singed any remnant of permanence,
All you could think to do was grab a peanut.

And in that moment I wanted to run towards you,
shoes on my hands and gloves on my feet,
asking if Charlemagne ever wet his bed
or if the rain ever wet the sea.

But such behavior would be terribly insensitive,
So instead I watched as you extended your arm forwards, reaching
Against the Wind,
and wondered why you ever started such a battle.

REMEMBERING THE DAY

TINA COCHRAN

I shied away, trying desperately to disappear into the hard, green tough pleather. The tough pleather scratched my skin as I pressed against the metal frame of the bus. I sat alone with my face turned away, my sightless stare aimed resolutely toward the neutral territory of the bus window. It happens every day. Our private Christian Academy lets out midafternoon. We all file on and race to our assigned seats, the personal throne waiting for each of us in Hell. Hell for me, anyway. It didn't matter that my brother and sisters sat just a few seats behind me. It didn't matter that I was only seven years old. Hell's judgment was final and terrifying.

They sat across the aisle, waiting. Like Cerberus, they stood to attention, watching. If my gaze staggered away from my glass-shrouded haven, they would pounce. They set their traps and cackled when I was caught. A loud noise, a sudden jerk, anything to succeed in breaking my concentration and they would preen. They won. They always did. Faces contorted, hands clutching hands, they would moan and point. The older would grip his wrist, his fingers clawed and the index completely folded in so that all that was visible was the base. Each gesture cut open a small wound that should never have been. Day after day I grew smaller, unable to escape. Too naïve to think anyone would save me. I knew there was no one to help. Everywhere I looked those two brothers were always there, dark-haired, dark-eyed, dark-minded.

*

I've always been. I will always be. I exist, not average, just unworthy. At least I thought so then. There is nothing special about a tomboyish bookworm. Our molds come in different forms but the final statue always gives off the same aura. We are average because of our lack of averageness. We are in almost every classroom, every crowd. Besides hair and eye color, nothing much changes. At least that's what we are told, if we are told. We are the quiet ones, soft-spoken and over-looked. We go to class, maybe run around the playground, but everyone around us fails to notice as we pass by. Why should they? We are like windows; people are always looking through us, no one bothers to examine the frame.

On one occasion and one occasion only are we deemed important enough to deserve their attention. More often than not, when that occasion comes to pass, we wish it hadn't. The hour of the hunters, the period of the prodders, no matter the group, the goal of the game is clear-cut and the players love to blindly slice away. We become a little more wall-flowery, intentional this time, and maybe, we begin to hope, a little more invisible. Eventually we reach the point where we pray they won't notice. We pray they won't care because we

know we are the easy targets.

*

A different school, public, that's close enough to walk to this time and things are settled. I've promised myself things will be different this time. I've made a few friends; friends who do not notice a tightly-curved left hand. I like them all the more for it. It is subconscious now, hiding it. If they don't know, they can't ask or poke or pull away. It's better if they don't notice. I've grown tired of trying to explain. So we run around the playground together. They flee and I give chase, and even though there is a distance; I can feel myself closing the gap. We don't talk about much, but that suits me. I'm not used to talking. I would not know what to say. I enjoy the silence now.

Almost three years have passed since I escaped from that place. No one knows, but my excitement toward changing schools wasn't because my one friend went to public school. I refused to let anyone see my weakness. I thought talking about it was taboo. No one in my family mentions it. My parents think that by transferring me they saved money; they don't know they saved a daughter too.

But people have started to notice again. I've grown too relaxed. The typical reactions ensue, but this time around I've found a few who surprised me. They didn't run and they didn't attack. I could not have been happier. I knew this place would be different. No one cares much about a maimed finger. In the end though, I was so busy watching the trenches I never thought to look up.

It was fourth grade, and like my classmates, I was enthralled by the chance to play an instrument. We were finally old enough to join the band. I wanted to play clarinet. It was beautiful. So I went along with a few others to meet the band instructor, Mr. Collins. He seemed nice enough. He had the five of us sit down in front of the various instruments on display. He went down the line asking the same thing. What do you want to play? Have you ever played before? Questions I am sure he memorized by rote. I fidgeted until he finally stopped in front of me.

"What do you want to play?" He tilted his balding head towards me.

"The clarinet," I answered. I was delighted when he pulled one off of his display. He held it out to me and I gloried in the feel of the long, lithe body in my hands. I was too caught up in the flowing curves of the mouthpiece to notice him pause.

"Perhaps another instrument would be better?" I looked up, surprised. His face was cold with forced sympathy. He arranged my now limp hands so my fingers were stretched over the instrument. Then withdrawing the clarinet, he lifted my left hand. "It will hold you back, you see. You won't be able to keep up with the others. You won't be as good. Try the trombone, it is better suited for you." He seemed pleased with himself. He had been selling his trombone pitch since we'd walked into the room.

It was the first time I had ever been told outright I wasn't good enough, but he was an adult. He had to be right...right? I dropped my chin and quietly agreed. I've gotten pretty good at keeping a blank face. I felt too ashamed to fight. My friends were watching. I kept my head down and spent the next year learning to hate the trombone as if it was, in some way, responsible for my pain. It would be six years before I would attempt to play any instrument again.

*

Anger is a heavy emotion. There are times when my mind races with it, the rage burning like a stick of dynamite soaked in jet fuel. My screaming thoughts begin to reverberate violently, raking across my mind. How many letters have I written only to hide them away? Letters to myself, letters to the world, letters of hatred and desperation fed by the insatiable desire to understand why. I lost my mind among those words; my composure ripped apart like an old receipt.

I hated life. I pitied myself. I raged in silence. The only witness to my loathing was destroyed the moment I shredded the pages. Paper was nothing to me but an innocent bystander in the way of my rampage. For all the times paper has acted as counselor, friend, confidante, instigator, and enemy, it kept its piece, and my peace. The others assumed I was all right, that I was happy. I was the quiet one, after all. What could I have to complain about? Everything in my world was pristine. I was the mature one. Interesting really, the way voluntary silence, suppressing the screams, can be misconstrued as maturity. No one would try to understand, for what was there to understand? And so paper and I, we kept up the act.

*

The images are blurry. The sounds are muffled. The memory as clear as the memory of an eighteen-month-old's can be. It is the memory that, normally, would have been forgotten had it not been gouged into my flesh. The room was small, but big enough for its purpose. Blindingly white despite the dust mites and fuzz balls that invaded the basement. Boxes, towers of them, were shoved haphazardly against the walls. To one side stood a woman, my mother, the vibrant red of her hair hanging loosely down her back. She stood at a table shuffling things about. I couldn't get her attention. She was working and I was bored.

The speckled white tiles were unfeeling, their cold touch stealing the heat from my small body. I moved across the room, falling about and stumbling. I liked the boxes. They were the perfect height. Blocks to play with, castle walls to scale and conquer. I deftly clambered up my cardboard stairs. At last I was victorious. I stared around my kingdom, my mother's ruby hair reflecting my gaze. I was bored again, almost, at least until I spotted my foe. Large, with sharp, jutting edges, my nemesis glared at me from its perch on the table closest to my tower. Its gnashing steel teeth gleaming under the flickering lights. The old-fashioned envelope sorter zoomed through its work.

I bravely stared the beast down as it continued to snap its jaws. I moved closer waiting for my chance. Endlessly, the soft clanging sang to me. I was bedazzled. Curiosity washed caution away like water running down a windowpane. I reached out, my left hand taking the lead. Closer and closer, I edged towards those hypnotizing, pearly envelopes. I pulled back in frustration. I was not close enough! I leaped the small chasm separating me from my comrade's playing field. Once fully seated on the soft white table. I reached once more. This time my goal was attainable. My hand easily passed into the mouth of the beast and, as its unforgiving jaws closed tight around me, I regained my senses. Rust-red burst into my vision as I listened to the whispered crunch of bone against bone. Shock overcame me for a fraction of a moment before, with my hand numb, I cried my very first and only audible scream. The darkness came quickly, temporarily releasing me from my physical pain.

A GHOST ON EARTH, ALIVE

NINA LI

She came upon the ball that night,
a ghost, on earth, alive.
She dressed in alabaster white;
they hushed when she arrived.

Whispers commenced with her
descent
as down the steps she came.
Unrivalled beauty, heaven sent?
Or truly hell her claim?

"I came upon your ball this night,
sorrow in this heart of mine.
Alas, I seek, an end to plight,
from fate of cruel design."

To her lament was no reply,
just silence in her midst.
She turned away with tears in eyes,
but turned again at this:

"Oh, sweet madam, to you I give
my vow to set you free.
If fail I do, then please forgive,
but what is it you need?"

"From you I ask a simple thing,
to save me from my fate.
A dance is all you'll need to win
a victory this date."

And when the dance began, she cast,
upon the lad, a spell.
Beyond the ballroom doors they passed
into the night from hell.

The man, once brave and chivalrous,
was nothing but a fool.
And by the moon so luminous,
he faced his fate so cruel.

She cried, "Naïve and youthful fool,
you and your silly vows!
To you, I give my fate so cruel
and life is mine for now."

Into the night the specter traipsed,
now made of flesh and bone.
The man she left with no escape;

*He came upon the ball that night,
a ghost, on earth, alive.
He dressed in alabaster white;
they hushed when he arrived.*

BIBLE BOLT

KATHLEEN FLYNN

The South will always confuse me. From its impressively continued grudge towards the North, to its insistence on maintaining a slow as molasses pace in everything but football, this should be a region that I should admire for its sheer stubbornness. Yet, there's something about this particular region that sets my teeth on edge, and I think I can pinpoint it to one specific aspect: the Bible Belt. There was something about having someone else's religion thrown constantly in my face that irritated me.

For most of my Easter recesses as a child, my family would pack our bags, hitch up our camper, and begin the long drive down to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. The half-sister I actually liked lived down there, and Myrtle Beach was always sunny and warm as opposed to Long Island, New York. Or so it seemed to me at the time.

One break about ten years ago, my parents decided that it was time for me to actually go out and meet some kids my age at the campground. While my brother picked up new friends at every place we stayed, I generally stuck close to my sister, spending most of the time riding my bike, going to the pool, or riding my bike to the pool. Tired of having me hang around the campsite, my parents sent me off to participate in a basketball tournament.

To explain a few things, Lakewood was not just a campground. In my mind, it was a super campground. There were over three hundred sites, each one slightly cramped and covered by a sheet of concrete. The idea for these beach resorts was to get as many people in one place as possible. This was not a campground for tenters; instead, it was a haven for those with huge RV's with multiple satellite dishes sprouting from their roofs and giant awnings encompassing the entire site. These coverings came in handy since there were maybe five trees total in this campground; my mother always requested a site with shade, but I can imagine the amusement of the receptionist on the other end of the line.

"Sure, honey, we'll put you in some shade," she would say, and we would always end up with a spot that had a bush which cast a small shadow on the ground and provided minimal privacy.

This campground was just one of three on a long stretch of road. Like its neighbors, Ocean Lakes and Pirateland, Lakewood had two pools (one of them indoors), the ubiquitous arcade with games from Whack-A-Mole to skee ball, a snack bar run by slow Southern old ladies, two miniature golf courses, a paddle-boat pond, a series of beachside condos, a dance hall, and a chapel. There were no Smokey the Bear signs in sight and marshmallows were hard to find. So, when I said that my parents sent me

down to the basketball court, I really meant that they ordered me to a fenced-in, five court complex complete with painted keys and three-point arches.

I reluctantly walked over, leaving my bike behind. I ended up on a team of misfits since most everybody else had already formed their three-person teams well beforehand. The games were soon underway, and it quickly became obvious that I wasn't making any friends. I was at that age where girls tend to be taller than boys—and I happened to be taller than most girls, so I towered over the competition. It wasn't exactly comforting to hear the fathers watching complain about the big girl crushing their sons, and I was anxious for the game to be over.

The tournament overseers finally called a timeout for what I thought was going to be a water break. It was a relatively hot day down in Myrtle Beach, and sweat was running down my face, leaving sticky trails behind. My hands were dirty from dribbling the basketball, so black smudges decorated my cheeks. I'd also added a few new bruises to my knees from diving after loose balls. Once that timeout was called, I made a beeline for the fence opening, only to reach it just as one of the organizers shut it. I stood there, stupefied.

The man, wearing a white Lakewood polo and khaki shorts, smiled and said, "If you could just take a seat over there, that'd be great."

I nodded warily and made my way over to where the other children were sitting under the basketball hoop. I sat down and pulled my knees against my chest, waiting for whatever was about to happen. I was hot, thirsty, alienated, and quickly becoming annoyed.

The man who had shut the gate walked out in front of us with a wide, toothy smile. His skin had a leathery texture with deep creases forming brackets around his mouth. Clearly, smiling was an almost permanent state for him. His sandy hair was brushed back off a receding hairline, probably covering an ever-growing bald spot. His blue polo shirt was resplendent, almost as pristine as the socks he wore with his sandals and had pulled up over his calves but not quite reaching his knees.

"How are all you kids doing today?" he asked.

We mumbled under our breaths, "Fine."

"That's great! Now, who wants a dollar?" he asked, pulling forth a crisp one dollar bill from his pocket. A young tan boy sitting in the front jumped up and grabbed it, probably thinking of what ice cream flavor he could buy with that money. "See folks? Did you see how he jumped up and grabbed that dollar? Now, that's how God wants you to accept him. Have y'all found Jesus, kids? Well, I'm going to tell you how the Lord came into my life. It started one day as I was walking along this very beach..."

He then proceeded to tell us how Jesus walked into his life and made him a Born-Again Christian, changing his life forever. I'm pretty sure I sat there, mouth open in horror as I realized what exactly I had gotten myself into. This was not the simple three-on-three tournament I had originally

signed up for; no, this was Baptist basketball, and I wanted no part of it.

I'd grown up in a town so Catholic, that two churches on the same block were required to serve the entire population. I'd gone to Catholic school, played CYO basketball, and was in a Girl Scout troop that regularly completed badges that involved further devotion to the Virgin Mary. When I was much younger, I'd convinced myself that there were only Catholics and those Catholics came in two forms: Italian and Irish. Later, as I started playing intramural soccer, I heard about Jewish traditions and even thought there might theoretically be other Christian sects. But up until now, I'd remained secure and untouched in my insular world.

Therefore, this religious interlude in the basketball tournament came as a complete shock. Once the tournament was over, I wandered back to the campsite in a daze. My mom noticed the perplexed expression on my face and came over to me, worried. "Kathleen, what happened?"

I looked up at her. "Mom, they tried to make me like Jesus."

"Kathleen, you go to Church, and it's Easter. Of course you like Jesus," she said in her best Mom voice. She wore her usual camping attire: a sleeveless pink button-down blouse with a pair of jean shorts. On her feet were the Bass flipflops she purchased every year. I'm almost positive her closet is home to many a worn-through pair of thong sandals given her tendency to throw nothing out. Her skin was already freckling, too, tanning at a faster rate than mine ever would; I'd inherited the fair Irish skin and burned at the first graze of a sunbeam. A practical pair of sunglasses perched above the Convey nose, which my brother had gotten from her. The glasses continued to slide down its long, flat surface, interrupting her task at hand.

"But Mom, this was a completely different Jesus. He's weird. He walks around on the beach and makes people like him."

My mother glared at me and went back to chopping up the boiled Easter eggs she was making into a colorful salad for my dad. "Stop being ridiculous."

I'm sure that my mother, being the deeply religious woman she is, was annoyed with my cavalier treatment towards Jesus. She made sure we attended Mass each Sunday, and there would be times when we were camping that we'd travel for hours searching for a Catholic Mass; whenever that happened, we'd end up saying a few Hail Marys or Our Fathers in the van. It wasn't exactly the most sacred space, with the portable toilet by one seat and the television looking down at us in the place of honor, but it made do. My father rarely accompanied us on these missions to find a place to worship. He had been previously married and had obtained a divorce and not an annulment as the Church required; as a result, he was no longer able to receive communion at Mass. When he and my mom were first married, my mother stopped going to Mass for fear that by marrying someone who had

been theoretically excommunicated from the Church, she had been tarred with the same brush. She and my father didn't even have a religious ceremony for their wedding and instead were married in their home. After speaking with a local priest, however, she went back to attending church services, my father frequently going with her only to stand in the back as the rest of the congregation shuffled forward to receive the Eucharist.

That experience definitely opened up my mind to the possibility of different Christian groups, let alone different religions. To me, Christian equaled Catholic. While Catholicism is the largest sect of Christianity in the United States, there are many more Protestants when all the different branches are taken into consideration. When I went back home, I suddenly realized the reason our church didn't use what I thought was the small chapel across the street from St. Aidan's "upper school." It wasn't a Catholic chapel but an Episcopal church that held services every Sunday. I also realized that the kids who attended the public school next to ours weren't all Catholic and that a bar mitzvah was not someplace where adults went to drink. I went from being a completely ignorant child to a somewhat informed but still confused "tween."

My mother had wanted to instill a deep connection to our Catholic background and insisted on sending us to the parochial despite the high tuition prices coupled with the extreme school taxes that went hand and hand with living on Long Island. A big part of my family's faith was quietly worshipping. We weren't "holy rollers," as my mom would say; instead, it was almost as if my mother had taken to heart the line of scripture from Matthew 6:5: "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men." To my family, prayer and religion was a private affair marked by quests for local churches and quiet prayers murmured before bedtime. Even in our home church, we sat in the left transept, which was largely filled with similar people. These people were not the heads of the CYO program or the Rosary Society or the St. Aidan's PTA; instead, they were the regulars, the ones who attended Mass each Sunday with little fanfare. My parents felt comfortable with these people, and they quickly became the individuals that, along with my parents, I modeled my own life of faith. As a result, I was almost completely unprepared for the events in Lakewood where the people wore their Baptist affiliation like I wore my Virgin Mary Girl Scout badges.

But the South was someplace I'd never understand. The next time we drove down was not around a major Christian holiday. It was simply part of our summer vacation. This time, I noticed a few things. Before, counting the signs for Pedro's Fireworks at South of the Border was the highlight of my trip; now, I noticed that for every "Pedro's Weather Report: Chili Today, Hot Tamale" sign, there was a "Jesus Saves" or "Buckle up; God is watching" one. We'd drive by three crosses arranged like the ones I'd see at Church for

Good Friday, followed by signs for the nearest location where friends in Christ could gather. And finally, when we pulled in Lakewood for yet another stay, I saw that beneath the "Welcome, Families" billboard was a quote from scripture that they changed every day.

Needless to say, I avoided all basketball tournaments during that stay. As years went by, my family gradually began to prefer the Pirateland campground with its lazy river pool and secular environment. There were only so many times my parents could enjoy staying next to youth groups singing hymns around the campfire into the night. Life was a little less awkward when my mother was allowed to stop explaining to the women that she'd met by the pool or the laundromat why we would not be attending the sunrise service that morning. As the years went by and spring sports began to dominate those Easter breaks, we stopped heading down to Myrtle Beach and it turned out to be a fortunate decision.

Each Easter, I'd pull out my pastel, flower-smothered dress while my brother was stuffed into a sports jacket as my mom attempted to thread a tie around his neck. I'd buckle my white dress shoes that would immediately get smudged when I stepped out of the trailer. We'd then get into our giant blue van and head down to the Myrtle Beach Convention Center which the small, local Catholic church would rent out for Easter. The overwhelming number of tourists just could not be accommodated within the small confines of the tiny building. We'd sit in the stands as the priest stood down below, championship banners from various sports teams at odds with the lilies and imported crucifix the church had brought in. It was a nice, if not weird, Easter Sunday. But that quickly came to an end when the Convention Center chose to rent out the arena to an entirely different event: the state cheerleading competition. I'll admit that I was much more comfortable in my own church with its high ceilings and robin-egg blue walls. And this building was large enough to fit the thousand or so worshippers that turned out for Easter Sunday. Yet the South continued to fascinate me.

While I don't fully understand the so-called "Bible Belt," I can appreciate Southerners' devotion. When describing why religion was so prevalent in his novels that were set in the South, William Faulkner simply said, "It's just there." He made it sound like it would be impossible to not include this aspect in his work, and, based on the environment in which he chose to set his plots, I can completely understand.

According to the United States census, nearly 86% of people living in the South believe in God. The majority of these people can be Southern Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, Episcopalian, or Pentecostal. Historians have cited the importance of the South as a stronghold for the Anglican religion largely because the later shifts of immigration did not settle there. Of the largely Catholic or Jewish immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, few chose to put down roots in the South,

instead settling in the large industrial cities of the North. And although there are regions in the South that are not dominated by Protestantism (like Florida and areas surrounding New Orleans), religion is one of the dominant characteristics of the South. Southerners often used their religion to, as one historian says, defend "The South' itself because attacks against it were as often based on morality as on economics, politics, or other rationales." Also, the South was a strong breeding ground for spirituality with the influence of the religious systems of Native Americans and African Americans on styles of worship and mourning rites. Religion became part of the South's identity and, for better or worse, just one aspect that determined how the rest of the country views it.

From what I have seen, Southerners embrace this stereotype with a relish that almost reaches Paula Deen's love of butter. I can't say that they are unfriendly; rather some of the most outgoing individuals I've met have hailed from the Sun Belt. But I have always had an aversion to people wishing to knock me over the head with a Bible, even in my own denomination. Personally, I blame this on Frank Emmanuel from first grade who tried to give me a saint trading card, an action which all the other students were quick to ridicule as I uncomfortably put the Saint Catherine of Sienna card back in its laminated slot. As I moved on to high school, I continued to practice my brand of Catholicism which called for a great deal of questioning and unwilling participation. While I attended Catholic high school, I chose the so-called "public school with uniforms," the institution that did not get recognized by the local newspaper for its pilgrimage to the movie theater on Good Friday to see Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*. As I grew older, I stopped resenting the pageantry and total predictability of the Catholic Mass. I enjoyed my religion classes and became a Eucharistic minister my senior year, but I lacked a distinct enthusiasm for participating in the various Right to Life and Mission Clubs my school sponsored. Once I moved on to college, I relished the notion that I could now choose if I would attend Mass or not, recklessly uncaring if this was, technically, a venial sin. My stance on religion even caused a rift between myself and my freshman roommate; she had looked forward to sharing a room with a fellow Catholic and tried relentlessly during the first few weeks to convince me to go with her to the Newman Society meetings and Mass during the weekdays. It was not until she stopped asking me to go with her that I began to attend Mass again, sitting in the back of the chapel at the far end of one pew. My faith actually became a big part of how I finally became comfortable at Gettysburg College; that hour of repeated actions that once irked me to no end now provided an hour of meditation and prayer that I realized I needed. While I signed up to read scripture during the liturgy from time to time, I never became fully involved with the community, instead preferring to sit in my pew and read along with the priest in the weekly missalatte. Gettysburg

became an important place for my faith formation, building on the foundation my mother had anticipated when I was only in kindergarten.

Given that I presently attend college near one of the largest battlefields, it should hardly surprise me that the Civil War was a large part of the formation of the South's religious consciousness and the Southern Baptist denomination in particular. The Southern Baptist denomination was formed in the heat of the abolitionist movement as its Northern counterpart adamantly refused to allow its congregation to own slaves. As the war progressed, more and more Confederate soldiers became Southern Baptists. Yet the South's loss in the war nearly destroyed this Christian denomination as the Northern Baptists swooped in with the carpetbaggers and preachers could only speak from the pulpit if they swore they had never supported the Confederacy. As a result, Southern Baptists and Protestant Christianity became a large part of regional identity. According to one *TIME* magazine article, Southern Baptists churches were closely connected to "high-decibel evangelism and opposition to the Pope, Darwin, smoking, dancing, and drinking." Even as late as the 1960s, there was a definite negative attitude towards Catholicism in the South, a perspective that came into the national view when John F. Kennedy, a Catholic from Boston, ran for President. Wallie Criswell, pastor of a Baptist Church in Texas, expressed an opinion that was only slightly more extreme than those of his brethren.

"Catholicism," he said, "is a political system that, like an octopus, covers the entire world and threatens our basic freedoms." In the fifty years since that election, the South has been in a slow cycle of change.

If the basketball tournament I participated in was any indication, the South still has some tendencies towards over-enthusiastic evangelism. Yet, there has been a growing movement towards acceptance of other religions in the South. Part of this has to do with the splintering of Southern Baptists and part has to do with the influx of immigrants from Central America and the snowbirds from up north questing for warmth and sunshine. There are now larger communities of Catholics, Hindus, and Muslims. David Goldfield, a professor of religion at University of North Carolina, states, "Given the widespread respect that religion holds in the region, in some instances it is easier to practice a minority religion. Even so, given the historic religious and ethnic conformity of the South, toleration may not translate to respect." While my religion may be tolerated, there will be people convinced that I'm looking for a religious upgrade when I go to the South.

I saw this attitude two years ago, the last time my family went down to Myrtle Beach to visit my sister. It was in the middle of the summer and Pirateland was booked while Lakewood still had several vacancies. So we pulled our trailer into its campsite and looked at the announcement of activities in the hope of something to do. And we found it under the heading of "Entertainment." There was no description, just a pair of jolly

music notes bobbing next to the bolded words. My mom decided that, as a form of family bonding, we'd all attend. We walked over to the activity hall and took our seats at a picnic table covered in the typical red and white checkered cloth.

A group of five men stood at the front of the room, right next to the microphone and giant bingo machine. They wore khaki shorts and collared shirts; at first, I couldn't understand why they were wearing shoestrings around their necks, but my mom impatiently explained that they were bolo ties and were popular. The lady at the piano started to play and the men began to sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." The piano sounded like every church instrument of its ilk; it tinkered as the woman merrily plunked her plump fingers along the ivory keys. The instrument was slightly out of tune, making the hymns all the more jarring. At first, I mostly resented missing a specific episode of a television show for this hokey sing-along. Then I realized something. Once again, this campground was guilty of extreme false advertising.

The people at the front would pause in between each song for a brief prayer. One woman stood over by the unused bingo cage, her blonde hair curled tightly against her temples while her pink lipstick was nearly fluorescent in the dim lighting. A small child sat next to her, singing softly along to the hymns while a rowdy group of teenagers hung out in the back, their rapidly chewing mouths indicating they were busy with gum and not with the word of God. The men leading the group had fine tenor voices yet the words they were singing barely even made sense to me at the time. In fact, as I looked back on this event, I could barely make out the details. It was as if I had survived a traumatic event, and it wasn't until I thought back carefully that the memories began to reform, crashing in like a graceless tsunami.

"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" was followed by "Amazing Grace," which was followed by a bunch of hymns I didn't know. My family was the only group at the "Entertainment" event not singing along. The people at the front had zeroed in on us; their khaki and blue polo shirt uniforms were as frightening as any cult garb. They all had smiles plastered on their faces as well as an unnerving tendency of ending every sentence with a heartfelt, "Amen!" As they moved towards us, my mom decided that a better form of family bonding would be bolting from the activity pavilion. She gripped my shoulder, muttered something along the lines of the hamburgers burning, and we made our escape. We left the pavilion behind, the cheerful music clanking in our wake.

The trend of bolting from Bible thumpers while visiting the South has become a bit of a family tradition. Since then, I've learned to tolerate the religious over-exuberance found in the South. But I will admit, that like David Goldfield said, toleration doesn't exactly translate to respect.

GHAZAL FOR EMPTINESS

ERIC KOZLIK

I began the solemn emptying of myself
When the summer moon was just a day past full.

Fine crumbs of something sweet fall on the floor;
My pitcher's empty, but your glass is full.

This deprivation is my only sin—
My days of abstinence and fast are full.

The furnace goes untended in your wake;
When I was molten, the die and cast were full.

Look to the sea, my dear, the Dutchman sails—
Your cabin's empty, but my masts are full.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Josiah Adlon is a junior studying studio art. A lot of his inspiration comes from street art, the idea of art being out there for the public and reclaiming the public space from corporations really gets his creativity flowing. His plan is to get a Masters in Fine Arts and work to propel not only his own work, but political works which question what it means to be an American and what it means to be human. Art is his expression and his escape. It has more power than the sword or the pen.

Matt Barrett is a senior English major whose work has appeared once before in *The Mercury*. He is looking for a job, so if you like his story and you know anyone who will hire this potentially homeless Gettysburg grad, please give him a call.

Will Buerger was born to a mother as well as a father, and takes pride in this unique aspect of his conception. He has been known to engage in various repetitive behaviors, such as the confinement and subsequent release of air within his lungs. Some things make him happy, while others do not. The act of summarizing a living creature in one hundred words or less falls under the latter category, as it is a task he finds particularly perturbing.

Austin Clark: "My alphabet starts with this letter called yuzz. It's the letter I use to spell yuzz-a-ma-tuzz. You'll be sort of surprised what there is to be found once you go beyond Z and start poking around." - Dr. Seuss

Tina Cochran is a fairly active writer. Her focus has been primarily on the novel and she has several underway, but within the past two or three years, she has begun to appreciate the value and structure of the short story. Flash fiction is a personal favorite. She plans to finish two of her novels this year and hopes to see both of them published one day.

Loren Deron is a junior Psychology major with Writing and Neuroscience minors. Loren has spent her last semester studying positive psychology in Denmark and is excited to share positive psychology with Gettysburg College. Loren would like to incorporate her passion for writing with her passion for psychology in the future. Loren enjoys spending time cooking with her Farmhouse cats, doing yoga, and adventuring around the world. Loren would like to give a shout out to her family, and two very special people, Kerry O'Connor and Steve Krzyzanowski. She would also like to thank her creative writing professor, Sheila Mulligan, for all of her help and support in writing. Peace and Love!

Elizabeth Elliott is a sophomore History major with minors in Civil War

Era Studies and Writing. In addition to being on *The Mercury* staff, she is a writer for *The Forum* and a member of GBurg TV. Originally from Timonium, Maryland, she enjoys reading, watching movies, and being a goofball.

Brian Engelsma is a junior from Orono, Minnesota. He is a Political Science and Philosophy double major who enjoys traveling and learning new languages. Brian also regularly writes for both *The Gettysburgian* and *The Forum*. After graduating he hopes to join the Peace Corps.

Rebecca Fisher is a student from Hackensack, New Jersey. She has very much been involved in art her whole life and is delighted to have her art be displayed for the first time in *The Mercury*.

Kathleen Flynn is a senior English major with a Writing minor. She's going to Disney World right after graduation and she might just move into Cinderella's castle and never leave.

Emily Francisco is a freshman from Chelmsford, Massachusetts. While currently Undeclared, she will most likely major in English with a Writing Concentration and double minor in Art History and Studio Art. A fan of Victorian literature, her piece "Only Heathcliff" was inspired by Emily Brontë's classic *Wuthering Heights*.

Aimee Griffin is an English and Philosophy major with a Theatre minor, which means she looks forward to her future of living in a cardboard box in a major city somewhere. When she's not writing, she can at times be found acting or directing with the Theatre department, or copyediting for *The Gettysburgian* and taking a stand against the overuse and abuse of the word "however" by aspiring journalists. In her free time she drinks a lot of tea so she can be more like the English people with whom she studied abroad and hopes to one day live among, and is an advocate for the right of gingers to be loved.

Preston Hartwick is a junior with geographic ADD. He grew up in Hong Kong and recently returned from studying abroad in Egypt, disappointed that he missed out on the revolution. He has a double major in Globalization Studies and Studio Art.

Megan Hilands is a junior from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, majoring in English with a Writing Concentration and Music. She is a violinist and participates in various ensembles in the Sunderman Conservatory of Music. Megan is also currently spending the semester studying in Vienna, Austria.

Lynn Jorden is a senior Political Science major and Writing minor from

Cheyenne, Wyoming. After graduation she hopes to either work for a member of Congress or go out on the campaign trail. She is a former president of College Democrats and is also involved in theatre. Her favorite things include sharks, Mystery Science Theatre 3000, and the United States Senate, especially the quorum calls.

Minah Kim is a freshman double-majoring in English and Art History. She enjoys long walks on the beach (preferably not exceeding an hour) and candlelit dinners (though this is still up for debate). She enjoys sleeping, eating, drawing, reading and writing—in that order. Her best friend at Gettysburg is Hannah Mikolajczyk, and although Minah isn't interested, Hannah definitely is.

Chandra Kirkland grew up in a solar-powered, dad-built house deep in the forest of Mifflin, Pennsylvania. She survived three brothers who taught her how to “be tough”, and she looked up to an older sister who inspired her to write stories. As an English minor at Gettysburg College, Chandra enjoys having the opportunity to share her work and improve it through the helpful eyes of her fellow writers.

Eric Kozlik is a senior this year. In his old age, he plans to take up knitting, canasta, and gumming Werther's hard candies. He is currently deciding between plot 756, which receives a good deal of foot traffic on Sundays, and plot 903, which boasts a lovely view of the tool shed. He thinks he would prefer a maple box to pine, and will not deign to be placed in an urn on some pretentious mantle. These mysteries and many others will be pondered over tonight's blue plate special.

Jessica Lee is a sophomore Environmental Studies major with a minor in Biology. She was born in Europe and has travelled extensively with her family, and at Gettysburg College she has continued to thoroughly enjoy meeting new people and exploring new places. Nature and the outdoors are her passion and she's happiest in the cold weather with her hiking boots and a warm coat! She was fortunate enough to travel to Colorado on an Environmental Science field course over the summer of 2010 with Professor Randy Wilson. The memories of that experience, and all her adventures, have been captured through photographs.

Nina Li is a senior and an Individual major at Gettysburg College. She hopes to pursue a career in the health professions after graduation.

Meredith MacLauchlan is a sophomore Studio Art major with a concentration in Photography in addition to an Anthropology minor. She took this digital photograph while partaking in two of her favorite passions: traveling and taking pictures! The subject caught her eye when she was

walking down an alley in Lucca, Italy over the summer. She is excited for the opportunity to study abroad in Florence next semester where she will continue pursuing her love of art!

Dinesh Manandhar is a Mathematics major with a Chemistry and Biology double minor. Nevertheless, she is really into arts, especially sketching and paintings. This past summer she took an acrylic painting course in Nepal, and towards the end started her “Nepali Girls” piece. She didn’t get to completely finish this painting over the summer. But she is happy with how much she got done. Last but not the least, she would really want to thank her mentor, Ms. Bidhata K.C. who helped her transition into the world of acrylic.

Sabrina Marinelli is a junior Biology major who enjoys writing as a hobby. Her family and friends inspire her creativity, and she wants to thank them in supporting her in all her writing endeavors.

Sarah Parker is a member of the class of 2013. She is an English major with a Writing Concentration. Her story, “Purple Mary Janes,” is one of the pieces to be selected for *The Mercury* fiction genre.

Kristen Rivoli is a junior Psychology major and Art History minor at Gettysburg College. She wrote the piece “Red Ivy” for an Introduction to Creative Writing course. Her photograph “Viridian Apparatus” appeared in the 2009 edition of *The Mercury*.

Gus Ryer is a senior at Gettysburg College. A member of GRAB staff, he loves the outdoors and is from Connecticut.

Hannah Sawyer is one of those assholes who gets to the library before everyone else and takes the best table and leaves her stuff there all day, but is never actually there. She is also a junior English major.

Gregory Scheiber is a sophomore English major with a Writing Concentration and a Secondary Education minor. He has been published before in the pages of not only his high school literary magazine, “Kaleidoscope,” but also in the brand new “Rat Tail Detail” magazine. Greg is actively involved in the theatre, building sets and doing tech crews on numerous shows as well as acting, directing, and playwriting and attending the campus’s Playwright’s Circle and the Poetry Circle, the latter of which he founded alongside peers Emily Francisco and Steve Krzyzanowski. When he is not doing oodles of homework, Greg likes to play video games, spend time getting lost on his bike, swapping poems with Mike Rebesch, or just plain goofing off.

Gabriella Schiro is a junior Studio Art major at Gettysburg College. She

is passionate about many forms of the arts, but visual art—particularly oil painting—is her favorite outlet for creativity. Often romantic and emotional, her pieces are inspired by nature, relationships, and spiritual experiences.

Angela Schmidt is from Morris Plains, NJ. She is the third child from her family to go to Gettysburg College. Her anticipated major is Health Science. Some of the activities that she enjoys doing are: drawing, painting, writing her own music and songs, writing for the Science, Money, and Technology section of the Gettysburg College newspaper, *The Gettysburgian*; singing in the advanced ensemble, Women's Choir; and volunteering for the Legos Robotics Program which is geared to helping third through sixth grade girls. She has loved her Gettysburg experience thus far and looks forward to the upcoming years!

Paul Tanasoca is a senior from Toms River, New Jersey. As an individual major in film, he plans on moving to California to pursue a career as a film editor. He is an active member of the track team, and in his spare time, he enjoys surfing, making films, and recording rap songs.

Sara Thomas is a soon-to-be Gettysburg College alumna. She wishes she never had to sleep and often pretends she doesn't for days at a time. She loves dancing, especially ballet and hip-hop, and the GC Dance Ensemble! Every time she sees a dog, she gets overly excited, jumps up and down, and squeezes it really hard. Her favorite food is macaroni and cheese. She finds homemade and Kraft equally delicious, which is good because she can only make the latter herself. She is a terrible cook but a good friend! Come be her friend and make her some delicious food. Also, be her friend on Foursquare because she is obsessed with checking-in everywhere she goes. She is currently the mayor of Writing House, Plank, Breidenbaugh, Mama's and some other cool places.

Sara Tower is a junior from Northfield, MA. She is an avid foodie and aspiring farmer, and often finds herself in rapture of the compost pile in her backyard. She is majoring in Globalization and Environmental Studies and studied abroad in India in Fall 2010. Her photograph was taken on a boat in the (Mother) Ganges, in Varana.

Kelly Weitner is a senior Economics major with a penchant for poetry. She can usually be found napping, sitting in The Commons or sewing costumes in the basement of Kline Theatre.

Liz Williams is a sophomore majoring in English with a Writing Concentration. She enjoys Red Sox games, late night shifts at the library, New York bagels, and Russian novels. She was born and raised in Clinton, NY and her favorite band is the Super Furry Animals.

Ben Winston is a senior graduating from Gettysburg College with a major in Computer Science and a minor in Creative Writing. He enjoys writing programs and strumming guitar chords just as much as he enjoys writing stories and poems.

Charles Zange is a History and French double major from northern Illinois. He works part time in the Theatre Department on campus and is pursuing his education to become a professor of History.

Ashleigh Zicker is a sophomore from Toms River, New Jersey with an Economics major and a Business minor. She is an active member of APO, Painted Turtle Farm, and plays intramural athletics. Photography and photo manipulating are her favorite hobbies. Her piece "Luray Caverns" is of Dream Lake in Virginia, a spring of water that perfectly reflects a ceiling of stalactites.

JUDGE BIOGRAPHIES

Tony Fasciano was recently named the editor-in-chief of the longstanding international online journalism magazine: *In The Fray*. In 2010 he founded Digital Americana, a first in literary magazines made for tablet devices. In 2006 he co-founded the production company, Hand Fashioned Films, with acclaimed producer, Hani Salama (*Control Room*, 2004) through which they have produced a series of non-fiction projects for film & television. He is a writer, editor, and filmmaker and currently resides in New York City.

Kelly Freeburger graduated from Gettysburg College in December 2008. After graduation she briefly worked as a copy editor for the Johns Hopkins University, and currently holds a sales position at The Sheridan Press where *The Mercury* is printed.

Torrey Kist was born and raised in Washington DC. Her mother is a fine arts painter- a great influence on Kist. Works have been exhibited in galleries in Maryland, Georgia, Pennsylvania, as well as the Savannah/Hilton Head International Airport and in several spaces throughout her current city of Savannah, GA. In addition to various local publications, T.S. was nationally published in *New American Paintings* in 2006. After graduating Gettysburg College with a B.A. in visual arts, T.S. attended Savannah College of Art & Design where she received a Masters in Fine Arts Painting (MFA). Until recently, T.S. worked as a full time arts educator for a local Savannah art museum designing curriculum for toddlers through seniors and special needs outreach audiences. Currently, Kist teaches youth art classes from her home studio in Savannah in addition to pursuing her painting career. Works range from acrylic and graphite on paper to installations of latex on walls to mixed media/dimension works with cables and technological media.
www.tskist.com

Marisa Trettel graduated from Gettysburg College in May of 2009. While studying at Gettysburg, she served as Co-Editor-in-Chief of *The Mercury* in 2008-2009. After graduation, she moved to Silver Spring, Maryland, which is literally one block from the line between Maryland and Washington, D.C. She currently teaches ninth and twelfth grade English at Springbrook High School.

Acknowledgements

The staff of *The Mercury* would like to pay special recognition to the President's Office and President Riggs, the Provost's Office and Provost Zappe, Student Senate, and the English Department for their contribution to *The Mercury*. We would also like to thank Linda Miller for all her help and advice. We would also like to extend sincere gratitude to Kim Kupperman and Mark Drew from *The Gettysburg Review* for donating their time and expertise. We would also like to warmly thank Kate Brautigam from IKON for her help with the production process.

Another note of gratitude goes out to the magazine's advisor, Kathryn Rhett, for her support and guidance throughout the publication process.

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 eclectic publication that reflects the creative side of the student body of Gettysburg College.

Finally, a very special thank you to everyone at IKON for helping *The Mercury* go green for the third time. This year's publication has been printed in its entirety on paper from sustainable-harvest forests with biodegradable ink. We believe this change reflects the increased global awareness of the campus community.

