



# THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

---

Year 2008


Article 1

---

1-1-2008

## The Mercury 2008

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

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

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

(2015) "The Mercury 2008," *The Mercury*: Year 2008, Article 1.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2008/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](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# The Mercury 2008

**Keywords**

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

**Author Bio**

# THE MERCURY



THE ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE  
OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

2008

# THE MERCURY

2008

---

## EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Kelly Bennett and Marilyn Springer

## MANAGING EDITOR

Nathan Storey

## PRODUCTION EDITORS

Amy Butcher and Geoffrey Calver

## NON-FICTION EDITOR

Jennifer Bray

## POETRY EDITOR

Caleb Baker

## FICTION EDITOR

Marisa Trettel

## ART EDITOR

Dori Zweig

## STAFF

Gwendolyn Brown, Katharine Ashley Davis, Rebecca Driscoll, Kevin Ellis,  
Kathleen Flynn, Sarah Flynn, Angela Hartman, Lynn Jorden,  
Chelsea Kasten, Austin Mallick, Lucy Matthews, Aubrey Siebenaller,  
Chris Stiteler, Leah Tuscano, Patricia Veasey, Kaitlyn Vredenburg,  
Victoria West, Benjamin Winston

## FACULTY ADVISORS

Kathryn Rhett

Fred Leebron

with additional thanks to Nadine Meyer and Mark Drew

## COVER ARTWORK

The 2008 cover artwork is by Anukul Gurung

Cover Picture: *Generally Geometric*, Photograph, January 2008.



# The Mercury: An Overview

## HISTORY AND PROCESS

- ◇ *The Mercury* is a student-run art and literary magazine released each April and has been published at Gettysburg College annually since 1899.
- ◇ All students of the college are invited to participate on the staff and to submit their work for possible publication.
- ◇ This year, *The Mercury* received over 400 submissions from 120 contributors.
- ◇ Editors are elected each year by the entire staff.
- ◇ Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis throughout the fall and are reviewed and chosen anonymously by the staff.

## EVENTS

- ◇ *The Mercury* holds a reception for staff, advisors, and contributors each spring in honor of the release of the magazine.
- ◇ Throughout the year, *The Mercury* staff participates in several campus events such as the Appreciation of the Arts Common Hour, Midnight Madness, Activities Fair and Get Acquainted Day.

## 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 2008: Dave Kiefaber for Non-Fiction, Freya Gibbon for Poetry, Lauren Passell for Fiction and Molly Hutton for Art.
- ◇ Mercury Prize winning titles are bolded in the Table of Contents of this issue.
- ◇ This year's winners are Evan Crowder '08 for Non-Fiction, Amy Butcher '09 for Poetry, Alison McCabe '08 for Fiction, and Sara Thomas '11 for Art.

## PUBLISHING

- ◇ The Mercury was printed this year by Graphics Universal, Inc. in Greencastle, Pennsylvania. We would like to thank them for their support this year.
- ◇ The production staff is deeply indebted to IKON, specifically Kate Brautigam and Corey Chong, for the time they devoted to this issue.

# Table of Contents

## NON-FICTION

*KENNY G, DANIELLE AND THE CURRY CLOSET, 5*  
*NEÜHUETTEN WANDERINGS, 16*  
*MEADOWS, GRASS, BICYCLE, 26*  
*ON TUNDERGARTH FARM, 44*  
*FOUR LEAVES OF RENEWED LUCK, 51*  
*REFLECTIONS ON A SIXTH-GRADE TRAGEDY, 84*  
*GROWING OUT OF PAMLICO, 91*  
*SILLY YAKS, 98*  
*MON DEUXIEME PAYS, 106*  
*ANTIQUE PORCELAIN, 111*  
*BLACK AND FREE, 117*

*EVAN CROWDER*  
*ALEXANDER ENGLERT*  
*NAZLI İNAL*  
*GEOFFREY CALVER*  
*MERRILL FORTIER*  
*MARILYN SPRINGER*  
*DESIREE KOSER*  
*JESSICA COX*  
*AMY BUTCHER*  
*EVAN CROWDER*  
*AMANDA HARLACHER*

## POETRY

*TEACH, 13*  
*STELLAR MATTER, 17*  
*THE BATTLE OF JESCO AN' NORMA JEAN, 38*  
*FISHER GIRL FROM PICARDY, 46*  
*A ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE, 54*  
*9 WAYS OF LOOKING AT A CUP OF COFFEE, 76*  
*THE AFGHAN GIRL, 82*  
*PORCH-LIT PERSEPHONE, 89*  
*INVINCIBLY VULNERABLE, 104*  
*TRIUMPH OF DEATH, 115*

*AMY BUTCHER*  
*ERIC KOZLIK*  
*KRISCINDA MEADOWS*  
*MARIANNE FLORENTINO*  
*CHRISTINE HABERSAAT*  
*LAURA BARONE*  
*STEPHANIE ALLEN*  
*ALEXANDER ENGLERT*  
*JEREMY ARNOLD*  
*KRISCINDA MEADOWS*

## FICTION

ONE NIGHT, 14

DAY IN THE LIFE, 18

TUESDAY MORNING, 35

CROSSING THE STREET, 39

THE ALABASTER KING, 47

BOYS WILL BE BOYS, 71

THE SALESMAN, 78

GREY MANNA, 110

ALISON McCABE

JOHN PITTENGER

JENNIFER LOGAN

ERIC CANZANO

NICHOLAS ROSENBERGER

AMY BUTCHER

ZACHARY SHEDLESKI

ALEXANDER ENGLERT

## ART

RAINY, 55

ANCIENT MODERNITY, 56

SELF-PORTRAIT, 57

INSIDE THE ARTIST'S STUDIO, 58

DYLAN IN A GESTURE, 59

SIT AND WATCH LIFE ROLL BY, 60

GEISHA AT THE FESTIVAL OF AGES, 61

STILL LIFE WITH CHAIR, SHIRT, JACKET, SHOES AND UMBRELLA, 62

FLAWLESS POISE, 63

THE BIKE, 64

DIRTY BATH, 65

FOGGY SUNRISE, 66

WAR AND "EQUALITY", 67

BOWLS, 68

SOUTHSTREET SEAPORT BOATS, 69

MULTIPLE MAC PERSPECTIVES, 70

SARA THOMAS

VICTORIA WEST

THOMAS HANVEY

MARILYN SPRINGER

CHELSEA KASTEN

ANDREW MATURO

AMANDA WARD

ANUKUL GURUNG

DESIREE KOSER

MEREDITH McENTEE

KELLY BENNETT

CHRISTOPHER MERKLE

BRIAN MENNA

CASSANDRA DeStefano

ALLISON SCHOFIELD

VICTORIA WEST

Kenny G, Danielle and the Curry Closet

The man driving the car speaks no English. We had found his number on a billboard at the airport, and in need of a ride across the Bay Bridge out of Oakland, we decided to call it. Jenn and I waited on the sidewalk outside of the airport in the crisp Californian air for half an hour before "Bapu" arrived. "Where you go?" he asks us through his thick matted beard.

"17-50 Buena Vista West," Jenn tells him.

"No Oakland?"

"San Francisco." Bapu nods. The cloth seats belch the thick scent of sandalwood into the air. His car smells like an Indian bazaar, and as it flies down the highway, an exhilarating burst of adrenaline begins coursing its way through my veins.

Jenn and I make the pilgrimage in the last week of summer. It is a religious journey for us; Muslims go to Mecca, Rednecks go to Graceland and Potheads like us go to the Haight. We have reserved a flat for ten days in the lower Haight, and Bapu is taking us to get the key. The sun is just beginning to set as we make our way deeper into the concrete canyons of the city.

"Where?" Bapu asks, simply.

"17-50 Buena Vista West."

"Buena Vista?"

"Yes," Jenn replies. A look of fear begins to work its way into her eyes as Bapu gets onto the phone with his wife. A flood of Hindi bursts into the cab, filling it with a melodic sound, unlike the purring motors of the creeping caravan of cars around us.

"Here." Bapu looks at me with the phone in his outstretched hand. Not knowing quite what he wants, I put the phone to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Hi. Where do you want to go?" The woman on the other end asks. She sounds like a female version of Bapu.

"17-50 Buena Vista West."

"Buena Vista West?" she asks.

"Yes."

"Let me talk to the driver." I hand the phone back to Bapu. He goes back to talking in his native tongue. Jenn pulls her long black hair back and ties it up in a ponytail. I can see her pale face start to turn red. Jenn is incredibly patient, but only to a point. I have known this since she became my best friend and, now, roommate. She is taking me to San Francisco for a vacation; one she tells me is much needed since my parents' recent divorce.

"Do you think he knows where we're going?" she asks.

His car smells like an Indian bazaar, and as it flies down the highway, an exhilarating burst of adrenaline begins coursing its way through my veins.



"I hope so." In one quick motion, Bapu hangs up the phone and slams on the brakes in the middle of a three-lane street. He throws the Town Car into reverse, and turns the wheels sharply. The inertia throws Jenn toward me in the back seat, and as he puts the car in drive, she is pushed back. I look to the left, and in horror, I see three lanes of speeding traffic barreling towards the car.

"Okay," Bapu says, burning his tires on the pavement. The car lurches forward. Bapu has just executed a three-point turn in heavy traffic. I look at Jenn, and I can see we are both thinking the same thing: How do we get out of this car?

Over the next hour, I talk to Bapu's wife three more times on the phone: once more about the office where we will get the key, and twice more about the location of our flat. We got into Bapu's car at six-thirty. It's nine when we get out.. He has finally brought us to 370 Waller (at Fillmore.) He helps us with our bags, placing them on the curb. The ride is a flat rate of fifty dollars. Bapu gets a poor tip.

"So what kind of place is this?" I ask Jenn while she puts the key in the door.

"It's like a time-share thing, except they rent it out by the week."

"It's someone's house then?"

"I don't know, I guess. I found it online, it looks like a nice place," she says. The door opens to reveal a steep flight of wooden stairs. At the top, we enter into a new realm. This is no vacation house. This is someone's house. A huge piece of tile greets us, adorned with a hand-painted picture of sandals on it: "MAHALO for removing your slippahs. (But don't take mo bettah ones when you leave.)" Right next to the tile is a large frame full of various pictures. Jenn goes into the living room and turns a light on. I look at the pictures. There's a middle-aged man; a typical white stiff, dressed head to toe in Banana Republic with square framed glasses. His wife is Filipino, her dark hair and amber skin match her wedding dress perfectly. Their daughter looks like a shrunken version of the wife. Even though she's probably five, she looks like she's thirty. She sits unwrapping a toy on Christmas not with the excited face of a child, but with the worn face of an adult.

Jenn goes upstairs. I look around the living room, until I hear her voice from the second floor. "I get the master bedroom. Are you sleeping in Danielle's room or the other bedroom?"

"Who is Danielle?" I ask.

"Their daughter, I guess. There's a little girl's room up here and it says Danielle on the door." Danielle. I am not sure if I will feel comfortable sleeping in a five-year-old girl's room.

"I'll take the other one." Jenn's room is filled with pictures of the husband and wife, and in the master bathroom is a cross-stitched wedding present. It says "Jim and Leni" with the date of their wedding on it. "Enjoy Jim and Leni's wedding bed," I tell her. She laughs as she puts her clothes in the drawers on top of Leni's flowered sun dresses.

The next morning is misty and cool. My window is open, and as I slowly awaken, the sounds of buses and car horns fill the room. We get dressed quickly, and get coffee on our way up Haight street. I look down the road, and seeing the

hills climb into the fog, I feel enchanted. It is unlike any other place I have been before. Everything seems magical in the mist. I have been to many cities, but San Francisco is the first one other than New York that I have visited without my parents.

Walking past Buena Vista Park, we see the road where Bapu made his precise three-point turn. Ahead of us is the fabled intersection of Haight and Ashbury. I feel my heart start to race—I will be standing in the same place as the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane and so many others. When I arrive at the intersection, a wave of disappointment washes over me. There is a Ben and Jerry's ice cream stand to my right, a gift shop to my left, and two tourist traps across the street. "Is this what hippies do these days?" Jenn only shakes her head. Teenagers in designer clothing carry shopping bags amongst the bums on the streets, and as I survey the scene, I feel the magic fading. Jenn decides to go into an anarchist book store and I go sit on a bench at the end of Buena Vista Park.

I hear footsteps behind me. Before I turn around, a dark-skinned man with a pencil-thin moustache, dressed in a stained sweatshirt and knit cap is sitting next to me.

"Hey man, where you from?" I can sense he knows I am an outsider.

"Pennsylvania."

"Shit, that's a long way brother. What are you doing out here?"

"Vacation," I tell him.

"I'm from Long Beach myself. Here on a spiritual quest."

"Oh yeah?"

"You ever heard of chakras?" He starts rubbing his hands together, and stares down at the people walking by on the street. I look at him, but he doesn't look me in the eye.

"Yeah, I've heard of that. It's a spiritual thing, right?"

"Yeah man, I'm trying to get my chakras back together. I was all fucked up in Long Beach. I was on drugs, you know, all that shit. But I got this book from a guy about chakras, and it all makes sense man, I've been really into the whole thing." His speech speeds up. "But I'm really here to get away from the dogs."

"Dogs?" I ask.

"You know. People who follow you around. They watch you living, just like that movie. You know, the Truman Show."

"That movie isn't real," I tell him.

"That's what they want you to think," Truman says. I see Jenn coming. "Hey man, you got any money you could spare? I need some food." I hand him a wadded up dollar bill in my pocket.

"Good luck," I say as I walk down the steps in front of the bench to meet Jenn. We walk toward the crosswalk, and across the street is a man in a huge winter coat. He begins to walk toward us. We try to talk to each other so the man doesn't try to speak to us. Having just met Truman, I do not want to deal with another bum.

"Give me twenty million dollars or I'll fucking kill you!" he yells. I freeze. Jenn laughs.

"Will you take a check?" she jokes.

"I'll take anything."

"Here's two bucks, I'll give you an I.O.U for the rest." Jenn extends her arm and the man takes the money. Jenn has been in New York City all of her life. She is the Socrates of street-smart. She has been drinking in city bars since she was fourteen, dodging late night bums, trying to make her train; she knows how to handle these types of situations. I do not.

"Thanks, here's a joke. The Pope and a rabbi are in a bar; then Michael Jackson walks in and says, 'I'm in the wrong fucking joke.'" He shoves the bills in his pocket and pushes past us.

"Thanks for not killing us," I call out.

"Don't mention it," he says.

We go to a hookah bar. Jenn chooses cotton candy tobacco, and we sit at high tables in the lounge. An Asian man is sitting at the table next to us, with a bucket of bubbles and a glass tube. He dips one end of the glass tube in the bubbles while dragging on the cloth-covered hookah hose, and, putting his mouth to the clean end of the tube, blows bubbles of opaque smoke. They ascend slowly, and then drift gently to the floor, where they explode into puffs of smoke and little puddles of soap.

"We need to get some weed."

"I know. What should we do?"

"We could ask a bum," she suggests.

"You think?"

"Sure, I did it all the time back in New York." I take sixty dollars out of the ATM in the hookah bar as Jenn pays for the tobacco. We shuffle back outside. The sun has come out, and dozens of homeless people are asleep on the grass-covered hillside of Buena Vista Park across the street.

"It looks like the bum beaches of Normandy over there," I tell her. Jenn laughs, and we make our way down the Haight, looking for the best vagrant for our job.

We make choosing our bum a serious task—he would be holding our money after all. Anyone who looks like they have a love of liquor is immediately passed upon. Packs of hungry bums are also eliminated, purely out of strength in numbers.

We meet Kenny G in front of the Army-Navy store. He is sitting on the ground in torn corduroys, a hemp hat and ratty hooded sweatshirt, holding a three-week-old puppy. When we see the puppy, Jenn immediately sits down next to Kenny G. She hands him a dollar, and takes the puppy into her arms, holding the shivering ball of black fuzz close to her chest.

We talk to Kenny G for a while. He tells us he has a bum girlfriend, who also has a bum puppy. He says she is on the next block over, begging as well. "Do you know where we can get some bud?" Jenn asks. I am taken aback by this. I have never seen drugs discussed so openly between complete strangers on the street before.

"Sure, I could do that for you," Kenny G says, smiling. Kenny G has one tooth in the front of his mouth. Half of a second is attached to the first one at the bottom, magically held on by months of plaque build-up. "Which one of you wants

to come with me?" I volunteer before Jenn has the chance. "Okay," he says. "Grab my bag and the puppy, and follow me." I put one of his canvas duffle bags on my back and take the squirming puppy into my arms. Jenn goes into the Army-Navy store to buy the puppy a blanket as I follow Kenny G down Haight Street.

"You from around here?" Kenny G asks.

"Nope, just on vacation from Pennsylvania."

"Right on."

"Why do they call you Kenny G?" I ask him.

"They say I look like him. Only I'm more handsome." He smiles, exposing his tooth and a half. He tells me he's twenty, that his mother threw him out of the house three years ago, and that he's been backpacking up the coast ever since. His girlfriend is in the same position, and they love each other. He tells me how hard each day is; showering in a McDonald's bathroom, finding food, finding a safe place to sleep. I see Kenny G is no different than me; we both have eyes, ears, hands, feet, tongues, minds, ideas, hopes, dreams, fears, desires and passions.

He drops his duffle bag on the grass at the end of Golden Gate Park.

"Wait here," he says.

"Do you need the money?" I ask.

"No, it's called pan-handling. I'll bring you the weed, you pay me if you want the bag that I bring back." I nod and Kenny G is off toward a copse of trees across the field from me. I sit with his bags and his puppy in my arms. I have a sweatshirt on, but I look decidedly un-homeless. A tattered man comes up and squats down in front of me.

"You need some H?" he asks quietly.

"No man, I'm just here for some weed."

"You need help with that?"

"No, I'm all set," I tell him.

"You need a pipe to smoke that weed out of?"

"Get out of here," I tell the man. I imagine a head shop and a pharmacy inside of his jacket, all organized and neatly laid out within the velveteen lining. Kenny G emerges from the trees not a moment to soon. He reaches into his sweatshirt pocket and throws a sandwich bag down on the ground in front of me in plain view. I scramble to pick it up, and I shove it in my pocket as fast as I can.

"Forty-five if you like what you see."

"I only have three twenties."

"I can spot you five if you want to break that after we get out of here." I agree and Kenny G takes my money and five of his own dollars and sets off toward the dealer in the trees. When he returns, I hand him twenty dollars and tell him to keep the change. We meet Jenn again in front of the Army-Navy, and she gives him a quilt she has just purchased. Kenny G wraps the puppy in the blanket, and thanks us. I shake his hand and wish him well. We set off toward Jim and Leni's house. We never see Kenny G again.

We rush to the nearest head shop and buy a cheap pipe, so we can go home to get high. It's like being in our parent's house. We take care to smoke only in the bathroom, with the tub full of bath oil and a toilet paper roll stuffed with dryer sheets to kill the smell. We decide to go get dinner at a glorified gay bar. We



are the only straight people there, and the thrill of feeling like a foreigner in my own land is intoxicating.

We smoke a cigarette on the curb while waiting for the taxi. A man in designer jeans and a pink bathrobe rounds the corner. He has green towel wrapped around his head. He isn't wearing shoes. "Hey pal, can I leech a cigarette?" he asks me. I hand him a cigarette, and he tears off the filter. He puts it in his mouth backward, cotton hanging from the end. "Can I get a light?" I light the cotton, hoping he will leave. He takes a huge drag of the filter and nonchalantly blows it into the night air. "How's your brother?" he asks.

"I'm sorry?" I look over at him. He is staring blankly into the street.

"You know, the one who collects all of the different beers and the fancy bags."

"I don't have a brother like that, man," I tell him. He is unconvinced.

"You know, the one in the navy," he says, stepping closer to me. I can see the wrinkles in Jenn's forehead as she lifts her brows at him.

"Nope, I don't have a brother in the navy." He comes even closer.

"Hm. I could have sworn that was you. Thanks for the cigarette." He walks into the street, crossing without looking.

The next night, we decide to go to a nightclub. We take a taxi to Harrison Street. It drops us off in front of a plain white building marked simply "Supperclub." When the doors open, the two-floor main room is flooded in blue light. There are no tables in the club. The wall is lined entirely with beds. The hostess leads us to a king-size bed with a lap table on it, and instructs us to take off our shoes and climb in. Our waitress is dressed up like a groupie from a Cure concert, and when she speaks, we see she is European. The first rule of drinking underage in public, according to Jenn, is finding a foreign server. She does not ask for our licenses, and brings us back our drinks.

In a matter of minutes, our table is littered with empty glasses. We decide to go outside and smoke a cigarette. Jenn's speech is slurred, and she tells me I am completely drunk. A woman walks up to us in a black dress. I look at her. She is good looking. We talk to her for what seems like half an hour. Jenn flips her cigarette into the street and I follow suit. We go back inside. "She wasn't bad looking." I say. Jenn laughs.

"That was a man." I laugh along with her. She suggests hitting on the waitress, since we both know she is a woman.

The next night is our last night in San Francisco. We have tickets to a musical: "Love, Janis." We decide it's the perfect way to end our trip. We have saved some of the weed we bought from Kenny G, and we decide to smoke it when we get home. We go to dinner first, at a Japanese restaurant called Ozumo. We drink a bottle of sake in shots, and we are both drunk when we get to the musical. We stumble through the lobby of the Marines' Memorial Theater, up to the box office. Janis's concert posters from the Fillmore are projected onto the walls of the lobby on top of framed pictures of Marines raising the flag on Mt. Suribachi, landing on beaches and fighting in Vietnam. We overhear a Marine in a military ball cap talking about what a disgrace it is to show a musical about a hippie in their theater. We take our seats, and when the curtain comes up, my soul explodes.

Janis comes on stage and a guitarist in a Nehru jacket with long hair rips into the riff starting "Piece of my Heart;" I feel a chill rush through my body. This is it. This is what I wanted to find in San Francisco. I didn't want the commercialism of the Haight, I didn't want the gift shops. I wanted that feeling that was the Haight in the 1960's. I wanted to feel like we were all one. Now, during the concert, I know our journey is complete. We are both transfixed, and neither of us say a word until we get outside. Drunk with ecstasy, we get into a cab.

We're let off at the corner of Waller and Fillmore, and I go to the head shop on the corner to pick up a cigar we can gut. (There are more head shops in San Francisco than churches in the South.) We race up the stairs, past Jim and Leni's tile. We don't remove our slippers. Jenn breaks up the weed, and I roll it into a blunt.

"Where are we going to do this?" She asks. "The bathroom fan will totally blow this right into the gap where their neighbors live."

"We should smoke it in Danielle's closet," I say. The allure of doing drugs in a five-year-old girl's closet is too much for either of us to resist. We work feverishly, taking Danielle's clothes out and laying them on her bed. Taking everything out that could hold a scent; the closet is threadbare in ten minutes. We sit on the floor inside and shut the door. I light the blunt, and coughing, hand it to Jenn. She takes a hit and coughs too.

"You know, this shit's pretty good," she says.

"And we got it off a bum," I add. We both start cracking up as we pass the blunt back and forth.

"We are retarded," I hear her say in the dark.

"Why is that," I say as the glowing ember is passed back to me.

"This closet has a slotted door."

"So it does." Jenn opens up the door, and the whole room is filled with smoke.

"Nothing we can do about it now," she says. We finish the blunt and put it out. The room is still filled with an illegitimate haze—the stuffed animals on the shelf look at us, expressing their disapproval at our treatment of their master's room. I bring in a fan and cover it with dryer sheets and we go downstairs to smoke a cigarette.

I stand out in the cool air, staring at the stars on our last night. Everything feels right with the world. I had come to the Haight expecting it would be just like it was in 1967. I expected everything to be as I had seen it in pictures and heard about it on television. It was nothing like I expected in a way that pleased me. I feel like I am part of this city. I am Bapu, I am Kenny G, I am Janis, Jenn and Truman.

"We should totally steal this sign," Jenn says, pointing to the plastic fake street sign on Danielle's door. She opens it, and the scent of marijuana pours out of the room like an oven full of cookies being opened for the first time. We panic. "Our flight leaves in five hours," Jenn screams. I run downstairs and start tearing Jim and Leni's house apart, trying to find an air freshener. There is nothing. I run back upstairs, sick with panic.

"There's nothing! Nothing!" I yell. My eyes are massive fireballs, and the

fact that I am incredibly high doesn't help us in solving our dilemma. Jenn is in Danielle's room, hanging the clothes in the closet.

"Here, do this, I will try to figure something out," Jenn says. I take over in Danielle's room as Jenn darts down the stairs. I finish with the closet and rush downstairs to find her. It smells like an Indian feast is being prepared. "They had curry powder," Jenn says as she works a wooden spoon around the edge of a skillet. "This will cover up anything." The scent of the curry drifts up from the stove, quickly filling the house. She grabs a trivet and leaps up the stairs with the hot pan. She brings it into the room, sets it on the desk and shuts the door. "Let's hope that works."

In one hour, curry magic has taken effect. Danielle's room smells like a Tandoor instead of a Hendrix concert. At ease, we finally go to sleep.

The next morning, we stand on the curb in front of 370 Waller St., the home of Jim and Leni; the home of Danielle and her curry closet.

"What a vacation," I say as the taxi pulls up.

"You're telling me." The trunk pops open, and a man in a turban with a thick beard gets out to help us with our luggage.

"Where you want to go?" The man asks in a thick Indian accent.

Teach

*(after Philip Schultz's "Sick")*

Every Wednesday afternoon for one fall  
I volunteered in an elementary school  
For children whose parents couldn't get them right away.  
Seven- to nine-year-olds, they wrote about  
Palms caked in grease, mothers swatting at bottoms  
To scare the devil away, fishing behind the post office  
For rainbow trout and rusted cans of tuna,  
Why envy came in Pokémon cards and orange sneakers—  
Until the program ended, and when I asked, "What happens to the children?"  
The principal smiled, faintly, as if to say, "Oh dear, you're done. Be done."  
"The vision is dying," I said to him, "Please, taste the truth."  
But his eyes glazed over from lack of sleep, or lack of hope,  
And I left feeling I might've helped them  
If only I had asked to stay.



## One Night

I'm going to think about the sun and the morning and a beach and some sand and a mermaid and a dolphin and the vacation that Benny and I never took to Fiji, because private practice shrinks have got the money, just not the time.

This will be the perfect opportunity to see to it that Benny never breathes again. He is sleeping, which is most ideal because his eyes are closed and so he will not see the glimmer of a steak knife as it catches light from the circular bulbs that frame the medicine cabinet behind the bathroom door left slightly ajar. Or if he wakes up, which Benny rarely does, it might be an excellent chance to follow his stagger to the toilet, watch him fill the bowl with ripe lemon piss, and then kick the back of his knees in such a way that will make his head dunk in. He will be too tired, and now too stunned, to notice the hairdryer balancing on the edge of the toilet seat, plugged in and blowing cool refreshing air through his thinning black hair until he throws his left shoulder up to fight the pressure of two palms pushing him down. And the hairdryer might then fall in and there might be a splash and maybe a quick singe. Or if he doesn't wake up to take a leak, and the steak knives are still in the dishwasher, the navy blue sock resting at the foot of the bed, the one he wears with black dress pants, might make its way around his oversized Adam's apple and to the nape of his neck so that Benny might even throw in a few raspy last words *what the fuck*, eloquent no doubt, before his heart quits on him.

And what is that? I'll ask no one in particular. Oh, and here I'll sigh, that's silence.

It will be best that Benny never breathes again because Benny snores. It is a sleep-stopping snore, the type of snore that doesn't quite cut it as background noise, that is so irregular, so unpredictable, that you must stay awake all eight hours every night to find out just what will happen next with the snore, whether it will whistle or rattle, puff or heave. It is the type of snore that reminds you of all the reasons why it is best to sleep alone, and leads you to forget all the reasons why you once wished to share a night, or two or three or eternal matrimony with another. Benny's snore reminds you of the sex you are no longer getting, and makes you wonder when was the last time Benny even breathed heavy in bed while still awake.

When was the last time Benny walked around the house naked? This used to be one of Benny's favorite things to do because he used to say *I like when I catch you checking out my goliath* or *Who you looking at?* and smirk. Sometimes Benny would sit at the dinner table naked and comment on how delicious the chicken pot pie and bagged salad tasted. One time Benny threw a cooked carrot at my shirt just so he could take it off to *get out the stain* and bring me to the bedroom.

Now Benny snores. And drools. And takes up more than half the bed. And sleeps with flannel boxers on. And doesn't get up until nine and I have to

be in the office by 8:45. And, dammit goddammit it's 6:16. And this is really the perfect opportunity.

And here is where you raise an eyebrow or two and say *she can't be serious*.

I'm going to get up now and walk around and head to the kitchen for something to eat because this is what you do when you cannot stand the warthog beside you hogging the king-size comforter. I'm going to walk into the kitchen and pour myself a glass of water and I'm going to rest my hand on my hip and my glass on the counter for a moment while I eye the bottle of ammonia behind the breadbox. Ammonia gets even the most difficult grime off of tiles. And I'm going to think about the tiles and the way they look more orange than tan when the sunlight hits them at this hour. I'm going to think about the sun and the morning and a beach and some sand and a mermaid and a dolphin and the vacation that Benny and I never took to Fiji, because private practice shrinks have got the money, just not the time. And I'm going to think of how Benny tells me how he tells all of his clients that a second honeymoon will save their marriage, that a spontaneous getaway will combat anxiety, cure insomnia, reduce gray hairs. *Dinner out might save you two*, he says, or *have you tried Viagra, whipped cream? Drink some tea and relax*, he says, *I'm sure I can help you through this*.

I'm going to drink some water and I'm going to stand in the kitchen alone and I'm going to hear Benny snort then hiss. I'm going to bring him a drink too, and wake him up with kisses. See that, I'll say, I'm sweet.

I'm in the kitchen and I'm staring at the tiles and the counter with the breadbox and I'm pouring Benny a drink and bringing it to the bedroom. I'm on the bed again and he's snoring and so I'm sure of this. He is lying on his side, his back to me, and I notice the black corkscrew hairs trickling down his spine from neck to tailbone, thicker at each end. I smile at the tufts on each shoulder blade, at the gummy, pale flesh underneath them. Once when Benny was a few years younger and his hair inches longer, I made him two pigtails, mixing strands of the fine head hair with the coarser curls sprouting from each side of his neck toward the end of the braids. He posed for pictures, standing like Marilyn Monroe. Now I'm on the bed and his back is to me. I smile at these thick, black hairs and so I'm sure of this. I'm kissing his neck and his shoulder blades and I'm impressed that I haven't forgotten how to make the kisses light and almost romantic. The snoring stops. Benny is awake and I am offering him his glass of water.

And here is where it ends and you say *what the*

And here is where Benny smiles and takes the glass and takes a sip and spits every bit out because three parts ammonia and one part water is really quite tough to swallow. And now Benny widens his eyes like he hates himself more than he hates me at this moment because he was about to, was excited to kiss my neck too.

Neuhütten Wanderings

# Removed by the Request of the Author

## Stellar Matter

*"We are bits of stellar matter that got cold by accident,  
bits of star gone wrong." –Sir Arthur Eddington*

\*\*\*\*\*

How dark a day it must have been  
(for we seemed so bright)  
wishing upon our lucky selves  
that we could have stayed~  
because the firmament is softer than it seems.

We spoke only in hushed flickers  
swallowed up by a deepening dusk  
waiting for night  
and the remaining tears of derision  
to shine coldly down from infinite cheeks  
on us prodigal suns.

(It was only light)  
Years ago, we were just a twinkle in someone's sky.  
I guess we got too real,  
too hot,  
burning a hole in the pocket of some deranged galaxy.

And, like so many Mercuries,  
We plummeted down as if some child  
had plucked the little wings from our sandals  
one by one  
(moon by sun)  
Just to send a thousand wishes  
simultaneously hurtling  
after the dizzying tails of our descent.

And now, at day's end,  
when we return to our singular craters,  
we silently pray for clouds  
lest we stare too intently  
at our own crystalline potential  
and wake the neighbors  
by glowing too brightly.



## Day in the Life

Before you talk down to us in other departments, why don't you try to get your own shit together?

The rings of the alarm clock pounded at the inside of his head. Remembering that he had already tried to hit the snooze once, he reluctantly rolled out of bed and allowed his shoulders to shudder as his feet touched the cold floor. Howard Pearlman could hear similar alarms blaring similar tunes in similar rooms all around him; the walls of the tiny studio apartment were like paper. Identical apartments, buildings full of them all lined up in neat little rows inside the left pelvis of a man named Paul. Howard realized that he was already late for work, cursed under his breath, and ran to get into the shower as he threw a couple slices of bread into the toaster and pressed the tab down, hoping that his breakfast would be ready by the time he got out.

He emerged from the shower minutes later wrapped in a towel, inhaling the thick blue smoke as the toaster consumed his well done bread. He ran over to pull the cord out of the wall, but not before his wet feet slid across the linoleum and his knee smashed directly into the handle of one of the cabinets under the sink. He cursed again, throwing the toast into the trash before limping to his dresser. Howard put on his standard outfit, with the khakis he had worn the day before, the blue short-sleeved dress shirt he had worn two days before, and the yellow clip-on tie he had worn every day before. Carefully, he combed his short salt and pepper hair straight back on his head, making a mental note to hit the gym that night as he looked with embarrassment at his torso in the mirror. He walked out of his apartment and down the stairs, nodding to the group of Achilles Heel coworkers who liked to carpool from the building next to his, and continued to his pale blue two-door compact. He got in, started the engine, and carefully pulled out of the small parking garage onto the spinal column of Paul Cornleaf.

The column was always a mess at this time of day, as all of the people in Howard's neighborhood behind Paul's left pelvis had more or less the same commute, up his back and dispersing into the various sectors of the body whenever the guys working the night shift in the brain determined that Paul had slept long enough and woke him up. Howard had one of the longest commutes of them all, as his office at Internal Censoring was located in a wing of the Brain Center, a small cube tucked into the middle of Paul's cerebellum. Howard pulled into the drive-thru coffee shop nestled between the two kidneys, got a large cup with cream and sugar, and carefully merged back onto the column.

Traffic was at a stand-still. Howard gingerly took the top off of the cup and tentatively began to take a first sip. He was instantly jerked forward as he heard his tail lights smash, hot coffee spilling down the front of his shirt and tie. Frantically, he pulled his shirt away from his body as he felt his skin burn, and

angrily looked into the rearview mirror. Pickup truck. Meant only one thing. Bicep guys. Howard had gone to high school with a few guys like that, and their prejudice toward the cerebral guys was legendary. The truck suddenly disappeared from his mirror, only to re-emerge at his side as it shot through a gap in traffic Howard had not even seen, which naturally closed back up the second he put his blinker on.

"Fuck you, Brain dork!" Howard heard fleetingly as the truck shot by him, the last glimpse he saw of it being the worn "I Don't Brake For Enzymes" bumper sticker on its rear. Howard half-opened his mouth to say something in return, but couldn't think of anything and of course they were already gone. He pressed his forehead to the steering wheel and sighed, only lifting his head when the traffic behind him honked to let him know the road was beginning to clear up ahead.

He took the exit at Paul's trapezius and pulled into the parking lot outside the Brain Center. All the good spots up front were always taken by the Ear and Eye guys, as they had to be there the second Paul woke up, lest he think he had gone deaf and blind in his sleep. Howard sighed, and continued to circle the lot. More spots than usual were taken, and he realized that Paul had a test in Psychology today, so all the Critical Thinking guys and some Memory temps had been called in. He gave up trying to find a spot, pulled back into the road, and parked next to a meter, filling it with as many quarters as he could find on the floor of his car. He grabbed his briefcase and trudged towards the main entrance of the Center. He opened the door and saw his boss Pierce was waiting for him in the lobby.

"Pearlman! Where the fuck have you been? We've already had Paul tell some broad on his floor that maybe she should throw some makeup on before she talks to him! You come in late like this just one more time, and I'll move you to the Excretory Division! Final Preparatory line!"

"Sorry, sir, it won't happen again. There was traffic, and I spilled my coff..."

"Never mind that!" Pierce cut him off, "Just get to work, God damn it!"

Howard shuffled to his office, opened the door, and sat down at the bare metal desk with a small monitor resting on it. His seat was metal with green padding, and besides the desk and chair the only other furniture in the room was a massive gray computer against the rear wall, its hundreds of yellow and red lights blinking rhythmically. Pausing to straighten the poster of a kitten hanging from a branch with "Hang In There!" emblazoned on it, Howard looked to his desk and made sure his Zen garden of sand and rocks was still sitting on his desk next to the blue Koosh ball. He sat down, reached into the drawer of the desk, pulled out a set of headphones and a microphone, plugged both into the huge computer, and put his head into his hands on the desk. Howard's job was unique within the company. In a conference room a couple of floors above him, whenever Paul had an interaction with another person, the Speech guys and the Information Processing boys would have a meeting and decide what they thought Paul should say. These guys were the cream of the moral crop, Boy Scouts, and thus would always be completely honest with whatever they felt Paul should say to whomever he was speaking with at the time.

Naturally, this was no way for someone to go through life. A person with

no Internal Censoring department would be a oneman emotional wrecking crew, leaving a trail of devastated fat women and acutely self-aware and semi-depressed teenagers with bad cases of acne in his wake. So Howard and the computer formed a defense against this. The guys upstairs would relay down to Howard through the headphones what they had in mind for Paul to say, he would speak it into the computer, and the computer would tell him through the headphones what Paul should actually say. Howard then relayed this to the guys working in the Larynx, and Paul would say the completed phrase. Paul's voice would come through into Howard's office via a loudspeaker tucked in a corner, so that Howard would know the computer's results had been successfully relayed. The monitor on his desk allowed him to see whatever the Eye guys were seeing up top. Thus, since Howard had not been at his station that morning, the computer was not manned, and Paul had told a girl in the dorm hallway that she should put some makeup on when really all he should have had to say was "Good Morning". The Speech and Info Processing guys were incapable of understanding these social graces, though, and within ten minutes of waking up Paul had severely insulted an acquaintance, all because of a little traffic on the spine.

The wall clock directly faced Howard as he sat at his desk. This was really the worst possible location for it, as it constantly taunted him. Every time he looked up it was right in his line of sight to remind him how little time had passed since the last time he checked. It was only 11:33 in the morning, and Paul hadn't said anything since the debacle in the hallway before Howard had gotten into work. He was now tangled up in his Psychology test, so there actually really wasn't a whole lot he could say at the present time.

Paul was a righty, so Denise from the Left Hand was on a break during the hand-written test and came up to see what was going on. Denise was a pretty, short brunette who loved to wear those knit sweaters with the fat, knit Halloween pumpkins or Christmas snowmen. She and Howard had dated for a while a few years back, and things were still just pretty weird between the two. They had both started out in the mail room of the nervous center, receiving, processing, and sending out the thousands of messages that everyone throughout the body sent up to the brain for confirmation. Howard had been promoted, and had broken up with Denise as he felt bigger and better things awaited him. Six years later, he was still stuck in middle management of the Brain while Denise was on the fast track in the muscular system. People were starting to whisper she was up for a promotion to the Right Hand soon.

"Hi, Howard! How have you been? How was your weekend?"

"Um, well, it's Friday, but it was nice. How have you been? Haven't seen you in a while, Denise."

"Oh, I've just been great. They guys who are gonna be in Ambidexterity finally finished their grad school degrees, so I think they're gonna have Paul start working on batting lefty soon so he can be a bigger asset on the intramural softball team."

"Oh man, that's great Denise, I'm really happy for you," Paul said through loosely clenched teeth, jealous of his ex-girlfriend's success. Man, he thought, she looked great. He wondered if she'd been going to that new gym they

just put in over behind Paul's right knee. Howard made another mental note to go there himself after work. He realized nobody had said anything in a while.

"Well, I better get back to work Denise. He's almost done with the test, God knows what he'll say to the professor when he hands it in, so I'll see ya soon. Great seeing you though."

"Yeah, great seeing you too, Howard. You have a coffee stain on your shirt by the way."

"Yeah, I..." Howard began, but she was already out the door. Depressed by the brief interaction, Howard looked down and started playing with the little Zen garden on his desk. It always relaxed him to move the little wooden rake around the rocks, making patterns in the sand that they lay in. It always relaxed him too, which was something he needed. It had already been a hell of a day, he thought to himself as he felt his body get more and more comfortable in the chair.

Howard woke up to Pierce screaming in his face. He could see the clock over his boss' shoulder. 3:35. Fuck.

"Pearlman, I swear to fuck, I am going to can your ass. Paul just told some girl that he likes her shirt because it draws the attention away from her face and to where it really belongs. If I catch you sleeping on the job again, I will personally make sure that you never work in this body again. See how you like working for a nuclear power plant cleaner. Get it together!"

Paul was heading to another class now. Howard was pretty sure it was Biology. As Paul sat there listening to the professor talk about gynecological diseases, Howard got a buzz in his earphones from the guys upstairs. Paul was getting ready to ask a question and they wanted Howard to do his job for once and let the computer check it out.

"Are these issues gender-specific or can they affect men as well?" A voice from the conference upstairs crackled into his headset.

Howard repeated the message into the microphone, and watched as the machine worked its magic, then spit out its revised suggestion into his headphones.

He heard a metallic sigh, followed with "Just tell him not to say anything" as a robotic voice spouted back to Howard.

Howard got on the microphone, clicking a switch on it so as to speak back up to the conference room upstairs.

"Guys, I'm sorry but the computer thinks he's better off just saying nothing at all. It thinks that that's a pretty ridiculous question."

A second passed before the voice replied in the headphones. "OK, great Howard, we'll go with the computer's recommendation. We'll tell the Larynx boys just to sit this one out."

Howard eased back in his chair, staring at the fluorescent lighting as he twiddled his thumbs. He was relieved that he had finally done something right. He inspected the coffee stain from that morning on his tie and shirt, praying that it would come out with a good thorough washing in the sink that evening when he finally got off work. It was a Friday though, and that meant that Paul would probably be out late so in turn Howard wouldn't get in until late. The Internal Censor office was a necessity and Howard had to be around during all of Paul's waking hours.

The Biology class ended, and Paul walked back to his dorm room thankfully in silence, allowing Howard to reflect more on the lost opportunity of Denise. It didn't matter, he thought, he could always ask Wanda in Digestion out on a date sometime. She always smiled at him in the cafeteria. Suddenly, Paul's phone rang. It was his mother. Howard tensed up. These were always the tough ones.

"Hi, Paul!" she started.

"Oh, hi, Mom," Paul replied.

"How have things been? Why didn't you pick up when I called you at 9:30?"

Howard's headphones crackled to life. "I was so fucking hungover I couldn't even see straight, let alone answer the phone," was the word from upstairs. Howard entered it into the computer, and Paul soon replied with "Oh, I'm sorry, I was in the library and had my phone on silent."

"Oh, OK, honey. Paul, I'd really like you to find a nice girl at school. Your brother's getting married soon, you know, and twenty isn't too early to start thinking about your future."

The headphones sounded off again. "Oh, Mom, I meet plenty of girls, and they're all just nice enough, trust me." Howard gasped. Why did the guys upstairs make his life so hard? He fed it into the computer.

"I know, Mom. I'm just looking for the right one and that's not something you can rush. I just want to meet new people right now. I think I'm gonna take a nap though, I love you!"

"I love you too, sweetie. Bye!" Paul's mom hung up.

Howard wiped the beads of sweat from his brow. Any mistakes on his part when Paul was speaking to his mom could get everybody in the body back to Paul's hometown, where they'd be reassigned to bodies that pumped gas or flipped burgers, and everybody knew what that would do to wages and job satisfaction. He had done well, though, and things were beginning to look up today.

He checked the monitor on the desk. Paul was walking down the hallway of his dorm, and once he had opened the door he collapsed into bed. Naptime for him. Howard got up and went to grab a cup of coffee. The Dream guys had it from here, and they didn't have any use for an Internal Censor like Howard. Besides, Paul only talked in his sleep when the Larynx guys were trying to make a little overtime.

He poured himself a fresh cup out of the small machine in the break room. There were a couple other guys milling around, and Howard recognized that all of them were only necessary when Paul was awake and were also enjoying the brief break. He knew only Seth by name, however, and went over to talk to the skinny young kid, fresh out of school and getting his start down the hallway in Blinking. He was raw, but had a reputation for ambition and wouldn't let anybody get in his way in his pursuit for a spot at the Holy Grail: the Cerebral Cortex. They were known throughout the body for their rich mahogany offices, burgundy leather chairs, and prime summer homes on the fingertips of Paul. It was a job to be envied, and a job that there was much competition for.

"Hey, Seth. How's it going?"



The kid looked slightly startled. "Oh, hi, Howard. Things are going OK, I guess. Not much mental effort needed for my work, though, is there?"

"I can't really say. I've never actually checked out the blinking operation."

"Oh. Well, it's basically me standing at a little podium with a red button on it. In front of me are two huge panels so that I can see whatever Paul sees. Every ten seconds or so, I press the red button, and the eyelids come down over the panels, then go back up."

"And that's your day."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, Seth, but that sounds absolutely awful. I don't mean to demean your job, but Jesus."

"Oh, OK, Howard!" Seth suddenly blew up. "Why don't you go ahead and embarrass Paul again by letting him insult two hot girls in one day? Do you know how hot the Blushing guys make it in here when Paul gets embarrassed? I had to change my shirt already today, and I was wearing an undershirt! Before you talk down to us in other departments, why don't you try to get your own shit together? Great stain on your shirt by the way. Looks nice. Let me guess. Pectoral guys? No, had to be the Bicep fellas. Way to stand up to them."

Howard was taken aback. Had he really sunk so low in the pecking order that the fucking *Blinking* guys were giving him shit? He turned and walked out of the break room, too embarrassed and ashamed to say anything back to Seth. Enjoy punching your button all day, buddy.

Out in the hallway on his way back to his office he bumped into Jeff from the Tear Ducts.

"Hey Jeff, what's going on, man?"

"Hey, Howard. What's that stain on your shirt?"

"How're things down at your neck of the woods?" Howard ignored the question.

"Awful, ridiculous hours this week. Paul watched *The Notebook* with a girl the other night, so I had to force out a few tears then, and then it was all I could do to keep the flow going when he watched *Field of Dreams* alone on Monday. Oh, and then he saw one of his friend's puppies cover its eyes with its own paws on Wednesday. That did it for him too. This is getting ridiculous, the guy's really just kind of a cry baby and it's a pain in my ass, you know?"

"Yeah, man, that sucks."

"How about you, Howard? How are things up at Internal Censoring?"

"Could be worse. Pierce is all over my ass about coming in late today and letting Paul make a fool out of himself to that girl down the hall who really only looks hot with makeup on."

"Oh, man. You mean Lisa?"

"Yeah, that sounds right."

"Christ, that was the girl he watched *The Notebook* with. Maybe she won't come around again. I hope not, anyways, it's pretty tough work for us to force his tears out. Thanks for the assist, buddy."

"Yeah, Jeff. You got it. I better be getting back, I think Paul is gonna be waking up soon."

"Yeah, definitely. Take it easy, Howard."

Howard walked back to his office, and went and sat down at his desk just as the monitor sprang back to life as Paul slowly woke up. Perfect timing. He worked on a crossword puzzle for a bit as Paul showered and sang a little tune as he did so. There was really nothing Howard could do here, either, as the computer had no capacity for correcting song lyrics. The Speech and Information Processing guys upstairs just gave their best guesses on the lyrics to the Larynx crew, and everyone just had to sit in their offices and listen to Paul butcher whatever song he had in mind that day.

Eventually Paul got back to his room and Howard watched with horror as he reached into his refrigerator and pulled out a beer. It was Friday. The exhausted Critical Thinking and Memory guys were burned out from a week of studying and test-taking. They had someone fill out the necessary paperwork so that the Willpower guys could scale back their operation and Paul could make a few mistakes. This would allow the CT and Memory crews to hit the road early, as drinking rendered them useless. This made Howard's life a living hell. He looked at the upcoming night with dread.

The first beer went down pretty easy, and barely began to seep under his office door. He felt bad for the guys down in the Bladder, this sort of night always affected them first and longest. A few more beers and Paul had called some friends over, and now Howard had to get to work making sure Paul didn't insult them too bad as the alcohol began to take hold on all of the other offices. It was about up to the soles of his shoes in his office, and the computer was elevated only about ankle level off the ground. The transmissions from the higher-ups in the conference room were coming quicker and quicker, and Howard worked as quickly as he could to feed them into the computer and get the results back to the guys in the Larynx.

"Hey fat-ass, grab me a fucking beer," became "Hey, Steve, can you grab me a cold one?", and "Let's do seven shots!" became "Let's do one shot!", and the hours became minutes as Howard frantically worked to keep Paul safe and out of trouble as the level of beer and liquor in the office rose and rose until finally it began to touch the computer, which made whining noises and began to hiss and pop as it struggled to continue to work. Finally, sparks flew from it and the blinking lights went out as it ceased to work altogether, to Howard's horror. He frantically looked back into the monitor to see Paul was talking to a cute blonde girl. The beer sloshed around his knees as he sat at the desk, helplessly watching the scene unfold.

"So, what's your major? Being hot?"

"No," she laughed nervously, "English. What about you?"

With the link to Internal Censoring cut, Howard knew the guys in the conference room upstairs would be talking directly to the Larynx, with no buffer at all. It would be brutal honesty, compounded by the fact that the goody-goodies in the Speech and Info Processing Departments were all light-weights who would surely be buzzed by now from the beer permeating the entirety of Paul's body. They would have no idea what would be acceptable to send to the Larynx pawns. Howard could only sit and watch in horror.

"Well, my major is Psychology. But I think I could 'declare' my love for you right now."

Howard put his head into his hands. The blonde walked away in a huff. The beer in the bottom of the office slowly began to disappear. Howard peeked between his fingers to see in the monitor that Paul was looking into the bottom of a trash can and vomiting vigorously. The beer would soon be gone for the most part. He watched in glee, cheering by himself in his tiny office, as Paul's friends dragged him back to his room on their shoulders and tucked him into bed for the night. The Motor Skills guys couldn't really hold their booze, either, and were always the first ones to go down when Paul was drinking.

Howard was jubilant. The censoring computer was still out of commission, but that was of no matter. The repair guys would come in the night and take care of that as Paul and all of his daytime crew, including Howard, slept. By morning Howard would be able to again regulate what Paul said, and everything would be OK again. He turned off the light in the office, walked to his car, plucked the ticket off of the windshield, and slowly pulled out, pausing only to slam on the brakes as an ambulance flew by, its siren screaming as it took an exhausted Liver crewmember to the infirmary. He pulled out tentatively again, slamming on the brakes a second time as a pickup truck hurtled by, its headlights permeating the darkness on the spinal column of Paul Cornleaf.

## Meadows, Grass, Bicycle

I remember my childhood in fragments, like a dream. I do not know what comes first, I do not know what comes last. I remember it like a drunken time. Desires, disappointments, and defeats are intertwined, followed by a black sleep, followed by a hangover. I remember when I wanted to die, I wanted to love, I wanted to live. I hear a bird I do not see. I think it sings of the spring, but the sycamore is long covered with yellow leaves, it smells like sweet death and bitter linden. I look at three empty chairs across the lawn. I see ghosts of friends, family, lovers. First kisses, first touches, first losses stand up and go. Behind me I hear cars pass by. The sound makes me think of the sea. I imagine a wave forming when I hear a car approach, it hits the shore when the noise is the loudest, then recedes, indifferent, the car is gone away. Winter claims November with the calmness of death.

I see ghosts of friends,  
family, lovers. First  
kisses, first touches, first  
losses stand up and go.

What is on my mind is meadows, grass, and a bicycle. They come to me in separate visions. First I am looking down to a meadow, green stretched under the noonday sun, the wind is silent. Then I am lying down, the blades of grass tickling my neck and ear. I can smell the dusty earth. Finally, a bicycle. An abandoned bicycle by an abandoned wall. It is red.

I don't know if I want to go to them, if I want to dream of them, or if I want to remember. I call my childhood back. The neighborhood. The girls. Çiçek, Arzu, Cansu, Nur, Burcu, Nergis Gülfer, Fersun. I remember the day we met. Burcu has a brother. Berk, a tall, skinny kid, he is older than us, he already talks about sex. They tell us the reason they tried to start a snowball fight last winter was because they wanted to meet me and my sister. Nergis has a brother, too, Eray, who is also older than us, but not as old as Berk. The boys play together. They like to break things, or at least poke holes in them, and they say they can calculate one's penis size by multiplying height, weight, and shoe size. Berk has a pocket calculator. We scold the boys with giggles, because that's what we think we should do. Sometimes the boys sabotage our games, but usually they leave us alone. We skip rope together. We eat ice cream together. We go to movies together. Together we ask permission from mothers to stay out "just a little longer" at night. Then we grow up together, and together we disperse. In time the details rub off, and sometimes it is only the details that stay.

I think now that we never went to the meadows together. We grew up in the city, far from the green, and far from the sea also, in Ankara, the heart of Anatolia. We walked down big avenues, we sat on sidewalks, played on narrow streets. We were the proud children of the steppes. For us, meadows and grass were parks here and there in the middle of the cement. Bicycles were dangerous. "God forbid, my daughter, what if you get run over by a car?" said mothers. If we never went to the meadows, never rolled on grass, never rode our bicycles together, what

I am remembering cannot be memories. What is it that I remember then? Why will they not leave my mind? It is cold. The rain is grey. Muffled. It needs color, I say, and maybe that's why I am dreaming of meadows. A spark of green, an embrace of sunlight, a dose of children's laughter.

Mother sent me and my sister out to the street a little before the summer of fourth grade ended. I was ten. "Don't come back without making friends. Look at all those kids playing on the street. Go out and play with them," she said. We went out. We did not come back in for five years, begging for "five more minutes," until we moved to İstanbul. Mother had to tell us to go make friends because having been born within fourteen months of each other we grew up with a playmate who was always there. We played together when we weren't fighting, we played games that had two people in them, and should they require more people we were willing to perform multiple roles.

In Ankara we lived on the fourth floor of a building and a large terrace wrapped three sides of our two bedroom apartment. On the terrace Mother grew herbs, right outside the kitchen door, so that one of us could go pick thyme, mint, rosemary, and marjoram when she was cooking. We had violets, Father's favorites, moss roses, daisies, scarlet sages, along with three lilac trees, and a number of roses. The soft orange rose Mother called *Nazlı Nazenin* for it would bloom one languid petal at a time, coy and delicate. She had given me the same name as she wanted her firstborn to be coy and coquettish toward life, that life would not tire her so much. There was also a grapevine in the terrace that gave only one grape in twenty-five years the summer when I was leaving home, and a mulberry tree that would become my best friend when I gave up talking to people. (I was eleven, and I had decided to kill myself. I was reading *Vasconcelos*.) The terrace was big, bigger when we were smaller, and it was alive, we could get lost in it. If we wanted to be outside we would go out to the terrace, run around, play with water, have picnics, acting all the while our many roles, getting into one character after another with perfect theatrical focus. Every now and then we would want to jump rope, which required a physical third person, but that was what the chair was for. It wouldn't cross my mind that we needed someone else to play with.

We used to wake up early, when Mother was leaving for work (she was an internist, now retired), and we would also go to work by setting up a table in the terrace and start playing "doctors." It required two doctors, us with our doctor names (we had new names for every new game we invented), and two of Mother's old lab coats, for credibility. The table was our office. Mother worked in a government office, her day consisted of seeing one patient after another, listening to complaints and prescribing medicine, and giving a good amount of advice, too. When we played "doctors" we would do the same thing, person after person would come to our table, we would write their names down, write their complaints, write the diagnosis, and finally the cure we thought was apt. Our patients usually had colds or upset stomachs, and we would not give them drugs for Mother rarely gave us drugs. We would write in their prescriptions, "keep your feet warm, drink tea of thyme with honey and lemon," or "tarragon tea, twice a day." We believed in keeping one's feet warm and created magic slippers—the greatest invention in the history of pharmaceuticals. You



could not take them off, nor did you need to because the material would become waterproof if you were taking a bath, and the slippers would turn into socks if you were going to bed or if you had to put shoes on to go out. That year we prescribed many pairs of magic slippers.

In the afternoon we would play "Leydi İnci." It was a game in which my name was Leydi Altın (Leydi being the Turkish spelling of "lady"), and my sister's, İnci Soprano. In "Leydi İnci" I would always be Leydi, and my sister would take care of the rest of the characters. She would come up with astronomical names such as Neptune and Venus for her characters, and Neptune and Venus would then come for tea. We would talk about important things, while I entertained and my sister jumped in and out of character to keep up with the pace of our heated conversations. Looking back now, it is interesting that I should stick with one character. I have been the one who was less stable, who had had many selves. I would, and still do, change from happy self to depressed self, reader self, writer self, Turkish self, foreign self, selfish self, selfless self. With that game I was Leydi for many years. It might have been my one and only stable self.

Every November, memories of Ankara come back to me, and I remember the cold first. I miss the winds that used to sting my eyes. I miss the day I would understand that winter had come to stay. That day when I turned on the faucet the water would have a more serious coldness to it. I miss having fires in the fireplace. I used to sit in front of the fire with flames in my eyes until my face could no longer bear the heat. Then images of home form, Mother, Father, my sister, the cat we had gotten when Father had left, fights, me reading, tension, me writing, snow, St. Exupéry, Vasconcelos, Steinbeck, my mulberry tree, rain, wine, too much wine, Mother praying five times a day, putting her prayer mat down towards south, "Your mother and I decided to live in different houses for a while," Joan Baez, Grieg, Lalo, Mother's sleeping, Father's drinking, the fluorescent light in the kitchen coldly buzzing. Finally sunny times gush into my quieted reminiscences. That's when the girls come in, noisy, jealous, happy, Çiçek, Arzu, Cansu, Nur, Gülfer, Fersun.

I was the first among the girls to leave Ankara. At the end of eighth grade because the Ministry of Education changed the law on obligatory education, I had the chance to take the high school entrance examination again (I had already taken it in fifth grade) and apply to Robert College of İstanbul, where Mother went to high school. A Turkish-American high school, Robert College was then, and still is, one of the most prestigious high schools in Turkey, yet Mother rarely talked about it, mostly because she had denounced having gone to school in a capitalist institute when she became a communist right after her graduation. In the years she had lost contact with her high school friends, and she would not talk about them when she talked about her high school, either. Mother talked about Mrs. İüküryan, her biology teacher, and Mrs. Kondayan, her literature teacher, and she talked about the food, and the view. When I was fourteen, Mother took my sister and me to Robert College as she needed a document from the school to retire two years earlier than her designated time. This time she was denouncing communism.

The Bosphorus seen from inside the woods of Robert College, the feeling

of standing at the edge of Europe, the unconscious appeal of finding a city that resembled me in the way that it is cut into two, that it is neither one thing nor the other, called me to be there. I had already given up on school, and I reasoned if I had to go to school I should be in a place that at least aesthetically pleased me, inspired me, and provided me with a good dose of melancholy. So at the age of fifteen I was leaving home for good to go to boarding school in İstanbul, knowing that after that summer I would only come home for vacations, after that summer I was condemned to be a visitor at my home. I knew, after I left home I would not be a child again. Years of playing in the streets had ended. Years of dreamlike childhood were over. I passed out copies of Yesenin's farewell poem, that he wrote with his blood after slitting his wrists, "*This predestined parting,/Promises a reunion ahead,*" packed my books and some clothes, and made a dramatic exit, "*Dying is nothing new in this life,/But living, of course, isn't novel either.*"

Now I remember what we dreamed of and have forgotten since, just like I remember others' stories that I have made mine in time. Meadows, grass, bicycle. Stories fill my mind. Others' stories, true, but if I want to I can tell them as if they are my own. I know stories of meadows, and grass, and I know childhood stories, too. My friend, my sister, my past, I can tell you stories from the times when people went back to their villages to spend the summer. I can tell you youth stories from the times when boys and girls escaped to the meadows. I can tell you your own story, and tell it like my story.

Once, do you remember also, we had swum in the green river early in the morning? Then the boys came and we were ashamed when our wet t-shirts stuck to our adolescent breasts. Another time it had rained, and what a rain that was, in the middle of the summer. We hadn't cared that everything was covered in mud, but we were upset that the river's color turned turbid. That day the trees had smelled like the color of rain. We had held hands with coy bravery, we couldn't even talk, but we had laughed. We had always laughed. Another time we had discovered a boat on the river side of the meadow. The paint on it had fallen off in places, and in places it had come loose, when the rains returned they too would fall off. The name on it was illegible. We had talked on and on about what we would do if we had a boat. We said if we were boys we would push the boat to the river and see what happened, but we were a little afraid, and a little lazy. The sun was burning, the shadows of trees were warm. Youthfulness was a roaring thunder in our veins. It was the season of daydreaming.

In our dreams we pushed the boat into the river, and, you know, it floated, we drifted a little, but we weren't afraid, there was such peace around us. The day was warm with the sun, green with grass, it was flowing in the river with us. The afternoon was everlasting.

My sister spent hours watching other kids playing outside. She would come to me and report, "One of them is Çiçek. Arzu is the one with short white hair, Cansu is Arzu's little sister, they live up the street. There is Nur, who lives in the building right across, and Burcu who lives on the first floor of the building right next to it." I don't remember being amused by the information she had gathered, nor was I amused when she would shout one of their names and hide under the

terrace wall. She had learned that Burcu's mother yelled her daughter's name like "Buur-jaa" instead of "Boor-joo," and with a deep and cracked voice. Once she was done calling out for Arzu or Cansu she would very professionally and very patiently wait for a good while, then imitate Burcu's mother. Every time, she sent Burcu to her apartment window to see what her mother wanted.

I watched the kids once. For five, maybe, ten minutes. They were playing a game in which everybody was running away from the one who was it, who could get them only if they were on the ground level. They had climbed on things higher than ground level, garden fences and stairs and even the doormats outside the building counted because they had metal grates under them. They would be still for a while and then it would all break loose, they would all run at the same time trying to climb on the next higher level safe zone. They would shout and laugh, stop, start again, then shout and laugh more. I went back to my books.

Kids playing out on the street were of no interest to me. I spent my summers reading in the terrace and playing with my sister. If ever we were bored with being at home we would go to Vietnam Café, which was in Vietnam. I did not know where Vietnam was, but I think my sister did, for she was the one who would read the world atlas while I was busy with my books. She used to memorize the capitals and flags of countries, and later test me on those. Vietnam Café was a favorite place to hang out, located at the backside of the terrace, outside my parents' bedroom and next to the short wall that marked the end of our terrace and the start of our neighbor's. Day after day we would go there and have mineral water with lemon juice and sugar in it. The specialty had a name I cannot remember anymore. It was served in blue and white china bowls.

We did not know what Vietnam meant. We did not know of the war, we did not know of the United States, we did not know of guns or protests. We did not have someone to tell us those things. Mother worked all day, and Father did, too, and he didn't always live with us, either. If I remember Father in the apartment in Ankara, I remember him depressed. I remember him drinking. He would drink, write, read, drink more, then one day, and when we were about to start dinner, he would pack his books and some clothes, and leave without saying goodbye. His empty plate on the table and the click of the door being locked from outside would mean something together, that I would not understand, for I would be crying, without knowing why I was crying. It was no news that he was leaving, but we would be surprised every time. My sister and I were used to finding poems torn from books and single flowers left in our mailbox or in front of our door, but we did not think they were from Father. It was easier to believe that an imaginary beast my sister was afraid of had become Mother's secret admirer. Mother played along with us, and if there was ever a sad amusement in her eyes for her children's ignorance of their own family life, or a look of yearning coupled with anger toward her husband, we were too young to see it. Among all this, we grew up mostly alone, and did not realize it.

I had seen the boat first. It was painted red inside, blue outside. Did I not say a bicycle? Where did this boat come from? We must have ridden our bikes to the meadow. We had left them under a tree, and eaten the piece of bread and cheese we had brought with us. We had seen a walnut tree then. I hadn't climbed it but

my sister and Çiçek had. I had picked up the fruit they had shaken off the tree, and we had peeled, cracked, and eaten walnuts until our hands were dyed a black-green. Grandmothers' advice on our minds, we had told each other not to eat too little, not to eat too much, not to drink water afterwards. That was when we had seen the boat. I had seen it first. While I was pondering what a boat was doing there, the girls were already over by it.

I was the dreamer. My sister and Çiçek were the adventurous ones. I was already lost in my dreams as they were trying to decide what to do with the boat. In my mind I was in a faraway country, in a faraway village, with faraway fishermen. I was there with those who coated their boats with special pastes only they knew how to make. I was there with the stifling smell and the glittery grey of the fish. I watched men and women who cleaned fish with mechanical motions of their sea-hardened hands. Woolen socks and hats, salt-bleached shirts, sun darkened skins. Early hours of the morning. I watched moments that had become meaningless because they were nothing but habits, and I watched the meaning imposed onto those moments also, with a feeling of hardness and coldness in me. I no longer knew where I was. The sun was hot on my back, wet in my armpits, and it carried me onto other stories.

Our building was at the intersection of two streets, and the elementary school we went to was diagonal from our building. My sister and I would hold hands and cross one street to the building where all the kids played during summer, then cross the other street to the school. On the ground floor of our building there was a tailor shop and a small grocery, and where the front yard of our building ended, a taxi station hut. They had been there since we were born, and Mother knew they would be watching over us when we were courageously crossing the two streets with our tiny feet to go to class. The tailor we knew as Tippler İlerif, who years later refused the holy water but took the dates that Mother brought with her when she returned from Mecca. We agreed he and his assistant would eat the dates with rakı that night. We agreed also that he was decent enough to refuse the holy water. It would be sacrilegious to make his nightly glass of rakı with water from Zamzam. We called the grocer Uncle Grocer, who had a brother, Namık, and we called Namık his first name among us, because we didn't want to be related to him. Unlike his brother, Namık was a sneaky looking man with rather sharply defined facial features and more hair on his head. We liked Uncle Grocer who would crack a joke every time we would go in to buy a piece of gum, a piece of marshmallow, a piece of candy. He would tease me more if I were there to buy cigarettes for Mother or a bottle of wine for Father. "You gotta stop with these bad habits, sister," he would say. "It's easy for you to say so," I learned to reply when I was older.

When Mother sent my sister and me out to find friends we went to the schoolyard and walked in circles for a while trying to decide which one of the strangers we wanted to talk to. We said hi to a sister and brother, both younger than us, and asked if they wanted to jump rope with us. They agreed. It was their idea, I think, to go up and play with the others later. I went up first and introduced myself. "Hello, I am Nazlı," I said, (I still introduce myself the same way) and Çiçek introduced herself and everybody else to me. It was a minute before my sister came to join us, and Çiçek repeated the introduction for her. My sister waited until she was done, then said,



with a big smile, "I know." She told them how she used to watch them from the terrace, and revealed that it was she who had called their names. They were not angry. Soon we were included in the above-ground-level game. We laughed and shouted. We played until Mother called us back home.

At first we would fight about the games we wanted to play, and once we started playing, we would fight about the rules of the games. The rules were so flexible that they changed as we fought about them, yet we continued to shout. I do not remember when we abandoned our plans of building an underground hut, I do not remember when we abandoned the games, and claimed a certain corner to spend hours talking about boys. It was around the time Burcu and Nergis left the group and Gülfer and her younger sister Fersun replaced them. It was also around the time we were allowed to stay two more hours after sunset. When it was time to go in, instead of Mother shouting my name in a way all the girls made fun of, she prolonged the first syllable too much, Father started calling my sister and me by whistling Beethoven's Eighth Symphony from the terrace. He was living with us again.

We girls were becoming aware of our bodies. We talked about our hair, facial features, especially noses, we talked about our periods. We tried our first bras, first cigarettes, first kisses. They used to say in the neighborhood that "Gülfer is the more beautiful, but Nazlı is the more appealing." Gülfer had boys, I didn't. For me there was no difference among the real, the dead, and the fictitious, and I would fall in love with all of them and usually at the same time. I loved St. Exupéry who went on a reconnaissance mission during the Second World War and did not return. He took my feet off the ground. But my heart was all for Vasconcelos, he was the one who connected me to life. I had fallen in love with him when I read *My Sweet Orange Tree*, the first one of his three autobiographical novels about growing up in a slum near Rio de Janeiro. Zezé, a precocious, sensitive boy was neglected in a family of too many brothers and sisters, except when they directed their anger and disappointment with life onto him. Zezé wanted to be a poet with a bow tie. Zezé was me. He knew, like I did, life was meaningless without love, and not having found it he had decided to die even earlier than I had.

I cried many times while reading *My Sweet Orange Tree*. I cried when Zezé became friends with Portuga, a rich Portuguese man living close to his neighborhood. I cried because Zezé had found love that he was heartbreakingly hungry for, and I cried because I hadn't found it myself. Zezé would include Portuga in his dreams, and I would cry because I was only dreaming one person dreams. When Portuga died in a train crash Zezé wanted to die, and so did I. He continued living so that he would spread love, along with marbles and actress pictures, just like Portuga did, and I cried because I didn't have the courage to live.

During the day I would sit with the girls on our wall, which Gülfer named "the randy wall," and we accepted not because we were randy, but because the thought of being randy held something exciting. We talked about classes, teachers, friends from school. We complained a lot. "Mother and Father are not talking," I would say. "My parents talk, but only against me," Gülfer would reply, then talk about three different boys; one in her class, one on the school bus, one who lived down the street. Çiçek talked about women. If she talked about family it would be aunts not uncles, if she talked about movie people it would be actresses not actors. "I wrote about Hume



and Hegel in the science quiz," I would say, "I think I will fail this one, too."

At night I would sit on the terrace wall right across from my mulberry tree and sing and cry, and sometimes if I could find the voice, I would talk to it. I had named it Portuga, hoping Portuga would love me like he loved Zezé, and that with his love my life would also become meaningful.

Vasconcelos wrote about rivers, boatmen who talked to their boats, fishermen who wrist-wrestled on a table with two upright knives on it, he wrote about whores, dark skinned women who were darkly soft to touch. He wrote about people who were brothers of the wind. I read every book he has written. In cold Ankara nights I imagined the Brazilian sun that dried the salt of the ocean on the beaches. I imagined Zezé growing up, through which I would imagine myself growing up. But I could not see myself in the future. I would then put my feet up on the corner of Portuga's high flower pot. Next time I would put one leg outside the wall. I would look down, seeing my dead body in front of the grocer's door. My blood would be black because red looked black in dark. Then I would dangle both legs outside. I could not look down. When I sat like that I thought the ground was so much closer that it made me dizzy, but I didn't think of death being any closer. Death was always close to me. I had decided on it.

When I left Ankara, I was aware that many things would not come with me, so I took my desire to die, I took being in love, I took the childish laughter and the memories of unending games we played in the afternoons too short. I took some sad memories along with the happy ones, and I remember them as if remembering a drunken time. All the dead and fictional came with me, and all the living left me, forgot me, and sometimes, maybe, they remembered me as their past. The further away I went the more my childhood became a painting framed with the cold, and maybe that's why I miss the cold so much, for it keeps my childhood together. With the dry frosts of the steppes I can go back to my childhood, I can dream of sun burnt countries, I can think of meadows, grass, and a bicycle.

They say there is so much air pollution in Ankara that birds die on tree branches. The children and elderly people should not go out if they do not need to, we hear in the news. It must have been November. Fersun. I have drunk too much, I understand it in the morning. I wake up late, I don't shower, I don't put on a bra, I pull a pair of shorts under the t-shirt I had on instead of a nightgown. Çiçek. Look at all those kids playing on the street. Go out and play with them, Mother says. Cansu. Hide and seek. Arzu. The randy wall. Uncle Grocer, two packs of cigarettes for my mother. Uncle Grocer, my father says it is more obvious when you wrap the bottle with newspaper. Nergis. Is this what you call a family? Nur. I prepare breakfast, I make coffee, I pull my hair in a pony tail without brushing it. We could take a bus, a bus whose destination we do not know, and it would take us to a city whose name we do not know, says Father. He is holding my hand. There is a smile left on my lips from the dreams I have not dreamed, in the meadows I have not gone to. A light blue bicycle under a sycamore tree. St. Exupéry says the coming of spring should be no irony to death. I see from my shadow that my breasts are budding. Remember, we used to buy peaches, one for you and one for me? Gülfer. Think of this book as a bird, Father tells me, think of its pages as the bird's wings. Will you marry me? Is

there a present time that will not turn into memory? If I were to love you, but not remember it later. I only let you stay the night because I was drunk. I reread St. Exupéry's memoir, *Flight to Arras*, and my longing for him comes back. In my heart I miss the touch of a lost lover. In the book St. Exupéry is getting ready to die, watching the war and the spring, dreaming of when he was fifteen, dreaming of geometry class, dreaming of card tricks. His dreams leak into his reality. Remembering the past, I remember myself when I was more daring, more restless, more reckless. A past self comes and stands by me. She is me when I read *Flight to Arras*. She doesn't even look at me. They say if the poplar trees start to shed their leaves from the top it means that winter will be a cold one. Tell me, are we late for everything? Nazlı Nazenin. What a strange tiredness is longing.

## Tuesday Morning

The dryer squeaks. Every time it gets to that one point where all the clothes reach the upper left edge of the window before they fall back down, the dryer squeaks. It's not a very loud noise. In fact, had this place been full with its usual crowd, I might not have noticed it at all. And if she were here with me the way she used to be, it's quite likely that I wouldn't have noticed any sound at all other than her voice. This morning, though, it is nearly deserted. Well, not nearly—it is most definitely deserted. With the exception of the old woman sitting at her desk in the back room, I am the only one here.

It's quite relaxing, actually. It's like an escape from chaos, like finding yourself in the eye of a tornado. I'm ignoring the fact that being in the middle of a circle of high-speed wind means I'll have to make my way through them again to get out to the real world. But then the real world isn't that much better. I'd rather be stuck in the middle of a tornado than try to fight my way through the bustling crowds full of people, all too rushed to notice they just knocked the coffee out of your hand and all over your freshly-laundered shirt. It's a necessary evil of being a part of the business world, I guess. But for now, it's just me and the squeaking dryer and the old woman, and I am perfectly fine with that.

I'll sit here for a bit longer and listen to the hum of the machine. It's late, but I have nothing else to do. Scratch that—it's early, at least according to most people's standards. Five in the morning is generally a time when people would be waking up, not sitting around at a laundromat thinking about the sleep they aren't getting and haven't been able to get for so long. I wonder why the old woman is up so early. Maybe she can't sleep, either, or maybe she's just an early riser. We used to be like that. We used to get up before the sun rose and take the dogs for a run in the park before work. They loved that, and every morning they would whine outside our bedroom door, waiting until their anticipation and excitement woke us. It worked, too—those dogs were better than alarm clocks. I stopped setting mine after a while because it just wasn't as reliable. Maybe I should start setting it again. It might help me get back on a regular schedule.

The clothes are already dry, but I put some more money into the machine anyway. It's not like I have anywhere else to go. God, these clothes weren't even dirty. I don't even know why I brought them here. It just seemed like I had to, like everything I had had to be cleaned—laundry was the first step. Laundry was also the step that got me out of the house. I couldn't stay there any longer looking at all of her things. There are just too many memories that I don't need to remember right now.

I'd rather be stuck in the middle of a tornado than try to fight my way through the bustling crowds full of people all too rushed to notice they just knocked the coffee out of your hand...

“...Orange?”

“I’m sorry, what?” I was so caught up in trying to avoid those thoughts that I didn’t even notice the old woman had gotten up and walked over to me.

“Would you like an orange?” she asks again. In her outstretched hand she holds the brightly colored fruit; its sharp scent brings me a little closer to the present. Her knobby fingers hold it securely as it rests in her palm. How old is she? In her eighties? She hadn’t looked that old from across the room, but her hands give it away. The skin is wrinkled, loose, her knuckles the victims of years of arthritis. I wonder if *her* hands would have been like that when she got older. I wonder if we still would have been together by then. It would have been wonderful to be old with her, to watch kids playing in the park while we sat peacefully on a bench under a tree with rings older than the ones on our fingers. I see couples like that when I go out on my lunch break. They look so content just to be with each other.

The old woman has just placed two oranges on the table and proceeds to sit down in the chair next to me. She seems to have taken my silence as an invitation.

“I’ve always thought that oranges are a wonderful remedy.”

“For what?” I’m not in the mood for conversation, but since there’s no one else for her to talk to, I have to fill the role.

“Oh, lots of things. They’re wonderful for colds, you know, lots of vitamin C. And they always lift the spirit. Have you ever seen anyone eat an orange while they’re upset? I haven’t. No, after all these years, I haven’t *once* seen someone eat an orange when they’re sad.” She takes one of the oranges and begins to peel it clumsily, her stiff fingers shaking as she struggles with the tough skin.

“Here, let me do it,” I say as I take the orange from her hands. She smiles gratefully and continues talking while I expertly tear off the outer layer of the fruit. We always used to have oranges before our morning run, and I was in charge of peeling them while she got the leashes for the dogs.

“It’s a nice morning, isn’t it? Not a time many people do laundry, but I like to open early just in case. You never know who will show up with an emergency.” I pass her half of the orange and we sit in silence for a few moments, trying to eat carefully so the juice doesn’t get all over our hands. It’s sweet, but still tart enough to make my mouth pucker a bit with the first bite. The squeak from the dryer doesn’t seem as loud as it did before.

“Good orange, isn’t it? My daughter brought them along when she came to visit a few days ago.” She pauses and waits expectantly. Sensing that she won’t get a reply from me anytime soon, she continues. “You’re not very talkative, are you? That’s all right; I could probably talk to myself for a week straight and not run out of things to say! My husband used to tell me that, actually. He always complained about it, but then when I wasn’t talking, he would get upset and think something was wrong. Imagine that! Either way, he wasn’t happy.” She looks down at the orange in her hands and laughs a little, shaking her head as a smile crosses her face. She suddenly seems very tired; the thin laugh makes her slight frame tremble and the wrinkles around her mouth give her smile the appearance of a painful grimace. The echoes of her voice fade quickly, and we lapse back into silence and finish

our orange. My eyes settle on the remains of the peel on the table in front of us. Already, the heat of the room has caused it to dry up and lose the bright sheen that had made it so appealing. It seems almost shameful compared to the whole, fresh orange next to it.

We remain wordless as I pick up the second orange. It's firm and heavy, and I toss it back and forth between my hands before peeling it. The sun has gotten high enough by this point to peek over the strip mall across the street; gold stripes stretch across the floor beside us and make sharp reflections off the bits of chrome on the machines. I pile up the peel of this orange next to the old one, and the way the morning sun hits it almost makes it look like it's still part of the orange instead of the discarded husk. Piecing it back together doesn't work—it won't stay in the shape I want it to without the fruit inside, especially not since I tore it apart.

I let it fall back into a pile and split the orange in half to share with the old woman. We eat together without a word, watching the stripes of sunlight stretch across the floor as the morning grows later. Someone comes in to use the change machine in the corner, or at least I would assume so from the sound of the bell on the door handle and the clinking of coins. Although they don't interrupt us, their departure makes the silence in the room seem greater than before. Or maybe it's because the dryer has stopped—I hadn't even noticed.



The Ballad of Jesco an' Norma Jean

*"Ever time I thank about the past it comes back up in the future,  
a-messin' up with my good life." -Jesco White, Dancing Outlaw*

\*\*\*\*\*

He didn't knowed 'er 'til he met her.  
His sister knowed 'er, and waved  
the car t'a halt—tryin' t get tuh  
the Double Super Buzz.  
Norma Jean weared rich clothes,  
the kind that sparkled, shimry,  
He said, "I think I'm fallin' in love,"  
an' she drove, with her glasses—  
not the costly kind that could  
git a man kilt. He asked  
if she could see without 'em.  
He took 'em off 'er and kissed 'er.

She says there're three husbands—  
Jesse, Jesco, and Elvis, and it must've  
be'n Jesse that put that charm on so thick  
that night, instead of robbin' 'er blind.  
But it's Jesco who tars of eatin' them  
sloppy, slimy eggs, gonna put her to bed  
in a coffin, gonna blow her brains  
'cross the dash.

Jesse says thar's love an' happiness,  
Jesco finds sorrow, hatred an' madness.  
An' Elvis gives way, out the trailer,  
to plywood in the mud, ta sharp shoes  
his daddy give 'im. Shuffles soft  
in sports socks n' spitz, an' when 'e  
hits the ground, on bend'd knee,  
'e can feel that shot shoot straight up  
from his shoes, and the shell  
spread like a rhinestone cape 'cross  
D. Ray's back—best in Boone County.  
Better 'er worse, Norma Jean saw it all.

## Crossing the Street

The wind blew furiously through the park, picking up leaves and hurtling them into the air. The morning sky wore a uniform gray broken by dark masses of rain-heavy clouds and the white sheen of an opaque sun. Every object bent before the will of the wind: trees bowed to its presence; debris hurried along its guided course; shrubs danced in their delicate positions. Everything bowed except the lone figure of a man, an object hurtling through the park directly into the current of the world around him. He hurried along the path as if he were a train, following a track laid toward a destination already known, an unstoppable hulk cleaving its way through the terrain. His legs worked in a rhythmic pattern, propelling the body forward unconsciously, without mental effort. The arms were folded in over the chest, gripping the long, black overcoat tightly to seal the shell against the elements. The black leather shoes tore along the grimy, earthen path, sneering at the world they knew they didn't belong in, a world of earth and grime and puddles. They waited patiently for the moment they would enter the safe, gleaming corridors of an office complex, with four walls and shoe shine in the office drawer. The only part of the shell that remained exposed to the elements was the head, with its crown of graying hair flattened backwards, the taut flesh protruding like a turtle's. But the seal against the outside world was complete even in this exposure, for within it resided the mind of Tom Seneraw.

Tom felt everything then, as if he were being rolled through every crevice in the road, as if a giant was forcing him into the earth itself.

*"I'm late for work. God damn it, I'm late for work. If I walk at this pace for the rest of the way and I find a taxi immediately, and we don't hit traffic, I will arrive between ten-fifteen minutes late."* Mr. Seneraw, in his anxiety, always used mathematics to assure himself of all possible outcomes.

In truth, he shouldn't have been too worried about being late to work. Mr. Seneraw was on time or early most of his working days and he often stayed later than most. It was not unusual for one of the lawyers to find him in his office at nine or ten at night, hunched over a case. The whole room seemed to be sucked into his concentration: the books, chairs, table, and lamp were all attentive to his complete ignorance of them.

"Mr. Seneraw, you should get some rest. You can't make a case if you look like the living dead in front of the jury."

"Huh?! What the...? You know, you scare the living daylights out of me when you do that! Didn't I tell you to knock before you came in?"

Mr. Seneraw loved his work almost all of the time. He had been in the profession for twenty-three years, and out of his numerous abilities his co-workers always admired that he could outthink anyone. His boss once said: "Mr. Seneraw thinks so much that if you surprised him to a game of chess, he would have

already thought out all of the possible moves and beaten you before you laid your hand on a piece." Mr. Seneraw practiced law as he would play a sport: with fierce competition, endless strategy, and tireless resolve. He thought of the courtroom as an arena for the game he played best: law. He won almost all of his cases. He had the best record at the firm.

His practice of law wasn't entirely a base motivation to outperform his opponents. Mr. Seneraw would always comment that the most gratifying result of being a lawyer is that, occasionally, one participates in a mindset that revolutionizes the thinking of a country. This happened very infrequently. Mr. Seneraw worked at his job passionately, even obsessively, as if he were falling in love with the law again every morning when he walked into his office and breaking up with her before he left. His fellow lawyers all enjoyed his company, even if they were jealous of his record. He had no wife.

Mr. Seneraw's exemplary habits did not excuse him from routine, the monotony which slowly drowns passion. And so Mr. Seneraw, although he could argue about lawyers as the protectors of justice or the genius of the Bill of Rights like an upstart twenty-year-old, he had been arguing the same thing for thirty years. In fact, he had already started calculating the potential amount of cases left before he decided to retire. This kind of mathematics was only done on twelve-hour days.

*"I didn't have much of a breakfast this morning. Eggs and toast. A hasty shower. I hate rushing before I get to work. It makes it harder to concentrate. I need to focus on this case. Should I get a cup of coffee? No, that might make me jittery. Harder to concentrate. I can just push the fatigue out of my mind."*

Mr. Seneraw was a man of faith. Of faith in the mind. He had the disturbing ability to lose all sense of time and people when he began to work. In this state the only elements that existed for Mr. Seneraw were those which he created with his mind, like an alternate universe with his natural laws expanding against the walls and glass door of his office. It was a beautiful, structured, and fully knowable universe; Mr. Seneraw did not wish any brazen co-workers to come pelting through his space, like dangerous and unpredictable meteoroids. In this way, his co-workers often felt like he made no effort to talk to them. When they approached him, he was indifferent or cold to their chatter. It wasn't entirely his fault; he couldn't help that reality was not so conspicuously demanding of him. In his first years at the firm, he would sometimes forget about his appointments with clients. He hired a secretary. He wished she could take calls and schedule appointments for friends and family. He rarely called his parents or his relatives. His mother would call him, irritated but expectant.

"You know we're not dead yet, dear."

"I know, mother."

"When are you coming to visit us?"

"I don't know, mother."

"How about Saturday for dinner? You don't have anything planned then, do you?"

"Well...I have an important case that I..."

"Now don't even try and pull that with me. It's too old. Think of a new one, and be here Saturday."

"Yes, mother."

"Write it down on the calendar, right now, so you don't forget."

"Yes, mother."

Mr. Seneraw had been forgetting for all fifty-three years of his life. He had been concentrating for fifty-three years. He liked to think, ponder, wonder, calculate, and prove. On certain nights, when he would come back exhausted and lay in bed he would hear the sound of silence in his head for a moment or two. He would think it queer and even disturbing. He didn't have a choice to stop thinking, either way; it had become a willing, forceful entity, an agreed domination, the tool to his power.

*"When I get to my office, I'll just start working right away. No one will notice me. Maybe I'll skip lunch just to make it convincing that I'm working very hard. It's already..."* he glanced down at his watch, a small recognition outside of his thoughts, "8:57 anyway." Recognition for a specific, determined purpose.

A leaf blew into his face, thrown at him by the persistent wind. It caught in the wisps of his hair. He swatted at it unconsciously, leaving bits of leaf tangled in his hair.

*"What do I have to work on anyway? Oh, that's right, that case with the Board of Education. Can anyone seriously think that creationism is a credible theory? I really hope they try to pull that scientific creationism bullshit with me. That would make things more interesting, and infinitely more enjoyable."*

In his haste, Mr. Seneraw stumbled over a rock protruding from the path. He did not seem to take any conscious notice of the break in his path. His legs quietly and automatically adjusted back on their determined course. There was no break in his thoughts.

*"I love it when people try to bring religion into the court. And to think that this country was founded on Christian ideals. Well, more deistic. It reminds me of my mother when she tried to drag me to church every Sunday. 'Mom, I don't want to sit in that stuffy church and listen to a priest drone on about all of those courageous things he doesn't believe in.'" He would sit home and read books assigned for summer high school reading instead. That particular day he read some of *Walden*. He had disliked it. It was too idealistic, too romantic, too many words.*

The trees snapped back and forth in neatly lined rows along the street as Tom approached the end of the park, deep in thought. Parked cars along the side of the road reflected the ominous contents of the sky in their metallic luster. There was very little traffic in this part of town. Tom approached the curb like a line approaching inevitably to form an intersection. This street was to be crossed, conquered, just like anything else in the way to the firm. Just like anything else in the way of Mr. Seneraw. Conquered without so much as a glance, like a great emperor pointing a finger at a map to the place of his latest whimsical conquest and airily flinging his massive army upon it. Tom's black soles clicked on the sidewalk as he exited the park. Parking meters stood in between cars like sentinels, blocking his path to the other side of the street. He stepped around the nearest one and in between two parked cars, only slowing down to glance cautiously at both sides of the street before crossing. The eyes swiveled left and right in their sockets, assessing with pupils unfocused and distant. This observance was done as a natural motion

of a machine, a practice engrained into the body and long ago stripped of its effort.

*"Not that I have anything against religion. I'm a man of science and math, and if religion coincides with these aims, fine. Pure, cold truth, that's what I want. People say it doesn't exist in a courtroom. I say to them, 'The truth belongs to whoever gives the best evidence and the best argument! The truth is what you make of it!'"*

Faintly, dimly, Mr. Seneraw heard the sound of what he imagined was a chorus of screams, grinding screams erupting from the asphalt. Then he felt a pain as intense as he had never felt before, burning, raging, into the whole left side of his body. The cracks of bones splintering resounded dully in his ears as numbing sensation spread over his entire body. He felt his face contort into a sort of grimace, a grimace that was at once in total shock of what was occurring and fighting off the threat of unconsciousness. He had felt his face move as though he was an alien host in his body feeling muscles that moved of their own accord. Ever so slowly Tom felt his feet leave the ground, his body propelled violently into the air by some unknown force, like a dead leaf in the wind. For a second, suspended in flight, he felt like an angel floating through the air. Or he felt like a man who had been pushed off of a cliff and wasn't quite sure what to make of the few puzzled seconds before he hit the ground.

The ground came up to embrace Tom's twisted body. It rolled him along with its hardened hands for what seemed like minutes. Tom felt it tear viciously at his clothing, shredding his pants, obliterating the sneer of his shoes, clawing away strips of flesh from his body. Tom felt everything then, as if he were being rolled through every crevice in the road, as if a giant was forcing him into the earth itself. He felt it with an excruciating intensity, an intensity he had never felt before because his most precious moments in life had been in the sanctuary of his mind, a sanctuary torn asunder, its foundations bare and crumbling. It was cruel to be exposed to the world like this, the world that he had never noticed but was now making itself undeniably, obtrusively known to him. But with this pain, this incredible, unendurable pain: Tom wanted unconsciousness. He desperately needed it, to escape this horror. But that which had helped him for so long, had been his strength and power, his victory, now prevented him from his one desire, keeping him awake. His body screamed for release, to be free of the searing inferno that was consuming it. He remained conscious.

Tom's body stopped rolling thirty-five feet from the now motionless bus. The bus had come around the corner of the park, hidden by its many trees. Tom had been in between the parked cars when he had given a cursory look to either side of the street. The bus driver had not seen Tom hidden among the cars. Tom had been completely unaware of the bus, even as it sped toward his destruction. The line had not reached its intersection; the laws of math and science had been shattered in Tom's limp form. Nearby, the trees bent low to the ground in submission to the wind.

Tom should have been feeling anger, or terror, or sadness, or fear. Strangely, he felt none of these. His mind had broken too, although he was not aware of it. He lay serenely on the pavement, arms and legs spread wide like he had paused in the process of making a beautiful snow angel and was silently contemplating it. His eyes fixed upward. His mind was blank. The wind played with pieces



of his garments that had been torn during his flight. It licked his face and ran through his hair. It lightly tickled his mouth. Tom had never felt these curious sensations before. He felt the blood pouring out of his many wounds, trickling down his legs and pooling on the street. It felt warm, almost comforting. In the far distance, Tom could faintly hear a voice screaming, another voice yelling for 911. It sounded like a choir was singing softly to him from a distance, gathered solemnly as witnesses to the spectacle. Tom peered at the sky. The sun had appeared in one of its brief moments through the clouds. He stared straight into the hot white orb as it shined its fiery beams over his body. The rays made Tom feel naked, exposed, and cold, like he had been thrown into an extremely icy pool of water. It was the kind of water that was so cold it burned and prickled, making one feel as though one were gasping at the brilliant surprise of life. Tom was gasping for air, but it was without desperation. He felt that it was the first time he had ever been naked without embarrassment, lying there with his mottled clothing clinging to him on the asphalt. He felt like he could lay there, mangled and open, forever. Most of all, he felt the silence. It weighed upon him with a lightness more exhilarating than any sound or any thought he had ever possessed.

When the paramedics came, Tom had already been dead for minutes. The last thing they saw before they covered his body in darkness were eyes glazed with water, looking straight, open towards a path no one could see.

## On Tundergarth Farm

There's an oak tree in Hanover, New Hampshire. Eighteen years old, it is still a sapling. I imagine that one day the tree will have a commanding view of the Connecticut River and Norwich, Vermont, where my mom once sat in bed, crying, watching everything unfold on the television. Underneath the tree is a plaque. It is bronze, with gold lettering in memory of my uncle, who died December 21, 1988 in the skies above Lockerbie, Scotland on Pan Am 103, The Clipper Maid of the Seas.

I imagine that in a fall of a thousand feet there is nothing. Only the sound of wind rushing past your ears.

Two hundred seventy people. I try to imagine the final seconds of their lives. The boom of a bomb exploding. The whoosh as the plane's aluminum siding tore off. The terrifying jolt in their seats. Falling through the air, the ground screaming at them. How did they cope with the inevitable? The knowledge that there was nothing they could do to stop their sudden, dramatic descent. Did they give in to their impending death? Or fight it, racking their brains for some way in which they could escape?

I recall September 11. Watching people hurl themselves out of the World Trade Center. Their bodies taking seconds to fall. I then imagine falling from thirty-five times higher. Seconds stretched into minutes. Minutes to contemplate your death. I imagine that in a fall of a thousand feet there is nothing. Only the sound of wind rushing past your ears. There is no time to think before you hit the ground. I imagine this because it is hard not to. I imagine this because I don't know where else to place my uncle.

July 1997. My father and I are in Boston. I am clutching two Red Sox tickets between my fingers. I am chattering excitedly as we drive along the banks of the Charles. We swing onto Beacon Street, which is lined with maple trees and elms. Their branches canvass widely, providing shade on a hot day. The brownstones here are three and four stories high. We drive by one of them and my dad says, "Your uncle used to live there." I stare at the building longingly. I wish I had the opportunity to visit him in Boston. I am sure he would have taken me to Red Sox games.

December 21. Winter is just beginning to settle into the Green Mountains, and this is my least favorite time of year. The trees are brown skeletons. The wind howls and the sky is more often than not, grey. It is cold, cold enough to snow. But there is not a flake on the ground.

December 21. My mom dines out with my grandparents, my sister and I come along. Each year we celebrate my uncle's life by getting together as a family. To celebrate the tiny group that we have left.

Every year they mention it on the news. "Today is the anniversary of the bombing of Pan Am 103..." I try and comfort my mom but I don't really know

what to say because I can't relate, she lost her brother.

My sister is nineteen. Two years younger than me. We are two very different people. She is conservative, I am liberal. She barely reads books, I love them. She is avid about economics; the only thing I am avid about when it comes to economics is whether I have enough money in my bank account to make it through the week. Despite our differences though, I love her and wouldn't know what to do if she died.

They found my uncle lying in a field outside of Lockerbie. "It was beautiful," my mom said. The field resided on a hill near the tiny hamlet of Tundergarth. Five kilometers from Lockerbie. The nose of the plane had crashed nearby, the iconic image from a terrible disaster. My mom said that there were sheep grazing in the meadow. It was lined with stone walls and canted towards the valley where Tundergarth rested. The steeple of a chapel barely visible. My mom carried a box when she visited, it was filled with pine-cones and maple leaves, chestnuts and dried flowers, pieces of New England. She scattered them where they found his body.

My grandparents were given my uncle's class ring from Deerfield, and a gold cuff link which had been found in the wreckage. For years, my grandfather was unable to sleep peacefully, terrified that his son had suffered.

It is Thanksgiving break, 2006, and I am browsing through photo albums. I discover a photo of my uncle giving me a Teddy Ruxpin toy. Teddy Ruxpin was a huge, animated teddy bear. I loved Teddy Ruxpin and carried him everywhere. When I entered kindergarten, Teddy Ruxpin sat in the corner of my room, his eyes haunting me at night. One morning, several years after my uncle's death, I buried my head in my mom's arms and told her, "I don't want him anymore."

In the photo, there is a smile on my two-year-old face and my uncle is laughing. His forehead is shining in the warm, June sun. It reflects off his glasses. I close the photo album and think about Teddy Ruxpin, and I wish that I had not gotten rid of him. I imagine that my mom was pained when I asked her to give it away. A piece of my uncle, gone. Forever.

**Fisher Girl from Picardy**

*(based on a painting of the same name by Elizabeth Nourse)*

At the top of that hill  
where the wind can hurl them down,  
they hold hands and stand next to each other.

Under that big white sky full of spirit  
stand a girl and a boy from Picardy.  
The color of their skin show the hours spent in the sun.

There is a smell of salt in the wind...  
That smell of salt in their hair, deep in their skin,  
is the mark of living by the sea.

She carries her fishing nets and an empty basket  
and does not shift under their weight.  
She stands straight looking towards the sea of promises,  
like an old lighthouse, firm and hopeful.  
Her little brother protects his eyes  
from that fierceness of the ocean,  
from the sun that bites,  
and from the spicy salt in the air.

Their faces are solemn and thoughtful  
while they think about the hours they will have to spend  
working with the nets  
and prepare themselves to touch the burning sand.

They will catch enough fish for the family,  
no more, no less.  
And then, the children will play in the water.

## The Alabaster King

I sink to the hardened ground as warmth betrays my skin. My body protests the cruel torture and begins to shut down. The cold is agonizing, but the pain serves as a reminder that I am alive. The frigid air slowly suffocates me, until I submit to its icy embrace and close my eyes sinking into a restful sleep. A violent shiver crawls through my frail body, like an electric current passing through a wire. Still, I remain at rest even as the blood in my veins is replaced by sheets of ice. It took me a second to remember how I ended up here: I started drinking and I never stopped.

... I remain at rest even as the blood in my veins is replaced by sheets of ice.

It was morning and I trudged through the dewy grass as first light began to stir the world to waking. Far off in the distance lights flickered on, illuminating windows, like fireflies ushering in the night, only in reverse. The scene around me started to spin until the horizon had melted away and there was only sky. At the first taste of bile I dropped to my knees. I didn't fight the urge to vomit. When my stomach was empty I collapsed onto my side gasping for air until the retching subsided. My throat burned and hot tears slid down my cheeks. Wiping my mouth on the sleeve of my coat, I forced myself to stand up. Freshly cut grass clippings clung to my hands, until I brushed them off onto my pants. I stumbled onward, but there was no place for me to go, eventually I found a bench. A gentle, but persistent nudging stole me away from my drunken dreaming. An old woman continued to prod me until I surrendered half of the bench to her. She reached into a worn brown satchel and retrieved yarn and a set of knitting needles. Wrinkles spread over her face and suddenly she reminded me of a squirrel. The needles clicked together rhythmically and created a makeshift lullaby.

I woke up hours later with the sensation of carpenters in my head, sawing and pounding. I had to face the cement and asphalt wasteland that lay before me. Standing shakily, I started the trek. As I emerged from an alley, a diesel truck roared by me and left behind a dark cloud whose pungent fumes burned my nostrils. Fighting off a fit of coughing I strode on slumped and wearied. Somehow I made it back to my apartment and up five flights of stairs, only to find that my key was missing. My body wouldn't take any more requests and I passed out in front of my door.

This time when I woke up, I was inside an apartment. Confused and still groggy I rolled over onto my stomach and nearly fell off the couch I was lying on. A voice coming from my left warned, "Be careful you don't fall off." It was a kind voice. There was a heavy wool blanket wrapped around my body and tucked under my chin and on the floor my coat was neatly folded and placed next to my shoes.

"How long have I been sleeping for?"

"I'm not exactly sure, but I found you passed out against your door



a couple of hours ago." The voice wasn't familiar to me and it was difficult to separate her face from the shadows of the sparsely lit room. I reached behind me and felt around for my glasses; while I was searching, a dim light filled the room. When I looked up, I saw that the walls were painted in warm earthy tones that reminded me of my childhood. I absorbed it all and allowed myself the brief comfort afforded to me by nostalgia. I am seven years old again, racing wildly through endless fields of corn, pushing stalks out of the way, with my father in hot pursuit, as laughter and joy come bubbling up from inside of me. I hear him calling my voice, but I can't tell where it's coming from. The sun is high in the sky and it warms me to my core. My father's voice has faded away now and I can't tell which direction will take me back home. Just as panic begins to set in, my father sweeps me off my feet, into his arms, and tickles me. He smells of morning dew and the fields, scents which he never could seem to wash off. I could smell them on him even after we sold the farm and moved to the city and years later as we laid him to rest below the ground.

I finally located my glasses and put them on. They sat crooked and the frame was slightly too large for my face. The scratches that covered the lenses made everything in my world look worn and ruined. In the pale light flowing from the lamp, I recognized the face of my neighbor, Katy. In the four months that I have been a tenant here, I've only seen her a handful of times, and even then, I never spoke to her. She sat silently, sipping a cup of steaming tea from a chipped ceramic mug. For the first time, I studied her face. She was young, or at least younger than I had initially thought, only a couple of years older than me. Her features weren't striking in any way, but there was a beauty in the subtlety of the way they were put together. And there was something else; she radiated this indescribable essence of clairvoyance. I felt as though she already knew more about me than I could ever surmise about her. "Do you believe in God?" she asked me.

The weight of her question caught me off guard, "Like a bearded man in flowing robes, or some higher power guiding us?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well, which one?"

"Both."

"No, I stopped believing a long time ago."

"I do," she said. "Would you like some tea?" I nodded my head and she rose from her seat and padded into the kitchen. She retrieved a tea kettle from the stove and filled it with fresh water. She began humming softly to herself, but I could tell she wasn't aware she was doing it. "What kind of tea would you like?"

I said, "Whatever you have is fine." She proceeded to rattle off a list of about ten different varieties of tea. I asked what she would recommend and she told me that she was partial to lemon with a bit of honey, but that she had something more exotic if I was in the mood. I wasn't. For a few minutes neither of us said a word and we were left alone with our own thoughts. When she finished steeping the tea, she discarded the bag and approached me with a misshapen mug, which she informed me that she had made herself. This time she sat down next to me, with her legs crossed, leaning against the arm of the couch. Again, she stared at me and continued to sip her tea. I brought my own mug up to my lips in an

attempt to avert my eyes from her gaze. "Do you play chess?" she asked.

"I haven't in a long time," I said.

"Do you have a chess board?"

"Somewhere, I do."

"I don't know how to play, but I love to look at the pieces. Would you teach me?" I didn't know how to respond. I wanted to get back to my apartment and the bottle of Jack I left on the kitchen table. Somehow I agreed to dig up the board and bring it over as soon as I finished my tea. While I was asleep Katy had gone to the doorman, explained my situation, and returned with the spare key. She accompanied me over to my apartment, despite my attempts to dissuade her. I dug through my closet searching for something I had left behind at an earlier stage of my life. And as I dug through two and a half decades of acquired possessions that represented my life, there was not one thing I was proud of. Near the bottom of a tattered cardboard box was the antique chess set I had been searching for.

I took the pieces out one by one and set them on their squares. I explained the rules, told her the name of each piece, and demonstrated how they could be moved around the board. I didn't tell her what my father told me the first time he taught me to play chess, which was: Chess is war and the objective is to crush your opponent's mind. That afternoon we played the first of many games. When the game had ended we both sat back and surveyed the board. Katy sighed and said, "Sometimes I think that I feel too much."

"Most of the world has the opposite problem."

"Does it ever seem like you feel too much?"

I said, "I wake up every day and pray for apathy." I packed up the board and retreated to my apartment. Once there, I sat in an arm chair and massaged my temples, waiting for sleep to come over me. I glanced at the coffee table and lying near the edge was a stained legal pad and a pen. I reached out and retrieved the pad and pen, treating them like a delicate set of china, liable to fall and fracture into a thousand pieces. I flipped to an open page and stared down at the lined paper. At first the nakedness of the stark white page offended me, but then the words began to flow from my hand and through my pen. Over the next few weeks things started to change. For the first time in the longest time, I stopped drinking and started writing again.

Katy stared intently at the chess board in front of her. We'd been playing nearly every day for two weeks and each day the game was becoming more drawn out and my inevitable victory wasn't so inevitable. I had begun to notice something; while we were talking, occasionally she would counter my attacks without a thought, in a single decisive movement. Other times, I could see her hand almost drawn toward a piece that would have struck me a devastating blow, only to pass it by and make a rookie mistake. "Have you ever dreamed in the third person?"

"No, why do you ask?"

"I did once," she said. "I was in a wooden row boat with William Faulkner. We were in the middle of a lake and I was rowing the boat, but there was only one oar. When I looked out across the water I saw glass and I realized we were inside a bottle. My psychiatrist said that it meant I was afraid of dying."

"Katy, how long have you been playing chess?"

"They say I was a child prodigy," she said without changing her tone.

"Why did you lie to me?"

"Would you have listened to me if I had told you the truth?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You're twenty-five and burned out. You couldn't stand the cruelty of the world so you gave up and poured your life out one glass at a time." I stared at her, but didn't speak. We resumed the game. I moved a piece. She moved her own and I knew it was over before she had a chance to say, "Checkmate," but instead the words that came out of her mouth were: "Kevin, I'm dying." I watched my king topple in slow motion, like I was viewing the Zapruder film. I went back to my apartment and sat down to write. In the past few weeks I had filled every notebook in my apartment and every scrap of paper. I'd begun to write on the walls and the floor. What looked like chaos was actually perfectly ordered. I picked up where I left off, above the molding in my living room.

I returned to Katy's apartment the next day with the chess board under my arm. She quietly explained to me that she had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer three years ago and that complete remission was extremely rare. Somehow I knew that the thing she craved most was normalcy so I gave it to her. We both pretended that everything was fine and that no one was dying, even when a hospice care worker moved in. As the weeks went by Katy's state rapidly deteriorated. I continued to write. I finished my novel the night Katy died. I stood over her and held her hand; in the other she fingered a chess piece. "We all have a destiny in life," Katy said, "and mine was to help you realize the greatness inside of you and to let it out."

"That's bullshit."

"It's not. Life is a mystery, don't act like you understand it." She pressed the alabaster king into my hand and breathed her last breath. I kissed her forehead. Back in my apartment on my kitchen table, covered in dust, sat the bottle of Jack Daniels I had been too afraid to touch. I drank it, and then walked to the liquor store, leaving my notebooks neatly stacked on the coffee table. I grabbed the first bottle off the shelf and told the clerk to ring it up. I headed for the park and slumped down against an ancient oak tree.

If there's one thing that Katy taught me, it's that there can be beauty in the downfall. I dig in my pocket for the alabaster king. My stiff hands claw at the frozen ground. I place the king in the hole and heap up a mound of frost-covered dirt.

## Four Leaves of Renewed Luck

A single stem keeps each of the four clover leaves in place. A symbol of luck, or at least that's what you are led to believe. I remember being a little girl during recess, quietly sifting through blades of grass in search of one of these rare treasures. My eyes played tricks on me every time I stared off into the fields, leading me to suspect that I had finally located one; however, each clover I found only had three leaves. Most of them did, actually, and I cannot recall ever finding a single four-leaf clover.

My mother, on the other hand, was luckier than me, or at least so I thought. She had seen such a fortune first-hand. I remember the day she recounted the memory of her discovery. I could not have been more than five years old at the time when she first told me. It was late in the afternoon and I had noticed that my mother had been spending quite some time alone in her room that day. The day was August 23, 1991: the solemn anniversary of my father's death was once again upon us.

...Without her even having to say anything, I knew that her one wish must not have come true.

That summer, only five years earlier, my father had grown very ill. During that season when one is supposed to spend time out under the warm sun, he spent days in the hospital that soon turned into weeks, and eventually into months. He was diagnosed with stomach cancer, and unfortunately the doctors had not caught it in time to help him recover. He passed away on August 23, 1986, a little less than two months before I was born.

I stood quietly in the hallway outside my mother's door only five years later, lost in thoughts of my father, a figure in my life that is surrounded by so much mystery. I have bits of stories that I have tried to piece together to make some sketch of his existence. Some stories stick out more clearly in my mind, while others I have heard have been forgotten, maybe purposefully so I could hear them being retold again. I've asked to be told multiple times about how he used to love playing golf because it makes me feel connected to him, as I share the same level of adoration for the game. Maybe it is the reassurance that the words I hear from these stories bring me; they comfort me when nothing else can. This brought me back to the four-leaf clover and the reality of the moment, as I stood there in the hallway drifting off trying to recall several memories of my dad.

I walked up to my mother's door and gave a few gentle knocks against the cold wood. "Who is it?" she replied, even though she knew it could only have been one of her two children. I volunteered my identity and she allowed me to enter. Without even glancing up at my presence, she sat there on the edge of her bed, calmly flipping through the pages of a worn leather journal. I sat by her side letting my legs hang off the corner of her bed, swinging them to and fro as I peeked at what she was so wrapped up in.

This journal was filled with crumpled, faded papers with scribbled writing, quotes, old black and white photos, and other mementos she had collected over her lifetime that she now was so willing to share with me. My tiny fingertips glided over the surface of old memories as together we turned each page, glancing over each little marking, analyzing the moments from my mother's past.

Together, we grabbed the edge of the next page and pulled the sheet over only to notice that something fell from the journal and slowly floated to the ground. My mother picked up the stained Saran Wrap that contained a pressed four-leaf clover, its shape maintained over the years by the weight of the journal's filled pages. I was very curious about why my mother had kept such a thing for so many years. She looked at me and smiled as tears slowly began to build at the edges of her hazel eyes. She pulled me into the cozy nook of her arm as she let me carefully hold the fragile phenomenon. I did not understand at first why my mother was crying, but I sat there patiently waiting for the words to come.

The story took me back to a time that I could not remember, that summer in 1986 and I had yet to make my introduction into the world. "You see, your father was very ill in the hospital. I went to visit him one day and received terrible news about his state," her words were struggling to come out, "they gave me little hope that he would ever recover." She continued to tell me about that same afternoon when she returned home. "I went outside and was walking around the front yard. I remember it was a perfect afternoon, a cool summer day, clear of any clouds and any of the awful D.C. humidity that we're both so used to. I guess I just wanted to look at my flowers and my garden because they make me so happy," she said. She always loves to garden, especially when she has a lot on her mind. I continued to patiently listen. "I walked back and forth through the yard, flooded with terrible thoughts. Then all of a sudden, there it was." My mother's daydreaming eyes had somehow stumbled upon that single four-leaf clover that stuck out in the middle of the yard. She bent over and grasped the stem until she felt it snap. Once she picked the four-leaf clover, the only thing left to do with it was to make a wish. Closing her eyes she dreamed of all the things that she had ever hoped for, but the one thing she wanted was the obvious wish that stuck out clearly in her mind.

She paused for a moment. I could hear her choking down the tears that wanted to flood her eyes. She gave my left shoulder a reassuring squeeze; she always had this way of comforting me that everything was going to be okay even in the toughest moments. Then, without her even having to say anything, I knew that her one wish must not have come true. A few weeks after her discovery of that four-leaf clover, my father passed away at the age of thirty-nine.

We sat there together, tears quietly rolling down both of our cheeks, and even though the words never left her mouth, it was almost as if the person I had looked up to my whole life was telling me that she had lost hope. It was for this reason that out of every story I had heard about my dad thus far in my lifetime, there was never one that had impacted me to the extent this one had. Instead of hearing all of the things about myself that reminded my mother of my dad, this story was not uplifting nor was it filled with optimism; it was depressing and painful. For a long period after, I stopped looking for four-leaf clovers; I had no



desire to. I felt empty inside, not just because I missed my father, but because I constantly was questioning why he had to die at such a young age.

There was a long period of time where I blamed myself for my father's death, not that I had any reason to, but I did it anyways. I would torture myself day in and day out, making myself feel guilty for something that I had no control over. I felt overly envious of other girls in my class who always had their dads to come watch them in their sports games, or their school plays, or to take them to work on those ridiculous "father-daughter" school holidays. My school seriously had that day as a holiday, which made me furious that I was stuck going to school that day when all of my other friends could go to work with their fathers. I was the one who had to suffer through forty-five minutes of grueling math class while Katie and Julia, two of my closest friends at the time, were showered with fancy pens that lit up in multiple different colors and stickers with their father's company logo on them. It wasn't fair. What did I do to deserve this fatherless life?

But no matter how many times I asked myself that same question, nothing changed. Nothing could bring back my father no matter how angry or upset I was about him not being in my life. Maybe four-leaf clovers are just a symbol of luck; maybe they have no way of actually making wishes come true. Maybe I'm missing the point of what they represent.

My mother still has that four-leaf clover, concealed in that old, dirty Saran Wrap in her journal. Every few years I'll go in and look through the tattered pages to make sure it's still in there. It reminds me that no matter how hard life gets, there is still always another way of looking at a situation. Even when my father was dying and my mother probably knew in the back of her mind that he was not going to get better, she still had the hope to wish for something that would probably not come true. She held faith and optimism, showing strength in a situation where many people would have broken down and given up. Even after my father passed away, she never turned her back on my brother or me, and she gave us everything we could have ever needed to feel fulfilled in our lives. To my mother, the purpose of that four-leaf clover was to execute a wish that she knew would never come true. It was almost as if each of the four clover leaves represented each one of us, and now with my father gone, it seems as if that fourth leaf is more meaningful now than ever before. Even though our family is not complete, the four leaves of that clover are still held together by time, proving to my mother and myself that we can still feel whole even without my father in our lives.

Now that I'm older and don't necessarily believe in the "fairy-tale" ideas that four-leaf clovers and shooting stars grant us wishes, or even that Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny exist, I still feel that there is something to be gained by seeing things magically from all situations, good and bad. Although the loss of my father still affects me in certain ways, I have been blessed with a new way of looking at life, and for that reason I feel lucky.

A Rose is a Rose is a Rose

Soft as velvet, pink as prim,  
So slim, a limb, trembling in the wind,  
Invites a whiff of sweet-smelled bliss,  
Just one caressing graze, so swift,  
Across your beauteous flesh, my gift,

A kiss for your luxurious semblance,  
Procuring accolade with only presence,  
Enthralling allure, so pure, allure  
Please let me touch your delicate skin-

But my, a prick, so slick, so quick  
I sensed your risk, but knew no trick!  
You slipped my mind, and though I cried,  
You won your wicked game...

Whether vain, vibrant, and velvet soft,  
Or wilted, withered and worn to thorns,  
A rose, is a rose, is a rose.

Rainy  
Sara Thomas  
Acrylic Paint  
May 2007





Ancient  
Modernity  
Victoria West  
*Black and White*  
Photograph  
March 2006





Self-Portrait  
Thomas Hanvey  
Graphite  
April 2007







**Inside the Artist's Studio**

Marilyn Springer

*Multi-Medium Collage on Masonite and Wood*

March 2007





Dylan in a Gesture  
Chelsea Kasten  
*Graphite*  
August 2005



Sit and Watch Life  
Roll By  
Andrew Maturo  
*Digital Photograph*  
July 2007





Geisha at the  
Festival of Ages  
Amanda Ward  
*Acrylic*  
April 2005







Still Life With Chair, Shirt, Jacket, Shoes and Umbrella

Anukul Gurung

*Oil on Paper*

November 2004





Flawless Poise  
Desiree Koser  
Oil on Masonite  
December 2007



The Bike

Meredith McEntee

*Black and White  
Photograph*

December 2003





Dirty Bath  
Kelly Bennett  
*Digital Photograph*  
June 2006

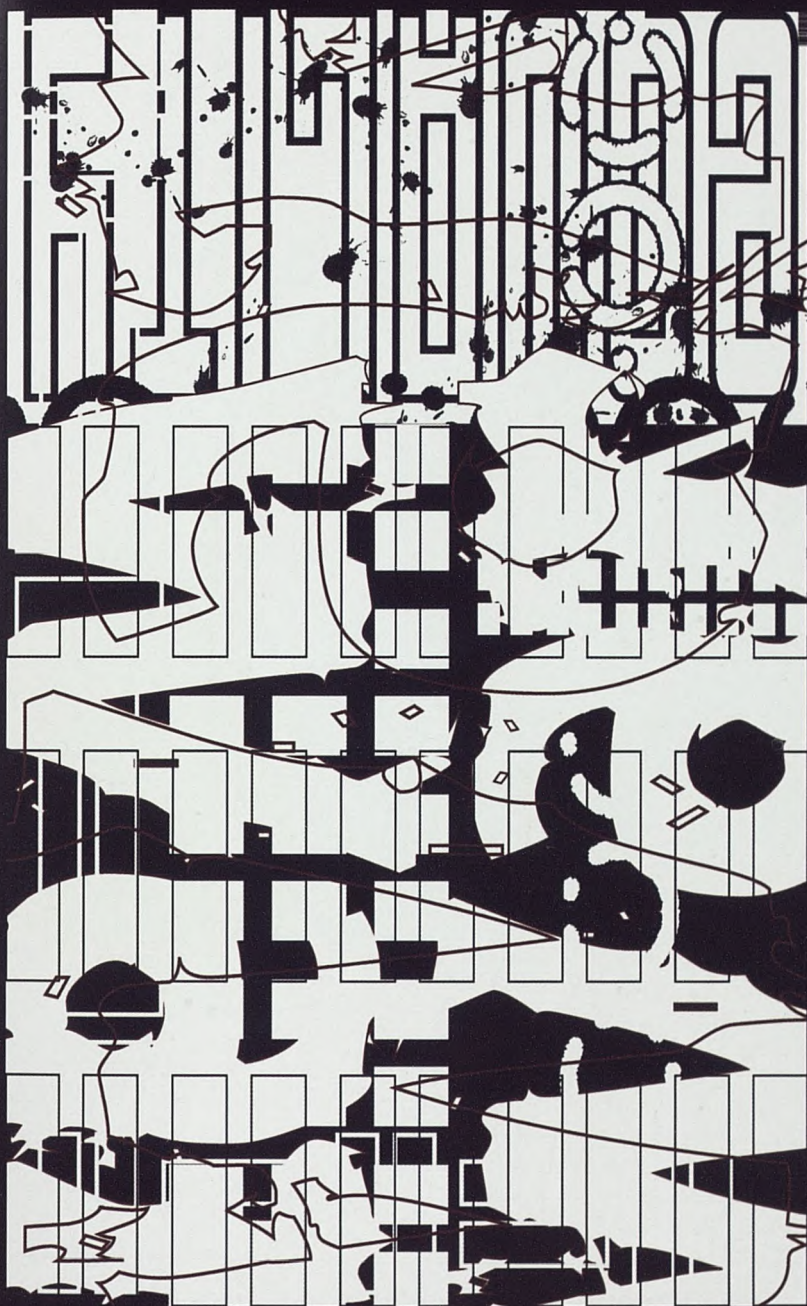




Foggy  
Sunrise  
Christopher  
Merkle  
*Digital Photograph*  
July 2006







War and "Equality"

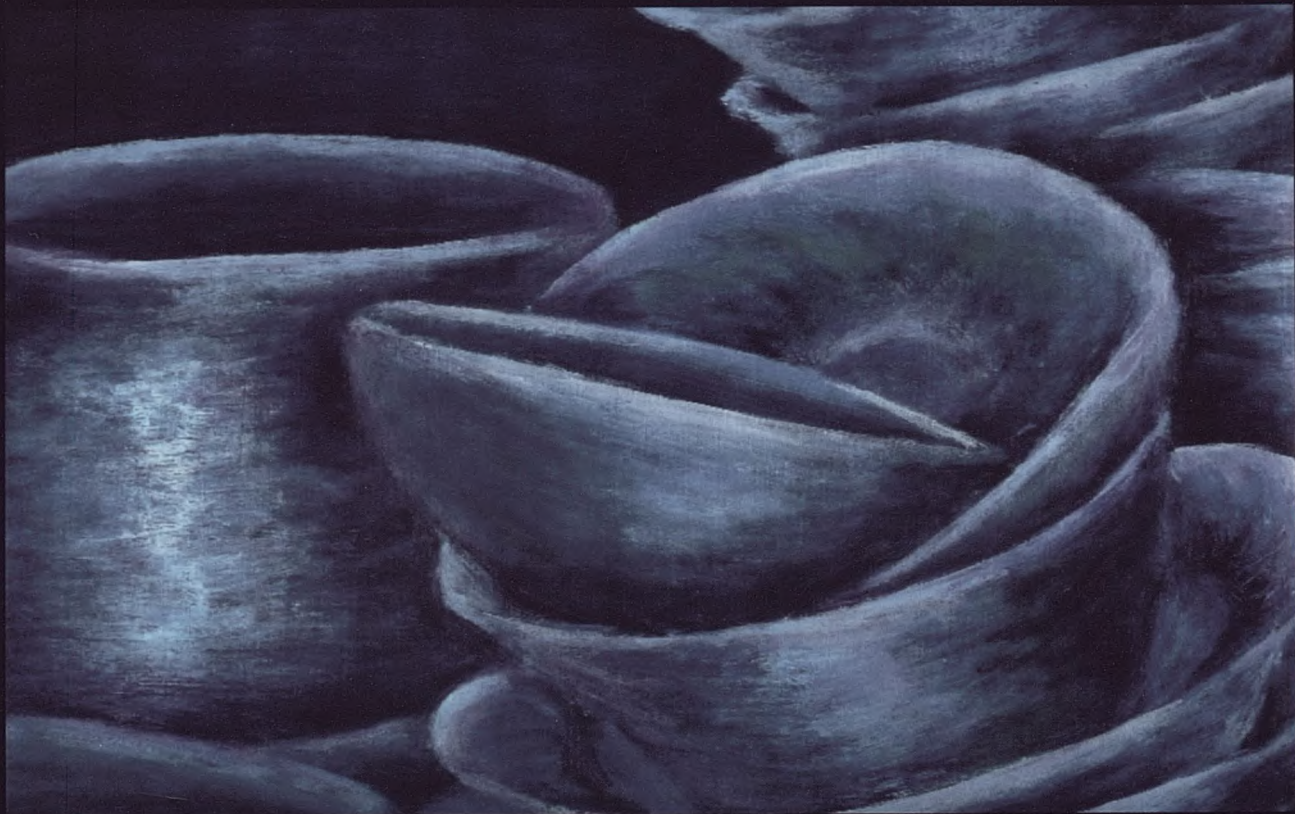
Brian Menna

*Giclée*

December 2005



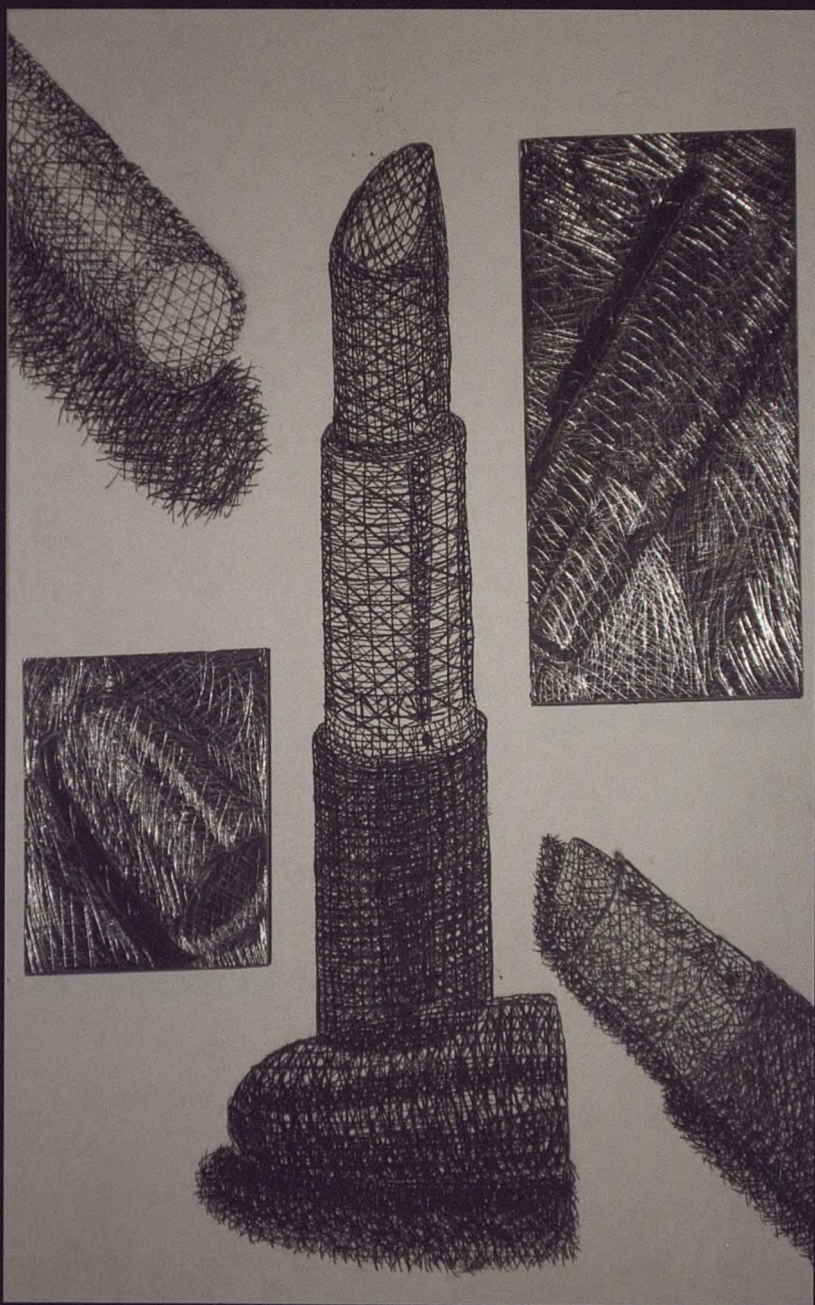
Bowls  
Cassandra  
DeStefano  
Acrylic  
December 2006



Southstreet Seaport Boats  
Allison Schofield  
*Digital Photograph*  
July 2005







## Multiple MAC Perspectives

Victoria West

*Pen and Ink and Scratchboard*

Spring 2005

## Boys Will Be Boys

As a child, I had always found a duty in clearing the backyard pool of bugs. It wasn't that I liked bugs, in fact I despised them, but something about lifting their almost lifeless bodies out of the water made me feel good inside, as if I had rescued a small kitten from a tree or found a donor for a patient in need of a heart. "Here you go," I'd say as I bumped the pool skimmer against the hot ashen cement that enclosed our pool. "I give to you another day."

It was almost as if these bugs had places to go, things to do. I felt noble and considerate as I watched their bodies trail a wet line across the cement before scattering their wings and lifting their upper bodies towards the sky. These bugs were going places, I told myself, they were the future pollinators of the local park or had big plans to migrate south by September. They'd turn up somewhere in Tampa, Florida and delight all of the tourists. They'd give birth to a small mosquito that would later bite my nemesis or inflict disease upon the neighbors' barking dog. They were *doing things*.

As much as I had wanted to believe that these organisms went on to live fruitful, productive lives, the reality of the matter proved that they were about as important as fruit flies and, as luck would have it, placed in the very same category.

It wasn't until I was about thirteen or fourteen that someone finally pointed out the insignificance of my actions.

"You stand here what, ten minutes a day?" My older brother, Wesley, asked once, bouncing a tennis ball against the ground in a loud, crude manner. "Know how many sandwiches you could make for the homeless in that much time?"

His point seemed insufficient as I knew I would only be able to make four, maybe five, sandwiches and there were no *real* homeless people in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, but still I considered my actions later that night. I lay in bed, my covers pulled back in a wretched mess underneath me, and contemplated the actual doings of these bugs. As much as I had wanted to believe that these organisms went on to live fruitful, productive lives, the reality of the matter proved that they were about as important as fruit flies and, as luck would have it, placed in the very same category. Was I really just wasting time?

The next morning, I wasted no time in gathering up the skimmer and tracing it along the surface of the pool, watching the small ripples gather stamina as they rolled across the water's edge. Today I would see where these bugs went, what they did, whether or not their returned to their husbands or wives and small children for a family movie and a bowl of popcorn.

The mission seemed easy enough, but upon scooping up half a dozen limp, waterlogged bugs, I began to realize the futility of the situation. Never before had I gotten so close to them, analyzed their tiny little faces and black, metallic-looking eyes. These insects looked more like little robots than anything else, their

bodies hard and solid, their wings and legs more like mechanic attachments than limbs. And, worst of all, they were all dead.

Finally, after scraping eight or nine bugs off the hot cement and into the arborvitae, I rescued a small firefly with flailing legs and flapping wings. He was still alive. Eagerly and excitedly I tapped the skimmer's net against the ground and watched the bug peel away softly, his black and white body catching on a small cattail that had dried in the sun. Bending down, I examined the bug and found humor in his arduous attempts to dry off and fly away. Clearly, he was going nowhere fast.

It was at about this time that Wesley came outside, his socks thrown on haphazardly and his heels resting uncomfortably on the top of his sneakers. Clearly, he had been watching me from the window in the kitchen and curiosity had gotten the best of him. His eyes squinted as he came closer, and he bent down to examine what rested on my leaf.

"Ridiculous," he said, shaking his head and squinting his forehead back into three or four tight, rolled lumps above his eyebrows. "I kill two dozen of these, easy, in a night."

He was, of course, referring to the luminous, plastic orange baseball bat he shared with our younger brother, William. On any given summer night, the two of them would sneak out through the garage, grab hold of the bat and whack at the night sky, smattering firefly debris across the bat like exploded water balloons. It was a forbidden action, and typically I was able to convince my mother to mediate, smiling as she ran into the yard, angry that they had disobeyed her. She'd break up their firefly massacre within minutes, but on a Friday or Saturday night, after she had enjoyed several glasses of wine and was resting on the porch, rocking with my father, I knew all bets were off.

"Just let them be," she'd coo softly, her voice soft and light and smelling of a peach wine cooler. "Boys will be boys."

"You're not getting this one," I said, suddenly hunching over the bug as if it were my very own newborn. I pictured the bug decorated with a small baby cap and little booties—four of them, one for each little femur. "Little Fire E. Fly," I murmured softly, smiling at my cleverness.

"Yeah, we'll see about that," he said in response, his hand reaching out to grab the soft leaf. He didn't get very close before I snapped at his hand, pushing it away from my new precious pet. Still, I knew there was a real threat in his words.

"See ya later, firefly," he said coolly, raising from the ground and walking away toward the garage. "We'll meet again soon."

For the remainder of the afternoon, I made it my personal undertaking to protect Mr. Fire E. Fly and, moreover, my dignity. This bug presented an opportunity to show my brother what I was made of, what sheer human passion could do in the face of adversity. Moreover, it was the next best thing to getting a guinea pig, something I had been hounding my mother over for the past three months.

"They stink," she had said, clinking some ice cubes into a clear plastic cup with teal and lime-green cartoon martini glasses around the base. "I mean, honestly. They're part of the rodent family."



Fire E. Fly came with me everywhere that day, and when I feared his life would be threatened—as it certainly would in any one part of the house if my mother discovered him—I dutifully camouflaged him in whatever seemed practical. An upside down baseball mitt for lumbering around the yard (I even held a ball in my hand to make it seem realistic), a pair of swimming goggles for whenever I wanted to take a dip, even a folded napkin when dinnertime came and my mother insisted we eat outside on the patio, citing the sun's rays for increasing her endorphins.

"It's God's own little happy hour," she exclaimed, setting down three china bowls filled with Spanish yellow rice, steamed asparagus and boneless chicken thighs. "Now, drink up."

After supper, I reached for Fire E. Fly and, as joyously as a young child would, attempted to skip off toward the driveway, where I would casually unearth my small pet and find another practical, discrete place for him to go, away from my brother's bat and the horrible glow of splattered bodily fluids.

"Not so fast, little lady," my father said, and I knew that instant that he'd have some drab, ineffective chore for me. The point of making his children work for their food seemed beyond me, as most of the time we only managed to create more of a mess that our mother, her kneecaps covered in the leftover food that we hadn't been able to 'slide' into the trash bin, would have to clean up. In fact, my father himself never lifted a finger, except to point it at one of us and remind us, "I work long days."

Holding the napkin tightly behind my back, I smiled at him politely and waited for his request. "Yes, father?" I said in a tone that openly mocked the Amy he'd like for me to be. It pleased him.

"Just clear the condiments and your plate, puh-lease," he said, smiling back at me. His mouth was about as wide as a baseball and a deep shade of ruby red from his wine. "Heidi," he said, glancing to my mother who sat beside him, "another drink?"

"Oh John," my mother said, dabbing her own napkin against her face. "We can't have *the child* fixing us another drink."

The way that they referred to me as 'the child' irked me, especially at fourteen years old, but I was beginning to worry about Fire E. Fly's oxygen levels while tucked tightly in the cloth and so, instead of questioning their diction, I merely smiled.

"Sure we can," he said, swatting at the air. "She's only got, what, seven years till she's fixing her own drinks? And you know what kids do the second they turn eighteen." He reclined in his chair and tucked his hands behind his head, looking off at the horizon and the fond memories it seemed to hold. "You remember our own college days. Fake IDs. Total ragers. You remember, *keggers*."

The fact that my parents had met in college was one thing, but their constant need to remind us all that it was a fraternity party they had met at—not an academic lecture or a food festival held by the Diversity Council—made all of us feel a bit awkward. There was nothing like imagining your own parents just years older than you, their clothing disheveled and splattered with alcohol.

"I don't mind," I said quickly, doing everything I possibly could to stop

my mind from imagining my father's pick up line or their first 'date.' I reached for the martini glass my mother had in front of her but she reached for it first, lifting it high above my head.

"It's not a big deal," she said, shaking her head at me. "I'll be in in a minute. I'll make myself one. I like to mix up the ratios anyway, if you know what I mean." She winked at my father and I reached for my plate, retreating to the kitchen with my napkin held securely in one hand in a manner that feigned casualness.

Once inside the house, I unfolded the napkin and carefully scraped Fire Fly off of the cloth with a spoon. Holding him up to eye-level, I examined him carefully and felt relieved to see his small antennas darting back and forth as he looked around his new surroundings heedlessly.

At the sound of my brother's loud, clunking footsteps, I carefully lowered the spoon and searched the kitchen for something quick and casual that I could place my small pet in. With my mother sharing flirtatious, reminiscent thoughts with my father, I knew there was no chance in hell I would be able to defend myself from Wesley if he came for my bug. That'd be it. Over. Done for. Lightning goop soup.

Quickly and professionally, I reached for a martini glass that sat in the kitchen sink and tapped the spoon against the rim, knocking Fire Fly into his new holding tank. *It looks so nonchalant*, I thought to myself, setting the glass against the countertop. *Like mom forgot her glass. How pragmatic.*

"I know you've got him somewhere," Wes said, moving closer to me. "And I'm gonna find him, wherever he is." With this he reached for a soiled knife that sat in the pan the chicken had cooked in. Pretending to slice it across his stomach, he cackled, "And then, stomach gore galore."

The rhyming amused me but not enough to give away my hiding place. I nodded at him confidently and retorted in a voice just high enough for him to hear, "Well, second you find him tucked away in his hiding place in the garage, he's yours."

Perfect. I had just dropped a wasted hint and he'd never think twice about my honesty. Wesley was so predictable like that.

"Oops," I said, covering my mouth and making the best frightened face I could. "I mean, in the *pool area*."

"Ah-ha!" Wes shouted, turning around and racing towards the garage. "He's mine now, that little bugger. And you still have to do *dishes*!" His footsteps pounded across the family room and tapered off as the garage door slammed shut.

Relieved, I smiled to myself and reached for my plate, carefully gliding the leftover rice into the trash bin without a worry for Fire Fly's safety. I could see him inside the dirty martini glass, creeping about cautiously, careful to avoid the wet splotches of sticky martini.

"You know," my mother said, closing the porch door behind her as she made her way into the kitchen, "you'll get along with your brother one day."

"Yeah," I said, rolling my eyes. "Some friend he'll make."

"Oh I mean it," she said, resting her plate in the sink. "He'll protect you from bullies, rescue you from bad boyfriends, who knows, maybe even supply you a

keg someday." Clearly, she was still reminiscing.

"Yeah, some hero. We'll see about that." I reached for my napkin and held it up to her, questioningly.

"The hamper," she replied, pointing to the hall. "Those things need a good washing."

I smiled at the truth in her statement. If only she knew what little organism had sat in that napkin in my lap for a good twenty-five minutes in the sweltering heat. Reaching the hamper, I tossed the dirty thing inside and replaced the lid overtop.

"I guess we'll just see," I said, making my way back to her, "I mean, I guess he's not *all* bad." My eyes scanned for Fire Fly but I couldn't see him, nor his holder, anywhere. I urgently made my way to the kitchen sink but found all the dishes had been loaded into the dishwasher. "There's still time, I mean," I stuttered, lifting the lever of the washer to find half a dozen pots and pans but still no martini glass. "We uh, we could become good friends?"

This last part seemed more like a question than a statement, but I couldn't even think of a way to rationalize my words. The fate of my very first pet was resting upon me, and I was determined not to lose him. What would become of his small, beady frame and his lustrous, luminous glow?

"Course you could," my mother said, pouring into her glass the remnants of the martini shaker and reaching for a fistful of ice cubes. Bringing the martini glass to her lips, her ruby red lips parted and she smiled, "And hey, boys will be boys."

9 Ways of Looking at a Cup of Coffee

I.

At dawn on a Monday,  
the sun hesitates  
like an unwanted embrace  
as I cup my cup of coffee.

II.

My neighbor,  
dressed in a severe white shirt and tie,  
backs out in a hurry.  
He never misses his morning date  
with the long-haired mermaid  
at the drive-through at 7:12 a.m.  
His wife doesn't know.

III.

10:00 a.m., alone,  
at my desk,  
staring at my mistake of  
flat, dollar-store bottled water,  
my coffee-thirsted mind wanders.

IV.

I will always be able to afford coffee!  
Pay me in shiny beans for my work.

V.

I am white.  
My coffee is black.  
Life is whiteblack  
-gray  
It takes its cup with sugar and milk.

VI.

You tell me.  
But then you ask me,  
and you tell me again.  
And your twisted words  
drip

drip  
drip -  
until -  
oh! Just stop justifying.  
The coffee has gone cold.

VII.

A cumbersome beauty,  
the barista,  
leans on the edge of the cracked counter, chatting,  
with a head full of apprehensive yellow waves.  
She flashes a smile,  
and shows off coffee-stained teeth.  
Beauty marks.

VIII.

I didn't mean to clutch you so  
desperately.  
I mistook you for my coffee mug.

IX.

This coffee dance  
keeps me  
Up  
all day until I  
crash (into my own)  
flailing arms  
when it has all gone away.



## The Salesman

I can't do this anymore. Just because I'm good at bullshitting people doesn't mean I need to do it for a living. I should be a salesman. They bullshit for a living and they can tell people their real names. I'm stuck with John or Jim or even Jacques if I'm feeling like a snobby romantic.

It's supposed to be an innocent game. In reality, this is sex with clothes on.

It was fun in the beginning. I was always excited to mark some naïve, rich daddy's girl who was far too trusting of any guy that had a smile and a look to boot. Going through the steps of a relationship was easy when feelings weren't an issue. A stint in the Peace Corps and a thriving investment firm were always easy ins with the families. My pseudo girlfriend loved the corps stories, along with the mother. The business savvy dad felt confident with me because of my "firm". Selling the dad was easy once I was "the one" in the mind of the ignorant daughter whose last true love was a puppy named Sprinkles.

I should have been a salesman.

I'm sitting around the campfire with all her model friends. The sun is starting to disappear. It's 6:00 PM. I hate November. I'm dressed from head to toe in thermal gear. I look like the Brawny man except with less sex appeal. I wasn't going to bring my lucky hat. You never know when some underwear model is going to have a hard lemonade and use his arms that are chiseled from granite to throw you in the stream. There goes the hat. Nevertheless, you can't go camping without a hat. It's a rule or something.

"John! John! Why are you sitting here like a party pooper!?"

What intricate language. I wonder where she learned this term. It was most likely in between her photo shoots and the shopping parties with her friends. It takes me a second to remember that I am John. Awesome. This shit is getting old. I don't know why I always pick John. Maybe it's because it has a long, respectful-sounding full name, probably not. Maybe it's because it's short and easy, most likely. It doesn't really matter. I'm John and she is Marybeth. You have to love the double names. I can barely remember one.

"John! Get over here!"

I skip over to the side of the stream and join the gladiators and gorgeous blonde knockouts as they are attempting to skip stones into the stream.

"John, how do you do it so well?"

I take a moment contemplating whether or not to actually attempt to explain this incredible ability.

"I don't know. Dumb luck I guess."

I know if I try explaining that they will just stare at my old beat-up Eagles hat and how it doesn't go with my bright orange thermal gear. Just once I would like to mark someone of interest with interesting friends to match. I think its called

reality. Some of my friends do the whole "I actually like the girl I'm with" thing. The funny thing is that they seem miserable too. I wish I could be miserable like them.

A couple more stones skip into the water: one, two, three. I look over to see the underwear model trying to skip a rock the size of his head. As I'm looking at the pinnacle of evolution, my hat disappears. I look and see that Marybeth is behind a tree with my hat on backwards. It's always backwards. I know this game. I have to playfully try half-assed to get it back, while we both laugh and grope each other. It's supposed to be an innocent game. In reality, this is sex with clothes on. Eyes in complete contact at all times, sharing in each other's affection. Thank God I'm blessed with nice eyes or this girl might see straight through me. I want to enjoy this ritual like everyone else does, but I can't help contemplating just hitting her to get my damn hat back. It's not her I resent, though. It's me. I see the pure joy in her eyes of just being with me. It's not her fault. I'm just pissed that I've never felt that way.

"You can't get your hat back from a girl?!"

Thank you, Calvin. After playing along with this childish game I finally get my hat back. It is now about 7:30. It's almost completely dark and everyone starts pairing around the fire. Billions of years of evolution are seen right in front of my face. It's like some force is pulling each person towards the one they will be with that night. The force working on me is probably greed. I see Calvin next to Victoria who hasn't talked to him all night. Now she's on his lap under a blanket. I'm basically watching porn.

Marybeth comes over and sits on my lap, taking and placing my hat on her head. It's backwards, of course. My initial thought is to throw her into the fire and laugh, thinking about the 100k I'm stealing from her father. After thinking twice about this idea I decide to let it slide. After all, I can't help feeling guilty as she nestles into groove of my neck. The hat does get in the way of the uncomfortable sitting-on-lap-head-lean anyway.

After a few more beers and a few more laughs she leans closer to my ear and whispers, "I need to tell you something." As a guy that has gone through many relationships, most of which were completely fake, I know it can only be one of three things: "I'm breaking up with you," "I love you," or "I'm pregnant." From my experiences, girls don't bring their boyfriends camping with them so that they can break off the relationship, so that is out of the question. She's on the pill, the greatest invention in the history of pre-marital sex, so that's not a possibility unless God hates me. So it's most likely the L-word. Awesome.

Time begins to pass quicker with each beer drunk. It has gotten easy to tell these girls that I love them, even though that couldn't be farther from the truth. I have become desensitized to the entire process. They give big speeches that could be three words. I sit there looking like I can't live without her. It's pretty easy once you get the gist of it. I just have to remember that it's my livelihood and I'm fine.

She starts becoming more and more aggressive in trying to get me back to our tent. I don't really feel like dealing with the situation right now, but I tell her if she gives me my hat back that I'll meet her in the tent. She walks off into the darkness, hatless, with nothing but a flashlight. I look around the fire and wonder

how and why I put myself through this. As I get up, Calvin takes a break from Victoria, almost as if he is obliged to do so, and yells, "Go get 'er cowboy!". Thank you, Calvin. I would say the same to him but it seems like he has already "got 'er" twice under the blanket.

I'm unzipping the door to the tent. I barely have one leg in before I am bombarded by hands, feet, legs, and arms from every direction. For a moment I think there is more than just her in there. Disappointingly, there isn't. It's just me, her and the sounds of nature. We begin with the pre-speech kissing. This never leads anywhere because girls know that if guys are aroused in the least bit, they don't really think with their brains too much.

The kissing ends. She begins her long, drawn out lecture about how she grew up never liking someone as much as me. When she is around me she doesn't think of anyone else. Blah, blah, blah. I zone out for a while, subconsciously listening for a key phrase like "I seriously..." or "I truly...". She decides on "I seriously love you.". This is the time where I give a dramatic pause like I'm so excited that I'm speechless. In actuality I'm usually thinking of who the Eagles are playing this Sunday, or what the score of the Sixers' game was.

This time, however, is different. I'm putting myself in her place. She just confessed her love to a guy that has no interest in her at all. When I break up with her, she will be devastated. She is going to think back to this night and realize it was all for show. If that happens to me, I will go crazy. To think that I've found my one and only, just to realize it's all a joke, would be the worst thing in the world. I'm not happy with my life and I'll never be happy as long as I pretend to be who I'm not.

"Marybeth."

"Yes?"

"I don't feel the same way."

Tears stream down her face. A natural reaction in this situation is to try to console her. This is one of the many tricks girls have to sway guys into saying things they don't mean. First I console her and then I'm supposed to change my mind about the situation. Not this time. This is the one sure thing I have had in my life. Not that I don't love her, because that's obvious. I need to feel for someone, both good and bad, because right now I don't feel anything.

"Just leave!" she manages to sneak out between the sniffing of her nose and the coughing brought on by the sniffing.

I go for the zipper on the tent door. I can't find it. Great.

"What are you doing? Please leave."

Trying my best I finally manage to find the zipper. I unzip it and give a shot at leaving only to discover I unzipped the window zipper. For those of you who don't camp, a window zipper only unveils a netting to let a breeze through, not a fully grown man. Some more rustling results in my escape. I leave listening to her cries fade as I approach the fire, feeling guilty, yet relieved at the same time.

"That was quick!"

I ignore this for my sarcasm has left me for the first time in the recorded history I call a life. I ponder the awkwardness of the rest of the night. I can't go back in the tent for obvious reasons. Eventually her friends will start asking where



she is. All I can do is let it come to me.

Time passes like it just ate Thanksgiving dinner. I nurse the same beer until I forget if it's beer or piss. Either way I still drink it because I'm pretty sure it's not piss. People start dropping off into their tents. I'm left sitting there for who knows how long. It could be a couple hours. I could have just sat down.

As I start to drift off sitting in my chair, I feel a tap on my shoulder. It's Marybeth standing there wrapped in a sleeping bag, eyes still swollen from the tears. Without a word she curls up on my lap and snuggles into my neck groove. This time I don't mind her taking my hat.

The tears dry and she regains the ability to talk like someone who has dabbled with speech before. We sit there and talk about unrelated things. We laugh and joke about stupid stuff we've done. It's weird. It took me telling this girl my true feelings to feel good for once. We aren't here as a couple anymore. We are here as two people, not hiding anything from each other. This is the most pure moment of my life. I put my hat on her head, backwards of course. The sun starts rising. It's 6:00 AM. I hate mornings.

## The Afghan Girl

You say you wonder what would cause her  
To look at you so accusingly; why is she so angry?  
It's not so difficult to understand, really.

Try losing your parents at six years old,  
Try witnessing the sky give birth to  
Brilliant Easter eggs of red and black,  
Try watching them crush your mother and  
Blast apart your father, pieces scattered  
Too far to recover them all.

After you've managed to grasp that,  
Cross the mountains, but do it in winter,  
Making sure your clothes have holes—and  
Leave your feet bare. Follow your grandmother  
With your siblings through the snow. Hide in caves,  
Huddled together more from terror than for warmth.

Swallow your pride, next.  
Beg for blankets, plead for food.  
Make sure to thank God that you're the youngest,  
Because it means that your brother and sisters  
Will starve themselves for you to eat. And then,  
Hate yourself for thanking God for this.

Now, spend the next six or seven years  
Drifting from one grey refugee camp to another.  
You grew up in the countryside, where there was  
Room to run for days, and a sky that stretched  
Beyond even that. These masses of people choke you.  
You will nurture your anger, your hate.

Remind yourself as you rise each morning to  
Another day of poverty: you come from  
Warriors who raged every day, every minute  
Against fate's fickle nature. Carry that within you,  
Let it blossom in your eyes, let it mark you.  
Anger is written into your face, a warning for life.

And when a photographer approaches you,  
Daring to steal a moment of the life  
You claimed in defiance of fate, and dictators  
And even God, look directly into the camera.  
Reject the world and its pity. Give the world instead  
Your anger. They will need it.



## Reflections on a Sixth-Grade Tragedy

How easily our pride is hurt.

Sometimes I look back on my last year and a half of elementary school and wonder if it's the reason for my chronic apathy toward friendship.

\* \* \*

...I became the unwanted sock crumpled in a wad and left under the bed.

In fifth grade an April Fool's joke shattered my narcissistic pride. My friend Emily claimed to have broken up with her boyfriend, Josh, and a week later he asked me to be his girlfriend—not in so many words, of course, because his question and my answer were never actually directed to each other. Sitting in the cafeteria eating pepperoni pizza, Lunchables, or tater tots from the lunch line, my friends grilled me with questions and comments.

"Guess who has a crush on you...Josh!"

"Are you gonna go out with him?"

"Maybe that's why Emily broke up with him...she knew!"

Walking back to our homerooms in casual line formation Kate, Kristen, and Jenna prodded me with their incessant questioning:

"So...what are you gonna say?"

My casual response "sure" determined that Josh and I were officially a couple, and sitting in the computer lab that day we embarked on our Oregon Trail quest together. We tried to save our Conestoga wagon from any perils we might encounter on the long and dusty road headed west, but before we were ever able to purchase our goods at the general store, Josh and I were through. Our mutual friend, Doug, snuck up behind us with Emily at his side and simultaneously they squealed, "April Fool's!" at the back of my neck. *Duh, you've been writing 4/1 on your papers the whole day!* The joke was revealed, laughter ensued, and I wondered how I could possibly be at the heart of anyone's joke.

The retaliation for the joke and the final termination of our friendship finished out my sixth-grade year, leaving me hurt and bitter, a pathetic gray-scale version of my former vibrant self. But I'm not sorry about the tragic events of my latter years at General Nash Elementary. I deserved everything I got.

You just haven't heard that part yet.

The summer before sixth grade was the summer of the phone calls, the tape recorder, and Jenna, the new girl who moved into the house across the street from my best friend, Noelle. I don't know if I was subconsciously still angry about the April Fool's joke, my pride still not fully restored, or if I was just harboring a desire to rebel against pre-teen, adolescent angst. Either way, Noelle and I concocted

a scheme to record conversations with our friends to find out what they really thought of us.

Kate was easy. She was loyal to no one, yet each person thought she was her best friend. She grasped on firmly to our invisible fly and we reeled her in without trouble.

"Noelle is such a baby. I said I didn't want to come over to her house today and she got all mad and hung up."

"Yeah, she's always a baby like that."

"People only hang out with her because they know she'll cry if she's not included."

"I know. It's so annoying."

"I'm probably not even gonna talk to her next year."

"Yeah, me either."

However, this representation can't be fully accurate. My lines couldn't possibly have run that smoothly with sweat beading above my lip, some stutters, the occasional Freudian slip, and the struggle to read the questions exactly as they had been written on the notepad with Noelle's left-handed writing. At one point, on the phone with Emily, she caught me mid-sentence and asked if I was asking questions directly from a piece of paper.

Over the course of the summer, when Noelle and I weren't together, she was befriending the new girl, Jenna, from across the street. Jenna was tough; she was cool. Her parents were divorced and she had three older sisters. She wore clothing from Wet Seal, listened to rap music, and wore makeup to school. Naturally I wanted to be around her, hoping maybe the coolness would rub off by proximity.

We invited Jenna to a tape recording session to finally bring closure to the April Fool's joke. The three of us sat Indian-style on the tan carpeted bedroom floor with the phone and tape recorder in the center of us. Jenna was an immediate pro.

"Ya know what's really funny? Mar is *still* not over that April Fool's joke from last year. Come on, get over it, right?"

"Ugh, I bet that's 'cause she still likes him. Too bad!"

"Haha, did she before? I mean I guess she had to if she said 'yes.'"

"[Sigh.] She's been obsessed with him ever since we started dating. It was ridiculous. I had to put her in her place."

So that was that.

About four months into sixth grade, my last year at General Nash, the year where I was supposed to reign over the entire school—from the kindergarteners with perpetual yellow snot dripping from one nostril, crusted above the lip; to the annoying fifth graders who try as they might could not pull off the flare leg jean with rainbow stripe down the side like all the sixth-graders could—I became the unwanted sock crumpled in a wad and left under the bed.

Emily's twin brother, Dan, came over to Noelle and me during recess. He held in his stubby fingers some pictures that Noelle, Kate, Kristen, and I had taken at Kate's house one night. We were trying to be sexy models, I don't know, maybe we had recently seen a Victoria's Secret commercial on TV. The lights were

dim and we set up some candles in the room and posed individually with pouty lips and sultry eyes, on the bed and next to the closet door. They weren't sexy pictures. In fact, they were rather silly; concrete examples of adolescent girls trying to be something they clearly were not, trying to show off bodies that had not been given enough time to develop.

"Jenna, Kristen, Kate, and Emily don't want to be your friends anymore."

We had no responses, just dumb, embarrassed expressions on our faces.

"They know that you recorded their conversations. Jenna told them."

Backstabber.

Dan presented each Kodak and then released it from his fingers so it fluttered to the grass at our feet, repeating each time a new picture was revealed that they did not want to be friends with us, that we were annoying to be around and not nice. And, from these risqué photos we were also sluts—the other girls' pictures had been conveniently removed from the stack.

It hurt. It hurt really bad.

We were being rejected. Singled out and rejected for not being enough of something or being too much of something else, and either way we weren't wanted, weren't liked anymore. And the worst part was that I had encouraged them to do it just by being, well...a bitch.

I told my mom what had happened and I knew she hurt with me, but a bigger part of her was relieved. A few months previous she witnessed first-hand how mean these girls actually were, and when I say "these girls" I have to include myself. My mom had offered to take us all to see *Titanic*. None of my friends said a word to my mom as they got in or out of the car to be picked up or dropped off. No one said "hi," no one said "thank you," not one girl even acknowledged a question my mom asked with a response. We couldn't even show respect at the movie theatre. As the great boat tipped on its side and people plunged into the deathly cold water, we laughed and threw Sour Patch Kids at the screen.

I became an estranged alien of whoever I had been before. My face broke out in red rashes of eczema so I was afraid to even show up at school, feeling I would be harassed for the blotchy, inverted craters on my face. Not even social times like lunch or recess could take my mind off of my hideousness as Noelle and I became fused together, afraid of talking to anyone but each other. At recess we would walk circles along the yellow bike lines spray-painted on the macadam, spewing words of hatred about these girls who could get rid of us without a second thought.

"At least I'm not fat like Kate. She'll never get a boyfriend."

"And the only reason Emily has Josh is because of her brother. If she didn't have Dan she'd just be that weird freckly girl in the back corner of the room. Josh would never have even talked to her."

"I know! And did you notice that Kristen has a mustache? Ew!"

I wish I could pinpoint when exactly I decided I was so amazing that someone would cry if they ever lost my friendship, or would spend nights awake just wishing I would talk to them.

But no one cried.

No one lost any sleep, and when my best friends all deserted me, no one

came rushing over to my lunch table and put their stocking-covered knees on the dirty linoleum floor next to my chair and begged me to let them sit at my table and be their friend. And rightfully so, why would they?

I don't think it's an overwhelming vat of pessimism that poisons my thoughts and makes me apathetic about keeping a friendship alive through everything that can potentially destroy it. I think that maybe I learned at an early age that a friendship does not always withstand the weathering and aging that we put it through. Perhaps if we're meant to grow as people we can't keep holding onto the same friendships from our past because it will only bring us back to the person we *used* to be.

\* \* \*

I briefly kept in contact with my former elementary school friends with the onset of junior high. Kristen and I were friendly if we had a class together, or would smile when we met eyes across the hall. Kate changed schools after sixth grade and went to a private Catholic school in Philadelphia so I haven't even seen her since the days of General Nash. I rode the bus to junior high and high school with Jenna and Noelle and we would stand together waiting for the bus, but our conversations would cut off as soon as we spotted a rectangular splotch of canary yellow come up past the bend in the road. I didn't even sit with them on the bus. I danced three nights a week through my senior year in high school and Noelle was in all of my classes. We were always friendly, just never friends anymore. Surprisingly, Emily was the only one I became friends with again and stayed friends with from middle school to high school. We were on the tennis team together and our friendship strengthened when we started hanging out at the same parties and became Co-Captains of the team our senior year.

Maybe if I had just learned to hold onto a friendship and had wanted to keep it going through distance and age then I would have been able to continue a relationship with my friends from high school—friends who were much different from the crowd I surrounded myself with in junior high, who were completely unlike the pack I clung to in elementary school.

After graduating high school, we would spend our summer nights in Kim's gray collapsible tent pitched in her backyard, fighting off mosquitoes with Off bug spray. Slurping from plastic bags of Franzia and wearing sombreros and ponchos, we would reminisce about "the good 'ol days of high school" because none of us had wanted to go to college when our acceptance letters and orientation packets came in the mail.

"Ew, college. I want to stay here with you guys instead. No one else will understand my Mexican tendencies."

"I'm not even packing my stuff up until the parental unit starts getting concerned. Maybe that way I won't have to leave at all."

"I already asked my dad if I could stick around here another year and work so I wouldn't have to go, but it's not looking promising. Boo."

But I had actually wanted to go.



In fact, I couldn't wait to get the hell out of Lansdale. To tear the pictures out of my Beatles calendar and start taping them to my dorm room wall. To experience living for the next nine months with a Turkish roommate. To meet people I never came across in high school.

To be vulnerable again.

# Removed by the Request of the Author

**Removed by the  
Request of the  
Author**

## Growing Out of Pamlico

As I stand in line at my Giant grocery store, the one in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, I survey the items riding along the conveyor belt: Giant brand baby carrots, Giant cereal-ohs, Giant margarine, Giant frozen pizza, Giant cranberry juice, and Giant chicken breasts. Satisfied, I hand the cashier my Bonus savings card before she can ask for it and I reflect on how Giant makes everything I need. I'm a tightwad wary of anything that costs more than a dollar; for those items, I make myself aware of palatable prices. For instance, the sale price of boneless skinless chicken breasts is no more than \$1.99 per pound and I stubbornly refuse to pay more than that. Occasionally, I even find them for less at the Butcher Block Meat Market fifteen minutes away down Biglerville Road. I buy store brand products because I won't pay for unnecessary advertising and packaging. Cheapness is at the core of my being but it's really not a surprising idiosyncrasy.

Our playthings were pinecones, broken sticks, little wild onion weeds, suspicious berries, fuchsia flowers and furry azalea bushes.

Going to the grocery store was often the highlight of my week as a child because my family lived in the middle of nowhere. We had no real neighbors; we were surrounded by water and subsequently mosquitoes. My bus ride to school took at least an hour. Every Sunday we would ride for twenty minutes to the Food Lion, our closest grocery store. I loved it because it meant getting out of the house and observing (but not interacting with) other people. I would patiently follow my parents as together we perused the aisles. They didn't pick Food Lion brand products (they don't pick store brand products now, either). I imagine they thought the least they could do was buy decent food (assuming the store brand to be inferior). At the magazine rack, I would check for the next installment of *Cat Woman*, the comic book devoted to the feline villain of Gotham City. I bought comics with money I occasionally earned from my grandmother by doing small chores like collecting pine cones (a penny a piece) and dusting her house (\$5 for the whole job). My addiction to office supplies (which has no starting point in my mind) would draw me indefinitely to the half-aisle of pens and notebooks over which I would pore.

The Food Lion was in a small shopping center recently constructed that had a CVS, Dairy Queen, Subway, Chinese restaurant, video rental store, and a Dollar General at the end. These stores were newcomers to us, exotic in the desolate coastal North Carolina county of Pamlico. While my parents shopped, I would sometimes walk down to the Dollar General to check out their office supplies. Their pencil-top erasers were extra-soft – the best erasers ever! I would walk through the aisles and think about the things I would buy if I had more than just a dollar. Oddly enough, not much in a Dollar General actually costs just one dollar. In that sense, it's nearly identical to Family Dollar. I don't know how many



non-poor people know of Family Dollar, but it was infamous in Pamlico as an indicator of poverty. Kids would insult you by saying your mama bought your shoes from Family Dollar. Good “mamas” put shoes on layaway for Christmas.

My mother hardly shopped at Family Dollar and in fact I don’t recall shopping for clothes until I was in junior high. I suppose my mother bought me clothes, but it must have been at times that I didn’t accompany her. Nearly everything I wore came from my grandmother’s thrift-store pickings. My wardrobe was a rainbow of neon colors (which I loved). On the weekends, I would often spend the night at her house and she would take me out to yard sales very early on Saturday mornings. If there were clothes for sale, she would be engaged indefinitely, checking for pants that fit my Aunt Mary or toys for my younger brother Nick. If there were curtains, though, there would be no hope for extricating her from the heap. She already had closets and windows full of identical curtains, all the same dingy color from the endless stream of cigarette smoke that trailed from her thin lips. Weekly, she visited the Salvation Army in New Bern to pilfer through their stock of clothes and drapes.

What’s funny is Granny had plenty of money back then (at least as compared to the rest of the family). I guess it was ten years before my family moved to North Carolina that Granny and Grand Pop had sold their Maryland home. They made an arrangement with the buyer so that he could make payments personally over the course of maybe 20 years. This extra monthly cash was what allowed Granny to spend copiously on her grandchildren (copious being relative to the situation – Christmas presents were often stuffed animals and other toys purchased from the Salvation Army). Her tenacity in squeezing the most out of her dollar showed that she was, and remains to this day, a woman molded by the Depression.

New Bern was the closest major city to our marshy county (we identified ourselves by county and not by town since the distinction was really quite pointless). New Bern is a fairly major city for the coastal North Carolina area; I’ve even met people who have heard of it. The drive, from what was my neck of Pamlico County, takes almost an hour yet New Bern is both a necessity and everyone’s favorite destination. It has a (“Super”) Wal-Mart, a (new) Target, a (pathetic) mall, a (shabby) movie theater, restaurants (that I never ate at), and many other places of commerce (that I never visited).

When we couldn’t afford the gas to go on a Saturday trip to New Bern, which was usually the case, my family and often my Aunt Mary and her daughters Megan and Tia would convene at Granny’s house. At the time, Granny’s just seemed like a really fun place to spend a Saturday, but now I realize that it was (and still is) the hub of the family. Granny would often prepare large, appropriately Southern meals so going to her house would always entail a delicious dinner. My favorite was Salisbury steak. Not the kind made out of ground beef (hamburgers and gravy), but out of cuts of meat. The breaded beef would fall apart under my fork as I scooped them up with a bite of rice drenched in gravy. A trip to Granny’s provided necessary nourishment. Even if she didn’t cook, she always had plenty to eat: turkey lunchmeat, pound cake from Food Lion, leftover ham, Pillsbury blueberry biscuits a day old and tasting stale, and packets of jam and ketchup from

Hardee's. Sometimes there would be an apple pie on the counter or steamed crabs piled up on a Styrofoam tray the beef cuts had been sold on. Granny's double-wide was a model of opulence.

As a child, I knew my family had little money. I was reminded of it frequently (like at Christmas time) and I accepted it wholeheartedly. That was my identity: poor. I carried it like a badge of courage and can't ever remember being angry or embarrassed about it. My whole family was and still is poor. I'm the first one to go to a college that doesn't have the word "community" in the name and still, not much of my family has gone there either. Before Pamlico, when I was very young, my mother had small jobs (she worked for Mr. Donuts) and my father made good money doing manual labor far away from home. We moved to North Carolina to be near Granny, not realizing that the economy of Pamlico County was stagnant – a cesspool that would suck you down till you had nothing left except Pamlico. To leave that place was one of the hardest things (financially) my family did. Most of our belongings were heaped on our front lawn in a month-long yard sale. Our final night in Pamlico we all slept on the floor of the empty living room since our mattresses were in the undersized U-Haul. I couldn't sleep because I was so excited to be leaving Pamlico, to be leaving North Carolina. I wouldn't have to go to Pamlico County High School after all.

Being poor made for an interesting life. I may not have had cable television, an experience I wouldn't know until I was sixteen, or a fancy Super Nintendo gaming system like my best friend Elizabeth Morgan had, but I had my imagination, a muscle that was extensively trained through my childhood experiences. (I'm one of the few people I know who doesn't have an attention deficiency.) My brother Nick and I along with our many cousins shared in lots of imaginative games that required few props. When visiting Granny, we children would be exiled to the outdoors for entertainment—we were rarely allowed to play inside. Granny's kitchen work and sanity would be at risk by our presence in the house. The exact band of children would change, but my brother and I frequently played with our cousins Megan and Tia. When I was very young, my older cousin Bo (I found out later that her name is actually Margaret) and her brother J.R. would play with us. Bo would play her favorite game with me: "Survival." We pretended that we were on a cruise ship (the porch) that sank and we had to swim (via the porch steps) to an island (the yard). The essence of the game was to find food and shelter on the deserted island. Once, when Bo was collecting much-needed sticks, she mistook a snake for a brown-colored limb and almost picked up the reptile. I don't think we played "Survival" after that.

Our playthings were pinecones, broken sticks, little wild onion weeds, suspicious berries, fuchsia flowers, and furry azalea bushes. Granny lived on the river—actually, on the river's edge—and we would sometimes collect little mussels from rocks that buttressed the property against the tide. We would break the dark bearded things open and mash up the yellow insides in oyster shells according to an original recipe. They were then imaginarily eaten, of course. At dusk, we would play hide and go seek – a game most improved by the limitations of darkness and the fullness of azalea bushes. Their leaves are poisonous, you know.

I'm not sure what we would have done without the river since it provided

everyone—children and adults alike—with something to do. Granny was an avid fisher and her favorite tackle was simple: a long bamboo pole with a length of cotton string, a red and white bobber, weight, and a hook. She always used shrimp as bait. She showed me how to break the pungent white flesh into pieces and carefully skewer them so that the fish can't just suck the tasty bits off the hook. You have to leave the shell on to further complicate the fish's attempts.

We kids loved to be on the pier, a massive wooden structure constructed by the men of the family that stretched like a giant capital letter T off of Granny's property. The bleached wood was hot but smooth on our feet (we were invariably bare-foot). Granny would sometimes leave bits of shrimp lying out, waiting to be hooked; they would become dry, rubbery, sticking to the boards. You would have to peel the shrimp from the pier. We would catch jellyfish in our net and lay them out to dry, too. They were our nemeses and we were weeding out the menacing red jellies (whose sting was allegedly more potent than the regular white jellies). They would end up like the shrimp, gooey and dehydrated—a gross pool of glossy clear jelly, no longer recognizable. We didn't have to worry about stepping on them; jellyfish tentacles can't sting the bottoms of your feet. If Granny was out fishing she would inevitably shoo us off the pier because our noise was scaring all the fish away. I think they weren't there to begin with.

If Granny wasn't fishing, she might put us to work. We were experts at catching crabs. We never used crab pots, those basket cubes that are baited and left in the water to lure their many-legged prey. We did it by hand and I was always in charge since I was the oldest of all the cousins (Bo and JR had long since moved away with their father). Sometimes the crabs would cling to the sides of the pylons underwater and we could scoop them up from there, but to get a decent "mess," you needed bait that was more efficient than shrimp. Granny would buy a package of turkey necks and tie each one to a long string (the same kind that she used on her fishing poles). The other end of the string she would tie to a pylon of the pier and let the neck sink into the murky water. Like that, the string would hang straight down by the weight of the fleshy neck. If an interested crab pulled and picked at the neck, the string would go taut at an angle and that's how we knew it was time; I did the honors. I would slide a wooden-handled net into the water off to the side so as to not disturb the feasting crab. With one hand, I would carefully inch the turkey neck up to the surface. The crab would be hanging onto the neck and when it got close enough that I could see him through the translucent green, I would swoop the net under him quick and there! one more crab added to the bucket. We never checked the size of the crabs – there was never a question of legality in our minds. It was our part of the river. You didn't need a license to fish, either. The concept of paying for the privilege to fish still boggles my mind.

At the end of the day, we would present Granny with our catch. With anticipation, we watched her pour the frothing crustaceans into a giant pot over the stove and cover them with a blanket of Old Bay. After an entire day of pacing back and forth between turkey-neck lures under the beating sun, we couldn't wait to break open the steaming red shells. And every time Granny did the same thing: gave us one or two crabs each and told us, "The rest are for crab cakes!" What an injustice to our hard labor. Crab cakes were for the adults and besides, they didn't

taste in any way as delectable as the crabs themselves. Granny used too much filler. At a young age, we were experts at “picking” crabs, deft with the requisite tools: wooden hammer and butter knife. The most important tool was our hands, though. The shell shards would slice our fingers and the spicy Old Bay would sting but we didn’t care. Fresh steamed crabs are one of the few joys I miss from North Carolina—they’re too damn expensive in Gettysburg.

The river provided us with tasty things to eat but it also offered us our absolute favorite thing to do during the hot, thickly humid summers: swim. The water was green and brown and weird little bits of mud swirled around in it. The water concealed lumpy large rocks that were scattered on the river’s bottom (they could have been chunks of concrete) and the razor-like edges could (and frequently did) slice the bottoms of our feet. Slick brown things like snakes and skates (a creature akin to sting rays) sometimes swam on the surface of the river. The skates, which were apparently harmless, would swim in a diamond pattern reminiscent of geese. For many reasons, the adults would have to be entreated to watch over us (I don’t blame them for refusing so often—who would want to sit in the heat and watch kids splash in the water?).

We loved to swim. We raced, we climbed the pier, we shouted, we splashed, we dodged the pylons. We would dig our toes into the sand and collect tiny clams (we never ate those and I don’t know why). The horse flies were a problem: they would buzz around your wet face and sting you. They were huge, pestering insects and the only escape from them was a dive underwater. We would open our eyes and see specks of green and yellow swirling around, reflections of light bouncing off of sand particles. We could see each other, too, and grab a leg or pinch an arm. I never saw our arch-enemy the jellyfish face-to-face, though.

Before the hurricanes came one summer and swept them away, jellyfish floated rampantly in the river. We had to clothe ourselves accordingly; long-sleeves were a necessity but Granny’s stock-pile of used clothing didn’t always have the right size and it was hard to convince yourself before getting stung that long sleeves in August were a good idea. I got stung a lot. If I close my eyes, I can feel the sinister wet yarn wrap around my arm or brush against my leg and the stinging burn left in its place. We were willing to risk the pain—which was remedied immediately with mucky river sand and later with baking soda, both suggestions of Granny’s—as a relief from the thick moist North Carolina heat.

In my home—a shack, really, which was owned by my grandparents—escape from the humidity was not as easy. We had one air conditioner perched in the living room window and it made so much noise when it clicked on that I had to crank up the volume on PBS. It was always more interesting than the programs on network television. In the evenings, our nuclear family would watch nature shows about African animals and *The Frugal Gourmet* (*The Food Network* is my favorite channel now).

My mother came up with the barrel idea. My father had a couple of big black metal barrels that he used to burn our trash in and my brother Nick and I filled a clean one with water under the shade of a thick gum tree. My mother laughed at us as we stood in the barrel, relishing the reprieve brought by the cool water, imagining we were in a pool (a luxury). As a child, the situation



seemed completely logical and absolutely fun; I'm sure it was as absurd as it was a sharp indicator of our simple life. How did my mother feel, seeing her children pretending to swim in a barrel? She had been accepted to Parsons School of Design, she could have been a savvy fashion designer living in New York. But instead, she was a wife and a mother and she took on the challenge that was Pamlico. We used what we had in order to get along, to survive. Being poor takes a certain resiliency and resourcefulness – or at least those qualities make poverty more tolerable. An unlimited supply of free crabs also helped.

I don't think Food Lion sold crabs. That was a commodity purchased on the side of the road, from a troller, or from your brother's friend. Food Lion now looks so diminutive compared to my massive Giant. Returning to Pamlico is a melancholic experience. The aisles are small. There are only two cashiers. Everyone moves slowly. The produce section is not nearly as expansive as I once thought it was. There aren't any comic books anymore.

Granny had to move away from the river. For all the joy it gave us, the river was not to be underestimated. It rose, I was told, past the bulkhead of Granny's property, onto the lawn, up under her second-hand Cadillac, up to the door of her home (which was probably six feet off the ground). Granny had to buy a new house (a different house) and when I visit her now, I don't feel the warmth I used to. She misses fishing. This "new" house is old and moldy. (The house by the river was probably moldy too, but that's not what I remember about it). The bathroom houses a pungent odor of urine (no one cleans it for Granny) and when I take a shower, I'm afraid the tub will fall through the floor because it sags under the weight of my feet. I try not to stand in the middle of the tub where it feels the softest. Even though all of Granny's familiar thrift store knickknacks clutter the limited space and dingy drapes hang in the windows, the house is foreign.

The monthly payments ended a few years ago and now Granny is just as poor as the rest of my family. Well, Bo isn't so poor anymore. A couple years ago she completed the second half of her four-year nursing degree at the University of North Carolina (the first half was undertaken at Pamlico Community College). She doesn't make as much money as my mom does here in Gettysburg, even though they're both Registered Nurses (and my mom went for the less prestigious two year program at Harrisburg Area Community College). But that's how Pamlico County is – once you're there, it's hard to get out. People make just enough money to pay their bills and fill their gas tank up so they can drive to New Bern and use their credit cards. I hope Bo moves.

Maybe it's not true to say poor *was* my identity. I think I still carry it around with me—that no matter what I accomplish in life, I will always be poor at heart. I don't feel like it has changed yet, but surely "poor" will have to go. Am I not safe in thinking that I won't end up poor even after being the first in my family to attend a four-year college? I haven't yet shed my badge and that's why I am proud of my \$1.99 per pound boneless skinless chicken breasts. I get to satisfy my boyfriend with easy to cut and eat chicken because he doesn't like to suck the meat off the bone like Granny showed me.

"We got those in today. We don't steam 'em here, a place in Maryland

does it. They're steamed with Old Bay." I look politely at the lady behind the lobster tank who is busy explaining the virtues of the blue crabs bagged up in groups of ten in the cold case in front of me. (I learned later in life that the crabs I had eaten for years were "blue" crabs and that there are many other varieties of crab, like the long red ones at Chinese restaurants.) The Giant fishmonger continues, "They're a dollar a piece." I maintain my façade of polite interest but on the inside I cringe. A dollar *a piece* is a hefty price. I can't pay money for something I used to catch for free – especially when you have to work so hard to get to the little bit of meat inside them.

"Hmmm." I nod in feigned curiosity. "I'll keep these in mind." I guess there will never be Giant brand crabs.

Sometimes I forget about Pamlico. I go weeks, even months, forgetting that eleven years of my life were spent barefoot and mosquito-bitten. When I visited Granny five months ago, I couldn't bear the July humidity. How did I ever survive down there? Following Granny to Pamlico had not been the best idea. But being away from her means no Salisbury steak, no fishing, and no yard-saling. Pamlico was financial suicide, but Pamlico gave me a tight-knit extended family that I had to leave behind. I tell my mother that had we stayed there, I would have killed myself, but living there shaped me into the person I am today. I may be cheap, but I pay my cell phone bill (from the cheapest carrier I could find) two weeks before the due date.

## Silly Yaks

Passover is coming up again, which means I'm ready to go grocery shopping. So is most of my family. We're a mixture of Catholics, Lutherans, perhaps a few discreet atheists and some undecided college students, but Passover brings us to crowd around the kosher/international foods aisle in late March like it's the second coming of *something* holy. It's for physical health reasons, though,

"I go up with the old people and drink the wine before anyone gets crumbs in it," she says...

not spiritual. We can't eat wheat. We can't eat wheat at any time in the year, but during Passover Jewish people don't eat wheat either, so there's a sudden influx of wheat-free cakes, macaroons, egg noodles, and potato pancakes in grocery stores around the country. We're always ready for additions to a diet that easily gets to be repetitive.

My dad was the first to be diagnosed with celiac disease, an autoimmune disorder that makes one's body treat the protein gluten as a poison. He had been so sick that we – my mom, sister, and I, as well as the extended family – were all glad to find this out. Certainly it was better than other test results had been:

"Well, Colonel Cox, I have good news and bad news," a doctor at Walter Reed Army Hospital once told him, no doubt under the harsh glare of institutional lighting. "The good news is you don't have cancer. The bad news is we don't know what you do have." We were all glad to see the good old taxpayer dollars at work there, taking care of career Army officers who had been serving their country since 1971 and suffering from gastrointestinal distress since 1985. Dad could scarcely believe it when, in April 1994, a doctor newly transferred to Walter Reed told him all he had to do was stop eating wheat, barley, rye and oats and he'd be fine. The gluten in those grains was irritating the villi in his small intestine. Villi are the parts of your small intestine that absorb the nutrients from the food you eat into your blood stream. When they're irritated, they lie down against the wall of the intestine, drastically diminishing the surface area available for nutrient absorption, hence his persistent diarrhea, malnutrition, and irritability. He was lucky the malabsorption had kept his cholesterol levels down or he would've had fifteen heart attacks by then, he was so touchy.

In the beginning, celiac disease made my dad the odd one out in the family. He ate special pasta, pizza and cookies made from rice, corn, or even potato. He chose where we went if we went out for dinner. (When he was out of town, my mom, sister and I ran to the local Bertucci's to eat pizza and tortellini like half-starved wild women.) He was also picked on a lot.

"Whoops, did I drop bread crumbs on that plate? Sorry, Dad...not trying to poison you or anything," we (mainly my sister and I, the bratty kids) would say as we waved our toast around the kitchen.

This is perhaps why he decided that we all had celiac disease too, and just didn't know it yet. It wasn't an entirely irrational idea – it is a genetic disease – but we were youthful and naïve and the current statistics just didn't back him up. Neither did his methods of diagnosis.

"What, your throat's sore? That's it, no more bread for you!" he crowed whenever anyone so much as sniffled in front of him. While the symptoms of celiac disease can vary from person to person, the biggies are gastrointestinal distress, extreme emotional sensitivity, migraines and a dry skin condition called dermatitis herpetiformis. A sore throat is not one of them. No wonder I still hesitate to tell anyone if I feel like I'm coming down with something. Especially because it turns out that Dad's intuition was better than the medical profession's.

My older sister, Alexis, was the next Cox to bite the glutenous cookie dust. After a year or so of having doctors tell her that she was a young female mechanical engineer trying to cope in the big, bad, male-dominated real world, so of course she was feeling run-down, and suffered from migraines and emotional meltdowns, she decided that she knew what was really going on (she always does). She cut the gluten out of her diet and lo and behold, an emotionally stable, energetic Alexis emerged. She now incorporates horseback riding, yoga, Pilates and ballroom dancing into her week, every week, while still protecting American citizens from technology gone awry full-time. Her miraculous recovery was enough to convince my two aunts, my dad's only siblings, that their various health problems could be celiac-related, too. They had the blood tests done, which came back positive. They stopped eating gluten and no longer had aching joints, "nervous stomachs," or chronic fatigue.

Last summer I stayed on campus, working for a professor and living in a dorm with Lisa, another student. The first time that I spent a weekend in the bathroom, I knew what was up. Even though I was cooking for myself for the first time, it never took more than a spoonful or two of cereal for me to realize the milk was bad, so I knew spoiled food wasn't to blame. These were classic celiac disease symptoms, and so I ignored them. They didn't ignore me, though, and the symptoms started to pile up: I slept nine to twelve hours a night, every night, despite not ever doing anything other than going to work (which consisted of sitting in front of a computer and transcribing interviews) and coming home to watch movies with Lisa. I lost weight despite surviving off of pizza, pasta, cereal, and ice cream. I cried at least once a week during our movies, whether it was *Superman* ("I'm always around. Good night, Lois"), *Thank You for Smoking* ("The great state of Vermont will not apologize for its cheese!") or *Lilo and Stitch* ("Ohana means family, and family means nobody gets left behind"). But when I went home in August and was out-walked by my fifty-seven-year-old mother and an equally aged friend of hers in a flat botanical garden – and by out-walked I mean I later took a nap all afternoon and then slept all night while they continued visiting people and going places – I knew I had to 'fess up to what was going on.

I cried when I told my mom that I wanted to be tested for celiac disease. Given my health by that point in the summer, that might not mean much except she cried, too. When I told my dad the same thing that night at the dinner table, he didn't cry or lecture or even gloat. My tests came back negative, but given



my family history, my doctor and I decided it would be dumb not to try the diet. Unsurprisingly, I too, have celiac disease. (In case you're wondering, while the emphasis on wheat-based products in my summer diet may have helped my symptoms become severe enough to be noticeable, they didn't create the disease.) Once I changed my diet, I was back to normal, at least as normal as I ever have been. Now weepy, sleepy Jessie only appears when I accidentally get "glutened," which makes following the diet entirely worthwhile, although not always easy. It took a few weeks of getting sick after Sunday brunch before I found out that the eggs in the buffet at my college's dining hall are made from powdered eggs, which have had some sort of wheat product added to them. It makes me mad when they add barley to a perfectly good tomato vegetable soup, and don't even get me started on products that list "modified food starch" as an ingredient but don't say whether it comes from wheat or corn. I feel awkward when pizza or cakes are brought into class. I look at normal pizza and remember the bloated gut, crying while curled into the fetal position on my bed in the middle of the day, and don't mind passing it up, but I don't want to offend anyone or stand out, or have to go into details about what my gut will be like if I do eat it.

"Lisa, what flavor do you think that is?" I asked as we checked out the ice cream selection on our way out of lunch one fine Thursday. One of the six cartons wasn't labeled.

"Dunno," she said. At four foot-eight inches tall, she had to peer in to get a closer look. "Looks like there's chocolate in it."

"Eat some and tell me if you think it's cookie pieces," I said, but she decided she didn't want ice cream that day. So, I didn't have any either.

Most of the time it's not that bad, though. Even when I do eat gluten, there's no anaphylactic shock involved, and I've always preferred margaritas to beer and grits to oatmeal. My mom is always forgetting or losing her glasses so I've been reading labels in grocery stores practically since learning to read. In fact, even before diagnosis I was known to pick up the soy sauce on the table in Chinese restaurants and read the ingredients out of idle curiosity. (Almost all of them contain wheat.) I've eaten gluten-free breads, pizzas, and pasta on and off throughout my life whenever my mom wanted to do Italian but didn't feel like cooking two meals, so the dryness of the bread and the mushiness of the pasta didn't faze me much. I can even appreciate how far these substitutes have come since my dad was diagnosed thirteen years ago.

Sometimes people even envy me. At the beginning of this past year, my RA, Jenna, was planning a soft-pretzels-and-movie night and stopped by my room to ask me what she could get for me to eat.

"I can eat pretty much any ice cream," I said. "How about a Klondike bar or something like that?"

"Great," Jenna said.

"Aw, I want a Klondike bar!" my roommate said as soon as Jenna was gone. I only managed to resist the impulse to ask her what she would do for one because I already knew there was no way I was giving mine up. Plus, you have to be nice to the person who licks your envelopes shut for you. (Yes, that glue has wheat in it. Thank the gluten-free gods for self-adhesive stamps.)

I've introduced multiple friends to the wonders of the peanut-peanut-butter-M&M cookies the dining hall has recently started stocking in their gluten-free fridge. I love the doughnuts, cookies and bread they keep in that fridge, although as breaks approach, it seems to get emptier and emptier without getting replenished, making me wonder if they're trying to starve us celiacs out, perhaps in an attempt to strengthen the world's gene pool. People are often curious about what I'm eating, and I'm happy to offer them samples.

"Just let me finish what I want of it and then you can stick your contaminated fork in," I told a friend after she expressed a desire to try my spaghetti in red sauce.

"Hey, this is better than what they give the rest of us!" she said. That night must've been a pretty bad one for normal folks, but I wasn't going to argue with her. Still, the best comes out at family get-togethers.

"You know, I was tested and I didn't cause this," my grandmother says at every gathering after she's told each of her grandchildren, and any other unsuspecting children that happen to be around, "You're growing like a weed, you're so tall and gorgeous."

"Those tests aren't foolproof, you know," Grandpa Gruber says in return. "Alexis and Jessie both tested negative and they have it." This is from a man who isn't even genetically involved, but has been forced to overhear discussions about gluten for years. Besides, he loves riling people up and knows this will encourage my grandmother greatly. Now she's telling us her family has good genes; we might even be related to Czar Ivan the Terrible. Why you would want to broadcast any sort of relationship to someone who beat his pregnant daughter-in-law and caused his son's death, I don't know. Besides, we've already decided that celiac disease is a Cox gene through and through; the carrier was her husband. My grandfather claimed to get sick whenever he ate something other than steak and potatoes, a fact for which he was unfortunately ridiculed for most of his life. My dad blames the genetic mutation on the fact that his Cox grandparents were first cousins. I'm guessing it goes back a little further than that fateful day in southern Virginia. Surely not all the celiacs in the world have that family history.

Sometimes I feel bad for the in-laws on the Cox side. They didn't know what they were getting themselves into, but in our defense, back when they married in, neither did we. It really isn't supposed to happen this way, you see. Current research suggests odds are supposedly 1 in 10 of first-degree relatives having celiac disease. Four out of my dad's five living first-degree relatives are celiacs. I'm no math major, but that's a pretty big difference. Celiac disease is still largely under-diagnosed. We're not complaining, though: these days there are all sorts of celiac groups and websites, including the one that oh-so-cleverly discovered that "celiac" sounds marginally like "silly yak," but nothing beats having a living, breathing, genetically related support group. When I arrived at college as a freshman and realized that being in German 301 probably meant I should have brought my German-English dictionary with me, my mom sent it to me in a box with a short note and nothing else. This year, she and Alexis came to visit me for a day loaded down with homemade cookies and store-bought soup, cereal, and instant macaroni and cheese. Our disease brings us together, not only with each other, but with

other food-troubled people. Over spring break, two of my friends from high school visited me at my parents' house, bringing the dietary restrictions in the house up to: no wheat (myself and Dad), no meat (a vegetarian), and no sweets (a diabetic). My mom was unfazed and we feasted on grilled vegetables, tofu, stir-fry, homemade soups and chef salads, and fresh fruit.

So, at Easter, my mom, Uncle Gregg, Uncle Steve, and nineteen-year-old cousin Peter are huddled in one corner of the living room or squashed down at one end of the dining table, eating rolls while at least one celiac is watching to see exactly what they do with their butter knives. It must be like being in an etiquette class.

"Uncle Gregg! Did you just put your knife back in the butter after it touched your bread? I can't believe this," eagle-eyed Alexis calls out from the other end of the table. Sometimes we're nice and just go ahead and give them their own butter. Eating dinner with your whole family is stressful enough without feeling obliged to keep an eye on every stray crumb. My three younger cousins (ages ten, eight, and five) have it slightly easier since the kids' table is entirely glutenous, at least so far. We may come across as paranoid to the non-celiac, but all it takes is one episode of glutening after eating food that you thought was safe to turn you to fanaticism.

Uncle Gregg times us to see how long we can all be assembled before the words "celiac" or "gluten" emerge. I think our record is about five seconds. There are always stories to be told as we dip rice crackers into the gluten-free artichoke dip, like how one of my Gruber cousins diagnosed a roommate of hers with celiac disease while the doctors were stumped, or that Shadow's new dog food, ostensibly for canine sufferers of early kidney disease, also happens to be gluten-free. Every specially made gluten-free dish has to be oohed and aahed over, its ingredients delineated ("Coconut flour? I didn't even know that existed; we've just been making do with white rice flour") and the source of the recipe examined. Sometimes websites are called up and cookbooks are passed around. Pens are whipped out of purses and notes are taken. My mom at times participates in this part of the ritual because although she isn't a celiac, she is the main cook (read: the cook for anything beyond frying an egg or opening a can of soup) in my house. At the end of the meal, Aunt Linda asks to have some of the quiche wrapped up for her to take home.

"Sure thing," Alexis replies and gets out the plastic wrap.

"Who wants a brownie for the road?" I ask, probably unnecessarily.

Everyone wants a brownie, even some of the non-diseased. Celiacs get priority, though. It's a high-status position around here, not something to be ashamed of.

After brunch, we transform the kitchen table into an egg-dyeing station. We like to do Ukrainian-style egg decorating, which involves candles, beeswax, pen-like implements called *kistky* and less-than-kid-friendly dyes. The kids are off hiding Easter eggs for each other in the backyard, though, so it's just Mom, Alexis, Aunt Linda and me sitting at the table when Uncle Steve walks by.

"What is this, a séance?" he asks as we pass matches around the table, each lighting a candle in front of us.

"No, it's an offering to the gluten-free gods," Aunt Linda replies and

picks up an egg. It's not entirely a joke – we take our disease seriously, and our bookshelves prove it with titles such as *The Gluten-free Gourmet Cooks Fast and Healthy* and *The Gluten-free Bible*. Uncle Steve continues on his way, certain that this is no place for the likes of him, and Aunt Lydia is the next to enter the room.

"I go up with the old people and drink the wine before anyone gets crumbs in it," she says when my mom asks if she's still taking Communion. She did for awhile because the Catholic Church insisted that when the bread turned into Jesus' flesh, it wouldn't hurt celiacs. They haven't come out and said that isn't true, but these days celiacs are allowed to take the wine and not the wafer. Meanwhile, a Lutheran pastor I know has started using gluten-free pizza crust in Communion and no one in the congregation has noticed.

"Peter was tested for lupus this year but the results were negative," Aunt Linda says about her son as she dips her egg into the scarlet dye. My sister and I exchange a glance.

"It's probably just celiac disease," Alexis says.

"I'm not a celiac!" Peter yells from the other side of the house. It doesn't matter if he hears us or not, he knows what we're talking about. I smile and shake my head, remembering the days when I too thought I was above the reach of the family disease. He and the three little cousins are living on numbered days, if you ask me. Whether you want to or not, you just can't escape your family.



Invincibly Vulnerable

In the darkness of a room,  
Clasping my damp blue pillow over his eyes  
My brother rests alone, undisturbed;

Except by the muffled sobs of a woman  
Which permeate auburn mahogany  
To resonate briefly throughout the couch he calls his bed.

Three hundred thirty-four miles away  
I feel my brother toss and turn  
Like a sailor stirred by the waves of the sea.

The torn leather beneath him,  
Whispers fond memories of mother and father,  
Never to meet his eyes again.

Yet still destined to find peace  
In a house with two instead of three,  
He hides beneath my pillow and falls asleep.

I recall the restless cougar  
We found at Brookfield Zoo. Just seven years old,  
You stood behind the steel fence, amazed.

As we stared seemingly for hours  
The cat swiftly climbed about a steep, remote rock pile  
In a replicated habitat he called his home.

You held my hand,  
Wondering the whereabouts of his family  
And why such a stunning creature should live alone.

As I read to you a plaque pinned on the cougar's fence,  
'Abandoned shortly after birth'  
Came flowing from my lips.

Your face soon turned to sadness  
As you said he should be freed. Clenching the cold steel tighter  
You wondered if he would ever be.

This cougar is a strong survivor, I said.  
And years later, I believe the same about you.  
Time heals, my friend, and one day you shall be free.

## Mon Deuxième Pays

On my last day in France, I ate a slice of vegetable quiche with 'des champignons' and 'un verre du vin rouge.' It was, after all, my last day in Aix-en-Provence. These things are best done with a bang.

It was hard to believe that I was headed back to the United States and away from the beautiful 'ville' I had learned to call home for four incredible,

As I turned to leave I glanced over my shoulder and smiled, "Mais la France toujours sera mon deuxième pays."

insightful months. It seemed absurd that after sixteen weeks of missing my small, suburban home and the friends, family and familiarity that existed there, the day to return had finally come. Ironically, it was on this day that I realized I wasn't ready to leave.

"I don't want to go," I grumbled, packing the eight pairs of ballet flats I had insisted on bringing with me to France. "I just don't think I'm ready."

"We don't have much of a choice," my roommate laughed, heaving her suitcase onto her bed and stretching it wide for packing. "Tomorrow we're gone."

At this, I sat down on the bed and glanced out my bedroom window and at the beautiful view of Aix-en-Provence. "But I don't think I've done everything I wanted to," I sighed. My eyes shifted outwards, past the glass window and onto the town and I smiled. When I had first moved in, I thought that living in the outskirts of the city would be tiresome, as I'd have to walk back and forth from town each day. Now I couldn't imagine my home-stay in France to be any different, and at night I'd sit in my bed and watch the chapel lights flicker in the mistral, the famous French wind that swept down from the Alps and bustled across the city. My host mother called it "le monstre," *the monster*, and when it was particularly strong, she'd rush from room to room, heaving the big, heavy wooden shutters closed and locking them in place. "C'est très fort, n'est-ce pas?" she'd ask. *It's very strong, huh?*

"Ya still have one more day," my roommate reminded me, tucking a strand of blond hair behind one ear. Her name was Charlie and she was stunning blonde and her face was covered in freckles and she spoke with a Southern twang. "If ya have things ya haven't done yet, now's the time to go out and do them."

Which is how I came to be sitting at a small café on the main drag, the Cours Mirabeau, at 2pm on a Sunday, savoring each delicate bite of a flaky, eggy tart between sips of a dark Cabernet Sauvignon.

"Plus du vin, mademoiselle?" a short, balding waiter asked me. *More wine?* I nodded to him. Of course.

"S'il vous plaît," I smiled.

The plan was to do everything I had wanted to do for quite some time, things I should have done when I first arrived in France on that scorchingly hot

September Saturday. At the time, I was so overwhelmed with my new life in a foreign country that I hadn't thought to do the very things that most people arrive simply to do. By the time I was accustomed to life in France, the little things didn't seem very important anymore; I was jetting off to sit in a bar constructed completely out of ice in Stockholm or ride a five-Euro gondola down the canals and under the Rialto bridge in Venice. Suddenly, stopping to sniff the market-fresh flowers and sip an espresso in a café didn't seem entirely important anymore. But the truth was that these were the very things that made France *France*.

After I had finished my lunch and requested 'l'addition' from my waiter, I stood and exited the small restaurant, stepping onto the main sidewalk that ran parallel to the Cours Mirabeau. *Now's the time*, I thought, and removed from my backpack a small list of things I had written down on a napkin over lunch.

The first thing I decided to do was visit the daily flower market, which was open every morning until noon and every weekend until five. I wandered in and out of rows of flowers, envying both vibrant purple lavender stalks and scorchingly yellow daisies. I touched each flower lightly, lifting it to my nose and breathing its beautiful scent in through my nostrils.

"Combien, ça?" I asked, clutching a beautiful sunflower in my fist and smiling at an elderly French man who sat, his body heaved over a cane, just in front of me.

"Ça? C'est trois Euros," he grinned, and I handed him the change quickly.

"Ce n'est pas cher," I laughed, tucking the flower under my arm. *It's not expensive*. It wasn't. Three Euros for a beautiful flower was an incredible deal, but I wasn't surprised. The vendors were not greedy people; instead, they were simply men and women who loved the land and were devoted to making their living off of it, but nothing more. Their prices were always reasonable and the quality of their goods was always superb. I was never disappointed with their products.

With the sunflower still clutched in my hand, I meandered up the winding, cobblestone street and into Emil BEC, my favorite bakery in all of Aix. Every day at about noon, my university friends and I would buy "une baguette pavot," or poppyseed baguette, a block of cheese and a green apple. We'd sit on the front stoop of the university, nibbling our lunches hungrily or, on days when class was cancelled or we had enough time, we'd take our lunches to a small park and split an inexpensive bottle of rose wine. Still, I had never sampled any of the bakery's fine desserts, for life as a student in Europe is hardly cheap and I rarely had enough money to cover the cost of lunch, much less a fancy dessert. Still, it was my last day in France, and I couldn't think of anything I'd rather spend my money on than *une tarte de fruit* or *un croissant*.

I glanced about the store window anxiously, eying each baked good and trying to decide whether a fresh raspberry tart would suit me better than an éclair. Finally, I made my decision and walked to the counter, pointing to a small tart that contained sliced kiwi, strawberries, blueberries and raspberries piled high above a soft pink meringue. The crust looked flaky and buttery, and I could imagine the crunch of the crust and the resulting soft feel of the fruit in my mouth.

"Une tarte de fruit," I said. Again, I handed over my money in exchange



for a famous French delicacy and smiled at the woman behind the counter. After she handed it to me, I rushed eagerly out of the bakery and stood, in front of the shop, my mouth crashing down around the dessert. The flavors exploded onto my tongue and I licked at my lips eagerly. It was incredible.

I proceeded to walk along the streets, both those that I had traveled along before and those I had never explored. I passed beautiful fountains, sprawling wine stores and butcher shops that wafted out the savory smell of rotisserie chicken and herbed potatoes. Continuing along, I eventually found myself in front of Saint Mary, a small elementary school where I had taught English to six-year-olds every Thursday morning for an hour. It was a Saturday and the school was closed, but I wandered along the perimeter of the building, looking in each window before finding the one where I had taught.

"Je vous manquerais," I sighed to myself, remembering the fun experiences I had shared with the students. *I will miss you.* I had taught them the alphabet, colors, the numbers one through ten and common conversational phrases, and in turn they had taught me the virtues of patience and understanding, as well as Bugs Bunny's famous French trademark.

"He says, 'ça va, Doc!'" they had laughed one afternoon when I had discovered they knew about Bug's Bunny. "He doesn't say 'What's up, Doc!'"

Despite the fears that I had had upon learning that I would be teaching them, the kids had been a surprising joy to be around. When my weekly hour was almost over and we had learned a sufficient amount, I would teach them American songs and games, such as "Heads Up, Seven-Up" and "Simon Says." They always loved Simon Says, and would mix French in when they didn't understand a phrase. "*Simon says...leve le main!*" they would cheer.

"Je vous manquerais," I repeated to the exterior of the classroom, tracing my hand along the glass. *I will miss you.*

With only an hour before my final dinner with my host mother and roommate, I quickly made my way to the Café Mirabeau, my favorite bar in all of Aix. I had become good friends with the French bar owner, Paulo, and my French professor was often there, as well, sipping a small glass of whiskey and grading papers. Her name was professor Margaux Hofstedt, and she had been both a mentor and a friend. We had become good friends over the last four months and often spent our Saturday nights together, cooking dinner in her kitchen while enjoying a bottle of wine and some French music. Margaux always had a new artist to introduce me to, and my strongest memory of France will always be Margaux's laughter as Henri Salvador's song, "Jardin, D'Hiver" played over the smell of pot roast baking in the oven.

As I walked into the bar, I saw Margaux at a corner table with her notebooks sprawled across a table. She sat, quietly, marking notes in the corners of the pages and bouncing her foot in soft circles under the table. At the front of the bar Paulo stood behind the counter, waving. With the jingling sound of the bell on the door, Margaux looked up and smiled at me, raising her arms for a hug.

"C'est mon dernier nuit en Aix," I explained. *It's my last night in Aix.*

"A celebration, then!" the bartender chanted in English from behind the bar. He poured three glasses of white wine and handed one each to Margaux and

me. "To a wonderful friend."

"Et deux très bon amis," I smiled. *To two good friends.*

"I will miss you," Margaux said in her broken English, doing her best to speak my language. We often spoke in both languages; she tried desperately to speak English while I did my best to speak French. It was a sign of respect for one another's language, and I appreciated it thoroughly.

"Vous me manquerez, aussi," I sighed. At this I felt a small tear well into the corner of my eyes, and I sipped my wine timidly. I would miss Margaux.

"Non, non, ma fille!" Margaux shouted. *No, no, my girl.* "Je tu verrai encore. Tu visiterai Aix-en-Provence encore." *I will see you again. You will visit France again.*

"Oui, Margaux," I said, wiping at my eyes and raising my glass. "Je peux visiter encore. Pour vous." *I will visit again for you.*

At this the three of us raised our glasses, and Paulo shouted in his thick accent, "Chin!" This was a sign of cheers.

"J'ai à partir maintenant," I sighed, looking at my watch. "J'ai à rentrer pour le dernier dîner en France." *I have to go now. I have to return for my last dinner.*

"Oui, bien sûr." *Of course.* Paulo and Margaux leaned over and squeezed one last hug. "Mais tu avez fait toutes les choses que tu veux faire en France. Vous avez habité comme une personne française. Maintenant vous devez retourner à votre pays." *You have done everything you wanted to do in France. You lived like a French person. Now you must return home.*

"Oui, Margaux," I smiled, pulling on my coat and reaching for the door heavily. As I turned to leave I glanced over my shoulder and smiled, "Mais la France toujours sera mon deuxième pays."

*France will always be my second home.*

Grey Manna

# Removed by the Request of the Author

## Antique Porcelain

The prisoners sat on railroad ties that enclosed the gravel parking lot with cigarettes in their mouths, clapping their hands. An unfired cherub head danced in Troy's white-washed hand that waited out of view behind his back. I whipped the bat around my self, the head hanging in the air, just in time to shatter it. I was heating up, or so Troy said, producing another head from the bucket.

My grandmother owned Terra Cotta Creations, a pottery factory, which employed thirty-two prisoners on work release from the Ozark Correctional Center in Forland, Missouri. For nine hours a day, the inmates would create cherubs, flower pots, nativity scenes, garden trinkets and table top fountains from molds filled with liquid clay. Each man had a specific task, from taking seams off of unfired figurines with vinegar, to dipping cherubs into a thin white wash, to installing water pumps in specifically cut holes. Relieved by the jovial attitude of the convicts, the monotony of the work was overbearing, particularly to a young boy.

I imagined her accosting him for touching me, telling him to keep his hands off of her white grandson.

My mother worked as a secretary in the factory's office, and each day after school, I would play there until each man handed me his time card to punch at six. The prisoners liked having me around. Many of them had children that they could only see for an hour a week, which gave me thirty-two self-sworn godfathers. During their cigarette breaks, we would go to the scrap heap where all of the unfired broken figures were thrown. Convicted criminals became first-graders with me as we threw cherub heads against cinder-block walls for fifteen minutes.

One of these inmates was Troy. He dipped figures in a thin paint, which would force the clay to take on the look of porcelain. He had a wide Afro, anchored with a sweatband, which topped a pencil thin moustache that curved out of the way of his glistening teeth when he smiled. His right hand was antique porcelain, his left was weathered and firm. As he dipped his bare hand into the paint, Troy would tell me stories, like the one about Fudgey. They were mostly about the other prisoners.

Fudgey had robbed a candy shop, or so Troy told me. I am sure he was hesitant to explain the concept of jailhouse homosexuality to the grandson of their boss, so, at the age of six, I was under the impression that the maternal black man who packed boxes in the front of the factory had mistakenly burglarized a sweet shop after having fallen on hard times.

"Chief over there, he once killed a man for a steak dinner," he said, pointing the white hand across the factory at the tall, olive-skinned man who painted fountains.

"Really?"

"Sure, I mean I guess so. That's what I heard him say."



"Wow."

"Yeah, it's somethin' else." I asked Troy dozens of times what he was in prison for. He never told me.

"Don't play with the darkies," Grandma said. Anita was an imposing woman. She stood nearly six feet tall; her chin dotted with scraggly black hairs sat atop a frame more powerful than many of her employees.

"With who?"

"The darkies. You can play with the other ones, just not the darkies."

"Why not?"

"Because they might try to trick you."

"But how? They're nice."

"They just will."

I had never before thought of any of the prisoners as being different because of what color their skin was. Anita, like my grandfather Bill, grew up in the Ozarks during the Depression. Not only were they poor, they were tempered in the unique kiln that only the collision of southern racism and bible-belt ideals could provide. This does nothing to excuse them, but now, it provides me with an explanation. I had known them to be racist, but never had Anita tried to keep me away from someone unlike her. (Bill, on the other hand, was more overt. I remember a time when a salesman in a shoe store refused to bargain with Bill, despite his claim that he wasn't black, but other customers could be.)

I was too young at the age of six to really doubt or oppose the ideals of our family figurehead. At the time, she was the woman who arrived unexpectedly on summer nights to take me to the ice cream stand. Her only grandchild, I was spoiled accordingly. An even greater love than my ignorant endorsement of her ignorance was her love for me. I was, as she said, life's greatest gift.

I never stayed away from anyone in the factory. I was more careful when Anita could see me, but I still gave coloring book pages from school to Fudgey, I still heard Troy's stories and still smashed cherub heads during smoke breaks.

Anita bought a German Shepherd to leave at the factory after someone pried the back door open one night and stole a shelf full of statues. She named the dog Terra Cotta, and called it T.C. (She was not particularly creative with pet names; she had a dog named Scummy, one named Muffin, and one named simply Pug, after its breed.) T.C. was a mutt; the blended colors of his fur and shape resembled a Labrador more than his Shepherd face and erect ears would reveal. During the day, T.C. was tied to the leg of a tractor-trailer, filled with clay, next to the rusted dumpster and the truck ramp outside of the factory.

I played in the truck ramp in the spring when it filled with water. The frog eggs that were laid there would turn into tadpoles that I could catch in plastic cups. With each new day there would be more tadpoles; when they became the tiny frogs that would hop up the ramp, I would catch dozens of them, putting them into a small aquarium I kept for this purpose. T.C. would wait at the edge of the ramp, barking, waiting for me to come back up. He was a loving dog, and habitually jumped up on me so he could lick my face.

One afternoon, after collecting tadpoles, I brought a handful of milk bones out to the trailer where T.C. was tied. I gave him the treats, and as he grew

ever more excited, he ran around me in circles, entangling my feet in his chain. I had bent down to unwrap my ankles from the chain when T.C jumped on me from behind.

I fell to the gravel, and felt the chain wrap around my neck from behind. T.C quickly came around to lick my face and I started to choke, his chain growing tighter around my neck. I tried to call for help, but my voice was a faint version of what it once was. I gasped for air while the clouds stood still above me. I set my hands to the galvanized chain—I was not as strong as the dog that was unknowingly killing me. T.C started to bark and as I started to feel weaker, I could hardly make any noise. I fell onto my back, the world growing ever dimmer. I could feel the push of the gravel parking lot against my back and the saliva on my face. The dog's face swirled in my ever-darkening vision; the sharp sound of his warm tongue slapping against my cheek rang in my ears while energy seeped from my body into the earth.

I started to black out. I could faintly see the corrugated metal door at one end of the truck ramp fly upwards and five black prisoners, one of them Troy, rushing out.

"Jesus Christ, the boss lady's grandson!" I could feel hands beneath the chain, the gentle strength lifting the links from my throat. Air crashed into my lungs while I lay in Troy's arms, a sea of hands patting me on the back. He carried me to the office, where my mother and Anita tended to my tear-streaked, swollen face.

Anita went into the factory to find out who had saved me earlier in the afternoon. I sat in her office, watching her through the large glass windows as she marched through the factory. I saw her disappear out of sight as she walked deeper into the metal building, toward the scraping department, which sat at the end of the truck ramp. She walked with Bob Morland, one of her friends, who served as the factory's head security guard. He followed her because in the scraping department, men used sharp metal tools to file away seams imparted by the mold.

When she came back into view, Bob had his arm around her. I had stopped crying and was able to see her clearly as she stopped in front of Troy's station. I could see her lips moving as Troy put down a wet cherub. I could not hear what she was saying, but I imagined. I imagined her accosting him for touching me, telling him to keep his hands off of her white grandson. The tableau paused, and Troy stood up.

I saw his antique hand and his own hand extend outwards, around Anita. She stood in his embrace for only a brief moment before he released her, returning to his work. Anita said nothing and walked away.

The next day, she bought them all pizza. She sat at a card table in the break room in the factory, sharing food with the five. In that brief moment, I thought Anita would be different. Matching ivory tooth with ivory tooth, Anita acted like herself among people unlike herself; something I can never remember seeing again.

As I stood next to the time clock that night, all of the prisoners had something to say as they handed me their card. Many of them told me how brave I was, others how strong. Chief merely nodded and winked.

Troy had his yellow time card in his porcelain hand at the end of the line.

"You're finally grown up now," he told me.

"I'm still only in first grade."

"I know, that doesn't mean you're not grown up."

"I'm trying."

Troy laughed at me. "I bet you are."

I punched his card, and he put it back in his slot. Turning to leave, Troy draped his jacket over his thin, prison issue t-shirt. "You always want to know why I'm in. You're grown now, so I guess I can tell you."

"Really?" A torrent of excitement poured through my body as Troy smiled back at me.

"Sure. I tried to rob a gas station, but the cops showed up before I could get away. I got seven years; worst mistake of my life. You know why?"

"No."

"My little girl will be ten when I get out of here."

"That's not too old, you're probably forty-five Troy. You're old."

Spreading his lips wide, he let out a small giggle. "Yeah, I am. But I hate knowing something could happen to her like what happened to you, and I wouldn't be able to do a thing about it."

## Triumph of Death

It seemed to happen all at once.  
Moments ago the joker laughed  
over a game of backgammon,  
to the strings strummed on a lyre.  
Though he knew it would come,  
for you, for him, for everyone.

He scurries beneath a large table  
once adorned with fruits and feasts,  
of greens and of beasts, of desserts,  
of delicacies, too delicate for this.  
The crimson checks upon your back  
won't keep you from this foul attack.

Set once in stately perfection, the table  
now tilted, cups crooked, plates askew—  
provisions putrefy beneath afflicting air,  
rotting on regal china, spilling and staining.  
A belly barren which once was full,  
his eyes like fire, his mouth like wool.

They've come to caress and spread  
their scrawny limbs about him, and  
his King—to let him see the time slip  
as does his breath, and his wealth.  
Between their bony fingers fall,  
the tithes and taxes of them all.

Black birds ride haggard horses  
collecting the heads of the dead and  
grinding bodies beneath wagon wheels.  
Murdered monks sing matins, and mourn.  
And in the bog the bodies float,  
while ghastly grins ruthlessly gloat.

The horizon heaves with smoky billows  
blowing up and away from a ruined land,  
spotted with gallows and guillotines,  
ravaged by ranks of choking change.



They ring the bells with wasted grip,  
on ropes to hang, 'round necks to slip.

The fool glances back over his shoulder—  
the blur of bedlam, drawn swords and  
futile attempts at flimsy defenses—  
for one last look before he loses himself  
beneath this table cloth, to hold his knees,  
to shut his eyes, to clench his teeth, and  
to tremble, and trust that what plagues the rest  
will not touch him, with their gaunt digits.

It comes in the air—and seeds to fester;  
it comes for all, sovereign to jester.

## Black and Free

Coffee drinkers are a breed all their own and a breed I have trouble understanding. Latte, espresso, macchiato, mocha; you may as well be speaking Portuguese. It is a strange society in which we live—one based on drinks ready to burn the tongue of any masochist willing to endure the pain for their daily fix. Why we do it is a mystery few, if any, have solved. Me, I only drink coffee when it's black and free.

Coffee is an addiction as dangerous as they come. Sadly, those who drink coffee will defend it to a bitter end. If you ask a coffee drinker why they drink it, few will admit their dependency. Others will fervently deny the pressure to drink in a society of heavy drinkers, for it portrays them as weak individuals incapable of thinking for themselves. However, most coffee drinkers refer to coffee as a "pick-me-up", something they need to make it through the trials and tribulations of daily life.

...They won't tell you this as a fun fact on the cardboard cup warmer.

I can assure you that there are millions who survive without contaminating their bodies with coffee and millions more who will get by without it in years to come. I understand fatigue. I understand early mornings, alarm clocks, all-nighters and eyelids that refuse to stay open. I've been there, but the answer to the problem of tiredness doesn't lie in multiple creamers, sugar and the occasional ration of whipped cream. Black coffee, and only black coffee, is the answer to your problems, my sleep-deprived and weary friends. All these extras won't pick you up, they will slow you down. And decaf. Don't get me started on decaf. Without caffeine, the culprit responsible for the energy we derive from coffee, what's the point?

There's no denying coffee's unhealthy side effects. There have been studies done, articles published and stories on the five o'clock news, all revealing the same not-so-surprising facts: coffee is not good for you. But apart from this, there are other risks to consider. I've seen an alarming number of cups accidentally kicked over in my college classrooms—money, time and sustenance down the drain. Why risk the embarrassment of spilling? Or burning your taste buds? Or spilling it on that new, white shirt, rendering it unwearable after five minutes of wearing it? You take more risks than you think when you buy that latte. Too many times I've watched a Starbucks cup throw itself over the edge of a desk, ready to end its life. I've seen people miss their mouths, pouring the steaming liquid into their laps. I've even seen coffee cause the destruction of many homework assignments, textbooks and various other important pieces of paperwork. Don't take the chance. Stop bringing your cups to class. Stop buying the drinks all together and save yourself the worrying.

You can save yourself time as well. Think about how much earlier you

have to get up in the morning to get your mocha-whatever before going to work or school. Go straight there; no need to try to avoid the inevitable. Instead of standing in the line at Starbucks, try the do-it-yourself checkouts in your local grocery store. Buy a banana. Cheaper, healthier and faster; bananas make more sense than coffee. The hours wasted in a year running for coffee is enough to make an addict stop drinking cold-turkey. If a man bought coffee Monday through Friday for a year and it took him fifteen extra minutes before work to obtain it, he would spend almost 53 hours running for coffee. That is over two full days getting coffee. There are more productive ways to spend your time. Knit a sweater—at least the knitter will get something out of it. A coffee drinker receives nothing in return for their money spent, aside from bad breath, a quick caffeine kick and the occasional bout of heartburn.

I forgot to mention the stained teeth, the hundreds of calories and the grams upon grams of sodium and carbohydrates. I hear people disgrace McDonald's every day. The Big Macs and Whoppers of the world are seemingly the biggest foes in today's society. In a Big Mac you get 540 calories—in a sandwich. Frappuccinos can have the same amount, whether or not you feel you're being healthy by opting for the non-fat milk. Don't kid yourself. I'm talking about a medium here, not even a large. Thanks, but I'll take the burger. We're scared of bagels and toast; too many carbohydrates. But coffee drinks have managed to slip through the cracks. They're clogging the arteries of people everywhere as fast, if not faster, than the foods we tell them to avoid. It's a drink, how bad for you can it be? Terrible. Let me put it in perspective. A "Dulce de Leche Crème," a drink Starbucks categorizes as a classic, contains approximately 450 calories, 65 grams of carbohydrates, 360 milligrams of sodium and no caffeine. No caffeine. Black coffee has 445 less calories, zero carbs and 350 less milligrams of sodium. Not only are you keeping all this excess out of your body by drinking black coffee, but it is the only way to ensure you're getting the energy you crave. You don't only lose the caffeine by buying the fancy (and often more expensive) drinks, but you lose all justification for drinking them.

I refuse to spend money on coffee. I'm pretty sure the founder of Starbucks doesn't need my money. He's got plenty. If the same man who wasted almost three days a year in line for coffee spends three dollars on his drink, he'll be spending over \$600 a year. Add a muffin—forget about it. That's twice the price of the car that will last me years. And my car has a lot more miles than a 16 ounce Grande-sized latte. But they won't tell you this as a fun fact on the cardboard cup warmer.

Perhaps I'm a contrarian. Perhaps this is my pathetic attempt at non-conformity. I've never tried any of the drinks that I'm launching my mini-campaign against, so perhaps this makes me a hypocrite. However, I can't help thinking that the money wasted on these drinks would be better spent in other places. Help the poor or put the money towards your kids going to college. Hell, you can even buy yourself something nice, but at least something nice will last. There are healthier options out there; options that won't cause you ulcers. Coffee is an expensive and dangerous fad. When people drink alcohol or abuse drugs because they are pressured to, we condemn them for being weak. When people drink coffee because

they are subconsciously pressured to by society, they are normal. There's nothing normal about a 400-plus-calorie beverage. Addicting and unhealthy, the macchiatos and the mochas we drink are part of the reason we are, statistically, the most obese nation. But what do I know? I'm no expert. I only drink it when it's black and free.



## About The Contributors

**Stephanie Allen** is a sophomore from Yadkinville, NC. (It's not close to anything you've heard of.) She's been writing since before she can remember, but isn't majoring in English. She chooses to confuse her parents by picking Japanese instead. Stephanie wears wild socks, can't decide between pirates and ninjas and is in a serious, long-term relationship with the word *skullduggery*.

**Jeremy Arnold** is a sophomore from Hartford, CT. He runs the wiffleball club on campus, contributes to the *Gettysburgian*, and works at the college's Writing Center. By his senior year he hopes to acquire an English with Writing major, Political Science minor and Business Concentration.

**Laura E. Barone** is an avid coffee drinker and devoted tea sipper from St. Louis, MO. A double major in French and Art History, Laura loves to slightly cool off her hot bevs with a drop or two of vanilla soymilk as she reads Molière and ponders the wonders of Matisse. Laura is also involved in Gettysburg Dance Ensemble, the Commons Café, and TGIT. Laura thinks the most beautiful and life-changing poetry, worthy to fill any empty cup, is the book of John.

**Kelly Bennett** is, as she calls herself, a "Soonior". Originally a member of the class of 2009, she will be graduating early in December of 2008 with majors in English and Management and a minor in Creative Writing. Kelly is co-editor-in-chief of both the *Gettysburgian* and *The Mercury* and co-organizer of a journalism conference set for the Spring of '08. (She apparently doesn't like doing anything on her own.) She spends too much time in front of a computer, writing, editing and answering emails but when she's not staring at a screen, Kelly enjoys running, reading and enriching Marilyn Springer's life.

**Amy Butcher** is a junior at Gettysburg College. She is double-majoring in Creative Writing and English and recently completed a semester abroad in Aix-en-Provence, France. In addition to serving as co-production editor for the *Mercury*, Amy is a *Gettysburgian* staff writer and a tutor at the Writing Center. She enjoys traveling, cooking and her Jack Russell terrier. Upon graduating, Amy plans to continue her education and pursue writing at the graduate school level. She aspires to be a Creative Writing professor and freelance writer when she grows up.

**Geoff Calver** is a senior Writing major with a minor in Political Science. He is an avid writer and literary enthusiast and hopes to be working within the publishing industry by June. He is a production editor of the *Mercury* and has been involved at an executive level on the magazine for three years.

**Eric Canzano** is in his third year of studies, with a major in Philosophy and a double minor in English and Religion. He likes to dip his feet into many different waters: sustainability, Buddhism, human rights, and piano to name a few examples. He hails from New Jersey, the 'armpit of America.' As for future plans, his birthplace and his path of study has left him few choices other than star gazing, arguing with people and being ridiculed.

**Jessie Cox** is a senior majoring in Languages and Linguistics and minoring in Writing. Her interests include traveling, puppies, the Beatles, and various combinations of the above. She would like to thank her family and friends for supplying her with chocolate and putting up with her subsequent sugar highs all these years.

**Evan Crowder** is a Renaissance man; a self-unemployed storyteller, dreamer (until it died), laissez-faire pupil, perspiring writer, corrections officer of humanity and journeyman jackass of all trades, preferring to divide his time equally amongst his vices. A determined follower of feline polo, Evan has had great success on the back of Hodge, his prize Calico. When not competing, he enjoys cooking ethnic food, reading physically deformed 18th century authors and drinking gin while writing non-fiction stories.

**Cassandra DeStefano** is currently a sophomore at Gettysburg College (class of 2010) majoring in Psychology with pending minors in Chemistry and Neuroscience. Painting and sketching are two of her pastimes. She is also a recreational runner. She is a member of a close-knit family of six, with an identical twin sister named Alyson. Cassandra was born in Mount Holly, NJ but moved to Harrisburg, PA when she was five years old.

**Alexander T. Englert** is a junior currently studying abroad at Heidelberg University in Heidelberg, Germany. Born and raised in Colorado, he loves traveling but still misses the west.

**Marianne Amelia Florentino Jimenez** is a member of the class of 2010. She was born and raised in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic and her first language is Spanish. The big-eyed Latina is planning to major in English and Theater. After graduation, Marianne plans to do all sorts of theatre activities. You can find her in the conservatory, literally trying to find her own voice.

**Merrill Fortier** is a senior. She is a Psychology major and an English minor and is slowly starting to face the real world, as scary as it is! While at Gettysburg, she has enjoyed getting involved in a variety of things such as playing for the women's golf team and holding leadership positions in various clubs around campus such as the CCL, Psi Chi, and Omicron Delta Kappa. She loves hanging out with her friends, laughing, playing the guitar, and writing as much as possible because that is how she truly loves to express herself.

**Anukul Gurung** is a junior from the lovely Himalayan country of Nepal. He is a Computer Science major and Studio Art minor. Anukul enjoys photography, painting, sketching, and soccer. He is interested in going to graduate school for art and design, or computer science, or taking a completely different route and getting a degree in non-profit leadership so that he can return to his home country and do humanitarian work. Currently, he is doing an internship on campus at the Office of Web Communications and Electronic Media. He is also a Resident Assistant in Stine Hall.

**Christine Habersaat** is a first year Health Sciences Major who hopes to pursue a career in the medical field. She enjoys writing poetry in her free time to express her creativity.

**Tom Hanvey** is a sophomore from Lodi, New Jersey. He is a Philosophy and Sports Management Double Major with a Pre-Law Concentration. He has studied art throughout his life and his work has appeared in several galleries. In 2006 he took classes at the MET in New York City. He cites Chuck Close as a major influence on his style of work.

**Amanda Harlacher** is a freshman at Gettysburg College where she minors in Education. Her possible majors include English or Spanish. She hopes to someday visit Madrid, become a famous author and have tons of dogs. Her favorites include SNL, John Mayer, "V for Vendetta" and her chocolate lab. She wants to write like David Sedaris and play tennis like Roger Federer.

**Nazlı İnal** is from İstanbul, Turkey. And she likes words. She likes words a lot.

**Chelsea R. Kasten** is a freshman. She enjoys sleeping, napping, staying up late, ridiculously long car rides, and tea.

**Desiree Koser** is a senior English major but her interests are varied. She has studied Japanese, German, computer science, women's studies, education, art, writing, and more. She likes to think of herself as a sponge absorbing knowledge. At heart, though, she is a crafter. Sewing, painting, jewelry making, paper crafting (greeting cards, book binding), and cooking are her passions. Her other passion is her long-time love, Mario; without his support and encouragement she wouldn't be the person she has become. She aspires to one day complete a book-length memoir of her childhood spent in rural North Carolina.

**Eric Kozlik** was born and raised in a dirt-floored, one-story log cabin nestled in the heart of Massachusetts bear country. He discovered his talent for writing when he was given a pen and paper for his sixteenth birthday and has not looked back since. During the off-season, he enjoys taming shrews, underwater basket weaving, and competitive knitting, along with track and field and improv comedy. He believes that the quickest way to a man's heart is through the left side of his rib cage, and that revenge is a dish best served with a side of onion rings.

**Jennifer Marta Logan** was born to be a visionary. She is a leader among leaders, student ambassador to the lands of the mysterious Orient, professional baked goods artiste, costume-maker extraordinaire, and warrior of the noble art of kendo. She is so badass that the city of Atlanta decided to name its metro service after her two decades before she was born~ a testament to her timeless fame. Truly, the finest mind of her generation.

**Andrew Maturo** is a first-year at Gettysburg College double majoring in Mathematics and Physics. After college, he intends on forgetting all this stuff he's learned and becoming a couscous farmer to possibly one day own the world's supply of couscous and part time, he will be a penguin rancher. This lavish and affluent lifestyle, although nice, is merely a perk to his lifelong urge to conquer the world's supply of couscous and penguins. Moreso, he will teach these penguins to play instruments so he can start a funk band called PengFunk. It's gonna be sweet.

**Alison McCabe** is a Psychology and Creative Writing double major. She will attend graduate school in the fall to receive her M.F.A. in fiction, and from there she has very little clue as to what she will do, though she knows what she would like to do, and that is to become an enormously successful writer. Instead of mentioning her interests—which are too many to list, and none of which are particularly interesting—Alison would like to use the remainder of her bio space to thank all the wonderful people who inspired, guided, and encouraged her to pursue writing.

**Meredith McEntee** is a sophomore from Northern Virginia and is a Globalization Studies major and French minor. She has been interested in photography since middle school and loves photographing her natural surroundings—nature and people alike (she sends thanks to her friends for being gracious and patient models!). Although most of her photography is now digital, she prefers black and white film, like the image shown. In addition, Meredith is involved in Track and Field, Tour Guiding, and eRace at Gettysburg and she is the cook at a summer camp in Maine.

**Kriscinda Meadows** is a junior English major, concentrating on the Gothic, with a Writing minor. She gave her first paper at Oxford on the zombie genre audience, and her second in Boston regarding HP Lovecraft's "Reanimator" stories and Burke's sublime aesthetic. This last year also saw the publication of her short horror story, "Wall-eyed" in the *The Undead: Flesh Feast*, a zombie anthology. Currently, she is studying in Bath, England and filling the gaps in her knowledge of 19th century Gothic. She usually lives in Gettysburg, with her partner, Peter, and their Spook.

**Brian Menna** says, "He had a word, too. Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn't need a word for that anymore than for pride or fear." - William Faulkner

**Chris Merkle** is a freshman Music Education major from Lewisburg, PA, home of Bucknell University and the third biggest Wal-Mart in America. He enjoys photography in his free time, which is why he doesn't do it that often. Chris's favorite photographs are those he has taken on vacation in Chincoteague, VA, where "Foggy Sunrise" was taken. Other favorite artists include Ansel Adams and Andrew Wyeth. Besides photography, Chris enjoys music (obviously), theatre, sports, movies, and more of the obvious. Enjoy the photographs!

**Jack Pittenger** is a senior History major from Boston, Massachusetts who doesn't want to hear it about 18-1. His interests include rugby, ATO, looking at Steve Tharp's hairline, trying to spot for Meat in the weight room, being a Windex man for the Flippers, and being sworn at by Professor Leebron. His career aspirations include saying he doesn't quite know yet when people ask him what he plans on doing after graduation and getting the fattest Newfoundland the world has ever seen once he has a place that's big enough.

**Nick Rosenberger** is a first-year. He enjoys Chinese food, reading books, listening to music, vinyl, chopping wood, tea, the outdoors, and social justice. If you share these interests, tell him, and he will be friends with you...maybe.



**Allison Schofield** is a first year from Greenwich, CT still deciding what she wants to major in but considering a minor in Spanish. She is heavily involved in groups on campus such as the Campus Activities Board, the Student Advisory Board, and the Attic Advisory Board. She took photography in high school and hopes to continue the hobby throughout college.

**Zach Shedleski** is a senior who is getting his BS in biology. He has no aspirations and actually believes they are pointless. Whatever happens, he will still be living for the weekends and dreading every morning he has to wake to an alarm. Zach has a long list of interests, none of which are interesting. He likes Townie better than Mamas.

**Marilyn Springer** is graduating from Gettysburg in one month as an English major with Writing and Studio Art minors, and hopefully by the time you're reading this, has a job lined up. She likes dancing, choreographing, writing, painting, lighter fluid, being inappropriate, sarcasm, and peanut butter. Hopefully all these things will continue to encompass her life as she embarks into the "real world." To her fellow seniors she would like to give a piece of advice—stay fierce.

**Sara Thomas** is a member of the class of 2011. During her first year at Gettysburg she participated in B.O.M.B. squad, Italian club, Law and Justice Society, and Mock Trial. She choreographed for Dance Ensemble and acted as treasurer of Paul Hall. She changes her mind about her future very often, but right now her plan is to major in English and minor in either philosophy or studio art and ultimately work for a fashion magazine. Her favorite things in life are dancing, her family, warm weather, and New York City.

**Amanda Ward** is a junior Theatre Arts major and English and Women's Studies double-minor. You must be shocked to hear of her participation in anything other than the shenanigans of the Theatre Department. Seriously shocked. However, she does maintain a fair degree of talent in the visual arts department aside from hammering and sawing all day. Since her life revolves around art, she is always trying to create some form of it. She hopes someday to bring artistic expression to under-privileged kids to inspire confidence and creativity.

**Victoria West** is junior/seniorish. She did a brief stint in North Carolina. In her spare time she likes to sing in rounds, drink too much coffee, and attend unofficial and unorganized scrabble tournaments (in that order). She also enjoys a good cheeseburger Happy Meal from time to time. She hopes to one day become a cheese connoisseur and host her own late night TV show. She's like a bird. She flies away. Ya know, that old chestnut.

## Acknowledgements

The staff of *The Mercury* would like to pay special recognition to the President's Office and President Will, the Provost's Office and Provost Janet Riggs, Student Senate, College Life and Dean Ramsey and Thomas Mottola, Development, Alumni and Parent Relations, The Art Department, Schmucker Art Gallery, *The Gettysburg Review* and the English Department for their funding contributions to *The Mercury*.

Another note of gratitude goes out to the magazine's advisors, Kathryn Rhett and Fred Leebron, for their 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. Reader staffs invested a tremendous amount of time evaluating and selecting submissions. We hope that their efforts make *The Mercury* an eclectic publication that reflects the creative side of the student body of Gettysburg College.