



The Mercury

The Student Art &  
Literary Magazine  
of Gettysburg  
College

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Volume 2006


Article 1

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2006

## The Mercury 2006

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## The Mercury 2006

### Keywords

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

### Author Bio



# THE MERCURY



THE ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE  
OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

2006



## Self portrait at the Window

Makenzie Seiple

*Pencil on paper*

12 x 14 in

February 2006

# *The Mercury*

The Art & Literary Magazine  
of Gettysburg College

2006

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# *The Mercury*: An Overview

## HISTORY AND PROCESS

- ◆ *The Mercury* is released each April and has been published at Gettysburg College annually since 1899.
- ◆ All students are invited to participate on staff and to send in their work for possible publication.
- ◆ Editors are elected each year by the entire staff.
- ◆ Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis throughout the fall and early spring.
- ◆ Submissions 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 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.
- ◆ The Mercury Prize judges were Leonard Goldberg for Poetry and Shelia Mulligan for Fiction & Non-fiction.
- ◆ Mark Warwick, James Agard, and Molly Hutton served as judges for the Mercury Prize in Art.
- ◆ Mercury Prize winning titles are bolded in the Table of Contents of this issue.
- ◆ This year's winners include Maelina Frattaroli '06, Art & Fiction, Jason Parker '06, Poetry and Larissa Stathokes '06, Non-fiction.

## 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, especially Greg Kingston and Kate Brautigam, for the time they devoted to preparing this issue for print.

## COVER ARTWORK

The 2006 cover artwork is by Alison Petrow.  
Cover photograph: *Diving Board*, black and white photo, 4 x 6, 2005.

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## Scrambled Eggs

"Look at it outside," he said. His hand fingered at the window shade. His eyes, normally a deep, dark aquamarine, reflected a pristine white as he spoke. "I can't believe you Pennsylvanians call *this* snow."

"It's higher than the front step," she protested, pulling her shirt on over her head. "There's at least a good four inches out there."

"Three *at the most*," he noted, shaking his head. "No more than three."

The girl sighed disappointedly and turned, her long blonde hair spilling out in tufts that intertwined and tangled across her back. Her eyes, sleepy and idle, glanced at the streets below. There, outside, the entire town lay covered in a thin layer of milky debris. Tall brick buildings looked like gingerbread houses, their rooftops caked in creamy, thick frosting that oozed and spilled. Window ledges appeared thick and heavy from the several inches of snow they held and tiny icicles hung down, shimmering in the emerging morning sun. Below, couples hurried along on the sidewalk together, their arms entwined, their faces shriveling and shaking as they went.

"Yes, it looks awfully cold," he said, nodding his head affirmatively, "but this isn't a *real* snow storm."

The girl turned her body away from his frame. Extending an arm, she reached for her navy blue and white sweatshirt—the one she had bought when she had first arrived on campus, back in the fall, back when the leaves littered the ground with pastel oranges and brilliant reds. She looked for her sweatpants but couldn't find them. She sat, chilled, and wiped at her sleepy eyes.

"I'm glad you stayed over last night," he commented, "I didn't think you would. I'm just sorry you'll have to walk home in this."

"I don't mind the snow," she smiled.

Outside a plow truck drove by, spitting gritty dark snow up onto the windowpane. The boy grinned, shaking his head. "*Plows?*" he murmured.

Finally, he turned away from the glass. "Are you hungry?" he asked, moving across the room and leaning against the ivory countertop. Little tufts of white fur stuck out of the corners of his slippers where his feet met the interior. They were cute, brown little things that made squeaky noises when he walked and smelled rich and musky.

Though her stomach ached, she didn't want to trouble him. Instead she avoided his question, ducking her head through the opening of the sweatshirt and pulling it down over the overlarge, dull T-Shirt she had slept in. The newfound heat sent warm little shivers up her spine and she shook

lightly. Feeling his eyes on her, she glanced up at him, a small smile creasing, subconsciously, over the corners of her lips.

"I'll make you something," he said definitively, turning his back to her before she could protest. "I think I have some eggs in here. You eat eggs, right?"

"I love eggs," she said, nodding, "Yeah, yeah, I can eat eggs."

"A person never knows, you know, when it comes to you vegetarians." He removed a small white carton from the refrigerator and reached into the cabinet for a bowl. Plucking a large egg from its casing, he cracked the egg lightly on the side of the ceramic dish and plunked it into a pan that sat, almost deliberately, on a stovetop burner.

His hair was puffy this morning. It stuck up in soft little patches that spread across his entire head. She imagined her fingers combing through it lightly, her body enclosed around his, the two of them perhaps sitting on a warm little couch in front of a warm little fireplace. She imagined them old and wrinkled, his gray hair peaking out in tufts between her soft fingers. She could practically hear their grandchildren as they ran about the house carelessly. She sighed.

"Toast?" he asked, turning back to look at her. His eyes caught hers and he smiled somewhat bashfully.

"You've been to Thailand," she announced abruptly, her body suddenly sitting upright.

"I have," he said, turning himself so that he was fully facing her, "yes I have."

"You've been to Bangkok, too."

The boy folded his arms in front of him and reclined against the countertop. He smiled unknowingly, his eyes softening around their edges. "I have. What's it matter?"

"And England, too, you've been to England."

Curious, the boy moved away from the countertop now and stepped closer to her. He took a seat beside her on the couch, his legs tucked together almost defensively. With his hands, he picked up her own hand, his fingers coiling gently around the little nub of her thumb. "Yeah, sweet thing? I've been to England."

The girl sighed and looked away, her eyes mapping the walls of his apartment. Here and there lay framed paintings of Harvard and other Massachusetts memorabilia. She knew his father had gone there; she wondered briefly if he had been a traveler, too.

"You like music," she stated.



"Love it," he nodded, obviously still unsure as to what she was getting at. His eyes seemed to be scrutinizing her, his lips quivering anxiously.

"You can play a lot of instruments."

"Guitar, piano, mandolin," he nodded affirmatively, continuing, "bass, djembe, ukulele, banjo, harmonica." Reflective in thought, he paused before adding, "Yeah, I guess that is a lot."

"You want to pursue music when you get older?" She asked him pressingly. Her eyes zoomed in on him now, her face tightening around his face. She saw the way his pupils dilated, his brow creased.

He sighed, biting at his lip. "Yeah, you know." His hand squeezed around hers. "If I could pursue it, well, yeah—that'd be great."

Her smile faded. "You'd tour the country, never be around." She glanced outside again, only this time the houses looked sad, trapped in the great burden of winter weather. The front doors stood miserably, unable to open, behind a great wall of solid snow. Icicles hung in sharp little swords like weapons or incarcerating prison bars.

Frustrated, he stood up, moving away from her and the couch, moving closer towards the kitchen and his heating pan. He turned the knob on the stovetop and, with his back to her, asked, "How do you like your eggs?" "You've seen it all," she continued. "You've seen the world."

"Not all of it."

"You have. You've seen most."

"Many have seen more."

"Still," she said, nodding, "you've seen more than me. You've seen Colorado—do you know that I have never even seen the Grand Canyon?"

"It's nothing special."

"It's tremendously special; it looks so beautiful. I'd love to go. But I don't, you know that? I never go."

He turned, glancing at her, then left his kitchen position to sit beside her on the couch. "Well," he said slowly, "you've seen France."

"Haven't you?"

"No," he said meekly, his smile fading. "I haven't seen France."

"Well." The girl thought for a minute, then added, "I haven't seen Seoul."

He laughed. "I only saw it briefly. I was in the airport."

"I haven't been on a Thai beach. I haven't met a Thai dog."

He smiled.

"You said you've pet a Thai dog."

"Two, yes." He smiled and placed his hand back in hers.

"And you've eaten beetles. You've sat, quietly, reflectively, in a monastery. You have a journal that was painted by a street vendor in Chang Mai. You rode an overnight train. You spoke Thai and made foreign friends."

He just smiled, reclining back in his seat.

"I listened to all of your stories," she said, continuing, "I've listened to them all. Every single one."

"Apparently," he grinned.

"For two months now I've listened," she continued, "and I've come to realize something." She sighed, adding quietly, "You're a traveling man."

He laughed at this, his body coiling up, his frame shaking lightly. Calmly he consented, "I suppose I am."

"You're always on the go." She nodded, clearly overwhelmed, her eyes now glancing down into her lap timidly. "I've lived in the same place for eighteen years."

"Souderton, yeah," he nodded. Then, as if trying to comfort her, he added, "Well, you know, it really does sound like a great little place."

"It was." She paused. "I knew my neighbors so well."

"That's real nice."

"I babysat the same kids for seven years."

"How sweet."

"Aidan and Katie. I watched them grow up, you know?"

"That's sweet hon."

"I was there when they bought their puppy, see? And I was there when that puppy grew up into a dog."

"Seven years is a long time."

"It is. I was there when Aidan first started to walk."

"Aw."

"Katie lost her first tooth on an apple."

"Yeah?"

"I've just—I stayed in one place my entire life. I haven't been around, you know, haven't traveled like you."

"Well that's all right..."

"Yes," she interrupted, "it is all right, but it's not like you."

He was quiet.

"You want to tour the country. You want to go from venue to venue."

"But," the boy began.

"And I want a little white picket fence and a little white picket fence life."

The boy stared ahead blankly.

"I want daffodils in my garden and frogs in a pond. I want tulips and daisies and children on a seesaw in the backyard."

They sat in silence.

"The waitress at the diner I go to," she stumbled over her words, her voice now slightly shaky, "she knows my order by heart."

"You always order the same thing?"

"Lemon meringue pie and two cups of coffee. Two sugars, two creams."

He shook his head, "That's kind of boring."

"I like things to stay the way they are," she stated. "I guess I just don't like change."

The boy stood up again, his body tense. He looked down and plucked the little pan from its stovetop, swirling the contents around slowly. "How thoroughly cooked do you like your eggs?" he asked distractedly.

Sadly, the girl shook her head, lowering her gaze. "However you like them is fine."

Quietly, the boy scooped the eggs onto two plates. He added a slice of toast to each, then smoothly moved over to her. "I cook my eggs depending on how I feel," he explained, lowering the plate to her lap carefully. He took a seat on the couch, took her hand and smiled, "Today, my eggs aren't running."

Outside, flurries began to fall and the gingerbread houses gleamed with morning luster.

## The Veteran

He sat down with trembling hands and tore open a paper sealed together many years before – he held a hand to his mouth – silence, drifting through the room like smoke trailing upwards and across the sky, a million different fixtures of light – and he through and through – thought to himself – and he paused and closed his eyes and relaxed a bit, and his hands fell to the green stucco chair arms, stumbling, taken victim by an unkind world and the terror that was gravity as it were – and overhead, in the dark sky a plane flew its course – and a man held a scotch on the rocks to his lips – and tasted sweet sin – and with it resigned his heart – and a thousand miles high a satellite, foreign metals and bright shining crystals, beamed images into a home – where a lady was sitting with her son in her lap, and his mouth smacked open and shut - open and shut - as he chewed on gum obscenely – and in the big black box with the flat screen the face of a man who seemed only half real related tragedy and horror and depravity and starving and the alcoholics and the homeless and the bums and the greedy corporations and the wars and the bombs and everything forever plaguing anything at all to the families in their rooms – and the woman threw half a steak, and bread, and a salad - untouched - into the garbage – and she picked her whites with a toothpick that came from the forests in some country where the jungle grew thick as ants on a warm summer's sidewalk in a town on a shore of a lake that stretches into the mountains with snow-covered hills – and all around was land – a land with beautiful mountains and aching hills, and flat plains that stretched on for miles – and somewhere, highway 95, a young man drove to Boston in a jalopy and parked in front of the recruiting station, where they moved men through in a hurry where out they left with pride-filled faces – and onto a boat where they sailed across an ocean to a land with accents and old churches and old houses and old cobblestone streets and fog and mist and celtic legends – where they met young women and drank in pubs and sailed across the channel – where they sat in a u-boat and shot their lives to hell – where shells went off all around and water splashed high and rocked the boats – and as the doors opened and bullets whizzed past his friend fell to the bottom of the sea – and they plowed through the countryside, with dead houses, and dead trees, and dead soldiers floating in flooded fields, parachutes still strapped to their backs – to a land where the sun never shone – and it was covered in soot from the flames and the bombings – where tommy's put holes in the enemies shirts and a red flag waved on a building – and to home they went and saw their girls and everyone smiled real happy – and his wife was in the kitchen fixing a meal – and listening to a voice on the radio saying this and that about Iraq and the way that everyone opposed it – and a voice full of southern, laid back drawl and indifference spoke aloud about how he was a man of the people and that he never paid attention to polls and he told men to be good sports and carry on their daddies traditions – and so the men lined up at the recruiting stations, rain pouring on their heads – and they frowned at each

other and lit cigarettes and dreaded to be pushed through – and when they came out it was into blinding sun and sand in their eyes – and a boy wakes up and realizes he's a man – and a bullet strikes his heart and he drops dead – and the man looked up from his green stucco chair and muttered holy hell – and a tear dripped from his tired eye as he read the letter written in '45 by a man he had known as Sarge – and his hands wept and his eyes they cried and he covered his hands with his face – and he sat sad and lonely and depressed and his wife hummed and hawed in the kitchen and he gave up – and he detests the southern president talking on the big black box and the way that he stands for nothing and far away in another land an American flag is burning.

MOLLY MASICH

## A Poem

There are no answers to fill in the spaces between mind and soul.

Sometimes, Darling, I think of you

I get so excited and I can't get a word in

Though I am all alone

Somewhere a memory of your voice has grown.



# Sick on the Inside

## 1: The Thing on the Bathroom Floor

Mommy didn't wake me up that morning to say bye. She didn't even go to work that morning. I think she forgot. Later, Daddy wasn't waiting for me in the driveway when Sharon, Kelly's mommy, brought me home from nursery school in their big, blue-gray car that made you go backwards and get real dizzy if you sat in the back. Riding backwards made throw-up climb up my insides. It stung, but it never came out. The car smelled like a muddy, wet dog because their dog went for rides sometimes. Daddy called it a "soccer mom" car.

Miss Sharon wanted to come inside with me, but I told her I wasn't afraid to go alone. She hugged me really close and said she wouldn't let me. When she stopped hugging me, I could still smell the hairspray on her brown hair. She said it was dangerous for a three-and-a-half year-old like me to go anywhere alone. She took my hand; hers was warm. She brought me inside with Kelly. Daddy wasn't in the kitchen, but we heard him talking to Mommy upstairs. I heard them talking two times – once in real life, and once in an echo. I think they were having what Daddy calls a deep conversation. Daddy's face gets all red like the skin of a tomato when he has a deep conversation. When Sharon saw Tommy, my fifteen-year-old brother, on the couch in front of the TV, she finally let me be alone.

Tommy waved to me, but didn't say anything. He smiled, just a little, but not enough to show his teeth. He had dark, metal braces. Mommy said that he was embarrassed because he thought no girl would want to kiss someone with mini cages glued onto his teeth. He had his headphones on and moved his head in fast nods. I could hear the loud music with too many drums through them. He was watching football. I hated football, but I also hated Barbies. They're all the same. No one ever looks like that. Tommy looked kind of depressed, but I think he was just going through a phase, like Mommy and Daddy always said. He didn't talk to them much; he was always talking to other people on the computer with the door shut behind him. Whenever Mommy or Daddy came into the computer room, he would make the screen go black and tell them it was none of their business who he was talking to. I thought he was mad because of his braces or his face that was red and bumpy like Mars. I ignored him; he just wanted attention.

I didn't smell the yellow soup with stars that Mommy sometimes made for me. She made me the one in the red Campbell's cans for my snack before dinner. I ate all of it except for the chicken. The pieces were too pink with a lot of slimy fat stuck to them. Mommy wasn't in the kitchen, and I was starving. I heard a little noise from upstairs; it sounded like Daddy was saying swearwords again; sometimes, he does when his paperwork drives

him crazy. Something was banging so loudly that I felt it through my shoes. I thought it was Daddy hammering a nail into the wall.

"Daddy!" I yelled up at him. He didn't answer me.

I ran upstairs and almost fell because my bag was still on my back. I'm happy I didn't fall because I did one time and my head hurt forever. It felt like my brain stopped thinking and was ready to fall out of my head. Daddy's office light was on, but he wasn't in there. The top of his hair wasn't popping up from his chair. Mommy and Daddy were yelling in the bathroom. The door was open, but just a little bit. I never heard anyone yelling in the bathroom before except when they were constipated because they didn't eat enough fiber. I didn't call Daddy's name anymore. I kept quiet, just like Daddy used to tell me when he didn't want to hear me open my mouth. I still keep quiet sometimes.

I didn't want to see them in the bathtub looking like that. She didn't look like Mommy, and he didn't look like Daddy. Mommy's chestnut hair was wet in her face like a messy, chocolate spider web. She kept hitting her head. Daddy's shirt had red paint all over, but they weren't painting. They moved a little bit. Mommy was screaming louder than I did the time I tripped on my shoelace and fell downstairs. Mommy said that I got the wind knocked out of me. Her skin was white like clay and it looked moist, but the shower wasn't on. Mommy screamed some more.

"No! No you don't!" She told him to go away.

She was sobbing, and her face was almost redder than the paint on Daddy's shirt. Her long hair was dancing all over her head that kept moving up and down real fast. When Daddy tried to give her a hug, she tucked her arms in and turned away. She shook like she was taking a cold shower.

Mommy was trying to hide something in her hand. Daddy told her to give it to him now, and that he wanted to take it from her because she was hurting herself. I couldn't see very well, but her hand looked tight. When my hand's closed tight, my knuckles get white because the blood moves away from the bones.

"I wanna help you, Claire," he told Mommy. He tried his best not to yell at her. Daddy always said that Mommy was a very sensitive lady. She didn't like being yelled at. I think Daddy was too scared to yell. I wanted to yell, but I think I had a frog inside my voice that made yelling impossible. I stayed in the corner.

Then, Mommy said something that I'll never forget. "You're a liar, Rob! A fucking fake! Admit it! You and me – a fucking waste, all so you could fuck --," she shouted loudly, but slowly, choking after every word.

She was breathing funny, like Tommy did when he used his electric breathing toy for his asthma. Her words were hard to understand. She didn't sound like Mommy because those were ugly words. I saw her spitting

on little kids like a big bully when she said them. They were words that you hear in those bloody, grown-up movies with lots of guns, bad guys, and policemen. I wasn't allowed to watch rated-R movies, but sometimes Tommy turned on the TV to HBO while I sat on the other couch painting with my water colors.

"Look, give me that thing in 3...2...", Daddy counted slowly. His voice got more tired, almost like he was whining, after each number.

Mommy was wriggling so fast, he couldn't keep up with her. She was squirming like the earthworm that moved like mad after I cut it in half with a shovel. That was the same one I tried to eat when I was three. I thought it might have tasted like brown, slimy spaghetti from Chinese restaurants. She held her hand with that thing in it up real high like Lady Liberty holding the torch. Before Daddy could count to one, something made the thing fall onto the bathroom floor. It fell fast, but slow because it was doing flips like the acrobat I saw at the circus after the elephants came on. The light on it changed like a dying flashlight as it flipped.

When it fell onto the tile floor, it sounded like someone dropping a coin. The thing was bigger than a quarter. It was a silver square; one side looked clean like strong aluminum foil, and the other side looked scary and almost red. It was skinny like the end of the knife Daddy uses to cut his rib-eye steak he always grilled. There were little red drops that bounced off of it onto the shiny, white tiles. Maybe it was the same red paint that Daddy was wearing. I looked at it for a long time. I was still looking at it, and Mommy was still choking. I never saw Daddy cry before then.

## 2: The Black Taxi Cab

It was thirty minutes past my bedtime, and I was still awake in bed. Mommy was late tucking me in. She came, finally. She always opened the door so it wouldn't squeak; Daddy always made it squeak. I saw the triangle of light grow bigger on my carpet in the dark when it opened. My eyes were wide awake and felt extremely big. She walked in slowly. She smiled at me, but didn't show her teeth; she never did. Daddy always said that that smile was her "secret charm" that made her look like that mysterious lady in Leonardo DaVinci's painting. Mommy took tiny steps like a ballerina as she walked, and they didn't make any noise.

She came over to me and sat next to me on my bed. Her chestnut hair, like Belle's from "Beauty and the Beast," smelled like her favorite lilac shampoo. It smelled so sweet, I wanted to eat a bouquet of lilacs. She kissed my forehead with her soft lips. She always said her secret was Vaseline before bedtime. After she bent down to kiss me, my face was covered in a brown-haired blanket of lilacs. She sat up again.

"Chrissy," she whispered. "I won't be driving you to school tomorrow. Daddy will instead."



"What about Friday?" I asked her. I was a little bit confused. Mommy always drove me every morning and Sharon always brought me home in the van.

"No, not Friday either. Not for a while, sweetheart. There's some place I have to go to," she answered. I could tell she was sad, but she tried not to cry. Her eyes were pink like a carnation.

Mommy said nothing for a while. With both her hands, she reached out to my face. I thought she was going to hold my head in her cushiony palms like she did all the time when she said she had the best little girl in the world. Instead, she slowly brushed my hair back with her long fingernails that moved in wavy patterns against my scalp. Her hands running through my hair felt like a comb with huge teeth. She tucked my hair behind my pointy ears; they were so pointy that Tommy would call me an "elf child." She smiled that smile again. But she looked down at my comforter instead of my eyes. Her hands dropped to her lap, making a soft slapping sound.

Mommy wasn't going to the doctor's for a check-up. She wasn't going on vacation with the people from work either.

I kept quiet.

She told me that I might not understand, but to try my best to listen anyway.

"I'll be gone for a while. Mommy's a little bit sick, sweetheart, but I'm sick on the inside. When a person is sick on the inside, they need to go see a doctor for a longer time than for any other sickness."

I kept thinking and thinking and trying to understand, but I couldn't. I asked her if she would be gone forever, like Grandma who went to that old, brick nursing home when she started to speak nonsense.

"No, not forever," she said. "It might be a long time, but not forever. Only until I stop being sick. But please promise me two things," she said, and then put her hand on top of mine. It felt like Play-Dough, cold, like how my palms felt on a cloudy day. "Promise me that you won't be afraid without me and that you'll listen to Daddy and be a brave, strong girl for him."

I was good at keeping promises, but I didn't know what to say to her. I think I started to cry a little. I hated when I cried because the hot tears would make my cheeks and neck itch for a long time.

"Can you do that?" she asked me.

She lifted me up and held me in her comfy sweater-arms. She let me cry my tears into them, but the wet sweater started to itch at my face, and I moved away. I never thought soft clouds could itch so much.

"I promise, Mommy," I whispered. I cried and cried anyway, and she rocked me to sleep.

9:15. I was four years old for fifteen minutes when a beeping sound a little louder than Daddy's cement truck woke me up. My window was open, and then Mother Nature blew in through the screen like Tinkerbell and froze the tip of my nose. I sat up in my bed and looked outside. There was a black taxi waiting at the end of my driveway. It was all shiny in the October sun, and there were strange shapes of light on different parts of it. Mommy always said the sun played tricks on shiny things. I couldn't see the person in it through the tree branches and yellow and gold fall leaves. They fell with the blowing wind like gigantic snowflakes. The driver beeped two times in a row, then another two times in a row.

The old kitchen door slammed shut. Mommy's high heels stomped on the stone sidewalk as she walked to the car. Whenever her shoes sounded like that, I knew she was leaving the house to go somewhere. But they were clunking faster this time. I ran downstairs so I could see her again. Daddy and Tommy were sitting quietly at the kitchen table; they both had their heads down. Tommy's hood blanketed his head, and his earphones were on again. I walked around them. I wanted to see her by myself as she walked towards the shimmery, black car.

I opened the front door and pushed the glass to open it some more. The glass was cold like the top of a frozen pond. My sweaty hands made cloudy fingerprints on it like white paint on dark paper. Mommy didn't see me open the door though, and I didn't call her name. She was already at the black car. A man with a big belly and bald head opened the trunk for her and helped her put her two big suitcases inside. He was so big, he seemed hungry. He looked like he wanted to eat the suitcases. They were only Mommy's suitcases, but it was like she was taking her whole life with her to the place she had to go.

The man with the big belly shut the trunk with his fat, strong arm. His arm was short like a plump sausage. The trunk made a noise that felt funny in my heart. I shut the glass door and kept looking from inside. Daddy and Tommy still weren't looking. I looked for a long time at the shiny, middle part of the tires. They were so shiny, they were white. I only saw the back of Mommy as she opened the front door and sat down for the ride to the place where she would stop being sick on the inside. The car disappeared.

### 3: Jack-O-Lantern Lady

"Daddy tells me you can paint a really pretty picture," she said to me.

She tried to get me to paint something for her every Wednesday after she picked me up from the bus stop. She was ugly. Her eyes had lots of red veins, and her eyebrows looked like caterpillars. Her nose was bumpy like a witch's. She had red hair like fire that was always messy; she never used a hairbrush in her life. One of her teeth was gray. There were three on the bottom that had yellow stains from too much mustard maybe, but I never saw her eat mustard. She probably ate mustard in private. We stopped buying mustard. Mommy loved mustard, the kind that was almost brown,

not yellow like paint, and had little dots in it. She put too much of it on her hotdogs. How revolting! I didn't like it because it was spicy and burned my mouth.

"I don't like to paint," I told her.

"Sure you do. All big girls like you love to paint. You're five now." She smiled.

Her name was Ingrid – a boring name, like Barbie. Her smile was crooked like a jack-o-lantern's and her breath smelled like a teacher's. Teachers have bad breath, especially teachers with faces like jack-o-lanterns. Someone told me that was because they have black coffee for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Her breath smelled like the bathroom after Daddy gets out. Daddy told me never to tell her that though because she was a friend of mine who wanted to help me, and you don't say things that hurt friends' feelings. I'm good at keeping secrets, so I didn't tell her. I kept quiet.

"I'm four and a half," I said. She stopped smiling.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you're so pretty that you should paint a picture of yourself?" she asked.

"I think so. But I don't want to anymore," I answered.

"Your Daddy always says how he loves your curls; you look just like Goldie Locks." She smiled again.

I got mad and didn't say anything for a little while. I thought *Goldie Locks and the Three Bears* was stupid anyway. Goldie Locks shouldn't have played those tricks on the bears.

"Daddy never says that he loves my curls," I told her. "He never says anything like that to me."

"Chrissy," she said. She sounded mad now, but she didn't yell. I hated it when someone said my name when they were impatient with me. "I asked you nicely if you could paint a pretty picture. Why don't you make this one especially for Daddy? I hear it's his birthday tomorrow."

"No," I said with my voice raised, like Mommy's when she used to scold me. "Daddy hates my paintings. He doesn't understand them. He said he didn't want a birthday party anyway; he doesn't have time."

It was true. My paintings frightened Daddy and even Tommy, who said he understood Daddy less than I did, and that's why he started making me paint for Ingrid. But my paintings were true stories, not fairytales.

"You know that's not true," she said, and smiled again.

I looked away for a while because I got grossed out staring at her slimy teeth. I don't think she knew what toothpaste was.

"I have a project for you," she said. "Now, this could be kind of fun. And, I promise, you don't have to show it to Daddy if it makes you feel uncomfortable, okay?"

"What project?" I asked.

"Next week, before I come back, I want you to have a painting ready for me. But this painting is different than all the other ones I've wanted you to make. I want you to think real hard about something you don't understand very well and are afraid to talk to me about. Maybe you don't understand why you think Tommy's sad, or why Daddy doesn't cook anything you think tastes good. I want you to paint that thing you don't understand, but under one condition: it has to be something important that's happened to you."

"Do I have to?" I asked.

"Chrissy, if you choose not to paint this, then you know we're going to talk about it. Sometimes, it's better to let the painting talk for you," she said.

The old kitchen door opened and she got up when she heard it. It squeaked like a rubber ducky, only louder. Mommy always said it needed some oil, and that she wanted Daddy to spray it for her. She never asked him. Daddy was home from work. He always came home at five, and then he would make dinner for me and Tommy. He always made me something disgusting because he didn't know how to cook like Mommy. Mommy knew how to make things home made and always let me help her.

"Little by little, Rob," I heard her say to Daddy from inside the kitchen. They were trying to whisper, but I heard their echoes. "You need to take care of yourself at some point; don't forget that. Blaming yourself won't do."

She left, and then Daddy started to make another dinner that smelled like it was burning. The burning stuffed up my nose. I wasn't hungry; there were too many butterflies flying in my stomach.

#### 4: Water Colors

Daddy was already 35 for four days now, but I decided to paint for him anyway. I thought maybe, after the painting, Daddy would start talking to me more. I would be expressing my feelings like he always told me to. Sometimes, my feelings came out, but I never knew I had them. I didn't want to show it to him until later.

Daddy was in the kitchen trying to fix that door, finally, and he was saying lots of swear words. His face was sweaty and little droplets of sweat bounced onto the linoleum floor like dew on grass. I covered my ears; I didn't like the sound of the swear words. They made my eardrums hurt like I had an ear infection. I turned the TV on kind of loud to the "Disney Afternoon" cartoons.

I put my big painting pad that Mommy got me when I was three on my lap, opened the water colors, and reached for the plastic cup in front of me.



I went into the bathroom to fill it halfway with water, then came back and sat down. I picked up the brush and heard Daddy curse some more. That stupid door!

"Turn that down, honey! Daddy can't hear his music!" he shouted, and then coughed. He coughed a lot because he would never stop smoking tobacco.

A fast song by Daddy's Rolling Stones blasted, "I can't get no satisfaction." Daddy listened to them all the time, probably because he liked the words, and this one was his favorite song. To me, it was boring to listen to. But, I danced to it sometimes with Mommy. She liked them too.

I grabbed the cup of water next to me, and turned to a new page of Mommy's painting book. Mommy said I painted well, like a fifth-grader. She always said that someday, I'd be a famous artist. I soaked the hairy tip of the brush so it looked like wet dog hair. I started with the color black. I wanted my painting to be at night, when I was scared the most after Mommy stopped tucking me in.

I painted a square with a black outline in the middle of the paper. There were a few puddles and a few gray parts, but it was still black. I poked a puddle with my pointer finger. It was cold like olive juice from a can. I rubbed it onto my blue jeans. I left the middle empty with the white paper so it could look like Mommy and Daddy's mattress. I switched to a skinnier brush for a minute so I could paint little pillows on top of it like the fluffy white ones on their bed. Then, with the fatter brush, I began to paint the black night inside the room. I only painted part of the picture black, like I'd paint a sky during the day. I didn't want to hide the entire painting. There weren't supposed to be any lights on, though.

I took the skinny brush and painted the shape of the shadow on the floor. It was the light coming through when I opened the door because I was scared and wanted Daddy. Mommy was on another business trip. I carefully painted a short girl with curly blonde hair, opening the door. The door was red, but I painted it black. Mommy thought the red was "out of character." That girl was me, except the yellow paint got mixed in with the black and turned a muddy-brown color, a little bit darker than sand. I wrote, "CHRISSY" next to myself.

And then came the horrible part; I had to draw the thing I didn't understand, but I knew was important. I couldn't let down my friend Ingrid. I touched the water with the skinny brush, held it there for a really long time, and watched as angry storm clouds sank into the water in circles, like the smoke from Daddy's minty cigarettes swirling around up into the atmosphere.

I dipped the skinny brush into the skin-color part of the water color box. As the brush moved toward the bed, it dripped a little skin-color juice onto the rest of the painting. The drops were like the watery cheese from Easy Mac that spilled on Daddy's Formica counters if Tommy mixed it too hard. I ignored the drops and began to paint again. I painted a circle, lying

down on the pillow, for the head of one of the people, and another circle on top of that for the second person. Then, slowly, I painted the person that was on the bed. It was a girl. I gave her bright blonde hair because I remembered how it glowed next to the moonlight shining through the open window. It was also very frizzy like the 80's Barbie's hair. The 80's Barbie was the ugliest and had clothes like a clown.

I drew her skinny legs all open and bent like an upside-down daddy long leg. I remember she sounded like she was dying, but I couldn't paint that sound. I just gave her a really ugly face instead, with green eyes and green lips. I didn't see her face in real life, though. It was too dark. I didn't put clothes on her because she wasn't wearing any. The brush started to get a little bit dry because I stopped painting for a while. I wanted time to concentrate. I made the man's body that was on top of the woman's; it was Daddy. I wrote "DADDY" above his head. This was my only painting I didn't understand.

I brought the painting up to my room and put it under my bed so it could dry in private. There were still black, olive juice puddles all over the nighttime part of it. I wasn't ready to give it to Daddy yet. After all, Daddy disliked all my paintings. I thought he might hate this one the most, though.

## 5: The Man with the Moustache

I actually never showed Ingrid or Daddy the painting. I painted a picture of our family holding hands instead. Daddy actually smiled, which made my stomach feel kind of funny, a *good* funny. I kept the painting I *really* didn't understand under my bed. I forgot, though, that Daddy vacuumed under there sometimes.

Miss Sharon didn't say much to me that day when she dropped me off. Looking at her face in the car mirror, her skin seemed paler than usual. Kelly sat in the front seat quietly, holding her coloring book, and made scratching noises with colored pencils. Miss Sharon's cell phone rang.

"Tommy? Tommy? Wait. I know; I know you..." she tried to say quietly. "She's with me. Please calm down. Shh. We're pulling up soon; come out."

When we pulled in, there was a giant, black car parked under the rusty basketball hoop that Tommy used when he wasn't listening to his metal. It had a green license plate with mountains on it. It was bigger than the one that took Mommy away. Tommy was waiting at the bottom of the driveway instead of Daddy; Tommy almost never waited for me. His headphones weren't on that day.

"Where's Daddy?" I asked Tommy.

"Inside," he said. He pretended Miss Sharon wasn't there when he spoke.

Then, I noticed that his face had red stripes down it, almost as red as the stripes on a candy cane, from tears. Miss Sharon held me close, as close as she held me the day I found Mommy and Daddy in the bathroom. She held me like this every day since the black taxi cab took Mommy away. Kelly hugged one of her legs and stared at Tommy's baggy pants and long wallet chain looping out of his pocket. She pulled a Kleenex out of her jacket pocket and handed it over to Tommy. "It's time, Tommy. Let's go inside," she whispered quietly.

"Why are you crying, Tommy?" I asked.

He said nothing.

Tommy never stood as close to me as he did then. His breath made white ribbons in the cold air, almost whiter than the smoke from Daddy's cigarettes. "Tommy? Whose car is that?" I asked.

"Shhh," he quieted me and took my hand tightly. Sharon still held onto me

"Miss Sharon, whose car is that?"

"You're going to meet the man who drives it soon. Just come with me, sweetheart. Keep holding my hand," she said.

The four of us, Tommy behind, walked down the long, flagstone sidewalk toward the front door. We followed the smell of fresh vanilla coffee in the kitchen. Tommy ran upstairs as soon as we came inside the house. Sitting at the table was Daddy with his head resting on his tangled arm-pillow. Ingrid was next to him rubbing his back with one hand and pouring coffee into small, green mugs with the other. At the far end of the table was a large man writing speedily on a clipboard. He was ordinary looking, neither skinny nor fat. He wore glasses that were too large for his face. They were so big, I thought his nose might have broken. His lips never turned upside down to smile; their top part was covered almost completely by his hairy moustache that stuck out too much.

"Kelly," Miss Sharon bent down to her. "Please go in the living room and watch some T.V. until Mommy's ready to bring you home. I have to talk to Chrissy about something, okay?"

I started to follow Kelly because I was already missing some of "Goof Troop." But then Miss Sharon grabbed my shoulders and turned me around to face the table.

"How do you do, Mr. Morrison?" Miss Sharon asked, facing the moustache man.

"Fine, thanks. And yourself?" he answered. He spoke slowly and quietly. His voice was all the same; there was no music to it. I couldn't even look at his eyes, only his moustache. It moved up when he said "fine," and out like a fish's mouth when he said "thanks." When it moved out, all the stripes of grey hairs stuck out straight from the skin like a porcupine turning old.

"As well as I can be. I'm Sharon, the one who called. I've been meaning to do so, but I always thought everything was under control until Tommy called me up late last night."

"Now it's time we tell her," the man said without any feeling in his voice.

"Chrissy, this is James. James Morrison. He came here to explain something to you. Don't be afraid, okay?"

Before I could answer, Daddy began to cry louder than he cried that time Mommy was going crazy in the bathroom. He made choking sounds like Mommy did that afternoon. Ingrid ran behind him and grabbed hold of his hands that were shaking like an earthquake.

Miss Sharon let go of me to help Daddy clean up the coffee he spilled with his shaking hands. I ran upstairs to find Tommy. He was in my bedroom, taking things out of my closet and stuffing them into suitcases.

"Tommy, what are you doing? What's the secret?"

"Just...Just sit, please."

Before I climbed on top of the bed so I could sit down, I lifted up the bed skirt to find my painting that was lying under there like a player in hide-and-seek. I hadn't checked in a week. It was gone. Daddy's vacuum had sucked it up.

"Tommy, it's gone!" I shouted.

"What's gone?" he asked.

"This picture I painted!"

"I....I....I know," Tommy said as he dropped one of my shirts onto the carpet floor. "Daddy, um...Daddy...Shh, nevermind."

I knew it.

We didn't say anything after that; we only cried.

Then, I started to lose control of myself like that poor earthworm I chopped in half on the flagstone sidewalk. I lie down on the bed and pounded it until my fists started to hurt, like when I tried to knead dough when Mommy used to make bread. But, it was more painful.

Someone knocked on the door loudly. We didn't move. I heard clumsy footsteps running up the stairs after the person who was knocking.

"Please!?!?" Daddy's congested voice yelled. "I know I, I know I -"

"With all due respect..." It was Mr. Morrison's voice; it was he who was knocking. "You have proven unfit under the circumstances. She knows, Robert, but what she doesn't know that your son does is your attempted..."



I plugged my eardrums with the soft tips of my pointer fingers.

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When the man with the moustache lifted me into the big, black car with the green license plate, I had to sit next to Tommy in the back. Now Mommy and Daddy were both sick on the inside. I didn't even know if Mommy was still sick, but she must have been very ill if she couldn't come home to help Daddy. Does everyone who's sick on the inside get taken away? I think I was getting sick on the inside, but not like Mommy or Daddy. I think I was sick because my painting kept talking to me. It still does. When it talks to me, I don't talk. It talks all the time.

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George and Jeannie make me that yellow Campbell's soup with stars and laugh at me when I pick out the slimy, pink chicken pieces. They let Tommy listen to metal without earphones. Ingrid still comes to visit me from time to time; I don't talk.

I'm five and a half.

## Parisian Traveler

Paris is a bear in slumber at a quarter-to-eight;  
 Even those ivory monuments are dreaming.  
 The only sound is the jingle-jingle of the crêpe vendor's cart  
 as he makes his little way up the curbed alleys and down to the promenade.  
 Morning smells of coconut yogurt here,  
 and tastes like the way an inviting park might appear  
 when it lands on your tongue in the form of a raindrop.  
 Wet. Splish splash splish drip drop. Moist.  
 Gustave Eiffel should see his creation now,  
 a spindle turning on the prettiest scratch of land beside the Seine.  
*"Little girl, parks cannot land on tongues in tiny raindrops."*  
 Heaven forbid I be a bit creative.  
 School children begin to flood the streets around nine,  
 plaid in pleated skirts that bunch around the kneecaps  
 and hide the ruffles of their lacey white socks.  
 Life here is far more beautiful than anything the Boonies ever had to offer  
 because the cow fields left no room for cafés and statues.  
 What's the use in green fields if you can't pose next to them during the flash of a camera?  
 They've got nothing stunning you can show your relatives weeks later with a grin.  
 The purple mountains' majesty is great and all but really, it's just no Louvré.  
 A blade of grass, a little dandelion, they make for terrible souvenirs.  
 Ten in the morning now and the dog-walkers are out,  
 little French poodles that wear sweaters and strut like models.  
 You'd be comfortable here—American music is all the rage;  
 can't even grab a café au lait without,  
*"3,500 miles away but what would you change if you could?"*  
 Everything we live we hear first in lyrics,  
 thus even in Paris I can't escape you.  
 I've still got the vicious bite marks of lust and force  
 strung all about my neck and check.  
 You can't erase something if you can't wipe yourself clean of it.  
 Passion just soaked right into our summer like a sponge.  
 You and me, we were about as PG as sin  
 and we have scrapes and jaded sneers that prove it.  
 Torn photo booth pictures and stories of obsessive loathing.  
 God how great it was to bring the dead back to life  
 and travel the globe every evening.  
 Kiddo took notes and bent pages in all the travel books  
 while you commented on the architecture.  
 She referenced restaurants and hotels in a little Mead notebook  
 just so she could retrace her steps.

Only this time she's doing it in the company of your ghost,  
which will then be held over a railing,  
its frame shaking under the dark Parisian streets,  
its belly thick with chardonnay and lobster.  
That'll be the end of it all, though that's not till tonight.  
It's only morning now and the crêpe vendor pushes on.  
Lately life's all about this crazy lil' notion I've got—  
if I keep on traveling, if I keep on moving, eventually I'll forget my way home.  
*"Tu est jolie avec les cheveux attachés à moi."*  
Without me around, you're good for a fling.  
Without you around, I'll do my own thing.  
France has asked to be my new landlord;  
Paris wishes that I pay rent with only my passion.  
And the parks open their gates and invite me in.

MOLLY MASICH

## Anonymous for obvious reasons

I've always been pro-choice, but I never thought it would be my choice to make. Now it's different, I've made the choice, it's been done. When it was over I saw them throw away my bloody disgrace in a plastic yellow picnic cup. I wanted to say wait, hold on, I want to touch it and measure its weight in my hands, smell it and dip one finger down to the bottom of the cup to feel for something that could be human and familiar. But I couldn't because the pain was so intense I couldn't even stand and I was vomiting uncontrollably anyway, but I wanted that little yellow cup. I wanted it so much, at least to say goodbye before I'd ever even said hello.

## Verisimilitude

"Verasimilitude...Verasimilitude....Nothing?" I pondered this unfortunate event for a few seconds and then wondered if maybe I should just give up this stupid pursuit and maybe play some video ga---NO! This shit was important! I've got to prove that fucker wrong! Okay okay okay, why would the website not recognize the word, think now think!...Well, he said the word, so it must be real, because he's got a PhD, which means he must be a little bit smarter than---"I spelled it wrong!" I exclaimed to the wall behind my computer. It didn't answer back, and I always took silence as a sign of agreement. It was probably just trying not to hurt my feelings, good of it really, I should be nicer to it and not let my roommate put Bon Jovi posters on it anymore.

"Let's see now...." I murmured as I delved into my orthographic quest, briefly wondering why I had used the word "let's" when there was clearly only one of me there but then of course all of my *being* was there so I could theoretically be using the plural in a metaphorical sense to represent the amalgamation of my whole---"Stop that!" I ordered, giving myself a firm smack in the temple, just to show...myself that...I...wasn't fucking around. My train of thought did stuff like that sometimes; my theory was that the hoboes had left their boxcars and overthrown the conductor, and no one had explained to them exactly the kind of relationship that trains and their tracks are supposed to have with one another.

Anyway, I wasn't going to let that bastard get away with this! And the online Oxford English Dictionary was my first tool in smashing down his smarmy intellectual gates and planting a flag of victory upon his crown!... It then occurred to me that perhaps one can watch a bit too much of the history channel. It also occurred to me that "smarmy" might not be an actual word, maybe I should look it up while I'm here---NO! NO! "Focus," I motivated myself, "Verisimilitude...wait! Ver-i! It's an I!" Now to see if I was correct (no pun intended). I entered the new spelling into its cozy little text box on the screen. Now for the defining moment of my day...well, one of the minor ones at least. I hit the "enter" button, ignoring my brain's attempt to get me to wonder why that button wasn't called "return" anymore. That question was for another day and another life crisis. "Success!" My fist shot into the air with enough speed that in a movie it would have been accompanied by a whip-crack sound effect. I didn't have a whip, neither did my roommate. That was a situation that would need to be remedied before the next time one of us needed a comic sound effect.

But that wasn't important! My first step was complete! The spelling was correct! It was a word! Now I was going to find out what this word actually meant. There it was, in front of me. Meaning, etymology, related words, textual references. As I looked over all this with the same intensity that one usually saves for an arm-wrestling match with a muscle-bound frat boy to determine who gets the love of the beautiful campus maiden...

because that happens a lot...and people still use the word "maiden" a lot...I reflected on what had led me to this sordid point in my life.

"You're papers are well-structured, but the points you try to make definitely seem to lack some verisimilitude." That's what he had said to me. That's what my *English professor* had said—to me! That wrinkled old bastard (well okay, he's not that wrinkled. But it wouldn't be insulting if I said something like: "That old bastard who apparently takes care of his skin!") had said *my* papers didn't have verisimilitude, saying the word in a smarmy know-it all way as if he thought that I didn't know what it meant...I didn't of course, but that's beside the point! I had marched out of that classroom offended but not knowing why, and I had marched out of there with a purpose, and now that purpose was filled...or fulfilled...or maybe both! In fact definitely maybe both! And as the meaning sunk itself into the folds of my brain I realized that he was *wrong*. He was *dead* wrong! So wrong that it required italics to express! "I've got you asshole! You're wrong!" I shouted to no one once again. Except that this time no one turned out to be someone, in fact it was *very* someone. My roommate had come back from... whatever the hell he does in the afternoon, to be welcomed into our room by my exclamatory...exclamation.

"Dude." He said like someone trying to explain to a friend why rancid Jell-O does not belong in his underwear drawer, "You've got to calm down. I don't know what happened, but all I know is that you've seriously got to stop dwelling on minor crap, because I *know* that's what this probably is. Calm down and realize where you actually are and what you're actually doing for once man."

"I can't calm down! Not with my verisimilitude at stake!" Fuck it, I knew what this word meant now and I was going to show it off! "This is personal! I need to show him, I need to show the whole world how verisim...atic. No, verisim-la-ton-ic...verisim-licious...Yes, that's it, how verisim-licious I am! I need to show them all what kind of character I have. I need to...I need...I need to go to the bathroom!"

And that's where I went!

A complete success! That's what my trip to the bathroom was. I'd give it, oh say, a nine out of ten...hell, maybe even a nine and a half out of ten, I was feeling generous now that I knew that I was going to take down that slimy louse of professor that thinks he's better than me just because he's accomplished more in his life and probably has a higher IQ. Hah, he thinks that I don't show verisimilitude? Yeah, well he doesn't show...not-suck...isimilitude...yeah!

I do admit that my almost perfect score at the toilet had calmed me down a bit and my brain was in the midst of the Herculean task of dragging me kicking and screaming back to my senses; but I wasn't going to let that bullshit stand in my way! No! I was on a mission! I was on an *epic* mission to go to the dining hall and get something to e---wait, no; there



was something else. Something I was going to do before that...think now, it was only two seconds ago that I was pissed about it...it had something to do with a professor, or maybe a lawyer, or a doctor...no wait, go back to professor...nothing? Okay, maybe we should try lawyer, hmmm, lawyers are rich, they say "your Honor" a lot, they---hold the phone! "Honor!" I was defending my honor! And not in the weird English way with the O-U-R at the end. English! The dictionary! My professor! My Verismility! That's it! It's all coming back to me now, and not in the stupid Celine Dione way either, it was in the real, non-French Canadian way!

"Dude, my stream of consciousness totally works!" I exclaimed as I turned into my room. Of all the things I could have said when I returned from the bathroom, apparently this was one of the things that no part of my roommate's brain had even considered beginning to make contingency plans for. He eyed me with a look of puzzlement reserved for people who have just been told that a carton of pancake batter had been elected president of Venezuela.

"..." He said. I didn't know ellipses could be spoken, but he managed it somehow. "That's...that's wonderful Mark." Was all he could manage in actual English. Apparently he then decided that pulling out an enormous textbook and doing some extraordinarily tedious homework reading was preferable to having any further conversation with me. I'm sure if suicide by glass shard hadn't been against his religion, that would have taken the place of homework at this point. It seems that he had resigned himself to the fact that, like every other time I had gotten into this mood, he was just going to have to wait it out until my burning passion for revenge manifested itself in me killing stuff on my Playstation and I became pacified enough to actually carry on some sort of normal human interaction. He hadn't even changed out of his gym shorts yet, as if he new that I was going to be tacking another workout onto what he'd already done that day just by making him be in the same room as me. I silently applauded him for this choice as it made for a delightful little metaphor.

"Look Sean, I know I've gotten like this a few times before." I addressed him from my computer chair, reflecting on the fact that if "Understatement of the Year" was an actual award then there would officially be too many award shows...oh, and that I probably would have won it for that last statement. "But this time, I've really been offended; this isn't like the time when that kid told me that my socks didn't match."

"That's not what he said Mark." Groaned Sean, planting his face into his open textbook, "I believe his exact words were 'Hey! You just rode your bike over my girlfriend's foot!' I don't think the word 'socks' ever really came up Mark! I think the words 'you're a dipshit' came up a little more frequently."

"Yeah, well he was thinking about my socks." I shot back with enough power that even I thought I had sort of justified it. "Those dipshit comments only compounded the matter. I bet that wasn't even his girlfriend either."

The way she was just hopping up and down in apparent pain like that. That's way too unappealing to attract any mate really. And anyway, like I said, this is *different*. I never got my revenge on that bastard. I had a plan too..."

"Whatever." He replied...which was really the only wise reply to ever use on me. Delving any deeper than that was just asking for a deep seeded desire to repeatedly slam your head into a desk. "I don't know what the hell you're pissed about this time; I don't care, and it doesn't matter because you'll just forget about it and move on in a few hours anyway. In fact, I bet those video games are just calling too you now..." He trailed off, again "interested" in his reading.

He was kind of right too...maybe if I just play for a little whi---No! I must plan. I must plan my victory over the falsities of that bourgeois faculty dog!...I don't actually like Marxism, but hey, fuck it. If his bullshit rhetoric can give me decent insults for people I hate then I'm game. Anyway, no was the time for action. I began to drum my fingers on my desk in the way that makes you wonder if the natives are attacking, and I had a brief moment when I truly felt sorry for Sean, my roommate. Because I knew that I was about as far from acting rational at that point as a biplane is to being to being a herring. But I'm not always like this. Most days I'm a sort of congenial guy, and I'm generally considered likeable by most people around me...I think. But of course for every couple of those days when I'm normal, there was one of these when he had to use all his will-power to not forget that battle-axing someone to death was illegal in our society. Yes, I often had moments when I felt bad for poor Sean for getting me as a roommate. But then I remembered that the roommate selection was random, and as such he had been stuck with me by chance. Therefore I didn't have to feel bad, because getting stuck with me meant that the universe probably hated him, and therefore I was really only like, forty percent to blame for him hating his life.

Now, how to show this professor who's boss...well, actually I don't really want to show him that I'm his boss, because being his boss would require me to do way more work than I'm really qualified for at this point in my life, I mean it would probably involve a lot of spreadsheets and board meetings and...AH HA! My mind exclaimed. It's amazing how cavernous the inside of your skull can sound when your thoughts start shouting like that. AH HA! A dramatic speech. That's the ticket. A well-planned dramatic speech with appropriate background music. That'll show him what's what...meaning I guess that it'd show him that the word "what" was in fact "what"...I guess...whatever that completely obvious point has to do with Verisimilitude. Anyway, I was proud of myself for coming up with this idea completely out of nowhere while thinking about something else. It's the kind of thing that Ben Franklin used to do, coming up with ideas in the bathtub and jumping up and screaming "Eureka!"...Of course Ben Franklin also contracted syphilis at least a couple of times so I probably shouldn't draw too much of a parallel there.

"I've got it!" I said out loud, more to the ceiling than anything else. As usual, the ceiling was more distant than the wall. "He has office hours in two hours, that's when I'll hit the bastard, that's when he'll get a face full of my verisimilitude...and maybe a face full of my sass too..." I began muttering as I opened up Word on my computer and started pounding away on the keyboard with an inspired furor that would make Joan of Arc blush...of course she was burned at the stake, so I'm pretty sure her cheeks were red by the end anyway...What? Too soon?

My roommate let out a mighty sigh from across the room. This was no ordinary exhalation of breath. This was a professional sigh. This was the sigh of a man who was used to audibly breathing his displeasure. But even that wasn't going to stop me now. No, nothing short of being smacked in the skull with a fist made of logic could put an end to my plans now...well maybe that or some *really* good ice cream.

What the hell happened? I was there. I stood right there in front of him, with my boombox, the CD of cheesy background music ready to go. I had it all prepared. I had written my entire speech in the two hours beforehand. I'd even given myself time to memorize most of it. I was there. I'd looked him in the face, ready to go ahead with the plan...but then...something occurred. It didn't go as planned, not at all. No, it had all backfired on me...What the hell happened?

I tried to give my little speech as planned (I forgot to turn on the music) but...somehow it just came out all wrong. I suppose I'd been a bit intimidated when I walked in there, what with all the thick volumes and professional looking books stacked up in the room. Plus the fluorescent light shimmering off the bald spot on his head had been quite impressive. I suppose that all blinded me to my purpose...what was my purpose again? That had all been lost to me as soon as I walked in there. "Pr...professor Horwitz." Is all I'd been able to gasp out at first. But then...well, it's not like I had forgotten my little speech. I remembered it all...eventually...and I guess I said it all, but it wasn't at all in the energetic, brave way that I'd intended. No, it was delivered with lots of stops and starts, and fragments of thoughts, and I had gone back to the word "um" so much that it could practically be considered my home country. So basically it was delivered in the style of a politician whose speechwriter has suddenly gone on strike.

I suppose you'd actually have had to have been there to truly understand the look he gave me when I had finished, but it was somewhere between "wow, there's something really interesting on my desk that requires the attention of both eyes and the vast majority of my medulla oblongata" and "I wonder how much damage I'll actually sustain if I just throw myself out this window right now..." In the end he took off his glasses, wiped them off, and invited me to sit down and actually chat with him. At that point I had to. Never underestimate the suggestive power of an old man taking off his glasses. At the end of our huge little talk about 15 minutes later, he asked me what the CD player was for. I told him "It's part of a...Latin...experiment...I'm doing...yes..."



The walk back to my dorm consisted of long, meandering thoughts that almost ran me face first into at least a couple of trees. The worst thing about it all was that...he was probably right. Everything he had told me about the papers I had written was more than likely right on the money. Maybe I really didn't show any verisimilitude in my writing. Maybe I wasn't being truthful at all. I had written those papers in a way that was meant to show my true slant on the issues, but maybe by being too personal and truthful, I had shown even less of what was really going on. Maybe I had made the papers ridiculous by putting my personal thoughts so literally into them. Maybe I had obscured the real meaning of what I was saying by incorporating far too much of my own silly thought pattern. Maybe by being too real I had ruined everything I had been trying to say. Eh, I suppose in the end he was right about it all. I had been defeated. My papers did, indeed, lack verisimilitude.

I sat in my bed thinking well into the night, my brain slowing down its pace with every moment. Sean had gone out somewhere while I was gone, and, despite his best efforts, he had eventually had to come back to his own room around midnight. I was lying down, pretending to be asleep by that point anyway. I heard Sean get into bed, pulling back the blankets tentatively, as if he expected to be interrupted at any second. Then there was the sound of him lying down, getting the comforter over him. I didn't know that the simple act of covering oneself in blankets could carry emotions, but this one certainly seemed relieved. It seemed Sean thought he was getting to sleep without any further incident, and I just simply couldn't have any of that nonsense.

"Well," I announced to the air molecules around me "at least I learned a new six syllable word today. That ought to make my brain-penis that much more impressive than everyone else's." Sean then groaned the groan of a man who has suffered from ultimate disappointment. At last, I knew my day was done.

## Rain

Torrential rains flooded the streets as I slammed yellow cab door. Walked away. Fragments of raindrops shattered onto the concrete. The resounding echo was something like a shotgun blast. Streams pooled into ponds. Which lead to creeks. Lakes. Rivers and oceans.

It takes a man minutes to drown, how long does it take an ant?

The ground trembled as the cab taxied its way down the avenue. Weeds grew in the cracks along the sidewalk. A man begged on a stoop. The doorman shooed him away. On the third floor a woman called out to Henry, and Henry kept walking.

Footsteps were quiet. The ground absorbed them, drowned them out with a cacophonous rain. I reached into a pocket and grasped a coin. Rolled it on my fingers. Felt the ridges sliding against the ghostly layer of skin. Steam poured out of a conduit. A bird wrestled with the air overhead.

In a corner of an apartment window there sat a sunflower. It lay wilting in the gloom. It swept around me. Wrestled with my hair. Behind the marble walls and shining smiles there lay deception.

She had peach eyes. She was somewhere overhead. She was flaying into some guy. Screaming his name. She was curled in his arms. Her cigarette was out. She poured a drink. Vodka. On the rocks. She grimaced as it coursed its way down her throat.

I clenched the coin tight. Wanted to break every one of my fingers. And in the silence I would scream. Everyone might turn. And look. And wonder what the hell my problem was. And keep on going with their lives.

The coin could be a bottlecap. And it would slice into my knuckles without shame.

I could see her everywhere. Not only in the window. Where she stood, naked, touching herself, feeling. She was the businessmen marching forward, their mouths slightly agape. Briefcases in hand. Their heads down. Shoulders thrown up and out. She was the children playing in the puddles. She was a flower reaching towards the hidden sun. She was the women, carrying their umbrellas in their hands. With pink dresses on and pink lipstick.

She was a brief whisper in the wind that danced around my legs. She was the sound of a million feet slouching through the rain-soaked streets. She was lightning cracking across the sky. And the Muslim prayers emanating from a cab. She was everywhere.

She was in the lighter in my pockets. The hands that felt cold metal and flak. She was in the cigarettes and coupons. Chapstick and keys. Dollar bills and pens. She was in the barrel of the gun. I put it to my mouth and pulled the trigger. And in the ensuing carnage, no one diverted their course. They were too busy with their own worries and thoughts in their heads. It occurred to me then, that I would have done the same.

## Mascara Tears

Mascara tears of eighteen years,  
Blear this graceless face.

Cardinal corners of the earth,  
And I behold no space.

Boundless like horizon,  
Yet stricter than is known.

Existing but not living,  
Form and standard pose.

There is no black or white,  
Though ten thousand shades of grey.

No sunrise over mountains,  
To start a brand new day--

Simply constant like the ocean,  
We float until we break.

All so individual,  
And each is just as fake.

Another wasted page,  
And so they call it art.

The purest things we know,  
Are deep within our hearts.

We all jump off the deep end,  
And maybe some will swim,

Or float against the  
Breaking waves and let them suck us in.

No matter what the method,  
We all stand in this mass.

Trapped inside our longings,  
And each is just as vast,

Still I need you to see me.  
I know a daunting task.

Dissolve away my sugar  
And tear this melted mask.

Throw it in the ocean and  
We'll stand east of the bay,

And kiss away our solitude  
If not just for today.

We'll find that bright tomorrow,  
Gauge the distance to run, and,

Fall on our knees gasping  
Before the rising sun.

We'll stumble in the darkness,  
Probing like the blind.

We only seem to grasp  
What we seek to find.

While some find what  
They seek, others just make due.

I'll only chase tomorrow  
At the heels of you.

We'll run until we fall  
Or fail or stop or break,

Cause even if we're trying,  
We can't be half as fake.

I'll let the sunshine burn me  
And dry mascara tears.

I'll chase you forever,  
For years and years and years.

You bring this life to me,  
The greatest gift of all.

You let me fly at the sun  
And catch me as I fall.

And all I'll ever ask of you  
Is catch me as I fall...

## Your Eyes

Again they looked  
With pity in their eyes,  
And crafted ways to save her  
In the corners of their minds.

Each as valiant as the next,  
Thoughts of forward motion,  
Instead they stared in front of them,  
And not a word was spoken.

And she was  
The worst of all.  
Contemplating the most recent fall,  
And analyzing all she knows from somewhere deep in space.

Trying to escape  
This place, without  
A trace of movement, and no  
Respect for grace.

And it's not  
For the attention – the million  
Salty tears; she'll cry them in her room alone,  
She has for many years...

But this is what they have to learn,  
How hard it is to hide  
She can wear a smile,  
But they'll know that it's a lie.

She's not looking  
For your pity.

She's not looking  
For your tears,

She's not sure  
What she needs,  
It's not completely clear.

All it takes  
Is time  
[I think]  
It starts where it began.  
Maybe we can learn from this...

I HOPE TO GOD WE CAN



## Dental Care

If you wanted to, you could practically taste the paint chippings that lay, scattered like sprinkles, across the white carpeting. Not that you'd want to. Neon blue walls and ashen flooring—it really made for an ugly scene, and it didn't make much sense; white carpeting alone didn't make much sense. Subway smog, dirt and grit, city-schlam—it was all going to be on display on our newly-garlanded apartment flooring.

The entire apartment is lit up—a half dozen lamps are turned on with their shades off to emit the most powerful radiance. The room probably looks like prison grounds from down on the New York night streets, all lit up like we're watching for escapees, and I tell him this. He laughs and I laugh. We laugh together.

I step into the hall and buy us two vending-machine Cokes with the two crumpled bills I have leftover from subway fare. I slide back into the room, inhale the toxic fumes, choke a bit, cough a bit, crack a window a bit and hand him one. Opening one for myself, practically a power pack in an aluminum cartridge, I ask him again why he had previously argued so intensely for this white carpeting, and would he have if he knew it would look like this? He doesn't really speak, just mumbles, just keeps on rolling his paint roller that way he does, and I put down the soda and walk back over to the door. My suitcases are there; they're brown and tan and army-green, camouflaged if only we were in the woods, and I haul them into our bedroom. It's the first room we'll live in together, and the last place I feel like being.

I hear the lights tinker off in the room next door and he stumbles in with that smug little grin on his face. He seats himself on the new sheets that cover the bed (our bed)—looking rugged the way he does—in the corner of the room, and he rubs the little spot to the right of his fanny; I sit down next to him and he breathes in deep, saying to me, "I thought this is what you wanted."

An apartment in New York City where we could both live together, as boyfriend and girlfriend, as fiancés, as aspiring writers, as the best of friends—isn't this what I wanted? And not just New York City, but Greenwich Village; it's a place where writers like us can hatch from young-adult eggs to fulltime-adult beasts. We could grow like that together.

There's not much else to say except the truth, here; no real opportunity for stellar lines or speeches of amplitude. I lean against his broad shoulders, slimming in his cut T-Shirt, and I inhale deeply. It's getting dark out; you can see for miles with our window-view. Miles of lights and miles of buildings and miles of people sitting on their beds who are all looking out at the miles, too.

I chose not to speak, and after our microwaved TV-dinners of mashed potatoes and fish fillets (which tasted more of their containers than food) bedtime soon follows.

The morning comes as if nighttime never did. With morning comes the honking of horns, the smell of gasoline and coffee, of grits and bacon from the small honky diner below our apartment, the scent of morning feeling. A million men stand with a million half-folded newspapers, waiting there below us for a million yellow taxicabs to stop, halt and cease so that they may all cross. Here stand a million reasons why I still don't feel comfortable in this new environment.

I stand up as he begins to stir, leaving him behind like a diminutive puppy at a pound. I can practically hear a pouch's whimper. I stroll into our undersized bathroom—so tiny I feel like I'm in a cubicle—and I let my fingers swipe across the jet-black countertops. See the flaked gold embedded in the stone, feel the cold tile beneath my feet.

It is what I want. I turn to look at the still half-asleep him. I see the entire room—it's so trendy and hip. The \$198.00 sofa cushions from IKEA, the \$255.00 denim window shades, the \$561.00 recliner with automatic inflating for the best air cushioning around. My eyes hit the pewter teacups my mother had given me; I feel bad for them because they sit on the desk, perfect pariahs in this innovative apartment. They sit *there* because I have no idea where else to put them—the countertop and drawers won't be delivered for another weekend—and my mom has already given them to me. You can't just turn something like that down. It's sentimental; it's a tradition. You know?

"It is what I want." I say, and his eyes dart open within a moment's lapse. He kicks at the covers a bit and they slide in a space between his arms. He says he is glad; he reminds me he loves me. He asks if I can put the coffee pot on.

I do. I sit at the small barstool next to the plastic patio table that's currently our makeshift dinner table—until the new one we ordered comes in, that is. For some reason or another, and I can't put my finger on what it is, it doesn't feel the way it should feel. I eat a piece of toast. The way I expected it to feel. I sip some orange juice. Or the way I wanted it to feel. Feeling physically full but mentally empty, I head for the shower.

All I can think as my cold toes hit the new, green blocked tile is how I wish that, rather than dirt, showers were capable of washing away feelings. What a great ability that would be.

As I soap up, I can hardly help noticing that the water feels distinctively differently than the water I'm used to showering in. There's a difference between city water and the well water I had grown accustomed to back on the small private estate my parents owned. This water felt heavy, leaden; it felt pretty rough. Something just didn't feel right, but for the love of God, *what?*

I step out. Fumble for a towel. It's so rough against my skin; I make note that I need to pick up a new one at one of the stores downtown. My eyes hit the countertop of the sink. I see the toothpaste---not yet opened and thus not yet a mess. I see the mirror---not yet really used and thus not yet smudged. I see one single toothbrush. I step out into our room, over to our bed, I kiss

his cheek. I whisper in his ear, I say a little something to him, I promise him that I'll be right back. The small key lies there, metallic-chromosomed, on the mantle and I scoop for it with an open hand. With my other hand I reach for the knob. Copper chromosomed. And I head down *our* hall, down *the* hall, down the elevator, down 5<sup>th</sup> and Main.

The door of the small pharmacy I enter next makes a jingling sound when I open it; the bells tinkle and it almost feels as if it is Christmas time. But it's a mild mid-April and we're far past Christmas at this point. The entire mart smells of medicine and old men, and I have a hard time making out much of a difference. They both reek.

There it is. Hidden (like those camouflaged bags I was talking about earlier) behind a rack of lunch coolers. A bird in a park, I peck at one and examine it with beady eyes. A light teal color, with a head that moves to accustom cannels and corners. Its got a finger-grip for the perfect hold, that perfect feel (precision!), and the packaging makes it look like one sweet little product. It costs \$1.27—the price of a small coffee on the corner of Madison Avenue—and I pay for it in the quarters I have left over from the vending machine's soda.

I head back up to the apartment; the small brown bag in my hand, it feels so light. And it feels so golden, so healing, and I pour two mugs of coffee. I step into our bathroom. He's half-dressed by now, pulling on a pair of jeans with his eyes fixated on the painting that hangs on our wall. It's a funky, contemporary piece done by our mutual favorite artist, Roy Lichtenstein. Brilliant reds, yellows, blues; it is a plethora of superiority and a showcase of color's splendid beauty. He breaks the staring-contest with the painting and glances over; he asks what I've got in that there bag.

I remove the item and tear the packaging away from it, setting it down on the countertop. One medium-sized Johnson&Johnson toothbrush.

Stepping over next to me, he asks what the difference is between kissing him and sharing a toothbrush.

I tell him I'd never kiss him first thing in the morning. I hand him his coffee.

He looks at me as if I'm kidding, as if I'm joking, and I haven't felt this comfortable in days. The paint chippings smell like freedom, and now I rather like the white carpeting in the morning's light.

## Alzheimer's

He moved in with us when I was ten. I remember helping my father carry his luggage in from the car, the cold October air pressingly sharp against my young little cheeks. At one point, with the last suitcase poking out from the trunk, my father pulled me aside.

"It's going to take some time for us to get used to things," he told me, only he said it like it was a warning, as if I should be prepared.

I didn't know what my father meant at the time, but I realized it the second I held my first conversation with him.

He couldn't remember who I was.

At the time, I had been really into Challenge 24 cards. That first night, I distinctly remember looking up from my purple and yellow cards to see his figure standing in my doorway. His expression was blank; his eyes honed in on the cards.

"You're supposed to find a way to make the numbers sum to twenty-four," I explained, hoping he might join me. Maybe he'd be a challenge. I had all but mastered the game and was eager to advance; my brothers were so sick of losing that they refused to play with me any longer. "You can multiply, add, subtract or divide the numbers, see?" I explained. "You just have to figure out how to make them equal twenty-four."

He looked at me for a long time without blinking. A minute later, he asked me how to play.

I spent the latter half of that night at my mother's bedside, crying and pleading with her. I didn't understand.

Since then, it's only gotten worse.

He lives in a room up in the attic, right above my bedside. At first he would wander the house late at night, mumbling about fruits and all of the different colors he saw. He'd announce an object's shape or texture, as if by defining everything he saw he would remember it. He never did. Red cold plate. Green soft carpet. I must have heard him say, "Hard gray television," at least four times in a single evening.

Eventually his late-night wanderings stopped. My mother worried that he may be a threat to the overall calamity of the nighttime house; she wasn't sleeping peacefully anymore, she'd say.

They installed a lock on his door at some point the following week. After that he wouldn't leave the room; he'd just pace back and forth on those old, creaking wooden planks. He'd jingle the doorknob and wait for a good hour or so before climbing into his bed in defeat, and then the cycle would repeat.



I would lie still in bed and listen to his cries.

But perhaps the worst thing about it was that he could never remember where his wife—my grandmother—was. She had died several months before he moved in with us, before his Alzheimer's got really bad. She had died before, back when he knew my name, back when he could still remember what he had done with his day.

"Do you know where Margaret is?" He'd always ask in the same sad tone, his eyes wet and curious.

The first time he asked, I didn't know what to say. I was so surprised, so saddened that he couldn't even remember that his own wife had died. Standing that miserably, rainy July day in a thick black tuxedo, he had cried so hard. When they lowered her casket into the ground, he fell to his knees on the ground, visibly shaking.

I had never seen my grandfather cry.

Whenever he'd pull me aside to ask, his eyes seemed so haunting and empty. They'd flicker about the room, scanning the couch and the recliner for her feminine, baby powder-scented presence.

Eventually, on advice from my father, I would just lie to him.

"She's in the other room," I'd say, "don't you remember, pop? She's cooking you a grilled cheese sandwich, just like you asked."

And then his face would light up in the same beautiful way, and he'd smile, nodding, saying to himself, "Oh yes, that's right, that's right."

He just seemed so much happier that way.

# Capisci?

—1—

I remember watching, in the dim, fluorescent glow of the kitchen light, my mother's heavy hands kneading. This was what Mamma did every Sunday afternoon: kneaded out her worries. Took out her nostalgia and aggression on the glob-like gluten formation, soon-to-be hard-crust bread. Kneading was like pottery to her. An art form that took those worries and baked them into a kiln. Temporarily vanished within the absorbency of the bread dough. Temporarily vanished under the holy vigilance of the Madonna statue adorning the corner of the plastic-covered table she labored upon. I was ten, and even after sitting in the kitchen every Sunday of my life, the near-violent love she put into perfecting the dough never ceased to amaze me.

Clutch. Fold. Wrap. Roll.

Turn.

Slam.

Pound. Sprinkle.

Knead.

Sometimes, she would speak to the dough, but her hands always spoke for her. Like the rest of her, they were plump and rotund. Their olive complexion was a dark contrast with the pasty whiteness of the dough. She hated her hands. Loved them only because of the dough. They were more massive than my father's and he would make fun of them because her fingers were so swollen. They were not unlike those pork links Sam the butcher, also a close family friend and my parents' saving grace, sold to us for half-price at the Grand Union. Sam had come to America a few years before we did. Things were cheaper in the late 1960's, even in New Canaan, Connecticut, but cheap was still expensive for the six of us. Five pork sausage links on one hand. Priceless. Priceless and powerful.

It had been ten years now, and my mother still hadn't removed the ring. Skin popped up in fleshy valleys around the metal encircling it. But the diamond in her wedding ring remained intact, despite its frequent passionate mingling with the dough. She refused to have it removed. Refused a lot of things.

"Figlio della puttana!" *Son of a bitch.* My mother's thunderous cursing reverberated through the kitchen and the shockwave of its sound bounced from wall to wall of shoddy, off-white sheetrock onto the brown, linoleum tile floor. She stared, wide-eyed and ominously into the bag of Pillsbury All-Purpose Flour as she reached for another handful to coat the ball of dough. Glistening droplets of perspiration birthed from her forehead, and two or three of them drizzled into the flour bag. My father used to joke that Mamma's sweat made the bread so moist that it didn't need olive oil for dipping. But something was wrong.

"Quegli americani pigri!" *Those lazy Americans.*

I stuck my head into the flour bag, careful not to breathe it in like I did that one time. I had had a coughing fit for the next fifteen minutes, and Mamma had tried to exorcise it out of me by holding me upside down and pouring water down my nose. I saw nothing there except miniscule, brown dots I thought were part of the wheat.

"Andate più vicino." *Go closer.* Still nothing.

"Con le mani, Maria!" *With your hands, Maria.* Maria, all pure and holy. I slowly submerged my hands into whatever impurities were lurching in the American flour.

"Guardate." *Watch.*

I observed in wonder the flour, in mountain-like heaps upon my palms. The brown dots were not wheat grains at all. They were alive. Crawling. Jumping. Winged things buried in the powdery, white blanket of flour like an army of ants harboring from the rain. I released the infested flour onto the plastic tabletop, and the flour flies leapt in a state of panic from the impact of the half-foot fall that must have been stories to them.

"Basta!" *Enough.* She slapped the backs of my hands with hers, and lumps of elastic dough clutched onto my knuckles. I should have thrown the flour outside behind the Japanese barberry bush.

In broken English, Mamma scolded, "Bad gal! Take the bread outside and give to dog! No gonna cook. Maledizione! *Bread damned to hell.* Stupid American flour..."

"Mamma," I interjected and shook my head in disagreement. "The dog'll choke. It's no one's fault. It wasn't the Amer-"

"State zitta, ragazza!" *Be quiet, girl.* "Throw outside-a now!" she demanded relentlessly.

I clutched the heavy ball of dough and cradled it tight to my chest like a newborn. The gluten adhered to my oversized, red cotton hand-me-down tee. I opened the rusty screen door and carried it outside toward Massimo's barb-wire den. The dog barked and roared. He salivated voraciously as if being offered a plentiful hunk of meat. Massimo was my father's ugly, putrid, unfriendly hunting beagle. He only acknowledged me in the presence of food.

Mamma Anna glared at me from inside the kitchen window as if I were about to deliberately disobey her. The brown irises of her almond-shaped eyes speckled with a kind of sadness and longing for the could-have-been bread. But it wasn't just the bread.

As I pulled the dough off my shirt, it made a tearing sound, like lined paper being de-perforated from a spiral notebook, only less sharp. The shirt was okay. I reluctantly tossed the ball of dough into Massimo's lair. He scavenged after it, but immediately lost interest upon olfactory instinct. It

wasn't meat. Rather, my mother's Italian bread damned to hell because Americans didn't exercise enough care in manufacturing their wheat products.

—2—

"Why are you carrying that?" Antonia, one of my sisters, asked on our daily morning walk to East Elementary School. She pointed to a half-sheet of paper with type-written print.

I held it closer to her face and grasped it tightly so the November wind wouldn't swirl it away, leaving it to be forgotten in the tornado of fallen, autumn leaves.

"Museum of Natural History..." she began to read, chestnut-brown eyes squinting in the near-direct intensity of the morning sun, shaded by wispy strands of straight, brown hair. "Oh, wait. I thought -"

Toni was a year and a half my junior, but her astronomical IQ results placed her with me in the fourth grade. But, being the oldest, I was expected to use my brains to benefit the rest of the family. I was Mamma and Papà's accountant, interpreter, their babysitter.

"I'm not going; you already know." I interrupted. I said no more.

"Yeah, Papà would have killed her if she said 'yes...'"

Toni's voice droned with the wafting whistle of the wind, and the next thing I knew, I found myself sitting at my usual front-row-center desk inside Mrs. Mooney's fourth grade classroom. It was Wednesday, the day to hand in the permission slip. The last day. I tried.

I pulled a dully-sharpened number two pencil from the front zipper of my tacky-pink book bag and placed it in the special pencil alcove carved into the right-hand corner of the wooden desktop. I had forgotten to print my name on the blank line of the permission slip right in front of me: I hereby do/do not give permission for my child, \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in the day trip to New York City's Museum of Natural History on Monday, November 14. I have/have not enclosed the required \$15.00.

Parent Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

*\*Please contact Principal Boyle, 203-966-9463 if you wish for your child to attend, but cannot afford the payment at this time. All financial concerns will be kept in the strictest confidence.\**

No. I was the "No" and the Parent Signature was "No." Mamma didn't know how to write anything in English but, "hi," "yes," and "no." She had clumsily scribbled the first "No" in blotchy, red ink and Papà the second in green.

"Penelope Anderson!"



Mrs. Mooney called in her stern, authoritative voice. It was even sterner and more authoritative when she called roll.

"Present, Mrs. Mooney."

"Margaret Brooks!"

"Here."

"Present!" she corrected Maggie as usual.

"Pre-pre-present, Mrs. Mooney." Maggie stuttered.

My classmates trudged up to the front, one by one, and handed in their permission slips, paper-clipped to small envelopes plentifully stuffed with cash.

I was the last. R.

"Maria Recchia!" No.

"No!" I declared modestly in my muffled, mousy voice. Talking in class was dreadful, more dreadful than sitting in the front-row center spotlight of Mrs. Mooney. I still rolled my R's, even after two years. I still did it.

"Excuse me?" she snapped, clearly infuriated with me for the lack of respect she thought I had shown her.

"I said...prresent," I blurted, dumbfounded.

"No, you did not say 'pResent.'" She emphasized, with what seemed to be ten octaves higher, the soft pronunciation of the "r." "You do *not* answer back to a teacher like that, not in this classroom!"

"I-"

"Silence!" Mrs. Mooney interrupted my fallen attempt to defend myself.

The class broke into roaring laughter, and she raised her hand to restore her beloved silence.

"Now, please correct yourself and come up here and hand me your permission slip."

"Prrresent, Mrs. Mooney," I meticulously articulated. She rolled her eyes and sighed as I rolled my "r" and attempted to breathe.

My spastic palms began to moisten with warm perspiration as I clutched the off-white half-sheet with both hands. Their tremor sent the red and green ink-scribbled "no's" into a dancing frenzy. It became increasingly difficult to maintain my composure with every step closer to Mrs. Mooney's desk I just barely towered over. My feet and underarms too began to perspire and nearly freeze with the frigid draft circulating through the classroom's open window. I inched as close to her as I could until the scrutiny in her bold, blue eyes and the intimidating, robust frame of her tall body expunged any courage from me.

"Hmm..." she sounded, examining in perplexity the permission slip she seized from my hands. "No, and...no? You *do* realize you're the only one unable to participate. But, it looks like you didn't even show this to your parents. Care to explain this?" There was a subtle attempt in her mannish voice to keep the conversation between just the two of us. She just wasn't careful enough. Everyone heard; she had a way of doing that. Humiliating you. Humiliating *me*.

"I - I, I didn't wr-wr-write that," I unsuccessfully verified.

"Then who else *would*?" she questioned.

"I - I didn't. It wasn't me. My mother and father...they said..." My heart palpitated rapidly as I choked back my public humiliation. "*No*. Both of them. They said no. They can't -"

"Sit down, please, Ms. Recchia," she silenced me and pointed to my desk.

I sat myself down on the harsh solidness of the desk chair. Under the belittling, laughing gazes of Davy to my left and Frances to my right, I felt more insignificant than ever. With my chin against my chest, long chestnut hair cascaded down like a frozen waterfall over the skin of my face, and I felt heat. I crossed both arms and cocooned my body within my oversized winter coat. I sank further into the seat until my head barely peered over the rim of the desk. In that moment, I let myself become swallowed by the tattered coat that fit me like a parachute. I kept my head bowed and starred down shamefully at the puffiness of my coat.

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Mamma had originally said "no" because she had always refused to give consent without Papà. Over dinner the night before the slip was due, Papà's cheeks and forehead turned from a healthy olive color to a meaty, luminescent red at the mere mentioning of the field trip. Silence permeated the dinner table. Not even the Madonna had anything hopeful to offer. Mamma, Emilio, Toni, and even three-year-old Clara stopped chewing and looked down at their plates.

"Non hai bisogno di andare. *You don't need to go. Troppi soldi per quel museo dove non c'è niente importante!*" *Too much money for that museum where there's nothing important!*

"Papà, I --, look --" I ambitiously shoved the permission slip into his sight while dropping onto my lap the anchovy and oil-coated fork that twirled the linguine.

He shook his head and silenced me, "*Chiudate la bocca!*" *Shut your mouth.*

This was one of the only times I dared to disobey my father:

"No! Papà, you didn't read the second part. *Leggete questo. Read this. La seconda parte!* It says we can borrow --"

Lash.

My father loved me, but he also loved to discipline me. In this case, my disobedient back-talking deserved a whiplash from Papà's belt. Papa purposely bought pants that fit him tightly around the waist so he wouldn't have to weave the belt through the loopholes. He only buckled it; that way, it was readily accessible for disciplinary threatening.

It struck my waist for the first time in my life. It stung, stung numbly even through my cotton shirt.

"This family not borrow money. Never! We not beggars. We here to work, not take free money to have fun. That embarrassing! Some day, you go; not now! And non dimenticate, *don't forget*, you do bills Monday," he exclaimed, plopping another tong full of anchovy linguine onto my plate. Those were Papà's last words that night.

Anchovy linguine – his favorite. He expressed his love to me in the strangest of ways, even if he made me calculate the bills and balance my parents' checkbook because he was convinced numbers in Italian and English were different.

Mamma chimed in, "Ascoltate tuo padre, capisci?" *Listen to your father, understand?*

Though Mamma tried to mask it, there was a glimmer of resistance in her eyes as she spoke.

I silenced myself, but I still wanted to go. Wanted to see the Lucy exhibit I wrote my first science project on. Wanted to see her there ever since.

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"Nice coat, Marria," bucktoothed Davy mocked.

Frances, his accomplice in ridicule, laughed along with him. "Don't get lost in that, now." I ignored them, but my heart beat much faster. And that day, I neither participated in the Pledge of Allegiance nor sang along to "My Country 'Tis of The."

—3—

Maria Anna Recchia. Maria Anna...ear? *It's true*, I thought, as I pulled my long, scraggly hair behind the creases of my ears. Recchia: ear. A feminized version of the word with the beginning "O" chopped off. I was all ears. Ears made to listen, obey. They made the rest of me look small in comparison. I studied myself in the fingerprint-clouded mirror of the hallway bathroom. I had escaped from the blandness of my brown-bag lunch into the bathroom where I allowed myself to think. Think of anything but the scathing glares I received from my classmates when they saw me bite into triple-decker peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Sandwiches on hard-crust Italian bread Mamma packed me because I'd have starved with just flimsy Wonderbread.

They were too big- my ears, my coat. Ears handed down to me genetically through Mamma, coat handed down to me by Good Will. My father

scarcely accepted hand-me-downs from Good Will; it made us look lazy, poor, foolish, shameful, he would say. I had begged him for a coat, though. Mamma had taken my side even though it was hard for her to part with my old, white one. The coat was a Christmas gift from my late Zia Loreta, *Aunt Loreta*. Loreta had held me close that Christmas when we were still together there. So close. I had felt her bony, sickly embrace penetrate through the coat's stuffing. I had grown out of it by the time I turned eight.

The pink puffiness of the thickly-insulated winter coat left only my neck, head, lower calves, and ankles exposed. It adorned my less-than-four-foot frame like a man's bathrobe would. The pocket seams were coming undone, pink stitching unraveling down to nothing but fine remnants of thread. Moths had eaten away at the right elbow, leaving a vacuous circle where the fabric would have been. The zipper had broken when I first tried it on. There were no remaining buttons. I used the strength of my arm muscles to wrap the coat around me.

I hated it. The coat, a hand-me-down. The evidence of its secondary nature was the cursive stitching of "Nancy" on the left pocket. It was clearly not my own. Mamma and Papà said the coat suited me just fine, but no one else seemed to be able to contain their laughter.

My hands, encased in the cushiony tunnel, had no need for gloves. Studying my scrawny mirror-body hidden within the obesity of the coat, I resembled an uncooked, fatty sausage link. Maria Anna Recchia: a sausage with Dumbo ears, scraggly hair, and tired, raccoon eyes. Poorly dressed. Poor in Italia. Poor in America. Poor.

For the first time that I could remember, I actually cried for myself.

—4—

From the walk home that day with Toni, I remembered almost nothing. Nothing – a striking resemblance to what I felt I had become. The walk was a moment frozen in time. I remember freezing – freezing even through the thick, tattered coat that had always kept me so well-insulated.

The one thing I remember was that halfway through the walk, I told Toni I wanted to be alone. We parted paths and I began to walk toward the center of town. New Canaan's most redeeming quality was that everything was close-by. I decided to take the back roads toward Main Street; I was born with a good sense of direction.

Within ten minutes, I arrived at the Grand Union. I figured I'd seek shelter from the November wind in there and visit Sam in the meat department. Sam was in the back shoveling processed, mutilated carcasses of soon-to-be meat onto the large, metal scales. He caught my eye for an instant, removed his blood-stained gloves, and approached me.

Leaning over the high meat counter, he said in perfect English, "Hey, how's it going?"



I waved, nodded my head, and shrugged.

"I stopped in today while you were at school and talked to your Mamma and Papà. It's been a while."

"Really?" I replied. "What about?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out, troublemaker!"

He clutched hold of a sausage link and aimed it at me playfully.

"I bet it's Papà that told you I was a troublemaker," I retorted, refusing to humor him.

He began to hum a tune as he chucked the sausage link over his head. He chuckled when it hit the ceiling.

"Oops," he shrugged. "No, your parents don't think you're a troublemaker, okay? Besides, I said only good things to them about you! When do they ever not listen to Sam the man, eh?"

"What?" I asked in perplexity.

"Niente." *Nothing*. We started at each other for a few empty seconds and then he gave me an odd wink. Even though I suspected he was up to something and was mildly curious about it, it was time for me to walk home.

"Arrivederci, Sam."

—5—

The pungent, garlicky stench of the kitchen wafted at my face as I opened the screen door to no one. Papà must have been on call at Waveny Care Center; Mamma was raking the dry, fallen leaves outside with Toni by Massimo's fence. She had already prepared dinner for the evening: pan-cooked rabbit legs with fried, red peppers and onions. Papà bred, stabbed, and skinned our poor rabbits. I had dry-heaved the time I walked into a skinning scene downstairs when I was hanging Mamma's dress to dry. Papà's gloved hands were a glistening scarlet crimson, fingers bejeweled with stringy rabbit entrails as he penetrated the knife deeper into the meat. *La carne del coniglio. Rabbit meat*. It repulsed me. My eyes welled up with tears from the overpowering scent of pan-fried onions and garlic.

I thought I was just crying onion tears, but I couldn't stop. Even in the solitude of my own family kitchen, I felt overshadowed under the scrutiny of Mrs. Mooney and sneering of Davy and Frances. Most of all, I felt the need to shield myself from Papà's leather belt and Mamma's slapping, dough-covered hands.

I made my way to the pantry cupboard and pulled open the folding, wooden door until the gold-medaled white bag gazed at me directly in the eye. Pillsbury. It was brand new. I grasped it and fell while doing so, bottom against wooden floor. With both thumb and index fingers, I vigorously

ripped open the creased top of the bag. Mounds of powdery whiteness ejected onto the hand-me-down, "Nancy" coat I was still wearing.

I stood up and raised the bag of flour high in my right hand. I stepped back into the middle of the kitchen floor and began to spin around. I let my left hand loose. I didn't care that it hit the rim of the kitchen table after each revolution. Gradually, I tilted the Pillsbury bag. A spiraling, dusty corkscrew of white released itself, falling rapidly like an avalanche onto every part of the kitchen. Flour coated the plastic-covered table, the holy Madonna at its corner, the oily rabbit meat and peppers left to languish in the skillet, the linoleum floor, and even part of the kitchen sink. The entire kitchen was a winter wonderland of wheat when the dust finally settled.

"I'm American too! Does that make *me* lazy?" I apostrophized.

As I began to run toward the bedroom I shared with Toni, I was jolted forward by the slippery grains of flour under my feet. I fell onto my chest; the coat's insulation hadn't saved me since the middle was not zipped shut. My only line of vision was that which appeared under the kitchen table. The belt that Papà had left under the table.

I regained my wind and grasped hold of the belt, almost fearing its reptile-like, prey-savoring hiss. I used the seats of the chairs to help myself up. Standing up cautiously now, I rummaged through the drawers where Mamma kept our utensils. The steak knife. The sharpest one Mamma had. I needed privacy.

I locked the bedroom door behind me, sat at the edge of my bed, and slashed away. My clammy, unnerved hands quavered as I held the tip of the knife up to the soft, yet violent leather of Papà's belt. It took a while for the sharpness of the knife's tip to finally penetrate the leather and cause enough noticeable destruction. The trick was to guide the knife with ease. When I was done, there were long gashes of exposed wounds, some X-marked ones, and other randomly placed punctures. Tough, fibrous black flesh: wounded. A softer, underlying whiteness was exposed around the tender, severed openings.

"No, *you* don't listen to *me*!" I exclaimed out loud to myself.

I released the knife and belt onto the polyurethane-glazed wooden floor and let my head slam against the softness of my comforter. Only, it wasn't soft. It was crunchy-sounding. I groped the back of my head and felt a piece of fairly wrinkled paper. I flicked on the rusty, tall lamp beside my nightstand, grabbed the paper from under my head, and read:

Dear Mrs. Mooney,

We know it's late, but we changed our minds. We want Maria to participate with the class on their trip to the Museum of Natural History. We will accept Principal Boyle's offer, and because we are a proud, hard-working family, we will pay you back the fifteen dollars sometime in the future.

Thank You,  
Alessandro and Anna Recchia

The handwriting was neither Mamma's nor Papà's; they *couldn't write*. Even when they attempted to write, they never wrote on college-ruled paper; the paper wasn't ours. And Toni would never betray them for my benefit.

I read the note over several times and speculated the possibilities. My speculation then lost itself in the events of that day.

Sam. The note was the brainchild of his suspicious wink. He must have worked his magic on my headstrong parents.

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I heard a slamming of metal against the wooden door hinge followed by a heavy, exasperating sigh. Mamma. She saw. I was left with no time for repentance.

"Maria, where are you?" She asked loudly and tumultuously where I was. In English.

"Nella mia camera, Mamma!"

I reluctantly unlocked the door, swiped the belt off the floor, and held it out in front of me. I beckoned it to Mamma as she opened the door, expecting a few disciplinary whiplashes for destroying the kitchen and mutilating Papà's weapon.

Mamma clutched the belt from its center, elevated it over her head in what seemed like a momentary state of fury, and threw it onto my bed.

"Look what you do!" She shouted.

"Mamma, mi dispiace, ma non mi avete capito." *I'm sorry, but you guys didn't understand me.* "Mi dispiace molto."

"You wrong. Now I understand," Mamma remarked. "Sam help –"

"Io lo so." *I know.*

"You clean and get Papà new belt tomorrow, or you not go to museum! Capisci?" *Understand?*

I understood, even through her initial anger toward me. For once, we understood. We all did.

## Island of the Misfts

"Christmas is for children," Gunish said with a wink. He was young enough that I could still see the football-hero frat-boy in his eyes. His flirtation with me was not sexual; it was how he conducted business behind the sturdy wooden bar. It was how he made a living.

I thought about how simple he was and wondered if he read that "Christmas for Children" statement on a bumper sticker.

Gunish might have made a good father or owned a restaurant or something to make him proud. But ever since he got his DUI he would stay after his shift to have drinks with Stella until his mom picked him up.

It was a traditional Passell family Christmas Eve at Tara, a reincarnation of the mansion in *Gone With the Wind*. We found ourselves there every year in the care of my Aunt Stella, who owned the place, and her interesting entourage of employees.

Christmas is the only day the hotel is closed. On this day it is our playground we prance around the lobby in our Christmas pajama sets, overturn the contents of the bar, and pass out on any guest bed of our choosing, as the Christmas Day Twilight begins to strengthen on the horizon.

Christmas is also Stella's only day off, but she always remains inside Tara. I used to think it was proof of her dedication to the white antebellum mansion, the gardens and ponds that sweep over the property and the politically incorrect statues of grinning black slaves. But now it just seems sad that she cannot bring herself to leave.

By the time my parents and I had arrived that afternoon, shielding ourselves from whipping Pennsylvania wind with boxes full of gifts, Stella and the staff were drinking champagne and nibbling on small sausages, cheerful and relaxed ever since they shuffled the last hotel guests out at noon check-out. When the heavy two-story doors shut behind my mother, father and I, sealing us into the warmth of Tara, we know we are in for the night.

I was sitting at the bar, in love with the picturesque snow mounding outside, the cracking in the large fireplace and the dreamy warmth of Frank Sinatra. We were all pretty drunk and throwing around expensive gifts tightly wrapped in small boxes. We used to wait to open them in the morning, like other families, but it's hard to get excited about Jay Stillwater picture frames and Chanel No. 5 when you're hung over.

Stella reigns over the dark cozy rooms of the hotel- it has become a part of her. Sometimes I see her in the foyer staring out the glass doors as if the outside world is another galaxy she is afraid to enter. So we come to her.

That night, she was inside, a regular Marilyn Monroe in a large mistletoe hat, hypnotizing us with magical waves of her hands and rolling laughter.



We often try to convince her to leave the hotel, that she deserves what is on the other side of the fortress-like doors. We used to tell her to leave the hotel to find love, until we realized that love had become her enemy thirty years ago, when in her early twenties, her fiancé was given the choice of receiving his parent's inheritance or marrying Stella, and he chose the money. She has been rebelling against love ever since, working the hotel all day and night to scare it away from entering her thoughts.

"Who needs men?" she will ask with a smile. "This place gives me everything I need."

And she likes to bury herself inside, dealing with people who only come and go and she won't see again. She still gets pissy when she sees too much of anyone- even her family. That's why we only come with the harsh Christmas wind. She can't stop us.

I was still propped against the bar letting the ice cubes mingle in my low glass and listening to Gunish talk about what a pain in the ass his girlfriend was when Stella was at my side shaking a small red box in my face.

"Merry Christmas, Lauren!"

I already knew what was inside. Every year she cleans out her jewelry chest and gives me the pieces she doesn't want anymore- they are too beautiful for me to ever wear. I gushed over the gift and began to slide my finger underneath the ribbon, but Stella had moved down the bar before I had a chance to open it.

"Who's been naughty this year!?" Eric, Tara's event coordinator, blurted out as he entered the bar, suggestively stroking the two-foot Christmas tree hat that was propped on his head. Everyone burst into laughter, except for Dad who just looked miserable. I had seen him slowly and silently securing his tie in the mirror earlier, and rubbing cologne on his blank face, getting ready for the evening like a death-row inmate getting ready for execution.

Draped over Eric's arm was a tiny dog named Maggie wearing a Shakespearean collar of red velvet and small gold bells that rang with every frantic movement of Maggie's head.

"Eric, could you look any gayer?" Blurted a voice from the other side of the bar. It was Cindy Superass. I don't know Cindy Superass' real name, or even who she is. She is only Cindy Superass, rolling off her barstool, her leopard miniskirt hiked up revealing a zebra thong.

Her hair was bleached blonde and crispy after years of too much product, her eyes large, deep pools of black ink. Her pouty lips were being pulled down by some unknown force, as if she were about to either cry or burst out into laughter.

"You're just jealous 'cause I get more men than you do, honey!" sang Eric. He kissed Cindy Superass on the cheek and stuck his chin on Aaron's broad shoulder.

Aaron was sitting even further down the bar, stroking a neat goatee with his hands neatly folded on his skinny knees (that were also neat). He turned to look at Eric and smiled like any other man in love. Divorced Aaron never gets to see his kids, the products of 45 years of denied homosexuality, on Christmas or any other Christian holiday that his ex can use as an opportunity to reinforce Christian values such as the sinfulness of homosexuality.

"That's okay," Aaron once said. "I can't stand that Martha Stewart traditional Christmas bullshit anyway."

He turned his attention to Maggie and let her lick his face.

"Good Maggie, Daddy loves you," he said as he took Maggie into his arms and spun the barstool toward Cindy Supersass.

"What'd you ask Santa for, sexy thing?" Eric asked, sauntering over to my drink and me.

I never know how to react to him, so I received a sloppy kiss and handed him a drink that Gunish had slid onto the bar.

"Drink," I urged him. "Grandma started without you."

Grandma's left hand was secured over mine, but her right one was clutching a JB & Water.

She looked up from her glass.

"Merry Christmas, Eric Baby!"

"I know what Joanie wants for Christmas. Joanie wants a man! She wants some uh-huh wham bam sizzlin' looooooove!" Eric said jerking his hips around while Grandma threw her head back and cackled.

The year before Grandma had held up a shaky shot of whiskey, proclaiming to the bar, "This is to Anthony- God help the bastard for leaving me, and may he know that I'm living and beautiful. Let's call him and tell him how happy we are."

Then she started to cry.

But she can't call him anymore. He was hit by a coked-out sixteen-year-old who stole his parents' car on a suicide mission on Memorial Day. The kid lived but Grandpa left behind people who never really got to say good-bye.

Like Dad, who was lurking in a corner, nursing a drink as he became more and more separated from the night. It's okay- they hadn't talked in eight years anyway.

Dad came over and gave me a long kiss on the forehead. He squeezed me a little tighter than usual.

"I love you," he whispered. I knew he was telling the truth, but I wondered why he was so sad.

My mother, who was given the nickname "The Queen of Christmas" after it became obvious that she lived for the holiday, was in a less solemn mood. A long string of fake pearls flew behind her as she darted around the bar. A loose silk blouse, revealing that she still had cleavage, floated around her body, the puffy sleeves like wings of a dove. She was distributing stocking to all of us, like she always does. She still makes me leave carrots for Rudolph and signs all the presents "Love, Santa."

Anyway, the stockings are always a hit, mostly because they are usually filled with little liquor bottles and exotic hard candies.

I let my stocking rest limply in my lap, watching everyone else open theirs. Loud laughter exploded as Eric fished a cigar out of his stocking, and Grandma waved a small bottle of perfume in the air. Dad wasn't paying attention to the red velvet stocking that lay abandoned on the countertop- he stared ahead, but forced a tight smile when we made eye contact.

Our connection was broken when The Queen of Christmas pulled herself to the top of the bar, her arms stretching toward the sky. A radiating light, born somewhere behind her, blurred the outline of her petite figure, like she was on fire. She kicked off her high heels and balanced on tiptoes adorned with deep red polish.

"Hallelujah!" She cried, and without warning, the Hallelujah chorus exploded from the speakers on the ceiling.

Everyone rose, as if in a choreographed musical, and belted out the words. I used the bar to steady myself as I rose to my feet and joined my family in the Hallelujah Chorus. The music was so loud that no voice could be heard.

"King of Kings, and Lord of Lords!" Stella had her big blue eyes closed while she sang, and the Queen of Christmas flailed her arms around, conducting an orchestra of 100 violins.

"And He shall reign forever and ever!" The Queen of Christmas' voice crested over the booming music. She tried to sing a few octaves higher than everyone else, but since we couldn't sing in octaves anyway, she ended up screaming like the rest of us.

How beautiful we sounded! I was overcome with a feeling of gratitude that we were together, that I had these people to sing the Hallelujah Chorus with. But I couldn't help wondering why they didn't have somewhere better to go for Christmas.

When the music died down, I looked to the other side of the bar to see Dad crushing some shiny candy wrappers in his right hand. I slid out of my stool and made my way to him, letting him immediately take my hand.

"Are you not having any fun?"

"What happened to my little baby," he asked.

"Babies grow up," He had been asking me that since I was just learning to talk and the answer hadn't changed.

He sighed before squeezing my hand.

"I'm sad, honey," he said. "I miss my Dad."

I never know what to say to this. I missed Grandpa, too, but my most intense pain was for Dad- I had spent more time mourning for him than Grandpa, wondering if he'd ever be the same. I continued to let Dad hold my hand.

Suddenly, Stella began circling the bar announcing "Christmas photo time!" Dad and I reluctantly followed her to the lobby. Stella had dragged in Gill, the weary security guard, and put a big camera in his hesitant hands. Like an astronaut on an alien planet, he looked at us with uncertainty.

Stella had crammed us together in the lobby in front of an excessively decorated Christmas tree overpowered with lights. The lights were overpowered with gold angels. The angels were overpowered with the beautifully wrapped merchandise underneath. These things made us so happy on Christmas!

Holding up our glasses and each other, we were laughing so hard we couldn't hear Gill say "Calm down, kids. Smile." But we continued to laugh and shriek, and Eric was making these silly little girly yelps. "Come on, guys," Gill pleaded, and when his frustration climaxed, he took the picture.

And it would've been a really nice picture if, at the very last moment, Eric hadn't grabbed my right boob.

"A beautiful Christmas picture of the Island of Misfits!" Stella sang after the family members as they retreated to the bar. The Queen of Christmas could be heard in the background, "the misfits shall inherit the earth!"

Stella took me by the chin.

"You're not a misfit," she said. "Not yet. But all of us, we're misfit toys. Me? Your Dad? Superass? We are all just broken Christmas toys. Lost and broken Christmas toys..." she trailed off, leaving me.

I suddenly felt tired and beaten down. I thought about how tomorrow this day would be over and we would go home and wonder why the hell we had so many bottles of Grappa and boxes of Godiva chocolate. In defeat, I returned to the bar, no longer feeling the Christmas euphoria that the rest of my family were drunk with. I slid onto a large cushioned barstool. Gunish had made me my signature drink, a Cocaine Lady- he knew I was bummed.

"Yep," he sighed. "Christmas is for children."

And I knew what he meant.



Pink Ibis

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## Christmas Morning

It was Christmas morning when simple  
no longer defined what we were.

It was that day  
when "family" became "people."  
I never again harbored a selfish thought,  
we were all too busy praying for you.  
"Fuck you!"

Like city folk in a simple  
town the words turned unaware heads. She thought  
the door was closed. He thought we were  
upstairs. People  
say that you can recall the day  
that your life changes. It was that day  
that it ended and began. Never could you revert, for people  
are not pawns, the game can't be re-set. From simple  
words come complex men,  
and things that were,  
are simply that. Don't dwell in thought,  
however impossible to resist. "I thought  
of that day,  
years later, when I turned 16," she said. "They were  
Gods to me and you."

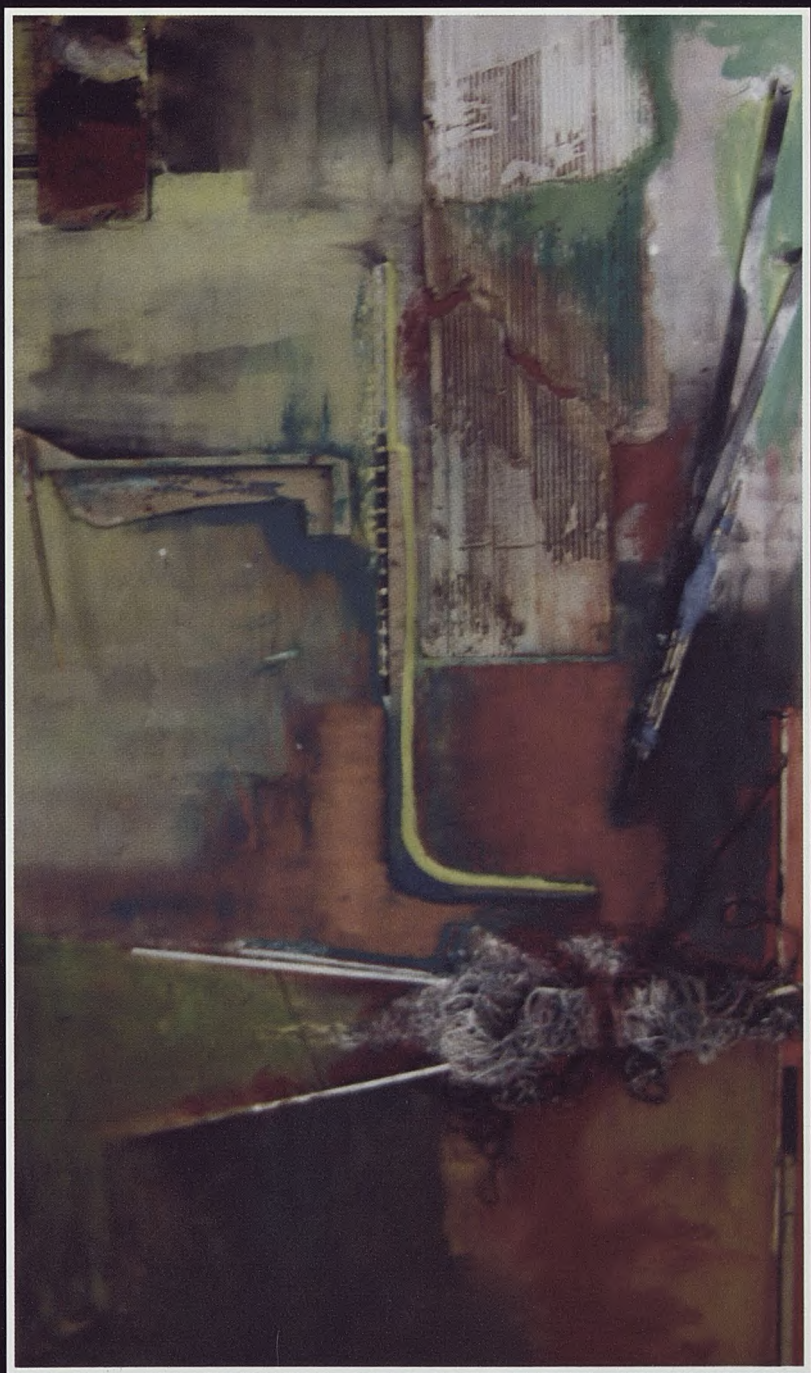
But like understanding the Holy Trinity, "simple"  
does not suffice. For simple people  
are strangers; and the people  
we've become are real. No complex thought,  
when in a child's mind, can be explained in simple  
terms. "One day

at a time," *they* said. "And soon you  
will be just like you were."

But is and was are the same as "were"  
When you're going on six years old, as people  
tend to forget. "Fuck You!"  
and "We're Through." "Our Fault?" "Get that thought  
out of your head! It'll all be normal again one day."

But normal is not that simple.

You claim to barely remember it now. That you were  
far too young. "We're fine people now." But like a simple fact  
wrapped in complex thought, I always recall that day.



## abstract painting

Allison Nix

*Mixed media: paper, wood, string, and oil paint on a reinforced Formica board*  
6 x 4 ft



## Les Clementines

Annie Beale

*Aix-en-Provence, France. photograph*

4 x 6 in

December, 2004







## Spirit

Chrissy Gilbert

*Oil on Canvas, Parsons School for Design*

28 x 22 in

February 2006



## Six Squares

Geoffrey Gaenslen

*Digital Painting on Coated Paper*

18 x 13 in

November/December, 2005





## Belts

Caleb Baker

*Digital photograph*

1600" X 1200"

July 2004





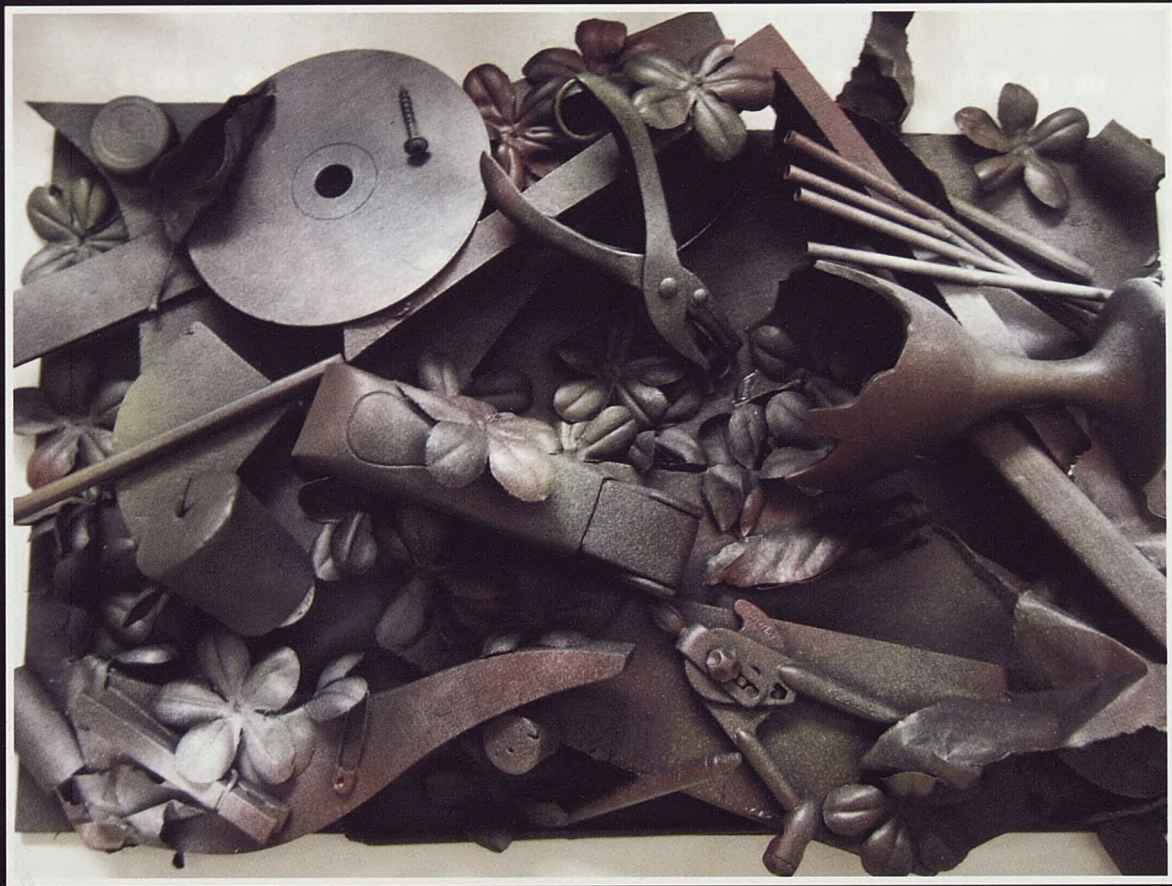
## Spring Cleaning

Molly Myer

*Found objects and spray paint*

24 x 12 in

January 2006





# Vision

Chris Boschen

*Digital Art, Photoshop 7*

28 x 20 in

November 2005





## Cop Car

Ming Zhou

*Digital photo, Staten Island, NY*

3 x 5 in

Summer 2004





Untitled

Sarah Quinn

Photograph

2592 x 1944

February 2006





Untitled

Sarah Quinn

*Photograph*

1536 x 1024

May 2003





## Innocence

Jennifer Lazuta

*Black and white digital photograph*

*Nieu Bethesda, South Africa*

4 x 6 in

October 2005







## Annunciation

Sarah Jacobs

*Oil on Canvas, Florence, Italy*

18 x 24 in

2005





## Giraffe

Erica Wiles

*Scratch board*

13 x 15 in

2004





## Girl with the Pearl Earring

Elizabeth Todd

*Magazine scraps, 2D design*





**Grandpa**  
Sarah Jacobs  
*Oil on Canvas*  
2.5 x 3.5 in  
2005



## Cherub Chub

Maelina Frattaroli

*Black and white digital photo*

3 x 5 in

August 2005



## The Shadowlands

She'll be standing on a street corner, lighting her cigarette. She'll look at you with dark brown eyes. She'll ache for a quick buck. She'll do anything.

You come to a stop, glance over at her. She is desolation in its purest form. You question the sanity in this world. You offer her a quick buck. In this insane world she is an anomaly, a quiet, sad temptress on a street corner.

It's the underworld. Unnoticed by most, looked down upon by those who know it's there. This is where the girls who got knocked up in high school spend their days. This is where a fifty will get you a dime bag or other party favors. This is where the world's lost souls gather. On some dark street corner in a city with a forgettable name.

You drive by and chew your nails in the comfort of your SUV. You look nervously around, hoping to god that she isn't here. Not knowing where else to look. You think back to the girl you once knew.

Amy had a smiling face and an infectious laugh. She used to read Burroughs and Kerouac. Told you that the modern world of the American man was an infectious disease you had to avoid at all costs. You smoked your first cigarette with her. Used to sit on park benches and talk books for hours. She used to be an intellectual.

Street lights stream by. Girl after girl walks to the window, still, no Amy. Decrepit brick buildings sink and bend over the horizon and smoke trails across the moon. The Beatles sift quietly through the car, settling on your heart and your ears.

A hushed voice. "I don't know how we're ever going to find her."

Shut up. Shut up. You want to tell the voice shut up but you know it's true. Miles of red light district and you're aware that the possibility of finding Amy barely exists at all.

I can see her face. Big bright red cheeks, turned to sunken stones. A dark hollow consuming her features. Her voice once high and light. Now, who knows?

Amy came from Colorado. Some town near Aspen. Her parents were the wealthy sort who treated her to trips around the world and spoiled her rotten. She turned out alright though. Not a Veruca Salt type. She was the first girl I befriended when I arrived outside that frightening dorm in ninth grade, afraid of meeting new people. Afraid of being away from home.

We walked to class together one fall day that year, and she told me, "You're the greatest guy I've ever met." I wasn't sure I deserved it, but I took the compliment and tried to give her all the love in the world.

She loved horses. I know, she told me every damn day. Constantly she talked about her horses. "Biscuit is so great. He's this chestnut and I love riding him. Oh, I love riding him. You should see it out there, we ride through the aspen trees and it's just so damn gorgeous."

She showed me her art. Paintings of a girl's face which turned to a purple mountain. Newsprint behind a swastika. I couldn't understand half of it.

I waited 'til junior year to kiss her. We were seventeen and lying in her bed, watching a movie on the TV. My hand lay on her stomach and I leaned over, touched her lips and held on tight.

The guys in the dorm, they ripped on her with a vengeance. She had the façade of a stupid ditz. The way she talked about her horses! Guys are guys are guys. I'd come back from her room and the questions bombarded me. "Hey there champ. How you feeling tonight? Did ya tell her to bend over and grab her ankles? Slip her the shocker?"

"She's so dumb." And you know what, they were right. She fucked a million and one guys. I can't count myself in that demographic.

Truth is, beneath it all, we liked her. When she stopped showing up at the room we laughed less. Nights I'd sit guilty in my bed and wish I'd treated her better. Wondered about the horrible truth behind peer pressure. She wasn't bad. She was great. She was the one girl who paid attention to us sad saps. Now we had lost it. I had stopped seeing her, stopped talking to her, she wasn't cool, I wanted to be. It was a stupid choice.

Senior year I only heard about her. I rarely ever saw her. "I hear that she sits up there in her room shooting up."

"I hear she has a cocaine addiction."

"I hear she has a sex addiction." She was a rumor. No one seemed to know the truth, no one seemed to know what she looked like anymore.

Cold December night. Everyone standing, cheering the hockey team. An ambulance rushes past. Our eyes tear away from the Deerfield player rushing up the ice. It stops outside her dorm. Calamity.

I visit her in the hospital. No one else stops in. I sleep the night next to her, watching her breath rise up and down, her lips cracked, her eyes sunken. They'll tell you weed is a gateway drug. Amy skipped weed altogether. Speed and heroin were her flavor. You tried to comfort her and tell her it was alright, but she wouldn't listen. Her body shakes and convulses, you try and calm her seizures, she spits in your face.

They said she overdosed on heroin.

Monday afternoon, April 20. I call her and she doesn't answer. Her room mate hands me a note. Dark ink on wrinkled, lined paper. "Gone." Are the only words on the sheet. Don't know where.



I can't give up on her. She was great. She wasn't amazing. But she was great. She was there for me. She was a shoulder to lean on and now she was gone. Gone, swallowed up in the streets of some god forsaken city in a huge, unforgiving country, where the weak are stepped on and shoved to the ground. She doesn't stand a chance.

Guilt sets in. You sit in your car and look at the pretty little women walking around and you wonder if you played a part in her disappearance. You wonder what happened to all of the girls here. They're just girls. Were they tormented? High school is tormenting. Unless you're a select group of few, high school is defines pain.

I pull into a parking space and put my hand on the wheel. Kill the engine. Light a smoke. Screw it.

JESSIE COX

## The Others

They say that those who sow in time shall reap.  
Big-boned, with big goals and big work they are  
Not frozen, but warm with success; not a  
Corpse in sight. The new father gets to sip  
His coffee in the diner at night while  
The woman in the corner plays that flute  
Without going flat for once: the glory  
Of sweat revealed in its entirety.  
(Pay no attention to any silent  
Sobbing, suppress the growing sickness if  
You can. It would not be normal or right.)  
Well, to their visions of empty but diligent years  
Leading to ultimate pleasure, I say, "Yeah, right."  
The early flamingo just gets the ice.

## Planetary Eyes

She stands outside the main door, waiting to get in, until the guy at the door grabs her hand, smears an X on it with black sharpie, and encourages her to have a good time. The air is so cold the hair on her skin stands up in a fight against it, a fight against the bitter coldness that seems to form a thick layer encompassing her skin, finding its way down her esophagus and through her nasal passages. All she can think about is getting inside. But then she reaches the steps and knows she'll be warm soon. No. She'll be hot soon. The whole room will be filled with a sticky heat. A hotness that breathes fire down her neck and traps the cold underneath it like a bubble under her skin, so she feels her body grow hot as heat radiates from the room, but that lingering coldness seems to continue penetrating her core. And somehow the cold manages to freeze itself under her skin. She's inhaling ice.

She's walking down the steps, past the Stop sign, which just makes her feel as though she belongs in this room. The lights start to change from intoxicating fluorescent, as it all mixes to a sort of purplish blue haze. Bright spots of white penetrate her retinas. First stepping onto the linoleum, her feet slip as she loses grip with the ground. No-grip sandals were a great choice. As the night continues the linoleum will fight harder and harder against her shoes to form a barrier in order to keep them from touching. She can't tell what has made her shirt so moist, but knows these floating, glowing plastic cups of intensely yellow alcohol around her must have something to do with it. Finally, through a mass of planetary eyes, she finds a face that looks like his. Yeah. It's him. How could anyone possibly mistake that Neanderthal appearance? His eyebrows stand apart, as though they've been shaved in the middle, like two soldiers at arms. His stupid, dumb grin glows with the fire of a thousand shots of vodka and his eyes... those bright blue eyes... they penetrate her. They always do. Maybe it's the glowing radiance that entrances her. Maybe it's their emptiness that makes her venture in and get lost in the blinding white mass of their empty intensity. She doesn't even notice him coming toward her but suddenly feels a soggy sensation press on her lips as he kisses her and she breathes in his hot breath. It fills her with a feeling that's icier than the chill of the late November night air.

So this is her night. His rough hands slither around her arms and down to her waist. She doesn't want those hands there, but feels them melt around her like there's no way to escape the water that encompasses you in the ocean. He smells like vinegar and mothballs. But she doesn't care. He's encircling her; forming for her a protective shield against the people in here that want to swarm around her, swallow her whole in their heated, delirious intoxication. But his intention is not to save her from them. No, his intention is only to prove himself to them. He holds her up as a prize that he's won, deeming him superior to their drunken aims of random hook-ups and one night stands. A little lip and tongue action never hurt anyone. Unless its repetition formed a sort of emotionally inept relationship.

Music, of what song she can't even recognize, flows into her ears, so they're throbbing with the sound. She can't shake it out. Her hair tosses everywhere, as her head jerks around. It's an entangled medusa-esque mess and sticks in her lip-gloss; her earrings lodge in her hair. Strands fixate like glue to her forehead, as her sweat forms a sort of adhesive. Here, they're all just cleverly disguised messes with pearl earrings and Hollister shirts, wanting someone to wipe the hair away from their eyes.

She feels pressure building near her left ear as he brings his lips to her and his raspy voice mumbles a casual line. She immediately pulls away. But what's the difference, he won't remember in the morning, so she whispers, "I love you too." She can make it just as casual as him. She aches to see what he refuses to show behind those planetary eyes, but knows at this point that he's just a hollow brain, a body looking for reassurance, looking for someone to be his savior in his drunken world of egotism and uncertainty. But she's just a pawn, she's just an ideal, she's not actually what he needs. But who the fuck can even tell what he needs besides another Natty.

She stumbles with him to the bar and once the cases of sweet glowing nectar are in view he pokes her in the pudgy section of her waist. She hates when he does that, and he knows this. But, she picks up on his hint and strategically placing her arms on top of the cool wooden bar, she leans into it, resting her chest on top of it, squeezing her elbows together to create even more cleavage than she already has. A girl does what she can to get a few beers.

After chugging its contents she slides along the linoleum and somehow finds the door leading into the bathroom. Looking into the mirror she wonders what the hell happened to her face. Black smudges are under her eyelashes and rings of purplish blue are below her eyes, right above the cheek bones, and make her complexion seem hollow. The once white corners of her eyes take on a pinkish hue and tiny bubbles of perspiration form an attractive mustache above her lip. She knows she didn't look this way when she left. But it doesn't matter. Man-made light makes any imperfection in the appearance seem extra noticeable.

Leaving the bathroom she sees him again, in between the numerous forms of circular bobbing heads. His white teeth glow with a greenish tint. His smile is the crooked hook that grasps into the meaty parts of her heart. He reels her in, dragging her across the sticky floor until she's wrapped up in the entangling net of his arms. Maybe if she had more strength, if she hadn't had those last few cups, if she didn't feel so much safety in his web, then maybe she might try to escape. But it was just too easy to stay there, looking up at him.

Their legs become entwined and he's pulling her so close she can feel the subtle pressure between his legs pushing on her. It grows stronger with every move. His dark eyes look black in this light and continue to fixate on her. They don't glow so intensely anymore, but she feels like he's staring through her pupils to the back of her skull with sniper-like radar, burning a crisp, bullet-like hole.



A muggy heat begins to encompass her, and his lips create pressure points of moisture that travel from her forehead down to her neck as he smothers her with kisses. Slowly she feels his lips move to her mouth. She's so thirsty, she can't fight him away. Suddenly she feels a gust of air and the massive weight of his body throws itself over her as he throws her body onto the couch and fixes himself on top of her. She feels the pressure of the couch against her back, but she's not uncomfortable. But with this heavy weight she can only find the strength to move her fingers. They gloss over smooth, greasy hair until she finds a different patch of texture that feels like rough, damp flesh with prickly hairs. Someone forgot to shave. Her mouth moves involuntarily as she feels her lips bump and collide with his wet slither of a mouth. There's no pleasure here, just the inability to function beyond the simple motions she's turned on and can't shut off.

She feels the sensation of his fingers glossing up her stomach and slithering upward underneath her shirt. She wonders if people are still even here and if they're watching them. But then she gets her answer as the weight of his body abruptly shifts off of her and her vision is cleared. Something reaches out toward her in a sweeping motion as someone reaches out their hand and smacks her with the full force of twelve beers. She feels a sting across her left cheek, slightly subdued by the alcohol, and she feels herself traveling downward as she's thrown off the couch. She hits cold ground and immediately finds herself looking into black. Raising her head up she notices she's just become familiar with the linoleum that had tried so hard earlier to keep her feet from touching it. The sting transforms into a pounding ache and she feels the corners of her eyes beginning to water as hot streams of liquid trickle down to the sticky floor underneath her. She's crying uncontrollably until her vision spins her down into the vortex of the floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

Opening her eyes again, a piercing yellow light filtering in through the blinds in front of her, forces her to wince. Adjusting her eyes to the natural light she hasn't been used to in some time, she looks around and notices nothing that holds any place of familiarity to her. She shoots her upper body up and the covers fall down to her waist. Her arms immediately move to cover her exposed breasts and glancing at the floor near the bed she notices a pair of purple underwear with white polka dots. She knows who was wearing those last night. Her first reaction is to throw the covers off her waist – only to stare at her own naked body. The hair on her arms begins to rise. An invisible compressor seems to push in against her and as her eyes glance at the body next to her on the bed she feels her blood begin to freeze. That iciness that once encompassed her skin seems to chill the dark secret chambers of her skull, filling her with an immeasurable feeling of dread. She knows those chambers below the waist aren't so secret anymore. Her vision becomes blurry and she begins to cry, as she realizes she has no idea who this body is lying next to her. A pair of green eyes looks viciously into her, eyeing every crevice in her body, and suddenly images of intoxicated lust begin to take shape and burn behind her retinas. And regret saturates her, and transforms her, and changes her once blue eyes, planetary.

Greg Little (falls asleep)

**Removed by the  
Request of the  
Author**

## A Phoenix Rising

'I want to be delivered,' she tells the tiny clams as they vanish into the sand. She's on her knees again, knees bruised and painted with a perpetual depression made only by grains of sand. Nearby, the dune grass whispers her song.

She doesn't remember falling asleep, but soon she is 6 again. And such a blissful 6 it is. Father lies on the circus-striped towel while mother applies the sun to her body one blessed ray at a time. Mother is radiant and gorgeous and dark-haired and an ideal wife and woman, she is. The girl digs a hole in the sand and gently climbs in, unaware of how agile and utterly beautiful she is. In the hole, she hides her beauty from the world.

She is 12. She runs from jetty to jetty like it's not the mile or so that it really is. She holds a grain of sand in her palm and wonders if the whole world started like that. She sees her life in that one tiny speck of the universe. Then she drops it into the sea and wonders if she'll ever hold the same grain of sand again. However, she knows nothing of statistics and probability and the ever-changing technological world. She only counts the rhythm of her heartbeat and compares it to the waves that always return to shore.

Eighteen and all the world's a stage. She has her mother's dark hair and her father's light eyes; a Mediterranean beauty that has never left the Atlantic coastline. She is dark and deep and poetic and mysterious, but that's only how others see her. To herself, she is merely the explosion resulting from the close contact of two elements: a sharp mind and a bottomless heart. Those two elements engage in battles so long she wonders when the war will end.

At age 25, she wonders why she spent all that time hiding in her little holes instead of swimming the seas. In her manuscripts, she tells the world that she is a martyr. She says, 'When I die, I want my hands and feet to be mangled and worn from working in the rich earth and drawing the beauty of the skies.' All hail her wisdom and subtle submission and the face she wears when faking both.

At age 54, she doesn't remember those words of wisdom and makes her living by letting her children live on, knowing she can never go back no matter how hard she swims.

She wakes up with sea foam in her mouth and the sunlight is trace, leaving no room for anymore long glances into the past. She is 96 years old today. Without a word, she digs her ancient hands into a coastline that has seen more cultures than grains of sand in the sea. Her hands form a familiar hole in the land and she pours her tears into it, racking sobs that carry her heart out with the ebbing tide. On Earth, she crumples her lungs into little raisins and spends her last breath where she spent her first. Her vision is reduced to a blur, a sketch, and then a faint line, and then she is gone. In death, her muscles go limp and every tendon relaxes for the first time in ages.

Her mangled hand slowly opens. There, like a sacrifice to the ocean, is a single grain of sand.

She is delivered.



## EAT, DRINK...

The dining hall was a mad rush of color and motion as I made my way to an unoccupied table and took my seat. Voices were pressing at my ears from all about, clattering sounds of forks and plates, the noises of chairs being moved across the floor. It was the pleasant cacophony of hundreds of students descending as a mob upon the offered fare -- a clamor that I had grown used to very rapidly over the past week.

I was trying to be inconspicuous, but the notebook drew a few stares from around corners or over the tops of cups. No one evaded me though. They were too preoccupied. Sliding my tray with its dismembered garden of green plant parts over to one side, I cast about in search of a subject. No one seemed particularly promising -- and I didn't feel like writing at the moment anyway.

*Damn assignments, I thought irascibly. People, trays, cooks, moving. Get out of my way with your little aprons. Move your asses. I don't want to watch you eat, I do not want to Sam I Am. What time is it? Sodas are bad for you, fool. I'm hungry.*

I contemplated my salad, but it offered no advice. Predictable, that. Inanimate objects are always mute, except when you wish that they would shut up and stop bringing your insanity up as a topic of discussion. I spurned the greens, the utensils as well, pushed them farther away and turned my notebook to a blank page.

*Well there's someone, I write lazily. They are eating. They are taking a bite. How happy. In the mouth, out of the mouth, chew chew chew, one bite two bite red bite blue bite. What the hell is it with Dr. Seuss today? Can I eat? Am I a stranger to myself? Oooh, philosophy!*

Then the girl who sat across the room from me caught my attention. It was not so much the direct method by which she transported the food from plate to mouth that struck me (I mean, really *struck* me), nor was it the particular choice of meal -- though the array of pseudo-edible processed substances was quite daunting. It was her expression -- the raptness of it, the happy solemnity with which she devoured like a sleepwalker. Eating might well have been an act of worship for her. Her round face was transfixed, as if each bite were an epiphany and each sip of soda a baptism. The ice-filled glass was resurrected twice, three times. I watched this rapture with deep interest. This acolyte had awakened in me a sense of intrigue. Why pray vainly at some distanced divinity for sustenance when one can give thanks to the food itself?

*Here here. More directness is called for these days. Now sit back down so that I can make a spectacle of your bizarre religious practices.*

But she did not so quickly return to her seat. Rather, she chose to make a pilgrimage. I saw her migrate the unwieldy bulk of her overfed form to the ice cream, and for a second my view was obscured as she bowed her head in prayer

to the pantheon of flavors. "Tonight's Forecast," the sign beside the machine read. "Cold and creamy." A prophecy?

The girl turned and navigated the sea of tables and students back to her seat. I wondered briefly whom she worshipped -- the food, or the Creators, those imposing figures who stood behind the Plexiglas alters and delivered nourishment as the supplicants lifted their trays in prayer. They had benevolent smiles and a ubiquitous presence, but one would expect a bit more terrorism from heathen gods, a bit more commanding about besides the ominous plaques that prohibited sternly the removal of certain religious idols from the place of worship: THE ONLY FOOD THAT YOU MAY TAKE FROM THE DINING HALL IS ONE ICE CREAM OR ONE PIECE OF FRUIT.

I looked back at my salad musingly. Was I too a member of this cult and did I simply not realize it? I obeyed the mandates. I removed no prohibited food. I left no trays upon the tables to call down evil spirits when I departed. I placed the silverware within the designated vessels. I came each day at the times of worship and gave proof of my identity to the door guards, then went daily to bow my head over a laden plate and give homage with my satisfaction. Did this make the blue-clad Creators my masters, or had they themselves been Created to serve me? Perhaps I am not meant to know. Who can fathom the vast mystery of the universe? Eat, drink and be happy!

LAUREN BARRETT

## A Late Night Tribute

I remember the drive to your house.  
There were only four lights and six roads of separation,  
    but every midnight ride home  
    showed me that was too far.  
There were afternoons that I spent  
    in lust with you-  
    the bedroom on the left,  
    the door always closed,  
    the shades always pulled so the neighbors couldn't see us.  
I remember the end,  
    and how few tears I cried,  
    and how sorry I am for that now.

## The Orchards

The pile of tree carcasses was at least fifteen feet high and interminably wide. Old trees mixed with new trees, leaves and branches making the outline of the pile ragged. You couldn't stand too close to it, or else the dust of the rotting bark would get in your eyes and on your skin. They'd cut down a number of the trees at the end of the summer, when they were full of apples that were nearly ripe, so the air was putrid with the smell of them decomposing. I stepped around it, surveying the open expanse of the descending hill where the orchard had been, at the road cutting the landscape like a deep scar in the dirt that led to the main road. The river looked so far, and I was suddenly disoriented. I'd never seen this area bare before, and it occurred to me that I didn't know where it linked up. There were so many orchards that I guess I thought they all linked up eventually.

Behind me were the shallow woods that separated my lawn from the end circle of the new street. Ahead of me, the sky was brewing with a coming thunderstorm. Across the Hudson, I could see the rain falling, but it wasn't here yet. I started walking.

"I can't have my own bear back?" he asked. I just looked at him for a moment in disbelief; I couldn't recognize him. His voice sounded so indignant, so impersonal.

"You gave it to me." My voice was meek in comparison. I held the toy in my hands, my thumbs pressing into the shirt it wore that read "100% Loyal." That was a joke.

"No, I lent it to you."

"For three years?"

I found my way to the road easily after climbing over a high pile of dirt and circumventing an abandoned backhoe. Only two of the lots had been filled, and they were just meters apart. That's what the city people do. They come up to the country and build million dollar homes right on top of each other and then commute. They keep one of the apple trees, and never realize their austere columns are made of wood and Styrofoam. I know though, because I've played in these houses before they were finished. They're all the same.

I met Mike when I was in sixth grade. He was probably the most annoying person on the planet. It's sort of the traditional story; he picked on me, I told him I hated him. We were both sort of outcasts on the fence by the time high school rolled around. I didn't really have any good friends, but I was a varsity cheerleader, and involved in all sorts of activities. I got to know the cool kids. There was an art about the way I survived high school - I convinced everyone that I was friends with someone else. Mike was a transplant, and he wasn't Italian, so despite the fact that he was smart and attractive he was pretty much a social pariah. In my town, your popularity is pretty much dependent on your last name.



The road wasn't really a road at all, actually, but a path ground out by the large tires of construction equipment, so the ground was uneven and difficult to walk on. Tube gutters from the side fed into it intermittently. I guess that without any trees on the hillside to soak up the rain, they needed to do something to prevent it from turning to mush. They looked temporary, in any case. In the distance, I saw a house that I'd never known was there. It had been hidden all my life, and now it was exposed. It was old, and surrounded by the dingy huts where migrant workers live. These were smaller and less solid looking than the one down by the main road. No one was living in them now.

I sold my childhood bike to a migrant worker when I was nine. It was pink, but he was so happy to have transportation, and I was so happy to have made a transaction at our family yard sale. As I passed the huts, I remembered his smile as he handed me the three dollars. The sky flashed with lightening, and though I was too low now to see the river, I knew the rain was making its way west toward me. The roofs of the huts were full of holes, and the walls seemed thin. I wonder if he had lived here, or down by the road. Seven seconds passed until the thunder boomed in my ears. I hope it was the latter.

"I said you keep it as long as we stayed friends. I don't mind letting my friends borrow things."

The words hit me like a two by four between the eyes – I was dizzy, shaking, and confused. This thing, this silly teddy bear. I tried to find my voice, and I'm ashamed that I couldn't keep myself from looking upset.

"I didn't realize that gifts were conditional," I replied. Mike seemed so businesslike and cold, as if he were simply going over an old contract and picking out the fine print. "And I'm so glad you've decided that we're no longer friends."

With a perfectly straight face and crossed arms, he grunted something about that fact that I hadn't called him on his birthday. He looked like a little boy trying to act tough. The lump in my throat prevented me from speaking just then. I had called him, but he wasn't there. He was never the first to contact me, not until this time, though I hardly think it counts.

Have you ever seen the sky just before a thunderstorm?

I learned about thunderstorm formation in a class on climatology. I don't remember much, except for the diagrams. I just never thought the diagrams would look anything like real life. In a way, they didn't. No diagram could show the strange quality of the colors. It was as if the sky was made of layers, thick clouds on top of a brilliantly clear blue sky. The clouds were dark on the underside, full of rain threatening to come down at any moment. Through cracks in the cloud cover, the sun lit the tall grass that had grown in place of the rows of apple trees, and the dirt, and the piles of dead trees, highlighting them as if they were under a brilliant spotlight. It was the clearest I'd ever seen any thing. But my favorite part was the inky blackness of the shadows. I took pictures that day, and even now I'm half convinced that they've been edited. The horizon too was dark as night, but just above it were the brightest, pinkest clouds.

As I reached the top of a small roll in the hill, I could see that the storm was now on my side of the river, at most about four miles away. It was just like the diagram from my science book – I could literally see the updraft forming a ways to my left. I kept walking.

Mike and I started dating in our junior year of high school. He wasn't my first boyfriend, but he was the first real friend I'd ever had. He called me back, and invited me over his house. He was the first person to actually bother to get to know past my extracurricular duties. I'm not the easiest person to get to know, I'll admit. But he was the first person who actually cared enough to try more than once. It was great to finally have someone I could talk to unconditionally. I didn't have to feel nervous when I approached him, nor did I need a reason. He was my best friend. My only friend.

What I loved most was football season. In our senior year of high school, he was a free safety, and I was captain of the cheerleading squad, so we traveled together to games. He gave me the teddy bear at an away game when I had a fever, but insisted on going to the game anyway. I told him he was crazy to give it to me; his grandmother had given it to him when he was three years old. But he said that it always made him feel better, and that he wanted me to have it. I offered to give it back when we broke up three years later. He refused to take it. Even if we weren't together, he said wanted me to have something to make me feel better when I was sick or sad. I felt better about the break up. It wasn't the romance I was afraid of losing, it was the friendship. He was still my best friend, and I had the proof.

After a surprisingly short time, my walk was nearing completion. I could hear the rain beating down nearby, and the thunder was pounding simultaneously with the lightening. I could see the main road, which I half expected. But I was wrong in my estimation of where on the road I'd end up. I was a lot closer to my starting point than had seemed possible from atop the hill. Three piles of dead apple trees were different down here. They were older, with naked branches. They were much smaller, too, having compacted on themselves after months of decomposition. The arms stuck out in all different directions, looking almost skeletal in nature. A single leafless apple tree is often a symbol of Halloween because of the harsh gnarled angles and shapes it creates. An entire orchard's worth of trees, mangled and rotting, is downright chilling in the stormy lighting.

Mike and I fought for a long while about the bear. He tried to tell me that it wasn't symbolic, but his only reason for taking it back was that we hadn't stayed friends. I'd never known him to be this spiteful, but it was as if he'd been stripped of everything I'd idealized in him. Our friendship had seemed so huge, and so untouchable, and here it was, poured into a stupid teddy bear. I could handle the relationship being over, but I had cherished the memory of it. It meant so much. It meant everything, and he was taking it away. It was as if he was reaching into the past, and uprooting the very foundations on which I'd placed my feelings. I gave him back the bear, hating myself for crying. He stole that memory from me, and made it something hurtful.

When my feet hit the pavement, I turned and looked back up the path. You could see the whole hill, right up to the woods that fence off my back yard, and stretching out to both sides. Nearly all my life, it had all been orchards. Before, you couldn't see anything from the road, not for the trees. I had always thought it was such a great distance, and so beautiful. But it was clear now, and exposed. It wasn't big anymore, and it wasn't nice. The land beneath it had been there all along, as had the migrant workers' huts. I couldn't stand to look at the ugly grooves that had sectioned off the orchards. It wouldn't be long before the path I'd walked was a paved road with a meaningless name, before everyone who remembered playing in the orchards as a child was gone from the neighborhood. How long would it be before it was completely unrecognizable?

When people and places change, they change for good. Nothing grows on a scar. Nothing grows on concrete, just as nothing grows in a relationship where fond memories have been ripped away. If there's nothing left to remind you why you were there in the first place, you won't go back. You can't go back.

The sky opened up, drenching me in rain as I stared at the open landscape. I turned to look up the main road, which is at least twice as long as the path. I started walking

MOLLY MASICH

## Rusty Lovers

Old men walk like their fronts are falling down while their backs stand straight up, rigidly. You can't image their hips ever moved like a well oiled machine. Their lovemaking must always have been rusty.



## And they call it truth

I watch my window as the world revolves around it,  
For my window is the window of perception,  
And through it, the perspective of perception itself can be seen.

And I thought I was something special.

As it turns out, my only memories are fading,  
As the blue haze of the ocean melding with purple horizon slowly  
Folds and quivers at the instantaneous moment of that solitary grain of  
Infinitely small  
Sand that sits on the beach and sees only the pane.

The fistfights and baseball games merge into one memory, as  
Michael, the self-proclaimed lord of the rundown once again slides safe  
Into the only home he could ever find.  
The umpire, screaming, but saying nothing, pats the boy on the back and then,  
Coherently states, "Son, he was safe".

Maybe that time when my dog chased the squirrel too far is embedded in my memory  
exactly as it happened.

The squeal of tires as I begin to run blindly through thorns and poison ivy  
Only to arrive with a car on the side of the road, doors open, and  
A young newlywed couple crying in pain. I throw my head back and laugh.

Wait, is that how it went?  
Or was Michael out at third;  
The horizon yellow, the ocean emerald;  
Did I laugh or did I panic and run?

Did you ever wonder why your yearbook contains pictures,  
As if your memory was too broken to remember the few hundred children who molded  
The worst fucking year of your life

Out of shattered dreams and misconceptions and lies.

And that the kids, set in front of a computer-doctored blue screen with little  
wavy streaks, Giving the whole thing an aura of credibility, appear dimmer,  
less personal and more Stationary than you thought?

Is that what a yearbook is now, the preset fading of your classmates and peers  
As the blue background is brighter than their smiles, as if proving  
That computers can simulate our realness better than we can perform our own.

And you thought you were special.

The music you hear is not new, it is not comprised of notes you haven't  
heard before, and yet, our teenagers are continually brainwashed by the  
sounds that tell them "you are not pretty," "you are not special," and "you're  
wrong" while simultaneously stating that the goal which they set for  
themselves can never be achieved without death.

The world of perception is upon us, as our own image confuses our heart  
And clouds our brain.  
Fills us with false hope and desire,  
Or real desire, for false hope.  
And we do not question it.

We are too afraid. Let go.  
Your memories will fade, but were they real in the first place?  
Alaskan horizons are white and gray;  
Michael left and went home with his mother, having never reached first;  
My dog was not killed by a newlywed, soon-to-be-mother of twins.  
We are too afraid. Let go.

Our fear binds us to our falsity, as it binds us to our addictions.  
It's all about perspective, as reality cannot be real unless  
It is personal.

CHRIS CROFT

## trying to sleep

i am having become unglued/undone with the slashcrashboombang&burn of  
all these empty-headed messinecessities  
and.  
love burns too fast and smokes up the room for far too long.  
uncertainty's a killer but (sadly) not a fatal one.  
and.  
i promise to start waking up earlier and feed the birds and sit and stare and  
stop frowning when things make me smile.  
and.  
somebody else that is not myself that is to say is taking up all the spaces in my head.  
i wish to have them back soon.  
and.  
the way i want to die is this:  
i want to overdose on your smile and swimming in your eyes and listening to you breathe.  
this is how i want to fall asleep and how i want to wake up.  
foreverandever until:  
fractured fragmented falling.  
peaceful dreaming lights.  
shining.  
on the backs.  
of my eyelids.  
overandover until:  
foreverandever until:  
you.

## Tavern Rat

The Somewhere Else Tavern certainly provided an interesting sensory experience for bands just starting out (sadly, it didn't provide anything useful, like money). It was wedged between a coffee shop and a deli in a local shopping center, and produced a slurry of noise that could be heard from any point therein. It was indistinct from far away, but whenever I approached the open doors, it broke down into distinct elements; inside and outside.

The parking lot held clusters of high school kids whose conversations fell in and out of each other. Occasionally, individual voices were transient as kids moved from group to group, gossiping and arguing playfully. Cars pulled in and out of the lot and let their motors idle as people moved equipment or shot the shit with each other through open windows. The owner's dogs circled everything, growling at the commotion (despite its regularity), their chains dragging across the asphalt in rough, uneven scrapes. The owner himself, a forgetful, stoned hillbilly named Burley, sat out on the porch, calling to his dogs in that toothless, nasal voice of his, strained through what seemed like acres of unkempt beard (he's diabetic and has since lost a foot to infection).

The bar itself was a dense mixture of amplifier feedback, bored heckling, the clink of glass bottles, and the evening's bands, who were often less interesting than their surroundings. Walking on the unwashed floor produced painful tearing noises, and the thick, gritty summoning of phlegm from someone about to spit, usually after a cigarette, reminded me how it got that way.

And while we're on the subject of excreting bodily humors, it's hard to describe the Tavern without touching on the bathroom, which really deserves its own paragraph. Hell, it deserves its own memoir. But I don't have a large enough vocabulary to describe how awful it was, so I'll just mention that it hadn't been cleaned in decades and had built up enough layers of grime to insulate it from mid-level radiation. How people worked up the courage to masturbate and have sex in there (to which I bore witness on more than one occasion, since people I knew always seemed to walk in on it) is, and will forever be, a mystery.

I've played at the Somewhere Else Tavern five times, and have been kicked out twice, with two different bands. The first time was my first gig there, with the Creeps. And to be fair, we didn't so much get kicked out as given up on; we set up, played for 20 minutes, and had our equipment shut off by the sound guy, who couldn't bear listening to us anymore. Given the Tavern's forgiving standards regarding local bands, I look back on that as something of an accomplishment. I didn't at the time, though, and neither did the rest of the band, so we broke up soon afterward.

Down for the Count, my next band, got blacklisted after our third performance. Our first gig there was as a replacement for a band who cancelled,



and the second was an opening slot on one of the Tavern's Punkfest. Those Punkfests started at 7:00 (when we played) and went until 1 in the morning, with bands alternating between playing on the tiny stage and the floor to hasten transitions. Despite it still being daylight when we played, and despite our noticeable lack of local following, we got a respectable crowd. I'd like to think that we were good enough to attract it.

The infamous third show was at another Punkfest, and yet another 7:00 timeslot for us. When we got there (separately; Ryan and Evan got there around 6:55), we quickly realized that we had all dressed in black. I normally did that for shows, but we looked kind of stupid when we all did it. Plus, Ryan was wearing his Emo Sucks shirt, which was important because emo is an offshoot of punk rock that was/is quite popular in Greensboro. Which is to say, that's what all the other bands were playing.

Emo, short for emotional, began in the 80s as a reaction to the violent, stupid direction that hardcore punk had taken. Early emo artists wanted something meaningful and heartfelt, so they slowed down the tempo and allowed personal lyrics and unrestrained emotion, to the point of crying, to dominate the style. I don't care much for the execution, but the concept is worth something.

Unfortunately, the concept was buried by the technique, and emo became a style for young musicians who whined about girls dumping them. The music suffered too, becoming so choppy and syncopated that it was a chore to listen to. Instead of moving forward, as punk and even early emo had done, it was stuck idling in neutral.

Down for the Count was more of a classic punk band. We played fast and loud, with a political theme that matured over time and an anger that came from my lyrics. I've always preferred hearing people yell than hearing them cry, even moreso when I was younger. Angry music, no matter how causeless, is fueled by energy and proactivity, which I could respect. Emo was maudlin to the point of self-parody, and seemed like music for people who were giving up.

It didn't help that the guys in those bands were usually better looking than me and had more friends. I didn't understand what they had to complain about, and the sight of popular guys bitching about not getting laid (usually in the hopes of getting laid out of pity) reeked of dishonesty.

And really, part of my distaste for the scene was my own fault. I was still new to punk and, like every other neophyte, was convinced that I was the punkiest punk that ever punked. It was a pretty arrogant, self-serving attitude that I spent most of my adolescence attempting to justify, which, as it turns out, is impossible to do. I was as angry as everyone else my age, and seeing other people who hadn't "earned it" (i.e. people who weren't miserable) adopt the term reminded me of that, which I didn't like.

Anyway, the band brushed aside Ryan's questionable wardrobe, set up on the stage, and played. Had we realized how drunk the sound guy was, we

wouldn't have bothered. As it was, we sounded like we were playing from half a mile away through several sheets of tinfoil. To add to the chaos, Evan got electrocuted by his own amp (not badly, but enough to scare him), Ryan's guitars kept going out of tune, and the monitors were broken, so we couldn't actually hear ourselves. As a result, we played a lot faster and louder than usual, and I put a stick through my snare drum during the first song. I also bent my hi-hat, although I'm not altogether sure how that happened.

It's worth noting that we didn't have much of an audience for this little fiasco, but those who we'd somehow managed to gather weren't terribly responsive. On the plus side, they didn't seem to mind that we sounded like shit. At least, that's what I tell myself to sleep better at night. In fact, the crowd barely fluttered an eyelash at Ryan's garbled apology, which was something to the effect of "I shouldn't have worn this shirt (his Emo Sucks shirt), because tonight we sucked far worse than emo ever could." Harmless, no?

But scene gossip is a powerful thing, so kids who got there after our set, or who were milling around the parking lot while we played, heard that some hardcore band dressed in black sullied the good name of emo. And despite not being there for our set and seeing how harmless it was, they got pissed. Every other band that night disparaged those ruffians who "trashed the scene" during their set, and we got painted as hateful pricks by people who didn't even see us play. Of course, since we were still in the crowd, whenever someone mentioned us we put on big grins and waved. None of us saw the harm in being smart asses at that point.

A few months later, when I tried to get us on the lineup for another Punkfest, I was turned down. As it turned out, some kid named Brandon (drummer for one of the local bands) booked the shows and came to Burley for dates to run them at the Tavern. He obviously wasn't a big fan of us.

The most ironic part of the evening was that night being the only time Down for the Count got paid to play. My cut was \$14. Sadly, a lot of people expect young bands to play for free and neglect to mention that until said young bands ask for money. When I came back to the Tavern two years ago with the Fairgreen Trio, my jazz band, I made \$11. That didn't sting as much, because the Fairgreen Trio pulled \$250 at an art show a month previous. Sort of made me wonder why the hell I played punk rock for 6 years.

Despite only playing there a few times, and being kicked out twice, I was a regular Tavern Rat during my junior and senior years of high school. I knew some of the other regulars, who were all genuine misfits (in that they didn't like school or most of the people in it), and we had that in common, so we bonded. We only went inside on rare occasion, and spent most of our time in or around the parking lot, talking and picking on each other. I tend to give people nicknames, so I remember a few of those kids pretty well.

Dirty Wayne was a goofy, redheaded stoner who wore a lot of loud, Spiderman-themed clothing and loved Black Sabbath perhaps a little too much. He worked in a porno store, hence the name. Surprisingly, I never

tried to hit him up for discount porn. He was usually somewhere in the parking lot, yelling jovial insults at people loading equipment ("Hey cocksucker! You suck cock!" was a favorite of his) and smoking Newports, flanked by one of the many women he somehow attracted.

Derek needed no nickname. He was fucked up literally all the time, to the point where he was barely responsive. When someone lit the sleeve of his hoodie on fire as a joke, it took three of us to convince him that he needed to put it out. That may explain, in a roundabout way, why we liked him so much. He amused us.

Pagan Chris (so named because he was pagan) was a really nice guy who dressed like the Mad Hatter and bought people stuff all the time. He was with me when I convinced a fat, bearded born-again Christian who proselytized around the Tavern that Bernie the Goatfucker (an invention of my dad when he was accosted by a born-again seat mate on a flight to Europe) was my personal savior, and as such, I had no room in my heart for Jesus. Chris laughed so hard he nearly soiled himself, and that guy never bothered me again.

Honestly, I'd have been nicer had he not called me a promiscuous drug addict. As someone who was/is proudly drug free, I was insulted by his "drug addict" remark, and as someone who never got laid, I was doubly insulted by "promiscuous." Why rub it in?

So yeah, Chris and I shared some laughs. When he left to join the Air Force, I felt like I'd lost a good friend. I lost more when the police finally caught wind of all the drug dealing in the McDonald's across the street from the Tavern. Undercover cops scared most of the dealers and buyers away, including all my friends.

With the familiar Rats gone, I spent more time actually inside the Tavern instead of outside bumming around. I didn't go in much before because most of the bands there were high school kids copying the five most popular aggressive groups of the day. Marilyn Manson and Blink 182 were quite popular. With them came scores of kids who bought rebellion in the mall, or preppy kids who reminded me of the people I went to school with and hated. But it was still a place to go where I could sit and watch people and be left alone, and I also felt like I fit there and the others didn't. Since I usually felt the opposite way, having the upper hand was welcome, if only temporary.

And not all the bands were terrible. On good nights, I heard more than music from those on stage. I heard ambition in voices strained to the cracking point, heart in distorted guitars that somehow found crude-yet-recognizable melodies, effort in confident drums that didn't overstay their welcome or lose the beat. I heard fun, the inexplicable synthesis of music, lyrics, and presentation that, when heard, suggests pure joy on the part of its creators. When that happened, it made sense to be there.



## Baby

I'm so fucking tired.

Of men who say, I've never done this before,  
as their pants fall to the floor,  
and they reach for my breast, I'm already undressed,  
so as things don't get ripped.

Of men who get hard,  
when they think of the card,  
I've been dealt, and their winning hand.  
Their hands on my back, and my neck,  
Their hands on my mouth before they bite my lower lip.  
Before they push inside of me and I slip,  
out of my body where there is no room,  
and out of my mind consumed,  
by their empty expectations and the strong perfume,  
I wear to conceal,  
the cigarettes and gin, how I feel,  
when they call me their wife's name,  
because I don't have one,  
and it's no fun,  
when it doesn't hurt a little.

I'm tired of men who act surprised,  
when they see the cigarette burns on my sheets,  
and the way I fail to care.  
The way I French inhale.  
Of the men who act surprised,  
when they see see the cigarette burns on my legs,  
and the way I fail to care,  
of the men who put them there.  
Haven't you heard?  
Romance is dead.  
And the blood stain on the bed,  
came that way,  
who am I to say,  
that that isn't what I paid for.

I'm tired of men who stay too long,  
and take too long, of men who wait too long,  
of men who meet my gaze, and count the ways  
you can teach me not to give a damn.

Of the things I have to say to make you come,  
of the things I have to say to make you go,  
before I start to show,

how much your hurting me,  
and how little I can feel my feet,  
beat, against the low ceiling,  
always peeling, white paint,  
like the faint, echo in my head,  
of the things I never said,  
to make you stop pushing,  
and pulling my hair,  
evading your stare as you question me,  
silently,  
and loudly, why I'm not blushing,  
from your touching,  
and the things you make me say.

Of the gifts you gave me,  
to save me, or to silence me,  
like I had a voice to scream, anyway,  
anyway you want me,  
cause the things I do don't haunt me,  
and you can't scare a ghost. So here's a toast,  
to iniquity. And getting sick of me,  
to getting the spins,  
and counting the sins,  
I've committed against myself.  
To crying and whining, the silver lining,  
that silhouettes my face in shadows,  
and smoke, the way you spoke,  
when you called me sweetheart.  
And my own heart, stopped beating,  
for just a fleeting,  
second when I realized I'd forgotten,  
how to pray or what to say,  
even if someone could hear me.  
I'm not expecting salvation,  
just emancipation,  
from the twill around my ankles.

I'm starving.  
How about a little affection,  
or at least a good intention,  
because I haven't seen that all day.  
And I won't say,  
anything about the way,  
you call me baby,  
just maybe, you didn't notice I was twenty four,  
and the way I leave the door,  
just a little bit cracked,  
just in case I turn my back,  
on you for five seconds, and you push me around,

no one would notice if I was gone,  
and my body won't be found,  
because no one's gonna look for a dead whore,  
and then you shut the door,  
because you know what I'm thinking,  
and I know you've been drinking,  
and I don't give a damn,  
when the bottle breaks,  
and you say my first mistake,  
was wearing red lipstick.

SAMUEL MARTIN

## Untrustworthy

running honey from a coffee can  
too liberal in its doses  
seeping through the slipstream  
of this pipedream  
this year jumped away from me  
like feathers from a hose, like numbers from a salesman  
not even Virgil catches these acorns

Holy man-  
Imbue my winter with a shake-up  
Simplify my eggshells  
-They cracked too early

i'm a lightweight  
dancing with the head of a road runner  
the strength of a fly  
charcoal receding my entrails  
i can't reach far enough into the wind  
fossils seem to strike my pose  
cords enchain my slacking

What should I speak of this garble?  
Should I pick a new place to transfer my dallies?  
I'm a lazy cat with too many options  
A drifter near a tidal wave  
Stand forth biting wind  
It's time I embrace your reality.



## He Shed His Summer Skin

When I found out that my grandfather was succumbing to cancer, I was in my dorm room at the University of Pittsburgh. Not even a month had passed since I entered college in the city, and already I regretted my decision to attend a large university so far from home. I missed my family and my home in eastern Pennsylvania in a way I never had before. Even so, when my mom regretfully informed me that mid-September afternoon that my grandfather's health was deteriorating and I would need to come home to say goodbye, I was at a loss. Having had no prior experience with death, I did not trust my reaction. I felt slightly numb, as if my emotions came not from my heart, but from a place in my head that dictated the correct response to the situation. I wanted so badly to feel the intense sadness of impending loss. I yearned for authentic, unadulterated sadness to seep up from my soul and roll down my cheeks in big, fat tear drops. Nothing came.

I was far too removed from his condition, the product of never before dealing with death and a less-than-close bond with my father's father. Our relationship lacked intimacy. The memories I have of my grandfather include frustrated conversations with the television, unremitting negative commentary, Pabst beer, and ham and cheese sandwiches on white bread. My mom used to say he worried himself sick, that his constant negativity brought on the worst. My grandfather never made a concerted effort to talk with me or show any interest in my life. On recent visits, though, I had noticed a change in him. He seemed calmer, softer around the edges. The last time I saw him, he uttered three words I had never before heard in his presence. He hugged me goodbye and said, "I love you." His eyes had seemed wetter, more caring. Still, there was a distance between us, an undisputed reality in my family. The reserved demeanor of nearly every relative kept a short yet noticeable distance between us all, making close connections rare and family reunions fairly awkward. Nevertheless, I loved my grandfather, and to imagine him fighting for his life and losing was a reality I could not begin to comprehend, in spite of our distance.

I can recall one instance in which my grandfather spoke directly to me. It was Christmas, a holiday that warranted an annual visit to my grandparents' house. Not yet a teenager but ambitious as ever, I had, as usual, worked my way into an adult conversation. Suddenly I was seated on the couch beside my grandfather who held a Bible in his hands. His face was flecked with tiny white stubble and his flannel shirt rubbed softly against my arm as he read, tracing each line of text with a pale finger. That night he recited to me the story of Nebuchadnezzar, the bloodiest ruler of Babylonian times, who was permitted by God to enter heaven after repenting his sins and pleading for forgiveness. The simplicity of being allowed into heaven by asking sincerely, no matter the number or severity of sins one has committed, baffled me, and I joined in the ensuing discussion. My acceptance into the conversation validated me and my participation made me feel mature. But my grandfather

had made me feel special. Such a simple memory, a simple story, but he taught me something that night. Perhaps I had yearned all along for my mysterious grandfather to bestow upon me a piece of his hidden knowledge. I wouldn't get the chance to discover more about him, such a solitary man swathed in privacy, until the Saturday morning I was to say goodbye.

Slowly, quietly, my mother, brother and I made it up the creaky wooden staircase to the spare room where my grandparents waited, one in bed, the other beside it. My steps were hesitant, apprehensive; I kept my head down. The rug on the stairs was olive green, familiar, the worn spots along the edges patched with strips of silver duct tape. Reaching the top, I glimpsed my image in a large mirror hanging on the wall. For a split second, I studied my eyes and couldn't help but wonder if they were emitting sadness or fear or stony resilience. Everything in the bedroom was exactly as it had been when my aunts and uncles slept there as children. The room was dim and stuffy, and through the windows I could see tree branches swaying in the late-summer breeze. The faded dresser top along the wall was a cluttered collage of objects from my aunt's and uncle's childhood, books and knick knacks rested on a tiny book shelf, a small record player sat on the windowsill. And in the middle of the room, where a rusty twin bed once sat, was a hospital bed, standing four feet off of the ground, a sturdy contraption tilted and lifted for comfort.

My eyes were drawn directly to my grandfather's skeletal face, his bright white hair. For years he had lived with cancer, and for years the disease had continued to spread. Only now did it show itself outwardly. I could see the sickness in his frail body, his hollow face. He was undersized and limp, like a marionette on slackened strings. I didn't want to stare and I didn't want to look away. Suddenly I felt the urge to sit beside him in bed, to say things to him I had never said before. I wanted to forget that we were never very close, because I was willing in that moment to become close to him, to forge the relationship we never made time for in the past. I wanted him to tell me another story as he had so long ago, to enlighten me with all that he had learned in his years. I wanted to ask him if he was happy. I wanted him to be proud of me. All of these desires bubbled up inside of me, but I couldn't speak, and I couldn't move. My mouth was dry, and when I managed a word or two it felt all wrong. My attempts at conversation were trivial and meaningless next to all he had been through and still had to confront. I wanted him to know how much I cared for him, how sad I really, truly felt. I no longer worried that I wouldn't know how to react, for now I didn't know how not to react. My emotions were of tidal wave force, breaking and churning inside me. Still, I was outwardly paralyzed, seized by my racing mind until my head felt light and my tongue went numb. I wanted to speak to him, to hold his hand, but my mouth stayed shut and my hands stuck to my sides. Though my mom's high-pitched phrases pierced the quiet room, more suited for a child than a grown man, I needed to hear her voice. She broke the silence as my brother and I stood awkwardly in quiet desperation. I tried to smile. I tried to speak to him with my eyes. I hoped desperately that he could see through me.

The cancer had broken his body, but not his spirit. Though his face was gaunt and hollow, his wide eyes shined a blue so bright it was as if they were lit from behind. His slender figure slumped beneath the bed covers, wilted with the kind of exhaustion that comes from decades of existence. His bones seemed almost to break through, their delicate structure visible beneath skin as thin as paper. His physical being was failing, but his eyes revealed the character alive within him, twinkling as only the spirit of the dying can. He was helpless, like a child who bears the knowledge of generations. His piercing eyes had the ability to glimpse the future while looking back on his life.

I had never, until that day, given much thought to the subject of death. I knew that death was heartbreaking and distressful for those left behind, but until I saw my grandfather struggle just to find comfort beneath the covers, I hadn't thought of death in terms of the dying. I pictured it a quick and painless release that happened in sleep. I realized that afternoon, as I stared into the eyes of my grandfather, that death is a living, breathing entity, slowly and painfully taking over, winning control. I imagined death as it consumes the physical body, creeping into the bones, situating itself in the chest, in the fingers. And then I thought of the fearlessness in my grandfather's eyes. He sensed death drawing near, and he was not afraid. There is a way to find beauty in a long life culminating in one final breath.

My grandfather had a den filled with books. At the top of the stairs in my grandparents' twin home was a small and windowless room to which my grandfather often retreated. The unspoken knowledge that his den marked forbidden territory kept me for years from seeing but a hint of its insides through the crack of an open door. After saying goodbye, I crossed the invisible boundary at last and entered into my grandfather's private sphere. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the sunlight pouring in through the room's single window. Particles of dust danced and swirled in the air, illuminated by the rays. The room held the musty smell of aged wood and after-shave. Books were stacked everywhere- paperback, hardback, leather-bound, all packed into one neatly cluttered space. Every version of the Bible, in several languages, crowded the shelves. Novels by Jane Austen, James Joyce, William Faulkner and so many more familiar and obscure writers were squeezed into bookcases.

As I scanned the room, my grandmother watched in the doorway with her hands tucked in her pockets, shoulders hunched forward, her eyebrows perched on her forehead. She was holding up well, as usual. My grandmother was known for her ability to do it all. A truly remarkable woman, I always admired her, though she never showed an ounce of vulnerability. She sensed my curiosity and remarked that he had read every page in the room. Then, taking her hands from her pockets and tugging on the chain around her neck, my grandmother told me I could borrow anything I wanted. What was his was now free to be shared with me. Since birth I had spent time with my grandfather and I had never known that he and I possessed a common bond, a love for literature and a thirst for knowledge.



I was inspired and yet deeply regretful that it took so many years and one awful disease to discover that piece of my grandfather I held within me.

I learned much more about his life in the following days. My grandfather earned a degree in Business from Drexel University, while traveling home every weekend to my grandmother's family farm in Oxford where he helped to raise his family. After graduation, he became father to five children and was the youngest person ever named a partner at a large accounting firm. Shortly after his promotion, he was plagued with anxiety so intense he had to resign after a nervous breakdown debilitated him. As I let the details of his past sink in, I began to better understand my grandfather's pessimistic outlook on life- he lived each day haunted by his inability to keep his job and provide for his family. He had it all and he lost it all, and yet he continued to read voraciously, absorbing whatever he could. Quietly religious, he kept his faith to himself. That is what the priest said about my grandfather at his funeral. A reserved man who kept his emotions inside, he was a mystery to me for many years, a mystery I hadn't known I wanted so badly to solve.

I was standing at a bus stop on a busy street corner when my cell phone rang. It was the Wednesday after I returned to school in Pittsburgh, and I answered my mom's call as cars and buses raced by in rush hour traffic. She told me he had passed away in the night. It was September 22, the first day of fall. He had promised he'd live through the summer, and he had, right up until the very last moment. Tears were in my eyes at once, and before long they were spilling down my cheeks. I tried at first to wipe them away, discreetly so the people around me wouldn't suspect my sadness, but I sensed they understood. They could see the grief in my eyes, and in their lack of shame my own melted away. I cried on the corner that day, hugging my arms to fight the wind, wiping tears from my face. My grandfather had been released from his tired body, his soul freed to heaven like Nebuchadnezzar's, and I was going to miss him.

## When to Toast

To passion,  
to sex in a Saab.

To love,  
minus the broken hearts,  
the disintegration,  
the lies.

To nature,  
to bodies that interlock  
like perfect  
serpents.

To hate,  
and so quickly forgetting  
that you may have ever had any.

To cold,  
and how it makes warmth more  
than what its worth.

To warmth,  
and how temporary it may be  
in the dark of the night.

To morning,  
the reprieve,  
the fall downward,  
the sinking feeling of the empty space next to you.

To afternoon,  
and the silence  
of your cell phone.

To evening,  
and the double features,  
and carry-out dinners  
for one.

To sleep,  
and the loneliness that pervades  
even unconsciousness.

Are you drunk yet?

## All-the-time-wine

out come the bottles  
 the glass  
 the wine  
 the fruits of the table are just fine  
 it's Sunday  
 it's hot  
 it's steamy about  
 the room that is nearest...the feathers they got  
 dance  
 dance around  
 show your stuff,  
 now that you have it  
 fill it up  
 and put it down  
 let's see who's running upside down  
 the man who sits  
 he smiles, he nods,  
 in his mind, he's jivin' his kind  
 (who...) is this man?  
 (what...) is in my wine?  
 Who's feeling fine?...  
 Dance  
 The eyes are all cast down  
 As the sitting man looks around  
 But he says as he did before  
 "You can make it with your drinks in hand,  
 but you'll never really touch the floor..."  
 climb  
 till your shoes are frozen feet among the sky  
 where  
 your bodies will need the wine  
 of who is fine  
 of life  
 of love  
 of fate  
 of will  
 of hope  
 to live  
 in a world  
 where we know not to dance on our own  
  
 with their minds,  
 and their souls,  
 the dancers stopped the music  
 to gaze



upon  
the bottles that were empty  
of wine  
from who?  
the man  
who said,  
"Fill the jars with water,  
and let them drink my wine..."

For what it's worth  
It's worth to say that  
If they looked inside  
And saw their glasses...  
they were full of wine the whole time.

## Shoes

I am not a morning person. I've always hated getting up before the sun. I am in my second year of high school but already I have mastered a concise morning routine, forty minutes then out the door, maximizing every second so I can spend more time beforehand in bed. I swear that I can make it at least thirty minutes in the morning without even opening my eyes, just going through the routine, in one room, out the other, remembering to step over the rim of the bathtub and into the shower instead of jamming my toe on the metal tracking that lines the edge, as I have a habit of doing. In fact if ever a stream of profanity makes its way out of my mouth before the clock strikes seven, it is more than likely because my poor big toe has taken yet another blow.

While I manage to save my metatarsal digits this morning, keeping on a strict time schedule is an entirely different story. God damn that stupid school bus. It is past seven, now the swearing may be directed towards my primary mode of transportation. I grab my bag, my swim stuff, and throw on a pair of flip flops. Why is it that only when you are in a hurry, and are tossing the only matching pair of shoes out of the shoe rack, that they never land left on the left side and right on the right side?

I can hear it coming as I clumsily run down the road, still trying to lock my toes around the straps of my shoes. The bus is making a low rumbling clamor, like a digestive gurgle, as the driver shifts from one gear to the other up the hill, spewing out a mechanical burp as it finally reaches the stop and opens the door. I go up one, two, three steps, then into the third seat from the front, falling down hard onto the greasy brown plastic. We are almost always late for homeroom. I don't know if it is the bus driver's fault, or all of the kids at the second to last stop who can never manage to run when they see this oversized yellow piece of tin coming. It is always the same kids. Only a few more months until I can drive, then I won't have to worry about the bus or the kids, or making it to homeroom before the late bell.

It is getting to that time of the year when it all just starts to blur together. I am already counting down the number of days that we have left in my assignment book. I cross out another number this morning while listening to the announcements.

The problem is that everything is the same; every day it's the same routine, waking up late for the bus, getting in late for homeroom and sitting there, just waiting for the next bell to ring. I am so tired of school, like most students, tired of the seemingly *déjà vu* moments that are part of the daily schedule. I wish the days were more exciting. It is funny how things turn around so quickly, next time I'll be more careful about what I wish for before I'm fully awake.

It definitely isn't the class bell shrieking to a robotic tempo from out in the hallway. It isn't normal to start the morning off with a code red lock down. Usually that is just the stupid drill that we do mid-afternoon, the drill that the students ignore and the teachers continue lecturing through. But because it is homeroom Ms. Smith at least goes to the trouble of locking the door, I'm surprised that she even feels compelled to do that much. I know she isn't going to go pull down the blinds on the windows that line the top half of the ceiling. That would require her exerting some effort, heaven forbid.

It is amazing how we all sit there so numb without any sort of concern over what the lock down is for. I guess it doesn't really help that last week we had to walk in the cold rain down to the junior high because of a bomb threat. Or the week before when they used the drill as an excuse to bring dogs into the school to look for drugs. I'm not worried, at least not yet, I don't even know if it is a drill or the real thing.

A half hour has gone by now. There haven't been any announcements, but I can see the shoes passing by outside our window. The simple Old Navy flip flops and Nikes and the top fashion of the moment, the Adidas tennis shoes. It doesn't make sense. Something must have happened. Why are there so many kids walking past our windows towards the back of the high school? We aren't trapped down on the bottom floor while the building is burning or a bomb is counting down, while the rest of our class is hauling their designer footwear to a safer place, are we? They didn't forget about A102 did they? I should be in first period by now. If I knew what was going on I would probably be more excited about the fact that I'm missing English right now. Instead, I'm starting to worry. I'm worrying because I've lost count of the number of feet that have gone by the window. Toes and ankles drift past. Attached to them, their calves and thighs, coated in various shades of blue, create a denim sky line. I can see a full body every now and then, all skinny. The girls are all in that stage where they have chests but no hips, and the boys are just lacking the leg and facial hair, and haven't had that second growth spurt yet. They are all young. It has to be the junior high kids. What are they doing? Pay back for our visit to their gym last week? At least it isn't raining on them. It has to be some sort of practice drill, like a fire drill to the extreme, or a tornado drill and they are pretending that the twister is chasing them out of the building and up the street. I don't know, but it is strange.

Another half hour and the shoes have stopped coming. I'm tired of waiting. I want to know what is going on. Why are we still sitting in homeroom? Sonia is starting to drive us all nuts, it is like she has ADD on crack and no sense of vocal volume control. "Turn on the TV! Turn on the TV!" She never shuts up. Although, I don't like to admit it, I agree with her. If something big has happened, maybe it is on the news already. It can't be just a drill anymore. Channel 8 is showing footage; Sonia was right, footage of our junior high. That's our front lawn. Those are our kids rushing up the hill, past the cameras, moving towards us and away from their building. Why are there ambulances? Why are there so many police cars? What has happened? I can't make anything out. All of the News 8 people just keep saying there



has been an incident. Well, no shit. I can easily tell that but what happened? Sonia is cackling. I don't know why, something in the text message she just got.

"Something happened to Dr. Segro." Ms. Smith yells at Sonia for sharing, telling her to put the phone away. Apparently we aren't allowed to know what is going on. Yet, the television is still on. I can't help but wonder what has happened to my favorite principal. Did one of the kids beat him up? Did he have to wrestle them to the ground? Oh, I wish that I could have seen that, Dr. Segro, all 200 some Italian pounds of him, pinning down some wily little seventh grader to the linoleum floor, just like the cowboys do with the pigs at the fair. What a way to start the morning. We are all sitting here while Dr. Segro is perched on top of some boy, waiting for the cops to come take him away. I bet his bald head is all red from the workout. We always used to joke about how he must wax it every morning because the lights reflect so brightly off of it, especially the stage lights when he gives the opening remarks before a music concert. I smile a little, thinking about one of my favorite concerts where he gave his best James Earl Jones impersonation in honor of our movie themed program. It makes me miss the Junior High.

Sonia starts up again; another message. I snap out of my mid-morning day dream and a wave of reality and panic wash over me. Austin, who is sitting up front on top of one of the ricketiest desks, is flipping through the stations now, trying to find out if Sonia is telling the truth. God, I hope not. We find out soon enough whether or not she is lying.

The principle is dead. A boy is dead. Ms. Smith's face goes white. I think all of ours do. This is Red Lion. This is my high school, my school district, MY home. People don't get shot here. This can't be real. That mass on top of the stretcher that the cameras are focusing on, that isn't him. It has to be a joke. Why isn't he popping out from under the sheet like they do in the movies? I can't keep my eyes off of the television. I can feel my chest tightening up like someone is trying to wrap a giant rubber band around my rib cage. This isn't real; I have to still be in bed. I just want to hear my alarm clock or the bus driving by, I don't care, I just don't want this to be the truth.

Dead? Dead. Gone. Shot. Murdered by a kid who then killed himself. How can he be dead? The only principal who ever bothered to learn my name. He always wore a suit to school. He was always out in the halls talking to the students, caring about everyone. He always stood in the cafeteria and watched over all of the kids before that first bell. He isn't standing there anymore. I think I'm going to be sick. I just, I just don't know what to do. I don't know what to think. I need to remember to breathe. I need to stop asking myself questions. I can't. Everything is a question. Today was supposed to be just another day. Why did it have to be different? This isn't what I meant when I wished for a little excitement. I thought this town was safe. Why did it have to happen here? Why did it have to happen to him? I'm still watching the TV. He always polished his black dress shoes. I can see them shining through the sheet.

## The Shaman

I hadn't wanted to go outside. Not at all, thank you. I had been in writing, working on something, important. That was what I wanted to do. It was hot outside--too hot at 95 degrees to be gallivanting about from one side of the property to the other.

But the mother's insistent voice:

"Are you a vampire? Go outside for a change."

I'd been outside once today. No, twice. The first time had been all of my own accord. The second time I had been on a fetching mission to the garden, but that scarcely mattered. The point was that I had been out. I explained this. My mom didn't buy it.

"Get your butt out there," she growled. "People get fat from sitting around on their asses all day like lumps."

So now I'm standing here in air that smells like someone's rejected sunlight, maybe a little burnt and with a bit too much humidity to make the cut. It's too hot. I mean this. It is incontestable fact that it is too goddamned hot. My existence cannot continue for much longer in this hell. I'm going to die. Basically I think it will happen like this. First my hair will start to melt, run down my face, all over the place. My ears will droop. Then they'll melt too. Then my face will start dripping from the nose like wax that's been too long in the heat, and little runnels of stuff will trace down and track dirty lines of melting body substance along my disappearing face until it spreads to my neck and my arms and further and there's nothing left of me but a puddle. Like the Wicked Witch. Only it'll be the heat that does me in and not the humidity. Help, I'm melting! I'm melting!

And I don't like the view either. The lawn is a tangle of weeds. It's a downright mess. It looks like some sort of jungle that has somehow acquired life and motive of its own, and it does not seem happy to see me. Don't get me wrong. I like the outdoors. I love the outdoors. I only despise being outside when it's like this and I'm in a bad mood. I've been coerced. I feel cheated. That doesn't help my attitude much.

Shadow rubs up against my leg. Go away cat.

I bend down to give him a polite pat anyway. Then I hear the shrill scream.

The voice carries through the muggy air with surprising clarity, bites into my ears, attacks my sense of hearing distantly but violently.

*Shaman. My little brother. In trouble.*

I shouldn't say that I worry about him constantly. It's just that he's four, and he gets into trouble easily, and with all of the wilderness about it's

rather easy for his trouble to get him hurt. His skinny little body is already covered in faded scars and fading bruises from falling down, running into things, running into dogs, running around ceaselessly with this sort of reckless obliviousness. I love him. I can't help being a little edgy when he goes off with no one to protect him.

So when I hear the screaming I forget my stubborn sluggishness all at once, kick it as far away from me as I can manage and break into a run.

The noise comes from the edge of the woods, back past the sloping bank of exposed shale where nothing can grow in the poor soil. I tear up the uneven road until I can see the line of trees clearly, and breathing heavily (it's too damned hot) I scan the forested tangle with anxious eyes. He's still yelling. I don't know what about. I can't see him. I don't know where he is, I don't know what's happening to him. Where's that good-for-nothing Oren? Oh god, what the hell is happening?

"Shaman! Shaman! Shaman, Shaman, SHAAA-MAAAN!" The ululating cry rolls ponderously up the embankment, only to be suppressed and pushed back toward its origin by the sheer heaviness of the air. My little brother's frantic yells, however, continue.

"Shaman!" No answer. I'm running. I'm flying, up the sharp rocks in flapping sandals with sweat slick on every inch of my body.

"Shaman!"

My foot slips from under me and the sandal strap tears from its mooring. Pain. Pain, lots of it. My knee has been torn open along the same broad scar that it was ripped along years ago, and bits of the sharp fragments of stone are embedded in the bleeding flesh. I couldn't really give a damn. My ankle feels oddly twisted. My shoe is gone, the shale-monsters are biting the soles of my feet. I don't care.

"Shaman!"

I've reached the top of the bank, and now I'm confronted with the rude snarl of green and living things that stands like a hostile army in my path. I shove aside branches, poison ivy, thorn bushes. My arms and legs are going to be a mess and my foot already is. I'm not thinking about this. I'm thinking of all of the terrible things that could be happening to my little brother. Mauled, eaten, hurt, savaged, kidnapped, torn apart, fell from a tree...

"Shaman!"

And then a quiet but audible little whimper:

"Bika?"

I turn and I look and I see the impish little face, tear-streaked, staring down at me from the low branch of a tree. Shaman. Unhurt but up a tree like a frightened beast. How did he get up there? I didn't even know that he could climb.



"Shaman!" I'm shaking so hard with some cocktail of adrenaline and relief that that's really all I can manage. "What happened?" I ask finally. I'm laughing a little. I don't know why. My tears aren't from laughing. Maybe I'm laughing at myself. Maybe I'm just so damned relieved that I don't know how to respond and my mind's just picked a few familiar emotions to throw out there.

"I saw a bear," he whispers. I give him a long look.

"A bear?" I ask. "Are you sure?"

"I s-saw it from far off," he says quietly. "It was really big. It was the color of white. Like a -- what are those ones called? -- a polar bear." I was so proud that he remembered that. I was also very glad that there was no real bear.

"It had brown spots though," he hissed. "I think it was a monster kind."

He had seen the neighbors' dog. I started to laugh. Rescuing him from the tree as carefully as I could, I picked him up and squeezed him. He didn't like that very much. He wasn't so big on hugs.

"It was just a dog," I reassured him, setting him on his feet. "Now let's go out in the sun where it's nice. This is almost as bad a place to spend the day as inside." He frowned.

"I saw it!" he insisted. I raised a brow but I didn't say anything else. I knew all about overactive imaginations.

## the red state

here, you can see the cloudshift  
out a hundred miles. it is where  
the sight of the next mountain is a fever  
in my eyes, and ache for my legs  
and my lungs.  
there, the green bushes rise  
from burning yellow grass, points  
along a treasure map,  
who's cleverest clue,  
is that the branches lead you home.  
up, up, they are stretching,  
like i do  
atop the mountain. it lights me up  
like the dustbowl lightening  
fire, wild, in the sky, alive  
for the same reason we run  
down the hill with eyes closed,  
arms and palms open,  
rushed, flushed, every time.  
and here, a waterfall flings glass  
baubles shattering light over rock and river,  
as i stand on the cliff,  
and scream.  
now, tighten your throat and stare  
upwards at tarnished clouds  
with squished bottoms you'd try to swallow  
if the rain wasn't beating you away.  
until then, rising  
clouds turn mountains into volcanoes,  
while shrub and sky instruct waiting fools  
on how to live ecstatic.

## Water and Fire

We all have our days where things just go wrong. The goal was easy; simply switch the apparatus from the condensing position to a distilling position. In layman's terms, move the glass pole from vertical to horizontal and attach another beaker to the end. I had removed the pole and added the beaker and secured it with a plastic ring. The next step was to cleanly attach the empty end into the boiling organic solvent Tetrahydrofuran, yet as I went to add the end of the pole into the beaker there was a distinct sound, the sound you hear when lighting a gas grill for the first time. It was unmistakable; nonetheless there wasn't time to react. Suddenly I felt like I was trapped in an inferno. I couldn't control the heat. The next moment I looked down and my world became chaotic.

The fire burned, a hot, fast snake searing my skin. It raced along my arms yellow and angry, and biting on its way. It blazed like a thousand angry birthday candles. It attacked me in sheets. Hot, hot sheets that were so intense that I was chilled. I wondered if skin could melt... The smell reminded me that skin was not fire-proof, and as pain pulsed through my body like lightning on the playground of my flesh, I wished for nothing more than to stand, with nothing touching me, no fire licking me, on a cool spring day complete with breeze. No, the fire continued to dance its hated dance on me. I could not escape its pace, nor its blaze. I wanted to free my eyes yet they were contained behind my goggles. I ripped off my gloves and tried reaching to remove the goggles, but the heat was too intense; I couldn't—it just caused too much pain. Finally, I succeeded, but the sight of fire so close scared me and I just screamed. I was so petrified that I could not even move. Abruptly there was a hand on my back pushing me; I heard voices all around screaming, however I could not make sense of the noise. The noises were overcome by the rumbling sound of a wave during a violent crash upon the seashore. The sensations were too strong. I wanted to run away but I was being held against my wishes. I took a deep breath and suddenly became conscious that the burning sensation had deteriorated and the cold water was very soothing. I came to the realization that Professor Damon and Cornelius were holding me under the emergency shower. I could not seem to breathe. I kept coughing and the room filled with smoke. The room was nothing but a haze, the haze you would find on a foggy morning after a torrential downpour in the heat of the summer. I was moved to another room.

As I was walked down the hall I could only hear the squish of my wet shoes against the tiled floor; the force of the water dripping all over my body was too heavy for me to hold myself up or look at the damage caused by the fire. I found myself frazzled and extraordinarily afraid. It was not the afraid you feel when you have gotten a detention in school and you have to face your parents, but the fear that you have just faced your worst nightmare. Inside the new room, Cornelius turned on the water so that I could continue to stop the burning by placing my arms and face under the running faucet.



There was a voice behind me. "The ambulance was on its way. Where was the fire?" I didn't have to respond. Cornelius stated that the fire was in room 142 and the professor was currently in there attempting to control it. Meanwhile the medics walked into the room. They instructed me to have a seat. I didn't want to have a seat. I had too many questions to ask Cornelius. How burnt was my face? Were my eyebrows gone? Did I have any hair left? What happened? Did anyone else get hurt? I could not bring myself to look into a mirror. I was too afraid of what I might or might not see. The medics began poking and prodding at me like I was a guinea pig they were experimenting on. Not to mention, now they wanted all kinds of information. The next thing I knew I had an oxygen mask on my face and my sneakers were coming off. Behind me Professor Damon was showing me a box of oatmeal. I didn't fucking care about oatmeal. My arms were hotter than lava; the medics had put a stop to my water supply and now they were attempting to stick a huge needle into my foot and this stupid man was trying to show me the importance of oatmeal and I couldn't give two flying pigs about food right now! Argg! I screamed. There was this burning sensation traveling up my foot and into my ankle and it would not go away. The medics told me to stop screaming and take a deep breath, that they had just given me some pain medication. I replied "It would have been nice if you have given me some kind of warning!" The one medic talked into his radio asking on the estimated arrival of the helicopter. Red flags went up in my head! *Helicopter? Why did they care about a helicopter when I was sitting in a building and my arms were burning?* The next words out of the medic's mouth were to me "We are waiting on the ambulance's arrival. As soon as it arrives we will load you into the back of the ambulance and transport you to the hospital where the helicopter is awaiting your arrival to transport you to a burn center." Well, at this point I had nothing left to do but wait.

I looked at my arms and I could not get over the sight. My left arm looked like I took an entire bottle of Silly String and covered my skin with it. Everywhere thin long pieces were hanging off. I did not dare touch it because I never knew what my skin might stick to. I didn't realize that your skin melted the way cheddar cheese melts. My skin was definitely melted and in some places it seemed to have vanished. I was convinced that my bone and tissue were sticking out in some parts. The right arm didn't look much different; the pattern of the burning was unique but it had an identical appearance.

What seemed like ten hours later, the ambulance finally arrived. In came this humongous stretcher. Once again I was given instructions to lie down on the stretcher. Although this time, instead of walking to the stretcher, I was picked up and gently placed down on top of this yellow paper blanket. I requested water once again because the burning sensation was back in my arms, but I was denied. Their reasoning was that I would not be allowed to have it in the helicopter so I might as well get used to the pain now. The medics assured me that when we got into the ambulance they would call the hospital and see if they could administer more pain medication. So I finally made it onto the stretcher and I yelled back to Cornelius to call some family. He asked for my boyfriend's number and so I gave it to him.

We left the room and headed toward the end of the hall, but we had to turn around because there was no way for the stretcher to make it down the set of stairs. It gave me one more opportunity to brace myself before heading outside all alone with no friends or family at my side. As we reached the outdoors, I was overcome with pain and discomfort. The heat of the sun was unbearable. I could not decide what to do. My first instinct was to remove all of the sheets from my body. It seemed like the appropriate reaction, that's what you do when you are hot in the middle of the night, yet that seemed to make everything worse. The other option was to try and hide beneath the yellow blankets, however I encountered another problem. As I tried to hide my arms and face beneath the blanket, it began to stick to my arms. I tried repositioning my body and I just felt the tearing of my skin, the same painful stick you get when pulling a band-aid off your hairy leg when you are eight years old. Finally I was shielded by the inside of the ambulance. The ambulance crew were kind enough to open up a bottle of saline and pour it over the portions of my body that were melted to the sheets of the stretcher. Slowly my arms began to absorb the water and the crew was able to gradually remove the blankets.

The helicopter was awaiting my arrival three short blocks away, however those three blocks seemed to have created a mountain of anxiety inside me about the helicopter ride. I knew that I was going into the helicopter, but until now I had no clue which hospital the helicopter was going to take me to. We finally arrived at the landing pad of the helicopter behind the hospital. The ambulance parked and the back doors of the ambulance were opened. In stepped one of the flight nurses. He introduced himself to me. Yet I could not remember his name for the life of me. Knowing someone's name is something I was always taught to value. Now, I am in a situation and I can't even address the only person who can help me. He told me that they would pull me out of the back of the ambulance and transfer me to the special stretcher designed to fit inside the helicopter. I was instructed to lie extraordinarily still and they would do all the movement. I braced myself for exposure to the heat of the afternoon.

Rapidly both teams transferred me onto the new stretcher and prepared to load me into the back of the helicopter. I was told to close my eyes because the propeller was running and they were afraid that dust particles would be sprayed into my eyes. I was loaded headfirst. Luckily once I was loaded into the helicopter another flight nurse greeted me. She introduced herself and asked if I needed anything. I requested to have some water placed on my body. She said that she would provide me with water as soon as she had the opportunity.

The rest of the crew climbed into the helicopter, shut the doors and we were ready for take-off. After we were in the air, one of the flight nurses attempted to put another IV into my hand, since my feet were inaccessible and they were authorized to administer more pain medication. It was at this point when I became extraordinarily violent. As soon as the needle touched my right hand I swung my fist toward the flight nurse. This was

the most excruciating pain I had ever felt. I thought I had seen stars. I was placed in restraints to prevent injury to the flight team while placing the new IV. The flight nurse was able to get the IV into my arm. Immediately afterwards the restraints were removed. A headset was placed onto my ears so that I could communicate with the flight team during the duration of the flight. The team informed me that we would be landing at John Hopkins Burn Center in approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. Shortly thereafter the headset began to irritate my burnt ears to the point where I threw it across the helicopter. To ease my pain some more the flight nurse began dripping water over my burnt arms and legs. They continued to shout and ask where I wanted the water, I simply pointed. After pointing to so many different locations they simply handed me the bag of water and allowed me to spray myself.

The next thing I remember was waking up to the noise of a generator and bright sunlight pouring into the back of the helicopter. Apparently, I had arrived at the hospital and was being transferring into the Emergency Center for further medical attention. I wish I had realized this was only the beginning.

Note: Names of faculty members and employees have been changed for reasons of privacy.



## Three Scars and a Wound

None of these gnarled crayon scribbles of skin that remain can compare to the one she left. How visceral the feeling was when the realization flooded me, drowning me with her, oblivious, indifferent, blasé.

Wholeheartedly experiencing life, the expanse of which I now recognize was so narrowly innocent and pure, I threw my nine-year-old body into every chest heaving and knee-thrashing activity. Similarly, free from the confining perspective of women and the explosion of hormones which would keep me anxiously guessing whether my outfit met her approval or whether she would notice the newest blemish on my face, I threw on my dirty, holey, grey sweat-pants and eagerly awaited my opportunity to play kickball at recess.

He was my best friend. We shared everything together, even our love for spontaneously pursuing random notions of challenge, accomplishment, secrecy, and mischief. These projects, always initiated with wide-eyed meetings of bursting expressions, never failed . . . to end in failure.

I raced around the field striking the ball, connecting passes, envisioning plays, pushing myself, time slowing down on the perfectly crowned pitch. I can still recall what must be my oldest flashes of memories. My brother, four years my senior, lovingly introduced me to the world of soccer. I also remember the frustration that ensued with the competition; he always demanded more than I could achieve.

Oh the courtship was like none other. We flirted, chatted, winked, and tickled. We teased, derided, admired, and giggled. We danced about wildly and gaily, a silly juvenile genuine activity, however, as structured as chess, each of us stealing pieces of each other with every move. She loved how I listened as she confessed her every life's detail while we broke from our walk on a bench with a faded metal plate dedicated to someone unimportant. I loved absorbing every pouted lip and brilliantly blue striation in her promising and comforting eyes allowing me to better picture her during the trying hours of loneliness during the day and illuminating my darkest dreams at night.

We were 'old school' in the mid-nineties, free from the restrictions of safety regulations, of which I believe my sole efforts on the playground and multitude of visits to the nurse may have initiated. We played our sports the real way . . . on blacktop. No teacher calling us in would interrupt the last out. No torrential downpour would halt our crusade for victory. No sunbathing intensity, heating the blacktop to critical mass and giving it the ability to cut skin with the nearest graze would ever stop me from sliding home to beat that red rubbery ball and the thong it would make against my back.

A little old for tree houses, Mike and I appropriately dubbed our new project the Sky High Forested Living Construction Operation. We scoured the forest for the perfect consortium of trees to found our housing development, we both wandered near and far, heads tilted back examining, constructing,

and deconstructing, imaginations ablaze, competing for bragging rights over who discovered the best location. Studying the kaleidoscope of trees, the ruffles of bark and spectrum of shadings, the location of trunks and the division of branches, we isolated the perfect spot and set up shop.

Soccer became my passion. The adrenaline, endorphins, and drive for success became addicting. Nothing gave me the feeling of anticipation and focus as the laces of my cleats clenching my feet.

She was young. Too young? And I was old. How old? That didn't matter anyway it was only fun and games and we enjoyed the attention, however, whenever the innocent longing of her eyes met the kind loneliness of mine I shuddered. We would walk for hours for weeks for months before that sweet first kiss. How comfortable and natural the soft wet interlude. It was as if the conversation never stopped.

One of the beautiful aspects of my elementary school days was my inability to succumb to monotony. I can always remember waiting anxiously for our recess supervisor to open the shed full of equipment, my eyes always darting to find the round object of my desire as if my spotting it would hasten our wait.

It was a gorgeous day, the sky never bluer and the sun never friendlier, slightly ironic, but not yet because I was still in the outfield.

We began with the necessary excavation of the site, taking our saws, axes, clippers, and blades of every sort and slashed, tore, ripped and up-rooted. We felt like real men as we ravaged the site. We threw back a swig of water from our dirt-ridden bottles admiring our progress. We cleaned all but a small group of poison oaks before noon. We took a break for lunch and a trip to the lumber yard to pick up the necessary materials.

Years of experience don't give it to you. Neither do hundreds of hours of practice and drills. I'm not exactly sure how but I developed some sort of a sixth sense which was revealed during the most heated soccer games. I'm not sure if there's some profound release of chemicals or subconscious psychological recognition, but there's no doubt that I knew at the sixtieth minute we were going to lose that game, despite our two goal lead.

Screw puppy love, I cared for her, this wasn't a game anymore, the flirting and baiting was done we were serious for some time now; she had long ago won me. Poetry aside and emotions on hold I felt betrayed and alone confused and cold. She was fading away just as she'd drawn near. Nothing had changed but her fickle mind how immature. I grasped for her with inquiry and pleading in every desperate attempt to remind her of all she was leaving. None of it was any use. I wasn't ready to see it; mentally I was preparing my heart for what it would soon have to deal with.

I eagerly awaited the first pitch, frustrated with its awkward bouncing. I hated waiting for even a second. Scolding the pitcher for being a belly itcher, or whatever the most popular rhyming insult of the time was, I again prepared for the pitch. Eyes widening as the ball's trajectory and roll seemed

optimal I struck the ball and dashed to first. Eric, the third baseman, made a great play and whirled it to first. Instinctively I slid. A broken bottle and shards of glass lay in my imminent path.

This was no usual tearing of my sweatpants and blood-tickled threads. Green sparkles adorned the blood soaked skin about my knee and leg. I glared at each pointy corner dazzling from my knee in the sunlight, wondering how painful they would be to remove and how big the scar would be.

We returned with every necessary accoutrement and rolling up the hill. Designing, engineering, and planning our execution, we covered the trees from roots to shoots.

We raced to finish going to work on the last two poison oaks. Arms over shoulders, teeth over blades, we sliced through the soft juicy arbor which sprayed its contents speckling the metal. I triumphantly turned to exclaim my victory and watched the graceful downward motion of his arm guide the blade through the last branch of the oak and follow through, like the counterclockwise motion of a long hand, meeting my face a millimeter east of my eye. I lay there wondering how painful stitches were and how big the scar would be.

No matter how sure I was about my instinct, whenever it revealed to me that we were going to lose, I always refused to accept it. Furious, I raced up field to intercept their next attack. I ripped the ball from his feet, charged their goal, and wound up to strike the ball with everything I had. That's when it all slowed down. One of those few instances in my soccer career where I had the privilege of examining what was happening around me from another perspective on a different clock.

He entered my line of vision too late, planting his foot directly behind the ball. There was no time to abort the swing, only to watch and feel what would happen next. The ball slowly compressed as the force of my foot traveled through it only to meet the barrier on the other side. I felt the tendon as it slowly tore. A prickly feeling, like Velcro strips being peeled apart, tickled my knee followed by a pop as if a champagne cork had been released off of my patella. Frozen I lay on the ground in shock wondering how painful the surgery would be and how big the scar.

I wait longing for my wound to heal and leave the mere memories as those superficial wounds have left the landscape of my skin. This scar had no superficiality. I lay there wondering how painful the memories would be and how profound the scar.

I retraced our steps through the protection of the forest examining the red love-soaked leaves scattering the path amongst the somberness of the amber foliage which trickled down, swallowing them up. My right hand felt heavier than ever without hers supporting it. I doubted that the love-bound brand she imparted would illustrate any more clearly the finality of my childhood. I reached the end of the trail and looked back at the barren



stripped trees and the mosaic of colors that scattered the ground. I could no longer recognize the path from the forest. I turned wiping the snow from my face, meeting the first cold heartless flakes of winter and I embraced the sharp burn.

RYAN MITCHELL

## Dying in September

In 2005 I wrote the song you haven't heard,  
During the same month on a new night, the twenty-third.  
The lines are leather and probably too much to remember,  
About what plagues the unluckiest lovebirds in September.  
A poem of broken lives, put to deadly music,  
Maybe I lost it because I never used it.  
Just hearing Earth Wind and Fire mocks all of me,  
My song is the sorrow that drowns drunken glee.  
In reflection I prefer a poignant deflection,  
Trust that my voice would have no inflection,  
Only spoken, sung, in a monotone minor,  
A key understood as a loss of desire.  
I will never again dance innocently,  
Only yearn for words of devilry,  
Lyrics to label a birthday,  
Filthy black, not grey.  
The verse is still in me,  
A chorus waits eagerly.  
My refrain is close,  
A deadly dose.  
I recall the title,  
Not for recital.  
Do you remember,  
*Dying in September?*  
I'm not sure when I lost my latest sappy song,  
All of a sudden the lyrics seem *really* wrong.  
Oh yes, surely you'll remember,  
That twenty-first night of September?  
The lyrics are close but remain underground,  
Buried beside innocence, silent, no sound.

## Plastic Pigs, Replacement Brains, And Other Things that Break my Heart

The look on my mother's face—drawn, brows arched, not in anger, but as if asking forgiveness—as she said the words “Your father's gone,” would stay with me and be the blueprint for the new building I was erecting. Experience as architecture—milestones turn to cornerstones and this was the experience to usher in the construction of what was officially my adulthood.

We stood in the kitchen and my mother sat at the table. I told her I knew it, and walked over to the sink. My older sister, Becky, leaned against one of the cupboards, her face slowly beginning to pinch into what was going to be a very long week of crying. I didn't cry. I didn't cry until his viewing, not until we all sat down to hear the eulogy. I slid a cigarette out of my sister's pack, went out to the back deck, and smoked. I watched the smoke curl up into a very black sky; it left my mouth like I imagine people think a soul leaves the body when it's time. This was not what I believed in. He was here and now he is gone. Just like mom said—he didn't “pass on” like most people do. He was just...gone.

Dad had been sick for the previous nine months. When I think of that length of time and how hard it was for him—the radiation, the chemo, the surgeries, the nausea and starvation—it seems like a very long time. But when I think of it in terms of the day before we found out it was cancer, it seems painfully short. I was living in Los Angeles, far away from my family's home in Pennsylvania, and had only been there for about two months when my mother called me with the news. Two months previous to that phone call I had stood in my parents' driveway, my father inspecting the packing job I'd done.

He was black, but not ace-of-spades black. His complexion was caramel—a testament to generations of biracial relationship in his own family tree, which he himself perpetuated when he married my mother, who is a very pale Canadian. He had a penchant for polo shirts with horizontal stripes, and jeans. On the weekends, when he'd commence with the yard work, he'd don one of his old, beat up trucker's caps—the kind with the mesh backing. He never wore them properly; he always looked as though someone might have plopped the cap slightly askew onto his head when he wasn't looking. Out of his mouth protruded a white plastic cigarette filter. He began chewing on them three years ago when he finally quit after forty years of smoking. As a kid, I rarely saw him without a cigarette in his hand, and now I never saw him without the white plastic filter, clicking between his teeth as he passed it back and forth with his tongue.

He considered the truck of my car, being the whiz he was at packing the most amazing amount of stuff into the tiniest of spaces, and everything I owned was in my car. He had no suggestions, nothing to move around there so I could fit this here and that there. He was satisfied, and he

coughed. He'd been coughing for a bit longer than people normally cough, so I asked him if he'd get the checked out. He said he would. Then he told me to get my car out of the driveway so he could pull out the riding mower and have a go at the grass. I did, and I was off to L.A.

I thought of this as I pulled into the driveway nine months later. I'd come home from California to help my mom around the house for a week. She was taking care of my dad 24/7, and despite both my sisters being around, she had no one to help out. As I pulled up the first thing I saw was the long, unkempt grass and I knew immediately that things were worse than I thought. We had four acres, and every moment we lived in that house, the grass was cut. This was the first time I had ever remembered it being this long—about mid-calf. I knew Dad couldn't cut the grass himself anymore, but the fact that he hadn't gotten anyone else to do it—that was surely a sign that my mother wasn't being totally honest with me about his condition.

And I was right. I thought I had a week to make an attempt at some closure—to say whatever it was that I needed to say, to listen to whatever it was that he needed to say, to ask the questions that I needed to ask. I would be visiting the hospital the following morning. I hadn't seen him in four months. I spent the plane ride and the drive from the airport trying to arrange things in my head from most important to least. My driver even asked if I wanted to stop by the hospital since it was on the way. I said no—I didn't want to put any undue stress on him by showing up unexpectedly. He was a proud man, and I knew he wanted to be prepared. As I got out of the car, the grass rippled from the far side of the yard towards me and I knew that everything I had to say would go unsaid. I wished I had stopped by.

Prior to learning that my father was dying, I didn't truly understand the point in having religion. I'd spent most of my life claiming uncommitted agnosticism and had, for the last few years, been steadily moving into atheism, so by the time my father got sick, I had nothing to lean on. It seemed that this was the time that crutch was made for. What do you do when you have no hope and the situation is out of your hands? You pray.

I had been thoroughly tested up to that point; my life was a tangled mess of disastrous decisions made in my ill-informed youth that had amounted to a tightly drawn knot in a noose. My neck wasn't in it yet. I simply crouched inside the knot watching execution after execution of my confidence, my esteem, my ability to care about my life—this consisted mainly of eating, sleeping and receiving a variety of abuses from my boss and my boyfriend.

I worked for a tile company up in the hills of Topanga Canyon, where I made the glaze from scratch and where illegally hired South Americans hand painted customs-made tiles for the rich and sometimes famous. My boss, Bob, was a combination of painfully stupid and horribly cruel. It didn't matter that I was a citizen of the country and spoke perfect English—he would yell at us all like dogs that shit in the corner.



My boyfriend was a talented film student who came across and quiet and shy. I learned quickly after moving 3,000 miles away from my friends and family that the closer he got to someone, the worse he would treat them. He didn't feel comfortable venting on people he didn't know well, and he didn't know many people well. So, whatever his frustrations were, he'd take them out on me. It began with him pushing me down into beds and couches, which was just humiliating—but over a relatively short period of time it moved on to pushing into walls or onto the ground. Once he had me down, he'd kick me in the ribs. Punches and smacks to the heads followed, but never in the face. I learned that in order to stop someone from choking you while standing up, you should go limp. He wanted to choke me, but he didn't want to have to hold me up while he did it. Unfortunately, that led to more assaults on my ribs, and ultimately banging my head off the hardwood floor and furniture. All of this was accompanied by the yelling and the screaming. I was worthless, I was useless, I was trash, I would never be anything, I would always be nothing. He hated the sound of my voice, hated looking at me. I bought all of it. I took it, I fought back, and I took it some more. Then, I went limp. The last thing my father had said to him in the driveway before we left was "take care of her." He took care of me, alright.

I had become so numb and apathetic that when it came time to deal with my father's mortality, I was surprised by the wild desperation it conjured. And I tried to pray, an attempt that lasted all of two seconds before I felt ridiculous. I figured it'd be more effective to pen a letter to Santa for a cure in time for Christmas.

I called my father often during his stays in the hospital, and as much as I could when he was home. More often than not, though, he was not able to talk. He was sleeping, or he was just too sick at the time. He was on numerous medications—Amethopterin, Procarbazine, Temozolomide. The nausea from the chemo made it impossible for him to eat and he lost weight at such a rapid pace that my mother feared he'd starve to death before the cancer ever killed him. But before the cancer spread, he was still pretty jovial. He meant to kick it. He had every intention of kicking it. He didn't quit smoking for nothing. My father lit up doctors' offices, keeping nurses and patients in stitches. These waiting rooms were choked with sadness, despair, and hopelessness, but not when it was my father who was waiting. By the time his name was called for his check-up, the room was howling with laughter.

When he was confined to the hospital for lengthy periods of time, I would try to devise ways of keeping things cheery when he couldn't. I sent him a small toy pig catapult, and he used to torment nurses with these diminutive pink plastic piggies, which drove my mother crazy because she'd have to collect them from various corners and under chairs so that he could shoot them again. Similarly, when we learned it spread to his brain, I wrote to tell him that it probably wasn't the cancer at all...I insisted that when the doctors operated they would probably find that they had indeed found the

defective part of his brain that made him so weird. I followed it up with a small toy brain—the kind you immerse in water and it grows. I told him it was a replacement and sent detailed installation instructions with it. The next time I talked to my dad, he told me I was sick, and then laughed wheezingly into the phone. My mother later told me that he showed it to everyone who visited—including the doctors who he insisted follow the instructions carefully.

It was difficult to accept that this person was soon to disappear. This was the man who adopted my sister and me when he married my mother and never once treated us any differently than he treated his own. This was the man who disowned much of his family because they couldn't accept that he married a white woman and did his best to protect us from the constant bombardment of racism from local whites. This was the man who worked for the Department of Defense as a Quality Assurance Specialist and, regardless of the financial difficulties we occasionally had, repeatedly turned down bribes that ran into tens of thousands of dollars each. He simply said that he wouldn't be able to sleep at night if he knew that one of our boys' planes went down because of a faulty component. While I know Dad had some faith, I was never sure how much he had. He wasn't an outwardly religious person, and we didn't go to church growing up.

The day after he died, my mother told me how he went, and while I know she just needed to tell someone as a mechanism of her own grief, I wished she hadn't. He drifted in and out of consciousness. He held up his hands in front of his face as if something struck out at him. He kicked, he swore. He'd only calmed when my mother spoke to him, soothing him, telling him it was okay to just...let...go. And he eventually did, though still fighting. Afterwards, my mother had to push his arms and legs back down. Wouldn't someone with faith go willingly? Wouldn't they just accept it? It seemed as though he didn't accept it and he certainly wasn't ready to go. He was scared. Did he pray? Did he beg? To whom did he pray and beg? As an atheist, I know I have no one to appeal to and I don't think he did either. And this is what makes it hard. It's one thing to lose someone with the belief that you'll see this person again, or that this person will somehow watch over you, is always with you—but this road seems much harder. I do not feel my father's presence, and I know that I will never see him again. But what I do have is this...

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My father's viewing was six days later. He had prepared everything before he died, up to and including writing his own obituary. The funeral costs were taken care of, everything was in order. All that had to be done was to call the florist to get a spray for the casket, which I did. We spent the rest of the time sitting around the house boomeranging back and forth between reminiscing humorously about my dad and staring numbly into space. Between the short spurts of laughter and bouts of sobbing, the house was dead quiet—we thought we would go crazy.

Finally the day had come and my mother, sisters, and I arrived at Lantz' Funeral Home. Muriel Lantz and her nephew Aaron greeted us warmly. They were close friends of our family. As I entered the parlor, I could imagine my father vacuuming. Michael had a normal cleaning staff, but sometimes a person would die quite unexpectedly and for whatever reason the service was rushed. On those occasions, my father and mother would make the quick trip up to Uniontown to help clean the viewing area and chapel. The hallways were long and lined with comfortable chairs and loveseats. The ceilings were low.

I pulled Aaron aside and asked how he looked. I hadn't seen him since Christmas and at that time he was relatively healthy looking. I was acutely afraid of seeing him after this terrible disease had ravaged him. Aaron assured me that he did his utmost, considering my father promised he would haunt him if he didn't.

We arrived before everyone else, and we each spent a little time privately at the casket. When it came my turn, I, of course, had nothing to say to him. He was gone. He couldn't hear me. I could do nothing but contemplate his body and think what a great job Aaron had done, and make a mental note to thank him later. My father lay in this powder blue silken box. His face shaved, his color good, though his lips were a little pale. I thought of his false teeth, which were in a box in the kitchen and had been for quite some time. There came a point when he became so thin and wasted that he could no longer wear them. Growing up, the only time we saw him without them was first thing in the morning when he'd wander downstairs in his blue robe, hair standing straight up like Don King, to get a cup of coffee. Today, he wore a sober blue shirt and tie, which he had selected himself. He didn't look like a sick man, let alone a dead man.

Soon, people were arriving. Some I knew, some I didn't. There were friends of my little sister, who was then a high school senior. Even a few I myself went to high school with, including Eric Wilson, who actually worked with my father for a time after graduation. They signed the book, they made their way through the receiving line—faces laughed and cried, looked joyful one moment, as they remembered him, and sorrowful the next, when they remembered he was dead. The nurses who had taken care of him arrived and cried openly and red-faced. One of them specifically I had sent a thank you card to a few months previous because she really went above and beyond to provide the care my parents needed. She hugged me and cried and told me what a wonderful man he was. I thanked her and told her that Aaron had done a beautiful job. I didn't know what else to say. The room was filling to capacity and I eased away from everyone to get a better view. The room was full. People who knew my father in high school, in the Navy, when he lived in Washington, DC and California, people who knew him from the many offices in which he worked, people who knew him from his time in Kuwait, people whom he counseled, people for whom he either found a deal or got a deal, people who worked at the local grocery—and more, so many more.

And this is what I had, and what I still have. I don't believe we live on. I don't believe there's an afterlife. I don't believe that we're watched over and waited for by our loved ones in some blissful state of grace for all eternity. But it's obvious to me now that we don't just simply disappear. If we touch enough people and we do enough good, we live on in their happy memories—and maybe even the not-so-happy ones. It's a little place in all our psyches, a place reserved for this very purpose, the place where we store all the good times we had with our loved ones who have left us. And we can access it anytime we want and when we do, that's when they exist again, just for us. This is what I thought of when the reverend began to give the eulogy, and I cried like a baby.

CHRIS CROFT

## run-up-the-hill windmill

The tv flashes ironies  
of complacent celebrities  
where faces are named  
and people framed  
in posturepedic flashcards  
headdresses for headcases

I've got headaches  
dripping from the ceiling  
of this boileroven  
I've got people shouting  
in retroactive chatter spasms  
humdrum highways

Sorry for the miscue  
I never know when to act  
recording my waves  
in a late night tumble  
spurning the ivories  
harrowing of hell

I need a lyric  
Or a sonnet to sing  
A drive for the ages  
tickle my instincts  
deflect the jargon  
heading for home



## About The Contributors

**Caleb Baker** writes exclusively on the Smith-Corona vintage typewriter that he used while writing with Robert Hunter and Jerry Garcia during the early sixties. After becoming popular at Ken Kesey's acid tests, the three, along with the other members of the Grateful Dead decided to head out onto the road where Caleb began taking photographs. Caleb currently lives in Wellesley, Massachusetts.

**Lauren Barrett** is a freshman from Ellicott City, Maryland, and loves all things having to do with writing and the outdoors. She is a member of GRAB staff and an officer in the Peace Club, and enjoys writing poetry and short stories in her free time. She hopes to be an English major and a Philosophy Minor, and likes climbing trees, going down the ocean, and reading autobiographies. Her favorite color is green.

**Anne M. Beale** is from Tacoma, WA (West Coast is the best coast). "I would like to thank: LFE for life, Mom, Dad, Beale/Fijalka Fam Clan, Megan Rose Owens, Katie Helm, 37 E. Lincoln. Thank you for everything, love you forever, love you for always."

**Kelly Bennett** is a first-year student, majoring in English and Management with a minor in writing. She graduated from Red Lion Area Senior High school in 2005.

**Chris Boschen** is a Sophomore majoring in Computer Science and Economics. He looks like a Gorilla playing DDR.

**Amy Butcher** is a small-town girl who's attending college in an even smaller location. She's a diehard tree-hugger, an über-liberal and a super-vegetarian. She likes writing, traveling and macaroni and cheese an awful lot. She's currently a freshman, double-majoring in both English and Creative Writing with heady plans to journey to New Zealand sometime in the near future.

**Geoff Calver** was born June 14, 1985 in Fribourg, Switzerland to two Canadian parents, thus making him a true maple-leaf toting Canuck. He fell in love with writing at the age of six when he read *The Art of War*. At age nine he befriended fellow French Canadian Jack Kerouac, as well as Allen Ginsberg, and Neal Cassady, subsequently he got himself into some trouble in Haight-Ashbury. In 2004 he began attending Gettysburg College. He is majoring in Writing the Narrative, a self-created major, and is a proud editor of the Mercury fiction section, he is also a frequent editorial writer for the Gettysburgian in the gonzo tradition of the late Hunter S. Thompson. He hopes to someday meet Ryan Adams and would like to travel the world, taste many exotic foods, and write about his experiences.

**Jessie Cox** is a sophomore who's interested in linguistics and foreign languages, writing, traveling and reading everything she can get her hands on. The story of where she is from would, unfortunately, take up more than her allotted space here. She thinks her friends are the greatest, even when they're trying to draw her, psychoanalyze her, or just steal her cookies. She'd also like to say hi to all the members of her family, especially the cute, black four-legged one.

**Chris Croft** is an English major from Sykesville, MD. He enjoys the writing of Dave Eggers, Chuck Palahniuk, H.P. Lovecraft, and whoever wrote *Beowulf*. His favorite poet is definitely e.e. cummings, and his hobbies include playing bass, being a DJ for WZBT, and being an insufferable indie music snob.

**Alexander Englert** comes from Littleton, Colorado and enjoys the rugged aspects of life. He is a philosophy major with no idea of what the future holds. In life's pursuit he prefers the uncertainty of questioning over the discovery of an answer. In his words, "life is a beautiful mess."

**Michelle Falcetano** is a senior at Gettysburg College. A double major in Philosophy and Political Science with a minor in Music, she was recently elected to Phi Beta Kappa. She is also a member of the Gettysburg College Choir and the editorial board of the Gettysburgian, the college's weekly newspaper. This is the first work she has submitted to the Mercury.

**Alyssa Falcone** is a first-year hoping to major in Italian. In her free time she enjoys playing violin, cello, and piano, and is involved with Gettysburg's orchestra and the Women's Rugby team. She also enjoys playing Text Twist non-stop and is always looking for a challenger. She would like to thank her family and friends for their support over the years.

**Maelina Frattaroli** is a senior and a double major in English and Spanish. After graduation, she aspires to "find herself," whatever that might entail, and then proceed at some point to graduate school for either an M.A. in Spanish or an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, or both. She hopes to travel the world someday: either when she's young and broke or old, retired, and rich. She also plans on consuming ridiculous amounts of garlic for the rest of her life because that's her obsession. She would like to thank Dusty, Kim, and Fred for believing in her and motivating her as a writer.

**Chrissy Gilbert** is a Sophomore from West Chester, PA. She is a Visual Arts and Management dual major.

**Geoffrey Gaenslen** is a Studio Art Major-to-be from Gettysburg, PA, where he works as a part time graphic designer.

**Sarah Jacobs**, a senior art history student at Gettysburg College, has studied art in Philadelphia, Florence, Italy, and as a student of her mother, artist Robyn Jacobs. Her two major artistic influences are her mother and Alice Neel. After graduation Sarah plans to stay in the Gettysburg area to work and paint.

**David Kiefaber** (senior) is shocked that he got published in the Mercury again; more so, in fact, than when he was published as a freshman. He is a

former Gettysburgian Opinions columnist, as well as a Bullet editor/contributor and WZBT DJ. His plans for graduation include attempting to postpone it as long as possible, and failing that, convincing a childless, billionaire industrialist to take him on as an heir, thereby negating the threat of unemployment.

**Ambika Kirkland** was born in rural Pennsylvania, where he lived in the same deep, dark, goblin-infested forest for eighteen years. He also gets chased about frequently by scary men in black robes. He kindly asks: "If you see any of them, don't tell them where I am, but let them know that I have finally decided to go over to the dark side..."

**Jennifer Lazuta** is currently a Junior, majoring in Economics and English. In her free time, she loves going to the beach and surfing. She enjoys reading, writing, photography, and travel. She is an avid sports fan, and high jumps here at Gettysburg on the track & field team.

**William MacLeod** is a Senior English major who hopes that his humble little tale will besmerch the good name of the English department for ages to come. He wishes to thank Professor Cowan for making him write this story and he wishes to thank the *Oxford English Dictionary* for existing, for without the *OED* this story might not have ever existed...and the world very well may have been a happier place.

**Anna Markowitz** is a Junior psychology major, with writing and neuroscience minors. Raised in multiple states and countries, Anna enjoys cross country running, diet soda, *Pride and Prejudice*, and her ipod shuffle; where you will always find at least one song by Tupac, and the Backstreet Boys.

**Samuel Martin** is a Senior English major and Music minor from the great midwestern city of Toledo, Ohio. He loves music, acting and Argentine beef, and plans on teaching middle-schoolers after graduating.

**Molly! Masich** is a Senior Film Studies Major/Spanish Minor with a penchant for sass and intrigue. Molly! wants you to know that sometimes Right and Wrong are the same thing.

**Kriscinda Meadows** is an English major and a Writing minor. She is a "non-traditional" student in the sense that she built up a portfolio of life experience before going to college. Among many other things, she has been a bookseller in Pittsburgh, a commercial production house painter in Cleveland, and worked with an ever changing group of illegal immigrants making ceramic tile glaze in Topanga Canyon for celebrities, outside of Los Angeles. Musically, she enjoys Elliott Smith, David Byrne, Dead Kennedys, Bad Religion, Mission or Burma, and much more. Literature-wise, some of her favorite books include *Lord of the Barnyard* by Tristan Egolf, *White Noise* by Don DeLillo, and *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* by Dave Eggers, and much more. She is a vegetarian. She can be best described as a Democratic Socialist. She loves garlic and zombie movies.

**Ryan Mitchell** is a Sophomore English major from Doylestown, Pennsylvania. He is inspired by John Keats, John Kruk, and Lenny Dykstra. He laments the lost art of the mid-range jumper and will forever insist that his peak years

were 7<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> grade. His mother Joanne is ranked in the top ten in the country, and his father looks like Steven Spielberg. His brother is a beast and they are thankfully, all healthy.

**Kitty Murphy** likes dogs. She also like snack packs and skittles (tropical). Her hero is Aamiri Baraka.

**Molly Myer** is a sophomore at Gettysburg College. She is a Studio Art major with an English Minor. In her spare time she plays field hockey here at Gettysburg College, and is also a volunteer teacher for an after-school art program nearby a few days a week.

**Alison Nix** is a Senior studio art major. One of the greatest influences on her work came as a result of going to an art school run by MICA (Maryland Institute College of Art) while she was studying abroad in France last year.

**Jason Parker**, born and raised for greatness, is an explosive power-pack in the irregular form of a human. This remarkable man spent his early years wrestling tigers and ferocious beasts as training for his adult life. At 18, he began attending Gettysburg College in an attempt to humble himself and keep his heroic feats undercover. He has become an exceptional gentleman known for his quick wit and incredible lung capacity. Among other things, he especially enjoys pink shirts, a good Kleenex and Ultimate Frisbee. He has talents that extend beyond writing poetry, including the ability to clap with one hand, the ability to squirt milk out of his nose (if properly triggered), and most importantly, the ability to survive a double barrel roll car accident at 68 m.p.h. You're glad he's alive.

**Lauren Passell** is a Religion major from Cleveland, Ohio

**Alison Petrow** is a Psychology major, with a Studio Art minor from Westfield, New Jersey. She has always taken an interest in music and the arts, having played the bassoon for several years. She is also am a member of the women's track and field team at Gettysburg.

**Colin Plover**, aka "the masked bandit" for his exploits on the soccer field, is double majoring in biochemistry and molecular biology and philosophy. Currently he hollers from Poughkeepsie, NY; however, he was born on the mean streets of Queens, NY no doubt giving him the large endowment he is blessed/cursed to live with. He enjoys the soft touch of cashmere to his left forearm and would like to acknowledge the tireless efforts of both his creative writing teacher and buddies at the writing center however few they may be. Along with his passion for welding he would like to thank the pains of his all too frequent sexless nights for his creative productions. Finally, if you see me on the street and feel moved to acknowledge my work positively or otherwise don't because I detest strangers.

**Sarah Quinn** is a senior from Vermont majoring in Spanish-Latin American Studies with a minor in Sociology. While she appreciates the benefits of recycling, she would like to thank the residents of Gettysburg for throwing away random things so that she may have subjects for her photos.



**Jai Schock** is a first-year student Journalism major and Political Science minor. Her interests include writing, drawing, photography, world culture, debate, activism, sleeping, and caffeine. She is the President of Allies and the Opinions Editor of the Gettysburgian. She likes all kinds of music, and her favorite food is crazy marshmallow cookies from Mexico.

**Makenzie Seiple** is a sophomore from Greenville, PA, a.k.a. the Asylum with a double major in Art History and Spanish. She would like to thank her friends for being infinitely patient when she asked to draw them for the umpteenth time, occasionally accepting bribes of chocolate-covered strawberries, and refraining from attacking her with dowel rods.

**Brendan Sheehan** is a senior English major and writing minor from Binghamton, NY. He hopes to be working in either the news media, sports journalism or publishing industry next year. His favorite poets are Louis Simpson and Saul Williams and his favorite writers are Ernest Hemingway and Malcolm Gladwell.

**Heather Simons** is a sophomore English major with a minor in Writing. This is her first piece published in the Mercury. Next fall, Heather will be studying abroad in Lancaster, England, and she hopes that her time in Europe will provide inspiration for further submissions to *The Mercury* and elsewhere.

**Marilyn Springer** is one of the most random people you will ever meet, and a sophomore at Gettysburg College. With her outlandish thoughts, she likes to freak people out with her crazy and sometimes disturbing pieces of writing. She will beat any challenger in an eating contest or a standoff of FRIENDS trivia, and in the next life she would love to have a breakfast buffet with John Lennon and Salvador Dali.

**Larissa Stathakes** is a senior at Gettysburg College. "A special thanks to Sheila Mulligan, Team Love Ferns, and Eryn B. for all their support and encouragement."

**Elizabeth Todd** lives on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. She studied art in high school in advanced placement classes, so it was a natural and easy transition into college. Her major is Studio Art and her minor is Art History.

**Heather Walsh** is from NE Philadelphia and currently lives in Hatfield, PA. She's an English major. Enough said. She's like to dedicate this work to the one who inspires her time and time again. Thank you honey.

**Erica Wiles** is from Rhinebeck, New York and completed the five course art sequence in high school. She is currently a freshman at Gettysburg College. She likes to keep herself busy whether it is running, soccer, dance or other various activities. She would like to thank her parents for their constant and supportive encouragement with her art, sports and studies.

**Ming Zhou** is a Sophomore majoring in Mathematics and Studio Art. She likes Chocolate.



**Joy**  
Makenzie Seiple  
*Pencil on paper*  
7.5 x 10 in  
July 2005



## Acknowledgements

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