



# Calliope

Volume XXVII

2011

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# Letter from the Editors

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We would like to thank everyone who submitted work to this year's publication. Calliope could not survive without the bright minds at Armstrong supporting the process. Thanks also go out to teachers at AASU that encourage their students to support Calliope every year. And last, but certainly not least, a special thanks goes to Katie Dubree who spent hours teaching us how to use InDesign.

# Staff

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*Calliope is published annually by and for the students of Armstrong Atlantic State University. The Student Government Association of AASU provides funding for each publication. Student submissions are collected through the fall semester for the following year's publication. All submissions are read and chosen through an anonymous process to ensure equal opportunity for every entrant. The Lilian Spencer Awards are presented for outstanding submissions in fiction, poetry, and art. The recipients of this award are chosen by the staff from the student submissions in fiction, poetry, and art.*



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# Travis MacMillan

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## *Good Friend*

Lillian Spencer Award for Short Fiction

Justin was a good friend. When we were flying back in my Saturn from partying in the 'Boro seven kinds of wasted, it was Justin who took a razor blade to his forehead to convince the cop pulling us over that I was rushing him to a hospital after a bottle crashing. He meant to cut himself only a little bit but apparently the forehead gives up blood rather easily to sharp razor blades. The officer turned on his siren and personally escorted us at 100 plus mph to the hospital.

It was Justin who sided with me over his psychopathic 'roid-freak cousin everybody called Duck, who had vowed to kill me for sleeping with his ex-girlfriend. There is not a sunset that my eyes take in that I am not in debt to him for that privilege. When his cousin tackled me outside of his ex's apartment complex, it was Justin who drove his right fist repeatedly into his cousin's right eardrum as both his hands were digging into my face to gouge out my eyes. Sometimes when I close my eyes, I can still feel the shockwaves that traveled through Duck's hands after Justin struck him and his grip went limp.

When my acid trip took a turn for the worse after my girlfriend called me to tell me she was breaking up with me, it was Justin who eventually lead me out of the surreal hell that was trapped inside in my broken head after two and a half packs of Marlboro Lights just as the sun began to rise. He was the one who called in sick to his job the day after and scrapped up what was left of my soul, as we drifted aimlessly in his step dad's boat, pretending to fish while smoking mid grade the better part of the next day.

After all was said and done, it was Justin who remained my friend after I became a Christian and quit drugs. I quickly

became a pariah amongst my former stoner and druggie friends. When you no longer have five on a blunt but rather have the good news to share that "God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them," you aren't quite part of the gang like you once were. Justin didn't care though. He was raised by his agnostic father and devoutly Catholic mother up until he was 13 when his mother had enough of his father's womanizing and left. Arguments over God and heathens in the heart of African jungles, who never will hear the name Jesus but are still going to hell, was nothing to shun but rather was an opportunity for Justin to practice his innate gift as a quasi-brilliant sophist. Besides, now that I was sober, I was a bit tougher and more focused piece of iron for him to sharpen himself on.

And now it was his girlfriend's house on Isle of Hope that I was headed to this Friday night. As I pull into the driveway, Justin rocks back in forth in a rocking chair on the front porch smoking a cigarette, looking out to where there should be a screen door. Wearing a wife-beater with a pair of dirty socks accentuating his unshaven face, he looks every bit the 200 pounds of the poor man's Tom Cruise that he is plus an extra foot or so. He actually went to the acting school in New York City that was on the old TV show "Fame". His charisma fueled by his poor work ethic carried him along for about a year and a half and now here he's back in Savannah after picking up a robust cocaine habit. He's been back in town for 5 months. I believe he's still unemployed now, but we try not to discuss work if we don't have to so I'm not sure.

"Well well... how is life treating my favorite pious half-ass Scotsman?" Justin says in his best Irish brogue as he rises from his seat.

"Better I hope than it's treating the patron saint of third generation wannabe-Irish reprobates."

"Glad to see your sass hasn't lost its edge in my absence, fucker!"

As Justin grunts "...ucker" he shoots in clinching me and the

ever so slightly homoerotic male bonding ritual of wrestling commences. We grapple back and forth for a minute without aid of fanfare nor shiny tights. Suddenly, I feel an opening. I quickly hook my left foot behind his right while shoving his right shoulder towards the ground at the same time, and he tumbles down. Trying to soften the impact, I guide him gently down to the ground to insure I imbed as few rocks as possible from the driveway into his backside. All in all, it was a rather dignified landing.

Justin coughs while he brushes himself off. He reaches nonchalantly into his front pocket for a cowboy killer.

"Tripping?! I guess I should have suspected as much from a would-be kabuki actor playing a washed up samurai. You must be still sore about the last match, huh? Of course you're fatter now that you've quit smoking so I don't know if I could pick you up and drop you on my knee anymore." Justin smirks as he cups his face and lights his cigarette. He tries his damndest to bat away the barrage of small rocks I kick his way while he is doing his best Reclining Buddha.

"I don't imagine that it helps the matter that you shed 25 pounds of muscle in Manhattan either, eh? So how are you doing with that, bro?" I ask as I gesture with a quick two taps to my nose.

"Alright... more or less, depending on how much money I have," he grins.

The wind seems to die suddenly in the middle of the air while the silence weighs uncomfortably on the both of us while we look across at each other still trying to catch our breath. His eyes look like his money was enough, but I can't tell for sure. The man enjoys a few too many vices for me to isolate what was dilating or reddening his eyes at whatever moment. I am fairly certain, however, that it is not just life my friend is high on.

"Don't worry, Ryan. I don't go out of my way for that shit. If it's around then... yeah, but otherwise I just drink and smoke a joint here and there."

He flashes a smile that infuses me with a hopeful yet

hollow reassurance. I want to walk around his girlfriend's house and behind the trees to make sure they aren't just two dimensional cut out props, the kind used on a stage to reinforce the illusion of reality in order to pull the audience further into the story, so that they forget that it is after all just a bunch of actors on an elevated platform, reciting memorized lines written by someone else. It's hard to tell when Justin's lying. I don't know if I believe him or not, but I want to.

The front door opens and Lisa radiantly emerges with her usual subdued charm as indie rock pours out from inside. She's wearing (I think) factory faded jeans with an attractive light pink shirt that looks like it probably came from one of the nicer department stores in the mall. Her short blond hair falls just beyond her ears catching stray rays of the setting sun which highlights her sharp features. She smiles as our eyes meet while she finishes putting on her last earring.

"Hey Ryan! How long have you been here?" Lisa says as she walks towards me for an obligatory yet still heartfelt hug.

"I just got here a second ago, Lisa. You're doing well I hope?" I say as I pat her back.

"Yeah. Yeah. I'm doing well," she says as her eyes lower ever so slightly while she steps back to where Justin is now standing.

"Good. So... I understand you're having a few friends over tonight for dinner and you need me to baby sit Justin for a while, huh? So what kinda pay does this job get?" I hate telling lame jokes like this. Its either something I genetically inherited or learned from my father. Either way, I can no more shake it than I can my pseudo Semitic looks.

"Yeah... you kids need to get going and run before the adults get here, okay!" she says only half joking. Lisa is older than both Justin and me by a few years. She's 28 and we're both 23.

"We'll be gone in one second, baby. I just gotta shower real qu..." said Justin.

"Justin! How long have you been sitting around the house doing nothing today? Have you talked to your dad again



about working for him? You can't just..."

"Yeah Lisa, I'm going to an interview Monday, alright? Now let me shower and get out of here."

Justin escapes through the front door in the porch and reopens it a second later to playfully, yet forcefully, pelt Lisa with his dirty socks, which is met with justifiable shrieks of disgust.

"So, Ryan what do you boys have planned tonight?"

"We were supposed to head to the beach and walk around after eating at The Crab Shack. That's what I'm signing up for anyway..."

"Don't let Justin drink too much, please. Justin becomes a prick when he's drunk and I don't want put up with his shit when ya'll come back tonight, okay?" she says as her eyes deepen. "Watch him."

"Yeah... I'll try my best to keep him in line."

We talk about how our jobs are going, what music she's playing (Sebadoh's "Smash Your Head On the Punk Rock"), what food she's preparing for her guest tonight, and other small talk to fill the seven or so minutes until Justin emerges looking closer to a working-class Tom Cruise now that he's clean shaven, showered, and freshly re-socked.

"You boys have fun okay? Justin call me, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Sure thing, baby. Bye."

As we head for Tybee, the sun splashes gold and pink across the clouds as it sets into the ocean. It's a nice evening and we drive with my car's windows down. The air has a near electric quality to it invigorating us as we roll down the highway. Justin and I reminisce, laughing and smiling as old memories and friends come back to life in our stories of yesterday. Certain details are embellished and others deliberately left out to craft a more favorable account of our semi-fiction lives. We graciously allow each other almost all the liberties the other thinks necessary unless one reaches too far. Then chops are tenderly busted.

The Crab Shack is as I remembered it. Fried mediocrity with Christmas lights, strewn out everywhere, and Jimmy

Buffett droning on and on till you just wanna raze the whole damn tourist trap to the ground. Still, as far as tourist traps go it has a certain charm that only increases the more one drinks. As such, the charm increased a good deal for Justin over the course of the night.

We arrive at the beach and walk out past the pier to the north side of the beach. The moon is nowhere to be found so a nice canopy of stars hangs above us. Justin burns a joint he brought for this purposely secluded occasion, and we sit in silence as the waves crash around us in the roaring darkness.

"You know, Ryan, I've been thinking lately about the whole life after death thing recently. It just seems strange to me."

"What do you mean, man?"

"Well, I guess it's the whole idea of continuing forever after you die, you know? I don't like it."

"Do you mean the thought of someone going to hell to be..."

"No, no. It's not that. Heaven or hell, it doesn't matter. Just the idea of always being... remaining forever," he says then pulls slowly from the joint illuminating his face, "it's... horrible man. I just want to no longer exist when I die and that be it."

"You're telling me that you wouldn't want to rejoin loved ones or be in the presence of an all loving God in heaven forever, Justin?"

"Yeah. And it's not that I want to die, exactly. I just wish sometimes," he sighs and then flicks what's left of the roach into the darkness, "that I'd never been born. Like that Queen song says."

What the hell does someone say to that!?! Really. What in the hell should someone say to something like that? I never bought a stupid WWJD bracelet, but I don't imagine it would do me much of any good here anyway.

"You know... Justin... I don't think we can even begin to think of what life would be like in heaven. I mean... someone

has eaten spam their whole life has no concept of what a filet mignon steak tastes like, right? Well..."

"No," he says quietly but under great conviction. "I want an end. Extinction. The candle is blown out forever and that's fucking it. To hell with spam or steak, I'm tired of fucking eating, man."

God. I want one of his cigarettes now. Some Bible verse about looking into the glass dimly keeps wanting to pop up in my head, but I let it pass as the wind blows the heavy moment out into the depths of the ocean as the waves continue to crash around us.

After a while, we continue back to the strip where most of the quaint bars are located at Tybee. The sound of Sublime's "Same in the End" playing brings us inside the Scandals bar. The bar is fairly empty and has a charming dinginess to it with the salty ocean air intermingling with the smell of cigarette smoke and beer. There's a pool table and only a handful of people due in part to early Fall not being the most happening time for the beach. It is just as well. I like it when establishments aren't crowded because it makes me feel like I own the place.

"Are you sure you don't want anything, Ryan." Justin asks as he starts to head to the bar.

"Yeah man. I'm good, thanks."

I do drink. I just can't do it around Justin. After one beer he brings another before I'm finished with the first then another, repeating the process adding shots and relentless peer pressure/nagging. Simply put the man does not facilitate moderation. Best to stay at zero, because the fight to stay at only one or two drinks is a pyrrhic victory at best.

With Justin going to the bar, my focus goes across the bar to a woman dancing more than a little drunkenly on the dance floor. Her sense of rhythm sucks, but her enthusiasm is almost contagious. Fine Young Cannibals' "She Drives Me Crazy" comes on the jukebox and I soon find myself dancing alongside her. She is probably in her early 20s. Bleach blond hair falls over a face I can't discern in the lighting

(though she looks attractive from what I can tell) and she carries a little extra weight in the right places. Other than when she steps on my feet, I guess I'm having a good time. She starts to run her hands through my hair and chest as she looks drunkenly into my eyes. She is pretty. Very wasted, but pretty. Before my conscience has the chance to weigh the morality of what would have passed as risqué in the 50's norms of our culture, Justin arrives back with a boilermaker in hand to tag out with me.

Sitting down, I notice a guy sitting on a stool with his head hung low across the dance floor from me. To say that he looks beaten down is akin to saying that road kill looks wounded. This man is crushed. There is a shamanic belief in many animistic cultures that holds that a man has many souls. Some govern personality, some vitality, some spirit (as in school spirit, fighting spirit, or teen spirit), and others do this or that. They think a man can lose some or most his souls and become a kind of zombie where they are sort of conscious, breathing, and living but not really living. Just existing. This man with his head in his hands on the stool was rather convincing evidence for this metaphysical theory. The shell of his body is here but his souls seem to be far away. Next to him there is an angry man standing with arms crossed who appears more and more angry the more I study him. He looks back and forth at Justin and the girl, who are now grinding on the dance floor, then to me over and over again. After a tense minute, he walks straight over to me with his hands at his side.

"Hey!" he says over the loud music.

"Hey what's up, man! You doing all right tonight?" I reply.

"No. No, I'm not," he says with grave seriousness. "You see that guy over there sitting down where I was standing?"

"Yeah."

"That's my friend and the girl you were dancing with and who your friend is rubbing his dick all over is his fiancé."

"Ohhh... dude I had no idea. I wouldn't have..."

"Yeah. Just tell your friend," he says and then angrily

resumes his post.

Justin, taking a break from dancing, sits down next to me. Drunken carousing is a good bit of what he lives for and right now he is swimming most comfortably in his element. Of course I don't condone this. But I am no sermonizer either, despite being a Christian. I've told him it's reprehensible to run around on Lisa. I have. It really leaves me at a loss, though. Where does one divide the line between morality and loyalty? I hate how he puts me in this situation again and again.

"Justin."

"Yeah buddy."

"That dude over there with the crossed arms told me that the chick we were dancing with is engaged to the man over there on the stool with his head hung low."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Huh...", Justin said considerately as he thinks over the matter. "Fuck him and his friend. I guess he needs to stop being such a pussy and take his girl back like a fucking man." With this Justin stands up abruptly and walks back to the dance floor. The drunken girl stumbles his way as seductively as she can and they're dancing/dry humping again. Within a minute, he's making out with her as they drunkenly grope each other.

I look away from the dance scene to see what kind of video games in the corner they have to eat my quarters and distract my conscience. Hmmm... Ms. Pac-Man??!! Yes. I rummage through my jeans and find an appropriate offering and gratefully plunk it into the slot.

Letting my mind zen out to the flashing pixels and droning of waka-waka-waka, I notice in my peripheral the angry man heading over to Justin. With Justin's back to him, he raises up a cue stick in an instant, and then breaks it across the back of his head in one smooth motion. Justin falls to the ground as the angry man repeatedly brings down what's left of the stick on top of him. As I take all of this in, the thickest

part of the cue stick reflects against the wall, offering itself at my feet. I pick up close to two feet of good solid wooden club without really registering the decision to do so as someone in a dream might. Calmly, I walk across the room and watch myself slam the club violently against the justified man's head. I listen to him scream as he falls over clutching his head, and then I rapidly strike him again and again until he's silently lying in a pool of his and Justin's mixed blood.

Picking Justin off the ground, I place his left arm around my shoulder and we trudge towards the door, unhindered by the bewildered small bar staff and the other two conscious yet near hysterical patrons. As I lay him inside the passenger seat, I hear Justin tell me that I'm a "good friend". I return to my body once again, throw up, and we drive off into the long night.



# Anna Kay Gibson

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*Mona / Gibson Girl*

Lillian Spencer Award for Art



Sharpie on sketch paper

# Ashley Pope

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## *Adrift in Fresh Water*

Lillian Spencer Award for Poetry

Woman, after the waves licked your wounds  
desert dry, and the heavy stones flew up above your head,  
you became a soft legend, a fire among the dead  
with a pen in your hand, you nails blood red  
from the hours spent climbing the glass.

The water lily sank from the weight of  
your shoe, as the tar-mud on your hands rinsed clean;  
a new life, the death was raw and a blinding green.  
You perched in blue quiet on the water lily; a pale queen  
on your throne undeniable; immortal and lost.

Your eyes, dark wide open, absorbed  
a thousand glances, a million and one days  
of lovers holding feathers in a thick violet haze  
over the chasm in which you wandered with no age  
while hundreds of sung heroes built altars to display your mind.

The water's fingers, black from earth's speech  
held you serene and steady, forbidding you to cry,  
fearing you might shatter the spell when you rose up to die.  
They shut your eyes against the colors floating by  
until sleep came bold and brazen, a new dress among the rags.

# Jennifer Borland

---

## *Beaten*

Water, glistening shallow ripples,  
leading to the ocean, clear;  
water, stagnant, clouded, murky,  
surrounded on all sides.  
My heart feels like a caged animal;  
seems a shame to keep it hidden.  
winds slip across the shore,  
a blanket, low, hovering,  
feels cold and damp,  
but is alive with many colors.  
Love hidden in plain view,  
disguised as moralistic forgiveness.  
Seagulls caw, unendingly,  
voices crying, no response,  
endless chatter swept away.  
Makes me feel crazy,  
telling me to run.  
craggy driftwood,  
ashen, veined, swirling,  
dry dominance embedded.  
The wall has been built,  
but I can see through it.  
the sky is very blue;  
paler, than the deep, dark ocean,  
looking toward the sun.  
Waiting all the time,  
but wanting moments to never end.  
The smell is salty,  
heavy and relaxing,  
warm despite the chill in the air.  
The truth is here,  
but I cannot speak it.

# Jennifer Borland

---

## *I Am the Scar*

A dog bite,  
festering, oozing sickly green,  
“It’s going to leave a scar,” I say  
dabbing antiseptic, watching you wince.  
“I am the scar” you reply,  
I smile but there is sadness in your eyes.  
It is the closest you have come to an apology.  
We sit in silence for a while,  
each thinking our own thoughts,  
of the same thing,  
wanting to say so much  
that the words have become useless.  
Later that night,  
lying on the bed watching tv,  
“You are very far away,” you say,  
never turning your head,  
my body perfectly in line  
with the edge of the bed.  
I had never even noticed.  
I slide over, and you wince,  
arm protectively covering your side.  
“I wasn’t going to touch it,” I say, and slide back.  
“I wasn’t sure,” you say.  
And we sit in silence for a while...  
until I hear the steady breathing of sleep.  
I roll towards you, looking for the remote, in the dim light,  
and finally find it wedged under your side.  
You don’t even flinch when I remove it.  
I turn back and fall asleep.

# Cynthia Flores

---

## *My Own Defiance*

I am in a state of confusion.  
My heart's eagerness cannot be silenced.  
A constant battle between moral and adrenaline.  
Risen from the subconscious, nearing the surface.  
Neither an agreement nor a treaty.  
The push and pull of mind and heart.  
Both crying for attention, solution, and absolution.  
To take a chance rather than coward.  
To risk it all for a selfish interest.  
To put away my disguise; though, I fret the judgment.  
It is my own defiance.  
No, no this can't be!  
Distractions are not strong enough.  
Near or far, I feel it!  
This routine I cannot bear any longer.  
I am trapped behind glass!  
I can only reach so far, and as I get closer,  
I become paralyzed.  
The simplicity is lost,  
And the brutal battle begins once again.

# Travis MacMillan

---

## *May the Universe Collapse*

Time has frozen  
like a busted freezer  
who shall never see  
the smile of the sun warm its days,  
nor the friendly touch  
of the repair man  
who now collects unemployment while watching reruns of  
soap operas:  
free of joy,  
free of purpose.  
With its ghost gladly gone, my brain lies dead,  
buried,  
all but forgotten  
except for the work of a weathered tombstone  
who reminds all who stumble upon it  
that once,  
within the halls of this skull,  
thoughts once played and roamed,  
but now lie languid,  
weak from lack of sustenance or friendly company.  
And yet...  
on and on you lecture.  
Every word that monotonically escapes your lips  
runs mildly through my ears,  
crashing uneventfully  
against my crumbling attention span  
that washes away to the sea of ennui,  
where I drown slowly until class is over,  
or the universe mercifully collapses in on itself, ending all  
existence with its demise.



# Elena Fodera

---

## *Daffodils*

The daffodils on lonely stalks

they shout to me the time of year  
when Spring has broken from its box  
and all its bright first flowers appear.

The daffodils – they bloomed today,  
their yellow faces new as art:  
and secretly they seem to say  
some syllables that rhyme with start

# Ashley Pope

---

## *The Blue Hour*

I get up early—the Silence  
mingles with the Sadness  
long enough to move my hand  
in steady motion.

Four A.M.—nebulous, still, embryonic.  
my hair interrupting my sight,  
the only distraction; scraping of  
lead, the only sound.

*When I eat last?  
Her discarded toast—  
Yesterday.*

This eternal blue hour,  
the minutes in between dreams  
and obligation; in between  
peace and reality; I thrive.

*If I had known the winter  
would never end, would I  
still have woken up?*

A piece of hurt, a piece of  
beauty, transformed into the  
typewritten words on a page—  
the fire to the minutes creeping by.

*He cries; she stirs; and my  
eternal blue hour halts  
jerkily as I stand up, a mother.*

# Ashley Pope

---

## *May*

You must have been afraid,  
seeing her laugh when your  
lips had frozen in a  
stiff line of duty and  
discontent.

Seven years before, you had  
made your promise, your vow;  
you could still feel the  
satin, smell the daisies  
and your grandmother's perfume.  
You remember the taste of the  
kiss that made it all  
honest; the proper dryness of  
it all. Your hope, but a  
wish then, a pulsating ember  
in your breast.  
Thousands of days later, there  
she is, laughing.  
Your lips, still.

Fury is quick, violent; but  
pain flows slowly through  
every vessel, leaving no  
vein undiscovered, and  
in its wake, a cold and  
fiery numbness.

You felt it, there, in  
the parking lot, and  
you clung to its flavor  
like the last drop of water in the  
desert. There was nothing  
else to hold.

You must have wondered,  
nervously fingering your  
diamond and your anniversary  
pearls, what could have been  
so funny. What the hell was  
so hilarious that it made her  
white teeth mingle with  
a sunbeam, blinding any passerby.  
Or maybe just you.  
Those damned white teeth.  
Those damned lips, laughing in  
her naiveté.  
And yours, trembling in  
your knowledge.

# Ashley Pope

---

## *Margaret Mary*

The moon is rising, Margaret Mary;  
I'm going home now.  
For all my thousands of listening ears  
my tongue is still somehow,  
trembling with the many words your heart  
lusts after and your mind spits back  
in a fiery flash of bitter endearment.  
I've done all I can tonight, my part  
relentlessly unfulfilling; you wander in lack  
of that pristine piece, the daddy to your  
cowering child, the perfectly round  
pill to that perpetual itch.  
Disappointed again;  
you stay awake, scrubbing the ground  
till your fingers bleed;  
perfection attainable;  
sanity hesitating, possible  
in the frenzied quiet hours as  
you create your colored hell,  
your drop in the blue bottle acidic.  
I cannot paint over that red stain,  
rendering the raw a stale black and white  
of afternoon coffee and whims.  
No one can pull the sun through the rain,  
flinging the shadows from your door.  
The sun is his own man; the light,  
rebellious and fickle, strays from  
your screams as a pen from wet paper.

So the night comes  
again, like a friend who never speaks,  
without hand or body to feel, to clasp.  
When the dark slips from your fevered grasp,  
I'll come again, Margaret Mary.



# Ashley Pope

---

## *Sunday Walk*

We walked between the trees on a Sunday,  
the pollen falling in our hair.  
We didn't care as long as the colors  
came out every year.  
You loved the way things grew and I  
loved how you talked about miracles,  
better for your lungs than oxygen's clear  
stream.

I remember when Sundays grew heavy  
on my skin, a southern spirit  
singing some nameless dread.  
I could never put my finger on it,  
but I tucked it in my bed  
every week, waking and wearing it, my Monday  
dress. I welcomed the rain  
to soothe the burn;  
puddles to fill the holes dotting the streets.  
That day, you said, a turbulent day  
of mystic rest.  
Sunday was a bitter apple and I, ravenous  
at the table.

So this is the sea; the great distance  
linking two worlds, two masses held  
spinning on fire, waiting to be joined  
again. These trees, the sprawling stance  
of the oak and we crane our necks to spy on the leaves,  
the only familiar line.

Take your boat, let's row to the top  
in these green waters, once red.

We'll make our own nest against the thread  
of sun and moon.

We'll fly on this Sunday, changing the grey  
sky to blue with our touch.

# Ashley Pope

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## *The First Year*

You said it would be an adventure  
and I agreed; a great expedition  
north to the town of

salt-box houses haunted by Einstein's ghost.  
We emerged from our fortress  
of books—my novels and your

theological masters—two southern  
pilgrims under the mild sun of the  
Jersey summer. When we got here,

I cried in our closet-sized living room,  
moving awkwardly between the boxes  
of white wedding gifts yet unwrapped,

the hazards of our 3-day journey forgotten,  
and I dissolved beneath the cardboard.  
You pulled me out with sobriquets and

striding walks through the picturesque town  
long covered over with pomp and  
the elite sideways glance of the maitre de.

We liked to walk. We loved the  
bakery and the library, dousing ourselves  
with sweet flour between the rising glass walls.

I gazed lustfully at the university, its  
    spires soaring to a heaven I would  
        never know. I thought how

sad it is, the lives we must forsake  
    to faithfully live our own. Do  
        you remember when I told you

all the things I would do if I only  
    had wings and an open ear to hear  
        the words I scribble. Dreams,

it seem, wax and wane under the relentless  
    rains of the long Jersey winter; before it dried,  
I stepped into a deep puddle

and disappeared.

# Ashley Pope

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## *Initials*

Crooked letters, splayed  
on the scrap paper  
like a child, like waking.  
The 60-year old hand  
wavered, wanting to be sure,  
to be right.  
No amount of poison  
can make a man whole.

# Jonathan Moody

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## *The Silent Descent*

An apple, rotted, stinking, drops.  
Nosy creatures gather -- a branch pops.  
Hunger, fear -- no other code proves  
more true. Flies buzz and worry,  
a feeble, gentle hum. Made from the same  
old clay, they don't pray or complain --  
only offer a mute reply.

# Jonathan Moody

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## *Pinecone*

Wooden fingers lie  
side by side. Botany, genetics,  
allow the skeleton to exist -- a whole,  
complete. Imagine  
no wholes. Holes with no wholes, even --  
fractions of nonexistence, growing nothing.

# Jonathan Moody

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## *Afternoon Catnap*

The sun hangs orange topaz  
through hazy humidity. Afternoon  
settles; the final gulp: cool,  
refreshing water is a tranquilizer  
for the sun-beaten. Wet jaws echo  
a yawn. A heavy head hits the  
ground, neck limp. Lips spill saliva;  
dirt-black foam cakes its jowls.  
Night envelopes evening; the group --  
safe, fur backs huddled, legs knotted,  
sleeps until threat causes them to wake.



# Jonathan Moody

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## *Liquid Sight Display*

The humidity is two-sided  
tape, forcing my weary back  
to a bed of matted grass.

Staring at the sky, brightness  
turns blue to spotty purple.  
Clouds pass slowly, crawling

overhead through the changing  
sky. Spotty purple fades to wavy  
pink, pink to spiraling orange.

I feel the grass leaving its print  
on my bare flesh -- the sun hot  
on my sweat-slicked skin.

As the day rolls by, a stop-motion  
film plays through my eyes. Chest  
tight, breathing slow, I shut them

and paint with the colors of the day.

# Alexander Sheridan

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## *American Christian*

Wolf in sheep's clothing. Push your selfish agenda.  
Scratch people's ears. Tell them what they want to hear.  
Rejoice in yourself. Rejoice in your arrogance.

Suit and tie. Do or die. Polish those black shoes.  
I hate your fake smiles when you walk the aisles.  
A pleasant voice everyday. Your throat is an open grave.

You preach the ten commandments yet keep few of them.  
Ignore those in prison. They just want someone to listen.  
You mention the poor but never give to them.

Blow the trumpets. Show off your good deeds.  
You whine when you fast. Ship without a mast.  
Go ahead! Pray to God like he's a slave to your will.

Take out a gigantic loan. Build everyone a church home.  
Take our money. Tax deductible money.  
Sit inside four walls and rot. Your soul's so much like slimy  
snot.

Say one thing, do another. Why do you hate your brother?  
Love the sinner. Love the sin. Jesus is your friend?  
Love your wife. Does she know what you do at night?

Baptize the unrepentant man just because you can.  
Scorn the ones who don't look like you. Say adieu.  
Lay down laws impossible to keep. Make people weep.

Close your eyes. Bow your head.  
Convince me to recite the magic words.  
You're nothing but a big pile of turds.

# Alexander Sheridan

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## *Windfield*

I stroll to the pond on the outskirts of my vinyl siding neighborhood. Turkey vultures loom over my head, eyeing me, hoping that I will die so they can feast on my internal organs. Green algae grows in the water and our Christmas tree from last year lays on its side, halfway submerged.

I don't know why Dad threw the tree in there. I suppose it's biodegradable. I approach the water and enormous tadpoles escape my sight. An egret treads shallow water, her neck like a giraffe's. Deer tracks adorn the ugly mud. The four legged vertebrae were thirsty and came here to drink.

I feel a burning sensation on my ankle. Multiple fire ants sting me. These robot brains will do anything for their corpulent queen. I brush them off, get out of the ant bed, and go to the hollow, concrete sewage block. I sit on the edge and my feet dangle over the polluted water.

A red dragonfly zooms into view. I watch him swoop down over the ants. What else did he eat today? A sand gnat? A mosquito? Did he prey on a newly hatched butterfly? Did he fly around my mobile trashcan earlier today, executing houseflies? Maybe this is his first meal in awhile.

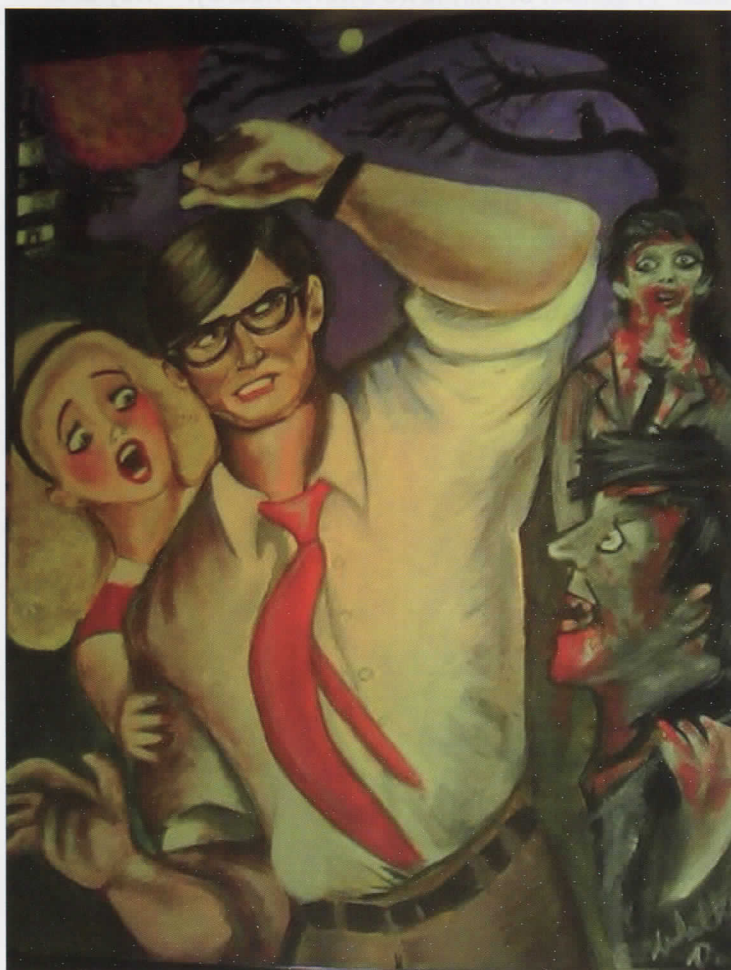
The dragonfly makes for a blade of grass extending over the water. A school of minnows swims nearby. They are probably here because they expect me to feed them spoiled bread. They will have no such luxury this time. Hungry brim move in and the school scatters in every direction.

The wind blows, bouncing the dragonfly back and forth like a mother rocking her baby's cradle. And then, in an instant, a brim jumps up into the air, catching the crimson insect in its mouth. One dies so that another can live. It's not until someone close to us dies that we finally begin to live.

# Walker Davis

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*Horror*



acrylic on canvas

# Walker Davis

*Scifi*



oil on canvas

# Walker Davis

## Party



colored pencil on paper



# Walker Davis

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*Wonka*



acrylic on canvas



# Katie Martin

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## *Grandad's Coveralls*



photograph

# Katie Martin

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## *Summer Shadows*



photograph

# Gabrielle Hague

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## *Dancin' with Myself*



acrylic on wood

# Alicia Corbitt

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## *Grow Up Slower*

As morning arrives, I have every intention of sleeping in my bed until eight-thirty. My plans are rejected by a baby's cry at exactly seven o' clock. I slowly manage to pull my heavy weighted eyelids open. My blurred vision begins to focus on the white crib at the other side of the room. With his pacifier still in his mouth, Jason laughs in excitement to see that I am finally awake.

I throw the warm blanket off my body and mentally remind myself that I have to get out of bed, even if I have had a rough week. I roll out of bed and land clumsily on the floor. After watching me from his crib, Jason, too, decides to fall. I can only see the blond hair that is standing up from his head. Laughing, he pulls himself up, by the bars of his crib, before I do. I rub my arm where I hit it on the bed frame and then my eyes. I dress in jeans and a t-shirt; I then lean over the crib to give him a kiss on his forehead.

"I'm so glad you're having a good morning," I say as I lift all twenty pounds of him from the crib. I pull the pacifier from his mouth and kiss him until he smiles. I cannot help but laugh along with his silly laugh and sweet blue eyes. Shawn rolls over in his sleep, and I put a finger to my lips to keep from waking him. After I change and put a fresh outfit on Jason, I go to the kitchen and dig through the overstocked fridge, only to decide that I just want cereal. I pour a handful of Honey Nut Cheerios onto Jason's highchair and make a Sippy cup of milk for him to drink. He giggles at the mess and slaps his hands on the tray, making Honey Nut Cheerios jump and creating a bigger mess.

I pour my own bowl of cereal and milk. By this time, Shawn has appeared from the bedroom. He looks as if he

could fall asleep at any moment. I have a mouthful of Honey Nut Cheerios as he tries to kiss me. "Why didn't you wake me up?" he asks sleepily.

"Cause it's too early," I respond, covering my mouth with my hand and wishing I could go back to sleep. I rub my hand through his beard, which is in need of shaving, as he kisses me again, this time with an empty mouth. Jason beats on his highchair to state that he is out of Honey Nut Cheerios and milk. I lift him out of the highchair and set him on the tile kitchen floor. He takes off before I can wipe off his hands. I have no energy to chase him into the living room, so I let him go with sticky hands.

Shawn makes a bowl of milk and Honey Nut Cheerios for himself and still manages to finish his bowl before I do, even though I have started eating first. Laughing, Jason walks in from the living room holding a bubble wand.

"Bye, bye, bye," he tells me and waves.

"Bye bye? Where are you going?" I ask him as if I do not already know.

His answer is to run to the front door and repeat "Bye bye," and wave.

I know he wants to go outside, so I hurry to finish my bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios and slip on a pair of shoes. I sit him on the couch so I can put a pair of sandals on him. I open the door. Before I can grab Jason, he has climbed down the one step and is in the yard.

"Hey Mister! When did you learn to climb downstairs?" I knew he could climb upstairs, but he always fell if he tried to go down.

He passes our orange and white cat named Tigger on the front porch, pausing to point and say "Kid-dy." I run after him as he runs across the yard, around a tall pine tree, around our old blue car, and though the tall grass, which was supposed to be mowed last weekend. I chase him between two trees and catch him. I swing him up over my head and rub my face into his round belly. He laughs and laughs until I am afraid he will forget to breathe. I take the bubble wand from

him and blow bubbles in his direction. My mother comes out of the house with her digital camera to get pictures of us playing in the yard for the family. Jason would rather pay attention to the camera she is holding than to me blowing bubbles that float away and pop.

The cool morning air is fading and being replaced with the summer heat. Soon it will be too hot for Jason to be outside. "Jason, it's time to go inside. We can watch Blue's Clues after we rub the dirt off you." Jason still wants to play and runs around the yard again instead of going back into the house. I catch him and we go inside to escape the summer heat and enjoy an episode of Blue's Clues.

I cannot help looking at my thirteen month old son and finding it hard to believe how much time has passed. I remember Jason eleven months old taking his first steps. I remember Jason nine months old just starting to crawl. I remember Jason six months old getting his first tooth. I remember Jason five months old at his first Christmas. I remember Jason three months old still being rocked to sleep. I remember Jason only a few minutes old looking at me with a brown eye and a blue eye, and thinking to myself, You better change that other eye to blue.



# Tim Bond

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## *What the Ghost Kid Said*

I've got something to get off my chest. My name is Tim, and I've been a fan of the rockband KISS since I was about six years old. Not the most shocking revelation about me: the shocking part is that I feel the need to write about it. Particularly, I am a fan of a certain KISS album, one Rolling Stone magazine ranked among their list of the "500 Greatest Albums of All Time" as 496th best album of all time. Rolling Stone is saying two things by this ranking: 1) "We're idiots," and 2) "We feel the album in question is a great album, but almost every other great album we can think of is better. But hey, we're idiots."

Why this is important to this story is explained tangentially in a great quote from rock music writer Chuck Klosterman regarding KISS's 11-years-and-counting snub by the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame (which includes Rolling Stone publisher Jan Wenner among its board members). Klosterman writes: "Every year (they are) denied entry into the Hall of Fame advances the idea that KISS exists outside the canon of critically sanctioned rock, and it perpetuates the idea that KISS fans are unjustly persecuted for loving KISS, which is central to the KISS-fan identity," Klosterman explains, adding, "I hope they never get in." Interpolating Klosterman in regards to my all-time favorite album goes a long way toward explaining why I am still endeared to these nine songs so long after first hearing them. What put me under a spell to begin with - the music itself - takes some explaining.

**“The first step of the cure is (swooping guitar riff)...  
a KISS @!!”**

The vinyl LP spun on the turntable. The stylus descended, and again the incantation was called forth.

“Daddy, somethin’ struck me...” That what I remember first thinking the “baby voice” on the song said. We were listening to the new KISS record, but as I look back I can’t honestly recall ever being aware of this album as “new,” In my mind, yes, this KISS record was and is as though it’s always been there, like Stonehenge or the pyramids; in the same way that it doesn’t seem possible to me that this music could now be “old;” archaic that is, or antique. I’d opt for the term “classic” if “classic rock” weren’t such a trite and limiting pigeonhole.

Needle hits vinyl again: “Okay, here’s your instructions!” This was our frontrunner for what the song intro said for the longest time, because at least it made some sort of dorky sense: these were marching orders for the “KISS Army”! Send \$5 to the address on the albums’ inner sleeve and you can be a member too!

“Hey! God’s talking!” That one scared us a little bit, because at that time 11-year-olds were often told in Sunday school that crazy people and drug addicts heard voices they thought were God on rock n’ roll records. These people then went out and did bad, bad, things. So if all that were true and “God’s talking” to us through a KISS album...well, I guess we could understand how bad things could happen. No, weren’t on drugs, so yes, we’d have to be crazy, then, since God was good and this song was bad...bad meaning “evil,” not bad meaning “in bad taste,” though this was a KISS record so you’d really have to wonder. About God, not KISS: their interest in your eternal fate was clear...

**“The spell you’re under...will slowly rob you of your virgin soul...”**

Even after listening repeatedly, Scott and I could never



figure out what the heck that child at the beginning of the song was saying, which must have been why we were so fascinated by it, that and the sound of the kid and his ghost playmates swirling in and around the heavy, menacing music. The drums marched, the guitars sliced, the children died and giggled. They really sounded like kids in hell, “H-E-double hockey sticks,” or “the bad place,” we would have said. No, actually by this time we would’ve just said “hell,” though hopefully out of earshot of our parents, not that they’d be able to hear us over all that racket anyway. This was my cousin and I after school, back in the days when music was not simply downloaded and enjoyed alone with headphones. Your friend buying the sought-after new music release was cause for a social occasion. You would share it with each other, together, not as an e-mail attachment or hyperlink. Listening and affirming together (this is probably where lip-syncing comes from), commenting on the music between songs or just chatting, even critiquing or enjoying the album’s artwork together. Yes, I remember...in this pre-YouTube world, the album cover could be critical to your enjoyment of the music inside it. A tremendous album cover was the first reason why this album was already the coolest album ever. Its cover was absolutely epic: essentially a comic book splash page rendered in the style of a classical oil painting – think Marvel Comics re-imagined by Michelangelo. The band members rose in its center from a phoenix of destruction while civilization as we know it lay in flames behind them, just the stuff a prepubescent boy would find enthralling. So before even the first listen it was suspected this music could destroy everything else that came before it. This album was in fact called *Destroyer*, and the cover’s rock band-as-superheroes setting the world on fire were KISS, the self proclaimed – cue the flashpots – “Hottest Band in the World!!”

The song we were struggling to decipher was the equally epic and so, so, evil “God of Thunder” — could a mere song ever really be called “evil” anymore? We were

dropping the needle on the song over and over again, trying so hard to decipher that child's spoken intro.

"Okay, Rumpelstiltskin." No way, we figured. That's kid stuff, definitely not Gene Simmons-ish enough.

"Okay...don't suck it."

Well, that was profane, all right; and at least as disturbing as "Hey! God's talking!" Because that would mean, unlike Moses' burning bush, God was speaking to us in a weird aural hallucination of Cookie Monster sodomizing Elmo (which is what "God of Thunder," broken into its component parts of monster and toddler, must most closely resemble to the uninitiated), so what the hell could He have been saying to us? I still have no idea. Instead of "cookie," imagine Cookie Monster saying "nookie, nookie"...and jamming out.

Suffice it to say, Scott and I never really figured out then or throughout our teens what "God of Thunder's" intro actually said. But it stayed interesting for a very long time trying to figure it out, particularly later when we were doing drugs.

### **"Flaming Youth will set the world on fire..."**

So I've been enamored of Destroyer since the day I first heard it, an experience impossible to recreate today. The way we listen to music is completely different, popular musical tastes have changed several times, and my unique personal circumstances that made this particular music important to me obviously cannot be replicated. So why write about it? There's the nostalgic aspect to be sure. Then there's the daunting challenge of it. If writing about music, like the anonymous quote says, is like "dancing about architecture," a "stupid thing to want to do", then why attempt it? Because I am at that hapless point in my life where I still feel I can do the impossible, no matter how stupid or pointless. Moreover though, I a) genuinely feel at least one KISS album merits your serious consideration as a "great" album, and (b) no one else I meet seems to think so, which is a source of my simultaneous frustration and amusement. But do people listen to entire albums anymore? I don't mean vinyl records,

I'm not that old and in the dark. I mean collections of songs by your favorite artist. I am aware that CD's are still sold, but like most people these days I purchase my music song by song on the Internet (when I'm not just outright stealing it). So for that reason alone, my topic might already be moot.

But of course I'm going to attempt the argument anyway, so strap on your platform KISS boots and hang on: as part of any music lover's well-rounded consumption, this KISS album is one you should sink your ears into yourself, and here are a few reasons why...

### **"Oh my God, no time to turn..."**

Though not "serious" music (which is it's the sheer joy, really) assessing Destroyer does require using critical terms. For example, the album draws upon archetypes, musical and otherwise. The opener "Detroit Rock City" is one of the best, if not the best, "death by misadventure" song ever, supplanting odes to (um, "ballads of"?) vehicular homicide that inspired it, like Jan & Dean's "Dead Man's Curve" or "Leader of the Pack" by the Shangri-las (herein lies the first problem with music journalism: its tendency to be self referential. Suffice it to say, these songs / artists I'm referencing... hey, they're pretty cool, too. Despite being ancient, you might want to check out the ones you aren't familiar with).

### **"You really like...Rock And Roll...all of the fame...and the masquerade..."**

"Do You Love Me" closes Destroyer with a genre/gender twist so deftly executed it took me years to catch on: the first half of the song is as macho as KISS can be. In a genre overcrowded with double entendre, this song whips out (pun intended) the cleverest one I've ever heard, or in this case, heard implied. Oh, and it's a canny KISS branding moment, too, in that it simultaneously describes their outrageous costumes. Paul Stanley snarls "you like my seven inch (pause) leather heels..." and what he is talking about and not

talking about is very obvious. The moment is testosterone-packed, but by the time the song moves from the bridge to its final refrain, tubular bells, cooing female background vocals and a piano that sounds two stories tall are added to the mix, making the song a stylistic homage to producer Phil Spector's 'Wall of Sound' recordings of the early 1960's, and more specifically his great girl group 45's of the period. It's such a great track its inspiration isn't apparent until two KISS albums later (1977's *Love Gun*) when, in an effort to ape *Destroyer*, a remake of "Then (She) Kissed Me" (1963 by the Crystals, produced by Phil Spector), is placed, as was "Do You Love Me," as the last track on the album. Not coincidentally *Love Gun* also features an oil painting cover by Ken Kelly, creator of the *Destroyer* cover.

All of this is not to mention the literary archetypes *Destroyer* co-opts for its song titles: "Great Expectations" (like the Dickens novel), "Flaming Youth" (an F. Scott Fitzgerald inference), and the mythological imagery (among other things) of the aforementioned "God of Thunder." Superficially, everything about the album screams "take this music seriously!" yet the music itself is, thankfully, serious only in its pursuit of escapism.

### **"If you don't feel good, there's a way you could..."**

That albums of popular music (particularly rock music, which in many camps had grown bloated with pretentiousness by the time of *Destroyer*) should ever be considered "art" at all is the Beatles fault. For all the accolades they get, the "Fab Four" have to take the blame for baby boomers creating this mythical "greatest albums of all time" mentality of which the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* album always seemed to be the album du jour most often named as "best." These lists, comprised of mundane radio station "countdowns", commemorative (i.e. even more pompous than usual) issues of *Rolling Stone* magazine, and, ever since, unsolicited rambling dissertations from drunken Drooling Fanatics you

sit as far away from as possible at your local bar - more on Drooling Fanatics later, of which I am a recovering member. As great as the Beatles were, however, they would not have had half their success, perhaps even a lack of hits altogether, if not for their producer George Martin.

Producers in popular music are often like a member of the act they are working with. Martin certainly deserved his title as "the fifth Beatle" for his stewardship of the Fab Four. Admittedly, no one could seriously compare KISS with the Beatles in terms of musical composition or musicianship, though KISS action figures could still kick Beatles dolls limey arses in the toy box of rock and roll). So taking my favorite KISS album *Destroyer* seriously as an artistic achievement requires mentioning its true creator -not KISS per se, but veteran music producer Bob Ezrin.

Rock & Roll Hall of Famer Alice Cooper, the first person to be dubbed a "shock rocker" even before KISS, calls Ezrin "our George Martin" and even casual fans of this so-called "classic" era of rock music, though they are probably not aware of it, are familiar with Ezrin's most popular success - Pink Floyd's *The Wall* ("we don't need no education..."). Most of these same fans would have heard the work that led Ezrin to be tabbed as producer of *Destroyer*, that being Alice Cooper's seminal early '70's output. Cooper tracks co-penned by Ezrin like "School's Out" and "No More Mr. Nice Guy" are played on classic rock radio to this day. KISS came on the scene with a theatrical concept similar to what brought Cooper initial success just two years before - bizarre makeup, stage props, hedonistic, often misogynistic songs - but what separates KISS from Cooper, in regards to *Destroyer*, can be summed up as KISS's relentless earnestness and a complete lack of a sense of irony, or in the case of Alice Cooper the entertainer, a sense of humor. Unlike KISS, Cooper was not above going for a laugh. Case in point: On "School's Out," Cooper puns "we got no class / and we've got no principles," cannily goes below the waistline - "we've got no innocence!" - and then goes over the top: "we can't

even think of a word that rhymes!” Bob Ezrin’s polishing of raw Cooper material into hits led to him producing Destroyer for KISS (a canny pairing, considering KISS was conceived as a band of four Alice Coopers) and co-writing all but one song. But unlike Alice Cooper, if you were listening to KISS back in the day and laughing, you’re laughing at them, not with them. This was of course before Gene Simmons’ Family Jewels and KISS performing with midgets on Dr. Pepper commercials, all anathema to me and my topic at hand.

**“So enter please/ get on your knees / there are no bills: they are all your fees.”**

Ah, there it is: “Calling Dr. Love,” from the said same KISS soda-pop commercial. A fitting use of the song garnering my “Great Guitar Riff Nullifies Most Cringe-Inducing Lyric Ever... Almost” Award. God I hate it (the commercial). Speaking of, I already hate myself for writing this paper. And why shouldn’t I?

I’m doing a bit of research, if it can be called that, and I am checking out KISS tribute bands online. I should emphasis: I am up at 3AM, watching KISS tribute bands on YouTube. My family is gonna find me in the morning hanging from the rafters by my tongue. But I am wondering...

I am wondering why, to this day, I am so enthralled by the album Destroyer that I can pepper almost any conversation with arcane, free-associated Destroyer trivia (TRIVIA!! Guitarist Ace Frehley was so wasted during sessions for the only two songs he co-wrote on Destroyer that his solos were performed by, in a foreboding sign of things to come for KISS, a session musician. Making matters worse, Frehley showed up afterwards still wasted enough to whoop and holler and give the solos a thumbs-up upon hearing the playback, thinking he was actually the one performing them.) Why do I have to fight back the urge to do this? For the same reason there’s Ritalin?

I am also wondering, at 3am, why other people like KISS too, and in this case why some like them so much they

would dress up like them, pretend to be them and name their tribute band “Destroyer” and play their songs? For fun and profit, it appears. As distasteful as KISS may be to some, what I am seeing online in these tribute band videos is an even more derivative, virulent strand of distasteful: a very elaborate stage show, complete with the lighted “KISS” stage logo burning itself into your retinas, warranting rock journalists to write “KISS” in all caps all these years. Hmm...if you took away the vocals, this tribute band actually isn’t bad...Yikes, I gotta shut this off. Besides, that Gene Simmons wannabe twinkling his micropenis of a tongue at the camera ...yeesh. Keep it in your pants, er, mouth, dude.

**“My leathers fit tight around me...my whip is always beside me...”**

I don’t have a local KISS tribute band I can interview for insight, but I have the next best thing. You could say Chip Larkby has a nice sidelight being the “next best thing” if the best thing you are referring to is ‘80’s style “glam metal” rock & roll. By day, Larkby is a successful real estate agent and a member of the homeowners association in my neighborhood. But Larkby lives a double life: on weekend evenings, he applies mascara and dons a heavy metal wig and strategically ripped fishnet hose, becoming Jani St. James, drummer for Silicone Sister, a regionally popular nightclub act specializing in recreating the 1980’s style stadium rock experience at your local bar. Like the KISS tribute band, Chip and the boys ham it up for fun and profit. I interviewed asked Chip / Jani to find out why playing dress up is necessary to play rock & roll.

“Well, for us it’s the money. We’re trying to recapture all those great bands that I grew up with in junior high and high school, and people are into it, coming out to bring back those days themselves, hear all those old tunes and see a real show as opposed to just a typical bar band.

“I think that’s at the core of what KISS did, too,” Chip



continues. I've ambushed him, so to speak, on his mobile phone (real estate agents want you to call them, don't they?), and he is in full weekday Clark Kent profiteer mode, in the morning by the office fax machine probably waiting for a big contract to come through, Saturday night's guy-sized ladies' underthings tucked away in his garage with the sound gear. Or who knows, maybe not.

"Back then, you just had stoned hippies onstage, standing around, and here comes KISS with this wild stage show." Chip continues, with nothing girly lurking beneath Monday morning's Regular Guy Haggar slacks. I don't know why I'm thinking about that – I'm not thinking about that.

"KISS captured an audience they still have to this day." Oh, we're still talking about KISS with Revlon Boy. "I think its cool they're still touring with half their original members but the original show still intact." Towns like San Francisco host yearly art and music festivals: I live down the street from, effectually, a member of a small gang of weekend transvestites who play AC/DC tunes at my neighborhood's yearly barbecue, who appear to really like AC/DC, and, hell...might actually be "AC/DC."

Are we still talking about music? Ahem, yes we are... ("guy" snort, hitch up pants). But in all seriousness it does feel good to talk with someone who "gets" the whole KISS thing, and I genuinely thank Chip for his time. But not before he yanks my chain about Destroyer.

"That was a bit before my time. KISS pretty much sucked in the '80's when they took the make-up off, but of course I am aware of that album and a couple of songs on there. 'Shout It Out Loud' is pretty good." Wait a minute - even alongside another (apparent) Drooling Fanatic, and a cross-dressing one at that, I'm again the oddball?

Chip's too nice of a guy to be mocking me, right? He's as unaware of me watching KISS tribute band videos all night last night (and now groggy as hell) as I am oblivious (and indifferent) to his underwear choice (I promise). Someone get



me to the nearest Starbucks!

I've crashed my car, he's faxed his tie. Droning on and on, Chip finally asks me, "Why do you like that album so much, anyway?"

Oh, (yawn) you're talking to me, Mr. Mascara? Hey, who's interviewing who anyway?

**"I'm the King Of The Nighttime World / Come...live the secret dream...."**

(That was the pick-up line, I promise. The "shit" on the schoolyard playground. For about five minutes, for all the short-bus girls. Who liked vampires. Damn, it's 3am again.)

Why do I like that album so much? I don't know...

Well, for starters, I'm a big fan of things that shouldn't go together making sense. Or the notion that something can be bigger than the sum of its parts. Back when I was watching Sesame Street, I was always trying to find ways that the ostracized item in the daily "One of These Things is Not Like the Other" sing-along could belong. I like carrots with peanut butter. I love it when I recognize an old song sampled in a new one, and I love it even more when it's a pastiche of two or more songs from different genres placed side by side. I am also a fan of things that are unintentionally funny. I'll rent the movie most people wouldn't that says "Quirky!" on the cover. And being a writer, I also have an interest in the trappings of fine literature: archetypes, irony - I am a huge fan of irony. That a single collection of songs could be iconic, ironic, and moronic all at the same time is what makes Destroyer unique.

The soundscape of the album, I think, must be what keeps me coming back: children's choirs and orchestras, chimes, gospel singers, calliopes, and of course "Detroit Rock City's" car crash (that should really end the album, shouldn't it? Instead it's the first song, making the rest of the album, borne from the heart of a deadly explosion, a death-throes hallucination? A flashback from inside a coma? Heaven? Hell? The equivalent of an Andrew Lloyd Weber-

esque Spider-Man: The Broadway Musical?) All these great musical flavors just shouldn't be mixed together on one palette, but they are.

A favorite moment typifies my experience: On "Great Expectations," a trademark Ace Frehley guitar riff swells into the mix, but an orchestra takes over the melody where a guitar solo is expected, all in the middle of what lyrically is probably the daffiest delusional fantasy ever written, even for a rock song, and for that matter, goofy even by KISS standards (eh, scratch that last part. I don't think KISS has standards, which is their whole appeal): "You watch me playing guitar / you feel what my fingers can do / and you wish you were the one I was doing it to". When you're a ten year old boy, preoccupied with but ignorant of the ways of the flesh, this is like Beethoven.

And then the Harlem Boys' Choir is singing the chorus... I'm not making this up, read the liner notes...and it's all makes no sense, is absolutely ridiculous, but at least (and this must be why I love it, I confess) it raises more questions than it answers. To me that's what great art does. Questions: If taken literally, KISS canoodled with their...instruments? Heh, heh, heh. Why is there a boys' choir in Harlem? Why are there boys' choirs at all? And does KISS carpool with priests when cruising for choirboys?!? By nature of these questions' unique inaneness, "Great Expectations" alone makes Destroyer not merely The Greatest Album Of All Time, but verily, I say unto you...it is "The Greatest Work Of Art in the World, Ever." On Bizzaro World, that is.

But then...I found out years later that the melody of "Great Expectations" actually is ripped off from a work by Beethoven! It's called "Pathique" – does that make Gene Simmons pathetic (a Bob Ezrin practical joke), or me the KISS fan for being so unsophisticated as to not recognize it? Oh, now I get it, and I feel ripped off, which is the way I've felt about every subsequent KISS album after Destroyer! I laugh; I cry: it's brilliant! (Not ripped off entirely: follow-ups Rock & Roll Over and Love Gun captured a jar's worth of

malicious electricity – oh, yes: “Calling Doctor Love,” or Ace Frehley’s “Shock Me,” Drooling Fanatics? – but these could not equal Destroyer’s full-on lightning storm of the imagination). That it answers no questions at all - Destroyer’s the Mp3’s in your iPod making mocking fart sounds during all your other songs’ insipid questioning! - yet provokes so much for those of us lucky enough to have nothing more substantial we’re forced to think about, this must be the reason I find it so compelling.

**“...You stand and clutch your breasts / Our music drives you wild / along with the rest...”**

Destroyer is the Greatest Album of All Time with No Redeeming Social Values Whatsoever.

I might have more succinctly stated my case that way, or merely said that an album comprised of this many cheap thrills shouldn’t sound so expensive, but that would’ve taken the fun out of it.

Yes, I am a Drooling Fanatic.

Steve Almond creates the term “Drooling Fanatic” in his new book *Rock and Roll Will Save Your Life* to describe persons who tend to attach themselves to particular bands for long stretches, an affiliation that is both cloying and evangelical. We refer to band members by their first names (I did not do this did I?). Friends, in turn, refer to band members as our ‘imaginary friends’...Chances are, we were DJs in college...with a name so stupid we are vaguely embarrassed to mention it now, though we are quite happy to mention that we were DJs...Chances are, the only periods of sustained euphoria in our lives have been accompanied by music.

Wow. I became a DJ instead of even going to college the first time around. And they used to call me “Bondo”...now that’s stupid sounding. Steve Almond, you wrote my life... which paraphrases an old country song I’ve just recalled titled “Hank Williams, You Wrote My Life”: someone please

put a stake through my heart before I write the Free-Associated Redneck Songs From Hell essay.

Steve Almond was kind enough to respond to my query regarding this essay. In regards to my all-time favorite album, Almond quipped “Destroyer is an epic of hedonism”.

An “epic of hedonism”...yes! Destroyer is the most hedonistic collection of songs ever, from the most hedonistic era in recorded music, by its most hedonistic band. Who else but KISS could have a simple album cover photo shoot – for 1974’s *Hotter Than Hell*, according to legend – turn into an orgy? “An epic of hedonism” says it all about Destroyer.

Almost.

### **“...we just can’t find the sound...”**

But I’ve failed to mention the other songs. There’s “Sweet Pain” and how Ezrin’s sweetening of the mix by adding disco-era female background singers transforms the ode to S & M from a confrontation (had it appeared on KISS’s raw prior releases) to a sexual liaison where both parties participate. Or that’s my studded dog collar and I’m sticking to it. That’s not to mention me thinking for years it was Peg Bundy singing on “Sweet Pain”...you know, the mom with the freaky red ‘doo on the old TV sitcom *Married With Children*? I got my KISS trivia mixed up for a while and found it funny imagining Peg Bundy beating Gene Simmons’ ass with a whip during the song ala Bettie Page...er, you’ll have to look up Bettie Page yourself, kids...but it turns out actress Katey Sagal did sing with Gene Simmons way back when...on a subsequent solo album, not “Sweet Pain.” Too bad.

I’m running out of time to point out the irony in “Flaming Youth’s” hallelujah-styled vocal breakdown (with carousel organ accompaniment – it’s a ride on a rock/gospel merry-go-round!) juxtaposed with the decadence inherent in actually being a “flaming youth,” in the Roaring ‘20’s sense in which the term was coined. My moment of opportunity is closing to lead you to the quintessential KISS song “Shout It Out Loud,” equal to its progenitor “Rock and Roll All Nite” in its

singalong call to action, but more intrinsically KISS in Simmons' and Stanley's sharing of lead vocals (at points Simmons and Stanley even morph into one another via Ezrin's trickery on the crossfades) and "Shout It Out Loud's" signature Ace Frehley guitar solo: brief but expressive, gravity-defying, ejaculative. Ezrin's giant piano makes another appearance, too, holding down the bottom end. And of course, if given the chance, I should save "Beth" for last, the well-known KISS anomaly at best Destroyer's palette cleanser, a cheesy morsel of pop schmaltz. Sorry, Peter Criss.

To paraphrase the familiar Compact Disc Audio Disclaimer – "I have attempted to render, as closely as possible, the impact of the original recording. Because of its high resolution, however, the original source recording can reveal limitations of the written essay." That is, my dance with architecture is nearly complete and the joke is on you, dear reader, because at just under 30 minutes minus sound effects, it may have taken you longer to read this essay about Destroyer than it would take you to actually listen to the album: skip "Beth" like I always do and it's even shorter. (By the way, a comment on contemporary music: just because it is possible to put 77 minutes of music on a CD does not mean artists necessarily should. Destroyer's all-meat, no-potatoes brevity is another of its endearing qualities).

What's worse, I haven't mentioned at all my personal memories associated with these songs, enough to comprise the full memoir I intend to write one day. But until then, there is one personal anecdote I need to share to resolve what you've (hopefully) stayed tuned for: what that little kid was saying on KISS's "God of Thunder."

### **Destroyer Coda (untitled final track)**

As karmic retribution for having harassed Chip the Hair Band Realtor on the phone, I've been ambushed by good old Cousin Scott. He calls from back home once or twice a year. It's usually late at night or at some other time too inconvenient for me, Boring Family Guy, to take his call, but this

time it is 10am on a Tuesday morning. Scott is never sober when he calls, not even this time, and this time he's pissed off at me.

"Listen asshole, I'm pissed off at you." See, I told ya. "You don't write somebody in jail a letter like you wrote me. 'Hope you straighten your ass up when you get out?!' ...Man, I'm gonna drive down to Hilton Head and kick your fuckin' ass."

'Straighten your ass up' was the gist of what I wrote in that letter, yes, but with a lot more sugar on it than Scott's giving me now. "I'll be waiting by the door when you get here, fuckhead," I say. I love him like a brother.

"Oh wait a minute, I forgot. I don't get my license back 'til next month. Uh, next month...you keep waiting until next month. Then I'll be there to kick your ass." We both laugh.

Throughout what turns out to be a conversation of an hour or more, Scott is digging through his old music collection: albums, old 45's, even eight track tapes, and what's even more amazing to me than actually having hung on to all this stuff, Scott also has a functioning eight track tape player. He's been punctuating his diatribes with blasts from the past, from the sublime ("Love Hurts" by Nazareth) to the bizarre (Cher's "Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves," among others). It's the Drunk Sounds of the '70's on a Tuesday morning. Of course, if you weren't drunk on Tuesday mornings in the '70's, you weren't really there.

Suddenly Scott stumbles upon Destroyer. "The greatest album of all time!" we cry in unison, with more laughter. I might have a beer myself now. The wife and kids aren't home and I'm "batching it" on Spring Break for a day, so why not? This is fun. It always was with Scott and me.

"I'm gonna prove to you once and for all this is my copy of Destroyer" - I never once disputed whose copy of the album this was - "by playing you a long distance dedication," Scott says. Sounding as ancient as it does immediate, "Beth" begins playing over the phone; or the end of KISS's "greatest hit," rather, beneath all those beautiful pops and scratches. It sounds like eggs frying with some violins

thrown in. Then here comes The Scratch, just like in the days of old.

"Me and the boys will be playin'...all night..." Peter Criss warbles from his black vinyl translucent pocket universe: "All nigh-zzzzzzzzziiiiiiiiiiippt!!"

Being the nasty little pervs we were way back when, we couldn't help imagining, thanks to The Scratch, that there were reasons other than "finding the sound" why Criss couldn't "come home right now" to Beth: The Scratch was the sound of him unzipping his pants to whip out his "Criss peter" (oh, we were clever little shits, weren't we?) and execute those reasons. Or maybe he was just jacking off. "Hey bitch," Scott howls, "I got your long distance dedication... right here!!" That didn't garner the laughs it did back in the day, but yes this was Scott's scratched-like-hell (even back then) copy of Destroyer.

I'm laughing though, because it's after school in '76 again. But then I screw it up. "You're gonna be pissed again, sir, when I tell you what 'God of Thunder' says."

Scott hits the volume off, putting "Beth" out of its misery: "Really? How do you know?" I hear him flipping the album over...

"Just this one website, so it might not be..."

"Okay, 'Mr. D.J.', what's it say?"

"Supposedly the producer's kids were playing in the studio with walkie-talkies, and one of these radios was set up in front of a mike and the kids were instructed to 'make scary sounds'. The ones that we had when we were kids never worked worth a crap, you ever remember that?"

"So what does the kid supposedly say?"

"You ready?" This answer has been thirty-five years in arriving. "Supposedly it says, 'okay, got reception...'"

"Okay, got reception...'? What the fuck's that mean?"

"Well, they were doing a microphone check I guess, and..."

"I get that, dumbass, but what the fuck does that mean?"

"Well, absolutely nothing I guess. It was just one website.

You know, you should..."

I have no idea what I was going to tell Scott he should do, because of course what he should do is hear it for himself. Through the phone, I hear Scott cranking the stereo, and history's repeating itself, except this time the genie's back in the bottle and closed for business.

Okay, got reception...(zzip!), okay, got reception...(zzip!), okay, got reception... Scott's ripping the stylus across the record now, muttering, "There's no fucking way that says that!" Okay, got reception, reasserts the dead baby.

Now the stereo's blasting through the phone. Scott must've set the receiver down, yelling "My ass! My aching ass!" between needle drops. We're hillbillies, Scott and I. Odds are, what you'd hear him shouting would approximate "Macon ash!" given Scott's East Tennessee accent and missing teeth from prison dentistry – "meth mouth," I'm told – but I understand him just fine, especially since I had the same initial reaction.

He comes back to the phone. "Well, doesn't that just suck?" Dudn't at jusschuck?

"I'm sorry, dude. You know, it might not say that." We both heard clearly that it did.

I hear Scott's bedroom door open. "What in the world's going on in here?" Enter Aunt Kathleen, Scott's mother and the sweetest, most myopic woman on earth. Back in high school, we could have been freebasing WD-40 back in the bedroom with goats spinning over our heads shooting blood from their necks all over the walls, and Kathleen would walk in ten seconds after it was all over saying "what in the world's going on in here?" God bless you Kathleen. Thanks for walking onto my page.

"Oh nothing, Mom," which is also what Scott would say back in the day. "Hey bitch (to me, not her)...Mom's making some breakfast - I'm gonna go get me some bacon and eggs." Scott's impromptu phone calls always end abruptly, but that's okay as I am considering what to have for lunch myself. "Listen, fuck you, I mean...thank you very much for



writing me that letter, and especially, for ruining Destroyer for me, you prick."

I chuckle. "You're welcome."

"Don't call back."

"You called me."

"Whatever, faggot!" Scott belches. We both are laughing again. "I'm gonna let you go."

"Right back atcha. See ya buddy." I haven't seen Scott in seven years.

"I love you, man."

"I love you, too. Later." Click.

A year later, last March, I finally came back home for Scott's dad's funeral. I drove up and drove straight back later that same evening.

I estimate, conservatively, that over the years I have listened to Kiss's Destroyer album about 600 times.

# Travis MacMillan

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## *Saving the Summer*

The summer of 1990 saw the death of countless brave Italian plumbers in the neighborhood of my childhood, Rice Mill. I would like to think, looking back, that they did not die in vain. That their sacrifice amounted to something, something bigger than the sum total of their lives' calculated worth by a cold utilitarianism mathematics. What that "bigger" was, I cannot say. But... I knew it was true in the part of my heart that words can't reach. The part of my heart that died the summer of 1990.

Walking through the neighborhood in summertime with Lyle, my friend since pre-school, was a hallowed tradition of sorts. We bounced back and forth between our houses playing video games at one of them until the mom who ruled the respective home unceremoniously ended our gaming and told us to "play outdoors" or to "get some exercise". Once ousted, we walked to the other Nintendo at the opposite end of our small upper middle class neighborhood, to continue playing indoors free of the shackles of either exercise or nature.

One care-free evening after Lyle got Super Mario Bros. 3, we were forced to yet again make the familiar passage from one cool de sac to the other.

"Dude! The new Mario is so awesome that I almost forget about part 2 being the retarded cousin of the series. All the different suits are so awesome, John. Makes me wish I had a hammer head suit to wear when we go back to middles school so I could throw a hammer through the gym's trophy case," Lyle says in an awesome way as we saunter down Springhouse Drive.

"Yeah, I totally know. I wish my dad wasn't so cheap

and would buy it for me too. I wasted my allowance I had been saving at the flea market last week on some crappy ninja sword. I broke it on the first stupid tree I hit with it and now...," I say as I look off into the never to be grasped future, "it'll be at least another month before I can buy my own Mario 3."

Curses. I had tried taking the remaining shards of the poor shattered weapon back the next day to the vendor in a brown paper bag. He was a rather portly Santa-esque biker looking figure, who very well might have moonlighted as a carnie when he wasn't hocking cheap crap on the weekends. He asked gruffly in a somewhat curious tone how I broke the sword. When I told him my story he said "Yep... they're pretty crappy swords. No refunds though. Sooo... you wanna buy another one, kid?" By God if I were a real ninja, I would have taken that shabbily dressed man's head for his insolence and then dragged the decapitated flabby corpse to the nearest black market. Then, once enough alcohol abused organs and fists of cash had gone back and forth, I would have my Super Mario 3.

"John, I could understand your dad not being able to get you the new Mario if you only had a one story house like poor Larry's, but you've got a 2 story, John!" Lyle says while shaking his head ever so lightly back and forth.

"Sometimes... I think... my dad wants me to think I'm poor, Lyle. I really do."

"Why? That's stupid! Is your dad a Democrat?!!"

"No, no!! God, no! He's a Republican, Lyle! You know that! It's just that he thinks I should learn the value of money or something."

"What the hell does that mean? How can you learn the value of money by not having it to spend? So do the poor understand money better than..."

"No, no it's that... I mean... like, I'll understand its value by knowing that it cost something to get it... I guess."

Lyle's feet stop and begin to fill with a rising indignation that escapes from his mouth after the disbelief fades.

"That is more retarded than the second Mario, John. You should make your dad play the second Mario after playing the third one and say, 'Dad. This is what the crap you say about knowing the value of money is like. Lame and not worth putting into my Nintendo. So shut up, stop being cheap, and buy me the damn game already!' I just don't get your dad, John."

"Yeah... to be honest, I don't get him either. Maybe because he grew up poor he's that way. I don't know, Lyle. It has to do with "character" or something. I dunno..."

"One time my dad started to talk about "character" or some crap like that and my mom started to laugh, but tried to keep a straight face till they both started dying laughing and had to leave the room. Dad said we'd have the talk later after they get back from Europe."

As we trek on, we're hit by a funny smell as we come to my end of the neighborhood. Strong and pungent yet unfamiliar, we have no category to place this alien scent. Emerging from the woods behind the Jones' house, a young man comes into focus. Somewhere in his early twenties and living with his decrepit grandmother, Todd worked at the Circle K which he drove/pushed his beat up car back and forth to. He is unkempt with long straggly hair he pulls back in a pony tail and is seldom seen not smoking a cigarette. In a strange unsettling way he looks sorta like a skinny unhealthy Jesus with an Adam's apple. I got the gist from my parents that Todd had made some "poor life choices" that I would do well to avoid.

Adjusting to the sunlight as he comes out from the wooded area, he calls out to us.

"Hey... uh... kids!"

Todd's eyes are on fire as he wears a relaxed yet crooked grin. There was something about him that seemed off but I couldn't place it. He pulls his blaring headphones behind his ears off, rests them on his shoulders, and then finds a crinkled cigarette from behind his left ear that was hiding beneath his hair. As Todd flicks and raises his green lighter

to his mouth, his head jerks back slightly while his eyes lit up, opening relatively wide. Regaining himself, he swaps the crinkled cigarette out for another one behind the right ear that he examines for a second. Finding it smoother, he lights it up and starts to smoke in a somewhat satisfied manner.

"So ya'll enjoying your summer?"

"Yeah... I guess so. We've only got one month left before we gotta go back to....," Lyle answers with a matter of fact-ness that kids usually use at an adult's quizzing.

"Awww... that's too bad," Todd interrupts with words not touched by the remotest sense of sympathy as he exhales. "I remember summer vacation and school and all that sh\*t. You know one day... all that will be over, right? Ya'll are going to have to get jobs you f\*cking hate and join the real world where life sucks. So you little f\*ckers better enjoy this sh\*t and make the most out of it 'cause its going to be gone, and after that even your f\*cking memories of these happy lil' days will start to fade, and all summer will be to you is just the time of year when everything is just really really f\*cking hot." Lyle and I stand speechless. I glance over and see that he's clutching the Super Mario 3 cartridge tightly in his quivering hands. Todd bends over slightly putting his left hand on his knee to make himself eye level with us and grins as he flicks his unfinished cigarette to the side like a warrior casting aside his sword's sheath as he prepares to deliver the coup de grâce.

"You girls enjoy the rest of your summer, okay?"

Then he kinda stumbled away while laughing to himself, delighting in the gravitas of his impromptu speech. For a good 10 minute we stood like corpses as his words sunk deeper and deeper inside of us. Never before had I contemplated the transience of my life nor life in general for that matter. My dad's allergy to pet dander had shielded me from the pain of having to say goodbye to furry friends as they were tossed into a cold merciless ground. None of my grandparents had passed on yet; they still had many years of spoiling me in praise of my good grades ahead of them. Always and for-

ever, I had seen life as an endless cycle of school and summer with the Christmas holiday joyfully meeting me halfway to raise my spirits for the rest of the trek to Summer's sweet perpetual embrace. Life was a game with unlimited continues where you got an extra 30 men if you knew the right code to put into the title screen. Now, I caught a glimpse further through the hourglass of time and saw the unforgiving grains of sand that were covering over me slowly but surely, until I am buried and forgotten, and the once sacred mantra "Up, Up, Down, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right, B, A" is but the mumblings of a tired and broken old man whose mind and time are now gone. That moment in time of my sixth grade Summer forever broke the way I viewed every moment after that. Childhood had died. Game over.

Later that night, we egged the hell out of that loser Todd's car. I tried slashing his tires too but the damn blade broke on the butterfly knife that I bought at the Flea Market. I think I finally understood what "character" was that night, too. When the blade snapped on the tire, I still managed to use it to scratch what was left of the faded paint on Todd's bomb even though it was hard to find amongst the rust in the night's darkness. I never did buy my own Super Mario 3, but my 401k is pretty damn good and I should be up for partner at the firm soon if I don't drink myself to death before then.

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"Uncle John!"

"Uh... yeah, uh... what Samuel?" My nephew's voice returned me once again to my sister's porch as I sat recovering from the Thanksgiving festivities. Awww... nostalgia and alcohol. They have such a wonderful way of disconnecting me from the present moment. I completely forgot the impetus of my sister's shotgun wedding was sitting there listening to me drunkenly ramble on along with his two cousins. "Uncle John, why are your stories always so bad? They never make any sense. Ever."

"I don't know... Sam," I ponder as I look past the sun as it putters aimlessly down the horizon. "Why do you have to embarrass your daddy by never starting a game in baseball? Maybe you should try out for cheerleading next year, huh? With your skinny little legs, who knows, you might be the one on top of the pyramid that all the football players want to take to prom!"

"I...I hate you uncle John!" Samuel quivers back behind teary eyes as he bursts through the front door. In a strange masochistic way, I sort of am looking forward to my sister and I quarreling over my "lack of sensitivity". Anger fires up my buzz like a roll of mentos in a diet coke bottle, and now that yesterday's spell is broken I need another escape.

"Hey, Samantha! Grab your uncle another beer while you're crying to your mom in the kitchen, will ya?"

"That wasn't very nice uncle John," said little Cindy as she peered up at me evidently expecting more from a parental figure than I was delivering.

"No... I suppose it wasn't, was it? Well, did you two enjoy your uncle John's story?" I ask as I give them my full yet less than sober attention.

They stare helplessly at me. Within their eyes, both a tender fear and a puzzled blankness stare back at me. The fear is due to a bitter jerk asking them to tell him something that will inevitably anger him. The blankness is from the moral quandary of having to either decide to tell the truth or to avoid the claws of the drunken tiger by lying.

"I...uhhh ... liked it?" Cindy forces past her conscience. Good girl. Best to learn to play the game early before any naïve idealism begins to take shape in you. It makes the whole "growing up" thing less painful I think.

"Yeah, yeah. Me too, uncle John. Me too!"

"That is so good to hear Cindy and Sivan." I beam back at them as my face threatens to rip from my forced smile. Sivan is only 5. I'd need at least another three beers to rip into her feelings like I did Samuel. I'm no monster. Cindy is 8, however, and that's old enough to get an emotional beat

down in my book. By “book”, what I really mean is the ever changing list of justifications I manufacture in vain to try and hinder my conscience in its crusade to demonize me. Try as I might, I can’t seem to drown my damn super ego in booze. Looking around, I feel the usual restlessness settle on me. That and I really have to take a piss.

“I think your uncle needs to go for a walk, kids...”

Standing up, my legs wobble a bit, but no more than any seasoned sailor’s legs would when he was out to sea. I walk towards the sunset without much fanfare from my departure. The girls start whispering as I begin to escape ear shot. Cheryl, my sister, did well for herself marrying Chet. Chet’s family owns a bunch of those crappy Quincy restaurants that you only find traveling on the highway. Lousy food or not, they have a really giant lake in their colossal back yard that I’m enjoying at the moment. It almost seems like it stretches out past the horizon that pulls me into itself as I lose myself in the view.

The sun’s golden reflection is captured by the tranquil lake as its essence infuses the body of water with a temporary majesty. Beautiful. How incredibly beautiful. The warm yet brilliant colors burn the sky along with the water with a god-like fire. Makes me wish I learned to paint, I guess. You know... so I could capture this moment, or at least the idea of this moment, and hold onto it long after the original has decayed somewhere in the back of my mind. Perhaps the heart holds onto such things. Not as distinct things onto themselves, but rather as some kinda patchwork that is just rolled up and mashed together in one big ball. That would make sense. It would explain why I can look at a sunset as wonderful as this and yet have tears stream down my face. “Dammit,” I mutter to myself as I throw a stone into the lake shattering the illusion. My wife with our newborn, Ichabod, is probably ready to leave and make the drive back to our house. I turn around one final time and absorb as much of the sunset into my heart as I think there is room for. “Good bye, sun.”



Walking up the stone laden path to the large ante-bellum style plantation home, I see Samuel slowly twisting back and forth on an old tire swing suspended from a large oak. Staring at a large patch of dirt, he is unaware of my presence. I suppose he is absorbing the dirt into his heart.

"Hey... Samuel."

"What uncle John..." he says with his downward gaze weakening as he slowly raises his head.

Sighing, I lift my head from the former place of his focus. I stare as deeply and softly into his eyes as a bastard like me can.

"I'm sorry for saying those stupid things to you earlier. I... I didn't mean them. Will you forgive your stupid uncle John?" Samuel uses his elbows to launch himself out of the swing as gracefully as a kid who warms the bench can, landing three or so feet from me. He looks down again at first, then back up at me sheepishly. In his eyes is something familiar yet somehow now very foreign to me at this point in my life. For the life of me I can not place it.

"Uncle John..."

"Yes Samuel?" As the "...el" was released from the boy's name, he steps forward, driving his little foot less than gently up into my balls. The welcoming ground receives my less than graceful crash magnanimously. Like the prodigal son, I have returned.

"I still hate you uncle John!"

As I lie in the dust watching my nephew storm off, I try to say "you should try out for soccer" but the words find no place to take root. Owwww. The other members of my clan look on from the porch that is quickly gathering with gawkers gleaming with both curiosity and shadenfreude. Yeah. The bastard got his. Enjoy the show you assholes.

While I spit dirt that has combined with my spittle to form mud out of my mouth, little Cindy walks over to me as meek as a little lamb. With her arms behind her back and her red curls bouncing angelically over her blue eyes, she looks so dear, so precious.

"Uncle John?" she sings.

"Huhhhhhkkk... yes Cindy?"

"It was a stupid story."

"I know, Cindy. Thanks for telling me."

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"Mr. John!"

"Uhhh uhh... yes? What is it?! What do you want?!!!"

"Its time for your medicine. You can finish telling everybody your story after you finish taking your medication, okay?"

Furrowing my brow, I snatch the little cups and down their contents as begrudgingly as a senile old curmudgeon can in petty indignation for being interrupted.

"These kids nowadays respect nothing and no one. When I was younger we knew what it was to respect one's elders! Anyway... where was I..."

"Not now, John! Matlock is coming on. Shhh... Finish your story later," the chorus of my enfeebled fellow nursing home residents barks at me in unison.

But there will be no later. I doze off in my recliner in the retirement home and drift off into forever. No one notices until Matlock is over when a nurse tries to wake me so I can choke down a microwave Salisbury steak supper. I loved Salisbury steaks. Why couldn't death have waited for meatloaf night? After I am lowered into the ground, all that will remain of me is what the sun retained of my memory in its heart from so many years ago. God, I hope the sun has some kind of consciousness...

# Ella Greer

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## *The Prettiest Wallflower at the Dance*

"I can't do this anymore."

"Do what?"

"Ella, I'm breaking up with you."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you, I'll miss my bus."

The Prom was the next day.

This conversation is to blame for my irrational fear of a large amount of high school students dancing in the school gymnasium, but most importantly, it was the event in my life in which I can point to and say, "That was when I knew I was going to write other people's stories." The boy, Ben, was my one and only. He was my crush, my dream, my dream boat. He was the tall, non-stuttering drink of water that complemented my gawky and awkward self. He was everything a sixteen year old girl could wish for, but no longer was he mine. Someone behind me yelled for his attention, he gave me a quick smile and ran off. I remained standing at the spot, in utter shock, well, as much shock a sixteen year old can feel. Suddenly, all I had left from my teenage dream were texts sent from my now first ex-boyfriend and a dress that I would never wear. I was devastated. I finally understood Kelly Clarkson songs.

Having never been dumped before, I was not sure how to go about the mourning stage. The feeling was odd, for I somehow knew that I would be in mourning for the rest of my life, I was certain that nothing good could ever happen ever again. My mom, afraid of coming home to a reenactment of "Fatal Attraction" if an over-dramatic, broken-hearted teenage girl was left alone, insisted that I follow her on the various excursions that soccer moms take with other

soccer moms.

I was quick to learn that people enjoyed hearing that I was dumped. Not because they could comfort me, but because they saw it as an invitation to tell their own sob story. They would scoff at the thought of me being so upset over a boy, and after telling their own miserable tale, they would look at me expectantly, as if that was my cue to jump for joy and thank them for showing me what true heartache was, and if anyone was to be sulking it should be them. So there I was, a down-trodden sixteen year old who did not go to Prom, hearing about others learning that they were the “other woman,” meeting their man’s “other woman,” being left at diners, being dumped by letters, and lovers moving away, never to be seen again.

It was one night, as I sat on the couch, wearing what was supposed to be my Prom dress, drinking Ovaltine and watching an endless collection of Drew Barrymore movies, when I learned how to wallow. I wanted to write. I felt as if my first official heartbreak was my badge of honor; I was officially a part of the world now. I wanted to write all of those stories that I heard. I wanted to listen to more stories, to write them down as well. I knew then that I wanted to write for everyday life. I wanted to assure people that they were indeed normal, to record the tragedies and the triumphs, the small victories and the battle scars. I wanted to know it all.

In the days of my childhood, I remember sitting on the kitchen floor, pretending to play with my dolls as I listened to my mother and her friends gossip at the table. I remember when their voices got low and they would look at me, uncomfortable. My mom would then ask me to play in my room. I was not a fool, I knew something scandalous was about to be said, something I could not stand to miss, so I would hide behind the opposite side of the book shelf, out of sight but able to make sense of the whispers.

I also had a terrible habit of watching people. Staring as they ate at the table next to ours, watching the girl hit her brother when the mother was not looking. I knew that the

mother was not looking because she was too busy acting like they were all having fun when she saw that a family she did not really like but pretended to like came in. There was a thrill when knowing immediately that the dad was pissed and that he could not understand why he had to keep up such appearances for all he wanted to do was eat a sandwich as he watched the game. My mom would then kick my leg under the table and tell me that it was rude to stare and that I should finish my meal. It was not until we watched an upper class couple on the way to a wedding on Tybee Island stop at a gas station, jump out of the car and yell at each other as the mother threw luggage out of the car when I realized my mom was fascinated by people as well. She was just better at hiding it than I was.

But now, after my night, my epiphany thanks to Drew Barrymore, I knew that staring was not rude at all. In fact, staring is needed. Eavesdropping is a necessary practice of life, being dramatic is needed to make anything worthy of remembering at all. George Orwell had it all wrong; children paying attention to the world around them should not be something to be frightened of. I realized that being a peeping tom should not be a crime, it should be embraced. Not only should being a peeping tom become socially acceptable, but it is the most common anthropologist of all; the anthropology of everyday life. The anthropologist that makes the world go round.

Grace Paley once said, "It is the responsibility of writers to listen to gossip and pass it on. It is the way all storytellers learn about life." Spoken like a true peeping tom. Eavesdropping is crucial if the society insists on thriving, rather than merely surviving. This has been proven because no one would have ever thought to invent indoor plumbing if they had not overheard the women complaining about their multiple trips to the river to wash their family's clothes. And if no one stared at the women as they clipped the clothes onto the clothesline and then stayed to see the child get stung by the bee hiding in the towel, no one would have invented the

washing machine or the dryer. Generations of bathers have been saved due to this peeping tom.

Whenever I watch a movie, I have to laugh. The last slide before the movie is the disclaimer that the story is strictly fictional and was by no means inspired by real life events. After the "I have read and agree with the terms listed above," the disclaimer is what I believe to be one of the biggest fibs spoken in our world today. This is because all writers write about everyday life; they are all active people watchers. They have a favorite bench in the park, they take pictures, find long-forgotten notes. They have a tendency of making those being observed uncomfortable, as if the writer has figured them out, like the writer knows both who they are and who they would like to think of themselves as being; which is why I laugh whenever I see the disclaimer, for I feel as if Margaret Atwood watched me one day and that is why Lady Oracle sounds so familiar.

There are news anchors who observe the political world, archeologists who stare at the past, entertainment talk shows who gawk at the rich and famous, and I, Ella Greer, am a part of the wallflowers who stare at everyone else.









