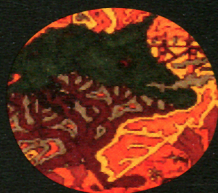


# Calliope

2009



# Calliope

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2009

Armstrong Atlantic State  
University

Volume XXV

# LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

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THIS YEAR CALLIOPE has expanded its literary submission guidelines to include short drama pieces as well as pieces written in French, German, and Spanish. The foreign language submissions were well-received by the staff, resulting in the first-ever foreign language poem to receive the Lillian Spencer Award. *Calliope* hopes to publish more foreign language and drama pieces in the years to come.

The publication saw an increased interest in the art submissions by the faculty of the Fine Arts Department. Several professors offered incentive for art students to submit their work to *Calliope*, which has resulted in one of the largest art selections that *Calliope* has ever produced. We thank the art faculty as well as the faculties of other departments for their support. We also wish to thank Dr. Baker for all the valuable advice given and knowledge shared during the production of this year's *Calliope*.

It is a sincere hope of the editors that *Calliope* continues to engage the entire AASU community in future editions.

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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 Lillian 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 received that year. For more information, or if interested in working on the 2010 Calliope staff, please contact Dr. Christopher Baker in the Languages, Literature and Philosophy department located in Gamble Hall.*



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## **Note on our Cover:**

DANIEL H. HALL JR., biology major at AASU, used pen and ink in creating the cover piece titled "Harmonious Tree-top Living."

# JONATHAN MOODY

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## *Phoenix Tears*

Lillian Spencer Award for Short Fiction

ABEL SINCLAIR PEELED his three foot, forty pound frame off the dusty earth, picked up his glasses, and began to remove small pieces of gravel that were embedded in his skin. He spat out the mud that had caked between his teeth. He ran his fingers through his shaven hair to remove the dust and realized that he had about a three-inch scrape and a rather large goose-egg on the right side of his pear-shaped head. The scrape left a wet, crimson smudge on his finger; he tasted it, the metallic taste made his face cringe in disgust. The one lens of his glasses that was not already missing cracked upon impact with the ground. As he sat on the warm dirt, Abel thought the boys had left and attempted to catch his breath as the last kick came from behind him, hitting him square in the kidney.

"Take that, you *retard*! I bet his mamma don't even love him, Joey!" said Tommy Flitler as he stomped on Abel's fingers. Tommy was eight and a half and much bigger than Abel, standing four feet tall and a solid fifty-five pounds. He wore dark jeans with light brown stitching that were rolled at the bottom. They looked brand new. His plain white shirt was covered by his green and white letterman's jacket, which fit him perfectly. The hat on his head was pulled tight, his black hair poking from the bottom. It was shaped perfectly around his ears, both sides cut evenly half an inch from the top of his ear. The treading on Tommy's shoes was not worn in the least. He could tell they were Chuck Taylor's that could not have been more than three weeks old. "You down-right pathetic, you know that Sinclair?!"

"Hey, come on Tommy. Give it a rest, willya?" said Joey Aglaeca, as he grabbed the boy's shoulder in an attempt to halt the beating. Joey wore no hat upon his head; his blonde hair was oiled and greased to a perfect wave across his scalp. His cheeks were rosy pink and his brown t-shirt seemed too small for him. The t-shirt was tucked into his tight-legged jeans, which were not dark denim, but not light. They were the exact same color as his new jacket.

"Man, *come on*! Quit bein' a square! You know Mamma will have my hide if I get home late!" Tommy spun around and decked him in the chest.

"Look here, Joey. If you're gonna be a girl, you can take yourself home and go play with your *dolls*," snapped Tommy with a smile. "I'm not finished playing with our friend." Tommy's kicks became more intense and Abel felt the bruise on his back getting sorer as the seconds trudged on.

"*Plah-pah...pah...*," whimpered Abel, trying to verbalize a plea for mercy.

"What's the matter, you idiot? Can't even say please?!" Tommy said as he laughed maniacally. "That's not very nice of you," Tommy cackled as he aimed another kick in the direction of Abel's back when Joey intervened.

"Come on, *TOMMY*," begged Joey, and, with a moment of epiphany, Tommy stopped beating the helpless boy.

"If you can say 'please'," Tommy said, "I won't kick you anymore today." Tommy

took a step back and crossed his arms in his green and white jacket and smirked at Abel. As the boys stood still, Abel rolled onto his back and fixed his watery eyes into the glare of the hot July sun. He opened his mouth, and a bubble of mucus expanded from his nose and burst, runny and green, on his lip.

"P-p-please," whispered Abel, barely able to breathe. Kicking dirt in his eyes, Tommy and Joey turned to leave Whitehurst Park, one with his head held high, and one kicking rocks with his head pointed towards the dry, Kansas ground.

"See you tomorrow, 'tard," said Tommy, and he hooted with laughter as the two boys walked away. With a glance over his shoulder, Joey looked back at the fallen boy. He paused in stride, and returned to his staring match with the ground. He adjusted the collar of his new denim jacket and with a tug at the corners, stuffed his hands back into his pockets. The boys continued home.

After lying on the ground for a few moments, Abel stood. The throbbing in his side was becoming more noticeable. With each breath, a shooting pain coming from his ribs caused streams of sweat to flow from his brow, gently cleansing his dusty face. As he began to walk, Abel stared down at his hands. The crimson bloodstain on his fingers entranced him. He still noticed the penny-like taste in his mouth. He was thankful that there were no noticeable battle wounds on his face, leaving him to look better once he had a shower. His head pounded with his speedy heartbeat, aching from the top of the knot on his head to the base of his skull.

His faded overalls had tears, one in each knee and a large one across his hind parts. One of the straps was missing a button, so it hung off him. The glasses that sat perched upon his plump nose were crooked; the only remaining lens was now cracked down the side. The thick frames touched his head again at his small ears, each no more than two inches tall. His high-top tennis shoes, Converse Chuck Taylor knockoffs, were dirty, as always. The strings flopped behind him like lifeless earthworms, twitching with every step taken. The hot flannel shirt he wore was left with one attached button, right in the middle. Some of his teeth had fallen out already, two on the top and three on the bottom. His silvery-blond hair was buzzed off, leaving hairs about as long as pencil erasers. His dreadfully pale skin was accented by his icy blue eyes, which bore years of weathering despite his age.

On his way home, Abel's aching head ran wild with thoughts. He wondered why the other kids in the park never got hurt. In his younger years, he played in the park with the other kids, but the games always left him with a scrape or a bruise. But he was seven now, and he knew the other kids were not playing with him. He stopped beside a fire hydrant and looked into the puddle on the ground where the city officials had cleaned the water out in regular fashion. The face that stared back at him was that of a stranger. Straining his neck, he turned his head so he could see the knot on the side of his skull. The cut made him dizzy and wobbly-legged at first, but he had regained the security of his legs and the dizziness began to subside, leaving his head to throb. He stared at the ears, too small for his body, on the side of his head. Turning his head, so that he was looking at his face again, he noticed the largeness of his nose, and the proportional difference of it to the rest of his facial features. He did not know why or how, but Abel Sinclair knew he was singled out. Staring into the puddle, the boy saw himself for the first time as everyone else saw him: Different. He looked up from the puddle and trudged the half mile trek home.



When Abel finally arrived at his house, he stood outside staring at the rickety framing for quite a while. The dilapidated ivory siding was rotting and had been for years. With his eyes, he followed the seam of the siding from one side of the house to the other, tracing his way to the bottom of the house which stood on cinderblocks. He then redirected his vision to the roof where rusty aluminum panels overlapped each other. The windowsills were termite ridden and looked as if they had no center; just the outer wood painted stale and crackling white. The cracked, single-paned windows exposed the sulfur colored drapery to the outside. Abel looked at the dismal color of the curtains and his stomach knotted. The drapes were cigarette-stained yellow with no crease for sunlight to slip through. The confinement that the windows had on the house made Abel's heart sink.

Nevertheless, Abel broke from his daze and started up the unsteady stairs to the front porch. The boards creaked under his feet and seemed to get louder as he climbed higher. Reaching the front porch, he took three steps to the front door. His hand grasped the metal handle and turned it. The door clicked open and he heard his mother call to him from her room, whispering as loud as she could. Abel passed his sleeping father on the green couch, the only comfortable thing in the entire house. The couch sat on the same wall, closest to the door, for as long as Abel could remember. The green in the fabric had faded to soft mint, and the arms were torn with cushioning sticking out from underneath. In his sweat-covered tank-top undershirt and briefs, his father fidgeted soporifically as the door crashed shut. The empty bottles clinked together on the couch as he rustled in his sleep, and a stench similar to kerosene invaded Abel's nostrils, as it had done daily for seven years.

"*Shush that Abel,*" said his mother when he entered her room. "You're going to wake your fath-..." Her words cut off due to the placement of her soft hands over her mouth.

"Jesus, God! What happened to your head Abel, you're bleeding!" Abel stared back into her battered face. The gorgeous auburn hair that hung by her cheeks was silky but disheveled. Her green eyes gazed at him through rings of bruising, and her crooked nose slowly leaked blood. If it were not for the swelling in her face, Abel would have seen the aged lines that ran from her cheeks to her mouth.

"I'm *fah-fah*-fine, Mom," stuttered Abel. "I *f-fell* in the *p-p*-park." Abel always lied about why he was cut up and bruised, but the signs of abuse on his mother's face proved that she knew different. "*Wh-whh-whaa*-what's wrong *w-w*-with your *fah*-face, Mommy?"

She began to speak but was cut off by the bobbing of her chin. She was about to cry, though she never cried anymore. "Oh, Abel, you know me," she said with the fakest of smiles. "I can be very clumsy. You know I fall all of the time," she said, quickly looking the other direction. She added without crying, "Looks like you're as clumsy as me." As she shifted in her seat, she moaned with exertion and threw her limp arm onto her lap. Abel noticed the rips in her clothing. Her cotton house gown was hanging from her shoulders, torn just so it exposed her breast. Along her chin were streaks of dried blood that she had not succeeded in wiping off.

"Mommy?"

"Yes, dear?" It was not like Abel to introduce a question before asking it.

"*W-why* am I *d-d*-different?" he said, holding back tears.

She sighed and stared into his hurt eyes. She held his face in her hands, rubbing his cheeks with her soft hands before grasping him and holding him to her chest. Over his head, she began to speak.

"Baby, it is very complicated," she stammered through the first sentence of her speech, "I don't know if you could understand just yet. When you came out, the doctors told us that you were going to be special. You weren't like any baby I ever seen, Abel. You were more gorgeous than the sunset on an ocean, but you had things that other babies don't have."

"But *mah-mmmah*-Mommy," he said, "I *d-don't wuh-wanna* be different."

"I know," she said. "Sometimes it can hurt." She paused and winced as she touched her cheek.

"Sometimes it can hurt real bad," she agreed, clutching Abel tighter to her. "But you know what your Granny always used to tell me before she died?" She backed Abel off of her chest and looked at him. The look on his face made it apparent that he was not taking any guesses at the answer of the question. "Granny told me," she continued, "for as long as I can remember, that anytime I'm hurt, I just have to find a phoenix." She did not wait for Abel to ask any questions. "A phoenix is a bird, son. It lives for a real long time and when it dies, it burns until it ain't no more than a pile of ashes." Abel, with his mouth agape, began to voice a protest. She again cut him off with a smile. "The phoenix gets born again from the ashes, so it can live forever. When the phoenix cries, if you catch the tears, they'll heal you up good, Abel. You gotta need one real bad, though, for it to come, you see." Abel looked up at his mother.

His usual frown turned into an awkward smile, riddled with snaggleteeth. "Now, run outside and play while I clean up and get dinner ready," she said. He looked at her, his eyes twinkling. She smiled back. "Now run on, I got things to do!" As Abel stood to leave, his father entered the room. He stared at his wife coldly, and then moved his glance to Abel.

"I always knew you were gunna be a little traitor sonuvabitch, sidin' with that whore," his father began in a loud and drunken tone. "You know, I never wanted you. If it wasn't for that bitch," he said, pointing at Abel's mother, "we wouldn't be worried with you. Would we Ruth?" He finished his tirade with a smile. The whites of his eyes seemed to glow with jaundice as Abel stared back and forth from them to the ground. "Now if you two pathetic bastards will get the hell outta my way, I'm going out." He walked to his room and started putting on his clothes. Abel stared at his mother, who seemed to be looking through the wall at her husband.

"Don't you listen to him, Abel. I don't know what's gotten into him." She fidgeted in her seat, leaning back onto the bed.

"I know *d-d-dad d-d-d-don't* mean it," Abel said, still staring at his mother. He heard footsteps in the hallway.

"I damned sure do mean it," his father said, with a grand entrance into the room. "And don't you make no mistakes about that, you *retard*!" He stomped out of the house and slammed the door behind him, shaking the secondhand prints of "The Last Supper" and "The Transfiguration" on the wall in the room where Abel and his mother sat. They heard the groan of his father's rusted Plymouth Fury crank to life and speed away. Abel's mother relaxed, slumping even flatter onto the bed.

"Now look here, Abel," his mother said. "You go on outside and play like I

told you before. I got a lot to do around here and if dinner ain't ready when he gets home, it's both our hides." She sat up and kissed him on the spot where the blood had dried on his scalp. The kiss stung Abel's wound, though he said nothing. With a smile, he rose and headed for the door. He heard his mother through the wall before he walked outside. She always talked to Jesus at times like this, though Jesus never talked back.

The outside air had cooled. It was six o'clock, and there were only two more hours of light. As he kicked rocks down the sidewalk, he noticed some honeybees flitting from flower to flower in a patch of violets. He stopped to watch the bees and noticed that their wings were too small for their bodies. The wings made a proportional difference that fascinated Abel. He squatted, six feet from where a group of a dozen or so flew erratically; with his head turned to the side, he watched one in particular. It was smaller than the rest of the bees but seemed to be in more control. His flight pattern was more regular than the rest, and he seemed to have a premeditated course of action. He climbed from one violet to the next, preferring not to fly, if possible. Abel's small bee made a large swooping circle when it was finished with the patch of violets. He thought it strange when the entire lot of bees followed the smallest one away. They flew as would a flock of geese in tight formation. One violet, wilted and drooping, went untouched. Abel reached down, picked it, and put it in his pocket. *Everything's good for something*, he thought as he felt the cool petals warm in his pants.

He stood and continued his journey, stopping once more beside the Walkers' charcoal-colored mailbox which showed him how far he'd come since he left the house. His father always said to turn back if he got to the Walkers' mailbox because he'd gone too far. *Not today*, Abel thought as he continued down the street. He had gotten no more than two blocks further when he saw the Plymouth Fury kicking up a trail of dust, heading his way. Abel did his best to cover his face and turn his back to the road, walking quickly back to the house. He made it two and a half blocks before he heard the tires roll to a creep beside him. He kept walking.

"What's-a-matter, boy? Don't you see me here? Your own damned father?!" said the driver. Abel did not answer. The car stopped, and Abel heard the driver's door creak open and slam shut with authority. Stumbling, his father walked after Abel, grabbing him by the collar. "I said don't you hear me, boy?!" his father said as he spun him around. The whites of his eyes still glowed yellow; he smelled even stronger of kerosene, this time mixed with a bit of perfume.

"I-I-I hear y-y-you." Abel said.

"Then why don't you listen, boy? This here's what happens when I let your mother try to raise you. She's 'bout as dumb as you are, I imagine. She got no sense to rear a boy." He paused and stared Abel in the eyes.

"Now I'm gunna give you one more chance to get in that goddamned car before I throw your ass in there." His brow wrinkled, and Abel knew he was serious. Abel put his head down and started towards the Fury. His footsteps left small prints in the dust. His father's larger footsteps erased Abel's.

Nineteen or twenty feet long, the car was rusted in all of the places where it used to be black. The tail end of the car was dented, where Abel's father had backed into numerous cars, telephone poles, and trees. The biggest dent ran perpendicular to the ground and sunk into the trunk about a foot deep. Inside of the crevice was a hole, and Abel saw right through to the front seats. The right tail light was busted out and

had been for a few years. Abel's father said that it added character and did not need to be fixed, that he liked it that way. Abel never believed him when he rambled on and on about things like that, but it was in everyone's best interests for him to keep his mouth closed. The passenger side of the car was scratched to the bare metal, bent, and the door barely opened. The rugged leather interior was a putrid hue of yellow.

Abel reached his door and pulled the rusted handle, forcing the door open as he scrambled inside. The door slammed behind him. He watched his father walk around the car, never taking his steady hand from the metal body of the vehicle.

The car moved for ten minutes without a word from either occupant. Abel preferred it that way. When there was no conversation, his father acted as if he was not there. He noticed that his father used both sides of the road when driving in the afternoon, swerving from one side to the other in a random manner. The spring coming through the torn cloth where Abel sat poked him in his rear end, causing him to squirm. The dashboard was torn out and hanging in Abel's floorboard, wires and metal hooks poking him in the shins. The cloth on the roof of the car hung down in Abel's eyes, so he pushed it behind his head. He looked at his father; unsightly light brown smears on his collar accented by red streaks of what seemed to be lipstick.

"So Abel, what was your mother talkin' to you 'bout in there?" his father said.

"N-n-nothing, d-d-dad," said Abel, his ribs still hurting with every breath he took.

"What in the hell is wrong with you, son? I ask you a question, and you don't respond. It's like you disobey directly, just to make me mad."

"N-no sir. I *fah-f-fell* today and m-m-mom w-was tellin' me ab-ahb-about feenick tears." Abel stared at his father, pleased with himself, and held his breath while he waited for his father's reaction. The car slowed and pulled to the dirt shoulder. The dust cloud that followed them faded.

"You listen here!" said Abel's father. "I SAID YOU LISTEN HERE!" he demanded again, this time grabbing Abel's face between his forefinger and his thumb, squeezing Abel's cheeks together.

"Don't you listen to none of your mother's bullshit, do you understand?" His eyes were cold. His face was contorted with rage. The cracks in his lips were covered by bits of white spittle that had not completed their journeys out of his mouth. His eyes were wide and his forehead beaded with sweat. His graying dark hair shook on his head with each of his violent movements. "She told me about those goddamned phoenixes, and how their dumb fuckin' tears heal all wounds. I've never heard as much bullshit in my life! My Momma told me that shit too, and ain't no phoenix ever come to save me, you little bastard. You wanna know why? Cause they ain't real, that's why. They ain't and they ain't never gon' be." He released Abel, who stared back at him in bewilderment. "So don't you go thinkin' that those damned tears gon' save you from a hard life, cause this ain't no goddamned fairy tale. This here's real life, boy, and don't nobody give a shit about you." He pulled the car back onto the road.

On the rest of the ride home, no words were spoken. Abel just stared out of the window at the sky. He opened the car door when they arrived at the house and got out. Abel felt for the violet in his pocket and removed it with care. The stem was bent twice over into the shape of a backward 'Z'. The petals were also bent up and crumpled, wilted and black. He touched the velvety texture of the petals and thought



of the bees that had once tread on their surfaces. He stared up at the sky. There were no sign of birds, and it was getting late. He followed his father inside to eat dinner, though he was not the least bit hungry.

## BENJAMIN KYLE BROWN

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### *Self-Portrait as Salvador Dali*

Charcoal on White Paper

Lillian Spencer Award Winner for Art

## ELIZABETH HARTAGE

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### *Vergnügungen/ Pleasures*

Lillian Spencer Award for Poetry

Der erste Anblick meiner Tochter  
nach ihrer Geburt,  
Schnee an Weihnachten,  
braun, rot, gelb, und orange,  
die Farben der Blätter im Herbst.  
Ein gutes Lied hören,  
ein spannendes Buch lesen,  
verliebt sein,  
bequeme Jeans anziehen,  
lachen,  
ausschlafen,  
frische Luft.

The first time I saw my daughter  
after her birth,  
Snow on Christmas,  
Brown, red, yellow, and orange,  
the colors of Autumn leaves.  
Listening to a good song,  
reading an engaging book.  
To be in love.  
Putting on comfortable jeans.  
Laughing,  
Sleeping in,  
And fresh air.

## JOSEPH SCHWARTZBURT

.....

### *The Gray before the Storm*

Loiters around like a quiet observer:  
How amazing! Thick water  
Eclipses the radiance of a fiery star:  
Cool and complacent it lulls its victims  
With a wave of calm and an easing breeze;  
People drink the air, in relief, not quite aware  
The building energy beneath the hazy guise  
Will, to gorgeous rage, soon step aside.  
The gray before the storm looms large;  
It doesn't question, doesn't bully  
It doesn't care, doesn't impose  
It exists, it sways  
It upturns leaves, and even gusts to say  
"I'm here," but it is paid no more  
Attention than an insect caught in a drift,  
Or than Ugly in the Beholder's presence.  
Yet it is beauty, and exquisitely so  
Whether with its first fresh drops  
As they unexpectedly descend  
Upon a sweet kiss in the park or  
upon a child's sidewalk chalk work of art.  
Lazy as the subsequent mist rising in the street,  
The dreamy gray before the storm  
Grants the mind permission  
For submission to imagination's influence  
While days of youth play as movies  
Before the wanderer caught unprepared  
The wanderer spellbound by the gray silence.  
Considering each dripping drop  
Like a moment lost forever  
Never to descend again,  
But followed by a thousand more  
And a thousand more  
Into a gray river of moments  
Moments lost;  
Moments reabsorbed into  
The gray, before the storm



# JOSEPH PETERS

---

## *Everybody Gets One*

- i. Clouds  
A storm system headed this way  
Bringing mischief and misery, slight chance of rain  
Scarf around neck, glasses on face  
White V-neck shirt and Adidas, no lace  
Facial and head hair? Let's not get started  
He's a lover, a friend, and slightly retarded
- ii. Coffee shop  
Pulls the laptop out of his sack  
Double shot espresso serves to help him relax  
Fingers to keyboard, words to screen  
Headphones play Outkast, So Fresh, So Clean  
Chess at a table, nearby to the left  
The fellow in yellow moves his knight and says, "check."
- iii. Christ  
White shirt with dark aviators  
Top hat and a toothpick, with looks like a skater  
Voice is so soft, sleepy, mellow  
"Check," once again calls the fellow in yellow  
Quickly, our Savior's the head of the line  
He places his order; his card gets declined
- iv. Caress  
Our hero sees the blonde walk in  
Her eyes, lips and breasts make his thoughts turn to sin  
Tries to speak but makes no statement  
Cashier asks Christ for alternate payment  
Voice remains even: "You know who I am"  
The fellow in yellow calls out "check" yet again
- v. Composure  
Something which our hero could use  
For fear of rejection, to approach he'll refuse  
A glance his way, his eyes avert  
Gloomy is the man in the pale pink shirt  
Fellow in yellow in triumph yells, "Mate!":  
His opponent falls over, death seeming his fate

- vi. Chaos  
No one can believe what they see  
The fellow in yellow looks a little diseased  
Says the blonde, "Do you think he's dead?"  
"Looks like it—maybe a clot in the head"  
Quick fingers on cell phones tap 9-1-1  
For our savior, however, the work's just begun
- vii. Calm  
Something which our Savior exudes  
Rolls up his sleeves and looks for a bruise  
Our hero, the blonde, all within range  
Do nothing but watch—He takes center stage  
Fellow in yellow holds tightly his breath  
And the man in pale pink is brought back from his death
- viii. Confusion  
No one can believe what they see  
The fellow in yellow merely sighs in relief  
Proudly alive, the man in pink  
Turns to our Savior and buys him a drink  
The blonde only smiles, her eye sheds a tear  
"My place or yours" is all he whispers in her ear.
- ix. Comfort  
The new couple leaves arm in arm  
Fellow in yellow avoids legal harm  
And Christ, in peace, enjoys his drink  
New life comes over the man in pale pink  
Turns to our Savior—"You know what you've done?"  
He smiles and whispers—"Everybody gets one."

## COURTNEY NICOLOU

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### *Poem Three*

Sometimes in the mirror I catch  
A visage of my mother  
But often it's a ghost, a scene  
Of fog, or it's the Other.  
Rarely do the eyes that peer  
At eyes in cold reflection  
See the owner of this shell  
But in a black dejection.

## AMANDA MATHIS

.....

### *El Ritmo*

Hay un canto en mi mente  
Torturándome porque no puedo escribirlo  
Oigo el ritmo  
pero no puedo agarrarlo  
y no puedo forzarlo en palabras  
Por eso para perseguirme queda  
Burlándome porque no puedo decirlo  
Si sólo yo parara y escuchara  
Pero, entonces no oigo nada

### *The Rhythm*

There is a song in my mind  
Torturing me because I cannot write it  
I only hear the rhythm  
but I cannot grab it  
and force it into words  
So it stays and haunts me  
Mocking me for what I cannot say  
If only I stopped and listened  
Yet, then I hear nothing.



## BRANDON NELSON MCCOY

.....

*July 2007- May 2008 (11 months in a Georgia prison)*

Seamless days in a desolate bed and  
The ceiling fan still creaks in its path.  
Refusing to continue and move on,  
The night would be the worst to endure:  
Lonely pillows provide such poor company,  
And record album covers aren't much to look upon  
When you dive into a jealous sea:  
Bed sheets don't warm cold paranoia.

Delusional voices of ecstasy and agony collide  
Amidst heated lust in calm, black night.  
Every new thought precedes the last anxiety  
And brings a new one, freshly prepared.  
Shadows of you and your new love dance  
On my walls and on my nerve-endings.  
And only detriment do I bring myself, allowing  
Your face to permeate my tightly closed eyes.

Morning leaks into the room; sunlight illuminates  
The orange walls and I curse its presence into a black hole.  
Lines of the room curve; shapes change form;  
Colors coalesce with one another; black into white.  
The pillow catches my fury, spitting forked words.  
The mattress absorbs my anger, violently smashing its posture.  
A sobbing helplessness returns. Once again, I'm alone  
Without my anger; my comfort: I weep.

September 29, 2008

Work; pay; sleep; work; pay; pay-

Urge and urge, always the capitalist urge-

Knowledge of your commodity:

My knowledge, your commodity, spelled and notarized

Somewhere in the future on a not-yet-existing wall.

Complacent complacency is key:

But patience, it fleets,

In times such as these with the day extending the nights

And nights undermining serene moments of tranquility and repose.

Disregard the will, my will,

My will to learn, to grow, to educate, to live-

Disregard it for the abstract notion

Of some idealized American dream.

Urge, urge, always the capitalist urge:

Knowledge is power, tacked to a not-yet-existing wall,

Spelled and notarized,

And I'll pay,

Pay to park, pay to read, pay to be broke and tired,

Pay to extend a notion of knowledge and greed,

All the while idolizing my own knowledge,

Spelled and notarized,

Somewhere in the future on a not-yet-existing wall.

## CEVON RAMBO

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### *There are Other Fish in the Sea*

This is why you're a fisherman:

You're selfish-

you want to check on your rod every now and then. Check and see if your salmon is still hanging on to the bait. Or if she's still stuck on the hook. Pretty morbid. I bet she'd give her bottom lip to be back with her family and friends, set free.

This is why you're a fisherman:

You're off on some self-initiated exile in the woods while the poor fish is still hooked on your rod. You return periodically under charming false pretenses but your actions and words just don't match your motives.

This is why you're a fisherman:

You're always talking about that one time you caught a shark and how it was the worst experience you got yourself into. And yet, you're always bring it up... If you're glad you got rid of it why must you recollect so often with a sigh of longing? It makes that salmon feel like an anchovy.

This is why you're a fisherman:

You're not really fishing for fish; you're fishing for self-esteem and worth when in truth there aren't enough fish in the sea for you to be fulfilled.

*Last Night*

Last night was a mixture of pain and pleasure  
It divided the rain from the stormiest weather  
It separated the soul from a human being  
Last night everything seemed so serene

Last night I didn't have to ask for another surprise  
I knew what I was granted by the look in your eyes  
I knew what you had to offer when you walked in the door  
Last night you reminded me of whom I hated once before

Last night I stood alone with you by my side  
Last night you proved you had nothing to hide  
You delivered a presence I had no taste to see  
Last night determined the end of you and me!

*The Aligheri Grounds, in Falling*

Buds bound now  
depart—lashed  
and whipped  
in tumultuous  
air; as trees altared  
in earthly seasons  
shriek palettes that will blacken  
to crisp cries when joined to shuffle  
among the others—dead all  
ready, all  
wailing below tree,  
below Dante's iron  
cage—  
He scrapes the tumbling leaves  
into neat heap and quiet,  
quite eloquently,  
sets them  
ablaze.

*A Dying Breed*

As the sun fades on this world, as we know,  
memories of the past flow with the tears.  
Fishing these waters, unlike long ago,  
starving for hope to overcome our fears.

Once a great bounty, just within our reach,  
drifting away by the tides rolling in.  
Gazing out to sea and walking this beach,  
as slow moving trawlers search deep within.

Seagulls hover; and the pelicans glide,  
chasing their dreams behind this dying breed.  
You can hear them cry, over what has died,  
the last of its kind reflecting our greed.

A dying breed, now sitting on the hill,  
old wooden planks suffering from a chill.

## *A Pirate's Tale*

Souls drifting under a warm summer's night,  
wandering slowly, changing their course.  
Bottles of rum flowing, sweetness and light,  
mumbling dark secrets involving a force.

Kaleidoscopic dreams of marine life,  
off into the horizon, underneath.  
A world of beauty without any strife,  
unless something seizes you with their teeth.

Legends of the deep, storms, monsters, and such,  
stirring about below just out of sight.  
Shadows evolving, and craving to touch,  
sustenance from above with all their might.

Down in the Caribbean, frightful tails,  
where mountains are rising beneath the sea.  
A treasure so vast, on the trail,  
where a creature roams and swims around free.

Long before dragons they would sneak around,  
a beast from the unknown, rising downstream.  
Food for thought, we shouldn't take lying down,  
before entering a world this extreme.

Predators lurking below in the deep,  
evolving throughout this unknown frontier.  
Chasing the moon, while we're fast asleep,  
where the water flows and is crystal clear.

Venturing to the surface, while searching,  
for souls totally lost and unaware.  
Stalking you from behind, desire reaching,  
devouring you with tender loving care.



Bottles of rum flowing, monster stories,  
old dark legends creeping beyond our sight.  
Shadows in the night, chasing small dories,  
or dinghies crossing over late at night.

A pirate's tale, some three hundred years old,  
regarding a swindler that rules the sea.  
An eating machine, horrible and cold,  
staying out of the water is the key.

Splashing, screaming, or just playing within,  
like a fish in distress, you're history.  
The beauty and beast, or life with a spin,  
down within this darkness and mystery.

Tales of treasure, booty, virgins, and rum,  
sailing the bloody seas could be risky.  
Pirates, cyclones or whatever may come,  
affects one's spirit, like blended whiskey.

Tropical harbors, evening feasting grounds,  
expect the unexpected down below,  
Just an old pirate's tale, drifting around,  
disbelief with a desire to know.

Mysteries from the deep, horror within,  
remarkable myths or large dorsal fins.

LINSEY GREEN  
Singer/Guitarist  
Singer/Guitarist





LIBBY GREEN

*Salinas Grande*

Digital Photography

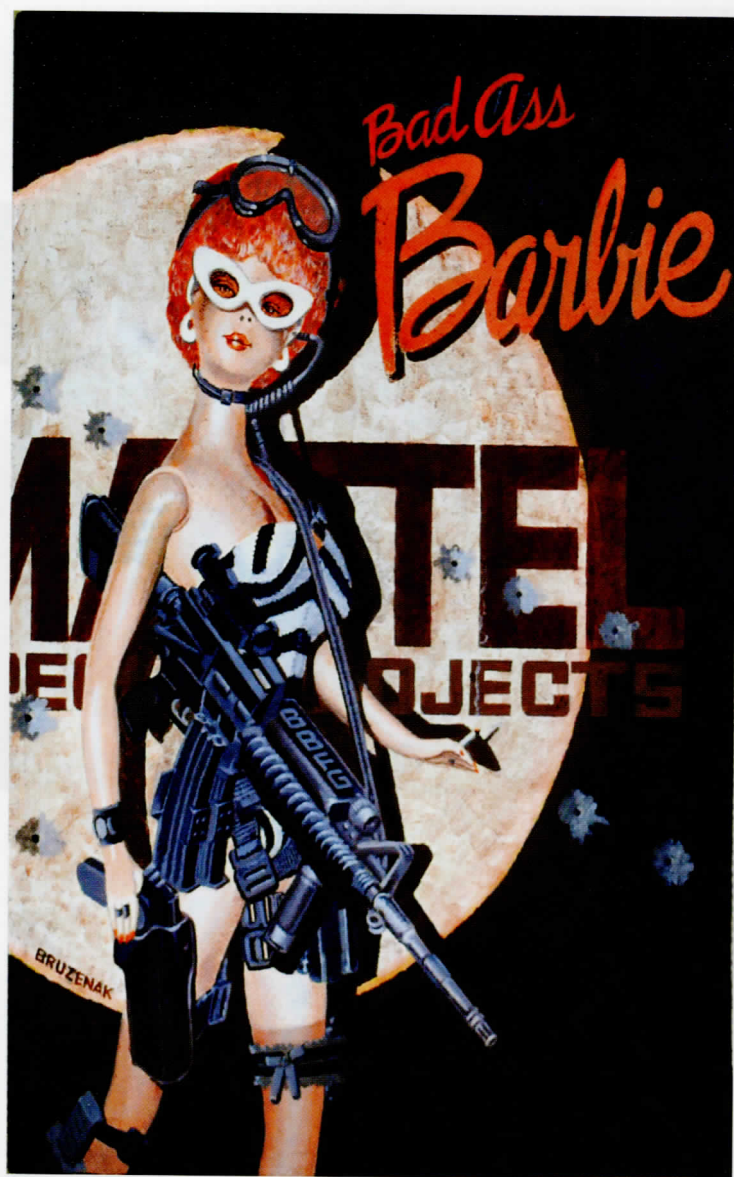


THEONE KARATASSOS

*Sculpted Brass*

Metals and Jewelry

30 CALLIOPE



KEN BRUZENAK

*Killer Barbie*

Acrylic



JAMIE LEE ALMOND

*Chandelier*

Lith Print





DIANE BOOKER

*First Light*  
Silver Gelatin



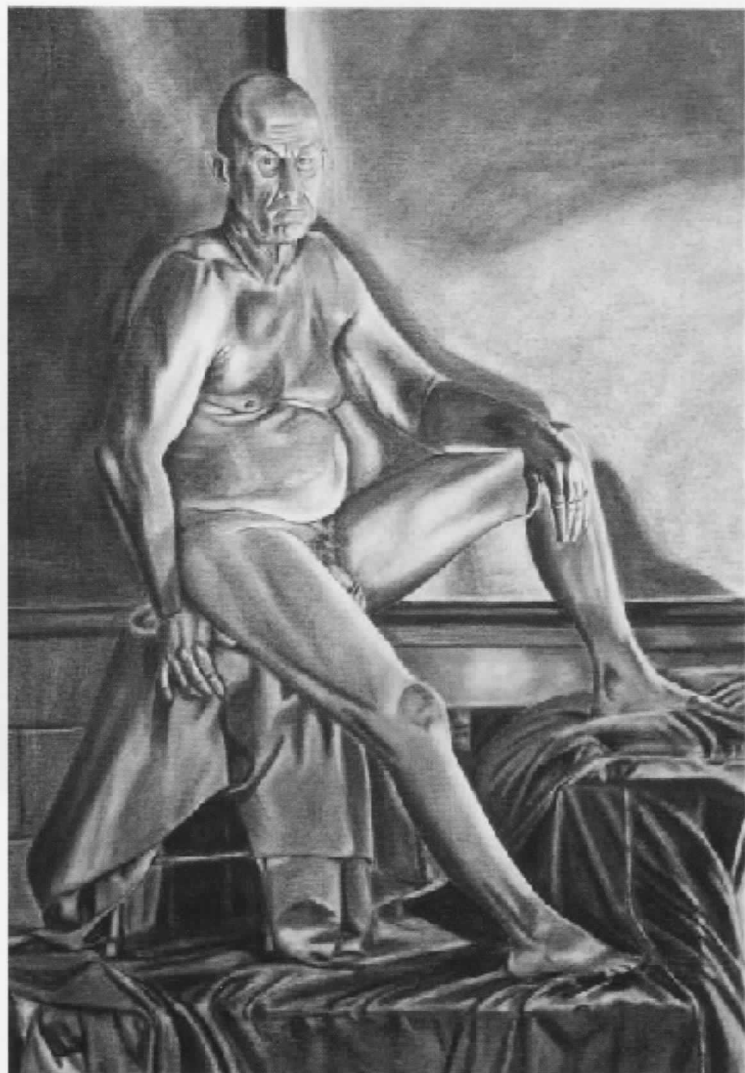
FARHANNA SMITH

*Magnolia*

Pastels

34 CALLIOPE





FARHANNA SMITH

*Nude Model*

Charcoal

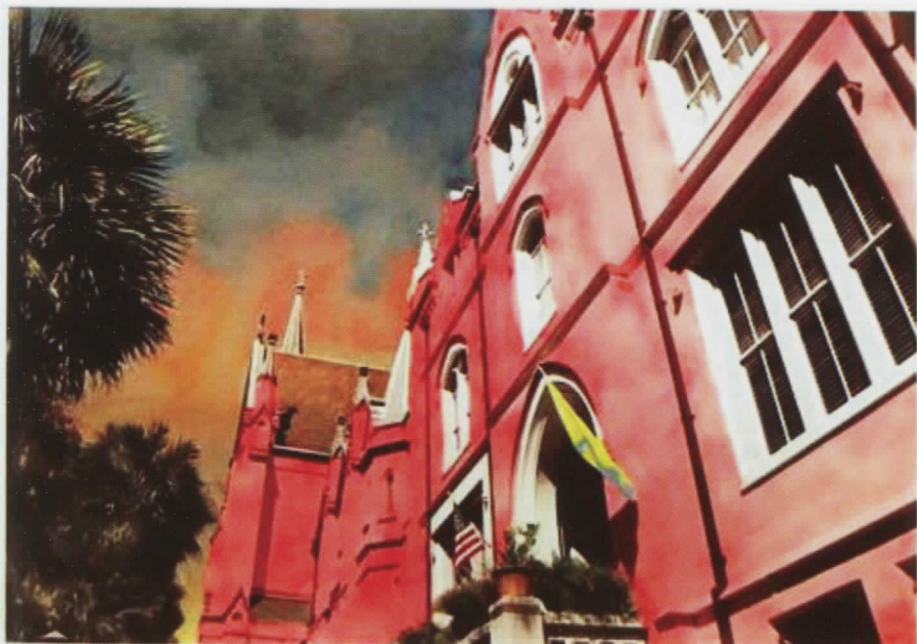


SHIMIRA HILL

*Good Girl Gone Mad #4*

Silver Gelatin Print

36 CALLIOPE



CHANELL PRUDE

*Let's Go To Church*

Silver Gelatin Print and Oil Handcolors



JIMMY TAYLOR

*Landen*

35 mm B&W Photography



BRITNEY COMPTON

*Reclaiming the Maasai Mara*

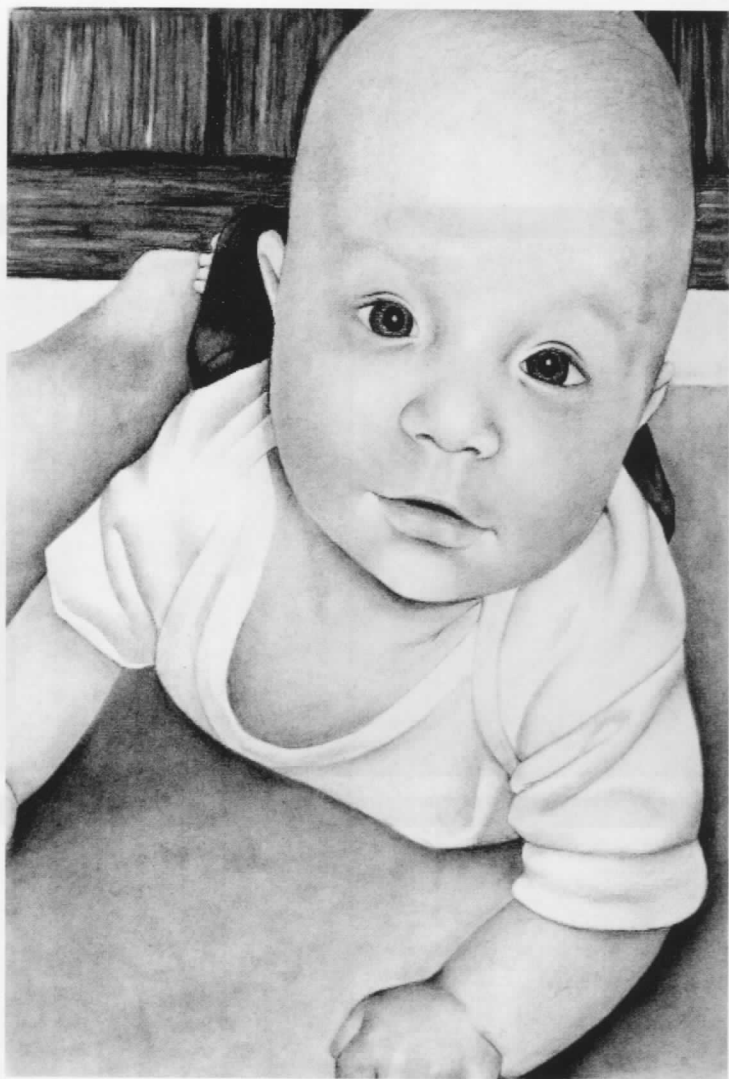
Ceramics: Raku



GUILLERMO GALLARDO

*The Boy in the Water*

Digital Photography



ERIN LARISCY

*Jackson*

Charcoal on Paper





ELIZABETH RUSIECKI

*Cuzco, Peru*

Digital Photography





JIMMY TAYLOR

*Wine Water*

35mm B&W Photography



RAPHYEL JORDAN

*Boots #6*

Acrylic on Canvas

44 CALLIOPE



JAMAAL GALLOWAY

*Fab Galaxy*

Graphic Design



AMIE L. CONLEY

*Little Feet of a Young Soul...Ashley at Forsyth Park*

Acrylic on Canvas



HANNAH OESTERHELD

*Daddy's Valentine*

35mm B&W Photography





ALICIA PEREZ

*Concertmaster*

Acrylic on Paper



HANNAH OESTERHELD

*We are Together*

Linocut



BRITNEY COMPTON

*Maasai Madonna and Child*

35mm B&W Photography





FARHANNA SMITH

*Chess*

Acrylic on Canvas



BRIANA HIGGINS

*Ziegun Stand at Zestospyln*

*(Homage to Frank Miller's "300")*

Pencil, Ink, Illustrator, and Photoshop CS3



CHRIS GIBSON

*Please, Send the Clowns*

35mm B&W Photograph



BRITNEY COMPTON

*Callista: Bawd of Euphony Series*

Ceramics: Raku



ALICIA PEREZ

*Giving is Receiving*

Acrylic on Canvas

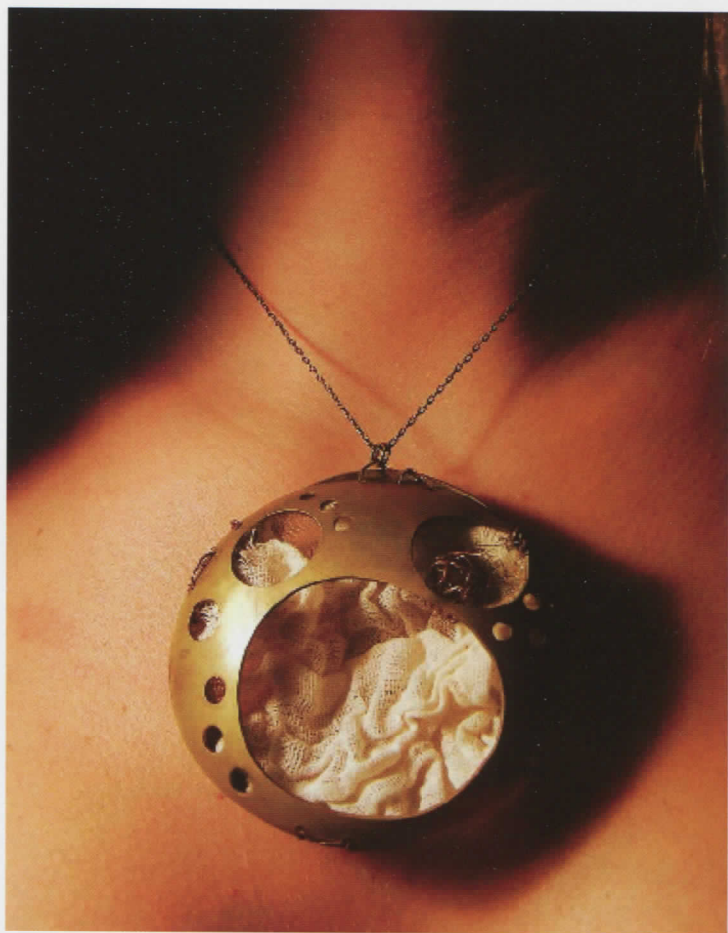


HOLLY HALES

*Chandelier*

35mm B&W Photography





THEONE KARATASSOS  
*Muslim, Brass, and Copper Wire*  
Metals and Jewelry



KEN BRUZENAK

*Candles*

Acrylic on Canvas

58 CALLIOPE





ALICIA PEREZ

*Change*

Acrylic on Canvas



# JOSEPH SCHWARTZBURT

.....

## An Archangel's Complaint

MY NAME APPARENTLY lacks importance. I am one of the thousands alluded to, but inconsequential enough not to be one of the Seven named; inconsequential enough to be named by humans, as it were. I'm speaking of angels, of course. I am an angel; an archangel, an angel of death. I'm not dark or dreary or ominous in any way, shape, or form except, maybe, that I'm malcontent. We, as heavenly beings, are not typically given to self-pity, but a few hundred millennia of existence weighs on the nerves. This thought brings me to my omnipotent gripe: Death – my job – is depressing.

My complaint will go unheeded, because He is not so much a *he* as an *it*. The good book was written by human hands with human minds, after all; suffice it to say that some discrepancies exist.

I don't have wings so much as I have the illusion of wings. Bright, effervescent light and outstretched arms could be misconstrued as wings, I suppose, and people's obsession with us being all majestic and wispy-like does cater to the way we've been depicted over the centuries. Those *homo sapiens*, the ones that claim to have seen us, have yet to offer any real, unaffected description of us not based on television shows or bestselling novels. I can only be seen when the soul loosens from the human bodily form. Though I exude my own heavenly light (best seen by the dying), most of the ethereal luminescence stems from the departing party. The human body releases a massive amount of energy near death and even more so when it finally dies. A great deal of power is needed to separate the soul from the physical structure.

When a body ceases function as a living organism, that's when I swoop in. I vacate loosened souls from freshly deceased corpses – a necessary but, admittedly, morbid job.

"Is time really longer or different somehow in heaven?" This is almost invariably everyone's first question as they "cross over". I neither belie nor approve any answers; I simply nod and push them along (they don't go *up*, by the way, or *down*, but that is a whole other misconception). Back to *time*; my view is that *time*, like most other things, is irrelevant. Think about it, do people care about five minutes of waiting at the doctor's office the same way one notices five minutes careening by during a sexual excursion? Time is relevant only to the situation; therefore, in my mind, time is irrelevant because situations, as well as people, constantly change.

Back to what I *had* said initially: my job, death, is depressing.

Never has this statement be truer than today as I ride the maligned, piss-reeking, sorry-excuse-for-public-transportation that is the PATCO speed-line connecting Southern New Jersey Suburbs to Center City Philadelphia. Morning rush hour calls for six cars packed to the brim, staggered at every fifteen minutes. Today the 7:50 leaving Lindenwold will only make it as far as the Ben Franklin Bridge. For more than half of the speed-line's passengers, the bridge will be their last stop...ever.

I'm anything but ecstatic about the situation; I'm downright upset. Not that I'm partial to the human race but life, heavenly or humanly, is precious. I believe some deserving people will face their due consequences while others will be unjustly removed,

but it levels the balance, *death* that is. *Death* and *life* eternally vie for dominance, but only an equal amount of lives entering to the number exiting will suffice, otherwise a whole host of other problems manifest.

The most disturbing aspect about my job is the children. Yes, I know, how cliché! But it's true. The young, the very young — I'm talking just-started-walking-still-pooing-their-pants-young and younger — are mostly incapable of having a say in the ruination of their immortal souls, and not allowing them the chance to properly screw it up seems a little inequitable.

Clink, chi-chunk, and skeerttt! The rusty metal wheels screech and scrape along the grainy tracks of the thirty-nine year old Speed Line.

The train shimmies past the increasingly urban landscapes. First through the ritzy suburban neighborhoods, then to the neglected, dilapidated row homes of inner-city Camden, before sinking below street level only to rise (two stops later) and latch onto the side of the bright blue Ben Franklin.

Inez Polito barely squeezed through the sliding doors three stops earlier... boy, will she be sorry in two minutes and thirty-five seconds. She normally would be thirty to forty-five minutes earlier getting the train, but her three year old son was being more difficult than usual today when dropping him off at day care. Being the Day Manager at the prestigious Double Tree Hotel on Broad Street was no easy feat for her (a Puerto Rican single mother) to accomplish. After only three months on the job, it seemed unlikely she'd be the permanent replacement for semi-retired Mr. Hillfield. Spoiler alert! She *will* lose the job; although, her absence won't be the real reason she lost the position.

Walter Ford has a job interview at a prominent law firm. His college drinking buddy, James Tidewater, is along for the ride and a walk around the city while Walter commences with his first professional, career-oriented interview. Just out of college, Walter has his whole life ahead of him, even if it is to be considerably shorter than he imagined this morning. James, misguided transient that he is, however, may find his life ripe with guilt and increased misdirection after the looming incident occurs.

Why?

It was James' idea to, "Take the fucking train, man. No sense in driving all the way in there for an hour's worth of time. Bridge fair, parking, and traffic won't be worth it. We'll go in early, eat breakfast, then you'll hit up the office and knock them dead."

Miranda Tisdale has drug her two young sons along for a visit to their grandmother's house in hopes that Miranda can score the extra cash she desperately needs to buy food for her kids and a bit of dope for herself. Miranda's off-again, on-again relationship with crack crumbled completely three years ago when her second son, Friar, was born three months premature. She's kicked the habit before and believes she can do it again. Times being as rough as they are and her being in a weaker state of mind since her husband left cause the cravings for escape to resurface, she tells herself that the drugs are simply to take the edge off. Miranda will confront a different edge this morning and her family be all the better for it.

Eight-year-old Natty Pinchot and her Uncle ride together. Her Uncle agreed to fill in for her mom by playing chauffeur and accompanying Natty to her violin lesson. Being extremely talented at such a young age, many prestigious schools scout her often; even Julliard has turned its ear towards her. Unfortunately, she expertly executed her

last concerto two days ago; her uncle will be fine, if fifty-nine years old, acute cirrhosis of the liver caused by alcoholism, and a history of high cholesterol constitute fine.

I could continue naming all those who'll live and die, exposing how unfair the dynamic is, but that wouldn't change the fact that it'll happen...that it is happening.

A loud thud!

The train slams to a stop. Cars continue to drive by on the bridge just outside the train's windows.

Everyone aboard remains calm. Whispers and uneducated guesses bounce off the walls within the train cars.

"It could be the brakes," frets Mildred Vern. Her story? It's actually pretty interesting. She's sixty-five, had three husbands and outlived them all. Burly woman that she is, she'll save two people today, go on to live to one hundred and three, and tally two more husbands.

"Naw, naw," starts Felix Boothe, a young African American male who'd been swaying to the beat of his I-pod before the abrupt hindrance. He's a tough street kid that moonlights as a poet. His next poem will become well-known after being printed in the local paper on the one year anniversary of this tragic event. "Power probably just went out. It's summer; they have blackouts and stuff all the time." Though he voices his opinion with founded assurance, he really doesn't know. Nobody does.

Except me, I know. It was a break in an electrical line that had started a small fire which has been brewing for the past ten minutes or so – the fault of a neglectful maintenance worker who skimmed on his duties to clock out five minutes early last night to make it to his son's soccer game on time. The breach eventually shut off power to the train and will, in less than a minute, ignite an electrical box that will blow a huge hole into the side of the bridge and obliterate car four, killing all but two passengers inside that car. A ten-vehicle pile up will occur on the bridge which will lead to the deaths of three more innocent (another relative term) individuals. Crowded train car five will capsize and land two-hundred feet below in the dingy Delaware River; no survivors. Car six will catch fire, but most of its passengers will get out *physically* unscathed.

The train shakes violently. A low rumble vibrates the hull. Sparks fly outside car four and then...BOOM!

The aforementioned explosion rocks the bridges tresses. Cars crash and traffic stops. Some motorists wait, but, after a moment of shocked contemplation, terrified drivers squeal off in a fit of fear at thoughts of terrorist attacks, or bridge collapse. People in the remaining, undamaged vehicles exhale a collective sigh of relief at finding loved ones, or themselves, whole and in their typically unharmed conditions of normalcy (is that a real word now? Normalcy? If it is, it's another relative term).

Me? I rode in car four. First, I'll grab those whose bodies blew apart in the explosion – the less intact the cadaver the "looser" the soul, the easier to grasp. Second, come the burn victims and those who experienced fatal head traumas, or puncture wounds that severed crucial arteries. Lastly, I'll attend to the fallen PATCO car where the intricate human body never ceases to mystify. It is surprising, after a two-hundred foot drop in a few-ton, metal coffin that many people survived – some are even conscious enough to vividly experience drowning. They are the last souls I'll gather because they will take the longest to die. Cruel? It isn't me. I'd take them first if it wasn't impossible to remove a soul from a live body. I simply don't have the strength to kill; nor do

I possess the power to prevent imminent death, which is why I didn't attempt to warn anyone or stop the train. I merely collect. As far as sorting (Heaven or Hell?), well there is no sorting and that's a whole other complaint.

Time to get to work.

My job – death – is depressing.

.....

*Three Sheets, to the Wind*

"DISTINCTLY, I REMEMBER one of her friends, and her, talking hurriedly, and catching quick sideways glances at me, as though there were a stain on my shirt and they were too embarrassed for me to let me know of it," said Walter W.

Walter sat across from his closest friend, the esteemed Councilor of the Magistrate, at *Le Mange*. His friend, the Councilor, had invited him to dinner as part of a streak of goodwill, levied with concern for his longtime friend. His concern was apparent, as his probing questions were relentless, being interrupted only by the restaurant staff. The Councilor knew that Walter had recently quit his job as a documentation clerk at the only prominent local bank; it was a position he had held for not quite twenty years. The bank was floundering in the marketplace, unsure of which—if any—avenue to pursue in order to further the investment capital of its shareholders. While indecision reigned supreme, the economy blazed in a tailspin that seemed to fall infinitely before reaching stable ground.

"I remember it—wholeheartedly did she look at me with such contempt," Walter continued, "that I felt a shudder rise within me. Such malice cannot come from a single faux pas."

The Councilor consoled Walter, reaching across the table to pat his fin. Walter needed such a caring friend during this troubled time.

The Councilor knew that his friend had been given to drink, and this night Walter was being especially generous with the libations—buying one or two for the Councilor every time he ordered yet another. The Councilor amiably accepted these gifts, but kept himself rather dry, as his friend was imbibing quite copiously, as though—as cliché as it is—trying to drown his sorrows—his senses.

Walter ordered another round for himself—dry gin on the rocks, with a twist of lemon. He gripped the newly-filled glass between two enormous fins and exhaled sharply through his blowhole, ejaculating spray fifteen yards behind him into the *maître d's* small kiosk near the entrance to the restaurant. Gazing into the ice cubes, ponderously, longingly, he drew a rattling breath. His eyes reflected the misty fog appearing around the base of the frosted glass. After he had sat reticent long enough, he downed the drink in one long swallow.

"My friend, dear Councilor," he said with a slight hiccup between phrases, "let me tell you how I came to this pitiable sate you see before you now: I was, admittedly, doing a bit of carousing one evening when I perchance bumped into our old adversarial acquaintance, Mrs. Freshburne.

"She ran to me, exclamations aside, and positively gushed about her latest success. Of course, it has been public knowledge for quite some time that I had been in a spot of hot water; you will..."

Walter stopped his narrative when the waiter approached again, wanting to refill his glass. He held it out, but the Councilor covered it with the palm of his hand and glared at Walter. Walter then disposed of the waiter with an urbane smile, expos-

ing his massive row of comb-like teeth. If the waiter was unaccustomed to behavior such as this, he did not show it in the least. In fact, he seemed simply thrilled by it; as though he had been waiting patiently, with ever-increasing expectancy, however, for a refined gentleman of the old style, which one hardly ever encountered anymore.

When the Councilor covered the glass, the waiter merely said, "Of course," and feigned a small, curt bow before leaving. The Councilor was relieved that Walter would, at least, for the moment, cease drinking strong liquor. He might yet again regain his senses and stop treating the wait staff as they were house servants, ever loyal to their master, their liege.

Issuing forth a decree that the present night was a remarkably handsome one, the Councilor urged his friend outside to walk and continue their discourse. Exiting the restaurant proved difficult for Walter, though. One of his flukes nearly demolished a table adjacent to the fireplace, which thankfully lay dormant at the time, and he caught a busboy with the same fluke as he wheeled around to apologize. Spewing smiles and apologies, Walter only made himself more of a nuisance until the Councilor retreated from the lobby back into the dining room to retrieve him. At this, though, Walter protested with a shrill blast and some spray out of his blowhole. It took several minutes to tidy the mess, but eventually Walter met the outside air leaning heavily on the Councilor's arm.

"I'm so sorry, dear friend," said Walter, "as soon as I stood up, my head began swimming and I acted rather stupidly." The Councilor waved his hand at a downward angle so that Walter knew to drop the subject and forget the fiasco as soon as he could. These things happen, insisted the Councilor, and they're quite unpredictable.

To ease the transition from indoors to the outside air, the Councilor produced two fat, stubby cigars from his breast pocket. He had been saving them for a special occasion, but this seemed to him as worthy a time as any. He offered the second cigar to Walter, and together they eagerly chewed off one end and took each a match, struck it on the brick façade of the post office that was neighbor to the restaurant, and happily lit their cigars.

Walter and the Councilor walked for several minutes in silence, each looking upward to where the barren late autumn treetops met the sky, with the twigs and branches bouncing mercilessly off one another in the penumbra hanging around the treetops and rooftops of the various stores, and, later, houses, lining the street where they were walking. The scene seemed to stay the same; repeating patterns of trees and bricks and often-flickering amber light blurred together and became indistinguishable from one another. It lent the evening a heady surrealism. The liquor had a slightly noticeable effect on Walter's gait—he was ambling close to the curb and would occasionally stumble off into the gutter below, dampening his thick blubber and grunting as he heaved his great massive body onto the level terrain. Each time Walter stumbled downward, the Councilor stopped walking and turned ninety degrees to his left, facing the whale head on. He did not offer his walking stick or even his hand out to his friend. He did not make any exclamation or inquiry into the whale's ability to walk. He did not even display any overt emotion on his face. He merely turned toward his friend and gazed steadily at him until he was level on the sidewalk again, at which point he would begin walking forward again, tilting his head slightly back to look upward at the meeting place of the trees and the roofs and the sky.



After some time of walking and puffing their cigars, Walter and the Councilor came to a part of the road that tunneled through a low mountain on the outskirts of town before reaching the seashore. They paused to extinguish their cigars and peered into the tunnel. It was oily and dark inside, with lamps cutting into the darkness every few yards, creating light like a drowning person's gasps for air when they bob at the surface before going under. Not far into the tunnel, the road begins to rise upon a steep incline. It is most unusual, and very inefficient for a tunnel road to climb such a steep angle, but the two pioneers forged onward, growing weary as they rose. In the sections of darkness, Walter would cry a low song, reverberating throughout the space until the intermittent light caused him to become self-conscious and stop. In this manner, the two walked on for a few more minutes.

By now, Walter's inebriation had subsided—left in his sweat, no doubt—and the usual after-effects of some unknown, hurried guilt mingled with shame were setting in. He knew that he had not been overly garrulous at the restaurant, and yet he felt as though he had betrayed some rich secret of his. He was sweating from the walk, and the tunnel he and the Councilor were in only trapped the humid night air, making it stale and swampy. Walter's perspiration stuck to him instead of evaporating. He looked to his friend, whose face was reflecting the faint glow of moonlight peeking through the opening at the end of the tunnel and from the top of the mountain. Walter clapped his fins together and exhaled loudly to get the Councilor's attention. The Councilor turned back to face Walter amidst the darkness.

"My friend," began Walter, "I know I made it seem as though my troubles began with that trifling woman I mistakenly chose to mate with, and I wish to correct my error forthwith: The woman was not my trouble, merely the nearest and most visibly manifest scapegoat for it. My troubles really began when I started to daydream what it might be like to return to my roots—my homeland, if you will allow the phrase, incongruent as it is with my origins. I've never known my family, and for this I have, I suppose, always felt some sort of lack in myself. I know I've lived a full life with great accomplishments, but a large part of me would forego the acclaim I've received as Senior Documentation Clerk if only I could have a 'normal' family of sorts.

"I began these romantic musings shortly after my position at the bank became, to put it politely, compromised. It is no secret now that it was a deliberate attempt to oust me. They brought in a shark, and no cajoling from the other board members will convince me otherwise!" He emphasized this last point with a stern blow from his blowhole. "Those men have tried to tear me asunder. My friend, you agree with me, I can tell, that I need now find my origin and get back in some kind of communion with my true nature."

As Walter was speaking, he and the Councilor had reached the end of the tunnel and stepped outside on top of the mountain. The cool freshness of the air was a welcome respite from the clammy interior they had traversed prior. The beginning of their walk was a great distance behind them now, and the moon shone brightly overhead. Here, away from the diffusive effect of the streetlights and the decaying brick buildings, the eerie light of the moon made shapes on the shin-high grass—shadows cast and metamorphosized between different aspects of the terrain. Turning around and looking beyond the pathway into the tunnel, they could see some of the town; a light here and there, and the deep, thoughtful blue that civilization marks upon itself

when it is deposited in a valley of lighter shades of the same color. It was as though the buildings, or the people in them perhaps, were absorbing the light from the surrounding country and using it for their own benefit. There was something soporific and sinister about the silhouette of the town when viewed from above.

Walter sat upon a stone and looked at his friend. The Councilor's breathing was more profound in the thinner air atop the mountain, and he looked statuesque standing with his hands in his pockets, looking down at the town. The moonlight fell into the deep, time-worn wrinkles on his brow and around his eyes. In this moment, the Councilor grew to be incredibly tall, and his torso became more spherical as his height increased. His arms and legs lengthened considerably, giving his body the appearance of a gnarled old tree whose trunk had split into three distinct pieces: The two thin, precise branches extending outward in sharp angles and decreasing in size, by sound mathematical principle, and the robust branch striving more or less upward and remaining of constant diameter until exploding into a million infinitesimal pieces at its apex. The giantified Councilor cast an oblong shadow behind him down the mountain. Walter saw all of this happen—he had been seeing it slowly happen, that is, all night long—and did not intervene.

Moving with all the airy liteness of a sylph, the Councilor folded his arms around his body and crouched down until he was squatting and hugging himself. He spun around slowly, carefully, so as not to disturb even the tiniest blade of grass beneath him. He took one foot and dug it into the soil until he was ankle-deep in the dirt. Then he took his other foot and stood on his toes. The pressure from his above-ground foot on the other caused a sickening crack to sound where his joint popped loose in the ankle that was dug into the ground and broke, maliciously and righteously.

He twisted the one leg around the other until he was well-knotted but still firmly rooted in the ground. As gracefully as they had moved before, his arms unfolded from around his body and reached outward from his torso, straight so that a board could be laid flat across them. He stood perfectly erect now and inclined his head to the ground, seeing Walter on the rock.

"Walter, sit down," said the Councilor; "A long time ago, before you came here, and probably you were even born, this mountain was very different. I am very old, you know, and have seen the changes made to this land. At one time, the town rested upon this mountain. It was not as densely populated, but the small community was a thriving one. The town itself looked quite different, actually. Back then, there were no street lamps or garish neon signs. There was no need for them. Atop this mountain it was misty nearly every morning, and the water vapor nourished the vegetation enough to grow well and support the small community in their needs for food and soil to work. The people were self-sufficient; no merchants came with goods from other lands on the sunny afternoons atop the mountain. The sea lay just beyond the plain at the foot of the mountain, but few went for want or need. Walter, I tell you, even the architecture was for a utilitarian purpose. Flying bulwarks and decorative pillars adorning the faces of buildings were unseen and unheard of. The houses were simple wooden structures, and after they were through serving their purpose, they were reconfigured for another use. It was a simple, fulfilling time. I don't mean to over-romanticize the mountaintop. There were problems as well. But amidst those problems there was a convivial sense of betterment that caused the townspeople to persevere.

"Then, after a season of famine, the people were bewildered. They had never experienced such hardship, such drought. A group of men arrived on a ship. These men were beastly and clever. They convinced the people of the town that in order to survive any more famines that might come they would need to relocate into the valley below. Fearful and afflicted, the townspeople acquiesced to the strangers' demands and made preparations to move into the valley. Before the move was made, however, the strangers betrayed the townspeople.

"In the middle of the night, they descended upon the town and shook them limb from limb. Entire families were separated and slaughtered. Many were fed to animals as a cruel spectator sport. The animals were then eaten as well. The red stain of blood painted the trees, and the acrid odor of burnt flesh permeated the air. The strangers pulled their ship onto the mountaintop and used hooks and chains to level the buildings—many with frightened people still inside. After the town was decimated, the strangers moved into the valley to build a more modern, proper city. This is the city you know, Walter; the conveniences of brick, alcohol, cigars, and money. The founders of this new town tried to build a tunnel though the mountain in order to reach the sea again, but their engineer miscalculated and their tunnel opens now where we stand—on this mountaintop—where the town once stood. Superstition keeps most from coming here, but, Walter, in your case it is part of where you need to be if you ever want to find your origin of nature. I know all this because I was here—I was there—and you came as a mere infant stowaway on our ship of strangers. Walter, depart from me."

The Councilor lifted his head back up and looked toward the sea. Walter placed a fin on the leg of his esteemed friend. The Councilor stood rigid, alone against the lightening sky, and quit breathing. Looking at the stain of the city on the otherwise unblemished land, Walter felt a compelling urge to retreat into the tunnel again and descend back into the life of comfort he had grown accustomed to; inside or outside the maelstrom.

## MICHELLE CRABB

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### *Zodiac*

BETH,

*I know this is a great burden that I am placing on you and your husband. I don't know how long I will be gone. All I know is that I just need to get away from it all. If there is one thing I can have a hold over, it is who handles my baby. Enclosed is \$42,342: the rest of "our" savings. It belongs to Ben. I trust him in your hands; you have always been such wonderful godparents to him. I'm so sorry to do this to you.*

*Love always,  
Wendy*

...

His breath came in steady wisps as his face hovered over mine. I had just called out his name. My body was trembling from the ecstasy of it all. Only, it wasn't Chris thrilling me in twisted sin, it was *him*. His black rimmed, rectangular glasses were hanging off the tip of his nose, reminding me of a stuck up librarian intent on hushing everything to oblivion.

Part of me couldn't stand him...I am not attracted to men who are so anal that perfectionism is too loose a term to describe them with. Not only that but, *he looks like a perverse librarian, geek hybrid that just walked straight out of a nineteen fifties Sears clothing catalog!*

"Wendy," he said. He wasn't even panting. He was just there, controlling me with every whim of his body. I was powerless to do anything but enjoy it and loathe it at the same time.

"No!"

I sat up. My back was slick with sweat. I glanced around myself. I had fallen asleep! Damn that Percy! Ever since I saw him with that girl at Biats, I had been having lucid visions of him ever since. The very thought of him like that made me wanton with an illness that rivaled the morning sickness I experienced when I was pregnant with Ben. I glanced over at the cradle several feet away from my bed and swung my feet over to the floor.

I crossed the room to see if my loud cry had stirred him. Ben lay still with his pale eyes closed. He hadn't even flinched. *Damn*. I ran my fingers through my hair. *Dare I tell her?* It wasn't exactly my place...*but, she's my best friend...*

"I can't tell her..." I folded my arms across my chest. *She has to know!* I began to pace the length of the room. "Your godfather, Ben. A snake!"

I needed to get the disturbing images out of my head. *A cold shower should do the trick...* but then, I didn't feel like being naked and wet at the moment...I walked over to the ebony nightstand that Chris had purchased with our bedroom set shortly after our wedding and knelt down. My hands reached in darkness until they hit something hard. I grabbed the cigar box I knew to be under there and brought it to my bed.

My fingertips rested on top of the dusty lid and I pressed my index finger over it. I hesitated before drawing a thin, brown line over the top, and flicked the dust it left behind off of my finger. With a sudden sigh, I flipped the lid over. The stagnant aroma of ageing newspapers and stale cigarettes wafted towards my nose with an invisible puff, making my nostrils flair with excitement. I peered into it. There were only a few objects inside, a pack of Marlboro cigarettes and several yellowed newspaper articles paper clipped together.

I lifted the pack from the box and held a quick breath. It had been the last pack that I'd ever purchased. I squeezed lightly and could still feel the seven, slender cigarettes inside. I frowned and let out a sigh. The pack didn't have the onrush of emotional tears and regrets that I had expected, instead, I felt as though they were just another item cast away and nothing more. No emotional attachment; nothing. I dropped them back inside. The newspaper articles on the other hand...

My fingers twitched as I ran them over the top article. It was a piece on corruption in the student government. The student treasurer had been stealing money from the treasury and the student vice president had been in on it. The vice president let it slip outside of class one day and I overheard it. Digging deeper into the mystery, I managed find solid evidence of their actions. They were later caught and expelled from the university. Luckily, they had yet to spend the money. It was later found in the vice president's dorm room under his mattress. I had won an award for that piece...the university's Merit of Journalism Award...

I closed my eyes, letting the memories take over. I was going to be a journalist. Back then, my dream had been writing the reports that newscasters read over the prompt during the evening news...Beth and I were alike in some aspects. She loved the creative side of writing, whereas I loved the thrill of journalistic reports and delving into the grit and truth.

But I had given it up. All for Chris.

I closed the lid and set the cigar box on my nightstand. My eyes drifted around our lavish master bedroom to the Tiffany designer jewelry box sitting on my dark vanity table. *Was it worth it?*

"Of course it was!" I threw my legs off the bed, ripped the box from my nightstand, and threw it under the bed; where it belonged. *What the hell am I doing? I made my choice. I don't need a job; don't even want one! I have Ben! I don't even need writing anymore. I haven't written in my journal for over a year now!*

I kept it in the bottom drawer of my nightstand. The diary was half full of silly musings and fake, unpublished articles about Church news and lives improved by God's Love.

"Ready to run errands with me?" I asked, taking a deep breath. The distraction had worked. Percy was far from my mind. I glanced over at Ben, who was waving his hands in front of his face, wide awake.

...

*I'm not going to tell her. It's none of my business and it's not my place.* The distraction hadn't worked after all...I couldn't stop thinking about it. I gritted my teeth as I pulled into my narrow driveway. The cracked cement was slick with water. I glanced

over the window of my sedan and saw the garden hose uncoiled in the grass, resting there like a sleeping serpent. *That crazy Judith! She borrowed our hose again!*

I cast a sidelong glance at Chris's blue sports car, or "Mitsubishi Eclipse Spyder" as he liked to put it. He had left the top down and I could see his two black seats in the sunlight.

"Looks like Daddy's home," I said with a smile, turning to Ben, who was sitting beside me in his car seat. He curled one of his pale hands into a fist and thrust it into the air in front of his face. He gurgled and I emitted a soft laugh. Ben was going to be exactly two months old in three days. Chris and I were going to celebrate it by graduating him to the nursery. We had been married for six years, going on seven. Ben was our first. *The simple life, it's all about simplistic pleasures... God, I really can't tell Beth... I don't want to be the one to do it.*

I glanced back over at silent hose, letting my eyes graze over it to the neighbor's house. Judith was watching me from the part in her lace curtains. The woman had been slowly losing her mind ever since her husband had died off in some sort of military excursion two years ago. She gave me a curt nod, but kept her pleat of a frown. The curtain dropped back in place and her shadow fluttered across the room. The eerie scene reminded me of the Victorian era puppet show stage for children I saw in that shop downtown where I got that antique desk clock for Chris.

I shivered and got out of my car to release Ben's car seat. Ben was such a quiet baby. Not once had I ever seen him wail and thrash about. The loudest he ever got was when I forgot to change his diaper two weeks ago. The poor thing had been lying in his own excrement for two hours. Even then, his cries sounded more like the pitiful meows of an abandoned kitten rather than the calls of an infant. *None of my business...none of my business...I will not call her...*

The images of what I had witnessed three days ago kept playing in the back of my mind as I carried Ben into the house. The illicit dream must have heightened my aggravation at it.

He had been sitting across from the pretty girl who works at the local comic book store downtown. She couldn't have been older than twenty. Her striking features were heightened by the dim lighting inside the restaurant. I had noticed them when I was pushing Ben in his stroller, trying to cross into the Plaza. At first I didn't see them, but Ben's godfather is the sort of man who stands out. Beth thinks him handsome. I don't. He's more of a nerd than anything else.

They were sharing a window table...with candles...The girl was leaning forward and her playful lips were twisting over unheard words. All the while, he sat smiling with his fingers just grazing her long, curly hair; which had fallen from her loose hair tie the moment before. *No! I won't call...but...I can't let this go by unsaid. Elizabeth adores him!*

"I can't take this!" I hissed as I crossed into my living room. *Put Ben down, and then...I call her.* I shivered. It felt as though tiny icicles of sweat were piercing me down the length of my back. I was never one for drama...ever. If anyone lived the "simple and happy life," it was Elizabeth. I heard Chris milling around in our office as I walked down the hallway towards our room. I paused at the nursery. The door was open and so were the bay view windows that overlooked our green backyard.

I could still smell the wet, sky blue paint even though it had been a week since

we had painted the room. It was almost ready for him. His new crib sat next to the large, open face of the window. The curtains were parted, but the soft breeze still managed to catch hold of them, pushing them back and forth like a child on a swing set.

"Three more days and this is yours, sweetie," I said to him. He grabbed my shirt and closed his eyes. The matching dresser set and changing table were due to arrive tomorrow and we were going to set it up in time for his two month birthday. "Come on." I moved away from it and continued to the master bedroom. I laid him down in the tiny cradle we bought from the same place that we had purchased our bedroom set. They didn't have anything larger. I smiled and hummed as I rocked it, watching his eyelids droop. *I can't break the news to her...I really shouldn't...it's none of my business.*

...

"Mmm, hey sweetie. I love you," Chris said as he pulled me onto his lap. We were sitting on the couch, enjoying a lazy evening. It had been two days since the dream and I still had yet to call her... But tonight... Tonight was going to be the night.

"Guess what? Deacon Irvine was raving about those cupcakes you made for the bakery last weekend when he dropped by my office this morning." He kissed me on the lips and started stroking my hair. I blushed. "You are the prettiest Deacon's wife, you know. All the other wives try to imitate you."

"Oh, Chris, stop! They do not!" I gave him a light pat on the thick of his arm and laughed. He grinned.

"I'm serious! They do, I swear it. Deacon Irvine was just telling me that his wife had gotten herself a copy of that floral skirt you were wearing last Sunday."

"She did not!"

"Oh, she did all right. He said she was fuming over not being able to find it at Sears. As if I have you shop there! But obviously, she eventually did find it... Don't worry, I know you'll outdo her. You'll outdo the lot of them." He went to kiss me, but he jerked suddenly and fell back against the couch.

"Dang," he said, prying his black cell phone from his pocket. He leaned away from me and nodded while pressing it to his ear. "I'll be there, as soon as I can." He flipped it shut and slid it back into his pocket with a sigh.

"The office. This recent promotion... well, with any luck, I'll get Winston's place when he retires in three years and I'll be vice president." He paused and sighed again. "Our delivery truck came early... He wasn't supposed to get here until tomorrow morning... but no... he had to come now at six."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry." I kissed his mouth. He slid his hand around my backside and squeezed my buttocks.

"That doesn't mean we can't have a bit of quick fun before I have to jet out of here," he said, sliding off the couch. He scampered down the vast hallway towards the master bedroom. I smiled and strolled after him. I found him hunched over Ben's cradle with a frown on his face.

"No time, I just got another call." He stood up and looked at me. "Wait up for me and make those homemade brownies. I really want one."

"Yes," I said with a groan and a slight roll of my eyes, which Chris did not see. I didn't feel much like going to the store and rushing to get all the ingredients in time to

have them ready for him.

He was looming over Ben's cradle again. I frowned at him and fought the urge to scream at him. He had a knack for making such demands at inconvenient times and I hated it. It wasn't that I didn't love him, no...I glanced at our bed and up at the framed picture hanging above it on the wall. We were standing in front of our University's library. He was standing behind me, wearing a maroon sweater with our school's crest embedded into the left breast.

His mouth hung open in a large smile and he was hugging me, wrapping his thick arms around my waist. I was laughing, my eyes were closed, and my hair was slightly blurred because he had just swung me around on the library steps and Elizabeth had snapped the photograph.

I was wearing a knit maroon sweater with the letters RSU spread across my chest in gold. I had on a skirt to match.

"Ha ha! Got ya!" Beth cried, winking from behind her grey camera. "You two look great!"

"Thanks," I said with a blush. The warmth from Chris's close body spread over me and I wanted nothing more than to force a kiss onto his handsome face. He had proposed to me the week before at our last Bible study session. He had decorated the place in romantic lighting and had managed to get the rest of our regulars in on it! It was like a surprise birthday party more than anything else, but I didn't mind. He had worked hard to keep it from me, and when he pulled out that gold band with the oval, three-carat diamond encrusted onto it, I couldn't refuse him.

"I can't wait till the wedding! I'm the maid of honor!"

"Christ, Beth, naming your own place in my wedding?" I feigned anger by moving away from Chris and folding my arms in front of my chest. Elizabeth flinched, lowering the camera a fraction of an inch. I glanced at Chris and gave him a knowing smirk.

"Of course you are the Maid of Honor!"

"Wendy!" Elizabeth started laughing. "You had me there for a second!"

"Girls, girls," Chris muttered, kissing my cheek. "I need to get to class, I'll meet you later." He hurried down the marble steps and I watched his round rump bounce as he weaved his way through a line of students going the other way.

"You two have a date yet?" Elizabeth asked, tucking her camera into the military green sack she had over her shoulder.

"Yes." I frowned. "Beth...um...I'm trying to quit. Please don't tell him I'm a closet smoker...I know he doesn't like that sort of thing and I'm doing so much better. Down to two a day..."

"Wendy," she looked up at me and settled her bag at her side. "Why would I tell him your deepest secret?" She was almost laughing. Her dark hair was pulled into a tight bun on the top of her head, making her look like a prim ballerina. Though, she wouldn't put it that way. She only wore it like that because it took, as she put it, exactly two minutes and thirty seconds. She was never one for fashion or primping.

"What's wrong?" She pressed near me and ushered me towards a secluded oak tree set away from the busy crosswalk. She leaned against the red brick wall of the library and folded her arms, giving me that expecting look mothers are so famous for. The arched eyebrow, the impudent frown, and the stamping of the foot...

"Well...eh, Beth. He um wants to marry as soon as he graduates. He already



has a job offer...one that would even make Percy's mouth water."

"So?"

"Well, err, he wants me to up and move with him...He wants me to eh... concentrate on domestic affairs...He's really ambitious. He's thinking about running for Senate one day, but first he wants to concentrate on being an 'upstanding citizen' and to involve himself with Church affairs...He already has a church picked out and has been in contact with the Pastor...He wants to be a Deacon."

"Why not just finish your degree and marry one semester later? It's not that long, there's no rush."

"Look who's talking," I snorted. She and Percy had eloped, to put it mildly. She frowned and let her hands drop to her sides.

"That's different, you know that. We know what each other wants and we are both striving to meet our ambitions. We don't even live together yet!"

"Well, I'm just striving to meet our ambitions too!"

"No, you are striving to meet *Chris'* ambitions, not yours. Finish your degree, you've only got that one semester left after this one! Besides, I want to graduate with you-what if I get some disgusting, loud partier slut for a roommate when you're gone? No way! I want you!"

"Beth...I'm sorry, but I already told him yes."

...And she did get a disgusting loud, partier slut for a roommate. She ended up pranking the girl so bad that the Dean made her move into the expensive private dorms. Not that Beth minded, though I still do wonder how she paid for the extra expense.

"Wendy, phone!" I blinked and turned. Chris was holding our house phone receiver out to me. I flushed at not even noticing that he had left the room to fetch it.

"Oh, sorry!" I took the receiver from him and ignored the confused look he had just given me.

"I love you," he said, wringing his hands together.

"Oh Chris, it's not you," I kissed his lips. "I was just reminiscing, that's all. That photograph up there brings a lot of memories back." He stepped beside me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

"It sure does. That was thoughtful of her to blow it up like that and to give to us. I can't believe that she had kept the original for so long."

"She's a girl, Chris. We are sentimental like that."

"Well, say hello to her before she hangs up. She's on the phone."

"Oh!" I blushed and put the receiver to my ear. "Sorry, Beth!"

"It's okay. I heard you two eyeing that picture." Her voice was bubbly as though she had just been making out with her husband. She was strange like that. The slightest thing involving Percy sent her into a dizzying throe of happiness that rivaled the high the Corner Creatures downtown got when they smoked pot. *I've got to tell her. I can't back out.* I felt my throat cinch shut as she told me all about Percy's new gold encrusted pen with his name engraved on it.

"That is, eh, a nice sounding pen..." I said, waving to Chris as he hurried out of the room. I let her continue rambling on about how "hot" Percy looked this morning in his brown pants and cream shirt. *I can't do this...Oh, Beth! You don't deserve this!* I followed Chris out of the room and waved once more as he left the house. I crossed

into the kitchen and pulled an empty glass from the cupboard. My lips were silent as I watched the water from our filter trickle into it. I drank it quietly, still listening to her as she described every last detail of his outfit. I drifted back into the master bedroom. I felt as though I were gliding...the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, bearing ill-fated news.

"Anyway, sorry to go on and on. I can tell you are bored," she snickered. "You left your high school yearbook here, Deary, and I found some interesting tidbits about you!"

"Oh God..." *I have to do it.* I sat down on my bed and leaned my head against one of the wooden posts for support.

"Zodiac, eh? 'Most likely to wander across the country in an idle daze.' Very interesting indeed."

"Yeah, I was a bit of a free spirit in my teenage years. Always off in my own world, doing my own thing. I once drew a unicorn in black marker on the girl's bathroom window. To this day, I honestly think it's still there."

"Zodiac," she continued snickering. "I never knew you had such a nickname!" Her voice...so innocent...I listened as she continued on with her amusement. *Please shut up!*

"Trust me, I was just as weird and my own 'special' little self as the nickname sounds."

"So funny! I can't imagine--"

"Look, Beth, um I have something I need to tell you." I closed my eyes and lifted my head away from the post. *Just say it!* "Percy's cheating on you!"

"Ex-excuse me!?" Her breathing became rapid.

"He's cheating on you." My voice was thick and raspy. I closed my eyes and recounted the scene at Biat's, right down to the slinky green dress the girl was wearing. *I'm so sorry!*

"No. I refuse to even think that he'd do something--"

"Did you not just hear me!? Her boobs were falling out of her dress and he was touching her hair!"

"He'd never." *Why must you make this harder on yourself, Beth?*

"That's what you get for marrying an Atheist!" I put an instant hand over my mouth to stifle the gasp that followed. There was a pause and I could almost hear the seconds dance by.

"Wha-what-did-you-just-say!? Excuse me!? Percy is--"

"An Atheist and you were dumb enough to marry into that! Honestly, did you think it would work between you two? You two stand on opposite sides of the political spectrum! Of course he'd go for a pretty little college freshman over you!" *What was I saying?* "And you know what? I bet she's one too. You know how universities love shoving that crap Percy believes in down our throats! Ha!" *No! Wendy, shut the hell up!* This wasn't how I wanted it to go! I winced as though my words brought physical pain.

"You bitch," she said. I dropped the phone. It rolled across the carpet and I sank back into my bed. The dial tone blared from the receiver...beating like a tiny heart.

"Hey, Wendy..." A warm hand caressed my cheek. "You're crying." I blinked and stared up into the blue eyes of my husband. He was sitting on the bed next to me,

leaning over my body. His crisp work shirt smelled of him; Old Spice and sweat. How long had I been laying there!? It must have been late for him to be back already.

"I'm fine," I said as I wiped the corners of my eyes with my thumbs.

"The phone is on the floor...and your cheeks are soaking wet. Look, I'll take you out sometime this week, okay? Go to bed; you look terrible. I'll deal with Ben." He pushed his lips against mine and I hugged him. *The simple life...simple...always simple...*

"I don't think Beth is going to speak to me anymore. I-"

"You two had a fight? Meh, don't worry about it. You always focus on the worst. She'll come around, you'll see."

"No-Chris, I *insulted* her."

"Wendy," he sighed. "Always complicating things."

...

"Ben, please cry for me!" I was worried...He had not uttered a single sound all day. It was his two month birthday and Chris was bringing home a cake for the occasion. *What is with this child!?* I stood at our large front window and started rocking him in my arms. *Please at least gurgle...Do something!* He looked up at me and his crystal blue eyes blinked. Ben's hands were in front of his face and he was flexing his stubby fingers. *At least he's moving...that's a good sign, right!?*

"Cry, damn it! Be normal!" I gasped at myself and instantly held him against my breast. "God, I am sorry...I'm just worried! You're the only friend other than my husband now. Judith doesn't count. She's insane."

I shivered. Last week when I was watering my plants, she watched me, standing there like a still porcelain doll, frozen eerie smile and all. She had opened her mouth and sang to me.

*"We foot it all the night,  
Weaving olden dances,  
Mingling hands and mingling glances  
Till the moon has taken flight.<sup>1</sup>"*

It was one of the most unsettling things I had ever experienced and I swear I had heard that from somewhere before. *Weirdo...that woman has turned into a complete nut case.*

"I don't know what I'd do if something were wrong with you!" I said, turning my attention back to my son.

He gurgled and yawned. A sigh escaped my lips as my eyes drifted to the window. Judith was standing in her front yard, borrowing our hose again. She was watering her plants and was in a pair of daisy dukes that showed off more than I cared to see. She was swaying her hips and I could see her thin lips moving as though she was singing a lullaby to some unseen child. Her blonde hair was loose and cascading down her back, almost elfin like. Her feet were bare, save for the single, silver toe ring that glistened from her left pinky toe.

*I miss Beth.* There was no way she'd forgive me.

I sighed and shifted my weight to accommodate Ben. Judith straightened and turned slightly. Her frown curled into a sullen smile, full of mischievous mirth. I stepped away from the window and was only too happy to hear the shrill calls of the phone. As

I passed my way to the nursery, I grabbed the receiver and laid Ben into his crib.

"Hello?" I said, arranging him onto his back. A harsh breath answered my greeting with a loud shudder. The noise was constant and reminded me of the bleating of sheep.

"Wendy, I think you might have been right." My heart heaved beneath my breast and I swallowed. I didn't want to be right...

"Beth, I-"

"He came home late last night and yelled at me. Yelled at me and, and compared me to *her*."

"Oh, God, Beth-" I covered my mouth. I didn't want to be right... *That poor girl... She worships the ground Percy walks on! She's always been that way! She is the most devoted woman I know.*

"Spare me your fake apologies. I only called so that you can continue gossiping with those preppy little church friends of yours. I'm sure you all had a blast Wednesday night... Yep, condemn the Atheist and the idiot who married him." She started sobbing until I had to quiet her with a soft hush between my teeth. "You know what? I refuse to believe you, Wendy. He was just having a bad day!"

"Beth, I'm sorry, I was angry, I-" *She's in denial...*

The dial tone hissed through the receiver against my ear. I slouched and lowered my head. I just stood there, holding Ben, in a half stupid daze. A door opened somewhere in the house. Chris. I set the receiver down on Ben's changing table and closed my eyes.

"Hey, hon." I glanced up to see that he had entered the nursery. "You okay?"

"I'm fine. Did you pick up the cake?" *Just put it out of your mind... It's in Beth's hands, not yours.*

"I sure did." A broad smile fashioned itself over his full lips. His eyes, so much like Ben's, sparkled in the light coming in from the window over the diaper station. He leaned forward and embraced me. I sank into his thick warmth and exhaled.

"I have it all ready. Pick the little tyke up and let's sing!"

"It's a shame he can't actually *enjoy* the cake," I said with a soft laugh.

"Well, yeah, but we can. He can enjoy the colors and the candles!" I turned to the cradle and lifted him out. He was silent and complied with lazy eyes. Chris moved behind his head.

"Benny, Ben! Happy Birthday, Benny, Ben!" he sang. Ben made no notion of hearing him and emitted a large yawn. "Beh, he'll be talking up a storm when he ages a bit. No need to worry. Some babies are just quiet." Chris stepped closer and stroked Ben's angular chin with his forefinger. Ben gurgled.

"I do have some good news, well, good for me; bad for you and Irvine, I guess..." he said as he ushered us into the dinning room. "Deacon Irvine broke his leg this morning. He had called me at work from the hospital," he shook his head and smiled. "If there's a determined man, it's him. He was going to host a men's retreat this weekend, but he can't exactly do that hopping around on one leg." He kissed my cheek. "I mean, Church retreats are kind of like the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts... So, he asked me to take his place."

"It's good for the both of us. Taking his place will get you noticed." I kissed his mouth and winked. "In any case, we can pretend that tonight is Friday, my sexy baby-

maker..."

"You're on," he said as he squeezed my buttocks. He skipped ahead of me to the table. I was reminded of a schoolchild rushing to be the first out on the playground during recess. I couldn't help but snicker at his excitement. I followed him to the table. He had set out the nice, white lace table cloth that his mother gave us last year, and he had even set out the nice china. I smiled.

Ben's cake was painted in white frosting with a red pickup truck glazed over the top. Two tiny candles sat on either side of it.

"It matches the sweaters that Beth and Percy give him," Chris said with a haughty smirk. He squared his shoulders, seemingly proud of himself for accomplishing such a clever feat.

...

My elbow slid off the desk, causing my hand to slam into the keyboard in front of me. The computer monitor behind it flickered. I glanced over the side of my chair, at Ben. I had put him in his car seat and had set him down on the floor next to me. He blinked and lay still, heedless to the loud stream of cuss words that had just flung out of my mouth. He hadn't even flinched.

"You are a good boy! Yes you are! So patient!" I glanced down at the crinkled note in my left hand and scowled. Chris had left one of his infamous tedious check lists for me to do this weekend. He had conveniently placed it on the counter next to the sink before leaving for work this morning. *As if I'm some sort of child who needs to be told to clean her room! Please!* I looked at the last chore on the list. "Call Customer Service about the cable upgrade." I really didn't want to call a customer service hotline, especially on a Friday afternoon. People just don't care anymore. Yesterday, the clerk at the bank snapped at me for talking too slow and fumbling with my purse. Her impatient scowl dropped from her angular face the moment she saw the numbers in our account. I sighed. I hated the bank.

I tore my gaze from the note and glanced at the car seat. I threw the note onto the desk, knocking Chris's cup of pencils over my lap in the process. I gasped and glanced at Ben to see if he was all right.

He was looking at the far wall.

I pushed the pencils off my lap and scooped him out of his seat. I kissed the top of his head. I wish Beth was here... She hadn't come over for our usual Friday lunch. She was still mad at me, not that I blamed her. Even after she had called me the other day, sobbing about him, she still hadn't forgiven me. I stood up, out of my chair and crossed the room. I started rocking Ben in my arms.

"It's just me and you this weekend," I said as I walked from our office into the living room. I looked out my favorite window and stared at Judith's empty driveway. *Why can't Beth just forgive me!? I didn't mean it!* But she had always taken his beliefs, or non-beliefs, I should say... so seriously even though she didn't agree with them herself. She scorned those who scorned him.

Again, I found myself hoping that I was dead wrong about him. But, one can never be sure of such things... after all, he is an *Atheist*... I watched as Judith appeared through her front door, dragging her husband's tattered, military duffle bag behind her. She opened her garage with a swift movement and disappeared inside. *I need to make*

it up to her. We had been best friends for so long. I turned away as Judith's car rumbled in the background. I glanced at the clock. It was already after four thirty. I had been wallowing in self pity for almost a half hour. *Wait! The antique clock!* I drew a quick breath. Elizabeth had loved that thing. When we had it in the house, she always eyed it and told me how much she loved it. She had gawked at me when I told her the price, but still admired it with silent eyes. Chris had taken it to his office a few weeks ago when they had promoted him. I did not miss the disappointment in her face when she had asked about it.

Chris wouldn't mind if I took it...and besides, it was going for a good cause. I carried Ben back into the office and strapped him into his car seat. I grabbed my husband's extra set of keys, lifted Ben's car seat, double checked he was okay, and hurried through the house to my car.

My sleek sedan sped through the streets like an old steam engine, plowing and forcing its way through rough terrain; except instead of rails, I was plowing through paved roads. *Lucky me the cops are obviously not watching...* I snickered as I mowed my way through our small city to the two story, brick building with oak doors in which Chris worked. The parking lot at the side of the building was empty, save for a few scattered cars, none of which belonged to my husband.

I pulled into Chris's parking space near the front, grabbed Ben, turned the car off, and made my way inside through the back door. Chris's office was on the second floor and over looked the park across the street. The view was breathtaking. Lush green trees blanketed the park's picnic tables and benches, fanning their branches out like flocks of male peacocks in their prime. Chris told me that sometimes he sees an elderly gentleman walking a tiny guinea pig on a leash and harness around the park's wide sidewalks.

I passed the few straggling office workers still trudging at their consoles and got into the elevator. Why I was in a hurry? I had no idea, I just wanted to talk to Beth again...and also, part of me wanted to know the truth behind Percy's behavior.

I set Ben down as I fumbled for Chris's office key and shoved it into the lock. The door opened with a loud, metallic click.

"Such a good boy, Ben, you are so quiet!" I picked the car seat up again and stepped into Chris's office. Sunlight trickled in through the blinds set in his window, casting horizontal stripes over the mahogany desk and furniture. The stripes fell over the wooden clock. It was set on his desk, facing outward. Its pale round face looked at me as though the numbers were a set of twelve eyes and the hands were its warped mouth. I suppressed a shiver and crept across the carpet towards it.

The clock's face was embedded into a wooden frame. The top was rounded off to match the face, while the bottom widened at the base. I set Ben down and ignored his sudden, loud gurgle. My hands grazed over the smooth, dark stained wood. The horizontal stripes bent around it as I lifted it from its place. I glanced away from it, letting my eyes linger over his desk. He had left one of his old textbooks from college out. I set the clock back down and reached my hand towards it.

It was one of his Economic books. The top of a pale bookmark peeked out from the text's thick pages. I slid the book across the top of the desk, ignoring the loud scraping sound it made against the wood, and opened it. I didn't see what he had been reading. My eyes were focused solely on the bookmark...It was actually a series

of small photographs; the kind from the trendy photo booths at the mall. There was a series of four photos, each with a couple. My hand trembled. The couple's lips were locked into a series of passionate kisses.

The man was Chris. I did not know the woman. She was young, blonde, and the picture image of a bubbly model on a teen girl's magazine.

I turned it over: "Chris + Samantha = Forbidden Love Forever" had been scribbled on the back in a messy, yet feminine script. It was also dated. Last Wednesday.

My eyes narrowed as the shock gave way to anger. *No way. There is no way in this plane of existence that I'm going to let my only son be raised – let alone touched by the disgusting, lying hands of "Samantha." ...Forbidden love...* I wanted to retch. *No way, there is no way she is laying a finger on Ben.*

I will die before I let that happen.

...

The birds chorused the same, pleasant songs that they had been singing since I was here years before. Nothing much had changed. I drew a quick breath and continued staring at the blank sheet of paper resting over the thick English text in my lap. The wooden bench made it nearly impossible to relax.

*"For this course you will all be writing with pen names, as you will be reading and critiquing each other's stories and articles."* I moved my hand away from the paper and felt around the bench for my cigar box. When my fingers hit it, I flicked the lid open and pulled out the pack of stale Marlboros. I had five left. I brought the pack to my lap and shimmied one out. I set it into my lips as I reached for the small lighter in my breast pocket.

I lit it and puffed, ignoring the flat smell and taste.

As for Beth and Percy, Percy hadn't fooled around on her. That pretty woman at Biats had been a seamstress and her parents own the restaurant. He had commissioned her to make an eighteenth century replica dress for Beth's birthday. They had eaten for free when I saw them; they had been planning the dress at the time. Afterwards, the woman's parents had given him a gift certificate for two. He and Beth ate there on her birthday. She wore the gown. They have forgiven me.

"Zodiac," I wrote in the top corner where my name should have been.

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<sup>1</sup> W.B. Yeats. The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats. "The Stolen Child." The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats. 2nd ed. Richard Finneran. Simon & Schuster Inc: New York NY, 1996. 18.

# ALEX ATKINSON

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## *Emma and Elle*

"WHY ARE ALL the houses so spread out over where we live?" Emma asked. She put her head on Ian's shoulder, and looked down at the scene sideways. "It must be so nice for all the people that live over there," she said, waving a hand in the direction of the city proper. "To be so bunched up, and bundled. To be so close to each other." A breeze blew by and Emma shivered, wrapping her arm back around Ian's waist. "In the city...they must never get cold."

Ian chuckled. "You know it's not like that...don't you?"

"Yeah," she said. "But it's nice to think that, don't you think?"

He pulled her closer. "I guess so," he said. "Silly and girly, but nice."

"Both of you are being stupid and girly," Elle said. She was lying on her back, on the decrepit old picnic table at the very top of the hill, behind them, blowing smoke up at the sky. "The city sucks, the country sucks, and the suburbs suck even worse. It's always gonna get cold, and it's always gonna be hot—and whoever you're fucking (or not fucking) is always gonna determine your mood, no matter where you live. Someday you'll understand that, little sis. And by then, Ethan, you'll be gone—probably off *doin'* someone else—and it really won't matter to you."

Ian grinned. "You know, I think I said *'silly and girly'*."

"Yeah, well, I revised it," Elle said. She took a drag of her cigarette and spat it back out, without inhaling.

Emma scowled at her sister. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

Elle shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe?"

Emma's nose crinkled like she smelled sulfur, and she crammed her head into Ian's arm. "Sucks for you then," she said from there. "And his name is Ian, not Ethan. He took a minute to learn your name; you should do the same to remember his."

Elle propped herself up. "Why?" she asked. "He's just a guy. What do you think he's gonna stay with you forever? Try not to be such an idiot around me, will you? Save all that shit for mom and dad. I mean, *Jesus*..."

"It's okay," Ian said.

"No," Emma said, turning toward her sister. "She's being rude."

"How?" Elle asked. "I'm just being honest. You're fifteen years old. By the time you're my age—by the time you're eighteen—you'll have forgotten his name too."

"Bull..."

"Bull? Bull what? Bull's ass? Bull's balls? In a bull's eye?"

"Bull-shit!" Emma screamed. "Why don't you just leave us alone?!"

Elle smiled. She threw her head back and giggled—arching her spine so her chest stuck out, shaking her hair so its dirty blonde tips tickled the table. "Oh, Emma," she said, looking back up at them. Her tee-shirt now pulled taut across her braless breasts. Her knees now up. Her nipples now somehow erect—as if she could make that happen on command. "You're so angry all the time." Her eyes fell on Ian, and her chin quivered. "Ethan..." she said, "do you want me to go?"



"Man, I'm stayin' outta this," Ian said, smiling nervously.

"Man?" Elle said, suddenly swinging her legs over the side and sitting up. "Man?" she said and stood on the bench.

"Stop it," Emma murmured.

Elle ignored her. "I'm no *man*," she said, stepping down. She took another drag of her cigarette and tossed it. "Ethan...how old are you?"

"Sixteen," Ian said immediately.

"Sixteen," Elle mused, her head cocked while she seemed to calculate the word's meaning. "Have you ever slept with a girl, Ethan?"

"W—"

"Have you ever fucked anyone, is what I mean," Elle interrupted, moving toward them. "My little sister, for instance?"

Ian glanced at Emma, and looked back up at her sister—his mouth working. "W—"

"Is that a no?" Elle giggled. She looked down herself, shifting her body as her eyes crawled toward the ground—as if her body was the barrel of a gun, and her toes were its sights. When she looked up, she was smiling slyly. "Ever thought about dating an older girl?" she asked. "A girl with a little more...experience?"

"God, you're such a—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Elle said, hushing her sister with a wave of her hand. Emma stopped talking. She just shut her mouth, and rested her chin on her knees. She didn't know why. Or what she was waiting for. "Language," Elle said, sitting down—slowly, smoothly, gingerly, as if she were using her ass to test the temperature of a pool—on the other side of Ian. "Can't you see we've got company?" She put her hand on Ian's knee. "Sorry about that," she laughed, "Ethan...my little sister's so crude."

Emma grabbed her hand and threw it off. "Stop it," she said again. More forcefully this time—coupled with a look that could sink a supertanker, and then evaporate the sea. Emma wished she could really do that sort of thing. With her mind. With a look. If she could've, right then, she would have wilted her sister like a blackened banana, and then peeled off all her skin.

"Uh, I think I should probably get goin'," Ian said, moving to get up.

"No," Emma said, grabbing him. "She's gonna be the one that goes."

Elle smiled, grabbed Ian's arm, and put her forehead on his shoulder. "E-thaaan, why's she bein' mean to me?"

"I can't imagine," Ian said. He was smiling too.

*He likes it*, Emma thought.

"Whaaat?!" Elle whined, shaking him and speaking directly into his ear. "What did I ever do to her?!"

Ian shrugged at Emma and grinned.

*He does like it. Look at him—he's enjoying all the attention.* "Let him go," Emma said, letting go of Ian and standing up as she did. "And come over here and talk to me, will you?"

"What do you wanna talk—"

"Elle!"

"Okay, okay, okay—coming," she said, pushing off of Ian's head as she stood.

"Be right back..." she ran her hand through his hair, twisting it roughly around her

fingers, and tugging at it, "E-than."

Ian looked longingly up at Emma, a question stamped plainly across his face—*is everything still cool?*

Emma glanced at him blankly, and then looked back at her sister—arms crossed. "You done?" she asked. "'Cause if you're not..."

"Oh, fine," Elle said, releasing Ian. "You know, you're no fun." She stepped over to Emma, and uncrossed her sister's arms. "And you look like mom when you do that," she said, holding Emma's wrist at her side, and smoothing her shirt at the shoulders. "So quit it, will ya, you're creepin' me out."

"You remind me of mom when you do that," Emma said. She brushed her sister's hand off her shoulder. "Next thing you know you'll be licking your fingers, and using your spit to smooth out my eyebrows."

"They are really furry," Elle said, wetting her thumb.

"Just come over here and talk to me!" Emma cried. She broke away from her sister, and wrapped her arms back around her chest—huffing as she bounded up the hill. "Now!"

Elle recoiled. "And she says I look like mom," she mumbled to Ian.

Emma turned to see if her sister was following her. She had already made it to the top of the hill, and was moving toward the trees on the other side of the picnic area. Elle was walking her way. Stumbling and smiling through the rocks that she could easily have gone around.

She looked nothing like their mother.

-2-

Emma's face was so stupid. The way her hair hung around it in those twisted mouse-brown clumps, shot with obviously artificial, almost-orange streaks of red—and the rest of it was tied into twin knots on the top of her head that made her look like a Koala bear. The way she gnawed on her bottom lip when she was angry—exactly like their father did—as if she were so upset by whatever it was that had pissed her off that she was going to try and eat her own chin. The way her eyes were situated. "What's wrong with you?" Elle asked.

"Me?!" Tears peaked, making the auburn of her irises look huge until she wiped them away. "There's nothing wrong with *me*! What the hell is wrong with *you*?!"

Elle shrugged. "I dunno—I'm not as tall as I'd like to be. But otherwise, I mean..." She looked her body down and back up, gave her hair a touch, smirked, and shook her head. "Really?"

"Really?!" Emma cried. "That's all you've got to say is fucking *really*?! You were just all over Ian over there! You don't think there's anything wrong with that?!" Her voice dropped an octave or two. "I mean, you know I like him," she almost whispered. "That's just...gross."

"Well, no one's forcing you to like him."

"You know what I mean!" Emma screamed. "You! Messing with him! Like that! It's gross! You're my sister, for God's sake..." Emma put her face in her hands and sobbed. In a lot of ways, it was really a relief not to have to look at it anymore—but a second or two later she whipped it back out again. "Do you understand anything that I'm saying to you?" she asked.

"Of course," Elle said. "You're telling me to back up off your man."

Emma's mouth worked—making her look a little like a toothless sea otter gumming an invisible trout.

"And I'm telling you, he's not yours." Elle took her little sister by the shoulders. "No one is. Everyone belongs to their self—and they're always gonna be fighting for the home team, no matter what they say to you. Especially guys. Understand? It's self-interest. And that's all anyone else is ever gonna give a shit about—they're gonna do whatever works best for them, whatever gives them the most pleasure at the moment, whatever gets their rocks off. I think it's time you learned that, little sis."

Emma swiped her eyes. "Just sounds like a lot more of your self-indulgent bullshit to me," she said. "I mean, what's your point? Trust no one? 'Cause if it is, really, that's original—I'm tellin' ya."

Elle's cheeks went all warm and tingly like she'd been slapped, and she took her hands off her sister. She would have loved to return the favor (in real life), but instead she settled for saying: "I'm tellin' ya, I'm tellin' ya," in her best baby voice, and framing her face with jazz fingers. "What do you know about anything? Huh? Not shit. Guys are gonna be all over that." Elle laughed, and jerked her head in Ian's direction. "Starting with that one. And they're probably gonna just keep right on screwing you over for the rest of your life—since you, like, seem to wanna make it so easy for 'em."

"Like you?" Emma asked.

"What?" Elle almost crossed her arms, realized what she was doing, and put her hands on her hips instead. Emma put her fist over her mouth and giggled—rubbing her eyes with the heel of her other hand. When she was finished, she looked up and smiled at Elle. Openly. Unabashedly. Her face as pink and splotchy as newborn's. "What?" Elle asked. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," Emma said.

"No, say it," Elle insisted.

"It's nothing... it's just..."

"It's juuust..."

Emma took a breath, looked her sister in the eye, and smiled. There was no meanness in it this time, no fight—but there was something. Consolation, maybe. "Easy-E," she sighed. She shook her head. "I heard a couple of guys calling you that last year, back when—"

Now Elle did slap her sister. She slapped her, and it didn't sting her fingers enough—so she slapped her again. And again—with her left hand this time—intending to even up her cheeks, and she probably would have kept right on slapping if Emma hadn't tucked her head in her hands, and let out such a loud, yowling, high-pitched scream.

Elle screamed back at her, gave the buns on her head a courtesy pop, and spat laughter. Her hands were throbbing. Her cheeks were burning (though, probably not as bad as Emma's). And her pulse was pounding into her head so hard that she could barely even think to form a word.

Suddenly, she felt spectacular.

"Everything good?" Ian asked, running around the trees to where he could see. "What's going on? I heard you guys—"

"Just stay out of it," Elle snarled, her face screwed to the point that her normally comely features were almost unrecognizable. Her eyes—normally wide and shining and the color of the Caribbean—were squinted and storming and squirming with veins. Her hair—usually well smoothed and straightened and parted perfectly even in the rain—was frazzled and flung thoughtlessly behind her ears, unmindful of the random pattern of its part. And her lips...her lips were moving so fast when she spoke that Ian thought they might actually fly off her face.

But she was still Elle. Elle the unavoidable. Elle the undeniable. Elle the always-gonna-be-older-and-outta-his-league. Elle...

"This is between me and her," she said forcing a laugh, and pinching the buns of Emma's hair like they were ass cheeks. "Me, and this stupid little bitch right here!"

"Screw you!" Emma screamed, popping her face out of her hands. Ian noticed redness there, on her cheeks, under her eyes, and he saw tears—heard them in her voice.

"Oh, you wish!" Elle yelled, leaning in as Emma's head retreated back into her arms. "Your little boyfriend wishes! He'd have done it right in front of you!"

Emma shook her head—and the hands that were holding it.

"No?! You don't think?! He'd-a fucked me right on those rocks over there and then laughed about it in your stupid little ferret face! That is, of course, if I had no sort of standards at all—and wanted to sleep with any old ugly-ass dude that you were dating!"

Ian started inching backwards, hoping that he could get back around the trees before attracting any more attention.

"No he wouldn't," Emma huffed. She turned and made for Ian—getting there and throwing herself into his chest without looking up. "He's not like that," she said into his shirt.

"Oh, he's a fucking idiot," Elle said. "He'd have done whatever I told him to. All guys are like that: *idiots*."

"Hey now," Ian said.

"See!" Elle exclaimed, pointing at him—seeming to do so with her entire body, the light of the sun sneaking in behind her, so that even the hair on her head and her sleeves and her forearms appeared to be doing the same, as if all were being bent by her will, and accusing him. "Do you see what I'm talking about?! What a weak, moronic thing to say! Here you are crying in his arms like a baby, and all he can think to say is: '*Hey now*'—when it's *his* people I'm putting under the bus! Which means he's either retarded, or an insensitive douche—I'm not sure which! Prob'ly both!"

"I thought you wanted me to stay out of it."

"I do! Can ya do that, please?!"

"*Why don't you just shut it!?*" Emma turned around—but put Ian's arms over her shoulders, and did not step forward. "Just quit it! Just shut the fuck up! Why don't you stop...*saying* everything that comes into your head and just leave? Go back down

the hill. We'll follow—and I'll see you at the house. I mean, it's enough isn't it?"

Elle's shoulders shrunk, and she smiled. "Mom," she said. "You should've crossed you arms that time—it would've been a better—"

"Just go."

"...imitation," Elle finished. Now she crossed her arms. "No. I like it here. And mom told me to watch you, anyway."

"Elle." Emma started scouring the ground. Ian guessed that she was searching for a rock. There were less under the trees, but there were some. It took a second or two, but she found one that was big enough.

"Alright, alright, alright—I'm goin'," Elle said, rubbing her elbows. "It's getting cold up here, anyway." She turned and started walking toward the picnic area. "Good t' meet ya, Ethan! You guys just do whatever it is you were gonna do, and forget I was ever up here! You'd-a done it anyways—but at least now I can say I *toldja*! Make your own mistakes!" She stepped around a tree, and was out of their sight. "Oh, and no offense with the whole idiot thing!" she called, crunching past the pebbles on the way to the path. "It's prob'ly just genetics! No helpin' that!"

Emma turned back around, and Ian held her for as long as he felt comfortable before speaking. But she wasn't crying. She wasn't squeezing. She barely even moved.

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The two of them sat on the bench, overlooking the city—and the sitting stone where they'd been before Elle started her rant. They talked some, but sat mostly. Ian asked if he should've stepped in—and Emma said no, no, and she meant it, or at least she thought she did—and that was enough. And there was some nuzzling. And the subject was changed. And a kiss or two was left on a head, neck, or lip. The two of them sat until the day was fleeing—and all that was left to look at were the lights from the houses and the vehicals below.

And then there was the cold. There. There with them the whole time. The first in a while that couldn't be associated with an afternoon thunderstorm. The first that meant something—told the future.

"I think we should go," Emma said. She had huddled against him, but now she sat straight—and he pushed himself up onto the table behind them.

"Yeah?" he said. There was agreement in his voice. Agreement—and something else. He knocked his heels on the bench. He checked his shoelaces, glanced at her, smirked, and then looked away.

"What?" she asked. "What is it?"

Ian shook his head. "Nothin'," he said. "It's just...should I have stuck up for you? Are you sur—"

"Yes. I'm sure," she said. "If you'd stuck up for me, you'd have said something stupid, and I would've had to yell at you for talking like that to my sister—and you wouldn't have understood, so—"

"So you're not mad at me?"

"No," she said. "Stop asking me that. Why do you keep asking me that?"

"Fine." Ian breathed audibly, and started examining his sneakers again.

Emma slapped him in the leg. "Why?"

Ian shrugged. "I dunno. I just feel guilty, you know? Like I let your sister—"

"You didn't let her do anything," Emma interrupted. "It doesn't work like that with her. It never has..."

Ian scratched Emma's back—sort of, it was more like he was scratching at her back—and kissed her on the top of the head. Emma could tell that he was really proud of himself for doing so. "You know, me and my sister don't really get along either," he said. "It's like a sibling thing, I guess."

"Yeah?" Emma looked up at her boyfriend. His features were fading with the light, but she could see that he was smiling—lips closed, eyebrows up, eyes opened unbelievably wide. They'd only been dating for about a month, but she already knew: it was his *I'm-off-the-hook* look. "So you know what it's like, huh?"

Ian nodded. "I think I do," he said. "It's like..." And here he paused, looking out over the city. Emma wondered what he was thinking. Wondered if he was wondering where her sister went—following her tracks in his mind down the hill to their neighborhood, to their street, to wherever she was right then. She wondered if he was remembering the way she sat down beside him, the way she spoke to him—touched his knee. And it occurred to her that maybe she should say something—something to get him started, or to stop him from saying anything at all—but she didn't. She just watched him, and waited—until he finally spoke.

"It's like..." he started again. "It's like when my dad tried to grow tomatoes in the backyard. Like what you were talking about earlier—about the city and our town and whatnot."

Emma frowned. She hoped that he could see how confused she looked.

Apparently, he could. "I know, I know—just bear with me for a sec," he laughed, scratching at her back again. He took a moment to compose himself, a breath, and began again. "It's like, my dad, right—he decided that he was gonna plant some tomatoes in our backyard, right around the time that we first moved here."

Emma nodded and shrugged—*okay?*

"But when he planted 'em—and now, he'd never planted anything before that I know of, anything that actually grew—he put 'em way too close together, so that when they started to grow, their vines got all tangled, and they didn't bear fruit."

"Tomatoes are vegetables," Emma said.

Ian waved her off. "You know what I mean. The point is, that the plants were so close together that all that could grow was a big mess of tangled-ass vines that looked like weeds—and there were no tomatoes. None at all. Not even those tiny little green fuckers that look like 'gator balls."

Emma giggled.

"You see what I mean?" he asked eagerly.

Emma nodded. "I think so."

"The tomatoes needed space to grow," he continued. "And I think it's that way with people too. We need space, ya know? A place apart from our parents, our brothers and sisters—our friends. Space where we can be ourselves. Otherwise..."

"No tomatoes," Emma finished, grinning up at him.

"Yeah!" Ian said. "And maybe it's like that with the city, too." He waved a hand its direction. "How they're so bunched up and bundled, how they're so close to each other—vines wrapping around vines until there aren't enough nutrients left to sustain

anything more animate than an ugly-ass weed." He stared out over gulch, watching the lights coming on and moving in the distance—seeming to consider what he'd just said. "That makes *us* the lucky ones, doesn't it? Out in the country?" He looked down at Emma intensely. "I mean...does that make any sense? Or was it all just gibberish?"

Emma smiled, and wrapped herself around his calf. It was warm, and when the wind blew, she pressed her cheek against his knee and waited. "Jesus," she said when it had passed—grinning up at him again. "You *are* a fucking idiot."

## CONTRIBUTORS

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ALEX ATKINSON is an English major at AASU. He says that he is a "Sophomore, junior, senior...something." Regarding "Emma and Elle," Alex says, "It was inspired by my buddy Ryan—who said to me, pretty much word for word, what Ian says to his lady friend at the end of the story (minus all the mushy stuff). We were moving a washer and dryer from my sister's house in Statesboro to my mother's house in Effingham—which is a long drive starting from Savannah (especially with no radio)—and out it came: 'No tomatoes, man.' I liked the way that phrase sounded, so I started thinking about what kind of character would say something like that, and when. This ['Emma and Elle'] is what I got. The sisters are composites of two sisters that I know—or used to know—only their names, ranks, and temperaments have been mixed and switched. The story took me almost three months to write, but I knew what the last line would be after working on it for less than a day. It wasn't meant to be insulting. I liked the analogy, and I'm pretty sure Emma did, too. We're all fucking idiots sometimes—mothers, fathers, girls and boys. And I'm glad she figured that out, in her life, long before I did in mine."

KEN BRUZENAK is working on his B.F.A. with an emphasis in painting.

BRITNEY COMPTON graduates in Fall 2009 with a double major in Art Education and English Communications. Her artwork reflects an exploration of different cultures and women's issues.

AMIE L. CONLEY is a Fine Arts major.

MICHELLE CRABB graduated from AASU in May 2009 with a B.A. in Information Technology and a minor in Writing. About "Zodiac," she says, "It was written for and dedicated to my father. I wrote it in Dr. Smith's Advanced Creative Writing class. Writing has always been a hobby of mine that I've always done on the side. I will continue to write until my fingers cave into arthritis and my mind gives way to old age! Even though I'm graduating in a few months, I don't know what the future holds for me... I just hope I can land myself a job that I enjoy—with 'enjoy' being the key word."

KEVIN DAISS graduated from AASU in December 2008 with a B.A. in English and a minor in philosophy. He came up with the idea for his story, "Three Sheets, to the Wind," by thinking about what it must feel like to be totally depressed and nearly extinct. "It must be pretty bad," he thought.

REBEKAH DAISS is a senior double-majoring in English and Spanish. She graduates in Fall 2009 and will pursue her M.A. in Comparative Literature.

OLUWAKEMI JEAN ELUFIEDÉ is a senior at AASU. She has been writing poetry since high school. She says, "I believe individuals are able to express how they feel in their own unique way. Reading and writing poetry is very positive and uplifting for my psychological state. In the near future, I hope society learns to understand individuality so more



people will learn to express themselves. I believe that *Calliope* is a productive element in helping college students display their talents. In the near future, I plan on publishing my own poetry book. I would like to thank God and my family for encouraging such positive activity in my life."

JIM EVANS is in his senior year pursuing a B.A. in Liberal Studies, and he graduates in the spring. He says, "Writing has become the passion of this non-traditional student (fifty-four years old) who returns to college after a thirty-five year hiatus. After being remiss, I left college back in the seventies to pursue a career in law enforcement in Miami, Florida. My wife and I moved to Darien, Georgia fifteen years ago. Although I was born in Savannah, Georgia in 1954, my family moved to Florida after my first grade year at Tybee Beach Elementary. I finished high school and graduated from Miami Christian School in 1972 before entering Miami-Dade Community College. Not everyone has a chance to finish what he or she prematurely left incomplete, but once I left college to chase the almighty dollar, the opportunity to finish college almost passed me by. Returning to college was not only a blessing, but it also opened my eyes to writing and the ability to incorporate both a virtue and vice into an art form like poetry."

GUILLERMO GALLARDO says, "I was lucky to be an exchange student at AASU during the fall semester in the year 2008. I am from a long and beautiful country in South America called Chile. I have always believed that photography allows me to be more conscious of the experiences I've lived. It is in this artistic expression here we are able to find answers to who we were and are, and what we could be in the future. In particular, this picture allows me to treasure beautiful moments with my family in the Elqui Valley, a nice place in the northern part of Chile, and realize about the evolution of my work."

JAMALL GALLOWAY is pursuing a B.F.A. with an emphasis in graphic design. He played basketball for AASU, and his artwork reflects his athletic experiences.

CHRIS GIBSON, photographer of the piece "Please, Send in the Clowns," is a graduating senior getting a B.F.A. with an emphasis in graphic design. He says, "Despite my love for design, the first thing I ever submitted to *Calliope* was this photograph. The past year I've really taken an interest in photography and have started to find my own style and eye for seeing things. Lately, I've really enjoyed setting up my shots and picking out backdrops and lighting. This piece is one of the many photographs that I took of the numerous toys I have. I never understood the whole 'fear of clowns' thing. I don't particularly like clowns or anything, but I've never in my life found them creepy or scary. I've been told by a few different people that this is a terrifying photograph. I don't see it. In fact, I kind of see it as very serene and calming."

LIBBY GREEN is a senior, graduating with a B.F.A. and a concentration in Photography in May of 2009. As an artist she tries to keep things as fun as possible. She enjoys experimenting with different photographic techniques both old and new. Her work is a direct reflection of herself and the places she has been. "Salinas Grandes" is a digital photograph taken during a study abroad trip to Argentina.

HOLLY HALES is a junior majoring in Communication Sciences and Disorders. Her photograph, "Chandelier" was developed from the first roll she shot in Mrs. Jensen's Introductory Photography Class. The depicted chandelier is from the Joseph Manigault House built in 1803 in Charleston, South Carolina. Her goal was to produce a photograph with bright whites and dark blacks. Since there was no electricity in the house, she had to rely on the sunlight coming in through the window. She is very pleased with the end result and hopes that others enjoy her piece.

ELIZABETH HARTAGE is a history major at AASU.

BRIANA HIGGINS, a senior Visual Arts major, says, "I consider myself both an artist and a writer. To me, one does not exist without the other. At the root of everything I am passionate about storytelling. From history to fiction, I absorb it all. Visually, I have always held a strong love for the styles of Western animation and comics, preferring them over realism and nonobjective art. It is with this passion for tales that I created my own fantasy world back in 2005. Over the years, I have strived to fill it with a deep, detailed history and populate it with several diverse cultures. These people were mainly inspired by the cultures of antiquity, and my piece depicts one of these many races. Because the Ziegun are based off of the ancient Greeks, I found it only fitting to use them to pay homage to one of my favorite graphic novels. While Miller's '300' is not historically accurate, it appeals to the storyteller in me for its dramatic and visually stunning presentation. "Ziegun Stand at Zestospyn (Homage to Frank Miller's '300')" is my tongue-in-cheek parody, yet also my completely sincere homage, to Miller's fine, inspirational work.

SHIMIRA HILL graduated from AASU in May 2009 with a B.F.A.. Her emphasis is in photography.

RAPHYEL JORDAN is a senior pursuing a B.F.A.. As far as his art piece is concerned, he says: "I've always tried to express the texture, the weight, [and] the feeling of the objects I'm viewing, which was the lesson I believe my Painting I teacher, Michael Woody, was trying to give. Even though this was the sixth painting of the same subject, I never approached the boots in that mindset. Thinking in such a fashion would guarantee a lack of passion for the subject, therefore resulting in the failure of my painting. Fortunately, there was always a different curve or bend in the boots I probably missed in the prior piece. Since this was the case, it was my goal to perfect (as [much as] humanly possible) the gesture of the boots along with every other object in the paintings by every single stroke of the brush I gave."

THEONE KARATASSOS is currently a senior pursuing a degree in Art Education. Upon graduation she is moving to Atlanta, Georgia to fulfill her desires to become an art educator—hopefully while taking classes to get a M.F.A.. Her mediums of choice include any three dimensional arts with a strong interest in fibers, textiles, and metals, although ceramics has recently sparked her interest as well. Her brass jewelry set, "Sculpted Brass," was completed in her first jewelry class. If the price of gold ever goes down, she will be excited to remake it in gold. Her other jewelry piece, "Muslin, Brass, and Copper Wire,"

was completed for an exercise in Fiber Sculpture on adhering elements together without heat or glue. She considers it a functional sculpture and hopes to make several more to help develop her ideas behind the piece and play with its aesthetic.

ERIN LARISCY is a senior working on her B.F.A.. Her art evolves through inspiration, and she can think of no better way to be inspired than by the people and situations that surround her everyday life. Because she chooses to focus on personal experiences, her work reaches a more intimate level, visibly or otherwise. "Jackson" is one example of personal experience. It represents the smiling, innocent face of a close friend's child. For her, this piece captures a moment in time that represents hope, happiness, and the future.

AMANDA MATHIS says, "'El Ritmo' was a poem that I wrote while taking a Spanish class at Armstrong. This poem is about the struggle to communicate with people at times and how frustrating it can be to not find words to express thoughts. My goals for my writing are related to my career as an English teacher. I plan to write in my spare time in order to show my students that I not only encourage them to write, but that I write too."

BRANDON MCCOY is 21 years old and working on a B.A. in English with a Gender Studies minor. After graduating from AASU he plans to "continue his journey westward, pursuing a Ph.D. in English." He says, "My contributions to *Calliope* found their origins, like so many poems, in my own life. Some of the inspiration for my writing comes from Walt Whitman, Jack Kerouac, Tennessee Williams, and Bob Dylan. I don't really consider myself much of a poet; I never have and probably never will. In my free time, I play mandolin, search the universe while listening to tunes, and anticipate/contemplate the growth of my beard."

JONATHAN MOODY says "Phoenix Tears" is "a eulogy to a fellow with whom I used to work. He was retarded and homeless—a really sad story. He had no family that wanted him and he slept in his car, where the police found him dead one day. What struck me as strange was his constant cheery nature. I could think of nothing else except for how terrible his life must have been, growing up in the '60s in a very close-minded society. Tragic but compelling—the story was meant to portray the acceptance of a life that was probably not very accepting of him. I've gotten some flack about the ending. Some ask me, 'Moody, why can't he just have one friend?' or 'Moody, how come there is no happiness in this story?' to which I answer: If you had known this man, you would feel the constant sorrow that surrounded his presence even through his cheerfulness. The acceptance that Abel shows is indicative of the acceptance that the boy was made to have regarding the world. There is no easy way to have a 'handicapped hero,' especially when he's a small child, but I hope that this story gets more into people's heads than sorrow. I would like for everyone to read this story and think twice before we are the Tommys and Joeys of the world. Hate must stop, and we must stop it."

COURTNEY NICOLOU is an English major at AASU.

HANNAH OESTERHELD is a Fine Arts major with an emphasis in photography. About her photograph, "Daddy's Valentine," she states, "My husband had just given my daughter, Taylor, flowers for Valentine's Day. I set them in her windowsill to try and create a dramatic scene with light. After some work in the dark room, it turned out better than I'd hoped." She gets her "artist genes" from her mother who lives in Mozambique, Africa, with her orphans. Her mother took the photograph with the boys in it, and Hannah carved the linoleum into a copy of the photograph with her mother's permission.

ALICIA PEREZ is a student at AASU. She says, "I am a senior pursuing a B.F.A. with a minor in music. As a representational artist in the field of painting, I have experimented with painting from nature and, most recently, distortion. Bearing the name 'artist' is more than just making a 'pretty picture'; it is capturing an emotion, transcending an idea, or just testing the view on reality. Like writers, there is meaning to my painting—from each brushstroke, to the colors, to the title of my works. Words do not suffice for me; pictures are worth a thousand words."

JOSEPH PETERS is an English major at AASU.

CHANELL PRUDE is a Liberal Arts major. She explores different photography techniques that allow a larger range of freedom when creating her artwork.

CEVON RAMBO is a junior at AASU majoring in Communication Sciences and Disorders. The author says, "'There are Other Fish in the Sea' is about searching for logic in heartbreak. It pokes fun at the metaphor we often use in society to comfort others and ourselves during breakups and divorces. In exploring the analogous relationship the poem finds potent and personal truth in an old adage. The driving inspirational force behind writing the poem was catharsis."

ELIZABETH RUSIECKI is a sophomore majoring in Art with a minor in illustration. She is proud to be part of a culture that is so rich in history. She believes that Cuzco, Peru is a incredible place that truly inspires everyone who visits it. She could not help but photograph everything that she saw in this beautiful place: the land, the city, and the daily lives of the Peruvian people. When she graduates she plans to become a photojournalist. She loves the art community and can never see herself departing from it.

JOSEPH SCHWARTZBURT is a junior majoring in English and he would like to pursue a M.F.A. in Creative Writing. Regarding "The Gray Before the Storm," Joseph says, "I wanted to write a piece that captured the essence of the calm that gives way to tumultuous thunderstorms as well as the sensation of the proverbial calms that exist before the tempests we face in our realities. Most people do not seem to notice the quiet pre-storm air until it becomes eerily quiet, or a wind gusts up; this is also true in the events that shape who we are. I wrote the poem about a year or so ago but tweaked it many times. This poem has since made way for a companion piece entitled, 'The Rage Within the Storm' which details the turbulence that follows the 'Gray.' Joseph says that his other work, "An Archangel's Complaint," "Grew out of an idea I had about an angel who is tired of human stereotypes of angels. The idea of the train came into play when

I thought of home and how I used to ride the train into Philadelphia curious about all the people aboard and what their lives were like. I also wondered what it would be like if the speed line ever fell off the side of the bridge into the murky Delaware River. These two ideas merged rather effortlessly and the source of the angel's distaste turned from angel prejudices to his designated task of removing souls from their bodies."

FARHANNA SMITH is a sophomore majoring in Art. She says, "My 'Magnolia' piece was of a photo taken outside of the fine arts building last spring, and I just knew I had to use it. I used it for a texture pastel project, and the magnolia is my favorite flower, and this piece is my favorite of everything I've ever done. The nude model was the first-ever male model I drew, and it was quite interesting but the only challenging part was what to do with the background, funnily enough. The 'Chess and Petals' painting was a piece I had a hard time with because I didn't fancy the 'Alice In Wonderland' themed still life very much and I was running out of time, but I was very happy with the end result. Although my passion is screenwriting, I love to draw, and I am becoming more comfortable with painting and hope to continue to become a better painter and appreciate it more thanks to Mr. Hsu, who inspires me to be a better artist and to have a greater understanding of not just painting, but art itself."

JIMMY TAYLOR is an AASU student pursuing a B.F.A. with an emphasis in graphic design. Regarding his work, he says, "My artwork generally takes physical objects, structures, or items and puts them into a surreal environment or a different perspective. A lot of the subjects of my art derive from a child-like imagination, such as toys, animals, and monsters. I like to exaggerate their behaviors in a fun, mischievous, and comical way. When it comes to some of my other works, I have been drawn to images that encapsulate energy or movement in an abstract way. I tend to do this with my photography by capturing textures in movement such as water or objects that have been through the natural process of decay. My graphic design work has elements of my child-like imagination slapped together with some graphically rendered shapes and smashed between two pieces of white bread."





