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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. The Lillian Spencer Awards are chosen by the editors in each area of art, literature, and poetry, and are given out to outstanding talent in each year's collection.

Submissions are collected throughout the fall semester for the following year's publication. Submissions should be placed in one of the drop boxes located around campus or emailed to the staff. All submissions are read and chosen through an anonymous process to ensure an equal opportunity for every student. For more information on submissions, or if you are interested in working on the staff of the 2006 edition, please contact Dr. Christopher Baker in the Department of Language, Literature, and Philosophy located in Gamble Hall.

All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you: the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was.

--Ernest Hemingway

Letter From the Editor

This year's edition of Calliope marks the first year that creative non-fiction was introduced into the submission process. We found as a staff as we read through the submissions that it was often extremely difficult to distinguish the fiction from non-fiction in the stories. Unmarked and anonymous, each story was presented in the same manner, giving the reader very little clue as to which genre the piece belonged. What we discovered in our reading was that there was a little bit of truth and a little bit of fiction in each work. It is difficult to define where the imaginary begins and where reality ends, and vice versa. After a great deal of discussion amongst ourselves, we decided to present this year's work similar to the last, without designating an area for each genre: fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction, photography, and art. We encourage you to read, view, and experience all of the works in this edition of Calliope as art, all representing a little bit, not only of the life we live, but also of the life we envision.

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Attention

Roll Call

This issue of Calliope is presented in memory of Dr. Jill Miller. An amazing scholar, teacher, and friend, she will be greatly missed, but her presence will continue to live on through the lives and work of her students. Her faith in us has changed us.

Omission

Christi Healan

This hunger eats at me,
a web of deceit I created.
Unintentionally.

Fear shrouds my tongue.
I swallow the words before they...
Escape.

Eventually, lies will consume
the truth with deception.
Unplanned.

A wall of silence hinders
and protects, but offers no
Redemption.

Plastic Mommies

Lindsey Ebner

He is the only person that laughs at my inappropriately timed jokes. He understands humor. Being a flaming homosexual at 16 will do that to a person, I suppose. He called last week at his usual time from New Orleans, which means the party went bitter and he needs my tasteless humor.

"How's the mega-bitch?"

I sighed and rolled my eyes, "Oh, Jason, darling, which one?"

"Which one do we hate the most? Mommy number one or mommy number, huh, what number are we on again? Oh yes, four."

"Jason, dear, it isn't ladylike to hate."

"Mommy Number Four, it is then."

His voice was raspy from hours of drinks and Marlboros. Mommy Number Four. I think I could have my own line of dolls. Each of the four dolls would have their own weapon of choice, hairstyles to match the decade, and of course their smiles would be stretched across their plastic faces with no wrinkles in the corners of their eyes. We simply cannot have sincere smiling dolls. That just won't do. I would have to name the legion of mommies, but no name seems to work for them, because they are all so different. I could name them after my dad, "Zachy's Wives" or maybe "Apron Killers," or I could even honor Jason and call them "The Flab Four." Nope. None of these names will do.

The first doll out of the doll factory was Mommy Number One, the main one, the one that tried to shove me through the birth canal. Poor number one, she couldn't even give birth right, or so I was told. She had to be sliced under the belly button to free me. She tells me often that she loves me more than my older sister because I look like her, and because for the first three years of my life I needed her. I was deaf. She taught me how to speak with my fingers on her lips and my hand making pictures in hers. The years she taught me how to speak were the only years she touched me without anger. I visited her every summer and Christmas until I was fourteen. That was the age the courts in Georgia decided I had a choice of whether or not I wanted to be beaten with her whip of humiliation

and manipulation. She called to say Happy Fourteenth Birthday. She called to remind me of my debt.

"Lindsey, I was in labor for three days. It was agonizing. They told me I might die if I gave birth to you, but I told them to go fuck themselves! I was having you if it killed me, and it almost did. Are you coming to see me this summer?"

"Shit, mom, you shouldn't have gone to the trouble. I mean you could of died and they would have cut me out anyways. Right?"

She showed me her belly scar when I was eight; "This is where the doctors slit my skin so you could come out. You gave me this ugly scar, and now I can't even wear a bikini." Her eyes mimicked her puckered lips as she pulled at the extra skin around her scar. I looked at her face with plain eyes, her eyes, and allowed the corner of my mouth to move upward. "Well, I suppose you should have just left me in there." She looked at me as though I had just proposed she buy me a snake.

Snakes. Oh how Mommy Number Two, the second installment in my doll collection, hated snakes. I am sure I reminded her of a snake and not just because at four years old I thought a garter snake made a great gift. She looked at me like I slithered all around her ankles daring her to touch my scales. Her first husband gave her three boys and I liked to pretend that I was the little girl she dreamed of. She loved taking long bubble baths, but I thought it strange that she would never let me take one with her. One summer while she was bathing away, probably dreaming of me starting kindergarten in the fall, I slithered in and showed her what I had found while playing. A dead bat. Her reaction was shocking. She hit my arm and screamed at me to "get the hell out." I did the only thing I could. I dropped the dead bat in her bath and ran to find my dad before she did. She morphed into the dragon from *Sleeping Beauty* before my eyes. "Run!" I screamed to my legs. I ran through the long hallway onto the screen porch and through the limp door, only stopping when I ran into my dad's legs. My nose still bends to the right from its impact with his hard knees, or so I think.

Later that night my dad ruffled the top of my head with his calloused hand as he laughed and soothed my tears. We ate our Oreos and milk together. I choked on tears and he choked on concealed laughter. I think he laughed the whole night on our couch that was missing

half its cushions.

One month after the dead bat incident I had a big shiny box waiting for me on my bed. I ripped the paper with my teeth and tore with my claws. I thought of treasures, games, Teddy Ruxpin, He-man action figures, Garbage Pail Kids trading cards, Thundercats, Transformers... I was going to explode if I didn't get the box open! God, why do adults put so much darn tape on presents for kids? I tore the box lid in half getting to my prize. Horror. A red denim skirt. A skirt. I knew it was for me, because the name started with an L, but I hadn't learned anymore of my name. My dad slipped on the hardwood floor running to my screams of terror. Mommy Number Two bought me my first skirt. Poor thing. I feel bad now for the way I reacted with such selfish pain at the thought of wearing a skirt. I wonder if she still remembers that moment...wherever she is.

"Linds?" Jason's voice slashed into my psyche.

"Huh?"

"Really, how is she?"

"Well, I haven't stuffed her in the kiln at my art class if that's what you're asking." God, I love the sound of his gut twisting laughter. I didn't get that one though. I got the kind of laughter you give the crazy lady behind you at the grocery store. The particular brand of crazy that wears a rain coat and boots in ninety degree weather and tells jokes about drowning puppies, that's the type of laughter that met my ear.

"Have you talked to her since the fabulous wedding fight?"

"Oh, you mean the fight where my Maid of Honor got confused about her title in the wedding, and thought she was actually supposed to defend my honor? No. Number Four is still sour about the black eye. I am waiting for the yellowish red color to seep in before I brave the visit. By then, she can cover it with makeup, and I can pretend I don't see it." Ah, there it is, that gut twisting laugh. Love him.

"Shit Linds, I wish I could have been there for that one!"

"Oh yah, that's all I needed at the wedding...another queen."

Black eyes. Mommy Number Three, my third doll,

left when I was twelve because of a black eye. Not because of the ones she gave me, but the because of the one I gave her when I got big enough to hand them out too. Mommy Number Three gave me my first spanking. It was with an antique metal flyswatter. I had to pull down my shorts and panties to receive my spanking. After four hard licks, the fragile swatter broke, infuriating her into action. Luckily, because it was the first time I was ever hit, I screamed so loud that she felt bad, my dad ran in, and I was saved. That night my dad and I ate Oreos and milk. We both choked through tears as he explained why I was spanked. I deserved it. I was riding my bike on the center line of the highway that stretched in front of our house. I heard Mommy Number Three yelling at my dad that night: "That monster's spirit needs to be broken. She is fearless. She ought to be scared of things. Damn it, Zack, she wasn't just riding on the center line with her bike. She had her arms stretched out and her eyes closed!"

Monster. I thought of the book I was learning to read, *Where the Wild Things Are*. I squeezed my eyes tighter and entered Max's world. I hung Mommy Number Three upside down from the trees and let the monsters tickle her toes. I danced in my own fox costume under the full moon with my monster friends, I dove into the water and turned into a mermaid, and then I walked out of the magical water and became a lizard. With my suction cup feet I was able to climb and sneak up on the meanest monster, Mommy Number Three. I laughed when the biggest monster started spanking her with a large black fly the size of a football. "AAAARRRGGGHHHH" I screamed and started to climb the trees, which of course were my curtains. I was just about to pounce on her with my lizard suction cups when my bedroom light was thrown on and glowing anger meet my wide eyes.

It took her years to break down my spirit. Many secret beatings had to occur, but finally I had to be put on anxiety medication. Way to go Doc, fill me up with narcotics. That won't have an affect on me later. My neurologist explained the dizzy spells and spots to me years later as being from the idiot doctor that calmed my nerves with drugs. The idiot doctor said I was the youngest patient he ever knew of to have such attacks, at the gentle age of ten and eleven years old. My stomach was torn with ulcers, I threw up constantly, I couldn't poop, and I stopped speaking freely. Only when spoken to by God. My

dad thought it was only from Mommy Number One's manipulation, he didn't know Mommy Number Three's secret. My dad would sit at my bed at night petting my curls and telling me stories. He dragged me to therapists and specialists and speech therapists, but I was tired. I wanted only him.

After Mommy Number Three was forced out, I had freedom from mothers for about four years. I liked the young funky girlfriends he brought home for a short time. There was a thirty something with red, yellow, and orange hair. We listened to the same music. There was one of my teachers. Thank God for that! I would have failed history that year without their fling. Then there was a scuba diver, and she was the best because she was one of those women that loved the earth and all of God's creatures. She reminded my dad what pot was, and I learned too.

Mommy Number Four came when I was sixteen with the mission of turning me into a lady. A lady. I have always liked the way that word sounds and the images that form in my mind. I think of a small petite woman in a soft silken blush dress with a delicate nose and large eyes surrounded with yielding blond tresses, standing enclosed by men of all ages begging for a glance. The dress just did not fit. It was too late for me to be mutilated into a young southern debutant. I had already been raised by a man and several crazy women that people nervously laughed with in grocery store lines. It was too late, but she never ended her crusade; instead, she was more determined. I was told daily I was too short, my feet turned in when I walked, my green eyes were dull, my boobs and butt were too large, and the tangled mess of curls was too rowdy. I never paid enough attention to other peoples' feelings, I spoke too harshly and too quickly, I smiled too much with too many teeth, I laughed too easily, and I always had paint and charcoal covering my forearms and clothes. I was a mess of a person in her eyes and at every moment I was reminded of it. The more she hated what I was the more I improved on all the faults she accused me of. It became fun. We danced back and forth with compromises until I was sure she would give up. It never happened.

"Hey Lin...you've fallen into yourself again haven't you?"

"Uh-huh. Sorry."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"Nope. I think I am going to look for some Oreos. Want some?"

"I wish! I miss you. I'll call you tomorrow night. Usual time?"

"Sounds good. Love you."

I hung up and began my thirty minute search for Oreos and a diet soda. My lips seemed to pout with a mind of their own as mine wandered on. Whether I am hunting for a soda or stalking a stem of grapes in the bottom of the fruit basket it always seems to take me at least thirty minutes in the kitchen. I have to open and close the refrigerator door three times, then I move to the pantry and search with my fingertips, and finally I open and close the freezer three times. My first choice just isn't right, so I move onto the second, and then my third choice and the choices continue to stack on top of one another until I decide I wasn't hungry in the first place. I finally found the Christmas tin filled with Oreos on the top shelf of the pantry. As I ran my fingers over the rough painted tin lid, I thought of the woman that gave it to me. I bet she actually spent time finding the right one instead of giving me one someone else had filled for her. I imagined her picking up several dozen different tins until she found the perfect one. I know she did, because it was covered with my favorite icon of winter: snowmen. I thought of her wrinkling her eyes in the corners without even realizing the skin's slow movement towards her brow. I saw her straight blond hair braided out of her face and her easy pink lips spread thin as she thought of me. I am sure that is how the tin came to me.

Of all these women that have molded me, this one woman, the chooser of the Snowman Tin, stands out as the exception. I won't mold her arms out of plastic or attach a distant smile. I won't stamp a number on her forehead and see only that number when I see her. I will see her. Her name is Debbie and she belongs to my husband. She tells me often that she loves me in my jeans, T-shirts, sneakers, and baseball caps. She loves my freckles, curls, laugh, and is never irritated by my honesty. She secretly laughs at my horrible humor and shakes her head at my wandering mind. She often talks about me as if I am not there, but then turns and smiles in my direction and says, "That's my Lindsey." I am sure I could do anything horrible or good and she would smile and repeat "That's my Lindsey."

I would love to tell you that this woman was the mother I always dreamed of having. The one that loved me for being different and never placed a blame on my shoulders that I could not brush off. I would love to tell myself this, to tell her this, but I can't. It isn't true. I wanted one of my own. I wanted the one I had. I wanted Mommy Number One to love me, teach me, show me, mold me, but she couldn't and can't still. I wonder if I had had a mother of my own if I would wear makeup, fix my hair, wear skirts and dresses, match my clothes better, tell false truths to save feelings, have girlfriends, and ultimately be a better girl.

I don't know what I would have been, but I do know what I am. I am my dad. I see me in his stubbornness and his easy truths. Some nights my dad echoes apologies over Oreos and milk and when his forehead wrinkles towards the center, and his eyes shine, I see that he suffers for these mothers. On these Oreo nights he does not need to speak because we share without words and endure our own thoughts. I start our silent dance by sliding an Oreo towards his fingers as he turns his gaze out a window that is not there.

"Hey...Dad. What do you think about all the new types of Oreos they have come out with? I want to try the mint ones, but I don't want to buy a whole bag because I know I am not gonna like 'em. What one would you try? Dad? Hello?"

"Well, Lindsey, at least I have given you something to write about." His eyes wrinkled in my direction as he slid the paper napkin with the tower of Oreos towards his milk. "I think I would like the white chocolate covered Oreos. Easy on the milk twerp! You're allergic to it. You would think you would learn not to drink it. Seeing how you are doubled over in pain an hour later."

I shrugged towards the ceiling and allowed half of my mouth to mimic my wrinkled eyes: "It's worth it."

For My Father

Jessica Martinez

That morning
My sister dressed our mother.
She chose cream and taupe-
Carried the clothes
To the funeral home
Alone
I was told-
(I could not do it.)
Instead, I wondered
If they really
Cut the clothes
Up the back.
I imagined them
Washing our mother's body.
She'd have hated it-
She was so private-
So private that
We would let
Nine Months
Pass before we cleaned
Out her dresser, her drawers,
Her closet.
So private
That she folded each one of us
Into the five cubby holes
Of her heart-
Separately,
Inside her-
There was no room
For my father.

The Death of the Piano

Ditrie Sanchez

No. 1

tap.
i pull the lever
tap.
and then i wonder
tap.
what that blue stain
tap.
came from on her shoe
tap.
it might be some
tap.
long forgotten gumball
tap.
she stepped in
tap.
without even realizing
tap.
and now she has to
tap.
get the gooey thing
tap.
all over me
tap.
and why
tap.
does she
tap.
always
tap.
get so
tap.
excited
tap.
when all i need
tap.
is a bit more
tap.
space between measures
tap.

my favorite part of being
tap.
the stretching of time
tap.
that comes at the end.
there-
she's done.

No. 2

settled moments
in between beatings
i watch as the others are struck
with cruel hammers
from underneath-
right in the belly
and they don't shout
but quaver and rejoice
they are tortured
in harmony
C!
i can sing with them
C!
my abuser is wrathful
C!
the tide will pass
c!
the pounding is not too hard
C!!
the thrashing is blinding
c.
"It is finished."

No.3

i sit in a dusty hall
 where a century wrongs me
 by leaving me desolate.

the halls once throbbed
 with the mechanics of my substance.

i was music once.
 at the time i didn't appreciate
 the pounding of ignorant children-
 the futile tinkering of adults with wooden ears.

now i would pluck out all my strings
 to suffer the inconvenience of inexperienced hands.

but gone are the days where knowing fingertips
 brushed my keys as to lover's lips
 pulling the delicate sounds
 that intoxicate the puritanical soul.

here is the reprimand
 for the haughtiness of my youth:
 that i should be a piece of furniture
 sitting idly by while around me
 the music taunts-
 as a painting calls to the eyes of the blind...

unwanted-
 i wait in my corner,
 ever a silent penitent
 until the Judgement Day.

Horton

Matthew Adams

Old Horton stays in the double wide,
watching sports with the smoke he hides.
Sometimes he comes out for a golf cart ride,
down to old Chechessee for the coming tide.

Old Horton looks up into the sky,
sees in heaven Crazy Mary and so he sighs.
Horton wants nothin' more when he dies,
just huntin' and fishin' without suits and ties.

Old Horton then was touched by an itch.
Thought of the things he could do being a crazy wretch.
So he grabbed his whisky and his boat he unhitched,
and took the truck to Charleston just before lunch.

Old Horton took to the city in all his splendor.
Blue jeans, boots, camouflage shirt, and orange
suspenders.
Mosied to the Market, ate at Henry's
looked for a girl for his pocket, and kicked for dreaming.

Old Horton made his way to Charleston Place,
looked for a room but would not pay the price.
Lady told him, snubbed him, laughed in his face.
She wasn't southern, her attitude a disgrace.

Horton, touched and feeling blue,
took his money and watched a man shine his shoe.
Without a lot of money the metro is not for you,
just another place where a man can lose.

Old Horton jumped in the truck and drove home,
4-cylinder GMC for a man with a frown.
No-more now does Horton city roam,
sits watchin' TV, smokin' in his doublewide home.

Old Horton a man grumpier n' hell.
Pop up chair, Lazyboy made of felt.
The laughing box, images of manipulative spells.
Still lowcountry cooking keeping his sense of smell.

Operation "Let's Ride"

Christi Healan

I turned my key and opened the door and there he was sitting in the recliner smoking a cigarette, the usual annoying clamor of the television absent. I immediately noticed his fatigues and boots making up the mound in the middle of the floor. "What are those doing out here?" I asked. "I was wearing them earlier." "For what?" I asked, surprised. "I went for a walk. Is that *okay*." It was August and he had been out of the Army for 3 months, so I thought it a bit strange. "So how long were you out walking?" "About an hour... I think there was an Iraqi following me."

I met Micah last February right around the time my divorce was final. He was everything my ex-husband was not. He was tall. This was important because I had just spent the last six years kissing a man that was nearly two inches shorter than me. I had grown quite accustomed to wearing flat shoes. Micah was a towering 6'4 and huge; I can hide my own large frame behind his vast back and shoulders. He had read nearly as many books as I have, which meant intellectual and stimulating conversations, opposed to the countless times I had to explain the meaning behind *Adaptations*, or what lethargic meant, or how to spell e-c-o-n-o-m-y, for example. He was awesomely free-spirited, and when asked what he felt like doing he simply replied: "Whatever you want, I'm down to ride."

Micah thought I was funny, and I thought he had great teeth. He encompassed everything that was inherently male that I had felt deprived of during my previous relationships. He was strong and strong-minded, not afraid to stand up to me or to anyone else for that matter, and within that realm I felt completely safe. He was a soldier. He was an Army of One. He had spent seven months in Iraq during the beginning of the War in a Bradley tank, he had swam in the Euphrates River, he had played soccer with little Iraqi boys before Iraq's soccer team made it to the Olympics. He also survived a six-hour mission that turned into a two-day ambush, remained at the front lines of a combat zone for six months, witnessed burning and decaying bodies in the streets accompanied by the smell of urine, feces, and decaying flesh. Dark things and dark secrets behind those lovely brown eyes and behind the lovely white smile were about to boil over the surface and spew out of the kettle onto the stove and down the side of the oven to dribble on the floor. If only someone had been watching the pot.

He moved in with me in May, after he got out. The next two months were spent adapting to each other's cleanliness, or his lack thereof, his search for a job, and

several trips to the emergency room for his sharp chest pains and unexplained stomach cramps. By August he had been through three jobs, the longest lasting just a month. One night in July stands out in my memory... it was dark in the bedroom; I was pulled from sleep by his right hand clasped tightly around my wrist and his left around my right ankle. He was tugging on me. I tried to writhe my limbs free from his grip but he held on tighter. "A female officer is on the way to process you. We can't deal with female prisoners." His voice sounded dull and forced. I shouted his name, "MICAH! Wake up!" He tugged on my arm and yelled "Stay where you are!" I pulled myself free, shouting at him and shaking his shoulder to wake him up. He rolled over and hissed at me: "I'M TRYING TO SLEEP!!!"

By mid August I was starting a new semester at college and desperately awaited the arrival of my financial aid check. Micah hadn't held a steady job since he moved in and all the weight of paying the bills and making sure we had food rested on my shoulders. I was broke, swimming in new debt and starting to feel helpless and frustrated. Opening my credit card statements was a thing I abhorred, and I constantly berated him for leaving on the occasional light or spending too long in the shower: "You're wasting water! You are costing me money I don't have!" "Why don't you get a damn job and buy your own fucking cigarettes!" It took everything and then some that I made at my restaurant job to get by, but I was determined to go to school and just work when I could. I didn't quit school when my ex-husband told me he'd gotten another woman pregnant. I didn't quit school when I finally left the marriage nearly two years after that and my Dad had a quadruple bypass three weeks later. I thought I could work full time and still make it at college. I was unprepared for the challenge.

In late August, Micah finally went to the V.A. clinic in search of reasons for his chest and stomach pain not to mention the increasing inches around his middle. He was given Clonopin and Prozac for his anxiety and was told that panic attacks were the reason for his unexplained pain and sudden racing heartbeat. It was an unfortunate misdiagnosis.

I don't know how it escalated to that point. The events of that September day leading up to that hour were lost in the adrenaline running in my blood, the angry stabs of my tongue, and the sudden overwhelming, fearful realization that what he was doing wasn't on purpose. We had been arguing. Shouting. Hurling accusations and obscenities of the kind that over the last few months had gotten worse and worse. I left the room to retreat to my angry tears. I decided I needed a cigarette. When I came back into the living room, he was sitting on the floor in his underwear in front of the coffee table with all his pills scattered about on the table, the empty bottles thrown to the side. He was shoveling them in his mouth. "WHAT

ARE YOU DOING!" I shouted. I completely ignored his muffled answer. I lunged for the pills, grabbing a handful and spilling the rest on the floor. He immediately tried to wrestle them from my hand, trying to pry my vulnerable thumb from my fingers while I shouted at him to STOP! STOP! STOP! His impact pushed me to my back on the floor and for a moment I watched his sorrowful and defiant eyes looking down desperately at my hands, his mind figuring the best strategy to defeat my fists and take the pills from me. He stopped and stingily grabbed at the pills on the floor and got up and ran down the hall to the guest bathroom, locking the door behind him.

When the paramedics and police arrived, he sat defiantly tearful on the couch, his arms folded across his chest. I was chain smoking, trying to calm my shaking hands and forced breathing. The five officers surrounded him in the living room, asking him to go easily. When they saw the big angry giant of a man refusing to let the paramedics in the house, they predicted an altercation, followed by an arrest. "You guys don't scare me! I'm a combat veteran! I'm certified in hand-to-hand combat! I can take all of you! You better respect me! Don't you know I've killed people?!" "Micah", I said, "You are going either way. If you resist this you'll just go to jail after they take you to the hospital"

He was taken to a private mental health hospital in Brunswick. He was there for two weeks. I made the hour-long drive ten of those fourteen days to see him. The first time I saw him in his room, he was sitting up Indian-style by the head of his bed, intensely fragile, with tears that sprung from his eyes when he saw me walk in. The strong, confident man I had fell in love with had been replaced by a shell of his former self. It was still Micah on the outside, but he was a stranger. I had never met this Micah. I was afraid, and I hurt for him. I knew then that he wasn't lying around the house unmotivated to find work, or isolating himself from everyone and picking fights with me, accusing me of cheating or flying off the handle over the smallest detail just to be an asshole. It was Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and it had taken over his mind and his body. The Clonopin and Prozac given to him by the V.A. made him manic. He was fragile, damaged, and needed me more than ever. I was no longer angry. I no longer felt taken advantage of. I wrapped my arms around him and he nuzzled his face in the curve of my neck. We rocked back and forth on his bed, his tears burning hot on my skin, my lips whispering promises in his ear.

He was prescribed a cocktail of five different psychotic drugs... one for this, one for that. He was a zombie. He finally found a job working part time. He was supposed to follow up with a different V.A. doctor. I dropped two of the four classes I was taking because I overspent my sick days driving to Brunswick trying to make the visiting hours. I went to the library and checked out every book I

could find about PTSD, gorging myself with the stories and treatments of other veterans who had endured the illness and how they coped. There was nothing written about how their families coped. I spent a lot of time watching him, asking if he was okay, and worrying if he was going to be like this for the rest of his life, and if I could deal with that.

On a Friday night in late September I got a call at work. "I love you," his sad voice told me. "Hey, what's up? I'm kind of busy." "I just wanted to tell you that I loved you." Immediately, I felt my stomach threaten to jump out of my mouth, felt the butterflies screaming vengefully.

"What's going on Micah?" and there was only silence. "I'm coming home!" I told him. "No! Don't come here!" he said with authority. I hung up the phone, searching frantically for my boss. I told her I had to go right away and I was sorry on my way out of the door. I drove the ten minutes home, threw open the door and found him once again in the living room, crying, his opened bottles on the island and his pills out in front of him on the table. I hurried towards him, and then I saw the knife in his hands.

"Micah, what are you doing?" I said in a tender fury. "Christi, I can't take this. I just want to stop it all." I knelt down in front of him and in a soft voice I made my plea: "Honey, if the meds aren't working, then we'll go back to the doctor and tell him. You'll go to some counseling, you can join a support group.... you are going to get through this, it will just take some time, that book said it could take *months*...I love you... *Please!* I'm going to marry you and you are going to father my children..." It was another night spent in the emergency room, followed by Micah spending three days at another mental health facility where I could only see him thirty minutes a day in a supervised visit.

By the end of October I was growing impatient. I was struggling in my two classes, struggling at work, worried about leaving him alone, and if he would find the pills that I had taken great pains to hide from him. I didn't have any money. I went through my school money within a month and a half. We couldn't go out, have dinner, rent a movie... nothing extra. We were confined to the house. At least his boss was gracious enough to understand that he was having difficulties, and they seemed very proud and somewhat self-righteous about the fact that they were supporting someone who had served their country. No, really...I'm thankful they held his job for him, although the meager paycheck he brought home barely covered gas and cigarette money, and his hours were being cut. He wasn't taking his meds the way he was supposed to, he was still confrontational and edgy, slurring his speech at times and non-respondent at others. The worst came when he began to use the illness as a crutch and used it to get out of responsibility or to get his way: he couldn't get up for work because his medication made him too drowsy in the morning, or he couldn't drive anywhere because of his medication. I began to think he didn't want to get better.

"The neighbors are laughing at me," he said angrily one night in late October. "No, they aren't. What are you talking about?" We had argued all day over little minute insignificant things, just to argue, because it became easy to argue with him and keep my defenses up. "They are laughing at me just like you are. They think I'm crazy." I smirked back at him, "Well, what are you gonna do about it?" He got up out of the chair, his eyes distant, and walked toward the front door pausing to tell me over his shoulder as he walked outside: "I'm going over there to kill them." He made it to their bottom step before I reached the gate of our fenced-in yard, yelling at him to get his ass back in the house or I was going to call the police.

I learned to recognize Micah's episodes by his sudden erratic behavior, his jumpiness, the flitting back and forth of his eyes. A sudden noise, a car horn, someone yelling out unexpectedly made him suck in a short breath and gasp in fear. The flashing headlights of an oncoming car or a flashlight made him have a flashback of the cars in Iraq flashing their lights in signal of an ambush. The sound of Frenchie, my Siamese cat, jumping from the counter to the floor drew him from slumber and sent him in search of "enemies" throughout the house. Commando-style, he armed himself with a knife because I took the shotgun I inherited from my ex to my dad's house and away from his searching hands. He would peek around the corners of doors, bending low and stabbing at the air of a darkened room before he entered. When we were out in public he thought people were talking about him, laughing at him. He accused me of seeing my ex-husband behind his back... fat chance. I learned to adapt to his mood swings and tiptoe around him while at the same time I became more aggressive. I had to.

"I think I need to go to the V.A. clinic tomorrow and talk to someone. I'm not getting better. The meds aren't working." I supported that completely and I met him there after I got out of class the next day. I arrived in time to see him sitting in a small gray chair at the end of the hall by the side exit. As I approached, he looked up and found my eyes, his own streaming hot defeat down his face. "They're sending me to Charleston," he told me with trepidation. The V.A. Hospital was in Charleston, and they were sending him on the two-hour ride in an ambulance. They were leaving in ten minutes. He had nothing to take with him, no change of underwear, no toothbrush, and no extra socks... nothing. No notice. I waved at him from the parking lot as I watched his shell ride away.

He was in the mental health wing on the third floor for two weeks. His meds were switched around and around again. I went to see him four times. I drove the two hours, having lost myself sixty miles too far north the first time, to visit with him for one hour and then driving the two hours back to my empty house, back to Frenchie and my two dogs, back to sit on my couch and look at the

lonely recliner where Micah always sat. I hoped that this was the last time.

By early November, Micah had been back from Charleston for two weeks. He never went back to his job. He was embarrassed at having taken so much time off because of the illness and couldn't face his boss. But he started to smile. He started looking for another job. He started talking about going to school. I was growing hopeful despite my gut. The two weeks were short lived.

On a Thursday night in mid November we argued heatedly about this and that and everything, and with every verbal lashing we tossed at one another the situation escalated. I knew it was growing out of control, but I was overcome with fury and rage. He took the bottle of pills and ripped open the cap and threw 5 pills in his mouth. "Do you want me to keep going? I'll do it!" "GO AHEAD!" I screamed at him. He took two more. "Aren't you going to call 911? Go ahead and call em," he hissed. He went to the kitchen and pulled a knife from the drawer and brandished it in the air, "I'll fucking slice my wrist!" I screamed at him: "Well when I see some fucking blood spewing, maybe then I'll call 911!! Go ahead and just do it already!"

I had supported Micah for six months, since he moved in with me. I took care of everything. I was the one working my ass off so we had lights to turn on, hot water to bathe in, food to eat, a phone to reach out and touch someone, gas for both cars to get around in. I was about to fail both the classes that I missed at least once a week because I was too tired to get my ass out of bed and go, much less keep up with the assignments. I did most all of the laundry, the cooking, all the shopping, the vacuuming, the mopping, I cleaned up his vomit when his stomach rejected his medication... and I was tired.

"Call your uncle and tell him to buy you a bus ticket, I want you out of here," I didn't need the hassle. I had already proved to myself that I could make it on my own, no matter how drastically tight the times were. It would be easier if the only person I had to support was myself, "You don't care about getting better, you wanna use this illness as an excuse to sit around and let someone else take care of you and I won't do it anymore. You will NOT talk to me like I'm a fucking dog or say FUCK YOU to me after everything I've done for you. This is my fucking house, and everything in it is mine and I deserve better than this bullshit!!!" He pled with me for another chance and made the usual promises that he would change, but I knew that if I gave in, if I backed down, then he would know he could do or say whatever he wanted. I drove him to the bus station the next morning at five thirty, fighting with myself the whole way.

It must have been obvious from my red-rimmed eyes and tear-stained face, to the strangely intimidating onlookers at the bus station, that we had been fighting. They stared at us from the time we walked through the

doors to the ticket counter, and feeling their eyes on us, back outside. We came upon a homeless man just outside the entrance who rebutted us until Micah gave him all of his change on the way back to my truck. There he was with nothing but the clothes on his back and what he could stuff into his duffle bag, giving the homeless man every cent he had left to his name. We said goodbye in the parking lot; me in the warm truck with the window rolled down and Micah outside the door telling me he understood why I was making him leave, and that it was okay.

It was a glorious weekend of peace. He called me Sunday afternoon to tell me he was coming back the next day: "I'm coming home tomorrow." "No, your not," I told him. I needed more time to be alone, to cope and come to terms with what it was that I wanted, and I still didn't know what that was. "Uncle Terry says I have to leave, he already bought me a ticket back". He had nowhere to go. His uncle refused to deal with his episodic aggressive behavior, denying that Micah really had PTSD, and purposefully instigated confrontations with him. The rest of his family is in Washington, and told him he had to deal with his own problems and that they wouldn't finance his trip back home to them. They knew better than anyone that Micah still had some fight left in him, it was what they called "tough love."

So, I went to pick him up from the bus station, only three days after I left him there. It was seven in the morning, damn cold, and he was outside the front entrance smoking a cigarette, wearing a pair of jean shorts and a pullover fleece. He came back with everything he took with him except four major items: the pills for depression, the pills for anxiety, the pills for sleep, and the pills for mood (or psychotic behavior). Micah's predisposition for absent-mindedness served as an unexpected blessing in those moments in his uncle's house when he hastily packed his Army duffle bag to catch the bus back home. His uncle refused to send his medication to him because he wasn't going to pay for the shipping cost. After a few weeks of withdrawals, instead of fumbling about in a drug-induced haze, Micah began to walk, speak, and think with a clear head. His episodes all but ceased, only allowing for the occasional fitful sleep that brings images of a war he survived over a year ago now, images and memories I can never know.

He went out every day to look for a job, and found one within three weeks of being back. He received his first check just in time for the holidays. He likes his job and now looks forward to going to work and being able to give me money to keep us warm and fed. He'll be starting his own college career in a few months. There are no more angry fights and screaming. No more accusations or anxiety. No more pills. He came home to me a changed man, determined to defeat the thing that he had allowed to conquer him when a war couldn't. It took some patience,

but now he laughs every day. He greets me with a smile and dinner ready after a long night at work. He regained the confidence and ambition that radiated from him when we first met. This is the Micah I knew was inside the shell.

February brought with it the sudden passing of a year since Micah stumbled into my life across a dim and smoky dance floor. Our anniversary was on a Sunday. The Friday night before, I was working when he came to see me an hour before I got off. He came in the front door with a large vase of roses, carnations, gladiolas, daisies and a smile. He greeted my smile by telling me that was only the beginning. He told me he had talked with his family in Washington and that they were sending us an anniversary gift by UPS and to make sure I was going to be home between 2-3 while he was at work the next day. I slept until one and then pulled myself out of bed to shower and get ready for another long night at work. At 3:17 I heard a knock at the door. I peeked out of the diamond-shaped window to see a woman waiting with another vase of flowers for me. I thought 'Aww, they sent us flowers... that's nice.' I thanked the woman, closed the door and pulled open the card. It said: "Surprise! I love you, Micah." So I went to work with a smile plastered to my face. Around 5:00 I was waiting for business to pick up, lounging against a counter sipping on Mr. Pibb when the Host called my name. The same woman from earlier was there with another huge vase of flowers... I was stupefied. The card said: "The next year will be sweet. Let's ride." On Sunday he blindfolded me and drove me downtown to a cozy little restaurant that I'd wanted to go to for years and never got around to it, the whole time asking me "Are you peeking?" and "Do you know where you are?" I smiled so much that day that my cheeks hurt and my teeth and gums grew dry.

The experiences of war didn't take Micah's body, but it ravaged his mind after the sand was washed away. He became the kind of casualty that they don't report on the news, a silent casualty of PTSD. He explored the depths of his own sorrow and knew regret unlike any most people experience. I can never know what it is like to survive seven months of fighting in a hostile desert, what it is like to be constantly on guard, to know I must kill or be killed, to see bodies lying in the streets of a city, or what it's like to live with the kind of remorse that comes with taking another life. But I know what living with the aftermath is like. It was a lesson resisted, hard learned, and rewarded. I know that whatever future lessons are in store for us, I'm down to ride. I was watching *Seabiscuit* the other night on HBO, and I couldn't stop myself from crying at something the owner of Seabiscuit said to the horse's trainer about their jockey who was blind in one eye: "You don't throw a body away just because he's banged up a little."

Visitor

Katherine Foote

I hear him, down the hallway, shutting the door,
water running.

I'm in my bed, listening.

Female Me

Uncontrollably acute

Patiently impatient.

My hair brushes my shoulders, my breath melts
quietly in waiting.

Down the hall, he's brushing his teeth, oblivious
to the girl in the dark.

Or maybe he does know

his power like

the moon's pull on the tides

and that the water flooding the marshes

swells and sifts—

the current runs strong

and drowns itself

then empties out into the ocean with one huge
sigh—

He spits out his toothpaste.

The water snaps off.

Ode to the Wells

Matthew Adams

From Marshland Road,
 Right past the oak grove.
You can drive down a little way,
 Through fields and cows and hay,
To Old Spanish Wells a different kind of state
 People sippin' on tea eatin' sundried dates.

But down in the Wells
 Time ain't the same.
People wastin' life
 On hate and shame.
Always thinkin' of the past,
 About the other man's whiplash.
Never trying to forget
 Or let the present represent.

From Grandmama's cookin'
 To a rainy days lighting.
To the marsh and the seas,
 And the weeping willows leaves.
Children are grown with their minds open.
 Time will kill elders prejudice notions.
But people will come carpetbaggin',
 Destroying the swamps New York creating.
But nothing will change the smell of bacon,
 Early mornin' grits and southern fried chicken.

Give 'em all time to decide,
If another man will change the tide.
Building all the city streets,
At their southern feet.
That'll bring all southern folk together.
Second southern age, brother for brother.

From a dusty kitchen window
 With old bottles to show.
In a rusty clawed tub
 Where the daisies are grown.
A boy so young,
 Barefooted, oh jump the dunge.
Growin', learnin', beatin' away time.
 Tryin' to make plans,

While trying to make a dime.

In a Carolina Wilderness,
 Small towns and quietness.
 Soon to be taken all away
 By big city folk, who can't stand to live day to day
 In the smog of their own concrete,
 Fightin' traffic, the flies, the smoldering heat.

So a carpetbagger says:
 "Let's bring the fam,
 To South Carolina's beautiful land.
 Rip up all the trees
 kill the locals like fleas.
 They'll take our big city cash,
 While we ruin and turn their state to trash."

Concrete, feel the heat,
 Can't walk with barefeet.

From a tall building window a man thinks back,
 About runnin' through the woods following a deer
 track.
 Wind in his face and his brother's a laughin.'
 A time so still, while the machine is in motion.

Lunch Break

Autumn Flynn

Doug and Walter ate at dusty booth listening to the usual clanking dishes and tinny country music. Flakes of dried clay peeled off their work boots and dusted the floor underneath the table. It was Lorraine's every day at lunch and they always came back to the job site smelling like cigarettes and fry oil. Walter refused to think about returning to work as he clumsily massaged his searing back.

"Could you pass the salt?"

Lorraine's fries were always soggy and bland. They were irresistibly bad. Walter needed some salt to make them go down easier. Three and a half shakes did it every time.

"Doug. Pass the salt would you?"

Doug emerged from his dripping cheeseburger. He stared at Walter as he gnawed on a wad of burger.

"Why can't you get it?"

Walter blinked. The dented salt shaker touched Doug's juicy plate.

"Why? Because it's rude, that's why."

Doug gulped his mouthful. "How is it rude?"

Walter's hands fell on the sticky table. "Because I'd have to reach over your plate to get it."

"Oh, I wouldn't mind." Doug took another healthy bite of his burger.

Walter snagged the greasy baseball cap off his head and scratched his thinning hair. The smell of fish made his throat tighten. Lorraine was making a tuna melt. He conjured a chuckle.

"Come on now, man. Just pass me that salt."

Doug set the burger on his plate and scanned Walter. "What do you need salt for anyway?"

"Well, for the fries of course. Just toss it over here please." Walter's left knee shook up and down. Doug reached his hairy arm across the table and plucked a fry from Walter's plate. He shoved it into his mouth and chewed. Walter shook his head slowly.

"These fries don't need salt."

Walter sputtered. "What'd you do that for?"

Doug picked up his burger and shrugged. "If I can reach across the table for a fry, you can reach across the table for the salt."

Walter glanced at the salt shaker. The steam from his fries had departed minutes ago. The tips of his fingers tingled. He glanced at Doug smacking his lunch. Walter sat still.

"You know, my back is really killing me today."
Doug wiped his stubbled chin with a napkin and a tomato seed clung to his sideburn. "Yeah? Maybe you should stretch it. Lean over here and get your own salt."

Viking Funeral

Bonnie Rae Terrell

Inspector Aberdine stretched a hand toward his coffee (for which he felt a desperate need), but found himself confronting the brutal reality that if he wanted a sip of the precious sanity-saving beverage, he would have to get up and pour himself another cup. He weighed the pros and cons, decided that he did not have the stamina to survive his current interview on the few sad little grounds floating about in the cold brown puddle of coffee residue that barely covered the bottom of his paper cup, and prepared to pour a fresh helping. He pushed his body up and was halfway to standing before he looked over at the coffee pot and realized it was empty. He sighed and deflated back into his creaking, squeaking wooden chair.

The Inspector glared disconsolately at the report and the pictures sitting in front of him on his desk. He switched his gaze to the small, slim, blonde woman sitting across from him in a chair that Inspector Aberdine felt certain must be a great deal more comfortable than his own. She smiled back at him in a benign, child-like way that disconcerted Aberdine into dropping his glare and simply looking disconsolate.

He heaved another deep sigh, shuffled the papers in an authoritative and officious manner (well, he saw no harm in at least *trying* to act like any of this made sense), settled his hands in a dignified position over his slightly rounded early-forties paunch, cleared his throat, and fixed the petit blonde with a look that clearly said, "Let's get down to business."

"Alright, Miss Warren, let's get down to business." Aberdine bent forward and tapped the report with his index finger in a very decisive manner. Miss Warren smiled kindly back at him and blinked her blue eyes. He cleared his throat. "Now, to be honest, I find it very difficult to believe what I've read here," he confessed in a tone meant to clearly demonstrate that he was not befuddled in the least, merely skeptical. "It says, ah, that you, um, drove to the top of the bridge with your recently deceased grandfather's body in the bed of your truck. You then released him on a tricycle going northbound into south-

bound traffic. After setting him on fire." The Inspector stopped, shooting the woman an expectant look. He waited for some sign of disbelief, of outrage, he waited for shouted indignation and denial.

Miss Warren smiled broadly and nodded her head.

"Yes, yes that's right," she piped in a small, pleasant voice.

Had the desk not been supporting his weight, Aberdine would likely have slid straight out of his chair and disintegrated through the cracks of the floorboards. Instead, he glared again at the papers in front of him (mentally cursing them for not being in error) while sneaking several forlorn glances at the empty coffee-pot. Maybe it would be worth the effort to brew another after all.

"Would you like some more coffee, Inspector? I'll fix it for you," chimed Miss Warren. Aberdine snapped his head back up and forced himself to affect an air of casual not-addicted-to-caffeine unconcern.

"Oh, uh, only if you'd like some. Doesn't matter to me." He shrugged his shoulders and pretended to smile. Miss Warren smiled back with a sincerity that made him feel like a cheap fraud before moving easily out of her chair and over to the coffee-maker. She calmly emptied a leftover half-inch of tasteless brown liquid into the soil of Aberdine's one and only office plant and patted its droopy leaves sympathetically.

Since she was turned away, the Inspector permitted himself to blink hard and shake his head once. He wasn't sure if he did it because he felt so frustrated or because this happily deranged woman bewildered him so completely, but he was sure he had just given himself a headache by doing it.

"Why, Miss Warren?" Aberdine asked as she glided to the trash can and disposed of the old, soggy coffee grounds.

"Hm?" She looked at him quizzically. The expression on her face reminded Aberdine of a kitten he had once had to shoo from sleeping in the bathroom sink at his grandmother's house.

"Why," he repeated while opening the drawer in which he kept his can of ground coffee, "did you set fire to your dead grandfather?"

"And send him pedaling off into traffic?" she finished for him. The Inspector nodded. "Well," Miss Warren continued, taking the proffered can and making her way

back across the room, "it was what he wanted." She nonchalantly scooped the black grounds into the coffee-maker while Aberdine gaped.

"What do you mean it's what he wanted?"

She paid him no attention. Merely hummed a chirpy tune as she walked to her bag, removed a bottle of water, and poured it into the coffee-maker, which then proceeded to bubble and hiss cheerfully, filling the room with the familiar caffeine-laden aroma of freshly brewed java. It was ambrosia to Aberdine's senses, but business *had* to come first and he single-mindedly resumed his line of questioning.

"What kind of man *wants* to be burnt up and hurled into traffic after he's dead?"

Miss Warren had reclaimed the seat across from him. She met his skeptical eyes, the corners of her pink lips turned up slightly, then swept her hands through the air between them in an all-encompassing gesture.

"My grandpa," she said.

Oh sure, *that* explained everything!

Inspector Aberdine was not accustomed to being utterly perplexed for excessive periods of time, and it was beginning to wear on him. Frankly he found it painful. He said, "I'm afraid I still don't understand," with a definite edge to his voice. Miss Warren cocked her head, puzzled over his annoyance. She sat quietly for a moment, with her pale eyebrows furrowed in concentration.

"Well, Inspector... I suppose I shall just have to try and explain Grandpa to you." Aberdine snorted. Still, he settled himself as comfortably as was possible into his creaky wooden chair and nodded to indicate he was ready to listen.

However, Miss Warren first took the time to leave her chair and head back over to the coffee-maker. She poured its dark, delightful brew into a paper cup from the stack Aberdine kept next to the pot. He watched her back and it struck him how much she resembled the large-eyed, delicate-featured porcelain dolls his grandmother used to collect (the profit he'd made from auctioning off the useless collectibles after the old woman's death padded his savings account nicely). The most noticeable difference being that instead of curls, Miss Warren's hair looked more like yellow dandelion fluff that someone had lightly puffed onto her head. She fell just short enough of doll-ish to make Aberdine find her, well, mildly attractive. He briefly studied

one picture of the post-mortem cyclist, taken long ago while he'd been among the living. The old Warren didn't have much in common with his granddaughter, but he had given her the bright eyes, the small face, and the slight build; all of which conjured in the mind an image of a curious finch. He had also passed down the sincerity in his smile, though not, fortunately, the bushy mustache that sprouted above it.

Miss Warren returned with a cup of steaming black coffee. She placed it on Aberdine's desk, dropped his empty cup into the trash can, then gracefully lowered herself into her seat.

"I thought you were having some too," the Inspector said while gratefully lifting the warm cup to his mouth.

"I changed my mind."

Aberdine peeked at her over the white paper rim. She was not quite smiling for once, but she still wore her customary sweet and guileless expression. He felt very foolish. But when he took that first blissful sip, he decided it didn't really matter. Ah, sweet caffeine...

"Now: Grandpa." Miss Warren began. "I guess I should start from what you already know and work back from there. Grandpa always said that he wanted a Viking funeral; you know, to be set off onto the water with his boat on fire and his body tied to the mast. That was his plan, actually."

The painful suspicion that none of this was going to turn out as logically as he wanted gripped Aberdine, forcing him to carefully set down his coffee cup. Miss Warren continued without taking notice.

"But Grandpa had to come up with something else after an oil tanker ran over his boat and shattered it to pieces."

"And just why was your grandfather sailing in shipping lanes very, very far from port?"

"Oh, it wasn't Grandpa. It was the six felons who stole his boat. They were going to run away to Cuba. Someone later told me that bits of them washed up on the shore there."

Oh no. One cup of coffee wasn't going to be enough.

"Anyway, that didn't phase Grandpa. He just changed his plans a bit and started all over again. He didn't want to take anything from my inheritance, so he couldn't afford to buy a new boat. Did I mention Grandpa had a really fantastic sense of humor? Well, fantastic

might not be the word. He was British, so he had a British sense of humor. But I always thought he was funny."

Oh ho! *This* Aberdine could grasp. The mention of British humor instantly accounted for quite a lot. He sipped his coffee.

"Grandpa decided he would go on a tricycle. A purple one with yellow flames painted on it and white wheels. He specially designed it and ordered the parts made for his size and assembled it all on his own. It gave him something to do for the last three years of his life. He was one-hundred-and-four years old, you know."

"Yes, that was in the paperwork. Excuse me if this is a silly question, but... why a tricycle?"

Miss Warren tilted her head as if she couldn't believe Aberdine didn't see the logic. "Why, because it has three wheels and won't tip over, of course," she informed him.

"Oh... yes, I see. Smart man."

"Mm-hm," she nodded her head, smiling fondly. "Grandpa told me all about it and how he wanted to be sent off on the bridge and everything. We even had a few practice runs in the driveway before he died, but we used toothpicks instead of matches and no kerosene."

Aberdine's (by now overextended) credulity was snapping and popping and doing cartwheels across his brain. Practice runs? *Practice runs?! Who practices for their funeral?* Well, granted, if it involves traffic and combustible chemicals, maybe some practice would be advisable. Oh no. Why was he trying to put a logical spin on this crazy old man and his lunatic descendent? He needed to get back in touch with reality. He needed to force *her* into contact with reality.

"Wait, wait!" Aberdine exclaimed, thrusting his left hand forward with the same desperate motion one might see an amateur baseball player use in a vain attempt to block the concussing momentum of an unexpected ball split seconds before it impacts his cranium. Miss Warren obligingly fell silent. The Inspector deposited his reeling head into his hands, which in turn shared the weight with his elbows, which were splayed on either side of the coffee cup into which Aberdine stared intently. He breathed in and out slowly, rippling his own brownish-black reflection and looking somewhat like a recovering crack addict. He squinted his eyes shut, took one last breath, then straightened up to face the woman whose brains, the Inspector felt

sure, were fluffier than her hair.

"Did it... never occur to you," Aberdine tried calmly to ask, "I mean, did you never find any of it *odd*? Your grandfather's last wish? That he actually expected you to carry it out? Practicing for his own death? It's- it's inconceivable! People don't do things like that. Why did you go along with him? You should have had the old man committed!"

For the first time since he had walked in, Miss Warren ceased to look cheerful. Her gaze melted, like her smile, and flowed down to the hands she was twisting in her lap. She said nothing and the Inspector could see nothing except the top of her yellow head, lit by a beam of daylight from the window so that she resembled a small sun. At first, Aberdine thought he was imagining things, but no; he distinctively saw a fallen tear slide its way from her thumb down each finger, lingering in the crevices between and leaving glistening evidence behind that it had been there. He wasn't sure why she took his words so harshly, but that didn't stop him from feeling as if he had just smashed a butterfly. And it didn't stop him from wanting a torrent of cinder blocks to plummet through the ceiling and pound him into the foundation of the building as punishment for acting like a thoughtless ogre.

Feeling very, very *very* sheepish, the Inspector eased open a drawer. He lifted out a box of tissues for the soundlessly crying woman, then gingerly eased the drawer shut again.

Long seconds in which Miss Warren did not move, did not make a sound, only sat in a completely rigid, weeping silence that made Aberdine pray harder for a cinder block hailstorm.

At last, he could no longer stand the strain and cleared his throat while suggestively nudging the tissue-box toward her. Miss Warren looked at it in surprise, having genuinely not seen it there. The Inspector looked at her in surprise because he had never known anyone could cry without their face turning red and their nose swelling. He had not known it was possible for tears to be pretty.

He began stammering an apology while Miss Warren dabbed her smeared cheeks.

"Uh, I- I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. Or your grandfather's memory. I, um... Please forgive me?"

The eyes she turned on him were so big, so blue, and so full of hurt and hopeful trust – like crushed violets

indomitably trying to spring vertical again – Aberdine fancied for a moment that the world was consumed with blue and he was drowning in it.

Then she looked down at the papery white square in her hand and started to absentmindedly fold it corner to corner, allowing the Inspector's mind to surface in his uncomfortable chair in his grey office with its pitiful and mostly brown little plant.

"Grandpa wasn't crazy," she murmured.

"No, no, of course he wasn't," Aberdine hurriedly agreed. He shifted about in his seat, crossed his legs, tried crossing them the other way, uncrossed them entirely, and reached over to put the box of tissues away for lack of anything better to do and because Miss Warren seemed to be finished with them. He finally screwed himself up to admitting, "I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry I was so inconsiderate."

"Grandpa was a wonderful man," she said after a moment. "I loved him so much."

"I'm sure you did."

"He wasn't crazy. He was just funny. He wasn't afraid of anything. He liked to make things. He liked to go places. He liked people. He was always so kind," she recounted to the white napkin she had folded into a tiny triangle.

Aberdine waited, but she didn't say any more – just sat and stared at the tissue. Desperate to loosen the tension that was crushing his gut like a sumo-wrestler, the Inspector grabbed his cup and moved to the coffee-maker. He needed a fresh, hot mouthful, definitely. Never mind that his cup was still one-quarter full. He needed something that hadn't been cooling and untouched for the last five minutes. He needed the pure, scalding caffeine goodness of a fresh cup of coffee.

What to do with the amount he had left?

Aberdine considered leaving it and just filling up a new cup, but then he noticed his solitary droopy-looking plant, and decided to follow Miss Warren's lead. He dumped his leftover joe into the plant's soil and picked up the coffee pot. He turned to the woman after he had finished pouring to ask if she was sure she didn't want any. He found her looking from him to the plant with an unreadable expression on her face.

"Um..." it rather unnerved him, "would you, ah, like a cup of coffee?" When she caught his eye, he thought, for

a moment, that she had the electric and excited air of someone who has just discovered something that delights them to no end. But he blinked and when he looked again, she was only smiling slightly.

"Do you have any sugar and cream?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, no cream. Only sugar."

"Well, I suppose just sugar is good enough." The way she tilted her head and wore that smile made her look as if sadness had never crossed her path and tears had never crossed her face. It made Aberdine wonder if he was the crazy one and had just dreamed the last few minutes.

Perplexed, but trying his damndest not to show it, the Inspector poured another cup and sat it in front of her. He returned to his chair and opened the same drawer in which he kept his ground coffee and produced a box containing dozens of little sugar packets. He slid it across his desk along with a plastic stirrer that was fortuitously hiding behind the coffee can. Being primarily a drinker of unadulterated black coffee himself, he watched in disbelief as the young woman emptied packet after packet into her cup and stirred. Finally, she achieved her ideal sweetness and took a sip. Aberdine followed suit and mentally reveled in the charming bitterness that sizzled and burned down his throat.

"Grandpa drank his coffee black too," Miss Warren's voice came breezing over him unexpectedly. The Inspector raised his eyebrows at her in an "oh really, how interesting, do continue" manner, thought it actually unsettled him slightly to find her scrutinizing his coffee or himself so closely. She took another small, contemplative sip before continuing.

"He was used to tea, since he came from England, but he learned to love coffee."

"Ah, yes, you mentioned something about your grandfather being British. One of those classic immigrant stories where he strikes off to seek his fortune in America? Did he jostle about with a thousand other travelers on the deck of a ship so he could catch a glimpse of Lady Liberty?" Aberdine asked, joking somewhat.

"No," Miss Warren informed him. "He didn't mean to come here at all. It was a bit of an accident really."

Aberdine was intrigued. "How does anyone accidentally immigrate to another country?"

"Well, a friend of his got married and Grandpa drank a lot at the party. He fell asleep and woke up in

Miami." The Inspector had to set his coffee down and put a hand over his mouth to keep from snickering. "He didn't see the Statue of Liberty until years later. In fact, it was four months before he realized he was in America at all. He thought he'd gotten off in Mexico. Since he didn't understand a word of Spanish, nobody told him otherwise until he walked several blocks north and met a lot of English-speaking gringos."

To hear *her* use the word "gringo" was it for Aberdine: he *had* to laugh. A guffaw leapt from his mouth. He sat in his chair and shook with laughter. "Are you sure," he calmed himself, "are you sure your grandfather wasn't just pulling your leg?"

Miss Warren looked at him, wide-eyed. "That's how he always told it." But a tiny grin snuck onto her lips and she confessed that Grandpa liked to tell stories and he may have embellished a little to make her laugh.

"Well, I take it your grandpa made it out of Miami?" Aberdine continued.

"Oh yes. It wasn't that he didn't like Miami, he just didn't have a head for languages and never could pick up on Spanish. So, he took a bus north."

"Ah, really? What did he do? I mean, how did he support himself?"

"Oh, Grandpa did all kinds of things! He did whatever people needed him to do. Then he met Grandma. She hired him to fix her fence. Then she needed him to fix a squeaky stair. And then a window needed replacing. Grandpa told me he finally realized she wanted him for a husband the day she walked into the kitchen and asked him if he liked her in pink with white dots."

Aberdine creased his eyebrows. "What was so special about that?"

"Her underwear was pink with white dots."

"Oh... OH!" It dawned on the Inspector, and he found himself blushing like a fool while Miss Warren giggled. Internally, he began comparing her rendition of her grandmother's exploits to his own granny's depressingly tame existence. Her life as he knew it had consisted of cats and dolls, plastic over the furniture and, eventually, Alzheimer's. Old Mrs. Warren sounded like a grandmother he could have liked.

"But the problem," Young Miss Warren went on, "was that Grandma was already married. She and Grandpa didn't know what to do about her husband. But things

turned out ok after she caught him in the shower with a local teacher. She got half his money in the divorce, and the car. Grandpa told me once that he thought she had blackmailed the schoolteacher too. You know, female teachers weren't allowed to be married or anything in those days. Grandma never would tell him exactly how they wound up with an extra three-hundred dollars. Sometimes I think Grandma may have been... just a little crazy."

Aberdine snorted at the understatement. Unfortunately, he did it while sipping his coffee, the result being that he blew a stinging multitude of hot droplets out of the cup and onto his face. This triggered a coughing fit and a hurried attempt to remove the burning liquid with frenzied hand motions, making the Inspector look not unlike a frantic raccoon trying to pat out flames on the ends of his whiskers. After ascertaining that his eyeballs had not been scalded from their sockets, Aberdine had the presence of mind to wipe the remaining coffee from his face and mustache with one of his tissues. He tossed the sodden napkin into the trash can, along with his sodden pretense of dignity.

He laced his fingers together, place them (this time sans dignity) over his early-forties paunch, looked Miss Warren squarely in her blue eyes (which had gone quite wide), and leaned back comfortably in his uncomfortable chair.

"Well, I bet those two took that car and drove off into the sunset, eh?"

Her first response was a blink. Then a beaming smile. "No," she shook her head and laughed. "The other way. They went East, to Atlantic City. They both took jobs at a fancy hotel. Grandma had to quit when she found out she was pregnant with my father, but Grandpa got promoted – became the hotel manager eventually. He always said it was because they liked his accent. They paid him well and Grandma never had to work again. She took up skydiving."

Aberdine smiled. "Sounds like quite a woman." He had been flipping through the file on his desk until he found the picture he wanted. It was the same one he'd been looking at earlier, only this time he pointed to the woman next to the man with the bushy mustache and asked, "Is that her?" He slid it to the middle of the desk; he and Miss Warren leaned over the old snapshot together.

"Oh yes, that's my grandma!" And that's Grandpa.

Their hotel used to face the beach they're standing on," she gestured excitedly at each part of the photograph – from her grandmother who looked like Mae West, to her finch-like grandfather, to the wind-frothed surf behind them. "Oh look!" she cried in delight. "There's my daddy. Do you see him? Right there!" She pointed. Aberdine leaned closer and realized there *was* a small, dark-haired boy in the picture. Sort of. He was hiding behind his father's legs, which left only his face from the eyes up visible alongside one pale little hand clutching Old Warren's pants.

"Oh... Daddy," the young woman across from Aberdine murmured. She gently lifted the picture and leaned backing her chair with it. The Inspector watched her, and suddenly wanted to cry. Her fingers and eyes touched the black and white image with such unimaginable tenderness, with such tangible *love*, he simply didn't know what to think. He felt sure he had never loved anyone that much. He wasn't sure he *could* love like that. How did she do it? Why did this pixie of a woman infuriate him, make him laugh, and make him want to cry? He hadn't cried at his own grandmother's funeral. He'd spent most of his adult life wearing a poker face, doing what it took to keep from annoying anybody and collect a decent paycheck. Now here this little blonde maniac had the insolence to push a dead old man down a bridge and completely unbalance Aberdine's stable, blank-faced life!

Miss Warren broke his mental tirade with a sigh and a wistful smile at the photograph. Suddenly, the Inspector couldn't remember precisely what he'd just been thinking and he wasn't sure what he had been getting angry about.

"I remember when Daddy died," she said quietly, continuing to lightly trace the picture with one white finger. "I was very little, but I remember. I don't know why I can't remember my mother. They both died on the same day."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

She turned her huge blue eyes on him and smiled serenely while reaching across the desk to return the picture. "What I do remember was happy," she said. "I went to live with Grandpa after that. He needed someone, really. Grandma had just died too."

"Oh, that's terrible!" Aberdine exclaimed. He felt genuinely sorry.

She nodded. "It was very hard on Grandpa at first.

She died skydiving and he thought something had gone wrong with her parachute, but they didn't find anything wrong with it. Then he didn't understand why she didn't pull the cord like she was supposed to. Her doctor told him later that she had cancer. She had it for years and didn't tell anyone. He said that by her last visit it had gotten very bad and she wasn't going to live long. When he found that out, Grandpa understood why she didn't pull the cord. He felt much better after that."

The Inspector sat in his chair and gaped. He felt as if a large iron spike had just skewered him in place. Something ominous throbbed far in the depths of his cerebellum and he knew he'd have to deal with one whopper of a headache later on. But for now, he just wanted fresh coffee. It was time for another cup. Without a doubt, time for another cup.

He heaved himself to a standing position and staggered toward the coffee pot, working out the stiffness in his legs as he went. He asked Miss Warren if she'd like another cup, but she declined. Aberdine stood in front of the window, next to his coffee and his plant. He gazed out, not thinking or feeling anything for the moment, simply drifting. Drifting in the late afternoon light that made the asphalt and concrete beautiful, that cast green trees in bronze, that lit up the face of the massive old clock tower. Which reminded Aberdine that normally he would have been home by now, and he had a job to finish. He refilled his cup and ambled back to his desk.

"So," he paused to taste the dark brew, "the only relative you had left, and he raised you." His eyes met hers, and suddenly the sun shone in his brain, lit with comprehension. If the Old Warren had wanted a tombstone it would have read, "Grandpa-father, mother, grandmother, friend. Here lies an entire family." Aberdine came to understand something about himself in that moment: his whole life had been cursed with an overabundance of family. He had forgotten their value. But if all you had was one person...

"I think I get it now," he spoke softly to Miss Warren. "I think I'm starting to see how you could love someone enough to do the last thing they ask of you. No matter how... unusual it is. You loved your grandfather that much, that's why you did it?"

She nodded. "Yes. What better reason could there be?"

Aberdine tilted his head in agreement. "Hey, I see where you're coming from. I'm not sure I see where Grandpa was coming from, but I understand why you had to do what you had to do. Still, I don't know precisely what the legalities on that are. The report is a little sketchy, exactly what did you do and how did you do it?"

"Oh, well, after Grandpa died, I had to use a lot of duct tape to keep his hands on the handlebars and his feet on the pedals. And he had designed the tricycle with a pole so I could make him stay upright."

"Oh my, the old man thought of everything, didn't he?"

"Usually, if a person lives to be one-hundred-and-four it's because they're good at thinking things out."

"Ah, yes, that makes a lot of sense."

"Mm-hm. Anyway, I drove to the top of the bridge and got him out of the truck. I poured the kerosene everywhere, like he had shown me, and gave him a little push to get him started. Then I struck a match and threw it and away he went!" Miss Warren beamed enthusiastically.

Aberdine sat in his wooden chair and pondered. Perversely, a medley of "Hunka Hunka Burnin' Love" and "Great Balls of Fire" began to play in his head.

"Didn't you worry that someone might get hurt?" he asked after a short pause.

"Oh yes, I thought about that. That's why I put him in the bike lane. And he wasn't going very fast because the bridge isn't very steep. There's not much traffic that late at night either."

The Inspector nodded and pondered some more. He chuckled. "I bet it looked quite impressive to those few people who were on the road. It's not every night you approach a bridge to see a fiery man coming toward you on a tricycle. A purple tricycle. With yellow flames and white wheels."

"And a little red flag waving behind," she added, with an almost gleeful grin. Aberdine put his head in one hand and laughed out loud.

When he had calmed down and regained his composure, he closed the file on his desk and tossed the folder into a drawer. He leaned forward on his elbows, he fidgeted with his mustache briefly.

"Look, Miss Warren," he began, "I'm not sure how all this is going to turn out for you. The circumstances are so strange, it's hard to tell how many violations you've

committed or which laws you've broken –"

"It's alright," she stopped him. "Grandpa knew about all that. There's plenty of money to cover any legal bills. I'll be fine."

She and the Inspector met eyes across the desk.

"Yes. I'm sure you will be fine," Aberdine stated. He smiled.

They both stood up and he stretched, then made his way to the coffee-maker to unplug it.

"May I use your phone to call a taxi? They've taken my license away for right now."

"Mm? Oh, um... ah... I'll drop you off."

"Really? You don't have to do that, I don't want to keep you out late."

"No, it's fine. I should have been home 30 minutes ago. A little while longer won't matter. Besides, it's Friday. Hey, ah... whygostraighthomewouldyouliketostopfor... coffee?" Aberdine, with his hand on the near empty coffee pot, realized too late how stupid the suggestion was. But Miss Warren smiled brilliantly.

"Coffee would be great," she told him. They left together. Aberdine flipped the light switch on the way out the door, leaving his office, his coffee-maker, his creaky chair, and his plant shining in the sunset glow that streamed softly through the window.

I Can Smile

Melissa Redding

It was one of those days that I never thought would happen - couldn't believe would ever happen. It was one of those years that felt like it passed too quickly. Like when I thought summer vacation would never come because I couldn't wait for my dad to drive my friends and me to Summer Waves. We couldn't wait to pile into that old Ford Bronco with our towels that had a cool band on them, probably New Kids on the Block or Debbie Gibson. We would smell of sunscreen and sing at the top of our lungs along with the songs that were on the radio. My dad was so cool that he would sing right along with us and then pleasure us with a serenade of an oldie song that only he knew the words to. We would whine about how uncool the song was and then he would just sing louder. Those were the good old days that I just couldn't wait to come around again; however, they come around so much faster than you ever thought they would and are over even faster. This was not a happy time that I had waited for. This was more of a moment that I never thought I could survive.

My brother called me at my apartment, the morning of January 26, 2002, and woke me up. I was so independent in my new apartment and felt like the most adult teenager I knew. He said that I needed to come to the hospital because my dad kept asking where I was. "What's wrong? Is something going to happen?" I just knew everything would be fine. I just knew. I just knew. My dad had been diagnosed with cancer, Renal Cell Carcinoma, in March. It was kidney cancer, a cancer that not a lot is known about. The internet, books, doctors, specialists - no one knew anything about his disease. Hours of research never provided me with an explanation of what caused this type of cancer and even more hours of research never told me what the cure for it was. It didn't matter because we were going to make it through this. So I got dressed and called the place that I worked and told them that I would be about an hour late because I had to visit my dad in the hospital. The voice on the other end of the phone sounded sad and worried, like she expected something bad was happening. I was a little pissed off that someone would think so negatively. Didn't everyone know that everything would be all right? I would be just fine.

I arrived at the hospital and walked to his room on the fourth floor, which is the oncology floor. The word "oncology" just sounds odd. What a name? The room was dark and quiet and everyone looked so sad and worried. I couldn't understand why they looked that way because everything was going to be fine. Just fine. I sat down in a mauve chair, a hard chair that I thought should have been

more expensive and softer because people spend hours waiting for their loved ones to get better. They spend hours sitting in this chair crying and hoping that things will turn out right. They weren't as lucky as I was going to be. Some didn't get to see their loved ones survive cancer. I sat in that chair and my grandmother came and sat next to me and rubbed her fingers through my hair. She seemed so sad. I couldn't believe everyone was just giving up and throwing in the towel when there was so much hope. My dad was never sick. He was a fighter and could make it through anything. This man carried me around on his back, his shoulders, made me laugh and smile. I have his calves, both skinny and without any attractive shape. He was also one of the cutest dads on the block. Why didn't they think that he could beat something not visible? They had no clue how strong he was and how lucky we were to have someone so strong.

The television wasn't on and all I could hear was the sound of the heart monitor beeping. It was so annoying. I just wanted it to stop. I wanted everything to stop so the last year could start all over. The doctor would come in, check the monitor, and not even speak. The doctor's and nurses all maintained a professional demeanor so they wouldn't get attached to their patients or risk letting their guard down. They couldn't be compassionate with the patient's family. What is wrong with letting your guard down? What is wrong with letting someone know that you care?

He was restless. He kept asking, "Is Melissa here? Did she come?" And I would tell him that I was right there in the room. I tried not to cry because I didn't want him to think that I thought he had lost the battle, like everyone else thought. I knew better. His legs would just move back and forth, back and forth. He looked like a child throwing a temper tantrum, only without crying or selfish motive. It was like something was holding him down and he was trying to kick himself free, but he couldn't and he just kept trying and pushing. Trying and pushing. He looked so uncomfortable and he would just keep saying, "I want to go home. I want to go home." I knew he wanted to go home and I couldn't wait until they gave him some more blood to raise his hemoglobin level so we could take him home finally. Two weeks in a hospital is a long time. His legs just kept moving and he would kick the covers off of him because he was hot. I didn't understand how he could be so hot when he had gotten so skinny and hadn't eaten very much. This man's face and body had changed from a handsome forty-six year old man to an eighty year old man in just eight months. The pictures on the mirror in my bedroom taken just a short time earlier showed a man with a bright smile, a tan, full face from fishing in the sun, and salt-and-pepper hair that only he could make look striking. Now, in the hospital bed, there was a man with a sunken face, pale, and an almost bald head that was as soft as a

newborn baby's. I wasn't ready for this, but was sure he would bounce back just fine.

Sometimes I think a person can lose all sense of judgment or intelligence when their heart takes over their mind completely. It all makes sense to me now, but that day I must have been stuck in a dream where I wouldn't accept logic. That day I knew that all that mattered was that my dad was the greatest man I had ever known and that God wouldn't take away a young girl's daddy before he walked her down the aisle or became a granddad. Sometimes all sense of logic is lost upon a dream that is so embedded in your heart.

I remember sitting down in the den of my parent's house with my father. His frail body was sitting in the chair that would become practically his home for the next few months. Sometimes, I still expect to see him sitting in the faded blue recliner. The September 11th tragedy had just happened and he looked at the television and started crying. I had never seen my dad cry before. I thought he was crying because of all of the people who had lost their lives and would never get to see their loved ones again. I never thought that I might not ever see my loved one again. My dad looked at me with tears and said, "I am just so scared that I won't be here for your wedding day or to see my grandchildren."

"I know you will," I said only smiling and naïve because I was certain he wasn't going anywhere.

That day, January 26, 2002, he kept asking my grandmother why I was crying and if I was okay. My grandmother told him I wasn't upset and then she whispered in my ear that I should stop crying because he might think something is wrong. I tried to stop crying, but it was an uncontrollable emotion that I had never felt. I couldn't stop and I wasn't sure if it was because I was accepting the inevitable or because I was just so frustrated with everyone else seeming like they had given up on him. I don't know exactly what was happening, but I think my dad somehow knew. Some moments I felt like he would kind of go out of his mind, like the drugs Oxycontin, Vicodin, Morphine, had gone to his head and he didn't know what he was saying. Right when I thought he was a little crazy, he would reassure me by saying, "I'll be okay. I love you."

How does anyone stay so strong for others? How could he have possibly been thinking about my feelings and if I was upset when he was the person in the hospital bed hanging on to life? How could he have been worried if I would be okay when it physically hurt him to even speak? How could I have been so selfish to cry at the thought of my dad not being there to walk me down the aisle? What could we all have done to make this whole situation never happen? Pray harder? Go to church more? My dad wasn't a bad person - why did he deserve this? How does

anyone ever know the answers to these questions or is there any answer? I don't think there is an answer, only more room for questions.

My mom had been by my dad's side for two weeks straight in his hospital room. She didn't leave to take a shower. She never left him even when he wasn't the best husband in the past. That day, when he started feeling better, she left to go take a shower and said to call her if anything changed. My grandmother told me a few days earlier that the men in our family don't die when there are women in the room. I thought it was all crap, but not anymore. My mother left to take a shower which was the first time she had taken a full shower instead of a wipe down at the sink in two weeks. I was getting so upset and worked up that my grandmother told me to go to the computer room down the hall and go play on a computer. I always wanted to feel so independent and secure, but that day all that I wanted was to be comforted and held like I was when I was a child - when I was daddy's little girl. I went down to the computer room and started looking for scholarships. Something hopeful to tell my dad when he recovered because I knew that my mom and dad wouldn't be able to afford to pay for my college tuition. They would have so many bills to pay when my dad left the hospital. My grandmother walked in the computer room with my Aunt Debbie and we started talking about - the weather, the wall paper, what I was going to do with my degree, if I was still dating the same boy, was my car running smoothly - what I cannot remember, but for a few minutes the whole room was quiet.

My grandpa ran into the room and said, "He's gone! He's gone!"

That moment when someone runs up behind you and screams and your heart stops because you're scared - that is how I felt. It wasn't real. It couldn't be real. My heart never started beating again. There was no sign of emotion, not for a few months. The nurse wouldn't allow me to see him right away because the nurses want to make the patients presentable when that is the last thing on the family's mind. After a few minutes that seemed like a year, I was allowed in. I never thought I would touch a dead person. On television the bodies always look so dead, so cold, and inhuman. This was different. I didn't mind holding my dad's hand; somehow, all that I could say was "He looks so peaceful." I was selfish I guess. I didn't want my dad to die but I wasn't thinking of the pain he was suffering through just to be a stronger man for me. I was daddy's little girl and I was so proud to hold that title. I still am.

Seven years ago, I was only sixteen, I dated a guy who's mother died while we were dating. Afterwards he

just fell apart. He didn't go back to school, he started drinking, doing drugs, didn't care if he slept all day, or if he even brushed his hair. He was going to be in a band and play guitar. He was. He became a different person than who I first came to know. I felt like I had to get away from him then, or I would end up in the same rut right there with him. Seeing him go through the emotions of losing a parent, I just knew that if something that sad happened to me, I would handle it differently. I would not fall apart. No one ever thinks something so awful and unexpected would happen to them. Lending an ear to listen or a shoulder to cry on is different from being the person that needs it.

So I graduate in May. I only missed one week of college and then just bounced back. I never talked about the feelings I experienced because I always down played them. I would say, "There are worse things in life" or "Some people don't even know their dad." This is all true but I needed to own my feelings. I needed to know that it wasn't selfish for me to want to cry and feel bad. I needed to know that everything would be fine, eventually. I needed so much more than had been taken from me. Everything is so much easier now even though I won't have some of the things that other girls will. I do have memories of a man that loved me more than he ever loved anyone else and would have done anything for me just to see me smile or know that I was safe.

Just the other day I downloaded the song "You Are So Beautiful To Me" because my dad would sing that to me when we were driving anywhere in his old Ford Bronco. We would drive to the dump and empty a trailer full of leaves or drive to Woo's Hardware store for some little thing he would need to fix something big around the house. I can remember the loud engine and the hardness of the seats, how tall the truck was and how we would just tower over all of the other cars on the road. I remember his bright smile and his bubble nose that I am also proud to wear and the way he would motion his hands as if he was directing a choir. I remember looking at him while he would sing the words to me and I knew that I was Daddy's little girl, that it was my song. I knew that those moments were mine and his only, to remember forever. I listened to the song in my car yesterday and for the first time since he passed away, I didn't cry. I smiled.

Fear and Loathing in the Second Grade

Alicia Ferrell

The assassination of John F. Kennedy; The explosion of the Challenger spacecraft; September 11th; these are events that one can never forget. For me, it was the collapse of Pat Copeland. I was in the second grade and it was during our morning song time. Each morning we stood in a circle, there was about thirty of us, and we would sing your basic Sunday school songs. I usually used this time to inspect the dirt I had collected under my fingernails or chew my shoulder length hair (A nasty habit that annoyed my teachers), but this morning I felt particularly inspired and thought I would stand tall, pay attention and sing "Fishers of Men" with great gusto. My nemesis at the time was a short, chubby girl named Pat Copeland. And because I too was a short, chubby girl, I hated her. Right in the middle of the song, the part where we were "reeling in" all of the people for Jesus, Pat, who was standing directly across from me, collapsed on the floor. Mrs. Geraldine Chapman, our teacher, ran to Pat screaming to our principal and her husband Sheldon Chapman, "O Lord! Help me Sheldon! She's swallowing her tongue!" I was gripped with time-freezing fear.

Before this crisis, I had never witnessed anything remotely exciting. Except Jimmy. Jimmy was a mentally challenged adult who went to our church. The church we attended had unofficial "assigned" seats. The Spears family sat on the right side of the church on the third pew; the White's sat on the left side, fourth pew. This was mainly because Mrs. White liked to watch how badly the Spears children would act so she could brag about her superior mothering abilities to her family. Where you sat said a lot about how spiritual your family was; too far up and you were pious, too far back and you were in need of a home visit from the preacher. My family sat on the left side and the sixth and seventh pews, somewhere in the middle. We did not sit together because my father did not want to have to keep looking to his left to see what we were doing so he sat my brothers and me in front of him. It also made it easier for him to thump us on our ear if we misbehaved, and you could always count on at least one person being thumped every Sunday.

My father was very rigid in his seating habits, which explained why he would not move when Jimmy started coming to our church. I had never seen a crazy person before, but I had heard of them. On our way to church every Sunday, we would pass an old, two-story home that looked as if it had been built before the civil war. It was easy to see that it had once been beautiful, but it had been neglected for many years and was in need of repair. My father would tell us that there was a crazy woman that the family had kept locked in the attic for many years. He told us that when he was a boy she had escaped from the attic and chased him and his friends with a knife all over the yard. I do not know if this story was true or not, my father was an Irishman who loved to tell outrageous stories, but because of this image, I had a paralyzing fear of crazy people.

I was not sure if Jimmy was crazy, or challenged, so I kept as far away from him as I could, but because of our "assigned" seats, I sat directly across from him in church. Jimmy's behavior during church was a constant source of glee for my brothers, who liked to witness disturbing events. Jimmy would pick his nose — there was nothing unusual about that — but he never carried a tissue, nor did his mother. I often wondered why she never scolded him for such uncouth behavior, but now I am convinced she was drunk most of the time. She sat with her eyes half-closed, and a thin-lipped smile fixed to her face throughout the service. Her expression never changed. If the preacher condemned us all to an after life of fire and brimstone, Jimmy's mother never frowned. She sat perfectly still, apparently reveling in her drunken stupor. Who could blame her after observing Jimmy's antics? After capturing his trophy, Jimmy would inspect it and then attempt to flick it as if he were participating in the "Booger-Flicking Olympics." I would experience the same paralyzing fear in church as I did that day when Pat Copeland collapsed. I was afraid of becoming part of the story.

One Sunday, after a particularly difficult struggle between Jimmy and one of his prizes, my brother asked, "What is that on your shoulder?" Tim, the most evil of all brothers, pointed to a small glob on my shoulder; I stared at the offending mark and knew that I had been an unwilling participant in Jimmy's sick sport. I was forever linked to Jimmy. My brothers convinced me that I was destined to become Jimmy's wife. It was a way of being marked, sort of like Cupid's arrow. I realize now that it was too easy. My brother must have put *something* on my shoul-

der (I do not want to know what), but there is no way a booger flew across the aisle and landed on my shoulder.

Seeing someone swallow their tongue was a much bigger deal than watching Jimmy's gross antics. I tried to see into Pat's mouth, but I was at the feet end of her seizure. Was it possible to swallow your tongue? I was sure it was an exaggeration.

Even though I was frightened at what was happening, I became completely distracted by something that took place at the opposite end of Pat's mouth. For me, this is where the memory becomes so unforgettable. Geraldine, the aforementioned big-haired teacher, rushed to Pat's feet and screamed, "Sheldon, pull her legs up so she doesn't swallow her tongue!" The principal pulled Pat's pudgy, patent leather clad feet up and showed, to my horror, Pat's pink underwear. I was mortified to see her chubby thighs in the air, exposed for everyone to see. My face grew hot and I felt physically ill. I was sure that Pat knew the entire second grade class was examining her underwear, and it was distracting her from keeping her tongue in place. I rushed, without thinking, to pull down her skirt, but they pushed me away before I could successfully cover her up.

Of course, Pat did not swallow her tongue, but I think that would have been a more favorable outcome. I know I would have rather swallowed my tongue than have everyone see my pink underwear. At least they would have had something else to talk about, "Poor Alicia. Can you believe she swallowed her tongue?" "She was such a nice girl." As opposed to "Did you get a look at those underwear? How about those fat legs?" From that day on, I lived in mortal fear of collapsing and showing everyone my chubby legs and underwear, and I hated Pat for exposing me this kind of humiliation was possible.

Every few months, I was forced to face this fear of exposure. The principal of our school felt that Fridays should be spent out of the classroom. That would have been great if his field trips had held any appeal to the student body. We would ramble up to Burger King in our huge yellow bus and all of us would get out for milkshakes. I am sure we were hated by the employees. I would often find a piece of plastic or paper in my shake. One time, I found the leg of a cockroach, long and hairy, in the bottom of my chocolate milkshake. The next time I abstained from any sort of treat, which was, I am sure, the desired effect. On another field trip, we went to a man's

house, deep in the woods. The attraction was a small monkey the man kept in a cage in his back yard. Mr. Chapman did not teach us anything about the life or habits of monkeys. We just stood there drinking our milkshakes while the monkey sat on his ass in the corner.

Mr. Sheldon Chapman was an unusual man, and I am convinced he was a closet sadomasochist. On days when we did not go to Burger King or see monkeys, we had field day. I would have slurped up a thousand roach-filled milkshakes to avoid field day. Field day was a day of random torture, but the most feared torture device for me was the Big Yellow Ball. Sadistic Sheldon would drag out this huge yellow ball and expect us to run as fast as we could, in our uniformed skirts, and then attempt to jump on top of this ball. The yellow ball may as well have been the sun. It was twice as tall as the second grader that would attempt to conquer it, and it would take five pairs of arms to reach around its circumference. Few could accomplish the feat of springing to the top of this ball, and certainly not a forty-eight inch tall second grader, but you were guaranteed to show your underwear and the chubby legs your skirt attempted to cover. I remember the terror I felt, while sitting in class, when I would hear that ball come bouncing out of the storage room: Bong! Bong! Bong! I would immediately begin to plot my escape. I was not a sophisticated child, so a bomb threat was beyond my game plan. I generally relied on the old stomachache / nauseous feeling, but my teachers stopped falling for that because I often wanted to go home, so they stopped believing my complaints. Mrs. Geraldine would announce to the class that it was field day and we should pick up our books and get ready to go outside. I would reluctantly stand-up, while those around me cheered and excitedly pushed their chairs under their desks. My eyes would meet Pat, who sat across the room from me, and I would recognize the trepidation I felt in her eyes. We both knew field day was not fun for fat girls, and I hated her for knowing how I felt.

Once outside, I would stand in line behind the others who could not wait their turn. They would ask to "cut" and of course I was happy to accommodate. If I put it off, maybe something would happen to get me out of this situation. Maybe it would begin to lightning, or maybe someone would have pointy tennis shoes and the ball would collapse like a popped balloon. While I was in line, I would try to remember what underwear I had worn that

day. Was it the cute panties with the pink ribbons? Or was it the yellow panties with the turtle? I looked at Pat and wondered what she had to be afraid of; she had already been initiated into the hall of shameful underwear showers. Pat looked at me as if to say, "Now it is your turn to be shamed. You have dodged it long enough."

It was at times like this that I longed to be Jimmy; afraid of nothing. His most private moments were open to the public. He was never afraid of exposure, or what someone else thought. He was blissfully unaware of the eyes cutting critically in his direction. His life must be Utopia, crazy or not, he was free. Free to pick his nose, free to have a hairdo that was not quite right, free to have fat thighs. What a lucky guy.

But I was not that free. The ball awaits my failure. I refused to go down that easy though. There were still six people ahead of me. I had time to think. I wondered what Nancy Drew would do. Bess would somehow create a distraction and then Nancy would jump into the car with Ned Nickerson and disappear, her strawberry-blonde hair blowing in the wind. But then I thought, "Nancy Drew would never be in this shameful situation." She would run, her thin thighs never touching one another, her panties not even a thought, and jump on top the ball to the cheers of everyone. I looked around for an escape route, but I could find no means of deliverance. As the line grew shorter and the ball came closer, I knew I would find some way to avoid this humiliation. No one had identified me with Pat; I was not called "fatty, fatty two by four" like Pat. I had avoided the exposure by playing it safe, lurking in the shadows and never calling attention to myself. I thought this day would be no different.

I would like to say that like the "crafty Odysseus" I found a way out of the line. Or even better, that I ran as hard as I could, my short, stubby legs pumping like pistons, and I jumped on top of the ball, never revealing my chubby thighs or pink underwear.

But that is not what happened. My time up, I walked like a prisoner to her execution. The much-hated Mr. Chapman, wearing a knit cap and a whistle around his neck, signaled me to move up in line and start running. I could feel my heart beating in my ears. It was much like the feeling I had when I saw Pat's legs in the air. I began to run, knowing that it was hopeless. I never made it to the ball. I tripped on my shoelace and fell long before I got

to the mountaintop. I jumped up as quickly as I could, unsure of what had been exposed during my fall. Mr. Chapman was already blowing his whistle for the next runner. The world had not imploded. There were no large groups of kids standing around, pointing and laughing. My heart was still beating. I looked around and saw Pat Copeland looking at me. She had a small smile on her pudgy face.

I'm in Love With a Girl Who Smokes Cigarettes Like She Owns the World and Isn't Afraid of the Bomb

Kevin Daiss

Quake,
 Shuddersoulder quickly down the avenue
 As you step gingerly over cracks and leaves
 Fallen to the ground-
 Cast aside cast aways from us.
 Breathe with a pause in mid-thought
 (cigarette dangling from your fingers like a rose)
 And close your eyes to relish the indistinct blur of motion
 Put in front of you by the birds lazily sewing patterns in
 the clouds.
 Before today you were always reflective,
 But this morning in the mirror you decided to be a light-
 house
 For anyone looking lost or anyone dodging dark.
 And,
 O what a light you are!
 Cast your net of goldenrod imitative daytime
 Over the sky and
 Sing!
 Sing for the night clouds you illuminate,
 And sing for the drunken fishermen you humiliate.
 Praise the highest power for your
 Talent.
 You do not dream so easily as me,
 You are never really asleep.
 Blending in with daytime at noon
 You're still vigilant-
 Though naïve and ambivalent.
 So step cautiously still down your dusk-darkened road
 Until the neighbors all stare and point their fingers
 At the fucking freak with a light on her face
 And a cigarette in her hand.
 Dance circular in the gutter
 With hand pointed straight up,
 Straight up,
 Straight up at the stars
 Your best friends
 And call out the moon as your enemy.
 Waltz to the end of your block and light another cigarette;

Light it for the future,
For the kids and the
Colors in their eyes.
You'll be bright.
Beautiful.
Blinding.

I Can Give You the Gift of the Moon's Shine

Kevin Daiss

I've been in the city bottlenecking
And breathing
Slower than the cruisers that cruise their cars at night.
I play records at the lowest RPM
So the words come out
Without sounding uptight.
I hide out
In the dive down
Stairways
Up to heaven,
Come down Lord,
Carry me home.
The Bible Belt
Gets looser on my hips
As I kiss
Die cast aluminum lips.
I spill the salt from my teeth
Into the street
And there's a man
Who will lick it from my shoes.
He asks for the time
But I just hand him the MoonShine.
I tell him, "Drink this my friend
And let the stars in your eyes live.
Let them sparkle with the city's tower lights."

Paper Dolls

Brandi Kincaid

You might not know it by looking at me but I come from a family of nomads. My mother, the leader of our tribe, has packed and unpacked us from one city to another for as long as I can remember. We've moved for business, and for pleasure, and sometimes I think we just did it to move our bodies, to make sure our feet didn't get too comfortable. When you are raising two young girls on what my mother used to call "twenty-five dollars and love," you learn to entertain yourselves creatively. Surprisingly enough, travel can be very cheap.

Mind you, when I say cheap, I also have to point out that this was about the time that Motel 6 was keeping the light on for people all across the great states, and almost every restaurant you found let kids eat for free. We collected little plastic toys from diners all across America to add to our ever-growing piles of junk. But cheap meals and plastic toys were not the more enticing part of a car trip. For a little girl with traveling in her blood, it was always about change. The thought of the inside of the car excited my otherwise stable being into a frenzy of preparation.

The year we decided to travel cross-country, my family owned a faded Ford Thunderbird with a torn red interior. It had a musty smell that can come from two children and a dog. I memorized the inside of the car that year. I knew every tear in the fabric, every pocket made by holes; I had hiding places long before we left. I made mental maps of how much stuff I could cram into any given space, and where, after I had shoved every book and Barbie that I owned into those spaces, I would sit. Packing was almost as exciting as being somewhere new. My sister, younger and less experienced, always wanted to sit up front. I assume this made her feel important or more in charge to sit closer to my mother. I, older and much wiser, knew better. I knew that packing was only fun if you had somewhere to put it. I knew that the backseat was like getting an entirely new room.

With my new room on the horizon, I planned: books on the seat, Barbies on the floor, tape player on my lap. My father had to work this year so my sister got her wish for the front seat and I was allowed to confiscate the back.

"He's simply to busy," my mother would explain, "We'll call him from the road, you'll see, it will be like he's with us." She smiled at my sister to make it all make sense and I caught her eyes as a tinge of what I now consider to be fear entered her voice. Virginia to New Mexico was where we were headed – four days there and four days back.

On a tight budget, we never left the house unprepared. My mother was careful to make sure we had snacks, drinks, and food for the lunches we ate either while riding, or pulled off alongside the highway. My mother, always frugal, packed food for meals inside of an old cooler with a stained white plastic interior that made it look dirty when actually clean. It had a blue lid that carried teeth marks from every childhood dog I could remember. There was lunchmeat, mayonnaise, bread, and pickles; all I ever remember eating while moving. Attached to the side of the cooler was a cookie cutter in the shape of a circle. When the temptations of the roadside McDonalds was too great for too little girls to bear, my mother made us magic food. In seconds she could take a square turkey sandwich and make moons, both half and full. That was the year, if memory serves, that my sister, queen of the food fetish, decided that cheese sandwiches were all she wanted for lunch. Riding in the car meal after meal, I finally realized that is the moon really was made of cheese, the man that lived there must have been American.

We left Virginia at six o'clock in the morning on the hottest day I can remember. I have often thought, since first recalling that day, that it must have been impossible to be that hot that early in the morning, but that's how it lives in my memory, and I never argue with memory. Drug from our beds, my sister and I grabbed the few remaining toys we had kept out the night before and slumped into our positions in the already packed car. To be more specific, while my sister slumped, I climbed. It is an artful thing to be able to climb so gracefully over the mountain of junk that I had so carefully placed into position the night before. Weaving myself into place among toys, I strapped myself in and fell quickly to sleep. I opened my eyes periodically when I felt the car stop, usually so that my mother could make a phone call, though I never saw her lips move at the phone. She always just returned to the car and began driving again. She could drive for eight hours straight without needing rest.

I woke up to the sound of rustling plastic that could

only mean my sister was into the snack bag already. I found her, mesmerized by cheese puffs, staring at the cows that were grazing in the rural Virginia pasture we were passing. I watched one cheese puff after another mechanically being put in her mouth, one hardly chewed before another was already on its way. "Slow down," my mother would remind her, cautious of little kid's stomachs on a road that was nowhere near ending.

I took out an apple, handed my mom a book on tape, and asked her to turn it up. "Make it loud," I said, ready for the voices of people outside the family fill my head. I brought three stacks of books on tape that year, just enough to go an entire day without repeating one. Whenever I am reading now, I can still, when the room is very quiet, hear that "ding" reminding me to turn the page. I always instinctively jump to flip it over; afraid I'll miss something if I waste time.

Now for as much as my family likes to move, we like to make things harder than they ever need to be. My poor mother had been driving for about six hours when the traffic began to slow somewhere near Georgia. My sister and I, being curious young girls, wiggled half our bodies out the windows until we could see what was up ahead. Cars were filing off left and right, directed by a policeman with a staunch appearance and small red flag. My mother calmed her very scared and interested little girls by explaining that the nice policeman wanted only to say hello and look at all the fabulous toys we had brought. As a six-year-old, I bought it. Looking back I realize that "say hello meant search for drugs.

When the police officer got to our car he asked us to pull to the right. I was confused by the direction, sure that he would be so impressed by the haircuts I had so lovingly given to my now bald Barbies, that he would tell us to follow the line of cars continuing down the road. My mother, trying desperately not to panic, was ushered away from the car. My sister and I escorted to another area, and the car searched, piece-by-piece. I was astonished by their lack of grace. How dare they mess up my well-organized system of junk! How dare they mix up the order I had meticulously arranged my books in! I felt an urge inside of me to scream out, to inform them of their grave mistake in placing Barbie next to Ken (they were fighting), and confusing my audio books with my music tapes. I said nothing. I saw the frustration in my mother's eyes as

they left all our belongings laid out on the ground and left for another car. Again, piece-by-piece, everything was put back into the car. I never achieved the grand display I once had, and my back seat room never did feel quite as comfortable. In the end, after the heat from the sun and having to put back together our mess, it felt nice to be inside the car again.

Just as we all took a deep breath, pausing to feel the relief of air conditioning and the rumble of a moving car, my sister looked up at my mother with tears in her eyes and threw up a bag and a half worth of cheese puffs all over her pillow. The heat from our stop had upset her tiny stomach, causing the over-processed food to revisit us. We pulled over again, only miles from where we had just been searched; just been made to stand in the hot sun while men of the law vigorously rummaged through our things. I guess the stop makes sense though, when you think about it. What is more suspicious in the field of drug trafficking than a young mother and her two daughters, one covered in orange cheese dust, and another surrounded by thin, plastic doll hair that she does not understand will grow back.

My mother, who has always seemed to me to be unshakable, took the pillow out of the car and peeled away the carrot colored case only to reveal a well-saturated pillow that would be, for the rest of the trip, out of service. She crammed the pillow in between two suitcases in the trunk and got back into the car. The smell of the incident had started to subside some b then, not that it really mattered. When you are around small children a great deal of the time, you become more difficult to decide whether it's the smell of secondhand lunch, or an elementary school hallway that you are smelling; it is difficult to remember which smell came first.

We spent the first night in a motel just inside Georgia, leaving just early enough to partake in the motel's stale continental breakfast, swap our cheese stained pillow for one of theirs, and for my mother to make another string of calls that never called upon her to speak. We somehow managed to travel most of the next two days without incident. One state blurred into the next as we traveled west, eager to reach New Mexico, to see my mother's parents, and finally return home. The luster of my new backseat room had worn off somewhere between Mississippi and Texas, and as I looked out over the great expanse

of dirt beyond the car; I began to long for the home I had been so eager to leave behind. In the tight backseat I began to forget what it was about my Barbie bungalow that had enthralled me in the beginning. I wanted out of the car and out of this state of dirt. I wanted my home.

It wasn't until we were a good fifty miles away from our third motel when I realized I had left my Ken doll tanning by the side of the tub, catching rays from the fluorescent bulb above. Horrified that my Barbie would be alone, I cried until we reached a small town with two churches and a gas station/general store. My mother, annoyed more by mine and Barbie's dependence on the Ken doll than the crying, finally consented to giving me a few dollars to purchase another. I walked into the store and silently filtered through one aisle after another, searching for something that might work as a mate for my doll. I ended up settling for Juan, a large, Latin doll with beautiful traditional clothing, and the head the size of Barbie's body. They were an odd couple to say the least; I was forced to keep them in counseling for the rest of the trip. "She'd be fine on her own, you know," my mother would say. It wasn't that I didn't believe her; I just wasn't ready to change Barbie's life around when she had so recently been shocked by our change in scenery.

We reached New Mexico just as my sister was beginning to forget the words to all her favorite songs. This is a great thing for a five year old, because when you are five and you forget the words to a song, you don't stop singing, you simply stop singing the words you don't know. No one, even a six year old can hear "John Jacob, Jingleheimer-Schmidt" fifteen times in a row, especially when its only identifying lyric is "na na na na na na," a line traditionally meant to lead into another verse, a verse my sister had forgotten back in Alabama.

Pulling up to my grandmother's house, my mother excused herself to use the phone while I unloaded my sister from the seat where she had somehow stuck herself to the cushion with a combination of gum and ribbon that had, at one point, been in her hair. My grandmother took us inside and we sat surrounded by shelves full of trinkets and mementos, all of which made her smile as she walked past them to the kitchen. As expected, she brought us juice and cookies, the expensive kind that are dusted with sugar and stored in a tin covered in pictures of faraway places. She offered to read a story as grandfather talked to .

our mother outside where we were not aloud to go. I had better plans than story hour, and I walked though the kitchen, past the half bathroom, and into her bedroom. There in her closets were dresses for big girls fashioned like the ones my Barbie wore. Her dresses, hats, and jewelry kept me fascinated and I hardly noticed my mother crying outside. "Stress," my grandmother explained. "All that driving wears a girl out," she lied.

The next morning I woke up excited about the day ahead, all the time to be spent with my grandparents. All night I had dreamed about mud pies, dress up, and story hour. When I got down the stairs though, our bags had been packed up and were resting by the door. My mother was whispering in the next room, and my grandmother did not have the stove on. I was befuddled. If the stove wasn't on, how would she make me Flintstone Pancakes? And why, after all the time I had taken setting up my even newer room upstairs, had all my things been packed away again? I crept into the kitchen and pulled at my mother's side. "It's time to go," was all she said in a fake, cheery voice that must have convinced me at the time, because I went upstairs and woke up my little sister. I was sure that there was more adventure waiting ahead.

As we packed the car, I noticed we had one more suitcase than when we had left Virginia. My toys had also been placed in the trunk, leaving a large space in the backseat that I hadn't made myself. I immediately realized my mother must have been thinking ahead about a beauty shop for those Barbies I had been working on, and I went back in the house to thank her. Once there she explained that my grandmother was coming home with us. "Just for a little while," she said. Confused, but not upset, I climbed into the car, not needing to wiggle into the now sparse space.

The days that followed were full of laughter and stories. My grandmother, the best roommate I may every have, showered me with tales of love and success, played cards for hours, and braided my hair three different ways all displayed on my head at once. My grandmother always knew how to make me beautiful. I was so captivated in the excitement of the ride that I almost did not notice when we pulled into our driveway. With stiff legs, I climbed out of the car and stretched my way up to the front door. As my mother unlocked it I noticed something was missing. The chair, where my father sat and read, was gone. His glasses

that always sat on the table next to the television were gone too. The only thing left on the table was the message machine, blinking a bright red twenty-one, a number I had never seen flash before. Sensing panic and deep breaths coming from my mother, I ran through each room. If it was a robbery, I thought, he probably went for my room first. Thank god I took my dolls with me. But nothing was gone from my room. My sister's was just as she had left it, and the guest room even had the two paper people I had made and left the week before lying on the bed.

When I reached my parents room my mother had already caught up with me. She walked into the half empty room and looked around before I could push past her myself. A piece of paper on the dresser made her cry, and I hugged tightly to her legs. I looked over into the closet my parents shared and noticed an empty space where my father's shoes had been. It was that very moment that I knew I was a nomad; it was in my blood.

It's been years now since that trip across country, and I still think about my backseat room and the stinky orange pillow. I wonder if someone else got that pillow, and a very disturbed part of me wishes they did. I do not like to drive anymore, and my nomadic ways have filtered into other areas of my life. I'm amazed by how much, and yet how little, I can recall about those days, when I thought moving had no consequence and travel was a game designed to keep me entertained. I can remember in detail how the policeman looked that pulled us over, the bedspread designs in hotels, and the voices from the books we listened to. Ironically, I cannot remember much about my father. He lives in my memory as an excuse; my mother's excuse. The only part of him that I am sure about is the space left on the closet carpet where his shoes had been. I often wonder if he had to move, if the possibility of a new room was simply too great to pass up.

Snake Oil

Karen Harrell

Southern Women smell like department stores.
The foundations and oils,
Perfumes that aren't cheap, but smell that way,
The patently medical remedies for the disastrous ravages
of age and time.

Forgoing the sweet magnolia and mists of bourbon,
These regal women search for the empty quick-fix.
The walk into the carnival of cubes,
Straining to hear the soft-spoken barkers of today, pushing
their wares.

Every barker looks the same:
Over-made face, helmet hair, glazed eyes that dart from
one mart to another.
They are robotic in their movements,
Feet turn into rotors, zeroing in on a lone, genteel lady
looking at lipstick.

"Oh no, no, wrong shade," the litany begins.
Age-defying, wrinkle-reducing, and Alpha-Hydroxy have
replaced
vapors, eye strain, and fainting couches.
The perfect red can moisturize and erase the pains of living
and dying.

Next come the peeling, mud masks, and detoxifying toners.
No self-preserving Scarlett needs to rely on lavender oil
and rose water.
Firming lotion negates hard farm work.
The good, strong equatorial sun is shunned for bronzers
and potions.

By reaching perfumes and notions, the barker has lost the
glassy eyes.
Her peepers twinkle with delight at tangible commission,
that dollar for degradation.
The shadow of the juniper rose has been erased and
transplanted,
Now the carnation, bland and generic, reigns supreme.

Fat Boy

Judy McDaniel

They always chose a table near the rear wall of the pleasant neighborhood restaurant, situated out of the mainstream comings and goings of a bustling dinner crowd. Pete Parson liked to treat his family to a nice dinner once a month or so, although his wife, Martha, thought it a waste of money, preferring her own cooking to restaurant fare. Ralph didn't care one way or another as long as he had plenty to eat and his chocolate milk to drink. The rich smells of southern country cooking threatened to engulf the family each time the kitchen doors swung open, and he retreated into the world of food. Ralph Parsons was thirteen years old, and morbidly obese. He walked with difficulty, pausing often to catch his breath. Eating was a different story; Ralph could put away all of the food within his immediate grasp with hardly a pause. That's exactly what he had done until he realized the others at the table had finished and were waiting for him.

"All set?" Pete asked, rising from his chair. His mother, Jane Parsons (whom they all called Nana), pushed back her chair, and began plucking at purse and sweater in that peculiar manner of women as they prepare to relocate themselves. Martha had ordered another chocolate milk for Ralph and was waiting for him to finish it.

"You all go on out," she said. "We're right behind you. Finish your milk, Ralph, and let's go."

As Nana followed Pete to the cashier's stand, Ralph began the tedious business of getting up from his chair. Martha helped the boy to his feet, and the pair began their cumbrous way across the dining room, Ralph using his mother's arm to maintain his balance. Because he was so fat, he gave the appearance of being sloppy. In truth, the boy wore pretty nice clothes; his mother saw to that. The problem was that his shirts always looked two sizes too small, they way they stretched across his stomach. His shorts were the same loose-fitting style that the other guys wore, but on him, they looked ridiculous. Martha was a large woman, noticeably overweight herself, so it was not surprising that they became an embarrassing center of attention. Conversation ceased at nearby tables; eyes first stared, then averted.

An older woman observed the boy with pity, comment-

ing to her husband, "Look at that poor child, Bill. He has such trouble walking."

Bill turned slightly in his chair, watched Ralph and his mother for a moment, and replied,

"He does seem miserable, but look at his mother. I'd say they've got a real weight crisis going on."

"You're probably right," said his wife, but I feel sorry for the boy. Surely, something could be done for him." They returned to their dinner and the conversation in which they had been involved.

Martha was very much aware of the looks and comments directed their way. "I told your father we should eat at home," she grumbled. Ralph sighed. Truth be known, he'd rather eat at home, too, rather than undergo the painful scrutiny that dining out entailed. Arriving at the front door of the restaurant, they found that Pete had pulled the car up to meet them, a kindness on his part. None of the family spoke during the short drive home, although Pete obviously had something on his mind. They dropped Nana off at her house, just a couple of streets over from the Parson home.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Ralph," Nana said as she got out of the car. "You all have a nice evening, and thanks for dinner, Pete."

Later, when Pete and Martha were alone in their bedroom, he asked her, "Can't you do anything about Ralph and the way he eats? He won't live to see eighteen the way he's going."

"So why is it my fault?" demanded Martha, laboriously getting into bed. "I don't see you getting on to him about his eating habits."

"What is it you always say - the family weight problem?" asked Pete sarcastically. "Well, you're right. Your family does have a problem and you're passing it on to our son."

Martha gave her husband a sullen look, saying, "I don't want to talk about it. Ralph has a problem, but he'll grow out of it. He's OK." End of conversation, as far as she was concerned.

Pete sighed, thinking that their conversations always wound up like this when he wanted to talk about Ralph. The boy needed some kind of help and Pete was at a loss as to what should be done. He knew he never was much of a disciplinarian; Martha was pretty much in charge. And why not? He worked hard all day; it wasn't up to him to solve all of the family problems, was it?

Next morning, Pete helped Ralph get his books and

stuff into the car, waited while his son got in, and headed off toward the school. Both enjoyed this brief time together each morning, although each was aware that Pete drove Ralph to school because the boy could not climb onto the school bus. *Man, Pete sometimes thought. We moved into this neighborhood because of the schools and the poor guy can't even ride the bus with the other kids. He's got to be miserable..* Pete's thoughts were cut short as they pulled up to the school drive.

"See you later, buddy," said his dad. "You planning on going to Nana's house after school?"

"Sure, Dad. She'll pick me up. I'll see you." And Ralph began his day at school. Nana did, in fact, pick up Ralph most days, and they had a special visit at her house. She worried about her grandson. *That Martha, she thought, set a poor example for Ralph, constantly cooking and baking and loading them all up with rich foods and sodas. Thank goodness, none of it stuck to Pete!* At her house, Ralph ate healthy snacks, and she was able to distract him from wanting more to eat by engaging him in a new video game or a book she had bought for him. Still, she was growing more anxious about him. Nana had studiously avoided a confrontation with her daughter-in-law. Martha was as defensive as a mama bear when it came to protecting her offspring. Seeing Pete drive by with Ralph on the way to school, Nana made up her mind - *enough is enough, she decided. I've got to intervene.*

Going to his grandmother's house was the highlight of Ralph's day, considering that school was becoming more and more uncomfortable for him. He experienced physical pain at times, like when he had to pick up his books that another boy had "inadvertently" knocked out of his arms. Most of his pain was psychological, though. He was considered a freak by many of the middle schoolers, some of whom had been his friends in elementary school. Hardly a day passed without an encounter with one or two boys as they all converged on their lockers between classes. Someone always seemed to bump into him, sometimes hard enough to almost throw him off balance, sometimes just enough to make him drop something, and they would ridicule his attempt to pick up the fallen objects.

"Hey Ralph, going out for football this semester?" one would ask.

"Yeah," said another. "You can be the ball."

Ralph usually said nothing; he just wanted them to go away. Occasionally, they got to him, and he came back with "Leave me alone. Get out of my face and leave me alone." Ralph was usually pretty docile, a good target for taunting, so when he did retaliate, the others generally left him alone. In class, he had use the desk provided for students with disabilities because he was too fat to sit in the conventional desk chairs. A bright boy, Ralph appeared dull and slow because he seldom spoke up in any of his classes. *If only he could be invisible, he often thought. If only he didn't*

have to go to school at all.

The worst part of Ralph's day was lunchtime. His mother packed his lunch because he was unable to squeeze through the lunch line. By the time he made his way to the cafeteria, most everyone else was seated, and the usual clamor of conversation and utensils was well under way. A few of the boys and girls teased him as he searched for an empty table, making fun of his unusually large lunch bag.

"What's in the bag, Ralph?" was often the question, asked in a mocking tone of voice.

"Bet you've got enough stuff in there for all of us," was another common jibe.

Once settled at a table, Ralph spread out his lunch. And what a lunch it was! It was apparent that Martha didn't want her Ralph to go hungry, judging from the number of generous-sized sandwiches, chips, and cookies, plus a quart of chocolate milk. While he ate, Ralph was able to zone out of his surroundings and the mean kids who teased him all of the time. He thought about going to Nana's house later; she always had snacks and never made fun of him.

So went the fat boy's day, every day, Monday through Friday, a miserable life for a thirteen-year-old. So it might have continued, were it not for a casual remark made by the school track coach. It was Ralph's habit to sit on a bench during the required Physical Education period, and watch the other guys perform their track and field events. He was unable to participate, but had to sit there, just the same. On this particular afternoon, Coach Keely came over and sat down next to him.

"Say, Ralph," asked the coach, "have you ever thought about walking a little on the track? It would give you a little exercise. I don't mean getting out

there like those guys,” gesturing to a group running relays. “Might help with your breathing, too.”

Ralph was both stunned and apprehensive. “I don’t think I could do that, Coach,” he said.

I can’t walk very far, and besides, the guys would laugh me right off the track.”

Coach Keely let that comment rest for a couple of minutes as he and Ralph watched the activity on the field. “I’ll tell you what, Ralph. If you can stay a little while after regular school

hours, we’ll both do a little walking. What do you say?”

Ralph was speechless. Before he could think up a reason to say no, he blurted out, “OK.”

He knew Nana wouldn’t mind picking him up a little later. As long as nobody else knew - he couldn’t

take much more ridicule, and he voiced this worry to the coach. Coach Keely gave him a thumbs up sign, and grinned as if to say, “this is our little project.”

Nana knew immediately, as Ralph eased himself into the car, that he was worrying over some new problem. She knew, too, that he would tell her about it when he was ready. Later, over fruit bars and milk - white, reduced fat milk, the story came out.

“Nana,” Ralph began. “Coach Keely wants me to walk with him after school. I told him OK, but that was dumb. I should have told him I can’t do it.” Clearly, the boy was both elated and scared. His grandmother was also elated; she encouraged Ralph to take Coach Keely up on his offer. She would pick him up a little later - no problem. She sensed that Martha Parsons would be the problem, that she would not take kindly to this unexpected change of plans. Nana decided that it was time to have a few words with Mama Bear about what might be the beginning of a new interest for Ralph. This was the opportunity Nana had been waiting for; now she had a good reason to intervene for Ralph’s own good.

Like clockwork, Martha was in the kitchen, preparing dinner when Nana brought

Ralph home. She had to admit the house smelled wonderful, the tantalizing smells of a chicken roasting in the oven and freshly-made brownies on the table, competing with one another for attention.

“Staying for dinner, Jane?” asked Martha. His grandmother usually dropped Ralph off at his house without coming in.

"No, thank you, Martha. Ralph has some exciting news to share!" Jane replied. "Tell your mother," she said to her grandson. Ralph explained the coach's offer, hoping his mother would approve of the new venture.

"Out of the question. You know you can't do any extra walking," Martha said to Ralph. "You might fall down. How do you know that coach won't just leave you out there by yourself?"

Nana indicated with a nod to Ralph that he should make himself scarce while she and his mother talked about the issue.

"Martha," said Nana, when she finally was able to get a word in. "You want the best for Ralph; I know that. Have you really looked at him, lately? He's getting so fat, it's hard for him to get around. He doesn't say much, but I know the other kids are sometimes pretty mean to him."

Martha was getting upset with her mother-in-law. What did she think she was doing, coming in here and trying to tell her how to raise her own son?

"I don't know what your problem is, Jane. Ralph is still carrying around a lot of baby fat.

He'll lose some of it, you'll see. I do everything in my power to make that boy happy, and you have no right to question what I do." It was obvious that Martha would not be swayed, even if Nana talked herself blue in the face. Fortunately, Pete arrived home in the midst of the argument. Once apprised of Coach Keely's offer, he was amazed. Leaving the two women to their quarrel, he sought out Ralph in order to gauge his son's feelings about such a major deviation from his normal routine.

"What about it, Son? Is this something you really want to try?"

"I want to try, Dad, but I'm scared. I want to show Coach Keely how glad I am that he thinks I can do this. If I fail, it sure won't be the first time, and everybody laughs at me, anyway."

Pete winced at his son's perception of ridicule. Putting his hand on Ralph's shoulder, he said, "I'm with you on this, and for what's its worth, I think you can do it." He made up his mind that Martha would have to understand that Ralph was old enough and, somehow, wise enough to make this decision. She had to turn loose; that was her main problem. Pete was no psychiatrist, but he could see Martha and her cooking as some kind of control. *Probably the way her mother*

raised her, he mused. He returned to the kitchen where his wife and his mother seemed on the verge of an uneasy truce.

"Martha," he told her, This afternoon walking with the coach is something Ralph really wants to do, and I'm proud of him for wanting to try. Let's support him in this." The conversation ended soon, with Martha grudgingly in agreement and Nana secretly pleased.

"Listen, you two," Nana said. "I really am happy for Ralph and I 'm glad we all agree that he should take the coach up on his offer." That said, she was out of the door, and looking forward to seeing her grandson after the school the following day.

Ralph was nervous the next afternoon, as he waited for Coach by the bench where they

had talked the day before. He hoped nobody was watching, and he hoped he wouldn't fall down; he hoped Coach Keely hadn't been putting him on. What if he didn't come? Well, that would be OK, too, Ralph thought. Then he wouldn't have to do it after all. Ralph had barely put his thoughts together, when he saw the coach striding across the track.

"OK, Ralph?" he asked with the grin that would become very familiar to Ralph.

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess," was the boy's reply.

"Then let's do it!" Arm in arm, they began to walk. It was slow going, with frequent stops for Ralph to catch his breath. Coach didn't try to engage him in conversation; extended walking was enough for Ralph to handle. His whole body strained as he struggled to put one foot in front of the other, the overweight body that was unused to the effort now demanded of it. Sweat poured off of him and he really did feel like he was going to fall over any minute. Coach Keely was well aware of Ralph's poor physical condition and the huge amount of fat he carried on his relatively short frame. He called a halt after about fifteen minutes, assuring Ralph they would add a few minutes and a few more yards of track each day.

"You can do this, Ralph. I know you can," were the coach's parting words. Ralph was hurting. Everything hurt, even his throat rasped from practically gasping for breath.

What have I gotten myself into, he wondered. He dried himself off and waited for Nana.

What was I thinking of...I can't do this. Nana was so enthusiastic he wanted to throw up.

"What do **you** know, Nana," Ralph finally burst out.

"What makes everybody think I can get out and walk? I can't even walk down the hall in time for my next class." Nana let him talk, saying no more until they were seated in her sunny kitchen.

"Ralph, honey," Nana began. "Nobody is forcing you to do anything you don't want to do. Want to know what I think? I think you really want to prove to yourself that you can successfully take on this challenge, scary as it may be."

Ralph finished his milk before he answered her. "You're right, Nana, all the way around.

I do want to do it and it is scary. And you know what? I'm going out on that track tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. May I have some more milk, please?"

Little by little, Ralph began walking for longer periods, forcing himself to breathe evenly, and focus on the business of one step at a time. There were times when he wanted to stop, to give up, but he kept walking. For a while, he didn't want to let his new friend and mentor down; soon, he realized this was for himself. His dad always asked him how he was doing, and Ralph knew he was proud. His mom still wasn't particularly thrilled, but Ralph figured she'd come around.

One afternoon, Coach Keely stopped Ralph in the hall and said that he would be running a few minutes late for their afternoon walk, but that Ralph should go ahead and get started without him. Later, stepping out on the track alone, Ralph had a few minutes of panic, the old fear of falling down washing over him. He walked for five minutes or so, before he saw the coach watching him from the sidelines.

"Hey, Coach, are you coming?" Ralph called out to him.

"You walk and I'll watch from here." was the reply.

Ralph was excited when Nana came for him. "Guess what, Nana!" he exclaimed. "Coach tricked me today and I had to walk by myself, and you know what? I did it. Boy, am I hungry!"

Nana allowed an extra fruit bar and, as they sat her kitchen table, she questioned her grandson about his new activity. Gently, she suggested they take a new approach to his eating habits in an effort to boost his energy and endurance. She knew, even as she made the suggestion, how Martha would react if Ralph started turning down some of her biscuits and gravy, her fried chicken and potatoes. Her daughter-in-law would first assume Ralph was coming down with

something, then figure that she, Nana, had put him up to turning away from the extra portions that he normally ate with relish. Well, she'd let the situation play out and see what happened.

That very evening, Ralph declined second helpings of both his favorite potato salad and Martha's tender pot roast. When he failed to ask for more chocolate milk, she could stand it no longer.

"Are you feeling sick, Ralph?" she asked. "You've hardly eaten a thing."

"I'm fine, Mom, just cutting back a little to get in better shape."

Pete had an idea that Ralph knew exactly what he was doing. "Give him a break, Martha. We both know he'll eat when he wants to."

The lunches Ralph took to school seemed to increase in volume, though, Martha's way of making sure he son got enough to eat. Ralph still came into the cafeteria after everyone else, found his lonely table, and spread out the contents of his bag, seemingly oblivious to the smart remarks coming from the other tables. His big lunch seemed overwhelming now that he was walking more and eating a little less at home. He knew what he had to do: he ate what he wanted, then walked deliberately to the bin labeled for surplus food, and tossed about half of his carefully and lovingly

prepared lunch into it. His actions did not go unnoticed, but nobody said anything as Ralph lumbered out of the cafeteria.

The word was out - Ralph Parsons was acting weird. A couple of the guys followed him that afternoon and hid behind some of the benches that lined the track. Ralph and Coach Keely stepped onto the track and started walking. They walked about half-way around, turned, and walked back to their starting point.

"Good walk, Ralph," said Coach. "Tomorrow, it's one full lap. Think you're up for it?"

"Yes, Sir!" Ralph responded. "I'll sure try."

Next day, a few more students showed up to watch Ralph Parsons walk a complete lap around the track, and nobody heckled or taunted him. Nobody said a word, actually. Ralph knew they were there; they probably expected me to fall over before I got half-way around, he thought. He showed them that he could do it, didn't he?

He told Nana about the guys coming out to watch him. "How do you feel about that now, Ralph?" she asked.

"I'm OK with it, Nana, as long as they don't start giving me a hard time about it." Nana wasn't at all sure things were going to continue as smoothly as Ralph thought. She knew a thing or two about kids that age and was pretty sure Ralph was in for more taunting sooner or later.

"Leave yourself some room, Ralph," she said. "And whatever happens, you'll deal with it." And she gave him a big hug.

His mother had calmed down about his new eating habits, although she still gave him the "clean your plate" bit almost every day. Pete said little, other than to suggest to Ralph that they go to the mall on Saturday and get some stuff like good walking shoes and maybe some new pants, since the ones he was wearing were getting a little baggy. It was as though everyone, students and family, waited for the other shoe to fall - for Ralph to go back to being his usual fat, lazy self and for the kids at school to start in on him again. In the meantime, they humored him. That Saturday, before the mall trip, Pete took Ralph to the barbershop. While they waited their turns, Ralph noticed that the barbers had to stop and sweep up after every two or three customers. He thought they needed someone to do the sweeping, but that was as far as the thought went.

Later that day, Pete asked Ralph if he wanted to go out and toss a football for a while.

"Hey, Dad, where did the football come from?" Ralph wanted to know.

"It's my old ball," his dad replied. "I played a little football in high school, and for some reason, I kept this one. Good thing, right?"

The following Monday, Ralph had a funny feeling when he got to school. It wasn't anything he could put his finger on, but something was going on. He found out pretty soon when he got to his locker. A bunch of the guys were just standing around.

"Hey, Ralphie," said one of them. "You sure look funny out there with Coach."

"You're too big and fat to be somebody's pet, aren't you, Ralphie?" from another.

"He thinks he's going to be a big track star, I guess," a third chimed in.

Ralph knew he had to say something; he wasn't about to let them scare him off.

"So, what's wrong with walking around on the track? It's better than sitting on the bench and watching you guys out there." He waited, hoping now that they had had their fun, they'd leave him alone. The bell rang...just in time, Ralph thought.

"Bye, Ralphie, we'll be seeing you," was the parting shot, as they walked off, a couple of them mimicking Ralph's rolling gait.

Sure enough, once in the cafeteria, they made fun of his lunch just like they used to do. One big boy, who was pretty much the school bully, walked past Ralph's table, and just happened to knock his lunch onto the floor.

"Oh, sorry, Ralphie," he said. "Guess your mama will have to make you a double-sized lunch tomorrow." They all laughed, waiting for Ralph to manipulate his bulk to the floor to pick up the remains of his lunch. Instead, Ralph stood up and shoved the bully.

"You knocked my lunch off the table, and you can just pick it up," Ralph said, wondering what had got into him.

Later, Ralph would tell his family you could have heard a pin drop in the cafeteria. It seemed like everything was in slow motion. Next thing he knew, the guy's fist was in Ralph's face, and he fell against the table, blood running from his nose. One of the cafeteria workers apparently called the principal's office and the fight ended as quickly as it had begun. Both boys were escorted from the room. Still, nobody had spoken; they were in a state of shock. Ralph Parsons had taken on the school bully!

That evening, Coach Keely dropped by the Parson home to check on Ralph. He told Pete, "I feel responsible for what happened today. Maybe I shouldn't have encouraged Ralph. I sure didn't see this coming."

"We're pretty upset over the incident," Pete replied, "but it's not your fault. You've helped Ralph gain a little self-confidence, and today he felt strong enough to stand up for himself. Don't think I'm in favor of fighting, and I've told Ralph the same thing, but I think this has been coming for a long time."

"Well, Mr. Parsons, I hope to see Ralph right back out on that track tomorrow. You can be sure I'll be there. Matter of fact, I think Ralph would be pretty pleased if you

showed up, too.”

After the coach had left, Pete looked in on Martha. She had just about hit the ceiling when she got the call from school. But there she was, watching TV, now that she had calmed down. He went upstairs to Ralph’s room, knocked on the half-open door as he always did, and entered the room. Ralph was sitting on the side of his bed, ice pack on his nose which, fortunately, was not broken.

“I don’t want to talk about it any more, Dad.”

“No problem, Son. I just wanted to tell you that Coach Keely dropped by to make sure you’re OK. If it’s alright with you, I may drop by tomorrow afternoon while you’re doing your walk.”

“Yeah, sure, if you want to.” Ralph obviously had little to say, so his father told him goodnight, and went back downstairs.

Ralph put the ice pack on the floor and lay back on his bed. *Why had he done something so stupid?* He looked around his room, a room that was surprisingly neat for a thirteen-year-old

boy. He looked at his computer, the CD player, his TV on the bookcase. He nodded slightly - everything was in its place. Here, Ralph was in control. This was his haven, the one place where he was completely comfortable. How could he go back to school tomorrow? They’d be waiting for him, alright. Besides, his nose really was hurting. Ralph fell into a restless sleep.

He didn’t go to school the next day, nor the next. His parents were beside themselves, trying to convince Ralph that he was not doing himself any good by staying away from school. Martha called the office and said he was sick, after which she did what she had always done when her little boy was sick: she fed him. And Ralph ate. He ate everything she put in front of him. The second day

that he stayed home, Nana came over.

“What do you hope to accomplish, Ralph?” she asked sternly.

“I just want everybody to leave me alone,” was his sullen reply.

That night, Ralph had a dream. It was an old dream, one he hadn’t had in a long time. In his dream, his mom had left him in a video store while she shopped in the mall. He got tired of standing around, physically tired, and began to feel dizzy. He thought if he could lean against the counter for

a few minutes, he'd be OK. But one of the guys who worked in the store told him to get off, because he was so fat he might break the counter. And everybody in the store laughed at him. They laughed and laughed until Ralph woke up, sweating and dizzy. *I know what I have to do, he said to himself.*

The next morning, he was ready when his dad left for work. Pete was relieved and the two of them chatted easily on the ride to school, just as though nothing had happened. Ralph walked purposefully to his locker, got his books, and went to class. He spoke to nobody and nobody spoke to him. *Fine, thought Ralph...you leave me alone and I'll do the same.* Later, as he walked past the guys in the cafeteria, he heard the bully make a remark half under his breath. He also heard a couple of the others tell him to shut up and leave Ralph alone. Opening his lunch bag, Ralph almost laughed when he saw that his mom was still trying to feed away his hurt. Well, that didn't mean he had to eat it all.

"Hey, Ralph, mind if I sit at your table for a minute?" He looked up in surprise. The voice belonged to Mary Sue, one of the really popular girls in school. Tongue-tied, he motioned for her to sit down.

"Glad to see you back," she said. "Those cookies look good; may I have one?" Ralph smiled at that, and passed her the bag of cookies. Mary Sue took a bite of cookie and stood up to leave.

"Well, take care, you hear?" And she walked away, cookie bag in hand. Ralph had no time to figure out what had just happened because the bell rang and he had to clean up his lunch stuff and get to class.

Coach Keely wasn't around after school, but Ralph put on his walking shoes and started around the track. He had to take it really slow - a couple of days with no exercise made a difference. He thought about his dream as he walked. He didn't want to be that fat guy any more. For the first time, he began to see where this walking could lead. More exercise, eat right. It became his mantra as he walked and, at first, he didn't see the guys sitting on the bench watching him. There were three of them and Ralph was OK with that. *More exercise, eat right, he mumbled to himself.*

Later, he told Nana what he had been thinking about. "I need to do this, Nana," he said. "All of a sudden I'm tired of looking this way. I know I've lost some weight and I've got a long way to go. But, you know what, Nana? I'm ready to try."

And he did. The afternoon track walk became a group activity. Much to Coach Keely's surprise, several of the boys began to join Ralph and to call out encouragement. "Go, Ralph!" became the daily greeting. The same guys who formerly gave him such a hard time now passed him in the hall or met him at their lockers with, "Go, Ralph!" He finally persuaded his mom to let him try buying his lunch at school. He could get to the cafeteria right along with everyone else, but wasn't sure if he had lost enough weight to get through the lunch line. It was a tight squeeze, but somebody called out, "Go, Ralph!" and he made it. Ralph went to his usual table, but didn't feel as lonely as he had before. Besides, there was always the chance that Mary Sue would stop by to say hello.

Along with the coach, Ralph's family were his biggest cheerleaders. Nana and Pete could see Ralph's self-confidence growing day by day, and Martha was as proud of her son as any Mama Bear could be. She had quit urging more food on the boy and she let Ralph know she was on his team. Nana missed picking Ralph up at school once he started riding the bus, but he still came to her house most every afternoon.

Getting through the lunch line became easier for Ralph as time passed, and as the semester neared its close, he could occasionally be seen in actual conversation with one of the boys or girls who had either taunted or snubbed him. He got up the nerve to walk into his classes and take a regular seat instead of the larger one - and nobody said a word. Two or three of the boys who had been his worst tormentors even thrust their fists in the air in mute tribute. Once he felt himself a part of the class, Ralph was more inclined to speak up, and to volunteer answers, which pleased and surprised his teachers. He took it slowly, keeping up with his afternoon program. If he seemed too smart or too cocky, it would take only a word or two to totally shatter his fragile self-confidence.

Ralph still had one more thing to do, and he intended to do it on the following Saturday, when he and his dad went to the barbershop. The two barbers and the men who frequented the shop had

remarked on Ralph's weight loss and they had begun to kid him about how he'd have more girlfriends than he could handle, if he didn't watch out. *Good man talk, Ralph thought, and he was proud.* When Mr. Wilson picked up the broom and began to sweep around his chair, it was the moment

Ralph had been waiting for.

"Say, Mr Wilson, don't you need somebody to do that for you?" Ralph asked the barber.

"Yeah, Wilson," said one of the customers, "if you didn't spend so much time sweeping, we wouldn't have to spend so much time waiting." The others laughed at his joke.

Mr. Wilson gave Ralph a long, hard look. Finally, he said, "Well, Ralph, sounds like you're asking for a job. How old are you now?"

"Almost fourteen," replied Ralph, "and I could sweep up for you on Saturdays." He waited. Pete waited.

"We'll give it a try, son. You come in here Saturday morning, 9:00 sharp. And I'll talk to your dad here about what I can pay you."

"Yes, Sir, Mr. Wilson!" Ralph was elated. He had a job. He had a long way to go to get himself in good shape, but he knew he had made the right start. He was still the fat boy at school, but he didn't get teased nearly as much, and even the teasing was different - *not as mean, Ralph thought*. Maybe he could start running a little, and maybe by next semester, he'd be able to take part in P.E. classes. Best of all, he had some friends. He had the full support of his family, and that had taken some doing! Ralph Parsons would never forget what it felt like to be so fat he could hardly walk, so fat he couldn't even get on the bus, or go through the lunch line. Now, he could concentrate on being a new guy - a better guy.

I Am

Erin Christian

I weave worlds into being with threads of belief as delicate and beautiful as gossamer.

I am a ringleader of a circus, with the crowds clinging to my words with desperation akin to that of the last drops of morning dew on leaves before the sun that is that is their working lives burns away their happiness.

I wage wars with precision surpassing the finest generals, for as soon as I declare war and sound the drums of battle, I am known the victor.

I am a creator, birthing entire societies of people from the womb of my imagination. Bringing forth people who inspire in others love, hatred, joy, and despair and ending their lives when they have served a purpose.

I am a believer in truth and love and selflessness, but also in hatred and evil and vile human nature, for in order to have light there must also be darkness.

From my mind, to my heart, through my fingertips, to the pen bleeding its life upon parchment flows life and death and love and longing and hope and divinity and pain and sadness and mirth and mischief and most of all, understanding.

I am a daughter, a student, a lover, a dancer to the music that sounds from the Earth, I exist for the entertainment and emotional fulfillment of all others.

I am, because of all things human, a writer.

Breathe

Carmela Orsini

Just once:

Take a breath, now.

Inhale...before the plunge:

Stomach turning

Brow sweating

Eyes blinking

Hands shaking

Holding the inhale...

Stop breathing

Fear

Fear of the moment awaiting;

Exhale, exhale,

Exhale...

Relaxed.

I Do.

Disconnecting Houston

Clinton J. Droste

I awoke with the viscous air clinging to my lungs, the back of my throat was ablaze and my throat was smarting. My eyes remained closed, but somehow I was able to picture each breath, as I exhaled, condense to form small clouds of body heat that I was quickly losing. My hands were frozen, tightly clenched, my fists burned, and my nails were digging into my skin. I tried to sit up, but my bladder was so full that my kidneys ached. As I struggle to open my eyes, I could feel my eyelashes being ripped out by the crust that had glued them together. I tried to move my feet, but as I pushed them away from my body, I felt a lashing on my ankles. I was hog-tied.

I had managed to open my eyes, but the darkness was piercing. I struggled violently, back and forth, side to side, but it was no use. I tried to yell, but what came out was more like a grunt. My nose sensed a familiar smell, but it was not so familiar as to remember right away what it was.

Why am I tied up, I wondered? Why is it so dark? How did I wake up here? Where is here?

"Hello!"

"Hey...Anybody?"

My body was uncontrollable. A thousand different thoughts ran through my head, and then I went out, unconscious, unaware, into a deep sleep that cradled me tightly; no dreams, no tossing, no turning, only darkness.

As I awoke for the second time, I was a little more receptive of my surroundings, though I had no idea how long I'd been asleep. The darkness still cramped the tiny quarters that I had been assigned, and I tried to feel around for anything that felt remotely familiar. Still, my arms and legs were bound, but now it felt more like a heavy weight upon my body. I could feel a strange sensation of dampness clinging to my back and shoulders, thick and sticky, like molasses. The odor was stronger now, and I was trying to make sense of it. I was so close to identifying it, but my mind was fighting the information that was

forcing its way through my nostrils. I could taste the staleness of blood in my mouth, but this was of little concern considering the seriousness of my situation.

"Hello?"

"Anybody...?"

"Heavenly Father, please forgive me for my sins
 Father, in Jesus name I pray. God...?"

"Help me...!"

I felt an evil spirit cloaking my numbness, my mind was astir, my heart was pounding, like an ancient drum lost in the midst and the flora of the jungle. At first, I though I was hearing thunder, but as the noise repeated itself, it became clear that I was hearing footsteps. As they neared, I went under again.

This time I felt cold hands grabbing and prodding, lifting and sweeping my lifelessness. I felt something scraping my chest like a razor slicing into my armor, and for the first time in days, I heard someone speaking. I tried to make out the words, but they were melded together, like a river, flowing over rocks. I wanted to respond, but I could not move. I saw the sun, bright and bold, flash and then disappear. Then I felt a pain that I could never forget, as though someone had their hand in my chest, moving and rearranging my insides like living room furniture. Slam, pull, push, tug, squeeze. I cried out, but my lips did not move.

Now, the voices seemed to be coming from more than one person, they pushed through the air, twisted and infused. I tried reaching out to grab the effluent noise, and then, nothing; no footsteps, no pain, no sun. In this silence I could sense the rotation of the earth. I imagined life going on as if I hadn't missed a day. I knew the moon would show its full face again, and somewhere someone was being born.

Suddenly, I plunged into a deep blue sea, my lungs filled with vascular lymph, and my weightlessness suspends my weariness. I think back to my childhood, but the memories are short, and encrypted; bits and pieces rush in, and then disappear. I see faces that I had forgotten, and I smell distinct aromas of places that I once visited. My body seizes and jerks forcefully and bursts

through the surface of the still water. I gasp strongly for air, and receive a huge dose to fill my lungs.

Someone is calling my name. I recognize the voice, this beautiful voice, it...it's my wife!

"Gloria...baby? I hear you. Gloria!"

Who is she talking to? I don't recognize the other voices. Why doesn't she hear me?

"I'm here. Can you hear me, Gloria?"

Why is she crying? What have these people done to her? I swear I'll kill the bastards if they hurt her. Then Gloria leans over me and I hear...

"Houston...wake up."

"Oh God, Houston. I can't live without you."

"Gloria, I'm right here. Please don't cry."

"I'm awake, look at me! I'm fine."

What is happening to me? Why does she not hear me? What kind of sadistic joke is this?

"Houston, please. I love you."

"Come on Mom, don't do this to yourself. We have to let him go. Dad can't hear you. The doctor said he doesn't even know we're here."

I Do

Sophie Hayle

Coveting the green ring
that gives away the impermanence
of the once gold band
you left by the sink,

I know better than to want
the passing promises you
once accepted;
the fate you sealed with a whispered
I do.

Baby on the way-
I can hear the screams to come
that you will silence with your
single voice
the only one left in that house.

I know better than to want
the struggles that will come
and the lines of too young and should have
people whisper in your dark.

Coveting your new title,
tacked on like a misplaced notion,
a new letter separating the
single syllable girl you once were.

Yes, I know better.
Yes, I covet still.
It's not the answer,
It's the question.

Insomnia

Erin Christian

When the eyes burn as fierce as hot coals and throb
woefully in their sockets.

When the joints creak wearily and the skin pringles at each
brush of cotton sheets as you thrash about in a battle for
comfort.

When the thoughts of the mind race across days past,
remembering all that was and all that could have been, as
the deafening sound of crickets pounds in ears that long
for sweet silence.

When the shadows of a darkened room dance and weave as
spectres of the forgotten world touched by sunlight and
yawns turn to sigh as the warmer, more welcoming world
is longed for.

Puddles

Katherine Walker

The rain falls cold and gray. I huddle in a plush oversized chair inside a plush oversized bookstore sipping bitter coffee from a paper cup purchased at a sleek and shiny coffee shop tucked away amidst a maze of bookshelves. Serious-faced people inhabit the archipelago tables. One man squawks into his cell phone. Another hammers an electronic reply to an instant message on his laptop computer. A woman stares in feigned interest at her tablemate's discourse. It is a disjointed pantomime of intimacy. I turn my back on them and face the horde.

Bodies ebb and flow in a living ocean. Wave after wave of people wash through the doors, spilling across the bookstore and flooding into the cavernous mall behind. Weekend shoppers: herds of angst-ridden teenagers seeking sanctuary from parental eyes, preoccupied parents dragging ill-tempered children by the hand like dogs on leashes, couples flaunting like peacocks to see and be seen. Everyone with somewhere to be and something to do, scurrying to and fro with a misplaced sense of urgency, their arid faces seeing without sensing the vacuous earnestness in which they exist.

I sit on my little island beyond the tide with a book in my lap. The familiar new book smell wafts over me in a chorus of virgin paper and glue. However, my mind is too numb to crack its hardbound shell, too dull to decipher the words printed across its pages. So instead, I stare through the rain-streaked window. Cars circle the parking lot beyond like vultures until they find that one perfect parking place. More people spew forth, running across the asphalt towards the sheltering doorway.

Why do people run in the rain as if a few more drops of water or a few less footsteps make such a difference? It is really a fear of getting wet? Or could it be something deeper, some hidden reflection we choose not to recall of days when time was all we had; a child's memory of watching a puddle form drop by drop until the entire world has melted into that mirror pool and time only exists as the tinkling heartbeat cadence of drip ...plop...drip?

I ask myself but I have no answer.

Cell Phone Man grates his chair against the tile. I turn to view the little tableau and find it very much the same: Computer Man still types away, Aloof Woman is now the one regaling her friend with some anecdote while the friend sits in detached attentiveness. Cell Phone Man gathers his newspapers and rises,

phone still in ear, and walks away from the remains of a small latte and half-eaten danish. As he crosses the store, he bumps into my chair.

"Sorry," he mutters as he turns only a fraction in my direction. His self-important scowl seems to say I shouldn't have been in his way. I watch him sidestep through the door as a woman carrying a child in tow tries to navigate the narrow entrance. Cell Phone Man pauses at the curb and glares into the sky, willing the sky to cease for him alone. The rain falls unimpressed. He holds the newspaper and holds it over his head as he dashes to the dry safety of his car.

A splash of color catches my eye. Amid the vast sea of somber hues, a small red umbrella bobs like a wind-filled sail in the hand of a little girl. Her other hand is enmeshed with her father's, pulling him slowly across the parking lot in a zigzag path. She stops to inspect each puddle she comes to only a moment before taking a great leap into its center sending the water up in shimmering sprays. Her impish face dances with laughter. The eyes of her father reflect the little girl's amusement. When they near the curb, she closes her umbrella and, taking both of her father's hands, leaps once more as he lifts her in momentary flight before alighting a few steps from the door. They enter the store and the man wipes the rain from his face with his free hand. His neatly ironed slacks are soaked from the knees down because of the little girl's romp. As the pair walks further into the bookstore, the man catches my watching eyes and smiles. I realize it is in response to my own.

I rise from my island and navigate through the horde to the checkout counter. A woman whose weary eyes belie the painted-on smile so carefully applied at the start of her shift scans my book and places it into a plastic bag with practiced efficiency. I hand her some cash and she hands me a receipt with my change.

"Thank-you-come-again-I-can-help-the-next-person-in-line-please?" she rattles off as a man in line behind me is already inching his way forward.

"Thank you. Have a wonderful day," I reply with a smile. The painted-on smile falters a bit as the clerk's face registers mild shock at the interruption of her routine.

"Thank you," she repeats slowly before turning to the impatient man before her. Her eyes seem just a little less weary.

I step outside and raise my face to the sky. The first kisses of raindrops on my face are cool and fresh. I unfurl my own sail and swing it wide to the gentle breeze. Stepping from the curb onto the water-slicked asphalt, I sail off to seek a puddle of my own. The world melts away while all around me the rain falls.

Until

Valeri Moore

In seclusion I drop the mask I hide behind.

On my knees I pray.

I give up my confessions of what I did wrong,

until my

throat aches

my stomach is empty

and tears have cooled my burning cheeks.

I pray until I

Feel deserving again,

until I can look at myself in the mirror.

Still I shiver.

Trying to push the memories of my confession away,

I pick up my mask.

returning to the role i play

I step back into my life,

wipe the tears from my eyes.

Surrounded by familiar faces

I play my part just right;

Laughing,

Smiling,

I hide my pain

all the while convincing myself

when I am good enough,

Then I will be me.

Safety and Comfort Guide

Karen Harrell

The woman has been sitting in my section for over an hour now. I've properly refilled her coffee cup four times, making sure she is well stocked with coffee whitener every time I stop by her table. Of course, it isn't real half-and-half; this isn't that kind of place. We specialize in comfort food, comfort food she doesn't seem to be interested in. When she first sat down, I listed the specials: meatloaf and mashed potatoes or fried catfish and green beans. She didn't even look at me while she declined to order. She barely croaked out "I'm waiting for someone to meet me."

Since then, the mound of creamer has grown to enormous proportions beside her cup; she only uses one per full cup of coffee, but doesn't take sugar. It's like some sort of mathematical equation; it's policy to bring at least three creamers, so she has eight left over from the twelve I've brought her so far. Every time I refill her cup, she pours in her one creamer and spends at least two minutes stirring it in, while she stares blankly at the tablecloth. After she is done stirring, she looks over at her mute mobile phone, as if she has missed a call. It isn't very loud in here today; Wednesdays at 3 p.m. rarely are. This is why I've had time to refill her coffee and stare at her from behind the drink station. I don't think she's noticed, yet.

She isn't the type of woman I usually go after, but I can see a hint of attractiveness about her, hidden behind her nervousness. She's not overly well dressed for an office atmosphere, but in this land of jeans and T-shirts, she is dressed to the nines. She has on a grayish purplish pair of pants with a dark purple blouse. Her jacket, which matches the pants, is draped carefully on the back of her chair. Her dark brown hair is in a severe bun, and I can see strands of red that seem natural, not out of a bottle. Her makeup is minimal, as far as I can tell, just a bit of eyeliner and shadow. I can see her freckles peaking out from behind light foundation, and her skin is pale beneath the little bit that she is wearing. She looks like she may be between 25 and 35: the age range that guys like me can never read. I always end up on the opposite end of the scale in that range when I try to guess a woman's age. I used to work in the midway at carnivals, guessing ages

and weights. One girl cried because I guessed she was 32 when she was really 26. Another beamed when I guessed 25; she turned out to be damn near 40. I didn't keep that job long.

I just refilled her cup again; this time she looked toward me. She didn't really look at me, more at my hands filling the cup. When I asked if she was ready to order, she actually spoke in a relatively louder tone, but still didn't want food. I'm back at the drink station, watching her stir the cup for minute two. I think she's being stood up, but I'm not sure. She seems so anxious, like she doesn't want to meet whoever is coming. I think this last cup of coffee has kicked in because she keeps eyeing the door like she thinks any minute now, here comes my guy. I can't imagine she's here for a date; who the hell takes a woman out to a country restaurant on a Wednesday before 5 p.m.?

While I watch her, I start to imagine what she does all day. I think she is a teaching assistant at the local college. I haven't seen her around, but she seems the right age, and her suit isn't good enough for her to be a full-fledged professor. It looks like she is comfortable in it and that she has owned it for more than a year or two. I see a couple of patches that are worn on the jacket's elbows; I bet she leans on them a lot. She has a dab of chalk dust on the cuff of her blouse, pee yellow against that dark purple. I saw that the last time I filled the cup. She can't be a high school teacher or middle school, they don't let out until 4 p.m., and it isn't quite 3:30 yet. Plus, she came in around 2; I remember because I had just finished rolling silverware for the dinner rush.

She just took a book out of a hidden inner pocket from her jacket. It looks slender, like a date book. Maybe she is a businesswoman, but I can't figure where from in this town; we don't have an over abundance of corporations. She could be from the city, but why would she drive all the way here to not eat food? She can get coffee in one of those chain places that specialize in strong coffee at a strong price. Instead, she is sitting here drinking our crappy brew.

I've come to hate the guy she is waiting for. At this point, I know it is definitely a guy; she is just too jumpy for it to be a long lost twin or a girlfriend from high school. She doesn't have a purse with her, so I don't think it's a date. Girls always seem to bring purses on dates, so they can touch up their lips or just look girlier. I like women

who leave the damn things at home. Anything they need, they should be able to carry in their pockets. If they don't have pockets, then they are too fancy for me. She isn't wearing lipstick, so she doesn't need to touch it up. Everything else is in her bottomless jacket pockets. I think I love her for that.

A man just walked in. She looks quickly at the door, but it isn't her man, he just wants to use the john. I notice she still hasn't started on this fifth cup, so I am still behind the drink station, fiddling with the pitchers, wiping the counter over and over.

When I get lonely, I start to read the warning labels around my apartment. One of my favorites is on my computer keyboard. It says, "To reduce risk of serious injury to hands, wrists or other joints, read Safety & Comfort Guide." Funny thing is that the keyboard didn't come with a guide; I got it in the mall when my old one went on the fritz. That always makes me chuckle; so many things should come with a Safety & Comfort Guide. I wish I could write one for this lady; she is the furthest from safe and comfortable that I've seen in a long time. She reminds me a bit of the woman who ran the funnel cake stand at the carnival I worked for. Both of them have nails bitten to the quick. Both of them drink coffees like crazy. I mean, really, five cups in just over an hour. No wonder she's so jumpy.

Whoa, her man is here. He just sat down and looks peeved as can be. I think she is his mistress and he didn't want to meet her near where they live. He's older than she is; he looks about 45 and is wearing an old suit, with stupid patches on the elbows. He has really dark hair with lots of gray strands and is unloading a leather satchel. Boy oh boy, he just keeps piling books on the table; they all look dusty.

I just got him a coffee. What a dick, he barely grunted at me. Neither of them want food, and my girl refuses to look up from the coffee cup now. He keeps acting like her father; he's red in the face and keeps talking at her, down to her. She has a little color now, a blush in her cheeks like she is ashamed. I'd like to shame him, making her wait that long. I think I'll spit in his coffee cup, a nice fresh cup of phlegm for his creamer.

I gave him his coffee and he didn't even thank me. Hell, he didn't even acknowledge my presence. He is definitely pissed about something; she's crying now, silently. I wanted so badly to ask her if she needs help, but

she won't look up from her cup at all. I bet he beats her, shakes her like a doll and throws her around the hotel room before he takes her. I can see him doing that, grasping her turned in shoulders and just shaking her until her teeth rattle. Or, maybe he just yells at her while she cowers on the bed, wearing whatever skimpy thing her throws her way. I bet his wife is fat and wears too much makeup. I bet she carries a purse.

Now he's calming down. He just grabbed her hand and is talking softly to her. They are leaning into each other, like they are at some romantic bistro instead of a greasy spoon. He's like the side show barker I had to beat up the summer I was at the carnival. He wouldn't stop yelling at the nervous funnel cake girl. That's what finally lost me my job, that and the fact I couldn't guess ages worth a shit. I can't stand a man who yells for no reason, especially at a woman. I mean, what the hell is this guy thinking, yelling at her in public, making her cry? I bet he's bad in bed and she only stays with him because she is lonely, like me, like that funnel cake girl was. I could save her from him. I wanted to save the carny girl, but she had never known anything better. This girl must have had at least one decent guy in her life.

He's kissing her hand now. What a shithead, buttering her up. I bet he's whispering crap like "I don't mean to get so mad, but you need to read all of these books if you want me to pump you full of my married guy jizz once a week." I may not be able to guess ages, but I know what lurks in the mind of a dirty old man. She deserves better. I think I'll bring her some pie.

Ha! Old married guy didn't like that one bit. He started fuming as soon as I walked up with the pie, just a big old piece of apple pie with extra ice cream on the side. She looks like she needs to fatten up a bit; I've never met a girl who eats pie and takes shit from some dude. I can save her with pie; she's eating it and looked over at me smiling. Now I know I love her, for sure. He keeps glaring at me; I didn't bring him crap. Maybe I should bring him just that, a pile of steaming crap on a plate, make him eat shit instead of her.

My boss made me step outside for a smoke; he could see me getting mad at the guy with my girl. He smoothed it over while I was gone and he wants me to apologize. Screw that; instead, I walked right up to the married asshole and popped him one in the jaw. I guess

that was a mistake; my girl started bawling and screaming "Why'd you hit my dad?" Shit, guess I don't guess anything right anymore. It's like at the carnival, when I hit that barker. I almost went to jail over that, but the carnival owner got me out of the jam, as long as I promised not to ever show up again. No problem there, I hate carnivals.

Now the girl has calmed down a bit. I'm just standing here looking at her, waiting for her dad to get up. Finally she looks at me.

"Why'd you hit my dad?"

I explain to her all about thinking he was her lover and that I wanted to save her from him. I explain about the funnel cake girl and the barker. I explain about how I can take her away from here and start fresh, maybe in the city. I explain how I love her and I will always take care of her. She just looks at me, big brown eyes brimming with tears, but a small smile starting at the corner of her mouth. The whole time her dad is still cold clocked on the floor and my boss is just screaming at me.

"What's your name?"

I tell her my name is Lex, short for Lexington. I tell her about how my mom was a history buff and really dug the battle of Lexington. She just laughs softly, so I keep talking about how my mom died and my dad still lives in a little house in town. I tell her I finished school, my mom never raised a moron. I tell her that she doesn't need all those dusty books to live, just the world in all its glory. Her dad is starting to come around, so I start shaking, waiting for the inevitable return punch, or lawsuit, one or the other.

Then my boss taps my shoulder and I'm back behind the drink station, rolling silverware. I guess I blanked out for a while there because the girl has just walked in and sat down. This time she's smiling; she's wearing her hair down and free. She looks over at me and winks. This time, she orders a big slice of apple pie and a cup of coffee. She looks in my eyes instead of at my hands. She smiles at me and says "Thank you." She's the funnel cake girl, all grown up, not needing me anymore. She eats her pie and drinks her cup of coffee, this time with two creamers instead of one. Then she grabs her purse and her check and heads out of my life forever.

Rebellious Child

Tyeshia Redden

I sit with lyrical devices in hand, desperately trying to
salvage the image I maintain Yet these so-called skills
cannot subdue the emotions my mind seeks to contain
Suddenly and abruptly hurt by the most unexpected
Thrown out into the cold, like the wandering soldier that
has defected

A longing to understand coupled with the shackles of one
who loves too much

Told that harsh decisions are made only for my good, only
out of love and such

And the mind-blowing realization of one who does not love
at all

Why I have been given these gifts only to squander them
To have others misconstrue my meanings and create
another problem

Denied my birthright under the pretense of love

Yet, she relit my flame, my true mother, the one from
above

In solitude, I endure the struggles that you carelessly
dismiss

Listening to the unfounded blasphemies that pour from
your lips

However, that was when I was young...

You cannot comprehend the sheer terror I feel at becoming
you

But I was never meant to be on your level or follow your
every cue

Even now, you are trading subtle deceptions for blatant
lies

I see the bleak torture in store, for the windows to the
soul, truly are your eyes

Your ceaseless babble is only the beginning to your own
ether

The unspoken now being said, off any scale, cannot be
handled by any meter

Now I have found that lyrical devices are not needed to
soothe this beast

Only through my turmoil will I ever find my peace

I only need my goddess-given words to truly express my

desires

You have only felt the heat; you are not ready for the
flames of my fires

I know your game, seen through your attempts at reconciliation

I need you about as much as I crave anthrax in my inhalation
In this never-ending struggle for every inch of satisfaction,
I must first battle a mile

Unknowing, not seeing, deaf, dumb, and blind to the
plight, to the passion of this rebellious child

Irrational

Carmela Orsini

Oh no, not again.

Wait a minute; be my friend.

I need you here; I need you now;

I need your help; I don't know how.

I'm free falling, falling hard:

So deal me in – give me good cards.

And if you do, I'll know you tried,

But if you don't, I know you lied.

Sorry again, I know I'm wrong.

What has kept you my friend so long?

I don't mean to be so harsh, so mean;

I'm so self-destructive, it seems.

So here we are to the final though,

For I am one not to be bought:

Are you strong, can you handle me?

Are you tough enough to be

My friend?

Oh no, not again.

Wait a minute; be my friend!

Ocean

Ditrie Sanchez

the ocean swell
is at just the right angle
to make you want to jump overboard,
and the sun's rays are pinging
off any bit of metal to be found
like madmen in search of a memory.
you don't really know
that salt can sting
until it slaps you in the face
like a performing seal
out of a Calder stabile
and once it does you wonder
does the sodium do it
or the chloride,
but then there's a whap
and you decide it's worthless
pain is pain, chemical or no.
on the starboard side
a slip of skin wafts about
sliding in and out of the water
it's embarrassing, really-
it has no boundaries.
but the tourists love to watch it
so you bring them here
to this indecent place
where the dolphins seduce
children's virginal hands.
it's a time of discovery.
i wash my hands
then turn the wheel.
that's enough for today...

I Sing a Song of Change

David Bailey

Saturday night is a strange beast. I sit in an easy chair while reading some winded writer rant on about walking in wooded areas. The television sits in front of me blaring a badly written skit program featuring untalented actors. The night is cold. A blanket sits comfortably around my shoulders giving me a strange feeling of immersion in some strange womb. What is most frightening about this is that I am enjoying it!

I enjoy the cold because it gives me an excuse to bundle up and bathe myself in a false sense of snug security. I love the idiotic rambling of the television because it fills the silence and blinds me to the fact that I'm alone. The piece of literature I have been scanning for 2 hours drones on and on lulling me into a slow quiet stupor. I nod my head and my thoughts scatter like a thousand insects on caffeine skittering about in every direction. Then they slowly dissolve into nothingness.

Then I see her. She stands before me motionless. She stares off into a distance, searching, scanning, and waiting. After a few excruciating seconds her eyes turn to me. She stares at me blankly and expressionless. Her gaze is comforting and soothing. There was a time when I prayed every night just to look into her eyes. Then I realize she is not looking at me. She is looking straight through me.

Then it starts. An echo of a song attempted long ago begins to play through my head. It is a refrain meant to praise and profess concealed feelings of love, but instead erupted into the world a weak, pathetic whimper that I try desperately to forget. It is a bastard child I dare not claim. No matter how much I run, it always finds me.

With a sudden lurch I'm pulled from my pathetic stupor. The book falls to the floor with the intensity of a brick on glass. The dialogue from the awful television program now pounds like a megaphone propped up near my ear. I shiver and feel the sensation of cold withered hands scraping down my back. The memory of that song has once again ruined a perfect evening.

What woman could cause such pain and despair? What song could possibly be that bad? One probably thinks of cheesy dime-store romance novels. Maybe she

was my first love and time gradually separated us. Maybe it was an unrequited obsession that tangled my mind into ugly knots like a rope fed through the spokes of bicycle. Maybe the song was ours and her absence has made it a forbidden taboo because it reminds me of her. The truth is that it's much simpler and embarrassing.

Her name was Elizabeth, and I think I loved her. I had watched her from a distance for about three months trying to muster the courage to say something. It's an old story that's been retold more than "Romeo and Juliet". Immature male struggles to overcome the fear of actually conversing with a member of the opposite sex. Girls are bug zappers to thirteen-year-old boys. We buzz around them, fixated in their all-encompassing glow; yet we keep our distance because we know the moment we touch we fry our brains and fall lifeless to the ground charred, black, and shriveled.

After a couple of months I gave up. She was a couple of baseball fields out of my league. I turned my mind to more important things like card games, CD's and band class. Than one monumental Saturday night my friends and I attended a concert. The music was so loud any attempt at conversation turned into a screaming match. The lead singer wailed like a bat. He thrashed around the stage with the overabundant energy so often associated with a child that desperately needs Ritalin. This was the Hell that brought me face to face with her.

I had just finished telling myself that there was no way this night could yield anything good or redeemable. I turned to leave and God answered the prayer I had abandoned. I was face to face with her. For the first time I gazed directly into her eyes. I no longer perceived the presence of the ground. I felt light and weightless. The experience was remarkably similar to huffing aerosol. She was so beautiful to me. All I wanted to do was tell her how lovely she was. I wanted to fashion my words into poetry for her. I wanted to woo her with a true song of love and affection.

Her mind numbing beauty dulled not only my senses but my words as well, "You...you're...uh...you're so beautiful. You're just so beautiful." My voice thundered through with the power of a cricket's chirp. The song I wished to sing for her had escaped my lips as a detestable mutation no better than the piercing screams of the heavy metal singer. My stomach seared with tumultuous agony as a single thought repeated through my mind like a morbid metronome, "You Idiot! You Idiot! You Idiot!" She just stood there and stared blankly like one would look at a rock or a wall. I walked away and sat in the parking lot for the remaining hour of the concert. The stars were lovely that night.

We never actually spoke again at any length. I would see her floating by like a ghost in the halls not even noting my presence. There were instances where those eyes would turn to me, but instead of feeling weightless

and giddy I would feel anchored. I would usually stare down to the ground hanging my head in shame with the horrid mockery of a song echoing through my head. Those weak words backed up by the screaming of a talentless psycho haunt me still to this day.

I should never have given up on her. Looking back I say to myself that every teenage boy makes a complete moron out of himself on a regular basis. There is no possible way this girl nursed feelings of bitter hatred and angst simply because my first words to her were more than a little awkward. In reality, she may have been somewhat flattered. She was probably confused, but definitely flattered. I turned away from her and ran because I was embarrassed by one little botched attempt at a song. I would rather have forgotten that moment completely than continue pursuing something meaningful with her. The truth is you cannot run; you can never forget. It was bound to happen again anyway.

And it did happen again. This is not the only song that echoes through my head and ruins an otherwise good day. This one usually surfaces while I'm driving to work in the morning. I'll be singing to a laughable sixties song about love and revolution. My voice rings within my head and seems to match beautifully to the music like I'm some undiscovered protégé. I imagine myself on stage performing to an eager audience showering me with affection. It takes no effort. The music flows naturally from me and I feel like a god. I laugh at my confidence, knowing how terrible I really must sound.

Once again a melody begins to play in the distant corners of my memory. It is high pitched, off key, and simply awful. Once again it's the sound of my own voice. I try to put it out of my memory and think of other things, but it's too late. It breaks out from the confines of my subconscious and dominates my thoughts. I try to turn away but it grows cancer like until there is no direction to look without staring directly into it. I let off the gas and begin to coast slower and slower. A short distance behind me a horn screams and I imagine the curses and obscenities shouted by the driver. I wish I could hear them. Anything would be better than this damn song from a time I wish I could forget.

This is how the song was sung. I was at a party standing alone in a corner sipping on some disgusting punch with a strange burning taste and an odor that reminded me of carburetor cleaner. I couldn't seem to break through the social barriers that separated me from the females. So I just stood in quiet desperation trying to give the appearance of having a good time. I stood with my arms folded in front of me bouncing to whatever song came over the speakers. I probably looked like a chaperone. An effeminate Latin American pop star burst from the speakers singing of finding that one true love, giving agonizing commentary to my present situation. The scene was

saturated in irony and perverse humor. I really liked the song, and I'm pretty sure the punch was spiked. I began to quietly sing along with the lyrics confidant in the vastness of my social isolation. I didn't realize how loud I was.

I remember their eyes, all turning and staring at me like I had committed some vile crime. To be realistic I had just practically raped the song. An agonizing silence passed over the room as the song came to an end. It was like the long quiet pause just before someone is executed in a guillotine. A young girl approached me. She was mildly attractive and my slightly inebriated logic had as of yet failed to understand the true extent of my foolishness.

"Hey," I said with a slight tinge of self-congratulation. I thought I had succeeded in finally attracting one.

"Hey, do you know who sings this song?" Her voice was like a harp, quick yet with a lasting resonance.

"Huh huh, Yeah I think his name is Valero or something Spanish like that", I'm sure she could smell the sour fire of alcohol on my breath.

"Why don't you let *him* sing it then?"

Five minutes later I was stumbling out the door into the all too familiar cold of the night. I remember standing there dumbfounded trying desperately to understand what had happened. Thought itself was challenging for me at this point considering the amount of tainted punch I had consumed standing alone in the corner. I breathed deeply and slowly while gradually lowering myself into a sitting position on the ground. I held my head in my hands fighting tears. Eventually I looked up and gazed upon my old friends, my true friends. The stars were once again incredibly lovely.

Both of these memories are songs that erupted from me. They were poorly developed and embarrassing, but that is not why they haunt me. They torture and plague me because I gave them life and substance, then, like a coward, I ran away from them. I refused to address and accept them. All I wanted was to deny and forget their existence but they lay away hidden within the darkest corners of my mind. It's like a bad sore hanging around an obscure corner of the mouth. One minute a poor sap is enjoying a nice slice of pizza, and then he only grazes it with a miniscule crumb. His mind splits in two and the succulent taste of pizza fades away to searing agony. Then he worries, "when will I hit it again? I will hit it again; it's only a matter of time."

They hold me hostage. These memories hide within me waiting to spring forth like predators stalking prey. They wait for that moment when I least expect, the one moment their existence has escaped me and I float in a pool of idle bliss. They wait for me to get nice and relaxed before they blow me to hell.

After years of contemplating these malicious enigmas prowling my mind, I may have finally started to truly understand them. They are like splinters. They hurt when

they first pierce the skin but once they have lodged the pain dulls away and only returns when you accidentally bump the area of the wound. The most painful thing to attempt at this point is removal. Leaving the splinter in the skin will only cause further damage later. Eventually a time will come when one must face this buried agony and remove it from the system entirely, even if it requires tearing away the layers of skin that have grown over it.

But these are not splinters, they are memories. We can never forget and so we cannot fully alienate ourselves from the experience of pain. We incorporate it into ourselves. It becomes an integral part of our personal identity. Through experience we form our personal boundaries and learn from mistakes. What we learn from these experiences constitutes the layers of skin that grow over the splinter. The wound has been repaired and we learn to avoid the situation that lodged the splinter in the first place, yet the initial pain and embarrassment still remains. For every pearly attribute we brag about, a grain of sand rests in the center. I never sang at another party, and I always check the punch before I guzzle it. I never stuttered before a woman again and I actually pride myself in my sociability with them. Why do these experiences still cause me so much misery? Even after I have learned and grown from them they return to torment me.

I'm sick of it. I'm twenty-one. I have been attending college for almost four years. My grades are good, I'm relatively healthy and my hair is terrific. I try as hard as I can and I live my life to the best of my ability. At the center of this vain impetuous youth lies a broken child crying over wounds that won't heal. Worst of all these experiences aren't even all that traumatic. There are people in the world who weep over the loss of loved ones, hunger, and war. I sit alone on Saturday night and grieve over a few social faux pas. I desperately need to get my priorities straight.

The human mind is very complicated and mysterious. The only real way to try to understand its mechanics is to use abstract terms and rely on metaphor. So, human memory seems to be formed like one would order from a very large buffet. The food is constantly changing and we select specific items that are suited to our taste among the overabundance. We are continuously bombarded by a menagerie of experiences and events. On a subconscious level, our minds pick and choose from the overcrowded buffet of meaningless experiences and construct collages that form the most pertinent and sacred experiences to us. Since the process is subconscious (when was the last time you really chose to hold onto a memory for the rest of your life?) then the mind is acting on its own beyond any real control from the person. That means one thing. These painful memories are there for a purpose. Now after years of suffering and running from these songs of dreaded experience I finally stand ready to face and understand

them.

I will never understand myself during those times. I was a sad, strange little child that had so much trouble just facing a challenge head on. Any time a complication or problem faced me I turned tail and ran. These failures only a few among many, tormented me so much that I couldn't bear exist in that primordial weakness. My cowardice and laughable, bumbling, innocence was a flaw that threatened to destroy me. What could I do?

I grew up. I stopped running from my problems. I intentionally threw myself in awkward social situations to overcome my fear of women and confrontation. I experimented with several forms of alcohol in safe situations so I could learn the taste and know my boundaries. I knew what my problems were and I did my best to fix them. For the first time I can stand up and say I like myself.

The self is a being that must experience challenges and trials in order to develop and grow. The mind is just like the body. The muscles must be stretched, torn and worked to grow and strengthen. Likewise, the mind and the soul must face the pressures and strains of life to become toned and strong. Without these embarrassing moments and the opportunity to overcome them, the mind and soul will atrophy.

I don't think I will ever like the kid who screwed up so much when he was young, but he is owed a high degree of respect. He may have runaway from everything at first, but he did work to make sure these situations did not repeat themselves. He owned up to his flaws and worked to change and grow. He is my progenitor. Without him and his suffering I could have never existed.

So from the ruins of two disastrous songs a new melody springs. It is a bit shaky and uncertain, but proud of its existence. It is a song of change. I sing for myself and any that wish to listen. Now, when those phantoms, images and botched melodies come to haunt and torment me I will not simply run from them. I will welcome and entertain them. I will be thankful for the opportunity to review and explore the self that has grown. Socrates himself stated, "The unexamined life is not worth living."

You

Hilary Wanes

I miss you,
but then again,
I miss me.

The parts of me
that came from you,
that used to remind me
of me.

Body and Mind, Heart and Soul

Sheryl Avery

As I left the building and waved good-bye to groups of
people

I see you running, hiding and tagging

The service was no bore, it has taught you to be kind and
forgiving

And so you're happy, I see your mind is free

You're playing

Later I sat huddled on a cold bench in the park

The wind blew silently and frigidly, a dog barked

Still I see you laughing, swinging and sliding

And so you're happy, I'm sure your heart is pure

You're playing

As I sat on the bathroom floor, a pool from your

Bath water surrounding me, yet still I sat if need be

I see you among tons of bubbles, splashing yet smiling

And so you're happy, I've seen your body is clean

You're playing

I smiled lovingly as I tucked you in bed and dimmed the
light

I see you praying and yawning as you sleepily uttered
goodnight

As you lay between the covers, your eyes are closed,

A soft smile on your lips, you seem to be asleep

And so you're happy, I'm pleased your soul is at peace

You're sleeping

It's My Body; I Can Do Whatever I Want!

Jessica Martinez

I worked all day to come home to the news—
protesters protesting the Anti-abortion protesters
and a picture of a young woman
whose jeans were slung low below her belly.
She had drawn a picture on her lower abdomen
with thick, red marker—a uterus, fallopian tubes and
ovaries.

Inside her symbolic uterus, a word was written: MINE.
I laughed—and if I had been present at the protest,
I would have politely tapped her on the shoulder
to inform her that while her uterus might belong to her,
apparently, other organs of her female anatomy do not;
after all, *prostitution* is still illegal in the United States.

Foundation

Chris Dunn

How to explain this feeling, this terrible sickness.
My heart aches and my stomach churns.
Oh, to have my feet on solid ground,
to truly know, to be whole.
All things appear as but distractions to me now.
The boulder's I so pained to move into place,
all that I valued as solid has crumbled into nonsense.
What I once held as indestructible, what supported me for
so long,
has vanished without a trace.
I went to clasp it, but it brushed aside as a silken spider's
web.
This must not be it, I thought.
It was here, I swear it.
I will search it out, and it will comfort me once again.
How sturdy, how predictable, how often I could count on
it.
This must be a nightmare.
Wake me up, O God!
I search and I search,
I long and I long.
What exists which is solid, what exists which is true?
This nausea has consumed me, death seems sweet in its
wake.
How, how can what was no longer be?

I've known joy.
A warm blanket, a presence so sweet.
An all consuming glow, pouring out of my heart, my mind,
my fingers.
All despair, all heartache, washed away in a glistening
light.
Waterfall of perfection, pouring, being, filling my soul.
Unable to contain it, too much goodness.
My heart becomes too big, I must explode.
My love rips down the gates of hell,
pervades all semblance of meaning,
falls the mighty, anchors the weak,
the world spins on its axis,
the depths proclaim its greatness,
all being proclaims its worth.
Death, life, one and the same.

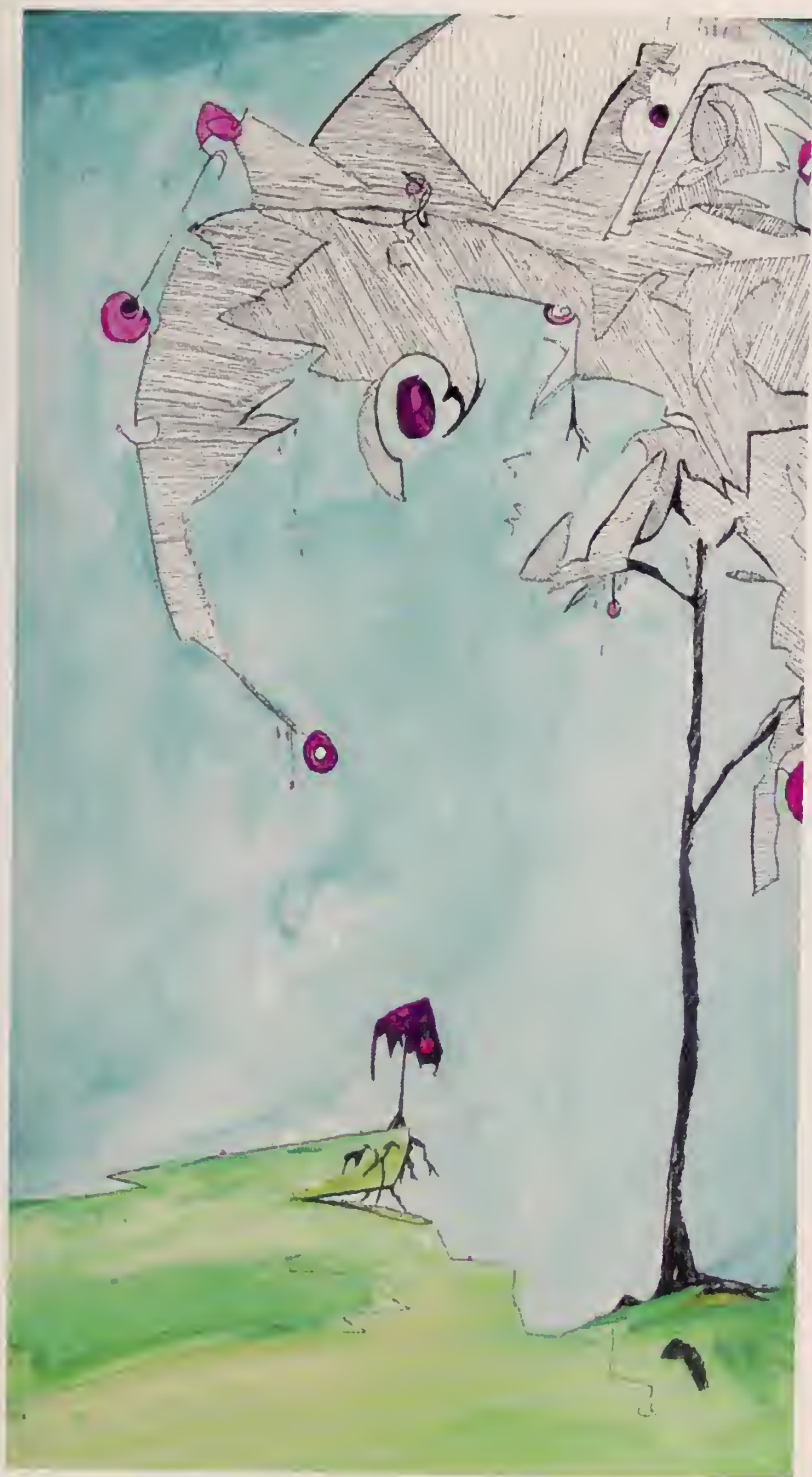
Bleakness now.

Where a river once flowed, now is parched and desert.

To do what is right, to find what is true.

What vanity to try?

Blackness and death, the only friends I can count on.



Spirit -In Memory of Dr. Jill Miller

Julian Santa-Rita



Hideaway

Colin Stark

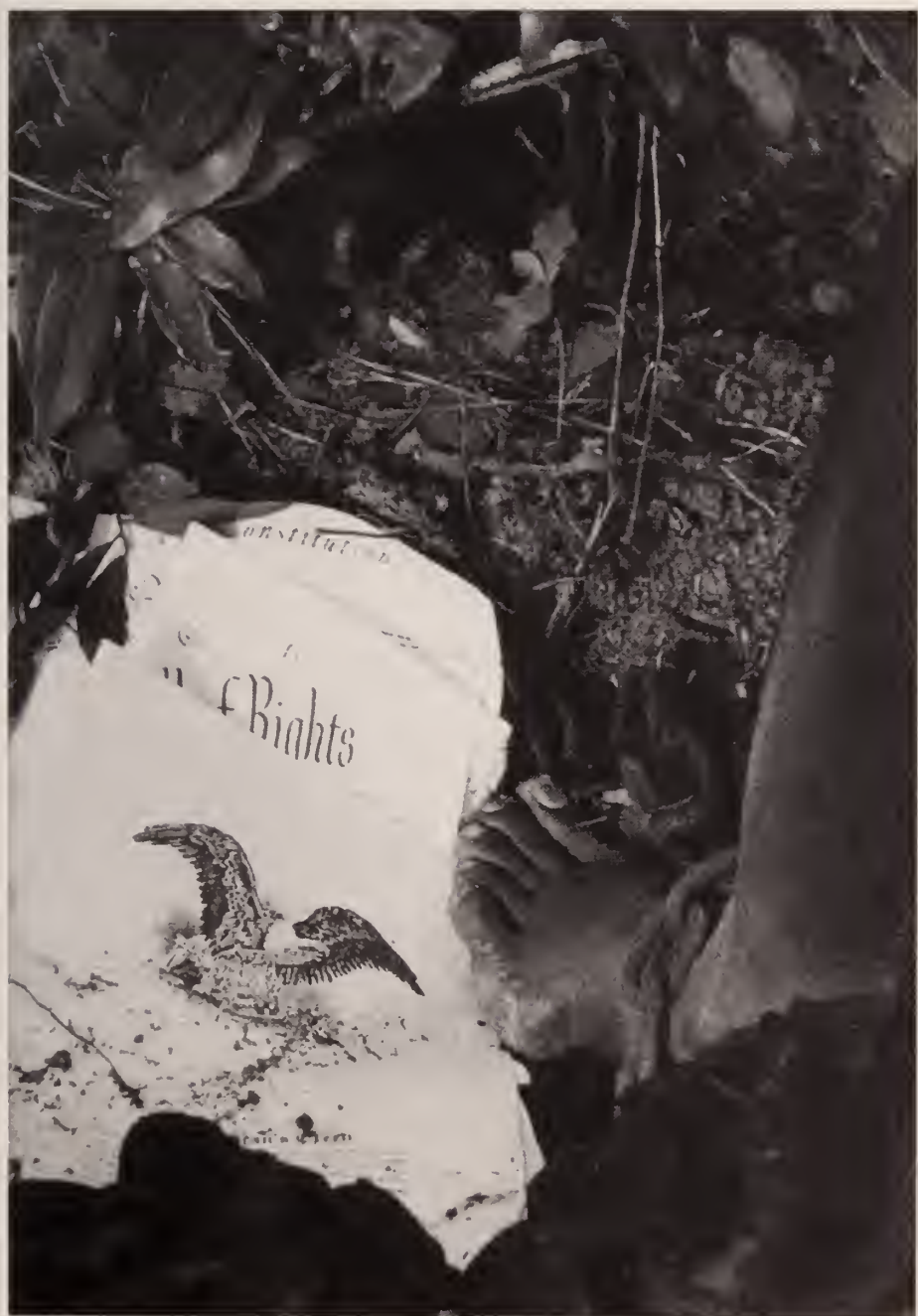


Dock

Firey Night

Monsoon Storm





Freedom

Jamie Hubbard



Blue Read



Within Me

Amy Kidane



Van Gogh's Marsh



Spring
Megan Stern



Untitled



Attitude

Jennifer Turpin Durden



Roll Call



