

calliope

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Calliope 2004

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Staff

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Faculty Advisor

Dr. Christopher Baker

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 2005 edition, please contact Dr. Christopher Baker in the Department of Language, Literature, and Philosophy located in Gamble Hall.



What was any art but a mold in which
to imprison for a moment the shining
elusive element which is life itself- life
hurrying past us and running away,
too strong to stop, too sweet to lose.

-Willa Cather

Consider Icarus,... Admire his wings!
Feel the fire at his neck and see how casually
he glances up and is caught, wondrously tunneling
into that hot eye. Who cares if he fell back to the sea?
See him acclaiming the sun and come plunging down
while his sensible daddy goes straight into town.

-Anne Sexton



Letter From the Editor

While collecting submissions for this year's *Calliope*, I noticed that many students had a great deal of apprehension about other people viewing their creative work. With shaky hands, students from all different disciplines presented me with creative offerings, much of which had never before been shared. While we as a staff sat and pored over the stack of submissions, we were overcome by the immense amount of talent and vision that had been laboriously worked into each piece. With each story that kept us turning from page to page, intent on discovering what the end had in store, and every picture that we sat mesmerized by, we were reminded of the way each one of these students is brave. Like the mythical Icarus, these artists were brave to take a chance, to take their stories, photographs, paintings, and poems out from the hiding places where they had previously been kept. Poems once kept scribbled down in an old journal, stories used as outlets for emotions to which the spoken word cannot do justice, and photographs that were originally intended only as part of a classroom assignment were handed over to be shared with the artist's peers. It takes a great deal of courage to begin a creative career, and that is precisely where many of these authors and artists are: the beginning. *Calliope* serves as one of the first steps in the creative process for what may be some of the most talented new minds we may ever know. As a staff, we were proud to be able to read and select from this year's submissions. We are thankful to the students that took a risk and allowed their peers to share in their talent. James S. Kunan once wrote, "I get the idea, sometimes strongly, sometimes not, that I am involved in purposes not strictly my own. I understand that a lot of other people feel the same way, and since some of them are writers, there is a movement in literature which expresses this idea. And things go on." Whether it is in art or literature, I do believe there is a movement, a movement in which every person featured in this year's edition, including its readers, is a part of. It is my hope that this year's *Calliope* will serve as a creative outlet in which things may continue to go on.



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Stones

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Untitled

* Notes the winners of this year's Lillian Spencer Awards.



Emily Broome Untitled silver gelatin print

The Parade

Amos Stevens

The ring was a small gold boa constrictor choking his hand. Saul was over the bathroom sink tugging the stubborn ring. Even the thick glob of Vaseline could not release the ring from its uncomfortable grasp. There was no pain from the clutch of the ring, just annoyance. Its minimal weight was enough to bother Saul. He raised his head from the porcelain sink just in time to glimpse his reflection in the large oversized mirror. Sybil's glaring makeup lights blurred the tiny fissures given to him by 45 years of life. He moved his wet Vaseline covered hand to the small white towel to the side. He had done his duty for the day. He had forced the ring upon his hand and had worn it to one of Sybil's events. He had taken the stranger out to validate his charade to the crowds. Now it was time to put the ring back in its small, silk shroud, but it wouldn't come off.

Today, Saul spent the day trailing Sybil as she made the final changes to the St. Patrick's Day parade. He went from table helping to pick out pastel green from evergreen and viewing the crudely made elementary school floats. He hated them all, especially the wiry purple Power Ranger one. But everyone was so proud of their child's accomplishment, so Sybil entered it into the parade. Saul stood silently trying not to think of the deformed purple thing. This was Sybil's simple, motherly venture. He did not want to debate the lines of relevance with a woman who kept an empty room in their house for a child they could not have.

Saul clutched his finger once more in a futile effort to release the ring. The ring did not move and his finger just inflated in size keeping the ring in its fixed position.

"Saul, Saul, I need your help," Sybil yelled from the nearby den. Saul retreated from his struggle and walked into the living room. He could already smell the fresh smell of potpourri. The smell carried him carelessly through the hallway. He brushed past the dead, hanging roses, not noticing the crooked state on the wall in which he left them. The pristine eggshell creme walls were new from the living room's annual renovation. Sybil was

reconfiguring the barren wall with all her old pictures but Saul was curious. Sybil was holding an empty picture frame with bronze varnish.

"What Sybil?" Saul asked.

"I am probably going to take a picture of you in the parade next week and I just wanted to know if you thought I should put it above our wedding photo or below it."

Sybil took a large step from the wall and tilted her head. Saul didn't know what she would do if he didn't give her an answer. She would be like the elephant ears or the spring ferns. She would sit still waiting for his motion for nourishment. Saul was the head of the house. These minute decisions were his to make. Saul never appreciated Sybil's oversimplification. Saul knew he could say to the side of the wedding photo, but there was never any deviation from Sybil's choices. She would echo the same question until she got her answer. Before Sybil could ask him again, he quickly picked his finger from his side in a blind guess.

"Above."

"Above? But don't you think that will be too high? I want people to see you leading the parade."

She had to remind Saul. Saul felt the familiar knocks of fury beating at his head. In an effort to keep the vein coursing down his head from exploding, he deliberately tried to forget. While he was at the refreshment table spooning pineapple punch into his cup, Sybil had volunteered him to lead the parade. Later that night he returned to her side to learn of what she took the liberty to do. At that moment he had felt his pulse pounding blood into his stiff body as he stood there holding back his hand from releasing the sticky, red drink all over her silky white dress.

The image of her silky white dress ruined helped silence the pounding. Saul knew his untamed frustrations would do no good. Sybil could not understand. He didn't want to confront her pity for him. Her vain sigh could not help him. There would never be any questions of why there were no children captured in time on her wall of memories. He had no room in his heart for her pity.

"People will see it better above the wedding picture, Sybil."

"Yes, I suppose you are right," she said. "I am going to put another picture closer to the door. Maybe the one where you are carrying me out of the church. Do you

know where it is?"

"In the spare bedroom," said Saul.

Saul knew the picture. It was centered in an old plain frame. He had suggested that she put it in the barren room. It was a time when he was ignorantly joyful. He was so proud to be stepping out of those high wooden church doors, the first breaths of new, crisp, winter morning air piercing his lungs. It was a perfect wedding. Rice was thrown. Doves were released. There was no fury then, just anxiety and pride. Under her veiled face, he saw a comforting smile reaching towards its highest limits with tears escaping the joy of her eyes. Her frail hands trembled in her thin white gloves. She was a beautiful bride.

But that was all shattered. The doctors would give him the cold, hard news as he sat motionless on the table. Saul was doomed to being a purposeless husband. No picture could capture Saul's hollowed heart. He no longer had a forward purpose in his life. His name was the only thing Saul could share with his wife, nothing more.

...

Saul was just about finished with the Windsor knot in his tie when Sybil rushed over to the mirror to spray on some of her perfume. In Saul's life, every social event was preceded with a dinner. The parade was no exception. The dinner was at Peter Roman's plantation. Peter Roman's was large for the five children he had. Every time he and Sybil visited the mansion, Sybil hugged his children. They didn't remind Saul of children, just empty voids. One time when they all ate dinner at their own ebony table, Saul noticed that all moved their forks and knives in an almost mechanical way. This never alarmed Sybil. Sometimes table discussion would deal with whom the children were going to marry. Saul always stared at his food and joined the children in their mechanized eating. From time to time, he would hear giddy laughter or melodic sighs from his wife, but this was never more interesting than the meatloaf.

Saul heard the gravel crunch beneath the Lexus's tires. The long, manicured stony road was not long enough to hide the imposing view of the Roman's house. It was an old Victorian plantation house with smooth marble columns surrounding the outer rotunda. Sybil gingerly

stepped from the car cautious of the stony driveway. Along the trip, Saul had noticed her desperately trying to save her yellow sunflower dress from wrinkles. As he exited the car, Saul noticed that she had failed in her efforts. There was a collection of small lines edging their way across her back indicating where she had sat. He could feel a smile edge the outer rim of his lips.

They made their way up the small steps of the stairs to the large oak door. Almost sensing their approach, the youngest of the Roman's children opened the door. Saul stared into her empty eyes looking for a joyful youth, but all the apathetic child did was stand aside and allow Sybil to pore over her.

"Welcome, Welcome," Peter said. Jeanne, go check your mother," Peter directed to the child. Sybil followed her small niece as she marched back to the kitchen without the slightest hint of a slouch in her back. "Would you like something to drink, Saul?"

"No thanks," Saul said. A waft of liquor indicated that the bar had already been open.

"I hear you're doing the parade thing this year?" asked Peter.

"Yes."

"Well, I'll be there," said Peter. "All the kids are doing something in it." Peter always had a way to remind Saul that he had children. They were always there as he entered, ate, and exited. They were Peter's trophies. He always had them positioned in the right place. Perhaps, it was for Sybil.

"They say you'll be riding one of my horses."

"Yes, which one?" Saul asked, thankful for the diversion from the children.

"Goodwill."

Peter was a horse trader and half of his expansive plantation was molded to suit the purposes of a ranch. Just as Saul was going to ask to see the horse, Jeanne entered the room.

"Mommy says that dinner is ready."

Saul followed the doll-like girl into the grand dining room. Each one of her steps on the hardwood floor was perfectly synchronized like a metronome. A reflection of Saul in his corduroy sports coat appeared in the large gold-framed mirror on the other side of the room. He casually walked past his image heavily hued with a white light by the large ornate chandelier. The room's new

furnishing included a table that was almost as long as the room itself. No matter how many times they refurbished the house, they could not get rid of the sulfur smell left behind by the well water. The Romans' children sat as straight as their dinner utensils. They did not mutter a word as dinner was rolled out on silver carts. Sybil took pleasure in serving each of the children. She often reached over the table to make sure Michael had enough vegetable or gravy, speaking to him in annoying decibels and begging for a reaction. When everyone was settled and the plates were passed out, Peter Roman ordered Michael to recite a dinner blessing, which he did without so much as a misplaced pause.

Peter muttered something or another about his hunting but Saul gave up on Peter's slurred language and full mouth. He was focused on the old ballroom mirror, which portrayed Sybil gleefully smiling as she questioned the children. He could make out her questioning them about school and about what they were going to do in the parade. They were part of the few children that were chosen to wave on the floats. Their pale mother sat as quiet as a corpse as the children cracked under Sybil's enthusiasm. The glimpses of lively children reflected in the mirror. Saul saw these kinds of questions as her nourishment. Saul knew her reaction was more of a caring aunt. The smiles of the normally quiet children were as close as she would ever be to being a mother. Saul thought this was the reason why Sybil dragged him to these dinners and forced him to lead the parade on his brother's horse.

...

Saul walked past the crowded gates of Erasmus State College to the quad where floats were tightly packed in, waiting to be released onto abandoned streets. He could hear each individual trumpet warming up its cold brass horn. But that wasn't even enough to drown out Sybil's voice.

"Make sure to hold onto the ropes, Saul. You don't want to pull out your back."

"I have ridden a horse before, Sybil."

"Well, you never know what can happen."

He could feel the anger building up within him. The cold weather outside hid Saul's red face. Saul wanted

to tell her to shut up but he was still coping with the green and purple uniform that had been chosen for him to wear. He was not the only one. The Roman's horse was decorated with frilly ribbons and a ridiculous purple skirt. All the girls from the elementary school had braided its mane. Peter allowed one of the school groups to paint shamrock tattoos on its velvet legs. Still the majestic horse stood calmly as if unaware of its appearance.

"Well she is the best one I got," Peter said as he threw the saddle over the horse's arched back. "She's gentle with riders," Peter continued.

Saul kicked a few pins of the horse's skirt as he mounted. Sybil reached down and picked up the fallen pins. The horse sighed as she gently reapplied the pins back onto his skirt.

"Make sure you wave, especially when you pass Lincoln Street," Sybil said with the camera hanging on her neck.

Saul tugged gently at the reins to direct the horse from the front gates. The horse took easy, calm steps to avoid the ignorant parade participants in the quad. Saul enjoyed the clunking sound the horse's shoes made on the cold pavement. The crowds parted to the sound of the incoming horse. Saul exited the large metal gates of St. Erasmus to the first stoplight. The band assembled behind him filling up the empty space. Saul could hear the Drum Major ordering, "left front, left." Shortly after, the band blared its first stanza of the march.

Saul moved down the street cautious not to tempt the horse's generosity. The appearance of the horse did not affect its tame magnificence. With a raised, cupped hand, Saul marched down the street as if Donatello had envisioned the horse's equestrian grace. Saul appreciated the horse's tolerance and its grace. He hardly recognized that he was coming up to Lincoln Street. He could barely see Sybil ready to take a picture as he passed the yellow blinking stoplight. He turned to the camera just enough to pose for the picture hoping that Sybil would be able to get it sitting behind the tall man in the front row.

There were a half a dozen flashes coming from the side of the rode when he passed. He thought that Sybil's flash had to be at least one of them. Then suddenly, without warning, a young girl jumped out into the road with an orange pin.

His horse bucked wildly from its rhythmic course to

avoid the small, innocent girl that had impeded its proud march. The horse's nostrils flared up as wild as its marble eyes and cast Saul to the rough cold pavement. His awkward purple hat fell and rolled somewhere into the crowd. There was a clutter of random metal parts scraping together coupled with the large disarray voiced by the mighty low brass from the marching band behind. Saul could feel the pain of every individual stone lodged into his side and face. The cadence of his heart pounded into his skull and fury engulfed him. He arose to his numb feet anxious to inflict pain on the girl who stood with her mouth gaping and her arms lying lifelessly to her side. She did not move as Saul grabbed her by those arms and put his face close to hers.

But then he saw. Those two pearly eyes held an image of Saul so small, so shaded by the dark abyss of her pupil, but at the same time so truthful to its portrayal of detail. There was no facade protecting his face and there were no social lights shining in the background of her eyes. Nothing could obscure the details presented in those cold, dark, fearful pupils. Between those wiry black eyelashes and wide amber spectacles, he saw a man entrenched in his own bitterness, his own self-guilt, and his own self-anger. This child who had only wanted to pin her gaudy orange pin on the horse's purple skirt couldn't hide Saul's heartless soul. He could feel her racing pulse through those strained arms and could see the glistening dewdrop sweat making wet tracks down the side of thinly ridged eyebrows. Then slowly a single shining drop fell from Saul's mirror.

Saul gently released the child from his cold clutches. Her small clammy fingers dropped the orange pin and she quickly scurried back to her crying mother whose shrieks of horror were clouded by the band. Saul leaned down and picked up the pin in hopes of returning it to its owner but it was too late. The child had disappeared in the myriad of bodies wearing blue and green fabric.

Saul looked at his now calm and composed horse standing as if it had never been frightened. It sat still bowing its head in a majestic manner.

"Would you get going already?" cried the impatient Drum Major. By then, the members of the trumpet line had already raised their horns and begun to play the march.

Saul's mind filled up with a million replies but none

seemed to funnel its way down to his mouth. He quickly mounted the ornate horse without the aid of any bystanders and rode down the street not realizing where his purple hat could be.

...

Saul recognized the hallowed gates of his alma mater as he exited from the parade. He wandered around the campus in search of his old bench. When he found the bench, he hardly recognized it. It had lost its black finish. He plopped his sore and bruised butt down on the bench. He felt the snag of every old weathered nail but his legs' relief was enough to coax the uneasy pain.

Sybil interrupted; rushing towards Saul, her heels pounding the pavement with a random meter.

"Where have you been? I have been looking all over for you!"

"Here, just here."

"Oh, all right," she replied. "I heard about the horse. Are you alright?"

"Remember when we first met?"

"What?"

"You know it was somewhere over there by the campus chapel."

"Well, the chapel isn't there anymore. They built a new one over there."

"Yes, yes they did," replied Saul. "You were over there doing something or another."

"Oh, I was taking a vote for the parade. Either you could vote for—"

"Yes, exactly," Saul did not want to hear another vote-by-vote analysis of the colors of the parade that year. "Well I have something to admit."

Saul looked into her vivid green eyes. They were so full of life and content. She arched herself up for Saul's next words.

"I am sorry," said Saul.

"Sorry for what?"

"I am sorry you are an aunt and not a mother."

"Saul," Sybil said, her eyes turning into glassy marbles.

"But you're my husband, Saul."

She turned to him and embraced him. He hugged his wife back inhaling the deep perfume. Through her frail frame, he could feel the gentle cadence of her heart. He

felt the gentle patter of her heart speaking out to his reminding him of a cool, crisp, winter morning that he had once experienced.



Abyss

Sean Kymalainen

So many passages,
With doors I can't count.
Where's the end of the maze?
Where's the top of the mount?

The confusion that rules,
While I search and I weave,
Lends a pause by the door,
Though my heart says believe.

Down a blind alley,
There is a dead end.
Which way is out?
What does this portend?

Eyes that don't see,
And ears that don't hear,
Although my senses are dull,
I possess mind-numbing fear.

From whence I have come,
I haven't a clue.
Where I must go,
Is what is my due.

The doors have been barred,
With no lock and no key.
I cannot get through,
I cannot be free.

Little by little,
Eyes that grow dim,
No more to be said,
A fall by the rim.

Broken Bough

Jason Breneman

The bus stopped where Stocksdairy road met Flowing Well long enough to open its door and rid itself of a single passenger.

"Just like Mrs. Scott used to do," thought Silas Stocks as he stepped through the vortex of dust and diesel fumes in the wake of the groaning, impatient machine. "Only then the bus was yellow instead of white."

He cinched his green duffel bag tight around one shoulder for the mile or so to the old place, not even pausing to wonder at the row of new houses recently built up on the cleared land by the paved road, to his right as he faced forward. He pressed on down Flowing Well, eyes fixed somewhere between the dirt in front of him and the horizon above.

The same familiar odor of honeysuckle sweetened the still, humid air he strained through puffy nostrils. To his left the yellow flowers dotted a mass of tangled green that slid over and around trees, swallowing the rotted wire and oak fence posts. Though no one had tended that land in several years, the honeysuckle still never as much as touched the ground on the other side of that old fence. Instead, a bare, tangled mass of black roots grasped the barren gap of orange sand between the fence and the road.

He marched on, kicking up faint whitish rust-colored dust over black boots. To his right, scattered voices of children wove through the remaining pines not yet cleared and sold behind the row of neat fenced-in yards. He could hear them laughing at him playing, each in his own shiny pen.

Something about it all, though, failed to reach him. As he trod steadily on, he acknowledged none of the familiar and foreign place he passed through. He wasn't even really sure what would meet him at the end of this road he had walked down so many times before. This time there was no one else here with him, and certainly no one he wanted to see who wasn't in jail or underground.

He thought of his brother:

I remember . . . I was younger . . . Josey was just

three or four... He got in trouble for refusing to pick up his messy room. Momma had tried everything: pleading with him, yelling, threatening punishment; Joseph just laughed when she spanked him. I was in the yard playing with a few G.I. Joes when the old man came home. I heard the door slam as he entered, and his raised voice as he demanded for Momma to tell him what was going on. I heard him get louder. He was going to find Josey and I knew that even he didn't know what he would do with him. ...Their three detached voices: Joseph still refusing to obey, my mother pleading with both of them, trying to stop the situation, and my father's booming voice rattling the old house and carrying out, slowly muffled, over the trees.

I remember wishing that Joseph would just quit, that he would just do what he was told. But of course he wouldn't. You could hear my father just snatch him up. The first couple times he hit him, you could hear nothing but a dull thump over my mother's screeching voice; not a sound from my four-year-old brother.

But then I remember him breaking, like we all eventually did, and letting out just a slow, dim whimper, which didn't stop; it seems like it hasn't to this day. Every time I looked at him I heard it, and would be always back in that day, alone, in the yard, crying in the mud.

His brother was grown now; he hadn't seen him since he had joined the army and left this place for what he thought would be forever. "Shit," Silas thought to himself, "Seven years. . ."

Silas reached the beaten driveway and his eyes fell on the faded yellow house. It looked smaller than he remembered, and quiet. The old shed still stood back behind the house, before the great oak. The steel cattle barn was still there too, defiantly standing between the shed and the oak. The rusty streaks on the sides of the metal, twisted and torn with age and weather, still shined and little, *like the...*

The cold breath of the place he had forgotten swirled around him, splitting his thoughts and passing through his gut, spinning itself into a cold, hard ball that pressed against his knotted stomach. A part of him fought against the memory he should have seen coming. Looking

on at the place for the first time, it came back to him like a ghost:

The old man was shaving with a pearl handled straight razor he had had for years. He listened half-heartedly to his wife's end of the conversation with Mr. Perdue.

"She said what? ...Touched her how? ...But she's only ten years old! ...You can't honestly believe that! No, I'm sorry, I just have a hard time believing my Silas... No, just, please, let me talk to him first."

Straightening up, he bit his lip and clenched his fist as the woman's words reaffirmed what he already suspected. His fist shook, and the metal blade against his face drew a slow bright stream of red over thick foam...

...Like a furious beast he invaded the room where the two almond-haired boys sat, blankly watching television. He gripped the bigger, rounder of the two by the scruff of the neck and yanked him from the room, heels kicking and dragging across the wood-planked floor. The younger followed, crying out and punching at his father's legs in protest. The man kicked at him, then threw the other at the screen door, out in the yard, and followed after him, fueling himself with cursing affirmations of the righteousness of his anger; muttering both sides of the argument since the boy remained silent, staring blankly ahead. Blind with rage and absolutely determined, he resumed his grip on his son and continued on into the October dusk.

"Where are you taking me?"

"We're going to settle this."

"Settle what? How?"

"Oh, I'll figure out something, I damn guarantee it."

The man's face was still smeared with a foamy lather from the shaving job he quit, and the white foam gathered with a furious sweat, pooling and bubbling around the corners of his mouth as he cursed and spat through curled lips. Silas could hear his brother's cries through the torn screen door, and by them he metered the distance his father had dragged him out into the silent dusk. He felt his weight bear against his father's beast-like frame as it gaited, ape-like, along. He could see himself dragged like an old burlap sack of peanuts by his father's dark gorilla arms. Through the autumn light escaping, he caught a shimmering glimpse of a metallic edge in his father's furious red clinched fist.

Outside himself, he couldn't remember feeling anything. Only the gaping metal grin of that damned cattle

barn, laughing at him, and his father's shaking red arm swinging over him, cutting them, back and forth, back and forth...

Supposedly Josey did it; finally killed him, according to what word still got around. Met him after another one of his drunken weekend binges. Right as he was stepping out of his truck, Josey caught him across the head with an axe handle. Beat him so bad, the cops had to ask Josey who he was. *After what the old man did to Ma, I guess he had it coming.* Silas heard that when the cops cuffed him and took him away, he was smiling; he was smiling the whole time.

"Damned Josey, you got more balls than me."

He walked around the old property that called itself his home. The house was a wreck of timber, old paint, electricity that tempted fate and the fire department with the fact that it was still standing. Around back, in the old shed, things were vaguely like he had remembered them, only scattered now and blanketed in the dust of neglect. Vines wrapped 'round the building, but rotted inside for want of light. His eyes took a moment to focus through the dust and dark, then led him across the floor to the old wood burning stove, up to the mantle above.

There, on the rotting wooden shelf, between the two musket balls, white with age and covered in dust, sat the old brass belt buckle. Its shiny patina cast off a greenish-gold light. He took the metal oval in his hand, catching the glare off the afternoon sun. He felt the slick, oily finish that didn't rub off filth on his hands; unlike anything else in the tattered shack. On the mantle, behind where the buckle had sat, a finger had scrawled out into the dust: "For my brother."

"That's just like Josey..." thought Silas.

Silas stood there for a moment reflecting on the buckle that he and his friends had found in that same place not so many years ago. It was their treasure then, an artifact of time past that was all their own. When they looked at it they felt some kind of source that they didn't understand but could tap their roots into.

"That was all just stupid kid garbage," he said to himself now. He thought of the buckle then in the hands

of his father, swung on the end of a belt at him. He remembered the rage within him then; the hate he felt for the old man. How he had vowed that when he was strong enough he would do something; he would eat the pain that bastard brought into the world.

Now his demon was gone, following in death the woman he sent to eternity before him, leaving on this earth just the two brothers: one in jail and this one, here, now. He felt around within himself for something that hurt, some kind of fresh pain about the whole situation that he could take and hold as some righteous justification for anger that he so terribly wanted to feel. But there was nothing there in his whole cold body to hold on to. Josey had done it; the old man was dead. *I went on forever with just that old man to hate, and nothing else. Now, what do I do? What happens when there is no hate anymore, just an empty sickness?*

—

Silas unloaded himself onto the greasy wooden workbench and untied and removed his black leather boots, dusted now in a reddish-white powder. He sat then together under the bench, familiarly knocking against an old wooden box.

"The same...?"

He grabbed the rope handle and flipped the box onto the floor. Tipping over, it spewed its contents out amongst the dusty and rusty nails. Through the mess tumbled a cedar case, carved in a pattern as familiar as his fingerprints. He popped the latch and twisted it open.

"For my Silas." The yellowed note fluttered to the floor. From the case he gingerly lifted the soft yellow chain, listening to its slight serpentine whisper as its links softly fell along in tandem. A jewel at the end of the chain glistened like a beetle's back, lit up and made of water.

Silas knew his mother had always wanted a daughter; she had told him so. Just the two boys were all God and her husband had given to her. When the day came that she knew she would not bear any more children with that man, she sat it in the case and gave it to her eldest son; there, alone, away from his father or his brother.

"This will be for your wife, someday," she had told him, back when "someday" seemed the same as eternity.

"It was your grandmother's. She was an old Creek

Indian, you know. Her people've been here since before the trees and the rocks, even." Silas held the delicate chain in his hand. He let the links slink down through his fingers, as if on their own accord.

"They met De Soto when he came up the Flint River. Did you know that? She gave me this necklace right before she died; Lord knows how she got it and kept it hid."

His mother sat there for a moment with a grin and shook like a house of cards. Silas looked at her and knew she was in one of her moments, when her heart was on something far away from what she was saying. He watched her eyes well up a little, then as she looked off and down at the floor.

"Your father's a good man, she whispered almost only to herself, "He's a good man." Her repetition was not lost on Silas. Even at a young age, he recognized her actions for what they were: the weak words of one who dealt with the world she hated by contriving one that wasn't there.

She moved her eyes back to Silas like she was waking up again to the world she was in.

"You know, besides me and Josey, this is about the only real proof that the woman ever graced this earth. Now, you keep this somewhere safe; I want the next person in the world who sees this to be the one girl you want to give it to. You understand?"

"Yes ma'am."

Silas set down the wooden case and wrapped the golden chain three times around his wrist. He brought the dark and glimmering stone up to his lips and kissed it.

"Sorry to let you down, ma."

Silas kicked open the door and stepped out into the cool autumn air. He took in the sight of his old house: the torn screen door, the galvanized steel tub they used to swim in. He turned and looked up the hill to the great oak. The rope he had hung up himself swayed hypnotically in the breath of the early eve. The tire was long gone; now, only the tattered end of rope fluttered at him like a horse's tail after flies.

He stared at it as he walked up the hill, towards the tree. He remembered how the acorns used to scrape and pierce his tender feet when he and his brother used to come up here to play. He used to come up here alone,

cradled like a baby in the old oak's branches.

He thought of a long time ago, in the tree *happy and alone, climbing in its great gnarled branches. I can spend all the time I want exploring and staring at the ants as they course around through the ridged bark. They crawl over my hands and arms and they do not harm me. I do not worry about what is going on with people and things elsewhere, and I couldn't even see the ground below if I did bother to take my eyes off the branches or the dancing shadowy shapes above. Instead there is just a notion of a faint green sea beyond me.*

He used to lie on his back on the great limbs, letting the whispers of the light drift through the leaves as tickle his face as he drifted off to sleep. "That's what I want," he thought. "To sleep."

In the tree, his now callused hands felt the same ridged bark of the old familiar tree. His arms carried him mindlessly up to the branch he had climbed up long ago and hung that rope himself, in the face of one of his father's many drunken promises. He inched away along the crooked, mossy branch, feeling the wind whisper through the leaves.

His hands found the end of the rope on the branch and pulled it up. Unnoticed, they felt at its thick, woven braids, then he quietly coiled the rope three times under his chin. It felt snug and tight, like a hug from an ancient ancestor. He felt the warm in their arms, and he trusted it. He let his eyes close and his body go limp as he lay in the branch.

He held his head back, feeling blood rush suddenly to his head. His eyes flickered shut as he felt the peace of the whispering breeze and the last warm light of the sun through the swaying branches. Upside-down and quiet, he released his grip from the tree.

He never felt the rope snap him like a whip and the unforgiving coils constrict after each faint, labored breath. Still, he did not struggle against it; he wasn't even aware of it. Neither did he feel his senses dull and his cursed memories whisper away, forever torn as his soul flickered and whispered away like a vein of smoke from a snuffed out candle, finally peaceful at home.

Clearview

B.J. Whitley

I never really noticed
you were not there
but now everything is clearer
and I laugh out loud
and you couldn't really handle this
a love like 'mine is hard to take
I'll not be yours any longer
as you slip so soundly away
into the clear view...



Steve Berg - Untitled silver gelatin print

Inspiration

Maddy Adams

In response to John Braine's statement:

"You must never wait for inspiration before you write.

It isn't that inspiration doesn't exist, but it comes only with writing."

Inspiration, well inspiration is

Why I started writing.

As an adolescent sitting in

a boring math class with

a pencil in my hand

my emotions booming from

pubescent hormones.

My mind stirring from anger.

-I hate my dad.

-I hate my school.

-I want to laugh.

-but that ain't cool.

Inspiration, well inspiration

Didn't strike me to take math class,

I was forced.

And in being forced, I loath

To do numbers.

To force writing, to force

Myself to write, well what

Do I gain, force is not

Fun, force doesn't make

Me want to do it now or

Later or have it right.

To force means to make contrived,

Plastic like a dictatorship.

It's not iron- It has

No heart- It's not individuality,

It's not me.

And most of all it's not

what comes natural. And

Nature is beauty not for

Its perfection but how
 It grows effortlessly
 Spiraling out to the world
 Being itself, being individual
 Being free to have those
 Imperfections that make
 It die or make it
 Genius to live through
 The next age.
 Inspiration, well inspiration
 Is emotion
 Emotion is individual
 Individual id freedom.
 So Mr. John Braine
 I'll wait.

For I don't write for you
 Nor do I write for she or he
 I write for myself.
 I write when I want.
 And I don't care if I'm good
 Nor do I care if I'm bad.
 The only reason I
 Write is for enjoyment.
 And if I don't enjoy it
 Then I write for school grades.
 And it just so happens
 That the only time I enjoy
 Writing is when I'm inspired
 By emotion- not that I
 Make false emotion
 Through fake inspiration
 Through fake writing
 Through fake flaking
 Through plastic and yarn
 And smoke of an old man yawn
 Strewn across a wall like spattered paint
 That makes no picture
 Unless it's fixed and makes everything
 A comet twisting in mad directions
 Flying across the universe
 No perfection in circles
 But perfection in ovals
 And crash explosion
 Bits flying and splattering

Across a wall no pattern
A moon crater ruddy from
Underlying plates, twisting
And turning, making moon
Earthquakes- rumbling sound
Waves that slide through
Space in a perfect circle
Except for the small pulsing
The waves make, as they fly effortlessly
Through the vacuum until they
Hit an object
A planet, a comet, a sun,
An ocean. The sound waves
Make ocean waves- waves that
Spiral through a dolphin's sensitive
Ears- waves making more waves
A gentle rustling that hits the
Sand. Movement of conch
Shells on the beach. A man,
A woman-love- and the intense
Feeling of space, the ocean wound
In spirals of one shell to one ear.
So yes, Mr. John Braine
I'll wait.

Solitude

Stephanie Swinson

Scoldings and reprimands whizzed through Toby's mind like rocket ships. *Alex was supposed to be here three hours ago. He promised we'd play today.* Tobias Stevens sat irritably on the front porch of Sunny Brook Orphanage waiting for his brother to return from his paper route and play catch.

Toby and Alex were identical twins. But to Toby, they were more like two halves of the same person. They often had that crazy twin stuff happen to them: Alex would skin his knee three blocks away and Toby would fall over with unexpected pain, or someone at school would ask a seemingly abstract question and Toby and Alex would answer the same thing at the same time. It freaked other people out but Toby was always proud. He and Alex would just look at each other and laugh while everybody else stood around looking confused.

Despite being so much alike, sometimes they were completely opposite. For example, Toby was right handed and really good at math; but Alex was left handed and he could draw anything he saw, and make it more beautiful than in real life. That's why Toby liked his two-halves-of-the-same-person theory, because together, they made up the perfectly rounded person.

Even their names made up a total person. According to their mother, he was the most wonderful person who ever lived-Tobias Alexander King-Alex and Toby's great-grandfather. At one time he was a tall, strong man who stood with dignity and confidence. Their mother used to comment on how much Toby and Alex looked like her beloved grandfather with their fire-engine-red hair and buttery skin.

Toby sat on the edge of a squeaky wooden rocking chair waiting to see that familiar bright red hair come around the curve. He strained to see all the way down the clay path looking for any sign of his brother's return. Everything seemed to converge into a single pinpoint of darkness, and Toby was in a constant battle of losing and

regaining his focus. He anxiously twisted and prodded his baseball glove, stretching it and balling it back up again. Tobias was beginning to worry about his brother. He couldn't remember Alex ever being so late to play catch.

Toby and Alex were sent to Sunny Brook on January 17, 1943, the day their mother died in a car accident. They were eight years old. Their father had been killed at Pearl Harbor only two years before, and they had no other living family members to take them in. They got used to a dormitory type existence with communal television rooms, activity times, and even shared showers. It wasn't so bad because there were never a lot of kids there; only a handful of regulars and the occasional new kid. There were a lot of babies brought into Sunny Brook, but they were usually either adopted or sent to other orphanages around Wyoming where they had a better chance of being adopted.

Toby and Alex kept to themselves for the most part. By the time they were ten, their roommate Frankie moved out to live with some uncle that the home had found in Florida, so Toby and Alex had a room to themselves. They had a few friends at school, but Toby didn't like many people messing with him and his brother. He felt that nobody else could understand what they had known. None of the other kids at school even had a clue that life could take away your mother and fling you into a world of generic cruelty, all in the same day. Nobody at the orphanage could understand the bond shared by twin brothers who were more like two halves of the same person than separate people.

Alex didn't mind people as much as Toby did. He would tell jokes to the boys and draw pictures of some of the girls. Toby could maybe understand talking to some of the guys, but he thought he never would understand Alex's attention to those stupid, prissy girls.

That's why it really shocked Toby when Alex asked the orphanage director about a paper route job that was posted on the downstairs bulletin board. "Alex, why on earth would you want a job?" Toby asked bewildered "Don't sign us up for that. We'd have to get up at like 5:00 in the morning. Are you crazy?"

Alex's eyes were simultaneously sympathetic and frustrated. "I didn't sign *us* up, I signed *me* up. And I won't have to get up early. Mr. Baker said I could deliver papers after school."

"No way. You can't do it after school! When will we play catch? How will you have time to get your studies done?"

"Look Toby, I promise that we'll play catch after I get back from my paper route every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday Afternoon." Alex placed his hand on his brother's shoulder. "This is just something I have to do... you know...on my own." A response stuck in Toby's throat. He had wanted to tell Alex that he didn't know; he had no idea what Alex was thinking. He wanted to say that he was afraid to be alone. Afraid to lose the only real thing in his life, but Toby didn't know how to say what he wanted. So he just smiled down at the old wooden floor and shrugged his shoulders feebly.

As Toby waited on the front porch, he replayed that scene in his mind. He tried to imagine what he could have done differently to talk his brother out of the paper route. It was the first time Toby could remember his brother ever letting him down. Toby felt the pang of separation as he realized that they might be growing apart. *Don't think about that*, Toby told himself, *concentrate on the game*. It was getting late and Toby was afraid that there wouldn't be enough daylight to play by the time Alex got back.

Toby was interrupted from his thoughts as he heard a squeak behind him and the front door slowly opened. He turned to see an old man wobbling out onto the porch. "Hi Tobias. We were all about to play cards and the nurse told me to see if you want to join us."

"No thank you. I'm waiting on my brother" was Toby's reply.

"That's just fine, Tobias, but maybe you could wait inside while you play a hand of Gin with the rest of us." Toby glanced up wildly. He'd been warned against persistent strangers. And he couldn't figure out how this one knew his name.

"I'm sorry Mister. I'm not supposed to talk to strangers," Toby replied taking note of the old man's grotesque ear hair and toothless grin for future identification.

The old man wobbled closer and sank slowly down into a rocking chair. "Look, Tobias, I just want to be your friend."

Toby looked away pretending not to hear the old man for a second. He considered running inside for help;

but he didn't want to get caught up in a lot of commotion and miss his brother. So he decided to stand strong.

"I don't need no friends. I got Alex. That's all I need."

"Fine." The old man shook his head as he eased out of the chair and started back inside. Just before he opened the door, he turned back to Toby. "Your brother's not coming, you know?"

How did that crazy coot get in here? Toby wondered. He thought again about telling some of the caretakers, but quickly reconsidered, deciding that the old man was probably just someone's grandfather. He settled back into the hard rocking chair and resumed his watch for his brother.

Toby sat on the front porch for another hour before finally deciding to go back inside to his room. It was 6:30 and already almost too dark to play catch. *Alex must have gotten caught up by some giggly girl. He is probably sitting there right now, drawing her picture instead of getting back home to play with his brother like he promised.* When Toby tried to get up, he realized that his limbs were stiff and his muscles ached. He grunted as he pressed all of his weight down on the handles of the rocking chair, finally catapulting himself to standing. *Gosh I guess I've been in that chair longer than I realized. I'd probably be too stiff by now to play catch anyway.*

Toby made his way back to his room. He was stomping and grumbling under his breath when he ran smack into a lady who worked at the home. She was beautiful to Toby—very petite with dark brown hair and perfect pale skin, just like Snow White. Toby liked to think that she looked like his mother, but secretly, he couldn't remember what his mother looked like anymore. "Mr. Stevens, where have you been? We're all about to play a round of Gin don't you want to join the others?"

"No thank you Mrs. French. I'm waiting for my brother. We're going to play catch if it's not too late when he gets back."

"Oh," she said quietly with a sympathetic nod. She paused and looked down for a second as if trying to make a decision. Finally she continued "Okay, Mr. Stev...um...Toby. Let's get you to your room. You can rest until your brother returns."

Mrs. French never made him take part in activities with the others if he didn't feel like it. Toby thought that

she really understood him. Because of that, she was his second favorite person in the world, after Alex of course.

When he got to the door of his room, Toby stopped short. He heard someone humming inside... not humming, listening to the radio. He burst in with relief and excitement. "Alex! I've been waiting all day. How did you get by..." Toby stood staring into the surprised eyes of someone who was definitely not Alex. Toby's mind raced, trying to sort through the confusion. "Frankie? When did you get back? I thought you went to live with your uncle."

"My uncle?...Why would I..."

"Your uncle...in Florida. Mr. Baker found your uncle so you won't be an orphan no more. You left us six months ago." Toby stood confused and defiant.

"All my uncles are dead, man. I'm your roommate but I don't reckon I'm no orphan."

Toby's face turned red. *Frankie can't be back. It will mess up everything.* "Alex and me have this room to ourselves now. You got to get out Frankie. Alex is coming back soon and he won't like you back in our room."

"Who is going to do *what to who?* Man, you talking crazy again."

Toby watched as his roommate reached back behind himself to press a red button on the wall marked EMERGENCY. Toby stumbled as his focus blurred on the big red button. A feeling rushed over him, like *deja vu*, sickly familiar.

Toby heard a slight ringing in his head as he swaggered to his bed, lost in a cloud that cradled his mind. He fought the confusion to find reason. He strained for something real to emerge from the scattered ideas that were flashing before him. They were speeding up from black depths like flashes of light only to slow to a snail's pace before his mind's eye so that he was forced to live his memories in unrelenting agony.

First he saw his mother's dead body: pale and pasty, encircled by flowers, her hair not fixed right, her lipstick too bright, and the worried frown that her face wore as she lay in that coffin lined in pink polyester. Toby was eight again and he wanted to get in the coffin too. He wanted to hold his mamma until she woke up from her bad dream—or until he woke up from his. Toby watched as the image of his dead mother began to speed up until it was nothing but shooting light again, and it shot away leaving a faint trail.

Behind it there were scattered, sparse images of Sunny Brook; their room, drab green and white walls pathetically decorated with images of Alex and Toby's favorite cowboys; Frankie with his giant nose and thick glasses; playing catch on hot afternoons; Mrs. French; lemonade; Alex's laugh, his cry. Then the memories of Sunny Brook sped up and whizzed quickly through Toby's mind as if they had somewhere else to be.

Then he saw Alex getting older, his paintings, his perfect daughter Emily, his dog named King.... Toby saw himself, walking slowly through a maze of caskets. He could hear the funeral director's voice growing from a faint mosquito's whine to a loud slow drone. He was explaining the merits of the different caskets, specifically, the Ch121—Red Mahogany "...and the body rests on silk lined, white, goose down." *What body?* Toby saw himself, twenty-seven years old, alone except for the funeral director, crying. *What body? Why was...Alex.* Alex was dead. Killed himself. Toby had felt the bullet—as if it had entered his own brain—the second it happened; even though he was forty-seven miles away. He had forgotten. *How could I have forgotten?* With realization came shame for having forgotten; and a tremendous pain, as if he were hearing the news for the very first time. *How many times will I forget and have to remember? How many times have I forgotten already?*

Tobias woke up screaming. His cold wet body was clenched in a fetal position with no other fetus to make him whole. Everything was encircled in a glow of florescent harshness and Toby ached. His stomach felt like it had been ripped from inside him; his chest burned with bitter agony. There were two doctors and several nurses hovering over him, asking him questions and fidgeting around his naked body. But Tobias could only cry. His pain would not allow anything else.

"Mr. Stevens, Do you know what day it is?"

"You were out for a while. Can you hear me?"

Off to the side he heard the murmurs of nurses.

"His dementia is getting worse."

In the far corner he watched an old man chattering away to one of the nurses and clutching a cane so hard, his knuckles had turned bright white. "...that's right, Frankie. I don't know why but he was calling me Frankie; and talking about some uncle or something. Then he

started with that Alex stuff again and I did just like they told me..."

A closer, soft voice sang over the old man's speech. "It's okay Toby. We're giving you a sedative. You'll be better tomorrow. We're all here for you." This last voice contained so much compassion and truth, that it caused Tobias to look up in its direction—*Mrs. French... no..., Mrs. Earl—not from Sunny Brook Orphanage but instead from Shady Oaks Retirement Community.* Her face was kind. As she tilted her head to one side, her tortoise-shell glasses reflected the florescent light and Tobias saw himself reflected in them too—not a nine year old boy, but a sixty-seven year old man. His screams turned to sobs. For a moment, Tobias' mind was completely clear. In it was a pure understanding of all of the horror and beauty of life. He was a sixty-seven year old man who had lost his other half forty years prior and was suffering from a mentally debilitating disease. But he knew he'd be happy again, just as soon as he forgot. He sank sadly into a heap. The injection was working and soon he was asleep.

The next morning Toby awoke from a long and deep sleep. He scurried over to his closet and put on his favorite outfit. He picked up his old baseball glove off the floor. He wondered how it got there and thought Mrs. French would be awfully angry if she knew he'd been so messy. On his way out to the front porch, he recognized one of the girls from the female dorms in the orphanage. He stopped only for a second. "Hey Tobias, where are you going? Don't you want to watch The Price Is Right?"

"I don't have time to talk now, Nancy. I got to go meet my brother. It's Saturday. We're playing catch as soon as he gets back from his paper route." With that, Toby obliviously waddled to the porch to await his brother's return.



Megan Stern - Untitled silver gelatin print

Ode to Smoking

Alexxus Anderson

Broken chain smoke,
Nicotine fits, a riot in my blood takes over my brain
forcing concession to a cigarette break.
Florescent lights to sunshine,
boxed life to open air,
air full of the smell of
Newports and Marlboros, Pall Mall's and CTs, scents from
Paradise.
The riots cease,
as all go on a fun in the sun vacation where deep breaths
of the
air are common.
Great way to get away from the workday
out to pollute myself and the world,
a smoke break.



Jennifer Turpin - "Front of Car" - silver gelatin print

Drive

Shawna Silverman

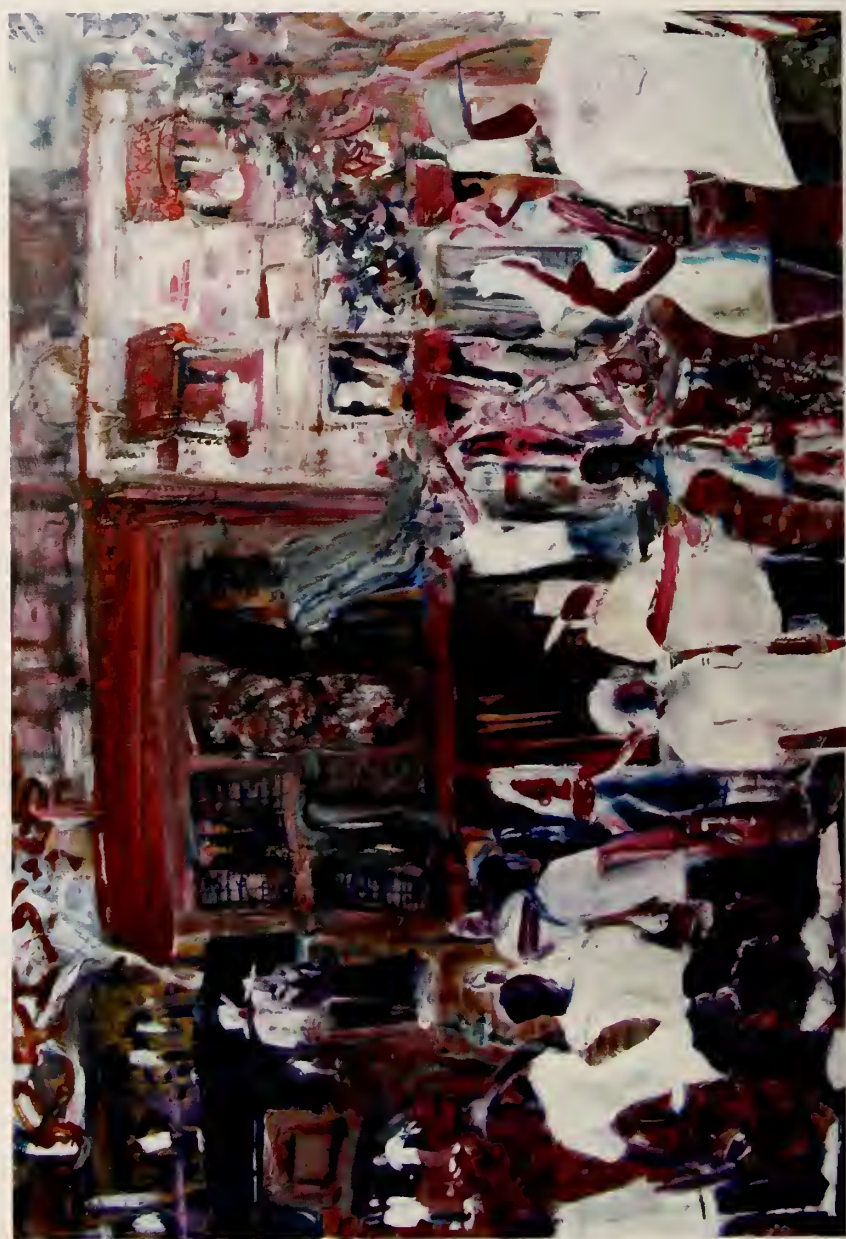
It's late, but you drive. The highway is an alien landscape awash with jewels this moonless night. It has seen no other cars in the blue-black Georgia morning. You have crossed north, then South Carolina, one then the other with grim resolve. When sleep threatens an open window and a quick smack or two across the face does the trick. For a few hours, you listened to the radio and sang along with Bob Dylan and the Beatles, distracted from your course until the hours wore on and one song slumped seamlessly into the next. The music is internal now, one song after another from your childhood, half-buried under fresher memories. The band lives only in memory. Your mother knows these bar-worn songs that have never seen radio play or been pressed to vinyl. She loved the man who crafted them and plied them roughly from stage to stage for twenty years across the Southwest. His callused brown hands held hers the night you were born. Tonight you drive to hear his voice, all gravel, and honey, and dust, for the last time.

One hundred or so miles ago, you stopped for a rest and a drink on numb legs that seemed to stretch too far to reach the ground. Your shoes were laid upon as gray a slab of concrete as ever graced a tomb. You sat on its matching bench and laced your toes through the night-cooled grass. Silent and intent, a silver garter snake parted a line across the lawn, sending ripples toward your waiting feet. He disappeared beneath you, a flash of pewter skin and bright, dark eyes. Lapping at the dew, his darting tongue might have pulled your songs from the air as they resonated in a halo of tenderness and regret. The little snake attended you as you rose to drive again, framed by a corona of halogen light.

Sleep is starting to seep into the corners of your eyes now, and the salt of your hands just makes them ache and beg to close. There is a pain that radiates from the joint of each thumb inward to the palm of each hand. Switching between them eases this for a moment or two. The highway is a river of obsidian now, running sharp and black with long streams grasping out at the heart of



Ryan Reese - Untitled silver gelatin print





Charles Estes - Untitled silver gelatin print



Kari Hunter - Lori - silver gelatin print



Rebecca Sherrod - Untitled silver gelatin print



Stephanie Sands - Untitled silver gelatin print



Curtis LeSage - Last Flash at Dawn - Oil on Panel



Bob Farr - "Stones" - silver gelatin print
Lillian Spencer Award Winner



Emily Adams - Untitled silver gelatin print

America. The tributary that carries you soundlessly into morning leads you down among the sage and the golden pines of New Mexico. It's a long time coming, and the endless expanse of Texas has not yet been broached. Your glance flickers to the glove compartment. Avert your eyes! It's not time yet. A black dog lying dead in the median looks like a baby bear. Your father told you all about the bears the first time he left Pennsylvania and started moving West. They are both the bane and the treasure of the residents in his small town. The story, which might have been true, was of a couple who were picnicking outside of the reservation near the anemic stream that gives the region its name. When the husband looked up from his lunch to see "the biggest damn bear on the mountain," he told his wife to run to the safety of the car, the windows of which had been left down to let the radio play. Hank Williams wailed away, tinny and unconcerned. He'd seen bears before. Abandoning picnic and mate, the woman ran towards the car, and of course, the second bear. The smaller bear was sitting in the passenger's seat eating cough drops and drinking warm beer.

The effort on your father's face to remain stoic and sincere as he told you this story defied human strength, and even gravity. Laughter might just burst through the top of his head, but then you wouldn't know that the tale wasn't true. It's all in the delivery, you see. The art of telling makes the lie real and breathes bears into existence out of the only desire for an audience and to make you smile.

The rain begins at dawn as you approach the city. She was your city once, and there is no need to take this route except to trace the silvering lines of an old scar. The exits slide by, and you turn unexpectedly at the last one. Slowing down is always the hardest part. Seventy and sixty feel much the same. Fifty drags uncomfortably, and at forty-five you must roll down the windows for some gauge of real speed. A windless southern night unfolds its sodden arms around you. You return briefly now to hear the echoes of lost time.

It is said that every house has its ghost here, and they flicker in the windows as you pass. There is something here, behind these cobblestones and bricks; behind these groves of electric light harvested in song. Here is the neighborhood where you stumbled through streets stained in sepia with lamplight at four in the morning. The shirt

you wore was not your own and you could smell the sweat of the black-haired man you stole it from. Your hands still tasted of him, and you did not care that this part of town bred murderers and thieves. It had rained that night as well, soaking you both as you walked to his house and stripped in a squalid bathroom that had seen the worst of too many parties. Candle wax and spent cigarettes littered the floor. You stepped around them to take his hand as he sat in the bath. The water went cold, then hot, then cold again. You talked for hours about frivolous things, drinking Wild Irish Rose and digging for common ground in your graveyards of childhood memory. He did love you in his distant way, as he did hate you later.

You slow to a stop in front of the now condemned house and sniff the air. There is no trace left here of him, or the dark hours spent lying awake in the stifling heat, not daring to touch him as he lay next to you glowing bare in the window light. His power washed from these stones with the wine and sweat. You turn once and head back toward the highway.

An hour behind now, and you speed without thought. The cool of night has burnt away. The breeze hangs almost motionless; your velocity gives it the illusion of a current, but it is thick and warm. Singing helps as you enter the special part of Georgia where radio stations are faint transmissions from dying stars, flitting in and out of range. The recognizable pieces of songs dance in static before you must turn them off before being lulled to sleep by gentle waves of white noise. Your father's songs again; you're trying not to think of the desiccated husk of what he once was. This keeps you awake. His slight frame once harbored a great strength. His eyes flashed razor-straight into yours, belying a keen intellect and fiery pride. Now the doctors draw lines in blue ink on his skin and run poison through his blood. When you saw him last, his huge brown eyes pleaded silently from a shrunken, fragile frame that belonged to a man twice his age. You could not help your observation. A baby bird; he looks just like a baby bird. You drive.

The road is silent and slick with morning before the first stirrings of the working world begin. It is owned now only by truckers, who touch its secret corners and clamor amongst themselves through radio waves. You cannot hear their phantom voices, and there is no music now. You pull out a cigarette and greedily inhale, savoring the

pull of smoke. You exhale in graceful, curling plumes. You throw out the butt and watch as it sparks behind you. The pack follows it. The lighter goes next.

Your stomach, soured on coffee, folds into itself as the traffic builds. You stop to eat when the morning ebbs and the cars crowd either side of you. There is no answer when you call. The machine is not on. You call again as you eat. You call when you throw your spent wrappers in the trash. Pulling out of the truck stop, you know you will stop at every rest area and try to make contact. When you hear his voice, you will hang up. With terrible love you will attend to his last wishes. Promises fortified by blood are not easily broken.

The sun tops out above the trees. There are college students at the next stop, laughing and snorting like great horses. You pick up the phone and let it ring for a long time. His wife answers. It is terse; he is gone. Without incident it seems, and sooner than was predicted. There was a flutter of the eyelids. He did not fight, of course. You leave the phone hanging as you pull away. Speeding back into the lanes, you acquire speed hungrily. Mile marker passes mile marker. Cars are not in front of you anymore. There is no one behind you as you open the glove compartment. The bullets scatter and the gun dances and rolls at over ninety-five miles per hour. He has loved you twice in the end: once by asking you to finish what he could not, and finally by releasing you from your duty. Unsure of what comes next, you turn around at the next exit. You drive.

**nazi poets masquerading as gods
to ee cummings**

Vicky Smith

i will not use correct capitalization

i will randomly sp ac e wo
rds

i will extol my poor grammar
parading shamelessly across
the page with

no commas
question
marks

colons periods semi colons

on

ill lump them in the middle of the page like this

...((?!)"','
!!!

ill eat mary olivers handbook to poetry
as i languish in an excess of adjectives

rolling in my filthy mundane cliché poetics

like a pig in shit

and when i decide id rather be published
than real

ill drop knees open mouth and swallow

for those nazi poets masquerading as gods

This is War Boys

Joseph Ventura

The hot Persian sun beat down heavily on the shiny, metallic transporter: a Fokker-Atlantic C-2. The military insignia and voluptuous woman painted on its belly were eclipsed and simply reflected the white heat. Vapors of mirage-gas simmered up from the hot tarmac. Private Rev. John Von Imple is the first to exit down the stairs wheeled to a tight fit with the large cargo doors. His square crew cut and dark rimmed glasses frame a round, somewhat pudgy face that his parishioners back home synonymized with compassion. Before deployment the whole church was present at the airfield. Where as many of the soldiers, fifteen years his younger, had curvaceous blondes clinging and begging for them not to go, the reverend, like on so many Sunday mornings before, was surrounded by some 150 older men and women with tears of joy in their eyes seeing him off. They carried signs that read: "Take Up Swords for the Lord!," "Onward Christian Soldier," and "Reverend Imple, We'll Pray For You." They chanted "Defeat the Darkness!," "Overcome the Evil," and "God Bless America" as he waved his once bible toting hands to the crowd and boarded the aircraft. The reverend-come-sergeant saw them vividly in his mind as he stepped down the steel stairs; feeling their confidence in him duly, and righteously, warranted.

The smells of burnt chemicals invaded Von Imple's nostrils. As so often with memories, an immediate olfactory distaste that would always be with him imprinted itself upon his mind. Stepping down onto the white tar, gypsy sounds of a foreign, heathen society beat into his ears. The friendly airfield, which his outfit had landed at, was less than two kilometers from the heart of A_Ulaybiyah, Kuwait. The bleating goats and horribly monotone pop music from a bustling, far from civilized, market could be heard from the barracks arranged along side the runway at Camp Doha. The stagnant vapors of helicopter fuel settled over the pale green tents like cumulus clouds over the cattle farms of Samson, Alabama. Private Rev. Von Imple clutched his bible close to his heart, heaved his bulging pack onto his back and hiked over to his super, Sgt. Braun T. Wallard.

The Sergeant sat at a sleek, four-legged, poker table under a dangling low-watt lamp. The forced neutrality of the varying shades of green, which made up the room, was an insult to the color. Green, a color much more comfortably a designator of environmentalists and green thumbs, at home blanketing the naive and gregarious, is pukish and pea-colored in this environment. Here, stamped on everything, dyed into scratchy wool blankets, the energy and purity of its pigments were purged by aggression; its essence lost in uniformity.

Sergeant Wallard, a monster of a man from Dallas, Texas—the epitome of the slogan “Don’t Mess With Texas”—sat over an Arabic-English dictionary. It was rumored by some of the men that in Field Training Sgt. Wallard’s outfit had been struck dead on by lightning. The men in his outfit were cooked alive. Wallard walked on third degree burns the 22 miles back to base, carrying the only survivor, scorched and ailing, over his shoulder.

His arms were as large as good Betty Tarring’s roasts, thought the Reverend. For a moment he was transported back home, back to dinner at the parish people’s homes, back to Samson, Alabama, to a small white wooden church with only ten pews and standing room. For a moment John Von Imple was lost in the peaceful memories of the events that brought him here in this campaign against evil. That sermon was supposed to be merely a reiteration of the President’s speech the week before—that was where it all began. He thought about the vivid descriptions of a weapon-bearing God striking with vengeance the wayward, un-godly ones, the comparisons of the Iraqi people with Jewish people under Hitler’s reign of terror, the call, no, the demand to arms that had roused a fire in the heart of the church-goers, so much so that nearly twenty percent of them had enlisted the very next day—including himself, their leader, Reverend John Von Imple. However, Betty Tarring had everything to do with his choice. Von Imple was surer of that than anything.

Sgt. Wallard issued the company’s bunking orders and left the barracks without so much as a welcome to the green G.I.’s filtering in. His heavy steps echoed throughout the near empty hall and in the heart of each boy’s chest. A general wave of anxiety broke over each soldier’s mind. Private Von Imple sat on his cot and began writing a letter to Betty, her flowery perfume the only concrete thing still in his head from back there.

Dear Sister Betty, it began, I have left our homelands and traveled to the battlefields for one purpose and one purpose alone: Love. Love of God, love of my parish, and love of my faith in Christ. I am determined to spread the teachings of Christ and rid the world of such awful diversions, veiled in a progression of compromise, as the Islamic teachings. Christian unity will not become a reality unless all churches accept the authority Christ entrusted to Saint Peter and his successors. With the backing of the U.S. military, God will reign supreme again. Unity in Christ is based on following His will and follow I shall. Betty, I want you to know that while J.C. is the only guide I need, the only light I see, the only food that nourishes me, you are my motivation in the flesh. The strength I gain from pleasing you will keep me a good man in the eyes of the Lord or set me apart from other men of the cloth. In Love of the Lord—Yours, Private Rev. John Von Imple.

Later in the afternoon Sgt. Wallard lead Private Von Imple and a few others in his company as tourists into the large city of Al Jahar. With complete normalcy, chickens scrawled across the dirt roads, women masked from head to foot walked in drones with a total sense of direction, and the familiar red, white and blue Pepsi yin/yang tempted consumers in a foreign tongue. The inverted teardrop rooftops of mosques and public buildings sat next to the "Golden Arches" of home, the McWorld. The absolute grittiness of the street carried with it a stench of the familiar along with that of unfathomable filth. To Private Von Imple it seemed as though the market was set upon a dumpsite.

"Good Lord! These God-forsaken people," he whispered to himself.

"Hey Preach— Save ya holy water, we'll need a shower wit it after this tour," hollered Logan Seavor, a wild-eyed, lanky youth from Mississippi.

Logan "lagoon," they called him. He was a drifter, hungry for adventure, hungry to be where the action was. Ever since the departure from Hunter Air Force Base, back in Savannah, Georgia, Private Von Imple had watched him from a distance. He saw in his rebellious tie-dyed t-shirts and untied shoes a lost soul, a lamb to be returned to the flock. He patiently waited for the opportunity God would give him to administer his lesson to Logan.

Logan Lagoon was the hapless type of guy that did things his way and his way alone. He was the type of fellow

who still kept a tape deck in his car—CDs too delicate and ephemeral for his personality. The type of mentality the military both despised but needed desperately; one who'd kill simply for the pleasure of it and kill again without being commanded. The short fuse fanatic that fanatics were eliminated by.

"Keep with ye, a pure heart and clear mind—psalm 52 verse 4, Logan."

"And plenty of .50 caliber, disintegrating, shortrecoil 'mmunitions, right Preach?" Logan said with a smirk. "Kill us some commie, towel heads! Fucking evil gooks."

"Gooks are Asian, dumbass," shouted Robbie, a twenty-two year old military journalist. "...And the Iraqis ain't communist either."

"Boys, keep your voices down. We are guests here. These people, the Kuwaitis, despite their lack of sanctity, have allowed us to enter their home and respect should be shown. 'From the east, great battles of my will shall be fought and blood, like water, shall purge the evil from its heart' Revelations 18:9. 'The Word shall give us victory over sin' Psalm 119:11. Be mindful of the duty at hand," Private Von Imple said as he moved his M-16 to his opposite shoulder and continued ahead of the other five men back towards the barracks.

"Walking bible," the other men joshed among each other.

The open flames of street fires dried large mammals of unknown specification in the slow grind of aberrant chefs turning pit-handles. The foreign chatter that surrounded the American soldiers further emphasized the strangeness of the landscape around them. Uncouth soldiers broke out into Chinese imitations. Old rusted cars, like gravestones, sat abandoned on every corner. The puttering motor of one pick-up revealed life of some kind, a sputtering of dust kicked into the air by bald tires. Three men in green fatigues crouched; huddled in the back of the vintage El Camino. A loud 'pop' like the snap of a snare drum echoed through the dirty streets. As if in a rush of gunfire, the men of Sgt. Wallard's company dove behind large wooden crates for cover.

A white fear shrouded all six men instantly. The bustling of the street seemed to eerily dissipate. Von Imple and Robbie were crouched behind two large wooden crates that partitioned a small rampart off from the rest of the

street. Von Imple clutched his crucifix and softly recited a prayer to Archangel Michael, the protector.

"Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, Oh shit. Not today—I just got here. I'm a gawddam writer not a fighter," chanted Robbie.

"Be calm Robbie and just stay quiet. It's probably just some kids with cap guns or one of those decrepit German vehicles backfiring," said Von Imple. "Logan! Logan? Where the hell are you?"

Slowly peeking above the wooden crate, Von Imple got a view of Logan. The air filled with his hysterical chortling. Clutched in his thin fingers was a chicken's rubbery neck drooping limply like a wilted flower. A rivulet of blood dripped from the fowl's fractured skull. An image of Betty floated up to Private Rev. Von Imple's consciousness. Her soft white features, like an angel's, hazy and round, as if seen through a camera filter, overwhelms him. Her blue eyes smiled at Von Imple. A tear raced down from the Reverend's face.

"Hey preach, ya wanna give the last rites?" asked Logan.

A spark ignited inside of the Reverend. A fire, as if on the pulpit conjuring up descriptions of the wrath of God's return, was set ablaze inside of him. The sterling cross, whose weight was a delicate ounce, burns into his chest. The whites of his eyes are flooded red as he jumps up from his position.

"You Heathens!!" yelled Von Imple as he raced out, lividly, into the open air of the empty market. The almond trees drop their fruit in syncopation with the charging stomps of his army boots. As he held his weapon from the waist he began to contemplate it unloading itself upon the guilty, the damned, the merciless. He imagined the shells from his weapon falling into the dirt like rain. He saw, with each empty casing dropping to the ground, part of the fiery with which his rage erupted extinguish itself. Just feet from Logan he fell to his knees and sobbed into his forearm.

Sgt. Wallard stood with the sore look of a parent's bereavement across his face. He reached out, grabbed Logan by the arm, and tossed him to the dusty street.

"You fool." Came the Sergeant's commanding voice. "Come on, you morons. In here." The Sergeant motioned the men into a small deli.

A large plywood sign hung over the doorway that

read: "Al Salaam" in Arabic. Underneath, in English, read "U.S. Military Welcome". There weren't many of these signs hanging around what was left of the city. The men dusted themselves off as they walked into the small building.

Every brown eye turned to them as the door swung shut behind them. A short bar separated the small wooden tables and the kitchen area. A short man with a large gold medallion visible through his open shirt watched the G.I.'s. No one spoke.

The walls were lined with a collection of religious and food service posters. Faux-gold framed pictures of Jesus and Muhammad hung next to grotesque close-ups of falafels, gyros, and hummus bread. On one wall hung a photo of Mecca. In it thousands of devout Muslims circled the holy pillar and were blurred by the timed exposure of the photographer.

The four men lumbered up to the bar and sat with their elbows on the counter. Next to them sat a small Kuwaiti man with his wife and daughter. The man wore dust infused jeans and Nike tennis shoes, with an open buttoned short sleeve business shirt. His wife, from head to foot, was immersed in a black burqa. Logan, Robbie, and John weren't paying any attention to the parents, however. Their eyes rested loving—maybe even lustily—upon the couple's teenage daughter, Salome.

She sat immaculately underneath the rows of jarred grape leaves, pickled cucumbers, and spicy Baba Ganoush. Her plum colored eyes patiently observed the servicemen. Her skin had a soft glow like the golden Tunisian dates that sat packaged on a shelf behind her. The men were enamoured.

Her father broke their concentration. "You are U.S. military, eh." Said the simple old man, imploringly. "We have respect and trust to give you."

Logan began to speak but Sgt. Wallard interrupted. "Thank you very much. We are happy to be here."

The room shook. A military plane passed above.

"You are hero." He turned to the man behind the counter, "Wilum, pour drinks for my hero friends." The grin on his face could have stretched the length of the entire Syrian Desert. His wife sat distantly. His daughter's face flushed as he continued, "We are with you in your fight against evil. *The Seed of evildoers shall never be renowned.*"

Rev. Von Imple's ears perked up. What was this? A man of God in this barren place? "Good sir, it joys my ears to hear the prophet's holy words from your mouth. I was certain I would not find a Christian man among the lot. And to think, here of all places. Praise be."

The man's composure slumped into the wooden chair. Salome leaned over her mother and father and looked into Rev. Von Imple's eyes. "Isaiah is a prophet of Islam." She said and then relaxed back into the contemplative position she held before.

"You sass that preach, girl." Said Logan as he licked his lips. "Ain't no god-fearin' in her. Where's your costume, sweet thing?"

"She's obviously not a Muslim, Logan." Answered the Reverend.

Salome turned slowly and peered at the Reverend's eyes. Her beauty enthralled him. Slowly her dark features spread out for him in hallucinatory waves like the gas off the hot tarmac. He glared adoringly into her royal eyes. Her features rounded and smoothed out ethereally and Private Rev. John Von Imple sat before his love, Betty Torring.

"Betty" He whispered.

Immediately the young woman spoke. "I refuse the burqa, but not my sweet lord, Allah. The Qu'ran does not say that women must cover themselves completely in public. That is the law of oppressive regimes. *He that ruled nations in anger, is persecuted, and none hindereth.* You fail yourself with such a narrow view of prophets." She pointed to the picture of Jesus that hung next to Mohammed's on the wall. "You fight for yourselves and your own views of the world. You refuse Islam, just as Islam refuses you. Your fear is a fear of truth."

"Salome!" Shouted her father. But, it was too late. The young girl sprang from her chair and was quickly out the door.

The Reverend, Logan, and Robbie were all on their feet. The girl's father reached out and grabbed Rev. Von Imple. "She knows no place for woman" He pleaded with the Reverend whose eyes followed the closing glass door.

He walked towards the door.

"Sit your holy ass down, Von Imple" Shouted Sgt. Wallard.

But, the Reverend continued. In a trance he followed towards the door. Just then, Wilum, ran from be-

hind the counter and grabbed the Reverend from behind. Logan, Robbie, and Gen. Wallard immediately surrounded him.

"You let go of that soldier, chief. Now!" Shouted one of the men.

In the spontaneity of birds taking flight, a hustled scrum of men erupted in the quiet deli. Fists flailed. Anger was mouthed in Arabic and retorted in English. Wilum was out numbered and quickly manhandled into a corner. The Reverend escaped out the door.

Salome stood in the middle of the dusty street. Her face radiated a light out over the glum of late afternoon. A light sprinkle of rain fell ubiquitously over everything. A single drop screamed like a miniature MOAB bomb down from the heavens. It careened through denseless clouds. Private Rev. John Von Imple stood captivated underneath the deli sign and the Kuwaiti and American flags that flew above. They unfurled above him. The tiny droplet of rain—a death shower?—continued to fall. It grazed the outstretched flag mixing with the rusty dust that covered everything. The alchemy of this momentary mixture transformed the droplet of life-restoring water into something sinister, something grotesque. The droplet splashed onto the Reverend's boots like blood.

"Betty." He murmured.

Tears splash into the great reservoir of sand. A prophet stood over a dead man.

The sun cast down Von Imple's shadow, out over the sand like a clock's hand.

"This is war, boys" said Salome, as she turned coolly and simply walked away.

Fatherless Seed

Duc Van Huynh

fatherless seed grew upon a fire
and coldness swept by with a breeze of wind.
living without desire
a child not knowing of any sin.
coming into a world of unknown
with a people of multiple clothes.
taught of earth, sky, and me
and learn that home was a shack
and was born of a fatherless seed.

Helpless

Duc Van Huynh

Seven days breathing nothing
But the smells of rotten flesh and dirt.
Ferocious little beasts crawling
In my eye sockets and under my shirt.
Above, a flower that sheds tears
Dampening my heart.
Helpless to move away from here
And even helpless to say,
"I miss you."

Clouds

Sean Kymalainen

To be floating along,
in a majestic blue sky.
To take shapes by the millions,
to wonder why.

No cares in the world,
nothing to make.
No obligations to meet,
no promises to shake.

To feel such a bliss,
like a soft, feathered touch.
To be so near heaven,
is almost too much.

To glide in the air,
so light and so free.
Ah, to be a cloud,
that is for me.

Everyday but Sunday

Emily Adams

The devil comes to my house everyday but Sunday
And delivers demons made of paper
To a box outside my door
Then he drives a city vehicle to my neighbor

At least we all get the same treatment
So with a sigh, I take his bringing into my home
Where I place them on my counter
And shuffle through them with a moan

Occasionally he brings some less frightening than demons
Like goblins, imps, and the random boogie man
I pinch them at their corners
And throw them in the can

The demons have my name on them
I feed each one with money
I stuff each of their mouths with my sweat
Each demon must be fed monthly
(or they come after me)

In the morning, I deposit them back into the box
Where they wait to be picked up today
Their faithful father is never late
Everyday but Sunday

Soiled

Sasha McBrayer

The used fork sits perfectly balanced
The white handle is clean as a hospital
But not the sharp, shaped metal
Tongs are coated in my last meal
Still tainting the air with lo mein scent
My tongue remembering the soy
I worry for the used fork
Soon it will be sticky, like the plastic it rests upon
Who will wash it if not I?

I Want Your Eyes

Sasha McBrayer

I venture deep, the only one willing to uncover what lies
within myself
What do I want?
I want your eyes
Humble, peaceful blue
Solitary and sharp
Decadent but so very simple
Give me your eyes
Just for a few glances at night
Just enough to send me to sleep
To give me those sweet, safe dreams of warmth and freedom

Would that solve me?
Would I be happy then?
Maybe not.
Maybe ... lend me also your voice
Say random meaningless things to me
Say them just so
I'll be content then
I'll be soothed in pretend land
I'll sleep soundly, I swear

For what would I know to do with all of you?
The complete you would be too fine a gift

A thing I could not fathom or handle
So keep to yourself precious son
And only lend me these gems
I swear
I'll never hunt you again.

The Essence of Man

Karen Bellflower

O Wretched soul, endure not thy immortal fate,
But do cast aside thine armor that shields thy virginal
state.

Reject the holy covenant of heavenly bliss
And embrace earth's passionate kiss.

O, spread wide thy frail pure wings
In search of mortal transcendental pleasures.
Do entrust thine saintly heart and let thine soul
Submit gladly in worldly flight.
Soar beyond the splendid golden gate
To plummet downward into chosen conscious grace.

O, tread ye not where Angels dare
For in this gilded garden lies Cupid's lair.
Awaken thine eyes to see this terrestrial Eden
And surrender whole heartedly to the son of Venus.
Now castaway thy Utopian crown
And sow thy seeds in this fertile mortal ground.

O, Bare thy soft Angelic breast to the fervent beast
And tame not thy savage heart conceived by sinful lust
But do savor the decadent fruit
That was spawn from a handful of dust,
For it is "The Essence of Man."

The Jazz Club

Ilene Cardenas

Enter, enter
into smoke-filled rooms
the soft sounds of pianos
and bases offsetting the
dimness of the room
Languid hands move over the surface of
smooth black and white keys that
obey their every touch
the perfect tempo
of sweet improvisation
filling my soul
music induced sweat
filling my every pore
finishing all too soon
the applause fills every corner
2nd set



To My Mother

Alexxus Anderson

Preconceptions cage in plastic
a hamster's house with no holes
where I suffocate for want of self-expression.
YOU forced ME
a triangular peg into a square hole
cutting off the corners that made me different,
unique,
un-you.
I've walked in your shoes,
your stockings,
your dress,
and you wonder why I scream
MURDER
when I can't please you.
You straightened my hair,
and I suffered with the do,
for you.
Shut my mouth with respect's muzzle,
seeded my mind with self-hate,
pressed the pattern of pain into my skin,
leopard spots you ordered me not to scratch out.
All these things you've done to me,
Mother
and you wonder why I scream
MURDER
when I can't please you.

To My Father

Alexxus Anderson

You are half my reason for being,
half my intellect,
so don't look so surprised that I'm a fucking wreck.
Momma ain't no saint,
but then neither are you,
so how you can expect me to be
is beyond the fucking moon.
you walked away and left me,
a woman to be sure,
but for the self-hate you've given me

there'll never be a cure.
Before you think this is all your fault
I just want you to know
you share the blame completely for this fiasco.
Cause you are only half
and to be whole one must have two.
So before you go,
KNOW
I hate my mother too.

When Girls Cry

Anthony Petrevitch

you wear a plastic halo
it's the thought that counts
watching over me like an omnipresent lover
waiting to comfort should i cry out
forever afraid to slumber
for the fear that i might fall down

you are the angel in my heart
the demon in my head
a crutch i cannot bear
like a monument to the dead
something cut away
like the skin i shed

you hold me like a dream
for you have yet to taste
what will i do
when tears stream down your face
i will laugh
and you will fade
a long lost memory
a testament to the time i wouldn't waste

Messenger of Death

Samuel D. Helms

During the 20th century, America fought in two world wars, two police actions, and several conflicts. For the families of those who serve in the US Armed Forces, the words "*We regret to inform you...*" are among the most feared. From February 1993 throughout June 1996, these words became part of who I was and who I am. During the final three years of my Marine Corps career, I was assigned as the Casualty Assistance Calls Officer (CACO) for the southeast corner of Texas; a region measuring 8,000 square miles. My bible was the US Marine Corps Casualty Manual. This manual covers everything from how I would receive the detailed information of the deceased, to walking the endless sidewalk to utter the words "*We regret to inform you...*" to hearing taps echoing in the background as I handed the folded flag to the grieving widow or parents.

My first assignment came only two weeks after arriving in Houston. The call came on a Thursday night at 10:00 p.m. My heart raced as I drove to the Reserve Center to pick up the message regarding the first casualty call. Pulling the message from the fax machine, I began to read the details surrounding the death of this Marine. As I read his name and unit, my stomach suddenly became empty and hollow. I knew this Marine; he was from the unit I had just left two weeks before. I arrived at midnight in a small Texas town and tried to find the rural route address. I contacted the Sheriff's office to get the exact location of the house. I knocked on the door, but no one was home. I called the house several times, but no one answered. The ride back to Houston seemed like an eternity. My mind kept going over and over the facts, wondering whether I could find the words to tell this mother that her 20-year-old son had committed suicide.

The next day I returned to that home in that small Texas town around 9:00 a.m. As I walked the sidewalk to the door, the sidewalk seemed to be never ending and the door seemed just out of reach. I could even hear myself breathe. What felt like hours to walk took only seconds. Before I could knock, the door opened, and the terror in that mother's eyes became etched into my memory forever.

Those words "*We regret to inform you...*" came so hard for me. I felt this mother's pain. I felt her anguish as it filled the room. I became the rock this mother chose to cling to.

As with most Marines, the world will not find weakness in our armor. For the next three years the casualty calls and subsequent funerals were conducted without a show of emotion, and with only a sense of duty.

During my final months as CACO, the last casualty call of my career made me aware of the impact and responsibility that had been given to me. Late one Wednesday night, the call came for a Marine who had died during a training accident at Twenty-nine Palms, California. He was a 33 year old Staff Sergeant with a wife and two children living in east Houston. It was midnight when I knocked on the door. The words "*We regret to inform you...*" cut the night air and his wife, now a widow, slumped to the floor. A few minutes later her 10-year-old son came out. At first he just looked at us, then asked us where his daddy was. I looked on the wall and saw a picture of a proud Marine in full dress blues posing with his boy; his son. As the child sat in my lap, I did my best to explain that his daddy would be home no more.

The deceased Marine had stipulated that, should anything happen to him and a casualty call were to be made, we were to inform his wife first, and then his mother, and finally, his father. At 5:30 a.m. I drove 80 miles to relay the news of this Marine's untimely death to his mother. As I walked up the driveway, the mother walked out to empty her garbage. As our eyes met, she screamed and fainted. My presence alone was enough to convey the sentiment my job called me to do. For the next hour, as I tried to comfort this mother in her time of loss, all she could say was, "My baby boy is dead." Upon leaving this mother with her grief, I drove 100 miles north to utter these words, yet again, to the father of this dead Marine. When I pulled into the drive, I could see the father working in the backyard. His wife stepped on the porch, and seeing me, walked rapidly to her husband. I made it to him before her. While he walked back toward the house, he began to weep softly. During the long, silent drive back to Houston, I knew the next two months were to be the hardest one for me emotionally.

When the body arrived the following Saturday at Houston's Intercontinental Airport, it was my duty to see that the family was there to accept the remains, and my

duty to relieve the Marine who had accompanied his friend home. The funeral director and I inspected the casket and ensured all of the documents were in order for the burial. Since the death resulted from an explosion, the casket was sealed. The ride back to the funeral home from the airport was quiet and subdued. Once the casket was arranged in the viewing parlor, the mother was adamant about seeing her son. As the family members tried to talk her out of it, she looked at me and begged me to provide her with a goodbye to her son. For a moment, I imagined my own mother asking someone like me for the same thing. Before we, the funeral director and I, would let the mother see her son, we had to be sure the body was presentable. Presentable meant the body was shrouded in a green wool blanket with the Marine's dress blues arranged on top. Once this was verified, the funeral director and I agreed to let the mother take one last look at her son. What felt like hours took only minutes as grief enveloped his mother. I, again, became the rock that a mother could rest upon and draw strength, except this time I was the foundation this mother pulled herself on. I still wonder if she pictured me as her son at that moment she said her final goodbye.

The day of the funeral was planned for and practiced by the other twelve Marines needed for full military honors. The rotunda of Houston's National Cemetery would be full. All family members and 20 Marines from the departed's unit would be attending the service. The hearse stopped on cue. With the skill of surgeons we, the casualty corps, set about our task, to give honor to a fallen comrade. I told my team that morning, "We don't know this Marine, but we are a band of brothers and, by God, we are going to bury him as if he were our brother." This funeral had become personal.

The afternoon sun was starting to cast long shadows as we slowly entered the rotunda. The Navy chaplain began the service and for the next hour we listened to songs and praise from the family and friends of the departed. As the sergeant and I stepped to the casket, the silence was deafening. It was so quiet that I could hear the flag whisper across the casket as we raised it high above our heads. When the first volley of the 21-gun salute sounded, the rotunda filled with sobs. The echoing of the final volley seemed to continue infinitely as Taps began. As the trumpeter held each note just a little longer than usual, the eyes of many combat-hardened Marines filled

with tears. Time seemed to stand still as we folded the flag. Painfully, with each fold, with each turn of the flag, the truth about this day unfolded. I was in this place, given this duty to not only honor the dead, but to give the living peace of mind, rest without worry, and a rock on which to find strength.

As the sergeant and I painstakingly folded and inspected this Marine's flag, we exchanged salutes that our task was completed. I turned directly towards the grieving widow. Today I counted my steps; the thirteen steps necessary to stand before her were never-ending. She had not shed a tear since hearing of the death of her chosen life partner. As I bent down with the Marine's burial flag, she and I looked at one another and began to cry. As I began "On behalf of a grateful nation..." Marines sitting behind her began to audibly weep. As I presented the flag, I watched my own tears fall on the ultimate symbol of our nation's strength. I felt the humility and compassion I had lost during the last three years return.

What prompted the death of my humility and compassion was the very same thing that prompted its return, the death of a Marine; the death of an unfamiliar, but not an unknown brother. As I gave my final salute as Houston's "Messenger of Death," I wondered if the next messenger would have the sinews of rock I had.

“The writer believes that all that can be thought can be written. In his eyes man is the faculty of reporting, and the universe is the possibility of being reported.”

-Emerson





